



*When it  
Shines*

USA Today Bestselling Author

LILIVALENTE



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A BAD DOG HOLIDAY NOVELLA

THE MCGUIRE BROTHERS

LILI VALENTE

*When it Shines*

A Bad Dog Novella  
The McGuire Brothers Series

By Lili Valente

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## About the Book

**The only thing worse than being snowed in at the airport on Christmas Eve far from home?**

Being snowed in with the **one man** you've been trying your best to avoid.

**Bear Hansen is a burly sweetheart with loads of sexy tattoos and big hands that did wickedly wonderful things to me the last time we met.**

Things that made me want way more than a one-night stand...

Which is why I ran, blocked his calls, and stopped commenting on his cat videos. I only have a few years to launch my career. I'm determined not to end up filled with regret like my mother, so I have to focus on making my professional dreams come true.

**But when Bear and I are thrown together by fate on the most magical night of the year, I find myself questioning everything.**

What if I have this all wrong? What if what I want most in life is standing right in front of me, offering to love me no matter what?

**Bear and I have one night to find out...**

*To Saratoga Springs. Thanks for the fresh start and safe place  
to land, post flood.*

# Chapter One



ROSE "DIPSY" DOBBS

*A woman running through the airport in elf shoes,  
regretting several of her recent life choices...*

Through my cell phone speaker, my mother's tinny voice frets, "You're never going to make it! These days, you have to get to the airport five hours before takeoff, Dipsy. Five hours!"

"It's two hours before a domestic flight, Mom, and I'm not checking luggage. I've got this." I grab my rolling suitcase and zoom away from security, bells jingling on my elf shoes. "Just don't forget to feed Hambone. He'll be upset if he has to wait for me to get there. He likes dinner promptly at six."

"I know that." She sounds offended. "I never forget to feed my grandkitty."

"Of course, not," I say, though she forgets all the time.

But that's partly Hambone's fault. Most cats will meow for their dinner, making such a ruckus, they're impossible to ignore. My sweet orange tabby lays down on the ground on his back, stretches his arms over his head, and sticks out his pink

tongue, playing dead until you notice he's being dramatic and put something in his bowl.

Unfortunately for him, Mom has a habit of ignoring living things that don't make noise. Our kitchen window is where houseplants go to die, and we don't talk about the ill-fated goldfish Dad thought would keep Mom company when I left for college...

"I'll put some catnip in it for a special Christmas Eve treat, too," Mom adds. "Your dad grabbed some while he was out getting bulbs to fix the lights on the tree."

"Amazing," I say. "You're the best. I appreciate you guys."

And I do. After the disaster in D.C., my parents graciously welcomed both Hambone and me to the basement apartment in my childhood home, no questions asked.

Like...literally no questions.

They still have no idea what went down during my East Coast failure to launch.

But that's typical Dobbs family dynamics for you. If a situation seems fraught or messy, my parents don't want to hear about it. They'd rather pretend I went to D.C. on vacation, not to start my first serious job, and that moving into the basement was always the plan.

It wasn't.

Continuing to build my "scrappy girl reporter most likely to dress up in a goofy outfit and make the news fun again!" brand wasn't, either. Fun news is fun and all, but I'm a professional. I graduated top of my class at the University of Missouri, in one of the oldest training programs in the country. Mizzou Journalism majors don't do puff pieces; we cover serious, hard-hitting news. I'm supposed to be making a

difference, not a list of the best places in St. Louis to catch a glimpse of Santa's sleigh.

But that's the way the cookie crumbles, and in a field as competitive as television journalism, beggars can't be choosers.

Hence the reason I'm currently dashing down a moving walkway in full elf gear, my carry-on clattering along behind me as my mother continues to list a dozen reasons why I'm probably going to miss my flight.

A heavily lined green velvet mini-dress, elf shoes with bells on the curled toes, and green-and-white striped tights wouldn't have been my choice for a "flying home on Christmas Eve" outfit, but there was literally no time to change. We finished filming my segment for St. Louis News thirty minutes ago, seconds before it was set to air.

As soon as we wrapped "Ten Elf Tips for Spotting Santa's Sleigh Tonight," I jumped in a taxi, waved good-bye to my producer and cameraman through the back window, and prayed to the sweet baby Jesus for deliverance as the cabbie skidded out into the swirling snow.

I love a white Christmas as much as the next girl, but is it too much to ask that the white stuff hold off until I'm safely home for the holidays?

Apparently so...

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the moving walkway, the snow is coming down so hard I can barely see the airline workers zooming around in their little carts, loading luggage and snacks into waiting planes.

It's gnarly out there, but the flight hasn't been cancelled. I checked on my way through the security line, seconds before

putting my mother on speaker and tucking my cell into the breast pocket of my elf dress—the better to assure her I’ll be home for our family’s annual Christmas Eve cocoa party *and* run like the wind at the same time.

In hindsight, I wish I’d waited to call her after I’d boarded.

Her endless stream of doom and gloom is making the race to gate 54B even more stressful.

“The weatherman said they already have six inches of accumulation at our airport,” she says, her voice pinched with worry. “Six inches, high winds, and a chance of thundersnow!”

“And a partridge in a pear tree,” I sing-pant.

“This isn’t the time for jokes, Dipsy,” Mom chastises. “Thundersnow is no laughing matter.”

“No, of course not, Mom,” I wheeze, muttering a quick, “Excuse me, on your left,” to the family in front of me before squeezing past the mother and her two young children.

“Mommy! It’s one of Santa’s elves!” the little boy shouts.

I glance over my shoulder, grinning and waving as my mother continues to foretell disaster.

I didn’t choose the elf life, but the elf life chose me, and I don’t want to let any Santa-loving kids down by being less than jolly—even while sprinting through the airport.

“And your father’s worried about the air traffic control situation when you’ll be landing,” Mom says. “The last time we had a snowstorm this bad, there was almost a head-on collision between two incoming planes. It was all over the news. Garrison Cranston should have been fired years ago. No

man with glasses that thick should be in charge of a fleet of flying death tubes.”

“We talked about this, Mom. We don’t call them flying death tubes when I’m about to get on one of them. And I’m pretty sure it’s fine for air traffic controllers to wear glasses as long as their distance vision corrects to twenty-twenty. Now, I have to go. The walkway’s about to end. I have to run for real. See you in a couple hours!”

“Don’t forget to throw salt over your shoulder before you board. You did bring salt, didn’t you?” she shouts, loud enough to earn me a strange look from the businessman gaining ground beside me.

“Sure did and will do. Bye, Mom!” I shout back, before adding in a voice for the businessman’s ears only, “She’s superstitious. In a weird way. As far as I can tell, she made the salt thing up, forgot that she made it up, and it somehow became one of our crazy family traditions. But that’s the fun of family, right?”

“Go ahead.” He slows his pace, clearly not in the mood to share in my frazzled breed of holiday cheer.

“Thanks! Happy holidays!” I cruise off the end of the moving walkway and break into a proper jog, my heart hammering as I careen toward gate 54B.

It’s a little regional gate, tucked into a circle of smaller gates at the end of the terminal. So it’s clear from the moment I dash into the abandoned boarding area, where the gate agent is closing the door leading to the jetway, that I’m too late.

“No,” I wheeze, waving a frantic arm at the woman dressed head to toe in the airline’s signature mauve. “I’m here! I’m here! Don’t close it yet. Please, my mother will kill me if I

don't make it home for—" My words end in a panicked screech as I trip over one of my ridiculous shoes and go flying into the air.

Time slows and it feels like I have a full minute to realize I'm on a collision course with the recycling bin.

I have time to note the overflowing plastic bottles at the top, the happy rabbit on the side encouraging folks to recycle, and the wad of gum stuck to the rabbit's nose by some jerk of a passerby. I have time to think about how gross people can be and how gross gum is and wonder if the gum I swallowed in middle school really stuck around in my intestines for seven years, the way Molly Rapper said it would. Then, I make impact.

Thankfully, my shoulder glances off one side of the bin, avoiding the mess on the rabbit's nose, but that's the only bright side. As the heavy blue container tips over and sticky plastic bottles rain down on my head, dislodging the elf cap my producer secured to my hair with industrial strength hair clips, I lift my arms and squeeze my eyes shut, certain the Dobbs' family holiday is going to have to go on without me.

A beat later, my lids slide open to see the gate agent hovering over me, her brow furrowed. I cross my fingers that I'm about to be the recipient of a Christmas miracle.

Maybe she's here to tell me that she'll hold the door for one more minute.

Maybe there's still a way to get home and soothe my mother's ruffled feathers before she declares the holiday a disaster and lays the blame at my jingly feet.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" the gate agent asks.

“I’m fine.” I flick a bottle off my chest and force a bright smile. “And I can be on that plane in five seconds flat. I promise.”

Her frown deepens as she pulls the recycling bin back into an upright position. “I’m sorry, ma’am. The flight to Bad Dog Regional Airport was cancelled. Thundersnow.”

“Thundersnow,” I echo, my stomach sinking.

So that *wasn’t* another one of my mother’s weird, not-based-in-reality-or-physics weather predictions.

“Yes,” the woman says. “And the chance of a bomb cyclone. All flights headed west are cancelled, and I’ll be sleeping in the staff room tonight. No way I’m getting all the way back to Imperial in this storm. If you have a lounge membership, I’d suggest you head there now, before they fill up with other travelers looking for a comfortable place to spend the night.”

“Thank you.” I fight the tears pressing against the backs of my eyes as I push into a seated position, wincing slightly at the pain in my left shoulder. “Sorry you won’t make it home for Christmas Eve.”

She flashes a sympathetic smile. “You, too. It was nice to meet you. You’re as sweet in person as you are on the news. I love your segments. They’re so funny, and they always make me feel better about *my* two left feet.” She laughs. “I think you’re about as accident prone as I am.”

My lips tremble into a curve. “Thanks. Though in my defense, the outfits they make me wear don’t help much.” I waggle my jingle belled toes back and forth. “I’m at least fifty percent more graceful in normal shoes.”

“I bet. Here, let me help you up.” She reaches out a hand.

I take it, letting her haul me to my feet, before releasing her fingers and smoothing my elf skirt down over the fluffy red crinoline and decorative shorts beneath. The shorts are like those diaper covers toddlers wear under their skirts, opaque and covered with tulle. They're cute, relatively modest, and help make my skirt stand out like a holiday bell.

After my run through the terminal, they also *itch* like crazy.

Even through my thick tights, it feels like the lower part of my bottom is covered in a swarm of fire ants.

"Thanks so much," I say, giving the affected area a discreet scratch that does nothing to alleviate the skin-crawling sensation. I motion to the empty bottles strewn across the carpet. "Should I put these back in the bin?"

She waves a slim hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll put a call in to the maintenance team. They need to empty it anyway."

"Are you sure?" I ask, barely resisting the urge to scratch again. "I feel terrible for making a mess."

"It's fine," she assures me. "I promise. We've all seen way worse. As long as no bodily fluids are involved, it doesn't even register on our yuck scale."

"Okay, thank you," I say. "And happy holidays."

"Happy holidays," she echoes, backing toward the wide entrance leading into the main part of the terminal. "Make sure to sign up for a shower as soon as you get to your lounge. On nights like this, shower slots are the first things to go."

My jaw clenches at the sides of my forced grin. "Will do."

As soon as she turns her back, I reach down to claw at my ass, squirming my fingers beneath the tight shorts and scratching my booty through my pantyhose.

My head falls back with a soft groan as relief spreads through the aggravated area.

But my respite is only temporary. As soon as I start walking again, the chafing and fire-ants-loose-in-my-undies sensations will resume. If I'm going to spend the night here, I need to get out of these clothes. And since I don't have a lounge membership—starving reporters don't spend enough on their credit cards to qualify for fancy perks—I'll be changing in a gross airport bathroom.

For a moment, I consider putting it off until after I call my mother but dealing with her inevitable “Christmas is ruined” meltdown will be even more miserable in elf gear.

Bending down, I collect my carry-on, chucking a few stray bottles into the bin before dragging my suitcase away and lifting it onto a row of empty seats.

I unzip the side and splay it open to reveal...beef jerky.

No, not *beef* jerky. This jerky has a holiday theme.

“What the...” I reach down, moving one of the plastic bags of Rompin' Reindeer Jerky aside to reveal more jerky beneath. There have to be at least thirty packages squeezed into this small gray suitcase that looks exactly like *my* gray suitcase.

But it isn't.

Sometime during the hectic rush through security, I must have grabbed someone else's bag by mistake. And now, that person has my change of clothes, my reading material, my iPad, and most of my toiletries.

“Rats,” I curse, scratching at my ass again.

I’m really digging in there, rummaging around in my fluffy panties like the Grinch after Whoville’s Christmas presents, when a deep voice murmurs from behind me. “I think you have my bag.”

I spin, my cheeks already flushing from the shame of being caught mid-ass-scratch.

Then I see whose bag I managed to steal and want to sink straight through the floor.

It’s Bear Hanson.

Bear, the rock star of the cat influencer world.

Bear, my former best online friend, and the last man I kissed.

Bear, a guy I’m pretty sure would like to turn *me* into jerky for treating him the way I have.

But he also appears to have a broken leg. If I decide to make a run for it to avoid confrontation, he probably won’t be able to catch me.

I’m assuming that’s the reason for the cast that stretches from above his knee, down to his sock-covered foot, and the little red scooter he’s currently driving. But even injured, Bear is an intimidating figure. His broad shoulders dwarf the motorized vehicle, his thick arms strain the seams of his dark green sweater, and his head is nearly level with mine, even though he’s sitting down.

He’s deliciously enormous, like a big sexy teddy bear, with a cat tattoo on his neck that gives him a bad boy edge my inner good girl can’t resist.

Truly. I can’t resist him. At all.

Which is why I ghosted him. I had to. I never would have had the internal fortitude to say “No, I can’t date you,” like I meant it if Bear and I were in the same room.

Even a phone call felt dangerous.

I can’t trust myself with this man. When I’m with him, I forget all my rules and my very good reasons for remaining single. As long as I’m a single career girl, I’ll never make the same mistake my mother made, the one that left her wondering “what if I’d chosen another path” for so long.

So long, there was no way her daughter could miss the fact that sometimes her mom didn’t seem happy to be a mom...

“Dipsy?” Bear’s green eyes meet mine, widening slightly in recognition before narrowing in a way that makes me feel like prey.

Very small, very itchy prey, with nowhere to run...

## Chapter Two



BEAR HANSON

*A man whose Christmas wish just  
came true...with a side of butt scratching.*

There she is.  
Dipsy.

Like I conjured her with my thoughts.

When the man at security said he'd seen a woman dressed as an elf running this way with a suitcase like mine, I never imagined it might be someone I knew, let alone the only woman I haven't been able to get out of my head for the past three months.

This is fate. Destiny. It has to be.

What other explanation is there? I always fly out of Chicago, not St. Louis, but a meeting with a potential sponsor and two flight delays have me flying out a day late from an unfamiliar airport.

Fate clearly had plans for our paths to cross.

So why does she look so...less than thrilled to see me?

"I'm sorry," she blurts out with a rush of breath.

“For what?” I ask, wishing I could go to her without having to wrestle with the crutches tucked into the scooter’s back storage area along with her suitcase. I just want to hold her, to gather her against me and promise we can get past whatever it is that made her ghost me.

But thanks to the idiot mobsters who kidnapped my cat over Thanksgiving and the broken kneecap I sustained getting away from them, simple things are no longer simple.

Which may be for the best right now.

Dipsy doesn’t look like she wants a hug.

She looks like she wants to make a run for it.

“I’m not mad,” I assure her, hoping that will ease her anxiety, but it only seems to make things worse.

She brings two fingers to rub between her brows. “Are you sure about that? My goofball stray cat knocked up your pure-bred Persian.”

I shrug. “Doesn’t bother me at all. I told you that. I even offered you pick of the litter. Didn’t you get my message?”

“I got it.” She bites her lip. “I just didn’t think you meant it.”

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

She mutters something I can’t quite make out, but before I can ask her to repeat herself, she pushes on, “And Clyde is so small. I worried she might not make it through the delivery without complications. Then I heard she’d been catnapped right around the time she was supposed to give birth...” She shakes her head, sending her red hair swishing around her shoulders, making my fingers itch to thread through the silky soft strands. “I was positive you must hate me *and* Hambone.”

My forehead furrows. “Why?”

“For putting Clyde in even greater danger than she would have been if she were just missing and not in the middle of bringing new life into the world.”

“I don’t hate anyone,” I assure her. “And Clyde and the kittens are all home safe with the cat sitter and doing great.” I smile. “There are five of them. Three that look like Clyde, one that’s all gray, and one ginger like Hambone, but fluffier.”

Her expression softens. “Aw. I bet he’s adorable.”

“She,” I correct, my smile widening. “I made sure to ask the vet before they were named this time. Didn’t want to confuse people all over again.”

“I think it’s cool that you have a girl cat named Clyde. It gives her layers.” Dipsy clears her throat. “So...a suitcase full of Reindeer jerky?”

“Gifts. For friends. Orphans’ Christmas gets bigger every year. We’re meeting up in Los Angeles.” I glance toward the snow streaking past the windows and add, “Or, we were. We’ll have to see how quickly the storm clears.”

Her lips turn down. “That’s sad. I mean, it’s great that you have each other, but also sad. My parents drive me crazy, but I can’t imagine the holidays without them.”

“Yeah, but a lot of my friends don’t know what they’re missing,” I murmur, thinking about that night at the cat convention, when Dipsy crawled into my lap and kissed me until the room spun, making me very aware of what I’d been missing. “I’m just grateful that I had a lot of good times with my family before Mom and Dad passed and my brothers moved so far away.”

“Right. Of course,” she says, wincing. “I’m sorry, that was a stupid thing to say.”

“Stop apologizing.” I sigh before adding in a softer voice, “I’m not looking for apologies. An explanation would be nice, but...”

I trail off, my pulse picking up as I wait for her to respond.

Instead, she clears her throat and points to my cast. “What happened to your leg? Are you okay? Do you need a hand getting to your gate? My flight was cancelled, so I’m happy to help. I don’t have anywhere to be.”

“I can’t really talk about it,” I say, which is partially true. Everything that went down with the Sweetwater mob is classified FBI and CIA business, but I could answer some of those questions if I wanted to.

But I don’t.

I’m more interested in *getting* answers than giving them out. “Why are you in St. Louis?” I ask, hoping a conversational softball might help dissolve the awkwardness.

This isn’t like Dipsy. Up until the day she ghosted me, she was an open book. I never had to ask what she was feeling or thinking. She either told me or the truth was right there on her face when we jumped on Skype for our Saturday afternoon chats.

Now, her expression is guarded, and her lips give nothing away.

“Top secret elf business for Santa,” she says with a self-conscious shrug. “And a guest spot for a St. Louis news station I’ve been working for lately on top of my Bad Dog stuff. Their fluff piece woman is out on maternity leave.”

*What about D.C.? I want to ask. What about hard-hitting journalism and having your own news show some day like Rachel Maddow?*

But I know better than to go there.

Instead, I say, “Nice. How did it go?”

“Good.” She flaps her hands at her sides. “Before filming ran late and I ended up sprinting through the airport like a crazy person with a stranger’s suitcase.” Her gaze returns to mine, her blue eyes filling with an emotion I can’t name. “And then you weren’t a stranger. You were you. And I feel terrible, Bear, but you can’t ask me to explain myself. I’m too embarrassed, and my explanation wouldn’t fix anything anyway.” She steps closer, close enough for me to smell the sweet floral notes of her signature perfume. “And that’s why I’m going to grab my suitcase and go. I’m sorry.”

I reach out, circling her wrist with my fingers as she starts past me.

Even that small touch is enough to send electricity sizzling up my arm. Judging from the way her breath catches and her full lips part, I’d bet the proceeds from this year’s Clyde the Belching Kitten dolls that she feels it, too. (Clyde dolls were the hot ticket of the holiday season, so that isn’t a small bet.)

But I’d still make it.

Now that she’s close, that feeling from September is back and stronger than ever.

When I look at this woman, when I touch her, I know this is where I’m meant to be. With her. Always. Maybe it’s crazy, but it’s also a truth I can’t deny and a feeling I don’t want to fight.

“Don’t, Dipsy,” I say, my voice husky and low. “I know we can get through this. Just talk to me.”

“I can’t.” Her eyes begin to shine. “I have to go to the bathroom and change. Or I need to scratch. My elf panties are so itchy, Bear. It’s ridiculous.”

“I noticed,” I say, remembering thinking the woman in the elf costume had a beautiful backside, even before I realized she was my woman.

*Mine.*

I want that more than anything, and it’s not too late to fix whatever went wrong between us. I just need to take things slow, treat Dipsy like one of the feral strays I used to help socialize back at the animal shelter in high school.

She’ll come around. She has to.

Destiny doesn’t make mistakes, and the fact that we’re both here at the same time with matching suitcases is too much to be a mere coincidence.

“Hit the bathroom. I’ll wait here.” I relax my hold on her wrist, sliding my hand down until my fingers are wrapped around hers. “My flight was cancelled, too. I’ll see if I can make a reservation for two for the Credit Express lounge. We can get a bite to eat, have a glass of wine, and catch up. No stress. We don’t have to talk about the past at all if you don’t want to.”

*Because I’m way more interested in your future,* I add silently.

Her fingers flex around mine for a beat before she releases them with a tight nod. “Okay. I *am* hungry. I think I’d be even hungrier if I weren’t so itchy.”

I smile. “Then we have a plan.”

“Right. A plan. A plan is good. Even when it doesn’t work out.” She clears her throat, adding in a softer voice, “That’s what happened with D.C. They laid off the man who hired me two days after I arrived. His replacement then proceeded to fire everyone *he’d* hired in the past six months. I couldn’t find another job fast enough to pay for my expensive D.C. apartment, so I had to leave. Now, I live in my parents’ basement.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks,” I say, trying to play it cool. I don’t want her to know how excited I am that she’s opening up to me again.

Not yet, not until I know what prompted the ghosting in the first place.

“Yeah, it does. But not as much as these stupid panties.” She smiles. “I’ll be right back.” She collects her suitcase from the back of my scooter, extends the handle, and rolls it across the gleaming floor toward the ladies’ room near gate 53D.

I watch her go, hoping this is the start of a Christmas Eve neither of us will ever forget.

## Chapter Three



DIPSY

“No.” I point a stern finger at my flushed face in the reflection. “You are not going to fall in love with this man. Not in ten days or ten hours, let alone ten flipping minutes.”

But that’s the problem.

That’s why I had to cut off contact after that one amazing night in September.

There’s just something about Bear... He’s gorgeous, obviously, but that’s only a tiny part of the attraction. It’s the way he looks at me that drives me crazy. He looks at me like he really sees me—*me*, not the cute, mannerly, easy-to-put-in-a-box girl everyone else sees.

Bear recognizes my ambition and believes I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. Bear understands that a woman can be a soft-spoken, book-loving cat nerd and still want to be a force in national news reporting. If I let myself fall for Bear, I know I would be accepted—*celebrated*—for the person I truly am.

But Bear is also very happy in Chicago, his lifelong home. He told me in September that he couldn’t imagine leaving his community, his friends, and his surrogate family behind. What kind of jerk would I be to ask him to abandon his well-

rounded life to follow a cub reporter around the country from crappy job to crappy job?

What if he'd been with me in D.C.? What if he'd uprooted his entire world to follow me across the country, only for me to lose my job in three flipping days?

Sure, Bear makes the kind of money that would have made it easy to pay our rent, but we would have both been stranded far from home, friends, and family. Bear can run Clyde's social media from anywhere, but his house-flipping business is based in the Chicago area. He might not have been able to keep that going from a distance. It would have been one loss after another, and I'm sure he would have come to resent me.

Sooner or later, he would have put his foot down, insisted we go back to Chicago, and I would have been doomed to live out a big-city version of my mother's unfulfilled life.

Mom wanted to be a ballet dancer. She had a scholarship to Julliard, part-time modeling work with a prestigious athletic wear designer, and a super cool attic apartment in the West Village. And then she met dad the summer between her sophomore and junior years of college and fell in love with a man who couldn't imagine leaving Bad Dog or his family behind.

By July, she was engaged.

By August, she'd withdrawn from Julliard and moved back to her tiny hometown for good.

She taught dance for a few years before she got pregnant with me and became a stay-at-home mom, but it wasn't the same. She never fulfilled her dream of dancing with the New York City Ballet or felt the rush of performing for a crowd with dancers as skilled as she was ever again. She still can't

watch The Nutcracker ballet without tearing up and running to hide in her and Dad's bedroom, and I can't completely silence the voice in my head that says I'm part of the reason her dreams never came true.

Deep down, I know my mother adores me and wouldn't take back a day of her life with Dad for all the fame and dance accolades in the world, but that's only because she fell in love.

Love changes things. It changes people. It gives and it takes away.

For every beautiful dream love makes come true, it takes another off the table. It simply isn't possible to have it all, at least not all at once. There are only so many hours in the day, so many years in a lifetime.

I know enough hardworking newswomen who are struggling to juggle marriage, motherhood, and work to think it's easy. No matter how hard they try, they inevitably drop a ball. Sometimes two.

Caroline Cash, my mentor, once left her baby at daycare four hours late because she was so busy researching a story. And never remembered her husband's birthday or work events. Marcus was so upset by it, he wanted to go to couples' therapy, but there wasn't time in Caroline's schedule. Now, they're separated, and she only sees her three-year-old on weekends. The court sided with Marcus when he claimed a woman who was anchoring the news until ten p.m. every night didn't have the capacity to set a dependable bedtime routine for a toddler.

It's heartbreaking, and I'm sure Caroline wishes she could go back and put off having kids until she had more seniority built up at work.

When I fall in love, I want to make nurturing my relationship with my husband and spoiling any children we're lucky enough to have my top priority. But I can't do that right now. I'm focused on my career. If I don't break through to the next level soon, I could be stuck doing mindless color pieces for small-town news stations for the rest of my life.

Or until I age out of being the cute girl reporter...

The life cycle of a newswoman's career is still much shorter than that of a *newsman's*. Just ask that Canadian reporter who was fired after she let her hair go gray during the pandemic. Gray on a man is "distinguished and wise." Gray on a woman means "old news," and old news is always bad news.

I hope the world is a different place by the time I'm in my fifties or sixties, but in the meantime, I have to live and work in *this* world. I have to push hard for professional success while I'm young.

Which means I can't afford to fall in love.

Which means I should go straight to the stinky food court and drink coffee alone—do not go to the swanky lounge with Bear, do not eat yummy food or drink wine or fall any further under his spell.

My lips turn down and the elf in the reflection suddenly looks very sad, indeed.

"Well, tough," I tell her, this weak version of me who wants to play with fire. "Sometimes right choices are painful choices." I scratch at my bottom again, emitting an angsty groan as the tulle slides between my thighs, reminding me that chafing is more than a backside-focused issue.

Time to change into something more comfortable. Surely, my resolve will be stronger once my outfit isn't an instrument

of torture.

Bending down, I open my suitcase on the bathroom floor, planning to extract my clothes before retreating into a stall to dress. But when I part the zipper and flip open the top, it isn't my cozy red sweater or comfy travel jeans I see.

It's...

I slam the suitcase closed again, my cheeks burning.

Surely, my eyes are playing tricks on me. Why would anyone board a plane with a carry-on full of...

I open the lid a few inches, but the contents have not transformed into my clothes, toiletries, and reading material. The suitcase is still full of giant, sticky-looking purple dildos with disturbingly realistic, vein-covered balls bulging at their base.

It's been a while since I've seen a penis. So long I've started to miss their ugly breed of cuteness. Penises are weird looking, for sure, but they're also fun and eager to play...kind of like puppies.

But *these* penises are nothing like puppies. They look like what Barney the purple dinosaur would be packing in an X-rated film. And they probably cause cancer. That plastic looks way too sticky to be safely inserted into a warm, moist environment.

PVCs can cause irreversible reproductive damage. I did a story on them last year—a story my boss gave to Caroline to report because he didn't think anyone would take a "freckled-face redhead" seriously when it came to their sexual health.

For a moment, I'm tempted to toss the dildos in the trash to save the vaginas of the innocent, but the law-abiding person within can't bring herself to dispose of another person's

property. After all, they might be using these dildos for some other purpose than actual dildoeing. Like an art project or a puppet show. Add a pair of googly eyes and a jaunty hat to one of these bad boys and he'd make a pretty convincing—albeit repulsive—puppet.

I close the case and zip it up, sighing as I realize this continuing fiasco means I'm stuck in elf gear for the foreseeable future. There are shops in the airport, but I'm not about to drop hundreds of dollars on "I Love St. Louis" leggings and a sweatshirt. I'll just have to hope that glass of wine in the lounge is enough to take the itchy edge off.

*Better if it doesn't. The more you're distracted by chafing, the less mental energy you'll have to obsess about how much you want Bear to touch you again.*

"Good thinking," I mutter aloud, giving my reflection one last firm look in mirror. Then, I head outside to face the biggest threat to my career-focused life and the sexiest, kindest man I've ever met.

It's a damn shame the two are one and the same.

## Chapter Four



BEAR

The lounge is packed, every couch and plush chair occupied by someone whose flight has been cancelled or postponed. I'm sure we're all hoping to be rebooked before it gets too late, but the number of pillows and blankets spread out on the blue velvet furniture gives testament to the fact that many of us expect to spend Christmas Eve in the St. Louis airport.

Dipsy is determined to do so in an elf costume. She stubbornly refused my offers to buy her something else to wear after we returned yet another wrong suitcase to the airport's customer service desk.

Where its contents caused quite a commotion...

I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone blush as red as Dipsy did when describing the carry-on full of purple dildos. I was tempted to pull out my cell and snap a picture and absolutely laughed my ass off as soon as we were out of earshot of the frazzled-looking airport staff.

"Stop," she'd hissed, her dimples popping. "It isn't funny. Those things are dangerous."

"Dangerous?" I'd arched a brow. "How big were they?"

She flushed pink again as she shook her head. "No, not that. The plastic. It was the bad kind, the kind that isn't safe

for...that sort of stuff. But the size was nothing to sniff at, either. Certainly nothing your average person would want to encounter in the bedroom.”

That had sobered me up pretty quick.

I’m a big man and not just when it comes to my height and fighting weight. My last serious girlfriend found my size uncomfortable at times, especially if we ran out of lube, and she wasn’t nearly as tiny as Dipsy. There’s a part of me that worries that Dipsy and I might have similar issues.

*Talk about putting the cart before the horse.*

*Or the cock before the kiss...*

The inner voice makes a good point. Since she emerged from the bathroom, Dipsy has been careful not to stand too close, let alone do anything that could be construed as flirting or romantic encouragement.

But the air between us is still charged, electric, a fact that makes our small couch in the corner of the crowded lounge feel even smaller.

“Pardon my reach,” I say, leaning over to prop my crutches against Dipsy’s side of the couch, out of the way of the kids running back and forth between the water station and the ice cream bar, squealing.

“No worries.” Her voice is breathier than it was before, and her gaze lingers on my lips for a beat before she clears her throat. “So, are you going to tell me what happened with that?” She casts a meaningful glance at my cast.

I settle back onto my side of the cushion, the sweet smell of her perfume teasing at my nose again. She smells so damned good. Her perfume, but also just...her. She’s the type of woman who should be named after a flower.

Which gives me an idea...

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll trade you a cast story for a name story. I’d love to know how you went from Rose to Dipsy.”

She rolls her eyes with a laugh, but nods. “Sure. But you go first. I’m sure your story is more interesting.”

“Not really,” I say. “I was at the warehouse about a month ago, checking on my stock of Clyde dolls, when an out-of-control semitruck slammed into a door nearby. The door flew off the hinges and into my kneecap. It shattered, and I’m in a cast for two months.”

She gives a full body wince. “Oh my God, Bear. That’s horrible. I’m so sorry. I had no idea! Your social feed has been so happy and Clyde-tastic lately. I had no idea you’d been through something like that.”

“I’ve been keeping it pretty quiet. I had enough of the spotlight when Clyde was gone.” I smile, trying not to read too much into the fact that Dipsy’s still tuned in to my social media. It’s Clyde she can’t get enough of, not me. “Time for the cameras and the attention to be back on the cats where it belongs. And I’m healing well. After physical therapy, I should be back to normal. It’s just going to take time.”

Her forehead furrows sympathetically. “I’m so glad, but still... That’s awful. Was the guy driving the truck drunk or something?”

“Something like that,” I say evasively, not wanting to flat-out lie to her, though I can’t share many more details.

Matty McGuire and his CIA friends made it clear this is a story they’d prefer I keep to myself.

She cocks her head. “So, this happened a month ago... right before Clyde came home.” Her jaw drops. “It was the

people who took her, wasn't it? Did they come after you with a baseball bat? Did you have to fight them with your bare hands to rescue your sweet baby princess? Did she belch in their faces and claw up their mean, catnapping fingers the way we were all hoping she would?"

I laugh. "No, it was a truck and a flying door. But you're not completely wrong."

"I knew it! I knew I smelled a story." She leans closer, her clever eyes flashing. "Tell me all the scandalous details. I promise I won't say a word."

"Said the ace reporter," I murmur.

"Cub reporter," she counters. "And I'm off duty."

"Your elf costume would say otherwise." I let my gaze rake down her tight velvet dress to her striped tights and back up again. When our eyes connect, there's an audible sizzle in the air.

Okay, so that was probably the chef at the stir fry station behind us adding oil to his pan, but still...

I want to touch her so badly. I want to cup her face in my hands and tell her how beautiful she is, to kiss every freckle on her nose, to curl my hand around her thigh beneath the table and squeeze, a silent promise that as soon as we're alone, I'll touch her in all the places she likes best.

A few of which I'm acquainted with already...

Back in September, we kept our clothes on, but even through her tight sweater, I could tell how much Dipsy loved nipple play. I've jerked off at least a dozen times to the memory of her squirming in my lap, whispering how good my hands felt on her breasts. I wake from dreams of her nipples tight on my tongue at least once a week and would gladly

donate all two million dollars of my profits from the Clyde doll to charity in exchange for an hour with my mouth on her bare skin.

I know I could drive her wild, give her the pleasure she's been missing, prove to her that our chemistry is something too intense to be denied.

Dipsy exhales, her lips so close to mine that I can feel her breath warm on my chin. "Yeah, well, they'll probably find my suitcase soon. Then I can change."

"Unless the person who took it by accident is already on a plane to Orlando."

"No, not Orlando," she whispers theatrically. "Anywhere but Orlando."

"What's wrong with Orlando?" the scruffy man next to us says in a sleep rough voice. He sucks in a snort through his large nose and sits up straighter in his chair, adjusting the lump beneath his red and green holiday sweater. "I'm an Orlando original. Born and raised."

"Oh, nothing's wrong with it," Dipsy says, beaming one of her irresistible smiles his way. "I was just joking. Though Orlando is pretty far away from where I'm headed tonight, so it would be sad if my luggage ended up there."

The man snorts again and swallows a wad of something I don't want to think about. "None of us are going anywhere tonight. This Yankee weather is a shit show. If I make it home, I'm never leaving The Sunshine State in December again. Thank God I have Gavin here to keep me calm, or I wouldn't get a wink of sleep. Thinking about taking off tomorrow in five inches of snow and ice crusted on the wings is enough to

give a man indigestion.” He pats the lump beneath his sweater again.

This time, it pats back, a tiny hand pressing up on the fabric before the creature burrows closer to his chest with a soft chirping sound.

Beside me, Dipsy’s eyes widen. “Gavin? And Gavin is...a long, skinny bird?”

The man’s faded gray eyes crinkle at the edges. “Nope.” His smile stretches wider as he lifts the bottom of his sweater, revealing the tip of a scaled tail. “Gator. And a real good boy, just like his mama. Sheila had to stay home this time, though. She gets sick to her stomach sitting on my lap on a plane, and holiday flights are too expensive to buy an extra seat.” He strokes Gavin again from head to tail. “But this little guy’s still a baby. Small enough to tuck in a cat carrier and cuddle under daddy’s shirt. Ain’t that right, Gavin?”

The alligator chirps again, a surprisingly sweet sound that nevertheless has Dipsy gripping my hand tight enough to make my knuckles ache beneath the table.

“Great,” she says in a strained voice. “That’s...really great.” She turns to me with wide eyes, mouthing, “I need to leave the area. Immediately.”

I nod and glance past her to our new friend. “Well, good luck. And safe travels. We’re going to go grab something from the bar. How’s the hot toddy?” I ask, nodding toward the empty mug with the cinnamon stick sticking out of it on the table near his elbow.

He grunts. “Not bad. They weren’t stingy with the whiskey, but I could use another. Hard to sleep with all these kids running around screaming their heads off. Back when I

was a kid, my mama would box our ears if we started caterwauling like that in public.”

“I’m sure they’ll quiet down soon,” Dipsy says. “And we can order another drink for you while we’re at the bar.”

“Well, thank you kindly, ma’am,” the man says, visibly perking up as he takes a closer look at Dipsy. “You’re the sweetest elf I’ve seen today. Nearly as cute as that girl on the news. As soon as she came on the screen, the hellions settled down for a few minutes and listened up. They were glued to those tips for spotting Santa, I tell you.”

Dipsy’s cheeks flush. “That’s good to hear. Happy holidays. Nice to meet you and Gavin.”

“You, too,” he says, pulling down the top of his sweater this time to reveal the narrow snout of a baby alligator and two glassy, pale green eyes. “Say thank you to the nice lady, Gavin. You can lick some more whiskey off Daddy’s finger when our fresh drink comes.” He glances up as he strokes the alligator’s nose. “He’s teething. My mama always said nothing better for a teething baby than a little whiskey.”

Dipsy makes a non-committal sound and hands me my crutches as I stand. We wave goodbye and start toward the bar on the other side of the room.

Dipsy keeps her peace until we’re out of Alligator Man’s earshot, then hisses, “We have to say something right? Surely, the lounge staff don’t realize there’s a drunk alligator under his sweater.”

“We don’t know that he’s drunk,” I say. “I’m not sure how alligator’s metabolize alcohol.”

She narrows her eyes up at me, making me laugh.

“I think it’s fine,” I say. “He seems to be keeping Gavin under wraps. And if it really is an emotional support animal, I’m sure he has paperwork for it. It’s probably legal and at this point doesn’t seem to be hurting anyone.”

She slides up to the last two empty seats at the far end of the bar, pulling out one high stool for me before hopping up into the one beside it. “You’re a better person than I am. I’m all for emotional support, but not when it comes from a reptile capable of biting my arm off. If I sat down on a plane next to a guy with a full-grown alligator in the seat beside him, I’d be lobbying hard for a move to first class and a suit of armor.”

“Agreed,” I say, leaning my crutches against the bar and taking the empty seat. “If Sheila were here, I’d be more concerned. Tensions are running high enough without throwing a mama alligator into the mix.”

“Yeah,” Dipsy agrees. “It’s chaotic.”

She casts a glance around the crowded bar and the dining area beyond, where more kids are running wild, screaming with excitement, or wailing with despair over being denied another ice cream cone, while several businessmen in suits hold loud meetings via zoom, oblivious to the people trying to hold normal conversations around them. There’s also a group of drunk frat boys shooting tequila by the fireplace, getting dangerously close to the flames, and a family of three who’s taken over a table for eight, earning themselves glares from all the unseated people juggling their appetizer plates as they lean against the wall.

And all around them, are overworked staff, doing their best to combat the mess without a word of thanks from seventy percent of the guests.

Dipsy turns back to me, whispering, “Are rich people always this savage? Or is this a crowded lounge on Christmas Eve thing? This is my first time in a lounge.”

I sigh. “This is pretty bad, but no, it’s not a Christmas Eve thing. As far as I can tell, rich people are as savage as the rest of the population, they’re just better dressed and have fancier watches. Not that I spend much time with them. My best friends are all electricians and drywall guys.”

She smiles. “I like that about you. You haven’t let the fame and money go to your head.”

“Same to you.”

She frowns. “What?”

“The fame,” I say, nodding back toward Alligator Man. “I bet you get recognized all the time.”

“Oh no, not really.” She laughs. “Well, I mean, I do, but it’s not a big deal. Most people just like the fact that I make them laugh or feel better about being a klutz. I’m not really famous, and I’m certainly not rich. Local news pays just enough to keep a girl reporter above the poverty line and living with her parents.”

“I think you’re selling yourself short,” I say. “I know you want to get your hands dirty with some hard-hitting news, but there’s something to be said for bringing people joy and escape. You make people happy, and you should be paid adequate compensation for that. You should ask for a raise.”

She snort-laughs, as if the very idea is absurd. “Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Why not? Why should the people who bring us the sad, violent stories make a better living than you do?”

She blinks, as if she's never considered that before. "I don't know. But they do. That's the way it's always been and things in the news world are slow to change. Besides, I do like the option to go deep sometimes. I love making people smile, but it feels good to help out in a crisis, too. Like when all the go-to local reporters were trapped in their homes during the flood over Thanksgiving, and I got to be out in the field on a serious story for once. That was such a rush."

"And you killed it." She casts a surprised glance my way, and I add, "I saw your report while I was in a hotel room with Clyde. You did a great job. I couldn't look away."

"Yeah?" she asks, leaning closer.

"Yeah," I assure her. "When you're around, I have a hard time looking anywhere else."

She exhales, her full lips parting softly. "Bear, I—"

Before she can finish, the bartender appears before us, asking in a frazzled, but forcefully cheery voice, "What can I get you two?"

Dipsy flinches in her seat before turning toward the young brunette in the Santa hat with a smile. "I'll have a glass of Chardonnay, please."

"And I'll have a hot toddy," I say, motioning toward the other room. "And the man with the gray hair in the Christmas sweater would like to order one for his table, as well."

The bartender nods, reaching for the wine beneath the bar. "Got it. Anything else for you? You can order burgers or sandwiches here if you aren't feeling the buffet."

"A burger actually sounds amazing," Dipsy says, arching a brow my way. "What about you, Bear?"

“Yeah, I’d love a burger, too,” I say.

“Got it. Thanks for your patience. The food should be out in a few.” The bartender finishes our drinks and steps away to punch our order into the computer. I pull out my wallet, extracting a ten-dollar bill to leave on the bar.

Dipsy studies me over the rim of her wineglass, seeming pleased.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re a generous tipper,” she says. “That’s hot.”

I arch a brow. “Yeah?”

She sips her wine, looking a little flustered, but not averting her gaze as she adds, “Yeah. You’re going to make someone a very lucky woman someday.”

“Someone?” I ask, hoping she can hear in my voice how much I want that someone to be her. How much I want to get past whatever went wrong in September and give this thing growing between us another chance. We were online, long-distance friends for months before we met in person at the cat convention, connecting on everything from our love of cats to our passion for junk food to our belief that no dream is impossible if you’re willing to keep working to make it come true.

I’ve missed my friend the past few months as much as I’ve missed the tempting woman who stole my heart with a single kiss.

“Yes, someone...” she murmurs, tipping her head closer.

I mirror her movement, my pulse picking up as her lips near mine. We’re inches away from our second kiss, a kiss I hope to transition into a serious conversation about giving

dating a shot, when a child's voice shouts, "Mommy, it's a lizard! A lizard with big teeth!"

Dipsy and I rear back, our horrified gazes connecting for a beat before a woman screams. "Alligator! There's an alligator in the Chex Mix!"

I jerk my attention toward her voice to see that she's correct. Alligator Man is passed out in his seat again, snoring, while somehow Gavin has found his way across the lounge, up onto a cabinet, and into a bowl of holiday Chex Mix.

The woman's panic spreads like wildfire. Soon, half the lounge is screaming or crying, while the remainder streams toward the exit amidst calls for security.

Dipsy and I stay seated as the first wave dashes past us. But when Gavin slithers out of the Chex Mix with a chirp, baring his baby alligator teeth as he weaves his way toward the cappuccino machine, Dipsy bolts from her seat so fast, she nearly knocks over the stool.

"Gotta go," she says, catching it before it tumbles over. "Can't stay in Alligator Land. Not even for a juicy and delicious burger."

Gathering my crutches, I slip out of my chair. "Lead the way. I'm following you."

Gratitude floods her expression. "Thank you so much." She pushes up on tiptoe to press a kiss to my cheek, a kiss I feel all the way through the lounge, past the luggage storage area where Dipsy collects my jerky-filled suitcase, and down the elevator to where my scooter waits for us by the entrance.

I'm still thinking about it when I slide into the scooter's leather seat and nod toward the slightly raised section on the back. "Get on. I'll be your getaway car."

After a beat of hesitation, Dipsy climbs onto the seat behind me, her thighs on either side of mine, her arms wrapped around my waist, and her scratchy panties so close to the small of my back, I can feel the stiff fabric poking through my sweater to irritate the skin beneath.

She must be absolutely miserable.

As I turn the scooter on, I tell her, “I’m taking you shopping. Now. No arguments.”

“Bossy, bossy,” she murmurs, but as I pull out into the terminal, zooming toward the shops in the distance, she doesn’t protest.

A beat later, I feel her cheek resting on my back and my chest goes tight.

This is it; this is where we need to be.

Together. Just me and her against the world.

And just like that, I have a plan...

## Chapter Five



DIPSY

Another mirror, another chance to talk some sense into myself...

But as I stand in the changing room at Plane Potato, an athleisure store specializing in comfy travel duds, I'm too surprised by my reflection to bother.

"You're right." I raise my voice to be heard on the other side of the canvas curtain separating the changing space from the rest of the store. I laugh, smoothing my hands over the green velvet tracksuit jacket and matching pants. "It looks awesome."

"I told you," Bear answers from somewhere outside. "I'm cracked at fashion, woman. Here, try this on."

More clothing sails over the curtain, landing on my head. I laugh again as I collect the items—a bulky cream cable-knit sweater and a pair of gray cashmere pants. The sweater is comfortingly heavy with a beautiful texture, and the pants are so butter soft, they make me want to curl up and snuggle with them on the floor. I reach into the waistband, looking for a price tag, but can't find one.

"Don't worry about the price," Bear says, reading my mind with eerie precision. "They're on sale."

“How deeply on sale?” I ask, running my fingers down the silky fabric. I shouldn’t even try them on, but they’re so soft, I can’t resist.

“Super sale,” he says. “And if you like them, it’s on me.”

“No way. I have money, and I’m the one who decided I couldn’t stand another second in elf gear.” I fight a moan as I pull the lush pants up to my waist. “Wow,” I say, my voice breathier than it was before. “These are really nice.”

“Kind of like your legs are wrapped in the fur of a hundred whisper-soft kittens, right?” he rumbles from the other side of the curtain.

“Exactly.” I grin as I tilt my head closer to the canvas, enjoying the stolen moment. Here, behind the curtain, it’s okay to let my guard down. I don’t have to watch my expression or try to force my body farther away from Bear’s on the tiny scooter seat.

Here, I can just feel what I feel...as bittersweet as it is.

I can’t let this thing with Bear go any further than it has already. Laying my cheek on his strong back while he drove was okay. I can chock that up to needing comfort after the trauma of seeing a baby alligator playing in a bowl of Chex Mix like it was the ball pit at a kid’s birthday party. But anything more than that would be a mistake, a big mistake. Bear’s life is headed one way, my life is headed in another. Falling for each other would only cause us both unnecessary pain.

I know this deep down in my bones.

Still, it’s probably okay to whisper, “I think I’ve developed an instant and profound addiction to cashmere. You’re going to turn me into a junkie, Hanson.”

He chuckles low in his throat. “Well, there are worse things.”

“Worse things than being a girl on a polyester budget with luxury wool tastes?”

“The polyester budget is only temporary. You’re going to ask for a raise, citing the popularity of your segments. And if you don’t get it, you’ll put together a reel and start applying at other news stations.”

I hum uncertainly. “I don’t know about that. Sounds like a good way to get fired.”

“Good. If you get fired, it’ll give that extra push you need to find a better job.”

“I guess.” I slide the jacket off and the wool sweater on, breath catching as my head emerges from the top. “Wow.”

“Nice?” he asks.

“It’s gorgeous,” I say, running my hands over my slightly fuzzy hair. “I thought I was too pale to wear white.”

“It’s not white, it’s cream,” he says. “That makes all the difference.”

On impulse, I open the curtain. Bear turns from the sweater display a few feet away, glancing at me over his shoulder. His green eyes widen, then narrow on mine, making the temperature in the store shoot up several degrees.

He shifts around on his crutches, leaning against the shelves behind him as his gaze rakes up and down my frame. “Stunning.”

“Thanks,” I say, my cheeks heating. “So, how did you become so wise in the ways of women’s clothing? Ex-girlfriend who used to make you go shopping?”

He shakes his head. “No. From flipping houses. Beautiful redheads and Victorian cottages have more in common than you’d think. Paint enough walls and choose enough fabric and you develop an eye for what colors complement each other.”

Forcing my giddy thoughts away from how much I enjoy hearing Bear tell me I’m beautiful, I cock my head, considering him. “You’re a man of hidden talents.”

“I also play a mean kazoo,” he says in a seductive rumble as he bobs his brows goofily up and down.

It makes me laugh—and tingle—at the same time. “Wow.” I tap a teasing finger to my chin. “A true Renaissance man.”

He lifts an easy shoulder. “I try. What about you? Any hidden talents?”

“No, sadly,” I say, my lips curving. “Aside from my cat photography skills and a decent singing voice, I’m pretty average.”

“Not even close,” he murmurs. “Can I pick out more things for you to try on? Or do you intend to deny me the pleasure of buying you enough clothing to fill up your new suitcase? I popped out to grab one from the store next door before it closed.” He nods toward the register, where a shiny white carry-on suitcase sits next to the counter. The girl behind it is still on her phone, giggling at whatever video she’s watching.

But who needs fashion help from a salesperson when you have Bear as a personal stylist?

“I’m paying you back for that,” I say, fighting a grin as I point a stern finger at his chest. “And I’m paying for the clothes. I have savings and these are clearly classic pieces that will be in fashion for years to come.”

“No,” Bear says.

My chin rears back. “No?”

“No,” he repeats with a smile. “I’m paying. Consider it your Christmas present.” He glances at his watch. “I don’t want to rush you, but the store’s closing in fifteen minutes and we have a dinner reservation at eight.”

Huffing out a laugh, I ask, “What? Where? I didn’t realize airport restaurants took reservations.”

“They don’t.” He selects a loosely knitted black sweater with a satin camisole underneath it from the display behind him and holds it up for consideration. Like everything else he’s picked out, it’s gorgeous. “I got us a table at The Gateway Grill, the steakhouse at The Waterhouse Suites Hotel in the international terminal.”

The girl at the register looks up suddenly, her bright pink lips parting. “Oh my God, that place is great. I went there with my dad for my eighteenth birthday last year. Get the rib eye. It has more fat on it than the other steaks, but the way they cook it with the herbed butter on top is so fire.” She sighs and her thick fake lashes flutter. “I dream about that meal all the time. It’s going to change your life.”

Bear arches a brow my way. “How can you resist an endorsement like that?” He hesitates a beat before adding in a more cautious voice, “I also took the liberty of booking a room at the hotel. They only had one left and I wanted to lock it down before someone else did. If your flight is rescheduled to leave in the next few hours, I can always stay there alone, but I’m pretty sure I’m stuck here until tomorrow morning. Figured it was better to have a bed than end up camping out in the lounge with the frisky alligators and feral children.”

Pretending my pulse isn't butterfly dancing in my throat, I nod. "That's smart. And dinner sounds wonderful."

Spending the night with him in a fancy hotel sounds even more wonderful, but I'm not going to let that happen. If my flight isn't until tomorrow morning, I'll go find an abandoned row of seats somewhere in the terminal and curl up there for the night—do not enter Bear's swanky hotel room, do not make out with his sexy face.

Anything more than a meal and a heartfelt goodbye isn't in the cards for us.

No matter how much I wish things were different.

I clear my throat, silently vowing to keep that promise to myself as I add, "But I can't let you pay for the clothes. I'll just get the green tracksuit. It's affordable and I can wear it to dinner and sleep in it tonight, too, if needed."

"Oh, stop," the girl says, rolling her eyes as her lips stretch into a grin. "You're going to ruin the Pretty Woman vibes, girl. He's trying to spoil you with clothes. Let it happen. I've been texting my friends about this romantic amazingness for the past ten minutes. If you don't let him whip out his credit card and treat you like a princess, we're all going to be so bummed."

"You do deserve to be treated like a princess," Bear says, making no effort to shut down his young accomplice.

"I do not," I say, reminding him in a hushed voice, "I ghosted you."

"But only because you're afraid of how much you want to be my girl," he says, making my heart stutter and all the blood drain from my face. "And it's not a big deal. I'm over it," he pushes on, ignoring my stunned condition as he tosses the

black sweater my way. I catch it and he says, “Try that with the black satin jeans on the rack next to you and the black leather boots on the wall. I’ll grab you some tennis shoes to wear with the other things.”

My lips part, but he cuts me off, “Come on now, we don’t have time to waste and The Gateway Grill has a dress code. No tracksuits allowed.” To the girl behind the counter, he adds, “Ring up the outfit she has on now, the green tracksuit, and the rest of the things I mentioned. I’ll bring everything else up to the checkout while she changes.”

“Everything else?” I squeak as he props his crutches under his arms and starts past me toward the register. “Like what?”

On his way by, he pauses, bending his head closer to mine. I think he was going for a cheek kiss, but I shift my head at the last second and our lips connect.

Instantly, the room is filled with skin-prickling electricity. With awareness of this big, strong, delicious-smelling man who kisses me gently, but thoroughly, before whispering against my lips, “Let me play Santa. It makes me happy.”

He pulls back, gazing down at me with such care, such gentleness and affection I can’t do anything but stammer, “Okay, th-thank you.”

Then, I flee back into the changing room, needing a second to pull myself together before I do something really stupid like climb him like a tree and rake my teeth over his strong, sexy jaw. Not only would climbing him like a tree potentially do damage to his injured leg, it would also prove I’m a weak-willed loser who can’t stick to my guns.

I suck in oxygen and mutter beneath my breath, “Stay focused. Your career is your top priority. You don’t have time

for anything else, and if you try to make time, you'll only end up doing a lot of things badly. Better to miss out on some opportunities so you can make the most of others. You can't have it all. No one can."

When I've talked myself down from my state of tingle-induced longing, I stick my head out and grab the satin jeans Bear mentioned. He's on the other side of the store, near the small selection of pajamas, making my pulse race all over again.

A man who understands the importance of a nice pair of pajamas...be still my heart.

"Seriously, be still," I hiss at the ridiculous organ as I quickly change into the all-black outfit, which looks as striking as Bear no-doubt knew it would. The loose weave of the sweater and the hint of silver in the black thread makes the top look like it's made of something metallic, an edgier style that's softened by the satin camisole beneath and matching pants.

Once I'm dressed, I open the curtain again, prepared to pad barefoot over to the boots and collect a pair of socks. But a shoebox is already waiting outside the changing room, complete with a pair of silky black knee-highs on top.

"Size six?" Bear asks from the register.

I nod, gaze fixed on the boots. "How did you know?"

"I've got a pretty good eye for sizes," he says, adding with laughter in his voice, "And I held up your elf shoes to see if I was getting close. I hope you don't mind, but I had Krissy wrap those in a spare shoe bag and put them in the suitcase. I didn't figure you'd have any need for elf shoes in the near future."

“If I never jingle when I walk again, it will be too soon,” I say, glancing up to catch his grinning gaze across the room, my heart swooping like a skydiver who’s just stepped off a ledge, giddy and free. “Thank you. You’re a force of nature.”

“He’s also a very generous man,” Krissy says, handing him a receipt over the counter along with a small bag. “Thank you, Mr. Hanson for making my Christmas Eve. That commission is going to pay for at least three credits at my junior college.” She glances my way, “I’m studying business so I can become a hedge fund manager and dismantle the finance bros’ chokehold from the inside.”

“Good for you,” I say. “Someone needs to teach those finance bros a lesson.”

“Right?” she agrees, her smile widening as I come to stand beside Bear and the suitcase he’s filled for me. When I grip the handle, I can feel that there are more than two outfits inside, but before I can insist that he let me pay him back for at least part of this, Krissy adds, “You look amazing, girl. Stick with this one. He’s got great taste. And you two are so cute together! Like if Gaston from Beauty and the Beast jumped stories to date Ariel from The Little Mermaid. Except, like, Gaston was a super nice guy and Ariel had legs and more freckles.” She props her chin on her fist. “I love your freckles, by the way. They are so in right now. Don’t you dare cover them up with foundation.”

She squeals softly as she sits up straighter. “Oh, and that reminds me! I put a free sample of my favorite liquid blush in the bag with the jewelry. We just got a bunch in, and the peach will look so good on you. That, a little black eyeliner, and a touch up with your mascara, and you’ll be ready for a romantic dinner by candlelight.”

“Speaking of, we’d better get going,” Bear says, moving backward on his crutches toward the scooter waiting outside. “After you, beautiful.”

Krissy waves from behind the register. “Have so much fun! And don’t forget to post pics from dinner on your socials. Cats are great and all, but you two are way too cute to hide behind the camera all the time. Love Tales of Hambone and everything Clyde the Belching Kitten, by the way. I’m an OG fan. Been following the feeds for years.”

“I think she just told us that we’re old,” I mutter as we move out to the scooter.

Bear turns back to me as he slides his crutches into the storage area in the back. “Well, I am. For sure. Does that... bother you?”

I jerk my focus to his face with a frown. “What?”

“I’m nine years older than you are,” he says, looking rather adorably flustered as he adds, “I did some googling when we first started messaging. You looked so young, and I didn’t want to risk having even a PG conversation with someone underage. So, I googled.”

“That’s smart and decent of you,” I say. “But no, it doesn’t bother me. Why would it? I have friends of all different ages. My mentor, Caroline, is almost forty, and we hang out all the time.”

“Good. That’s...good.” He smiles, but I can tell he’s let down by my answer.

Probably the “friends” part, but as much as I want to please him, I can’t take that back. Friends are all we can ever be, and if I’m being honest with myself, we probably can’t even be that. I can’t get any closer to Bear without wanting

more than friendship, without wanting to abandon my well-considered game plan and let him continue sweeping me off my feet.

And “off her feet” isn’t a smart place for a reporter of any kind to be, let alone one trying to break through to the next level before she runs out of time.

But we can have a lovely dinner together and a gracious goodbye.

That will be enough. It has to be.

“All right then, we should get going.” He scoots his suitcase to one side, making room for my new bag. He reaches for the handle, shooing me away when I try to insist that I can lift it in myself. “I’ve been lifting weights the entire time I’ve been in this cast. Nothing wrong with the rest of my body, just the bum knee.” He slides my suitcase into place before adding, “Though I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to drive. My knee aches less when I can lean back in the seat.”

“Sure, no problem,” I say, happy to be able to do something for him for once. It’s only when he sits down and motions for me to take the extremely tiny slice of seat left over in front of him that I hesitate.

But changing my mind now would only make it seem like I was bothered by the thought of basically sitting in Bear’s lap as I drive. Which I am, but I don’t want Bear to know it. The less he knows about the depths of my lust for him, the better.

So, I swing up to straddle his strong thighs, facing the front of the scooter, and pretend my entire body isn’t aching for him to squeeze my ass as I pull out into the terminal. I love a good ass squeeze and Bear is very good at squeezing ass, a fact he proved the last time I was in his lap.

*Don't think about that. Don't think about anything but steak and potatoes and a firm, friendly goodbye.*

I try, I really do. But by the time we reach the flag-lined entrance to the international terminal, my body is humming louder than the Christmas carols pumped through the airport speakers.

Hark hear the bells indeed...

Only this time, the bells aren't on my feet, they're in my heart, pealing out a song of thanks for every second spent this close to Bear.

## Chapter Six



BEAR

I don't want to ask the woman at the front desk if they've had a room cancellation—I want to keep Dipsy as close to me as possible for as long as possible—but the part of me that's determined to test my “destiny” theory won't stand for it.

If it's really destiny, there will still be only one room.

Only one bed...

Only one place for us to end this increasingly perfect night...

So, I do it. As soon as we cross The Waterhouse Suites Hotel's plush, candlelit lobby, where a man in a tuxedo is playing “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” on a grand piano, and several couples sit around the softly lit room on overstuffed couches drinking cocoa or mulled wine, I ask if I might be able to book another room for my friend, nodding toward Dipsy beside me.

“No, I'm sorry, sir, there's still only the one room.” The clerk glances up from the computer screen, her dark eyes apologetic as she glances between Dipsy and me. “I would offer to have a cot sent in for the living space, but we're all out of cots, too. We've had an unusually large number of last-minute guests with large families.”

“It’s fine,” Dipsy says with a dimple-popping smile. But for once it doesn’t make her look cute or wholesome. Maybe it’s all the black she’s wearing. Or the sexy heeled shoes or the eyeliner she smeared on in an airport bathroom on the way to the hotel. I’m not sure what it is, but it makes me want to kiss her even more.

“We’ll figure it out,” Dipsy continues. “Thank you for looking.”

The woman smiles. “Of course, would you like me to call a bellhop to take your bags to your room? It looks like your dinner reservation is in...” She takes another quick glance at the screen. “Five minutes.” She motions behind me, to where I left the scooter parked by the check-in desk sign. “We could take your scooter, as well, if you’re going to be using your crutches, sir.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” I say, collecting the key card she passes over and tucking it into my back pocket.

Dipsy and I leave our suitcases in the scooter’s storage area and start back across the lobby toward the understated entrance to The Gateway Grill. It’s just the restaurant’s name carved into a large oak plank that’s part of a larger oak archway, but as soon as we step through into the host area, it’s clear the eatery is going to live up to the hype.

Behind the pale blond hostess, who wears dark green velvet that matches the couches outside, is an open fireplace big enough to fit a Volkswagen Bug. Above it, the equally massive rock chimney stretches up three stories to the glass ceiling. The glass is lit by soft green light that illuminates the snow falling from the dark sky. All around the central dining area, guests tuck into delicious-smelling food at dark wood

tables on one of three floors, all open to provide a view of the cozy scene below.

As the hostess leads us to our table on the second floor, right across from the fireplace on the other side, I see the source of the muted classical music filling the room. It's a woman with a giant golden harp leaned against her shoulder. After we're seated, I look over to see Dipsy watching the woman with wonder.

"A fan of the harp?" I ask, my heart squeezing again as her gaze connects with mine.

Damn, she's beautiful in the candlelight, like a ghost from Christmas present, vibrant and alive and promising that these are the glory days. These are the days we'll look back on and wish we'd relished every hour, every second.

"I've actually never seen someone play in person before," Dipsy says in a hushed voice. "I didn't realize they were so huge. That thing has got to be bigger than she is, even when she's standing up. I wonder if it's crushing her shoulder..."

I glance down at the harpist, whose features are fixed in an expression of peaceful focus. "I don't know. She looks pretty comfortable."

Dipsy clucks her tongue softly. "Looks can be deceiving with women. I'm sure I looked comfortable while I was reporting in that elf outfit, and my mom used to smile like nothing was wrong while she was bleeding into her toe shoes on stage."

I wince. "Ouch."

She reaches for her water with a nod. "Total ouch. I used to take dance lessons when I was little, but as soon as we reached the toe shoe stage, I was done. I don't love ballet

enough to bleed for it.” She sips the water and sets it down, lips quirking as she collects her menu from the table. “This place is really nice, Bear. Thanks for bringing me here.”

“My pleasure,” I say. “Merry Christmas Eve.”

“Merry Christmas Eve.” She looks like she’s about to say more, but our server appears beside the table. The young man in the crisp white button-down shirt and dark green apron with the restaurant’s fireplace logo emblazoned on the front shares the specials, takes our order for the cranberry walnut salad and chilled lobster claws to start, and leaves us with a few suggestions from the wine list as we turn our attention to the main course.

When I glance back at Dipsy to ask if she might be interested in sharing the tomahawk steak for two—I’m a big man and in all the travel madness, I haven’t eaten since breakfast this morning—she looks shell-shocked.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“The lobster claws are sixty-five dollars, Bear,” she hisses. “That’s more than I usually spend on an entire meal. Even on a special occasion.”

I give a small shake of my head. “Don’t worry about it. It’s my treat. Think of it as another Christmas gift.”

“But you already bought me God knows how many hundreds of dollars’ worth of clothes,” she says, her brow still furrowed. “And I haven’t had a chance to get you anything and I’m... I’m not...”

“You’re not what?” I prompt when she glances down at her menu with a sigh.

She pulls in another breath, seeming to brace herself before she shifts her focus back to my face. “I’m not going to

spend the night. I can't. After dinner, I'm going to get my suitcase and find a place to sleep in the terminal. It's just a boundary I need to draw for my own well-being and—"

"And that's fine," I cut in, my tone harder than it was before. "I have money coming out of my ass. The money doesn't matter to me."

"But I—"

"And even if it did, I wouldn't use it to manipulate people," I push on. "I'm not wining and dining you to get into your pants, Rose. I'm wining and dining you because I like you and enjoy your company." I pause a moment, lifting my menu before I add in a softer voice, "Getting into your pants will be something I accomplish with charm, patience, and kissing you the way I know you're dying to be kissed."

She swallows, heat and fear creeping into her gaze in equal measure. "I can't kiss you again, Bear. Not ever." She swallows. "No matter how much I want to."

"Why not?" I ask, hating what I'm hearing but glad we're finally talking honestly about the potential between us.

"I'm focused on my career," she says. "That's it. That's the way it has to be. Multi-tasking isn't possible. That's been proven by science, and I'm a big believer in science, even though I barely passed chemistry sophomore year."

"Same," I say. "Chemistry is hard."

But it's not really. Not the kind of chemistry simmering between us, anyway. This should be easy.

"Spending time with someone you enjoy doesn't have to be, though," I add. "I don't want to distract you from your goals, Dipsy. I want to help you achieve them."

Her forehead furrows. “I know, but I would be distracted. I’m easily distracted. Like with my name. I never told you why everyone calls me Dipsy. I completely spaced on my end of the bargain.”

I shrug. “There was an alligator in the Chex Mix. Extenuating circumstances.”

“Still, I owe you and I haven’t paid up. But I will, as soon as we order,” she says, forcing a smile as the server arrives with the salad and lobster.

We choose our main dishes—rib eyes for both of us—and I order a bottle of a red blend I know isn’t too tannin-heavy. Once the server leaves, I reach for a lobster claw, dipping it lightly in the melted butter on the appetizer plate as I say, “Okay, shoot. Tell the tale of Rose Dipsy Dobbs.”

She dishes salad onto her plate. “It’s not a tale. I told you, it’s boring. I had a blood sugar condition as a kid and fainted a lot. One of the kids at preschool asked my mom if I was sick and she said ‘no, Rose is just a little bit dipsy.’ The nickname stuck.” She shrugs and stabs her lettuce with her fork. “See? Boring.”

“Not boring,” I say. “Did you like the name change?”

She frowns, chewing and swallowing before she says, “Not really. I didn’t dislike it, but it wasn’t as pretty as Rose. But once it stuck, it didn’t feel like I could change it without being a bother.”

“Then be a bother,” I say, claiming the rest of the salad. “You have the right to be a bother. Especially when it comes to your own name.”

She takes a drink of water, setting it down thoughtfully. “Well, yes, I guess, but now everyone in the tristate area

knows me as Dipsy the fun-loving girl reporter.”

“Rose,” I murmur.

Her lips part, and heat creeps back into her gaze. “Yes, Bear?”

“What would you like me to call you?”

Her fork paused in mid-air over her salad, she pulls in a breath and exhales, “Rose, please.”

“Done. It can be that easy.”

“You’re crazy.”

“You’re scared,” I counter. “But you don’t have to be. What’s the worst that could happen? We start dating, you realize you were right about falling madly in love with me distracting you from your work, and we take a break.” I collect another lobster claw. “Or...it’s fine. Maybe it’s better than fine. Maybe it’s amazing, and we’re happy and you’re successful and we have a house full of kick-ass cats and life is better than we ever imagined it could be.”

She nibbles at her bottom lip, dividing her attention between the lobster claw she’s detaching from its pre-cracked shell and my face. She looks like she’s seriously considering something—hopefully how good it would feel to relax her “work first and only” policy and let me in—but our main course arrives.

By the time the wine is poured and we’re digging into our delicious-smelling steaks, the moment has passed, and we’ve moved on to discussing how hard it would be to become a vegetarian.

Before I can find a way to guide the conversation back to us, a familiar voice rings out from the host area. “You can’t

kick me out. I have a right to be here and so does Gavin. I've got his papers, right here."

A beat later, a woman screams and murmurs of "alligator" begin echoing throughout the bottom floor.

## Chapter Seven



DIPSY...ROSE?

I've never been so glad to see an alligator in my life.

I've never been glad to see an alligator at all—I find reptiles terrifying—but watching Gavin scuttle around the fireplace and crawl nimbly up onto the small stage where the harpist is still strumming away is a relief.

Below us, people leap from their chairs, abandoning half eaten steaks as they run for the exit or climb up onto the chairs, bringing their nibble-worthy legs out of reach of the tiny gator. The harpist screams as Gavin crawls over her foot and kicks reflexively, sending him soaring into the air. But like a cat, Gavin lands on his feet and instantly starts weaving his way through the tables toward the cold seafood bar against one wall.

Two waiters give chase as another catches the now standing harpist as she faints.

From this vantage, safely on the second floor of diners and out of chomping range, Gavin doesn't seem that threatening—he's barely eighteen inches long and probably weighs less than Hambone—but those in the line of fire are understandably disturbed.

For my part, I'm grateful for an excuse to stop thinking about Bear and me.

About Bear as my boyfriend, my lover, my sexy and devoted partner who makes every night feel like Christmas Eve...

He's just so damned irresistible.

The way he believes in me, the way he makes it clear that he wants a relationship without playing games, the way he looks at me when he's thinking about kissing me...it's almost too much. My resistance is hanging by a thread and the chances an emotional support gator will be there the next time Bear nearly breaks through my walls are slim to none.

Sooner or later, my luck is going to run out.

I have to go. Now. I have to beg Bear's forgiveness and make a break for the exit. I can leave the suitcase with him in the room and maybe he can return some of the items before he flies out tomorrow for a refund. And it's not like I'm going to need that elf costume again any time soon.

But leaving right now would involve walking through the territory of a still rampaging baby gator. And it would mean leaving before I've finished the best steak I've ever been served in my life.

And it would mean leaving this man who makes me feel so seen, so beautiful, so special.

Suddenly, a thought hits me...

"Do I make you feel special?" I ask softly.

For a moment, I worry Bear hasn't heard me and doubt I'll have the gumption to ask the question again. But then he sets down his fork and knife and reaches under the table to take my hand.

“You do.” He holds my gaze in a way that makes it almost impossible to breathe. “You don’t want a relationship. You don’t want to feel anything for me aside from friendship. You’re fighting this so hard, but...you’re still here.” His full lips twitch. “You must think I’m pretty okay.”

Curling my fingers around his much larger ones, I whisper, “I think you’re the best. The very best.” I swallow past the nerves tightening my throat. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’d...wait for me, would you? A year or three? Just long enough for me to get my career where it needs to be?”

He seems to consider it for a moment, but then his brow wrinkles and his shoulders hitch closer to his ears. “The part of me that thinks running into you tonight was destiny wants to say ‘yes.’ But I’m not getting any younger, Rose. Or any less lonely. I’m ready to share my life with someone special. I think that someone is you, but if you truly can’t make space for me, even a small space...”

I press my lips together, fighting a wave of emotion as the lower level of the restaurant continues to devolve into chaos that eerily reflects the state of my torn and tortured heart.

Torn because I want to say “yes, Bear, I can make space for you,” so badly. Tortured because I know it wouldn’t be a small space. If I fall for Bear, I’m going to fall hook, line, and sinker. He’ll become the focus of my world—How could he not? How could the joy and satisfaction I’ll find in any job, even my dream job, compare to the way I feel when I’m with him?

My focus will slip, my career dreams will wither on the vine, and in seven years, when that legendary relationship itch starts to set in, I’ll be thirty-one and likely too old to pick up my career where I left off. Too much will have changed, and

there will be younger, hungrier women willing to do entry-level gigs for half the money. The news reporting world will have passed me by, just like the ballet world passed my mother by.

And I can't do that. I can't subject my partner or any children I'm lucky enough to have someday to that.

Tears stinging into my eyes, I force myself to release Bear's hand.

He sighs in response, the sadness in his expression so exactly mirroring my own that something deep inside shouts for me to wake up. To wake up and take a hard look at the path I've chosen.

Is this really what I want?

Is missing out on this chance with Bear really the right call?

"Let's finish dinner," he says gently. "And then I can go get your suitcase and bring it down to the lobby before you leave." I open my lips to protest, but he cuts in, "I insist. I bought those things for you. I want you to have them. And when you wear them, I want you to remember how much one guy out there believes in you. You can do anything you set your mind to, Rose, and I can't wait to see all your dreams come true."

I press my napkin to the corners of my eyes, catching the tears before they can fall. I want to tell him how wonderful he is, how much I wish our timing had been different, and how much I believe in him, too. But I don't trust my voice not to shake.

Luckily, the room downstairs is still loud enough to mask my soft sniffles as I pull myself together. It seems Gavin has

disappeared into the large Christmas tree in the corner and neither the servers nor Mr. Florida have been able to coax him out again.

By the time we finish our meal, the entire first floor of the restaurant has been evacuated and the manager is escorting each group of diners to the exit, armed with a broom in case of any emergency baby alligator action.

“So sorry about this,” he says, discreetly wiping the sweat from his upper lip. “This isn’t the experience we hoped to provide our holiday guests.”

“It’s all right,” Bear assures him. “We understand.”

“And the food was incredible,” I add, refraining from mentioning how much better it tasted before Bear and I decided to go our separate ways.

After all, that’s not the manager’s fault. That’s down to bad luck and a misalignment of priorities that isn’t likely to be cleared up any time soon. By the time I’m ready for a man like Bear, he’ll probably be married with kids, and what could have been with him will be a path I’ll never be able to follow.

Even as a newly twenty-four-year-old, I know that choices have far-reaching consequences and that some opportunities, once passed over, never come again. It’s part of what makes this one life we get to lead so precious and wonderful and scary.

It’s scary to imagine never sharing another evening with Bear, never watching his clever eyes sparkle into mine across a dinner table, never hearing his deep, sexy voice rumbling in my ears.

Never feeling his lips against mine...

The last possibility is too much, too terrible to contemplate, and before I know it, I've pulled Bear behind the Christmas tree in the main part of the hotel—the one *without* a baby alligator in it—and wrapped my arms around his shoulders.

Instantly, he drops his crutches and pulls me close.

Our lips connect and my entire body catches fire and for one shining moment, this is all that matters.

This man, this stolen moment.

This incredible kiss...

## Chapter Eight



BEAR

This isn't an "I've changed my mind" kiss.

This is a goodbye kiss.

I know that. I can feel it in the way Rose clings to me, kissing me like it's the last time she'll ever know what passion like this feels like. But still, I can't stop the hope that rises inside of me.

Surely, she can feel how perfect this is, how right.

She belongs in my arms, and I belong in hers. This is what I've been waiting for. She's it, the person the universe made for me, and the only woman I want to share my life with.

"Rose," I murmur against her soft mouth.

She whimpers and tightens her grip on my shoulders, her tongue stroking against mine with a hunger I'm dying to satisfy. All I want to do is take her upstairs, make her come until she's so relaxed and well-loved that she'll finally see tonight the way I see it—like the chance of a lifetime, not a minefield best avoided.

I want to worship her beautiful body, soothe her fears, and win her trust.

But her worry runs deep. The chances that I'll be able to convince her that falling for me won't take professional

success off the table for her are slim to none, but I have to try. Just one more time.

Pulling back, I gaze down into her flushed face. “Do you trust me?”

Without hesitation, she nods.

“Then trust me when I tell you that we can do this.” I cup her cheek, running my thumb over her kiss-swollen bottom lip. “I’m already established in my career. I don’t have to prioritize it the way I used to. Your job can come first. We’ll plan around whatever you need to do to advance in your field. I’ll be your work at home boyfriend who makes sure dinner’s on the table when you get home from a long day of hard-hitting reporting.”

Her brows draw together. “But won’t you resent me after a while? If you’re forced to move away from your home and friends? To uproot Clyde and the kittens and run your house-flipping business long distance?”

“I seriously doubt it,” I say. “But if I did, then we could discuss it together and find a solution. Maybe I divide my time between Chicago and wherever you’re based at the time. Or maybe I hire a manager for the house-flipping business and spend more time on Clyde’s socials and toy development. I can be flexible.”

Fear creeping back into her eyes, she whispers, “I believe that you can. Or that you believe it, anyway. But...I can’t, Bear. I’m not built that way. I’ve only had one serious boyfriend, and I got so tangled up in him that I nearly failed algebra my freshman year of college.” I start to protest, but she pushes, on, “And my feelings for him are nothing like what I feel when I’m with you.”

“I feel it too,” I say, my voice rough with emotion. “I love you, Rose. I don’t care that it’s fast or illogical. It’s real.”

“Me, too,” she whispers, unshed tears shining in her eyes. “But if we start down this road, I know how it ends. I’ll end up bitter and resentful like my mother, and you’ll be like my dad, secretly hurt that his devotion isn’t enough to make his other half happy.” She steps back, shaking her head. “I can’t do that to you. Or to me. I care about you way too much, and I wish you the best of everything. I wish that were me...but it’s not. I’m so sorry.”

She turns, dashing across the lobby. Before I can call for her to come back, she’s running out into the international terminal and disappearing from view.

Crouching to grab my discarded crutches, I start after her, but by the time I reach the first seating area near the piano, the voice of logic has convinced me that there’s nothing I can do. I tried being honest about my feelings, making assurances, and talking things through, and it wasn’t enough. Rose isn’t ready for this right now.

And she might never be ready.

I know a lot of career-focused people.

People who openly state they’ll focus on love and family “someday.”

But someday never comes. Two of my good friends in the pet influencer community are men in their seventies who never had time for a family and only had friends through work. Now, in retirement, their cats are their only source of companionship.

Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but I can tell both Dale and Sammy wish they were sharing their lives with

someone who speaks their language and doesn't shed on the furniture. Dale jokes all the time about "not becoming an old cat man like me," and Sammy flat out told me I should make more time to date.

But time isn't the problem. I have time. What I don't have is the will to put myself out there with a bunch of strangers, when I already know that no other women will ever make me feel the way Rose does.

"Rose," I murmur aloud one last time, a foolish part of me hoping the word will summon her back to me, like magic.

It doesn't and after a few more moments, I start toward the elevator, accompanied by the melancholy pianist's rendition of "Greensleeves."

Most people know the song as the Christmas carol, "What Child is This," but it's the original folk lyrics that echo through my head as I wait for the elevator car.

*Alas my love, you do me wrong, to cast me off discourteously...*

Rose wasn't discourteous, she was kind. Sweet, even.

But the casting off still hurts like a baby alligator gnawing its way through my chest, on a collision course with my heart.

## Chapter Nine



DIPSY

Too late, I realize my newly purchased toiletries are in the suitcase upstairs. I have my purse, wallet, and I.D. but no face wipes, toothpaste, or toothbrush. Also, no coat or warm clothes. I hadn't needed one in my elf costume—the dress is heavily lined for outdoor events and my tights were thick and warm—but in these slick satin pants and this wide weave sweater, I'm soon freezing in the chilly terminal.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I hunch my shoulders and keep walking, past groups of people camped out asleep on rows of chairs, teenagers illuminated by the glow of their phones, and an old woman petting her cats, soothing them to sleep inside their carrier.

I'm suddenly consumed with a longing for Hambone. If I could just scoop him up, bury my face in his soft, sweet-smelling fur, and feel his warm body vibrate against my chest as he purrs, things wouldn't feel so awful.

Or they might, but at least I wouldn't be alone with the awful.

Longing for my cat is followed quickly by a frozen bowling ball dropping into my stomach as I realize I never called Mom to tell her I wouldn't be arriving tonight, after all. Stifling a groan, I head over to an isolated corner by a large

window, where the air is even colder, and shoot my mom a text—*So sorry, Mom, but I'm not going to make it home tonight, after all. I'm hoping to be booked on a flight into Bad Dog first thing tomorrow morning so we can still have presents at noon like always, but there's no news on that yet. I'll keep you updated. Have a wonderful Christmas Eve and know I'm with you in spirit. All my love, Dipsy.*

Just a few seconds later, I get a text from someone else.

I click over to my main screen to see a new message from Dad and the icy lump in my stomach gets even heavier—*Hey, pumpkin. Mom's a little upset that you didn't call to give us an update. We got the notification that your flight was cancelled a couple hours ago but we didn't receive any word from you. I thought maybe your phone had died.*

Sighing, I confess. *No, it didn't. I just totally forgot, Dad. I ended up with the wrong person's suitcase and then ran into an old friend and then there was an alligator in the Chex Mix in the lounge. It's been a crazy night.*

He sends over a wide-eyed emoji. *An alligator?*

*A baby alligator, but yeah,* I reply. *I'm so sorry. Truly.*

*You sound sad.*

My lips twitch even as the backs of my eyes start to burn. *How can you tell? You can't hear me.*

*I can tell. I'm sorry we're not together, Dips. But you'll be here tomorrow, and we can do our hot chocolate party on the night after Christmas instead. Or on New Year's. I like hot chocolate way better than champagne.*

*Me, too.* I sniff, fighting another wave of tears. *I love you, Dad.*

*I love you, too. Hang in there, baby. And don't worry about Mom. I'll smooth her feathers, and everything will be fine by the time you get home. You know how Mom is. She gets her feelings hurt easily, but she never holds a grudge.*

Wrinkling my nose, I send him a heart and a thumbs-up and tuck my phone back into my purse.

He's wrong, of course. My mother *does* hold a grudge. She's been holding one for at least twenty-four years. Probably longer.

Who knows when the enormity of everything she'd given up for love hit her, but she's definitely been keenly aware of it all the years of my life. And Dad knows that. It's why he walks on eggshells around her when she's in a mood and goes out of his way to spoil her on holidays and her birthday. He'll be trying—and failing—to make up for tempting Mom away from her dreams for the rest of his life.

I swipe at my eyes and clench my jaw, more determined than ever to stay away from Bear. I can't stand the thought of living out the same sad, depressing dynamic with him. I'd rather be alone. Forever.

And I just might be.

I can't imagine falling this hard again. I've never ached for a man like this, never felt so at home with someone I've spent less than ten hours with in-person, and only messaged for a few months. But Bear's such an easy person to get to know. He has nothing to hide and nothing to prove. He's quietly, confidently himself, a trait as sexy as it is rare.

"Excuse me, ma'am," a creaky voice says from a few feet behind me.

I turn to see the older woman with the cats creeping up behind me, her fingers tugging nervously at the bottom of her red sweater. I smile, hoping to put her at ease. “Hi there. Happy holidays.”

“Hello. Happy holidays to you, too.” She blinks and her lips twitch at the edges, but she still looks like she’s braced for a blow. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but do you think you could watch my kitties while I run to the bathroom? I don’t think I can carry my suitcase and their carrier all in there at once. There won’t be room in the stall, and I just got them calmed down and sleeping sound.”

“Of course, no worries,” I say, starting toward her. “I have a cat at home, a big, orange tabby. His name is Hambone.”

Her smile widens. “Oh, that’s lovely. I love tabbies. My first cat when I was a little girl was a tabby. She used to bring me dead mice in the morning and put them right by my bed. Scared the dickens out of me, but she was so proud, so I tried not to scream when I saw them.”

I laugh softly. “Cats are monsters, but sweet ones.”

“The very sweetest,” she says, her tired eyes brightening as she collects her purse from the chair beside where the carrier sits on the ground. “I’m Muriel, by the way.”

“Dipsy,” I say, the name sad on my lips. But that’s who I am. I’m Dipsy. I clearly lack the adulting skills to be Rose.

Rose would know how to balance work and a relationship. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t have let herself spend time alone with a man like Bear in the first place. *Rose* would have known better.

“So nice to meet you, Dipsy. And thank you. I won’t be long.” Muriel reaches for her suitcase, and I offer, “You can

leave that here, too, if you'd like. It's always easier to get in and out of the stall without a big bag."

She hesitates, her fingers tapping on the handle. "Well, we're not supposed to leave our bags unattended with strangers, but you seem like such a sweet girl. You have a trustworthy face."

I smile. "I get that a lot, and I *am* trustworthy, but if you feel more comfortable taking your bag, you should."

Muriel's brow furrows. "Where's *your* bag?"

"That's a long story," I say with a sigh, briefly relating the tale of the twin bags. "Or triplet bags, I guess," I amend. "My friend had one, I had one, and then there was the one I turned in to the lost and found."

"Oh, dear," she says, fingers tapping faster. "It wasn't a gray suitcase by any chance, was it?"

I cock my head with a frown. "It was. Are you psychic?"

Muriel laughs. "Oh no, not at all. There was a woman here not long ago, complaining to her friend about having the wrong suitcase. She was worried about not having any Christmas presents for her coven."

My brows lift. "Coven?"

"Yes." She lowers her voice, "They were talking very openly about being witches. And I'm not one to judge, but they were also talking very openly and *loudly* about...other things. Private things."

Clearing my throat, I struggle to think of a tasteful way to ask if she's talking about dildos. But there is no tasteful way to ask about dildos, so I stick to, "Intimate things? Intimate things you would use...intimately?"

She nods quickly. “Yes! Hanky-panky toys and spicy magic. That’s what my granddaughter calls it when a show has too much kissing in it. She says it’s ‘spicy’ and asks to change the channel. She’s at that age where she still thinks boys are gross.”

“Lucky her,” I say with a wry twist of my lips.

Muriel chuckles softly. “Isn’t that the truth. I loved my Phillip, and we had a lot of good years, but when he left me for the woman next door, a part of me was relieved. Let *her* make his four-course dinner every night after a long day of work. I’ll spend my evenings quilting and watching Grey’s Anatomy. Such a good show. Do you watch?”

I shake my head. “No, but I’ll put it on my list.”

Her smile widens. “You should. Such great characters. The kittens are named Meredith and Cristina, after my two favorites.” She motions toward the cats. “Oh, and don’t worry if they wake up and start crying, they’re still getting the hang of travelling. I’ll be back as fast as I can. And then you can go look for your suitcase at the lost and found. I’m pretty sure the witches said they’d turned it in. Hopefully without putting a hex on it.”

Laughing, I assure her, “I’m not worried. And take your time. I’m in no rush.”

She thanks me again and, after a beat of consideration, leaves her suitcase on the other side of the cats’ carrier before scurrying across the terminal to the bathrooms with just her purse.

Resisting the impulse to reach for my cell and numb my pain with a mindless puzzle game—I can tell Muriel wouldn’t be a fan of me being on my phone while I’m supposed to be

cat sitting—I watch the people come and go from the donut shoppe. It’s a bit farther down the hall from the bathrooms, lit by a giant pink neon donut on the wall above the counter. The coffee smells burnt and awful, but the line remains long.

I guess some people are determined to stay awake all night.

I get it. I would usually be afraid to fall asleep alone, but right now, I don’t care about being vulnerable in a public place. I just want to be unconscious, far from my waking worries and the clawing certainty that I’ve made a terrible mistake.

What if I’ve been fooling myself?

What if I can’t have it all, no matter how carefully I plot and plan?

What if I have to choose between professional success and personal happiness? What if tonight was the place in the woods where the paths diverged, and I’ll never know what it’s like to have a partner or a family?

*Or what if you’ve just been looking at this all wrong? the inner voice whispers. Maybe you just need to change your perspective.*

Change my perspective...

I turn away from the donut shoppe toward the other side of the terminal—curious as to what fresh perspective my current situation might have to offer—to see a baby gator dashing across the gleaming white tile at an impressive speed.

Two out of shape security guards give chase, walkie-talkies buzzing, while just behind them, Alligator Man shouts, “Run, Gavin! Run like the wind, buddy! I’ll meet you by the fountain in terminal two.”

Seemingly inspired by his owner's encouragement, Gavin speeds faster, until his clawed feet barely touch the floor. When he reaches the donut shoppe, he seems poised to dash past the crowd without most of the weary travelers even noticing. But at the last second, a fussy toddler breaks free from her mother and darts out of line, right in the path of the scaly fugitive.

Pulse racing, I surge to my feet, but before I can rush for the little girl, Gavin skids to a stop, claws scrambling on the slick tile as he reverses direction. He seems as scared of the little girl as she is of him.

Though, to be fair, the child's squeal of—"Green Puppy! Mommy, green puppy!"—doesn't sound frightened. She sounds delighted and is still giggling when Gavin succeeds in changing course, scuttling between the legs of the flustered security guards, and heading straight for yours truly.

Heart in my throat, I move in front of the kittens' carrier, digging my heels in and standing my ground. I can't leave them undefended with a natural predator, even one who's probably full of Chex Mix and way too freaked out to stop long enough to claw his way into a zipped-up carrier.

But how to stop a baby gator?

I don't want to kick him and risk hurting the little guy, but I don't want to get anywhere near Gavin with my hands, either. This night has been hard enough without getting gnawed on by a teething reptile, and I'm not trained in hand-to-hand combat.

But maybe I don't need to fight him...

Maybe I just need to distract him a little.

Moving fast, I grab my cell from my purse and jam the flashlight icon on the lock screen. With seconds to spare, I turn the phone around, aiming the light directly into the baby gator's eyes.

Gavin emits a startled chirping sound and goes stiff, his claws skidding a few inches on the floor before he comes to a stop and topples over onto his side. Once he's down, he just... lays there, legs limp and his jaws lightly parted.

For a moment, I'm scared I've given the poor thing a heart attack, but then Alligator Man calls out from just a few feet away. "It's okay! He's just playing dead. He does that when he's scared. Let me pick him up and get him back in my sweater. Please," he pleads with the security guards, who are slowly closing in on Gavin from his other side. "He's a good boy. He didn't mean to cause trouble. It's just all the holiday excitement, and it's his first time away from his mama. Baby gators need their mamas for the entire first year after they've hatched. I should have known better than to take him so far away from Sheila for more than a day or two. This is my mistake, not his."

The taller security guard with the flushed pink face shoots a meaningful glance at the guard with the thick mustache.

"And maybe you could promise to get a carrier for Gavin from one of the travel shops," I pipe up, trying to be helpful. "I'm sure these nice men would feel better about letting you two go if you had him in a more secure situation than tucked under your sweater."

Alligator Man wrinkles his nose, but grumbles, "Yeah, I guess I could do that."

"You could even follow him while he does it," I add to the guards, earning a grunt from Alligator Man that sounds equal

parts irritated and grateful.

“Yeah, that would be fine.” He eases closer to Gavin. “So, can I pick him up now?” he asks the guards. “Or are you going to taser me?”

Mustache Guard sighs. “Go ahead. But don’t let him get loose again or emotional support animal or not, we’re going to have to take him into custody. We can’t have alligators running around the airport.”

“Even baby alligators,” the taller man says.

Muttering something about how gators are safer than fluffy animals that can set off allergy symptoms or an emotional support fox he met one time who smelled like actual ass, Alligator Man gently collects Gavin from the floor. In one smooth motion, he tucks the baby under his sweater and cradles him close. “There, there, buddy, you’re okay,” he whispers.

A beat later, Gavin’s tiny snout appears in the opening of his sweater. He lets out a soft chirp and licks Alligator Man’s chin.

From behind the guards, a reverent voice coos, “Green puppy.”

We all spin to see the toddler who frightened Gavin standing a short distance away, holding her mother’s hand with one pudgy fist. She points to Gavin, her eyes wide and excited. “Pet green puppy? Missy pet green puppy? Pet him soft?”

Her mom laughs nervously. “I told you, honey. It’s not a puppy. It’s an alligator, and they can be dangerous.”

The little girl scowls as she glances between her mom and the “green puppy” who’s still licking Alligator Man’s face, clearly dubious about Gavin’s danger potential.

“Aw, Gavin’s a sweetheart,” his owner says. “She can pet him if she wants. He’s a real good boy, and I’ll hold his mouth closed.”

“Pwease, Mommy, pwease!” Missy’s eyes go wide as she thrusts her arms up toward her mother.

“Okay,” the woman says, clearly uneasy but doing her best to encourage her daughter’s bravery.

And that’s how Muriel emerges from the bathroom to find a tiny girl petting an alligator just two feet away from her peacefully sleeping kittens. “Oh dear,” she says, her eyes wide as she watches Missy giggle and stroke Gavin’s scaled head. Coming to stand beside me, she whispers, “That doesn’t look safe.”

I nod, murmuring, “No, it doesn’t. But we can’t always play it safe.”

Muriel looks up at me, seeming to understand that I’m talking about more than alligators. “That’s true. Play it too safe and you might miss the whole point. We’re not here to play it safe. We’re here to be alive. As alive as we can stand to be.”

I glance down at her, my throat tight. “Yeah. And I think I can handle more than I’ve been giving myself credit for.”

She smiles. “I think so, too. Happy holidays, Dipsy.”

“Call me Rose,” I say, my heart swelling as the need to make things right crowds out every other emotion. “And happy holidays to all of you, even you, Alligator Man.”

“Chuck,” Alligator Man says, grinning at the enraptured Missy. “Call me Chuck. And God bless us everyone.”

“Everyone,” I echo as I back away from the group.

“Go get your man, woman,” Chuck says, surprising me. “He looked way too sad waiting on that elevator. No one should look that sad on Christmas Eve.”

No, they shouldn't.

“Thanks, Chuck, I will,” I say, waving before I turn and jog back toward the hotel, the weight in my heart easing with every step.

## Chapter Ten



BEAR

I'm drying off after another awkward, cast-impeded shower when I hear it—the soft beep of the door opening in the main part of the suite.

Quickly, I wrap the towel around my waist and grab my crutches.

It's probably just a member of the housekeeping staff coming in for turndown service who didn't notice the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. But just in case, I put on my "don't fuck with me" face as I move through the bedroom and down the short hallway leading into the kitchen and living area.

In my younger years, I was a boxer long enough to master the fine art of wordless intimidation. My sheer size is usually enough to get the job done, but an "I could pound you into the ground with one hand tied behind my back" glare is always a good thing to have in your back pocket, especially when you're down to one good leg.

But when I reach the main room, it isn't a member of housekeeping.

It's Rose, her chest rising and falling faster as she pants against the door. "The elevator was taking forever so I took the stairs. All five floors," she says, her eyes widening as I step fully into the space. She swallows hard, before she adds in a

thinner voice, “I’m out of shape. You are...not. Wow. You. In a towel. You’re not out of shape. Not even a little bit.”

“You’re perfect.” I mean it, but I don’t move any closer.

My gut says the fact that she’s here and thinks I look good in nothing but a towel is a great sign. But on the off chance that she’s just come to get her suitcase, I don’t want to get my hopes up. I’ve already been up and down that roller coaster too many times tonight.

Her breath rushing out, she shakes her head hard. “No, I’m not perfect. I’m not even close. But I’m also not my mother or my father or my friend, Caroline, or any other ambitious person trying to have it all. And I’m not going in blind. I know the dangers. I know it isn’t going to be easy.”

“But what if it is?” I ask, my head spinning as it becomes increasingly clear that she’s here for me, for *us*. Because she can’t walk away from the potential here any more than I can. “What if it’s so easy, Rose? What if all we have to do is stop letting fear win?”

Her bottom lip trembles. “Then I’ll feel really stupid,” she whispers. “And really grateful. I love you, Bear. I don’t want to say goodbye. Not tonight or any other night.”

Throat tight, I say, “I want to hold you so badly right now, but this towel is about to fall off.”

“Oh, no.” She bites her lip, adding in a huskier voice, “That would be terrible.”

I bite my lip, too, but the smile tugging at my mouth muscles its way through. “But that would hardly be fair. Me, in nothing but a cast and a smile and you totally dressed.”

She reaches for the bottom of her sweater, making my heart skip a beat. “You’re right. That wouldn’t be fair.” She

strips her top off, tossing it onto the large couch between us, leaving her in nothing but her black satin camisole and pants. She meets my gaze and arches a brow. “Better?”

“Much better,” I murmur. “But there’s still so much I can’t see.”

She peers at me through her thick lashes as her fingers skim the bottom of her camisole. She’s teasing me, and I love it. “What would you like to see?”

“I’ve been dreaming about your breasts more than I probably should,” I say, the front of my towel growing increasingly indecent. “I have some very intense fantasies involving your nipples and my mouth.”

Her throat works, but she doesn’t look away. “I have similar fantasies.”

“Looks like we’re on the same page, then.” I hold my breath as she reaches for the bottom of the camisole and draws it slowly up, revealing her pale skin, inch by glowing inch. Then, she whips it up and over her head. I get a good look at her small, but full breasts, topped by peach-colored nipples that are already hard for me, and control is a thing of the past.

Somehow, I meet her on the couch without my crutches. Maybe I hopped over on one leg, maybe I teleported, maybe it was a little bit of holiday magic—all I know is that I’m so grateful to have her in my arms. As we fall back onto the cushions, her skin soft against mine as she straddles me and wraps her arms around my neck, I’m the happiest man in the tristate area.

“I’ve been dreaming about this every night since September,” she confesses against my lips, moaning softly as I

cup her breasts and drag my thumbs gently over her tight tips. “And that. But be careful with that.”

“Because they’re so sensitive?” I ask, kissing my way down her throat, relishing the sweet smell of her skin.

“Because they make me go from zero to sixty,” she says, already squirming in my lap, even before my trail of kisses reaches one perfect nipple. She fists her hands in my hair, panting, “It’s embarrassing. How fast I get turned on.”

“Not embarrassing, incredible,” I murmur, flicking my tongue across her nipple. My cock jerks beneath the towel as she gasps, and her hips buck sharply forward. “Fuck, Rose, you’re so sexy.”

“You, too,” she says, dragging her fingernails down my bare shoulders with enough force to make my blood rush faster. “But you lied. About the towel. It didn’t fall off, and I’m really sad about it.”

Smiling against her other nipple—just as sweet and sensitive as the first—I say, “I’m sorry. But I bet you could take care of that. If you were so inclined.”

“I’m very inclined.” She shifts to one side, tugging at the towel. I lift my hips, helping her pull the fabric out from under me, revealing my not at all shy or retiring erection.

I’m hard enough to rock a Christmas tree topper, every inch of my probably too long and thick cock on display. I cut a quick glance Rose’s way, but she doesn’t look worried. She looks...hungry.

“You really do think I’m sexy,” she whispers, reaching out to run her fingers lightly up and down my throbbing shaft.

I stifle a moan, my throat tight as I confirm, “The sexiest. But we don’t have to rush. We can take as much time as you

need to feel ready.”

She looks up, meeting my gaze as she continues to play with my cock, gripping the shaft and rubbing the pre-come at my tip in circles with the pad of her thumb. “Why? Because you’re enormous, and I’m a delicate little lady flower?”

Balls tightening in response to her attention, I grunt through a clenched jaw. “Something like that. I’ve had trouble before. With other partners. Sometimes it wasn’t comfortable for them.”

“You don’t have to worry,” she says, leaning in to kiss my cheek with a sweetness that makes the feel of her hand on my erection even more erotic. But love always makes sex so much better, and this is the kind of kiss you give a man you care about, not just one you want to ride all night long.

Please let it be all night long...

I can already tell I’m going to need her more than once. There’s no way this first time is going to last as long as I’d like, not when I haven’t been with a woman in over a year and Rose is so relentlessly sexy.

“I had a well-endowed boyfriend in college, it wasn’t a problem,” she whispers in my ear as she kisses me again, this time on my jaw. “And you’re not nearly as big as the Barney dildos. Now *that* was a terrifying display. Which reminds me, I think someone turned in my suitcase. A woman I met in the terminal overheard the dildo owner lamenting the loss of her sexy presents. I should check the lost and found in the morning.”

“Or we could go now if you want. If you’re worried,” I say, smiling as she makes a disdainful sound and pulls back to glare down at me.

“Are you insane? We’re not leaving this room until you’ve been inside me at least twice.”

“Three times,” I counter, popping the button at the top of her pants and jerking her pants and panties down around her hips, sending fresh heat flaring into her eyes. “Take those off and get on top of me.”

“So bossy,” she whispers as she slides off the couch, holding my gaze as she removes her boots before wiggling out of the rest of her clothes. When she’s naked in front of me, she brushes her hair from her face, her fingers still tangled in the red locks as she asks, “Not too skinny?”

“Beautiful,” I whisper, devouring her with my gaze, wanting to memorize every inch of her gorgeous body. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“You, too,” she says, slowly straddling me again as I circle her waist with my hands, drawing her closer. “I’m not hurting your leg, am I?”

“I don’t feel anything except desperate to be inside you,” I confess, sucking her nipple into my mouth again, my cock beginning to leak as she gasps and rocks against my erection, hard enough for me to feel how wet she is.

“I love this,” I say as I slide my hand between us, gliding firm fingers over her clit and into the wet heat between her thighs. “Feeling you wet for me is the only thing I ever want for Christmas.”

“God, Bear,” she says, her fingers gripping my shoulders again. “That feels so good. I want you so much. I feel like I’ve been waiting for you forever.”

“Forever,” I echo. But for me, it’s a promise. “I want this tight, wet pussy all around me, Rose.”

“Yes,” she breathes, reaching between us to stroke my cock.

“There are condoms in the bathroom. In my black toiletry bag. I’d run get them, but I think you’ll be faster.”

“I’m on the pill,” she says, continuing to stroke me. “And I haven’t had a partner since I was tested a year ago.”

“Same,” I say, fingers digging into her slim hips as I fight for control. “But I can get tested again. I don’t want you to have any doubts.”

Her gaze softens on mine. “I’m done with doubts.” She bends to claim my lips in a long, slow, sexy-as-fuck kiss. “And I’m past ready to make you mine.”

“Then stake your claim, woman,” I say, joy and hunger flooding through me as she fits my cock to her center and begins to sink down, inch by head-spinning inch.

I love that this tiny woman, barely half my size, has stated that she’s claiming *me*. I love that she’s taking the lead and wants me as much as I want her.

But most of all I love the fact that, as her molten hot pussy glides around me, squeezing me tight enough to make my balls clench, her expression never waivers from one of complete and total bliss.

When she’s fully seated on my cock, she exhales and leans her forehead against mine, whispering, “Oh, Bear.”

“Rose,” I whisper back. “My Rose.”

“Yours,” she echoes. “And you’re mine.” She shifts forward and my cock slides a few inches out of paradise before she rocks back, taking every inch of me again. “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“We’re done apologizing, remember?” I murmur, threading my fingers into her hair with one hand as I grip her ass with the other. “Fresh start. No regrets.”

“No regrets,” she echoes, taking every inch of me again, proving we were made for each other. “And no more letting fear call the shots. We can do this.”

“We have to do this,” I say, lifting into her as she begins to move faster. “I need you like this, Rose. Every day. Always. Fuck, baby, you’re so sweet, so sexy. I want to fuck you for the rest of my life.”

“Yes, God, yes,” she echoes, arching into my touch as I flick her nipple, then roll it between my fingers and thumb. “I’m going to come, Bear. I’m going to come so hard on your cock.”

“Yours,” I agree, the pressure building in my balls confirming I’m not going to set any endurance records this time around. “Come on me, baby. I can’t wait to feel you dripping all over my cock.”

“Dirty talker,” she pants, grinding harder at the end of her next thrust. “I love it. Love it so much. Oh, Bear. Oh my God!”

“Yes, baby, oh fuck, I can feel you. You feel so good,” I rasp, my heart slamming in my chest as she cries out my name and her pussy clamps down around me in waves. I grip her hips, pinning her tight to me, burying myself to the hilt as I lose control, the primal part of me wanting to come as deep inside her as possible.

My orgasm twists through me with almost painful pleasure, making my breath catch in my lungs as I come and come, until my head is full of cotton candy and I’m too weak

to do more than grunt when Rose turns her head and drags her tongue up my neck.

“Is that a good grunt or a bad grunt?” she asks, her body still limp against mine.

“Good. Lick me anytime.”

“I was licking your cat tattoo,” she says. “It’s so sexy, I can hardly stand it.”

My lips curve as I wrap an arm around her waist, holding her close. “Yeah? My last girlfriend thought it was weird.”

She pulls back, making my forehead furrow as her breasts leave my chest. “Your last girlfriend was an idiot. No offense.”

“None taken.” I open my eyes to find Rose gazing down at me with a thoughtful expression. “You should be closer,” I say, pointing back to my chest.

She smiles. “Agreed, but I was thinking maybe we should move to the bed. If we were on the bed, we could probably do this from behind, right? Even with the cast?”

As if to insist he can take her from behind right now, my cock twitches inside her.

“Oh.” Rose’s eyes widen and so does her smile. “Was that a yes?”

“A hell yes. Get going, woman. I’m following you.”

Her gaze softens. “You don’t have to, you know. Follow me. We could do weekends together and holidays and stuff. You don’t have to uproot yourself for me if you don’t want to.”

“It would be an honor to uproot myself for you.” I cup her face in my hand. “Wherever you are is where I want to be.”

Her eyes begin to shine. “Want to come to Bad Dog with me tomorrow? And have a hot chocolate party and meet my parents?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation. “I’ll ship the jerky to the rental house in L.A. for my orphan’s Christmas offering, make my apologies, and promise them I’ll host orphan’s New Year’s Eve next year. We can do it together, wherever we end up.”

She smiles even as a tear slides from the corner of one eye. “That sounds perfect. I’d love to help you host orphan’s New Year’s Eve. We’re really going to do this, aren’t we?”

I swipe the tear from her cheek. “We are. Is that scary?”

She shakes her head, more tears falling as she begins to laugh. “No, I’m just so excited it’s making me cry for some reason. I can’t wait. I can’t wait to share my life with you.”

“Same,” I say, the back of my nose starting to sting. “Now get in the bedroom, Rose. I have plans for you.”

“I’m so glad,” she says, kissing my cheek before shifting off my cock and grabbing the towel from beside me. She wipes the evidence of how much I enjoy her body from both thighs, her cheeks flushing. “We made a mess.”

“Want me to put on a condom next time?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, I like the mess. I like everything about being naked with you, Mr. Hanson.”

*And I’m going to make you Mrs. Hanson as soon as you’ll let me, I think.*

Aloud, I say. “Same, beautiful. You’re my favorite.”

Emotion in her gaze, she reaches a hand toward me. “Let me help you up?”

“Always,” I say, surprised at her strength as she pulls me out of the low couch.

She’s tougher than she looks, a fact I take as another sign that we’re meant to be, and that together, we have the strength to get through just about anything.



That theory is tested the next morning, when we learn the flight to Bad Dog doesn’t leave until almost four in the afternoon, meaning we’ll miss most of Christmas Day with her family.

But Rose remains upbeat.

So do I, and soon we’ve connected with several familiar faces in the Credit Express lounge.

Rose introduces me to Muriel, a sweet older woman waiting to fly out to see her grandbabies in Michigan. She, in turn, introduces us to Hester, the owner of the dildo suitcase, who assures Rose the sex toys are paraben free and even offers to give her one to take with her as a memory of our crazy airport Christmas.

“Thank you,” Rose says, blushing as she cuts a quick glance my way. “But I’m good. I’m not a...props kind of girl.”

Hester nods as she finishes chewing a giant bite of the fried chicken and waffle dish the lounge chef made as a special holiday treat. “I hear you, but if you change your mind, you have my card.” She turns, pointing her fork toward Chuck, aka Alligator Man, who has been allowed back into the lounge as long as he promised to keep Gavin in his new carrier. “You

want one? You said you were between boyfriends, right? Could be a fun time.”

Chuck shrugs and offers her a slightly loopy smile. He’s been hitting the spiked cider already and is clearly feeling no pain. “Sure. Why not? But you’d better wait to give it to me until later. Looks like my new friend, Missy, is headed over for some Green Puppy love.”

I arch a brow at Rose.

“Gavin,” Rose explains. “Missy calls him ‘green puppy.’ It’s adorable. You’re going to love her. She has no fear.”

She’s right. I do love little Missy, who is so sweet and gentle with Gavin, I swear she has him purring in just a few minutes.

“Is he...purring?” her mother asks with a laugh, echoing my thoughts.

“Sure is,” Chuck says. “I tried to tell everyone last night—Gavin’s a lover not a biter. He just likes to explore. And who can blame him? If I were a baby gator, I’d want to climb up in a Christmas tree, see what all that shiny stuff is about.”

“Shiny,” Missy echoes, pointing at Gavin’s neck, where a thick gold necklace with a sparkling diamond “G” hangs this morning.

“Yeah, that’s his Christmas morning bling,” Chuck says, reaching into his shoulder bag and pulling out another gold necklace. “Gotta have some bling. I got you one, too, buddy. Just in case I saw you today, so you and Gavin could match.”

Coos of approval rise from the gathered company and Missy’s expression is a mixture of awe and joy as her mother slides the necklace over her head. “Thank you,” she says to Chuck. “You made this crazy experience really special.”

“My pleasure,” Chuck says. “We green puppy lovers gotta stick together. And we all need a little something that shines.”

I agree with him. But the only shine I’ll ever need is sitting beside me on a love seat, her hand in mine and her glossy hair spilling over my shoulder as she cuddles close.

“Love you,” I murmur for her ears only.

She looks up, her smile brighter than every Christmas light on the nearby tree. “Love you, too. Want to play poker for pretzel sticks?”

“More than anything,” I say, making her laugh.

Soon, we have a poker game going with our new friends, Missy is cleaning our clocks with winning hand after winning hand, and I’m filled with the certainty that everything is just as it should be. After years of wishing for a Christmas morning just like this, I’m finally right where I belong.

With her.

My Rose.

My favorite.

## Epilogue



ROSE

*One year later...*

I've never been so excited to see an airport.

Or an airport security line.

Or a man in a tuxedo...

I spill out of the limo with two of my dearest friends to find Bear waiting for me at the curb in his tux, with his three best men behind him and a giant bouquet in hand.

He holds out the bouquet, his eyes shining as he says, "Happy wedding day, baby."

"Happy wedding day," I echo as I start laughing and crying at the same time, prompting Cami, my bestie from college, to jump in between Bear and me to dab at my face. Beside us, my cousin Jamie lifts an open bottle of champagne into the air shouting, "Let's get these beautiful people married, bitches!"

Jamie has only had one glass of champagne, but she's a lightweight, and insisted she needed a little liquid courage if she was going to lure Bear's younger brother, Ben, into her web of seduction at the reception.

God, I'm so glad I'll never have to worry about luring anyone into my web of seduction ever again. The only man I'll ever want, or need, is standing right in front of me, swiping tears from his cheeks as he gathers me into a one-armed hug that's still powerful enough to lift my feet off the ground.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers into my ear.

"Thank you," I whisper back. "So are you. But I bet you're a lot less cold than I am right now."

He laughs as he sets me down. "Right. Let's get you inside."

"Sounds good," Barry, his middle brother says, shivering. He lives on a fishing boat in Bermuda and isn't accustomed to temperatures below fifty degrees.

"And get to the security line," Baxter, Bear's oldest younger brother grumbles. "Looks like it's a mile long."

"Amazing," Jamie says, lifting her bottle into the air again. "That will give us time to finish the champagne while we wait."

"I'll drink to that," Ben says, grinning as he sidles up to Jamie and takes a swig, holding her gaze as he swallows.

Bear glances my way, and we silently discuss the situation.

*Bear: Are we okay with this?*

*Me: I'm okay with it. I'm sure they'll have fun, and they're both adults. And Jamie is headed back to our place to relieve the cat sitter first thing tomorrow morning, so they can't get into too much trouble. What do you think?*

*Bear: I think I'm okay as long as you're okay. You're all I care about today.*

*Me: Aw. You're the best. I love you so much. I can't wait to be your wife.*

*Bear: Me, either. I also can't wait to do bad things to you in the honeymoon suite.*

*Me: Yes, please.*

“Are you two doing that telepathy thing again?” Cami asks as we all hurry through the sliding doors and into the ticketing area.

“They are, it’s gross,” Baxter confirms in a surly voice. If I didn’t know him, I would think he wasn’t a fan of our love, but he’s just a grump. Deep down, I know he’s so happy that we found each other, a fact he proves when he adds, “But it proves they were meant for each other.”

Meant for each other...

We truly are. From the moment we stopped fighting the pull between us, Bear and I haven’t spent more than a night or two apart. We’re almost always on the same page. Bear happily moved himself and our fur babies—Hambone, Clyde and Blanche, Sophia, and Dorothy, our little golden girls—to Detroit for three months when I landed a guest spot anchoring the evening news.

And he’s won my family over so thoroughly, that when mother spots us on our way to the security line, she runs over and hugs him first.

“Oh, darling,” she says as she emerges from Bear’s big hug and turns toward me. “I’m so happy. Even if this is a terrible place to get married.” She presses a finger to the bottom of her nose. “It smells like cigarettes, sweat socks, and bad meat.”

“It’ll smell much better inside, Mom, I promise,” I say, ushering her forward in line. “And you’re going to love dinner. The restaurant is beautiful, and all decorated for the holidays.”

“And then we get to go to Aruba tomorrow,” my dad says with a big grin. “I think we should do family Christmas at the airport and then split up for trips every year.”

My mom huffs. “We’ll see about that. A beach might feel weird in December. And you know I burn so easily.”

“My delicate flower,” Dad says, kissing Mom’s cheek, making her giggle.

Bear and I exchange more silent words:

*Bear: They seem happy.*

*Me: I told you. I think our love reminded them that love is fun. They’ve been like high school kids lately. Every time I stop by the house, they’re making out.*

*Bear: Good for them.*

*Me: Yeah. Let’s never stop making out.*

Bear leans down to kiss me, and Cami exhales a put-upon sigh. “Darlings, I love you dearly, but her make-up is a work of art. I slaved away for half an hour on that redhead-friendly smokey eye. If you mess it up, I will have to feed you both to the baby alligator.”

“He’s a toddler gator now,” I say, grinning as I spot Chuck waiting for us on the other side of security, Gavin looped around his shoulders. The now two-foot-long gator is dressed in a tiny tuxedo jacket and grinning with excitement. I wave and call out, “He looks amazing, Chuck! So do you!”

Chuck grins and puffs out his chest in his brown plaid suit coat. “Of course, we do. We know how to dress for a party.

Now, hurry up. Muriel and the witches are already at the venue and Missy and her mom are setting up the chairs.

I shoot him a thumbs-up before turning back to Bear. “I can’t believe they all came. Our entire airport family!”

He hugs me close, his big arm around my waist. “I believe it. It was a special night.”

“And you’re a special couple,” my dad says, clapping Bear on the shoulder. “I’m so glad you and my daughter found each other, son.”

“And we’re so happy to have you join our family,” Mom says, making Bear and I both start to tear up again.

“Stop,” Cami insists. “No crying until after the photos, then you emotional trainwrecks can sniffle all you want.”

My mom laughs. “Thank goodness for Cami. I’m glad someone’s keeping us from ruining the pictures. Pictures are the best part of a wedding day.”

Bear glances my way, silently saying—*No, promising to love you for the rest of my life is the best part of the wedding day.*

Aloud I whisper, “Absolutely.”

And then we’re at the screening area and setting all our unusual items on the belt—wedding bouquets and Cami’s camera equipment and a bag full of favors for our guests. Bear had our suitcases sent to the honeymoon suite already, so we’re blissfully unencumbered as we head through the X-ray machines.

Chuck, with Gavin now on his leash, joins us when we’re cleared, and we start toward the venue, an isolated part of the

international terminal with beautiful light that's not far from the hotel.

Our procession attracts its fair share of attention—four gorgeous men in tuxedos, a woman in a wedding dress, and a baby gator in his ring-bearer getup will do that—and by the time the rows of white seats come into view, we've attracted a following. Waving to the friends and family already gathered for the ceremony—including Nora and my cousin, Matty, who have become one of our best couple friends—we head to Cami's scouted location for a pre-ceremony photoshoot.

Complete strangers snap our picture behind Cami as Bear and I pose by a striking art installation made of thousands of melted marbles.

“See,” Bear says, smiling down at me with his arm braced on the wall above my head. “You're famous.”

I roll my eyes. “I am not. I'm sure none of these people know who I am.”

“Sure, they do,” he says. “You're Rosie, Chicago's ‘Find the Fun’ reporter and national treasure.”

I giggle and Cami calls out, “Yes, just like that!” She clicks a few more shots. “Keep looking at each other and smiling. The light is perfect.”

“I don't think I've reached national treasure status just yet,” I say, tipping my chin up.

“Only a matter of time,” Bear says, proving he's my biggest fan.

I'm so grateful. Without his gentle pushing for me to get real about what I want from my career, it probably would have taken me a lot longer to realize I don't want to be a hard-hitting journalist. I want to bring joy and fun into people's

lives. I want to give them the kind of news that makes a day easier, not sadder, or scarier.

I've embraced my fluff piece destiny, and I'm having an amazing time—*and* making quite a bit more money, since I landed my new gig at Chicago Channel Seven six months ago.

Life is so good and about to get even better.

"I'm going to marry you so hard," I whisper as Bear leans down for a kiss.

"So hard," he echoes just before his lips meet mine.

A collective sigh of happiness rises from the small crowd gathered behind Cami, and I suddenly have a wild idea. When Bear pulls back, I ask, "Should we invite the strangers to the wedding?"

"We absolutely should," he says. "That's how you grow an airport family."

And so, we invite twenty-three strangers to witness our "I do's." Missy's mom proves she's the wedding planner with this mostest by finding more chairs at the last minute, and the ceremony goes off with a hitch. Bear and I both cry, but thanks to Cami's quick make-up intervention, I'm tidied up for the reception in just a few minutes.

We start back through the terminal hand-in-hand, Mr. and Mrs. Hanson at last.

At the reception, Matty and Nora surprise us with the sweetest toast and a framed picture of Clyde and Hambone's other two kittens—Sunshine and Rainn—dressed in tiny formal clothes. We eat an amazing surf and turf dinner, dance until midnight, and take tons of pictures with Gavin perched in the Christmas tree above us like a grinning gator angel. (Our

reptilian buddy may be a year older, but he still loves being where the action is.)

Slowly, one by one, our guests head to their rooms, until it's just me, Bear, and the waitstaff tasked with clearing the last of the party.

We sway together to the holiday music playing over the sound system, neither of us wanting the night to end. It's just been so...perfect.

I look up at my sexy husband, heart aching with happiness as I whisper, "There's only one way this night could get any better."

"You, me, bed?" he asks.

I smile. "You really can read my mind."

"And what a sweetly dirty mind it is," he says, swooping me into his arms and carrying me out of the restaurant. He holds me all the way up the elevator and into our swanky suite, not putting me down until we're in the bedroom surrounded by a dozen flickering candles my very thoughtful husband must have paid someone to light in advance of our arrival.

"The best," I whisper as he lengthens himself on top of me on the mattress. "You're the very best."

"Right back at you," he says, and then he kisses me and teases me and does all the things he does so well.

Things I know he'll keep doing for the rest of our lives.

**The End**

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## *Sneak Peek*

**A RED HOT second chance romance. A weekend in a snowed in cabin. And all kinds of ways to get warm....**

I figured moonlighting as a Santa stripper was the most exciting thing on my docket this holiday season.

But that was before Macy Clayton careened back into my life, before we were snowed in at a secluded ranger station with nothing but each other to keep warm.

And yes, what the survivalists say is true—you really do stay warmer, and happier, when you're naked.

Soon, Macy and I are back on track to forever. But crossed signals and old wounds prove that second chances can be tricky, even during the most wonderful time of the year.

**I'll pull out all the stops to prove to Macy she's the only one I want to jingle my bells, but will it be enough to pull off a Christmas miracle?**

## EXCERPT

### c. Lili Valente

#### Macy

The last dregs of Wednesday fly by, my morning flight to Denver passes in a blur, and all too soon I find myself parking my rental car outside the Fish and Bicycle Café and Brewpub and snagging a table near the windows at the back.

I'm here. Really here. Back in Lover's Leap after ten long years.

It's surreal.

Lover's fucking Leap. Never has a name been more depressingly accurate. Dear Olivia is deluded when it comes to this town. It isn't paradise in the Rockies; it's a place where love goes to die—literally.

"Officer, my heart has hurled itself off a cliff and sees no reason to get up," I mumble into my coffee cup, staring broodily out the window at the people scurrying about downtown, hustling to get errands completed before the freak snowstorm the weather service started warning about this morning gets any worse.

If I lean forward, I can catch a glimpse of the rocky pinnacle in the distance through the swirling snow, the sharp outcrop of the town's namesake jutting out from the surrounding mountains.

These days, the Lover's Leap historical site is a tourist destination for rock climbers. A hundred and fifty years ago, it was the location of a double suicide. Dolly Hunt and her lover, Sal Newman—a female fur trapper with a heart of gold and a

weak spot for pretty young socialites—leaped to their deaths after Dolly’s brothers tried to kill Sal during a bar brawl. The note the women left behind professed that they would rather die together than live in a world that didn’t realize love was all that mattered.

There’s a plaque with their suicide letter inscribed on it at the summit.

I know most people find this story inspiring—albeit in a sad way. But for me, my hometown’s namesake is a sobering reminder that love makes people do stupid, dangerous things. Especially here, in this picturesque place where heart-stopping natural beauty and an adorable main drag do such a good job of glossing over the uglier parts of life.

The tourists don’t see it, of course. The tourists stay on the ski slopes or on quaint and funky Evergreen Lane. They see the charming surface: the unique shops, the cozy eateries, the crystal-clear river burbling by, and the epic views of pristine wilderness sweeping away from downtown as the Rocky Mountains stop playing nice and start showing off. They don’t see the people in the surrounding rural wilderness living hand to mouth. The parents who drink too much because their seasonal jobs have gone out of season and the kids waiting for school to start up after Christmas so they can count on steady meals.

The teenagers saving every penny so they can get a decent set of wheels and get the hell out of town before *they* take a crazy leap...

I was one of those kids, those teens. It was a hard-knock life in the Clayton house from day one, but it wasn’t until my best friend betrayed me that I became one of the bitter and love-less in Lover’s Leap.

Dean Roberts.

Just thinking his name is enough to make my coffee churn in my stomach.

Dean, the boy next door, the friend who was like a big brother to me until the day he became so much more. Until the day he kissed me on his back porch after Thanksgiving dinner and the entire world lit up in vivid, heart-stopping color.

He kissed me until I knew what it felt like to burn, to need in a way I hadn't understood you could need someone before that perfect afternoon. I'd fallen in love head first, without a second thought for the safety of my heart.

At fifteen, I'd had no doubt that Dean could be trusted with every part of me—the good, the bad, the beautiful, the sad, and everything in between.

Now I'm twenty-five. Ten long years have passed since my first, painful lesson in betrayal, and I've learned the only things a girl can count on are bills, taxes, L.A. traffic sucking all the ass, and people letting you down.

Even Lynn, my true-blue ally, dropped the ball on me this time.

Lynn was supposed to have made this trip. My sister was looking forward to seeing her Lover's Leap friends and collecting the things our dad left us in his will—a box of family memorabilia he snagged from our cabin before the bank foreclosed a few years ago. Olivia is the only person in town I've kept in touch with, but Lynn has an on-going group text chain with a gang of local women her age. They get together at least once a year to drink too much wine and gossip, and Lynn was giddy with excitement over the chance to see her besties again before their next meet-up in June.

But at the last minute, her boss sent her to fill in for a sick colleague at a drug rep conference. Now she's somewhere in Orange County talking up an allergy medicine guaranteed to keep your sinuses clean and clear, while I slog my way through this town filled with so many bittersweet memories I felt compelled to add three extra sugars to my coffee.

It's a damned shame, really.

Lynn is the one who's studied our ancestry and takes pride in being distantly related to the Delacourts, the family that inspired the town's Frozen Dead Dude festival when their patriarch had himself cryogenically frozen and stored in a Tuff Shed on their property.

The annual celebration in honor of the local nut job takes place the week leading up to Christmas Eve and is Lynn's absolute favorite time of the year in Lover's Leap. She adores bowling with frozen turkeys in the square and cheering on the coffin race through downtown.

I, however, don't put much stock in hokey festivals.

Or heritage.

What good are distant relatives? None of my second cousins stepped in to offer Lynn or I a place to live when Child Protective Services knocked on our door all those years ago. Lynn insists it wasn't our extended family's fault—our dad kept us isolated—but I don't really care. I don't hold a grudge against our relatives, but I have no desire to put faces with names, either.

The year our father bailed on us for good, I almost lost my sister. We were placed in separate foster homes for three months while a caseworker tracked down our great aunt and arranged for our transfer to L.A. If Aunt Maggie had decided

she was too tired to raise two teenage girls, Lynn and I would have been torn apart. And Lynn, who was only thirteen at the time, would have lost the only person she'd ever been able to count on, the mama bear of a big sister who had been her defender and provider from the day our mother died when Lynn was still in diapers.

I don't have the time for anyone who failed to keep that from happening, and I have nothing but contempt for the person who set the terrifying wheels in motion—Dean *effing* Roberts.

“Bastard jerk-face jerk,” I mutter, attention fixed on the snowy street, half hoping Dean will walk by so I can glare at him until he bursts into flames.

He apparently still lives here. Olivia only moved back to town a few days ago, but she was quick to get the dirt and give me the scoop on my old flame.

Dean lives in town, in a cottage not far from Evergreen Lane. He works as a wilderness guide, runs a camping-supply rental business, and has lunch with his mama every Friday at the elementary school, where she still works as the nurse. Olivia mentioned an ex-girlfriend she didn't think Dean had been too serious about, and some sort of drama with Matilda Williams, the tiniest, shyest girl in elementary school—the one I can't imagine creating a sound above a whisper, let alone any drama.

But no matter how much the gossipy part of me wants to know more about both the ex *and* the drama, I didn't press Olivia for more information.

Dean's existence isn't relevant to me. I couldn't care less what that liar is up to or who he's up to it with. He's nothing to

me now, just another ghost haunting a town I can't wait to leave the moment Olivia and I finish our lunch date tomorrow.

The only good that would come from seeing Dean would be the satisfaction of looking him in the eye without an ounce of feeling and then turning and walking away.

But I don't have the time for grand and chilly gestures, either.

The storm is kicking into high gear, the snow getting deeper, and there are fewer and fewer people on the street outside the café. If I'm going to check into my hotel near the slopes before the storm strands me in downtown, I need to make tracks. The mountain passes will be treacherous by later this afternoon.

I finish my biscuits and gravy, thank Matty O'Sullivan for a delicious meal, and leave a generous tip because Matty's mom was always so generous with me back in the day. From the time I was a kid coming in for breakfast on the rare weekend when my old man hadn't lost his paycheck to the slots, Sandy O'Sullivan always slipped me an extra side or two for free. It was as if she knew that I couldn't always count on a morning meal, let alone bacon with my pancakes.

"Good to see you back in town, Macy," Matty says as he collects my signed check from the table, a warm expression on his guileless face. He was always a gentle giant, and it doesn't look like much has changed in the past decade. "You gotta come back for happy hour while you're here. We've got a killer Christmas brew this season, and our IPA won gold at the state fair last fall."

"Congratulations, that's amazing. I'd love to taste both, but I'm on a tight schedule this trip." I push my chair away from the table and reach for my coat and purse. "I'm on an evening

flight out of Denver tomorrow. My clients get antsy if I'm gone for more than a few days at a time."

"You're some sort of guru or something now, right?" Matty asks, his tone so sweet I can't get annoyed at the misrepresentation of my life's work.

"Not really. I do massage therapy for people with chronic pain and help them manage their symptoms with meditation. I have a loyal following, but I wouldn't call myself a guru."

"Oh, well, that sounds great, too." Matty grins. "Olivia and Daisy were in the other day. They said your business is kicking ass, but I wasn't surprised. You always had your shit together, even when we were kids. Seemed like there wasn't anything you weren't good at."

*Except figuring out who I should trust and avoiding getting my heart broken into a thousand pieces. The thought is all the confirmation I need that getting out of Lover's Leap ASAP is the best thing to do.*

I'd love to have more time to spend with Olivia, to catch up with Daisy, and to sample the Fish and Bicycle's brews, but this town does things to me. Bad things. It aggravates old wounds, the ones that roughed up my heart when I was still too young to know how to process that kind of pain.

The ones that have never fully healed, not the way they're supposed to.

It's better if I get in and out as quickly as possible and get back to L.A., where the weather is sunny and so am I.

L.A. Macy doesn't growl into her coffee or glare at the street thinking about setting people on fire with her eyeballs. L.A. Macy is the friendly neighborhood speed-walker who always stops to chat, pet your dog, and talk smog and Santa

Ana winds. L.A. Macy has even learned to live with the hellish city traffic, though she secretly prefers days when she doesn't have to leave her cozy Venice office to make house calls, and dreams of opening a retreat center somewhere quiet and having her clients come to her.

L.A. Macy also has hope—loads of it.

She has hope that someday she'll find that perfect-for-her work situation and then her good life will get even better. She believes in a wide-open future filled with opportunity, adventure, and maybe even love in store when the stars align and bring Mr. Right into her orbit.

But in Lover's Leap, it's too easy to slip into the skin of the hopeless girl I once was, the one who watched through a social worker's car window as Dean grew smaller in the distance and my heart broke so hard even my practical sister agrees it made a noise.

It was a soft crack that filled the back seat, vibrating in the air as we were spirited away.

So I don't linger any longer over friendly conversation. I hug Matty goodbye, wish him all the luck in the world with his brews and business, and get on the road, setting my Elantra on a course for the Summit Hotel.

As a teen, I drove these roads hundreds of times, sitting behind the wheel of Dean's old truck, learning how to drive from the boy next door instead of the father who was never around.

I don't expect to have any trouble getting to my hotel. I'm sure everything will be fine.

But I should know better than to take anything for granted, especially around here.

Not ten miles from town, I hit a patch of black ice and go spinning—*God, don't let me die in Lover's Leap*, screaming through my head as the car rushes toward the guardrail.

I can't go out like this. Not like this.

Not in the one place I vowed to put in my rearview mirror forever.

Just like in the movies, my life rushes past my eyes, filled with love and regret and a few too many scenes featuring Dean Roberts...

I think about his warm brown eyes and his kiss and the way he always knew exactly what to say to make me smile, to make me laugh, to make me feel loved and understood.

A part of me wishes that I'd been able to feel the way I felt with my first love one more time before it was all over.

But wishing won't heal a broken heart or stop a car speeding toward a giant tree en route to a head-on collision.

Get [\*\*A NAUGHTY LITTLE CHRISTMAS\*\*](#) now!

## About the Author

Author of over forty novels, *USA Today* Bestseller **Lili Valente** writes everything from steamy suspense to laugh-out-loud romantic comedies. A die-hard romantic, she can't resist a story where love wins big. Because love should always win. She lives in Vermont with her two big-hearted boy children and a dog named Pippa Jane.

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