

MY FAKE BOYFRIEND

CHRISTMAS

GAIA TATE

My Fake Boyfriend Christmas

Miles & Kieran Series Book 1.5 (novella)

Gaia Tate

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ONE

The crowd cheers when the song's final chords die in the smoky air. Miles wipes the sweat off his forehead and waves back at the audience. He can't believe all of these people have come to see him. But that's what Alex—the club owner—told him. He gets off stage under the disappointed groan of the crowd. He always feels drained after a gig and can't wait to get home and shower.

"Nice job." Alex gives Miles a thumbs-up when he passes him behind the stage. "They love you, kid."

Miles gives him a quick smile. "Thanks. Do you still need me on Saturday?"

"Hell yeah. We have a booking for a corporate party. And they asked for you specifically."

Miles raises his eyebrows. "Okay."

"I know you've been working overtime," Alex adds. "And I hate to take your Saturday. But it's the high season. I'll bump up your rate, of course."

"Sure, no problem," says Miles. He doesn't have any plans anyway.

Alex grins. "Awesome."

Miles makes his way to the tiny dressing room, which also serves as a storage. He drains a water bottle and packs his guitar before checking his cell phone. He feels the familiar disappointed pang in his chest as he scrolls through the missed calls and unread messages.

He's not sure why he still feels disappointed. It's not like he and Kieran had regularly communicated before that bizarre weekend that they'd pretended to be boyfriends. But now Kieran has his number. It's been a few months. He's had plenty of opportunities to reach out to Miles if he wanted. Which means he doesn't want to. Miles sighs and returns a missed call from his mother, putting her on speaker as he packs his belongings.

"Thanks for calling back," she says in her usual formal tone. "Have you settled in?"

"Yeah," Miles says. "I still need to get some furniture, but it's livable."

Last week, he finally signed the lease on an apartment in the suburbs and moved out of his parents' house. It's nothing exciting, but Miles feels proud compared to where he's been a few months ago. He reminds himself to call

Jeremy, Ethan's brother, and thank him for connecting him with Alex.

"Good," his mom says. "I received an unexpected call this morning."

"Yeah?" Miles says, half-listening as he zips up his backpack.

"We might have a change of plans for Christmas."

He throws his trash into a bin, looking around the room to ensure he doesn't forget anything. Then he takes the phone off speaker, pressing it between his ear and shoulder as he locks the door.

"Let me guess, someone invited you over, so you won't be hosting." He throws the key to the club's manager and waves at her on his way out.

"Let me finish," his mother says. "The family who invited us are the Callahans."

Miles stops in his tracks. "What?"

"Chloe's parents. Gosh, I haven't heard from them in ages."

"They invited you over for Christmas?" Miles asks suspiciously.

"Yes. They invited you, too. And your brother. Diana has this idea that we should get together for old time's sake. They want us to spend the holidays at their lake house."

Miles lingers in the alley behind the bar, biting his lip to prevent himself from asking the question on the tip of his tongue. "Is Chloe coming?" he asks instead.

"Yes, Diana said she is."

"And...Kieran?" He winces at his own neediness.

"She didn't say anything about him. So, what should I tell her?"

"I need to think about it. I might have some gigs around that time," he lies. "I'm not sure I can make the whole week."

"Well, don't take too long to think. It's not proper to leave people waiting for an answer."

"I'll let you know. I've got to go now, Mom."

He disconnects and dials Chloe's number as he exits the alley, heading for the bus station.

"Let me guess, you heard about my parents' mad idea?" Chloe says instead of greeting.

"My mom just told me. What do you think?"

"I'm not too excited about being stuck in a lake house with my parents. With you, though, it'll be fun."

"I've always wanted to visit your lake house," Miles says thoughtfully. "Although I'm not looking forward to being there with my family either."

Especially my brother.”

“Would he even come?” Chloe asks. “Isn’t he super busy at the clinic?”

“He is. We haven’t talked for a while.”

“What’s up with our older brothers being so successful?” Chloe sighs. “It’s like we always have to play catch up. Kieran won’t be there, by the way. He already has plans.”

“Oh.” Miles tries to keep the disappointment from his voice. “What’s he doing?”

“Probably someone long-legged and disgustingly good-looking. Ever since that weekend, he’s been acting strange. It feels like he’s shut me out.”

“You shouldn’t blame him. It was a nightmare.”

“Do you think he could have PTSD or something?” There’s concern in Chloe’s voice.

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked since then.”

After the events at Ethan’s, Miles promised himself not to contact Kieran. He broke that promise a few weeks later, sending him a text message. He didn’t get a reply and sent another about a month later. Kieran never responded. To Miles, that was a clear message.

“I’ll try to talk to him again,” Chloe says. “Anyway, enough about my brother. Will you come to the lake house? Please.”

“Isn’t Luca coming? I’ll be a third wheel.”

“He is coming on Christmas day. And you won’t be the third wheel. I’ll show you around, and I promise we won’t get sober for the entire week.”

“Well, when you put it like that.”

“You won’t regret it,” Chloe says.

Miles’ not sure spending a week with the Callahans will help take his mind off Kieran. But he figures it’s better than spending the holidays alone sulking in his new, almost empty apartment. If he has too much free time, he might do something stupid. Like drunk-text Kieran and say something he isn’t supposed to. At the lake house, he’ll at least be surrounded by people, keeping him distracted. He concludes it’s a solid plan.

TWO

On Christmas Eve, Miles sits in Chloe's car as she carefully navigates through the small town towards the outskirts. The radio warns of an upcoming snowstorm in the area in the next few days, and snow has already started to fall. They're both glad to make it unscathed when they reach their destination.

The Callahan's vacation house, nestled almost on top of a frozen lake, is solid but not abundant. It's a two-story made of durable wood, exuding warmth against the backdrop of the snow-covered pine trees. When they exit the car, the air smells of smoke from the two massive chimneys on the roof.

Miles remembers Chloe leaving for the lake house during summer vacations and holidays. He was always secretly jealous of her for having a family that spent holidays together.

"Seems your parents are already here." Chloe nods at the white crossover parked in the driveway. "Are you ready for the madness?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Miles says. "Do you want to bet on the number of inappropriate comments our parents will make?"

"How about we make a drinking game out of it?"

"Are you trying to turn me into an alcoholic?" Miles asks in mock accusation.

Chloe throws her head back and laughs, reminding Miles of Kieran. "We'll have to make teeny tiny sips. Not shots, or we'll be under the table in a couple of hours."

Miles smiles. "Deal."

"There they are!" Mrs. Callahan opens the front door. "Oh my god, Miles, I haven't seen you in ages. You look so handsome." She pulls Miles into a tight hug and kisses him on the cheek. "Come in, come in."

Despite the cold, she wears a T-shirt and flare jeans, accentuating her delicate and youthful figure. A giant crystal necklace hangs around her neck, and about a dozen thin bracelets her wrists. She could be mistaken for Chloe's older sister if it wasn't for her shoulder-length grey hair.

"It's good to see you, Mrs. Callahan." Miles returns her hug.

"You must tell me everything about that dreadful weekend you and Kieran had at your friend's house."

“Mom, you’ve heard that story like a million times already,” Chloe interjects.

“Yes, but not from Miles!”

“We’ll have plenty of time for stories, Diana. Let the kids come in.” Mr. Callahan steps forward and hugs Chloe, then shakes Miles’ hand. “Did you get here fine?”

“It was super stressful,” Chloe says. “The roads are getting blanketed by the minute.”

“I’m glad you’re here in one piece,” Mr. Callahan says.

Like his wife, he has more grey hair than he did when Miles saw them last. But his wiry body is as energetic as always, and the spring in his step is still there.

After Miles and Chloe remove their winter jackets and shoes, Mr. Callahan leads them to the living room. Miles’ parents are already there, sitting on a couch among open boxes of Christmas tree decorations.

“We figured it’d be fun to decorate the Christmas tree together,” Mr. Callahan explains.

“Hi, Mom, hi, Dad,” Miles greets his parents, their hugs feeling more formal than the ones from Chloe’s parents. The Riveras aren’t a tactile family, and their relationship feels even stiffer in contrast with the Callahans.

“I hope you brought something warmer than that.” His mom eyes Miles’ rock band T-shirt.

“Um,” says Miles.

“Don’t worry, dear, I have plenty of Kieran’s clothes here. We’ll find something for you,” says Mrs. Callahan. “But first, let me sort out your beverages. Does hot cocoa sound good?”

“Yes, please.” Chloe removes a box of ornaments from an armchair and sits down.

“Can I have a coffee?” Miles takes the vacant space on the couch next to his parents.

“One cocoa and one coffee coming right up. Darling, can you take the kids’ bags upstairs?” she asks her husband. “Chloe, I’ve put my yoga mats in your room. I hope you don’t mind. I needed to make space in the small guest room.”

Chloe rolls her eyes. “Fine, turn my room into storage. Are you planning to turn it into a yoga studio next?”

“I would never do that, sweetie. You know, I mostly keep it as you left it.

Miles, since Kieran isn't coming, I've put you in his room. It has better heating."

"Thank you, Mrs. Callahan." Miles tries not to dwell on the fact he'll be spending a whole week in the room where Kieran spent his teenage summers. It's difficult enough to stop thinking about him, being with his family. Each of them has a trait that reminds Miles of Kieran. Chloe has a similar laugh. Mr. Callahan's eyes are of the same color and shape. And Mrs. Callahan has the same nose and cheekbones.

After Miles and Chloe finish their beverages and warm up, they help their parents decorate the Christmas tree and the rest of the house. As a finishing touch, Mrs. Callahan hangs a sprig of mistletoe outside above the front door.

"There can't be a Christmas party without mistletoe," she says. "Oh, right on time. Look, there's your brother," she tells Miles as they watch a car pulling into the driveway.

Peter, Miles' older brother, and his wife, Angela, exit the car and walk along the snow-covered gravel path. Miles hasn't seen them for months, and Angela's growing belly is now prominent underneath her winter coat.

"Let me help." Miles takes a few steps forward, shivering against the freezing air without a jacket, and takes the bags from Angela.

"Good to see you." Angela kisses Miles on the cheek. "You've changed since we last saw each other," she adds. "In a good way."

"Thanks. You've changed, too." He smirks.

"Don't tell me about it." She rolls her eyes. "Believe me, I'm aware."

"Hey, little bro." Peter bumps Miles on the shoulder, then turns his attention to their hosts. "What a nice house you have here, Mr. and Mrs. Callahan. Look at this beauty. Is this redwood?"

"Western red cedar," says Mr. Callahan. "And thank you. Kieran paid to renovate it a few years ago. We fixed up the exterior pretty significantly. The renovations inside are a never-ending cycle, as you can imagine."

"I know how it is," Peter says. "We've been working on a nursery for months, and it's nowhere near finished. I can't imagine doing the whole house at once."

"Come on inside, everyone," Mrs. Callahan urges them. "You're letting the cold in. Peter, Angela, look up." She points at the mistletoe. "Don't forget to kiss, or it'll be bad luck."

Peter kisses his wife, and everyone gets inside. Miles' parents enter the hallway to greet their older son and daughter-in-law. The house fills with

festive commotion as the guests settle in.

Chloe shows Miles to Kieran's room and leaves him alone to unpack. Miles closes the door behind him and looks around. It feels even more bizarre to be here than he imagined. Kieran's room is a typical teenager's room from over a decade ago. Miles inspects it with curiosity. The walls are covered with faded movie posters. There's a telescope in one corner and a pile of construction sets and puzzle boxes in the other. The bed is made of solid, heavy wood. Underneath it, Miles expects to find magazines but is surprised to see piles of books instead. He skims the spines and finds classic science fiction mixed with books on acting and theatre history. He smiles, noticing a battered volume of *Pride and Prejudice* among them. The wardrobe and the drawers are full of Kieran's old clothes, but Mrs. Callahan has helpfully emptied a few shelves and a nightstand for Miles.

It doesn't take him long to unpack as he didn't bring much. He fishes out the small gifts he prepared for everyone and sets them aside on the desk. Then he swaps his rock band T-shirt for a plain white one and makes a beeline to the bathroom down the hallway to splash some water on his face.

"Hey." Chloe sticks her head into the bathroom. "We're having snacks downstairs, and then everyone's going to church. Do you want to stay behind and help me with the dinner?"

"Yes, please," says Miles. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Cool."

He picks up the gifts from his room and takes them downstairs, putting them into the name-tagged stockings above the fireplace. Then he joins others in the dining room, where Mrs. Callahan serves finger sandwiches.

When everyone else leaves for the local church's Christmas Eve service, Chloe puts on her holiday playlist, and they start working on food, debating over the appropriate amount of sugar in the eggnog.

"If it were up to you, you wouldn't put any sugar at all, isn't that so, you monster?" Chloe adds another spoonful while waving Miles off with her free hand.

"How can you maintain such a good shape with your giant sweet tooth?"

"It's genetic. Now leave me to it and work on the shrimp cocktail instead."

Miles fetches the ingredients for the shrimp cocktail from the fridge, eyeing Chloe's work. "Put more rum in it, will you?"

"Yes. It's not time for it yet. Geez, since when have you become so bossy?"

“You still love me though.”

“And sassy. But I do.”

It’s fun to cook and banter with his best friend in anticipation of the feast. Even the fact that he has to spend a week with his parents and older brother doesn’t seem so dreadful. And Miles almost forgets the longing feeling in his chest that has been there since his weekend with Kieran, playing pretend boyfriends. He hasn’t even looked at his phone for a couple of hours, with the stupid hope that Kieran might send him a message to wish him a Merry Christmas.

The winter sky outside the windows gradually darkens, and Chloe lights candles and adds wood to the fireplace to keep it going. After the eggnog cools in the fridge, she claims they must try it to ensure she got the proportions right and to prove a point to Miles. They put together a Caesar salad while getting tipsy on the eggnog, joking and giggling. When their families return from church, it’s finally time for the festive dinner.

Mrs. Callahan finishes setting up the table in the dining room by arranging holiday-themed dinnerware, adding pillar candles, and scattering small ornaments and sprigs of pine branches. “Just take any spot you like,” she says as the guests huddle around the table.

The seating is tight, and they brush each other’s elbows as they sit down. Mr. and Mrs. Callahan occupy the opposite ends of the table. Miles gets a spot next to Mrs. Callahan, with Chloe opposite him next to Peter.

“The food smells amazing, Diana,” Miles’ father says.

“I’ve had helpers.” Mrs. Callahan smiles at Chloe and Miles. “Thank you, dears.”

“No problem, Mrs. Callahan,” Miles says.

“Miles is so well-mannered, isn’t he?” Mr. Callahan says to his wife. “It’s funny. When he and Chloe became friends, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he would become my son-in-law. That’s, of course, until Chloe told us Miles came out.”

Chloe grimaces at Miles and makes a point of sipping from her glass of eggnog. Miles remembers their drinking game and reaches out to pour himself a drink.

“Don’t get me wrong, Miles, I was happy and proud of you,” Mr. Callahan adds. “But you can say I was the first man whose heart you broke.” He laughs.

Chloe takes another swig of her eggnog.

“Wait a second,” Mrs. Callahan tells Chloe, noticing her drinking. “Who would like to say a prayer?”

Before anyone can answer, a car engine rumbles outside, becoming louder as it approaches the house.

“Are we waiting for someone?” Chloe asks.

“No, we’re not,” Mrs. Callahan says. “Who could it be?”

Mr. Callahan stands up and walks to the window, peeking between the curtains. “My goodness! It’s Kieran.”

THREE

Miles watches through the window the blue Porsche Panamera parking in the driveway. Chloe and her parents head to the hallway as Kieran walks from the car to the house under the falling snow, his figure outlined by the warm light coming through the opened front door.

“Kieran, honey, what a surprise! You said you couldn’t make it. I’m so happy you did.”

“Hi, Mom.” Something turns over in Miles’ stomach at the sound of Kieran’s voice.

His legs move of their own accord as he crosses the dining room and sticks his head into the hallway in time to see Chloe jumping toward her brother.

“Kiers! What an awesome surprise!”

“Hey, Cece.” Kieran hugs his sister, and when she lets him go, he turns to his father. “Hi, Dad.”

Miles stands frozen in his spot, watching Kieran’s family greet him. His hair, face, and jacket are covered in snow from the short walk from the car to the house, and a few flakes melt on his eyelashes, turning into beads of water.

Kieran’s eyes fall on Miles. “Hey. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Miles mumbles, taking a step toward him. He awkwardly shakes Kieran’s hand.

“Don’t stand there, sweetie; come in. We were just about to eat. You’re right on time.”

“Great. I’m starving,” Kieran says.

“We need to arrange an extra seat,” Mrs. Callahan says. “Miles, do you mind moving your chair over a bit to make a spot for Kieran?”

“Sure,” Miles says.

“Chloe, could you fetch another plate? Oh, this is exciting!”

Miles returns to the living room and scoots his chair closer to Angela, freeing the space between him and Mrs. Callahan as instructed.

The atmosphere at the dinner table amps up at Kieran’s arrival. He takes a few minutes to say hello to everyone and then takes his seat.

“Now, where were we?” Mrs. Callahan says.

“We were going to say a prayer,” Mr. Callahan says. “Why don’t one of our guests say it?”

Miles' father volunteers. Miles glances at Kieran, and their eyes meet briefly before they take each other's hand for the prayer. Miles thinks he imagines the slight smile on Kieran's face before they close their eyes. After the prayer, everybody happily digs into the food, and conversations start flowing.

"Son, why did you suddenly change your mind and come here?" Mr. Callahan asks.

"My plans changed."

"What's her name?" Chloe asks with a smirk.

Instead of a reply, Kieran turns to Miles' parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Rivera, how's your law firm doing?"

"Thanks for asking. It's doing well. We're looking for new partners at the moment."

"Are you expanding or planning for succession?" Kieran asks.

"A bit of both. We need some fresh blood," Miles' father says. "It's a shame that neither of our boys is interested in being a lawyer."

"You can't always make the kids do what you want," Mr. Callahan says. "Every parent at some point realizes their child is an independent human being."

"That's true. When Peter decided to pursue a medical career, we were heartbroken. But his practice is doing very well," Miles' mother says. "And it's good to have a doctor in the family. If only Miles did something as practical."

Chloe catches Miles' look over the table and makes a point of taking a swig of her eggnog. Miles does the same.

"Miles' music has taken off recently," Chloe says. "He has fans now."

"That's nice," says Peter. "Maybe someday it'll also start to pay the bills," he adds in a lower voice.

"Peter," Angela says, glaring at her husband.

"What? I'm just being pragmatic. And an art career is not that."

"Kieran also has an art career," Chloe chimes in.

"Yes, but Kieran's successful. He's made a name for himself and is making insane money. Unfortunately, it's not the case with Miles. He's still couch surfing at twenty-six."

"I got my place now," Miles says.

"Yeah, but for how long?" Peter says.

Miles doesn't respond. He doesn't want to argue with his brother. It

reminds him why they don't talk much. Angela catches his gaze and mouths, *Sorry*.

"Miles told me you have a boyfriend from Italy." Miles' mother says to Chloe, delicately changing the subject. "How interesting."

"Yes, his name's Luca."

"Is he going to join us?"

"He's coming tomorrow."

"Wonderful. I'm very excited to meet him."

"That reminds me. Dad, can you pick up Luca from the airport?"

"Of course, dear. Let's hope the snowstorm won't delay his flight."

"And what are you working on right now, Kieran?" Angela asks. "Anything new?"

"Actually, yes," Kieran says. "I can't share the details, but the movie setting is a tropical island. The location is amazing. I can't wait to begin shooting."

"How exciting," Angela says. "Is it a romantic movie?"

"Yes. It has a love triangle, and I will have two partners. One has already been cast, and they're now looking for the second one."

"I'll be looking forward to it."

"Speaking of romance," Mrs. Callahan says. "Kieran, you'll never guess who I ran into in town this morning." When Kieran doesn't try to guess, she continues, "Amelia Richards, your old girlfriend."

"I forgot that her family owned a house here," Kieran says.

"The house belongs to Amelia now. She also owns a diner in town. She has a child and is divorced. And she's single," Mrs. Callahan adds meaningfully.

"I wonder why you think that information is relevant to me," Kieran says.

"Come on, I know you liked her."

"It was eight years ago," Kieran says.

"Yes, but she's such a nice girl. Why don't I arrange a date for you two while you're here?"

"Because I'm not interested."

"You can't only chase actresses and models. They're so vain. I feel like you need a good, down-to-earth girl to settle down with."

"Thanks, Mom. But I'm not looking to settle down," Kieran says flatly.

"Their generation just doesn't want to start a family," Miles' father says. "Take Miles, for example. He went through so many boyfriends in the past

few years that I stopped trying to remember their names.”

“It wasn’t Miles’ fault,” Miles’ mother says. “Miles wanted to marry Ethan, and Ethan said no.”

“Poor thing,” Mrs. Callahan says to Miles. Suddenly, she looks like she has an idea. “There’s a very nice boy in town. Son of our old friends. His name is Zac. He’s gay, and he’s very handsome. I will see if I can arrange for you to meet while you’re here.”

Kieran chuckles. “I don’t understand why you always need to matchmake people, Mom.”

“Sweetie, we are your parents. We want you to be happy and live a full life.”

“A person can be perfectly happy on their own.”

Mrs. Callahan frowns. “Kieran, why are you—” She stops mid-sentence, staring at her son.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Mr. Callahan asks.

“Nothing. I just lost my train of thought. I guess I’m getting old,” Mrs. Callahan says. “By the way, I gave your room to Miles,” she tells Kieran. “We weren’t expecting you, so—”

“It’s okay,” Kieran says. “I’ll leave my stuff in Chloe’s room for now.”

“After dinner, I’ll prepare the small guest room for you.”

“Sounds good.”

“We can switch if you want to,” Miles says. “I’ll take the guest room.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I won’t kick you out,” Kieran says softly.

Across the table, Peter studies them. “So, you two had quite an adventure this year.”

“We did,” says Kieran. “It was intense.”

“I’m dying to hear Miles’ side of the story,” says Mrs. Callahan. “Kieran said you’d crawled through the vents to get out of a basement. Was it scary?”

“It was terrifying,” Miles admits. “But the thought of being murdered by a serial killer was more terrifying.”

“You saved my son’s life,” Mrs. Callahan says. “I will be forever grateful to you for that.”

“Technically, your son also saved me.” Miles steals a look at Kieran. “I’d say we’re even.”

“I don’t know. Tackling a killer seems more badass than crawling through the vents,” says Peter.

Kieran glances at Peter over the table while Mrs. Callahan says, “If Miles

didn't get out first, Kieran wouldn't have been able to tackle him."

"I think it's quite pointless trying to determine who saved the other more," Mr. Callahan says from the other end of the table.

"I agree with Dad," Chloe says. "What's more interesting is that they pretended to be *boyfriends*." She giggles.

Miles wonders which glass of eggnog she is on. He catches Peter and his parents looking at her in surprise, realizing that his family only knows part of the story.

"We must finally hear all about it," Mrs. Callahan says. "It sounds so amusing, but Kieran hasn't shared any details with us."

"Maybe now that we have them together, they'll share," Mr. Callahan says.

Suddenly, all eyes are on them, and the room feels stifling. Miles makes eye contact with Kieran, and they share an unspoken communication.

"Fine." Kieran leans back in his chair. "What would you like to know?"

"Did you kiss?" Mrs. Callahan asks.

"Mom!" says Chloe. "Of course, they didn't." She shifts her gaze to her brother, and her eyes widen. "Wait, you did?"

"How do you think we pretended to be boyfriends?" Kieran asks.

Chloe stares at her brother, then shifts her gaze to Miles.

"What kind of kiss was it?" Mrs. Callahan asks in the meantime.

"Mom!" says Chloe.

"If it was just a peck in the lips, it's not even worth talking about," Mrs. Callahan says. She looks at Kieran and Miles. "So, was it a proper kiss?"

"Define proper." Kieran seems amused by his mother's questions.

"Was it a French kiss?"

"Darling, what are you asking?" Mr. Callahan says.

"Mom wants to know if I put my tongue in Miles' mouth," Kieran supplies helpfully, even though his father's question is rhetorical.

Miles imagines that his face is as red as the tablecloth. He pretends to be interested in the shrimp cocktail.

"I'm more interested in why you had to pretend to be boyfriends," Peter says.

"He needed a plus one for the engagement party," Chloe explains.

"And why didn't you bring a real boyfriend?" Peter asks, still looking at Miles.

"I don't have a boyfriend at the moment," says Miles.

"You could've come up with an excuse and not go. But you decided to

drag a busy man like Kieran instead. Do you even know how much an hour of his time costs?”

“Actually, it was my idea,” Kieran says.

“Because you’re a kind and generous person,” Peter says. “Although paying for an escort would’ve been much cheaper. But I guess Miles can’t afford even that.”

Kieran shoots a quick look at Miles. “I didn’t do it out of charity. It helped my career quite a bit.”

“It did?” Peter raises his eyebrows. “In what way?”

“After the tabloids got hold of our photos from that weekend, I started to receive tons of new offers from studios,” Kieran says. “And the roles are more diverse than before. My management is thrilled.”

“Sounds a bit like queerbaiting,” Chloe quips.

“I’m not telling them I’m gay,” Kieran says. “I had a private weekend, my photos leaked, and they made the assumption themselves. Besides, it makes the fans happy.”

Hearing Kieran explain everything so pragmatically feels like a stab of an icicle in Miles’ chest. He’s been pining over Kieran for months, and here the man is bragging about the boost in his career, thanks to Miles. Was it his initial plan when he suggested pretending to be boyfriends?

Miles processes his thoughts while there’s a lull in the conversation at the table. He wanted a quiet, dull Christmas, getting drunk with Chloe and sleeping. And now Kieran is here, and Miles’ emotions are getting messed up again. He sighs and downs the rest of his drink.

Under the table, Kieran suddenly taps his leg with his hand to grab his attention. Miles tries not to look startled.

“Hey,” Kieran says quietly so only Miles can hear. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Miles says.

“Tell me about your music. Are you working with Jeremy’s friend?”

Miles tries not to feel annoyed that Kieran is suddenly interested in his life. He would’ve responded to Miles’ texts if he were genuinely interested.

“His name is Alex,” he says, keeping his tone even. “He’s the club owner.”

“How often do you play there?”

“Normally twice a week, but it’s been more often lately because of the holidays.”

“I’d like to come to your show sometime.”

“You would?”

“Yes. Maybe I’ll bring some friends.”

“Sure. If you have time,” Miles says.

“I can make time.”

Miles knows it’s not a big deal. Kieran’s just saying it out of politeness. And even if he comes, by “friends,” he probably means he’ll bring a date.

“Do you write your own music?” Kieran asks.

“I had a long hiatus. But I started again recently,” Miles says reluctantly. There is no way for Kieran to know that Miles returned to music because of him, but he’s still ashamed to admit he’s writing again.

“Do you have your guitar with you? I’d love to hear you play.”

“No way.” Miles crosses his arms on his chest. “You have to come to the club and pay for the ticket.”

Kieran smiles. “So, this is how it is between us now? Transactional?”

Miles raises an eyebrow. “Was it ever any other way?”

Kieran frowns and opens his mouth to say something else, but Peter interrupts them by asking about Kieran’s car. In the meantime, Mrs. Callahan suggests bringing dessert, and Mr. Callahan and Chloe volunteer to do it. After dessert, everyone relocates to the living room for drinks of their choice. Kieran, Peter, and Miles’ father put on their jackets and go outside to look at Kieran’s car, debating the car’s ground clearance and weight distribution.

Miles stays inside and chats to Mr. Callahan about music. Their discussion leads them to the garage, where Mr. Callahan shows Miles his collection of old acoustic guitars.

“This is so impressive. I love the Gibson most.” Miles looks at the display before him. “If I played acoustic guitars, I’d go with it. It has that warm tone that’s unmatched.”

“And it’s so versatile, too,” says Mr. Callahan. “It’s great for folk, country, blues, and even rock.”

“It’s true, but at the end of the day, I prefer electric guitars,” Miles admits. “They offer more versatility, especially for the music I want to create.”

Mr. Callahan huffs. “We need to have a face-off, and I’ll show you what this baby can do.” He pats his guitar.

“I’ll be looking forward to that,” Miles says.

“Have I ever told you that me and my buddies had a band?”

“No, I didn’t know that,” Miles says, amused.

“I had long hair, too.”

“I hope you have pictures.”

“Diana should have them somewhere,” Mr. Callahan says. “If you win the face-off, I’ll show you.”

Miles laughs. “Name the time and place.”

“Let’s arrange something early next year,” Mr. Callahan says.

They return inside, where everyone’s back in the living room after dispersing around the house. As the evening progresses, the parents and Angela retire to bed. Miles, Chloe, Kieran, and Peter hang out together for a while, but then Chloe mumbles something about needing to sleep off all the eggnog and leaves. Kieran and Peter take the couch, drinking wine and chatting.

Miles goes to the kitchen to make himself tea and returns to the living room, taking the armchair beside the fireplace. With Kieran showing up at the lake house unannounced, he suddenly wants his mind to be clear. It’s enough that his infatuation clouds his thinking.

He half-listens to Kieran and Peter discuss the state of the film industry in America and the recent writer’s strike. Then, they switch to healthcare, and Peter talks about the nuances of running a private practice. Kieran seems interested in the subject, listening attentively and asking follow-up questions. It amazes Miles how Kieran can hold a conversation on practically any topic. He sips his tea and watches them, immersed in his thoughts, until he hears his name.

“...bringing a fake boyfriend to an engagement party.”

Miles blinks. “What?”

“I can’t get over you dragging Kieran into your shitshow relationship with your ex.”

Miles doesn’t say anything, instead trying to piece together how Peter jumped from the intricacies of purchasing medical equipment to him.

“As I said, it was my idea,” Kieran says. “Miles didn’t like it.”

“But he agreed eventually. That’s so childish and irresponsible. He should have realized that you were just being polite.”

Miles knows his brother is drunk. He doesn’t want to argue, so he keeps his mouth shut. There’s nothing he can say now to dissuade Peter.

“You’re wrong,” Kieran says to Peter.

“I know. You mentioned the benefit to your career,” says Peter. “But there’s no way you knew in advance it would happen.”

“And that’s not why I went with Miles,” Kieran says. “I went because I wanted to.”

“What?”

“I wanted to be with Miles, but I wasn’t sure he wanted the same,” Kieran says as if weighing each word. “I thought the only way I could have him, at least for a little while, was by being his fake boyfriend.”

Miles realizes his jaw has dropped, so he shuts his mouth, glad for the dimmed lights.

“You’re joking,” Peter says.

“Not at all. It turned out that Miles also had feelings for me. And now we’re dating.”

Peter blinks a few times, then turns to Miles. Miles takes a big gulp of his tea.

“Why am I only hearing about this now?” Peter says doubtfully, leaning back in his chair and looking between them. “Mom would’ve told me.”

“Miles has been kind not to tell anyone because I haven’t come out to my parents yet.”

“Does Chloe know?”

“No. You’re the first person to know, actually,” Kieran says. “It’s still fresh. It started during the weekend at Ethan’s. We...couldn’t keep our hands off each other.”

“Please, don’t. TMI.” Peter reaches for the wine bottle on the coffee table.

They don’t talk while he downs another glass.

“You dropped a bombshell on me,” Peter says eventually. “Now I feel like a douchebag for saying all those things.” He turns to Miles. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Miles stands up from the armchair, taking his half-empty cup with him. He won’t participate in whatever game Kieran is trying to play. “I need to get some sleep.”

He leaves the room, feeling Peter and Kieran following him with their eyes. He drops his cup in the kitchen and goes to the bathroom upstairs to brush his teeth and wash his face. As he returns to his room, he is still processing what happened. He turns off the overhead light and only leaves the bedside lamp, flopping on the bed atop the covers. Still in his clothes, he stares at the ceiling for half an hour, playing out what happened in his head. Once again, Kieran treated him like a charity case, thinking he had to lie to protect Miles from his brother. Miles stopped caring what Peter thought about him a long time ago. He doesn’t need Kieran to stand up for him or pretend again. He feels humiliated, wanting to leave this house and go back home. The problem is that he doesn’t have a car, and there’s a snowstorm

coming. Getting back will be difficult.

While he's brainstorming ways to escape, someone knocks on the door.

"Come in." Miles lifts his head as Kieran enters the room and closes the door behind him.

"I need to get my clothes." He waves at the drawer.

"Go ahead."

Kieran crosses the room and rummages in his drawer, fishing out a T-shirt and joggers. Then he turns around to face Miles, leaning back against the drawer. "Can't sleep?"

"Sort of. I don't sleep well in new places." Miles sits on the bed against the headboard. He catches a strange expression on Kieran's face. "What?"

"It's weird to see you in my bed."

"If you changed your mind and want your room back, I can switch," Miles says.

"No, never mind. I'm a bit drunk," Kieran says.

"I figured that," Miles says. "You told Peter we're dating."

"He pissed me off." Kieran crosses the room and perches on the edge of the bed, keeping an arm's length between them, his clothes piled in his lap.

"The lie proves his point," Miles says pointedly.

"It's not you who lied," Kieran says. "I did it because the alternative would've been to kick his ass. And that would ruin Christmas for everyone."

"You don't have to stand up for me anymore," Miles says. "You're not my brother."

"Believe me, I'm aware of that," Kieran says. Then he adds, "Your brother is kind of a douchebag."

"I know. And he's a doctor."

"I bet he has horrible bedside manner."

"Thankfully for me, doctors can't treat relatives," Miles says, and Kieran chuckles.

Miles still can't wrap his head around the fact that the person who occupied his thoughts for the past few months is now sitting on his bed. When Kieran didn't answer his messages, Miles got a feeling that he had made up the entire weekend at Ethan's in his head.

"How's Ethan doing?" Kieran asks suddenly as if reading his thoughts.

"I don't know. He left for a silent retreat at a Buddhist monastery in Thailand a few weeks ago and hasn't returned yet. He said he needed to process what happened. I think he had difficulty accepting that he killed his

fiancé.”

“Makes sense.” Kieran looks like he wants to ask something else but doesn’t.

“Did you get everything you wanted?” Miles asks, looking at the clothes in Kieran’s lap.

“I did,” Kieran says.

“Good,” says Miles. “Goodnight.”

Kieran’s eyes roam Miles’ fully clothed body and the cover he’s lying on. “Okay. Goodnight.”

The door clicks shut as Kieran leaves, and Miles rolls onto his stomach, muffling his frustrated sigh with the pillow.

FOUR

When Miles looks out the window in the morning, he's almost blinded by the snow. A thick, brilliant-white blanket covers everything from the backyard to the horizon. He shivers as he gets out of bed, fighting the desire to get back in and sleep until lunchtime. Last night is a kaleidoscope of images flashing through his head as he quickly showers and dresses in the bathroom down the hallway.

Downstairs, Mr. and Mrs. Callahan serve buffet-style breakfast by arranging cinnamon rolls and various fresh fruits on the kitchen island.

"Good morning," Mrs. Callahan greets him. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did, thank you," he lies.

"Was the room warm enough? It might get chilly in the mornings."

"It was perfect," Miles says.

The kitchen smells of coffee and cinnamon, and the aroma alone wakes him. The only other person in the room besides Mr. and Mrs. Callahan is Chloe. She sits on a bar stool at the kitchen island, picking at a piece of toast and putting small bits into her mouth with a thoughtful expression.

"Morning." Miles lands in a chair beside her.

"Morning," Chloe says. "You're up early."

"I could say the same about you." Miles takes a slice of orange from a plate. "How are you feeling?"

"My head is killing me." Chloe lifts her mug. "I needed fuel."

"Would you like a coffee, Miles?" Mrs. Callahan asks, standing at the stove with a spatula in her hand. From Miles' vantage point, it looks like she's making pancakes.

"Yes, please."

"Can I get one, too?" Kieran asks as he enters the kitchen.

His hair is sleep-tousled in different directions, but somehow it looks artful, as if a stylist worked on it for half an hour. He's wearing a slightly wrinkled T-shirt and loose joggers. Miles turns away as the patch of skin between the hem of the T-shirt and the waistband of Kieran's pants comes into his sight. Kieran takes a bar stool on the opposite side of the island, closer to the stove. He doesn't say anything to Miles or Chloe.

Mrs. Callahan sets two mugs of coffee in front of him. "Here you go, two

coffees for my favorite boys.”

Kieran looks at the mugs and stands up, heading for the fridge and getting a fresh milk carton.

“Since when do you take coffee with milk?” Chloe asks.

“It’s not for me.” Kieran brings the milk and one of the mugs to Miles. “Do you want a spoon?”

Miles stares at the milk, Kieran, and back at the milk. He remembers.

“What?”

“A spoon. To stir it.”

“Yes, thanks,” Miles says after a pause.

Kieran brings him a teaspoon and returns to his seat, reaching for his coffee. He looks more awake after taking several sips.

“How come you never remember how I take my coffee?” Chloe asks.

“I can’t memorize how much sugar you put in,” Kieran says. “Is it seven spoons or eight?”

Chloe picks a grape and throws it at Kieran over the island. Kieran dodges, and the grape hits Mrs. Callahan in the back.

“Kids, stop playing with food!” Mrs. Callahan says without turning.

Kieran takes a few more sips of coffee. “Also, you’re the younger sibling. Technically, you’re my servant for life. It should be *you* making *me* coffee.”

Chloe throws another grape at him, which Kieran catches with his mouth and eats. “Thanks, keep them coming.”

“Fucker,” says Chloe.

“No cursing in our house,” Mr. Callahan interjects. “Especially in front of the guest.”

“Oh, come on,” says Chloe. “Miles is not a guest. Besides, you should hear the dirty mouth he has on him.”

“Did I miss something?” Kieran asks, raising an eyebrow.

Miles ignores the conversation, eating a slice of apple and washing it down with coffee.

“Stop with this nonsense,” Mrs. Callahan says. “Instead, let’s make plans for today. I thought you could go ice skating.”

“Not me,” says Chloe. “I still have a headache.”

“And you know I don’t like ice skating,” Kieran says.

Mrs. Callahan shakes her head incredulously at her children, then looks at Miles.

“What do you want to do today, dear?”

Miles remembers the conversation they had at the dinner table. “I want to take you up on that offer, Mrs. Callahan,” he says. “I’d like to go on a date with your friend’s son.”

He needs a distraction from Kieran. His relationship with Frank feels like ages ago, and he hasn’t been with anyone since. He hasn’t even had a date, focusing solely on work and writing music. If he’s honest with himself, he doesn’t feel like dating at all. That’s the part that scares him the most. He needs to stop projecting his desires on Kieran. And his brain must stop interpreting every Kieran’s word and action as flirting.

“You would?” Mrs. Callahan says. “That’s lovely, dear. I’ll get in touch with him today. He’s a nice boy.”

“Thank you.” Miles tries not to look at the Callahan siblings.

Peter, Angela, and Miles’ parents come downstairs soon after. Chloe, Kieran, and Miles leave the kitchen to give them space for breakfast. They hang out in the living room until everyone joins them to get the gifts from the stockings above the fireplace.

The living room fills with cheer and laughter as they fish out the gifts, mostly candies, toiletries, stationery, and funny socks. Chloe gives Miles a festive red scarf. Kieran gives everyone a gift card to different online stores, apologizing for not having time to pick something more personal. Miles doesn’t want to know the value of those gift cards and is relieved when he’s the only person not to receive one. Instead, he finds something bulky at the bottom of his stocking. It takes him a bit of effort to get it out.

“I hope you like it,” Kieran says with a smirk as Miles removes a miniature red handbag.

Everyone stares at it in confusion as Miles’ face heats up. He meets Kieran’s eyes and is torn between the desire to laugh, punch Kieran, and run away in embarrassment.

“What’s that?” Mr. Callahan asks, voicing the question written on everyone’s face.

“It’s...kind of an inside joke.” Miles’ face and ears burn as he recalls their impromptu performance at Dr. Grace’s office. They pretended to have relationship problems, and Kieran blurted out that Miles was obsessed with miniature handbags. “Thanks,” he says to Kieran.

“You’re welcome.” Kieran seems pleased with the effect it has on Miles.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get you a gift,” Miles says. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“That’s okay,” says Kieran. “I have an idea how you could make up for it.”

Miles’ head is immediately flooded with unwanted images of *how exactly* Kieran wants him to make up for it, and he struggles to banish them.

“I wanted to go to the town for a walk. I need company,” Kieran says. “And I think you’ll enjoy getting outside for a while. You look a bit warm.”

Miles clears his throat. “Sure. Does anybody else want to come with us?” he asks hopefully.

But nobody else wants to go. Chloe claims she’s still hungover. Angela says she’s a bit tired. Mr. and Mrs. Callahan don’t have time as they need to get started on the turkey. Miles’ parents volunteer to help them with the cooking.

“Peter?” Miles turns to his brother. He can’t believe he’s hoping Peter would say yes.

But Peter shakes his head. “Not in this cold. Besides, you two probably want to catch up,” he adds.

Miles is glad nobody else picks up on the meaningful note in his tone.

“Have fun, boys,” Mrs. Callahan says. “But don’t you dare stuff your stomachs with junk food. Leave space for the dinner.”

FIVE

In the late morning, the snow stops falling, although according to the forecast, it's only temporary. The air is fresh and crisp, and Miles' head already feels clearer after the first few minutes outside. They pass the low backyard gate and take the path to the town that partially goes along the lake.

Under his winter jacket, Miles is wearing one of Kieran's old sweaters that Mrs. Callahan insisted he borrow. It smells of an unfamiliar detergent and is a bit long for Miles, but it keeps him warm, along with his favorite beanie and the scarf Chloe has given him.

Kieran walks alongside him in his dark green winter jacket and a grey beanie. The frost has already touched his face, and his cheeks and nose are tinted pink. And although the word *cute* shouldn't apply to Kieran's tall and muscular appearance, it's the one that comes to Miles' mind when he looks at him. He would never admit that out loud, though.

The lake shines under the scarce sunbeams that manage to pass through the clouds. The branches of the pines around the lake bend under the heavy weight of the snow, making it feel like they stepped into a postcard.

"It's so beautiful," Miles says, breaking the silence between them. He slows down his pace to take in the scenery.

"This was my favorite place as a teenager," Kieran says. "In summer, if you swim to that side," he points to the right, "there's a clearing surrounded by bushes. You can't see it from outside. You have to know about it to get there."

"Secret meeting spot?" Miles asks.

"Sort of. We used it when we played pirates. Later, when we got older, it was the place to bring girls to."

"Sounds like fun," Miles says. "Our secret spot was just a large tree. Not as cool. And I can't relate to the part about girls."

Kieran chuckles, but then his face becomes serious again. "When did you know?"

"That I'm gay?" Miles hesitates, wondering how much he wants to share. "When I was six or seven. But I couldn't name it at the time. I realized it later when I was about fifteen, and I had a first huge crush on a guy."

Kieran studies his face. "Did he break your heart?"

“He was out of my league and paid no attention to me. It was completely one-sided—the story of my life.”

Kieran puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes it through the jacket. “He probably was an idiot.”

“You sound like Chloe,” Miles says. “If I’m so great, why don’t you set me up with one of your fellow actors? I’ve heard that Dylan Harrison is gay. Is that true?”

Kieran huffs. “I’m not outing other people.”

“I’m not asking you to out him. Just set us up on a date,” Miles grins.

“Don’t you have a date with that guy from the town? The one my mom is arranging.”

“Need to keep my options open,” Miles says.

“What happened to the Miles that wanted to get married?”

“Haven’t you heard? That Miles is dead. I’m entering my slutty era.” He steps backward, facing Kieran. “By the way, I will die if we don’t start moving now. I’m freezing.”

Kieran follows him. “Are you ready to go check out the town? We could get a drink or something.”

Miles stops and lets Kieran pass him. “Lead the way.”

They walk for about thirty minutes along the snow-covered road before reaching the outskirts of the town. Its low buildings and storefronts gleam with Christmas decorations, string lights, and intricate wreaths. The scent of roasted chestnuts and spiced cider wafts from the vendor stalls lining the streets, and people gather around them to enjoy the treats. An impressive Christmas tree towers on the main square, adorned with shimmering ornaments and a shining star.

As they cross the square, Miles notices a group of girls who seem to be following them. He turns to Kieran. “I think your fans are tailing us.”

Kieran looks over his shoulder. “How do you know they’re fans?”

“They’ve been after us for a while and keep staring.”

“There’s a way to check if they’re fans,” Kieran says.

“What way?”

Kieran reaches out and takes Miles by the hand. The girls behind them squeal and giggle.

“I think you’re right,” says Kieran, the corners of his mouth tugging.

“By the way, why don’t you have bodyguards?” Miles asks.

They continue walking, and he ignores that Kieran doesn’t let go of his hand.

“I don’t like having someone following me everywhere,” Kieran says. “Besides, people here have known me since I was a kid. I’m a local first and an actor second.”

“I get it. You’re just not that famous,” Miles smirks.

“Fuck you,” says Kieran.

“Thanks, but I’d prefer Dylan Harrison.”

Kieran rolls his eyes, and Miles laughs. As they banter, they miss the girls approaching them until they’re up close. They look nervous as one of them asks Kieran, “I’m sorry to bother you, but we were wondering if we could get an autograph?”

“Of course.” Kieran’s facial expression changes into a professional smile. “Do you have a pen?”

The girl gives him a pen and a notepad. He asks for her name and jots something down in it.

“Can I get yours too, Miles?” the girl asks.

Miles tries not to look surprised and knows he’s failing. How does she even know his name?

“Uh, yeah, sure.” He takes the notepad. “Do you want me to say something specific?”

“Anything you like,” she says.

Miles leaves her a quick note and does the same on a postcard and a piece of paper the other girls hand him. Kieran asks them if they want to take a selfie, and the girls beam in delight. They take the selfie, with Miles and Kieran behind and the girls in the front. The girls thank them a few times and walk away with a spring in their step, looking back at them and giggling.

Miles follows them with his eyes, and when they disappear from the view, his gaze wanders around the square. On the opposite side, there’s a small stage with a festive sweater contest in progress. Not far from there, locals sell handmade trinkets from tiny wooden booths. He looks at the center of the square at the Christmas tree, still amazed by its size, and notices two men standing next to it, looking out of place. They are both wearing similar dark suits.

“Are you okay?” Kieran asks.

“What?” Miles tears his eyes from the men. “Yeah. I’m just cold.”

“How about we go to that place?” Kieran points to their right.

“Sure,” says Miles. “As long as I get to feel my toes again.”

Kieran nudges him toward what looks like a diner, and they quickly cross the square and reach the heavy wooden door decorated with a large wreath made of pine branches and dried fruit.

Warm air envelops them as they enter. There aren’t that many visitors, with just a few tables occupied. They look around and pick a booth near the window, which allows them to watch the pedestrians outside. They take opposite sides of the booth, but it’s so tiny that their knees bump under the table. Miles gets a flashback sitting at the club Ethan took them to, and his insides get all fuzzy when he remembers what followed after on the dance floor. He brushes the memory away.

The waiter comes to take their order, and he stares at Kieran as they ask for coffee.

“I think he recognized you.” Miles removes his gloves and flexes his frozen fingers. “He looked starstruck.”

Kieran glances over at the guy and then back at Miles. He takes off his gloves, too, and sets them aside on the seat. “People recognize me more when I get this haircut. When I’m not filming, I let my hair grow longer. Add a baseball cap and baggy clothes, and I can get around mostly unscathed.”

Miles regards him, trying to imagine Kieran with longer hair. He likes the image. Kieran’s golden-brown hair is so smooth and grabbable. It would be even better if it were a bit longer.

“Why are you smiling?”

“I just imagined you with a ponytail,” Miles says.

“I never let it grow that much. I don’t think a ponytail would look good on me.”

“You never know until you try,” Miles smirks.

Kieran opens his mouth to reply, but they’re interrupted by a familiar-looking woman approaching their table.

“Amelia?” Kieran asks at the same time as Miles recognizes her.

The events of eight years ago rise in his memory. When Miles had been attacked by homophobic classmates in high school and had called Kieran for help, she’d come with him. She was Kieran’s girlfriend at the time, and she took Miles to the ER while Kieran dealt with his bullies.

“What a surprise,” Amelia beams. “When Billy told me Kieran Callahan

was in my diner, I didn't believe it. But it's you."

Kieran stands up and gives her a tight hug. "It's good to see you. Long time."

"Long time indeed, Mr. Hollywood," Amelia says.

"You look great."

Amelia snorts. "Flatterer. I'm going crazy trying to keep this place going." Her eyes fall on Miles. "Wait. You're Miles Rivera, right?"

"Yes. Hi." Miles stands up and shakes her hand. "It's good to see you, Amelia."

"You, too. You were still a kid when I last saw you." She gives him a curious once-over. "Look at you now. So handsome. Are you an actor, too, like Kieran?"

"No, I uh...do music," Miles says.

"I see." She looks between them. "So, what brings you guys here?"

"We're here for the holidays," Kieran says. "My parents are hosting Christmas at our lake house, and Miles and his family are visiting."

"I see." The expression on Amelia's face becomes even more curious. "It's so nice that you're still in touch after all this time," she says carefully.

"Yeah. I'm still friends with Chloe, Kieran's sister," Miles says for clarity because it feels like Amelia is making assumptions. It's awkward enough that Peter now thinks he and Kieran are together. He doesn't want anyone else to believe that.

"Oh, that's wonderful. Tell her I said hi," Amelia says, and Miles promises he will.

"And how've you been?" Kieran asks. "Mom said you have a daughter."

"Yes, her name's Emma. She's three," Amelia says, the expression on her face proud.

"That's amazing. Congratulations," Kieran says sincerely.

He and Amelia chat for a while, sharing what's happened in their lives in the past eight years and discussing mutual acquaintances until the waiter returns with the order.

"I need to go back to work," Amelia says when he puts the mugs on the table. "It's been so nice seeing you both. Kieran, let's catch up properly some time."

"Sure thing." Kieran returns her hug and kisses her on the cheek before sliding back into the booth.

They finish their coffees in silence under the interested glances of the staff.

Miles pays for their coffees, leaving a sizable tip, which Kieran says makes their Christmas gifts even.

“Full disclosure. My assistant bought that handbag in a thrift store for five bucks.”

Miles feels relieved at that. He would feel awkward if Kieran gave him something expensive, even a gag gift. He doesn't need another reminder of how rich Kieran is. He suspects Kieran knows that.

When they step outside, the snow is falling again. The clouds become denser, and a strong wind swirls around. People on the square start to disperse, hurrying home for Christmas dinner.

“We should head back.” Kieran zips up his jacket.

“Is this the snowstorm everybody's been talking about?” Miles asks.

“Seems so.” Kieran glances over their heads. “It doesn't look like it will end soon.”

“I guess there's no point asking if we can get an Uber?”

Kieran opens his phone and checks the app. “I'm afraid we'll have to walk.”

Miles sighs. “I was hoping not to turn into an icicle.”

“Let's hurry then.” Kieran leads the way.

As they walk back along the square, Miles notices the strange men in suits again.

“Are you sure you don't have bodyguards with you?” he asks Kieran.

“What?”

“I saw those two guys before we went into the diner. They seem to be watching us.”

Kieran follows his gaze. “I've never seen them before.”

“Paparazzi?”

Kieran shakes his head. “They don't have cameras. Maybe they're waiting for someone.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Miles follows Kieran into the side street.

They cross the town and head toward the lake house, their feet drowning in snow mounds that grow by the minute. They lower their heads against the gusts of air blowing in their faces. Miles shivers in the cold, thankful that Mrs. Callahan forced him to wear Kieran's old sweater. The wind howls

around them, and the sky begins to darken.

“How much longer do we have to go?”

“About half an hour,” Kieran says, raising his voice against the wind.

“How’re you doing?”

“I’m fine.” Miles buries his hands in his pockets. His teeth start chattering.

Kieran looks at him in disbelief. “Do you want to find cover somewhere? Warm up for a bit before we go on?”

Miles shakes his head. “I’d rather push through and get home sooner.”

Kieran glances at the whirlwind of snow above the road ahead of them. “Maybe we can ask my dad to pick us up on their way back from the airport.”

Miles recalls the conversation Chloe had with her father about picking up Luca. He takes out his phone and looks at the time. “Luca’s plane landed half an hour ago.”

Kieran fishes out his phone and dials his father, but Mr. Callahan doesn’t pick up.

“There’s a school in walking distance from here. Do you want to go there and wait until we reach my dad?”

Miles hesitates. On the one hand, he wants to get to the lake house as soon as possible. On the other, his toes feel like they’re about to fall off. Waiting it out a bit and getting a ride seems like a reasonable idea.

“Okay, let’s go to the school,” he says finally.

Kieran leads him off the road, and they walk for a couple of minutes, passing through a park until a massive building appears in the distance.

“Is it even open on Christmas?” Miles asks.

“No, but I know how to get in.”

Miles looks at him incredulously. “Wait...Are we breaking into a school?”

“Nobody’s going to be there.” Kieran chuckles. “Besides, we’re hiding from a storm. I’m sure they’d understand.”

“Why does it feel like we’re always breaking rules when we’re together?” Miles says.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like it.” Kieran gives him a mischievous wink, and Miles feels adrenaline rush through him.

SIX

Instead of going to the school's main entrance, they go around the building and find an emergency exit. Kieran fishes out a lockpick from his pocket and easily opens the door.

Miles rolls his eyes. "Seriously?"

Kieran smirks in response. They get inside, shaking off the snow, and close the door behind them.

"I've never seen such a bad storm." Miles shivers.

Kieran reaches out and dusts the snow off his beanie. "They're quite frequent in this area. I used to enjoy them when I was a kid. We'd stay in and play board games all day."

"Sounds fun," Miles says. "My family never did anything like that."

"They do seem a bit stiff," Kieran says with a small smile.

"Stiff is an understatement," Miles says as they walk along the dark hallway. "Oh, look, the lights are working."

As they wander along the corridor, the lights begin to turn on. Kieran takes his phone and tries to call his father again, but there's no answer.

"He never seems to hear his phone."

"Try Chloe," Miles suggests.

Kieran does, but Chloe's phone goes straight to voicemail.

"Okay, how about we explore this place for a bit, and if they don't call back in ten minutes, I'll dial my mom. I don't want to startle her, so we'll leave it as a last resort."

"Sounds good."

"Where do you want to go?" Kieran asks.

"The teacher's lounge, of course," Miles says without hesitation. "I bet there're some leftover snacks."

Kieran quirks an eyebrow. "We're committing theft now?" he asks with amusement. "What happened to Miles, who was concerned about breaking into a school?"

"He got frozen and starved to death."

They locate the teacher's lounge a couple of minutes later as they enter a darkened room with a kitchenette, comfortable chairs, and round wooden tables. Once Kieran finds the light switch, Miles makes a beeline to a small

fridge by the far wall. But to his disdain, the refrigerator turns out to be empty. He searches the cupboards instead and finds a bag of cookies and a pack of crackers. The cookies turn out to be stale. Kieran laughs as Miles spits one into a trash can.

“I don’t like sweets anyway.” He opens the crackers. “These are decent. Why are you smiling?”

“I like it when you break the rules,” says Kieran, regarding him from the other end of the room.

Miles’ face heats up. “I’ve only had a piece of apple for breakfast.” He takes a bite of the tastiest cracker he’s ever had. “And by the way, it was your idea to break in. If we get caught, I’ll blame it on you.”

“Let me put a reminder to give a generous donation to this school.” Kieran fishes out his phone and takes a note.

“If you’re in such a charitable mood, make me some tea while you’re at it.” Miles flops down on a plush chair. He kicks off his winter boots and puts his legs on a chair before him.

To his surprise, Kieran heads for the kitchenette, puts on the electric kettle, and then rummages in the cupboard for teabags. Miles watches him from his vantage point, and a sudden question pops into his head. It’s something he’s been meaning to ask since the diner, but it didn’t seem appropriate. Now that they’re stranded in a snowstorm, the mood calls for a heart-to-heart conversation.

“Why did you and Amelia break up?”

Kieran glances over his shoulder, taken aback by the out-of-the-blue question.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” Miles adds hurriedly. “I’m just curious.”

Kieran sets two steaming mugs on the table next to Miles. Miles moves his feet aside so Kieran can take the chair in front of him, but Kieran catches him by the ankles as he sits down, pulling Miles’ feet in his lap.

“I don’t mind answering,” he says, absent-mindedly rubbing Miles’ feet through the woolly socks, his hands warm.

Miles makes an effort to remember the question he asked.

“We broke up because she thought I didn’t like her as much as she liked me. And that I couldn’t give her what she wanted.”

“A family?” Miles shifts slightly in his seat, trying to look unbothered by Kieran’s ministrations.

“That, too.”

Miles recalls Kieran’s conversation with his mother the night before when he said he was not looking to settle down. If the rumors of Kieran’s sporadic relationships are even partially true, his stance on marriage and commitment hasn’t changed in the past eight years. In some sense, he and Kieran are complete opposites. All Miles has ever wanted was a stable relationship. He doesn’t seem to be able to have it. He ignores the surge of disappointment that Kieran doesn’t share the same values. It doesn’t matter. It’s not like he has a chance anyway.

“Can you feel your toes now?” Kieran asks, interrupting his thoughts.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks.” Miles shifts again, and Kieran lets go of his feet.

They drink tea in silence, listening to the wind howling outside and rattling the roof of a small utility building nearby.

There are many things Miles wants to ask Kieran, like what he’s been doing for the past few months and why he didn’t answer any of Miles’ messages. But he doesn’t feel he has the right to ask those questions, so he keeps his mouth shut.

The silence between them is suddenly interrupted by steps in the hallway.

“Shit.” Kieran turns around abruptly.

“You said there’s not gonna be anyone here.” Miles hisses, hastily putting his winter boots back on.

“That’s what I thought. Maybe it’s the security.”

“On Christmas?”

Kieran doesn’t reply. He heads for the light switch and flicks it off. Miles only sees Kieran’s silhouette in the darkness as he approaches and takes Miles by the elbow. “Get under the table.” He pulls Miles down, and Miles obliges.

They crouch under, twisted like pretzels, listening to the steps coming closer.

“I think there are two of them.” Miles strains his ears. “Why would they have two security guards in a school during Christmas break?”

“Shh,” Kieran says, and Miles stops talking.

The next moment, the door to the teacher’s lounge flings open. Miles expects the lights to be turned back on, but it doesn’t happen. Instead, two rays of flashlights skim the room. Miles stops breathing. Luckily, the table they’re hiding under is partially obscured by a couch, so the flashlight only skims the top.

“I don’t think they’re here,” a deep voice says, confirming Miles’ suspicion that there are two people.

“I saw them come inside,” says the other. “They must be here somewhere.”

“Let’s search the library and the cafeteria,” says the first person.

To Miles’ relief, they leave the lounge after a few more lingering moments.

“That was close.” Kieran crawls from under the table when the steps fade into the distance.

Miles follows him, trying not to make noise. “Thank god they didn’t notice the mugs.”

“Yeah,” says Kieran. “But why were there two of them?”

They wait a few more minutes to be safe, then carefully open the door and peek into the hallway.

“I think they went that way,” Kieran points to their left. “So the cafeteria must be there. We should be okay to get back to the emergency exit.”

“That’s if there are no other security guards in here.”

“Let’s hope not.”

“What happens if we get caught?”

“I don’t want to find out. I can imagine the headlines if it happens,” Kieran says.

They tiptoe down the hallway until they reach the emergency exit. Miles sighs with relief when he touches the door handle, but at that moment, Kieran’s phone rings, its sound echoing against the corridor walls.

“Shit,” Kieran grabs the phone from his pocket as they step outside. “Hey, Dad. I called to ask if you could pick us up on your way from the airport. You are? Okay. No, that’s fine. We’re going to walk then. See you soon.” He hangs up. “They’re already home.”

“That’s fine.” Miles’ veins are pumping with adrenaline after nearly getting caught, so he doesn’t feel the cold as much as before. “Let’s just get out of here.”

As they trudge toward the lake house through the biting winter air, Christmas lights from the distant buildings flick at them like tiny stars. Half an hour later, they finally reach the house. The warm glow of the lights in its windows beckons them from the distance. When they approach and stand on the porch, they can hear the voices and the laughter coming from inside.

Before ringing the doorbell, Kieran suddenly turns to Miles. “Today’s been fun. Thanks for coming with me.”

“I enjoyed it, too,” Miles says.

Even though he regretted coming in the beginning, now he's glad he did. He doesn't know when he'll see Kieran again. Would he disappear for months again? Would they ever get to have another adventure together? Something tugs painfully in his chest. Maybe Kieran doesn't even care if he sees him again.

Kieran glances up. "A mistletoe. My mom always says it's ten years of bad luck if you don't kiss under it."

"Oh." Miles follows his look. "We can't allow that," he says because he's gone crazy.

For a fraction of a second, Kieran seems surprised. His smile fades, and his eyes flick down to Miles' lips.

He puts his hands on Miles' shoulders and leans in.

Miles isn't sure what's going on. Maybe he got hypothermia on the way back and is now hallucinating. But if Kieran Callahan wants to kiss him, he won't question it. He leans in to meet Kieran halfway, tilting his head upward. Kieran moves even closer, and their lips lightly brush before the front door swings open, making them jump away from each other.

"Finally! I was getting so worried for you two." Mrs. Callahan waves for them to come in. "You must be freezing."

Stifling the disappointment in his chest, Miles follows Kieran inside. His cheeks are flushed, and he's too embarrassed to look up. Has Mrs. Callahan noticed that they were about to kiss? Even if she did, she doesn't show it.

They enter the warmly lit dining room, where everyone is about to sit down. The smell of food wafts from the kitchen, and Miles' stomach rumbles, reminding him how little he ate today.

Chloe appears in the doorway from the living room, storming their way. Her eyes are sparkling with glee, the traces of her morning hangover gone. Her boyfriend Luca is in tow.

"Guys, you will never guess what happened!" Chloe says before Miles or Kieran can say anything.

Miles looks around at the people who spill into the hallway: Mr. Callahan, Peter, Angela, and his parents. Everyone has a strange, excited expression on their face.

"What did we miss?" Kieran asks.

Instead of answering, Chloe outstretches her arm and showcases a ring that hasn't been there in the morning.

Miles gapes. "No way." He turns his eyes to Luca. "Is this what I think it

is?”

“Yes.” Luca wraps his arm around Chloe.

“Congratulations, that’s amazing.” Miles gives a big hug to Chloe and then to Luca. “I’m so happy for you both.”

Kieran comes up to congratulate his sister and his future brother-in-law. “When’s the wedding?”

“We don’t know yet. We’re thinking around summer,” says Chloe. “We want to do it in Italy.”

“Wow,” Miles says. “I’ve always wanted to go to Italy.”

“Well, prepare for your dream to come true.” Chloe grins.

“My *nonna* can’t travel long-distance,” Luca explains. “And we can’t have the wedding without her.”

“Luca’s family would like to pay for everyone to go to Italy!” Chloe adds excitedly.

“That’s very generous,” says Miles.

Chloe squeals, overwhelmed, and gives Miles another tight hug that almost chokes him.

“Alright, everyone, let’s eat. We have two things to celebrate tonight,” Mrs. Callahan says.

Miles and Kieran excuse themselves to go to their rooms to change and freshen up. When they return downstairs, the guests have already sat around the table.

“We forgot to take out the cranberry sauce,” Mr. Callahan tells his wife. “I’ll go get it.”

“Oh, no, honey, you need to cut the turkey. Chloe, could you get the sauce, please? It needs to be re-heated.”

“I’ll do it,” Miles volunteers, wanting to let Chloe relax on her special day and, simultaneously, wanting a minute to himself.

He navigates to the kitchen and finds the saucepan with the cranberry sauce on the stove. He puts it on low heat and stirs it, immersed in his thoughts.

He feels happy for Chloe and Luca. A wedding in Italy sounds like a fairytale. He’s never traveled abroad and feels excited to go for the first time. He wonders if he could combine that trip with visiting other places in Europe and takes a mental note to research other places he wants to see.

Immersed in his thoughts, he doesn’t notice Kieran walking in until he’s standing close to Miles.

“I thought I’d help you,” he says in a low voice.

Miles startles, blinking his thoughts away.

“You have sauce on your face.” Kieran points at his right cheek.

Miles absent-mindedly wipes it with the back of his hand.

“Is it ready?” Kieran looks into the saucepan.

“We need to check if it’s warm enough.”

Miles takes out the wooden spoon, but before he can do anything else, Kieran dips his finger in the spoon and sends a few drops of sauce into his mouth. “I think it’s ready.”

The doorbell rings, but neither of them reacts. There’s commotion in the dining room, and then someone goes to answer the door.

Miles avoids looking at Kieran’s lips and thinking about their almost-kiss a few minutes ago. “That’s very unhygienic. Now I have to wash the spoon.”

Kieran smirks and reaches out, wiping Miles’ cheek with his thumb. Miles busies himself with pouring the sauce into the bowl.

Kieran keeps staring at him. “Miles, I—” he begins to say, but at that moment, Mr. Callahan enters the kitchen.

They both glance up, and Miles notices a strange expression on his face.

“Boys, two men on the porch are asking for the two of you.”

Miles and Kieran exchange a surprised look.

“It’s not because we took the crackers from a teacher’s lounge, right?” Miles says under his breath.

Kieran doesn’t reply. Instead, he heads into the hallway, and Miles follows him. To his surprise, he recognizes the two men standing in the doorway. It’s the same men he saw on the town square watching them.

“Mr. Rivera, Mr. Callahan,” one of the men says, taking a step forward. “We apologize for interrupting your Christmas dinner. We’re agents Hendricks and Burke, FBI.” They both flash their badges at them.

Kieran’s back straightens. “What’s this about?”

The agents exchange a brief look before one of them says, “We need your help.”

And just like that, Miles realizes the holidays are over.

To be continued...

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