



Peppermint
PASSION

A STEAMY CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

**HALLIE
BENNETT**

Peppermint Passion
A Curvy Girl Christmas Romance

Hallie Bennett

The Arrowed Heart

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Every Hallie Bennett romance features a curvy
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PROLOGUE

ELI

Thank god another MerryCon is over. My tired body sinks into the backseat of a hired town car, relishing the end of my commitment to this year's festive palooza.

I don't understand everyone's obsession with these damn holiday movies.

They're all the same from the predictable plots to the carbon-copy characters. And it's all bullshit. Candy-coated and peppermint-scented *bullshit*.

People don't act like that in real life, and Christmas isn't a miracle season meant to bring couples together. Of course, if I ever voiced my annoyance with the films, I'd be out of a job because my career's landed me as a rom-com staple these past few years.

So, I slap on a fake smile and do my job like any other citizen in this country, even if the scripts make me cringe.

"They loved you, Eli." My manager types away on his phone as he speaks. "You've already been asked to return next year, and I'm sending your confirmation."

Great.

"Can't I take a break? Surely missing one convention won't derail any offers for a role." It'd be nice to spend December at home where I could avoid overly zealous holiday fans, music, decorations. Hell, the whole season really.

"No, you have to go. Especially since you'll be promoting a new film around that weekend." He pulls a manuscript out of his bag on the car floor and tosses it to me.

The Little Drummer Brigade.

I read the ridiculous summary and scoff.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER ONE

SHELBY

“Dammit!” A string of curses follows as a chorus of bells sings a merry tune. Someone’s caught in the decorative lights and bells draping the entrance to MerryCon, and he’s not happy about it.

I tug on the wagon full of inventory I’m hauling to my booth, forcing it over the extension cord the wheels are caught on, before my attention strays to the annoyed stranger again. Stranger because I don’t know him personally, but his handsome profile is definitely recognizable.

Eli Cooper.

He used to play teen heartthrobs over a decade ago. Films like *Sixteen Again* and *James Talbot Needs a Date* were my catnip back in high school. These days I prefer comforting Hallmark or Hearts of America rom-coms, and Eli’s graduated to those, too. Though it seems the shift in his career isn’t exactly appreciated.

“Who the fuck hangs a walking hazard over the main entrance?” Eli growls, detangling himself from the web of twinkling LEDs. Two volunteers are attempting to help him, but all of his huffing and puffing is clearly making them nervous.

This is why people warn you to never meet your heroes.

Not that Eli Cooper is my hero. Or really even a celebrity crush. That phase ended right around the time I started my crafting business and realized teen boys—however fictional—were subpar compared to a man who could partner with me, personally and professionally. Sure, fate’s failed to send this magical man into my life so far, but he’s definitely not Eli Cooper—or any other childhood crush.

Unfortunately, Eli’s confirming what I thought the first and only time I watched one of his holiday rom-coms: he’s just *not* that into Christmas. Or Hallmark predictability. Or MerryCon. He’s probably contractually obligated to be here this weekend because it’s the biggest event of the year for television movie fans who love their holiday movies and actors.

I wheel to a stop in front of my booth. It’s mostly set up, only missing this

last load of ornaments for the display cases, then I'll be free to watch the continuing saga of Eli Cooper vs MerryCon Christmas Lights.

"Can you believe that guy?" My neighbor shakes her head in disbelief, popping a piece of peppermint bark into her mouth. Nancy's representing her family's candy shop during the event, and she's already mentioned three times how excited she is to meet her movie crush, Calder Mayfield. She's sweet, but I hope he doesn't disappoint her like fans of Eli would be if they witnessed this altercation.

He's lucky it's still early and MerryCon doesn't officially start for another hour.

"I know, right? They're lights. Not a big deal." I carefully stack my bestsellers—hand blown glass snow globes featuring the North Pole—and mentally prepare for a busy day.

When I filled out the vendor form for MerryCon, I never expected to be asked if I'd like to sponsor their ornament-making contest. Chic Charm Crafts is a small business, hardly a world-renowned name. But the organizers liked the idea of supporting a local shop, and I couldn't say no to the large order they placed for decorations and supplies for the contest, plus the exposure it would net me.

As an artisanal shop, we're getting by alright financially, but this could push us to the next level. I have dreams of becoming an exclusive handcrafted brand. MerryCon could make it happen.

The hour flies by and soon my booth is besieged by enthusiastic attendees eager to complete their holiday shopping in between meeting their favorite celebrities. Pictures with Calder Mayfield, Macy Adams, and Thatcher North are proudly shoved in my face as everyone gushes over their interactions.

"Ms. Heights? We're ready for you on Stage B for the ornament contest," a volunteer says after waiting patiently for me to finish wrapping a customer's gift.

"Oh, thanks for letting me know. It's easy to lose track of time in the middle of all this." I wave a hand toward the crowd of people flitting around the vendor section. We're cordoned off from the celebrities by a tapestry of silver and gold curtains, though the roar of chatter rising above the makeshift wall makes it obvious that things are more chaotic on the other side of the building.

The volunteer nods, a bit frazzled based on the wisps of hair escaping her ponytail and the strained smile stretching her lips. "We have double the

number of attendees after Thatcher North's whirlwind romance last year. Everyone wants to witness a Christmas miracle or land an actor for themselves. You can't imagine the vetting volunteers had to go through this year."

Placing a *Be Right Back* placard on the table, I ask Nancy to keep an eye on my booth while I'm gone before following Elyse, according to her nametag, into the fray. "I hadn't considered that. I remember reading about Thatcher falling for his volunteer, but it didn't occur to me that more people would show up to MerryCon looking for love."

"It's kind of ridiculous." Elyse sighs. "I mean I love these movies and actors as much as the next person, but they're *actors*. They could be completely different than the characters they portray. Besides, who wants to live in Hollywood or whatever?"

"You've got a point." Because Los Angeles is definitely not for me. I love my four seasons, including white Christmases, too much to move across the country for sunny weather, crazy traffic, and a *man*.

CHAPTER TWO

ELI

Me and glitter don't go together. Nor do holly jolly Santas or prancing reindeer. Yet that's what I've got to work with for this damn contest.

Make the most festive ornament you can, and fans will vote on the winner!

That had been the annoyingly cheerful announcement before the six of us participating began stuffing our clear plastic ornaments with holiday fripperies. I already lost the gingerbread house contest earlier after my roof caved in from one too many gumdrops. I'd prefer not to completely embarrass myself again, but this is ridiculous.

Macy Adams sits across from me and her miniature elves are neatly standing in a row constructing toys. How'd she get them to stay upright in this round ball of torture? My fingers barely fit through the top opening to shove items inside, let alone arrange them perfectly.

“Five more minutes until judging!”

My fellow contestants add a burst of speed to their movements but not me. This is as good as it's going to get—a toppled Santa squished by Rudolph atop a mountain of fake snowflakes. Nothing says Christmas like that, right?

Screwing the cap onto the ornament, I set it down before leaning back in my chair and crossing my arms, ready to get the fuck out of here. *Only a couple more hours.* Then I can chill in my hotel room until tomorrow—when the holiday craziness starts all over again.

A woman waits on the side of the stage for us to finish. Shelby Heights. She's the owner of the local shop that's sponsoring this event. With her cart of art supplies and denim overalls, she fits the image of a hands-on artisan—even has a cute handkerchief tied around her neck as if at any moment she might need to whip it off and wipe away a stray drop of sweat or unscrew a difficult paint lid.

In short, Shelby looks like the typical small-town heroine in every Hallmark and HAC film I've been in. Except for one minor difference... I'd like to explore those lush curves minus the overalls, handkerchief, and everything else hiding her gorgeous body.

Okay, so a major difference.

Because I've never wanted to fuck any of my co-stars. No matter the tabloid rumors saying otherwise.

Not that the tabloids care much about me these days. They're more concerned with current big screen stars than former *People's Sexiest Man Alive* winners whose bread and butter are cheesy Christmas movies.

I'm not bitter.

Not at all.

Paparazzi sucks, but at least their constant hounding means you're still relevant to the mainstream entertainment world—not just the niche Hallmark fanatics. Like my mom. She's the reason I accepted the lead role in my first holiday film, *Snow On the Square*, three years ago.

There'd been a lull between jobs when my agent approached me with the offer. Two weeks of shooting in Vancouver, and I'd earned a little money while making my mom extremely happy. Of course, I never envisioned saying yes to one movie would snowball into a slew of seasonal films and becoming a rom-com regular.

The only positives are it's easy with quick shooting turnarounds and steady paychecks.

“Congratulations, Macy! You're the winner! MerryCon will be donating \$1000 to the charity of your choice. Let's give all of our contestants a final round of applause. Didn't they do a great job?” The emcee flashes a broad grin as everyone claps, and I'm thankful this is over, wiping my hands of excess snowflake confetti and returning to my booth with one last curious glance toward Shelby.

Day one of MerryCon comes to a close a few hours later. Instead of booking it out the door like originally planned, though, I head toward the vendors section in search of Shelby. I may not believe in love at first sight or Christmas magic, but lust at first sight? That's something my body wholeheartedly accepts.

Thoughts of her pretty smile have kept me sane during the hundreds of photo ops today. The fans were kind, and I don't take their support for granted, even if I can't relate to their holiday enthusiasm. But now, I'm finally free to do what I want, which is test the softness of Shelby's lips with my own.

Damn, what's going on with me? The woman's a stranger, yet I'm already halfway toward obsession.

Shelby isn't hard to find. Her booth is one of the most extravagantly decorated spots in the area. An arch draped in tinsel and twinkling lights curves overhead, gilding her in a warm glow like she's a fucking Christmas angel, while yards upon yards of red and green ribbon twine around table and chair legs, wire shelving... Basically, anything that can be bound to death in holiday decor.

But the evidence of her overexuberance for all things Christmas isn't enough to deter me. Curiosity and lust ride me hard, despite our differing opinions on the holiday.

Approaching the booth, I lay a hand over my heart and ask, "Save a desperate man from his mom's disappointment?"

CHAPTER THREE

SHELBY

The warm, masculine voice sends a shiver of awareness down my body. *Whoa*. That's never happened before. Peering up from my squatted position on the floor, where I'm trying to get this stupid garland to lay right on a shelf, I see the owner of the magical voice is none other than Eli Cooper.

What's he doing here?

And how come he never sounds like that in his movies?

"Excuse me?" I toss the uncooperative snowflake garland aside and struggle to my feet. Tight spaces and denim do not mix. Especially when you're a woman with wide hips and a big ass like me. Not that I'm complaining, though I wish some of those extra curves ended up on my chest to make me a nice hourglass shape versus the bottom heavy pear I'm currently rocking.

"I need help picking a gift for my mom," Eli says, his gray gaze tracing me from head to toe in obvious perusal. I resist the urge to fidget or cringe. Despite being happy in my own skin, there's no way in hell I stack up against the Hollywood starlets he's used to working with.

A charming smile plays about his lips, and if I hadn't witnessed his temper tantrum earlier with the lights, I may be caught in his dangerously attractive web. However, his true colors showed this morning—the man scares volunteers and sneers at all things Christmas. Even if he *is* here to purportedly buy a gift for his mom.

I absolutely will *not* find that endearing.

It's the bare minimum a son could do.

Picking up one of the snow globe ornaments, I force a professional demeanor. "This is our most popular item. Or you could go with—"

"What about that?" Eli points to something behind me.

"Oh, that's for display. Holiday wreaths are special orders, so I don't keep them in stock, but—"

"Let's make this a special order then."

He cuts me off again, and my jaw tightens, no doubt transforming my

pleasant smile into a brittle grimace. Eli is reminiscent of every demanding customer I've had in the past, people who expected me to drop everything to fulfill *their* special needs.

"Sorry, but my schedule is booked already. I stopped accepting special wreath orders for Christmas mid-November. There are lots of other stores you can buy one from, or I can sell you the supplies to make it yourself. Your mom would probably prefer a homemade one, anyway."

"You must not have been paying attention during the ornament contest because I suck at crafts." A speculative look enters his eyes. "But *you* don't. What if I make the wreath with your help? I'll pay extra for your time and supplies. Share it on social media to boost your shop."

Geez, his mom must be super picky about her gifts if Eli's going through this much trouble for one measly wreath.

Before I can respond, he pulls out his phone and rapidly types out a message before an answering ding sounds. "We're all set. The event coordinator said we can stay and use the table still set up on Stage B. A security guard will lock up after we leave."

The Polar Express has nothing on Eli Cooper. He works fast. My eyes are probably huge saucers at this point as I struggle to catch up.

"I haven't agreed to anything yet. This is a busy weekend for me and—"

"Do you already have plans tonight?" he asks. Those gray eyes dare me to lie as a teasing smirk forms on his utterly too attractive mouth. Framed by a five o'clock shadow, those lips conjure all sorts of fantasies—what they'd feel like against my own, how good the scrape of his beard would be along my inner thighs...

"Well, no... But..."

"Then it's settled. We'll order dinner, and you can show me how to make one of those," he gestures to the giant wreath that started this entire mess, "for my mom. Please? It's for a good cause and will be mutually beneficial. I promise."

Men and their promises.

Crossing my arms over my chest, my gaze bounces between Eli and the wreath, contemplating my decision. Though there's really no contest.

I shouldn't watch so many Hallmark movies because against my better judgment, I agree with his proposition. In fiction, this would be the start of our charming love story. And my stupid subconscious loves the possibility.

Eli Cooper's not for you. He's a grump. A grinch.

The reminder is completely ignored by my hopelessly romantic heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELI

Shelby doesn't like me.

Or at least, she doesn't fawn over me like most women. Which is a good thing, but also frustrating considering how attracted I am to her. It's not even about her outward appearance either, although those round hips of hers are perfect for holding onto while I pump my cock between those deliciously thick thighs.

Get it together, Cooper.

Her curves are a plus. So is her creative competency—something I never thought I'd find a turn-on, hell, never knew it was a *thing*—yet here we are.

Shelby knows her shit. A consummate professional. Despite the way I bulldozed into her life and claimed her evening for my own, she's laid out a plethora of supplies and walked me through the process of tying green branches to a wiry frame.

"You know you steamrolled me into agreeing to this, right?" she asks, settling in a chair across from me after we've finished eating the pizza I ordered for dinner. And I swear a whiff of gingerbread releases from the shake of her head, her hair swinging side to side in its ponytail.

Gingerbread? Really? Have I been so enmeshed in Christmas that now I'm imagining this beautiful woman smells like a damn cookie?

"Think of the publicity. Or my poor mom's reaction upon receiving a bought gift rather than a homemade one." I wink and place a hand over my heart in exaggerated concern. I'd feel guilty for using my mom this way, but, no doubt, she'd be onboard with the tactic.

Shelby rolls her eyes, but there's a smile hiding in the corner of her mouth—she's not completely immune to me.

"So, your mom... I take it she's a holiday movie fan?"

"How'd you guess?" I tease, cramming a poinsettia flower onto my wreath. "She's a super fan and has been since the inception of *Countdown to Christmas*. I can't tell you how many movies I was forced to watch, especially when they started airing earlier and earlier in the year. Fucking

October for Christmas movies. It's unnatural."

The memories come flooding back. Sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the television while my mom sat on the couch behind me laughing or crying, depending on the film. Hearing her hope before a first date only for it to be crushed by the time she returned home and turned on a recorded holiday romance—something I'd have to endure while trying to comfort her. No matter the time of year. We could be in the heat of summer, and she'd still play *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*.

I love my mom, but she puts too much faith in Christmas miracles and finding love during the holidays. None of it is real. Every sappy line and kiss is contrived. Scripted. Fake.

"Yet you star in several of those movies each year." Shelby's nose scrunches in confusion as she twines a gold ribbon around her wreath frame—already it's obvious hers is leagues better than mine.

I shrug in resigned acceptance. "The first film was for my mom, but then they kept sending me scripts. Since nothing else was on the horizon..." Man, I hate being a fucking cliché. Former teen star demoted to the small screen.

"It makes sense now. Why I never got into your movies."

"Ouch."

"Sorry," she tilts her head to the side and offers an apologetic grin, "But I always got this feeling that you didn't enjoy what you were doing. That you actually looked down on the roles as something beneath you."

"I don't understand the cult-like following." Even to my own ears, my tone sounds defensive. "It's acting, like every other show or movie out there, yet people latch onto these holiday films as if they're true to life. Like at any moment someone from their past will pop up to sweep them off their feet."

Like my mom believes.

"That's not fair. It's a comforting fantasy, and some of the storylines could happen in real life." Shelby frowns at my less than generous description.

Damn, even frowning is sexy on her, and I shift in my seat, ignoring the semi I'm sporting. "Name one thing you've ever experienced or know that someone experienced in real life," I challenge. "The basic holiday activities don't count like decorating a tree or wrapping presents. Have you had to stop a developer from tearing down your business with the help of the developer's son? Bumped into an old flame who's writing an article about you for their magazine?"

Shelby's eyes narrow. "No, obviously, but those examples don't prove they

can't happen. It just hasn't happened to me *yet*. I'm more the crafter who gets paired with a local handyman to help bring my vision for the holiday festival to life."

That was oddly specific, and a stab of jealousy pinches my heart at why she might have listed that possibility. "Do you already have a man?" I ask, intent on her answer.

The direct question surprises her. Her gaze drops to the wreath in her hand, her fingers unsteady as they try to tie a bow. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, I don't. I'm focused on my shop."

Relief pours through my veins like a shot of ice cold champagne. "Spoken like a true Hallmark heroine set to fall in love with a small town farmer who'll teach you how to slow down and smell the roses. Yet you're here with me instead."

And I'm worlds away from a rural good ole boy.

I'm closer to resembling the ex-boyfriend left behind in the city, but like I told Shelby, this is reality, and I'm not getting left behind anywhere.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHELBY

He's not wrong. However, annoying the truth may be.

I *am* living the heroine's life before her Christmas romance. But just because Prince Charming or whatever hasn't shown up yet, doesn't mean I'm going to hate on Hallmark or HAC holiday films.

"Touché." This is an argument neither of us will win. "Let's agree to disagree, shall we? You need to finish your mom's gift, and I've got to leave soon. Besides, this whole conversation isn't conducive to my Christmas spirit, which you don't want me to lose considering how I'm only helping you because of it."

"Don't forget the positive exposure for your business, too," he adds with a bright smile. *Gah!* Why does he have to be so handsome with those dimples and wavy hair begging my fingers to run through the soft strands?

All this press for Chic Charm Crafts better pay off. Big time. Especially if I'm expected to hang out with this Christmas Grump—who's also a Holiday Hunk.

"So, you've got plans tonight... Hot date?" There's almost a note of envy in his voice, but I shake off the thought. Why would Eli Cooper be jealous if I had a date?

"Maybe." *Not.* But he already knows I'm single and a Hallmark heroine in training, apparently. What's the harm in letting him believe my happily ever after is right around the corner? Spitting in the face of his scorn for holiday romance?

He hums in the back of his throat, a frown creasing his mouth. "What's on the agenda? A freezing sleigh ride? An ice cold movie in the park?" His disdain is clear.

"Christmas carols at O'Malley's," I retort with a huff.

"Of course. The two of you can share a romantic duet together."

"Under the mistletoe."

Eli glances up at me, and the fire in his gaze shocks me with its intensity. What's his deal? What's *my* deal? Because I'm squirming in my seat,

suddenly flushed and tingly like a bolt of electricity just ran down my spine.

Knock it off. You can't actually be attracted to this man!

Sure, he's handsome, and it's kind of fun teasing him, but so what? It doesn't mean anything.

Eli snaps his gaze away, releasing me from its powerful hold, and snips a loose ribbon from his wreath. "Well, have fun with your corn-fed farmer. Perhaps you'll prove my theory about Christmas fairy tales wrong."

Maybe I will.

The bar is crowded. Everyone loves Karaoke Night at O'Malley's, and Christmas karaoke? It's the best kind because literally every patron knows the songs and sings along with raucous laughter and cheer.

"You made it! I thought you might be late since you had a date with a movie star." My friend Corinne waggles her eyebrows suggestively, and I roll my eyes, tossing my jacket over the back of a bar stool.

"It was hardly a date. We spent most of the time arguing about Christmas movies while he butchered a gift for his mom." The woman would probably love the misshapen mess of greenery, since it was made by her son, but the poor thing was definitely made with more love than talent.

Corinne pouts. "You're not going to see him again?"

"Probably not. I'm sure he'll stick to his booth at MerryCon while I focus on what's important—potential customers." My gut tightens at the reality. It shouldn't bother me that there'd be no more banter with Eli Cooper. The man's the antithesis of a holiday hero, no matter the leading men he plays.

"Hmm... I'm not so sure about that."

"What? Why?"

Corinne juts her chin toward the bar entrance where Eli and a couple of other recognizable stars step in from the cold. *Did he follow me here?* Immediately, I shove the thought away. One hour together is hardly enough time to entice the man into stalking me. He probably remembered I mentioned O'Malley's and figured he'd check it out with some friends. Enjoy the night life our town had to offer, which wasn't much.

"Oh, and he brought Patrick Nickels with him. Do you think I've got a shot of snagging my own Hallmark hottie?" Corinne fluffs her hair before readjusting her blouse, displaying her cleavage to full advantage.

"It's Christmas. Anything can happen, right?" And wouldn't that prove Mr. Christmas Grump wrong if his friend fell for a small town girl like

Corinne?

“Next up, we have Shelby Heights!” The emcee announces my name, and I whip my head around.

“What’s he talking about? I just got here.”

“I put your name down to reserve a spot. You know how long the waitlist gets.” She’s not wrong. But still... Getting on stage to sing a Christmas song while Eli watches sends my heart into overdrive as I wipe my sweaty palms down my leggings.

“Looks like we have a shy one, folks. Let’s give Shelby some encouragement!” He starts clapping and others join in, all smiling and looking around for me.

Damn. There’s no escaping now.

Glaring at Corinne, I stand up and weave through the crowd until I’m on the raised stage, the microphone slippery in my hands. I awkwardly wave while waiting for my song to begin. Who knows what the hell Corinne chose for me?

The sultry notes of *Santa Baby* spill from the speakers, and I swear I’m going to kill Corinne. *Santa Baby*? Really? She had to choose a sexy song about wanting a rich husband and all sorts of expensive gifts, especially when I could feel Eli’s focused stare on me.

Damn, damn, and double damn.

At least my voice doesn’t suck as I suffer through the first verse. Four years of choir in high school, then another four in college gives me a bit of a confidence boost that I’m not completely humiliating myself in front of Eli.

Liar. A hot flush leaves sweat dampening the ugly Christmas sweater I changed into before arriving. Who am I kidding?

This is the most embarrassing moment of my life.

CHAPTER SIX

ELI

Of course she can sing.

I take another sip of my beer and stare in awe as Shelby's bewitching voice continues to rasp about needing Santa to give her everything she desires. I may not be Kris Kringle, but I sure as hell am willing to give her what she needs.

Like a long hard fuck.

After she's finished, Shelby returns to the bar where her friend gives a thumbs up at the performance. I excuse myself from the group I came with and approach her on the other side. "So, you sing. You craft. I suppose it's safe to assume you're an amazing baker. Is there anything you can't do?" It would fit her Hallmark heroine personality.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm hopeless in the kitchen." Shelby tosses her hair over her shoulder and shrugs while her friend eyes me curiously before making herself scarce. *Smart girl.* Leaving the two of us alone.

"I guess that makes sense," I tease, daring to trail a finger down her arm, needing to touch her even in a small way. "There always needs to be one flaw. Can't be too perfect."

Shelby laughs and shakes her head. "My one flaw... If only. The silver lining is I may not be able to bake, but clearly, I know my way around the bakery section." Her hands sweep down her body to draw attention to those tempting love handles I want to squeeze.

"Thank fuck," I mumble, practically drooling over her curvy body. Shelby blushes at my heated perusal, and I quickly try to recover. "I mean who doesn't love a good cookie or pastry? In fact, you need to try my snickerdoodle."

"Your what?"

I didn't realize how perverted that sounded until her shocked reaction registers. Grinning, I gently tap her nose. "Get your mind out of the gutter. You're supposed to be an innocent rom-com heroine. My mom taught me how to bake, and it's kind of our thing together. I make a terrific

snickerdoodle cookie.”

“Oh... well, that’s nice... and surprising,” she stammers, blushing at the dirty way she’d interpreted my statement. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for the domestic type.”

“Hey, Cooper, who's your friend?” Patrick appears at my side, and I grit my teeth, annoyed by the interruption. “You were the one who did the ornament contest today, right?”

“Guilty,” she says, nodding. “I’m Shelby.”

“That was pretty fun, although this guy sucked.”

“Yeah, seems all those holiday movies didn't really help, did they?” Shelby directs the question toward me, and I bask in the warmth of her attention. I never want to lose it, but Patrick’s presence is distracting.

“What'd I tell you?” Ignoring Patrick, I step closer to Shelby. “That's because they're all fake.”

“Oh, here we go.” Patrick throws his hands up in the air.

“So you know about your friend's holiday humbugness?”

Chuckling, I repeat after her. “Humbugness?”

“It's a thing.”

“Oh yeah, I'm aware. But we still love him.” Patrick pats me on the back. “Speaking of love, it looks like y'all are under the mistletoe.” He points to a spot above our heads where mistletoe hangs.

There's a string of it over every few seats. Who the hell hangs mistletoe over a bar? It's a minefield for customers.

“Mistletoe's for kissing, not love,” Shelby corrects, her tongue darting out to wet her bottom lip. *Talk about a distraction...*

Patrick shrugs. “In our line of work, they kind of mean the same thing. The movies end on kisses, right?”

“True.”

“So Chop Chop Movie Boy.” He grins, staring me down. I want to kiss Shelby, but I hate that it's manufactured because of a stupid holiday tradition and Patrick.

Shelby sighs before bracing her hands on my shoulders. “Relax, this isn't a marriage proposal,” she says before standing on her tiptoes and brushing her mouth across mine.

There's an immediate spark, and I want to pull her closer, but we're in public. Plus, I know this isn't a real kiss, no matter how much I want it to be.

“There. All done, and you survived.”

Patrick laughs, and then Shelby's eye catches something behind me. "Sorry, I gotta go. My friend is waving me down. You guys enjoy the rest of your night and the weekend."

"Sure thing, I'm sure we'll see you again at MerryCon."

Shelby smiles before leaving, and Patrick can't resist ribbing me as we head back to our table. "Cooper's got a Christmas crush."

"Now that's an alliterative title." The invisible line between me and Shelby tautens the further away we get, and I fucking hate it. But there's nothing for it. We're both here with separate parties—friends we can't ditch. "Why don't you pitch it to the execs?"

"I just might, and recommend *you* for the lead role, Mr. Grinch."

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHELBY

I don't know what I was thinking of kissing Eli Cooper.

Sure, we were under the mistletoe and it was full of the holiday spirit, but kissing him when he was clearly reluctant? I must be out of my mind.

“Um, what was that?” Corinne asks, her eyes wide. She’d disappeared sometime during my conversation with Eli, leaving us to chat in private until his friend showed up.

“What was what?” I pretend to be dumb, chugging the rest of the margarita she had in front of her.

“You and Eli Cooper kissing under the mistletoe. Something a little more happened at that private tutoring session after all, hmm?”

“No, nothing happened earlier, and nothing really happened now. Patrick showed up and pointed out the mistletoe. One thing led to another. Doesn't mean anything.”

“Right, you do realize how many holiday romances we've seen, right? And you're at a freaking holiday romance con. That's like triple the magic.”

I laugh at the exaggeration. “Hardly. The kiss didn't mean anything. It was all a bit of fun. Eli will be going home in a few days once MerryCon's over, and I will be staying here to run my shop.”

As it should be.

My mind can't fathom a future with Eli Cooper. We're complete opposites.

“It wouldn't work between us. We're too different. Besides the whole celebrity/normal person thing, he doesn't like Christmas. And who doesn't like Christmas? *The Grinch.*”

“But then he turned it around and actually had a good heart.” Corinne pointed out, wriggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“You're saying that's Eli? You know him even less than I do!” He *did* craft a Christmas gift for his mom, though. A total grinch wouldn't do such a wholesome thing, right?

“Maybe.” She shrugs.

“Whatever.” Dreaming of what definitely won't happen is giving me a

headache when tonight's supposed to be fun. "Did you sign yourself up for karaoke tonight? Because I can't be the only one embarrassing myself up there."

"You were great!"

"Thanks, but what was up with the song choice?" My voice raises. "Freaking *Santa Baby*?"

"What? I like that song."

"Mm-hmm... So, is your name on the list?"

"Yep. I'll be performing the international classic, *Silver Bells*. It doesn't get enough love, and I figured people would like something different from *All I Want for Christmas is You* or *White Christmas* or the other usuals."

An hour passes and I laugh and cheer Corinne on as she sings her song, and before long, it's time to call it a night since I have to be up early to prepare for tomorrow. I need to restock my booth, and I'm contemplating bringing some extra wreaths for fun after Eli's interest.

Corinne and I part ways outside the bar as I head down the sidewalk of Main Street. Thankfully, it's not super late. This is a safe area and well lit, but I appreciate that there's still a fair amount of people roaming the walkway checking out all of the Main Street window displays.

I huddle deeper in my jacket as a light dusting of snow begins to fall. The forecast had called for some white weather, though it's too early for a white Christmas. Hopefully, it comes back around in time for the holiday two weeks from now.

When I cross an alley between two shops, a hand darts out and tugs me back. My vocal cords freeze up. Before they can loosen enough to scream, a familiar voice whispers near my ear, "It's okay, it's me."

All of my fear coalesces into annoyance when he drops my arm. Twisting, I slap his chest. "What the hell, Eli? You scared me to death. What are you doing creeping around in dark alleyways?"

"I was waiting for you to leave with your friend. You girls sure know how to have a good time."

"How long have you been out here? It's freezing."

"Not too long." He shrugs, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Well, what was so important that you risked hypothermia? I didn't forget that I need to wrap the wreath you made, and I'll drop it by your booth tomorrow."

"No, it's not that," he says. It's hard to make out his expression in the dark.

The street may be glowing with brightness, but the twinkling lights don't reach very far into the alley.

"It's about the kiss."

"Oh." I blush, wondering if he's going to chastise me for accosting him against his will. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it—"

"No." His finger reaches up to cover my lips. "The only problem with the kiss was that it wasn't long enough," he admits.

My eyes feel like they're about to bug out of my head. *Um, what?* This can't be real. Eli Cooper didn't think the kiss was *long enough*? I didn't think he wanted it in the first place!

There's no time to process this new information, however, because Eli's mouth replaces his finger, obliterating any chance at rational thought. Eli Cooper, former teen heartthrob, current holiday rom-com star is kissing me under the snowfall.

It'd be romantic if I knew it meant anything to him. But I'm sure he's left a string of broken hearts around the country with as many women that probably throw themselves at him.

Don't think about it. Enjoy the moment for what it is.

Just because it's not serious doesn't mean I can't enjoy a Christmas fling. Where's the harm as long as I know the score? With that in mind, my body relaxes into Eli's warm and firm chest.

One of his hands cups my cheek while the other grips my waist and clenches the abundant flesh. He moans, and it's the hottest sound I've ever heard. *I made him sound like that. I'm the one giving him pleasure, and it makes me inordinately proud.*

He tastes like brown sugar and Christmas—evidence of the buttered rum he must have ordered at O'Malley's. It's delicious and comforting, like the weight of his large palm carefully holding my cold-flushed cheek. My hands burrow beneath his jacket to skim the ridged muscles of his abdomen, and everything takes on a hazy quality.

I'm living in a genuine Hallmark moment.

Until Eli pulls back and blinks away a couple of fallen snowflakes from his lashes. "That was..."

"Perfect," I finish for him, probably wearing a silly grin on my face.

"Yeah, perfect is a good way to describe it," he agrees, matching my smile.

"I feel like this is the first time I've seen you happy," I tease. "Where's my Christmas Grump?" A thrill goes through me when referring to him as mine.

“Seems you've tamed him.”

“Oh, have I now?”

Eli's brilliant smile only widens in answer. “Can I walk you to your car?” He grabs my hand when I slowly nod, and we walk down the sidewalk as if we're a true couple.

A fine layer of snow covers my car, and Eli frowns. “Are you going to be okay getting home?”

Rolling my eyes, I squeeze his hand before letting go. “Don't worry, I'm used to this weather. What about you, California boy?”

“Think you mean Indiana Hoosier,” he corrects.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, although it's been a while since I've experienced a white Christmas.”

Once my car's unlocked, there's an awkward silence. Then Eli presses a hard kiss to my lips before retreating. “I'll see you tomorrow, Shelby.”

“Okay.” The two syllables are all I can manage after his second kiss. He keeps me off-balance with his personality changes from grump to charmer to passionate lover. Well, kisser. *For now.*

A minute later, I drive off, unable to resist the urge to check my rearview mirror. Eli's standing under Christmas lights with the snow falling around him in a glow of white—the ultimate Hallmark hero, even if he'd vehemently deny it.

I'm in trouble.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELI

“I can't thank you enough for inviting me to this,” my mom squeals, her eyes darting across the room like a kid in a candy store.

“Of course, I couldn't *not* bring my Hallmark-crazy mom to the Christmas convention celebrating all your favorite holiday films.”

“You're right. You would have gotten a stern talking to from me if that had been the case.” She pinches my cheek and I groan good-naturedly, hoping no one witnessed the move like I'm still a boy instead of a grown man.

“Is this your mom?”

So much for that hope. Shelby walks up to my booth, a giant red and green striped bag in her hand.

“Yep. Marla Cooper, meet Shelby Heights.” I make the introductions, carefully observing the interaction.

“Nice to meet you.” Shelby smiles, and my mom's excitement multiplies as she studies the two of us. I know what's going on in her head, and I can't say that I blame her, because after last night, I want Shelby in my life. Even if it is fast and out of character for me.

There's just something about her.

“Well, aren't you sweet,” Mom says, nudging my side with her elbow in a not-so-subtle gesture of enthusiasm. “Are you a volunteer?”

“Oh no, I'm one of the vendors. I had to drop this off for Eli.” She sets the bag on my table. “I've got to head back to man my own booth.”

Mom's excitement dims a bit before brightening again. “I'll have to stop by and see you after I get all my pictures taken.”

“Mom is excited to meet her favorites, despite having met them before,” I say from the sidelines.

“You can never meet your movie boyfriends too many times,” she says, causing Shelby and I to laugh. Suddenly, Mom's shoulders droop as she pats her forehead. The uncharacteristic weak act has my guard rising. What is she up to?

“I'm afraid after meeting everyone today I'm going to be pretty fatigued,

though, and poor Eli has this charity gala tonight.” She pinches my bicep. “Perhaps you could step in for me and be his date?”

“Mom!” Embarrassment swamps me at my mom trying to set me up with Shelby as if I can't do it myself. This isn't fucking middle school, where we need go-betweens because we're too shy to actually speak to each other.

“Oh, I couldn't. It sounds like it'd be a special thing between you two.”

“Pish posh.” Mom waves her hand. “I've been to a couple of these things, and they're all the same. I'd rather get some rest before tomorrow, the last day of MerryCon. I don't want to be exhausted before I complete my itinerary.” She acts like she's about to hike Machu Picchu instead of standing in line to meet a couple of movie stars.

“Please, dear,” she lays it on thick as she reaches for Shelby's hand. “You'd be doing me a great favor.”

“Well...” Shelby wavers, her eyes darting to me for help. All I can do is shrug in acceptance. When Mom puts her mind to something, she can be as stubborn as they come. Besides, it's not like it'll be a hardship escorting Shelby to the gala. I want more time with her and this is the perfect excuse.

“Then it's settled. Do you need a gown?”

“I still have a bridesmaid dress I could wear. It's Christmas-themed from a few years ago so it should work, I think.”

“Excellent.” Mom claps her hands, perking back up, and I shake my head at her deviousness. Although, I'm excited for the opportunity to spend the evening with Shelby. “He'll pick you up at seven tonight. Eli, do you have this young lady's number?”

“Not yet.” I offer my phone to Shelby so she can put it in, and we share a secret smile, both aware of what my mom is doing but unable to refuse her. Shelby hands my phone back before waving goodbye, and I watch as she leaves.

My mom playfully slaps my shoulder. “You didn't tell me you met somebody.”

“That's because we only met yesterday,” I say, sitting back in my chair as I wait for the doors to open and my line to fill up with fans. For some reason, today I'm not as opposed or frustrated about meeting everybody.

“Well, she seems like a nice girl. And it's about time I get some grandkids.”

“Mom, I just said we met yesterday and you're already thinking about grandkids?”

“It's not often that you're interested in someone, Eli. I saw the way you looked at her. It's obvious this girl has caught your eye, so I'm not going to let a perfectly good opportunity for the two of you to get to know each other pass.”

“Thank you for interfering, although I'm perfectly capable of securing my own dates.”

She harumphs and crosses her arms. “Yes, we see how capable you've been.” Her brows raise, knowing full well I've never brought a woman home for anything.

My last serious relationship was only three months and most of that was long distance. “Acting isn't exactly conducive to relationships.”

“You'll make it work for the one that matters.”

And somehow I believe her.

Maybe all those holiday films she's forced me to watch are finally rubbing off on me. Or maybe it's Shelby's special brand of magic.

The ride into the city is easy and comfortable as Shelby and I relay how our days went—her fielding a lot of customers while I met a ton of fans. Our driver parks outside the hotel hosting the gala, and a valet opens our door.

“Welcome.” He waves us forward, and I place a guiding hand at the small of Shelby's back.

I haven't seen her dress yet because she's bundled up tight in a long winter jacket and scarf, but soon the silky red fabric is revealed like a damn Christmas present as she unwraps her outerwear.

“Wow,” I breathe. Shelby was beautiful in overalls when I first met her and earlier today in leggings. But now in this slinky dress that conforms to her luscious body and *fuck me* heels, she's a gorgeous Christmas angel with curves in all the right places.

“Do you think it's fancy enough?” she asks, nerves trembling in her voice.

“Are you kidding? You're the most beautiful woman here,” I say, eyeing the men around us in annoyance. A wave of possessiveness takes over.

I don't want anyone looking at my girl.

Shelby laughs and shakes her head. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, although I doubt you're right. This is like a buffet of beautiful women, the shiny elite of New York City.”

“I don't lie,” I growl, needing her to believe me.

“Maybe not, but you're certainly stretching the truth. But I won't hold it

against you. It's not every day I get called *beautiful*." She pats my chest as we enter the ballroom filled with tables set up for the five-course dinner.

"You should be."

There's an indecipherable expression on her pretty face, but I don't look away, intent on her seeing the seriousness in my gaze. I've been around a lot of pretty women in my life. Had gorgeous co-stars. Shared a magazine cover with a woman voted *Sexiest Woman Alive*. None of them hold a candle to Shelby.

She's perfect in my eyes, and I'm determined to make her believe that.

We find our table, my name on a folded white card, and sit down before the rest of the guests arrive to fill the empty seats. Shelby smiles at each new arrival. Some of them I know, like Patrick, but others I don't.

I keep my arm wrapped around the back of Shelby's chair, toying with the fall of curls draped over her shoulder. They're silky soft, and I catch the faintest smell of gingerbread again. Is it her shampoo?

Sighing at the hours ahead of us, I wish we were anywhere but here because I want to be alone with Shelby. Especially since our time is limited. I'm expected in Vancouver tomorrow night after MerryCon ends.

Before we met, I was excited for this opportunity. Something different from my holiday movies—a drama series with a recurring role that could become a show regular. Now, I'm wishing I had more time to spend with Shelby before racing off to another film set.

"How'd you two meet?" an older lady asks from across the table.

"Eli needed help making his mom a Christmas present."

"Oh, that's so sweet. What'd you make her?"

"A wreath," I say. "Although the true talent is Shelby." She blushes at the compliment, and I grin at the adorable sight.

"I love it when couples support each other. There's nothing better than a partner who believes in you and hypes you up, right?" The woman directs her question to Shelby, and rather than denying our couplehood, she nods. Shooting my heartrate into outer space.

I want Shelby to be mine.

I don't know how it would work, but my mom was right. If I want it badly enough, I'll figure it out.

And I fucking *crave* Shelby.

CHAPTER NINE

SHELBY

The balcony is chilly when I step outside of the ballroom. Eli and I have been here for a few hours, enjoying a delicious dinner of salmon and asparagus, along with the richest dessert I've ever had—a dark chocolate mousse with strawberries.

Everyone was really nice, too.

Not what I expected from a charity gala filled with wealthy socialites and business scions. I thought for sure someone would be snobby about my off-the-rack dress. Guess there might be something to Eli's warning about watching too many movies. Because nobody here acted like the stereotypical mean girl.

Eli is the only mystery.

I can't get a good read on him. My first impression was that he was a rude grump. Then he made his mom a Christmas gift, and he was really sweet with her this morning when I met her. There's the man who's attracted to me based on our kisses and the way he keeps touching me tonight. But what does it all mean?

Who is the real Eli?

I told myself to enjoy a Christmas fling, but I've never been this intrigued by a man before or had a physical reaction as strong as what he elicits. It's like all those teen crush feelings I had back in the day have returned tenfold now that we're both adults, and he's only gotten hotter with age.

“What are you thinking about?” Strong arms circle my waist from behind as Eli presses a kiss to the crook of my neck. When he does stuff like this, I can't help but want to swoon into his arms and agree to let him have me however he wants me.

He's leaving tomorrow. The reminder sobers me. “Nothing much,” I lie. “Needed some fresh air. It's a little crowded in there.”

I should leave it at that. Keep things light and carefree. Unfortunately, my mouth has other plans. “Eli, what are we doing?” I ask, desperate to know where his head is.

“What do you mean?”

“What is this? You kiss me, you take me to this fancy charity event, and you're leaving tomorrow. What are you expecting here? And I don't mean to pressure you. I'm not asking for a marriage proposal or anything...”

He eases me around to face him. “I like you, Shelby.”

“Okay.”

“I like you, and I desire you.” He strokes the side of my face. “The question is do you feel the same? Are you going to let me have you?”

A night with Eli Cooper? *Yes, please.* Screw the consequences. Forget about my worries about tomorrow. If all we've got is tonight, then I want to make it count.

“Yes,” I whisper, and a smirk of satisfaction stretches across Eli's very kissable mouth.

“Merry Christmas to me,” he whispers. Then he's kissing me, twisting and turning us until my back hits the cold stone of the building. We're out of view from the ballroom, hidden in the shadows where it's chillier, yet Eli's heat is enough to make me feel like I'm burning alive.

His hand skims down my side and finds the slit of my dress, slipping beneath to caress my thigh. “I can't wait to feel the hot clasp of your sweet pussy, baby. To see all these gorgeous curves free for my tongue and hands to explore.”

I pant at his unexpectedly dirty words. Eli's made it exceptionally clear that he's nothing like the characters he plays on television, but damn... I didn't think the difference ventured so far into filthy territory.

It's an undeniably sexy discovery.

My hips jerk forward to encourage his hand where I want it to go. Obediently, he follows my silent request to slide under my panties to caress my wet slit.

“Fuck, you're soaked already. You need this, don't you, baby?”

“Yes.” It's the only word I can muster, apparently.

“This is going to be quick and dirty, but I promise later I'll take my time. I want to savor you, but for now, my cock needs to be inside you. To feel the tight clamp of your cunt.”

Dirty, filthy man. God, I love it. Anticipation and arousal rages inside my body. I've never been so turned on in my life.

Eli swiftly undoes his pants and frees his enormous cock. Despite the shadows, the thick length slaps against my stomach, outlined by the pale

glow of the city lights around us. He pulls a condom out of his wallet, and I chuckle.

“You always keep one of those handy?”

“I do when I know I'm going to be around you,” he retorts, guiding the condom over his hard dick. His eager hands reach beneath my thighs before tapping the back of my legs. “Jump on, baby. Wrap those thick thighs around my waist.”

I'm hesitant at first, knowing I'm heavy, but he doesn't allow me to linger very long. He lifts me up without any problems, and a surprised moan erupts at the show of strength. One minute I'm lifted high, the winter air slicing into my lungs, and the next I'm sinking down on Eli's cock, sharing his heated breath.

“Fuck,” he grunts once he's buried to the hilt, then Eli begins to move, thrusting jerkily before finding a rhythm. He wasn't kidding about fast and dirty, but I don't care.

I'm on the edge already, and we've barely begun. His head dips to nuzzle my breast, his lips shoving aside the v-neck of my dress to reach my nipple, sucking it hard.

“Touch yourself, baby. Make yourself come on my hard dick.”

Another gush of wetness slides out of me as I drop a hand down to circle my clit. His pounding rhythm continues as he alternates firm and gentle sucks of his mouth on my breasts. All of it culminates in a shout of pleasure as my orgasm hits me, and Eli's isn't too far behind.

“Goddamn,” he mutters. “This pussy is magic.”

“Christmas magic.” I can't resist teasing him, despite the haggard breaths sawing in and out of my chest.

Eli nods, a speculative gleam entering his silver gaze. “I think you're right.” The admission takes hold of my galloping heart and refuses to let go.

Shit. I think I may be falling for my grumpy Hallmark hero.

The drive home is quiet. Eli holds my hand this time around, though, and I contemplate what our future holds. After the chauffeur parks in my drive, we sit there in silence.

“You know, I don't hate Christmas,” he says out of the blue.

“Could have fooled me.” But there's no heat behind my words.

“I know I don't have the best way of showing it. But it's not the season so much as...” He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. “I don't know how to

explain it. My mom raised me by herself. She watched those holiday movies year round. Made me sit and watch them with her, too. I guess at some point it became this annoyingly painful reminder of what we didn't have.”

I rest my head on his shoulder, cuddling closer as he shares this vulnerable part of his past. Who cares if the driver is waiting for us to exit? He can chill and earn his huge tip in the easiest way possible, by remaining silent and giving us this quiet time together.

“My mom dated, but she never found love. I never magically got a dad for Christmas. So the fairy tale of it all jaded me.”

“That's why you take issue with these movies,” I say, finally understanding his attitude.

“Yeah, it wasn't real. I kept thinking about other people like my mom watching these movies hoping for something similar and never finding comfort. It pissed me off on their behalf.”

“But they *are* finding comfort in it.” I turn to face him more fully. Stroking his arm, I carefully explain, “We're not stupid. We understand it's fictional. But that's part of its charm. We can sit back, relax, and know in the end that this couple is going to live happily ever after. *That's* comforting. It's an escape.”

“Don't you have something like that?” I ask, hope shimmering in my voice. “It may not be holiday rom-coms like your mom, but surely there's something you love that helps you escape the stresses of life.”

Eli shrugs. “I don't know. When I'm stressed, I work out. But I don't know that I'd say I love it.”

“You don't have any hobbies or anything?”

“I'm not like you, Shelby. You're this creative savant. I'm not.” His mouth screws up into a self-deprecating expression.

Lifting my hand, I smooth out the frustration with a soft caress along his lips. “You don't have to be creative to have a hobby. What about baking? You said you enjoy it. There's a hobby.”

“That's true. Although I don't do it too often. It's easier to order in or buy whatever I need or want.”

Stubborn man. I can tell he's not willing to relinquish his false beliefs quite yet, so I move on. “Thank you for sharing about you and your mom. It's kind of funny.” I chuckle. “You have more experience with these films than me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I didn't start watching Hallmark movies until college. Then I was

hooked. I guess it's because my life got more stressful.” My shoulders rise and fall with a sigh. “So you've got decades more experience than me.”

“Yet you're the Hallmark heroine. I swear, you are the living embodiment of every leading lady.”

“I don't know if I'd go that far, but I appreciate it. My life hasn't exactly been a Hallmark movie so far, but I suppose it's looking up.” I squeeze his hand.

He returns the comforting gesture, tenderness emanating from his gray eyes. “Yeah, it is, isn't it?”

“Even if our time together is fleeting.” I broach the topic we've been avoiding.

“It doesn't have to be.”

How I wish that were true.

“Eli, come on. MerryCon ends tomorrow, and then you'll be jetting off to who knows where. But it's not this small town. I'll be back in my shop, working as usual. People can make long distances work, but we're from two different worlds. We barely know each other.”

“We know each other well enough,” he argues, his body tensing.

“Still. I'm not sure it's wise to commit to anything after a 48-hour fling.” I don't wait for his response, extracting my hand from his and getting out of the car. If I don't leave now, my willpower may desert me. “Tonight was lovely. Thank you for taking me, and thank your mom for pushing us together. I'll see you tomorrow, if you find a break. Okay? Goodnight.” I wave and hurry to my front door, slipping inside while Eli watches, waiting until I'm safely ensconced in my home before telling the driver to leave.

I breathe a sigh of relief. The hard part's done. I let him know where we stand, and I feel good about it. Well, good about my bravery to say something, not good about our time together ending.

But that's reality.

This isn't a Hallmark movie, after all.

CHAPTER TEN

ELI

Shelby's words replay in my mind the rest of the night as I toss and turn in bed. How can I sleep knowing that tomorrow is potentially the last time I'll see her?

The answer is I can't.

So finally around 4 a.m., I drag myself out of bed, change into sweats, and head down to the hotel gym. Maybe some exercise will clear my head. Will provide a solution to our dilemma.

Because Shelby had a point.

I'm due in Vancouver tonight. I'll be there for at least a month. More if I land a regular spot on the show. Even if I don't, there's always another job. I can't expect Shelby to follow me around the country for shoots. Some spouses do, but she runs her own business. A brick and mortar store. She can't leave that behind, and I'd never expect her to.

The lady from the gala's words float in my mind. Partners supporting each other. Encouraging the ones they love.

The treadmill pounds beneath my feet as I up the speed. If this were one of the movies I've starred in, there'd be an easy solution. A perfect ending tied up with a bow. However, this is real life. The fact I've lamented for years.

But maybe I can learn from all those movies I've been in. Maybe there's something to be said for my characters' actions. A big gesture at the end to win the girl.

The idea has merit.

Stopping the treadmill. I stare at myself in the wall to wall mirrors, sweat creeping down my brow. *A big gesture.* That might win Shelby over. But what happens when I have her?

I mull over the possibilities until a plan begins to form in my mind, and it's not long after that I'm calling my agent.

We've got work to do if I'm going to win my girl.

MerryCon is a circus for the last day of the event. My line is ridiculously

long, and I haven't had a break all morning. *Doesn't matter*. Soon it'll be time for me to put my plan into action. The knowledge buoys my energy.

"I'm proud of you," Mom says from her place next to me. The fans have gotten a kick out of meeting my mom. She's loved discussing her favorite movies and stars with everyone who's stopped by.

"Why's that?" I ask, signing another autograph book.

"Because you're fighting for love. You're giving in to Christmas magic. Something I doubted I'd ever see."

"Your romantic tendencies finally rubbed off on me," I admit.

"I suppose you're right."

My volunteer ropes off my line, as requested, to give me a break, and Mom, realizing it's time, reaches underneath the table to pull out the wrapped cookie tin of snickerdoodles I made for Shelby. It was a pain getting the hotel to agree to let me use their kitchen on such short notice, but eventually, they'd relented. I'd whipped these up this morning right before my ride to MerryCon arrived.

Taking the tin of cookies, I wink. "Wish me luck."

She gives me a hug. "You don't need it. If Shelby can't see what a catch you are, then she's not the one for you. But I've got a good feeling."

"I hope you're right." She follows me into the vendor section, where I head straight for Chic Charm Crafts. Shelby is busy laughing with a customer, and her beauty has me rubbing the spot above my heart. She lights up the room with her smile.

A calmness settles over me. This is right. Whatever happens, Shelby and I will make this work.

"Eli, what are you doing here?" Her brows scrunch up in confusion as I set the tin of cookies on her table. "What's this?"

"A Christmas gift." A murmur of awe begins behind me as MerryCon attendees curiously watch to see what'll happen next. Last year, it was a huge deal when Thatcher North fell for his event volunteer. I suppose I'm about to create another buzz, falling for a vendor.

But I don't care. Publicity is the last thing on my mind.

"I baked you snickerdoodles like I said I would. And I've got one more thing for you." The beginning strands of Chase Bryant's version of *Blue Christmas* begin to play as I retreat a step before singing the first line. I'm not a great singer, but this is my declaration to Shelby.

I'll have a blue Christmas without her. I'm falling for her. I need her in my

life.

She's got the voice of an angel but can't bake.

I can make a mean cookie but can't hold a tune.

It may be silly comparing these specific strengths and weaknesses, but they're proof of how complementary we are, even in the smallest of details. It's a lot to put in a song, but this is only the opening volley. If Shelby lets me, I'll prove my devotion for years to come.

I continue singing, my eyes never leaving hers, as tears shine in her dark blue eyes. She dabs at her cheeks, shock and hesitant hope warring on her features.

When the song finally ends, everyone cheers, but I only care about Shelby's reaction. She's the only one that matters.

"Shelby, I care about you, and I don't want this to be the last time we're together. Please give me a chance to prove that what we have can be real and lasting." Rounding her booth table, I tenderly draw her into my arms. "I'm going to be in town for the foreseeable future. Plus, the good thing about holiday rom-coms, as you may know, is that we film them fairly quickly. So I'll only ever have to be away from you for a few weeks at a time. This can be my home base with you, if you let me."

"Eli, I don't know what to say." Her voice is shaky, but I take it as a win that she hasn't immediately refused me. In fact, she's snuggling closer in my embrace.

"Say yes!" someone shouts from the back, and we both laugh.

"You're serious right now," she double-checks, wiping at a stray tear.

"I am. I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I may have been a Christmas grump. I may not have believed in Christmas miracles. But you've converted me. Your sweet smile. Your kind heart. And the rest of your secrets that I'm yearning to learn have completely ensnared me. Please say you're willing to take this chance with me."

A watery smile begins to form as she whispers, "Yes, I am."

"Thank God." I sigh before tilting her chin up and kissing the hell out of my girl. Everybody cheers as flashes of cameras go off.

The Grinch has been gentled. And I couldn't be happier. Happier than I ever thought I'd be at a festive event dedicated to Christmas.

Hell, I bet Shelby can even talk me into attending another MerryCon next year.

The thought sends a thrill down my spine as I hug Shelby closer, because I

guarantee I'll enjoy her efforts to persuade me.

EPILOGUE

SHELBY

“Harder, baby. Suck me deep.” Eli’s gruff words prompt me into action as my mouth tightens around his cock, sucking him further down my throat in our luxurious hotel room.

This past year has been a dream.

A freaking fairy tale that’s even surprised me—the hopeless romantic between the two of us.

Like Eli promised on the last day of MerryCon after he sweetly butchered *Blue Christmas*, he’s stayed close. First, by renting an apartment in town then moving in with me because it’s not like we weren’t spending most nights together anyway.

When he leaves for a job, we text or call, but it turns out we’re not one of those couples that need constant contact. Go figure! So the breaks are an opportunity for each of us to do our own thing before coming back to share the excitement with each other.

Eli’s third MerryCon starts tomorrow morning, but he’s putting on his grumpy front and pretending like he doesn’t want to go again. Which is why I initiated my persuasion tactics. Okay, one persuasion tactic, but it’s usually all my man needs before agreeing to whatever I want.

And it’s not like I don’t enjoy our game either.

His velvety thickness stretches my jaw, and I hum in appreciation. I love his cock. Love when it’s pounding into me from behind. Love when it’s slowly torturing me to exquisite pleasure. But most of all, I love the man it belongs to.

Eli can still be grumpy. But he’s also tender and thoughtful. Not above showing how much he loves me in return. Last year’s grand gesture proved that.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful on your knees for me, baby. I love you so much,” he groans, massaging my scalp as he restrains himself from completely taking control of our lovemaking.

Releasing him for a second, I glance up and wink. “Love you, too, Mr.

Grinch.”

Forever and always.

Curious about Thatcher North's whirlwind romance with a volunteer?

Check out his age gap/curvy girl romance in [*Festive Fever!*](#)

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XO, Hallie

About The Author

Hallie Bennett



Hallie prefers steamy, insta-love stories where the curvy girl finds love with a filthy-talking hero. And when she ran out of reading material, she decided to write her own stories. If you want a quick, hot read, she's your girl!