

ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



Rescued

BY **SANTA**

BRYNN HALE

RESCUED BY SANTA

ALL THE JINGLE LADIES



BRYNN HALE





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RESCUED BY SANTA INFO

Sonnet

Losing my husband sent me into a tailspin.

The only things keeping me upright and moving are our son, Nyck, and the fact that the ER needs me as an emergency room doctor.

But still... I'm not myself. I want to be happy again. I want to feel again. And I want to see a future again.

When I ordered this Secret Santa Sighting on my video doorbell, my son was supposed to be off with my sister shopping for the holidays, but Nyck is home sick.

And then Nyck goes out and talks to Santa and tells him the only thing he wants is for me to be happy!

I'm touched at how Santa handles it and then Santa doesn't let me down. He grants my wish for a date.

Jasper's handsome, sensitive, and he rings my bell in so many ways, showing me that happiness can be mine again.

But when I find out that trust is the one thing he can't give me, I'm crushed.

Can we have our holiday happily ever after?

Jasper

I have everything for a great life. Well, everything but love.

Not that I haven't tried, but most of the women wanted me for one thing- my money.

They wanted what I could give them, not what we could give to each other.

When I go on a Secret Santa Sighting doorbell ring all dressed up as the jolly fellow himself, I think it's going to be like the others.

Do a little ho-ho-ho and then go-go-go!

But nine-year-old Nyck catches me and tells me how much he wants his mom to be happy, I can't help but want that too.

Sonnet turns out to be everything I've ever wanted in a woman. Kind, nurturing, funny, and a holiday angel in a curvy package.

When Sonnet finds out that I've done the unspeakable - at least in her mind - she runs away.

How can I show her that my trust is in her completely?

This Santa is ready to make all her wishes come true.

If you enjoy safe reads with instalove perfection, strong men, spicy scenes, and a solid happily ever after with no cheating or cliffhangers, then this series fits your wish list.

Grab a mug of hot chocolate and settle into your favorite reading place to fall in love with All the Jingle Ladies!

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CHAPTER 1



JASPER

I HEAR THE BELLS BEFORE THE PERSON IS STANDING IN FRONT of my desk. Specifically, the tinkle of jingle bells that are on my assistant's outfit. She's worn the same outfit every casual Friday from December 1 on. A cranberry red sweater with a light-up Christmas tree, black jeans, and these green boots that have a line of tiny bells around the top edge are Fallon's festive attire.

And I thought I loved the holiday. She puts my efforts to celebrate the season to shame.

But I also know that smirk on her face.

I see the sticky note in her hand, folded in this certain way and my heart leaps in my chest.

It's another chance to show someone the spirit of the season. This is a highlight of my year.

My business isn't my passion, it's a way to pay the bills. And it does that and more. Much more. I enjoy my job, but what I'm about to do is something that gives back ten-fold, and I'm not exactly sure why.

Better not to question it...

Fallon slips the paper into my hand. "You know, you wouldn't be missed at the party... just sayin'."

I consider skipping the holiday shindig. She's probably right, but there's a sense of duty to holiday merriment built into me. It's DNA level.

I shove the paper in my jeans pocket. “I’ll do a round and then head out.”

She rolls her eyes. “Do you ever take a day off?”

Rhetorical question. She knows what my commitment level is to projects, big or small, never wavers and vacations alone just don’t interest me.

I hit the office floor and “Santa, Baby” chimes through the intercom system, drinks in hands of my associates and employees, and I can see several will be using our company pays for a ride-share program. It’s offered on or off the clock and Fallon will help those who need one to get one. She’s like my inner business voice.

Hmmm. Maybe she needs a raise and title change.

I’ll investigate that after the holidays.

Women come from every edge of the room to make small talk, but I don’t dip my pen in the company ink.

“Well, well, look who’s making a rare appearance. Ho-ho-ho, boss man.” My partner Kieler offers my normal office hermit behavior to my face.

It’s not that I want to be a hermit. It’s a self-protective measure, built from years of—

“Hi, Jasper, happy holidays,” a brunette who works in accounting says as she passes by, her hand grabbing my forearm and squeezing. I instinctively pull away.

“Hi, Raquel, happy holidays.”

Kieler rolls his eyes and makes himself conveniently absent. He knows what’s coming. I know what’s coming.

She leans in close. “Love to give *you* a present.”

No one here knows what I do on the side, so she’s not talking about my passion project. And it’s not all women, but I’m a magnet for both crazy and wanting something more than my time and heart.

Just my wallet.

I'm tired of having to recover once again when I find out that their intentions are different than what I hoped for. If I could just find a woman who's more into me than my investment portfolio. But thus far, I've only found superficial connections and not someone who I can trust.

Another woman grabs my arm and I stiffen.

"It's just me," Fallon's voice soothes me. She's had to pick up the pieces a few times when I went down a dark rabbit hole after another relationship evaporated in front of my face.

She hands me a bag. "You better head to the gym." She winks. "Your sled, I mean car, is waiting out front with Jerome."

"Thanks, Fallon."

She sighs. "You'll be okay, Jasper."

I don't know...

I slip the bag from her and start toward the elevator.

Kieler intercepts me as I'm hitting the button. "You know, you can take time from working out at the holidays. Maybe live it up a little, enjoy a glass of beer, and eat more than chicken breasts and broccoli."

"You know that's not me."

"Seems like it."

Sure, I get up at 4 a.m. Sure, I get on my bike and ride for twenty miles first thing, but I sure don't eat chicken breasts and broccoli. Well, not exclusively.

I adjust the bag as the elevator dings. I turn around before hitting the button. "Have a great Christmas, Kieler."

And the elevator door closes as he's shaking his head.



SONNET

I flip the bedding back and forth. *Where is it?*

I have to leave for the hospital in ten minutes and I want to spend time with Nyck. His fever hasn't broken, and I'm concerned it's more than something viral. He seems fine. He's playing and running around, but one more sign and I'm making the call.

You're the only doc there tonight. You really want to do that to the person on call?

"Ugh!" I continue searching, but out of the corner of my eye, I see something.

A shadow darkens the doorway.

"Sonnet, it's on your dresser, like always." My sister Harmony's voice comes out with a little know-it-all tone, but I'm kind of okay with it.

I grab my badge and clip it to my scrub pocket.

"Now, don't get freaked out and I'm only telling you because I know you'd throw me out into the snow if you found out... but Nyck's fever is now a hundred and one."

There's the sign.

"I think I should call in."

"Sis, it's a fever. Kids get them all the time. He's running around the living room pretending that Watson is a bad guy. Watson on the other hand is sitting in the middle of the room and watching him like his twelve-year-old, lazy, basset hound ass requires."

I chuckle lightly and from behind Harmony comes a voice saying, "I'm fine."

Harmony pulls Nyck in front of her and my nine-year-old son's toothy grin beams. "Since we're not going shopping, we have a night of popcorn and movies planned out. Right?" She tickles him lightly and he crumples forward.

"Aunt Harmony! I'm going to tickle you when you go to sleep! But we're definitely watching movies."

Nyck squirms from her touch and runs back down the hallway.

I follow behind him as Harmony whistles a tune I can't quite make out.

Jingle Bells? Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer?

Our love of music is cemented in both our souls and names.

I still when I hit the living room. It doesn't even look like the holidays are here. I really need to get the tree up and the decorations set.

I turn around and a picture catches my eye. I walk the five steps to it and each one seems like there's concrete on my feet. Me, Nyck, and Parker. The man I love —loved, no love never dies— died three years ago, unexpectedly.

"I can't believe another year has gone by."

Harmony's arms wrap around me from behind. She's a great hugger. "He's still here. I feel him."

"Some days I can't," I whisper.

"Sis, he doesn't want you to be sad anymore. Parker would never want that."

My throat starts to clench. She's right, but every Christmas it's the same feelings. Maybe if he hadn't died three days before the holiday, I wouldn't remember so hard.

No, it wouldn't matter, loss is loss, grief is grief.

"I try not to be sad," I say softly so Nyck doesn't hear.

"I know.

Nyck jumps into view, holding up a small clock. "You need to go, Mom! There are people who need you."

He's turned into the man of the house with Parker gone.

"But if you need me more, I'll stay. Just say the word."

Harmony and Nyck yell, "Go!"

"Fine! I'll go!" I say with a huff and grab my bag.

I hear them talking as they head into the kitchen, probably to make that popcorn.

“Have you made out your list for Santa yet?” Harmony asks him.

“Not yet, but I know what I want.”

I still. I need to know this. Dr. Stevens will cover for me for a while.

Nyck slides a stool out.

“What’s that?” Harmony asks, opening the cabinet.

“I want mom to be happy again.”

My heart crashes to the bottom of my stomach and now I think I’m going to be sick.

Can I be happy again?

My life imploded and I haven’t found my way out of the rubble of my heart yet. It’s hard to be happy when I’m constantly reminded of the beautiful life we had together and I’m scared I won’t have that again.

“She’s happy, Nyck,” Harmony tries to cover for me, but even I question her tone.

“No, Aunt Harmony. She *used* to be happy.”

My heart cracks a little more. Even my son sees through my smile.

Harmony doesn’t respond and I wouldn’t want her to. We agree that we don’t lie to Nyck. “Let’s watch a movie in the den.”

“Something scary!” Nyck says, his feet slapping the kitchen tile as he heads into the den.

“Okay, something scary,” Harmony says with a growl.

“Nothing scary!” I call out and they both laugh.

I shake my head and roll my eyes.

It’s a blessing to have Harmony in my life. After Parker’s death she moved in. I work long and sometimes grueling shifts. I need to decompress when I come home and that’s why there’s a second entrance to the house, so I can slip into my

bedroom, shower, and slip into bed before Nyck sees me. And Harmony is there. Always.

I worry that she put her life on hold to take care of me and Nyck and I should find someone and let her get back to her life. It's not fair to her to keep her here.

Nothing is fair in the world right now.

Nyck sneezes in the back hallway and I pause at the front door.

It's just a fever.

My phone buzzes with a text to put an exclamation on where I'm needed. No doubt they're just as busy tonight as every night.

My phone buzzes again.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you," I say to the piece of irritating metal in my bag. I pull it out and it's an unknown number. I don't open the message.

It'll wait until later.

The phone goes back where it came from and I'm out the door.

Time to make a difference in lives.

But is there a way to make a difference in my life.

CHAPTER 2



JASPER

I STARE AT THE ADDRESS NUMBER. IT'S THE SAME AS THE SLIP of paper. The house is dark. That's a good thing. No one home is the only way to do this.

I check my phone one more time. I texted the number to verify they still wanted their visit, but I never heard back.

Maybe they're all out shopping. 'Tis the season for things like that, even though I don't have someone to shop for. Kind of miss that part of a relationship. I enjoy picking out the right gift for someone.

These Secret Santa Sightings are a quick doorbell ring, allowing the video to catch a sighting that the parent can share with their child Christmas morning. They're done anonymously with no private information shared. The person wanting a visit donates to one of three charities a minimum amount and then the Doorbell Santa system sends a Santa out to show up in the video doorbell and say a few words. A little planned holiday cheer.

I adjust the long white beard and the leather belt. Might as well give it a try. If they don't get it recorded, the parent or homeowner can ask for a follow-up visit.

The home is red brick ranch with a holiday green front door. It's noticeably charming. But what's most noticeable is what's not present... decorations. Usually people who order these visits have it decorated to the hilt so that it looks like Christmas morning, and that worries me that they'll decorate

later and the child or children will notice the missing holiday accoutrement. Kids are very perceptive in my experience.

I make it to the front door and I still.

Was that someone inside?

We ask that no one be home to eliminate the potential for being caught. And knock on wood, I've never had that happen. I'm relatively sure it was just my reflection in the window.

I wait for the green light to engage my presence, pretending to adjust my bag of goodies over my back. The card said that child's name is "Nyck," so I've prepared my spiel in my head.

"Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas!" I lean back and laugh a little. I'm not the roundest Santa in the bunch, more... slightly fluffy... than portly. "I can't wait to deliver these gifts. They're for a Nycholas. Hey, that's my name, too! I'm known as St. Nick, but most people call me Santa."

The doorbell crackles to life and I freeze.

Crap.

A voice whispers, "Hey, I'm so sorry. I forgot you were booked for tonight. I need you to come back another time. My son's in the den watching a movie, not feeling well, and because of his bionic hearing, he might hear you."

My heart ticks faster and not just because I might get caught. The voice is what I might call... *melodic? Soothing? Almost rhythmic?* I calm myself before speaking, not something that I usually have to do with women. Most don't affect me at all. Probably from shutting down my heart so many times.

I lean close. "Oh. Um. O.K." It's like my brain is stuck in low-syllable-count-land. "But... it won't be me." I'm not sure why she'd care, but something inside of me needs to put it out there.

I clear my throat and lean in closer to the camera like I might be able to see her. "They'll send someone else."

There's a long pause and I wonder if I've lost her. The thought sits like bad fruit cake in my stomach.

"Oh, well, I guess that's how it'll have to—"

The door opens and I'm face-to-face with a young boy that barely reaches my belly button through the glass storm door.

And all the blood drains from my body and all I hear from the doorbell is, "Oh, fuck!"

I stop a chuckle as the child opens the door.

"Santa?" he asks, with wide eyes.

This isn't supposed to happen.

My chest burns. I could turn and walk away saying, "Wrong house," but that wouldn't be me.

"Well, hello... there..." I stumble briefly and quickly straighten from the doorbell.

If I wasn't so damn awkward with kids...

Adults I can engage, but someone I can't tell what they're thinking, that puts me on high alert and waiting for something I can't handle.

"What are you doing here? Christmas isn't until Sunday."

Smart kid.

"Um...um... just, just doing a dry run!" I use my business acumen on why I'd send someone early. "Need to make sure that we could find your house."

The young boy looks around the corner and his furrowed brow deepens. "Where are your elves and reindeer?"

I'm getting the third degree from a child!

"Ummm... I gave them the night off. They're very busy and deserve a break."

A light chuckle comes through the doorbell, and I shuffle my feet to cover the outburst, but not before noticing that her chuckle is even melodic.

"My mom needs that, too."

My gaze goes to the doorbell. The light is still green. *She's still watching?*

The young boy closes the glass door behind him and since his parent is watching, I figure it's okay to continue and if I'd deny Nyck this I'd hear it from the program.

"I know I haven't gotten my list to you. Can I just tell you right now?"

"Sure. Let's sit." I move back toward the wrought iron bench on the front porch.

We both slip onto the bench and Nyck makes sure I'm looking at him. This kid is going to rule the world someday. His instincts are something I live by. Look a person in the eyes. Don't scare away from a confrontation. Ask for what you want.

"So, what would you like this year, Nyck?" I think what I wanted when I was about his age. "A bicycle? Video games?"

"No." He shakes his head and sighs. The sound pulls me in. Whatever he wants it's weighing heavy on him. "I want my mom not to be sad anymore."

I don't know what to say. My silence seems to spur him on.

"My dad died when I was five and ever since, she's been sad. I hear her cry in the kitchen at night sometimes. I don't want her to cry anymore. Can you help her be happy?"

I swallow down some fear that this request is even above my pay grade.

"Santa? Can you do that?" I must be silent for longer than he can stand.

I shake from the distress that courses through me like a slithering snake. "I'll see what I can do, Nyck. Now you go back inside and get some sleep. I hope you feel better soon."

His head tips with a question, but he only says, "Thanks."

I've let some information from his mother out, but I open the front door to usher him back in. Before he goes, he rushes

me with a hug. I stiffen just a little before melting into the small boy's gesture.

He turns back when inside the door. "Tell your elves I say hi!"

I laugh. "Will do."

"Bye, Santa."

"Bye, Nyck."

I wait for the wooden door to shut and the lock to click before stepping in front of the video camera again. "You still there?"

"Yeah." Her voice is now tight like an overtightened guitar string.

"I'm guessing you're Mom?" My painted white brows rise with the question.

She sniffles. "Yeah. I didn't know he could hear me crying."

My heart reaches out to her, like I want to wrap her in my arms and take every pain away. My mom was a single mom, too. I know how she struggled. It was part of the reason why I worked so hard, so she didn't have to struggle anymore. And now she travels the world and has everything her heart desires.

But my heart desires something right now...

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I don't want to be too forward and misread the room.

There's a long pause, but I hear her clear her throat. "Santa, would you like to go on a date?" She giggles. "I mean, if there's no Mrs. Claus."

My heart leaps in my chest.

"There's no Mrs. Claus and yeah, this Santa would love to take you out for dinner, Nyck's mom."

"Sonnet," she answers.

"And I'm Jasper."

"Nice to meet you, Jasper."

Maybe I can fulfill Nyck's wish after all.

CHAPTER 3



SONNET

I CAN'T EFFING BELIEVE I'M GOING OUT WITH SANTA? I DON'T even know this man.

Jasper. Jasper who?

I put on another layer of mascara, something I haven't worn in a long time.

I turn to Watson who's in his bed in the corner. "What am I thinking?"

He does his best to care by rolling onto his back and asking for a belly rub. I do as the basset hound demands while trying to calm myself.

How Jasper... I mean, Santa... acted with Nyck had me dreaming of how kind Santa could be to me, too. And believe me, Santa had some moves in those dreams.

But then there's the concern that he's some mass murder, but the company wouldn't hire someone who wasn't vetted, right?

A voice from the doorway makes me jump. "So who are going out with? Wait! Is it that hottie doctor from nephrology?"

Ewww.

"No! Drs don't date Drs. At least not if we can help it. It's a prescription for disaster."

"Funny." Harmony flops onto my king size bed and all I can remember was how that bed used to be filled with Parker,

myself, and Nyck on Sunday mornings. “So, who is this?”

“He’s new.”

“New to who and where?”

I roll my eyes with my back to her.

“I saw that eye roll in the mirror, sis.”

“Sorry, but could you just not do the whole twenty-questions thing?”

“What’s he look like?” she asks ignoring my request, like usual.

I really don’t know.

I straighten my back and look at my sweater and jeans outfit. I doubt Santa’s a Five Seasons kind of guy, so I’m going for more bistro or brewery kind of vibe.

“Well, what does he look like?” she uses sign language to repeat. She learned the skill when Nyck was born, and we thought he might be profoundly deaf but found out his hearing impairment wasn’t as severe as we originally thought.

“I heard you.” I’m not deaf, but often ignoring her gets her to stop. “Ummm... he’s kinda tall... and kinda has a rounder body—”

“A dad bod?” she asks with a gaping mouth as I grab my jacket off the end of the bed. “Wow, I didn’t expect that.”

“I don’t judge a book by its cover, judgy-judgerson.”

“Fair enough. Do go on...”

Ugh. What will make her stop?

“He’s got facial hair. His hair is kinda... silvery.”

“Older man? Love it. Tell me more...”

Good God.

“He’s generous. He likes kids. And he... he likes to wear red suits and black boots.”

Harmony’s head rears back. “You make him sound like he’s... Santa?”

The doorbell rings. *Saved by the bell.*

“Please go get that.”

Harmony stops in the doorway. “Are you sure you want to go out with this guy? You seem... nervous?”

Maybe that’s a good thing... or a bad one.

“Weren’t you the one who was pushing me to get out more often just two days ago?”

“Things change. I’m concerned with you being so secretive about this guy and—”

We both pause when we both hear a voice inside. *Nyck let him in?!*

I definitely didn’t want that to happen. And I need to have a conversation with Nyck about opening the door!

Harmony smiles. “Whoa... he sounds sexy AF.”

I can’t disagree. The rumble of his voice is setting off all my warning lights that I’ll need new panties by the end of the night.

“Hey, there. I’m here to see Sonnet?” he says. “Your mom?”

“Yeah, that’s her. Come on in,” Nyck’s voice seems older every day. He’s had to mature faster than I think he would have if Parker had been here.

I shove my sister into the hallway. “Come on. Move!”

She leans in as we make it down the hallway. “Do you have a condom?”

I shout whisper into her ear. “I’m not having sex, Harmony! It’s just dinner.”

“I was asking for me!” she shouts back, pulling me to a stop.

For fuck’s sake.

“Move!” I shove her forward.

We walk out and Jasper's sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, Legos spread everywhere and he's creating something that looks like a Christmas tree.

Jasper brings his eyes up to me and I'm frozen in his bright smile.

"Move!" Harmony shoves me forward and I shuffle.

Harmony walks up and reaches out. Jasper stands and clasps his hand.

Her eyes ping-pong over him. "I'm Harmony, Sonnet's sister. And that's not a red suit and not a lot of facial hair." She glances back over her shoulder. "Is this really the guy?"

I take time to raise my gaze to his and those piercing whiskey brown eyes from the camera are the same. "Yeah, that's him."

"Nice to meet you, Harmony. I wasn't quite myself when I met Sonnet." He winks at me, and the rumble of a chuckle seizes my chest.

There's a rush inside of me, like a spark of something I haven't felt since Parker.

"You hurt her, and I will pull every hair out of your nose, one by one." Harmony's declaration pulls me from staring at the fine man specimen Jasper is.

"Harmony!" I admonish her through gritted teeth.

Jasper's eyes are wide taking Harmony in as he steps around her. He leans in, "Understood, Harmony. Sonnet," he breathes in deeply as he steps in close to me. His lips land on my cheek and my eyes fall closed to just take the moment in. "You're beautiful."

I'm not sure if I imagined it or if he really said it. But when I open my eyes and my sister is practically panting and drooling over him, I'm going to assume it was heard.

"Thank you. So are you. I mean, you're pretty, no handsome. I mean... attractive. Shit. You know what I mean."

The man has absorbed whatever brain cells I had and made them into goo. Not a good look for a doctor.

His hand slips to the curve of my lower back and the move settles me in an odd way. Parker was a hand holder, this is different, it's a little possessive but I lean into the move. His warmth is too inviting.

"If you're ready..." he gives the slightest pressure to get me moving.

I nod, grabbing my coat from the back of the couch.

Harmony huffs at her phone. "I swear these things a just junk." She pokes at the screen like a two-year-old playing a game.

"Well, if you didn't do that," I say with a shake of my head.

Jasper smiles. "They definitely have the ability to cause havoc, right?"

"They just cost so much to replace that it's use it until it just won't start again."

With his assistance, I slip my coat on.

Nyck runs over and slips his arms around me. "Have fun! Thanks for helping me with my Legos, Mr. Jasper."

"Anytime, Nyck."

Nyck's head tips and I can see the gears turning in my son's head. Being born with a hearing deficit, utilizing hearing aids from age three years on.

Nyck's hearing is astute as any nine-year-old's now and his deduction skills even sharper.

Outside Jasper opens his car door. I noticed he had a small limp on the way down the sidewalk.

"Thanks," I say, slipping into the plus Italian leather of the fanciest car I've ever been in. It's spotless inside—almost too clean for a man's car in my opinion. But the smell.

My ovaries jumpstart like they've been hit by lightning.

The smell is all Jasper. Woodsy and clean.

What am I doing? Dating Santa... that's what I'm doing.

CHAPTER 4



JASPER

THIS WOMAN ISN'T SHY, BUT SHE IS CAUTIOUS. KNOWING THAT she recently, years don't count when it comes to death, lost her husband makes me as cautious. Heck, I used a private detective to find out who she is.

Doctor in the ER, specializing in trauma.

No debt, not even house payment or student loans.

Great credit score and sizable bank accounts to her name.

Hubby, Parker, passed unexpectedly of an aneurysm.

Sister lives with her to help with her son.

And one son— Nyckolas Parker Michaels. Nyck, born with some physical challenges, but from my perspective he overcomes all of them like a champ. If anything, his hearing is superhero level.

Sonnet seems perfect on paper, but I've learned over and over that black and white is grayer than expected.

I pull the car out of the driveway and put the manual transmission into drive. The all-wheel drive manual isn't totally perfect for winter weather, but something in me wanted her to be safe, and this car has the most real metal of my collection.

"I... I don't think I can do this, Jasper." Her voice is timid, not what I'd expect from the confident doctor.

"Can't do what?"

I mean, I've been thinking of some things the beautiful doctor and I could do, but I'm going to keep most of the ones that happen between sheets to myself. I'm not that crass guy. But I swear I could be with this hot woman. She revs my engine, fast and furious.

She grabs my hand on the steering wheel, and I stop the car. "To date. I'm not ready."

My stomach almost hurts, like it's empty and I'm a starving man, craving this woman as my last meal.

I try to stay calm, but tension settles into my neck and then down my spine. "I'm not looking for forever, Sonnet. Just a nice dinner." That's not totally true.

"Not dinner." As soon as I said the suggestion, she dropped her hand from mine, leaving it cold. Dinner is too much, too soon, too far. She needs baby steps.

"Drink? Cocktail? Coffee?" I sound desperate, but I can't stop myself. I'm positive that spending any time with this woman will quell the burn in my stomach.

She shakes her head.

I pull off the side of the street and put the car into neutral, engaging the parking brake. "You deserve to have a fun and relaxing time tonight."

Her mouth drops open. "I'm *not* having sex with you!"

I can't stop the smirk that lifts my mouth. "I understand. But on that subject, having to explain what a condom is to your son was more than a little uncomfortable. Thankfully I could re-direct him to the Legos."

"*Shit*. He had his hearing aids turned up."

"I wondered. I could barely hear Harmony."

"Rocks on Mars can hear Harmony," she deadpans with raised brows.

I laugh heartily. "But to be clear, I wasn't suggesting sex. How about your holiday shopping? There's only three days until the big day. Is that done?"

She chews on her lower lip while deep in thought. “No, it’s not. But you heard Nyck, he doesn’t want anything.”

I put the car back into gear knowing that I have her attention and the wheels are turning on both the car and in her head.

“That’s not true. He wants you to be happy.”

Sonnet huffs. “When he’s happy, then I’m happy.”

I take that as a sign. “Then let’s go shopping.”



WE’RE HOURS INTO SHOPPING AND I’M CARRYING THE BAGS and boxes like a champ. I only offered to pay once and she shot me down— hard. I’m fine with that. It gives me hope that I can trust her. Although, I’m not sure she really knows who I am.

And I’m not sure I want to tell her. It changes things. Some women turn into a different person. Some women start asking questions that I’m not prepared to answer, like do I demand a prenup agreement and what do you think about division of assets in divorce. Uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as the condom-incident with Nyck.

At this moment, I’m positive that Sonnet could take every penny I have, and I’d still be interested in learning more about her. She’s just that engaging and real. And she’s funny.

She was talking about Harmony and what she should get her— a gag? A permanent vacation in Bermuda? An astronaut’s helmet to wear around the house so she’s muffled?

I don’t think Harmony’s that bad. And like Sonnet, she’s amusing, and I honestly think she would cut off my dick if I hurt Sonnet, so I’m going to do everything to avoid that.

But she’s putting so much effort into finding just the right gift for everyone that I can see how much she cares.

She’s finally found new pajamas for everyone to wear Christmas Eve. A tradition that she credits her late husband

with and for a moment that brings a melancholy look to her eyes, but she moves on.

She rounds the corner and finds a mug that says “Eat, Read, Repeat.” “This is her! She loves books. I admire her zeal for learning. She knows six languages thus far.”

“Wow, I know two and that was hard fought, I can’t imagine six that’s a huge feat.”

She smiles and I can see the pride she has in her sister. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Nope. Just me. Is Harmony your only?”

“No, I have two brothers. They’re in the military, one stationed in Alaska and the other in Montana.” She hands over her card to the cashier.

“So you’re all in the fields of service to others.”

She stills. “I guess so. Harmony doesn’t quite know what she wants to do when she grows up—not that I think that’ll happen anytime soon—so she’s the outlier.”

“She’s Nyck’s nanny?”

“More like Nyck is *her* nanny.”

I chuckle, again, and the feeling is like seeing a new dawn after a rough night of storms. “But she is providing care to you?” I ask softly.

She looks to me. “Yeah, and I’m concerned that she’s put her life on hold to—I don’t know why I’m telling you these things, Jasper, I usually don’t open up like this.”

I slip a hand to her lower back, not guiding or demanding anything from her, just for support. “Maybe you should.”

“I don’t like burdening others with my—”

“Your life is not a burden to anyone.” I step in close. “It’s your truth, your path, and your reality. This is why I find you incredibly attractive. You haven’t been anyone but yourself.”

The cashier clears their throat. “Wow. That was…”

“Let’s go,” Sonnet says over whatever the person behind the counter says on a breathy sigh.

I grab the last bag from Sonnet’s hand. We start toward the parking garage, the wind kicking up in the Colorado winter. We’re supposed to have a white Christmas, but I won’t hold my breath.

“I notice your limp is getting a little worse. Are you okay?”

Leave it to the good doctor to notice.

“Old war injury,” I respond, hoping to end the conversation.

I try to remember where the door on the garage that leads to the elevator is. I won’t admit it, but taking stairs isn’t going to happen.

“No, really?”

“I ruined my knee doing something. It doesn’t like the cold. Nothing you can do about it, doc.”

She slaps her hands together and rubs quickly. “There might be. I’ve got some pretty sweet Mr. Miyagi moves.”

After a chuckle, I think about letting part of my past out there, but I decide to deflect. Like Sonnet, letting go of my real issues isn’t my superpower. It’s more like my kryptonite.

“What do you want to do now?”

Please don’t say take me home.

She stills and watches a white horse-drawn carriage rolling up before we head into the garage.

“The last Christmas Parker was here, we did a carriage ride.”

I lean in close, her long legs, bring her ear to my lips. “Would you like to do one now?”

She looks up and our lips are inches apart. A hot mist of our breaths gathers like a soft cloud between us. I lean toward her, her eyes closing, giving me the needed indicator, and just

before our lips touch the horse whinnies and Sonnet gasps, stepping back.

“Sorry, I... I’m not—”

I throw all bags into one hand and grab her hand, giving a squeeze. “No worries, sweetheart. It’s okay.”

She bites the side of her bottom lip, like she does when she’s in deep contemplation and I wonder if she even knows she does it.

Adorable, and I’d like to have a little nibble myself.

But as much as I want to see hope and possibilities, what I really see in her eyes is a truth that I can’t erase. She’s still working her way through what has hurt her.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

I swear I dreamed the word. “What?”

“Let’s go for a ride, Jasper. I need to start living in the present and not in the past because the past isn’t coming back.”

I hold the bags up. “You have a lot of presents to live for.”

She shakes her head with a smirk. “Cheesy. Come on.” Grabbing my hand, she flags down the carriage and pays the driver for a ride. I go to open my mouth and protest, but there’s a look in her eye that she needs this. She needs to be in control and I’m along for the ride in lots of ways.

The driver stores the bags and helps us in, getting us tucked under multiple layers of soft blankets.

Sonnet curls in next to me, closer than I would have thought she would, but I’m not complaining. “So, what do you do for a living, Jasper?”

“I’m in business,” I state matter-of-factly.

She turns to face me. “There are lots of businesses—a drug dealer? A shoe salesman? Dog grooming?”

I lean in close and hold up a glove-covered hand, pointing to the north. “See that building all lit up in green lights?”

She nods.

I shrug. “I own it.”

“You own the building or the businesses in it.”

“I own it all, Walsh Enterprises.”

When she rears her head back in surprise, her red winter hat slips back a little revealing blonde hair that sparkles in the lamp lights. “Oh, wow. Do you like being in business?”

“I had another dream a long time ago, but it just wasn’t mean to be.”

Baseball is a young man’s dream. Like Nyck. He’s the perfect age to teach perfect throwing and catching mechanics. I’d love to get out on a field with him and throw some balls back and forth. When it’s nice again.

Snowflakes start to fall at a pace I’d call more than flurries, but less than anything that will accumulate. I see Sonnet shiver and I slip my arm around her back.

“This okay?” I ask, drawing her in close on the velvet seat.

“Yeah, thanks. I didn’t think it was supposed to snow.”

“Expect the unexpected is one of my mottos.”

“And it’s a good one.”

The clip-clop of the hooves is soothing. The horse goes down Larimer Square in the heart of Denver’s historic downtown district between 14th and 15th streets. The lights on the buildings twinkle like tiny lightning bugs.

We turn down a side street and Sonnet’s chest rises quickly.

She points. “My Secret Santa Sighting donation went to this organization. My husband used to volunteer there.”

The Downtown Denver Homeless Shelter...

I look at the building, people gathered outside looking up at the falling flakes like they’re magical.

Maybe they are.

“It’s a great organization,” I reply and hear her snuffle.
“Sonnet, are you okay?”

Stupid. Of course she’s not okay.

“I mean, what can I do to help? Anything?”

Her bottom lip quivers. “No. Just brought back memories, but I want to remember that they’re all good. Really good. And that organization is doing such good work.”

I wipe a single tear that rolls down her cheek.

She smiles. “So why are you a doorbell Santa?”

Opening up is hard to do, at least for me. It’s the fallout of being open that holds me at bay. But tonight, I feel like I can trust this woman. Even if we don’t go further, she’s the real deal, caring, sweet, and almost unreal.

“My mother was a single mom and every year in July she would have someone come to the door in a Santa suit to get my list. She wouldn’t have been able to afford anything last minute, and I knew that, so I asked for things that were either activities or small. She worked an extra job for the rest of the year to afford a Christmas and give me memories that I cherish now.” I take a deep breath.

Her hand finds mine in my lap and our fingers roll together. “She sounds wonderful. I can understand how she wanted to give you what you wanted. I’m just not sure I can give Nyck what he wants. Happiness is fleeting, right?”

That might be our combined experience, but I have hope.

“I’ve had a great time tonight. Did you have a good time?”

She swallows softly, her lips rising into a gentle smile. “I did.”

“Do you think that’s happiness?” I pull her in closer.

There’s a long pause and I wonder if I’ve once again stepped over the line.

She leans in closer. “I’m happier than I have been in a long time.”

I meet her in the middle for a gentle kiss. Soft, lingering.
One that I don't want to stop, but she's not ready for more.

And I want it all.

I back away slowly and I swear I see a little disappointment in her eyes.

“Wow,” she says, and I nod.

“Agreed. Wow.”

That was a kiss I felt from the bottoms of my feet to the top of my head and pausing for a blood pumping stop in the middle. I take a couple deep breaths to calm what's starting to rise to the occasion. Thankfully I have a long, cashmere coat on, so there's no visible evidence, just the tension inside of me and my pants.

“Would you like to come over for decorating our tree tomorrow?”

The black and white is definitely graying and I wonder if we should wait until after the holidays, but her happiness means more than I ever imagined to me now.

I kiss her forehead as she nuzzles under my chin. “I'd love to...”

CHAPTER 5



SONNET

MARIAH CAREY BELTS OUT “ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS You” into the living room and I do my best to keep up with her, but it’s useless. She’s the queen of the holiday song.

But enter Harmony and she’s in tune, tone, and pace with Ms. Carey, even putting her own flourish on it. She has the musical gift in the family. I can hold a tune and sing-along, but Harmony makes the song her own.

She comes over and grabs my hands and swings them back and forth to force me to dance with her. I roll my eyes, but it’s been a good day after a great night.

I’ve had the biggest smile all day. Jasper invaded my dreams last night and I’m not scared to admit that I woke up with a very hot personal fireplace. Took a cold shower, which in the middle of winter in Colorado is not recommended, but still I’m thinking things I haven’t in a long time. Things that would make my sister blush. Heck, they make me blush.

The doorbell rings.

He’s early.

I motion toward the noise. “I gotta get that.”

“He’ll let himself in, eventually.”

I shake free from her hold. “And it’s freezing out there!”

Harmony folds her arms. “Concerned about his welfare, interesting. Very interesting.”

“I’m concerned with a lot of people’s welfare, including yours.”

“I’m well and I’m fair,” she says spinning, her hair splaying out around her.

“You’re something, all right.”

I open the door all I see is a tower of gifts. “Jasper? Are you behind there?”

A muffled, “Somewhere,” is all I hear.

I start pulling a few off to find his smiling face. “Hello there.”

“Hello. I know I’m early; I couldn’t wait to get here.”

“And I couldn’t wait for you to get here.”

We sneak a quick peck behind the remaining mountain of packages until I hear a familiar soft padding of feet behind us.

“Jasper?” Nyck’s voice breaks our bond.

“Hey, Nyck! Are you feeling better today?”

Nyck narrows his eyes in. “How did you know I was sick?”

“Oh…” Jasper sets the gifts down on the coffee table. “Your mom told me, of course.”

Nyck doesn’t say anything more because his eyes are on the stack of gifts. “Wow! Are all of those for—”

“Nyck! Manners, please,” I say quickly.

“Sorry. How are you, Mr. Jasper?”

Jasper walks to me with his hand behind his back and I’m curious. “I’m good. And yes, the majority are for you. There’s a couple for your mom and your aunt, too. Hope you like them, but I’d like you to open them on Christmas morning.”

Nyck’s shoulder’s fall, but he springs to life with a huge smile when Jasper holds out an expertly wrapped box.

“Except this one.”

Nyck grabs it, drops to his knees, and tears it open. “Yes!”

I look over his shoulder and my eyes pop at what I see.

A remote-controlled robot?

I move back to Jasper and lean in. “That had to have cost ___”

His lips meet mine to shut me up. And it’s rather effective. I lose all care about what the gift was, only what’s happening at the end of my lips. The man has more than business acumen, he has some extra talents.

He pulls back, pecks my nose, and when we turn, Nyck and Harmony are both smiling at us.

Creepily.

“Hot chocolate anyone?” I say with a breathiness that I can’t hide.

Harmony cackles, “Sure.”

“Please!” Nyck says before tearing open the robot box.

“Yes, please,” Jasper adds. “I’ll help.”

“I bet you will,” Harmony says under her breath.

I mouth, “Stop it!” to her and she rolls her eyes defiantly.

In the kitchen, Jasper leans back against the counter, his long legs crossed and his blue sweater emphasizing his amber brown eyes.

“How are you doing... *really?*” he asks before grabbing a cookie off a plate next to him and taking a big bite.

I try not to sigh, but there’s no hiding from him that I’m in a little funk.

I still, coffee mug in my hand. “Putting up the tree is always a hard day. It reminds me of Parker. He loved the holidays and put up so many decorations. I felt like we were inside of a holiday store.” I try to smile at the memory, but some recollections just weigh me down.

He reaches out a hand to snatch my waist and move me in front of him, pulling me to his chest. He lets me be there, but

the milk simmers quickly on the stove, calling to me. I lean back not wanting to part from the comfort.

He doesn't let me go, and it catches my attention. "You don't have to forget him to find happiness again."

"I know. It's just... can I have *that* happiness again? It seemed perfect and I'm worried I only get one shot at how amazing that was."

He lowers his head and I pop to my toes to meet him. It's a longer distance than when I was seated next to him last night. The kiss is gentle to start, but soon, his tongue trickles a long line on the split of my lips, and I open to tangle our tongues like two ribbons winding into each other.

After we part, he presses his forehead to mine. "I think you can be happy Sonnet, and I think we can be happy together."

My heart leaps into my throat. It's a wonderful sentiment and I truly want to believe him.

"Even Santa might not be able to fulfill that wish, Jasper."

Our tender moment is broken when we hear commotion in the other room.

"Help!" Harmony calls from the living room and we both go to the doorway to find her tangled up in the tree lights.

"I'll get this," Jasper says with a shake of his head.

"And I'll get the hot chocolate."



THE FINAL TOUCHES HAVE BEEN MADE. THE HOUSE IS DAPPLED in crimson red and holly green with splashes of gold and silver. Classic and simple. Less than Parker would have done, but more than I thought I'd ever do again. It seems like a new chapter is starting.

Nyck and Jasper put the robot together and then spent hours torturing Harmony with it. Apparently, it can mimic someone's voice using AI. Ultra-creepy but mostly amusing.

Eventually Harmony invited Nyck to watch a movie in the den and Jasper and I stand in front of the decorated ten-foot tree.

“It’s beautiful, Sonnet.”

“Thanks. I bought a new star for the top. Wanna do the honors?”

His hand slips behind my neck and kneads the tired muscles. “It’s your home. I’ll be back up.”

Parker was a doer and I loved that, but I also like this. But Jasper knows that I can do it myself and encourages it. He’s there for me if I need him.

I start unwinding the cord from the gold star. “What’s your favorite Christmas movie?” I ask.

“Okay, so some say this isn’t a Christmas movie, but—”

“No.” I shake my head.

“Yes, *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie. I stand by that.”

“The theme is killing bad guys. How does that scream holiday to you?”

He laughs. “Touché, but it’s set at Christmas, it’s a holiday party that John McClane is attending. There is a Christmas tree in the Nakatomi Plaza is lit up.”

“Just because there’s a tree doesn’t make it a holiday movie.”

“How about you?”

“It’s a tie.”

“You never said we could have two.”

I giggle as I climb the ladder. “*White Christmas*, old school, and *Elf*, new school.” I look down from the top and his arms hold the ladder steady, and I catch him taking a quick glance at my assets. Never been thin, but I’ve lost a little weight in the last couple years and it’s given me some wicked curves. Grief does things to a person.

“Good choices.”

“To me, a holiday movie has to have snow, maybe a cheesy snowball fight, and I know it’s idyllic, but why shouldn’t things be perfect at Christmas.”

He sighs. “They should be.”

I plug the star into top of the white lights string and the shape lights up. I reach to the tippy top placing the topper there. The gold sprays a burst of light into the room, temporarily blinding me. I lean back to feel Jasper’s hand on my waist, protecting me. Keeping me safe.

My eyes water and the moment feels like a new path. I step down and my sock slips on the rung.

“Jasper!” I call out and before I know it, I’m cradled in his arms.

“I’ve got you.”

Time is irrelevant. At this moment, I could stay here forever.

“I want you, Sonnet.” It’s honest and my heart clips faster in my chest.

“I want you, too.”

“Come to my place tonight?” he doesn’t demand, and I need that.

I need him.

“I got Nyck, Sonnet. Have fun,” comes from the hallway in my sister’s voice.

Jasper sets me to my feet and after a quick goodbye to Nyck, we walk out hand in hand.

I’m ready to jingle Santa’s bells.

CHAPTER 6



JASPER

BEFORE I PUT THE CAR INTO GEAR, I TAKE A DEEP BREATH. There's no denying that I'm nervous. But why?

"You okay?" she asks as if I'm giving the signal that something's wrong.

I stop wringing the steering wheel and instead wring the back of my neck. "I... I just want this to be perfect. You deserve perfect. You *had* perfect. What if I'm not—"

She turns my face to her. "*Nothing* is perfect, Jasper. Maybe I thought what I had was perfect, but it disappeared and that's the way it is. Let's go for delightfully surprised and maybe a type of perfect that's perfect for us will happen?"

Her hands dig into my hair, pulling the strands just enough to send a zing to my cock.

"I like surprises," I say against her lips.

Her lips hit mine and I'm not sure where she begins and where I end now. It's hard to imagine we aren't one complete being now.

Her tongue tickles my lips and I open. The way she kisses is like she's giving me part of herself and yet asking me for a part of myself. She's not demanding, but she is urgently telling me what she wants and if we don't get to my place I'm afraid that I'll have an accident fit for a teenager. I open an eye and see Harmony staring out the front window at us with a wide smile.

Her hand sneaks across my thigh and cups my growing cock. She sucks in a breath. “Wow. Now that’s a big surprise.”

I laugh.

“I love your laugh,” she says.

And I think I love you.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER WE’RE INSIDE MY APARTMENT AND her eyes can’t stop darting in every new room.

“I think I forgot that you are rich.”

I don’t hate that it’s not the first thing she thinks about me.

“There’s good and bad to having money,” I reply, hanging up our coats.

“All I can think of is the good.”

“The bad ones are few, thankfully, but they leave a lasting impression.”

I grab a decanter of bourbon and hold it up. I need to take the edge off. And the edge is sharp when the flood of memories of past relationships gone wrong trickles into the present. Sonnet seems different. But some of the others did, too.

I try to tell myself to trust my gut. It’s never failed me in building a multi-million-dollar business, why would it fail me now?

She nods to accept the offer. “I don’t think condo living would be for me.”

“And honestly, it’s not really me either. I bought this to be close to work, but now that I’m more hands off, I’ve been thinking about getting a house. Something in the burbs.”

She smiles, that brilliant wide and white highlighted by her luscious pink lips. “Sounds like a good plan.”

I look back after I pour two fingers for each of us. “Your house is pretty perfect for three people, right?”

“It is. I’ve been considering getting something a little bigger and a little farther out from Denver.”

“Like a cabin in the mountains?”

“Just on the edge.” She grabs the tumbler from my hand and when our fingers cross, a quick electric zip rockets through my hand and into my chest.

“I bet Nyck would love that.”

“I think the house reminds him of his father and I wonder if that’s a good or bad thing.”

“Two sides to every coin, right?”

She stares out the large glass windows in the living room. “Exactly. What seems perfect or at least like it’ll work out, sometimes doesn’t.” She takes a quick sip and licks a small drip from her bottom lip. “Delicious. But I want you to know that I don’t have any false illusions that tonight may be only physical.”

I stop with the glass halfway to my mouth. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, you... you’re awesome, but I’m sure you could have anyone you want.”

I slip in behind her. “Sonnet, *you* are who I want.”

She turns to look up at me. “But things happen, Jasper. We can’t predict the future.”

“True. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t live for today.”

“I want to feel whole again.”

I lift the glass from her hand after she takes a longer sip. “Let’s see if I can help you with that.”

Setting our glasses on the glass top table to our left, I turn back around and move her blonde curls behind her. Dropping my lips to her neck, I slowly tease my way up and down,

listening for reactions. Her escalating moans and quick breaths tell me that I'm on the right path.

My lips knead farther down, tickling over her collarbone. Her back arches as my hand cups her full breast. Her pert nipple pokes through her sweater, tight and taut. I just barely skim the tiny peak.

And again.

And again.

Each time she moans louder, the high ceilings echo her pleasure back to me. It's intoxicating to be surrounded by the sounds of her. She's a holiday medley of ecstasy. The sensations that course through me tell me that there's not a part of me that wants to stop what's happening.

"You're sure, Sonnet?" I ask, only wanting that finality of permission to ravish her body.

"Don't stop." She holds my head in her hands. "For the love of Santa, don't stop."

I chuckle, but in the next second, I scoop her into my arms.

The bed is the only place for us now.

My hard body cradles her as I lower her, leaning down to slowly descend to her lips. When we kiss it's like everything is right in the world. It's natural and there's no clumsiness like with other women, just perfect.

Her hand reaches between my legs and she cups my cock through my jeans.

"Sonnet, you keep doing that and I might just become a teenager with no willpower."

She smiles. "I'm sure we could get him back up."

Her hands work my belt quickly and she shoves them down my legs. I start to roll to my side, and she stops me.

"No, I have an idea." She shimmies down my body until she's under me while I'm doing a push up.

Her mouth opens and she engulfs my cock, her hands pulling my body down to her. In seconds we have a pounding rhythm. The woman's a complete sex kitten, take charge, grateful and ready to bless me with a mind-blowing orgasm.

Which is quickly... fuck... shit...

My body quakes fast and hard. I pump twice more and she swallows every bit of my seed.

“Jesus, woman...” I roll to my side and she sits up, wiping the sides of her mouth.

“God, that felt amazing. Was it good for you?” she asks with a chuckle, already knowing the answer.

I love her enthusiasm and honesty. It's refreshing. “Now, it's your turn.”

I pounce on her and lift her shirt, my lips cultivating a path to what can only be heaven. She wastes no time shimmying from her pants and lifting her shirt and the tank underneath revealing a beautiful body. Curves, peaks, valleys, and softness.

I lift a leg and crawl under, coming face to face with the prettiest pink pussy I've ever seen. She's wet. Ready for my dick, but I want to hear her explode before we get to the main event.

I stroke myself once, twice, making sure that he's on the job. And he doesn't disappoint. I'm harder than granite, still.

I pull my shirt over my head. “Sonnet, you make me ravenous to take you.”

She bites her lip, but only grabs my head and shoves me toward where she wants me. There's nothing like a woman who takes charge. My cock weeps with excitement.

You'll get your chance soon enough.



SONNET

His cock. Damn. I could barely get my mouth around it. I'm dying to have it inside of me, but first, I want to be on the edge, ready to fall over and find that bliss I've been missing for four years now.

Practically a virgin again.

I swore off casual encounters, knowing it wouldn't mean anything and I need it to mean something. I want it to mean everything. And this does.

His tongue tickles my clit, dancing like a feather against the tiny bud. I just allow the sensations to float through me. It's sweet, sweet torture.

Teasing.

Pleasing.

Deliciously throbbing.

And when his mouth moves down, I have no power to say anything. I'm taken away to a place where it's only pleasure and the past doesn't exist only him and I. The way he licks and suckles, while his hands hold my hips, allowing me to rock against his lathing tongue.

He takes long swipes and then dives in deep, before returning to that now ultra-sensitive bundle of nerves to suck hard. And in the blink of an eye, I explode into a thousand shards of pieces. Colors I've never seen before shoot behind my closed eyelids. I try to call out his name, but I can only shout "Fuck!" The pulses continue to wrack my body for what seems like minutes, even if it was only seconds.

"Jasper!" I finally get his name out.

"I'm here, baby."

"I need you inside of me, please." I can't help but beg. It's like my body craves him. Needs to be his.

He reaches to the end table, and I stop his hand. "I'm covered, if you're clean?"

"I'm clean. You're sure?"

I hold his face in my hands. “I promise, I’m covered. I want to feel you.”

He moves over me and when he seats between my legs and I get that first rock of his cock along my center, I’m panting, nodding for him to just drive in deep.

“Please, honey. Please.”

He slowly, inch by inch seats himself inside of my body, connecting us into one entity. “Fuck, damn, so hot.”

His thrusts are gentle and I’m only craving more friction. I start demanding a pace, almost hungry for his cock. Hungry for him.

“Faster,” I moan. “Deeper.”

He listens to me, bringing a raw pace that builds the embers inside of me into an inferno and on the next plunge, I’m sent into the stars like a firework bursting to life.

I scream his name and my back arches my body into his.

His eyes darken as he plants deep and releases what I can only imagine in the future will create something special.

Our bodies calm and we stare into each other’s eyes. Just taking in the moment.

“I never thought I’d love again. But I’m happy to be wrong. Jasper, I love you.”

He drops his lips to mine. “I love you, too.”

My confession is a wish coming true. And Santa knows how to fulfill wishes.

Damn does he know...

CHAPTER 7



SONNET

THE CEILING OF HIS BEDROOM IS PAINTED A CHARCOAL BLACK and one might think it's too much, too over the top, too masculine, and possibly too dark, but this morning, every color has a place in my life and I'm seeing brilliant hues, even if they're dark.

During the night, I rolled over to find Jasper's gaze on me, worshipping me, and it was on again. The connection was stronger than we could argue with. It was a fission of our bodies and souls. My body was helpless to the pull. And when we crashed into each other, the beauty stole my breath and made me believe that perfection actually exists many times over.

I wander around the apartment. It doesn't feel like I'm snooping, it's more that I'm learning about him. There's a picture of him and I'm guessing his mother. She's looking up at him with such reverence. I know that feeling. It's easy to appreciate Jasper Walsh for lots of things.

I stop when I pass a picture of a young man in a baseball uniform. *Rockies?* He played professional baseball? I'll have to ask him about that when he wakes up.

I yawn. I need a little wake-up juice. Coffee to most, but we doctors have another name for it... Dr.'s Little Helper. It's our version of an elf.

I make my way to the kitchen. Everything is slick and my reflection bounces back at me. I'm wearing a button-down shirt I found hanging on the back of the door in the bathroom.

No panties. Cheeks hanging out to meet the Denver sunshine. And on my face is the world's record for giant smiles. I'm truly and incandescently happy.

I find all the necessary needs to make that liquid sunshine and in ten minutes I'm sipping from a hot mug at the kitchen table staring out the floor to ceiling windows. The city is just starting to wake up and I'm finding myself doing the same.

I'm seeing things clearly. Parker wasn't perfect. I wasn't—and I'm still not— perfect. But together we did what we could to make it feel perfect for each other. And I'm not sure that's what I need now. But I do know that this handsome Santa has brought joy and hope back into my life. Sometimes we need to be rescued from ourselves, to trust someone else, to make room for a future we couldn't even imagine.

Bringing my gaze back from the sun lighting up the mountain tops in the distance, I lift my mug, but a familiar name catches my eye.

Dr. Sonnet Michaels.

I move it a little from under the short pile of newspapers and magazines.

My birthdate.

My place of employment.

Tick. Tick. My heart beats faster.

My bank account balances.

My debt list.

My work history.

The death of my husband.

Tick. Tick. Tick. My heart thuds quickly against my chest cavity.

My son's name and date of birth.

My sister's past boyfriends?!

She dated Tomas Richmond? I dated Tomas Richmond!

Wait, wait...

What the hell is this?

I look at the second page and there's a bill for a private investigator.

My heart crashes to my stomach.

Why would Jasper need to find out so much about me? And did he do it before he did the Santa visit? Does he prey on lonely widows?

My head starts to spin, and my thoughts roll out of control.

Everything... my whole life in two pages.

Is he a stalker? A past patient gone unhinged? That happens.

No, it can't be. I saw the awards in the hallway for his philanthropy. He's not a bad guy, but why the need to find out if I'm a bad person?

He's Jasper Walsh. He's earned every *40 Under 40* awards out there—most eligible, most successful, most charming, most desirable. I know this not from hiring someone, but from reading the paper.

My life doesn't appear in the paper. Well, parts have. Parker's death was front page news.

“Man Dies of Aneurysm While Serving the Homeless,” the title of the paper etched indelibly in my mind.

There were no signs, like usually happens. The aneurysm was instant and heartbreaking. I still remember my friend telling me that Parker was being brought in by ambulance. I thought maybe he fell. Maybe a car accident and was bruised up, just a precaution, but when the ambulance arrived without sirens, I knew.

There was no hurry to get into the ER because he was already gone. They were just giving me time to say goodbye before taking him to the county coroner's office.

I hear feet padding down the hallway wood floor. Jasper comes out in his boxers, his body is amazing for a nearing fifty

man, and he stops when he sees me in his shirt. I can see the wheels spinning, but when he sees my face, he stills.

“What’s wrong?”

I hold up the report. “What’s this?”

He wipes the sleep from his eyes.

My hand shakes as I hold the papers out to him. He takes them and his eyes close as soon as he reads the title.

“What is that, Jasper?”

He sighs and sets it on the table. “Sonnet, most women want me for one thing. I had to make sure that—”

“That I wouldn’t... steal from you?”

He huffs slowly. “Kinda... wait, no!”

I’m on my feet and now he can see my assets hanging out as I near him.

He continues, “I need to know that you wouldn’t use me. Wait, that’s not right, either.”

“Then what is it? Did I need to look good enough on paper to date you? That I was acceptable based on my bank account. Well, here’s news that wasn’t in there. About three-fourths of that is Parker’s life insurance and it’s slated to go to Nyck for college and his future, so what do you think now? Am I good enough?”

His face is pale, the normal tinge of tan gone.

“I’ve had several women use me for my money. I had to protect my interests.”

“That’s not me, Jasper. And now, I’m not sure I’m interested in being with someone who can’t trust me. You know, I decided not to protect my heart and I thought you were the real thing. I dropped my guard, but now it all feels fake. Fake Santa and... fake love.”

A tear tracks down my face, cold and lonely.

I start off for the bedroom.

“Wait, please, Sonnet.” He starts after me, but I spin to him and yell back in his face, “Don’t follow me!”

And he doesn’t.



I WALK INTO THE HOUSE AND HARMONY IS PUTTING A FEW gifts under the tree.

She stands and her head tips. “You look...”

“Don’t,” I say firmly.

Her brows peak like fireworks. “Uh-oh. What happened?”

“He’s not who I thought it he was.”

She crosses her arms and lowers her eyebrows slowly. “Seemed pretty straight forward to me.”

“He had a private investigator look into me... into you... into all of us!” I shout whisper at her, hoping not to bring Nyck into this.

Her mouth drops open. “Who is he?”

“Jasper Walsh.”

The realization hits her. He’s never in the papers for more than a bulb flash moment. “The billionaire?”

“One and the same.”

“Wow.” There seem to be weird wheels turning in her head. “Sonnet, you know, he has a lot to protect. He was probably just being cautious.”

“Whose side are you on?”

Her normal sunny disposition sours into a cloudy face. “I’m here for you, but I want you to think about this.”

“Harmony, I want someone who trusts me.”

“Maybe he does now, but just couldn’t to start. I can imagine that—”

“Yeah, yeah, he said the same thing, many women have used him. Are you sure you’re just not looking for reasons to run away? Maybe you’re—”

“Where’s Jasper?” Nyck comes out rubbing his eyes.

My stomach clenches. “He had to go see his family.”

My son’s face falls. “Can we make pancakes?”

I force a smile. “Of course. Sounds great. Can you go get the mix out?”

“Sure!”

He runs to the kitchen, and I turn to Harmony.

“My life is fine without him.”

She bites her lip. “You know that I support you unconditionally, right?”

That’s what I want to hear. I open my mouth to offer my gratitude, but she holds up a hand.

“But this time... I want you to consider that maybe you’re scared, that you’re facing something that you’re not sure of. You had love and it ended sadly, but that doesn’t mean you have to be sad forever, Sonnet. It’s okay to be scared, but don’t let it cloud what might be another chance at happiness.”

“Mom!” Nyck calls out. “It’s ready.”

“I’m being called.” I walk backwards and my brain tries to process what she said.

Sure, I’m scared. Who wouldn’t be? But am I running from what could be amazing or am I protecting myself, just like Jasper felt the need to?

“Right. Okay. I’m going to run out to do some shopping. I’ll be back before you head into work at two.”

“You know I heard you.”

“I know.” She mumbles as she leaves the room, “Maybe just once you could *listen* to me.”

I still. She’s sacrificed so much for us. I’ve relied on her so much. Maybe it’s time to stand on my own two feet.

Maybe it's time to rescue myself.

CHAPTER 8



JASPER

WHAT A SHITSHOW! I CAN ONLY BE MAD AT MYSELF. I'M NOT mad that she found it. I am the one who ordered it, I only have myself to hold responsible for this.

It's Christmas Eve, but I decide to head into the office. No one will be there and it's where I do my best thinking.

I walk off the elevator and there's a light on in a corner. I walk to the doorway.

"What are you doing here?"

Kieler lifts a wrapped box and shakes it at me. "Forgot a couple gifts that were delivered here to the office. Why are *you* here, boss man?"

"Just wanted to wrap up a few—"

"Gifts?"

"Projects."

"Jasper..." he sighs my name and it's one of the only times he's ever called me by my first name. I take notice. "What's going on, really?"

Normally I'd brush it off, especially with the office player who is in front of me. But this time, the situation's different. I'm different. What I'm experiencing isn't something I can't fully understand. No books, no college degrees, no intuition has prepared me for this.

"I did something I can't take back, and I hurt someone. Someone who I... I..." The word is right there, but it's foreign

to me.

“You love?”

I nod.

“How bad are we talking?” he asks and I can see that he’s truly listening.

Leaning against the doorframe, I tell him what happened. The simple, and yet complicated, details. And Kieler says nothing.

I wait.

And wait some more.

“That’s pretty bad. I can understand your side, but can you see hers?” he says.

I’d put a lot of thought into it. “Yeah. She’s questioning everything related to— us. She’s hurting, still, and a part of her always will. But I want to soothe the hurt. I want to take the pains away and make her feel the hope that I feel when I’m with her. I think that I was meant to do that Santa Sighting. I wasn’t originally supposed to, but the first Santa couldn’t. I wonder if Parker had something to do with it. Sonnet’s looking for reasons to run, she’s been through so much.”

“If you love her, then you need to let her know it and show her she can trust you, that you understand her and want to be there for her now and always.”

I wonder if I’m dreaming. The office playboy is giving sound advice. This is too weird.

“Who are you?” I ask with a little sarcasm.

He leans back against the front of his desk. “Just because I haven’t found someone, doesn’t mean I don’t want to. I kinda envy you for finding love.”

Now I absolutely know the world has gone completely mad.

But I can’t help myself. I need to hear more.

“But how do I show her that she can trust me. That I want to be the one who is there for her?”

He shrugs and lifts the packages off his desk. “Hey, I’m not the idea man, boss. That’s on you. But if I had to guess, that Santa suit you have on the closet door in your office might be a start of how you can apologize. Good luck and merry Christmas, boss.”

Santa Claus is coming to town.

CHAPTER 9



SONNET

“MOM! MOM! MOM! SANTA CAME!”

Christmas morning, I walk into the house and Nyck attacks me at the garage door!

“Let me change out of my scrubs and I’ll be right there.”

I’ve worked twelve hours straight, but this energizes me better than any caffeine ever could.

His green eyes remind me less of Parker’s today and more of someone else’s.

Nyck rubs his eyes. “Where’s Jasper?”

I don’t know why, but I look to Harmony.

She wraps her arm around his shoulders. “He went to see his family.”

“Oh. I thought... never mind.” His eyes fall on the stack of gifts. “Can we open his gifts?”

“Sure.

Nyck hands them out. Three for him, two for me, and two for Harmony. Someone he didn’t even really know and yet... then I remember him asking a dozen questions about Nyck and Harmony while we were shopping.

Nyck opens his first gift, the smallest. It’s a ticket. His eyes widen. “Wow.”

“What is it?”

He holds it up and I see “Season Pass – Denver Rockies.” My eyes start to burn with the tingle of tears. “I told him that I want to learn to play baseball. Now I can watch with him!” He holds up a note that he has the other ticket.

Harmony bites her lip and I blow out a long breath. Jasper and Nyck could still be friends. But I’m not sure I can only do friendship.

Harmony opens her first, the biggest. She tears off the wrapping in two seconds. “Holy sh—”

“Harmony!”

Nyck stops staring at his ticket to look up.

She holds up the gift. A brand-new phone, top of the line. “Sorry, but this takes a lot off my monthly budget. And it’s prepaid for a whole year.”

Okay, holy shit is right.

Harmony does so much for us and I’m sure Jasper was only recognizing that. I need to appreciate what she does for me.

“I’m so thankful that you’re here, Harmony. I’m sorry that I don’t appreciate you more.”

She stills. “Thanks and you’re welcome. You know, I never really had a purpose in my life before coming here to help you. Not that I ever thought Parker would die, but being here, well, I think I know what I want to do with my life now.”

I wrap an arm around her and Nyck starts opening his second gift. “What’s that?”

“A nanny.”

“You are a nanny.”

She rolls her eyes. “I know but like for someone else. Nyck’s going to be old enough to be home by himself soon and... well, someone else might be here,” she whispers.

I pull her close. “I don’t know, but I can adjust my schedule this next year and be home more.”

“I love being here, but... I think it’s time for me to grow up, Sonnet.”

“You are grown up. Maybe I need to grow up a little, too.”

Nyck lifts the next gift, a baseball glove. “Jasper used to play for the Rockies. Isn’t that cool, Mom?”

That was that picture.

The last gift is a gaming console with paid online gaming, only the PG games, so he’s disappointed, but I appreciate Jasper thinking of that. And there’s a note that I can unlock others that Jasper will share a code with me.

“I like Jasper. I can’t wait to play some ball with him.” He punches the mitt into his palm and then shakes his hand like it hurt.

My heart sinks. Not only did I fall for Jasper Welsh, but so did Nyck. A man who could not only be a great partner for me, but a great role model for Nyck.

I lean over to Harmony. “I... I think I made a mistake.”

“Apologies are part of loving someone.” She really has matured lately. And her volume is less than Mars, more like kid in a candy store when she opens her second gift – a massage and facial. The man knows when someone needs a change in their life.

“Mom! Mom! Open yours from Jasper!” Nyck points to my gifts.

I lift the box over the envelope. I tear into it, getting into the spirit. It’s a beautiful necklace with a snowflake on it. A small note inside says, *Here’s to more sleigh rides in snowflakes.*

I shove the note in the box so they can’t see it and hold it up. “It’s a necklace.” I smile thinking of that night. He brought something out of me.

Hope.

“Beautiful,” Harmony offers and Nyck’s nose crinkles.

“Jewelry... girls, so weird.”

I laugh.

The next is an envelope. It's unassuming, just my name hand-written on the outside. Inside there's a Christmas card and out falls a piece of paper. I pick up and read out loud, hoping it's PG.

“One million dollars has been donated to the Downtown Denver Homeless Shelter in honor of Parker Michaels.”

The blood drains from my arms.

“Oh, Sonnet,” Harmony says her lips rolling in.

My eyes water and I fight to keep the tears from falling over the bottom edge.

“A million dollars?” Nyck's mouth drops open. “Is he Batman?”

Harmony and I laugh and Nyck goes back to examining the ball glove.

No, but he is a damn good Santa and I have one more wish...



I TEXTED JASPER AFTER WE'D OPENED ALL OUR PRESENTS.

Sonnet: I'd like to talk. If you have time tomorrow, I'm open.

But I never heard back.

And now I'm staring at the ceiling in my room, considering my options.

Drive to his place, although I'm not sure I know exactly where it is. I was kinda distracted looking at the gorgeous man who was taking me back to his apartment. I was giddy as a schoolgirl being courted by the quarterback.

I could just chalk it up to learning and move on.

That's not gonna happen.

I look to the nightstand and the envelop with that note is there.

A million dollars.

Some might think he was trying to buy my love, but I don't see it that way. I see a man trying to do the right thing without being asked. I see a man who took what he knew, from the private investigator dossier and what I told him on the carriage ride, to do something incredible for people who have less than he has. And I see a man who believes in helping others, like I do.

Nyck's in bed, clutching the ball glove and I know that moving on just doesn't feel right for either of us.

When Jasper and I made love, it felt like I was whole again, like someone or something had intervened in our lives to bring us together. And honestly, it was a new awakening for me. It opened my eyes that I don't have to be alone, and I can have love again. I don't know why I doubted him.

The doorbell rings and I pick up my phone, sitting straight at the same time. I just know who it is.

What the...

There's only a sea of red in the camera. Then a man's face—decked with a white as snow beard— comes into view. A face that I saw in my dreams last night.

And it wasn't Parker's.

“Ho-Ho-Ho, Sonnet.”

I can hear Harmony giggling in the living room.

I open my messaging and text her.

Sonnet: Stop listening to the doorbell.

Harmony: Fine. But I wonder what giant package Santa has for you tonight.

Sonnet: Harmony!

Harmony: Got it. I'll go to sleep.

I look into the camera. “Hi Santa.”

Jasper smiles. “Hi, Sonnet. I hear you’ve had a few rough years lately.”

“Got that right.”

Santa’s eyes soften. “I wanted to come here and let you know that there’s someone how wants to be there for your future. He wants you to have all the happiness and he’s ready to love you into forever.”

My heart pounds like a drum corps are inside of my chest. I swallow down the fears—he’ll leave, he’ll be taken away, that he doesn’t trust me.

“But can he truly trust me?”

Santa sighs. “He does. I know that you want me for me. I mean, that guy knows that you want him for him.” He winks and I feel the gesture in my gut, sizzling.

I still. “How can I know for sure?”

Santa nears the camera and whispers, “I’ve been burned before, but when I’m with you, I feel whole. I feel at ease. And I feel your honesty. I gave up on my baseball dream, but I’m not giving up on the dream of us. You make me feel like I’m the only one you want to be with.”

“Am I the one for you, Santa?” I start walking down the hallway.

“The *only* one.”

I run to the door and unlock it, throwing open the screen door and jumping into Santa’s —Jasper’s— arms.

I stare into those beautiful eyes before pulling down his fake beard. “You had me at ‘Ho-Ho-Ho’.”

He laughs and holds me close. “Merry Christmas, Sonnet.”

“The happiest Christmas to you, Jasper.”

“God bless us, everyone,” we hear through the doorbell.

“Go to bed, Harmony!” Jasper and I call out.

We all laugh and I look into Jasper’s eyes.

He smiles, lines crinkling at the edges of his eyes. “I think I know why I do the Santa Sightings now.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because my heart knew there would be someone out there who was waiting to fill Santa’s wish for happiness, too.”

“Santa, you rescued my heart from sadness, and I don’t ever want to miss you like that again.”

“Is that an invitation to move in?”

Time spins quickly. My head and heart scream the answer at me. It’s time to believe. “Yes!”

My lips crush to his, excitement feeding through me and into him.

When he breaks the kiss, I breathe like I’ve run a marathon. “I love you, Sonnet.”

“I love you, Santa.”

EPILOGUE



JASPER

SIX MONTHS LATER

“YOU SEE HOW THEY BACK EACH OTHER UP ON THE FIELD. That’s what baseball is about. It’s about teamwork that’s selfless.” I point to how the pitcher ran over to the first base to be backup for the first baseman chasing the pop fly.

“Do you think I could be a pitcher some day?” Nyck asks.

“You can be whatever you want to. With dedication and practice, you can be out there on the field.” I give him a wink and point with my head to the score board.

It’s time.

Sonnet’s hand rests on my thighs. I ended up getting a box suite when she said she wanted to come along. And now the other seats in the skybox are taken with resident from the shelter where we volunteer every week. They have a buffet of hotdogs, hamburgers, chips, and desserts all at their fingertips and are encouraged to go back for seconds.

Nyck heads inside the suite and my stomach plummets. We have a surprise for Sonnet all worked out. I asked him for permission to ask for Sonnet to become my wife this last week and he said that he wanted to be there. I figured the game was the perfect place. Now the seventh inning stretch, the music starts up and people start singing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.”

Nyck pulls Harmony outside with his ball glove tucked under his arm.

Harmony's voice rings out and I can see why she's recently been cast in the local performing arts rendition of *Phantom of the Opera*. She's got the pipes.

The song ends and the score board lights up. It's now or never.

It's only now.

“Sonnet?”

“Yeah, honey?” She lays her head on my shoulder. “What's up?”

I point to the scoreboard as Nyck comes over and opens his mitt in front of her.

Her eyes squint to the scoreboard.

Will you marry me, Sonnet?

When she comes back to Nyck, the diamond ring is shining in the Denver sun.

Six months I waited to ask her when I really wanted to do it on Valentine's Day, but I wanted to make sure she was doing okay. That our love was perfectly perfect.

And it is.

She doesn't hesitate. Her head starts bobbin up and down with her hand on her mouth. “Yes! Yes! I will marry you, Jasper.”

I lock her lips to mine and the crowd erupts. Apparently, they'd been casting to the big screens around the ballpark.

I slip the ring on her finger and peck her lips again. “So perfect.”

Nyck slips in front of us and Harmony comes from behind us for a group hug.

Sonnet thinks that I rescued her, but in the end, she rescued me, too. I was too protective of my heart. I was too stubborn to let anyone in.

But never again.

I've been rescued, too.

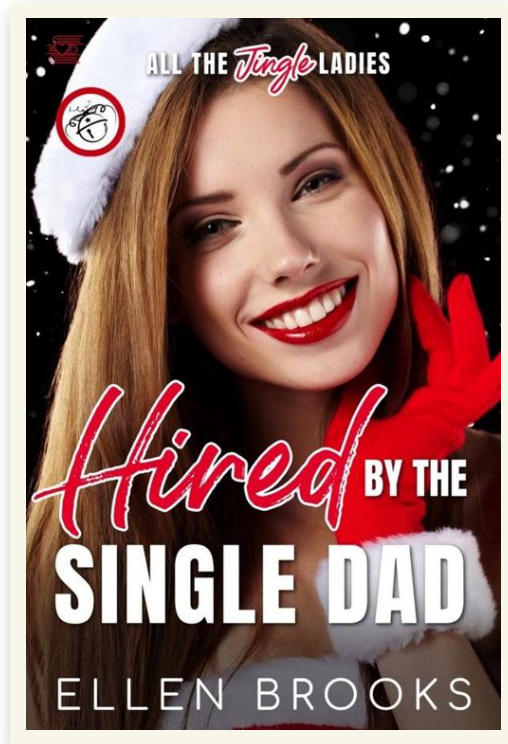
Want to read a sexy bonus epilogue? Click on the link below to find out what happened next to Sonnet and Jasper...

[Bonus Epilogue for Rescued by Santa](#)

Thank you for reading. We'd love to hear what you thought in a review! [Rescued by Santa](#).

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Click the picture to find out more about the next in the All the Jingle Ladies series!



He's a widowed single dad who doesn't believe he'll ever fall in love again. She's resigned to making other people's weddings beautiful after being burned in the past. How could one Christmas Eve wedding possibly turn into forever for the bride's dad and the florist he hired?

Veronica

Opening a box from Tiffany's on Christmas morning was a dream come true. Until it turned out the earrings were meant as an apology. Which led to a nasty divorce.

Luckily I kept my business and, thanks to years of hard work, have become the premier floral designer in the city.

I'm finally going to take the holidays off when a last minute no-expense-spared wedding changes my plans.

The rich father-of-the-bride is a man in his prime who's easy on the eyes so I don't mind until he wants to be hands-on with the prep. And show me everything I'm missing.

But it's not like I'm going to fall for a client on Christmas Eve, right?

Garrett

I'm fortunate to have loved once, even if I lost her way too soon.

Which is why, now that my daughter's grown up and ready to say I do, I'm determined to celebrate her wedding, even in the middle of the holiday bustle.

She's encouraged me to find love again but I don't believe lightning can strike twice.

Until the florist breezes in and turns my world upside down.

Veronica is stunning, and an accomplished young professional. But she's also sworn off love.

I'm willing to put in the work to prove I'm all in, but can she move on from the past and embrace a future together?

If you enjoy safe reads with instalove perfection, strong men, spicy scenes, and a solid happily ever after with no cheating or cliffhangers, then this series fits your wish list.

Grab a mug of hot chocolate and settle into your favorite reading place to fall in love with *All the Jingle Ladies*.