

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

MERRY
CHRISTMAS

Resting Scrooge Face

A SHORT STORY



DEC 25

MEGHAN
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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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PROLOGUE

CALEB

Dear Christmas,

I despise you.

Harsh? Maybe.

But why must your snappy anthems and heartwarming magical stories about family and togetherness follow me around?

Why are there twinkling lights, shiny baubles, and joyous children everywhere I look?

Why must we spend hours standing in the frigid cold to watch one single tree be lit up by a town mayor? We all know what a tree looks like with lights on it at this point—there're over a dozen scattered along the white picket fences lining Main Street.

And most importantly, why must your devoted admirers—in their ugly Christmas sweaters with their fresh-from-the-oven, poorly decorated gingerbread men—follow me around town asking who I'll be kissing under the mistletoe this year?

The answer is no one.

NO ONE!

That ship sailed many years ago, when I messed up the one good thing in my life. So, if anyone is listening, if anyone wants to offer some temporary relief from this cheerful and uplifting merriment, also known as my own personal purgatory, it would be most appreciated.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

“Whatcha writing?” Arden asks as he steps into my hardware store.

My head snaps up to see the seventy-year-old mailman wearing a red-and-green-striped turtleneck under his bowling shirt.

Yeah, not even my closest of friends—despite the forty-year age difference—can stay away from the pressures of having a holly jolly time.

“Nothing,” I answer as I crumple up the letter and toss it in the trash. Why did I think writing out my disdain for the holiday season would be helpful? “Are you ready to go?”

He holds up his bowling bag and smiles. “Ready. But it seems as though you’re not. Where’s your bowling shirt?”

“In my truck. I’ll change when we get there.”

“It would look nicer if we showed up to bowling night already dressed. More intimidating.”

I heave a heavy sigh and place both my hands on my register counter. “Arden, I just suffered through two hours of helping curly-haired grandmas in festive yuletide vests asking me what Christmas lights I thought would look best wrapped around them for some sort of Christmas parade that’s going down at the senior living community this week. Excuse me if I just need a freaking second.”

“You know, ‘bah, humbug’ would have been less wordy.”

“Noted,” I answer. “Let me close out the register, and then I’ll drive your wrinkled ass over to Port Snow.”

As I pull my till and start to move it to the back office, he calls out, “This boorish antijoy attitude you’ve been wearing recently—it doesn’t have anything to do with Nola Bisley coming back into town, does it?”

I pause, my back muscles tensing as my grip on the till grows tight. Does my piss-poor attitude—including my insane letter to Christmas—have anything to do with the one that got away, the woman who just so happened to move back to our small, wintery town in the heart of Maine?

Absolutely, it does.

Chapter One

NOLA

Look at these chesty-men ornaments,” Grandma Louise says as she paws through the many decorations displayed in the Forever Christmas shop.

We drove into Port Snow this morning to visit the Lobster Landing, a beloved tourist shop in our corner of the world, for their sale on peppermint fudge. Being huge fans of their fudge, we had to be first in line—well, Grandma Louise had to be first in line. And thanks to her cane, which is decorated like an actual candy cane for the holiday season, she knocked people out of the way and just played the grandma card—basically giving her the right to defy society’s standards of “keeping her cane to herself” without receiving any sort of retaliation.

I glance over in Grandma Louise’s direction and catch her running her index finger over the well-carved six-pack gracing a glass man ornament, a novelty the Forever Christmas shop carries every year. And every year, Grandma Louise marvels at them.

“Are you going to finally break down and buy one?” I ask.

“Don’t be absurd.” She sets the ornament back down. “Thirty-two dollars is outrageous for an ornament. Plus, I’m the kind of woman whose decorations consist of class and opulence. There is no room for such heathen Christmas decor in my living room.”

“What about your bedroom?” I ask, nudging her with my shoulder.

She smirks, the pink of her bright lipstick stretching along her lips. “Now, that is another story.” Together, we laugh, and she hooks her arm through mine. “What a beautiful sound, that laugh of yours. I don’t think I’ve heard it since you moved back here.”

“Haven’t had much to laugh about,” I answer.

And that’s the truth. After Chris kicked me out of our quaint apartment on the Upper East Side when we realized our future goals were different—spoiler alert: I wanted a family; he didn’t—I had nowhere to go. Out of options, I came back to my hometown of Bright Harbor, Maine. With a population of roughly eight hundred cheerful busybodies, Bright Harbor neighbors Port Snow, one of the most famous towns in the Northeast. Being back has had its challenges. For one, I’m living in my gutted childhood home and helping my parents renovate it. Currently on vacation in the Florida Keys, they’ve handed over the reins to me since they’ve moved into a smaller cottage right off the coast. I know I shouldn’t complain—and as a freelance designer, I can work from anywhere—but now that I’m back in town, I’m having to dodge and dive questions from everyone asking why I’m back in Bright Harbor while ignoring the holiday cheer that seems to surround me with every corner I turn. Grandma Louise is the only one I can’t avoid, because she won’t let me. But the worst of all, and I mean the absolute worst, is being in a constant state of panic that I’ll run into Caleb Butler, the unofficial heartthrob of Bright Harbor and the boy who broke my heart.

Grandma Louise pats my hand as I guide her out of the store and toward Main Street. “We will get you back to normal in no time. If anything, the Christmas spirit should liven you up.”

“I don’t know, Grandma,” I say as we navigate a crowd of shoppers getting in their last-minute purchases before the big day. “Not sure there’s much of the holiday that will cheer me up, more like remind me that I was dumped by a pompous city boy—who I thought was going to propose to me on the twenty-fourth.”

“Now where did you get an idea like that?”

“You,” I say. Grandma Louise is a romantic. “You called me up earlier this month and told me you had a dream that I was going to forever be bonded with the love of my life on Christmas Eve.”

“Yes, and that is to be loosely interpreted. I didn’t name names.”

I roll my eyes. “Want to go into Snow Roast and grab some hot chocolate?”

“Would it be a trip to Port Snow without Ruth’s heavenly hot chocolate?”

“It would not,” I say as we set off toward the coffee shop, just a few doors down, each shop window on the way displaying its version of Christmas. A bookstore has even made a tree out of old pages with tangled lights around it from stump to tip.

These shops are just a small glimpse of the community’s cheerful spirit. Known for its picturesque small-town feel, Port Snow is decked out in twinkle lights and green garlands, with holiday music pumping through speakers that are placed up and down Main Street, giving the coziest feel. It’s the kind of ambiance that should warm the soul of every person who strolls down the streets.

Unfortunately for me, it’s doing nothing to thaw my ice-cold heart.

“Oh look, there’s Myrtle,” Grandma Louise says. “She has a new boyfriend, you know. He sews his own pants because it’s cheaper than buying them. Well, he split a seam the other day at the market while grabbing toilet paper from the bottom shelf. You could hear the rip from a mile away.” Grandma Louise lets go of my arm and waves over at Myrtle. “Yoo-hoo, Myrtle. How are Edwin’s pants?”

Poor Myrtle—and Edwin for that matter—having her business . . .

Oh.

Dear.

God!

Just past Myrtle and her larger-than-life updo, which involves candy canes poking out on all sides, is none other than the man I’ve been trying to avoid, the man who broke my

heart, the one and only Caleb Butler. He's currently in conversation with Arden, Bright Harbor's kindly old mailman, but the pair is approaching fast.

He can't see me. I'm not ready for any sort of uncomfortable interaction with him.

Without time to think, I spin away from Grandma Louise, loop my arm around a lamppost like Gene Kelly, do a swift one-eighty, and land behind a decorated trash can wrapped in a large red bow.

Crouched down and leaning against the hard surface, I bring my legs in close to my chest and take a few deep breaths as my mind reels with the chances of seeing him here.

And better yet, did he see me?

"What on earth are you doing, child?" Grandma Louise asks, peering over the trash can.

"Shhh, act like I'm not here."

"Why on earth would I do that?"

"Because *Caleb* is up ahead, and I don't want him to see me. Now just be cool, Grandma."

Understanding falls over her expression. "Ah, okay. The avoidance technique. Got it." Striking up a whistling tune of "Rockin' around the Christmas Tree," she stands next to the trash can and twirls her cane. "Good afternoon," I hear her say. "How are you doing? Beautiful day for shopping. Not many days until Christmas—I hope you're ready for Santa. Oh, hey there, Caleb." My back stiffens. *Please don't let him see me here, please, oh please.*

"Hello, Grandma Louise," he says, his deep voice draping over my shoulders like an old blanket, all warm and comfortable. "How are you?"

"Wonderful. Getting ready for Christmas. What about you?"

The chill of the cold sidewalk starts to seep past the fabric of my jeans as I shiver, hoping he doesn't see me.

“Just taking Arden to get some fudge. Griffin Knightly put some on hold for us over at the Lobster Landing.”

“What a nice boy,” Grandma Louise says. “We got some earlier.”

“We?” I hear Arden ask.

Oh, come on, Grandma!

“Uh, yes, we.” Her voice shakes ever so slightly. “*We*, as in me and my trusty cane. This girl loves a good jaunt around town.”

I press my hand to my forehead. This ship is sinking.

“Friends with your cane now, Louise?” Arden asks.

“Are you judging me?” she snaps. She may be small, old, wrinkly everywhere, but she is feisty.

“No, not at all. Would never think of doing such a thing.”

“That’s what I thought.” Grandma Louise raps her cane on the ground, putting an end to that conversation.

There’s a brief silence before Caleb says, “Ah, well, it was good seeing you.”

“You too, dear.”

“Arden, I’m just heading into this shop—I’ll catch you in a bit,” Caleb says.

Listening to the departure of boots, I shift around the trash can just in case Caleb decides to look back, and wait another minute before I determine the coast is clear. That’s when I stand and come face to face with Arden.

“Nola? I thought that was you behind the trash can.”

I swallow hard and try to act as casual as possible. “Oh, you, uh, you saw me there? I was just checking for, uh, for any sort of trash in the gutter. Got to look out for Mother Nature and she’ll look out for us, you know? Littering is for fools.”

“That it is.” Arden smiles broadly, bushy eyebrows raised.

“Did you like my save back there?” Grandma Louise says, her inability to remain cool completely vanished. “That boy is

walking away, thinking I'm having some sort of love affair with my cane." She lets out a wallop of a laugh before walking right by Arden and into Snow Roast.

Thanks a lot, Grandma.

When my eyes connect with Arden's, he gives me a knowing look as he rocks back on his heels. Great.

"So." I shift uncomfortably. "You're, uh . . . you're not going to tell him you saw me, are you?"

He smiles softly. "Although appealing, I think I need to honor your stealthy invisibility moves."

I let out a long sigh. "Thank you."

"But you know, it's bound to happen at some point. I hear that you're renovating your parents' old home. And word on the street is, Caleb owns a hardware store."

"Yeah, well, we'll cross that bridge when we need to. In the meantime, thank you for not saying anything about seeing me. I appreciate the invisibility." I offer him a wave. "It was good to see you, Arden, but I need to go help my grandma before she orders a hot chocolate for her cane."

"Hold on one second, missy. I was actually looking for you."

"Oh? Why?" I ask.

"When I finished my mail route, I was packing up for the day and found an envelope stuck in the cracks of my console. It's for you." From his back pocket, he pulls out a green envelope and hands it to me.

"Oh, thanks." I take a look at the envelope. My name is scrawled across the green paper, but there is no address or return label. "How did you know you were going to see me here?"

"Just a hunch." He winks. "And I heard you lost a bit of Christmas spirit . . . maybe this letter will help you."

"Do you know who it's from?" I ask, completely confused.

“I know everyone in our town, Nola.” He winks again and starts down Main Street toward the Lobster Landing. “Merry Christmas.” He offers a wave, leaving me perplexed but interested at the same time.

How odd.

Who could it be from?

“Merry Christmas, Arden,” I call out while heading into Snow Roast.

As I step inside, I find Grandma Louise in deep conversation with the shop’s owner, Ruth, who is standing behind the counter, her husband, Brig Knightly, taking orders next to her. Since she seems to be on her best behavior for once, I step to the side and open the envelope, curious about what the letter might say.

I pull out the crumpled paper, and I read it to myself.

Dear Christmas,

I despise you . . .

This is supposed to bring back the Christmas spirit? Not so sure how, but the letter does have my attention, and who knows, this could very well be someone to commiserate with.

When I finish reading the letter, I smile to myself, pleased to have found a kindred spirit in whoever this “Resting Scrooge Face” might be. The sentiment is real, because why do we get so excited about a Christmas tree lighting up when there are trees all around town decked out in twinkle lights? I feel seen. When I then glance up, I come face to face with Grandma Louise.

“What’s that?” she asks.

I quickly fold the letter and tuck it into my purse. Don’t need Grandma sniffing around. “Just a letter that Arden found for me, nothing to worry about.” I clear my throat. “Actually, would you mind if I run over to Wicks and Sticks for a second?”

“Not at all, dear. There is an open table by the fireplace, so I’m going to take a seat.”

“Okay, sounds good. Be right back.”

I step out onto Main Street again, where flurries have started to fall from the sky. Thankfully Wicks and Sticks is across the road, so I quickly make my way to the other side, grab the gold handle to the door, and open it up. A wave of scents hits me all at once as I take in the rows and rows of candles for sale. Although tempting, a new candle is not why I’m here. I head to the back, right where I know the owner keeps stationery sets. Because it’s Christmas and because it’s Port Snow, my non-Christmas options are limited to two. A watercolor-bird stationery set, or shiny golden paper, which would require me to write in black.

Gold isn’t so bad—better than a jolly Santa sucking on a candy cane—so I pick that up and head to the cashier.

Maybe I’m lonely. Maybe it’s the holidays, or maybe it’s the way that letter spoke to me, but Resting Scrooge Face caught my attention, and for some reason, I want to write back.

Now, if only I can get Arden to deliver the letter for me.

Chapter Two

CALEB

The door to the hardware store rings, and my eyes dart to the front, where Arden is walking toward me, decked out in his postal uniform.

“Hey, Arden,” I say as I turn back to sorting screws. Some kids came into the store earlier this morning and thought it would be funny to mess around with the “Scrooge.” Little do they know, I caught them on camera, reported them to their parents, and quickly turned their holly jolly Christmas into a stocking full of coal.

And guess what? I don’t feel bad one bit.

“Heard you busted the Salem Street Boys.” I see that news has spread.

“They messed up my screws, so yeah, I did.” I pluck a flange-head screw from the dome-head pile and put it in the appropriate bin.

“The audacity,” Arden sarcastically says as he plops a blank gold envelope on the counter beside the cash register.

My eyes go to it and then back up to him. “What’s that?”

“That, my friend, is a letter.”

“Yeah, I figured that, but from who?”

He blows on his knuckles and then rubs them against his shoulder. “Oh, just someone who happened to read your crumpled-up letter from the other day.”

“What crumpled-up . . .” My voice falls as I spin to look into the wastebasket. The empty wastebasket. “Where the hell is the letter I wrote?”

“Ah, you see, I thought it would be fun to deliver it to someone I knew was going through the same feelings as you. Misery loves company and all.”

“Jesus, Arden, that was private.” I grip my hair and blow out a large sigh of frustration. “That wasn’t for anyone.”

“Maybe not, but this person found it quite entertaining.” He taps the envelope. “You’ll thank me later.”

And just as quickly as he came in, he darts to the back of the store, toward the Christmas section.

Like . . . *Where do you find the nerve to read my trash?*

And where exactly is there someone in this small town who despises Christmas as much as I do? Let me give you a hint . . . nowhere.

Yet I’m intrigued.

Very unlike me.

Let’s chalk it up to hearing “Home for the Holidays” by Perry Como five times today on the town speakers while walking from my house to the hardware store. Just like Port Snow, Bright Harbor plays Christmas music on repeat. Like, right now, if I listen closely, I can hear it playing outside.

Yup, “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer”—how terrifyingly morbid, and yet it’s sung with such optimism.

Anyway, my eyes fall back to the letter, and because I’m sick of sorting screws, I pick it up and examine the gold envelope. Feels festive. I can’t imagine that someone who despises Christmas as much as I do would have gold stationery.

Let’s just see exactly who this person might be.

I flip open the flap, pull out the matching gold stationery, and read the letter.

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

This might come as a bit of a shock to you, being that we live in a town where Christmas never sleeps, but I’d like to admittedly piggyback on your sentiments toward the holiday.

Here are my reasons:

Eggnog. Why this is a liquid we consume, I can't quite be sure, but the fact that it's thrust upon us like water is incomprehensible.

Gift giving. Isn't this just a "Ring around the Rosie" of money? Especially now, as an adult. You give a gift card, you get a gift card back. Seems pointless—why don't we all just keep our money and call it a day.

Laughing children. This might make me sound like an utter troll, but the sound of children laughing while Christmas music plays in the background really makes me want to pull out the Snowball Slinger Two Thousand—prototype, made up in my head—and start pelting them, one by one.

Mistletoe. The only people who like to hang this are the meddling aunts of the world who think it's the world's greatest treasure to make two people awkwardly dance around the pressures of having to smash mouths in public.

And last but certainly not least, parties where people expect you to bring a plus-one. And if you don't, the dreaded question of why you're single. It's none of your freaking business, Robert, or Pam, or . . . Jerry.

Sheesh, had to get that off my chest. Thanks for listening.

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

I set the letter down and glance up, feeling the lightest of tugs on the corner of my mouth.

Am I . . . am I smiling?

No, that can't possibly be it. I don't smile, especially during the holiday season, when tacky garlands are worn like scarves. And especially not this season, when Nola could be around every corner.

But this letter hits me in my cold, dead soul and propels me to do the last thing I'd ever have considered doing when Arden first handed it to me . . . and that's write back.

From under the cashier counter, I pull out a notebook and then grab the pen that's tucked behind my ear. As I'm putting ink to paper, the floorboards from the back buckle under the heavy stomp of Arden, who is holding a blow-up reindeer while sporting a grin so wide, I think I can see every tooth in his mouth.

I point the pen at him. "Don't say a freaking word."

He holds his free hand up. "Not a peep. I'll just wait here while you finish up so I can deliver that for you."

"I hate that you're getting so much joy out of this."

"I don't. I'm actually loving it."

"I bet you are," I say and then focus on my response.

"Morning, Caleb," Denise says from over the bakery counter. "How are you?"

"Good," I answer, taking in the bustling Knickers Café. Filled with too many Christmas sweaters to count, cheerful jingles, and the smell of spiced apple cider, the café is booming on the one day a week I take off from the hardware store.

Of course.

"Uh, are there free seats upstairs?" I ask, hoping that it's quieter up there.

"Yeah, there should be. Do you want your usual?"

"Sure."

"I'll have it sent right up."

"Thanks." I offer her a wave and, newspaper in hand, head on up the creaky, steep stairwell to the second floor.

Vaulted ceilings painted white make the space seem larger than it is, and with two-person tables spread throughout, it

offers more seating while keeping the groups small. I spot a table next to one that's occupied by a bag.

Typical.

People think they can claim a table just by setting a personal item down. If I weren't worried about becoming the town curmudgeon—have to keep a healthy business—then I'd kick the bag to the ground and claim the table as mine just for the hell of it.

But to maintain a good name in town, I refrain from showing the leather bag my boot and take a seat right next to the table. Settling in, I unfold my newspaper and hold it up, blocking out the rest of the café.

Now if only I had earplugs to block out all the monotonous chatter as well as Bing Crosby telling us just what kind of Christmas he's wishing for.

"I told you, I didn't take any manuals from the manual drawer," I hear a feminine voice say as its owner takes a seat at the table next to mine. Ah, great, my neighbor has arrived. Just in time to annoy me. "Why would I do that? Do you really think I'm that petty?"

Feels petty to me.

"Well, I'm not," the voice responds, a touch louder, and for some reason, it feels . . . familiar. "Chris, just stop. If I wanted to mess with you, I would have dipped your ties in the toilet before I left and never told you." She pauses, and I swear . . . I swear I know that voice. "Well, I guess you'll never know if I did." I grip the newspaper a touch tighter as I feel myself wanting to peek over it. "I don't know, look it up on the internet and stop bothering me. Don't forget, you're the one who dumped me. You're the one who ended this relationship, not me."

And then it hits me.

That voice.

It's . . . *oh shit*.

“Goodbye, Chris.” The sound of her setting her phone on the table echoes in our shared space. “Sorry about that,” she says. Is she talking to me? I hope she’s not talking to me. “Not sure if you heard any of that over your newspaper. I hate people who forget about social etiquette in small spaces. I just got annoyed after the sixth phone call in a row, so I answered it, and oh my God, why am I talking to someone holding a newspaper up? Clearly you don’t want company. I’ll just shut up now.”

My palms sweat, my nerves kick up, and I’m so freaked out about what to do because sitting right next to me is none other than Nola Bisley. The girl who got away . . . after I broke her heart. The same girl who said she’d never talk to me again, not in a million years.

And yet here she is, talking to me.

Well, talking to my newspaper.

So, the question is, What do I do?

More like, How do I get out of here before she realizes who I am?

Before I can catch a glimpse of what she looks like now, because that will destroy me, I need a plan. Seeing those bright-blue eyes again, those heart-shaped lips, which always seem to be the perfect shade of pink. No, I can’t. I’m already in a bad mood. Seeing her will just make everything worse and remind me of the biggest mistake I ever made—telling Nola Bisley that I didn’t want to move with her to New York City and then breaking up with her.

At least I still have my trusty invisibility cloak—the newspaper. So, maybe if I shimmy out of this table at the right angle, while holding the paper up, I can remove myself from the situation undetected and go on my merry—

“Here you go, Caleb. Two eggs; a buttered bagel; three strips of bacon, extra crispy; and one black coffee. Let us know if you need anything else.” With that, the waitress’s footsteps retreat down the creaky stairs.

My fingers curl around the paper as my heart races—I've been revealed.

Should have seen that coming. As if a newspaper would have really protected me from coming face to face with my ex-girlfriend. That would have been too easy.

No, I'm just stuck.

I'm not sure if I should set the paper down, greet Nola with a smile, and dig into my food, or crumple the newspaper, toss it at her face to distract her, and disappear.

Unfortunately, neither option feels right. And it's not like the café is helping much either. It's almost as if everyone in this upper level has decided to stand still and close their mouths for once. I hear nothing but the roar of my own heart.

No chipmunks singing about wanting a Hula-Hoop.

No faint jingle bells jangling from ugly sweaters.

Not even the subtle scrape of a fresh balsam being dragged down the road, ready to be erected in a living room and adorned with homemade ornaments.

Nope, just me, the steam from my coffee, and the distinct gasp coming from the table next to me.

Looks like the jig is up.

Slowly, I lower the newspaper but keep my head turned down as I pick up my fork and push around the eggs on my plate. Maybe if I don't look at her, she won't see me.

"Caleb," I hear Nola say, her voice tight now, slightly embarrassed. Can't a guy catch a break? "I . . . I didn't know that was you."

"How could you? Not like you can see through paper, unless you developed the talent over the years," I answer. My tone is harsh, but it's not directed at her, more directed at the world for putting me in this situation.

She doesn't answer right away, but I feel her eyes boring into me, with such intensity that I finally look up and feel all the air squeeze from my lungs.

Hell, she's so beautiful. More beautiful than I remember. Her brown hair is short now, just kissing her shoulders and styled in cute, spunky curls. Her eyes are no longer framed in dark eyeliner, but just accentuated by mascara. Her face has thinned out, as well as her shoulders, but those lips, they're the same, and her penetrating eyes, yeah, they're piercing my soul, one blink at a time.

We sit like that, just staring at each other. She's probably noticing the crow's feet I've developed over the years, or maybe the scruff I now wear because I'm too lazy to shave every morning, or the fact that the scruff on my chin is dotted ever so slightly with gray.

I'm an older version of the boy she once loved. The boy who broke her heart and let her walk away.

An uncomfortable silence stretches between us, until I finally say, "What?" Because I honestly don't know what else to say.

I'm uncomfortable.

I'm unsure of how to handle this.

And I've already started this conversation wrong by acting more hostile than I should.

"What?" she responds. "That's what you're going to say to me? What?"

No, what I really want to say is how beautiful you are.

How I've missed staring into your eyes.

Or hearing your laugh.

"I don't know, Nola." I blow out a heavy breath as I grip the back of my neck. "I'm not really educated on the subject of what to say to an ex-girlfriend who you haven't seen in years."

"Neither am I, but I'd at least have the decency not to come off as antagonistic."

"Really? Because you're coming off antagonistic right now."

Dude, what the hell are you doing? Stop poking the bear.

I can't help it, though. I'm out of my element. Self-defense has kicked in.

"Only because you started it," she shoots back.

I let out a deep sigh. "I'm not about to get into a fight with you in the café where there are over a dozen sets of ears waiting to report on what they heard while drinking their coffee this morning. So, let's just eat our breakfast in peace and ignore each other."

There, that's better. Offering a truce. Seems productive.

"That must be easy for you—you've had plenty of practice," she says. Okay, so maybe no truce just yet. And yeah, I deserve her comment. I ignored her calls countless times after we broke up, but that was because I didn't want her coming back here. I didn't want her giving up her dreams of going to school in the city.

I don't say anything, because there is nothing to really say, so I slip my eggs on my bagel and lift it up, and just as I take a bite, Nola leans forward so her face comes into view again.

"And for the record," she says, slapping a hand on the table, "I'm not sure what you heard on that phone call, but I did not take Chris's—my ex-boyfriend's—stupid manual."

I finish taking my bite, chew a few times, and because I probably hold the world record for most stupid comments made in a short period of time, I say, "But did you slip his ties in the toilet?"

See the steam coming out of her ears? Yup, I've done it now.

She rears back an inch, her eyes blazing with fury. "That's between me and his ties. Best you stay out of it."

"I didn't even want to be near it in the first place."

Or maybe a more correct answer could have been, *I believe you. You don't seem vengeful enough to put ties in a toilet.* But I'm batting one thousand in the idiocy department, so why stop now?

“Aw, that feels familiar,” she says just as her food is delivered as well. French toast with a side of fruit. Classic Nola: some things never change. “You never wanted to be near me.”

I’m not surprised she’s throwing the past in my face. I didn’t handle our breakup well—I was like an immature pelican flapping his way around disaster and doing a terrible job at it.

Even though I’ve approached this whole situation like a floundering cod face, I’ve been struck with a moment of clarity. She’s really upset, and it’s all my fault. I should back down.

Back down NOW!

Tearing my gaze from her flushed and angry face, I dip my head down and focus on my breakfast. One nibble at a time.

Bite . . . chew . . . swallow.

Just focus on that process. Eat. Eat. Eat. And then get the hell out of here. I can take the bacon to go in a napkin.

And yet, despite my brilliant moment of clarity, something is niggling me in the back of my head.

You never wanted to be near me.

That was not true. Far from the truth, actually. I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with this woman. But she had dreams of going to New York City, of working in writing and interior design after graduating, and I wasn’t the man she needed for those dreams at the time.

So, for her to say I didn’t want to be near her is so wrong.

Very wrong . . .

And I can’t just sit here and let her believe that.

“If we’re stating things for the record,” I say, leaning in toward her table this time, “I wanted to be near you.”

“Ha!” she guffaws. “Says the man who thought it would be easier to break my heart than act like an adult and talk

things through.”

“I tried,” I snap back at her. Woop, there goes the self-control. “You shut down.”

“I shut down because you said you were going to die in this town. You weren’t moving anywhere.”

“I said that because I was too scared to think I could be anywhere but Bright Harbor.”

“So that’s why you lived in Boston for a year?” she asks.

Gasp Plot twist! How the hell did she know about *that*?

Boston was . . . well, it was my sad attempt at trying to do something more than take over my dad’s hardware store. It was me trying to prove myself, to become a real woodworker and learn from some of the best. And sure, I learned, but when it came down to it, even though I tried to match Nola’s aspirations, to become the kind of man she needed, I knew damned well I wasn’t programmed to be a big-city man. I was meant to stay here in Bright Harbor, to help people around town, and to care for my parents as they grow old.

“How do you know about Boston?”

She stands from her table and picks up her plate. “People talk in this town, even to girls who move all the way to New York, or did you forget that?”

“How could I forget the gossip line here? That’s how I found out you left without saying goodbye.”

“Why on earth would I say goodbye after you broke my heart?”

“Because you loved me,” I say.

“Yeah, well, that was a mistake, and we both know it.” She pushes her chair in with a resounding clunk and heads toward the stairs without another word.

Great job, Butler. Way to make your first interaction with Nola since you broke up a memorable one.

You moron.

Chapter Three

NOLA

I wanted to be near you,” I mutter as I rip at the old carpet in the den. “How dare he say that to me.”

Running into Caleb was everything I thought it would be—irritating, less than pleasant, and downright frustrating. First of all, could the man be any more attractive? You always hope for the people who break your heart to age horribly, but not Caleb Butler. Nooooo, he has to be like Napa’s finest wine. The man aged impeccably. Scruffy jaw, thin laugh lines near his eyes, tan skin, muscles . . . so many muscles . . .

But besides his physical appearance, it was his apathetic approach to our relationship that really got to me. High school sweethearts, we were each other’s firsts with plans to get married. He got me. I got him. No one in my life ever made me feel as safe, as loved, or as wanted as he did. But when I asked him to go to New York with me, he didn’t.

And that was the end of that. Like a Band-Aid, he ripped me right off and tossed me into the trash. There wasn’t another word from him, no letters, no visits. Nothing. I knew coming back here would mean seeing him again, but I didn’t think I was going to be this upset about it.

With hands gripping the edge of a carpet, I give it one giant tug and fall straight back on my butt, dust flying up into the already chalky air. I spit out a few clumps that land on my lips and use the back of my hand to brush away some wayward hair just as there is a knock on my front door, which is open despite the cold weather—I needed a breather from the dust.

“Delivery,” Arden calls out.

“Back here, behind the rose-colored monster also known as carpet.”

“Ah, there you are,” Arden says as he makes his way around the disaster of my current residence. “Looks like you’re elbows deep in renovations.”

“You could say that.” I lean back on my hands.

“Well, I don’t want to distract you too long—just have to personally deliver you this note.” He pulls out a green envelope and hands it to me, wiggling his brows. “You got a reply from your secret friend.”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling this person?” I ask while taking the letter. “Is it kind of weird they wrote back?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Arden replies. “Why would it be weird?”

“I don’t know. Feels strange writing to a person I’m unfamiliar with.”

“But that’s the fun in it,” Arden says. “You don’t know who it is, so you can be candid. And even though you might not want to admit it, isn’t it nice that during this time, when we depend on family and friends to celebrate traditions passed from generation to generation, that you have someone to lean on too?”

“Yeah, that does feel nice.” I shake the envelope at Arden. “Is this really you, feeling sorry for me? Writing me letters?”

“Why would I do that when I can just talk to you in person?” He grins and jingles the bell on the tip of his winter hat. “Plus, sorry to say but I am quite fond of Christmas and everything it entails. You know where to find me if you want to write back.” He takes off toward the front door, and I call goodbye before he disappears.

Maybe he’s right; maybe it’s nice not to feel so lonely after all.

Succumbing to this pen pal thing, I open the envelope and pull out the simple notebook paper.

Dear Ho Ho No,

*Great name. I feel it all the way down to my toes.
But I have to ask, have you always hated the*

holidays, or is this a recent development for you? It is for me. I used to love Christmastime, especially living in a place like Bright Harbor where the community really comes together to make it special.

But this year, it feels different. I can't seem to find the joy in it, most likely from an unexpected visitor in town—but I won't get into that. I will say this: your letter made me laugh, and I can jump on board with the hatred for eggnog. Mistletoe is the devil's weed. Laughing children—well, that doesn't bother me as much, maybe because I have nieces and nephews and they've made me deaf to their obstinate joy. I do support gift giving if it's to someone special in your life. But the parties . . .

The parties are what really drive me nuts. You're required to go, but all you're asked, over and over again, is why you're single during the holidays. Can you please tell me why people find it necessary to butt into your personal life?

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

Smiling, I bring the letter over to my childhood room—the only untouched part of the house—and pull my new stationery from my desk drawer, deciding to write back right away. I'm heading into town a little later; maybe I'll stumble into Arden, and he can make a special delivery for me.

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

You pose an interesting question. I think I might have an answer. You see, the world revolves around one thing . . . mating. It is our cosmic calling to be concerned with who's mating with who, when they're mating, and . . . well, how.

This tradition of invading one's privacy is transferred over into parties. When small talk about the weather and the salty sidewalks is no

longer a viable option, our fellow humans refer to what has been cosmically instilled in them. Has this person mated? I need to find out. If not, I need to find them someone to mate with. Perhaps I'm the person they should mate with . . . and the questions go on and on.

Make sense?

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Dear Ho Ho No,

I hate to agree with such a blatant claim as the universe revolving around one single thing—fornication. Then again, I am a man, and I'd be lying if I told you the sexual act of being with another human doesn't cross my mind from time to time. So, does that make me . . . one of them?

Sure, I have the kind of bitter exterior that would make any nibbler pucker with disfavor, but perhaps if I was peeled down to my core, I'd be just like the rest of them: clapping my hands when two people kiss under the mistletoe.

And you know our mutual hatred for mistletoe.

Frankly, I'm terrified. Please reassure me that everything is going to be okay.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face (currently biting nails as I await a response)

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

I would like to address two major points in your last letter.

One. No matter what exterior you wear, what armor you don, what shield you possess, you are not exempt from falling in line with the rest of the

*conformists. Like I said before, we are preconditioned to talk about mating, fornication . . . *wincen*s . . . coitus. That's in our blood, buried so deeply in our marrow that there's no point in even trying to be rid of it. But here is the difference between us and others: we might live with this condition that subconsciously makes us chatter about coupling, but we are aware, we are responsible, and we have taken a solemn oath to not engage.*

Two. You have stated you're a man, which dissolves an aspect of anonymity, and therefore, I need to even the playing field. Let the record show . . . I am a woman.

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Dear Ho Ho No,

Does that change things?

I'm a man.

You're a woman.

Will the mistletoe-ians track us down and force their mating small talk on us? I'm worried about the inevitable. It's a small town. People will wonder; people will yearn for the next ripe coupling to talk about.

I think in order to save ourselves, we need to do something drastic. Something that will straighten the spines of those hankering for some fresh meat on the dating market. I think you know what I'm about to say . . .

We need to friend zone each other, right here and now. Make it known, Resting Scrooge Face and Ho Ho No hereby proclaim a mutual friend zone that forbids them from ever running into each other under the mistletoe.

Please confirm your agreement with this new plan.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

What a genius idea. Nothing screams celibacy with another human more than putting them in the friend zone. I would like to officially agree to this plan.

But in order for it to be valid, for us to truly be “friends,” I think we need to expand our knowledge of each other. So, I propose we offer three fun facts that maybe no one else knows. This way, we form an even more immediate bond than we already have, and if we ever are presented with a chance to talk about our friendship in public, we will have thoughtful things to say.

I will go first (hopefully you’re cool with this).

I have recently discovered that I prefer crab over lobster. Being that we live in Maine, along the lobster belt, I understand the audacity of this statement, but crab settles better with me, and in sort of a psycho way, I like cracking the legs. Side note: I’m not a psycho. Cracking crab legs is probably the kookiest thing I do.

When I was ten, I decided to dye my hair using blue Kool-Aid. I didn’t know what I was doing, so I just dipped my head in a bowl of it but didn’t consider that the Kool-Aid would dye my skin too. I had to walk around with a blue ring across my forehead.

I’m not proud of this, but I once went to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter and got in a fight with a twelve-year-old over a wand. He tried

to zap me, so I zapped him back, tossed Butterbeer at his shoes, and bolted.

I think it's important to show our dark sides, and the wand incident is a dark moment in my life.

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Dear Ho Ho No,

Being a Harry Potter fan myself, I can understand the deep-seated passion you might have when it comes to wands. Now the Butterbeer spillage, that might have been a bit uncalled for, given how expensive it is, but I can't pass judgment.

As for me, I really put some thought into these, so I hope you learn a thing or two.

(1) I've never told anyone this, but every year since I was seven, I've picked a flower from my mom's garden, pressed it, preserved it, and labeled it with the year I collected it. I have a whole book dedicated to the flowers. When my mom turns sixty, I'm going to give it to her.

(2) I will fight someone to their death if they tell me bubble gum is a legitimately tasty artificial flavor. Nothing, and I mean nothing, tastes good in bubble gum flavor other than actual bubble gum.

(3) And finally, when I was a punk eleven-year-old, my friends dared me to tug on Santa's beard at the mall and expose him to all the children waiting in line to see him. So, I waited, and when it was my turn, I walked up to him and gave his beard a giant tug, only to find out it was real, and I basically body-slammed him to the ground by his beard. I have never sprinted so fast in my life. Guilt consumed me, to the point that I

turned myself in the next day, and I ended up shoveling “Santa’s” driveway for the rest of that winter.

Now it’s your turn not to judge me.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

You’ve collected flowers from your mom’s garden since you were seven?

Okay, that is probably the sweetest, cutest, most charming thing I’ve ever read, and if we weren’t firmly in the friend zone, I very well might swoon over something like that.

But don’t worry. There’s no swooning.

None whatsoever.

And to solidify there is no swooning, I think we need to tell each other a horrifying story. Something that is so embarrassing we’ve never told another soul. This sort of information will tamp down the swooning and officially put us in a firm friend zone.

Now, you need to go first, because I need to judge my story off the extremity of yours. So please delight me with your embarrassment.

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Dear Ho Ho No,

To be honest, I wrote the flower thing in the hopes that maybe . . . just maybe you would swoon.

*So, if anyone should be worried about not staying in the friend zone, it’s me. *Whispers* I think . . . I think I’m morphing into one of the*

mistletoe-ians, so this idea of throwing down something embarrassing, I think, is a smart move. Put some “ick” out there so there is no chance of us becoming like the rest of the people in this town—holly jolly, with a penchant to dabble in romance.

So, to tamp down any possible chance of swoon, I will tell you when I was ten, I went to my dad’s company party. My dad introduced me to his boss, and when I shook his hand, I said, “Dad, is this the son of a bitch you were telling me about?” I’ve never seen my dad’s face turn so red. I had to apologize with a card the next day saying that I didn’t know where I heard that phrase from, even though my dad said it in the car on the way to the party. Afterward, he brought me to get ice cream, and I was so confused about how to feel that I ended up throwing up ice cream and sprinkles on a little girl in line who was waiting at the counter. I’m still emotionally distraught as I think about it.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

Well . . . that didn’t really do the job, just made me feel sad for the little boy who thought he was asking a solid question. Although throwing up on an innocent little girl does have some horror appeal to it.

Therefore, I will tell you an equally embarrassing story.

I had this squishy ball that I loved playing with—I was about twelve, for reference—and I used to rub it along my dad’s hairy legs because it would make the hair stick up and I thought it was funny. So one day, my friend asked me if I wanted

to play, and I told her yeah and that I wanted to show her how I gave my dad a ball massage—not understanding exactly what I was saying. My more mature friend told me I was a freak and then told her parents, who called my mom and confronted her about my sick idea of getting their daughter to massage my dad’s balls.

The ball massage on the hairy legs ended after that.

So, where does that put me in the friend zone?

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Dear Ho Ho No,

*I’m sorry, I’m still cackling over here. Ball massage. *Wipes tears**

Honestly, I think you might be my favorite person. Would it be too presumptuous to ask you to give me a ball massage?

At this point, I don’t know if this is working because the ball-massage story made me like you even a touch more.

So tell me exactly how this is helping us.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

In all honesty, I can’t quite remember how this storytelling is helping.

Truth of the matter is, it’s just making me swoon even more. And it shouldn’t, right? Throwing up on innocent victims and offering ball massages to adult men should really be a turnoff, but I think it’s only added to the charm.

Have we been secretly drinking the “eggnog”? Is that what’s happening here?

*I’ll admit, I did see a couple holding hands this morning down by the post office, and I thought to myself . . . *gulp* that looks nice.*

***Winces** I know, I know. The holiday music is getting to me. The cheer in the air. The reminiscing.*

I mean, I ate a gingerbread cookie last night and I liked it. I think these letters are having a reverse effect. They’re making me feel all ooey gooey inside.

This might have been a bad idea . . . then again, maybe it was the best idea I’ve had in a long time.

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Dear Ho Ho No,

I hate to admit it, because I really think we had a good thing going at the beginning, with our pledges against falling for the romance and cheer of the holiday spirit, but I find myself slipping.

My toe tapped to “Run Run Rudolph” yesterday. I was horrified when I realized it.

And you might have eaten a gingerbread cookie, but I dipped a sugar cookie into hot chocolate last night and felt . . . all warm inside.

I also sniffed a pine tree and exhaled with a smile. This guy, Resting Scrooge Face, smiled at the smell of a pine tree.

I want to blame the environment, but I think these letters have pulled me out of the funk I’ve been feeling lately, and that’s all thanks to you.

We can deny it all we want, but I think the spirit of Christmas is sinking into our souls. And we can only blame ourselves.

If I could predict anything, it would be that there is more toe tapping, cookies, and hot chocolate in my future.

Sincerely,

Resting Scrooge Face

Chapter Four

CALEB

Are you . . . humming?” Arden asks as he catches me walking out of the café, coffee and cinnamon bun in hand.

“What? No,” I answer even though . . . yeah, I might have been humming. But rest assured, it wasn’t a holiday song. Although one more letter from Ho Ho No and I might be tempted to hum a verse of “Jingle Bells” under my breath.

It’s weird what a simple letter can do to a person. An interaction with another human who possesses the same feelings as you when you’re surrounded by nothing but the opposite. I don’t know who Ho Ho No is, but I will say this—she’s helped make me forget about my holiday angst, about my mistakes, and most certainly about my regrets.

“Uh-huh,” he says, falling into step beside me, “sounded like you were humming something festive.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I ask. “Me all cheerful, falling in line with the rest of the town, sparkling with holiday joy.”

“It would be entertaining.”

We make our way across the street to the hardware store, where I unlock the door, ready to open for the day.

“Do you have a letter for me, or are you just here to irritate me?”

“Irritate, of course.” He lets out a boisterous laugh as he follows me to the cashier counter.

“Lucky me.” I set down my drink and cinnamon bun and flip on the lights.

He snags a piece of my cinnamon bun off my paper plate and plops it in his mouth. “I’m just checking in on you to see

how you're faring . . . looking to see if your grumpy disposition has cleared out." He sniffs the air and smiles. "Seems like it has."

"Spare me the annoyance."

"Just seems so interesting that you gain yourself a pen pal and all of a sudden that scowl you've been wearing all month has finally disappeared."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I say just as the front door opens and Nola walks in.

My heart practically stops in my chest. Never in a million years would I think she'd come in here—she must be desperate for something.

"Hello, dear," Arden greets her as I stand frozen in place, unsure of how to act, especially after our sparring match at the café.

"Uh, hi," she says, her eyes floating to me and then back to Arden. Dressed in a pair of worn overalls and an unzipped winter jacket, her posture screams unsure with a hint of regret.

Hand on the counter, I keep my voice neutral as I ask, "Is there something I can help you find?"

She clears her throat. "I don't want to be here."

Arden chuckles. "Well, she tells it like it is, doesn't she?"

Sure does.

"I need some paint, and I don't have time to drive to Pottsmouth today, so here I am. Don't make a big deal of it. I just need to get my supplies and I'm out."

"Sure," I answer as I round the corner. "What kind of paint do you need?"

"White," she answers as she twists her hands together, Arden watching the entire interaction.

"Okay," I drawl out. "What kind of white paint—you realize there are multiple shades, right?"

Her brows draw down. “Yes, I realize that, but I assumed we would discuss shades when you brought me to the paint section, wherever that is.”

“Oh, this is entertaining,” Arden mutters as he picks off another piece of my cinnamon bun.

Ignoring him, I say, “Right over here.” She follows me to the paint section, on the other side of the counter, arms crossed, clearly wishing she was anywhere else but here. “So, what are you painting?”

“A room,” she answers, her attitude at boss level.

“What kind of room?” I ask.

“What does it matter?”

With a sigh, I turn toward her. “The finish matters. So, if it’s a bathroom or kitchen, where stains are bound to happen, I’d suggest something with a touch of gloss, since that’s easier to clean.”

“I don’t need suggestions—I know exactly what I want.”

“Oh really?” I ask, returning the snark. “Because when you walked in here, it seemed like you had no idea what you needed besides white paint.”

“Are you really going to argue with me over this? It’s paint.”

“You started it,” I say, clearly acting like a mature adult.

“Not making friends,” Arden says.

Nola taps her toe, looking like her patience is wearing thin. “Do you realize how hard it was for me to come here? Very hard, so please, just give me a gallon of white snow in eggshell so I can get out of here.”

“White snow?” I ask just as she slips a paint chip out of her pocket and holds it between us. I snatch it from her. “Could have started with that.”

“Could have shown me where the paint was so we avoided the earlier interaction.”

“Are you really this agreeable all the time? I remember you being less cranky.”

“Ooooh, bad move,” Arden says.

Her brows lift in surprise. “Yeah, well, I remember you being a touch more charming, but here we are.”

“He *was* more charming, wasn’t he?” Arden adds.

“Not helping,” I shoot back as I watch him shove another bite of my cinnamon bun in his mouth. I pick up a gallon of eggshell paint, scan the color, and then reach for my can opener, which is not in its normal spot on a hook near the scanner.

“What are you looking for?” she asks. “Your manners?”

I shoot her a seething glare.

“He hasn’t had manners for years,” Arden says. “Afraid he lost those a while ago.”

“Where is my paint can opener?” I shout, annoyed with Arden and irritated that I look like an idiot in front of Nola.

“Is that it?” Nola asks, pointing to the metal opener that’s resting on the shelf right in front of my face about an inch above its hook. She snorts.

Arden snorts and sips my coffee.

And I start to fume.

“It’s not funny,” I say as I start to pop off the lid.

“It’s sort of funny,” Nola says, now moving over to Arden.

“It’s very funny,” Arden says as he picks up the cinnamon bun and offers her a piece. And to my chagrin, she takes it.

“Glad I can be so amusing this morning.” I remove the lid and set it to the side as I adjust the paint color levels on the colorant machine to make the “white snow” shade Nola needs.

“Oh, before I forget,” Nola says as I lift the paint can. “I want to give you this.” From the corner of my eye, I catch a glint of gold sparkle under my store’s fluorescent lights. I turn

just in time to catch Arden slipping a very familiar gold envelope into his pocket.

What.

The.

Hell.

There is no way.

No freaking way that . . . that . . . no. It can't be true.

There's no way that Nola is Ho Ho—

“Caleb, the paint,” Arden calls out just as the can slips out of my hands and careens down to the ground in what feels like slow motion—right onto my foot. I buckle over in pain just as a spray of white paint flies up from the can, straight up my nose, all over my face, and into my hair—completely drenching me from head all the way down to what I assume is going to be a broken toe.

“Mother . . . *ffffff*,” I gasp, holding back my curse word as I dance around on one foot.

But thanks to the paint slathered all over the floor, hopping on one foot turns into me slipping and flying up in the air as if I stepped on a banana peel.

I land with a resounding *oof*.

“Oh my God,” Nola says.

“What on earth are you doing?” Arden asks, walking up to me.

“Are you okay?” Nola asks.

“Fine,” I grumble as I sit up and clutch my back. Yup, that's going to hurt for a long time, but not as much as my pride.

Because what a spectacle. Here I am, sitting on my butt in a giant puddle of spilled paint, covered in said spilled paint, looking like the most incompetent hardware-store owner ever. All in front of Nola.

But not just Nola—all in front of Ho Ho No.

Better yet, Ho Ho No-la.

How did I not see it? How did I not connect the dots?

“Do you, uh, do you need help?” Nola asks.

“No,” I snap as I try to stand, the nearly empty can still pouring onto the floor. I grip my forehead and let out a deep breath. “I just need a minute.”

Arden steps in. “Nola, dear, why don’t you finish up whatever you need to do in town, and I’ll deliver the paint in an hour.”

“Okay, yeah, that works. Thank you.” She pauses. I can feel her wanting to say something else, but instead, she takes off, the bell above the door ringing her departure.

Once she’s gone, I lie back down in the paint, press my hand to my stomach, and look up at Arden. “She’s the one I’ve been writing to.”

He smiles awkwardly. “Afraid so.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have written her back?” he asks.

“Probably not.”

“And why not, exactly? Is it because you want nothing to do with her? Or is it because you still very much love her, regret the way you treated her, and want nothing more than to be with her again?”

“I think you already know the answer to that,” I say while I attempt to get up, my body feeling like molasses from the thick paint coating me.

“Okay, so if you regret the way you treated her, why don’t you try to fix it?”

“Because you saw how we interacted.” I gesture toward the paint. “It’s a lost cause.”

“Well, for one, you didn’t take the conversation in a positive direction. There was a lot of hostility in your voice and your actions.”

“Because I’m frustrated,” I say as I stand.

“Frustrated with who, precisely?”

I push paint off my shirt and onto the floor. There is no saving this outfit. Straight to the trash it will go. Thankfully, I have a shower and spare clothes in the back of the shop.

“I asked you a question,” Arden pushes.

“I know . . . I know.” I heave a heavy sigh. “I’m frustrated with myself. The moment I heard she was back in town, I should have gone up to her, apologized, and tried to fix this tension between us. But I was scared and proud, and I didn’t think she’d even look in my direction, so I’ve just been stewing all month.”

“And look where that got you.” Arden gestures to my clothes. “I think it’s time you change up tactics, don’t you? Trust me when I say if you love her, you need to fight. I know this from experience. I once loved and lost but never fought. I regret it to this day. If you still love her and she’s in Bright Harbor for good, then I think it’s time you fix things.”

Loved and lost and never fought. That was me when we first broke up. And Arden is right: I did regret it. I regretted it every day. And now that she’s back, since we’ve been sharing these letters and I can put a face to the name, it just sends a laser-sharp realization straight to my heart that this is it. This is my second chance, and if I don’t do something now, I could lose her forever.

“You’re right,” I answer and then glance down at the paint. “First things first, though: clean up. While I do that, I need you to do something for me.”

“What?” he asks.

“Go across the street and order me a coffee and cinnamon bun.”

“There’s still a piece left.” Arden gestures to the nearly empty plate.

“Go.” I point toward the door while Arden grumbles under his breath. There’s no way I can work on an empty

stomach.

Dear Resting Scrooge Face,

Toe tapping, sugar cookies, hot chocolate . . . sniffing pine trees? What have you done with the pessimistic Christmas hater I met several letters ago?

Not that I'm blaming you, because I very much share the same sentiment.

These letters, well, they're what I look forward to. They put a smile on my face, and even though I enjoy seeing Arden deliver me a green envelope, I'm starting to think that maybe, I don't know . . . we meet?

***Winces** I know, that might be asking a lot, but I feel like we have a bond, and I don't know, maybe we don't have to be alone while we're secretly hating ourselves for enjoying the mouthwatering, sugary goodness of a fresh-baked Christmas cookie.*

What do you think? Am I being too brazen?

Be honest.

Sincerely,

Ho Ho No

Chapter Five

NOLA

You're smiling," Grandma Louise says as she walks into the kitchen.

"What? No, I'm not," I answer, not sure why I'm denying it.

Well, actually that's a lie. I know exactly why I'm denying it—I don't want to tell her the reason I'm smiling. She'll ask too many questions, but between you and me, I can't get the image of Caleb covered in paint out of my head.

How the paint splattered up his nose.

The way he slipped, legs flying in the air.

And his white-coated jaw as he clenched it.

Thankfully I believe the only thing he hurt was his pride—otherwise I wouldn't be smiling so much.

"I saw it, you were smiling." She pokes my cheek.

"I don't smile, Grandma. Remember, I'm the Christmas Curmudgeon." I wink and then move toward the living room, where I finish my paint prep. Hopefully Arden brings it soon.

"You haven't been very curmudgeon-y lately. You watched a part of *Meet Me in St. Louis* with me last night."

"Your point?" I ask.

"It's a Christmas movie."

"That's *not* a Christmas movie. There's a Christmas scene." My favorite part of the movie, but that's beside the point.

"You still watched it. I'm beginning to suspect these letters that you think you're so coy about hiding have actually put that nonsmile on your face."

She caught me writing a letter one night when she was visiting and asked what it was all about. Of course, she'd connect my happiness to the letters. She may be old, but she's still very sharp.

"I will not dignify that comment with a response," I reply just as there's a knock at the door. "Oh good, that's Arden with the paint."

"Ah, that's my cue to go take a nap upstairs in your bed." She smirks, knowing I would let her do anything at this point. "I fear if I stay down here, you'd put me to work."

Very accurate.

As she makes her way upstairs, I walk over to the entryway and open the front door. "Hey, Ar . . ." My voice falls as I am greeted by Caleb, paint-free and freshly showered, holding a bucket of paint. "Oh, you're not Arden."

"No, I'm not. It's reassuring to me that you can spot the difference." Was that a lighthearted joke? That seems odd after the two interactions we've had since I've been back.

"I thought he was delivering the paint."

"He had some other things to do, so you get me."

"Oh, well, thanks for delivering it. How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about it," he says as he nods toward the inside of the house. "Let me set this down for you."

Don't worry about it?

Wanting to set the paint down for me?

What happened to the man who was huffing and puffing about his paint can opener?

"Not necessary, I can handle it," I say, feeling rather unsteady.

"Nope, I got it," he says, walking past me and right into my living room.

Uh, what's going on?

I shut the door and spin around to find Caleb, one knee on the ground, other leg propped up as he opens the can of paint and then plops a stir stick in it to give it a good blend.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Helping you.”

Okay, now I *know* something weird is happening.

“Don’t you have a hardware store to take care of?”

“Jimmy came in when I told him I had a paint accident. He’s watching over everything.”

“Okay, well, I don’t really need help.”

“Didn’t ask you if you did or not.” He holds up a paintbrush and a roller. “Do you want to roll or cut in the edges?”

“Both, because I can do this alone.”

“Fine, I’ll cut in,” he says, ignoring me completely.

I watch in confusion as he pours the paint into the paint pan and then in a little cup for himself. He takes a paintbrush and moves toward the wall, where he starts dabbing paint, cutting in the edge of the doorframe.

“Caleb, seriously, what are you doing?”

“Are your brothers coming back for Christmas?” he asks.

“No, Banner and Ryot are staying in Chicago for . . . wait, why am I answering that?” Hands on my hips, I stomp on the ground. “Caleb, why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asks, still painting. “Trying to remind you that I’m a good guy, that people make mistakes, and that even though I know our chapter is over, I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable living here.” He turns and faces me now. “I don’t know the full story of why you came back here, Nola, but I do know that you deserve a chance at happiness, and I refuse to be the man that keeps you from obtaining it. I know this is awkward, being in the same town again—I just want to make it less awkward.”

Oh, well, that actually seems really mature.

Call it the heightened season of joy or the sincere look in his eyes, but for some reason, I feel the layer of ice that surrounds my heart whenever he's around slowly melt.

“Oh . . . well . . . thank you.”

“You're welcome.” He smirks. “Now pick up a roller. I'm not painting alone.”

“Okay, hold on a second,” I say, catching my breath from laughing so hard. “There's no way that's true.”

Caleb nods as he works the paintbrush along the baseboard. “I wish it weren't, but yes, last year, when I was helping build the set for the summer theater program, my pants snagged on a nail. I didn't realize and ended up ripping them right off, leaving me in shredded pants and underwear.”

I bend over, a hearty laugh coming out of me. “Oh my God, and in front of the children?”

“Unfortunately. I received many letters from angry parents. Needless to say, I wasn't asked to help out this year, and if I'm being honest, the summer program didn't pack the punch it normally does, and I know it's because my woodwork wasn't put to good use.”

“Out of fear of you showing everyone *your* wood.”

He raises one brow, which of course only makes me laugh some more. “All they saw was underwear, and they didn't even get a good look because my blazing-white legs probably blinded them.”

I chuckle some more. “Most likely.”

“Okay, I shared, now you tell me—what's the most humiliating thing that happened to you while you were in New York?”

“Man, where do I even start?” I ask, getting more paint on my roller. “There was the time I mistook an elderly gentleman for my blind date and talked to him for half an hour before I got a message from my real date saying he was upset I stood

him up. The old man smacked his gums at me and smiled as I took off.”

“Oh hell.”

I shrug. “They happened to have the same name. It was a coworker that set me up; no picture was provided. Then there was the time I was put in charge of helping my boyfriend’s mom in the kitchen during Thanksgiving. The family was obsessed with Grandma’s cheesecake, and this was Grandma’s last Thanksgiving. She got enough energy to make her cheesecake one last time. I was asked to pull it out of the oven, but I didn’t realize it was in a springform pan, so I pushed my fingers up into the bottom, popped it out, and spilled the holy cheesecake all over the oven door.”

Caleb slowly turns around, eyes wide. “Nooooo.”

I nod. “Yup. My boyfriend broke up with me that night. I didn’t blame him. I didn’t want to be around the family anymore either.”

“Wow, I think that might be worse than pantsing myself in front of children.”

“A close second.”

“Wait, Mrs. Gingerfield gave you, and only you, the recipe to her famous chutney?”

Caleb nods as we sit in the middle of the living room, taking a break.

“Why?”

“I made her a porch swing. She wanted to pay me, and I said I didn’t need her money, I just wanted to make sure she was comfortable while watching the neighborhood. So, in return, she presented me with a box. Inside the box was another box.” I laugh. “And inside that box was an envelope.”

“Stop, that’s not how she delivered it.”

“It’s exactly how she delivered it,” he answers. “And inside the envelope was a laminated card wrapped carefully in tissue paper. And on that card was the recipe for her chutney.”

“I can’t believe it. She hasn’t spoken that recipe to a soul. What did you do with it?”

“Well, I wrapped it back up in the tissue paper, put it in the envelope—”

“And then back inside the box, and the other box,” I continue for him.

“Exactly, and then I took that box and put it in a slightly bigger box.”

“No, you didn’t,” I say, unable to control my laughter.

“And then I stuck it in a safe-deposit box in the bank that I pay ten dollars a month for.”

“Seriously?”

He nods. “And then one day, when the time is right, I will go to my safe-deposit box and pull out the box, and then the other box, and then the last box, and then the envelope, unwrap the tissue paper, hold up the recipe card, and present it to whoever becomes my wife. And when she asks what it is, I will pat her gently on the shoulder and say, ‘Please make this for me, I have no idea what chutney is.’”

My laugh carries through the empty living space. “You are so ridiculous.”

“Devin and Darnell are married?” I ask in utter shock.

“Yup,” he says. “And they have five kids.”

“Five?” My eyes nearly bug out of my head. “I can remember when Devin wanted nothing to do with babysitting because she hated kids so much, and now she has five? With Darnell? Her sworn archnemesis?” I shake my head. “I don’t think I can believe that.”

“It was hard for the rest of us to grasp as well, because right before they presented themselves as a couple, they were seen in the corner market, throwing flour at each other.”

“Oh, I remember Grandma Louise telling me about that. She said it was the great white cloud that never settled. Took Martin at the corner market weeks to clean up.”

“I think if you go in there, you can still see some of the flour in the air.”

I roll paint along the wall, loving how this room is brightening up so much. “And now with five kids, unbelievable. Were you at the wedding?”

“Everyone was at the wedding—it was hard to miss. It was as if they were trying to prove a point, so they did it on the steps of the municipal building and had it cast out to the town by speakers.”

“That’s a bit obnoxious.”

“No, obnoxious was Devin and Darnell riding in a white carriage pulled by horses and shouting to the rooftops that they were married while empty beer cans trailed behind them. Thankfully, they moved closer to Pottsmouth, so we don’t see them very much around here.”

“But the flour is still there.” I smirk at him, and he smirks back.

“Yup, we will forever remember the flour.”

“Can I ask you something?” I say as I finish up rolling the last wall.

“Yes,” he says while he stands on a ladder above me, cutting the edge of the ceiling.

“Why did you go to Boston?”

He pauses and glances down at me. “So, I see the funny stories are done—just jumping right into the hard stuff?”

I shrug. “Might as well. I was always curious, and I guess if we’re going to live in the same town, we might as well get everything off our chests.”

“That’s fair.” He climbs down the stairs and then takes a seat on the stepladder rung. “Well, after I broke your heart and treated you like crap—”

“Glad you see it like that.”

“I always have, Nola,” he says, his eyes full of sincerity. “I know how much I hurt you, and it’s my biggest regret.” He glances down at his hands. “But I wasn’t mature enough for you. It’s not an excuse, it’s a fact. You had dreams; I had . . . well, I had my dad’s hardware store. When you left, I thought that maybe if I proved to myself that I could be something else, something better for you, then I could beg for your forgiveness. So, I went to Boston, where I took woodworking classes for a year, and after a year, I knew I wasn’t cut out for the city. I wasn’t cut out for a grown-up relationship, for that matter. The maturity wasn’t there. But if there was one thing I knew for sure after being in Boston, it’s that I was meant to stay in Bright Harbor, and that’s when I decided to fully let you go. I knew we were headed in opposite directions, and if I tried to follow, I’d be miserable. And that’s not fair to you.”

“Oh,” I say softly, as the truth hits me. I never realized that’s how he felt. “You could have told me that, Caleb.”

“And risk having you stay when clearly you were supposed to go and explore the world?” He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t have done that. You deserved more.”

“I deserved you,” I say before I can stop myself.

His eyes flash up to mine, and as we stare at each other, time seems to slow down around us, giving us this single moment to reflect on our regrets, on what we should have said but never had the courage, the strength to say when it mattered most.

I clear my throat and take a step back. “Well, that was in the past, I guess.”

“Yeah,” he says. “So then, why are you back here, Nola?”

Great question, and up until maybe a day ago, I might have had a different answer. But now, with the mysterious letters and the warmth of reminiscing, my answer has morphed into something else.

“At first, it was to get away from Chris, my ex, but now that I’m here, being with Grandma Louise, walking around

town, even talking with Arden, it feels like I'm exactly where I want to be. Home."

He stands from the ladder. "So that means you'll be staying longer?"

I nod and wet my lips as the tension grows even thicker. "Yes. I'll be staying longer. I'm thinking about settling down here. Even though New York was my dream, I quickly realized that I don't think I was cut out for city life either. I miss this town, the people in it, and the community. I was lacking the deep friendships in New York that I have here. There's nothing left for me there, but a lot left for me here."

"Well, good thing we had this day then, huh?"

"Yeah, good thing," I answer as he takes a step closer.

In a flash, I'm transported back to what life was like with him, before I decided to leave for New York. I was happy, protected, comfortable, and sure, venturing out into a new world was a good life experience, but being back in Bright Harbor feels so right, like all the puzzle pieces in my life are connecting . . . besides one.

One single piece that seems to be splitting in two.

Because even though I'm here with Caleb, so close that I can almost taste him, I can't help thinking about those letters and the man who wrote them. If only . . . ugh, if only they were the same man.

With a gentle hand to my chin, he angles my head so our eyes lock. My pulse picks up, his familiar scent wrapping around me like a blanket, spreading warmth through my limbs. "If things were different, if you left on different terms, I would have asked you out the moment you came back into town."

"You . . . you would have?" I ask, my heart beating so hard that I can barely hear Caleb over the roar of my pulse.

"I would have." And then with a brush of his thumb over my cheek, he moves away and toward my front door. "Thanks for today, Nola. I had a really good time."

He opens the door and then bends down. “You have a letter.” He holds up a green envelope.

Wow, the timing could not be any better, reminding me of a choice I may have to make.

“Oh, thank you.” I walk up to him and take it.

His eyes fall to my lips and then back up to my eyes. “You haven’t changed a bit, Nola. Still beautiful and funny as ever.” He offers me a soft smile. “See you around town.”

“Yeah, see you around.” I shut the door behind him and clutch the letter close to my chest. Just as I turn around, I come face to face with Grandma Louise.

“You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

Startled back into the door, I let out a small squeal. “My goodness, Grandma. You scared me.”

“Well, if you weren’t spouting heart eyes for the man, you might have heard me walking up with my cane.”

“I wasn’t spouting heart eyes,” I say, even though I know my cheeks are flushed. Crazy what a difference an afternoon can make. Starting the day, I didn’t even want to look at Caleb, let alone be near him, but now . . . now I wish he hadn’t left. I wish we could talk more. I wish . . . hell, I don’t know what I wish.

“Okay.” Grandma Louise pats my shoulder. “Just remember, sometimes people come back into your life for a reason.” She winks and then heads toward the kitchen. “I’m going to warm up a pot pie for dinner. Do you want one?”

“Maybe a little later,” I call out as I flip open the envelope and pull out the letter.

Dear Ho Ho No,

I would love nothing more than to meet up with you. How does tomorrow night at eight, in the gazebo on Main, sound?

Yes, it might be Christmas Eve, but I’m willing to take a chance on this holiday spirit if you are.

*No need to write back. I'll be there, waiting
for you.*

Sincerely yours,

A not so Resting Scrooge Face anymore

Chapter Six

CALEB

Christmas lights glimmer in the dark of the night, along the bushes, fences, and closed shops. Soft instrumental Christmas music plays in the distance as the rest of town is huddled around McGregor's Farm, enjoying Bright Harbor's annual ornament exchange. And as I walk, wrapped in a heavy jacket and scarf, toward the lit-up gazebo that's surrounded by decorated evergreens and casting a golden glow in the center of town, the lightest of snow begins to tumble down from the sky.

I can't be sure if she's going to show. When I was at her place yesterday, I honestly didn't think it was going to go as well as it did. I didn't think she was going to let me stick around, but when she did, I took advantage of it. I tried to act like no time had passed. We reminisced, we joked around, and we spoke our truth, a truth that I believe squashed every sour feeling between us. After that conversation, I thought about telling her about the letters but wasn't sure how she'd take it. She'd already gotten the rundown about my feelings, about Boston—it was best I left it at that.

But now as I'm walking toward the gazebo, hands in my pockets, my stomach twisting in knots, I sort of wish I did tell her. Because if she shows up, she shows up for the man in the letters. And what if she's disappointed? What if she knows she wants to be with "Resting Scrooge Face," not me . . . ?

This was a terrible idea.

What the hell was I thinking?

I pause, just as I'm about to step up into the gazebo.

Maybe I don't do this. Maybe I find another way to communicate with her. Maybe I give this more time and I can ease her into the idea of me being the one writing her the letters.

Maybe I could—

“Caleb?” Nola says from behind me, causing my shoulders to tense and my spine to straighten. “What are you doing here?”

Well, looks like there’s no escaping now.

Slowly, I turn and take her in. Her cute short hair is styled in waves under a red winter hat. She’s bundled up into a black coat, red scarf, and black winter boots. She looks warm, but so beautiful at the same time.

“Uh, hey, Nola,” I say.

She glances behind me and then looks around. “Are you waiting for someone?”

I pull on the back of my neck and figure this is it. Time to come clean.

“Yeah, I was. I was waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me?” she asks, looking confused.

“Yes.” I reach into my coat pocket and pull out a green envelope—Arden told me it’s what he’s been delivering my letters in, so he gave me a final one for tonight. “I have one last delivery for you.”

She stares down at the letter and then back at me.

“You . . . you’re . . .”

“Resting Scrooge Face,” I finish for her.

“But . . . how?”

“Arden found my original letter that I threw out in the trash. He hated how lonely I was, how I sequestered myself during the holidays, and I guess he thought the same about you, so he gave it to you. And then you wrote back. Hearing that someone else was suffering through the festivities made me feel a sense of normality—something I lost the moment you came back to town.”

Here goes nothing.

I step forward, and I take her hand in mine. “Nola, you are truly the best part of my life. I have the best memories from when we were together. I had the best laughs with you by my side. And even when we went through some hard times, knowing I had you to lean on took away some of the pain. When I lost you, I lost a part of myself along the way. But you’re here now, and slowly, you helped bring that part back to life with your letters.” I link our fingers together, hers in gloves, mine not. “I’m so sorry for the past, for treating you the way that I did. And I promise you, if you give me another chance, I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.”

Tears well up in her eyes as snowflakes cling to her eyelashes.

“Caleb,” she says, her throat tight, her voice strained. I hold my breath, wondering if she’s about to let me down easy. “You have to know.” She wets her lips. “Even during our time apart, even when our hearts were both shattered, it’s always been you. Always and forever.”

And then, she’s moving her free hand around the back of my neck and standing on her toes.

Happiness sprouts through me as I bring my nose down to hers, hovering my mouth just above her lips.

“I wondered if it was you,” she whispers. “I wondered if you were the one sending me the letters. Coming here tonight, I had to find out.”

“And if it wasn’t me?” I ask.

Her nose rubs against mine. “Then I would have gone to find you.”

With that, her mouth presses against mine. Slowly at first, she waits for me to react, but when I do, when I part my lips, she reciprocates the kiss and steals my very soul for her own. Forever.

Hands to my cheeks, she holds me in place as her mouth explores mine, as my body aches for her, as my heart settles.

This is my girl. The one I’ve been waiting for. And sure, it might have taken a few years and some letters delivered by a

friend, but we're here, in each other's arms, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

She pulls away and smiles up at me. "What's in the letter?"

"Why don't you find out."

With a suspicious glare, she opens the envelope and reads it out loud.

"Dear Ho Ho No . . . la."

She smirks.

"I love you. Will you join me for some fresh eggnog and gingerbread men back at my place? It is Christmas Eve after all.

"Sincerely, forever yours,

"Your Resting Scrooge Face."

She loops her arms around me and presses her forehead to mine. "I love you too, and I want nothing more than to celebrate the season with you."

"Then . . . it's a date." I lift her chin and lean in to kiss her one more time, when I hear clapping just off to the right.

We turn only to find Arden and Grandma Louise standing next to each other. Grandma Louise has her arm looped through Arden's as they stand there, smiling up at us.

"Look at that, kissing under the mistletoe," Arden says.

Nola and I both look up at the same time to see a sprig of mistletoe hanging from the gazebo's entrance, directly above us. Together we laugh as I say, "Well, isn't that just ironic."

"Ironic or meant to be?" Nola asks with such a beautiful grin that I have to kiss her one more time.

"I told you it would work," Arden says.

"No, you didn't, you buffoon. I told you," Grandma Louise argues. "Giving her that letter was my idea."

"No, it wasn't, you old bag of bones. This entire coupling was my idea."

“What a bunch of baloney. When we were on our date, *I* was the one who said we needed to get those two back together.”

Date? Can we speak about that for a second?

“Yes, and I came up with a plan,” Arden argues.

“Exactly, so the overall plan was mine, details provided by you.” She pats his hand. “See how that works?”

Arden grumbles something under his breath as I turn back to Nola. “Looks like there were some Christmas elves hard at work.”

“It worked,” Arden shouts, making us all laugh.

I loop my arm around Nola’s waist and hold her close as I bring my mouth a whisper away. “Merry Christmas, Nola.”

“Merry Christmas, Caleb.”

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MEGHAN QUINN**

UNTYING THE KNOT

MEGHAN QUINN

“**W**hat do we have here?” I push past boxes of oatmeal, protein bars—hmm, maple donut, wasn’t sure anyone liked that flavor—and tubs of protein powder. “Typical,” I mutter. Normally, I’m a healthy-ish person who can appreciate a solid tub of whey protein, but not after a sweaty night of drinking and dancing in a bar. I need some snacking food.

I move to another cabinet, and then another, and another but come up short. Hoping I can find something in the freezer, I whip that open as well, wishing for an ice cream bar of some sort, but only find rotten bananas and ice packs.

“What kind of household is this?” Groaning, I go back to the fridge, snag the Tupperware full of grapes—plucked from the vine—and head back into the living room, where I sit on the couch and turn on the TV. I go straight to TBS, knowing there will be sitcom reruns, and to my delight, it’s *The Big Bang Theory*. “Oh Sheldon, you crazy fuck,” I say as I pop open the grapes and start inhaling them one at a time.

I’m in the middle of poking my straw through the hole in the Capri Sun when the front door opens and shuts. Locks are engaged, shoes are kicked off, and a bag of some sort slams to the floor before a man appears in the living room entryway.

Well, would you look at that? *Hello*, sir.

Tall, broad with brown hair, a man stands in front of me sporting a pair of baggy sweatpants and a plain black T-shirt. His long fingers twitch at his sides as his sculpted shoulders set back when he realizes he’s not alone. Hiding under a Stud Muffins hat is a set of piercing blue eyes that carry confusion as he looks me up and down.

“Who the hell are you?” he asks.

I toss a grape in my mouth and answer, “A guest to this residence. Who the hell are you?”

“The renter of this residence,” he responds.

“Ah, well . . . it would help guests greatly if you offered them more variety of snacks when they come over. Protein bars and grapes aren’t going to cut it.”

He glances around, clearly looking for any indication of what the hell is going on, and then turns back toward me. “Who are you here with? Banner?”

“Why yes, I am, technically.” I hold my finger up to my mouth and say, “Now, shush. You’re interrupting my show.”

He glances at the TV and then back at me again. “Where the hell is Banner?”

“God, you with the questions.” I roll my eyes. “He’s upstairs with my best friend having sex.”

“And you’re down here, eating grapes and watching a show?”

“Yes, that’s precisely what’s happening. Good job stating the obvious.”

He pulls on the back of his neck and shakes his head. “I don’t have the fucking patience right now to deal with this.”

“Good, then you can leave me to my show.” With another shake, he heads up the stairs when I say, “Uh, dude . . . man, guy.”

“Ryot,” he says.

“What’s that now?”

“My name is Ryot.”

“Oh, that’s an interesting one. Okay then, parents attempting to make you popular straight out of the womb. Anyway, do you happen to have a blanket? There’s a swift breeze coming from the window, and I’d rather not catch a chill while sitting here.”

“No, I don’t,” he answers.

“You don’t have one single blanket?”

“Not for you to use,” he answers again. This time, he starts walking up the stairs.

“Sheesh, what kind of host are you?”

“I’m not. You shouldn’t be here.” And before I can respond, he’s out of earshot.

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Ryot? Pick up *UNTYING THE
KNOT* now available on
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“A heart-tugging, slow-burning, second-chance romance . . . This is a couple that I couldn’t help but root for.”

—*Red Cheeks Reads*

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—*TotallyBookedBlog*

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—*Nightbird Novels*

“Sweet, sassy, sexy, and sentimental.”

—*Harlequin Junkie*

“Second-chance enemies-to-lovers romance at its finest.”

—*Bookishly Nerdy*

“I’m a sucker for second-chance romances, and add in the small town and I’m hooked. And who better to give me all the feels with a little humor and a mix of sexiness than Meghan Quinn.”

—*Embrace the Romance*

That Second Chance

“With each book I read by Meghan Quinn, I become more in awe of her writing talent. She truly has a gift! *That Second Chance* was simply perfect!”

—*Wrapped Up in Reading*

“A sweet, sexy, swoon-worthy, MUST-READ romance from Meghan Quinn, and I would HIGHLY recommend it! I fell head over heels in love with the quaint and charming small town of Port Snow, Maine, and all of its residents.”

—*The Romance Bibliophile*

“I’m basking in the HEA goodness of *That Second Chance*, which gets five stars.”

—*Dog-Eared Daydreams*

“I adored the small town of Port Snow and the fabulous tight [bond] the Knightly family have not only with each other but their community as a whole.”

—*Book Angel Booktopia*

OTHER TITLES BY MEGHAN QUINN

All her books can be read on Kindle Unlimited.

Getting Lucky Series

That Second Chance

That Forever Girl

That Secret Crush

That Swoony Feeling

Brentwood Baseball Boys

The Locker Room

The Dugout

The Lineup

The Trade

The Change Up

The Setup

The Strike Out

The Perfect Catch

The Bromance Club

The Secret to Dating Your Best Friend's Sister

Diary of a Bad Boy

Boss Man Bridegroom

The Dating by Numbers Series

Three Blind Dates

Two Wedding Crashers

One Baby Daddy

Back in the Game (novella)

The Blue Line Duet

The Upside of Falling

The Downside of Love

The Perfect Duet

The Left Side of Perfect

The Right Side of Forever

The Binghamton Boys Series

Co-Wrecker

My Best Friend's Ex

Twisted Twosome

The Other Brother

Stand-Alone Titles

The Modern Gentleman

See Me After Class

The Romantic Pact

Dear Life

The Virgin Romance Novelist Chronicles

Newly Exposed

The Mother Road

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

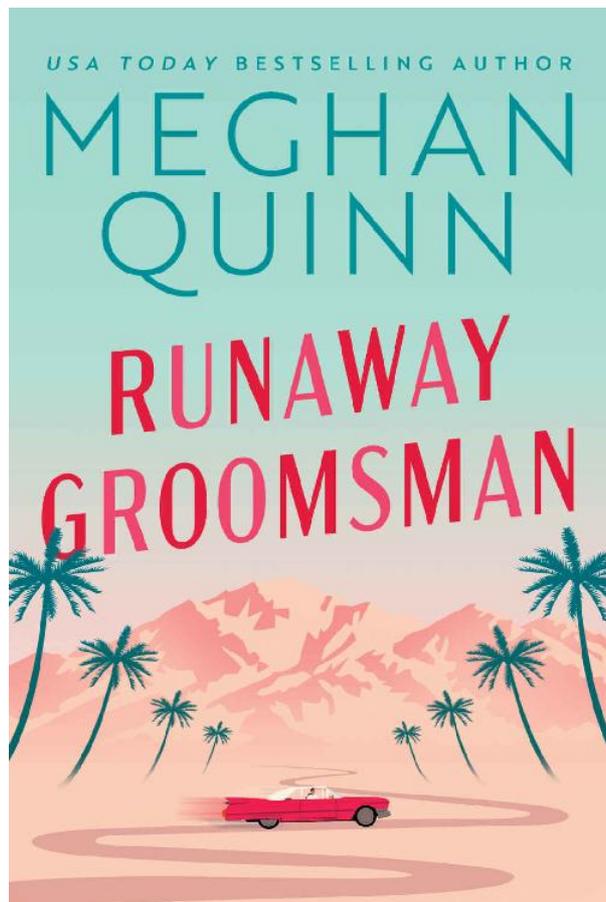


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A *USA Today* bestselling author, wife, adoptive mother, peanut butter lover, and creator of romantic comedies and contemporary romance, Meghan Quinn brings readers the perfect combination of heart, humor, and heat in every book.

Text “READ” to 474747 to never miss another one of Meghan Quinn’s releases. Message and data rates may apply.

**HE RUNS FROM THE ALTAR
—AND FINDS LOVE IN THE
PLACE HE LEAST EXPECTS.**



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