

ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



# Caught

BY MY

# BEST FRIEND

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ROSE BAK

# CAUGHT BY MY BEST FRIEND

ALL THE JINGLE LADIES



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Cover Design: Last Chapter Press LLC

Editing: Jordan Bailey of [Successful Writer Marketplace](#)

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## CAUGHT BY MY BEST FRIEND INFO

**Falling in love with your best friend is something that only happens in movies, not in midlife...**

**Mary Ellen**

For eighteen years, Antonio and I have been the best of friends.

We've shared everything: inside jokes, secrets, Cubs tickets, even an address.

Everyone thinks that we're secretly in love with each other, but that's ridiculous.

I mean sure, Antonio is charming and hot, and we almost kissed that one time, but I'd never do anything to risk our friendship.

**Until Antonio pulls a stunt right out of a rom-com...**

**Antonio**

When my grandmother was on her death bed, I told a little white lie.

I wanted my nonna to die happy, so I told her I was engaged to my beautiful best friend.

But Nonna unexpectedly recovered, and now she's coming from Italy to spend Christmas in Chicago with me and my fiancée.

She's on a mission to get us to set a date for the wedding.

Now I need to convince Mary Ellen to move into my apartment, sleep in my bed, and pretend to be my fiancée.

**I have an ulterior motive though: I want to finally break out of the friend zone and convince my best friend that we have a shot at something better- love.**

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## PROLOGUE



MARY ELLEN

*WRIGLEY FIELD, 2010*

“IT’S JUST NOT THE SAME SINCE HARRY CARAY DIED.”

I glanced over at Antonio as we sat back down after some random celebrity led us through the “Seventh Inning Stretch”. We were part of a group of six friends who shared two season tickets to the Chicago Cubs, and today it was mine and Antonio’s turn to come to the game.

“The man’s been dead for twelve years, Ant.”

My best friend smirked at the nickname I’d given him when we first started hanging out five years ago.

“I still haven’t gotten over it.”

“I think you’re just feeling nostalgic,” I told him.

“About what?”

“You’re turning thirty soon. It’s the decade where people start pondering their life choices and doing grown up things like buying a house or getting married.”

“You didn’t.”

“I’ve only been in my thirties for six months. Give me time. I’ll start pondering soon.”

“Hey, Beer Man!”

I grimaced as Antonio bellowed in my ear in his effort to get us another round of Budweiser. Once we both had a new

beer in hand, he turned in his seat and pinned me with his dark brown eyes. Normally Antonio was a joker, always laughing and playing pranks, but just now he was serious. Intense even.

“I need to find a wife.”

I choked on my beer. “What?”

“My nonna says I need to get married soon.”

“To inherit her fortune?” I joked.

I already knew his nonna was dirt poor and lived in some ramshackle house in the Italian countryside. I’d seen the pictures. Besides, Antonio faithfully sent her money every month to help support her. He was a good grandson.

“She wants me to get married so she can come to the wedding before she dies.”

“Is she sick?” I asked in concern. Last I’d heard, Nonna was still working in her garden, keeping up her large property, and meddling in people’s lives.

“No, but she’s says that she’ll probably die soon.”

Besides being a hard worker, Antonio’s grandmother tended towards the dramatic.

“Your nonna is as likely to die soon as the Cubbies are to win the World Series. Neither’s gonna happen in our lifetime.”



## CHAPTER 1



MARY ELLEN

### *PRESENT DAY*

I SHOVED MY WAY INTO THE CROWDED TRAIN CAR WITH A SIGH. It had been a long day and I'd been hoping to sit down, but there wasn't a seat in sight. The guy next to me jostled my arm and I brought my bag closer to my body in case he had wandering fingers. These were the kinds of things you had to think about when you were a woman living in a big city.

When I'd bought my apartment about ten years ago, proximity to one of the elevated train stations—or the “El” as we called it in Chicago—was high on my list. It was a cheap and convenient way to travel, but some days I longed for a home in the suburbs and a nice, private SUV. Especially around the holidays when the trains were jam packed with Christmas shoppers.

A few minutes later I burst out onto the El platform, taking a deep breath now that I was outside again. The air was crisp and cool, hinting that snow was coming. I was so focused on trying to figure out where I'd stashed my snow boots last spring that I didn't even notice Antonio standing at the bottom of the stairs until I almost ran into him.

“Mellie.”

When we first became friends, Antonio had announced that my given name—Mary Ellen—was “too stuffy” for me. He'd promptly dubbed me “Mellie”, a mash-up of my name, saying it suited me better. I'd promptly informed him that

Antonio was too stuffy for him, and I'd be calling him "Ant" from now on. We'd been best friends ever since.

"Hey Ant, what are you doing here?" I asked as he moved away from the wall next to the little convenience store nestled under the El platform. The owner, Mr. Kim, waved to me through the window.

I was confused why Antonio was lurking at the El station waiting for me when we both lived in the same building. I'd bought a place there first, and when my neighbor's apartment opened up a year later, Antonio had swooped in and bought it before it was even listed. It helped that Mrs. Jameson's kids knew that Antonio and I had looked out for their mother for years.

Between us, Antonio and I occupied half the top floor of a three-story walk-up in the Edgewater neighborhood. It was a short walk to the beach and the Lakefront Trail, and a quick El ride to Wrigley Field and the Loop, the downtown area where we both worked. It was perfect for both of us.

Having my best friend as a neighbor was just a bonus.

"I thought we could pick up take-out from Sushi Sushi and hang out at my place."

My best friend was a good-looking guy. He wasn't super tall—just a hair over five ten—but he was solidly built with a barrel chest, a trim waist, and biceps that I knew he worked hard to maintain. Now that we were in our forties, his dark hair was threaded with a few streaks of silver, mainly around his temples, and tiny lines bracketed his firm mouth from all those years of smiling. But it was his eyes that I liked best. Large, brown, and the one place he couldn't hide his emotions.

Today those eyes were full of turmoil. Antonio was up to something.

"Why not just text me?" I asked suspiciously. "Or wait until I got home?"

He winced. "I was too nervous."

Antonio always needed to move his body when he was feeling big emotions. It really helped his workout routine

because he was a guy who was prone to big emotions. He said it was the Italian in him.

“Nervous about what?”

“I need a favor, Mellie. It’s a big one.”

“Bigger than that time when you woke me up in the middle of the night looking for condoms?” I asked as we started walking down the street shoulder to shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“Bigger than when you wanted one of my tickets to the playoffs so you could impress your new boss with Cubs tickets?”

“Yeah, bigger than that.”

“Wow, this sounds serious. We’d better get some booze to go with the sushi.”

## CHAPTER 2



### ANTONIO

I SET OUT THE VARIOUS TAKEOUT CONTAINERS ON MY KITCHEN table while I waited for Mary Ellen to come over. We'd picked up food and beer on the way home, but she'd detoured to her own apartment to change out of the pencil skirt and conservative blouse that she wore for her day job as a fundraiser for a local charity.

I'd left the door unlocked, so she let herself in. Professional Mary Ellen was gone, leaving casual Mellie in her place. She was dressed in navy blue yoga pants, thick wool socks, and a Chicago Bears sweatshirt that fell halfway to her strong thighs. I was pretty sure she'd stolen that sweatshirt from one of her ex-boyfriends. She looked adorable. Even though we were firmly in our forties now, Mary Ellen still had the ability to make me catch my breath.

We'd met at a party at our mutual friend Brian's house back when we were both twenty-five. She'd been a little thinner back then, but still curvy as hell with rounded hips and full breasts bracketing her smaller waist. Her dark red hair fell in waves to her shoulders, and the minute I'd looked into her light blue eyes, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning.

Unfortunately, she'd immediately put me in the friend zone, probably because she was dating someone at the time. As our relationship progressed, I'd kept my feelings to myself, never wanting to ruin what we had. She was my best friend, my most trusted confidant, and my emergency medical contact. That was way more important than any pesky

romantic thoughts that lingered in the deep recesses of my brain.

As Mary Ellen got us beers from the fridge, I debated the best way to tell her what I needed. Not one to dither, she sat across from me, grabbed a California roll in her chopsticks, and raised one red eyebrow.

“Out with it, Ant.”

I took a deep breath. “My nonna is coming to visit.”

She reared back in shock. “Your nonna? The woman who told you they’d have to pry her cold, dead body off her land before she’d leave Italy for any reason— including your college graduation? That nonna?”

I nodded. “Yep. She’s decided she wants to visit America.”

“Why now?” She took a delicate bite of her sushi. I got distracted for a second watching her lips.

“Remember how she had that heart attack last year and almost died?”

“Of course I remember. I babysat your cat for two months while you teleworked from Italy and helped her out.”

The poor kitty had died the month after Antonio got home. From old age, not from my care. Needless to say, those was a hard few months for poor Antonio.

“Well, what I didn’t tell you is that when I first got there and she was so frail, I was sitting at her bedside and she took my hand and said, ‘Antonio, why have you never found a woman? Why will I die knowing my only grandson is single and alone?’ And, well, I was really upset because I thought for sure she was dying.”

“Okay.” She kept her eyes on me as she speared another piece of sushi with her chopsticks. “But she recovered.”

“Yeah.” I smiled, because my nonna was one of my favorite people in the world. After Mary Ellen. “The thing is, I didn’t want Nonna to be worrying about me on the way to the afterlife. I wanted her to die happy. So, I kind of told my

grandmother that I was in a serious committed relationship with a woman, and we'd probably be getting engaged soon."

Mary Ellen frowned. "Antonio Matteo De Luca! You lied to your nonna on her deathbed?"

"I panicked," I said defensively. "She was dying!"

"So, what did you tell her when she recovered? That you broke up with this mysterious woman?"

"Um. No. She was so excited that I was finally in love that after she recovered, I told her that I'd gotten engaged."

"Isn't she wondering why you haven't gotten married yet?"

I stared at the table, too nervous to meet Mary Ellen's eyes.

"I told her that we'd moved in together but then my fiancée got cold feet and wouldn't set a date for the wedding yet."

Mary Ellen dropped her chopsticks to stare at me as I got to the worst part.

"Now she's coming to spend Christmas with us and convince my fiancée that we should get married instead of living in sin."

"What is this? A nineties romantic comedy?" she asked incredulously. "What are you planning to do? Rent a fiancée?"

"Not exactly."

I took a deep gulp of Budweiser in case Mary Ellen killed me on the spot and this was my last drink.

"I told her that you were my fiancée. Now she's coming here to meet you and convince you to quit messing around and finally marry me."

## CHAPTER 3



MARY ELLEN

“I MUST HAVE HEARD YOU WRONG. I COULD SWEAR THAT YOU just told me that you —a grown ass man— not only lied to your nonna, but somehow dragged me into it?”

I leaned back in my chair and took a long drink of my beer.

“Just to be clear, the favor you said you need is that you want me to go along with this ridiculous ruse and lie to your sweet old grandmother?”

Ant snorted. “Nonna is many things, but sweet is not one of them. But yes, I need you to be fake-engaged to me. Also, you need to move in here for a few weeks.”

“What?”

“Nonna is staying with me. She’s going to expect my live-in fiancée to be here, not next door. Also, just a heads up, she’s going to make us go to church with her. She’s very concerned about the way we’re living in sin.”

My mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words came out. I took another drink of my beer, then several cleansing breaths, before I spoke again.

“No.”

“It’s only for a couple of weeks,” he pleaded. “It will kill her if she finds out I’m still single. You know how I feel about my nonna. She’s the only close family I have left.”

“It will kill her if she finds out you’re a damn liar. I’m shocked, Ant. It’s not like you to be dishonest. Why would you say you were engaged to me?”

He shrugged. “You were the first name that popped into my head.”

His words sounded true, but he avoided my eyes, telling me there was something else there, I just wasn’t sure what.

“She’s been hearing me talk about you for years,” he added. “She already thought something was going on with us. She was convinced that we were really dating, and I just hadn’t admitted it. I just... went with it.”

“Don’t you think we’re a little old to be fake-dating and lying to people like we’re in some cheesy romance novel?”

“You like cheesy romance novels,” he reminded me.

“Yes, but they’re fiction. This is real life, Ant. Someone’s going to get hurt. Besides, if I stay here, where am I going to sleep?”

“In my bed. With me.”

I didn’t want to think too hard about the tiny little thrill I felt at his words.

Best friend, I reminded myself. No benefits allowed.

“No.” I said firmly. “No way.”

“What’s the big deal? How many times have we fallen asleep together on the couch when we’re watching something? Also, we’ve shared a bed before. Remember when our hotel reservations got messed up at Summer Fest that time?”

Did I ever. That night we spent in Milwaukee sharing a double bed was the night I had to admit that I was the tiniest bit attracted to my best friend. Having his solid body behind me, waking up pressed together from shoulder to hip... it had been torture. It had also been like ten or twelve years ago. We had grown up since then.

Or at least I had. I wasn’t sure about Antonio right now.

And as for that sense of attraction I sometimes felt towards him, that was just something I had to live with to have my best friend in my life. I knew he didn’t think of me like that —



never had— and I wasn't going to destroy years of friendship because I sometimes wished I could kiss him. Or more.

“Let me make sure I've got this straight. You're asking me to move in with you, pretend not only to be your girlfriend but your fiancée, and to go to church with you and your nonna?”

“And spend Christmas with us.”

When I didn't say anything else, he leaned forward and grabbed my hand, squeezing it in his larger one.

“Please, Mellie. We were going to spend Christmas together anyway,” he reminded me. “I'll do anything if you help me avoid disappointing my nonna.”

“Anything?”

He nodded vigorously. “Yes, anything. Just tell me what you want.”

“I'm going to need to think about that for a while so I can come up with something of equal magnitude to this... this ridiculous charade.”

I kept my voice firm, but we both knew I was going to cave. God knows, I'd never been able to say no to this man before. I likely wasn't going to start now.

I sighed deeply. “When does Nonna come in?”

“Saturday. I told her that we'd pick her up at the airport.”

“I guess you really do love her,” I teased.

There was a joke in Chicago that you really knew if someone loved you if they were willing to make the trip out to the airport to pick you up. It took at least ninety minutes from anywhere in the city, and getting around the airport was a competitive sport.

I looked around the familiar surroundings of Antonio's apartment. It was a carbon copy of mine, just reversed. But where my place was feminine and soft, his was more minimalist. I spent as much time here as I did at my own apartment. At least I'd be comfortable staying here for a couple of weeks.

“Well, we’d better move some of my stuff over here then. And get a Christmas tree, the way an engaged couple would do.”

Antonio leapt around the table and pulled me into a big hug. The man gave the best hugs. He was about three inches taller than me, and our bodies lined up perfectly. I rested my head on his shoulder for a long moment, hoping that this wasn’t going to be a mistake.

This was definitely going to be a mistake.

## CHAPTER 4



### ANTONIO

“HOW DOES IT LOOK?”

“It’s a little crooked, but it’ll do.”

“It gives it character,” I said, stepping away from the Christmas tree. “Besides, I don’t feel like finding my saw to cut more off the bottom.”

I pressed my hands against my lower back. It was twinging after I dragged the tree several blocks and up two flights of stairs. I wasn’t as young as I used to be.

My phone beeped, reminding us it was time to head to the airport. We would decorate the tree later with Nonna. She was going to love it.

Neither Mary Ellen nor I had a car—we didn’t need one, living in the city—and after some discussion, we’d decided we’d take the El to the airport then get an Uber back here. I didn’t want to make my nonna go up and down the stairs to the train. I was already nervous about her climbing the stairs to my third-floor apartment. Last time I saw her, she was a little frail.

“Do I look okay?”

I glanced at Mary Ellen, taking in her long skirt and boots, the soft pink sweater that hugged her generous breasts, and the red hair that she’d flat ironed until it was hanging in a straight line to the top of her shoulders. She was stunning.

“You look perfect,” I said, grabbing a sweater to pull over my tee shirt, then adding my puffy coat. “Let’s go.”

I pulled her hand into mine.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Engaged couples hold hands,” I reminded her.

“Your nonna isn’t here yet.”

“Yeah, but we need to practice looking natural doing couple things.”

Mary Ellen rolled her eyes, but she didn’t pull away. Ignoring the little zings I felt in my hand where I touched her, I held tight to her hand all the way to the El station.

About an hour later, we exited the train at the airport stop. O’Hare International Airport was a zoo on a good day, but near the holidays it was total bedlam. Mary Ellen and I settled against a wall just outside the security doors, waiting for Nonna to come out. She’d texted me when she landed, but I knew she’d have a long wait to get through Immigration and Customs. I hoped it didn’t make her too tired.

Any fears I had about Nonna being frail evaporated the instant I saw her stride through the security exit. My grandmother was scarcely five feet tall, but she was a force of nature. She was eighty years old now, but she looked much younger. She stood ramrod straight, decked out in a bright green track suit and a pair of Nikes that I’d sent her for her birthday. Nonna loved Nikes.

“There she is,” I said to Mary Ellen. “In the green.”

Mary Ellen’s eyes widened comically. “That’s your nonna? I thought she’d be a little old lady.”

“Well, she’s eighty. She had my mom when she was eighteen, and Mom had me at nineteen. But it looks like she’s recovered from her illness and is back to her old self.”

“Nonna!” I called as I walked rapidly towards her, tugging Mary Ellen behind me.

I released my fake fiancée’s hand so I could sweep Nonna up into a big hug.

“Antonio!” Nonna launched into a torrent of Italian. I understood about a fourth of it.

“Inglese, Nonna, per favore,” I reminded her.

“It’s terrible that tua madre never taught you the language of your people.”

Nonna’s opinion on my mom only teaching me English had been a source of constant irritation between the two of them all the way up until my mom died of breast cancer several years ago.

The other source of contention between them had been my mom taking me back to the states after my father died when I was a baby. Mom was Italian, but had been born and raised in the U.S. She’d fallen in love with my father on a school trip and stayed in Italy after the wedding, but as a young widow, she chose to come back to Chicago and raise me with her own family.

To her credit, she had worked very hard to keep me connected to my father’s Italian family, even sending me to stay with Nonna and my cousins every year.

“Nonna, this is Mary Ellen. My fiancée.”

I loved the sound of that.

“Hello Mrs. De Luca, it’s lovely to finally meet you.”

Nonna looked between us, eyes narrowing. “You don’t have any food here in Chicago? You are both too skinny.”

Given that Nonna weighed maybe a buck ten, her criticism was unjustified. Mary Ellen, however, was thrilled to be called too skinny. I could see the delight in her eyes.

“Don’t worry, I will feed you when I am here,” Nonna assured us. “I will not have my grandson marrying someone who looks like they might fly away in your windy city.”

“I brought you a coat, Mrs. De Luca,” Mary Ellen changed the subject by pulling a winter coat out of her bag. “But I’m afraid it’ll be too big on you.”

Nonna grabbed the coat, looking it over before shrugging it over her shoulders. It swallowed her up, going almost to her knees. I rolled my lips in to keep from laughing.

“Come on, Nonna. We’re going to take a ride share back to the city.”

“The city? I thought we were in the city.”

“The airport is actually quite far from the main part of the city,” Mary Ellen explained. “Should we stop at the rest room on our way out? It will probably take us at least an hour to get back to our place, maybe longer.”

As Nonna and Mary Ellen headed into the ladies’ room, I breathed a sigh of relief. This was all going to work out just fine.

## CHAPTER 5



MARY ELLEN

ANTONIO'S GRANDMOTHER WAS NOT WHAT I EXPECTED. GIVEN the things I'd heard about her, I pictured her as a super elderly woman with white hair, stooped over, maybe with a cane, dressed in a black skirt that went past the knee, and wearing orthopedic shoes. Mrs. De Luca looked younger than she was, with hair dyed a dark red, smooth skin, and dressed in a bright green outfit and Nikes.

I could tell already that she was a unique mix of outrageous and conservative.

The three of us were in the back of the SUV that Antonio had ordered through the ride share app. We'd been in the Uber for approximately ten seconds before Mrs. De Luca smacked Antony on the back of the head.

"Ow! Nonna! What's that for?"

"You need to go to confession for living in sin!"

I shrank back in my seat, glad that Antonio was seated between us. My reprieve was short-lived. Mrs. De Luca leaned forward, looking past her grandson, and pinned me with a stern look.

"And you. You're not getting any younger. You think you can do better than my grandson?"

"No ma'am," I said obediently.

"Good, then we will go see the priest while I'm here. Unless you'd prefer to get married in Italia?"

“We haven’t really talked about where to have the wedding,” I said.

“Why do you have feet that are cold?” she asked in slightly jumbled English. “Why do you make my Antonio wait?”

I pinched Antonio’s side as hard as I could. He jumped but remained silent. Coward.

“It’s complicated,” I prevaricated.

Mrs. De Luca made a sound of disgust. “Young people. Everything is complicated with them.”

At my age, I was thrilled to be called ‘young’. And ‘too thin’. I liked Antonio’s nonna already. I just hoped she would let the wedding thing drop.

By the time we got to our apartment building, Mrs. De Luca seemed to be winding down. We made our way upstairs and showed her around Antonio’s two-bedroom apartment.

“This is your bedroom, Nonna,” Antonio told her, setting her suitcases inside the door. “The bathroom is next door, and Mellie and I are across the hall.”

She mumbled something under her breath that I was pretty sure involved us being sinners, then told us she was going to take a nap and we should wake her up when it was time to cook dinner. The minute she closed the door I grabbed Antonio’s wrist and pulled him into the living room, as far away from Nonna’s bedroom as possible.

“Why am I the bad guy in this scenario?” I asked him. “I can’t believe you told her that I have cold feet. I don’t want your nonna to hate me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” he said. “She just wants us to quit stalling and get married. I think she’s hoping for great-grandchildren.”

My jaw dropped. “Are you delusional? I’m forty-three years old! That ship has sailed.”

“It’s not over until you finish menopause.”



I stared at the man in front of me, wondering what he'd done with my best friend.

“What exactly do you know about female reproduction?” I asked. “And how do you know I'm not in menopause?”

“You bought a box of tampons the last time we went shopping,” he reminded me.

I put my hand on his chest, intending to give him a little shove, but then I got distracted by the little zings that ran up my arm. When I looked up, Antonio was staring at my hand like it was one of the sudoku puzzles that he loved to solve.

I stepped back before I did something totally crazy, like throw myself into his arms and kiss him. One thing was for sure— these next two weeks with him and his nonna were going to be a challenge.

Little did I know how much of a challenge it would be.

After Nonna woke up from her nap, she demanded to cook dinner for us, but we insisted on taking her to our favorite Greek restaurant instead. We ordered some family style dishes so Nonna could try a little of everything. I'd thought she might be hesitant to try strange foods, but she ate with gusto.

Something she also did with gusto: flirt with Mr. Poulos, the restaurant owner. He was a dapper older man, probably in his seventies, who'd been widowed for a long time. He preened as Nonna flirted with him like a teenage girl.

As we ate our dinner, Nonna gave Antonio updates on all the people who lived in her village. It was sweet watching Antonio and his grandmother. I could tell by his face that he had no clue who most of those people were, but he listened intently. They clearly had a strong relationship and doted on each other.

When we got back to the apartment, we decided to decorate the Christmas tree that we'd put up earlier today.

Nonna insisted that we open a bottle of wine and try some of the cookies she'd brought with her from Italy. They were delicious, and the night passed surprisingly quickly as we listened to Christmas music and arranged ornaments on the

tree. By the time Nonna headed off to bed at ten o'clock, I was ready for bed myself. Pretending all day was exhausting.

As she headed to her room, she turned back to ask, "What time is the church?"

"Ten o'clock," Antonio responded without hesitation. "We'll leave at nine thirty."

I loved the way he said that like he went to church regularly. I knew for a fact the only thing he did religiously was follow the Cubs.

"Okay. Buona notte."

"Good night, Nonna," we said in sync.

Earlier she'd insisted that I stop calling her 'Mrs. De Luca' and call her 'Nonna' instead.

Antonio and I worked together to straighten up the kitchen, then headed to his room. Grabbing my pajamas, I headed into the walk-in closet to change. When I came back out, Antonio was standing in the middle of the room wearing only a pair of white boxers with a candy cane design.

Without any consultation with my brain, my eyes roved down his bare chest, stopping for a second at the bulge in his boxers before snapping back up to his face. My panties suddenly felt damp.

"Where are your clothes?"

"I sleep like this."

"Not tonight, you don't," I said firmly, walking to my side of the bed. "For God's sake, put on some sweats or something."

"But I get hot when I sleep."

I put my hands on my hips and stared him down, carefully keeping my eyes on his face.

"Do you want to sleep on the floor?"

"No."

"You know what to do then."

## CHAPTER 6



### ANTONIO

I LOOKED AT THE STERN LOOK ON MARY ELLEN'S FACE AND resisted smiling. She was so adorable. Her hands on her hips pulled her pajama top tight against her breasts, very obviously unrestrained by a bra. I could see her nipples poking through the thin fabric.

With effort, I turned my eyes away, mostly so I could avoid popping a boner like a horny teenager. I wouldn't be able to hide that while wearing these boxers.

By the time I'd pulled on a pair of grey sweatpants and a tee shirt, Mary Ellen was sitting in bed, her back propped up against the headboard, her e-reader in her lap. I slid onto the other side of the bed, then realized it was too hot under the blankets and pushed them to the side.

"Are you making a wall between us?" she asked.

I looked down at the roll of blankets and smiled. "Hey, remember that old movie we saw at the Biograph? The one where they slept with a blanket between them and called it the Wall of Jericho?"

She nodded, her lips curving up at the memory. My best friend and I had made a lot of memories together over the years. I hardly remembered the time in my life before she was my friend. It felt good to have her in my bed, like she belonged here.

"Yeah, *It Happened One Night* with Clark Gable, I love that movie."

"We should watch that again."

“Not this week,” Mary Ellen said. “This is our week to watch our favorite old Christmas movies.”

Every December we had a repertoire of movies we watched without fail. We’d started our annual Christmas movie marathon years ago. In addition to classics like *Elf* and *A Christmas Story*, Mary Ellen always wanted us to watch *Christmas in Connecticut* and *The Shop Around the Corner*. For my part, I insisted that we watch *Bad Santa* and *Die Hard*.

Like so many parts of our lives, the Christmas movie marathon was our “thing”. We both had a lot of other friends, including several mutual friends, but the one person I talked to every single day without fail was Mary Ellen.

I studied her out of the corner of my eye. She chewed on her bottom lip as she read what was no doubt a cozy mystery. Mellie loved those. Well, when she wasn’t secretly reading romance books.

Feeling me watching her, she turned her head. “What?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to thank you for helping me out. It means a lot to me.”

“You’d do the same for me,” she said. “Although I’d never get into such a ridiculous situation.”

“Come on now, I keep your life interesting.”

She nodded. “That you do, Ant. That you do.”

I was tired, but when Mary Ellen finally shut down her e-reader and turned off the light, I found it impossible to sleep. I stared at the ceiling for hours, listening to my best friend breathe next to me. When I woke up the next morning, I was lying flat on my back on one side of the bed, with Mary Ellen on her stomach on the other side. Her eyes snapped open as I sat up, looking around in sleepy confusion.

“What?” she asked, her voice scratchy. “What’s wrong?”

“I expected us to wake up snuggling,” I admitted. Maybe because I’d been tempted to do just that last night.

“This isn’t a rom com,” she reminded me. “Besides, you sleep like a starfish, with your arms and legs all flung wide.”

“I do?”

“Yeah, you damn near nailed me in the face when you spread out your arms.”

“It’s been a while since I slept in the same bed with someone,” I admitted. “I’m used to spreading out.”

“Jeez, you don’t even let the women you sleep with stay over?” She propped her head on her hand.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I haven’t dated anyone for a long time.”

“Well, in fairness you’ve never been much of a dater.”

It was true. I mostly did short term arrangements. It wasn’t that I was a player, not exactly—it was more that after a few dates, everyone started to bore me. Even when the sex was good, I lost interest quickly. In fact, the only woman I hadn’t lost interest in after spending any amount of time with was lying right next to me.

Hmm. I hadn’t realized that before.

“You haven’t dated in a while either,” I reminded her.

My best friend generally dated someone for exactly three months before she got tired of them. We were quite a pair, really, both of us pathologically unable to sustain a romantic relationship. But as I looked across the mattress at Mary Ellen, I couldn’t help but wonder if the reason no one caught either of our interest long term was because no one measured up to what we had with each other.

That’s when I realized what I had to do. I was going to make it my mission to break out of the friend zone where I’d languished for over fifteen years now. There was one thing I wanted for Christmas—to change my relationship status with my best friend.

I just had to figure out how to make that happen.

## CHAPTER 7



MARY ELLEN

“YOU’RE PRETENDING TO BE HIS GIRLFRIEND FOR CHRISTMAS? I swear I’ve seen this one on the Hallmark Channel. Like fifteen times. They always end up engaged by the end.”

My friend Lainie looked over from the next bike. We had a standing Monday night date at the gym to work out. Well, technically we’d lackadaisically pedal on our bikes and catch up on each other’s lives before hitting the sauna and getting dinner, but just coming to the gym had to count for something right? I increased my pace a little bit just in case.

“I’ve known Antonio forever and I just can’t believe he’d lie to his nonna like this.”

“He thought she was dying,” Lainie reminded me. “People do weird things when they’re under stress like that.”

“I don’t know why he told her it was me though.”

“You don’t, really?”

Lainie gave me a “how stupid are you?” look, making me groan.

“Not this again. I’ve told you a million times, we’re just friends.”

“All I’m saying is, the rest of us all think it’s very telling that the two of you spend so much time together and never get serious about anyone, ever. When Mark met you guys, he thought you’d been married for years the way you act.”

Mark was Lainie’s billionaire fiancée. Old childhood friends turned enemies, they’d gotten together after their

twenty-fifth high school reunion earlier this year and after a rocky start, had fallen in love. They were adorable together, and I'd never seen Lainie happier.

I rolled my eyes and Lainie stopped pedaling, turning in her seat to pin me with a hard look.

“Tell me the truth, do you ever fantasize about him?”

“No!” I lied, pedaling even faster.

Lainie's eyes focused on my legs before returning to my face. “You're telling me you don't find him attractive? Even a little?”

“Of course I find him attractive. I'm a heterosexual female and he looks... Well, you know how he looks. He's totally hot. And now he's getting that silver fox vibe, too.”

“What if he finds you attractive, too?”

“He doesn't.”

“You're wrong. A few years ago, he was out drinking with the guys and Antonio got drunk and told them that he totally wanted to bang you. Brian told me about it later.”

Brian was another one of the guys in our friend group. He'd been Lainie's platonic date for the reunion where she'd fallen in love with Mark. It was okay though, because Brian fell in love with another one of her former classmates that night, too.

I stopped pedaling so I could face her full on. My heart was racing way faster than it should have been.

“I don't believe that,” I said firmly. “He's never acted like he's remotely attracted to me.”

God knows I wanted to believe it, but Brian must have misunderstood.

When she opened her mouth to argue, I rushed to add, “It doesn't matter if I find him attractive, Lainie. It doesn't matter if he finds me attractive. He's my best friend. If we were to try to take things to the next level and I lost him, I'd be devastated.”

“Would you be devastated if you lost me as a friend?” she asked.

I frowned in confusion. “Sure.”

“Funny, you don’t sound as convincing when it’s not Antonio.”

I skipped dinner with Lainie to head home and hang out with Antonio and his grandmother. They’d spent the day together exploring the city while I’d been at work, and I figured Nonna would be tired when I got home. I figured wrong.

I found her and Antonio in the kitchen, dancing to a Dean Martin song and cooking up a storm.

“You’re home!”

Antonio danced over to me and pulled me into his arms, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. The way you would if you were engaged to someone. We’d hugged a million times over the years, but we’d never kissed, not even a quick peck. Our eyes met as our lips pressed together, and I felt a little zing all the way to my core. I resisted the urge to deepen the kiss, instead stepping back with a little laugh.

“I’m all sweaty. I should take a shower.”

“We will eat the dinner when you are finished,” Nonna told me.

After taking a quick shower, I returned to the kitchen wearing yoga pants and a baggy sweatshirt. Today, Nonna was wearing a gaudy flowered skirt that looked like it was left over from Woodstock along with a “Kiss Me, I’m Italian” shirt that I was absolutely sure she’d gotten from Antonio.

“Thanks for waiting for me,” I told them.

“No problem.”

Antonio threw an arm around me and pressed a soft kiss to my temple. We were doing this now? The casual kissing?

“Nonna and I made fresh pasta.”



My eyes widened as I saw the huge platter of pasta on the counter, surrounded by three other covered dishes.

“So much for my workout.”

“Did you and Lainie even break a sweat?” he teased.

We’d run into him in the gym more than once and he always teased us about our easy-going approach to exercise. Antonio took his workouts more seriously, exercising until his muscles were shaking.

“Of course,” I said primly. “In the sauna.”

We shared a laugh, and as I looked away, I found his grandmother watching us with an amused smile on her face.

“You two are a very nice couple. I like this very much. We will eat pasta and plan the wedding so we can talk to the priest.”

## CHAPTER 8



### ANTONIO

“NONNA, MARY ELLEN ISN’T CATHOLIC. WE’RE NOT GOING to have a church wedding.”

Nonna gasped and dramatically made the sign of the cross. It was all fake, of course. I’d seen her watching Mary Ellen in church yesterday where it had been painfully obvious that she didn’t know how any of our rituals went. I was pretty sure it had been the first time Mary Ellen had been to a Catholic service.

“Are you... protestante?”

“She’s not a protestant,” I reassured her. “Mary Ellen’s parents raised her with no religion.”

The look of horror on Nonna’s face clearly conveyed her belief that being agnostic was even worse than being Protestant—and she hated the protestants. It was a long story involving a a boy she had a crush on in school who she thought stole something from her. I didn’t remember the details, but it had left Nonna with the strong belief that all protestants were liars and cheats.

“You will be baptized then.”

“I’m sorry Nonna, but I’m not going to do that.”

Mary Ellen’s tone was surprisingly firm. I realized then that there was more to her own story regarding religion. And just when I thought I knew everything about her...

“Okay then, it is settled. You will come to Italia and be married in the village. My cousin the priest will marry you

outdoors, even if it's not a true marriage in the eyes of God. He can also baptize you later if you change your mind."

"This pasta is incredible, Nonna," I said loudly, changing the subject. It was true, too. The combination of homemade pasta and Nonna's special red sauce was making me very happy right now.

Also making me happy? My grandmother seemed to be completely recovered from her brush with death. We'd walked all over the city today and she'd still had the energy to nag me about my life choices and make me pasta.

After dinner, Mary Ellen and I worked to clean up the table and load the dishwasher. By the time we'd finished, Nonna had gone into her room for the night. She liked to read the Bible for an hour every night before she went to sleep.

"Do you want to watch one of our Christmas movies?" I asked Mary Ellen.

She glanced at the clock on the oven. It was just after eight-thirty.

"That sounds good."

"We can watch the movie in the bedroom," I said. "It'll be more comfortable."

We normally watched TV in the living room, but I loved the idea of snuggling with her instead. She hesitated for a long moment before acquiescing.

"Yeah, sure, okay. But I get to pick the movie."

After changing into our pajamas, we settled onto the bed to watch *The Shop Around the Corner*. The old Jimmy Stewart movie was one of Mary Ellen's favorites, something she used to watch with her own grandmother when she was younger.

Instinctively, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and Mary Ellen leaned into me, snuggling against my chest, and rested her hand on my thigh. As we watched the two enemies in the movie realize that they were really in love with each other, I pondered the best way to get Mary Ellen to see me as a man, not just a friend.

Kissing her had been a good start. Even though our kiss had been chaste, I'd seen the way her eyes had widened in awareness. In that moment, she was thinking of me as more than a friend. I just needed to tap into that more.

"I've been thinking," I said tentatively.

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say," I protested.

"I don't need to know, Ant. I recognize that tone of voice. It says you're about to suggest something outrageous, likely something that defies the laws of physics, and is probably illegal."

"That only happened the one time, and we were only twenty-five then."

She slid out from underneath my arm to get a better look at me. "I almost plunged to my death when we jumped onto that El train."

"We got in the car, didn't we? And made it to city hall before they closed."

She closed her eyes like she was praying for patience.

"At what point did you forget that we are middle aged now?"

"I'm not asking you to jump onto a moving train this time," I said. "Or flash your boobs at a cop. Or dump beer on a Green Bay Packer." I laughed internally. We had some fun when we were young and stupid.

"That guy was going to call the cops on me," she reminded me.

"Their quarterback was always a pussy," I said dismissively. "And this has nothing to do with anything besides us. Well, us and Nonna."

She sighed deeply. "Fine, what's your idea?"

"We should make out."

“No.”

“We need to practice.”

“No.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because as I keep reminding you, this isn’t some nineties rom com we’re living here. This is real life.”

“Yes, and in real life, you wouldn’t freeze when I kiss you the way you did before dinner.”

“I didn’t freeze, you did.”

“We both did,” I reminded her. “We need to be more natural, or Nonna is going to get suspicious.”

“Maybe she should get suspicious,” she said stubbornly. “If this goes on too much longer, Cousin Enzo the priest is going to be baptizing me while I’m wearing a wedding dress.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mellie, the baptism and the wedding will be completely different ceremonies.”

Mary Ellen’s mouth dropped open and she stared at me for a long moment before turning around and facing the other direction. Reaching over to turn off the bedside lamp, she said, “Good night, Ant.”

## CHAPTER 9



MARY ELLEN

I PUNCHED MY PILLOW, WILLING IT TO SHIFT INTO SOME magical shape that would help me sleep. The problem wasn't the pillow, of course. It was the guy sleeping next to me. The guy who thought we should practice kissing like we were high schoolers too scared to admit they had a crush on each other.

Maybe Lainie and Mark should have practiced kissing, I thought suddenly. Then they wouldn't have spent twenty-five years apart before finding each other again.

Thinking about my friend who was shacked up with her sexy billionaire fiancé was much easier than thinking about my friend who was sleeping six inches away from me, emanating heat like a furnace. With his Mediterranean blood, Antonio had always run hot.

Hopefully, he'd had no idea how tempted I was to give in to his ridiculous idea to practice kissing. When he'd kissed me earlier, it had ripped the seal off the box where I kept all the inappropriate thoughts about my best friend hidden away.

Things were already spiraling out of control with this ruse, and it had only been three days. If things kept going like this, by the time Christmas got here I'd be married, baptized Catholic, and pregnant. I'd probably have some kind of mutant baby, of course. I was turning forty-four next month and I was firmly in perimenopause. I wasn't even sure I could conceive, even if I wanted to. Which I didn't.

I'd grown up in a home with neglectful parents who didn't have much time for the kids they popped out every two years.

My siblings and I had grown up almost feral, learning at an early age to fend for ourselves. As the oldest, it had fallen to me to take care of the younger ones.

As far as I was concerned, I'd already done my share of raising children. I didn't need to do more.

Technically, I knew that Antonio didn't want kids either. We'd bonded over that many times over the years. When you didn't want kids, especially as a woman, people tended to have a lot of judgement about that. It was ironic that we'd ended up in a group of six friends who were all childless by choice. Although our friend Brian had raised his niece after his sister died.

I closed my eyes and was immediately assaulted with a vision of Cousin Enzo marrying me and Ant in a field of flowers. I'd never so much as seen a picture of the priest, but I could picture him clear as day. Lainie would be my maid of honor, of course. I imagined Antonio would ask Brian to be his. Or maybe he'd do something crazy like ask Nonna to be his best woman. She'd probably be up for that.

I shook my head at my thoughts. I was not a woman who was prone to daydreaming, especially about things like weddings. Damn this fake engagement, it was totally messing with my head.

I punched my pillow again and tried the deep breathing they taught at the yoga class I occasionally attended. My last thought before I fell asleep was that maybe Ant was right and we should kiss a little. Just to be safe.

When I woke up the next morning, Antonio was spread out in the center of the bed, his arms and legs flung wide. Without space of my own, at some point during the night I'd apparently decided to use his biceps as a pillow. My ear was pressed against his arm, and his hand was cupping my hip possessively. It felt kind of... nice. And that thought made me roll over and get myself out of bed.

I was working all this week, but Antonio had taken the week off to hang out with his grandmother. I grabbed my clothes from the closet then went to the hallway bathroom to

get ready. By the time I got into the kitchen Nonna was there, cooking.

“Good morning.”

“Buongiorno,” Nonna greeted. “I made the breakfast.”

“Oh gosh, that’s nice of you, but I have to get to work.” The truth was, I wasn’t one for breakfast in general, instead eating later in the morning when I had my second dose of coffee.

“I will make it to go then,” she said firmly.

By the time I was finished putting on my shoes and verifying that I had everything I needed for work, Nonna had two foil wrapped packages ready to go.

“I make you breakfast sandwich,” she told me. “Like McDonald’s but more delizioso. And coffee in the traveling cup. Strong, not weak like American coffee.”

“I’m sure I’ll love it, thank you. Have a good day with Ant.”

The rest of the week passed in the same way. I’d get up while Antonio was still sleeping, take whatever breakfast Nonna had packed for me, and head to work. When I came home, dinner was waiting, always including some kind of freshly made pasta. Then I’d hear the stories of their adventures in the city. We’d share a bottle of wine over dessert, then Nonna would retire to her room to read the Bible, and Antonio and I would retire to our room to watch a Christmas movie.

Meanwhile, Antonio was getting increasingly touchy. A kiss on the lips when I came home from work, a kiss on the cheek when he passed me, his arms around me whenever we were sitting close to one another.

I was sure that it was all part of the act, but for me, it was ratcheting up my attraction for him until he was all I could think about. I spent my days and nights daydreaming about him like a lovestruck teenager. And every time I looked into the depths of his chocolate-colored eyes, I asked myself what if.



## CHAPTER 10



### ANTONIO

I WOKE UP TO THE BEST THING EVER— MARY ELLEN snuggled against my side, her head on my shoulder. She'd been using my arm as a pillow all week —although she claimed it was because I was a bed hog— but this was the closest she'd gotten to me during the night. It had to mean something, right?

Something was changing between us, I could feel it. We'd always been super comfortable with each other, always been physically affectionate, but things felt different now.

Mary Ellen's breathing changed. She stiffened, then sat straight up, looking disoriented.

"What? Oh. Sorry, I. Um."

Wrapping an arm around her, I pulled her back down to my side, then winced as her head bounced against the bony part of my shoulder.

"Relax, Mellie, nothing wrong with a little snuggling."

To my utter shock, she did relax, settling back against me with one palm laid flat on my belly. We were both quiet for several minutes before Mary Ellen spoke, her voice soft and tentative.

"I feel like we're starting to cross some lines here. Or at least blur them."

"Maybe it's not a bad thing," I responded.

I breathed a sigh of relief that I wasn't the only one feeling it. I also appreciated that our relationship was strong enough

that we could acknowledge it.

She shifted to look at me more directly. The air around us felt heavy, charged.

“We’ve been friends for a million years, Ant. I don’t want us to do anything to jeopardize that because we get caught up in our role-playing game.”

Bracing my feet on the bed, I rolled us both over until Mary Ellen was on the bed beneath me. She squealed, then laughed, before spreading her legs to let my hips nestle between them. Our bodies fit together perfectly.

“What are you doing?” Her tone was a little breathless.

“This.”

I lowered my head until my lips hovered just above hers. My heart sank when she turned her head.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth!”

“I don’t care.”

She turned back in my direction, and I knew her well enough to read the desire in her eyes.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” I whispered. “And it’s not because I’m caught up in a game.”

The second she said “okay,” I went in, pressing my lips against hers, then pressing the tiniest bit harder. When she sighed, I slid my tongue into her mouth, and it was like lighting a match to dry tinder. Mary Ellen opened for me, her tongue meeting mine, and my cock turned to steel as I eagerly explored her mouth.

*Finally*, I thought.

Her hands came up to my hair, pulling the strands the tiniest bit. She tilted my head to get us a better angle and I completely gave myself up to the kiss. Kissing my best friend—really kissing her—was even better than I’d imagined. And I’d imagined it a lot over the years. By the time we broke apart, we were both panting, my hips grinding against her core through our pajamas.

I levered up on my forearms so I could see her face clearly. Her green eyes were wide and stunned, a flush of pink across her pale skin, her lips swollen and parted. I wanted to remember this picture for the rest of my life.

Suddenly I heard a pounding on our bedroom door, making us both jump apart guiltily.

“You lazy people must get out of bed now,” Nonna called through the door. “We have much to do today.”

My eyes met and held with Mary Ellen’s as I called, “We’ll be right out, Nonna.”

As she walked away from the door, Nonna grumbled loud enough for us to hear her clearly. “You two need to go to confession!”

Mary Ellen covered her eyes. “Oh my God! She probably thinks we were having sex!”

“If she’d come knocking ten minutes later, maybe we would have been.”

“Ant.”

“Mellie.”

We stared at each other for a long, charged moment.

“This is big,” she finally said.

“It is. But maybe this was always meant to happen. That kiss... It was incredible, Mellie.”

“Yeah,” she admitted. “It really was.”

She sighed deeply, then pushed on my chest until I rolled off her.

“But I still don’t know if this is a good idea. If this fucks up our friendship, I’m going to be really sad.”

“It won’t. I promise you that.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Ant.”

## CHAPTER 11



MARY ELLEN

I WANDERED THROUGH THE CHRISTKINDLMARKET WITH Antonio and his grandmother, his strong fingers wrapped around mine. Holding hands was nice. Comfortable.

This tingling sensation where our skin touched was new. Or maybe it wasn't new at all, maybe I'd just ignored it before. God knows we hadn't held hands like this before our fake engagement. A fake engagement that was starting to feel so real.

"I like this place," Nonna told us approvingly.

The Christkindlmarket was an enormous holiday event that happened in Chicago's Daley Plaza every December. Based on traditional German holiday markets, the event ran throughout the Christmas season, drawing over a million visitors each year.

It was a nice day, sunny and cool but not too cold, and the public square was jam packed with visitors strolling through the booths offering everything from ornaments and Nativity scenes to sausages and cookies. Somewhere in the market, a group sang traditional Christmas carols. It was one of my favorite things about Christmastime in Chicago.

We stopped near the stage to watch a ballerina troupe do a short segment of *The Nutcracker*. Antonio moved behind us, his strong arms wrapping around my waist and pulling me close. I relaxed back against him, enjoying this new physical connection.

We walked around browsing the booths until we got hungry, then Antonio purchased a variety of German food for us while I got beer and Nonna found us a table. We ate mostly in silence, enjoying the Christmas music and people watching as we tucked into our food.

As much as I tried though, I couldn't put this morning's kiss out of my head. It kept replaying on a loop, over and over. When I'd woken up to find myself snuggled against Antonio, I'd panicked. But then he'd pulled me close to him again and I started to wonder if he was feeling things change between us the same as I was.

When he kissed me, well, let's just say I forgot about everything else but the feeling of his lips on mine. Until Nonna interrupted us, of course. I couldn't help but wonder how far we would have gone if she hadn't brought us back to our senses.

"You're thinking too hard," Antonio whispered in my ear.

I shivered at the movement of his breath, and to my shock, he clamped his teeth on the shell of my ear and bit down just hard enough to give me the tiniest jolt of pain —closely followed by a jolt of arousal.

Elbowing him in the ribs, I looked across the table to see that Nonna was watching us carefully, a tiny smile on her face.

She really was a sweet little old lady, even if she was a tad eccentric. Today, she was wearing a black velvet button hat with a giant red flower on it, like she'd stepped out of that nineteen-nineties sitcom *Blossom*. Underneath the giant winter coat that I'd loaned her on her first day here, she wore lime green stretch pants and a multicolored striped blouse that she left untucked.

"Do you want to do any more shopping, Nonna?" Antonio asked after we'd finished eating.

"I want to see the fancy windows now," she said decisively.

We walked the short distance over to State Street where all the major department stores installed elaborate holiday

window displays every year. In the front windows of Macy's, an enormous North Pole scene was set up, the display stretching across several windows. There was fake snow on the ground, mechanical elves making toys, and Santa and his reindeer flew above it all, lit with the red nose of Rudolph.

The design was meticulously done, and I loved watching the look of wonder on the kids' faces as they took in the scene with their little noses pressed up tight against the glass.

"When I was younger, my grandmother would bring me here," I told Nonna as we stopped at the next set of windows. "This store was Marshall Field's back then, and it was a tradition for us to come downtown to view the windows. Afterwards we would go inside to the Walnut Room—it's a famous restaurant—and get hot chocolate and a snack."

"You were close with your nonna?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. Very."

Even though my grandmother had been dead since I was in college, I felt my eyes sting with tears. Antonio wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close, and kissed the top of my head. I leaned into him, allowing him to comfort me even as I felt ridiculous for being so emotional over some holiday windows.

"This store is called Macy's," Nonna said suddenly, noticing the sign. "Like in the movie with Maureen O'Hara?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "That movie was set in New York City, but it's the same store. If you like the movie, we could stream it on TV if you'd like."

"I would like this," Nonna said. "It will be nice after so much walking today. I am feeling tired in my legs."

Other than the first night when she'd arrived and been jet lagged, it was the first time we'd seen any sign that Antonio's grandmother was feeling her age. A look of consternation crossed my fake fiancé's face.

"Let's take a taxi home."

"We can take train," Nonna protested. "It is less money."

But Antonio was already standing on the side of the road, waving down a cab.

We slid into the cab, with me sandwiched between Antonio and his grandmother. As the taxi driver careened northward, narrowly avoiding an accident approximately every fifteen seconds like every other taxi in the city, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen when Antonio and I were alone again in our bedroom tonight.

## CHAPTER 12



### ANTONIO

“I’VE ALWAYS LOVED THIS MOVIE,” MARY ELLEN TOLD US AS the original *Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street* finished. “The remake is an abomination, though.”

“Agreed.”

Mary Ellen and I were united in our dislike of movie remakes.

After a great day exploring the holiday festivities downtown in the Loop, we’d come back to my place to chill and watch movies. Mary Ellen and I were snuggled together on the couch, with Nonna in the armchair, her feet resting on the ottoman.

The best thing about this fake engagement —besides how happy it was making my nonna— was having free reign to be as physically affectionate with Mary Ellen as I’d always wanted to be. We’d spent a lot of time together over the years, and we often hugged or bumped shoulders or gave each other playful smacks on the arm, but I’d never been able to put my arm around her shoulder while she snuggled into my side. I’d never been able to nip the shell of her ear like I’d done at the Christkindlmarket. And I’d certainly never been able to make out with her like I’d done this morning.

“Do you want to watch something else, Nonna?” I asked as Maureen O’Hara realized that Santa Claus had got them their dream house.

“No,” she said decisively. “Too much TV is not good for your eyes. I will go to my room now.”



After Nonna left, we sat in an increasingly awkward silence, which was kind of a bummer because we'd never once had an awkward silence. Mary Ellen and I had clicked immediately when we'd first met, and we'd never been anything but fully comfortable around each other. Deciding I needed to nut up, I cleared my throat.

“Should we talk about it?”

Mary Ellen moved away from me so she could sit sideways on the couch and face me.

“Did you mean it before, when you said that maybe this was always meant to happen?” she asked.

It wasn't the question I was expecting, but I nodded.

“The truth is, I was attracted to you the first time we met, but you were dating that tool Jackson...”

“Jason.”

“Whatever. By the time you broke up, you'd already put me in the friend zone.”

“Actually, when I broke up with Jason you were dating April,” she reminded me.

“Who?”

“Cheerleader for the Bulls. Blonde hair. Doe eyes. Spray tan. Enormous fake boobs. Had a laugh that sounded like a braying donkey.”

I thought for a second. “Oh yeah, I forgot all about her.”

I rarely remembered any woman who wasn't Mary Ellen. It was interesting to me that Mary Ellen hadn't forgotten. I wondered if she'd been jealous.

“My point is, if I'd met you when we were both single, I would have totally asked you out, Mellie. But by the time we were, we had this great friendship that I didn't want to mess with. But on some level, I was always attracted to you. I just didn't act on it because I didn't think you were attracted to me.”

Mary Ellen's green eyes widened.

“I was attracted to you, too,” she whispered, a slight blush crossing her cheekbones.

I damn near cried in relief.

“Come here,” I said, patting my lap.

After a slight hesitation, she came to straddle my legs, positioning herself near my knees. I met and held her eyes.

“You know how our friends always thought we were secretly in love with each other?” I asked.

She nodded. It had been a source of constant ribbing and nosy questions over the entirety of our relationship.

“Maybe they saw something we were too scared to admit.”

“Is that why I’m the one you told Nonna you were engaged to?” she asked curiously.

“When I thought about being engaged, you were literally the only person I could imagine that being true with,” I confirmed.

My heart started thumping a little harder as we stared at each other for a long moment. Then, as if someone had fired a starter pistol, we both moved forward at the same time, our mouths meeting in the middle. I threaded my fingers through her hair and nipped at her lower lip, demanding entrance, then slid my tongue along hers.

Mary Ellen shifted her body closer until her center was pressed right against my rapidly hardening cock. Her hand moved between us, unbuttoning the flannel shirt I wore and wrenching it open. When she found the tee shirt beneath, she groaned in frustration.

I pulled away and gave her my cockiest smile. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

When her expression faltered, I lowered my hands to her hips.

“We’re not going to sleep together tonight.”

“We’re not?” she asked in confusion. “Do you want me to go back to my place?”

I shook my head. “I mean, we’ll sleep together, but we’re not going to have sex. Not tonight, anyway. This is too important to rush.”

“We can mess around a little though, right?” she clarified.

“Yes,” I said with forced casualness.

“Take off the shirt then,” she ordered.

I shrugged off my flannel, then pulled my tee shirt over my head, tossing it to the side. Mary Ellen’s hand went right to my chest, exploring the light layer of hair she found there before scratching my nipples with her thumbnails.

Groaning, I practically ripped her sweater over her head, then made quick work of the black satin bra I found underneath. I angled her backwards so I could lower my head and take one pink nipple into my mouth. Her breasts were full, with a tear drop shape, and I couldn’t wait to get a taste.

“Ant,” she gasped as I gave her nipple a hard suck. “Oh my God.”

I swirled my tongue around her nipple, teasing her, then nipped it between my teeth before adding suction again. The little bud hardened to a peak inside my mouth as Mary Ellen arched her back, pressing closer. When she was panting with desire, I moved to the other nipple, giving it the same treatment.

Mary Ellen’s hand slid down, cupping my erection and stroking me beneath the fabric of my jeans. I pumped my hips, pushing myself into her hand, and we both groaned softly.

Moving to the waistband of her yoga pants, I slipped my hands down under her panties until I was cupping her bare ass in my palms. Our lips met again, and we kissed for what felt like hours, Mary Ellen stroking my cock while I kneaded the soft flesh of her ass.

When I was seconds away from coming in my pants like a horny teenager, I pulled away. I wanted nothing more than to roll her underneath me and fuck her until she’d forgotten about any man who wasn’t me, but I’d meant what I said when I told

Mary Ellen that we shouldn't rush this. I'd waited way too long for this chance, and I wasn't going to mess it up now.

I pulled away regretfully and she scooted back on my legs, watching me carefully.

"We should go to bed. To sleep," I clarified.

"Okay."

I was gratified by how disappointed she looked at my suggestion. But when we fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, I knew there was no way I'd be able to hold out much longer.

## CHAPTER 13



MARY ELLEN

“GOOD MORNING.”

I looked up from my position basically sprawled on top of Antonio.

“Oh. Sorry.”

When I went to move, he tightened his arms. “Don’t be. It’s a nice way to wake up.”

I shifted a bit and when I did, I could feel his morning wood pressing against my thigh. I glanced down, then looked back to Antonio.

“Someone woke up excited this morning,” I teased.

“Hungry, too.”

Before I knew what was happening, he’d rolled me onto my back, just like yesterday, but this time he whipped off the blankets and scooted downwards.

“What are you doing?”

His hand stilled on the waistband of my flannel pajamas.

“I’ve been dying to taste you.”

All the air rushed out of my lungs. When I didn’t protest, Antonio slid my pajamas and panties down my legs, baring me completely. His eyes fixed on my pussy, and instinctively I pressed my legs together.

“You’re beautiful,” he breathed.

I wasn't one to wax, but I sent up a little prayer of gratitude that I'd recently groomed things down there, almost as if I'd been expecting this to happen. And maybe I had.

Antonio spread my legs wide and moved to lay on his stomach between them, and I couldn't think of a single reason not to let him, especially when I felt his tongue sliding up my inner thigh. I moaned, bending my knees and letting them fall to the side so he could have better access.

He teased around my apex for a few minutes, licking and biting the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, the scruff on his unshaved jaw adding to the delicious sensation. Just when I was about to beg him to quit messing around and do something, he used his thumbs to spread my pussy lips.

I was already dripping wet, and he'd scarcely touched me. As much as I'd pretended it wasn't true, I'd wanted this for a long time. And when he licked up my seam, it was all I could do not to come on the spot.

Gripping his hair with my fingers, I directed him towards my clit. He chuckled against my folds, the sound vibrating up through my body.

“Hold on, greedy girl. I want to explore first.”

Antonio pressed closer and licked his way inside my channel, lapping up my arousal with a low hum of pleasure. He teased around my opening, then slid his tongue inside me, giving me a few gentle thrusts that made my hips lift up from the mattress, desperate to take him deeper. His hands clamped on my hips, holding me still as he continued to fuck me with his tongue.

When I was writhing beneath him, nearly ready to explode, he finally made his way up to my throbbing clit. He licked a circle around it, then tapped it a few times with the tip of his tongue, then made some more circles.

“Ant!” I gasped. “Please!”

He finally sucked the swollen bud into his mouth, biting down softly. I could feel my orgasm starting and so could Antonio, because he slid a finger deep inside me and started

pumping in and out while he continued to suck on my clit. He added a second finger, stretching me wider, then bent his fingers, pressing along my inner walls.

When Antonio found my G-spot, I blindly reached for his pillow, pressing it against my face as wave after wave of pleasure rushed through me. My legs clamped around his shoulders, squeezing him close. I bucked against his mouth, moaning into the pillow as I came so hard that I actually felt dizzy from the intense sensations.

Antonio slowed his motions as I started to come down and when I removed the pillow from my face, he was resting his chin on the swell of my lower belly, staring up at me with a look that told me he was quite proud of himself.

He deserved to be. I hadn't come that hard in... maybe forever.

"Holy crap," I gasped. My breath was coming in short gasps.

"That was awesome. I could die happy right now," he said, giving me a wink.

"So could I," I told him. "I had no idea that you were so good at that. Seriously, you could win a prize."

The alarm on my phone went off, making me jump, and I reached to turn it off just as we heard Nonna bang on the door.

"Quit being lazy. It is time for church!"

## CHAPTER 14



### ANTONIO

I'D SPENT A LOT OF TIME IMAGINING WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE to go down on Mary Ellen, but my daydreams didn't come remotely close to the reality. It was incredible. I'd always loved pleasuring a woman, but I'd never realized how much depth of experience there would be with someone I truly cared about.

After Nonna had reminded us about church, I'd rushed into the shower to give myself a little relief. It wasn't like I could go to church with a raging hard-on. I knew Mary Ellen felt bad that she didn't get to reciprocate, but I was glad that the first time we'd been intimate I could focus on her.

I wanted it to be clear that this wasn't about me scratching an itch. This was about forever.

After helping Nonna into the pew, I slid in next to her with Mary Ellen on her other side. My grandmother leaned closer.

"We can talk to the priest after mass about the marriage."

Behind her head, Mary Ellen bugged her eyes at me. I was wearing her down, but she wasn't quite ready to make our engagement real yet, that was clear. I opened my mouth to tell Nonna that we needed more time.

What came out was, "Mellie and I are probably getting married in Italy instead."

Mary Ellen's mouth dropped open, then closed quickly as Nonna whipped her head around to look at her.



“You will come to me for the wedding? This is great news,” my grandmother said happily. “How about next month? The only thing that would make me happier than watching your wedding would be if you get baptized Catholic.”

Mary Ellen gave her a weak smile.

“I already told you, I’m not getting baptized, Nonna.”

“It’s no worry, my cousin Enzo can marry you outside the church. Antonio will give him money to make him forget you are not Catholic. Let us pick a date.”

“I’m not sure, maybe next year or the year after...”

We were saved from continuing the conversation by the start of the service, but I knew that Nonna wasn’t going to forget what I’d said. And neither would Mary Ellen.

After church we went out to brunch, and Mary Ellen was on me the minute Nonna left the table.

“Antonio Matteo De Luca!”

“What?”

I feigned innocence, but she wasn’t having it.

“Now we’re getting married in Italy? Next month?”

“Did you want to wait for spring?” I asked her. “Italy is beautiful in the spring.”

Her mouth dropped open, and I pressed my index finger against the underside of her jaw.

“You better close that before I get ideas. I’m still half hard from this morning.”

Mary Ellen rolled her lips in, shooting daggers at me with her eyes.

“I don’t like lying to your grandmother.”

“I think we should do it.”

“Do what?”

“Get married.”

“Are you insane?”

“Maybe. But I’m also realizing that I’ve loved you for a long time, Mellie.”

“I love you, too, Ant, but that’s not a reason to get married.”

“You misunderstand me.”

I stretched my arm and cupped her cheek in my palm, gratified when she leaned into my touch.

“I don’t just love you, I’m also in love with you.”

I pressed a quick kiss against her lips as her green eyes widened almost comically.

“You feel it, too, right?”

Her eyes darkened with emotion.

“I don’t know what I feel right now, Ant, other than confusion. Everything’s different now.”

“Different can be good,” I reminded her.

“I’m not getting married just to please your grandmother.”

“How about we get married to please ourselves.”

Mary Ellen pulled back. “This is too much, too fast, Ant. I can’t just turn on a dime like this. I need you to back off.”

“Fine, I can back off,” I reassured her.

I lied. There was no way I could back off now. I didn’t want my best friend to retreat into her comfort zone.

When Nonna got back, I scooted closer to Mary Ellen on the seat of the booth, pressing myself against her from hip to knee. She subtly moved closer to the wall, and I followed, wrapping my arm around her shoulder.

She pinched the top of my thigh, or tried to anyway, but it didn’t do much.

I knew the exact minute she decided on a better way to get back at me. Nonna was telling us a story about someone in the village who I was clearly supposed to remember when I felt

Mary Ellen's hand move to rest on top of my thigh. It felt nice. Comforting.

At least until that hand started to move.

I was taking a drink of my water when Mary Ellen's finger brushed against my cock, causing me to choke on the liquid.

"Are you okay, honey?" Mary Ellen asked sweetly as her fingers curved around the quickly growing bulge in my pants, stroking me up and down.

It had been years since I'd been able to get hard instantly.

"Yeah," I choked.

As subtly as I could, I brought my hand under the table, prying her questing fingers off my erection. I wrapped her fingers in mine, resting our joined hands on my thigh while I silently recited the starting line-up for last year's Cubs in an effort to calm down.

Mary Ellen leaned closer, and under the guise of kissing my ear whispered, "Thinking about the Cubs?"

## CHAPTER 15



MARY ELLEN

“I’M GOING TO REST FOR A WHILE.”

Antonio’s grandmother seemed to still be tired from our big day walking around downtown yesterday, and her announcement that she was taking a nap when we got back home confirmed it.

“Okay, Nonna. Mellie and I need to run an errand. We’ll be back before you wake up, okay?”

“Si, caro, I will see you soon.”

Antonio grabbed my hand, pulling me out the door at a fast pace.

“Where are we going?”

Instead of answering me, he practically ran next door and used his key to open the door to my apartment.

“Ant, what’s going on?” I asked again.

The minute he pulled me inside, he swung me around, pushing me against the closed front door. He pulled the hand he was holding up to press it against the door on the side of my head, then did the same thing with my other hand, trapping me against the wood.

Speaking of wood, when he pushed his hips against me, I could feel the hard swell of his erection against my lower belly.

“You think it’s fun to tease me?” he said, his voice more serious than it usually was.

I smirked as I remembered his reaction when I'd stroked his dick in the restaurant earlier. If he thought he could intimidate me, he'd forgotten who he was dealing with. I rocked my pelvis, pressing against his erection and making him groan.

"You think you can arrange my wedding without talking to me?" I countered.

He lowered his head, and his kiss was unexpectedly hard and rough. Damn, I had no idea Antonio could be like this. I liked it.

I moaned against his lips, and he shoved his tongue inside my mouth to tangle with mine. The kiss was hard and hot and by the time we came up for air, we were dry humping against the door like teenagers.

I was wearing a loose, knee-length skirt for church and Antonio released my hands and grabbed the hem, shoving it upwards until it was bunched around my waist. Meanwhile I was furiously grabbing at his buttons, desperate to get him out of the shirt he was wearing. When I shoved it off his shoulders, he practically ripped it the rest of the way off before squatting to remove my panties.

His hand came to cup my mound and all the blood in my body headed in that direction.

"You're so wet already," he groaned.

"You weren't the only one affected by the teasing," I retorted.

Stroking him in the restaurant had ratcheted up my own arousal. I unsnapped his pants, then slid his zipper down. Antonio took half a step back and my body immediately felt bereft without the heat of him against me.

"Tell me you want this," he ordered.

I met his gaze, saw the intensity in the brown depths.

"I want this, Ant. I want you to fuck me."

His eyes widened. He shoved his pants and boxers down, giving me a brief glimpse of what looked like a very

impressive cock. Then his large hands gripped the back of my thighs, boosting me up against the door. I wrapped my legs around his hips, tilting my pelvis so it lined up just right against his erection.

Maybe this was going to be a terrible mistake, but right now it felt like I was going to die if I didn't have him inside me.

He pressed against my opening, then slid in just an inch or two, waiting for me to adjust. Locking my ankles behind him, I used my leg muscles to pull him forward, so he slid into me in one long stroke. I gasped at the feeling of fullness.

"There's no going back after this," Antonio told me.

I bit my lip. "I know."

He slid out slowly, then pushed back in until he was fully seated deep inside me. I could feel my body stretching to accommodate him, then relaxing against his cock. Antonio began moving, slowly at first.

"Quit dawdling," I gasped.

I wanted him to be rough. I wanted him to imprint himself on me, so I never forgot this moment. I wanted him to fuck me through the damn door. The last few days had unleashed a wave of desire I'd been suppressing for years, and there was no way I was going to deny myself any longer.

"Harder."

My command seemed to break his control. He started pistoning his hips against mine, pushing inside me so hard, so deep, that the door rattled behind me.

Grabbing his hair, I pulled his face down for a kiss, and our tongues mimicked the motions of our hips as we kept climbing together. My entire body felt electrified, my focus on what was happening blocking everything else out. I wasn't aware of anything besides the hard thrusts of his hips, the movement of his tongue exploring my mouth, the sensation of his strong shoulder muscles bunching beneath my fingers.

We broke apart and Antonio lowered his head, biting at the juncture of my shoulder. I gasped.

“I don’t know how long I’m going to last, Mellie. I’ve wanted you for too damned long.”

I squeezed my hand between us so I could give some extra attention to my clit, while Antonio nosed my sweater off my shoulder and left a trail of little bites along the top of my shoulder.

One of his hands shifted from my thigh to reach beneath my sweater. He pinched my nipple hard through the fabric of my bra and suddenly I was breaking apart. I stiffened, my back arching away from the door, my toes curling inside my boots, my entire body violently shaking with the force of my orgasm.

“Ant!”

His name came out as a high-pitched wail that I didn’t even recognize.

“Fuck. Mellie. You feel so good squeezing me... I don’t think I can...”

His words dropped off to a long groan as he thrust deep inside me, shooting a warm jet of cum against the wall of my womb. He pulled back partway, then pushed in again, each thrust releasing more of his cum while I held him tight.

When he was done, he sagged against me, his head falling to the crook of my shoulder, his breathing ragged like he’d just run a marathon.

“Holy. Shit.” His words were a mumble against my skin.

After a few seconds, he lifted his head to look at me, his expression shocked.

“I know,” I said, giving him a soft smile. “Maybe we shouldn’t have waited eighteen years to do that.”

## CHAPTER 16



### ANTONIO

I STARED AT MY BEST FRIEND, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OUR relationship, I didn't know what to say to her. It was like what had just happened had completely fried my brain.

The air around us cooled. Mary Ellen unwrapped her legs from my waist, setting her feet on the floor, and moved around me, like maybe she wanted space as much as I did right now.

I just stood there like an idiot, my dick hanging out, my forehead pressed against the door, my heart thundering in my chest while I considered the implications of what had just happened. I needed to catch my breath and process the enormity of what I'd just done with Mary Ellen. That hadn't just been us having sex. It had been the entire world tilting on its axis.

"You just gonna stand there showing me your ass?" Mary Ellen's voice had an artificial humor to it, telling me she wasn't as unaffected as she was clearly trying to be.

I tucked myself back into my pants, then zipped up before I turned around. Mary Ellen was dressed and heading for the refrigerator. She grabbed two bottles of water and tossed one in my direction. I caught it with one hand.

She leaned against the counter, studying me. Her red hair was wild, her green eyes huge in her flushed face. She looked well and truly fucked.

I didn't know why I was so... freaked out wasn't the right word. More like shellshocked.



I'd been hit by a car once while riding my bike and the impact had tossed me several feet through the air and onto a patch of grass. I remember feeling just like this as I laid there looking up at the sky. Shocked. Breathless. Off kilter.

Mary Ellen's expression dimmed the longer I remained silent.

"Stop freaking out, Ant. It's all good," her voice broke through the fog. "It's just sex. It doesn't have to mean anything."

My eyes flew to hers and I wondered if she was taking my reaction as me pulling away. In fact, nothing was farther from the truth. I was ready to drag her onto the next plane and find Nonna's cousin Enzo right now. I wanted this woman wearing my ring.

As her words registered, I realized that maybe she was the one who was pulling away. I could practically hear her anxiety increasing the longer we stood watching each other, and she looked like she was trying hard not to hyperventilate. I stepped closer until I could take her hand.

"It doesn't have to mean anything?" I asked incredulously. "It means everything."

"This is too much. It's all too much, Ant. I mean, what are we even doing here, acting like this?"

She pulled away, pacing into the living room. I watched her carefully, knowing her well enough to know she needed time to process her emotions. When she returned to me, she looked the tiniest bit calmer.

"I have a proposal," she said. "Things seem... intense right now. We're playing a role for your grandmother. We're both realizing that we've had... more than friendly feelings for each other for a long time. And now that just happened..."

She waved in the direction of the door.

"How about we just continue as we have been until Nonna leaves on the twenty-sixth, and then we'll reevaluate where things are. Figure out if this is just some weird reaction to forced proximity, or if we really want to take the next step."

“And if we don’t?” I asked, wondering how she could envision any future where we didn’t take the next step, because I sure couldn’t.

“Then we go back to the way things were,” she said.

“We can’t go back to the way things were,” I said stubbornly. “Not when I know there’s so much more between us.”

“Please, Ant. Let’s just take some time to regroup. I’m freaking out here.”

A long, uncomfortable pause stretched between us before I finally said, “Fine.”

“We’d better get back to your place before your nonna worries about us.”

She headed for the entry, but I stopped her with a hand on her elbow.

“When you say we should continue as we have been, does that include sex? Because I don’t know how I can sleep next to you tonight and not want to sink so deep inside you that I don’t know where you begin and I end. Not after all that’s happened today.”

She studied my fingers on her arm, avoiding my gaze. Then she sighed, a world of emotion in the exhalation.

“Well, engaged people have sex, so I guess we can try it again. Although maybe all this was just a fluke.”

I felt happy that she wasn’t pushing me totally away, but I could feel her setting up the boundary between us, like the blanket that we’d had between us on the bed the very first night we’d pretended to be engaged.

If there’s one thing I knew about my best friend, it was that when big things happened, she needed to take some time to think. After a chaotic childhood, Mary Ellen had never been comfortable with the unexpected. She preferred things to be neat and orderly. Predictable. Nothing about today had been predictable.

I decided that for now, the best approach was to do what I'd always done—joke around with her.

“Try it again? Try? Sweet baby Jesus, I can hardly walk right now. There's no ‘try’ about it.”

She grinned, taking the out I was giving her.

“Speaking of sweet baby Jesus, your nonna wanted us to set up that manger scene we bought at the Christkindlmarket yesterday. Let's do it now so we can surprise her when she wakes up.”

“Sounds good.”

Later that night, as Mary Ellen fell asleep with her head on my chest after another vigorous round of love making, I knew one thing for certain—there was no way we were going to be able to go back to the way things were before my nonna came to visit.

She'd caught me hook, line, and sinker. Now it was time for me to reel her in and make her mine.

## CHAPTER 17



MARY ELLEN

“OH MY GOD, I CAN’T EAT ANOTHER BITE!” I RUBBED MY belly and smiled at the two De Lucas at the table. “You Italians really know how to do Christmas!”

It was funny. I’d spent at least a dozen Christmases with Antonio, either alone or with other people, and he’d never cooked or talked about wanting anything special for the holiday. In fact, when it was just the two of us, we usually did so-called “Jewish Christmas”— ordering Chinese takeout.

But with his grandmother here, Antonio was adamant about what we should have for Christmas. It was traditional Italian all the way.

Last night we’d eaten cheese ravioli, salted codfish, seafood linguini, and a variety of vegetable and pasta dishes. I learned that it was traditional for Italian Catholics to abstain from meat on Christmas Eve. Apparently, fish wasn’t considered meat, a fact that I’d teased Antonio about when we were alone.

The three of us went to Midnight Mass, which I had to admit had been kind of nice. Then we all slept in this morning before preparing a huge brunch of veal, lasagna, manicotti, chicken, potatoes, cured meats, and a bazillion side dishes. It had all been delicious, and we decided to leave most of the food out so we could graze throughout the day.

After brunch, when we were good and stuffed, we headed into the living room to open Christmas presents. Normally Antonio and I exchanged one gag gift and called it good, but

with Nonna coming, we'd agreed to add a few small gifts for each other and her, wrapping them and leaving them under the tree.

We sat around the Christmas tree and alternated opening gifts, as was the tradition in their family. Antonio and I had both tried to buy things for his grandmother that she wouldn't buy for herself. A new pair of Nikes. Soothing bath salts. A new cell phone with a larger screen. DVDs of some of her favorite movies.

It was heavy to carry back, but I'd also bought her an Instapot. She'd fallen in love with Antonio's, and I knew she'd enjoy having one of her own. Nonna gave me a beautiful scarf she'd brought back from Italy, as well as a silver bracelet that looked expensive.

I'd gotten Antonio a variety of things: a new shirt, a whimsical Dr. Seuss tie for the days he had to go into the office, and a new Cubs jersey. Coincidentally, he'd also gotten me a Cubs jersey, as well as a night shirt with a heart design and matching socks.

"Thanks for everything, both of you," I said. "This is the best Christmas I've ever had."

It was true, too. Growing up, Christmas was always more stressful than fun due to the challenging dynamics in my family. I'd never really known what I was missing until today.

"Hold on, I've got one more thing for you," Antonio said. He looked almost nervous when he handed me a small box.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Open it and see."

Both he and his grandmother watched closely as I opened the box, revealing a smaller box inside. The smaller box held a little velvet jewelry pouch. My eyes met Antonio's for a long moment. We weren't "give each other jewelry" kind of friends. I opened the pouch, expecting to find earrings, or maybe another bracelet, but instead a ring fell out into my palm.

It looked antique, with a small yellow square-cut diamond surrounded by smaller green stones. Jade maybe.

“Nonna pointed out that I hadn’t bought you an engagement ring yet,” Antonio told me, his voice rough.

“No wonder you do not want to set a date when there’s no ring,” Nonna tutted. “Thoughtless boy. When you propose marriage, you must offer a ring of engagement. It is only proper.”

When I continued to stare at the ring, Antonio lifted it out of my palm and slid it onto the ring finger of my left hand. It fit perfectly, and the three of us admired it while it sparkled in the light.

“I remember when your coworker Susan got engaged you talked about how you hated those giant gaudy rings. This one seemed to suit you,” Antonio told me. “Those jade stones remind me of your eyes. I’ve always loved your eyes.”

When I didn’t say anything, he asked nervously, “Do you like it?”

I lifted my gaze to his. At that moment I knew. I was completely in love with my best friend, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. Not just as his friend, but as his partner. I wanted this engagement to be real.

To my complete horror, my eyes filled with tears. Antonio looked alarmed. I’d never cried in front of him the entire time I’d known him.

“It’s beautiful,” I finally said, my voice cracking. “Absolutely perfect.”

It was, too. If I’d looked all over the world for the perfect engagement ring, I never would have found anything I liked more. I leapt into his lap, grabbing his face between my palms, and kissed him deeply, uncaring that we had an audience.

When we pulled away, Nonna looked a little teary herself.

“Now that you have the ring, we will set up the wedding. I will send an email to Enzo.”

I glanced between Antonio and his grandmother.

“How about we do it in April?” I suggested. “Then we can spend Easter with you, too, Nonna.”

Antonio’s eyes widened. “You mean it? We can get married in April? This April?”

I nodded. “Yes. I love you, Ant, and I want us to make this official. Let’s get married this Easter. In Italy.”

This declaration wasn’t for his grandmother, it was just for him.

“I love you, too, Mellie. It’s always been you. Only you.”

“There’s just one thing,” I said.

“What?”

“We need to be back in time for the Cubs home opener.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss that, even for the wedding.”

Later that night as we laid in the bed, naked, sweaty, and shaking from the force of our mutual orgasms, we talked about how our relationship was no longer fake. We were living out a real-life version of every “fake relationship” book I’d ever read.

“Our friends are going to give us endless shit about this,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, but the truth is, they were right. I’ve always been in love with you, even when I didn’t want to admit it. And of course, you were head over heels for me,” he teased.

I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his before lowering my head back to his chest. It made a great pillow.

“I love you, too, Ant. You’re the second-best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“The first is when the Cubs won the World Series, isn’t it?” he laughed.

“Of course.”

## EPILOGUE



### ANTONIO

“DO YOU, MARY ELLEN AMELIA O’CONNELL, TAKE THIS MAN, Antonio Matteo De Luca, to be your wedded husband according to God’s holy ordinance, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish and obey, until death do you part?”

Mary Ellen’s eyebrows raised to her hairline. We’d told Cousin Enzo at least three times to leave off the obey, but he’d stuck it into the vows anyway.

My best friend gave me a sweet smile.

“Except for the obey part, I do.”

Several of our friends chuckled from the audience.

“And do you, Antonio Matteo De Luca—”

I held up my hand. “I do.”

Enzo gave me a frown. “I must say the words to make this official.”

Behind Mary Ellen, her best friend Lainie coughed into her hand to hide her laughter. It was a beautiful spring day, and we were getting married on my Nonna’s property in Italy, surrounded by family and friends.

“I promise to take Mary Ellen Amelia O’Connell to be my wedded wife,” I told Enzo, though my eyes were fixed on my bride. “For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, when the Cubs win or the Cubs lose, I promise that I will love and cherish her until death do us part.”



Enzo looked confused but continued the ceremony. We exchanged rings, repeated some prayers despite our insistence that this be a non-denominational ceremony, and then finally—finally—the elderly priest pronounced us officially married.

“You may kiss the bride.”

I swooped Mary Ellen backwards into a dramatic movie-style dip and pressed a long kiss to her lips. She was laughing when I pulled her back to standing. We’d been laughing together most of our lives, and I knew we’d be laughing together until we took our last breaths.

The guests clapped and we walked down the aisle hand in hand, finally officially married.

We made our way towards the river where the photographer was waiting to take pictures. But before we got there, I pulled Mary Ellen behind a tree, pulling her close to me.

“We’re married,” I whispered next to her lips. “You’re my wife.”

It was a total caveman thing to think, but I loved calling her “mine”.

“I can’t believe that after all these years, I married my best friend. But I guess you’ll make a good starter husband.”

I laughed. “Starter husband? What the hell? I ought to paddle your behind for that comment.”

“Please, you’d enjoy that as much as me.”

Mary Ellen placed her hands on my shoulders, rising up for a kiss. I kissed her long and hard until I felt something smack me in the back of the head. I wasn’t surprised to find Nonna there when I pulled back.

“Save this for the wedding night,” she chastised. “You have guests waiting. And go to confession!”

Thanks for reading my story! If you’d like to know what happens with Mary Ellen and Antonio, check out this bonus epilogue -

## Bonus Epilogue

Thank you for reading. We'd love to hear what you thought in a review! [Caught by my Best Friend](#).

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## All I Want for Kissmas



## Snowflakes & Holidates

