



Merrily You

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Holiday: If there's one thing I can count on, it's my family to be all in my business. No matter how many times I explain boundaries and privacy, they're just not getting the memo, especially when it comes to my relationships. For years they've been asking me why I don't date my best friend and roommate, Daniella. No matter how many times I say the words "we're friends," they're not getting it. Daniella: I love my family. I really do. But they will NOT leave me alone about being single. Every time I show up, they're throwing someone new at me or making pointed comments about Holiday that aren't subtle at all. Since murder isn't an option, I'm going to need another idea.

Holiday: With my family Christmas celebration coming up, I honestly think about cancelling, but then I have a better idea. Since everyone already believes that I'm secretly in love with Danny, why not just go with it? We've known each other for so long, this will be easy to pull off.

Daniella: Leave it to Holiday to come up with an absolutely wild, but completely brilliant, plan to get our families off our backs. The two of us are so comfortable that pretending to date shouldn't be that different than being besties. And then...it is. Very, very different.

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Chapter One

Holiday

“Mom,” I said, pressing my fingers into my forehead to stave off an impending headache. “We’ve been over this. Danny and I have been best friends for years. Friends. That’s all.”

I couldn’t count how many times I’d said those exact words over the years. From the minute I’d come out to my family as bisexual in high school, they’d just assumed that I’d come out to them because I was actually in love with my best friend, Daniella. When that didn’t happen, everyone was perplexed. My mom. My dad. My sweet grandmother who immediately made me an afghan in the bi flag colors. Aunts and uncles. Cousins. The whole extended family. Even other friends.

Now here we were years later, and I was still fielding the same questions and assumptions. It probably didn’t help that Danny and I were joined at the hip, had gone to the same college, and decided to live together after we graduated. But why wouldn’t we want to live together? That was what best friends did. And sometimes people had platonic commitments that were just as valid as romantic ones. That wasn’t me and Danny, but no one seemed to understand. I’d given up trying to explain myself. I was over it.

Now here we were, a couple weeks out from Christmas and I’m already preparing myself to handle all the questions and the looks and the teasing. It was too much. Couldn’t I get a break this year?

“But you’re so good together!” Mom said. “You’d be the perfect couple. We already love her. Are you sure you don’t—” I set the phone down and let out a silent scream. Mom was oblivious and just kept yapping.

Danny needed to get home from work right now so I could vent to her about this. We’d both managed to get jobs in the city about forty-five minutes from our hometown, which was some kind of miracle.

Danny had a job as an assistant to a financial advisor and was looking to potentially get into that field while I’d wandered around doing various different jobs until I’d stumbled my way into two part-time jobs: one at a new romance bookstore called *Between the Sheets*, and also doing some social media management for authors that I’d found through the bookstore. Danny made way more money than I did, but I appreciated my freedom. I’d probably do a murder or throw myself out of a window if I had to work in a regular office five days a week. Not for me.

My heart jumped for joy when I heard Danny’s key in the door. Mom was still going.

“Bye, Mom, I’m burning something on the stove, love you!” I ended the call when she was still in the middle of a sentence.

“Thank fuck you’re home,” I said.

Danny raised her eyebrows. “Hello to you too? No greeting, no asking how my day was? You’re not going to be a very good wife if you don’t learn some better social skills.”

I rolled my eyes as she set her brown leather designer backpack down by the door and rolled her shoulders. Every day I watched her do the same routine when she got home from work. First the shoulders, then she’d reach back and release her light brown hair from the elastic or clip she’d put it up with. Then she’d stretch her back and make a

noise that always made me uncomfortable because it was too close to a moan. After that was the shoes. She'd sigh and give me a tired smile before going to her bedroom to change out of her work clothes and into a T-shirt and shorts.

I couldn't help but feel smug that I was the only one who got to see her like this. Danny hated leaving the house looking anything other than perfect. The only times she was ever late were because she'd had to fix something about her appearance.

We made an odd pair since I had left the house more than a few times with my clothes on backwards, with toothpaste stains on them, or with mismatched socks. Once I'd even gone out with two different shoes on somehow.

If Danny and I hadn't been friends since we were kids, we never would have become friends as adults. There was just no way. Our relationship was built on a foundation of embarrassing moments, growth spurts, both coming out as bisexual, and inside jokes that we'd forgotten the origin of.

Once Danny had emerged after shedding her work persona, I filled her in on my call with my mom as I banged around the kitchen making dinner. Since I was home more and I actually enjoyed cooking, it had fallen to me to make most meals. We'd never even discussed it. I'd just done it. Kind of like how Danny did our laundry because she was the kind of person who actually did separate colors from whites and cared about what temperature you were supposed to wash your clothes in so they lasted. She also knew how to sew and more than a few of my clothes had evidence of her mending them without me even knowing.

Danny pulled one of her fancy beers out of the fridge and used the bottle opener magnet from the fridge to pop the top. With a sigh, she hopped up on the counter next to where I was chopping onions to throw in a pan. Chili was one of my go-to winter dinners and I had it down to a science. I also had some mix to make cornbread to go with it.

“So,” I said, blinking tears out of my eyes, “how was work?”

Danny waved her hand and gulped her beer. “You know. Numbers. Money. Things go up, people happy. Things go down, people unhappy. Same old, same old.” She’d explained some of the minutiae of what went on at her job, but my eyes had glazed over when she’d started discussing the different kinds of IRAs. I figured that was stuff that you only had to worry about when you were older if you were responsible. And if you actually had money. I went through a little panic at the beginning of every month trying to figure out if I was going to have enough to pay all my bills. Sure, I knew that Danny would float me some so I wasn’t in the red, but I tried not to let that happen. I didn’t want to be beholden to her. It also made me feel like a fuckup. Danny did her best not to ever make me feel that way, but it happened anyway. It was only natural when my best friend was so competent and responsible, and had been since we were kids.

Danny always did her homework and had perfect penmanship and won the geography bee and was every teacher’s favorite student. I would resent her if she wasn’t my ride or die.

“How was the bookshop?” she asked.

I snorted. “Some woman came in and asked what knotting was and I ended up explaining it to her. Sold her three books and a dildo.” The bookshop carried romance books exclusively, as well as other book accessories and then my boss, Larison, had added a few sex toys in the back. Discreetly of course. But they were there for those who wanted to partake.

The company we bought some of them from was also in Maine and had partnered with several authors to make anatomically adventurous models of some of their characters, which I got a kick out of. And then we had some simple and pretty vibrators. Larison was still deciding if butt plugs or nipple clamps were “too much”

to add. I'd suggested blindfolds and she'd thought that was a great idea. They were a good entry point to spicing up your bedroom activities.

Danny stared at me. "What did you tell her?"

I threw the onions in the pan and double checked that I had the rest of what I needed.

"I think I pulled a book off the shelf and read her a passage and then pulled up a visual aid on my phone."

Danny almost choked on her beer. "Oh my god. I don't know what I would have done."

I shrugged. "People ask all kinds of things. I'm happy to be an educational resource."

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“Better you than me,” Danny said, getting off the counter when I handed her the can opener. I almost never let her cook, but she could open a can as well as the next person.

She opened the cans and drained the beans, rinsing them in the sink before setting the bowl beside the stove for me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Anytime, H.” Danny was the only one who called me that. My parents had never really explained why they’d decided to name me Holiday (my secret suspicion was that I’d been conceived at a Holiday Inn, shudder), but I’d always gone by my full name. People always tried to shorten it to Holly, but that just wasn’t me. I wasn’t a Holly, sorry. When people in school had tried to make that nickname happen, Danny had called me H and that had stuck. But just for her.

Danny got out the big bowls with handles that we always used for chili and I put the cornbread in the oven. I browned the meat and threw everything in the pot to simmer. I should have started it earlier in the day and let it hang out in the crockpot, but I hadn’t gotten my act together this morning to do that. One of these days I would succeed at meal prep, but today hadn’t been the day.

The two of us ate on the couch, blowing on hot spoonfuls of chili and cramming cornbread in our mouths. Danny ate more delicately than I did, but she was the kind of person who never spilled anything on her shirt. It was a skill I’d never learned.

“There’s a new episode,” I said when I turned on the TV as Danny loaded the

dishwasher. We tried not to watch our favorite shows without each other. It had caused too many fights in the past so now we just waited and avoided the drama.

“Yeah, sounds good.” Danny sat down with a sigh. Her forehead had just the tiniest wrinkle in it that you wouldn’t notice unless you had looked at her face every day for years.

“What’s up?” I paused the show and turned my full body toward her.

“Nothing. Just thinking about Christmas. With Raquel getting married, everyone is going to be on me about settling down and not being alone and I’m already tired of it.” She pressed against her forehead and I leaned closer to rub her shoulders in the way I knew she liked.

“God, I know. Mom was pestering me about it too. But it was just the same old song of thinking that we’re together when I’ve told her that we’re friends. I think we might need to wear shirts or something. We are not together, stop asking!”

Danny snorted. “They still wouldn’t get the hint. We’d have to do something drastic to get them off our backs.”

“We should just pretend we have to work and then book a cruise or something,” I said. The idea of just me and Danny on a cruise for Christmas sounded amazing. No personal questions. No avoiding uncomfortable topics. Just cold drinks and smooth sailing.

Danny made a face. “You know I would never set foot on a cruise ship.” She visibly shuddered. “I can’t go on one after that documentary I watched.” I rolled my eyes. The documentary had been about how cruise ships functioned, but to Danny it was a horror film.

“Okay, not a cruise then. How about a remote cabin with a wood stove? But not so remote that there isn’t a decent grocery store or hospital nearby.” Danny was all about being prepared. If there was someone who always had a band aid, or pair of tiny scissors, or a tire jack, it was her. Good thing for me because I was constantly forgetting my keys, phone, etc. whenever I went anywhere.

Sometimes I wondered if Danny and I were made to be best friends. If some cosmic force out there had said “yes, put those two together” that had led us to being in the same class in third grade after Danny’s family moved to town.

“You know our families would have our faces on the news if we did that. They’d have search parties out,” Danny said.

I laughed. They would. If I didn’t immediately call my parents back when they called me, their assumption was that I was dead in a ditch somewhere. My mom had gotten really into true crime in her retirement and that had made things even worse. She was always warning me that I was just one supermarket trip away from being kidnapped or something. No matter how many crime statistics I shared with her, I couldn’t temper her paranoia that something was going to happen to her baby. The perils of being an only child. I’d never really felt like that since so many of my cousins were around my age and all lived nearby. Lots of people assumed we were siblings when they saw us together.

Now a bunch of them were married and had babies and it was weird as hell to see the kids I used to play tag with now had children of their own.

Danny yawned and leaned against me.

“Can’t we just fast-forward to January? I’m ready for this year to be done.”

“Me too,” I said. “We’re on the same page.”

I breathed in the familiar scent of her peach conditioner and sighed.

Chapter Two

Danny

Time never passed the way you hoped it would. When you wanted it to slow down, it always moved faster. Before I knew it, I was cleaning out the fridge at work so nothing went rotten while everyone was gone for the holidays.

We'd had a little party, but it was mostly an excuse to hire a caterer and buy everyone lottery tickets. You wouldn't think that a company full of finance experts would be into lottery tickets, but every year I got a bouquet of them.

At least I'd have Holiday with me. We'd made a pact when we went to college together that we would always go with each other to our family Christmas events. Hers put more of an emphasis on Christmas Eve, and mine was all about Christmas Day, so it worked out perfectly. That way, when we were ready to tear our hair out, there was someone who could be a refuge. The two of us had saved each other more times than I could count.

It was worth it, even when people assumed we were together and asked a million questions about why we weren't together. Holiday and I had it mostly down to a science by now, but this year the pressure was even worse.

My sister, Raquel, had recently gotten married, which left me as both the youngest, and the only one still single. Michael, my oldest brother, had married his husband four years ago and they'd had my little nephew last year. This would be the first Christmas that baby Nicholas might actually be aware of and I was looking forward to sharing the magic with him.

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After saying goodbye to my coworkers, I drove back to my apartment with dread in my stomach. Holiday and I were driving together back to our hometown first thing tomorrow morning. It seemed silly to take two cars, but we always did, just in case.

As usual, I already had everything packed and in the trunk. If I knew Holiday, and I did, she would be throwing things into the backseat tomorrow morning and no doubt I'd get a panicked call ten minutes into the trip that she'd forgotten something and had to go back and she'd meet me at the breakfast place we always hit. Every year was the same, and I didn't hate it.

There was a consistency to Holiday's chaos that I'd adjusted to after so many years of knowing and living with her.

Holiday was trying to cook dinner and pack when I walked in, and I had to tell her to focus on dinner and I'd grab what she needed. I was better at getting everything into her suitcase in an organized fashion anyway.

Holiday yelled at me to grab what she wanted to bring, and I folded everything and made a quick trip to pull some things out of the dryer.

"You should wear that new velvet dress you got," I called to her.

"You think? It's not too much?" she yelled back.

"No, it brings out your eyes." Holiday had eyes that were the prettiest shade of blue that looked like an ocean right before a storm. The dress was a darker blue, but it was gorgeous on her and made her eyes glow underneath her bangs.

“I like that. Give me more compliments,” she yelled back, and I laughed.

“I give you plenty of compliments,” I said as I gently folded the dress and added it to her suitcase.

“You can never have too many compliments.” Her voice made me jump. I’d been so busy putting the dress away that I hadn’t heard her come up behind me.

“Jesus, Holiday. You almost gave me a heart attack.” I shoved her gently as she frowned.

“That’s not a compliment. I was asking about compliments.”

I glared at her.

“Don’t scare me and I might consider it.”

She huffed and rolled her eyes. “You’re really not getting this compliment thing at all.”

I glanced back into the suitcase, wondering what I was forgetting.

“Why am I the one who has to give compliments? Shouldn’t there be some sort of give and take?”

“But we were talking about me,” she said with a pout. I knew that face. She was determined and I wasn’t getting out of this without giving her what she wanted.

“You are an excellent cook, an incredible best friend, and your eyebrows are perfect without even trying.” She’d heard me say all those things before. Well, maybe not the eyebrow thing. That was something I’d always thought but had never voiced. My

own eyebrows required far too much maintenance and upkeep so they didn't look like overgrown caterpillars on my face.

Holiday's smile was brilliant. "You think I have perfect eyebrows?"

"Yes, H. You have perfect eyebrows." Now I was never going to hear the end of it.

"What's that? Oh, sorry, I can't hear you over the sound of my eyebrows being perfect."

I sighed. "I've created a monster."

Holiday winked. "A monster with amazing eyebrows."

"Did I say amazing? I did not say amazing."

She opened her mouth to throw a retort at me, but then her eyes went wide. "Shit, the chicken!"

Holiday dashed to the kitchen to save our dinner and I finished packing up her suitcase, zipping it with way too much satisfaction.

That night we had our own Christmas tradition of watching all of our favorite heartwarming romantic holiday movies. If we didn't have to go home to see our families, my idea of a perfect Christmas would be spent inside with Holiday on the couch eating too much food and watching as many movies as we could before we completely passed out in a food coma. We'd go outside at some point and drive around the suburbs and look at all the decorations on the houses before going back home and convincing Holiday to make three different kinds of cookies that I would then devour.

We could do all of those things at another time, but the idea of a quiet Christmas really appealed to me. It would be so...peaceful.

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In between the movies, we each fielded messages from our family group chats asking us when we were leaving (early in the morning), reminding us what to bring (Holiday had made enough peppermint double chocolate chip cookies for both of us, and the wine my mom liked was already packed), and having the same arguments we had every year.

“We should just put them on silent,” Holiday said.

“Then they’ll call.” We’d tried that before. One thing we’d always had in common was relentless families who were not content unless they knew every single ounce of our business. In addition to wanting to know everything, they also were constantly begging us to move closer. Because forty-five minutes was “too far away.”

My mom had gone so far as to start sending me crime statistics in cities. I had stopped trying to remind her that I didn’t live in any of those cities. It didn’t matter. She was almost as bad as Holiday’s mom that way. At least she didn’t demand that I listen to gruesome episodes of true crime podcasts like Holiday’s mom did. I’d have to do an intervention if that ever happened.

The two of us fell asleep on the couch together, which was another tradition. I woke to the alarm on my phone blaring as a familiar voice cursed in my ear.

“It’s too fucking early.”

I blinked my eyes open and looked down to find Holiday with her head on my chest, her hair absolutely everywhere. Part of her bangs stuck straight up in the air, making her look like she’d been electrocuted.

She looked cute and grumpy as hell.

“You say that every year,” I rasped, my voice rough and scratchy.

“It’s true every year,” she said, sitting up and yawning, her jaw cracking.

“Come on. Let’s get going.”

“Coffee,” Holiday said, trying to run her hand through her hair and just tangling it further.

“Yes, yes. I know you need caffeine.” So did I, but one of us had to take charge and it was usually me. I wiggled out from under her and stood up, stretching my back and hearing it pop far too many times. We really needed to get a better couch. Maybe one with a bed inside so neither of us ended up needing back surgery before we were thirty.

“Coffee,” Holiday moaned, tilting over and crashing back onto the blankets.

“It’s coming,” I said, making my way to the kitchen and getting things started for her. I’d set my alarm so we had plenty of time for Holiday to wake up, for us to pack everything else we needed into our cars, and for us to have enough time to stop and get our favorite breakfast.

After so many years, I had this part down to a science and we were right on schedule.

Holiday had passed out again but woke up when I waved a cup of coffee under her nose. I’d added just enough peppermint creamer the way she liked.

“Coffee,” she said, which was one of the only words she could say upon waking.

“Finish your coffee. I’m going to get dressed.” I’d already set out her outfit last night on her dresser, so I grabbed it for her and set it next to her on the couch before going to my room and changing for the day.

When I arrived back in the living room after putting my hair up and brushing my teeth, Holiday had finished her coffee, but she was staring out the window with a glazed look on her face. Caffeine hadn’t kicked in yet.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, heaving her to her feet as she whined. I set the clothes in her arms and shoved her toward the bathroom.

“Go get ready. I’ll take the rest of our stuff to the cars.”

In spite of needing my own caffeine fix, I had work to do to make sure this journey went smoothly.

One good thing about combining Holiday and caffeine was that once it hit, she was unstoppable.

I came back upstairs to find her bustling around, throwing things from the pantry into a bag.

“What are you doing?” I asked slowly. She spun around, her blue eyes a little wide.

“Just packing snacks. I hate it when I don’t have snacks when I’m driving.”

“H. The trip is less than an hour. And we’re stopping at the diner. We don’t need snacks.” She turned around and ignored me.

“Why don’t you come and help me get the rest of our stuff to the car? Don’t forget the cookies and the wine.” I’d put notes on both of them last night so we didn’t

forget.

A few minutes later we had everything in the car and were ready to go. I'd badgered Holiday into having a full tank of gas and made sure her car started and there were no dangerous lights coming on before I told her she was okay to go.

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“You’re worse than my mom,” she muttered under her breath.

“Yeah, and what happens when I don’t tell you to check your car before you go somewhere?”

“That was one time!”

“Yeah, because of me, it was only one time.”

Holiday’s eyes narrowed. “Fine. Me and my perfect eyebrows will see you at the diner.”

I was about to head to my own car when she honked the horn.

“Seriously?”

Holiday grinned at me. “Thanks for helping me keep my shit together. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Oh, and your hair looks great today. And that sweater is a perfect color on you.”

Oh, she was giving me compliments now. I was surprised to feel my cheeks getting pink and it wasn’t just because of a sudden burst of cold air.

“See you at the diner, H,” I said. She gave me one more smile before cranking her music and driving onto the street in front of our apartment complex.

I followed after her, but quickly lost her when a light turned red. I’d see her soon.

Chapter Three

Holiday

“And extra whipped cream,” I informed the server at the diner. Danny and I stopped here every year and got a massive breakfast to fortify us for the marathon ahead. It was an essential part of surviving.

Danny looked at her phone and frowned.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Oh nothing. Just my parents wondering if I’m going to die alone under a pile of cats. As if there’s something wrong with being single and happy and owning cats. They got upset when I reminded them that statistically the happiest people are single women. Now I’m being message lectured. Same old, same old.” She rolled her eyes, but I knew it hurt her. Being compared to her siblings was something she’d dealt with her whole life.

“I’m sorry.” She sipped her coffee and waved me off.

I glanced at my phone and saw that Mom had sent me a picture of the mistletoe she hung up every year, suggesting that I should kiss Danny under it.

Same old, same old.

I rolled my eyes.

“You know, since our families are so convinced that we’re together, we should just lie and say that we are. Then they might actually leave us alone.”

I'd said it as a joke, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I dropped my fork and almost screamed.

"That's it!"

People at the tables around us stared for a second before going back to their own meals.

Danny rolled her eyes. "H, be serious."

"No, I am. This would solve all our problems. We're already comfortable with each other. It would be so easy. Just pretend we're together to get everyone off our backs and then we can say we went back to being friends in January or something." We could cross that bridge when we needed to. Right now, our main mission was dealing with our families and this was the perfect solution. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before.

"Danny, this could work!"

Why wasn't she jumping up and down with me? Not that I was jumping, but I was definitely bouncing in the booth.

Danny kept staring at me as if she was waiting for me to say I was joking. I wasn't.

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“Lie to our families? Isn’t that unethical?”

I snorted. “If it would get them to leave us alone, does it really matter? We wouldn’t have to lie if they weren’t like that.”

Our server arrived with our huge breakfast plates and I dug into my apple cinnamon Belgian waffles with enthusiasm. Danny stared down at her breakfast plate filled with eggs and bacon and sausage and home fries and toast. I also had a frothy latte in front of me while Danny had just put a little cream in her coffee. No fun, I always told her.

“Danny. It’s only confirming what they already think is true. So is it really a lie when everyone already believes it?”

She looked up and I forced myself to stare into her eyes. She always said that they were boring brown, but that wasn’t true. They were a deep, rich color that made me think of soil and wood and coffee. I thought her eyes were incredible. I’d have to save that compliment for her for later. Right now, I had to get her to agree to this plan that was going to save us a whole lot of annoyance.

“Danny. Just go with me on this. It’ll work.”

Why was I having to talk her into this? What was her hesitation?

It was only for a few days and then we could go back to our regular lives. Plus, if we pretended to date and then broke up, it would take care of next year too.

Neither of us had anything going on with someone else, so it couldn’t be that she was

seeing someone. Unless she had a crush that I didn't know about, but that was highly unlikely. Wasn't it?

"Wait, is it because you like someone?" I had to know.

Danny shook her head and picked up her fork. "No, it's not that. It just doesn't feel right."

"Well we've tried everything else, so why not this?" There really wasn't a good reason not to do this.

She sat back in the booth and crossed her arms. "This is a really bad idea, Holiday."

"If by bad, you mean brilliant, then yes, it is." This had to be one of my best ideas.

Her lips twitched and I knew from experience that I was breaking her down. She might be stubborn, but I was stubborn.

"We can totally do this. Just hold hands a few times, call each other baby, make eyes at each other, and it'll be done." We'd probably have to kiss at least under the mistletoe, but we could get to that later.

Danny and I were already pretty comfortable with each other physically, which meant it wouldn't be that hard to bump up the touching a little bit to make us seem like we were closer than we were. Snuggling a little more with Danny wasn't a hardship. And it would be fun to pretend to flirt with her in front of people. See if I could get her all flustered. Danny was a hard person to fluster under most circumstances.

"Come on, think about it. I'll wait," I said, putting my focus on my waffles. I didn't want them to get cold. While I ate, I let Danny think. She'd come to the right conclusion, I just knew it.

I was almost halfway through my waffles when she let out a deep sigh and I didn't even need to look up to know that I'd won.

"Fine. Okay? Fine. But we're going to need to make some ground rules and set some boundaries on what we're comfortable with."

Now we were talking.

Chapter Four

Danny

I must be out of my mind. I'm definitely out of my mind to be agreeing to this absolutely outlandish plan. It's the kind of plan you saw in movies, not in real life.

But. There was a logic to this plan. There was almost an inevitability of it. If our families wouldn't stop believing that we're together, then why not say "sure, yeah, we're together, okay?" I wasn't naive enough to think that confirming those theories about me and Holiday would stop all of the chatter and annoyance, but there was a chance that it could lessen it and I would do just about anything to get any kind of relief.

Plus, having to be a little affectionate or flirtatious with Holiday wouldn't be a terrible hardship. It might even be fun. Sharing a secret between the two of us. It reminded me of when we were younger, and we'd whisper our deepest, darkest secrets (they seemed so scandalous at the time) to each other in the middle of the night while we slept in the same bed at each other's houses.

No, being Holiday's fake girlfriend over Christmas wasn't the worst thing I'd ever had to do. Not by a mile.

Holiday was so excited, I knew she wasn't really listening to me while I laid out what I thought some of the rules should be.

"No kissing," was my first rule.

"What?!" she nearly screeched. One thing about Holiday is that when she was excited about something, she lost nearly all her volume control.

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“We’re gonna have to kiss, Danny. That’s ridiculous. I’m not saying you have to suck my face off, but we’re going to have to kiss a little or else it’s not going to be believable.”

Our server came and refilled my coffee and asked if we wanted anything else. Holiday tried to order another latte, but I reminded her that she’d had enough caffeine already and if she had too much, she’d start spinning in circles.

“Fine, fine,” she said, pouting. “Back to the kissing. How about noexcessivekissing? And we talk about it beforehand? No surprise kisses. We’ll plan them.”

I guess that made sense.

Other than that, we wouldn’t need to do anything physical, except for sit close to each other and maybe put an arm around each other or something. Not much more than how we already behaved.

“What about nicknames? Are we going with the classic baby? Babe? Honey?” This was too much.

“I don’t know, Holiday. You decide.”

She sat back and gazed at me, her head turned to the side as she pondered. It didn’t really matter to me.

“I think we keep it simple. Babe. I could call you babe. Feels easy.”

Babe it was.

“Okay, babe,” I said, trying it out. The word came too easily. I wasn’t going to think about that.

Holiday grinned at me. “Now we just have to come up with the story.”

“What story?” I asked, adding more cream to my coffee.

Holiday looked at me as if I was being purposefully obtuse.

“The story of how we got together, obviously. They’re going to want to know what happened for us to go from being friends for years to deciding to date.”

Oh. Of course. She was right again.

“You’re better at that stuff than me,” I said. This had been her idea in the first place. Holiday had always been more of a romantic than I was. My family always teased me for being so practical, but I couldn’t help the way I was. Being practical was logical. What was wrong with that?

There was a sweet whimsy to Holiday that I did envy sometimes, but I didn’t necessarily need to have that for myself because she’d always been there to remind me. I couldn’t even remember what my life was like before she was in it.

I didn’t want to. Some nights, when the anxious thoughts seized their moment to pop up and keep me awake, I thought about what would happen when Holiday found someone. It was inevitable. Holiday was beautiful, she was fun, and she was easy to love. It was a wonder she hadn’t found anyone already, but she always told me that she wouldn’t get into anything unless she was really sure about it. Like Elizabeth Bennet, she said. I’d read the book, but I couldn’t remember what exactly she was

talking about.

“Danny?” Holiday said, bringing me back to the present moment.

“Hm?” I asked.

“What do you think of that story?” she asked. I hadn’t heard a word.

“Can you go over it again?” I asked.

“I think the best story to tell is that we went out to Sapph together for drinks and we had a few too many and then started dancing with each other. Then one of us, and we can’t remember which because of the drinking, asked ‘why don’t we date’ and then we had a sloppy drunk kiss and when we woke up the next day we decided, hey, that would be fun, let’s date. What do you think?” It sounded entirely plausible to me. I wasn’t thrilled about telling my family that our revelation arrived via too much alcohol, but it wasn’t that bad.

“Okay. That works. I think I can remember it, but I’ll defer to you when we’re together to tell it.” Holiday nodded and then grinned at me again.

“This is going to be so much fun.”

Was it?

Holiday’s parents’ house and my house were only five minutes apart from each other. When we’d been younger, it had been a perfect bike-riding distance. Some years I’d spent just as much time at her house as I had at mine and vice versa. Her house was first, so I watched her pull into the driveway behind her parent’s cars and wave to me. I waved back and then continued down the street and hung a right to get to my family’s place.

The twinkling lights covered the house and I hoped my dad had been safe when he'd put them up, but he probably hadn't. It was a wonder he hadn't fallen off the ladder a million times.

My mom had added a new inflatable character to the lineup of Frosty, Rudolph, Santa, and The Grinch. Now she had a snow globe that had little white pieces flying around inside it. Subtle. The whole thing was garish and too much, but I'd die before I said that out loud. The decorations brought my parents joy and I would never be the one to criticize that. Even if I thought their taste was more than a little questionable. I could escape to Holiday's tomorrow and experience the more sophisticated decorations that I preferred.

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“Hello?” I called as I opened the front door. “I’m here!” I heard shrieking coming from the kitchen and before I knew it, I was engulfed in my mother’s floury arms. She was already baking and the house was filled with the warm smells of cinnamon and spices and other delicious things.

“There’s my girl!” Mom said, hugging me so tight it was like she’d never hugged me before. She pulled back and there were tears in her eyes. As if I hadn’t seen her approximately two weeks ago.

“Mom, stop,” I said. She sniffed and clutched me again.

“I’m just so glad to have everyone here. How was the drive? Did you hit any traffic?” She put her arm around me and led me to the kitchen which was already dominated by cooling pans of cookies. Every year, Mom agreed to make cookies and every year she made an increasing number. By this point she was making enough to feed a small country, and it took her nearly two days to accomplish. It stressed her out, but she wouldn’t hear of taking a break.

“No, it was good.” Mom shoved me into a chair and pressed a cup of coffee into my hand, getting the creamer from the fridge.

“Where’s Dad?” The house was unusually quiet.

“He had to run out to get a few things for me and then he was stopping at Raquel’s to take a look at her garbage disposal. I guess it’s acting up.” Was my father a licensed plumber? No. Would he act like he was and refuse to call in a professional because he was convinced he could do a better job for free? Yes.

“Of course he is,” I said, sipping my coffee.

“How’s our Holiday?” Mom asked with a fond smile. “We’re seeing her tonight, right?” Since it was the day before Christmas Eve, Holiday would be coming over tonight before we spent tomorrow night with her family. Alternating had always worked out so neatly for us.

“She’s good,” I said. Holiday and I had agreed to make our little announcement later tonight when everyone was here so we didn’t have to share the same story to twenty different people. For right now, I wasn’t saying anything.

“I can’t figure out why that girl is single. Well. I don’t know why you’re single either. Sometimes I think you do it on purpose.” Wow. Not even ten minutes before the criticism started. That had to be a record. I just sipped my coffee and pretended her words didn’t bother me.

It wasn’t easy.

Mom went back to mixing her gingerbread dough as she prattled on about town gossip and what was new with my siblings.

“I’m telling you, Nicholas is a genius. He’s already reading.” Seeing as how Nicholas wasn’t even two years old, I found this highly improbable, but he was Mom’s first grandchild, so I wasn’t going to argue with her.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“No, no. I’d just have to correct you and that would make more work for me,” she said, waving me off. Of course. No one was allowed to help because we’d do it wrong. Not that she’d even let someone try.

“You could run to the basement and get the second set of baking pans. They’re in one of the Christmas bins.” God help me. The Christmas bins. They took up nearly one entire corner of the basement and they seemed to multiply every year.

It was safe to say that my family loved Christmas more than any other holiday. It was the big one.

“Sure,” I said, standing up and abandoning my coffee.

How’s it going over there? Mom is currently telling me how much she doesn’t like my bangs. Again.

The message from Holiday made me smile as I walked down into the basement. Sounded like everything was right on schedule.

Chapter Five

Holiday

“I’m not going to grow them out,” I said when my mom wouldn’t stop pestering me about my bangs. I’d cut them a few years ago after a bad date and she’d disliked them ever since.

“But they cover up your gorgeous eyes,” Mom said. I rolled said eyes. My bangs did not do that, and I had no idea when Mom had joined an anti-bang society, but enough was enough.

“Leave my hair alone! Jesus,” I said.

Mom huffed but dropped the subject.

“I think your hair is gorgeous,” Aunt Cindy said as she came into the living room with a tray of hot chocolate for us. Uncle Gary and my dad were salting the driveway outside. It was supposed to snow tonight, so we might actually have a white Christmas. I’d be thrilled if we did. There was nothing more festive than the yard blanketed in white as we celebrated inside by the fireplace.

“Thank you, Aunt Cindy,” I said, chucking a bunch of marshmallows on top of my hot chocolate.

Soft piano music filtered through the house from several speakers and Mom had outdone herself with the decorations this year. They weren’t as fun or silly as what I’d find at Danny’s house, but my mom’s decorations were always spectacular. She’d done red and gold for the theme this year and there wasn’t a pine needle out of place. Nearly every room had a tree in it, all with matching ornaments and lights. My mom decorated as if she was competing, and every year she outdid herself. I always took a ton of pictures and had them printed out so she could save them in an album. It was the least I could do to record all her efforts.

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Mom and her siblings had grown up poor, so I think it was her way to give herself the kind of Christmas she hadn't had growing up. When popcorn and folded paper stars were as elaborate as things got.

"When are you going to Danny's?" Mom asked as we sipped our hot chocolate. This was definitely worth coming home for. Mom made it in the crockpot and I didn't even know what was in it. Deliciousness.

"I'm going over for dinner," I said. Danny's family did a potluck, so there would be no shortage of really good food.

Mom huffed again but didn't comment further. She really wanted me here for the whole time, but this year I'd at least have a good reason. We were telling her family tonight and telling mine tomorrow. They were going to be pissed that they'd be the second to know, but they'd have to deal. A few years ago I had suggested that we combine our family Christmases and that hadn't gone over well. It wasn't that my mom and Danny's mom didn't get along. They did, and they had a nice friendship. But they were each militant about how their celebrations would go and they weren't giving an inch. New Years was another thing entirely, and things got much more flexible. But Christmas was the big one.

I did my best to help Mom with organizing the house, making lunch, and generally keeping things running smoothly. Dad was on grocery run duty, and he was busy as Mom kept thinking of more things we needed. Mom had four siblings who lived nearby, Dad had three, and there were too many cousins to count. Soon our house would be overrun and there wouldn't be enough food or toilet paper or wine. The garage fridge was packed with extra food and booze, but it wouldn't be enough, even

with everyone bringing their own contributions. It was mayhem, every year.

Sometimes I wondered why my parents had only had one kid when they both had siblings, but it seemed like too personal a question so I'd never asked. Did I really want to know? Not really.

Messages from Danny were nearly constant. She also sent me pictures and videos and it was almost like she was here with me.

You look great, babeI sent when she showed me the Christmas sweater her mom had forced on her. It was tacky in the extreme, which I loved. I would have worn it in a heartbeat.

Babe? I thought we were only doing that when other people were around?She responded.

I was practicing. Seems like a good idea to try it out ahead of time so it comes out sounding naturalI responded.

Oh. I guess that makes sense. Babe.I couldn't help but giggle at that simple four-letter word. It was so cute, and I was starting to like it. I could have been calling Danny babe this whole time. Maybe I should have been.

"Talking to Danny?" my cousin Jessie asked, a smirk on her face.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes."

She snorted. "Are you ever going to admit you're in love with her or no?"

It was already starting, and I wished I could just tell them that hey, we're dating, but Danny and I were telling her familyfirst. We wanted to be together when we shared

the news so we could cover for each other. Seemed like the right way to do it.

But now I was wishing I'd just sent a message to the family group chat and then turned my phone on silent. That would have been dramatic, but it would have gotten it over with.

Now I had to field comments until then. I was already tired. So tired.

I put on a nice sweater and jeans, yelling at anyone who was around that I was going over to Danny's and I'd be back later.

Snow fell softly to the ground as I started up my car and turned on the wipers to clear the powder. It took some maneuvering to get my car around all of the other vehicles, but I was happy when I made it to Danny's. Her mom must have talked her dad into another inflatable. He'd been resisting for years. Go Linda.

I didn't bother knocking and walked into a wall of warm air filled with the scent of cookies. Linda was a machine when it came to cookies and she always made hundreds. My contribution was always pitiful compared to what she cranked out in two days.

I always joked I was going to call her Betty Crocker or submit her to one of those baking shows as a potential contestant. She could bake anyone under the table with a smile on her face.

Danny was the first person I saw as I knocked a little bit of powder off my boots and left them by the door.

"Tell me that's eggnog with rum in it," I asked when she held a cup out to me.

She smiled and I felt every single ounce of stress immediately leave my body. "It is."

“Bless you. Babe,” I said, whispering the last word.

I didn’t know if it was my imagination, but her eyes sparked at the last word. Maybe it was just the reflection of the lights above the doorway.

I gulped some of the eggnog and almost moaned. It was so good. Just the right amount of spiced rum. I wouldn’t be able to drink as much as I wanted, because I had to drive home, but it would have been nice to get blasted on eggnog and then pass out in Danny’s room with her. That had happened a time or two before, but I didn’t think it was a good idea tonight with us announcing our relationship. Had make a good impression on my fake girlfriend’s real family.

Danny and I didn’t have much time to ourselves as I plunged into the house and greeted everyone, hugging her parents and siblings and anyone else that I knew.

Everyone was obsessed with little Nicholas, and I had to admit that he was a pretty perfect baby. This year he was a lot more aware and actually talking. He thought things like tissue boxes were hilarious and his laugh was completely infectious.

“Someone is getting spoiled by Santa,” I leaned in and said to Danny as we sat on one of the couches together. Due to a lack of space, we were practically in each other’s laps, but I wasn’t complaining. We’d done this before and for some reason it felt different this year. Was it because of the whole fake relationship thing?

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There were about fifteen different conversations going on at once, including a heated debate about daycare options for Nicholas.

Danny turned to me. “Now?”

“Oh, now? I mean, sure.”

Danny stood up and tried to ask for everyone’s attention. It took a few tries and finally her brother Michael whistled to get everyone to shut up.

She looked down at me and gestured with her eyes for me to stand up. Oh, right. We should have practiced this, shouldn’t we? Oops.

“Holiday and I have an announcement,” she said, and my back instantly started sweating, making my undershirt stick to my skin. I’d thought this would be a fun thing to do, like being an actor in a play, but now I was on stage and the lights were just a little too bright and the audience paying just a bit too much attention.

Yikes.

“We’re dating,” I said when Danny froze. I knew her well enough to see her starting to panic, so I grabbed her hand and squeezed it to get her attention.

For a second, no one spoke. Then it was like we were hit with a roar of sound and applause and “I knew it!” and even her dad handing over some money to her brother.

“You bet on us?” Danny asked. She still held my hand in an iron grip. I didn’t think I

could have let her go if I tried.

Her dad just shrugged.

“Oh, my girls,” Carol said, her eyes brimming with tears as she hugged both of us.

Raquel hummed The Wedding March music loudly.

“Hold your horses,” I said, pointing at her. “This is new and we don’t want everyone to make a big thing of it.”

“Good luck with that,” Michael yelled. I glared at him and he hid behind his husband.

“This calls for a toast,” Carol said, still wiping her eyes. “To love. Both longtime love and new love. May we all experience as much of it as we can. Cheers!”

Everyone lifted their glasses, and I did the same, staring at Danny.

“To love,” I said quietly so only she could hear.

“To love,” she echoed as we sipped our eggnog.

“I’m cutting you off,” Danny said a while later when I was trying to sneak another cup of eggnog. She’d been attached to me all night, even more so than normal. I knew it was because of the fake relationship, but it was also to make sure I didn’t get wasted. Which I was very close to being, but I was past the point of caring.

“But I can just pass out here,” I whined. “We did that two years ago and it was fine.”

Danny’s eyes narrowed. “It was fine? Do you not remember punching me in the face?” She pulled her phone up, scrolled through her pictures, and then presented me

with the image of her with a bruise under her eye that I'd accidentally caused when I'd rolled over in my sleep.

"I apologized for that a million times. I was asleep!"

"You two are so cute," Raquel said, coming over to get some more food. "I can't believe it took you so long to figure it out." That was the prevailing sentiment about us. That inevitability.

Danny wanted to argue with Raquel like she usually did, but I nudged her and reminded her that we were doing things differently this year.

"Well, we did," Danny said, her chin jutting out defiantly.

"We did, didn't we, babe?" I asked, putting my arm around her and doing my best to give her an adoring look. It was easier now that I had a few drinks in me.

"Ugh, stop it," Raquel said, shaking her head. "You're too cute!"

She filled up her plate and left us alone. More of the adults had had a few by this point and the volume had gone up in the room and the random singing had gotten more frequent. Danny's parents had a small mostly in-tune piano that people kept sitting at and playing carols. Everyone would join in and sing, regardless of knowing the lyrics. It was so much fun, but after a whole night of it, I knew Danny had had enough and needed to go recharge.

"Let's go take a break in your room," I said in her ear.

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Danny was only a few inches taller than me, so I didn't have to go too far to whisper to her.

She looked down at me and nodded. "Okay."

Taking her hand, I pulled her through the crowd, ignoring some of the cheering and comments. Some of the comments bordered on lewd and I definitely didn't pay attention to those.

Once we'd made it to Danny's former room, I shut the door. She went over to sit on the bed, rolling her shoulders and closing her eyes.

"You okay?" A check-in with her seemed necessary. We were trying to figure out this fake relationship thing as we went.

Her eyes opened and she gave me a tired smile. "Yeah. It's just a lot this year. For some reason."

I sat next to her on the bed and it was like going back in time. Her room hadn't changed much in all the years she'd lived in it. Even now, there were framed pictures on the dresser of us, grinning. Old posters on the wall. Piles of her favorite books. A closet full of her old awards and trophies and certificates. At least the ones that her parents didn't display in the rest of the house. Part of the living room was taken up by a shrine to the three Romano siblings. Danny hated it, but I thought it was sweet. My parents had a less embarrassing shrine for me too. You couldn't fight proud parents.

"It's going well, I think," I said, sinking onto the bed next to her. It still smelled the

same. Danny loved peach scents and had her whole life since she'd worn too much peach body spray in junior high. Whenever I smelled anything remotely peach-like, it made me think of her. A few times I'd even had to make myself a peach cobbler or pie because I'd been craving peaches.

"Yeah," she said, huffing out a breath and looking out the window, which was lit up by the numerous blinking lights outside. I could just see the corner of one of the inflatables in a crack between the curtains. Those things were hilarious.

"Are you sure you're good? We can go out there right now and tell them it was a joke. They'd believe us." Danny's family and mine were lovers of (harmless) pranks. Her mom might yell at us for getting her hopes up, but she'd get over it.

She shook her head and looked back at me. "No, it's fine. We can keep going."

"We didn't kiss in front of them. I'm surprised they didn't make us." That was definitely something they'd do.

Danny let out a long breath before looking down at her lap.

"Maybe we should...get the first one over with. So we're not doing it with so many eyes on us. So we can make it convincing."

Oh. That was unexpected. I'd thought that I'd have to convince and cajole her into kissing. It was going to have to happen before we went to my parent's house because there was mistletoe right above the arch in the living room and she was going to make us pose under it for a picture once she found out about us.

"I mean, yeah, sure," I said, trying to hide my trembling hands. Actually, my whole body was trembling. Why was I shaking so bad? This was Danny. My best friend. She'd seen me on my literal worst days. She knew all the most embarrassing corners

of my soul. She had the dirt that was under the dirt. The microscopic organisms that were under the dirt that was under the dirt.

If there was anyone in my entire life that I was most comfortable with, it was Danny. This shouldn't be a big deal.

Why was this a big deal?

"Just a quick one," Danny said when I hadn't responded.

"Yeah, sure." Why did my voice sound so far away?

"Do you want me to do it?" she asked, narrowing her eyes as we sat on her yellow flowered comforter that wasn't her style, but her mom had gotten it for her anyway.

"Okay," I said. I couldn't move if I tried. My body was seized by some kind of deep panic that I couldn't understand as Danny leaned forward and tilted her head slightly so she didn't bump my nose.

"Here I go," she whispered when she was inches away from my mouth. Her breath brushed across my skin while my heart thumped in my chest, loud as thunder.

This was happening. Danny was going to kiss me.

And then she did.

Chapter Six

Danny

No clue where the idea to kiss had come from, but once I said it out loud, it made

sense. We should kiss in private for the first time before trying to do it in public. If we were awkward about it, people would know. Everyone would be watching and would have no qualms about calling us out for a bad kiss.

To make this work, we had to be comfortable. Although, “comfortable” was the last word I would have used to describe kissing Holiday. It should have been comfortable. Hugging her was probably the most comfortable I’d ever been. But a kiss was different. I didn’t know why, but it was. It was absolutely and entirely different.

When she didn’t take any initiative, I said that I could do it. And now I was, while Holiday sat next to me, her body absolutely rigid. I told her I was going for it to give her a chance to stop me, but she didn’t. Instead I softly pressed my mouth to hers and then pulled back almost immediately. I’d told her it would be a peck. Just a moment in time. A blink. A nothing.

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Holiday hadn't even closed her eyes and I found her studying me

"What the hell was that?"

That wasn't the reaction I expected.

"What do you mean?"

Holiday rolled her eyes. "I've gotten better kisses from my grandmother. I barely even felt that. Are you scared to kiss me?"

"No," I said immediately. I wasn't. Kissing her wasn't scary. It was unsettling, if it was anything.

And she was right, it hadn't been a long kiss. I didn't want to make her uncomfortable, but now she was calling me out for not going far enough?

"Then give me a little more than that. We've got to act like we want to kiss each other. Just imagine I'm someone you want to kiss, come on."

Holiday scooted even closer to me. A moment ago, she'd been absolutely still, but now she was animated. As if she was excited about this.

"Want me to go for it this time?"

I nodded, at a loss for words.

This had been my suggestion, but now I wished I hadn't opened my mouth. My body was flushed, overheated. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears.

A kiss shouldn't be this monumental. I swallowed, begging myself to calm down and remember this was just so our families would leave us alone. This was so we could have a more peaceful Christmas. A kiss that we'd laugh about years from now.

Just not in the present moment. This wasn't funny at all.

"Here I go," Holiday said, doing something unexpected. She reached for my face and stroked my cheek, using her hand to move my face before closing the distance between us and brushing her mouth against mine.

The kiss was light, but that didn't matter. It crashed through me with an intensity that was almost like being electrocuted. Holiday stroked the side of my face as she continued to press her mouth against mine for what felt like an eternity.

Her lips were soft and warm and even though our mouths were both closed, I swore I could taste her anyway. Rich, with the spice from the eggnog. A little bite of alcohol from the rum. And then just her natural scent that I was so used to, but still noticed every day.

"There," she said, pulling apart, and I didn't think I imagined the shaking in her voice. How that word wasn't exactly steady.

I didn't feel steady myself. I might be sitting on the bed, but everything else felt scrambled. As if gravity had been tampered with.

The sound of the party coming from the living room down the hall rushed into my ears and I remembered where we were. For a few minutes, everything else had fallen away and it was just the two of us.

“Was...was that okay?” Holiday licked her lips and I couldn’t look away from her face. It was as if she’d revealed another facet of herself that I hadn’t seen before. How was that possible? I’d seen her in every way. I’d seen her face more than my own. How did it look so different now?

“It was okay,” I finally managed to say.

Her cheeks went pink with a blush that made her look so nervously pretty.

“Only okay? Wow, thanks. I thought we were giving each other compliments?”

Shit. I didn’t mean it that way. Was I supposed to tell her that it was good? Should it be good?

“It was just a kiss, H.” I stood up from the bed, needing to put some space between us. My body was restless, and I paced around in a circle. I didn’t want to go back to the living room, but it also couldn’t stay in here with Holiday. Being near her now was too much.

“Are you okay?” she asked. I turned around to find her watching me. I shouldn’t be pacing. She was going to assume something was wrong. Nothing was wrong.

Everything was wrong.

“I’m fine. Just bracing myself to go back out there.” I made a face, hoping she’d laugh. She didn’t.

“Are you sure?”

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I nodded. “Yeah. You should be good to drive in another hour or so.” I didn’t want to ask her to leave, but I kind of wanted to ask her to leave. Let me deal with all these thoughts and confusing feelings by myself. It was too hard to think with her in such close proximity.

“Oh. Right.” She glanced down at her lap and when she looked up, she had a smile on her face. “Although getting tipsy on eggnog and passing out under the tree has its appeal.”

I tried to match her smile. “You did that two years ago. I had to drag your ass in here. And then you punched me.”

Holiday stood up. “Did you drag me? I don’t remember.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I know.”

We seemed to be back to our regular banter, but the ground didn’t feel solid beneath my feet yet. I wish I could blame it on the eggnog, but I hadn’t had that much. I’d mostly been sticking to soda.

Holiday put her hands on my shoulders and I jumped. “Take a deep breath with me.” I did and then she smiled.

“Let’s go. Your family probably thinks we’re fucking in here.”

I choked on a breath that turned into a cough as Holiday laughed and made her way back toward the living room to cheers.

Chapter Seven

Holiday

Danny was weird after the kiss, even though she said she was fine. She was lying, but I didn't know why. Was the second kiss bad? I'd never asked anyone I'd kissed if I was good at it, but I assumed that when they kept kissing you that was as good an endorsement as any.

What if it was bad and she just didn't want to hurt my feelings? I'd kept my mouth closed and hadn't used any tongue or too much pressure, but you never knew. I'd even gone to the bathroom and chugged some mouthwash just in case we might have to kiss again later, and I had bad breath. Maybe it was the rum? I wanted to ask her, but then I didn't want to know the answer. So I kept a smile on my face and kept singing at the top of my lungs and sat next to Danny until I knew it was time to go home. My parents would be wanting to have a late-night talk with me. I'd inherited my night owl tendencies from both my parents. So many times I remembered when I was a kid they'd come into my room and surprise me with a late-night ice cream run or dessert at a local restaurant in my pajamas.

Danny had been smart to cut me off from the eggnog because I was sober enough for the short drive. She walked me to the door and there were quite a few eyes on us.

I leaned close and spoke in her ear. "We're going to need to kiss goodbye."

She reeled back from me, her eyes wide before she glanced back at everyone in the living room.

Turning back to me, she nodded and leaned forward, giving me a quick peck like our first kiss that we'd had earlier. Reaching my hand up, I grabbed the back of her neck to pull her closer and kissed her again. No one would believe that brief little kiss.

“See you tomorrow,” I said when I pulled back and stroked her neck once.

“Drive safe,” she said, watching me walk to my car.

I almost sent her a message asking if I was a bad kisser, but I deleted the message as soon as I typed it out. I sat in the driveway of my parents’ house and shook my head at myself. I was probably just paranoid. Danny was just weirded out by kissing me because we were friends. That had to be it. Kissing in theory was different than kissing in reality. Would she want to call things off now? We’d already told her family and mine was next.

My thoughts were jumbled as I walked into the house and found my parents sitting on the couch and talking. All of the other relatives had left, and the lights were low.

“How was it at the Romanos?” Mom asked as I shucked off my boots and my coat and hat.

“Loud,” I said, leaning my head on her shoulder.

Mom laughed. “Well, that’s just how it goes. You ready for tomorrow night?” I wasn’t, but that didn’t matter. It was happening anyway. I’d already decided to wear the dress that Danny had packed for me. It was blue velvet and was a little sexy for a family party, but I wanted to wear it.

The party would be a little more formal than our Christmas morning celebrations, when we’d mostly be in our matching silk pajamas that Mom made us wear every year. There were several sets in different colors and I wasn’t a big fan of them, but she wanted us to get pictures wearing them so I sucked it up. The three of us would spend a little time opening presents and then throw ourselves into making a huge brunch that everyone would kind of drop in on. The rest of the day was spent opening presents and eating in one long celebration. I’d dip out to go to Danny’s celebration

in the afternoon and then come back for more. It was a marathon, not a sprint, and I was already tired.

That cabin I'd talked about with Danny was looking pretty good right now. I wanted to lay down and eat too much and listen to music and watch fun movies. There was just so much social pressure involved. So much talking. More than one year I'd actually lost my voice.

"Want to watch Rudolph?" Mom asked. I was tired, but I wasn't going to turn down a classic.

"Sure," I said, snuggling into the couch. Dad got us more hot chocolate and served it to us, including enough marshmallows for me.

The three of us watched the classic movie and quoted our favorite parts and it was nice to have it just be the three of us. Even if I couldn't stop thinking about Danny and the kiss fiasco. Things were going to be weird tomorrow if we couldn't get our act together under the mistletoe. I needed to talk to her tomorrow and figure this out. Even if it turned out I was a bad kisser. She could give me some pointers or something.

The next day I woke up late, as usual, but grumpy. I hadn't talked or sent any messages to Danny and found a few waiting for me when I checked my phone.

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I think we should talk before your party tonight. Mom wants me to go to the grocery store for five million things. I can pick you up and then we can have some privacy. Does that sound okay?

It would be nice to get out of the house, even though I'd barely been here for a day. Being in the car with just Danny would be nice.

Sounds good. Let me have some breakfast and get dressed. Come over whenever.

I yawned and stumbled to the shower and then to the kitchen where my dad was making eggs and bacon and had a cup of coffee mixed with hot chocolate for me. There was nothing more decadent and if I wasn't careful, I was going to have too much and then be bouncing off the walls until it was out of my system.

I could hear Danny's voice in my head telling me not to overdo it. She was always my voice of restraint and reason. Without her I would have gotten into a lot more situations.

"Thanks, Dad," I said when he slid a plate of breakfast in front of me. Mom joined us, still in her robe. She was an elegant woman, but I liked seeing her like this. No makeup. Her hair still in rollers. When I was little, I'd loved watching her put on her makeup and do her hair. It seemed magical to me. How she'd used so many powders and potions to make herself look even more gorgeous. It was amazing to see her with my dad, who was handsome in a bookish way. He had glasses and thick dark hair that was always tousled. I'd gotten more of his looks than hers, but I had gotten her hair, which was nice. If only she'd leave me alone about my bangs.

We ate breakfast while Dad read the paper and Mom gazed out the window. The snow had stopped, and the weather had warmed up enough that what fell last night had melted. There was more precipitation in the weather forecast, so my hopes for a white Christmas were still on track. I wasn't giving up hope.

Breakfast was quiet, but my ears perked up when there was a knock at the door.

Danny.

"Come in," I called. She knew she didn't have to knock. I never did at her house.

Danny came in and gave me a tight smile. Great. The weird vibes were still there from last night. That damn kiss. We shouldn't have done it. Should have saved it for the mistletoe and then we could forget about it.

"Daniella, come sit down and have something to eat," Mom said. She didn't care if Danny saw her with her rollers in. Danny was almost another daughter.

"No, thank you. I've already eaten." No doubt her mom had fed her until she'd begged her to stop. Carol didn't listen to phrases like "no thanks, I'm full."

"At least have a cup of hot chocolate and coffee," I said. It was rich and indulgent.

Danny looked at me and sighed. "Fine."

She sat down at the table with us and Dad made her a cup. She asked him what was new in town and he read some of the headlines in the paper, along with the letters to the editor. Some of them had us laughing as Danny finished her cup and I went to get dressed.

When I came out, I found my dad deep in discussion about financial stuff with

Danny. If I didn't interrupt, we were never getting out of here. Dad loved to pump Danny for investment tips.

"Love you, bye!" I called to my parents as I bundled Danny out the door and toward her car.

Once it was just the two of us and she was driving in the direction of the grocery store, silence fell between us and it made me twitchy. I hated this kind of silence.

Just before Danny pulled into the grocery store, I blurted out, "Am I a bad kisser?"

Chapter Eight

Danny

What? Where did that come from? I had no idea what she was talking about. I stared at her for a second before someone honked and I made the turn into the grocery store parking lot.

It was chaos trying to find a spot, and I focused on that instead of what Holiday had said.

I turned off the car and faced her. "What are you talking about?"

She pulled at a thread hanging from one of her gloves.

"I just...things have been weird since last night. Since the kissing thing and I wondered if it's because I was bad at it. You can tell me, you know. If it was bad. I mean. You can."

She wouldn't look at me.

It took me a moment to follow her logic. She'd thought that I'd pulled away because the kiss had been bad.

“No. It wasn't bad, H. I told you it was fine.”

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She rolled her eyes. “That’s what everyone wants to hear. That they’re fine at kissing.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say! Do you want me to tell you it was amazing and life-altering?” That wasn’t true, but I’d say it if it would soothe her anxieties.

Holiday huffed out a breath. “Well now you’re just trying to placate me.”

“I don’t know what you want!” I yelled a little too loudly, but I couldn’t help it. This whole thing was frustrating.

“It’s fine, whatever. Let’s just go in.” She stared out the window with her jaw clenched.

“Will kissing you again prove to you that I don’t think you’re a bad kisser?” This was the second time I’d suggested kissing and the last time had been a mistake. Why did I keep doing this?

Holiday swiveled around to face me. “Do you mean that?”

“I mean whatever you need to convince you that I didn’t hate kissing you.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

This time I wasn’t going to just give her a peck. If she wanted more, I’d give her more.

I leaned over and didn't wait for her to stop me. She'd asked for this. The console was kind of in the way, but I angled my body so I could join her mouth with mine. This time I didn't pull away immediately. I kissed her, trying to make her believe that she wasn't bad at this. That her mouth was plush and warm, and she smelled incredible. That all of my thoughts turned to static when we kissed and I forgot everything, including my own name.

Instead of keeping my mouth closed, I opened my lips and really kissed her. Tried to show her. Tried to tell her.

She let out a little gasp of surprise but didn't stop me. Instead, she opened her mouth and kissed me back. Tentatively at first, but then we both sunk into it and then we were truly and honestly kissing.

Holiday was not a bad kisser. Not even a little bit. She met me with a sweet intensity that was overwhelming. There was also a sense of rightness about kissing her. As if I'd remembered something that I'd forgotten. As if we should have been kissing before now.

As soon as that thought crossed my fuzzy mind, I leaned back, forcing myself to let go. Forcing myself to stop, even though everything in me screamed at me to keep going. To find out what sounds I could get her to make. To see what her tongue would taste like.

So many wild and dangerous thoughts that I didn't know what to do with.

Holiday blinked at me, her lips swollen and pink. I'd done that. I was responsible for the look on her face. It felt like a victory of some kind.

"Do you believe me now?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

“Yeah,” she said in a dreamy voice. “I believe you.”

Eventually we got out of the car and went into the store. Holiday was responsible for the cart while I went down the list and tossed what we needed in the cart. My mom’s handwriting had always been hard to read, and she’d scribbled it in a hurry so there was a little bit of translation required.

Holiday sang along to the songs in the grocery store while we filled the cart. It seemed impossible that Mom could need even more stuff, but here we were. We did this routine every year and I should be used to it.

The two of us went through the self-checkout and Holiday bagged everything up in my mom’s reusable bags before heading to the car.

Neither of us had said anything about the kiss and I wasn’t going to unless she brought it up. Part of me hoped she didn’t. Talking about the kiss was dangerous. It might lead to all kinds of thoughts that neither of us should be having. The kinds of thoughts that ruined friendships.

Holiday and I had had our disagreements and fights over the years like anyone, but I’d never doubted our friendship. Never worried that I wouldn’t have her in my life. We talked about having rooms next to each other in the nursing home and swapping each other’s fake teeth as a joke.

I wouldn’t let anything jeopardize that future. Not even new and unsettling feelings about her. No matter what, she couldn’t know what was going on in my mind. I’d have to hide it until those thoughts went away and we got back to normal. It was probably all the Christmas cheer or something giving me these ideas. It didn’t matter. It just had to stop sooner rather than later.

Thoughts were still muddled in my brain when I dropped Holiday off at her parents’

house again and waved. I'd see her in a few hours at her family party. I hoped she wore her blue dress.

Dad helped me unpack the groceries before I was commandeered by Mom to help with packing up the cookies. Some were going to relatives, some to neighbors, some to who knew where. Every year I wondered how we would get rid of so many cookies and every year there was an empty kitchen with just a few crumbs left after the holiday. Like magic.

I took a shower and dressed in a nice button-up and slacks for the party.

"Oh, you look nice," Mom said, nudging Dad when I came out of my bedroom.

I rolled my eyes and hugged them both, telling them that I'd say hello to Holiday for them. I'd also brought a box of cookies with me as a contribution to the party.

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I'd never been nervous to go to Holiday's party before, but this year I was. and I knew why.

This was going to be a long night.

Chapter Nine

Holiday

I was just coming down the stairs when Danny walked in, looking gorgeous. Her hair was up, but she'd used her prettiest clip and had a button-up that fit her extremely well. Her pants were also tailored perfectly and for a moment, she made me forget how to walk down the stairs.

Our eyes met and her mouth parted as she stared at me. I'd put on the blue velvet dress and had curled my hair, pulling half of it up. My bangs were behaving miraculously well and I'd thought I looked pretty good in the mirror. But it was nothing to how I felt when Danny looked at me.

Eventually I managed to get down the stairs without tripping while Christmas music classics played in the background and more people piled into the house. Mom flitted around with a tray of hors d'oeuvres that I'd helped assemble earlier. Each year the party got bigger and I told her to hire caterers, but she always waved me off and said that she could handle everything herself. She could, but it took everything out of her, and she was always completely exhausted until New Year.

"Hey," I said to Danny as she took off her peacoat. "Gimme that." She handed me the

coat and I grabbed it, forgetting why I'd wanted it in the first place. Oh, right. I was going to put it on my bed so it didn't get lost in the pile of other coats that were already in the guest room.

"Be right back," I said, scampering up the stairs to my room. I came back, a little breathless, to find Danny and my dad talking.

"Holiday, my love, can you give me a hand?" Mom asked as she swept around, distributing napkins.

"Yeah, of course." I gave Danny a smile and then went to the kitchen to do my duty as a daughter.

I didn't actually get to talk to Danny until nearly an hour later. She was situated in a corner of the living room with a drink and a plate of food and seemed fine being on her own.

I opened my mouth to say something to her, but then the volume on the music went down and someone clinked silverware against a glass to get everyone's attention. I turned around to find Mom and Dad standing on the stairs, ready to make their annual toast.

"Thank you all for coming to our little shindig," Mom said, giggling. She was glowing in a sparkly gold dress, her arm around Dad. They really were adorable.

"Here's to a Merry Christmas for all and to a Happy New Year. Santé!" Our ancestors on my mom's side were French Canadian, so she used that word every year.

"Santé!" Everyone said, raising their glasses. I didn't have one, so I just sort of raised my hand pretending I did.

“Share mine,” Danny said, leaning close to me. She motioned to her glass and I closed my fingers around hers. They were warm. The two of us raised the glass and then didn’t know what to do.

“Guess we should both drink?” I asked.

“You first.” Still both clasping the glass, we tilted it toward my mouth and I sipped, managing not to spill any before letting Danny take a drink as well.

“There. No bad luck,” Danny said, and I let go of her hand, my fingers zinging with the prolonged contact.

“I think we should probably tell my parents about us now. Since she made the toast and everything.” Unlike with Danny’s family, I wasn’t going to stand up on the stairs and address the whole room. We could share with my parents and then let the word spread organically.

Danny nodded. “Sure.” She didn’t sound enthusiastic, but I grabbed her hand and dragged her across the room where Mom was arranging cookies on one of the extra tables she kept around just for this party.

“Mom?” I asked, tapping her shoulder.

“Yes, what is it?” she turned, giving me a smile that was tight. It was easy to see the stress around her eyes, but she was in her element. Mom loved hosting this party even though it took so much out of her.

“Um, where’s Dad?” I looked around and found him laughing with one of his brothers. I caught his eye and motioned for him to come over. He excused himself and joined us, putting his arm around Mom and kissing her cheek.

“So, Danny and I just wanted to tell you that, um, we’re together.” I should have rehearsed a speech or something, but I hadn’t.

I’d kept her hand in mine when we’d walked over and now I held up our joined fingers as evidence.

“Oh, Holiday!” Mom clasped her hands together. Her eyes were a little misty as she hugged us both.

“Congratulations. This is wonderful news. We’re happy for you both. Daniella, you’ve always been part of our family,” Dad said, and his eyes were a little damp too. Dad really did adore Danny. They’d always had a connection that I’d teased her a few times about.

“We’re very happy,” I said. “Aren’t we, babe?” I asked Danny because she hadn’t said anything.

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“We are,” she said, squeezing my hand.

“Oh, can we get a picture of you kissing under the mistletoe? Please?” Of course, Mom would want that. Just as I predicted.

“Sure,” I said, tugging Danny with me right to the arch where the mistletoe hung.

“Okay, give me a second,” Mom said, messing with the settings on her phone. I went ahead and let her position us before turning to Danny.

I tried to reassure her with my eyes since I couldn’t say anything without my parents hearing.

She nodded back at me and then on my mom’s command, we kissed like we were supposed to.

This time it was different than in the car. Not as uncomfortable, that was for sure. It was only natural to sink into this kiss. Did it count as our third? I didn’t know. But this time it felt only natural for me to kiss her with no inhibitions and for one of my feet to lift from the floor and curl up behind me in the perfect pose.

To her credit, Danny kissed me back with as much enthusiasm, her mouth relentless against mine, pressing hard like she was trying to crawl inside me. I wasn’t opposed to that at all. She could do whatever she wanted with me as long as she didn’t stop kissing me. I’d grabbed onto her shirt to anchor myself and I knew I was wrinkling it, but I didn’t care. She had her arms around my waist, her fingers digging into my skin just on the right side of too hard.

It wasn't until Danny pulled away that I heard the cheers of people around us. Oops.

My intention with the kiss had been subdued but convincing and we'd swung all the way to intense and borderline inappropriate. I had no excuse except that I couldn't help myself. Every time Danny's lips touched mine for longer than a second, I lost my damn mind. Forgot every plan and rule I'd made for myself.

Danny stared down at me, her breath coming in little gasps as if she'd just run down the stairs. Her brown eyes were wide in her face and she looked a little stunned. Probably the same way I looked.

"Sorry," I said, not really sure what I was apologizing for. She'd kissed me back just as recklessly.

"I..." she trailed off. She closed her eyes. "I think we need to talk."

She opened her eyes and my heart dropped into my stomach. This couldn't be good.

"Okay, um, let's go to my room." I gave my parents what I hoped was a normal smile and winked at them before heading for the stairs. They'd hopefully think that we were going upstairs to fool around. Gross, but necessary. My parents had never been weird about sex, even when I'd come out. They'd made sure I had all the information I needed and had taken me to the doctor for birth control if I decided I wanted it. In some ways they'd been a little too progressive and had swung over into embarrassing, but it was better than the alternative.

Danny shut my bedroom door behind us, and I clenched my hands behind my back.

She was going to break this off. Right after we'd made out under the mistletoe and told my parents we were "dating." Fuck.

“Just say it.”

Danny had been staring at my bed and turned around slowly. “Say what?”

“You’re going to say that we should break up. Or fake break up since we aren’t actually dating. Whatever.” I hated this. Why had I come up with this idea in the first place? She’d been right. It was a bad one.

“I don’t... Fuck, Holiday.” Danny shook her head and started pacing around the room. “I don’t know what to do with this.”

“With what?” I was thoroughly confused now. “It’s fine if you want to call this off. Bad timing, but I can just tell my parents it was a joke.” They would not get the joke, but if Danny wanted out, I’d do whatever it took to make her happy. I would do anything for this woman. That had always been true, and it would always be true.

“That’s not... I don’t...” She ripped her hand through her hair and yanked the clip out, making me wince. That looked painful, but she was going through something right now.

I stepped closer to her. “What’s wrong? You can tell me.”

Danny stared at my face with a pained look.

“I’m scared, H.”

The devastation in her voice hit me right in the center of my chest. What was going on?

“What are you scared of, babe?” I asked. The last word just slipped out of my mouth without me even thinking about it. How did that happen? I put my hand on her arm

and begged her with my eyes to tell me what was going on so I could fix it for her.

Danny finally broke. “I’m scared of the way I feel about you.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“And how do you feel about me?” I asked slowly. She was going to have to spell it out.

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“When I kiss you...it doesn’t feel fake to me, Holiday. I tried to tell myself it wasn’t real, but it feels real to me. I’m so sorry.” She started to cry, and I gathered her into my arms, pushing her head against my shoulder.

“Shhh, it’s okay.” I was still processing her words and it took me a moment to put everything together.

“Are you saying that you liked kissing me?” I asked. I’d never gotten a decent answer about the kissing situation.

Danny let out a pained sound and lifted her head. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

Why was she sorry?

“Because I’m going to ruin everything.” I must have said those words out loud because she’d responded to my question.

“Why are you going to ruin everything?” I was playing catchup with everything going on in her head. One of my hands brushed up and down her back trying to soothe her.

“Because I don’t know how to go back to the way things were,” she said, blinking away tears and sniffing. I wanted to get her a tissue, but I didn’t want to leave her.

“Hold on, let’s sit down.” I guided her over to the bed, my heart racing in my chest. This felt like one of those moments when everything was about to change, and my body was flipping out about it. If she was saying what I hoped she was saying, then

both of our lives were never going to be the same from this moment onward.

Danny sat heavily on the bed next to me and I reached for a tissue from the box on my nightstand, using it to blot her face and give myself a second to try and calm down.

I didn't calm down, but Danny had a moment to blow her nose.

"Are you saying that you want to kiss me?" I asked, my voice squeaking.

Danny nodded. "Yes. Yes, I want to kiss you so much I can barely breathe."

Well. That was as strong a statement as any.

"Oh," I said, exhaling. "Then we're on the same page."

"What?" she asked, tearing another tissue apart with her fingers. "You want to kiss me?"

Her surprise was fucking adorable. "Yes, Daniella. I want to kiss you. I don't know why we're sitting here talking instead of kissing except that I didn't know you wanted to kiss me back. I thought I was the one who'd have to suppress their feelings." I'd been worrying about it all day. Wondering how the hell I was going to hide my surprising and growing attraction to her.

"What the hell is wrong with us?" Danny asked, shaking her head slowly.

"No idea," I said, laughing. It wasn't funny, but it kind of was. A giggle burst out of my mouth and then I couldn't stop. Danny laughed with me and soon we were falling back on my bed and trying to catch our breaths.

“What the hell, Danny?” I asked, turning to face her. She was so close, and she looked beautiful with her hair all over the place. Danny had always been beautiful, but it was like it hit me differently now after we’d kissed. Her beauty had an edge to it now. An intensity that sometimes made it hard to think around her.

“You’re beautiful,” I blurted out, as if my tongue had taken a cue from my brain.

“So are you. I’ve always known it but...” she trailed off again. “It’s different now.” She stroked a few stray hairs out of my face.

“Yeah, it is.”

I really needed to kiss her, so I reached for her face and pulled her closer. Danny didn’t stop me as I sealed my mouth to hers. Oh,yes. Kissing Danny was exactly perfectly right.

It truly was astonishing that we hadn’t been kissing before this. So many years of not kissing her that I was going to have to make up for.

This was the strongest kiss. The most uninhibited. Danny didn’t hesitate to move until she was straddling me and kissingme so hard that I could barely breathe. The only thing that mattered was that she didn’t stop.

The kind of want that I had for her was all-consuming. It was too big to contemplate. Too much, but just enough. Just enough for me. I could handle it.

I whimpered into her mouth and she moaned back at me. Our tongues tasted each other for the first time, and I was lost and found at once.

Kissing Danny waseverything.

“Oh my god, I want you so bad it hurts,” Danny gasped into my mouth. She’d grabbed me and had started driving her hips against mine and had turned the kiss from something sweetly desperate to something harder and more intense.

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“Fuck, I want you too, Danny,” I said, rolling my hips against hers and making her moan. I didn’t want to talk anymore. I wanted action. Specifically her action on my action until we both came. I’d never needed anyone this much in my entire life.

Chapter Ten

Danny

That mistletoe kiss had somehow led us upstairs and if I wasn’t careful, we were going to fuck right here right now during Holiday’s parents’ party. They’d probably be thrilled, but I didn’t know if letting our hormones make all of our decisions tonight was the best idea. With a monumental effort, I pulled back from the kiss and sat up. Holiday’s eyes flew open.

“Why did you stop?” Both of us were breathing hard and it was hard to form a coherent thought with all of the blood in my body rushing to harden my nipples and make my pussy drip and ache. I hadn’t had an attraction so strongly like this ever in my life. Not to anyone.

“I don’t want to stop. But we should,” I told her when she sputtered out a protest. “We should take a moment and talk about this.”

Holiday glared at me and thrust her hips up against me in a way that almost made me black out.

“H. We’re moving too fast. We need to figure this out.” I needed to get off her if we were going to have any kind of coherent conversation. but I didn’t want to. So I just

kind of rolled to the side, but she rolled with me so we were face-to-face again.

God, she was lovely. Her dress had hiked up and I wondered if she was wearing any underwear. I hoped she wasn't.

"I'm not wearing anything under this dress," she said, as if she'd read my mind.

"Jesus Christ, Holiday," I said, closing my eyes. "You're trying to kill me."

"No, I'm trying to get you to fuck me. There's a difference."

I swore again. "How did this happen?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "Don't really care. Only that it did, and I want you and I need you to do something about it. Please?"

She pouted at me and I knew that I was doomed. She'd always used her pout to get her way and it had always worked on me. In this moment if she asked me for anything, I'd give it to her. She could get away with murder with that pout.

"Holidayyyyyy," I said, drawing out her name. "Your parents are waiting downstairs."

She scoffed. "They already think we're doing what I want to do, so why not go ahead and do it? It's Christmas Eve." Her fingers played with the buttons on my shirt in a distracting way.

"What does Christmas Eve have to do with it?"

"You're supposed to get everything you want on Christmas Eve. It's a night for wish fulfillment."

This was the first I was hearing of it.

“Are you really going to make me talk you into this?” she asked, and I realized she’d unbuttoned my shirt when she pushed it open, revealing the simple bralette I had on underneath.

“Ohhh, you look gorgeous. Is this new?”

What I should have done was to reach for her hands and make her stop. To rebutton my shirt and reiterate that we should hit pause for a little while.

That wasn’t what I did.

Instead I sat up and pulled my shirt off.

“Take your dress off,” I heard myself say.

“No way. I’m not getting completely naked while you’re still wearing everything,” Holiday said, also sitting up as I reached for the hem of her dress.

“I’m not wearing everything. I took my shirt off,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, and you should take this off,” she said, yanking at the strap of my bralette. “You know I’ve seen you naked before.”

She had, but not for a long, long time. I’d done my best not to let her see me naked the past few years. Holiday had been a little more cavalier about it and would sometimes barge into the bathroom while I was in the shower to ask me about something.

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Holiday kept messing with my bralette until I took it off.

“Pants, please,” she said, staring at my breasts.

“Dress, off,” I said, snapping my fingers. No idea where that came from, but my patience was thin. I’d gone from wanting us to slow down to wanting to get her naked immediately. I needed to see her. Needed to touch her and taste her and know what she sounded like when she came.

I’d heard her before, of course, but that had been through walls, and I’d been doing my best not to listen. This was the opposite of that. I had to know.

“Fine,” she said, “but start taking your pants off because I need to see those legs. God, you have the most amazing legs. Have I ever told you that?”

I didn’t think she had, but I was happy to hear it now.

“Your body is incredible,” I told her as she stood up to get her dress off. She really wasn’t wearing anything underneath. With no hesitation, she pulled it over her head and tossed it on the other side of the room, standing there in all her glory.

“Come here,” I said, reaching for her. She stood between my legs and we both stared at each other.

“We’ve never been naked before like this,” she said, gazing down at me, making me burn.

“No, we haven’t. Seems like something we should have been doing.”

“Yeah, definitely. Are you...are you sure?” She’d thrown off the dress with such confidence, but now I saw a flicker of doubt.

“Yes,” I said, reaching up to pull her mouth down for a kiss. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my entire life. I want you.”

Chapter Eleven

Holiday

This was really fucking happening. Holy shit. It was like all my wishes had come true at once. Not even a week ago if you said I’d end up in bed with Danny on Christmas Eve, I would have asked you what you were smoking and if I could have some. But now here we were, and everything was exactly right.

Danny was naked in my bed and I was so fucking ready for her to fuck my brains out. It was easy to lay on my back and for her to lean down and kiss me before straddling my hips and rubbing against me, her nipples slipping against mine and making me moan so loud that I was afraid they’d hear me downstairs.

“Can I touch you?” she asked in between kisses. My thoughts were barely coherent, so it was nice she was taking the lead. I was happy to let her.

“Yes, please,” I gasped as she stroked her hand down my chest, brushing her fingers over one of my nipples.

“I want you so much and I want to do this right,” she said, rolling one of my nipples between her fingers and making me arch my back. Understanding her words took a moment.

“Everything you’ll do is right,” I said. “You know me, and I know you.” Our chemistry as friends had to translate to chemistry in this way too, I was sure of it.

Danny met my eyes before leaning down and sucking on one of my nipples, making me cry out.

“I want to take my time with you,” she said. “This first time.”

Good. There would be a second time if I had anything to say about it. But she didn’t need to take her time. I didn’t have the patience for it. I needed to come or else I was going to die. Probably.

“Danny, I need you. Please make me come. Then you can be all sweet and kiss me everywhere,” I said, and she let out a soft laugh.

“Okay, baby. I’ll make you come.” Our gazes locked when she called me “baby.” It wasn’t the pet name we agreed on, but I liked it. I liked it a lot.

“Please, Danny,” I said as she stroked her fingers through the trimmed hair of my pussy. I’d never gone full Brazilian, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“You’ll have to teach me,” she said, stroking one finger up and down me, just barely skating along the hood of my clit. Even that little bit of contact had my hips twitching and my mouth opening on a moan.

“Do whatever you want,” I said. “It’s all good.”

She let out a little snort and started a slow stroke of my pussy, gently pulling on each of my labia and then fluttering her fingers right at my entrance in a way that made my eyes cross.

“Ohhhh that’s good,” I said, grabbing onto the arm that she had propped herself up with, desperate to have something to hold onto.

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Danny leaned down to kiss me as she did some gymnastics with her fingers that had me panting and moaning and generally falling apart. And that was before she raised her hand to her mouth, spit on her fingers and then slid one inside me. I was so wet that she hadn't needed the spit, but fuck, that was hot.

"You're gorgeous, baby. Look at you. I could make you beg for it, couldn't I?"

Who was this sex goddess and what had she done with my best friend? Or maybe she'd always been this person too and I'd just never seen it. Holy shit, I had been missing out.

"Yes, I'd beg. I have no shame. I'll do anything if it brings me an orgasm. You've heard me."

Her cheeks went a little red, but she didn't stop what she was doing as she leaned down to kiss me while she fucked two fingers in and out of me, stopping every few thrusts to grind the palm of her hand against my clit and make me see stars.

This woman was a pussy witch.

She found my G-spot with no effort at all and kept moving and stroking and circling and doing things with her hand and fingers that I didn't know were physically possible all the while ravishing my mouth and it was all too much and my orgasm grabbed onto me, stealing my breath and melting my spine and exploding through every cell of my body.

A few tears dripped down my cheeks, but I was powerless to stop them as pleasure

shot through me, obliterating everything else.

“Holy fuck,” I said when I could form coherent words. I couldn’t move any other parts of my body, but my mouth seemed to be working okay.

Danny leaned down to sweep her tongue into my mouth before she sat up with a smile of satisfaction that I’d never seen on her face before. She held up her hand and wiggled her fingers. They were coated with my desire and I watched as she licked every single one of them clean.

“Holy shit,” I said. Curse words seemed to be my go-to vocabulary right now because holy shit. This woman.

“Mmm,” she said, swirling her tongue around her finger. “You taste amazing.”

“Fuck,” I said. “I want to taste you.” I hadn’t gone down on a woman in a long time and that was a damn shame because I fucking loved it. The taste, the sounds, the responses. It was the best, and I wanted to experience that with Danny.

“What if...” she started to say and then trailed off.

“What? You can tell me. If you have any fantasies, and I know that you do, you can tell me. I have a bunch.” That was an understatement. I had more sexual fantasies than I could count. Some were more general, and some were so specific that I’d never told anyone about them for fear of being laughed at. I’d always worried that I thought about sex more than other people. That my desires were out of the ordinary. Then I’d gone on the internet and reminded myself that there were millions of humans out there with far more depraved desires than I.

“I’ve never tried to sixty-nine. I feel like a loser for never trying it, but anatomy never lined up or I was too shy to ask.”

“I’ve done it,” I said. “With a girl and with a guy. It was harder with the guy because he was tall, but we figured it out. It should work.” With a little bit of coaxing and positioning, I got her to get on all fours with her pussy right above my mouth and her head down by mine.

“Now this is a view,” I said, licking my lips. My mouth was watering, already desperate to taste her.

“Okay, now all you need to do is lower your hips a little bit.” She did, and I helped angle her just right. Perfect. She was right there, and I was ready.

“First one who comes wins,” I said before giving her clit the softest of kisses.

Danny gasped. “Wins what?”

“An orgasm,” I told her before dragging one of her lips gently between my teeth.

Her only answer was a moan before she lowered her head and I felt her warm mouth engulf me.

I cursed, but the sound was muffled as I sucked her clit into my mouth. I was determined to get her to come first and it seemed she was similarly determined.

We both moaned and tortured each other as she rode my face and I thrust my hips up into her mouth. It was messy and chaotic and sloppy and perfect.

Her desire was all over my chin and dripping down my throat and I had never been happier or more satisfied in my life and neither of us had come yet.

I thrust my tongue inside her as much as I could and then circled her clit, alternating between the two until her hips locked and she came all over my face, a second before

I came against her tongue.

Danny's arms and legs shook above me as she struggled to hold herself up after she came.

"Go to the side," I told her, pushing her a little bit so she'd topple over onto the bed next to me. She did, flopping on her back, her face glistening while she pushed her hair out of her face.

"I can't go back downstairs with my hair smelling like pussy," she said.

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“It’s okay. I’ll make our excuses. You can stay tonight, you know.”

She shook her head. “My parents would actually murder me if I didn’t wake up with them tomorrow.” Right. It was Christmas Eve. The incredible sex had put it out of my mind.

“Oh. Yeah. That makes sense. Well, I’ll just have to make things even before you go.” I heaved myself upright.

“What do you mean?”

I reached into my nightstand and quickly searched through my collection of vibrators, finally selecting one.

“I’ve come twice and you’ve only come once. I’m not sending you home with only one orgasm. What kind of friend would I be?”

Danny smiled slowly as I showed her the vibrator and then turned it on.

“Well in the interest of fairness,” she said, spreading her legs.

I leaned down and kissed her, tasting both of us. “I’m all about fairness.”

Chapter Twelve

Danny

Holiday did make me come with the vibrator. Even harder than when we'd been going down on each other. I'd floated somewhere near the ceiling for a while until remembering where we were and what we'd been doing.

"I need to shower before I go home," I said. There was no way I could just put my clothes back on and go home the way I was. She was all over me.

"That's fine. I might join you. We'll get you all cleaned up and send you on your way." She was pouting again. I reached out and grabbed her chin.

"You can't do that anymore. It makes me want to give you things."

"What kind of things?" she asked, raising those perfect eyebrows.

"You know what kind of things." I rolled my eyes and sat up, my joints loose from the orgasms.

"Tell me," she said, her eyes sparkling. My god, she was stunning. I couldn't believe I'd seen her naked and had gotten to make her come. Twice.

"No. I need to get home." I picked up some of my clothes and realized I couldn't put them back on until I'd showered off.

"I don't want you to go," she whispered, staring at the bed.

"I know, baby," I said, reaching out and stroking the side of her face to get her to look up at me. "But you know how mad my parents will be. And I'll see you tomorrow as soon as we can." She always had Christmas morning with her parents for breakfast and gifts, then would come to our party in the afternoon. Hopefully she could get away a little earlier. It seemed selfish to want her to abandon her family for me, but I didn't really care.

“I like how you call me baby now,” she said, grinning at me.

“You do?”

She nodded.

“Then I’ll keep doing it. Baby. Do you have a robe or something I can put on?” She did, so I covered up and snuck down the hall with her after she’d put on a second robe. We showered together, touching and kissing and laughing.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she kept saying.

“I know. It’s scary how easy it is,” I confessed.

“I know. But we know each other.” She moved her loofah across my breasts, causing me to moan. If she didn’t stop, I was going to beg her to make me come again.

“We know each otherreallywell now,” I said, grasping her wrist and making her stop stroking me. “If I’m ever going to get home, we’re going to have to stop.”

Holiday let out a little sound of frustration, but she handed me the loofah so I could finish washing myself. Once we were out of the shower, I put my clothes back on and brushed out my hair, putting it up again. Everyone was going to notice that my hair was wet when I got back, but I’d let them draw their own conclusions.

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“So,” I said when Holiday had put her dress back on and had braided her hair. “We’re doing this?”

She snorted and kissed me once. “Yeah, Danny. We’re doing this. Officially.”

I’d needed to hear it confirmed.

“Good,” I said, kissing her again, letting myself melt into her mouth and enjoy the decadence of kissing her. God, she was good at kissing.

“I’m yours, Danny,” she said, smiling at me. My heart stopped for a second.

“I’m yours too. Always have been.”

We kissed one more time before she handed me my coat and pushed me out of her room, leaving me to do the walk of shame on my own.

The party was still going on, but things were winding down as people made their way back home to wait for Santa to come down the chimney or chimney equivalent if they didn’t have one. More than a few parents were going to be up late tonight assembling gifts to leave under the tree. I did my best not to make eye contact with anyone, but it would have been the height of rudeness not to say goodbye to Holiday’s parents, so I sought them out where they were hiding in the kitchen and whispering about something.

“Holiday is upstairs,” I said with as much dignity as I could manage while my entire face was on fire.

They shared a look and just smiled at me.

“We’re so happy it’s you,” Simone said, holding her arms out and I had no choice but to let myself be hugged by the woman who had been like a second mother to me. It should have been awkward, but it wasn’t. I embraced her dad, Derek, as well, feeling too many emotions to name.

“Merry Christmas,” I said. Insufficient, but I didn’t know what else to say.

“Merry Christmas, Daniella,” Simone said, winking at me.

My parents were still up and bustling around when I got back, and immediately noticed my wet hair.

“We didn’t think we were going to see you tonight,” Mom said, nudging Dad. “We assumed you’d stay with Holiday.”

I rolled my eyes. “And get a massive guilt trip? No.”

Mom’s eyes narrowed. “You be nice to me or I’m going to tell Santa not to bring your presents.”

All of her children might be grown, but my mom still acted like Santa was a real person and would withhold gifts if she snitched on us. Normally it was cute, but tonight I was over it.

“I’m tired,” I said. “Can we not?”

“I wonder what she’s tired from?” Raquel said, coming into the living room with a smirk on her face.

“Don’t you have a husband to get home to?” I asked. Raquel had married a respiratory therapist who unfortunately had to work today but would be getting off right about now.

“Oh, I couldn’t leave without seeing my baby sister’s walk of shame,” she said, laughing as if this was the best thing to happen to her all year. Insufferable. Maybe I should have stayed with Holiday. Then I could have snuck in early in the morning and pretended I was here the whole time.

“Like you haven’t had one before?” I asked. When it came to walks of shame, my sister had had many more than me. Once I’d even sat down and ranked them from least to most embarrassing. This must be revenge for that.

“Children,” Mom said, her voice sharp. “Not on Christmas Eve, please.”

Raquel rolled her eyes and then hugged and kissed my parents goodbye and said she’d be here tomorrow with Kevin for the family celebration.

“Byeeeeee, Danny,” she said, laughing as she walked out the door.

I glared after her until the door shut.

I miss you.Come back.The message from Holiday came about twenty minutes after I’d gotten home. I was already in bed, scrolling social media and trying to get to sleep. It was impossible though, because every time I closed my eyes, I thought of her.

Hey, I miss you too. I didn’t want to leave you.I wished we were together right now.

Instead of answering my message, she video chatted me. I answered, smiling as her sleepy face filled the screen, illuminated by the glow of her phone. She was in bed

too, which was unusual. Holiday was more of a night owl than I was.

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“I’m too tired to type. You took it out of me, you monster,” she said, laughing.

“Yeah, I know how you feel. Tonight was...something else.” Something amazing, incredible, unbelievable. All of those words.

She kept smiling.

“I can’t believe this is happening, Danny. I just... Wow. You’re kind of dirty, you know that?”

Now I was the one laughing. “I guess? I think you brought it out in me. I’ve never really thought about it before.” In my past sexual experiences, I guess I’d taken the lead of whomever I was with at the time. With Holiday, it had been different. Everything had come easily and naturally by knowing her and by knowing myself.

“Well, it was hot as hell. I’m a big fan. And I can’t wait for this holiday to be over so we can go back to our apartment and not go anywhere but the bedroom for a while.” Right. In a few days we’d be heading back to our regular lives and I’d be going back to work and so would she and we’d pick up our lives, but everything had changed.

“How is that going to work?” I asked.

She pretended to think about it for a second. “Well, we can use your bed until we just absolutely wreck it and then my bed and go back and forth. You’ll have to do a lot of laundry, but it will be worth it. I’ve always wanted to have sex in the kitchen too.” It took me a moment to catch up. She was talking about sex.

“No, I don’t mean that. I mean everything else. Are we together, together?”

She snorted. “Are you asking me if I’ll be your girlfriend? Are you saying you like me, like me?” Holiday was making this into a joke, but I was serious. I needed to know what we were to each other now after everything had changed.

“Yes, Holiday. I like you. A lot. In every way. And I want you to be my girlfriend.” There. The only thing I’d held back was the fact that I was completely in love with her. This should have been a startling revelation, but it wasn’t. I’d realized sometime around when she’d taken her dress off. I’d just known, in every cell of my body, that I loved her in every way you can love a person. In loud ways and in quiet. I had always loved her, but that love had grown and stretched and moved with the two of us as we matured into the adults we were now.

I’d tell her tomorrow.

“Well, I want you to be my girlfriend. So there,” she said.

“Sounds perfect to me.”

She gazed at me and was quiet for a moment, but I knew she was thinking about something.

“I love you, you know,” she said, her voice quiet.

“I love you,” I said, the words coming out of my mouth before I considered what they meant. We said them all the time, but now they had a different definition.

“I know,” she said. “But it’s different now, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yeah. It has. But I don’t regret it. I wouldn’t change anything about how

this has happened between us. Nothing.” There was no way to know how things would have worked out if we’d discovered feelings for each other when we were younger. I wasn’t interested in playing that kind of game. I was only interested in who we were now, and the fact that we loved each other.

“We’ve got a lot of sex to make up for,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Mmmm, yes. But other things too.” Not that the sex wasn’t amazing. It was. But I was excited about everything with her.

“You know, it was pretty smart of us to fall in love now, because we already live together. It’s like we skipped a step. Didn’t even have to UHaul.”

I laughed. “We did UHaul. Just not in the usual way.” We’d rented the truck together and had crammed it full of our stuff before we’d moved into our current apartment.

“We’ve literally been living together for years.” Since our freshman year in college.

“You’re still my best friend too,” she said. “I know my brain is all loopy from the sex, but I need you to know that you’ll never stop being my best friend, Danny. Always.”

I’d never wished I could teleport somewhere more in my life than I did at that moment. The clock on my phone screen showed me that it was after midnight, so it was officially Christmas.

“You’re my best friend, H. Always and forever. Merry Christmas, baby.”

“Merry Christmas, babe.”

Chapter Thirteen

Holiday

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I hadn't been this excited for Christmas since I was a kid and knew I was getting the exact toy I wanted because I'd snooped in the closet where my mom always hid the presents.

This was slightly different.

I woke up with a smile on my face and bounced downstairs, eager to get the morning started so I could get over to Danny's house as soon as possible.

"Look at you, so bright and merry," Mom said as I kissed her cheek. I'd put on the matching silky pajamas and had brushed my hair out so I looked cute for the numerous pictures she was going to take of everyone opening presents. Those would be uploaded to the family picture drive and I'd get copies made for another album.

"I wish Danny was here," I said as Dad handed me a cup of coffee mixed with hot chocolate.

"You'll see her soon enough," Dad said, patting my shoulder.

Mom shoved us into the living room and started handing out presents. The three of us lost ourselves in the opening and exclaiming and thanking each other for what we'd gotten. Everyyear we made lists for each other, which made shopping much more efficient. It took out some of the surprise, but everyone got what they wanted, so did it really matter?

Mostly I'd asked for items for the apartment, including some baking tools, as well as several special edition books. I got everything I wanted and then some. I tried to stop

checking the time, but I couldn't help it as we made our traditional breakfast of candy cane-shaped pancakes with whipped cream, sausage, and mimosas. When I was a kid, they used to put ginger ale and orange juice in a glass for me, but now I was an adult, I got the real stuff.

Mom and Dad kept glancing at each other and smiling and I knew they were having one of those silent conversations that people who have been together a long time could have. It just reminded me of Danny and how much I wanted to be with her. She'd sent me a few messages already, including some pictures of her presents and I'd responded with enthusiasm. I'd thought about video calling her and just leaving the call open so we could "be" with each other, but that seemed a little bit excessive, so I didn't.

"I'm sorry, I just miss her," I said as I practically threw the plates into the dishwasher and caught my parents hiding laughter behind my back at my hurrying.

"We know," Mom said, hugging me from behind. "You miss your girl and want to be with her. Go on, I'll finish up."

"Thank you," I said, handing her a plate. "I love you, thank you for all the presents."

I made sure to hug both of them again and ran upstairs to get cute for Danny.

I did remember to send her a message informing her that I was on my way instead of just showing up hours early for the party because I was considerate like that.

She must have been watching for my car by the window because I couldn't even reach for the doorknob before the door flew open and she was yanking me into her arms and kissing the hell out of me.

Cheers and whistles sounded behind her from all the people watching, but I didn't

care. She tasted like she'd been eating a candy cane and I couldn't get enough of her mouth. I'd stand here and kiss her until the earth exploded. I didn't care. The only thing that mattered was the two of us.

"Merry Christmas," she said, leaning back and smiling at me.

"Merry Christmas," I managed to say. She'd kissed me so much that I could barely form the words.

"Close the door!" someone yelled, and Danny rolled her eyes as she yanked me inside. I kicked off my boots and waved to everyone in who was now staring at us.

"Hey," I said, feeling my face go red.

Danny looked at me and then grabbed my hand. "We'll be in my room."

There was nothing to do but stumble along behind her as she dragged me down the hall to more cheering and whistling. Her family was relentless.

Danny shut the door with a laugh and then pushed me up against it, kissing me hard again.

"Wait, you're going to crush your present," I said, reaching to the pocket in my coat where I'd put it.

"We can't have that," she said, brushing my hair back. "I missed you so much. I almost bailed and drove to your place so many times."

"Same," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out the small box.

"Do you want me to open this?" she asked as I pressed it into her hand.

“Yes. Where’s my present?”

Danny laughed and gestured to her bed, which was made and had one wrapped present in the center with a bow on it. Years ago, we’d made a “one present” rule for most holidays, since we got each other presents all the time. We’d also gone through times when we were broke, so one present thoughtfully chosen was better than a bunch of crap we didn’t necessarily want or need.

“Open them at the same time?” I said as we sat on the bed together.

“Deal,” she agreed.

Paper rustled as we unwrapped our presents.

“Oh, H,” she said, revealing the necklace that I’d gotten her. It was a delicate silver chain with a compass rose pendant that had four tiny opals for each direction. Her birthstone. “It’s so beautiful.” She stroked the pendant while I was trying to find the words for what she’d given me.

It was the brand-new ereader that I’d been coveting for ages. The one I had was old and janky and barely held a charge, but I hadn’t been able to justify getting a new one.

Danny’s present was definitely over the budget limit we’d set for each other, and I was speechless.

“I wanted you to have it,” she said, as if she’d anticipated my argument. “I got it on sale.”

“You did not.” I knew she hadn’t because I’d had an alert set to let me know when the company was having sales and there hadn’t been any that significant to make the present affordable. She’d even got it in my favorite shade of pink.

“Fine, I didn’t. But I’m not sending it back.”

“Fine,” I acquiesced.

Danny let out a bark of laughter as she fumbled with the clasp on her necklace. “That was fast. I knew you couldn’t resist it.”

“Let me help,” I said, holding my hand out for the necklace. Danny gave it to me, turning around so I could drape it around her neck and fasten the clasp.

“How does it look?” she asked, facing me. The chain was long so the necklace rested just above her breasts, exactly as I hoped it would.

“Perfect,” I said, diving forward and kissing her, pushing her back on the bed.

“Holiday,” Danny scolded as I kicked the wrapping paper off the bed and shoved my present to the side.

“Now it’s time for your second present,” I told her with a grin.

She raised one of her eyebrows. “Second present?”

“Yup. I just need to unwrap you first.” My fingers went to the tie on her pants and she let out a breathy little moan that turned me on so much that I almost came right then and there.

“I think I’m going to love this present,” she said, her voice already dazed with lust. I couldn’t wait to absolutely wreck her while she wore the necklace I gave her and nothing else.

“I’m just getting started,” I said, pushing at the hem of her shirt.

Eventually we made it out to the party, but not until Danny had put on a different outfit and we’d both cleaned up in the bathroom. She held my hand as I walked on wobbly legs out to join everyone else and eat too many cookies. Both of us tried to

ignore the knowing looks and comments, but honestly, they weren't so bad. Danny wouldn't stop looking at me and I knew because I couldn't stop looking back at her.

"You two are sickening," Michael said, but he was literally sitting in his husband James's lap while Raquel and Kevin played with Nicholas on the floor. No doubt there would soon be two grandchildren in the family if Carol had anything to say about it.

"I'm just so happy to have all my children happy," Carol said, wiping her eyes again. She'd cried so many tears of joy today that I was almost worried about her.

"Hey," Danny said, nudging me and pointing to the window. "You got your wish."

It was snowing.

Jumping to my feet, I grabbed Danny's hand. "Come on. Let's go for a walk." I needed to move after eating so many cookies. Not too many. There was no such thing, not in my experience.

Danny laughed at my haste as we shoved our feet into our boots and put on our coats and hats and gloves.

"It's beautiful," I said when we stepped outside. "Come on."

I didn't have to tell her where we were going. She knew.

We walked, gloved hand-in-hand, to the elementary school where we'd met so many years ago.

"Want a push?" she asked as we strolled around the playground, stopping by the swings. I couldn't count how many hours of recess we'd spent on these swings.

They'd been replaced, of course, but they were still in the same place.

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“Swing with me,” I told her, sitting down.

Without letting go of my hand, she sat on the swing next to me.

I let out a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” she asked as we swayed back and forth, fingers still joined.

“That everyone knew we were in love before we did. We’re literally the last to know. Should we feel bad about that or something?”

Danny threw back her head and looked up at the falling snow, letting it gather on her eyelashes. She looked back at me and shrugged.

“The only point is that we got here. And that I love you.”

“I love you,” I said. I couldn’t stop saying it. “I love you!” I yelled.

“I love you!” she yelled back, and we dissolved into giggles. Everything was wonderful.

“This is basically the best Christmas ever,” I said.

“Agreed. We’ll have to try and top it next year.”

She leaned closer, a wicked smile on her face. “I’m already planning.”

Epilogue

Danny

A Christmas proposal was cliché, but I didn't care. It was our one-year anniversary and we needed to get engaged if only to stop both our families pestering us to get engaged. Our effort to get them off our backs had completely blown up in our faces and I was pretty sure my parents and siblings were going to propose to Holiday for me if I didn't hurry up.

This year, our parents had agreed to joint-host two parties: one at Holiday's on Christmas Eve as usual, and the second at mine on Christmas Day. It was a relief for all involved that two dynamic women could share duties and not end up so frazzled.

Since Christmas Eve was technically our anniversary, I'd planned to propose under the mistletoe where we'd kissed last year. I'd planned it all out with Holiday's parents and made sure they knew the signal I'd send them so that Simone could have her phone ready to record. Nearly everyone knew this was happening, except for Holiday. I didn't think she knew. She couldn't have known.

I'd been very sneaky about getting her ring and hiding it from her for months.

Simone got up and made her yearly toast and then I nodded to her, giving the signal.

"And I think we have one more surprise," Simone said, nodding back. This was it.

Before I could take Holiday's hand and lead her to the arch with the mistletoe, she grabbed mine.

"What?" I asked and then she was down on one knee with a box open. My mouth dropped open as everyone else went silent.

“Are you proposing?” I asked.

Holiday smiled nervously up at me. “Yeah, that’s kind of the idea?”

I gasped and found Derek standing there with the ring box I’d given him for safekeeping because it hadn’t fit in any of my pockets without being too obvious. He was grinning as he handed it to me.

“Then I guess that’s what I’m doing too,” I said, also dropping to one knee. Holiday burst out laughing as everyone cheered.

“They knew,” Holiday said, shaking her head. I glanced quickly at our parents and found them both laughing and crying at the same time. Yeah, they’d known.

“They knew we were in love with each other before we did, so I guess that makes sense,” I said, smiling through tears. “Do you want me to go first?”

She shook her head. “No. I got down on my knee first.”

Holiday had also told me she loved me first, so I’d let her have this one too.

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“Danny. I love you. I have loved you for most of my life. You have bewitched me, body and soul.” She grinned, and I knew that was a line from *Pride and Prejudice*. Of course she’d quoted one of her favorite books. “I don’t know who I would be if I hadn’t met you, and I don’t want to find out. Say you’ll marry me so we can spend the rest of our lives together. My best friend and my wife.”

I nodded, barely getting out the word “yes” before she hugged me hard and then sat back so I could have my turn.

“It feels weird going second. I’ve been trying to figure out the right words to say to you in this moment for months. I don’t know how many times I tried to write down how I feel about you, but there weren’t enough words, or the right ones haven’t been invented yet. Until they are invented, or I figure them out, I can only say that I love you. You’ll always be my best friend. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” She screamed and threw herself at me, causing us both to topple over onto the floor as the room erupted in cheering and good wishes.

Somehow, we managed to jam the rings on our fingers before we were engulfed in hugs from anyone and everyone.

Once we finally found each other again, glasses of champagne were pressed into our hands.

“To love!” Holiday yelled out.

“To love!” Everyone echoed.

She pulled me closer. “To us.”

I tapped my glass against hers. “To us.”