



The Billionaire's Christmas Baby Surprise

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Description: They'd both be happy never to see each other again,
But they each have something the other needs,
And little do they know, they've already created something beautiful!

Billie Stone usually loves the holidays, but this year she has a problem, and the worst possible person is offering to help her out. Max Grayson's reputation proceeds him. A rakishly handsome, notoriously ungenerous billionaire, he only wants to donate his time and money in exchange for the PR opportunity it provides. Even worse, they've already spent the night together – a moment of madness that was only ever going to be a one-off. But with the holidays rapidly approaching and her Christmas gift-giving program in dire lack of funds, Billie has no choice but suck it up and partner with Max for the season.

What follows is nothing short of a Christmas miracle. Piece by piece, day by day, Billie starts to peel away at her new volunteer's layers, revealing a far more enticing man beneath the Scrooge-like façade. And then, just as she's trying not to fall completely, the two learn that they're going to have a Christmas bundle of joy of their own!

Can Max – the reformed curmudgeon, and prospective father – change his ways?

Total Pages (Source): 55

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

CHAPTER 1

MAX

Max Grayson folded his hands and leaned forward in his chair. His entire PR team had assembled in his office, which was rarely, if ever, a good sign.

“So,” he said, “what brings you all here on this fine November day?”

“Do you want the good news first, or the bad news?” Stephanie Adino, the head of Max’s PR team, gave him a tense smile.

“I suppose I’ll start with the good news.”

“Well, as I’m sure you’ve heard, our latest franchise of Bluebell Diner has really taken off over in Albany. The patron numbers are looking good, there have been positive reviews online and in social media of the food and service, and we’ve gotten past those all-important first three months.”

“And the bad news?”

Stephanie handed Max a piece of paper by way of reply. The paper showed an image of a restaurant with a “foreclosed” sign on the door.

“All right. What does this have to do with Bluebell Diner?” Max tried to keep his tone patient, but it was a struggle. Although he understood the importance of PR, he almost always felt that his time would be better spent actually working than worrying

so much about optics.

“This restaurant was a real establishment in Albany. Papa’s Sunrise Café. Apparently, Bluebell Diner moved in right next door, offering low prices that the café just couldn’t compete with. They shut down last week.”

“And this is my problem because...”

Stephanie looked like she was working hard to keep her cool, too. “It’s a problem because the optics are terrible, Max. The locals are in an uproar about this. There’s been a lot of bad press surrounding you and your business practices.”

“Right.” Max held back a sigh. For some reason, he always seemed to feature in the press, both in tabloids and on social media. The public seemed to be invested in his every move, which was often frustrating. People liked the homestyle food and reasonable prices that Bluebell Diner offered. They liked to comment on Max’s wealth, and occasionally he was listed in articles about eligible billionaires. Every once in a while, he would appear in a spread that listed details of his occupation (CEO), his age (thirty-five), and his hobbies (according to the tabloids, working out and traveling, although the correct answer would be cooking and working).

The public weren’t such fans of Max’s aggressive business practices, but that was hardly on him. That’s just how restaurant business were run. With hundreds of Bluebell Diner locations across the United States, it was clear that the way in which Maxran his business — the same way his father had run the business before him — was working.

“This could be really bad for you,” Stephanie continued. “Because of that, we’re suggesting a complete image overhaul.”

“What would that look like, exactly?” Max glanced at his wall clock, which showed

that he was coming dangerously close to his next meeting. A complete image overhaul sounded very time-consuming.

“We need to showcase another side of you to the public. A kinder, more charitable side. Instead of letting the tabloids tear you to shreds over Bluebell’s business practices, we can highlight how you channel profits into a good cause.”

“So, I need to write a check?”

“A little more than that. We’ve gotten you a ticket to the Grateful Gala, an annual benefit hosted by the city of Denver to put wealthy benefactors in touch with charitable organizations in need. It’ll be next week. Go, talk to some people, and be seen among the charitable community.”

Max sighed and ran a hand through his sandy-blond hair. “Stephanie...”

“Just think about it. The holidays are coming up, and your image is especially important now. People want to support businesses that are family-friendly and charity-minded — not ones that put local family restaurants out of business.”

“I’ll think about it, but if I’m being honest, I don’t see the need for it. Bad press always blows over in a news cycle or two. It’s more important to make sure business is running smoothly and that profits are coming in than to make sure I always look good in the press. Which, as you’ve said yourself, is impossible.”

“Fair enough, but the public isn’t the only group you need to worry about. A few of our investors have been muttering about pulling their funding. This kind of press doesn’t just make you look bad — it makes anyone who invests in Bluebell look bad. Particularly since Bluebell is supposed to be a family-friendly, home-style, old-school restaurant. Undercutting local businesses just doesn’t mesh with our image.”

“All right.” Max took the envelope of tickets that Stephanie handed him. If the tabloids were making his investors restless, he could spend an evening hearing about puppies and homeless shelters and whatever else needed funding. He could even write a generous check when the evening was over. “Is there anything else?”

“Not at the moment.”

Stephanie and the rest of the PR team got to their feet, nodded pleasantly to Max, and filed out of the office. Another glance at the clock showed him that he only had five minutes before his next meeting, during which he’d be sitting down with a new potential cutlery supplier. He stood and went to his coffee machine. As he waited for the cup to brew, he glanced out the window.

Bluebell’s corporate offices were in downtown Denver. From his broad office window, Max had a view of skyscrapers and, in the distance, the shadowy curve of mountains. Colorado’s typical blue skies were clouded over today, though, and it looked like it might rain. Or snow, perhaps. It was already mid-November, and chill weather was taking root in the mountain city.

Pretty soon, the buildings outside Max’s window would be draped in sparkling Christmas lights. A fir tree decorated with baubles would move into Bluebell’s lobby. Christmas carols would take over every radio station, and newscasters would begin to speculate about whether this year would be a white Christmas.

Nothing much would change for Max, though. He wasn’t the kind of guy who got caught up in the holiday spirit — he had too much to do to worry about carols and decorations.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

Too much to do such as, apparently, attending a charity ball to reform his image. Max took his cup of coffee from the machine and took a long drink. He was going to need the energy.

CHAPTER 2

BILLIE

Across town, in an outreach center housed in an old building far from the towering skyscrapers of downtown Denver, Billie Stone was humming along to a Christmas song on her headphones. Sure, it was only mid-November and too early to be getting into the Christmas spirit, but this was Billie's favorite time of the year, and she needed the pick-me-up.

Today was not going well. She'd had a meeting with her finance team (which consisted of just one person, Barbara, a slightly frazzled middle-aged woman) in which Billie had learned that Sweetest Surprise, her charity, had fallen short of the mark for holiday donations. Very short.

"We can still give some gifts," Barbara had told her dubiously. "But it won't be anything like last year."

"There's still time to get a few more donors," Billie had told her hopefully.

"Sure." But Barbara hadn't seemed convinced, and Billie wasn't sure she'd even convinced herself. After the meeting, Billie had reached out to a few past donors on Sweetest's mailing list, but she wasn't optimistic. Times were tight for everyone this

year.

Billie just hated the thought of failing the children Sweetest Surprise usually helped. Last year, they'd delivered a record number of gifts to children whose families couldn't afford them, including children in hospitals or in foster care. Although Sweetest worked year-round with numerous outreach programs, the Christmas gift delivery was always the highlight of Billie's year.

Except, maybe, this year.

Billie looked down at the spreadsheet she'd printed from Barbara's bookkeeping. The woman had been right. Their funding this year was less than half what it had been the year before. Suddenly, the Christmas song playing through Billie's headphones didn't feel nearly as festive anymore, and she pressed pause. If she didn't raise a huge amount of money, and fast, families who'd come to rely on Billie's Christmastime deliveries of festive food and gifts would go without.

There was still one opportunity for her to fundraise enough money to cover the gift-giving program. In a few days, the city of Denver was holding its annual Grateful Gala. Last year, Billie had attended the event and had received a generous donation from one of the benefactors who'd been there.

Still, she had been hoping not to go this year. Most of Sweetest's donors were ordinary people — teachers and doctors and firefighters who worked with kids in need, families who wanted to do something good around the holidays, or empty-nesters who remembered how special it was to wake up on Christmas morning to presents under the tree and who wanted to make the same thing happen for other families.

The benefactors at the Grateful Gala weren't ordinary people, though. Most of them were extremely wealthy people who mostly donated to charity to improve their

image. Billie didn't turn her nose up at such donations, but she did find it hard to charm and flatter people who didn't know anything about what the kids she worked with were going through. They tended to be out of touch and, sometimes, rude.

Still, this was about more than just Billie. She opened her old laptop, which took nearly five minutes to creakily start up, and replied to the invitation she'd received to the Grateful Gala. She would attend, with all her promotional materials in hand and her best charming smile. The kids she worked with deserved that.

Just then, Billie heard a shout of happy laughter coming from somewhere else in the building. She gently closed her laptop and followed the sound.

The outreach center consisted of several rooms: a large meeting hall, three classrooms, a kitchen, and a small dining area. Kids had just begun arriving in the large meeting hall for Sweetest's afterschool program. The project worked with kids who didn't have somewhere to go after school, often because their parents worked long hours. The kids received help with their homework, participated in games and art activities, and received a nutritious snack.

"Billie!" Chloe, a young woman who was one of Sweetest's afterschool volunteers and who had previously benefited from Sweetest's programs, hurried through the gathering crowd of kids. She had her phone in her hand. "Guess what?"

"What?" Billie asked, already grinning.

"I got accepted to Colorado College!" Chloe waved her phone enthusiastically, much too fast for Billie to read anything on the screen. "Early decision! Can you believe it?"

"Of course, I can." Billie opened her arms to give Chloe a hug. "I'm so proud of you. You worked so hard for this, and you deserve it more than anyone."

“Thanks.” Chloe pulled back with a grin, then did a little happy dance. “Okay, I better go. Fractions aren’t going to solve themselves!” Still dancing, Chloe made her way over to a small group of elementary schoolers in huge winter jackets and hats. They waved her over excitedly.

Billie leaned against a wall and watched as the kids got their coats off and headed towards the kitchen for their snacks. Despite the cold weather outside, everyone was in good spirits. Billie took a deep breath and headed back to her office. She owed it to kids like Chloe, and to everyone she worked with, to get the money she needed for the Christmas program. No matter what it took, she was going to make sure these kids got their gifts.

Several days later, Billie was in her modest studio apartment, staring at her closet. As the head of a charity, she didn’t have a lot of opportunities to wear fancy clothes. Last year, she’d worn a designer dress she’d borrowed from a friend, but she’d felt uncomfortable all evening. This year, Billie was determined to feel comfortable — but she also didn’t want to look completely out of place.

Finally, she settled on a long red skirt and a fitted black sweater. It might not be as fashionable as what the benefactors werewearing, but it was comfortable and Christmassy. Billie wove her brown curls into a loose braid over her shoulder, put on a pair of snowflake earrings, and added a little makeup.

“I’m ready,” she told her reflection. The only thing that mattered tonight was getting enough money to fund the gift-giving program. She couldn’t let herself get distracted by anything else.

Just as she was heading out the door, her cellphone rang. It was her mother.

“Billie!” Gloria sounded as cheerful as always. “Can you bring green beans to Thanksgiving dinner next week?”

Billie chuckled as she slid her feet into a pair of low heels and grabbed her jacket. “Is this your way of making sure I’m coming?”

“Maybe.” Gloria chuckled warmly. “You still haven’t responded to my e-invite.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“I think you can just say e-vite,” Billie told her.

“Sure, sure, e-vitation. Anyway, I know you’re busy this time of year, and I just wanted to make sure you’d have time to come.”

“I will, I promise. I know how important Thanksgiving dinner is.” The holidays were the best time of the year in Billie’s family. When she’d been younger, her family had struggled to make ends meet and their Thanksgiving celebrations had relied on food pantries. Christmas gifts had come from toy donations and secondhand stores. Still, the holidays had always been a magical time. As adults, Billie’s oldest brother had become a cardiothoracic surgeon so that he could support their parents, and Billie had opened a charity to help other families like hers. Now, their holidays were accompanied by plenty of food and beautifully wrapped gifts, but they hadn’t lost their Christmas magic.

“Okay. Good. And don’t worry about the green beans.”

Billie laughed as she locked her front door and hurried down the hallway. “All right, then.”

“Are you off somewhere?” Gloria asked.

“Yep. I have a charity gala tonight.”

“A gala. How fancy. Maybe you’ll meet someone.” The hope was plain to hear in Billie’s mother’s voice. All of Billie’s three siblings had already settled down and gotten married, including her younger sister, who was only twenty-eight. At thirty,

Billie was still single — and she didn't see that changing anytime soon.

"I'm a little more focused on fundraising than flirting," Billie told her mother. "Anyway, I've got to go. I see the bus coming around the corner."

"Bye! Love you!" Gloria hung up, and Billie put her phone back in her purse with a smile. Talking to her mother was yet another reminder of why she needed tonight to go well. Gloria had always worried about making sure her children had a happy Christmas, and Billie didn't want any other mothers to have to worry about that.

The bus arrived and Billie got on. It was a long ride from her house to the gala downtown, so she put in her earbuds and leaned back. Outside, the low buildings and frosty parks of her neighborhood gave way to skyscrapers and busy intersections as the bus rolled towards the heart of Denver.

It's going to be okay, Billie told herself. You'll get the money you need.

She just wished she could believe that.

CHAPTER 3

MAX

Max smoothed his tie and looked up at City Hall, where the gala was being held. The hall had been completely made over for Thanksgiving. Bales of hay stood beside the tall double doors, and the windows were decorated with handprint turkeys made, Max guessed from their quality, by local schoolchildren. Enormous pumpkins and ears of shucked corn with the leaves still attached lined the stairs up to the front door.

"Come on." Stephanie prodded his shoulder. "Let's go in."

“How long do I need to stay at this thing?” Max asked. “I have more work to do this evening.”

“You’ll stay as long as it takes.” Stephanie nodded to a pair of cameramen who were taking shots of the guests as they arrived. “Smile.”

Max smiled, but his heart wasn’t in it. He really did have a lot of work to do, and the fact that this gala was holiday-themed made everything that much worse. Max just didn’t understand why everyone got so excited about a few hay bales and some paper turkeys covered in feathers and glitter glue.

He and Stephanie headed inside. Most of the attendees had already arrived, it seemed. Max and Stephanie handed their coats in at the coat check and stepped into the main room. This, too, had been decorated for Thanksgiving with overflowing cornucopias, fall-leaf wreaths, and more handmade handprint turkeys.

“I’ll be networking as well, to help us find some good charities,” Stephanie said. “It’s important that you’re seen talking and enjoying yourself.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll see you around.” Stephanie peeled off to talk to a group near the refreshments table, and Max wandered in the other direction. Waiters were meandering through the crowd with platters of Thanksgiving-themed hors d’oeuvres. Of course.

“Can I interest you in a mini pumpkin pie, sir?” one waiter asked.

“I’m all right at the moment, thank you.” Max smiled politely at the waiter. He might not be excited about the food on offer, but he’d worked in a Bluebell Diner location for a while before he’d taken over the company, and he knew the difficulties of working in the food industry. He wasn’t about to be rude to the staff tonight — or any

night.

A few people greeted Max as he walked by. Several held fliers and brochures in their hands or bags, and Max imagined that these were the charity representatives. Sooner or later, he'd need to start talking to people, but before the evening really kicked off, he wanted to find a quiet spot and answer a few urgent emails. Luckily, he spotted a free bench along the far wall and took a seat. There were a half dozen unanswered emails in his account.

The top email was from his father, Jim Grayson. Jim was the founder of Bluebell Diner and, although he no longer worked at the company, he was still involved in Bluebell's affairs. Max decided that he'd look at the email later. He was already in a bad mood and didn't want to make things worse.

The next email was from Stephanie and contained a list of charity representatives Max should talk to tonight. He went on to the next email and spent a few minutes evaluating CVs for his new temporary head of HR — the previous head was about to go on maternity leave and wouldn't be back until Easter.

“Ahem.” Max looked up at the sound of a throat being cleared and saw Stephanie standing in front of him, her hands on her hips. “Is this what you call networking?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“I just have a few emails to answer.” Max’s annoyance grew. He didn’t want to be here, and he wanted even less to be told off by his own PR manager. With a sigh, he got to his feet and put away his phone. “But I was just about to mingle.”

“I’m sure.” Stephanie didn’t look sure, but she stepped out of the way to allow Max easier access to the ballroom. He smiled politely, passed her, then swept his gaze over the room.

People were mostly talking in small groups of three or four, he noticed. It was easy to tell who the wealthy benefactors were and who the charity representatives were; the former were dressed in clothes that cost a small fortune, while the charity representatives wore more simple attire and, in some cases, held handfuls of business cards and fliers.

“You might want to speak to James Olson,” Stephanie suggested. She pointed to a man in a neat, if aged, navy suit who was talking to a small group of benefactors. “He runs a no-kill animal shelter that focuses on finding families for harder cases, like older dogs and pit bulls.”

“Actually, I have someone else in mind.” Max’s gaze had been caught by someone else entirely. On the far side of the room stood a woman in a long red skirt and black sweater that perfectly showed off her feminine curves. Her brown, curly hair was in a long braid over one shoulder, but a few curls had sprung free to frame her heart-shaped face. She was absolutely gorgeous and, if Max was going to talk to someone, he might as well talk to her.

Max bade farewell to Stephanie and crossed the room towards the beautiful woman.

On the way, he took two glasses of wine from a passing waiter, thanking him politely. The beautiful woman was saying something to the man and woman she was talking to. They both laughed, and she handed over a business card before turning away. Max stepped in front of her.

“Hello. I seem to have picked up an extra beverage. Perhaps you’d like it?” He held out one glass of wine and the woman took it with a warm smile.

“Thank you. That’s very kind.”

“I’m Max Grayson.” He held out his free hand, and the woman took it. Her hand felt small and delicate in his own.

“Nice to meet you, Max. I’m Billie Stone. I don’t think I saw you here last year.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. This is my first year here.”

“Isn’t it lovely?” Billie nodded to the decorations, the food, and the guests.

“Well, some parts of the evening certainly are lovely.” Max grinned to let her know that he meant her. Billie smiled back, but it wasn’t the charmed smile he’d expected.

“Indeed. I too feel that the best part is the incredibly worthy charities here. Maybe you’d like to hear about mine?” Billie flashed a sweet smile, and Max found himself smiling back.

“All right. Let’s hear about it.”

CHAPTER 4

BILLIE

If Billie were being honest with herself, she didn't really expect to get a donation from Max Grayson. Though this was the first time they had met each other, she knew plenty about him already. He appeared occasionally on her news feed, always in one of two contexts: either as an eligible bachelor who was both rakishly handsome and very wealthy, or as a ruthless businessman who stopped at nothing to make sure his company succeeded. Neither persona seemed very charitable.

And although Billie had to agree that Max was rakishly handsome, with his sandy-blond hair, sparkling blue eyes, firm jawline, and muscular physique under a perfectly tailored suit jacket, the rest of what she'd heard about him wasn't particularly flattering.

Still, Billie had to give this her best shot. Summoning thoughts of kids like Chloe, and parents like her own mother, Billie dove into her speech.

"I run a charity called Sweetest Surprise." Billie smiled at Max. "We do a lot of work with children in the Denver community, mostly children in low-income families or in foster care. We offer mentorship, afterschool programs, a food pantry, and clothing and school supplies to kids who need them. Best of all, every Christmas we offer my favorite program."

"Your favorite program? I have to hear about this." Max took a sip of his wine and grinned in a way that Billie could once again only describe as rakish. The tabloids had gotten that part right.

"Our Christmas program distributes gifts to children in need around the Denver area," Billie told him. "Kids, or their parents or caregivers, submit Christmas wish lists. Our employees and volunteers buy and wrap all the gifts, then deliver them on Christmas Eve so that Santa can put them under the tree in time for Christmas morning. We also provide a special Christmas dinner."

“So, you’re basically one of Santa’s elves,” Max suggested.

Billie chuckled. “I like to think of myself that way, but unfortunately, there’s a lot more to it than that. See, Santa’s elves don’t really have to worry about funding, and... I do.”

It was always so awkward to bring up money, but that was why Billie was here. She summoned her mental image of Chloe cheering about her college acceptance and of the joy on kids’ faces on Christmas morning.

“Of course. I imagine that’s what brings you to the Grateful Gala on a frosty evening like this.”

“Indeed.” Billie leaned slightly closer and caught a whiff of masculine aftershave. One of the roving photographers stopped by, so Billie and Max stepped together to pose for a quick picture. The photographer moved on, but Billie and Max stayed close together. Despite the situation, Billie felt a shiver of attraction run down her spine at Max’s closeness. She wasn’t immune to the presence of a handsome man, even if he seemed more interested in her than in her charity.

“Well, no matter what brought you here, I’m glad we got to meet.”

“Right.” Billie bit her lip. “It’s been nice chatting with you.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“It’s been nice chatting with you, too. Maybe we should get out of here. I know a nice bar just down the street where we could grab a drink and talk more.”

“Unfortunately, I have lots of fundraising to do, so I can’t exactly duck out.” Billie had found Max’s flirtations charming at first, but she was getting annoyed now. Max should realize that she had bigger concerns than grabbing a drink. “If you’d like to hear more about Sweetest Surprise’s programming, I’d be happy to tell you.”

“As long as it’s you talking, I’m ready to listen.” Max winked, and Billie sighed. She took a step back.

“Listen, Max. It was nice to meet you, but it’s clear that you’re not really interested in what Sweetest Surprise does, or in funding us. If I had to guess, I’d say you’re here to get a PR boost. After all, you’ve never shown an interest in charity before, and you’re barely showing one now.”

“Hey, what’s wrong with a little positive PR?” Max winked. It was a very attractive gesture, but Billie was almost too annoyed to notice.

“I’m sorry, but I need to find donors who are actually interested in my cause. There are a lot of kids who won’t have anything under the Christmas tree if I don’t.”

“That makes sense. Have a nice evening, Billie.” Max nodded to her, and Billie nodded back, then peeled off to work the room. She was so busy with her work that she rarely flirted with anyone, and some part of her had enjoyed flirting with Max. Still, he’d been annoying and was clearly a very different person than she was — and more importantly, she really did have a lot of fundraising to do. There was no time

for her to get distracted by a handsome man.

For the next few hours, Billie made her rounds of the room. She laughed and chatted and oohed over photos of dogs and boats, then handed over her fliers. Lots of people seemed interested in talking to her, but no one was willing to agree to a donation on the spot. As the night wore on, she began to feel discouraged. This evening was her last best hope to get the funds she needed for the Christmas gift-giving program. If she didn't get the money she needed today, she had no idea what she'd do.

"Thanks for telling me about your charity. Sweetheart Surprise sounds lovely, though I have to say, there are a lot of worthy causes here tonight." The middle-aged couple Billie had been talking to held out their hands for her to shake.

"There certainly are. I appreciate you taking the time to hear about mine," Billie said. She didn't correct the couple about the name of her organization. It was clear that they wouldn't be donating. Billie scanned the room for her next target and saw, to her surprise, that the ballroom was rapidly clearing out. Only a few waitstaff remained, and they were busily packing up the remnants of the food and clearing up the hall.

Billie deflated as she realized that she'd really missed her mark for the evening. There was always a chance that someone would reach out later, but as of now, she was no closer to her fundraising goal than she'd been a few hours ago. She was just in a considerably worse mood.

"Hey, Billie."

Billie turned to see Max Grayson striding across the room towards her.

"Hey, Max." She smiled wearily.

"How did your evening go?"

“Not as well as I’d hoped.” Billie hesitated. She was tired and frustrated and stressed about the gift-giving program. Maybe a little flirting with a handsome man would take her mind off all that. At least she could be annoyed with him instead of anything else. “You mentioned a bar nearby?”

“I certainly did.” Max grinned and held out his arm. Billie took it. Together, they crossed the ballroom to the coat check, where they got their jackets and headed out into the cold November air. Billie’s breath formed a white cloud in front of her mouth.

“So, tell me,” Billie said as they walked. “You really were there just because you’ve gotten some bad PR lately, weren’t you?”

“You’ve caught me red-handed.” Max sighed. “But let’s not talk about that. I’d like to hear more about you.”

“About me?” Billie considered. “There’s isn’t a lot to tell.”

“Oh, that can’t be true. How about your name. Billie. Is that short for something?”

“Nope. My parents just liked the name. How about Max? Is that short for Maximilian?”

“No, it’s just Max. See, we already have something in common.” He winked.

“Tell me, ‘just Max,’ what’s it like to run a restaurant conglomerate?”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do,” Max told her. His tone was a little more earnest now than the casually flirtatious one he’d had before. “My father opened the first Bluebell Diner when he was a young man. When I was very young, there was only the one restaurant, right here in Denver. My mom was a waitress, my dad was a chef, and

they had a small staff of employees who I knew by name. They'd set me up in a back booth with a glass of lemonade and a stack of coloring books and I'd watch the hustle and bustle of the restaurant."

"That sounds nice. It must be really different running a huge chain of restaurants than it was having just one, though."

"True. It was... a big shift, for all of us, when Bluebell began to open more locations and really took off. Luckily, I enjoy the corporate side, too."

"Do you?" Billie wrinkled her nose. "It would be hard for me to go to work with nothing other than profits in mind."

"Would it?" Max raised his eyebrows. "Don't you always have to look for funding for your programs? Every business is concerned with money in one way or another. Companies like mine just deal with money on a larger scale."

They stopped in front of a small bar, where Max opened the door and let Billie in. The bar was filled with a Friday-night crowd of first dates and groups of friends talking and laughing. Max led them to a small table in the far corner and pulled out her chair for Billie. Billie knew that Max was probably this charming withevery woman he met, but she couldn't help smiling at the gallant gesture anyway.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

A glance around showed that this was the kind of quintessential neighborhood bar Billie hadn't known existed in the middle of downtown Denver. The bar was made of a soft, dark wood, while the room was filled with cheerily mismatched chairs and tables. The bartender seemed to know many of the patrons by name as he swished from one side of the bar to the other with a cloth draped over his shoulder, handing out beers and cocktails with both hands. Small bowls of shelled peanuts sat on each table, and ambient country music played through a jukebox.

"Would you like to eat something?" Max asked.

"Maybe." Billie's stomach rumbled lightly, giving away the fact that she hadn't had time to grab more than one or two hors d'oeuvres the whole evening. She'd been both too nervous and too busy trying to charm the other attendees.

"I've only been here a few times, but the mac and cheese was good."

"I'll have that, then." Billie set down her menu, which was slightly sticky. "Are you eating?"

"Mac and cheese too." Max winked. "I'm not a fan of Thanksgiving food. What's your excuse for still being hungry?"

"I like Thanksgiving food plenty, but it was a busy evening for me." Billie raised an eyebrow. "What don't you like about Thanksgiving food?"

"I've just always found it a little... underwhelming. Mashed potatoes aren't that great. Turkey usually comes out dry. I don't like green beans in general. And what

other time of the year would anyone be happy to see sweet-sour jellied cranberries as part of a savory meal?"

"I suppose." Billie leaned back. "Still, the fun of Thanksgiving isn't necessarily the food. The company is usually the important part."

"For some people, maybe." Max flagged down the waiter and they placed their orders. When he turned back to Billie, he had a pensive expression. "Are you one of those people who genuinely loves the holidays, Billie?"

"I am." Billie smiled. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Not at all." Max raised his hands, chuckling. "It's just rare to meet someone who actually enjoys the holidays. I think a lot of people find them either disappointing or stressful."

"Holidays are only disappointing if you set your expectations wrong," Billie told him. "And anything can be stressful. That doesn't necessarily mean it isn't fun or worthwhile."

"That's a good point, actually. Stressful doesn't have to mean bad."

"I know." Their drinks arrived and Billie took a long sip of the beer she'd ordered. She didn't usually drink much, but she needed a little distance between herself and the disaster of a fundraising event if she were going to enjoy the rest of the evening. "So, let me guess. You hate all holidays."

"Not all of them. Labor Day has its perks."

Billie chuckled despite herself. For all that she found this man frustrating, and for all they seemed to have very different views, she enjoyed talking to him.

“What about Saint Patrick’s Day?”

“That’s not bad either. And I do have a soft spot for Boxing Day.”

“Boxing Day?” Billie grinned. “You mean that British day after Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Do you celebrate?”

“No. But it’s always a relief having the holidays over.” Max winked and Billie laughed again.

“Okay. We’ve established that you enjoy running your company and that you don’t like holidays. What else do I need to know about you?”

“Not much,” Max said lightly. “To be honest, I spend a lot of my time working. Let’s talk about you. Do you enjoy your job?”

“I do.” Billie nodded to punctuate her statement. “It can be stressful running a charity, just as I’m sure it can be stressful running a restaurant conglomerate, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t worthwhile.” Max raised his glass at the familiar phrase. “It feels good to help kids and families that might struggle otherwise.”

“Did you get the funding you needed at the event tonight?” Max asked.

“No, but don’t worry. I’m not going to ask you.”

“I’m not sure if I should be offended.”

“There’s no need to be. I just know that you’re a lost cause when it comes to charity.

And this evening isn't about business anymore."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“No?” Max leaned forward and Billie caught another whiff of his aftershave. The table was small and, if he came a few inches closer, they could easily be touching. “Then what is this evening about?”

“Two people who had a bad day trying to have a better evening,” Billie said. It was a struggle to keep her voice even when Max was so near, but she was almost certain that she’d pulled it off.

“What makes you think I had a bad day?”

“Well, forgive me if I’m wrong, but you seem to be a man who cares about his company doing well and earning profits more than anything. And you were just forced to spend an evening away from your company talking about charities that you don’t find very interesting.”

“Insightful. There’s one thing you got wrong, though.”

“What’s that?”

“It isn’t that I don’t find your charity interesting. Everyone I spoke to tonight had a worthy cause to share. I just don’t believe that giving a little money to a charity, no matter how wonderful the charity is, will really make a difference.”

“You don’t?” Billie was surprised.

“I don’t. The problems in the world are just too big. If I give some money to an organization that helps dogs, some dogs have a better life, but there will still be wars

and poverty and famine and hundreds of other dogs that don't benefit. Nothing I do will change that."

"That's a really sad way to look at things." Billie bit her lip. "Of course, I know that a few Christmas presents aren't going to save the world, but they do mean a lot to the kids who get them. If we can all do our parts, however big or small, I really think we can make the world a better place."

"I didn't mean to offend you. I do believe you do good work."

"I know. This just isn't something that we're going to agree on, I suppose. I just wish you could see the kids' faces when they wake up on Christmas morning to presents under the tree and a feast on the table."

"Maybe that would change my mind." Max raised his glass to her. "Now, let's go back to being two people who had a bad day trying to have a better evening."

As if on cue, their mac and cheese arrived. Billie inhaled deeply and heard her stomach rumble. She really should have tried to eat more at the event.

As they ate, conversation slipped into easier topics. Billie learned that Max had lived in Denver his whole life, but that he frequently traveled to help open new branches of Bluebell Diner. Billie told him that she'd never actually eaten at a Bluebell Diner, which made Max's eyes widen in horror.

"How is that possible? They're everywhere."

"When I was growing up, my family didn't have much money to eat out, and as an adult, I don't go to many restaurants. I usually just have something quick at home."

"Now that's a little sad. There's something very special about going out for a meal."

“I am enjoying this dinner.” Billie nodded at the small pot of mac and cheese. “And I do meet friends or family to eat out sometimes — but I usually prefer to host or go to their homes.”

“I can see how that would be nice. Still. Come by Bluebell sometime. The original location is right here in downtown Denver. You can have dinner or breakfast on the house.”

“Thanks.” Billie took another forkful of mac and cheese. “And what should I try?”

“We have a nice breakfast-all-day menu,” Max told her. “If you like pancakes, bacon, and hash browns, you’ll love Bluebell.”

“Who doesn’t like pancakes, bacon, and hash browns?” Billie smiled. “I’ll have to try it sometime.”

But she knew she wouldn’t. As much as Billie was enjoying her evening with Max, as much as she felt a spark of chemistry between them beneath all the disagreements, she knew she wouldn’t see him again after tonight. They were just too different. They didn’t see eye to eye on anything — except perhaps breakfast food.

Yet, when they finished dinner, Max graciously insisting on paying the bill, Billie found that she wasn’t quite ready for the evening to end yet. So, when Max offered to walk her home, she accepted.

“It isn’t exactly a walk, though,” she admitted. “I live about an hour from here.”

“An hour?”

“On the bus.” She hooked her thumb at the bus stop across the street.

Without missing a beat, Max raised his hand to hail a cab. “It’s cold tonight, and the next bus might not be for a while. Let me treat us both to a nice warm cab ride.” As if by magic, a cab pulled over in front of them right away, and Max reached for the door handle.

“All right.” Billie let him open the door for her, but she felt a little bad. The bus was good enough for her on any other day. Still, she leaned forward to give her address as Max took a seat beside her and the cab glided forward.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“What are your plans for Thanksgiving?” Billie asked once they were on the way. Then she stopped herself. “Wait, I know. You’ll be working, right?”

“You got it. I’ll have a nice quiet day at the office, maybe with some good takeout for lunch. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll go to my parents’ house. I always do for the holidays.” Billie had a sudden urge to invite Max, which she pushed aside. He wouldn’t have fun at her family Thanksgiving. This is a one-night only... friendship.

“That sounds nice. Do you have a big family?”

“Yes. Two brothers and a sister. All married. My brothers both have kids, one newborn and one toddler, and I wouldn’t be surprised if my sister has an announcement to make sooner or later. Plus, I still have a couple of living grandparents and some cousins who will probably be there.” Billie paused. “Do you have siblings?”

“No. I’m an only child.”

“Somehow, I feel like I knew that already.”

The cab pulled up outside Billie’s apartment. Max paid, sending another wave of guilt through Billie, and they both got out. It was icy cold on the sidewalk, so Billie didn’t want to linger outside. She suspected that Max would feel the same way.

“Would you like to come up?” Billie asked before she could think better of it. “I can

offer you something to drink, as thanks for ‘walking’ me home.”

“I’d be happy to.”

Max waited patiently as Billie unlocked the entry door, and they climbed the stairs to her apartment. She unlocked her apartment door and let them in, then gestured for Max to have a seat on the couch while she crossed to the fridge to survey the drink options.

“I can offer you another beer, some water, or orange juice.”

“I’ll take a beer.”

Billie took a beer for Max but poured orange juice for herself. Back on the couch, he clinked his bottle against her glass and they each took a sip.

“Nice apartment,” Max said.

“Really?” Billie looked around skeptically. Her studio was small and old, but tidy and covered in pictures as well as a small seasonal pumpkin.

“Really. I like how you decorated the place.”

“Thanks.” They were sitting close together on Billie’s couch now. Every time Billie lifted her glass to drink, her arm brushed Max’s.

Billie wasn’t one for relationships, not really. She’d never had the kind of serious relationship that her mother so desperately wanted for her. Yet she wasn’t the kind of person to pursue a fling that she knew would only ever be short-term, like this one. With Max so close by her, though, all her usual practicality seemed to wash away.

Max was incredibly attractive. She didn't usually fall for the cocky, self-assured billionaire type, but something about Max's easy conversation and the way he held himself made attraction stir in her stomach. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted to feel his broad hands on her hips and his lips on her own.

And why not? It had been a bad day. She didn't need to worry that Max had strong feelings for her that would complicate things. Maybe, just this once, Billie could let herself be caught up in a moment and let go of the walls she usually kept around herself.

Slowly, Billie set her glass of orange juice on the table, then took the beer from Max's hand. He sat up a little straighter, his blue eyes darkening to the color of the sky at dusk.

"Are we done drinking?" he asked, his voice low.

Billie felt a sudden wave of shyness, but took a deep breath and let the wave wash over her and fade away.

"I thought we might be."

"I've wanted to kiss you all evening," Max continued, his voice still low and intense. "Ever since I saw you across the room."

"I think we could do something about that," Billie replied. Her voice came out a little higher than she'd intended. She leaned closer, then Max closed the distance between them and brushed an achingly slow kiss across Billie's lips. All her nerves seemed to stand to attention at his touch. Max sat back and smiled. It was the slow, satisfied smile of a man who had found something, or someone, he wanted.

Billie ached to feel his touch again, and Max must have felt the same way, because

they were kissing again in an instant. This time, the kiss was deeper and a little more urgent. Billie wrapped her hands around Max's shoulders, and he slid his hands around her waist and drew her towards him. Billie wanted more of this man. She kissed him back, her hands tangling into his hair as his five-o'clock shadow brushed against her cheek.

"Do you want me to go home?" Max asked. His voice was a whisper against her ear, making her shiver with anticipation.

"No. Stay." And Billie shifted until she was sitting across his lap. Max pulled back and looked at her for a long moment with those intense blue eyes. He smoothed a hand across the curve of her cheek, along her shoulder, and down her arm to her hand. He placed her hand against his chest, where she could feel his heart beating.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“You are so beautiful, Billie,” he said. “Feel how you make my heart race.”

And then they were kissing again. Time seemed to slow to the pace of honey poured from a spoon, slow and golden and sweet. Billie took off her sweater and tossed it over a chair. Max ran his hands along the curves of her hips, down her spine, along the line of her bra. Then his own shirt was off, and they were pressed together, kissing again, as Billie savored the feeling of his bare chest and firm muscles against her.

Then Max was on his feet, with Billie held effortlessly in his arms. She wrapped her legs around him and they kissed again, gentle yet full of heat and expectation.

“Shall we go to bed?” Billie breathed against his ear.

“Oh, yes,” Max said, and he carried her across the room and laid her back on her bed. Billie tossed aside her worries and doubts and let herself be a woman of pure sensation, caring for nothing more than how Max touched her, how he whispered her name, how he looked at her with longing and never looked away.

For a long time, they had little more need for words.

CHAPTER 5

BILLIE

Billie woke to the gentle classical music of her alarm. Still half-asleep, she reached for her nightstand and slid her alarm off. Yawning, she sat up — and memories of the

night before came flooding back. Going to the Grateful Gala. Meeting Max. Feeling annoyed with Max. Going with Max to a bar. Talking to him for hours. Inviting him home.

Inviting him into her bed.

Then the night they'd spent together. It had been truly amazing. For all he had seemed uncaring and ruthless, Max had been both gentle and attentive in bed. In the light of day, Billie still felt butterflies at the thought of how he had looked at her like she was the only person in the world who mattered, and the way he'd whispered her name.

Yet, in the light of day, Billie also realized that she'd made a mistake. What had she been thinking, inviting someone who was practically a stranger to spend the night with her? No, a stranger might have been okay. Max was worse than a stranger — he was someone she barely knew, yet could hardly get through a conversation with without dissolving into disagreement.

Now, she was going to have to gently kick Max out of her apartment. She had a lot to do today. Hopefully, it was as abundantly clear to him as it was to her that their relationship, such as it was, had run its course. They'd enjoyed a wonderful night together, and that was it.

"Max?" Billie called hesitantly. There was no reply. She got out of bed, wrapped her sheet around herself, and made a quick round of her apartment. Since she lived in a studio, there weren't a lot of places to check besides the bathroom, so it was quickly clear that Max had already left. This conclusion was backed up by the note lying on her dining table.

Billie, thank you for a wonderful evening together.

Max

Billie let out a sigh of relief. Max hadn't left his number or made any mention of them seeing each other again. He understood that this would only be a one-night, one-time thing.

Feeling lighter, Billie dropped the sheet back onto her bed and headed for the shower. The warm water was invigorating, and she began to feel more like herself as she woke up fully. The warmth and wakefulness brought another, less pleasant, memory from the night before, though: Billie hadn't secured a single donation for the Christmas program.

Oh, no.

At least the evening and night she'd spent with Max had distracted her from that looming problem.

Billie finished rinsing the soap from her hair and stepped out of the shower, where she wrapped herself in a fluffy towel. What was she going to do? It was already almost Thanksgiving. In just over a month, it would be Christmas, and if she didn't find at least one very generous donor, hundreds of kids would wake up to a Christmas morning without gifts, decorations, or even food.

It was a Saturday, so Billie would normally have spent the day either at home or with her family or friends. Today, though, she dressed in a pair of jeans and a gray sweater, grabbed her winter coat and scarf, and hurried out into the chill November air. The sky was Colorado blue today, but the air was still frosty.

Billie strode to the bus stop, where she was just in time to catch the bus to her outreach center. On Saturday mornings, a few of her staff members came in to host workshops on photography, drawing, music, and robotics, so the center was already

buzzing with kids and adults when she arrived. Billie nodded a hello to a small group in the entryway, trying not to make eye contact with the kids who, because of her, might not get the Christmas morning they deserved.

Billie went straight up to her office, where she retrieved the pile of physical business cards, as well as the airdropped virtual business cards on her phone, that she'd collected during yesterday's event. One by one, she wrote to each of the potential donors, thanking them individually for a pleasant conversation the night before, restating the need for Christmas donors, and offering a link to Sweetest Surprise's website.

Near the bottom of the pile, Billie saw Max's business card. She hesitated. Sweetest desperately needed money, but Max was a lost cause. It wouldn't do any good to write to him. It would just create an awkward situation for her, and she was ready to move on from what had probably been a mistake last night.

Billie set the business card to the side and went on to the next.

Morning dragged into afternoon. The kids and staff members trickled out, a few of them stopping by to say goodbye to her. Evening came, and Billie ate an oatmeal bar from the vending machine, trying to ignore the growling in her stomach. If she could just get one person to agree to cover the Christmas program, she could go home happy... For billionaires like Max and the other attendees of the Grateful Gala, the few thousand it would take to cover the Christmas program was little more than loose change. Yet, still, Billie had no luck.

She went home after darkness had fallen, feeling exhausted and disappointed. At least all the busyness as she'd tried to find a donor was a good distraction from Max. Even as she'd worked hard to chase down potential donors, though, memories from the night before had kept floating unbidden into her mind. Without the distraction of needing to fund the Christmas program, Billie was sure she'd have thought of little

besides Max all day.

Sunday morning saw Billie back at work, digging into old records of previous donors in hopes of striking gold twice. By Monday morning, she was so discouraged that she could barely spare a smile for Barbara the accountant.

Then, around eleven, just as Billie was about to throw her hands in the air and declare that this was impossible, one of her employees came hurrying into the office.

“Billie, there’s someone here to see you.”

“Who?” Billie asked, getting to her feet.

“He said his name was Max. And he wasn’t alone.”

Billie’s brow furrowed. Max was here? He was the last person she’d expected to see, not just in her office, but ever again. Billie wasn’t sure what he wanted... but she was almost certain that this wasn’t going to be good news.

CHAPTER 6

MAX

It had been harder than Max had expected to put Billie out of his mind. The night they’d spent together had been truly extraordinary, and not just the time they’d been in bed. Talking to her had been both fun and thought-provoking, even though they disagreed on just about everything. Plus, she was gorgeous, and that was hard to forget. Taking her to bed was a memory that would stay with him forever.

Yet when Max had woken in Billie’s bed on Saturday morning, with her long brown curls splayed across the pillow and a soft smile on her lips as she slept, he’d known immediately what he needed to do. As much as a part of him wanted to stay, perhaps to have breakfast together or stroll through the chilly November streets side by side, he’d known that he needed to leave. Right away.

He and Billie were just too different. She loved the holidays and helping children and

her family. Max loved his work and little else.

Even if they'd been more similar, though, they couldn't have had anything more than a brief, passionate one-night stand. Max just wasn't cut out for love. He'd had a few relationships before, but they'd all ended... not badly, exactly, but not well, either. The women he'd dated had always wanted to be his priority — something Max was never able to give them. Without him, Bluebell Diner would sink, and all his father's hard work, not to mention his own, would go down the drain. No matter how much he might enjoy dating, he couldn't prioritize one woman over a whole company.

It didn't matter anyway. Max was sure that Billie understood as well as he did that they didn't have a future together. He fully intended never to see her again — and he fully intended to ignore the way that thought made his heart ache.

Perhaps, Max thought as he slipped out of her apartment, leaving a note on the table before he went, Billie represented a different kind of path, one Max could never take. She was sweet and kind and generous, all things that Max could never allow himself to be. Yet she was also headstrong enough to argue with him. If things were different, if they could have been together... well.

Max tried to put all thoughts of Billie out of his mind as he hailed a cab and headed home. After a quick workout in his home gym and a cold shower, he felt more like himself. He headed out, stopping on his way to the office for a pastry and a coffee from a café just around the corner, and went to work.

Ever since Max was a child, he remembered his parents working hard every day of the week, including Saturday. He'd admired their dedication, so, as an adult, he followed in his father's footsteps and put in an extra day at the office each Saturday. Max didn't require any of his employees to come in, but a few were always here, working on tasks left over from the previous week, or getting a head start on the next week. Max greeted the few people he met in the hallways with a nod, then went into

his office and got to work.

The thing Max appreciated most about Saturdays in the office was how quiet it was. With few meetings and few people to distract him, he always got more done on Saturdays than the rest of the workweek combined.

Today, though, Max was distracted despite the quiet. He wondered what Billie was doing and if she'd gotten the money she needed for her Christmas program. He was sure she had. She was charming and passionate, and Max knew that wealthy benefactors would be tripping over themselves to fund her programs. She'd seemed worried at the bar, but surely she'd woken up Saturday morning to a flood of calls and emails offering funding.

Still, he wondered.

Sunday was a little warmer than Saturday had been. Max spent a few hours in the morning in his home office, then the afternoon working out and getting his ducks in a row for the upcoming week. Most of his staff would be off on Thursday and Friday for Thanksgiving, which meant that the beginning of the week would be busier than usual.

The day slipped by quickly and, before Max knew it, it was Monday morning. On the way to work, he checked his schedule and had to stifle a groan. The first thing on his agenda was a meeting with Stephanie and the PR team. Hopefully, they just wanted to share thoughts from the Grateful Gala and let him know that he could forget about charities, and their beautiful founders, for the rest of this year and well into the next.

Max was not so lucky. Stephanie and her team were already waiting in his office when he arrived, and they looked all business.

"Good morning, Max." Stephanie gestured for him to take a seat, even though this

was his office.

“What brings you by?” Max asked. He sat in his desk chair and leaned back.

“We wanted to check in after the gala on Friday,” Stephanie told him. “Over the weekend, your social media and tabloid appearances have been trending up, thanks to a few pictures of you mingling with a more charitable crowd.” She showed him a post on her tablet, which showed Max shaking hands with Billie. He vaguely remembered posing for that picture, but the sight of Billie in the long, flared red skirt and tight sweater she’d worn brought back a lot of other memories that Max tried to put out of his mind.

“Great. So, it looks like this endeavor has been a success.”

“Exactly. We’ve proven that engaging with charity is good for your image, which means that it’s time to move on to Phase Two.”

Max did not like the sound of that. “Phase Two?”

“We need you to engage with a charity directly,” Stephanie informed him. “The public should see that you’re willing to put your money where your mouth is. Did you meet any charity representatives who you’d particularly like to support? It would help if you were promoting a cause you believe in.”

Max’s mind went blank. He’d spoken to numerous people at the gala, but only one stood out, and he couldn’t very well name her charity.

“Come on, you must have heard about at least one cause you believe in,” Stephanie prodded.

“Sweetest Surprise,” Max blurted. It was the first — and only — charity he could

think of. Plus, Billie deserved any money she received. She was probably swimming in donations already, but a check from Max couldn't hurt.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“Oh, wonderful. That Christmas gift charity. Perfect.”

“So, I just write a check?” Max asked.

“Here’s the problem.” Stephanie leaned forward. “A check isn’t going to cut it. It’s a good start, but the public needs to see you actually engaging with a charity. Giving your time. Being part of the cause.”

Oh, no. This was getting worse and worse. “So, you want me to work with Bil—Sweetest Surprise?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m not sure that the director will be very excited to work with me.” Not after we spent a passionate night together and then went our separate ways in the morning without even saying goodbye. Not when she knows that we disagree about charity, and that I’d only be there for the publicity.

Stephanie waved his concerns away with a flick of her manicured nails. “I can be very persuasive. I’ll call over this afternoon and work everything out.”

“Maybe it’s better if I speak to them in person.”

“Good idea.” Stephanie nodded slowly. “I’ll set an appointment for this morning and see if I can get a big check made up in time. A photo of you handing over a big check would be a great start.”

“No, I mean, I should speak to them and make sure that the organization is okay with this. It’s a lot to ask.”

“Hardly. Every charity needs funding, and publicity like what we’re offering will only bring in more funding, on top of the donation you make.”

“Still.” Max wasn’t budging on this. If he was going to drop back into Billie’s life uninvited, he needed to be the one to speak to her about it. He needed to make sure that she was okay with collaborating in a professional capacity with him. “Let me talk to them before we proceed.”

“All right.” Stephanie tapped on her tablet. “How about we go over together around eleven? I’ll get a check made up by then. How much are you willing to donate?”

“I’ll cover her Christmas program,” Max said. “I have a flier somewhere around here with the amount she needed. Actually, I’d like to give a little extra.”

“Good, good.” Stephanie nodded approvingly. “Now you’re getting it. I’ll track down the amount the organization needs and make sure the check covers that and a little more.” She got to her feet, and the rest of the team followed suit. “See you around ten thirty.”

They swept out, leaving Max alone in his office. He dropped his head into his hands. He knew already that this was going to be a disaster. A complete and total disaster. Billie wasn’t going to want to work with him. She might not even accept his donation if she had enough money for her Christmas program anyway. Which she probably did by now. Then Max would be scrambling to find a different charity that he was even less excited to work with.

In retrospect, Max wished he’d named a different cause. But Billie’s charity was the first that had popped into his mind — and if he were being honest, he did think that

her Christmas gift program was worth supporting. He just hadn't expected to actually have to ask to work with her.

Max sighed and put the whole sticky situation out of his mind. He still had several hours until he needed to leave to meet Billie, with Stephanie at his side. In the meantime, he had work to do — work that was vital to the future of his company, instead of just good for his image.

For the next few hours, Max reviewed contracts and approved budgets and gave the go-ahead for a few last-minute details for the Colorado Springs branch of Bluebell Diner that was due to open in a few weeks. Usually, he was an expert at tuning out stresses from outside of work while he was in the office, but today he still found it hard to put Billie out of his mind. Would she agree to work with him? Would she accept his donation? Would she hate him for turning up at her place of work after the night they'd spent together?

In a matter of hours, Max would find out. And he had to admit, part of him was looking forward to seeing Billie again — even though he knew it wasn't going to go well.

CHAPTER 7

BILLIE

Billie smoothed her sweater as she hurried down the stairs to the entryway where, apparently, Max was waiting. Sure enough, he was standing between the coat tree covered in children's jackets and the bulletin board advertising community events. Max looked completely out of place here, in the outreach center. He wore a crisp tailored suit and looked every inch the consummate businessman, while Billie's center had a homemade, low-budget feel. In her jeans and sweater, Billie was sure she had a homemade, low-budget look herself. Beside Max stood a tall woman in a

suit and heels, who smiled at Billie when she entered.

“Welcome to the Sweetest Surprise Outreach Center,” Billie said in what she hoped was a cheerful and professional tone. “I’m Billie Stone, the director. What can I do for you?”

If it surprised Max that Billie was greeting him as though they didn’t really know each other, he didn’t let on.

“I’m Max Grayson, and I’m here today with my head of PR, Stephanie Adino. We’d like to speak with you about a potential funding opportunity,” Max said smoothly. Billie’s heart skipped a beat. A funding opportunity? Could this be the saving grace that Sweetest needed? Yet she tamped down her enthusiasm. There was no way to know if Max was actually planning to give her money and, if he was, how much he was willing to give.

Then there was the fact that Billie didn’t want Max here, in her space. The last time she had seen Max, he’d been holding her in his arms as they both drifted off to sleep. Just before she’d slipped into sleep, he’d kissed her, right on the edge of her hairline, and Billie had almost melted.

Then again, the evening leading up to that had been spent mostly bickering. It was clear that Max didn’t believe in the holidays or in charity — so what was he doing here, offering to give her money?

Billie stilled her thoughts and put on a professional smile. “How wonderful. Please, follow me.”

She led them up the stairs, past a confused-looking Barbara, and into her office.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“Please, have a seat. Can I offer you some coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Max said, while Stephanie politely declined. Billie went to the coffeemaker, which groaned with displeasure at being forced into service when it was old and falling apart, and prepared a cup of coffee.

“Milk and sugar?” she asked.

“No, just black.”

Billie should have known. A man who didn’t like the holidays probably wanted little sweetness in his life. She set the cup in front of Max and circled her desk to her chair.

“So, you wanted to discuss a potential funding opportunity?”

“Yes.” Stephanie spoke up. “We’d like to partner with you to fund your Christmas gift-giving program. It’s essential that kids in Africa get their gifts.”

“In Denver,” Billie said.

“Sorry?”

“The gift-giving program is for children here, in Denver.”

“Right.” Stephanie didn’t miss a beat. “Of course. We’d like to fund your Christmas gift-giving program so that children in Denver get their gifts. I have a photographer and a big check with the full amount you need, plus a little extra, waiting

downstairs.”

But to her own surprise, Billie found herself shaking her head.

“I’m sorry, Stephanie, but I don’t think I can accept this.”

“Why not?” Stephanie looked shocked.

“It’s clear that this is just a photo opportunity for you,” Billie said. “You don’t even know what Sweetest Surprise does. I want to work with funders who believe in the cause.”

What are you doing?the voice of reason inside Billie’s head begged.The kids need this money. Just take it.

“Can I speak with Billie for a few minutes?” Max asked.

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” Stephanie asked, but Max was already ushering her towards the door.

“I just need five minutes.” Max closed the door behind her and turned back to Billie. “Sorry about that.”

“Why?” Billie crossed her arms. “She just said the same thing you did, more or less. You showed up for the event last week to get a photo op, and now you’re here for another. You don’t care about my charity any more than she does.”

“Maybe not,” Max admitted. “But if it makes you feel any better, I’m just as unhappy about the photo op as you are. I don’t see why we should spend our time posing for photos when there’s real work to be done.”

“I guess we can agree on that.”

Max sat back down and leaned towards her. His blue eyes were bright.

“We can. Listen, Billie. My PR team suggested that I work with a charity as something of a PR stunt. That much is true. I was opposed to it, but they brought me around, and I decided that if I had to do this, I might as well actually fund someone who deserves it. If you already have enough money for your Christmas program, though, we’ll leave.”

Billie bit her lip. She didn’t have the money. Although... “Did you say work with a charity? I thought this was just about a donation.”

Max winced. “As well as the check, they’d like me to be seen helping out with your work.”

“What?” Billie threw her hands in the air. “Come on, Max. How would you feel if I came to your place of business and asked to work with you?”

“You take on holiday volunteers,” Max pointed out. “I’m sure I have the skills to help out like any other volunteer would. Listen, neither of us want this to turn into a big thing. I’ll give you all the money you need. I’ll show up, take a few pictures, and get out of your hair.”

“That isn’t going to cut it.” Billie folded her arms again and raised her eyebrows in a challenge. “If this is so important to you, then you really have to do it. I expect you to show up when I tell you to and actually help with my projects. You have to stay beyond the photo opportunity. You have to actually see the kids we help.”

“Does that mean you’ll accept our partnership?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

Billie thought of all the kids who needed presents for Christmas. She thought of all the parents who so desperately wanted to give their children a magical visit from Santa Claus but who wouldn't be able to pull it off without her help. She thought of all the people who deserved a little Christmas magic. This was about so much more than just Billie and her confusion after their night together.

"Fine. I accept."

Max grinned his honey-slow grin again, and Billie quickly raised a hand. "But just to be clear, this is a professional partnership."

"I completely agree." Max raised his hand in a Boy Scout salute. "I promise that we'll keep things professional. And I promise I'll show up and do what you tell me. Stephanie tells me that I need a picture of me handing you the big check, plus two or three more appearances."

"Fine. And I expect you to show up punctually and ready to work, just as I would expect of any of my volunteers." And to keep that knee-weakening smile to yourself.

"Of course." Max extended a hand to her across the table. "Billie Stone, it looks like we're in business."

Billie shook his hand and tried to convince herself that she wasn't making a huge mistake. She also tried to ignore the feeling of Max's warm, slightly rough palm against hers and the memories the contact brought back.

"Shall we go downstairs for the check exchange?" Max asked.

“I suppose.”

“That’s the spirit.” Max winked and they both stood. Outside the office door, Stephanie was waiting, her phone in her hand. She straightened at the sight of them.

“We’re in business,” Max told her. “Your plan to redo my image is a go.”

“Thank you for agreeing to this, Ms. Stone,” Stephanie said.

“Sure.” Billie tried for a pleasant smile but was almost certain that she’d fallen short.

“Please, call me Billie.”

“Shall we head downstairs? I have the check in the car outside.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they were standing in Sweetest Surprise’s entryway with a check so large that Billie couldn’t have touched both ends with outstretched arms. A photographer appeared from somewhere outside — perhaps Stephanie had stashed him in the car as well — and motioned for Billie and Max to stand closer together.

“Can we get some kids in the picture?” Stephanie asked.

“Sorry, it’s the middle of the school day. We don’t have any kids on the premises at the moment,” Billie said.

“Whose are these, then?” Stephanie asked, gesturing to a coat rack filled with small jackets.

“Those are some of our spare clothes for kids who might need them.” Billie tried to keep her tone even. This was going to be very frustrating.

“All right, let’s get a move on,” Max said briskly. “As much as I’d love to pose for photos all day, I do have actual work to do.”

“Right. Max, hand her the check, and Billie, look excited and grateful.”

Billie smiled in what she hoped was an excited and grateful expression and pretended to accept the check. As she looked down at it, she noticed for the first time the amount written on the pay line, and her mouth dropped open. This was enough to cover the Christmas program and more. Sweetest Surprise should be fully in the green through summer with funding like this.

The photographer snapped a photo and, when Billie later saw it, she realized he’d captured the joyful moment that she’d realized her beloved charity would be funded for longer than she’d thought. He was good at his job; Billie would give him that.

“Thank you again,” Max said. He held out his hand, and Billie shuffled the check to lean against her leg so that she could take it.

“I expect to see you next week to help decorate the center for Christmas,” Billie said. “I’ll be in touch about timing.”

“Of course.” Max winked again. “See you later.”

Then he left without a backwards glance, clearly ready to get back to his “important” work. Billie hoisted the check into her arms and went to track down Barbara to see where one could even cash a check like this. Hopefully at the nearest bank, because Billie did not like the thought of carrying this thing on the bus one bit.

As she maneuvered the stairs with the check in her arms, Billie couldn’t help wondering what it was going to be like to work with Max. Perhaps she should have told him that it was all right to just show up for publicity photos and not actually help,

but she hated the thought that Max would get good press without doing anything. Maybe helping with the charity would be good for him.

Or maybe he'd just drive her crazy with his classic mix of charm and cockiness.

That remained to be seen.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

Billie found most of her staff in the break room having lunch. They were so thrilled at the prospect of the funding — and so excited about the giant check — that Billie felt her spirits lift. She might have to work with a man she wasn't all that fond of, but she'd also secured the funding that her charity needed to run their Christmas program. That was something to celebrate.

CHAPTER 8

MAX

Max straightened his Sweetest Surprise T-shirt and examined himself in the mirror. He wasn't sure where Stephanie had gotten the T-shirt and half-expected that she'd had it made up herself. Either way, she'd said it was important that he looked like a real participant in the charity's work, not just a funder.

Still, Max would have been happy taking a few photos and getting back to work if it hadn't been for Billie. She'd insisted that Max actually pitch in and get his hands dirty, so he would. At least for twenty minutes or so, and then he'd need to get back to the office. The pre-Christmas rush was in full swing now that Thanksgiving was over, and he had a lot to do.

Max sighed. He had a lot to do nowrightnow— but instead of working, he was about to leave for Sweetest Surprise's outreach center, where he'd be decorating for Christmas. Max was almost certain that he'd never hung a Christmas decoration in his life. The closest he'd come was giving the all-clear for Bluebell Diner locations to put Christmas trees in their restaurants each year.

Hopefully, it wouldn't take long.

Max headed down the elevator to the parking garage, where his car waited. Sweetest Surprise was only a short drive away, but Max was grateful for the heating in the car. Tomorrow was the first day of December, and he could feel it in the air. Christmas decorations were starting to go up around the city, from strands of colorful lights on businesses to trees on the sidewalks. The crisp smell of pine seemed to be everywhere, and Christmas carols had begun to play in every store and restaurant.

Billie was probably in her element. Max was just waiting for it to be over.

For a moment, he wondered what it might be like to feel so excited about a holiday. He'd never really looked forward to Christmas, not even as a child. The decorations and special food hadn't made up for the way his father had always run off to the office, even on Christmas Day. Nor had they made up for the fact that his family didn't believe in gifts.

Max put all thoughts of his father out of his mind as he pulled up outside the Sweetest Surprise Outreach Center. Outside, a pair of teenage girls in warm jackets were stringing up a set of Christmas lights across the front doors. They smiled at him as he went inside.

The entryway was buzzing with activity. A few volunteers were hanging up paper snowflakes, probably made by the children the center supported. Another was switching out the doormat for aHappy Holidays!version, while another was assembling a fabric snowman from a box.

"Where could I find Billie?" Max asked the volunteer with the snowman.

"She's in the main activity room," she told him. "Just through there."

Max followed the volunteer's directions through a doorway and into a large room. It was clearly made to be multi-use. Folding chairs lined one wall, along with several large folding tables, and the open storage closet showed boxes marked Art Supplies, Projector, and Table Tennis, among others. A fresh, as-yet-undecorated pine tree stood in the far corner beside a large window. In the center of the room, Billie was sitting cross-legged on the floor, untangling a string of Christmas lights. Stephanie was already there, engaged in conversation with a photographer. "Jingle Bells" played over a portable speaker.

Max crossed the room to Billie, his shoes squeaking on the polished wooden floor. She looked up at the sound, but her expression remained neutral.

"Hi, Max."

"Oh, good, you're here." Stephanie hurried over to him. "All right. We need a few shots of you and Billie decorating the tree and hanging lights."

"Right." Max surveyed the decorations on display. "Where should I start?"

"Would you mind helping me with this?" Billie held up the tangle of Christmas lights. "If you grab the other end, we might be able to straighten it out."

"That's not the best for photos," Stephanie said hesitantly.

"Maybe not, but it is what needs to be done." Billie's tone was calm, but Max sensed that she was a little annoyed. "After the lights are untangled, we'll put some baubles on the tree, and you can get some shots of that. In the meantime, feel free to help with another string of lights."

Stephanie obediently picked up a string of small white lights and began undoing a large knot. Max was grudgingly impressed that she was actually helping, but he

didn't have long to think about it. He joined Billie on the floor.

"This is quite a mess."

"I know." Billie shook her head. "Some of the volunteers who helped take down the decorations last year were in a bit of a rush. It's hard to supervise everything."

"I can imagine — you have a lot of volunteers. I saw a few on the way in."

"Sure. Everyone wants to volunteer putting up the Christmas lights. The volunteers to take down the Christmas lights aren't usually as enthusiastic." Billie gave a what-can-you-do shrug, and Max felt bad that he was also just here to put the decorations up. By the time they came down after Christmas, their partnership would be over, and he would be back to his real work.

That was for the best. He was hopeless at untangling lights.

After a few minutes, Billie managed to undo the final knot, and they both stood. The photographer followed them to the tree, where Billie and Max each hung a few ornaments. Then he got a few shots of them draping a garland of lights over a table in the far corner. As they posed, Max found himself very aware of how close Billie was to him and how she smelled faintly like peppermint and vanilla. He also noticed that her smile for the cameras wasn't anywhere near as radiant as her usual smile, which made sense. Max wasn't all that excited about posing for staged pictures either, not when he should be working.

"We should be good," the photographer said after a few minutes. Stephanie looked at the camera and approved the shots. When Max leaned over to check the photos, he saw an image of himself and Billie sitting on the floor with the Christmas lights, both laughing as they tugged on a particularly tangled section. Max hadn't even known that the photographer was taking pictures at that point, but he liked this one. In the

photo, Billie had her head thrown back in laughter, and Max was grinning at her. They looked like two people who actually got along.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:36 am

“Great. I’ll head out,” Stephanie said. “Max, are you going to the office?”

Max glanced at Billie, who raised her eyebrows at him, and shook his head. “No, I’ll stay and help.”

“Suit yourself.” Stephanie and the photographer said their goodbyes and headed out, leaving Max and Billie alone.

“Thanks for putting up with the photos,” Max said.

“Sure, no problem.” Billie put her hands on her hips and surveyed the room. “I think I’ll need to get a few more volunteers in here to help. Can you handle the tree?”

“Yep.”

“Great. I’ll be right back.” Billie left, presumably to find more volunteers, and Max was alone with the tree. He stared at it for a long moment.

Max had never decorated a tree before. He had no idea how to do it, but it couldn’t be that hard. There were already a few golden baubles on the tree’s wide branches, so he added a few more. Next, he draped a strand of white lights over the branches, placed a golden star on the topmost point, and stepped back to admire his handiwork. The tree wasn’t about to win any awards, but it was decorated, which meant that Max had fulfilled his promise to Billie and could get back to work now. He really had a lot to do.

When Billie came back in, with the two teenage girls from outside in tow, he

motioned her over. The girls went to the table on the far side of the room and began setting up a Christmas village, while Billie strode over to him. Her curls were in a messy bun today and she wasn't wearing any makeup, but she looked as lovely as always.

"I'm done."

"You're done?" Billie's eyes narrowed. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's decorated. And honestly, I have a lot to do today."

"Right. Let me just ask you this. Do you put the same level of care and attention into your work that you put into this tree? Because most of the baubles are on the left side, the lights aren't wrapped around the tree, and you didn't even use any of the snowflakes."

Max felt a surge of annoyance. "Obviously I put more thought into my work, because it matters more. If I mess up at the office, the company could lose hundreds of thousands of dollars and a lot of people could lose their jobs. If the tree isn't up to your standards, nothing bad will happen."

Billie crossed her arms. "Max, you said you'd actually help. I know this doesn't matter to you, but it matters to me. Can't you try a little harder?"

"Fine." Max turned back to the tree. "I just can't imagine that anyone other than you will care if the tree doesn't look perfect."

"You know what? Never mind." To Max's surprise, Billie looked suddenly on the verge of tears. "If you really don't want to be here, then don't be. And take off that shirt." She gestured to the Sweetest Surprise T-shirt that Stephanie had given Max.

“Billie.” Max reached for her hand, but she stepped away. “Why are you so upset?”

“Because this does matter. Don’t you remember what it was like to wake up as a child on Christmas morning and run downstairs to find your presents? Can’t you make a little effort to create that kind of Christmas magic for someone else?”

“Honestly,” Max said, his voice low, “my Christmases were never that magical. Sorry about the tree, Billie, but I agree that it’s best if I go.”

“Yeah.” Billie let out a breath. “Go back to your work, if it’s so much more important.”

Max wanted to say something else, but he knew that whatever he said would fall short. So, instead, he just nodded to Billie and left the outreach center. Once he was outside, he got in his car and drove straight to the office. He needed to lose himself in his work — because his work really was more important than a Christmas tree. Wasn’t it?

Yet, as Max turned on his laptop and got to work, he couldn’t help feeling guilty about how he’d left things with Billie. She’d been too much of a perfectionist about the tree, but she’d been right, too. Maybe he should make more of an effort to help others. He could give someone else a magical Christmas, even if he’d never experienced one himself.

Though Max knew that such thinking was silly. His father would be incredibly disappointed in him if he heard him talking like that. A magical Christmas couldn’t be quantified into revenue or stock prices or a new storefront. If Max let himself get distracted by intangible goals, he’d never be able to ensure Bluebell Diner continued to be the success his father had made it.

So, Max put all thoughts of Billie, Sweetest Surprise, and Christmas out of his mind

and focused only on the task at hand: final approval of the new Bluebell Diner space in Colorado Springs. Nothing was more important than making sure his company succeeded. Even if it meant disappointing a beautiful woman whom Max cared about more than he wanted to admit.

CHAPTER 9

BILLIE

To say that Billie was hesitant to work with Max again would have been an understatement.

Maybe she'd been a little hard on him. She could acknowledge that. When her volunteers made mistakes, she was always constructive and kind, which she hadn't been with Max. Billie had expected him not to take the decorating seriously, and when she'd been faced with proof that he didn't, she hadn't reacted well. Maybe, if she'd been a little more understanding, he would have tried again with the tree.

But this wasn't all on Billie. Max had been a jerk, too. Sure, he wasn't that into Christmas, but that didn't mean he couldn't make an effort to help out instead of rushing so that he could get back to work. And he'd been wrong. It didn't matter how the tree was decorated. Billie had spent an extra hour making sure it looked perfect and, when the kids had arrived the next afternoon, they'd been awestruck and excited to see the beautiful tree.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

Max cared about profit over all else, but he was wrong about that too. It mattered how you treated people and the kind of effort you gave, not just how much money you made.

Billie sighed. The decorating fiasco had happened several days ago, but she still found herself thinking about it. She'd even complained to her sister, Jamie, about how she was stuck with a rich jerk who couldn't even decorate a Christmas tree properly, which really wasn't that hard to do. Billie had left out the part about how they'd spent a night together beforehand, because that didn't really have anything to do with their current situation.

Worse, it wasn't like she could just cancel her arrangement with Max. She'd agreed to several photo shoots of Max "helping" her, and it was time to invite him to the next one. Trying to forget, or at least conceal, her annoyance, Billie got out her phone and dialed Max's number. He picked up on the third ring.

"Billie?" He sounded surprised to hear from her.

"Hi, Max. I need to go shopping tomorrow to get some things from the kids' wish lists." She hesitated, trying to cultivate a polite and professional tone. "Would you like to... join me?"

"Yes, please."

"If you'd just like to come to take a few photos, that's fine."

"No, I'll really help this time. Where and when tomorrow?"

Billie gave the name of a local department store and suggested two in the afternoon.

“That sounds fine.” There was a pause on the other end. “How does the tree look?”

“Good now.”

“I’m glad to hear it. See you tomorrow, Billie.”

It wasn’t an apology, but it was the closest either of them was probably going to get. It just remained to be seen how the shopping would go the next day.

To Billie’s surprise, Max showed up at the department store the next day without Stephanie or his photographer.

“Where’s your entourage?” Billie asked, looking around the parking lot in case they were planning to jump out for some candid shots.

“It’s just me today,” Max said. “Stephanie asked that I get a few selfies of the two of us together, but she also implied that just being out in public would get enough attention.”

“Great. Attention. This should be fun.” Billie took a scrunchy off her wrist and tied her hair back into a ponytail. “Are you ready?”

“Wow, your hair is going up. This must be serious. Yes, I’m ready.”

“Great. Then grab a cart. We have a lot to buy today.”

Max obediently went to get a cart, and they headed into the store. Just like the outreach center, the store had been brightly decorated for Christmas. “Last Christmas” played over the speakers, and the first row of shelves was a display of

Christmas decorations and wrapping paper. Miniature reindeer and fluffy-bearded Santa Clauses smiled at them as they passed.

“We’ll start in the baby section,” Billie told Max.

“Not in toys?”

“No, but we’ll go there next. We offer gifts to everyone from babies to teenagers, so it isn’t all toys — although it mostly is. I also try to pick up some special chocolate or gift sets for the parents if I have the budget — and this year, I do, thanks to you.”

“That’s thoughtful. To get gifts for parents, I mean.”

“They deserve it. They work so hard to make sure their kids have everything they need.”

They strolled through the baby section, where Billie picked up a few plush toys as well as several packs of onesies, a set of bottles, and a pile of diapers, crossing each item off her list as she went. Then it was on to the toy section.

“Do you see any plushie octopuses?” Billie asked, scanning the first shelf.

“Here’s one.” Max stretched up to retrieve a pale orange plush octopus with eight legs and an embroidered smile.

“Perfect. Put him in the cart.” Billie crossed the octopus off her list.

“So, these are lists from the kids at your center?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Mostly. I also collect wish lists from any other families who want to submit one. This octopus, for instance, is for...” — Billie cross-referenced her lists — “five-year-old Lukas from Loveland.”

“Loveland is kind of far.”

“I know. Delivering all the gifts on Christmas Eve is quite a trial. But it’s worth it.”

“What’s next?”

“We need a game of Monopoly, preferably the dog-themed one. Do you see it?”

“Over there.”

Slowly but surely, the pile of gifts in the cart increased. Board games and art kits were stacked side by side with baby dolls and train sets until Max precariously balanced a princess doll on the very top.

“I think we’re out of room.”

“We are. That means it’s time to keep this cart at the checkout desk and get another.” Billie put her hands on her hips and raised her eyebrows. “Unless you’re ready to head home?”

“Not a chance. We still need lots of gifts.”

They parked the cart near the checkout, asking a friendly cashier to keep an eye on it,

and went back for a second cart. This time, they swung through the clothing section and stopped by school supplies on the way back to the toy aisle.

“What’s next?” Max asked.

“We need a remote-controlled airplane,” Billie said.

“Oh, cool.” Max led them to the mechanical-toys section, where remote-controlled vehicles of all types stood in rows. “I would have loved one of these when I was a kid. I always made paper airplanes and tried to fly them as far as possible. When I got older, I even made them out of balsa wood, but I never had a remote-controlled plane like this.”

“Why not?” Billie asked. Then she quickly covered her mouth. “Sorry, that was rude. I just meant... your family seems to have plenty of money for nice Christmas gifts. Didn’t your parents know you wanted a plane?”

“No, they did. But my father didn’t really believe in presents. He still doesn’t. He believes that you can only really enjoy something that you buy with money you earned yourself. And he thinks that gifts create expectations and obligations.”

“Oh.” Billie bit her lip as she took the remote-controlled plane Max held out to her. “That’s sad.”

“It’s all right.” Max gave her a sideways look. “Which of these gifts would you have loved as a child?”

“Probably one of the dolls,” Billie admitted. “I was always one of those girls who carried around a baby doll and pretended I was a mother.”

Max picked up a small baby doll and handed it to Billie. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” She cradled the doll in her arms. “Does little Goom Goom look like me?”

“Goom Goom?” Max began to laugh. “Did you just name your baby Goom Goom?”

“I couldn’t think of anything!” Billie giggled. “It was the first name that came into my mind.”

“Okay, fine — except that Goom Goom isn’t a name. It’s a sound, maybe, but it’s definitely not a name.”

“Oh, sure, because you’re such an expert. What would you name this baby?”

“She looks like a Tabitha,” Max said.

“Tabitha?” Billie began to laugh again. “That’s a good name, but where in the world did it come from?”

“It just came to me. I happen to be excellent at naming things.”

“Is that so?”

“Sure. I named Bluebell Diner.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“I don’t think I believe that. You said you were just a kid when your parents opened their first restaurant.”

“I was, but I still named it. And not after the flower, like you might think. When I was little, I went to stay with my aunt and uncle on their farm for a few weeks and they had a cow with a blue bell around her neck. She was my favorite cow, and when I got home, I missed her so much that I persuaded my parents to name the diner after her.”

“This is so much new information.” Billie gently set the baby doll back on the shelf. “You stayed on a farm?”

“Sure. My parents were putting their finishing touches on the diner, which they wanted to call Homestyle Diner, by the way.”

“Terrible.” Billie rolled her eyes in jest, but Max nodded seriously, then undermined himself with a wink.

“So, they packed me off to the countryside to get a taste of farm life. I was probably five or so.”

“Do you remember any farm skills?”

“Not at all.” Max chuckled. “I don’t think I could milk a cow if it hit me in the face.”

“Let’s see.” Billie grabbed a stuffed cow from the shelf behind her. “Think fast!” She tossed the cow at Max, who expertly caught it out of the air.

“I feel like catching a cow is a bit different from milking one, but I like where your head was.” Max tossed the cow back to her. “We can call her Mrs. Cowper.”

Billie looked down at the cow’s embroidered face, including a happy smile and thoughtful eyes. “She does look like a Mrs. Cowper. Okay, I’ll admit that you’re good at naming things.”

“But now that we’ve named her, I feel bad leaving Mrs. Cowper here. Do you think one of the kids will want her?”

Billie scanned her list of toys. “Let’s see. Eloise, aged eleven, says that she loves animals and wants us to donate money to a charity that helps them. Maybe we can give her Mrs. Cowper as well as a donation.”

“Really?” Max circled the cart to look at the list with Billie. “I have trouble believing that an eleven-year-old would rather donate money than get a Christmas present.”

“Right here.” Billie pointed to the entry in question. “And I believe it. I know Eloise, at least a little. She comes to our afterschool program. She’s always helping younger kids with their homework and sharing her snacks with them. And I once saw her spend twenty minutes befriending a ladybug.”

“She sounds like a special kid.”

“She is. And I think she’ll love Mrs. Cowper, as long as we make a donation in Eloise’s name, too.”

“Excellent. We can make a name tag for Mrs. Cowper,” Max suggested. His blue eyes were lit in a way Billie hadn’t seen before. “And maybe we can write a little story about how Mrs. Cowper needs a family to take care of her.”

“Max Grayson.” Billie put her hands on her hips. “Do you care?”

“Maybe just a little.” Max took the plush cow from Billie’s hands and put her into the cart. “What’s next?”

Over the next hour, Billie and Max were able to cross almost everything off the list. They found matchbox cars and chemistry sets, miniature telescopes and princess costumes, hairstyle dolls and turtle bath toys. Billie also added a stack of chocolate boxes and a few self-care gift baskets for the parents to the cart.

“Is that it?” Max asked.

“For now. I usually get another batch of wish lists in mid-December, so I’ll probably have one more trip, but we should be okay for now. Except...” Billie ran her finger down the list. “We didn’t find the Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca.”

“What exactly is a Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca?”

“It’s the dearest wish of Josefina, aged six. Apparently, it’s one of those really exciting toys that all the kids want this year. I’m surprised we only have one on the list.”

“And this store doesn’t have a Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca?”

“No.” Billie bit her lip thoughtfully. “But I should be able to get one on another shopping trip.”

“No way. What if all the stores have sold out by then? Let’s try somewhere else.”

“Don’t you need to get back to work?”

Max glanced at his watch. “It’s fine. It’s a Sunday afternoon and I don’t have that much to do.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“All right, then. Let’s pay for all this and keep looking for the Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca.”

They paid for the gifts and loaded them into the car outside.

“Is this your car?” Max asked as he set a bulging bag on the back seat.

“No, it’s the official Sweetest Surprise car. I borrow it occasionally for personal use, but mostly I take public transit. Are you ready for the next store?” Billie put in the last bag and closed the trunk.

“You know it.”

“Actually, let’s drop these gifts at the outreach center first. It isn’t far.”

Back at the center, Max and Billie unloaded armfuls of gifts and stored them in Billie’s office. By the time they were finished, it looked like Santa’s workshop had been transferred to Denver. Stacks of toy boxes took up most of the floor space and a parade of dolls and plush animals lined Billie’s bookshelves.

“Are you ready for another store, or have you changed your mind after carrying one thousand bags?” Billie asked.

“I’m ready,” Max said. “Let’s find this Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca. At this point, I’m very curious about what it looks like.”

“Me too, actually. Let’s go.”

They piled back into the car, where Billie tuned the radio to a station playing Christmas songs and turned the volume up. She sang along to “White Christmas” and “Santa Baby”, then looked over at Max. He wasn’t singing.

“Sorry.” Billie turned the radio down. “I forgot that you’re not a fan of Christmas.”

“I’m not, but I don’t mind you singing.” Max turned the volume back up. “Just pretend I’m not here.”

Halfway through “Here We Come A-Wassailing”, they arrived at the next department store. Billie turned to Max with a serious expression.

“Remember, we’re here for one thing, and one thing only.” She locked eyes with him. “The Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca.”

“Yes ma’am!” Max saluted. “Let’s roll out.”

They headed into the store, but there were no Sunshine Sparkle Alpacas here, either. The next store was sold out, too. Finally, in the fourth store, Billie spotted a final box on the shelf and hurriedly grabbed it.

“Victory!” She held it up and hurried back to Max, who’d been looking in another aisle.

“Nice work. Okay, let’s see what’s so special about this toy.”

Billie turned the box so they could both read it. The alpaca inside, visible through a sheet of clear plastic, was white and sparkly with a picture of the sun on her flank. Her mane was rainbow-colored, and she wore a friendly smile.

“Well, we know that she can say sixteen unique phrases,” Max read off the box. “A

talking alpaca. That makes sense.”

“She can walk, prance, lie down, and eat,” Billie added. “What do you think she eats?”

“Sunshine, of course. And she has a unique backstory in the included booklet.”

“Just like your Mrs. Cowper idea.” Billie and Max exchanged a smile. “Well, I’m very glad we found her. Little Josefina is going to be overjoyed.” She paused. “Thank you for coming with me.”

“It was my pleasure.” Max glanced at his watch again. “But I should be going now. I do have a few things to do this evening.”

“Of course. Wait!” Billie held up a hand. “What about your selfies?”

“Right. Do you mind taking one now?”

“Sure.”

Max got out his phone and held it up. Billie squeezed into the frame, her shoulder brushing Max’s, and, at the last moment, held up the alpaca. Max snapped the photo.

“Thanks, Billie.”

“No, thankyou. I’ll see you for the next photo opportunity.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Max grinned and headed out. Billie took the chance to pick up a few things she needed for her apartment, then bought the alpaca and her supplies and made her way home. She stopped at the outreach center first to drop off the Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca with the rest of the gifts, and, as she did, she smiled down at it. The alpaca was proof that, despite his prickly exterior and general dislike of all things holiday-related, Max actually cared. Maybe there was more to him than the wealthy jerk who’d refused to do a good job on the Christmas tree.

Despite her misgivings, Billie had enjoyed her afternoon with Max. It had been fun goofing around with him in the toy aisle and hunting down the elusive alpaca. Maybe the rest of the photo opportunities she’d agreed to wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Billie went home with a smile on her lips and a happy holiday warmth in her heart. She had the funding she needed, and Max was less of a jerk than she’d thought. Better still, she had the Christmas presents the kids had asked for. Things were looking up.

CHAPTER 10

MAX

Max added his signature to a few documents for the new Colorado Springs branch, humming under his breath as he did so. To his surprise, he realized that he was humming a Christmas song, “Jingle Bells.” He was almost certain that this was the first time in his life that he’d ever hummed a Christmas song.

Clearly, Billie was having a festive influence on him. And if Max were being honest, he was enjoying the time he spent with her. Shopping for gifts the day before had been fun — more fun than he'd expected. Billie was a really special woman, and Max was looking forward to spending more time with her. The next scheduled event wasn't until the following week, when they'd deliver gifts to children in a local hospital, but Max was already looking forward to it.

He checked his watch. It was just after six p.m. on a Monday evening and, although he normally would have stayed at the office until well past eight, he didn't feel like he could focus any longer today.

As if on cue, his phone beeped with a message. Max turned it over to see a text from Billie.

Hey. Need some help wrapping presents. No cameras, but are you in?

Without hesitating, Max replied, Sure. Now?

Yes, at the outreach center. See you soon.

Well, Max had been wanting to leave anyway, and here was the excuse he needed. He packed up and headed out, ignoring his employees' startled looks at the fact that he was leaving so early. The outreach center was a bit of a drive, but Max didn't mind. He enjoyed having the time to think and listen to the radio, although he chose a classic rock station instead of Christmas songs.

When he arrived at the outreach center, he found that it was full of kids. They seemed to be heading out after their afterschool program, based on the way they were all tugging on jackets and calling out excitedly to each other. Max wondered if Eloise, the little girl who wanted a charity donation instead of a present, was here today. Perhaps one of these children was even Josefina, the girl who so badly wanted a

Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca.

Max threaded between the kids and made his way to Billie's office. She was sitting on the floor, surrounded by gift bags, wrapping paper, ribbons, bows, and tape. About a quarter of the gifts had been neatly wrapped, while the rest waited for their turn.

"Max!" Billie looked up and grinned. Today, she wore a red dress and tights and looked very Christmassy. "You made it. I'll try to pretend I'm not surprised."

"For both our sakes, I think that's a good idea." Max surveyed the wrapping-paper piles. "How can I help?"

"Have a seat. You can choose the floor or the desk."

"You're on the floor, so I'll join you." Max lowered himself to the ground and picked up an action figure. "So, we just wrap these up?"

"Yep. Although you might want to start with one of the boxes. They're a bit easier."

"I'm sure I can handle this." Max unspooled a length of wrapping paper and cut it neatly with the scissors Billie handed him. "Although I'm pleased you thought of me, I have to ask — why am I here, instead of one of your other volunteers or your employees?"

"They've all been working hard lately, and I figured you'd enjoy a chance to pitch in." Billie winked. "Can you pass me that bow?"

Max looked over his shoulder at a row of bows ranging from crisp white to bright tie-dye. "Which one?"

"The yellow, please."

Max handed the bow to Billie, who stuck it on top of a beautifully wrapped box. Meanwhile, Max wrapped the paper he'd cut around the action figure, tucked in the flaps, and used a long piece of tape to secure the sides in place. He added a few more pieces of tape to the top and sides of the figure, where small pieces of wrapping paper were threatening to peel away. Satisfied, he held up the action figure to examine his work.

Immediately, Billie burst into laughter. Max glanced at her, then looked at the action figure again. Despite himself, he began to chuckle as well.

"It looks like you tried to wrap that with your feet," Billie giggled. "In the dark. In a windstorm."

"Hey, it isn't that bad!" Max held up the action figure by the top piece of the wrapping paper. As if to contradict his point, the bottom part of the wrapping paper gave way, and the action figure slid out and landed on the floor with a hollow bounce. They both burst into laughter again.

"Okay," Max said, once he was able to talk again. "You're right, that may not have been my best work."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“I certainly hope not. If that was your best work, I’d be very worried about the quality of your restaurants. Have you ever wrapped a present before?”

“I mean, I’ve put things into bags.”

“Okay, we can work with that. There are a bunch of gift bags over there. Maybe it’ll work a little better if you try those instead of the wrapping paper.”

Max threw the sticky, torn mass of wrapping paper and tape into the small trash can beside Billie’s desk and took a handful of gift bags and gift tags. He slid the action figure into the first bag, but the figure’s helmet poked out over the top as though he were watching Max’s every move. Max added a little tissue paper around the figure’s head, then looked up to see Billie watching him with wide eyes.

“What?” He tucked another bit of tissue paper into the bag.

“You can definitely see what’s in there.” Billie nodded to the head, which was still very obviously poking up through the wrapping paper.

“Fine.” Max took the action figure back out of the bag and put it in a second bag, which was much taller and thinner. The figure fit perfectly. “How’s that?”

“Maybe you’re getting it.” Billie grinned broadly. “Maybe.”

“I’ll take it.” Max reached for another gift bag and a round plush animal with small legs. “Do you always wrap this many gifts?”

“Yep, and that’s just the ones for the kids. I have a bunch more for my siblings and parents and nephews.”

“Right, you told me you had a big family. How did Thanksgiving with all of them go?”

“Oh, it was nice. My infant nephew came to the table with us in a sling and smiled at everyone for the whole meal. And the food was lovely, of course, since my mom is a great cook. How was your Thanksgiving? Did you really spend it in the office?” Billie carefully crimped the edge of a sheet of wrapping paper and fixed it to the box with a single, perfectly sized piece of tape.

“I did, and it was fine.” Max slid the plush animal into the bag and tucked a few pieces of tissue paper around it. Then he reached for a gift tag and a pen.

“I have to ask.” Billie bit her lip. “I know you said that Christmas wasn’t that magical and that the holidays aren’t a very special time for you, but don’t your parents miss you on Thanksgiving?”

Max thought of his parents and gave a low chuckle. “They spent this Thanksgiving in Aruba on the beach. I don’t think they missed me.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

“I had to work.” Max shrugged. “I’ll have time for vacations later.”

“Right.” Billie nodded slowly. “Once you have a child and the child takes over the business.”

Max laughed. “Yeah. Exactly. That’s my plan.”

“That’s some really long-term planning. Especially since you appear to be single now.”

“It’s all about the long game with me.” Max stuck the gift tag to the bag. It peeled off and floated to the floor, so he went for round two, this time armed with a large piece of clear tape.

“I’m curious, though.” Billie leaned over, took the tag and tape from Max’s hands, and carefully tied the tag to the handle of the gift bag. “Do you want kids?” She blushed. “Sorry, I know that’s personal. You don’t have to answer.”

“I don’t mind.” Max set the gift with the other wrapped presents. While his back was to Billie, he took a moment to formulate his answer. “I like kids. But I’m clueless with them. I don’t know what they need or how to parent one, so I worry that if I actually had a child, I’d mess things up. Does that make sense?”

“It does.” Billie nodded. “But, as someone who’s spent a lot of time around kids, I can tell you that it’s harder to mess them up than people think. As long as you show up for your kids and support them, things mostly turn out okay. And you seem like the kind of guy who would show up. I saw your dedication to getting the Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca.”

“Thanks.” Max was oddly touched by Billie’s words. “I’m a long way from having kids, though.”

“Same. I’m as single as you are.” Billie held up her left hand to showcase her lack of a ring. “But, since I do spend all day with children, it’s something I think about.”

“Why were you curious? About if I wanted kids?”

“I don’t know. When we first met, I thought you were...”

“A jerk?” Max filled in the blank. “I know. You weren’t that subtle.”

Billie bit her lip again. “Sorry. I don’t mean a jerk, I just mean... we seemed really different. But I saw another side to you when we went shopping. It made me wonder what else there is to you that I don’t know.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

Max wasn't sure how to reply to that. He was glad that Billie didn't think he was a jerk anymore — he was certain she had thought that during their first few meetings, even if she was too nice to admit it now. On the other hand, he was still the exact same guy he'd been when they first met. He cared about his business more than his personal life. He didn't appreciate the holidays much. He wasn't sure he understood the point of charity.

Nothing had changed.

Yet, at the same time, Max was sitting on the floor of Billie's office, wrapping Christmas gifts for children he would probably never meet. He could have been at work, preparing for the holiday rush, but instead he was helping Billie. That wasn't something he would have imagined himself doing a few weeks ago.

It's just for the publicity, Max told himself. But that wasn't entirely true, since there were no cameras here.

"I don't think there's much more to know about me," Max said. "You, on the other hand, must have some good stories. What do you do all year, when you aren't being one of Santa's elves?"

"Well, I've told you about our afterschool programs," Billie said. "We also have lots of Saturday workshops. And apart from Christmas, we try to do something for the other holidays, too."

"So, what do you do for, I don't know, Halloween?"

“We have a costume party, of course.” Billie grinned. “A lot of the kids can’t afford costumes, so we always put together a big rack of donated costumes, as well as a table full of art supplies for kids to make their own. Everyone chooses or creates a costume, we have snacks and carve pumpkins, and then we offer escorted trick-or-treating groups around the local neighborhood.” She paused in the middle of tying a bow around a box. “Do you also dislike Halloween?”

“It’s not that I dislike the holidays exactly.” Max put an oddly shaped painting kit into a bag with a picture of a unicorn in a Santa hat on the front. “I just don’t love them as much as other people do. Halloween is a good one, though.”

“Are you one of those guys who loves scary movies?”

“Guilty.” Max chuckled. “I’ve always enjoyed a nice scary movie. Or a documentary.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Whereas you probably like heartwarming Christmas rom-coms,” Max guessed.

“I do.” Billie grinned. “I love stories with happy endings. And you already know that I love the holidays.”

“How about Easter?” Max continued. “Do you have a celebration for that?”

“Sure. We do an Easter egg hunt all around the center. And for the Fourth of July, we have a barbecue in the park down the street for the kids and their families. There are sparklers and hot dogs and even some small fireworks.”

“How about... Presidents’ Day?”

“Okay, you’ve stumped me. We don’t have a big celebration for Presidents’ Day.”

“I knew I could get you.” Max surveyed the room. “I can hardly believe it, but we’re almost done.”

“You’re right. Hand me Mrs. Cowper, please.”

Max twisted around and found the stuffed cow they’d picked out together at the store.

“Here you go.”

“And here’s the charity donation certificate.” Billie held up an embossed piece of paper. “I found a charity that buys cows for families in need in rural Ethiopia. They get milk from the cow that they can drink or sell, so it provides for them for a long time.”

“Aha — and since you’re giving the kid a toy cow, it all ties in. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks. It felt kind of funny to donate money from one charity to another, but Eloise will be over the moon. Now, we need a special bag.”

Max found a bag with a picture of a cow jumping over the moon next to a sleigh pulled by reindeer. “How’s this?”

“Perfect.”

He held open the bag as Billie put the cow and the certificate inside. Their hands brushed, and Max looked straight into Billie’s soft brown eyes. She looked back at him, and, for a long moment, time seemed to freeze. It was as if they were the only two people in the world. They were so close that Max could have closed the distance between them in a heartbeat and brought his lips to Billie’s in the kind of kiss they’d shared the first night they’d met. The kind of kiss that had made Max’s heart race and

had made him ache to be closer to Billie. The kind of kiss he'd thought about a few too many times since then.

The temptation was huge. Just a few inches and he'd feel Billie's soft, pink lips on his own. He'd be surrounded by her slightly pepperminty smell, and he'd run his hands down the gentle curve of her back. A little longer and he could lift her onto the desk, where she'd wrap her legs around him, and he'd kiss the curve of her neck and...

Max quickly sat back, doing his best to banish the flood of images from his mind. He and Billie were partners now. They were working together for the Christmas season, and that would be it. Even though Max enjoyed spending time with Billie, even though they'd spent a few very lovely hours together buying and wrapping presents, even though kissing her was the closest Max had come to magic, it would never work. They were just too different. And sooner or later, Max would let her down. He'd have to run to the office, or he'd say something disparaging about something she loved, or he'd be unable to conjure the Christmas spirit, and it would all be over.

"Thanks for your help." Billie's voice sounded a little higher than usual and, when Max glanced at her, he saw that she was biting her lip again. "I think we're good here."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“I was happy to help.” Max got to his feet. “Let me know when you need me again. For more charity work.”

“I will. Have a nice evening.” Billie pushed to her feet and smoothed her shirt. “Do you want me to walk you out?”

“That’s quite all right, I know the way.” And the cold air outside would do him good. He couldn’t think of Billie as a potential romantic interest. It wasn’t good for either of them.

As Max headed out, he waved to a few straggler children who were just leaving. They waved back enthusiastically, and Max thought of what Billie had said about children. Then he tried not to think about Billie at all.

As a distraction, Max went back to the office. It was getting late, and most people were on their way out, but there was always more work to be done. The more Max could focus on his work, the less Billie would slip into his thoughts, and the easier it would be to put the memories of their night together out of his mind.

CHAPTER 11

BILLIE

Billie was having trouble focusing.

A few days ago, Max had come over to help her wrap gifts. It had seemed innocent enough, until they’d been kneeling on the floor beside each other, wrapping a plush

cow. The next moment echoed in Billie's mind over and over — Max's eyes had met hers. They'd looked at each other for a long moment, and Billie had felt attraction stirring inside her. She'd wanted to lean forward and kiss him. She'd wanted to feel his broad hands on her back and his warm lips against her own. She'd wanted to inhale his masculine shaving-cream scent and feel the brush of his five-o'clock shadow against her cheek. She'd wanted him to pull her against his firm chest and whisper in her ear.

And that was out of the question.

Billie didn't even like Max that way. She'd enjoyed the night they'd spent together (it still sneaked into her mind sometimes, right before she fell asleep), but they were just too different. A relationship would never work. And worse, it could jeopardize the funding for Sweetest Surprise's Christmas program. Billie couldn't let that happen.

Most likely, the attraction had been one-sided. Max probably hadn't felt the band of tension that seemed to be pulling her towards him. That was for the best. They needed to work together again in a few days, when Sweetest Surprise would visit the local children's hospital to give out gifts to hospital-bound kids, and Billie needed to act normally. She couldn't be thinking about kissing Max or about the night they'd spent together — no matter how fresh it was in her mind.

Billie sighed and looked down at the new year schedule she'd been trying to sort out. One of her employees wanted to offer a dance class, but it was at the same time as the afterschool program and they both needed the big room. Billie chewed the end of her pencil thoughtfully. This was the problem she should be wrestling with instead of thinking about Max.

Unfortunately, Billie's attempts to distract herself over the next few days invariably went off the rails. At least she was supposed to meet her sister, Jamie, for dinner, which she'd been looking forward to. It would be a good opportunity to distract

herself from all thoughts of Max and focus on something else for a change.

They met at a local pizza place, where Jamie had already ordered them a large ham-and-black-olive pizza, their joint favorite, to share. Billie slid into the booth across from her sister with a grin.

“Jamie, how are you? It’s been too long since we’ve seen each other in person.”

“I know, things have been a little busy.” Jamie wiggled a little in her seat, then leaned forward. “I wanted to wait to tell you until after dinner, but I couldn’t hold it in. I’m pregnant!”

“Oh, my gosh!” Billie slid out of her seat and came around to hug her sister. “Congratulations! You and Stewart must be thrilled.”

“Absolutely. And you’re definitely going to be the favorite aunt.”

“I’m not so sure.” Billie pulled back to smile at her sister. “Our sisters-in-law are pretty amazing.”

“Yeah, but they’re distracted by their own kids and husbands,” Jamie said with a shrug. Billie was sure she hadn’t meant it as a cutting comment, but it still stung to be reminded that she was single and childless. Still, it was Jamie’s day, and Billie wasn’t about to get offended.

“Well, your baby’s best aunt is here.” She sat back down and leaned her elbows on the table. “How far along are you?”

“Seven weeks,” Jamie said. “We found out yesterday, and I wanted to tell you first.”

“Thank you.” Billie beamed. “I really am so very happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me, too.” Jamie beamed back. “And I’ve already started thinking about names. I’m only worried that I won’t be able to get Stewart on board, although he says he’s pretty open.”

“What are you thinking about?” Billie leaned forward. “Tell me absolutely everything.”

Only after she’d gotten back home did Billie realize that she was sad for herself as well as happy for her sister. Billie was thirty and no closer to children than she’d been five or ten years ago, while her younger sister would become a mother at twenty-eight. For some reason, that made her think of Max again and the conversation they’d had about kids. All roads led back to Max, even thoughts about children. It was completely unavoidable now.

The next day, Billie filled in for a missing volunteer during the afterschool program. Almost immediately, she heard Eloise talking to her friend Sierra about Christmas gifts.

“Why would you want a donation to charity?” Sierra asked skeptically.

“I want to help people,” Eloise replied earnestly. “I just hope Santa understands that.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Santa?” Sierra giggled. “Do you really think...” Their voices trailed off as they headed into another room, but it was too late: Billie was already thinking about Max and the conversation they’d had about charity — and the toy cow they’d gotten for Eloise along with her donation.

On the morning of the hospital trip, Billie got a call from Max’s head of PR. A little surprised, since she’d mostly been communicating directly with Max, she answered. “Hi, Stephanie.”

“Billie. I just wanted to check in about tonight’s hospital event. Max will be there, as we agreed, and we’re also sending a photographer.”

Billie held back an internal sigh. “All right, but keep in mind that we shouldn’t take pictures of the kids unless they and their parents agree.”

“Of course, of course. Don’t worry; everyone is prepared to be very sensitive. Anyway, I just wanted to check in with you. See you this evening!”

Instead of making Billie feel better about the event, though, Stephanie’s call made her feel much worse. She wondered why it had been Stephanie instead of Max who’d called. Max hadn’t texted over the last few days either.

Billie sighed. This would be fine. Yes, she was a little worried about how Max would behave, after he’d told her how clueless he was with kids, but she was confident he would be fine. It was the cameraman and Stephanie that she was more worried about.

As afternoon came, Billie checked her outfit — a Christmas sweater with a bright

green tree on the front that she loved even though it was tacky, and a pair of jeans — then smoothed her hair back. Maybe she should have worn something else. She always wore funny Christmas sweaters to the hospital in hopes of brightening the children's days, but with the cameras rolling...

No. Billie glared at herself in the mirror. The pictures didn't matter — only the kids did.

She loaded the presents into the car and drove to the hospital. The call with Stephanie, her worries about Max, and her own uncertainty about her outfit made Billie more than a little grumpy as she pulled into the parking lot, but she steadied herself with a few deep breaths. Even if Max wasn't good with the kids, even if her outfit looked bad on camera, even if Stephanie was a bit odd, they were still giving out Christmas gifts today — and that was what mattered.

Billie began lugging the first round of gifts from the car into the hospital, but was stopped right away by Max, who had just pulled up next to her.

"Let me help you."

"Thank you." Billie smiled gratefully and handed him a few bags. Then she paused, sniffing. "Something smells good in your car."

"I'm glad to hear it." Juggling the bags she'd handed him, Max opened the trunk of the car to reveal five large bags brimming with takeout boxes. "I brought some food from the restaurant. I thought the kids might appreciate a break from hospital food."

Billie's heart melted. "That's so sweet. But why did you offer to help me carry my bags? You have a lot to carry, too."

"Good point." Max looked down at the row of bags. "This might mean two trips."

Exchanging a smile, they began to carry in their haul. The hospital administrator who was meeting them was in the lobby, and she immediately offered to come help with the next load. On the way out, they ran into Stephanie and the photographer and quickly co-opted them into helping as well. With so many hands, the work went quickly, and they were soon on the way up to the long-term ward.

“Remember,” the administrator said kindly, “some of the kids on this floor are quite sick. Please be considerate and only take pictures if they’re all right with it.”

Everyone nodded, but the photographer looked slightly annoyed. Billie hoped it was because he’d already been told this several times today, not because he’d been planning to take pictures indiscriminately.

When the elevator doors dinged open, they were greeted by three nurses. The one in holiday-themed scrubs stepped forward.

“Welcome to Denver Children’s Hospital,” she said with a bright smile. “Please, come on in. The kids are very excited to see you.”

“We’re excited to see them,” Billie said. “Thank you so much for having us.”

“It’s really our pleasure. Follow me.”

First, they went to the hospital’s common area. The kids who were more mobile had congregated there, many with their parents or grandparents, to play games and listen to Christmas music. At the sight of Max and Billie, they all cheered.

After greeting them, Max set up most of the food into a buffet line along one wall with the help of Billie and one of the nurses.

“I’m keeping aside a few boxes,” he told Billie quietly. “We’ll go to a few individual

rooms after this, right?”

“Right.”

Next, they went around the room handing out boxes and bags. Soon, the kids were tearing wrapping paper away and squealing with delight at their new toys, games, art sets, and books. The photographer snapped shots of Max and Billie handing out the gifts and of the kids, all of whom seemed to be in good spirits. Billie noticed a few with the telltale head coverings of chemo or who were wearing leg braces or were hooked up to IVs, but no one seemed especially sick, and spirits were high.

“I think I have everything I need,” the photographer told Billie. “Thanks.”

“Sure.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“I’ll head out too, then.” Stephanie checked her watch. “Are you coming, Max?”

Max looked from Stephanie to the kids to Billie, then shook his head. “No, thanks. I’ll stay a little longer.”

“See you later.” Stephanie and the photographer left.

Billie turned to Max. “You didn’t need to stay.”

“I wanted to. It’s nice to see the kids, and I’m glad that they’re enjoying their presents and the food.”

“Well, the next part might be a little more difficult. It’s time to visit the kids who can’t leave their rooms.”

“I’m ready.”

Together, Max and Billie filled their arms with the remaining gifts and the unopened food and followed the Christmas-scrubs nurse to the first room. Inside, a small child of around six sat cross-legged on the bed. She was bald and there were bandages around her head, but she still looked up and smiled when Billie and Max entered.

“Mommy, the gifts are here!” the little girl said excitedly. Her mother looked up from the chair beside the bed and Billie saw that she wore a weary expression.

“Hi, I’m Billie, and this is my friend Max,” Billie said. “We brought you a special toy, directly from Santa.”

“Really?” The little girl’s eyes glowed with excitement.

“Really.” Max lifted a small bag from the pile of gifts and handed it to the child. She unwrapped it excitedly and pulled out a small stuffed rabbit, which she immediately hugged to her chest and covered in kisses.

“Oh, hold on a minute.” Max tilted his head. “I don’t think your rabbit is feeling well.”

“She isn’t?” The girl looked worried and snuggled the rabbit closer. Billie gave Max a warning look — suggesting to a sickchild that her toy wasn’t feeling well was almost definitely a bad idea. But he either didn’t see her or chose to ignore her.

“No, but don’t worry, we can make her better.” Max held out his hands and the girl handed the rabbit back. Max carefully wrapped a length of bandage from a spool on the girl’s bookshelf around the rabbit’s head. He tied it neatly behind the rabbit’s ears until the toy was wearing a smaller version of the bandages on the girl’s head.

“There we go.” He handed the rabbit back to the child. “She’s feeling better now. She just needs a lot of hugs and kisses.”

The little girl gave the rabbit a hug and a kiss, then held it back to admire it. “She looks just like me! Is she also getting better?”

“Definitely.” Max nodded. In the corner of the room, the girl’s mother looked slightly teary, and Billie went to give her a box of food and an encouraging squeeze on the shoulder.

“This is so sweet of you,” she told Billie. “And my Mandy really is getting better. We got the news this morning that she should be discharged early in the new year.”

“That’s wonderful.” Billie and the mother looked at little Mandy, who was hugging her rabbit and telling Max all about her favorite TV show, Paw Patrol, and about how the food in the hospital was “blecky.”

“I think we can fix that,” Max said. Mandy’s mom brought the box of food to her daughter, who danced with delight at the sight of a box full of French fries and grilled cheese sandwiches.

“What do we say?” her mother prompted.

“Thank you!” Mandy told Max and Billie with a grin.

“No problem. We’ll leave you to your lunch.” Billie grinned back. “Happy holidays.”

“Happy holidays!” She snuggled her rabbit closer and waved as Max and Billie stepped out into the hallway.

“That was so sweet, what you did with her rabbit,” Billie said as they walked to the next room.

“I thought it might be nice for her to have a toy that looked like her.”

Billie’s heart warmed. “Clearly, you were right. She was so excited, and I’m impressed.”

Max shrugged. “She’s the one who’s really impressive. She’s six years old, in the hospital for Christmas, and clearly not feeling well, but she still smiled and was excited to see us.”

“You’ll see a lot of that today. Kids are amazing.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

Max nodded. “I believe it. So, who’s next?”

“Follow me.”

For the rest of the afternoon, Billie and Max went from room to room, giving out gifts, talking to the kids, and offering food from Bluebell Diner. Billie saw the softer side of Max once again. He had time to talk to and play with every child they met, even though the cameras weren’t rolling. He swapped puns with a ten-year-old boy in a wheelchair and even watched part of an episode of Bluey with a three-year-old who was too tired to talk much.

As she watched Max play and interact with the kids, Billie felt her heart softening. When they’d first met, he’d really seemed like a detached jerk, but the more she got to know him, the more she saw that he really did care. Maybe he still wasn’t a fan of Christmas, but he was sweet and understanding with the kids. It was the time he’d searched everywhere for the Sunshine Sparkle Alpaca — times five.

When they finally said goodbye to the last of the kids and headed out to the garage, they were both exhausted yet in good moods.

“Thanks for staying,” Billie said.

“Of course. It was... good publicity.”

Billie rolled her eyes. “Come on. There were no cameras for half of it, and I know you didn’t like the idea of working with me as a publicity stunt anyway. You enjoyed yourself.”

“Maybe.”

“And it felt nice to do something good.”

“Don’t push it.” Max winked. “But really, I’m glad we could spend the afternoon with the kids. Do you visit the hospital other times of the year?”

“Sweetest Surprise does have a program in which we train volunteers to read to and play with hospitalized kids. I go with them sometimes, but mostly I’m too busy at the center. Managing the whole charity means I don’t get to spend as much time with the kids as I’d like.”

“It’s hard to be the boss.” Max smiled at her. “But you clearly do a wonderful job. I’m impressed at how well you organized everything.”

“It’s not my first rodeo. You should have seen the first year I tried to distribute Christmas gifts. I only went to a dozen or so families and I still ended up running late and driving back and forth all over town. Now I give volunteers maps of specific areas, and everything is much smoother.”

“You don’t do deliveries yourself?”

“I do about half of the deliveries — whatever the volunteers can’t cover. Christmas Eve always ends up being a very busy day.”

“I can imagine.” Max glanced at his phone. “Okay, I need to go. But first, did you like the food?”

“The food?” Billie frowned.

“Yeah, the food from Bluebell that I brought.”

“Oh!” Billie laughed. “I didn’t get a chance to try it.”

“Come on.” Max grinned. “All right, I’m putting my foot down. There’s a new location opening in Colorado Springs in a few days, and I’m going to the opening. Come with me. You need to try my food.”

Billie tried to ignore the warm feeling in her chest at the invitation. Surely, Max meant this as nothing more than a kind gesture to a friend. “All right. I can do that.”

“Wonderful. I’ll send you all the details.”

“Okay.” Billie bit her lip. “See you then.”

“Bye.” Max got into his car, and Billie followed suit. After he drove away, though, she sat in the parking lot for a little while longer. Why did Max have to be so complicated? It had been easy to put aside her feelings after their night together when he’d seemed like such a jerk, but now...

Now it was harder to ignore the fact that she was attracted to him. Max was not only handsome and successful, but also caring and thoughtful. It was a very appealing combination that left Billie wishing she could spend more time with him. Maybe even another night together.

She sighed. That was still impossible. She and Max were partners — and, despite his invitation to dinner, he probably didn’t feel the same way about her.

Plus, even if he’d helped her wrap gifts and been nice to a few kids, he still believed in profits over charity and didn’t see eye to eye with Billie on most things. It was best to focus on the Christmas program — and, apparently, on a dinner at the Bluebell Diner with a man she couldn’t allow herself to have any romantic feelings for. A dinner that, in retrospect, Billie probably shouldn’t have agreed to.

CHAPTER 12

MAX

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

Max wasn't sure why he'd invited Billie to the restaurant opening in Colorado Springs.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. He knew that he wanted to spend more time with her. The hours he'd spent with her, buying and wrapping and giving, had been wonderful, and he wanted more. He also wanted to share his own life with her. So far, he'd gotten to experience a slice of what she did every day, and he'd seen that it wasn't nearly what he'd thought. He hoped that she might have a similar experience visiting the diner.

And he wanted her to try Bluebell's food. Even though Max wasn't anything close to a chef, he'd worked closely with chefs to design and taste-test the menu. He knew that everything Bluebell offered was delicious, and he knew that Billie didn't always make enough time to eat. Even she'd admitted that her work lunches and dinners were often vending-machine granola bars or packaged supermarket sandwiches.

What Max didn't know was why he'd thought it was a good idea to invite Billie.

Over the last few meetings, he'd grown closer to her. Their first night together had been fantastic, yes, and Max still thought about it in quiet moments. Yet it had also been an experience shared between two people who were practically strangers. Now, Max knew Billie a lot better, and he knew that if they spent the night together, or even simply kissed again, it would be a hundred times better than before.

Yet Max also knew that he couldn't kiss Billie. The same problems were still in place: they were too different, and Max was too focused on his work. That just wasn't going to change. He needed to keep his distance from Billie — while also being

friendly and accommodating on a two-hour round-trip drive and during a dinner that was starting to look a little too much like a date.

The maelstrom of thoughts whirled through Max's mind as he pulled up in front of Billie's apartment building to pick her up. He hadn't been here since they'd spent the night together in late November, and to his surprise, it looked different. Someone had put up Christmas lights over the front door, and one window — which Max suspected was Billie's — was covered in paper snowflakes and draped in a wreath.

Max sent Billie a text to let her know he was there, then sat back in his seat to wait. A few minutes later, the front door opened, and Billie stepped out. Her gaze swept the street, then she caught sight of him. With a spring in her step and a wave, she hurried down the stairs, her jacket gapping open to reveal a long green skirt and a white sweater. The ensemble reminded Max of what she'd worn to the fundraiser where they'd met. Her dark curls were caught up in an elaborate braided style, and she wore simple makeup that brought out her beautiful brown eyes.

"Hey!" Billie slid into the seat next to Max and flashed him a grin. Her cheeks were pink from the short walk in the cold.

"All set?" Max asked.

"Yep."

He pulled onto the road, and they were on their way. "Have you been to Colorado Springs before?"

"Yeah, a few times. I went to a music festival there a few years ago, and I've been to the Garden of the Gods once or twice. How about you?" Billie bit her lip. "Silly question. You must have been down to oversee the opening of the new restaurant."

“That’s not a silly question. I don’t usually attend restaurant openings, because new locations are mostly far away. Since this one’s closer, I’ve been in person twice now, but more out of interest than anything else. And I’ve only visited Colorado Springs to check in on the restaurant. I probably wouldn’t have made it down otherwise.”

“Really? I thought you said you’ve always lived in Denver?”

“I have.” Max grinned at her. “But I haven’t had a lot of time for exploring.”

“I can see that. Have you been up to Aspen?”

“I went to a conference there.”

Billie chuckled. “I shouldn’t be surprised. I bet you didn’t even do any skiing.”

“To be honest, I’ve never been skiing.”

“What?” Now Billie’s eyes widened in mock horror. “What kind of Coloradoan are you?”

“Clearly, not a very good one.”

“Do you hike?”

“Not really.”

“Rock climb?”

“Not at all.”

“Have you even been rafting?”

“Never.”

Billie threw up her hands. “Come on, they’re going to revoke your Colorado card.”

“I do like the sunshine, if that means anything.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Barely.” Billie looked out the window. “Did you drive down to the Springs the other two times, too?”

“The Springs? Fancy. And yes. We do have a corporate jet and a corporate helicopter, but for such a short trip I prefer to drive myself.”

“What? I could have ridden in a helicopter? I’m heartbroken.” Billie grinned to show that she was joking.

“Next time,” Max said.

“Right.” Billie glanced at him. “Next time.”

But Max knew he’d misspoken. By the time the next nearby branch of Bluebell Diner opened — in Casper, Wyoming in February — he and Billie wouldn’t be seeing each other anymore. Christmas would be over, and they’d both have gone back to their regular lives. The thought of their partnership coming to an end made Max’s heart ache, but it wasn’t worth dwelling on it now.

There was a lull in the conversation, then Billie reached for the radio and a Christmas song came on. She began to hum along. Then she straightened.

“We should play a car game!”

“Like what?” Max smiled at her enthusiasm.

“The predictions game,” Billie suggested. “We both make a prediction of something

that will happen, like how many cows we'll see between the next two mile markers, or if we'll see an out-of-state plate before we reach the next exit. Whoever guesses closest to the correct answer gets to ask the other a question."

"All right. Let's try the one with the cows."

"Great. Since we're still in the suburbs, I'm going to predict that we'll see zero cows in the next mile."

"Then I'll go with one cow — and I'll win if we see any." Max glanced out the window. "There's the mile marker."

For the first half mile, they rolled between apartment buildings and supermarkets, passed a school, and crossed a park. Then Max pointed.

"Look."

Billie followed his gaze. "Come on, that's a picture of a cow on a billboard. It's not even a real cow."

"No one said it had to be a real cow. And that sign has three cows discussing the importance of drinking milk, so I'm definitely in the lead."

"Fine. You're good at this. I can see that your cutting business acumen translates well to children's car games."

"Thank you. I get to ask you a question, right?"

"You do."

Max considered. He had the opportunity to get a few of his questions about Billie

answered, but he didn't want to make her uncomfortable by suggesting anything too personal. Finally, he settled on a softball.

"Why did you start Sweetest Surprise?"

"Oh." Billie looked out the window. "Well, my family... we didn't have a lot of money when we were growing up. My parents worked hard, but it was still difficult raising four kids. And when my dad hurt his back and couldn't work construction anymore, he struggled to find a new job that would take him, so a higher burden fell on my mom. We relied on food banks and charity shops more than a few times to get food to eat and clothes to wear, but that meant that the food we got wasn't always the best, and the clothes we wore often had holes and stains before we got them. My parents always made sure we had something under the Christmas tree, but it wasn't easy.

"All my siblings reacted to that adversity in different ways. My oldest brother, Mark, became a surgeon so that he could support our parents as they got older. David went into construction, like my dad, but he became a manager so that he could help prevent other people from being injured. My little sister became a nurse because she wanted to make sure she'd always have work."

"And you started a charity to help other families like yours," Max finished.

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize that would be such a personal question."

"No, it's all right. I don't mind talking about it. I'm proud of my parents for how hard they worked, even though it was difficult for all of us."

"I can imagine." Max's heart went out to the younger version of Billie who had

worried about where her next meal would come from or whether she would get presents on Christmas morning. More than ever, he wanted to feed her a good meal — even though he knew that couldn't make up for the difficulties of her past. “How are your parents now?”

“Oh, they're great. They're both retired and loving life. They spend a lot of time with their grandchildren. Oh, and my sister is expecting, so there's another grandbaby for them to love on the way.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Congratulations to your sister.” Max glanced at Billie out of the corner of his eye. She was smiling, but there was something a little sad behind her expression. Perhaps it was hard for her to see all her siblings married with children when she was still single — or maybe she was happy on her own. Max didn’t really know.

“Thanks. Shall we try another prediction?”

“Sure. How about we see how many cars pass us on the left in the next mile.”

“Sounds good. I’ll say... five.”

This time, Billie won. After some consideration, she asked Max, “If you didn’t run Bluebell Diner, what would you do?”

“I honestly have no idea. I’ve never even thought about doing anything else.”

“Think about it now.”

“All right. Maybe... maybe I would be a chef.”

“Really?” Billie looked interested. “Do you like to cook?”

“I do. I don’t have a lot of time to make elaborate meals, because I’m mostly at work, but I do love to cook, and my food seems to be edible.”

“That’s very cool. I wish I could cook, but I’m just as likely to leave something half raw as I am to burn it.”

Max opened his mouth to tell Billie that she needed to come over so that he could cook for her, then closed it. Once again, he was veering dangerously close to date territory. He needed to keep things professional — or as professional as they could be when they were playing a car game.

“What’s our next challenge?”

As they played, the scenery outside changed from the suburbs of Denver to rolling plains marked by the occasional gas station or town. A few flakes of snow drifted down from the sky and melted onto the windscreen, which even Max had to admit looked very Christmassy. When they arrived at the Bluebell Diner, there was already a crowd of excited patrons waiting to be seated. Max held out his arm for Billie, who took it, and led them to the front of the line. After a quick ribbon-cutting ceremony, the branch manager let them in with a smile and a few words of welcome.

Inside, the diner was already decorated for Christmas. A large, fragrant Christmas tree decked with white and red baubles stood in the entryway, each table was decorated with a miniature tree, and strands of lights ran around the edges of the room. “Holly Jolly Christmas” played softly in the background.

“For someone who doesn’t like Christmas, your restaurant is very Christmassy,” Billie said to Max in a low voice as a server led them to a small booth by the window.

“People like Christmas,” Max replied with a shrug. He slid into the seat across from Billie.

“Welcome to Bluebell Diner,” the waitress said. She smiled at Max and Billie. “Here are a few menus for you, and I’ll be back in a jiffy to take your drink orders.”

“Thank you,” Max and Billie said in unison. The waitress smiled again, then turned to lead another group of diners to a nearby table. Billie picked up her menu and began

to peruse it. Max tried not to watch her too closely. After a few minutes, she set it down again.

“Everything looks amazing. What do you recommend?”

“Well, I think our breakfasts are a highlight. The Farmer’s Plate is a big hit, and so is the Chocolate Tower, but my personal favorite is the three-by-two.”

“Two pancakes with your choice of toppings, two eggs your way, and two bacon links or sausages, served with hash browns and fruit.” Billie looked up and grinned. “We have a clear winner. I don’t remember the last time I had breakfast for dinner.”

“It’s the best meal of the day,” Max told her. “Next time, you should try the Reuben, though. It’s also great. So is the bagel grilled cheese. And?—”

“Okay, okay.” Billie held up her hands with a laugh. “I’ve already picked something, so you’ve got to stop suggesting more options or I’ll get confused.”

“Sorry.” Max grinned back. “I’m just pleased that you’re here.”

“I’m happy to be here, too. It seems like a lovely restaurant.”

“Thanks. I hoped that if you could come here yourself, you’d see another side to the restaurant business beyond my focus on profit. There are real people who get to enjoy good food because of my work.”

Billie looked up. “I do see that. I know I disparaged your work when we first met, but I can see that this place is special. And people seem really excited to be eating here. I can’t wait to try the food.”

Just then, the waitress reappeared, and Billie and Max gave their drink orders —

coffee for Max, water for Billie — and ordered their food.

“If I drink coffee this late, I’ll never sleep,” Billie said.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“And if I don’t drink coffee, I won’t be able to stay awake for the drive home.” Max looked out the window. “It could be a snowy one.”

Billie followed his gaze. Her eyes widened at the inch-deep blanket of snow on the ground.

“When did that happen?”

“Winter in Colorado,” Max said. “Who’s the real Coloradoan now? You’re so surprised by a little snow.”

“Hey.” Billie glared playfully. “I’m still the real Coloradoan. I just didn’t see the snow falling, that’s all.”

They watched flakes drift from the sky in the light of a streetlight for a few minutes. Christmas music was still playing over the restaurant’s speakers, and Max heard the clatter of cutlery and the chatter of excited voices from the other guests. It was an almost perfect moment.

Then the waitress returned with steaming plates of food, which she slid onto the table. Max watched as Billie inhaled deeply and smiled, then reached for her fork and took a bite. She chewed appreciatively then looked up and caught Max watching her.

“What?”

“Sorry. I want to make sure you like it.”

“I do. It’s very delicious.” She went in for a second bite. “But you need to eat, too.”

“Right.” Max took a bite of his Reuben. “Would you like to try mine?”

“Sure.”

Max cut off a corner of the sandwich and Billie took it. “Mmm, you’re right, this is good. But mine is better. And you can’t have any.” She winked and Max laughed.

“That’s fine; I’ve tried it before.”

“Is there anything on the menu you haven’t tried?”

“Yes, actually. There’s an eggplant parmesan that I’ve never been able to bring myself to try. I’m not a fan of eggplants.”

“Interesting.” Billie looked thoughtful. “Only eggplants, or zucchinis too?”

“I also don’t like zucchinis, but they aren’t on the menu.” Max took another bite. “Do you have any foods you don’t eat?”

“Not really. Since food was sometimes scarce growing up, all of us learned to eat just about anything that was put in front of us and not waste anything.” Billie bit her lip.

“Sorry. I’m just not used to talking about any of this, and now that you know...”

“It’s really fine.” Max’s heart went out to Billie, both for the child she’d been and the woman she was who felt she had to keep secrets. He understood that — he had secrets, too. Max was beyond pleased that Billie had opened up to him, but he didn’t feel ready to share about his own family. Not yet. “You can talk about anything you want with me.”

“Even... Sunshine Sparkle Alpacas?” Billie grinned, clearly ready to change the topic, and Max followed her lead.

“Of course. What else would we even talk about?”

Their conversation meandered back into talking about the gifts and the children. Billie told Max about a few of the kids, and he listened with more interest than he’d expected to have. Perhaps Billie could make any topic sound interesting — or perhaps he was starting to care about the work her charity did.

They finished dinner, thanked the waitstaff, and headed out into the parking lot where they stopped short on the stairs of the restaurant. The parking lot had been covered with at least six inches of fluffy white snow during the hour or two they’d been in the restaurant.

“How is this even possible?” Max asked.

“It’s a Christmas miracle,” Billie suggested, but even she sounded unsure.

“Not so much of a miracle. I don’t think we can drive back to Denver in snow like this. They probably haven’t had time to clear the highways yet.”

“And the snow is still coming down.” Billie tilted her head back to look up at the snowflakes that shone in the parking-lot streetlights. A few flakes caught in her long eyelashes. “What should we do?”

“Well, I see a hotel just across the street.” Max pointed. “What do you say we head over and see if they have a couple of free rooms?”

Billie seemed to hesitate, then nodded. “I don’t suppose we have any other choice. Let’s go.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

They cautiously crossed the snow-covered street, and headed into the hotel's reception. The man behind the counter greeted them with a friendly smile.

"Do you have a reservation?"

"No, unfortunately not. We were supposed to drive back up to Denver, but now we're planning to stay here for the night because of the snow."

"I think I can help you out." The man typed in his computer, then nodded. "You're in luck. We still have one room available."

"Just one?" Max exchanged a glance with Billie, who promptly appeared fascinated by a pamphlet about local hiking destinations that was sitting on the reception counter.

"Yes, sir. All the rooms are filled up, what with the start of the holiday rush. Would you like it? It's two twin beds."

"Billie?"

"Sure," Billie replied, without looking up from her hiking pamphlet.

"All right, we'll take it." As Max handed over his ID and credit card, he tried not to think about what had happened the last time he and Billie had spent the night together. What should have been a professional dinner outing was quickly turning into something very different. At least there were two beds.

The man behind the counter handed over two key cards and pointed them in the direction of their room on the fourth floor. They rode the elevator up mostly in silence, exchanging only a few slightly tense smiles, and quickly found their room. Max scanned the card to let them in, and they both stood in the doorway for a long moment, looking at the small room with the two side-by-side beds. Then, at the same moment, they turned to each other.

“I—” Max said.

“This—” Billie began at the same time. They both laughed a little nervously, and Billie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear that had escaped from her braid. Max fought a strong urge to follow the motion with his own hand. He wanted to take her in his arms again.

“You first,” Max said.

“I just wanted to say that this is a bit of a strange situation, but I hope we can both keep things professional.” She looked up at Max with those big brown eyes, her pink lips slightly parted. Her jacket was unzipped.

“I wanted to say the exact same thing,” Max said quickly. “I hope that this isn’t too uncomfortable.”

“Come on, we’re two adults. We can handle this like adults.” Billie smiled, then shed her jacket, tossed it over the back of the desk chair, and sat on one of the two beds to remove her shoes. “Just because we’re in a hotel room together doesn’t mean that anything will happen.”

“You’re right.” Max followed her lead.

“It’s like a slumber party,” Billie added. Max tried not to think of the last time he and

Billie had had a “slumber party.” Instead, he nodded.

“We can braid each other’s hair and try to contact some ghosts.”

“Is that what you think girls do at slumber parties?” Billie asked. “Not to mention that I don’t think you have enough hair to braid.”

Max smoothed a hand through his short hair. “You’re probably right.”

“Anyway, it’s getting late, and I guess we’ll need to get up early tomorrow to drive back to Denver. Snow or no snow, it’ll still be a workday. I’ll just take a quick shower, and we can turn out the lights.”

“Sounds good.”

While Billie went for her shower, Max turned on the TV and flipped through a few channels. Nothing very interesting was on — at least nothing that could distract him from the fact that Billie was in the next room showering. When she reemerged, she wore one of the hotel robes, and her curls were wet around her face. She smiled at Max and sat down on her bed.

“Anything good on?”

“Not really. I’ll shower too.” Max headed into the bathroom to wash up. When he came back out, Billie had shed the robe and was in bed. As far as Max could tell, she was wearing a white undershirt and not much else. Max decided that he was better off sleeping fully clothed and got into bed in his pants and button-down. Billie gave him a strange look, but didn’t comment.

“Good night, Max.”

“Good night, Billie.” He flipped off the lights, and they lay there in the dark. It was still early, and Max didn’t feel tired at all. Not with Billie so close.

“Max?”

“Yeah.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“There’s something that’s bothering me a little. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Max’s mind went immediately to the night they’d spent together, which was what he couldn’t stop thinking about. “What is it?”

“I don’t think I bought enough gifts for the parents for Christmas,” Billie told him. Max immediately felt like a fool. Of course Billie wasn’t thinking about their night together. She was focused on her work — which Max should be, too. It was inappropriate for him to remember how it had felt to kiss her and hold her in his arms when she was clearly not interested in repeating the experience.

“Hmm, maybe not,” he said instead. “Maybe we can have another shopping trip to pick up a few more things.”

“Good idea. Good thing we still have a week and a half until Christmas.”

“Good thing indeed. All right. Good night.”

“Night.”

But Max lay awake for a long time after that, his mind spinning in circles with thoughts of Billie.

CHAPTER 13

BILLIE

Billie folded a set of pajamas and added them to the pile of donated clothes. Today was laundry and sorting day, a once-a-month event when she washed and went through all the clothes that had been donated. It was always a big job, and she usually had lots of help from her staff, but today she'd decided to do it on her own. Billie didn't feel like talking to anyone, and she needed time to think. She was alone in the center's biggest room with piles of clothes spread on the long table in front of her.

Last night, she and Max had spent the night together. Nothing had happened beyond sleeping in the same room, but still, the memory was strong in Billie's mind. They'd shared a lovely dinner at Max's diner in Colorado Springs, and the snow had forced them to stay in the city overnight. When Billie had found out that they were sharing a room, she'd half considered the idea that it might be fate. Perhaps the universe wanted her and Max to spend one more night together. She'd had visions, very clear visions, of Max pressing her gently against the hotel room wall and kissing her until her knees went weak. Memories of the night they'd spent together had come flooding back, and Billie had known that another night would be even better.

When they'd slept together the first time, she'd been certain that it was nothing but a one-night stand with a man she wasn't all that fond of — and it had still been magical. Now that she knew Max better, now that she respected him and even admired his dedication to his restaurants, it would be even better.

But it still would have been a terrible idea. After all, Max was a major donor. And he wasn't interested in Billie. He'd clearly thought of her as a one-night stand and nothing more, just as she had. After all, he'd seemed relieved and very quick to agree when Billie had told him that she wanted to keep things professional.

Even though being professional was the last thing she wanted.

Billie examined a white shirt with a spaghetti-sauce stain down the front and shook her head. Why did people donate things like this? She tossed it into a pile of unusable

clothes that she'd recycle into rags or crafting material and reached for a small pair of jeans with appliqué flowers on the legs. Better. She folded the jeans neatly and put them on a pile of preschooler clothes.

When they'd gotten back to Denver this morning, Max had dropped her off at home so that she could change, then bid her a polite goodbye. It had all been so... ugh... professional.

Billie almost missed the days when she'd thought that Max was nothing but a self-centered, entitled jerk. Things had been simpler then. She'd known that she needed to keep her distance, which had been easy to do despite his attractiveness. Now that she liked him as a person, it was much harder to ignore her desire to be close to him.

Just then, there was a knock. Billie looked up from a green T-shirt with a T. rex on the front and called out, "Come in." It was probably one of her employees with a question.

"Hi, Billie."

Billie was beyond startled to see Max standing in the doorway. He wore a different suit from the one he'd slept in —why had he slept in his suit, anyway?— and he looked refreshed.

"Hi, Max." Billie frowned at her phone, where she kept her calendar app. "Did we have an appointment?"

"No. Sorry for dropping in." Max looked around at the piles of clothing on the table. "Is this a bad time?"

"No, it's fine. Um, why are you here?" That had come out a little harsh. A traitorous part of Billie's brain suggested that he might be here because he wanted to spend a

little more time with her, but that probably wasn't it.

"I was hoping you might be able to help me." Max crossed to the table and picked up a small pink sweater, which he folded messily. Billie gently took the sweater from his hands and refolded it.

"With what?"

"I overheard one of my employees talking. Apparently, she and her husband are foster parents, and a sibling group of five kids was dropped off at their house last night with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Their social worker is trying to get some clothes from their house, but my employee, Janet, wasn't feeling optimistic. I felt so bad for those kids. It's almost Christmas and they don't have anything. Not clothes — and definitely not presents."

"Max." Billie tilted her head to the side. "Are you overcome with a charitable urge?"

Max chuckled. "Yes, it seems like it. I'd like to get Janet a few things for the kids, but I'm not sure where to start. I was hoping you could help."

"I'd love to. We should start by calling Janet and asking if it's okay for us to help — and finding out a little more about the kids."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Good idea.” Max pointed to her. “I knew I came to you for a reason.”

Billie chuckled. “I’m happy to help. I’m going to finish up here while you give Janet a call.”

“Sounds good.” Max turned away and began to dial as Billie folded a pair of tights. A few minutes later, he was back. “Okay, Janet says she’d love any help we can give. The kids are eleven, eight, five, two, and a baby — the five- and two-year-olds are boys, and the others are girls. They’ll all be home after five if we want to drop anything off, and I have her address.”

“Perfect. Nicely done.” Billie looked down at the table full of donated clothes. “I know where we can start. Let’s see if there’s anything here that’ll fit the kids.”

Within a few minutes, they were able to fill a large plastic bin with three outfits for each child. Billie tossed in a few unopened packs of underwear and socks from her supply closet, then enlisted Max’s help to put the rest of the clothes into the closet.

“What’s next?” Max asked as he slid the last pile of teenager-sized shirts onto the corresponding shelf in the supply closet.

“Let’s swing by the store and pick up a few toys, toiletries, some diapers, and maybe something nice for dinner so that Janet doesn’t have to cook.”

“We can grab something from the restaurant for dinner,” Max suggested.

“Great.” They grinned at each other, and Billie had the warm, pleasant sensation of

being part of a team. Max really had changed from the guy she'd met at the Grateful Gala. That guy would never have gone out of his way to make sure a foster family had what they needed for the holidays — while this guy hadn't hesitated.

"We should get going," Billie added. "It's already two in the afternoon and we have a lot to buy."

"I brought my car, so I can drive." Max held out his arm, and Billie instinctively took it. "Shall we?"

"We shall."

The first stop was the store where they'd purchased Christmas gifts for the kids a few weeks earlier. Max made a beeline for the toy section, where he and Billie picked out a few small gifts for each of the kids. Then Billie led him towards the grocery area.

"Toys are fun, but they also need healthy snacks," she told him.

"That's a good point." Max grinned. "I guess there's still a lot I don't know about kids."

"You're getting better. You picked out age-appropriate toys for all the kids."

"Good for me. So, what kind of snacks should we get?"

"I imagine the foster mom — Janet, right? — will buy most of the snacks. We can just get a few things to get her started — I'm thinking fruit snacks, some crackers, and some fresh fruit."

"How about we get some cereal and milk, too?" Max suggested. "I know we're bringing over dinner, but I can imagine it'll be a scramble to get breakfast ready in

the morning.”

Billie was impressed. “That’s a great idea. Look at you, all responsible and charitable.”

“I’m trying.” Max turned into the cereal aisle, where he grabbed a box of something that looked like miniature cookies. Billie chuckled.

“Or maybe you’re just a kid yourself. I think we should also get some healthier options.”

“Fair point.” But Max still added the miniature cookie cereal to the cart, and Billie didn’t complain. It would be nice for the kids to have some special food when their whole world was falling apart.

They went to the toiletries section next, where Billie picked up a few boxes of diapers and found shampoo, conditioner, and body wash — all kid-friendly.

“How much of your job is just buying diapers?” Max asked as Billie added a third box to the cart.

“A lot,” Billie admitted. “They’re both essential and expensive — and babies go through a lot of them.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun,” Max said.

“I can’t imagine it is, but at least not having to worry about how to afford diapers makes it easier.” Billie added a container of wet wipes and some diaper cream, plus a few canisters of formula.

Once the cart was full, they headed to the checkout, where Max insisted on paying for

everything. They loaded their purchases into his car, then headed to the restaurant. It was almost time to meet Janet at her house, so Billie called ahead to confirm the address and make sure it was still all right for them to come by while Max ran inside to get the food.

“I have grilled cheese, chicken fingers, French fries, and buttered pasta,” he told Billie as he slid back into the car. “They seemed like the most kid-friendly options.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“All good choices. Janet says she’s ready for us to come over and said thank you again.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking her.” Max fastened his seatbelt. “It’s impressive that she’s taking in so many kids right at Christmas. All we’re doing is shopping.”

Billie gave him an approving nod. “That’s a good way of looking at it. But keep in mind, the real heroes are the kids, because they didn’t have any choice in the matter.”

“True.” Max put the car into drive, and they headed towards Janet’s house. “There’s a lot that I just never thought about.”

“It was the same for me when I started working with foster families,” Billie agreed. “My family didn’t have a lot of money, but I was lucky enough to grow up with loving parents who were always able to put us first. Not everyone gets that.”

“True,” Max echoed, and there was an unmistakable sadness in his blue eyes for a fraction of a second.

They arrived at Janet’s house a few minutes later. After parking out front, they each loaded their arms with bags and headed to the front door. A woman around Billie’s age with long, red hair in a bun opened on the first knock. Her eyes widened at the sight of Billie and Max with all their supplies.

“Wow,” she said. “You said you were bringing over a few things, but I didn’t expect this. Thank you so much.”

“There’s no need to thank us,” Max said. “Do you mind if we come in and set everything down?”

“Of course not.” The woman, Janet, opened the door wider to let them in. In the living room, two girls and two boys were playing a game of Sorry. A baby snoozed in a pack n’ play in the corner. At the sight of Billie and Max and the bags, the kids looked up with interest. Billie blinked in surprise as she recognized the oldest girl: Sierra came to the afterschool program at Sweetest Surprise sometimes.

“Sierra, Kate, Jordan, Carter, this is Billie and Max. They’ve brought over a few things for you.”

“Like what?” the oldest girl, Sierra, asked suspiciously. Then she caught sight of Billie. “Miss Billie!”

“Hi, Sierra.” Billie set down the bags and knelt to the girl’s level. “How are you doing?”

“Mom had to go away for a while.” Sierra looked worried. “I was trying to take care of everybody, but it was too hard.”

“Of course, sweetie. You did a wonderful job. And now Janet is here to help.”

“Yeah.” Sierra nodded bravely.

They spent around an hour with the family. Janet insisted they stay to share the food they’d brought over. Luckily, Max had brought plenty for everyone. After dinner, they played with the kids for a little while. Max was a natural with the younger boys, spending quite some time helping them assemble the Hot Wheels set he’d picked out for them and sending cars careening down the long, curved track. Billie rocked the baby for a while, then spent some time talking to Sierra and Kate.

When they left, Janet thanked them again and, once again, Billie and Max waved off her thanks.

In the car, Max turned to Billie. “What sweet kids.”

“I know. The oldest one comes to our afterschool program sometimes.”

“Did you know her family was having trouble?”

“A lot of the families we work with are having trouble in one way or another, but I didn’t know about Sierra’s family in particular.”

“I feel so bad for those kids, living in a new home at Christmastime.”

“I know.” Billie paused. “Speaking of which, Sweetest Surprise has a lot of programs that work with foster kids. If you’d like to keep volunteering after Christmas, maybe you could work with one of them.”

For a moment, she was sure she’d gone too far, and that Max would laugh at her and say that he wasn’t interested in charity after Christmas was over. But, to her surprise, he nodded.

“I think I’d like that.”

“That’s wonderful. And thank you for coming to me when you heard that Janet might need help.”

“Of course. I didn’t consider anyone else. And, to be honest, it felt good to help.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Billie smiled at him. “We played a small role, but it’s nice to think that, because of what we did, we can make things a little easier for that sweet

family.”

“It is.” Max looked at the time on the car’s dashboard. “But now I need to get back to work.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Back to work? It’s well past working hours.”

“Yes, but I was out all afternoon and there’s a lot to do.”

“I can’t really fault you.” Billie grinned sheepishly. “I was thinking of doing a little more work myself.”

“I’ll drop you back at the outreach center, then?”

“Yes, please.”

They listened to Christmas songs as they drove back to the center, where Max bade Billie goodbye and she slid out of the car. Inside, she headed straight to her office and sat down in front of her computer. Max might be a workaholic, but she had the same tendencies. Every moment that she worked meant that things could be a little easier for the kids.

And each moment that she worked meant another moment that she wasn’t replaying every second she’d spent with Max in her mind. Otherwise, she’d just be remembering how he’d said that helping actually felt good, how he’d smiled at her as though they were sharing a secret, how he’d said he still wanted to worktogether after Christmas — and how he’d kissed her, almost a month ago now, when they’d spent the night together.

Billie opened a grant application she’d been writing. It was definitely better to work than to get caught up in her memories.

CHAPTER 14

BILLIE

Several days later, Billie was working on the grant application again when she got a call from Max. Surprised, she answered right away.

“No text?”

“Not today.” There was a smile in Max’s voice.

“How special. So, what’s up?”

“Well, I have two pieces of news for you. The first is that my PR team says that our work together has been a big success so far — though it’s too soon for final results. They’re already talking about making this an annual thing.”

“Really?” Billie’s heart beat a little faster at the thought of working with Max year after year. “What did you say?”

“Of course, I said I’d need to talk to you about it, but I don’t have any objections.”

“Because it feels good to help,” Billie prompted. Grinning, she shifted the phone to her other hand and stood, walking to her window.

“It does. And it’s been nice getting to know you.” There was a pause, then Max added quickly, “But mostly because it’s good publicity.”

“Sure, sure.” Still, Billie’s heart warmed at Max’s words. Good publicity or not, that clearly wasn’t what he’d thought of first. “What’s the other news?”

“Right. Well, in a few days, there’s a big corporate Christmas party for Bluebell Diner. I know, a corporate party is probably the last thing you want to attend, but since Christmas is there too, I thought you might agree to go as my guest.”

Billie’s heart fluttered now. “Oh! Yes, of course. I’d love to.”

“It would be a nice way to thank you for everything you’ve done for me this past month.”

“That’s kind of you, but there’s no need to thank me. You’ve helped a lot, too.”

“Even if that’s true, which I doubt, I’d still like for you to come.”

“I will.” Billie grinned like she’d won the lottery, all alone in her office by the cold pane of the window. “When is this?”

“December nineteenth. It begins at seven. Oh, and it’s dressy.”

“All right.” Billie thought of the skirt and sweater she’d worn to the gala, which was her dressiest outfit. It looked like it’d be making a comeback in a few days.

“Do you mind if I pick you up at your place?”

“Not at all, but won’t that be out of the way for you?”

“No, I don’t mind. See you then.”

“Bye.”

Billie hung up and stood for another moment by the window, just holding the phone and grinning. Max wanted to spend more time with her. Although this wasn’t a date, obviously, she was still thrilled. Even the fact that it was a corporate party didn’t bother her. For all Max’s obsession with profits, his business was doing good work, and she could appreciate that.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Billie called, pivoting away from the window to prepare to greet her guest.

Chloe, one of Billie’s teen volunteers who’d recently gotten into Colorado College on early decision, peered around the door.

“Hey, Billie.”

“Hi, Chloe. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to ask if we have any more of those little pom-poms. I used a bunch of them in an arts-and-crafts project today.”

“Sure, we should have them in the supply closet. If we’re out, you can add them to the list, and I’ll get them in a few days.”

“Thanks!” Chloe turned to leave, and Billie impulsively called after her.

“Hold on, Chloe.”

“Yeah?” The young woman peeked around the door.

“You like fashion, right?”

“Of course. I made this jacket myself.” She stepped back into the office and nodded at a patchwork jacket that looked like it had been sewn together from different materials. It looked very professionally done, and Billie would never have guessed it was homemade.

“So, if I wanted to look nice for a party, what should I wear?”

“Do you have a date?” Chloe’s eyes lit up.

“No, no.” Billie felt herself blushing and moved on quickly. “It’s just a small holiday party with a... friend.”

“It sounds like a date to me.” Chloe grinned mischievously. “And if it is, the important thing is that you wear something that makes you feel comfortable and beautiful. Fashion comes second.”

“Thanks, Chloe.” Billie was impressed by the girl’s maturity. They chatted for a few more minutes before Chloe headed downstairs to go home. Billie stayed in her office. Despite what she’d said to Chloe, and despite what she’d reminded herself just a few minutes ago, the invitation to the party did feel a little bit like a date. More than a little bit. She was looking forward to seeing Max in a non-work setting. Maybe they’d have a chance to talk, even dance. Billie smiled at the prospect.

Surely there was no harm in enjoying a nice evening with a colleague whom she respected. A friend. There could never be anything romantic between them, so perhaps Billie could lean into the imagination that there could be. It wouldn't hurt. Or at least it wouldn't as long as Billie remembered that the real reason she was going was to build a stronger and more professional relationship with a key donor.

That evening, after work, she ate a quick dinner of a boxed sandwich (thinking of Max and his delicious restaurant food as she did) then went out with her sister Jamie to go dress shopping. Chloe was right that Billie should wear something she was comfortable in, but she hadn't said anything against Billie going out and buying that something.

The sisters spent a lovely few hours browsing the stores until Billie found a new dress in a festive green that was just her size. Jamie teased her about going on a date, and Billie responded that she had bigger things to worry about now, like becoming an aunt.

Still, thoughts of Max were never far from her mind.

"Come on," Jamie said as they sat down in a coffee shop, the green dress in a bag at Billie's feet. "You are totally going on a date."

"I am not," Billie said yet again. "It's just a work event with a colleague."

"I know about your work, and this does not seem in character. Come on. I'm married and pregnant. I need a little gossip."

"Fine." Billie sipped her peppermint hot chocolate, enjoying the moment as Jamie grew more and more impatient. "It's really not a date. But do you remember how I told you about the guy who's working with Sweetest Surprise?"

“Max,” Jamie recalled. “The annoying businessman who can’t decorate a tree to save his life.”

“That one.” Billie chuckled. “Although he’s, well, grown on me over the last few weeks. He’s actually been really helpful at Sweetest Surprise and I’ve... enjoyed working with him.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Oh, come on.” Jamie danced a little in her chair, always the excited younger sister. “You like him. This is absolutely a date.”

“No, no.” Billie tried not to smile. “He just invited me to his corporate holiday party. Hundreds of people will be there. I’m sure he’s just being polite.”

“When he sees you in that dress, he’ll forget all about being polite,” Jamie predicted with a knowing smile.

Billie rolled her eyes dismissively, but she couldn’t help feeling a little excited about her evening with Max. Maybe he would be impressed when he saw her in her new dress.

By the time the evening of the nineteenth rolled around, Billie found herself spending a little too long trying on her dress and making sure her hair and makeup looked nice. Perhaps all this was a sign that she should start looking for love once the holidays were over. Clearly, she was craving the thrill of a first date and the spark of new romance — neither of which were going to come from Max. No matter how much a part of her might want that.

When Max sent her a text letting her know he was outside, Billie gave herself one last assessing look in the hallway mirror then grabbed her purse and hurried downstairs. It was time.

CHAPTER 15

MAX

Max sat in his car outside Billie's apartment and tried not to feel nervous.

He was rarely nervous about anything. Even corporate mergers and changing stock prices were rarely cause for anxiety. Yet today, as he waited for Billie to come downstairs, he did feel nervous. He worried that Billie wouldn't enjoy the party and that it had been a mistake to invite her. He worried that he'd forget himself and kiss her, even though he knew that this wasn't a date. He worried that he'd let himself get too close to Billie and that it would be hard to back away after the holidays ended.

He worried that he no longer wanted to back away from Billie.

In a heartbeat, though, all his worries faded away as Billie stepped through the door of her apartment building. She wore a dark green dress made of what looked like velvet that hugged her curves before flaring into a wide skirt ending at her knees. She'd paired the dress with heels and a half-up, half-down hairstyle that left strands of curly brown hair framing her face and grazing her shoulders. She wore a little more makeup than usual, which perfectly brought out her luminous chocolate-brown eyes. As a final touch, a pair of snowflake earrings completed the ensemble.

As she hurried down the steps to the car, Max gave himself a stern reminder that this wasn't a date. He wanted to thank Billie for all she'd done for him over the last month when she'd allowed him to volunteer, even though he hadn't been very good at it in the beginning. That was all. There were no romantic feelings here. He couldn't let there be.

"Hi, Max." Billie slid into the passenger seat and turned to him with a smile. Her cheeks were pink from the cold.

"Hi, Billie. You look lovely today."

"Oh, this?" Billie smoothed the skirt of her dress over her legs. "It's nothing special."

So, where's the Christmas party?"

"At the offices," Max told her. He put the car into drive and merged with the traffic on Billie's street. It was another icy cold December evening, but the skies were clear and there was no sign of Christmas snow in sight. Stars twinkled high above in the inky blackness of the night. "The venue may not be the most exciting, but we always have great food."

"From the diner?" Billie asked.

"Some of it. We actually have a mix of catered and diner food — some people expect fancier fare at the holidays."

"I'll be happy with the diner food. I can't get over the breakfast for dinner I had in Colorado Springs. It was so good."

"I told you." Max grinned at her. "Food is important. You can't just grab a sandwich between meetings."

Billie chuckled. "First, I can't believe that you really never grabbed a sandwich between meetings. You're so busy that you must have. And second, the last few times I've had a quick sandwich, I couldn't help thinking of you saying that exact thing."

"Good. I'm having a positive influence on you."

"Ha. Right. I'm pretty sure we can agree that the positive influence is from me to you."

"Right, because you're so wonderful." Max meant to use a joking tone, but it came out more serious than he'd intended. Billie glanced at him with those big brown eyes, then looked away. Quickly, Max searched for another, safer topic. "What are your

plans for the holidays?”

“Well, Christmas Eve is my big delivery window, so I’ll spend most of the day driving around, delivering gifts and food to the families on the list. Christmas Day is usually quieter. My family has our big Christmas celebration on the twenty-third, so that all my siblings can celebrate in their small families, but I usually go over to my sister’s house on Christmas Day for a little while. What are your plans? Don’t tell me you’ll be working.”

“I’ll probably be working.” Max grinned sheepishly. “If you think I’m not into the holidays, you should meet my father. My parents aren’t exactly the type that’ll suggest a big family gathering.”

“Right. You told me your parents went somewhere in the Caribbean for Thanksgiving. Are they planning another overseas vacation?”

“No, I think they’ll be around here. I might meet them for dinner or something on Christmas, but it won’t be any big celebration.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Billie reached into her purse and withdrew a small, wrapped gift. Max glanced at it with interest.

“What’s that?”

“I know it’s silly, but I kind of got you a small Christmas present. I brought it along tonight because I wasn’t sure if I’d see you again before Christmas.”

“Really?” Max’s heart sank. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“That’s fine. It’s not like we planned to exchange gifts. And anyway, gift-giving isn’t about receiving something back.”

Max pulled into the office’s parking lot and found his reserved spot. Once they were stopped, Billie handed over the present. It was wrapped in reindeer wrapping paper and topped with a bright red bow.

“I definitely saw you wrap gifts for the kids in this.”

“I wasn’t going to go out and buy wrapping paper just for you.” Billie rolled her eyes. “Come on. Open it.”

Max didn’t want to. Whatever Billie said, gifts created expectations and obligations. He’d feel like he needed to give her a gift, too, especially if she’d spent money that she didn’t have on a present for him. But it would be rude not to open the gift, so he threaded his finger under the wrapping paper and pulled it off.

As soon as he saw what was inside, he burst into laughter.

The gift was a small remote-controlled plane, just like the one Max had admired at

the store. It didn't look particularly fancy or expensive, but it was exactly the kind Max would have fallen head-over-heels for as a child.

"I know it isn't much," Billie said. Max looked up to see that she wore an anxious expression. "I just thought, since you always wanted one?—"

"I love it. Thank you so much, Billie. It's just the kind I would have liked as a child." He felt a sudden need to kiss her, but settled for a quick, awkward hug across their seats.

"I'm glad you like it." Billie's voice was soft in his ear. He smelled that beautiful pepperminty scent again and inhaled.

"I'm definitely going to fly it after the party." Max sat back, releasing Billie.

"You don't have to. I know it's a little silly."

"No way. I absolutely am." Max set the plane on the back seat. "Maybe we can even fly it together."

"I'd like that." They smiled at each other until Max caught sight of the time on the car's clock.

"Oh, we'd better get going. People will be wondering where I am."

"Of course — the CEO is too important to go missing." Billie winked. "Let's go."

They got out of the car, and Max led the way to the elevators that would bring them up to the top floor, where the party was taking place. Billie looked a little nervous, but she was still smiling.

When the elevator doors opened, they stepped out into a room full of Christmas decorations, excited chatter, and the delicious smell of food. A string quartet played “White Christmas” in the far corner, a Christmas tree covered in hundreds of tiny white lights sparkling beside them. A few bows of mistletoe hung from the ceiling, which Billie did her best to ignore — along with any thoughts of kissing they sparked.

“Oh, you must hate this,” Billie whispered to Max as they made their way into the room. “This is so Christmassy.”

“It’s terrible, but people like it,” Max replied in a joking whisper. In truth, he didn’t hate the Christmas party as much as he had in past years. He could understand why people enjoyed the lights and the music and being with people they cared about. Max could even understand why gift-giving might be fun.

“Max, there you are.” Stephanie hurried over, then froze as she caught sight of Billie. “You’ve brought a guest.”

“I thought it was only fair to invite Billie after she’s been such a gracious host this month,” Max replied smoothly.

“Wonderful. That will make for some great photos. Billie, nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you, too.” Billie smiled politely.

“I just wanted to remind you to visit the photo booth,” Stephanie said, gesturing to a small photo booth that had been set up in the corner. “A few silly photos would be great publicity.”

“Will do.”

Job done, Stephanie departed. Max turned to Billie. “Silly photos?”

“Yes, please.”

Max led the way to the photo booth, where they waited in line for a few minutes before stepping inside. Assorted Christmas-themed props, from Santa hats to giant candy canes to headbands with Christmas trees on them, lined shelves behind the camera. Billie immediately grabbed a reindeer antler headband for herself, then tossed Max a giant gift. Smiling for the camera, they posed.

“A little closer,” the photographer suggested. Max took a step towards Billie, their shoulders brushing, and lifted the gift again. The camera flashed. “Now a silly one.”

Billie stuck out her tongue, and Max pulled a face. When the camera flashed, they both began to laugh, which the photographer captured with another flash. Billie and Max thanked him on the way out.

“That was great.” Billie was beaming. “What’s next?”

“Max!” A tall, tuxedo-clad man threaded through the crowd towards them. “I heard you brought a date, so I had to come over and see for myself.”

“Not a date,” Max said quickly. “Billie, this is Bradley Anderson, my head of sales. Bradley, this is Billie Stone. She runs a charity for underprivileged children here in Denver, and she’s allowed me to volunteer with her this holiday season.”

“Volunteer?” Bradley’s eyes widened. “That’s almost more surprising than a date.” He held out a hand to Billie. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“Tell me, what was it like having Max here volunteer for you?” Bradley leaned forward. “I can’t imagine he was very excited to take time away from work.”

“Maybe not, but he did a wonderful job.” Billie smiled. “It was a pleasure to work with him.”

“Really?” Bradley looked as surprised as Max felt. He’d half-expected Billie to complain, at least jokingly, about him, but she’d praised him instead.

“Really.” Billie nodded. “He worked hard, he was great with the kids, and he really helped my organization. Maybe you’d like to try volunteering with us next.”

Bradley chuckled. “Volunteering isn’t for me, but thanks. Max, it was great to see you.”

“You too, Bradley.” They shook hands before Bradley melted back into the crowd. Max turned to Billie.

“You didn’t have to be so complimentary.”

“I meant it. You really did do a wonderful job.” She leaned closer. “Except for the whole tree fiasco.”

“Right. Except for that. Can I interest you in something to eat?”

“Please.”

They wove towards the food, which was laid out on a buffet table. Nearby, several tables had been set up where people could sit and eat. Max and Billie each loaded a

plate before finding a pair of free seats. Max was pleased to see that Billie chose mostly food from the diner.

“Billie?”

They both turned to see Janet, now wearing a flattering black dress and sparkly earrings, sitting across the table from them.

“Janet!” Billie smiled. “How are you doing? How are the kids?”

“They’re great. The things you brought over have been an absolute lifesaver. I got to spend the first few days bonding with the kids instead of running around trying to cook and buy clothes and supplies.”

“That’s wonderful.” Billie exchanged a grin with Max. “I’m so glad we could help.”

“You really did. I’m glad I ran into you. I can’t stay long tonight — my husband is at home looking after the kids and I’m excited to get back to them, but I wanted to drop by.”

“I’m glad we ran into each other, too.”

Another woman from the programming team leaned over. “What’s this you’re talking about?”

“Well, Max here had the idea to help Janet get a few supplies for her foster kids,” Billie told her.

“More than a few supplies,” Janet put in.

“Really?” The woman looked surprised. “Wow. I’m impressed.”

For the next half an hour or so, Max sat back in awe as Billie sang his praises. Whenever anyone asked about his work with her, she told them that he’d done a wonderful job, just as she’d told Bradley. Max was touched. Whether he’d done a good job or not, it was sweet that Billie wanted him to look good in front of his employees. Whenever possible, he put in a comment about how it was Billie’s organization that did the hard work, and that Billie was the one who’d been truly wonderful.

It was the best Christmas party Max had been to, perhaps in his life.

Until, towards the end of the evening, Jim Grayson, Max’s father and the former CEO, showed up.

CHAPTER 16

BILLIE

Billie was enjoying the Christmas party more than she’d expected to. Max’s employees and partners were, by and large, lovely. More than a few were curious about how the billionaire had held up while working for a charity, and Billie was pleased to report the truth: that Max had been an asset over the last month. A few were interested in Billie’s charity, so she shared a little about the work they did and slipped in the fact that there were always opportunities for volunteering or donating.

As well as the company, the food was delicious, the atmosphere was festive, and

everything felt very merry. It was fun to see Max in his usual environment, too. Instead of being the harsh, profit-oriented boss she might have expected a month ago, he was friendly and seemed to care about his employees' lives. He asked after children and spouses, commented on vacation pictures, and complimented a few people on particularly good work they'd done this quarter.

Around nine, though, another guest arrived. As soon as he stepped through the doors, the atmosphere changed. The chatter died down to faint whispers and people seemed to grow stiffer.

Billie looked around for the person responsible for this change and spotted an older man in a neatly tailored suit. He had gray hair and a few wrinkles, and he looked familiar, somehow, though Billie couldn't quite place him.

"Enjoying the party?" he asked one woman. She nodded. "Nowadays, everyone expects a party just for doing their jobs. Am I right?" He grinned at the woman and chuckled, but Billie got the feeling he was serious.

Billie turned to Max to ask who this man was, only to see that Max looked mortified. Realization dawned. With those blue eyes, that strong jaw, and the slope of the nose, the newcomer looked a lot like Max — which was why she'd thought he seemed familiar.

"Is that your father?" Billie asked in a low voice.

"Yes."

Just then, the man caught sight of Max and made a beeline towards their table.

"Son," he boomed. "How are our profits looking this quarter?"

“Hi, Dad.” For a moment, Max sounded like a young boy who’d been caught stealing cookies from the kitchen. He quickly regained his usual composure, though. “How nice of you to drop by. This is Billie Stone, who I’ve been working with this month on a charity project. Billie, this is my father, Jim Grayson, the founder and former CEO of Bluebell Diner.”

“It’s lovely to meet you.” Billie stood and extended her hand to shake. Jim took it.

“So, charity?” he asked.

“Yes. We help underprivileged children in the Denver area with afterschool programs, food support, and gifts at Christmas, among other things.”

“And my son has been working with you,” Jim added.

“He’s been quite an asset,” Billie told him. “I’ve really appreciated his generosity.”

“Generosity.” Jim scoffed. “I can see why he’d be interested in throwing our profits down a black hole when a woman as pretty as you is involved.”

“Dad.” Max was on his feet in an instant. “I’m happy to have you join the party, but you won’t say anything like that about anyone’s work.”

“Understood.” Jim threw his hands up as though Max was asking something deeply unreasonable of him. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I was only joking.”

“No offense taken,” Billie said, although she was stinging a little.

“Now, circling back to profits.” Jim pulled out a chair and sat beside Max. “How are we doing this quarter?”

“Very well,” Max said. He rattled off a few numbers that made Billie’s eyes widen, though Jim didn’t seem all that impressed. “But let’s not get too caught up in the profits. It’s supposed to be a festive time of the year.”

“Right. Well, I’ll go catch up with some old acquaintances. I saw Carter around here somewhere.” Jim headed off towards a group on the far side of the room. In the distance, Billie heard him ask someone else about a particular revenue number. The man replied with a few specifics, and Jim chuckled.

“Well, maybe you should be working instead of partying, then!” He let out a “ha” at the end to mark the comment as a joke, but Billie was almost certain that he hadn’t been joking at all. She couldn’t help thinking that Jim Grayson was acting like a real Scrooge.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

In that moment, Billie understood a little more about why Max was the way he was. Of course he cared about profits and didn't believe in charity — because his father held those beliefs as well. Yet, while Max clearly wanted the best for his employees, Jim seemed to prioritize the bottom line over anything else.

Slowly, the room filled with quiet chatter again, but there was an anxious undertone behind the murmur of voices. A few people looked thrilled to see Jim Grayson, but most seemed on edge around him. Billie could understand why.

“Sorry about that,” Max said in a low voice.

“Don't worry.” Billie smiled at him. “It was nice to meet your father.”

“That's kind of you to say, but we both know it wasn't. He insulted you!”

“A few weeks ago, you might have said the same thing,” Billie pointed out. Max froze, then nodded slowly.

“I guess you're right. Sorry, Billie.”

“Stop apologizing.” She got to her feet and held out a hand. “I see a balcony over that way. Let's go get a bit of fresh air.”

Max let her lead him across the room, nodding to a few people as they went, and onto the balcony. No one else was out in the chill December air. Billie strode to the railing that overlooked the city below. Christmas lights and streetlights illuminated the dark night and, far overhead, Billie could make out a few stars. It was quiet out here, away

from the Christmas music and the murmur of conversation, and Billie breathed in the peace and the beautiful view.

Max came to join her by the railing, his hand resting only inches from hers.

“Are you cold?”

“A little, but I’m okay. We just can’t stay out too long.”

“I really am sorry about my father.” Max let out a puff of air that formed a cloud in front of his mouth before dissipating. “I care about business doing well, but I’d never suggest that people go back to work instead of celebrating. Or say that they feel like they need a party just for doing their jobs.” He shook his head. “My father’s always been like that. Anything apart from work was seen as not good enough. I spent my childhood studying and learning about Bluebell’s business model and even working as a waiter once I was older, but it was never good enough, either.”

“I’m sorry.” Billie put her hand on Max’s. “That sounds so difficult.”

“It was.” Max glanced at her, his blue eyes unreadable. “I don’t mean to complain.”

“Please, complain away.” Billie swept a hand across the cityscape in front of them.

“No one can hear but us, so vent all you want to.”

“Thank you. It’s just... I love my father. Of course I do. And in many ways, he raised me to be a hard worker with a strong business sense. But he also raised me to feel like I was never doing enough. When I brought home an A on a test, he’d ask about extra credit. When I started working for Bluebell, he expected me to come in on weekends and evenings and give up my whole life apart from work. When I have record high profits and great stock prices, he asks me how I’m planning to improve next quarter. And whenever I do something like throw a Christmas party for my staff, he seems

disappointed.”

“Hey.” Billie nudged Max with her shoulder. “Even from this very short interaction, I can see that your father has unreasonable expectations. But that doesn’t mean that you have to meet them — or that you even have to try. I’ve seen how good your heart really is. I’ve seen how considerate you are. Maybe, instead of trying to follow in your father’s footsteps and always feeling like you’re falling short, it’s time to pave your own path.”

“Maybe.” Max stared out over the sleeping city. “You make a good point about creating my own path, but all I’ve ever wanted is to make my father proud.”

“He should be proud of you now.” Billie squeezed his hand. “Look at everything you’ve done here. You’re a fantastic CEO. You clearly care about the company, about your employees, and about your customers. And now, you’re even giving back to the community. If your father can’t see how amazing you are already, I doubt there’s anything you can do to change how he feels about you.”

“I just always hope that if I’m impressive enough, he’ll finally believe in me.” Max wrinkled his nose as he said it, but Billie admired him even more for admitting all this.

“And I think it’s far more impressive to create your own way. Getting what you want without treading on other people is much harder, and much better.” Billie turned to Max. “At first, I didn’t see how amazing you really are. We seemed to disagree on everything. But the better I know you, the more I see how similar we really are. We both just want the best for the people and organizations we care about.” She took both his hands in hers. “And that’s something to be proud of.”

“You’re right.” Max looked down at Billie. “Thank you. That really means a lot.”

“Anytime.” Billie tilted her head back until she could meet Max’s eyes. Suddenly, she realized how close they were. They were close enough that Billie could smell Max’s shaving-cream scent and see the curve of his eyelashes. Heat radiated from him, protecting her against the cold night. Their hands were entwined as they looked at each other, wordlessly acknowledging the power of this moment.

Everything else seemed to fall away. There was no more Christmas party, no more Jim Grayson, no more city of Denver, no more charity, no more anything. There was only the two of them.

“It’s snowing,” Max said, his voice low. He was right. Broad, white flakes drifted from the sky above, landing on Max’s shoulders and catching on the top of his hair.

“It’s beautiful,” Billie said.

“You’re beautiful.”

And then they were kissing. Billie didn’t remember making a conscious decision to rise onto her tiptoes and put her arms around Max’s shoulders, but she must have. Max’s lips were warm and soft and tasted slightly of the hot apple cider they’d both been drinking over dinner. His strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer until there was no space left between them.

This kiss was different from the kisses they’d shared the first night they’d met. Then, everything had been fueled by attraction and the giddy feeling of seizing a moment in time. Now, the attraction was magnified by the real affection Billie felt for Max and the connection they’d built over the last month. Billie never wanted this moment to end.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

After what felt like a few minutes, but could easily have been seconds or hours, they drew apart. Max's arms were still wrapped around Billie's waist and her hands were still on his shoulders. They grinned at each other. Billie felt dizzy from the magic of the kiss.

"I didn't expect that," she said.

"You didn't? I've barely thought of anything else since the first moment we met."

"Really?" Billie melted against him, her dizziness increasing. "I may have imagined this a few times myself. I just didn't think we'd actually kiss again."

"I wasn't sure, either. But now that we have, I think we should keep kissing."

"I like that idea." Billie glanced around the deserted balcony. "On the other hand, it is a little chilly out here, and people might be wondering where you went."

"Good point. But perhaps later..."

"Yes. Later." Billie smiled at him. She wanted nothing more than to kiss Max again, preferably as often as possible. And hopefully, those kisses would lead to another night together... maybe even more than that.

With a regretful expression, Max released Billie. She stepped back — and stumbled, her dizziness hitting again. Max steadied her with a hand on her elbow. His eyes narrowed with concern.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I just feel a bit lightheaded.” Billie made a face. Perhaps the dizziness hadn’t been from the magic of the kiss at all, but rather from an oncoming cold. She often got a bit sick around the holiday season because of the cold weather and the stress of her work. Still, this was terrible timing.

“Do you want to sit down? Should I get you some water?”

“I’m really fine.” Billie waved off his concern. “But maybe I should head home and lie down for a bit.”

“Of course. I can drive you.”

“No, please stay. This is your party, and you should enjoy it. Plus, your employees will want to see you. I can just take a cab.”

“All right.” Max looked a little concerned, but he nodded his assent. “I’ll call you one. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m sure.” Hopefully, a nice rest and some hot tea would nip any possible illness in the bud.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 17

MAX

As Max held out his arm to walk Billie downstairs, he couldn’t help feeling a little apprehensive. The kiss they’d shared had been amazing, even better than he’d

imagined. Holding Billie in his arms again had felt magical. Her soft lips, the press of her body against his, that peppermint smell... it had all been perfect.

Yet now she wasn't feeling well. It was terrible timing — unless it wasn't. Perhaps the kiss had made Billie uncomfortable, and she'd decided to create a reason to leave early. The last thing Max wanted was to make Billie uncomfortable.

She took his arm and smiled up at him. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes."

"You look a little worried."

"I just want to make sure you're all right." They walked back inside. "Are you sure you don't need to go to the doctor?"

"Definitely not." Billie shook her head, then winced. "I just need to rest and have some fluids. I'm sure I'll be fine by tomorrow."

"Okay." They crossed the room, nodding and greeting a few people as they passed. By the elevator bank, Max pressed the button to call the elevator. "I just wanted to say, if anything about tonight made you uncomfortable..."

"Not at all." Billie fixed those beautiful brown eyes on Max's. "I've had a wonderful evening. And I hope we can continue our conversation as soon as I'm feeling better."

"Absolutely." They stepped into the elevator, which whisked them downwards. They waited in the lobby for a few minutes until the cab arrived, then Max walked Billie out and opened the car door for her. "Text me when you get home, all right?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Of course. Enjoy the party and don’t let your inner Scrooge take over.”

“I’ll do my best.” Max winked at her, then gently shut the door and tapped the roof of the cab. It drove away, leaving Max alone on the sidewalk. He stood in the cold for a moment, watching the cab disappear down the street. Hopefully, Billie would feel better shortly. Hopefully, she really did want to continue their conversation the next day.

Because now that Max had kissed Billie again, now that it seemed there could be a real connection between them, he didn’t think he could let her go. The same problems were still there. He wasn’t sure how to manage a relationship while being the best CEO for Bluebell Diner that he could be. He wasn’t sure how to love a woman as wonderful as Billie. Yet Max was confident that, if she cared about him, too, they could figure everything out together.

She’d been right. It was time to pave his own path, instead of following in his father’s footsteps, and Max was certain that Billie was part of his path. Maybe, with her by his side, he could begin to imagine a new kind of future — one where he wasn’t always waiting for his father’s approval. One where he could enjoy the holidays as much as she did. One where he could care for, even love, Billie without hesitation.

Whistling to himself, Max went back inside and headed up to the party. He was ready for a festive evening.

Unfortunately, the scene that greeted him when he reemerged into the office space was hardly festive. Jim Grayson was standing in the center of the room with Stephanie, their arms crossed as they faced off against each other. Several of Max’s

employees and partners had stopped to see what was happening.

“PR,” Jim scoffed. “In my day, hard work was enough — we didn’t have to make it look like we were doing things.”

“That’s not what PR is,” Stephanie replied calmly. “It’s about showcasing the things that make a company great.”

“Well, it seems to be about pouring money into charity and sacrificing your CEO’s time to — what — grocery-shop and decorate trees?” Jim scoffed. “No wonder this quarter saw lower profits than the last.”

“The amount we donated to the charity was a fraction of a percent of quarterly earnings,” Stephanie replied. “And Max didn’t give any time he didn’t have to volunteering.”

As Max listened to them argue, a strange feeling came over him. He’d been deeply against Stephanie’s suggestion to volunteer with Billie’s charity when she’d first brought it up. And he’d been resentful of her insistence on posing for photos and her seeming lack of interest in Billie’s cause. Yet now, he felt defensive of her and her work. Had he been as bad as his father when he’d talked about how neither charity nor PR were very useful?

Max stepped between Stephanie and Jim.

“What are we discussing?” he asked.

“Mr. Grayson and I were discussing the ins and outs of PR,” Stephanie replied smoothly. Max admired her ability to spin the conversation into something positive.

“That sounds interesting,” Max said. “Stephanie, I’m not sure I mentioned it, but I

appreciate you encouraging me to pursue charity work this holiday season. Working with Billie has been very positive for me and for the company.”

Stephanie looked a little surprised, but she smiled. “Thank you, Max.”

“And now you too, huh?” Jim asked Max. “You’d rather spend your time volunteering with a beautiful woman than putting in an honest day’s work.”

Retorts bubbled in Max’s chest, but he didn’t voice any of them. This was already turning into a scene, so the best thing to do was shut it down as quickly as possible.

“Dad, it’s starting to get late,” Max said calmly. “You might want to head home.”

Jim’s eyes widened. “Are you kicking me out?”

“Not at all. But I do think it’s time for you to go.”

“Fine.” Jim stomped out of the room, leaving all eyes on Max. He gave everyone a reassuring smile.

“Shall we continue with the party?” he asked. “I think it’s about time for dessert.”

Slowly, everyone returned to talking and eating. The atmosphere in the room eased now that Jim was gone. Stephanie thanked Max once again, then drifted off to join a few PR colleagues. Although Max and Stephanie would probably never be friends, Max’s time with Billie had taught him to appreciate the value of everyone’s work, even if it was different from what he’d do.

Speaking of Billie... Max pulled out his phone and saw that she’d sent him a text.

Home safe. Have a nice evening. XO

Max's heart warmed at the kiss and hug at the end of the sentence. It might not mean anything, but knowing Billie, it also might. More surprising was the fact that he wanted it to mean something. He sent Billie a quick text back.

Glad to hear it. Hope you feel better soon.

After a moment's hesitation, he added his own X and O to the end of the sentence before pressing send. Then he put his phone away and went to mingle with the other partygoers.

It wasn't quite as fun or as festive without Billie by his side, but Max still enjoyed himself. He chatted with employees, strategized with partners, ate several Christmas cookies, and watched as some brave (or possibly inebriated) souls danced to the string quartet's Christmas music. When the evening rolled down and everyone began to head home, he stayed behind to help the caterers clean up before making his way back to his apartment.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

Max had always loved his apartment. It was large, modern, and comfortable, with wide windows that looked out over the Chicago cityscape, and it had every modern appliance. Yet today, as Max tossed his keys into the bowl and toed off his shoes, he couldn't help feeling like something was missing. He wished he had a Christmas tree, or even a sprig of mistletoe, to bring in a little holiday cheer.

Then, with an excited jolt, he realized that he did have something Christmassy — the plane Billie had given him as a gift. He ran back out to his car to grab it, then spent an enjoyable half an hour flying the plane around his lofted living room. If only Billie could have been here, too.

Max was going to need to get her a Christmas gift as well. Not because he felt an obligation to give one — she'd clearly given him the plane simply because she thought he'd enjoy it rather than because she wanted something in return. No, Max wanted to give her a present because he wanted her to feel the same warm happiness he felt on this cold December night, knowing that Billie had thought about him and that she cared about him.

By the time Max had taken a quick shower and climbed into bed, he had the perfect gift in mind. He'd just need to go out and buy it the next day. Better yet, getting a gift would give him a good excuse to see Billie again as soon as possible.

He was still in a good mood when he drifted off to sleep, despite the altercation with his father. This was already turning into the best Christmas he'd had, and it wasn't even Christmas Day yet.

BILLIE

Billie woke the morning after the Christmas party feeling worse than she'd expected. Her headache was gone, but she still felt tired and a little dizzy. Worse, when she got out of bed, she felt a wave of nausea that sent her running to the bathroom.

A little water and some plain crackers later, Billie felt better, but she was still annoyed. She hated being sick. Worse, the timing of this was terrible. Not only did she have a lot left to do before Christmas and the gift delivery, but she also wanted to see Max again as soon as possible after their kiss the night before.

Billie smiled at the memory of Max's lips on hers and his strong arms around her. Maybe she was wrong, but it felt like that kiss had meant something. Something big. It had felt like the beginning of something and, from the way he'd looked at her, Billie suspected that Max felt the same way.

Yet now, Billie was sick, and she couldn't very well track Max down and confess her feelings when she was nauseated and dizzy. Billie crunched another cracker in annoyance. At least the sustenance seemed to have done her good, because the nausea was passing. For now.

Billie reached for her laptop and cued up an old sitcom that she liked to watch during her rare downtime. As she listened to the canned laughter and watched the shenanigans of the main characters, she felt herself relaxing back onto the couch. Perhaps she'd eaten something bad that had made her stomach hurt. And the dizziness and headache could easily be explained by PMS. Billie often got minor headaches and felt quite emotional before her period — and sometimes she was even nauseated.

She absently reached for her phone and opened the period-tracking app that she used. If her period was due to arrive in the next few days, she could relax a little knowing

that her symptoms would soon pass. Billie scrolled back to the date of her last period... and back... and back.

Her heart almost stopped as she realized that she hadn't had a period since early November. It was now December twentieth, almost six weeks later.

She bit her lip. The most likely explanation was that her period was delayed due to the stress of preparing all the gifts for the holiday delivery. After all, she'd only spent one night with Max, and it had been almost a month ago.

Almost a month ago. Billie sat up straighter. That would mean that they'd spent the night together right around the time she was ovulating and, although they'd used protection, no method was a hundred percent effective. Billie looked down at her stomach as though a baby bump might have already started to grow. Then she closed her laptop, got to her feet, and changed into a pair of sweatpants and her winter coat.

The nearest convenience store was a short walk away. Billie walked as quickly as she could, though she still felt a little dizzy. In the back of the store, she located a row of pregnancy tests and selected one more or less at random. At the checkout counter, she pretended to be deeply involved in choosing a candy bar while the cashier rang her up.

Billie hurried back home, where she went straight to the bathroom and did the test. Her heart still racing, she set a timer on her phone for two minutes and leaned against the counter, trying to take deep breaths.

This was going to be fine. In fact, though she hesitated to admit it, some part of her hoped that the test would be positive. She'd always wanted to be a mother, and the idea of having a baby was appealing. Still, she also loved her work and was extremely busy, which didn't leave a lot of room for being the kind of involved mother she'd want to be. And Billie knew that a pregnancy would throw a wrench

into whatever relationship she was building with Max. He wouldn't want to be a father.

Or would he? He'd been good with the kids, and he'd talked about perhaps wanting children someday. Billie drummed her fingers on the counter. No, there was no way to predict how Max would react. He loved his work, and he hadn't seemed interested in a romantic relationship until that kiss yesterday. Being a father would probably seem like too much for him.

And even if?—

Beep, beep, beep.

Billie swept away the timer on her phone and flipped the pregnancy test. She stared at it for a long moment, hardly able to believe her eyes. Even though she knew that pregnancy tests weren't always accurate, she was sure that this one was.

She was pregnant.

A mix of worry and joy swept through her. Worry about how Max would react and about how she would make time to raise a child when she was already incredibly busy. Yet also joy at the fact that a new life was growing inside her, a life that was equal parts her and Max. A life that would soon be a baby who she would hold in her arms and sing to sleep. Then a toddler who she would teach to ride a tricycle and read picture books with. Then a preschooler, curious and bright, who would hold her hand and chatter happily on the way home from school.

Billie had spent a lot of time with kids, so she knew what she was getting into better than most. She knew that being a mother was an incredible joy, despite having its hard moments. And she knew that she would love this baby more than anything or anyone else in the world. Already, she felt protective of the whisper of a child just

starting to grow inside her.

Still, she couldn't banish her worries, either. Billie bit her lip. What if Max didn't want any part in this child's life? Yet she'd also seen the good man he could be. Maybe he would be as excited as she was at the thought of a baby.

Billie reached for her phone and opened her chat with Max. The last message was from him, wishing her a good night of sleep. Taking a deep breath, Billie tapped out a message.

Hey, Max, are you busy today? I'd like to meet.

She read the message several times before pressing send. Almost immediately, Max replied.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

I'd love to meet. Shall I bring over some lunch?

Perfect, Billie replied. It would be better to meet at her apartment, where they could have privacy for the looming conversation, than to try to talk in a restaurant or other public place.

Billie spent the rest of the morning cleaning her apartment, taking a shower, and changing into a pair of jeans and a sweater with a reindeer on the front. Vaguely, she considered dressing up but decided against it. She'd rather be comfortable for the conversation they needed to have.

At around twelve thirty, the intercom rang. Billie buzzed Max in, then waited, her heart pounding. Please, let him take this well.

There was a knock on the door. Billie opened it to reveal Max on the other side in his usual slacks and a button-down shirt under his jacket. In one hand, he held a takeout bag that smelled amazing. Perhaps Billie's nausea really was gone for good.

"Hi, Billie." He smiled at her. "You look nice."

Billie raised her eyebrows and looked down at her reindeer sweater. "That's kind, but I'm not sure I believe it."

"You should. You always look nice." At Billie's invitation, Max came inside and handed her the bag of takeout so that he could remove his shoes and jacket. Billie still felt nervous, but the sight of Max's familiar face relaxed her a little. She set the takeout bag on the table and began to unpack its contents.

“I realized I haven’t been inside your home since the first night we met,” Max said.

Billie bit her lip. That was as good an opening as any.

“True. That was about a month ago now.”

“That’s hard to believe. I feel like I’ve known you longer than that.”

“Me too.” Billie grabbed a pair of plates from the kitchen cupboard and set the table.

“Actually, before we eat, we’d better talk.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Max crossed the room to Billie. “First, are you feeling all right?”

“Yes, I feel much better today.”

“Good.” Max took her hands. “Billie, I really like you. This last month together has meant a lot to me. And I think that we should?—”

Billie bit her lip. “Hold on. I should maybe talk first.”

“Oh.” Max’s face shuttered.

“No, not because I disagree. I, um, I like you a lot, too. But I do have something to add — something that might come as a bit of a shock.”

“All right. What’s up?”

“Well, you remember how we spent the night together.”

“I do.” Max smiled.

“Well, it’s been a month now, and I... I haven’t gotten my period. Plus, I wasn’t feeling well last night or this morning.” Billie hesitated. “So, I went and got a test.”

“A test.” Max’s face was unreadable now.

“A pregnancy test.” Billie bit her lip. “I’m pregnant.”

Max stared at her for a long moment. His hands released hers, dropping by his side as he looked at her. Billie’s heart rate raced again as the tension built. She had no idea what Max was going to say, and that realization terrified her. For all that he had a good heart, for all that he was a good guy, he was still concerned with his business over anything else. Maybe he was going to reject her and their child.

“Are you sure?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yes.” Billie nodded. “Apart from the test, I’ve definitely had some symptoms, although I didn’t realize it until this morning.”

“We used protection.” It wasn’t a question.

“We did, but no protection is a hundred percent.” Billie bit her lip. “I know this comes as a surprise?—”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“A surprise?” Max pivoted away from her with a derisive sound that cut straight through Billie’s chest and into her heart. “You’ve got that right.”

Billie opened her mouth to apologize, then shut it. The pregnancy was no more her fault than Max’s, and she wasn’t about to say she was sorry about the baby. The baby was a Christmas miracle, even if the timing wasn’t ideal.

“I know,” Billie said instead. “I was shocked, too. But after I had a little time to think about it?—”

“How long have you known?”

“I just found out this morning. Come on, Max.” She reached for him. “I know we didn’t plan this, and the timing isn’t great, but can’t this be a good thing?”

“Billie.” Max stepped back, out of her reach. “Maybe for you it can be, but I can’t be a father. I can’t. Not now, probably not ever.”

Billie felt his words as another blow to her heart. “What does that mean? You are going to be a father, whether you’re ready or not.”

“It means I’ll support you and the baby,” Max said. “Anything you need, you’ll have. I can provide child support, pay for the best schools, anything. But that’s it.”

“What?” Billie felt tears prick at her eyes now. “You won’t have anything to do with the baby? Or... or with me?”

“I can’t, Billie.” Max eyes were filled with real regret, but it wasn’t enough to counteract what he was saying.

“I can’t believe you.” A tear spilled from Billie’s eye, and she wiped it away angrily. “You could be a father if you wanted to be. I know you could. You’re a good man, Max. You wouldn’t be like your dad.”

“I would.” Max shook his head. “I can’t do this. I’m sorry, but I need to go.”

“Don’t. Please. Let’s talk about this.”

But Max shook his head again. “I’m sorry.”

With that, he turned sharply away from Billie and went to the door, where he slid on his shoes and took his jacket. Billie stood, her heart aching, as he reached for the door handle... and hesitated. A moment passed. He looked back at her, and Billie saw that his eyes were filled with sadness. Then, very slowly, he pulled the door open and left.

When the door closed behind him, Billie let her tears fall. She found herself sobbing so hard that she had to sit down. The intensity of her emotions was unexpected. She liked Max, of course she did. Over the past month, they’d grown close, and she’d come to both trust and respect him. Last night, when they’d kissed at the party, she’d even begun to wonder if she could love him. But they hadn’t known each other all that long, not really, so she shouldn’t have been this heartbroken that he’d left.

There was the baby, though. Billie rested a hand on her stomach, which was still flat. From outside, there was no way of knowing that she was pregnant, not yet — but inside, everything had changed. Slowly, Billie regained control of her emotions and wiped her tears away.

“It looks like it’s you and me, kid,” she whispered to her stomach. Immediately, she

felt silly — her high school biology class was enough for her to know that the collection of cells in her uterus couldn't hear her yet. Despite that, she still felt comforted at the thought that she wasn't in this alone.

As much as it hurt that Max wasn't going to be a part of her life (or the baby's), Billie knew that she could do this. She had to. She would do anything to make sure her child had the best life possible, even if she had to do it on her own.

Taking a deep breath, she went to fill a glass of water. As she entered her kitchen corner, she noticed that the takeout Max had brought was still sitting, untouched, on the table along with the two plates she'd gotten out of the cupboard. The sight was enough to make tears well again, but Billie didn't let herself cry. No matter who had brought it, no matter how sad she was, the food smelled good. Plus, she was eating for two now.

Alone in her small studio, Billie sat at her table and ate the sandwich and salad Max had brought for her. In another container, there was a slice of cherry pie, which she ate as well. Perhaps Max had meant for this to be a special meal. Before finding out about the baby, he'd certainly seemed interested in pursuing a relationship with her.

That didn't matter now. Billie savored each forkful of the pie, then threw away the containers and cleared up the table. As she put the leftover paper napkins in a drawer for later, she noticed a small box sitting on the table. Her heart thudding, she opened it. Inside, nestled on a piece of tissue paper, was a pair of earrings adorned with tiny Christmas trees. A small note in Max's handwriting read, Merry Christmas, Billie. Thanks for the plane.

Tears welled again as she closed the box. Max had gotten her a present. Somehow, the fact that he'd made time to go out and shop for her made all this so much worse. She couldn't let herself sink into sadness, though. Pregnant or not, heartbroken or not, it was still Christmas, and she still had a lot to do to make sure the kids got their gifts.

Everything else — her excitement about the baby, her sadness about Max, her hope for the future, her heartbreak — could all wait for later. And hey, maybe work would serve as a distraction from everything that was going on in her life.

CHAPTER 19

MAX

From Billie's apartment, Max went straight to the office. Sure, it was a Sunday. Yes, no one else would be there. But that didn't matter. Max's work was waiting for him, and he could lose himself in numbers and reports and approvals until thoughts of Billie disappeared from his mind.

Or that was the hope, at least.

As he'd expected, he was the only one in the building on this frosty pre-Christmas Sunday. He went straight to his office, where he switched on his space heater (the building's heating system didn't work Sundays, either), and powered up his computer. A flood of tasks appeared on the screen, from emails to be answered to pings on the messaging system and documents he'd saved for later. Usually, that would be enough to push any thoughts of life outside work out of Max's mind, but today it wasn't.

Instead, he kept seeing, over and over, the look of hurt on Billie's face when he'd told her that he wouldn't be a part of her or the baby's life. She'd looked so shocked and so sad that Max had wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and tell her that everything would be all right.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

It would've been a lie, though. Max had been ready to try a relationship with Billie. He cared about her deeply and suspected that they might have been able to work things out. He would still be distracted by his work, but so would she; it might have been all right.

A baby was another story, though. Max remembered the heartbreak he'd felt every time his father had told him that he wasn't good enough. He remembered how hard it had been to hear other kids talk about trips to the zoo or camping with their fathers when Max's own father had no time for anything but work. He remembered the way he'd been desperate to make his father proud, even long after he'd realized that wasn't possible.

Max couldn't put his own child through that. The only way to stop himself from becoming his father was to stay away entirely. Billie was hurt now, but she would be okay. She was strong, smart, and independent — she would be a great mother. Max had no doubt about that. With his financial support and her nurturing love, their child would grow up happy and healthy without any of the struggles Max had faced.

Max clicked on an email from one of his investors about renewing their partnership in the coming year. He began to type out a reply but found his mind wandering again.

If only there was a way for him to be the kind of father his child needed. Max had enjoyed spending time with the children in the hospital, but even he knew that was very different from being a father. It simply wasn't possible, and if he tried, he would only end up hurting Billie, the baby, and even himself in the process. No, his distance was for the best.

Max refocused on the email he was writing, which had turned into a long string of commas, and started over. The best way he could provide for Billie and their child was by doing what he did best: working and earning money. His financial support would ensure that the baby wanted for nothing. That was all Max could do.

Max stayed at the office until late in the evening. Then he drove home along the frosty, moonlit streets of Denver. Yesterday's snow had formed dirty piles on the sidewalk after the snowplows had come through. In Max's current mood, it felt like a reminder that nothing good could ever last.

Monday, Max was back in the office bright and early. He started his day with several hours of meetings. Since there were only a few days before Christmas, there was a lot to be done to ensure that everything would be in order in the new year. Billie must be busy, too, making sure that everything was ready for the gift distribution. She had plenty of volunteers, so she didn't need his help. Still, he felt bad for not being there.

The last meeting before lunch was with Stephanie and the PR team. Max welcomed them into his office with a smile.

"Good morning," Stephanie said. "We just wanted to give you a quick update on what's been said about you in the press and on social media. As we discussed, it was important to overhaul your image in time for the holidays. I'm happy to report that your collaboration with Sweetest Surprise has more than paid off. There have been numerous positive mentions of you, both in tabloids and on social media. There's even a new hashtag trending, #CEOsGiveBack. It's part of a call for wealthy company owners to, as you can probably guess, give back to their communities." Stephanie smiled proudly. "In short, the campaign has been a complete success. The only question now is whether you should partner with the same charity next year, or switch to something different."

"It'll have to be a different charity," Max said.

“Oh?” Stephanie frowned. “Why is that?”

“It just is. But I appreciate all your hard work on this campaign, and I’m glad it paid off.” The truth, of course, was that there was no way Billie would agree to work with him again after how things had ended this year. In fact, Max might never work by Billie’s side again.

“I know you were skeptical at first,” Stephanie continued. “But I think we can both agree that this went well.”

“Indeed.” The charity partnership had gone well. Max’s relationship with Billie was another story entirely.

“Now, if you have a minute, let’s dive into our January PR strategy. This year, we’re hoping to highlight more restaurant openings in a positive light. Your trip to the Colorado Springs location also generated some great publicity, both for you and for the restaurant in general, so more trips like that are in order.” Stephanie continued to lay out the strategy. Max listened attentively, offering his thoughts and feedback when necessary, but his heart wasn’t in it.

Although the campaign had worked, he felt unable to celebrate the success without Billie by his side. He wanted to call her and tell her that she’d been right and that giving back both felt good and was good for him. He wanted to tell her that he’d stay on as a volunteer.

More than anything, he wanted to ask her to give him another chance.

Yet even after Stephanie and her team had wrapped up the briefing and headed off to lunch, even when Max was alone in his office, he didn’t reach for his phone. It was too late for him and Billie. Reaching out to her now wouldn’t be fair to her — or to himself. It was better to keep his distance.

Instead, Max reached into his desk and pulled out his checkbook. Carefully, he filled out a check to Billie, wrote the purpose as Child Support, then signed it and slipped it into an envelope. He addressed it to Billie and wrote the Sweetest Surprise address, since he didn't know her home address off the top of his head. Then he added it to the pile of outgoing mail.

Even though the baby wasn't here yet, Billie would need the money to pay for good medical care, baby clothes, diapers, and all those things she'd purchased for so many other mothers. He remembered the stacks of items she'd bought to make sure busy mothers wouldn't have more tasks on their plates, and his heart ached. Billie deserved someone who would do all that for her — someone who would hold her hand during labor, someone who would be around to change diapers, someone who would tell her how amazing she was.

Max just wished that he could be that person.

That Monday, as he worked and worked and tried not to think about Billie, was one of the longest days of his life. More than once, he reached for his phone with thoughts of calling her and apologizing. Each time, though, he forced himself to turn back to his computer and keep working.

Eventually, hopefully, it would become easier to pretend he didn't care.

CHAPTER 20

BILLIE

The first day after Max had walked out of her apartment after ending things, Billie was resolute. She wasn't going to let anything he did get to her. Instead, she was going to work on the gift delivery, read a book about pregnancy, and pretend that everything was fine.

The second day, as Billie wrapped a few final gifts, she realized that she was angry. How could Max have walked out on her and their baby like that? Who did he think he was? She was never going to forgive him. He was self-centered and idiotic. Sure, his father had his issues. Billie understood that. But that was no reason for Max to walk out on her while she was pregnant.

The third day was the night before Christmas Eve. Billie's family had gotten into the habit of celebrating Christmas on the twenty-third, so that her married siblings could also spend time with their in-laws on the proper holiday and so that Billie would be able to make her gift deliveries on time. Billie grabbed the bag of gifts she'd carefully picked out and wrapped for her family and headed to her parents' house on the bus. As she rode, she watched the city roll by. A few people were out and about, allbundled up against the cold, but the streets were mostly empty. Everyone was home with their families.

As Billie rode, she realized that she wasn't angry with Max anymore. Disappointed, yes. Sad, yes. But angry, no. He was clearly trying to do the right thing by giving her space, as misguided as the attempt was. More than that, Billie knew that she would eventually have to tell her child about Max, and she wanted to be able to tell funny and sweet stories without anger clouding her vision. The baby deserved to believe that he or she had a loving father, even if Billie had to skim over the part about that father not wanting to be involved.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

When she arrived at the stop near her parents' house, she hauled the bag of gifts off the bus and trekked down the road. It was biting cold, and she wished she'd commandeered the Sweetest Surprise car, but it was all right. The fresh air felt good after a slightly nauseating morning.

Billie arrived at the same time as her little sister, Jamie, and her husband. They piled out of the car, and Jamie ran to give Billie a tight hug. Her husband, Stewart, gave Billie a handshake and a cheerful greeting.

"It's so nice to see you," Jamie said, hugging Billie again. "How did that Christmas party go? The one you were buying the dress for?"

"Oh." Billie bit her lip. "It didn't go quite as expected."

Jamie's brow furrowed, but Stewart was already by her side, escorting her into the house and out of the cold. Billie followed.

Inside, everyone was in pairs; her brothers sat with their wives, her parents were together, and Jamie and Stewart were holding hands. Noah, Billie's toddler nephew, came running up to her, and Billie swooped him into her arms.

"It's nice to see you, squishy face," she told him. Noah cackled at the nickname and gave her a sloppy kiss. Billie's heart warmed at the thought that her child would grow up with cousins like this. He wiggled to get down, so Billie set him back on the floor.

"Billie!" Her mother and father came to give her hugs, followed by her sisters-in-law and brother. One sister-in-law handed Billie her other nephew, Sam, who was now

four months old. He smiled a gummy smile up at Billie as she bounced him. Again, her heart warmed at the thought of her own child, who she would soon be holding in her arms.

A glance around the room brought her earlier sadness back, though. It was clear how much her siblings each loved their spouses and how much joy parenthood as part of a couple brought them. Several of Billie's friends were more than happy as single mothers, but Billie had always imagined that she would raise her baby alongside a partner who loved her. That was clearly not going to happen.

"Everything okay?" Jamie had appeared by Billie's side, a concerned expression on her pretty features.

"Mmm." Billie nodded and smiled down at the baby boy in her arms. "Everything's okay."

After the initial flurry of greetings, they all settled down on the living room couches for the annual gift exchange. Billie snuggled her nephew as her family opened their gifts, oohing and aahing over jewelry and books, new hiking boots, and wireless headphones. Noah almost fainted with excitement when he unwrapped a remote-controlled car Billie had gotten him, which reminded Billie of the plane she'd gotten for Max. Had he ever even flown it? Probably not.

Billie returned her attention to her nephew as he gave her a big, sloppy kiss then went to beg his mother to try the car out before dinner. Permission granted, he ran into the dining room to give it a try.

"Have you opened your gifts?" Billie's mother, Gloria, asked.

"Not yet. I haven't wanted to put this little sweetheart down." Billie motioned to Sam, who had now fallen asleep. His lashes were splayed across his chubby cheeks,

and his hands fisted then relaxed in time with whatever dream he was having.

“Oh, give him here.” Gloria scooped up her grandson and handed Billie a gift in exchange. “I need to soak up time with my little sweetheart, too. Pretty soon, it’ll be three grandbabies in the family!”

Billie bit her lip and glanced at her stomach. She could easily wait to tell her family about the pregnancy, but the time felt right.

“Actually... it’ll be four.”

All eyes turned to Billie as the room suddenly fell silent.

“What do you mean?” Billie’s oldest brother asked.

“I’m pregnant.” Billie rested a hand on her stomach. “It’s early days now, but I’m due next summer.”

“Oh, my gosh!” Jamie was the first to react. She practically flew across the room to envelop Billie in a tight hug. “This is the best news. We’ll be pregnant together! Our kids can play together when they’re born! Oh, Billie, how wonderful. Congratulations.”

Billie grinned at her youngest sister’s enthusiasm. “Thanks, Jamie.”

“Have you thought about names?” Jamie asked excitedly.

Billie chuckled. “Not yet. Like I said, it’s early days. I only just found out.”

“Still. Amazing!” Jamie grinned broadly. One by one, the rest of Billie’s family offered their congratulations. Finally, Gloria gave her a hug before pulling back and

meeting Billie's eyes.

"May I ask about the father?"

"He's not in the picture," Billie said delicately. "But that isn't what matters here."

"Of course not. What matters is my beautiful grandbaby! And you, my darling daughter."

"Thanks, Mom."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“So, what do you think? Will we have yet another boy in the family, or will it be a girl?”

“I might still have a girl,” Jamie pointed out.

“True. Imagine! Two boys, then two girls. I’d start having flashbacks to early motherhood.”

Billie exchanged smiles with her siblings.

“You still haven’t opened your presents,” Jamie pointed out.

“Right! Thanks.” Billie opened her gifts from her family, smiling and thanking them for each one. Her parents had gotten her a pair of candy-cane earrings that Billie put on right away. Her brother Mark had gotten her a book, David a bath set. Finally, Billie unwrapped a baby onesie from Jamie that read I love my best auntie.

“Did you know?” Billie asked, holding up the onesie.

“Not at all.” Jamie nudged her. “I thought my baby could wear it, you know, since you’ll be his or her favorite aunt. But this is even better, because your baby can wear it and I’ll be the favorite aunt!”

“Hey, the competition is fierce,” Mark’s wife pointed out.

“True.” Billie smiled at her. “We might have to get a few more onesies.”

With all the gifts opened, everyone began to migrate to the dining room to set up the Christmas dinner feast. Billie's stomach was already grumbling. Her mother was a wonderful cook who always went all out for the holidays. She got to her feet and followed Gloria into the kitchen, only to be snagged by Jamie and pulled into the hallway.

"Where are we going?" Billie asked. Jamie pushed her into the guest bedroom and gestured for her to take a seat on the bed.

"I know you didn't want to tell mom about the guy, but you'll tell me, right?" Jamie's eyes were bright. "If he did something bad to you, I'll tell him off — like you did when Chester Milton was bothering me in high school."

"Thanks, but there's no need to tell anyone off." Billie shrugged. "Things just don't always work out."

"Okay, but the guy must be Max, right? The one you were going to attend the holiday party with, who was working with your charity?"

"Yes, it's Max." Billie hesitated. She'd come to terms with Max's decision not to be a part of her or the baby's life, but it still hurt to think about him. "I liked him a lot, but we weren't really together. When I told him about the baby, we agreed that it was best for him to contribute financially without us trying to be a couple."

"Oh." Jamie bit her lip. "And that's what you want?"

"I want what's best for my baby," Billie said.

"I definitely understand that." Jamie took Billie's hands. "But what about you? I thought you really liked this Max guy?"

“I did.” Billie’s heart ached. “I was excited to go to the Christmas party. And yeah, maybe a part of me thought it was a date, as much as I denied that. But it just isn’t meant to be. Max is too caught up in his past and in a different kind of future.”

“So, even if he wanted to be together, you wouldn’t?” Jamie asked. In an instant, an image appeared in Billie’s mind of Max with a bouquet of flowers, asking her to take him back, begging for a second chance. Then Billie remembered how Max had fled her apartment, and the image burst.

“That isn’t going to happen, so it isn’t worth thinking about,” Billie said. “Right now, all that matters to me is that my child has everything good in the world.”

“Well,thatwe can do.” Jamie squeezed her hands. “Your baby is already going to have the world’s best mother.”

“That’s impossible,” Billie replied. “Yoursis.”

They smiled at each other, then Jamie gave Billie another hug. “If you ever want to talk any more...”

“You’ll be the first one I call. As always.” Billie hugged her sister back. “And the same goes for you, you know.”

“I know. I hardlystoptalking.” Jamie pulled a funny face that made Billie smile. “Now, should we go back out there before Mom comes to hunt us down?”

“You go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“All right.” Jamie looked a little worried, but she gave Billie her space. Once her sister was gone, Billie sat on the bed for several more moments, just looking down at her stomach. What she’d said to her sister had been true. There was no way Max

would ever want a second chance, so there was no point considering it. And it was for the best that Billie told everyone the decision not to be together had been mutual.

Neither of those realizations stopped Billie's heart from aching, though. Maybe, if things had been different, Max would have been by her side at this Christmas party. He could have seen the joy her family felt, and experienced firsthand how wonderful it was when new children joined the family. He could have finally seen the true magic of Christmas. Maybe it would have been enough to change his mind about the baby... and about Billie herself.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

Or maybe not. Billie got to her feet, straightened her dress, and went to rejoin her family in the dining room. They were all laughing at something adorable Noah had said, and Billie slipped easily into a free spot at the table. Jamie caught her eye and smiled from across the table, Gloria slid a slice of ham onto Billie's plate, and Mark ruffled her hair like they were still kids. Christmas music played in the background, the tree twinkled from the living room, and the table was surrounded by smiles, laughter, and happy chatter. For now, it was enough. At least her baby would grow up with a loving and involved extended family — even if the baby's father wouldn't be in the picture.

CHAPTER 21

MAX

Max's apartment felt quiet. Very quiet. And empty.

It had always been that way, of course. Ever since Max had moved in several years ago, he'd lived alone, and he'd preferred that things were both neat and quiet. Today, though, on December twenty-third, he found that he didn't appreciate the quiet as much as usual. Instead, the lack of distraction left him thinking about Billie far too much, which wasn't good for him.

Max had spent the better part of the morning catching up on emails, but he was now in the rare position of having no work left to do. He couldn't do anything else until he returned to the office with the rest of his employees on December twenty-eighth. The prospect of four empty days, one of them Christmas, with no work to do stretched dauntingly in front of him.

Max prepared a snack in the kitchen and went to the living room, where he flipped on the TV. Canned laughter and Christmas music rang out on seemingly every channel. It seemed that no one was playing anything other than Christmas rom-coms, Christmas-themed TV episodes, and Christmas-based comedyspecials. Of course, every mention of Christmas reminded Max of Billie. What was she doing today? She'd mentioned something about going to her parents' home on the twenty-third. Hopefully, she was surrounded by loving family. Hopefully, she didn't feel an ounce of the loneliness and regret that Max did.

With a sigh, he flipped off the TV. The dancing animated reindeer and their cheerful Christmas song disappeared, leaving his apartment even quieter and emptier than it had been before.

Max got to his feet. He did have one Christmas obligation that he could do today, one he usually dreaded: visiting his parents. Visits to his parents almost never went the way Max wanted. No matter how nicely everything started out, he and his father always ended up discussing business, and the conversation often turned ugly. Jim Grayson could never stop himself from commenting on all the things Max could have done better, which always left Max feeling like a failure.

Maybe, instead of trying to follow in your father's footsteps and always feeling like you're falling short, it's time to pave your own path. Billie's words from the night of the Christmas party echoed in Max's head. For a moment, he wished that she were by his side to visit his parents with him. Then the moment passed, and Max realized that even if he could be with Billie, it wouldn't be fair to force her into his family drama. It was better that he handled this himself.

Max picked out a bottle of wine from the kitchen and headed down to the garage. It seemed like no one was on the road today. Perhaps it was the chill weather, or perhaps everyone simply had better things to do than driving around today.

Max's parents had moved into a sprawling house at the edge of the city when they'd retired. It always took a while to drive there, so Max often found his thoughts wandering to work while he drove. Today, of course, it was Billie who filled his mind. Billie and the baby.

She was around seven weeks pregnant now, if Max had gotten the calculations right. Some self-destructive instinct had pushed him to look up information on the internet, so he knew that Billie might be feeling nausea and tenderness, and that she might be more tired than usual. He also knew that the baby, their baby, was currently the size of a grape.

Max hoped that Billie wouldn't be too tired and sick to enjoy Christmas. He hoped she'd take it easy with deliveries this year, letting her volunteers and employees take over the majority of the work — although he doubted she would. He hoped that the little grape-sized baby was doing well.

He hoped he would be strong enough to keep his distance, despite the pull he felt to call Billie and tell her he'd made a terrible mistake.

Finally, Max arrived outside his parents' home. After waiting for them to buzz the gate open, he pulled into the parking area and got out, the bottle of wine in his hand. His mother came outside to meet him and enveloped him in a quick hug.

"How are you, Max?" she asked.

"Not too bad," he replied.

"Great. I was just making dinner, so go sit with your father in the living room until it's ready."

"All right. Thanks for cooking. You really didn't have to."

“Nonsense. I like to cook, just like you do, and I want to spoil my only son a little.” She led him inside, where Max shed his coat and took off his shoes before letting her propel him into the living room. His father was sitting on the couch reading a newspaper. A cup of coffee steamed on the table beside him.

The first thing that struck Max was the lack of Christmassy cheer in the room. As a child, he’d been used to it, but he’d just spent the better part of a month surrounded by wrapped gifts and fragrant pine trees and glittering Christmas lights. It was strange to see a room that looked so dark and so ordinary.

“Max.” Jim looked up from his newspaper and gave his son a nod of acknowledgement. “Nice to see you.”

“Nice to see you too, Dad.” Max took a seat on the chair across from his father. Jim gave another nod, then lifted the newspaper again and returned to his reading. Max held back a sigh. His father didn’t even seem willing to make an effort to talk to him. Max considered just getting out his phone but decided against it. Whether or not Jim was feeling chatty, they needed to talk.

“How are you?” Max asked.

“Fine.” Jim creased the newspaper to look at another section.

“Great.” There was a long pause. “Aren’t you going to ask how I’m doing?”

Jim slowly lowered the newspaper and met his son’s eyes. “I saw you four days ago at the Christmas party. I know you’re doing fine, so I don’t really see the need for small talk.”

“We can talk about something else, then.”

“All right. Do you have your year-end reporting yet from the branches? Anything I should know about?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“I don’t want to talk about business, either,” Max snapped. “Come on, Dad. We’re family and it’s the holidays. Don’t you think we should make an effort?”

Jim sighed. “I see you’ve caught a little of the Christmas craze this year. Next, you’ll be expecting presents, I imagine. Is this about that woman I met at the party? The charity woman?”

Max deeply didn’t want to talk about Billie right now, so he focused on another part of the sentence that was equally frustrating.

“Maybe I would like a present.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Not now, necessarily, but when I was a kid. Would it have killed you to give me a gift or two?”

“You wouldn’t have enjoyed them properly without earning them yourself.” Jim shook his head. “I thought we’d talked about all this.”

“We never talk!” The frustration, the feelings of inadequacy, and the sadness Max felt all skyrocketed. “You only care about the Bluebell Diner. You don’t care about me. When I was a kid, you were never around, and you were never there for me.”

“I wasn’t around because I was building a future for you, for our family. Because of the diners, we went from a family who relied on food stamps to one that can afford more than one home. How can you say I don’t care about you?”

“Well, you never showed it.” Max shook his head. “I always felt like I wasn’t good enough for you. I still do. And worse, I think I’m becoming you!”

The words slipped out before Max could think twice. He regretted them instantly, especially when his father leaned forward, his brows furrowed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m going to be a father.” Max shook his head. “The woman I love is having a baby. But I was so scared that I was going to mess things up, that I was becoming you, that I might have ruined everything already.”

“You have a baby on the way?” Jim’s face was unreadable.

“Yes, I do. You remember Billie Stone, the ‘charity woman’ from the party? Well, I love her.” The words felt so natural to say, as though they had always been true. “And she told me she was pregnant a few days ago. Instead of being there for her, instead of supporting her, I said I’d contribute financially and that was it. I never wanted my baby to feel inadequate or unloved because I made a mistake — and by stepping away I’ve just become even more of an absentee father than you were.”

There was a long pause. Jim’s face was still unreadable, but Max was certain that his father was going to kick him out of the house. There was no way Max would be allowed to talk like this.

Then Jim sighed. “You love this woman?” The question was unexpected, but the answer was easy.

“I do.” If only Max had recognized that sooner. If only it was enough.

“Then you should be with her. You should be a father to your child. Maybe I didn’t do everything right with you, but I must have done something well, because you’ve turned into a man I admire. One who’s braver than me.” Jim ran a hand through his hair. “I was never able to balance work with family life. Because of that, I hurt my

relationship with you, and with your mother. But we aren't the same, and I believe that you can do better."

Max was blown away by his father's admissions. Jim admired him. He thought he was brave. These were the things Max had wanted to hear all his life — but they didn't change anything.

"It's too late," Max said. He shook his head. "I've already messed everything up. Billie doesn't want to be with me anymore."

"I don't know this Billie," Jim shrugged. "But I do know that if you love her, you should go after her. Maybe she still won't want to be with you, but at least you will have tried. You need to go after what your heart wants — nothing else is more important. Take it from me, Max. I chased all the wrong things for too long, which made me miss out on a lot of important moments with the people I love. Don't make the same mistake."

"Okay," Max took a deep breath. "I will. I'll tell her how I feel."

"Don't just tell her," Max and Jim both looked up to see Max's mother leaning against the doorway. "Show her. If you think you've messed things up, you need to prove that you won't do the same thing again."

"I will," Max stood. He was filled with a new energy — he did love Billie, and even his own father thought that Max could do better than he himself had. Maybe there was still a chance to make things right.

"But first, let's eat," His mother nodded to the dining room. "There's no point running off into the cold to make a grand gesture on an empty stomach."

Max laughed despite himself and followed his parents into the dining room. His

mother had prepared his childhood favorite: macaroni and cheese with a side of carrot sticks. Max smiled. Even if his father had been distant, his mother had always tried her best. He gave her a quick hug.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Anytime. Now, sit down, get something to eat, and tell us everything about this girl you love.”

“All right.” Max sat and took a scoop of macaroni and cheese. “Well, her name is Billie Stone. She runs a charity called Sweetest Surprise that helps local children.” He glanced at his father, but Jim looked interested and far less judgmental than Max had anticipated. Encouraged, he continued. “She’s smart, playful, creative, and generous. And she’s beautiful. She has curly brown hair and big brown eyes...”

For the rest of the afternoon, Max told his parents about Billie. His mother was supportive, and, to his surprise, his father was, too. When Max left a few hours later, he hugged his mother, shook his father’s hand, then got into his car feeling more optimistic than he had in a long time.

There was, of course, one big problem. Max had experienced a change of heart and knew that he wanted to be a part of Billie and the baby’s lives. He still had to win Billie over, though, and it wasn’t going to be easy. He’d really messed up with her. He needed to make things right, which meant that he had a few errands to run.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

First, Max had to buy something. Luckily, a few stores were still open on the twenty-third, though he made it just before closing time. Next, he put in a call to one of Billie's employees at Sweetest Surprise, then a few more calls to some people he hoped would help. Finally, he went home. If everything went well, by this time tomorrow, he and Billie would be together. And if not, at least Billie would know that he loved her — and at least he would have tried.

CHAPTER 22

BILLIE

Billie woke early on Christmas Eve, as always. She was filled with a mix of excitement and morning sickness that proved to be a less-than-fun combination, but after a cup of ginger tea and a plain bagel, she felt ready to face the day. A glance at her delivery list almost sent her running back to bed — it would take hours to drive all over Denver delivering each gift. Billie had sent out several emails asking for volunteers, but even her usual volunteers were always hesitant to work on Christmas Eve, and Billie couldn't blame them. Most years, she'd rather do the work herself than make anyone else get up early on Christmas Eve.

Today, though, she wouldn't have said no to a little help.

Yawning, she took a last sip of her ginger tea, put the cup in the dishwasher, and went to shower and dress. As long as she didn't get too dizzy or nauseated and have to take a break, she could be done with all the deliveries by mid-evening and could crawl back into bed for an early night. Tomorrow, Jamie had insisted that she come over to spend Christmas morning with her, Stewart, and their parents. Billie wasn't sure she

wanted to go but had agreed anyway.

She picked out a red sweater and a pair of jeans, then added a red Santa hat at the last minute. She might be tired and sick, but this was still supposed to be a magical day of giving gifts to children who really deserved it. Billie wasn't about to let them down.

The Sweetest Surprise car was waiting for her at the center, where she'd also be picking up the first load of gifts. Billie took the bus to the center, and she was one of only two people riding. The other was an elderly gentleman who smiled at her and wished her a merry Christmas when he disembarked, leaving Billie completely alone. Clearly, most of the city's residents were home with the people they loved this early on Christmas Eve. Billie rested a hand lightly on her stomach. She had someone she loved right here with her.

At the center, she hurried to the door, shivering as she pulled out her key and put it in the lock. To her surprise, and worry, the door swung open before she was able to turn the key — it hadn't been locked. Inside, the table where she'd laid out the gifts was nearly empty, with only one batch of gifts left to go. Billie's heart sank. Had someone stolen all the presents? Who would do such a thing?

"Merry Christmas Eve, Billie."

Billie turned to see Barbara, her accountant, with several bags of gifts in her arms.

"Barbara, what's going on?"

"Well, a few last-minute volunteers signed on to help with deliveries," Barbara said. "They got here at the break of dawn and have been delivering gifts all morning."

Billie almost slumped to the floor in relief. Not only had the gifts not been stolen, but they'd already been delivered! If Billie took this last batch herself, she'd still be home

before lunchtime.

“That’s wonderful. I had no idea.” Billie pressed a palm to her heart. “Who are these volunteers? I need to thank them.”

“Most of them are out on deliveries, but I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

“All right. I’ll take the last batch of gifts and be back as soon as I can. Please, tell the volunteers to wait if they can. I want to thank them personally.”

“Oh, I’m certain at least one volunteer will wait for you,” Barbara said. She grinned, and Billie’s eyes narrowed.

“Do you know something?”

“Not at all. Enjoy the deliveries!”

Still suspicious, Billie loaded her arms with gifts and headed out to the car. Barbara followed with a second armload, which they packed into the trunk. Billie hurried back inside to make a huge batch of hot chocolate and set out some Christmas cookies, telling Barbara to make sure the volunteers enjoyed them when they got back. Then Billie bade Barbara goodbye and headed out on her rounds.

Now that almost all the gifts were delivered, Billie’s spirits were high. She sang along to Christmas songs on the radio as she drove to the first house, even dancing a little in her seat as she went. The day got even better when she realized that many of the kids on the list were ones she knew. She delivered Mrs. Cowper and the donation certificate to Eloise’s mom, dropped off gifts with the foster family she had met with Max, and handed presents to Chloe’s dad for the older girl and her younger siblings.

The whole morning had a wonderfully festive air. Billie loved bringing a little magic

to each home, and she loved the way the parents' faces lit up when they saw the gifts, the food, and even the small presents Billie had made sure to include for the parents. After making the last delivery of a toy guitar to the home of a musically inclined three-year-old boy, Billie drove back to Sweetest Surprise with a light heart.

The mystery volunteers had really saved the day. Not only was Billie not stressed out of her mind, as she usually was on Christmas Eve, but she'd also been reminded of how good people really were. Sure, there were always people who cared only about themselves, but there were many others who were willing to get up early on December twenty-fourth to bring a little magic to children in need. Billie couldn't wait to thank the volunteers. Hopefully, they'd stuck around and would still be there when she returned.

When she pulled into the parking lot, she saw that several cars were still parked outside. That was a good sign. Inside, volunteers were sipping hot cocoa from paper cups and enjoying Christmas cookies. Several of them looked familiar, although Billie was almost certain they hadn't worked with her before.

"Thank you so much for helping with the deliveries this morning," she told them.

"No problem," one woman replied with a smile. "We're happy to help, Billie."

Billie wasn't sure how this woman knew her name. Perhaps they had met before, even if she didn't remember, which was embarrassing. Was it possible that pregnancy brain had started already?

"Do you mind if I ask what inspired you to sign up last-minute?" she asked.

"Well, when the boss asked if any of us were interested, we jumped on the opportunity," the woman said. "If he wanted to help, we knew it must be special."

“The boss? Who’s your boss?”

“He’s just arriving now.” The woman nodded out the front window, where a white van with the Bluebell Diner logo on the side was pulling into the parking lot.

“Thanks,” Billie said, but she was already distracted. Bluebell Diner. A boss who wanted to help. People who looked vaguely familiar. Was it possible that Max was the man in the van outside?

Billie’s heart began to beat faster, but she told herself to stay calm. This didn’t necessarily mean anything. Even if Max really had come to help, it was possible that he’d just wanted to take an opportunity for one more photo shoot or that he was trying to make up for walking out on her. It didn’t mean that anything had changed between them.

Billie made her way outside, more than a little nervous. On the way, she passed a smiling Stephanie, who was breaking down empty cardboard boxes that had been used to transport the gifts and food.

“Hey, Billie, nice to see you!” Stephanie said as she used a box cutter to rip through a strip of boxing tape.

“Nice to see you too,” Billie replied, a little confused. Stephanie had never really gotten her hands dirty and helped with the charity work before. It was nice to see, but it was more than a little puzzling, too. Her confusion grew when she spotted Jim Grayson talking to a woman around the same age, both of them wearing Sweetest Surprise T-shirts. She slipped past them.

Billie exited into the cold December air. Outside, the van door slid open, and Max hopped out. He was dressed in casual, comfortable clothes and, to Billie's great surprise, he wore a Santa hat just like hers.

"Thanks for all your hard work today!" he called to someone in the van. "As a small bonus, I'd like to offer everyone who helped here today Monday off."

"Thanks, boss!" came the reply from the front seat. Max waved before turning right into Billie. They both looked at each other for a long moment.

"Are you the kind volunteer who did all the deliveries this morning?" Billie asked.

"Along with a few of my charity-minded employees, yes." Max stepped closer. "Is there somewhere we could talk?"

"Um, sure. We can go to my office." Billie's stomach turned. She wasn't sure if it was pregnancy nausea or nerves. Trying to calm herself, she led Max through the lobby, past the volunteers, and up to her office. There, she leaned against her desk, arms crossed, as Max closed the door.

"Thank you for all your help with the deliveries," Billie said. She bit her lip. "You really saved my life today. I wasn't looking forward to doing everything while feeling nauseated."

"You're feeling nauseated?" Max looked concerned. "Do you want to sit? Do you want some water?"

Billie shook her head. "I'm fine now, but thank you. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to apologize." Max took a step closer. "I'm so sorry for how I reacted

about the baby. It wasn't right for me to walk out without talking to you."

"Thank you for saying that. Um, and I got your child support check in the mail. I tore it up, though. I don't need child support until there's actually a child."

Max smiled a little, though he quickly schooled his expression. "That sounds like you."

Billie sighed. She felt a little teary. Max was here, so close, and apologizing. It was almost exactly what she'd imagined. Yet now, it just hurt, because she knew that, no matter how sorry Max was, he still wouldn't want to be with her or be a real father to their baby.

"I appreciate your help," she said again. "I really do. But I do still have a lot to do."

"Billie, please, wait." Max closed the distance between them and took her hands. "I know I messed up. Not just about the baby, but about our relationship. I was scared. I was scared to become a father and to fail our child. I was scared to try a real relationship with you and to let you down. All my life, I've been scared of messing things up and falling short.

"But I talked to my father yesterday, and he made me realize something. The biggest and worst way I could fall short is by not being there at all. I know that I've made mistakes, but I want to be a father to our baby. I want to be a partner to you." Max raised his eyes to Billie's. "If you're willing to let me, I want to be a part of your life."

Billie felt breathless. For a long moment, she didn't know what to say. Max wanted to be with her. That was amazing — but what if it wasn't enough?

"I'm so glad to hear you say that," she replied. "But Max, how do I know you won't

walk out again when things get tough? Raising a baby isn't easy. Being in a real relationship isn't always easy. I can't let you into my heart again if I don't know whether I can count on you."

"I won't run away again." Max shook his head. "The difference now is that I love you. I love our baby. And I want you to know how serious I am about you — both of you. That's why I got you a small gift."

Max let go of her hands and reached into his pocket. Inside was a small box wrapped in Christmas tree paper, which he handed to her. Billie took the gift and looked up at him. Her heart fluttered in her chest.

"Should I open it?"

"Yes."

Billie slid away the wrapping paper, her hands shaking slightly from nerves, to reveal a ring box. Her eyes widened as she opened it. Inside, nestled on a piece of velvet, was a gorgeous engagement ring made of a glittering diamond set on a band inlaid with snowflakes. Billie looked up from the ring to see that Max was on one knee.

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“I know we haven’t known each other that long,” he said. “But I love you, Billie. I want to be with you. I want to be a father to our child. I want to marry you.”

“Max.” Billie felt teary. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.” Max smiled up at her. “For a long time, I used to hesitate when it came to big decisions because I worried that I was making the wrong one. But I know that this is the right decision. I don’t want to waste another minute without you. Billie, you’re the most amazing woman I’ve ever met. You’re incredibly generous and always ready to help others — or give a second chance. You always make me laugh, whether we’re shopping for toys or wrapping gifts, or just eating dinner together. You’re the person I want to tell when something good happens. You’re the person I want to see every night before I go to sleep and every morning when I wake up. And you’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen. Billie Renee Stone, will you marry me?”

Billie felt tears finally spill from her eyes. “Yes. Of course I’ll marry you.”

Max slid the ring onto her finger then pulled Billie into a tight hug that turned into a lingering kiss. When they separated, Max was smiling.

“I love you so much, Billie.”

“I love you, too.”

They kissed again, this time longer, slower, and more tenderly than before. Billie could hardly believe what had just happened. She’d gone from waking up this

morning feeling more alone than ever to being engaged to the man she loved, a man who loved her, too. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

They kissed for a long time, the universe seeming to stand still around them. Billie never wanted this moment to end.

“Don’t worry,” Max added a few minutes later, when they were standing in each other’s arms. “We don’t have to get married right away.”

“Good,” Billie replied. “Because I’d kind of like to fit into my wedding dress.” She looked down at her belly meaningfully, and Max chuckled.

“Fair enough, but you’ll be beautiful no matter what.”

“Even in my Santa hat?”

“Especially in your Santa hat. Merry Christmas, Billie.”

“Merry Christmas, Max. Let’s make this one the best yet.”

EPILOGUE

TWO YEARS LATER: BILLIE

“Merry Christmas, Billie,” Max whispered.

“Merry Christmas.” Billie yawned and stretched, then her mouth dropped open.

“Max, what are you doing here? Isn’t it bad luck to see me today?”

“No, it’s just bad luck to see you in your dress. Anyway, I didn’t like the hotel. I missed you too much.” Max kissed her on the cheek. “And I missed Henry, too.”

Billie wrapped her arms around Max and pulled him closer. “Well, I’m not complaining. As long as you’re sure this isn’t bad luck.”

Max kissed her again, on the top of the head this time. “How could it be bad luck when we’re together? Are you ready for today?”

“Absolutely. I can’t wait.”

“Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say that we’ve waited enough,” Max said with a grin.

Billie grinned back. It was true — they’d done their share of waiting. After becoming engaged so soon after meeting each other, they’d decided to take a long engagement so that they’d have time to get to know each other better and plan the kind of wedding they were both excited about. Then, in the summer after they’d met, their son had been born, which had changed everything.

As if he knew his mother was thinking about him, Henry gave a short babble that Billie heard over the monitor. They exchanged a glance, then Max rolled out of bed.

“That’s my cue.” He winked and headed to the nursery. Billie yawned and stretched again, luxuriating in the warmth of the bed on a cold morning. She should get up soon, she knew it. There was still a lot to do before the wedding this afternoon, not to mention gifts that needed to be delivered this morning. Yet she was so comfortable in bed that it was hard to move. A few minutes later, Max reentered the bedroom with Henry in his arms. At sixteen months old, Henry was energetic and adorable, with a few babbled words in his vocabulary and a gummy smile for everyone he met.

“Mama!” he shouted as Max set him in Billie’s arms. Billie snuggled her son close and kissed the top of his sweet-smelling head.

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

Today was Christmas Eve, but it was close enough. Max and Billie had decided on Christmas Eve as the perfect day for their wedding, since it was the day they’d gotten engaged and confessed their feelings for each other. Plus, it would give them a very special anniversary that neither of them could ever forget.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 4:37 am

“Okay, now we need to get up.” Max went to the closet, where he grabbed a pair of jeans and a red reindeer sweatshirt. “Why don’t you get changed while I get our little elf ready?”

“Sounds good to me.” Billie yawned and gently dislodged Henry from her arms. He reached for his father.

“Dada!”

“You know it, kiddo.” Max scooped Henry into his arms and headed into the kitchen. Billie took the opportunity to change out of her pajamas and take a long, hot shower. One thing motherhood had taught her was how important it was to appreciate the little things in life, like time for a peaceful shower.

Becoming a mother had certainly been an adjustment. What made it a thousand times better was that Max was by her side every step of the way. They had attended every obstetrician appointment together, decorated the nursery together, redecorated Max’s apartment together to make it more family-friendly, and shopped for baby clothes and supplies together. When Billie went into labor on a hot summer day, Max rushed her to the hospital and held her hand the whole time. And when their son, red and wrinkled and squalling, came into the world, they held him for hours, just staring at his little face — together.

Since then, both Max and Billie had taken a step back from work. Max delegated more of his tasks to trusted employees, as did Billie. Before, neither of them had been able to imagine anything being more important than work, but now it was clear that their little family was the most important thing in the world.

After her shower, Billie joined her fiancé and son for a breakfast of gingerbread pancakes with fresh fruit and maple syrup. Max was a wonderful chef, and stepping back from work meant that he had more time to pursue his other passions. Delicious breakfasts and dinners were one benefit from his interest in cooking.

After breakfast, the trio headed down to Sweetest Surprise. Max got Henry settled in his car seat while Billie coordinated with volunteers and brought out the pile of gifts they were delivering. Last year, Henry had stayed home with his aunt Jamie and cousin Miles, but this year he loved riding in the car, so Max and Billie had decided to include him.

They spent the morning traveling around the city, delivering gifts to families across Denver. Henry sang along to Christmas carols and danced in his car seat. He got a little fussy towards the end, but they were almost finished with the deliveries and were able to take him right home.

By the time they arrived back at the Sweetest Surprise center a few hours later, Henry having taken a nap while Max and Billie did some final wedding preparations, Jamie, Gloria, Max's mom, and Billie's sisters-in-law had already worked their magic. The largest room had been turned into a Christmas wonderland. Snowflakes, cut by the center's children from white paper and decorated with a rainbow of glitter, hung from the ceiling. Christmas lights were strung along every wall, and the Christmas tree that Max had decorated beautifully earlier that month sparkled in the corner.

In the front of the room, a row of chairs had been set up. At the end of the aisle, Billie and Max's fathers had worked together to create a stunning arch of pine boughs and glimmering lights. Billie's heart warmed as she saw her father and soon to be father-in-law putting the final touches to the arch.

Over the last two years, Jim Grayson had experienced a change of heart. Billie wasn't sure if it was the news of his first grandchild being on the way, the long conversations he'd had with Max to repair their relationship, or the effort he'd put into being the best

grandfather he could be, but something had changed in the man. He had left the running of Bluebell Diner in Max's capable hands and was now focused on his family for the first time in his life.

"Okay, I'll see you in a minute." Billie kissed Max, took Henry from his arms, and turned to head to her office to get changed. Jamie threaded her arm through Billie's and went with her, her son Miles snuggled in her other arm.

"Are you sure you want to have the wedding here?" Jamie asked in a low voice.

"Absolutely." Billie smiled at her sister. "Max and I are both excited about it. Sweetest Surprise is what brought us together in the first place. It's where we fell in love. And best of all, it has plenty of room for everyone we care about." She paused. "Anyway, isn't it a little late to ask that? What would you have done if I said no?"

"I don't know." Jamie shrugged. "Sisterly magic, I suppose."

Billie chuckled. "You know, I believe it."

Jamie and Billie got their squirming sons changed into their tiny tuxes. As soon as they were dressed, both boys began chasing each other around the small office, shrieking gleefully and wrinkling their suits. Jamie and Billie exchanged a glance and laughed. Becoming mothers at the same time had been wonderful, as they'd been able to share tips, tricks, and babysitting help at every stage.

Jamie helped Billie into her wedding dress, a gorgeous white, lacy gown with a festive green ribbon around the waist. Then she helped Billie with her hair and makeup.

When they'd first gotten engaged, Billie and Max had talked about having a big wedding, perhaps in a tropical destination where they could wed on the beach. But as time had gone by, they'd realized that they didn't need anything splashy to proclaim

their love. They just wanted to be together, with all the people they cared about, in a place that meant something to them.

Their honeymoon, however, would be two weeks spent in the Caribbean, so they would have a little beachy fun, too.

Once they were both ready, Billie headed back downstairs. Her father was waiting for her at the end of the aisle, and he took her arm with a wide smile.

“I’m so happy for you, Billie.”

“Aren’t you going to get all teary, like you did when Jamie got married?” Billie teased.

“Not today, sweetheart. I already know how much you and Max love each other. I already know how good you are as parents and how well you take care of each other. I don’t have anything to feel teary about.”

Then the music began to play. One by one, pairs of bridesmaids and groomsmen headed down the aisle. Next, Henry ran down the aisle along with Billie’s three nephews, all of them ring bearers together. The role of flower girl was filled by a little girl from Sweetest Surprise.

Then it was Billie and her father’s turn. They stepped into the room, and a hush fell. Billie knew all eyes were on her, but she didn’t have time to feel self-conscious. At the end of the aisle, Max waited, dressed in a dapper suit, with a bright smile on his handsome face. He was holding Henry in his arms.

Billie’s heart almost melted at the sight of her two favorite guys. She’d never wanted anything more than she wanted to marry Max. It was difficult to walk slowly down the aisle, balanced on her heels, instead of kicking her shoes off and dashing to the man she loved.

Finally, she reached him. Max took her hands in his and planted a quick kiss on her lips that made everyone ooh.

“I love you,” he whispered into her ear.

“I love you, too.”

The rest of the ceremony went by in a beautiful blur. Max and Billie said their vows, which they’d written themselves. They exchanged another kiss, their first as husband and wife. They danced all evening with everyone they loved. They ate delicious food, courtesy of Bluebell Diner, since that was another thing that had brought them together.

Throughout everything, one thought played in Billie’s mind over and over: I couldn’t be happier than I am now.

With her brand-new husband by her side and her wonderful son in her arms, Billie truly felt that all her Christmas wishes had come true.

The End