



Books Beans and Buns Holiday (Foggy Basin)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: At Books Beans and Buns, you can buy a book, a signature coffee, and a sweet roll. And maybe find true love.

All decked out for the holidays, Brock and Eddy are celebrating at the store and inviting their Foggy Basin friends to join them.

A small-town holiday short story.

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Chapter one

Eddy

A aand...

Upload.

Finally. It was finished. The first bit of framework for my newest game, Medieval Zombies—a working title. I hoped it would do as well as the one that launched last year, but it still needed a better name. This iteration was done for now, though. Done. I didn't have to do anything else until... "Oh. My. God. Brock! It's Christmas time!" I ran out of the guest room that Brock had set up for my office and flew down the stairs. At the bottom, I grabbed the newel post and used it to sling myself around. "Brock!"

"What?" My hunky man came out of the kitchen and slid across the tile floor in his socks. "What, what, what?" His beard was growing out more. He said for the winter, but it didn't matter to me. He was fucking sexy and all mine. We'd gotten engaged last year during the Insidious Rule launch party. It had started snowing then, but none of it stuck to the ground. We didn't get a white Christmas, but I hoped for one this year. So far, it was only cold.

I slammed into Brock's chest. "It's Christmas. We have to get ready."

"Ready?"

“Nothing is ready, and Mom is coming. So is Greg. They’re staying here.” My mother and brother were all I had. I kind of wanted to impress them. Mom hadn’t been here since the wedding in June. When Greg came for the launch, he stayed in the rooms above Pints and Pool in town. He’d stayed at Pints for our wedding, too. We went back home and saw them a few times, but mostly phone and video since our little honeymoon. This time, Greg would stay here in one of our guest rooms. And we only had two. One of which doubled as my office, which is probably where we would put Greg. And Mom would go in the nicer guestroom. But figuring out where they were going to stay was only part of what needed to happen. “We have to get groceries, clean their rooms, and what about the store?”

“Okay, yes.” He wrapped me up in his soothing arms. “But what about the store?”

“It’s not even decorated.” I looked around our kitchen and dining room. “Neither is our house. Where are we going to put the tree?”

“In the living room?”

“That sounds like you don’t know. Where did you have it the year before last?”

“I didn’t. There was no one to share it with before.”

I scoffed. “What about your BFF, Jackie? And I happen to know a certain cousin you have and her wife. They would not leave you alone at Christmas.”

“No, they wouldn’t. I went over to Paige and Sharon’s. But there was no reason to decorate here.” Last year, we went to Greg’s for Christmas and didn’t put it all out, so I understood. But...

“Do you even have decorations?” I hadn’t been up to his attic yet. I imagined it was full of things he didn’t want to deal with from his grandfather, and I didn’t want to

step into that, but we needed some festive here—holiday joy and merriment.

“Mmm...maybe.” He kissed my forehead. “We could put mistletoe right there.” When Brock looked up, my eyes followed.

It wouldn’t be a bad idea. “We could get a huge red bow!”

Brock leaned in to kiss me for real as if that mistletoe was already there, and I let him. For a minute, I chased his tongue with mine, languishing in his warmth, savoring the taste of him. Then I remembered what I’d come downstairs for. I smacked his chest as I pulled away. “Your sexiness is distracting me.”

“Relax, babe. I have decorations, and whatever we don’t have, we can get. I’m pretty sure they have tons of stuff at Nuts and Bolts. Or we can run over to Miller’s Point. They have stores, you know.”

“Hmph.” I didn’t really want to make a trip out of it, so I hoped Brock had plenty. “Maybe Paige and Sharon have stuff we could borrow for the store, too?”

“Maybe. Come on. Let’s get started before you get your britches in a wad.”

“I’ll have you know, I’m going commando.” I really wasn’t, but I wanted to see if I could get Brock wound up. He was so laid back sometimes, and it drove me crazy.

“Are you now?” There was a twinkle in his eye, but otherwise, you would have thought I told him the sun was up.

I wiggled around, shaking my ass. “Want to find out?”

And that would probably lead us back to the bedroom. Brock opened his mouth to answer, but a banging in the kitchen interrupted and was promptly followed by,

“Yooohoo...Brock! Eddy!”

“Come on in, Evelyn.” Brock’s exasperated expression had me stifling a giggle.

But a visit from Evelyn meant coffee in the kitchen, and I loved Brock’s coffee. He’d inherited the blend from his grandfather along with the bookstore, and it was a town favorite for good reason.

Brock led me by the hand into the kitchen. “Good morning, Evelyn.”

“Dear, it’s nearly noon. Morning indeed.” She wore a pair of faded jeans tucked into her rubber boots and a bright coat with a flowery print. She pushed the hood off her head.

“Does that mean you don’t want coffee?” Brock reached for the pot.

“Heavens no. Pour me one. Cream and sugar, please.” Then she turned her eyes on me. “Well, Eddy. How’s the gaming going?”

“Just uploaded my latest edits. So, pretty good.”

“Lovely. Lovely.” She looked like she had more to say, or maybe she wanted to dig for the latest gossip she could share with the rest of the town. I swear that was her favorite pastime. One of the interesting things I’d discovered since moving here was the thriving gossip network in Foggy Basin—often headed by Brock’s neighbor.

Brock slid a doctored mug to Evelyn, then started fixing one for me. “What else can I do for you today, Ms. Evelyn?”

“Oh, well...” She seemed a little flustered, but she might have been faking it. “Lots of businesses downtown are getting ready for the holiday, but I noticed Books Beans

and Buns was not.” She glared at Brock as if he were a repeat offender, which he probably was. Not that he’d had the store long before I walked into his life. And then last year, our first together, he had closed the store to join me at Greg’s. But this year...

Inspiration struck like lightning. “Evelyn. Why don’t you come down later and help decorate? Maybe we can ask our family and friends to come too. Everyone can bring something to add. It’ll be fun.”

“Like a decorating party?” She sipped her coffee, staring at me over the rim.

“Yes!”

Brock rolled his eyes and handed me the mug. “Sounds chaotic.”

“Yes!” I cheered again before sipping my heavenly brew. “Mmm...so good.”

“Well, I’ll spread the word.” That’s what she did best anyway. “Let’s get that bookstore decorated. Brock, you better order extra buns and get that coffee brewing.”

“Uh...when are we doing this? The store is closed today.” It was Monday, and the only day of the week we ever closed, and sometimes not even on Monday.

I sat my mug on the counter and bounced on the balls of my feet. “We can get organized today and have everyone over tomorrow. Then we can have a big open house on Christmas Eve. My mom would love that.” Not that everything revolved around Mom, but any time I could show off, I wanted to. I wanted her to be proud of me, yes, but more importantly, I wanted to show her how happy and full my life had become.

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Chapter two

Brock

The rest of my day was spent in the dark, dusky attic, pulling down Christmas decorations. Once I found them. They'd been shoved to the farthest corner—of course. When Pops died, a lot of his belongings were boxed and stuffed up here, without much attention to order. Looking around, I figured I would need to finally get to sorting through all these things. Most of it I would keep, but some I would donate, and sadly, I was sure a bit of it would end up in the trash. It felt wrong for any part of Pops to go to the trash, but this wasn't him. It was only stuff. And it was for another time. Now was the time to drag that old artificial tree to the opening and down the rickety stairs so Eddy could fuss over it. Only Eddy could get me up here doing this. But I would do anything for my excitable sweetheart.

"The tree is coming. Watch out." That was the only warning I gave before the bulk of the box slid down the stairs, ending with a thump at the bottom.

"Woah. This is big. Does it even fit in the living room?"

"Yes. Pops always put it there when I was a kid." I backed down after it, since it was the last thing to go down, and pulled the attic closed behind me. "It's been up here a few years though. I don't know what kind of shape it's in."

"It'll be fine..." I recognized that sound from him, and when I turned, I saw a familiar expression on his face.

“What?”

“Why don’t we take this one to the store and get a real one for here?” His eyes lit up, and I wanted to give in, but I knew better this time.

“Eddy. This...this is huge. And do you really want to deal with pine needles everywhere?” I sure didn’t. “It won’t fit at the store. We need to get a tiny one for there.” Pops had never decorated Books Beans and Buns outside of a few signs in the window. I don’t know why, but this would be a first. But I knew my store and this tree would not work. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to say no on this one.”

Eddy pouted. “Fine...”

“But wait until you see all this stuff.” Pops had collected many things over the years, and a lot of it was from my childhood, packed safely away every year so it could be preserved. Eddy would totally get a kick out of it. And it would distract him from not getting his live tree. “Why don’t you call your mom and have her bring some things?”

“What kind of things?” He dragged one of the smaller boxes toward the living room.

“Sentimental things. Whatever she might still have from when you and Greg were kids.”

Eddy looked up at me, puzzled at first, but then his eyes flew wide and sparkled. “Oh! There’s stuff from your childhood in here.” He pointed to the box he was still struggling with.

“Yee-ees...”

“Woo-hoo. Let’s get these open.” He circled the box and shoved at it.

“Here.” I saved him from straining his poor muscles and moved the box into the living room, followed by the others, while Eddy started opening things up.

While he unwrapped ornaments and other Christmas nicknacks, I started on the tree. “I think I remember how this thing goes together.” It was a full, seven-foot blue spruce, a classic look. I fiddled with the stand and started inserting branches. I was totally absorbed, concentrating, and about halfway through when Eddy shrieked. “What? Are you okay? Eddy?”

“Ohmygawd, yes. Look at this.” He held up a Styrofoam ball with red felt strips circling it. I knew what it was. He turned it around, showing me a picture of myself from kindergarten or first grade.

“Yep, I made that.” I refused to be embarrassed by my chubby little six-year-old cheeks.

“Were you in kindergarten? This is sooo cute.”

“About that. I guess. There are a lot of treasures like that, I’m sure. Oh, look. I made this one in like third grade or something.” I reached for the thread-covered orb. “We used to have a few of them, but slowly, over the years, the thread came undone.” This one was a faded pink and had plastic gadgets stuck into it. I didn’t know what they were, but they probably helped keep the thing together.

“Pretty. Delicate then?”

“I guess.”

Eddy set the ornament aside carefully, cushioning it with a bit of tissue paper before digging back into the box. A few minutes later, he burst out laughing. “Ohmyheavens! This has to be you and Jackie, right?”

It was a Polaroid of us wearing reindeer antlers and big red rubber noses. “Heh! That was Christmas break from my freshman year at college.”

“Is this at the store?” He looked closer at the picture.

“Let me see.” I snatched it from him to inspect it. “Yep.” Bookshelves could be seen in the background.

“So cute. And young.”

“Hey, I’m not so old now. That was only a few years ago.” Actually, it had been too many, and I hadn’t felt that carefree in a long time. Until I met Eddy. “Maybe those noses are in here somewhere and you could wear one.”

“Haha. Not. I want to see you in a Santa hat though, so maybe I’ll be your sexy elf.” He wiggled around where he sat as if doing some kind of sexy dance, but it was really quite silly.

“You’re always my sexy elf.”

He stuck his tongue out at me. “Whatever.”

I finally got the tree up, and Eddy had the boxes unloaded with strings of lights crisscrossing the living room. It was a mess, and tomorrow, the store would be worse. But Eddy’s eyes had a renewed sparkle in them, so I didn’t care. Much.

And then he scowled.

“What’s wrong, sexy elf?”

“None of these lights work.” In fact, he had several strands lit up. “I mean. They do.

But they don't. Look." He pointed to unlit bulbs all over the place, and then he held up two strands that each had half their lights out. "I can't work with this."

"Let's run into town and get new ones." Simple.

But Eddy had more scowling.

"What?"

"I don't know. I was hoping to use what we had and not have to go anywhere. I still have to call a bunch of people and see if Mom can come early."

"What? Why? Why would she need to come early?"

"She will want to help decorate the store. Don't you think?"

"Eddy..." As much as he frustrated me, I would actually drive to Sacramento and back if I had to. Anything to make him happy. Almost.

"Whatever. Come on. Can I go like this?" He wore a T-shirt with some kind of video game graphic on it, but it wasn't one of his. And it was a little too big on him. Add to that his Sponge Bob sleep pants. And matching slippers.

"Can you throw on jeans and sneakers instead?"

"Yes," he huffed as he stomped off. But it didn't take him long, and in a few, he was back, his clothes completely different.

"You could have worn the same shirt."

"Why?" He shrugged. "If I was going to change, might as well change it all."

Besides..." He tugged at his branded shirt with his company logo emblazoned on the front. "Might as well get some advertising in."

"I call bullshit." This was a small town and everyone in it already knew who he was and what he did for a living. He had no need to advertise. Evelyn and Reuben, the mailman and partner in gossip crime, had already done that for him.

"Whatever. Let's just go." I didn't want to go anywhere with a cranky Eddy, though.

"Hey..." I grabbed him, wrapping him up all snugly in my arms. "Are you still commando?" I whispered in his ear.

"Ha! I wasn't earlier, but now I really am. It's your punishment for making me change." He shook his ass, so I grabbed it.

"I'll take care of that when we get back."

Eddy laughed then and didn't stop smiling as we headed to the car. Mission accomplished.

We parked in the little lot at Nuts and Bolts, the local hardware store, and walked up. Eddy darted over to the rocking chairs they'd put out in the front. It was a nice addition, and many of the locals spent time there hanging out and people-watching. And gossiping. Eddy rocked back and forth, talking with one of the said locals, Mr. Avery. He was an old guy who'd lived in Foggy Basin long before I was a kid here. He was old now and often confused me with Pops. But I didn't mind. It was nice to see someone still here after all this time. It reinforced the impression that in small towns like this, some things never changed. And never needed to.

I left Eddy rocking with Mr. Avery and walked inside, where there had been plenty of changes since Hudson had come back to town. He took over the store with his

partner, Jack, who was also a local when Hudson's father retired. They made a great couple and a great team. They cleaned the store up and shifted the inventory around. Everyone could tell that it was better now. They carried so many things that people needed, saving them a trip to the next town, and for some, that was lifesaving. For us, it was an amazing convenience.

They had put all the holiday stuff right out in front, so I didn't even have to search the store for it. Other places might have put it in the back, so you had to wander through the entire store to get to it. I could not complain about how Hudson and Jack ran this place. It was new, revitalized, but still a Foggy Basin staple, not unlike my store, and they always took the town population into consideration when laying things out.

Eddy sidled up next to me while I looked at the boxes of Christmas lights. "It's too cold to sit for long. I don't know how Mr. Avery does it."

"He's used to it."

"Mmm...I guess. I'm going to grab a cup of coffee to warm up. Be right back. Oh! Want one?"

"No, thanks." I didn't often drink coffee that wasn't Pops' blend. Hudson had put a station in the front of the store from the local bakery, Don't Go Bakin' My Heart, along with pastries. Their coffee was good, but not Pops good. I admit my bias, though.

I'd picked out a few boxes of lights before Eddy got back. "Here. Open your mouth."

I obliged, trusting him completely, and he stuffed something yummy inside. "Aww. Dah goo." Hard to talk with my mouthful of all that sweet goodness.

"It's Percy's. Of course."

All the pastries Percy and Ben made were fantastic. No lie. I might not drink their coffee, but I'd eat just about anything that came from their bakery.

In addition to the lights, Eddy grabbed a box of multi-colored plastic ornaments. And I slid in two mistletoe springs with big red bows. We dropped some of the stuff off at Books Beans and Buns, including a small tree, sized appropriately for the store, before heading home. Eddy called his mom to see how fast she could get here and if she needed transportation while I drove. He missed her so much. I needed to do something about that, one way or another.

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Chapter three

Eddy

By the time we got home, it was even colder outside, if that was possible. So much colder than Sacramento's normal weather. "Ugh...Brock, think we're going to get snow for Christmas?"

"You never know. We normally don't get much, if any. But it's plenty cold, right?"

"Uh, yeah." It snowed at the party when we got engaged, making the moment simply magical. But it didn't stick. Not to mention the weather warmed significantly the next day. But now...I shivered as I stomped out of my boots. "Maybe we can get the fireplace going. Ohmygawd!"

"What?"

"I forgot stockings." I ran through the hall and into the living room. We'd decked out the mantel with garland and the one strand of twinkle lights that actually worked. But it needed stockings for sure.

"We'll get some. But if we're going to light it now, it's probably good not to have felt hanging in front of it."

"Yeah, okay. Sure."

Brock worked on getting the logs going while I dashed upstairs. I wanted to bring

down a few blankets and pillows and get cozy in front of the fire. It was one thing we hadn't done in this house yet. I slipped a bottle of lube in my pocket before trundling downstairs with my cozy cache. I spread everything out but wanted a bit more. I pushed two chairs closer and tossed a light quilt over them. It was the perfect size to drape over everything and stiff enough to give a little structure to my blanket fort.

"Ooh..." Brock bent to unlace his boots. "I want in there."

"Uh-uh-uh." I wagged my finger at him, then pointed at the fort. "This is a no-clothes-zone."

"You still have clothes on." When Brock pouted, which wasn't often, it was a glorious thing. I couldn't keep my lips from his when that bottom one poked out.

I kissed him softly, then nibbled at his lip. "I was in construction mode. But now..." I held my hands over my head and took a step back. "Watch this." I pulled my clothes off as quickly as I could, camping it up. I liked being silly with Brock and felt free with him. The side benefit was getting him to laugh. When his dark bedroom eyes sparkled with mischief, it was like I brought him a joy he couldn't get anywhere else. It made my heart flutter every single fucking time. "Wah-la!" I held my hand up to show him I was now naked. Except for my socks, but it was cold, and a chill almost immediately raced up my spine, giving me bumps down my arms. I shivered overdramatically. "I'm getting in." I crawled under the blankets into the cozy nest I made.

Brock grumbled something, but he didn't take very long to get naked and join me. "You..." He grabbed me, pulling me close so my face smooshed into his furry chest. "You have been driving me crazy all day with your wiggling around and commando-talk." He grabbed my ass and squeezed. "I want you, and I'm not waiting."

"Well...you have to wait just a minute longer."

“Why?” Oh, my big bear was getting growly in the best possible way.

I pointed to where I’d dumped my clothes. “I left the lube out there.”

“Where?” He leaned out and riled through my clothes.

“Pants pocket.”

“Ah...got it.” Then he was back, cuddling me and scruffing my neck with his beard.

“I love you, Eddy. I want you to know that.”

“I know. I love you, too.”

“I love your fort, too.”

“Mmm...you’re almost too big for it. Oh, look.” I turned so we could see the fire.

“Great job, babe.”

“Thanks.” He buried his face in my neck again and squeezed me a bit. Then his hands wandered up my back, down my arms.

I touched him too. Sometimes, I touched him to make sure this was all real. “I’ve never been this happy in my whole life.”

“Good.” He kissed me, slow and sweet. I tried to put my feelings into it. It was not a simple kiss, not consumed with passion, but love and depth. But yes, heat. As our tongues lazily chased each other, that heat grew, followed by want. Then, it went deeper. And all along, it was accompanied by the dance of our hands, exploring each other.

“I need you, Brock.” I slid my hand over his cock and slowly stroked it.

Brock moaned and thrust his hips up. “Get ready. Let me watch you.”

I sat up, thankful it was a blanket roof instead of wood. Grabbing the lube, I went to work on my hands and knees. My sticky, lube-covered fingers teased my ass open until I was satisfied it was enough. “Want to ride you.” I climbed on top of him, pausing to slick him up before positioning his dick at my hole. Then, slowly sat on it, taking him in, inch by inch.

Once I was seated, I began to move. Brock grabbed my hips and helped me along while flexing his. The pace was leisurely while we enjoyed each other, the feel, the heat. Until. He hit my prostate—the magic button—and just like that, I was ready for more. “Brock! Fuck me.”

He flipped me over, taking down the quilt-roof in the process. But I did not care. The fire was crackling, the floor was cushioned, and Brock was inside me. Moving faster. Grunting. Moaning.

Our bodies slapped together, and I flexed to meet him with each pounding thrust. Quickly, I moved to that feeling on the edge of coming but not. I wanted to stay there forever with Brock looming over me, moving inside me, holding me in thrall. I didn’t want to come because then it would be over. At the same time, I needed the orgasm that lingered out of reach.

Brock brushed his lips against my ear. “Come for me, baby. I want to feel you...”

“No...I don’t want to stop.”

Brock chuckled. “We can always do it again.” He pushed forward, as much of him inside me as possible, then he pulled out. Again. And again.

I lifted my ass off the floor, searching for the perfect angle, and when he hit it again, I

exploded, no longer able to hold it back. Brock kept fucking me through it until, finally, he stopped and grunted. I felt him come hard.

Afterward, we cleaned up and put the roof back on our little blanket house. Then we snuggled up. I was home in this man's arms.

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Chapter four

Brock

I did indeed order extra sticky buns and put on the coffee with a second pot of cocoa. Percy did a fantastic job filling the order on short notice. That was one of the things I loved most about living in a small town like Foggy Basin. The other business owners were friends who would go out of their way for you with only a moment's notice without worrying about ever being paid back. But I would try to do something nice for my baker friend.

The extra buns were needed, for sure. We weren't open long before people streamed in. Starting with Jackie, but that shouldn't have surprised me. He was my best friend and my backup for the store. "Hey, hey, hey!" he called as the bell on the door jingled softly.

"Isn't that supposed to be ho, ho, ho?" Eddy rushed over and gave Jackie a big hug. I was incredibly happy and relieved that those two got along. In fact, they more than got along. They seemed to be working on a fantastic friendship. Then Eddy pulled out that old Polaroid and shoved it in his face. "Oh wait, you're the reindeer!"

"What the hell?" Jackie snatched the picture out of Eddy's hands and stared at it for only a second before he doubled over with laughter. "Oh. Gawd. Brock. Remember..." He took a deep breath and held the picture up. "Remember this..." And he was laughing again.

"Yes. I do. You goofball."

Jackie slapped the picture on the counter and slowly, slowly calmed down. “This is too much. Where did you find this?”

“We pulled down boxes from Brock’s attic.”

“This is great. I’m going to share it on my blog.” Jackie whipped out his phone and snapped a picture of the picture. “Those were the days, right, Brock? We were so ridiculous back then.”

“Back then?” I glared at him but also handed him a cup of coffee, fixed how he liked it.

“Whatever. You’re not as quick to jump at my proposed shenanigans but I have a feeling I know how to goad you into doing whatever I want.” He raised an eyebrow and stared at Eddy, who stood there nodding with a big shit-eating grin plastered all over his face. I was in trouble.

“Whatever, you goof. Let’s get started on the decorating already.” This was going to be a mess, but if it made everyone happy, I could live with it. “Eddy, when’s your mom getting here?”

“They’re on their way. So soon. I hope.”

“Oh?” Jackie asked. “Is your brother coming with her?”

“No. He’s still coming later in the week. He has to work, but Al is going to drive her up.”

“Oh. Al? So...uh, they’ll be here? Later today?”

“Uh, yeah...why?”

“No reason. Just curious. Let me help with these lights.”

I watched Jackie with narrowed eyes. He was acting suspiciously. I didn't know what he was up to or what that had to do with Eddy's mom, but if he pranked her, that would be a problem. She was a sweet, loving woman, but she was getting up there in age too, and I did not want anything to happen with her. I'd have to keep an eye on my buddy.

Eddy and Jackie got to work on stringing lights, but the tiny tree we bought had them built in, so they worked on the shelves while I set it up on the front counter. Eddy had found tiny ornaments in one of our boxes at home, so he brought them for the tree. It took all of two minutes to decorate it.

“Yoo-hoo! Brock!” Evelyn jingled her way inside. She wore bells that out-rang the door. I hadn't thought that possible, but she was something else. “Some others are coming in a few, but I wanted to get here early to see if you needed anything else.”

“I don't think so. I brought some stuff from home and some we got at Nuts and Bolts, so...”

“Oh, I saw Paige yesterday. She's also bringing some things.” Evelyn was entirely too excited. The last thing she needed was sticky buns and coffee, but we made our way to the back of the store where she'd get both.

“Here you go. Thanks for spreading the word, Evelyn.”

“Mmm...my pleasure. For sure.” She dug into the sticky bun and rolled her eyes with pleasure. “You need to put some holiday music on, Brock. It's feeling festive here!”

“Oh, yeah. Eddy brought some. I'll get it going.” I moved to my office, where the controls for the seldom used PA system were and plugged Eddy's phone in to run the

playlist he made.

It wasn't long before Paige showed up with her wife Sharon in tow, a couple of guys from the police station with them. They had their treats and then worked on decking out all the shelves with garland.

Everyone was working happily or snacking on the buns when Reuben stopped in. "Brock, hello. Look what I have for you today." He was the mailman in town for as long as I could remember. In fact, I recalled him and Pops standing at the counter—or rather leaning on it—and shooting the shit for hours when I was a kid. He handed me a card. It had a picture of Foggy Basin Main Street all lit up with holiday lights on the front of it. "Look. Your store is right there." The back side said Happy Holidays from Foggy Basin .

"Well, that's real nice. Thanks."

"Your Pops would have loved it."

Evelyn sidled up to him with a cup of coffee. "He would indeed." They made an interesting pair, with Reuben's flaming red hair and Evelyn's light brown, turning to silver.

I left them chatting. Or rather gossiping. I heard a few mentions of Pops, but I was sure it would turn to current events soon enough. Evelyn giggled at something he said, but I moved on. They could go like that forever. I did miss Pops being with them in that gossip gaggle, though. I missed him in everything, but not as painfully as I used to.

It didn't take long at all before the place looked like Christmas exploded all over it. Garland and lights were everywhere. The music was cheery, and people were laughing. It all warmed my heart. I wondered what Pops would think. He'd never

done this, and I didn't know exactly why. This was nice.

"Hello." Eddy's mom bebopped in with Alfred in tow. He worked for Eddy's company as head of IT and security.

"Hi, Mom!" Eddy ran over and hugged her, long and tight. It was so easy to tell how much he missed her. Maybe we needed to talk about moving her to Foggy Basin, or at least Miller's Point or Hartsville. They had hospitals and were a lot closer than Sacramento. She was happy at her assisted living center, but maybe to be closer to Eddy, she'd consider it. In fact, they should move their HQ to Foggy Basin so all of Eddy's family could be here. That probably wasn't going to happen, but I wanted it for Eddy. To make him happy, but also maybe to give me a little more assurance that my husband wasn't going to leave me to go back home to the city.

But when he finished hugging his mom and saying hello to Alfred, he put his arm around my waist and squeezed. That was everything.

We got them coffee and the last few buns. "Alfred, how long are you staying?" Eddy asked him.

"I'm not. Leaving soon. Gotta get back." He held up his coffee. "As usual, this is the best." Then he pulled out his phone and snapped a few pictures of the coffee and half-eaten sticky bun. He tended to post things on Instagram a lot. I didn't care. It had helped drive heavier tourist traffic through here. People often stopped in on their way to the lake to fish or just pass through on the way back to the city. But it has increased since last spring when Alfred attended our wedding and posted everything on social media.

Jackie walked back from the store front. "Hello. I was working on the window. Good to see you."

“Oh, and you.” Eddy’s mom got up and hugged Jackie. She’d taken a liking to him as if she could sense he needed a mother figure.

Alfred hummed and then slipped off to the bathroom without saying anything.

Jackie stared after him. Hmm...maybe I had misunderstood his earlier reaction. He wasn’t pranking anyone—he was anxious about Alfred. I’d have to keep my eye on that. And for the next hour, I did. They danced around each other until finally Alfred found Eddy and said his goodbyes. Jackie watched him leave with a puppy-dog pout but didn’t say a damn thing to the man.

I bumped into Jackie’s shoulders. “What’s up with that?”

“Up with what?”

I made the puppy face at him and pointed the way Alfred had gone. “That.”

He punched my arm. “Shut the fuck up.”

Oh, there was definitely something going on with them. “Really? Alfred?”

Jackie’s cheeks turned pink. “Really. Stop. Okay, he’s nerdy cute. And do not say anything to Eddy. I mean it.”

“How do I not keep something from him? He’s my husband.” I suspected there was more here than Jackie crushing on Alfred. “Why would he care if you liked the man?” Jackie looked off to the right—his tell that he was lying or hiding something. “Wait. Did you sleep with him?”

He jumped at me, covered my mouth with his hand, and mad whispered at me. “I told him I wouldn’t tell anyone. Come on. He doesn’t want to get in trouble with Eddy.”

I peeled Jackie's fingers off. "Why would that get him in trouble? You're grown men. And it's not like you work for the company."

"I don't know." He held up his hands, clearly exasperated.

"You want a repeat, huh?"

Jackie sighed. "Doesn't matter. He wouldn't even look at me."

"Oh, he looked." Jackie's eyes flew open wide. "You should go after him. Hurry before he really goes." I was betting he was sitting in his car, waiting and maybe struggling with indecision.

Jackie took off like a bat out of hell. Eddy came up behind me. "Where's he off to in such a hurry."

I grabbed Eddy's face and popped a kiss on his mouth. "I'll tell you later."

Not long after that, everyone cleared out, and we took his mother back to our place. Eddy broke out the cocoa and we settled in front of the tree after he hung the four stockings he'd swiped from the stuff Paige had brought over. I had to admit it was nice. It had been a long, crazy day, but the ear-to-ear smile on Eddy's face was worth every bit of it.

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Chapter five

Eddy

I was working in my makeshift office. Well, that's what I said I was doing. Because I was really secret Christmas shopping, and I was nearly out of time. I didn't know what the hell to get Brock that would be special and meaningful. I didn't want to get him just anything. I had a few just anything presents for him already, but I need that one thing.

I was also supposed to be getting the room ready for Greg. But I didn't want to. I scrolled down the Amazon screen one more time, feeling seriously like I wouldn't find what I wanted there, regardless of how fast they could or couldn't deliver it.

"Knock, knock. Can I come in?" Mom rapped her knuckles against the doorframe.

"Hey, Mom. Come in."

"That sounds like you're exasperated. As usual. Is it your game?"

"What? No. I'm not even working on the game."

She circled around my desk to see what I was really doing. "Oh. Are you stuck on what to get for someone? Greg doesn't need anything."

"No. Yes. Not Greg. Brock." I pulled my hair.

Mom tapped my fingers, getting me to let go. “How do you not have something for Brock?”

“I mean, I do, but I don’t. I don’t have anything good. You know, memorable. Sentimental. He loves sentimental.”

“Well. I may be able to help.” She smiled slyly—so much like Greg’s evil, up-to-something expression. Then she darted out of the room, still really spry for her age.

She came back a moment later as I was logging out of my useless laptop. “What’s up, Mom? What did you do?”

She stuck her hand out, showing me a box. A ring box. “I was going to give this to you for Christmas or after or something. I mean. I didn’t give it to you before because I didn’t give it to Greg, and he’s the oldest, plus he married first. But I never liked his partner.” She crinkled her nose, then shook the box at me. “But I talked to him, and well, this feels right.” She winked at me as I took it from her. “We absolutely adore Brock.”

I slowly opened her box, revealing her ring. Her wedding ring. It was a gold band etched with the words love is eternal in a gorgeous script. Inside, it had her name and dad’s. I didn’t have to look to know it. It wasn’t feminine at all. Simple. Classic. “Oh. Mom.”

“Yeah. You’re probably going to have to get it sized, but my fingers are big. It should work. If you want to give it to him. You know, it was actually my dad’s ring. But I didn’t want to part with it, so when I married your dad, we added our names, and I kept it for mine.” She had never been very traditional. She did her own thing, and I loved her and admired her for it and hoped I took after her in some small way. Looking at my life now, I guessed I probably did.

“I think he’ll love it. It’s perfect.”

I hugged her tight, and she kissed the side of my head as she hugged me back. “I have another idea, too. We have to go out for this one and maybe enlist the help of your nosey neighbor. What’s her name again?”

“Evelyn?”

“Yep. Come on. Get some shoes on. Let’s go.”

That night, I held Brock tight. Mom and I had the ring sized while we were out, and it was going to be a perfect fit when I slid it on his finger. Our other surprise was ready, too. Christmas was going to be amazing. But the best part was this big, sexy man beside me. I snuggled in close.

Brock snuggled me right back. “You okay?”

“Perfect. So perfect. I love you so much.” I kissed his neck and nuzzled against his bearded chin.

“I love you too, babe. I hope you’re having a great Christmas so far.”

“I am. The best.”

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Chapter six

Brock

I had to get up early and open the store—guests or not. The truth was, I didn't mind. I liked the store, even decorated in all the Christmas-crazy. After all these years, all the time that passed, and even with all the changes I'd made to it, the store was still one of my favorite places to be. Plus, I'd ordered a few presents for Eddy to be delivered there, and they were supposed to come in later that day. I hadn't timed it so that Eddy would be occupied by his mother, but that sure as hell worked in my favor.

So I'd left Eddy sleeping in and started the coffee. And promised to work out later as I shoved a muffin in my mouth. Before the coffee could finish brewing though, there was a knock on the door. The front door—so I doubted it was Evelyn. Who the hell? And before coffee? Rude .

My brain sounded more and more like Eddy all the time. With a huff, I trudged to the door before whoever it was woke the whole house. I pulled open the door.

“Chella.” Of course, my birthmother would show up out of the blue. “What do you want?”

“Uh! Brock...” She shook her head, sending a million tiny bells jingling. They were woven in her massive mane, which was still a rich, dark brown. I was pretty sure she died it. Crow's feet deepened around her dark eyes as she laughed. She looked entirely too much like me, but that was the only similarity. “I'm still your mother.”

“Barely.”

Her frown eased the lines around her eyes while simultaneously showing off the ones around her mouth. Her garish red lipstick didn't hide the cracks there from years of smoking. “It's Christmastime. I wanted to see you.”

“I assume you're passing through.” I didn't want her here any longer than she had to be. We had been on good terms the last time she left, but since then, she missed Pops's funeral and my wedding. And I didn't have any patience for that.

“I get it. You're mad. I know. I missed his funeral. It was too hard.” Sorry tinted her eyes, and for once, she appeared truly remorseful.

“Whatever. Come in.”

“I knew you'd understand.” She gave me a hug, which I half-heartedly accepted.

“You might as well meet Eddy. It was bound to happen.”

“Eddy? Oh, do you have a boyfriend now? Finally...”

“No, Chella. I have a husband. You'd know that if you bothered—”

She squealed, an unholy sound that I was sure would wake him. “Married? How?”

I heard his slow steps on the stairs. “I met him after Pops died. It was fast, but still. Eddy? I want you to meet someone.”

He joined us in the foyer with wide eyes, looking completely adorable in his Xbox sleep pants with rumpled hair. “You must be Brock's mother. I see the resemblance.”

“Yes, hi. So glad to meet you. Uh, didn’t mean to wake you. I figured Brock would be up. Heading to the store?” She held my arm like a lifeline.

“I am. As soon as the coffee is done. You can come with.” I pulled away, knowing they would both follow me into the kitchen. I poured coffee for all of us. I could imagine a million questions swimming through Eddy’s head. “We can maybe do more introductions this evening. Sound good? I do have to open the store.”

We all agreed, and since Chella had been dropped off at the house by an Uber, I figured she was spending the day with me, and I let her climb on my bike behind me. Eddy leaned in for a quick kiss, then ran back into the house. It was entirely too cold to be outside in pajamas.

At the store, while I dealt with the delivery from Percy, Chella looked around, noting the changes. “It looks amazing, Brock. You did a great job. Pops would be proud.”

“I’m sure he would. We’re doing all right.”

“Listen. I didn’t know you were seeing anyone. Let alone getting married. I maybe would have been around more if—”

“Don’t say that. It’s a lie. You go with the wind. I get it. Don’t apologize.”

She sighed heavily and leaned against the front counter on her elbows, another cup of coffee in hand. “Doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

“So you say.” The tension was still sitting there between us, but at least my heart was less heavy. A little. Maybe it was because she’d caught me off guard. I didn’t have any more time to think about it or discuss it because customers started coming in. Some were attracted by the décor, but most were looking for last-minute gifts. By the time I had a break, my order had arrived.

“You really are doing well here. Pops never did great. I think a lot of people bought his books to help him out. This town has always been that way.”

“Maybe...” I opened the box, sitting on my desk.

“Is that for Eddy?”

I nodded and sucked my bottom lip between my teeth as I pulled the book out. It was a rare edition of *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson. The plot and how we met kind of fit together. Not perfectly, but enough. And he'd appreciate its value. “It's in better shape than I thought.”

“I don't know if he's going to like old books the way you do, Brock.”

I glared at her. “You don't know him.”

“I know enough. Xbox pants, he's younger than you.” She tilted her head to the side. “But a little nerdy. I'd bet he'd like superhero comics or something like that better.”

I made a noise. “He'll appreciate this. I promise. But it's not everything.” I pointed to the other box sitting on the floor by the desk. Chella moved over to it.

“Can I open it?”

“Sure. You can help me wrap them, too.”

She got the box open and pulled one of the mugs out. It had a cute vampire cartoon that said I'm a biter on it. There were four different monsters, all with the same caption on each mug. She raised an eyebrow as she unpacked them. “Cute?”

I laughed. “This is Eddy. He makes video games that have monsters and shit in them.

He loves monster movies. Vampires and Zombies are his favorite.” I pointed to the two that corresponded with those. “And he’s a coffee fiend.”

“He’d have to be.” That wasn’t a lie. Our family was all about the coffee. I started drinking the coffee blend Pops created when I was a teen.

“You’re not wrong.” I leaned over and picked up one of the other mugs. It had some kind of sea creature on it. “His first game had something like this in it.”

“His game...” She looked at the mug. “Splash Zone?” She raised an eyebrow. “Are you telling me that your husband created the Splash Zone video game?”

“Uh...yes. I’m surprised you know of it.”

“Please.” She rolled her eyes. “Can’t get away from it. Anyone who likes video games loves it.”

“Well. There you go. That’s my man.” The final mug had an alien. The typical green-skinned, big-eyed one. “He’s going to love these for sure.” They were a good size, too. A lot of times, when you bought mugs with cool stuff on them, they were tiny.

“Well. I guess you know your husband.”

“What are you really trying to say, Chella?”

She blew out a long breath. “I’m impressed. I mean. I know you’re amazing, but you don’t put yourself out there. And coming back to Foggy Basin? Yeah, I thought that meant you’d never find anyone. And here you not only found someone, but he’s a cutie and successful.”

“I don’t care about his success. I mean, yeah, it’s nice, but honestly, I fell in love with

him before I understood that.”

“You’ve such a golden heart.” I knew she did, too. It was harder to see it under all that wanderer lust. But I knew it. A part of me worried that thinking such things about her was my imagination. Wishful thinking. But she was raised by Pops, same as me.

After closing the shop, we drove home. I’d called Eddy earlier and asked him to figure out dinner for the four of us. The conversation was going to be interesting. Chella and Denise were completely different people. Opposites. And. I called Denise Mom. A name I had never used with Chella. Lord knew she tried to change that over the years, but she hadn’t raised me. She had never been a mother.

I pulled up into the driveway and balanced the bike while Chella dismounted like a pro. She took off the helmet Eddy normally used and tucked it under her arm. “Where you want to put this?”

“Bring it in.” We had a place for both our helmets in the hall entry. After stowing them away, we headed in to find Eddy and his mother.

They had the dining room table decked out with a Christmassy centerpiece, which consisted of a plain vase filled with little ornaments and a bit of garland wrapped around the base. “Nice.” They’d also found the placemats that must have been stuffed in one of the boxes. I hadn’t seen them in forever.

Chella laughed and touched one. “I remember these. Wow. Can’t believe you still have them.”

“I still have everything of Pops. You’re welcome to go through some of it.” He was her father, after all.

“Maybe some other time. Hi, I’m Chella.” She stretched her hand out to Eddy’s mom.

“Denise.” She shook Chella’s hand. “I hope you don’t mind, Brock, but we also used the good plates.”

“Not at all. The table looks fantastic. Where’s Eddy?”

“Uh...he took something over to Evelyn’s. He’ll be right back.”

“Hm... How is that old broad anyway? I haven’t seen her in years.” Chella pulled out a chair and sat down at the table.

“Just as nosey as ever. And gossipy. She’ll bend Eddy’s ear all night over there. I probably should go get him.”

“Oh, not at all.” Denise patted my arm. “He’ll be fine. Why don’t you both go get cleaned up for dinner? It’s not fancy, but we managed to cook for you.” She smiled sweetly.

I bent over and kissed her cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

Of course, that was enough to get Chella to jump up and follow me upstairs. “Mom?” She started in on me as soon as we were out of earshot.

“Yes. She’s Eddy’s mom, so I call her Mom .”

“What happened to all that I’m not calling anyone Mom who didn’t raise me?”

I huffed. “I meant you.”

“Right.” She shoved me toward the back bedroom. “Renovations look nice, Brock. I’ve never seen this old house looking so good.”

“Thanks.”

She kissed my cheek. “You’re more than welcome, baby.” Then she pinched me where she’d kissed before turning into the guest bathroom.

It left me a little surprised. But I always knew she had a lot of respect for Pops. Maybe seeing this place differently made her nostalgic. I didn’t know what the hell that woman was thinking. I headed to my room and washed up.

Eddy had returned by the time I went back downstairs. I hugged him tightly and kissed him. “Missed you.”

“Missed you more.”

“No, you didn’t. You were hanging out with your mom all day. No time to even think about me.”

“On the contrary, my dear. We talked about you all day.” He laughed manically as if he’d been up to no good.

“I should have known.”

Dinner was simple. Chicken and rice with green beans. We opened a bottle of Chardonnay to go with it. The conversation was mostly Chella regaling us with stories of her travels all over the country. In fact, she had been in Boston when she heard about Pops passing and couldn’t get back. I didn’t ask her why it took her so long, though. Surely, she could have been here sooner, knowing I was here dealing with it alone.

Eddy’s mother was fantastic, asking tons of questions and laughing when Chella said something funny. It was interesting seeing the impression Chella had on someone

who didn't know her. It made me question my feelings. Was I being too hard on her? Not hard enough?

After dinner, Chella and I tackled the dishes, and I was elbow-deep in soapy water while Chella was drying. "I really like Eddy. I can see how much he loves you."

"We fit."

"You do. Reminds me of Pops and Mamma." We rarely talked about her mother. "She was...more like Denise. A better mom than I could ever be."

I started to protest, though I had no idea why.

"No," Chella stopped me. "We both know better. And I'm sorry I was such a shitty mom." She turned away from me as she dried a plate.

I thought about that for a minute. I had come to the decision that not everyone in the world was cut out to be a parent, and that included her. I was only dragging out these hurt feelings because she didn't come when Pops died. And that was my expectation, not her reality. "You gave me your dad. Pops was the best parent."

"He always was. I never blamed him for my shit. Not once."

"I know. He never held it against you, either. Said you were just who you were." Which was probably how I came to terms with her in the first place.

"Yeah, a lot like my mom in some ways. She did her own thing, no matter what anyone said. Unlike me though, her own thing happened to be Pops. Rest her soul. Rest both their souls now."

"You missed his funeral."

“I know. I’m sorry. I couldn’t...I know it hurt you. Maybe this will make up for it.” She put the towel down, pulled a ring off her finger, and held it out to me. “This was my mother’s. Pops had given it to her, and I think Eddy should wear it.” It was a simple gold band. Nothing special. “Look here.” She put it in my palm and turned it over. My grandmother’s initials were engraved on one side of a tiny heart and Pops’ were on the other side. The script was worn and faded but could still be seen.

It was the most selfless thing she’d done, next to dropping me off with Pops when I was a baby. I clutched the ring. “Thank you.”

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“ A ll of the lights, all of the fun, all of us here, all of us one.” I couldn’t help singing when I entered the shop. After all, it was the morning of Christmas Eve.

And I shouldn’t have been surprised when my mom belted out the next line of Kelly Clarkson’s Christmas song. “Only a gift, only a toy, only for a good girl and boy.”

Then we sang the next line together and danced through the center of the store. “The greatest party you ever did see...”

“What is that?” Brock unlocked the back door to meet Percy.

“Dude. Kelly Clarkson. Come on.”

Brock muttered something under his breath and stepped outside. Percy was there with the buns as usual.

“Hey, Percy. Bring Ben by later! It’s a party all day.”

He waved from the doorway. “Sure will. Thanks, Eddy.”

He made me wish we had presents for everyone in town, but that was a tall order. Small or not, we knew a lot of people. In fact, not ten minutes after opening, Haven dashed in. “Brock! I need coffee and buns to go. And did you get that book I ordered? Oh, hi, Eddy.”

“Hi. I’ll grab the book while Brock gets your buns.” I winked just to see him blush at the double entendre. He was good friends with Brock, and since he’d found his honey

in Maddox, he'd opened up a lot. It was obvious he was happy, but still, he was a reserved man.

"Leave him alone, Eddy." Brock swiped a hand through the air. He wasn't mad, though.

I laughed as I danced into the back office to grab the book. I heard Brock introducing Mom. I had never been happier, and I was thrilled she was here to see that. "Here you go." I handed him the book.

"Thanks. I'll settle up this afternoon."

"No worries, Haven." Brock wouldn't care a bit about the money. Especially since Haven let him use the garage at Twisted Chassis to work on the bike all the time. "Consider it a Christmas present. Tell Maddox hello."

"Thanks, Brock. Yeah. I have to run." He held the Styrofoam box of sticky buns up. "This is for him." He smiled as he dashed through the store.

"That was nice." I sidled up to Brock. His heart was gigantic. "It was almost like you read my mind."

"Read what mind?"

"Har-har, big guy. Leave the funny to the comedians, will ya?" I smacked his chest. "Seriously, I was just thinking how nice it would be to have gifts for everyone."

"Not everyone. That's too much. But the closest friends, I think we have a thing or two. Jackie and my cousin..."

"But I meant something small."

Mom set her coffee down and cleared her throat. “Why don’t you give out free coffee today?”

“And buns!” I jumped up and down.

“Perfect.” Brock caught me and cuddled me in, kissing the side of my face. “Now go put on some real Christmas music. Enough of your singing.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, but I also obliged, turning on the music we’d had playing when we decorated.

Mom followed me into the office and leaned against the desk. “This is nice, Eddy.”

“What is?”

“Your life.”

I circled around and hugged her. “I found where I belong.”

“That you did.”

The conversation was interrupted by a group of people coming in the front. “Come on.” We went to the front to greet everyone. Sharon had brought in a bunch of the guys from the Sheriff’s Office, including the sheriff, Clay West, and Officer Duarte, who everyone knew was with Andrew Star, who owned the Blue Star Diner. They really made a dreamy couple. “Andrew, is the diner open tonight? I want to take my mom.” It was the best food in town.

“We’re open.” He patted my shoulder. “We’re always open. Tonight. Tomorrow. Prime rib and baked ham on the menu.”

“Great. We’ll be in. Mom will love your ham for sure.”

The rest of the officers and Sharon got coffee and buns, and most of them left afterward, but Sharon stuck around. “Paige will be over later. She kicked me out of the house.” She winked knowingly.

“Ah...she’s up to something. Right?” I sat next to her at the coffee bar.

“Oh, I bet she is. Hey, when everyone finds out these are free today, they’ll be by. Whole town.”

“Right. That’s the idea.”

“You might want to call Percy and ask for another order. They’re going to go fast. Hell, free sticky buns from Percy? Sign me up any day.”

Brock slapped the counter. “You’re not wrong. I’ll go call him now. I don’t want to put extra work on him. I’ll take whatever he has.”

“Oh, maybe he has Christmas cookies or cake!” That got me excited. Percy was really the best. So talented. My taste buds were happy he was in Foggy Basin.

“I’ll call him.” He headed into the office.

Sharon wasn’t kidding, though. And it didn’t take long for the shop to fill with people wanting Percy’s treats. We bought a ton of Christmas cookies. Percy was totally going to sell out between what we had and what folks could get at his store. We saw half the town before noon, and we sent more than a few over to Don’t Go Baking My Heart to get other goodies for their holidays.

I hugged Nate, the big bear from Pints and Pool, when he came in. He’d helped me out when I first came to town and put up half our wedding party, not there were a lot of people who came from out of town when we got married. But he was a good guy, and so was his man, Kit.

Evelyn showed up. Of course. She gabbed her way through the store, chatting with everyone. She came by a lot, but hardly bought anything but sticky buns. It didn't matter to us. Books Beans and Buns was a staple business for our community that always welcomed everyone. And taking after Nuts and Bolts a bit, Brock didn't hesitate to give out free coffee or cocoa if someone needed it. More often than not, the kids who came to the store to game were cocoa recipients.

And all those teens showed up, making it even more of a party. Mom made another pot of cocoa for them and hooked them up with treats, then they all took turns on the gaming consuls. I spent some time chatting with them. I loved getting their input on what they liked and didn't like about the games they played. As a game designer, it helped a lot to hear it right from the best customers.

Eventually, Greg showed up. I raced through the store and hugged him tight. "So glad to see you."

"You too, little bro." He chuckled as he peeled me off of him. "I talk to you all the time, though."

"Yeah, I know. But, actually having you in the same room is different."

"Whatever." He winked at me so I knew he was playing. "Where's Mom?"

"Uh..." I looked around. "Oh, there." I pointed across the shop to the Body, Mind & Spirit section. She was looking at books with Evelyn and Paige, who had shown up at some point.

"I'll go say hello."

Jackie bounced over to me. "Hey. I saw Greg come in. Is, uh, Al coming, too?"

"I don't think so." I lifted an eyebrow, questioning why he was asking about Alfred,

but Jackie smiled, held up his hands, and walked away. Brock was right. Something was going on with them. I'd have to give Alfred a call and let him know I didn't care if he dated Jackie. Maybe that would help.

Brock, wearing the Santa hat I bought him, handed me a coffee. "I like this on you, baby." I adjusted it a bit. He was sexy in anything, really, but I loved that he was getting in the Christmas spirit.

"Good, but you did not dress up like an elf. And you promised."

"I didn't have enough time. But there's always next year."

He looked up at the ceiling then and pointed. "You know you're under the mistletoe?"

"Oh shit. When did that get put up there?"

"Jackie did it."

"The stinker."

"I'll thank him later." Then Brock pulled me close and kissed me. A few people hooted and cheered, and I smiled into the kiss. This was the best Christmas ever.

Greg woke up early Christmas morning, hooting like a child as he tore through the house. He banged on our door. "Get your asses up! It's Christmas." Then he took off, yelling, "Mom! Get up!"

Brock groaned and pulled a pillow over his head. "Really?"

"He's always been like that."

“I thought you were the excitable one.” Brock wasn’t wrong. Most of the time, it was me pinging off the walls.

“Not at Christmas.” I couldn’t hold back my chuckle. We’d had so many great Christmases over the years. Mom always made them wonderful, even when she didn’t have much money for presents. It wasn’t about that for us. The excitement was about being together as a family. Enjoying the morning, the tree, the lights, and mostly the company. “Let’s go, big guy.”

Brock sat up and grabbed me. “Not so fast, Spaghetti-Eddy.”

“What the hell? Spaghetti-Eddy? I’m vetoing that shit right now.”

“That’s what I call you in my head when you get squirmy, especially when you’re squirming away.”

I snuggled into his arms, loving the feel of them—my big hunky man. “I’m not squirming anywhere. Yet. And seriously, don’t call me that.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Okay. I, uh, have something for you, but I don’t want to do it in front of everyone. I want this for just us. Okay?”

“Uh...sure, Brock. Whatever you want.”

He pulled away and pilfered through his drawer, pulling out something very small that fit in his hand. “It’s not wrapped. I don’t even have a box, but I don’t think that matters.”

“Okay.” I sat up, serious now. What was it?

“You know my bio-mom was here.”

“Don’t sound so grumpy about it. Chella was nice and the visit was relatively painless, if overdue.”

“Very overdue, but I’m not getting on that now.” He cleared his throat and shook his hand that hid the gift. “She gave me this to share with you.” He turned his hand over and opened his fingers, revealing a gold band. “This was her mother’s. My grandmother. She said she thought I should give it to you.”

“Oh, Brock.” I picked it up out of his palm. “I love it.” After examining it, I slid it on my finger, snug to my wedding band. He got a huge, messy kiss after that—morning breath and all. “Turns out. I have something for you, too. Hang on.” I jumped out of bed and dug into the pocket of one of my jackets where I’d hidden Mom’s ring. “I have a box, but...” I handed it to him.

Brock opened it and smiled brightly. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yep. My mom gave it to me to give to you. I’ll tell you all of it later, but it was hers. And her dad’s before that. It has their names in it, and I thought we could add ours.”

“I love it. This is kind of funny.”

“It is. And special. Oh, shit! Time. Get up. Get dressed. Let’s go.” I had something else for him that was going to be at our back door any minute.

Brock was not a rusher by nature, but I danced around him, pulling on clothes and throwing his at him, pushing him to get them on, out the door, and down the stairs. Just in time. “Hello!” Evelyn called from the door.

“Already?” Brock grumbled. He complained about her, but I could tell, secretly, he loved having her around. She was a living, breathing reminder of Pops and his youth. “Merry Christmas, Evelyn. Want coffee?”

“Not today, Brock. I’m playing Santa.” She pulled up the furry bundle of joy and handed it over the bottom half of the Dutch door. She’d even attached a red bow to his collar. “Merry Christmas, my friend.”

“What? What is this?”

I sidled up behind him, giving him a tight hug. “Merry Christmas, baby. I got you a puppy.”

“Holy shit.” Brock took the dog while everyone crammed into the kitchen nook. “What’s his name? Is it a him?”

“It is a her , and you get to do the naming.”

Evelyn chuckled. “I’ve been calling her dog .”

“Oh, that won’t do.” Brock cuddled her up to him, fitting her under his chin. Score! “I’ve already got a better name. Eve. For Christmas Eve.”

“That’s perfect.” Evelyn shivered and looked around. “Oh, it’s starting to snow. I better go.”

“Merry Christmas, Evelyn. And thank you.” I waved as she scampered carefully back to her house. It was indeed snowing. “Look, Brock! I knew it.”

“You called that one. But we have other Christmas gifts to open. You ready, Eddy?” I couldn’t even be mad at the rhyme with my name while watching his bright eyes as he cuddled the pooch—Eve.

“You know, we’re going to have to make an appointment to get her to the vet.”

“I’ll call Alex in the next day or two.” Brock meant the town’s new veterinarian,

though he wasn't so new anymore. He fit right in with this town, kind of like me.

"Good. Come on." I led him, Mom, and Greg into the living room by the tree and handed out gifts. Most were little things, and I didn't care at all what was there for me. Well, not after receiving his grandmother's ring. But there was an old book, which shouldn't have surprised me coming from Brock. It was actually gorgeous and a rare edition.

"That book reminds me of how we met." He cuddled next to me as I examined it. I saw his reasoning a little, but...

"I never read it. Believe it or not."

"I think you'll like it. It's an adventure. Just be careful with the pages. It is valuable. Well, a little anyway."

"It's priceless to me." I grabbed his neck, pulling him down to give him a kiss. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Oh, open this." He handed me another package.

Turns out, they were coffee mugs with little cartoon monsters on them. I loved them immediately. Perfect!

Then he gave me the best gift of all. "Mom," he said.

"Yes, dear?"

"I want to throw this idea out. It's been driving Eddy crazy that you're so far away. There are a few wonderful places in Miller's Point and Hartsville. Would you be open to at least checking them out?"

“What? To move here?”

“Well, closer to here. A lot closer.”

My eyes grew wide and wider still when she didn’t immediately shoot it down.

“What? What are you saying, Brock? I swear, I did not put him up to this.”

“It’s okay, sweetie. I’ve been thinking about it.” My family meant everything to me, aside from Brock and his small town, that I was beginning to love so much.

Greg huffed. “I want to move closer too, but I don’t think I can.”

Well, that was giving me all kinds of ideas. “Why not? Why not move HQ here? It would be great for the town as well as us.”

I was surprised to see Greg smile at that. “There are actually a lot of nice men in this town.” He waggled his eyebrows. He hadn’t started dating again since he-who-won’t-be-named was locked-the-fuck-up where he belonged.

Mom agreed to go look at the assisted living places in our neighboring towns, and we tabled the rest of the conversation for later. But I was really liking the whole idea. Employees that didn’t want to move could still work remotely. I wouldn’t let anyone go, but it would bring new people to this wonderful town. I’d have to figure out the logistics and make sure we had a place and get approvals from the town government, but Brock could help with that.

Yep. This was turning out to be a fantastic Christmas.

That night, I was content as we snuggled in bed. I ran a hand down Brock’s thick, muscular back and to his waist. He was getting love handles, but I did not mind. He was still a big hunk. I squeezed his butt.

“You feeling frisky, baby?”

“Maybe. A little. I’m enjoying the feel of your skin against mine.”

Brock shifted around so we were face to face on our sides and then scooted closer. “How about this skin on skin?” He reached between us and squeezed our cocks together. Mine had started growing the minute he said the word frisky, so I was nice and hard and so was he.

I thrust my hips, humping into his hand, my cock rubbing against his. “Brock...” The moan that slipped from me was only to be expected. Brock turned me on like no one else ever had. He kept me calm and inspired me. He was the most loving man, giving me more than I could ever return.

I flipped him over to his back. Of course, he went willingly, or I wouldn’t have been able to move him. I straddled him so we still lined up. He grabbed hold of our dicks as I leaned forward and braced myself on his shoulders. Shoulders that supported me in more ways than this. “You mean so much to me, Brock.”

“You mean everything to me, Eddy. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” I gasped out as he stroked us. He slowed only long enough to squirt lube in his hand from the bottle he kept on the side table. Then he jacked us, slow at first, then building until he was working us both over like he was in a race.

I shifted and humped into every stroke. The feeling built until I exploded, and I swear I saw the North Star behind my eyes.

Brock moaned and squeezed his fingers tighter, then joined me, shooting out and adding to the mess.

“I’ll get a washcloth as soon as I can move again.” I flopped over on my back and

closed my eyes. My life was amazing in this little town, and Brock was working to make it even better for me. I couldn't ask for more. "Merry Christmas, Foggy Basin."