



Moody's Grumpy Holiday

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The geek, the cowboy, and a not-so-grumpy holiday...

Moody

Living in Christmas Town doesn't make me a fan of the holidays. Quite the opposite. In fact, eleven months of the year, I'm perfectly happy running my bookstore in peace and quiet. Of course, that changes in December when it's mistletoe madness and mayhem. Ugh.

But this year, there's a new cowboy in town and it's not as easy to grumble about...anything. I admit, Hudson is handsome and hunky, but everyone knows I'm not myself till January, so he'll have to buzz off and charm someone else.

Bah humbug.

Hudson

Moving to California wasn't in my plans. I could use the change of scenery, though, and Oak Ridge Ranch is a good investment. That's not a sneaky way of saying I'm hiding from my past—no siree. I'm following a new path to a new town, that's all.

And so far, so good. Except...my attraction to the nerdy bookstore owner is throwing me off my game.

Look, I'm not interested in anything other than a casual hookup. But Moody is a mystery, and I want to know more about the adorable geek with a sunny disposition who turns into a holiday grump every year.

For some reason, he feels like home away from home. December may be the last month of the year, but something tells me this is our beginning.

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HUDSON

“The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now, please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason.” — How the Grinch Stole Christmas! , Dr. Seuss

Sunlight sparkled on the ocean like a golden curtain across the deep-blue water. The sand was warm and palm trees swayed in the light autumn breeze as seagulls surveyed the scene, prepared to swoop in for the kill or to claim an errant piece of crust from the trash. Someone blasted “Good Vibrations” from their car radio as they cruised Pacific Coast Highway, and you know...it was kind of perfect. Like a movie set or a photo shoot for a travel brochure.

I hated it.

The fact that my ex-fiancée thought a California beach resort would have made a great honeymoon spot for us was yet another missed red flag. I wasn’t a beach guy. At all. I loved mountains, valleys, and rugged wilderness. I loved being on the range, riding horses, minding cows, mending fences.

Don’t get me wrong, there was no denying the beauty here. It was fucking stunning. But it was too...lonely. Or maybe that was just a reflection of my current state of mind.

On that depressing note, I tipped my Stetson, hopped into my rental truck, and headed

north, veering inland on Highway 154 toward Santa Ynez and Oak Ridge Ranch.

I'd done some homework and had recently been in touch with one of the owners regarding their aggressive expansion plans. They were looking for investors, and I was looking for...something of my own. A purpose? Nah, that sounded desperate. A new direction, maybe.

My mom worried that I was lost, and maybe she wasn't totally wrong, but I wouldn't have made the trip west if the business opportunity hadn't been interesting. The fact that I was staying at the honeymoon getaway that never happened was a weird one. But Kylie was last year's news. It was time to move on.

And since I was here, I figured I'd do a little sightseeing and check out the coastline, the local wineries, and get this...a place called Christmas Town in the hills that boasted a ginormous year-round Christmas tree and supposedly had the best homemade chicken noodle soup in the state. Or maybe the country. Sold.

The craggy incline was beautiful with hearty brush giving way to tall eucalyptus trees. When the highway narrowed abruptly in a series of hairpin turns, I lowered the volume on an old Johnny Cash classic as if that might help me concentrate.

Visibility sucked. Tendrils of fog gathered on the horizon, and within a mile, I couldn't see more than a foot in front of the hood. I white-knuckled the wheel with sweaty palms, cursing Kylie, California, and my pride for staying at the five-star hotel she'd booked.

I could have stayed near the ranch, but I hadn't wanted to lose my deposit. Smart, right? Not so much. I was exhausted, hungry, and in very real danger of wrapping my rental around a tree.

I didn't mind a little combat driving, but I'd have preferred to be at home in the

Rockies on familiar roads in my own truck. But this was me trying to prove I was fine. This was me trying to come out on top and?—

“Christmas Town, next off-ramp.”

Oh. Okay.

I followed the signage, exited the highway, and turned right onto Reindeer Lane.

No joke.

The two-lane road was lined with evergreens and deciduous trees bright with orange and yellow fall foliage. A few cottages with generous porches were tucked in between the trees and shaded by a layer of mist. The effect was picturesque and welcoming.

I continued on to Santa’s Corner, where the biggest Christmas tree in the west—or so the wooden plaque affixed to a stake in a bed of red geraniums claimed—stood sentry with a statue of Santa himself at the bottom of the slope leading to Holiday Lane, a.k.a., Main Street. At least I assumed it was the main road in town.

I spied a post office, a market, five tourist boutiques that sold holiday treats, a toy store called Elves R Us, Donner’s Diner, Rudolph’s Fudge Shop, Vicki the Vixen’s Coffee Café and Soup Cantina, and last but definitely not least, Moody’s Marvelous Bah Humbug Bookshop.

The street was awash with autumn leaves, but damn, they really wanted it to be Christmas here.

Every shop had a wreath; every other lamppost was adorned with garland. Granted, some went off brand with a nod to Halloween, which was a few weeks away, but the

mistletoe and candy cane holiday vibes were strong. It was kitschy and a little kooky but thoroughly charming.

I parked in front of the bookshop and caught my reflection in the passenger's side window as I paused to slip my cell into my pocket. My blue plaid flannel, basic white tee, worn Levi's, and scuffed-up boots were my everyday uniform—the hat, too. I might have left my Stetson behind if I hadn't finger-combed my dark hair till it stood on end, though. No point in scaring the natives.

According to my mother, that was a legit concern. I was a big guy with broad shoulders, thick biceps, and over the past six months or so, the consensus amongst those closest to me was that I looked mean as fuck and ready to choke a live rattlesnake.

"Smile, honey," my mom had reminded me at the Denver airport. "I know you're still hurting and I know it hasn't been easy, but you're better off now. And you'll meet someone new."

"I'm not hurting, and I'm not interested in meeting anyone at all, Ma. Thanks anyway."

"Understandable," she'd conceded. "Just do me a favor and practice smiling. You know, curve your lips on one side. That's it. Now try the other side. Oooh, not quite. Keep tryin', sugar."

I nodded to a passerby, wrestling my mouth into something that felt like an approximation of a friendly expression as I pulled open the door to Vicki the Vixen's Coffee Café and Soup Cantina .

On second thought, I'd try again later. The place was packed.

The shop was divided by a row of low bookshelves—coffee on the right, soup on the left, and bistro tables throughout the space. The soup section had a long-ass line that curved at the window. The blackboard above the marble counter gave a list of specials. Today's soup du jour was Vicki's famous chicken noodle. What do ya know?

An older gentleman with a handlebar mustache greeted me with an up nod. "Howdy."

"Does it taste as good as it smells?"

"Better than, and worth the wait," he replied, leaning in and cupping his hand to his mouth conspiratorially. "This is the lunchtime rush. In ten to fifteen minutes, you'll get your soup and a window seat. Might want to head into the bookstore for a bit in the meantime. Tell 'em Bud sent ya."

"Thanks for the tip. I'll check it out."

"Good idea. Moody has a nice selection and he's a great guy...till Christmastime, that is. Then all bets are off." Bud cackled uproariously as he pointed at the sliding glass door dividing Vicki the Vixen's shop from Moody's.

I wasn't sure what to make of the warning, but I didn't think much of it as I dodged a mom with a stroller and a couple decked in workout gear, and slid the door between the shops open.

Have you ever walked into a room and had an unexplainable sense of déjà vu?

I knew for a fact I'd never set foot into Moody's Marvelous Bah Humbug Bookshop, but something here felt familiar. I chalked it up to the homey vibe of comfy leather chairs interspersed among the rows of curated books. I had a similar setup in my condo in Colorado, complete with a fireplace, but that wasn't it.

This went beyond scent and ambience to something I couldn't put a name to. I just knew that for the first time in days—no, a whole year—my shoulders slipped a few notches from my ears and I felt...relaxed.

“Hello!” a cheery voice called out from behind a stack of books. “Make yourself at home. If you have any questions, holler and I'll be with you in a jiff.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, a real smile playing at the corner of my mouth as I wandered down an aisle dedicated to a potpourri of subjects, ranging from self-help to gardening to travel to sexual health.

My gaze naturally drifted to the sexier titles like, *The G Spot*, *Finding Your O*, and *How to Please Your Lover*. I reached for the last one but quickly pivoted to the gardening section and grabbed a random book with flowers on it when two older women shuffled toward me, their heads bent in conversation.

“If Dot chooses another biography for the book club next month, I'm slipping a gummy in her iced tea.”

The other woman snickered. “What good would that do? A gummy would float to the top of her drink, and then she'd wonder who dunnit. No one causes a scene like Dot, and I'm hosting next month, so please...don't.”

“I wouldn't,” her friend grumbled without heat. “But I'm fairly certain a gummy bear would sink and dissolve.”

“No, it would float.”

“Sink.”

“Float. I'm sure of it. I bet Moody will know. He knows everything. Or...maybe you

know?”

I glanced over at the two little old white-haired ladies and lifted my brows. “Uh...you want to know if a gummy will sink or float?”

“Yes, but the kind with marijuana in it. That makes it heavier, doesn’t it?”

“Uh...well, I?—”

“Halt!” A slight man with wild sandy blond hair whipped around the corner, shoving thick glasses to the bridge of his nose as he warily eyed the troublemaking octogenarians. “Gummy bears will not dissolve in water. Expand, yes. Dissolve, no. However, that’s neither here nor there. Mrs. Johnson, you must refrain from your tomfoolery, especially the potentially calamitous kind. Failure to do so will result in an enthusiastic suggestion to Dot that she might consider reviving her love of classic literature for book club. War and Peace is a sumptuous epic novel. Just saying...”

“Oh, now that’s just mean, Moody,” Mrs. Johnson huffed. “It’s too early for your usual holiday orneriness.”

“Hmph .” The younger man snorted. “You should know that your trickery is unnecessary anyway. Dot loves gummies, so...behave.”

“Fine. I’ll behave and I’ll bake you some snickerdoodles if you encourage Dot to choose a short, fun, well-written book with a little sexy sauce for next month.”

Moody’s lips twitched. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Extra sexy sauce equals extra cookies,” the other woman singsonged as they toddled away, chattering like teenagers.

“Well played. That was a master class in dealing with—what did you call it?—tomfoolery.” I tucked the gardening book under my arm, chuckling as I tilted the brim of my hat and turned to get my first real look at Moody.

Objectively speaking, he was handsome in a boy-next-door way. Moody was maybe five inches shorter than my six two and skinny with big brown eyes, a pointed chin, porcelain skin, and pink cheeks.

And just like that, the earlier feeling of intense familiarity hit me with a strong dose of awareness that took me by surprise.

Moody straightened his spine. “Yes, no one wrangles eighty-year-old miscreants quite like me. I’m sorry you were privy to the uglier side of small-town book club politics. It’s a feisty crew. Now, how might I help you, good sir?”

Good sir? I bit the inside of my cheek to keep my monster grin in check.

“Honestly, I’m just passing through town. The soup next door looks good, but I thought I’d check out your shop first. I could use a good book. Can you recommend anything?”

He cocked his head and pursed his lips. “Of course. What are your interests? Are you in the mood for fiction, nonfiction, historical, contemporary, mystery-suspense, romance, biographies?—”

“Okay, okay.” I set the book I’d tucked under my arm onto the shelf and held my hands up in surrender. “I get it. Lots of choices.”

“An abundance,” he agreed in a prim and proper tone that seemed more suited to someone closer in age to the old ladies he’d scolded.

Not gonna lie, I was intrigued.

I pointed at the large M affixed to the wall behind the register. “You’re Moody?”

“I am. Louis R. Moody, PhD, MA, amateur ornithologist, and bookseller at your service,” he pronounced, extending his hand.

“Hudson. Nice to meet you.”

We established that I was a big guy, right? Well, my palm practically swallowed his. He glanced down at our joined hands and cleared his throat, blushing as he raked his teeth over his plump bottom lip.

Fuck, he had a pretty mouth. Perfect for sucking dick or?—

Whoa! Wait up. Where the hell did that come from?

Yes, it was true. Moody was pretty in a nerdy, kind of adorable way, but it was weird that his brand of hot registered with me at all. Christ, but I couldn’t recall the last time I’d noticed anyone new. Male or female.

I’d been afraid my shocking lack of libido would take a year or two to rebound after recent events.

Well, I guessed this was me rebounding.

Huh.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hudson,” Moody replied, oblivious to my pervy internal sidebar.

“Actually, Hudson is my first name,” I corrected for no apparent reason. This guy didn’t need details. I was a potential customer, nothing more, so I should shut up already. Too late. I was yappin’ again. “Hudson Babineaux, rancher and occasional mystery novel fan...at your service.”

I winked.

Holy crap, I was flirting now too.

Me.

I couldn’t believe I still knew how to do that. Remarkable. Amazing. It needed to stop immediately, but hey...this was progress.

Moody inclined his head. “Did you say mystery? Come this way, please.”

He led me toward the rear of the store to a section dedicated to Mystery, Suspense, True Crime, and Moody’s Podcast Tips. He gave a mini dissertation on a few of his go-to authors in the genre, his voracious appetite for old-time thrillers, and his current obsession with murder podcasts.

It was information overload at its finest. I didn’t have the heart to tell him he was wasting his breath. “Occasional mystery novel fan” was code for it was the genre of the last book I’d read all the way through. Truthfully, I rarely got through two paragraphs at the end of the night before conking out.

I juggled the stack of books he’d handed me, flipping the top one over to read the blurb. “This one looks good.”

Moody squealed in agreement. “It’s a roller-coaster ride of a thriller—fast-paced, buckle your seat belt, and be prepared to sleep with the lights on. I don’t spook easily,

but that one scared the bejeezus out of me. You'll love it!"

I smiled, something I'd done a lot of since I'd walked in his shop. And while it was a rusty gesture for me, it was genuine. "Cool. I'll take it."

"Terrific. I can ring you up now, if you're ready."

The bell at the front desk trilled on cue. "Yoo-hoo, Moody! Are you here?"

"Be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail," Moody called out.

I raised a brow at his old-fashioned phraseology. It was a tad jarring coming from someone who I'd guess was no older than thirty-five...tops.

"It's okay. I'd like to look around," I insisted.

"Excellent. Holler if you need anything."

I gave a thumbs-up and perused the shelves while fellow shoppers filtered in and out of the store. Soft jazz drifted over Moody's melodic voice as he chatted amicably with customers who seemed to know him well.

"Love this cookbook," Moody commented as he rang up a sale.

"Did you try Sharon's chili recipe yet?" someone asked.

"Affirmative. That chapter was called, 'Death by Chili Powder.' It was a disaster. Too spicy for this fella." Moody held up another customer's purchase. "You found the new Pumpkin Patch Posse book!"

"'Tis the season," the woman replied. "I took my kids to the pumpkin patch in

Solvang last weekend. I bought a few extra, if you'd like a couple for the store."

Moody gasped. "I'd be tickled pink! You're like...the real Great Pumpkin , First Edition , Chapter One."

She cackled as if he'd told the funniest joke ever. Me? I didn't get it. The dude was an oddball with a quirky sense of humor, but he was fascinating too. Moody was energetic and friendly, tailoring casual conversations to book purchases and weaving personal tidbits in along the way.

I'd spent less than fifteen minutes in his company, and I was bewitched...or maybe just bewildered.

Who was this guy? How old was he? Where was he from? Why books? Was he gay or straight or bi? Was he married or?—

Screech!

Nothing ruined a casually curious moment quite like the M word.

I stepped up to the register and set two thrillers on the counter. "I'll take these."

Moody placed the books side by side and tapped each of the covers. "Excellent choices. You'll be spooktastically entertained. I questioned the author's use of Greek mythology, but she ties it up beautifully and honestly, that's just me. I always have questions."

I pulled my card from my wallet. "Good to know. I have one for you."

"Shoot."

“Why do they call you Moody instead of Louis?” I tipped my hat and flashed a lazy half smile at him that once again felt more natural than the grimace I’d perfected recently. Yep, still flirting.

“It’s my name,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Your last name. In my family, my brother was named after our dad, William. Dad was Bill, but for some reason, my brother’s football teammates call him Bano, a very rough squished-together version of our last name, and it stuck.”

Moody squinted thoughtfully. “I’ve always been Moody. I’m aware that being called by one’s surname evokes collegiate athletic synergy, but nothing could be further from the truth for me. I assure you, I did not play football or basketball or any sport involving a ball or a stick or sweat whilst in school. Do you play sports?”

“I played football in high school and for two years in college. But that was a dozen years ago or so.”

He ran my card and slipped the books into a paper bag. “And now you’re a rancher?”

“I am.”

Was it my imagination, or did Moody’s gaze roam my chest and biceps, traveling south for a beat before meeting my eyes?

“What does a rancher do, exactly? I assume there are horses and livestock and a lot of fences to repair.” He pushed his glasses into place and continued in a rush, “At least, that’s how it goes in romance novels.”

I snorted. “Is that right?”

“Oh, abso-posi-tootly! The cowboy with bulging muscles and a big belt buckle, the sassy damsel who’s never in any real distress, and a series of fences that are always falling the heck down. There’s usually a sex scene on a haystack in a barn or with someone bent over a fence and—” Moody slapped his hand on his mouth. “Oh, my gosh.”

I guffawed. I couldn’t help it. He was so freaking...adorkable. “Recommend one of those to me too, will ya?”

I was joking. Remember the guy who couldn’t get through a whole page without falling asleep? That was still me.

Moody gnawed his lip and closed his eyes briefly as if hoping for celestial intervention, then nodded curtly and disappeared.

He returned a minute later with two books.

“I’ve inserted my foot into my gob, and I’m not sure how to remove it, so I shall barrel forward. These are both super romantic, spicy reads. As you can probably ascertain, the one with two gentlemen on the cover is a gay romance and the other with the tough-looking cowgirl is a male-female romance. I’m queer as a maypole, but I’ve read and loved both. You choose what suits you best. Take one or take all...on the house. You won’t regret it.”

“I’ll happily pay. No freebies necessary.” I tried to give Moody my card, but he waved me off.

“No, no.”

I set a twenty on the counter instead. “I insist.”

“Okay, pick your poison while I get your change,” he said, opening the register.

“I’ll take this one.” I picked up the gay romance novel and dropped it into my bag.

And on that note, I tipped my hat and sauntered to the café door, cool as could be, as if I’d purchased a gallon of milk at the corner store from the most ordinary guy on the planet. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

In a twist, my impromptu side trip into the Santa Barbara valley might have been just what the doctor ordered.

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MOODY

O h. My. Gosh.

I'd just sent a cowboy off with a gay romance filled with some of the sexiest, blush-worthy intercourse scenes ever written. Two hunks with muscles to spare, tight jeans, bulging cocks, and penis parties galore! The part where Clive roughly shoves Boone's Levi's over his derriere as they kiss in a passionate swirl of tongues, then breaks for air and says, "Bend that fine ass over the fence, boy. I'm gonna fuck you till you see stars" still gave me vapors.

Yes, there were some conspicuous discrepancies. How did they manage to keep their hats on while they'd been busy cleaning each other's tonsils and copulating in every corner of the barn and in the woods? If I wasn't mistaken, they'd had a naked encounter in the shower with their hats and boots on. That was exceedingly unadvisable.

A man who owned a real live Stetson would either laugh like a loon or weep at the very idea. Assuming Hudson survived the shock of reading highly salacious material.

Breathe, Moody...breathe.

I fanned myself, blinking like an owl behind my glasses as I talked myself off the proverbial ledge. Sex was positive and life-affirming. And I had issued a content warning. Hudson had chosen to partake of his own volition, so...that was on him.

Okay, better. Much better.

I cast a wary glance through the sliding-glass window and spotted Hudson. I couldn't see his face from this angle, but I hoped like heck he was contemplating lunch and not wondering about the weirdo pawning porny romance in a town dedicated to all things Christmas. At least I hadn't given him the link for the naughty Santa novel I'd unintentionally—I swear, it was an accident—bumped into on an online site.

Santa and the naughty elf he'd taken over his knee and— Stop!

I swiped my clammy palms on my shirt, straightened my glasses, and sneaked another peek. Hudson was gone.

Phew! Nice guy and all—not to mention, exceedingly handsome—but he was just a tourist with sad eyes and “complicated” written in invisible ink across his forehead.

Not that it mattered. I'd probably never see the cowboy again.

That was the sobering, honest truth. So, cool your jets and get to work, Moody. There were orders to place, books to reshelve, and holiday inventory to sort through. I didn't relish that last chore—however, it had to be done. Bah humbug .

Oh, no.

No, no, no. Not yet.

It was too early for bah humbugging. There was no reason for negativity in any way, shape, or form. Business was booming, the town was thriving, birds were singing, I had plenty of food, a warm bed, and thousands upon thousands of books to keep me company. Add a surprise cowboy sighting that made for delicious fantasy material...

Life was good.

“Yoo-hoo, Moody! I brought you a fresh blueberry muffin and your daily taste of soupy yumminess. Where are you, honey bun?”

“Be right there!”

I carried a box into the store, pausing to kiss Vicki’s cheek before rounding the register and setting my burden on the counter. I practically whimpered as I reached for the piping hot coffee and peeked into the bakery bag she’d brought me along with a mini container of her soup du jour . I cocked my head in wordless communication as I sipped the coffee.

“Leek and potato, garnished with rosemary, sage, parsley, and thyme. It’s life-changing, if I do say so myself,” she boasted, pulling out one of the stools behind the register to settle in for a chat.

“Splendiferous! I can’t wait to try it.” I peeled the top off and made a small production of sniffing the contents as per our usual morning routine.

Vicki had been bringing soup samples every day at eight a.m. since I’d bought the shop next door five years ago. I’d been too polite to decline her generous offerings at first, even though her admittedly wonderful specials like split pea and lentil with prosciutto were quite literally the last thing I wanted to eat that early on any day ending in Y.

I’d blown my top and told her how I really felt in December, which had only made me feel terrible in January. I’d had to grovel my way back into her good graces, and the price I paid now was soup. Every. Day.

On the plus side, she’d cut the portions and included a muffin and coffee, so no

complaints.

The gold bangles on Vicki's wrists jangled noisily as she lifted her cup to her red lips and eyed me over the rim. "How'd you sleep last night?"

"Fine. You?"

"Terrible. I dreamed that a giant squid slithered under the door and into my kitchen, then somehow ended up cooking in a pot on the stove. The squid seemed happy enough, but the whole town was up in arms. I agreed with them. I didn't want to serve squid soup. I spent half the dream coaxing the squid to go read a book at your store," she scoffed.

I chuckled lightly. "Sounds terrifying."

"The worst part was that there was someone I wanted to talk to in the dining room, and I couldn't get there. I thought it was your dad."

My heart squeezed and contracted in my chest. I swallowed against the stab of pain as I picked a blueberry from the muffin top. "Oh."

"But no...it was a cowboy," Vicki continued, leaning across the scuffed wood counter, her bright-blue eyes twinkling mischievously. "Co-in-kee-dink? I think not. Did you meet that gorgeous hunk of man who moseyed into town yesterday? He popped into my store for lunch and popped directly into my dream."

I coughed around a mouthful of coffee and reached for a napkin to dab the corners of my leaking eyes. "You don't say."

Vicki cackled merrily. "I do say! Something tells me you saw him too."

“I might have caught a gander.”

She pursed her lips in barely contained glee. “Good gander, eh?”

“Uh, yes, as far as ganders go, it was more than satisfactory,” I replied awkwardly.

“Oh, Moody, you’re the best.” Vicki hooted, covering my hand with her manicured and heavily bejeweled one.

“Uh...thanks.”

A word about Vicki Sorensen Moody. She was a larger than life, former Vegas showgirl in her early sixties with red hair she usually wore in a loose bun. She had a heart-shaped face, mega-long lashes, and loved loud makeup and garish clothing. It didn’t matter that we lived in a tiny town where L.L. Bean casual attire made more sense than sequined jackets and faux-fur stiletto boots...Vicki didn’t subscribe to norms.

Moreover, she hated waste. She had gobs of gorgeous clothing from her former life and as long as she could squeeze her booty into her finery, she was going to damn well do so. Her words, not mine. My father had likened her to Ginger on Gilligan’s Island , the glamorous movie star who’d somehow found herself stuck on a deserted island, or in Vicki’s case, a showgirl stuck in a quaint town where it was Christmas every day.

Oh...one more thing: Vicki was my late father’s wife. Yes, my soup-loving, colorful friend was also my stepmom.

The super fun kind who supplied me with unsolicited condoms in spite of the fact that I was thirty-five years old and capable of purchasing my own—never mind that I hadn’t been on a date in ages. She also regularly brought me bottles of Pinot from her

favorite local winery, even though I was a well-documented lightweight who preferred nonalcoholic beverages.

I amused Vicki, she befuddled me, and somehow that, plus a tight connection to a man we'd both adored bound us like peas and carrots, peanut butter and jelly, milk and cookies, and...you get the idea. Good thing too, since we practically lived in each other's pockets.

Sometimes I wondered what my father would think if he could see us now, sipping coffee and chatting about cowboys and?—

“Premium package, from the looks of it,” Vicki hummed lasciviously. “Not that I was staring at his junk, but I'd have been hard-pressed not to notice the man is hung like a horse.”

I lost the battle, promptly sputtering and snorting coffee through my nose. “Geesh, Vicki! That's...rude.”

“Very,” she agreed with a wink. “So what? I'm stating facts, honey. And I'm only sharing my thoughts with you.”

“And your soup-meliers?” That was what Vicki called her cooks, by the way. *Sommelier*, soup-melier...it sort of made sense.

“Okay, you got me. I have a big mouth, but don't you worry, I'm not interested in wrangling a man. I had the best. No one can take your dad's place.”

“Vicki...”

She held up her hand like a stop sign. “Try your soup while I bore you with town gossip. You'll never guess who's pregnant. Tiff Bautista. I called it, did I not?”

Vicki launched into storyteller mode and somehow managed to make the impending arrival of our local florist's third child with her high-school-sweetheart-slash-husband-of-ten-years sound like front-page news. I oohed and ahed while inwardly battling an unexpected bout of...let's call it discombobulated duress—for no discernible reason.

I owned a dreamy bookstore and a cute cottage in a town that no doubt had inspired more than one Hallmark holiday movie. I had good friends, an interesting hobby, and I had Vicki. I had so much to be grateful for and yet, I was acutely aware of what was missing...and who was missing.

Ugh, I'd been afraid of this. My holiday blues were creeping up earlier than ever. It was a cycle, and I couldn't seem to shake the blahs once they hit. First came sadness, then anger, followed by rueful acceptance, and finally...peace.

I could use a nice fantasy diversion in the form of a cowboy with calloused hands and a big dick and?—

Oh, boy.

I lifted the lid off the container and picked up the spoon Vicki always included, hiding my face in my soupy morning snack while silently cursing whatever impetuous force in the universe had encouraged me to give a complete stranger a saucy gay romance book. And him for taking it!

Add “horny” to my list of woes.

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MOODY

The day started out slower than normal. I didn't mind as it gave me a chance to catch up on display design for the upcoming Haunted Hollows Book Fair. Doc Montez bought a few coloring books for his grandkids who were visiting over the weekend, and Gail Jensen bought three historical romances to take with her to Portugal. That was it.

Until the bell above the door chimed at one p.m.

"Hiya, Moody."

I froze on the third step of my ladder, blinking like a vampire awakened in a new time zone as I cradled volumes one through four of a popular paranormal series in my arms. "You're back."

Hudson chuckled softly and tipped his hat in greeting. And darn it, he was more handsome than yesterday. Was that possible? I wasn't sure why a different color of plaid flannel would make a difference. Or maybe it was the cut of his dark jeans. These were a tad more snug in the crotch area and?—

Oh, no. No lecherous longing looks.

"I am and I—hey, let me help you with that." Hudson hurried to the ladder and held it still while I slid the books onto the shelf.

I thanked him, dusting my hands off as I climbed down. “What can I do for you? Wait. Don’t tell me you stayed up all night reading and finished every book you bought yesterday.”

He gave a roguish smile. “Just the gay romance.”

My jaw hit the floor and stayed there for an embarrassingly long duration.

“The cowboy romance,” I squeaked.

“That’s the one.” He moved to the register and casually leaned against the counter. “It was good. The characters definitely had chemistry, and those steamy scenes were scorching hot. But I have a few gripes.”

“I see.” I cleared my throat. “I’m not the author, but feel free to share said gripes with me. If you’d like.”

“That’s why I’m here. I don’t know anyone else who’s read that particular book, and I have a little time to spare before I head over to Oak Ridge. I thought I’d get your thoughts on the matter and pick up the second book in the series...if you happen to have it.”

“The second book. Uh , yes, I do, and um...I shall return momentarily.” I was grateful for the minor chore and the chance to realign my wavelengths and remind myself that this man was a customer...nothing more, nothing less. Deep breaths, Moody. Deep breaths . “Here you go.”

Hudson straightened from his rodeo hero pose—minus the chaps and ropes and the fragrant odor of livestock—and studied the cover. “Ahh, two burly-chested hotties. Another couple, or is this a continuation?”

“New couple. This one is Maverick and Ted’s story,” I replied like a real know-it-all. “So...gripes? Lay them upon me.”

His eye crinkled at the corners. “Well, okay...number one, there are a few inconsistencies. The author has the guys wearing tighty-whities in one chapter and boxer briefs in the next. I don’t know about you, but it’s one or the other for me.”

“Which is it?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Boxer briefs. You?”

“Same.”

Hudson nodded. “Also, the animals are fed way too often. Chester had to be knee-deep in hay by the fifth chapter the way they were schleppin’ it into that poor horse’s stall every other scene. And there’s a minor plot hole with their ex-girlfriends. Both seemed like they were gonna wreak havoc, but nothing happened.”

“Oh. Right. It’s been a while since I’ve read that one. However, I remember that it was steamy and—” I bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood, then blurted in a rush, “I should never have recommended that book. I don’t know why I did it. Don’t get me wrong, it’s good in spite of the plot holes and animal feeding frenzy, but I?—”

“Whoa. I liked it,” he intercepted. “A lot.”

“Why?”

He wrinkled his nose in confusion. “It was light and breezy. I like the setting, and...I suppose it was the mindless diversion I needed.”

I stared at him, willing a customer to sail through the door and save me from asking a leading, inappropriate, mind-your-own-dang-business question.

“You weren’t averse to the homosexual content?”

Too late.

Hudson quirked another sexy half smile my way. “Definitely not. I’m bi.”

“Bi.” I fiddled with my glasses. “Oh, okay. Uh ...great. Well...”

“Damn, I just made this weird, didn’t I?” He glanced away briefly, slipping his hat off as he turned to me again. His longish brown hair fell into place, framing his chiseled cheekbones to perfection.

I was too busy unsticking my tongue from the roof of my mouth to form a coherent sentence, so I went with, “Gosh, no!”

He snickered. “You don’t have to be so polite. I’m...sorry. I don’t make a habit of announcing my sexuality, but I’m not sure there’s another way to explain why I don’t mind reading about two men who enjoy a robust sex life.”

“Ha. I suppose that does explain things,” I agreed awkwardly. “I assumed apologies were in order for foisting romance on you when you clearly stated a preference for mysteries, but I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I did. Gotta be honest, you’re a good salesperson. The odds of anyone gettin’ me to read a romance are damn low.”

“Why is that?”

Hudson waved dismissively. “Meh, life stuff.”

Oh. I knew that man had secrets. Of course, his private affairs were his own and it was grossly wrong to pry, but?—

“What kind of life stuff?” I pressed, slipping the new book into a bag.

“Well...my fiancée dumped me a month before our wedding day.”

I widened my eyes in shock and dismay. “Oh. Oh, my gosh. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It sucks for sure, but it would have been worse if we’d actually tied the knot.”

I furrowed my brow. “True, but I’m positively indignant on your behalf!”

Hudson chuckled. “I’m fine. It’s almost old news now. The wedding date that didn’t happen was a year ago. I’ve had time to get over it and move on.”

“That’s the spirit. You’ll meet the right girl...or guy when the time is right.” I winced. “Cliché, cliché. Sorry if that sounds trite, but I think it might be true.”

“Thanks, but I’m gonna give myself a break in the hearts and flowers department for a while. I’d rather concentrate on work, do some sightseeing while I’m here, and”—he picked up the book between us on the counter—“catch up on some reading.”

I grinned. “Bravo! You have the right attitude. We have so many amazing notable natural diversions in the area. You could do a day trip to Moro Bay or drive to Big Sur. Our local wineries are exceptional too, and of course...the beach is just a skip and a big jump down the road. How long will you be in town?”

“Two more days,” he replied. “I’m staying at the beach, and it’s beautiful, but I’ve discovered I don’t like sand. It’s terrible ’cause I’ve got this gorgeous room with ocean views, meals included. I should love it.”

“Romantic sunsets and canoodling couples clogging the boardwalks...yes, I can see why that wouldn’t appeal, but—” I cocked my chin as the puzzle pieces clicked into place. “Wait...oh, dear. You’re on your honeymoon.”

Hudson put his hat on his head and sighed. “Bingo.”

I made a yikes face. “Is it awful?”

“Yeah, it’s terrible,” he admitted with a wry laugh. “I don’t know what I was thinking. No, that’s not true. I don’t like throwing away money, and I’d never been to California. I will say...it’s beautiful. I have business here too, so it’s not a weeklong pity party by any stretch.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Are you a nature lover?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Great. I’m going to give you a list of things to do and see in the next forty-eight hours.” I pulled out a pad of paper and pen and scribbled a few suggestions. “Hiking, wine tasting...bird watching. There’s a great restaurant with views of the valley just fifteen minutes down the road. It’s called Solano’s and if you love a good steak, you’ll be a happy clam. They also have clams. In fact, they’re known for their shellfish. I’d say you need a reservation most of the time, but this is low season and a single guy can always find a seat at the bar or?—”

“Come with me.”

I dropped the pen and frowned. “To dinner? Me?”

“Yeah, you.” He lifted his arms in surrender. “I’m not coming on to you, Moody, I promise. I have no game whatsoever right now, anyway. Like, zilch. I also have no agenda, and I’m not looking to hook up. I’m just a little tired of my own company, and you seem like an interesting guy. If you’re free for dinner, it would be nice to talk some more. That’s all.”

The bell chimed, alerting us that a customer had walked in. Two seconds later, it chimed again. Low voices chattered about the weather, a rock star’s new autobiography, and someone’s unruly pet. I heard every word somehow. Odd under the current circumstances.

I mean, the cowboy had asked me out to dinner. The cowboy...you know, the dreamy one with muscles galore and a hat and a handsome face.

Oh, yes...and he was bisexual. And only a “very comfortable in his own skin” bisexual could devour some sassy man-on-man romance and come back for another helping, which made him extra dreamy.

Fantasy activated, am I right?

Except for the part where he’d been dumped by his fiancée and was nursing a broken heart on his honeymoon.

Some guys have all the luck and some guys were...me.

Sad-sack musings aside, I liked Hudson and it wasn’t as if I had a busy schedule, so...

“I accept your invitation, kind sir.” I thrust my hand toward him, a serious expression

on my face.

Hudson grinned as he shook my hand. “Cool. It’s a date.”

HUDSON

“ I t’s a date?” Not your finest work, Hudson.

Maybe not, but I liked Moody, and I didn’t think I was guilty of giving mixed signals. I’d been brutally honest about being a tourist with trust issues. I’d even mentioned the business venture that sounded a hell of a lot more interesting to me after my meeting at the ranch.

See, I didn’t want to work for someone else for the rest of my life, but I couldn’t afford to buy my own business outright. Investing in a successful, well-established enterprise run by experienced and reputable folks was a nice option.

Oak Ridge was a sprawling dude ranch that catered to equine and agricultural lovers and wealthy clients who wanted to play cowboy for a week...with a twist. Real cowboys didn’t have spa treatments after working in the fields, nor did they dine outdoors under a crystal chandelier artfully hung from an oak branch and eat meals prepared by a chef with Michelin-star cred under his belt. It was borderline ridiculous, and yet those exclusive getaway packages made the ranch serious dough that they funneled into crops and distribution.

They also had a fledgling winery and were poised to release their newest Pinot Noir. I’d tasted it on my visit earlier in the day, and damn, I’d been impressed. I wanted in. I had the capital they needed to expand, and I had experience in just about every aspect of ranching from land management and maintenance to breeding and animal

care.

I'd grown up raising cattle and sheep on my family's farm in Colorado. I was no stranger to hard work, and I wasn't shy about pitching in to help at any hour of the day. But ownership wasn't something my uncle was willing to share.

"Why not?" Moody asked, spearing lettuce with his fork.

"Uncle Jim is old-fashioned. My mom inherited cash and a small share of the ranch from my grandfather's estate when he passed. He left the majority ownership to my uncle, who happens to have three sons of his own. I'm not a greedy man by any stretch, but I don't want to be working for someone else my whole life. I want to build something and God willing, leave something for my kids someday."

Moody bugged his eyes out. "Your kids. Do you have those?"

"No, but I'd like to...eventually. How about you?" I buttered a slice of warm sourdough with the patience of a heart surgeon in an operating room. I wasn't sure what had gotten into me, but I hadn't stopped talking since we'd sat down for dinner. Moody could take the reins for a while.

"Children? Oh...well, I don't know. I like kids, and I think my practical nature and my dedication to education would be an asset in paternal care, however...I'm not fun."

I snort-laughed. "Sure you are."

"Oh, please," he scoffed, fussing with his glasses. "I am quite self-aware. Fun is not in my repertoire."

"I think you're fun."

Moody rolled his eyes. “That’s because you don’t know me. I might live in a village where people actually believe in peace, joy, and goodwill toward their fellow citizens, but none of that makes me fun. Bah humbug.”

“Bah humbug? Are you Scrooge?” I teased.

“I’m widely regarded as Scrooge’s ambassador to Christmas Town, so...yes.”

I hooted merrily. “You? No way.”

“Way. I don’t mind the nickname. In fact, it’s oddly endearing. The point is...I would never be the fun parent. I had one of those, so trust me, I know that a lighthearted approach makes a world of difference when raising young ones.”

“I think the capacity to give unconditional love is more important. I got lucky in the parent department. My dad was cool under pressure and he could be fun, but he was tough too. My mom was the softie. Still is.”

“Yeah, well, my father was literally Santa.”

I dropped my fork with a clang for comedic purposes. “For real? Does that mean you’re an elf?”

Moody’s lips curled in a reluctant smile. “A South Pole elf, perhaps.”

“Ah...still cool.”

He chuckled, his eyes twinkling in the candlelight. “My dad embraced all things silly. As far as he was concerned, the fact that he was a big man with white hair, a beard, and a belly meant that he had a particular calling when he moved to a holiday-themed town. Dad bought himself a suit with faux-fur lining and a hat and shiny black boots

and shouted 'Happy Holidays' at the top of his lungs as he waltzed down Reindeer Lane beginning the day after Thanksgiving. Needless to say, he was a hit. Sam Barnham took over two years after Dad passed, but it's not the same. As Vicki says, 'Sam's a sorry second.' ”

“Well, I admit that's pretty cool. Your dad sounds like a good guy.”

“He was the best,” Moody said matter-of-factly. “He's been gone almost four years now, and he's sorely missed by everyone. Town hall dedicated a statue to him...right next to the giant Christmas tree. You've probably seen it.”

I cocked my head curiously. “The Santa statue? That's your dad.”

“ Mmhmm . A decent likeness, too.”

I reached across the table and touched his hand. “I'm sorry for your loss. My father's been gone ten years, and not a day goes by that I don't think of him. Working at the ranch has been a good way to feel connected to him...if that makes any sense.”

Moody raised a brow. “Of course it does. I moved to the area after my father's first heart attack. I was also in between jobs and hadn't relished the prospect of a return to Wall Street. My dad showed me the property next to Vicki's café and asked me what I would do with it if I could do anything in the world.”

“Sell books?” I guessed.

“Yes. My initial plan was to start a business and hire a manager to run it for me, but I'm still here.”

“You must like it.”

“I love it. Belle from Beauty and the Beast was my childhood idol. I envied her more than I could possibly put into words. I wanted a room filled from floor to ceiling with books and a ladder that whisked me from one end to the other. Teenage me added the coffee shop next door to the equation. Tea and books and comfy chairs to snuggle up in...” He fluttered his eyes as if in a euphoric trance. “But adult me became terribly busy, bought an e-reader, and was happy enough ordering online publications. Owning a bookstore seemed outrageous. Way too big of a dream.”

I grinned, loving his passionate speech and glowing eyes. Geez, this guy was magnetic. I felt drawn to him in a way I hadn’t been to anyone in a long time. “But you did it.”

Moody inclined his chin as if taking a mini bow. “Yes, and I’m proud of it. I should be thinking about how to expand, but maybe someday. So to answer your question—I like that part of my dream has come to fruition. I also like that Vicki is here.”

“Vicki the soup vixen?”

“That’s the one. Vicki’s my dad’s widow, and she’s family. We look out for each other. And Santa Ynez Valley is a truly lovely area, so yes...I’m happy here. Ish.”

“Ish?” I prodded.

“It’s a quiet life. Sometimes, I think a little more action would be nice. I miss New York City, but going back to long hours and cold winters in a fast-paced city doesn’t appeal to me. Neither do the holidays,” Moody added scornfully.

I narrowed my gaze. “You seriously don’t like the holidays?”

“That is correct.”

“Yet...you live in Christmas Town,” I continued in a measured tone.

“Also correct.” He tore a piece of bread in half and took a big bite.

“Everyone loves the holidays.”

“I’m not everyone.”

“No...you’re not,” I agreed with a laugh.

“I have my reasons and I won’t bore you, but suffice it to say, that the lighthearted joie de vivre required to embrace the magic of the season is not wired into my system.”

“I see.” I wrinkled my nose in barely masked confusion. “Look, I know we just met, but you strike me as a jolly guy. Happy to the core.”

“Thank you. I am.” He paused a beat. “Until December and the holiday season and blah...”

“Blah?”

“There’s an existential argument to be made that we’re conditioned to enjoy the holidays and part with money with smiles on our faces. It’s a genius ploy, really, but gosh, it grinds my gears. And the rush of endorphins is often accompanied with a January crash and a case of the blues.” Moody paused when a team of servers swooped in to deliver our meals. He thanked our waiter, complimented the presentation of his salmon, her hair and necklace, and asked after her mother. The moment we were alone again, he picked up his fork and finished his thought. “It’s simple science, Hudson. For every positive, there’s an inverse reaction. What goes up must come down. Faux December high, real January low.”

I wanted to argue that there were exceptions to the rule, but I didn't want to dwell on negatives. If Moody wasn't a fan of Christmas, that was his prerogative.

While we ate, we abandoned the holiday conversation in favor of neutral subjects, like the weather, the hundred and fifty wineries in the area, the sixty-plus restaurants, and the amazing variety of wildlife. Especially birds.

His face lit up as he talked about unusual species he'd encountered like the burrowing owl, the white-throated sparrow, and Lawrence's goldfinch.

Let's face it, Louis Moody was a quirky dude. He was animated, interesting, engaging, and thoughtful. I liked him. A lot. His intensity was counterbalanced by the sweetest smile, the pretty eyes, and the unexpected virtue of not taking himself too seriously. I knew far too many people whose big opinions made them seem alternately annoying or difficult...or both. Not Moody.

Then again, the only thing we really disagreed about was the holidays. Or perhaps I was still confused by the notion that this generally jolly guy was Christmas Town's resident Scrooge.

We squabbled over the check, but I insisted on paying. "This is the nicest meal I've had in ages. Great food, and even better company. Please. My treat."

"If I cannot change your mind, I grudgingly acquiesce." Moody sighed. "Thank you."

I grinned. "You're welcome."

We walked to the parking lot in silence. I should have been thinking about my follow-up meeting with the owners of Oak Ridge in the morning, but my mind was securely locked in the present.

On Moody.

We'd driven separately, which had made sense since we were coming from opposite directions. However, I wasn't ready to say good-bye now.

"That's my vehicle." Moody gestured to a white SUV under a lamplight.

The whoosh of the ocean crashing on the beach below us and crickets chirping in the nearby bushes soothed my nerves as we wordlessly walked toward the row of cars. Yeah, I was nervous. I couldn't figure it out. Nothing was going to happen between us.

Look, I was over Kylie for sure, but I wasn't ready to start something new—especially not with someone I'd potentially bump into again if I did end up investing in the ranch. And Moody wasn't a one-night-stand option. Don't ask me how I knew that...I just did.

"Hey, um...it was great to meet you. Thanks for having dinner with me and giving me insight about the area. It was nice of you."

"I'm nice." Moody's sassy wink went straight to my dick.

Whoa. Wait. Was he flirting now?

I crossed my arms and regarded him with faux skepticism. "I thought you were the Grinch."

"Scrooge," he corrected. "One doesn't want Christmas at all, and the other is a curmudgeon who wants less holiday fuss."

"They're both grumpy as fuck."

“Absolutely. The worst.”

I made a mini production of studying Moody: his fit, compact body, the proud tilt of his jaw, his twinkling eyes. My gaze lingered longer than necessary on his mouth and— Shit ...this was reciprocal flirting for sure. I couldn't seem to stop, though.

“Not you. You're a great guy. I know these things.” I tapped my temple. “I have good instincts, and?—”

“Oh, no. Stop.” Moody wrinkled his nose. “Darn it.”

I frowned. “What's wrong?”

“Well, I was attempting amorous wooing, or...I think I was.”

“Wooing,” I repeated.

“Yes, I'm terribly out of practice. But you ruined it.” He threw his hands in the air and paced to the lamplight and back again. “‘Good instincts.’ Two words later, and my cover is blown.”

“Uh...still not following.”

“My curiosity, which I've somehow managed to control for two hours straight, has reared its ugly head, and my insatiable interest for information that is none of my business is demanding to know what happened. Why? And how could she?” Moody stopped in his tracks and gestured wildly at me. “Look at you. You're hopelessly handsome, seemingly intelligent, charming without trying too hard, and though of course, I can't be sure of this, the substantial bulge in your jeans indicates you also possess a large penis. I see no downside whatsoever. So...enlighten me, please. What on earth was your ex-fiancée thinking?”

Yeah, I had nothing.

I stood there, speechless, unsure where to begin. The breakdown of the wedding that didn't happen, the ex whose name I could barely remember after an evening with Moody, the fact that he was interested in me...all of it.

But I started with the easy stuff.

“My dick is larger than average.”

Holy shit. Really, Hudson? Really?

We stared at each other, the air suddenly thick and potent with desire. Maybe that was all on me, but no—no, it wasn't. He wanted me.

Moody stepped closer. “I believe you. I'm about to utter words that I may regret in the morning, but I don't think I can stop myself.”

“What kind of words?” Christ, was my voice always this deep?

“Show me.”

I swallowed hard. “Show you...my dick?”

“So I can judge for myself,” Moody replied evenly.

Yep, I was gobsmacked.

I glanced around the parking lot, looking for witnesses. Was he serious?

Did it matter? My cock was on board. It twitched against my zipper, hopeful for some

unexpected action.

But I was the one doing the thinking here, not my dick.

“Moody, that’s?—”

“I was joking,” he intercepted with the world’s phoniest laugh. “I’m practically incapable of issuing dastardly invitations. That was my inexpert way of voicing solidarity and quite frankly, amazement that...”

He circled his wrist as if searching his internal data bank for PC terminology.

I took pity on both of us and supplied, “That I got dumped?”

Moody nodded. “Yes.”

“So, let me get this straight...you were flirting with me earlier just for fun, and now you’d rather know why my ex left me.”

“Well...I’m still flirting, but with less voracity. I’ve turned down the heat, you might say.” He pushed at his glasses, chuckling at his joke, quickly adding, “Out of respect. It’s rather in poor taste to seduce a brokenhearted man. Or perhaps not, but it’s not something I’d be good at.”

“It happened a year ago, Moody. I’m fine.”

“Oh, good. That’s excellent.”

We stared at each other for a beat. “You’re still curious, huh?”

“Terribly,” he admitted.

I snorted. “It’s kind of chilly out here. My hotel is up the road. Did you want to come by for a?—”

“Glass of water. Yes, please. I’ll follow you.”

And with that, he marched to his SUV.

Okay...I’d either invited a cute guy to my room for a glass of water to discuss a breakup or my dick size. Or both.

This was going to be interesting.

5

MOODY

To be clear, I was not in the habit of initiating sexual encounters. Ever. Not my style.

I was more likely to flirt badly with a man I found attractive and subtly encourage him to do the seducing. For example, I might accidentally bump knees with a stranger at the bar and if he kept his knee in place, I might touch said knee while doing some embarrassing coquettish move that involved fluttering eyelashes and insipid smiles.

Don't judge. Clichéd maneuvers might seem uninspired and unoriginal, but they worked like a charm. If you lived in robust metropolises, that is.

Sadly, desire and opportunity had not been on the menu lately. I lived in Christmas Town, for Pete's sake. The pickings were slim to nonexistent.

The last time I'd had sex with an actual human male was—well, I couldn't remember the exact date, but it had been a while...as in two years or more. I was a horny, horny boy, and the bisexual cowboy who'd showed up out of the blue was like a mirage in a desert. Hudson was a tall glass of cool water, and I was so darn thirsty.

Was this smart? Uncertain.

If Hudson was who he claimed to be—single, emotionally unavailable, and mildly interested in me—who was I to complain? We could discuss his foolish ex and if things went well, he could show me his large cock.

I didn't know what to think about him potentially moving to the area. But maybe that didn't matter. The ranch was twenty minutes away from town. There were wineries and rolling hills and swerving, narrow roads in between. Personally, I rarely drove north, so I'd never see him again.

For real, this time.

I parked in the visitor lot, swiped my sweaty palms on my khakis, and fussed with the top button on my blue oxford shirt. Relax.

Easier said than done. I spotted Hudson at the entrance to the hotel lobby, and my heart did its darnedest to jump into my throat.

Geez, he was too handsome.

He hadn't worn his cowboy hat tonight. His hair was longer and wavier than I'd thought, his eyes were bluer, and his dimples were drop-dead darling. And don't get me started on his form-fitted black V-neck sweater. Gorgeous.

I highly doubted I was his type, though. I mean...just look at me. I was an unrepentant geek, and Hudson was a stunning masculine beefcake. He'd probably been too shocked by my bold overture to let me down gently. I suspected he was prepared to send me on my merry way after spilling his guts about his ex, then give a brief, "Let's not ruin a budding friendship with sex" chat.

In fact, that was absolutely what he'd do, and who could blame him?

Not me, that was for darn sure.

I mustered the dregs of my fast-waning courage, pasted a smile on my face, and strode toward the lobby. "Good evening, sir."

Hudson grinned, all flashing white teeth and crinkling eyes. Super gorgeous.

“Good evening. My room is this way.”

He ushered me through the lobby, passing the elevators and the massive flower arrangement of lilies and roses under a gargantuan crystal chandelier. We walked along a wide corridor with jewel-toned carpet and lit with fancy sconces and entered a separate wing.

Hudson tapped a key card to the panel and opened the door with a flourish. And my jaw dropped.

Cartoon character style...on the floor...dropped.

I gasped, abandoning any semblance of cool as I moved to the bank of windows and the panoramic view of the full moon shining a spotlight on the Pacific Ocean.

“This is incredible, like the world’s biggest stage lit with twinkling stars. It must be magnificent in daylight.”

“It is,” Hudson agreed, turning on the lamp next to the sofa.

I pivoted on my heels, shaking my head in wonder at the opulent furnishings and the sheer size of the suite—which, quite honestly, rivaled the square footage of my entire cottage.

“This is the honeymoon suite,” I stated.

“Yep.” He brushed his hands together and pointed at the well-stocked bar in the corner of the room. “Just water?”

“Yes, please.”

“You got it. Make yourself comfortable.” Hudson poured himself a cocktail of some kind and handed me a water bottle, raising his glass in a toast before sitting on the opposite end of the sofa. “Cheers.”

I uncapped the bottle, took a sip, and launched into nervous chatter mode.

“I worked for a guy who lived in a penthouse on the Upper East Side. He had a few of us over for a holiday soiree, and I’d thought I’d never seen such a glamorous home. It wasn’t a mansion with acres of land, a pool, stables, and private bowling alley, though if I’m not mistaken, he owned all that in New Jersey, too. But he did have a Central Park view, cathedral-high ceilings, and everything dripped with crystal and glittered with gold. I was twenty-five at the time. I couldn’t believe people really lived like that. Especially since I shared an apartment in Bushwick with two strangers in a five-story walk-up. I’d been suitably impressed, but this is...truly something special.”

“Yeah, it’s nice.”

“Ugh ! What was wrong with her?”

“Kylie left me for her yoga instructor,” Hudson replied, looking decidedly unbothered.

“No!”

“Fraid so. We didn’t tell our friends and family that, of course. I wasn’t supposed to know there was another man, but I found out about him after the dust settled. The official statement was that we’d decided to put a temporary hold on our nuptials. ‘Apologies for the inconvenience, and thanks to all for supporting us and for

respecting our privacy.’ ” He huffed derisively. “My mom flipped her lid. My whole family did. But I stuck to the script. The real story was...sad. She just wasn’t in love with me, and the closer the date came along, the more unhappy she was. And the more evident it was that there was someone else. I could feel it, but I didn’t know how to talk to her about feelings. We didn’t have that kind of relationship. We were the couple who’d dated for two years, saw a bunch of friends gettin’ hitched, and figured it was our turn. I proposed, she said yes, and we spent another year and a half planning a huge wedding with three hundred guests.”

“Three hundred?”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe the budget. It was insane. Her parents were footing the bill for most of it, but the honeymoon was all me. Kylie wanted a beachy adventure, and this was where it was going to start. We were supposed to jet to Hawaii from here, but thankfully, I was able to cancel that part with minimal damage. So...here I am, a year and some change later.” Hudson gave a self-deprecating shrug and sipped his drink.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, unable to think of anything constructive that didn’t sound like a useless platitude.

“I’m not. I’m not sorry at all. Don’t get me wrong—I was at first. I was hurt and confused and all that, but Kylie was right. We didn’t have it. All we talked about was the wedding. I was busy at the ranch, she was busy at work. Hell, I didn’t even know she took yoga. We weren’t growing in the same direction, and that was before the ‘I dos.’ I’m grateful as hell she recognized it. No one wants to be with someone who doesn’t love them. No one wants to be a habit or a lifetime regret. I’d much rather be the guy who got dumped.”

“You’re a wise man. I commend you, good sir.”

Hudson snickered. “Thanks. And for the record, I’d originally decided to take this trip for the sake of closure, but now...it’s business too. More of a reconnaissance stakeout than anything.”

“Understood. One more question.” I ran my fingers along the fringe of the silk pillow next to me on the sofa and pointed at the modern chandelier over the dining table nearby. “Is this level of opulence the norm for you?”

“God, no. I have a condo a mile from the ranch. Two bedrooms, one bath, boring beige carpet, and a kitchen that could probably use a facelift. Anti-opulence at its best.”

“Great.” I sipped my water, recapped the bottle, and set it on the coffee table. “Well, you can show me your penis now.”

I had a feeling my candor surprised him. Hudson went still for a beat, and then his shoulders shook. I couldn’t tell if he was laughing or in the midst of a choking fit.

He held up a hand in surrender and sucked in a gulp of air. “You’re very...”

“Forthright? I know. It’s a blessing and a curse. I either keep everything inside or...” I made an expansive hand motion. “I put it all out there.”

“Good to know.” He sipped his cocktail, grinning at me over the rim of his glass. “Let’s hold off on the penis show-and-tell for a bit. Why don’t you tell me about your love of books? Romance, specifically. What do you like about them?”

“Happy endings. Both kinds.”

Hudson slapped his knee as he choked down his drink. “Jesus, Moody.”

“What? I’m a horny, red-blooded man. I like sex. That’s not interesting...it’s biology.” More chuckling. “Why is that funny?”

“I’m just not used to so much honesty. I like it.”

“Thanks.” I beamed. “I read other things too, but romance is a lovely escape from reality. You’re going to love that second book with Maverick and Ted. Super swoony.”

“ Hmm . What’s your favorite scene? Do you have one?”

“Of course, but I don’t want to spoil it for you.”

“No, it’s fine. I have contracts to read now. I’m not sure when I’ll get to the next book. So...go for it,” he urged.

“Well, if you insist. There’s a scene where they’re in the barn, chatting about horse things and one of them...Ted, I think, stops and says, ‘I thought about you all day.’ Just that.” I fluttered my eyelashes. “So romantic.”

“O-kay...”

“And spicy. In the same scene, Ted pulls Maverick between his open thighs and undoes his belt and zipper while he kisses him. Next thing you know, Maverick has his jeans around his knees, his pecker is flying like a flag at full mast, and yet...there’s so much tenderness. Soon after, Ted bends him over yet another bale of hay and well...you can probably guess how that ends.”

“Happily?” Hudson suggested with a roguish gleam.

“Yes.”

He stood slowly. “C’mere.”

I obeyed. I had questions...of course I did, but now wasn’t the time. Something in the air had changed. Idle conversation had given way to possibility and desire. I didn’t know Hudson well at all, but I trusted him. And yes, I was extraordinarily attracted to him.

I rested my hand on his shoulder, my gaze locked on his. “Now what?”

“You wanted a good look at my dick. Go on...help yourself. Undo my belt, Moody.”

Oh, gosh...oh, wow.

I licked my lips, nodded, and immediately got to work. I threaded the leather strap, unbuckled his belt, and reached for his zipper. “May I?”

“Be my guest,” he purred.

His zipper grinding along the narrow strip of metal echoed in the room. I pushed the denim open, brushing my thumbs along his cotton-clad erection. I was salivating. For real. And I wasn’t sure where to look—his cock, his eyes, my cock? Everything needed attention, stat.

“I hate to seem forward. However, in order to properly judge length and girth, I’ll need to remove your?—”

Hudson hooked his fingers under the elastic of his boxer briefs and lowered them. His engorged dick sprang free and bobbed between us.

Oh, yes...it was quite large.

Gosh, I wanted that. I wasn't sure what he'd let me do, if anything, but I was hoping this might turn into more than a "show-and-tell" moment.

"Big or...very big?" Hudson asked, gripping himself at the base.

His tone was light and jovial. I spared him a distracted grunt and licked my lips. "Very big, but not excessive."

Another low rumble. "You can touch, if you want."

"I want," I rasped.

I hovered my hand for a moment, tracing the jagged vein from his balls to his tip. His hum of pleasure spurred me on. I gathered his precum with the pad of my thumb and spread it over the head with lazy circles.

"Mm , that's nice. Tighten your grip. That's it. Good boy."

Oh, my. He was playing with fire now. I adjusted my glasses and as clandestinely as possible, adjusted my poor aching penis before doing as he said, stroking him in a firm hold. I used his precum as lubricant and made a meal out of gliding my hand up and down, up and down.

"Is this all right?"

"Very fucking good. Let me see you too." Hudson had my belt undone, khakis unzipped and pooled at my feet, and my boxer briefs over my derriere in seconds flat. He kneaded my cheeks, feathering a digit along my crack and finally closing his fist around my cock.

" Ungh !"

I squeezed my eyes shut, leaning into his touch as he stroked me...just right. Every twist of his wrist and long pull elicited a moan of pleasure. It was slightly embarrassing, but I was too turned-on to curb my enthusiasm.

I matched the rhythm he set, jacking him in steady thrusts, breathing in when he breathed out. My knees buckled under the growing onslaught of desire. Hudson put his free hand on my hip as I teetered forward. Our noses brushed, and our lips were now less than an inch apart.

“I’m gonna kiss you, Moody.”

“Yes.”

He fused his mouth to mine, tilting his chin as he drove his tongue between my lips.

I was now officially on the verge of combustion. I tugged at his neck and deepened the connection. We were consumed in a tangle of tongues, nibbling lips, and furtive stroking. It was so good, but I needed to be closer.

I hiked my left leg over his...or attempted to. My feet were trapped in my khakis. I lost my balance and knocked Hudson onto the sofa, nearly toppling onto the floor. Perhaps that should have taken some of the wind out of our sails, but um...no. The momentum shift launched us into a new sphere of horny humping.

We released our cocks in favor of rutting like animals. Hudson cupped my ass cheeks to hold them in place while he pumped his shaft alongside mine and sucked on my tongue. He felt so good and I was so...close.

Too close.

I whimpered, frantically breaking the kiss.

“You’re gonna come,” he guessed. “Yeah, do it. Come for me. I got you.”

That was all it took. I fell apart quite spectacularly, spurting cum on his cock and balls...and possibly the hem of his sweater. He kneaded my flesh as I trembled and shook in the aftermath. And he kissed me—long, sweet pulls of his tongue that were almost tender. I melted in his arms, making love to his mouth as I slowly morphed into a puddle of goo.

And yes, it was a testament to how out of practice I was that I didn’t immediately realize that the poor guy still had a gigantic boner.

I scrambled off him, wincing when my knee hit the floor with a thump. “Ow.”

“Where’d you go?” Hudson sat up with a laugh, his erection still pointing proudly at the ceiling. And just like that, I knew what to do. I reached for him and shoved my head in his lap. “You don’t have to—oh, fuck. Oh, yeah. That’s it.”

Now, I admit, I was rusty at the art of fellatio. And yes, I considered it an art. There was a difference between sloppy sucking and knowing how to apply the right amount of pressure to stimulate a lover and?—

Okay, fine. I sucked him like a gosh-darn Hoover. I wouldn’t claim it was my best work...not by a long shot, but he seemed pleased.

Hudson held my head in his hands and lifted his hips in a silent request for more. I complied, bobbing double time till he yanked at my hair in warning. I ignored him and seconds later, I was rewarded.

I swallowed everything he gave me, then sat on my heels and wiped the corner of my mouth. Hudson’s chest heaved as he leaned forward and grabbed my chin, thrusting his tongue inside.

It was nasty and crude, and that was before I remembered the window shades were open and anyone on a boat with a pair of powerful binoculars could see us.

This was...so naughty. And so liberating.

“What a terrible idea this was. I loved it,” I gushed, hopping to my feet and grabbing a napkin from the side table to wipe the mess we’d made.

Hudson chuckled. “Me too. I—where are you going?”

“Home.”

He frowned. “Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“Okay. Um...” Hudson struggled to sit up. “I’m busy all day tomorrow, but I’ll see you next time I’m in town. If that’s cool.”

I inclined my chin. “Yes, of course.”

“Great. I think I’ll be back in December too, and?—”

“No.”

“No?”

I redressed, straightening my soiled shirt as I shook my head. “No, I’m not at my best in December, but perhaps January.”

“January,” he repeated, zipping his jeans.

I smiled. “That’s correct. If you don’t return to California or you do come and decide not to visit me, I’ll understand. I want to thank you most earnestly for your...I suppose we’ll call it friendship. Hospitality works too. You’re a good man, Hudson Babineaux. I wish you a happy and healthful?—”

“What if I’m here in December?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Let’s hope our paths don’t cross. Now, as my Spanish friends say, ‘ Adios, amigo .’”

And with that, I opened the door, tripped over the threshold, and almost took out the housekeeper standing nearby with fresh towels for turn-down service. I apologized profusely, braving one last glance at Hudson leaning against the jamb with his arms crossed, looking deliciously disheveled and utterly dreamy.

I allowed myself the briefest moment of longing.

If Christmas were real, I’d ask Santa for a Hudson-sized gift, no ribbons required. But I knew better than most that real life didn’t care about the date on a calendar.

6

HUDSON

D ecember

“Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” blasted from the speakers of the brand-new pickup truck I’d purchased ten minutes after the ink had dried on the contract I’d signed with Oak Ridge Ranch. I glanced at the ocean in my rearview mirror and sang along at the top of my lungs. Man, what a difference a change of scenery made.

I’d given my uncle my notice, put my condo on the market, and spent the past two months transitioning between jobs. My friends were excited for me. I think they realized I needed a change.

My mom agreed, but she wasn’t thrilled with the move. “It’s so sudden. Where will you live? When will I see you? Will you be home for Christmas?”

I hadn’t had the heart to tell her no. I had bigger worries on my mind.

See, I hadn’t planned on moving to California. Not right away. I’d figured I’d travel between Denver and Santa Ynez and ease into the transition. But they needed me.

Tanner Spade and his brother, Jax, were my new business partners, along with a few family and college friends of theirs. Everyone had a lane and stuck to it at Oak Ridge Ranch. They were all in their early to midthirties and had real ranch experience. Tanner was the livestock guru, Jax was finance and marketing, Waylen was dairy

operations and sales, Mills headed the vacation destination program, and Santiago ran the winery.

They'd taken what was once a small family-owned operation and brought it into the twenty-first century in a way that honored the past yet allowed for new ideas and substantial growth.

“We’re busier now than ever. Between the new winery, sold-out packages for the dude ranch, and the overflow of interest from tourists in Christmas Town, we’re stretched thin. I could use your help with the livestock and horses immediately. We bought a bull from a ranch in Austin, and we’re hoping to mate him with—doesn’t matter, just...think about it. Please.”

Tanner had even offered the use of a bungalow on ranch property to sweeten the deal. I’d still thought about it long and hard. Not only was this a big move, but I’d grown up on a working ranch with direct ties to reliable distribution channels. We fed people. Dude ranches were for entertainment, and wineries just weren’t on my uncle’s radar. Investing in Oak Ridge was one thing, but actually working there was almost rebellious.

I supposed that made me a rebel ’cause here I was, whistling to holiday music in sunny California on a beautiful December afternoon with nothing but blue skies for days. And you know, I was feeling pretty pleased with my decision.

The only thing that would have made it sweeter was Moody. I’d thought about him every damn day since that night in my hotel room.

Odd things reminded me of him—the rack of mysteries at the local market, my mom’s homemade chicken noodle soup, the Santa hat one of the attendants had worn on my flight to California. Honestly, anything Christmas-themed conjured an image of the sweet man with adorable glasses who got feisty as hell at the mention of the

holidays.

Like this song on the radio.

It was almost obsessive. Sure, he was a great guy and I'd love to see him again, but his good-bye at the hotel hadn't been wistful in the slightest. He'd practically bolted out the door without bothering to give me his number...a strong indication that he wasn't interested in a repeat. I couldn't seem to take the hint.

I'd googled his shop for the listed number and left a message for Moody with someone named Katie. I never heard from him. I'd tried emailing him. Nothing.

That should have been it. Message received, loud and clear. So what was wrong with me? Maybe I had a fetish for being dumped. Or maybe the fact that he was unavailable was somehow an extra turn-on. Weird. Trust me, I knew it. But I also knew there was no way I could live twenty minutes away from Christmas Town and not see Moody.

Just once.

And then I'd move on.

I veered off the now-familiar exit and drove down the evergreen-lined Reindeer Lane, smiling when I reached Santa's Corner and the biggest Christmas tree in the west. Holy...cow. It was decked for the season, with enormous red and silver balls and colorful twinkling lights and surrounded by giant presents with glittery bows. I slowed to take in the mass of poinsettias, the fake snow, and the star affixed to the top. The statue now donned a real Santa hat too. It was very festive.

I wasn't the only one who thought so. Tourists milled at the base of the tree and around the statue, posing for pictures.

The season was officially on, I mused, continuing uphill to Holiday Lane.

And...oh, my God. I'd never seen anything like it. My breath hitched audibly.

Christmas had literally thrown up all over town. It had already been pretty Christmassy in October, but they'd turned up the volume to the max. Every lamppost was wrapped in garlands and bows, every window had a wreath, lights were strung on every tree and crisscrossed the streets, the rooftops were covered in faux snow, and every shop had some kind of holiday-themed artwork drawn on the windows.

It was busy too, as in parking was scarce, the sidewalks were crowded, and there were lines out the door at Donner's Diner, Comet's Christmas Collectibles, and Vicki the Vixen's Coffee Café and Soup Cantina. Also, a lot of folks were wearing hats. Elf hats, Santa hats, reindeer antlers...you get the idea.

I circled the block twice and found a parking spot on Frosty Drive in front of a Spanish-style hacienda with a lawn filled with an entire troop of Santa's reindeer...life-sized. Their neighbors had Santa gnomes, blow-up snow globes, and mechanical elves assembling toys. I was...transfixed, amazed, and feeling even more festive than I had been ten minutes ago.

My heart soared with almost childlike joy and anticipation. For the holidays...and the prospect of seeing Moody. Only now, I let go of my doubts. I'd built up seeing him again as if it were a life-or-death meeting that might change our lives, and that was silly.

We were just a couple of guys who'd fucked around once. We'd had a one-night-stand and it had been fun, but that was all it had been. Fun.

However, we could be friends. Even in December.

I nodded to a cheery group of tourists and paused to listen to the carolers in Victorian dress harmonizing to “Good King Wenceslas” on the corner. This was nice. Very nice.

My holiday spirit was firmly intact, and my smile was so big it hurt my cheeks as I pushed open the door to Moody’s Marvelous Bah Humbug Bookshop.

“ Ugh ! People!” a grouchy voice grumbled loudly from the back of the store.

A woman wearing a gaudy Christmas sweater with Rudolph’s face complete with a glowing red nose and ubiquitous Santa hat winked from her post as queue-police-slash-greeter. “Don’t mind Moody. He’s our resident grump. Welcome to the Bah Humbug Bookshop. I’m Stella, one of Moody’s elves for the day. There are a few of us here to help. If you’re looking for anything in particular, let us know.”

“Thank you.” I tipped my Stetson and wandered the periphery of the line zigzagging in front of the register.

Moody’s Marvelous Bah Humbug Bookshop took its role as the black sheep of Christmas Town very seriously, but it wasn’t quite an anti-holiday store. Charlie Brown twig trees and spindly black plastic ones dotted the shelves. There was a section dedicated to the Grinch and Scrooge, and black paper snowflakes were cut into garlands and strung with fairy lights from the ceilings. Oh, and vaguely depressing holiday music was piped through the overhead speakers. Honestly, it was kinda cool. The darker theme was a refreshing contrast to the relentless cheer everywhere else in town. Good gimmick.

I hummed along to “Blue Christmas” as I walked the aisles, hoping for a glimpse of the owner. And if possible, I hoped to catch him on my own.

No such luck.

“May I help you, sir?” A college-aged girl with freckles, long brown hair, and a “Rudolph Didn’t Run Over Grandma” T-shirt popped up out of the blue.

“Uh...no. I’m just browsing,” I replied. “Actually, is Moody here?”

“Yep, he’s in the naughty section.”

I widened my eyes comically. “Excuse me?”

She snickered merrily. “Not that kind of naughty. We have a great selection of unique gifts that are crankier than the normal holiday stuff. It’s hard to miss, but you’ll see the sign. And Moody should be there. If you can’t find him or if you need anything else, I’m Katie, and I’d be happy to help you.”

“Thanks.”

I headed for the rear of the store and stopped in my tracks, hands on my hips as I took in the array of grumpy gifts. There were keychains, notepads, cell phone cases, costume jewelry, clothing, socks, ornaments, and more. Some were plain black or a neutral color, others had sayings, like, “Ho-Ho-No,” “Merry Grumpy Holidays,” “Is This Jolly Enough For You?,” and of course, “Bah Humbug!”

My lips twitched in amusement as I fingered the collar of an “I Can Get You on the Naughty List” sweatshirt. It was very Moody and?—

“What are you— ah-choo —doing here?”

I spun on my heels and smiled.

Christ, he was beautiful. Angelic, even, with soft golden hair and rosy cheeks. I stared at his mouth a beat too long, but that couldn’t be helped. I’d kissed those lips,

damn it, and I still remembered how sweet he'd tasted.

"Moody."

"Yeah, it's me. I belong here, I'm stuck here. You're not. So I repeat— ah-choo —"
He pulled a tissue from his pocket and blew his nose. "Why are you here?"

"So this is December Moody," I drawled.

"Oh, honey, he's worse than ever this year." The redhead I remembered from the soup place next door stepped out from behind a Grinch display. Vicki the Vixen. Her rhinestone Christmas tree earrings swayed wildly as she shook her head and massaged Moody's left shoulder affectionately. "Poor boy has a c-o-l-d and he won't rest. I'm Vicki, by the way."

"Hudson. We met a couple of months ago."

Moody glowered. "Do not waste time with pleasantries. No one has forgotten you or your hat."

"My hat?"

He ignored me, whirling to Vicki. "And I'll have you know that clogged nasal passages do not result in sudden difficulties with orthography, a.k.a., spelling. A small c-o-l-d is no hill for a climber like me. I'm fine, and I'm sure you're busy at your own store, so I must politely yet profusely insist that you buzz off."

"Isn't he the best?" Vicki chuckled lightly, then wagged a finger at Moody. "I will not buzz off, mister. You're sick, and you shouldn't be here. Go home, darlin'. You have competent elves on duty. There's nothing to worry about...except getting everyone else sick. Even you aren't that mean."

“I’m not?”

Vicki arched a brow. “No, you’re not. I’m going to make a soupy care package and send you home.”

Moody opened his mouth as if to protest and sneezed four times in rapid succession. His final hearty “ah-choo” left him winded with watery red eyes, shoulders slumped. “Fine. I concede defeat. Temporarily. I’m not— ah-choo —happy about— ah-choo —this.”

“I know, sugar. I know.” She patted his back and shot a pointed glance my way. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll leave you two to chat while I get that chicken noodle ready. Don’t you go anywhere, Moody.”

“I don’t want soup,” he mumbled under his breath as Vicki moved toward the front of the store, leaving me with a disgruntled, cranky, and obviously ill Moody.

“Sorry you’re not feeling well,” I hedged, cocking my head as I studied him.

“It’s not the end of the world. I’ll rest this afternoon and be good as new tomorrow.” He grunted and blew his nose. “You never did answer my query. Why are you here?”

“You’re looking at the newest investor and livestock manager at Oak Ridge Ranch.”

“Oh. You did it.”

“Yeah, I just moved into town a couple of days ago. I waited till after Thanksgiving for my mom’s sake, but I was ready for a change and a challenge, and this definitely qualifies. I’m easing into operations and getting acquainted with the animals—heck, and the ranch hands this month. I want to be up to speed so I can hit the ground running in the new year and—shoot, sorry. I’m babbling.” I gave a lopsided smile,

narrowing my eyes at Moody's glossy-eyed stare. "No offense, but you don't look so hot. How about if I grab that soup for you and give you a ride home?"

"Oh, no, no, no." He sniffed loudly.

"I insist. Where do you live?"

"I don't need a ride. I can walk. And I don't need you. You're nice and very handsome, Mr. Babineaux, but there's no reason to pretend that you and me—no. No point. Good luck at the ranch. Good tidings, felicitations, and all that hooey. Now, I bid you adieu."

Exit speech complete, Moody stepped aside and tripped over an open box filled to the brim with holiday goodies: felt ornaments, coloring books, and Santa hats. I crouched to help him up, stifling the urge to laugh. Poor guy was a wreck and there was nothing funny about it.

But he was also a big ol' pain in the ass. Barbed, bitchy, and ready to put his dukes up and punch someone's lights out. Anyone would do.

I'd worked with a few rough characters with ornery dispositions. Some people were made to snarl through life. But the Moody I'd met a couple of months ago had been sweet, kind, thoughtful, and sexy as fuck. A ray of fucking sunshine. I knew that guy was in there somewhere hiding under the prickly facade.

I held up my right hand like a stop sign and pointed at the leather reading chair in the corner. "Sit."

Moody growled. "I am not a dog."

"No, you're a snippy little dragon who could use a nice smack on the rear." I steered

him toward the chair while he sputtered indignantly. “Now stay here. I’ll be back.”

Grumble, grumble, grumble.

I pursed my lips in amusement and headed for Vicki’s Café and Cantina, and nearly plowed into her in the doorway between the two stores.

“Close call.” Vicki chuckled, shuffling a bag from one hand to the other.

“Sorry about that. I was going to grab the soup from you and take Moody home.”

“And what did Moody have to say about that?”

I rubbed my nape and flashed a lopsided grin. “In a roundabout way, he told me to fuck off.”

Vicki snorted. “Sounds like Moody. Well, he’s a grown adult and he knows his own mind, but it would be nice of you. All I can say is, you’ve been warned.”

“Understood.”

“Nice to see you again, Hudson.”

“Thanks.” I took the bag from her and added, “You’ll probably be seeing a bit more of me. I just moved to the area.”

“That’s right. Welcome! Tanner told me you’d signed on at the ranch. Congratulations. They’re a nice group of gentlemen, and they’re doing big business. Between Christmas Town and Oak Ridge Ranch, this area is on an upswing. This is obviously our high season, but they generate a lot of traffic year-round at the winery and the dude ranch, and their clients aren’t averse to a little holiday magic in July.”

I smiled. “That’s good to know. I’m looking forward to getting started.”

“Good luck to you, and thanks for delivering the soup. Please let Mr. Cranky Pants know I’ll be checking on him later today.”

“No problem. So…” I hiked a thumb over my shoulder meaningfully. “Moody really is moody during the holidays, eh?”

Vicki pursed her red lips, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Oh, honey, he’s a bear. Add a cold, and he becomes a grizzly. Under all the huffing and puffing he’s a softy, though. Don’t let him scare you.”

I found Moody arguing with Bud near the register.

“ ‘Little Drummer Boy’ is off this year’s playlist. Don’t bother asking for it, Bud. It’s a no,” Moody said, blowing his nose.

“Now, c’mon, Moody,” the older man teased. “It’s one of my favorites. Who doesn’t love a good pa-rum-pum-pum-pum?”

“Me, that’s who. I strongly dislike it, actually. In what world would a brand-new mother want to hear some punk kid banging on the drums after giving birth?” He blinked his watery eyes and dabbed at his lashes with his knuckle. “That’s a personal viewpoint that will never be tested. Nonetheless, I’m right.”

Bud hooted merrily. “You make me smile every damn year, Moody. Don’t go changin’.”

“Grr.”

I nudged Moody’s elbow, fixing him with a faux-stern look. “I thought I put you in

the corner and?—”

“Threatened me with a good time,” he finished sardonically. “You did and it was fun, but you took too long and if I’m going home, I’m going now.”

“Good-bye, Moody. Feel better!” someone called from the register.

“Later, Moody!”

“Hope you feel like yourself tomorrow.”

“Get some rest, Moody.”

He frowned at the chorus of well-wishers, his brow knit so tight that his glasses slipped as he pushed them to the bridge of his nose and reached for his coat. “Hmph.”

I headed after him, brushing past the carolers at the corner singing “Happy Holidays.”

Moody fumbled with his zipper, muttering something that sounded like, “Happy Honking Holidays.”

I caught up to him and draped an arm around his shoulders. “Hey, sunshine, my truck is this way.”

“Yeah, well, so is my house. Whopty-doo. Is that my soup?” he asked, pointing at the bag in my hand.

“Yes, sir. It’ll be yours as soon as I make sure you’re safely home.”

Moody scoffed. “There’s no crime in this town, unless you count the time Bailey

Zedrich pilfered a lottery ticket from the market. He was fourteen, and we collectively decided he deserved a second chance.”

“Great. I’m still walking with you.”

“I could have you arrested.”

“On what charges? Carrying soup?”

He grumbled some more and trudged on to Frosty Lane, his head bent, stopping in front of a sunny yellow one-story cottage with a white picket fence, a graceful weeping willow, wide picture windows, and a generous porch. Very nice.

But unlike his neighbors, there was no wreath on Moody’s door and no lights lined his roof. However, a creepy-looking gnome with gray hair and black suspenders stood next to the door and from what I’d witnessed firsthand today, I’d say the gnome fit.

“Well, home sweet home.” He held his hand out for the bag of soup.

I ignored him. “Great place. Even the gnome is kind of cute.”

“His name is Hector.”

“Hector,” I repeated. “Odd, but cool.”

Moody narrowed his eyes. “You’re determined to snoop, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Hmph . Fine. Come in.” He opened his door with a flourish. “It’s adorable. I know,

I know. Snoop away while I change my clothes.”

He left his shoes in the foyer on a mat under a small console table and hung his coat on a hook beside a mirror before shuffling off, in his socks, across the hardwood floor.

Okay, he was right. I was curious. The urge to peek at personal photos, scan his bookshelves and the artwork on his walls for clues was strong. And no, that wasn't like me at all, but I was more intrigued by Louis Moody than ever.

However, I was here for soup duty, not snoop duty.

I bypassed the cheery blue-and-white living room with a comfy-looking sectional and a flat-screen over the brick fireplace and the adjoining dining area with striped wallpaper and lace curtains, and headed for the kitchen at the rear of the house. It was a small space, painted the palest shade of lavender. The appliances, tiles, and cabinets were white, but the barstool cushions were bright purple and the cups and saucers on the open shelf above the sink were a colorful mix of floral and striped patterns.

It was cheerful and fun...like the version of Moody I remembered.

I set the bag on the counter and rummaged for a bowl and spoon. The soup was still warm, but I thought he might want some tea, so I took the liberty of filling his teapot. I turned on the front burner, pivoting at the sound of bare feet on the kitchen floor.

The poor guy looked like hell. His eyes were puffy, his nose was red, and he was paler than normal.

“Here's your soup,” I said, sliding the bowl on the table near the window. “I put water in your kettle for tea. Do you have any peppermint or chamomile?”

Moody stared blankly as if none of my words computed. “Uh...”

“Hey, are you okay?”

“No, I’m terrible. But tea isn’t so terrible, so...yes, please. It’s in the pantry.” He fell onto a chair and buried his head in his hands. “Woe is me.”

I made the tea and helped myself to a glass of water.

“Do you have a fever?” I asked, sitting across from him.

“Meh , I don’t think so.” He picked up his spoon and skimmed it over his soup.

“Have a bite, Moody.”

I expected a sassy reply, but he obeyed. And for a short time, the clink of his spoon against the side of his bowl was the only sound in the room. Occasionally, he’d lift his gaze to me, but he seemed to have lost a little spunk. No doubt he was exhausted. Being sick and crabby took it out of a guy.

“You don’t have to stay, you know. I’m a big boy. Ah-choo . I can take care of myself.”

Okay, so he was still a pain in the ass.

“I know, but everyone could use a hand once in a while.”

“True. That’s not the case now, though. I’m perfectly capable of eating soup on my own. You’re here for your own reasons, and all I can say is your timing is doo-doo.”

“Doo-doo?”

“Yep, stinky, rotten, sucky egg balls.” He slurped a noodle into his mouth and blinked back tears. “I’m a hot mess, and guess what?”

“What?”

“I have a cold, too.” Moody cackled at his joke, which led to a wicked coughing fit.

“Oh, boy. Have a sip of tea.”

“No, I?—”

“Moody...”

“Leave me al?—”

“Drink the fucking tea, Moody.”

He narrowed his gaze, but to my surprise and relief, he picked up his cup. Of course, he made a face. “Hot...no sugar.”

“You don’t need sugar. You need rest,” I replied matter-of-factly.

Moody rolled his eyes. “Thank you for your insight, doctor. Doctors don’t usually wear cowboy hats, do they? Maybe they should. Although not everyone looks good in one. Yours is unquestionably appealing, but don’t take that as a compliment.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Good. Ah-choo . Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to curl up on the sofa with a box of tissues and watch classic game shows.”

I gathered his bowl and the cup of tea he'd barely put a dent in, rinsed them in the sink, and turned to find Moody leaning on the wall. "Go on. I promise I won't steal the china."

"You don't have to be so nice, Hudson. I'm a lost cause. I wouldn't waste the energy if I were you."

I furrowed my brow, but he'd already shuffled off to the living room.

Now listen, I admit I was curious. The sick, Oscar the Grouch version was the polar opposite of the man who'd sucked me to oblivion in the honeymoon suite two months ago. He didn't want me in his house, at his store, or in his life. He couldn't have been more clear if he'd rented space on an LA billboard. And that was before I'd pushed my way inside.

So, why wasn't I out the door and halfway to my truck?

I didn't have an answer. Something pulled at my subconscious and insisted that this man was someone I needed to know. That was borderline ridiculous. Logically, I knew this, but I still couldn't shake the feeling that he was...special.

Quit being an idiot, Hudson.

I dried my hands on a dish towel and joined Moody in the living room with a prepared good-bye speech and best wishes for his swift recovery.

"I'm gonna head out and—" I cocked my head. "Do you really have tissues stuffed up your nose?"

Moody's watery gaze slid my way. "It won't stop. Desperate times call for desperate measures. That's a quote by Hippocrates, by the way. He was a Greek physician. One

might call him the OG MD.”

“Right,” I grunted at the goofball snort-snuffle-chuckling at his own joke from beneath the pile of blankets he’d burrowed under on his sectional. “I think the doctor would prescribe actual medication, though. Do you have any antihistamines?”

“Yes, maybe...I dunno.” He groaned, slipping lower on the sofa. “Hey, beat it, buster. I want to be miserable alone.”

See? He couldn’t have been clearer. Go, Hudson, go.

“I know you do, but I can’t leave you like this.” Oh, for fuck’s sake. “Let me at least grab your medicine and some water, okay?”

Moody flashed a deadpan glance. “You want to peek in my drawers, don’t you, cowboy? Get it? Bathroom drawers?”

“Very funny. Are you going to let me help you or not?”

“ Ugh , sure, fine, whatever.” He sat up to blow his nose and pointed in the direction of the hallway.

I sifted through the uber-organized medicine cabinet in the bathroom and returned a few minutes later with a couple of tablets and a fresh glass of water. He mumbled his thanks and snuggled into his makeshift cocoon, his eyes glued to the television.

“What are you watching?”

“ Match Game , circa 1977. It’s a hoot. Comedy genius with innuendos coming out the wazoo.”

I perched on a corner of the sofa. “The wazoo, eh?”

“Yes, have you seen it? The host presents a fill-in-the blank query for the contestants and celebrities. Simple sentences that can turn perverse in a hot second. And the seventies were very un-PC. They can make a question about how you’d spend your earnings on a million-dollar lottery ticket into a saucy advertisement for an online sex shop. Of course, there was no Internet in those days.” He wrinkled his nose as if deep in thought. “I think they had sex shops, though.”

“Definitely.”

Moody snickered softly. “Now that would be embarrassing. I can’t imagine walking to the register with flavored body oils or a toy of some ilk. Can you?”

I grinned, unsure if I was more amused by his choice of sex shop goodies or the word ilk. “No, that would be awkward.”

“So awkward,” he agreed. “ Ah-choo .”

“Bless you.” I was pleased he’d dropped the crabby act and had seemingly forgotten he wanted me out, so I pressed my luck. “What would you do?”

Moody widened his eyes over his tissue-covered nose. “At a sex shop?”

I guffawed. “No, with a million-dollar lottery ticket.”

“Oh. Uh ...I’d have to think about it.”

“Off the top of your noggin...what’s your first purchase?”

“I’d pay the mortgage on my shop and Vicki’s,” he replied automatically.

I furrowed my brow. “You’d spend your first chunk of change on someone else. Gee, that doesn’t sound very scrooge-y of you, Moody.”

He scowled...adorably. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Nope. I’m good.”

Moody opened his mouth, then shrugged and turned his attention to the television.

And maybe it was wishful thinking, but I could have sworn his lip twitched in the teensiest hint of a smile.

Yeah, I know. That wasn’t much to go on. However, it seemed like a pretty big hint that Moody’s holiday mood was a big ol’ front. I’d bet that winning million-dollar lottery ticket that he was hiding something behind that shield of cantankerousness. Something dark enough to cause his sunny soul serious pain.

I’d had some personal experience with pain. I knew what it felt like to put on a smile when you wanted to fucking cry. Not so easy.

And though I didn’t know him well, I thought it was a safe guess that Moody wasn’t too bummed that a pesky cold had taken him out of commission for a day or two. No doubt a little escape in mindless television under a sea of blankets in the middle of the day probably sounded kind of amazing. Again, I understood. I’d had a bad case of the flu this time last year, and I’d never been happier to have an excuse to be alone with no one walking on eggshells around me.

I’d just wanted to be alone. Except...not really. ’Cause being lonely also kinda sucked.

Call it a hunch, call it a shameless tactic to ingratiate myself into his life at a low

point, but my gut told me the adorable grinch with a red nose and pale skin needed company. Neutral company. So I took my hat off, tossed it onto the coffee table, and settled in to watch some TV with my new friend.

MOODY

My common cold came with a side serving of a sinus infection that knocked me flat on my booty for the entire first week of December. If I hadn't been groggy and congested with a runny nose and a general feeling of malaise, I might not have minded that my illness had taken me out of circulation just as holiday festivities were getting underway in town. I'd missed the Elf on a Shelf competition, the candy cane making demonstration, and the church boutique.

Boo-hoo.

Okay, fine. Do not tell a soul, but I'd secretly always enjoyed the candy cane demo. Vicki held it at the café every year as the Christmas Candy Emporium wasn't large enough to hold the throngs of peppermint lovers who swarmed into town for the event. She took the opportunity to test new holiday scones and drink concoctions, like orange cranberry with eggnog glaze and peppermint hot chocolate.

Like any wise salesperson, Vicki anticipated that her treats would be a hit and sold them prepackaged by the dozens. Of course, all that extra activity next door meant a big boost in sales for me, so I couldn't complain. But I was me...so I usually did.

Not this year.

This year I was home recuperating from the blergh.

I hardly remembered the first two days. I'd drifted in and out of sleep, vaguely aware that I wasn't alone. For some reason, I liked that. I'd figured it was Vicki, but that didn't explain the hum of sports commentary in the background. Touchdown, wide receivers, and end zone penetration? Nope, those words did not compute.

On day three, Vicki had dragged me to the doctor, who'd given me antibiotics and strict instructions to rest. I'd been too miserable to argue. I'd just wanted to be home with my remote control...and no visitors. Except whoever was supplying me with endless tissues and cups of peppermint tea.

By the fourth day, the fog had cleared.

"Oh. It's you," I rasped. Blinking awake, I shielded my eyes from the sunlight streaming through my living room window and zeroed in on the man sitting in the armchair next to the sofa, watching television.

The cowboy twisted to face me. "Hey, there. How're you feeling?"

Good question. I sat up, licking my dry lips. "Better...I think. What are you doing here? Is it January?"

Hudson smiled and shook his head. "Not yet. I told Vicki I'd drop off your soup and make sure you took your medicine. Hang tight. I'll get that for you now."

"You don't have to do that."

"No, but I volunteered, and I don't mind at all." He returned with a glass of water and a bottle of prescription pills.

I took the antibiotics, swallowing around the razor blade scraping my throat.

“ Ugh . That hurts.”

“Poor guy.” Hudson patted my knee gently. “Sinus infections are the worst. I’ve had a couple, and I remember feeling achy all over. The important thing is to keep hydrated and get a lot of rest.”

“I didn’t know you were a doctor,” I snarked.

His grin was instantaneous, spreading across his handsome features like wildfire. “I’ve missed that sassy mouth of yours.”

“I’m sorry. That was rude and—no, wait. It’s still December, so...I’m not sorry at all. I’m sick and I’m mad about it, and...and...you shouldn’t be here. Sure, I saw your penis once, but let’s face it, I don’t know you and you don’t know me, so...skedaddle.”

Hudson cocked his head as he perched on the coffee table. “You’re right, but you were the one who asked me to stay.”

“I didn’t!”

“You did. You said, and I quote, ‘I like your peppermint tea. Do you want to watch The Price is Right tomorrow?’ So here I am.”

I gasped. “I didn’t say that. I wouldn’t.”

“You did,” he insisted.

I frowned, pointing at the flat-screen. “That’s not The Price is Right .”

“Nope, we’re watching sports highlights. We’ve got NBA, NFL, NHL, and of course,

it's college bowl game time, so?—”

“Halt. I don't understand those words.”

“That's okay. My teams aren't doing so hot this year, so it's a little painful to explain.” Hudson turned the station to the Game Show Network. “Are you hungry?”

“Not really.”

“You should eat something. How do you feel about lentil soup?”

“It sucks dragon balls,” I huffed around a cough.

He chuckled. “What about chicken noodle?”

“It's the devil's dander.”

“Tomato soup?”

“Meh .”

“Meh ? That's it?”

“I sort of don't hate it.”

Hudson clutched his chest in mock surprise. “Alert the press! We found something Moody doesn't hate in the month of December.”

I pursed my lips to hide my smile. “I like some things in December.”

“Name three...that aren't fifty-year-old game shows.”

“Warm blankets, birds, and chocolate-covered pretzels.”

“Oh, good ones.” Hudson pointed to the television. “The Joker’s Wild okay?”

“Lovely. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He pulled his cell from his pocket and scrolled through messages, seemingly in no hurry to leave. I wasn’t sure why he hadn’t moved on yet. I was an expert at scaring off eligible bachelors...and friends. And looking and feeling the way I currently did, I couldn’t believe this one was still lurking about. Hudson was either a masochist or a weirdo or both or?—

Or maybe he was lonely.

I frowned. So? It wasn’t my problem he’d moved to a new state and started a new job. Did I have to be nice because he was being nice to me? Was that a rule? If so, I didn’t like it. I’d warned him that I was no good till January. No good at all.

“Are you staying?” I asked testily.

He glanced up from his phone. “I don’t have anywhere else to be, so...sure, if you’d like the company.”

“Why?” I winced.

Contrary to my sassy mouth, ungracious behavior didn’t come naturally to me. It was hard work being a full-time turd. But I truly couldn’t understand what this handsome hunk of a cowboy was doing here playing babysitter to my sick downtrodden self. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t hang out with me.

Hudson snickered. “Because you’re so pleasant.”

A smidge of decency surfaced out of the blue. “Sorry, I’ll try to be less...”

“Of a dick?”

“Yeah, that.” I brushed my forearm across my nose and sniffed. “I just thought you’d want to explore the area before you settle into your new job. This doesn’t seem very fun.”

“This, my friend, is a good time,” he quipped, flashing a sexy grin my way.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m serious.”

“I know. The truth is, I did my share of exploring a couple of months ago. I was up and down the coast and saw San Francisco, Yosemite, and Moro Bay. I spent a day in Monterrey, drove through Carmel, and even went to that Hearst mansion.” Hudson snapped his fingers. “What’s it called?”

“Hearst Castle.”

“Yeah, that was cool. But for now, my focus is getting to know everyone and the animals at the ranch without stepping on toes. Tanner and the other owners have been welcoming, but I’m not officially part of the crew till January.”

“I hate to sound like a broken record, but why did you come to California early if you knew they didn’t need you till—oh, no!” I gasped, furrowing my brow. “Oh, no.”

“What’s wrong?”

I wrinkled my brow, embarrassed yet determined to proceed. “Did you fall in lust

with me? Is this a sexual conquest excursion waylaid by an inconvenient malady?"

Hudson's mouth fell open. He closed it quickly and choked. A bubble of laughter escaped through his nose like fizzy champagne he was attempting to stuff into a bottle. He finally gave in, threw his head back, and guffawed.

"You are really something, Moody."

I slipped under the blanket, intending to ride out the wave of mortification in peace, but that wave never materialized. I knew without verbal assurance that Hudson wasn't making fun of me. Just as I knew that for reasons unknown, he liked me...quirks and all.

Ugh . Fine, I liked him too.

I kicked the blanket aside and sat up to straighten my Halloween-themed flannel pajama bottoms. "Okay, wise guy. Pipe down and control your hilarity. It's a valid inquiry, and you know it. Most people wouldn't choose to make a big move in December, especially if it requires a return journey to visit with family for Christmas Day."

Hudson licked his upper lip, his eyes still crinkled with humor. "True, but I'm not going home for Christmas. Thanksgiving was my last hoorah."

"But you like Christmas. I'm rather certain you said so."

"I do."

"Oh...bad memories?" I guessed, cocking my head curiously.

"Not at all. I just want to get an early start on the next chapter."

“Commendable.”

“Thanks. Don’t get me wrong. Part of me hates the pitying looks I still get and constantly having to reassure everyone I’m doing well.”

I regarded him thoughtfully. “I see. I know a thing or two about hiding out. You can stay.”

“I’m not hiding out,” Hudson scoffed, adjusting the volume during a commercial for baby shampoo. “I’m taking a month-long hiatus and spending a little time with my new friend, the only guy who might be less enthusiastic about the holidays than me this year. Scratch that. I love Christmas, and being here gives me a chance to enjoy the season without my mom repeating over and over that I’ll find the right person someday. Not gonna happen.”

“You don’t want to fall in love again?”

“Pardon my French, but...fuck, no. I’m a thousand times more likely to fall in lust”—he paused to wink at me—“than love.”

“ Hmm . Well, me too.” I nodded briskly, then stared at the television. “Bah humbug.”

Hudson snickered. “Bah humbug.”

I wasn’t sure how long he stayed. Another hour...maybe two? I drifted in and out of sleep, sipping tea and watching shows my dad had introduced me to years ago.

And you know, it was a perfectly pleasant afternoon.

In December.

MOODY

Hudson returned the following afternoon with Vicki's turkey chili and fresh cornbread. He'd texted his intentions, so I'd expected him. However, I hadn't expected the lurch in my chest at the sight of the cowboy filling my doorway with that sexy hat, a saucy grin, and a lunch bag. My body's involuntary response annoyed the heck out of me.

"You again," I deadpanned.

"Me again."

I held the door open and invited him in.

He came again the next day with a container of Vicki's semi-famous Irish stew and soda bread. And the day after with her chicken tortilla soup and jalapeño rolls. I snapped and snarled that he shouldn't stay, but I was secretly happy when he shooed me out of the way, pointed at the sofa, and told me to beat it.

We watched TV, I grumbled, he chuckled, and eventually...we talked. Well, Hudson talked. He told me about growing up on a ranch; his first horse, Maggie; the first time he milked a cow; the enormous spider webs that reappeared every summer in the barn which they now referred to as Charlotte's Barn...because hello, Charlotte's Web .

He was annoyingly charming and as much as I hated to admit it, I looked forward to

our afternoon visits.

I liked the cowboy. I liked the deep timbre of his voice and his teasing smile. And I supposed I liked that he was stubbornly interested in me in spite of the fact that I'd given him every reason to steer far, far away.

By the end of the week, I was beginning to feel like myself. I'd promised Vicki I'd obey the doctor's orders and not dive back into work as if nothing had happened.

"Ease into it, honey," she'd cajoled. "There's no sense working yourself silly. You have Katie and Stella to help, and I'm right next door if they need anything. Recuperate and enjoy your cowboy beau. By the way, I'm going to want the unabridged story on that one."

"He's not my beau, and there is no story," I'd huffed.

"Well, then make one."

Right.

No, thank you. December was about survival...not coaxing a lover into my boudoir.

Besides, Hudson obviously had his own issues, and I suspected those issues were what made our unlikely "friendship" possible. I was a seasonal sad sack, and Hudson was, well...undetermined.

At the very least, he was a glutton for punishment.

Knock knock.

I opened the door and gulped at the sight of the sexy beast in a cowboy hat who was

bearing the usual gift of soup. “I’m not sick anymore,” I announced.

He squinted, tipping his hat as he leaned closer. “Hey, what do you know? You look good.”

I blushed under the scrutiny of Hudson’s shameless once-over. “Thanks.”

“Vicki’s special today is butternut squash with rosemary bread. I had a bowl earlier and man, it’s delicious.”

“Well, okay. I’ll save it for later.” I ushered him inside and took the container as I pointed toward the living room. “You don’t have to stay, but if you do, don’t change the channel.”

This was where he’d politely bow out. He was too much of a gentleman to admit he’d reached his quota and someone else’s of classic game shows, but no...

“Hollywood Squares ? I love this show,” Hudson announced, reclaiming his usual spot in the armchair next to the sofa.

We watched an episode of Hollywood Squares circa 1975, chuckling at the blatant innuendo and Paul Lynde’s comedic genius. Family Feud was next. As with every day this week, I figured the first notes of the theme songs would be his cue to bolt, but Hudson grabbed water bottles for both of us, crossed his legs, and settled in for a rip-roarin’ good time of guessing possible answers to questions like “Name a place with reserved seats,” and “Name something you put mustard on.”

“Hot dog,” I shouted at the television. “That’s the only possible response. Oh, and hamburger.”

“Bologna,” Hudson offered.

I wrinkled my nose. “Gross.”

“What’s so gross about bologna?”

“Everything. It’s a substandard lunch meat choice.”

“I know a lunch meat snob when I see one,” he teased.

“Guilty. I’m not a picky eater, but some things are off-limits. Like bologna.”

“ Hmm .” He twisted toward me, setting his hat on the coffee table. “What’s your favorite food?”

“A warm poppy seed bagel with plain cream cheese. You?”

“Steak. Porterhouse, medium rare.”

I raised a brow. “How very caveman of you.”

“Guilty.” He wagged his eyebrows. It wasn’t particularly humorous, but I giggled. It was such an odd sound that I coughed around it and quickly wracked my brain for another topic to cover my curious behavior.

The first thing that popped to mind was...cheese.

“I’m partial to an English cheddar, and I will never, ever touch blue cheese.”

Hudson scoffed. “You’re nuts. Blue cheese is awesome. In fact, all cheese is awesome.”

I explained all the ways that his argument was subjective. Hudson staunchly

disagreed. We were both intrigued by the popularity of charcuterie boards, and neither of us was fond of olives.

“They’re very...”

“Meh,” Hudson finished.

We shared a smile and resumed watching the next episode as the first question dinged on the screen. “Name something engaged couples shop for.”

“Uh...let’s change the channel,” I said, faking a yawn. “Or better yet, you should go. I’m suddenly feeling the effects of the antibiotics and?—”

“I’m fine, Moody. And c’mon, if a question on a fifty-year-old game show is gonna make me cry in my beer, I’m in big trouble.”

“Cry in your beer,” I repeated. “Such an odd expression. I wish I knew the origin. It sounds like something attributed to Shakespeare, but it’s certainly a later phrase often used in country songs to evoke?—”

“Moody?”

“Got it. Cease chatter. Message received.” I made a button-lip motion and reached for the remote control. “But game show shenanigans get stale after a while. Let’s watch?—”

“Leave it. Seriously. I’m not sad, Moody. If anything, I’m the opposite of sad. I’m hopeful about the future, excited for a new opportunity. My life is good,” he replied.

I nodded slowly. “I’m glad. In that case, I’ll go first. I’ve never been engaged, but I imagine a married couple would need a house, china, appliances, rings...”

“And furniture.”

“My imaginary beau and I won’t need much. As long as he’s not opposed to holiday madness in this town, I have everything we could possibly need.”

I flung my arms wide and inhaled deeply. Yes, for the first time in days I could breathe through my nose, and my body didn’t ache. It was glorious. I had a passing thought that I should check in at the store, but Hudson was here, and there was no hurry.

“Have you ever been close to getting married?”

I did a double take, pushing my glasses to the bridge of my nose. “Uh...no. Not at all. I’ve dated a hodgepodge of decidedly uninteresting suitors: a waiter who spoke to his mother thrice a day, an accountant with OCD who split every dinner bill to the penny, and a grad student who wanted to discuss his thesis on soil erosion ad nauseam.”

Hudson snickered. “Fun.”

“Hmph. I tried a dating app two years ago, and my first experience seemed promising. I was paired with a fellow former lawyer who’d started an online consultant firm and?—”

“You’re a lawyer?” he intercepted.

“Yes. I specialized in complex litigation. Our clients were high-profile banking institutions who required assistance with compliance and regulation matters, acquisitions and mergers, and treasury management.”

Hudson whistled. “Sounds important.”

“It was stressful and demanding. I worked eighty hours a week, never saw my family, and rarely had time for amorous affairs of the heart.”

His lips twisted and his eyes sparked with humor. “That’s no good.”

“No, I was exceedingly competent at my job, but...it wasn’t for me. I’m happier now, though my love life is still a barren wasteland. I can tell you’re trying not to laugh. Please, don’t hold back on my account.” I shrugged, hiding a smile. “As I was saying, my most recent paramour was an online hookup. His name was Christopher. He was tall and skinny, and he enjoyed stamp collecting, soap making, and the opera.”

“Sounds like a good time,” Hudson snarked. “How was the sex?”

“Vanilla.”

He hooted merrily. “Oh, yeah? Tell me more.”

I rolled my eyes. “There’s nothing to tell. We dated for two months, which was long enough to ascertain that he preferred blowjobs to anal. When he occasionally acquiesced, he preferred missionary sexual intercourse in a dark room.”

He was still grinning. “Did Christopher top, or did you?”

“Oh, are we getting into the nitty-gritty?”

“You started this conversation...not me,” he singsonged.

“ Hmm . Well, I don’t top. Ever.”

“Why not?”

“Too many ways it could all go wrong. I might go too fast and hurt my partner...or worse, go limp. I’ve read all the how-to-have-good-sex self-help books, and they say communication is key. I’ve just never been with anyone who was willing to discuss the joys of rimming or hitting one’s partner’s prostate for maximum pleasure. Which isn’t to say I’ve never had good sex. I simply haven’t had enough of it.” I shifted uncomfortably and gestured to the flat-screen. Why was I still speaking? This had to stop...posthaste. “I enjoy classic sitcoms as well. Do you? I believe I Love Lucy is on now.”

“Let’s take a TV break.” Hudson turned off the television. “This conversation is much more interesting.”

“No, it’s more embarrassing. This incessant jabbering must be a side effect of my medication. I’m not usually such a blabbermouth.” I briefly squeezed my eyes shut and snapped them open a moment later. “What about you? Are you experienced in the gay side of your bisexuality? Have you had male lovers? I think that’s a yes, since you seemed to know what to do when we...”

“Had sex?” he supplied with a wry smile.

I cleared my throat and squeaked, “Yeah...that.”

His eyes were still twinkling. “I’ve had boyfriends and girlfriends. I came out in high school. The guy I had a crush on asked me to prom. I was seventeen and let me tell you, I was nervous as fuck. Part of me was screaming that it was a bad idea, but the louder voice in my head said, ‘Do it. Do it now. Say the words, kiss the boy, and be true to yourself.’ I’ve never regretted that decision once.”

“No one in your manly circle of cowboy cohorts took issue with your sexuality?”

He shrugged. “The only one whose opinion mattered was my dad’s. He had some

archaic views about what constitutes being a real man. Honestly, that wasn't easy...but he came around."

"That's good. Now you might be surprised to know this, but I've been out since birth. Or at least since I was seven years old and asked Santa for a Holiday Hostess Barbie. The cat was out of the bag and out the door then." I snickered at the memory, straightening my legs on top of the blanket in my little nest on the sectional. "I don't think my dad was surprised, though. He never asked if there was a girl I liked at school. Not once."

"So...hold up." Hudson held up his hand like a stop sign. "You used to like the holidays?"

"Oh, gosh, yes! Of course, I did."

"What did you like the best?"

"Everything. I grew up outside of Pittsburgh. We had plenty of snow, bright lights on every house in the neighborhood, and big faux reindeer on our lawn. My dad and I always chose a tree that was far too big for the living room, so it was a hassle to get in the house and ladders were required to decorate it. My mom would always fuss about it. But we had music and hot chocolate and a fire in the fireplace and..." I sighed wistfully, lost in an old memory, adding, "It was fun."

"Holidays are fun."

"Meh ."

"I bet you were a cute kid," he commented, nearly blinding me with his sexy dimples.

I fluttered my eyelashes like a lovesick fool. It was involuntary, I swear, but I was

instantly annoyed with myself. “Yeah, sure, whatever.”

Hudson barked a laugh. “If it makes you feel any better, most kids love the holidays. I know I did. We had hayrides with Santa, caroling in the park, and...lots of other activities.”

“As you might have guessed, Christmas Town is rife with cheery pastimes.”

“What would you say is the best?”

“It’s all...blah. Terrible.”

“But if you had to name something...what would it be?” he pressed.

I shot a suspicious glance his direction. “Well, I don’t hate baking and decorating cookies, so the gingerbread house competition is passably fun. It’s something I’m fairly good at too. Or used to be.”

“Ah, good to know. How do you feel about Christmas trees?”

I used to love them , I thought to myself.

“I think they’re a waste of time and timber,” I replied.

Hudson put his hat on and stood abruptly. “Cool. I think I want one.”

“A tree?”

“Yeah. Where should I go?”

“To the forest.”

He raised his brows and leveled me with an expectant look. “Moody...”

Fine. I’d never been quick with snappy comebacks anyway.

“Dalton’s Farm,” I blurted.

“Where’s that?”

I reluctantly followed my guest to the door, spouting directions as I unbolted the lock.

“Have fun.”

“Thanks, but I’ll never remember all that. You’ll have to show me.”

I frowned. “I’m not showing you squat. Find your own tree.”

Hudson widened his eyes mischievously. “Someone is gonna get a lump of coal and a spanking for Christmas.”

“If I’m lucky,” I quipped. Okay, that was a nifty comeback.

“Mmm .” He leaned on the doorjamb and casually let his gaze roam my body. “Well, you know...I’m thinking you kinda owe me one. Who’s been bringin’ you soup all week, Moody? Who’s been watching your favorite game shows with you?”

“I didn’t request your company.” I glowered.

“No, you didn’t,” he conceded, raking his teeth over his bottom lip.

My eyes snagged on his mouth and stayed there. I’d kissed that mouth, and I’d really, really liked it. He was good with his hands and gosh, his penis was gorgeous—long and thick and?—

Stop it, Moody! You're turning into a scurrilous, sex-crazed horndog.

"Are you attempting trickery?"

Hudson smirked. "Who me? Never."

"Well, I'm not going to shop for a tree or..."

What was I saying? I couldn't concentrate. My brain was stuck on the memory of that night. The weight of his big body on mine, his tongue in my mouth, my mouth on his cock.

"Hey, you okay?" He dragged his forefinger along my jaw.

No, I was not okay. I was lost in a sensual haze, unable to tell up from down, right from wrong. Nothing was the way it was supposed to be. I should have been at work, and Hudson should have been at a ranch in Colorado or somewhere far away. But he was here and his touch was so tender, so seductive.

I stared at him impotently, wishing my top-notch education had prepared me for moments when lust rendered me incapable of stringing together a logical thought. I didn't want anything to do with Christmas trees, but I didn't want him to go. Not yet.

"I—" I licked my dry lips, nodding and then shaking my head. Before he could ask what I meant, I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and crashed my mouth over his.

Hudson stumbled sideways, no doubt surprised by my enthusiastic onslaught. But he didn't pull away. He hummed into the connection, tipping his hat and angling his chin as he easily took command. Suddenly, his hands were in my hair, gliding under my T-shirt, slipping past the elastic of my sweatpants while he stoked a fire to life with every talented thrust of his tongue.

Yes, we were making out on my front porch in broad daylight. Mrs. McKenzie was probably getting an eyeful as she raked her leaves across the street. The whole town would think their resident cranky bookseller was a rascal. I didn't care. Not one bit.

I wanted his lips and his hands and his tongue and more, more, more.

"Inside," Hudson growled, closing the door behind us.

We stood, panting in the foyer, sizing each other up. I couldn't speak for Hudson, but I was buzzing with desire. For him. For us.

I curled my fingers under his belt buckle and met his eyes. "May I? Please."

"You want to get on your knees for me again, boy?"

Oh, dear. I was going to faint.

I nodded like a puppet, grateful when he unbuckled and unzipped himself, freeing his erection in a theatrical swoop. It bobbed between us, steel and velvet and...yes, I was sinking to the floor. I had the presence of mind to wiggle my sweats and boxer briefs out of the way so I could stroke my cock while I reacquainted myself with this perfect specimen of masculine beauty.

You think I'm exaggerating? Oh, no. The view from below was stunning. I gazed up at Hudson, the brim of his hat shadowing his eyes as he unbuttoned his plaid shirt, revealing a smattering of hair on his toned, muscular abs. His body was a masterpiece and his cock...perfection.

I opened up wide and swallowed him to the root. He grunted above me, sliding his fingers in my hair. Good. I wanted him to use me, take what he wanted. I yearned for

rough and dirty. No coddling, nothing gentle, nothing sweet. Just...sex.

I dug my fingernails into his flesh in a silent command to fuck my mouth...now, please.

Unfortunately, Hudson didn't get the message. He flattened his palm against my forehead and pushed.

“Wh-what's wrong?”

“Slow down. I don't want to hurt you.” He pulled me to my feet, cupped my chin, and searched my face for clues. “You've been sick for a week. Fuck, I don't know what got into me. I'm sorry. I?—”

“Don't you dare apologize. I want sex, Hudson. I'm dying for it. Look at me!” I pointed at my rigid cock, then set my hands on my hips. “You're responsible for this, and the only polite thing to do is provide aid and...and...release.”

He flashed another one of those lopsided, naughty smiles as he closed his fist around my shaft. I whimpered and moaned, and it only got worse when he stroked me from base to tip...slowly.

“Invite me to your room, Moody.”

“Okay, yes. This way.” I hooked my thumb behind me.

Hudson nibbled my bottom lip and slapped my rear end...hard. “Show me.”

HUDSON

Moody's room could have doubled as an annex to his bookstore. It was filled to the brim with books...on the floor, on the nightstand. Somehow, the controlled chaos and competing colors on bindings made the space seem cozy and inviting. Like its owner.

It was neat and tidy, too. His queen-sized bed was made, the duvet folded to reveal crisp white sheets. There were no discarded clothes lying about, no trash bin filled with used tissues. If I hadn't seen the mess over the past week, I wouldn't have known he'd been under the weather.

But I had.

I'd been here every day, playing nurse in some convoluted quest to shimmy my way into Moody's orbit. The man fascinated the hell out of me. He was sassy and rude one minute and unbearably sweet the next. At first, I'd mistakenly thought he was easy to read. I'd been wrong.

Moody was an extremely intelligent guy who led a simple life in a small town and probably felt a little disconnected and lonely being one of the only out gay men under forty in the area. But he'd given up a lucrative career in law for a level of solitude most people didn't crave until they were ready to retire.

Was he hiding? Was he doing penance? Was he really going to let me fuck him? Right here, right now?

My head was a jumble of contradictions—noble intentions warring with a very base need to pin him down and devour him. Moody had been sick for a week, and this couldn't be good for him. But Christ, look at him, wiggling his ass as he shed clothing like a second skin.

I lingered in the doorway, dick out, jeans riding my waist as I watched the show. A T-shirt flew over his shoulder, and his sweats and boxer briefs dropped in a puddle on the floor beside his bed. He opened the nightstand drawer, mumbling what sounded like a prayer.

“Please don't have an expiration date, please don't have an expiration date.”

I grinned. This was why I liked him. Moody was guileless. He was incapable of being untrue to himself or anyone else. That didn't mean he was an open book, but it meant I could trust him. And after a year of wondering why I hadn't realized my previous relationship was a sham, it was nice to be with someone painfully honest.

Not that this was going anywhere serious. Don't be ridiculous. This was just...fun. 'Cause sex was fun, and Moody was fun and...did I mention that he was hot as fuck?

“I like my handprint on your ass,” I hummed.

His hand flew to his rear end as he craned his neck to get a glimpse, his cheeks turning pink. “It stings, but I like it too.”

“Good.”

Moody tossed a condom and a bottle of lube to the bed, then fiddled with his glasses. “Uh...so, how do you want me? All fours, on my back, or on top? As previously stated, it's been a while for me. I trust you know what you're doing. If you have any reservations, speak now. Otherwise, take your darn clothes off and let's get to it.”

My lips twitched. “On your knees.”

I pursed my lips in amusement when he scrambled madly to the center of the mattress. Any trace of humor disappeared a moment later at the sight of his pert little ass in the air, cock swaying between his legs. Fuck, I wanted him.

I set my hat at the end of his bed and kicked off my boots, my eyes glued on Moody. I took off my shirt and draped it on the striped chair wedged in the corner in front of a wall of bookshelves before sauntering to the bed. He released a soft sigh of relief as I reached for the lube.

“Thank goodness. I’m ready. No more dillydallying. Please,” he moaned.

I wanted to laugh or at least smile, but my dick and my brain had one focus...Moody’s hole. I needed that.

Now.

I climbed onto the bed, and yeah, I should have taken off my jeans. I didn’t. I grazed my fingers from the top of his spine to his crease, dipping along the curve of his ass to his low-hanging balls. I gripped his cock, smearing precum at the tip as I stroked him. My dick pulsed and jerked against the elastic band of my boxer briefs as if begging to join the party. But this was more important. I wanted Moody so greedy for me, he’d never second-guess letting me in.

I uncapped the lube, coated my fingers, and glided a slick digit along his crack. He hung his head and lowered his weight onto his elbows. I opened his cheeks, grazing the sensitized skin at his entrance...over and over. His pucker contracted and released at the light touch.

“One finger, Moody,” I warned, pushing inside him.

“Finally,” he grumbled. “Ohhhh...yes. Yes, yes, yes.”

I remembered a thing or two about having your prostate stimulated. If done properly it felt very fucking good, and feeling good was the name of the game here. I wanted him writhing and desperate. He was almost there.

Two fingers later, Moody was trembling for me, chanting my name. Three...well, he was incoherent.

I pulled away and got off the bed, losing my jeans and boxer briefs in a flash. “On your back.”

He obeyed, though his brow was creased with confusion. “Missionary? Okay. We can do that. What about the lights?”

“Lights stay on. I want to see you.” I tore open the condom. “Just so you know, I’m happy to suit up, but I got tested after we fooled around and?—”

“Me too. No condom...just you.” Moody propped his head higher on the pillow and lifted his legs. “Now, will you please hurry? My penis is engorged to the point of pain, and I’m perilously close to expiring.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” The mattress dipped under my weight as I scooted between his open thighs. I lined my cock at his hole and pushed. “Relax. That’s it, baby. I got you.”

I entered him slowly, our gazes locked. He was so tight, so responsive, and so unbelievably hot. I wanted to thrust, drive deep, and lose myself in him, but I kept my composure. Within seconds, I was the one trembling, my cock buried to the hilt, sweat glistening on my forehead. I bent to kiss him.

Moody lifted his hips. "I'm ready now. You can move."

I did. I pulled almost all the way out and slid all the way in.

Holy shit, this was perfect. He fit me like a fucking glove. My nerve endings zinged to life, igniting a flame that rocked me to my core. So hot, so intense. I bent to capture his mouth in a searing kiss, twisting our tongues as I fucked him...a little faster, a little harder.

The headboard hit the wall with a steady thump that matched the slap of skin and desperate groans for more as Moody clutched my ass, arching into every thrust. This man knew what he wanted. He threw his arms around my neck, shifting his weight in a wordless request to switch positions.

I rolled us over, smiling as I glanced up at him. "Ride me, baby."

"One moment, please." Moody leaned backward to grab my hat from the edge of the bed and set it on his head. And without further ado, he proceeded to ride me like a seasoned cowboy.

A skinny guy with glasses, wearing a hat that was far too big for his head, bouncing on my cock like a wannabe rodeo hero shouldn't have been sexy, but my God, he sent me flying. I dug my heels into the mattress, jacking him to a rhythm we had no chance of sustaining.

"I'm gonna fucking come," I growled.

I did...and Moody was right there with me.

We heaved, staring at each other in wonder. We were a mess of sweat and cum, wearing big-ass grins and not much else. Well...the hat.

“Looks good on you.” I tipped the brim, chuckling when he batted my hand away.

“I’ve never worn a cowboy hat and, shocker...I’ve never engaged in sexual activity with a cowboy. You’re my first.”

“Oh, so you were using me to fulfill some weird fantasy?” I teased, tweaking his nipples.

“Yes.” He smacked my hand again and wiggled his ass on my spent dick. “Two for one—a cowboy and his hat. This is a most excellent way to recuperate after a daunting illness.”

“Most excellent,” I agreed.

“Thank you.”

I snickered. “Thank you . I can feel my cum dripping from your hole, by the way. That’s fucking incredible.”

Moody blushed, just as I thought he might. He shifted off me, mumbling something about a cleanup on aisle Hudson. Silly and goofy, but I was still grinning like a fool when he returned with a wet cloth.

“Here you go,” he said, wiping the mess we’d made. “I am grateful, you know. I’m not thanking you for sex—that would be weird. But...thank you for coming by every day this week. It was above and beyond, and I appreciate it.”

I captured his wrist and waited for him to meet my gaze. “It was my pleasure.”

He nodded and yes, blushed again. “Nonetheless, if I can do anything to repay your kindness, let me know.”

I reclaimed my hat as I sat up. “Help me buy a Christmas tree.”

Moody frowned. “You were serious.”

“Yep. It’s just a tree, Moody.”

“Think of something else...or better yet, get back to me in January.” He fixed his glasses and put his hands on his hips.

I rescued my boxer briefs and jeans. “Nope, that’s the favor I’m collecting for soup duty. I’m open pretty much every day next week. Check your schedule and?—”

“I’m busy! It’s that dreaded mistletoe and holly and ho-ho-ho time of year. People buy books and gifts and...stuff.”

“Make time for me, Moody.” I planted a rough kiss on his mouth and squeezed his bare ass. “I promise to make it worth your while.”

I plucked my shirt from the chair, grabbed my socks and boots, and redressed on my way to the front door. I heard muffled grumbling and groaning, and then?—

“Fine, but I’m not going to like it. Not one bit.”

I froze, my hand on the doorknob and a big ol’ grin on my face. “Don’t be so sure about that,” I called out.

He probably had a snarky reply, but I got the hell out of there, pulling my socks on and stuffing my feet into my boots in the foyer on the way to my truck. Hey, I was playing with fire and possibly asking more of the grumpiest elf in town than I should have dared. That was a chance I was willing to take.

Don't get me wrong—I wouldn't force him to go anywhere with me.

All I wanted was a reason to be with Moody. If a damn tree was my ticket, I'd happily buy two.

HUDSON

Tanner Spade was one of those naturally engaging people who seemed to have a genuine lust for life. He couldn't just say a simple good morning. He had to smack you on the back and ask how you were doing, usually while in the middle of grooming a horse or examining a cow, or today, cradling a two-month-old goat kid.

"Is this a bright and beautiful day, or what?" Tanner grinned, crooking his chin to the furry white burden in his arms. "Say hi to Nelly. She's a feisty little thing. I caught her nibbling on her brother's ear and terrorizing the cats."

"Hiya, Nelly. We've already met. She followed me home yesterday...or as far as the fence, anyway."

Tanner chuckled softly. "She's a friendly one, aren't ya, girl?"

I scratched under Nelly's chin. "I was on my way to check the equipment list at the stable and?—"

"You don't have to do that. It's one of my chores for later...after Mills takes our urban cowboys out for their ride," he said, gesturing to the group of vacationing clients huddled around a stall, listening to a spiel about how to properly mount a horse.

I glanced over at the group of corporate big shots preparing for a day on the ranch.

Some wore bolo ties, belt buckles the size of dinner plates, and jeans tight enough to constrict blood flow. That wasn't gonna be comfortable.

I had to admit the dude ranch was the only aspect I wasn't truly sold on. I didn't have a problem with it, per se. I just couldn't see myself playing tour guide to millionaires wearing thousand-dollar boots that probably wouldn't see the light of day after one trip.

"Good idea, but I'm happy to do it. Or I can take Nelly off your hands," I offered.

"Okay, suit yourself." He passed the goat to me and brushed his palms on his jeans. "Be good, Nell. No biting. I don't want Hudson to regret that he didn't hightail it to Christmas Town when he had the chance."

I stroked the kid's ears and scratched the top of its head as I studied my new business partner. Tanner was my height but outweighed me by at least twenty pounds. He was a good-looking guy with wavy sandy-brown hair, green eyes, and an affable smile. His cheery disposition and positive attitude permeated every facet of the ranch.

I'd liked him from day one. And I'd learned a long time ago that you could tell a lot about folks based on how they treated animals. Tanner was the quintessential animal lover. He was the type who'd give a hungry dog his own dinner, use his shirt to fashion a tourniquet for an injured sheep, and stay awake till the wee hours of the morning to comfort a laboring horse.

Those were things I'd do without a second thought as well, but I'd known plenty of assholes who lacked the compassion gene and hadn't deserved to work with animals in any capacity. That wasn't the case here.

Oak Ridge was a sprawling, multi-purpose commercial enterprise. We sold vacations with horseback riding and ranch-life activities to the public, and dairy milk and crops

to local vendors. But animals were vital to our success, and Tanner and his crew treated them with care. And yeah, he talked to them all damn day.

In a way, his sunny nature reminded me of Moody...pre-December.

"I like Christmas Town," I commented conversationally. "It's aptly named, that's for sure. I don't think I've ever seen more tinsel or garland in one place."

"Right? It's crazy."

"Any idea how the town came to be? I mean, it's a unique concept."

Tanner tilted the brim of his hat and snorted. "Believe it or not, the whole Christmas thing was a gimmick an oil tycoon thought up when he bought the town forty years ago. I think it was called Mayville at first, but he wanted to recreate the wild west with a saloon and cowboy-inspired shops. It didn't attract visitors the way he hoped, so he hired a marketing firm to come up with ideas and one of them suggested going all out during the holiday season and advertising western-themed fun for families. That enormous evergreen at the bottom of the hill was the inspiration, and it was a hit. But the crowds disappeared in January, and the solution was to change the name and ring in the holidays all year long. Decades later, it's still going strong. Though I heard they have Santa to thank for that."

"Excuse me?"

He snickered. "Milt Moody. You've seen the Santa statue. C'mon, you can't miss it. He moved into town and took Christmas to the next level. He dressed up as Santa year-round. Flip-flops and Bermuda shorts in warmer weather, full suit in fall and winter, but the beard was omnipresent. He organized troops of carolers, themed events, and put the town on the map again. No one knew why he did it. He didn't own a business or any shares in the town. He was just a retired teacher from

Pittsburgh who loved the holidays. Go figure.”

Moody’s dad.

“ Huh . I—” Buzz buzz. I slipped my cell from my pocket, angling it out of the curious goat’s reach to check the caller ID. “Ah, that’s my mom.”

“Talk to her. I’ll take Nelly.” Tanner swept the baby goat from my arms and ambled away. “See you around, man.”

I waved before answering my cell. “Hey, Ma.”

“Hi, honey. How’s California treating you? Don’t tell me you’re eating granola and kale salads every day...that’s all I ask,” she joked.

I headed toward the fence facing an open field and hiked my foot on the middle slat. “Rest assured, I haven’t eaten a single piece of kale since I’ve been here.”

She chuckled, a light and breezy sound that reminded me of home. “Good. What’s new, what’s happening? Give me all the details. I miss not being able to knock on your door or bump into you at the barn.”

“It’s only been ten days, Ma.”

“So? California is far away. Is it nice?”

“It’s great.” I filled her in on my move, told her about a horse I knew she’d like, and the holiday tasting at the winery. “You’d love it. You’ll have to come visit soon.”

“I will, but first...I have to tell you two things, and I’m not sure how you’ll take either one of them. Number one, I bought you a ticket to come home for Christmas.”

“Mom...” I leaned on the fence post and frowned. “We talked about this. I’m not?—”

“Number two, Kylie married a yoga instructor and moved to Nashville,” she continued in a rush.

“Oh.”

Maybe that was supposed to hurt, but I didn’t feel anything at all.

Huh.

“I know. Good riddance. She’s obviously moved on and so have you, which is wonderful, but you should be with your family at Christmas, honey. And?—”

“Mom, I’m not coming home for Christmas.”

She sighed heavily on the line. “I know I should respect your wishes, but I think you’re being stubborn, and I hate to think of you being alone on a major holiday.”

“I won’t be alone,” I heard myself say.

Not my brightest move. My mother’s gleeful shriek nearly detonated my eardrum.

“Oh, my gosh, that’s wonderful! I had a sneaky suspicion this move had something to do with a new girl. Or guy. Tell me everything.”

Shit.

I winced. I wasn’t exactly lying. I had met someone. But Moody and I were friends who’d fooled around a few times. I liked him and I was pretty sure the feeling was mutual, but we weren’t “seeing each other.” We were just...casually intimate?

No, that wouldn't fly.

"There's nothing to tell. I met some new friends, and...don't worry about me being alone. I'll be fine."

"You'd be better than fine at home," Mom grunted. "I'll leave it for now, but think about it. You have the ticket if you change your mind."

I highly doubted that would happen, but I didn't want to argue, so I switched to general holiday topics, which of course led me to Christmas Town. I described the holiday-themed street names and the stores peddling ornaments, snow globes, and everything in between.

But I didn't tell her about Moody's Marvelous Bah Humbug Bookstore or its crabby owner. That was a curious oversight on my part. My mom loved bookshops. Moody's humbug attitude would have made her chuckle. And that might have been enough to make her forget about wanting me home.

I didn't have to mention that I had a major crush on Moody. I could downplay our friendship and never mention his big brown eyes or the way his nose twitched when he was trying not to laugh and the shake of his shoulders when he lost the battle.

Just thinking about Moody made me smile, but I wasn't ready to share him yet and invite unwanted speculation. For now, it was enough to be happy.

And you know, I forgot my mom's news about Kylie for a full twenty-four hours. I braced myself for a wave of anger or sadness, but I still felt absolutely nothing at all. I'd call that a win.

MOODY

“That tree is too short. That one is too skinny. That one has a bald spot.”

Hudson put his hands on his hips and pivoted in the middle of the Christmas tree lot like a sheriff facing an outlaw, serious as heck and prepared to do battle if necessary. Possibly with me, but let's remember, I came with the warning label, “No good until January.” He should have known this wouldn't go well.

He tipped his hat and pointed at a medium-sized Noble fir leaning against a post. “How about that one?”

I trudged over to the perfectly decent tree and looked for faults. It was a nice height, full and lush, and the needles smelled gorgeous. There had to be something annoying about it. Anything at all.

But gosh, it was...perfect. It reminded me of the trees Dad and I used to pick out at the lot around the corner from our house the day after Thanksgiving. It reminded me of cool wind, snowflakes on my father's beard, and mugs of hot chocolate filled with mini marshmallows.

“I don't hate it,” was the best I could do.

Hudson set a meaty hand on my shoulder and snickered. “Try again.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“If you don’t hate something, you might actually...” He wiggled his fingers as if hoping to conjure a spell. “What’s that word again?”

“Not completely dislike it?” I offered, batting my lashes.

He crossed his arms, his lips quirking in amusement. “Do you need a thesaurus?”

I scoffed. “Fine. I think it’s quite adequate. Perhaps even...charming.”

Hudson’s grin threatened to take over his entire face. His eyes crinkled and his teeth gleamed, and against my wishes, the corner of my mouth curled to mimic his. Oh, no. I bit the inside of my cheeks to nip the unwarranted smile in the bud, but he was talking now and it was hard to listen and keep track of my facial muscles at the same time. Don’t ask me why...it just was.

“Charming! We’ve got ourselves a winner, ladies and gentlemen!” He clapped and threw his arms in the air. “Woohoo!”

“Calm yourself. It’s a tree. No one won the darn lottery,” I huffed.

“You have a point. All right, I’ll grab the trunk, and you take the other end.” He swooped low and hefted the tree with ease, obviously requiring no assistance whatsoever.

“You’re impressively endowed in the biceps department. I doubt you’ll need my help.”

I started to turn away, but Hudson tugged my scarf to stop me.

“Not so fast. This is a two-person job,” he insisted.

“You’re literally holding it on your own now and...” I puffed my cheeks out like a blowfish and rolled my eyes. “I know when I’m being tricked. This is holiday coercion at its worst.”

He winked. “Come on. I’ll pay you in blowjobs if you help me get this in the truck.”

“Blowjobs...plural?”

“Plural.”

“Very well. I accept.” With that I slipped my hand through the fir branches, grasped hold of my end, and marched ahead of Hudson to the register.

“Moody? Is that really you?” Cheryl Dalton inquired with a swift double take that made the ball at the end of her Santa hat smack her on the nose.

I pushed at my glasses and inclined my chin. “It is, indeed. My presence isn’t indicative of a seasonal change of heart, however, so please don’t spread untoward rumors.”

The older woman’s lips twitched. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good. I’m simply helping a friend.” I introduced Hudson, then meandered to a nearby rack of mistletoe, garlands, wreaths, and lights.

Memories assailed me from every direction: like the time I got stuck under a mistletoe in fifth grade with Missy Flaherty, who insisted I had to kiss her because those were the rules. The memory shifted to hanging silver garlands in Dad’s classroom and his boom of laughter when he caught me wrapping it around my

skinny body. He'd asked what I was doing, and I'd answered quite honestly that it looked pretty...like a dress.

Some dads might have been scandalized or mortified, but Milt Moody had just ruffled my hair and told me to put one on my Christmas list.

Tears threatened out of the blue. I swallowed them down and dabbed the corner of my eyes to be sure there was no leakage.

"...find all the decorations you'll need in town," Cheryl was saying. "I'm sure Moody would be happy to point you in the right direction."

Hudson winked. "I bet I can talk him into it. Thanks again."

I scowled at Cheryl and hurried after Hudson, doing my darnedest to help him schlep the tree to his truck, happy I'd managed to fight off a new surge of déjà vu.

Once inside, Hudson fastened his seat belt and adjusted the volume on the radio, blasting "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and then, to my dismay, he commenced singing. I smacked my forehead and slumped theatrically against the upholstery.

"This is torture. Are there really blowjobs attached to this assignment?"

He patted my knee. "And a rim job if you join in."

I rolled my eyes. "That isn't fair. I'll have to do without."

"Have it your way." He put the truck in reverse and immediately broke into song again. It was pitchy albeit ridiculously endearing.

I was definitely, absolutely, one thousand percent not going to sing or even hum

along, but darn it, I couldn't control my toe tapping in my sneaker. That was the least of my worries. Butterflies were dancing in my stomach, and I felt gooey all over. Not okay.

It got worse when Hudson insisted on stopping to purchase ornaments in town.

“Are you bonkers? Ornaments were not part of the deal.”

“Humor me.”

Against my better judgment, I acquiesced. I'd be the talk of the town by morning. Everyone would be speculating about what had prompted two Moody sightings at holiday venues within an hour. Of course, they'd come to the swift conclusion that I was infatuated with our new neighbor, and they'd be correct.

But this was for BJs...plural.

Okay, that was a lie. It wasn't the promise of sex that had convinced me to tag along on Hudson's holiday spirit quest. It was him.

Hudson was so magnetic.

That had to be why I followed him through Mrs. Clause's Ornament Parlor, grunting my yays and nays to red bulbs versus silver ones. I grudgingly approved his glittery star tree-topper and admitted that I preferred colorful lights over plain ones. And yes, the velvet tree skirt was a pleasant addition.

But that was it. He'd get no more opinions from me.

And no, I certainly would not be aiding him in the decorating process. Are you bananas?

After I helped Hudson lug his purchases into his abode, he was on his own. Although I had hoped this afternoon jaunt would end on a libidinous note, sans clothing, Hudson had insisted that I should come to his place rather than dropping me off when we were still in Christmas Town. That meant something, didn't it?

Perhaps not.

"Aren't you going to bring the tree in the house?" I asked, gesturing to the adorable gray bungalow he'd parked in front of as I shut the passenger side door.

Hudson tilted the brim of his hat and shrugged. "It can wait. I want to put the lights on the house first."

I frowned. "Why? That makes no sense."

"Sure it does. I want to get them up before it's dark." He folded his arms, seemingly in no big hurry to get started with anything in particular. "There's a ladder in the garage. I'll grab that and worry about the tree tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? You're going to leave it in your trunk all night long? That's—no!"

"No?"

I closed my eyes briefly and released a put-upon sigh. "I'll help you take the tree inside."

Hudson grinned as he leaned in to kiss me. "Thanks."

He didn't require my assistance. No chance. Hudson was fit and burly, and his shoulders were wide enough to carry three trees at once, Paul Bunyan style. But I helped anyway, struggling to hold my end and the bags of ornaments too.

I dumped the bags on the coffee table and somehow ended up supervising the tree placement after Hudson partially blocked his hallway. We arranged it in the window and it looked...very nice.

His cottage was rustic chic with wide-plank hardwood flooring, high ceilings, and comfy leather furnishings anchored by a red-and-gold print area rug. It lacked personal touches like books and photos, but it was a homey space with potential. And yes, the tree added undeniable warmth.

“This is lovely.”

Hudson smiled. “Pleasant Moody is making a comeback.”

“Don’t push your luck,” I grumbled without heat.

“I wouldn’t dare. I like this place, too. It was one of the overflow cottages Mills used for guests of the dude ranch, so it came prefurnished. The kitchen is small, but it has an island and my bedroom is?—”

“Why don’t you give me a tour?” I intercepted, flashing my version of a come-hither wink.

“Do you have something in your eye?”

“Uh—no.”

“Good.” He thumped his thumb on the box of holiday lights. “Lights first, then a tour.”

No mention whatsoever of naked shenanigans.

I squinted in disbelief. “Are you joking?”

“No. Come help,” he said, as if that were a logical response to my rhetorical query. “It’ll go faster and?—”

“Help? Help...how?” I threw my hands in the air in exasperation. “I’m short, significantly under-muscled, and I have zero interest in illuminating the interior or exterior of your surprisingly resplendent home. I’m here for sex. You owe me a gosh-darn blowjob!”

Hudson widened his eyes comically, rubbing his stubbled jaw. “Are you pouting?”

“Well...I—yes, I am,” I admitted.

“Naughty boy, but...you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. This is extortion and exploitation and if I didn’t know better, I’d accuse you of foisting unwanted holiday cheer down my throat when?—”

“When I should be sucking your cock,” he finished. And just like that, the air crackled with a familiar seductive spark. “C’mere.”

I swallowed hard, but try though I might, I couldn’t make my feet move.

Lust choked me, rooted me to the spot. I felt dizzy, and my cock ached behind my zipper. Hudson repeated my name, his voice rough and raspy, like gravel. His tone was authoritative but soothing. Don’t ask me how. I was too busy struggling to remain upright whilst in a fog of intense desire.

“I...” Yes, I’d apparently lost the ability to form words.

Hudson dropped the lights on the coffee table, grasped my face in his big paws, and thrust his tongue between my lips. He commanded the kiss as he slowly walked me to the closest wall. He fumbled with my belt and zipper. I felt cool air and the brush of his fingers on my bare booty, but I couldn't concentrate on anything beyond his tongue in my mouth.

Until Hudson pulled his hat off and sank to his knees.

Listen, I was a big fan of blowjobs. Who wasn't? But I was not the most experienced gay on the planet. I'd been with men who'd bragged about their prowess and left me underwhelmed with sloppy ministrations and either applied too little or too much pressure, so I'd set my expectations on the lower end of the spectrum to avoid disappointment a long time ago.

Hudson single-handedly reset the standard. He fondled my balls, rolling them languidly in my sac while he stroked and sucked. I saw stars almost immediately, but there was no way I'd let myself come that fast. I bit my bottom lip and pushed my fingers through his thick hair. He hummed, sending a delicious vibration along my shaft that spread through my body like wildfire. I was warm all over and tingly, and oh...

Do not come. Do not come.

I thought I might be able to hang on if I didn't look at him. The view of his lips wrapped around my dick was too much. Too, too much. But I could rest my head against the wall, hands in his hair, and just...let Hudson do whatever he wanted to me. He could suck my balls, stroke me, and tease my hole with one finger. And if he pushed that digit on my pucker, I could handle it.

Oh, gosh. Maybe not.

“I’m gonna come,” I panted.

Hudson took everything I gave him, sucking and sucking till I went limp. Then he sat on his haunches and licked his lips, his gaze locked on mine. I expected a teasing comment along the lines of fulfilling his side of the bargain. Or perhaps he’d try to talk me into helping with those darn lights again. Or maybe he’d kick me to the curb or?—

“You’re very beautiful. You know that?”

I opened and closed my mouth in shock. Nope, I definitely hadn’t expected that. It wasn’t just his words, it was the sincerity in his tone. Beautiful? Me? He really believed it was true, and that was enough.

So yes, in a moment of weakness, I held the ladder while he strung lights on his house. Was I happy about it? No.

But I wasn’t unhappy either.

All I knew for sure was that I didn’t want to be anywhere else. I didn’t want to be home alone, wishing time away. If the alternative involved bright lights, a tree, and a hunky man with twinkling eyes...so be it.

Confusing. I know.

HUDSON

Holiday music wasn't something I thought much about. I had some favorites and there were a few I didn't really care for, but on the whole, I was ambivalent. The season never lasted long enough for me to form a strong love or hate bond. However, if I heard "Last Christmas" one more time, I was going to come un-fucking-done.

"What's with this song? I hear it every time I come in the store."

Katie, one of Moody's sales assistants, chuckled as she tore open a box of merchandise I'd carried in from storage. "Moody loves it."

Yes, hanging out at Moody's Marvelous Bah Humbug Bookshop had become a daily habit. It happened organically. Sort of.

I'd start my day bright and early on the ranch, watering and feeding animals, meeting the staff, and generally getting the lay of the land. By early afternoon, I'd run out of ways to be useful. Sure, I would have been welcome anywhere on the ranch if I jumped in to help, but something pulled me into town...to Moody.

What had begun with a friendly check-in to make sure he was feeling well after his illness had become an afternoon ritual that usually ended with me doing some manual labor. The toilet got clogged; I volunteered to fix it. The boxes in the alley needed to be broken down; I was the man for the job. The Ghastly Grinchy Holiday display was a mess? No worries, I didn't mind diverting kids while Moody and his elves cleaned

up.

Everyone knew we were friends, and they might have even suspected there was something more between us, but neither of us paid attention. We were at that blissful phase where a budding friendship collided with amazing sex. I wanted to kiss him, blow him, fuck him...and yeah, I wanted to know what made him tick.

Funny enough, I knew he felt the same about me. I caught his clandestine stares and noticed his blush when I waltzed into his shop. His hand trembled when I brushed our pinkies and offered to help. And when he was ready to close for the day, he let me walk him home...no squawking about not needing an escort.

Why would he? The second he clicked the lock, we were all over each other, tearing off clothing in a rabid effort to get to skin. Honestly, I loved that we'd mutually reached the same conclusion that there was no reason to overanalyze our attraction. It existed. That was enough.

I was addicted to Moody—the curve of his spine as he rode my cock, the sharp jut of his pelvic bone as he picked up the pace, the rise and fall of his chest as he chased his orgasm, and that sweet, whimpery sound he made as he shot his load...yeah, sign me up.

It was more difficult to explain why his smile made my heart skip a beat and why his curious list of eccentricities seemed like clues I shouldn't ignore.

Like this damn song.

“You have to admit that this song is on heavy rotation and?—”

“That's because I'm exceedingly fond of it.” Moody popped his head around a bookshelf, pausing to give me a thorough once-over.

I flashed a knowing grin that made him blush and damn it, I wanted him again. I pushed my porny thoughts aside and tried to remember what the hell we were talking about.

“Moody loves sad holiday songs,” Katie chimed in. “He’s like a reverse romantic during the holidays.”

“Hmph . I like it, it stays,” Moody scowled. “Feel free to vamoose now if you want, Katie. It’s almost five o’clock anyway.”

“Oh! Thank you. I need to stop at the market for confectioners’ sugar before it’s sold out. I’ll grab you some too,” she said, squeezing his arm as she passed by.

“I don’t require sugar.”

“Actually, you do. Vicki put your name on the gingerbread house sign-up sheet and I think you forgot to cross it out like you usually do, so...you better get baking! See you tomorrow, Moody.”

I frowned. “Gingerbread house sign-up?”

Moody shook his head in resigned exasperation. “It’s a yearly contest in town that I won’t be partaking in.”

“Why not? If I recall correctly, you mentioned you were a decent baker.”

“I’m excellent,” he huffed indignantly.

“But...” I prompted.

“It’s...” His glasses slipped as he wrinkled his brow, the way he always did when his

brain and mouth were out of sync. "...messy. You have to bake the gingerbread from scratch, no prepackaged designs. And then you have to assemble it and decorate with aplomb."

"Hmm . Sounds like fun. I'll sign up."

He eyed me suspiciously. "Do you bake?"

"No, but it can't be that hard, and you can help me." I trailed a finger along his forearm, loving the flustered flare of desire he couldn't quite mask.

"I know what you're doing. This is more trickeration."

"Trickeration?" I repeated with a laugh. "Don't be dramatic. It's gingerbread."

"Baking is a science. Not difficult, necessarily, but it requires patience and...and...you have no idea how cutthroat this competition gets. This isn't Christmas Town's version of The Great British Baking Show . This is war."

I snorted derisively. "Really?"

He fiddled with his glasses again. "Well, not war, but...a very serious contest that requires a team of bakers. Katie partners with her mom, Vicki signs me up on Team Vixen, knowing full well that I'll politely bow out, and?—"

"Why? I know you have a strong anti-holiday stance, but does it have to be a Christmassy gingerbread creation? We could just make a house. Or better yet, a ranch." I picked up a couple of the empty boxes I'd stacked in the corner. "Me and you...could be fun. Like a baking date."

"A baking date?" Moody repeated.

I pointed at his chest. “Exactly. Your kitchen is bigger, so?—”

“No gingerbread in my house.”

I narrowed my gaze. “Okay, we’ll do it at my place. Send me a list of ingredients, and I’ll do the shopping. Sound good?”

I braced for a grumbly Moody brush-off, and let’s be real, I kind of deserved it. He’d clearly stated that he had no intention of participating and once again, I’d inserted myself. Sue me. I liked this man, and I wanted to see him smile the way he had a few months ago, unfettered and free.

But really...a gingerbread-baking date?

Ingredients for a gingerbread house: flour, baking powder, salt, brown sugar, ground ginger, cinnamon, allspice...

I scoured the Santa Ynez supermarket spice section and came up empty. They had basil, bay leaves, cardamom seed powder, cayenne, and thirty more with tiny labels and even smaller font, but no allspice. Maybe that wasn’t important.

I pulled out my cell and texted Moody.

Where the fuck and what the fuck is allspice?

I hit Send just as a new message popped up from my family chat. It was a group selfie of my mom, my brother, a slew of cousins, their significant others, and my aunt and uncle taken at Sunday dinner. The caption read: We miss you, Hud! Come home for Christmas.

“Well, fancy running into you here!”

I spun, jostling my cell and nearly dropping it. “Whoa.”

Vicki cupped her hand beneath mine to catch it, wiping her brow in mock relief when that proved unnecessary. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“That’s okay. I was texting and got distracted.”

“Happens to the best of us,” she replied, tucking a strand of hair into her loose bun and pointing a red manicured finger at my screen. “Is that your family?”

“Uh...yeah.” I turned my phone toward her and gave a brief rundown of the Calhoun and Babineaux clan.

“That’s a big crew,” she commented, sidling around me to grab two jars of cloves.

“There are even more of us during the holidays. Cousins I haven’t seen or sometimes even heard of come out of the woodwork.” I checked to be sure I hadn’t missed a new message from Moody before pocketing my cell. “It’s chaos...the fun kind. My mom’s convinced I need that in my life, so she’s enlisted the whole gang to coax me home for Christmas.”

Vicki cocked her head, her hand frozen over a package of powdered sugar. “You’re staying in town?”

“That’s my plan.” I turned back to the spice section.

“Ah...well, that’s good. I noticed that you and Moody have become...close, but knowing Moody, he won’t offer the appropriate holiday invite, so if you happen to be available for dinner on Christmas Eve, you’re welcome to join us at my house. Believe it or not, there will be no soup on the menu.”

I smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“My pleasure. And good luck with your gingerbread house. You’re going to need it,” she chided playfully. “I’ve got my husband’s secret recipe.”

“Gingerbread smack talk? That’s a new one.”

“Oh, honey, you don’t know the half of it. My late husband was very serious about gingerbread flavor, and Moody was all about construction and design. They were very close, and together, they were a great team. But...things have changed,” she commented, her voice suddenly wistful.

The baking aisle at the local grocery store probably wasn’t the best venue for probing conversations, but I was too curious and this woman knew Moody better than anyone.

“Moody told me his dad was literally Santa.”

Vicki grinned. “Yep. Milt looked the part, and that man embodied kindness and joy and...blessings. Can you believe I met him at a Vegas strip club?”

A woman pushing a drooling toddler in a shopping cart glanced up, immediately veering in the opposite direction.

“Is that so?”

Vicki waited for the young mother to clear the aisle and nodded. “It’s true. Milt came to my show every night during his two-week vacation. It was hard not to notice the guy with the bushy white beard and twinkling eyes. Santa at a strip club? The story just wrote itself. He was such a gentleman...always laughing, always able to find a silver lining. Like Moody.”

The “except in December” was inferred, but I let it go and refocused on the spice shelves.

“He sounds like he was an amazing guy.”

“The best.” She smiled sadly, motioning to the shelves of baking goods. “What are you looking for?”

“Allspice. Got any idea where I can find it?”

Vicki joined the search and found the allspice hidden behind a container of cumin. She dropped it into my cart, nudging my shoulder as she stage-whispered, “The decorations are crap here. You need to buy your supplies at the Candy Emporium in Christmas Town. If you give Sally my name, she’ll hook you up with the good stuff.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she called out, stopping in her tracks at the end of the aisle. “Hey, Hudson?”

“Yeah?”

“Moody played ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ at the store earlier today. That’s kind of a big deal ’cause it’s a downright happy song, so...thank you.”

I furrowed my brow in amused confusion. “That’s great, but that’s not me.”

“Oh, yes, it is.” She waved and disappeared a moment later.

Okay, that was cryptic and odd, but also...sweet.

Buzz buzz.

Allspice is also known as Jamaica pepper or myrtle pepper. Contrary to popular belief, it is not a combination of spices, but its own distinct spice. Its flavor is reminiscent of cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg. If you've exhausted all options, we can make do with a homemade blend. However, my alchemy skills are rusty.

I took a photo of the allspice and sent it to Moody. Allspice, all good.

Smiley face emoji. Magnificent!

I snorted at the exchange, but I was grinning like a fool. I was doing that a lot lately. Was it regular sex with a beautiful, interesting man or was it something else? Hard to say. I just knew I was...happy.

I liked to think Moody was too.

13

MOODY

Hudson's kitchen was definitely smaller than mine. He was short on prep space, and I had no idea where we'd assemble the gingerbread ranch. Maybe on the round dining table in the corner where the baby goat was munching a carrot and?—

I gasped and jumped a foot in the air, or at least a few inches. "There's a creature—a critter...in your house."

Hudson hummed distractedly as he bent to retrieve something from the refrigerator. "A critter? Oh, that's just Nelly. I'll introduce you in a sec. How about some eggnog? We can spike it with a little bourbon and?—"

"Uh...yes, yes, fine, just...Nelly?" I swiped my clammy palms on my shirt, scanning my internal databank for information about this particular animal. I came up blank. "You have a pet goat?"

I didn't know squat about goats, except that they generally lived in barns. No...wait. I vaguely recalled an acquaintance in grad school who'd claimed to be a goat. Or maybe an otter or a furry or—oh, dear. Oh, dear, not the same thing.

Pull it together, Moody.

Hudson set a carton of eggnog on the counter, then bent to gather the goat in his arms. "Come meet, Moody, Nell. Don't be shy. He's a sweetheart."

“Are you talking to me or the goat?”

Hudson laughed. “Yes. Nelly is a flirt. She follows Tanner everywhere, but she’s taken a shine to me too. This is the third day in a row this week I’ve found her waiting at the gate behind my yard.”

“But she’s in side your domain. Is that...okay?”

“Sure. She won’t get into much trouble in the kitchen, but we’re gonna take her home before we start cooking, anyway. Want to pet her?”

“Um...sure.” I gnawed my bottom lip and inched closer, gently brushing my hand on the soft tuft of hair on Nell’s head. She didn’t flinch or even seem to notice me at all. She was besotted with the big, burly man cradling her in his arms. I couldn’t blame her.

“That’s it. Good girl. I told you he was a good egg, Nell. A little fussy sometimes, but nothing we can’t handle,” Hudson cooed.

“Hey,” I grumbled without heat, petting her long ears. “She is pretty cute, and she?—”

“Baaaaa!”

I jumped again and this time, I bounced into the counter and knocked over a measuring cup and a spatula. Nelly bleated in earnest at the racket, wiggling out of Hudson’s arms and tearing around the kitchen table in circles. Every time he tried to catch her, she’d hop away like a demented bunny.

At first it was alarming. This tiny creature was wreaking havoc, skidding across the floor and bouncing off cabinets and chairs, darting out of reach at the last possible

second.

And then, well...I had to admit it was gosh-darn funny. Hudson was so big, and Nelly was so tiny and quick, and the ridiculousness of a goat dodging capture like a child playing tag with an old geezer was slapstick comedy gold. I was not immune. At all.

On Nelly's fourth lap, I lost my composure. A snicker morphed into a fit of giggles and eventually dissolved into uproarious laughter. I flopped onto the nearest chair, doubled over with tears in my eyes. My feverish cackling and Nelly's bleating echoed in the small confines. Poor Hudson gave up the chase, raking his hand through his hair, the picture of a man at wit's end.

"Holy crap. I don't know where to begin." He kneeled to grab the carrot Nelly had abandoned earlier and glanced my way. "Are you okay? I can't tell if you're crying or?—"

"I'm fine. I'm—baa." And yes, I was laughing again...so hard that I slipped off the chair.

"Hold that thought. Gotcha!" Hudson swooped the goat in his arms and sat cross-legged on the floor next to me. He offered Nelly the carrot and sighed with relief as she nibbled away as if nothing had happened.

I leaned into his side to pet her, no hesitation. My insides felt warm, and though I could probably claim that was thanks to the unexpected comedy show, I knew that wasn't it. Just as I knew Nelly's presence wasn't an accident.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

"Right. Because it's so much fun to chase a fucking goat while I'm trying to impress a guy," he snarked.

I smiled and kissed his cheek. “I’m impressed. Tell me all about Nelly.”

Hudson studied me intently. I wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but I liked it when he laced our fingers, squeezed, and started talking.

“Nelly? She’s a pain in the ass, but she’s cute. Like you. Her brother is a little bigger. They call him Gordy, and...”

My December defenses, which had already been on shaky ground for a week or more, crumbled brick by brick, leaving me exposed and vulnerable. I could feel the fall happening, but I couldn’t stop it. Worse...I didn’t care.

Hudson told me about the goats he’d befriended and the cow he was sure had a crush on him. He talked about horses he’d grown up with in Colorado and the cranky old cat that had slept at the end of his bed every night till he left for college.

Hudson loved animals...all animals. He’d thought about becoming a vet, but he’d been needed at the ranch, and there hadn’t been enough hours in the day. He talked about losing his dad to cancer and how he’d slipped into a mode of playing it safe. He was sure that was why he’d proposed to Kylie. He said he’d heard that she’d married the yoga instructor and that his family wanted him home for the holidays.

“What do you want?” I asked, snuggling closer to the sexy rancher and the goat sleeping in his arms.

“I don’t know. It’s only a few days and part of me thinks it might be fun, but...I also think I have a bad habit of trying to please others for the sake of keeping the peace.”

“ Hmm .”

“Not sure what I’ll do, but I know that I need to peel my ass off this cold floor before

I'm stuck here for eternity with a drooling goat on my chest." He stood and held his hand out. "C'mon. Let's put the eggnog away for now and take Nelly home."

We exited through the gate in his yard and strolled the moonlit path to the barn. Hudson dropped Nelly off with her family, then gave me a tour, introducing me to his favorite cows and a horse in the stable he'd nicknamed The Boss.

I'd always been skittish around animals. They were big and smelly and possibly dangerous. And while I didn't think I was incorrect, with a real cowboy at my side, I felt brave enough to pet an animal who outweighed me by eight hundred pounds or more. It was invigorating and fun...the way everything seemed to be when I was with Hudson.

I was so giddy from our excursion that I forgot to decline his offer of bourbon in my eggnog and I didn't make a fuss about the amount of work ahead of us after we'd scoured the kitchen post goat visit.

We couldn't simply make the dough and bake it, we needed a design. We discussed various ideas while sipping eggnog, finally agreeing that a basic rectangular shaped ranch with a small barn was the way to go.

"We can bake tonight, cut the gingerbread and let it harden tonight. I recommend waiting till tomorrow to decorate."

Hudson smiled and tied an apron over his plaid shirt. "I'm in. Just tell me what you need me to do."

I glanced up from the recipe on Hudson's iPad as the first notes of "All I Want for Christmas Is You" blasted from the Bluetooth speaker on the kitchen counter.

This was my wakeup call.

This holly jolly nonsense was the worst. It was everything I'd sworn off years ago—the gateway to crushing memories and debilitating fear. Dramatic, yes. I knew it. And trust me, my therapist did too. I'd funneled my nonsensical feelings into a curmudgeon persona of sorts that made the holidays palatable, but the eggnog, the tree, the twinkling Christmas lights in the kitchen window, and now...holiday music? This was too much.

This was where I'd say, "Turn that off or I'm leaving," or perhaps I'd walk out the door without a word. I didn't owe Hudson an explanation. I was a nutball during the holidays. Everyone knew it. They'd warned him, I'd warned him. What was he thinking?

I froze, hoping my whirling mind would quiet so I could make a decision. But Mariah sang louder and Hudson was shaking his hips, dancing as he refreshed our drinks and added more bourbon. Oh gosh, and now he was humming and he was wearing an apron and he was nice to baby goats and to horses and to me and?—

I plucked the glass from his hand, set it on the counter, and lunged for him, standing on tiptoe as I fused my mouth to his.

Hudson took my overenthusiastic lip-lock and turned it into something hot and sexy. I melted into the kiss, loving the taste of sweet eggnog and alcohol on his tongue and the feel of his strong arms around my waist. It was heaven, and I didn't ever want to let go.

He rested his forehead against mine and tilted my chin till I met his gaze. "You okay?"

"I'm splendiferous."

Hudson threw his head back and laughed. "Glad to hear it. Should we start baking?"

I nodded. “Yes. Let’s bake.”

A little-known fact about yours truly...I was an excellent baker. Top tier, first rate, “could lend a hand at a fancy French patisserie in a pinch” good. Seriously.

“Whoa! How do you know how to crack eggs like that?” Hudson asked, wrinkling his nose in wonder or confusion. “Hang on. Did you even measure the sugar? How do you know if that’s the right amount?”

Fair questions.

“I perfected this recipe at the tender age of twelve and made it continually for twenty years. I’ve taken a couple of years off, but I’ll never forget how to crack a darn egg.”

“Okay...well, what can I do?”

“You could measure and mix the flour, salt, and baking powder.”

Hudson gave a thumbs-up, tossing curious glances as I blended sugar and butter, swaying to a familiar carol on the radio. “Twenty years of baking?”

“Yes.” I pushed at the frame of my glasses with the heel of my hand and proceeded to spill all the beans. “When I was ten years old, I took over baking my mom’s chocolate chip cookies. She loved them, though too much sugar made her queasy after chemo. She kept me company in the kitchen and gave me pointers I still use today—unsalted butter only, always add an extra quarter cup of flour, and refrigerate the dough for at least twenty minutes before putting it in a properly preheated oven. Cooking, baking, and books were my safe haven during my mom’s illness and my dad’s sadness.”

Hudson frowned. “I’m sorry, baby. How old were you when she passed away?”

“Fifteen,” I said. “My parents were in their midforties when they adopted me and?—”

“You’re adopted? I didn’t know that.”

I shrugged. “ Mmm . It’s not news to me, but yes. My birth parents were forced to surrender me to the state or so the story goes. They were either neglectful or just bad people. My real parents, the ones who raised me, never went into gory detail. I was adopted officially at nine months old to a lovely older couple who’d never been able to have children of their own. They adored each other, and they adored me. They accepted me as is, too.”

“Good. That’s the way it should be.”

“Yes.” I added cinnamon, allspice, and ginger. A minute or so later, I was yapping again. “My dad fell to pieces after we lost Mom. He didn’t know what to do with himself. His hobbies had been her hobbies—antiquing, gardening, cooking. He was terribly depressed, so one year, I signed up for a gingerbread house competition and asked for his help. Actually, I recall an exaggerated desperate plea. Dad agreed...grudgingly. And guess what?”

“He loved it and decided to become Santa?”

I cast a sharp sideways glance his way. “How’d you know?”

Hudson chuckled, raising his hands in surrender. “Just a guess. There must have been a step or two in between.”

“It began with gingerbread and a little weight gain. He let his beard grow too, and one of his students commented that Mr. Moody bore a striking resemblance to Santa Claus. My father loved it. He loved it so much, he became Santa.”

“That’s pretty damn cool.”

I grinned. “It is. My Aunt Kathy was a little concerned. But he didn’t move to the North Pole, hire elves to make toys, or wrangle a few reindeer to do some heavy lifting. Dad wore the costume—red T-shirts in warm weather, red sweaters in colder months, and he kept his beard long year-round. And...he started volunteering—food banks, hospitals, events for cancer awareness, child and domestic abuse—if he was needed, he showed up. And it made him happy.”

“He really was a great man.”

“Yes, and Mom was equally fantabulous. I’m lucky they chose me. I wouldn’t be me if it weren’t for them,” I replied matter-of-factly.

Hudson pushed the bowl of flour toward me and dusted his hands off. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Me too, but I’m okay. I have a lot to be grateful for, and I know it.”

“Now that sounds like something the Moody I met in October would say,” he teased, nudging my shoulder. “Not December Moody. That guy’s a grouch.”

“Hmph .”

“December is tough for you,” he stated. No judgment, no question...just a simple acknowledgment.

Silence.

But not quite. “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” was playing now. I’d always liked this song. It was silly and funny and...it reminded me of happy memories and

warm kitchens that smelled like cinnamon and hope.

Just like that, I was yapping again.

“My best friend moved to Texas on December thirteenth when I was nine years old. I was devastated. My first boyfriend dumped me on December second. I was seventeen and thought he was all that and a bag of chips. I confronted him on what I thought was his erroneous “newly single” status on Myspace. Apparently, it was my Dear John letter.”

“Asshole,” Hudson huffed.

“Total jerk soda,” I agreed. “I knew it, but I was crushed anyway. Two days later, I broke my wrist. It was a woe-is-me year. There were worse Decembers, of course. My mom was diagnosed on December fifteenth, and she passed on Christmas Eve five years later. But I lost Dad in December, too...and that one broke me.”

My voice cracked and I hated it, but Hudson pulled me close, ignoring my squawked warning that my hands were dirty. I held them up but found myself slowly melting into his embrace.

“I’m sorry. I know I’m repeating myself, but I am sorry.”

“Thanks.” I gently pushed out of his arms and sighed. “Dad died the day after Christmas four years ago. He was older and not in great health. In some ways, it wasn’t unexpected, but I miss him...so much. And I selfishly struggle with being alone.”

“How is that selfish?”

I waved dismissively. “It just is. Dad must have known he didn’t have much time.

Almost every day that month, he told me how grateful he was that I was his son and how much my happiness meant to him. He'd point out a pretty bird or a beautiful sunset and just...go gaga. It was sweet and charming and...very Dad. His last words to me were 'Be happy.' I've tried, but...I have a very hard time embracing joy. The incessant pressure to smile through it all weighs on me. It's easier for me to keep my head down and work through it, grumpy face and all."

Hudson brushed his thumb over my cheek and cupped my chin. "I like this face just the way it is."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks, but I've unwittingly become the opposite of my dad's sunny Santa."

"You seem pretty happy now."

I cocked my head, furrowing my brow as if taking stock of my emotional state of mind. "I am. You have an interesting effect on me."

He grinned. "Yeah?"

"Yes, it's quite curious."

Hudson set his hands on my hips. "You know what I think?"

"Hmm ."

"I think it's good and healthy to mourn. And it's okay to be sad. It's also okay to let yourself be happy. I'm no therapist, but I've visited a couple, and I think it's true that we punish ourselves when bad things happen. As if we deserve to suffer, and that's not right. You should always give yourself a chance." He gave a wry half grin. "Trust me, I've gone through some sticky emotions over the past year. Anger, grief, hurt,

peace...some emotions are easier to swallow than others.”

“And how do you feel now?”

“I feel...hopeful,” he replied.

I smiled. How could I not? I rested my arms on his shoulders and stared into Hudson’s eyes, surrendering to a wave of contentment I hadn’t felt in...years.

“Me too.”

The first strains of Michael Bublé’s version of “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” drifted from the speaker. For once, that familiar panicky sensation didn’t grip me and pull me under. It actually did look and feel Christmassy, and I didn’t mind. Not one little bit.

Hudson inclined his chin and kissed me. “Wanna dance?”

I did. I really did. I couldn’t summon any part of me that hated corny Christmas music or dancing, and I didn’t want to, anyway.

I nodded my response and laid my head on his shoulder.

We swayed in the cozy kitchen like an old married couple. Tears clouded my vision as ancient memories flooded my mind—sleigh rides and hot chocolate, homemade stockings and tinsel, and laughter. So much laughter.

And peace.

I felt it now in Hudson’s arms—shuffling in a circle, my secrets and shortcomings revealed in a bourbon-laced eggnog haze. It was good and right. And I wanted to

believe it was real.

We stayed up late, baking sheets of gingerbread and cutting them into carefully measured squares and rectangles.

“We can begin assembly tomorrow or the following day,” I said.

“Sounds good.”

“Excellent.”

Hudson turned off the kitchen light and followed me to the foyer. “You all right?”

Fair question. Honest answer: undetermined.

I lingered at the front door, eyes on my cell, pretending to scroll my calendar. I wasn’t ready to leave, but it was late and we’d never had a sleepover. That probably required a conversation.

Don’t do it, Moody. Don’t say anything goofy or silly or ?—

“We’ve reached an impasse in our sexual journey that some might construe as crossing a line. I certainly wouldn’t want to impinge on boundaries, literal or figurative, but it occurs to me that we’ve never spent the night at either of our abodes.” I paused to push my glasses to the bridge of my nose, aware that I’d morphed into a verbal runaway locomotive. There was no stopping me now. Unfortunately. “Together in one bed, that is. And I’m definitely not asking for an invitation, nor am I issuing one. Although, I will say that I’m not averse to?—”

“Stay.” Hudson backed me against the door and held my face in his hands. “Stay here with me. Let me make love to you. All night. Please.”

I leaped into his arms. Gah! Yes, yes, yes.

Hudson caught me with an oomph , laughing as he fused our mouths, half carrying, half pulling me to his bedroom.

We undressed in our usual frenzy, but we slowed once we were skin to skin, sucking and licking. His slid his erection alongside mine, rutting and pumping his hips while our tongues mated. I hiked my legs high, wordlessly inviting him to take more.

He prepared me with thick, lubed fingers...one, two, three—dragging them over my prostate until I begged him to give me what I really wanted.

“Do it. Please, now.”

Hudson slicked his cock, his knees nudging my inner thighs while he took in the view of me spread out and open for him. “Say it. Tell me you want me to fuck your sweet hole.”

“I did,” I whined. “I just said it.”

He rested the tip on my pucker, then reached for my dick and stroked me, twisting his wrist slightly...the way he knew I liked it. “Go on, Moody. Let me hear it. I want inside you more than I want my next breath, but you’ve got to say the words and you’ve got to?—”

“Fuck my sweet hole, cowboy!” I growled.

I thought he’d laugh. I mean, I sounded ridiculous to my own ears.

Hudson didn’t agree. He entered me, his trembling arms caging my head as he began to move. And it was glorious and beautiful and sexier than every other time. Don’t

ask me why...it just was. His rippled muscular torso, the clench of his jaw, the rhythmic slide of his hand on my shaft timed perfectly to his every thrust. But I liked it better when he lost control, released my cock, and slammed into me over and over and over and?—

“ Ungh !” He roared like a wild beast, pouring every ounce of himself into me.

Two quick strokes later, I joined him, falling apart as he wrapped me in his arms, spent and gasping for air.

It wasn't until my breathing returned to normal that I heard the soft strains of “I'll Be Home for Christmas.” Strange. I thought we'd turned off the music. I opened my mouth to ask Hudson, but I didn't want to mar this perfect moment. Besides, I liked the sentiment.

I was with Hudson, and I felt very much at home.

14

HUDSON

“Is that Moody?”

“What’s gotten into him?”

“Is he okay?”

I noticed a few clandestine looks of disbelief and confusion in town. And I definitely overheard a few whispers.

I couldn’t blame them. The town Grinch suddenly didn’t seem so grinchy anymore. For starters, he smiled, joked with his customers, and even incorporated some more cheerful holiday elements in the store...like joyful music and trees with more than one limb.

Someone commented that he’d dropped his standard “Happy Honking Holidays” greeting too.

And then there was the gingerbread contest.

It had turned out to be a bigger deal than I’d thought. See, apparently the gingerbread bake-off was a vehicle to raise money for each participant’s charity of choice. There was paperwork and advertising involved—chores that were divvied out amongst a few shop owners. When Misty Sherman, Christmas Town’s candy queen, was

summoned to Santa Barbara for a family emergency, Moody stepped in to help. No questions asked.

Curious?

Maybe, but I was too busy enjoying his company to analyze Moody's holiday personality quirks. We spent every spare moment together.

I gave him a horseback riding lesson, taught him how to manually milk a cow and feed the animals. Let me tell you, Moody surrounded on all sides by a posse of hungry goats was high entertainment. He was unbearably sweet and so full of joy, it was hard to look away. In fact, I caught myself staring at him like a lovesick puppy, and that was just...weird. Wasn't it?

I walked him home from the bookstore most nights and talked about every little thing that had popped into my mind while we'd been apart—differences between my uncle's ranch and Oak Ridge, changes I hoped to implement. And Moody talked about books that inspired him, his secret love of poetry, and the snow globe collection he'd inherited from his mom that he'd decided to dust off and display in his window at home.

We'd commented on his neighbor's holiday lights— "Elegant, a tad garish, over the top and then some."

We'd talked about our favorite gifts from childhood—a skateboard, a game console, and new boots for me; an Easy Bake Oven and a bicycle for Moody.

"Did you ever get the dress you asked for?"

"No, I amended my request to a sewing machine." Moody had snickered at the old memory, crossing his arms as if for warmth. "I don't know why I asked for it. I was a

terrible sewer. I figured it was a simple matter of following directions, but my seams were always off-centered and wonky. Of course, Mom praised the odd-shaped napkins I made for her birthday and didn't comment that I'd inexplicably chosen a flannel fabric."

I'd guffawed, my voice echoing off the rooftops on Frosty Lane as I'd draped my arms over his shoulders and kissed his temple. "Never change, Moody. Never change."

He'd flashed a megawatt grin at me and launched into a series of nature books he'd loved as a kid, especially Audubon's Birds of America . Don't quote me, but I was pretty sure I'd received an in-depth report on the sandhill crane. Not important. His animated tone lulled me and made me feel connected to him, part of his world.

Game shows had given way to holiday cartoons. Less The Price is Right , more Miracle on 34th Street . We'd curl up on his sofa or mine to watch old-time reruns and end up sharing tidbits of our lives—friends, family, dreams and disappointments. It was so fucking easy to be with him.

Moody was smart, passionate, and accidentally witty. He had a heart of gold and a tendency to say exactly what was on his mind. He was the most refreshingly real person I'd ever met.

And fuck me, the sex was incredible.

I didn't think I'd ever wanted anyone this much. Frankly, the greedy, desperate, needy feeling confused me. Everything about him turned me on—his smile, his pout, that thing he did with his lips just before he burst into laughter. And holy fuck, the noises he made while I was inside him were the stuff of X-rated fantasies.

Fine. I admit it, I was in deep.

But I cautioned myself to play it cool. I'd been burned badly. Moody was nothing like Kylie, but I had no intention of jumping into a serious relationship. Yet I worried I might be in over my head.

Keep it together, Babineaux. No falling for the reformed grump with pretty eyes and pink cheeks and ? —

“I hate to be a braggart, but our gingerbread ranch is the best.”

Christ, he was cute, I mused, snapping to attention.

I nodded, barely keeping my amusement in check as Moody eyed the competition on display in Vicki's café and cantina. There were quite a few impressive works of gingerbread art, including Team Vixen's, but Moody was right. Ours fucking rocked.

Moody had downplayed his ability. My man was a baking genius. He'd designed a mock-up of a miniature ranch with a red barn surrounded by a white picket fence. We'd baked cutouts of horses, cows, pigs, and goats and placed them strategically on the green icing that looked like a reasonable facsimile of grass.

Okay, he'd done most of the real work. I'd been his assistant...or lead elf.

And I hadn't minded at all.

Whoa, wait up. Did I call him my man? Sure, it was in my head, but?—

“Did you actually make this?” Tanner crouched to examine the detail on the gingerbread ranch.

“Well...I helped.” I gestured toward Moody, who was chatting a few feet away with Vicki and Katie from his shop. “But it was really all Moody.”

Moody glanced up and smiled. That was it...just a smile, but I swore my heart went into overdrive, beating like a drum. My throat felt tight, and my hands went clammy too. Christ, what was wrong with me?

Tanner shot a knowing look between us. “You and Moody?”

“I...well, yeah, but—it’s new and—” I sputtered like an idiot.

“Well, I like it. He’s quirky but cool. My kind of people.” Tanner veered the conversation to practical matters at the ranch. “Hey, this isn’t the venue, but I was wondering what your plans are for the holidays. My sister wants Jax and me to visit her family in the Bay Area. I know you’re not technically here till January first, but if you’re in town on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, I was hoping you could oversee the animals.”

I licked my lips, gaze locked on Moody. Yeah, my pulse was racing, my tongue was heavy. Something was wrong with me.

“No problem. I’ll be here,” I replied distractedly.

“Oh, great. I thought you might be going to Colorado, but I wasn’t sure.” Tanner clapped my shoulder, commenting on the next best gingerbread house. Or something like that.

I wasn’t paying attention.

Look, I hadn’t given my mom a definitive answer yet about the holidays. I’d told her I’d consider coming home, but...this felt like home. Which was nuts. This place was new to me. New faces, new experiences...a new lover.

And yet...it felt so right.

Vicki put her fingers to her lips and whistled, pulling me from my reverie. The room went quiet as all heads turned to the feisty redhead standing near the soup counter.

“The results are in! I want to thank everyone for participating. As you know, we’ve raised thousands for local charities so no, these are not just pretty gingerbread houses.” She motioned to the tables lined with gingerbread masterpieces. “They each represent the gift of a new beginning, and I couldn’t be prouder. Third place goes to...”

Moody sidled next to me, brushing my arm. “As first place winners, one of us will be expected to give a speech.”

In spite of my internal emotional rollercoaster, I snickered. “Someone’s confident. We haven’t won anything yet.”

“True.” He furrowed his brow and nibbled at his cuticle. “I shouldn’t be disappointed if we get second or third. It’s not about winning, it’s about...giving. Huh.”

His expression turned thoughtful, but Vicki interrupted with the news that Team Vixen had won second place.

“And first place goes to...drum roll, please.” Vicki rapped a beat on the counter, beaming as she continued, “Hudson and Moody!”

Moody beamed as the room exploded in applause, chanting, “Speech, speech, speech!”

I set a hand on his shoulder, noting that he suddenly seemed overwhelmed. “It’s okay. I got this.”

“No, it should be me.” Moody straightened his spine, head held high, and motioned

for quiet.

“Give us a good bah humbug, Moody!” someone called out, much to the crowd’s amusement.

“There will be no bah humbugs from me,” Moody said, rolling his eyes at the collective good-natured groan. “Not now. I know this is a house made of cookie, but to me...it feels like something more this year. It feels like a new chapter. It feels like hope. Don’t think for one second this was my idea. No siree, Bob. This was Hudson’s diabolical plan to foist holiday cheer on me and honestly, it should grind my gears. It doesn’t. Instead, I’ve been reminded that in spite of dark times, there is still joy in the world and much to be grateful for. So thank you, Hudson and thank you, Christmas Town. This is quite...splendiferous.”

The café and cantina erupted with another round of cheers and effusive shouts of “Happy Holidays” until a grinning Moody finally huffed, “Bah humbug.”

MOODY

Winning a local holiday competition was all well and good, but there were still books to be sold and work to be done. I was busier than ever in the days following our gingerbread win. Tourists flooded the town, bringing business to every shop on Holiday Lane. I was awake early in the mornings, preparing the shelves and restocking popular items. By the end of each day, I ached all over, exhausted from the holiday melee.

But you know what? I liked it too. I genuinely, abso-posi-toot-ly enjoyed everything about my job. How lucky I was to be surrounded by the things I loved—books, kind people, and endless goodwill. How lucky I was that a certain hunky cowboy waited for me, walked me home, made me tea, asked about my day, and held me in his arms.

Very lucky, indeed.

I had no complaints. Me. The same miserly individual who'd wished December would bug off and make way for January already had gone through a magnificent transformation. My blinders were off, my heart felt lighter, my head was clearer. I was...dare I say it...happy.

Except for one thing.

There was a wistfulness in Hudson I didn't understand. On one hand, he oozed contentment, but I noticed him staring at me or into space at random times as if

looking for answers to questions he had yet to formulate.

I didn't push and no, that wasn't like me. I knew better than most that some thoughts needed to be sorted on one's own. I didn't think he was tired of me or unsure of his move to California. If anything, he seemed excited for this new beginning at the ranch and he was an attentive lover and boyfriend and?—

Gosh, I wondered if this was too much, too soon.

I didn't want to be greedy and ask for more than he could give. I had very little experience in matters of the heart. Hudson had been through a rough patch with his previous relationship. And honestly, I wasn't sure if we were currently in a relationship. Perhaps this was a casual sexual affair. That was how we'd started, and maybe that was all he wanted.

This was a January problem. I wouldn't dare risk losing him. Not now.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to be excited about what the day might bring during the holidays. It was a sweet feeling.

Of course, I could have done without the heart palpitations and bouts of unexplained dizziness that seemed to be a normal reaction to Hudson's presence. They happened so frequently that I upped my salt intake to combat the possibility I had a mild form of anemia.

"Stop! No salt," Vicki scolded, plucking the shaker from my hands. "Too much isn't good for you, and you'll kill the taste of my gravy. Go on...give it a try."

I obeyed, nodding my approval. "The flavor is quite robust."

She snickered, waving absently at a customer as she leaned against the café counter.

“Thank you. I think I’m set for Christmas dinner. Are you sure you don’t mind that I’ve invited a few more guests this year?”

“Not at all. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“Good. I’ll need two pies. Possibly three. Does Hudson have a sweet tooth?” Vicki inquired casually.

“Um, he likes apple pie...I think.”

“I’ll make extra to be on the safe side.” She pushed a pencil over her ear and cast a quizzical glance my way. “Do you have something on your mind, honey?”

I frowned. “Hudson never mentioned Christmas dinner.”

She looked surprised. “Oh. I don’t think he officially RSVP’d either. Damn, is he going to Colorado after all?”

“I’ll ask.”

I meant to, I really did.

The days got away from me and the nights were a perfect blend of sex and sweetness.

It should have been easy enough to interrupt A Charlie Brown Christmas to inquire about my lover’s plans, but I was wary of interrupting the impromptu foot massage.

Okay...no, that wasn’t it. I sensed that mood again—a haunting of some sort, a cloud I hoped would blow away.

I gnawed my lower lip, wondering why Charlie Brown bothered with his terrible

classmates and simultaneously wishing I could read Hudson's mind and?—

“You should go home for Christmas,” I blurted.

Hudson furrowed his brow. “Huh?”

“Shoot, darn, dagnabbit. That was supposed to be a question. Are you going home for Christmas?”

“I wasn't planning on it. I thought I told you that.”

Oh.

“I don't think so.”

“ Hmm . It's always good to see my family, but it's a hassle to travel during the holidays. Mom understands. I can use the ticket in January. I think she's stubbornly hoping I'll surprise her and?—”

“You should.”

Hudson froze. “You want me to go?”

“No, no. I'm simply aware that assuaging familial guilt goes a long way during the season of felicitations and goodwill toward men...and women.”

“Uh-huh.” He muted the sound on the television, shifting on his seat to eye me suspiciously. “What's really going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Look at me, Moody.”

I bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood. It was a futile attempt at keeping my gob shut, but it was worth a shot 'cause the moment I started blabbing, all kinds of embarrassing things were bound to pour out of me. Just wait.

“I can’t.”

“Moody...”

“ Ugh ! Fine.” And here we go. “I have very strong feelings for you.”

Hudson grinned. “Good.”

“As in...I think about you all the time. Morning, noon, night. I want to be with you, hear your voice, touch you...constantly. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, but you were engaged to someone. You were a month away from ‘I dos’ and there’s a possibility I’m your second-place prize.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your rebound,” I clarified. “Your boomerang affair before you return to the dating pool with aplomb!”

“You’re not my rebound, and you’re definitely no second-place prize.”

Moody huffed. “You say that now because you’re a gentleman. Next you’ll claim I’m a sexual dynamo with untapped potential.”

Hudson lifted my hand to his lips. “You are.”

I squeezed his fingers and whispered, “I’m simply afraid this is a seasonal romance. I can’t tell if it’s too much, too fast, too sudden, and...to be honest, it scares me.”

Silence.

“Oh.”

That single syllable echoed in my ears. “I ruined this, didn’t I?”

“Don’t be silly. We’re good.” He worried his bottom lip. “I don’t have all the answers, Moody. I know that I like this place and I love being with you, but I can’t tell you the future.”

“I know.” I laced our fingers, hoping my smile met my eyes. “It’s okay. There’s no rush.”

“You still don’t trust December, do you?”

I was too surprised to comment at first. “I...I suppose I don’t.”

Hudson nodded. “I understand. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, but I think you need space. More than you’ll get here with me.”

His Adam’s apple slid in his throat. “If you need me to go, I’ll go. But I’m not leaving, Moody. Not really. I’ll be back.”

“And I’ll be here.” I pushed hair from his eyes.

He crashed his mouth over mine, piercing me with a weighty look as he released me.

“Just so you know, it’s the same for me. You’re always on my mind. Always.”

Hudson made love to me that night...and it was different. He branded my lips with greedy kisses and moved inside me with a ferocity that took my breath away. It was as if he were saying words that couldn’t be spoken aloud with his body. Though I’d had no practice, I understood this language.

I detected the notes of distress and fear in both of us and gave them grace.

But in the morning, I was alone.

I was used to being alone.

I was used to hollow expectations and disappointment. I was used to loss and sorrow. I braced for a flash of pain as a cold December wind whistled through the trees, testing the tethered blow-up reindeer on my neighbor’s lawn. It didn’t come.

So strange. I couldn’t figure it out. I should have been a wreck. I should have been a mess of tears and sadness. Eventually, the tears would clear, and I’d be cranky about my situation and before you could say Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, I’d be my grouchy December self again. And I’d have no one but myself to blame.

But there were no stinging regrets, no angst against the universe, or bah-humbug malaise. I was still...happy.

Don’t get me wrong, my heart was a little tender, but it was full too.

I loved Hudson, and somehow, I knew he felt the same way. Maybe not the L-word, but something close.

Someday, when he was ready to hear the words and let me in, I’d tell him. And

maybe we could be something special.

For now, there was power in letting go.

16

HUDSON

I checked the locks and made sure I hadn't left the Christmas lights on before tossing my duffel onto the passenger's side seat. The steering wheel was icy cold, and the windows were glazed with a sheen of frost. It would take a minute or so to warm the truck up, so I pulled my cell out, intending to send a quick text to my mom. Or maybe I'd surprise her.

I'd lined up a few ranchers to take care of the animals, so...this was it.

Time to go home.

My fingers froze over the screen as "Last Christmas" blasted through the speakers.

What the fuck? I hadn't turned the radio on...or had I?

Weird.

I set my phone aside to adjust the volume and was immediately hit with a memory of trudging through the Christmas lot with Moody. He'd been so cranky and grumpy and so fucking adorable. And the time he'd met Nelly and laughed his ass off in the kitchen...or when he put a Santa hat on and dared anyone to give him heck about it.

Heck . Yeah, that was Moody.

I swallowed around the ball of emotion lodged in my throat and blew out an exasperated breath.

He was right.

This was too much, too soon. We both came with baggage and fuck, it seemed heavier than usual right now.

On that melancholy note, I reversed the truck and veered past the ranch, heading west at the main street. A tactical error for sure. It would have been faster to go east and avoid the narrow winding roads that led to the coastline beyond. I had a long drive ahead of me and a plane to catch, but I stayed on course and fifteen minutes later, I spotted the exit for Christmas Town.

I should have kept going. I was already behind schedule, but like the very first time I'd passed the sign, something pulled me in.

Five minutes. Just one peek at the decorations. I'd take a pic for Mom, so she'd see how cool this place was.

I wasn't going to park, but a spot opened up in front of the biggest tree on the West Coast and that almost never happened. I hopped out and snapped a few pictures of the tree, and another of the garlands and bows on the lampposts leading to Holiday Lane.

"So beautiful."

So joyful. Like Moody.

Fuck, what was I doing?

"It sure is," someone commented behind me.

“Oh, hey, Bud.” I gave the older man a lazy up-nod. “I was just taking a few pics for my family.”

“You should get one with Milt too.” Bud pointed at the Santa statue, then moseyed along. “Merry Christmas, Hudson.”

“Merry Christmas.”

I aimed my cell at the jolly Santa, but the sun’s glare made for a crappy pic. I moved closer and tried again, leaning in to read the inscription engraved on a plaque at the bottom.

“You were never lost. You simply made a detour.”— Milt Moody, Christmas Town’s original Santa and a firm believer of second chances and happy endings. May you keep the spirit of the season in your heart all year long.

The words blurred and bended, and my pulse skyrocketed through my veins. I swallowed around the grapefruit in my throat and read the dedication a second time...and a third. I studied the statue of the kind-faced man with a full beard, twinkling eyes, and round belly.

You were never lost. You were never lost.

Look, I was a fucking adult. I didn’t believe in Santa or in the stuff of childhood fantasies, but damn it, I believed in second chances, happy endings, hope, and love and?—

“Moody.”

I raced to my truck and peeled out of my spot, leaving a vapor trail behind me as I turned up the hill into town. It was early, but there were customers in line at the diner

and the café. The bookstore wasn't open yet. He had to be home.

I punched the gas but came to an abrupt stop just as a van from Morningside Senior Center flashed its hazard lights.

Fuck. This was going to take a while. I clicked my blinkers to signal a U-turn when Moody strolled into view, head bent on his way to the bookstore.

And there went my heart. Boom, boom, boom.

My instincts kicked into triple gear. Move fast, now, don't wait, don't let the real thing slip away. I pulled my truck into a red zone behind the van and jumped out.

"Moody!"

He did a double take, adjusting his glasses as he squinted, and my God...he was beautiful.

Boom, boom, boom.

I knew what this was. I could be brave and give it a name.

He was twenty feet away, ten feet, five feet...

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk in front of Rudolph's Fudge Shop, tipping my Stetson, my heart tripping over itself as he neared.

"Moody," I said with a reverence reserved for prayer.

He widened his eyes, peering left and right before closing the distance between us.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Colorado."

“Yeah, but it’s Christmas Eve.”

“I know. Are you sick? You look pale and kind of dopey.”

I smiled. “I do?”

“ Mmhmm . Did you take an antihistamine? Oh, I hope not. My cousin, Flo, got in a doozy of an accident after mixing mouthwash and cold medicine...and probably vodka, though she swore she?—”

“I’m not sick, baby,” I said with a laugh. “I’m just...”

He cocked his head curiously. “What is it?”

I licked my lips and opened my arms in surrender. “I love you.”

“You—”

“Yes, and fuck it. Maybe it’s too much, too soon, but when you know, you fucking know. And I know that you’re the coolest, kindest, sexiest, most amazing person in the whole damn world. You need to know that there is someone who will put you first, look out for you when you’re feeling low, and celebrate every win. That someone is me, Moody. Me. I’m your guy.”

Moody blinked like an owl. “I-I love you too.”

I swooped him in my arms and spun him in a circle, kissing him breathless. My Stetson fell off, but who cared? “Merry Christmas, my love.”

“Merry Christmas.”

I bent to pick up my hat, then set it on Moody's head, loving his sweet chuckle. I cupped his chin and traced my thumb along his smooth jaw. "By the way, I'm staying home for the holidays...with you."

"But your mom..."

"She'll understand, and she'll be happy for me. For us. She knows I've been lost for a while...looking for escape, looking for change. I just saw your dad's statue and read that quote and—he was fucking right. I made a detour, and I got my second chance...with you. I'm not going to blow it. I won't waste a single day. Fuck January. I want you now."

Moody's eyes sparkled and welled with tears. "You have me. Always."

If life were a rom-com, gentle snowflakes would drift from the heavens and a band of carolers would sing "Holly Jolly Christmas" or something everyone knew the words to right then and there. Real life was better.

We swayed together on a bustling street, oblivious to the traffic, the long lines in front a few shops, and the skinny guy in an ill-fitted Santa suit with a cell glued to his ear as he paced on the corner.

It all faded to nothing. Just a steady boom, boom, boom .

My heart swelled in my chest as the enormity of the moment hit me. This was love.

Real love.

And a chance at forever with this intriguing, intelligent, beautiful man was the greatest gift ever.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:09 am

“ I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight, ‘Happy Christmas to all, and to all, a good night.’”— A Visit from St. Nicholas , Clement Clarke Moore

Three years later

Moody

Garlands tied in bright-red ribbons cascaded over the steps next to countless strings of colorful lights that were destined to be hung along the roof and wrapped around the base of the amber tree in our yard. A giant wreath with red bulbs and holly was already on the front door and the sprig of mistletoe had been strategically placed in the eaves above the porch swing Hudson had bought me for Christmas two years ago. I loved it.

And I loved how festive the house would look as soon as we got our keisters in gear and decorated.

“Would you prefer to drape garlands or hang the lights, good sir?”

Hudson quirked a grin from under his Stetson. The familiar kind that made me feel gooey on the inside.

He propped a ladder along the side of the house and pointed at the lights. “Lights first, baby. You know the drill. This will go fastest if you’re my elf.”

“Yes, but I will not wear the hat,” I replied primly. “That bell is ridiculous.”

“You’re so damn cute in it, though,” he drawled, climbing the ladder. “Okay, let’s start with strand number one.”

“This one?”

“No, that’s number five.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Oh, got it. Here it is.”

“That’s number two.” Hudson hiked one boot on an upper rung and flashed one of those Not Safe for General Public looks. “Are we playing a game now?”

“What do you mean?” I tried fluttering my lashes, which never went quite as planned as I tended to resemble a defective mechanical toy.

“You know. The one where we reenact a saucy scene from a cowboy romance. If I’m the alpha cowboy who’s gonna paint your back porch red for being a brat, fill me in, baby. We’ve got two hours of daylight and a whole lot of Christmas decorating to do.”

I clasped my hand over my mouth and faux fainted against the nearest tree. Of course, I didn’t actually fall to the ground...the leaves were mucky, and the German shepherd down the street liked to do her business in our yard. “Well, I never...”

“I’ll make you a deal. Tell me the filthiest scene you want to work on while we string lights and”—he paused to wave to Mrs. McKenzie across the street, continuing our conversation as if we’d been discussing the weather report—“put up the garland.”

“Okay...” I grinned at our neighbor as I collected the first string of lights and handed it to my husband. “I read a new one with a cowboy and an insurance salesman. The salesman sells the cowboy a bag of goods, and as they say, a skirmish ensues. They wrestle to the ground and well...one thing leads to another.”

Hudson fastened the lights to the hooks on the roof, a wide grin on his sinfully handsome face. “So you want to wrestle with me?”

I pushed my glasses higher on my nose and shook my head. “That would be a swift and unfortunate battle, so no. But we could pretend.”

“We could,” he agreed. “What about a naughty holiday story?”

I beamed like a madman. Not everyone was as lucky as I was, and I knew it. I’d married my soul mate and best friend—the one person who understood me, accepted me, and always put me first.

Three years ago, we’d made a vow not to rush into a major commitment. Sure, we were boyfriends, but we didn’t have to adhere to a timeline. But one year later, Hudson moved into my house and commuted to the ranch. Six months after that, he proposed on a cliffside overlooking the winery. There was a sumptuous picnic, a glorious sunset, and a few mosquito bites. But gosh, it was so romantic.

We were married at the ranch that December...one year ago. It was the largest venue in the area, and we’d had quite a few out-of-town guests to accommodate. We divided our time evenly between Christmas Town and Oak Ridge, so it made sense to have a classy country wedding before returning to the land of year-round holiday shenanigans.

And yes, Hudson’s mom was a regular visitor. She fell in love with Christmas Town, just as her son suspected she might. I think she could tell we were madly in love and that Hudson was happy here. That was all she’d wanted for him.

So...why December?

Well, I wasn’t afraid of it anymore. I wasn’t afraid of losing or being left behind. No more tears, no more sadness.

I had Hudson now. And he had me. There would be no more grumpy holidays. Only joy.

“Santa and the sassy elf has been overdone. Santa and the cowboy has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” I pointed at the lights. “That one is crooked.”

Hudson fixed the light in question and hopped off the ladder, pulling me into a sneak-attack hug and fusing his mouth to mine. We broke apart with a laugh and stared at each other as if in wonder.

“You’re the best Christmas present I’ve ever received.”

“Ever? Better than the Xbox console you coveted in your teens?” I teased, snaking my arms around his waist.

“A thousand times better. No comparison.” He traced the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip. “I love you, Moody.”

“I love you, too.”

And I would forever.

I’d learned to let go of hurt and sadness. It hadn’t been easy...until Hudson. And now...I craved this life—the silly stories, the quiet nights, the laughter.

I believed in second chances and happy endings. I believed in the spirit of the holidays...with hope and love.

Thank you for reading Moody and Hudson’s story!