



The Christmas Keeper

(Laurel Holidays #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A grumpy pub owner is about to have his chilly heart warmed by a down-on-his-luck country singer.

Brann Argraves has never left the charming village of Whiteham before nor does he wish to. As the owner of the Whiteham Taphouse, he is content to spend his life serving drafts of beer to the locals, shooting darts with his buddies, and shutting himself away in his cabin for the duration of the holidays. Who needs all that ho-ho-ho, any who? His sister, on the other hand, not only yanked him out of his happy yet somewhat solitary bubble, but she's also reveling in it. Planning a winter wedding was plain foolish, Brann feels, as is making people fly to some frozen wasteland in Canada to tie the knot. Now, he's never been happier to return home after the wedding and get back to his bar, his darts, and his little home on the outskirts of town.

Landing at a wintry airport smack dab in the middle of a nasty snow squall, Brann and his weary fellow flyers are entertained by a handsome, rumpled man busking outside the airport. There's something almost magical about the man's dark, sad gaze as well as his angelic vocals. Perhaps it's the residual merry-merry of his sister's nuptials, or maybe he recognizes a lonely kindred soul, but Brann steps way out of his comfort zone when he offers the man a warm place to sleep above his bar. Kenan Gardet settles into the pub with ease and Southern grace. The down-and-out singer quickly proves himself an asset to Brann's business as a good barkeep and as a nightly draw on stage. What he didn't expect was Kenan capturing his heart one plaintive song and gentle kiss at a time.

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Chapter One

“Did I ever show you the last photos of my Kelli’s baby?” I forced myself to stare at yet another picture of another wrinkled little prune wearing a pink knit stocking cap. “This is Diaphony. I honestly do not know where you kids nowadays find these oddball names. Whatever happened to using down-to-earth names like Helen or Margaret or Gypsum.”

My gaze widened. My great-aunt Priscilla blinked at me from behind thick bifocals.

“Gypsum?” I asked loudly because I had to in order to be heard over the band playing “(Shake, Shake, Shake) Shake Your Booty” a mere hundred feet away. Also, Aunt Prissy never wore her hearing aids so conversation with her was always bellowed.

“Mm, yes, that was my dear departed Edgar’s father’s mother’s name.”

I studied the old, old gal on my left. “Her name was Gypsum. Like in the gypsum used as a fertilizer in your garden? That kind of gypsum?”

“No, I don’t garden anymore. It’s too hard to get up and down, although I did have a lovely tomato plant in a container. Kelli planted it for me. I have a picture...” Dear God, please save me from another old lady with a cell phone. “Hmm, I don’t know where the pictures went.”

“Let me go find Kelli for you,” I rushed to say, shot to my feet, and hightailed it across the packed dancefloor of older folks, my parents among them, shaking their booties as if doing the hustle was going to save the world from some sort of

catastrophe.

I had no clue who Kelli was, what she looked like, or if she was even here in Ottawa. All I knew about my incredibly distant cousin was that her kid looked like that dog that had starred in *Deadpool* and *Wolverine*, and she gave tomato plants as gifts. Didn't matter. It had gotten me free from another nosy relative asking when I was going to get married because I wasn't getting any younger and my baby sister had beat me to the aisle. Oh, the shame!

As if I cared Nora had found her prince charming before me. I was happy for her and for Antoine. He was a good guy. Much better than that dickhead she had dated back home. The guy had done her wrong so badly that she had moved from Pennsylvania to Canada to start over as far away from the asshole as she could get. If he'd not run like a scalded cat the moment he'd been caught cheating on my sister with her ex-bestie, I would have stuck him to the wall of my bar with a handful of darts and then punched him in the face. Repeatedly. No one hurts my little sister. I had warned Antoine about that the first time we'd met, and he had taken me quite seriously. Sure, he was a hockey player who had about six inches and fifty pounds on me. Didn't mean I couldn't get a fast, cheap shot in before he beat me to a pulp.

I elbowed my way through a pack of Ottawa hockey players to get to the bar. Free bar, so the two tenders were hustling to fill orders for over three hundred people. Antoine was really famous, universally liked, and had a French-Canadian family that numbered in the thousands, or so it seemed. My order was an easy one. A double shot of Irishman's Grand Reserve with a stout German lager, preferably Guinness. The barkeep was cute and pulled a good beer. I tipped well, took a sip of my cold beer, sighed, and glanced at my watch to count down how many hours were left before I could feign a headache and leave the reception venue unseen by my sister or mother.

"There you are!" Nora slid in beside in a cloud of joy and Estee Lauder Modern Muse. Her bright brown eyes, the same color as mine, were shining as she reached

out to take my hand. “They’re going to play the song for our dance next.”

“I didn’t know that there was a dance for the bride and her brother,” I replied and tossed back the shot. It burned nicely.

“They do when the bride asks for one.” With that, my tiny little sibling tugged me from the bar. I quickly tossed a ten to the cute bartender before grabbing my beer. “Plus, you’re not just my brother, you’re the brother of honor, so that calls for a special dance.”

Knowing I would lose this battle—I always lost with Nora—I followed along in her white lace wake, smiling at people I didn’t know, beer in hand. We reached the bandstand before she turned to check me out. “Where is your tie?”

I dug into my tuxedo jacket pocket, pulling a knowing smirk from the guy playing bass. He was cute too. There were so many good-looking guys here. Probably most were straight, or if they weren’t, it wouldn’t matter as I was leaving as soon as the newlyweds drove off with cans clattering behind them or I could sneak out unseen. Knowing my sister and mother, who had eyes like hawks, I’d not be making my break anytime soon. Nora yanked my tie from my hand with a tsk that sounded so much like Mom’s that I had to snicker.

“Your nose crinkles just like Mom’s,” I teased.

“Honestly, Brann, you look so handsome in this tux,” she chided, reaching up to retie the dark green bowtie. Forest green and white were the colors, holiday-themed, or so the wedding planner had explained to me as if I were a halfwit. “You should keep the tie tied and work the room. I’m sure there are some guys here who would love a dance with you.”

“I don’t dance in case you forgot.”

She tugged the bowtie tightly. “You do now. You should learn. Dancing is a great way to meet new people.”

The band stood above us, ending the previous disco song, and the lead singer stepped up to the mic with a rehearsed smile.

“Where would I slow dance with men back home? They closed down the dance hall right after World War II.”

“I’m not talking about dance halls, dork. I mean at the bar.”

“Right. So many of the patrons would love to see two guys slow dancing during Monday Night Football. You’ve been in this big liberal city for too long if you forgot what rural Pennsylvania is like.”

“I haven’t forgotten. I moved to get away from the toxic masculinity BS.” She patted my now righted bowtie with a tiny, French-manicured hand. “I just want you to be happy. You hermit up at home with Fred and Wilma, then spend all day in that bar, wasting your nights with the guys throwing darts at a corkboard, and go home alone.”

“I’m not alone. Fred and Wilma are there. You just said so.” Her lips flattened. “What? You just said it. Geese are wonderful company.”

“Ask Wilkes about how wonderful they are,” she snapped back like a rubber band.

“Wilkes should have known better than to go through the front gate just to deliver the damn gas bill. I have a sign.” If people choose to ignore the BEWARE OF THUG GEESE sign on my little picket fence, then woe onto them, and that applied to Wilkes Lilly.

“You’re lucky he didn’t mace Fred,” she said as she battled to keep a straight face.

“Fred was just protecting his lady love,” I argued as I had with the postmaster after that whole butt pinching fiasco last spring. I’d lost the battle and now had to collect my mail at the post office due to a ‘dangerous poultry situation’ at my home. Some people are so delicate. One little goose pinch never hurt anyone. Well, okay, it did hurt, but the bruise faded in a week or two. Fred pinched me at least once a year on the backside, generally in the spring when hormones were high, but it didn’t require a trip to the ER, for goodness sake.

“Uh-huh. Well, it wouldn’t hurt you to spend some time with people other than the mill workers and your geese, Brann. You’re turning into a real Ebenezer Scrooge.”

Ow. That one stung. I wasn’t a Scrooge. I just didn’t like people or Christmas.

Oh wait...

I downed my beer as she waited for a reply, hands on slim hips. I was about to recite my famous “You can worry about a lot of things, but I’m not one of them” line when the band struck up the song she had chosen for this special moment. My grin was wide when I heard “You Got a Friend in Me” from Toy Story . We’d loved that film as kids, watching it over and over on rainy days. I placed my glass on the bandstand, bowed, and took her into my arms.

“You’re such a dork,” she said as her eyes grew misty. I pulled her close, kissed her beautiful brown hair, and led her around the dance floor until her new husband claimed her. I moved aside, melding into the crowds of athletes, their wives, and family members from both sides. My gaze stayed on Nora, my throat tight as she beamed at Antoine. They’d be happy together. He adored her and she him. They would have a wonderful life here in Canada, him playing hockey, and her working for a charity that her hubby was devoted to. I’d done my duty as big brother extraordinaire.

“Brann, oh my goodness, I’m so glad I found you,” Mom gushed as she raced to me, the hem of her lovely red mother-of-the-bride dress up to her knees. Dad trailed after her, smiling in that whimsical way of his whenever my mother was up to something. Nora was the spitting image of my mother, whereas I was a mish-mosh of my parents. Brown eyes for both of us kids but my hair was totally ginger thanks to Dad’s side of the gene pool. Mom’s thick hair was a lush brunette with highlights shot through it. No gray hair dared to peek out of her mane lest it be plucked or dyed on sight. Dad, on the other hand, was more cavalier about his silver. It made him look distinguished, he liked to say, and it did. “Paula Prescott, she’s the lady sitting beside Antoine’s aunt Marie, has a son—”

“Dad,” I whined piteously, throwing my sire a plaintive look. “Can you reel your wife in please?”

“Carmen, you promised no matchmaking at weddings,” Dad said, which got a pout from my mother, who thought it was her life duty to see both of her children happily wed with children before she could pass over. She got that from my great-grandmother, a beautiful woman of ninety-two years. A war bride, Nonna, came to the US from Italy with a very Scottish man with flaming red hair. Nonna was still kicking it in a senior center in the same Boca Raton retirement center my parents now called home, her fingers always in the mix when it came to pairing off anyone not in a committed relationship under the age of thirty. Nonna ran family matchmaking like a mafia Don, only her displeasure was shown in withholding the annual holiday card with ten dollars in it as opposed to a horse’s head in your bed. I’d not gotten ten bucks in a card for over three years. Nonna’s upset was large. Even flouncy men could get married and have children now, she would announce on the family Zoom calls every fourth Thursday.

“If not here, where?” Mom asked, settling her gaze on me as couples bounced around on the dance floor to a Bruno Mars song. “If not now, when? We only see you once a year, twice if we’re lucky, and there is never a man on your arm when we see you.”

“That’s because I’m happy being single,” I argued.

“No, you’re not.” I threw a sour look at my father. “You’ve just let all this silliness on social media taint your thoughts on relationships. Not every man you meet is going to be so extra as Paulie.”

“Mom, I don’t think extra is used in that way,” I explained as Dad shrugged. “Paulie was not extra in any way other than being an extra-large dick.”

“Brann,” Dad chided. Mom rolled her eyes.

“Well, he was,” I childishly replied, folding my arms over my chest just as I had when I was six and my parents did not let me have a llama for my birthday. “My life is good. Honestly.”

Mom opened her mouth to parry but Dad slid in, calm and cool, to deflect. “Carmen, I’m sure that Brann will find the right partner someday, on his own time. Just like Nora has. Speaking of Nora, I think she’s looking for you.”

Mom’s sharp assessment of her poor, lonely gay son flew across the room to her youngest. Nora, feeling that maternal gaze, met our looks with confusion. “Looks like she needs help with her hem,” Dad lied.

“I told her it was coming undone. She should have bought it from Cousin Sophie and had it shipped instead of buying it from some unknown shop in Canada with no Italian seamstresses.” Off Mom went with a full head of steam, leaving me to ponder on how she knew the ethnicity of a gown maker in Ottawa when she was in Florida, and what difference it made.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

“Anytime. She means well, Brann. She just wants to see you happy.”

“I know, I do, I know, but love comes when it comes, and for some people, it never comes at all,” I tossed out. He studied me for a moment, then bobbed his head. “I’m truly happy with things the way they are. And no, my being alone has nothing to do with Paulie.”

“Okay, I never said it did. Will we see you for Christmas?”

“No, I’m sorry.” I caught the flash of disappointment in his eyes. “I’d love to fly down, but I shut down the bar for a week for this.” I waved a hand at the festivities. “I can’t do that again in two weeks or I’ll never crawl out of the hole. The holidays are my busiest time. Then there’s the headache of lining up goosesitters...”

“Sure, sure, we understand. Nonna will be sad.”

“I know. She won’t send me ten dollars again.”

That made him snicker before he gave me a quick side hug and fell in behind Mom.

Nora made a face at me that spelled pain in my future. I ducked behind a potted fern, stole a flute of champagne from a passing server, sipped, gagged, and went to sit in the corner until the newlyweds left for a night of passionate consummation. I did not sit alone. I spent the remainder of the reception celebrating with mugs of Moosehead and shots of Canadian Club to show love and support for all the non-Italian Canadian wedding gown makers in the Great White North.

Cheers. To the bride! To the groom!

When I staggered to my hotel room after the blushing bride and her hulking hubby raced off to some remote cabin, I was still humming “Satisfied” from Hamilton. I had

concluded that Canadians not only made fine wedding dresses, but they brewed some hellishly good lager. Their whiskey wasn't too bad either. I fell into bed, with my top hat and tails still on, belched loudly, and drifted off to have randy dreams about getting frisky with a few of the founding fathers.

The next morning's flight out at the crack of fucking dawn was ugly.

Well, to be fair, it was me that was ugly. The flight was okay. I spent most of it, and the hour-plus layover in Detroit sipping coffee to wash down more acetaminophen tablets than were recommended. My connecting flight back to the small airport an hour from Whiteham was far from okay. We took off into some strong headwinds and snow, nothing too bad, but enough to make the small jet thump around as if it was running over a washboard in the sky.

Each jolt made my stomach lurch and my head pound. Since the turbulence was so nasty, no smiling attendant was handing out shortbread cookies and ginger ale. They were all buckled in just as we were, which was fine, but man some ginger ale for the hungover ginger would have been nice. Coming into the rural airport was fun. Not. Intense snow squalls had raced over the state, creating whiteout conditions that not only made driving perilous, it made landing a plane dicey. The runway was cleared but icy in spots, and the wind was brutal and filled with snow. When the wheels touched down, a collective sigh ran through everyone on board.

No one was happier than me—perhaps the flight crew might have been—to disembark and head to the single luggage conveyor belt in front of the lone car rental kiosk. It was midday, but the sky was so dark and heavy with snow that it appeared to be evening as I glanced through the thick glass walls overlooking the parking lot.

I briefly noticed a man sitting on a round stuffed seat as I followed the other

passengers to baggage claim. Just a fast glance as you do when you're surrounded by strangers with a headache and a gutful of sour. He was leggy, that much I'd clocked at a glance. Long legs, thin, Jack Skellington legs that were crossed at the knee, a ratty six-string on his lap. A headful of dark curls bowed low over his instrument as we filed in, cranky, with only one thing on all of our minds: how shitty it was going to be driving home in this white crap. Or maybe that was just me. Snow sucked. Sure it was pretty but unless you were seven and getting a day off from school, which the poor kids didn't even get anymore thanks to internet classes, snow was nothing but a nuisance. It meant shoveling, plowing, skidding off dirty roads that weren't cindered, slow days at the bar, and clearing out a goose pen for Fred and Wilma. White Christmases? Bah-humbug. I'd rather have a clear day in the 80s. People drank lots more beer in the summer.

So the guitar man had been just that. Some dude waiting for someone, probably. It wasn't until he began to play that I lifted my sight from a text I was sending my neighbor Mr. Blum to ask if he had placed bedding in the pen for the geese to lie on. Everyone around me quieted when he began to sing and strum. His voice floated over the small terminal, pure and clear, with a slight twang that spoke of southern roots. A deep baritone, filled with emotion, that pulled me into the country song he was singing. It was a voice reminiscent of Luke Combs, not that I personally was into country but when you ran a small pub in a rural town, you listened to country all day long, either on the radio or on the old Rock-Ola jukebox in the corner. Whoever this guy was, he certainly could have been on any modern country station. Hell, he was better than most of the singers I heard while washing glasses or shooting darts. His empty case sat at his scruffy sneakers, open, with a sign asking for holiday donations.

My gaze touched on his hands, long fingers, skilled, moving over the neck of his guitar as he did a cover of "Welcome to My World" that left me speechless. Inky dark eyes framed with thick lashes met my awed stare. A smile pulled at sensuous lips. His curls twisted around his ears, tickling some thin silver earrings in his lobes. His face was stunningly handsome, a proud nose that spoke of some Middle Eastern

ancestry perhaps, and a slim strong jaw covered with unmanicured scruff. The clapping of the dozen or so passengers pulled me out of the fog his voice and face had launched me into.

“Thank you,” he softly said, sparing no time before starting on a holiday song about a hat made of mistletoe. The passengers tossed bills into his case as he sang, his ratty blue scarf hanging open to reveal a long neck inside a thick sweater. His coat was used, and used well, with small tears on the elbows but that took nothing away from him. He was beautiful. I took a step closer, then another. The sound of the suitcases tumbling down to the belt was white noise when his gaze met and held mine. My mouth opened to let something fall out when two airport security guards arrived, looking quite pissy. The music stopped dead. The passengers, now intent on getting their bags and going home, paid little attention to what was going on.

“Come on, you can’t do that inside. Take it outside,” an older man in a dark uniform told the singer. The musician, to his credit, immediately started to gather his tips, all the while nodding along with the rousing he was getting.

“Can I play in the vestibule? My car is just so cold,” the singer said, his tone respectful as he was hustled along like he was some sort of vermin. The lady at the car rental kiosk was bobbing her orange head, her nose crinkled as if she’d just sniffed a skunk’s ass. “I won’t touch anyone coming in or out. If you can just let me stay for another hour or two, I can afford a room at a motel.”

“Sorry, you’re outside or we call the cops and they arrest you for soliciting.” Older guard gave the singer a gentle shove to the revolving doors as the check-in clerks behind the two airlines that flew out of here watched in morbid fascination.

“Okay, no, okay, it’s fine. I’ll play outside,” the singer, cowed now, said as he was herded to the doors.

My feet moved on their own, propelling me past the old bat in the car rental desk, and planting me in front of two tired TSA agents.

“It’s five degrees outside and the snow is blowing sideways,” I chimed in, getting a look of utter shock from Curly as he juggled his guitar case and a small duffel.

“That sucks, I get it, but he can’t play in here. I suggest you get your luggage, sir, and let us do our jobs,” the younger burly fellow informed me. Getting into it with airport security was not on my to-do list, so I lifted my hands, palms out, and gave Curly a “I tried, dude” look that got me a soft smile of thanks that made me forget how to walk properly.

I stumbled into a trash can as my sight stayed on the busker being shown the door. Wind right off an iceberg blew in as the door spun, flakes as big as my hand rushed around the singer, lifting his curls from his high forehead. His shoulders rose to his ears. When he turned to look at the guards, they motioned him to move from the doors. So he did, his face into the wind.

I grabbed my lone bag from the conveyor belt, shot the guards a dark look, and stomped outside into a squall that robbed the air from your lungs. I saw Curly crossing into the short-term parking lot, and I followed, my old suitcase thumping behind me.

“Hey!” I shouted, the word lifted and blown into the next county. Curly paused, looked back at me, and then walked toward me. “Hey, listen, I don’t know why they did that but tossing anyone out into weather like this is shitty.”

“It’s how it is. Thank you for trying to help.” A flash of white teeth set off a total mental shutdown the likes I had not felt since...forever. “I should get to my car. It’s parked on the street over there, and if I don’t get back to it by six, the city will tow it and all my possessions are in it.”

“You live in your car ?” I asked and instantly regretted how terrible my emphasis on car had been. “I mean, it’s really cold to be sleeping in a car.”

“Yeah, it’s chilly, but I have blankets.”

I stared at him as snow swirled around us. Tiny white specks of frost clung to his eyelashes and whiskers. I couldn’t stop admiring the way his nose sat on his face so perfectly. That was probably why my mouth started making offers that my brain would eventually be horrified about.

“I have a spare room above my bar that you can sleep in,” I blurted out as the speakers that usually announced flights leaving and arriving was now playing Christmas carols. Dolly Parton, to be exact. Curly stared long and hard at me as if weighing whether to accept or run for the guards inside the airport. “I’m not after...I’m just...” And there I floundered because I had no fucking clue why I had just offered this stranger a room above the alehouse. “I don’t want anything. I swear. I just wanted to help. To be...helpful.”

“Right. Look, I’m busking, not hooking, so whatever you think is going to happen isn’t.” A fire lit in those mahogany eyes of his.

I felt my face ignite with shame. “What? No, no, I’m not trying to hook up. Shit, no, not at all. I’m totally the opposite of that guy.” Snow attacked us...like it honestly assaulted us. My nose was starting to run. “I’m not after anything other than...”

“Than what? My spleen?”

“I...spleen?! God, no, I’m not after your spleen. I’m just trying to be kind. Just a kind offer to a fellow human being two weeks before Christmas. You can turn me down, and to be honest, I would turn me down too.” I pulled my sleeve under my runny nose. This cold was crippling. “I’m trying to do a good deed. That’s all. I’ll be

sleeping at my place, which is not near my bar.”

Nora’s off-handed, or I hoped it was off-handed because who wanted to be a Scrooge, had cut deeper than I would ever admit to her, or this man. Maybe I was a little puckery about the holidays, and human beings in general, but I wasn’t some old dude who hated everyone.

I just hated certain people. The ones who pissed me off, which was mostly everyone sure but...well shit.

He appeared to be contemplating. I wished he would contemplate faster. My balls were now nestled inside my body and my toes were brittle from the cold. If I wiggled them, they’d snap off.

“I’m not sure I should be that close to temptation, but hey, maybe it’s a test from the big man?” He pointed skyward. I glanced up to see a large plastic St. Nick and two wobbly reindeer secured to the roof of the canopy over pick-ups and drop-offs.

“Santa?”

Dark eyes flickered upward. Lush lips, wet from melted snow, twisted at the corners before his sight dropped back to me. His dark gaze stayed on me for ages before he nodded, just once. I could not begin to explain how happy seeing him bob all those curls made me. Obviously, I was suffering from some sort of alcohol-induced mental slip. What other reason would I have to do what I’d just done?

“Thank you. I guess the Christmas spirit isn’t as dead as people say it is.”

Oh right, Christmas spirit. Yeah, that was me. I was just full of holiday cheer. So not.

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Chapter Two

He held out a hand.

“My name is Kenan Gardet.”

I grasped his cold fingers. “Brann Argraves, owner of the famous Whiteham Alehouse in scenic Whiteham, Pennsylvania.”

“Sounds...scenic.”

He gently tugged his hand from mine. I mentally slapped myself. “It can be at certain times of the year. Winter is not one of them. Let’s get to my car, then I can take you to yours and you can follow me. Feel free to peel off at any exit if you reconsider.”

“Okay, thanks.” He pulled up his dancing scarf to cover his nose and mouth. I just ducked my head, snot frozen on my upper lip now, and forced my way through the barrage of wind, snow, and cold. Thankfully, my car wasn’t far. This wasn’t JFK after all. Kenan, which was a unique and pleasant name, stood by the passenger side until it was unlocked. He placed his guitar case into the back of my badly used Nissan Rogue, then folded himself into the front seat. Those long legs were tucked under his chin, so after a moment he pushed the sticky seat back as far as it would go, and we were settled. No, not settled. Neither of us was calm nor situated. We were both nervous and cold—so damn cold.

“Heat will take a minute, but we’re out of the wind,” I said as the engine coughed and then caught, blowing cold air on the windshield. The wipers were frozen. “I have to

scrape.”

He nodded, deep brown eyes with thick wet lashes watching me above his damp scarf as I grabbed the ice scraper, took a breath, and exited back out into winter’s embrace. While I chipped at the ice built up on the windshield, I asked myself over and over why I had done something so ridiculously out of character. Was it merely because of my sister’s little barb? Nora had called me names before, some much nastier when we were in our teen years and fighting like feral cats over everything. Scrooge. What about that name was so hurtful? I’d not ripped off any of my workers. Granted, I only had one, Larry, and he was part-time on weekends and holidays, but I paid him well. I didn’t kick dogs or shake my walking stick at orphans or spit at nuns. My mother would have my balls if I even glanced at a nun sideways.

So why was I all caught up in that one dumb comment from a woman newlywed who had been hitting the bubbly all afternoon? Why was I now caught in this situation?

A chunk of ice broke free, and Kenan’s face stared at me through the hole. He smiled a funny sort of awkward smile that pulled a dorky grin from me.

Something warm, like a brazier on a lovely patio in Rome, flared to life in my belly. The ice scraper slid from my cold fingers to the snowy blacktop.

“Nope, nope, nopeity-nope,” I muttered to that long dead area of Brann that I’d buried after Paulie had ripped the nice, trusting, loving part of Brann out then served it to the man he’d cheated on me with as a side with fava beans and a nice chianti. “Nope, nope, nope.” Each nope was accompanied by a gouge at the snow/ice/sleet sheet on my windows. This was not a romantical situation, not at all. I was merely trying to break out of my bah-humbug during the holidays. Was it a crime to be nice? No. No, it was not. It was also not a crime to offer a man who was having a rough go of life a lift. Even if he only spent one night in my office then split for parts unknown, and hopefully warmer, I’d been a good Joe. I could then tell my sister that I’d

performed a gracious act out of nothing other than human kindness and caring for my fellow humanoids.

Yes. That was it. And my fingers were so cold I couldn't feel them, so I dove back into the car, which was now warming nicely. I glanced at Kenan.

My stomach performed a swoop that made our recent descent from forty-thousand feet feel like a sunny day landing. My dick, which had been disinclined to find any man worthy of a boner in over four years, suddenly decided it was going to wake up. Why the hell not?

So yeah, about the only reason we're being Mr. Congeniality is out of basic human kindness? Better tell our nether regions about that.

"It's cold out there," I offered. Mr. Brilliant Dialog was in the house. Whoop-whoop.

"Sure is," Kenan replied through his scarf.

I rubbed my hands together in front of the heater vent, praying my brain would engage soon. "So you sound southern..."

"I am, yes, sir. Born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. My grandparents emigrated from Yemen to the United States in the '60s. My grandmother wanted to live where the blue grass she read about in various books was, so they settled in Kentucky where, much to her sadness, the grass was green and not blue."

I chuckled. He seemed to relax a bit, his long skilled fingers coming up to untie and lower his scarf from his face. He certainly was a pretty man.

"She must have liked it there anyway, even if the grass was plain old green," I said and shifted us into reverse.

“Oh she did. They both found a nice shop to buy and filled it with my grandfather’s oils and her sculptures,” he boasted as we crept up to the self-service parking kiosk. I paid with my debit card, hurried to put up the window, and pulled out onto a small two-lane road. “My car is over there in the flea market parking area. They’re closed in the winter, so no one cares if you stay there for a few days, other than the cops.”

“Seems the cops would have better things to do than roust someone just sleeping in his car,” I replied and got a grunt as we eased into the unplowed lot of what used to be a drive-in movie.

“They have laws against vagrancy in most of the books.” He shrugged. “I mean, I get it. They see me and think the worst.”

“Laws are stupid,” I grumbled. He chuckled softly. “Well, not all laws, obviously, but laws that give people a hard time over just trying to survive are stupid.”

“I don’t disagree. That’s my car, the old Chevy Sprint.” He pointed to a beater red car covered with snow. I pulled up beside it, and we both braved the elements to get the windows cleared. “I’ll follow you.”

I nodded, unsure of what to say. I climbed back into my Rogue, my head all over the place, and eased slowly out of the slippery parking area and back onto the road. Making the usually forty-five-minute trip home grew into over an hour and a half due to conditions. Which was fine. The more time I spent distanced from Kenan and those damn enchanting eyes of his, the more time Practical Brann had to regain control. I liked Practical Brann. He was safe. He kept himself out of harm’s way emotionally, happy with his little fortress of companionlessness, and never did outlandish things for pretty boys after the catastrophe that had been Paulie. Or hadn’t until about an hour ago. But now that I had time to breathe and distance between myself and he of the soulful eyes and magical voice, I could state with confidence that my actions had been purely humanitarian.

“It’s the season to give,” I told myself as we crept along the back roads that led to Whiteham, most having been recently plowed and cindered as school was still in session. And really, what was a few inches to rural folks in this neck of the woods? I’m just giving a man who needs a warm bed a place to lay his head. Santa would be proud. Maybe I’d get a new bike or one of the vibrating butt plugs that I’d been eyeballing for months.

My right hand left the wheel to fiddle with the radio, finding a country station with ease. Up here in the boonies country and western was big. Classic rock fans like me had one station to listen to, all the others were hillbilly tunes. Every few miles, I would check the rearview and smile to see Kenan still following at a sedate speed. Then I would scowl at myself in the mirror, rip my eyes from the Chevy behind me, and stare straight ahead with a vengeance.

An old Garth Brooks song started, the one about the rodeo, and I found myself wondering if Kenan sang about bulls and shiny spurs. Maybe he was less cowboy songs and more broken hearts songs, or maybe he was all about girls in jeans and pickup trucks. Maybe he didn’t care about girls at all. Maybe he liked men who came home smelling of stale beer and—

“Whoa, just whoa.” I jammed my finger into the scan button hard. And found more country. Then more country. And then even more country. “Where the hell is AC/DC when you need them?!” I shouted as I pawed around in the glove box for my CDs, nearly taking out a mailbox as I drifted off the road. Correcting quickly, I opened the cracked case, shoved that disc in, and cranked the volume up to ‘make my ears bleed’ levels. Only when my car was vibrating with screaming guitars and lead singers did I breathe properly. Obviously, my four-year stint of celibacy was wreaking havoc with my senses. That was logical. I was a young man, not even thirty yet, and I had needs. Generally, those needs were happy with Tonya Thumb and her four sisters but every now and again, it stood to reason, that a good-looking guy who spoke with velveteen inflections that sang of sweet tea, stately plantations, and waves of Spanish moss on

aged oaks would bring up some yearnings.

“Yep, yearnings were common,” I assured myself, hands on the wheel, my sight darting up to check on Kenan as we neared the bustling metropolis of Whiteham, population ten thousand forty if you counted all the cows. “Everyone has yearnings. Even your mother.” Oh. Oh no. That was...yuck. I came back to reality hard just as we sailed through one of two red lights on Main Street. Yep, good. I just had to keep thinking of my mother and father getting frisky and all stirrings in the genital region withered like last fall’s pumpkins left on the vine.

The hamlet of Whiteham had been busy whilst I was in Canada. Every street light now held its customary tinsel tree decoration, and every store had blinking lights with festive displays in the windows. Even the hardware store, Al’s Hardware, on the corner had joined in and had a fat cardboard Santa waving a jigsaw in their front window. Then there was the alehouse, sitting there like an unwanted case of genital herpes between the waving Santa and some sort of new-age white birch tree with pink lights and fairies extravaganza. Spring Muse was a new shop, just opened in the spring, and was packed full of Stevie Nicks inspired clothing as well as scented oils, beaded things, and wispy fae hats with long frilly dangles. The owner was an older woman, Beatrice, who was into Wicca and brewing ‘potions’ that she claimed were healing. Given how old Bea was, I had wondered if she was making embalming fluid.

“That’s not nice. It’s Christmas. Stop being a Scrooge,” I reminded myself as I pulled into a parking slot in front of the pub. Kenan eased in behind me. The street was empty for the most part. It was after five p.m., which was when the sidewalks were rolled up. I kid. Mostly. Things did get quiet here, though, in the evenings aside from Friday and Saturday nights. The weather didn’t help either. I loathed the idea of having to get out and face yet another wall of snow and wind, but get out I did, as did Kenan.

“Is this your bar?” he asked, his voice muffled by his scarf, his hands filled with a

guitar case and two fat duffel bags.

“It is. Prepare to be impressed,” I jokingly replied as I unlocked the front door and threw it open. I waved in Kenan, hurried in behind him, and pushed the door shut. I breathed in deeply, the smell of old wood and hops filling me with ease. I did love this old gal even if she was a little on the crusty side. I turned on the lights and glanced to the left at my guest. It was beyond strange to see this stranger standing here inspecting my little bar, yet here he was. “Impressed yet?”

“It’s homey,” he answered stiffly.

Yeah, it was that. I liked to think of the small space as eclectic pub chic. The walls were dark wood with some funky metal ale signs from local flea markets, the floor tiled, and the tables few and far between, wedged in where I could fit them around the jukebox. The bar, now that was a thing of beauty. Rich dark wood, famous brewery taps on display, stools that had held a lot of asses, and a register that I’d found online from the 70s. That was mostly for show. I had a new point-of-sale system register tucked behind a stuffed flounder that held my business cards in its tiny fishy mouth.

A chalkboard on the wall by the door announced the beer of the week, which would be discounted so customers would venture out of their beer comfort zones. Mugs and glasses lined the bar and the shelves behind it and stacks of bowls for nuts and pretzels sat tidily beside a metal sign stating that the best beer was the one in your hand.

Eclectic pub chic to the nth.

“You want a glass of something before we head up?” I asked, waving at the taps with domestic and imported ales. “I just got a new Belgium dark that’s strong but fruity.”

“No, no, thank you. I’m in NA and while booze isn’t my addiction of choice, it’s best

if I avoid alcohol.” He said it calmly as if it were a simple fact of his life. I nearly fell over. “It’s okay, honestly.”

“No, no, it is not! Oh shit, I didn’t know...we can do something else,” I rambled, mortified, that I’d brought this man who was battling an addiction into a damn pub. What the fuck was wrong with me?! “We can—”

“Brann,” he interjected in the slow drawl of his. My mouth snapped shut. “It’s fine. I’m in good shape. You didn’t know. I’ve been in bars since I got out of rehab, several in fact, and not once have I slipped. Two years clean.” He beamed.

“That’s...that is awesome. Congrats, man, seriously.”

“I’d love a ginger ale, though. Oh wow, look at her,” he whispered as if Sophia Loren had just entered the room. Hey, I’m gay, not blind. Sophia was a knockout. He placed his guitar case on the floor and floated over to the jukebox, his smile growing wider the closer he got to it. “This is gorgeous.”

He placed a hand on the bowed glass and bent over to read the title cards, most filled out by me so nearly unreadable. “What a beauty.”

“Yeah, she’s my baby. I’ve spent more money on her than I did on my house, I think.” He chuckled as he perused the choices of songs. I perused his ass. It was small and tight. Ugh. Nope, nope, nope. I rushed behind the bar where I felt safe with all that wood separating me from temptation and filled two glasses with ice, then shot some ginger ale atop the cubes.

“Do you mind if I play something?” he called, and I shook my head as I fished around in the small fridge where I kept sliced lemons and limes. I found the lemon container, but they were kind of dried out. They had been sitting for a week, so I chucked them, sliced a fresh one, and then placed both glasses on coasters with the

alehouse name on them.

“Your soda is ready,” I said and got a nod. Curls bounced. My dick twitched. I was tempted to dip my cock into the mug cooler, but the board of health might frown upon that, so I shoved at my crotch with the heel of my hand as Kenan fed quarters into the old gal. I loved that coins had to be used. I was not about to hook her up to the internet even if some people, most my age, bitched about having to use coins. Tough shit. Find some change or hum to yourself. Making her digital would ruin her. Some things were meant to be left the hell alone. New was not always better.

Hmm, maybe I was a little curmudgeonly after all. Mom always said I had the soul of a seventy-year-old locked into the body of a twenty-something. I could live with that.

I had a tin of quarters, painted with red nail polish, that I used to feed the jukebox when it sat silent too long. People seemed to only play it if someone had played it first, and at the end of the week, I’d collect the change. The red ones went back in the tin and the rest went into the register as profit. It wasn’t a lot of profit, trust me, but it made me feel as if the thousands I’d sunk into her would be paid off. Some decade.

“Crazy” by Patsy Cline floated out of the speakers hidden in the corners. Kenan made his way to the bar, climbed up onto a stool, and took a sip of his soda.

“This is good,” he said. “What do I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

He frowned, then dug out a couple of crumpled ones that he slapped on the bar. “I’d like to say that I don’t take charity, but obviously I do, but I can afford to pay for my soda.”

“Okay, I didn’t mean to offend.” Some of the tension left his jaw. “So, did you know

this song is the most popular jukebox song?” He shook his head, causing some curls to fall into his dark eyes. My cock was now at half-mast. “It is.”

“That’s cool. I love classic country.”

“Me too,” I lied. Well, it wasn’t a total lie. I did like the older stuff like this song. Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings. The rebels. I just didn’t tend to listen to the genre when I wasn’t at work. My customers sure liked it though, which was why there were so many of the golden oldies on the Rock-Ola. Silence fell then as Patsy finished and Kenny Rogers began to tell a tale about a gambler. “I like classic rock too.”

“Mm, same. Early Eagles are golden.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

Ugh, this was uncomfortable. I tossed down my soda. My head and body were not playing well right now. I needed to get him upstairs and me home before I did something stupid.

“Let me show you to the office. It’s not fancy, but there’s a couch and it’s warm. There is a sink and toilet up there and you can find some snacks on the shelves.”

“That’s fine, thank you for your kindness. I’ll be out of here in the morning.”

I stalled, my foot missing a step, at the thought of him rolling out of town without a goodbye, which was asinine. The man could go where he wished. I really needed some distance and time to summon my inner grumpy old man. Lewis Black was my spirit animal. I needed to remember that, especially now.

“No rush.”

That was all I could say that wouldn't sound weird. Once we reached the second floor, I showed him my office. It was small, with a desk, a light, an old Dell desktop, and a sofa to rest on at the end of the day. I'd slept on it many a night when I'd been too tired to drive home. One of Nonna's crocheted blankets hung over the back of the couch and an ugly pillow with a matching green and yellow cover, also from Nonna, rested against the arm.

He gave me a look that was hard to read. I knew how hard it was for a man, or woman for that matter, with pride to accept help. God knows when I'd fallen to bits after Paulie, I'd been reluctant to ask for any aide, and so I hadn't until my sister had arrived from college to sort my shit out as only Nora could have done. But crying on your sister's shoulder was a far cry from accepting a handout from a total stranger.

"There's a phone downstairs if you need to call out," I said to break the heavy, awkward silence of the moment.

"Thanks. I have a cell phone, but no plan." He sat on the sofa, back rigid as a fence post, his worn wet sneakers side-by-side on the old tile floor.

"Oh, well feel free to use the Wi-Fi if you want. Password is alehouseba96."

"That is such a hackable password. Your business, your initials, and the year you were born," he tossed out, peeking up at me through lashes too thick for a mortal man.

"Dude, listen, if you get into my banking app, you'll be bitterly disappointed." He graced me with a smile that went right to my balls. "I'm robbing Peter to pay Paul as my dad likes to say."

"Same," he softly replied. "I'll leave things as I found them. You won't even know I was here."

That was highly doubtful.

I made a manly sort of huffing sound, gave him a nod, and backed out of my office, releasing a breath I didn't know I'd been holding once the door clicked shut.

Fred and Wilma were quite glad to see me. They were tucked into their little coop, fresh hay and water, the food dish empty. Since it was dark now, I'd not feed them as it would only put food into the mouths of the mice that scurried around my little shed/coop, scaring the living shit out of me. There was no petting of goose heads. My two weren't the type to sit on your lap. Though they were the kind that would come when called. Wilma would take lettuce from my hand, Fred would not. Fred didn't quite trust me since that time I had to give him liquid antibiotics a few years ago when he had cut his foot on a broken beer bottle someone had chucked down into the creek where they played. I was furious, obviously. Stupid people truly grind my gears.

After that ten-day course of unhappiness for all, Fred now stayed just out of reach, which was fair. If some dude had sat on my back and forced my mouth open I'd...well, I'd probably not object if what he was putting into my mouth was his cock, which would be impossible as he was on my back but the point stood. I made a mental note to buy Mr. Blum—and no, he was not a bloom like a flower he liked to joke—an extra bag of corn on top of the bag I owed him for tending to my geese. Mr. Blum fed the crows every morning so the extra shell corn would be appreciated.

My house was chilly, so I built a fire in the woodstove to save on burning gas, threw my dirty clothes into the hamper, and changed into fleece pants and a sweatshirt bearing the logo of my new brother-in-law's team. I made a cup of coffee, flopped on the couch, and checked my phone. Nora had sent me a short message asking if I'd made it home safely because I was late checking in. Honestly, she and my mother

were clones. Right under my sister's text was one from Mom saying if she didn't hear from me soon, she would send the state police out to look for me. Hey, go for it. A man in uniform did things for me.

As did a soft-spoken singer, it seemed.

While I sent off texts to the worrywarts, I pondered why I was so drawn to Kenan. He was not my typical type. Paulie had been my type. Big, buff, and athletic. Not a creative bone in his large body. Paulie, and in all honesty, anyone over the age of ten who insists on being called Paulie instead of Paul should be avoided so bad on me, was a pipeline worker for a fracking company. Tanned from working outside, muscular, and unable to keep his dick in his pants as I had found out.

So yeah, Kenan was the anti-Paulie. Oh. Oh, there it was. I smiled at how clever I was. That was the draw. Now it all made sense. I found the man sleeping in my office so hot because he was the exact opposite of the guy who had kicked me out of our place on Christmas Eve after I'd come home to find him being fucked by the crew's driller. *à propos*, eh? Drilled by the driller. You can't make up this kind of shit. Nor would anyone want to.

Given what had taken place with Paulie and Newt—yes, his name was Newt—was it any wonder why I'd be attracted to Kenan? No, it was to be expected. And once he moved on, my dick would simmer down, my head would clear, and my secure little life would resume. All I had to do was see him off in the morning, conscious clear to doing a good deed during the holidays, and on the world would turn. Easy. No sweat.

Damn, I was clever.

I went to bed sure that I'd sleep like an angel resting its sweet head on God's shoulder.

Nope. Not even close.

Every time I closed my eyes, Kenan was there, smiling or singing or flicking his curls. That last one was a lie. He had not flicked a curl once that I'd seen, but man, if he ever did I'd lose a few cogs. After two hours of tossing, turning, and cussing passed, I did the only thing a man could do to ensure he would fall asleep. I jerked off. Didn't take long. A handful of spit, a mental image of a country crooner with eyes like dark chocolate, and a few tugs.

Once I caught my breath, I wiped off with an old tee, tossed the dirty shirt to the floor, and crashed. I dozed off instantly, sated for the moment, and dreamed of being a musician for Kenan at the Whiteham County Fair. I was in a sequined dress, a big blonde wig, and playing a steel guitar. A pen of pigs next to the stage watched us. The lady pigs were screaming and fainting ala the hens in that old Porky Pig cartoon with the swooning hens. I knew they were lady pigs because they had pink bows. My dreams were clearly locked into gender norms. I'd have to work on that in some dream analysis or something.

When my phone alarm sounded, I sat up, blinked at the winter sun well over the tops of the pines, and swore I would never drink chocolate mint coffee before bed again. Although, I did look damn fine in drag.

My morning routine was always the same. Roll out, piss, ride a few miles on my stationary bike in the laundry room, head out to tend to Fred and Wilma, come back inside, eat, shower, and head to town. It never deviated. When it did on occasion, like the time I came out to find a black bear had torn the door off my feed shed and had hauled off my metal trash can of waterfowl pellets, that made me cranky. Routine was good.

This morning looked to be headed for the crapper because when my eyelids popped open, I saw I was late and thought about Kenan. That was not routine. As I moved

through my other morning rituals, he kept appearing out of nowhere like a damn pop-up ad. Pedaling past a fjord in Norway, POP, there he was. Filling up the heated waterer while Wilma nibbled at my chore boots, POP, there was Kenan. Buttering my bagel, POP, Kenan.

It got so disturbing that I thought about calling the alehouse just to check on him.

“Nope, nope, and even bigger nope,” I scolded myself. The man was probably on his way to some warmer clime, I hoped, where he could busk in the warmth. Perhaps he was on a bus back home to Kentucky, where the horses were all walking horses...no, that was Tennessee, right? Kentucky had thoroughbreds. And grass that immigrants imagined was blue but was green. Thinking of that little anecdote over my bagel and coffee made me smile. Actually, every time I thought of Kenan, I smiled, which was downright stupid. The man was a drifter, a recovering drug addict. He had probably flown out the front door of my pub like his ass was on fire as soon as his eyes had opened, and who could have blamed him. Talk about temptation.

So, imagine my surprise when I got to work an hour later and way past my usual time so I could open the doors at noon and be ready to find Kenan mopping the floor.

I stalled in the doorway, the bright sunshine falling on the wet floor, and gaped as my grip on a box of a dozen doughnuts from the corner mart tightened. An old Hank Williams Jr. song was playing on the jukebox. Kenan swung around, wet mop dripping, and hit me with a smile that impacted me like a two-by-four to the jaw.

“Morning,” he called over Mr. Williams Jr. telling the world about how he was about to get hell bound and whiskey bent. “I hope you don’t mind that I jumped in to do some cleaning before you showed up?”

“I...uhm...no, it’s fine, of course. Very courteous,” I babbled, pulling the door shut. The lunch break at the mill would start in five minutes, and I hadn’t even dumped the

change into the register yet. Being late made me grumbly.

“It looked like it needed a mopping.”

“Probably did,” I replied, taking care of where I stepped as I made my way to the bar. “I tend to forget.” I placed the bank bag on a spotless, shiny bar. “Did you polish the bar?”

He nodded, curls bouncing.

If I were a praying man, I’d have been on my knees. Oh. Kneeling in front of Kenan would be—nope, nope, major nope.

“I made some coffee too. I wanted to help in whatever way I could to pay you back for your kindness.”

“I...thank you.” I fumbled about with the register, forgetting the password momentarily as I gazed at his perfectly formed face. “Shit.” One sign-in attempt of being locked out, I finally got the damn drawer to open. Kenan returned to his mopping. The door opened. I looked up to see my regulars filing in, mill workers coated with sawdust. “Shit,” I said again as Kenan backed up, bucket in tow, to allow the customers to come in.

“Finally hired some help, huh?” Lyle, one of only three supervisors at the sawmill outside of town, asked as he dropped his ass into his favorite stool. “About damn time. You got the fryer going?”

“Not yet. I slept in. Jet lag,” I said as the bar and tables were claimed in short order.

“Jet lag? Canada is like five hours away,” Linc, a young guy with an eye for pretty girls and motocross, said.

“Not all of Canada is five hours away,” Lyle pointed out as he reached behind the bar for a coffee mug and the creamer. They made themselves at home here. “Only Toronto is that close. Use the phone for something other than porn and find a damn map of the world. What do they teach you kids in school nowadays?”

“Not cursive,” someone shouted, which got a laugh from everyone but Linc who rose to the bait far too easily.

I would have liked to get into the teasing, but I had beers to serve, orders to take, and food to cook. My menu was simple bar food, burgers and fries, onion rings, and some cold sandwiches, stuff that went well with beer. Kenan eased up beside me behind the bar, his arm brushing mine. I looked to the side while pulling a pitcher of dark ale for the foursome from the sanitation department.

“I’m not much of a short-order cook but I can serve beer,” he offered as the shouts of customers who were hungry, thirsty, and short on time rolled over me.

I nodded. “Thanks, that would be so helpful.” I paused, my hand on a tap. “If you’re sure that you can handle it?”

“I’m positive. Maybe my next NA sponsor will give me a sticker for working in a pub and only drinking ginger ale,” he kidded and gently nudged me aside. Okay, so he was a tiny bit bossy. That was not a turnoff by any means.

“Put on an apron,” I barked as I stepped back.

“Where are they?” Kenan asked while pulling a nice, foamy pilsner.

“Oh, right.” I shuffled to the left as Lyle gave me an odd sort of assessment. “Did I grow another nose while I was gone?”

“Nope, just watching.” Lyle leaned back on his stool, sipped from his cup of coffee, and smirked as if he knew something, which he didn’t. The man knew nothing.

“Well, watch the damn TV,” I snapped, found the remote and snapped on the wall-mounted television, and then stalked into the cramped kitchen to fire up the grill and deep-fryer. While they heated, I pulled two clean aprons, deep red with my alehouse logo on the front, and snuck back into the pub. Kenan was doing a good job filling orders. I handed him an apron, grabbed a book of guest checks and a pencil, and started circulating the few tables to take orders.

Not going to lie, having a hand at the taps made the lunch rush much easier. Kenan knew his way around a bar and seemed to have a subtle charm that the rednecks enjoyed. There was something about the man, a strength that lingered under the surface of his Kentucky appeal.

When the worst of the chaos was over, I cooked two burgers with a side of fries and toted them out to the bar. Kenan was washing glasses when I placed the food down. Lyle and the others had left to return to work, thank God, so there was only one table left. Travelers through our little burg on their way south, like geese only with less attitude. Nice people who had enjoyed the food and ale and were now discussing which route to take into the Virginias.

“Oh that looks great, thank you.” Kenan wiped his hands on his damp apron after placing the glasses on a towel to dry.

“It’s the least I could do,” I honestly replied, heaving a leg over a stool.

“Soda?” he asked. I bobbed my head. He filled two glasses with ice and sprayed some lemon-lime soda into them. “I think the Bud Light keg needs to be tapped.”

“Yeah, that goes fast here. I’ll grab that after we eat.” The basement was a dank, dark

place, perfect for keeping kegs cool and out of the way. “Sit down. Eat.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied with a crooked grin and I did my best not to let affect me. “Is it always that busy in here?”

“Mm, lunch and dinner can be, but that was insane. Probably because the place was closed for a week and everyone was tired of bologna sandwiches from home.”

“And you do this by yourself?” He slid into a seat beside me, his thigh resting tight to mine. I watched as he plucked a fry from the mound on his plate and poked it into the mayo running out from under the top bun.

“Like mayo on your fries?”

“Yeah, I’m a little different.”

“To each their own,” I said, then coated my fries with a mix of mustard and ketchup. We ate in peace for a moment, his leg cozy as it rested beside mine. “I’d like to pay you for your time.”

“Okay. Yeah, thanks.” He was a slow eater in comparison to me, who sucked grub down like a Hoover according to my mother. “I put the tips into that metal cup so we could split them.”

“Nope, those are yours. I got mine off the tables.”

“Cool, thank you. The people here seem nice. No one commented on my nose or my accent.”

“Why would they say anything about either? Your accent is pleasant and your nose is pretty.” His eyes flared. I choked on a crunchy bit of French fry. “I mean...your nose

is fine on your face. Sits fine on your face. It's lined up between your eyes in a way that is normally pretty on any human being."

Mortification dropped on me like an anvil on a cartoon coyote. "Thanks," he murmured, his gaze unreadable. "I'm always glad my nose wasn't on my forehead."

"Yeah, that would..." There was no way out of this without looking more idiotic. "I'm going to go change that keg." Up I shot, leaving my fries and half my burger. Kenan's hand landed on my forearm. I paused in my flight to the basement to look at his fingers resting on me.

"Your nose sits prettily on your face too," he said and removed his hand.

Words failed me, so I smiled way too hard and made my escape to the basement via the kitchen. Each step into the cellar, the temp dropped so that by the time I was wedged into the narrow space filled with beer kegs and lines leading to the bar, all the heat that Kenan's touch and compliment left my overheated skin. It never froze down here, but the temperature was such that a coat or sweater would have felt good. In my half-mad state to flee, I'd not grabbed the old, tattered coat that hung by the basement door.

"A little cooling off will do you good," I told myself as I moved automatically, unhooking the handle and then twisting it off. Space was limited down here, so I had to move the empty keg, roll in a new one, and tap the new one. I blatantly ignored the boxes of holiday decorations moldering in the corner. God knows I should chuck them in the dumpster. They'd not come out of that cold box once since Paulie had fucked over Christmas forever. If I threw them out, I'd have more room for beer, which would make me money, but here they poked at my memory every time I had to tap a keg.

Right. Fuck those boxes. I had other things to do besides get lost in the dismal past.

Once the new keg was ready, I took a moment, or ten, to suck in chilly air to cool my motherfucking jets. This day was not at all routine. I wiped my wet fingers on my apron over and over, a calming method of sorts, until I felt that I was once again Brann the beer man aka my old self. Sure, Kenan had said something nice. Yes, I liked it. I was only human. He'd simply been returning a compliment. My nose was an okay nose. Nothing spectacular like his. His nose was regal and added something to his face. It spoke of his lineage. Mine was just a dull old nose that sucked in air. Still, it was nice of him to say it was pretty, even if he knew it was blasé.

Hefting the empty keg into my arms, I slowly climbed the stairs. The empties went outside into the back alley so the beer trucks could pick them up. The drivers had dollies to handle the filled kegs, but all I had was my back. Kenan stood at the top of the stairs, watching me waddle upward, his curls lying on his brow.

"I'll get the door," he said and disappeared. I grunted a thanks as I moved past him into the alley, icicles as tall as he was hung from the back of the shops, a few dropping to the ground as the sun tried to warm the county. "Look about the whole nose thing..."

"Nope, no need to explain," I huffed as I placed the empty atop another spent keg. I turned to look at him, which was a huge mistake because every time I saw his face, I did something stupid and un-Brann-like. "I know you were just being polite."

"Well, actually—"

I waved him off. "It's all good. People are nice to each other that way. Like when someone shows me a picture of a new baby and I say the kid is cute, even though it's not really all that cute. I mean, newborns look like something Rosemary gave birth to." He chuckled. It was a soft laugh, but it made me feel ten feet tall because he got the reference. "So reciprocating a kindness with a kindness needs no explanation. We both have nice functional noses."

“Okay, yeah, we do. They work well.” He tapped his nose once, just like Santa laying a finger aside his nose. “I love that movie.”

“Yeah? Most people don’t even know about the old classic horror flicks, but I love them. Nora likes to say that I was born in the wrong decade.”

“Nora is your wife?”

“God no, I’m gay.”

“Oh, nice to know. Me too.”

Ah. Well, that was nice to know. “Small world,” I said, my witty verbiage on full display.

“Sure is, so Nora is?”

“Oh, my sister. She just got married. I was coming home from her wedding yesterday.” Had I mentioned that to him yesterday? Shit, I couldn’t remember. I was so dumb around this man I could have confessed to any number of things and not recalled. “To a hockey player. Up in Canada.”

“Shocking.”

“What? That she got married?”

“No, that she found a hockey player in Canada.” That made me snort. Not a very pleasant sound, but it seemed to amuse him. “I like the old things, old songs, old movies, and old souls.”

Our gazes locked. He wet his lips. My entire being sang in joy.

“Oh hey, Brann, glad I caught up with you.” The smell of cigarette smoke arrived a moment before Al Prescott, of Al’s Hardware, stepped around the pyramid of empties. His wife Glory had banished him and his smokes outdoors ten years ago. Al was one reason I did my best not to tarry around in the alley. “I heard you hired some help. About time.”

“Well, Kenan isn’t exactly hired, he was just helping out,” I explained as Al gave Kenan a long look that wasn’t at all welcoming.

“Ah, well, that’s nice. ’Tis the season and all. Listen, Brann, I know we’ve been through this a few times over the past few years.” Al sidled in closer, cigarette in hand, to wedge his portly self behind the kegs that acted as a windbreak of sorts. The sun shone nicely off his bald scalp. “But as the head of the Main Street Business Association, I’d like to invite you to think about putting up some decorations in your windows. The alehouse is the only store on either side of the street barren of any seasonal joy.”

“I think I hear the phone ringing,” Kenan said, easing back inside. I wanted to kick Al in his pork belly—and yes, he ate a lot of pork, so I felt justified in calling his girthy middle that—for breaking up what could have been...

Well, maybe it was a good thing Al and his Marlboro Lights had shown up.

“Al, we’ve been over this. I don’t do Christmas.” I folded my arms over my chest as a small sparrow flitted to the ground to pick at the crumbs under the dumpster. He found a frozen fry to peck at while we talked.

Al shifted, his smoke blowing into my face. I waved the cloud away. He seemed not to notice or care. Probably the latter.

“Well, yes, and I understand that you have your reasons, but surely you could find a

little tree or a candle to place in the windows? We're not asking anyone to go against their beliefs." He drew in a lungful, exhaled, and carried on. "Speaking of beliefs, did you vet that young man before you brought him in to help at the bar?" My hackles, which were always raised around Al, rose even higher. "Now don't look at me like you do when you come in to vote."

"I look at you that way when I vote because you always make a comment about my rainbow vote."

He did have the decency to blanch. "That was meant as a kindness. You know Glory and I have nothing against the gays." Right. And I was Tina Turner. "I'm only concerned about your safety when you bring a certain type of person into our community."

"Certain type? The type with curly hair?"

He scowled, then dropped his butt to the snowy ground. It sizzled. "You're always so quick to take offense, Brann. I never did understand that. I'm only looking out for our community."

"Yep, me too. People with curly hair are a known menace to our fair village." With that, I stalked inside and slammed the door in his face. Fuck him and his ignorance. I stormed through the kitchen into the pub to find Kenan chatting with a couple of customers. They had tall glasses of dark lager and a dish of nuts. All seemed in order. "I'm going to go do paperwork. Can you hang out for another hour or so?"

"Sure." He looked as if he wanted to say more but didn't.

I climbed up to my office, opened the door, and was hit in the face with the aroma of Kenan. It was a warm scent, slightly woodsy, and it lingered not only by the sofa but also in the small bathroom. I washed my hands of old beer, then dried my hands on a

small towel that smelled of Kenan. Had he washed his body here in this dinky sink? Was that why my hand towel carried his fragrance?

“You are losing it,” I told myself, yanking the towel from my face and stomping to my desk. I sat down with a huff, opened my desktop, and stared at all the bills that needed to be paid as my mind stewed about Al. Fucking Al. Such a jerk. How he weaseled his way to be the head of anything was a mystery for the ages. If Al and a rabid zombie rabbit were running for head of the small business association of Whiteham, I would not only vote for the rabid zombie rabbit, I’d put signs in my yard saying VOTE FOR THE RABID ZOMBIE RABBIT just to twist Al’s checkered knickers. Sure, I had decorations in the basement. Those were from the Paulie era before a certain dickhead had ruined the holidays for me. Now they sat there unopened and unused, full of spiders and mice droppings. And that was where they were going to stay. No one could force me to decorate.

A soft rap on the office door jarred me from Al, Christmas, and the box of ho-ho-ho stashed in a dark, cold corner next to a keg of Miller High Life.

Kenan stuck his head in, curls galore. I sat up straighter. “Hey, are we allowed to serve food after the lunch rush? A couple of gas workers looking for a bite.”

“Sure, yeah, I’ll be right down. You can go whenever you want.” He nodded but didn’t move. “I mean, if you want to. To go. Somewhere else. You’re more than welcome to stay here for a couple of days, you know, if you want to make some money for the next leg of your trip.”

“I’d like that, thanks. Your couch is very comfy, and the people here are nice. Would you mind if I played tonight? Just a short set. Maybe make some more tips. Gas is expensive.”

I didn’t have a clue, but what the hell wasn’t expensive nowadays? “That would be

fine. Maybe from six to seven after we get most of the eaters fed?”

“Perfect. Thanks, Brann. Oh, and I have something in my bag that I’d be willing to let you use as a decoration in the front window.” He hurried to one of his two duffels stashed behind the couch, kneeled, and rummaged. I enjoyed the way his back muscles flexed under his long-sleeved Henley. Dark, dark curls tickled the nape of his neck. My fingers itched to comb them out, then watch them spring back. He winked at me as he stood with a small brass menorah in his hand. “If you dare. I mean, it says seasonal joy to me.”

“Oh, Kenan, I so dare. I love it. Yeah, let’s get that set up stat.”

He blushed just enough to make his ears adorably pink. I think it was right then that I knew I was in deep, deep , deep trouble.

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Chapter Three

Standing behind the bar sipping a ginger ale, I felt a warmth lingering in my chest that had little to do with the jalapeño relish I'd spooned over my burger at dinner.

I suspected that little glowing briquet was directly related to Kenan, who was now seated on a stool in front of the jukebox singing his heart out for the locals. Not one soul in the place, and there were quite a few, were talking. Every ear was tuned to the guitar man. Mine was as well, along with my eyes. To be honest, it was nearly impossible for me to pull my sight from him seated there, one foot on the floor, the other tucked behind a rung. His head was bent, curls tickling his scruffy cheek, his well-loved six-string, resting on his lap like a child.

He had done a few old country classics, including one by Willie Nelson called "Hello Walls" that actually made a few guys at the bar a little teary. He just had one of those voices that plucked heartstrings. Then he had played an original song, a devastating telling of a man who'd been close enough to heaven to touch the clouds and then fell, hard, like Icarus, the landing breaking more than his wings. The applause nearly shook the dust from the rafters. People were throwing cash into his guitar case by the handfuls. The man had talent. Far too much to be sitting in an alehouse in some Podunk town in the middle of nowhere.

That one had to have been written about his addiction, or so I assumed, but what did I really know about him? Other than he was sleeping in his car, had a voice that should have won him a few CMA awards, and had eyes that could cradle a man for eons.

"Brann?" A woman's voice tugged me from a soulful rendition of "Funny How Time

Slips Away” played by a drifter sitting under a glowing menorah.

“Oh, Paula, hey, another pitcher of Molson?” I asked and got a nod of her silver hair. Paula and her girlfriends all worked at the courthouse. They usually gathered here for dinner and a pitcher of beer, then went home, but Kenan, it seemed, had kept them in their seats. Hell, they’d even called their husbands to come listen to the new barkeep.

“Yeah, please.” She leaned over the bar to whisper beside my ear. “Where the hell did you find him?”

“At the airport,” I replied before even thinking. She drew back slightly, confused. “We bumped into each other and started talking about bars and country music. He said he could pull a beer and sing a little so...” I shrugged, the lie bitter as rotten hops on my tongue, but I had no way of knowing what Kenan wanted to be known about him. Was he open about his past addictions, his time in rehab, and the fact that he slept in his car? I knew so little about him, yet here he was, switching into a country Christmas song about Santa looking a lot like some kid’s daddy. All the patrons were singing along. The air was now so festive I was expecting elves to appear and start rocking around the tree. Well, if I’d had a tree. Maybe they could rock around the menorah instead since that was the only holiday display visible.

“Huh, I thought maybe he was from around here. He looks familiar for some reason. Well, lucky for us, he needed a job,” she said, her head bobbing to the upbeat tune. “I hope you keep him around for a while. This place needs something bright in here that’s not neon.”

I stared stupidly and placed her pitcher in front of her. She tossed me some cash and then boot-scooted to her table. A few younger women started dancing, even though there was no dance floor. Kenan played the hell of that old guitar, his dark eyes glowing like the lone candle in the multibranch candelabrum. The joy he brought to his music was infectious. My little alehouse was packed probably past maximum

occupancy.

When Kenan slowed things down with a Waylon Jennings tune, the front door opened. I rolled my eyes to the open-beam ceiling. Al stormed in, his gaze roaming the packed pub until it found me behind the bar. I'd been waiting. To be honest, I was surprised that it had taken him this long, but he'd probably had to wait to close the hardware store.

Surprise showed on his face as he took in the patrons, then his shock morphed into a scowl as his sight landed on Kenan strumming his heart out, his black curls shining from the flickering candle resting above him in a small window nook.

"Brann," Al said after weaving through the crowd, his jaw set.

"Al, where's Glory? You should have brought her around to hear Kenan," I said as I reached for a glass with one hand and the Miller Lite tap handle. "Your usual?"

"No, I am not here to drink." He spun from scowling in Kenan's direction to me. "Maybe just one. Glory's mother is coming over for dinner tonight."

I poured him a beer, placed it on a coaster, and took his fiver. "Tell Glory that we missed her."

He downed the cold one in a long pull and then belched softly. "Yes, I will. Brann, we do need to discuss that candleholder in the window."

"You said I should decorate for the holidays." Innocence dripped from me like honey from a hive. Al opened his mouth to reply, but I had to leave him to take care of some customers. After I rang them out, I returned to Al, now looking a little less fractious.

"I'm not saying that the candleholder—"

“It’s called a menorah.”

“Yes, the menorah. I’m not saying that it’s not lovely and that it’s not festive because Glory and I love the Jews. I’m just concerned that you’re displaying an open flame in a wooden window casing. Surely that can’t be safe. We don’t want our Main Street businesses to burn down two weeks before Christmas. For safety’s sake, perhaps a less flammable sign of the holiday would be better? Why not one of those little ceramic trees with the rainbow lights the gals make at the ceramic barn? That would be bright and gay!”

I thought to bicker. I probably should have, but Al would have run to Charlie, the fire chief and his poker buddy, and Charlie would have to come over to give me shit about open flames and exceeding a few fire safety rules.

“Okay, we’ll see what we can do about the open flame situation,” I replied.

“Good, good. Well, off I go. See you at the gingerbread house bake-off next Friday at the fire hall.” Off he went, pleased with himself for being an asshole.

Kenan played for another thirty minutes or so, then ended his set. The crowd was saddened to see him lay down his old acoustic, but they understood they were now sitting here past closing time. It took some time to get everyone out. When the last customer left, I rushed to the door like a linebacker and threw the locks shut. Kenan chuckled as he lifted chairs from the floor to place them on the tables.

“How did you do with tips?” I asked, joining him to clear the floor for the broom and mop. It was incredible how much of a mess an inch of fluffy snow can make. Not that I generally paid a lot of attention to the floor, mind you. But Kenan seemed to be a mopper, and who was I to argue with a man who wanted clean floors?

“Really good.” He beamed at me around sixteen wooden legs in the air.

“Cool,” I replied, standing there like a dipshit, trying to think of something to say. “So, about the candle,” I blurted out. He cocked an eyebrow in question before moving to another table. “I’m sorry we had to extinguish it.”

“Meh, it’s okay.”

“Well, no, it’s not really. Al was being a jerk. I mean that candle probably should stay lit throughout the seven days, right?” I hustled around to the next table.

“Only if a miracle is taking place.” He gave me a wry smile. “Generally, we blow them out before bed, but if we have to leave the house, out they go.”

“Oh, okay, well, that’s good. I thought it might be a big sin or something.”

“Nope, it’s all good.”

“Good. Cool.” And dead space. Ugh, why could I not word? “You get presents every night, right? I should have thought to get you something.”

He folded his arms over two spindly wooden chair legs, dark eyes searching my face. “Brann, that’s super kind but we literally have known each other for less than forty-eight hours.”

“Well...yeah but as your friend I should have been prepared for...what?”

His head had tipped to the side, just an inch or so. “Are we friends?” I stared dully. “I mean, we just met. You offered me a little gig to make money to fill up my tank. Friendship takes a little time to build.”

He had a point. My brain was stuck in tar while my mouth was rolling on a hamster wheel powered by a rodent on crack.

“I hope we can become friends before you head off on the next leg of your musical journey.” He nodded. I, feeling like a total baboon ass, kept talking. “So in that vein of us being potential friends, I’d have felt better about myself if I had gotten you a gift. Your religion must be pretty important to you if you carry a menorah.”

“Meh.” He shrugged before swinging another chair up and around. “As a kid, it was a weekly thing, sure, and I had my bar mitzvah and that was fun. As a teenager, when I went to college, I drifted, and I became adamant and rebelled against all things to do with Judaism. Those were my wild years. My grandpa used to say that all the time. ‘Kenan had his wild years but now God has brought him back,’ he’d say when I was straight enough to finally visit him in the nursing home. Pity my parents were about done with me by the time I stopped snorting ketamine up into my sinuses. Not that I blame them. I did some pretty terrible shit when I was high, blew some big chances.” He talked and worked. I worked and said nothing, eager to learn what I could about him before he saved enough cash to leave. “Anyway, the menorah was my grandfather’s. He left it to me. I guess he died hoping that if I had it, I would start settling down, find a guy, a nice Jewish man obviously, and we would start going to synagogue.”

We stalled by the jukebox as we had run out of chairs. “So your being gay upset the family?”

“Greatly. That was the first disappointing thing I did, or so my parents felt. My grandfather, though, lived through a lot in his time. He was the most accepting person I had ever met. Sometimes, when it’s a dark night, like dark in here,” he tapped his chest, “I wonder why he died and not...well, not other family members who weren’t quite so understanding.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I softly said, then dared to squeeze his shoulder. “And I’m really sorry for allowing Al to extinguish your candle.”

“Meh, it’s fine. I still performed the mitzvah.”

“I have no clue what that means.”

He laughed, a soft rolling laugh that did wild and wooly things to me. “I could tell by the blank look on your face. I’ll explain while we sweep and mop.”

He talked and swept, and I listened and mopped.

When we said goodnight and I went out the back door to get to my car, I was resigned to track down an electric menorah somewhere in this damn county, and I would find eight little gifts.

I was calling it holiday spirit. And if that spirit stuck it to Al while making Kenan smile then ho-ho-ho call me Old Saint Nick.

“How is it possible to have a town filled with stores and not one of them has an electric menorah?” I asked Fred and Wilma as I was chopping ice out of their pool with an axe. Yeah, winter farm chores were fun. Not. Fred eyeballed me as Wilma nibbled at the strings of my boots. Small bits of frozen goose water flew into the early morning rays of sun. The clear skies overnight had sent the temps plummeting into single digits. Fa-la-la-la-fucking-la. I stopped to catch my breath and wipe the sweat from my brow. Sweating this heavily when it was four degrees out was sacrilegious or something. “Speaking of religion,” I huffed as I placed my hands atop the axe handle, two impatient geese telling me in goose to hurry the fuck up so they can get a drink. “I need an electric menorah and some little gifts.”

Fred deposited a steaming pile of goose shit on the fresh hay I’d covered their snowy pen with. They had the run of the fenced-in yard during the day, but in the winter I

liked to put bedding down so they could keep their little webbed feet off snow and ice.

“Are those your feelings about the holidays?” I asked Fred and got a loud honk. “Yeah, me too, but Kenan is alone and on the road so showing a little cheer to the guy won’t hurt.” Fred was not buying it. Wilma was too busy trying to pinch my ass to get me moving to care. “Ow, hey, that’s not the way to be. I’m just trying to find something for the guy for Hanukkah.”

“You’re taking too long to get them some water,” I heard from behind me. Twisting to avoid another ass pinch, I saw Mr. Blum smiling at me over the pen fence. He tossed some corn into the full feed dishes, which made both geese very happy. He was a lovely old fellow, with a thatch of wild silver kinky hair, thick glasses, and dark gray eyes. His back was bowed, his skin deeply wrinkled, and his walk slow, but he never missed his morning stroll even if it was so cold your nose hairs froze. “Did I hear you say something about Hanukkah?”

“Morning. Yes, I have a new helper at the alehouse.”

His eyes lit up. “A Jewish lad?” I nodded. “Well, well, that makes two Jews in the whole of Whiteham. I’ll have to come down and introduce myself.”

“Oh, are you Jewish?”

“I am.” He tugged down his knit stocking cap to cover his rather large ears.

“Ah cool. I never see anything in your windows around this time of year.”

“I prefer to keep my religion to myself. Lots of people in small towns tend to have small minds.” Yeah, that was a truism. “Now my Betty, she was always so proud and vocal, but when she died, I fell into myself more than usual. You know how that is.”

I did. Sadly, I did not know Mr. Blum had lost his wife. Shit, I hadn't even known he was Jewish. Guess I'd fallen into myself so deeply I didn't even care to find out the basics about the people I interacted with all the time. Christ, maybe Nora was right about me. "So, this young man of yours—"

"He's not mine. I just met him at the airport and he was down on his luck, so I offered him a place to sleep and some hours at the alehouse."

That made my neighbor smile so widely his craggy cheeks obscured his eyes. "Now that is the truest form of good cheer to men I have heard in quite some time. So, tell me about him."

"Well, he's about my age, I think, tight curly hair, dark eyes, tall, very lean, can sing like an angel, and handles himself in a bar very well." Mr. Blum nodded along as I began gushing, the nips at my thighs from two thirsty geese not stalling my ramble at all. "He's southern, plays guitar, and carries his grandfather's menorah as a memento. We had it lit last night in the little sign windows of the bar, but Al came over to complain about the candle."

"Al would complain if he were hung with a new rope." I stared. "It's an old saying. So Al complained about the menorah?"

"Well, he said it was the open flame, which, okay, I sort of get, but we all know it was the candelabrum." Mr. Blum bobbed his head. "So, you know me. I'm now on the search for an electric menorah to put in the window. I might start handing out dreidels at the door."

Mr. Blum laughed a hearty laugh that got my geese to stop pulling at my pant legs for a moment. But just for a moment. They really had no patience.

"I'd love to back that promotion." Mr. Blum chuckled.

“I doubt it would ever get off the ground as I can’t find a damn electric menorah anywhere in town, let alone a case of dreidels. I could order one online, but it would take days to get here.”

Mr. Blum patted my arm. “I have an old electric one stashed away in the attic. I’ll go fetch it for you.”

“That would be amazing. Thank you so much.” He grinned in a mischievous way. No one liked Al, not even the cardboard Santa. “Now I just have to figure out what to get him. Any suggestions? Ow! You little shit, Fred!” I rubbed my ass where the gander had just given it a hard pinch. “I get it. Work faster. Damn feathered taskmasters.”

“You best get them happy or your backside will be a solid bruise. I’m going to go muddle around in the attic. I might join you for lunch if you’re accepting?”

“Of course. My treat.” Mr. Blum gave me a curt nod of acceptance, tossed more corn to the geese, and slowly made his way back around my house to the road. I snuck after him, careful not to be seen, to ensure he didn’t slip on the ice anywhere as he returned to his tiny home under the pines.

Once I saw him duck inside his bright red front door, I went back to watering the geese before there was a webbed-footed coup attempt. I would not put it past them. When I was back inside thawing out with a cup of hot coffee and an English muffin with peanut butter, I scribbled out a shopping list to fill before I went to work.

I had some holiday shopping to do, which was outlandish in its own right. I’d just finished my muffin when I got a call. Seeing that it was my sister, I wiped my fingers on a paper towel before answering.

“Why are you calling me?” I asked and got a raspberry from Nora, who looked as if she had just rolled out of bed. “You’re on your honeymoon.”

“I know. I just wanted to check on you. The last time anyone saw you, rumor was you were lit.”

I sighed dramatically. She made a face. “I’m a big boy, Nora. Now why the hell are you yakking at me when you have exactly one day left with Antoine before he has to return to playing hockey and making millions?”

“I miss our morning talks,” she replied sadly. “Tell me you’ll still send me stupid texts every morning.”

“I promise I will send you stupid texts every morning.” She sniffled. I leaned down to stare at my phone propped against my empty coffee mug. “Nora, are you crying?”

“Yes.” And just like that, the waterworks began. She’d been doing this for about a month now, ever since she’d found out she was pregnant. Hence the quick wedding ceremony in the middle of hockey season. Seemed Antoine had some very strict and very religious grandmothers who would have died a thousand deaths if he had not married my sister. Not that they hadn’t been planning a wedding anyway, they had been. It was just that the vows had to be said before Nora was showing, or so the elderly matriarchs of the Bolanger clan had decreed. “I can’t help it. I’m so happy!” Ah. Okay, as long as they were happy tears. If Antoine had made her sad, I might just have to fly back to Canada to kick his ass. “Tell me something happy that happened to you today. I can’t stand it if I’m happy and you’re still so sad.”

Well, shit. I glanced down at the scrap paper in front of me. “I’m going to buy some Hanukkah gifts for my new friend Kenan.” I waved the list in front of her now red nose.

“Wait. What?” She dabbed at her leaky eyes with the sleeve of the ridiculously oversized hockey jersey she was wearing. “You. You’re buying holiday gifts? For a friend? Is this friend a guy?!”

Wow, it was amazing how rapidly her moods shifted. Poor Antoine. “Yes, he’s a guy.” She squealed so loudly my eardrums wept. “No. Stop that. Do not squeal. It’s not like that at all. He’s just a nice guy who’s helping at the alehouse for a few days, or maybe weeks, depending on how long it takes him to make enough money for gas to move onto his next stop.”

“Weeks? How much gas is he buying? Does he drive a tank?”

“No, he drives a beat-up—it’s not even important.” I huffed and she glowed, the little imp. “It’s just a thing is all.”

“Is he cute?”

“Nora ...”

“He is! I can tell by the way your eyebrows get all droopy.”

“He’s not...okay, look, he’s not ugly.”

“He is so cute.” She was bouncing in her seat. “He is just adorable. I can tell you think so. Antoine! Wake up! Brann has a new friend named Keifer, and he’s buying gifts for him!”

My new brother-in-law mumbled something in French from just out of view.

“His name is Kenan. I’m only buying small gifts for each day of Hanukkah. Do not wake up Antoine to relay inconsequential information.”

“This is huge. Huge! Send pictures of Kenan. I love you, big brother! Antoine, wake up ! Brann has a Jewish quote-unquote friend!”

“Magnifique,” Antoine grunted just as the call ended.

Jesus. I ran my hands over my face. You’d think I never had a friend in my entire life. I had plenty of friends. There was Mr. Blum and...

Did geese count?

Oh! And the guys in the dart league. So many friends. Too many to count.

My phone buzzed. I eyed it like the cell was an adder. It was my mother. Nora was to blame for this. I would get her back somehow, somewhere, someday. I ignored the text as well as the call that followed. I had other things to do this morning. Like buy little gifts at the thrift shop outside of town for my friend. Friend . Just a friend. A passing acquaintance. A temporary coworker.

Yep, this was just me being a nice boss.

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Chapter Four

S ometimes I impressed myself.

Not only did I get myself out of the house an hour early, but I managed to find some pretty cool little gifts for Kenan at the thrift shop. Nothing too ridiculous or expensive. I mean it was a thrift shop after all, but they were cute little things: a tiny stuffed dog with a beret (the headwear could be a yarmulke if you squinted really hard), a small rose-toned lidded dish where he could put earrings, a bracelet with spangly beads of red and green. Then I went to the grocery store. I found some small chocolates, a tin with hard candy, an orange, and a brownie from the bakery.

I planned to give him the brownie tonight, which was why I was now in the basement in my short-sleeved tee and pulling out boxes of decorations and looking for some damn wrapping paper. It was damn near impossible to rummage around in this lot and not be assaulted with memories.

Lights that Paulie had bought for the bar, a two-foot fake tree to sit beside the jukebox, little glass balls that he had insisted we buy even though drunken customers broke at least one every damn weekend. I should have thrown them all out the day after he had broken me in two.

For years I had glowered at them, cussed them, even spat at them, but I'd never been able to toss them. My father, a hoarding master, claimed that throwing perfectly good things away was wasteful and that someday, maybe in ten or twenty years, you might need it. My mother did not agree with that thinking, so there were many spats about Dad's need to keep string or stop in the middle of the road to pick up a stray bungee

cord. Maybe that was why I'd kept this mess of remembrances, or maybe I'd just left them here because I would have a need for them someday.

Pushing aside a large stocking in the shape of a beer mug, I found a small package of flat wrapping paper. Candy canes. Cool. Slipping things back into place, I tucked the pack under my arm, climbed the stairs, grabbed the gifts, and rushed upstairs, only to come up short once I entered the office. I'd been so engrossed in finding gifts and searching for paper that I'd forgotten the giftee was bunking on my sofa. The blanket he slept under was a rumpled ball on the floor. The sound of a man splashing around in the water closet—and closet was the right word—reached me in the doorway. Kenan emerged just as I was turning to sneak back to the bar to wrap my little goodies at a table. He was bare-chested, damp, and incredibly sexy. The man was lean as a whippet, but that took nothing away from his appeal. Dark curls covered his pecs and ran down into his jeans, jeans that were unbuttoned to show just a peek of bright red briefs.

He yelped in fright. I stumbled backward, my bag of presents in one hand and candy cane paper in another.

"Shit, oh shit, you scared me to death," Kenan huffed, hand coming up to rest on his thumping heart. "Oh shit, okay, fuck." He nervously laughed as I, the creeper, stared at his dark brown nipples as if I'd never seen nipples before. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you until later."

He rushed to pull a wrinkled tee from one of his duffel bags. "I was washing up."

I nearly moaned in loss as he tugged a blue T-shirt over his wet curls. "No, totally on me," I said, thrilled that I had found my voice. "I have some errands to run this morning."

"Cool, I'll be out of here in a second. I just have to hang up my socks to dry." His

head popped out of his shirt, dark eyes finding me still in the doorway. “Are you okay with me handwashing some delicates as my mother used to call them then letting them air dry?”

“Oh man, yeah, please come to my place to use the washer and dryer.”

He thought that over. “I was going to ask about a laundromat in town.”

“No, sorry, nothing at all like that. Next county they have one. We did have one, but it caught on fire and burned to the ground about seven or eight years ago. Faulty wiring or something. A notary bought the land and then built a little house where she works from her office. So if you need something notarized, you’re golden, but if your BVDs need a scrubbing, you’re shit out of luck.”

“Ah, gotcha. If my using your washer and dryer isn’t too much of an imposition...”

“Not at all,” I rushed to assure him. “Feel free to shower too.”

“Oh. That’s...above and beyond, yeah?”

“I mean washing in a sink works and all, but nothing beats a shower. If you want, which you totally do not have to want at all. Sometimes I skip...” I forced my jaw to shut to allow my stupid brain a chance to slow the hell down. “Not important. The offer stands if you want to use my laundry room and my shower. I can cook something that’s not a greasy burger for dinner or we can grab something at the pizza shop on the way home.” He seemed unable to find words. I wished I was suffering from verbal lockjaw instead of word diarrhea. “Right, well, let me get out of here so you can finish dressing.”

“It’s your office.”

“I know, but...”

He walked over to me, in his stocking feet, and pulled me into a hug. I was not expecting it at all, and my spine went ramrod straight for a moment. He smelled good and clean like the green soap in the soap dish. I decided on the spot that I wanted that kind of soap in that dish forever. His curls tickled my cheek and nose, and instead of turning from the tickle, I moved my face into it.

“You’re one of the kindest souls I have ever met,” he drawled quietly, his embrace gentle yet firm. Kind? Me? That was not the general consensus of most people. I closed my eyes, inhaled all those curls, and then felt the brush of his whiskers against mine. My dick was not only awake now, but it was playing reveille to ensure my balls were wide awake. The only thing that saved me from grabbing him was the fact that I had my hands full. My lips, however, were not holding anything, so they were free to find his cheek. Just a fast peck was intended. The kind you give your grandmother in thanks for a fiver in your birthday card. Only his cheek was not a matronly cheek. My lips landed on the corner of his mouth, not his cheek at all, and the jolt was akin to shoving your tongue into a toaster. Not that I had ever done that as a kid on a dare.

His breath quickened. My eyes flew open. We had a long, long moment of stunned staring as he held me flush to him. I didn’t dare shift right or left. My cock was so hard if I moved an inch, he would feel my erection. Probably he already did. Oh shit.

“That was not supposed to be a mouth kiss,” I blurted out, his minty breath warm and moist on my face. “It was supposed to be a kiss like the Europeans do, like to show thanks or to be welcoming. Like a grandma kiss.”

“You kiss your grandmother on the mouth?”

“What?! No, shit, no!”

He began to snicker as his arms fell away. I stayed locked in place, my gaze resting on his jovial brown eyes, utterly lost in the smell, sound, and now feel of him. If I wet my lips, would I taste that almost kiss?

“I was kidding. It’s fine. Hugs and cheek kisses are always welcome.” He moved away to finish dressing his feet, bending over to find his sneakers under the sofa. My sight fell to that skinny, firm ass.

Time to go. “Okay, so yeah, see you downstairs,” I mumbled as I waved the wrapping paper in the general vicinity of downstairs.

I then ran like a jackrabbit with a pack of braying beagles on its ass.

Thankfully, Kenan gave me some time to gather my scattered wits.

I wrapped tiny gifts with quaking hands, mumbling to myself about how dumb this was, how I’d never done this for any part-timer before—not that there had been many since I was ‘difficult and expected too much’ according to the last dude who had worked for exactly four hours before quitting because I’d asked him to engage with the customers a little and pull his damn face away from his phone—and why did they make scotch tape with ends that you couldn’t find. You know, the usual shit someone grumbled about when being festive.

“This is why I don’t do the holidays,” I whispered as I wrapped a stuffed dog in a square piece of candy cane paper with little to no skill or worry about pleasing aesthetics.

When I was done, I stashed all the tiny presents in the cash bag except for the one I was going to place by the menorah in the window. I had no clue if that was how it

was done. Did you place the gifts under the candelabra like it was a Christmas tree? Damn it, I was such a gentile. I was about to Google it when Kenan came down the stairs, hair damp and curly, eyes darting about the bar until he found me with a poorly wrapped gift in my hand.

“Happy second day of Hanukkah!” I shouted. Why did I shout? Not one damn clue. It wasn’t like this was a surprise birthday party.

“Brann, that was not at all necessary,” he said as I climbed down from the chair, gift resting in my palm, as he closed the distance. “I don’t have anything for you.”

“You still have several days. I like fruitcake,” I teased. The lingering tension left his face when I plunked the messily wrapped toy into his hand.

“You’re the only person I know who does,” he replied, weighing the package before opening it with more than a little trepidation. Those dark sinful eyes lit up when he saw the little pooch in the flat beret.

“His hat is flat,” I hurried to say as if he couldn’t see that for himself. “I saw him in the bin and he looked like he was wearing a yarmulke.” Kenan snorted softly. “So I thought he would be a good gift for a nice Jewish man during a special time of the year. If you don’t like him, we can just say he’s a French poodle who has seen some shit.”

“What kind of shit?”

“Oh, uhm, well, he broke up with his boyfriend and so he’s been spending his nights in cabarets, smoking like a fiend, drinking lots of French wine, and reciting slam poetry to other poodles who snap their fingers when his poem concludes.”

Kenan laughed, hard, and I felt a tingle in my toes that climbed up to settle

somewhere in the vicinity of my stone-cold heart.

“I’ve never met a man who has a mind quite like yours,” he said.

“I’m uniquely Brann.”

“Yeah, you are very much uniquely Brann.” And with that, he leaned in to kiss me. Right on the mouth. Not on the cheek or nose or corner of my lips or my ear. Right on the kisser. His lips were warm and soft and lingered for a moment before he went to pull back.

“I like your kisses,” I softly said, sliding an arm around his waist and gently pulling him closer. The stuffed dog was flattened between our chests as we gingerly tasted each other. I lapped at the seam of his lips, eager beyond sanity, and got a tiny taste when he sighed and let me in.

The bar phone rang. Sanity returned. I opened my eyes and found myself swimming in pools of sweet milk chocolate.

“I like your kisses too,” Kenan whispered, then peeled himself out of my arms. I stood there like a marble carving, breathing hard, erect, and unable to do anything other than smile like a freaking idiot as Kenan jogged around the bar to pick up the call. “Someone asking about lunch specials,” he asked, his sight locked with mine again.

“Specials? We have beer and burgers. Those are the specials,” I managed to croak out, furious at whoever had broken our tender moment. Kenan snickered before telling the caller we were having a special on burgers and ale. I had to smile at his way with people.

The front door opened and cold air rushed in with a couple of the mill workers. Shit.

Where had the time gone? I'd been so busy wrapping and kissing Kenan, the grill and deep fryer were still cold.

"Hey, guys," Kenan called, hung up the old wall phone, and began pouring glasses of beer while I stumbled into the kitchen. I pulled a clean apron over my head and sighed at the boner holding out the front of the apron. How the hell was I supposed to cook with that thing? I'd have my pecker in the hot oil if I wasn't careful. The sounds of male laughter filtered in right before someone fed some coins into the jukebox. "Kiss an Angel Good Morning" began to play, and I could only hope that Kenan had been the one to choose that song.

Nothing said goodwill to man than a nice dart league.

If only the jokers who shot darts could stop being total fuckups for ten minutes and take the game seriously. There was a hundred-dollar gift certificate to Pete's Sporting Goods out on old Bender Bean Road plus a trophy. A motherfucking trophy. That I had wanted for the past three years but never won because my team was too busy being tipsy gossip grannies.

Tonight was a case in point. They'd shown up at the appointed time, seven, which gave me time to clean the grill, tidy up the kitchen, and change into our league shirts. Spiffy numbers in bright green with our team name, Alehouse Topsy Arrows, on the back.

Kenan had pulled out his guitar and played during the span of when the kitchen was closed to when the dart throwing began in earnest. The pub was packed, which was highly unusual for dart night. Generally, it was just the dart teams, but tonight everyone and their chinchilla were here. That could only be due to Kenan's draw. God knows I sure was captivated by him, so why wouldn't the rest of Whiteham be?

Mr. Blum showed up around eight, and between rounds of darts, I introduced him to Kenan. The electric menorah was removed from a cloth shopping bag and instantly placed in the window with a small dog in a beret seated under it.

Kenan led Mr. Blum to the bar, where he and my neighbor fell into some really deep conversations while Kenan pulled beers and I tried to focus on darts. It was hard to pay attention to the game when my sight kept traveling to Kenan. If I concentrated hard enough, I could still feel the press of his lips to mine. He'd fit into my arms so well like we were puzzle pieces created solely to snap together.

"Hey!" Someone elbowed me. My gaze whipped from the bar to Tommy, my teammate, who was glowering at me as he held out a handful of darts. "Where the hell is your head tonight, man? The Milk Plant Mavens are kicking our ass!"

I shot the four women on the milk plant team a dark look. They all held up middle fingers then cackled in delight as our third shooter, Mitch, stumbled over a chair, more than a few sheets to the wind, and fell on the dart in his hand. Laura, one of the shooters' wives, was a nurse, so she got Mitch's ass cheek freed from the dart, cleaned up, and bandaged.

"Jesus," I moaned when Mitch limped home. We had to pull a new player in, which happened to be Mr. Blum. The old gent was fair shakes at darts, and while we didn't win, we didn't lose as badly as we generally did. The ten teams finalized scores, drank more beer, and then headed home around ten p.m.

"Why don't you two boys come to my place for dinner tomorrow night?" Mr. Blum asked as he pulled on his winter coat. "It's been a long time since I had a reason to bake some challah bread."

"I..." My sight darted to Kenan. We'd not had any time to talk today, what with customers and beer deliveries and banking runs. Perhaps he was sorry we'd kissed

and was planning to leave town tonight to avoid my pawing him. “I’m not sure what plans Kenan has.”

“I’d love to, thank you, Mr. Blum.”

Mr. Blum beamed like a new headlight. “Excellent! I’ll dig into Betty’s recipes and see what other treats I can come up with. Goodnight, boys.” He shook our hands vigorously and strode out into the cold night. I locked the door behind him. Kenan began picking up chairs. My back stayed on the doorjamb for several seconds as I tried to organize my thoughts.

“So, about earlier,” I said and got a confused look. “The kiss...”

“Oh.” He placed a chair atop a table and folded his arms over his chest. “If you want me to go, I will. That was pretty cheeky of me to force a kiss on my boss. I’d totally understand if you told me to hit the—”

“No!” I rushed to end that train of thought. “No, not at all. I was fully into it. I’m really drawn to you, Kenan, but I need you to know I’m damaged goods. My last boyfriend fucked me over royally, and I have what some might say ‘trust issues.’ I’m cranky, irritable, and tend to prefer spending time with my geese than most people.”

“I’d like to meet your geese. You talk about them like they’re children.” His defensive stance relaxed, his shoulders dropping, his lips twitching at the corners. I’d kissed that corner. Hell, I’d kissed the whole mouth. And I wanted more.

“Children that bite you on the ass on occasion, shit all over the place, and are loud and obnoxious, so, yeah, exactly like kids but with feathers.”

His chuckle warmed me inside. “I’d like to meet them. Maybe I could bring my clothes over to your place tomorrow, take a shower...if that offer is still open?”

“God, yeah, it’s totally open. I have water and soap.”

“Then I should be set.”

I rubbed at my chest, right over where my heart was thundering in a mix of fear and happiness.

“I have bath towels too, just so you know.”

“Good to hear. The bar towels are a little small to dry off with.”

I snickered. Man, I really, really liked this guy. “So the kiss...”

“Was miraculous.”

Wow, that was some high praise. I hoped to experience another miracle or two tomorrow. I’d have to thank Nora for insisting I take one day a week off for good mental health. Spending a wintry Sunday with Kenan was going to be the best thing I’d done for my well-being since I’d traveled to Canada to be the brother of honor. I’d have to thank my sister for that too. Her head would be the size of a half keg when we spoke next.

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Chapter Five

S unday morning was usually a layabout day for me.

After I tended to Fred and Wilma, that was. One thing about having pets was that no matter what, you had to get up and take care of them. Hot, cold, rain. Weather didn't matter, those critters needed attention. But this Sunday I was up at the crack of dawn, unable to fall into a deep sleep due to a severe case of jitters. I'd not had anyone over to my place, other than Mr. Blum, for years. And it showed. So after filling up water dishes and pools, the treat dish with half a head of lettuce—geese love the greens, especially in the winter when they can't get to grass—and their feed bowl with waterfowl pellets mixed with some corn, I scurried back inside, grabbed a cup of coffee, and started cleaning.

It was amazing how much dust accumulated when you never dusted.

Three hours later, my little house was passable. My mother would condemn it, but she wasn't here, so there would be no white glove treatment of the windowsills. I'd dusted, vacuumed, and scrubbed the stove. The kitchen floor had been mopped. After giving my hard work a perusal, I decreed my home fit for a guest. Mostly. A text came in a few minutes later from Kenan asking if I was open for laundry service. I hit him back, then jumped into the shower, found some decent clothes, and even slid a small hoop earring into my lobe. I generally just wore a silver stud, but today felt special.

“Because nothing spells romance like adding fabric softener to someone's underwear,” I muttered at the stupidity of it all. We'd shared a few kisses. That was

it. Sure, they were hot as hell and had left me tossing all night until I'd taken matters into hand, literally, to ensure I got a little rest. I was being stupid. And dumb. "They're synonyms, Brann," I told myself because I was now, it seemed, Mrs. Abrahms, my ninth grade English teacher. Were they synonyms? Fuck, who knew? Everything I learned in high school, I promptly forgot as soon as I got that diploma. Other than the things I learned about sex. Those lessons stuck. Sadly, it was all about het sex, so we didn't get the inside scoop on how to prep for anal sex, which is silly since anal isn't just for us gay guys. Still though, I did know how to roll a condom onto a banana, so thanks to Coach Slattery for that. It would have been fun to see the football coach who called everyone who didn't perform up to his specs a flower petal flouncy boy have to explain to the class about how to rim a guy to get him ready for a good ass pounding.

The doorbell rang, jostling me out of my walk down memory lane. I rushed to the door, took a deep breath, and yanked it open. Kenan stood on my front step, cheeks pink from the cold, two fat duffel bags hanging off his shoulders.

"Good morning," he crowed merrily, then gave me a huge hug with a kiss on the cheek. He seemed very European at times with all the hugging and smooching.

"Come in, please." I stepped aside. He slid inside, stomped the light snow off his sneakers, and placed his bags on the floor. "You can leave your boots there on the tray."

"It snowed overnight, just a little bit. The drive over here was magical. Slippery at places. My car needs better winter tires, but since I'm heading south, I should be okay."

"South, yeah, it's much warmer in the south."

Oh my God, Brann, you enormous pudding head.

“So it is,” he concurred and hung his coat in the small closet by the front door. “I’m not a big fan of the cold but I must say a kiss of Jack Frost on your nose sure makes it feel like Christmas.” He gave my small but tidy home a once over then smiled. “This is a really nice place. It feels like you.”

I glanced at the couch, windows, and dollar store paintings I’d hung on the wall so that Nora would stop telling me I lived in a tomb. The place was pretty bereft of anything bright or personal in any way after the great Paulie Purge a few years ago. I’d thrown out everything he had ever touched, including holiday decorations, clothes, pillows, and the stupid oils he’d picked up at some antique store. He liked to fancy himself a trader of fine things. I just called him a traitor. Period.

“Thanks,” I replied. “Why don’t we get your clothes started?”

“Sounds good.” He hefted his bags from the floor to his shoulder. “I appreciate all that you’ve done for me, Brann. Not everyone would take in a stranger like you have.”

“We all have bad times,” I said as we made our way to the little offshoot hall next to the kitchen. “I’ve been there myself.”

He nodded in silence, filling the washer as I prattled on about whatever appeared in my head as I couldn’t seem to concentrate on anything other than the glorious shape of his nose.

Once the first load was agitating, we made our way to the kitchen and made coffee. I offered him a slice of a coffee cake I’d grabbed at the gas station on the way home last night.

“I love coffee cake,” he said and sighed as he took a forkful. “Unless it’s talking to me.” I paused with my fork resting on my lower lip. He frowned slightly. “Sorry, that

was a bad anecdote to share on a sunny day. I'm sure you don't want to hear about my years lost in K-land talking to baked goods."

"No, hey, we're able to talk about anything. We're friends." I gave him a wobbly smile while praying he didn't ask me anything personal. "The big thing is that you're clean now."

"Yeah, I am." His smile was bright, his lips covered with tiny bits of cinnamon and brown sugar crumbles. "So, when did you buy this house?"

"Mm, it was left to me by my grandfather. It was his hunting camp. I did some minor renovations and moved in about five years ago and opened the alehouse."

"It looks like a camp, rustic and all. I like the open beams. What made you decide to open an alehouse?"

"I like beer."

He chuckled softly. We spent a good hour just sitting in the kitchen as the meager winter sun shone on us, talking about nothing vastly important, feeling each other out in terms of what was discussable and what wasn't. I veered away from any mention of old boyfriends and Kenan kept his addiction days to himself. After coffee and cake, and with the second load of wash chugging, we went outside so he could meet Fred and Wilma. We took more lettuce.

"Oh wow, they're big," he said as we stood on the outside of the small fence, each word steaming in front of us. "Rounder than wild geese. Can they fly?"

"Not really. I mean, they can run and flap, but they're too heavy for flying like wild geese. They've been bred to be meatier," I whispered behind my hand so they wouldn't hear. Kenan sniggered. Fred waddled closer, lowered his head, and hissed.

“Ah, okay, that sounds like the wild geese I’ve met,” he commented, then held out some lettuce to the gander. Wilma eyed the lettuce but stayed where she was, in the sun, atop some warm hay, with her head tucked back under her white wing. “Here, buddy, come get some lettuce.” He waved the wilted leaf. Fred stamped to the fence in the classic goose ‘back off, fucker’ position. Kenan leapt back. The lettuce fell into the pen, where Fred gobbled it down. “Damn, okay, so he’s not at all in the holiday feels. Duly noted.”

“To be fair, he’s never in the holiday feels, be it Christmas or the Fourth of July. Fred is my spirit animal.”

“Goose gotta goose.”

“Exactly.”

He stared at me with a winsome little smile as the cold, cold wind tugged at his curls. “You really do love them.”

“They’re cool. Most people dislike geese, but you just have to understand them. These two aren’t lap sitters. They’re not down to be petted. I’m not sure what happened to them before I rescued them off the Kirby pond two years ago, but whatever someone did to them, they’ve not learned to fully trust yet.”

“Mm, so they’re quite a bit like you.”

I blinked, shook my head, and blew out a soft little sigh of resignation. “Maybe,” I confessed with a shrug. “Just one word of advice: don’t go into their pen. They don’t know you well enough and may act out.”

He slid his cold hand into mine, his long rough fingers gripping my hand tightly. “Not everyone is meant to be petted.”

I glanced down at his hand meshed with mine. I squeezed it, then leaned in to kiss him on his beautiful mouth. His lips were warm. His nose was chilly. No words could come out of me that would cover just how much I loved that he got me. I'd never been a gregarious person, not like Nora, and I'd always preferred to be won over slowly, from a distance. Wary. After the breakup with Paulie, my mistrustful nature grew. What it was about this man I'd not yet figured out. He was not pushy or boastful, perhaps. He knew pain, had lived through hell, and had somehow managed to hold on to his gentleness.

"We should go inside now," I whispered when the kiss ended.

Kenan nodded, his eyes hooded. I led him through the back door, and we kissed again. The washer had spun out, but the dryer was still tumbling. I backed him into the door jamb, hands on his lean hips, and slid my tongue into his mouth. He moaned as his tongue curled around mine.

"I'd like to shower before this maybe goes any further?" he asked tentatively. "Not that I expect anything from you other than the kindness you've—"

I pressed my mouth to his softly, then pulled back so I could gaze into his dark eyes. "Going further sounds really good." My dick was so hard it ached. "But I don't want you to feel that we have to have sex in any way. You're still my helper at the pub until you decide it's time to go south." Saying that hurt more than I would want to admit. "If we sleep together, it's because we both want to, nothing more, nothing less. You're leaving soon and I'm too mean to love."

He reached up to cup my face. "You are the least mean man I have ever met. Show me to your shower."

I was more than happy to oblige. My house was all on one floor, so the bathroom was just across from the main bedroom. I had a second bedroom, much smaller, and it

pretty much just held shit from the alehouse in a sort of limbo storage since the pub's basement was packed with kegs.

After I had the light on, I motioned him in, his hand still in mine, and stood there staring at this beautiful man as if I'd lost all sense, which I kind of had. Something had taken root as I'd stepped into the bathroom, with him following behind. Fear. I was scared. The last time I'd felt this strongly about someone, he'd hurt me so badly I'd spent weeks moving around in a dark, dark fog where I worked and then went home to weep. It had been a bad time. Extremely bad. And I'd sworn I would never allow myself to feel those feelings ever again.

"You look terrified," Kenan whispered. "If you're not ready, please just say so. I can shower all by myself. I've been doing it since I was seven."

He was trying to make light of the tension threatening to overwhelm us. I floundered for what to say, then decided to just kiss him some more. Let our bodies talk as they were. They certainly knew what to say when we didn't. We began peeling off clothes as we tasted each other, his hands roaming over my bared back as I cradled his skinny ass with both hands.

My hand left his tight ass for a mere second to crank on the taps. When we had our briefs off, he took hold of our cocks and led us into the shower. I stubbed my toe on the tub as I tried to step in and over yet not lose the magic of his prick resting next to mine.

"Ouch, damn toes hanging on the end of my foot," I hissed before burrowing my nose into his long throat. His laughter was brief as we stepped under the flow of the water. My hands went back to massaging his glutes, my middle finger teasing the tempting crack of his ass. We melted into the hot water, both of us rutting into his strong grip. My balls tightened up far too soon, and I came embarrassingly fast. Kenan followed, his slim body tensing as he shot all over his hand. I couldn't get enough of him, his

taste, and I licked his shoulder, then back up his neck to his mouth as we rode through our orgasms.

“Good God,” he panted when I finally let the man grab a breath. “That was...”

“Magnificent?”

He chortled gruffly, gave us both a nice long stroke, and then, sadly, released our cocks. I gently spun him to face the showerhead, my fingers tracing wet paths over his skin, my lips starved for more of his flesh. He leaned into me, head back, eyes closed. I feasted on him until we were both hard again. He spun to face me, slid his fingers into my sodden hair, and licked into my mouth. We rutted against each other, wet wanton hands stroking and caressing, his long, lean cock jabbing at my belly. Hips rolled, fingers delved, and when I blew apart for the second time, his finger was deep inside me just as mine was buried in him.

The water was lukewarm now, so we had to rush to get washed. I worked shampoo into his curls, amazed at how long it took to rinse all the bubbles. He washed my back. I lathered his long legs, kissing his knees, which made him giggle like a teen girl. When we left the shower, we toweled off, side-eyeing each other timidly, our gazes wanton and bold even if our thoughts were on the shy side.

I wanted to say something clever, erudite like someone on some fancy romance show would say to the man they’d just frolicked with in the shower, but all I could do was rub his hair with a towel and marvel at the texture of it as it dried.

“I think you have the most beautiful hair,” I whispered. He blushed a little, stole a kiss, and carded his fingers into my wild mass.

“And I think you have beautiful hair too. I love the color and the way it falls over your brow.”

“Mutual hair admiration society is now called to order.” I nipped at his lower lip. The awkwardness was still in the air, along with some lingering steam, but I felt less uptight now. “Lunch sound good?”

“It sounds incredible.”

He padded out to the dryer to pull on clean clothes while I hurried to dress in my bedroom. When my ass was covered, I fluffed up my two pillows and ran my hand down over the comforter. All clean and ready for a new lover to tumble into them. The thought of falling all over each other in the shower—twice—had never entered my mind, so I’d readied the bed. I even went so far as to buy lube and condoms, just in case. Be prepared and all that.

When I met him in the kitchen, he was wearing old jeans with torn knees, an oversized sweatshirt with a yellow monkey on the front, and thick woolen socks.

“You look so cute,” I said as I wrapped my arms around his middle. “I’d like to cook you something really fancy, but my culinary skills stall after burger flipping and deep fryer lowering.”

“If you have eggs, I can whip up a pretty nice omelet.”

I pecked his nose. He purred like a cat napping on a sunny walk. Then we set into making an omelet filled with green pepper, onion, and covered with sharp cheese. I made toast and coffee, and we carried our brunch into the living room where we sat on the sofa, plates on our thighs, silently eating while stealing peeks at each other. Hand to God I felt fourteen all over again. Fourteen without pimples or algebra homework. Could it get any better?

As it turned out, things could get better.

My general vibe of lie around Sunday won out after we were filled with eggs. We curled up on the sofa to watch movies. Now I was a standard action spy guy, but Kenan had other ideas about what made for a lazy winter Sunday flick fest.

He cued up a movie that I'd never seen before, his lovely brown eyes lighting on me as I made faces at the promo on the screen.

"Seriously?" I asked because...seriously?

"It's funny."

He was a cute little wheedler. I gave one of his curls a tug. "This isn't really my favorite genre..."

"Give it a thirty-minute no thank-you watch."

Cute but persistent. "I thought that was a no-thank-you bite."

"Same rule applies. If you dislike it after thirty minutes, we'll watch something else."

I sighed as theatrically as possible, then folded. It was those brown eyes of his.

"Okay. Thirty minutes, then we find John Wick or Jason Bourne."

"Deal."

And that was how I spent the next few hours watching Will Ferrell as an elf. To be fair, it was cute, in places. Over-the-top holiday sweet, enough to give me cavities, but overall, the movie was entertaining. Not even close to the Terminator or Red

series, obviously, but the movie made Kenan laugh aloud throughout. And that alone was worth giving up explosions and bullets for a little while.

The day sped by amid folding wash, kissing, and cuddles on the couch. We tucked Fred and Wilma into their coop for the night to keep them safe from predators. If they slept outside, a random fox or coyote would love a nice fat goose for a late-night snack. They wouldn't get too cold since they were wearing down bodysuits.

When dinner time arrived, I was loathe to leave my sofa, but Mr. Blum had texted earlier to double-check we were coming. We'd said we were, so we had to go. Kenan pulled on a dark blue sweater with some black jeans. I followed suit with a sweater Nora had mailed to me for Christmas a few years back and a newish pair of Levi's.

"Okay, so I know this is going to be a stupid question," I said as we stood by the front door tying our winter boots for the short walk up the lane.

"There are no stupid questions," he replied with a playful wink.

"Oh, trust me, there are," I replied, tugging my laces tight and straightening them.

"Name one."

"Is a sleeping bag a nap sack?"

"Okay, I stand corrected. To be fair, that's pretty funny."

"Thank the internet. My brain stores dumb things that I see online."

"Well, that was a good use of your brain storage." He rose from his crouch, kissed my cheek, and pulled on his coat. "What was your question?"

I tugged a toque onto my head, a gift from Antoine that bore his team colors and logo.

“Okay, so please don’t think I’m stupid, but what is required of me for this dinner at Mr. Blum’s?”

Kenan looked confused. “Uhm, you’re supposed to eat and make small talk?”

“No, I mean...” I pointed to my toque. He shrugged, totally lost. “Do I have to wear a yarmulke?”

“Oh. I was really lost there. No, not unless you wish to wear a kippah during a prayer.”

“Okay, so next dumb question. Is there a box in the closet filled with headwear for those of us who don’t own said proper headgear? Like a lost gloves box, only this is filled with...” His quirking lips answered my question. “Right, okay, moving out the door now.”

“You may want a coat. Also, just so you know, any headwear is acceptable so your toque would be fine. Unless Mr. Blum cheers for a different hockey team, then there may be fists flying.”

He snickered all the way to Mr. Blum’s little house tucked back amid the pines. We walked at a relaxed pace despite the cold, elbows brushing, exchanging the kinds of knowing looks that lovers did. The night was dark, the sky clear, and a thousand stars glittered overhead. That was one thing about living in the boonies that drew stargazers from all over. Little to no light pollution for novice astronomers. There was even a state park close by where star lovers from around the state gathered for viewing parties. So yeah, the skies were just that breathtaking.

The redwood cedar siding, exactly like what covered my house, was somber without the touch of the sun on it, but the warm glow of candlelight from a menorah in the front window cast the dusting of snow on the ground in rich gold. The tiny candles, two of them now, flickered invitingly.

“I see he dug out more than that old electric one,” I commented as we made our way up his neatly shoveled and salted walk.

“Sometimes it’s good to let go of past hurts,” he said offhandedly, or so I felt he wanted it to sound like, but I suspected the comment had been aimed at me.

I let it slide. There was no point in getting into a squabble with the man over something that would not change. I’d been eviscerated on a holiday. I now hated that holiday. Sue me. If my boyfriend had cheated on me on National Chocolate Ice Cream Day, I’d hate chocolate ice cream. Okay, no, that was a lie. I will always love chocolate ice cream. The point stands, though. What made Christmas so special? Other than the whole birth of a baby in a manger in Bethlehem thing. And since I didn’t do religion even that meant little to me. Christmas was a commercialized mess where people overspent to the point of crippling debt to outdo their neighbors and friends. What may have been a charming little holiday ala Jimmy Stewart, angels, and tinkling bells was now a fraudulent corporate sham to bilk people out of—

“Welcome!” Mr. Blum yelled as he opened his front door before we could even knock. “Come in out of the cold. Take your boots off here in the foyer. Yes, good, now give me your coats. I’ll toss them on the guest bed while you make yourselves comfortable.”

Off he toddled, leaving Kenan and me to drink in the small but comfy home. It was a tiny place, also a former hunting camp, but it looked loved, whereas mine looked like a hunting camp with better plumbing. There were pictures of family everywhere, knitted throws on the back of a long sofa, scattered rugs on the softly buffed

hardwood floors, and of course, the menorah which sat proudly on a side table in the front window.

“Nice house,” I commented while Mr. Blum was talking away in another room.

“Very homey,” Kenan added.

Our host arrived then. “Why are you lingering here? The floor is cold. Go into the living room. Come now, we have all kinds of appetizers. It took me some time to go through all of Betty’s recipes, but I found a few.” He waved a hand at a coffee table that was bowing under the platters of food. A few he said. A few dozen was more like it. “It’s been several years since I entertained. Our son is on the other side of the world working for a relief charity, so he rarely visits in person.” A sadness flickered on Mr. Blum’s face before he shook it off.

“This looks great,” I said in earnest. Kenan nodded, wide-eyed, as he perused the dishes.

“Now, of course, Kenan, you know what most of them are, but for our gentile guest let me explain what we have. Obviously, we have challah bread which might still be warm from the oven. There are latkes, kugel which will not be as good as my wife made but should pass with a push, some brisket which I suggest you use the challah to soak up the juices, applesauce, and of course...” He waved at a plate of jelly-filled doughnuts.

“Okay, I know doughnuts,” I chimed up all sorts of proud.

“Also known as sufganiyot,” our host said with a kind smile.

“This all looks amazing, Mr. Blum. It’s been a long time since I had such a traditional meal. Thank you,” Kenan said.

“It’s my pleasure. It’s good to have some young people in this old place. Grab a dish! Serve yourself whatever you wish and don’t be shy. Oh! I forgot wine.”

“Can we help?” Kenan offered and got a snort as a reply. “Guess that means no.”

“Guess so.” I lifted a plate from the stack, then eyeballed all the food spread out in front of us. Soft music played off in another room, just audible out here.

“Here we go!” Mr. Blum appeared, wobbling toward us with three glasses of dark wine in delicate flutes. “This was my wife’s chosen drink for the holidays. She loved Manischewitz, and I prefer moscato, but since these recipes are hers as is the menorah, I thought we could enjoy the grape to honor her.”

We all raised our glasses to Betty and then toted our food to a small square table in the corner. A card table that had been covered with a white cloth. After Mr. Blum was seated with a plate, Kenan and I sat, shook out our napkins, and paused as Mr. Blum lowered his head. We followed suit. The prayer was in Hebrew, so I was lost.

“Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who brings bread from the earth,” Kenan whispered before the amen. Mr. Blum had on a skullcap, Kenan and I did not, and that all seemed cool. Another prayer of thanks for the wine followed.

“Dig in, please. I need to be reaffirmed that it’s all good. I was in that kitchen for three days! No wonder Betty was always so tired.” He chuckled warmly while slicing his brisket.

“We would have gladly helped,” I hurried to say.

“Guests don’t help cook. Betty would haunt me if I had company making the food I served them,” Mr. Blum replied, so I let it drop but still felt bad that this old man had worked so hard to feed us. I resolved to eat lots. It wasn’t hard to fulfill that vow

because everything was absolutely delicious. By the time the meal was over, I was so full I could barely breathe.

“I should have worn jogging pants,” I whispered to Kenan as we helped clear the table. Mr. Blum was looking pretty worn out by then, so he did relent to let us tote platters into the boxy kitchen while he sipped his wine and listened to a best of George Gershwin CD that was filling the little home.

He patted my belly. A flare of lust ignited then sputtered out as the three jelly doughnuts I’d ingested smothered any thoughts of passion until I could digest properly.

“I know what you mean,” he said while we scraped scraps into a plastic bucket that Mr. Blum would toss out to the crows along with some corn. This practice was discouraged by the game commission since it drew bears, but, as Mr. Blum would say, the bears have to eat too. Still, he only did that during the winter when the bears were sleeping since the game warden had given him a firm lecture or twenty. “I’ve only been in Whiteham for a week and my pants are already tight.”

I reached over to rub his flat stomach. “A few pounds looks good on you.”

With his free hand, he cupped the back of my neck. I moved into the kiss willingly, eager to lick the sugar off his lips. He was a heady mix of tastes that made my blood run hot.

“Boys, come out here and look at this,” Mr. Blum called. Kenan moved back an inch, rubbed his nose against mine, and then looked into my eyes.

“This has been the best day I’ve had in years. Thank you, Brann.”

I stole another kiss because how could I not then we moseyed back into the living

room to sit on either side of Mr. Blum on his couch and page through an old scrapbook. We spent a good two hours looking at black and white images of a much younger Mr. and Mrs. Blum and their son David as he grew from infancy through his college years. Several dogs had come and gone throughout the years, and Mr. Blum recalled each dog's name and bad habits.

After several big yawns that our host couldn't hide, Kenan and I made our excuses after a vow that we would reciprocate the dinner date next week by having Mr. Blum over to our place.

Our place. Mr. Blum had called my place our place, as in mine and Kenan's. Both of us fell over each other to correct him.

"Bah, semantics. I know two souls who belong together. Betty and I were the same. The looks that we snuck when we thought no one was watching, the stolen kisses in the kitchen while the old timers sipped sickly sweet grape wine and the tiny ones spun dreidels. I know." He gave his nose a tap and went off to gather our coats from his guest room.

"We'll let him think what he wants," I whispered as we tied our boots in the foyer.

"Sure, yes, that's fine," Kenan concurred with little objection.

"No point in correcting him about it. Back in his day, everyone who kissed probably ended up getting married, so you know..."

"Yeah, totally."

We were still playing along with the darling old dude's antiquated thoughts about love and other outlandish things ten minutes later as we were walking home, hand-in-hand, sharing hot glances under the bright moon and a hundred thousand points of

light. Maybe back in the '60s, a guy could fall in love at first sight. That kind of stuff didn't happen now, and certainly not to a man who had no heart left to give. But hey, if it made Mr. Blum happy who was I to yuck his yum?

When we stepped into my place, which looked barren in comparison to the lovely home we'd just left, I turned to Kenan, his hand warm in mine.

"It's really late. You might as well spend the night here. Then we can ride to work together. Save gas."

"Oh, okay, yeah, that's great. Yeah, totally we should carpool. Lower our carbon footprints and all that."

Yep, totally, that was why I invited him to stay. We were young men looking to help the climate crises however we could. Carpooling. Check. Washing in cold water. Check. Sharing a bed to save on fuel oil use. Check. Spooning your bed partner to ensure your thermostat was set lower. Check.

See. It was nothing silly like Mr. Blum's old-fashioned silliness about love at first sight. We were just a couple of Gen Z eco-warriors doing our part to save the planet.

Chapter Six

Several days later, Kenan and I were still doing our part for the earth.

Us and Greta Thunberg.

On Saturday, December 20, I woke up tangled in not only the covers but in the insanely long, hairy legs of my new lover. Yes, I was calling him my lover. Lover did not mean that we were in love. It meant that we were making love. Simple as that.

Just this morning, to be precise, I found myself lying with him, his legs over mine, his curls tickling my nose, admiring the way his nose worked. It drew air in, then let it out. Amazing. I wiggled to my side, careful not to move around too much if possible. Kenan tended to sleep lightly, so I moved with care until I was facing him. I ran my hand along his side, enjoying the bump of my fingers over his ribs, pleased to see that his gauntness was easing. He was still incredibly slim, lithe, even, but he was slowly losing the pallor he'd worn that night at the airport. My fingertips skimmed down over his hip, lingering in the gulley that ran to his groin, as I worried over the fact that I'd known this man only two weeks, but it felt as if our souls had known each other for eternity. It was terrifying. And so, I shoved that thought away into a little brain box where I pushed other things that scared me, such as little hats on pigs, tax day, and how some people could vote against their own interests.

"Pretty man," I whispered as my hand found his cock, semi-erect already, the tip slick with seed that I ran my thumb through. Kenan moaned, one dark eye opened, and his lips drew up on the side. "You looked horny."

“Mm, really? I thought maybe I looked like I was sleeping,” he teased, pumping his hardening cock into my fist.

“Horny sleeping,” I replied, then stole a hot kiss. He ground into my hold, his dick filling my fist now. I sucked on his tongue, nipped at his lower lip, and then rubbed my cheek against his. Whiskers on whiskers. My cock throbbed with want. “On your back. I want to suck you.”

“Holy shit, you’re bossy,” he said but flopped onto his back with haste.

Yeah, I was bossy. And his boss, which was something that could come back to bite me on the ass. Well, he’d done that last night before he’d slithered up over me, pinned me to the bed then fucked me between the thighs until we both shot our loads. Maybe we shouldn’t be fucking at all. Probably not.

“You’re fired,” I mumbled as I nuzzled his chest, my tongue darting out to flick a tight brown nipple.

“Again?”

“Yep.” I worked my way down his abdomen, tongued his navel, and fell on his fat dick as if I’d not eaten a pound of lasagna last night. Mr. Blum had eaten so many carbs he’d fallen asleep on the sofa before dessert had been served.

“Okay...shit...that’s so good,” Kenan moaned as I tongued the underside of his cockhead. We’d never done oral before. Only frottage until he’d humped the hell out of me in a wild thigh sex session just ten hours ago. “Will you hire me back again?”

I nodded and hummed an affirmative. He’d quit a few times before we’d fucked around, and so I had started firing him and then hiring him back. This way when we had sex, he wasn’t my employee. It was stupid, obviously, but hey no one ever said I

was a genius. If they did, they didn't know me well.

My mother would agree if she ever found out about Kenan's past. I hoped that would never take place. If I kept my distance until Kenan left, then this whole crazy affair would just be a past remembrance. It would all fade into memory like the second grade play when I threw up inside my tree costume. Guess that memory wasn't as faded as I assumed it had been.

Somewhere, off in another galaxy, a cell phone alarm went off. I cursed around a mouthful of cock, trying to focus on the task at hand, but Kenan seemed to be losing concentration.

"Ugh, sorry, I can't with that beeping," he grumbled and eased his dick out from between my lips before leaving the bed to find the phone. I lay there on my belly, dick hard, face in the sheets, maligning Alexander Graham Bell for inventing the telephone. Eventually, the alarm quieted, so I flopped to my back, prick standing at attention, waiting.

After five minutes, my cock was soft, but my curiosity was piqued. Had Kenan forgotten about me? Surely not. Growing concerned that he had slipped and hit his head, I pulled on my jogging pants from where they'd been tossed last night, found a sweatshirt, and pattered to the kitchen to find no one. A cup of coffee had been prepped and was sitting in the maker, so I swiped it just as I heard someone outside shouting. I rushed to the small window over the sink, went to my toes, and gazed out at Kenan sitting on top of the goose coop, legs tucked into his chest, bellowing my name.

"Poor kindhearted fool," I lamented, took a sip of coffee, and went to save my lover from Fred. Slogging out into the bitter cold with sloppy boots and my chore coat, I made my way to the goose pen. Kenan, bless him, was curled into the tightest ball he could curl into, his dark eyes pinned on the gander trying to find some flesh to pinch.

“Morning!” I cheerily called as I reached the white picket fence.

“Call him off!” Kenan shouted, his roar sending a couple of fat mourning doves roosted nearby to wing. “He tried to pull my pecker off!”

“Fred, have we not discussed penis attacks?” I asked the irate gander. Wilma waddled over to see if I had any goose treats as her partner continued to terrorize the man sharing my bed.

“I came out to give them some warm water and a funky cucumber from the vegetable bin and he chased me up here. Can you please call him off?”

“What was one of the first things I told you about these two grumpy shitbirds?” I asked as I entered the enclosure, Wilma already tugging on the hem of my coat. I bent down to pick up the rubbery cuke from the frosty ground. Kenan said some rather biting things about me and my geese as I worked on trying to snap the cucumber in half. “No, I did not tell you that the birds were assholes and so was I, although that is true.”

“Fine, you said not to come into the pen because they don’t know me well,” Kenan recited verbatim. “I thought I would be nice to them and they’d learn to like me faster.”

“Yeah, that’s not how goose minds work, or at least not how Fred’s mind works. I’ll get the pool broken out. That should lure him away from your pecker, although, to be honest, I rather like nibbling on your cock as well.”

Fred made a lunge at Kenan’s dangling leg. “Ah shit! That goose needs to be our holiday dinner!” Kenan nearly lost his boot as he scrambled to get his foot back under his buttocks.

“Now that’s just not in the holiday spirit at all,” I chided while reaching over the fence for the old axe. Winter chores were so much fun. Not.

“Neither are you or those winged terrors!”

“I see the truth in your words.”

Once the pool was free of ice and was being filled, Fred lost interest in Kenan. But just. When the gander turned to get a drink, Kenan leapt off the roof of the coop and executed a superhero landing that would have been epic had his boot not hit a patch of frozen goose shit. He went to his ass with a grunt. Fred spun. I shouted. Kenan dove/vaulted over the fence, then spun after the landing, and gave my bird the bird.

“You realize Fred has no idea what that middle finger means, right?” I asked before heading off to start filling buckets at the outside hydrant behind the pen.

“Oh he knows,” Kenan stated.

Needless to say, we never returned to our aborted blowjob. We showered, ate, and left for the alehouse together. The lunch hour was slow that day, which suited me as I had plans to close around two so we could get home and start working on our gingerbread house for the contest tomorrow night.

A few of the regulars mumbled a bit when I made last call at two in the afternoon.

“Go home and be with your wives,” I told a small group of guys watching SportsCenter. “Don’t you all have kids? Go spend some time with the little darlings.”

Kenan was snickering beside me, his hands in hot soapy water, washing beer mugs as

I bantered with the customers.

“You’re good with your clients,” Kenan said as bubbles climbed up his forearms.

“Yeah, telling them to go the hell home is Customer Relationship Goals 101.”

That made him laugh softly. “They know you’re only kidding.”

“Am I?” I asked, shooting him a dubious glance before ringing out a couple who had stopped by after doing some last-minute shopping in town.

“Yes, you are. I know you love all of them.”

“You’re delusional,” I countered and made my way into the kitchen to clean the grill, which was always a fun job. I was scrubbing away when Kenan jogged through the kitchen. “Problem?”

“Nope, the last table just left, so I thought I’d tap those two empties now.”

“Ah, good thinking. The mill is letting out early so they’ll be lined up outside for the Penn State game.” College football was big around here. We didn’t have any pro teams close enough to drive to the games. Buffalo maybe, but who the hell wants to drive into Buffalo in the winter? You might get snowed in and not be able to return home until Flag Day. “Do you need help?”

He flexed his arms. “I’m a beast,” he tossed out before thundering down into the basement.

I chuckled to myself before returning to my scrubbing. Once I had the grill cleansed and rinsed, I did a fast tidy of the sandwich prep table and was just doing a fast skim of the deep fryer to remove bits of coating and French fry when Kenan returned.

“I hate these little burned bits floating in the oil,” I said as he shifted around behind me. “They just dirty up the oil that much faster and cleaning out the fryer is a shitty job that I hope to dump on you since you’re the help.”

Smirking, I glanced over my shoulder. He stood in the doorway, arms filled with boxes from the basement, looking like he’d just been caught tiptoeing out of the Louvre with the Mona Lisa under his arm. The smile fell from my face instantly.

“What are you doing with those?” I snapped. He gently placed them on the floor, wiped his cold, dusty hands on his Whiteham Alehouse apron, and set his jaw. Not going to lie, he looked damn hot when he jerked that whiskery chin up a notch.

“I thought we could add a few decorations to the bar. We have the menorah up in the window on the left of the door, but the other window is barren. I thought we could add a small tree to that one, sort of saying that the ownership embraces celebrations of all faiths.”

I tossed the burned bits back into the fryer, then chucked the metal skimmer into the metal sink. It hit with a loud clang.

“I don’t do decorations,” I flatly stated.

“You did the menorah.”

“That was only to shove a fist up Al’s ass,” I countered with so much acid it was a wonder my tongue didn’t smoke after the words had left it.

“Oh, I see. So you don’t support the Jewish community at all. You were just playing along to be a dick to someone. That fits.”

I didn’t know if I should be mad or hurt. I went with mad since hurt would mean I

was feeling things that a man with no heart should feel. And that would be bad. Scary bad.

“Don’t try to make me sound like some kind of bigot. You know it was placed in the window as a way to show that there are other religions celebrating something big this time of year other than the Christians. If we start filling every nook and cranny with holiday shit, we’ll have—”

“We’ll have what, Brann? A bar filled with some light and joy? Oh right, yes, God forbid we show any kind of brightness or love to the world lest some of that seep into that chunk of calcified carbon resting in your chest!”

I opened my mouth for a counterattack when Al, of all fucking people, pushed through the swinging door decked out in a green suit with a red tie. My retinas went into anaphylactic shock and tried to black out my brain so it wouldn’t have to suffer.

“Oh, here you boys are!” Al said, giving the sandwich station a loving look. I shot Kenan a dark glower that was supposed to be about him not locking the front door but was taken in some other way I assumed since I got a heated glare in return. “That turkey looks delicious. Mind if I have a few slices just to tide me over until Glory runs home to make our lunch and bring it over?”

“Sure, whatever.” I motioned at the covered containers of lunch meat, tomato, lettuce, onions, and pickles. “Buns are underneath. What did you want, Al? We’re closed early.”

“Oh, sorry, the front door was open.”

I looked over at Kenan. His mouth was a papercut. “I wanted to double-check that you two are coming to the party and gingerbread bake-off tomorrow night?”

His sight stayed locked on the sandwich he was making. “I plan to be there. I can’t speak for Kenan. He could very well be in Tallahassee by then.”

Kenan’s chin jutted up an inch higher. Fire danced in those brown eyes of his. I suspected I was about to see the angry side of the man that, to this point, had been nothing but loving and sweet. And to be honest, after that Tallahassee comment, I kind of deserved whatever hellfire he rained down on me. Fuck, I was a petty dick when I was cornered.

“We all hope Kenan will be here!” Al said and slathered enough mayo for three sandwiches on his cold hamburger bun. “I wanted to see if you’d be willing to perform something Jewish at the party?”

Al glanced at Kenan standing by the boxes.

“Something like a bris?” Kenan asked with such innocence, I nearly snorted in amusement.

“That would be lovely!” Al beamed, then slapped his monster sandwich together. “A few songs about your oil days. Oh! Glory and I love that one that the boy on Saturday Night Live did a few years ago.” Kenan blinked. I rolled my eyes, for I knew what was coming. “You know the one that he sings about Bowzer from Sha Na Na and the Fonz?”

“Jesus Christ,” I huffed.

“No, I don’t recall him mentioning our Lord in that Hanukkah song,” Al commented. I slammed the lid down on the sandwich station. Al startled. A slice of tomato fell from his sandwich to his shirt. “Well damn. That will stain. I best get back so Glory can scrub that out. Thanks for the bite. See you both at the firehall tomorrow night,” Al bellowed and hightailed it back to the hardware store without offering to pay...the

cheapskate.

I stalked out after Al, locking the front door with sharp twists of my wrists, then taking a moment to rest my brow on the cold wood.

I heard the floor creaking as it does by the bar. I sucked it up, straightened, and turned to look at Kenan holding a small, bent to fuck fake tree. The poor thing looked like someone had wadded it up into a ball, of sorts, and then flung it into a box, which was exactly what had happened.

“Paulie bought that tree for the bar,” I said with zero emotion. That was the only way I could get through trying to explain why I was such a fucking asshole loser. “It used to sit at the end of the bar, back when I thought he loved me. Turned out he loved being drilled by someone else more than me.”

Kenan nodded, not angrily actually, but in something that was probably resignation. He plunked the abused tree on the bar and then went back into the kitchen for the other boxes. One by one, he carried them into the pub, placed them on the table nearest the old jukebox, and stood there staring at me. Willing me to say more, perhaps?

“I could drive home for about sixty bucks if I avoid toll roads,” he informed me, his voice cracking slightly, his twang a bit thicker.

“Oh.” There was a shiny bit of dialog if ever I heard it.

“I made sixty-two bucks the first night I sang here. So far, I’ve made close to four hundred dollars between tips and my wages.”

“Okay.” I began to rock side to side, just a little as if I could prepare myself for whatever slings and arrows Kenan would launch at me. “I’m glad.”

He closed his eyes, thick dark lashes lying on his cheeks before he lifted them to stare at me. “I’m saying all that because if I wanted to be anywhere else, I would be. I have enough money. I just don’t want to be down south.”

“Yet.” Confusion knitted his eyebrows. “You’re not down south yet , but you will be someday. And that’s why the decorations stay in the boxes because it’s easier to leave that kind of shit in the basement in a damp egg box than bring them out for someone to shred.”

Amazingly, or shockingly, or maybe both, Kenan didn’t hurl a verbal spear at me. Paulie would have. Any time I expressed any kind of self-doubt about myself or our relationship, he’d fire back with both barrels.

“Okay, that was a lot to unpack. Why don’t we just sit and talk this out?” Kenan moved to the table next to the one heaped with ugly memories of an ugly holiday. He pulled out a chair, patted the seat, and planted his tempting ass in another chair. Then he sat there, watching me expectantly.

“This feels a lot like being called into the vice principal’s office,” I confessed, shuffling over, shoulders slumped, to plunk myself down onto the padded chair. My back was to the jukebox. I wished some music was playing. Anything really at this point. Hell, I’d take opera right now. Any sort of something to distract me from the way Kenan was handling this.

“I hope not.” He sat forward, stretched his arms over the table, and laid his hands out, palms up. “I’m not going to yell at you. I shouldn’t have done so before.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I’m a champion ballbuster. My mother will tell you all about my attitude. She’d scream at me for hours when I was a kid.”

“I’m beginning to see a pattern of how others interact with you,” he said, wiggling his

fingers. I resolutely linked my hands with his. The touch of warm skin to clammy skin—mine being the moist flesh—helped to ease my shoulders down from my ears an inch or two. “But that’s a discussion for another day. Tonight, I wanted to just let you know that whatever happened with Paulie wasn’t on you.” I rolled my eyes. “It wasn’t. And no matter what he said to you or how he tried to spin it that you were this, that, of the other which led to his infidelity is bullshit. He cheated on you. End of. If he was that terribly unhappy, he could have broken up with you and found a new guy. Right?”

“Sure, yeah, I mean yeah, true.” I studied our fingers as I spoke. He squeezed my hands. “I hate that he did that to me.” My sight lingered on the callouses on his fingertips. I loved his rough skin on my tender bits. It was the only part of Kenan that was abrasive. The only part that I had discovered so far, anyway. Probably there were components of the man that were gritty and unpleasant. We all had those grating aspects.

“I hate that he did that too. But—and this is a big but—you need to try to let go.” I must have made a face because he gave me a tender smile, rich in understanding. “I know. I know it’s hard. One of the many things we learn in rehab is to let go of the past.” His dark eyes darted to the boxes sitting atop a table and reeking of mouse pee. I’d not noticed that smell before, but it was much warmer up here than in the cellar. “There’s some merit in rehashing the past, to a point. Looking back, we can see where we made mistakes and hopefully learn from them. However, when we get stuck in the past and can’t move on because we’re lost on the what-ifs, then we’re in trouble. Sometimes we get mired down in our previous mistakes to the point that it becomes obsessive.”

“I’m not obsessing over Paulie,” I barked and went to break our connection.

He held tight. “I didn’t say you were obsessing over him. You’re just bogged down in what he did, which was super shitty, make no mistake about that, and you’re caught

in this endless cycle of rumination over things that serve no benefit at all.”

I brought my sight from our linked fingers to his face. He was so calm, so tender, so understanding.

“I don’t know how not to hate him and this time of year,” I confessed on a shaky exhalation.

“Admitting that is a big step.” He brought my hands to his lips, kissed my knuckles, and gave me a loving look that made my eyes dewy. “Trust me, some of us take months to be able to acknowledge that we’re unsure of how to take a step forward.”

“You?”

He nodded. “Took me a few rounds of rehab to finally have it take hold. The first two times I served my time, and that was how I looked at it. Like I was incarcerated. Soon as I got out, I was right back to using. The third time was the charm as they say.” I smiled a wobbly smile. I could sit and listen to him talk forever. “I went in on my own, my life in shambles, desperate to find a clean road to a happier Kenan. I lost a lot.”

“I wish I could help you get back what you lost.”

“You are, sugar.”

Sugar. Oh my gods and hot griddlecakes. He called me sugar in that slow southern way that made me feel like melted butter inside. I never had a man use an endearment when speaking to me before. Paulie usually called me...well, that’s not important. Paulie is in the past. Begone, vile shitter.

“I’m sorry for being such a jerk. I just seem to revert to that when I get pressed,” I

said, holding onto his long fingers for dear life now. “I mean, I’m always a jerk—”

“No, not a jerk. Just adorably grinchy at times, and I like that about you. People like that. Your friends and customers enjoy how itchy you are.”

“Itchy. Super. So I’m poison ivy.”

“The cute kind.”

“Is there a cute kind of poison ivy?”

He didn’t reply. Smart man. He continued to hold on to my hands as the heater clicked on. Warm air wafted down over us, carrying the smell of rodent urine.

“Those boxes really stink,” I announced and got a nod of his curls. I stared at them for a long, long moment, and then glanced at Kenan. “Will you help me carry them to the dumpster?”

“Of course.”

I rose from my seat and leaned over the table to steal a kiss. His gaze softened as our lips met.

“Thank you for being so wonderfully you,” I whispered over freshly kissed lips.

“I’m far from wonderful. I’m just a man, like you, who’s trying to make it in this world.”

“I’m so glad you made it into my life.”

Our lips met once more before the smell of mice pee drove us to stop necking. Rising

from my chair, I grabbed a couple of boxes, Kenan did the same, and we marched out to the dumpster, the cold so brittle that it made your head ache when you sucked it into your sinuses.

Within two minutes, every box of decorations was in the trash. I stood there studying the boxes, my nose hairs frozen, for a moment or two. Kenan disappeared, then reappeared with the mangled little tree in his hand. He passed it to me.

“We’ll get a new one for the window. But only a small one, and only a tree.” I announced to the alleyway. The cold wind carried my declaration off into the darkness. “And no flashing lights. I hate flashing lights.”

“We can put tiny gifts under it for the customers,” he suggested as he handed me the last bit of holiday flair my ex had purchased.

“Let’s not get carried away. If I buy them gifts, they’ll think I like them, and they’ll never go the hell home.” I slam-dunked the tree into the dumpster ala Vince Carter’s reverse 360 windmill dunk, only not with a windmill or any of the skills Carter possesses. Basically, it was just a mediocre slam dunk, but it did feel good.

“We’d not want that.” He linked his arms around me from behind, kissing under my ear, as I gave the boxes one last look before slamming the lid on them. And hopefully that part of my past. I leaned back into his arms, letting my head loll onto his shoulder, and enjoyed the stars above until my nose was cold enough to snap off, which took about thirty seconds.

“Let’s get the place cleaned up and get home. We have gingerbread construction awaiting.” I turned in his arms, cupped his face, and took a long, sweet taste of his mouth. “Thank you for being so...Kenan.”

“I can only be me. And you can only be you. We just have to be ourselves and live

our lives as we want.”

“Is that something you learned in rehab?”

“Nope, from a country song about following your arrow. Kacey Musgraves. Maybe we can get it on the jukebox.”

He pressed a kiss to my temple.

I nodded and burrowed my nose into his shoulder. If Kenan asked for the moon, I’d scale the tallest ladder to try to fetch it out of the heavens for him.

Okay, so in our defense, no one told us how freaking hard it was to make a gingerbread house from scratch.

It had seemed easy. I mean, we watched a video on YouTube a few nights ago in bed. Sure, it involved baking and icing. That had seemed simple.

It was not. Neither the baking nor the icing. When we were ready to assemble our house, a creation of an epic endeavor called Graceland—yes, that Graceland—we were already knee-deep in a biblical mess that would require a true holiday miracle to ever clean up.

“Okay, so we have to cut the gingerbread into house parts.” Kenan looked up from the tins of slightly overbaked gingerbread sitting all over the house, cooling. “Now looking at the front porch of Graceland, we’re going to need four pillars. How do you make round pillars out of flat gingerbread?” I shrugged. He frowned. “You have to stop eating the walls, sugar.”

“Mm, I love it when you call me sugar,” I admitted around a mouthful of gingerbread.

“Well, you’re as sweet as this icing,” he replied with a little wink that went right to my balls. Swallowing my ill-gotten gains, I wiggled up behind him, flattened my gummy hands over his apron, and pushed my rapidly swelling cock into his ass. “Brann, this is not the time or place for sexual shenanigans. This reproduction of the King’s home will never be ready if we get off track.” I tasted his earlobe in reply. “Damn it,” he huffed as if he were put off, but his backside slowly started to move against my dick. I’d learned that he had a real love of having his earlobes sucked. The harder and sloppier the better. I ran my tongue over the small hoops.

“You’re one sexy baker,” I whispered into his ear, my sight moving downward to watch what he was doing with his hands. He shuddered, his grip on the icing bag tightening. White frosting oozed out of the tip and over his fingers. “Oh hell, now that is suggestive.”

I spun him to face me, grabbed his wrist, and lifted his icing-coated fingers to my mouth. He fed me his digits, one at a time. His gaze was hot and locked on my mouth as I tongued and lapped off all the sugary goodness.

“If I coat my dick with this here icing, will you clean that off?” he asked. As if there was any other reply other than ‘Hell yes!’ would exit my mouth, I went to my knees so fast it hurt. But the pain was nothing. I had his apron pushed aside and his prick freed from his jeans before you could say run, run as fast as you can. I enjoyed the sight of his leaking cock for a mere second before lapping up the slick coating from the fat head. “Bring on that sugar,” I said, my sight darting up to meet his. Those dark eyes glowed as he brought the icing bag around, then slowly, carefully, drew a shaky line of pure white frosting from where my fist rested around the base all the way to the tip. “Mm, I love sweets.”

“Lick it off slowly,” he growled so low it resonated in my gut. Determined to give him what he asked for, I did just that, running my tongue down and then up, smearing the sweetness all over his shaft then sucking it off. I pulled off. He added more. Some dribbled to the floor from the tip of the bag. We’d get that later. Right now, I needed more Kenan dick. I sucked hard now, moaning as ivory frosting coated my lips and chin. He began moving his hips, adding more icing every time I rested his cockhead on my lower lip. His fingers were covered when they carded into my hair and I couldn’t have cared less. I could feel the tension in his thigh as I rested one hand on his leg, so I eased back, slowed down things, and used a huge dollop he placed on my tongue on his balls, making sure I sucked each orb into my mouth. Icing was everywhere. He rocked back to yank his balls free, gasping when one popped out.

“I’m too close,” he panted, using his fisted hand in my hair to lead me to my feet. I kissed him hungrily when I was standing. “I want you to fuck me.”

Oh. Oh shit, that was unexpected. Hot as hell, but unexpected.

“Okay, yeah, I’m so down for that. Uhm...” He looked confused at my stalling. “It’s just we never had that awkward talk. You know? About status and all that.”

“Oh, that awkward talk. I’ve kind of been working on myself, which required some small amount of celibacy.”

“Small amount?”

“Total. The counselors in rehab strongly suggested that we not dive into a relationship or even casual sex as that can lead from one kind of addictive behavior, ketamine in my case, to using sex as a substitute for insert your drug of choice here.”

“Wow, impressive.” He shrugged it off, but I knew how hard it was to go without. “I’m not on anything, but I’ve not been with anyone since He Who Ruined

Christmas. I'm cool with wearing a condom until we can both get tested."

"Sounds good to me. Now can we fuck?"

"Yes, shit yes," I huffed, turned him around, and then placed a hand on his back. He laid over the pans of gingerbread, the bowls of candy we'd bought for decoration tipped, spilling tiny red cinnamon balls over the counter and floor.

We'd get them later too.

I tugged his pants free, easing one socked foot and then the other out of his jeans before whipping them to some far corner. Hell, maybe they landed in the sink.

We'd get them later as well.

I bent down to kiss his spine as my hands fondled his tight ass cheeks, spreading them wide as I slid my leg between his to widen his stance.

"Lick this off my ass," he said, reaching back to offer me the icing bag. I jumped on that brilliant idea, easing back to draw a fat line from between his shoulder blades down to the crack of his ass. I threw the bag onto the counter. The bowl of eggs lost an egg. It hit the floor with a sad little wet smack.

Yep, we'd get that later too.

I went to licking, following the line of his spine, my tongue rolling over the bumps of his vertebrae until I was on one knee, my nose burrowing between his cheeks. I tongued my way to his hole, placed my hands on each buttock, and spread him wide. Kenan made a low, guttural sound that shot me like a rocket to the brink of orgasm. My cock was throbbing in my jeans, but it was going to have to give me time to get Kenan ready. I toyed with the furled opening with the tip of my tongue and then used

my icing-covered fingers to rub frosting over his hole. He cried out when I buried my tongue in him. Dishes rattled, pots clattered to the floor, and something that sounded like the tin filled with crushed candy canes fell off the counter with a crash.

Later. We'd get that later as well.

He pushed his ass back on my tongue, and I feasted.

I only stopped when my balls drew up. With a soft peck to his pucker, I got to my feet, unzipped my pants, and pulled out my dick. I fumbled in the pocket of my pants, now around my ankles, to find my wallet and a condom, which I rolled on with all due speed.

"Hand me the butter," I said in a voice that sounded more like Animal from the Muppets than my own.

"Hurry...get inside me...I'm so fucking close," Kenan begged, sweeping his arms to the side to grab tight to the edge of the counter. The dish was a slippery mess of melted butter, but I made it work. I just poured the butter over my cock while Kenan rotated his hips in the most suggestive way I had ever seen in my entire life.

"Hold still," I panted, slid a finger into him to add some slick, and then rubbed the head of my cock on his little hole. "Fuck, this is so..." I moved into him inch by inch, the feeling of his body tightening then relaxing to let me glide all the way in so amazing I forgot to finish my sentence. And many others that followed. "Shit, that's...so tight and...yeah tighten...shit...damn it...Kenan baby."

He met me thrust for thrust, arching back seeking more. The sound of skin smacking skin filled the kitchen. His cries grew louder, faster, and then he came without me touching him at all. His channel constricted around my dick. I drove in hard, pushing him over and into a baking pan that tipped over the side and hit the floor.

We'd get that one later too.

Right now, I was too busy pumping a load into the condom as I held his lean hips in place. A fire raced out from the base of my spine, turning the kitchen wobbly as I tried not to buckle. I wanted him to ride out his orgasm buried on my dick. And he did. Each glorious shiver of his release was felt by my cock.

"Holy hell," I gasped when I could find my breath. I leaned down to rest my belly on his back. He turned his head. I licked awkwardly into his mouth, gripping him tightly as my balls emptied. "If anyone had told me...baking was this much fun...I would have shown up for all...those family sciences classes...in high school."

"Same here," he replied with a breathy chuckle. I kissed the corner of his mouth, his cheek, and his ear. I kissed his neck, his shoulder, and the nape of his neck. "Mm, damn, I love the afterglow of a good pounding." I nipped at his earlobe, catching one of the hoops with my teeth and gently tugging it. "Know what I don't like?" Uh-oh. Had I fucked him improperly? Shit. Shit. Shit. "Having to clean spunk off the front of the drawers."

Oh. Phew. Okay. Yeah, that sucked. I looked around at the havoc our passion had wrought. Fuck. We had a major mess. And no gingerbread house was built.

"We'll get that later. Are you okay?"

"Mm-hmm. We should bake more often."

Maybe we would. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe we would bake every damn day .

Until he left, which was something I was refusing to think about. Guess I was just living day by day, no dwelling in the past and no stewing over the future. He was here now. So I'd have to enjoy each moment to its fullest as I blithely skipped

through life. La-de-da. Look at Brann being chill. Yeah, I wasn't buying it either.

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Chapter Seven

“So exactly what is it supposed to represent, dear?”

I shot Kenan a look. The fire hall was packed with people and gingerbread artwork. Mrs. Prickett, the head of the Whiteham Christmas Fete Committee and co-chair of the gingerbread bake-off, was about a hundred years old, thin as a toothpick, and wearing a tinsel dress. She was also greatly befuddled over our, our as in Kenan and Brann's, entry. Our. A couple. Sort of. Maybe. Possibly. Ugh. I did not do uncertainty well.

“Well, it's a nightmare scene from Silent Hill,” I tossed out like spaghetti at the wall in hopes my explanation would stick. Mrs. Prickett blinked up at me through her thick bifocals. “Silent Hill is a scary movie.” I thought of delving into Pyramid Head and how the monster represents the protagonist's guilt about murdering his wife, but this ho-ho-ho celebration hardly seemed the place. I mean, there were elves all over. And Mrs. Prickett did not seem to be the one to discuss such dark and possibly masochistic things with. She was older than dirt and wearing a tinsel dress.

“Oh, that's interesting,” she replied with a weak smile as Kenan placed our terrifying attempt at recreating Graceland on a long folding table. The entry beside ours was Santa's workshop, complete with little gumdrop reindeer and a fat marshmallow Santa. Fucking Wanda Wilkes. She always had to go that extra mile, or gumdrop Rudolph as it was. Good thing I didn't own a dog because she sold the licenses at the courthouse, and I would be damned if I'd pay eight bucks to someone who was such a gingerbread exhibitionist. I could be cranky and spiteful. Ask anyone in town. They'd all agree.

“It was supposed to be Graceland,” Kenan politely tried to clarify, but that only made it worse. There was no resemblance to that grand estate that Elvis called home. Although the tiny blue shoes—globes of dough that we’d spray painted blue—that we had placed on the uneven front steps gave it a nice touch we had felt. Those little sapphire loafers were the only thing that could tie this monstrosity to the King. “But it ended up looking like the Addams Family house.”

“Oh, I remember that show. Such a lovely couple. Just like you two!” Mrs. Prickett beamed up at us. I stammered.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Kenan said and got a little pat on his arm from one of the four gingerbread judges before she rushed off to find a priest to bless the horror that was our bake-off entry.

“You don’t have to say that we’re a couple,” I quickly said as a group of unruly urchins raced past with bags of apples. Probably for the apple dunking booth the local Presbyterian church was manning under the American flag on the wall.

“Do you not want people to know that we’re together? If not, I’m afraid that ship has sailed, sugar.” He nudged me in the side and swept his hand outward. Every eye in the fire hall was on us. Eighty percent were smiling, and 20 percent were scowling. “I think they know where I’ve been sleeping and it ain’t in your office.”

“Swell.” I shot a glower at all the gawkers. Most looked away. Paula, another courthouse worker and a regular at the alehouse, stared hard at Kenan. When she noticed me looking at her, she smiled and then averted her gaze. “Why does that woman gawk at you all the time?”

“Maybe she’s never seen such a stunning Jew before?”

“Yeah, that tracks. Most in this town have probably never laid eyes on a Jew in real

life.”

“Well Al knows about Adam Sandler so there’s that.”

And as it so often happens when you mention the devil who pops up?

“Ah, there’s the man who’s heading the diversity entertainment corps tonight!” Al bellowed as he charged at us. He was wearing a dark green Christmas camo suit. Kenan’s brown eyes flared. “You’ll be pleased to know that not only will we be having a Jewish representative, but we also invited Fred Ottoman from the Lutheran Church out on Lipp Road near the junction.” Al was so proud. He actually tugged on the lapels of his ugly suit as he rose to his toes. “Yes, sir, we’ve opened the doors of religious acceptance here in Whiteham. You’re on in half an hour right after Mabel and Mauve Krester perform “Jingle Bell Rock” on their musical saws. Everyone is quite excited about them being here! They were headliners at the fair last year. Not everyone can boast about playing in the beef barn to over a hundred dedicated saw enthusiasts!”

Kenan and I watched Al swagger off into the crowd. He turned to me.

“The man does realize that Lutherans are Christians so...”

“Yeah, no, he probably doesn’t, but it’s progress of a sort.” I gave his pinkie finger a tug with my pinkie finger. “Do you want a dipped apple?”

“Nope, I’ll hold off until after I perform. Don’t want to sing with caramel and nuts in my teeth.” We strolled around the hall, pinkie holding pinkie, and chatted with folks. Well, Kenan did most of the chatting. I just nodded and grunted. I wasn’t a small talk sort of man. But Kenan seemed to be, so I let him chit-chat until the Krester sisters were announced. Kenan slipped out the side door to get his guitar as the elderly spinster twins took seats in front of a tall, stately evergreen in the corner of the hall

and pulled out their saws.

“Nice to see you out and about,” Paula said as she sidled up to me with a steaming cup of mulled cider in her hands. “I’m working the cider stand and thought I’d bring you a drink. Just to shake things up.”

“That’s very nice of you,” I confessed, took the cider and blew over it before sipping. The rich taste of apples, cinnamon, cloves, and allspice tingled on my tongue. “I’m not generally a fan of these kinds of gatherings.” Two young boys, around ten, barreled into my back. Cider sloshed to the rim of my cup but thankfully, not over the top. The kids never looked back as I mumbled about rugrats under my breath.

“No, I suppose not, but still it’s nice to see you here. Kenan is working wonders with you.” She smiled at me as if I was supposed to be impressed or touched or...I had no clue. “Speaking of Kenan...”

She had to stop talking as the hall was filled with the alien sounds of musical saws. I sipped my cider as the twins played four songs and then left after taking several bows. When I glanced down to speak to Paula, she was gone. Huh. Had she even said goodbye? I looked around and found her at the mulled cider booth ladling hot drinks and collecting cash for the fire company. Shrugging, I moved closer to the tree, eyeing the glass balls with worry. Whoever thought that glass balls would survive with so many rambunctious ruffians dashing around obviously was not accustomed to kids. Not that I was either. What I knew about kids was nominal. Although now that I was going to be an uncle next summer, I had better brush up on uncle stuff, whatever that entailed. Probably buying toys and dandling my niece/nephew. Was there a proper dandle technique? Man, I had some big reading online to do.

Baby thoughts shifted to handsome man thoughts when Kenan wiggled through the crowd now packed in around the Christmas tree. I smiled widely at him as his dark sight found me to the left of his stool.

“Evening, everyone,” Kenan called to the crowd. “I’m Kenan Gardet, and I play and sing a little. Thanks to Al for inviting me to perform a few songs for you tonight. I hope you enjoy the tunes I’ve chosen.”

Everyone clapped politely, some with more exuberance than others. Many of my customers were here, and they knew firsthand how fucking talented Kenan was. The others would find out momentarily. I smiled at Glory, Al’s wife, who was moving through the crowd with a donation plate. Not for Kenan, but for the fire company, which was funded mostly by local city government and community grants. All the firefighters were volunteers. That was just how it worked out here in the rural communities.

Kenan strummed his guitar after getting it settled on his thigh. “Since tonight is all about celebrating not only the holidays but each other’s individual lights, I thought I’d start with a song that my grandfather enjoyed a great deal at this time of the year. It’s called “Eight Nights of Joy” by Rabbi Joe Black. I hope you enjoy it.”

I sipped slowly, the cider opening my sinuses, when Kenan began to sing a song I’d never heard before. It was snappy and upbeat, a real toe-tapper as Mr. Blum would call it. I gazed around the hall, a fast look-see with the hope of seeing my neighbor, but he wasn’t there. Perhaps he had dropped by earlier to avoid the chaos and rude cider-spilling kids, who were waiting to sit on Santa’s lap.

The crowd applauded loudly after the song ended. Kenan bowed his head, curls falling into his face, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to step out of the crowd and brush those tight ringlets back.

“Thank you, thank you.” Kenan smiled softly at the citizens of Whiteham who, it seemed, had accepted this tall, dark stranger into their midst with little upset. Sure, a few of the bigots who disliked me for liking men also seemed to dislike Kenan for liking men as well as for wearing silver Star of David hoops in his ears tonight. But

overall, my customers and the folks who he had interacted with here had been kind to him. Or if they hadn't been, he'd not mentioned it to me. And I felt that he would, given we were sharing a bed.

All of his possessions were at my place now. The whole sleep in my office thing had fizzled out pretty damn quickly. Not that I was complaining. Kenan could curl up beside me until...well, until sometime in the future. There. No dwelling on the past and no fretting about the future. I was here, and he was here, and the songs he was singing were beautiful.

He belted out "Candy Cane Christmas" and followed with a classic rendition of "O Come All Ye Faithful" and then wrapped up his little set with an original song about life on the road. He sang about sleeping under the stars, snow on your nose, and the kindness of strangers. His gaze never wavered from mine as he sang that final song. When he was done, everyone clapped wildly, me included, or as wildly as I could while holding a cup of cooled cider.

When he rejoined me, which was a little bit later as everyone in town stopped him while he moved through the throngs, I offered him some of my cider.

"Thanks, my throat is a little dry," he said as he took the Styrofoam cup. His calloused fingers brushed mine, sparks dancing from my fingertips to my chest. Even the slightest touch from this man made me feel woozy.

"I think Paula may have spiked the cider," I said to cover my giddiness.

When we both glanced at the cider booth, Paula was once again staring at Kenan. He nodded at her as he raised his cup.

"Does she look at everyone as if she's trying to see through them ala Clark Kent?" Kenan asked.

“Not that I’ve ever noticed before. I think she’s got the hots for you.”

“Oh well, she’s barking up the wrong tree. I’m already in a thing with you.”

I tore my sight from Paula to look at Kenan. “Are we in a thing?”

“Are we not in a thing?”

Okay, he had me there. I mean, I guess what we had could be coined a thing. Thing by definition was something that you didn’t want to give a specific name to, and since I was in this weird place where I was trying not to get too involved while being wholly and totally involved, I guess we were, in fact, and toot sweet, in a thing.

“Yeah, I think we are in a thing.”

And with that, he backed me up a few steps to just under a fake sprig of mistletoe and kissed me on the mouth. Right in front of God, Al, and Santa, who was just exiting the men’s room.

Saturdays at the alehouse are busy.

The day before Christmas Eve was pandemonium.

Kenan and I had run our asses off all day, and his performance after our elite supper hour had netted him over two hundred in tips and three encores. Seriously, the people of Whiteham adored him. And he seemed to really like them. It showed in his interactions with everyone while playing or even behind the bar. He was the calamine to my stinging nettles. The only person who seemed odd with him was Paula. To the point that she even tried to pull me aside during his time singing, but I was too damn

busy to take ten to talk. Whatever her issue was, and I suspected it might be his religion, I didn't have the time or the interest to hear it.

If Al and Glory could get over their problems with menorahs, so could she. No one was forcing her to come into my pub. She could go home to drink beer.

Other than Paula trying to have some clandestine meeting with me, everything else was coming up roses. The till was full. The patrons were smiling and Kenan's tiny gifts were now sitting under a new tabletop artificial tree at home, right next to his grandfather's menorah, on a side table that had previously held junk mail. We'd not lit the menorah's candles, but we did plug in the fiber optic tree. It was enough. I'd told him it was silly to show off such tiny presents, but he merely arranged them as he liked and reminded me that the best things came in small packages which had led me to another quandary.

If you give someone Hanukkah presents, do you also give them Christmas presents? And if so, what the hell would I give the man who has brought so much to my life in such a short span of time? I'd ask Mr. Blum, but he was packing to fly out early tomorrow to spend the holidays with his sister in Daytona Beach. This morning when Kenan was showering I'd spent a few minutes scrolling online, but it was hard to refine my search enough to get decent answers. Gift for a man who has shown up out of the wintry blue to make your days feel like spring even though it's colder than a witch's titty got me some really odd, and somewhat disturbing, results.

So I'd shelved that worry for today, Christmas Eve day, and fell into bed last night, too tired to even give Kenan a decent goodnight kiss. We'd bussed cheeks, then fell right to sleep. Now I was awake, early given the lack of sun, and wondering what had pulled me from my sleep.

Kenan was sprawled out beside me, naked and warm in some cheery flannel boxers, when I heard the knock at the front door again. This time he must have picked it up as

well, for he lifted his head, curls stuck to his whiskers, and gazed at me in sleepy confusion.

“Wassat?” The man was too cute when he was half-asleep.

“I think it’s someone at the door. Probably Mr. Blum dropping off the lasagna pan before he heads to the airport.”

“Mm, okay. Got to pee,” he mumbled, leaving the bed to yank on some superbly tempting gray joggers at the same time I pulled on some fleece sleep pants. It was exactly six in the morning. Dear Lord, save me from early flight travelers on Sundays. The knocker rapped on the door with a little more gusto. Poor old fellow was probably freezing his testes off. The temps of late had felt like they’d blown in off the back of a yeti. Hustling over cold wood floors, I heard Kenan flushing as I unlocked the door and threw it open.

“Surprise! Merry Christmas!” Nora and my parents yelled as tiny flakes of snow blew into my stunned face.

Kenan pattered out with polar bear boxers on his head and some sloppy joggers hanging off his hips. “Nesi’a tova,” he called out just as his gaze met my mother’s shocked face. “Oh. That is not Mr. Blum.”

Nora giggled. My mother gasped. Dad’s eyes flared. Kenan ran back to the bedroom.

I stared at my family, dumbstruck. “What the hell are you doing here?” I finally managed to cough out as my sister fell into a fit of unwarranted hysterical snickers.

“Was that a half-naked man with polar bear underwear on his head?” Mom asked.

“No, Mom, it was a half-naked polar bear with man underwear on his head. Here’s

your sign.” Her scowl was deep. Hey, she was the one who made us watch all those Bill Engvall comedy shows when we were kids.

“It’s very cold out here, son,” Dad commented, shoulders up around his ears.

“Oh sure, yeah, come in.” I stood to the side. They filed in. My parents looked rather distressed and my sister looked giddy. “I just talked to you last night,” I hissed at Nora as my parents took off their coats and boots. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?!”

“It was a surprise. We’ve not had Christmas together for years. So surprise!” She threw her arms into the air and then around my neck. I grumbled into her soft hair before giving her a quick, gentle, and hugely begrudging hug and releasing her. “Antoine is playing in Buffalo today, so he’ll be flying in later tonight for a day or two holiday break as well. I love what you’ve done with the place.”

“I haven’t done anything with the place since you were here last,” I replied, taking their coats and chucking them on the sofa. Mom rolled her eyes.

“I know. I was being facetious.” Nora gave me a pert hair flip and toed off her little boots.

“It’s quite telling that your son has a new boyfriend, and no one knows about it,” Mom commented as she stared holes at my bedroom door. “When did this happen” Her sight darted around the room. I sidestepped to block the tiny table of holiday cheer but was too late. “Is that a menorah?”

Nora’s eyes went round as dinner plates.

“He’s Jewish?” my mother asked.

“Yes, he is, and he is mortified to have met you in such an indelicate way,” Kenan said as he exited the bedroom, fully clothed, his smile tense.

“Oh my God, you are so cute!” Nora gushed and ran over to hug him. “I’m so happy that my brother finally found someone.”

And there were the tears. “Nora, come on, don’t cry all over the man,” I softly said as I tried to pry her off Kenan. She was having none of it. “She’s pregnant. She cries over insurance commercials,” I whispered to Kenan, who was, as to be expected, unprepared for a weeping woman to be boohooing all over his sweater.

“Don’t make excuses. It’s perfectly fine to show emotions,” Nora sniffled, then let go of Kenan, who patted her shoulder awkwardly.

“Well, I’m feeling several emotions,” Mom interjected. Dad was in the kitchen making coffee. That was his go-to when things got tense. He made coffee while Mom verbalized.

“I’m sure you are, Mrs. Argraves,” Kenan slid in before I could open my mouth to reply. “Surprises are always so unexpected.”

Bless the man, he was just as rattled as the rest. I mean, yeah, surprises were unexpected, which was why they were surprises. I disliked surprises greatly. My sister knew this, hell the whole family knew this, and yet here they were without warning. I had suspicions as to whom it was that had plotted this little drop-in, and she was going to get an earful. A mild earful as she was pregnant, but an earful just the same.

“Yes, yes they are,” Mom tightly responded. “But there are mild surprises and then there are huge, distressing surprises.”

“Oh? What do you find so distressing, Mother? That your gay son has a man sleeping over or that the man sleeping over is a—”

“Coffee is ready,” Dad called out, his shout breaking what was going to be a showdown.

“Oh yay, coffee. Let’s go have coffee. I love coffee, but I can’t have any now that I’m preggo.” Nora latched onto Kenan, hand on his arm, and pulled him into the kitchen.

Mom and I glowered at each other until she spun on her heel. “I wish you wouldn’t use such an ugly term, Nora. You’re expecting, not preggo. Ugh, that word is so tacky.”

Kenan threw me a nervous look over Nora’s head.

I took a few steps but recalled that my chest and feet were not dressed. “I need a shirt,” I muttered and left the four of them to coffee. I took a moment to scrub at my face with my cold hands in the privacy of my bedroom before pulling on some wool socks and an old hoodie with a pink piggy on the front.

When I returned to the kitchen, things had not miraculously gotten any better. If anything, the vibes were worse. Kenan and Dad stood by the fridge, sipping coffee in silence as my mother and sister were seated at the little round table. Nora was chirping away merrily at Kenan about her new husband’s shoes while Mom sat sipping her coffee, her thin brows in a deep V as her sight lingered on the tree/menorah table.

I paused to turn on the tree. I really wanted to light some candles for the menorah, but that might be considered rude, and since I was entertaining the thought just to be spiteful, I merely gave the candelabrum a warm pat as I walked by it.

“So, now that we all have coffee—” Dad said.

“I have tea. It’s decaf,” Nora clarified. “I carry bags in my purse because it’s so hard to find decaf tea anywhere, it seems.”

“Correction. Nora has tea, and the rest of us have coffee. Why don’t we all gather our wits and think about a nice place to have breakfast? Is that diner out by the lake still in business, Brann?” my father enquired.

Dad stayed where he was, as did Kenan, and I slid in next to Kenan to stand protectively by his side as my father handed me a cup of coffee.

“Yeah, it’s still there. Gas workers kept it going since the pandemic,” I replied, taking a drink, my sight resting on my mother, daring her to say something off-color.

“Excellent. The last time we were here, we had some of the best pancakes there. Big fluffy ones with chocolate chips topped with whipped cream. I ate two platefuls, then on the way home had to stop the car because I thought I was going to get sick all over—”

“You could introduce us to this young man,” Mom sliced into Dad’s pancake adoration. “Or are we to sit here not knowing his name?”

“Mom, Dad, Nora, this is Kenan Gardet. He works for me at the alehouse,” I said, bracing for the next round of disapproval. Her face tightened.

“Good Lord above, Brann. He could sue you for sexual misconduct. Whatever is going on in that head of yours? I know you men tend to think with your penises, but this is just foolishness! Are you hoping to be dragged through the courts by this person?” She flung a hand at Kenan.

“This person has a name,” I snapped.

“Maybe we should take a few moments to re-center our emotions?” Kenan offered. Dad jumped on that with both feet, as did Nora, who was now looking a lot less chipper around her grand surprise. “Let’s go tend to the geese.”

Kenan took me by the hand. We stepped into chore boots and yanked on coats in simmering silence. I could hear my mother talking to my sister in a low rumble as we exited the house. The cold did little to lower the heat burning inside me.

“Fred and Wilma must have heard the back door close,” Kenan said, his words clouds that lingered in front of us. I grunted. He sighed. The mist rose slowly and then dissipated. I could hear the geese making their usual hurry-up honks as I stormed across the snowy yard. I had to stop at the gate and that was where Kenan caught up. “Brann, I am so incredibly sorry for that whole nightmare scene. If I had known it was your family...”

“No, do not apologize. You did nothing wrong.”

“I was wearing underwear on my head. I mean, sure, Mr. Blum probably would have gotten a chuckle out of it since he was the one to give me the boxers, but even so, I could have just told him they fit well and not bounded out like a toad hitting a hot pavement just to get a guffaw.”

“Nope, nope. This is not on you. You were just being friendly and maybe a little silly. My mother—”

“Will calm down once she has had time to process. Your sister and father are so nice.” He took my chilly face between his palms. “Trust me. Even your mother, who is kind of upset right now, will remember how much she loves you. Things will calm down.” He gave me a soft kiss as the geese, hearing our voices, began noodling at the

coop door with their bills.

I tried, honestly, I did, but I could not let go of all the lingering upset. Kenan was jovial, or giving it his best effort, as we did morning chores. The geese, probably sensing my tension, were being standoffish, or more standoffish than was normal for the two of them.

“I promise I’ll clean out the bain marie after the holiday party this afternoon and bring home all the wilted lettuce and funky tomatoes,” I told them. Fred craned his neck at us while Wilma demurely nibbled at some pellets and washed them down with fresh water. I glanced at Kenan, sprinkling some fresh bedding around the pen. “I usually make them a tossed salad for the holidays.”

He paused, smiled at me, and tossed the last handful of hay to the cold earth. “For someone who claims to be heartless, your heart seems pretty easy to find.” He placed a chaff-covered hand on my chest, right over my heart. “Yep, there it is. I found it.”

Oh yes, he had found it and held it in his warm, musical hands until it had thawed. Much like that fledgling robin I’d picked up this past summer. He’d tumbled from the nest during a thunderous storm that had blown through like a typhoon. Soaked to the skin, I held him in my hands, seated under his upset mother in the oak above me, until he had stopped shivering. Then, with an irate mom trying to dive bomb me, I shimmied up the tree to place the tiny bird back in its soggy nest. Two days later, the nest was empty of birds but the lawn was covered with robins. I told myself that one of those bobbing around in the grass was the little wet fledgling.

“I’m sorry about my mother.” I sighed and enveloped him in a crushing hug.

“Don’t be. Her biases aren’t reflected on anyone other than herself.” He pecked my neck, his lips warm on the cold flesh. “Also, she might turn around to be just fine once she gets over her Hebrew shock.” I pulled back to gaze at him. “That’s like

sticker shock, only it's over a Jew and not over a used Corolla."

That made me smile. The man had a wicked wit. "Well, she can get over her snit or she can be a long time mad."

I took his hand and led him back inside, proudly, arms swinging, to find my mother's demeanor had calmed significantly. I couldn't say if my father, or Nora, or perhaps both, had given her some shit, but she was actually halfway pleasant, if not a little distant, the rest of the morning. We went to the lakeside diner, ate ourselves nearly sick on chocolate chip pancakes, and then dropped the family off at the one and only motel in town. The Whiteham Winds was a nice little hotel, clean with friendly staff, and incredibly grateful for the customers since winter was an off time of year for an area that thrived on tourism.

"We have a party from two to six for the courthouse employees, so we'll be able to meet you for dinner out at the Invers Inn over in the next county around seven," I told my folks as we got them situated in their hotel rooms. "Nora made the reservations already and is heading to the airport to pick up Antoine as we speak."

"You should have let your father check your tires before letting her take off," Mom said while unzipping her suitcase.

"They're good tires," I assured her. Dad rolled his eyes as he turned on the TV to find the classic Western channel he was so fond of. Once he located Gunsmoke, he was happy. Then it was time for Mom to roll her eyes. She was not a fan of Marshall Dillon. "She'll be fine. She manages to drive around Canada all the time by herself."

"She probably takes better care of her things than you do," Mom replied as she shook the wrinkles out of a blouse. My jaw tightened.

"Oh gosh, look at the time," Kenan called from the corner by the door. "We have a

lot of setting up to do for the party. Looking forward to sharing a lovely steak dinner with you both later today.”

With that, he pulled me from the room. We started walking to the alehouse. It wasn’t far. It would have to be in Ohio for me to work off the aggravation that my mother seemed to stir in me with such ease.

“Hey!” Kenan shouted.

I stopped, spun, and saw him standing outside the alehouse. Well, shit, I’d stomped right by it.

“Sorry, I was trying to walk off some parental exasperation,” I said as I moved past Al’s Hardware. I flipped off Santa just because he was all about the ho-ho-ho. And people wonder why I dislike this frigging holiday so much.

“I understand. I’ve been trying to do that for two years. I walked to the west coast and back, but the hurt never went away.”

“Damn it all.” I gave him a fast hug. “I’m such an ass. Here I am bitching about my mom sniping at me about the state of my car’s upholstery, and you’ve been disowned by yours.”

“That was her call. Your upset is right here in your face, but mine is far away. Just try to keep in mind that she might nitpick about your choice of tires and men, but she is here to celebrate Christmas with you, her gay son.”

He was so right. “You are a miracle.”

“Oh God, hardly.” A self-deprecating chuckle burst out of him. “It’s easy to see what others are doing that needs work. It’s much harder to view yourself and your foibles.”

I nodded. That there was the truthiest truth to ever be truthed.

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Chapter Eight

One of the highlights of the courthouse party, other than the mayor sneezing so hard after a few too many pitchers of Coors that he toppled over backward and his wife had to come fetch him before Tanya, the sole reporter for our little hometown paper, could be summoned from the next county, was Kenan singing.

I'd heard him crooning a dozen or more times now, and every time it left me speechless. Why a man with such amazing talent was traveling the US busking and taking odd jobs was impossible for me to figure out. I thought to ask him numerous times, but that was his story to tell when he was ready, and so I never asked. Also, if I poked too much, he might decide to pack up and move on. Sure, he said he was happy here, but happiness quickly became unhappiness. Just ask Paulie.

"Hey, I was hoping to get a second alone with you," Paula said, easing her backside around the bar as the rest of the courthouse employees were enraptured with Kenan singing "Blue Christmas" as good as the King. Was I biased? Hell yeah. Paula was decked out in a red sweater, black skirt, and tiny red Christmas balls dangling from her ears. She'd even tucked some tinsels in her silver hair for the occasion.

The song ended, everyone clapped, and a few folks tossed cash into Kenan's guitar case. I pulled a pitcher of Molson for Avery and the gang from the Prothonotary's office.

When I was done tucking the cash from Avery into the till, I wiped my hands on my apron and faced Paula.

“If you’re going to make a snide comment about Kenan’s religion, I would just as soon you not,” I said with a bit more veracity than was probably polite when dealing with a steady customer, but I’d had more than enough from my mother. I was not going to listen to any anti-Semitic dross from anyone else.

“I would never. Dear Lord, my brother-in-law is Jewish,” she replied after the shock had worn off.

“Oh. Sorry.”

She studied me for a moment, clearly working out if she should continue speaking to me or just go back to her table. She opted to keep talking.

“No, that’s fine. I’ve heard some stupid shit during my time as well. What I wanted to discuss with you...well, it’s a little delicate.” I tipped my head. She began to play with the small ball hanging from her right lobe, tugging at it nervously. A fissure of unease crawled up my spine. “Now, I don’t know how familiar you have gotten with Kenan. And that’s none of my business. We do see that he’s spending all of his time at your house, and again, that’s fine. You’re both grown men.”

Kenan broke into another song as she dawdled and pulled on her earring. “I’m not sure what it is you think you need to tell me. I know he’s a wandering soul, and I know he had an addiction to ketamine.” He’d not been shy about his past stints in rehab. The nights that he sang, he often prefaced this song or that song with his time battling back from his addiction. “I know he’s gay,” I tacked on just to be a snide son-of-a-bitch.

Her lips flattened. “That’s good. Good. Then he’s told you all about his time spent touring with Margo Morgaine and how they were at the Opry one night and he was so stoned he fell off the stage screaming about packs of wolves trying to eat Margo and him?”

Oh shit. No. That was all news to me. “Uhm...of course he told me,” I said, trying not to look as if she had hit me in the face with a pitcher of rocks.

“Oh good, phew! I mean, I assumed he must have. I mean, if you take away the scruff and cut his hair short, mostly everyone who knows a damn thing about country music could tell you that’s Lance Galloway. I assume Kenan is either his real name or he made it up when his career went into the shitter. But no matter what he is calling himself, there is no mistaking that voice.”

Lance Galloway. I’d never heard that name before. Then again, I didn’t do country. My sight flickered from Paula to Kenan. Lance. And there it lingered. Paula must’ve sensed I was preoccupied with the guitar man, so she stopped without saying another word. Perhaps she had also picked up that I’d been lying through my teeth. I’d never been one for deception. Say what you are feeling, Mom always said. She lived by that tenet and so did I, for the most part.

“I’d appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. Kenan is trying to build a new life for himself,” I said with some real bite.

“Oh, of course. My lips are sealed.” She pretended to zip her lips and scurried back to her table.

Shaken, I snuck back into the kitchen to take a minute or two to re-center. And search the internet for one Lance Galloway.

Yep. There he was in all his glory. My Kenan. Shorter hair, clean face, no earrings, smiling wide for the camera as he stood side-by-side with Margo Morgaine, the queen of modern country pop. And when I say side-by-side, I mean side-by-side, this is my man, this is my woman side-by-side. Jealousy flared so brightly I had to blink to clear the veil of green from my vision.

I found a song, one of several, from his debut album. Album. The man had an album. Headlines about him and Margo, pictures of them touring, hugging, making money hand over fist. Not one mention of him being queer or Jewish or a drug addict. One of his biggest hits played as background noise while I stared at a past life Kenan had never mentioned. I felt that hard granite slowly starting to encase my heart. He'd lied to me just like Paulie...

"Man, people are so in the giving mood! I think I made over a hundred bucks just from this party and..." Whatever Kenan was saying dropped off as the lyrics from his breakout hit "Twice Broken Fool" filled the small kitchen. "Shit."

The door swung closed behind him. I searched his face. He looked stricken.

"Nice of you to let me know about this other you," I said, the words as icy cold as the winds swirling down Main Street, bringing some light snow to the area. Yay, a white Christmas. "It would have been nice to be informed, you know, for when someone came up to me and asked me how the hell I managed to get Lance Galloway to sing in my shitty little alehouse on the backside of nowhere."

He placed the wad of ones, fives, and tens on the sandwich prep cooler. "I should have told you, I know, but it hardly seemed relevant."

That one got me. I started to laugh, a dry, aching laugh. "Not relevant he says. You were a fucking superstar!"

"No, I was riding the coattails of an established older woman who took a shining to me."

"Were you fucking her?" I asked with such venom the words burned my tongue. And I knew that I needed to rein in my hurt and fear of being torn asunder back again, but I just could not do it .

“I’m gay, Brann, remember?”

“Oh, well, you don’t look too gay in most of the images that I found.” I shoved my phone into his face, showing him a close up and personal montage of him and Margo kissing. He batted it aside.

Brann, by all that is holy, stop before you ruin this.

“She was a beard. And I was one for her.” He blew out a breath. “Look, we can get into this in depth, but first we have another hour of this party to tend to and—”

“Fuck them and their fucking holiday cheer fest.” I pushed around Kenan, our shoulders smacking, and stalked into the pub. The jukebox was playing an old Waylon song about Luckenbach, Texas. I wished everyone in this damn pub was there.

“Okay, party is over. Sorry. Sour lettuce was discovered in the kitchen. Everyone out.” I herded the forty or so people to the front door. “I’ll refund your money for the hour. Out you go. Merry whatever.”

Once the door was closed, I turned the lock into place and tapped my brow to the stout wood a few dozen times. Maybe if I hit my head hard enough, it would knock some sense into me while dislodging the irate, insecure asshole that was now running amok.

“That was rude,” Kenan called. The jukebox went quiet. I turned to find him standing behind the bar, his dark eyes unreadable. “Those people paid for this pub for a set time.”

“I’ll refund them. Their time will be better served being home with the kiddies instead of sitting here getting drunk, pinching Lois from Dog Licensing on the ass,

and drooling over a man who was shagging a MILF to get his face on the Coming Soon posters outside the Grand Ole Opry.”

That one hit hard. I watched him wince.

Brann, you stupid fuck.

Kenan nodded slowly, walked over to a table, pulled out a seat, and glared at me until I stormed over to do the same. Then we both stood there, glowering, chairs out, no one sitting, for a good minute and a half before I flung myself down into the seat so hard it made my tailbone ache. Only then did Kenan sit.

“First off, Margo and I never had sex. She’s a lesbian. She’s in a committed relationship with her hairdresser, Eve. They’ve been a couple for ten years,” Kenan informed me flatly.

“Why is she hiding it?” I asked because I had nothing in reply that sounded intelligent after I got the lowdown on Ms. Margo Morgaine.

“Because it’s country and western, Brann.” He sighed and scrubbed at his face with his hands. When his fingers fell to the table, he looked at least five years older.

Look what you’ve done. You’ve torn the joy out of this man just like you did Paulie.

“There are gay singers who are out in that field,” I argued. Surely there had to be in this day and age.

“Yes, there are a few. I can count them on my hands and toes, but yes, a few. Margo and I were not ready to come out then. She still isn’t, and that’s fine. People are allowed to come out when they’re ready. And I wasn’t ready. Plus, I am a Jew. A gay Jew in a cowboy hat. Can you imagine how that would sell to all the rednecks?”

“Are you telling me there are no Jews in country and western music?”

“No, there are plenty, but most aren’t queer on top of it. It was...” he ran a hand through his curls, “my agent suggested I keep that under the covers. Give the world a few years to get used to me, learn to love me, and then we could spring the Jewish bit on them.”

“And when did he think you should tell your fans you were gay?” I leaned back, folded my arms, and did my best to be as truculent and shut off as possible.

He shrugged. “He never really said, which meant he thought it should be hidden forever. And since he was also Margo’s agent, his advice for her was the same. But amazingly, we could be a fake couple for the world to hide our nasty little rainbow secret. Sure, people might titter about a woman in her forties hooking up with a guy in his twenties, but better that than having the good ole boys find out that Lance Galloway was a fag. And no, my agent never used that word, but it was always hovering in the air like a swarm of malignant mosquitoes.”

“You could have just done it anyway, come out,” I tossed out.

“Yeah, I could have, but I was twenty years old when Jack found me playing in a dive in rural Kentucky. He had been in the business for over thirty years and had Margo on his roster. I was so starstruck that he could have pitched me a contract where I made a dollar a night and I would have leapt at it. He took me under his wing and promised me that he would be at my side as we worked through the less than savory life situations I was burdened with.”

“Being Jewish and gay,” I said, suddenly disliking this Jack dude a lot.

He tapped his regal nose. “Exactly. So, I signed, and it was a good deal. He didn’t try to rip me off like other agents sometimes do. The only thing he asked us, and added

to our contracts, was that we maintained a good, wholesome public image.”

“Sure and being queer and a Jew didn’t fit that wholesome image.”

“Well, the Jewish part was less a stumbling block than a man who liked to suck dick. But yeah, they were to be hidden. So Jack suggested we pitch the idea that Margo and I were an item. She’d been dating men for years in public, probably still is. I don’t keep up with what’s going on in Nashville anymore. I would have set myself on fire to please either one of them, and before long, I was opening for her on the road and pretending to be her lover. We never went further than a chaste kiss now and again to keep up the ruse and the fans happy. After the first few months of this lie, I started doing K now and again to keep me moving and to dull the pain of being something that I wasn’t. Seems I have a highly addictive personality because I was hooked and using that shit hard in no time. Somehow I managed to keep myself clean for shows, but as soon as I got off stage I had friends, and that term is used real lightly, who would show up to get high with me.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, feeling lower and lower the longer this tragic tale went on.

“You didn’t sniff shit into your nose. That was all on me. And Brann, it was euphoric. And then it wasn’t. I started falling into k-holes, where I would become totally unaware of the world around me. My heart would speed up, I’d grind my teeth so hard my jaw ached, and I’d get wobbly and fall over. Jack and Margo did what they could to keep me under control or lie to the press to say I drank too much because falling down backstage is okay if you’re drunk but condemned when you’re stoned.” I quirked an eyebrow. “Yeah, society is way more accepting of dudes being assholes soused on beer.” He grimaced. “No offense.”

“None taken.” I tried my best not to serve people until they blacked out. The mayor’s overindulgence tonight was above and beyond for me, but he’d only had one pitcher among five people, or so I knew. I wasn’t really here to babysit even though barkeeps

ended up doing just that more than we would like.

“So yeah, shit was spiraling fast. My career was taking off, but my addiction was a monster that I had no control over. At the darkest point, which was the baddest night I have ever lived through, I was sniffing K every twenty minutes.” My eyes flared. He bobbed his head. “Yeah, it was really bad, but the worst was the night it all went to shit. Margo and I were invited to the Opry. Or I should say Margo got the invite, but they wanted us to play a new duet we’d recorded that was ripping up the charts. I was so nervous before we went on that I asked Margo’s makeup artist for a little K just to get me through the biggest night in my life. He was happy to share with me.

“I hit the stage so out of it that I couldn’t recall the lyrics. I ended up falling into Margo, then off the stage, lost control of my bodily functions, and my blood pressure rocketed. Needless to say, after that performance in front of a sold out audience packed with press, I was quietly whisked away to rehab. The first one. Out in thirty, back two months later, out in thirty, back using, then fell into another k-hole that nearly killed me. That last stint stuck. My fans did not. My agent did not. And Margo, well, she was never really my girlfriend, but she was a friend, or so I had thought, but even she had to move on from the wreck that was Lance Galloway. I don’t hold it against her, even if she was my friend. Sometimes you have to distance yourself from toxicity. So yeah, that’s my story.”

He was picking at his fingernails, a nervous trait I had never seen before. Heart breaking, I reached over the sticky table to place my hands over his. Sad, dark eyes raised from his jagged hangnails.

“That’s one hell of a story. I think you’re brave and strong, and I am so fucking sorry for being such a bent-up asshole.” He wiggled his fingers between mine, his gaze dewy. “I just...” I exhaled so hard I got dizzy. “When Paula told me who you were—”

“Kenan is who I am. That’s the real me. Lance was a name Jack made up since my real name sounded a little too foreign for the fans.”

“I think Jack has no clue about the fans. I cannot imagine a group of people who worship Dolly Parton would turn on you simply for being queer and Jewish.” He gave me a tart ‘come on, Brann’ look. “Okay, sure, some would, yes. But overall, I bet most of the fans would be fine with a gay singer who lit eight candles instead of a tree every December. I know I’m head over heels for him.”

His lips twitched at the corners. “Well, that’s not even on my radar. The fans, the tours, or the friends who ply you with drugs just to ensure they stay on your good side. I gave away a lot of money when I was using, spent a lot too. So much so that I walked out of rehab with nothing but my first guitar, my clothes, and a map of the United States in my back pocket. No set goals, no family to come get me, just my six-string and my voice. Oh, and a parting severance check from Jack that bought me a used car. But hey, that was enough. And I did okay. Busking is good money if you’re in the city.”

“How did you end up in Elmira? I mean, if you’re looking to do well busking rural anywhere probably will just get you the John J. Rambo treatment from the cops.”

He chuckled. “I feel that. I’ve been run out of dozens of small towns. I ended up here after my car broke down along Route 17, and I walked to the airport after seeing the signs. I kind of stupidly thought it would be bigger...”

“Guess you learned.”

“Yeah, I did. I managed to get a job cleaning bathrooms at a glass factory and got a new battery for my car. But then I was broke again, so I tried my hand at busking. And then you walked into my life.”

“You poor bastard. You’d have been much better off if you had told me to go play in traffic. I’m a real problem child. Just ask my mother.”

“I need you to believe me when I say I am here because I want to be here. I plan to be here for as long as you can stand me being under foot. I like it here, I like you, and the people are nice. Kind and generous. Accepting of me, of us . You don’t find that everywhere. I am sorry for not telling you about Lance.” He brought our linked hands to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “It’s odd, but I kind of think of Lance as this whole other person. Someone who was in my past, who did some stupid shit, got knocked down from a glittery pedestal, and now is a faint memory that some country fan may think of now and again and ask their sig other whatever happened to him. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, sure. You’ve moved past that guy. I mean, he is still you, obviously.”

“Mm, totally still me. That’s my addict. He’s always with me. And sometimes when things are tough, I talk to him. I’ll tell him to fuck off, that I got this life shit, and I’m handling it.”

“You so are. And if I ever, ever make you so angry that you feel the need to use—”

“You won’t. Just because you have moments of uncertainty about us?” I nodded. He smiled at me so sweetly that I almost wept. “We all have our little voices, those inner saboteurs, that like to act out on occasion. Mine will get real sulky when things are super rough, just so you know.”

“And mine will lash out like a harpy when he feels he’s been lied to. Trust me, I know you didn’t lie. You just didn’t tell me everything, and while it was a big thing, you are entitled to keep things about your past to yourself. We’ve only been doing this thing for a few weeks.”

“A few wonderful weeks. And no, that was a bad way to handle that part of my past. I should have come clean right after you gave me a place to sleep. And now that I know how much you hate surprises—”

My phone rang. Rang. Not pinged. Mom. “Speaking of unwanted surprises.”

She was calling to see if we had left yet and I would bet my damn pub on it. I released Kenan’s hands, dug my cell out, and passed it to him. He drew back as if I were handing him a scorpion.

“What do you want me to do with this?” he asked as he gingerly lifted my phone from my palm.

“Tell her we’ll be at the restaurant on time.” He gaped. “You can do it. That Southern drawl of yours will make her melt like ice cream on a hot sidewalk. Just like it did her son.”

I stole a kiss, timid after all the deep shit we’d just gone through the past thirty minutes, but one filled with promise.

“You still want me to stay with you?” His question was a raspy whisper.

“I would like nothing better. Now talk to the female version of me. I need to clean the kitchen and if I sit here staring into your eyes much longer, we’ll be upstairs on the couch fucking like warthogs.” He raised one sleek eyebrow. My dick twitched. “On second thought, tell her we’ll be a little late.”

He politely told my mother something had come up the kitchen sink, and we’d hopefully still be there on time, but if not to go ahead and order drinks and appetizers and we’d be along in short order.

We raced up to my office, dove onto the old sofa, and proceeded to get very naked and very warthoggish.

Dinner with the fam was an odd affair.

I suspected that Nora, who was now seated beside her handsome behemoth of a husband and glowing brighter than the candles on the table, had an inkling that what had come up to make Kenan and I late had nothing to do with a sink backup and everything to do with two men being hog wild about each other. To her credit, she did not tease us about our goofy smiles or the way Kenan's hair was beyond wild. That was on me.

The parental units noted nothing other than we were late. Dad was fine with it, as he always dragged his feet, but Mom...well, Mom was quite pointed about how being late was a sign of inconsideration. She did give us a sharp look when we finally arrived at the same time as the appetizers. The restaurant was hopping so a slow kitchen had worked in our favor.

"So, this is so nice," Nora gushed as she looked around the table. "It has been like ages since we all were together for Christmas." Her eyes rounded. "Oh crap, I'm sorry. For the holidays. I didn't mean to exclude you, Kenan."

He smiled and waved off her worry just as a server arrived with some nibbles. "No, please, it's fine. I love Christmas. It's such a joyous time of year, everyone is cheery and filled with goodwill for their fellow man. Also, the tips are great!"

Dad nodded, then passed the dish of asparagus wrapped in prosciutto to Antoine. "I remember when I tended bar during the holidays back in my college days, tips were always double. I used all my savings and a fat night of tips to buy my darling wife an

engagement ring for our third Christmas together.”

Mom gave him a look of sheer adoration. I stared, rudely, as I could not recall ever seeing my mother gaze so lovingly at anyone.

“It was a tiny little diamond chip. You would have needed a magnifying glass to find it, but she didn’t seem to mind. She said yes and here we are thirty-three years later with two grown children, a new son-in-law, a grandbaby on the way, and our son’s new boyfriend to welcome into the fold.”

I nearly choked on my asparagus. “Dad, Kenan isn’t my—”

“That’s so kind. Thank you for being so cordial,” Kenan said before giving me a quick glance. I nodded, chewed, and let the misstep slide. Maybe Kenan was onto something. Maybe I didn’t have to call out every little flub my folks made. Big ones, yes for sure, but tiny errors such as calling him my boyfriend when we were...well, I wasn’t sure what you would call us. Lovers fit well. We sure did love to love on each other. Anything past that, though, I didn’t want to try to pin down. Living in the present was hard, especially for someone like me who got anxious if things weren’t laid out neatly far in advance. “I’m thrilled to be part of this wonderful family. I’ve fallen out with my parents, so this is quite lovely.”

Mom’s head snapped up from cutting her asparagus. A small fire in a huge hearth snapped and popped behind her.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. I hope they didn’t turn against you when you came out.” She pointed at me with her fork. “When Brann came out, we were totally fine with him being gay. I think we went out and bought a rainbow flag for our front porch the very next day.”

That was true. They had taken it pretty damn well, considering my mother was a firm

believer in the tenets of the Catholic church. To a point. She was not happy about the way women and queers were treated and was quite vocal about it. Father Leon had gotten more than one earful over the years.

“That was a large part of our issues, yes, but they couldn’t handle my drug use,” Kenan said as he buttered a warm bun. My mother and father both stopped slicing asparagus. Nora and Antoine shared looks with me.

“That’s their loss,” I said just as bowls of lentil soup arrived and were placed in front of us. A small band—one man on guitar, one on keyboards, and a young woman in a silver dress—began playing in the corner. Soft holiday tunes filled the eatery.

“It certainly is. God will not judge you unkindly when you kneel before him for judgment, Kenan. Addiction is a crushing sickness to carry. My grandfather was an alcoholic, so I know the torment that one suffers with that is not of their doing. Some people are just born with an addictive personality, just like some people are born gay.”

Who the hell was this woman?! “Did aliens land and swap out your wife with a pod person?” I asked my father. Antoine, who was a pretty quiet man, laughed out loud and then blushed deep red as Nora giggled openly. Kenan hid his snickers behind his cloth napkin. Dad reached over to pat my mother’s thigh. Mom pointed her butter knife at me just as she used to when we were at the dinner table and I would get sassy.

“ Brann Michael ,” she warned halfheartedly.

“How does one tell if one’s wife is a pod person?” Dad asked to the side, loud enough for everyone at the table to hear. We all laughed.

“See, this is where my children get their cheekiness from,” Mom said with a pointed

look at my father that turned into a soft look. “I’m the soft-spoken one. Do not let them tell you differently.” She poked her fork at Kenan and Antoine, who both nodded along. Smart men. It wasn’t wise to get your mother-in-law mad at you. Not that she was Kenan’s...nope, nope, nope. Not going to wade in the worry of the unknown. Terms were not important. Kenan and I were happy right now.

Our meals went well amazingly, the food was delicious, and my mother was actually charming. I sat back several times during the evening to try to suss out how she could be this nice now, but a few hours earlier she was all over the place about Kenan. So, when my dad, Kenan, Nora, and Antoine went to the band to ask if they took requests, I leaned in close to my mom, who was enjoying a cup of coffee after her cheesecake.

“Okay, so why are you being so nice to Kenan now, but when you met him, when you saw the menorah, you were such a bitch.” Her eyebrows knotted. “Well, the term fits.”

“I personally do not think it fits,” she fired back, lowering her coffee cup to its saucer. “And I do not like the insinuation that I disliked the boy because he’s Jewish. That is simply untrue, and frankly, it’s hurtful.”

“Mom, you about shit yourself when you met him.”

“Yes, I did, because I didn’t know about him. What did you expect? I show up at your door and there’s a strange man larking around with underwear on his head. Then you announce, as bold as brass buttons, that he’s your employee whom you’re sleeping with, and that he’s Jewish. All in that tone of yours that just dares a person to be anything but happy as peach pie.”

I sat back, properly chastened, but still curious. “Fine, yeah, I may have bitten before I even barked, but you certainly acted like you disliked his faith.”

She huffed. “Brann, for goodness sake, if I were going to dislike anything about the young man, it would be his choice of headgear. He seems to be a nice man, kind, polite, and quite handsome in his way. You’re happy when you’re around him, something that we’ve not seen since Pecker Head Paulie hurt you so deeply.”

“I cannot believe I’m hearing the words pecker head come out of your mouth,” I said as she smiled just the smallest bit.

“Well, he was. The truth is not always pleasant as we know. You and I tend to say what’s on our minds. Many would say being blunt is a good thing, while many would say it’s bad. We lack compassion, or empathy, or whatever it’s called when you blow smoke up someone’s skirt. I may speak too quickly. Perhaps I should temper my tongue as your father and sister reminded me after you left, but you know that I am always honest with people, even when it’s uncomfortable to do so. So, no, I did not hold Kenan’s faith or his time battling addiction against him. What upset me most was that you didn’t tell us that you had found a new man and that he would be here. Are we so reprehensible that you couldn’t bring yourself to even pass along something this big?”

“No, of course not, I just...” And there I skidded to a stall. “I’m not sure how long this thing with Kenan will last is all. I’m trying not to put my cart in front of the horse as Dad likes to say.”

“Ah, so you’re hedging. That does seem wise given how your last breakup nearly drove you into a mental hospital.”

“I wasn’t that bad.” She shot me a flat look. “Okay, yes, I was in bad shape, but Paulie had hurt me badly.”

“I know he did, but you do tend to over-commit your whole self. You need to stop making your relationship your everything. You’re a bright, hardworking man. Take

pride in your other accomplishments. Also, since we're having this little talk, I must say that I'm worried that you're having sex with your employee. That could turn around to bite you on your ass when things go wrong."

I scowled. "When. Nice. So you're predicting a fail already."

"Brann, for goodness sake, stop being so annoying. I'm not predicting anything. I barely know the young man, but surely you must see he does carry some extensive baggage. He's an ex-addict and a wandering soul. I'm concerned that you will attach yourself to him—"

"Like a leech?"

She frowned deeply. The band shifted to an old Christmas tune sung by Perry Como way back when or so the lead singer told us. The dancers moved more slowly. Where the rest of the family had disappeared to, I didn't know, but I was now wishing they would come back so I could leave.

"Please stop that. I did not say anything about a leech, for goodness sake, Brann. Do you honestly think that my opinion of you is so low?" Now she looked hurt. God dammit. I shook my head, scanning the restaurant for the others. They were at the bar. Nora was peeking at us around Antoine. When I caught her, she jerked back to let her beefy husband block my view. Cool. So this was a set-up mom and son talk. My sister was so getting coal in her stocking. "I can't hear your brains rattle. Please answer me."

"No, I don't honestly think you feel I'm a leech. Maybe I feel that way about myself and I just like to project it to others so I can hide in my cabin forever without the danger of being thrown over a cliff by someone I love."

Mom blinked. I slowed my breathing by exhaling slowly.

“My that was quite the honest answer. I’m glad for it. It shows me that you’re coming to terms with your shortcomings.” I rolled my eyes. “Don’t take offense. We all have faults. I’m too direct. Your father is too easy. Your sister is always trying to make life perfect, even though she knows full well that life is never perfect or easy, and you build walls that a bull elephant couldn’t knock down. Antoine, well, he’s a bit too Canadian at times, and Kenan—”

“Wait, roll that bus back. What the hell is too Canadian?”

This I had to hear.

“You know. Polite. Kind. Courteous.”

“Oh yeah, those are terrible qualities.”

“I never said they were terrible, just...annoying. How can one person be so damn mannerly?” She sighed as if that were a mighty weight. I couldn’t help but snicker.

“I won’t need you to list Kenan’s shortcomings. All it would do is make me defensive,” I tossed out.

She studied me closely, her long nails now tapping on the side of her coffee cup.

“You like him a great deal, don’t you?”

“I do, yes.”

“Hmm, I thought so. The way you look at him says a lot. Brann, I just want you to be careful with your heart. This man, though he does seem earnest and quite charming, does work for you.”

“Mom, please...”

She huffed out a short breath. “Fine, make your bed and lie in it.”

“I plan to do just that.” We sat there watching each other while “Happy Holidays” filled the air.

“I would have appreciated knowing, though. Do you know I spent the afternoon scouring every small shop on Main Street for a gift for Kenan?”

“Did you know I didn’t have time to even do that and so your gifts are probably being stolen off your front porch as we speak?”

“That’s your sister’s fault. She was gung-ho about flying in to surprise you. She misses you, Brann, we all do. I hope Kenan can help you see that there is more to life than work and darts.”

I picked up a spoon just for something to do with my hands. “He’s doing a lot of good things for me.” I tapped the handle on the table as the band broke into a smooth rendition of “Merry Christmas, Darling” that got a few more couples out of their seats to dance in front of the small stage. “So, what did you get him?”

“You’ll see tomorrow. I don’t trust you not to tell him. Remember that Christmas when you saw me wrapping the denim jacket that Nora had asked for and you ran to tell her?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I’m not good with secrets. Or lies.”

“No, you are not, but neither am I. Oh, here they are.” Dad and Kenan arrived at our table. “Did you get your requests in?” Mom asked as Dad bent down to kiss her cheek.

“We did. Would you like to dance, milady?” Dad asked with a regal bow. Mom

giggled like a teen, rose, and let my father lead her out to sway next to Nora and Antoine.

Kenan extended his hand to me. I glanced up into eyes as warm and sweet as the lava cake I'd just eaten.

I slid my fingers over his. We made our way around tables, some people giving us nods and smiles, a few glancing away. I let him lead. It seemed fitting since he was guiding me from a dark place into a world of glitter, candles, and renewed faith in the possibility of love and trust.

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Chapter Nine

Christmas Day dawned bright and cold.

I moved closer to the toasty man lying in my bed.

See, I was a good boy and always did what my mother told me. I'd made and unmade my bed and was now lying all over it. Kenan mumbled something into his pillow as I wiggled tight to his side, my hand slipping down over his bare back to fondle a small but tasty rump.

"What was that?" I asked, licking a line down over his shoulder to the middle of his back as my fingers delved into the crack of his ass. "You want my dick?"

He chortled into the pillow before craning his head to the side to look at me. Early morning sun shone across the bed. I'd never seen a more beautiful sight.

"I said Merry Christmas. Not sure how you got give me your dick from a friendly holiday greeting."

My index finger roamed lower. Kenan softly moaned and spread his legs to give me access to his pucker. Pressing into him with no lube wasn't happening. I never wanted to hurt him, but playing with the edges of his hole was totally taking place.

"Dicking. Picking. Pickles. Holiday. Christmas. It's all there if you look closely enough," I replied as I toyed with his hole until we were both hard. The condoms and lube were now on the nightstand, right on top, within easy reach. We were ripping

through both at an amazing rate.

“The way your mind works terrifies me,” Kenan said as we wrestled around, me sliding over his back to get the goodies.

“Be afraid. Be very afraid,” I teased as I sat back to roll on a condom, then smeared it with thick ropes of lube. “You look so good spread out under me.”

“Mm, you’ll feel so good inside me if you ever get there.” He gave his ass cheeks a flex. My cock was eager. And since he was such a demanding bottom, I slid into him with one smooth, hot thrust. Just how I had learned that he liked it. “Oh Brann, that is just perfect.”

Yeah. It was. Sheer perfection. As we moved and sweated, I admitted to myself that this was how I wanted to wake up every morning for the rest of my life. Obviously, I couldn’t say that out loud, and I should be slapping myself for even thinking about future Kenan and Brann. One day at a time, but that just wasn’t how my heart worked. When I fell, I fell hard. I fell totally. And I was deeply in the feels for Kenan. So deep that visions of days spent playing with the geese come summer danced in my head instead of sugarplums. Kenan was an enthusiastic bottom, rising up to meet each heated push into his slick, hot body. He lurched under me, a soft cry that I loved hearing as he came over the sheets. I followed quickly, his shudders and shivers tugging me over the edge. I fell over his back, winded, dick jerking, and kissed his ear.

“Ugh,” he panted, his channel milking me as I chewed on his lobe. “Ah that...shit...I have a mess...”

“We’ll clean it up in a second,” I whispered and licked the shell of his ear, tugging gently on the hoops in his lobe before easing out of his body. He made a sound of loss that stroked my ego before he rolled to his side. I glanced down at him, sweaty

and covered in semen, and decided that it was never too early for breakfast. I smiled and pinned him to the bed, one hand on his chest, and lapped up the pearly smear of cum from his belly. He twitched and snorted, but his eyes were hot when I moved from his navel to his mouth. His arms fell around my shoulders as my tongue swept over his. “There,” I teased between kisses. “I’ve already started tidying things up.”

“Ass.” He chuckled, stole another peck, and then gave me a gentle push that I rolled into, falling back to the bed, right over the wet spot. “Shower then goose chores or goose chores, then a shower?”

“Let’s run out and do the geese then dash back and shower.”

So that was what we did. We pulled on some dirty clothes from the floor. We were two dudes who were coated in drying spunk. Wrinkled clothes from the floor did not bother us. Kenan made some coffee for us while I dumped all the greens and funky tomatoes and cukes from the alehouse kitchen into a big bucket. Then I topped the leftover sandwich toppers with some watermelon and some peaches that I’d bought for their holiday smorgasbord.

Kenan came over to sprinkle a few blueberries from the fridge over the mound of fresh veggies and fruit, and then we geared up and went outside. I took a moment to inhale the bitter cold air. Fluffy snow coated the trees and lawn, the kind that was super pretty to look at but terrible for making snowmen. Kenan was headed to the goose pen. His new life goal, according to him, was to win over my geese. I wished him well. Bless his heart. My geese were not easily won over. Wilma was chill, but Fred would sooner pinch your ass than say hello. This he knew well, but he was determined and seeing how he had won over the people in Whiteham, it was possible he would. Given enough time. Time. That was the unknown element. And something that I was not dwelling on. Nope. Nope. Nopeity-nope.

Life was all about today. And today the sun was out, the birds that wintered over

were singing, and all was right in the world. I glanced up the road, unable to see much of Mr. Blum's cottage but seeking it out just the same. I made a mental note to go check the place for him and toss out some corn for the crows he fed. I was pretty sure the birds he fed weren't always the same ones as crows were partial migrators, but he seemed to think they were, and hey, whatever made him happy. He was due back tomorrow night. Maybe Kenan and I would head over the following day before work to see how he had made out with his sister. I was hoping his son would show up as well since they seemed to be estranged.

Speaking of sisters. Mine was texting. At ten after seven. I opened the text to see a GIF of six animated geese popping out eggs while the "Twelve Days of Christmas" tune played in the background.

"My sister is a goober," I called to Kenan, who was already in the goose enclosure with the bucket of goosey holiday cheer. "She's awake and sending dumb goose GIFs already."

"She's probably freshly loved just like me," he loudly said and then bent to open the coop door.

"Eww, no, we do not picture baby sisters freshly loved," I replied.

Kenan laughed as Fred followed Wilma out, gave the dude with the curls a low hiss, and then spread his wings out in a threatening manner. "No, do not hiss. Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the geese in the yard!"

Fred was not having it. Kenan chucked the greens into a low, rubber dish and sprinted out of the enclosure as if his ass were on fire. Fred honked several times proudly.

"Man, he hates me." Kenan sighed as I jogged down the snowy path to join him.

“Nah, he’s just grumpy. Like me.” I smiled at Kenan.

“He’s way grumpier than you.”

“Well, if you want, I can bite your ass so that Fred and I are on equal grump ratings.”

“That doesn’t have quite the same fear impact.” He patted my backside. “I’m not going back in there, so it’s up to you to clean the pooh from the coop and give them fresh lounging hay.”

“Hmm, I suspect fowl play.”

“Oh my God. That was terrible. Give me the phone so I can tell your sister you’re making dumb puns at the crack of dawn.”

“Trust. She knows. She grew up with my dumb ass.”

Kenan typed away madly while I forked up frozen goose turds and then filled pans with water for drinking and dunking lettuce leaves. Once that was done, I met Kenan at the back door, kissed him on the mouth, and took back my phone. My sister had taken the ten minutes I was occupied being a good goose shepherd to tell Kenan every embarrassing moment from my life, aged zero to six. Thankfully, other than a brief stint where I liked being naked more than dressed and had streaked through a local shopping mall, I’d not done too much. Now when she got to the teen years and beyond, that would change dramatically.

We slipped back inside, showered leisurely, and made ourselves a light breakfast of toast and more coffee. Then we began prepping dinner. It was, much like the gifts for my family, totally slapdash. Since I’d not known they were coming, I’d had to rush to find enough food for six instead of the two I had planned on feeding. Needless to say, on the day before Christmas, the local grocery store was picked clean. I found one

canned ham, some corky sweet potatoes, and a bag of red potatoes with eyes poking out of the netting window. Oh, and some day-old cherry tarts on the reduced-for-quick-sale rack by the bakery department.

Mom liked to eat early on holidays, around one, so we peeled and cubed, placed some pineapple rings from a can in my cupboard on top of the canned ham, and then set the table.

It was the least festive-looking table ever. Mismatched dishes, plastic cereal bowls for the sides, and glasses from the bar. I owned no holly leaf tablecloths or crisp linen napkins like my mother. We folded paper towels and placed my dismal flatware from K-Mart atop them.

“The table could use something.” I sighed as I stared at a large hole where a floral arrangement should sit if this was Mom’s table.

“Hold on.” Kenan darted over to the menorah/tree table, picked up the candelabrum, and set it reverently in the center of the table. “How’s that?”

“Looks good. So, can we light the candles?”

“Hmm, well, some say sure, some say no. My grandfather always refused to allow it to be lit afterward, saying doing so would take away from the holiday lightings. Now I feel that it would be fine for a small family gathering. It might spur some interfaith discussions.”

“Are you positive? I don’t want to go against your grandfather’s wishes.”

Kenan nodded. “I’m sure. It’s mine to do with as I see fit now.”

“Okay then, we’ll light them. Thank you. For the centerpiece and for being so

understanding about my mother. Sometimes she can be so kind and other times...”

He hugged me into his side as we drank in our work. “She’s fine. If she can accept an addict dating her son, I’m sure she can handle me being a Jew.”

“You’re such a good man.” I snuggled in close, inhaling his clean clothes and warm skin.

“Meh,” he replied with some dry humor. “I think I should tell them about Lance.”

I lifted my head from his shoulder. “Are you sure you want to bring that up?”

“Yeah, it should be discussed. I don’t want them to find out like you did. I handled that very badly.”

I let my head drop back to his shoulder. “We both handled that poorly. But yeah, you should probably mention it so when they find out, and they will if we keep doing this thing, they won’t feel as if we were trying to hide something from them. My mother was hurt that I didn’t even mention you. Not that I need to tell her every minute detail of my life...”

He slipped his arm around my waist. “For all of her foibles, at least she’s steadfast.”

That she was. I held him close as we shared a quiet moment, both of us lost in thought about family and how important and maddening they could be.

As normal, my mother was fifteen minutes early.

“You know this is how people walk into odd situations,” I chastised her while

opening the front door.

“And this is why you shouldn’t engage in odd things,” she parried as she stepped inside, giving my cheek a pat, and then shrugged out of her coat.

“Your definition of odd may not be my definition of odd,” I replied while my father, sister, and Antoine piled in out of the cold, snowy boots melting on the old rug just inside my front door. Dad handed me a large bag of wrapped gifts, which I passed to Kenan to place under the rinky-dink fake tree. He hurried to deliver the presents and then jogged back.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Nora teased and gave Kenan a wink as he came over to shake hands and help gather coats. He was so good at being courteous. After all the shit that life, and people, had dumped on him, he somehow moved through his days with a kind of serenity that I envied. “I’ve never seen Mom with boxers on her head before.”

“Well, there was that one time before you kids were conceived that we went to a party thrown by your uncle Milton and—” Dad began.

“And that was too long ago to bore the millennials with. Something smells good.” Mom gave Dad a dark look and made her way into the kitchen, stopping at the small table with the mismatched dishes and the glowing candles. “That is a lovely menorah, Kenan. Do you travel with it, or did you buy it here in town?”

“It was my grandfather’s. One of the few familial things that I have,” he said and then went on to discuss his beloved grandfather while skipping, pretty obviously, over mentioning his parents. Nora and I exchanged looks.

“Well, the holiday sounds like a lovely one. I’ll confess I don’t know much about Hanukkah, but I’m willing to learn. There’s something about oil, yes?” Dad asked.

“Why don’t you sit and chat while I pour some wine?” I enquired with a wave toward the living room sofa. My cabin was small, so there really wasn’t much space to get away from each other, but Nora came with me, on the explanation that she was better at pouring wine than I was. Being a professional barkeep, I should have taken offense, but I just went with it.

Kenan was chatting away as Nora and I removed the chilled wine from the fridge.

“Does Kenan not have a good relationship with his family?” Nora asked in a small whisper as I rummaged in my utensil junk drawer for the corkscrew.

“Not really. I’m not at liberty to discuss it, but he’s pretty much alone in the world now.”

“He has you.”

I glanced at my little sister. She smiled right before her bottom lip started quivering. “Oh Nora, baby girl.”

“Stupid hormones,” she gasped as I gathered her close. “I’m just...all over the place...but I am so happy...you two have each other.”

Estee Lauder Modern Muse filled my sinuses as she sniffled into my shoulder. My dark inner voice of no self-confidence wanted to question just how long we would have each other, but I stuffed a sock into his mouth. Mentally. I was not going to dwell on dire what could happen. Along that path lay misery. Life was to be lived today.

“I’m happy we have each other too.” I kissed the top of her head, held her away from me, and made a stupid joke about her whining. She snorted like a hog. Everyone turned to look, which made both of us giggle like fiends.

“They’ve always been like that. Both of them find great humor in rude sounds that escape the human body,” Mom tutted.

“Well, honey, a good fart is a thing of beauty,” Dad tossed out. Kenan and Antoine laughed out loud as did Nora and I. Mom rolled her eyes. We had wine, and then dinner, and then some dessert. None of it was fancy, or expensive, but our bellies were full, and as my father likes to say that’s the important thing.

After the food, we took our glasses of wine, or decaf tea in Nora’s case, and settled on the rundown sofa and recliner. We voted on who would hand out the gifts. Nora won, or lost, depending on how you looked at it.

“I don’t have a Santa hat,” I confessed. That was a family tradition that whoever got the vote to hand out presents had to wear a Santa hat. “I do have a green top hat that was part of a beer promotion for St. Patty’s Day last year.”

“That would be divine.” Nora beamed. Once the hat was fetched and atop her head, she handed out the meager gifts.

“Oh, look a new circular saw!” Dad crowed as did Antonine, Nora, and Mom. Well, Mom didn’t actually crow. She kind of patted the tool as if it were a cat on her lap. She was terribly allergic to cats and power tools.

“Al had like nothing left other than saws or tape measures,” I explained as I shot a look at my sister.

“Oh hey, I got a saw too!” Kenan chimed into the saw joy.

“Yes, we found out that Al had little to pick from,” Mom tossed out. “I am sorry, Kenan. When we get home, we’ll send you something a bit more personal.”

“No worries, ma’am. I’d love to try my hand at cutting wood,” he responded, saw box on his thighs, his dark eyes alive with pleasure.

“Nonsense. We can’t simply give you a saw while Brann gets all these lovely gifts,” Mom said in that way that we all knew meant the decision was finalized.

“Might as well not bicker about it. She’ll send them whether you want a sweater and cologne set or not,” I told him as I placed my new sweater and cologne set on the floor by my feet.

“Okay, well, then thank you. You can mail them to the pub, I guess,” Kenan said. “I don’t have a mailing address or anything.”

“Send them here,” I rushed to say. My eyes touched on Kenan. “Until you figure out where you’re going to be in the new year.”

“I plan to be here, with you, maybe in a little apartment somewhere in town.” He reached out to take my hand.

Good thing because something had to tether me to the earth.

Chapter Ten

The day after a big holiday usually feels like a massive letdown.

This one, however, didn't feel like that at all. Probably because the man who had made the season so festive and gay was strolling along beside me to Mr. Blum's cabin. We'd gotten a call from him late last night informing us that he'd be home early today and wished to speak to us rather urgently.

We'd watched the front window closely for his old Toyota pickup to trundle down the lane, our second day off in row—a rarity for me even with family in town—and then had pulled on coats, hats, and gloves to visit after an hour had passed. We were spending the night at the movies and then having dinner with the family. Antoine had to fly out early tomorrow for a game, Nora was going with him back to Canada, and my folks were heading back to Florida.

Mom had wheedled a commitment from us to show up in Boca Raton in March for Dad's sixtieth birthday party. Kenan had jumped on the invite, claiming that his southern boy snow fascination had worn off long ago. That had left me walking on air hearing that we'd be a couple for at least three months, barring anything huge happening. I had no plans to do anything to jeopardize our relationship. I had to learn to accept Kenan's word as truth. And, if we did end up apart, my life would go on. Those were hard lessons to absorb. I had to remind myself daily that I was loveable, worthy, and capable of not being a noose to quote Paulie.

"What do you think he wants?" Kenan asked as we turned off the road to enter his tiny yard. Several crows took to wing when we stepped on the path. It hadn't taken

him long to toss food out to his friends. The bird feeder was also full and smoke poured out of his chimney.

“I couldn’t hazard to guess. Probably he wants to show us snapshots of his time with his sister and give us a gift card for feeding the birds while he was gone.”

“That’s sweet, but totally unnecessary.”

“I’ve been telling him that for the past few years. I generally use the gift card to buy shell corn for him when he runs out and his social security check hasn’t come yet.”

“You’re such a sweetie.”

“Keep that to yourself. Everyone in this town thinks I’m a dick, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

He stole a fast kiss before ringing the doorbell.

The door swung open and my elderly neighbor stood there, mildly sunburned on his nose, but smiling widely.

“Ah, there are the boys. Come in. I brought some of Angela’s nut roll home and the water is hot for tea. Come in, come in, don’t worry about your boots.”

We worried. After removing them and our coats, which we hung by the door, we followed Mr. Blum into his cozy kitchen, sat down, and let him place a platter overflowing with nut roll on the table.

“I have a package with ten different flavors, but I thought a nice Earl Gray would go well with the sweets,” Mr. Blum informed us while placing a teapot on a knitted cozy in the middle of the round table. “Dig in.”

He passed cream and sugar to Kenan. We nibbled on incredibly good nut roll as we sipped tea and made small talk about his few days with his sister. His son was not mentioned, so I didn't ask as a wave of sadness for the old gent washed over me. Family could be difficult for sure.

"So, here's why I called you boys up the lane," Mr. Blum said with a clap of his age-spotted hands. "My sister is having some eye issues. She needs surgery and since she never had children or got married, I'm going to go stay with her."

"That's very brotherly of you," I said as Kenan chewed and nodded.

"She's the only person I have left, other than you two." He looked at Kenan and then at me. "Such a nice couple. A Jew and a Gentile falling in love. Gives me hope for the rest of the world."

I could only smile at Kenan. "That being said, I would like to rent the cabin out to you, Kenan, if you'd like to stay here until spring? I won't charge much, maybe a hundred dollars a month. I think you are a good boy, observant of the holidays, and possessing a tender heart."

Kenan's third slice of nut roll stalled midair. "That's...that's very kind of you. I'd love to rent your cabin and take care of it while you're nursing your sister."

I felt a twinge of regret but saw it for what it was, me being petty. Kenan needed this, badly. He'd been wandering for years, and this would be a way for him to set down roots of a sort. Would I miss him in my bed? Yes. For sure, but he would just be down the lane.

"Excellent! I'll call my sister to let her know things are settled here. Now, tell me who won the gingerbread bake-off? Was it Millicent Prickett again?" Kenan and I bobbed our heads. "Pah, she always wins."

“Well, to be fair, her gingerbread Taj Mahal was pretty impressive,” I admitted, my sight flickering to Kenan as he beamed at me, his face alight with pride. I was happy for him, truly. Small steps lead to big rewards. I didn’t recall where I had seen that before, but it rang true.

Kenan and I were solid. I just had to add that to my daily morning mantras in hopes that it stuck.

On our way home, he took my hand, gently, to tug me from my silent state.

“Are you mad I took Mr. Blum up on his offer?” he asked as he pulled me to a slow stop beside some snowy pines lining the lane.

“No, I am not mad.”

“You seem mad.”

I cupped his scruffy chin with my free hand. Dark, worried eyes caught mine and held them.

“I’m not mad. Honestly, I am happy for you. I think having a place to call your own is a major step in your recovery journey.”

That erased some of the worry lines, but just some. “I agree. So why are you so quiet?”

I smiled weakly. “I’m having a rather lengthy battle with my inner saboteur. He keeps wanting me to freak out, grab you, and force you to stay with me.”

Worry turned to understanding. He turned his head to kiss my palm. Well, actually, it was the palm of my glove, but it counted.

“I understand. Those internal voices are real dicks at times.” I nodded strongly.
“Mine likes to remind me of how much better life could be if I were high.”

“He sounds like a donkey dick.”

He chuckled. “He truly is. I think we should name our inner assholes. This way when we’re wrestling with them, we can just say ‘I’m cool, just taking time to bitch slap Stewie. Or Ralph. Or Donald.’”

“I want to call mine Richard Noggin.”

He snorted so loudly a resting cardinal took to wing. “I love that. I’m going to go with Ricardo Cranium.”

I snickered. “We are so damn clever. So yeah, I’m just conversing with Richard. I truly am happy for you. I’m so stupidly happy you’re staying for three more months.”

He stepped closer. His breath was rich from the cinnamon tea we’d enjoyed with Mr. Blum. “I have no plans to leave Whiteham. I think I might have found my forever town and my forever guy.”

My heart nearly burst out of my ribcage. “That right there is the best gift anyone has ever given me.”

“Better than a saw?”

“Oh man, tough call. Can you cut a two-by-four with your dick?”

“No, but I can do other things with it that you enjoy.”

Okay yeah, he totally was on point there. His dick was pretty magical. As were his

fingers...

“Hearing that was a thousand times better than a saw.” We kissed right in the middle of the road in front of God, the pines, and all the snowflakes fluttering down from the sky.

Seven days of bliss rolled past in the blink of an eye.

Mr. Blum was getting ready for his big trip south, which meant that Kenan was also getting ready to leave my house. It wasn't like it was going to require a moving van. He literally had two bags of clothes, his guitar, and his car. One trip. Done. Moved. So while he was nervous with excitement, I was still working on trying to get the insecure dickhead in my skull to shut the fuck up. It was tough, but I was slowly choking the life out of him. Good thing you couldn't go to prison for throttling your toxic traits.

New Year's was upon us and the alehouse was filled to capacity. Possibly even passed it by a few people. Kenan was putting on a show for the crowds and he was, as always, killing it. There were patrons in here who I had never seen before. I'd run out of fries early and had kicked about five kegs already. Tips were flowing into my cup and Kenan's guitar case. The vibe was lively, happy, and just a tad silly, which was always the feel as we left one year behind and welcomed a new one. Our lone local driver, Teddy, who owned a yellow Chevy and was affectionately known as Teddy the Taxi Driver, even though it wasn't really a taxi, was on call tonight. Teddy never charged people for taking them home. He'd lost a son to a drunk driver twenty years ago and had been shuttling inebriated folks around the county ever since. You needed a ride after one too many beers? Call Teddy Smith out on Keeley Fork Road. Teddy was good people.

I was leaning on the bar, enjoying a cover of “Friends in Low Places” which had the crowd singing along in hilarious, slightly tipsy voices, when a youngish guy wiggled up to me.

He was a clean-cut sort, short brown hair, bright blue eyes, and dressed in a blue sweater. Cute fellow. Not as cute as the guy sitting on a stool strumming a guitar but cute enough for a baby-faced dude.

“Hey, can I get a mug of Goose Island?” he shouted. I nodded and held out my hand. He rolled his eyes, pulled out his wallet, and extracted his driver’s license. New York State. Name was Mark Mills, and he was twenty-five.

“Sorry, but you look about sixteen,” I said as I handed back his ID.

“I get that a lot.”

“Let me get your beer.” I walked down the bar, pulled him a nice mug of the trendy IPA, and headed back to him. The crowd was cheering Kenan on as he moved from that Garth Brooks classic to a slower song. “Eight bucks.”

“Not bad. I paid twelve at a bar in Boston.”

“This ain’t Boston.”

He laughed and then slid a ten across the bar. “Keep the change.” I nodded in thanks and went to tend to some other customers. When I returned to ring up the sales, Mark was sipping his beer as he watched Kenan with the same intensity a cat watches a mouse. “Man, he is good,” he said between songs.

“Yep, he is,” I replied as I stuffed some crinkled twenties into the till.

“Care to tell me how you managed to lure Lance Galloway out of whatever cave he’s been hiding in to play in this alehouse that is not Boston?” He spun around to face me, his phone resting on the bar next to his beer. I felt my gut tighten instantly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I snapped, slammed the drawer to the register, and stalked to the other end of the bar. It took several minutes, but I finally caught Kenan’s attention. Mark was now seated on a stool, his sight locked on Kenan. I gave my head a jerk in the direction of the now-closed kitchen. Kenan’s brows tangled, but he told the crowd he needed to wet his whistle and would return in ten minutes.

I met him in the kitchen, purposely avoiding eye contact with Mark.

“What’s wrong?” Kenan asked as soon as the doors swung closed. The kitchen was subtly lit, with just enough light to allow us to see our way to the basement. Washed cooking utensils sat drying by the sink. The hum of conversation just outside the door was dulled slightly.

“That guy in the sweater by the register asked me how I got Lance Galloway to sing in this shithole.”

His eyes flared. “He called your bar a shithole?”

I loved how defensive he was over my little pub. “Not exactly. I said this town wasn’t Boston.”

“Ah. Well, yeah, it’s not.”

“No, but then he used my quip a second time. That’s not the important thing, though. He somehow knows who you are.”

“It was bound to happen.”

“I can throw him out. I’m the owner. I can refuse to serve anyone I want. And this guy was rude to my place of business.”

“It was you who said it wasn’t Boston.”

“I’m allowed to poke fun at her. She’s my bar. Kind of like having a sister. I can say that Nora’s right ear is bigger than her left, but no one else had better make fun of that one Dumbo ear.”

“I never noticed.”

“Trust me, it’s huge. She hides it with her hair. Anyway, I can toss his ass to the curb. Just say the word.”

He gave me a soft kiss. “I don’t think we need to chuck him out in the snow. I’ll see what he wants and then I’ll decide what to do about him.”

“Okay.” I didn’t like it. Mark had a bad aura, I thought. “He’s probably a reporter or something. He just has that nosey ass vibe.”

Kenan shrugged as if nonplussed, but I noted the tension lines around his pretty dark eyes. When we exited, Paula and Mark were deep in conversation. She grinned at me when I made my way back behind the bar. Mark, the smug little sweater wearer, tapped his empty mug.

“Hey, Brann! I see you already met my nephew, Mark. He lives outside of Buffalo and is studying for his doctorate in journalism. Says he wants to be a senior editor at a big DC newspaper someday.” She gave him a proud auntie hug. Called it. I knew he was a reporter of some sort. I wanted to kick him off his stool but instead, because I

was a sweet sort of fellow, I merely forced a smile and then refilled his fucking mug of beer.

Kenan began singing again. I was too busy to spend much time glowering at Mark and Paula, but when I could get a moment, I made sure Paula knew I was not pleased. Mark visited the men's room near the end of Kenan's second and final set. I pounced like a fox on a sleepy chicken.

"Did you tell your nephew about Kenan's past persona?" I snarled, low, hoping to keep this discussion between us as the clock was nearing midnight.

She blanched. "I might have mentioned it over our Christmas dinner, but only to him! He's looking for a big story to add to his portfolio and I thought—"

"You thought you'd sell Kenan out to this kid with a poison pen?"

"I...no, of course not! I didn't sell Kenan out! I just mentioned that I'd seen Lance Galloway at this pub, and he was singing for tips. I mean, Brann, you got to admit that a rising star that fell out of the heavens in such a big way working in a—"

"Do not run down my bar. I know it's not some fancy schmancy Boston pub. Christ. People need to get off their high horses." She blinked at me in utter confusion. "Never mind about Boston. The thing is that you swore you would keep your lips zipped."

"I only told Mark. No one else. He's my nephew, and he so wants to get ahead. I thought if he could write about Kenan, it would be big and look good on his resume when he goes to New York or Chicago or Washington. I didn't mean any harm to Kenan, but surely someone other than me was going to put two and two together. He's not Clark Kent. He can't hide behind long hair and a hairy face forever."

She was right, of course. Kenan's past was bound to catch up with him. How it hadn't until now was a mystery. People believed what they saw and what they wanted to believe, I guess.

"Probably so, but you sold him out. I think that's pretty shitty," I replied and walked away to take care of other customers, leaving her to stare at my back.

Midnight came with hoots, hollers, and a hungry-eyed journalist sitting at my bar. After the chaos of a new year was past, people returned to blowing on their noisemakers and downing beer. Kenan was done playing now, and when he snapped his case shut, he made a beeline to Mark. I was too busy tapping kegs, washing glasses, and filling orders to eavesdrop. The two of them were at the bar, heads together, and Kenan appeared to be pretty serene. While I was giving some mugs a good suds, Mark and Kenan shook hands. My sight stayed on Mark as he made for the door, stopping to give his aunt a peck on the cheek. They had a few words. Probably him thanking her for ratting out my boy—

My Kenan to him.

"Hey, you can stop glaring at him with your stabby eyes." Kenan nudged me out of the sink to take over washing. I wiped my hands on my apron. Paula glanced my way, then quickly pulled on her coat to leave with her nosy nephew. "It's all cool."

My sight flew from the door to Kenan. "And how is it cool?"

"I'm going to meet him here tomorrow for an interview."

"Oh." I thought for sure he was going to do something else. Not sure what, precisely. Throat-punching Mark and then banning Paula sounded like a good start.

"It's time. I can't keep sneaking around the country busking at airports. I have a

home now, well for three months anyway, and a man who I'm having a thing with." I pointed to myself. "No, Teddy the Taxi Driver. Of course you, doofus."

"I'd like to put forth a petition to clarify what having a thing is," I said and waved goodbye to a few mill workers as they headed out.

"I can do that with one word. Boyfriend." I gaped. "Too soon?"

"No, I..." I had to take a breath to steady myself. "No, not at all. I love it. But you know me. I dive into the deep end of the relationship pool without floaties. So please don't let me push you into something serious if you're not feeling it."

He flicked soap in my face. "I was feeling that. And I am feeling you and me too." He wiped the bubbles from my cheek then carded his wet hands into my hair to kiss me into a stupor.

I flipped a page. Just a simple page flip.

How on earth Kenan...nope, my boyfriend—that was going to take some getting used to—how my boyfriend thought that a simple page flip was aggressive I couldn't grasp.

"Maybe you should go up to the office when Mark arrives?" Kenan suggested as he gathered some coffee mugs from where they had dried on a clean bar towel overnight to pour himself and me some dark roast. It was my fourth cup already this morning. So maybe I had page flipped with a bit of zeal. I was beyond jittery.

"Maybe I should sit here at the bar in case he starts asking you shit questions. Maybe I should boot him to the curb and ban his aunt."

“Okay, I don’t think you should boot or ban.” He pushed a steaming cup of adrenaline boost to me. I closed the paperback I’d been pretending to read. It was some ’70s crime story that someone had left lying on a table about a year ago. I’d pulled it out of the lost and found box by the coat rack just for something to do aside from booting journalists. “He’s not done a thing illegal. To be honest, he’s been pretty forthright for a reporter. He could have been lurking around your yard taking pictures of us fucking on the sofa.”

“How do you know he didn’t?” I shot back.

“Do you honestly think anyone could sneak into the yard with Fred and Wilma there? They’re louder than a Doberman and just as mean.”

“Dobermans are just mean because people make them that way.”

He gave me a quirky smile. “And why are geese so mean? Did people make them that way?”

“No, God did. In defense of geese, they’re just aggressive to protect themselves, their goslings, or their territory. I totally respect that.”

“You would. You and those geese are the same. Lots of hissing, wing flapping, and pinching, but deep down you’re just fluffy doodle lumps.”

“Please. Fred and I take exception to being called fluffy doodle lumps. We much prefer being called fuck around and find outers.”

He snickered into his coffee. “You’re so funny.” He met my gaze with a soft one that instantly started to unravel my ball of snark. “Let’s just give Mark a chance. I’ll answer what I want to answer and nothing more. I’ve already stipulated that we get final approval of the piece before it goes to print. I will not reveal where we live or

where I'm working, I promise. I know you don't want the press showing up here or at your place, and neither do I."

"I will sic Fred on anyone who shows up at my cabin with a camera. Bird watcher? Tough shit, bucko, haul your ass down the lane."

"Totally fair, although you might want to ascertain what the camera is being used for before you let loose the goose."

"We'll see. I kind of like seeing some folks dashing down the road with a goose on their heels. Of course that's why I have to read my own electric meter now."

"I've never known a person more perfectly suited to their pets." He rose to his toes to kiss me on the mouth just as the front door opened. We both turned to see who was here this early. If it was one of the gas workers, they'd be told to go to the Happy Mart for their morning java. Mark slid in, bringing a gust of cold wind with some light flurries with him. The leftover blue and white streamers from New Year's Eve shook madly.

Mark gave us a wary smile as he shook off his coat and stamped the snow from his Vans.

"I ran into a snow squall on Route 17 that halted traffic for ten minutes until it blew through," Mark said as he neared us at the bar.

"Those snow squalls can bring some unexpected things into our lives," Kenan replied with a gentleness that made me want to block any and all unpleasantness from his life. Mark being one of those things. "Brann is going to take his coffee to his office now and we'll take that table by the jukebox."

"I am?" I threw Mark a look that made him shrink into himself.

“You are. We’ll be done in an hour, maybe less.” Kenan patted my cheek. I rose, coffee mug in hand, and threw my most foreboding look at Mark.

“You play nice,” I warned the reporter before stalking upstairs. Each step was placed heavily on the stairs. Leaving the door open, I flopped down behind my desk, stared at the sofa where Kenan had slept, and waited not unlike a jaguar waiting for a monkey to walk past. Did monkeys walk? Shuffle. Lumber. However the fuck monkey’s motivated.

Ten minutes passed. I considered going down to get my book just to see how things were going, but I kept my ass in my rickety office chair. Instead of spying or eavesdropping, I set up some tax forms for the new year, downed my coffee, and decided it was probably time to put Kenan on the books. For his sake and mine.

The creak of the fourth stair from the top pulled me from boring tax shit. Kenan eased into the office. He was not crying or cussing.

“How did it go?” I asked as he dropped to the sofa, all long legs and curls. The sexiest thing I had ever seen in my life, and he was all mine.

“Pretty well. Better than lots of other interviews I’ve given. He seemed pretty relatable, kind, and understanding of my wishes to just be left alone. He promised that where we were located would not be in the finished interview, but he could not guarantee that some people wouldn’t figure it out, which is okay. People will talk. I hope you’ll be understanding if some of my old fans show up now and again.”

I left my seat at the desk to sit beside him on the old, bow-legged sofa. I pulled the blanket he’d slept under over us. He cuddled in close, two bugs in a rug as Dad liked to say.

“I will not mind if some old fans show up. I won’t mind if new fans show up. Here.

At the bar. I will mind if people track us down to our homes. That is a crime punishable by goose pinching for starters, followed by a call to the state police. I'm not going to let some obsessed fan scare you."

He nuzzled his nose into my throat, then tossed a lanky leg over my lap, his thigh resting over mine as he hugged me into him tightly.

"Agreed on all points." He smelled so good, his curls tickling my chin. "I told him everything. All about the drugs, the stints in rehab, and my life on the road."

"Did you mention your parents?" I ran my hand up and down his back. If we never moved from this spot, I would die a happy man.

"I mentioned that we had a falling out. He pressed a bit. I said that no is a complete sentence and to move on. And he did. Overall, he was pretty nice. I guess we'll see if that kindness was just an act to make me spill more juicy stuff or not. He did ask if you were mad at his aunt still and I said that I thought it was more a case of feeling betrayed."

"That. But yeah, I'm mad at her. She said she wouldn't say anything and then what does she do? Go running to some wanna-be Anderson Cooper to tell him about her amazing discovery. That's not the way people in this town act."

"She was trying to help her nephew. Maybe you could consider giving her a second chance. Everyone deserves at least that in life. Some of us need third, fourth, and fifth chances before we get it right."

I had to squeeze my eyes tightly and frown. "Ugh, damn it. Why are you always so damn right and nice and kind?"

He softly laughed as his breath fanned over my throat. "Lots and lots of rehab. Lots

and lots of group therapy. Lots of praying. Tons of praying, to be honest. I'm really not all right all that often. I do try to be kind. Do unto others and all that."

I huffed dramatically. "Fine, I will consider not being a dick and banning Paula, but she is going to have to do some big-time tipping for her to be graced with my sweet disposition again."

That made him laugh out loud.

I could be sweet. When I had good reason. Kenan got lots of my sweet because he was a very good reason.

"I'm so glad you're staying here in Whiteham," I confessed into his curly hair. He sighed as he melted into me. "I think I might kind of love you." God I hoped it wasn't too soon to say that to him. If he ran off into the night, I would curl up and let myself mummify. Months from now, someone would find this human-sized cheese curl of a human body lying on the sofa dead from a broken heart that couldn't take being broken again.

He picked up his head, kissed the corner of my mouth, and then stared right into me. "I think I might kind of love you too. And no, it's not too soon to say it."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"You were thinking it."

Shit. He knew me too well already. "Yeah, okay, I was."

From down below, the sound of customers filing in rose up the stairs. Kenan sighed. "I forgot to lock the front door."

“Hey, barkeeps, we’re hungry and thirsty!” Lyle shouted from downstairs.

“If we stay very quiet, maybe they’ll go away?” Kenan posed.

“Are you two getting down with it?!” Lyle bellowed up the stairs. Titters could be heard from his buddies.

“No, we’re going over beer invoices,” I yelled as Kenan snickered softly.

“Is that what the kids are calling it now?” Lyle replied. More dirty sniggers from the peanut gallery downstairs.

“Can’t they pour themselves a mug?” Kenan whispered, unwilling to leave my arms, it seemed.

“Nah, they’ll just drink all my beer for free and then set the place on fire trying to make double batches of onion rings. We better get down there.”

“If you insist. Can I have a kiss?” he asked, and I was more than happy to oblige. The kissing and hugging could have gone on for much longer, but someone had fired up the jukebox and the smell of hot fryer grease reached my nose. I threw off the cover, took his hand, and pulled Kenan to his sneaks.

“Yeah, they’re trying to make food.” I hauled ass down the stairs where the usual suspects were all seated at the bar aside from Lyle, who was in the kitchen. I tossed him out with a growl as Kenan made more coffee. Once the first wave of sawmill workers were full, I snuck out of the kitchen to grab a soda. Kenan was at a table with three of the mill workers, laughing at something one of them had said.

“You and Kenan got a thing going?” Lyle asked as if everyone in this damn burg didn’t already know that.

“Yeah, we do.”

“He’s a nice guy.” I caught Kenan’s smiling gaze dart to me and linger. “Good barkeep. Real good singer. You know none of us really care if you two are gay and Jewish.”

“That’s incredibly kind. I’m not Jewish,” I said as I tied on an apron.

“Oh, Willie over at the tire shop said he heard you were converting. I told him I hoped so then maybe we could get some blintzes on the menu.” I stared at Lyle. He winked.

Funny man. This town was filled with hilarious, decent sorts. Well aside from Al, but hey, no town could bat a thousand.

Epilogue

Lyle eyed the blintz resting beside his burger, then threw me the most scathing look I ever got from a customer.

It was divine.

“You know I was kidding about these being on the menu, right?” He glanced at the others gathered in the alehouse for our new traditional Easter/Passover celebration. Kenan was off because it was Passover, but he was home whipping up some delicious treats for the family that we were going to pack into a hamper for a trip to Canada.

“Hey, don’t ever let it be said that Brann Argraves does not cater to his customers.” Everyone in the bar howled with laughter. “I’d tell you all where to go, but it’s a holiday.”

“Ignore them. These are to die for,” Paula said, cutting into her creamy blintz with her fork.

I thanked her. She had not been banned, but things between us were still cool.

“Yeah, Kenan has a good hand with more than just plucking a guitar,” I replied while filling two mugs with a stout Irish beer I’d brought in for St. Patrick’s Day last month and kept serving as people had loved it. Same with the slight change to the menu. Nothing drastic. Just a few new items for people to pick at while drinking. Kenan had suggested the new Irish beer, and the little batter-dipped mushrooms. And had advocated not to ban Paula. The man had a way about him that left me malleable as

clay. Everyone at the bar giggled like teenaged girls. “No, not that way. You people are dirty. And on Good Friday. For shame. All of you.”

No one seemed the least upset. They all seemed really jovial at my expense. Whatever. I wasn’t going to let this pack of howling fools ruin my mood. I had two more hours to serve beer and then I was off for two weeks. Two . Two whole weeks . Kenan and I were going to spend a few days with the family up in Ottawa for another interfaith meal, then we were flying down to Daytona Beach to close on the sale of Mr. Blum’s cottage to Kenan.

Seemed Mr. Blum’s sister was not going to get much better, and he was loathe to leave her. So, being the gracious soul he was, he offered to sell the cabin to Kenan with one stipulation: Kenan was to always light his grandfather’s menorah in the front window. The selling price had been insanely low. In truth, the little bungalow was older than the town hall here in Whiteham, but it had a large chunk of land that went with it. Much of it was state game lands, so no one would be building on it anytime soon. Just like my cabin in that regard.

There had been a small sticking point with a down payment. I wanted to get a loan to help him out as I had pretty decent credit. Kenan would have none of that. And while we went back and forth over that, the interview about Lance Galloway was released. It started small, just a local piece, but it was soon picked up and spread, as things do, online. Mark had been true to his word and hadn’t mentioned where we were located but people talk. There was a hot two weeks right around the middle of March when fans began showing up at the alehouse. Most were super gracious. Kenan played at night, as always, and they had been mollified by hearing his voice a few more times. Then the fans moved on to other singers as they do.

On St. Patrick’s Day, during the height of madness with corned beef sandwiches and green beer—yes, the corned beef was also Kenan’s idea—a leggy redhead walked into the bar. The whole pub fell into silence when Margo Morgaine, her hairdresser, and a bodyguard the size of a Hereford bull with the same disposition entered our

meager establishment. There was a moment of stunned silence as a hundred slightly tipsy buffoons in sequined green top hats gawked at the music superstar. Bing Crosby was crooning about smiling Irish eyes over on the jukebox.

Kenan stood behind the bar with me, sweaty, beer-stained, and stunned into utter speechlessness.

“Well, I have never in all my life seen two such handsome barkeeps,” Morgan said as she swept around the bar to embrace Kenan. I stood there with my teeth in my mouth, an empty pitcher in hand, and gawked.

Things kind of went nuts for a few minutes. Margo and her secret partner took a table that had been graciously vacated by gas workers. Kenan joined them after a look at me as if asking for permission. As if he needed that from me. The three of them chatted amongst themselves for several minutes, Margo holding Kenan’s sticky hand in her perfectly manicured grip. Mr. Bodyguard stood behind Margo, silently daring anyone to try it. No one did.

After Margo and Kenan bussed cheeks, Kenan and she sang one song. Her voice and his paired perfectly as they sang one of their duets. And then she took several selfies with her adoring fans before she left the alehouse much as she had entered. Like a well-rehearsed typhoon of grace. When I’d mentioned that to Kenan later that night, he had said that nothing Margo did was unrehearsed. His ex-agent had set up this reunion for her to show her humanitarian side to the world. If Margo could forgive him, then so could the rest of the world.

She had also placed a check into his hand before she had left. Dividends off their duets. It was a substantial amount of money. Way more than I could have gotten at the Whiteham Savings & Loan to help with his down payment.

“Are you sure you even want to buy that old cabin now?” I had asked, feeling rather small compared to the woman who had just knocked our small town on its ear.

“You’ve got enough cash on hand now to build a new place or hell, I don’t know...go on tour.” He’d wiggled closer to me in bed. I stroked some dark curls from his face. His hair had gotten wildly long over the winter months. I liked it long. Gave me something to hold on to when we fucked. Also, it was as soft as a cloud when I buried my face in his hair.

“No tours, no big fancy mansions. I just want to be here getting my life in order. All of that shit is in my past. My future is here, in Whiteham, with you if you still want me in your life.”

I then showed him, twice, how much I wanted him in my life. How what had been a kind of love was now a full-fledged love.

“...see if I can get my wife to make these,” Lyle was saying when I returned to the present.

“I’m sure Kenan will be happy to share it. It was one of Mrs. Blum’s recipes.”

I was positive he would pass it along. The man had given this small town his everything. He’d bared his soul, his painful past, to these people and they’d taken him in as one of their own. Sure, Al had questioned Kenan if he had plans to put lamb’s blood around the doorway of the pub, but after Kenan replied that he would simply hang up a banner that read “Dear Angel of Death: You’ve got the wrong house, please pass over. A dank—A Faithful Hebrew” above our door, Al had slunk back to his hardware store to slap up a giant pink rabbit waving a screwdriver set that was on sale. Because nothing says my lord has risen like a sale on Phillips head screwdrivers.

“Thank you for taking Fred and Wilma,” I tacked on as Lyle plunked his final bite of blintz into his mouth. “I know they can be difficult...”

“They’ll be fine. We have a nice big barn. As long as they can get along with Festus, our donkey, all will be well.”

“Maybe Festus will teach Fred a thing or two about respecting boundaries.”

“Could be. He’s a crusty old turd, but I love him. Wife says me and that cantankerous mule are similar asses.”

I chuckled. “Kenan says the geese and I are birds of a feather.”

It was then that Kenan appeared, smiling, his light jacket of bright pink setting off the rosy tone of his cheeks. Early April could be downright chilly here in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Everyone called out his name, much like Norm on Cheers , and Kenan stopped to chit-chat or gossip with them all. I couldn’t help but smile as he made his way behind the bar to steal a kiss.

“I thought you were working on the world’s most magnificent seder plate,” I said after the smooch ended.

“I was, but I ran out of horseradish.”

“Ah, well, you better not fart around in here too long. The grocery store will be closing at six instead of eight today.”

“Oh right, small town hours. I keep forgetting. Looks pretty busy. Are you sure—”

“I’m sure. It’s a holiday for you. Also, seder plates don’t make themselves. Nora is dying to dig into it. Of course, she’s been on this horseradish and sour cream dip kick for the past few weeks.”

“Pregnancy will do that to you. I’ll be sure to get extra horseradish. Do you need anything from the store? It’s a long drive.”

“Babe, it’s like seven hours if we don’t stop. I think I can manage. Now go finish your seder prep. I’ll see you when these knuckleheads go home.”

Kenan cradled my face in his hands. They reeked of horseradish. He kissed me on the mouth with such passion I had to hold on to the bar to keep from melting to the floor.

“I love you so much,” he whispered when the kiss broke.

“I love you too,” I breathlessly replied. His smile was brilliant as the bright spring sun shone through the pub windows. “Now go. I’ll see you when I get home.”

“Yep, I’m off. Thanks for taking the geese, Lyle. I can get them some of the out-of-date bagged salads if Penny is working the produce section when I—”

“Go !” a half dozen of us said in unison. Kenan laughed and rushed out of the bar, a cool wind coming in as he left, making all the little paper Easter eggs and Happy Passover cardboard decorations hung from the ceiling sway.

I got back to serving beer and blintzes followed by daydreaming as I washed pitchers, mugs, and glasses behind the bar. I had no clearcut idea what would happen when, say in a year or more or maybe less, Kenan and I possibly decided to live together. Would he sell his place? Would I sell mine? Was I putting my horse way in front of my cart? Probably. I did tend to worry about shit that was several years down the road. Having a home of his own was massively important to his recovery efforts. So while I disliked him not being in my bed every night seeing him living a clean, healthy life as a steadily employed taxpaying citizen made me incredibly proud of him. We’d sort it all out when the time came. For now, we spent nights at my cabin and then at his, swapping out places as the mood suited.

“Hey, I’m going to head home. Check on your geese and Festus, and then snuggle up with the missus for the rest of the night. You closing up soon?” Lyle asked as he pushed an arm into his jacket sleeve.

“Yeah, I have to clean the kitchen yet, but after that, I am out of here. Well, once I roust all the boneheads out, that is.”

Lyle chuckled. “Ah, you like us deep down.” I cocked an eyebrow. “I’m glad to see you heading out to be with Kenan. He’s a good man. We all can see how happy you are.”

I nodded, touched by his tenderness. It wasn’t a trait that many men displayed. Me included. Since I wasn’t good at being nice, I fumbled about for a reply that would express everything I felt for Kenan without making me look too sappy.

“He’s a keeper,” I replied and felt that described it all. I was no poet. Then I shouted out last call. Several dart players moaned. I told them to take the damn board with them and just get moving.

It was time for me to head home to my man. We had a holiday to celebrate. One of hundreds I hoped we would see side-by-side. The silver band hidden away in my sock drawer for next Christmas would hopefully be the start of a joyous lifetime spent together as partners in all aspects of our lives. Who would have thunk it? Me, Brann the Grump, putting joyous and holiday in the same sentence. Amazing what love could do for a man.

THE END