

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

A gingerbread house with a fire on its roof, surrounded by colorful Christmas lights.

# MERRI- MENT AND MAYHEM

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALEXANDRIA  
BELLEFLEUR

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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# Chapter One

**9** *11. Where is your emergency?"*  
    *"215 Juniper Lane, Port Angeles. I need you to send the fire department."*  
    *"What's your emergency?"*  
    *"There's smoke coming from next door. A lot of it. I—hell, I think my neighbor's house is on fire."*



Everleigh Dangerfield sputtered and coughed, choking on the thick cloud of acrid smoke clinging to the kitchen ceiling.

*Soft and chewy gingerbread cookies, the handwritten recipe card read. A simple, foolproof take on a holiday classic.*

Foolproof, her ass.

If Grandma Dangerfield could see Everleigh now, she'd be shaking her head. Not even in town for forty-eight hours and already the house looked like a bomb had gone off, whatever dry chemical they put inside fire extinguishers blanketing the kitchen, scorch marks halfway up the wall, the oven nothing more than a burned-out box. At the center of it all, Everleigh stood on her tiptoes, sweating and swearing, balanced precariously on the tiny beamlike strip of counter between the stove and refrigerator. Frantically, she flapped a tea towel in front of the smoke detector.

Over the incessant chirping came the banging of a heavy fist against the front door.

"Port Angeles Fire Department!" someone shouted. "We got a call about a potential fire at this address?"

Everleigh whimpered. Great. She wasn't even wearing *pants*. "It's open!"

Another knock followed, this one louder and more urgent, rattling the door against the frame. "Fire department! Anyone home?"

*Fuck*. Honestly? She blew a strand of pink hair out of her face and pitched her voice louder. "I said that it's—*eep!*"

Her heart lurched into her throat, her sock-covered feet slipping on the melamine countertop, arms pinwheeling uselessly at her sides. Tense from the top of her head down to her toes, Everleigh braced for impact as the floor rushed up to meet her.

Over the roar of blood in her ears came the sound of pounding footsteps. A split second later, two strong arms cocooned her, catching her midair, cushioning her fall.

She tipped her head back to get a look at the—she assumed—firefighter who'd spared her at least a few bruises, and promptly forgot how to speak the moment her gaze locked with his.

*Holy shit*. Everleigh wasn't usually one to swoon over a pretty face, but if ever there was an exception to be made, the guy cradling her against the broad expanse of his chest was it. His black helmet had slipped, dark, tousled hair falling haphazardly across his forehead, a charmingly boyish counterpoint to the hard line of his jaw, the prominent cleft in his chin, the slightly crooked bridge of his nose. Inky lashes framed eyes a color of blue Everleigh had never seen before, not outside of a postcard-worthy picture taken somewhere far, far away, where the beaches were covered in white sand instead of driftwood and the waters were crystal clear.

"Nice catch," she rasped, breathless in a way that had nothing to do with the smoke still lingering in the air.

Those aqua eyes swept over Everleigh from her head down to her sock-covered feet and—*Really?* Her cheeks prickled with heat. The white crew socks she had on featured the infamous Elf on the Shelf, grinding on a candy cane like a stripper pole. SANTA'S LITTLE HO, HO, HO, they read.

Deep dimples bracketed his mouth when he grinned. "I'd say."

She sucked in a deep breath. This close, and even with the stench of smoke stuck in her nose, she could smell him. Clean and faintly soapy

with just a hint of warm sweat beneath. She wanted to press her nose against the skin of his neck and breathe him in.

Behind them, a throat cleared, snapping Everleigh out of her lusty reverie. Since when did she find *sweat* attractive? A total *stranger's* sweat at that. Chalking the bizarre desire up to stress-induced, temporary insanity, Everleigh craned her neck, trying to see over his shoulder.

In the doorway, a man with a copper crew cut and an abundance of freckles stood arm to arm with a tall East Asian woman with long, dark hair that hung in a neat braid over her shoulder. On her other side was a broad-shouldered Black woman whose red helmet set her apart from the others. Otherwise, they were dressed identically in standard turnout gear—a black coat and cargo pant set adorned with reflective stripes and heavy-duty-looking leather boots. PAFD 33, their helmets all read.

The firefighter cradling Everleigh in his arms set her down on her feet, one hand lingering on the small of her back for a moment as if making sure she wasn't going to topple over. He glanced at the woman in the red helmet—the fire captain, Everleigh presumed—and his smile turned a touch sheepish. “Looks like the fire's out, Cap.”

She shot him a look full of fond exasperation. “It would appear so, Brantley.”

*Brantley.* Was that a first name or a last name? Before Everleigh could ask, the captain turned to her with a placid smile. “Hi, I'm Captain Keegan. Are you all right? Any burns or injuries we need to take a look at?”

“No, I . . . I'm all good.” Everleigh shook her head and tugged on the hem of her oversize sleep shirt, making sure her ass was covered. “Sorry to have wasted your time.”

Overhead, the smoke detector continued to chirp obnoxiously.

Humming softly to herself, Captain Keegan stepped farther into the kitchen, regarding the aftermath of Everleigh's adventure in baking with a baffled frown. “Can you tell me what exactly happened here?”

Everleigh looked pointedly between the oven and the now-empty fire extinguisher lying on its side in the middle of the floor. “Besides the obvious?”

“Even if we weren't the ones to put out the fire, I'll need to fill out an incident report,” the captain said. “Whatever details you can give would be a big help.”

Everleigh rubbed her eyes and sighed. The sooner she got this over with, the sooner she could start cleaning, and the sooner she could fall into bed and get to work repressing the memory of this very bad, no-good day. “I was baking. Cookies. Gingerbread cookies.”

The redheaded firefighter, whose coat had MILLER stamped across the back, reached inside the oven and pulled out the charred baking sheet destined for the garbage.

Brantley whistled. “I’ve seen my fair share of kitchen disasters, but I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen anyone screw up cookies this terribly. I mean”—he poked a vaguely briquette-looking lump on the pan with a gloved finger—“these are hockey pucks.”

Miller chuckled. “Like you’re one to talk, Probie.”

He pointed a finger in Miller’s face. “*Once*, Wendy. I set off the fire alarm at the station one time, and you assholes never let me live—”

“*Boys*,” the woman with the braid—Chen, according to her coat—chided. She squinted at the pan, then looked at Everleigh, a twinkle in her dark eyes. “You ever heard of that show *Nailed It!* on Netflix?”

Her face burned and she averted her gaze, avoiding the curious eyes of the four firefighters whose undivided attention she had, whether she wanted it or not. “I’m not usually this hopeless in the kitchen, okay?”

Miller rifled around inside his pants’ pocket and pulled out an odd-looking wrench. He unfolded it, and with one hand gripping the top of her refrigerator, rose onto his toes, pressing the curved tip of the tool against the hush button on the smoke detector. After a few seconds, the chirping stopped, and Everleigh could hear herself think again.

“Unfortunately, I can’t write *acutely hopeless* down on the incident report,” Captain Keegan teased. “Any idea how the fire started? Was it spontaneous or . . . ?”

Everleigh cringed. “I’m pretty sure the baking sheet might’ve been too small.” Honestly, how was she supposed to know the cookies were going to spread like that? “And I think there might be something wrong with the oven.”

One minute, everything had been fine, and the next, Everleigh had smelled something burning. She’d rushed into the kitchen to discover thin wisps of black smoke seeping out from around the oven door and up through the burners on the stovetop. Like an idiot, she had panicked and done the one thing they told you not to do: open the oven.

From there, a series of unfortunate events had transpired, escalating in awfulness. The door was too hot to touch, and she couldn't locate a single pot holder. The thought of kicking the oven closed hadn't even occurred to her, frazzled as she was, this being the first fire Everleigh had encountered outside of campsites and candles and fireplaces. By the time she'd found the pot holders—for some reason, Grandma Dangerfield stored them in the spice drawer—the flames had started to lick at the bottom cabinets.

In keeping with the running theme of the night, the fire extinguisher hadn't been in the kitchen, but Everleigh had vaguely remembered coming across it inside her grandmother's closet. Her *upstairs* closet. The safety pin on the thing had been jammed, because of course it had, and by the time she had managed to yank it free, the fire had engulfed the bottom cabinets entirely, spreading rapidly up the wall and licking at the frilly lace curtains framing the window over the stove.

She was lucky it hadn't been worse, honestly.

"If there wasn't something wrong with it before, there definitely is now." Firefighter Brantley ducked down and peered inside with a frown. "Oh, yeah. The element in here's fried. This thing's cooked."

Miller chuckled. "Literally."

Everleigh rolled her eyes. "No, I mean *wrong*, as in the broiler came on."

"You're saying it came on by itself?" Brantley asked, sounding skeptical.

She crossed her arms. "Mm-hmm."

"Hmm." He nodded slowly and lifted a hand, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Almost like it had a mind of its own."

She narrowed her eyes. "Exactly."

"So it wouldn't have anything to do with that knob there"—he pointed at the stove—"being set to *Broil*, not *Bake*?"

Miller did a piss-poor job of covering his laughter with a cough.

She shot him a weak glare, her heart not really in it, and swallowed hard. "I didn't do that."

She *totally* did that.

"Of course not." Brantley's lips twitched like he was holding back a smile. "I'm sure your sentient oven decided to set itself to broil specifically to sabotage you in your baking endeavor."

Wow. “Says the guy who set off a fire alarm inside a damn firehouse,” she muttered, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. “When you put it like that, it sounds ridiculous.”

His smile broadened into a full-blown grin that did riotous things to Everleigh’s insides. “Maybe because it *is* ridiculous?”

She harrumphed, trying hard to tamp down the butterflies doing somersaults inside her stomach.

“Well, thank you for coming out,” she said, edging toward the front door. “I’m sorry for having wasted your time, but as you can see, I have the situation under control.”

As under control as possible, given the circumstances. She had a kitchen to clean and a new stove to find, cabinet doors to scrub and revarnish if not replace entirely; time was ticking, and the list of what she needed to do before she could put the house on the market was growing by the day.

Chen and Miller looked to their captain, who, with a tip of her chin, sent them outside, following at a slightly more sedate pace.

“One last thing.” Captain Keegan paused and pulled a small yellow notebook out of her pocket. “I need your name for the report.”

“It’s Everleigh. Everleigh Dangerfield.”

Captain Keegan jotted her name down with what looked like one of those tiny pencils they gave you when you played mini golf. “It was nice to meet you, Miss Dangerfield.” She tucked both the pencil and pad away. “You have a good night. Stay safe.”

“Thanks.” Everleigh hugged the door. “And again, sorry for the inconvenience.”

“All in a day’s work, Miss Dangerfield.” Pausing on the bottommost porch step, she turned and looked up at Everleigh, one corner of her mouth quirked in a slight smile. “My brother-in-law owns an appliance store in town. Olympic Appliances, just off Oak Street. Their Black Friday sale ended on Sunday, but tell him Lana sent you.”

Everleigh let out a huge breath and sagged against the door. Grandma Dangerfield’s life insurance had covered the funeral expenses and that was it. Everleigh’s job as a freelance UX designer paid well, but the cost of living in Seattle had risen exponentially over the last three years, with most of her paycheck going toward her rent and groceries and a rainy day fund. She *really* wasn’t looking forward to dipping into

her savings account to pay for a new oven. A discount, no matter how small, would be a huge help. “Thank you!”

Captain Keegan waved and set off for the engine.

“Right behind you, Cap!” Brantley lingered at the threshold, and Everleigh couldn’t help but notice how much of the doorway he took up. She was bad with heights, but he was crane-her-neck-to-look-him-in-the-eye tall, especially when he was standing this close. Six four, six five, maybe, and he had the breadth to match. Broad shoulders and thick thighs hugged snugly by his turnouts.

Slowly, Everleigh dragged her eyes back up to his face, and it was a good thing she was holding on to the door because her knees instantly went weak.

He was staring down at her, watching her watch him, a cocky little smirk flirting at his lips that had no business being as attractive as it was. “Dangerfield, huh? Might as well just call you Trouble.”

*Hilarious.* “And I should call you what?” She lifted her gaze to his, looking up at him through her lashes. “Probie?”

“Nah, I haven’t been a probie in over a year. Miller just likes to give me grief ’cause he’s . . . well, he’s Miller,” he said as if that explained everything.

She cocked a brow, fixing him with a look of faux irritation. “Seems to me like he’s not the only one good at giving someone a hard time.”

He winced, clearly mistaking her act for the real thing. “If I went too far with those cookie cracks—”

“You didn’t.” She had to bite back a smile at the look of relief that passed over his face, his shoulders relaxing as he exhaled. “It takes a lot more than a few jokes at the expense of my baking abilities to hurt my feelings.”

“*Lack* of baking abilities, I think you mean,” he teased, chuckling when she scowled.

“You think you’re real cute, don’t you?”

In the blink of an eye, his smile turned sly. “Better question is, do *you* think I’m cute?”

Laughter sputtered from her, and she didn’t need a mirror to know she was blushing, that there was a hot flush spreading across her face

like wildfire. “You know, I’m starting to think *I’m* the one who should be calling *you* Trouble.”

He dragged his plush bottom lip between his teeth, dimples making another appearance. “Trouble can be fun.”

As if the words weren’t suggestive enough, his gaze flickered to her mouth, then back to her eyes, leveling her with a stare that felt a lot like a challenge. *Your move*, the look dared.

Her heart raced, the temptation to say, *Fuck it*, and throw caution to the wind, be reckless for a change, almost overwhelming.

*Trouble can be fun*. Something only someone who’d never been burned before would say. Unlike her, who’d learned the hard way not to play with fire.

Everleigh swallowed hard and looked away, avoiding the question. “You know, you . . . you probably have fires to put out and . . . I don’t know, kittens to rescue from trees.” He laughed, a throaty rumble of a sound that sent a shiver down her spine, her thin shirt doing nothing to mask the way her nipples pebbled beneath. She crossed her arms, praying that if he noticed, he’d just think she was cold. She *was* standing in an open door without pants in December. “Don’t, uh, don’t let me keep you from . . . from saving lives and stuff.”

Using those broad shoulders, he pushed off the doorjamb and stepped right into her space like he belonged there, standing close enough that she could smell him again. Close enough that she could feel the heat of his body. Against reason, like a moth drawn to a flame, Everleigh wanted him even closer. “I’m not working on Wednesday. You could let me take you out.” He grinned. “That way, you can keep me as long as you want.”

Everleigh’s breath left her body in a rush that had her slumping against the door. “You’re shameless, you know that?”

He ran his thumb along his bottom lip, studying her closely, as if cataloging every breath she *didn’t* take. “That’s not a no.”

Everleigh eyed the tape gun resting atop the stack of boxes set against the far wall and sighed. It wasn’t a yes, either.

He followed her gaze. “You moving in?”

“Out, technically. This house belonged to my grandmother.” She fingered the heart-shaped locket that hung from the gold chain around

her neck and swallowed past the tightness in her throat. “She passed away last month.”

His brows drew together in a gentle frown. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Everleigh shifted her weight from one foot to the other awkwardly, not any better at accepting condolences now than she had been a decade ago. “Thank you.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, I actually live in Seattle. I’m just in town to settle her affairs and get the house ready to list by the start of the year.”

She could probably pull off everything she needed to do in a week or two if she put her mind to it, but in addition to settling Grandma Dangerfield’s affairs, Everleigh wanted to give her a proper send-off full of merriment and cheer befitting the woman who had loved Christmas like no one else Everleigh had ever met.

Holiday decorations filled her attic, handsewn sachets of peppermint potpourri tucked carefully inside each drawer of the dresser she dedicated to storing her ugly Christmas sweaters. She had adored Hallmark movies and eggnog, Department 56 Christmas village sets, and hand-painted nutcrackers. Every year during the month of December, it was a given that her mantel would be cluttered with a collection of Advent calendars full of jams and gourmet chocolates and little bottles of booze, tiny samples of makeup and skin care she’d give to Everleigh.

As a final hurrah, this year, Everleigh was going to carry on all of Grandma’s fun and festive traditions. She’d bake cookies, or try, and she’d hang lights and buy a real tree that she’d hide a silly pickle in, even if there was no one around to look for it. She’d sing along to all the Christmas classics and drive around to look at the neighbor’s decorations and—hell, if the spirit moved her, she might even go to midnight mass.

He nodded slowly. “What you’re saying is you’ll be in town for the next few weeks?”

She tried to hide her wince. It didn’t take a genius to see where he was going with this. “Look, Brantley, you seem like—” She frowned when he chuckled. “What’s funny?”

“Nothing.” He smiled. “Only that Brantley’s my last name. It’s Griffin. Griffin Brantley.”

She bit the inside of her cheek and nodded, studying him with fresh eyes now that she knew what to call him. “Okay, *Griffin Brantley*. You

seem like a . . . fun guy.” And maybe a year or two ago that would’ve been enough, but that was then, and this was now. “But I’m only in town for a few weeks, and I don’t do casual.”

Hookups and flings left her feeling empty more often than not these days. Everleigh was . . . well, she wasn’t *looking*, but she wanted something real. Something she could hold on to. Someone to come home to. Build a life with and love as deeply as her grandparents had loved one another. Her parents, too.

“Wow.” He drew out the word with a teasing grin, a hint of laughter in his voice. “Cocky much?”

Her jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

He folded his arms across his chest, mirroring her stance. “Pretty bold of you to assume I want to sleep with you.”

She scoffed, her cheeks growing hot. “Okay, for starters, I never said anything about you wanting to sleep with me and—” Well . . . he did, didn’t he? “You’re the one who asked me out.”

And flirted. *Brazenly*. Everleigh definitely hadn’t imagined that.

“Sure.” He dipped his chin. “You’re not from here, right?” He waited for her nod. “I figure it couldn’t hurt to have a friend who knows the best place to get a drink in town, could it?”

“A *friend*?” If she sounded skeptical, it was because she was.

Griffin gave her an easy smile and shrugged. “Can’t have too many of those, can you?”

No, no she supposed not, but—

“Yo, Probie!” Miller shouted, one foot in the cab, the other braced on the running board of the rig. “Pileup on the 101 near Old Blyn Highway. Saddle up!”

“Catch you later, Trouble.” Griffin tossed her a cheeky smile over his shoulder and took off for the rig. “Hopefully not literally next time!”

Griffin Brantley would not be catching her later. Not literally, not figuratively. Not if she had anything to say about it.

Tonight’s brush with disaster was just that. As soon as the holiday dust had settled and the house was on the market, Everleigh’s ass was going to be on the first ferry back to Seattle, Port Angeles and all that it had to offer firmly in her rearview mirror. She had a plan, one that did not have room in it for a hotter-than-blazes firefighter.

A hotter-than-blazes firefighter that, with any luck, Everleigh would never cross paths with again.

## Chapter Two

**9** 11. *Where is your emergency?"*

*"My neighbor needs help! She fell!"*

*"Can you tell me the address where she fell?"*

*"It's 215 Juniper Lane. Please, please hurry!"*

*"I'm dispatching emergency services now, ma'am. What's your name?"*

*"Gloria Martin. I live across the street at 220 Juniper Lane. Oh . . . oh, God!"*

*"All right, Gloria. I need you to stay calm for me. Can you tell me the nature of your neighbor's emergency? Where was she when she fell?"*

*"She was on the roof and . . . and the ladder she was on broke. She slipped. My husband went to get our ladder, but it wasn't tall enough. None of our ladders are tall enough!"*

*"All right, ma'am, I understand. Without moving her, can you tell me if your neighbor is injured?"*

*"Move her? I can't reach her! Poor thing is holding on to the gutter for dear life!"*



*"Don't let go!"*

She gritted her teeth and choked up on the drainpipe, muscles she didn't even know she had starting to seize. "Didn't intend to, Bob!"

As if this whole ordeal weren't mortifying enough, the entire street, twenty-some-odd neighbors, had gathered around, watching while

Everleigh clung to the side of her late grandmother's house like a desperate baby koala.

*Don't stress! Hanging Christmas lights is a piece of cake!* They, being the self-proclaimed experts on TikTok, had said. *Don't be intimidated and don't waste your hard-earned money on one of those expensive, gimmicky lighting services. With these easy hacks, you'll be the best-decorated house on the block.*

With a canvas tote bag full of colorful LED lights and TuffClips tossed over one shoulder, Everleigh had scaled the ladder she'd found inside the shed with confidence. It had been covered in cobwebs, but aside from a few crusty old spiders that had fallen onto the frost-covered grass when she'd dragged it out—and sure, it was a little rickety and wobbly—it was, by all accounts, perfectly serviceable.

Or so she'd thought until the moment her foot went through the topmost rung, rot weakening the wood. She had clung to the gutter, watching over her shoulder as the ladder hit the ground and snapped clean in half, leaving her stranded thirty-some-odd feet in the air, with only the unforgiving concrete driveway and a few prickly holly bushes beneath her.

“You've got this, Everleigh!” sweet, sweet Frank, the kind, white-haired gentleman who lived across the street with his wife, shouted. He'd been her personal cheerleader throughout this entire shit show. “Gloria says help's almost here!”

In the distance, sirens wailed, the most wonderful sound Everleigh had ever heard.

“They're here!” Gloria yelled, and a door slammed, followed by another. “She's over here! Hurry!”

“Miss Dangerfield.” She knew that voice. Captain Keegan. “How are you doing?”

Everleigh let out a half laugh, half sob. “Oh, you know. Hanging in there.”

“You're doing great. Brantley's on his way up to you now. We'll have you down in a jiffy.”

Arms and legs hugging the drainpipe, Everleigh stole a careful peek over her shoulder.

From the basket attached to the tip of a cranelike ladder, Griffin Brantley grinned. “Long time, no see.”

Four days had passed since her last brush with disaster. *Four*. “Not long enough.”

Griffin clutched his chest and laughed. “Ouch.”

“I didn’t mean—” She huffed. “You know what I meant. This is mortifying.”

“Look on the bright side. At least this time you’re wearing pants.”

“Small favors,” Everleigh muttered under her breath.

Griffin held up a padded belt with a rope attached. “I’m gonna slip this harness around you, okay?”

She looked at the harness and gulped. “Isn’t that a little overkill? Can’t you just, I don’t know, grab me?” Preferably fast.

“It’s just a precaution,” he said. “Department protocol. I won’t let you fall.”

Everleigh exhaled shakily. “All right.”

Quickly and efficiently, he worked to secure the belt around her middle. “You know, you didn’t have to go to all this trouble just to see me again. You could’ve just called.”

“Aw, shucks,” she deadpanned, voice quivering only a little. “You found me out. This was nothing more than a desperate bid for your attention.”

“Called it.” His hands lingered on her waist. “You ready to let go?”

It took a second for her fingers to obey her brain. As soon as she relaxed her grip, the drainpipe shuddered, creaking ominously. A gasp flew from her mouth.

“Hey, hey. It’s okay, you’re okay.” He squeezed her waist. “I’ve got you.”

She shook her head and pinched her eyes shut, clinging to the gutter like a lifeline.

“Everleigh. Look at me.”

Maybe it was his tone, or maybe that he’d called her Everleigh, but without question, almost as if compelled by the sound of his voice, she complied.

Griffin stared steadily at her, blue eyes beseeching. “Trust me.”

With a short, sharp breath, Everleigh let go, trusting that he wasn’t going to drop her. Barely a split second of free fall later, she found herself cradled against his chest. Sooner than she’d have liked, she was back on her feet, stupidly mourning the loss of his arms around her.

Hands still fisted in his shirt, Everleigh tipped her head back and looked up at him. *Big* mistake. *Huge*. If she had thought he was beautiful standing in her grandmother's kitchen, he was breathtaking now, bathed in shades of gold and pink, the setting sun hovering right at the horizon glinting off his skin, giving him an almost ethereal glow.

His smile was soft and slanted, and Everleigh's heart, already racing, beat even faster, a painful tattoo against her ribs. "I told you I wouldn't let you fall."

"I guess you did," her voice came out breathy, barely above a whisper.

His big hands rested on her hips, calloused thumbs sweeping an arc against the strip of bare skin between her jeans and sweater, the latter of which had ridden up during the rescue. Goose bumps erupted across Everleigh's skin, and she was pretty sure she wasn't imagining the way Griffin's eyes darkened, his breath shuddering from between his lips.

"How we doing up there, Brantley?"

Everleigh jerked back, Captain Keegan's voice a cold-shower shock, snapping her back to reality. For a moment, she had forgotten where she was, that she was standing on the platform of a ladder suspended thirty feet in the air, neighbors gathered in the yard below, watching this entire disaster unfold.

Griffin scrubbed a hand over his face, chuckles petering off into a sigh. "On our way down, Cap!" He pressed a button on the control panel, and as the basket began to lower, Frank let out a cheer that incited a round of applause from the neighbors down below.

Everleigh groaned. "You must think I'm a total disaster." She certainly felt like one.

"Eh, I was thinking more along the lines of a hot mess." He grinned wolfishly, eyes dragging down her body. "Emphasis on *hot*."

Despite it being only a few degrees shy of freezing out, Everleigh went warm all over. "Well, I'm not. A mess, I mean. Not usually. Unfortunately, you've just been witness to my extraordinarily awful spate of bad luck."

An extraordinarily awful spate of bad luck that she could only pray would soon pass.

Griffin hummed. "See, what you call bad luck, I'm more inclined to call fate."

“*Fate?*” She laughed. “You think it’s *fate* that my grandmother’s neighbors had to call 911 for me twice in one week?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Feels a little like the universe wanted us to cross paths, is what I’m saying.”

“Wow,” she breathed. *This guy*. He just didn’t quit, did he? “I bet that line works on all the girls.”

“A few guys, too.” His lips twitched. “But it’s not a line. I’m serious. You’re telling me it doesn’t feel a *little* serendipitous, us meeting like this?”

“Like I said. An awful spate of bad luck.”

His tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek, and he squinted, blue eyes twinkling in the late-afternoon sun. “Mark my words, Trouble, I’m gonna win you over yet. You’ll see.”

She had to briefly pinch her lips together to keep her smile in check. “Knock yourself out.”

As soon as they were back on solid ground, Chen was there, opening the basket. “You mind if Miller and I check you out real quick? It won’t take a second.”

“That’s really not necessary,” she said. “I’m fine.”

Everyone was staring, neighbors all still gathered around, whispering, and Everleigh wanted nothing more than to escape back into the house with what remained of her dignity.

“You should take a look at her left hand. She’s favoring the right.”

Everleigh whipped her head around, staring at Griffin in disbelief. “Because I’m right-handed,” she argued. “Of course I’m favoring it.”

Maybe it was a little tender, and *maybe* she’d heard a teeny, tiny little pop, followed by a sharp pain near her palm when she’d first slipped and grabbed at the gutter, but she’d swallow a couple of ibuprofen and be fine in an hour or two.

“Humor me,” he said, and with a defeated sigh, Everleigh let herself be led over to the back of the engine, where she sat on the tailboard, trying not to squirm under Griffin’s watchful gaze as Miller wrapped a blood pressure cuff around her biceps, checking her vitals.

A hiss of pain slipped through her teeth when Chen palpated a particularly tender spot at the base of her index finger. Damn, that hurt.

“Sorry,” Chen said. “Can you form a fist for me?” Everleigh could. “Okay. Now, here, squeeze my hand.” Chen frowned thoughtfully.

“Hmm. Grip strength’s diminished.”

“A2 pulley strain?” Miller asked.

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

Everleigh looked between them. “Is that bad?”

“Well.” Miller blew out a breath as he unwrapped the cuff from her arm. “It’s not good.”

“Great,” she muttered. “Just great.”

Exactly what she needed. An A2 . . . whatever strain potentially putting her hand out of commission for God only knew how long. The hits just kept coming, first with the oven and now this. She had the entire upstairs left to pack and half a house strung with lights she’d need to figure out how to take down without a ladder and, now, with only one hand.

Chen patted Everleigh on the knee and rose from where she’d been crouched in front of her. “It’s a common injury seen among rock climbers. Tendon pulleys act as connective tissue to keep the tendon close to the bone.”

“You ever been fishing?” Miller asked, a non sequitur if Everleigh had ever heard one.

“Not in years, but I used to go with my grandfather all the time. Why?”

“Tendon pulleys are like the eyelets of a fishing rod. You know how they keep the fishing line attached to the rod? You put too much force on ’em, and that sudden stress can cause tearing, which’ll cause the tendon to pull away from the bone, a little like a bowstring.” He held up his index finger, illustrating in a way that made her stomach churn. She preferred not to think about the parts of her body hidden beneath her skin, and she definitely didn’t like to think about them tearing. “You lose grip strength, can’t bend your finger—”

“I *can* bend them, though.” She winced. “It just hurts like a bitch when I do.”

Griffin reached for her hand and cradled it between both of his. “Could just be a strain.”

Everleigh studied the long, scarred fingers wrapped around hers with a frown. Letting Griffin hold her hand felt a little too close to encouraging him in his quest to . . . At this point, she honestly didn’t know his endgame. Win her over, whatever that meant. He could talk

about serendipity until he turned blue in the face, could claim his lines weren't lines at all, but Everleigh was pretty sure the guy was a consummate flirt who, in all likelihood, chatted up everyone on calls from damsels in distress to little blue-haired old ladies.

Just this once, Everleigh would allow him this small liberty, but only because it was hard to deny that his hand felt nice wrapped around hers. That she couldn't remember the last time anyone had just . . . held her hand. Which was probably tragic, but nothing new there.

Captain Keegan wandered over from where she'd been chatting with Frank and his wife, Gloria. "How are we doing over here?"

"Treat and street, Cap," Chen said. "You'll need to see a doctor. X-rays don't show tendons, but sometimes fractures can happen concurrent with soft-tissue injuries. They'll want to rule that out, and they might do an MRI to confirm whether there's a tear. But since it's not a life-threatening injury, you don't need to go to the emergency room. Unless you'd like for us to transport you—"

"No, that's fine. I'll just drive myself to urgent care."

Gloria stalked across the yard, her husband right behind her. "My ears must be failing me because I *know* I didn't just hear you say you're going to drive yourself to the doctor, did I, Everleigh?"

Her cheeks burned. "It's fine. Really, I can—"

"Nonsense." Gloria set her hands on her hips. "Frank and I will drive you. Won't we, Frank?"

He held up his keys. "Of course we will."

With no small amount of reluctance, Everleigh tugged her hand free and stood. "Thanks for, you know, rescuing me. *Again.*"

Griffin flashed his dimples, and she could swear her knees wobbled. "Anytime."

She quickly thanked Chen and Miller and followed Frank and Gloria across the street to the Buick Lucerne parked in their drive.

"Shame about that ladder, Everleigh," Frank said, unlocking the doors. "It's going to be strange not to see the place lit up this year."

Shielding her eyes from the setting sun, Everleigh turned and stared forlornly up at the house half-decked with lights.

"Yeah," she murmured.

It really would.



“I’ll be fine,” Everleigh said for what felt like the umpteenth time since leaving urgent care. “You don’t need to come and cook for me, Gloria, I promise.”

A mild strain was all it was, the nurse practitioner had said. With rest and ice, Everleigh would be good as new in a week, two weeks tops, as long as she kept it splinted and avoided putting any additional stress on it.

“We’re just worried about you,” Frank said, making a left onto Juniper Lane. “All alone in that house, especially this time of year.”

“You know,” she teased, “it’s not really any different from being alone in my apartment this time of year, right?”

“No, because that’s even worse,” he grumbled. “Don’t you get lonely?”

Everleigh scoffed out a disbelieving laugh. These two were worse than Grandma Dangerfield with their mother-henning. The concern was sweet but unnecessary. “I do have friends, Frank.”

“But are they *good* friends?” he prodded. “Friends you see more than once a month for coffee?”

She must’ve waited a beat too long to answer because Gloria tutted loudly.

“Everleigh—”

“They’re . . . *we’re* busy,” Everleigh stressed. “We’re all busy.”

Her friends were all either married or in serious relationships; a few even had kids. Get-togethers were no longer spur-of-the-moment the way they once were, but rather planned meticulously weeks, if not months, in advance. But Everleigh understood. Life happened. And her life? Her life was good, leaving little room for her to complain. She had a roof over her head and a job she liked and . . . she was content. Just occasionally, when she was in a funk, the kind of melancholy mood that had an awful tendency to creep up on her around holidays and birthdays and special occasions, Everleigh would wish for *more*. As the pages on the calendar seemed to pass by quicker every year, Everleigh’s yearning for that undefined thing grew.

If there was a solution, she knew it was down to her taking charge and doing something to change her life. But most days, she really was content. And content was easy. Content was safe. Change, on the other hand . . .

“You work from home; you could die in your apartment, and who would even know?”

“Gloria!” Frank threw his wife a horrified look from the driver’s seat. Everleigh was sure her face looked similar.

“Morbid as the thought may be, it’s true.” Gloria crossed her arms. “Everleigh could be rotting in her apartment for God knows how long before anyone would think to look for her.”

“Someone would check on me.” She was sure of it. It might take a few days, but *someone* would look eventually. She frowned. Ninety percent sure of it.

Gloria huffed. “If you’re sick, who even brings you soup?”

Soup? Everleigh shrugged. “I’d probably just DoorDash it, to be honest.”

At that, Frank scoffed. “The same way you’d probably order a Lyft if you needed someone to take you to urgent care, I bet.”

Everleigh kept her mouth shut and Frank groaned. “I was kidding, Everleigh! A Lyft? Really?”

“I swear,” she stressed. “I am perfectly capable of taking care of—”

Gloria gasped, and it was a good thing Everleigh was wearing her seat belt because Frank slammed on the brakes.

“Jesus, woman!” He panted, knuckles white around the steering wheel. “You can’t just— *Oh. Oh, my.*”

Everleigh’s breath caught in her throat.

At the end of the cul-de-sac, Grandma Dangerfield’s house was lit up with enough Christmas lights to rival an airstrip. Someone had picked up where Everleigh had left off. The big, colorful bulbs Everleigh had found in the attic had been strung all around the steeply pitched gable roof, and icicle lights she didn’t recognize hung from the gingerbread trim over the porch.

“It’s a Christmas miracle,” Gloria murmured, and Everleigh had to laugh, because it was either that or cry. And, well, she might do that, too.

This was no Christmas miracle. Everleigh didn’t believe in those any more than she believed in fate or serendipity or whatever the hell

Griffin Brantley wanted to call it. But she did believe people could be good and kind, and that? That was better than any miracle in her book.

“Thank you so much for driving me.” She threw open the door and hopped out before Frank had even put the car in park. “You two have a good night!”

Everleigh sprinted up the front walk and took the porch steps two at a time, heart racing by the time she made it to the front door. The front door that had a note taped to it, right above the knob, unmissable.

*Everleigh—*

It read in a slanted script.

*Stay out of trouble 😊*

xx.

# Chapter Three

Miller was first to spot her, greeting her from inside the open doorway of the firehouse with a lopsided smile.

“Dangerfield!” He tossed the towel he was using to dry the bumper of the shiny red fire truck over his shoulder. “What brings you by on this fine afternoon?”

Eyes scanning the firehouse, hoping to spot a particular firefighter, Everleigh lifted the wicker basket off her arm. “I come bearing cookies, actually. And this batch isn’t burned. Promise.”

Miller took the basket from her and peeked inside, pulling out an oatmeal raisin cookie that he promptly shoved in his mouth. “A little char never hurt anybody.” Crumbs fell onto his shirt and the floor. “They don’t call us smoke eaters for nothing.” With his mouth full, it sounded like *nuffin*, and she had to stifle a laugh.

“Cookies?” A stocky man with curly blond hair poked his head around the side of the fire truck. “Someone mentioned cookies, right?”

Miller jerked a thumb at her. “Dangerfield brought us sustenance.”

She waved. “Hi. I’m Everleigh.”

A wide smile crossed the man’s face. “So this is the famous Trouble we’ve all heard so much about.”

Famous? *Sure*. “More like *infamous*, I’m guessing.”

“Nah.” He chuckled, eyes flitting over her shoulder. “Brantley won’t shut up about you. This whole week, it’s been nothing but *Trouble this and Trouble that*—”

“Hey! Aren’t you on dish duty tonight, Boyd?”

Everleigh’s pulse quickened and her breath made an audible catch in the back of her throat that she prayed Miller couldn’t hear over the sound of his chewing. She bit down on a smile and turned, watching as Griffin jogged down the stairs, eating up the firehouse floor with his

long stride. His eyes crinkled and the corners of his mouth curled. “Don’t tell me you’re bringing the emergencies straight to us now, Trouble.”

“Ha ha.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Not quite.” She gestured to the basket of cookies Miller was doing a number on. “I brought cookies, if Miller decides to share.”

“Come on, man.” Boyd reached for a cookie, and Miller smacked the back of his hand before taking off, Boyd hot on his heels. The sound of their laughter echoed through the firehouse.

“Were those oatmeal?” At her nod, Griffin hummed. “Well, would you look at that. Oatmeal happens to be my favorite. Seems a lot like—”

“If the next word out of your mouth is *fate*, so help me God . . .” Everleigh laughed. “That’s what most people would call a coincidence.”

He shrugged. “Coincidence, fate. I don’t really care what you call it.” One corner of his mouth pulled up in a smirk. “I think it’s awfully interesting that I was just thinking about you, and lo and behold, you appear.”

Thinking about her, huh? “Not to poke holes in your theory, but I’d have been here sooner had it not been until this morning that the new oven was delivered. The cookies are a thank-you.”

“You realize responding to emergencies is our job, right? You don’t have to thank us for it. Though”—he grinned—“you’d be hard pressed to hear any of us say no to baked goods.”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about,” she said, placing a hand over the tender ache inside her chest that bloomed each time she thought about what he’d done. “The lights, Griffin. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Oh, that.” He shrugged as if it were nothing, when it meant *everything*. And he probably didn’t even realize it. “You needed a ladder; we had a ladder. You didn’t have to thank us.”

As if it weren’t his idea. As if it weren’t him she was here to thank. As if Everleigh weren’t tempted to press him up against the engine and show him exactly how grateful she was. “Well, I wanted to. So here I am.”

“You want to know what I think?” His front teeth scraped against his bottom lip, leaving his mouth red and distractingly kissable. “I think you came here today because you wanted an excuse to see me.”

Everleigh's heart stuttered and sped. "Maybe I did."

Maybe it made her a reckless idiot, but after what felt like an endless winter spent frozen by . . . by *fear*, Griffin's warmth had been the first thing to make her feel alive and happy.

He ducked his head, smiling down at his feet, looking supremely pleased. "So."

"Hmm?"

"You're in town for the month."

"I am."

"I don't know if you're aware, but Christmas is in a couple weeks."

"No." Everleigh gasped theatrically. "I had no idea."

Griffin chuckled and the sound sent a shiver down her spine, warmth blossoming inside her chest. "You got family coming to town?"

The question Everleigh dreaded most, the one that never failed to put an ache in the back of her throat. "Uh, no. It's just me and my older brother now, and he and his wife live in upstate New York. She's got a big family up there."

Nieces and nephews and so many cousins she couldn't believe anyone could remember everyone's names. The kind of family you saw in movies and on TV, the kind Everleigh had always wanted. And yet, twice she'd taken her brother up on his offer to fly out and join them, and each time, she'd felt lonelier in a room full of people she was tangentially related to than she had when she spent the holiday by herself, eating Chinese takeout and watching *Home Alone*.

Her brother had a lovely family, but it wasn't hers.

Griffin frowned. "You're spending Christmas alone?"

She shrugged. Frank and Gloria had invited her over for dinner on the twenty-fourth. As much as she wanted to take them up on their offer, she didn't want to intrude.

"Yeah, no." Griffin gave a short, sharp shake of his head. "Absolutely not. That's not happening."

Everleigh balked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." He folded his arms across his chest and steeled his jaw. "Christmas is the one time of the year no one should be alone."

"All right, Cindy Lou Who." Everleigh laughed. "Look, it won't be the first Christmas I've spent alone."

Freshman year of college, she'd spent Christmas by herself in the dorms, the loss of her parents too raw to fathom the idea of celebrating anything. Then there'd been a couple of years after college when she'd been working at a firm, rather than as a freelancer, and had had to work the day after Christmas, making the trek to Port Angeles unfeasible. So this was hardly her first holiday season spent alone, and in all likelihood, it wouldn't be her last.

His frown deepened, and Everleigh had the strangest urge to smooth away the faint lines etched between his brows with her fingertips. "Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn't."

It wasn't meant to make him feel anything at all. "I will be fine. Seriously."

What was it with everyone in this town worrying about her? Not that it wasn't nice, but it was new.

"Here's what's going to happen." His voice picked up a gruff, authoritative edge that made her instantly flustered. "You heard of Deck Out the Docks?"

She racked her brain and vaguely remembered spotting a flyer posted up near the Vietnamese restaurant off Front Street. "I . . . I guess? It's a boat-decorating contest, right?"

"Mm-hmm. And Captain Keegan happens to live on a houseboat. Every year, she and her girls go all out with the decorating, and those of us who aren't scheduled for a shift like to show up to show our support. A lot of local businesses set up booths, and the bakery off First Street always gives out free cocoa."

Everleigh smiled. "That sounds like fun."

"Good. Because you're coming."

"Oh, I am, am I?"

"Mm-hmm." All it took was one measured step, and the toes of his heavy-duty boots bumped her sneakers. He lifted his right foot to rest on the rear step of the engine, his knee bumping her thigh, and with his left hand braced over her head, his big, broad body boxed her in against the back of the truck. She fisted her hands at her sides against the urge to reach up and knot her fingers in his shirt, drag him down, and seal her mouth to his. "This Friday. Six o'clock. I'll pick you up."

She shut her eyes. "Griffin—"

"We don't have to call it a date if you don't want to."

As if calling it a date was the issue and not that every time she was alone with him it became that much harder to remember all the reasons why this was a bad idea.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she murmured, needing him to understand that, however trite it sounded, this wasn’t about him. It was all her. Her baggage and her zip code and what she wanted. “I just . . . I just think it would be better if we didn’t”—she swallowed over the tight knot in her throat—“call it a date.”

He hummed. “Let me see if I’m understanding this right.” His thumb swept against her cheekbone, and against her better judgment, she opened her eyes. Griffin was gazing down at her with an intensity that somehow left her both hot and cold. “You want it to be a date, but you don’t want to *call it* a date.”

Heat crept up her neck. When he put it like that, it sounded silly. “Right.”

“Because you don’t do casual.”

“Mm-hmm.”

The furrow that appeared between his brows was less perturbed than it was thoughtful. “What if I said I don’t do casual, either?”

She turned her head to the side. “Griffin—”

He captured her chin in a firm but gentle grip, making it impossible for her to look away, to hide. Her breath quickened, pulse racing at the way his eyes had morphed into blue flames. “I’m serious, Everleigh.”

If anything, that made this whole thing worse. “I still don’t live here.”

His thumb traced the contours of her mouth, dragging down her bottom lip. An almost violent shiver rolled through her, and his eyes darkened. “If you did?”

If she lived here, she’d have taken Griffin up on his offer to take her out on that first Wednesday. If she lived here, she probably would’ve dragged him off to a storage closet by now, a bunk room, maybe, and they probably wouldn’t be talking.

But as Grandma Dangerfield loved to say, *If ifs and buts were candy and nuts, we’d all have a merry Christmas.*

“I don’t.”

He lowered his hand and Everleigh instantly mourned the loss of his touch.

“Six o’clock?” He smiled, bittersweet and soft, and Everleigh *ached*.



“Hold on, let me get this straight: you work two consecutive twenty-four-hour shifts, so forty-eight hours, followed by ninety-six hours off?”

Griffin guided her through the surprisingly large crowd with a hand on the small of her back. “That’s right.”

“*And* apparently you like to pick up extra shifts this time of year so your coworkers can have more time with their families.”

The tips of his ears turned an endearing shade of pink. “I’m a single guy without kids in his late twenties whose parents live twenty minutes across town. I can see them whenever I want. And my nieces and nephews? God love ’em, but they’re at that age where they couldn’t care less about their uncle Griffin when they’ve got presents from Santa waiting under the tree.” He shrugged easily. “It’s only fair I trade a few shifts so Harris and Nelson and Perez can spend time with their families.”

*Fair and right and good and kind* weren’t givens, but Griffin acted like they were. Like it was no big deal for him to sacrifice his Christmas so his coworkers could spend time with their children. Just like it wasn’t a big deal to finish hanging the lights for a disaster of a girl trying to do her grandmother’s memory justice.

“Tell me, are you *striving* for canonization, or are you just hoping it’ll be by happenstance?”

Griffin slipped his arm around her waist and bent, dropping his voice to a near whisper, his lips brushing her ear. “If you knew half the thoughts I’ve had about you, *saint* would be the very last thing you’d dream of calling me.”

A thrill shot through her, her thighs clenching at the thought of Griffin lying in his bed, a bunk in the firehouse, maybe, thinking about her in the middle of the night between calls, the heel of his hand pressed against his hard cock.

She shivered hard and Griffin chuckled.

“Thirsty?”

*Parched.* “Sure.”

“Let’s see.” His gaze swept the side of the marina’s parking lot that had been roped off, vendors selling everything from holiday tchotchkes to baked goods. “Cider, cocoa, or eggnog?”

“Cider, please.” Everleigh pointed over her shoulder in the direction of the dock. “I’m going to head over to the boats.”

Griffin nodded. “Meet you down there.”

The theme of this year’s Deck Out the Docks was Candy Land Christmas, and the boat owners of Port Angeles had shown up and shown out, turning the marina into a whimsical wonderland. There was pink and silver tinsel and sparkles aplenty, schooners and sailboats decked out with giant creations of sugary sweet treats that looked good enough to eat. Bright bubblegum pop renditions of the holiday classics drifted from the speakers of a nearby pontoon boat, and a few yards out in the marina, standing atop the deck of a small yacht, a group gathered around an electric heater cheered loudly as someone whipped out what looked like a blinged-out bottle of champagne and began filling red Solo cups.

“Miss Dangerfield!”

She turned, waving when she spotted Captain Keegan making her way down the dock, holding hands with two adorable little girls who couldn’t have been older than four or five.

“Captain Keegan.” Everleigh smiled. “And who do we have here?”

“This is Ava, and this is Charlotte.” Both girls waved shyly before tucking their heads against Captain Keegan’s thighs. “My daughters. And call me Lana, please.”

“As long as you call me Everleigh.”

Cap—*Lana* nodded, her mouth opening like there was something she wanted to say. “Is Brantley around?”

She tipped her chin toward the parking lot. “Grabbing us drinks.”

“Ah.” There was a twinkle in her eye. “You’re all he’s been able to talk about, you know?”

Everleigh flushed. “He, uh, seems like a really great guy.”

“I caught him looking up ferry schedules yesterday.”

She frowned. “Ferry schedules?”

“Mm-hmm. The Edmonds-Kingston ferry.” Lana arched a brow. “You know, the one between here and Seattle.”

The air left her lungs with a punched-out little laugh. “You’re kidding.”

It was, give or take, two and a half hours from Seattle to Port Angeles. Too far to reasonably commute daily, but someone could, say, spend a decent part of their ninety-six hours off in the city and make it back here well rested and ready to start their shift. Not that that *someone* would need to make the trip, not when, as long as Everleigh had her laptop and a reliable internet connection, she could technically work from anywhere. Anywhere including a homey little seaside town like Port Angeles that—with its charming festivals and neighbors who welcomed each other into their homes during the holidays and Good Samaritans willing to hang lights for a disaster magnet of a near stranger—had managed to worm itself into Everleigh’s heart in just a few short weeks.

*Not* that she was thinking about what that meant for her and her life past December. No siree, Everleigh wasn’t thinking about that at all.

Lana shook her head. “I wouldn’t joke about—”

A scream pierced the air and Everleigh whirled around with a gasp.

The yacht that only moments ago she’d admired had fallen into chaos. Sparks flew from the heater, flames already licking at the bottom of the mast.

“Cap!” Griffin jogged down the dock, a cup clutched in each hand and a frown creasing his face. “What happened?”

“Looks like an electrical fire, and it’s growing fast.”

In a matter of moments, the fire had spread, the entire bridge deck enveloped in flames, the passengers trying in vain to douse the fire with Solo cups full of lake water. No one aboard was wearing a life jacket.

“Go back to the house and get your father,” Lana said, shuffling her girls up the dock. “Tell him Mommy said to call 911. There’s an electrical fire on a boat anchored in the Port Angeles marina. Captain Keegan is off duty but on the scene.” The girls took off at a sprint, and she tugged on the zipper of her puffer coat, dragging it down.

Griffin set the drinks down and grabbed at the neck of his hoodie, tugging it over his head.

Everleigh goggled, watching him strip. “What are you doing?”

“In fifty-degree water, cold-shock response sets in in less than a minute.” He kicked off his boots. “The fastest B-shift will be able to get

here is in five minutes. And that's if we're lucky. That's too long."

Dressed in nothing but an undershirt and boxers, Griffin executed a perfect swan dive, disappearing beneath the surface of the dark, choppy water. Everleigh's heart leaped into her throat.

"He'll be fine." Lana stepped out of her flats and reached for the button on her jeans. "Brantley's a strong swimmer. We both are."

Over the course of the next five minutes, Everleigh bit her nails to the quick, watching as Griffin and Captain Keegan swam back and forth between the burning yacht and land, single-handedly helping the boaters make it back to shore. Hands literally full, closer to the dock than the boat, they missed as a hand shot up from the water, disappearing beneath the surface a moment later.

Everleigh didn't think.

The water pricked at her skin like needles, stinging. She'd swum the one-hundred-yard breaststroke and four-hundred-yard freestyle relay in high school, made a few extra bucks lifeguarding at a community pool every summer. But that had been a decade ago; she was by no means a weak swimmer, but she'd never swum in waters this cold. And unlike Griffin and Captain Keegan, she hadn't stopped to strip down, diving instead into the water dressed in a cowl-necked sweaterdress.

A face surfaced from the water half a dozen yards away, a young woman fighting to keep her head above the waves.

Adrenaline crashed through Everleigh's veins, and she kicked her legs harder. If only she had a life buoy, a rescue ring, something, *anything*. Griffin and Lana had made it look so easy, towing the victims ashore, hands wrapped under their arms, using their legs to propel them.

"Help! Help!"

Sucking in a lungful of air just in case, Everleigh wrapped her arms around the waist of the woman struggling to keep her head above the water.

"Hold on," she panted. "You're going to be okay!"

She kicked hard and fast, pinching her lips shut against the water that lapped at her chin. With the dock in sight, no more than ten yards away, the woman she was helping panicked, starting to thrash. The heel of her hand jammed into Everleigh's temple, her fingers tangling in Everleigh's hair, finding purchase, shoving Everleigh's head under the frigid water.

Her chest burned. Thirty seconds. That was how long, on average, drowning victims had before their involuntary breath-holding failed, carbon dioxide building up inside the lungs, triggering an involuntary gasp for air followed by aspiration of water into the trachea. Not even that long in cold water.

Just when it felt like her lungs were going to explode, an arm banded around her waist, dragging her above the surface. Everleigh gasped, sucking in a greedy lungful of air, and blinked brackish water from her eyes.

Griffin stared down at her, hair plastered across his forehead, water droplets clinging to his long, dark lashes.

“I’ve got you,” he said.

## Chapter Four

Shirt, sweatpants, extra-thick socks, and shower's just down the hall." Griffin pressed a bundle of clothes into Everleigh's hands with a crooked smile. "Follow me."

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble." She wrapped the emergency mylar blanket tighter around her shoulders and padded after him, feet bare and skin clammy. "I would've been fine. Really."

"You almost drowned, Everleigh." He looked over his shoulder at her. "Humor me."

His house was beautiful—a modified A-frame cabin, tucked away in the woods near the Olympic National Park, secluded yet still closer to town than her grandmother's house by a solid twenty minutes. It felt a little like the tree house of her dreams, painted in shades of green—forest and hunter, basil and fern—the floor-to-ceiling windows along the back of the house bringing the outdoors in.

As much as she loved the city and everything it had to offer, this was the sort of house she'd always dreamed of calling home. A house in a town that wasn't quite so small that everyone knew everyone's business, but small enough that there was a real sense of community. It was a place where she could imagine putting down roots, raising a family. Should she ever be so lucky.

Griffin stopped in front of the last door on the left. "Shower should have everything you need, and the towels are all clean."

"Thanks." She held up the bundle he'd handed her, clothes that were soft and smelled like him, like fresh linen and peppermint. "I'll be quick."

"Take your time." His eyes flickered to her lips and back to her eyes. "I'll, uh, make up the guest room for you."

He pulled the bathroom door shut, and Everleigh slumped over, elbows resting against the basin of the sink, her head cradled in her hands, mylar blanket sliding to the floor, forgotten.

*Fuck.*

People got hurt all the time. Either of them could've wound up in the hospital or worse tonight, and what would she have done then? Crawled into bed, reassured by the fact that she'd done a bang-up job protecting her *feelings*?

Fuck her feelings, her fears, all of it. Everleigh opened the bathroom door and—

Griffin stood just on the other side of the threshold, hands braced on the doorframe, head hung, looking as absolutely wrecked as she felt. His eyes flitted up, meeting hers. "Sorry. I was just about to—"

"This was a date," she blurted.

He frowned. "Sorry."

"I'm so, so tired"—she reached out, fisting the front of his shirt—"of pretending this isn't what I want."

"Everleigh." His jaw clenched. "What are you saying right now?"

She laughed. "Isn't it obvious?"

He shook his head. "I need you to be really fucking clear right now."

The word *fuck* rolling off his tongue sent a bolt of heat through her. "I'm saying you should kiss me right now, or else I'll—"

Griffin's mouth came crashing down on hers before she could finish the threat.

There was nothing chaste or slow about it. His tongue was in her mouth, tracing the ridges of her teeth, tasting her, taking what he wanted, stealing her breath. When he drew back, teeth nipping at the swell of her lower lip, she shivered, a soft groan escaping.

"Goddammit, Everleigh," he swore, hands rising, gripping her arms. "You're infuriating, you know that?"

"Me?" She laughed against his mouth. "I'm infuriating? You're the one walking around in a uniform that's way too fucking small." Hugging his biceps in a way that was practically pornographic.

He chuckled and stepped closer, pressing his erection into her hip. "I'm not wearing my uniform now."

“No.” She nipped at his lip the way he had hers, earning a groan. “But you are wearing too much.”

“Could say the same about you.” He hummed, and one hand slid down her shoulder, her arm, slowing to caress the skin of her inner elbow, pausing to brush his thumb against the thrumming pulse in her wrist. He shifted, tracing the curve of her waist before reaching for the hem of her waterlogged dress. His fingers slipped beneath the fabric and trailed up the inside of her knee, fingertips rough and warm as they danced against the skin of her thigh. His hand cupped her over her underwear, pressed right up against her cunt through the cotton. “I bet you’re already wet for me, huh?”

Her face flamed as she nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

“Fuck.” He chuckled under his breath, the look in his eyes heated but a bit soft, too, as his gaze flickered over her shoulder into the bathroom. “Truthfully? I’ve never actually fucked anyone inside a shower before. And considering your track record and how I’m not looking to call 911, maybe—”

She grabbed his face and pressed her lips against his so she wouldn’t grin too stupidly. “Bed,” she muttered against his mouth.

“Bed it is.” His hands slid down, palming her ass, fingers biting into her flesh as he lifted her against him. She wrapped her legs around his waist, gasping softly when he pressed against her, her panties the only thing covering her core.

Griffin stumbled down the hall, trying to navigate while nibbling her neck. His teeth grazed against a particularly sensitive spot just under her ear, and she tightened her legs, squeezing him to her, making him groan.

Halfway up the stairs, he huffed and set her down, right on the staircase. “Fuck this.”

Shuffling until he was kneeling several stairs below her, he reached under her dress, fingers looping around her underwear, tugging them over her ass and down her thighs. They wound up flung somewhere over her shoulders, forgotten when he ducked his head beneath her dress and ran the flat of his tongue between her folds, moaning softly against her.

“Oh, my God.” Her hands twitched, grasping the edge of the stair, fingernails biting into the dark wood. The tip of his tongue flicked against her clit, hard and fast before he wrapped his lips around the

bundle and sucked. A shudder racked her body, her stomach tensing, twitching. “*Fuck.*”

Fire sparked inside her veins when his hand trailed up her thigh and two of his fingers pressed against her, sliding inside and curling against the spot she could never comfortably reach, but his fingers were longer and thicker than hers and he knew exactly what he was—*fuck*—what he was doing with them. Pleasure unfurled from the base of her spine and spread—

“*Oh.*” She snapped, muscles trembling, as she came, pleasure blindsiding her, stealing the breath from her lungs until her vision spotted.

Griffin withdrew his fingers, raising his eyes as he licked his lips, lips that were flushed and swollen and slick. “Good?”

She shook her head, blinking, words failing her. “Uh-huh.”

Slowly, he smirked, cocky as hell, and her cunt clenched all over again. “Good. Not that I’m opposed to further practice, because—*fuck*, Trouble. You taste amazing.”

As if to make the point, Griffin brought his hand to his mouth, sucking his fingers clean.

Everleigh squirmed. There was a stair sort of poking into the middle of her back that she hadn’t noticed until now. A credit to exactly how good with his mouth Griffin was, managing to distract her. “Maybe we could actually move this to a bed?”

Griffin ducked his head, laughing. “Sorry. Got a little eager there.”

On the list of things he needed to apologize for, his eagerness ranked dead last.

Before she could even think about standing, Griffin reached down, scooping her off the stairs and into his arms sideways without so much as a grunt, her knees crooked over one forearm while the other held her back, cradling her the way he had that first, fortuitous night in her kitchen.

As soon as they were inside his room, he set her down on her feet. He took a step back, blowing out his breath. “So.”

She bit the inside of her cheek and lifted her dress up her body and over her head, dropping it at her side.

Griffin stared, mouth open.

“Jesus Christ,” he swore, reaching behind his neck and pulling off his hoodie, the muscles in his arms flexing in the process. He was . . . *God*. It should be criminal to look that good.

Broad shoulders gave way to an equally broad and built chest that nipped down into a defined waist. A trail of dark hair ran beneath his belly button and disappeared into his jeans, jeans she wanted off yesterday.

“Off,” she demanded. “Take those off.”

Griffin held her stare as he popped the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper. His thumbs dipped beneath the waistband, but he paused, lips quirking. “Impatient?”

“About to start without you.”

Griffin shook his head and shucked off his jeans, his boxers sliding off, too. He stepped out of the denim and took a step toward her, cock jutting out in front of him, hard and thick, pearly fluid leaking from the tip.

Everleigh hadn’t realized she’d licked her lips until Griffin groaned, his hands grabbing her hips and pulling her close. His cock pressed against her stomach, heavy and hot, precome smearing onto her skin. “Are you sure?”

Resting her hands on his shoulders, she captured his lips. He tasted warm and like her, tangy and sweet, his mouth still covered in her arousal. She swiped her tongue against his bottom lip and pulled back before he could deepen the kiss. “Yes.”

Griffin stretched an arm out, reaching inside the top drawer of his nightstand, pulling out a condom. Before he could rip open the foil, before Everleigh hardly knew what she was doing, she was reaching out and stilling his hand with her fingers over his.

He looked at her, a question in his eyes creasing his brow.

Cheeks hot, she fought the urge to squirm and shrugged instead. “I’ve got an IUD, and I haven’t, you know, been with anyone since the last time I got tested. I’ve got my results on my phone if you want to see. So if you’re—”

“I had a physical last month,” he said, throat working hard as he swallowed. “I’m good. I can show you my results if you—”

She shook her head. “I trust you.”

Griffin's breath shuddered from between his lips, and his eyelids fluttered, composure cracking. He tossed the condom aside and reached for her, gripping her by the hips, his fingers biting into her ass. "You want me to fuck you raw? You want me to come inside you?"

Everleigh shivered and a tiny whimper clawed its way up her throat. "*Griffin.*"

He chuckled and the sound rumbled through her, heat pooling between her thighs. "Come on, Everleigh." He leaned in, his stubble rasping against her cheek as his lips skimmed the shell of her ear. "You want it? I want to hear you say it. I want to hear you tell me you want it."

Her cunt clenched and she dug her nails into his shoulders, suddenly dizzy with desire even as her face burned hotter than it ever had before.

Everleigh had never had sex without a condom before, but she wanted it. Wanted to feel him.

"I want it," she breathed. "I want to feel you."

He groaned softly and turned his head, lips brushing her cheek. "Hands and knees for me, baby. Please."

Griffin's bed was soft, the dark-green comforter plush under her palms as she got comfortable, bracing herself on all fours.

He didn't say she couldn't look, so she peeked over her shoulder, watching as he knelt on the bed and crawled toward her. He molded himself to her back, curling himself around her, closing the distance between their faces so he could kiss her again.

His mouth was still pressed against hers, his teeth biting at her bottom lip when he filled her with one swift thrust. Her head fell forward, breaking the kiss, as she gasped softly.

He felt huge like this, or maybe it was just this position—she had no idea. But it felt like he was touching every inch of her, his cock nudging places inside her she didn't even know existed.

And somehow, he sank even deeper when he shifted, bracing himself with an arm on either side of hers, his lips pressed against the nape of her neck. "You feel fucking amazing. Your pussy is—"

His hips drew back, withdrawing until only the flared head of his cock kept her open to him. He quickly thrust forward, burying himself inside her again. "Fuck, Everleigh. How are you this perfect?"

She closed her eyes and hummed. His breath was hot against her neck, his lips even hotter as he sucked what was going to be a vicious mark into the side of her throat that she couldn't wait to press her fingers against.

"Please," she panted. It was—fuck, it was so good, but too slow, the drag of his cock inside her leaving her all but vibrating with need.

"Please, what?" His tongue laved a path up her neck, his teeth closing around the lobe of her ear. "Tell me. Tell me and I'll do anything, I promise."

"Harder." She whimpered when he immediately delivered, hips snapping.

"Like this?" His breath was ragged against her ear, damp and hot, and combined with the feel of his cock constantly nudging something deep inside her, she'd never felt this utterly fucked before.

"Yes," she gasped. "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"Never going to," Griffin said, making it sound like a promise.

Her eyes slipped shut, her mouth hanging open as little punched-out noises slipped from between her lips. Thank God his nearest neighbors were acres away because she couldn't have been quiet had she tried.

"Thought about this," he confessed in a murmur against her throat. "I thought about burying my face between your thighs and eating you out until you screamed my name. I thought about burying my cock inside you just like this and fucking you so good your legs would give out and you couldn't . . . couldn't leave my bed. Wouldn't want to leave." He huffed softly. "Fuck, Everleigh. I thought about fucking you so full of my come, I'd be dripping down your thighs. You drive me so fucking crazy. God, I'm just—"

With one arm, he grabbed her around the waist and hauled her up until she was sitting on his lap, impaled on his cock. He shifted, hand wrapping gently around her throat, pulling her mouth toward his. Only when she was totally lost in the feeling of his mouth against hers did he begin to rock into her, slower, but just as hard, more intense because of it.

Her legs started to shake, and it had nothing to do with how she was kneeling and everything to do with how he was taking her apart with his cock and his words, his unbelievably filthy words, promises she prayed he'd keep.

“You gonna come for me, baby?” His thumb brushed her trembling bottom lip. “Come on. You can do it.”

Fuck. Her stomach tensed, the thread inside her perilously close to snapping. She felt like she was going to fly apart. “*Griffin.*”

A groan rumbled through his chest, and he pressed his lips to hers in a bruising kiss. It muffled her cry as she shattered, toes curling in the sheets almost to the point of pain, her muscles locking and releasing rhythmically.

With a sound that verged on a growl, Griffin settled his hands on her hips and lifted her off his cock, pulling her back down hard and fast before he eventually groaned softly against her shoulder.

The room was quiet save for the sound of them catching their breath. Wincing at the stiffness in her thighs, Everleigh shifted and Griffin’s cock, now soft, slipped out of her along with a trickle of wetness that made her shiver and bite her lip. She collapsed against the mattress with a stuttered sigh. “Oh, my God.”

Griffin chuckled and scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “That was . . . wow.”

She covered her face with her hands. “It was.”

The mattress dipped as he settled in beside her. A moment later, a hand slid between her thighs, fingers gently tracing her slit from top to bottom. Griffin pressed his fingers, and with them, his come, back inside her with a satisfied-sounding hum that, even spent, made Everleigh drop her hands and spread her thighs a little wider.

“So.” Griffin’s cheeks were flushed, his blue eyes bright, but the twist of his mouth looked nervous as he, with wet fingers, traced abstract patterns along the inside of her thigh. “Do you really have to leave at the end of the month?”

Everleigh smiled softly, stomach fluttering and heart thundering. “You know, I was thinking I might stick around, actually.”

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2024 Tami Keehn*

Alexandria Bellefleur is a bestselling and award-winning author of swoony contemporary romance, often featuring lovable grumps and the sunshine characters who bring them to their knees. A Pacific Northwesterner at heart, Alexandria now lives in New York City with her cats, Mills and Boon. Her special skills include finding the best pad thai in every city she visits, remembering faces but not names, falling asleep in movie theaters, and keeping cool while reading smutty books in public. Her debut novel, *Written in the Stars*, was a 2021 Lambda Literary Award winner and a 2020 winner of the Ripped Bodice Awards for Excellence in Romantic Fiction.

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“Alexandria Bellefleur powers this fake-dating masterpiece with boatloads of heart, and the result is perhaps her most divine tale yet.”

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—Talia Hibbert, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Bellefleur has a droll, distinct voice, and her one-liners zing off the page, striking both the heart and funny bone. She has a gift for comedy, possessing more style and panache than a debut writer has any right to

. . . There's a sparkling quality here, one that mirrors the starry title. Bellefleur writes as if she's captured fairy lights in a mason jar, twinkly and lovely within something solid yet fragile."

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