

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

ONLY SANTAS IN THE BUILDING

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALEXIS
DARIA



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IN THE
BUILDING**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*For anyone missing a loved one during the holiday
season.*

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Chapter One

A pristine white snowflake hangs from my doorknob by a loop of bright red cord.

After trudging up the stairs to my third-floor walk-up on the Upper East Side, I'm sweating profusely in my down coat and carrying a canvas tote filled with goodies from my deadline-fueled snack run. A quick glance at the other three units on my floor reveals that none of them have anything dangling from their doorknobs.

Further examination shows that the snowflake is one of those hand-cut varieties that kids make in school, where you fold a paper into triangles and cut shapes into the sides. It's fashioned out of card stock, and the cuts are neat and precise.

The only children in our building live in 4D. It's mid-December and I imagine their mom, Mrs. Kim, must be overrun with paper snowflakes and has decided to share the wealth. Smiling, I bring the snowflake inside.

I have a Christmas tree, such as it is. It's small and looks like it was planted by Charlie Brown. It's also completely devoid of decoration, much like the rest of my apartment. I hang my snowflake on the tree, front and center, before stripping off my coat and unloading my snack haul: salt and vinegar chips, red- and green-wrapped Hershey's Kisses, roasted cashews, and a container of honey so big it would make Winnie-the-Pooh salivate with envy. When I'm on deadline, I get very specific cravings, and having snacks on hand means I'm less likely to order an entire cake when my stress levels skyrocket. I also mainline tea like it's oxygen; hence the jumbo-size honey.

I tear open the bag of Kisses, grab a handful, and return to my desk, where the remaining panels of *Starsong* #24 await me.



The next day there's an origami crane hanging from my doorknob. I spot it on my way downstairs to check the mail.

The crane is crafted from heavy red-and-gold-striped wrapping paper, and it fits in the palm of my hand. The edges of each fold are sharp, and the crane's head is cocked at a jaunty angle. It's suspended by a loop of red cord. I collect my mail, and on my way back in, I bring the crane with me.

It goes on the tree with the snowflake, and already my apartment feels a little cheerier.

Not that my home is dreary per se. The walls are typical apartment-rental white, and my compact furniture is cream with oatmeal accents. It's just that I only moved in three months ago, and most of my stuff is still in storage, including my Christmas decorations. I've managed to frame the variant cover I did for *Starsong* #10, which shows a flashback of the pink-haired, lavender-skinned superhero flying over her home world before she was pushed through a portal and crash-landed on Earth. I also have a single plant, a housewarming gift from my sister, April. It's a rubber plant, which, according to her, is notoriously difficult to kill.

Otherwise, the only decor in my living space is the previous occupant's junk mail, empty snack packaging, and used mugs.

Don't judge me. I'm on deadline, and it's not like there's anyone else around to be bothered by the mess. And Starsong, who can overcome obstacles with the literal and metaphorical power of her voice, is, alas, unable to illustrate her own prebattle pep talk to her team. With my mind full of all the close-up shots I'm about to draw, I dump some cashews into a small dish, refill my giant cup with tap water, and get back to work.



On the third day, another piece of red cord is looped over my doorknob, this one attached to a circular wood slice painted with the silhouettes of evergreen trees in front of a dark, snowy sky.

I flip it over to see if there's anything written on the back, but it's blank. I'd assumed everyone in the building was receiving these ornaments, but something like this would take more time and skill, and I can't imagine the kids in 4D, who are both under ten years old, are *that* enterprising. But then again, people were always complimenting my drawing skills when I was a kid, so maybe one of them is a particularly gifted artist, or maybe their parents helped.

Or maybe these aren't coming from them. I haven't seen Mr. or Mrs. Kim around to ask.

Whatever. I don't have time to worry about it. My deadline is in two days, and I'll only make it if I work every waking hour and more than a few sleeping ones too. I'm finishing up a battle sequence, the culmination of Starsong's efforts to surround herself with community.

I bring the wood slice inside, since it seems rude to leave it on the door. Also, it's pretty. The ornament goes on the tree with the others, and I return to my desk, where the round, blank eyes of a dozen Funko Pops stare me down. They're some of the few things I've managed to unpack and my only companions. They remind me of the Precious Moments figurines that populated my grandmother's living room, a thought that's both comforting and a little unsettling. Tightening my wrist brace, I focus on sketching one complicated action pose after another.



On the fourth day, there's a white, crocheted star waiting for me on a loop of red cord. I shouldn't even be wasting time by going outside, but I'm out of oat milk, and I *need* it for my tea.

My shoulders relax as I finger the yarn. I know who these are from.

Mrs. Greene in 2C used to be a costume designer. She sews, obviously, but she also knits, embroiders, needlepoints, and more—anything involving fiber crafts, she can do. Her apartment is like a museum, filled with costume pieces and props from movies and Broadway shows she worked on. I love hearing all the stories behind each item. When she goes out of town to visit her grandchildren, I take care of her two cats. And while Mrs. Greene is not an old Puerto Rican woman, her knowing grin and propensity to bring me home-cooked food

reminds me of my own grandmother, who died this past summer, leaving behind a void that will never be filled.

My deadline is technically today, but I have one page left to complete: the resolution, showing Starsong surrounded by her found family in her new home on Earth. I want this page to have an emotional impact, and I'm planning to work all night until just before the start of business hours tomorrow. After I regain some brain space, I'll think of a nice way to repay Mrs. Greene.



I submit my final pages at eight o'clock the next morning. Overall, I'm proud of how they turned out. I'm known for blending a cutesy style with a strong command of anatomy, and I really brought my A game to this project.

After sending the Frodo "It's done" GIF to my Chismosas in Comics group text, I take a shower, wash my greasy deadline hair, and fall into bed, where I sleep for the next five hours.

When I wake, my phone is full of texts expressing some variation of "Congratulations, Evie!"

I drag myself out of bed and make a cup of tea. My fridge is mostly empty, and since Goldfish crackers don't count as a meal, I place an order at the Thai restaurant around the corner that has a great lunch special. After bundling up in my coat, hat, and scarf, I leave to pick up my food. It'll be faster than having it delivered, and I could use some fresh air.

My phone buzzes with another congratulatory text as I'm turning the corner to the staircase. I glance at the screen . . . and run smack into a hard, hoodie-clad chest.

One big hand catches my elbow, another cups my waist, and I'm suddenly staring up into eyes the color of rich hot chocolate.

It's Theo Winters.

My upstairs neighbor.

And the subject of all my late-night fantasies.

Chapter Two

The firm support of the hand at my waist sends rippling tendrils of awareness through me. Under my heavy coat, my skin tingles, and I start to sweat. Between the shock of the collision and my racing heart, it takes me a moment to find my voice, and the words come out thin and tight. “Oh, my God. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t looking.”

By contrast, Theo’s deep baritone is as steady as an ancient oak tree. “Are you okay, Evie?”

“Um, yeah. Thanks to you.” If he hadn’t caught me, I would’ve landed on my ass, making this encounter even more embarrassing than it already is.

We’re so close. And while I’m incredibly glad I showered and brushed my teeth, I wish I’d also taken the time to brush my hair instead of tucking it under a pink beanie, and maybe swiped on a little lip gloss too.

Theo, on the other hand, looks perfect. But then, he always does, with his dark, wavy hair, sharp features, and overly sensuous mouth. If I drew him, he’d look like a cross between Maluma and Jon Snow, romantic and rough. He’s at least a few inches over six feet and sort of bulky. And when he grins, his prominent canines slightly resemble fangs. I was obsessed with vampires when I was in high school, so this little detail does not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

I wouldn’t mind at all if he bit me.

Not in a vampire way. In a sex way.

It’s official. I have it bad for Mr. 4A. *Real* bad.

But then my stomach churns as I recall the last time I saw him.

It was last week, and I was already in frantic deadline mode. Someone knocked on my apartment door, and since I was expecting

Bernard, the building's super, I opened it without looking through the peephole.

Rookie mistake. Instead of Bernard, there was Theo in all his rugged glory. He had on jeans, work boots, and an olive-green Henley that made his brown eyes look like melted milk chocolate.

I, meanwhile, was wearing a ratty Oscar the Grouch T-shirt, no bra, and baggy sweatpants. My unwashed hair was pulled into a messy bun that was admittedly more mess than bun, and my curtain bangs desperately needed a trim. I hadn't washed my face, let alone brushed my hair or my teeth, and of course, I'd just polished off a bag of salt and vinegar chips.

I think I gasped when I saw Theo, or squeaked, or something else equally ridiculous. And then I blurted out, "I thought you were the super."

His dark brows lifted as he took me in. "Are you expecting him?"

I tried unsuccessfully to push the longer parts of my bangs behind my ears, as if that would do anything to help my overall appearance. "Um, yeah, my hall light is out. I have a stepladder, but I still can't reach it. Bernard said he'd swing by today to change it."

Theo nodded. "I can do that for you. But I'm actually here to check out your kitchen. I think one of my pipes is leaking, and I wanted to make sure it isn't causing damage. Mind if I look?"

I *did* mind and would've preferred he come back after I'd used mouthwash and, I don't know, gotten a full makeover at Sephora, but politeness, lack of sleep, and this persistent crush had me opening the door and saying, "Sure. Come on in."

When he passed by me into the apartment, I nearly whimpered. He smelled fresh and woodsy, like cedar and mint, an aromatherapy blend specifically designed to incite my libido.

Since he lives right above me in 4A, the layouts of our one-bedroom apartments are the same. The bathroom and bedroom are to the right, off a narrow hallway that opens into a combo kitchen / dining / living room space.

Theo stopped in front of the sink and rolled up his sleeves, showing off a collection of tattoos. Then he opened the cabinet doors and crouched down, peering inside with a penlight attached to his keys. It was on the tip of my potato-chip-flavored tongue to ask about his tats

when I noticed that my sink was full of dirty dishes and take-out containers.

Have I mentioned that I've been on deadline?

And that there's been no one else to bother cleaning up for since my grandmother died?

I was about to apologize for the slovenly state of my apartment—and myself—when he straightened to his full height and I nearly swallowed my tongue. Theo's a big guy, and while his size always makes my mouth go dry when I run into him in the hall or around the neighborhood, his standing in my tiny kitchen made him seem even more gigantic. I wanted to climb him like a beanstalk.

"Everything looks okay," he said. "Which light bulb needs changing?"

"Oh, um, that one." I pointed at the overhead light fixture in the hallway.

"Gotcha. Where's this alleged stepladder?"

His adorable grin only served to make me more flustered. I showed him the stepladder stashed between the fridge and the wall. He unfolded it in the hallway and climbed on. When he reached up to unscrew the old-fashioned glass fixture, my eyes zeroed in on the exposed strip of skin above the waistband of his jeans and . . . Yeah, I'll just say it: his ass. I stared at his ass. And I couldn't stop.

Theo's ass filled out the back of his jeans with an intriguing curve, the muscle definition on his lower back acting as neon arrows pointing down. Really, how could I *not* look?

To give a little background information, I met Theo the day I moved in. It was ninety-five degrees, and the movers were two hours late. My mother had been badgering me all morning, as if the delay were somehow *my* fault, and the heat certainly hadn't helped me keep a cool head.

I was watching two guys maneuver my overstuffed cream couch up the narrow staircase while trying very hard not to yell *Pivot!* like Ross in *Friends*, when there was Theo, appearing out of the ether like the patron saint of five-story walk-ups. He immediately stepped in to help, barely even breaking a sweat. He joked with the movers, relating his own experiences carrying furniture up these tight quarters, and that was when I found out he lived right above me.

From that moment on, I've fantasized about showing up at his door for a cup of sugar, *wink wink nudge nudge*, while wearing tiny shorts and a see-through top with a lacy bra underneath. Never mind that I don't own a lacy bra; for the purposes of this daydream, I've magically found one in the back of my underwear drawer.

Instead, I was wearing my Oscar the Grouch T-shirt, which is so symbolic of how I look like trash whenever I see him, I can't even take it.

My grandmother used to style her hair and wear lipstick every day, no matter what, *Because you never know who you'll run into*. If I told her about this, I know exactly what she'd say.

You see? ¡Te lo dije!

I'd give anything to hear her say *I told you* so one more time.

But let's return to the flashback at hand.

"You have a new bulb?" Theo had asked, and I'd quickly handed him the one that was sitting on the counter.

With deft movements, he swapped out the old incandescent bulb for an LED, and my attention was once again drawn to his butt as he descended the stepladder, folded it, and put it away.

I cleared my throat. "Thank you. Um, for changing the light bulb."

"My pleasure," he said. "I'm always happy to help, Evie."

Then he glanced at my Christmas tree and smiled.

The tree stirs up another blush-inducing memory. I'd been coming home with groceries a few days earlier when I felt the urge to impulse-buy a Christmas tree from the vendor on Lexington. Even though it was a small tree, carrying it home was a lot more unwieldy than I'd expected, especially with a week's worth of fridge staples weighing me down. Theo found me struggling to drag it upstairs by the trunk, and much as he had with the sofa, he swooped in to save the day. Before I knew it, Theo had the tree slung over one broad shoulder and the handles of all my reusable grocery bags looped in one big hand.

Days later, my tree was still as devoid of ornamentation as when he'd carried it upstairs for me. And even though he didn't ask or offer up any sort of judgment, my mouth ran away from me in a rambling explanation.

"I've got a big deadline coming up for this comic I'm working on. It's the last issue of this arc—sort of a big deal, possibly setting up for a

crossover event, although that's kind of a secret, so pretend I didn't say anything—and I was the replacement artist because the previous one had, like, a family emergency or something and the publisher knows I can draw pretty fast.” Why was I telling him all this? Who fucking knows! But once I'd started, I couldn't stop until I'd reached some kind of point. “Anyway, all my Christmas decorations are still in storage, because they—” I barely managed to cut myself off. It was bad enough that he was always helping me cart things up the stairs; he didn't need to carry my emotional baggage too. “Um, I haven't had time to go get them. Or do anything else, like wash dishes or do my laundry, clearly. And it feels silly to buy new ornaments when I *do* own some. Somewhere. So yeah, I haven't decorated the tree yet.”

And with that, I'd *finally* shut my mouth.

Theo was quiet for a moment before he nodded. “Well, I'll let you get back to work. Sorry for interrupting.”

“Don't apologize!” If I wished hard enough, maybe a portal would open and fling *me* into the far reaches of space, as had happened to Starsong. “Thanks for making sure there wasn't any water damage.”

He sent me a crooked grin. “Just being a good neighbor.” And then he was gone, leaving me with the lingering scent of cedar and mint.

The second the door closed behind him, I tore into the bathroom, slapped on the light, and bit back a screech when I saw my reflection. How could I let him see me like that? Why hadn't I just asked him to come back later?

Because my crush-addled and sex-starved brain short-circuited whenever I encountered this gorgeous redwood of a man.

And now here we are, face-to-face at the top of the stairs, and unfortunately, I'm not doing much better. I'm clean, at least, but that's about all I have going for me. I step back, hoping he doesn't notice the dark, puffy circles under my eyes from weeks of all-nighters, and he finally releases his hold on my elbow and waist.

More's the pity.

“On your way out?” He stuffs those big, warm hands into the pockets of his hoodie. I could feel the heat of them even through my coat, and I'm trying not to fixate on how they'd feel against my bare skin.

Warm hands on a cold night . . . Heaven.

I clear my throat and scramble to answer. “Mm-hmm. Picking up takeout.”

His brows quirk with interest. “From where?”

“Yummy Thai, around the corner.”

“Oh, they have a great—”

“*Lunch special*,” we both say at the same time. His wide grin matches my own, and I feel a sort of neighborly kinship with him.

“Are you going to the party tonight?” he asks. “On the fifth floor?”

The fifth floor has only two units, and each one is twice the size of my apartment. Mr. Barnes lives in 5B, and according to Mrs. Greene, he was a famous songwriter. Apparently he throws an annual, themed Christmas party and invites everyone in the building. My guess is that this is also an effort to appease the residents so they don’t complain about the noise, but Mrs. Greene says it’s always a lot of fun. This year’s theme is Only Santas in the Building.

“I’m planning to go,” I say, and then take a leap. “Will you be there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” I’m probably imagining the warmth in his eyes, especially since he steps aside a second later. “I better let you go. See you later, Evie.”

I mutter goodbye and trot down the stairs, swallowing back a groan. Why the hell do I always have to look like such a train wreck when I run into him?

Hmm, maybe because I’m depressed and grieving and my only coping mechanism is to drown myself in work? Just a thought!

On the second floor, I stop at 2C and knock, but Mrs. Greene doesn’t answer. I figure she’s probably out getting her hair or nails done before the party tonight. She’s seventy-eight and resembles Nichelle Nichols of *Star Trek* fame. I have never seen her looking anything less than stunning. She has a penchant for jewel tones and statement pieces, and her makeup and hair are always just so.

As for me? I’m thirty-one and can best be described as “cute.” An ex-boyfriend once called me a “sexy chipmunk” and actually meant it as a compliment. I get carded every single time I buy liquor, and when the clerks check the year on my ID, I get varying expressions of disbelief.

With a little primping, I can certainly pull off “pretty.” But tonight, I want to feel more than pretty. I want to feel like a knockout. A

bombshell. A ten out of ten.

I want to feel as confident and badass as Starsong.

I might not have the power of flight, but I have luxury-brand mascara and a forty-dollar tube of red lipstick, and that's nearly as good.

The last two times I've run into Theo, I've been at my worst. This party is my chance to show him—and myself—that I'm not just a sweats-clad cave dweller with dirty hair, endless deadlines, and a tragic backstory.

It's time to take charge of my own narrative. Tonight, I'm going to blow Theo's mind.

Chapter Three

There's no ornament waiting for me when I get back, and I take that to mean Mrs. Greene is still out. No matter. I'll see her at the party, and I can thank her then.

I sit at my round two-seater dining table and video chat my sister, April, while I dig into my chicken pad thai.

"I need advice," I tell her when she picks up.

"My favorite words," she says, then yells to the side, "Don't break that!"

Sounds like my nephews are getting into trouble, as usual.

April is forty and sort of like my second mother. She's also my best friend, which didn't happen until around ten years ago or so. She lives in Philly with her husband and their two sons. The boys think it's so *cool* that their tía illustrates comic books, and they tell all their elementary school friends.

"Did you finish your pages?" April asks once she's done hollering at the boys.

"I turned them in bright and early. Already got a confirmation from the editor."

"Congrats! Does this mean you finally get to take a break?"

"For the next couple weeks. Then I get the script for another project in the New Year."

"Hmm." April, who works as an occupational therapist, has very specific views on my work-life balance, or lack thereof.

"Anyway, that's not why I called," I say before April can launch into a lecture. "This is about Theo."

April's dark-brown eyes, nearly identical to mine, narrow. We definitely look like sisters, with the same honey-tanned skin and high

cheekbones, although her hair is curly while mine is straight, and I have freckles across my nose that make me look perpetually twelve years old.

“What do I always say?” she asks in a tone that sounds just like our mother.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t shit where you eat.”

She knows all about my crush on Theo and has made it perfectly clear that I shouldn’t have a torrid affair with my neighbor.

But I really, really want to.

“I’m just saying, you were lucky to find this place,” she goes on. “You don’t want to jeopardize it if things with him go south and you still have three-quarters of the year left on your lease.”

When I chew instead of responding, she asks, “I take it he’s going to be at this party tonight?”

“He is.” I tell her about our literal run-in on the stairs. By the end, April is shaking her head.

“Sweetie, I just think that if he were into you, he would have made it obvious by now, and no, carrying your stuff isn’t enough.” Her tone isn’t unkind, but we’ve been over this many times before. “Why hasn’t he at least asked you out for coffee yet?”

“I don’t drink coffee.”

She huffs. “That’s not the point. Have you decided what you’re going to wear tonight?”

I gladly accept the change in topic. “I was planning to wear a Santa hat and make some cookies, but I look like such a slob every time I see him, I want to go all out.”

April’s expression softens. “Evie, if he doesn’t like you at your worst, he doesn’t deserve you at your best.”

“I know.”

I haven’t told her that I’m not aiming for Theo to like me. That feels too far out of reach, and honestly, I’d be satisfied with making out with him in a dark corner of the party.

Do I want more? Hell yeah. In addition to being gorgeous, Theo is smart, helpful, and polite. From our brief conversations in passing, I know he works as a software engineer, he’s lived in the building for seven years, and he owns his unit. Mrs. Greene adores him and said he fixes things for her when Bernard, the super, takes too long to show up.

I want to get to know my upstairs neighbor, who's apparently as competent with computers as he is with tools. But I feel like such a loser every time I run into him, I end up babbling or getting tongue-tied. For once, I want to feel like I'm at my best during an interaction with Theo. Is that too much to ask?

"How's the apartment?" April cuts into my thoughts with another common topic of our conversations. "Have you gotten anything out of storage yet?"

"Not yet. But it's fine."

I glance over at my little Christmas tree, which is looking a lot less sad these days with its snowflake, crane, winter landscape, and star. I want to thank Mrs. Greene before I mention them to April.

A bubble of warmth swells in my chest. This tree, with its small collection of handmade ornaments, has made me feel more at home here than anything else has.

April's quiet for a moment, and I chew another bite of pad thai.

"I know you and Grandma were really close at the end," she says gently. "We all appreciated how much you stepped up to help her out. It's okay if this isn't an easy transition."

I don't know what to say to that. Honestly, I try not to think about it much.

I moved in with my grandmother three years ago. She was eighty-five at the time and self-sufficient, but she needed someone to help take out the trash and stuff like that. The rent on my apartment in Brooklyn had been sucking me dry, and since I work from home, I was the ideal family member for the job.

Grandma and I made great roommates. She cooked, I cleaned, and in the evenings we watched telenovelas together. My Spanish language skills are basic at best, so she'd fill me in on things I didn't understand, and I found my vocabulary improving.

Then she had a stroke. A month later, she was gone.

"Selling the house was a shitty thing for Tío to do," April continues. "We all know that."

The noodles in my mouth suddenly turn flavorless, and I wash them down with a gulp of water.

My grandmother's death was hard on all of us. I helped my mom and my aunts and uncles clean out the house, but I was hoping to

continue living there, at least for a while. The mortgage had been paid off ages ago.

But my grandmother had put the house in my uncle's name, and he sold it without telling anyone. Without telling *me*.

"I just wish he'd at least given me the chance to buy it." It's an old complaint, but April is a compassionate ear, on this topic, at least, and it's the part of the whole story that bugs me the most. "Not like I could afford it, but still. And then he only gave me three weeks to move out."

That right there is why all my stuff is in storage.

April makes an understanding hum. "I know you don't want to live with Mom and Dad. But you could still move in with us. We have plenty of room, and I bet you could sublet your apartment."

I stayed with my parents for a few weeks after moving out of Grandma's house. They live in Astoria, and it's not like they charged me rent or anything, but I can only deal with my mother in small doses, so it was never going to be a permanent solution.

After yet another Sunday morning fight with Mom over going to church—she wanted me to go, and I didn't—Dad called in a favor with an old friend and hooked me up with this place. The floors creak like they're in a haunted house and the kitchen appliances are ancient, but it's rent stabilized and all mine.

Even if it doesn't quite feel like home yet.

"That's really nice of you," I tell April. "But I'm not ready to leave New York." And as much as I love my sister, her well-intentioned but intrusive questions would get on my last nerve.

"I just want you to know it's an option, okay?"

"Thanks. Oh, I'm getting another call," I lie.

"Have fun at the party. I want to hear all about it later. And make good choices!"

I suppress a good-natured eye roll. She's been telling me that for as long as I can remember. "I will. Bye, *Mom*."

"Ouch. Point taken. Bye!"

I hang up and put the rest of my lunch in the fridge. Then I finally tackle the dishes in the sink.

These are the moments when I miss my grandmother the most. When it's quiet, when I'm alone, when I don't have a deadline breathing

down my neck. It's easier to stay busy than face the grief of my first Christmas without her.

The ornaments in storage? They're hers. I had decided to keep them even before my uncle sold the house out from under me, so I didn't tell anyone I had them.

But I can't face seeing them anywhere other than the fake tree in her living room.

So the fact that Mrs. Greene thought of me and took the time to make these ornaments, *by hand*, means more than I will ever be able to convey to her.

Still, I have to thank her somehow.

I think about it while I finish the dishes and do my daily fifteen-minute yoga routine. I want to make something in return. Another ornament? No, that feels derivative. A drawing? Maybe.

Then it hits me. Christmas is a week away, and I haven't done any baking yet. While I'm not much of a cook, I enjoy the precision of baking. You follow each step and when it's done, you have something delicious and heartwarming. I'll find out Mrs. Greene's favorite dessert and make it for her.

With my mind made up and my body loose and limber, I turn my attention toward the other order of business: prepping for the party in 5B.

Riding high on the endorphins of hitting my deadline, and maybe a lingering sense of empowerment inspired by Starsong's own story arc, I rummage through my dresser and tiny closet. It's not enough to just look pretty; I want to embrace my creativity and do something *memorable*.

While rifling through a bin of cold-weather gear, I'm hit with a brilliant flash of insight.

If I sacrifice this white scarf and this red sweater . . .

After a quick image search on my computer, I grab a pair of scissors and a hot glue gun.

A short time later, with my costume complete, I slick on some mascara and wine-red lipstick. Then I trim my bangs and use a curling iron on the ends of my hair. I pin up the sides with a couple of claw clips and leave the rest hanging loose.

With my hair and makeup done, I wrestle my boobs into a strapless push-up bra and pull on a pair of black jeans so tight I know I'll feel the

urge to pee every time I sit down. But this is a minor inconvenience, because they make my butt look fantastic.

And now, it's time for the pièce de résistance.

I've trimmed the neckline and wrists of a red V-neck sweater with pieces of a fluffy white scarf. I tug the sweater over my head, taking care not to mess up my hair or makeup, and tuck the hem into my jeans. After cinching a stretchy black belt around my waist, I turn to admire the results in the mirror hanging on the back of my bedroom door.

"There you are," I say to the mirror. For the first time in a while, I feel like more than Evie C., the cute and quirky comic book illustrator.

I'm Ivelisse Cruz, the grown-ass adult who knows what she wants and goes after it.

I am wearing Mariah Carey's iconic red Santa outfit from the 1994 music video for "All I Want for Christmas Is You." Or as close to it as I can manage, using items found in my closet.

I look hot, and also a little silly, which seems appropriate for a Christmas costume party with your neighbors. I wish I had red pants to complete the look, but that might be taking it too far. And with jeans, I can hold my phone, keys, and lipstick in the pockets, although just barely.

I snap a picture and text it to April. Her reply pops up immediately.

Genius!!!

Smiling, I slip my feet into low-heeled, black ankle boots and grab the narrow gift bag with a bottle of wine I picked up earlier. I leave, lock the door behind me, and climb the two flights of stairs to the fifth floor.

The door to 5B is open and live piano music floats out. Someone is playing "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas."

Taking a deep breath, I step over the threshold.

And immediately spot Theo.

Chapter Four

Everything inside me squeezes when I look at Theo. He's standing across the room, chatting with Mr. Kim from 4D—or, at least, I think it's Mr. Kim beneath the fake white Santa beard.

Theo's wearing a red-and-black-plaid flannel with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, showing off his tattoos and strong forearms. There's a generic Santa hat on his head, the white trim stark against his black hair, and he has an honest-to-God tool belt filled with *real tools* slung around his hips.

He's so fucking hot I want to scream.

Then he turns, and I can tell the exact moment when he sees me.

I wouldn't say his expression is thunderstruck. That implies an almost comical level of shock and surprise. But everything about him stills, and his face goes blank, save for a burning intensity in his eyes. His lips part slightly as his jaw goes slack. After a long moment, he blinks, as if coming back to himself.

I imagine drawing him this way, then try to picture the kind of scenario where such a facial expression would be appropriate.

It's the moment when the girl in the teen rom-com abandons her glasses and ponytail and descends the stairs in all her prom-ready glory. It's the moment when her high school crush finally sees her for the beautiful twenty-six-year-old actress that she is.

I drew Starsong's face like this the first time she met the woman who became her love interest.

I'm not a teen movie heroine or an actress or a superhero, but I *have* managed to strike my crush speechless, and it fills me with an immeasurable sense of power and triumph.

It's such an improvement over how I've been feeling lately, it doesn't take much effort to gather my courage to walk toward him.

I manage two steps before a Sam Elliott look-alike intercepts me.

"Hi there," the man says. "I'm Nate Barnes."

Mr. Barnes is an older white man with a full head of gray hair, a thick white mustache, and sweet eyes. He wears a sharp red suit, perfectly tailored to his lean frame. I shake his hand and pass him the wine.

"Hi, Mr. Barnes. I'm Evie. Thank you for inviting me."

"Of course. You're the new girl in 3A, right?"

"That's right."

"Nice to meet you. Loretta has only the kindest things to say about you."

I smile. Loretta is Mrs. Greene. "I think she's pretty great too."

"I can already tell you're a vast improvement over the man who lived there before you," Mr. Barnes continues. "Absolutely horrid. Never came to a single one of my parties. Shame what happened to him, though."

"Oh, no. Did he pass away?" I infuse my voice with an appropriate amount of horror and sympathy, but I mostly want to know whether he died in my apartment.

"Nothing like that. He moved to Florida." Mr. Barnes shudders. "A worse fate I cannot imagine. And I say this as someone who was born in Jacksonville. Now, have you met young Theo here?"

He gestures, and before I have time to collect myself, Theo is at my side, so close and so handsome that I struggle to catch my breath.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the Queen of Christmas herself." Theo's deep voice makes *me* want to shiver, but I hold it together, even as his warm gaze sweeps me up and down.

"You know who I'm dressed as?" That was my biggest concern with this costume, but I figure it looks Santa-ish enough that it won't matter if people don't recognize it.

"That song is a modern classic." Then Theo leans down and speaks in an undertone. "You look good, Evie. Really good."

An effervescent fluttering sensation starts in my belly. "Thanks. Ah, so do you. Lumberjack Santa?"

He lets out a low chuckle. "Something like that. I was going for Santa in his workshop." He jiggles his tool belt, and I hear the sound of sleigh bells.

“Cute.” I narrowly refrain from making a joke about his jingle balls, and am immensely proud of my restraint. Look at me, not babbling inappropriately! I’m already making progress.

“Light bulb still okay?”

“Yep. Turning on and off, just like it’s supposed to.”

He laughs, as I hoped he would. “Aside from not being able to reach the ceiling, how do you like living here so far?”

“I kind of love it,” I answer honestly. “Everyone is so friendly. And lately someone’s been doing something really sweet for me, so I’m trying to think of a way to say thank you.”

He cocks an eyebrow and grins, flashing those little fangs I like so much. “That so? Got any ideas?”

“I was thinking of baking something.”

That seems to surprise him. “Do you enjoy baking?”

“Yes, but I don’t do it often.”

“Ah. Deadlines?”

“That, and I have this condition called Tiny Kitchen Syndrome.”

He nods. “I’m familiar with it. Hey, I built out an extra counter in mine, if you want to come bake upstairs. Might make it easier.”

This is so much like my borrow-a-cup-of-sugar fantasy I want to pinch myself. “You wouldn’t mind me making a mess in your kitchen? I mean, I’d clean up afterward, obviously.”

“Well, I hope I’d get to taste the results.” He grins, then gives a little shrug. “Anyway, I like cleaning. It gives my brain time to work out all the problems I’ve fed it over the course of the day. You know how sometimes you get an epiphany while you’re washing dishes or folding laundry?”

“I love those moments.” I also love that he *folds his laundry*.

“Me too. But I need to give my brain those breaks, otherwise it can’t crunch the data.”

I elbow him in the arm. “You’re such a computer guy.”

“Not entirely. I like to work with my hands too.”

“Oh, I’ll just bet you do.” The suggestive comment slips out before I can think better of it. His eyebrows leap high on his forehead, and a slow smile spreads across his face. I clear my throat and rush to change the subject. “Um, I’m actually done with my latest deadline.”

“Congratulations. You’re an artist, right?”

“Yeah, I illustrate comic books.”

He looks impressed. “Like the interior pages? All the sequential art?”

I nod. “And the occasional cover too.”

“Wow. That’s so creative. And it takes a ton of skill.”

I grin. “That, and the willingness to sit hunched over my drawing tablet like a gargoyle for the majority of the day.”

His groan turns into a laugh. “Tell me about it. I like my job, but I get antsy being stuck at my desk. Not to mention the constant battle against neck and back pain.”

“That’s why I started yoga,” I say. “So I could keep up my profession’s sedentary lifestyle.”

“Same. Well, not yoga, although I wouldn’t be opposed to it. I run around the reservoir in Central Park when the weather’s okay, and about five times a week I go to the gym down on East Seventy-Fourth and Third.”

“I can tell,” I murmur, eyeing the breadth of his shoulders, then cough into my fist. “Um, you’re a software engineer, right?”

He gives me a curious look. “Yeah. I freelance for a few financial firms. So I understand the pressure of deadlines, the need to block everything else out and let the work consume you.”

“Exactly!” The fact that he gets it excites me in a way I can’t explain. “My family worries that my work habits are unhealthy, but there’s something satisfying about it too, you know?”

He nods, his gaze locked on mine. “There’s nothing like the intense focus that comes with being fully absorbed in a project.”

I can’t look away from him. You know that rare, beautiful moment when small talk takes a surprise turn and you’re suddenly connecting on a deeper level with the other person? That’s happening right now with me and Theo, and I don’t think I’m the only one feeling it.

“Sometimes it’s like being in a different world,” I say softly. “Like when you wake up from a really immersive dream. I stop working and think, *Oh, right, this is the real world, not Starsong giving up the quest to return to her planet and finding a new home on Earth.* And then I look around and I’m just alone in my apartment with no one to talk to.”

Oh, God. I’ve admitted way more than I meant to. But when I search his face, there’s no judgment, only understanding.

“Feel free to come up and talk to me,” he says quietly. “I have those moments every time my watch yells at me to take a break and I only have my cat to converse with.”

His response is so terrifyingly perfect, I can only address the last part. “You have a cat? What’s her name?”

He winces. “Tink. Her name is Tink.”

“As in . . . ?”

“Tinker Bell, yeah.” He rubs the back of his head and looks slightly embarrassed. “She has green eyes, and while she’s affectionate, she also has a bit of an attitude and doesn’t like being ignored.”

His description makes me giggle. “She sounds like quite a character.”

He rolls his eyes. “You have no idea. If you ever hear any crashing sounds from upstairs, that’s her.”

I purse my lips. “Now that you mention it, you’re oddly quiet.”

“Really?” Relief washes over his face. “That’s good to hear. I never wear shoes inside, and I’ve fixed the floorboards as much as I can so they don’t creak.”

“You did an excellent job. Mine make so much noise it’s like they’re trying to communicate with me.”

He grins. “What do you think they’re trying to say?”

“Probably, *Stop stepping on my face.*”

He laughs at that, and the look he gives me is sort of . . . fond? “You have a great sense of humor, Evie.”

My chest twinges. It was something my grandmother always complimented me on, even if she didn’t understand half of my pop culture references. I try to lighten the mood. “Are you sure that’s not just a nice way of saying, *You’re weird*? Because I’ve heard that one before.”

He shakes his head, and his tone is thoughtful. “Nothing wrong with weird.”

Just then, I spot Mrs. Greene’s elegant white coif disappearing into the galley kitchen. And even though part of me is dying to see where this conversation leads, the other part is scared of the emotional territory we’re skirting around.

The second part wins out, and I take a step back. “Excuse me for one second. I need to ask Mrs. Greene something.”

The apartment is filling up, and I have to wend my way through the crowd. By the time I reach the kitchen, Mrs. Greene is gone, but Mr. Barnes is in there, refilling the charcuterie board.

Politeness and the need for a moment alone with my thoughts have me moving forward. “Can I help with that, Mr. Barnes?”

“Please, call me Nate. And sure, if you wouldn’t mind. Everything is here on the counter, and when it’s done, it can go back on the dining table with the other food. Thanks, dear.”

The board is huge, and I take my time neatly arranging the cheese cubes and slices of meat. I didn’t expect to connect so easily with Theo, and more frightening than the little slips of innuendo is the urge to tell him more—about me, my work, my family, my *life*. I didn’t come here to spill my guts to him; I came here to *seduce* him. So why am I hiding in the kitchen after one little compliment?

I know why. It’s because it’s the kind of compliment that says he sees *me*, not just the image I’m projecting tonight. And it’s more than I bargained on.

After a few moments, I hear someone enter the kitchen. I turn, expecting to see Mr. Barnes—Nate—but it’s Theo.

“I’ll be out in a moment,” I say quickly, since I don’t want him to think I’m avoiding him. “Just finishing this.”

“Not a problem.” He pulls a screwdriver out of his tool belt. “Since I came prepared, Nate asked me to tighten the hinges on the top cabinet. It’ll just take a second.”

He comes closer and opens the cabinet next to me. I should probably move out of the way, but as usual, Theo’s nearness makes my brain malfunction and I freeze in place. He smells like a cold forest breeze, but heat radiates from his body. Even though it’s warm in here, I want to wrap myself up in him like a fuzzy blanket and sleep for a week.

He fixes the hinge, then checks the others while he’s at it. As he’s closing the cabinet door directly over my head, my rational brain finally pops back online and tells my feet to move the hell out of his way. I turn to leave, but he steps aside at the same time, and somehow in the confusion, we’re knocked off-balance. Theo’s pelvis slams directly into mine.

My lower back hits the counter, trapping me against him, and he grabs the edge by my hip, bracing himself to keep from falling on top of

me.

His eyes go wide. “Shit. Sorry about that.”

And in a moment of perfect clarity, I know it’s time to make my move.

Before he can step back, I clamp a hand on his forearm, holding him in place. “It’s okay,” I say, a little breathless from the impact and from staring directly into his eyes.

His chest heaves, like he’s also having trouble catching his breath. His gaze drops to my lips before meeting my eyes again. “Yeah?”

I swallow hard and nod. “Yeah.”

And somehow, we both know I’m saying *yes* to something else.

He shifts closer, almost imperceptibly, and my palm slides up a few inches to the crook of his elbow. His other hand grips the counter, effectively caging me in, which is fine because there’s nowhere else I want to be right now.

His eyes are still locked on mine as his head lowers a fraction. “You sure, Evie?”

My lips part as I lift my chin. “I’m—”

“Hey, Theo! We need your height!” someone calls from the living room.

Theo’s head snaps up and he glances over his shoulder. His eyes shut briefly and he mutters, “Fuck.”

Then his gaze returns to mine with such fierce focus that it makes my skin tight.

“We’re not done yet.” His voice is rough and deliberate, and all I can do is nod.

And then he’s gone, leaving me slumped against the counter with only a half-full charcuterie board for company.

Chapter Five

The party is fun, and it's nice to meet my other neighbors and Nate's music industry friends. But it's impossible to steal another moment alone with Theo, or to catch Mrs. Greene to thank her for the ornaments. And in the back of my mind, all I can think about is Theo's decree.

We're not done yet.

I don't know what he means by that, but every part of me is keen to find out.

I'm headed into the kitchen for the wine opener when Theo and I finally cross paths again. We pause in the doorway, and he gives me that slow, secret smile he's been sending me all night, the one that has my panties feeling a little damp. My face heats and I smile back, but before either of us can pass, a voice yells, "Kiss! You're under the mistletoe!"

It's Mrs. Greene, whose delighted and mischievous smile sparkles as much as her red sequined gown.

Theo glances above our heads and frowns at the small cluster of leaves hanging from the lintel. "That definitely wasn't there earlier."

The rest of our neighbors—led by Mrs. Greene and Mr. Barnes, who are almost assuredly in cahoots—egg us on with hollers and chants. The wine has been flowing liberally tonight, and everyone is in a jovial mood.

As for me? I'm apprehensive. I *want* to kiss Theo—fuck, do I ever—but I never imagined it happening like this.

I'm doing the mental arithmetic to figure out how this changes things when Theo gives me a rueful smile. "You don't have to do this."

Normally I wouldn't. But we had that almost-kiss in the kitchen, and Theo said, *We're not done yet*.

I'm going to take him at his word.

“It’s fine,” I say quickly, stepping closer to him.

He searches my face for a moment, then shrugs. “All right.”

Then he’s leaning down, aiming for my cheek, probably planning to deliver a light peck before backing away.

But I didn’t dress like Mariah Carey to mess around, and if this is my only kiss with Theo Winters, I’m going to make it a good one.

At the last second, before his lips can graze my cheek, I grab his face and pull his mouth to mine.

I feel his shock when my lips land on his, hear the sharp inhale when he sucks in a breath through his nose. Then I’m slanting my mouth and stroking the seam of his lips with my tongue. He opens for me, and it’s a wrap. Cheers and catcalls erupt as Theo’s strong arms band around my waist and pull me flush against him. He tilts his head, changing the angle of the kiss and taking it even deeper. He tastes like wine and peppermint and sugar cookies. I can’t get enough.

Too soon, he breaks the kiss and stares at me, wild-eyed. He casts a quick look around at everyone clapping and whistling. A flush creeps up his neck and he grabs my hand.

“Merry Christmas, everyone,” he calls out gruffly as he pulls me through the crowd. On the way out, he shoots Mr. Barnes a suspicious glare. “Nate, thanks for hosting.”

Nate chuckles, and I see Mrs. Greene by his side, grinning hugely. She sends me a cheery wave.

A few people mill in the hallway and stairwell. Theo tows me past them and down a flight of stairs to the fourth floor, where we stop in front of his door.

“Is this okay?” He’s panting like he’s just run a hundred-yard dash. “You don’t have to come in, but—”

A million thoughts race through my head. I think of my sister and my grandmother. Of Starsong and Oscar the Grouch. I think of the sofa and the tree and the light bulb.

I think of him offering to let me use his kitchen, of inviting me to come up and talk to him, of him understanding how it feels to live and breathe your work.

When I answer, my voice is clear and firm. “Yes. I want to.”

His grin flashes, big and adorable. “Great. Yeah. Me too.” And then he’s fumbling to unlock his door.

We stagger inside and lean on each other as we hurry to remove our boots. His tool belt hits the ground with a clunk and a jingle of bells. When I'm standing in my socks with Theo towering a foot above me, a serious expression crosses his face, and he catches my shoulders.

"How much did you drink?"

"One glass of wine. You?"

"A glass and a half." He sounds relieved. "I just wanted to make sure—"

I cup his cheeks and interrupt. "I get it. And I love that you thought to ask. But if you don't take me to bed right now, I'm going to scream."

"Noted." He grabs my hips and hoists me up. I lock my thighs around his waist and press my mouth to his as he carries me into the bedroom.

I'm desperate to know what his place looks like, but there will be plenty of time for snooping later.

We fall onto his bed together and I come up for air long enough to get a sense of dark walls and floating shelves. He reaches across me with one long arm and flicks on the bedside lamp. It bathes the room in a cozy glow, and I see that the walls are gunmetal gray and the bedding is marigold yellow. It's masculine, but modern. Lived in, but neat. Also of note? He doesn't have a desk in his bedroom. What's it like not to sleep in your office?

But then his mouth is on my neck, and all of my awareness is centered on the wet slide of his tongue and the gentle scrape of those sexy fucking teeth. I let out a squeal when he rolls us and I'm suddenly straddling his thighs. He gazes up at me in the soft lamplight with sleepy, lust-darkened eyes. I've never seen a more beautiful sight.

"Is this where I make a joke about sitting on Santa's lap?" It's out of my mouth before I can think better of it, but he cracks up.

"I forgot I was wearing this." He reaches up to remove the hat, but I stop him with a hand on his wrist.

"Leave it. It's festive."

He raises an eyebrow. "Would you be mad if *I* made a joke about sitting on Santa's *face*?"

"Only if you didn't mean it." I'm breathless at the thought, and his expression turns hungry again.

“I mean it.” His voice is dark as he pulls me down to kiss me. “As long as I get to be Santa.”

This whole exchange is ridiculous, and if I weren’t so turned on, I’d laugh. But our mouths are busy and our hands are pulling at each other’s clothing, and the time for chitchat and giggles has passed.

I toss my belt aside and Theo divests me of my sweater. The white trim tears and he looks horrified.

“Shit. I ripped it—”

“That’s okay, I attached it with hot glue. It was never meant to last longer than tonight.” My flippant comment activates a flood of anxiety. *Theo* isn’t meant to last more than one night, but what if I want more? Will my heart be torn to shreds like this makeshift costume?

“You made this?” He casts an impressed glance over the garment. “You’re so fucking creative.”

He kisses me like being creative is the most attractive quality in the world, and all traces of worry are smothered by his tongue tangling with mine.

It takes both of us to peel off my jeans, and in the process, my panties come down too. I only have a momentary bout of embarrassment before Theo is nuzzling the curve of my hip.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” he rasps, and I am overwhelmed with need.

“Do it,” I whimper. “God, Theo, I’ve been dreaming of this—”

I suck in a breath when his fingertips brush my core, and he finishes the thought for me.

“For months.” He strokes me softly, coaxing my body to open for him. “So have I.”

Hope blooms in my chest before my brain catches up. Wait a second. Did he just say *months*?

But before I can ask for clarification, he flips us again. Suddenly, my knees are on either side of his head. We maintain eye contact, which should be awkward or at the very least unnerving, but it just feels right. It feels right to look in his eyes as he uses his mouth on me, it feels right to hold his gaze as I buck against his face, and it feels especially right to see the satisfied glimmer in those brown depths when the dam fractures and the orgasm crashes over me.

I finally break eye contact when I slump down onto the mattress. With a wolfish grin, he sits up and quickly strips off his shirt, jeans, and boxers.

He leaves the Santa hat on.

I lie in a boneless, blissed-out heap while he rummages in his nightstand for a condom.

His big frame is bulky with muscle, and tattoos spiral up his arms and across his chest. I want to examine them more closely, but later and in better lighting. He's the kind of pale that looks like he tans instead of burns. Dark hair is lightly scattered over his chest, leading in a trail down to what is probably—no, *definitely*—the most impressive dick I've ever seen in person.

"How are you real?" I murmur, half to myself, as I eye the curve of his ass. I want to draw him, just like this, stark naked but for a Santa hat, his face still wet from my—

"What do you mean?" He stretches out on the bed next to me and reaches around my back to unhook my bra, which I'm somehow still wearing.

"You're just . . . well, *look* at you."

"No, look at *you*." He lowers his head to my breasts. "You take my breath away, Evie."

"Oh, fuck." I can't say anything else when he's using that talented mouth on me, and honestly, it's better that I don't. I reach for him, stroking his cock with loose pulls, and he groans against my sternum. I feel the vibration all the way through my chest cavity, and it seems to echo the pounding of my heart.

Finally, when I'm all worked up again, he shifts away from me. My breath catches as he rolls the condom down his length.

Holy shit. This is happening.

Kneeling between my thighs, he caresses my body with slow passes of his palms. "Is this okay?" he asks. "To do it like this?"

"You mean because you're built like the Abominable Snowman and I'm the size of the Sugar Plum Fairy?"

Oh, my God, what is *wrong* with me? I squeeze my eyes shut, but not before I see the dumbfounded expression on his face. The bed shakes with the force of his laughter, and he bends at the waist to rest his forehead on my belly, apparently so overcome that he can't stay upright.

“It wasn’t *that* funny,” I mutter, although I’m biting my lip to keep from smiling.

When he lifts his head again, he has to wipe tears from his eyes. “You are a fucking delight, Evie Cruz. Where have you been all my life?”

He says it with such heartbreaking fondness, I don’t know how to respond. I’m certainly not going into detail about anything that happened more than three months ago, so I settle for a cheeky “Downstairs?”

“I’m so fucking glad you moved in.” Unlike mine, his tone is serious. And then he’s leaning over me, blocking out the light with those broad shoulders and nudging my center with his cock. “So fucking glad.”

I grip his arms, arching my back and moaning as he presses forward. His dick is as thick and heavy as the rest of him, but I’m so ready for this, I couldn’t wait another second if you paid me a million dollars.

Okay, maybe *one* second. But that’s it.

Because I need him. Need *this*. I’ve imagined this moment for months, and now I need to experience the reality of how it feels to be with him.

He’s so much better than my fantasies.

His hips pump as he works himself into me, slow and steady. I whimper when he withdraws and clutch his arms on every thrust. It’s intense and incredible and *holy hell, how is he not even all the way in yet?*

I gasp when he pushes inside again. “You’re so fucking big.”

He grimaces. “I know. Sorry.”

“That wasn’t a complaint!”

He peers down at me with his hair falling in his face. His grin is a bright slash in the shadows, and I can’t help smiling back. I could fall for this man so, so easily. I don’t care that he’s my upstairs neighbor or that we’ve only known each other a few months. He thinks I’m a *fucking delight*, and I find him irresistible. What more do I need?

When our hips finally press flush against each other, he lets out a ragged groan. “You feel incredible. God, Evie. Fuck. I . . . Are you okay?”

Why, because you've stuffed my stocking with your massive candy cane? But I keep that thought to myself. See? Growth! Instead, I grab his ass cheeks with both hands and *squeeze*. "I'm fine! Just move . . . Yes, oh, God, like that. *Like that.*"

His hips snap, cautiously at first, then faster, until I'm being pushed farther up the mattress by the force of his thrusts. I hang on for dear life as pleasure unlike anything I've ever known—at least, with another human present—spirals through me in shimmering waves of ecstasy.

Pop culture references notwithstanding, he's too tall, or I'm too short, for pure missionary. I ache to feel his chest pressed to mine, but watching the strain of muscles in his arms and neck is arousing in and of itself.

Then he sits back, draping my thighs over his hips, and uses one hand on my waist to pull me onto him, over and over. He lays his other hand flat on my belly and presses his thumb right over my clit, working me with fast, tight circles.

The combination is too good. I clutch the blankets above my head, writhing on him as short, breathy cries fall from my lips.

"That's it, beautiful," he croons in a husky voice. "Take what you want. Do you have any idea how fucking amazing you are? How fucking perfect?"

I babble something and shake my head because words are too hard right now and I can't—I can't—

"I'm coming." The words are a sharp gasp, and I'm honestly surprised he understood me. But his face lights up like a goddamned Christmas tree, and he urges me on.

"Come on, Princess. You've got this. Come all over me . . . Yesss. Good *girl.*"

His eyes flutter shut as I clench around him. My climax consumes me, whiting out my thoughts and savaging my body like a blizzard. He fucks me through it, and within seconds, he's gripping my hips tight, pounding into me at a punishing pace.

My mind is mush but I try to memorize the moment he comes. The way he looks—teeth bared, head falling forward, his hair in his eyes. The way he feels—jammed to the hilt inside me, his strong fingers digging into my skin. The way he sounds—a staccato groan, followed by harsh breaths sawing in and out of his lungs.

We're both still for a long moment before he opens his eyes and shakes the hair out of his face. The Santa hat fell off him at some point, but I couldn't tell you when.

"You are exquisite," he whispers.

But all I hear is my sister's voice saying, *Don't shit where you eat.*

Chapter Six

While Theo's in the bathroom, I pull on my panties and pick up his shirt. It's still warm and smells like him. At the moment, I smell like him too. I wrap that fact around me as tightly as I do the flannel.

You are exquisite does not seem like a precursor to *Get out of my apartment*, so I slip out of the bedroom to peek around.

The hall light is on, along with the one over the stove. Otherwise, the living room is dark, the shades drawn against the yellow ambient light from outside.

From what I can see, his decor carries over the color scheme from the bedroom, this time with tan and white accenting the gray. His desk is brown wood and looks custom made. Unlike mine, which is cluttered with used mugs and nerdy figurines, his contains neatly organized equipment, including two monitors, a split keyboard, a sideways mouse, a set of speakers, a microphone, and what looks like an antique alarm clock, the kind with actual bells on top. His chair is an expensive ergonomic one I've been eyeing but can't afford.

There's a single framed photograph, but I don't pick it up. That feels too intrusive, even for me.

Theo also has a ton of plants. Like, at least twenty. They're everywhere—hanging from the ceiling, perched on the windowsill, even stationed around his desk in small white pots. And they're *thriving*. If I needed more proof of his caretaking abilities, it's right here.

His kitchen is spotless, which is a turn-on but also makes me hate him a little. The appliances are stainless steel, and the cabinets are black with brushed-metal fixtures, way more modern than my kitchen's dated oak ones. The backsplash is dark-gray subway tiles with white caulking, unlike mine, which are the reverse.

And just like he said, there's an extra counter jutting out from the wall.

Swoon.

I imagine spending time here with him. His apartment feels so much more like a home than mine does. What if I took him up on his offer to use his kitchen, to chat with him between focused work sprints? What if we both ordered the lunch special from Yummy Thai and sat right at his little dining table to—

“Holy shit!”

A sudden movement from the sofa makes me jump out of my skin. Green eyes flash at me in the light from the stove, and I press a hand over my chest.

It's his cat, Tink.

Once my heart rate calms, I move toward the sofa with slow, careful steps, not wanting to spook her. She's gray and blends perfectly with her surroundings. I wonder which came first, the cat or the color scheme?

“Hi, Tink.” I hold out my hand, palm up. “I'm Evie.”

The cat sniffs my fingertips thoroughly, probably smelling her owner—Roommate? Servant? Serf?—on them. Then she deigns to rub her cheek across my nails, and I take that as an invitation to scratch behind her ears.

She starts to purr, and I smile.

“What about us?”

I jolt. Theo is standing at the entrance to the hallway in boxers, socks, tattoos, and nothing else. He really does walk quietly. He holds my sweater, running the white trim through his fingers and examining where it detached from the neckline.

I swallow hard and repeat the question back to him. “What *about* us?”

“You said this shirt wasn't made to last longer than tonight.” He looks up from the sweater, and the overhead light casts his eyes in shadow. “Are we going to last longer than one night?”

The fact that he's asking should mean something, but I'm scared to even guess what that could be.

I shrug and keep my tone airy. “Up to you, buddy.”

He drapes the shirt over the back of his desk chair and pads over to me. Cupping my face, he looks me right in the eye and says in a quiet

voice, “Look, I’ve been told in the past that I need to *use my words* more. I’m still working on it, but believe me when I say you have no fucking idea how long I’ve wanted this.”

“Really?” I couldn’t look away from him if I tried. These past few months, I’ve been so stuck in my head, so sure my crush was one-sided . . .

He wears a patient expression. “Since the day you moved in. Do you remember?”

“That you helped the movers carry my couch up the stairs? Of course I do. It went above and beyond neighborly duty.”

His thumb strokes my cheek. “Not that part. Afterward. When I tried to ask you out.”

Shock colors my tone. “*You did?*”

“I started to say, *If you want coffee*, but you cut me off.”

I slap my forehead. “And I said, *I only drink tea*. Shit! I thought you meant, like, if I wanted a coffee *right at that moment*. Or maybe you were about to recommend a café in the neighborhood. Not like, did I want *a date with you*.”

I’m rethinking that whole interaction, along with all the others since. But he’s smiling and rubbing my arms up and down in a comforting caress.

“Evie,” he says softly. “Do you want to go on a date with me?”

Why does this question scare me more than anything else we’ve done tonight?

Maybe because this is what I *actually* want, and I told myself I was fine settling for less because I didn’t even have a chance of having more.

But what if I do? What if *we* do?

“Yes.” It comes out as a whisper, and I say it again, stronger. “Yes, I want to go on a date with you, Theo.”

He wraps his arms around me in a tight hug and buries his face in my hair. “Thank fuck.”

I clutch his big shoulders and laugh. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

But as he’s straightening, my gaze falls on something just past him, something I would have noticed sooner if Tink hadn’t come out of hiding right when she did.

Everything in his apartment is neat, except for a collection of tools strewn across his square dining table. At first, I thought they were extras he'd removed from his tool belt, but now I see there are some extremely specific items that wouldn't be required for typical home repairs.

Like the half dozen oddly shaped metal blades with rounded wooden handles, all spread across an unrolled sheet of leather. Or the set of paints in tiny plastic cups, next to a couple of clean fine-detail brushes.

I drift closer, taking in the tableau of supplies in the dim light. There's also a crochet hook and a fancy pair of scissors.

And right in the middle of it all, a spool of red nylon cord.

I suck in a breath.

"It was you." I pick up the spool and spin around to face him. "It was you!"

His brow furrows in confusion. "Of course it was me. Wait . . . You didn't know?"

My heart is racing and I can barely think straight. "How would I know?" It comes out as a tortured moan.

"At the party, you said . . ." He trails off as realization dawns over his features. "You said *someone* was doing something sweet, and you were going to bake them a thank-you gift." He chuckles and runs a hand over his face. "I thought you were playing coy and trying to find out my favorite dessert—which, by the way, is lemon bars."

"Coy?" I shake the spool at him. "What about me makes you think I have the fortitude to play coy?"

Amusement is etched all over his features. "Who did you think it was?"

"Mrs. Greene!" I slump into one of the chairs.

He bites his lip as he considers this, then nods. "Yeah, I could see that. Is that why you were trying to talk to her at the party?"

"Yes, but I could never catch her. Speaking of, can we discuss how she and Mr. Barnes were obviously conspiring to trap us under the mistletoe?"

Now he looks bashful and rubs the back of his neck. The move highlights his chest and arm muscles to a thrilling degree.

"That's probably my fault," he admits. "They both know about my huge crush on you."

I cross my arms and lean back in the chair. “And I’m sure Mrs. Greene guessed that I have a crush on you. That devious woman!”

Then I look at the tools again, incontrovertible proof of everything he’s been saying.

“What I don’t get is why?” I turn back to him. “Why go through all this for me? And why not just tell me?”

He pulls out the other chair and sits next to me. “The *why* is that you told me your ornaments were in storage and you didn’t have time to get them. And I didn’t tell you because I felt bad about disturbing you the other day while you were working. I didn’t want to disrupt you again by knocking every time I brought one over. I also . . . kind of thought you knew it was me and hoped you’d think it was romantic.”

I press my hands to my cheeks, which are growing warm. “It wasn’t the interruption that had me flustered, it was *you*. You showed up at my door looking so delicious and being all competent and friendly, and I was a complete mess.”

He frowns. “No, you weren’t.”

I scoff. “Um, yeah, I was. Dirty hair, no bra, dishes in the sink? Any of that ring a bell?”

He ducks his head and rubs his temple, like he’s embarrassed. “I might have noticed that you weren’t wearing a bra, but honestly, the rest didn’t register. I thought you looked pretty because you always look pretty, and I was too excited to see you to be distracted by something like used dishes. I know you eat, Evie.”

I blink, still stuck on one point. “You think I always look pretty?”

“Yeah.” He looks bewildered, like this is such an obvious thing he can’t imagine why we’re discussing it.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to argue with him, to insist that no, I’ve looked absolutely *terrible* every time I’ve run into him, like a troll lurking under a bridge, but . . .

The words *beautiful* and *princess* come back to me, along with—this one gives me a shiver—*good girl*.

Maybe it’s not my place to convince him that he’s wrong.

But there’s still one other thing I need him to clear up.

“So it wasn’t my Mariah Carey costume that made you mindless with lust?”

He nearly chokes. “What? No. I mean, fuck, you looked *incredible* tonight, don’t get me wrong. But no, Evie, I didn’t suddenly decide I wanted to have sex with you just because you wore a tight outfit.”

“Then why tonight?” I press. “You’ve never given me any hints—” I glance at the table covered with crafting supplies. “Oh. I guess you have.”

He laughs and pulls me onto his lap. Sitting on him, I can better look him in the eye, and I like the way he loops his arms around my waist. It’s a casual move, not sexual, as if he just enjoys holding me close.

“Well, for one thing, you told me your work project was complete. I know you’ve been busy, and I didn’t want to get in the way. For another . . .” He shrugs. “We live in the same building. I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable if you didn’t feel the same way.”

“And then I kissed you in front of all our neighbors.”

The memory makes me wince, but his grin is huge. “You sure did.”

I glance at the tools on the table beside us. “What are these for?”

“Ah.” He sets me on my feet, then stands and leads me back into the bedroom. “I had a grand plan for today’s ornament, but it turns out my whittling skills are a bit rusty. The first couple of attempts broke, and the paint was still drying on the final when I left for the party. I didn’t want Tink to mess with it, so it’s in the bedroom.”

He flicks on the light and hands me something from the top of the dresser.

It’s a carved wooden reindeer that fits in the palm of my hand.

Tears spring to my eyes.

Theo’s widen in alarm. “Evie, are you—”

I shake my head, gesturing for him to be quiet as I study the ornament. It takes me a moment to sort out what I want to say.

“My work deadline wasn’t the only reason why I didn’t decorate my tree.” Voice hoarse, I tell him about my grandmother and the circumstances that precipitated my move to this building. He draws me over to sit on the edge of the bed and keeps a warm, comforting hand on my knee as he listens.

I clutch the little reindeer the entire time, and when I’m nearly done, I hold the ornament up.

“Grandma had a reindeer like this. Not wood—I think it was needle felted—but it was one of my favorites. I saw this, and it just reminded me so much . . .”

I can’t go on, but it doesn’t seem like I need to. Theo bows his head, and when he raises it again, his own eyes look a little wet.

“I’m—” He stops and clears his throat. “I’m sorry about your grandmother. But thank you for telling me. I had no idea.”

“That’s just it.” I wipe my eyes. “You didn’t know the real reason, and you did it anyway. You made me five beautiful, thoughtful ornaments by hand, just so my Christmas tree wouldn’t be naked. How can you be this sexy *and* so sweet at the same time?”

He chuckles. “I’m not done yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you notice? I put the snowflake on your door twelve days before Christmas.”

My jaw drops. “You’re going to make me *twelve*?”

He nods, and I throw my arms around him in a tight hug.

“It’s been good for me too,” he confesses into my hair. “Reconnecting to my creativity. Like I said, I enjoy working with my hands, and you can probably tell I’ve built some of the furniture around here. These days, I spend all my time sitting at my computer, and I’ve missed that side of myself. But that was just a bonus. The real gift was making something for you.”

I press a smacking kiss to his cheek. “I am going to bake you the best goddamn lemon bars you’ve ever tasted.”

His eyes roll back as he moans. “I can’t fucking wait.”

“I didn’t realize baked goods could also make you moan like that,” I tease, and his gaze darkens.

“Anything and everything about you makes me moan.”

“Even my dirty dishes?”

“I told you, I like cleaning.”

Now it’s my turn to moan. “I think that’s the sexiest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

He’s chuckling as he pulls me down on the bed.

An hour later, we’re lying under the covers, fully naked. Theo’s arm is slung over my waist, and his head rests on my hair where it spills across his pillow. I’m on my back, holding the little wooden reindeer and

running my fingertips over the ridges left by the tools, each one carved by Theo with his own two hands.

For me.

“What are you going to name it?” he asks.

I smile. “Mistletoe.”

Lifting the reindeer over our heads, I turn my face to kiss him.

Epilogue

Christmas Day

A week later, we're sitting on my sofa, gazing at my tree. It's decorated with all twelve of Theo's ornaments. In addition, my Funko Pop figures hang by tiny harnesses made of knotted red nylon cord. There's Storm, Loki, and Princess Leia, among others. And of course, Starsong.

The tree looks festive and silly and represents the most thoughtful gift I've ever received.

We're eating lemon bars off a plate on my coffee table. It's the third time I've baked them in the past week. I'm worried Theo's going to get sick of them, but he swears that will never happen.

If it does, I'll just find something new to bake for him.

We're sharing a quiet moment before we go to his mother's house in New Jersey, where I'm going to meet his mom along with his two sisters and their families. Last night I brought him to my aunt's big Christmas Eve party in Queens, and he met my entire extended family. Theo was, as usual, charming and helpful, instantly ingratiating himself with my parents by carrying all the gifts and food into the house in one trip.

I was worried it would be awkward to see my uncle, but then he presented me and all my cousins with checks from the sale of the house. Mine was twice as much as everyone else's, a thank-you, he said, for taking such good care of Grandma during her final years. It was completely unexpected, and didn't quite make up for his shady behavior a few months ago, but having Theo at my side grounded me and reminded me to look toward the future instead of the past.

At the end of the night, my sister, April, pulled me aside to whisper, “I was wrong! He’s definitely a good choice.”

It was nice, but I didn’t need to hear it. I already knew.

“When do you start working again?” he asks me now. I swallow a sugary-tart bite of lemon bar and wash it down with tea.

“I’ll receive my next project at the beginning of January,” I tell him. “And after that . . . I think I might raise my rates and take on fewer gigs.”

A grin threatens to split his face in half. “Seriously?”

“Whoa, there. Why do *you* look so excited?”

“It’s just—” He shakes his head and glances away. “I didn’t want to say anything, but . . . as a fellow freelance workaholic, I worry about you burning out. So I’m glad to hear that you plan to lessen your workload. That’s all. I’ll support whatever you choose to do, but I care about you, Evie. More than care. I’m falling for you. And . . . Shit. I’m going to stop talking now.”

He stuffs a lemon bar into his mouth, but that doesn’t deter me from pulling his face down to mine and pressing a kiss onto his closed lips. His earnest confession makes it easy for me to admit my own feelings.

“I’m falling for you too.” My voice is low, and his gaze doesn’t leave mine as he finishes chewing.

“Merry Christmas, beautiful.” His eyes are soft as he brushes my hair behind one ear.

I smile. “Merry Christmas, Santa.”

The rich, delighted sound of his laugh warms me to the tips of my toes, and suddenly, I feel right at home.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alexis Daria is the international bestselling author of *Along Came Amor*, *You Had Me at Hola*, *Take the Lead*, and other romance novels. They have received starred reviews from multiple publications and have appeared on “best of” lists in numerous trade publications.

PRAISE FOR ALEXIS DARIA

Praise for *You Had Me at Hola*

“Sexy, compelling, and complex—a terrific romance from a rising star of the genre.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“An absolutely pitch-perfect summer escape.”

—*New York Times* Editor’s Choice

“A triumph of Latinx joy and feminist agency.”

—NPR

“I could not get enough of Jasmine and Ashton!”

—Jasmine Guillory, *New York Times* bestselling author

Praise for *A Lot Like Adiós*

“A charming, sexy spitfire of a novel!”

—Emily Henry, *New York Times* bestselling author

“The steamy love scenes, vibrant cast, deeply felt emotions, and sense of fun make this a surefire hit.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A must-read for those who love contemporary queer, family-focused romances.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Second-chance romance perfection!”

—Tessa Bailey, *New York Times* bestselling author

Praise for *Take the Lead*

“This perfect romance will dance its way into the reader’s heart.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“A sparkling debut.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Vibrantly written.”

—*The Washington Post*

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