



A Christmas Date

(A FESTIVE HOLIDAYS ROMANTIC COMEDY)

FIRST COMES LOVE

BOOK 3

CAMILLA ISLEY

One

Christmas Is Coming

“Your mother called again,” my assistant, Melanie, informs me as soon as I step foot into my office. “Third time this week.”

I sit behind my desk and peek at the calendar placed next to my unopened laptop.

Tuesday, December 11

Only Tuesday and we’re already on the third call of the week.

Bodes well.

“I’ll call her back when I have a minute,” I tell Melanie. “Anything else?”

Still standing on the threshold, she shifts on her feet, uncomfortable.

“Come on, I won’t shoot the messenger,” I promise her.

“Right, because she’s asked me to read you this, word for word.”

From the way Melanie is cowering, it can’t be good. I lean back in my white leather chair, cross my hands in my lap, and sigh. “Go ahead.”

“Nikki,” she intones, “I spent thirty-five hours in excruciating pain to bring you into this world, and the least I deserve after nurturing you in a loving home for years is for my daughter to return my calls, especially at Christmas. I’ve already set my expectations very low, as I wouldn’t presume you could pick up the phone and call your mother of your own free will...”

I grip the armrests of my chair until my knuckles turn white. “Can you skip the guilt tripping part and get to the core of the

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message?”

Melanie looks up at me. “Yeah, sure.” Her eyes shift back to the note, and she scrolls through the words for what feels like ages. “Ah, yes,” she finally sighs. “She demands to know when you’ll be heading home for Christmas, how long you’re staying, and if you’re bringing someone.”

I hate the holidays. And I hate when Mom uses the absent-daughter trope to shame me into doing what she wants. But what I hate the most is the two combined. And Christmas is the most inescapable holiday of all.

My stupid boss, along with millions of other idiots scattered around the planet, loves Christmas. So what does the prick do every year? He closes shop, forcing everyone to go on vacation. Which means that every December, without fail, I’m trapped visiting my family in Connecticut for too many days.

Even worse, this year Christmas falls on a Tuesday, meaning the agency will stay closed from the twenty-second to the twenty-ninth. Nine sanity-challenging days of hell in total. And my mother knows, and she’s been on my case for a month now to make sure she’ll get me for as many of those nine days as she can.

This must be punishment for something terrible I did in a past life, I swear.

I exhale. “I’ll call her back when I have a minute.”

Melanie is giving me the no-you-won’t stink eye, but I have my mean boss poker face on, so she keeps quiet.

“Is that all?” I ask.

“Err, no. You have lunch with your sister today.”

And my day isn’t getting any better.

“I’ll have to reschedule,” I say, shuffling the notes from the morning’s meetings. “Can you call Julia and tell her?”

“I could have... if you’d asked me this morning. But she’s

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been waiting for you in the lobby for twenty minutes.”

“What?!” I stare at my watch.

Half-past noon, already. Where did the morning go?

Well, no way out, then.

“Jules,” I greet my younger, blessed with all the good Moore genetics, sister.

With natural blonde hair, blue eyes, and an angel face, she’s the opposite of my dark hair, brown eyes, and sharp features. When people want to pay me a compliment, they tell me I’m interesting, unique, strong... never beautiful. Julia has always had the pretty-sister crown firmly glued to her head. Ever since we were babies, and her golden curls made her look like a cherub out of a painting. Even as a toddler, I was unimpressive.

“Nikki,” Julia shrieks, pulling me into a hug in the middle of the lobby. Without leaving me time to react, she grabs my hand and drags me out of the building. “I can’t believe we’re really having lunch! I was sure you’d cancel at the last minute. When Melanie didn’t call this morning, I was kind of surprised.”

Guess the absent-sister guilt technique is another trait she inherited from our mother. And, okay, I’m not the best at keeping engagements... Or calling, or texting... And it’s not that I don’t love Jules... It’s only that being around my baby sister is so hard sometimes...

“About that.” I avoid looking at her by buttoning up the collar of my coat against the freezing air. “Can we go somewhere nearby? I have to get back to the office soon.”

Hidden behind a curtain of flying hair, I watch as Jules struggles not to let her smile falter.

“Sorry,” she says, linking our arms and dragging me to the edge of the curb to hail a cab. “I’ve already picked a place, and

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Paul is meeting us there.”

A cab screeches to a halt in front of us seconds later, thankfully distracting Julia and buying me enough time to compose my features. Otherwise, my expression would’ve given me away. If being around Jules is hard, the combo Julia *and* Paul leans dangerously close to unbearable. Worse than family and holidays.

I open the cab’s rear door and settle on the black leather seat. Not because I’ve accepted my fate, but because I really need to sit before I fall down. Julia squeezes in next to me.

Once the cab pulls into traffic, I casually ask, “If you’re having lunch with your boyfriend, why do you need me to tag along? Don’t you guys want to be alone?”

I’m still hoping I can escape. I could hop off the taxi at the next traffic light and grab a hot dog from a street cart on the way back... It’d be so easy. A perfect, quick, sans Jules & Paul lunch.

“Don’t be silly,” Julia says, laughing as she crushes my getting-out-of-lunch fantasy. “Paul loves you as a sister, just as much as I do.”

Ah.

Whoever said words hurt more than actions was so right. I focus on the tall city buildings sweeping by, fighting a losing battle with the lump in my throat. I don’t utter a word for the rest of the fifteen-minute trip, and follow Julia out of the cab as it pulls up in front of... *No!*

I stare transfixed at the retro diner that used to be my and Paul’s special place, now *their* special place. Behind the glass walls, Paul is already seated in a red vinyl booth, waiting for us at our usual table, now also *theirs*.

Nuh-uh, I don’t think I can go in there. My feet are glued to the concrete. I can’t move.

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That is, until Jules pulls my hand forward, saying, “Come on, Nik, it’s freezing out here.”

She drags me the few steps to the door and pushes it open, pulling me into the past. Back to almost ten years ago when it was just Paul and me, when Julia was still in high school and living at home. Out of my life, never into his.

Big Mama hasn’t changed since then: the black and white tiled floor, the red booths near the windows, and the row of metal stools with cushions of the same red vinyl along the bar on the other side. Even the air smells the same: of burgers and fries, vanilla, and coffee that never stops coming.

Paul and I have been friends since freshman year in college; we were both majoring at NYU in marketing, with a minor in design. Before we officially met—thanks to the Typography professor pairing us for the course project—I’d seen him around campus. It was impossible not to notice Paul. Blond, tall, with broad shoulders and a square jaw, he was a poster child for all-American wholesome handsomeness.

But before academic requirements forced us together, the idea of talking to him never crossed my mind, even if we shared almost every class. I didn’t dislike him per se; I’d simply dismissed him as way out of my league, and someone who my parents would approve of too much.

They do, by the way.

I’m not sure how Big Mama became our regular meeting place. It could’ve been because here we could eat breakfast at any hour, or because the coffee was cheap and never ran out, or because the place was open 24/7... It just happened as our friendship happened: naturally.

One conversation with Paul was enough to make me go back on all my prejudices about him. Paul Collins wasn’t just a pretty face in preppy clothes; he was smart, and fun, but also a creative

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genius—in short, a boy even more out of my league. Not that it mattered, as he had a girlfriend at the time: Marie, who, I suspect, barely tolerated our collaboration and following friendship.

For a long time, I believed Paul and I would be one of those couples who finally come together after an unfortunate mix of missed connections and bad timing. When he broke up with Marie, I was in another relationship, and when that ended, he'd started dating someone else. Then his first job out of college was in Chicago, where he lived for three years while I stayed in New York. But when he came back to the city single and called me to grab a coffee at our old spot, I thought, *This is it, we're finally going to happen.*

Little did I know that day would turn into the worst of my life instead. Whenever I try to pin down exactly how all my dreams of a future with Paul were crushed, I can't. My brain, probably suffering from a bad case of PTSD, has erased the details to protect me. All I remember is that while I was with Paul, Julia, who had also moved to the city by then, called me with some stupid emergency and joined us at the diner. Well, that was enough to erase me from Paul's dating map forever. If I'd ever been there at all.

From the moment Jules sat down next to me, it was as if I didn't exist anymore. Conversation just sparked between them, it was like there were fireworks coming across the table, while I remained invisible. That day, I officially became the old college friend who had introduced Paul to the love of his life. Big Mama ceased to be our special place, and instead became the special spot where they met.

Ten years of shared history wiped out by one of Julia's smiles.

Never, with any of Paul's previous girlfriends, had I

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experienced that sense of terrible loss, of a future that now could never be. Because even if they broke up, he would be my sister's ex: permanently off-limits. Sadly, that's also when I realized Paul meant more to me than an old crush or a romantic fantasy about a friend. I was in love with him. Had been for years. But on the same day I understood the depth of my feelings for him, they became forbidden.

As far as I know, Julia had no idea Paul wasn't just a friend for me. And by the time I figured myself out, they were already dating. Too late for me to call dibs on him. And no matter how much it hurt to sit silently by and watch them fall in love, I couldn't bring myself to ruin their relationship. I cared too much about both of them.

Now, as I walk back onto the crime scene, I'm all jitters.

Why has Julia dragged me here? Why are we having lunch with Paul? Let's hope at least it'll be quick. I mean, they both have jobs to go back to. Don't they?

The moment we sit, a server comes with menus. Like the diner, the menus haven't changed; the same big, laminated sheets barely legible through the years of grease that has seeped into the plastic. Not that I need to check the menu. I know what I'm getting, and also what Paul's ordering.

I leave my menu on the table and stare at Jules as she tries to decipher the writing under the dirty plastic to find something allowed by whatever diet she's following at the moment—not that she needs one.

When the server comes back, she turns to Paul first. He orders the fluffy pancakes, as I knew he would. Then, looking at me, he adds, "French toast with berries and cream?"

I can't help but smile and nod. He remembered.

"And you, honey?" Paul asks Julia. "What are you getting?"

All eyes are now on my sister.

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“I’ll take... Mmm...” Jules purses her lips. “The chicken salad without the chicken, eggs, bacon, and onions. Leave the dressing on the side, please.”

Our server raises an eyebrow but doesn’t comment, just writes Julia’s order on her pad.

Paul sighs—half-amused, half-exasperated—and orders a round of Bloody Marys for everyone. Julia asks for hers to be virgin.

When the server’s gone, Jules turns toward Paul with a complicit smile. “Should we tell her now?”

Paul shifts in his booth. “Maybe we should wait for our drinks.”

“Tell me what?” I ask.

My sister smiles at me. “We have some very special news to share, and we wanted to do it here.”

I don’t like how this sounds. I look at Paul for reassurance, but he only shrugs in response. At once, my palms go clammy with sweat.

“This is where we met,” Jules continues, “and if it weren’t for you, it would’ve never happened.”

Don’t I know!

“So it seemed the perfect place to tell you...” My sister pauses for effect. “Are you ready?”

No!

Can I say, no, run out of the diner, and never see them again?

I swallow, grimace, and nod.

Julia takes a deep breath and says, “We’re engaged!”

Something pulls tight in my chest, and I blab the first thing that comes into my head, “T-to each other?”

“Of course to each other, silly.” Having thus handed down my death sentence, Jules launches into a wedding planning rant. “No need to say, you’ll be my maid of honor. The main color

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scheme for the ceremony and reception will be cream and peach. But I'll need your visual expertise to make sure everything is perfect."

"I-I produce commercials," I manage to stutter. "I don't plan weddings."

"Yeah, but you have an eye for setting, wardrobe, photography... You're the ace up my sleeve. We're still debating over two different wedding planners, but as soon as we pick one I'll let you have their contact so we can all coordinate..."

I don't interrupt her a second time. I let her blab on and on about all her wedding ideas while I nod and mmm-hmm every now and then whenever I feel a pause in the conversation requires it. Conversation... more like a monologue. I should be glad my input isn't needed. There's too much of a strong buzz inside my head for me to be able to communicate anyway. Something like the loud ambient interference of a microphone standing too close to the speakers. I'm the microphone, and Jules and Paul's engagement is the amplifier making my brain explode and taking my heart with it.

Two

Blue Christmas

“You think I’m making a mistake?” Jules asks.

Her voice drags me out of the haze I’ve been in since my sister dropped the bombshell that she and Paul are engaged. I stare up at her, surprised to see we’re both in my office. That I’m sitting behind my desk while my sister is perched on it and is eyeing me expectantly. I don’t remember paying for lunch, or even if I said goodbye to Paul. Did I congratulate them? I hope my strict, uptight education kicked in at some point, and that I managed to be at least polite, if not overenthusiastic.

I’m not sure why Julia came back uptown with me after we left Big Mama. Or why she followed me all the way to my office. Or why she’s now seated on my furniture asking very stupid questions.

“A mistake?” My words come out in a hiss. Julia is marrying Paul; how dare she not thank her lucky stars? “What do you mean, a mistake?”

“Only that Paul is so predictable sometimes, don’t you think?” Jules doesn’t let me answer before she continues. “Take the way he proposed. He made a romantic dinner at home with candlelight and roses and popped the question after dessert.”

Red. I see red, and I’m not sure I can keep the anger out of my voice as I ask, “And what would a worthy proposal have entailed?”

“Something more original... More special. Take Amanda’s boyfriend.” Amanda is her best friend. “Joshua asked her on the summit of a wild mountain after they’d struggled to the top together. Paul’s proposal was so cliché by comparison.”

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“I’m pretty sure that if Paul ever asked you to go rock-climbing, you’d dump him on the spot.”

Jules shrugs. “Fair enough, but you’re missing the point.”
“Enlighten me.”

“Sometimes I think Paul is a bit, you know, *boring*. Take his looks, for example, blond hair, blue eyes, square jaw... He’s just so WASP-y; even his job is so proper and expected...”

I’m trying really hard not to start yelling what an ungrateful, spoiled brat she is. “I’m curious, how would a non-boring man look?”

Julia stares at the ceiling with a dreamy expression. “Don’t you ever dream of an adventure with a tall, dark stranger? Someone with smoldering green eyes and full lips, and danger written all over his face. Someone who speaks Italian and doesn’t own a car.”

“And how would he get around? On the subway?”

The last time my sister took the subway, I was still in college.

“Ew, no. He would ride a bike, of course. One of those big, black monsters... We’re talking about the kind of guy who sweeps you off your feet with just one look, who can make you fall hard and fast. Someone mysterious, intriguing...”

“And what occupation would this dangerous stranger have, since marketing is clearly so out of style with you?” I ask, even if I agree that Paul’s job isn’t exactly exciting. I’ve no clue why he decided to waste all his creativeness to go work in the driest, most Corporate America branch of marketing the city has to offer.

“You didn’t get offended, did you?” Jules says. “When I said Paul’s job is boring, I didn’t mean yours, too. You do completely different things.”

Her disrespect of my profession is the least of my concerns at the moment.

“Not at all,” I say.

“Anyway,” she continues, unfazed. I suspect I could’ve said I was mortally offended, and I would’ve gotten the same reaction. “My stranger would have to be some kind of struggling artist, someone who lives paycheck to paycheck, and who appreciates everything he has because he doesn’t know if he’s going to still have it tomorrow.”

“So you basically want to marry a penniless, unemployed artist, who’d propose to you on top of a big rock with a plastic ring because he can’t afford a real diamond?”

“I never said marry, I only said I’d like one last adventure. Is that so wrong?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one about to walk down the aisle.”

I must’ve been scowling more than I realized, because Jules goes on the defensive. “No, you’re right. I’m just being silly. But it’s hard to think I’m done with first dates and first kisses... That Paul will be *it* for me for the rest of my life.”

Considering the last few disastrous first dates I went on, I count Julia lucky she won’t ever have to go on another one. “First dates are overrated, trust me.”

She smiles. “Maybe you’re right. But this is all so new; it’s normal for me to have some wedding jitters, isn’t it?”

I’ve had enough. “Listen, Jules, I don’t mean to be rude, but I really have a ton of work to do...”

“Sorry.” Julia hops off the desk. “I’ve already stolen too much of your time. Thank you for talking me down.” She pulls on her coat. “I’ll send you the wedding planner’s contact as soon as I’ve picked one...”

“Whatever you need.” I hug her goodbye and usher her out. “You know the way, right?”

“Yeah.” She gives me another quick hug and goes.

I don’t watch her get to the elevators; I shut the door to my

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office and pull down all the blinds. Back behind my desk, I drop my head on its cold surface and wait for the tears to come. Only they won't. After holding back for too long, my body is wired to resist and refuses to let go.

For the rest of the afternoon I stare blankly at my screen, finishing none of the work I was supposed to do—namely, the final revision of a lipstick commercial that starts shooting soon. A high-end gig with A-list models and a top-notch director. I just scroll through the art boards, casting pictures, and wardrobe selection without really seeing any of it. By the time Melanie knocks on my door to tell me she's leaving for the night, I've no idea what the plan is for the shoot the day after tomorrow.

Ah, hell. I decide to follow Melanie out. Take the night off, process the blow, and come back in the morning as good as new. The engagement doesn't really change anything. They already live together... Marriage won't make their relationship any better... Only more permanent... More unbreakable...

Kids are coming next, a vicious voice whispers inside my head.

As I walk out of my building, I try to imagine what a Jules & Paul baby would look like. Gorgeous, for sure, with blonde hair and blue eyes... Perfect, really. They're going to have perfect babies, to live in their perfect house, after their perfect wedding.

Despite the biting cold, my feet refuse to walk me to the subway station. Instead, I wander the streets of New York surrounded by a frenzied holiday crowd. Revoltingly cheery people going about their jolly business amidst colorful shopping windows and those sickening Christmas tunes coming out of a thousand speakers hidden everywhere in the city.

A couple in front of me stops to kiss under a mistletoe wreath. Disgusted, I side-step past them, only to be assailed by

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a blinding display of red and green lights. Between the music, the lights, the colors, and the crowd, my head starts spinning. It seems like the whole city is bearing down on me. I need to get somewhere dark and quiet, *now!*

As I quicken my pace, my eyes catch on a shop window without even a hint of red or green, or of a single Christmas decoration. Instead of sickening jingle bells, modern lounge music is drifting out from under the glass door.

On impulse, I walk in.

An Asian guy with shoulder-length, platinum-blond hair welcomes me with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, dear, but we’re almost closing. Did you have an appointment?”

An appointment? I take in the twin rows of black leather chairs in front of floor-to-ceiling mirror walls and realize I’ve walked into a hair salon.

“No, sorry,” I say. “I just needed a break from all this holiday madness, and your place was so...”

The guy nods understandingly. “We pride ourselves in being the anti-Christmas types. So, my darling fellow Grinch, having a bad day?”

“Horrible.” I walk toward one of the chairs. “Can I sit here for five minutes and breathe some un-festive fresh air?”

“Sure, sure.” He gestures for me to sit, and I don’t know if it’s out of professional habit, but he starts combing his fingers through my hair. “Such a blank canvas,” he says, pulling apart a few locks. “When was the last time you had it trimmed?”

“Honestly? I don’t remember. It’s been a while.”

I like my hair as it is: long, dark, straight. And I haven’t changed my style in forever. If it ain’t broke...

“And are you feeling adventurous today?”

“No, *no!* Not at all.”

I make to get up, but my host keeps me in place with a gentle

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pressure on my shoulders.

“Mmm, I’m not sure you’ve walked in here by chance, darling. Sure you’re not ready for a change?”

I’m about to say “no” again, when the question really sinks in. Am I ready for a change? Do I want to keep spending my life pining after my sister’s boyfriend—sorry, fiancé?

No.

Do I want to keep dreading the holidays and every visit home?

No.

So, am I ready for a change?

Hell yeah!

I meet the guy’s eyes in the mirror.

“That’s what I thought.” He smiles knowingly. “I work only by appointment, but I will make an exception for you, little bird.”

“Oh, no. You were about to close, I wouldn’t want to make you stay late. I can come back tomorrow.”

The stylist gives me a piercing stare through the mirror. “You walk out of that door now, honey, and we both know I’ll never see you again.”

He’s right.

“Okay. Let’s do this.”

“Great!” He pats my shoulders. “Now, tell me how much of a radical change you want.”

I lift my chin. “Make me a new woman.”

After leaving the salon, I spend the rest of the walk home spying on my reflection in every shop window I pass. I barely recognize myself. Jiang—the genius hairstylist—basically turned me into Jaimie Alexander’s secret twin sister. Think Nina Dobrev from

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the pilot episode of *The Vampire Diaries* to the series finale makeover. Only my new cut is shorter and more radical.

And so bouncy, and so fresh, and so not me.

As I unlock my apartment door, my phone pings with a new text. I drop my bag on the counter, take out the phone, and sag on the couch, exhausted.

What a day!

My fingers are so cold from my stroll around Manhattan that when I try to unlock the phone, the touchscreen almost doesn't recognize them as warm, human flesh. Only after I blow hot air on my fingertips and swipe twice more does it work, and I can read the text.

It's from Blair, my best friend and roommate.

Sorry I haven't been home in forever

I'll be there in a few minutes

Are you in?

Just got here

Great

I have some big news

Bought champagne to celebrate

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Champagne? Oh gosh, she's getting married, too. Richard proposed. I try to summon some altruistic joy, but I can't. There's only one thought drilling through my skull: I'm going to be single forever and die alone.

Just like that, out of nowhere, the tears come. My chest and shoulders spasm with body-wrenching sobs, and I don't seem to be able to stop the flood.

The frustration, the pain... the bitter jealousy, for my sister, for my best friend... they all come out in a downpour. Oh, gosh, I'm a horrible person who doesn't deserve love. Why would anyone love *me*? I'm dark and grumpy and stubborn—simply, utterly unlovable.

That's how Blair finds me a few minutes later: a sobbing, self-loathing mess sprawled on the couch.

"Oh my gosh, Nikki." She rushes into the living room, coat still on, dropping a bottle of bubbly on the coffee table, where she sits. "Are you okay?"

I try to speak, but it's difficult when you're crying as hard as I am, so I only shake my head.

Blair does a double take and points at my face, shocked. "Your hair—it's gone! Are you crying about the haircut?"

"Nooooooooo," I wail. "S-should I be c-crying about it?"

"No, no!" Blair jumps in to reassure me. "I love it like this! But it's a big transformation... I thought maybe you did it on the spur of the moment, then changed your mind. Is that it?"

I shake my head again.

"So what is it?"

After a few deep breaths, I speak the unspeakable. "Julia and Paul are engaged."

Blair doesn't respond. She removes her coat, kicks off her shoes, and slides onto the couch next to me, taking me into her arms. She pets me and cuddles me as I tell her everything: the

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lunch at Big Mama, the announcement, Jules' stupid doubts, my lone walk through the streets of Manhattan, and the hair salon.

"Do you really like my hair this way?" I ask at the end.

"Love it!" Blair smiles sincerely.

I hug her tighter. "Distract me. What was your big news?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch her throwing a guilty look at the champagne bottle. A thick layer of condensation now covers the dark glass. The wine's got to be warm by now. Great, I ruined her celebration.

"Oh, nothing," she says, brushing my question off. "Let's talk about it another night."

"You bought the bubbly," I insist. "Don't tell me it's nothing."

She chews on her index nail, undecided.

"Did Richard propose, too?"

"No," Blair says and, still biting her nail, adds, "but he asked me to move in with him."

I try to smile, I really try, but my lower lip starts trembling. I manage an, "I'm so happy for you," before I start sobbing again.

Blair pulls me back into her arms and tries to console me. "It won't be super soon. I told him we would need time to figure things out, and I'm not going anywhere until you're okay. Listen, I know the holidays are hard for you, and I'm here. Richard is going back to England over the break, but I'm staying in the States. We'll go home together, and whenever it gets too hard at your place, you can come and crash in my room, I promise. It'll be just you, me, and Chevron. A girls' club."

I calm down a little. Blair coming home to Connecticut with me is the lifeline I need to survive this Christmas. Knowing she'll be there is the only positive piece of news I've gotten all day. Also, for the first time, I notice Chevron—Blair's semi-

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golden-retriever dog—didn't come home with her.

“Hey, where did you leave Chevron?”

“At Richard's. I took the subway back. With traffic, it would've taken forever in his car, and it was too cold to walk, even for me.”

“Oh, I could've used the extra cuddles.”

Chevron is the most empathic and *only* dog I like.

“I thought you were a cat person.”

“I am, but Chevron is basically a cat born in the wrong body.”

Blair smirks. “If you say so.”

“At least when the two of you move out I'll be able to adopt a real cat, body and soul.”

The thought almost cheers me up, if not for the mocking voice inside my head announcing, *Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Nikki Moore: single, alone, and crazy cat-less cat lady.*

Three

The Perfect Man for Christmas

The next morning, I arrive at the office super early. Not only to catch up with work, but also to avoid the double-takes and possibly false compliments my impromptu makeover will spur.

I've just finished checking the wardrobe for tomorrow's shoot when Melanie walks in. She stops just inside the door and makes a shocked, "oh-I-walked-into-the-wrong-office" face. Then she blinks, realization dawning. Closing the door behind her, she approaches my desk slowly. "Your hair..."

"Is shorter," I say, making it clear that, no, I don't want to talk about it. "What can I do for you?"

"Your mother called again... I'm running out of excuses..."

"Arrrrrrrgh..." I let out an exasperated growl and drop my head in my hands.

"Mmm... Are you okay, boss?"

"No, I'm not okay." I lift my head and bang both fists on the desk. Not content, I brush off all the sheets of paper crowding it in a crazed swipe. The documents tumble to the floor, carrying a pen holder and my landline phone with them.

I stare at the mess with a small surge of satisfaction. Melanie, on the other hand, has gone pale.

"Sorry," I say. My reaction was atypical; I've never freaked out in front of her. "I'm not mad at you."

Still wary, my assistant sits in the chair opposite to mine. "Okay, boss, tell me what's going on."

Over the years, I've always strived to maintain a professional relationship with Melanie. But she's been with me from the start, and we've also developed a friendship-with-boundaries.

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This is one of the times I feel like testing those limits a little.

“It’s the holidays and I’m single, while Julia just got engaged...” I skip the “to the love of my life” part, to maintain a shred of credibility in front of my assistant. “My roommate just told me she’s moving in with her boyfriend. And in less than two weeks, I’ll have to go home and listen to every single one of my relatives ask me why I’m still single. When what they really mean is, ‘What’s wrong with you? Why does nobody want you?’”

I huff. Aww... it felt good to let it all out.

Melanie absorbs all the personal info like a pro. “Is it the ‘single at the holidays’ part that bothers you, or is it your family?”

Good question. I don’t particularly enjoy being single, and the prospect of dying a crazy cat lady is not very appealing. But why does the anxiety get so much worse near the end of the year? I’m fine with my life eleven months out of twelve, but every December I promptly turn into a train wreck. Does Christmas make being a spinster harder? Or is it the judgment in Aunt Betsy’s thin-lipped smiles? The ill-concealed sadness behind my mother’s eyes for my “condition?” Or the well-intentioned-but-deeply-insensitive jokes everyone spins me back home?

It’s not me. It’s them.

“My family,” I tell Melanie. “They drive me nuts.”

“Well, but that’s an easy fix.”

“Really? How?”

“You’re an executive producer. Produce them.”

“What do you mean?”

“There must be a gay best friend—possibly with the looks of Rupert Everett—you can ask to go home with you and pretend to be your boyfriend.”

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Sometimes I forget my assistant is still basically a child. At twenty-five, she's not jaded enough about life to accept not everything can be solved "Hollywood Style" and end in happily ever after.

Pity happily ever afters don't exist. Some genius in my profession invented them to sell romance to the crowds. That's all.

"Sorry, Mel, but I'm not Julia Roberts and this isn't a movie. No gorgeous gay besties in the picture."

"A straight friend would do, too. Anyone you can ask?"

Ironically, the one male friend I could've felt intimate enough to ask something so embarrassing would've been Paul. Isn't life funny sometimes?

"Not really," I say.

"Well, then hire someone!"

"Are you suggesting I hire a male escort?" And we've moved from *My Best Friend's Wedding* to *The Wedding Date*, maybe she has a thing for Dermot Mulroney. "Are you crazy? I'm not that desperate."

"I was thinking more an actor." She points at my computer. "You have a database full of them right there in front of you; you just have to pick and choose."

"That's even more absurd and unprofessional." To signify that this conversation is finished, I bend forward and start collecting the scattered documents from the floor. "Break's over," I say, pushing up the pen holder.

"All right, boss," Melanie says, getting up. She helps me clean the mess and places my office phone back on the desk, eyeing it meaningfully. "But your mom won't give up, you know?"

Don't I?

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Another afternoon of staring into space earns me a late night at the office. I wish nothing more than to go home, change into a pair of sweatpants, and watch a silly romcom that will make me cry and despise my life even more. But I can't leave before every minute of tomorrow's shoot is mapped out. And I need to also check the ad sales reports on my holiday commercials and recheck the TV air schedules for the projects I'm following. So I trudge on, even if my eyes keep crossing over the endless Excel sheet lines and columns.

By 8:30 p.m. I'm so exhausted that, when my landline rings, I pick up without thinking.

"Nikki Moore."

"Nikki!" My mother sounds both astounded and utterly ecstatic she's finally cornered me. "I thought I'd get your voicemail. I'm not sure your secretary is passing along all my messages. What are you still doing at the office this late?"

"Working, obviously."

"Work, work, work. You work too much, honey, there's more to life than just work."

I could come up with a million retorts. But if I argue back, the conversation will spiral into a sermon from my mother. A lecture starting with a list of all the important things I'm neglecting, and ending in a praise of the perfect work-life balance Julia has achieved. So, instead of defending my right to be focused on my career, I give her the easy response.

"Mom, you know how busy it gets at the holidays, worst time of the year. I really need to finish up here, so..."

"I'll be quick, then." Now that she has me, she's not going to let me off the hook that easily. "I wanted to know when you're coming home for the break. Julia is coming on the twenty-

second.”

I peek at the calendar. The twenty-second is the Saturday before Christmas.

“Either then, or on the twenty-third,” I say. “I’m sharing a car with Blair, and we haven’t made a decision yet.”

“But you’ll definitely be here by Sunday night.”

“Yes.”

“And when are you leaving?”

“Not sure yet, Mom.” I try to stall before she traps me up there for a full week. “Depends on what my plans for New Year’s are.”

“Oh, are you going somewhere?”

I twist the cord around my fingers and say, “I could.” Which isn’t an outright lie. I *could* go on a trip; I’m just not planning to.

“All right, we can settle that once you get home.” I think she’s finally going to cut me loose when she adds, “So, you’ve heard about Julia and Paul. Isn’t it wonderful news?”

Peachy, I’d say, to keep in tone with the wedding color scheme.

“Yeah, I had lunch with them yesterday.”

“Oh, great. So, I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind swapping rooms with your sister?”

“And why should I do that?”

“Because your bed is bigger, and since Paul is spending the holidays with us—”

“WHAT?!”

“Isn’t it marvelous? He’s almost part of the family now, and it makes sense he’d want to be with us at Christmas.”

“And what about *his* family? Don’t they want to spend Christmas Day with their son?”

“I think his mom prefers Thanksgiving. Anyway, can I tell

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Julia she can have your room?”

“No.”

“Nikki, don’t be unreasonable. You’re coming home by yourself, and they’re two—they can’t sleep in Julia’s bunk bed.”

The thought of Julia and Paul sleeping—*and doing who knows what else*—in my old bed blinds me with rage. I lost my virginity on that bed with my first boyfriend—senior year, one spring afternoon when both my parents were out. Julia can’t have that, too. That bed has a lot of good memories, and I won’t let Julia spoil those as well. She’s already collected enough pieces of me.

“I’m not by myself,” I say on impulse.

“What do you mean?” my mom asks, surprised.

“My boyfriend is coming with me.”

And I’m digging myself a deeper grave with every sentence.

“You have a boyfriend? Since when?”

“Yeah, it hasn’t been long, but I wanted you all to meet him.”

Lie, after lie, after lie.

“Oh, Nikki, you’re making me so happy! What’s his name? How did you meet?”

“I don’t have time to tell you the whole story now, Mom, but don’t worry, you’ll meet him soon enough.”

“Sure. I’ll let you go back to work... So many things to organize here. I love you, honey.”

“Love you, too, Mom. Bye.”

I hang up and drop my head on the desk over my crossed arms.

What have I done?

I should call her back and tell her it’s all been a mistake. That Julia can have my man, my dream life, and even my bed. What does it matter, anyway?

Only it *does* matter. I can’t spend a week at home, single and

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pathetic, sleeping in Julia's tiny princess bed while she shares my bed with Paul. Not possible.

I straighten up.

So, where do I find a boyfriend?

I throw a guilty stare at my computer.

No, I couldn't.

What if someone at the office found out?

Impossible.

No one would ever believe I've hired a fake boyfriend off the agency's database.

With a few quick clicks of the mouse, I close the Excel sheet I was studying and access the actors/models database.

A pop-up window prompts me to input filters to narrow down the search. I select "male" and then, before I know what I'm doing, I start creating an avatar of Julia's ideal man.

Eyes: green

Hair: dark

Height: 6' 4" and above

Age: |

I'm undecided if I should include only the 30-34 range or expand it to 25-29 and 35-39. What if the perfect man is 29 or 35? I select all three, just to be on the safe side.

Languages: |

I check English and Italian and click Search.

With my heart in my throat, I wait for the results. Does such a man even exist?

The search engine lands three positive hits. Wow. Apparently, there are a lot more tall, dark-haired, Italian-

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speaking men in New York than I thought.

I open the first profile, and the picture of a beautiful man pops on the screen. I say “beautiful” because it’s clear that this male model favors his feminine side. It’s in the delicate pout of his lips and the graceful tilt of his head. No one would ever believe he’s in love with me.

I close his profile and open the next one.

Jackpot!

Now, if a man could ever be described as dark, smoldering hot, and mysterious, this guy has nailed all three. The headshot is pretty simple: he’s staring at the camera straight up, face forward. His wavy black hair is just long enough to be very sexy, as sexy as his full-lipped mouth, and his green eyes are piercing a hole through the screen. Tyra Banks would say he’s smizing at the camera.

I study the picture a little longer... His straight nose is sprinkled with freckles that make him cute on top of sexy. And even the line of his neck is masculine and inviting. He is the perfect man. He’s my guy.

His other pictures only reinforce my conviction. A profile shot: equally sexy. One of him smiling: heart-melting. And...

Whoa.

The last picture is a black and white bust shot. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Mysterious is wearing jeans and teasingly lifting a tank top to reveal his bare chest while he stares at the camera with a naughty expression—eyes alive with mischief and mouth curled up at one corner in a lopsided grin. The shot takes my breath away. This must be photoshopped; no real person could really have abs and pectorals that sculpted.

Reluctantly, I close the picture and open his profile.

Diego O’Donnell, age twenty-eight. Two years younger than me, but we live in a modern era where a two-year gap a cougar

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doesn't make. From his CV I see that the guy has done a few lesser gigs on Broadway and has a couple of high-level commercials under his belt. But nothing so big that it'll make him snub my proposal. Mr. O'Donnell still fits the struggling artist profile.

Mmm, let's see where you live.

The address listed on his file is far away enough from Manhattan to tell me he's not swimming in cash.

Good.

Because I need someone just as desperate as me to take this job.

Fueled up by adrenaline, I save his contact on my phone and press Call.

###

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Camilla Isley is an engineer turned writer after she quit her job to follow her husband in an adventure abroad.

She's a cat lover, coffee addict, and shoe hoarder. Besides writing, she loves reading—duh!—cooking, watching bad TV, and going to the movies—popcorn, please. She's a bit of a foodie, nothing too serious.

A keen traveler, Camilla knows mosquitoes play a role in the ecosystem, and she doesn't want to starve all those frog princes out there, but she could really live without them.

You can find out more about her here: camillaisley.com and by following her on Twitter or Facebook.

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