

TARAH DEWITT

Christmas Presents



christmas presents

tarah dewitt

This one is for you.

May your season be calm and bright. Thank you for making this the year that I was able to realize a dream.

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author's note

I love that my characters end up feeling like they exist off the page, but sometimes it would be nice if they could shut up and leave me alone.

That being said, this particular little project turned into something so emotional and FUN for me. I loved getting to revisit them and imagine them all in the present. There is nothing here but Christmas sugar and spice, there is no real conflict and nothing but fun. This is not a new story all its own. There are perhaps a few small clues for future books in the Santa Cruz story, but nothing essential. I simply wrote these for everyone who has enjoyed my characters and been touched by their tales, who might want to see a bit more of them this holiday. Thank you, thank you, thank you for caring about them as I have.

part one

. . .

DECEMBER 23RD

Boise, Idaho

Tait

As we pull into the long term parking garage, I catch myself watching the planes land in the other terminal. Wondering if my sister and her family might be on that one landing now, or maybe they're on the other one I see taxi'ing. It's blue skies out there currently, but the chill is enough to let you know that snow is on the way.

"That's it," Henry growls, letting out a long-suffering sigh from the driver's seat.

"What? What's wrong?" I reply.

His handsome face crinkles into a sympathetic look. He takes the big palm on my thigh and moves it to my hand, giving it a squeeze.

"Honey, let's reschedule," he says firmly.

"Henry, no—"

"Tait, you've had your head out that window for the entire three-hour drive. When *Mele Kalikimaka* came on you didn't so much as hum, and that's one of your year-round favorites." He tilts his chin and lifts his brows. "Let's reschedule. Just this once. We've got insurance on the flights and the hotel is refundable, and I know you want to see Ave and the boy for Christmas."

My chin starts to wobble. "But you learned all those things in German for the Christmas markets. Christmas in Germany is arguably the best in the world," I urge.

"And we've got plenty of Christmases together and to my limited, hick-brained knowledge, Germany isn't going anywhere anytime soon either."

"Henry."

"Tait."

A tear breaks loose, and I decide not to speak about the darker shade of my thoughts, to say *what if this is Em's last Christmas?* out loud. Because I already know that he's all too aware. That my grandmother means just as much to him as she does to me.

"But . . . we don't even have a *tree* at home," I whine, despite fighting a smile. We didn't get a tree because we thought we'd be gone.

"Honey, I've got an ax and I happen to live on a couple thousand acres. I'll get you a tree." He nods, and I launch myself at him across the middle seat and into his lap, start kissing his face

maniacally.

“You won’t resent me for this? I just . . .” He waits patiently for me to finish. “I’m just dying to see Ave and maybe play in the snow with Jack and—”

“Truck is already in reverse,” he chuckles.

I exhale and let myself fully smile at him. “I love you so fucking much.” I kiss him again. “I also can’t wait to go to Germany with you at some point. Or somewhere exceptional.”

“Baby, exceptional is everywhere with you. Especially at Christmas. Now buckle up and pick out a new playlist for the next three hours, alright?”

I feel incandescent. He almost seems *excited* to head back home—definitely not the slightest bit irritated at me for upending our plans, despite the fact that we drove all the way here and planned this trip for nearly six months. Henry’s entire approach to life and how he manages to roll with it, his loyalty . . . We are in that sweet spot of love where we’ve settled into something comfortable and steady. That part where you’re *comfortable* voicing every feeling because you feel protected by someone.

“Henry Marcum, if I wasn’t a responsible adult who cared about road-safety I would absolutely be offering you road head.” His foot clips the brake a bit abruptly, but he recovers before he gives me a stern look.

“You want to call your sister and see if they’d like to ride back with us?” he asks. I’ll never not be impressed with his ability to stay on task.

“No, Dad had Grady and Caleb drop off a truck for them the other day. Let’s get home so I can have my way with you.”

He rolls his neck and squirms in his seat. “You don’t think I’d let you have your way with me in a parking garage? Don’t let that mouth write checks you’re not willing to cash in on, honey.”

I consider it. He’s in my favorite dark jeans, a thick flannel that only adds to his already-colossal shoulders and arms. And as much as he bemoans it, his new haircut adds a clean cut edge to his otherwise rugged look and *god*, it works for me. Speaking of which . . .

“I think it’ll be good for you and Jack to make peace over Christmas,” I say. His head falls back against the seat with a huff.

“How are you going to transition from mentioning road head and having your way with me to reminding me that your nephew is a little punk.”

“Henry, he’s four.”

“Tait, he knew what he was doing with the slime and you know it.” He throws the truck into drive and starts toward the exit as I chuckle. Jack and Henry were inseparable over Thanksgiving, which ended abruptly when Jack slimed Henry’s hair. The stuff was impossible to separate and was so bad that we—I—was forced to cut it out. Which then led to Henry having to go into town for a professional haircut to fix it.

I settle in the center seat close to him so I can rest my head on his shoulder, just as I realize something . . .

I’ve spent a career looking for the extraordinary, the exceptional. Even in my marriage to Cole, I was always trying to plan bigger things, always in search of special.

Now, all I want is my home. My family and Henry are my *home*, the place I’d choose over anywhere, the place with the people who make me feel special, who are the most precious to me.

I am strangely overcome and relaxed all at once, alone tear spilling down my face. I close my eyes and let myself *feel* all of this—this overwhelming gratitude, safety, love.

“Honey, wake up.”

“Hmm?”

“Tait,” Henry’s voice rumbles beside my ear. “We’re home honey. Open your eyes.”

The vibrations from the truck mixed with the two a.m. wake-up call must’ve put me to sleep. I crack open my eyes and sit up, squinting at the world around me.

A sea of glittering white surrounds us. The sun’s reflection off the snow is nearly blinding, more flakes gently float down from the sky. It feels like we’ve slipped into a sugar bowl.

“I had to stop at Charlie’s for the dogs already, so I ruined the surprise,” Henry says. “But I told them to come over later this afternoon and we’ll do snowmen and sleds and all that. We’ve got about six hours to ourselves to pick out a tree and decorate however you want to.”

I take him in now. He’s wearing a sweatshirt under thick Carhardt coveralls, a hunter green beanie on his head. He cracks a smile at my expression. “What?”

“Nothing,” I laugh back. “I just vaguely remember once thinking that you were one of the few men that probably could pull off a pair of overalls, back when I first met you. I was right.”

“Hmm,” he grunts. His breath leaves him in a puff that curls through the frigid air. “I started the fire inside already.”

“You know, you’ve been suspiciously good at deflecting my advances today,” I grumble.

“Someone’s gotta keep this train on track. Now come on.” He claps his gloved hands together excitedly. “Go get changed so we can get a tree.”

After I greet the pups and do as he says—changing into my own bib-and-beanie combo, the thought nags at me again in earnest.

“Hey!” I call out to him across the porch. He’s saddling up the horses and rigging up a sled behind one. I cock a hand on my hip. “You playing hard to get with me or something?” I know I segued out of the parking garage proposition, but normally he’d have taken me inside already and prioritized taking *me* before anything else.

He stomps up the steps toward me with a grin, surprises a shriek out of me when he grabs me by my straps and hauls me against him.

“Tait.” His voice is rough, my favorite edge to it that sends a promising thrill through my core. “I plan to tie you up in ribbons and bows and gift you to myself later.” His grin turns smug at whatever my face is doing. Heat pools at the base of my spine. “But I also *really* want a tree to put you under.” He pulls me further up and gives me a chaste kiss, before he abruptly drops me and swats my ass. “Just like Christmas presents—the build-up only adds to it. Now let’s go.”

We head out at a leisurely pace, taking in the sights around us. It’s truly an idyllic winter day. Icicles drip from branches, the ponds are all frozen over. The world is blissfully quiet aside from the sloshing of hooves in powder and the horses’ occasional gentle snorts.

“No one bugged you about coming over earlier or anything?” I ask Henry after some time.

He shakes his head. “No, why?”

I shrug and look back ahead. “I don’t know. Think I figured they’d be excited that we were staying back, or something.”

He laughs quietly to himself. “Honey, they are. They’re probably still in shock that we chose

home over European holiday charm and getting the chance to say ‘frohe Weihnachten’ everywhere we went.”

I stick my lip out in a pout. “You can still say it, baby. You totally mastered it.”

“I really did, didn’t I?” He sighs through a smile. “Truthfully, I was relieved when you wanted to stay back. It feels a bit sacrilegious not to be home at Christmas.”

I make a rueful sound. “That’s not always the case. Not even close.” I recall my lonely years without family, or even friends with traditions. This time of year can be the bleakest for some. We sway back and forth a few more steps. “But I feel deeply lucky that we have somewhere we want to be. People we want to be with.”

We slow to a stop side by side.

“You know I’d go anywhere with you, right? Any day, any time,” he says.

I lean over in the saddle until he meets me halfway, kisses me with snowflakes clinging to his eyelashes.

“I do know. And you better know that I’d do the same.”

His brows come together. “I do.”

We march on a while longer until we come to a clearing rimmed with fat, fluffy trees. It takes me next to no time to find The One, and it takes Henry even less time to take it down and secure it to the sled.

We take our time getting back, while we make small talk about what gifts we’re excited to give, the things we can’t wait to eat. Em’s scalloped potatoes are renowned and Grace makes a bourbon-chocolate-pecan pie that I’d lay down my life for. I love that we can talk about nothing together, that we can be just as content in silence, too.

By the time we get home and return the horses to their newly-built stable beside the house, my weird energy from the morning has settled, though Henry still seems . . . off, somehow. He changes out of his snow gear a little too quickly and flees the room, where he’d normally indulge himself in watching me change, too. I slip into some comfortable thermals with a pout, but I tell myself that it’s probably just me overthinking, and set to decorating the tree after we get it in the stand.

But, Henry still doesn’t relax. He busies himself with filling up the wood ring for the fire and tends to it while I work, and as soon as he plops onto the sofa I see him lurch up again and head into the kitchen.

“Can I make you a drink?” he bellows.

“Sure!” Whatever will take the edge off.

When *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree* comes on, another thought surfaces.

“It’s weird that Ava has been home for, like, over two hours now and hasn’t even texted me. Not a call or anything. What the hell is going on?”

Henry hands me a drink in my favorite mug. I took him to California for the first time earlier this year for his birthday. Brought him to South Lake Tahoe and through the foothills and wine country. We even visited my Alma Mater (go banana slugs!) in Santa Cruz. Found an adorable coffee shop by the Boardwalk where one of the owners hand-made these mugs.

Henry nods down to my drink and waits for me to take a sip. Something perfectly spiced with rum. When my eyes find him again I notice the flush on his cheeks.

“Jesus, Henry are you okay? You’re not sick are you?” I reach the back of my hand and place it against his forehead. Not warm.

He laces my floating hand with his and brings it down. “I told everyone I wanted you to myself for a while, alright?” he says, quirking a brow. “Now will you have some goddamn patience and let me?”

There’s humor in his tone, though I don’t quite buy it. We would still be on a plane right now if we’d stuck to our plans—not exactly the most special or intimate sort of bonding. He’d be starting to get uncomfortable since he’s too damn big for the seats, so he’d be up in the aisles pacing to break up the stiffness. I’d be working on a crossword puzzle with him in between.

“Alright,” I say softly, searching my favorite gold-green eyes. “Cheers.” We clink our mugs together and watch each other take a sip. I snake my hand out of his and slip it into his back pocket. “Tree’s ready for something under it now. And you *have* been so very good.” I bite my lip, stifling a laugh at the cheesiness of it.

A laugh bursts out of him. “And you *are* the gift, aren’t you?” he cheeses back. When he dips down to kiss me I block him with my drink between us and take a long gulp as I step backwards out of his embrace.

“Go get comfortable.” I nod toward the couch, and he obliges. Out of the corner of my eye I see the dogs flee the room like they can read it.

I take off one warm sock, and then take another languid sip. Take off the other sock and do the same. It’s likely the least sexy striptease given the winter-wear aspect, but I take my time drawing it out. By the time I’m fully bared I can see him growing hard in his gray sweatpants.

“You next,” I say quietly, tilting my chin his way.

He stands and peels off his shirt in a flash and then gives me a come hither motion with a finger. I pad my way across the room before I speed up shamelessly, practically leaping into his arms as he sinks his hands beneath my ass and lifts me. A moan vibrates up my throat when our lips meet, the taste of rum and ginger on his tongue. He kneads his big hands up the backs of my thighs before he presses them into my back like he’s molding me to him. I squeak when he falters a step—fumbling around with one hand on the coffee table before he turns us and lays me back into the couch.

“Wasn’t kidding about this,” he says, holding up a spool of ribbon, dropping to his knees. I hold my breath as he tears off two long strips with his teeth. “Damn, that’s harder than you’d think.”

“Usually someone has scissors,” I chuckle.

“Thought running off to get scissors might kill the moment,” he smiles lopsidedly before he proceeds to tie each wrist to the outside of its corresponding ankle in expertly snug knots.

“I swear Hen, if you make a comment about me being hog-tied or anything referencing roping cattle—” My quip is cut short when he licks up my center and I bow off the couch in an arch.

It’s a special kind of torture not to be able to touch him, to only writhe beneath his mouth and hands. The wanton, needy sounds I make should probably embarrass me, but he treats every inch of me like a precious gift.

After several minutes of constant, steady attention—something he builds and stokes until I’m out of my mind with need—I blissfully come apart completely. He scrapes a path back up to my face with his stubble against my skin, the sensations mixing and heightening every latent pulse. By the time he’s untying me we’re both shaking, and I frantically touch every bit of him that I can until he’s dragging me down to the floor and huddling over me. Our mouths tangle, his smiling into mine as I clumsily push off his pants. We groan in unison when he slides into me at last, and everything starts to slow, the moments stretching as we lose ourselves in one another.

That dip and pull starts to tug at my core again, just as he asks, “Can you come for me one more time, honey?” his voice low against my ear, his body overwhelming me everywhere else. I arch up

and press a knee into his hip in answer and he rolls us around to put me on top of him. He bears the brunt of the work still, lifting and pistoning me while I touch myself, until I shatter all over once more. He sits up and keeps working my body along his, his mouth at my collarbone and his hair threaded in my hands. And when he finishes, he does it with a soft, guttural sound and an “I love you,” whispered into my skin.

We drag a big blanket off of the couch and lay together on the floor for a time. The fire crackles behind us and snow falls all around outside.

“I have one more thing I want to try with the ribbon,” he says, bursting our bubble of silence and making me laugh.

He tilts up and leans back over the coffee table to grab a different spool I hadn’t noticed before.

“Close your eyes for me,” he says, almost nervously. I can see his pulse jumping erratically in the base of his throat. As if I’d say no to letting this man tie me up in any which way. I laugh softly and comply.

I feel him lift my hand into the air. Feel the cool silkiness of the ribbon as he secures it around my finger. I choke on a gasp when realization hits.

“Open them.”

I open my eyes and immediately find his tear-filled ones. My own pool with comical speed.

“I planned to do this in some incredibly romantic spot, just you and me halfway across the world. But I was having the hardest time deciding exactly where or how. And I just don’t want to wait anymore, anyway. All I knew was that for this, I wanted you all to myself.” He takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. “This life is ours. Yours and mine. No matter what family, friends, or anyone else has to say about it. Whatever comes of it, you are my person. I want to be your biggest supporter, your friend, your fan. I want you to see every place you’ve ever wanted to see and have everything you’ve ever wanted. I’m not ever going to be the best with words, the most cultured or creative. But I promise that I’ll love you with everything I’ve got, for as long as I’ve got, if you’ll let me.” I let out a sob, my heart breaking in happiness. “Tait, will you marry me?”

“God, yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes—” I yank his face to mine and continue chanting as I kiss him.

“Wait, wait!” Henry laughs. “Let me give you your ring!”

“Oh! Give it to me!” I wiggle my hand where the ribbon is tied around a particularly important digit. Henry unravels it and pulls it taut before he slips the band down the length, until it gently bumps into my fingertip. He spins it around and slides it the rest of the way.

I sit up so I can look at it in the glittering Christmas tree lights.

“I know it’s different and if you don’t like it—”

“Henry, I love it.” My voice wobbles around all the edges. “It’s perfect. It’s . . . it’s more than perfect.” It’s a band of emerald cut diamonds, each one perfectly substantial in size, a continuous circle all the way around.

It’s simple and beautiful, full of little facets that shimmer. Like everything I hope for our life to be.

We lay back down, side by side, taking turns holding it up to the light.

“So now you know why I wanted to sneak you back here and keep everyone else away for a bit, then?” he asks.

“Oh my god, do they know?!”

“Yes,” he laughs. “And I know they’re excited to celebrate with us and all, but let me keep you like this a while longer, okay?”

I smile up at him from his chest. “Okay.”

We spend the remaining three hours of our time this way. Naked, cuddled up together, and talking. We move the party to our bed rather than staying on the hard floor, but we don't get dressed and we don't stop conversing. We talk about projects around the ranch, plans for the future and Henry's dreams of giving kids like him a place to have some of the same experiences he was afforded. We talk about my upcoming assignments, mostly things in the country. I'm especially excited to work for a magazine shoot photographing the women coming off of the Wet 'N Mild comedy tour, so I talk to him about the creative direction I'd like to take for that.

Henry's face lights up when we talk about babies for us one day. He practically glows with laughter when my jaw drops at the news that he wants SIX. We settle on a hypothetical two.

The moment our hours are up, both of our phones begin to ding. We get dressed and load up the pups in the truck to head over to the main house so we can share our celebration with the rest of our family.

We all ooh and ahh over my ring and over Ava's belly—she's due with my second nephew in just a few months. There's laughter and yelling, too many drinks and tears. We make plans for sledding and snowman-building over Christmas, plus an engagement party after New Year's. Jack abuses his early Christmas gift and starts shooting everyone with his new Nerf gun. We play cards and eat a disturbing number of cookies.

Em is more subdued than normal, a little more pensive, but she's excited all the same. Every time I find her across the room and she's not aware of anyone's gaze, I catch her beaming at everyone with pride. I slip my camera out and take as many pictures of her as I can.

I think if I could bottle up this feeling tonight, I'd ration it and save a sip for every bad day.

Instead, I steal pieces of it with my camera, and capture it in all the other ways I can, too. Try to carve it into my mind and heart.

And that, to me, is the beauty of Christmas. It's not quite the end of the year, but it's the twilight of it. The time to reflect on everything old and new, to restore faith in everything to come. Because, just like it was this year and in all those past, you know that even in the devastating, love will be there too.

part two

. . .

CHRISTMAS EVE Los Angeles, CA

Farley

“Meyer, you have to do it.”

“Jones, I’m begging you. I’ll get on my knees. *Don’t* make me do this,” Meyer says, his brow wrinkled in desperation.

“Don’t try to knock me off track with that innuendo. *Hazel* wants you to. It’s not me!” I laugh.

He groans and lets his head fall back—a mini tantrum that’d look more appropriate on a preteen than a thirty-six-year-old man.

“I’m not wearing the Santa hat, then,” he declares.

I reach up and scratch my fingertips along his beard. “But with all this gray you totally pull off the hot, sexy young-Santa. I’m really craving some lap time.”

“*Christ,*” he hisses, smirking at me. “You’re evil, you know that? You’ve managed to turn me on and make me feel like a creep at the same time, Fee.”

“I love you too.” I beam at him.

He breathes out a gruff laugh, before he slips his hand around my waist and presses me to him. He dips down to lay a kiss to my lips and the pouf from his Santa hat grazes my temple. A hum rolls through him when I bite his lower lip, the warm hand on my back slides lower.

And then we hear a clap to our left and turn that way.

Hazel has glitter in her gel-slicked bun, blush staining her cheeks.

“*We have to go!*” she signs. “*I want to be early so Bernard gets a good seat!*”

Meyer lets out an exasperated sound and scrapes a palm down his face. “*You have all your gear?*”

“*Yes, snowflake costume and flower costume all packed.*” She pats her duffel for emphasis. She was chosen for multiple parts in our local Nutcracker. It’s an otherwise all-hearing cast, yet she managed to beat out quite a few other kids for two on-pointe roles.

“*Alright, let’s go,*” Meyer declares, before he starts walking toward the door. I cough behind him and he turns.

“*You forgetting someone?*” I ask. A muscle ticks in his jaw.

“*Don’t forget to use the tongs,*” Hazel adds.

It takes every ounce of control I can muster not to combust on the spot as I watch Meyer take the tongs out of a canister on the counter, pluck Hazel's Elf off of the shelf, and place it in a clear jar. He gives me a dead-eyed expression when he tightens the lid on it, safely locking Bernard in his chamber.

When Hazel bounces ahead of us to the car he growls, "You think she might be too old to believe?"

I choose my next words carefully. "Well . . . have you *told* her yet?"

His only response is a grunt as he carries Bernard by the lid of his jar rather haphazardly. I reach over and give his ass an encouraging squeeze (because he loves me and I now get to do that sort of thing).

The drive to the theater is short, with Meyer holding my hand the whole way. I only break apart to talk with Hazel as needed.

She doesn't seem the slightest bit nervous, actually—a realization that makes me so proud I struggle to swallow. She's practically vibrating with excitement, smiling permanently. This is what she *loves*, what lights her up from within, and as biased as I may be, I think her passion makes it into every graceful stretch, twirl and leap.

Meyer and I check her in with her instructor, but we don't walk her backstage for this performance because her friend Olive is here and volunteered to hang out with her for the duration and act as her translator.

"*That way you two just get to enjoy the show,*" Hazel had said. I could tell that Meyer struggled with it at first, but eventually gave in.

We're one of the first families to arrive, so after we send Haze off we settle into one of the front rows just beyond the orchestra. Meyer tries to pass me Bernard.

"Nah-ah," I laugh. "He's all yours. Make sure you hold him up high enough to see during her parts."

He gives me a withering stare, so I ask, "Why haven't you talked to her yet about the whole Santa/elf thing? I feel like you're normally ahead of the timeline as far as those things go."

His expression softens and he shifts, spinning Bernard on his thigh. "I, um," he begins. "I wasn't great at a whole lot of the cuter traditions when she was small. I wasn't the best at figuring out her hair, didn't do the bake sales or volunteer in her classroom much. Until you came around, I really wasn't great at letting her *try* too many things." He sighs regretfully, and I have to stop myself from interrupting him and reminding him that he's the best father I know, that anyone in his position back then would have wanted to keep her insulated, would have insulated himself, too. "But one year, we went out shopping for gifts to send to my parents, my sister and nephews and all that. She was only five or so at the time, but she had enough friends who had talked about meeting with Santa and who had brought in their pictures with him for show-and-tell . . . So I decided while we were out shopping that I'd take her. I walked us through the little tunnel thing they had and waited in line for over an hour. And when it was finally our turn, one of Santa's helpers asked me *for our reservation confirmation.*" He gives me a knowing look.

"Oh, no," I say.

"Oh, yeah . . . In typical bumbling dad-mode, suffice it to say, I did not have a reservation. And I understood why they had a system and a form and everything as she was explaining it to me. They

wanted Santa to know if a child has any sensory issues in advance, and they wanted to make sure he knew their names—adds to the believability of it all, I think. Fairly certain he had an earpiece and everything. The elves all had headsets. There was a real-life reindeer in an enclosure. Pretty legit.” He smiles at the memory. “I’d already gotten Hazel’s hopes up by that point, you know? I didn’t want to give up. I was busy arguing with her—*Jesus*, I think I even tried to bribe her—and when I looked down Hazel was gone.” At the mental image of Meyer panicking, my heart hiccups in my chest like it’s happening to me in the present. “But then I looked up,” he continues, “and there she was, already up the stairs, standing next to Santa in his chair. And like a real-life Christmas miracle, he began signing with her.” My eyes well up embarrassingly quick and he grins at me like he expected it, bends down to kiss the tip of my nose. “I think *I* believed in Santa Clause again that day, Fee,” he tells me, before blowing out a long sigh. “I also think it just feels like magic when someone understands you, when someone sees you and speaks your language, literally and figuratively. Especially for Haze and I . . . So, maybe I just wanted her to hold onto that as long as possible.” He returns my watery smile. “Just like we want to hold onto you as long as possible too.”

I shake my head in mock-irritation at his making me cry. And just like a little over a year ago and countless times in between, he dips forward to kiss away one of my tears. Emotion simmers when I watch him lick it away from his lip, just as the lights dim low. And isn’t it funny? How, just like the cyclical nature of Christmas, these small moments of love can feel this way again, can make your heart rate speed up and your cheeks go red, even when it also feels like *dejàvu*. Every year, every time, it’s magic.

The entire ballet is flawless. It’s whimsical and moving, and regardless of how many times I’ve seen it performed before, I’m completely swept away all over again. Meyer is an excellent sport and does his part to hold up Bernard so he can see when Hazel is onstage, too.

And yes, I do manage to catch a few photos of this.

By the time the curtain closes, I feel confident in saying that we are all officially filled with the holiday spirit.

I head to the lounge to meet up with Hazel as Meyer walks back to the car to grab her bouquet. When I find her, she and Olive are hugging and bouncing excitedly.

“You were stunning,” I tell her, scooping her into a quick hug.

“Thanks, I know!” She curtsies proudly. *“Everyone else nailed it, too!”*

“My mom’s out front,” Olive says, holding up a phone. *“I’ll head out.”*

“Thank you, Olive,” I say. We hug and say our goodbyes just as I see Meyer in the distance, returning with roses.

“You should tell him,” I sign to Hazel, positioning her in front of me so Meyer doesn’t catch any of it from across the room. *“Trust me.”* She nods in response, still smiling.

Meyer makes his way through the crowd, completely oblivious to three separate family photos he’s interrupted in the process. When he passes Hazel her bouquet, he swallows compulsively.

“You were perfect,” he says to her, glowing with pride. *“I hope you don’t mind that I left Bernard in the car.”*

Haze lifts the flowers to me before she responds. *“Dad, I know about Santa. About the elf.”* Meyer looks at me with a frown before Haze presses on. *“I caught on a few years ago, but you always loved Christmas so much. I didn’t want to break tradition, or ruin it for you. I didn’t want anything to change.”*

His frown turns puzzled. *“You made me pack that elf, though.”*

I wince and rub my palms down one of his biceps. *“I may have encouraged the idea.”* He slices

me a glare. *"I'm sorry. A little."* I push up onto my toes to whisper in his ear. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

The mirth on his face brings to mind a million things he must be recalling. Namely how I set the thing up on his nightstand one night and really freaked him out when I made a quip about voyeurism. He clears his throat and looks back at Hazel.

"Do you have any questions about it?" he asks Haze.

She answers confidently. *"I talked to Fee. She told me that Santa is still something to believe in, even though you are the one who wraps my presents and fills up my stockings. She said that it's because it teaches us to believe in something we can't see or touch. She also accidentally said 'hear,' but I forgave her for that part."* Meyer lets out a small laugh through his nose and I continue to hold my breath, hoping I got this one right. When she came to me and cornered me with questions this year, I didn't feel okay lying to her. *"She said it's like how I've had to learn to believe in myself, in my dancing, even though I know I don't understand music. That believing in Santa teaches kids to believe in themselves, their friends, and their family—that kind of magic. I'm sorry we pranked you, though. You're not mad, right?"*

I look away from Hazel's face to find Meyer searching mine, his jaw twitching. He shakes his head, his expression breaking apart on a wide smile.

"No, I'm not mad. Not at all. Especially because that elf is a goner."

We all laugh and melt into a hug together, and it occurs to me that this is that same sort of magic, that something worth believing in, even in the face of the unknown. The belief in the absolute *magic* of love and friendship, and that no matter what life deals us in the years to come, we'll have this—each other.

Later that night, I lean into the hallway just as Meyer is slipping the last of the gifts under the tree.

"Fee, have you seen the sticky bows?" he calls out, oblivious to my presence.

"You mean these?"

His head snaps up and he immediately belts out a laugh, sitting up on his knees with his hand on his chest.

"Hey," I chide. "Some would find you laughing at my seduction tactics a little offensive here." I point to the bows covering my nipples.

"Somehow I think you'll be fine," he chuckles. "But bring 'em here."

"Come get them."

He gets up with a little grunt and immediately starts for me. I squeak and run for the bedroom.

He's on me in a matter of steps, scoops me up and tosses me over his shoulder.

"Meyer! You'll throw your back out!" I screech when he spanks my bare ass.

"Shit," he laughs, rubbing a circle on the spot. "That was harder than I meant to."

When he flops me onto the bed and sees me laughing, he says, "Actually, no. *That* was for the elf."

"Fair." I prop myself up onto my elbows and watch him undress, wordlessly, until my thoughts win out and I have to ask, "Hey, was that okay? That I addressed that with Hazel, I mean. I've just always been honest with her as much as I can and she'd already heard so much from other kids and ___"

"Jonesy, I only think I fell in love with you more for it." He smiles. "Now give me my bows. You

know I don't like when the wrapping is sloppy.”

I toss my head back and laugh as he crawls over me, peels off each bow and flings them away before he kisses his way up to my mouth.

He knees my legs apart gently before he rocks back on his heels and looks down the length of me, letting out a low curse.

My chest rises and falls rapidly as I watch him take himself in his hand and pump once. Twice.

“I feel the same,” I whisper. I press my foot into his tattoo before he captures it, hooks it around his hip and leans down.

I gasp into his mouth when he slides into me, one hand clutches at his shoulder while the other traces down his spine, holds and presses him to me when he thrusts deep. It's quiet aside from our breathing and the whimper I let out when he reaches a hand between us.

He doesn't take away his hand until I come, and I take it and slip his finger into my mouth, delighted at the heat in his eyes. His thrusts get harder, faster, and I watch him fall apart above me, relish his weight when he collapses onto me.

I feel sleep tugging at my senses immediately, like my world really is at peace for a moment, like my body knows this comfort down to my bones. I tell him I love him with my hand into his back, and he replies the same way with his into my hip. And maybe it's just the season and just because it's Christmas Eve, but I can't help but think that this is what that song meant when it said all is calm, all is bright. Because quiet and lovely as it is, love is also this blazing, burning thing within.

part three

. . .

CHRISTMAS DAY

Santa Cruz, CA

LaRynn

I wake up to the sound of an electric violin drifting in through the windows. There's a busker who's been setting up down by the pier for the last few days, treating everyone to a side of holiday spirit with their sunrise. Yesterday's jingle was The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy, but I recognize today's as Carol of the Bells.

I smile immediately—both at the tune and at the realization that the urge to be sick is absent for the seventh day in a row. It took almost eighteen weeks to get here, so I'm still dizzy with relief every time I don't need to catapult myself into the bathroom the moment my eyes crack open.

I roll toward Deacon, expecting to find him wrapped in two extra blankets since he's not loving the brisk December air quite to the extent that I am. He's been especially grumble-y about it lately, since I seem to run as hot as a furnace and prefer to sleep with the windows open. But my smile falls when my hand meets the top of the comforter, his side of the bed already tidily made.

It's when I slide out of bed and slip into a fluffy robe—*fluffy*, since Deacon has commandeered my silk one—that I notice the steam billowing out from under the bathroom door. Poor man must've woken up cold and decided to thaw out with a hot shower.

I'm just contemplating surprising him with a hot breakfast and an even hotter coffee when I hear a sound . . . something that managed to puff out from under the door with the steam. A grunt? A forceful sigh?

Either way . . . curiosity has rarely scathed this cat, so I decide to take a closer look, and quietly open the door.

Through the fogged up glass, I can see that my husband's strong back is to me. Muscles stacked upon other muscles, a tan that still managed to cling to him even this deep into winter. One hand is splayed on the tile, while the other arm works—tugging languidly.

Just as my brain puts together what I'm seeing, another one of those strangled sounds escapes him. Lust licks a white-hot brand up my spine.

I could join him, but . . . Well, for some reason pride has me considering sneaking away and leaving him to it—we've barely touched in weeks. I know that things have been slammed at the shop, which is wonderful, but since this is the time of year Deacon usually gets caught up on maintenance

items at Santa Sea, we've each been so preoccupied, and we've gone and filled this home with every cushy comfort that makes sleep too tempting when we get home. So maybe that's why we haven't. But . . . maybe he's subconsciously resentful. We only opened the expanded shop in February, and things were all going as smoothly—at least as smoothly as that kind of chaotic time can. But we were so happy. So excited about how everything was settling in. Only six months after that we found out our news, far from planned. He's put on a brave face and says he's excited, but I occasionally see the worry around his eyes, too. So—maybe our dry spell is because of . . . me?

He stills like he can hear my thoughts, then turns and gives me a sheepish look.

"Don't stop on account of me," I say, leaning against the wall at my side and smiling with force.

He doesn't start up again. Just tips his head back with a cocky smirk that I'm ashamed to admit makes my knees go rubbery.

"Enjoying the show?" he asks.

"I am." I smile back. No point in playing it cool when I feel the heat pooling in my cheeks. "Most action I've got in weeks, actually."

His grin falters. Shit, did I sound whiny? I didn't mean to let any neediness slip in. I start to shift self-consciously on my feet when he slides open the shower door and stalks toward me.

"Hey," he says softly, wrapping me up and pulling me into his bare, wet chest. A droplet of water glides off the end of one of his curls and splatters against my cheek. I try to glare, but it dies immediately at the look in his eyes. "You've just been so tired. Not to mention *sick*. Often. Which feels like something I caused. I don't want to—pester you."

"Fairly certain we were equally involved in my state," I say with a laugh.

"Have you thought any more about when you think it happened?"

"*Jesus*, Deacon—"

"—cause I'm still leaning toward that time in the Bronco." He snakes a hand down and squeezes my hip, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

I laugh despite myself and I shake my head at him. It dies down and he kisses my forehead, before he places a soft peck to my lips.

"So," I whisper. "It's not because you want me less . . . right now?" *God*, I'm internally rolling my eyes. A year and a half ago I would not have recognized this version of myself. One that flings my fragile thoughts his way without abandon.

The bastard starts to laugh again, and this time I succeed in glaring.

"I'm sorry," he says. "But, seriously?" He lifts a brow my way.

I try to push out of his embrace but he man-handles me back in, traps my back to his front and my arms behind me.

"LaRynn," he coos into my neck. "You really don't know how crazy you still make me, do you?"

My response is to start panting when he presses himself to me, the evidence of just how *much* he wants me hard against my backside. He grips my wrists in one big hand before he reaches around with the other and tugs the tie to open my robe.

"If anything, I want you even more. All the time, every day." He starts peeling things off of me. "Looking at you now, carrying a piece of us in you . . ." The robe hits the ground and my breathing picks up. He fingers the strap of my silky negligee. "I look at you, and just knowing you're mine . . . *god* . . . it makes me want to fall to my knees and worship you and then hide you away from anyone or anything else. I'm in *awe* of you." His hands slide down and start to clutch and gather the fabric at the tops of my thighs. I'm practically writhing against him, extremely and immediately turned on, and I wonder if I've ever wanted him as much as I do in this exact moment.

The thought takes me back for a moment, a little dizzy at the strength of it—likely the hormones, too. But I feel like that’s all I’ve been lately—a medley of extremes. Frightened, then sick, then tired, hungry, then happy, then sick again. I want to *settle* with him as he sinks into me, to cocoon us in and shut out everything else for a while. I decide to put a voice to my thoughts.

“I feel like I’m going insane sometimes, and then you’re right there. With that mouth and those words and these hands.” I lay mine on top of his and meet his eyes in the bathroom mirror. “Thank you for saying what I need to hear, for always being patient with me, being patient with . . . life, and the wrenches it throws in our plans. I know we’re always going to be fine because of *you*.”

His eyes glaze and he frowns, swallowing roughly. “You make it easier than you think, love.”

He curls his head into my neck and starts to kiss and nip, pulling up the nightie with agonizing precision. He grazes all my hypersensitive places that are taut and heavy. Calloused fingertips and silky material take turns igniting my nerves, lighting me up until I’m brighter than that Douglas Fir in our living room.

“Look at you,” he grits. And I do. I look at us together in our reflection. I feel bigger than average by this stage, but we’re both fairly big people so I guess that’s to be expected. I have that funny new outward belly button thing going on. But I look at his tattooed hand as it spreads on my stomach, and I see the way he looks at me and I feel like a goddamn goddess.

When he palms my breasts I groan and reach back to grip in his hair, hard enough that it pulls a low grunt out of him. He moves around to my front and captures my mouth in a kiss. It’s hungry and slick, and between him stealing my air and the warm steam in the room I start to feel like the heat is oppressive.

“Living room,” I say, gasping when his hand dips to my center.

“Living room?” he asks.

“It’s our last Christmas with just the two of us,” I explain. He swipes his thumb along my cheekbone and gives me a sweet grin, so I add, “Maybe I just want to fuck you under a Christmas tree while I still can, before we’re drowning in presents and chaos for every Christmas hereafter.”

A laugh tumbles out of him as he flings open the door and drags us free.

“CHRIST, woman!” he yelps suddenly, picking his feet up off the ground rapidly and rubbing his arms. “It feels like a meat locker in here! I’m walking on ice!”

I start to laugh uncontrollably even as I steer him toward the living room. We pass the shelves he made me, our makeshift mantle for the season. Two stockings hang from it next to a baby one my mom sent when we told her the news.

Out of the corner of my eye I see some gifts he’s wrapped in secrecy. I saw two yesterday that were addressed,

To: Baby—I love you so much already it scares me

Love: The hottest DILF to ever dad

I’m assuming he’s going to want me to open those, even though there are a few addressed to **Mrs. MILF my Love**, too.

My eyes catch on the tree we snagged from the lot in front of our paint shop—more specifically on the sand dollar ornament I made for him. It’s not the most aesthetic bauble, so I’d hung it on the side of the tree originally as he watched, sipping a hot whiskey drink while Nat King Cole played on the record player. Later that night I’d found it moved, front and center, so I tried to move it back. It’s

been our silent, sweet game ever since. I move it to a more conspicuous spot, and at some point each day I find that it's been returned to the front again.

He strips the oversized blanket from the back of the sofa—one of his gifts that he opened early—and wraps himself in it before he plops onto the couch with a frown.

“Aw, sweet man. Too cold now?” I tease.

“I am,” he grouses. “Come warm me up.”

I smile and sink my knees onto the seat, bracketing his hips. He loops the blanket around us both so that it's tucked across my lower back and against his sides, before he leans forward and nuzzles my chest. My hands find their purchase in his curls like always. He flicks his tongue against my nipples the way he knows I love.

He keeps one hand working between my thighs while he touches me everywhere else with the other. Grazing my belly and breasts in reverence, he watches me quietly as I start to gasp and whimper. When my hand grips his length he hisses before his head falls back. His throat bobs and he shakes his head lightly, one side of his mouth ticking up.

“So fucking beautiful,” he whispers hoarsely, clutching at my hips.

I take that as my invitation to inch higher and press into him, and as he lines himself up beneath me I lay a kiss on his temple.

“I love you,” I sigh into his stubble as I sink down onto him.

He kisses and licks a path from my collarbone to my throat before he replies, “I love you too. So much.”

We rock against each other slowly, heating as we draw out every grind and roll, until I feel like blown glass under his attention. I lean back onto my braced palms against his thighs, letting my head loll back as a bead of sweat trickles down my spine. Two more circles and I fragment into a million pieces as I come, whispering his name and clutching at his skin. He pulls me up and helps pump my hips with a small, exerted sound—one that grows into something more desperate when he follows me over the edge soon after.

We stay wrapped around one another for a minute, catching our breath, until I start laughing.

“What?” he asks. “What is it?”

“I think we just had sex to the instrumental version of *Deck the Halls*.”

He stills and tilts his head, listening to the song filtering in from outside. And then he laughs through his nose and kisses me again.

“New tradition?”

“Absolutely.”

I shift to get up before he urges me back down.

“Wait. I want to give you your gift now,” he says.

“You don't want to get cleaned up first?” I laugh.

“No.” He shakes his head. “It . . . it kinda has to do with earlier, actually.”

I frown, searching his gaze—admittedly confused. He slides out from under me and struts in all his naked glory over to the tree, as I tuck the blanket around me like a towel. When he makes his way back to the couch, he pulls me into his lap with one arm, while he timidly clutches the gift in his other.

“It sort of felt like this was *my* gift, but then . . .” He looks down at it nervously again. “Well. Just open it and then I'll explain.”

I grin stupidly at how shy he's being. I've explored every inch of this man—what on earth could he have gotten me that has him feeling any type of unsure? I peck his cheek before I start to unwrap.

I softly gasp when I peel the paper away.

It's a small book . . . but the cover is just a photo of me, taken at the cafe. I've got one arm outstretched to replace one of the mugs on top of the machine. I started hand making them this summer and have become consistent enough that we now have a little section to sell them as merchandise. I'm looking back over my shoulder and smiling at something to the left of the camera, my other arm cradling my belly.

"Deacon . . . this had to be recent?"

"Just keep looking," he says softly.

The first photo was taken at a safe distance. The door to the bathroom is cracked open in it, and I'm on my knees, my elbows on the toilet, palms cradling my head.

"You took a picture of me being sick?!" I blurt out. I try to say it with incredulity, but my eyes are already watering.

"Keep going," he replies archly.

The next few are of me sleeping, various pillows tucked around me. The next one he snuck of me from a distance again, as I'm looking in the mirror sideways and pulling my shirt tight against my torso, the bud of my belly barely starting to show.

One of me working at my pottery wheel, splatters of clay on my apron and cheeks.

Another of me at the shop, laughing with June and Elyse at the breakfast bar.

More of me sleeping—a particularly lovely one of my face plastered to his bare chest and drooling. My shirt had ridden up and my belly (officially popped in this photo) was on full display.

Me cuddling Vienna on the couch at Macy's during Thanksgiving.

Elyse and I again on her last visit, me pressing her hand to me to feel the baby kick—which he begins to do now in the present. Deacon's hand slides to it under the blanket, drawn there as if he knows, too.

"I hope this isn't—isn't violating or anything. I can delete all of these off my phone," he says.

I shake my head, trying to stop my lip quivering. Fucking hormones amplifying everything.

"We've just been so non stop, you know?" he continues. "Between this place and then the shop reno and opening that up. And again, I know this wasn't planned." He rubs a circle right where I'm being prodded from the inside with a foot. "I—I promise, we'll definitely try to be more careful and space out the next one," he adds, laughing at the last part.

"Already with the next one?! This one's barely more than half-cooked!" I huff a laugh and a tear falls.

"You're powerful, LaRynn," he tells me, his face entirely serious. "I wanted to capture all of this so you could see just how *powerful* you are. I didn't want us to miss this or forget any of it. Life's already gonna blow past us . . ." He sighs. "And I hope, without crossing over into creepy territory, this might give some insight as to just how much I want you. I'm bordering on obsession, here."

I laugh-cry some more and kiss him. "I love it so much," I say. "I love *you* so much. Thank you for this. Now I *really* can't wait for you to open your gift."

He smiles giddily and I go scoop it up.

When he opens it his eyes widen and his jaw falls open.

"You . . . ?" He frowns.

I make a bubbly noise. "I've been taking my own photos," I say.

The first one is of him over a year ago, before we knew we were really in this with each other. It's blurry and he's not even facing me in it. He was wearing a cutoff and framing up a section of a wall, his baseball cap slung on backwards. I remember him absentmindedly shaking his hips back and

forth to some song, even as he toiled away on one of the most mind-numbing parts of that project.

There's one of him laughing while driving us somewhere, one hand on the steering wheel.

One of the top of his head, one of my hands threaded in his hair, his forehead buried against my (then-flat) torso.

Another of him putting together a crib—something I felt was premature, but could not deter him from. If doing things early eases his worry, makes him feel somewhat in control, I can't and won't fault him for it.

There are numerous photos of him at the beach. Action shots of him playing volleyball in the sand. One of him in his hoodie watching the sunset.

"I wanted you to know that I see you, too," I say. "That I'll always see you, or at least keep finding you. Even when a kid comes around. Finding you over and over again is going to be my favorite part of life, Deacon."

He glides a hand along my face and I lean into it, and the moment he kisses me the song changes outside. Our lips pull up in matching smiles as we chuckle. *Joy to the World*, indeed.

Deacon

"You ready to head down?" I call.

After the best Christmas morning I can ever recall having, it's time to head down to the shop. It's our first year hosting some of our friends and family, and we both figured we'd utilize the bigger kitchen and entertaining space available.

LaRynn walks out in a dress that hugs every curve of her, paired with some combat boots and a beaming smile.

"Elyse just called—she's coming now too," she says.

"Really? Huh."

She scoops some presents up that I promptly take from her.

"Why so quizzical about it?" she laughs.

I snort. "You don't think it's weird that Jensen calls and gives me a whole spiel about how his family had their big dinner on Christmas Eve this year instead, then asks if there's room for him today, and then *suddenly* Elyse happens to be joining, too?"

She tilts up and pecks me on the chin. "I think you need to leave it alone, my love."

I make a noncommittal noise and follow her out the door.

"Plus," she adds, "June corroborated Jensen's story."

"Yeah but she also said it was Jensen's idea. That *he* got his family to mix up the traditions."

She sighs and shrugs. "Let's just leave it be."

"Fine," I mumble, taking her hand. I know in my gut something is up. "Let's grab Sal and head down."

June is already at the shop when we arrive, Elvis' *Blue Christmas* playing through the speakers and the scent of whatever dessert she's brought wafting through the air.

We say our greetings and turn on all the twinkle lights that are strung up around throughout the

place, including the tree in the corner.

And before we know it, everyone else begins to trickle in. Jensen shows up next, followed by Elyse. Glenda stayed in town this year so we invited her to join as well. She finds Sal immediately and they silently slip into a game of Gin. And last but not least, my mom arrives with my brother.

Despite how little we talk or how we rarely felt close growing up, there's something strange about the sibling dynamic. They were raised by the same people as you, privy to the same fights and triumphs, so—at least in our case—they *get* you. Even as he swaggers in carelessly I can tell that he's anxious about being here. And since I will forever be an annoying younger brother, I think I'll go ahead and introduce him to my (scary to others, sweet to me) wife before he gets too comfortable.

"Ramsey," I greet him with a nod, just as I feel LaRynn step beside me.

He matches my serious expression at first, until we break at the same time and laugh, pulling each other into a hug.

"I can't believe *you* are going to be a dad," he says, smiling.

"I know. Especially when you're the one who looks fucking old!" I pinch his graying, bearded cheek before he swats me away and rolls his eyes. I pull my mom into a quick hug before I lose her to everyone else.

"Too bad you could be twins," my wife says. I whip my head her way and let her read the betrayal on my face.

"She's way too pretty for you," Ramsey laughs, before he extends a hand toward LaRynn.

She peers at it a moment before she grabs it. "So, I'm glad you could make it this year," she says, maintaining her grip. "It's nice to finally meet you."

He doesn't break away. "Yes, last year was . . . a little busy. I was working through an injury—"

"Oh, absolutely. *Totally* get it," she replies, her expression never changing. They continue to stare each other down, hands still grasped.

"I'm still . . . I'm still sorry about it, though," Ramsey fumbles. "I should have been here earlier . . . than this." He looks at my mom and I and then his shoes.

LaRynn breaks into a smile and pulls him into a hug. "That's alright. Happy to have you here now!" Ramsey's hands float out at either side in confusion before he hugs her back.

When they part I notice Elyse and June have also migrated this way and are staring at him. Jensen wears an annoyed expression at June's side. I steer Rynn with me back to the treats.

"We look nothing alike," I say to her quietly, very obviously fishing.

She lets out a high-pitched laugh. "Ha. Okay, love. Whatever you say."

"Well." I throw an arm over her shoulders. "*I* say I'm still more handsome."

She pinches my face and kisses my puckered lips. "Of course you are." She heads off toward Glenda and Sal. I smile, even if I don't know about that little placating tone to it.

We all end up gorging ourselves between a perfectly cooked prime rib and every treat and side known to man, so after dinner everyone decides to walk down to the Boardwalk. We take it slow for Glenda and Sal, but we stay together. The dropzone ride has been decorated in lights to resemble a tree, and the train out front is adorned in greenery and colored bulbs. We walk the length of the park in small groups. Jensen and Elyse talk conspiratorially, Ramsey and June walk silently with three feet between them, Sal, Glenda, and Mom are the loudest of the bunch—stumbling and cackling over who knows what.

Music from the park speakers mixes with the sounds of waves crashing onto the dark beach. But closest around me is quiet laughter. Small happy sounds from my wife, her hands cradling her belly.

We take one of the train cars back and end up belting along to the *12 Days of Christmas* so loud you'd think it was *Caroline* at Fenway.

We're a family. Some by blood, sure. And I'm excited and honored to be bringing more people into this. But we're a family *mostly* because we found one another. And no matter how much time goes by or what paths we take, I think Christmas will always be a great time to find each other again.