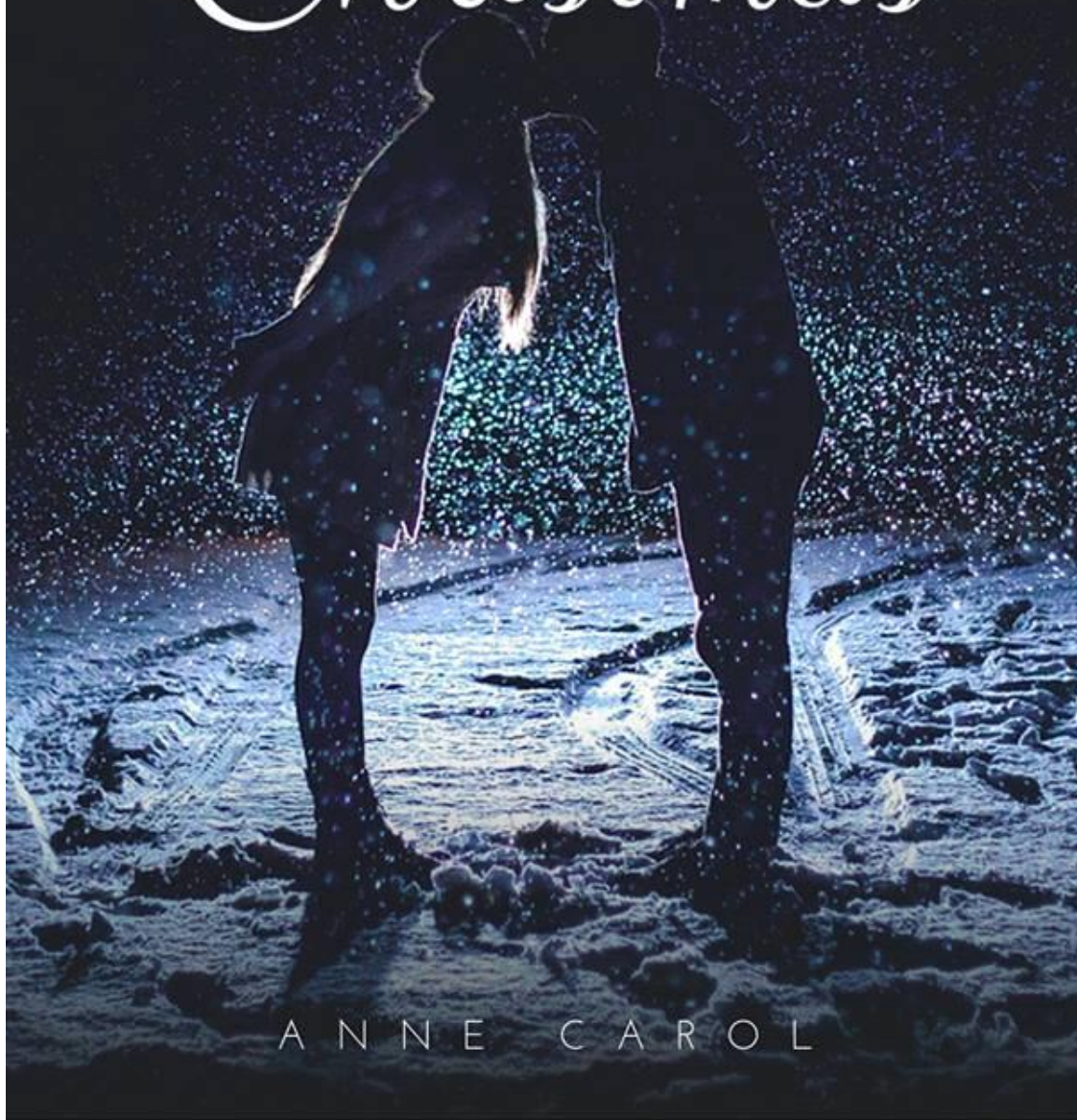


A
Taste
of
Christmas



A N N E C A R O L

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“Loved the romance beyond the ocean to this lovely country of England—a must-read to rekindle the feelings you had for your first love, as well as your current ‘love of your life.’” ~ Pam

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A TASTE OF CHRISTMAS

ANNE CAROL

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DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to all those who are in search of true love. May you find your “happily ever after”, whether in a winery, a college campus, or a coffee shop.

~ Anne

CHAPTER ONE

While my hands framed his ruggedly handsome face, he gazed into my chocolate brown eyes and pressed his lips to mine—

“Lauren! Get back to reality and wash these glasses,” my older sister barked, jarring me out of my fantasy.

“Sorry, Becca. I’ve got to get this line down before I forget it,” I said, leaning over the paper, pen in hand.

Becca peered over my shoulder, so closely I could smell her peppermint breath. “Why do you keep using our tasting room menus to jot down your ideas? You should really keep a notebook handy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, now you know what to stuff in my Christmas stocking.”

“Seriously, you’re wasting those papers. They’re supposed to be for the customers.”

“This coming from the girl who’s consuming all the mini candy canes that are *supposed* to be for our customers,” I deadpanned.

“I like fresh breath,” she quipped. “Besides, nobody eats them anyway. I don’t know why Mom insists on putting these out. They totally conflict with the flavor of the wine.”

“I think it’s to make it more festive.”

“As if the overabundance of poinsettias and Charlie Brown Christmas Trees isn’t enough.” She waved her hand around the mid-sized room, displaying the mini pine trees and signature red flowers.

Becca was right about that one. Mom loved decorating our winery tasting room for whatever season we were in, but she particularly loved splashing the room with Christmas accents every December. She always said that in the wine business, you’re not just selling customers a product, you’re providing them with an experience; a get-away. Therefore, it was important to provide a cheerful and festive atmosphere.

Mom was good at the hospitality thing. Before she married my dad, a successful but humble Italian farmer, she’d worked in a local bed and breakfast. There she learned how to cook like a professional chef as well as cater to the needs of tourists. The job prepared her for the many years she’d spend in the wine industry.

My parents have owned this winery for as long as I could remember. Gotelli Vineyards was one of the first wineries in the foothills of Central California. Most people think of California wine country as Napa and Sonoma Counties, which are a good three to four hours

west of us. While those are beautiful areas, we also have quite a booming wine country right here. I'm proud of my parents, George and Linda, because they built this winery from the ground up, and at a time when they were raising three young children: me, my sister Becca, and my brother Joey.

The three of us kids grew up working for my parents, so it wasn't a surprise that two of us—me and Joey—now worked for them full time. Joey, older than me at 26, worked with Dad on the agricultural end of things. Basically they were responsible for turning the grapes into wine. I'd graduated two years ago with a business degree, so I helped Mom take care of the business end, which included the tasting room. Becca, the oldest sibling at 27, worked on weekends and special events, but by day, she taught kindergarten.

Because of my mother's gift of hospitality, our winery had become one of the more popular ones in our area. It wasn't the biggest or fanciest winery, but we had one of the most active wine clubs, mostly because we put a lot into connecting with customers and members. We had a great website, weekly live music, monthly movie nights, contests, and amazing wine club parties.

Did I mention the parties?

One of the biggest parties was coming up in another week, and I had yet to find a date. Not that I didn't have someone in mind, but it was more fantasy than reality. I knew there was no way this guy would go with me.

"So may I ask who you're writing about?" Becca asked, as she set out fresh wine lists and arranged the clean glasses.

"Nobody," I claimed. "It's just a story that came to me." Okay, so I was bending the truth. I've loved reading and writing romance stories since I was a pre-teen, and when I wrote, I usually had the object of my current crush in mind.

"Sure, Lauren." She raised her eyebrows at me. "I think I know who it is. Is it—"

"Shh!" I hushed her as one of our tasting room employees walked in.

"Hello, Brett Mayer," she called to him, but winked at me.

"Hey, did I miss something good? Looks like you two were in a huddle," remarked Brett, as he came in and started washing his hands.

Becca placed her hand on her hip. "Oh, we were just talking about this wonderful Chris O'Donnell look-alike who works with us on weekends in the tasting room. Right, Lauren?"

Brett's face flushed pink and he shook his head, chuckling. "Nice. I'm flattered."

Narrowing my eyes at Becca, I was about to say something nasty when our mom strolled in and flipped on some music. "It's almost show time. Let's liven it up in here."

Staring at her gaudy Christmas sweater, which she probably bought at one of our church's boutiques, I raised my eyebrows. "That shouldn't be a problem. All they have to do is look at your sweater. Does it light up, Mom?" I teased.

"Very funny. I know you girls don't care for my sweaters, but I love breaking these out every year," she said with all the confidence in the world.

"I happen to like it, Linda," Brett said.

"Kiss up," I said with a grin.

"Thank you, Brett." Mom came over and gave him a side squeeze.

Brett had been with us on the weekends for about four months, and he was a pretty nice guy, though I didn't know much about his personal life. Becca wasn't off the mark, he was definitely a dead ringer for Chris O'Donnell, and sometimes I wondered if my sister harbored a secret crush on him. As for myself, I went for the tall, dark, and handsome types. Like—

My thoughts were interrupted when "Last Christmas" by Wham came through the speakers. I cringed. "Oh, this song..." I buried my face in my hands.

"What's wrong with it? Not a fan of '80s holiday tunes?" Brett asked, as he opened up the reds we were pouring today.

"Oh no, it's not that. It just reminds me of, well, last Christmas." I wrinkled my nose. By now the torment I'd experienced was long gone, yet whenever I thought about the year and a half I'd wasted on Mark, it still made me angry. I thought he'd be "the one," until I found out he was cheating on me just before the big holiday party last year.

"Long story." I shifted myself to face the back counter. "Where are the rice crackers?" I asked, attempting to divert the conversation.

Becca handed me the bag of crackers, and I started filling the bowls along the front countertop. I didn't realize she was following me until I heard her whisper, "So is it Tom?"

At the mention of *that* name, my skin buzzed. I nodded, smiling.

Tom, oh how you dazzle me. Tom was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. Add to that rich and charming. He was the full package. Tom belonged to a number of wine clubs here and in the Napa Valley, but for whatever reason, he favored ours. Probably because we attracted a large number of single women, thanks to my brother's good looks and my sister's wide circle of teacher friends.

But I couldn't think about that. In my fantasy, he wanted *me*. In my fantasy, he'd sneak behind the counter, grab me by the waist and carry me off into the sunset. We'd get married on a beach in the Caribbean, travel the world together, and maybe have a few gorgeous dark-haired angels.

Yeah, right.

Becca snickered.

I scowled at her. “What?”

“You. I see that faraway look in your eyes.” She nodded toward the entryway. “Better snap out of it. Our first guests are about to arrive.”

Closing my eyes and taking in a deep breath, I tried to clear my head of all unrealistic hopes, until a warm hand on my arm forced me back to the present.

“Helps if you open your eyes,” Brett said, squeezing my shoulder. I looked up and saw him smirking at me.

A spark ran through me. *Woah, what was that?*

I whipped my head around the room, thinking perhaps Tom had snuck in and my body was reacting to his presence. He was the only person who did that for me, I thought.

“I’ll take these ladies, if you want to help that couple coming in,” Brett said, gesturing toward a group of older women who were walking in, followed by a middle-aged couple holding hands.

“Sounds good. I know you like the ladies,” I kidded.

Brett was such a magnet for older ladies. I loved how he flirted with them; and I’m sure they loved getting attention from a cute young guy.

While Brett was busy charming the seniors, I checked out the couple approaching the counter. The man was striking for a fifty-something-year-old: handsome face, nice physique, dark tousled hair, and salt and pepper stubble that was surprisingly sexy. And, the way he looked at his lady made my head swim—he adored her. She was a pretty blonde, in her forties or fifties, and you could tell she’d taken good care of herself.

“Hi, folks, how’s your Saturday going?” I asked, trying to make eye contact, but I’m not even sure they knew I was here.

He slid his arm around her neck and kissed her cheek. “It certainly started off nice,” he said softly.

Ooh, an English accent.

“David,” the woman said, smiling sheepishly.

Pointing back and forth between them, I said, “Let me guess, newlyweds?” Yeah, they were older, but it was possible, especially given their touchy-feely behavior.

The lady laughed out loud. “Hardly.”

“Try thirty-four years,” said David, playing with a lock of her hair. “And five months.”

“Oh my, gosh. No way. That’s how long my parents have been married. Any kids?”

They looked at each other and shrugged. “I think today we’re going to pretend we’re twenty-one, what do you say, Beth?”

I chuckled. “I like you guys.” Grabbing two tasting menus, I placed them in front of David and Beth. “So do you two prefer whites or reds? Or we can do a combination?”

David pushed his menu away. “None for me, thank you. I actually don’t drink.” He glanced at his wife. “Beth? You like reds, right?”

“Yeah, but I’ll do a combination,” she said, perusing the menu. “I see you have a Gewurztraminer, and I’d loved to try that.”

“Sure thing.”

One of my favorite things about working the tasting room was for one, talking wine varieties, and two, meeting new people. I had a particular weakness for cute couples, and David and Beth were now taking the prize as the sweetest couple, even though they were probably my parents’ age. To be that in love after thirty-four years of marriage, it was definitely something I longed for. I was glad the tasting room wasn’t too crowded yet, because it was fun chatting with them.

I’d just poured Beth’s fourth taste, a 2013 Barbera, when Brett stepped into my space. He bent his face toward mine and whispered, “Those old ladies just gave me a twenty-five-dollar tip!”

I gasped. “What?” I threw my hand on my hip. “What’d you do?”

“I was just being myself,” he said, wearing a cocky grin.

Out of nowhere I felt my face flush. “I recommend you keep that up. It’s working for you, Brett.” I reached over and pinched his cheek.

“Thanks. Hey, I’ve got to step out for a sec, Lauren.” He smiled at me, grabbed his phone, and went to the back room.

Turning toward my favorite couple, I noticed Beth grinning at me as she swirled her wine.

“Is he your boyfriend?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

I pointed toward the back door. “Brett?” I asked. “No, just a co-worker.”

“Could’ve fooled me, the way you were looking at each other,” she said. “I could totally feel the chemistry.”

“Uh…” I said, stone-faced. *Brett?*

“Beth, stop playing matchmaker,” David shook his head at her.

She frowned. “I can’t help it. I like to see people happy.”

Chuckling, he met my dazed expression. “I’d better get her out of here before she has you off and married.” He laid down his credit card and asked her, “What am I getting you, angel?”

She went with the Barbera, and as I rang it up, I peeked over at Brett. He was entertaining his second group of senior women, probably trying to get another tip. If he was the same way with the younger set, surely he either had a girlfriend or was playing the field.

And why does that bother me?

I handed David his card and the wine. “Thanks for coming in. It was great talking to you. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, and good luck,” Beth said, winking at me and then looking Brett’s way.

I laughed uncomfortably as they strolled out, his hand resting on the small of her back.

“Great job on the sale, Lauren,” Brett commented, giving me a thumbs up.

“Did you see how cute that couple was? How they didn’t stop touching each other for a second?” I sighed, putting my hand to my chest.

Inspired by their romantic gestures, I picked up a menu and started jotting down lines for my novel.

“You know who that guy was, right?” Brett asked.

“No, who?” I answered, not looking up from the paper.

The sound of someone clearing his throat interrupted our conversation. Upon looking up, I had to practically hold on to the counter when my knees buckled. “Tom.” I broke out into an embarrassingly huge smile, and I couldn’t keep from blushing.

“Hey, Lauren. You always greet me with the best smile, doll.” His voice was enough to make me melt into the floor. Smooth as velvet.

“Thanks.” I dipped my head down, unable to deal with the intensity of his sea blue eyes. It was almost too much.

My gaze flitted over to Brett, who was staring at Tom with a look of annoyance. No, it was more like throwing daggers with his pupils. *Wow.*

I quickly looked away and refocused my attention on Tom, who suddenly had a platinum-haired bimbo hanging on his arm. The air was sucked out of me and just like that, my smile vanished.

Steeling myself so I wouldn’t crumble, I went into business mode “What would you like to try today?”

“Is there anything new on the menu? Any specials I should know about?”

I went into my spiel—forgetting that he was the hottest guy on earth and I was madly infatuated with him. After sharing a tasting with the doe-eyed blonde, he bought a few glasses of Chardonnay and took her to the chilly outdoor patio. Unable to face him cuddling up to her in the cold, I drew my eyes away.

Becca scooted over to me. “Sorry, Sister. Seeing that probably doesn’t do much for your story, does it?”

I grunted. “Yeah, I don’t remember a blond airhead showing up.”

Rubbing my shoulder, she said, “I didn’t want to say this earlier, but I’m afraid we have the wrong hair color.” She looked out the window at the two of them. “I’ve never seen him with a brunette.”

“Yeah, I know I live in a fantasy world.” I peered out the window at Tom and the girl, feeling my stomach crash.

“At least you realize that,” she said, giving me a pathetic I-feel-sorry-for-you look.

Fingering my dark locks, my mind whisked me back to my junior high days, when I was so envious of all the fair haired beauties in my class that I begged my mom to let me bleach my hair. She wouldn’t hear of it.

“You have such a lovely head of hair, dear. Don’t ruin your natural beauty,” she’d said, running her hand down my long waves.

I hated her for a long time after that. The guys I liked always seemed to go for the cute blondes. With the exception of Mark. He’d cheated on me with a redhead.

Tired of feeling like a second class citizen, I was suddenly determined to prove my sister wrong. I made a vow to myself that if I happened to get Tom alone, I’d ask him to be my date for the holiday party.

The only problem was, I wasn’t sure if I’d get that chance.

The tasting room was unusually quiet. Over to my right, Brett was madly typing away on his phone, and my sister had disappeared to the back room. Inching my way to the back counter, I picked up an empty glass and discretely poured myself a half glass of wine.

Knocking it back in one gulp, I heard Brett clear his throat behind me. “Are we taste-testing?”

Feeling my face flush, I slowly turned around and held up my glass. “Liquid courage.”

He furrowed his brow. “For what?”

I grimaced and shrugged.

“Well, I won’t tell anyone.” He gifted me with a sly grin, one that showed off his cute dimples.

My heart did something funny, but I quickly suppressed it. Now was not the time to have conflicting desires—not with the object of my obsession only yards away.

Unfortunately, I stood there like a fool, preparing myself for something that would likely never happen. Annoyed, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened the Kindle app, diving into my latest romance novel.

“Hi again.”

My head shot up at the sound of his voice. “You’re back.” I quickly shoved my phone away.

“I’m just returning the glasses,” Tom clarified.

“Oh, okay. Did you enjoy the Chardonnay?” I stammered, noticing the girl wasn’t with him. Glancing out the window, I saw that she was still outside, bundled up in her coat.

“Yes, thank you.” He nodded.

As he began walking away, the liquid courage took effect, and I heard myself say, “Tom?”

He stopped in his tracks, flashing me his best smile. “Yes?”

“Do you have a date for the holiday party?” I said it so fast and too softly, I was sure I blew it.

“Excuse me?”

I shook my head. “Never mind.”

“Did you just ask if I had a date for the party next week?”

Nodding, I stared at the ceiling to avoid his gaze.

“No, I don’t. Would you like to be my date, Lauren?”

CHAPTER TWO

I couldn't believe it. I'd landed a date with the Man of Steel's twin, and not just for any run-of-the-mill event, but for the one I'd been fantasizing about: the wine club party.

There were just two problems. First, the fact that Tom kissed his lady friend when he returned to her. That didn't sit well with me. Was I destined to be just another conquest?

Second was the stony silence of my tasting room cohort, Brett. I knew he was watching the entire scene from his side of the bar, though he tried to disguise it by pretending to play on his phone. Don't ask me how I knew this. I mean, I should've been completely focused on the dark haired stud asking me out, but I could sense Brett's eyes on us, as well as his disapproval.

I quickly came down from my high, now feeling a giant knot in my stomach. *Nerves*, I thought. After all, I'd been dreaming of this moment for months.

Becca reappeared from the back, gasping when she saw my face. "Lauren, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Thankfully, another couple was entering the room, diverting Brett's attention.

"I do?"

"Yeah, normally you're beet red whenever Tom's around."

I grinned. "Maybe it's because I'm still in shock."

Her eyes widened. "About what?"

"Tom just asked me to the holiday party."

"WHAT?" she practically screamed, gaining the attention of Brett and his customers.

"Shh..." I pointed my finger to my lips.

"Are you sure you didn't just imagine that?"

"Oh, come on, Becca. Give me a little credit."

I told her exactly how it'd happened, and she shook her head. "All right, when are we going shopping? We need to get you a nice dress."

"Well this certainly beats the ugly sweater I wore a few years ago." I stood in front of the full-length mirror and admired myself in my new deep green, silky, strapless cocktail dress.

"Oh my, gosh. The ugly sweater year," said Becca. "That was a bad idea. I mean, I get the concept, but it just didn't work for a nice wine club party. Mom'll never live that one down."

“Nope.”

Becca chuckled. “She’ll look nice tonight. I’ve seen her dress and given my stamp of approval.”

We were at our parents’ house getting ready for the big party, which was less than an hour away. I still lived at my parents’, adjacent to the winery, but Becca shared a condo closer to town with a roommate.

I spun around, allowing the skirt of my dress to twirl.

“You sure clean up well, Sister. That shade of blue is amazing on you.”

Becca wore a halter top style cocktail dress in royal blue. “Thank you,” she said, doing a curtsy. My nightstand clock was in her line of vision and she popped up. “Oh, Paul should be here any minute. Are you about ready?”

I drew in a deep breath. “I think so.” Attempting to shove aside my jitters, I asked, “So you and Paul? Anything going on there?”

She gave a quick shake of her head. “No. He’s just a friend.” Paul was the speech therapist that worked with her school district, and he also happened to be in our wine club.

“Oh, good. I thought maybe you were interested in Brett.” I wagged my eyebrows.

She looked taken aback. “Brett?”

“Yeah, you’re always flirting with him. Why not?”

Becca opened her mouth to say something, then quickly shut it. She looked like she was hiding something. “For many reasons. For one, I’m pretty sure he’s not interested in *me*.”

“Oh? He’s got an eye for someone else?” That knot in my stomach came back, alarming me. *What is it with me lately?*

She shrugged. “I dunno. I think he plays the field a little.”

My mood crashed, which was crazy since I should’ve been on top of the world.

“Becca, do I look all right?” A wave of insecurity flowed through me.

“Lauren, you look stunning. Well, for my snot-nosed little sister,” she said, grinning.

“Oh, hush! Let’s just go.” Unfortunately the heaviness inside me remained.

I took my time following her down the sweeping wood staircase in my new high heels. Being a tomboy, I was usually seen in my jeans and boots during winter time, so whenever I dressed up, I became fearful of messing up my dress or losing my footing. Becca seemed to rock the heels a little better, as she’d always had a feminine style.

“What’re you waiting for?” She called up from the bottom of the stairs.

When I finally caught up with her, a shiver ran through me, and I grabbed her arm. “Becca, what if he doesn’t show?”

“Wow, you are insecure. What would make you think that?”

“I don’t know. He just seems...out of my league, you know?”

“He’s not out of your league, just in a different one.”

I thought I heard her mumbling something under her breath, but maybe it was my crazy imagination.

Our shoes made crunching sounds as we walked along the gravelly road from the house to the brightly lit tasting room. I could already hear the music blaring from inside.

Becca began humming along to “Jingle Bell Rock” as sung by the *Glee* cast.

“Oh, Mom has her playlist together. Expect a lot of *Glee* songs,” I said.

“Of course,” Becca agreed. Mom was a big fan of the show, and she was always making playlists of *Glee* songs. It was too funny, especially since it was a teeny-bopper show.

Hanging about the entrance to the tasting room was a tall, lean figure. My heart skipped a beat, and then Becca said, “There’s Paul.”

Crushed, I followed her as she walked over to him. He was a nice looking guy, early thirties, with short and spiky blond hair. He wore a dark suit with a festive red and green striped tie.

“Nice tie, Paul,” Becca said, as she gave him a casual one-armed hug.

Paul tugged on the tie. “Why thank you. You ladies look gorgeous. “

We thanked him as he held the door open for us. The spicy scent of cinnamon wafted through the air, and I noticed the wine bar was lined with red candles. Mom was at the food table, helping the caterers set out the appetizers, while Dad stood behind the bar, visiting with a few early arrivals. Joey, decked out in a suit and tie, fiddled with the phone which was plugged into the sound system. Most likely he was going through the playlist, making adjustments.

His date, Brenda—another part-timer in our tasting room—perused the area, making sure all the decorations were in place. We’d set up a few tall round tables where people could set down their plates and glasses. One section of the room was cleared out for dancing. I stared at the floor, picturing myself in Tom’s arms, swaying around in the dimly lit room.

Where is Tom? I opened my wrist bag and checked the time on my phone. *He was supposed to be here five minutes ago. Great.*

Leaning toward Becca, I said in a low voice, “I’m going to check the parking lot for Tom’s car.”

She raised her eyebrows at me. “Don’t seem so eager, Lauren. Give it a few more minutes.”

I took in a deep breath and trudged to the counter.

“Hey, sweetie. You look nice!” Dad said. “Where’s your date?”

My stomach clenched. “Good question.” I glanced out the window at the parking lot, where a myriad of headlights could be seen.

“You want a glass of something, to ease the nerves?” Before I could answer, he grabbed a glass and set it in front of me. “Merlot?”

“Yeah, perfect. Just half full, please.”

“Sure thing, daughter of mine.” He took an open bottle of 2012 Merlot and filled my glass to the halfway point. “Don’t worry, he’ll be here. And, I’ll be watching to make sure he doesn’t get too handsy with you.”

I groaned. “Oh, Dad.” *If he even shows.*

Five minutes passed, and then ten. After twelve minutes of watching people arrive, I stepped away from Becca and Paul to head outside. Leaving behind the chatter of people, clinking glasses, and jazzy holiday tunes, I strolled out to the parking lot. There was a bite in the air, and with my free hand I tightly clutched the wrap around my shoulders.

Cars were still arriving, but none of them were a red Porsche. My mind scrambled, wondering why he wasn’t here. Restless, I took a big swallow of Merlot, nearly choking when it went down the wrong pipe.

“Hi Lauren. You okay?” asked one of our regulars, as she and her husband came in from the parking lot.

“Yeah,” I spluttered, patting my throat. “It just went down funny.”

“All right, we’ll see you in there. You should get inside, it’s cold!” she said, making a shivering motion.

I nodded, wearing a big plastic smile. Once they were gone, I erased the smile and fetched my phone to check the time again.

Oh my, gosh. Twenty-five minutes!

“That’s it. He’s not coming,” I muttered to myself, stiffening up as a cold breeze hit me.

Mortified by my situation, I was tempted to crawl home, throw on sweats, and pig out on junk food. But then my family would wonder where I went, and it was wrong of me to abandon them tonight. Plus, maybe I was jumping to conclusions and Tom would come after all.

Maybe something happened to him?

Not taking my eyes off the parking lot, I backed up and fell into one of the outdoor chairs, gasping at the freezing seat. Placing my glass on the table, I burrowed under my wrap, trying to keep from becoming numb with the cold.

Part of me was worried, thinking perhaps he'd been in an accident. Another part of me figured he was just running late. Siding with the latter, I snatched my compact from the clutch and checked my face and hair. I had to look perfect for him, because *he* was perfect.

Or was he?

The voice of Andy Williams crooned from inside as "It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" played through the speakers. *What a load of crap.* Last year I was nursing a broken heart, and this year it seemed my bad fortune was continuing.

I was well on my way to a pity party when I heard the crunch of footsteps approaching. *Ah, yes! He did come!* Relief flooded through me and I rose from my seat, throwing my hair back all sexy-like.

"Lauren! What are you doing out here? It's freezing."

It wasn't Tom. Not that Brett was the worst consolation prize.

"Hi, Brett," I said sheepishly, slumping back into the chair. "I'm waiting for my date," I replied, circling the rim of my glass. "Or rather, getting stood up by my date."

He pulled out a chair across from me and sat down. "Wow, I'm sorry. Was it Tom?"

Pursing my lips at the mention of his name, I nodded.

"He didn't call or text? I mean, maybe something happened."

"I've been checking my phone for thirty minutes," I mumbled. "I don't think he's coming." I sniffed. My emotions were a mixed cocktail of sadness, anger, and embarrassment.

"Hey, don't cry," Brett whispered, scooting closer. He placed his hand over mine on the table, shooting heat waves through me. "You look so beautiful tonight."

My lips quivered and I met his gaze. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"Yes," he said, as if stating the obvious. "And we can't let your pretty dress go to waste."

I melted into the seat, overcome by warmth.

"What are you saying, Brett?"

"I know I'm not rich and handsome or anything like Tom, but would you be my date, Lauren?"

My skin prickled as I stared at him in his dark, three-piece suit.

“Yeah. Yeah, I will.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Why don’t you have a date, anyway?” I asked, suddenly immune to the chill. “I thought you were popular with the ladies.”

He guffawed and looked away. “It’s a myth.”

“I doubt that.”

“No, actually I don’t have a lot of time to date.” He rubbed his chin.

“Oh?” It occurred to me that I didn’t know a whole lot about Brett, except that the tasting room was his side job.

“I work from home and don’t get out much.” He shrugged. “Well, except for coming here. It’s a nice break for me. I really enjoy it.”

His baby blue eyes met mine with a glow, and I got the distinct impression there was more behind his statement.

“What is your day job, anyway?”

“Computers,” he said, chuckling. “I’ll admit, I’m a total geek.”

“Nothing wrong with that these days.”

We were quiet for a moment as the song inside changed to “Holly Jolly Christmas.”

“Think you’ll stick around here, take over eventually?” he asked, studying me.

“Yeah, seems like a good plan. As long as I can keep writing.”

“I’ve noticed you jotting things down in there. What are you writing?”

Embarrassed, I hunched my shoulders. “Romance,” I mumbled.

He laughed. “Don’t be embarrassed. I bet you’re good. As long as you include nerdy heroes in your stories,” he said.

“Nerdy heroes?” I asked, amused.

“Well, you know. Instead of the rock stars or firefighters or Navy SEALs, write something with a computer geek so we can be fairly represented.” He placed his palm over his heart. “We can be romantic heroes, too.”

“You’re too funny, Brett. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I quietly observed him, trying to picture him as a dashing hero in a book. He was no Navy SEAL, but there was a certain appeal to him. Maybe it was his down-to-earth personality,

which made him vastly different than the character in my current story. Of course, that one was fashioned after Tom, the no-show, who was inching his way down from the pedestal.

“Hey, why don’t you go inside and grab a glass of wine? I guess I kidnapped you before you had a chance to get one.”

He raised his eyebrows at me. “I didn’t mind.” Reaching for my glass, he said, “I’ll fill yours, too. Merlot?”

“Yep, you must know my tastes.”

He smiled. “Maybe a little. You sure you don’t want to go in?”

Grimacing, I shook my head. “No, I’m not in the mood to face the crowds right now.”

“I understand. Don’t worry about him, okay?” He touched my shoulder as he passed me, making my heart flutter.

After he headed inside, I stood up and walked a few steps, taking one last survey of the parking lot, unsure of what I wanted anymore.

The lot was completely still. My phone buzzed from inside my bag, and when I grabbed it, I saw a text message waiting. Quickly tapping the icon, I cringed when I saw Tom’s name.

Hey Lauren. I’m sorry for the late notice, but I can’t make it tonight. Something suddenly came up. I promise I’ll make it up to you. Have a great evening.

Glancing around to make sure nobody could hear me, I growled, “What a jerk.”

Reading the message a few more times, I was tempted to launch the phone out into the parking lot, but then I realized it wasn’t the phone’s fault.

The door to the tasting room opened and closed, and I heard someone shuffling over. Assuming it was Brett, I held up my phone and whined, “You will not believe who texted me.”

“Who?” came the voice of Craig, a frequent guest at our tasting room. He was constantly flirting with me, the overtures increasing the more he drank. I sighed.

“Craig. Sorry, I thought you were someone else.”

“I can be whoever you want me to be, sweetheart.”

I had yet to turn around and look at him, but I could feel his hot breath on my neck, and the pungent smell of his too-strong cologne coupled with the acidic flavor of wine permeated the air.

Right now I want you to be Brett.

“Did you see Brett inside?” I asked, turning on my heel to face the thirty-something-year-old man with a boyish face and balding hair.

“What do you want with Brett?” he slurred.

Alarmed by his stumbling state, I said, “He’s my date tonight.”

“Why can’t I be your date, honey?” he said almost angrily, coming closer. Instinctively, I cowered back, scared of what he’d do.

I was just about to say, “Because my date has some manners,” when out of nowhere, somebody yanked him away from me.

“I think you need to leave, Sir,” said Brett. He stared Craig in the eye, and if looks could kill—well, you know. “I’m sure we can call a cab for you, unless you have a ride.”

Craig wriggled free of Brett’s hold and backed up. “Hey, I don’t want any trouble. My buddy’s driving, so no need for a cab.”

“Why don’t you go back to your buddy and leave her alone,” Brett insisted.

Craig blinked his eyes and his mouth fell open, and in the next beat he tiptoed back inside the building.

My body flooded with warmth, in spite of the chilly air. I was all smiles as I regarded Brett, who motioned for me to sit down. Our wine glasses were already perched on the table in front of me.

As I stared at him, slack jawed, he slipped out of his jacket and wrapped it around my shoulders. The scent of his aftershave alerted my senses and made me aware Brett wasn’t just a co-worker, he was an attractive, single man.

Reveling in the protection of his jacket, I grinned at Brett as he sat down beside me, closer than before.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his eyes full of concern.

“I am now.” The grin didn’t leave my face. “Who says computer geeks can’t be heroes?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” he said, winking.

“One might think you staged that scene, just to prove your point,” I kidded.

“Nah.” He stared out into the distance. “I wouldn’t do anything to make you uncomfortable, or feel embarrassed.”

That last one was directed at Tom, surely. Grabbing my phone and opening the text, I slid it over to Brett. “He texted.”

Brett picked up my phone and studied the screen. His brow furrowed and his lips moved slightly as he read Tom’s text. Then, he widened his eyes and gazed at me.

“What?” I sensed he had something big to say.

“Don’t laugh, but this sounds like a line from *The Brady Bunch*.”

“*The Brady Bunch?*” I asked. He sure had a way of lightening the mood. “As in, the ancient sitcom from the ‘70s?”

“Yeah, remember the episode where Marcia breaks her nose?”

I pointed a finger in the air. “And the football player cancels their date.”

“Because ‘something suddenly came up,’” he finished, using air quotes.

“But really he was trying to get out of it because he was embarrassed by her nose.” I slunk down into my seat. “Which means, Tom lied. He didn’t really want to go to this party with me.”

My body felt like a two hundred pound sack of cement. I hung my head low.

“Lauren, he’s a jerk,” Brett said. “Don’t let him get to you. He’s not worth it.”

“I feel so stupid.”

“Well, stop,” he said. “And if I hear one more word about Tom, I’m going to start quoting more lines from old TV shows, just to annoy you.”

I giggled, breaking out of my funk. “This could be interesting. Tom, Tom, Tom—“

He put his hand over my mouth. “No more!”

I shook with laughter as I carefully took his hand away. My fingers burned where I touched him. “How about Brett? Can we talk about him?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Hmm...clearly you like old sitcoms. What else do you like?”

“Well, old music.”

“Define ‘old’. Like Big Band, ‘50s?”

“More like early ‘80s.”

“Oh. Me, too. My parents still have their old record collection. I love listening to that stuff.”

“Did you know we had an ‘80s rock star in here last week?”

“No. Who?” I took a sip of my wine.

“David Somers, the guitarist from Vinyl Fog, an English band. I’ve got loads of their songs on my ‘80s mix.”

“Oh! He was the English dude in with his pretty wife. Come to think of it, he did look like a rock star.”

I sat back and tapped the edge of my mouth, contemplating. A rock star romance would be fun to write.

“Hey, don’t forget your computer geek hero,” Brett said, appearing to read my mind.

Grabbing his hand and squeezing it, I gushed, “How could I?”

“Your mood certainly has changed.”

“Yeah, because we’re not talking about that person anymore.”

“He doesn’t deserve you.” He stared at me. “You know that, right?”

A wave of hope floated through me. Before I was tempted to reach over and kiss Brett senseless, I stood up and pulled on his arm. “All this talk about music makes me want to go dance.”

As if backing up my statement, “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” shouted through the speakers. He followed me, holding my hand, but I paused just before entering the room.

“Brett?” I said, facing him. “Only my family knows that the ‘other person’ was supposed to be my date. As far as everyone else, can we just pretend you were my date all along?”

He reached up and pinched my chin. “Sure, Lauren.”

“I can’t believe he stood you up,” Becca remarked, as we hovered near the appetizers on a break from dancing. “How rude.” She paused. “Truthfully, I’m not that surprised. I never trusted that guy. Sorry, Lauren.

She glanced past me. “Or...maybe I’m not sorry.”

“Huh?” I asked, biting a carrot stick.

“Brett seems to be a nice distraction for you. I should’ve known he’d be right there to pick up the pieces.” She gasped, throwing her hand over her mouth.

I swallowed hard. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. Me and my big mouth.”

“Now I have to know.”

“Come on, Lauren. He’s into you. Surely you can pick up on that?”

“I’m getting that impression tonight.”

“So why are you wasting your time with me, munching carrot sticks like a sad bunny?”

“Even sad bunnies get hungry.” I snickered. “Besides, he had to take a phone call. Probably somebody having a computer crisis.” I explained to Becca that Brett was a work-at-home computer geek.

“Did I hear my name mentioned?” Brett’s voice sounded from behind me. “You ladies talking about me again?”

I was beginning to adore the sound of his voice. It wasn’t sexy and rugged like Tom’s; more tender and warm—like I wanted to be wrapped up in it.

“Only good things, I promise,” I told him, and then asked, “Everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. Minor little crisis,” he said, smiling. “All good now.”

I held out my hand to him. “Let’s go dance, my geek hero.”

The makeshift dance floor was covered with a great mix of people: couples of all ages, a group of young single women, and pairs of friends cautiously holding each other. Brett and I fell into the last category. When I pulled him onto the dance floor, I didn’t realize a slow song was coming on. I wondered if somebody had messed with the playlist, because “Heaven in Your Eyes,” by Loverboy now played.

Brett brought me in closer, and I comfortably settled against his shoulder. “This is a classic ‘80s tune. You like this?” I asked.

Smoothing the back of my hair, he whispered, “Yes. Very much.”

My heart thumped wildly in my chest. The way I fit into his arms gave me a sense of peace. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to breathe in his masculine fragrance.

The sound of someone clearing his throat forced me to open my eyes and look up.

I sucked in my breath. “Joey, what are you doing?”

My sneaky big brother was standing there, holding a sprig of mistletoe above me and Brett.

Joey chuckled. “You two look so cozy over here. I’m just trying to help out.”

I pursed my lips and glared at him. “Thanks,” I said.

Feeling my face heat up, I slowly backed out of our embrace and shyly glanced at Brett, who wore a hint of a smile. “Well?” he said.

Shrugging, I said, “Go for it.”

Even though I only expected an innocent peck, my heart rate sped up at the thought of his lips on mine.

Ever so carefully, he released his hands from my waist and brought them to my face, cupping my now flaming cheeks. His gorgeous blue eyes stared down at me, making me want him so bad I shut my own eyes and bent my face up. My skin buzzed when his lips brushed against mine in a sweet kiss, but when he pressed harder my knees nearly buckled beneath me. I had to cling to him for support.

“All right, that’s enough. You can let go of my sister now,” Joey grumbled.

But we didn’t listen. My fingers gravitated up from Brett’s shoulders to his soft light brown hair as our lips fused together.

What do you know? I think my story just changed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Later that night I was heavy in thought, with my nose buried in my diary, when my mom knocked on the door.

“Lauren?”

“Yes?” I called, setting the leather bound book beside me on the bed. “Come in.”

She let herself in and sat at the edge of my striped comforter. “I heard about Tom not showing. Are you okay?”

I hunched my shoulders, staring down at my fingers. “I was embarrassed at first. And hurt, of course.”

“But—?”

Shrugging, I said, “I’m over it, I guess.”

“Oh? Is Brett responsible for your quick recovery?”

My face warmed at the mention of Brett. “Maybe, did you...see?”

“Oh, honey I think the whole room saw that kiss. It may have caused an earthquake.”

I laughed. “It was a nice kiss. He’s a sweetie,” I said, not able to hide my smile.

“Yes, he is. I’m sure a lot of young women think that.” She gave me a pointed stare. “Perhaps you should give it a rest with Tom. He’s a wonderful supporter of our wine club, but he’s not a one-woman man, if you know what I mean.”

“I guess so.” Even though I felt a spark of hope with my newfound feelings for Brett, I still felt crushed by Tom’s rejection.

“Sexy doesn’t always mean rich and handsome. Sometimes sexy can come in the form of a nice, caring, and respectable man.” She patted my hand. “Just keep that in mind.”

Brett walked in to the tasting room the following afternoon carrying a single red rose. My eyes grew wide. I was a sucker for red roses, and this time of year, they were only available in flower shops. Which means, he’d made a special trip.

“What’s with the flower, Romeo?” I hinted.

“For you, also known as my date last night.” He walked over to me, beaming, and handed me the perfect flower. “I bring flowers to all my dates.”

I deflated. *All his dates?*

“I thought you didn’t have time to date?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’m not a monk, for goodness sake.”

Pouting, I put the velvety petals to my nose and breathed in the sweet scent. Not wanting to let on that I was jealous of these other dates, I slipped him a half-smile and said, “Thank you.” I turned my back on him and began wiping the counter, though it was already clean.

I was beginning to think I’d never find anyone who wanted *me*. Mark cheated on me, Tom stood me up, and wonderful Brett preferred playing the field. So if he brought all his dates flowers, did he also kiss them like he did me last night? Or did he go even further? That thought depressed me. Tom for sure played around, and I was used to that idea. But Brett was different. He had potential.

For the next hour or so, when I wasn’t attending to a customer, I escaped to my thoughts. Brett must’ve picked up on this because he kept his distance. I wasn’t trying to be cold toward him, but I felt like I needed to guard my heart right now. It’d been through so much over the past twenty-four hours.

At one point, I put my fingers to my lips, recalling how good it felt to be kissed by Brett. No, not good—amazing. When he looked over at me, I faked a cough and drew my hand away. If I wasn’t mistaken, I saw a smile light up his face. *Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to talk to him. Then maybe I could get another kiss?*

I blinked my eyes and shook my head, trying to erase the thought. I needed to get a grip. The last thing I wanted was to become obsessed with someone who was not going to return my affections.

Grabbing my phone out of my pocket, I clicked on the Kindle icon and dove into my novel, occasionally looking up to see if anyone was coming. It seemed the Sunday afternoon before Christmas was a slow day for wine tasting. I supposed people were out doing last minute shopping.

Sinking back into my fictional world, I was startled when I heard a man’s voice say, “Hi, Lauren.”

I knew that voice. One that used to attract me, but now it just angered me. Without looking up, I said with a clip, “Hey, Tom.”

“Listen, you have every right to be angry with me.”

My face snapped up and I narrowed my eyes at him. “You don’t say.”

He hung his head low. “A good friend had an emergency, and I had to go help her at the last minute.”

I could only imagine the kind of help this “friend” needed. A grunt from a few feet away sounded, and I looked over to find Brett playing with his phone, his jaw ticking.

“Whatever, I did all right.” I whirled around, flipping my hair back.

“I want to make it up to you, Lauren.”

“How?” I asked, pretending to straighten up the back counter.

“Look over here.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned half way around. Tom was waving tickets in the air. “You like the opera?”

Oh, goodness. The opera? He had my number.

My demeanor changed at the sight of those opera tickets. I’d always had a fascination with the opera, ever since our parents took us as kids. It meant dressing up and rubbing elbows with all the society people, and then having dinner at some posh restaurant late into the night. And being on the arm of a rich and gorgeous man—it was hard to resist.

Plus he actually had the tickets, so this looked like a sure thing. Given my doubts over Brett and his dating practices, I was very tempted to overlook Tom’s blunder last night. As long as I realized nothing would come of us, what was wrong with experiencing one fabulous night out?

Approaching Tom with a smile, I gushed, “I love the opera.”

“Then come with me,” he said with a wink. “They’re doing Verdi’s *La Traviata*.”

My muscles went slack and I sighed. “Oh, that sounds fabulous.”

Just then the back door slammed shut, startling me. Glancing to my right, I noticed Brett had vanished.

“What’s *his* problem?” Tom sneered.

I tensed up again. “I don’t know.” I looked behind me and then back at Tom. “Can you wait here for a minute?”

Before he could answer, I joined Brett in the office, where I found him pacing around.

“Everything okay?” I timidly asked. I didn’t want to assume this was a bad reaction to Tom asking me out. As far as I knew, he could’ve gotten a disturbing email or text.

He jerked his head up and threw his arm toward the door. “You’re falling for that?”

I shrugged, shaking my head. “I don’t expect anything from him, but I wouldn’t mind a night out at the opera.”

“You may not expect anything from him, but I’m pretty sure he’ll expect something at the end of the night.”

At one time that would have appealed to me, but now after everything that’d happened last night, in addition to seeing the tormented look on Brett’s face, it gave me pause for thought.

“And did you even notice the lipstick stain on his neck?” Brett added. “Why are you even giving him the time of day, Lauren?”

Suddenly I felt tired. Burying my face in my hands, I sunk down on the top of the desk like dead weight. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing, except you’re a bit gullible. And a little too swayed by a handsome face.”

“I should’ve known I wasn’t good enough for him. He really is out of my league.”

“You’ve got that all wrong,” he said, slowly approaching me. His fingertip touched my chin and he lifted my face to his. “You’re too good for him.”

I stared at the ceiling. “Yeah, right.”

“You’re sweet, beautiful, and smart, yet you allow a jerk to treat you badly.” He smoothed the back of my hair, creating tingles all along my spine. “You need to go out there and tell him where to stuff those tickets.”

My eyes widened and I chuckled. “I’m not sure I can word it that way, but I will decline the invitation. Your remark about the lipstick stain pretty much decided that one.”

Standing up from the desk, I scooted past Brett and made my way to the door, pausing as I touched the door handle. I looked back at him. He was becoming more gorgeous by the second, and I had a sudden urge I couldn’t resist.

Sidling back over to Brett, I cupped his face in my hands and drew his lips to mine. As I deepened the kiss, I let my fingers wander to the back of his hair.

Once I let him go, I giggled at his stunned expression.

As I inched my way to the door, he smiled and said, “Go dump that guy.”

Groaning inwardly, I returned to the front. Tom was still there, typing away on his phone. He was so into his texting, I had to clear my throat to get his attention.

“Oh, you’re back,” said Tom, shoving his phone in his pocket. My eyes drifted toward his neck, where I saw a dark red splotch. *Oh my, gosh.*

“Yep, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to go with you to the opera.”

“Oh? Why not?” He looked taken aback, as if this was the first time he’d been turned down.

Right on cue, Brett snuck out from the back and returned to his post, still sporting a grin.

Tom looked back and forth between us, his tight expression relaxing. “Oh, I understand completely.” He opened his wallet and put the tickets back. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

With that, he quickly retreated from the room, nearly slamming into a group of ladies coming up the walkway.

I glanced open-mouthed at Brett. “That was easy.”

He looked relieved. “So, now that you’re free, would you like to go to dinner with me this evening?”

“I’d love to.”

Hours later, I was twirling Alfredo noodles around my fork as we dined at a local Italian restaurant, Geppetto’s. Brett and I had no trouble holding a conversation, and I felt relaxed in his company.

“You’ve got a nice appetite,” he remarked, stabbing a fork into his sirloin steak. “I like it.”

“Fettucine Alfredo is my favorite. And I think now that I’ve been released from my fixation on Tom, I’m starting to feel like ‘me’ again.”

It was amazing how different I felt now that my obsession with Tom was over. The clouds had separated and I could see light. I just didn’t know the light had been by my side for months in the tasting room.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. How much time did you waste on that guy?”

“I don’t know and right now I want to pretend he doesn’t exist.”

“Fine by me.”

Just then his phone lit up and he grabbed it, focusing on the screen. Without looking up, he said, “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to take this.”

“Go ahead,” I urged, taking another bite of creamy Alfredo noodles. It seemed he was often interrupted by phone calls, and I wanted to ask him more about his computer job. Then again, I was afraid he’d get too technical and I’d end up feeling dumb. I used computers for basic things: writing, using social media, and making spreadsheets. As far as troubleshooting, I was clueless.

He returned a few minutes later, apologizing for the interruption.

“It’s okay. People need computer help at all hours of the day. I understand.”

“Uh…” he began in a strained voice. He shifted in his seat. “Lauren, there’s something I want to show you.”

He fiddled with his phone and slid it over to me, pointing to the screen. My mood brightened at the photo of him with a little blond girl, who had his exact eyes.

“Oh, she’s adorable. A niece, I presume?” I slid the phone back.

Blowing out a big breath, he replied, “No. Actually…she’s my daughter.”

After I recovered from the shock, I stuttered, “I-I didn’t realize you’d ever been married. I mean, you were married?”

A darkness overtook his face. “Yes, for three years.”

“Is your daughter with her now?” *And is your ex going to make my life miserable?*

He bent his head low and shook it slightly. “Annabelle is with our neighbor. My wife passed away a year and a half ago from cancer.”

My stomach fell, and I slumped against the chair. “Oh, Brett. I had no idea,” I said. “So, all these phone calls...they aren’t work calls, are they?”

“Well, a few of them were, but the one I just had was from Annabelle. She wanted to kiss me goodnight.”

My heart warmed at that. “She sounds like a doll. How old is she?”

“Three, almost four.”

“I can’t imagine how hard it must be for you. Do you have any family around?”

“No, my wife’s parents are both gone, and mine are across the country, tending to my sister. She’s got a lot of problems.”

He went on to explain how his younger sister had been in and out of rehab multiple times, so Brett chose to stay out of the way for now, not wanting Annabelle in the middle of the drama. I got the impression he was a really good dad, but I wondered why he worked weekends.

“My job allows me to be home with her, so other than a few hours of preschool, she’s with me twenty-four seven during the week. Having the winery job gives me a chance to get out and be around adults.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

We were quiet for a moment.

“Listen,” he finally said. “I know I’ve dumped a lot on you, and I understand if you’re not ready to date a guy who has a kid. That’s why I’m telling you upfront. You’d be surprised how many women I’ve chased away with this news.”

My shoulders dropped at his honesty. “Well, you were dating the wrong women, clearly. Yeah, it’s a lot to swallow, but I like you, Brett.” *And I’m honored you’d consider me for the role of mothering your daughter*, I thought but didn’t dare say out loud. I mean, a guy in his position wouldn’t waste his time with someone he didn’t see as suitable mom material.

Then again, what was I implying? I adored Brett, but was I ready to fill the shoes of his late wife? I was only twenty-four, just a few years out of college. Maybe I needed to think about

this first. My mind swam with conflicting arguments, all while Brett sat there with a heavy expression.

Yet when I looked at him, I found it hard to believe any woman in her right mind would walk away from such a wonderful guy just because he had a little girl.

“You want to meet her?” Brett’s voice startled me out of my thoughts.

“Who? Annabelle?”

“Yeah. I can just introduce you as a friend. No pressure, I promise you.”

Oh, Lord, what do I do?

CHAPTER FIVE

My bright striped pillowcase was darkened with tear stains, yet the tears kept coming. Ever since Brett told me he was a single dad due to his wife's premature death, I'd been struggling to keep my emotions in check. I was even more of a mess after he mentioned the women who'd rejected him because of his "baggage." I hurt for him.

When he asked if I wanted to meet Annabelle, what could I say? I told him I'd love to meet her, though we didn't schedule a particular time. We were a week away from Christmas, and I figured we'd wait until after the holidays for any introductions. My heart and intuition told me it was fine to date Brett, but my logic argued with them. Or maybe it was my insecurities.

He gave me a sweet, safe kiss upon dropping me off, right after apologizing for "dumping" things on me. I assured him he didn't have to excuse away his status as a widowed father. In fact, I told him it was crazy to apologize for such a thing.

"I don't think I deserve you," I'd said, using his words regarding Tom and me.

"Nonsense. I wouldn't have taken you out if I didn't like you."

I smiled, holding back the huge lump in my throat. "I'd better let you get home to your daughter."

"All right." He gave me one last peck. "Thank you."

He watched me walk inside, and then, ducking past anyone who could see me, I bolted up to my room and buried my head in my pillow. I cried for Brett, who'd experienced a terrible loss. I cried for Annabelle, who probably had very few memories of her mother.

Where could I possibly fit in to this fractured little family?

The next morning, still reeling from Brett's tragic story, I gave my mom a hug from behind as she stood at the sink washing dishes.

"What's this for?" she questioned. "I mean, whatever it is, I'll take it."

"Hmm...just because I love you," I said, now taking a seat at the table.

She turned her head to smile at me. "And, I love you, too. How was your date last night?"

"It was really nice," I said, pausing before I continued. "Did you know Brett has a daughter?"

She stilled, sighing. "Yes."

"What?" I cried. "And you didn't tell me?"

She set down the dish and sponge and turned around. “First of all, I didn’t want you to consider him off-limits. Secondly, it needed to come from him.”

“So you think I’m ready to be a mommy?”

“I don’t think it’s out of the question.”

She went on. “Let’s face it, a lot of guys your age—and older—are only after a good time. I don’t see Brett as being that way. Good men like him are hard to come by.”

She returned to the dishes, just as my phone buzzed, indicating a text message.

Hey, Lauren. Just checking in. I’m about to start my work day, but I wanted to tell you what a nice time I had last night. Hope you did, too. I’ll talk to you later. Yours, Brett.

Something about the way he said “yours” gave me a cozy feeling inside. I clutched the phone to my chest, and then read through the text a few more times.

“You’re right, Mom. I just worry about being good enough for him. His wife was probably a great mom and a fabulous cook.” I sighed. “...and I’m sure he misses her terribly.”

“All those things might be true, but try not to dwell on those. Grandma Rose and Grandpa Fred married each other after both being widowed, and they’ve been very happy together.”

“I know. I just never thought I’d be an instant mom.”

“The thing is, don’t analyze it to death. If you do, you’ll drive yourself crazy. Get to know him, meet his daughter, and spend time with them. You’ll know the right thing to do. And remember, sometimes life takes us down a path we’d never consider, but in the end could turn out to be a beautiful thing.”

I wanted to write those words down. It was true, after all. Up until now, I’d been floating through life, struggling through dead-end relationships and getting caught up in fantasies that only belonged in romance novels.

Really there was no reason I couldn’t turn out to be a good stepmom to Annabelle. I was a girl, she was a girl—how hard could it be? Over the next few days of texting back and forth with Brett, I stopped stressing about it, like Mom suggested. I made up my mind to let things happen naturally. Still, when Brett sent me this text a few days before Christmas, I froze:

I know you probably have a big family gathering on Christmas Day, but I’d love for you to stop by in the afternoon or evening, if you can. It’ll just be me and Annabelle.

I took in a deep breath as I tried to calm my stomach flutters.

I’ll try. Send me your address, I replied.

He immediately got back to me with his address, adding, *I really hope to see you.*

No promises, but I will try.

After I hit “send,” I felt guilty. Escaping a large family gathering on Christmas wouldn’t be any trouble. I could easily slip away without anyone seeing me, if I was sneaky enough. I’d just be one of many dark-haired Italians roaming around, grubbing on raviolis.

The problem was, I was still fighting insecurity. Being at his home on Christmas of all days—alone with him and his daughter—seemed intimidating. I was sure he shared many holiday memories with his wife, and I didn’t want to be compared with her. And as insensitive as it seemed, I didn’t embrace the idea of him reminiscing about her, while I sat there feeling inadequate.

But he wants you there, my subconscious told me. I wanted to listen to that inner voice because something told me Brett would go out of his way to make me feel welcome. He wouldn’t do anything to make it awkward for me; he was just that kind of guy.

We continued texting back and forth all the way until the night of Christmas Eve, when he said, *I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.*

That text made it hard for me to chicken out, but I still went ahead and told my sister and mom about Brett’s invitation, just so I could have that extra push. They’d both made it quite clear they approved of my dating Brett.

I was so nervous the next day, I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to eat. Nothing stunk worse than not having an appetite when faced with a holiday feast, Gotelli-style. As we sat around the table, I pretended to listen to the various conversations. I couldn’t care less who said what to whom and where my aunt’s co-worker went on her extended vacation, and blah blah blah. All that mattered to me was having Annabelle accept me. Because if she didn’t, I could kiss Brett goodbye.

I shivered at the thought, but what if it came to that?

“Stop worrying, Sister. Everything will be fine,” Becca reassured me, shoving a piece of pumpkin pie my way. I waved it away, clutching my stomach.

“What time is it?” I asked with a parched throat.

“Why don’t you check your watch, dingbat?” she said, pointing to my wristwatch.

Oops. “Okay, let me rephrase. What time should I go over there? I don’t want to seem overeager.”

“Really? Who cares? How many mornings have you woken up to text messages from Brett? Talk about eager.”

I smiled. “Good point.”

“It’s four o’clock now. Why don’t you bug out?”

As if he could hear her, Brett texted me. *Hey, what time can we expect you?*

Leaving soon, was my reply.

He sent back a smiley face. *Oh, man, he's a keeper*, I thought.

"Lauren, I'm going to pack up some raviolis for you to take over," Mom said, apparently listening in on our conversation.

"Mom, I'm sure he's got enough food. Besides it's just the two of them." And the way my mom packed up food, it'd be enough to feed a family of eight.

"Oh, for goodness sake, who doesn't love raviolis?"

Clearly I had no choice. At least they froze well.

Less than fifteen minutes later, I was behind the wheel of my Honda, thumping my fingers against the steering wheel and breathing deeply.

A tap on the window gave me a jolt. My sister was outside, saying "Get out of here!"

"All right, all right!" I tossed up my hands in defeat.

Switching on the radio, I put the car in drive and headed off, singing along to "Do They Know It's Christmas?" by Band Aid.

I'd memorized the directions to Brett's house, but just to be safe, I adjusted the volume so I could concentrate. He lived in a newer part of town, whereas my parents lived out in the country, so it was a good twenty minutes before I turned onto his street.

Nice, I thought as I pulled up to his house, a one-story ranch style with a stone pathway and quaint front garden. The home looked well-maintained from the outside, and I could only guess the same was true for the interior.

Picking up the pan of raviolis, I nervously walked to the front door. Just before knocking, it swung open and peeking around the edge was Brett's smiling face.

"Merry Christmas, Lauren."

"Merry Christmas, Brett. I hope you like raviolis," I said, holding up the pan.

"Raviolis?" I heard a small voice from inside.

Brett's eyes widened as he took the pan and waved me in. "I think you know the way to my daughter's heart. She's crazy about raviolis."

The inside was just as well-kept, though simple. I followed him from the small entryway to the open kitchen and living room, where a medium size Christmas tree stood in the corner, brightly lit and full of old school Shiny Brites. At the base of the tree sat a little girl with long wavy blond hair, wearing a red sweater and jeans.

And she was staring at me. "Did you bring raviolis?" A hopeful smile followed.

“Yes.” I smiled back.

She popped up and started clapping. “Yay!” It was the cutest thing I’d ever seen.

“Annabelle, why don’t you say hi to our friend, Lauren?” Brett urged.

“Hi, Lauren,” she said, suddenly acting shy. “Daddy, can I have raviolis?”

He chuckled. “Anna Banana, you just ate!”

I started laughing with him. “I guess my mom was right about those.”

Brett sighed. “I’m going to go heat some up. Anna, why don’t you show Lauren what Santa brought you?”

When he left the room, I had a brief moment of panic. *What if she ignores me? All she wanted me for was the food.*

But then she tiptoed over, grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the tree. “Come see my new Barbie.”

“Oh, a Barbie? I used to play with Barbie dolls.”

“You did?” she said, like this was the best news.

We sat down and she showed me the blond-headed figure, who was donning a fabulous red gown. Annabelle explained that she was Holiday Barbie, but Santa had “brung” her other outfits she could use for the doll.

I was actually starting to relax and enjoy doing little girl things, when out of nowhere she lifted her innocent gaze and said, “Are you going to be my new mommy?”

My chin dropped and a shiver of alarm passed through me. “Uh…”

“All right, Annabelle, raviolis are heated,” said Brett, making me sigh with relief.

She dropped the Barbie and scrambled to the table, as if she were fighting five hungry men for the food.

“Yum!” she said, looking at the full plate.

While she scarfed the raviolis, Brett led me over to the sofa and we took a seat.

Putting his arm around me, he asked, “How was your day?”

“Crazy, as most of our family gatherings are,” I said. “How’s your day been?”

“Good, but it just got better.” He smiled and squeezed my shoulder. “She’s been anxious to meet you all day.”

“Really? I have to confess I was nervous that she wouldn’t like me.”

“Not possible. Certainly not after all the talking up I’ve done.”

“Oh, Brett.” I wondered if I should tell him what his daughter had asked me. It’d caught me off guard, and I wanted to know how to respond if she asked again.

“Daddy! I’m finished! Can we watch a movie with Lauren?” But I supposed that would have to wait. She was now standing in front of us, hands folded and wearing a pleading expression.

“You finished already?” Brett asked, sounding tired.

She nodded emphatically

“All right, pick a movie.” He glanced at me. “You’re okay with this?”

“Sure, it’s your house. I’m up for anything.”

“Hmm...you don’t know what you’re saying.”

I raised my eyebrows at him, thinking *uh-oh, what does he mean by that?*

Annabelle came back from the TV cabinet and held up a DVD of *Frozen*.

“Honey, you’ve seen that so many times. How about a different one?”

Her body went limp and she jutted out her bottom lip.

“Anna, pick a different movie, please,” he repeatedly sternly.

Holding her head low dramatically, she slumped back over to the cabinet and pulled out a new DVD, dropping *Frozen* on the ground.

“What’s that one?” I asked, attempting to lighten her mood. “I’m getting excited!”

She displayed the front of the box to me, giving me a sheepish smile.

“*Ratatouille*? I love that movie!”

Instantly she brightened up, her blue eyes taking up half her face. “You do?”

“Oh yeah, what do you think, Brett?” I elbowed him.

“I think we have a winner. You know what to do, honey.”

I watched as she opened up the box and slipped the DVD into the machine, like a pro. “Wow, impressive,” I whispered to Brett.

“Oh, she could do that at eighteen months,” he bragged.

Once the movie started playing, Annabelle grabbed her comfort “blankie” and crawled up onto her daddy’s lap.

I was already falling in love with the little stinker.

*

Later that night, after giving Annabelle a bath and reading her a bedtime story, Brett and I settled down on the sofa and relished the silence. He'd opened a bottle of 2013 Barbera from my family's winery and poured a few glasses.

"Great choice." I swirled the glass, took a whiff, and sipped it. "Mm...I can taste blackberry. So good."

"Your dad and brother make great wine."

I nodded in agreement as I snuggled into his side, careful not to tip my glass. "This is nice. Thanks for inviting me."

"It would've been lonely without you." He kissed the top of my head. "Annabelle adores you, in case you haven't figured it out."

"I might've picked up on that," I said, and then paused for a second.

"Earlier this evening she asked me if I was going to be her new mommy," I admitted hesitantly.

"Oh, goodness. I'm so sorry. What did you say?"

"Well, I didn't have a chance to respond because you'd brought in the raviolis." I chuckled. "She must've forgotten."

"Yeah." He looked down, gathering his thoughts. "I can talk to her tomorrow. She's starving for female attention."

"I'm sure." I didn't know what to say, so I was honest. "I never want to replace her mother, but I wouldn't mind doing some girly things with her, if you want me to."

"Really?" he sounded relieved. "Oh, she'd love that."

We sat quietly, sipping our wine.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "I want you to know that as much as I loved and will always love my wife, I've accepted that she's not coming back."

My throat thickened and my eyes burned.

"She'd want me to be happy, and she'd want Annabelle to have a good mother."

A tear trickled down my face, which I quickly wiped away.

"I guess what I'm saying is, I have plenty of room in my heart for another woman, so please don't be scared to give me a chance, Lauren."

He set down his glass, took my face in his hands, and said, "I'm already falling hard for you, my dark haired beauty." Moving his hands to the back of my hair, he pressed his lips to mine and kissed me hard, as if he'd waited all week to show me affection. The scent of his skin

so close to me was enough to make me lose my mind. It wasn't long before the kisses grew deeper.

Eventually we broke apart and he said, "Why don't we settle down with a grown-up movie?"

I blushed over our passionate embrace. "Sounds good."

We found a holiday rom-com, poured another glass of wine, and snuggled for the next few hours. It was the perfect end to a lovely Christmas day.

I didn't know what exactly would happen with Brett. What I did know was that I was glad I expanded my tastes in men to include a sweet computer geek who had baggage in the form of a precious three-year-old daughter. Just a week earlier, my mom had said, "Sometimes life takes us down a path we'd never consider, but in the end could turn out to be a beautiful thing."

I couldn't think of anything more beautiful than a widower finding happiness again after losing his wife to cancer, or an insecure young woman finally finding a man who longed to give her his heart.

This was a true love story, and I couldn't wait to watch it unfold.

EPILOGUE

One year later...

“Who would have guessed this a year ago?” I asked, smoothing the front of my white satin gown as I stared at my reflection. “The hopeless romantic marrying a computer geek.”

“You’ve got a good one, Lauren. I only hope I find a man as good as Brett,” my sister said, standing beside me in her red chiffon maid of honor gown.

Sucking in my stomach, I said, “I ate too much at the rehearsal dinner last night.”

“It was a lovely, festive dinner. And why not enjoy yourself?” She sighed. “Oh, I love a Christmas wedding.”

“I agree,” piped in my mom. “It gave me an excuse to get more Christmas decorations!” She laughed.

Rolling my heavily made-up eyes, I remarked, “I’m just glad you didn’t wear one of your hideous sweaters.” I glanced at her in her floor-length champagne colored dress. “You look fabulous, Mom.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” She came up alongside me and spoke to my mirror image. “You’re beautiful, Lauren.” She patted my shoulder. “And you’re going to be a good mother to Annabelle, and any future little ones that come along.”

Placing my hands on my belly, I smiled. “Maybe by this time next year, I’ll have a bun in the oven. We don’t plan to wait long to try, as we want to give Annabelle a sibling.”

At four years old, she was itching for a baby brother or sister, and now I couldn’t wait to give her that gift. In her young life, she’d already experienced so much heartbreak with the death of her mother. It was time to put the pieces of her life back together. That is, with different pieces. She often asked about her mother, and between me and Brett, we made sure she never forgot the beautiful woman with whom she’d spent the first two years of her life.

The door burst open, jarring me out of my thoughts.

“Lauren, are you ready?” asked a tiny voice.

I swiveled around in my white gown, facing the blond angel in her red satin dress. “Yes, are you?” Annabelle was our flower girl, and she was poised to sprinkle red rose petals along the makeshift aisle inside the tasting room, where our ceremony was being held.

I shuffled over and knelt down in front of her. “Don’t you look pretty?”

“Can I call you Mommy yet?” she asked with hopeful eyes.

“Soon, very soon, princess.”

As I stood up and took her hand, my heart was full of anticipation for the moments ahead; not just the ceremony, but the rest of my life.

THE END

(P.S. Thanks for standing me up, Tom.)

Note: If you'd like to read more about David and Beth, the romantic duo who appears in the first chapter, Anne Carol's Faithfully Yours series will take you on an adventure through their epic love story, beginning in their teen years.

NEVER LET GO (FAITHFULLY YOURS #1)

<http://amzn.to/1RcugAW>

NEVER FALL (FAITHFULLY YOURS #2)

<http://amzn.to/2dt0kB>

NEVER CHANGE (FAITHFULLY YOURS #3)

<https://amzn.to/2JmEL9e>

NEVER GIVE UP (FAITHFULLY YOURS #4) – Coming in
Summer of 2020

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/23948001-never-give-up>

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Last, but not least, thanks to all the wonderful readers out there who read voraciously! You keep this book business thriving. There are no words for how much we appreciate you!

A TASTE OF CHRISTMAS PLAYLIST

I love holiday music, and I had a great time assembling this playlist. It's a mix of oldies, classics, and a few contemporary holiday hits. I hope you'll check out my selections and add them to your holiday playlist!

"Christmas Time Is Here (Instrumental)" – Vince Guaraldi

"Last Christmas" – Wham!

"Jingle Bell Rock (Glee Cast Version)" – Glee Cast

"Baby, It's Cold Outside (Glee Cast Version)" – Glee Cast

"It's The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year" – Andy Williams

"A Holly Jolly Christmas" – Burl Ives

"Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree" – Brenda Lee

"Heaven In Your Eyes" – Loverboy

"Do They Know It's Christmas?" Band Aid

"The Christmas Song" – Ella Fitzgerald

"White Christmas" – Bing Crosby

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Anne Carol grew up reading, writing, and listening to English rock bands, obsessing over one in particular. Her obsession and endless daydreaming inspired her to write her first romance novel at age twelve. Over twenty years later she decided to re-write the story for publication. Never Let Go is the first book in her edgy inspirational series, Faithfully Yours, and is a story that has been a part of Anne since childhood. When she's not reading or writing, she enjoys traveling, wine tasting, cooking, watching Hallmark, and networking with other authors. Anne lives in Northern California with her husband and two sons.

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