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A MARRIED LITTLE CHRISTMAS



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PIATKUS

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PART 1

Sweater Weather

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1

ANNA

"YOU ORDERED DELIVERY FOOD," my best friend deadpanned. "In the middle of your family Christmas party dinner."

I peeked around the corner, making sure nobody was in the hallway. "Celine, I'm not eating anything she makes," I whispered into my phone.

My family was talking loudly in the tiny, dated kitchen across the house where my older sister was *definitely* tainting yet another side dish.

I slid down to sit against the wall under a gold-framed photo of my brother with the Grinch at some holiday pop-up circa twelve years ago. He was screaming. It was my sister Jodie's favorite.

"Sorry," I whispered. "I love my sister, but I cannot afford to get food poisoning right before Christmas."

"Is it that bad?"

"The smoke alarm has gone off twice. I watched her cut the lettuce with the same knife she used to cut the raw bacon, and I'm pretty sure she thawed the turkey on the counter for the last two days. I try to tell her and she gets mad."

Celine sucked air through her teeth. "Yup, that sounds like Jodie. Are you at least warning your parents?"

"Of course. Literally nobody is listening to me. This is gonna be

terrible. The house is down to one bathroom right now. She doesn't want to pay weekend pricing, so the plumber isn't coming until Monday."

"Yikes. It's gonna be a shitshow."

"Ha."

Celine yawned and I looked at my delivery app. The guy was on the way with my food. "My delivery's coming."

"What'd you order?" she asked.

"Pancake Disco."

"For dinner?"

"I'll eat pancakes anytime," I said, leaning to look around the corner again. "I got some potatoes too."

"The junkyard ones? I freakin' love those." I heard her pressing buttons on a microwave. "So how's the house look? Is it cute?"

"It is cute," I admitted. My sister was good at crafting, and she loved the holidays. "She wrapped all the photo frames in the living room to look like gifts. And Ivan did the outside. Very festive."

"So contrary to the culinary horrors within."

I had to cover my snort.

"Anna!" Dad called. "We're waiting for you!"

I puffed air into my cheeks. "I have to go," I said quietly. "My dad wants to play Cards Against Humanity."

"Oh. Does he know what it is?"

"Not a clue."

She hung up, laughing.

I wandered back out to the living room. My older sister, her husband Ivan, my sixteen-year-old brother Devon, and my parents were gathered around the coffee table.

"Everything okay?" Mom said, dealing cards. "You were gone for a while."

I put a hand to my belly, laying the groundwork for my departure in ten minutes. "My stomach's a little queasy."

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Mom paused mid-deal. "Oh no."

"Yeah," I said, sitting down like it hurt. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to eat."

"I'll send you with leftovers," Jodie said, fanning her cards.

"Great." So thoughtful. Salmonella to go.

I wrapped myself in one of the red holiday fur-lined throw blankets Jodie always had out this time of year and nibbled on a handful of almonds Mom had put on the table for snacking. I was starving. I'd already passed on the appetizers since they were also questionable. I didn't even eat the deviled eggs, and I *love* deviled eggs. When I got my food, I was going to sneak to the bathroom and inhale it. Discard the evidence under the sink until a better time arose to throw it out—though if my projections about the safety of dinner were correct, the bathroom might be busy. Maybe I could stash the empty takeout boxes under the bed in the guest room?

Dad looked at his stack of cards over his glasses. "Oh my. Oh *my*. What is this game?" he asked, blinking at us.

My little brother cracked up.

Mom looked at her cards and her eyes flew wide. "Is this a sex thing?" she said, horrified.

"I love how you just bought this, Mom, and didn't even read the box," Jodie said.

"The boy at the checkout said it was fun!"

"It's gonna be fun for me," Devon said, organizing his cards.

"Is this what you kids think is entertainment these days?" Dad asked, reading another card and shaking his head.

"Oh, like you guys didn't summon demons and Bloody Mary?" I said, checking out my stack. "I've seen the Ouija board in the attic. At least we're not opening a portal to hell."

Mom bobbed her head. "She has a point."

"I saw a Ghostbuster car the other day," Devon said.

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Mom looked up at him. "Where did you see that?"

"Parade."

"Was it the car from the movie?" she asked.

"Yeah, but like, a different business on the side," he said.

"What kind of business drives a 1959 Cadillac ambulance hearse?" Dad said, making a face at his cards.

"Uh, a ghost-busting business?" Devon said.

"They don't actually have those," Jodie said.

"Yeah, they do." My brother rolled his eyes.

Mom shook her head. "It was probably just a fun show car."

"Nuh-uh, I googled it," Devon said. "It's real."

"We playing this or what?" I asked.

My family got back on track.

We did a few uncomfortable rounds of the game. One where Mom was so mortified to read the cards she had to hand them to Devon, who was just thrilled to have permission to drop f-bombs in front of his parents. The second round was Dad's turn. He was beet red the whole time.

"I can't keep doing this," Mom said, giving up. "It's too vulgar." She plucked at the front of her shirt like the entire ordeal made her sweat.

It was Saturday, December 16. Since Jodie was an ER nurse and worked the holiday, we were celebrating Christmas today. We'd already done gifts. I got my parents a monthly cheese club subscription. Devon got a new video game. I bought Ivan a bourbon he liked, and for my sister, a bunch of cute stuff from this boutique I was obsessed with in Minneapolis, Lykke and Loom—which was funny, because she gave me the same thing.

It was a good party, aside from the starving.

My phone vibrated with a text from my delivery driver. He said he was arriving with my order, which was weird because the app still showed him a few blocks away. Glitchy, I guess.

"Ooof." I grimaced. "I think I need to run to the restroom again," I said, getting up. "Play without me."

"You can't stop in the middle of it," Jodie said.

"That sounds like a winning card," I quipped.

Devon and Ivan laughed.

I made like I was heading for the bathroom, then cut across the kitchen instead and out the sliding glass door to the chilly backyard, wearing the enormous snow boots Ivan left by the door.

I'd put in the delivery instructions for the driver to park down the street and come in the side gate for an extra $10. It was like I was buying drugs, only it was buttermilk boogie cakes.

The roof of the house was hung with multicolored Christmas lights. I waited under those, rubbing my arms in the cold. I heard the footsteps of the delivery guy while I puffed warm air into my hands.

Then the gate opened. It was my food…and my ex-boyfriend.

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2

Jeremy

AS IF TODAY COULD not get any fucking weirder.

"Anna?"

I stood there, holding a bag of pancakes, looking at the shocked face of my high school girlfriend.

"Jeremy?" She blinked at me. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"In your yard or in Minnesota?"

"Both?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "It's a really long story…"

We stared at each other while heat crept up our cheeks, both of us shocked into silence.

It had been almost a decade since I'd seen her. It hadn't ended well.

She looked great. Stunning, actually. I was still friends with her mom on socials. I never posted there, ever. I just kept the account to see what people were doing. The pictures of Anna were few and far between, but they weren't as good as the real thing I was discovering.

I suddenly remembered what I was doing there and had to snap myself back from memory lane. I handed the bag to her. "This is yours I guess?"

"Thanks," she said, taking it. "I'll add the extra ten to the app."

"Oh, I'm not your delivery guy. I mean, I *am*. I'm delivering your order. The original guy had an accident."

"What? Oh my God, is he okay?"

"Yeah? I think so? Someone rear-ended him. I was the car next to his at the light. I pulled over to help, but emergency services got there almost immediately and he asked me to drop this off, said he needed the money. I figured he was already having a bad enough day. It was only a few blocks. I was on the way to my mom's."

She nodded slowly. "Thanks. That was nice of you."

"Yeah."

Then we just stood there.

Anna Bellthrope.

God, that woman broke my damn heart. It had been ages. I'd entered a new decade. I was a completely different person than I was at eighteen. But my heart did not feel any different looking at her.

It had started to snow. Just a couple of small flakes, but they'd landed in her brown hair and sparkled in the light from the string of Christmas bulbs hanging from the eves. She took me in with deep brown eyes. Her soft skin, her full lips, the cold making her cheeks pink. She looked like an angel.

Maybe I was actually dead. Maybe this was heaven. Maybe it had been me in the car accident and I didn't survive, and I'd lived a good enough life, been a good enough man, for eternity to take me back to her.

Or maybe this was hell, and I was supposed to see what I'd lost.

I cleared my throat. "Lots of cars in the driveway. Christmas party?"

"Yeah. Just my family."

"So I guess there's not enough food in there, huh?" I joked, nodding at the house.

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "Jodie's cooking."

"Ah. Say less."

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She laughed dryly.

"What have you been up to?" I asked.

Her face changed suddenly. Shifted to something wary, like she'd just remembered she didn't like me.

"You really want to small talk with me?" she said, a little cold now.

"I just thought we could—" I was cut off by the sound of a sliding glass door opening around the corner.

Anna jerked to stare in the direction the noise came from. Someone called her.

"*Shit*," she breathed. She looked around frantically. "Move. Move!" She grabbed my sleeve and ran to duck behind the AC unit, pulling me down with her.

"What's wrong?" I whispered, crouching in the snow.

"Shhhh. They don't know I ordered food," she said. "My sister will never let me live it down."

We listened in the silence. Someone was coming.

"Put it between the thing and the wall," I whispered.

"What?"

"The bag. Hide it," I said.

She shoved the to-go order in the gap behind the AC unit.

Then we hunched there, listening to the sound of approaching footsteps. Closer, closer—then Anna's dad, Mark, was looking down at us, backlit by the string lights. It took him a second before the recognition moved across his face. "Jeremy?" He squinted.

I glanced at Anna, and she nudged me to get up.

I stood. "Hi, Mr. Bellthrope." I brushed the snow from my pants. "It's nice to see you again."

He looked at me like I was an apparition.

"What are you two doi— Terri!" he called over his shoulder. "Look who's here!" He grabbed my hand and shook it enthusiastically. He was lighting up before my eyes. "Jeremy Todd, I'll be damned! Why didn't

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you tell me you were coming? Anna, I didn't bring enough beer. I have to run out to the market."

"It's fine," I said. "I'm just—"

Mrs. Bellthrope rounded the corner and froze with her hands on her cheeks. "Jeremy!"

"Hey." I waved.

She tiptoed over the pavers in her slippers and threw her arms around me. "I had no idea you'd be here. What are you doing in the yard?" She let me go and looked back and forth between me and Anna. "This is where you went, Anna? I thought you had diarrhea."

Anna looked mortified. "Mom!"

Terri waved her daughter off. "He's a doctor now, he doesn't care about diarrhea." She came back to me, beaming. "I can't believe you're here! Come inside, it's freezing."

I put a thumb over my shoulder. "Oh, I was just—"

"Coming inside," Anna said, making aggressive eye contact with me. "He was just coming inside. It was a surprise."

Everyone looked at me.

Anna was staring lasers through me. Broadcasting silently in that wordless communication that we'd been so good at once, projecting right into my brain that I needed to go along with it.

"Right," I said slowly, turning to smile at her parents. "I was just coming inside. But we can't stay long," I said. "She's the surprise at my house in a little bit."

Anna looked at me wide-eyed.

"I can't believe you two kept this a secret," Terri said. "I didn't even know you were back in town. I'm so happy to see you!"

Mark waved us toward the house. "Come in, it's freezing. Let's get some drinks. I want to hear all about California and med school!" He started for the house and stopped after a few steps. "Does anyone else smell pancakes?"

Anna coughed.

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Abby Jimenez

"Probably just someone cooking nearby," I said.

He nodded. "Probably right. Let's go."

Mark went first and Terri followed. Anna grabbed my arm and held me back. "What do you mean I'm going to your house?" she said under her breath.

I looked at her, amused. "I'm going to *your* house. That wasn't exactly part of *my* plans today."

She glanced in the direction her parents went. "How else was I supposed to explain why we were hiding behind the air conditioner?"

"I don't know. None of this is *my* tangled web of lies. All I know is now I'm late for *my* family Christmas party and the least *you* can do is help me with that. I lost ten minutes bringing you your food, and now I have to go inside?"

She crossed her arms. "Oh, stop being dramatic. It'll be five minutes tops."

My face called bullshit. "Five minutes? With *your* parents? I'll be lucky if I'm out before midnight," I whispered. "Or I could just go now—"

"No! You owe me this, Jeremy."

It's true. I did.

"I will gladly participate, if you do my house next," I said. "The food will be better over there anyway. It'll be edible."

She scoffed, but she still didn't agree. We fell into a standoff.

I had an ulterior motive in making her come with me. I wanted to talk to her. I'd been wanting to talk to her for years. I wasn't a superstitious person, but fate had intervened tonight and I might never get the chance again.

"Fine," she said finally. "I will go to your house. But only because it'll get me out of eating Jodie's turkey—and I'm *not* staying long."

"All right."

She looked annoyed. "Don't eat anything in there unless you want to play dysentery Russian roulette."

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"Noted." I cleared my throat. "Just to be clear, we're supposed to be dating in this scenario you've concocted?"

She blanched like the thought disgusted her.

I'm not gonna lie, it hurt my feelings a little bit.

She looked away from me. "I mean, I would think so? Otherwise it's not much of a surprise, is it?" she said tightly. "But do not touch me."

She stomped around me in her too large boots and headed the way her parents went.

Well, it was nice while the nice lasted. When she was too shocked to remember that she hated me.