

## Christmas Repeats

*A. L. Brooks*

“No!” Hannah didn’t mean to say it so loudly, but her stomach had tied up in knots the minute Mary suggested setting her up with a friend she knew.

“But—”

“Mary, no! I can’t. I’m not ready.” This time Hannah’s voice was low in tone, tight with the restraint she was trying so hard to maintain when all she really wanted to do was scream. She knew Mary meant well. Mary always did, but Hannah was nowhere near ready to ‘get out there’ again, as Mary put it. Yes, it had been nearly a year since Nadine left. And yes, for most people, that would be plenty long enough to “get over that bitch”.

But it hadn’t been long enough. Not for Hannah.

Maybe it was the time of year. Finding out your girlfriend was cheating on you, on Christmas Eve of all days, was bound to do a number on you, wasn’t it? As a result, Christmas last year had been miserable, and there was no way Hannah was putting herself in the firing line for the same heartbreak again this Christmas. She couldn’t bear the thought of being set up with someone “who I know is just *perfect* for you” only to have it all come to nothing this close to Christmas. She had three weeks to survive, three weeks of trying to forget last year and all the pain she’d endured into this year, *then* she’d be ready to start a new year with new hope. She could wipe the slate clean and begin again.

But not now. Not so close to Christmas.

Mary’s voice softened in apology. “Okay, I won’t push again. I just—”

“I know,” Hannah replied, equally as softly. “I know.”

“So,” Mary said, upping the chirpiness in her tone. “Want to come over on Friday and binge-watch some Netflix with me? I’ll provide snacks and wine.”

Hannah smiled. “Now you’re talking. That’s an idea I can definitely get behind.”

“Cool. Bring your jammies, stay over.”

“Even better! Thanks, Mary.”

“Any time, hon, you know that. And I’m sorry for pushing earlier.”

“Forget it. Those yummy little cheese biscuit thingies will make up for that.”

Mary laughed. “Yes ma’am.”

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“Ping-pong?” Hannah stared at Janice across the bank of desks between them. “What do you mean, ping-pong?”

Janice chuckled, her shoulders shaking and her mass of black hair bobbing.

“It’s cool. Really. Trish said she went to this place in the summer with some friends, and it’s brilliant. Come on, it’ll be something so different to do—we office minions always do the dinner-and-get-pissed thing at Christmas, and that’s just getting boring.”

“And Sandra signed off on this?” Hannah still couldn’t get the incredulity out of her voice.

Janice grinned. “Yes, she did. Said it might help towards team morale, bring us all together in a fun way, or something like that.”

“Right…” Hannah said, drawing the word out over several moments. “And we all have to go, no excuses?”

Janice stood, grabbing her coffee mug.

“Yes! So don’t even think about trying to duck out of it. Come on, you need this. You need to cut loose a little. So *please*, try and leave grumpy Hannah at home on Monday, and get into the spirit of it all, okay?”

Hannah heard the genuine concern underlying her words, and sighed.

“Okay, okay. I’ll try.”

“Good. Now, come on, coffee time. It’s only eleven in the morning and I’m fading already, girl.”

Still feeling mighty dubious about the Christmas party plans Janice had just shared with her, Hannah picked up her own mug and followed her friend down the corridor to the kitchen.

Their office had recently been refurbished, and that project had produced a fully working kitchen for staff use for the first time in the five years Hannah had worked there. The coffee machines were pretty good, and she chose the latte setting as she placed her mug under the nozzle where the caffeine-laden elixir would soon deliver itself to her mercy.

“So,” Janice said, ripping open two packets of sugar and dumping them in her own mug. “Any news? Any gossip? Anything at all you want to share with me?”

Hannah shook her head. “Nope. All quiet.”

“Tsk,” Janice said. “I’m a married woman, I got nothing to share. I’m relying on you to give me something to titillate my senses.”

Hannah turned to stare at her. “Did you just use the word titillate?”

Snorting, Janice shoved Hannah’s now full coffee mug out of the way and slid her own under the nozzle. Pressing the button for her beverage of choice, she folded her arms across her ample chest while the drink brewed.

“Come on. You’ve been single for ages. Tell me you’re at least out there looking again.”

Hannah stepped back. “What is it with you people? First Mary, now you.”

“Huh?”

“Mary called me last night, trying to fix me up with someone she knows.” Hannah huffed. “I’m not ready, okay? It’s too soon,” she affirmed, a little snippily.

Janice’s eyes widened and she reached out a hand, placing it slowly on Hannah’s arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just having some fun.” She frowned. “I’m really sorry, okay?”

“Okay.” Hannah sighed. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to rip your head off.”

Janice shrugged. “It’s fine. I understand.” She paused, pulling her mug out from the coffee machine and cradling it in her hands. “You sure you’re okay though? I mean, still being on your own?”

“Actually, I am. I know some people find it hard to believe, but I really am. I’m not ready to get into all that again. And it’s the wrong time of year for me, you know that.”

Janice snorted. “Oh, yeah. I don’t blame you for that, not after what that bitch did to you last year.” She took a sip of her coffee. “You got plans for Christmas?”

“I have,” Hannah said, smiling. “Mum and Dad, of course. I’m actually looking forward to it.”

“Good. Didn’t want you sitting at home feeling all sorry for yourself.”

“Nah, that’s just for weekends. I give myself public holidays off.”

Janice laughed. “The fact that you are joking about this tells me you *are* doing okay. I’m pleased.”

“Yeah, I am.” Hannah sighed; the lie came so easily. She wasn’t okay, not really. But she would be. One day. “Yes, sometime in the future, I would like to be in a relationship again. Nadine hasn’t ruined that for me, not totally. Just, for now. You know?”

“I get it.” Janice took another sip of her coffee, then motioned back towards their office with her head. “Now, I suppose we’d better get back to it before Steve the Sleaze starts looking for us.”

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Hannah woke on the following Monday with dread eating at her insides. Today she had to plaster on a happy face and act like she’d always wanted nothing more in life than to play ping-pong with all of her office buddies to celebrate Christmas.

*Jesus.*

She dressed in black jeans, a soft ribbed sweater whose teal colour contrasted nicely with her short auburn locks, and low-heeled black boots. If she was going to be made to leap around a ping-pong table, then heels wouldn’t be sensible. She decided make-up was in order, too, if only to give some pretend sparkle to what she knew were rather lifeless eyes. They hadn’t always been so. Just the past eleven months and three days.

Shaking herself and taking a few deep breaths, she grabbed her leather jacket and handbag and headed to work.

They started the day in the large conference room with an update from Sandra on all their achievements in the year, and Hannah blushed as she was singled out for praise for the three new clients she’d successfully signed in the summer. The applause from her team was warm and genuine, and she felt an equally genuine smile light up her face in return. Maybe today wouldn’t be so bad after all.

From there they launched into a Christmas quiz, splitting into four teams of six and raucously shouting out answers of varying degrees of correctness for the next forty minutes or so. Mince pies and a box of Quality Street were passed around, and by the end of the quiz the mood in the room was appropriately jolly. Hannah found herself responding to it, a smile creeping across her face. Janice caught her eye as they all trooped out of the room to get their coats and bags, and she grinned.

“Just what you need,” she whispered, as she strolled by.

Hannah nodded, and smiled again but didn’t trust herself to speak, as her emotions were suddenly riding high. Somehow, in the morning’s events, surrounded by her work colleagues, some of the old Hannah had started to re-emerge. It felt really good.

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The place they all travelled to next was in the town centre, in the basement of a nondescript office building. They filed down the stairs to find a large room resembling an old pub, which contained nine ping-pong tables and a bar that ran the full length of one side of the room. There were various alcoves around the room containing plush dinette seating and small tables. Sandra spoke with the woman who greeted them at the door and she promptly led them to three alcoves that were at the back of the room. 'Reserved' signs were on each of the three tables embraced by the alcoves, and ice-filled buckets of bottled beers and opened bottles of wine stood on each of the tables.

"You're playing the three tables directly in front of you," the woman called out. "Feel free to practice as soon as you like, and we'll start bringing out your food shortly. Later, when you've finished eating, we'll start a little tournament for you all. We'll pair you up and you'll play round-robin matches before the best four pairings reach the semi-finals."

*Oh, great,* Hannah complained silently, *a competitive tournament.* Just what she didn't need—no doubt all the testosterone-laden blokes in their department would be aggressively vying to be champions.

She grabbed herself a very cold beer from one of the ice buckets, and found a perch on one of the seats, taking a healthy gulp as she did so. At least the beer was free, and cold. She glanced around the room while she drank. It looked like they were one of three parties in here this afternoon. The rest of the room was starting to fill with other very obviously office workers all divesting themselves of coats, grabbing drinks from their own tables, and then picking up ping-pong bats and starting to play around. The noise volume increased rapidly over the next few minutes, only added to by the cheesy eighties music that started pumping out of the sound system.

*Great, I'm probably going to get a headache.* She swigged more of her beer and wryly acknowledged that the alcohol probably wouldn't help matters.

"Hey, you, come on. Let's practice!"

It was Janice, of course. They'd worked together for four years, and had always got on well. Janice was the first person Hannah had come out to at work, and she'd been a good friend. She knew what Janice was doing today, and she begrudgingly had to admit she was right. This *was* good for her, and she should just get on with being part of it.

She clunked her now empty beer bottle down on the table and stood up, straightening her jeans.

"All right then, champ," she declared. "Let's play."

Hannah had only ever played ping-pong once, when she was much younger, but she was surprised at how much fun it actually was. She and Janice played for about ten minutes, getting used to the way the ball moved, and then Sandra herself came over with Holly, her executive assistant, and the four of them played an hilarious game of doubles for another ten minutes or so. Hannah found herself laughing so hard it hurt. She couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

The organisers appeared after the food to draw names out of a hat and into teams of two. The round-robin doubles matches started straight away, and Hannah was paired with Holly. The two of them played quite well together, and won their first match, leading to high fives all round. They then got a rest for a while, so Hannah grabbed herself a second beer and leaned against the wall watching the other matches. She glanced around the room, noting that all the other parties were also deep into their own tournaments.

As she swept her gaze back across the other tables towards her own group, she found her eyes caught by those of a gorgeous blonde on the opposite wall. The woman smiled, a little shyly, and Hannah found herself responding with a small smile of her own before she could stop herself. When she realised what she was doing she hurriedly pulled her eyes away and pushed off the wall to take a seat next to Holly. Just before she sat down she couldn't resist peeking back over her shoulder.

The blonde was still looking at her.

Holy shit.

The woman smiled again and Hannah blushed, turning back quickly to face Holly and join in on her conversation. She had no idea what they were talking about; the words passed through her brain without registering. After a minute or so she dared another look back. This time the blonde was looking at her own group of co-workers, her head turned slightly away.

Hannah allowed herself the luxury of a lingering look. The woman was gorgeous, no doubt. Her hair was all tousled soft curls, just about shoulder-length. Hannah wasn't close enough to see the colour of her eyes but she had a natural beauty to her that was just...lovely. And her body... Hannah blushed at her where her thoughts took her then. Her body was curvy and Hannah had no trouble at all in imagining how the woman's long legs would feel wrapped around her. Shocked at her completely uncharacteristic ogling, she pulled her gaze up from those legs to find herself trapped by the stranger's eyes again.

*Oh, shit. Busted.*

Then she noticed the woman smiling, a wide smile this time, and Hannah meekly smiled back. She blushed some more as the woman carried out her own blatant appraisal of Hannah,

slowly dropping her eyes down the length of Hannah's body and back up again, finishing with a subtle wink once their eyes met again. Hannah couldn't help herself. She giggled. She'd never had someone be so obvious about this kind of thing. It was flattering, and a warm glow tingled somewhere in the middle of her chest.

The blonde was still looking at her, still smiling, and then suddenly she gave a little nod in the direction of the bar.

Was she serious?

*Oh. My. God.*

Hannah found herself in danger of hyperventilating, and quickly put her beer on the table before she dropped it. This kind of thing never happened to her.

*Never.*

The woman looked at her now, her face dropping slightly at Hannah's hesitation. Hannah knew damn well why she was hesitating. She'd told Mary enough times recently she didn't want to start anything new just yet. And yet, here and now, there was a—*God*—gorgeous woman who was clearly interested in Hannah, and she clearly wanted to talk to Hannah. Oh God, could she? By now the woman's smile had faded completely, and Hannah realised she had very little time left before she had to make a decision.

Her legs decided for her. Without really understanding how, suddenly she was upright, and walking, and the woman was smiling again, and also walking, and they were on a course to meet at the bar. Hannah's heart was beating extraordinarily hard in her chest and she swallowed a couple of times as she approached the bar.

"Hi," the blonde said, as Hannah reached her side.

"Hi."

"I'm Carrie."

"Hannah."

Carrie smiled, looking a little sheepish. "I don't...I don't normally do this, just so you know."

"Me neither." Hannah's voice croaked a little. This was one of the most nerve-wracking things she'd ever done.

Carrie laughed, and blushed. "I couldn't help it. I saw you and it...it just happened."

Hannah suddenly got scared then. Much as she wanted to believe Carrie was a very nice person, and that she really didn't ever do this sort of thing, it could just all be a line, couldn't it? A tried-and-tested chat-up sequence guaranteed to get someone as gullible and fragile as Hannah into bed for a one-night conquest?

Carrie tilted her head to one side, her face turning serious. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

Hannah sighed. Great, a mind reader *and* brutally honest. No skirting around this then. But maybe that was for the best.

She shrugged. “It’s nothing personal. It’s just...this sort of thing doesn’t happen to me. Ever. And I’m still dealing with the aftermath of something that ended around this time last year, so I’m a little jaded, if I’m honest.”

*Oh, way to go Hannah, put her off completely in less than five minutes.*

She galloped on, unable to stop now she’d started. “The thing is, you could just be feeding me a line, yeah? Something that sounds all perfect and lovely but is just a way to get me into bed and then dump me spectacularly fast the next morning. And I’m just not up for that. I’m not asking for declarations of commitment or anything like that, but if you are just looking for a one-night stand, can you please look somewhere else?”

She had no idea where that little speech had come from, but she felt rather good for saying it. It was true—she couldn’t face being jerked around again, not after Nadine. Honesty was good.

Carrie smiled, that shy smile again and it made something tug at Hannah’s insides.

“I’m really glad you’re honest,” Carrie said. “I’ve also been crapped on by someone this year who was less than honest, so I might have some idea of where you are right now. And no, I’m not looking for a one-night stand. That’s not my style at all. I would genuinely like to get to know you—yes, what brought us over here was based purely on physical attractiveness, obviously. But I haven’t felt this attracted to someone in ages, and I’d really, truly, like to get to know you to see if there’s anything more than just that between us.”

Hannah breathed out slowly. Carrie’s words sounded very sincere, and her whole body language seemed to back that up, keeping a respectful distance between them and not presuming an intimacy that would be too soon. Glancing away from the distraction of Carrie’s beauty, Hannah tried to gather her thoughts and delve deep inside to see what she really wanted.

Across the room Janice was staring at her, a grin on her face. When she caught Hannah’s eye, she gave her a subtle thumbs-up signal before looking away again.

“Okay,” Hannah heard herself say. “How about we meet up sometime and see what happens?”

Carrie’s smile was wide and happy. “I would like that. A lot. When?”

Hannah swallowed.

*Oh, shit. A date.*

The one thing she said she didn't want this side of Christmas. And yet...

"Is tomorrow too soon?" She hadn't actually meant to say 'tomorrow'. She'd been thinking the weekend might be nice when all of a sudden her mouth took over the situation and now it was out there and she couldn't really take it back.

Carrie grinned. "Not at all. Can I take your number and we can maybe swap some texts tomorrow to arrange things?"

Hannah nodded, numb.

A date. Tomorrow.

*Holy shit.*

When Hannah got back to her table she saw Janice looking at her from across another table, her grin now splitting her face. Hannah blushed and nodded slightly at her questioning look, and then laughed outright as Janice launched into a dramatic fist pump.

"Stop," she mouthed across the space between them, and Janice laughed even louder.

A few minutes later she pulled her phone out of her bag and saw the notification that she had a new text message from an unknown number. As her pulse rate increased yet again she opened the message.

*As promised, here's my number. Will text tomorrow to arrange our date. V.glad I met you today. Can't wait for tomorrow. Carrie*

Oh. My. God.

The rest of the ping-pong event passed in a blur.

She was vaguely aware that she and Holly made it to the semi-finals of the tournament. She thought she drank some more beer, but she had no idea how many. And she knew she did her utmost not to keep looking for Carrie across the room the whole afternoon, but she also knew she failed at that rather badly. She took comfort in the fact that most times when her eyes did go looking for Carrie, she found Carrie's looking right back at her, that same shy smile on her face that made Hannah's insides do that squirmy thing.

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They had arranged to meet at one of nicer bars in town. Just for a drink in the evening.

Taking it slow.

Slow did nothing to calm Hannah's nerves. Her stomach churned constantly on the bus ride into town, and at every stop the bus made, she had to talk herself out of getting off and turning round to go home.

She was torn—half of her thought she was crazy to attempt this dating thing so close to Christmas. The other half kept remembering how lovely Carrie was and wanting to find out if it was more than skin deep.

*It's just one drink. Easy. An hour of her company and then you'll have a much better idea of the sort of woman she is.*

Other than jaw-droppingly gorgeous, of course.

And so she stayed on the bus until it ended its route next to the Town Hall, and hopped off with all the other passengers. The walk to the bar took her only five minutes, and she made herself pull the door open without hesitation.

Her face flushed as she entered the warm bar, as her cold skin met the heat from the open fire on one side of the room. She quickly pulled off her gloves and scarf and rammed them in her bag as she glanced around, looking for any sign of Carrie—

Ah, there. At one of the small tables against the far wall, her smile wide and welcoming as Hannah's eyes met hers across the room.

Inhaling, willing her stomach to settle, Hannah walked across to join her. Carrie stood as she reached their table, and grinned.

“You made it.”

Hannah nodded. “I did. Hello.”

“Hi.” Carrie shuffled on the spot. “Is it okay to say I'm delighted you're here, as I feared you wouldn't turn up?”

Chuckling as she removed her coat, Hannah said, “Yes, it is. You have no idea how many times I nearly turned round on the way here.”

“Well, I'm awfully glad you didn't. Can I get you a drink?”

“Oh, um, well, any craft lager they do, please.”

Carrie nodded. “Nice. That's one tick for you.”

Hannah laughed. “Craft beer fan?”

“Oh, yes.” Carrie nodded briskly. “Love it.”

She walked off towards the bar, and Hannah shot multiple glances at her as she eased herself into her chair. Carrie moved with grace and confidence, not a swagger as such, but an easy stride, her hands tucked in her jeans pockets, her hips swaying in a perfect rhythm that had Hannah swallowing hard.

*Steady on.*

When Carrie returned with a pint and placed it on the table in front of her, Hannah thanked her and took a long drink from the foamy top.

“Oh, yes. Perfect,” she murmured as she set the glass down again.

“So, how was your day?” Carrie leaned on the edge of the table on her forearms. This brought her closer to Hannah to be able to hear her properly, but not close enough that Hannah felt crowded or pushed.

“Not too bad. Pretty much everyone had hangovers from the event yesterday so it was nice and quiet.”

Carrie laughed. “Yes, my lot too.” She touched her temple. “I didn’t do too badly, just a slight headache.”

“Same,” Hannah said, smiling. “Two large coffees and some paracetamol soon sorted that out though.”

“I’m guessing that was a work thing yesterday?”

Hannah nodded. “Yes, that was the sales and marketing Christmas bash. I work for TN Jones, up at the industrial park.”

“Oh, yeah, I know them. I pass there on the way to my work—Franklins, the car parts distributor.”

“Right at the end of Turner Drive, yes?”

Carrie grinned. “That’s us. How funny, we work only five minutes away from each other but I’ve never seen you.”

“Small world.”

“That it is.” Carrie smiled at her before taking a sip of her own beer.

“So what are you drinking?”

“IPA.” Carrie smacked her lips. “My drink of choice whenever it’s available. Which is pretty much everywhere these days.”

“I know, it’s great, isn’t it? Good craft beer is on tap in so many places now.”

They launched into a lengthy discussion of favourite beers and favourite pubs or bars, which segued nicely into talking about food, and restaurants, and the most amazing street food either of them had tasted so far on their travels.

Just as they were about to veer off into talking about places they’d been, Carrie pointed at their now empty glasses.

“Want another?”

Hannah was a tad taken aback that the first pint and therefore the first hour of conversation had passed so quickly. Carrie was so easy to talk to. And not once did she move into over-the-top flirting mode, or make Hannah feel uncomfortable about how they were interacting. Instead Hannah found herself also leaning forward on the table, and talking far more about herself than she usually did on a first date, and gazing into Carrie's gorgeous green eyes at every opportunity she got. She would never have imagined feeling so at ease with someone so quickly, but she knew what that told her, so she didn't hesitate to stand and say, "My shout this time. Same again?"

\* \* \*

She called Mary as soon as she got in, and suffered only a short lecture on Hannah's hypocrisy over pre-Christmas dating before being allowed to actually tell Mary all about it.

"Oh God, Mary, she is *so* nice! I still can't believe this is happening. Or that I'm letting it happen. But just talking to her, and being with her, is so easy."

"Lots in common?"

"Loads! Beer, films, travel. We've been to a lot of the same places, but also have a lot of the same places on each of our bucket lists. We have some differences too, but that's good, right?"

"Totally! God, you don't want to be clones of each other."

"I know, that's what I said. So, she can keep her country music and line-dancing fetish to herself, and I'll keep my love of art galleries."

"She hates art?" Mary sounded shocked.

"Wait, so the line-dancing thing doesn't freak you?"

"Well, I'm just glossing over that, to be honest. Too weird for me. But art?"

"I know! Well, it's not like she hates it, but she just doesn't do galleries. We joked about going away together and finding somewhere with galleries that I could enjoy while she did a local line-dancing class."

"Wow, you talked about going away together already? Hello, who are you and what have you done with Hannah, the woman who didn't even want a date before Christmas, never mind get involved with anyone again?"

Hannah laughed guiltily. "I know, I know. Sorry. But no, we didn't seriously talk about going away together. It was just an easy kind of joke thing."

"So..." Mary's voice turned cheekily seductive. "Was there a goodnight kiss?"

“No, there wasn’t. She didn’t offer and nor did I. And I’m okay with that, trust me. I need to take this slow. I’m not being sprinted into anything physical just because she’s, you know, utterly gorgeous.”

“Damn. Given the state of my love life lately, I was hoping to live vicariously through you.”

Hannah chuckled. “Give it time, honey. You’re bound to make another conquest before I even get a peck on the cheek.”

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They had two more dates that weekend, a film on Friday and lunch on Sunday, and Hannah knew she was falling already. Carrie was sweet, attentive, funny, gorgeous and just so...*everything* that Hannah liked. Hannah was daring to believe again, and it was exciting and hugely scary all at the same time.

Their Sunday date was a big lunch at a gastropub a couple of streets away from where Carrie lived. The food was good, as was the beer, and the conversation even better. They laughed until their sides ached, and when Carrie slowly reached for Hannah’s hand across the table at the end of their meal, a delicious shudder ran through Hannah. Carrie’s hand was warm, her fingers linking with Hannah’s so perfectly.

It felt *really* good.

“This okay?” Carrie asked quietly, gazing deeply into Hannah’s eyes in a way that made Hannah instantly want to call for the bill and get them somewhere far more cosy and private.

All Hannah could manage was a nod. Her pulse was racing just from holding hands. How on earth would she cope with a kiss or anything more? And why was she thinking that far ahead already? She needed slow. She needed to totally trust Carrie before she ventured into anything more serious. She’d thought she’d trusted Nadine and look where that got her. She’d rushed full tilt into that one and got her heart stomped on. No, this time, slower was better.

“You’re still struggling, aren’t you?” Carrie’s voice was tinged with a hint of sadness.

Hannah looked away, then back again.

“It’s not you,” she exhaled. “I know that’s the biggest cliché in the book, but it’s true. My ex cheated on me. I’d rushed into getting...physical...with her before I really knew her. I don’t know if it would have made a difference if I’d taken longer, but I know I got my heart

broken when I found out what was going on. I just don't want to make the same mistake again."

"I get that. I do." Carrie squeezed Hannah's fingers. "I'm not rushing you. At all. I just... I just really like you, and I'm willing to wait as long as you need. I promise. I want you to trust me, I want you to want this"—she waved between them with her free hand—"as much as I do. I hope you'll get there soon. I'd be lying if I said anything else because well, the physical attraction I have for you is pretty amazing actually, but that doesn't mean I'm going to push."

Hannah smiled, and blushed a little. "Don't worry, the physical attraction is not the problem." And she dared to stare, to let her gaze drift over all the bits of Carrie's body she could see.

"Jesus, don't..." Carrie whispered, and Hannah met her eyes with a startled look, thrilled at the response nonetheless.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly.

Carrie grinned, and slowly pulled her hand back from Hannah's.

"So," Carrie said, clearing her throat. "I have an idea. I know, like me, you probably already have lots of plans around Christmas with family and friends, but is there any way you could find a bit of time for me on Christmas Eve? There's something I'd really like to share with you that day, if it's possible?"

"I'd like that." Hannah smiled. "I'm not working that day, just driving to my parents' place in the evening. What time were you thinking of us meeting up?"

"Around lunchtime? I've got something to do in the morning, something I'm helping a friend with, but we should definitely be done by noon. Want to meet me in front of the museum around then?"

"It's a date."

Oh, God.

A date. On Christmas Eve. The anniversary of her and Nadine's break-up.

Well, if anything would put that to rest, a date with the lovely Carrie should do it.

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When they left the pub, they walked slowly through the park that led back to the main road. There Hannah could catch the bus back into town and out again to her place. In the centre of the park was a large ornamental fountain, switched off now for winter, but still an

impressive-looking structure lit up by the setting winter sun. As they approached it, Carrie slowed her pace, eventually pulling to a stop in front of the fountain.

“You okay?” Hannah asked, reaching for Carrie’s hand.

Carrie smiled, and blushed, and looked away.

“What is it?” Hannah tugged Carrie back round to face her.

“It’s going to sound a bit silly.”

“Try me.” Hannah smiled encouragingly.

Carrie looked skyward, exhaling a deep breath, then brought her gaze firmly back to meet Hannah’s.

“I’m going to miss you. We’ve seen each other three times this week, and talked on the phone a couple of times, and now I have to go nearly a whole week before I can see you again. I know that sounds sappy, I know we’ve only known each other a week, but... I’m just going to miss seeing you. I love spending time with you.” She sighed, and blushed some more.

Hannah felt her heart flip down to her stomach and back again.

“God,” she breathed. “You are just so adorable right now.”

Carrie laughed. “Yeah, or the other word you could use would be pathetic.”

Hannah nudged her. “No, I’m sticking with adorable.”

And before she could stop herself, before she even knew what she was doing, she reached across the short space between them and kissed Carrie. Kissed those soft, warm lips in the way she’d wanted, deep down, to kiss them ever since they’d first met. Carrie’s small moan sent a shiver through her, and then Carrie was returning the kiss, her arms wrapping round Hannah, pulling her as close as their thick winter coats would allow. Their tongues tentatively met and they both groaned deep in their throats. It was a kiss that made Hannah’s knees weak and the rest of her body want to do significantly more than just kiss.

When they eventually broke apart to breathe, Carrie stared at her in wonder.

“Wow. I mean...just...*wow*. Where did that come from?”

Hannah chuckled and now it was her turn to blush. “I’m not entirely sure. I didn’t plan on it. It just...happened.”

“Well, I’m not sorry it did. Are you?” Carrie looked at Hannah quizzically.

Hannah shook her head. “No, not sorry at all.” She paused. “But, I really think I should go now. I might have to wait a while for a bus this late on a Sunday.”

Carrie nodded, seeming to understand that for Hannah, the kiss had been a pretty big step, and one she’d need some time to think about without any more distractions.

Carrie kept hold of Hannah's hand but stepped away to steer them around the fountain.

"Then let's get you to that bus stop," she said, and her voice was clear and happy in the fading light around them.

\* \* \*

Christmas Eve dawned bright and chilly, Hannah's perfect Christmas weather. They never got snow at Christmas, but Hannah didn't mind—snow made travelling so much more of a drama, and she wanted a nice easy drive to her parents' home later that night.

But first, there was the small matter of the Christmas Eve date.

It was a bittersweet moment. Last year she'd gone into the city for a last-minute, spontaneous gift for Nadine, only to stumble across her girlfriend kissing another woman in a cafe they themselves had often frequented. She'd stood on the pavement outside, watching them through the window. The other woman was beautiful, that much Hannah could see, and the intimacy she had with Nadine spoke of something that hadn't started just five minutes earlier. Eventually, as they broke apart from their extended kiss, Nadine had happened to glance out of the window to see Hannah staring at her with tears running down her cold cheeks. She and Nadine had been a couple for months, and she'd thought they were happy. And monogamous.

Hannah realised that day, Christmas *fucking* Eve, she'd got it all wrong.

She had walked away then, not stopping even when she heard Nadine shouting after her. She'd ignored all of Nadine's texts, emails, and calls until the new year. Christmas Day was spent with her parents, as usual, and she buried herself in the preparation and then consumption of the family dinner.

A few days into January she finally called Nadine, knowing she needed to know just how long she'd been cheated on. It transpired it was about a month. Nadine, apparently, was going to tell her, but didn't want to spoil her Christmas and so had been waiting until the new year to break the news.

How thoughtful.

Hannah said some things, shouted some others, and that was that. All over. And Hannah swore she'd never let herself be so duped by anyone again. Next time, there would be lots of time and trust built up before her heart got anywhere near involved.

Now, here she was, a year later, going on a date on Christmas Eve with a woman who made her forget every single one of those vows from last year. As much as she tried to tell

herself to take it easy, to take her time, to let things build between them, her heart wasn't listening. Her heart was doing cartwheels and star jumps and wondering just how long she and Carrie could be together.

Was forever too much to wish for?

She showered and got dressed way too early. They weren't meeting until noon but she was fully ready at ten. She snorted at herself as she turned in front of the mirror.

By ten thirty she couldn't stand the waiting any longer. She'd missed Carrie too this week. A lot. They had spoken a couple of times, but both had had various Christmas events to be a part of each evening, so the calls had been brief.

She gave in and got her coat. She'd go into town early, maybe have a look in a couple of shops before meeting Carrie at the museum.

The bus journey didn't take long, and she was walking through the crowded main shopping area by eleven. She gazed in shop windows at Christmas displays, feeling a joy for the season she wouldn't have thought possible only a few weeks ago. *Must be the Carrie effect.* She smiled to herself. At a quarter to twelve she resolved to just walk through to the museum. It wouldn't matter if she was early; she could find a bench to sit on while she waited.

She decided to cut through the passage that led from the end of the main shopping street through to the car park at the back of the museum. It was one of the oldest passageways in the city, still cobbled, and always had delightful Christmas decorations strung between the buildings. Filled with boutique shops and a couple of small hotels, it had a charm that never ceased to make Hannah smile at this time of year.

She turned into the passage and raised her eyes to take a few moments to check out this year's decorations. Dropping her gaze slightly to make sure she didn't knock into any of the passersby, she came to a shuddering, heart-stopping halt.

About ten paces in front of her, facing an open doorway that spilled bright light out onto her face and the passageway's cobbles behind her, stood Carrie.

But not just Carrie. On the single step that led out of the doorway stood another woman.

And she was kissing Carrie.

And Carrie was kissing her back.

Hannah felt everything slow down around and within her. The sounds of the street, the voices of the people walking by, her heartbeat, her breathing. Everything muted, and time seemed to stop.

No.

Not again.

*Not again.* It couldn't be happening to her *again*. How was it possible? How was it fair? The tears came then, spilling down her cheeks, quickly followed by the sobs.

"No," she said, surprised at how loud it came out, or that it came out at all. "No!"

Heads turned, people stared. Through the shimmer of her tear-filled eyes, she saw Carrie turn. Saw Carrie's eyes widen in horror when she saw Hannah standing there. Saw Carrie start to come towards her, only to be pulled back by the other woman.

And that was enough for Hannah. She turned sharply on her heels, apologising automatically to the man she bumped into as she did so, and she took off as fast as her heeled boots would allow on the cobbles beneath her. She couldn't run, she knew that—if she did, she'd break a bone somewhere. So she strode, hard and fast, head down against the crowds. She crossed the main shopping street and ducked behind the supermarket, across the big car park and out to the main road, heading for her bus stop. The tears were still falling, and she gained some sympathetic looks from a couple of women at the stop, but refused to meet their eyes.

She stood in the cold while her tears continued to spill, and wondered why she couldn't get her brain to work. She couldn't think beyond anything except the vision of Carrie—*her* Carrie—locked in a passionate embrace with another woman. Only six days since they'd shared *their* first kiss. A kiss that Hannah thought had meant something to Carrie.

How could she have been so stupid? She'd tried so hard to do it right this time. Tried so hard to take things slow, to get to know someone first. And for what? For Carrie to turn out to be just like Nadine.

She vaguely heard the screech of a vehicle pulling to a sharp stop nearby, and the sound of doors opening and closing.

"Hannah!" The call came from across the road. "Hannah!"

She looked up, slowly, her brain recognising the voice but refusing to believe it. When she blinked away a few tears she could just make out Carrie standing on the opposite pavement, next to a van, waiting impatiently for a break in the traffic to get across the road.

No. No way was she going to talk to her.

She turned and started walking up the road in the direction of her flat.

"Hannah wait!" Carrie shouted. And then suddenly her voice was a lot nearer, as was the sound of her feet pounding the pavement behind Hannah. "Hannah, please. It's not what you think!"

Hannah stopped suddenly and whirled round to face her.

“Don’t!” she shouted. “Don’t you dare spin me another line! I know what I saw. That’s the end of it. Just leave me alone!”

Carrie continued running towards her, then Hannah noticed the other woman from the doorway was just behind Carrie, also running. And behind her there were three other people running, a woman and two men.

“Please,” Carrie pleaded, closer now, and Hannah could see she was crying too. “Please Hannah, *please* let me explain.”

“Tell your girlfriend to keep away!” Hannah’s voice was hoarse with tears and anger. “I don’t want her fucking near me!”

“Hannah, she’s not my girlfriend, I swear.” Carrie had stopped in front of her now, but was keeping her distance to a few feet away. Her face was red, tears streaming down her face, and she looked utterly distraught.

“I’m not!” called a voice from behind Carrie, and Hannah frowned, suddenly very unsure of just what was going on.

“She isn’t!” called another voice, this time a man’s, from even further behind Carrie. Hannah looked beyond Carrie to see the other woman, and the other three people, all standing and puffing on the pavement a few paces back from Carrie. She looked back to Carrie, who was swallowing hard to try to stop her own tears.

“I’m so sorry you saw that,” Carrie began, and held out a placating hand as Hannah made to speak. “Please, I can explain, just give me a chance.”

Against her better judgement, but very confused by Carrie’s demeanour, the other people standing behind her, and what was happening around her in this moment, Hannah wrapped her arms around herself and nodded briskly.

“We were making a film. Sally”—she pointed to the woman standing with the two men—“is an old friend from uni. I often help her out with some of her short films, usually behind the camera. But for this one she needed an extra actress for one scene, and rather than pay someone she asked me, as a favour.” Carrie was talking quickly, the words spilling out of her mouth. “I didn’t tell you about it because...well, I thought you might think I was spinning you a yarn to impress you. You know, pretending to be an actress.”

Hannah blinked, but didn’t move, tacitly giving Carrie the go-ahead to continue.

“Petra”—she pointed to the woman immediately behind her—“*is* an actress. She has the lead in the film and all I had to do was play the role of her one-night stand leaving in the morning. Hence the kiss you saw.”

Hannah felt something shift inside her.

“It’s true,” Petra called from behind Carrie. “Phil and Stuart are camera and sound.” The men waved. “Sally directs and produces. I only met Carrie this morning on set. When Carrie told us who you were, and what you must have thought, we...well, we thought we all ought to come along and help her explain.” She smiled, warmly. “Carrie’s loopy about you, by the way. All she’s talked about all bloody morning.”

Carrie turned to face Petra, and then turned back with a shocked expression on her face when Hannah chuckled.

Hannah herself didn’t know where that came from, only that somehow it was bubbling up and couldn’t help but escape.

“Hannah?” Carrie’s voice had softened from panicked to tender. “Are you okay?”

Hannah nodded, sniffing, reaching into her pocket and relieved when she found a tissue there she could wipe her face with. She took a deep breath and exhaled.

Oh, God. It wasn’t a repeat.

Carrie wasn’t Nadine.

It was Christmas Eve and Carrie was loopy about her and they had a date and life was just fucking wonderful.

“Come here,” she said softly, opening her arms.

Carrie sobbed, launching herself across the space between them to pull Hannah tight against her. “I’m so, *so* sorry,” she whispered against Hannah’s hair.

“It’s okay,” Hannah said, raising her face to stare at Carrie. “It’s fine. *We’re* fine.”

Carrie nodded, smiling widely.

“Now, how about we kiss and make up?” Hannah grinned at Carrie’s shock and then gasped as Carrie’s mouth plundered hers, her tongue driving all other thoughts from Hannah’s mind.

“Hooray!” Sally’s voice held more than a hint of exasperation. “Now, can we please get back in the van and back to the set? We need a bloody re-take after this interruption.”

Carrie and Hannah broke apart, giggling.

“I’m sorry I flew off the handle,” Hannah murmured, stroking Carrie’s face.

“No, don’t apologise. I’m sorry I put you through that. I would never hurt you, please believe me.”

“I do,” Hannah said. And she did believe her, without any doubts now. “Merry Christmas,” she whispered, and her heart leapt as Carrie pulled her into her arms again and held her tight.

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