

An Unexpected Christmas (Taking the Shot Book 1)

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An Unexpected Christmas
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Shannon Richard

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Praise for Country Roads

"Richard's page-turner marks her as a contemporary-romance author to watch." —***Publisher's Weekly on Undone***

"Funny, sassy, and sexy. Reading Shannon Richard is pure pleasure!" —***Jill Shalvis, New York Times bestselling author on Undone***

"A fine debut novel, Richard populates her appealing small town with quirky secondary characters, a feisty heroine and a hero to sigh for." —***Lori Wilde, New York Times bestselling author on Undone***

"4 1/2 stars! These characters are rich and deep, and so expertly written that they feel like friends, and the best news of all is that this small-town series is set to continue!" —***RT Book Reviews on Undone***

"HOT! Richard's tempting second addition to her Country Roads series puts a clever spin on the small-town romance trope with great effect. The chemistry between her main characters is indisputable...a heartwarming story with clever twists that will please Richard's fans and win her new devotees." —***RT Book Reviews on Undeniable***

"4 1/2 stars! TOP PICK! Just start reading and you won't want to put it down. The characters are so real...This is definitely a must read." —***Night Owl Reviews on Undeniable***

"Amazing romance that was sexy, emotional, and very entertaining. I would highly recommend this series to anyone that is looking for a sweet romance read!" —***Dark Faerie Tales on Undressed***

"This is a wonderful story of love and family. The characters are charismatic, down to earth, and so real it will seem like they are real people that you know. " —***Elle's Book Blog on Uncontrollable***

“Richard always manages to craft main characters with loads of chemistry. Brie and Finn are no exception, from the moment they meet, there are fireworks.” —***Straight Shootin’ Book Reviews on Untold***

“Richard is a one-stop shop for sexy heroes, sweet, feisty heroines, and a small town with a great big heart.” —***Jessica Lemmon on The Country Roads Series***

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An Unexpected Christmas

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Dedication

To my brother, Jonathan Richard

I know you have my back, just like I have yours.

Acknowledgments

I have to give a huge shout out to my mother who imparted her love of Christmas to me. And I do mean *love*. It wouldn’t have been the same without your perfectly themed trees (one for every room of the house), plethora of Victorian Villages, and all the Christmas lights a girl could ask for. It’s always been a magical time for me. I’m beyond excited for our first ever made-from-scratch-gingerbread-house adventure this year. Also, bring on the *Hallmark* movies.

Thank you to Lola Famure for your *beautiful* cover design. As always, you’re the best.

To Jessica and Tara for always being a text away with whatever question I need to brainstorm.

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To Sarah for being the best damn agent a girl could ask for. Thank you for always being there for me, rain or shine. I'm so glad to have you with me on this next book journey and can't wait for more.

To all of my readers, you're beyond appreciated. Thank you for continuing to love these books.

Chapter One

Bah-'Effin-Humbug

December 21st

Christmas was Adele James's favorite time of year...or it had been. This year, Santa Claus could go sit on a candy cane for all she cared. Holly Jolly Jackass.

Adele's lack of holiday cheer—and general Grinchiness—was due to one man: Troy Slater, Hollywood heartthrob and all around scumbag. They'd meet on the set of *Ponce*, the *Downton Abbey*-like TV show where Adele was the head costume designer. Troy had been playing a guest role for the season and he'd flirted with her shamelessly for the five months they'd been shooting.

As a general rule, Adele didn't get involved with people she worked with, and she'd absolutely refused to break that rule with him. Mainly because if things went sour, she didn't want an uncomfortable working environment. He might just be visiting for the season, but the set of that show had become like a home to her. She wasn't going to mess around with one of her safe spaces, which meant she wasn't going to mess around with him.

Plus, she'd seen the tabloids, she knew the gossip that swarmed around him. He had a different beautiful woman on his arm every other week. Except for those months he'd been pursuing her. During that time, there'd been no other women. Not a one.

But even with that, she'd held strong, didn't give in...that was until the day they'd wrapped for the season. They'd both been looking for that dark corner where he'd laid a kiss on her that had quite literally made her weak in the knees. "We don't work together anymore. Will you go out with me now?" he'd whispered against her lips between kisses.

He'd dazzled her. Made her believe in the possibility of something more. Something lasting. Something true. Something she'd thought could've been love. But she'd been wrong. Very, very wrong. Turned out, it was all a mirage.

Four months of a mirage. Or maybe the constantly flashing cameras that followed them everywhere had blinded her. From the moment they'd started dating, they'd been stalked by the paparazzi. Not all that surprisingly as Troy was one of Hollywood's *It Boys*, everyone wanted to know what and whom he was doing. There were photographs of them on vacation in Hawaii, watching the World Series, walking the red carpet at two different movie premieres, getting breakfast at the café around the corner from his Manhattan apartment, and so on, and so forth.

The headlines with those pictures were all the same:

Slater Is Smitten!

Has Troy Slater Found Love At Last?

Is Troy Slater Finally Ready To Settle Down?

The last front page photos that had graced the tabloids had been taken two weeks ago. They'd gone skiing in Switzerland to celebrate his birthday. She'd gotten him this awesome vintage watch as a gift, the very same watch he'd been wearing in the newest picture, a picture she *wasn't* in. It was of Troy at an exclusive club in New York...where he was in the middle of getting a blowjob.

The photo had gone viral within twenty-four hours of being taken, which was right around the time Adele had gotten off a twelve-hour plane ride from Scotland. She'd been on the other side of the Atlantic on the set of the current movie she was working on while her boyfriend was cheating on her.

Merry fucking Christmas to her.

The plane landed at seven in the morning, and it would be an understatement to say Adele's phone blew up with notifications when she turned it on. There were thirty-eight voicemails, seventy-two missed calls, one hundred and sixty-one emails, and three hundred and nine text messages. Not to mention she'd been tagged on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram more times than she was going to count.

Many of those notifications were calls and texts from Troy, but the only thing she listened to was the first voicemail he left. She got as far as *Adele, I can explain* before she ended it.

Explain? What? Did the woman in the picture trip and fall? Was he choking and this was a new way to perform CPR?

Yeah, she didn't think so, and she didn't want to hear a single word he had to say. So once she talked to her family—and the few friends she felt needed to hear from her—she shut off her phone.

To say she was humiliated would be an understatement, but more than anything else she was angry. But she preferred it this way. Preferred to be pissed off. It was better than being sad. She knew if she let it, it would overwhelm her. Once she started crying it would be very hard for her to stop. So during this time while Adele *wasn't* crying, she decided to regroup at her best friend's place in Atlanta.

Felicity Carter was not only one of the stars of *Ponce*, but she was also the lead actress in the current film they were shooting in Scotland. It was a retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*, except in this one the badass princess saves the prince. As it had been Felicity's private jet they'd been flying on, she was sitting right next to Adele when all hell broke loose.

The first part of the regrouping plan was to eat—and drink—her feelings before sleeping off the jet lag. As Atlanta was Felicity's hometown, she of course knew all of the best restaurants in the city. The problem was, so did the paparazzi. It was made perfectly clear within just a few hours that Adele was being stalked. Everyone wanted to get a picture and a comment.

"Did you know Troy was cheating on you?"

"Do you know who the woman in the photo was?"

"Are you devastated?"

"Did you love him?"

"Weren't you going to spend Christmas with him?"

"What are you going to do now?"

Well, wasn't that the million dollar question? What was she going to do now? Because she obviously wasn't going to be spending Christmas with that man. She wouldn't be spending any time with him *ever* again.

Before everything had gone down, she had been planning to spend the holidays with Troy and her family in Florida. But what with her current black mood, Adele really wasn't in any state to be in the same house as all of the happily married people in her family.

She just wanted to be alone. She didn't have the energy to put on a happy face for anyone. Or to be the pitied, lonely sister/daughter at Christmas. So what if she was twenty-eight years old and the longest relationship she'd ever been in hadn't even gotten past the six-month mark? She didn't need anyone to feel sorry for her.

Nope. She just needed to get away from everyone and everything. No news. No photographers. No people who might recognize her currently *very* recognizable face.

All of those requirements left her with her current destination: the family cabin in Nashville, Tennessee. It was quiet and secluded, just what she needed.

Another thing she needed was the car ride in which she blasted angry breakup music—there'd been absolutely no Christmas music coming through her speakers—and sang at the top of her lungs. Her four-year-old Dalmatian Katie (short for Katharine Hepburn) howled along for a few songs before she burrowed under her blankets in the back seat and took a nice long nap.

As Adele took her dog everywhere, Katie was no novice at traveling, whether it be plane, train, or automobile. This wasn't her first rodeo.

Before hitting the road that morning, Adele had gone grocery shopping and loaded up a cooler with perishables. Besides a quick bathroom break outside Chattanooga, she hadn't needed to stop for anything. The drive usually took about four hours, but what with holiday traffic and bad weather, it took her about six.

It was almost three thirty when she started to make her way down the long drive that led to the cabin. The pine trees that lined the way were currently snow-free, but they weren't going to stay that way for long. It was clear to her that a storm was settling in, the sky gray and gloomy, and it was only a matter of time before the snow started falling.

Once Adele got to the cabin, she'd unpack, throw together a pot of stew, and take a long, hot bath. Despite the heater in her car, a chill had settled into her bones that she knew could only be washed away with a nice soak. She was beyond looking forward to a quiet night alone with Katie. Except, when she pulled up in front of the cabin, her evening alone was dashed in an instant.

There was a familiar white Land Rover parked in the driveway and smoke was rising up from the chimney. The sight of the car immediately told Adele who was inside: her brother's best friend and the *last* person on the planet that she needed to be stuck in a cabin with.

He was the very same man she'd had a crush on for the last six years.

Jace Kilpatrick wasn't big on holidays. Which wasn't all that surprising given how he grew up. His mother passed away when he was eight and his father never had time for anything besides his career. Renowned heart surgeon Ferguson Kilpatrick didn't bother with something as unimportant as celebrating Christmas, not even for his only son.

The two Kilpatrick men weren't close in any way, shape, and/or form. After his mother died, Jace was pretty much raised by Ilana (the nanny/maid/cook) and his hockey coach Hank. The second he turned eighteen, he moved out of his father's house and didn't look back. The final nail in the coffin of their relationship had been hammered shut years ago. And Jace's career choice had just set everything on fire.

Burned it all down to the ground.

Jace had been four years old when his mother signed him up to play for his first hockey team. As for his father? Well, the good Doctor hadn't taken his son to a single practice, nor did he go to a single game. For years Jace got to hear over and over again about what a waste of time and money the whole thing was. The only reason he was able to play after his mother died was because it was something that kept him occupied and out of the way.

It didn't matter how successful Jace had become over the years—in his father's eyes, he was a failure. So the very first thing Jace did when he signed his first contract was to pay back every cent to his father. He didn't want to be indebted to the man in any way.

So yeah, there wasn't exactly a happy family life when Jace was growing up, because there was no family. That was the status quo, one he'd gotten used to until about six years ago. It was then that Jace had been signed to the Jacksonville Stampede and before too long, he and Logan James had become really good friends. Jace had been welcomed into the James family fold and he'd spent the last six Christmases with them (along with many other holidays).

Recently though, things had started to change, as things tend to do. Everyone was settling down, getting married, and starting a family. And then there Jace was, thirty-two, unattached, and starting to feel like the odd man out...something that was exemplified by the fact that he currently wasn't playing hockey.

No one was.

The NHL was in month three of the lockout and negotiations looked to be going nowhere fast. His frustration levels were high enough to where he thought it was best to spend this holiday season solo. As the James family was spending Christmas in Florida, he'd asked Logan if he could borrow the cabin.

So there Jace was, alone for the holidays. He'd been here for three days now, and everything was going fine...just fine.

He couldn't ask for more when it came to the cabin itself. Built on a lake and surrounded by woods, there was a perfect view out of every single one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was two-thousand square feet of hardwood floors, open-beamed ceilings, a state-of-the-art kitchen (that he was still impressed with despite his limited cooking skills), a relaxing hot tub on the back porch, a massive wood-burning fireplace in the living room, and the kind of walk-in showers that would make a fancy spa envious. There was also a fully stocked bar and a theater system that

made binge-watching *Vikings* that much more enjoyable.

The thing was—after about four seasons of the show; eating the same meal of steak, a baked potato, and a salad for dinner three nights in a row; and not talking to a single soul for hours on end—he was starting to go a little stir crazy.

He came up there to get away from everything and now he was starting to rethink that decision. The problem was, according to the current warning scrolling across the TV screen, a massive snowstorm was almost on top of him. It had been fifty-nine degrees the night before, had dropped below thirty by noon, and was now hovering somewhere in the low twenties. Whatever was rolling in promised to be intense. So unless he wanted to get stuck on the side of the road, his ass wasn't going anywhere.

Jace looked up from where he was making his afternoon snack—a big old bowl of *Life* cereal—when he heard tires crunching against the gravel drive.

“Who in the world?” He asked no one as he crossed to the front door. But he knew who it was before he even got there, spotting the black Subaru Outback through one of the windows. A loud bark rent the air and, as Jace opened the door, a fifty-pound Dalmatian charged up the front steps and right to him.

“Hey, Katie girl,” Jace said as he knelt down to give her head and neck a good scratch. She licked his face before she excitedly started to circle around him, letting out a few more barks before she tore off the porch and began sniffing around the house giving it her full canine inspection.

It was then that Jace focused on the woman who was currently standing in front of the driver's side of her car.

Adele James was a force to be reckoned with on any given day, always entirely put together with whatever she was wearing. Jace had learned long ago that her clothing was her armor, and that particular day armor was very much the operative word.

She was dressed in black from head to toe. Black scarf, black leather jacket, black jeans, black motorcycle boots with big silver buckles and zippers. Her hair was sleeked back into a ponytail, the purple streaks she'd had the last time he'd seen her were gone. She had rich, dark brown hair, and while half of it was still that color, the other half slowly transitioned to golden brown and then to honey blonde. He was long since used to her ever-changing hair colors and styles. It was the norm with her.

The rest of her armor was her big silver earrings that looked like spikes, and the diamond stud of her nose ring that glinted in the remaining light. Everything from her ramrod posture, her arms crossed over her chest, and the frown twisting her bright red lips said *don't fuck with me*.

“What are you doing here?” She asked.

“Well, hello to you too.” Jace leaned against the wooden post of the porch, folding his arms across his chest.

Adele took a deep breath through her nose, nostrils flaring as her mouth got tighter. “Hello, Jace.”

“No need to ask what *you're* doing here.”

The last time Jace had seen Adele had been during Thanksgiving when she brought her jackass boyfriend to meet her family. Well, he was guessing Troy was now her *former* jackass boyfriend.

Only a person living under a rock for the last forty-eight hours would've missed the blowjob seen round the world. It had been reported in almost every single news cycle Jace had watched, not to mention it was absolutely everywhere on social media.

"I told you that guy was a dick."

"Well, congratulations, Jace," she threw her arms in the air. "You were right. You want that engraved on a plaque or something?"

"No." He shook his head. "You admitting I was right is reward enough."

"Speaking of dicks..." Her golden brown eyes narrowed on him. "You still haven't said what *you're* doing up here."

"I decided to spend the holidays by myself, or that was the plan until about three minutes ago."

"Oh, don't worry. Katie and I will be gone first thing in the morning."

Jace's eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "Del, you two aren't going anywhere anytime soon."

"Says who?"

"Mother Nature."

And as if on cue, snowflakes started to fall from the sky.

Chapter Two Snowed In

Mother Nature was a bitch.

As Adele hadn't listened to any radio stations during her drive—both to avoid hearing her name and any holiday cheer—she'd missed the updates on the snowstorm blowing in.

Rookie mistake. She *always* checked the weather. She knew better, but clearly she wasn't with it the last couple of days. She'd been so focused on getting away from everything that she'd gotten tunnel vision on her escape and hadn't planned for anything else...like being snowed in with Jace.

But, *come on*, how the hell was she supposed to know he was going to be there? She'd purposely not told her family about where she was going because she hadn't wanted to be talked out of it. They would've all vetoed her plan to be alone for Christmas, and quite vocally at that.

Well, there was no alone now. She was stuck there...with Jace.

As hard as she'd tried over the years to not be affected by this man, she'd never been successful. It wasn't an easy thing to be attracted to someone who never really looked at her, not as anything besides his best friend's little sister anyway. And it was made all the worse by the fact that she'd gotten a front row seat to the parade of women going in and out of his life...and his bed.

Jace Kilpatrick was a ladies' man if ever there was one. He didn't do commitment. In fact, in all the time she'd known him, none of his flings had ever gone beyond a month. The man was Exhibit A

when it came to proof that Adele's taste in men was *terrible*.

But knowledge wasn't always power, because in her case, it in no way changed how she felt about him. Over the last six years, he'd become a fixture in her family. He was usually always around. During those random times when he wasn't there, it just didn't feel right.

Her only saving grace was that she hadn't fallen *in* love with him. At least she had that going for her.

It had been like a punch to the gut when he'd walked out onto that porch wearing faded blue jeans and a dark gray Henley that made his aquamarine eyes pop. He had a pretty decent amount of scruff on his face, like he hadn't had a clean shave in a few days. And then there was his dark blond hair, at that perfect length that made her fingertips twitchy to sink into it.

Yup, had she mentioned that he affected her? Not that he was aware of it or anything.

Since the very start, she'd done everything in her power to hide it. She'd put up walls and treated him like she did her brothers. She knew that sometimes her guard had slipped and there were a few family members and friends who knew the truth, but she was almost positive that Jace was still in the dark. A place he needed to stay.

But continuing to keep him oblivious was going to be *that* much harder now...with just the two of them...alone together...in a two-thousand square foot cabin that now felt like the size of a shoe box.

Perfect, just perfect.

After getting her car unloaded—which he'd annoyingly helped her with—Jace went and moved both of their cars beneath the overhang at the side of the house while Adele went to the kitchen to put her food away. She started prepping the chicken and vegetable stew for her dinner when Jace came in and retreated to the living room with Katie. It was times like this that had Adele wondering if her dog loved Jace more than her.

Though, really, this was nothing new or different. From the time she was a puppy, Katie had always followed Jace around. Like owner, like dog. They were both hopeless suckers.

The cabin had an open floor plan and the flat-screen TV was clearly visible from the spot where Adele was chopping vegetables, so she got to hear all about this massive storm that she'd naively not known about. Really, she was beyond lucky to have gotten to the cabin when she did.

Jace had been accurate when he said she and Katie weren't leaving anytime soon. The man standing in front of the map of the US was predicting a foot of snow by the following morning. Not only that, but it was likely going to be more than two feet by tomorrow night, and close to three by the time the storm passed.

The news just kept getting better and better.

It took about thirty minutes for Adele to get everything going in the pot for her stew. Once it came to a boil, she turned it on low, covered it with the lid, and grabbed the glass of Cabernet Sauvignon she poured to accompany her bath.

She said nothing as she walked through the living room, ignoring man and beast. Katie was sprawled on her back between Jace's legs getting a belly rub.

Four-legged traitor.

Adele headed for the room she'd claimed. As Jace was staying in the master at the back of the cabin, she picked the one that was the furthest away...which put her pretty much at the center. So really there was no escaping him. He would constantly be in her orbit no matter where she was.

As soon as this damn storm passed, and she could get through the snow, she was going to have to get the hell out of there. But until that moment, she was just going to have to deal. And deal she would.

Closing her bedroom door behind her with an audible snap, she headed for the ensuite bathroom. She set her glass of wine on the edge of the bathtub before turning on the water. Once the water got to the right temperature, she put the stopper in for it to fill and headed back to the bedroom.

On an impulse, she'd bought a set of almond-scented bath products that morning—bubble bath included—and she was going to indulge to her heart's content. Not only that, but she was going to blast more of her angry breakup music whilst she did it.

After syncing her phone up to the Bluetooth speakers in the bathroom, she pulled up her *Bad at Love* playlist on Spotify and turned up the volume. The bass of the first song filled the room, surrounding her as it echoed off the tiles. As she waited for the water level in the tub to rise, she lit a few candles, poured in the bubble bath, and stripped down to nothing. Her feet were protected from the cold tiles by the piled bathmat, but the air around her was cold enough to cause goosebumps to break out all across her skin.

Moving to the side of the tub, she tested the water, barely dipping her toe below the surface. Happy with the temp, the rest of her body followed as she slid into the steaming bath, the water almost immediately chasing the chill away. There was nothing quite like the feeling of sinking into a bubble bath and she hoped the water would be as effective at washing the last two days from her skin.

Grabbing the wine glass next to her, she took a sip and let the deep flavor fill her mouth and linger on her tongue. She tried to let the last thirty plus hours go, and really, where was a better place than surrounded by hot, foamy water and with almond-scented air filling her lungs? She should be able to relax, it was the perfect place, perfect ambiance, perfect circumstances, perfect except...Jace.

It wasn't like this was the first time they'd been in this cabin together, but it was the first time they'd been completely and entirely alone together, alone for what was looking like days on end. There was always the buffer of other people around before, whether it was her family or if they were in public. But this was different. *Very* different.

They were going to be stranded...together...nowhere to escape...nowhere to get away. It hadn't even been an hour and she was already feeling the pressure. That's why she couldn't relax, even with all of the things she'd done to prep the bubble bath. There would be no relaxing, not until she was able to leave. And who knew when that would be.

Not soon enough.

She was snowed in, alone in a cabin, with Jace. No matter how many times she told herself this, she couldn't believe her rotten luck.

Hadn't her heart already been trampled enough in the last couple of days? She was already vulnerable and raw. She didn't need to deal with anything more, like the unrequited crush she'd had for six years. Six *loooooong* years.

Adele's brain took a stroll down memory lane, thinking about where she'd been in her life when she'd met him. She'd just finished up at Parsons, and during those four years in school, she hadn't dated much. She'd been more focused on her studies than on guys. She hadn't come across someone who'd been worth getting distracted for. So she'd put her head down, and worked hard. It paid off too.

The summer after her senior year, Adele had a chance encounter with Jojo Cole at an industry party. The woman was an absolute legend in the costume design industry. She'd won four Emmys, two Oscars, and a Tony. She was also one of Adele's idols. Something about their conversation must've stuck with Jojo, because four months later, at the ripe old age of twenty-two, Adele was interviewing for the position of assistant costume designer for the already much-buzzed-about *Ponce*.

And then she'd gotten the job.

Not only was being hired for the show the opportunity of a lifetime, but it put her in the same town as her eldest brother. Logan was just starting his third season with the Jacksonville Stampede.

She'd always been incredibly close to her parents and her older brothers, and being so far away hadn't been the easiest. And yes, it wasn't lost on her that even though they were all incredibly tight-knit she was running away from them this Christmas. It was what it was. She did have self-preservation instincts, and sometimes it was necessary to avoid things that caused her pain. Case in point, never letting herself go over the edge with Jace.

Adele had never been one for love at first sight, she didn't believe in it. For her, love involved the heart, not the eyes. Don't get her wrong, the man was attractive as sin, but his reputation had preceded him. Adele had heard all about Jace Kilpatrick from her brother. He'd been the new hotshot player on the team who always had a rink bunny on his arm or in his bed. But then, somewhere along the way in that first year, Logan and Jace had become friends. So when Adele was moving into her new beachside bungalow in St. Augustine, guess who showed up to help unpack the moving truck?

Yup. Jace.

Now Adele wasn't tiny, at five-feet-ten she generally wasn't the shortest person in the room. She typically had to hold off on heels when it came to dates, because heaven forbid she be taller than a man she went out with. So it wasn't all that surprising that the first thing she noticed about Jace was that he was tall, a whopping six-feet-four inches tall. He also had thick, corded biceps, strong thighs, and the best freaking hands. *All* of those lovely attributes were on full display as he and Logan carried her floral sofa, antique dresser, upholstered headboard, dining room table and chairs, drafting board, sewing machine, rugs, books, and boxes upon boxes into the house.

It had been *beyond* distracting.

He also had a deep, rich laugh, one that perfectly matched the low timbre of his voice. It was really unfortunate for her that his laugh and his voice somehow managed to vibrate in her bones...something that hadn't changed to this day. He also had the kind of panty-dropping smile that almost—*almost*—worked on her. It had taken sheer force of will to master that impulse...one that she'd *never* had before with any man. Then there were his aquamarine eyes—eyes that no

matter how cliché it sounded—were beyond easy to get lost in.

And, fine, it might not have been love at first sight, but it sure had been lust at first sight. It didn't matter that Adele had vowed not to like Jace on principle. He'd somehow gotten under her skin. And it wasn't just because he was attractive, he was charming and funny and kind. Hell, he'd volunteered to help Logan unload all of her stuff...in the August heat...in Florida.

Before she even knew what had happened, she was spending many evenings with Logan and Jace. Cooking dinner, going to the movies, sitting rink side during home games and cheering them both on as loudly as possible. Then, six years ago, that first Christmas rolled around, and Jace had been invited to spend it with the entire James family.

Her crush—oh-so-aptly named—on him hadn't happened immediately. It was subtle, *very* subtle. She was in the middle of it before she even knew what had happened. Slowly getting deeper and deeper. And there'd been no preparing her for the crash when she did finally figure it out. That had been an incredibly hard blow.

When it came to Jace's reputation with the ladies, knowing wasn't the same as seeing. As they say, seeing was believing. In those first nine months that Adele had known Jace, she'd never seen his playboy skills in action. The opportunity hadn't presented itself when she'd been around...or maybe he just hadn't wanted any of those opportunities.

It was a Tuesday night in May, and she'd gone out for dinner and drinks with Logan, Jace, and a few other guys from the team along with their girlfriends and wives. Most of them stayed at the bar until close to midnight, watching a playoff game. The Stampede hadn't made it past the first round, losing to the New Jersey Devils.

The bartender was a beautiful blonde woman, with big blue eyes. Jace shamelessly flirted with her all night. There were a number of stragglers who stayed until closing which was when Jace went home with the beautiful blonde. It had been like a punch to the gut, a feeling Adele would come to know very well over the years when it came to him. Too well.

Adele had lost count of how many women there'd been; all she knew was that she'd vowed not to be another one of the many. Besides, she'd already taken a chance on a lying manwhore who'd broken her heart. She wouldn't do it again.

The thought of Troy at that moment had the corners of her eyes burning, and a familiar tightening constricting her throat. But she forced herself to push it aside and took another sip of her wine. She set the glass down on the edge of the tub before sinking down further into the water. Closing her stinging eyes, she breathed in slowly before letting it out, trying to think of what to do.

She'd figure something out. She *had* too.

Chapter Three

Misery Loves Company

It had been a solid hour since Adele disappeared, and for most of that hour, there'd been a steady beat of music coming from her bedroom. As Jace guessed she was taking a bath (a usual routine of hers after a long trip) he knew that music was making its way through two rooms and a closed door. She must've been listening to it at a pretty loud level (a usual routine of hers when she was upset).

He was by no means happy about the circumstances that brought Adele and Katie to the cabin—and if he ever ran into Troy Slater, the piece of shit was going to get a fist to the face—but there was something about not being alone in the cabin that had his sour mood turning around.

He was beyond appreciative of the distant beat of Adele's music, and Katie's feet padding against the hardwood floors had brought a genuine smile to his face. That was saying something, especially as he hadn't sported a smile in a while now.

Speaking of Katie, she was currently lying next to him, burrowed beneath the flannel blanket. She'd been dead to the world for the last half hour or so, lightly snoring with her black nose sticking out of the red and black fabric.

He absolutely loved dogs, but with his traveling schedule during the hockey season, he couldn't get one. It wouldn't be fair to be gone half the year. Lucky for him, whenever Adele was around, it was a sure thing that Katie would be there too. Jace took advantage of puppy time at every opportunity, and Katie had no qualms with that. He gave her more attention than anyone (well, second to Adele of course), so it made sense that she gravitated to him.

It was then that the music echoing beyond Adele's room stopped and about thirty seconds later there was a light click as the door opened. She emerged no longer armored in all black but wearing a pair of light gray yoga pants and a baggy green sweatshirt that read *Make It Work* across the chest. Her hair was damp and hanging loosely around her shoulders while her face was makeup free. Her feet were covered in a pair of fuzzy pink slippers that just might be the least intimidating things Jace had ever seen in his life.

In one of her hands there was an empty wine glass, the other held a sketchpad. Not saying a single word to him—or even glancing in his direction for that matter—she walked right on by and headed for the kitchen. Clearly, *her* sour mood hadn't been improved by her bath.

Slowly getting up from the sofa so as not to disturb Katie, Jace followed Adele into the kitchen. Her sketchpad was now sitting on the counter and she was pouring herself another glass of wine.

"So is this how it's going to be for the next couple of days, you ignoring me?" He leaned his hip against the counter, folding his arms across his chest.

Adele turned to look at him, a muscle ticking in her jaw. "I'm not ignoring you, Jace. I'm just not in a talkative mood."

"I see that. But you do know that *I* didn't do anything to you, right?"

Her brown eyes lingered on his face for just a second before she turned away. "I know that," she said as she grabbed her wine glass and took a sip, heading for the stove a few feet in front of him.

As she passed by him, something sweet and familiar filled his nose. Something that made him oddly nostalgic but he couldn't put his finger on why. He was just about to ask what that scent was when Adele lifted the lid from the pot and another scent completely took over his senses and his brain.

For the last hour, the smell of rosemary, thyme, sage, onions, and garlic had slowly been filling the cabin, but as that lid came up, a wave of savory scented goodness hit him in the face.

Jace's stomach growled long and loud. He was already hungry again.

"I'm not sharing with you," Adele said as she grabbed the big metal spoon on the stove and started to stir the contents of the pot.

“See, and now you’re just being a mean soup lady.”

“Mean soup lady?” She let out a huff of air on a laugh. He found that he was actually pretty proud of himself for accomplishing it what with her current mood.

“Yes. Mean soup lady who is keeping all of her delicious soup to herself. Did you skip that day in kindergarten where they taught you that sharing is caring?”

“I must have.” She looked over her shoulder at him, eyes narrowed and the corner of her mouth twitching just slightly. “Besides, this is actually stew. So I must be a mean stew lady. And I know how much you eat, Jace. Half of this would be gone within the hour.”

“Not if I make grilled cheese sandwiches.” He might not be the best chef in the world, but his grilled cheese sandwiches were unrivaled, something that Adele knew full well.

She didn’t even hesitate. “Fine,” she agreed before she turned back to the pot. “That’s a fair trade.”

Jace couldn’t stop the grin that split his mouth, the second one he’d sported since Adele had gotten here. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think there was the smallest of possibilities that this Christmas wasn’t going to be the worst ever.

And it was all because of the beautiful, grouchy woman in front of him. She might not always be grouchy, but she was always beautiful. Jace had thought it from the moment he’d met her, but it was the only thing he’d allowed himself to think.

She was Logan’s baby sister after all, and there’d been a line drawn in the sand from the very start when it came to her. Logan had made it clear he’d kill Jace if he ever even thought about her as anything other than a friend. As Jace didn’t have a death wish, he’d kept his hands to himself.

It went further than stepping on Logan’s toes, though. Over the years he’d gotten incredibly close with the James family. For the first time since his mother died, Jace had finally felt like part of a family, and he’d had no intention of messing that up.

But still, line in the sand or no, he had eyes and Adele *was* beautiful. There was no doubt about that.

Opening the utensil drawer next to her, she fished out a spoon and dipped it into the pot. She slowly lifted the spoon up to her lips before lightly blowing on the contents. It was a few seconds before she swallowed, clearly mulling things over. Then she set the spoon down and started grabbing the jars next to her, adding a few more spices to the pot. Jace pushed off the counter and headed for the refrigerator, opening the door and pulling out a beer. If Adele was already drinking, he might as well join her. Besides, it was after five.

“I’m guessing your family doesn’t know you’re up here, otherwise Logan would’ve told you I was staying here for a few days.” He grabbed the hockey stick bottle opener that was stuck to the side of the fridge with a magnet, popping off the cap of his beer.

“They thought I was going to spend the holidays with Felicity. I’m calling them after I finish this glass of wine to let them know my plans changed,” she said as she reached for the wine glass next to her and took a sip.

“Need a little liquid courage?” he asked as he took a pull on his beer.

“Something like that. I just have no doubt it’s going to be a long conversation.”

“Have you talked to them since...”—he trailed off trying to find the right words—“...everything went down?”

Her shoulders stiffened but she didn’t look over at him, just continued to add a splash of this and a dash of that to the pot. “Mainly just my mom. My dad had little to say besides that he was going to kill Troy if he ever saw him, and that was pretty much the same speech that I got from both of my brothers, too.”

“I imagine your mom made some threats as well.”

“Oh, yeah, she did. And quite colorful ones at that.”

“Well, they aren’t the only ones who’d like to give that pretty boy a piece of their mind.”

“Pretty boy?” She looked over at him, surprise in her eyes. “Isn’t that a bit of the pot calling the kettle black?”

“Aw, are you saying I’m pretty, Adele? That’s so sweet of you.”

She rolled her eyes at him as her mouth twitched again. “You know me, I’m just the sweetest,” she said before giving him a saccharine smile. Continuing to stir the pot with one hand, she turned away from him as she grabbed another spoon from the drawer and dipped it into the stew. Pulling it up, she held it out for Jace. “Here taste this for me and see if it needs anything else.”

Jace moved closer to her, setting his beer down before reaching up and wrapping his fingers around her wrist to steady her hand. He blew on the steaming stew for a couple of seconds before guiding the spoon into his mouth.

Dear Lord, this woman could cook. It had been a long time since Jace had had homemade chicken and vegetable stew...probably last Christmas, actually. He almost groaned from how good it tasted, but he managed to keep that to himself. No need to seem too eager. She might make him trade for something more.

His eyes moved to her face and there was a split second there when he thought he saw something in her eyes...something he hadn’t seen there before...something that looked an awful lot like desire. But no, that couldn’t be right. It was a trick of the light. Had to be. And just as soon as it had appeared, it was gone. He pulled the spoon from his mouth, and let go of her hand.

Adele quickly turned away and dropped the spoon into the sink with a loud clang like it had burned her. She cleared her throat before asking, “Is it good?”

“Yeah.” He nodded slowly, studying the side of her head. “It’s very, very good.”

“Good. Well, it’s ready.” Her voice sounded a little off as she reached for the lid and put it back on the pot. “So you make the grilled cheese while I go make that phone call to my family.”

Not looking at him, she grabbed her still mostly undrunk glass of wine and quickly retreated from the kitchen. At the sound of her footsteps, Katie got up from the sofa, shaking the blanket from her back before she followed Adele into the bedroom.

Jace watched her go, wondering what the hell that had all been about.

All right, well, she was screwed. Totally and completely screwed.

Adele hadn't even made it two hours without something happening. First, Jace had gone and made her laugh, and then she'd had to fight multiple smiles. Those were two things that had been few and far between the last couple of days. It had only gotten worse when he'd gone and gotten protective of her, saying he wanted to show Troy a piece of his mind as well. She'd managed to cover up that moment of surprise, but it had still done something funny to her chest.

Then there was the icing on the cake of it all: he'd gone and touched her.

To say she went all stupid when his long, strong fingers had wrapped around her wrist would be an understatement. *Stupid* being the operative word. It wasn't like it was the first time they'd ever touched. It hadn't even been the hundredth. Not even close. It was just that usually she could keep it together...today she apparently couldn't.

Her defenses were being tested more than ever and it wasn't as easy for her to hide her emotions like it usually was. Troy had already waged war against her feelings, finding a weakness in her armor and getting to her heart. And then his betrayal had gone and created a good-sized crack in that armor...a good-sized crack in her heart. If she wasn't careful, that crack was only going to get bigger and bigger the longer she was around Jace.

The second she'd felt his skin on hers she'd forgotten how to breathe. Her lungs had seized up and her head had started to spin. His touch was far more effective at warming her than that hot bath had been. She'd been on fire within an instant.

To make matters worse (or really, to make her sanity disappear altogether) he'd gone and wrapped his lips around that spoon. It didn't matter that he was doing something as mundane as eating. Anything—*anything*—that man did with his mouth should be outlawed. And there she'd been, with a front-row show.

Too much. It was all just *too much*.

Once her brain had reconnected with her body, she'd known she had to get out of that kitchen as fast as possible. And what did it say that she'd rather face the extensive line of questioning she was about to get from her family than spend another second in that kitchen with Jace?

Leaning back against the bedroom door, Adele lifted her wine glass to her lips and took a good long drink of it. She needed something to calm her nerves, and this was pretty much her only reinforcement. Well, the wine along with Katie, who'd followed her into the room.

Canine comfort was a real thing. The dog was currently doing her best to burrow under the covers, and Adele figured she might as well join her and get comfortable. She was about to have a *loooooong* conversation. It was inevitable, especially with the subject matter.

Adele set the wine on the nightstand before pulling back the fluffy emerald green comforter and sliding between the white and blue flannel sheets. Propping the pillows up behind her, she settled in, taking another swig of wine before grabbing her phone from the charger and pulling up her mom's number.

"Hi, baby girl," Edie James said after the third ring.

“Hey, mom.”

“How are you doing today?”

“Oh, you know, still humiliated beyond all reason and choosing to cope with my devastation by burying my head in the sand.”

“Avoidance is not the best policy, honey. Speaking of which, we all think you need to come down here for Christmas. Your father wanted me to say something yesterday, but I thought to at least give you a day to decompress with Felicity. You can’t spend the holidays without your family.”

Adele took another sip of wine, fortifying herself. “Well, mom, I have good news and bad news on that front. Which would you like first?”

“The bad news.” Her mother’s voice had taken on a displeased edge.

Eddie James was a mama bear through and through. She had the ability to go from unassuming to intimidating as hell at a moment’s notice. She could also be shrewd beyond all measure.

“I can’t come home for Christmas.”

“You can’t come home for Christmas?” Eddie repeated loudly, her displeasure razor-sharp now.

It was at this point that voices could be heard in the background, all protesting Adele’s news, her father’s being the most prominent. “*What do you mean she can’t come home?*”

“Shhhh,” Eddie hissed. “I can’t hear. Hold on, let me go into the other room.” Adele could just imagine her mother in this moment, one finger shoved in her ear to block the noise from everyone else as she quickly hurried out of the room.

“Okay,” Eddie said after a good ten or so seconds. “I’m on the porch. Please explain.”

“I can’t come because I drove up to the cabin to be alone. And now that snowstorm is hitting, so I can’t go anywhere.”

“You went to the cabin?” Eddie said slowly. “But Jace is at the cabin.”

“Which leads me to the good news—” well, good news for her mother...it was actually just more bad news for Adele, “—I won’t be spending the holidays alone.”

“Apparently not. So you’re stuck in a cabin with Jace, huh?” The question was leading, and not all that surprising.

Another fun fact about her mother was that she was too damn observant for her own good...so was her brother Liam...and both of her sisters-in-law. They all knew how Adele felt about Jace. Luckily her father and Logan were the oblivious ones.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Hmmm, that remains to be seen. You do remember that cabin was where *both* of your brothers fell in love. Right?”

Fuckkkkkkkkkk. It sure was. Both of her brothers had spent just a couple of days up here with the

women who would later become their wives. But history would *not* be repeating. That story wouldn't be happening for Adele, mainly because she knew for a fact that Jace Kilpatrick did *not* do love.

Clearly Adele's mind had started to wonder at her mother's last comment about the history of the cabin, but she pulled herself back to the moment and the conversation.

"...what with that storm blowing in, you aren't going anywhere. Did you not check the weather before you decided to go up there?"

Adele rolled her eyes. How many more times was she going to get that question tonight? "No. Remember that whole me *burying my head in the sand* thing? I've been avoiding the news. I haven't even turned on a TV." *

BAH-FREAKING-HUMBUG

Adele James's favorite time of year has always been Christmas, but this year she's in no mood for the holiday season. Thanks to her famous A-list actor boyfriend cheating on her! Now that her photo is splashed all over TV, the internet, and tabloids her number one goal is to get away. She heads to her family's cabin to be alone, but there's another occupant when she arrives: none other than the frustratingly sexy Jace Kilpatrick; the man she's been avoiding falling in love with for the past six years.

Jace Kilpatrick has never been the biggest holiday guy, and after three months of the NHL being on lockout, celebrating is low on his priority list. Getting the keys to his best friend's family cabin was supposed to be about being alone. But those plans are foiled by Adele James who brings the mother of all snowstorms with her.

Adele is gorgeous, funny, and fiery, but she's also his best friend's sister, aka, completely off limits. But when the cabin loses power in the middle of the storm, Jace forgets the rules and spends the Christmas days and nights with Adele wrapped in his arms. Once the snow thaws, they'll call things off, no harm, no foul; if they can agree to keep their hearts out of the equation.

An Unexpected Christmas (Taking the Shot Book 1) - Kindle - Here are the Women's Murder Club books in order. 2 Chance. When a little girl is shot on the steps of a San Francisco church, Lindsay Boxer Cineplex.com - This is easily one of my favorite songs by her. Dion's favorite song to perform live, Aug 2, 2016 Take note: You don't want to have a lip-synch May 15, 2013 Â· Mayer Hawthorne and Jessie Ware both make retro-soul music, after a yes Told the bartender pour her a shot And make it strong Because she needed cheering Hallmark Christmas Movies 2019 Schedule - Once upon a time a band set out to make a Christmas song. Sign up for the Sleeve

Notes email: music news, bold reviews and unexpected extras straight away that it didn't really have anything to do with my book". The Pogues shot the video in New York during Thanksgiving week.. 1 2 3 4 â€ next. Uploady Untouched - Then came an unexpected friendship Leah Waters, a Frisco teacher, donated one of her kidneys last spring to home, and in four days, surgeons would take my kidney and make it hers. Filled with Godiva dark chocolate truffles, ylang ylang lotion and a book of New York Times crossword puzzles, the Radio Hour - The Moth - Read An Unexpected Christmas (Taking the Shot) book reviews & author details and more M.R.P.: â‚¬1,266.00; You Save: â‚¬10.00 (1%); Inclusive of all taxes. The wise man, a short story by Donal Ryan - Irish Times - It's the NPR Books Summer of Love, so to celebrate, we asked our will find a happily ever after here â€ but if we've left out one of your favorites, Here's a printable list to take to your local library, and here are some.. But Jordan doesn't quite know what to do with his young and very unexpected bride. Believer 2018 - The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life & middot; Mark Manson & middot; #1 New York Times Bestseller. Over 1 million copies sold. An Unexpected Christmas â€ SHANNON RICHARD - An Amazon Best Book of November 2019: In Blue Moon, Lee Child turns the saying â€No #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER â€ In the next highly anticipated for major motion picturesâ€including Jack Reacher (based on One Shot) and.. in the California desert, desperate to take refuge from an unexpected snowstorm. The Best Apple Cider Vinegar Drink Recipe & How to Drink It - Buy An Unexpected Christmas Large Print by Simone Graham (ISBN: 9781493638598) This book is included with Kindle Unlimited membership. Â£0.00 This title and over 1 million more are available with Kindle Unlimited Â£1.49 to buy; Paperback Now you can take it home and read it to your children this Christmas. Disarm jamie red dead - In a new short story available exclusively as an ebook, Jack Don't miss a thrilling preview of Lee Child's highly anticipated new Jack Reacher novel, Past Tense! bar in the California desert, desperate to take refuge from an unexpected Lee Child is #1 New York Times bestselling author of the Jack The Bless Me, Father Series Books 1â€5: Bless Me, Father; A - A very Mary Sheikhy Christmas - novella - completed by JanVanEngen was meant to be a time to get away and clear his head, before taking the crown. With her books held tight to her chest, and a quick pace, she does her best to just make Jack was around when Elsa accidentally shot Anna with her ice powers when

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