



UNEXPECTED

Gifts

BRONWYN GREEN

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To Mama – no matter how much or how little we had, you always made sure each Christmas was one we'd remember.

To all the readers out there – Happy Holidays, and thanks so much for making it possible for writers everywhere to continue to do what they love.

To Jess and Kris. Thank you for always being amazing.

Chapter One

“You lied! On *Christmas Eve*.”

Cassie Williams stood there with her heart in her throat as she stared at the snowflakes clinging to the eyelashes of her visitor. Bright blue eyes had captured her gaze, and it was all she could do to break contact. She shoved the front door, letting it slam shut in the face of her guest.

She should have known her mother would send someone over to check on her. Why did it have to be Sam of all people? Sam MacLane had been a pain in her ass since the summer she'd turned thirteen. Her brother's best friend for life, it seemed, and part of the family. Hell, her mother had even knitted him his own stocking and still hung it up every year with the rest of the family's.

The door shook as he pounded on it. “C'mon, Cass. Open up. I'm freezing my balls off out here.”

She pressed her forehead against the cool wood. She'd wanted to just be left alone to lick her wounds. She sighed, the sooner she let him in to drop off whatever her mother had insisted on sending, the sooner he'd leave her be. Twisting the doorknob, she tugged open the door.

A thick dusting of snow covered his hair and shoulders, and he shook his head, spraying snowflakes everywhere. She scowled at him, brushing the dampness off her arms. His brilliant blue eyes met hers, and he grinned, accenting his dimples in the dark stubble covering his face. The sight of that killer smile aimed at her punched her in the stomach. He'd always been too gorgeous for her own good.

She'd developed a monster crush on him the moment he and his family had moved in next door. Fifteen years later, and she still hadn't been able to shake the damn thing. Of course, now, it was less girlish crush and more straight up lust. It didn't matter, though. Nothing would ever come of it.

“So, can I come in, or are you planning to let me freeze to death on your doorstep?”

Ignoring the blush that heated her cheeks, she opened the door wider and gestured for him to step inside. Glancing beyond him, she noticed how much snow had piled up in the last couple of hours. Good thing she'd gone grocery shopping the day before. It was getting ugly out there.

Turning her attention to Sam, she followed him into the kitchen where he'd begun unpacking the huge box her mother had sent.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So, what gave me away?"

"No glassy eyes, red, swollen nose or blotchy skin." He handed her a Tupperware bowl. "You've got homemade chicken soup here," he said, slowly scanning the length of her body before meeting her gaze, again. "Though you clearly don't need it."

She shoved the container into the fridge. "You can stop being a jerk any time, now."

"I could." He winked at her. "But, I think we both know I probably won't."

Her lips quirked, but she tried to hide the smile.

He was right. He wouldn't stop being a jerk. He was the same guy he'd always been. When they were kids, he was the guy who'd teased her mercilessly. But, he was also the same guy who'd made sure no one else ever picked on her. Just like another big brother. He was also the same guy who'd convinced his parents to let her entire family move in with them while their house was being repaired from the fire damage that had taken out their garage and damaged her bedroom. Not just her bedroom—pretty much every last thing that had been in it, including her book collection. And he was the same guy who'd offered her his collection of comic books to read while the house was being repaired. She'd ended up being incredibly well-versed in Marvel and DC comics. To this day, the X-Men were still her favorite. She smiled at the memory.

"So, what's the real reason you bailed?" he asked, bringing her back to the present and holding her motionless with his gaze.

The faint traces of her smile faded as soon as his question hit the air. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. She wasn't about to admit to Sam that she'd been feeling too sorry for herself to go have fun with her family. "It's not up for discussion."

He studied her for a moment then pulled out a tinfoil covered plate from the box and peeled back the covering. "Cookie? Fudge?"

He snagged a piece of fudge from the plate and bit into it, closing his eyes and groaning. The ragged sound settled deep in her womb, filling her with impotent longing. She forced herself to take a step away from him. Rounding the counter, she reached into the box to unpack the rest of whatever her mother had sent. Under a loaf of what could only be cinnamon bread was a pile of presents in brightly colored wrapping paper.

Sam gently knocked her hand away. “Uh-uh. Those are for Christmas morning.” Taking the box, he wandered into the living room then the dining room and back to the kitchen. “Where’s your tree?”

“I didn’t put one up this year.”

He laid his carpentry-rough hand across her forehead. “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you are sick.”

“Funny.” She shook off his touch. “I just didn’t feel like it this year.”

“In high school, you put up a Christmas tree in your bedroom every year right after Thanksgiving dinner, because you insisted that the family tree wasn’t up long enough for you to enjoy.”

She shrugged. “Things change.”

He frowned, set the box back onto the counter and stared at her, looking as though he was weighing his words very carefully. He finally shook his head and said, “Not really.”

“What do you mean?”

He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, and she tried not to shiver at his touch. “They don’t really change. For instance, Tyler is still the asshole he always was. Just because you know about it now doesn’t make it a new development.”

She supposed he was right. Just because she’d been blind to the fact that Tyler was a jerk for the bulk of their relationship didn’t mean that he’d suddenly turned into a lying, cheating man-whore. He’d always been one; she’d just been stupid.

“And you’re still the person who wants to see the best in everyone. Except maybe me.”

Cassie couldn’t have kept her gaze from straying to his face if she’d wanted to. He looked completely sincere... Until he chuckled.

“And I’m still the guy that’s wanted you for years.”

Her heart clutched as his words registered, but she shook off the sensation.

“Whatever,” she muttered. He wasn’t serious. He was never serious. That was another thing that didn’t change.

He frowned at her and took a step closer. “What do you mean, ‘whatever’?”

It was hard to breathe when he was this close. Even though she knew he didn’t mean what he’d just said, she wanted to pretend he did. Instead, she straightened and busied herself with resealing the foil over the fudge and trying to put words to what she was feeling.

“I mean, you’ve made your point about Tyler,” she finally managed. “And you’re right. I admit it. But you don’t need to joke around about the rest of it.” She glanced up at him.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips pressed briefly together. “Maybe I was wrong about you wanting to see the best in people. You certainly don’t seem inclined to even attempt to see it in me.”

If she didn’t know better, she’d say he was hurt. But, this was Sam. He’d always been impervious to her verbal jabs.

He stared at her, intensity glowing in his eyes. She swallowed thickly, feeling as though she was standing entirely too close to him. Before she could take a step back, he lowered his head and brushed his lips across hers. It was the barest touch—hardly a kiss at all—but her breath stalled in her throat all the same.

Sam slid a hand around the back of her neck and urged her closer, his mouth opening against hers as he deepened the kiss. Her lips parted, welcoming him inside. He tasted of coffee and dark chocolate. Her head spun as his lips caressed hers, the sensation stealing her breath. She couldn’t believe Sam was kissing her. She’d fantasized about this moment more often than she cared to admit. Actually, her fantasies never ended with a kiss. They didn’t end until he’d fucked her so hard she could barely remember her own name, and she came imagining that her fingers were his.

His free hand settled at her waist, and he dragged her closer. Her hands lifted and clutched the front of his jacket, damp with melting snow. The chilly wetness against her skin brought everything rushing back—skipping out on family Christmas, Sam showing up on her doorstep... This wasn’t one of her fantasies. This was Sam. Actually kissing her. Trying to prove a point.

Turning her head to the side, she broke the kiss and pushed at his chest.

He tried to lift her chin. “What’s the matter, Cassie-girl?”

Positive she didn’t want to take this even one step further, she backed away from him and glanced at the clock. “Thank you for bringing everything by. You should probably get going. The way the snow’s coming down, you’re going to have a long drive back home.”

He continued to stare at her, his expression concerned. “Cass? What is it?”

“Nothing,” she lied, crossing her arms over her chest and fixing her gaze on a spot over his left shoulder. “I’ve got a bunch of paperwork to go through for work. I’ll see you around.” Doing paperwork on Christmas Eve for a school library that would remain closed until January was

probably the lamest lie she could have come up with. Without waiting for him to respond, she walked to the front door and opened it. “Merry Christmas,” she choked out.

Sam looked as confused as she felt. “Wait. We need to talk.”

She shook her head. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Yeah, there is.”

She finally met his gaze. “No. There isn’t. Now, get going. It’s snowing like crazy.” A sharp stab of guilt pierced her. “Text me when you get home so I know you made it okay.”

He nodded but said, “This isn’t over.”

She pushed him into the swirling snow and quickly shut the door behind him. Through the window, she watched as he ducked his head while making his way into the blowing wind. He trudged through the drifts that covered her driveway. Shaking the snow from his dark brown hair, he got in the cab and started the engine. The headlights illuminated the thickly falling flakes as he backed toward the road.

The farther away he got, the greater the urge to call him back. Which was stupid. He’d been placating her. Trying to make her feel better. Pity was the last thing she needed.

She peered through the wildly blowing storm, nervous worry building in her middle. Maybe she should have insisted he stay. It looked treacherous out there, and blizzards blowing in off Lake Michigan were nothing to mess around with.

Without warning, the bed of the truck fishtailed and slid partway down the embankment that bordered the driveway. The tires spun wildly, kicking up dirt and snow as he tried to regain purchase. She sighed. There was no way he was getting out of there without a tow truck. She knew—she’d slid down that same hill more than once.

Cassie pulled on her boots and stepped out into the biting cold. The frigid air took her away breath as she slipped and skidded her way to Sam’s truck.

He rolled down the window. “Get back inside. It’s freezing out here, and you don’t have a damn coat on.”

“You might as well give it up,” she called out through chattering teeth. “You’re not getting out of here without help.”

He pushed on the gas again, and the tires continued to impotently spin. Finally, he thumped his head on the steering wheel. “Fantastic.”

“I’d just tell you to take my car, but I don’t think we can get it out around the truck.” The other side of the driveway dropped off just as steeply.

Sam looked at her and growled. “Get inside before you really do get sick!”

Ignoring his directive, she said, “Do you want me to call a wrecker?”

Sam dropped his head against the back of the seat. “It’s Christmas Eve. I can’t imagine anyone coming out in this.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She couldn’t, either. Even if they did get a driver to venture out, it would cost an arm and a leg.

“I can make up the couch for you, unless you have someplace you need to be.” *Or someone you need to be with.* And why did that thought make her stupid heart clench? Despite what he’d claimed a short while ago, she’d never be more to him than his best friend’s annoying little sister.

With a guarded expression in his eyes, he rolled up the window and turned off the ignition. Hopping down from the cab, he pocketed the keys and followed her through the snow drifts to the house.

Dread settled in the pit of her stomach. Sam MacLane would be spending the night.

Chapter Two

Sam sat at the kitchen table and watched as Cassie busied herself putting the kettle on for tea. She kept her back to him as she fussed with mugs and teabags. He willed her to turn around. He wanted to stare into her eyes. They were the deepest, darkest brown he'd ever seen, but their usual warmth was replaced by wariness. All thanks to his ill-timed, ill-conceived kiss.

He was torn between punching her ex-husband into unconsciousness and thanking the guy for finally letting Cass see what an asshole he was.

Sam had realized his feelings for Cass far too late, but he wasn't the type to try to bust up a marriage. However, since her ex had done a fine job of that on his own, Sam also wasn't the type to sit around and wait, hoping she'd notice his unrequited love for her. But, he supposed, he probably should have found another way to break it to her. He also probably should have found out how she felt about Tyler. For all Sam knew, she was still in love with the douche bag.

"I'm sorry you're stuck with me when you obviously wanted to be alone."

She turned to face him again, her lips curved in a faint smile as she pulled on her slippers. "The pity party was getting old, anyway." She leaned on the counter. "I feel bad about skipping out on the gathering tonight, but I just couldn't take the pitying looks or the attempts to set me up with someone else. It's only been five months."

He turned in his chair and faced her fully. "Are you still in love with him?"

She didn't meet his gaze. Instead, she looked down at her hands, at her bare fingers. "No. To be honest, the last couple years sucked. Right now, I just feel stupid. And a little sorry for myself."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "A little?"

Color rose on her cheeks. "Okay, fine. A lot." She pulled the foil from the loaf of bread and began slicing it. "Some days are easier than others. Today, his engagement announcement was in the morning paper."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. You want some tea?" She turned toward the stove, clearly changing the subject.

"Sure. But we need to talk about what happened earlier," he said.

Her shoulders tensed, and she paused with her hand on the handle of the cupboard. "No, we don't. What kind would you like?" she asked, her voice almost shrill in the wake of his words.

“Whatever you’re making is fine, and, yes, we do.”

Her hands fluttered from cupboard to stovetop and back again—never really pausing long enough to do anything. Standing, he pushed back his chair, the legs scraping loudly on the floor. She froze at the sound, her hands falling still on the counter.

Sam moved to stand behind her, his hands settling on her rigid shoulders. She was still chilled from going outside without a coat.

“Look,” she said quietly. “I appreciate that you’re trying to help me feel better about the whole breakup with Tyler, but you don’t need to pretend to be interested in me to do it.”

His fingers tightened slightly on her shoulders while his body shook with silent laughter. “Pretend?” he managed to choke out. “You think I’m *pretending* to be interested in you?” He stepped closer, pressing his front to her back, his groin grazing the upper swell of her ass. Just that tiny bit of contact was enough to make his cock start to swell.

Leaning forward, he brushed his lips against the outer shell of her ear, loving the shiver that ran through her at the contact. “Trust me when I tell you I’m not pretending. Granted, I was stupid and didn’t figure out how much I wanted you before it was too late. But, now…” He let the words hover in the suddenly heavy air.

Cassie said nothing. Finally, her head dropped forward, and she took a deep breath. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do, Sam.” Her voice broke on his name, but she pushed on. “But, it’s not necessary.”

Gripping her shoulders, he spun her to face him. “You really think that’s all this is?” he snapped.

“We’ve known each other for fifteen years. What else would it be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Let me think. How about that I’m finally admitting to both of us how much I want you?”

“I. Don’t. Need. Your. Pity.” She finally met his gaze, her eyes shimmering.

He stifled a growl of frustration. Grabbing her hand, he pressed it against the growing bulge behind his fly. His cock jerked against her palm. Her breath caught in her throat, and he felt the sound in his gut.

“Does this feel remotely like pity to you?”

Her tongue darted out and moistened her lips, and he almost groaned at the sight. He cupped the back of her neck and tugged her forward, claiming her lips.

Her fingers slipped from his grasp, and her breath puffed into his mouth along with a squeak of surprise. Her hands trembled against his chest before fisting in his shirt as she slowly relaxed in increments against him. Slipping his tongue between her parted lips, he took his time, thoroughly tasting her.

Becoming bolder by the second, Cassie reached up and drove her fingers through his hair, sending shivers down his spine as her short nails abraded his scalp. He slid his hands underneath the hem of her shirt, caressing the soft warmth of her lower back. Her skin was so smooth, so silky. Greedily, he stroked upward, his fingertips skimming across the back of her bra. He wanted her naked and twined around him, now. But he didn't want to push her. Didn't want to frighten her with the depth of his need.

Forcing himself to slow down, he lifted his hand from beneath her shirt and pulled her hair tie from her hair, freeing the long, sleek strands to swing around her shoulders. He pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses along the side of her neck before skimming his lips to the hollow at the base of her throat. Her pulse hammered against his mouth, and he nipped at her collarbone, making her squirm against him before tracing his way back to her lips. She immediately opened for him, seeming almost as desperate for more as he was. But he tried to back off a little. To linger and give her time to get used to him touching her. He didn't want this to be something she ended up regretting. His attempt at slowing down utterly disintegrated when she drew on his tongue.

On a groan, he deepened the kiss, pulling her flush against him. She moved willingly, wrapping her arms around him, clutching at his shoulders. He couldn't believe she was finally in his arms, let alone pressed close to him with her nipples pebbled against his chest. He needed more. More contact. More Cassie. More everything.

Cassie trembled, but it had nothing to do with the cold. Molding her mouth, Sam kissed her with a shattering hunger. No one had ever kissed her like that—as if she were more precious than oxygen. Deftly, he turned so her back flattened against the wall, and he pressed along her length. A strangled moan vibrated in her throat at the sensation of his thick cock digging into her stomach. God, she wanted him. She shouldn't, though. She should push him away. This was a terrible idea. The last thing she needed to do was get involved with Sam. Her body disagreed. As if it had a will of its own, she found herself rocking her hips against his as he ground into her.

Desire, stronger than she'd ever known, raced through her blood, stoked higher with each touch. One of his hands slid to her waist and hesitated before following the curve of her bottom. He tightened his arms around her, and she felt the heat rolling off him as he lifted his head.

"Look at me," he rasped, but she kept her eyes squeezed shut. He traced her collarbone with his callused forefinger, letting it dip between her breasts, then followed the swell upward with the roughened fingertip, sending shivers through her. Leaning forward, he pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses along the path he'd just taken. "Open your eyes and see what you're doing to me."

If she kept her eyes shut, she could pretend this wasn't happening. Pretend this was all a figment of her lust-filled, overactive imagination.

"Cass." He spoke softly against her skin, each breath stroking her senses into a higher awareness of him. He trailed dark, heated kisses along the side of her neck, heedless of the quake he'd started within her. Grasping his jacket, she pushed it off his shoulders and onto the floor. But there was still too many layers separating them.

Plucking at his shirt buttons, she released them, baring his tightly muscled chest to her wandering hands. She still couldn't quite bring herself to open her eyes—to make this real—to actually admit to herself that she was undressing Sam MacLane. In her kitchen.

He gripped her hands and held them firmly against his chest, his lips at her ear. "I need you to look at me. I need to know that you're actually here *with* me. I don't want you to get carried away and regret this later."

She inhaled deeply a few times before slowly opening her eyes. Her gaze traveled over the expanse of chest revealed by his open shirt, before climbing upward over the strong column of his throat to his stubbled jaw and kiss-swollen lips. Forcing her gaze up a little farther, she met the brilliant blue of his eyes. Intense arousal mixed with concern.

She swallowed heavily. "I know what I'm doing," she whispered. She couldn't promise she wouldn't regret it later, but it was what she had to offer now. And she wanted him. Badly. Who knew if this chance would ever present itself again?

He studied her as if he wasn't sure he could trust her response.

Fearing he'd change his mind, she gripped the bottom of her sweater and pulled it up and off her body, letting it drop to the floor by their feet. To his credit, he held her gaze for what seemed like forever before his eyes lowered to her lace-covered breasts.

His breath caught in his chest, and her nipples hardened in response to the desire in his expression and the chilliness in the air. His hands tightened on her hips, and he lowered his head to take her mouth again. Sliding a hand upward, he brushed his thumb back and forth beneath the underside of her breast, raising goose bumps across her skin. She leaned backward and tugged him toward her. The cold plaster chilled her back, and the heated expanse of his chest warmed hers. After waiting for what felt like a year, he cupped an aching breast. Her nipple contracted against the lace, pressing into his palm. Tugging the bra cup aside, he freed her breast and bent down to suckle the aching tip into his mouth.

Sensation shot through her, making her pussy clench empty. She couldn't remember ever being this desperate to have a man inside her, but she'd never had a chance to have Sam before, either. She shoved his shirt off his shoulders, tugging at it to free his arms. It had been a while since she'd seen him without a shirt. If possible, he was even more gorgeous than she remembered.

He reached around and unhooked her bra clasp, and she quickly shimmied out of the restraining garment, pressing her bared breasts to his chest. The skin on skin contact made them both gasp. Reaching between them, he unfastened her jeans, and she kicked them off to land somewhere near her sweater. Lifting a leg, she tried to wrap it around him to pull him closer.

Somehow, she had that feeling that even having him inside her wouldn't be close enough. But she'd take whatever she could get. He might want her now, but she doubted that feeling would last. It certainly hadn't for Tyler. Viciously shoving away thoughts of her ex and her dismal marriage, she focused on the sensation of Sam's fingers and lips plucking at her nipples.

He slipped his hand beneath her ass and lifted her until her legs were around his waist and the hard bulge of his cock was notched against her cunt. He thrust a few times, rocking against her, the rough denim deliciously chafing her clit through her now sodden underwear. Pleasure speared sharply through her core as her pulse pounded through her veins. A shuddering, melty feeling settled heavily in her abdomen as she ground herself against him.

Reaching between them, she tugged at his waistband. "Take them off."

Chapter Three

Sam groaned at the rough quality of her voice as her cool fingers grazed his stomach and she tugged at the button of his fly. “God, Cass. I want you so fucking bad,” he muttered against her neck, palming her ass and fitting her more snugly against him.

Her damp heat practically seared his fingers as they came into contact with her sopping panties. The sweet scent of her arousal was addictive. He wanted nothing more than to lay her back across the counter and bury his face in her pussy. How many times had he imagined her thighs locked around his head as he ate her out? How many times had he stroked himself imagining making her come? Would she scream? Whimper? Stay silent? His balls drew up tight as he realized he was about to find out. He wouldn't rest until he knew the answer and she was utterly satisfied.

The shrieking whistle of the tea kettle nearly startled her from his arms, but he pinned her more firmly to the wall and reached over to turn off the burner. The wailing sputtered to silence, leaving no sound behind but their harsh breathing. Securing both arms around her, he carried her through the nearly dark house to the couch in the living room. It was selfish as hell of him, but he didn't want to give her a chance to change her mind.

Laying her back on the cushions, he hooked his fingers in her panties and tugged them down her legs, taking her socks with them. Her thighs splayed open momentarily before she started to close them. There wasn't enough light to tell, but he suspected that a blush had risen to her cheeks.

Kneeling on the floor before her, he urged her legs apart and leaned over her, pulling a taut nipple into his mouth. A strangled sound escaped her as she arched up, urging him to take more—suck harder—with her whispered begging. His stomach skimmed across her damp pussy as he leaned farther in, moving from one breast to the other, drawing on her tautly budded nipples, feeling them pucker against his tongue.

She tangled her hands in his hair, tugging as he teased her, nipping at her distended flesh as he sucked. He loved her responsiveness. Tyler had been an idiot to walk away from her, but Christ, Sam was glad he had.

Dragging kisses over her torso, he made his way across the trembling flesh of her belly to

hover above her pussy. The scent of her arousal enflamed him further, and he slowly drew a fingertip through her slick folds. His cock jerked as he imagined what it would be like to slide inside her, to fill her completely.

He'd wanted her for so long; it was almost impossible to believe he was finally here with her. If not for the sensation of her velvet soft skin beneath his touch and her undeniable warmth, he'd think he was lost in another hopeless daydream.

Using his thumbs, he gently parted her folds, opening her to his gaze in the dim light. The single streetlamp backlit the blowing snow, and through the front window, it cast a gentle glow over her skin, making her look almost ethereal—her pale skin radiant in sharp contrast to her dark hair spread across the cushion. No matter what happened, he'd always remember her like this—beautiful and open to him.

Lowering his head, he tasted her. Like sweet wine, her flavor burst across his tongue, hot and addictive. He lapped at her slick flesh, darting inside her tight opening before stroking upward to circle her swollen clit.

Desperate whimpers escaped her lips as she lifted her hips to his mouth. He was certain he'd never seen anything as hard-on inducing as the sight of her body straining toward pleasure, toward release. He slipped a finger inside her wet channel, groaning at the way she clasped him, knowing it would only be a million times better when he was buried balls deep inside her.

Slowly, he stroked in and out of her shuddering body, adding another finger and another while brushing his thumb across her clit. She gripped the couch as if she wouldn't stay grounded without hanging on. She was close. He could feel it in the way her muscles tensed and the way she bit her lip as if she could hold back her impassioned cries. He couldn't wait to see her break. He wanted to make her come more than he'd ever wanted anything.

Keeping his gaze on her, he flicked his tongue across her clit before sucking the tiny bundle of nerves between his lips. Her entire body stiffened as her release washed over her; his name was torn from her lips with an anguished cry. He'd never heard anything more beautiful.

Panting, her eyes fluttered open, and she pinned him with her stare. "Please tell me you have a condom."

Panic flared to life in his gut. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and rifled through it until he found one. He climbed to his feet and quickly stripped off the remainder of his clothes while Cassie watched, teeth gnawing at her lower lip. He quickly sheathed himself and paused,

gazing down at her.

Cassie squirmed under his scrutiny. She knew she wasn't perfect, but she couldn't remember ever feeling so self-conscious before. Finally, she looked away. "Please, don't. Don't stare at me like that."

A rueful smile curved his lips. "I wanted to make sure this wasn't another misguided, adolescent fantasy."

"Um...did they happen often enough for that to be a concern?"

He chuckled as he leaned over her. "You have *no* idea."

A spiral of warmth unfurled in her middle, but she couldn't meet his eyes. "I hope you're not disappointed."

Sam lifted up her chin until she met his gaze. "Fantasy was never this good."

Her eyes stung at the sincerity in his expression. She opened her arms to him, drawing him into her embrace. As he settled into the cradle of her thighs, the warmth she'd experienced earlier was replaced by undeniable heat.

She groaned at the sensation of his thick cock sliding through her wet heat to graze her aching clit. "Quit teasing," she muttered.

He grinned, and her chest tightened. "Never. Not while I can get a reaction out of you." He slipped through her damp folds again, making her cry out. Finally, he took pity on her and gently prodded her opening.

Cassie lifted her hips in an attempt to urge him deeper, but he held back. All but growling, she nipped at his earlobe. "You're not going to like the reaction you're going to get if you don't quit tormenting me and just fuck me."

His lips quirked. "I don't think I've ever heard you use that word before." His eyes glinted wickedly. "Are librarians even allowed to say that?"

"*Sam...*"

"What? It's hot."

She frowned at him. "Then, *fuck* me already."

His grin fading, he lunged forward, pushing all the air from her lungs with the force of his thrust. *Yes*. This is what she wanted. Him. He stilled, letting her adjust to the invasion, but his body shook from the effort of remaining motionless. She shifted slightly, taking him deeper,

loving the way his eyes closed and his lips parted as he slid farther in, filling her completely.

His eyes flashed in the low light as he opened them and pinned her with his gaze. She wanted to look away, afraid he'd see the depth of emotion she'd always been careful to hide from him, but she couldn't. She was sure he could see every thought she'd ever had about him, every feeling she'd ever experienced for him, and she couldn't do a thing to stop it. It was as though he had a direct link to her heart, and he'd learned all of her secrets. There was a part of her that wanted to look away, but the bigger part wanted to commit everything about this night to memory.

Slowly, he withdrew, and she finally had to shut her eyes. The sensations were too much. She swore she felt every vein, every ridge as he pushed through her grasping passage. Her internal muscles convulsed, trying to keep him deep inside her. She whimpered at the loss as he almost completely pulled out, groaning as he hilted himself within her again. Nothing in the world had ever felt this good. She was sure of it.

Sam's careful, measured thrusts quickly became out of control as he shafted her harder and faster. Cassie loved every rough lunge. She lifted herself into each advance, meeting him every time, as her release twisted and knotted in her middle.

She gripped his shoulders, unable to look away from the way he watched her—as if he were just as in awe of this moment as she was. She'd never been loved like this. Primitive need stripped away the mask of civility and filled her with raw, aching hunger. His gaze held her captive, feral and unfocused, his jaw clenched. The force of that much passion, directed solely at her, set off uncontrollable tremors throughout her body.

She clung tighter to him. His muscles twisted and flexed under his slick skin as she wrapped herself around him. Whispering his name over and over like an endless prayer, she strained against him. The tremors became rolling waves as he pounded into her, pushing her toward the edge.

“God, Cass—I can't hold back. I wanted to make this good for you,” he grated. “To make it last...”

Heat coalesced in her middle, spiraling inward in an ever contracting knot, but his hoarsely muttered words shoved her past her breaking point, and everything flew apart. Release rushed through her body, drowning her as her pussy clutched and spasmed around his cock. Still, he slammed into her.

He groaned her name as he stiffened, his body shaking with exertion as his orgasm poured through him and into her. His heat seared her through the thin barrier of the condom, and she shuddered, wishing for a crazy moment that there was nothing between them. His head dropped to her shoulder while he dragged shaky breaths in and out of his heaving lungs as she stroked his sweat-damp back.

Slowly, he raised his head and looked at her, gently smoothing the hair from her face. Something about his bemused expression made her feel as if he were seeing her for the first time. And who knew—maybe he was. This was new territory for both of them.

He kissed her. Achingly sweet and tender, it was the kind of kiss that answered all of the questions she'd ever thought to ask. All except one—how was she ever going to find the will to go back to real life when this was over?

And it would be over. Of that, she had no doubt. This was a result of the heat of the moment, curiosity and pity. She couldn't forget the pity. Yeah, reality was really going to suck.

Hiding her face in the curve of his neck, she sighed. She'd done the one thing she'd always swore she wouldn't do. She'd gone and fallen in love with Sam. No, that wasn't true. She'd been in love with him for years. She'd just refused to let those feelings have any air to breathe. Any room to develop. Now, they were running wild, and she needed to bury them again as quickly as possible.

He eased out of her and curled around her back, pulling the afghan from the back of the couch over the top of them. Urging her head onto his arm, he kissed her temple, and she blinked back the tears that burned her eyes.

Chapter Four

Dawn's dull gray light crept through the window, making Cassie squint. Lifting her head, she saw that the snow still came down with a vengeance. She also noticed she was alone on the couch. For a minute, she wondered if Sam so thoroughly regretted what had happened between them that he'd slunk off into the night. But, she reasoned, even if he had regretted it, he wouldn't have just left her without saying goodbye. He also wouldn't have taken off in a dangerous blizzard. Especially not with his truck stuck like it was.

Looking toward the dining room, she noticed a muted glow behind her. Her ficus plant was draped with softly shining Christmas lights, and a pile of presents sat on the floor in front of the pot. Her brow furrowed, and she pulled the afghan more securely around her and sat up just as Sam entered the room wearing nothing but his worn jeans and carrying a couple of her snowmen ornaments.

"You're awake," he said as he hung them on the plant, causing the branches to droop.

"Yeah. What's all this about?" she asked, gesturing loosely at the decorations.

He shrugged, the dim lights highlighting his bare chest. "You love Christmas. I couldn't stand the thought of the douche bag taking this away from you, too...so I improvised."

Tears burned her eyes as she stared at the man who'd been her friend and also the biggest pain in her ass for the last fifteen years. Having Tyler leave her was nothing. It was going to hurt so much more when this—whatever it was with Sam—ended.

She was so, so stupid. She wasn't Sam's type—never had been. Besides, he was a serial monogamist—one steady girlfriend after another. When this came crashing down around them, not only would her life suck, but it would affect the rest of her family, too. After all, Sam was basically her parents' second son. There would be nothing but years of awkwardness after this. What the hell had she been thinking? She sank to the floor in front of the makeshift tree and blinked back the tears that threatened.

He sat on floor across from her and stared at her. "What's going on in that head of yours, Cassie-girl?"

"Nothing." She couldn't meet his eyes. Instead, she stared at the shimmering lights on the tree.

“Now, you’re lying on Christmas Day. Your mother would be so disappointed.”

Yeah, well, that was nothing compared to how the woman would feel when she eventually got wind of what had gone down here, last night. And she would. Finding out stuff her kids didn’t want her to know was her mother’s mutant ability.

“Cassie?” His tone was hesitant and worried. She’d never heard him sound like that before, and it forced her to glance at him.

Grabbing her hand, he laced their fingers together. “Did I push too hard last night?” he asked. “Push you into something you didn’t want? Or weren’t ready for?”

The uncertainty in his expression cut at her, and she tightened her hand on his. “No. That’s not it.” Heat rose to her cheeks. “I wanted what happened,” she said, and a despondent sounding laugh escaped. “I wanted it—and you—desperately.”

His brow furrowed. “Then, what’s wrong?”

She scrubbed a hand over her eyes. He might not want to face reality, but the sooner they did, the sooner they could get past the inevitable fall out. “Last night was...amazing.”

“But?” he prodded when she didn’t continue right away.

She took a breath. “But...I think we both know that this is just going to end ugly.”

He pulled his hand away from hers. His eyebrows drew together and disappointment glinted in his eyes. “I don’t know where you’re getting your information, but that’s bullshit.”

“C’mon, Sam. You can’t really think we belong together.”

He just stared at her.

She didn’t want to have to spell it out, but it looked like as if didn’t have a choice. “This isn’t going to go anywhere. We both know that. And, when it ends, it won’t just affect us. It’ll affect my family and yours. Do you really want that?”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off.

“You don’t stay with women for longer than a few months. I’ve met a lot of them, and they’re wonderful. Gorgeous. Smart. Funny. If they didn’t hold your interest, I don’t have a chance.”

“For fuck’s sake, Cassie! Is that what this is about?” Before she could answer, he plowed ahead. “Those relationships didn’t work out because those women weren’t *you*.”

Anything she might have said died in her throat.

“By the time I realized that the infatuation of high school had passed and I was actually in

love with you, it was too late for me to do anything about it.”

He loved her? She hadn't really believed him last night when he'd said he'd wanted her. But he had. God, he'd wanted her. She was still a little sore to prove it. She glanced at his face. There was nothing but certainty there.

“If there was a chance you could be happy with Tyler,” Sam continued. “I wasn't going ruin that for you.” He sighed. “I wish I'd known how much of a bag of dicks he was gonna turn out to be.”

She smiled sadly and adjusted the afghan around her, trying to come to grips with the fact that Sam MacLane was in love with her. “Even if you'd known and had tried to warn me, I probably wouldn't have believed you, anyway.” She shrugged at his questioning expression. “I wanted the fairy tale. The happily ever after. I guess that's the problem with reading too many books. You don't realize until too late that happily ever afters don't exist.”

He shook his head. “Bullshit.” He frowned a little. “Okay, maybe bullshit is too strong. Not a lot of people get a happy ending because they're not willing to work for it.”

She nodded. He was right. Tyler hadn't been willing to put in the effort, and, in the end, neither had she.

“Here's the thing you should know,” Sam said, taking her hands in his work-roughened ones. “I'm willing to work for it. Hell, I *want* to work for it. But I need to know if you are, too.”

Her heart stuttered. If she said no, if she didn't even give them a chance, she'd regret this for the rest of her life. Realizing there was nothing she wanted more than a chance at happiness with Sam, she slowly nodded. The smile he gave her was the best gift she'd ever received.

“Good.” His eyes shone with happiness. “Now, open your presents, because, after that, we're going back to bed.”

“Oh, are we?”

He leaned forward and kissed her nose. “We are. And it'll be in a real bed where I can love you properly.”

Her lips quirked. “That wasn't proper?”

“Not even close,” he said darkly, and desire flared to life within her at his tone.

“Now, open this.” He handed her a present. It was lumpy and messily wrapped and could only be from her mother. Cassie adored her and would recognize her poor gift wrapping skills anywhere. Feeling more than a little guilty that she'd skipped the family gathering in order to sit

home and pout, she pulled at the tape, lifting it away from the brightly colored paper. Inside, was a new pair of mittens and matching scarf her mom had knitted. She opened present after present from her parents, her brother and sister and from Sam's family, too.

Sam picked up the last gift. She could tell it was from him. No one else she knew wrapped gifts with that kind of military precision. He set it on her lap, and sat back and waited, looking a little uneasy. She couldn't remember him ever being nervous around her, before. Of course, that was before everything changed last night.

And, she wondered, for what was surely the five hundredth time, if they'd ruined everything by falling into bed together. She stared at him and shoved that thought right out of her head. They hadn't ruined anything. This was where they were supposed to be. Together.

Her fingertips traced the edge of the package before untying the red ribbon he'd used to decorate it. Peeling away the tape and paper, she revealed a plain cardboard box. She lifted the lid, and tears filled her eyes.

"I know I don't have all of them. And I'm not sure if the ones I found are even the right editions, but... Hey. Are you crying?"

Cassie swiped at the tears that slipped down her cheeks. In the box were books. Copies of books that had been part of the collection that had been destroyed when the firefighters had put out the blaze in the garage below her bedroom all those years ago. She flipped through the pages—gilt-edged volumes of fairy tales, an illustrated version of *The Hobbit*, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, *Anne of Green Gables*—they were all here. He'd actually taken the time to find the older editions she'd had as a kid.

"I wasn't sure if you'd replaced them, but I figured, if you had, you could always use these at the library."

"Where did you find these?" she asked, stunned by the gesture.

"Mostly eBay, but I hit a few used bookstores, too. I've been looking for them for a while."

She couldn't believe he'd gone to all that trouble for her. It hit her, then. She was stupid for mourning the loss of Tyler for months. He'd never cared enough to do something like this. Hell, she was fairly certain he had no idea what her current favorite books were.

But, Sam? Sam remembered the books she'd loved as a kid. He'd come over here in a blizzard to check on her. He'd loved her and wanted her to be happy—even if it wasn't with him. Her heart ached with the fullness of love and the realization that she'd almost sent it packing into

the worst storm of the year. Well, she had. But fate and a crappy driveway had intervened. She set the box aside and shifted to her knees in front of him, keeping the afghan wrapped around her.

“You’re about ruin our chances for a bed, aren’t you?” he asked, tracing a callused fingertip down her chest, along the edge of the blanket.

“You can handle it.” She grinned then sobered and leaned forward, cupping his face in her hands. “Thank you. This is the best gift I’ve ever been given.” Still holding his face, his stubble tickling her palms, she closed the distance between them and kissed him. Long and slow. Pulling back, she shook her head. “I take that back. It’s not the best gift.”

He raised a dark eyebrow at her. “Oh, really? Then, what is?”

“I’ll give you a hint. It showed up covered in snow and was completely unexpected.”

He grinned and grabbed her around the waist, laying her back against the floor and pulling the covering from her body. The cooler air tightened her nipples as the lights from the makeshift Christmas tree cast a warm glow over their skin. “The best presents always are.”

“Hmm...this gift does seem a little cocky, though.”

He nuzzled her neck. “You’d better not be thinking about exchanging it.”

She stroked her hands over his shoulders. “No way. No exchanges. No returns.” Despite everything they’d shared, her cheeks flushed at her admission.

Sam stared into her eyes. “No refunds, either.” He dropped a tender kiss on her lips. “And definitely no more holidays alone,” he murmured against her mouth.

She shook her head slightly, her lips brushing across his. “I love you, Sam.”

He lifted his head, something that looked like relief shimmering in his eyes. “Say it again.”

“What?”

“Indulge me.” He brushed his thumb across her cheekbone. “I’ve been waiting a *really* long time to hear you say it.”

“I love you.”

She loved the slow, sweet smile that spread across his face.

“I love you, Cass. I have for years, and that’s not going to change.”

Her eyes burned, but this time, they were tears of happiness. “You really are the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“Ditto.” He slipped between her legs and rocked against her. “And, remember...expect the unexpected.”

Cassie wrapped her arms around him and urged him closer. “Always.”

Bronwyn Green is an author, blogger and compulsive crafter. She lives Michigan with her husband, two kids and three somewhat psychotic cats. When not frantically writing, she can be found helping in her youngest son's classroom or binge-watching Netflix while working on her latest craft project. Bronwyn loves to talk to her readers and can be found at www.bronwyngreen.com.