

hot
cocoa
hearts



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In memory of Liz Teed, inspiring teacher and one of the
first fans of Cake Pop Crush and its offspring.

You are missed.

—S.N.



Chapter One

“I’m not coming out. *Ever.*”

I curled up my legs, blinding in their green-and-white-striped tights. Then I scooted farther back into the plastic child-sized gingerbread cottage. I’d made up my mind. I was going to stay here until: (1) My parents gave in or (2) I turned eighteen and didn’t have to listen to them anymore.

A red-cheeked Santa ducked his head through the tiny window.

“Ho, ho, ho!” he bellowed. “What’s this I hear about a certain

elf going on strike?” He winked. “Don’t you want to bring joy to lots of little girls and boys this Christmas, Emery Elf?”

I rolled my eyes, giving my cherry-red romper a resentful tug. This crimson monstrosity, brighter and tackier than Rudolph’s nose, had replaced my favorite *Dark Side of the Moon* tee, my purple plaid skirt, and black leggings.

“Dad, would you please quit the Santa act already?” I groaned.

“Break character? Never.” His blue eyes twinkled with annoying cheer.

I grimaced. “I’m protesting Christmas.” I motioned to the walls of the cottage. “I’m staging a sit-in.”

There was a pounding on the roof, which was only an inch above my head. “Emery Mason.” Mom’s stern voice hissed from outside. “This is the price you have to pay for breaking curfew.”

“But that was for the sake of my art!” I objected. “You of all people should get that!” I was hoping to appeal to her creative side—the one that made her chronically burn casseroles and lose car keys in favor of snapping pictures. If anyone could understand forgetting yourself in the moment, it was Mom.

My plan didn’t work.

“You come out right now and do your job,” she said, “or you’ll be staging a sit-in in your room. *Permanently.*”

Sure, I’d broken my curfew last Friday night. But how could my parents blame me? The moon and stars had been so bright, and the air had that crackling winter coldness to it—perfect for photography. I’d been at the park, trying to get a mood shot of the moon through a bramble of bare tree branches. I’d planned to be back home by nine, but I forgot to bring my cell, so I couldn’t set my phone alarm as a reminder. Before I knew it, curfew came and went.

Now Mom and Dad were making me pay for it. Big-time. It was bad enough that every year, my parents became Mr. and Mrs. Claus incarnate, bubbling over with ridiculous amounts of holiday cheer. Now they’d dragged me into it, forcing me to work for them for the whole month of December—the busiest time for their portrait studio business. To make matters worse, they were running a Santa photo booth at the Fairview Mall, and yours truly was being put to work as Emery the Helpful Elf.

I sighed, stuck on my plastic pointed elf ears, and stood up, instantly banging my head against the roof. Then I crawled out

the candy-cane-striped door and into the Nightmare Before Christmas.

The North Pole Wonderland photo booth hadn't even opened yet, but already, there were two dozen kids and their parents lined up for pictures with Santa (aka Dad in his beloved Santa suit). The Fairview Mall was crammed with bustling Saturday crowds eager for holiday shopping sprees. A manic, head-splitting version of "Jingle Bells" was blaring through the main concourse. Giant ornaments and snowflakes hung from skylights overhead, and twinkling garland draped across every inch of the second-floor railings. There was even an entire store called Holiday Heaven, stocked with every Christmas trinket, snow globe, or centerpiece known to mankind. And—even more ludicrous—the store was using half a dozen live penguins in its window display! The mall had gone Christmas crazy.

"Look, Mommy!" a child in line shrieked. "It's one of Santa's elves."

Dad nudged me as he headed through the mountains of artificial snow toward his sleigh. "That's your cue," he whispered.

Oh joy. I raised my hand in a weak wave just as Mom breezed by me.

“Em,” she said, “have you seen my camera bag?” She paused to take in my outfit. “And do you have to wear those black boots? Didn’t the costume come with pointy slippers?”

I shrugged. “Couldn’t find them,” I lied. In reality, my elf slippers were buried in the back of my closet. “Besides, I’m *not* giving up my Doc Martens. Aren’t the elf ears humiliating enough?”

I was praying that none of my other friends would see me in this getup, especially Sawyer Kade. He was the unspoken leader of the Undergrounds, the group I hung with at school. He was also the lead singer of Sweet Garbage, a band he’d started out of his garage. Just thinking about Sawyer was enough to set my heart racing. An image of him flashed before my eyes—his messy, purple-tipped hair and amber eyes, and that moody, quiet air he gave off when he was deep in thought over his lyrics.

I’m not sure Sawyer and I qualified as friends, since he’d never actually spoken to me before. We may have been a part of the same friend group, but there are so many of us in the Undergrounds

that the two of us had never officially crossed paths. Still, I'd had a crush on him since, well, forever.

Mom waved her hand at me distractedly as she glanced around for her bag. "Okay, okay. Wear the boots." She kissed my forehead, then gave the bell on my elf hat a playful tug. "But work on the attitude, please. You're going to have a good time. You'll see."

"Maybe I would, if you let me take the pictures."

"Em, we talked about this." She puffed her cheeks in exasperation as she adjusted her lighting equipment. "Parents want their kids' photos with Santa to be more . . ." She paused, searching for the right word. "Traditional."

"Oh, I get it." I kicked at an unsuspecting Styrofoam gingerbread man in the snow, knocking him over. "My photos are too weird for holiday cards, right?"

"I didn't say that." Her eyes met mine with a "let's not do this" look. "You know I love your style. But it's not the right fit for this type of thing." She bent to fix the fallen gingerbread man, then straightened as the blaring music suddenly stopped and a voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Attention, holiday shoppers," it boomed. "This is an

important security announcement. A penguin has escaped from the Holiday Heaven window display. It was last spotted headed for the fountain on the main promenade. Please report any sightings to the Welcome Kiosk as soon as possible. Do not attempt to apprehend the animal alone. Thank you.”

“See?” I said. “Even the penguins want to escape.”

Mom glared at me. “Funny. Now, can we get ready to start greeting our customers? Please?”

“Fine.” I sighed. “And by the way, your camera bag is hanging around Blitzen’s neck.” I nodded toward the nine plastic reindeer harnessed to Santa’s sleigh.

Relief swept Mom’s face. “Thanks, sweetie.” She slid her camera out of the bag, checked to see that Dad was ready in his sleigh, then smiled at me. “Okay. Let them in.”

I walked over to the front of the line, took the first photo order package from an eager mom, and unlatched the gate to the North Pole Wonderland.

“Hi there, boys and girls!” I called out to the droves of kids. I struggled for an enthusiasm I didn’t feel. “Who wants to sit on Santa’s lap?”

On cue, the boy at the front of the line stomped on my foot, the two behind him started whacking each other with candy canes, and a toddler in a red velvet dress burst into tears. The melody from my least favorite carol popped into my head: *On the first day of Christmas, my parents gave to me, some kids screaming miserab-ly.*

And the day was just beginning.



Three hours later, I had gone from grumpy to downright Grinchy. If the tears from kids and the frowns from their parents were any indication, the photo booth was an absolute disaster. Most of the kids were more interested in pulling off my dad's Santa beard than in sitting still for a photo, and those who did sit still were frozen with fear. The line had gotten even longer over the course of the morning, I could hear people grumbling about being hungry for lunch, and even Mom and Dad's cheer was waning.

"How much longer, miss?" a mother called from somewhere in the crowd. "We've been waiting for over an hour!"

“We’re working as quickly as we can,” I offered, trying hard not say it through clenched teeth. I took a pale-faced little boy by the hand. Poor kid. He probably wanted to spend the day sledding, and here he was, stuffed into a suit jacket and tie for the perfect Kodak moment.

“Are you ready to get your picture taken with Santa?” I asked, hoping to get a smile out of him. His lip started quivering. Not a good sign. All it took was one glance at my dad in the sleigh for him to start bawling.

“Stop that, Tommy!” his mom scolded. “Just lift him up there,” she insisted. “He’ll calm down in a second.”

I hesitated but remembered my parents’ mantra: The customer is always right.

“Okay,” I said. I placed my hands around Tommy’s chest, ready to hoist him into the sleigh, when suddenly . . .

“Yow!” I yanked back, clutching my right hand. “He bit me!”

“No,” his mom said. “He would never do that.”

“But—but—” I stammered in shock and fury while my dad gushed apologies, shooting me a warning look not to lose my temper.

Tommy grinned triumphantly and ran into the gingerbread house to hide while his mom turned back to me. “If you can’t do your job,” she snapped, “I want my money back.”

“Fine.” I handed her back her order form as I seethed, ready to tell her exactly what I *really* thought. I mean, what were Mom and Dad going to do, fire me? I wish! “You know what?” I started. “Your son is—”

“Hungry!” a voice behind me announced.

Huh? I spun around to see a dark-haired boy my age holding a tray filled with cookies and small red cups brimming with marshmallows. He wore a sweater almost as tacky as my elf outfit: It was green-and-red-striped and had a gargantuan Rudolph with a blinking red nose plastered across its front.

“Who would like to try Santa’s Magic Hot Chocolate?” the guy asked, and was met with kids’ cheers and parents’ resounding applause. “I think Tommy should get the first one,” he said, loud enough so Tommy could surely hear, even inside the gingerbread house. “Too bad we can’t find him anywhere.”

That was all it took for Tommy to come bursting out of the house, all smiles.

“Thank goodness he came,” my dad mumbled to me as he climbed down from the sleigh.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Alejandro Perez,” my dad said. “His grandfather owns Cocoa Cravings, the hot chocolate shop over there.” Dad nodded toward a store only a few steps across the concourse from the North Pole Wonderland. Inside, a white-haired older man I guessed was Alejandro’s grandfather was standing behind the counter. “We agreed to let them hand out hot chocolate samples to people in line to help promote their business. And I don’t think it’s going to hurt ours any, either.”

I watched Alejandro as he wove through the line, handing out cups and making easy conversation with the customers.

“You know,” he said, bending toward one little girl conspiratorially, “Santa always drinks this on Christmas Eve, right before he delivers presents. It’s made fresh up at the North Pole.” The girl giggled as Alejandro winked. His thick black curls hugged his forehead, and he was so cheerful that even his glinting dark eyes seemed to be smiling. He was definitely giving off that wide-eyed, boy-next-door vibe. I might’ve even thought he had

a kind of naïve cuteness if I'd been in a better mood. But right now, all I could do was stare, wondering how he could maintain that sappy expression amidst hordes of tantruming kids. It had to be an act.

But his mood seemed to be contagious, because within seconds of taking sips of their hot chocolate, customers relaxed into happiness. Even Tommy was sitting in the sleigh unprompted now, waiting patiently for Dad to join him.

“Wow,” I muttered in disbelief. “What’s in that hot chocolate?”

Alejandro must’ve heard me, because he walked over, giving me a wave. “Hey, Emery, how’s it going?”

“Hey,” I said, taken aback that he was acting like he knew me, when I couldn’t remember ever having seen him before. “Alejandro, right?”

“Alex for short.” He was still smiling. Did he ever stop? He tilted his head inquisitively, as if he knew I was drawing a blank on him. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

“No,” I mumbled, blushing in spite of myself. “Sorry.”

He shrugged, laughing. “I’m in eighth grade with you at

Fairview. I just moved here from California last month. I'm staying with Abuelo, my grandpa, until my parents wrap up their jobs in San Diego. They wanted me to come here ahead of them so I wouldn't miss the beginning of next semester." He handed out a few more steaming cups. "I'm not that surprised you haven't seen me at school. We don't really move in the same circles."

I saw how this could be true. My friends and I prided ourselves on moving against the tide, spending our lunch periods discussing art and music instead of the latest gossip. Above all, we didn't believe in faking anything, especially emotion. And I had a feeling that Alex here was a seasoned pro at the on-demand smile, legit or not.

Alex held a cup out to me. "Here. Try some. You look like you could use it."

"Thanks," I said, waving the cup away, "but I don't like hot chocolate."

"Who ever heard of an elf that doesn't like hot chocolate?" He laughed. "Isn't that against the big guy's rules?" There was a teasing glimmer in his eyes.

“It’s not my thing. Too sweet and syrupy. Ick.” I shook my head, grimacing.

His eyes widened. “Man, if you’ve got something against hot chocolate, you must be having one *bad* day.”

“*Bad* is an understatement.” We stepped back as Mom moved in with her camera to snap the photos of Tommy with Dad. I popped a piece of my favorite hard candy, Venom, into my mouth. The tart watermelon and spicy pepper flavors zinged over my taste buds, cheering me up a bit. Then, while Alex handed out the rest of the hot chocolates, I recounted every detail of my traumatic morning to him. It felt so good to unload all of my frustrations, even onto a stranger. “I’ve been bitten, stomped on, and yelled at,” I finished in summary, “and if I hear one more Christmas song, I’ll scream.” I sighed. “I hate the holiday season.”

Alex laughed. “You hate Christmas? I love this time of year!”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.” I motioned to his sweater.

“Hey, if you can’t wear an ugly sweater at Christmastime, when can you? Besides, it’s my work uniform. Abuelo has Frosty the Snowman on his.”

I couldn't help grinning at that.

"So, what's your problem with Christmas?" He leaned closer, whispering, "Wait, don't tell me. Your grandpa got run over by a reindeer?"

I laughed. It was impossible not to. He was funny, I had to give him that. "Christmas," I said, "is a completely commercialized holiday that feeds on materialism. It's just another way for stores to make money off customers who feel obligated to buy meaningless gifts for people they probably don't even like."

"Whoa." Alex shook his head, holding up a hand for mercy. "I wonder if they offer elf training workshops in anger management."

I wanted to look mad, but another laugh broke through instead.

"Seriously, though," he said, his eyes holding mine. "It's too bad you feel that way. Christmas is the season of love and giving . . ."

As if on cue, a child's voice rose up from the line, whining, "But *why* won't you buy me that doll, Mommy? It's only thirty dollars, and you said I could have a treat today!"

I jerked my thumb in the direction of the voice. “See? Nothing but ‘gimme gimme.’”

Alex only smiled. “You can’t blame an overtired kid for trying.” He shrugged. “And if you’re hoping to convert me, it’s not going to work.”

I raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “There’s no way you can stay legitimately happy through all of this.”

“So what are you saying? That I’m faking it?” He studied me in a thoughtful way that made me fidget self-consciously with my costume. It was like his eyes were searching for something inside of me I didn’t even know was there. It was unsettling, *and* irritating.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Maybe you are.”

“Or . . .” He leaned toward me, jingling the bell on my hat, and warmth flooded through me. I felt momentarily disoriented at his closeness. “Maybe you’re wrong. And maybe *I* can change your mind. Starting with hot chocolate.”

I snorted, the spell broken. “I don’t change my mind about much. Just ask my parents.”

“Then you’re in even worse shape than I thought.” He shook

his head at me, then looked past me toward Cocoa Cravings, where his *abuelo* was motioning him over. “I’ve got to get back to the shop.” He picked up his empty tray. “But since we’re going to be working next door to each other, I’m sure I’ll see you again. Better watch out. Optimism can be contagious, you know.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m immune.”

He turned to walk away, but as he did, a small penguin waddled in front of him, followed by two puffing, out-of-shape security guards.

“Come back here, Happy Feet!” one of them hollered.

Alex and I looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

He started walking again, calling over his shoulder, “See you around, Scrooge!”

I stared after him, surprised by how much I had laughed today.

“Break time’s over,” Mom said, tapping me on the shoulder. “I need you to help set up the next shot.” When I hesitated, Mom handed me a basket of candy canes. “Well, come on, Em! Get over there and spread some cheer.”

I sighed. This was going to be the longest holiday season of my life.