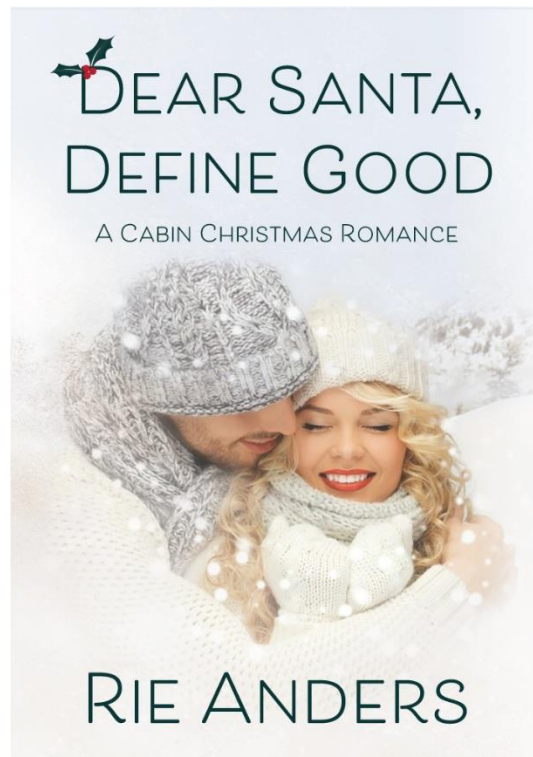


# DEAR SANTA, DEFINE GOOD

A CABIN CHRISTMAS ROMANCE



 *Rie Anders*

## CHAPTER 1

“Jacob! Wake up!” I pounded on my brother’s bedroom door as I ran down the hall, frantically tying the belt on my bathrobe on my way to the kitchen.

Mumbling to myself about how late we were, I put on a pot of coffee and pulled two microwavable egg sandwiches from the freezer.

My brother and I owned Brooks Adventure Outfitters in Jackson, Wyoming. While we don’t open the shop until 10 a.m., we had gone out the night before to celebrate our birthdays, and today...we were running late.

While the coffee was brewing and the sandwiches were cooking, I went back down the hall to get him. Pounding on his door, more firmly than before, I shouted, “Jacob? Jacob, wake up!”

Not hearing an answer, I opened the door and jerked my head back, eyes widening, cringing at the stench that hit me. My eyes watered, and when I looked to the bed...no Jacob. “Jacob?”

A loud moan came from his attached bathroom. “In here.”

I crossed his room and saw him lying on the floor, his back against the tub, arm resting on the toilet seat. “What the heck, Jacob? For goodness sake. Did you really drink that much last night?”

“I’m so sorry, Mia. I didn’t think I did, but then I woke up this morning feeling awful.”

He really did look absolutely miserable. Skin splotchy, eyes red, T-shirt...well, disgusting.

I flushed the toilet, wet a rag with cold water, and wiped his face, watching as his eyes started to close and his head lolled back.

“C’mon, take off your shirt, and let’s get you back in bed.”

He slouched forward and I pulled his shirt off and over his head, throwing it in the bathtub behind him to retrieve it later.

Jacob and I were twins. Yesterday had been our thirty-first birthday and, by the looks of him, he’d drunk *way too much*. The birthday was nothing monumental, and it had been on a Monday. Even so, the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar had been filled with friends willing to celebrate any occasion.

My curly blonde hair fell into my face as I leaned down to help him up. The smell of smoke from the bar last night had permeated the long strands, and I almost felt sick from the combination of awful scents. I needed a shower.

“C’mon big guy, you gotta help me.” My hands were under his arms, and I tried to lift him from the ground. He was well over six feet tall, a former linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks, as gorgeous as Chris Hemsworth, and solid as a bull. Or, since we live in Jackson, Wyoming ... a buffalo.

Jacob and I grew up in Laguna Beach, California. Our dad was a football coach for the San Diego Chargers. I loved the beach, but I was drawn to the mountains. My parents took me skiing at Snow King Mountain, in Jackson Hole, when I was six years old. I spent my entire young life trying to get back.

During that first visit, my dad had taken me on an overnight snowmobiling trip through Yellowstone Park. The guide took us through the snow-covered trees, along a path cut specifically for what he called sleds, and wound through the hills into an open pasture. This was the first time I experienced true exhilaration.

Settling in front of my big, burly dad, I recall him leaning around me so he could face me. We were on a so-called sled for two, and I was nestled in front of him so I wouldn’t fall off. He asked me if I was ready. I smiled gleefully, nodding my answer. He gently bonked his helmet to mine so I would know he understood me, and then he revved the throttle.

We shot out across the pasture like a rocket, and I screamed with delight. Laughing into the wind, I held on for dear life as my dad turned sharp, heading in a new direction. That moment solidified that wherever life took me, it was going to be on a snowmobile. I had found my passion.

Doing my best to get my brother from the bathroom to his bed, I heard him mumble against his chest, “I didn’t drink very much last night, Mia.”

My average height was causing me to struggle to keep him upright. I managed to get him to the bed, and he fell like a lumberjack onto it. Curling himself into a ball he started to shake. I stared down at him, and put my hands on my hips. “What’s wrong with you, then?”

Rheumy eyes stared back at me. “I think I’m sick.”

A flash of panic struck me. “Oh, no, no, no, no, no! You have that bachelor party coming in this afternoon.”

“You have to take them.” He started to heave, and I ran into the bathroom to grab the garbage can.

“Jacob!” I whined at him. “C’mon, you can take them. You’ll be better in a few hours, or days, and everything will be fine. Please don’t make me take a bunch of frat boys up to Racers Roost. I’ll kill one of them, I’m sure of it.”

Racers Roost was a six-bedroom log cabin my brother and I built together almost five years ago. Between my race winnings and Polaris royalties, and his NFL earnings, we sunk everything we had into Brooks Adventure Outfitters. The house was nestled deep in the forest, and it was where we took our customers when they joined one of our wilderness excursions.

His response was a robust hurl into the garbage can.

Closing my eyes, I lowered my chin to my chest and shook my head side to side. With resignation and a heavy sigh, I told him, “I’ll call Morgan, she might be able to work the shop while I’m gone.”

A grunt and a moan were all I heard from him as I left his room. I went back to the kitchen to call Morgan Archer, a friend of one of our employees.

As the phone rang, I poured myself a cup of coffee and then took the sandwiches out of the microwave. They had hardened, so I tossed them in the trash and sat down at the kitchen bar, waiting for Morgan to answer her phone.

She answered after a few rings and I proceeded to tell her my predicament.

“Oh, goodness, what exactly do you need from me?” She whispered. Her voice was muffled. I imagined her huddled between the book shelves of the library, where she worked her usual job, mumbling with her hand over her mouth.

“Jacob is sick and I need to pick up a party at the airport this afternoon. I was hoping you could come work in the shop until Cody and I get back.”

Cody was our employee. A twenty something year-old skier, snowmobiler, river-rafter, and mechanic-in-training. He showed up one day over a year ago and just made himself useful. He was

rangy and wore a man-bun. These days, he was indispensable to us.

“Oh sure, I can do that.”

She was going to hate me for my next words, so I said them in a rush. “And then I was wondering if you could work the store and check in on Jacob for the next three days.” I squinted my eyes shut and prayed she’d say yes.

“What?”

“I know, I know. But, now that Jacob is sick, I need to take this damn excursion since he won’t be able to work. I need Cody and Mac with me and everyone else has left for the holidays. There’s no one else.” I begged. “Please?... Please, please, please, please, please.”

“I can work the next two days, but I work on Friday, so Jacob needs to be better by then.” She tried to sound adamant, but I could hear the teasing lilt in her voice. I thought she might have a crush on Jacob, but I had more pressing problems than thinking about the two of them.

She told me she’d be at the shop at two-thirty and we hung up.

I finished my coffee, rinsed my mug in the sink, and reached for the aspirin in the cupboard above the microwave. Taking two for Jacob, I shook the bottle and took two for myself. A dull ache was already beginning behind my eyes and I needed to ward it off.

Jacob was lying flat on his bed, one arm thrown across his stomach, the other across his eyes. He was breathing heavily. I sat down on the edge of his bed, put my palm to his forehead, then gently nudged him awake.

Now that I knew he most likely had the flu; I spoke more softly to him. “Jacob. Jacob. You need to take some aspirin. Jacob, wake up.”

He groaned and slightly rolled himself to his side. Lifting himself up on one elbow he took the aspirin, put them in his mouth, and washed them down with the glass of water I handed him.

The pillows cushioned his fall back down to the bed, and I laughed at his misery. “You look pathetic.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

He waited a moment and then, without opening his eyes, asked if I got in touch with Morgan.

“Yes. She’ll be here this afternoon while I go get the party.”

“Good. That’s good.” His voice trailed off.

“You so seriously owe me for this.”

He was nodding off again. “Uh-huh.”

I covered him with the comforter and then went down the hall to my room to get ready.

When Jacob and I built the store, we added a second floor with a two-bedroom apartment. At one end of the hall was a door that acted as our front door and went down to a parking area in the back of the store. At the other end of the hall was the door that opened to a staircase that led into the store.

The apartment had a full-sized kitchen, a large living area, and we each had our own suites, with a bedroom, bath, and small office.

I showered quickly, washing my hair twice and applying a leave-in conditioner. I left it down so it could dry on its own.

Dressing for the day in my thermal long underwear, black stretch pants, and white turtleneck sweater, I pulled my fur-lined boots out from my closet, and pulled them on over knee-high socks.

The sun was shining today, but I had lived in Jackson long enough to know that the temperature was most likely in the teens. It would be biting cold outside.

Peeking in on Jacob before I left, I saw he was fast asleep. I pulled the blanket up over him and left the door open just a bit.

Hanging on the rack by the door was my fur-lined jacket, which I grabbed on my way out the door into the store. Before I stepped out, I glanced at the clock above the microwave ...10:02. Late, but not too bad.

I walked out onto the balcony that looked down into the store and locked our apartment door behind me.

Not only had I managed to live my dream, but my brother and I had built our business into something bigger than either of us had first imagined.

After college, Jacob had been drafted by the Seattle Seahawks. Four years into his career, he broke his leg. Both bones down near the ankle.

I'd left California right after high school to travel and compete in snowmobiling races. Polaris found me cute and inspiring - their words- and they started sponsoring me. Eventually, I became a face of the brand and traveled all over

promoting them. I moved to Jackson, Wyoming, permanently. When my brother was injured, he came to live with me while he recovered.

The sports doctor here in town told him that the way the bone had healed, he could never play again. He still walked with a bit of a crooked gait, but he pulled the cowboy thing and made it look like a swagger. It certainly did not ward off swooning girls, and I was constantly signing them up for rafting trips...the ones he led.

Jacob decided to stay in Jackson, and I was starting to tire of the traveling, so we settled on snowmobiling tours. Then we added white-water rafting. Followed by fly-fishing. Later, overnight excursions, which is when we built Racers Roost.

Now, we had four guides and a mechanic, and I was perfectly content. I had already won the World Championship Snowmobile Derby, basically the Indy 500 of snowmobile racing. I loved being able to stay here, in Jackson. It was my home.

Standing on the ledge, looking down into the store, I was proud of the business we had built. We had a section for fishing, a section for kayaks, a section for skiing, and of course, an apparel line.

Cody was unlocking the front door and I saw Mac enter through the back. He caught my eye and raised his green industrial coffee thermos to me. "Ready for the day, Princess?"

Descending down into the store I smiled at him. "Absolutely!"

I reached the bottom of the steps as Cody started the cash register. Mac came to a stop in front of me and I gave him my standard morning greeting. "Today looks like promise Mac, today looks like promise."

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