

NAUGHTY & NICE

A Cabin Christmas Romance

 *Rie Anders*

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CHAPTER 1

Summer

“Darling Media Group, this is Holly. How may I help you?” I answered the reception phone, smiling as my new boss Cat had instructed me. She was sure that smiling made me sound friendlier.

Cat Darling owned Darling Media Group, a boutique marketing and advertising company in Laguna Beach, California, and she was a big thing in the sports world. Most of her accounts were high-end extreme sports clients.

I’d worked for Cat for six months now, and nearly every week, surfboard and fitness products had been delivered to the office—gifts from her clients.

“Put Cat on.”

The deep voice caught me off guard and left me speechless. I blinked a few times and then looked out to the crushing surf of the Pacific Ocean. I’d run that strip of beach earlier this morning, so I could start my day calm and centered. To get that feeling back, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply before responding.

When I opened them again, the late summer blue sky shone against the horizon. I didn’t want to look away, but I had to. I looked back at the phone—the red light was still on, and he was still there.

Rather than telling the caller to ‘eff off’ and disconnecting the call, I fixed the smile back on my face. “And a very good day to you, Sir. How’s the weather where you are?”

Silence.

I waited. A breath came, and then an exhale. “May I please speak with Ms. Darling?” The man’s tone sounded strained, as if he finally remembered his manners but hadn’t wanted to use them.

“She’s unavailable at the moment. This is her assistant, Holly. How can I help you?”

“Ms. ...?”

“Tremaine. Holly Tremaine.”

“Ms. Tremaine, would you please have Cat call me?”

His tense and rapid speech bugged me. I wanted to poke him, however unprofessional that may be. I was tired of being unappreciated and talked down to. I might be new to this receptionist gig, but I was, well, had been, a talented set designer for the biggest production studios in California. But, not anymore.

I needed this job.

I pushed my nasty thoughts down and readied my pen to take a message. “And you are?”

“Ford Savage. She has my number.”

I wished he’d had the decency, or I should say, the *indecenty*, to hang up because I couldn’t control my laughter.

“Ford, as in the Mustang?” My words came out staccato. “What a ridiculous name.”

I’d definitely crossed a line, and his reply was swift.

“Are you planning on a long-term career with Cat, Ms. Tremaine?”

Crap.

Pissing off a potential customer was not the best way to stay in Cat’s good graces.

I swallowed my pride. “Mr. Savage, please forgive me. I was out of line. I will definitely pass along the message.”

“See that you do.”

The dial tone buzzed in my ear, and dread washed over me. I stood and then walked to the glass-encased conference room where Cat worked on a big campaign presentation.

My heels clicked on the high-gloss wood flooring as I crossed the office’s open floor plan.

She saw me coming, but I rapped my knuckles on the glass anyway and pushed the clear door open. “Got a minute?”

“Sure, come on in.”

She glanced at the junior designers seated at the coffee table. “Come back in fifteen?”

They nodded, stood from their chairs, folded their notepads, and excused themselves. The conference room door swooshed to a close.

All sides of the room looked out towards the rest of the office; it was like sitting in a fishbowl. As a designer, I appreciated the cool, industrial look she was going for in the old building.

Cat nodded her head toward the white leather and metal chair at the head of the table. “Sit.”

I sat, and she smiled at me, taking the seat across from me. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Better. I’m still a bit distracted.” I pulled on a strand of my hair.

“The lawsuit?”

“Yeah. It just seems to be dragging on.”

“No woman should ever have to go through what you did, Holly.”

I crossed my legs. “I shouldn’t have gotten that comfortable with the director. I thought his flirtations were just witty set banter.”

“Kirin thought the same thing when that fan tried to kill him. He’s always so nice to his fans. When that crazy stalker lady snuck into his house, he was disturbed. And a little heartbroken.”

Kirin? Right, Kirin was Alex. When they met, he dropped his stage name, hoping not to be recognized, and went by Kirin.

I nodded. “I think what makes it so hard is that in public, people cheered me on after I filed the class-action lawsuit, but, in private, those same people blacklisted me.”

“I understand.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m glad Kirin introduced us. I’m really happy to have your help. And I’d like to consider you a friend.”

I paused, a little uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. Cat was my boss. Alex was my friend.

Her brow furrowed. “You look thin. Are you eating?”

“I am. I’ve put back on a few pounds.”

She watched me.

For months, I ignored the whispers in the hallways and dressing rooms. For months, I hardly ate, and my hair fell out. I hated everything about me. But, now that I was less stressed, my curves looked less bony, and my short black bob had grown back. But, still, I looked goth. Almost heroin chic. After a roomful of corporate lawyers in suits turned everything I said or did into vile and slutty innuendos, I believed them. A belly button ring, the gladiolus tattoo on the back of my neck, and ‘I am enough’ tattooed on the inside of my forearm were all cries for help.

It wasn’t who I was, but damaging my outsides felt like a good way to manifest the ugliness I felt on the inside.

She looked down at my red Mary Jane heels and smiled. “You look pretty.”

I crossed my arms in front of myself. My breasts no longer filled out the front of my tan and white checked 1950s style gingham sundress. “Do you have any cheesecake?”

She laughed and then swiveled back and forth in the chair. “I don’t. But do you want to join Kirin and me for dinner?”

“I’d like that, yes.”

Getting back to business, I told her I had a message for her. “It was someone named Ford Savage.” I let out a little snicker as I handed her the note.

“Oh! Fantastic! I have been trying to land them for ages!” Her excitement made me groan.

“What? Why are you groaning?”

“Um, ah ...” Oh, Lord, she was going to kill me. “I kind of laughed at his name and might have been a little snarky.” I rushed on. “In my defense, he was *really* rude.”

Her eyebrows rose to the top of her forehead, and then her face sagged. “Did he say anything else?”

The storyboard on the wall caught my attention; it was uninspiring. “Is this a collaboration campaign?”

Her eyes darted to the board and then back to me. “Yes. Did he say anything else?”

I sighed and looked at my lap. “No, just to have you call him. Nothing else.”

She stood from the table, crossed her arms, and paced. At every turn, she bit her lower lip. “I’ve wanted to represent them for years. Savage Sportswear is big-time with extreme sports, heli-skiing, snowmobiling, and all of the other winter outfitters.” She stopped pacing and looked directly at me. My head jerked back. “I need you to find out everything you can about their company: demographics, annual reports, charities, everything. Find anything I can use to woo him over the phone.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Well, you obviously can’t answer a phone correctly.” She tried to make a joke of it, but we both knew it wasn’t. “You have three hours.”

I went back to my desk, opened my computer’s internet browser, and typed in Savage Sportswear. The website was masculine and edgy with a black, dark blue, and gray color scheme. A banner ran across the top of the site showing a helicopter emblazoned with ‘SAVAGE.’ Two skiers stepped off the helicopter into the snow.

I clicked through their products, extreme vacation packages, and list of contacts. Apparently, their corporate offices were here in Laguna Beach. How odd. Executives were listed, but there weren’t any pictures. The content was cliché and as expected, so I clicked off as soon as I found what Cat needed.

Out of curiosity, I searched for ‘Ford Savage.’ Images popped up, and I gasped. God bless! Tall, dark, and handsome didn’t begin to do him justice. Strong jaw, full lips, and a beautiful wide smile. He was well over six feet, solid, and an image of a Viking came to mind. Every picture showed him either half-naked, surfing, or dominating some extreme sport: skiing, rock-climbing, ice climbing, snowboarding. Ford Savage was the image of the company. Ford Savage was what they were selling.

The other half of the images showed him at various events. Different women draped themselves on him. They were so similar that they blended, but I didn't see the same face twice.

A picture of him in front of the surf shack down the street caught my attention. He played with a young girl: hung her upside down and spun her around. His smile was bright. Their faces were happy. The camera caught the spray of sand whipping from Ford's body as he twirled the girl around. The wind pulled his collar open and displayed his strong, tan neck. My fingers grazed the computer screen.

"Did you find what I needed?" Cat called from the doorway of the conference room.

No, but I found what I need. I pulled my eyes from the screen; she stood at my desk. I looked up at her with wide eyes.

"This guy is gorgeous."

CHAPTER 2

After she rolled her eyes and tsked at me, I typed up the information she'd asked for and sent it to her in an e-mail.

A little while later, I sent her a text letting her know I was leaving for the day and would meet her for dinner. I gathered my bag, put my Jackie-o sunglasses on my face, waved goodbye through the glass of the conference room, and stepped out onto the sidewalk of the Pacific Coast Highway.

This stretch of the highway went straight through the small 'downtown' area. It was late afternoon, so the highway was crowded with the work crowd coming home from the larger towns of Irvine and Newport Beach. Still, it was much more tolerable than the chaotic, noisy, dirty traffic of Los Angeles.

I'd parked my car in a small lot adjacent to the office building, and after getting in and buckling up, I drove to the Laguna College of Design to speak with the administrator about teaching in the Fall. After I left the studios, I applied to be an Art History instructor. I wanted to tell Cat about the interview, but she had become almost friendly today, and I felt a little guilty.

While Art History wasn't my major, I did know a little bit about art. I hoped my film studio experience would qualify me to teach.

The college campus's parking lot was empty, and I found a spot close to the art deco style building.

The dean met me at the door, grinning broadly as I walked up the ramp to meet her.

"So glad you could make it. Come on in."

She held the door for me. I thanked her and went through.

As we went through the building, she talked as she walked. I followed slowly, taking in the building around me. The wood-paneled walls, from the 70s, and multiple skylights brightened the halls. "I was very pleased to get your resume. You have had an impressive career."

"Thank you."

"The campus is quieter this time of year; only a few summer classes are offered to help transfer students catch up."

She reached a small office and motioned for me to enter.

Architectural Design magazines, academic books, Native American clay vases, and an array of art from around the world filled the office.

She laughed, "It's a lot, I know. One of these days I'll get it organized."

I smiled and sat down in the leather-covered accent chair in front of her desk.

With a heavy exhale, she sat down across from me. “That’s better. I needed a bit of a break. Planning next semester's instructors is a lot of work.”

I rested my hands on my lap, crossed my ankles, sat up as straight as possible, and answered, “I imagine so.”

“Well, I guess that’s why you’re here.”

“To organize your office?”

She paused her rambling and then laughed. “You’re funny.” She looked around as if seeing it for the first time. “I guess it is a bit of a mess. Not sure what I would do with an orderly office.”

I decided not to continue with my overly-friendly jokes and waited for her to get settled.

Despite her rambling earlier, she looked at me keenly, and got right to the point. “You don’t have an art degree.”

“No.”

“And you are currently working as a ...?”

She looked down at my resume, but I finished for her, “Receptionist for Cat Darling, the owner of Darling Media Group.”

She continued watching me.

“I answer her phone.” I added as proudly as I could. “And, help her prepare for briefings, and marketing pitches.”

“You’ve never worked anywhere other than for the studios.” Her voice was quiet, almost thoughtful. “You’ve worked on some impressive films. Why did you leave?”

This was a standard question from the research I’d done, so I knew she wasn’t trying to trap me, but answering it honestly might disqualify me. Still, I wanted to be honest with her.

“I had some problems with the director.”

Her face changed from curious to compassionate the moment I said ‘director’, and I almost cried when she said, “I see.”

The case had been all over the national news, especially in California. It was hard not to know about it.

“Tell me about yourself.” She sat back and waited while I talked about my philosophy on design.

I knew I wouldn’t be at the top of her list to hire, so I had to sell her on what I could do. I focused on how understanding history made sets believable. “In my previous position, I knew it was important to create something that was not only life-like and flawless but historically accurate. I challenged myself to find those little details that made a set something more.”

I paused, making sure she was engaged. Her eyes were steady and focused on me, so I continued.

“I’d check the facts. Does the scene take place in 1890, in a farmhouse on the prairie? Then the light can’t be a Coleman burner. Period movies must be historically accurate. It’s not Art History so much as it is cultural history. It’s how you transform fiction into real life. I believe my experience and knowledge will bring a lot to this college.”

When I finished, she leaned forward with her arms crossed and looked directly at me. “I’ll be candid. I like you. I think you’ve done great work, and you’re honest. But the board has very specific professional acumens that they adhere to. You will be a tough sell. However, we are close to the start of the school year, and I haven’t met anyone I like more than you.”

I waited, unable to tell which way she was leaning.

“I’d like to hire you, Holly, but I need to talk to the board.”

My left leg bounced excitedly. I hadn’t realized how desperately I wanted this job until she said that, and now, I could barely keep myself seated. “Thank you so much! I would be honored to work here.”

She laughed. “Please know nothing is official until I talk with the board.” She stood to walk me out. “I should know something by the end of the month. You’ll be hearing from me one way or the other. And if the answer is yes, I’m assuming you’ll accept.”

“Oh, yes, definitely!” I shook her hand vigorously, too excited to do anything less.

“Excellent! I’ll be in touch.”

Her tone wasn’t confident, and I felt disappointed that I wasn’t as qualified as I needed to be.

As I walked back to my car, I waved at her over my shoulder. Three weeks, I could wait three weeks.

In my car, I checked my phone: Cat had texted me the restaurant’s name. I drove there.

Feeling somewhat hopeful about the job opportunity, I smiled as I waited for Cat on the restaurant’s outside deck—until I saw her marching towards me through the main dining area.

When she stepped outside, she glanced around, and I waved to tell her where I was.

She strode confidently across the terra cotta tiles; her white pantsuit looked fresh and pretty against the backdrop of vibrantly colored flowers in clay pots strategically placed between the tables.

She wove her way through the tables on the patio and tilted her head to avoid running into the yellow and orange umbrellas extending over the diners.

She focused on me; her face pinched in confusion.

“What did you say to him?” She asked as she pulled one of the four wrought iron chairs from our table and sat down across from me.

“Um, who?”

“Ford, what did you say to him?” She put her handbag on the table, crossed her legs, and leaned towards me.

I hadn’t been polite, but now I regretted my outburst. I may have cost her one of the largest accounts she’d ever had.

I tried not to stutter defensively. “I told you that I laughed at his name, but I apologized right away. I didn’t say anything else.”

She waved the waiter over. “I’ll have what she has. Margarita?”

“Salty Dog.” I told the waiter.

He nodded, and Cat continued when he walked off. “He wants to give us his winter campaign. A trial run.”

“Cat! That’s fantastic! Why do you sound so frustrated? You should be ecstatic!”

She paused. “He wants you to design it.”

“I’m sorry. Design what?”

“The campaign.”

The blood rushed through my head, and it was difficult for me to concentrate. “I don’t understand.”

“Holly! What is wrong with you? What don’t you understand? He wants to give us the winter campaign, but you have to design it.”

“I’m not a marketing designer,” I said dumbly.

The waiter appeared with our drinks, and Cat took a gulp of hers before continuing. “I know. That’s what I told him. He didn’t seem to care. He said he loved the work I’d done for Patagonia and North Face, but he wanted something unique. He said, and I quote, ‘I’d like Ms. Tremaine to run it. We have two weeks. I’ll make all the arrangements. Please see that she’s on the jet.’ And then he hung up on me.”

I mumbled, “Yeah, he did that to me too.”

All I could think was that I wished I’d hung up on him. The words sunk in: Two weeks. Jet.

Her tone softened. “Seriously, Holly, is there anything you aren’t telling me?”

“Seriously, Cat, no.” I responded in the same tone, although a little more desperate. “What does he mean, ‘See that she’s on the jet’?”

“I don’t know. I checked my e-mail before I left work, and there was nothing. Let me check again.”

While she looked at her phone, I kept talking. “This is so ridiculous. I don’t know the first thing about what you do. What does he expect me to come up with that’s even remotely profitable? Or good?”

“Oh! Yep, here it is.” She interrupted me and began to read it to herself, mumbling the words as she read. Her eyes bugged out, and then she leaned back in her chair.

“What?”

“Wow!” Was all she said.

“What, wow? What wow?”

“He’s sending a private jet for you. He figures the two of you can knock out a campaign in two weeks.”

I reached for her phone. “Let me see that.” I read the highlights and then gently put her phone face down on the table across from me. I whispered. “He knows who I am.”

“He didn’t say anything about the lawsuit. How do you know?” She looked worried.

“It’s the way he said he wants a female perspective from someone that challenges societal and cultural assumptions. He doesn’t know me, only of me, and he thinks that if I have the courage to stand up for myself, then I can create something that is ‘in your face’.”

Silence settled between us as we contemplated this bizarre request.

Cat looked out towards the ocean. “I won’t take the job. I’ll tell him that I won’t sacrifice my brand and use someone that doesn’t know the business.”

“Really?”

She had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

I put my finger to my chin and stared out at the sparkling blue water. Seagulls cawed on the shore. A pod of seals dived in and out of the water from the rocky jut a few feet from the shoreline. I turned back to her and asked, “What if I could do it? What if, even if this is some kind of joke, I actually did a good job?”

“Holly, not only do you not know what you’re doing, I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

I weighed the options in my mind. “Maybe he just wants to punish me?”

“That’s sort of twisted. Why would he want to punish a receptionist? But, even more importantly, I don’t want any of my

designers to be subjected to anything remotely close to what you went through with that director.”

“I don’t know if I should be offended or touched by what you just said.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t seem to be saying the right things tonight. This just has me really confused.”

She smiled at me, but my mind already raced with possibilities. Even if I did get the college’s job, I would be back in time to take it. I smiled back at her.

“That’s kind of you, but I think I can do it. It’s just a set, really, right? I mean, I get his vision, I put it on a storyboard, and then I bring it to life. The only difference is that its media.” My words came out fast as I became more excited.

“But what about being alone with him?”

I tilted my head. “Will I be alone with him?”

“He said housing would be taken care of, but I don’t know if that’s his house or something different.”

“Wait, back up a minute. Why is he sending a jet if their corporate offices are here?”

She flipped her phone back over. “Here, I’ll read it to you.”

Clicking it open, she read, “Our driver, Mr. David Leeds, will meet Ms. Tremaine at the Jackson Airport. Housing has been arranged for Ms. Tremaine, and a private chef will be available at her disposal.” She looked at me over her phone. “It goes on a bit about non-compete clauses and a bunch of other documents that my legal team will look over, but that’s about it for you.”

“He has a home in Mississippi?” That was the only Jackson I knew of.

“No, Jackson Hole, WY. It’s near Yellowstone Park.”

“Wyoming? Like cowboys and buffalo?”

“And skiers and snowmobilers and extreme sports enthusiasts. Holly, have you not been paying attention to what I do?” She’d reached her limit with me, so this *definitely* wasn’t the best time to tell her I was looking for a real job.

Across the deck, Alex approached the table. She turned to see what I was looking at, and her face lit up. Alex and I had gone to college together at San Diego State University School of Theatre, keeping in touch through social media and then working together over the years on a few films. Alex was the odd man of Hollywood, preferring to keep to himself and dedicating most of his working time to writing screenplays. His focus on the screenplays was, most likely, what made him a highly sought-after actor.

Heads turned in recognition, with a few of them snapping a quick picture. A few mumbles of awe echoed through the restaurant as he walked by, but everyone kept a respectable distance from him.

He gave a few waves, nods and hellos to the fans, and continued.

When he reached the table, he leaned down to kiss Cat on the lips. “Hey, Beautiful.” Moving to my side of the table, he gave me a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. “Hey, Holly.”

A light ocean breeze ruffled my dress, and I put my hands in my lap, holding down the hem.

“Hey, Alex. I see you are still Laguna’s darling boy.” I teased.

“They were really supportive during that stalker incident. I appreciate them a lot.”

Finally, he noticed the unsettled energy bouncing between us and lowered himself into a chair—slowly. “Um, hashtag sour faces, what did I miss?”

“I’m going to Jackson Hole.”

“Wyoming? Cool!”

I rolled my eyes. “No, not cool. Not cool at all.”

- END CHAPTER 2 -

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Season’s Greetings

Rie