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SNOW & MISTLETOE

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 *Rie Anders*

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## Chapter 1

“You’re what?”

The words, ‘We’re going to have to let you go,’ hung in the air between us. I stared across the pretentious, gaudy mahogany desk at my boss, who was—at this moment in time—firing me. Well, he wasn’t so much firing me as laying me off. Regardless, the outcome was the same: I no longer had a job.

“I’m sorry, Caitlyn.” He always called me by my formal name. My name is Caitlyn Darling, but I have gone by Cat for as long as I can remember. It took me a long time to realize my last name was actually Darling. I’d always thought my teachers were calling me, “Cat, darling.”

My boss’s mouth was still moving, and I refocused my attention on him. “The revenues for this year just won’t sustain additional staff next year, and we thought it would be best to give you notice before the holidays.”

His fat, ruddy face was blurring in front of me, and I focused on Elliott Bay out the window behind him so that I could clear my vision. The clear blue sky was reflected in the bay below, and gave the illusion that it was much warmer than today’s 37-degree temperature. The weather forecasters had said snow for Christmas, but current conditions didn’t make that seem likely. Weren’t they wrong most of the time anyway?

He continued, “You can leave today, and we’ll pay you through the end of the year.”

I thought to myself, *Maybe if you sold this ugly desk and your Cadillac Escalade, you could keep me for another year.*

Taking a deep breath, I wrung my fingers together, and tried not to cry. Working in advertising had been my dream job right out of college. *Starling Design’s* clients included Patagonia, K2, Sherpa Adventure Gear, and a number of other outdoor companies in Seattle. Helping them shape their image gave me a great deal of satisfaction. I loved knowing that my designs could inspire the public to purchase their products, and be a part of the outdoor lifestyle they were selling.

My graduation had been postponed a year because I’d interspersed my academic semesters with internships. My parents had wanted me to get a “respectable” degree, but I had never wanted to do anything other than graphic design. We didn’t have much money growing up, and they were worried I would always be poor. We lived east of Seattle in a really small town called North Bend. My mom worked at the public library, and my dad was an art teacher.

I, apparently, believed in myself a little more than they did, and started entering my work in design contests and graphic arts competitions. I eventually caught the eye of K2 skis, and they hired me to freelance on a winter campaign.

The campaign didn’t pay me very much, but it was enough to boost my confidence in my talent, and I applied to Cornish College of the Arts and was accepted. Tuition was incredibly expensive, so I applied for financial aid and scholarships, freelancing and submitting my work to contests in my spare time. All of my hard work paid off when I was hired at *Starling Design*, where I’ve been since I graduated six years ago.

I’d never been let go before, and I felt sick to my stomach. “Mr. Peterson, I’m unclear about how this works. Is there someone in HR who can help me?”

He slid a packet over to me, nodded, and said, “Your final paycheck and 6 weeks’ severance are in there. One week for every year you’ve been with us. You have a week to submit the acknowledgment forms and sign up for medical insurance. You will need to leave your key card, badge, and computer with security on your way out today.” His chin

was folding over the neck of his shirt, and I briefly wondered if he could breathe. I also couldn't understand how he had risen to Vice President of the creative design team when he clearly knew nothing about art.

It was 3 o'clock on the Friday afternoon before the Christmas holidays. I was leaving Monday morning to go skiing in Aspen with my boyfriend, Sam, and now all I could think about was that I needed to find a new job. Sam was going to flip out. I was going to flip out.

"Do I have time to clean out my desk?" I sat primly in front of him. My 4-inch stilettos were tapping furiously on the plush carpet of his office, and I was grateful he couldn't hear them. Tap, tap, tap—my leg bounced frantically.

He leaned across the table, and I saw sweat beading on his forehead. Was he going to have a heart attack? *Please, dear God. Please let him have a heart attack so I can keep my job.*

I wasn't that fortunate.

"Your accounts have already been transferred over to Paul Hanley. You're free to clean out your desk now and leave." He shuffled some papers around on his desk, and then looked in a drawer, seemingly uncomfortable that I was still sitting here.

What the heck? Paul Hanley, that doofus? My self-esteem just fell through the floor. Paul was a junior design artist and had only been with the company since June. Little levers in my head started clicking like dominoes, and I suddenly remembered that Paul was the owner's nephew.

It was time to put my big girl panties on, hold my head high, and walk out of this shithole of an office. I couldn't argue. I couldn't even think straight, and even if I could, nothing was going to change the outcome.

I stood to my full 5 feet 9 inches (well, 5'5 without shoes), and gathered up the papers from his desk. Tears were brimming in my eyes, and I fought to keep them from falling in front of him.

"I assume that you will give me a good reference?" It was taking all my gumption not to pick up the stapler off his desk and throw it at his head.

"Of course. Of course. Everything you need to know is in your packet. Phone numbers for employment verification and unemployment—everything."

Ouch! Unemployment. I hadn't even gotten that far in my thinking. He was ten steps ahead of me.

"Right. Unemployment. Of course." A tear fell from my eyes to the packet in my arms, and I knew I needed to escape. Fast. Before I had a complete meltdown.

I reached across the desk to shake his hand, and he heaved himself halfway out of his chair to return the gesture.

"Thank you for the generous severance, and I hope you have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year." I added in my head, *You, bad Santa.*

Calmly—but with purpose—I went to the door, left his office, and shut the door quietly behind me. Continuing down the hall to the elevators, I waited for the one that would take me back down to my floor and eventually out the front door.

When it arrived, I stepped in with a few members of the accounting team.

"Hey, guys, leaving for the holidays?" I pasted a smile on my face.

Nerdy Steve responded, "We're headed to the Owl and Thistle for a few drinks, if you want to join us."

"Oh, thanks, but I have a lot to do before the holidays. I'm going to have to pass, but you guys have fun. I love that place."

One of the other accountants asked me if I had plans for Christmas. Saved by the bell, the elevator stopped at my floor, and I stepped out.

When the elevator doors shut behind me, I stopped in the middle of the hall and sent a quick text to Sam.

*Sam, please call me*

Placing my phone back on the top of the packet, I quickly went to my office to gather my things. The offices were all quiet, since most of the designers had already left for the weekend. As I came around the corner, I noticed a crate of boxes and a security guard ready to help me. He saw me, and I stopped in my tracks, put one finger up to indicate “one minute,” and turned back towards the bathrooms.

As soon as I entered the bathroom, I locked myself in a stall and started to cry. At first it was just the silent kind: the one that digs deep into the pain, but doesn’t make any noise until you hit the point of no return. Then I sobbed. The tears fell from my eyes, and I crossed my arms in front of me in a hug. This was unbelievable.

When my tears subsided, I took some deep breaths and tried to call Sam. It went to voicemail, so I hung up and exited the bathroom stall.

The guard was still at my office door when I returned, and I greeted him with a smile. “You must be here to walk me out?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded coldly without a smile. *Ma’am?* Maybe he can remove the knife he just verbally shoved in my heart.

“Right. Okay.” I smiled a closed-lip smile at him and took one of the boxes from the stack. I stood in the middle of my office and just looked around. There wasn’t anything I wanted except a few pictures of me with my family, and one of me and Sam taken at Cannon Beach last spring.

I took my Longchamp tote out of my overhead and stuffed my pictures in the bag. “I’m ready.”

Walking in front of him, I kept my head up, and prayed I wouldn’t see anyone I knew. They would all know soon enough. And I wasn’t fired, so there was that. At least, I kept reminding myself I wasn’t fired, just let go. It became a mantra in my head.

When we reached the glass front doors of the building, I turned to the guard and handed him my badge, which also acted as my computer key. He took it from me unsmilingly, and walked away. I stared after him in disbelief. This was so surreal.

I exited the front door and walked across the street to the parking garage. I quickly located my Fiat Spider convertible and settled in for the drive...where? Home? I guess. When I buckled in, I texted Sam again: *I’ve had a crappy day, please take me to dinner tonight... why aren’t you answering me?*

Staring out the windshield of my car, I saw on the dashboard that it was only three-thirty. The last thirty minutes had felt like a lifetime. Sam and I usually had plans on Fridays, but maybe he was working late to get ready for our trip.

Every year for Christmas, he and his family rented a house in Aspen, and this year, he’d asked me to go with him. Christmas was my favorite holiday. I wanted to be with my family, but this year, my younger sister and her husband were in San Francisco with a new baby and didn’t want to travel. It was a perfect Christmas to go skiing with Sam and his family.

Sam and I met on a Saturday evening wine cruise almost two years ago. My last roommate was getting married, and she wanted a wine cruise to be her bachelorette party.

When I’d started at Cornish, I’d rented a room in a house on Queen Anne with two other girls, Shaye Richards and Erin McAllister. Shaye was a quiet girl, and kept to herself, but Erin and I were always out at the clubs and local bars. Shaye bought her own house a few years after we all graduated, and we rented her room to Susan Gray.

Susan was the one getting married. And ironically, she was marrying Ned Fox, so she would be Susan Gray Fox.

The night of the party, all the girls had met at our house. A party bus limo had picked us all up there, and I had planned to call Uber for anyone who needed a ride home after the event.

When we arrived at the dock for the two-hour cruise, I saw Sam immediately. He was a golden boy across a sea of Seattle grunge. I tripped getting out of the bus, and he grabbed me as my heel caught on the curb.

“Easy, there—you ok?” I could have sworn I saw a sparkle on his tooth.

“I’m fine, yes, thank you.” I stuttered a bit before brushing imaginary lint off of my black cocktail dress.

“You girls going on the wine cruise tonight?” I bristled at his use of the word “girls,” but ignored it and beamed up at him.

“Yes, my friend Susan is getting married next weekend. This is her bachelorette party, of sorts.” The girls were still unloading off of the bus, and wandering towards the ticketing booth where we would board the small 200-passenger cruise ship for the evening.

“And you?” I stood next to him as others joined him.

“No, I’m not getting married next weekend.”

Blushing, I started to say, ‘You know what I mean,’ but then I looked into his sparkling blue eyes and saw that he was laughing at me.

He saved me by adding, “I’m entertaining some clients tonight, and I thought this would be a cool Seattle event to share with them.”

I was so overwhelmed by his charm, I lost track of all the girls from the bus. Frantically looking around for them, biting my lower lip in confusion, I said, “I seem to have lost my friends.”

He saw my discomfort and said, “Come on, join us. We’ll find them.”

I ended up spending most of the evening with him, and when the boat returned to the dock after cruising around Elliott Bay, he asked for my number.

He called me the next day, and we’ve been together ever since.

Except for now, when he wouldn’t answer his phone.

I texted him one more time before I drove out of the garage.

*Sam, I’m headed home. See you there?*

I drove up First Avenue towards Queen Anne hill, to the three-bedroom house I rented with Erin. It was just the two of us now, since Susan had moved out. We liked the quiet, and since we were making more money than we had in the past, we didn’t need a third person to share the rent. We had turned the third bedroom into an office and workout room, and I would use both when I got home.

Parking my car on the back street behind the house, I went down the steps that led into our backyard, and through the back door into the kitchen. The kitchen led into the dining room on the left, which circled into the living room, which had a picture window that looked out over Lake Union. The living room led around to the front foyer, where a grand staircase went upstairs to the three bedrooms and one bathroom.

The stairs creaked like those in old houses do, but other than that, the house was quiet. Erin was probably still at work.

My room was in the back, looking towards the back yard. I changed into yoga pants and a bra-tank, and then I checked my phone. Nothing from Sam. Starting to get worried, and a little frustrated, I called his office before I went to the office/pseudo-workout-room.

“Global Marine Insurance, this is Jeanette. How may I help you?” Sam’s secretary answered, and I was so relieved to hear her voice, I audibly sighed.

“Jeanette, it’s Cat, is Sam there?”

Her voice was clipped and panicky when she responded. “Oh, hi, Cat. Uh, no. He left already.”

Cradling the phone against my ear, I went into the office and sat down at my desk.

“Okay, well, I’ve been trying to reach him, and he’s not responding. If he checks in, would you please let him know I called?”

“I sure will. You have a good holiday. Good-bye.”

Holding my phone away from me, I stared at it in shock, surprised at her clipped hang-up.

I set my phone next to my computer and logged on, waiting for my email to come up. The very first one was from Sam.

To: Cat Darling  
From: Sam Stevens  
Subject: I’m sorry

Cat,

I’m sorry I’m doing this via email. There just never seemed to be a good time or a good place to do this.

For the past few months, I have been seeing someone else, and we have grown very close. I’m taking her to Aspen, and I’m ending my relationship with you.

I wish you the very best in life, and I’m so grateful to have shared such a wonderful time with you.

Merry Christmas,  
Sam

“What. The. Fuck.”

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