

## Chapter One

*The buttery sweet scent of fresh mince pies teased Ashley as she sipped her hot chocolate. Snuggling deeper into the overstuffed sofa, she watched Santa's feet emerge from the chimney. He wriggled his girth backward to free himself, displaying an impressive plumber's crack above the fur-trimmed red suit bottoms before he stood and hiked up his pants. She stifled a giggle, startling him. He spun around, his elbow cracking into her temple...*

Ashley woke with a panicked gasp as a man tumbled into her bed, knocking his skull against hers and cursing loudly enough to make her realize this was no dream. It was a potential nightmare. She struggled to free herself from under him and fought for breath to scream.

"Bloody hell!" he yelled, apparently not lost for breath himself. "What the—?"

Ashley answered with a sharp fist to his eye, and he cursed again.

The weight lifted from her, and Ashley reached in the dark for the lamp next to her bed only to grasp air. Twisting to her left, she blinked as her eyes adjusted and told her she wasn't imagining things. No lamp, no bedside table. Where was her furniture?

A hand grabbed her hip and she kicked out, connecting with something soft that made the man squeal like a rich girl who got a pony on Christmas morning. His hand slid free and a loud *thump* told her he'd landed on the floor. *Don't give him a chance to yank you down with him. Escape!* But one of her legs was still tangled in the comforter, so she grabbed a pillow and beat it over his head while she thrashed to get free.

"Stop," he gasped, "...love of God."

She raised the pillow over her head, ready to deliver death by feathers, when her eyes finally got used to the semidarkness. The room was dully lit by a streetlamp casting its light through a thin curtain. *Her* room faced away from the street and stayed dark all night. A small table and lamp stood on the right side of the bed, not the left. The walls were painted a deep, dark color. Maybe red. Not the bright sunshine yellow of her room. Masculine, antique-looking furniture lined the walls. Not the cheapo build-it-yourself-with-instructions-half-translated-from-Chinese that she could afford. And the man—who'd used the word *bloody* as a curse—lay curled up on a wooden floor like a newborn with a tummy ache. Real wood, not linoleum designed to look like wood.

Crap. She was in London, not San Diego. And this house was the one she'd swapped her

own for during the holidays. Double crap.

“Who are you?” She glared at the man on the floor, tightening her grasp on the pillow and judging the distance to the bedroom door in case he gave the wrong answer.

“Oliver,” he groaned. “Oliver Stansfeld. You’re in my bed.” Still grimacing, he cupped his package with one hand while the other protected his face from further pillow attack.

“Oh, no.” Mortal terror quickly ebbed away, replaced by a different kind of panic. Horrified, she slapped her hand over her mouth. *I’ve been asking Santa for a man for ten years, and this is what I do to him?* She lowered the pillow. “I’m so sorry. Can I...um, can I help you with anything?”

He rolled to his knees but stayed hunched over, his forehead resting against the floor. For the first time she noticed that someone had unwrapped him. Her Christmas gift was nekkid. He panted, in through his nose and out through his mouth, clearly trying to get a grip on the pain. She gave him a few moments and tried to ignore the way his deep breaths accentuated the muscles bunched across his back and rounding over his taut backside.

*Stop perverting. He’s hurt, and you just attacked him in his own home.* “Do you need an ice pack?”

He groaned again. Shaking his head, he said, “No ice. Just another moment of silence. Please.”

Oh, crud. He was polite even when she’d nearly smashed his family jewels. Maybe that was a British way of coping with agony. Would he kick her out of his house? Surely he would understand that she’d thought he was an attacker. She’d saved for this trip for five years and she was finally here, ready to live her childhood fantasies of snow, figgy pudding and men who called each other *guv’nor*, but she’d just gouged the man’s testicles for heaven’s sake.

Hospitality only went so far.

“I’m *so* sorry—”

“Shh.” He pressed a finger to his lips, still cringing. She held herself completely still until Oliver took one last deep breath and pushed himself up to kneel below her, covering his groin with both hands. He let out a pained-sounding sigh and finally met her eyes. Blinked. Then seemed to look more intently.

Holy Christmas miracle, the man had the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. Even with only a touch of light to illuminate the room, she could tell they were a wintry blue like ice, but without

the coldness. In fact, they warmed up as a wry smile touched his lips and shone even brighter because they were offset by his mop of dark hair.

“Sorry I startled you,” he said, his voice still somewhat strained. “I didn’t expect to find Goldilocks in my bed. I take it you’re one of the San Diego women I’ve swapped houses with?”

She nodded. “But...what are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in San Diego.”

He reached for her and she stiffened. *Oh*, he wanted the pillow. Fair enough. She let it go and he covered his crotch, making her bite back her disappointment. *Bad girl. Man in pain.*

“Technically speaking, not quite,” he said. “I should be in a plane above Canada right now, but Mother Nature and Heathrow have scuppered my plans.”

Her brows drew together, and he explained. “The runways are covered in ice. They boarded us, then made us sit on the tarmac for five hours before announcing the airport was closing. No flights in or out today.”

“You’re kidding! At Heathrow?”

“It was a catastrophe.” He grimaced. “The staff said we were best off coming home and trying again tomorrow, so I’m stuck here for another night instead of on a sunny beach. I’m sorry, I figured your flight had been canceled too. When did you get in?”

“Seven this morning.”

“Ah. You must’ve been one of the last ones allowed to land. And no problems?”

She shrugged. Did Brits often have conversations naked? “The plane skidded a little when it landed. The train to Paddington was fine but catching a bus was harder than I thought. Apparently a lot of buses were canceled because the roads were too icy.”

He blinked up at her. “You took a *bus* to Shoreditch from Paddington? That must’ve taken nearly as long as the flight from L.A.”

The memory of her first London adventure made her smile. “I took *three* buses here from Paddington. And it took about two hours. Most of that time was waiting for the next bus. I’ve never been to London before, so I wanted to see everything. I didn’t want to travel underground.”

“A taxi would’ve been much easier.”

“And much more expensive.”

He inclined his head in agreement. “But with three of you sharing—”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you. My roommates backed out at the last minute. I’m here alone.”

*Alone.* Yes, she was alone for Christmas... again. Not quite the perfect vacation she'd imagined, but at least she was here.

"Wait," he said, eyes narrowing, "I'm supposed to be staying at your place. By myself."

She rushed to reassure him. "Don't worry. It's still all yours. Kendall fell in love and decided to spend the holidays with her boyfriend, and Devon's mother had to be rushed to the hospital last week so she's in the Bay Area." She shrugged, making her oversized pajama top slip over her shoulder. She unconsciously pulled it back up, but his gaze followed her movement, making her very much aware that she sat in his bed braless while he kneeled on the wooden floor. Naked. "Yep. It's just me here for Christmas."

His gaze stayed on her no-longer-bare shoulder. "That'll be lonely, won't it?"

Her smile strained a little before brightening. "Maybe. But I've been saving for this vacation for years, and my flight was non-refundable. So I'm going to have the best damn Christmas of my life."

Suddenly looking uncomfortable, he cleared his throat. "I'll, um... I'll let you get back to sleep, then. I'll be in the spare room downstairs if you need anything."

"Oh no! This is your bed. I should go."

He held up his hand to stop her when she shifted to get off the bed. "Please. It's yours while you stay here." With a playful wink, he said, "I'd never forgive myself for kicking a woman out of my bed."

She bit back her smile and watched as he stood, pretty awkward with the pillow still clutched to his stuff. Sadly, he managed it without exposing himself and said, "Sleep well. I hope the jet lag's not too bad."

"You too." She cringed. "I mean, about sleeping well. Not the jet lag thing. You're from here."

He threw her a panty-melting grin before striding out of the room with a surprising amount of dignity, considering he was bare-ass naked and he'd been bested in a pillow fight by a girl.

\*

*Peppermint.* The scent wove its way into his dreams, enveloping him in childlike sweetness and

excitement before reality crashed in to remind him of all that had been stolen from him. All that he'd destroyed.

Consciousness swept the cobwebs from the sleepy corners of his brain until he finally gave up and opened his eyes. *Peppermint*. He could still smell it. Finally awake, he detected another smell alongside it. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose.

*Chocolate*. Pure, sinfully rich chocolate. His neighbors must...

No, not his neighbors. His guest—the one he'd never planned to meet in person. They'd both signed up to a website that helped people trade houses for their holidays. As much as he wanted to avoid Christmas, he hadn't wanted to spend two weeks in a hotel so the solution had seemed perfect. Have a holiday in someone else's home—a home in a warm climate where it wouldn't feel like Christmas—and pretend it was his for a while. His home on a California beach. His life without memories.

But one whiff of peppermint and chocolate brought Claire right back to him.

*Stop being pathetic*. Throwing his duvet to the side, he pushed himself out of bed and made for the door, only to have a draft of chilly air remind him he was naked. *Shite*. Not only was he growing colder and less impressive by the second, but last night he'd dumped his suitcase in the entryway and stripped on his way up the stairs, desperate to get to bed after such an exhausting, frustrating day. Somehow he would have to cross the living room and mount the stairs to his bedroom where he could grab some clothes—all without knowing where in the house his guest was.

What had his footie coach always told him in school? *Remember the six Ps: Prior preparation prevents piss-poor performance*.

Except he hadn't been in a fit state to prepare for anything last night, when he'd fallen into bed naked and landed on a strange woman—clearly frightening the life out of her. Smashing his still-throbbing nuts seemed to have calmed her down, but his strolling through the flat starkers would only convince her he was a sex pest.

Not that he would be around for long. Surely Heathrow would be open by now. But still... He glanced around the room for anything that might cover his pride. Nothing in the wardrobe—Claire's nurse had cleared it out when she'd left. The pillow had worked last night, but it'd been dark so his guest probably hadn't seen his arse hanging out. That left the curtains or the duvet.

Yanking the duvet off the bed, he wrapped it around his waist. It was thick with feathers, making him feel like the freakish mutant offspring of a human woman and the Michelin man. He waddled out the door and into the living room, where his houseguest sat curled on the couch in her pajamas. Cute pajamas—the all-in-one kind with feet and a hoodie. They were mint green, covered with holly and smiling snowmen, and looked fleecy. Inexplicably, warmth began creeping through his body again.

She sipped from a steaming mug and focused on a hardback book laid across her lap, giving him a chance to see her in the lamp's soft light. Goldilocks, indeed. Pale blond hair curled around her shoulders and beyond to nestle against her breasts, which he sadly couldn't see anything of since she was swaddled in fabric. The only skin he could see—her face—was lightly tanned, the kind of tan that spoke of days outside in a sunny climate rather than hours spent baking under a heat lamp. He couldn't make out the color of her eyes, downcast as they were on her book.

He must've swayed closer because she looked up and smiled when she saw him. *Brown eyes*. Like dark chocolate.

"Morning," she said, her voice still husky with sleep. "I hope I didn't wake you. I couldn't sleep and didn't want to waste a second of this beautiful day."

Her enthusiasm smacked him in the face. It just seemed so...*American*. When was the last time the prospect of *anything* had put such a joyful expression on his face, or even got him out of bed before sunrise?

Probably Christmas when he was seven. He'd sneaked downstairs early and seen that Santa had left a bike with his name on it. His dad had still been speaking to him and taught him how to ride it. Suddenly uncomfortable, he cleared his throat. "No, you didn't wake me." Though he did notice the peppermint smell grew stronger out here. "Did you figure out the kettle all right?"

Her brows drew together. "Kettle?"

"The tea kettle. For boiling water." Wait, she was American. "Or are you drinking coffee? Did you find the cafetière?"

Her confusion only seemed to grow, but he couldn't figure out what he'd said to flummox her.

"No...I brewed my special peppermint hot chocolate recipe."

Ah, that explained the smells. They reminded him that he needed to check Heathrow's website and get the hell out of here before he drowned in other people's Christmas cheer. Instead, he shuffled farther into the room. "And what's special about your recipe?"

She snuggled deeper into the sofa pillows and raised the mug to her lips again. *God*, those lips. Wide and tipped upward at the corners, smiling even as she sipped. She looked so sensuously cuddly that he was filled with a strange longing to collapse next to her and wrap her happiness around him.

"First, you start with really high-quality chocolate—the luxury stuff you can't find in supermarkets. I walked around the neighborhood yesterday and found a specialist chocolate shop at Spitalfields market. Mmm..." She closed her eyes in mock ecstasy. The warmth he'd felt turned to molten heat and headed south for the winter. *Good Lord*. Soon his duvet wouldn't be thick enough to hide her effect on him. *It's morning. That's why. Just a delayed good morning from my todger*. Except the quality of this semi-erection was distinctly different than morning wood.

Obviously unaware of his dilemma, she continued. "Then you use milk—" she raised a brow, managing to look like an angel about to give someone a telling-off—"not water."

He struggled to contain his grin, twisting his face into a look just as severe as hers. "Of course. Never water. Sacrilege."

"Exactly."

"Let me guess the third ingredient. Peppermint Schnapps?"

She gasped. "At eight in the morning? What d'you think I am, a lush? No way. I crumble a candy cane into the mug and stir until it melts. It's delicious. Want to try some?"

She held her mug out to him in a way that somehow came off as sweetly innocent instead of overfamiliar. But a thought bounced into his mind—a thought spoken with Claire's voice—and he shook his head to ward it off. *Yummy! Drink it, Ollie*.

"Are you sure?" she asked, and he realized two things at once. First, that she'd taken his headshake as a negative instead of an attempt to rid himself of the voices in his head. Probably a good thing. Second, he didn't know her name. He knew there were three women living in the beach house he'd swapped his house for, but which one was she? She'd said some names last night, but he'd been too distracted by her momentarily bare shoulder in the intimacy of his moonlit bedroom to pay close attention. "I'm sure. Thank you. Um...this is rather embarrassing,

but I didn't catch your name."

She set the mug on the old leather travel trunk he used as a coffee table and stuck out her hand. "I'm Ashley. Ashley Turner."

"Lovely to meet you, Ashley Turner." *Ashley with the soft, warm hands and smile that could light up the Highlands in the dead of winter.* He cleared his throat. "I have a couple of mates named Ashley."

"Really?"

"Mmm-hmm. They're both men."

She grinned bigger. "Well, I'm not."

Yeah, he'd caught that. More the pity that she was here in London and not in San Diego, where he could flirt with a holiday romance. Which reminded him... "I need to see when my flight's going today."

She gave him an encouraging nod and turned back to her book, seeming to forget about him with almost insulting ease. After standing there awkwardly watching her for a second, he finally shook off his lust and crossed the room to his carry-on bag. When he bent to unzip it, though, his duvet slipped and fell to the floor. He scrambled and yanked it back up, but not before he heard a suspicious choking sound.

Ashley coughed, slapping at her chest.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Mmm-hmm." Her cheeks had turned peppermint red. He tried not to laugh as she fumbled an attempt to make him think she hadn't been watching him. Waving at her book, she hurriedly explained, "Ghost of Christmas Future just showed up. Startles me every time."

"Uh-huh." He pulled out his laptop, took it to the kitchen table while keeping a firm hold on his duvet, booted the computer up and opened Heathrow's website.

Then cursed. Loudly.

"What's wrong?"

Raking his fingers through his hair, he yanked hard and swore again.

"Oliver?"

"Airport's closed. All flights canceled. All day." Three days before Christmas and one of the world's busiest airports was closed due to a cold snap they'd been unprepared for. Didn't that just say it all? If America was the land of optimism, Britain was the home of everything going

tits-up. God, he wanted to bask in the California sunshine so badly he could taste the coconut sun cream, but instead he was stuck in Blighty, surrounded by twinkle lights, merry pub-goers and too much snow.

And memories of a Christmas-mad young woman who'd been stolen from his life far too early. A woman who had no Christmas future, thanks to his recklessness.

A tentative hand touched his shoulder, and he twitched in surprise. Ashley pulled out the chair across from him and sat down, propping her elbows on the table. "I'm sorry, Oliver."

"Ollie," he said automatically.

"Ollie," she repeated softly. "You'll get there tomorrow. There's no way they can keep the airport closed for two full days. In the meantime..."

She smiled, a smile so full of promise that his interest piqued again. Suddenly he could think of at least a half dozen pleasant ways to forget about being snowed in. He cocked a brow and felt one side of his mouth lifting in a Grinch-like grin. "Yes?"

She leaned forward and whispered, "Why don't you come Christmas tree shopping with me?"