



# **BROOKE CAMPBELL**

# not! Just a Holiday Romance



# First published by Brooke Campbell 2025

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#### First edition

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# What Was She Thinking?



Sal shifts to try to get her legs comfortable in the narrow space and ignores her seatmate's glare when her elbow slides off of the armrest on his side.

Go ahead. Say something. I dare you.

All she needs is an excuse. Then she doesn't care how many air marshals are on this plane, she'll happily knock his lights out, hobbled as she is or not. Unfortunately, he zips his lips and Sal loses the best shot she's had in hours to relieve some of the frustrated anger tightening her shoulders. Anger that's been building steadily since she and her dirt bike forcefully parted ways two weeks ago. Now her baby—the Honda CRX450 that is her pride and joy—is in the shop, and her right leg is trussed up like a mummy.

She can't blame her anger on pain. After two weeks, it's manageable. She can't even blame it on herself for wrecking her prize dirt bike. No, she can only point to one thing chapping her

ass with increasing ferocity. More than anything, she despises needing help. Well, that's not true. She hates accepting help with a passion that far surpasses needing the help. And ever since the surgeon had to screw the puzzle pieces of her ankle back together, she hasn't had a choice.

Sal glares at the seatback in front of her. Why was she too damn proud to let the flight attendant exchange her economy seat with the person at the front so her cast-covered leg would have more room? But honestly, after that guy practically ran her down with a wheelchair, which she vehemently refused, she couldn't take much more help. She's the one people depend on, not the other way around.

By the time Sal makes it off the plane, she isn't the only one grumbling. She can't blame anyone who hurries to get around her, even when they jostle her. She was pretty slow and awkward trying to get down that damn narrow aisle on crutches, and she held people up in her determination not to be the last to deplane. Not to sit there docilely waiting for the wheelchair. When she feels her ears heating up, it isn't hard to cover embarrassment with her new friend, Fury. In fact, she does it so well, that by the time she hobbles off the shuttle van and gets her first look at the resort, no one she shared a ride with will even look in her direction as they hurry inside to start their holiday vacation.

Sal's ears ring with the sudden silence and she takes in a deep breath of clean, frigid air. She savors the cold as it expands her lungs. Her exhale floats around her and she amuses herself imagining it's smoke from all that cooling ire in the center of her chest.

The Vermont resort glitters in the snowy twilight with thousands upon thousands of lights spilling warm glowing

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puddles in the growing dark. Festive garlands, ribbons, and glass balls drape and hang from every possible surface. Against the snow, the bright colors and brighter lights are shown off in all their glory. Tell-tale columns of smoke streaking the sky promise hot fires and warming beverages.

Her attention is drawn by the setting sun. Sal leans heavily on her crutches to watch the fiery ball sink behind peaks of the Green Mountains, painting both sky and snow crimson-gold. By the time it sinks and the color drains to a deep navy, Sal's nose and fingers are nearly numb from the icy air.

She waves off the well-meaning doorman's offer and shoulders her duffle bag to head into the bright warmth. Sal joins the back of the line, waiting for her turn to get checked in. She grinds her teeth, determined to hang on to what those moments of sky-gazing gave her. *I can be patient. Sure I can.* Her stomach growls loudly, causing at least two people to turn around and snicker.

Food. She needs food. And Tylenol. A handful.

Shit. Why did she let her sister talk her to into keeping the reservation? What was she thinking coming to a ski resort when she can't even put any weight on her leg? It's not like she'll be doing any skiing or snowboarding or anything except sitting on her ass and watching other people have the fun she'd dreamed of having. She's always wanted to learn how to ski. So she booked the resort, bought the plane ticket, and spent the last six months paying off her credit card. And now? Merry Fucking Christmas.

#### Two

# Not Looking for a Friend

The last couple ahead of her finally moves on and Sal steps up to the desk. The expression on the clerk's face as he watches her approach has Sal bracing for solicitous remarks. But he doesn't voice them. He works efficiently and she heads for her room quicker than she imagined she would. Thankfully, it's on the first floor. She didn't ask for the adaptive suite, but when the automatic door swings out of her way and she gets her first look at all the space she'll have to maneuver around in, she could kiss that guy. Well, kiss him on the cheek, that is. He clearly changed her room assignment.

She swallows a couple of Tylenol with a bottle of water she fishes out of the welcome basket on the dresser and stows her bag. Then, Sal heads out. She needs the lay of the place before she can finally relax. It used to drive her ex crazy the way Sal can't rest until she explores a new place. Of course, lots of

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things drove that woman crazy and not for the first time, Sal thanks her lucky stars they ended things somewhat amicably a little over a year ago.

Perhaps predictably, the resort is designed to look like a large mountain cabin. Exposed wood beams, rough-hewn stone walls, and fireplaces you could just about stand inside. Three stories of guest rooms take up one long side of the rectangular building. Opposite that is an open floor plan. The high roof takes advantage of natural lighting provided by a multitude of skylights, though now that the sun has set, touches of class elevate the décor with tasteful crystal lighting suspended from various heights. Floor-to-ceiling windows span the entire front wall facing the mountain range. Lit ski runs stripe the nearest mountain for night skiing, and she can't wait to see the views in the daylight. The great room is divided loosely into three separate areas by those huge double-sided fireplaces. The area farthest from the entrance is the restaurant, the center is a game room of sorts, and opposite the reception desk is a large lounge boasting tons of comfortable leather seating.

Holiday decorations are everywhere. Much like when she stood outside for those few peaceful minutes, she feels her spirits lift in spite of herself. Though she'd happily punch anyone who dared to tease her about it. But she can't deny Christmas really is her favorite time of year. Has been ever since she was a kid. So, it's with a quiet delight that she counts four massive Christmas trees on her tour, not including the tasteful beauty she'd already seen at the reception desk. Each tree offers a different color theme and style, from the whimsical tree bearing traditional colors in the game room of course, to the elegant gold and white tree in the restaurant. Instrumental holiday music streams throughout the great room.

Sal doesn't feel up to sitting in the restaurant for a full dinner. She opts instead for the lounge, where she might be able to prop up her leg, and indulge in a plate of bar food with a hot adult beverage to wash it all down. She settles on a love seat near her favorite of the trees—a blue and silver mammoth. As she gets her leg propped up and leans back against the fragrant plush leather, her blood pressure ticks down another notch.

It's short-lived, however. Her blood pressure rises again for an entirely different reason. A waitress appears before her, dressed in tailored black slacks and a shoulder-skimming cherry red sweater. Sal's mouth goes dry as she gazes into wide brown eyes set in a friendly face. Waves of rich mahogany hair tease her bare peach-tinted shoulders, and a smile that enhances the cutest pair of dimples Sal has ever seen, completes the picture. *Aw hell.* If she were at all interested in finding love, which she very definitely is not, she'd be a goner for sure.

"Hi there! I've met everyone else who checked in tonight, so you must be Sal, right? I'm Meg. What can I get for you?"

"Yes, I'm Sal. If you've got wings, I'll take some. And a hot drink—mulled wine or spiced hard cider."

"We've got both the wine and the cider. Which would you prefer?"

"Cider. Please."

Meg nods and turns her attention to the notepad in her hands. A shock of hair falls over her right eye and Sal has to stop herself from leaning forward and tucking it behind that cute little ear. She wonders what sounds Meg would make if she removed the dangly earring and sucked on her earlobe.

What the hell. Pull yourself together, Sal. She ain't flirting with you. This ain't a damn bar. Besides, the way her luck's been going lately, Meg probably has a beefcake husband and eight

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beautiful children.

"How hot do you like it?"

Sal blinks. She must have zoned out for a second. "What?"

Or not. A faint blush rises and disappears just as quickly from those plump cheeks. Sal swallows hard before she mentally shakes her head at herself. *Nah. She's not flirting*.

"The wings. We can do them with a sweet sauce, if you'd rather."

Sal shakes her head. "Oh, right, ah, I'm a classic Buffalo sauce girl myself. Blue cheese dressing, if you've got it."

"Sure thing. The wings will take a few minutes, but I'll be right back with your cider." Her eyes sparkle when she grins. "Don't you go anywhere, now."

Well, shit. Is she flirting with me? And if she is, so what? Sal put her days of meaningless hook-ups behind her. Didn't she? And vacation romances never last, no matter how romantic this holiday setting may be. Still, Sal can't take her eyes off the waitress' beautifully curvy ass as she walks away. Just damn.

A minute later, Meg returns with her cider. She leans over to set the mug on a cocktail napkin she places on the low table, and despite the sweater being sufficiently above her cleavage, Sal averts her gaze. It's hard enough to keep her thoughts off where she'd like to put her hands and mouth. She doesn't need added temptation.

"Where you from?"

Sal scratches her cheek. She's got to put a stop to this before one of them gets the wrong idea. "Richmond. Virginia."

"No way! That's where my sister lives! What part?"

*You don't say.* Sal doesn't want to encourage the woman. Yet, she can't seem to stop herself from answering. "Lakeside."

"Oh, yeah, I think I know where that is. That's not far from

my sister's place. She's in Glen...Glen Alley?"

You've got to be kidding. "It's Glen Allen."

"Right! Well, I live in Atlanta. Or at least I did."

Her cheeks color again and Sal totally ignores how cute Meg is when she blushes. She did not come up here for romance. She grabs her cider and takes a long swallow. She cradles the warm mug, suddenly feeling the day, the past two weeks, catching up with her, and wishes the woman would take the hint and go. Between countless medical people, her dirt bike mechanic, both insurance companies, her union rep, and her kind but overbearing family, she's about all talked out.

"Can I grab you a cushion?"

Sal takes a deep breath. Then another. Sure, propping the leg up higher would be smart. And feel better. But the last thing she wants is a mother hen clucking over her. She got enough of that with her sister. "It's fine. Don't bother."

"You sure? It's really no bother." Meg gestures to the room at large where the few folks sitting around seem perfectly content. "And I bet it's sore after a long day of travel."

"I said it's fine. Thank you."

"Suit yourself. I'll come back when your wings are done."

Sal watches her walk away, mentally cursing. The woman was just being kind. She nurses the cider while she waits for the food, staring pensively at the patterns the blinking blue lights reflecting onto those shiny silver balls create. Gradually, the warm alcohol loosens her joints, and eases the tension in her shoulders.

Sal looks up in time to catch Meg nodding at her cast as she sets down the platter and silverware rolled up in a bright green linen napkin. "You've sure got a lot of people who care about you."

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Sal glances at what is primarily little Gracie's doodling, her stomach growling. Things have gotten tough for her sister's daughter since her 6th birthday, and just thinking about what that sweet child has gone through makes Sal's heart hurt. And she has no intention of sharing any of that with a stranger, no matter how cute, or well-meaning, she may be.

A wing hovering before her mouth, she simply says, "Yup," and bites into the juicy meat with relish.

"Okaaay. You just let me know if you need anything. Enjoy that dinner."

Sal stops chewing as she watches Meg's retreat with a frown. Damn. She didn't mean to hurt the woman's feelings. But she's not looking for a friend, much less a girlfriend. The discomfort swirling in her gut isn't due to the food. She'll have to apologize. Eventually.

Since she thought about Gracie, now Sal can't stop thinking about her. She had been such a sweet, cheerful child. Then on the night of her 6<sup>th</sup> birthday, she started having dreams. Prophetic dreams. Of people dying. They all hoped it was a fluke. But the visions kept coming. And over a year into it, they show no signs of stopping. That carefree little girl's life was turned upside down. The whole family's lives have been affected, even Sal's. She puts on a brave face, but Gracie isn't fooling anyone about how horrifying it's been for her. She's the only member of the family to experience anything even remotely special. Paranormal. Magical? Sal's sister barely remembers the man who gave her Gracie in a one-night stand, just days before she met the man Gracie calls Daddy. Maybe they don't know exactly how it started or where the prophecies come from, but Sal's money is on the child's birth father.

And this is one of the things Sal determined to let go of during

this vacation. It would be really great if she could just fucking do that. She rips into another wing and loses herself in the Christmas tree again.

Nearly asleep on her feet thanks to a full belly and a second cider, Sal gets balanced on her crutches and heads out. She chooses the most direct path, too tired and cranky to waste time. She doesn't count on Meg choosing that exact moment to stop clearing the tables and stand in the aisle stretching what are probably tired muscles. Surely she knows Sal is standing here watching. And what seeing the hot woman move so sinuously does to Sal's libido is far from welcome. She is absolutely not going there. She will *not* audition for her own personal holiday romance movie.

"Excuse me." Sal almost regrets her brusque tone when Meg jumps.

"Oh! You startled me." Hand over her heart, she smiles at Sal. "Did you need something?"

Oh, hot stuff, you have no idea. "No. Thanks. Just need to get to my room." Alone. And she wishes that thought didn't leave her so hollow.

Meg's eyes sparkle with humor. "Well, I'd better scoot out of your way, then, huh?"

Is she laughing at me?

The whole way back to her room, Sal tries to figure out why that thought pleases her so much.

She makes herself brush her teeth and get into clean boxers and a t-shirt before finally slipping her spent body under the thick feather duvet. Sal rubs her face and tries to find a comfortable position. Okay. So, coming here in this condition might not have been her best decision. But she is here. And by God, tomorrow she is going to make the best of it if it kills her.

#### Three

# What Has She Got to Lose?



Sal wakes refreshed by a good night's sleep. She stands before the mirror after cleaning up, anxiously looking for signs of muscle loss. She's spent a lot of time lying around and since becoming mobile again, she's noticed a weakness she didn't have before the accident. She tires faster, though it could be due to pushing herself harder because of that. *Oh, well,* she reasons. *I'm over halfway through my 30s, I can't expect to bounce back like I used to. It will be what it is.* Not like she's here shopping for a wife, at any rate.

She combs her short black hair and adds a dollop of gel and gives her hair a bit of style. Her sister calls it Sal's rakish look. Whatever that means. She calls herself done, and heads out of the room.

Her belly full of a hearty breakfast, Sal heads to a table by the windows in the lounge, where she can watch the activity

on the slopes. She's disappointed when the waitress isn't the beauty she was so rude to last night, Meg. But not because Meg's exactly Sal's type and she played a significant role in her dreams last night. No. Sal really needs to apologize to her. It's probably just as well that she doesn't see Meg, though. She isn't in the mood for a fling, no matter how sexy the woman.

An hour later, bored with watching other people having fun on the slopes and having had her fill of coffee, she moves to the game room to find something to do. She rebuffs a couple of seniors when they beckon from a puzzle, opting instead to sink into an armchair in the corner. Her good leg bounces as she watches a couple of small kids playing under the watchful eyes of their father. A few minutes later, their mother arrives and they all run off to gear up for the slopes.

Sal rubs her hand back and forth over her buzz cut and taps a rhythm on the armrest. She isn't used to all this sitting. So much inactivity. As a new construction electrician, she's used to being on the go all the time. Even when she's not working, she's out on her bike or hiking or working in her yard. She may not be able to do any of that stuff right now, but she doesn't need to just sit here moping.

Her eyes fall on a bookcase against the far wall. She could read. Yeah. With a burst of energy, she covers the distance in a flash. Woohoo, look at me go. Fastest thing on crutches on the whole East Coast. She smirks at herself as she stands before the bookcase, scanning the shelves. After a few minutes spent staring at kid's books, old Condensed Reader's Digests, and historical romances featuring bare-chested Fabio with halfnaked women draped across his arms, she gives up. After that, she wanders from window to window, taking in the stunning views and wishing she were out there instead of stuck inside.

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She retreats to her room in disgust, and whatever crap is on the television.

By lunchtime, her mood has soured nearly to the same level she arrived with yesterday. She considers just ordering room service. But dammit all to hell, she didn't come all this way to sit in her room. She makes her way to the restaurant, hoping she will get a glimpse of Meg, hoping she won't. Once again, Meg is nowhere to be found. But Sal isn't disappointed. Nope. In fact, she enjoys every bit of her lunch. She just wishes she had a reason to linger a little longer. She has no idea what to do with herself once the check is paid.

Sal stands listlessly in the hallway, wondering dejectedly what to do, when she hears a familiar cheerful voice.

"There you are! I've been looking for you."

Sal looks up to see Meg striding through the front doors, unzipping a bright blue puffy jacket, her cheeks and nose rosy from the cold. A blue knit cap topped with a yarn ball covers her ears and pops those bright brown eyes. Sal watches her tug off her mittens, and unwind her white scarf, wondering why Meg would be looking for her outside. It's not like she can do anything out there. Did she forget to pay for her meal last night? She was tired, but she's pretty sure she remembers handing over her debit card.

"Where's your coat? I can't believe you aren't out there already. It's perfect. No wind and the slopes are prime!"

Is she crazy or making fun of me? Sal swings her right leg. "Ah, yeah, hello? Remember this? I can't put any weight on this."

Meg cocks her head, a gesture Sal most certainly does not find adorable. "So what?"

Sal grits her teeth. "So what? I can't stand on it. Not that I even know how, but I definitely can't ski."

Shaking her head, Meg laughs.

Sure, it's a cute laugh, and it makes those gorgeous eyes sparkle and dance, but what the hell?

Before Sal can give voice to what she's thinking, Meg says, "You know what? It'll be better if I show you. But you gotta get your coat and stuff on. Don't worry, I'll wait right here for ya!"

Stunned, Sal stares at her. Show me? Show me what? But Meg just raises an eyebrow and points down the hall to the rooms. Hell. What has she got to lose? She didn't come up here to sit around indoors all day, that's for damn sure. If there is even the slightest chance she can do something...fun...she can't pass it up. Without another word, she hurries back to her room to suit up.

#### Four

# A Glutton for Punishment



"Are you kidding me with this?" Sal glares at a couple of children screeching their way down the gentle slope, their parents running easily beside them. She's gone sledding down steeper hills back home in Virginia.

Meg chuckles. "Just trust me. Come on." When Sal doesn't move, she lays a hand on her shoulder. "Have a little faith, Sal. Come on."

Trust? Faith? "What? So you're a ski instructor now?"

Meg smiles. "Actually, I'm a slope instructor! Most of us wear more than one hat around here. Now, are you just going to stand around grimacing at the kids, or are you going to trust me?"

Sal chokes on her protest. No matter what she does, being out here is better than being inside. She squares her shoulders and follows Meg.

"All right, since you've never gone skiing and we don't have any adaptive skis anyway, we'll stick with other equipment. We've got sleds and toboggans, as well as tubes. I think a toboggan will be the easiest, at least to start."

Sal eyes the row of brightly colored plastic doubtfully. They look like damn toys. "This ain't my first rodeo. I can handle a sled."

Meg drags over an orange toboggan. It's got a lever on one side and she's gripping a handle extending from the back. "Sure you can, when you aren't in a cast that prevents you from using the foot brakes. I'm not saying you won't be able to later. But if I'm guessing right, you don't have a good idea of how different it will be when you only have one leg to maneuver with. That's the reason we are starting on the easier slope and a toboggan. You can control the speed with your arms. See?" She manipulates the lever to match her words. "Push it forward to increase your speed. Pull it back to apply the brake."

Sal points at the handle, unable to stop her lip from curling. "What's with the training wheels?"

Unperturbed, Meg smiles. "This first couple of times are about helping you just get a feel for it all—the movement, using the lever to adjust your speed while guarding your ankle. And, hopefully, having a little fun at the same time!" She crosses her arms and levels her gaze at Sal. "You did agree to trust me."

Sal resigns herself to looking like a child. It still beats sitting inside. "Fine." She moves closer, but hesitates, heat warming her ears. She hates this. Hates having to ask for help. Hates needing it. "Ah. How do I get on this thing?"

Meg's matter-of-fact tone makes her feel marginally better. "Yup. Well, you just sorta sit down." Hopping on one leg, she demonstrates. She lands heavily, making her breasts bounce.

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Then she beams proudly up at Sal.

Sal could have gone all day without seeing that. Now she won't be able to get the image of Meg sitting there gazing up at her from the region of her...*Hello, star of tonight's dreams. Oh, no you don't, libido.* She has to get that girl vertical and fast.

Sal leans down and offers her hand. When Meg hesitates, Sal gets a glint in her eye. Two can play this game. "Have a little faith, Meg." Meg grips her hand with a laugh. Sal easily pulls the woman to her feet and is relieved to find there's nothing wrong with her strength. When Meg stands, they're so close, their breaths fog one another's faces. *Shit. Didn't count on that.* But she's not exactly eager to move back out of Meg's personal space.

"Wow," Meg whispers. She blinks. Her gaze travels from Sal's eyes, to her mouth, back to her eyes. Sal watches as her cheeks, already rosy from the cold, darken just a little. "Wow," she whispers again. Then, like being woken from a trance, she shakes her head, releases Sal's hand, and nearly trips over the toboggan in her haste to put distance between them.

Meg clears her throat and grips the toboggan handle. "Okay, so, now that you see, um, how to, ah, get onto the toboggan, you can, ah, go ahead and give it a try yourself!"

Sal studies Meg, noting how the unflappable woman is suddenly flustered. Won't meet her eyes. *Interesting. Very interesting.* 

No. No it isn't interesting. At all. She isn't getting involved in some kind of holiday romance, no matter how perfectly Meg fits into her ideal. Squaring her shoulders, she leans the crutches against the wall of the shed and drops down onto the toboggan with as much dignity as she can muster. "Let's get this ridiculous show on the road."

Despite all of her misgivings and fears of looking foolish, between Meg's enthusiasm, the beauty of the day, and just being out and *doing* something, Sal ends up having a blast. After a few runs on the kiddie slope with Meg guiding, she graduates to the regular run. Meg chooses her own toboggan, and they spend the afternoon flying down the mountain. She never really gets the hang of the ski lift, but Meg's unflagging positivity keeps her from feeling any embarrassment each time she awkwardly tries to keep her seat while juggling the toboggan. And Meg keeps Sal grinning.

Hopping on the lift seat one more time, Sal hates to have to admit it even to herself, but she needs to call it quits. If she doesn't get her foot up soon, and take some Tylenol, she'll never sleep tonight. Besides that, she's ravenous.

Meg beats her to the punch. "Unfortunately, this was my last run. I'm pulling a double today and by the time I get a shower and change, I'll have to be in the restaurant."

Sal frowns, despite the relief of not having to say she's had enough. "I know you at least worked last night. That's not a double, that's three shifts in a row."

Meg shrugs. "It's good money. And it doesn't happen often. The waitress that was supposed to work dinner tonight couldn't make it in." She lays a hand on Sal's arm. "I appreciate your concern, but I'll be okay. And it's not like this was work. I've had a great time."

Sal lays her hand over Meg's. "So have I. Listen, I owe you an apology. I was...rude last night."

Meg's warm brown eyes sparkle. "You were a grumpy old bear last night."

Sal huffs. "Old?"

Meg laughs at the expression on her face. "But I understood.

# A Glutton for Punishment

Travel days are hard on most people." She indicates Sal's right leg. "And even harder when you aren't at your peak performance. It's pretty obvious you're an active person and that cast has you all out of sorts. So, thank you for apologizing, but don't worry about it. I didn't take it personally."

Sal holds Meg's hand a second longer before letting go. "I'm really grateful you came to get me earlier, but what made you seek me out?"

"You mean other than it kind of being my job to make sure everyone is having a good time?" She winks. "I suspected you were sore because you had no idea what you could do with that leg." Satisfied, Sal nods and turns to watch the trees go by. "And maybe I have a soft spot for grumpy old bears."

Sal laughs. "Or maybe you're just a glutton for punishment." "Oh, if this is punishment, tell me where to sign up. I want more."

Their eyes meet and hold for the brief remainder of their trip up the mountain. And Sal decides her sister is going to get a huge poinsettia delivered tomorrow for encouraging Sal to keep her vacation plans. What the hell, she'll even have them throw in a box of holiday chocolates for Gracie. After all, next week is Christmas. And right here, right this minute, Sal wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the whole wide world.

#### Five

# Not Ready to Say Goodbye



Bright and early the next morning, Meg is waiting for Sal when she comes out of her room. Her cheery face is a welcome sight and Sal forgets all about her need for coffee. Meg looks ready for something fun in a thick green cowl-neck sweater, jeans, and sturdy, warm boots.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning yourself." Sal frowns when something occurs to her. "Don't tell me you're working again this morning?"

Meg laughs and waves her hand. "No, no. I've got the whole day off. And I have a great idea for today. I mean, if you are up to it. Or, I mean, if you are okay with spending more time with me. You can say no. I mean, it won't hurt my feelings."

But Sal has the distinct impression it would hurt her feelings if she told Meg no. Hell, it would hurt her own feelings. The prospect of spending another day with this vibrant woman

# Not Ready to Say Goodbye

thrills her. Granted, having someone else making the plans isn't Sal's favorite. She's usually the one making decisions about things when she's in a relationship. And that thought brings her up short. This is not a relationship. This is a resort and she's a paying guest. Meg's job is to make sure guests have fun. Sure, she may be on her day off, but it doesn't mean they're dating. Still, Sal's shocked to hear the soft sincerity in her own voice when she says, "I'd love to spend time with you again today, Meg. What did you have in mind?"

The blush on Meg's cheeks makes it worth it. "Oh, um, I thought you might enjoy a ride into town. If you don't mind me driving, that is."

Sal nods at her bum leg. "Looks like I don't have much choice. But I'm happy to put myself in your very capable hands." *Wait. Did I really just say that?* Inwardly, Sal cringes.

But Meg's huge smile deepens her dimples and Sal lets out her breath. "I'm so glad you said that. If you can wait for breakfast, I can promise you it will be worth it. In the meantime, I took the liberty of making a thermos of coffee. If you're ready, grab your coat and we'll head out."

They ride down the mountain into town on a sweet two-seat snowmobile. She's never seen anything like the badass Ski-Doo. Like a fat motorcycle with tank-like tread and skis instead of tires. Sal would love to be able to crawl all over it and study how it works.

Though she's been on a bike of some kind since her first Honda CRX150 when she was a teenager, she's rarely been the person riding behind someone. But with her bum leg and not knowing the first thing about how the snowmobile handles, much less how to drive on deep snow, she's almost relieved to let Meg take the wheel. And Sal has to hand it to her, Meg

handles the machine like a pro. Tinted visors on the helmets protect them from snow glare and block the majority of the freezing wind as evergreens whip past. Their ride down the mountain is both smooth and invigorating.

Meg stops them in front of a coffee shop, parking among several others. Sal indulges in a little chuckling over the idea of everyone arriving via snowmobile. That is, until Meg smoothly swings her leg over the machine to dismount. She pulls off her helmet and shakes out her hair, and it's like time grinds to a slow crawl watching all that lovely brown hair waving around, emitting wafts of Meg's floral shampoo. Sal's mouth goes dry and for a minute, looking at that beautiful woman smiling back at her, all she can think is, *This is it. I could die and this would be my heaven.* 

In the warm cafe's interior, they linger over hot coffee, slices of quiche, and chocolate croissants. Sal reaches across the table, palm up in hopeful anticipation. Unhesitatingly, Meg lays her soft hand in hers. They lose a little time like that, gazing into each other's eyes. It feels—surreal. Too good. Impossibly wonderful.

Meg tugs gently and Sal relinquishes her hand. She picks up her mug, studies the contents for a minute. "The other night you said you used to live in Atlanta. What did you mean by that? Where do you live now?"

Meg smiles but something like sadness crosses her face and she slumps a little in her seat. "It's just that, I come up here to work every winter, have since college. I love it up here and I can earn enough to make it worthwhile. But not everyone respects seasonal work and my roommate rented out my room without telling me. She did at least pack up my stuff, and she's holding it for me, so I guess I can't be too mad. But it looks like I won't

# Not Ready to Say Goodbye

be going back there. In fact, when I go to my sister's next week for Christmas, I was going to talk to her about staying with her. Just until I figure out what to do, you know."

Sal's heart races. Could it be? Might Meg actually live just a few miles away from her? Afraid to put too much stock in that possibility, she focuses on the practical. "What kind of work do you do when you aren't up here helping grouches find their smile?"

She laughs and Sal's grateful to see the worry lines disappear from Meg's forehead. "Well, my real job is app building. My employer is an avid skier himself. In fact, he hired me after we struck up a conversation my first winter up here after college. So, seven months of the year, I work my butt off programming, so that I can take advantage of the full winter up here. I work remotely, anyway, so when they really need me, I just hop on my laptop and take care of whatever glitches or bugs pop up."

Sal feels buoyed by the prospect of a future between them. She works in as much handholding as she can manage while on crutches, as the two of them wander from shop to shop, talking and laughing. The more Sal learns about Meg, the more she wants to know. She challenges herself to see how many times she can make those dimples appear. After a quick lunch they head back to the snowmobile, with Meg's promise of sights she won't want to miss.

The engine's whining rumble limits their communication to pointing things out and vigorous gestures. Sal keeps her eyes on the awe-inspiring vistas while she tries hard not to think about this being her last night at the resort. Thanks to Meg, Sal catches sight of her first moose and snowy owl. Yet, all she can think about is how much she doesn't want to fly away from this beautiful place tomorrow, doesn't want to walk away from

Meg. It may be cliché but whatever may exist between the two of them, it doesn't feel over. She wants to see where it might lead—what it might become. Long-distance relationships are too hard. She's been down that pothole-riddled road and it came to a painful dead end. But maybe, just maybe, she won't have to face that with Meg.

The sun hangs low in the sky when they turn toward the resort. Without clouds to pick it up, only the snow receives liberal spills of corals and siennas. They race over the fiery snow to reach the resort before the flaming ball sinks below the distant peak. Sal fears the dramatic ending to this incredible day is a kind of omen—and she determines not to let the sun set on this budding relationship.

Meg brings the Ski-Doo to a stop in the shed and dismounts. After swinging her leg over the seat, Sal looks up to see Meg holding out her crutches. She feels the longing in Meg's eyes deep in her own chest, where it echoes her own. She stands, and when Meg begins to move out of her way, she stops her with a gloved hand on her arm.

"Wait. I..." Sal swallows the lump in her throat. If she doesn't see this through, she knows she'll regret it the rest of her life. She glances at all the guests and employees milling about and pulls Meg over to the side where they have a little privacy. "Do you work this evening?"

Meg shakes her head. "No. I'm working breakfast, but until then, I'm...I'm free."

Sal nods. "Okay. Good. That's good. I, uh." She laughs and shakes her head at herself. "I'm not ready to say goodbye, Meg."

"No?" Meg's shoulders seem to drop a notch. From relief?

Eyes locked on Meg's sparkling gaze, Sal shakes her head slowly. "No."

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Meg's cheeks pinken and she drops her eyes. She clears her throat. "What would you like to do?"

"Come to my room with me." She hurries to stop the protest she sees rising to Meg's lips. "For privacy. To talk. And, I want to feel you in my arms."

Meg frowns and her shoulders raise, tightening again. "I'm not interested in a one-night stand, Sal."

Sal actually laughs, which makes Meg's eyes flash. "No, no, I'm not laughing at you, I'm laughing because you plucked that thought right out of my head. I'm not either, Meg. But I'm desperate to kiss you. Without an audience. And I don't want our first kiss out here where our lips risk freezing together."

Meg laughs. "Okay."

"Okay?" Sal feels her posture straighten. Good. That's very good. "So, can you eat dinner with me or should I order room service?"

Meg scrunches up her face with apology. "I think it would be better if we order room service. I'm sorry."

"No, that's actually really fine with me. I need to put my leg up for a while, anyway."

Meg frowns. "Yeah, I bet bouncing around all day on that snowmobile wasn't the best idea."

"Are you kidding? It was worth every second. Don't give it another thought. I'm thrilled with how we spent the day and I wouldn't change a thing. It was...a gift."

Cheeks pink again, Meg nods. "Well, okay then. Let me just run to my quarters first, and then I'll come to your room?"

"That's great. Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

# Never Been More Sorry



Sal's grateful her sister made her pack one nice outfit. She shakes out the crisp white button-up shirt, pleased to see it release the wrinkles like magic. Gotta hand it to her Marine brother-in-law for steering her toward the purchase. He has great taste and she would rather dig ditches with a spoon than iron clothes. The white contrasts nicely with her black hair. With the hunter green slacks, the outfit looks sharp and hits just the right note of Christmas cheer. After a moment's deliberation, Sal takes a chance that Meg won't be offended and goes ahead and orders dinner for both of them. She reasons that if she were cooking dinner for Meg, she wouldn't have a choice.

Despite needing to put up her ankle, Sal can't stop pacing. All she can think about is taking Meg into her arms, wondering if her lips are as soft as they look. What she sounds like when

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she's turned on.

Finally, finally a soft knock on the door makes her heart jump with nervous excitement.

When she pulls open her door, her mouth goes dry. For a long moment she just stares at the lovely woman waiting on the other side of the threshold. Sal's glad she changed clothes. Her eyes travel from the low-heeled black pumps, up shapely legs, skimming over the knit knee-length purple dress dotted with large white snowflakes, which hugs Meg's body in all the right places, lingering over the deep V-neck, until finally ending at her eyes. Unable to speak, she moves out of the way.

Meg drapes the coat she was carrying across the back of a chair before turning back to Sal, a smile on her face. "Great minds think alike. You look...great."

Sal smiles appreciatively. "I can't hold a candle to you, Meg. You are...I...I don't have words." When Meg colors, she adds, "And that dress is nice, too." Sal watches the blush travel down Meg's neck with distinct satisfaction. It may have been a minute, but she hasn't forgotten the thrill of making a woman blush like that.

"Oh, you smooth talker." Meg frowns at Sal's cast. "Let me guess. You haven't been propping that thing up. Come on, let's get you situated."

Sal shakes her head. "I hope you don't mind; I already ordered some food."

"Oh, good! I'm starving. Lunch was a long time ago."

"Yeah, it was. I didn't want to wait any longer than necessary. Anyway, I can wait to get settled until after I let room service in."

Looking confused, Meg starts to say something, but then her face clears in sudden understanding. "Oh, that's so sweet of

you. But the guy on room service delivery tonight is a friend so it's fine if I let him in. Now, no more excuses. Let's get you comfortable."

Meg quickly rearranges furniture. When she's done, Sal lets out a sigh of relief as she relaxes into one of the two armchairs with her leg propped up on pillows on the other. Between her and the bed, the table sits awaiting their dinner. Meg perches on the bed facing her. While they wait for their meal, they chat easily, picking up where they left off, learning about one another. Sal marvels at how easy Meg is to talk to, her openness and overall positive outlook on life. She can't get over how much they have in common, from interests to values. And the woman is *hot*.

When the food arrives, they pause briefly while they get everything set up and dig into the hot food. Settling back on the edge of the bed with her plate balanced on her lap, Meg winks at Sal. "Excellent choice. Their spaghetti and meatballs are the best. They use three different meats for the balls and the sauce is homemade."

Sal grins. "I couldn't resist. It's one of my favorite meals and after the last two days, pasta just felt right."

"I know what you mean. A lot of activity, especially out in the cold, always makes me want to carb-load."

Meg gathers their empty dishes and sets the tray outside of Sal's door. Closing the door, she turns back around to find Sal standing, crutches under her armpits, her hand outstretched.

Sal watches Meg close the distance between them, a half-smile playing over full lips. She closes her hand around Meg's and tugs her gently closer. When Meg stands before her, she drops her hand in favor of dragging the backs of her fingers down the side of Meg's face. Her other hand on Meg's waist, she watches

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a pulse beat on the side of Meg's throat, feels a shiver travel down her body.

"May I kiss you now, Meg?"

Meg huffs. "I was really, really hoping you would."

Her fingers underneath Meg's chin, Sal tilts Meg's face. She hesitates a breath away, savoring the moment: Meg's flushed skin, a fine tremble in her core, Sal's own anticipation quickening her pulse. Finally, she can't take it any longer and slants her lips across Meg's.

Softness. Invitation. Sweetness. Random words fly through Sal's mind as she melts into Meg's lips. Her tongue lazily traces them, tasting, learning. Meg's lips part and she delves between them, exploring Meg's mouth, teasing her tongue, studying her responses. When she regretfully ends the kiss, she leans her forehead against Meg's, catching her breath.

Meg hums deep in her throat. "Oh, wow. You're like *ridiculously* good at that."

Sal chuckles, her chest swelling just a little. "Honey, I could say the same about you. I think my toes curled."

"Um, can we sit down? I don't think my knees will hold me much longer."

Meg kicks off her shoes and snuggles into Sal's embrace. Propped up against the headboards on pillows, their kissing gets hotter. With lips and tongue, Sal explores Meg's face, her ears, her neck—discovering sensitive places and taking note of what she responds to most favorably. It's an increasingly difficult fight to keep her hands in neutral territory. Especially when she dips her head and outlines the dress' neckline with her tongue. Meg's quick inhalations, moans and shivers nearly drive her wild. When she's sure she can't resist another moment, Meg saves them both by placing her hand on Sal's shoulder.

Sal stills immediately, dragging air into her lungs, trying to cool her ardor. "Right. Good. Okay. Just give me a minute."

Meg's laugh—purely feminine and extremely pleased—thrills Sal and relieves her. She'd been worried she went too far. She flops back against the headrest and turns to Meg.

Heart in her eyes, she declares, "I've never been more sorry to have morals."

Meg cracks up. When the laughter passes, she rolls onto her side to face Sal. "Oh, man. You said it. Oh, shit. Wow. Sal. I want you so bad right now. But—"

"Yeah...but..." Sal sits up. If she doesn't get out of bed with Meg right now... She pats Meg's thigh. "Grab your coat. I've got an idea that will help us cool off."

A few minutes later, Sal leads Meg away from the brightness of the resort. The crescent moon emits enough moonlight reflecting from the snow to show her the way. When they reach the leveled-off playground further up the slope, the short hike leaves both of them breathing a little harder.

Meg looks at her, beaming. "How did you know about this? I love it up here at night. What a great idea." She helps Sal clear snow off of a picnic bench and they sit. Meg scoots as close to Sal as she can without sitting in her lap.

Leaning back, Sal looks up at the vast black velvet expanse dusted with nature's twinkling lights. "I spied this spot from a window and thought I'd be able to reach it. I had a feeling it would be far enough away to see the stars." For a while they quietly enjoy the sky, holding hands.

Sal breaks the silence. "You'll be at your sister's place next week. Then you'll be living with her, at least for a while, in another two months or so, yes?"

"That's the plan. I admit, I wasn't very excited about the

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prospect before."

"Now?" Sal turns to Meg, not wanting to miss a nuance of her answer.

Meg meets her eyes. "Now, for the first time since I started spending my winters up here, I'm considering cutting it short."

Sal frowns. "I'm not asking you to do that, Meg. Don't you dare do it for me."

Meg shakes her head slowly. "No, I don't think you would ask it of me, would you? No, I'd do it for me. Because right now, the thought of you flying away from me tomorrow, and us not seeing each other for an entire week, makes me physically ill. Never mind the stretch from New Year's until the resort closes."

"Fuck, I don't even want to think about tomorrow, much less January and February."

"So, what are we saying, Sal?"

Sal smirks. "What are my intentions toward you, little lady?" Meg laughs. "Yeah, I guess that's what I'm asking. Is this just a holiday romance for you or something else?"

Sal cups her face. "My intentions, Meg, are to see where this goes. I will wait for you. As long as it takes. Because what we have? It's once in a lifetime. I feel it in my bones. This is not just some vacation fling to me. I'm talking about the possibility that this could be the real thing."

A tear sparkling in her eye, Meg leans in and punctuates each word with a soft kiss. "Best. Answer. Ever."

# Happy Holidays, Yall!



This romantic holiday short first appeared in a Romance Writers of America anthology of winter holiday short stories by the Rainbow Romance Chapter. Since getting the rights back, I have added to, tweaked, and polished it a bit more.

In case you were wondering, the loose inspiration for this story comes from Kristy McNichol's 1985 movie Just The Way You Are. (I may or may not have had a crush on Kristy way back when.) Anyway, this is the movie I would rather watch.

For more free content, news, and updates, sign up for my newsletter here or go to http://tinyurl.com/BC-Newsletter.

Thank you for reading this little holiday romance. I'd love to know what you think! Feel free to email me at brookecampbell writes@protonmail.com

Last but not least, if you want more Sal and Meg...and Sal's little niece Gracie, stay tuned!