

Where the Holly Will Hang

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Where the Holly Will Hang

by [Tsuki](#)

Summary

A year ago, Abby had wondered if she was beginning to finally love the holidays again. Now she's single, in-between jobs, and stuck in an airport two days before Christmas. But when she learns that Riley is stuck in the same airport, there's a chance for something new. And something new can be good.

Notes

I loved so much of this movie, but found myself bristling at the end when Harper and Abby got their "happy" ending with still so many red flags waving in the air and the crackling chemistry between Abby and Riley left unresolved. Thus this story is, like many others, my post-canon reflection on what may have happened after. Apologies if you think I'm being a bit hard on Harper in my post-canon story, but I just found it so fascinating that in the film she helped write the speeches for her father (who is very coded as a conservative on the American political spectrum) and I couldn't help but wonder what that meant for her own views, not to mention how she handled (or didn't handle) conflict in the film. Also, Riley is just queen and needed more character details.

The plan for this story is for it to be four chapters, with each chapter named after a Christmas song, and the story as a whole hopefully finished by New Years.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS, everyone! Hope that you enjoy the story!

Blue Christmas

*"And when those blue snowflakes start falling—
That's when those blue memories start calling.
You'll be doin' alright, with your Christmas of white,
But I'll have a blue, blue, blue Christmas."*

- *"Blue Christmas," written by Billy Hayes & Jay Johnson*

“Five hours?! You’re delayed FIVE hours?”

Abby winced at the crackle of her cell phone in combination of John’s slightly-too-loud exasperated yell in her ear. As she pulled the cell slightly away from her ear to temper John’s near shriek of a response, she shrugged slightly to keep her carry-on bag strap from slipping off her shoulder. “Yeah—I mean, obviously there’s no snow here, but the plane scheduled for my flight was coming from Chicago and the storm there is—”

“Oh. Right. Right. I’ve seen the closures on the news. Say no more.” Abby smiled to herself at how her friend’s voice plunged in volume and transformed immediately into a calmer, slightly imperious tone. “But if your plane is delayed that long, you won’t get in until after ten. The party starts at eight, Abs.”

“I know,” Abby sighed. “You were really sweet to invite me, but don’t worry. Enjoy your fancy literary party with Mark. I’ll grab a cab and, if you are still dancing under mistletoe or whatever, I’ll hang out at that bar down the street from your place until you’re done with the party.”

John was silent a moment before muttering a hesitant, “You sure? If you want, I can send Mark to come get you when you land.” Abby knew John couldn’t leave the company Christmas party since, as a representative of the literary agency, he was essentially one of the hosts. But she also knew that, as one of the new up and coming writers and John’s new boyfriend, Mark shouldn’t really be leaving either.

“No, you and Mark should be there *together* at the party. Have a great time and don’t worry about me. I’ll be bumming around the San José airport all day then on a plane for another seven hours, so I don’t think I’ll be in a super festive mood anyway, and I can totally afford to take a cab.” Maybe barely if she didn’t get a job offer soon, but for now she knew she’d better stay positive. “We can watch bad movies and hang out more tomorrow. Don’t worry about me. Have fun.”

“Okay. I know Jane will be sad she didn’t get a chance to see you. She’s been talking about it all week. Probably for the best though.”

“Yeah,” Abby agreed. Her chest tightened hearing the name of her former almost-sister. She hadn’t talked to any of the Caldwells since the break-up in August, but Jane really had been the only one to reach out. Abby hadn’t been able to bring herself to respond to Jane’s texts—or to the text last month from Harper, asking her how she was and wishing her a happy Thanksgiving. “Tell her I said hi and that I’m sorry to miss her.”

“I will tell that absolute lie for you,” John assured. “I know that not having to face a Caldwell is probably the one silver lining of being stuck in an airport—and not even one of the really fun ones—for five freaking hours.” Abby muttered a sound of tacit agreement before murmuring some final pleasantries and goodbyes on auto-pilot. After she hung up the phone, Abby found herself staring out the airport window at the rows of planes—some parked and some coasting through the morning gray—shuffling people to and fro to get them to their homes, families, or vacations for Christmas.

Abby had none of these. Not this year.

Just last Christmas, it had seemed like everything was going to work out. She had finally found her Christmas spirit again amongst the Caldwells with Harper, her love and new fiancé. After the disastrous Christmas of two years ago, the Caldwells had clearly gone out of their way to try and give Abigail a truly welcoming, traditional family Christmas. Sloane had given Abby advice on gift ideas for the white elephant, Jane had given her a book of fantasy Christmas stories that she’d written as a special gift just for friends and family, and they’d all spent a wonderful two weeks in a festive whirl of holiday bliss. The memories of that Christmas now felt fragmented to Abby—a kaleidoscope of Christmas lights, Christmas movies, hot chocolate, Caldwell family laughter, and Harper’s warm smiles as she showed off her engagement ring and kissed Abby under the mistletoe. It was nothing like the year before, and Abby had wondered if she was beginning to finally love Christmas again.

And then winter had turned into spring—and, for every snowflake that melted outside, it was like something began to freeze the air between Harper and Abigail. Sentences came out sharper than they meant to. Silences became longer. Everything began to chill, crack, and break.

By the time the temperature outside crept up to 80 degrees and the humidity began to rise in Philadelphia, all that Christmas joy seemed like a dream, hazy and forgotten. Abby had moved out of Harper’s place at the start of August, and thankfully found a sub-let for September through the start of December. But the university student with the lease was back from study abroad in the new year, so Abigail was essentially homeless and sleeping on John’s couch for the holidays, waiting with baited breath to find out if she’d have a job in her field when the New Year started.

She sighed, her eyes re-focusing on her reflection in the window glass instead of on the fleet of airplanes outside. She had cut her hair a little shorter recently; it was still the same essential style of androgenous-queerness she preferred—shorter on the left-side and longer on the right—but now died a deep auburn red instead of the platinum blond she’d been sporting for years. Between that and her slightly heavier-hand on her eyeliner, she couldn’t help but think of a saying she’d once seen on a novelty postcard: “Be careful of a woman in her red-hair phase—she’s going through some shit.” Accurate, she decided.

Abby checked the gate sign once again, but the flashing “DELAYED” letters and new departure time hadn’t changed since the last several times she’d looked. Somewhere in the distance, a too cheery Christmas song played.

She sighed and scanned the terminal for a familiar green-and-white logo or a directory display map that might signal where she could find coffee in this airport. First caffeine, she decided—then she could plan how she was going to fill five hours of time all alone in an airport two days before Christmas.

“*Abby?*”

Abigail jolted at the unexpected inquiry and whirled around, finding herself face to face with — “Oh my God. *Riley?*”

“Oh good, it is you. If it wasn’t, I was going to feel very, very creepy. Especially since I’ve been staring at you for like five minutes.” The dark-haired woman only wore a half-smile on her heart-shaped mouth, but her brown eyes were as warm and friendly as Abby remembered them. “This is crazy. Are you waiting for the Philly flight?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

“Crazy delay.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

They both stood awkwardly for a moment before Abby blurted out, “You look really good.”

Riley raised an eyebrow and let out a sharp laugh. “I just came from a double shift at the hospital, so I very much doubt that. But thank you.” She gave Abigail an appraising look for a moment that made something clench in Abby’s stomach—and maybe a bit lower. “You look good too. I like the red.”

“Thanks. I wanted something a little different.”

Riley nodded. “Something different can be good. With hair. I mean, different hair can be good when— I mean. Ugh,” she shook her head as if the force of the headshake would right her thinking, “I need coffee. Want to grab a coffee with me? There’s a place down that way.” She gestured to her left with a local’s sense of certainty.

“That’d be great—I was just strategizing about how to get coffee in my system. Lead the way.”

As they walked through the terminal hall—each gate they passed trimmed with tinsel, garland, and twinkling lights—Abby looked at the figure of Riley more closely. Two years hadn’t changed much about her appearance. Her hair might be slightly shorter, Abigail decided, but it was difficult to tell, as it was currently twisted into a messy bun at the back of

her head. She was as stylishly dressed as Abby remembered her, though—a sleek black turtleneck peeking out from a fitted jacket above striped no-wrinkle travel pants and Audrey-Hepburn-esque flats. As she wheeled a compact travel suitcase behind her, she looked every inch the successful doctor Abby presumed her to be by now... which just made Abby feel that much more self-conscious about her elusive state of between-employments.

“So, you work at a hospital out here then? I didn’t know you moved out of Maryland,” Abby muttered as they filtered into the long line at the terminal coffee shop.

Riley nodded. “Stanford Hospital. Children’s health, specifically. I got the job last year—that’s why I wasn’t at all the Christmas things at the Caldwells last year. I was new, and it made sense to work on Christmas. Really get settled.”

“Ah. Good for you. Yeah, I was wondering.” Abby had, in fact, wondered about Riley’s absence last year—there hadn’t been a good time to ask about it, and she and Harper were doing so well that she hadn’t wanted to pry about Harper’s ex and bring up old embers of jealousy. In a quiet moment late in the night, though, Abby had silently wondered to herself if Riley had stayed away from her hometown and the Christmas party that year because she was too upset that Abby and Harper had gotten back together.

But no. She was saving lives and helping children. Abby now found herself blushing in delayed mortification over her self-importance.

“How about you? What brings you to the not-so-sunny part of California?” Riley smirked as she gestured casually to the airport’s large windows and the scenery of endless gray clouds.

“Job interviews,” Abby admitted. “I’m looking for a new position. I was at the Barnes Foundation, but the grant funding for my position ran out and...” The words lodged in her throat, but Riley nodded, understanding.

“And something different can be good,” she finished for her, looking pointedly at her red hair.

Abby nodded. “Yeah. Right. So, I came out here for basically a marathon of interviews—Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, art educational organizations around the Bay, and yesterday the San José Museum of Art.”

“Thus, flying out of San José International,” Riley concluded. “Geeze, the odds seem crazy that we’d be here at the same time. Wild. Oh, here—” They stepped up to the counter, where Riley ordered a coffee and espresso concoction that sounded like it could kill a small animal with the amount of likely caffeine, while Abigail ordered a small, plain coffee. The cheapest on the menu, she reasoned, counting out the change in her pocket. As she began to pull it out to pay, though, Riley waved her hand away. “Oh no, I’ve got this. I’ve got a doctor’s salary and my parents still refuse to let me buy my own plane ticket home for the holidays. I can afford to buy a cup of coffee for a cute girl I found at the airport.”

Abby felt a blush heat her cheeks as Riley flashed a smirk and wink her way. Sure, she knew the flirting comment was mostly just Riley’s sense of humor mixed with what was probably a

heavy dose of pity. (God, she knew about the breakup then. Of *course* she knew.) But it still made a reticent smile skirt across Abby's lips.

The shop was packed with holiday travelers, but they found one remaining table with a double-seated bench—the table's other chairs having been poached and dragged over to other tables by larger groups. The bench was a tight fit, Abigail's left arm and leg necessarily pressed tightly against Riley's right, but after a few sheepish smiles they both got settled comfortably, holding onto their coffees like they were lifelines.

After a few moments of sipping and caffeinating, it was Riley who finally sighed and looked over at Abby cautiously. "So."

Abby winced, bracing herself for the upcoming inquiry. "So."

After another sip and careful look at Abby's wary expression, Riley tried again. "So—what did Harper do to fuck it all up?"

Abby laughed a short, clap of a laugh, half-choking on a sip of coffee. She had expected a question about the breakup, but not that phrasing. "What makes you think she was the one to fuck it up?"

Riley just gave Abby a pointed look that screamed 'Are you kidding me?' and shook her head. "Was it the queer-defense-of-traditional-family-values article? Because that was a ride. I got sent that on social media from pretty much every gay acquaintance I have in Pennsylvania."

Abby shook her head. Harper's op-ed had gone viral in September, shared both by people who praised the LGBT-conservative perspective and those who hated it and wanted to call her a hypocrite. "No, she wrote that after we broke up—although we definitely had some political arguments, and she'd said things like that before that pissed me off. I guess it shouldn't have surprised me. I mean, hell, she helped write like half her father's speeches. He's thinking of running for Congress next year, I guess?"

"Yeah, I heard something like that," Riley agreed. "Not mad about that part, personally. It's a pretty red district, and I would definitely prefer Mr. 'support all families' Ted Caldwell, with his lesbian daughter and his marching in a Pride parade, then the alternative. But..." Riley shook her head, frowning, "yeah, sounds like you and Harper weren't exactly on the same page."

Abby shrugged a shoulder. "That wasn't the only problem. I could have lived with us having different politics. We could have talked about that, I think. At least, I hoped so." Abby winced slightly, thinking of a summer event she and Harper had attended during the last Pride month. It had been a fundraiser for queer youth, and between the MC's emphasis on accepting non-binary teens into the community and some political comments and jokes about conservative politicians, Harper had complained for hours afterward about how uncomfortable she felt, how not everyone saw issues of gender and sexuality the same way in the LGBT community, and how upsetting it was that the community expected a monolithic ideal of queerness as much as her parents had expected the "perfect" child. Abby didn't quite think they were the same thing and said so to Harper at the time, perhaps more harshly than

she meant to. Which led to another one of their arguments—lately becoming more and more common—filled with cold words and hurt feelings.

That hadn't been what really ended it though. "It was a modern art exhibition," Abby sighed.

Riley quirked her head, her expression morphing into half-amused and quizzical. "I mean, I've heard of people not understanding modern art, but I haven't ever heard of it actually *ending* relationships. Although," Riley paused meaningfully, "I heard that there was a lot of side-eye at the last Picasso exhibit."

Abby half-laughed despite herself. "That is a terrible joke."

"It is. But it made you smile, which was the goal." Riley set her coffee on the small table in front of them and turned so she could look at Abby's face more directly, causing her knee to brush Abby's leg even more in the tight space. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No! It's okay. I want to. I haven't—I haven't really had anyone to tell this to besides my friend John," Abby said, taking a deep breath. "It's just... I don't know if it's going to sound stupid."

"I doubt it. But I'll let you know," Riley bluntly smirked.

Abby half-smiled back. Then she took a deep breath. "It was an exhibition on women in contemporary art. I knew some of the organizers, also Carnegie Mellon alums, and it's totally an event that's up my alley—less so up Harper's. I got a free ticket through the museum, and I asked her if she would go with me and if she wanted me to buy her a ticket. She said yes, but said she'd buy the ticket herself. We get closer to the event date. I ask her if she got her ticket. She says yes. Great. Day before the event rolls around, and Harper says she has an important deadline to finish for her article and can't go. I'm disappointed of course, but I know her career means a lot to her—I totally support that. So, I ask if I can maybe give her ticket to someone else, and... and she apparently never bought it. She just *said* she did." Abby shook her head, still disbelieving, as she took a sip of her coffee. "And I know it's not a big deal. It was just a museum art show. She already knew she was busy that week, but she didn't want to hurt my feelings, and she wasn't really that into the art. But..."

"But you trusted her," Riley finished, her voice deep with regretful understanding.

"Right."

"And it was a pattern of behavior."

"Yes!" Abby felt the rush of relief that Riley understood her feelings. "But she totally didn't get that. I said that it was like when she said that she'd told her parents she'd come out when she hadn't—that she chose to lie rather than having difficult conversations. And, to be fair, I didn't say it very nicely. I was angry and upset, and I just kept thinking that we had promised to be open and honest from now on and here she was lying about something again." Abby shook her head. "We both said some really hurtful things that night. And, well, that was it."

Memories of the argument that night were whirring in Abby's memory as a mournful Elvis Christmas song played over the shop's small speakers. It was mostly just moments and flashes: Harper's choking sob. Abigail's own voice harsh with anger. The glint of the ring set down a little too hard as Harper said, "I can't wear this anymore. I need to be with someone who doesn't constantly use the worst week of my life against me."

"I'm sorry to hear," Riley was saying when Abby brought her attention back to the shop again. "I mean, I'm not totally surprised, obviously, but I am sorry." Riley tapped the lid of her coffee cup, flashing a pained half-smile Abby's way. "If I had been in the city then, I would totally have taken you out, bought you sweets, and gotten you shit-faced. Please tell me you had friends who did that for you?"

"John tried," Abby affirmed. "Together we at least achieved the shit-faced part."

"Well, that's something," Riley said. Suddenly her lips quirked into a playful smirk. "Well, can I try and take care of the rest of it today then?"

Abigail frowned, not quite following Riley's question. "I'm sorry, what?"

Riley smiled a bright, white smile that seemed to warm her whole face. "Taking you out and buying you sweets." She absently tapped the lid of her coffee again as she added, "I figure barely after nine in the morning is too early for the shit-faced idea, but the rest is achievable, and honestly more fun when you're not newly and freshly miserable."

"Uh, take me out where?" Abby gestured loosely around them. "We are stuck in the airport for most of the day, and we can't leave. The security lines are insane and—"

"Nope, not leaving. Just the airport—but 'hitting the town' style. People watching, sweet eating, Christmas shopping—all the fun and distractions you could hope for in one semi-convenient beige building, that we will eventually be able to leave in four and a half hours." Riley raised her eyebrows a few times, making them invitingly dance on her forehead. "What do you say, Red? Make it an airport date?"

Abby felt herself biting her lip as the blush crept up her cheeks again, spurred on by the combination of the new nickname and the word "date." She knew that's not how Riley meant it, of course—they barely knew each other and hadn't talked for two years. They had an interesting connection and some overlapping history, but clearly Riley was just being nice and looking for a way to kill some time and have fun.

Which was perfect. Abby needed that too.

"Sure. Let's do it."

Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree

*"You will get a sentimental feeling when you hear
Voices singing, let's be jolly,
Deck the halls with boughs of holly.
Rockin' around the Christmas tree
Have a happy holiday.
Everyone dancin' merrily
In the new old-fashioned way."*

- "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," written by Johnny Marks

"So, what do you want to do first?" Riley wagged her eyebrows as she gestured at the terminal before them. "Have you finished all your Christmas shopping?"

Abby shrugged. "Kind of. I pretty much only am buying for my friend John and his boyfriend, Mark." She hesitated, biting her lip a bit in guilty thought. "I probably should get something else for John. I'm pretty much crashing at his place indefinitely until I hear about a job." She had bought a pretty nice, cashmere scarf for John on discount and some matching cozy couple's patterned socks for he and Mark. They were presents she could afford, but nothing special or worthy of the care and love that John had shown her over the years. "Yeah, shopping could be fun. You need to buy for anyone?"

Riley shrugged. "I think I'm all set with my family. I got presents in my checked bag for my mom, dad, and sister. I don't really have any friends I'm buying for."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah," Riley affirmed. "Dylan. She's two years younger. She's usually at the Caldwells' holiday things too, but these past couple years she's been at her boyfriend's family's house in Montana for Christmas. She sends me pictures—it's really cute looking. White Christmas, log cabin. The whole Hallmark thing. My mom hates it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. My mom thinks Chris—that's Dylan's guy—is trying to steal her away from her family and move her across the country. She hates that I'm far too, but for me it's the prestigious job that my mom can brag about that took me there, and the fact that I always come home for Christmas has been a big deal the last couple years. I feel bad for my sister, but in a weird way, it's seriously been awesome. Because of Dylan and Chris, my mom has had this, well, revelation that heterosexuality is not the answer to the question: 'what makes a good mother-daughter relationship?' I probably should get something extra nice for Chris—I could maybe even credit him for my mom going to her first PFLAG charity event last year. She's seriously been way more open minded and supportive lately. It might also be this weird

competitiveness she has with the Caldwells too though. Like, ‘Oh no, Ted walked in a Pride parade? I must walk in *two* parades now!’”

Abby half-laughed. “I’m glad she’s being supportive, whatever the reason.”

“Yeah, me too. Although the number of tacky rainbow things I get at Christmas has also increased a disturbing amount. And I haven’t really put them to the test yet.”

“You’ve never brought a girlfriend home to meet them?”

Riley shook her head. Memories of Abby’s previous Christmas celebrations with the Caldwells hung silently in the air. Finally, Abby gave Riley a playful hip check and gestured in front of them.

“So, I at least need to find something for John. Are there any good airport shops? Some places have, like, full shopping malls in them, right?”

“Some absolutely do,” Riley half-laughed, her voice a little more somber than before but lightening as she continued, “But not this airport. Think of that as a part of the fun and challenge, I guess. Think John will want a tin of mints and motion sickness medicine? I know we can find those at least.”

Abby snorted in response and then found herself pulled by the hand down the crowded airport halls. They walked by kiosks of hand lotion and decorated chocolates, a few different newsstand stores, a collection of tiny airport restaurants, and finally a store dedicated to luggage and travel accessories before pausing at the end of the walkway. A sign with bold letters and a red circle warned them that passing beyond that point would take them outside of the screened security zone.

“Huh. I guess those are our choices,” Riley sighed. She was still loosely holding Abby’s hand, a casual gesture of closeness that caused Abby to feel slightly flushed and awkward. After a moment, she pulled her hand away to nervously push her hair out of her face.

“I’ve always wondered—who buys luggage at the airport, *after* security?”

Riley made a small humming sound and put her now-free hand in her pocket. Abby tried to not feel like she’d just lost something. “I’ve wondered the same. And who buys luxury purses at an airport. I feel like I’ve seen those stores a lot too.”

Abby sniggered slightly. She shook her head when Riley gave her an inquisitive look. “It’s just... I know one person who once bought a designer purse at an airport.” When she saw Riley quirk an eyebrow in interest, she continued, “Tipper. Harper’s mom.”

Riley winced. “Oh man, that makes so much sense. Louis Vuitton?”

“Coach, I think.”

Riley groaned. “You can get those at almost any department store. Why would you feel called to buy one in an *airport*?”

“I have no idea,” Abby agreed. “I guess she just felt called to. It was red. She carried it around all last Christmas.”

Riley looked at Abby with a slightly pained, empathetic expression. “Well, this activity supposed to get you not thinking about your ex. I keep blowing that one.”

Abby chuckled and shook her head. “No, that’s fine. It’s... kind of funny, really. You know, this season I’m relieved at least that I don’t have to go to that white elephant party. Buying a gift for that was seriously one of the most stressful parts of my holiday, two years in a row.”

Riley sighed in agreement. “So many possible landmines, so much judgement. I didn’t know until I was in college that white elephant parties have the possibility of being fun. I went to one with some people from the bio department, and it was all goofy gifts like second-hand quesadilla makers and toilet ducks. It was awesome.”

“Toilet ducks? What is a toilet duck?”

Riley laughed and held up her hand in a C-shape, creating an open space of about three inches with her fingers. “It’s this hunk of toilet cleaner about this big in the shape of a duck silhouette. You put it in the toilet to help keep it clean, I guess.”

“Is that one of those things that turns the water blue?”

“I think so. But duck-shaped.”

Abby found herself grinning. “Of course. It *has* to be duck-shaped.”

“Obviously.”

“Naturally.” They both broke into quiet laughter and shook their heads. “Can you imagine Tipper’s face if you brought a toilet duck to her white elephant party?”

“I have imagined it,” Riley admitted. “Several times. Wistfully and longingly, usually as I’m in the middle of buying yet another Caldwell-appropriate ceramic knick-knack or William Sonoma kitchen utensil year after year.”

A warmth bloomed in Abby’s chest as she saw Riley stealing a careful glance at her. Talking about the Caldwells didn’t seem so bad right now, not with Riley. They had a shared experience, similar hurts and histories, and the same mix of wry amusement and complicated affection for the family.

As Abby felt that sense of warmth spread, she found herself saying, “What about having our own white elephant thing?” At Riley’s inquisitive look, Abby continued, “In this airport. We go to all the retail stores and try and find the weirdest, silliest gift we can for each other. Cheap, of course.”

Riley nodded, chewing her lip thoughtfully. “Fifteen-dollar cap?”

“Perfect.”

They made their way back down the terminal, stopping in each newsstand store and kiosk, musing aloud about who was on the cover of what magazine, pointing out humorous and strange travel items, and thumbing through mass-market paperbacks. They fell immediately into an affable rhythm, Abby noticed. It was easy and familiar, as if they'd kept in touch this past year. As if they were friends, and not near-strangers thrown together by bad east-coast weather and fate.

"Oh look," Riley picked up a small box. "A vibrating neck massager for stiff muscles." She quirked her eyebrows at Abby. "Is this much needed in your life?"

Abby snort-laughed loudly enough that another customer in the travel shop turned to look. She felt the pink flush heat her cheeks as Riley smirked. The obvious other uses for the little massager hung between them. Okay, so they were the kinds of friends who could make sex-comments. Good to know. "Uh... I think I'm good. Have that all covered."

"If you say so." Riley winked and placed the box back on the shelf. "You know, I went through two vibrators after I broke up with my last girlfriend. I didn't actually know you could wear out a vibrator, but I managed it. To be fair, they were cheap with shotty electrical connections."

Abby nibbled on her lip and tried to look casual as she moved a universal-international-outlet-converter on and off the shelf absently. "How long ago was this?"

"Few months ago. We'd only dated for a few months in total, though. Not like, well, you."

Abby nodded, waiting a few more breaths before asking, "Seeing anyone now?"

Riley looked up from her browsing and her gaze caught Abby's. "Hmm. No. Nothing serious. Just some casual dating here and there."

"Mmm." Abby looked almost any direction but at Riley, finally settling on a seasonal Christmas ornament display in the back corner. Then she saw them. "Oh fuck, what are those?"

They made their way back to tinsel and glitter covered corner where various Christmas baubles and trinkets hung from a plastic wrack. In the middle row, a series of gaudy, shirtless merman ornaments hung in a brightly colored row. Abby picked up one with a shiny golden tail and dark hair.

"That looks like your friend," Riley observed.

"Yeah, had the same thought. And he's holding a book—John's an editor. It's perfect. Oh man. A sexy merman Christmas ornament of himself. He'll love it. I absolutely have to get this for him."

"Great," Riley said. "Mission accomplished. You do that—I'm going to go grab a couple things too."

They separated and made their way to opposite sides of the store, meeting outside with two opaque plastic shopping bags.

“I still haven’t bought something for you,” Abby admitted.

Riley shook her head. “No rush. We still have hours. Want to grab lunch?”

“Sure.”

They settled on an island-themed restaurant that was strung with fluorescently bright tiki-statue-shaped Christmas lights and advertised brunch cocktails and pineapple-topped Hawaiian burgers. Conversation flowed easily as they talked about recent films they’d seen, which morphed into a debate over the best lesbian movies of all time (Abby insisted that her nostalgia for *But I’m a Cheerleader* and *DEBS* wasn’t over influencing her, and that Riley citing a Swedish movie Abby had never even heard of made the debate unfair), and careened slowly and casually into dating history and first-date horror stories (Abby’s favorite was Riley’s animated story of first-date with the woman who hated mushrooms who harshly criticized Riley for getting some on her pizza, since she swore that she would taste them if she went down on her). Abby didn’t have any recent dating horror stories, but she had some pretty decent ones from before Harper, and she was pleased when, on a particularly good anecdote that she knew always garnered a laugh, she nearly made Riley spit out her bright-pink cocktail. It smelled like guava.

When the bill came, Riley was quick to snatch it up from the table before Abby could protest. “Single doctor, remember? I’ve got this.” Abby felt a twinge of guilt but didn’t protest too much given her realism about both her bank account and airport pricing.

But she really did need to do something nice for Riley.

“Can you wait for me outside?” Abby asked after the waitress picked up the check. “I have to grab something. I’ll be back in a sec.”

Riley nodded, her brow furrowing in confusion at Abby’s abruptness. “Yeah. Sure.”

Abby muttered a quick thanks and rushed back over to the newsstand store. She swiped the few items she noticed off their shelves, paid quickly, and hurried back with her plastic bag bulging and stretching more than it had before.

Riley was standing right outside the restaurant and raised an eyebrow at Abby. “Is that another gift in your bag, or are you just happy to see me?”

“Both,” Abby quipped back with a smirk. “I figured out your present.”

Now it was Riley’s turn to have a happy spot of pink paint her cheeks. “Gee. Thanks, Red.”

“Did you want to exchange now?”

“Do *you* want to?”

“I’m fine with whatever. You pick.”

Riley hummed in thought a second and then shook her head. “No, let’s do another couple things first. We can always do our gifts back at the gate. Next, let’s head to the food court area.”

Abby frowned in confusion. “We just ate.”

“Right, but there should be something over there for Christmas.” Riley grinned. “It’ll be a surprise. Come on!”

Riley’s hand was back on hers as they made their way to the other side of the airport. As they came closer to the food court, Abby could hear soft piano music— *O Holy Night?* —overlapping the tinny Christmas carols being projected over store speakers. Soon, a bright green, white, and red striped piano came into view, an older man just finishing his playing and muttering some thank you’s as he stepped away.

“It started last year, I heard,” Riley said in response to Abby’s unspoken question. “It’s a communal piano, and it’s only around for the holidays.”

“How cool,” Abby murmured. She waited to see if anyone would sit down in the older man’s place, but the few people that had been watching began to disperse and the piano bench remained empty. Abby glanced over at Riley inquisitively. “Do you play?”

Riley hummed in agreement and nodded. “Since I was a kid. My mom likes music and all, but mostly I think she wanted me and Dylan to do well in school. She read this book that said that music students score consistently better on tests, especially in math and science.”

Abby chuckled. “Seems like it worked, Doctor.”

“Yeah,” Riley smirked. “Guess so. Thanks, mom.” Abby gestured at the piano, and Riley sighed. “I can play, but I can’t sing all that well. It just sounds like my speaking voice but louder. Help me out?”

“Oh, uh. Sure. Yeah, I guess I can.” Riley took Abby’s hand again and pulled her toward the piano, and they both sat on the lacquered bench. It was actually less of a tight squeeze than the coffeshop seat had been, but Abby still felt the heat of Riley’s body radiating next to hers.

Riley tested out a few keys and then nodded at Abby. “Just join in where you want to,” she said, and began to play.

She started with *Let It Snow*, and Abby was amused to find Riley’s description of her singing voice fairly accurate. She was a beautiful piano player, but her singing sounded like she was trying to get someone’s attention from across the food court. Abby smiled and bobbed her head to the rhythm of the song, pitching her voice higher to harmonize with Riley’s on, “Since we’ve no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!”

After that song, Riley transitioned into a dreamy rendition of *Winter Wonderland*. Abby tried to ignore the tensing in her chest when they got to the line, “He’ll say ‘Are you married?’ We’ll say, ‘No man, but you can do the job when you’re in town.’” She was unsure whether

the tensing was mourning over her broken engagement with Harper or something else more adolescently fanciful.

A little girl approached the piano nervously, and Riley carefully closed the song with a flourish on the keys. “Hey there,” she said to the girl, leaning down so that she was closer to the child’s eye level. “Did you want to play next?”

The little girl nodded, turning slightly inward in clear apprehension. Abby could hear her parents’ eager encouragements just a few yards away.

Riley clapped her hands together and smiled broadly. “I am so excited that you want to play. I’ve been playing piano since I was your age too. Do you like it?” The girl nodded, a little faster and a little more boldly. “Me too. Here, you can play the piano now. It’s all yours.” They slid off the bench and watched as the girl carefully pulled herself up.

“Your playing was really good,” the girl said to Riley.

“Thanks,” she smiled back, her grin seeming to light up her entire face. “I bet you’ll be really good too. What’s your favorite Christmas song to play?”

“Rudolph.”

“Oh, I love that one!” Riley gasped. “I can’t wait to hear you play it.”

The girl grinned widely, and Abby could see that her front two baby-teeth were missing. She tentatively knocked at the keys before beginning her rendition of what was clearly a simplified version of *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. Abby and Riley sang along with the little girl, who laughed when Abby added “Like a lightbulb!” to the lyrics, then she transitioned into a shakier version of *Jingle Bells*. They clapped eagerly with her parents when she was finished, exchanged some airport Christmas pleasantries, and then made way for a third piano player—a teenage boy who clearly had a flair for the dramatic as he added flourishes, riffs, and runs to his playing of *Jingle Bell Rock*.

Riley grabbed Abby by the waist and whirled her around for an improvised dance for a moment, trying to keep time with the constantly embellished and changing song until they were both stumbling and laughing. As they walked slowly away from the food court and its piano, Abby looked at the smiling Riley. “That was really fun.” Riley nodded in agreement as Abby continued, “And you said you work in pediatrics, right? You must be good at that. You’re so sweet with kids. I think you made that girl’s day.”

“Thanks,” Riley sighed. “Yeah. My job can be hard—I am constantly dealing with scared patients, and even more scared families—but I really like kids, and I am happy when I can make them smile and make being in the hospital just a little less awful.”

“Seriously, I bet you’re great at that,” Abby affirmed. There was that pink at the top of Riley’s cheeks again—Abby could get addicted to making that little blush bloom. “Do you want kids of your own someday?”

Riley nodded slightly. “Someday, yeah. I’d like to be a mom. Who knows when I’ll be in the right time and place for that, though. How about you?”

Abby hesitated slightly. “Yeah, I mean... I definitely have this dreamy image of having a family. The whole lesbian package with a wife, two kids, and a Subaru headed to soccer practice and the Children’s museum on weekends, a Christmas celebration with too many toys and ripped wrapping paper everywhere. But...”

“But you imagined that with Harper,” Riley finished for her. Abby winced.

“For a while, yeah. Two years ago, that dream definitely had Harper sitting next to me. Not at the end, though. Once I felt like I couldn’t trust her, I knew I couldn’t have kids with her, and the image became... fuzzier. Just a fantasy. Plus, her mom would freak out about the wrapping paper. Tipper seriously made her kids fold and save the wrapping paper for charity or something.”

Riley half-chuckled and then looked at Abby with a sad fondness, reaching over carefully and brushing her auburn locks out of her eyes. “You’ll find your person, Red. You’re too awesome not to.”

There was that heat and tightness in her heart again. That was happening a lot today. “Thanks. That’s, uh, that’s sweet, Riley.”

Riley just hummed and gave another half-smile. “Okay, before we head back to the gate, I have one more place for us to go. It’s just down this way.”

This time it was Abby who took Riley’s hand first and smiled as she said, “Okay. Lead me there?”

Winter Wonderland

Chapter Notes

This slightly-shorter chapter is probably going to be the last one posted before Christmas, but the last chapter (which should be a bit longer and contain a bit of a post-flight holiday montage) will be up by New Year's. Things heat up in the airport, and a slow-burn becomes not all that slow. Enjoy and happy holiday season!

*“Gone away is the bluebird
here to stay is a new bird
He sings a love song
as we go along,
walking in a winter wonderland.”*

- Winter Wonderland,” written by Felix Bernard & Richard Bernhard Smith

Riley stopped abruptly before they turned a corner. “Do you trust me?”

Abby opened her mouth to affirm instinctively, then paused a moment. “Trust you for what exactly?”

Riley smirked. “Do you trust me to lead you to our next stop with your eyes closed? I want it to be a surprise. I’ll be careful and make sure you don’t run into anyone or faceplant.”

Abby looked around at the bustling travelers in the airport terminal, as well as the shiny smooth ground beneath her sneakers. “Uh. Promise?”

Riley crossed her heart with her index finger. “Promise.”

Abby hesitated only a moment more before she closed her eyes, letting her body relax as Riley took her by the hand, navigating her carefully through the terminal.

“Okay, keep walking forward, keep walking... okay, turn with me. And just a few more steps... and here! Open your eyes and look up.”

Abigail opened her eyes to see clear squares flashing white, grey, and blue all along the stretch of terminal ceiling. They glittered and blinked like sun on water or reflections on ice. She tried to follow the flashes to see if there was a pattern— Was it following music? Was it randomized? —but after a few moments, she turned in confusion back to Riley’s smirking face.

“It’s really neat looking, but what is it?”

“It’s modern art, so I kinda’ figured it would be right up your alley. It’s an installation that makes patterns out of weather data across the world. There’s a screen with what city is being displayed over there on the wall, as well as some information about it.”

They walked over and huddled around the screen, watching as the patterns moved from the white snowstorm in Chicago to the hazed grey of Mumbai, the pieces of glass hanging ornament-like from the ceiling, seeming to dance and shift with the changing data. Abby read a bit aloud about the design team and researchers who put the art installation together, and they watched for several minutes as data swirled above their heads in sparkling interpretations of Christmas weather from across the world.

“This is fantastic,” Abby sighed.

“Yeah?” Riley smiled, looking somewhat relieved and self-conscious at the same time. “I’ve always thought it’s neat, but I’m not an art person, so I wasn’t sure if… well… I’m glad you like it too.”

“I love it,” Abby insisted. Her arm brushed lightly against Riley’s as she chuckled, “Shopping, food, music, dancing, and now a modern art installation. Who knew getting stuck in an airport would be like five dates in one? Oh—I mean—uh,” Abby felt her face flush in embarrassment and panic for a moment as she continued, “not that this is a date. I’m not trying to say that we were, like, dating. That’s not—”

Riley smiled softly and took Abby’s hand in hers again. “Hey, I was the one who used the word ‘date’ first, Red. And I kind of thought the fact that I was flirting madly with you was kind of obvious?” Abby felt her stomach tighten in a rush of conflicting emotions. The conflict must have shown on her face because Riley let go of her hand and stepped back. “But… you’re not ready. God, I’m an idiot. It’s too soon, and I’m connected to Harper. I’m sorry, I—”

“No!” Abby shook her head fiercely. “That’s not it. It’s not—Geeze, um, how can I explain?” She took a deep breath, trying to untangle the fear, shame, and insecurity welling inside her. “It’s not that it’s too close to the breakup with Harper, or that you know her and her family. I think I’m ready to feel something else and move forward. It’s just…” She paused to brush her auburn died hair away from her face, her eyes stinging slightly with the bite of unshed tears. “You’re awesome, and today has been great and I’ve loved every second of hanging out with you. And, yeah, I’ve been flirting too, obviously, but… I am just so not sure where I’ll be after Christmas, if I’ll have a job, if you and I will even be in the same state. I’m just imagining sitting on John’s couch while totally unemployed in Pittsburg looking for, like, a job in Toledo, while you’re in California—and if we started something—actually, knowingly started something besides a casual friendship—I can already tell it would *mean* something to me. And I can’t start that while knowing that uncertainty and pain is more likely than it working out. I’m still too raw to make that choice, Riley. You’re *amazing*—seriously—but I’m just uncertain in everything in my life right now.”

Riley blinked twice before wryly replying, “Well, that was the most heartfelt ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ that I’ve ever heard.” When Abby opened her mouth to reply, Riley waved her hand and

smiled ruefully. “No, I get it. That makes a lot of sense. So,” she forced a more cheerful smile and gestured toward the airport terminal, back in the direction of their gate, “we’re just friends hanging out in an airport. That’s great. And we can stay in touch? This has been nice, and I’d like to not wait until the next act of God and a Chicago snowstorm to talk to you again.”

“No. Yeah. I mean, I agree—no more relying on snowstorms and coincidences. We should totally stay in touch.” Abby felt the tenseness and panic in her stomach relax, but it was replaced with a slightly mournful wistfulness. God, Riley *liked* her. A gorgeous, successful, funny, kind doctor who actually cared about how she felt and what she liked had seriously been suggesting that they *date*—while Abby was homeless, jobless, untethered, and uncertain. The idea felt strange to even believe in Abigail’s current winter of self-loathing.

They made their way meanderingly back toward the gate, pointing out cute Christmas decorations and casual observations as they walked. Finally, Riley quirked her head curiously at Abby. “Toledo, Ohio?”

“Huh?”

“In your little speech back there, you mentioned imagining yourself applying for jobs in Toledo. Are you talking about Ohio?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s on my next ‘desperate round of job applications’ list.” At Riley’s incredulous look, Abby chuckled. “Ohio has some nice art museums—the one in Toledo is strangely incredible. They got this huge grant from, like, a glass manufacturing family. It’s a whole thing. But, yeah, wouldn’t be my first choice in comparison to here.”

Riley murmured an affirmative sound. They arrived back at the gate, with the information sign flashing that boarding time was just thirty minutes away.

“Guess we managed to kill the time,” Riley sighed.

“Yeah,” Abby affirmed, her throat tightening slightly. “Guess so.”

Riley made another humming sound in her throat, then quirked her lips into a smile and shook the bag in her hand. “Present time?”

Abby matched her smile and nodded. “Definitely.”

They found two empty chairs at the corner of the gate; they were surrounded by kids with hand-held gaming devices, people swiping their phones absently, and a couple people seemingly napping while waiting for the long-delayed flight, but as they traded their airport newsstand bags, it felt strangely intimate, like trading presents on Christmas morning.

Abby opened hers from Riley first. Inside was a set of coloring pencils that advertised that they acted as watercolor paints when water was added, a notebook of thick cardstock, and a green San Jose Museum of Art keychain.

“The keychain is for luck and memories,” Riley explained. “Like a talesman maybe. The others—I don’t know if you like making art or just learning about it, but the pages rip out, so I figured you could make greeting cards or little art pieces that you could give to friends or save for yourself without taking up too much room if you’re moving somewhere soon.”

Abby felt her hand come up to touch her mouth as she blinked back fresh tears, which made her feel so stupid. It was a white elephant gift from a newsstand, but... Geeze, Riley hadn’t seen her in over a year, barely talked to her at all before that—and somehow this tiny giftshop present was more thoughtful and more about what *she* might want than years of presents from Harper. Harper had always gotten her things that she thought Abby *needed*—a book Harper had loved that she felt Abby should read, a new phone gadget, or new items they had discussed for their small home—but she never really tried to buy unique to Abby’s own interests and tastes. And here was Riley, in a small city-airport, shining a light on what Abby didn’t really know she had been missing—someone who tried to really know her.

“It’s perfect. Thank you,” she said, feeling her chest clench tighter. Riley gave her a slightly confused and concerned look, clearly noticing Abby’s powerful but restrained emotions over the gift, but then smiled tenderly.

“You’re welcome, Red.”

Abby shook her head and cleared her throat to try and pull herself a little more back together. “Okay, your turn. I, uh, I didn’t really feel I knew a lot about you, but I figured your job was really stressful, so...”

She handed Riley the bag a little too quickly, their fingers knocking together during the hand off. Riley smiled as she opened the present: a small travel candle scented with lavender, a facemask for relaxation that could be heated or cooled in the microwave or fridge... and the small neck massager Riley had pointed out earlier.

Riley raised an eyebrow, eyes glistening with amusement. “We’re not dating... but you bought me a vibrator? Not entirely sure about these mixed messages.”

Abby faked a look of shock. “That is a home spa kit with a *neck* massager, miss doctor! If you use it for something besides what’s recommended on the packaging, that is up to you, but if you’re implying that I meant anything dirty by it—” She couldn’t keep her fake shock up for any longer, her expression cracking into a jubilant grin. Then they both started laughing, loudly and near-hysterically. Abby was too busy staring at Riley’s delighted smile to see if they were making a scene.

“Thank you,” Riley finally sighed, another few chuckles escaping her lips. She was silent for a moment, hesitating, before she tentatively looked at Abby with half-lidded, darkened eyes. “Am I an absolutely horrible person if I tell you that the next time I use this to... *destress* and work out tension, I’ll probably be thinking of you?”

“Oh. Fuck.” A wave of heat rushed through Abigail’s body at the thought of Riley sprawled naked on a bed, whispering Abby’s name as she pleased herself. The mental image didn’t just weaken her resolve—it shattered it entirely. “Only if I’m a horrible person,” she admitted hoarsely, “for saying that I kind of want you to.”

Riley muffled a frustrated moan behind the side of her hand. “Look, I know you said you just wanted to be friends, and you seriously have good reasons, but there’s clearly something here and I just—”

“Oh, goddamn it,” Abby muttered, pushing herself forward and interrupting Riley with a kiss.

It wasn’t the smoothest kiss Abby had ever instigated—it was a little too forceful at first, causing an awkward bump of noses and teeth. But then Riley tilted her head and parted her lips, suddenly bringing them together into a sweet, passionate dance of skin, breath, and lips. Abby felt Riley’s hand tentatively press against her neck, changing the angle again to allow them to kiss deeper as Abby’s tongue tentatively swept against Riley’s. Abby tried to pull Riley closer to her, momentarily forgetting where they were until they both bumped against the airport chair’s metal and plastic arm. They looked down at the barrier between them and began to laugh again, self-conscious blushes blooming on both of their cheeks.

“Well,” Abby laughed.

“So,” Riley agreed.

“Apparently I’m bad at the ‘let’s just be friends’ thing.”

“Apparently.”

“I still don’t know what it means, though. Or where I’ll be. But you’re great, and today has been crazy wonderful.”

Riley opened her mouth to respond when an announcement for their gate crackled above their heads, a reminder that pre-boarding was going to begin soon. The dark-haired doctor frowned and took out her ticket from her bag. “I’m 7A, boarding group A. You?”

“Oh. Uh.” Abby felt the reality of the world crashing down again. The tension in her stomach returned as she pulled her own ticket out of her jacket. “22B. I’m boarding in C-group.” Abby tried to force a lightness to her voice as she quipped, “First class, huh?” She had only been able to afford a coach-level middle seat herself, and the insecurities began flooding back as Riley tentatively nodded.

“It’s part of my Christmas present every year,” she murmured. “My mom buys my ticket and uses her credit card points to upgrade me.”

“That’s nice.”

“Yeah. Um,” Riley’s expression tightened, as if bracing herself for pain, “I want to offer an option, but I don’t want you to think I’m crazy or all stalkery.” At Abby’s quirked eyebrow, Riley continued, “I want to keep spending time with you. So... what if I ask the airline if they can see if whoever’s in 22A wants to swap for my first-class spot?”

Abigail’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Seriously.”

“I...” Fear and hope, excitement and hesitation all fought for purchase in Abby’s heart for a moment before she swallowed her anxiety and said, “If they’ll do it, that’d be amazing. I’d like to keep spending time with you too.”

Relief and joy lit up Riley’s face. As she left to go check with the gate desk, the news on a nearby television broadcasted that, for those spending the holidays in the eastern part of the United States, it was likely going to be a white Christmas.

Abby found herself humming the Christmas carol quietly, allowing herself for the first time in a long while to be grateful for snow and holiday cheer.

A Lot Like Christmas

Chapter Notes

So... when I said I'd have this fic finished by about New Year's, you all knew I meant the LUNAR New Year, right? In all seriousness, sorry for the massive delay; the end of 2020 and the start of 2021 brought a lot of craziness with it, but I finally was able to put that aside and finish this. This chapter is from Riley's third-person limited point of view, since I thought we'd gotten so much of Abby's. I realized as I started and restarted this chapter several times that finishing the awkward cuteness between these two needed both of their thoughts. Hope this brings you some belated holiday spirit!

*"But the prettiest sight to see
Is the holly that will be
On your own front door."*

- *"It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,"* written by Meredith Willson

*"I don't care if snow stops falling down
Santa's come and gone, yeah he's left town
I don't need a Christmas tree
Mistletoe or red and green.
All I need is you next to me
To make every night Christmas Eve."*

- *"Christmas the Whole Year Round,"* written by James Slater & Mike Daly

Christmas was both over and not over. The smell of pine and sugar always permeated Riley's parents' home for several weeks after Christmas Day. Her mother had grown up Catholic after all, and—although Riley could barely ever recall having seen the inside of a church in her childhood—the tradition of celebrating Christmas at least until the first week of January had been adopted into the Johnson home without fail.

And her parents weren't the only people still celebrating Christmas, Riley mused as she adjusted her green velvet suit coat over her red sweater and dark jeans. She tried to tweak the curl going what she felt was *the wrong way* at the bottom of her hair, her gut clenching in doubt. Was this too understated for The Oxwood HoliGays post-Christmas party? She had

been going for Christmasy but classy, deep jewel-tone versions of the holiday red and green. Would other people be more kitsch? Should she try and look more fun, more camp? She normally wouldn't care, but... but she had she caved to impulse and invited Abby, something which her nerves were screaming had been an absolutely. terrible. idea.

Meeting Abby two years ago—first acknowledging that initial white-hot spark of attraction, then bonding with her over shared Harper-based pain and a similarly awkward senses of humor, and then hearing that she had mended her relationship with Harper so easily—had cut through Riley like a phantom pain, the feeling and memory of losing a limb that never actually existed in the first place. She hadn't lost an actual relationship—just the glimmer of hope, an acknowledgement in Riley's gut that Abby was exactly the kind of person that she had been waiting for. To know that this gorgeous, witty, awkward, and genuine woman was besotted with *Harper* of all people, the person who instigated so much of the torment and complicated wounds of Riley's youth, was an extra layer of ironic anguish. Even though Harper had acted like her same childish, selfish, and deceptive self these fifteen years later, she still had Abby forgiving her, staying by her side, and even proposing to her less than a year later.

It was that last news—delivered as a casual update about the Caldwells in a phone conversation with her mother—that had honestly been too much for Riley. She supposed it was gutless that, when the ask to work the week of Christmas came up, she snatched at the opportunity to not go home, to not see how happy Harper and Abby were, like a shipwrecked person might grasp onto any stray flotsam to avoid drowning. Gutless, but so much easier.

The news of Abby and Harper's split had been more obscure. Conjectures from a few local friends who shared that they saw Harper alone at bars around Philadelphia again, the noticeable increase in Harper attending political speeches and family appearances with her father, the lack of Abby in any social media posts by Tipper Caldwell.

Riley thought about texting, seeing if Abby's number was still the same from when they had first exchanged contact information over a year prior... but she immediately squashed the impulse. She wasn't Abby's friend. She wasn't her *anything*. It was just Riley's little fantasy, her private pain and quiet crush. Really, it was likely that Abby barely remembered her.

But then... seeing her in the San José airport had been like a dream. That whole day, in fact, had been like a little pocket of time and space, a gift. It had felt like being in one of those Hallmark movies that her mom and Dylan loved so much around the holidays. Riley wouldn't have been surprised to have heard one of those sleigh-bell chimes when Abby leaned in and kissed her as they sat in those terrible airport chairs.

Changing her plane seat had been a wild, desperate impulse, but it had felt so perfect as they whispered secretively through the whole flight—trying not to wake the person in 22C who started snoring right after takeoff—about favorite foods, childhood memories, inspiring lesbian fashion icons, and other winding topics. Riley's stomach fluttered the whole flight as Abby's fingers lightly brushed the side of her leg, her hand, the top of her arm.

Offering to drive Abby to John's had been a no-brainer, and Abby hadn't even tried to hide her relief at not having to spend the fair for a cab or ride-share. Making out in the backseat of the car while Abby waited for John and Mark to get back from whatever party they were at...

well, that was a no-brainer too. Literally, as Riley felt like all coherent thoughts were banished as Abby gripped tightly on the back of her neck, bit softly at her lips, and breathed frantically into her. When Abby's phone began to buzz with text messages that John had dropped off Mark and was nearly back at the apartment, both she and Riley were almost groaning with frustration, Abby grinding into the side of Riley's hand, denim rubbing raw against naked skin as Abby murmured filthily into Riley's ear and creatively cursed her choice to wear jeans to the airport.

"I don't know what the hell we're doing," Abby admitted moments later, face flushed as they stood on the icy steps of John's apartment building. "And honestly, a small part of me worries today might have been some sort of hallucination. Like, this year has been so terrible—maybe I fell into a coma and my scrambled brain came up with a fantasy where you somehow think I'm worth," she gestured flailingly between them, clearly feeling as incapable as Riley did of producing a clear description of their current relationship status, "even though I'm basically the living embodiment of 'between things right now' and was clearly a terrible enough decision maker that I almost married your high school ex."

Riley let an awkward, happy chuckle escape her lips and shook her head before letting her emotional armor of a wry smile carefully fall back into place. "I'm fairly sure I'm not a coma hallucination. You could have secretly traveled to another dimension though—one where you are much cooler than you realize." Riley tried the waggling her eyebrows trick again, which always seemed to make Abby smile. It worked, with the extra bonus of Abby also giving her that shy bite-on-the-lip that made Riley especially weak in the knees. Geeze, this girl.

"That sounds like a good dimension," Abby finally half-laughed. "I'll take that dimension."

They stood in the freezing weather for a moment in silence, neither of them sure how to part ways. Riley felt like she was an adolescent all over again, hesitant and awkward.

"Oh, I should give you my number," Abby gasped finally. Riley murmured an agreement, her stomach tightening as Abby rattled off the series of numbers already saved in Riley's phone from nearly two years ago. Maybe she should have texted months ago... maybe... maybe...

"Oh my gosh, Abs, I am SO sorry! Have you been waiting—" John paused in his flushed jog up to his front stairs, his eyes narrowing slightly at Riley's presence. "Oh. Am I interrupting, uh— who *are* you?"

"John, this is Riley," Abby quickly jumped in. "We have some mutual, uh, acquaintances and just happened to be at the airport at the same time. She was kind enough to drive me to you."

"Huh." John stared at her for a moment with an intensity that felt like x-ray vision. "I've seen you somewhere, but I can't place—"

"I was at the terrible Christmas party two years ago when you heroically pretended to be Abby's very 'straight' ex-boyfriend," Riley offered. "It was, if I may say, a valiant effort and performance. Five stars, certified fresh, should have swept the awards season."

John pressed his lips into a tight, thin line and hummed in performatively fake appreciation. He clearly didn't know what to make of Riley's presence, and Riley could feel the waves of

protectiveness rolling off him in thick waves like San Francisco fog.

Abby blushed and scratched the back of her neck as she muttered, “Thanks again, Riley. I really, uh, appreciate, uh—God, it’s cold, and we should get inside.” She looked between John and Riley awkwardly for a moment and bit her lip again. “I’ll... I’ll text you?”

“Yeah, it was good to see you.” Riley nodded, heat rolling through her again. She now knew what it was like to bite those lips herself—it wasn’t just a lonely, guilty fantasy anymore. The thought sent a thrill through her, making her want to giggle like a schoolgirl. Instead, she smirked and said merely, “Don’t be a stranger.” As she turned to leave, she waved politely at John and smiled once more at Abby, her eyes lingering for a moment on her slightly tender, teeth-reddened lips.

An hour later, she had her first text message:

<<O God, I am so sorry John was SO weird. I mean, not weird for John, but weird for any other standard of normal people.>>

Riley chuckled, typing a quick response in between pleasantries with her parents:

<<No worries. I could tell he was being protective. It was sweet. I’m glad you have a friend who cares about you that much.>>

It took another hour—after some awkward catching up with her dad and her mom insisting that she needed to eat more and couldn’t she just heat her up a plate?—before Abby responded:

<<I’m glad you can see that. He’s a really good friend.>>

Riley wondered briefly if Harper had seen that, if she had been jealous or judgmental of John as the one person in Abby’s life who maybe cared more about her feelings than she did. Riley dug her fingernails into her palm, once again willing away the phantom imaginings of Harper and Abby’s relationship. It mostly worked.

After that night, they texted daily.

<<Mark’s favorite Christmas movie is Elf. He’s suggested that we watch it three times already. I’m running out of plausible excuses.>>

<<Not a fan of man-child movies?>>

<<Not so much. And is it really so hard for a Christmas movie to pass the Bechdel test?>>

<<Actually, most movies with Santa in them do. The reindeer grunting at each other in front of Santa’s sleigh? All female deer. That’s feminism.>>

<<Oh, my mistake! :D I stand corrected. How could I have missed that?>>

<<OK, help: my mom will not stop offering me food. She loves baking and cooking for the holidays & every time I leave the room I swear something else appears. There’ve been

like six batches of xmas cookies. We may need to do an intervention.>>

<<John has like ten different protein powders in this apartment, no holiday treats at all. Trade you.>>

<<Update: he seriously tried to argue that chocolate protein powder is a holiday treat.>>

<<He is wrong.>>

<<Clearly.>>

Mainly, the texts were conspicuously casual: updates on Christmas activities, favorite holiday foods, random musings and observations. They actively didn't talk about their frenzied make-out. Neither of them brought up the future. Sometimes Riley thought she could feel the tension in the spaces in between their text bubbles, all the fears and hopes, trepidations and passions. But they stuck to small updates, wry teasing and jokes, some hesitant flirting, and the occasional spirited debate on such important topics as the best kinds of peppermint candy.

On the night of the Caldwells' annual white elephant party, it was Abby who texted first:
<<What did you get? Any toilet ducks?>>

Riley had chuckled under her breath, sneaking a picture of the large wooden spoon with the large tag screaming "ARTISAN!" that she'd drawn from the wrapped present pile. *<<It can't even be washed. It needs to be treated in oil like cast iron. Why have a spoon that you can't wash? What do you even use it for?>>*

Abby sent back a simple link in reply, which Riley opened to find a page on BDSM spanking spoon paddles. Riley nearly spit out her mulled wine and had to excuse herself a moment, face hot as she escaped from the beige-wearing polite company and allowed herself the first real laugh and smile at a Caldwell event since she was a teen.

It had been the night after Christmas when Abby had texted simply: *<<How long are you in town for? Any chance we can sneak in one more visit?>>*

To which Riley's traitorous fingers had replied before she could think better of it:
<<Actually, there's a queer post-Christmas bash at The Oxwood on the 28th if you'd like to go. Lots of themed cocktails and festive drag numbers. Should be fun.>>

The weight of what Riley had asked didn't sync in until Abby had started digging into the details. The Oxwood was close to Riley's parents' neighborhood, nearly an hour outside of Philadelphia.

<<I could ask to borrow John's car, but I'd have to be sober all night.>>

<<Ugh. That sounds like a horrendous plan. Did I mention the themed cocktails? How about I get you a ride share to here, you can stay the night in the guest room, and I can drive you back in the morning?>>

The time between Riley's suggestion and Abby's reply text felt like years.

<<You sure? That sounds good, but what about your parents?>>

Summoning a tone of nonchalance that she didn't quite feel, Riley replied: <<It's fine. I've had friends over before.>>

Another achingly long pause before a simple: <<OK. Cool.>>

Since then, Riley had been trying to convince herself of just that: it was fine, no big deal, all just 'OK. Cool.'

Her mother had barely seemed to raise an eyebrow when she had said a friend was going with her to the party and would be staying the night in the guest room, so maybe Riley was doing a better job than she thought of projecting that sense of casualness and calm. Maybe. And maybe reindeer really could fly.

Riley tried again to redirect the stubborn hair curl in her mirror, finally cursing and giving up. It was fine. Things were fine. No big deal. Abby and she were just having a small kind of fling. Barely more than "just friends." Just some physical attraction and tension. Abby said it herself: she wasn't ready for anything real. Who knew if soon she was going to be living near the Bay or freaking Toledo, Ohio? No pressure. No expectations.

Right. If she actually believed that then her heart wouldn't have been trying to jackhammer out of her chest.

It was almost time for Abby to arrive, so she made her way downstairs, the smell of holiday food wafting through the air again.

"Mom, what the heck are you making this time?"

Her mother, Camila, once had the same rich brown hair color as Riley, but now it was more silver than brown. Her eyes, though, looked almost exactly like Riley's and her daughter recognized the same impish amusement, which so often glistened in her own eyes, now in her mother's. "Christmas Dinner Casserole! We still had so many leftovers, I wanted to put them to use! Will your friend want any dinner? There should be plenty, and Dylan texted to say she ate at the airport."

Riley hummed in a non-committal tone. "Sounds delicious, mom," she deadpanned.

"Oh hush, I can tell you don't actually think so. It will be though! Just you wait! When have I ever gone wrong with holiday food?"

"Those peppermint chocolate cookies when you totally overdid the peppermint?"

"Fine, sure!" she sighed, shaking her head, "On their own they were too much, but remember what good ice-cream sandwich vehicles they made?" Riley chuckled and nodded. "I'm sorry you're going to miss Dylan getting in, hun. This snowstorm is just messing everyone's flights, aren't they? But if you're not out too late, I'm planning a brunch with cranberry-orange pancakes in the morning! Does your friend have any dietary restrictions I should know about?"

“Uh... not that I know of,” Riley admitted. “I don’t know how late she’ll want to stay though, mom. We’ll probably skip brunch so I can drive her home.”

“Oh.” Riley winced. Her mother was so good at filling that ‘Oh’ with such meaning. Disappointment. Confusion. Suspicion. Hurt.

“I just don’t want to take up too much of her time. She’s probably busy, has things to do back in Philly. You know.”

“Hmm.” More meaning in such a short syllable. “Which friend is this again? I didn’t think you kept in touch with many people back in the city.”

“I don’t,” Riley admitted. “She’s... a recent reconnection. You’ve met her actually. She was at the Caldwells last year. And the year before.”

Camila paused and raised an eyebrow. “Is this the same young woman who was noticeably absent from *this* year’s festivities? Harper’s fiancée?”

“Ex-fiancée,” Riley amended. “And, um, yeah. We reconnected recently. She’s cool.”

Something almost like an amused smile twitched at the corner of her mother’s mouth. “I see.”

Riley was stopped in responding by the heavy chime of the doorbell. She excused herself quickly, trying not to look like she was rushing to the door too eagerly. She was getting the door for her friend. Her totally casual friend. Right.

That pretense dissolved like warming snow the moment Riley opened the door. Abby stood in a black velvet suit jacket, black ankle boots, a flashing Christmas light necklace, and... a short... red... dress. Flashes of their heavy make-out in the backseat of Riley’s rental car and Abby’s heavy breathing in her ear—cursing that she hadn’t worn something that was more ‘easy access’—returned to her memory with a vengeance.

“Wow,” was all Riley could muster for a moment, followed by a quick throat clear and a casual, “Come on in.”

“Thanks. Um, this isn’t too much, is it?” Abby looked at Riley’s jeans and then down at herself sheepishly.

“No, it’s... wow, it’s good. You always look...” Riley cleared her throat rather than finish her sentence properly. Adjectives weren’t coming to her at the moment. “You have great style. I’ve told you that, right? Really great.”

“Thanks. You too,” Abby laughed. “And thanks again for the stay over invite. You sure your family doesn’t mind?”

“Not at all!” Camila called from the connecting kitchen, clearly done pretending she wasn’t eavesdropping. Riley half-wincing and ushered Abby into the kitchen.

“Abby, this is my mom.”

“How do you do, Mrs. Johnson—”

“Oh no! Please, it’s Camila. So nice to meet you. Abby, right? I’ve put some fresh towels in the guest room, and I was just telling Riley that I’ll be making cranberry-orange pancakes in the morning if you’re able to stay for breakfast. Riley’s sister, Dylan, is coming in tonight for a belated Christmas celebration and staying through New Years. She was supposed to be in this afternoon, but that snowstorm is just causing havoc with travels, isn’t it? Did you do any traveling this year, Abby?”

“Uh,” Abby’s eyes darted back and forth a bit between Riley and her mom. “Yeah, actually, Riley and I actually reconnected in San José. I was there for a job interview.”

“Really? What kind of work, sweetheart?”

Abby smiled shyly and started talking about the docent and education oversight programs at the different museums and her background in art history. Riley found her wince turning into a smile as her mother launched into a series of follow-up questions, and soon she and Abby were discussing favorite ancient works of art and the difference between different types of museums. “So interesting,” Camila insisted, nodding at the end of Abby’s quick summation of the difference between grant and gift works of art. “I always pushed my girls toward the hard sciences, but a life without art isn’t worth living, I say. I do hope one of those jobs works out for you. You clearly have so much knowledge and passion.”

“Uh, thanks. I, uh, actually…” Abby bit her lip, and Riley could see a nervous flush begin to spread on her cheeks.

“Did you hear back from any?” Riley asked, her heart tightening.

“Yeah. Yesterday, I got a couple email thanks for the interview rejections from San Francisco, but…” She took another deep breath, as if fortifying herself. “Uh, I actually got a job offer for San José.” Abby looked almost shyly at Riley as she asked, “No pressure, and no problem if it’s too much of an ask, but… I could use some help getting to know the area when I get there.”

Riley’s breath caught in her throat a moment. “Not too much of an ask at all. I’m happy to. But, just checking, Red—” Riley inched closer, leaning on the kitchen island next to where Abby stood. “You know where you’ll be after Christmas now.”

Abby raised an eyebrow and gave a small smirk. “Uh huh.”

“And you know that you have a job.”

“Yep.”

“And you and I will be in the same city area.”

“Potentially even the same area code,” Abby replied, her subtle smile growing. “And, uh, I think I’m ready to try and, um, take a chance on something *real* again. I mean, if—” Riley’s

mouth was on Abby's before the next syllable. Abby half-laughed in shock before kissing her back for a moment. "I'll take that as a yes," Abby murmured against her.

Camila cleared her throat. "Well, seems like some celebrating is in order. Congratulations on the new job, Abby, and the move, and..." She smiled pointedly at her daughter. "Everything else. And I am happy to move the towels to Riley's room, or you can stay in the guest room. Whichever is more... comfortable. Just let me know before you leave—Jim and I will probably be sleeping like the dead by the time you two get home but want to make sure you're all set for washing up in the morning."

"Uh, thank you Mrs. J—I mean, Camila." Abby's face was beet red now, and Riley's was sure hers matched. "I, uh, if Riley is okay with it, her room is fine."

"Yeah," Riley half-croaked, trying desperately not to meet her mother's eye. "That's great."

Camila hummed in agreement. "Well, I know you two will have plenty of alcohol at that little party tonight, so I won't break out the champagne, but I make a famous hot cocoa, Abby, so let me know if you want one! We'll also have them during tomorrow's movie marathon, which you are welcome to stay for!"

"Oh, no, mom, I'm sure Abby—"

"What movie marathon?" Abby asked innocently.

Camila's eyes practically glowed. "It's a tradition when I have both my girls back home. We make an absurd amount of hot cocoa, which you can spike if you so choose, and play Hallmark movie trope bingo. Riley started the bingo part of the tradition, but Dylan and I agree it makes it so much more fun. We stay in holiday pajamas all afternoon. It's a blast."

Abby crooked her eyebrows at Riley and smirked. "I would have brought more festive lounge wear if I had known. No holiday pajamas with me."

"Oh, don't worry about that! Riley has several pairs of holiday pajama pants and socks. I give her a set every year! You can borrow some—right, Riley dear?"

"*Several* pairs?" Abby's amused grin was growing by the second.

Oh god, this was so much worse than her mom being weird about it. "Yeah," Riley said through a wave of embarrassment and half-gritted teeth, "I do have several. And yes, if you wanted to borrow some and stay you *totally* can, but if you need to get back..."

Abby shrugged. "I don't want to tear you away from a family tradition, and I'm sure John is getting sick of me anyway."

"It's settled then! Abby, you can stay as long as you like!" Camila practically crowed. "Now, you two have a party to get to! Don't let me keep you—be safe and have fun!"

They were both thrumming with unasked questions as they called an Uber, their fingers brushing lightly as they waited. Snow was starting to fall again, light flakes dusting their hair.

“Did I make it weird?” Abby finally asked. Riley was quick to protest, but Abby continued in a rushed breath, “I mean, if this is too much, just let me know! I don’t want to push you into anything! If you wanted to keep things more casual, I didn’t mean, or if me telling you that I’m moving to San José seemed like too much pressure!”

Riley shook her head. “No, it’s—God, I should probably fess up. I’ve had a crush on you since I first met you. You moving to California is like something out of a fucking dream.”

“Seriously?” Abby blinked in seeming disbelief.

“Seriously.”

“Huh.” She bit her lip again, thoughtfully. “That’s... I mean... really?”

“Yes.” Riley leaned in and kissed Abby softly again. “Really. Remember, this is the universe where you are much cooler than you think you are.”

Abby snorted out a laugh and nodded. “That’s right. I forgot. Great universe. Especially a good one at Christmas time, it seems.”

“Yeah,” Riley smiled as she looked around at the falling snow on the Pennsylvania ground. “It really is.”

As the rideshare arrived and drove them to the bar, past patterns of holiday lights and festive lawn decorations, Abby and Riley found their hands entwined.

“So,” Abby sighed. “You brought a girl home to your parents. And kissed one in front of your mom. How does that feel?”

“Actually? Really good. Maybe I was worried over nothing because...” Honestly, because of everything from high school with Harper. She still expected the pain, denial, and rejection from everyone. But it had actually gone okay, even with her mother's over-eagerness to Abby. Speaking of which, “God, was my mom just way too much though? Seriously, if you don’t want to stay tomorrow, tell me *now* because she will do that whole inviting you to the next meal, event, or whatever about three more times. You’re looking at a dinner and maybe another overnight if you don’t give me a clear time you need to get back. My mom is like a serial hostess. I think she gets off on it.”

Abby grinned. “I seriously don’t mind. Your mom seems really nice, and I’m sure the rest of your family is too. As long as you...”

“I want you there,” Riley interrupted, finishing the unasked question, “as long as you want to be there. And don’t mind my mom plowing us with sweets and silly movies and just generally acting like it’s still Christmas.”

Abby turned on her light-up Christmas lights necklace, filling the car with multicolored reflections. “I think I can be in the Christmas spirit. It’s been surprisingly easy this year, actually.”

“Yeah,” Riley agreed. Abby snuggled closer as they traveled through the wintery streets, toward peppermint cocktails and drag show festivities, Christmas carols still stuck in their heads and holiday lights reflecting both inside and outside of the car. Tomorrow they’d eat pancakes, drink hot cocoa, stay in reindeer and candy-cane pajama pants, and laugh at the sappy Christmas movies. After that... who really knew? Maybe Christmas was technically over—but it still felt like they were still celebrating the feeling that, this year, there was a chance that they had managed to get everything they’d truly wanted.

END

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