

“I like big butts and I cannot lie!” Ellie Richards pursed her lips and bopped her head in time with the music, flicking the volume up until the smooth rhymes of Sir Mix-A-Lot filled the car’s cabin. She knew all the lyrics by heart and rapped along. She gripped the steering wheel of her small blue Toyota with one hand, pushing her glasses up her nose with the other. Alone in the car, she was free to be as dorky and silly as she wanted. And today, she felt especially dorky and silly, but in the best possible way.

As she coasted north up the I-25 from Denver toward Cheyenne, the sun mirrored her mood and shone brightly, glinting and winking off of the freshly plowed snow piled at the side of the highway. It had technically only been winter for ten days, but several inches of snow had already accumulated, much to the delight of the skiers and snowboarders. Although Ellie was neither a skier nor a snowboarder—unless being unbelievably awesome at *Infinite Air Snowboarding* on her PS4 counted—she was headed west of Cheyenne to Centennial, Wyoming, one of the busiest ski and snowboard destinations around.

She danced in her seat, moving her shoulders in time to the music. Yep. Definitely in a good mood. This coming year was going to be the year of Ellie, and she was starting her New Year’s Eve off right. Cheesy 90’s “Ellie Gets Pumped” mix? Check. No traffic? Check. A can of Pringles to devour on the two-hour drive from Denver to Centennial? Check. Well, half a check since the can was already half gone. But still. All good things.

At twenty-eight, almost twenty-nine, she finally felt as though she had stuff figured out. Her dream job was actually panning out, and the website was getting tons of traffic. She’d bought an amazing townhouse in Lakewood, just south of downtown Denver, and she was going to get her dating game together. No more wasting time on guys who couldn’t commit or who rejected her because she somehow wasn’t good enough for them or who took advantage of her and used her until boredom set in or someone else came along. Nope. No more. This was the year of Ellie, and that meant making smarter choices about her love life. Professionally, she had it going on, and it’s not like she looked like Quasimodo. Granted, she didn’t look like Gisele

Bündchen either, but honestly, like one percent of the population was so genetically blessed. And she wasn't asking to date Chris Hemsworth. Who, given his good looks and her experience with gorgeous guys, would only hurt her and make her feel terrible about herself.

There would be no feeling terrible about herself during the year of Ellie. Not allowed. She deserved better than she'd got over the past several years, and she was sick of it. Rejection after rejection had left a tender spot, almost like a bruise, on her heart. She couldn't keep opening herself up to guys who would only make that bruise worse, who would poke it and prod it until it became a permanent scar. There wasn't any one particular guy who'd done all that damage. No, the lingering hurt was from a string of rejections, each hurt piling on top of the last, cutting a bit deeper each time.

She drove under an underpass, the pavement beneath her wheels sheltered from the sun. She didn't even realize she'd hit a patch of slick black ice until she began to spin into the opposing lane of traffic, which, thank God, was empty. She took her foot off the gas, letting the car slow naturally and not making the skid worse by hitting the brakes. Doing her best not to jerk the wheel, which would only cause her to spin more and completely lose control of the car, she tried to steer the car away from the center of the highway.

And then an eighteen-wheeler appeared, barreling toward her, blaring its horn. Her vision narrowed to pinpoints as adrenaline surged through her.

"Oh, fuck," she whispered and in a move of sheer desperation, she yanked the wheel hard to the right. Just as she'd known it would, the car began spinning, but at least it was spinning away from the truck. Before she could try to correct her trajectory, she slammed into a snowbank on the side of the highway with a sudden, jarring halt. Chunks of snow flew up around her, landing with wet thunks on her windshield.

With a shaking hand, she reached forward and cut the ignition, shuttering the car in silence. Mentally, she took stock of herself, but she seemed to be in one piece and unhurt. She wiggled her fingers and toes and tentatively, gingerly, flexed her arms and legs, testing them and

breathing a sigh of relief when everything worked as it should. Thankfully, the impact hadn't been forceful enough to trigger the airbags.

"Holy shitballs." Her voice vibrated loudly in the heavy silence of the car. She inhaled slowly, trying to calm her thundering heartbeat, and exhaled through her nose, resting her forehead on the steering wheel. After several deep, calming breaths, she pushed her door open and did a quick inspection of the car. The front passenger's side fender and tire were pushed right into the snowbank, but the car appeared to have escaped the spinout unscathed. She blew out one last breath and got back in the driver's seat.

God. That could've been so much worse.

She turned her key in the ignition, restarting the car and turning down the volume on the music. Shifting into reverse, she eased her foot onto the gas, but her wheels only spun fruitlessly. She shifted the car into drive and turned the steering wheel, trying to ease the front fender out of the dense snowbank, but to no avail. After she'd tried putting the car in reverse again and had only managed to spray slush and snow everywhere, she put the car back in park and once again turned it off. She was good and stuck. Great. Now she'd have to call a tow truck to come pull her out.

Stupid black ice.

Glancing over at her purse on the passenger's seat, her shoulders slumped. It had flown forward during the spinout, spilling its contents all over the inside of the car. Sighing heavily, she unbuckled her seatbelt and scooted her seat back. She checked her purse for her phone, hoping that maybe it hadn't flown out with the rest of the contents, but it was completely empty. Her car was now littered with gum wrappers, pennies, an embarrassing number of lip balms, mints, a tampon, Pringles, and enough receipts that they almost looked like white confetti, scattered festively over the upholstered seats.

Her eyes scanned the interior of the car, and a flash of royal blue caught her eye. Leaning forward, she could see her phone, encased in its Dr. Who-themed TARDIS phone case, wedged

under the passenger's seat. She thrust her hand under the seat, trying to pry it free, but it, much like the car, was stuck. She huffed out a breath, blowing a lock of hair off her forehead. Adjusting her ponytail, she crouched on all fours on the driver's seat, leaning her butt up against the window as she dug under the passenger's seat, trying to wiggle her phone free.

A sharp series of raps tapped against the driver's side window, and consequently, against her butt, causing her to start and bonk her head off of the dashboard. Once again blowing the errant lock of hair away from her glasses, she craned her neck to look over her shoulder. Her mouth went dry.

Staring at her butt was quite possibly the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen in the flesh. His eyes snapped to hers, and she felt pinned under their piercing light blue gaze. Combined with his chiseled jaw, full mouth, and tall, broad frame, he looked like a freaking model. In a light brown police uniform. A model, in a police uniform, who was looking at her with concern on his face. She could've melted into a pile of hormones right there.

Cautiously, she eased herself back into the driver's seat, gave a half-turn to the keys in the ignition and powered down the window. A quick glance in her rear-view mirror revealed that an SUV emblazoned with "Laramie County Sheriff" in black-and-gold lettering had pulled in behind her.

"Is everything okay here?" His voice was a lovely, almost melodic tenor, but with a rumbly undertone that did stupid, wonderful things to her stomach and the butterflies erupting there.

"I . . . um. Yes? I almost hit a truck because of the black ice back there and I spun out, and I'm fine, but I'm stuck, I think." Oh God. She couldn't seem to stop talking. It was like her mouth was possessed, as though staring at him had short circuited her brain. "And my phone is under the seat, and I was just trying to get it out, and then you came and knocked on my window, well on my butt really." *Stop. Talking.* "And now I'm telling you how I got here," she finished, her voice trailing off weakly.

He smiled, flashing a killer pair of dimples and perfect white teeth, and her heart vaulted into her throat.

“You sure you’re okay, miss? Sounds like you had a bit of a scare.” He leaned forward, resting a hand on the roof of her car.

“I . . . uh . . . okay.” She nodded dumbly.

Atta girl. Smooth. She gave herself a mental thumbs up, cringing inwardly.

“You’re not hurt?” He frowned, concern creasing his brow.

She couldn’t stop staring at him. It felt ridiculous to even think it, but he was beautiful. He was like a stunning work of art that needed to be adored and appreciated. Nervous lust slammed into her, swirling in her chest as she stared at him like a visitor to the Galleria would stare at Michelangelo’s *David*: a mixture of awe, happiness, and something intangible and surreal.

And now, because *David* was naked, she was wondering what Officer Sexypants had going on under his uniform, which was the last place she needed her barely functioning brain to go. Her mind flashed with images of skin and muscle, and she swallowed. She managed to shake her head slowly.

His frown remained. “You seem shaken up. How about you sit in my truck where it’s nice and warm while I dig you out?”

She watched, transfixed, as his gorgeous mouth formed the words. Very kind, concerned words. She nodded, and he stepped back so she could push the door open. Her booted feet hit the ground and she yelped as they almost went right out from under her, her weak knees and the icy pavement both conspiring against her. Strong arms looped around her, and if her legs hadn’t been completely useless before, they were now, because every bone in her body had just turned to mush.

Flush against him, she realized that he was both taller and broader than she’d first realized. She looked up into his blue eyes, her heart hammering in her chest. “Thanks.”

He held her against him, not moving, just for a second. A disappointingly short second. “You’re welcome.” Something flashed in his eyes, disappearing before she could analyze it, and he dropped his arms to his sides.

“I’m Ellie.”

“Sergeant Grayson.” He smiled kindly at her, and her brain emptied of all coherent thoughts.

“Oh, like Dick.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could call them back.

Oh. My. God. Undo. Undo! You did not just say the words “like Dick” to the sexiest man you’ve ever met.

He quirked up an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

Heat flooded her cheeks and she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “You know, from Batman? Dick Grayson was his sidekick, Robin. Well, I guess technically he’s Nightwing now, but that’s . . . um . . . not important.”

A smile, bigger and brighter than the ones he’d offered her before, lit up his face. “So you’re not asking me if I like . . .” A teasing glint shone in his eyes, sending her stomach swooping up and then down.

She bit her lip and shook her head, her ponytail swishing against her cheek. “No. Definitely not. I mean, if you do, if you don’t, that’s none of my business. I heard your name, and I said the first thing that came into my head. I’m just going to stop talking now.” She exhaled, puffing her cheeks out.

God, Ellie. Get your shit together.

“Well, I don’t.” He leaned toward her and winked. “Catwoman is much more my type.”

She touched her fingers to her lips as fresh blood flowed into her cheeks, excitement replacing her embarrassment. “Too bad I left my latex suit at home.”

He laughed, and the sound warmed her straight to her core. “Let’s get you out of the cold.”

He led her to his SUV, his gloved hand on the small of her back. Despite the layers of fabric separating them, it felt as though his touch was burning her, igniting her nerve endings, and something caught, deep in her chest, at the sweet protectiveness of the gesture.

A tiny seedling of hope took root inside her. Maybe he wasn’t like the other men she’d dated. She wasn’t sure if she should let that seedling grow or rip it out by its roots.

Matt Grayson brought his shovel down hard on the surface of the icy snowbank, chipping away at the snow and breaking up the ice around the wheel well of the front passenger’s side tire of Ellie’s car. Scooping up a shovel-full of heavy snow, he tossed it over his shoulder, digging in again in a fast, efficient rhythm.

He definitely wasn’t going to miss this. Winters in Wyoming were long, cold, and sometimes impossibly snowy. He was more than happy to trade the snow for rain, especially when that trade came with a big promotion, and the chance to really make a difference. Handily enough, it also served as an excuse to start over somewhere new.

He glanced back over his shoulder in the direction of his SUV, where Ellie sat in the front seat, scoping out the police gear mounted to the dash with animated curiosity. Something tightened in his stomach as he watched her, and he forced himself to keep shoveling, trying to ignore his body’s response to her.

To be fair, it wasn’t every day that he pulled over to help someone stuck in a snowbank only to be presented with the view of a deliciously round, feminine ass. God, she was cute. More than cute. She was a blonde in glasses, and the sexy librarian vibe she gave off was really doing it for him. He felt a tug of disappointment that he couldn’t ask her out. Figured. The first woman he’d wanted to ask out in a long time, and he met her when he couldn’t do anything about it. He shook his head. Flirting with her had felt good. He’d felt light, happy, and warm. So warm.

Damn.

He kicked the tire and a chunk of sludge dislodged from the top of the wheel well, splattering on his boots. Stepping back, he surveyed his work and felt a bead of sweat trickle from his hairline down over his temple. Flexing his hands around the shovel, he circled the car, checking for damage and any other buried portions. He bent over to check the tailpipe, making sure it was free of snow. Leaning against the rear fender, he waved Ellie over, and watched as she hopped out of the SUV and made her way cautiously toward him. Immediately, his mind flashed back to how she'd felt in his arms and his palms tingled with the urge to touch her again. They'd been separated by several layers of clothing, including a Kevlar vest, and the contact had only been for a second or two, but it had left him wanting more. He felt the insane need to see her blush again, to hear her laugh, to see her light brown—almost golden, really—eyes light up as she smiled. He knew nothing about her, and that only drove home the realization that he *wanted* to know her.

Her long, blond ponytail swayed behind her as she walked, swishing against her shoulders. Her pink cheeks stood out against her ivory skin, the bottom lip of her wide mouth caught between her teeth. She pushed her glasses up her nose as she approached, squinting against the sun already slanting toward the horizon.

“Thanks for your help, Sergeant Grayson.”

“You're welcome. And it's Matt.” Not that it mattered.

“Matt. I don't know how long I would've been here if you hadn't come along. Good timing.”

She had no idea how wrong she was. His timing was terrible.

He nodded, not sure what to say because he couldn't say the things he wanted to. “Drive safe. Happy New Year.”

She nodded, her brow furrowed and her lip once again caught between her teeth. He needed to stop looking at her mouth. Needed to stop racking his brain for ways to prolong the

interaction. He pushed off the fender just as she strode forward, and once again, they were chest to chest.

“Happy New Year to you too, Matt.” She opened her mouth as though she were going to say more, and then closed it, pressing her lips together. Something bright and hopeful shone in her eyes as she looked up at him, and regret slammed into him.

Fuck.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt an instant connection like this with anyone. Not since the divorce. Hell, maybe not even before the divorce.

With a smile, he touched the brim of his hat and stepped around her, back toward his SUV. Before he'd reached his vehicle, he heard her open and close the door to her car, start the engine, and pull onto the highway. By the time he settled himself in the driver's seat, she was nothing but a set of taillights.



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