

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

*Kiss Her  
Once for Me*

“A sparkling winter wonderland, quirky family traditions, and a messy ‘love trapezoid’ make the yuletide gay in this earnest queer rom-com. . . . It’s delightful to watch this clever spin on the fake dating trope unfold. This is a winner.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Beautifully tender and delightfully sexy, *Kiss Her Once for Me* is the holiday romance of my dreams. A cozy, cinnamon-scented hug of a book.”

—Ashley Herring Blake, author of *Delilah Green Doesn’t Care*

“Dizzily adorable and brimming with laugh-out-loud humor, *Kiss Her Once for Me* is the new rom-com gold standard. Alison Cochrun writes with palpable compassion, tenderness, and heart that makes every page a memorable one. I swooned, squealed, and shrieked my way through this absolute masterpiece.”

—Mazey Eddings, author of *Lizzie Blake’s Best Mistake*

“Bighearted, affirming, and dreamy—*Kiss Her Once for Me* is an ode to those in search of love, family, and a new lease on life.”

—Timothy Janovsky, author of *Never Been Kissed*

“Cochrun’s writing is by turns whip-smart, hilarious, and deeply vulnerable. *Kiss Her Once for Me* is both a queer celebration and subversion of romance tropes, along with being a love letter to Portland and an incisive exploration of family, art, and failure. Jack and Ellie’s swooningly romantic love story will make even the most cynical among us believe in the magic of snow days.”

—Anita Kelly, author of *Love & Other Disasters*

“*Kiss Her Once for Me* is a gift of a story. Capturing the festive charm and nostalgia of the season, the fresh-fallen-snow wonder of falling head over heels, this holiday romance also reminds us that giving and receiving love can be as tangled as a knot of Christmas lights, yet, with patience and perseverance, finally unwound and no less beautiful, the glowing joy we all deserve.”

—Chloe Liese, author of *Two Wrongs Make a Right*

“Don’t let the holigays pass without gifting yourself the unparalleled delight of coming home to the magic-brimmed pages of *Kiss Her Once for Me*! Alison Cochrun stuns in her sophomore novel, lovingly ushering readers into the giant hearts and all-consuming, snow-laced romance of Ellie and Jack. *Kiss Her Once for Me* is at once deeply tender and whip-smart, radiating joy and intimate self-love from every line. With ultimate care and close attention to detail, Alison establishes her work as a safe haven of sensitivity and affirmation. This is precisely the take on *While You Were Sleeping* that the Queer Community deserves, and the whimsy-infused second-chance romance of my dreams. May we all get a snow day.”

—Courtney Kae, author of *In the Event of Love*

ALSO BY ALISON COCHRAN

*The Charm Offensive*



# Kiss Her Once for Me

A  
NOVEL

Alison Cochran

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*This book is for my parents,  
who love me when I fall as much as they love me when I fly.  
And for the grandmas, obviously.*





*Kiss Her  
Once for Me*





# *Last Christmas*





A Webcomic

By *Oliverartssometimes*

Episode 7: *The Girl on the Bridge*

(Christmas Eve, 11:22 p.m.)

Uploaded: February 4, 2022

Snow days are a special kind of magic.

When I was a kid, snow days meant freedom from the stress of school and from the debilitating social anxiety I felt there. On a snow day, I could wander outside and make friends as easily as packing a snowball between my gloved palms.

In college at Ohio State, snow days meant freedom from my rigorous study schedule, when my best friend, Meredith, would burst into my dorm at one in the morning so we could go sledding in South Oval on trays stolen from the dining hall.

And in Portland, a snow day seemed to mean freedom from *everything*.

My boots sink into nearly a foot of snow as I step onto the Burnside Bridge. The boundaries of the city had blurred over the course of the day, and now nothing is contained to its usual place. Grass, sidewalk, and street have all become one smooth, fluid thing—a world that looks sugar-spun and impossibly sweet. Up ahead, a couple cross-country-skis across the bridge while their portable speaker blares “White Christmas,” and behind me a group of twentysomethings is having a snowball fight in the middle of the road, and beside me, a woman slips, grumbles, and curses, “Fuck the snow!” at a rather loud volume.

"Is it the snow we should be blaming?" I ask calmly. "Or your shoes?"

"The snow," she answers, clomping her boots deliberately with each step. "These boots are magnificent."

I gesture to the boots in question. "They do seem like they were selected more for aesthetics than utility, though. Like your coat."

She stops stomping through the snow and looks up. "Wait. What's wrong with my coat?"

She's wearing one of those brown Carhartt jackets so popular among a certain demographic back in Ohio and an entirely different demographic here in Portland. Hers isn't even zipped, so her flannel is exposed beneath, tucked into her light-wash jeans.

It's an aesthetic, all right.

"It's a very nice coat," I reassure her. "Not exactly practical for snow, though, is it?"

"In my defense, it hardly ever snows here."

"Yet when you left your house this morning, you knew snow was in the forecast."

She harrumphs and shakes snowflakes out of her exposed hair like a golden retriever in the rain. Her black hair is cut short, shaved along one side and long on the other, so it falls across her forehead in a damp clump. All day, I've fought against the urge to push that hair back out of her eyes.

On a snow day in Portland, you could meet a stranger in a bookstore, spend the entire day with her, and find yourself on a bridge overlooking the Willamette River at 11:23 p.m. on Christmas Eve. On a snow day, you could be the kind of person who followed a stranger anywhere, even if she did complain about the snow.

The stranger in question moves to the edge of the bridge, her eyes staring out at the black water. "Okay, explain it to me, Ohio: what's so great about snow?"

"Well, first of all, it's gorgeous." I exhale, and she turns to shoot me a sideways glance. The freckles beneath her eyes almost look like snowflakes on her light brown skin. It's only been fourteen hours since I met her, but I've already memorized the pattern on her cheeks, charted those freckles so I can draw them later.

I wrap my blue scarf tighter around my neck to hide my blush. "And it's . . . *real* snow, like this . . . big snowstorms . . . they have the power to stop the world for a minute. Snow freezes time, so the constant pressure of life is briefly suspended in a blanket of snow, and for one day, it's like you can catch your breath."

She leans against the railing, her arms lazily draped over the edge. "You know you're allowed to relax even when it doesn't snow, right?"

"When it snows," I say, more emphatically, "the world transforms. Snow is *magic*."

I gesture around us, to the night sky that shimmers light purple, almost glowing to match all the white. To the trees that sparkle an iridescent silver. To the snowflakes floating through the air, giving off the illusion that they're traveling in all directions, defying gravity. I stick out my tongue and manage to capture one, and I notice too late that she has her phone in front of her, and she is taking a photo of me with my tongue out.

"What are you doing?"

"Attempting to document the supposed snow magic. For scientific purposes."

"And from such a cute angle."

"Oh, please. You're adorable, and I'm sure—" She pauses, tilts her head to the side to study her phone screen, and winces. "Actually, maybe we might want to take that again. . . ."

I shove her arm. "I will not subject myself to further mockery."

She holds her phone in front of my face. "Come on, Ellie. Something to remember you by before the night is over."

"I don't turn back into a pumpkin when the clock strikes midnight."

"Yes." She smirks. "But maybe I do. Besides, I'll want to have a photo of you when you're a famous filmmaker. Academy Award for Best Animated Feature is part of the ten-year plan."

"Twenty-year plan," I correct. "I don't want to be unrealistic."

"Ellie," she says, her tone surprisingly serious. "I have full faith that you will accomplish whatever you set your mind to. Now." She holds up her phone again. "Look like you don't want to murder me, please."

I drop my arms limply to my sides and shrug, as if to say, *Like this?*

She shakes her head. "No, show me *you*. This does not capture your essence."

"I'm not sure you've known me long enough to comment on my *essence*."

She eyes me through her phone screen. "I know your essence is not an awkward shrug."

"Are you sure? An awkward shrug could *definitely* be my essence."

She makes a restless, impatient sound with her tongue, and, not knowing what else to do, I lift my arms in the air, like a standing snow angel, and I twirl on one foot in a slow, sweeping arc in the middle of the bridge. Eyes closed, tongue out.

"How was that?" I ask, slightly dizzy and struggling to reorient myself.

She studies her phone with an unreadable expression, then takes a step closer to me. "Here." She shows me. The photo is blurry, a few snowflakes sharply in focus in the foreground, and me in the background, a contrasting swirl of color: the muted dark brown of my braid and the pale white of my skin against the purple of my jacket, the blue of my hand-knitted scarf, the little slice of red that is smile and tongue.



"I think it's perfect," she says.

"My turn." I snatch her phone and wheel it around on her. There she is, in portrait mode, nearly six feet tall, steady with her feet in the snow. "Show me your essence."

She shoves her fists into the pockets of her khaki coat, flashes me a sideways smile, and leans back against the guardrail separating the bridge from the river below. Her essence: perfectly distilled into a single pose, as if she knows, so unequivocally, who she is.

I take the picture.

She reaches out for me. "One more," she murmurs before she wraps an arm around my waist. I know I can't really feel her body between all our layers, but I imagine I can, imagine what it would be like to have her skin against my skin. I can smell the eggnog, the maple-bacon donuts from Voodoo, and the freshly baked bread scent that lingers on her clothes. She looks like she should smell like pine trees and campfire, like the wild and untamed parts of the Pacific Northwest. Rainwater and damp soil and moss.

But actually, she smells like bread. Like warmth. Like something that would fill you up.

"On the count of three," she starts, and on the screen of her iPhone, I can see our faces cheek to cheek. Me and the beautiful girl with the impractical jacket and the half-moon smile. Snowflakes in her black hair and city lights sparkling behind us.

We both smile.

"One . . . two . . . *three*."

Her thumb swipes at the screen to pull up the photo, and I stare at the girl captured on her phone.

"On a snow day," I tell her, "you can be a different person."

With her arm still around my waist, she asks, "What kind of person do you want to be?"

*Not an awkward shrug.* I want to be the kind of person who pulls a stranger close in the snow, so I do it. I wrap my arms

around her, pull her in, until our bodies are flush, entangled, moving slightly to stay warm.

And then we're slow-dancing in the snow. She's humming the tune to "White Christmas" in my ear, and the rest of the world falls away as we dance on a bridge while the minutes tick down until Christmas. All that exists is her breath, her voice, her arms, and all the places our bodies meet. We're suspended in a perfect snow globe built for two.

On a snow day in Portland, you could fall in love.

# Chapter One

Tuesday, December 13, 2022

There is almost an inch of snow on the ground, so naturally, the entire city is on the verge of collapse.

Since buses are delayed, I tighten the red, hand-knitted scarf around my neck and plow angrily down Belmont Street. Cars are Tetrised bumper to bumper from the arcade all the way to the dispensary because no one here knows how to drive in the snow. Schools have prematurely closed for the day, and children appear in every doorway and walkway, dancing joyfully, catching snowflakes on their tongues. Up ahead, I watch two kids attempt to make snowballs that are at least 90 percent dirt.

Leave it to Portland, Oregon, to be simultaneously so delighted and so horrified by such a modest amount of snow.

And, quite frankly: *fuck the snow.*

By most meteorological definitions, this doesn't even constitute snow. It's small and wet, falls too quickly, and halfway melts into the concrete as soon as it lands. Still, it's enough to delay the buses and completely derail my day.

I reach into the pocket of my puffy jacket and pull out my phone to check the time again.

Three minutes. I have three minutes and ten blocks to go, which means I'm going to be late for work. And if I'm late for work, I definitely won't get the promotion and pay raise I so desperately need. And I'll probably get fired. *Again.* And if I get fired again, I'll probably lose my apartment.

Two days ago, the neon-yellow flyer appeared in the slit of my front door, informing me of the raise in rent January first. Fourteen hundred dollars a month for four hundred square feet of subterranean hellscape in Southeast Portland.

If I lose my apartment, I will have to find housing in a city with a horrible housing crisis. And if I can't find a new place to live . . .

The anxiety extrapolates and catastrophizes all the way to its natural conclusion: if I'm late for work again, my trash heap of a life will finally be put in the compactor and crushed into a cube of steaming hot garbage once and for all.

Why does Portland snow always insist on ruining my life?

The image creeps in. The girl with fire in her eyes and snow in her hair. Dancing on a bridge at midnight. The sound of her laugh in my ear and her breath on my throat and her hands—

*But no.* There's no point in torturing myself with the memory of last Christmas.

I look down to check the time again just as my phone buzzes with an incoming call. The cracked screen on my iPhone 8 flashes with the name *Linds* along with a photo of a woman holding a two-gallon alcoholic beverage outside the Bellagio.

I briefly consider ignoring the call, but Catholic guilt, solidified in infancy, wins out. "Hey, Linds—"

"Did you Venmo me that money?" my mother starts as soon as the call connects. It's abundantly clear that *no*, I did not Venmo her the money, or else Lindsey Oliver would have no reason to call me.

"Not yet."

"Elena. Lovey. Baby girl." Linds adopts her best mom voice—the one she probably learned from watching Nick at Nite reruns while stoned through the better part of the late nineties. Lindsey Oliver insists everyone, including her only child, calls her Linds, while she exclusively calls me *Elena* despite the fact that I'm Ellie, that I've always been an Ellie, that Elena fits me like a too-tight pair of jeans.

"I really need that money, sweetheart. It's just two hundred dol-

lars.” I can perfectly picture my mother’s pouting face on the other end of the line. Her dark brown hair, which she dyes a stark blond; the natural waves she straightens every morning; the pale skin she’s eradicated through numerous tanning salon punch cards; the high cheekbones she highlights through contouring.

I can picture her face because it’s *my* face, except I still have the curly brown hair Linds calls “frizzy” and the pale skin that makes me look “washed out.” If my mother isn’t asking me for money, she’s probably criticizing my appearance.

“I promise, this will be the last time I ask,” she insists.

“I’m sure it will be,” I huff as I jog to catch the tail end of a “Walk” sign. Not for the first time in my life, I regret that my only means of physical exercise is the occasional kitchen dance party while I wait for my frozen burrito to heat up in the microwave. “I’m just a little strapped for cash at the moment with my student loans and my rent, but hopefully I’ll get this promotion to assistant manager, and—”

“It’s not my fault you insisted on going to college forever and got fired from Lycra Studios,” she snaps.

“Laika Studios,” I correct her for the dozenth time. My mother may switch her career goals as frequently and thoughtlessly as she shuffles through husbands, but she never misses the chance to remind me of *my* greatest failure. I don’t let her see how these words affect me, though—don’t let her know about the hot kernel of shame that blossoms in my stomach. “And I didn’t go to college forever,” I manage casually. “I got a master’s of fine arts in animation.”

“And what’s the point of having that fancy degree if you can’t financially provide for your elderly parents?”

Linds is forty-six.

Her rant is really starting to build now. “For eighteen years,” she laments, “I clothed you! I fed you! I kept a roof over your head!”

Her claims of providing for my basic needs are greatly exaggerated. When I was twelve, I’d asked my mother for money for new art supplies. Linds hadn’t taken it well.

*“Do you know how much it costs to raise a child? And you want more?”*

*“Add it to my tab!”* I’d screamed in a fit of preteen surliness.

And Linds had screamed back, *“Maybe I will!”*

And she had. Lindsey had calculated the cost of my existence down to the nickel, and she expects full reimbursement. Unfortunately, saying no to my mother is not a skill I developed in the first twenty-five years of my life. I exhale a lifetime of parental disappointment into the wet, snowy air. “Okay. I’ll see what I can do to get you the money.”

Her voice goes soft on the line as she coos, “Thank you, Elena, my darling.”

And this is it. This is my moment. I need to strike while she’s briefly filled with maternal pride and affection.

“So, Christmas is less than two weeks away,” I hedge. “Any chance you’ll make it up to Portland for the holidays this year?”

There is a desperate hopefulness in my voice, even though I already know the answer. She didn’t come last Christmas, and she won’t come this Christmas, and I’m only setting myself up for heart-break.

And is that even what I really want? To spend Christmas morning scraping a hungover Linds off the floor between suffering her rants about everything from my lackluster physical appearance to my even lackluster love life? The last time we spent Christmas together back in Cleveland—before Linds followed husband number three to Arizona—she dragged me to a nightclub, tried to set me up with a handsy forty-year-old Realtor named Rick, and then promptly ditched me so she could go home with Rick’s friend. I didn’t see her for three days after that.

I was nineteen. My mother had provided the fake ID. *Happy fucking holidays.*

Is that *really* my Christmas wish?

The answer is, apparently, *yes*. I don’t have anyone else. If last

Christmas is any indication, it's best I'm not alone for the holidays. I tend to make misguided life choices in the name of loneliness.

"Why would I leave Phoenix for somewhere wet and cold?" Linds asks, reminding me that my Christmas wishes are always irrelevant.

"Because *I'm* here?"

She smacks her lips into the phone. "Elena Oliver, don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"You're so dramatic. You've always been like this. Don't get all sensitive and try to make me feel guilty for not wanting to spend Christmas in the rain."

"I wasn't—"

A deep voice growls in the background of the call, and Linds mutters something under her breath in reply. "I gotta go."

"I could always fly down to Phoenix," I offer pathetically. So very *pathetically*. Just a twenty-five-year-old woman, begging her mother to spend Christmas with her.

"Now's not a good time for that. Just Venmo me the money by tonight, okay?"

That's it. No *happy holidays*. No *I love you*. The call disconnects before I can even say goodbye. The earlier shame in my stomach is eclipsed by the aching hole of loneliness in my chest. I'm going to spend Christmas by myself in my squalid studio apartment, eating a five-dollar rotisserie chicken over my kitchen sink for dinner.

Homesickness sluices through me, but there is no home to be sick for, nothing waiting for me here or anywhere.

I don't let myself think about the brief moment last Christmas when I thought I'd found someone to ease the ache, a person to call home.

But I'm always alone, have always been alone, and just because it's Christmas doesn't mean there's any reason for that to change. You can feel just as lost and aimless at Christmas as any other time of the year.

I pause as I wait for a walk sign, and around me, the snow is already turning to rain.

The thing about snow is, it never lasts, and you're always left a slightly dingier version of the world when it starts to melt.

I stare down at my cracked phone screen. I'm already four minutes late for work.

*Snow magic, my ass.*



## Chapter Two

“You’re late.”

These are the words that greet me when I come huffing into Roastlandia at 10:06 a.m. Through glasses obscured by the snow-rain, I catch sight of my reflection in the coffee shop front window. My brunette braid is waterlogged, my bangs are plastered to my forehead, and my pale skin is flushed from anxiety and exertion. In short, I look like someone who’s about to get fired.

My boss, Greg, stands by the front door awaiting my arrival, his ginger-bearded face scrunched up and condescending.

All I can do at this point is grovel. “I know. I’m so, *so* sorry. The buses were delayed because of the snow, and I had to walk here, and—”

Greg simply *tsks*. “I don’t need to hear excuses, Ellie. Just clock in.”

I don’t argue with the man who holds my fate in his grubby, mustache-sculpting-wax-stained fingers, but I *will* draw him vindictively later—exaggerate his neck beard and his skim-milk complexion and those beady little eyes. He’s wearing his threadbare “This Is What a Feminist Looks Like” T-shirt, which means he’s the only person in Portland under forty being ironic unintentionally.

As if to underscore the irony, he looks me up and down and scoffs. “You look like a basset hound who got stuck in a washing machine. What are the customers going to think when they see you?”

“Sorry, Greg,” I say again as I follow him into the back. “It won’t happen again.”

He looks skeptical at best.

I want to point out that I've never been late before, not once in the nine months I've worked at Roastlandia. That I do dishes while my coworkers take their vape breaks, that I've worked through numerous lunches at his behest (*without pay*) and never once complained. But there's no point with Greg.

When I got fired from my last job, and my ten-year plan fell apart, I was just desperate to put some of the pieces back together. So I got a job at a coffee shop in a city full of incredible coffee, and I figured it would be a great place to work while I got back on my feet.

But it turns out I'm a failure at serving coffee, just like I was a failure of an animator.

Roastlandia is in the late-morning rush, and I quickly join my coworker Ari behind the counter. She's at the register, humming along to a Christmas song that sounds tinny through the speaker. The same speaker I've already threatened to rip off the wall a half-dozen times already this holiday season if it plays Michael Bublé one more time.

"You're like the cynical, city-dwelling, career gal at the beginning of a Hallmark movie who hates the holidays and has her heart melted by the strapping, small-town Christmas tree farm owner," Ari said the other day as I complained under my breath about Greg's obsession with garlands.

"Yes, except the part about being a 'career gal,'" I replied, gesturing around us.

The second he'd digested his Thanksgiving tofurkey, Greg decked out Roastlandia in twinkle lights and holly and started his Spotify Christmas playlist on repeat, convinced customers love the cheer as much as they love the overpriced holiday-themed lattes. As if everyone celebrates Christmas. As if it's not the most triggering time of the year. With its steampunk-looking espresso machine and handcrafted artisan chairs and the artwork featuring overweight cats made out of recycled soda bottles for sale on the walls, Roastlandia's usual vibe is *hipster coffee shop trying too hard to seem like it's not trying at all*.

Its current vibe is all that, plus *Christmas*.

And no, I'm not particularly fond of Christmas. For very transparent, gaping-hole-of-loneliness-in-my-chest-related reasons.

I begin steaming a milk substitute for a customer's flat white as the opening notes of "Last Christmas" by Wham! float overheard, and honestly, this song feels like a personal attack.

*Last Christmas*, I moved across the country to work at one of the most acclaimed animation studios in the world.

*This year*—

"Almond milk, Ellie! I said *almond milk*! Not oat milk. Were you even *listening*?"

I flinch and almost send the stainless-steel milk jug clanging to the floor. When I look up, I see Tuesday Jeff encroaching on my personal space. The man so named for his regular Tuesday visit of terror has two hands braced boldly against the back of the espresso machine, and he leans forward with a collection of spittle gathering in the left corner of his mouth. I will definitely draw him like this for my webcomic when I get home: currently apoplectic about milk substitutes and always looking like the food critic from *Ratatouille*. This entire day will make a good story for my most recent episode.

"Sorry, Jeff—" I give him my most ingratiating smile as I make a quick switch in faux-milk containers. "I thought I heard you order oat milk."

He absolutely 100 percent *had* ordered oat milk.

"Why would I want milk made from oats? You can't *milk an oat*!" he shouts at me.

"Can you milk an almond?" I mutter quietly, before covering with a very loud, "I'm extremely sorry."

Somehow, "Last Christmas" is still playing. Or maybe playing again?

*Last Christmas*, my life had direction and purpose.

*This year*, the highlight of my day is crafting shitty latte art for a cranky septuagenarian. Tuesday Jeff doesn't even crack a smile at the

impressive foam snowman I've designed on his flat white. I snap a photo for Greg to post on our Instagram, but Jeff simply troops out the door to brave the slush without so much as a thank-you.

"He's such a twat," Ari says from behind the cash register as soon as Jeff is gone. For some reason, Ari can get away with saying stuff like this about customers without ever attracting Greg's outrage. Ari Ocampo is a thirty-one-year-old woman pulling off wearing a fedora indoors, so I guess she can get away with just about anything.

"Today's a big day," Ari trills.

"Taylor Swift's birthday?"

Ari is unamused. "The day you talk to Greg about the promotion to assistant manager."

Everything inside me slides downward, like the anxiety is shifting my center of gravity to somewhere around my knees. Ari gives me a look almost as condescending as Greg's. Yet, with her thick black hair, currently punctuated with an undercut and dyed with streaks of purple, I will draw Ari as I always do in my webcomic panels: like a trans, dark-skinned, badass Rapunzel. "You've put it off as long as you can, Ellie."

"I don't know. . . . I can put things off for a shockingly long time if potential rejection is involved," I inform her.

"It's been two weeks since the interview, and Greg owes you an answer. You deserve to know if he's going to give you the job."

I make a vague sound of agreement. Of course, I *want* to know if I'm going to get the promotion. I also *don't* want to know, because if the answer is *no*—if I don't get this raise and I fail yet again—I have no idea what I'm going to do about my mom and my student loans and my rising rent. The fractured pieces of my dreams might be beyond repair.

Ari must smell the anxiety wafting off me because she backs down. "Fine. You'll talk to Greg when you're ready."

For the next few hours, we fall into our usual rhythm. Me, silent behind the espresso machine, crafting foam art like it's 2012. Ari,

happily chatting with every customer. Ari loves working as a barista. She says it allows her the opportunity to nurture her extroverted soul while still pursuing her secondary calling as an apiarist. Apparently, her entire backyard is beehive boxes, and she makes home remedies using her honey that she sells at the Saturday Market.

“In other news,” she says near our six o’clock closing, her perkiness not even slightly dulled by the long day of serving the overcaffeinated and pretentious, “I’m meeting up with some friends at those new food carts off Alberta after work. You interested?”

I bristle at the dilemma she’s placed before me. Ari means this invitation as a kindness, but my social anxiety is of the crippling variety.

I could say yes, could agree to hang out with Ari and her Portland hipster friends later. But then *later* will invariably arrive, and I will invariably have a terrible stomachache at the thought of leaving my apartment to go somewhere new. I will agonize over how to get out of the plans until I finally send a text with some half-assed excuse Ari will see right through.

And then I’ll sit on my couch watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for the tenth time and working on my webcomic, consumed by guilt over both my deception and my cowardice.

Regardless of whether I tell Ari yes or no, I’m going to spend my Tuesday night watching *Avatar*, so I might as well skip all the painful, anxiety-inducing in-between bits.

Besides, this is just a pity invite. “Sorry. I can’t. I have plans.”

Ari looks at me like she knows my plans involve dipping stale graham crackers into a container of cream cheese frosting before falling asleep with my heating pad at nine. “My friends are nice. You’ll like them.”

My social anxiety isn’t about a fear that people will be mean to me. It’s a far more nuanced kind of mindfuckery, a deep-seated conviction that every social interaction is a test I’m predetermined to fail. “Maybe next time,” I murmur.

Ari cocks her hip and stares me down. “Is this serving you?”

I roll my eyes. “We get it, Ari. You follow Brené Brown on Instagram.”

“Don’t attempt to deflect with humor. As your best friend, I have to ask—”

“My *best friend*? We’re casual workplace acquaintances at best. . . .”

Ari ignores that and barrels onward. “Is this whole sad-hermit thing you’ve got going on serving you?” Ari makes a circling gesture in my direction, indicating *my whole thing* just as the bell dings above the door to signal a new customer. “Like, is this making you happy?”

I laugh uncomfortably. “Of course I’m not happy! I’m a twenty-five-year-old with massive debt from two degrees I’m not using who got fired from her dream job and now works for a dickweed serving coffee to snobs in this shithole.”

“Shithole, is it?” asks a lush male voice. I turn away from Ari to discover that the customer who just entered Roastlandia isn’t a customer at all. It’s *him*.

Andrew Kim-Prescott. Roastlandia’s landlord. And he heard me call this place a shithole. Which is just *fuck*.

If I’m really lucky, maybe he heard me call my boss a dickweed, too.

A visit from Andrew Kim-Prescott is usually a highlight in my sad-hermit life, but this is just the flammable tinsel on the dried-out Charlie Brown Christmas tree of my day.

“Mr. Kim-Prescott,” I say, adjusting my glasses on the bridge of my nose. “Would you like your regular?”

He nods. “Please. And Ellie?” He flashes me his most winning smile. “You can call me Andrew.”

If a Burberry coat were a person, it would be Andrew Kim-Prescott. This evening, he’s wearing a navy pin-striped suit under a herringbone trench, his black hair arranged in its signature wave

over dark brown eyes and a luxurious pair of cheekbones. He checks the gold Bulova watch on his wrist, and I swoon.

I like my men like I like my life goals: unattainable.

It's not even that he's wealthy (though he is). And it's not even that he's laughably handsome (though he *really* is). I look forward to Andrew's visits because for the length of time it takes for me to prepare his sixteen-ounce green matcha latte with cashew milk, I'm distracted from thoughts of selfish mothers and mean bosses, of social anxiety and failure, of being lonely and lost. Because it's impossible to look at Andrew's face and experience negative thoughts.

"Hey, Andrew," Ari says casually to the man who owns this building, and the building next to it, and the building next to that, like a young, surprisingly hot Dickensian landlord. (That's how I usually draw him, anyway.)

He's technically not our boss, but without him and the real estate investment firm his family owns, Greg never would have fulfilled his dream of selling overpriced, over-roasted coffee. Andrew comes by at least once a month to get updates on the business and drink his hipster hot beverage.

"Ari. Good to see you," Andrew purrs. Even his *voice* is expensive, like cashmere, or ordering an appetizer before your entrée instead of ordering an appetizer *as* your entrée.

He finishes paying and comes around the counter to stand across from me like Tuesday Jeff did. "So, Ellie. Do you have any plans for this evening?"

This feels like a trap, like he and Ari are setting me up to uncover my lies. I don't have plans. I *never* have plans. "I—"

"Andrew! You're here!" Greg comes flying out from the kitchen, because he has a preternatural ability to smell Andrew's presence. Which, incidentally, smells of bergamot and lots of money. "I read about your grandfather's passing in *The Oregonian*," Greg says with his usual amount of tact. Which is to say, none. "Our condolences."

Andrew conjures a charming smile. "Thanks."

Roastlandia's landlord is the heir apparent to Prescott Investments, a major firm that owns a healthy chunk of Portland's real estate. For a city that prides itself on being distinctly anti-capitalism, Portland *loves* the Prescotts. Maybe because they're good at appearing philanthropic even as they erect the same generic apartment buildings all over town, gentrifying everything from the Columbia River down to Sellwood.

Richard Prescott, the firm's founder and Andrew's grandfather, died from pancreatic cancer last week. It was on the front page of *The Oregonian*.

I set his green matcha latte on the counter, and Andrew reaches for it, giving me a playful wink. "Greg, you wanted me to check on the electrical issue in the kitchen?"

Greg nods obsequiously, and Andrew follows him through a swinging door into the back office. As soon as they're gone, Ari releases a knowing *tut*. I turn. "What?"

"As your best friend, I think you should date Andrew Kim-Prescott," she announces.

"Why do you keep calling yourself my best friend?"

"Do you have other friends in Portland?"

"That's—" *a fair point*.

Ari squints as if contemplating it further. "Yes, absolutely. I've decided. You should *definitely* date Andrew. Andrew would help you shake up your life. He's charming and well-connected and fun, and you're . . . well, you know." *The opposite of that*.

I find myself thinking about last Christmas again—about the bridge and the snow, about thinking I could become a different version of myself, even if only for one day. "Andrew Kim-Prescott does not date people like me."

"He winked at you."

"He probably had something in his eye. Dust keeps gathering in these sprigs of holly, and I'm the only one who cleans them."

"Come on. You know you're adorable. You're tall. You've got this



thick, luscious hair going for you, and *huge*”—I self-consciously cross my arms over my ample chest—“blue eyes,” Ari finishes. I drop my arms. “You’re like if Zoëy Deschanel stopped taking her Lexapro.”

I hold my hands in a prayer pose beneath my chin. “My kingdom for off-brand escitalopram.”

“See? That whole quirky vibe. Men love that shit.”

“I’m not *quirky*. I have generalized anxiety disorder, and trust me, there is nothing cute about it.” Unless you find chronic gastrointestinal distress, anxious vomiting, and shutting down at the first sign of conflict *cute*.

“Dude, this is Portland. We all have GAD. Get yourself a therapist already.”

“I have a therapist,” I mumble. Her name is Anna, I see her twice a month through an online service. Based on the fact that she told me I’m “thriving” at our last session, she’s obviously awful at her job.

“I think you should ask Andrew out,” Ari reiterates.

There is nothing worse than happily coupled people meddling in the romantic lives of the perpetually single. Though, I guess in Ari’s case, it’s happily *throupled* since she’s been dating a married lesbian couple for the past two years. They both come into Roastlandia sometimes, and the three of them are sickeningly cute together. “Ari. You’ve known me for nine months now. Do you really think I’ve ever *asked someone out*? Besides, Andrew isn’t really my type.”

I can feel Ari’s eyes on the side of my face. “Because he’s Asian?”

I wheel around. Ari is Filipino and five seconds away from garrotting me with Christmas garlands. “What? No! Of course not!”

She looks slightly less murderous. “Because he’s a dude? I thought you were into dudes.”

I shift anxiously on my feet. I came out to Ari my first week at Roastlandia, when we caught each other checking out Hot Yoga Janine in her Fabletics. It wasn’t a particularly profound moment.

“You into women?” Ari had asked me point-blank.

To which I'd eloquently said, "Uh, yeah, I'm generally into everything," like I was commenting on which pizza toppings I prefer.

This was followed by Ari punching me in the shoulder and saying, "I *thought* you were one of us."

And sure, I fell a little bit in love with Ari in that moment, but we didn't exactly dive into the nuances of my sexuality. "I mean, I'm bi," I stammer now, "so *technically*, yes, I'm into dudes, but I'm also demisexual, which means I don't experience sexual attraction at all without a strong emotional bond."

"I know what demisexuality is," Ari cuts in.

*Right.* Of course. This is Portland. It's not like all the times I tried to explain myself on third dates back in Ohio and was met with blank, uncomprehending stares. "Okay, well, for me personally, I can look at people and find them physically attractive in, like, an objective way. And I can develop crushes. But unless there is deep trust there, that crush is always going to feel kind of distant and abstract."

Ari—who proudly wears a trans flag pin beside a lesbian pride pin on her Roastlandia apron—gives me a look that says *my question did not require a dissertation*. "But if you do form that emotional bond, you are capable of being sexually and romantically attracted to men?" she asks slowly.

I nod. "In theory." In practice, it hasn't happened before. Needing emotional intimacy in relationships while also having an anxiety disorder that makes emotional intimacy nearly impossible is just rude as hell on the part of my brain.

"Well, if I were into dudes," Ari declares, "I would be all over Andrew, so you should definitely form an emotional bond with him."

"It's not really that simple. And besides, Andrew is almost *too attractive*. The money and the suits and the hair . . . Andrew's life is perfect and being around him would only remind me of how *imperfect* my life is."

I'm content with my distant and abstract crush on Andrew Kim-Prescott.

Ari adjusts her fedora so it sits jauntily over one eye. “No one is perfect, Ellie.”

Before I can respond, the swinging door opens again, and Greg and Andrew emerge. As Andrew asks Ari to transfer his latte into a to-go cup, Greg turns to me. “Ari mentioned earlier that there was something you wanted to discuss with me?”

Andrew and his hair are suddenly the furthest thing from my mind. It’s this conversation or eviction. I take a deep breath. “Yes, uh . . . did you . . . um, did you have the chance to, uh . . . Did you make a choice? About the new assistant manager?”

Greg sighs. “I’m not sure what you want me to do here, Ellie. I need an assistant manager I can depend on, and you were six minutes late today.”

“I’m sorry,” I say instinctively. “I’ll never be late again. It’s just—I *really* need this promotion. I just found out my building is raising my rent January first, and with my student loans, I can’t afford to pay fourteen hundred a month making fifteen dollars an hour—” I don’t tell him where most of my money actually goes. Greg Radzinski doesn’t deserve to know about my fucked-up family dynamics. “And I know you want me to have schedule flexibility, so I can’t get a second job unless—”

“I can’t make you the assistant manager because I feel *sorry* for you,” Greg interrupts. “This is a business.”

The conversation is going about as well as I could’ve predicted, really. “If maybe I could just get an advance on my next paycheck, then.”

“I don’t think anyone has given pay advances since nineteen eighty-seven.”

“I’m going to get evicted,” I mutter, on the verge of tears now. I imagine drawing *myself*, standing before my boss, sniveling. Portrait of a Sad Woman Shaded in Blue. One panel in a sequence of a thousand similar panels in the slightly fictionalized webcomic about my life. Title: *The Perpetual Suck*.

I wish I could conjure a different version of myself—a version of Ellie Oliver who didn't snivel and beg for people to treat her with even a modicum of respect.

"Don't cry." Greg's face goes momentarily sympathetic, and he reaches over to massage my arm. I honestly can't remember the last time anyone touched me so intimately.

Except I suddenly *can* and remembering is so much worse. Because remembering the way she held me opens the hole in my heart wide enough to consume me from the inside out.

*Last Christmas*, I—

"Ellie," Greg starts, his voice laced with compassion. For a second, I think maybe my impending tears have softened his hardened heart, that maybe Greg will keep me from completely falling apart. "You're a resourceful girl," he tells me, squeezing my flesh through my cardigan. "I'm sure you'll figure out a side hustle."

And there it is. That's the extent of Greg's advice. Then he's pushing his way through the swinging door into the kitchen again, and I'm still standing there, only now I'm outright sobbing. I turn and see the pitying faces of Ari Ocampo and Andrew Kim-Prescott. And I promptly dart toward the bathroom.

*Last Christmas*, it felt like the pieces of my life were finally clicking into place.

*This year*, I'm watching them shatter.