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# Let it snow

three holiday romances

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**speak**

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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the jubilee express

maureen johnson

*For Hamish, who embodied the "go down the hill really fast, and if something gets in your way, turn" school of teaching me how to deal with a snowy slope. And for all who toil behind the facade of a corporate monolith, for every person who has to say grande latte three thousand times a day, for every soul who's ever had to deal with a broken credit card reader in the holiday rush . . . this one is for you.*



## Chapter One

It was the night before Christmas.

Well, to be more precise, it was the afternoon before Christmas. But before I take you into the beating heart of the action, let's get one thing out of the way. I know from experience that if it comes up later, it will distract you so much that you won't be able to concentrate on anything else I tell you.

My name is Jubilee Dougal. Take a moment and let it sink in.

See, when you get it up front, it's not that bad. Now imagine I was halfway through some long story (like I'm about to be), and I dropped that one on you. "By the way, my name is Jubilee." You wouldn't know *what* to do next.

I realize Jubilee is a bit of a stripper name. You probably think I have heard the call of the pole. But no. If you saw me, you'd get the idea pretty quickly that I'm not a stripper (I think). I have a little black bob. I wear glasses half the time, and contacts the other half. I'm sixteen, I sing in choir, I attend Mathletes events. I play field hockey, which lacks the undulating, baby-oiled grace that is the stripper's stock and trade. (I have no problem with strippers, in case any strippers are reading this. I'm just not one. My major concern, stripe-wise, is the latex. I think latex is probably bad for your skin because it doesn't allow it to breathe.)

My objection is that Jubilee *isn't a name*—it's some kind of a party. No one knows *what* kind. Have you ever heard of someone throwing a jubilee? And if you did, would you go? Because I wouldn't. It sounds like something where you have to rent a large inflatable object, put up bunting, and make a complicated plan for trash disposal.

Come to think of it, it might be interchangeable with hoedown.

My name has a lot to do with this story, and like I said, it was the afternoon before Christmas. I was having one of those days when you feel that life . . . *likes* you. Finals were over and school was done until New Year's. I was alone in our house, which was feeling very cozy and snug. I was dressed for the night in a new outfit I'd saved for—a black skirt, tights,

a sparkly red T-shirt, and my new black boots. I was drinking a little eggnog latte that I'd cooked up for myself. All my presents were wrapped and ready to go. It was all leading up to the big event: at six, I was supposed to go to Noah's house—Noah Price, my boyfriend—for his family's annual Christmas Eve Smorgasbord.

The Price Family Annual Smorgasbord is a big deal in our personal history. It was how we got together in the first place. Before the Smorgasbord, Noah Price was just a star in my sky . . . constant, familiar, bright, and far above me. I'd known Noah since the fourth grade, but it felt like I knew him in the same way that I know people on television. I knew the name. I watched the show. Sure, Noah was a bit closer than that . . . but somehow when it's real, when it's your life . . . that person can feel even farther off and more unobtainable than an actual celebrity. Proximity doesn't breed familiarity.

I had always liked him, but it never really occurred to me to *like* him, like him. I never thought that was a reasonable thing to want. He was a year older than me, a foot taller, broad of shoulder, bright of eye, and floppy of hair. Noah was the whole package—athlete, academic, school-government bigwig—the kind of person you think must only date models or spies or people who have laboratories named after them.

So when Noah invited me to come along to El Smorgasbord on Christmas Eve last year, I more or less ruptured an eye in my excitement and confusion. I couldn't walk straight for three days when I got the invitation. It was so bad that I actually had to *consciously practice walking* in my room before I went to his house. I had no idea if he had asked me because he liked me, or if his mom made him (our parents know each other), or because he lost a bet. All my friends were just as excited, but they seemed to understand it more than I did. They assured me that he had been eyeing me in Mathletes, laughing at my attempts at trigonometry jokes, bringing me up in conversation.

It was all so *crazy* . . . as weird as finding out that someone had written a book about my life or something.

When I got there, I spent most of the night safely propped up in a corner talking to his sister, who (though I love her) is not exactly deep. There is only so much you can say about your favorite brands of hoodies before you feel the conversational walls closing in. But she can go like a champion. Elise has some Thoughts on the Subject.

I finally took a break just as Noah's mom was setting out another plate and I could make the Oh-excuse-me-but-doesn't-that-look-good excuse. I had no idea what was on it, but it turned out to be pickled fish. I was backing away, but his mom said, "You have to try a piece."

Being a bit of a lemming, I did. But this time, it worked out, because that's when I noticed that Noah was watching me. He said, "I'm so glad you took some." I asked him why, because I really think I suspected it was all a bet. ("Okay, I'll ask her to come, but you guys have to give me twenty bucks if I can make her eat pickled fish.")

And he said, "Because I've been eating it."

I was still standing there with what I assume was a very enchanting expression of total stupidity etched on my face, so he added, "And I couldn't kiss you unless you'd had some, too."

Which is both gross and breathtakingly romantic. He could always have just gone upstairs and brushed his teeth, but he stayed and lurked by the fish for me. We snuck off to the garage, where we made out under the shelf of power tools. That was the start of it all.

So, the particular Christmas Eve I'm about to tell you about wasn't just any Christmas Eve: this was our *one-year anniversary*. It was almost impossible to believe it had been a year. It had all gone by so fast. . . .

See, Noah is always really busy. When he emerged into the world, tiny and wriggling and pink, he probably had to get footprinted and out of the hospital as quickly as possible to get to a meeting. As a senior, a member of the soccer team, and president of the student council, his time had been whittled away to almost nothing. I think in the year that we had been dating we had had about a dozen proper dates with just Noah and me going somewhere by ourselves. About once a month. We'd had plenty of joint appearances. Noah and Jubilee at the student-council bake sale! Noah and Jubilee at the soccer-team raffle table! Noah and Jubilee at the food drive, in the tutoring room, at the homecoming-organizational meeting . . .

Noah was aware of this. And though tonight was a family event with many people in attendance, he promised me there would be time just for us. He had made sure of it by helping out in advance. If we put in two hours at the party, he promised, we could escape to the back room and exchange our gifts and watch *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* together. He would drive me home, and we would stop for a while. . . .

And then, of course, my parents got arrested, and all of that went to hell.

Do you know the Flobie Santa Village? The Flobie Santa Village is such a big part of my life that I just assume everyone knows what it is, but I've been told recently that I make way too many assumptions, so I'll explain.

The Flobie Santa Village is a series of collectable ceramic pieces that you can put together to form a town. My parents have been collecting them since the time I was born. I've been staring down those tiny plastic cobblestone streets since I was big enough to stand on my own. We have it all—the candy-cane bridge, Lake Snowbegone, the gumdrop shop, the gingerbread bakery, Sugarplum Alley. It's not small, either. My parents bought a special table to put it up on, and it takes up the center of our living room from Thanksgiving until New Year's. It requires seven power strips to make it all work. In order to diminish the environmental impact, I got them to turn it off at night, but it was a struggle.

I was named after Flobie Santa Village building #4, Jubilee Hall. Jubilee Hall is the biggest building in the collection. It's the main place that presents are made and wrapped. It has colored lights, a working conveyor belt with gifts stuck to it, and little elves that turn as if they're loading and unloading them. The elves of Jubilee Hall each have a present glued to their hands—so what it really looks like are a bunch of tortured beings doomed to pick up and set down the same gift over and over again until the end of time or until the motor breaks. I remember pointing this out to my mom when I was little; she said I was missing the point. Maybe so. We were clearly coming from different directions on this subject, considering she felt those little buildings were important enough to name her only offspring after.

People who collect the Flobie Village tend to get a little obsessed with it. There are conventions, about a dozen serious Web sites, and four magazines. Some of them try to play it off by saying that Flobie pieces are an investment. And they *are* worth a lot of money, it's true. Especially the numbered ones. You can only buy those pieces at the Flobie showroom on Christmas Eve. We live in Richmond, Virginia, which is only about fifty miles away—so every year on the night of the twenty-third, my parents leave with a car full of blankets, chairs, and provisions and sit in line all night and wait.

Flobie used to make a hundred numbered pieces, but last year they reduced it to ten. This is when things got bad. One hundred pieces wasn't nearly enough, so when the number went down to just one-tenth of that, the

claws came out and the fur started to fly. There was a problem last year when people tried to hold places in line—a problem that quickly turned into people smacking each other with rolled-up Flobie catalogs, throwing cookie tins, stomping on each other’s lawn chairs, and dumping lukewarm cocoa on each other’s Santa Claus–hatted heads. The fight was big enough and ridiculous enough to make the local news. Flobie said that they were “taking measures” to make sure it didn’t happen again, but I never believed that. You can’t buy that kind of publicity.

But I wasn’t thinking about that when my parents drove off to get in line for piece #68, the Elf Hotel. And I still wasn’t thinking about it when I was drinking my eggnog latte and whiling away the time until I got to go to Noah’s. I did notice that my parents *were* later arriving home than usual. They usually got back from Flobie around lunchtime on Christmas Eve, and here it was, almost four o’clock. I started doing some of the general holiday duties to keep myself busy. I couldn’t call Noah . . . I knew he was busy getting ready for the Smorgasbord. So I added some extra ribbon and holly to his presents. I switched on all the power strips that power the Flobie Santa Village, setting all the enslaved elves to work. I turned on Christmas carols. I was just stepping outside to turn on the lights on the front of the house when I saw Sam advancing toward our house with his storm-trooper stride.

Sam is our lawyer—and when I say “our lawyer,” I mean “our neighbor who happens to be an extremely high-powered lawyer in Washington, D.C.” Sam is exactly the person you want to take on a huge corporation or to represent you when you’re being sued for a billion dollars. He is not, however, Mr. Cuddles. I was about to invite him in to try one of my delicious eggnog lattes, but he cut me off.

“I have some bad news,” he said, ushering me into my own house. “There’s been another incident at the Flobie showroom. Inside. Come on.”

I thought he was going to say that my parents had been killed. He had that kind of tone. I envisioned huge piles of the Elf Hotel flying off the belt, taking down everyone in sight. I had seen pictures of the Elf Hotel—it had sharp candy-cane spires that could easily impale someone. And if anyone was ever going to be killed by an Elf Hotel, it would be my parents.

“They’ve been taken into custody,” he said. “They’re in jail.”

“Who’s in jail?” I asked, because I’m not super-quick on the uptake, and because it was much easier for me to envision my parents being taken down

by a flying Elf Hotel than it was to think of them being taken off in handcuffs.

Sam just looked at me and waited for me to catch up on my own.

“There was another fight when the pieces came out this morning,” he explained, after a pause. “An argument about who was holding spots in line. Your parents weren’t part of it, but they didn’t disperse when the police told them to. They got hauled in with the others. Five people have been booked. It’s all over the news.”

I felt my legs starting to wobble, so I sat down on the sofa.

“Why didn’t they call?” I asked.

“One phone call,” he said. “They called me, because they thought I could get them out. Which I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you *can’t*?”

The idea that Sam couldn’t bust my parents out of the county clink was ridiculous. It was like hearing a pilot come over the intercom and say, “Hey, everyone. I just remembered I’m no good at landing. So I’m just going to keep flying around until someone has a better idea.”

“I did my best,” Sam went on, “but the judge isn’t budging. He’s sick of these Flobie problems, so he’s making an example of them all. Your parents instructed me to take you to the train station. I only have one hour, then I have to be back for hot cookies and a sing-along at five. How quickly can you pack?”

This was delivered in the same gravelly tone of voice that Sam probably used when pounding people on the stand about why they were seen running from the scene covered in blood. He didn’t look happy that this task had been foisted on him on Christmas Eve. Still, a little touch of Oprah would have helped.

“Pack? Train station? What?”

“You’re going to Florida to stay with your grandparents,” he said. “Couldn’t get a flight—they’re being canceled all over the place because of the storm.”

“What storm?”

“Jubilee,” Sam said very slowly, having concluded that I was the least-aware person on the planet, “we’re about to have the biggest storm in fifty years!”

My brain wasn’t working right—none of this was going in.

“I can’t go,” I said. “I’m supposed to see Noah tonight. And Christmas. What about Christmas?”

Sam shrugged, as if to say that Christmas was beyond his control, and there was nothing the legal system could do about it.

“But . . . why can’t I just stay here? This is crazy!”

“Your parents don’t want you alone for two days over the holiday.”

“I can go to Noah’s! I *have* to go to Noah’s!”

“Look,” he said, “it’s all arranged. We can’t reach your parents now. They’re being processed. I bought your ticket, and I don’t have a lot of time. You’re going to have to pack now, Jubilee.”

I turned and looked at the twinkling little cityscape next to me. I could see the shadows of the doomed elves as they worked away in Jubilee Hall, the warm glow of Mrs. Muggin’s Cake Shop, the slow but merry process of the Elf Express around the little expanse of track.

The only thing I could think to ask was, “But . . . what about the village?”