

Hazel Yeats

Bunny

FINDS A
FRIEND



Chapter 1

CARA KNEW THAT SOMETHING WAS off, but it took her a second to realize what it was. The *ho ho ho* sure was jolly enough, but it lacked Santa's characteristic baritone. It was more of a soprano, angelic enough to land him the lead in an all-girls choir. As Cara approached the throne on which he was sitting, she realized that this wasn't the only thing about him that was different. He seemed a little girly. He seemed to wear a little rouge on his cheeks. He seemed unable to hide the fact that, under his clearly fake pot belly, he was quite slender and elegant.

She sighed. Just her luck. Had she not decided that the road to celibacy was the only one for her—the only *right* one? And was it not a little ironic that fate chose to practically throw this gorgeous Kristina Kringle in her lap only hours later? Then again, maybe it was the ultimate test. A chance to prove that she stood by her resolution. Because if she was able to resist a saint, a hot saint at that, then surely she would be rewarded by losing her sex drive and become a crocheting spinster in flannel slippers.

Doing a survey of the women she'd been involved with over the last decade had made her realize that most of them had been either narcissistic, unfaithful, emotionally

confused, or teetering on the brink of an alcohol addiction. In some cases, with a considerable overlap. She'd had a call from Kelly, her girlfriend of two months, that very morning. Kelly told her, in a tearful voice, that she was going off to find herself—not in an ashram or sweat hut, as Cara had always thought she one day would, but in the arms of a straight co-worker. Or formerly straight. Or fluently straight. Or whatever.

Cara hadn't presumed that she and Kelly were meant to last, but it stung anyway. When she'd hung up the phone, she had somehow understood that every relationship she would ever have would be doomed. Call it kismet, call it karma, call it bad luck, but the coupling thing wasn't for her. And since all her coupling had started by noticing a woman's angelic voice and slender elegance, she vowed to close her eyes as she handed Santa the papers.

Now, all she needed was to find a way to do so inconspicuously, which wouldn't be easy given the fact that she was on the ground floor of De Bijenkorf and that it was one of the busiest days of the year. The luxury, upmarket department store, centrally located at Dam Square in the heart of Amsterdam, was a magnet for both locals and tourists, especially around Christmas. The striking, historic building appealed to people—its spectacular façade lighting, the extravagant window displays, the large light dome, and six floors of luxury goods. Outside the store, in the square, there was a Christmas tree soaring over twenty meters into the Amsterdam sky, decorated by four kilometers of Christmas lights.

Even Cara mellowed at the sight of so much beauty. But then she remembered that she had a job to do, and she hurried inside.

Santa's little enclave, prominently situated among the shop-in-shops of high-end fashion brands, was enclosed by a wooden fence with a gate at the front—now open to let the children in. There were two huge Christmas trees on either side of Santa's throne, decorated in gold and red. Scattered around the compound were three remarkably lifelike reindeer, their antlers as large as tree branches. Two children, dressed as elves, were busy moving gift-wrapped boxes from one place to the other. The floor was covered with snow blankets. From the speakers came the sound of Christmas carols.

Cara took off her gloves and unzipped her coat. It was unseasonably warm today, and there were far too many people here. About a thousand more than she was comfortable with. She lingered at a safe distance from Santa's chair, holding on to the railing to avoid getting trampled by the crowd, and watched him, or rather her, operate for a moment. Santa seemed very comfortable in her role, despite the gender confusion. She had an electric sort of energy. She was bouncing up and down, laughing, and spreading joy. She looked as natural in her red and white getup as though she wore nothing else all year round. The children were lined up waiting to take their places on her lap, eager to tell her what they were expecting to find under the tree in three weeks' time.

Cara watched the line grow and panicked. Was she going to stand here all day, waiting for a lull in Santa's schedule, to hand her the envelope? Cara was new at this—in fact, Santa was her first client. She'd had instructions, sure, an official training even. She had diligently read the entire manual, but there hadn't been anything in the rules about how to act

when your first client happened to be Father Christmas. Let alone *Mother* Christmas.

She braced herself, pushing her elbows forward in the hope of lending her girly features a little brazenness, and cut in front of the waiting children.

“Hey!” a stout boy in a blue anorak shouted. “Wait your turn.”

Cara turned and crouched down, facing him. “Now look, you little twerp,” she said, pointing a finger at him. “I’m not having a very good day here. Me and Santa have some business, okay? So just back off and give me a moment.”

The boy, startled by her aggressive tone, stepped back, almost knocking over the kid who was in line behind him, who promptly started to bawl.

Cara walked through the gate as soon as Santa’s lap was empty. She took a few steps, until she was close enough to get Santa’s attention. The chair was quite high, and she had to look up.

“Hi,” Santa said. “I appreciate your eagerness to sit on my lap, but would you mind terribly *not* scaring away the customers? This is a once-a-year gig, as you may know, so it’s important I keep them happy.”

Cara stared at the woman, her mouth dropping. She had some nerve!

“So, what can I do for you?” Santa looked at the envelope in Cara’s hand. “Is that your list?”

Cara shook her head.

“In that case, just *tell* me what you want.” She eyed Cara critically, then pointed what Cara knew to be a mocking finger at her official process server badge. “I’d suggest a shiny ornament for your lapel, but I see that’s been taken care of.”

“I’m good,” Cara said. She sighed. “That was funny, by the way.”

Santa flashed her an innocent smile. “Then perhaps someone to pull the stick out of your ass?”

Cara threw the woman an angry look and resisted, with some difficulty, the temptation to climb on the chair and smack her in the face. There was to be no physical contact, let alone violence. Not only was she here in an official capacity, but this was one Santa you didn’t want to get into a fight with.

She gave Santa a cold look. “Strong language coming from someone in your position.”

Santa smiled again. Cara noticed her perfect, white teeth. She also noticed her gorgeous, hazel eyes. Most of the rest of her face was not visible through the beard. It was funny, Cara mused, how she could see so little of Santa’s face and still somehow know that she was quite attractive. It made her want to rip the beard off to see the rest of her. She kicked herself, mentally, and pushed all thoughts of Santa’s physical appeal to the back of her mind. She cursed herself for even noticing these completely irrelevant details about someone who was obviously an asshole.

“I don’t know what it is,” Santa said, “some people just bring that out in me.”

Cara was beginning to be very aware of how she was holding up the line. It was time to wrap this up or all hell would break loose. And besides, there was no reasoning with this woman. She could stand here and argue with her all day and accomplish nothing.

“Whatever,” she said, as “O Holy Night” wafted from the shop speakers. “Are you Jude Donovan?”

“Shush!” said Santa. She pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the waiting children. “Don’t say that out loud.”

Cara followed her gaze. Yes, there were children, so what? She turned back and waited for an answer, that didn’t come.

“Well?” She was getting impatient. “Are you?”

Santa shook her head. “No, I’m Kris.”

Cara stared at the envelope, once again reading the name.

“Kris Kringle!” the woman said, seeing Cara’s confusion. “*You* know. Santa?”

“Seriously.” Cara heard the voices of protesting parents and felt a bead of sweat begin to trickle down her back. “I really need you to confirm that you’re Jude Donovan.”

“Okay,” Santa said. “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I’m...” her voice became a whisper, as she leaned over to where Cara was standing “...I’m her. I’m Jude Donovan.”

Cara nodded and handed Santa the envelope, which she took with a bewildered expression.

Cara curtsied. “You have been served.”

* * *

“A guy?” Inge opened the Styrofoam box with eager fingers. “How could you think someone named Jude is a guy?”

Cara shrugged. “I just assumed. Aren’t all Judes guys? *Jude the Obscure*? Jude Law? The dude in Hey Jude?”

“Not sure about *Jude the Obscure*. I guess when you’re obscure you have more important things to worry about than your gender.”

Cara looked at her sister critically. “Do you even know what obscure means?”

“Sure,” Inge said. “Invisible, right?”

Cara nodded. “Right. Thomas Hardy spent many a sleepless night wondering if he shouldn’t have called his novel *Jude the Invisible*.”

“There’s no need to go all literary and intellectual on me.” Inge crumbled up a napkin and threw it at Cara. “After all, you don’t even know what sex the average Jude is.”

“Most of them are men.” Cara bent over to pick up the napkin from the floor and put it in on her tray.

“Anyway,” Inge said, “tell me more about the lovely Santa.” She sank her teeth into her double cheeseburger and moaned. Cara watched her like a mother watches a child enjoying an unhealthy but much deserved treat; with that curious combination of guilt and satisfaction. She was the only person in Inge’s circle of friends and family who didn’t point blank refuse to eat at a McDonald’s, even though she hadn’t personally felt the desire to set foot in one since the age of twelve. She didn’t care for the menu, or the garish, plastic ambiance, but she didn’t have the problem with fast food that Myra and Alice had. Cara felt strongly that adults should decide for themselves what they did, or did not, want to eat. With Myra busy doing whatever it is that mothers of large families do during the day, and Alice in Milan to discuss the deeper meaning of below-the-knee hemlines, Cara had decided to indulge her beloved sibling. After all, hadn’t Inge willingly accompanied her to gay bars and Pink concerts through the years, without being particularly passionate about either? Watching her devour a Happy Meal every now and then was the least she could do to pay Inge back for her support.

“I wouldn’t call her lovely.” Cara shook her head. “And besides, I make it a rule not to look at the people I serve in that way.”

“You do, huh? So far you’ve told me about the length of her lashes, the swell of her breasts under the grubby Santa suit, and how her smile seems like the sun coming out after a long and harsh winter. How is that not *that* way?”

Cara frowned. “I’m positive I never said a word about any swell.”

“It was implied,” said Inge. “So what happens next?”

“With her, you mean? I don’t know. It’s got nothing to do with me. I just deliver the paperwork and that’s it.”

“So you haven’t been back to the store to see whether she’s still there?”

“Of course not.”

“Want to go down there?” Inge held the red container upside down. The last two crunchy french fries fell into her hand.

“What?” Cara said. “Now? Why?”

“To see if she’s kept her job, of course.” Inge looked to her left and right before eyeing Cara. “What if,” she whispered, bringing her face closer to her sister’s, “she has to stand trial for a horrible crime? Like murder.”

“Yes,” Cara said. She sighed. “That’s very likely. Don’t you think they’ll be checking the credentials of a person who applies for a job at a public place? A person who’ll be working with children?”

Inge shrugged. “I’m not saying she’s necessarily the one who committed the murder, am I? Maybe she was simply an innocent witness. Someone who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Like at a horrible crime scene, where she stumbled upon a barely breathing victim, lying broken in a pool of blood.”

“Ugh,” Cara said. “That’s gross.” She saw Inge eye her own french fry cup. “Aren’t you getting a little carried away here?”

“I’m just curious.” Inge reached over the table for the red container and held it up. “Are you eating these?”

Cara shook her head. “Be my guest.”

Inge emptied the box on the tray. “All I’m saying is that I’d want to know what’s going on with her if I were you. You’re obviously intrigued.”

“What if she’s not there? And I’ll be forever wondering?”

Inge shrugged. “Then I guess we owe it to her to find out what happened. It’s not unthinkable that she’s in the witness protection program.”

“Is that not, by its nature, something we’re unlikely to discover?”

“It may be for mere mortals, but you’re a government official with access to classified information, right?”

Cara shook her head. “Far from it. If anything, I’m a glorified mailman.”

“Anyway,” Inge insisted. “I just want to see Hot Santa.”

Cara looked at her sister in horror. “Please,” she moaned, “tell me you’re not going through some weird bi-curious phase. Because I really can’t deal with that right now.”

“Spare me,” said Inge. “I find it beyond imagining how you people can go through life never feeling a—“

“Whoa!” said Cara. “Please don’t finish that.”

“Don’t have to.” Inge giggled. “You know exactly what I mean. So, are you coming? If you do, I’ll spring for lunch.”

Cara shook her head. “It was your turn anyway. So I think I’ll pass. I have work to do. Those legal documents aren’t going to deliver themselves.”

Inge responded by stuffing the very last fries in her mouth.

* * *

Three days later, Cara's curiosity got the better of her. She took an irresponsible detour between assignments, which basically meant that she was playing hooky, so there was no time to waste. She checked her watch, sighing as she realized that she was supposed to be in a housing project in Almere, trying to serve debt collection papers to the same guy for the fourth time. Every time she rang his doorbell, a dog started to bark, or rather whimper—not aggressively, more like hopelessly. She tried not to think about the possibility that her client had vacated the premises, leaving the poor animal behind. After she had failed to find him home, twice, she brought huge amounts of dog treats and kibble the third time. She dropped the food through the mailbox in hopes the dog would find it, and praying that she wasn't just prolonging his agony. The realization that she couldn't get him any water kept her up at night, which is why she made an extra trip there and rang the neighbor's doorbell. A middle-aged man answered the door—drowsy, or drunk, and smelling of old sweat. He assured Cara that the dog's owner came home regularly, walked the dog on those occasions, and left enough food and water for the animal when he 'went on business.' He also promised her to keep an eye on things.

As Cara walked through the revolving door into De Bijenkorf, she looked to her left and right, trying to be inconspicuous, as if she were about to engage in some criminal act. The thought that only minutes from now she would be face to face with the woman who'd been on her mind constantly these past days, for no apparent reason, made her heart beat in her chest.

The feeling of total disappointment when she saw, at first glance, that sexy Santa was no longer there, was so overwhelming that, for a second, her whole world went black.

The scene was exactly as it had been before. The trees were there, the elves, the kids, Vixen, Blitzen, Cupid, and, most importantly, Santa's throne.

What was clearly very different, was the person sitting on the throne. Santa's pot belly was real, and so was his deep voice. Jude Donovan was gone.

Chapter 2

ON FRIDAY, AT TWO P.M. on the dot, they met up for lunch at Inge's. As always, she served tons of food: sandwiches, olives, fish, meatballs, pickles, cheeses, and cold cuts.

Alice swallowed a piece of smoked salmon and grinned. "You curtsied?"

Cara nodded. "I did."

"And you actually said, 'you're being served?'" Alice was trying hard not to laugh. "Wasn't that a little...dramatic?"

Cara reached for her glass and frowned. "I wanted to lend a bit of class to the whole thing, okay? She was quite rude. And she was my first one." Cara paused. "Also, I've always wanted to say that."

The front door swung open. Bart wandered in from the street, where he was working on his car, and put a bottle of Turtle Wax on the dinner table.

"What have you always wanted to say, Sis?" He wiped his hand on an oil soaked rag. Cara smiled at her brother-in-law. Her dependable, good-natured brother-in-law. She shook her head. "Never mind. Not for you."

"Honey," Inge said, "could you not put your greasy car stuff on my table?"

Bart shrugged. "Is this one of those occasions where men are supposed to make themselves scarce?" He picked up the

wax and eyed his wife suspiciously. "Or did you ladies honor our home with your presence because you want the male perspective on your troubles?"

"If you must know," Myra said, "we're honoring your home with our presence because once a week it's Sister Day at *Casa Inge*. And this week, it happens to be today." She smiled at Alice. "I mean, of course, Sister *and* Sister-in-law Day."

"Yes." Alice sighed. "I know I owe my place in your sister posse to Arend."

"If Arend and I ever split up," Myra said, "heaven forbid, then we will keep you on as a member of the family, I promise. We'll adopt you as our own sister. I'm sure my parents would love to have another daughter. We never give them any trouble, and never have."

"So basically you're banning me from my own house?" Bart said.

"That's right, honey." Inge dipped a meatball in mustard.

"Which isn't to say that we wouldn't appreciate your input," Alice said.

"You're just being polite, aren't you?" He smiled.

Inge nodded. "We are."

"I see," he said. "I will make myself scarce, then. But if you should change your mind, I'll be in the back yard. Holler if you need me, okay?"

"So, why a department store?" Alice asked, as soon as Bart had closed the door behind him. "Why couldn't you have delivered the papers to her house?"

"I actually thought that was a little weird myself," Cara said. "But my instructions were clear. I guess that maybe they had tried her house and she was never there. We deliver documents to the weirdest places."

“Poor you,” Inge said with an evil grin. “You were so close to finding out where she lives.”

“Shut up, okay?” said Cara.

“So why did you quit?” Alice asked.

Cara shrugged. “The thrill wore off.”

“After two weeks?”

Cara couldn't recall a time when she wasn't expected to explain her every action to her much older sisters. And after Myra married Arend and they all became friends with Alice, she joined the pack, so then there were three to gang up on her. It wasn't always easy being the baby of the family. Her sisters seemed to regard her as an improved version of themselves, someone who wasn't allowed to make mistakes or to go through phases of doing stupid things. Mothering her was second nature to them. And though Cara was, on occasion, quite happy to turn to them when she needed someone to talk to, she didn't care for the way her chosen path in life (or her inability to choose a path in life) tended to be criticized. They expected her to make nothing but sensible choices and grown-up decisions. They expected her to be responsible. To commit. And she wasn't ready to commit. Not to a job, not to a woman. She knew she would always get edgy when her time wasn't her own to squander. She needed a bit of breathing space, and she didn't think there was anything wrong with a little job hopping or even a little girlfriend hopping. She was thirty-two, what did they expect? Wasn't she supposed to try things out before she settled on anything permanently? Then again, she may never commit. Maybe she was just that kind of person—restless, adventurous.

“The thing is,” she said, “I didn't have a clear picture of what the job was all about. I thought I was going to be like

this really cool private eye, hunting down criminals, driving my convertible along the coastline, the scent of the sea my only company.” She bowed her head. “Instead, I kept finding myself on the doorsteps of shabby family homes, serving my papers to tired housewives whose asshole husbands’ cars were being repossessed.”

“So?” said Myra. “Doesn’t every job have its downside?”

Cara shrugged. “It was depressing, not to mention that the pay doesn’t become interesting until you get a case that poses a serious threat to your safety.”

“So basically, you thought you were going to move to California and be Kinsey Millhone.”

“Who?”

“Kinsey Millhone,” Inge said. “Beloved private eye in Sue Grafton’s alphabet series of thrillers!”

They all drew a blank.

“Jesus,” she said finally. “What’s wrong with you people? Would it kill you to pick up a book once in a while?”

“Sorry,” Cara said. “Perhaps you should give us some reading advice.” She pushed her sister playfully. “I hear you’re quite the expert on *Jude the Invisible*.”

“I can hardly find the time to breathe,” Myra said. “Let alone pick up a book.” She rested the palm of her hand lovingly on her stomach, currently home to her fourth child. Cara and Alice were sitting next to her on the couch, fighting for the available space.

“Anyway,” she said, turning to Cara. “I guess what we’re trying to say is that we’re a little worried about you. I thought that with Kelly in your life and the new job...”

Her voice trailed off, and Cara could just tell that her oldest sister was picturing her wheeling a pram down the street, or giving a closing argument in a courtroom.

“Kelly has found solace in the arms of another,” she said. “who brings light to her life where I brought nothing but darkness.”

“Really?” said Myra. “What a horrible thing to do. And you two seemed so content together. Like two kittens.”

“It’s fine,” Cara said. “The kitten left some nasty scratches, but they’ve healed and now I’m perfectly okay. There’s absolutely no need to worry about me.”

“It’s just that you don’t seem to be...going anywhere,” Myra insisted.

“Nobody’s going anywhere,” Cara said. “Where we’re all going, is to our graves. What’s important is that we have a bit of fun until that day arrives.”

“So are you?” Alice asked.

“Am I what?”

“Having fun.”

“Sure.” Cara nodded, as Inge pointed to her empty wine glass—yes, she wanted a refill. Being interrogated like this was always easier with a little alcohol to take the edge off.

“Sure, I’m having fun,” she said. “No more or less than any one of you.”

Inge filled the wine glasses and teacups. When she helped herself to a big wedge of cheese her sisters started screaming, keeping their promise to help her lose weight.

“Oh, shut up,” she said. “Bart told me, only yesterday, that he likes a bit of meat on me.” She looked smug. “There’s more of me to love.”

Alice ran her hands over her hips, as if to make sure they were still as slim as she needed them to be.

“If you ask me,” Cara continued, “this whole concept of going somewhere is a typically unenlightened, western-

culture way to deal with mortality. Or rather, to *not* deal with it. To try and push it away. Instead, we have to embrace it. Because it keeps us on our toes. And because it won't be ignored. There's no such thing as being in control of your life; no matter how big your house, or how steady your job, or how healthy your diet. It ends when it does. A blood clot, a car crash, a nuclear disaster—*something* will be our undoing. We have no say in the matter.”

“You're overthinking things,” said Myra. “We're talking about instinct here. It's very natural to have goals in your life. To want a family. A home. Maybe you'll even want a home here—in the suburbs. Or at least in a better part of the city, with fewer gunfights and muggings. You need some security.”

“Security makes me feel as though somebody is sitting on my chest, making it impossible for me to breathe,” said Cara. “And I'll have you know that I've never been mugged or shot. I simply can't afford to spend 4,000 euros a month on a studio apartment, and I'm not ready to live the life of a Stepford wife in some ghost town that was reclaimed from the sea no more than a couple of decades ago.”

“We're all different, I guess,” remarked Alice. “I, for one, find an incredible sense of security in the thought that I'll be picking up my new car later today.” She looked at her Rolex. “In less than three hours, to be exact.”

“Finding your sense of security in possessions isn't healthy either, if you ask me.” Myra cast Alice a disapproving look. “You and Arend are so different that way.”

“Arend used to be like me.” Alice said. “But then you guys had all those kids and he had no choice but to shift his priorities.”

“I find my sense of security in food,” Inge confessed. It was something that she had obviously made her peace with.

“Let’s just say,” Cara concluded, “that we’re all dealing with life’s issues in unhealthy ways, okay? I’m too flaky, Inge eats too much, Alice spends too much, and Myra has too much unprotected sex. So what? I say we’re all just fine the way we are, and I for one love you guys no matter what.”

“Hear hear,” said Myra, before she gulped down the last of her tea.

“So anyway,” Inge said, wiping the bread crumbs off her shirt, “remember this Santa woman we were talking about? Our Cara’s got a thing for her.”

* * *

“I do *not* have a thing for her,” Cara said to herself as she drove home. “Far from it. She was obnoxious, she was hostile, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she had to stand trial for killing off the Easter bunny.”

She knew that her words were hollow. If she couldn’t even believe them herself, how would she convince someone else? Okay, the woman *had* been obnoxious, but she was also funny, and pretty gorgeous from what little the Santa suit had revealed of her. And the truth was that Cara hadn’t exactly been a ray of sunshine herself that day.

What if Jude had been fired because of her? Had Cara not totally disrupted the peace, yelling at the boy and arguing with Santa? Kids had started crying, parents had given her angry looks. What if Jude had lost her job because of it, through no fault of her own? She had been so good at what she did. And what if the performance she had referred to as her once-a-year gig was her *only* gig? What if playing

Santa was like her career, and her sole source of income? As her heart swelled with compassion at the thought that Jude Donovan might be penniless, Cara suddenly realized that her own circumstances weren't any less dire. The process server position wasn't at all what she'd expected. It was supposed to be a fast-paced job, exciting and dangerous, and she was looking forward to the thrill it would bring. But it didn't. At all. She served people who didn't want to be served, who were often aggressive and frequently desperate—it was the opposite of what she'd thought it would be. She wasn't cut out for it. She gave it a chance, hoping it would grow on her, but when it started keeping her up at night she decided to quit, having lasted less than two weeks. She handed in her badge and went home with her last pay check. She'd have to find a new job, but since nobody was hiring staff so close to Christmas, she decided to take a couple of weeks off and not look for employment until the new year. She supposed she could devote her time to trying to find Jude Donovan, but she wasn't sure where else to look for her except at the store where she'd found her. She parked her car and walked home, pulling her scarf up to her ears. It was probably time to leave the incident behind her.

* * *

The next time she caved and went to De Bijenkorf to try and find Jude, she was shocked to find that the previously live Christmas show had been turned into a set of props. The elves were gone, and so was Santa. The packages lay motionless under the trees. The reindeer were there, but the absence of people in the enclave made them look every bit as lifeless as they were.

Cara swore under her breath. Somewhere in the universe, someone, or something, was doing everything in their power to keep her and Jude apart. It seemed that Jude was drifting further away from her with each passing day.

As she stood there feeling bleak, her eye suddenly caught a person in a Santa suit going up the escalator. She would have to move fast. She ran across the store, past the Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Burberry, and Gucci shops. She excused herself to everybody she almost knocked down in the process. She stepped on the escalator, walking up the moving steps to try and catch up with Santa, who was kind enough to stand still, so that she was gaining on him. They stepped off the escalator at the same time. Santa hurried away, but Cara followed him—or, as she was feverishly hoping, *her*—and as she came up from behind, she tapped Santa on the shoulder.

“Excuse me.” She leaned forward to catch a glimpse of Santa’s face.

As soon as Santa turned, Cara’s heart sank. This was most definitely a guy. And not exactly the sort of guy that was a credit to his gender, either. He was scrawny, kept pulling at his beard, and had bloodshot eyes.

His head shot up. “What?”

“I’m very sorry,” Cara said. “But I was actually looking for a colleague of yours. Do you work on the ground floor?”

A store customer, with her arms full of bags, elbowed Cara out of the way to get to the escalator. Cara almost lost her balance.

“Do I what?” Santa snorted. He eyed her suspiciously. “Don’t tell me you’re with the Tax Office!”

Cara shook her head. “I just need some information. Do you know who else has been playing Santa here at the store?”

I sound like an idiot, she thought. A desperate, lovesick idiot.

Santa shook his head. “How the fuck should I know who does what here, lady? What do you think I am, a fucking information board? Don’t you think I have better things to do with my time?”

“I thought you might belong to some kind of collective,” Cara explained. “You know, working in a group, taking turns.”

“Some kind of collective?” Angry Santa scratched his cheek. “What are you, nuts?”

“I’m probably mistaken.” Cara was beginning to fear he would smack her, which is why she smiled amiably. She hated him, but he might be her very last link to Jude.

“Would you mind telling me who hires you?” she asked.

“Queen Maxima hired me, okay? She called me up herself.”

“I see,” Cara said. She sighed.

Santa belched. “You know what? Maybe we should discuss this later.” He looked Cara up and down and it was clear from his smirk that he liked what he saw. “I’m a little pressed for time right now, but my evening happens to be wide open. So how about sharing a little...you know...eggnog later. Just you and me, okay?”

Cara looked at him with a face full of loathing. Then she turned around and stepped back on the escalator.

Going down.

* * *

Christmas came and went. Cara drove to her mother’s house, in a blizzard, on Christmas Eve and spent two seemingly endless days trying to pacify her expanding

family. Even Myra and Arend were arguing, and Inge, the great peacemaker, unfortunately wasn't there to help her bring any festiveness to the mood. She was glad when it was finally over.

She spent New Year's Eve with Inge and Bart, who had invited a lot of people, most of whom were strangers to her. She sat next to a guy with a moustache and a passion for model trains. He talked too much, and he smelled funny. Not necessarily bad, but funny. Like cotton candy. After his third beer, he moved closer and put his hand on her knee, the alcohol giving him the courage to make a pass at her. She protested only lightly when he planted his lips on hers at midnight.

She was beginning to forget about Jude Donovan.

Chapter 3

IN THE SECOND HALF OF January, she found a job delivering pizzas. Alice called it an all-time low, but Cara had found the ATM machine empty, and she was in dire need of some cash.

For some reason, she liked her new position, humble though it may be. It felt good, after the process server job, to have people actually be glad to see her when she rang their doorbells. In a nation, as tiny as the Netherlands was, that ordered five thousand take-out meals a day, her future at Cara Mia was quite secure. What she did was so much more than simply deliver food. Not everybody would greet her wallet in hand and slam the door in her face. Many of her customers had to find money first—rummaging through pockets, looking for purses. Cara waited patiently, watching their kids stare at her, listening to their dogs bark at her, smelling their smells, stealing looks at their interiors, gracefully accepting their tips, and being appalled at the filthy rags some people were comfortable answering the door in.

There were definitely people who couldn't get rid of her fast enough, but some struck up conversations, even confided in her. Many excused themselves for the state of their apartments, although generally not the ones who had the most reason to. Some didn't credit her with so much as

a look, but quite a few made a pass at her. All men, never women. Some subtle, some not so subtle. Some were grown men, whose wives she could see setting the table in the background. But mostly it was young men—students with an attitude, whose expression would change dramatically the minute they laid eyes on her; or teenage boys, clumsy and sweaty, always knocking things over or dropping their change.

There were horrible ones too—condescending ones, rude ones, drunk ones, dirty ones, broke ones.

The pay was moderate, but the tips made up for a lot.

Delivering pizzas was so much more than handing over a grease-stained cardboard box—it was a study of the human condition.

* * *

“Another day, another lunch.” Inge rubbed her hands together.

It was Friday. Alice was the only one who was supposed to go back to work. For the other three, there was no curfew today.

They were at their favorite deli, a little restaurant in Amsterdam’s Nine Streets district—a collection of narrow passages which traverse the city’s canals. It was an elegant place, with original wooden paneling, upholstered walls, and oak flooring. Inge liked to say that the food was almost as good as hers.

“Wonderful.” Alice leafed through the menu, although she knew it by heart. “I’m starving. I think I’ll have the small goat cheese salad.”

Inge snorted. “That’s what you have when you’re starving? So what do you have when you’re just a little hungry?”

“A glass of water,” Alice said.

Inge stuck out her tongue to Alice, then turned to Cara. “So how are you, baby Sis? How’s the search for Jude?”

Myra, who had been busy trying to remove a stain from her collar with a wet napkin, was now all ears. Her eyes grew wide. “Jude? Who’s Jude?”

“Nobody,” Cara said. “The search is off.”

“Jude Donovan,” Inge explained. “Also known as Hot Santa.”

Myra had never looked more surprised. “Jude Donovan?”

Inge nodded. “Do you know her?”

“Not *the* Jude Donovan?”

Oh God, Cara thought. I was right. It was on the news. She killed herself. She was found in an alley, starved to death. Cara had long since abandoned the thought that there might have been anything incriminating in the documents she had delivered to the woman. If this was never going to be more than a fantasy, then she might as well make it a good one, where Jude was a hot saint rather than a hot criminal. Her feelings had gone through this weird transition since that fateful day at the store, from angry and offended to caring and compassionate. Their encounter was like a fan fiction story now, where the actual event had been rewritten into something it never was, and was never supposed to become. It was taking on a life of its own.

“What do you mean, *the* Jude Donovan?” asked Inge.

“Duh!” Myra said. “The famous American children’s book writer.” She stared at three pairs of raised eyebrows. “The Bunny series. Seriously?”

“I am now officially an illiterate,” Alice complained. “First Kinsey Millhone, and now a Bunny whose fame has apparently eluded me.”

“*Bunny Goes on a Trip. Bunny Has a Baby Sister.*” Myra shook her head at their ignorance. “It’s literature for toddlers! It deals with life’s issues in a way they will understand and respond to.” She was looking as proud as if Bunny were her own creation. “The twins’ absolute favorite is *Bunny Has a Boo-Boo.*”

Inge burst out laughing. “They should totally make a grown-up version!” She hollered. “*Bunny Has a Really Bad Hangover.*”

Alice smirked. “*Bunny Fakes an Orgasm.*”

“Thank you guys,” Myra said, casting them an angry look, “for ruining that for me. I will never look at Bunny the same way again.”

Cara still hadn’t spoken. She was dumbfounded.

“But is this Jude the same person as Cara’s Jude?” Inge asked.

“We can find that out right now.” Myra picked her giant purse off the floor, groping about inside. “If I’m not mistaken, I happen to have here...” To everybody’s surprise, she presented a children’s book with a giant, white rabbit on the cover. “Ta-dah.”

“You carry those with you even when the kids aren’t around?” Alice looked at the book in disgust.

“Sure,” Myra said. “Being a mom isn’t like a nine-to-five job, you know. It’s a round-the-clock commitment.” She pointed to the purse. “I’m sure I have a bib in there somewhere. And a pacifier. And a stuffed giraffe.”

“Honestly.” Alice stole a look at her own Birkin bag. “I don’t know how you can live like that.”

“Gimme.” Inge yanked the book from Myra’s hand. She turned it over and found what she was looking for. A picture of the author.

“Wow,” she said. “She *is* hot.”

Cara was afraid to look. She wanted to think of Jude only in private, not share her like this. But her eyes strayed, and before she knew it, Inge was pushing the book in her face.

“Is it her?” she said. “Was Santa quite so...Mediterranean looking?”

Cara stared at the picture, realizing that it was impossible to tell, without the Santa outfit, if the dark-haired, olive-skinned woman in the picture was the one she'd been arguing with all those weeks ago. Whether she was or not, there was every reason to keep staring at her photo as long as she could. Cara smirked. Maybe she should ask Myra if she could take the book home. After all, what better way to go off to dreamland than reading a good story?

“What's that look?” Inge asked suspiciously. “It's her, isn't it?”

Cara shook her head. “I honestly don't know,” she said, handing the book back to Myra.

“You don't know?” Inge's head nearly fell to the table. “How can you not know?”

“I only saw her for a minute, okay?” Cara said defensively. “She was dressed in a Santa suit, with a beard and a mustache, fake eyebrows, a hat, white gloves, and a cushion strapped to her stomach—the only real part of her that was actually visible were her eyes.”

“Also,” Alice said, sounding slightly bored, “what does it matter if she's the same woman or not?”

“Cara needs closure,” Inge said simply.

“Okay!” Alice banged her fist on the table. “Enough now! I have been extremely patient with you people. You are my beloved almost-sisters, and I was confident that you were bound to see the light *sometime*, but I guess I was wrong.”

Cara frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I have a question,” Alice said. “Or rather, a riddle. Picture four women—young, urban, *educated* women. They are having lunch at what is considered to be a reasonably upscale restaurant in the city. They get to talking. They want some information. They spend hours debating their issue, they stare at a picture on a cardboard children’s book, endlessly.” She lifted her hand in the air. “Now, here’s my question. And mind you, we’re talking the twenty-first century here, not the nineteenth. What inexhaustible source of information are these friends forgetting to consult?”

“The...uh...Internet?” Cara said.

“Yes, the Internet!” Alice hit the table again. “For God’s sake, Google the damn girl already!”

“Good point,” Cara admitted.

“And welcome to our digital abode,” said Alice, bringing out her phone, “my dear Neanderthals.” She took a minute to enter the name. “Here.” She looked smug as she handed the phone to Cara.

Inge leaned over to look at the tiny screen. “Wow,” she said. “There’s like a million hits.”

“Told you she was famous,” said Myra.

Cara opened the writer’s official website.

“Look at her bio page,” said Inge. “Maybe there’s something there about her personal life.”

“She has a partner,” Myra said.

“A *partner*?” said Inge. “Is that not the closeted lesbian’s word for girlfriend?”

“Ms. Donovan lives,” read Cara from the screen, “in the Hollywood Hills with her longtime partner and their two dogs.”

“Hollywood Hills?” Alice said. “So what’s she doing in our little country by the sea?”

“She lives here now,” Myra said. “She traveled to the Netherlands to meet her European fan base and then a year or so later she moved here. Well, half moved here. She spends a few months of the year in California.”

“So why Holland? Why Amsterdam? Why not Paris? Or London?”

“Because,” Myra said, “she fell in love. That’s why.”

Cara stared at her. “In love? Who did she fall in love with?”

“With all of us!” Myra stuck her nose up in the air. “She *adores* us. She adores our countryside and our sea. She loves our canals and our windmills. Most of all, she loves our quaint, yellow light when the sun sets. She says it makes her want to take up painting.”

Cara grabbed her sister’s arm. “Myra,” she said, “what the hell? Do you know her? Like personally?”

Myra shrugged. “Sadly, no. I just read up on her. And I YouTubed her to death for a while, to be honest. There’s something about her that makes me wonderfully drowsy, as she talks in that cute American accent of hers about kids and being an artist and what it’s like to live in two different worlds. She’s...what’s the word...*soothing*. Jude Donovan puts me to sleep the way her books do my kids.”

“So what about the partner?” Cara wanted to hold Myra upside down and shake the information out of her.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Myra said. “I guess she brought him with her when she moved here. That would seem logical. Then again, maybe she left him behind in the Hollywood Hills. She doesn’t talk about personal stuff much.”

“So you have all this completely irrelevant information about her, but you don’t know if she’s gay?” Inge said.

“Why would I? How was *I* supposed to know my baby sister would get the hots for her?”

“I thought the word partner was used mostly by forty-year-old women who are uncomfortable using the term boyfriend,” said Alice.

“Nonsense,” Inge said. “She’s definitely gay.” She took the phone from Cara and looked at the photo gallery again. “I totally see it now.”

“How can you see something like that?” Alice asked. “I can never tell, not unless they have crew cuts and wear flannel shirts.” She paused. “And keys on chains. I nearly fell off my chair when Arend told me about Cara. How could she be...you know? The way she looks?”

“Why?” Cara said. “Because I’m blond?”

“Well...no.” Alice shrugged. “You know very well what I mean. It’s the way you carry your blondness—it’s those damp tendrils of hair around your ears, your subtle makeup, your long-leggedness. It’s that whole delicate, feminine, chiffon vibe you send out.”

“Chiffon vibe?” Inge turned to Alice. “What the hell—“

“First of all,” Cara said, “thank you, I think. Second of all, you guys are a bunch of horrible bigots, and finally, it makes no difference what she is. She could have a thing with Bunny himself for all I care.”

“Bunny is a girl,” Myra said to nobody in particular.

Inge turned to Cara. “Aren’t you curious?”

“I thought I was responsible for getting her fired,” Cara said. “For rendering her homeless and starving. Now that I know she’s famous and filthy rich, I can stop worrying about that. I’m letting it go. Closure has been had.” She handed the phone back to Alice. “Now let’s talk about something else.”

“Right.” Myra got up. “Something else indeed. I need to use the restroom.” She looked at Cara. “Come with me, okay?”

“That always weirds me out,” Alice said, “women going to the bathroom together.” Inge shrugged, picked up her knife, stuck it in a slice of brie, and put it in her mouth.

Once they were in the restroom, looking at their faces in the mirror above the sink, Myra turned to Cara. “Look,” she said. “I don’t know what the hell is going on with you and Jude Donovan, but if you really want to know who she is, you can find her at De Paddestoel tomorrow—the children’s bookstore. You know where it is, right? It has this wildly decorated window full of balloons and garlands and stuffed animals.”

Cara nodded. “What’s she doing there?”

“Duh! She’s promoting her new book.”

“Don’t tell me.” Cara cocked her head. “Is it...*Bunny Solves a Murder?*”

“Actually,” Myra said, “it’s *Bunny Finds a Friend.*”

Cara didn’t know what to say to that.

“The store opens at four. I didn’t want to tell you in front of them.” Myra nudged toward the door. “Inge seems to be coming on a little strong today.”

“Will you be there?” Cara pointed to Myra’s bulging belly. “Considering you’re the chief producer of Ms. Donovan’s fan base?”

Myra shook her head. “We can’t fit it into our schedule. Saturdays are a bit crazy. In fact, the whole day is one long rush hour.”

“I see,” said Cara.

“Make no mistakes about this, Cara.” Myra wiggled her finger in Cara’s face. “This woman is like a God to anybody under the age of six.”

She was early, but even so, there was a line waiting, outside the children's bookstore, that meandered all the way down to the Spiegelgracht. There were dozens of kids, screaming, holding Bunny books. They carried bags that no doubt contained drawings and papier-mâché rabbits for the person Myra had referred to as their God.

From the end of the line, the bookstore was nowhere near visible. Cara's heart sank. How long would she have to wait before she was inside? And how would they even be able to fit all these people into the store? It didn't seem that large from the outside—long but narrow. She left the queue and walked in the direction of the bookstore until she was facing it from across the street. She stood for a while, staring at the Bunny-themed window and the cardboard cutouts of Jude Donovan's lovely face. It was pretty impressive. But now what? She wasn't going to spend her day standing in line here. And even if she did, wouldn't it be weird that she was there alone? Shouldn't she have borrowed one of Myra's kids?

Maybe she could wait outside the store until later, she considered, hoping to meet Jude as she came out with a big fat check in her hand. She felt ridiculous when she remembered how worried she had been about Jude starving after being fired from her gig. She hadn't been fired, of course—her performance had probably been a one-time thing. She might have made a tour, visiting random malls throughout the country. A present to her doting audience, to the parents of her fans, who knew, but had to keep secret, that their kid had actually sat on Jude Donovan's lap without even knowing it.

She saw one of her coworkers from the pizza place whizzing by on his bike. He waved, and a thought struck her. She should distinguish herself from the common people somehow. She should gain access to the store by *delivering* something. Something without which Ms. Donovan's performance was going to end in disaster. She thought long and hard—what was it that any reading for children couldn't do without? Children, naturally. A bomb threat? She dismissed this, for obvious reasons. She started pacing up and down the sidewalk, then stopped to think, leaning against a giant, plastic ice cream cone outside a snackbar. She stared at the little bookshop across the wide street, the noise of the traffic washing over her. She realized that she wasn't exactly the world's most inventive person. All she could think of was actually delivering a pizza. But she didn't even know whether the slender Jude ever ate pizza. Maybe she lived on green tea and soybeans. If only she had Alice's phone now, so she could consult the bio page to see if it said anything about her diet.

She considered that she might be going insane. She knew that somewhere in her conscious mind, the question why she was so desperate to meet Jude Donovan was demanding to be answered, but she chose, for now, to ignore this.

Precious time was being wasted. She'd simply have to risk it.

She ran to catch a tram.