

THE RESCUE AFTER CHRISTMAS: A *Sit, Stay, Love* Christmas Story

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Chapter One

By the time Sera Madden spotted the red and silver Christmas tinsel tangled around her ankles, it was too late.

‘Sera!’ a deep voice boomed.

‘I’m fine,’ she muttered, now face down in the grass.

Strong pairs of hands were suddenly on her arms, first her left, then her right, then she was briefly airborne before she found herself back on her feet.

‘Are you okay?’ Ethan asked from one side, urgency in his voice.

‘That was hilarious,’ Toby said from the other side, laughing. ‘You just faceplanted.’

‘Thank you, *Ethan*, I’m fine,’ she said to Ethan while glaring at Toby. ‘Herriot, *you* could be a little more sympathetic.’

‘But you should have seen it, Ser.’ Toby imitated her fall, complete with arm movements and sound effects. She whacked him on his stomach and he caught her wrist and yanked her towards him. She landed with a soft *thwomp* against his solid chest.

‘Do I need to kiss anything better?’ he asked, sweeping an auburn strand from her face and dabbing a smudge of dirt from the tip of her nose. His milk-chocolate eyes shone and one brow lifted. ‘Like, did you hurt your lips?’

‘Yes, I injured them terribly.’

He smiled at her in the way he always did, which made the whole world seem perfect and right, and then he was kissing her and she was melting into him and Ethan was mumbling something about public displays of affection as he stepped away.

Toby dusted one more kiss across her lips, then crouched to pull the sparkly booby-trap from around her ankles. ‘You need to be more careful. How’s it going to look if you have a black-eye in your photo today?’

She leaned on him, one hand gripping his broad shoulder for support. ‘I don’t know, how will it look if you have one?’

Toby gazed up from under floppy curls, a grin stretching across his face.

It was photo day for the annual Rose’s Rescue fundraising calendar and the place was utter chaos. The dogs and cats were all washed and brushed, dressed in bows and ties and bandanas. Some were wearing Santa hats, others wore reindeer ears and Sera’s sheep was decked out as an elf. The Rose’s Rescue shelter team were all on hand to help the disorderly pack to sit, stay and pose, and the air was alive with barks and laughter.

That year, Sera had the brilliant idea of asking Ethan to be the calendar's main attraction, knowing the famed actor's presence would not only bring in a lot more sales but also a lot more publicity. But ever since the success of his movie, *Sit, Stay, Love*, his availability was limited and it had been hard to pin him down, which meant everything was running horribly late, adding to the mayhem of the day. But with record pre-orders it was looking as if the calendar would be a massive success and though it wouldn't quite make it under the tree for Christmas, it should get to the customers in time for New Year's resolutions.

But Ethan wasn't the only handsome man modelling for Sera that year. To her utter astonishment, Toby had put his hand up to feature in the calendar, saying something about a vet making more sense than a movie star. But really, the minute he'd heard that Ethan was involved, she couldn't have stopped him even if she'd wanted to. Which she didn't. So his almost-as-handsome-as-Ethan's face would be gracing March, August and of course, December. It was kind of cute that he still got a little jealous over Ethan, even though Sera had told him a million – possibly a trillion – times that he shouldn't. Sera's heart belonged to Toby one hundred percent, regardless of how long it had taken her to figure that out.

Buffy tore past Sera and Toby, a Santa hat clamped tight in her jaws, with Ethan following, his long legs pumping as he sprinted after the dog.

'Buffy,' he hollered. 'That's not yours!'

Toby straightened up, his gaze following Ethan and the joyful staffy-cross as they charged down the grassy slope then he shrugged and joined the chase.

Sera shook her head as she watched the two men try to corral her wayward dog, the pair of them overly-tall and overly-gorgeous. She adored them both, just in very different ways.

Ethan was her dear friend, pure sunshine and more perfectly groomed than all the dogs in the calendar put together. And Toby, with his unruly curls, constant teasing and unfailing kindness, had her whole heart.

She laughed as Toby skidded, his feet going out from under him, sending him sliding across the grass on his arse.

‘Serves you right, Herriot!’ she hollered. Then she ‘Awwed’, her palm flattening against her heart, as Ethan offered Toby his hand and hauled the other man off the ground.

Ethan James, movie star, and Dr Toby McManus, vet surgeon, would never be best mates. But they tried very hard to be some form of friends, because they knew that made Sera happy.

‘We have all the animals dressed and ready to go,’ Carol said, stepping in beside her boss. She sighed softly. ‘Look at those two. Who would have thought they’d ever get along.’

‘How did I get so lucky?’ Sera said.

‘Because you deserve it.’ Carol rubbed Sera’s shoulder and Sera gave the woman’s arm a gentle squeeze.

‘I guess I better sort this out,’ Sera said. And with one ear-piercing whistle, she had Buffy by her side and the slightly slobbery Santa hat in her hand. She grinned victoriously at the two men traipsing up the hill, both winded from the chase. ‘You two better get dressed,’ she said.

‘You got it,’ Ethan answered with his million-dollar, magazine-cover-gracing smile.

‘Oh God,’ Toby grumbled, wearing his standard *I’m-only-doing-this-because-I love-you* frown.

‘Just a little to the left please, Ethan,’ the photographer said. He was a friend of one of the shelter volunteers and usually took photos of the surf, but his services came for free – a donation to the rescue – so Sera wasn’t going to knock him back.

‘How’s it going, Greg?’ she asked.

‘If you’d have told me a few months ago that I’d be taking photos of Ethan James, I would never have believed you. So it’s going great.’ He showed Sera a couple of photos from the back of his camera and a whispered ‘*Gosh*’ escaped her lips.

‘Right?’ Greg said. ‘I mean, I’m a straight guy, but he’s *very* beautiful. So is the other guy, actually. A vet?’

‘Yep,’ she said.

‘And your boyfriend.’

‘Yep.’ She smiled and looked to Toby, who was trying to adjust the purposefully over-tight Rose’s Rescue polo shirt she’d made him wear.

‘How do you know Ethan?’ Greg asked, setting the camera up for the next shot.

‘We sort of dated.’

‘Oh, wow.’

They both laughed.

‘What’s happening?’ Ethan called out. ‘Is my hair doing something weird?’

Sera walked across the animal pen to Ethan, who was sitting on the grass shining in the way only Ethan could, leaning back against the fence, his long legs stretched out in front and the denim of his jeans moulded around his thighs. He was wearing a Rose’s Rescue T-shirt that fitted him like a second skin, clearly displaying his sculpted body, and his dog, Harry, was tucked into his side wearing a particularly stylish blue bowtie, to match his owners eyes.

Sera needlessly fussed with the front of Ethan's perfect hair.

'You look great,' she said. 'Which you know.' He grinned at her, lopsided and adorable. 'Is that T-shirt cutting off the circulation in your arms?' She nodded to his biceps bulging out from under the hem of the sleeve.

'I've been training a bit more,' he said. 'Can you tell?' His tongue stuck out between his teeth as he smirked up at her. Sera tutted and raised her eyes to the sky. 'There's this action movie I'm hoping to read for, so I want to make sure I'm at peak physical form for it. How am I doing? Am I peaking?' He cocked a brow and smirked again.

'Can you give me a minute,' Greg called. 'I need to change filters.' Sera nodded and dropped onto the grass beside Ethan.

Some days she thought she was becoming immune to Ethan's flirty grins and cheeky looks. Then there were the six other days of the week.

'When are you heading north for your next movie?' she asked.

'Soon. Second week of Jan.'

'So you're home for Christmas?'

'Mm,' he mumbled and scratched Harry's head.

'Are you spending it with your family?'

'Sera, please. They're all going on a cruise and I'm not invited.'

'Oh. Sorry.' Sera had never met Ethan's family, but she knew they were a sore point for him. He didn't get on with his brother, and his mum didn't approve of him acting, no matter how successful he'd become. Sera looked to Toby, leaning against the side of the new kennel block talking to Carol, who would most likely be blushing as all the women who worked with Sera

seemed to do in Toby's presence. Toby's mother had a new boyfriend and was staying in Perth for Christmas, so Sera and Toby were spending Christmas Day with Sera's parents.

'You know,' she said, 'you could come and have Christmas with us at my parent's place. I know they'd love to have you.' Ethan's gaze flicked to Toby.

'Are you serious?' he asked. 'What do you reckon the doc will think about that?'

'Um.' She hesitated just a little. 'He'll be fine.' Looking to Toby again she waved, and he waved back, his head tilting and his brows bunching in confusion. 'I'll let mum know and send you through the details.'

'Are you serious?' Toby asked, or rather grumped. He was standing in Sera's kitchen with a bowl of popcorn tucked in the crook of one arm and two beers clasped in his hands.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I should have checked with your first. But he has no one to spend Christmas with, Herriot. Do you want him to be alone?'

'I don't really care how he spends Christmas.'

'Yes, you do. You like Ethan. A little.' He grunted. 'I've already told mum. She's beside herself. She's making a special trip into the city to go to some artisan cheese shop. She won't stop talking about some kind of brie that's apparently to die for.' Toby just nodded. He'd known Lydia Madden long enough to not even blink when Sera talked about her mother's cheese obsession. 'But I can cancel him, if you want me too.'

'No,' Toby said, dragging out the word. 'Don't cancel him. You should tell your mum Hollywood's become lactose intolerant, though. Just to mess with her.' Sera laughed and

whacked his arm and a handful of popcorn kernels flew into the air, fluttering to the tiled floor where Buffy quickly gobbled them up.

‘Actually, he *is* on a special diet. He’s bulking up to audition for some action movie. Did you notice how much bigger he was?’

‘Nope.’

They moved to Sera’s small lounge room and simultaneously dropped onto the cushions. Toby placed the popcorn and beers on the coffee table and picked up the remote.

‘Do you want to watch the latest Indiana Jones movie?’ he asked.

‘Are we ready to add a new movie into the rotation?’ Sera asked back.

‘I think there’s room for another Raiders movie. We’ve got the other four in the mix.’

‘True. Okay then.’ She pulled her legs up under her and leaned against Toby’s side.

‘You’re not really angry at me for inviting Ethan for Christmas, are you?’ She took a handful of popcorn from the bowl that Toby held out for her.

‘I’m not angry, Ser,’ he said. ‘Maybe a little disappointed you didn’t think to tell me before you told your mum. But I love how much you care for others. Even him. He’s your friend and I guess he’s okay-ish. I’m not buying him a present, though.’

‘What if he buys you one?’

Toby frowned. ‘Chocolates with razor blades in them?’

‘He doesn’t hate you, Herriot.’

‘He’d rather I wasn’t around, anyone can see that.’

‘But you are around, and I’m with you.’ She tilted her head, reached up and placed a long, soft, kiss on his jaw, her heart fluttering at his low moan. ‘I’ll tell him no present, okay? Now stop being an idiot and press play.’

Chapter Two

Ethan admired the cheese platter in the middle of the table, laid out as a spiral with a wedge of brie taking pride of place in the centre.

‘Lydia, you’ve outdone yourself!’ he said. ‘Is that Brie aux Truffles?’

Sera’s mother gasped. ‘It is.’ She beamed and took his arm. ‘Of course *you’d* know that. I had to stop myself from buying an entire wheel. John would have killed me.’

‘Why would I have killed you?’ Sera’s father asked.

‘The cheese, John.’

‘I think we all might die if we ate a wheel of that cheese. Our hearts would stop. How are you Ethan? Did Sera tell you we saw your movie? Lydia enjoyed it, but I preferred that Tom Cruise film. The one with the planes.’

‘Dad!’ Sera chastised her father. ‘Sorry, Ethan. He’s only just discovered action movies.’ She elbowed Toby as he chuckled beside her.

‘It’s okay.’ Ethan said. ‘*Maverick* was pretty good.’

‘Shall we head out to the balcony?’ John waved his arms guiding everyone through the French doors.

Sera and Toby had arrived at her parent's house a couple of hours earlier than Ethan, so that the family could exchange gifts before he arrived – the idea being not to embarrass him. The last thing Sera wanted was for him to feel left out. Her family were excessive when it came to gift giving. Not in value, but in quantity. The pile of presents under the tree invariably made it look as if they were a family of ten instead of a family of three, well, four with Toby. She'd given Ethan strict instructions that he wasn't to bring anything with him, no wine, no chocolates and definitely no presents. She told him they were all just happy to have him there, and he was all they needed.

'Another drink, Toby?' Sera's father asked, offering him a beer.

'Thanks, Mr Madden.'

'Oh Toby, when are you going to stop calling us Mr and Mrs Madden, you're *practically* family.' Lydia gave Sera and Toby a smile that made Sera glower and Toby study his feet. In the awkward silence that followed, Ethan spoke.

'So, um. Yeah. I brought gifts.' Ethan looked at Sera and cringed.

'Ethan. You promised.' Her hands went to her hips.

'I lied.' He ducked back into the house and came back a minute later carrying a large black tote bag with Tom Ford embossed across the front.

'Where did you hide that?' Sera asked.

'Outside. I was praying no one would steal it.'

'Ethan, you didn't need to buy us gifts,' Lydia said, though her face and her voice were filled with glee.

‘I know I didn’t need to, but I wanted to.’ He flashed her one of his movie star smiles, the one with lots of teeth and deep dimples that sank into his cheeks forever. Lydia tutted, but smiled and patted his arm.

‘He’s flirting with your mum,’ Toby muttered to Sera. ‘I think I’m going to puke.’

‘He flirts with everyone. It’s his natural state. Just ignore it.’ She took Toby’s hand and squeezed it tight as she said, ‘Ethan you really shouldn’t have.’

‘Who else am I going to give Christmas presents to? It’s my way of thanking you all for welcoming me into your home and your lives.’

‘He’s laying it on a bit thick isn’t he?’ Toby grumbled. But Sera barely heard him because her heart was beating too loud, swelling and breaking in equal parts for her friend.

Ethan indicated for everyone to sit and, while he remained standing, they all took spots on the cane couches nestled on the balcony. It was early evening, so the sun was yet to set, and in typical Aussie Christmas Day fashion it had been scorching hot and everyone was desperate for the promised cool change to blow through. Families were still out celebrating in the parks and on the small beaches that dotted the harbour, and the laughter of children drifted up from the walkway below.

John ensured everyone’s drink was full, fussing over Lydia and Sera, topping up his daughter’s wine one more time with a ‘There you go Poppet’ before his wife grabbed his arm and pulled him back down to the cushions with a wide-eyed stare that clearly meant ‘Sit!’.

‘Sorry, Ethan,’ John said. ‘The floor is all yours.’

Ethan reached into the tote bag, pulled out a Santa hat and placed it on his head, jiggling the pom-pom. It had a bell that tinkled, and his grin reached all the way to his sky-blue eyes.

‘Right, first Lydia.’ He handed her an envelope-sized green gift box, tied with a large red satin bow.

‘This is beautifully wrapped, Ethan,’ she said admiring the box. ‘Did you—’

‘Absolutely not. My publicist’s assistant did the wrapping for me.’ He smirked, adding a single shoulder shrug.

Lydia carefully untied the ribbon and removed the box lid. She lifted out a small plastic card.

‘Société Fromage?’ she asked and looked up at him.

‘It’s a membership to a private cheese club,’ he said. ‘It’s supposed to be one of the best in Australia. They have regular meetings and you get a monthly cheese box. I hope you like it.’

‘Oh Ethan.’ Lydia smiled widely. ‘It’s cheese. Of course I like it. How perfect.’

‘Little better than the scarf I gave her,’ Toby said under his breath, as Lydia continued to gush. Sera squeezed his hand tighter.

‘She loved that scarf,’ she whispered. ‘She’d love anything you gave to her. She adores you. You know that.’

Toby nodded, his fingers lacing through Sera’s.

‘John, this is for you.’ Ethan said and handed John a similar sized box, blue with a silver bow. John opened it carefully, pulling out another card.

‘The Brews Brothers, isn’t that a movie?’

‘Ah, no, it’s a brewery,’ Ethan explained. ‘I know you like craft beer. This is a voucher for a home brew course. I signed you up for one in February. I hope that’s okay. You can change it if it’s not.’ His brows lifted.

‘It is absolutely okay,’ John said. ‘I’ve always wanted to try home brewing. I can set something up in the garage. Thank you Ethan, this is very thoughtful.’

‘Oh god, dad, you’re not going to blow the place up are you?’ Sera asked. Her father had never been the most practical of men.

‘Not once I’ve done Ethan’s course,’ he said.

Ethan beamed. ‘Two for two. Now, Ms Madden, it’s your turn.’

‘I’m so mad at you,’ Sera said. ‘We weren’t supposed to be doing this and I haven’t got you anything.’ She was also mad at herself. How could she not have bought him a gift? She was going to have to buy him *something*. Maybe a ‘good luck for the new movie’ gift. Or should that be a ‘break-a-leg’ gift? She’d figure it out, but she had to get him something, because there was no way she could let him be the only person not getting a present.

‘I really don’t need anything,’ he said softly, as if reading her mind. ‘Now, stop complaining. Here.’ He shoved a small parcel at her. She huffed as she took it.

Paper covered in puppies wearing reindeer ears wrapped Sera’s present, which was obviously a book. But she still turned it over and over, shaking it once while holding it to her ear.

‘It’s a basketball,’ she said.

‘How did you guess?’ His smile widened.

She very carefully peeled back the sticky tape, and pulled away the paper to reveal an old, worn copy of *All Creatures Great and Small*.

‘Is this—?’

‘It’s a first edition. I remember you saying you liked the book, and that you watched the show with your grandmother, and I know Herriot is your nickname for the doc, so... Look inside.’

She gasped as she opened the cover. ‘Oh my gosh. It’s signed. Look, Herriot!’ Her eyes were saucer-wide as she looked to Toby. He leaned over and nodded.

‘That’s an amazing gift, James,’ he said.

Sera jumped up and smothered Ethan in a hug, kissing him hard on his cheek with a loud squeak.

‘Thank you, Ethan.’ He shrugged again, and she thought she saw an uncharacteristic pink rising in his cheeks.

He cleared his throat as she sat back down, the book clutched to her chest.

‘I’ve got something for you too, Doc.’ He pulled a box from the bag, larger than anyone else’s, and handed it to Toby. Toby took the box, his brow furrowed.

‘It’s heavy,’ he said, with suspicion in his voice. ‘Will a thousand springy snakes bounce out at me?’

‘Dammit. I should have thought of that,’ Ethan said.

Toby glanced at Sera, obviously unsure, and she nodded for him to open it. He pulled back the paper to reveal a wooden case.

‘What is it?’ Sera asked. She shuffled a little closer, her hand automatically resting on his thigh.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, as he carefully flipped up the two bronze clasps on the front and lifted the lid. He dropped back against the cushions. ‘Holy shit. Is this a Humphrey’s Veterinary box?’

‘I hope so. The guy online said it was.’ Ethan moved over to Toby and stood above him. ‘It’s got the original booklet which dates the box to 1887.’ He pointed at the booklet as if Toby might have missed it. ‘So I wouldn’t use anything still in those bottles.’

‘Is it a big deal?’ Sera asked, looking from Toby to Ethan and back to Toby again. He was still staring at the box, his jaw slack as he blinked over and over. ‘Herriot?’ she asked again.

‘Yeah. I ah...’ He looked up at Ethan. ‘You shouldn’t have. It’s too much, mate.’

‘Nah it’s not. I hope you’ve got somewhere in your surgery you can display it.’

‘Definitely.’ Toby carefully closed the box again, nursing it on his knees. Then he gently wrapped the paper back around it.

‘I might put it inside for safety,’ he said. ‘And I’ve got something for you, too.’

Sera blinked. Toby had bought something for Ethan? When did he buy something for Ethan? He hadn’t mentioned anything to her.

Oh god, don’t let it be a gag gift.

Her fists scrunched on her lap. She had an image of Ethan pulling out a T-shirt with Toby’s face on it. Or the actual thousand springy snakes.

Toby returned carrying a red paper gift bag.

‘It’s not wrapped quite as well as yours,’ he said as he handed Ethan the present.

The two men stood side-by-side, both looking so awkward it practically screamed from their every pore.

Toby sat down again and Sera shuffled closer. ‘What did you buy him?’ she whispered. ‘It’s not something mean, is it?’ Toby’s eyes snapped to her.

‘Thanks for the faith in me, Ser. Fuck.’ A frown darkened his face.

‘Sorry, it’s just—’

‘Should I open it now?’ Ethan asked, his gaze was darting from Toby to Sera.

‘Yeah, mate.’ Toby said. ‘Go ahead.’

Ethan pulled a book from the bag. His brows shot up. Then he nodded, a smile widening across his lips.

‘I don’t know if it’s any good,’ Toby said. ‘But I had a quick flick through and it looked solid. Ser told me your next movie has three dogs, and I know dogs aren’t really your thing so I thought it might come in handy.’

‘It will,’ Ethan said. ‘Thanks Doc, that was...thoughtful of you.’

‘You sound surprised,’ Toby said.

‘Well...’ Ethan chuckled. He turned his gift around to show everyone. The book was titled, *Good Human, Good Dog: Tips for the Nervous Owner*.

Chapter Three

The turkey was demolished, the salad eaten and everyone was over-full and wearing coloured paper Christmas hats.

‘What do you get when you cross Santa with a duck?’ Sera’s father asked. His cheeks were rosy from wine and he had the last of the Christmas bon-bon jokes clutched in his hand.

‘What, dear?’ Sera’s mother asked with the patience of a woman who had tolerated many bad jokes from her husband over the years.

‘A Christmas Quacker!’ John laughed, his hat tilting. ‘Come on Lydia, you have to admit that was a good one.’

‘No one would believe you are a highly articulate, well-read journalist right now, dear.’ Lydia said. Sera’s father chuckled some more, then kissed his wife on the cheek.

‘I’ll start clearing up,’ Ethan said and went to stand, but Lydia wrapped her hand around his wrist and stopped him.

‘You will do no such thing. You are our guest and I want to hear all about your new movie. Sera and Toby can clear up.’

‘Technically, we’re guests too, Mum,’ Sera said as she stood and collected Ethan’s plate. She nudged Toby to help her. He’d been a little grumpy since the whole gift giving thing on the balcony. He’d spent most of dinner ignoring her and chatting to her dad about an extension he was considering for his surgery and what it would take to get it through council. She’d been aware of him occasionally glancing in their direction while her and her mum listened to Ethan talking about his travels around the world, and at one point she’d taken his hand and squeezed it tight, because he seemed like he needed it. And even though he still didn’t speak to her, his warm hand stayed wrapped around hers where it rested on his solid thigh.

‘Are you still mad at me for before and the present thing?’ she asked as she placed a bowl into the dishwasher. They were alone in the kitchen, an entire floor below the dinner party.

‘I’m not mad at you,’ Toby said, rinsing a plate and handing it to her. ‘Just a little hurt that you’d be surprised I would be nice to Mr Hollywood in there.’

‘I wasn’t surprised.’

‘Yes, you were. You asked if I got him a mean gift. Did you think I’d embarrass him in front of everyone?’ He leaned against the kitchen counter; his arms crossed over his chest.

‘When am I ever not nice to the guy.’

‘There was that time you punched him in the face.’

‘Hey, I was drunk, and he was being a dick, and that was a while ago.’ He uncrossed his arms with a sigh, slid his hands around her waist and drew her to him.

‘I’m trying my hardest to be okay with him making heart-eyes at you every five minutes. Because I know you’re with me. I never doubt you. But I get the feeling he’s hoping he’ll turn up one day and you’ll have changed your mind about him and me and which one of us you chose. I don’t have to like that he’s so obviously still in love with you. But I’m trying.’

Sera scrunched her mouth to the side. ‘I know you are, and I love you for it and for everything else about you. Except maybe how you never hang up your towel.’ She poked him, then she pushed up onto her tip-toes and gently kissed him. ‘And I’m sorry for upsetting you. You know I think you’re the kindest man in the world.’

‘That might be a bit of an exaggeration.’

‘True.’

‘Hey.’ He pressed his lips to her hair and she could feel him smiling. ‘Let’s finish these dishes and go eat your mother’s cheese.’

Sera’s phone rang in her back pocket and she rested her full weight against Toby as she reached around and dug it out.

‘Rose’s Rescue,’ she said. A woman’s voice began to spill out panicked words. ‘It’s okay. Slow down,’ Sera stepped back and looked up at Toby as she listened to the person on the other end of the phone. He frowned, looking down at her, his hands still grasping her waist. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll find her,’ she promised the caller. ‘Can you text me where you are. I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

‘What’s happening?’ he asked.

‘A pregnant cat got out. She was making all the signs of going into labour, and now she’s somewhere under the house. The woman is a senior, she can’t get under there and she said there’s no one else she can call. Shit. Neither of us brought a car, and both of us have had too much to drink to be driving anyway.’

‘What’s going on?’ Ethan asked from the doorway. He was leaning against the jamb, his solid arms wrapped across his solid chest and his paper hat at a jaunty angle.

‘Rescue emergency,’ Sera said. ‘I’m going to have to call around and see if any of the team can help.’

‘I can drive you,’ Ethan said. ‘I haven’t been drinking.’ He looked at Toby. ‘I’m in training.’

‘Yeah mate, Sera told me.’ Sera could hear the roll in his eyes.

‘Anyway, why don’t I take you?’ Ethan pushed off the door, pulled his keys from his back pocket and rattled them.

‘Are you sure?’ Sera asked. ‘We could be a while.’

‘Of course I’m sure. When am I not up for an adventure?’ He grinned, dazzling and dimple popping.

‘I’ll come too.’ Toby stepped closer to Sera, his hand going to the small of her back.

Sera shook her head. ‘Mum’s going to be mad enough without all of us going. You stay and smooth things over, Ethan and I can handle this.’

‘No.’ Toby said it with such gusto, Sera blinked up at him in surprise. ‘I’m coming.’ He looked to Ethan. ‘Rescues can get pretty messy.’

‘I’ve helped Sera on a rescue before,’ Ethan said, snatching the paper hat off his head. ‘Puppies in the bush. We’ve got this covered, dude.’

‘I’m coming, mate. Unless you’ve suddenly become a vet, Sera will need *me*.’

The men were facing each other now, tall as church steeples, shoulders squared, scruff-covered jaws set and chests puffed. It was both the most ridiculous and the hottest thing Sera had ever seen.

‘What on earth is going on?’ Lydia asked as she joined the testosterone-soaked party in the kitchen.

Just two guys swinging their dicks, Sera wanted to say. ‘Rescue emergency, mum,’ is what she said. ‘Ethan is going to drive us.’ She moved closer to Toby and took his hand. She wouldn’t leave him sitting with her parents gnashing his teeth while she went off with Ethan. That wasn’t fair on him. He *was* trying, and she didn’t want to make it any harder for him than she already had.

‘Nonsense,’ Lydia said. ‘You don’t all have to go. Ethan, you stay here with us.’

‘Sorry, Lydia. I’m the designated driver.’

‘Then, Toby, you stay.’ Lydia looked desperate.

‘I need Toby with me, mum,’ Sera said.

‘Sorry Mrs— ah Lydia,’ Toby added.

‘But my cheese platter!’ Lydia’s face crumbled in utter devastation.

Sera stepped forward, still gripping Toby’s hand, and kissed her mother’s cheek. ‘How about Toby and I come back tomorrow evening and we can enjoy your cheese platter on the balcony. How’s that sound?’ Lydia nodded forlornly. It was a sacrifice. For Sera and Toby Boxing Day was traditionally a day of eating junk food and nursing a hangover while snoozing through a *Die Hard* marathon.

‘Yippee-Ki-Yay mother—’

‘Shh.’ Sera silenced Toby’s muttering with an elbow to his ribs.

Chapter Four

Sera shone a torch under the house.

‘Still no sign,’ she said to Mrs Parker, who stood beside her. The older woman was wearing a light blue cotton dressing gown with fluffy slides on her feet, her white hair neatly curled as if she’d recently been to the hairdresser.

‘I thought I heard something earlier,’ she said. ‘But now I’m not sure.’

Sera straightened up. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll find her.’ She glanced to Toby and Ethan who were both standing with their arms across their chests, looking like a couple of surly oak trees.

‘Looks like I’m going under,’ she said.

‘I’ll go,’ Toby said. ‘If she’s having kittens, it’s probably best I’m there.’

‘I’ll join you,’ Ethan said, stepping forward.

‘Will you fit?’ Toby asked. ‘I mean, you’ve been working out.’

Ethan’s lips curved into a tight smile. ‘I never knew you were so funny, Doc.’

‘A-hem.’ Sera cleared her throat loudly. ‘If you too are quite finished, I’d like to remind you that there’s a cat under the house in labour.’

Toby took the torch from Sera’s hands, one corner of his mouth lifting.

‘Okay, okay,’ he said. He gave her a kiss, lowered himself to the ground with a grunt and wiggled under the floorboards of the deck.

Ethan scratched his head as he watched Toby disappear.

‘You don’t have to go under there,’ Sera said.

‘I kind of feel like I do now.’ He rolled his eyes as if to say, ‘Yeah I know I’m an idiot.’

‘Well, knock yourself out.’

‘There’s a fair chance of that. I think the doc was right, it’s going to be a tight squeeze.’ He smiled and accepted another torch from Mrs Parker, got down on the ground and very slowly shimmied beneath the house.

‘It’s going to be fine, Mrs Parker,’ Sera said moving in beside the woman, hoping she sounded confident. She wasn’t as much worried about the cat as she was the two men killing each other. ‘Toby is a vet. So he’ll be able to help her.’

‘And the other one is that movie star isn’t he?’

‘Yes, that’s Ethan James.’

‘I thought I recognised him. And why is he under my house?’

‘That is an excellent question.’ Sera huffed. ‘Toby is my boyfriend. Ethan is my friend, well, sort of ex-boyfriend...and ah...’

‘I see,’ the woman said, clearly seeing.

‘Yeah.’ Sera sighed. ‘Anyway... How was your Christmas, Mrs Parker, apart from the cat?’

‘Apart from the cat, it’s been quite pleasant, actually. My family are out of town so I spent the day with a friend who is in hospital. Hip replacement. Been there, done that.’

Sera nodded as her phone rang. 'Excuse me,' she said, frowning at Toby's name on the screen. 'Why are you calling me,' she whispered, fearing the worst.

'Because it's easier than getting out from under here to talk to you. I found the cat; she's having her kittens. James has got one wrapped in his shirt. Can you join us with some towels?'

Using the torch from her phone and with three of Mrs Parker's towels jammed in her armpit, Sera clambered under the house.

'We're up the back,' Toby called, obviously seeing her light. A torch flickered for her to follow.

She wormed across the ground using her elbows and knees, wincing at the gravel digging into her. This wasn't her first under-house cat emergency, but why did there always have to be gravel? A pebble pressed into her elbow, hitting her not at all funny funny-bone, and she hissed.

Through her watering eyes she saw the two men, lying on their bellies, their long legs stretched out behind them.

'What's happening?' she asked, as she squeezed in-between their bulky forms. She handed Toby a towel, and he carefully lifted the mother cat and placed her onto it.

'Well, somehow James has managed to remove his shirt,' Toby said, with a shake of his head.

Sera moved her beam of light onto Ethan without thinking.

'You told me to put the kitten in my shirt, dude,' Ethan objected.

'You could have just used a corner,' Toby answered a look of utter bewilderment on his face.

'I thought we were talking multiple kittens,' Ethan said back.

‘We are. I think another one is about to come out. I had a feel of her belly, there’s maybe another three or four in there.’

Ethan shot Toby an expression as if to say, ‘Then what’s the problem?’

‘Thank goodness it’s not twelve or something,’ Sera muttered, her eyes still on the half-naked Ethan. He really had been working out. His shoulders were huge, muscles cording over the bones, and his back was a series of well-toned bumps narrowing down to the rise above his jeans waistband where his butt started—two perfect back dimples leading the way. It took Toby podding her with his elbow for her to realise she was shining her torch on Ethan and not on the cat.

‘You okay there?’ Toby asked, brows raised. ‘Oop, here we go, she’s straining.’ He shuffled around a little so he could get a better view of the mother cat.

‘She’s not going to like us being here,’ Sera said moving closer to Toby.

‘Why not?’ Ethan asked.

‘Cat’s prefer to do this in private,’ Toby said. ‘But nothing about this situation is exactly ideal, and if I have to put up with it, so does she.’

They’d been lying under the house for over an hour when Toby said, ‘I think that might be it.’ They’d all been busy keeping the kittens warm and out of the dirt as the mother gave birth to her five tiny babies.

‘I’m going to wrap the mum in a towel and take her out,’ Toby said. ‘Hopefully she won’t bite me. You two manage the kittens, okay?’

Sera nodded, and she heard Ethan whisper ‘Okay’ with a whole lot of breath.

The three rescuers wiggled backwards across the rough ground, each with precious cargo wrapped in their arms. Toby was out first, handing off the mother cat to Mrs Parker. He took the kittens from Sera as she emerged and helped her up, then from Ethan, helping him up, too.

‘Mrs Parker,’ Toby said. ‘I’d like to take your cat and her kittens back to my surgery if that’s alright with you, just to make sure everything’s okay. That was not the best place for her to be bringing a family into the world.’

‘Thank you,’ Mrs Parker said. ‘I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you all coming here on Christmas.’

‘You had your very own Christmas miracle, Mrs P.’ Ethan grinned, his T-shirt clenched in his fist, covered in newborn kitten goo. ‘Is there a star over this manger?’

Mrs Parker tittered, and asked, ‘Would you mind if I took a photo with you, Ethan? My daughter-in-law is a fan.’

‘Sure thing. Let me just put my T-shirt—’

‘I wouldn’t bother,’ the woman said quickly, giving Ethan a wink.

‘Oh.’ He flicked Sera and Toby a slightly stunned look, then shrugged and with a broad smile said, ‘Okay then.’

Sera clamped her lips shut, biting back a laugh as she leaned against Toby.

Mrs Parker pulled her phone from her robe pocket and handed it to Ethan, who swung an arm around her shoulder, gently pulling her into him, resting his head against hers as he took the photo.

‘I guess he does look as if he’s been working out,’ Toby whispered in Sera’s ear. ‘But don’t you dare tell him that I noticed.’

When they got to the surgery and unloaded the kittens from the car into a carrier, Toby stretched out his hand for Ethan to shake. 'James,' he said.

'Doc,' Ethan said in return. 'That was pretty cool, what you did tonight. First time I've ever seen anything giving birth in the flesh. If I ever have to play a vet on screen, I'm booking you as my consultant.'

Toby chuckled. 'Thanks for your help. It was good to have another set of hands. And thanks for the present, that was very generous and thoughtful. Good luck with the movie.' He smiled down at Sera, kissed the top of her head, then disappeared through the surgery door.

'I guess he's alright,' Ethan said. He grinned at Sera. 'Thanks for inviting me tonight. It was the best and the weirdest Christmas I've ever had. Apologise to your mum for me will you? Don't tell her I was never going to eat any of that truffle brie.' He patted his flat plane of a stomach. 'Fat content's too high.'

'Will I see you before you head up north?'

'Definitely. You can't get rid of me that easy.' He gifted her one of his bazillion gorgeous smiles, and she reached up and softly kissed his cheek. His eyes lingered on hers, sparkling blue, then he nodded towards the house. 'You better go inside to your...' His teeth dragged across his bottom lip. 'Boyfriend. I'll see you next week sometime. I need to talk to you about Harry, he keeps chewing and burying things.' He gave her a quick hug, climbed into his shiny red Audi and roared away.

Sera found Toby in his house adjacent to the surgery with his eyes closed and his head tilted back, resting on the couch cushions.

'Are the mamma and kittens okay?' she asked.

'Mm-hm. Is Hollywood gone?' His eyes were still shut.

‘Yep. I’ll probably see him next week, before he heads off to shoot his new movie.’

Toby opened his eyes and rolled his head towards her. ‘Was I a dickhead today?’

‘No. I think that might have been me. You were kind of a saint.’

Toby grinned and held his fingers over his head like a halo. Sera’s eyelashes fluttered towards the ceiling, making him laugh.

‘You weren’t a dickhead, Ser,’ he said. ‘I know everything you do is coming straight from the heart, but you don’t always make it easy for me when it comes to James.’

‘I know I don’t and I’m so sorry, Herriot. But it’s only you though, you know that right?’

He nodded. ‘I know. I’m not sure the movie star has figured that out yet.’

‘I get that I’m asking a lot of you to be friendly with Ethan,’ she said. ‘It’s just, I don’t think he has anyone, can you understand that?’

‘Totally. No surprise there.’ Toby smirked as Sera’s brows arched and her hands went to her hips. ‘You know I’d do anything for you,’ he said, softly. ‘Even if that means being friends-ish with your ex.’ He sighed, his eyes darkening as he studied her. ‘Now get over here. I need to kiss you.’

Sera climbed on top of him, her thighs along either side of his, and lowered herself down onto his lap, sliding back and forth once, then twice. He growled at the friction, then leaned up and nipped her chin, his hands pressed tight against her back. She shifted again with one more slide, just because she liked the sound he made.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘We are going to bed.’

‘I thought you needed to kiss me.’

‘I do, but now thanks to your wiggling I also need to fuck you.’ She laughed, and he groaned, his thighs shaking as he pushed up off the couch, his hands sliding under her butt to lift her with him.

‘Have you been secretly working out too?’ she asked, her mouth pressed to the side of his throat, her ankles hooked behind his back.

‘Obviously not, or you wouldn’t seem so heavy.’

‘Hey! Ugh, I just remembered we’ve got to go back to my parents’ place tomorrow.’

‘Yep. But that’s tomorrow’s problem.’ He stumbled up the hall, kicked open his bedroom door and unceremoniously dumped Sera onto his bed.

She giggled as she bounced, the sound quickly turning into a gasp as he whipped his T-shirt over his head, unbuttoned his jeans, slid them down his long legs and stepped out of them. He stood before her in his boxer briefs.

She stared at him, blinking, then laughed. He was wearing Christmas underwear that vaguely resembled Santa’s trousers, red, short and tight, with white cuffs around the thighs and a black waistband that looked like a belt, sitting low on his slim hips.

‘Have you had those on all day?’ she asked.

‘Yep.’ He laughed. ‘I’ve been dying to show you.’

‘Is Santa happy to see me or is that my present in your pants?’ She grinned and nodded at the well-defined bulge in the front of his briefs. His laugh died on his lips, and she swore she could see his pupils blow out right in front of her.

‘Well, that depends.’ His voice was a throaty growl.

‘On what?’ Her heart pounded and her blood whooshed and every part of her tingled... and he hadn’t even touched her yet.

‘On whether you’ve been naughty or nice.’ He flicked his brows up and down, and Sera actually moaned. She wiggled forward, hooked her finger in the waistband of his pants, pulling it back, and let it go with a *snap*.

‘But being naughty *is* nice, right?’ She could barely get the words out without swallowing back a gulp.

‘Very...very...nice,’ he said.

‘Well then Herriot, get over here and let me unwrap you.’

Chapter Five

Sera lugged a box into the Rose's Rescue reception area and hefted it onto the desk with a 'Ta-da!'

Carol was busy updating the computer with information on their latest resident, a red kelpie-cross Toby had christened Elmo for her colour.

'Look,' Sera said. 'It's the box of Christmas calendars for the staff. Finally.'

They'd only get to enjoy a few days of January – a cat named Oscar because he was such a grouch – but she wasn't complaining. They'd had to organise a second, then a third print run of the calendar because orders were so high. Ethan's publicist, Lena, had made sure that the media knew that Ethan was starring in a charity calendar holding dogs, cats, puppies and kittens all while wearing a very, very tight T-shirt, and sales had gone through the roof. As had donations. But as far as Sera was concerned, the best thing to come out of all the publicity was that one of the shows that featured the calendar had also picked up on Toby's natural beauty, and Herriot had quickly become known as 'The Hot Vet.' Much to his horror. His client numbers soared and people had been bringing in their calendar for him to sign. He grumbled about it, but Sera got the feeling that he secretly enjoyed stealing a little bit of Ethan's thunder.

She pulled a calendar from the box, carefully unwrapped it from its plastic, and flipped to December, the only month featuring the two men together. She sighed, her shoulders lifting and falling wistfully. Ethan and Toby leaning against the fence with Harry and Buffy at their feet was quite a sight. Ethan standing sideways, hands shoved into his pockets, his chest practically touching Toby's shoulder and his face turned towards the camera, his smile and dimples popping, and Toby front on, arms folded across his chest and his feet crossed at the ankles, his hair flopping in his eyes, and the softest of smiles on his lips. The pair of them were spectacular, even in their Santa hats.

Carol peaked over Sera's shoulder.

'Gosh,' she said.

'I know,' Sera said.

'Dr McManus could be a movie star, too. He's just as good looking as Ethan.'

'Better.' Sera turned to Carol and beamed, then flipped the calendar to September. This time it was just Toby, sitting on the ground, his long legs crossed. A scruffy stray named George was in his lap licking at his chin and Toby's eyes were squeezed shut with laughter, his dark curls messy around his face, and his full lips wide over a smile just as stunning as any Ethan had ever tossed her way.

'You're right,' Carol said. 'He is better looking.'

'Who's better looking?' Toby asked from behind them. Buffy came tearing down the hall, her feet skidding on the wooden floor, her tail wagging a million miles an hour. 'You are a rubbish guard dog, Stink.' He dropped to a crouch and gave her a hug and a scratch on the head, then he straightened up with a grunt. 'What are you two looking at?'

Sera turned the calendar around and grinned.

‘Oh God.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘I had a producer call me today, something about a show he wanted me to audition for.’

Sera’s chin dropped. ‘Oh Toby, that’s—’

‘Your other boyfriend’s job.’

She closed the calendar, stepped away from the desk and moved towards him, her arms looping around his neck and her body curving comfortably into his.

‘I only have one boyfriend, and he’s a Hot Vet.’ Toby gave her another eye roll.

Carol wiggled past them, heading for the door. ‘Remember when you two had no idea you were in love?’

‘No,’ Toby said at the same time as Sera said ‘Yes.’ She poked him in the belly.

‘What?’ he asked. ‘I always knew I loved you.’ Sera beamed up at him.

‘I’ll see you two tomorrow,’ Carol said, quickly slipping out the door.

‘Bye,’ they answered, their eyes still locked on each other.

‘I was thinking,’ Sera said. ‘For next year’s calendar you can be Mr December all on your own and wear your Santa boxer briefs. Only your Santa boxer briefs.’ Her brows waggled.

‘But they’re just for you.’

‘Will I be getting Easter boxer briefs?’

‘You might.’

‘With a bunny tail?’ She shimmied her butt.

‘If you’re lucky.’ He gently tapped her wiggling arse. ‘So, what do you want to do tonight?’

‘Pizza and a movie?’ she asked.

‘One of the Jurassics?’

‘Or one of the Aliens?’

‘How about number three.’

‘Three sounds good.’

‘Let me take a shower first,’ he said.

‘Can I come too?’ she asked. She pressed her body hard against him.

‘Do you *need* a shower?’ His eyes darkened as he gazed down at her.

‘Nope.’ She grinned.

‘Then definitely.’ He took her hand as they walked up the hall. ‘So, I’m better looking than Hollywood, huh?’

‘You *did* hear us!’

‘Maybe.’ He chuckled. ‘It’s no surprise though right, I am the Hot Vet.’

‘Yes you are.’

‘You know I’m even hotter in the shower.’

‘Oh yeah? Can you prove that?’

A growl rumbled in Toby’s throat. ‘Yes. Yes I can.’

He lifted Sera into his arms, her legs going to their familiar spot wrapped around his waist, her fingers tangling in his curls and her lips quickly finding the place where they were always meant to be, doing the thing they were always meant to do.

Kissing her best friend.