

Christmas Rekindled

A Bangers Tavern Romance

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Bartender River Lundqvist has a damn good reason for hating Christmas. Bangers Tavern is the perfect place to lay low over the holidays—until Charlie walks in. His first encounter with the saucy server nine years ago was utter humiliation. Her reappearance stirs up powerful desires and hopes for a new start. But the timing is all wrong.

Back in Tacoma to care for her estranged dad over the holidays, freelance web designer Charlie Khoury braces herself for the suckiest Christmas ever. A temporary job at Bangers Tavern gives her a chance to escape Dad's criticism and blow off some steam. But why does the hunky bartender seem to hate her?

A pretend girlfriend is just what River needs to keep his family off his back—until a kiss under the mistletoe flares hot enough to melt the North Pole. When greedy developers threaten Bangers Tavern, River and Charlie must team up to save it. Their sizzling chemistry feels like the real thing—but everyone knows rebound relationships don't last.

Come to Bangers Tavern for an enemies-to-lovers tale of reconciliation, found family, holiday cocktails, and the sexiest Christmas miracle ever.

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Dear Reader: I began writing this series before the Pandemic of 2020 hit. After much careful thought, I decided not to include references to Covid-19 and our current political turmoil. My purpose in writing this series is to provide myself and my readers an escape from harsh reality, so I've set the Bangers Tavern series in a pandemic-free, alternate contemporary time. My best wishes for the health of my readers as we adapt to our new normal and strive for a more just society.

Chapter One

“Hey, what’s a guy gotta do to get a beer in here?” Dad bellowed from the living room.

Charlie Khoury crumpled forward and thunked her head on the kitchen table. Between her dad’s demands and the cheesy Christmas music blaring on TV, she was never going to finish this website redesign.

“Most wonderful time of the year, my ass,” she grumbled as she nabbed a can of Rainier from the fridge and a tin of Pringles from the cabinet. Maybe that’d keep him happy and quiet long enough to finish her project.

Who’d a thunk she’d so desperately miss her cramped shared apartment in Portland? Sure, her roommates were slobs, but they fetched their own food and respected a closed door. Closed doors meant work in progress. Closed doors were sacred.

Not to Dad. He’d keep hollering until she emerged from whatever corner she’d squirreled herself into. And thanks to his ancient router, the kitchen was the only room with a decent Wi-Fi signal.

She found him on his lumpy recliner, a Sudoku magazine on his lap, watching a Christmas special. Only the first of December, and already the holiday music was inescapable.

Setting his refreshments on his TV tray, she surveyed his stained bathrobe and bare, hairy legs, the right one encased in a plaster cast. When had he stopped taking care of his appearance? True to his Lebanese roots, Dad was usually a snazzy dresser. Tonight, he looked like he’d been dragged through a bush. Backward.

She rested her fists on her hips. “Doc says you’re supposed to get up every hour, Dad. You don’t want to get a blood clot.”

He didn’t even look up from his puzzle. “Doc says to elevate my leg. So I’m elevating it.” He wiggled his toes and reached for the beer. “Thanks, doll.”

“Sure.” She patted his shoulder. As much as this enforced proximity was a pain in the ass for her, it must be worse for Dad. He was a mover, a shaker—ask him and he’d tell you so himself. At length. But a stoned driver crunched Dad’s delivery van, landing him on disability for at least two months. With his shattered tibia and bruised ribs, he was going to need help until January when he got his walking boot. So here she was—home for the holidays.

Joy, joy, joy.

She trudged back to the kitchen and poured herself another cup of coffee. At least here in Dad’s house she wasn’t battered with constant reminders of Marvin, who’d abruptly moved out just before Thanksgiving. Turned out he’d been carrying a torch for his college girlfriend back East—his newly-single, no-longer-ex-girlfriend. That news hit like a bolt out of the blue. She thought she and Marvin were fine, then wham! They weren’t in love, not really, but they’d been comfortable for three years, her longest romantic relationship ever. The sex was great, they shared lots of laughs, and she thought, eventually...

She thought they were all set. She thought her life was all set. And now, she found herself questioning everything.

The front door rattled, then banged open. Anna strode through, wearing pastel scrubs beneath her poufy parka, arms loaded with shopping bags. She set them at her feet, swiped a hank of hair back from her forehead, and hitched her scowl to one side. “Pringles, Dad? Honestly?”

Holding his youngest daughter’s gaze, Dad ripped the foil from the can and stuffed a stack of chips into his mouth. “Mmm.” He wagged his thick black eyebrows as he crunched.

Anna strode over and snatched the beer. “No alcohol while you’re still on pain meds. And wipe those crumbs off your mustache. Looks like a dirty whisk broom.”

“You’re a real Scrooge, you know that?” Dad wiggled his butt, settling further into his seat, grabbed the remote, and flipped to a boisterous sports report.

Shoulda known he wasn’t supposed to drink. Shrugging off a twinge of guilt, Charlie hefted two shopping bags and headed for the kitchen. Anna followed with the rest.

“So, still no luck on getting him a home health aide?”

“Nope.” Her sister’s reply crackled with irritation. “His insurance won’t cover that, not for broken bones.”

Charlie grumbled under her breath, “I’m gonna break more bones if he doesn’t stop bitching.”

Anna spun, wielding a bunch of celery like a sword. “Don’t you dare, Charlie. He’s our father, and it’s effin’ Christmas. Christmas is about family, remember? We can’t leave him alone to fend for himself.” She poked Charlie’s sternum. “About damn time you showed up to do your fair share.”

Charlie splayed her hands. “I’m just—being cooped up together is so freakin’ frustrating for both of us. And my work—”

“Which you can do anywhere.” Anna slammed a can of pineapple on the counter. “Some of us have a regular work schedule. Some of us—”

“I know, squirt.” Charlie stepped behind her sister and squeezed her shoulders. “You’re a far better daughter than I am.”

Anna growled and kept unpacking.

“I’m not being snarky. You’re a freakin’ saint, coming over to check on him every day. You must understand how frustrating it is, spending all day cramped by these four walls and Dad’s opinions. About my looks, my clothes, my hair, my love life, my work.” She loaded sliced turkey and cheese into the fridge. “He never picked on you the way he did—does—on me.”

Anna sank into a chair and massaged her temples. “He would if he knew how much I want to leave my husband. But I don’t tell him because I don’t need his B.S. on top of Brandon’s. Especially not during the holidays.” She fixed Charlie with a sharp glare. “Were you even gonna visit this Christmas? I mean, if Dad hadn’t got hurt?”

Charlie’s shoulders sagged. “Honestly, I was gonna go skiing on Mount Bachelor if I could scrape together the cash. Guess that makes me a shitty daughter.”

Anna patted her hand. “Well, you’re here now. Back in your twin bed, just like in the good old days.”

Charlie snorted. “Old, maybe, but not good. Not since Mom—”

Anna tensed. “It is what it is, right? Why don’t you go stretch your legs? I’ll watch TV with Dad. Maybe we’ll set up the Christmas tree.”

“Oh God, does he still have that tacky old thing?” When they were little, Charlie and Anna would sit cross-legged beside the shiny aluminum tree while Mom read Christmas picture books aloud. Their ancient color wheel lamp grumbled as it rotated, illuminating the tinsel branches in blue, red, green, yellow. After Mom died, Aunt Hala and Uncle Fred helped them pick out a real tree each year.

But last Christmas, out of the blue, Dad resurrected the tinsel tree, along with those tacky ornaments—Styrofoam balls wrapped in shiny red thread. Alone in the living room at midnight, Charlie unhooked one, rubbed its satiny surface against her cheek, and wept.

When the last of the groceries were stowed, Charlie went back to the guest room, still furnished with matching twin beds. Someone, probably Aunt Hala, had made a feeble attempt to update the décor with new linens, throw pillows, and decorative knickknacks. But if you knew where to look, you could still spot the faint outline of long-gone posters she and Anna clipped from fan magazines.

Charlie bundled up in her leather bomber jacket, knit scarf, and beanie, enough to keep her warm on the short walk to her favorite hometown bar. The happy noise of Bangers Tavern would help her shake off this itchy claustrophobia.

Hands stuffed in her pockets, breath puffing like a locomotive, she rounded the corner onto Sixth Avenue, Tacoma's sixteen-block stretch of night spots, vintage clothing boutiques, record shops, restaurants, and cannabis dispensaries. The yeasty, sugary scent wafting from Legendary Doughnuts almost lured her in, but she craved a different treat: a fat, juicy, grease-dripping-down-your-elbows burger topped with crispy fried onions and melty cheese curds, with a side of the crunchiest, golden-est tater tots this side of the Cascades, washed down with a Mac & Jack's African Amber.

Hopefully, Dawn would be working tonight. How long since she last saw her old boss and surrogate mom—one year? Two? Charlie's cheeks heated with shame.

She stepped around a grizzled old dude shouting slurred curses at an invisible foe, demurred when another wild-eyed guy offered her some "choice Indica bud," and gave a wide berth to the boisterous dude-bros smoking outside Jazzknuckles. Fairy lights and glitter snowflakes twinkled from the wedding gown resale boutique, and a plastic Santa holding a fat joint grinned from a record shop's window. She grinned back at him. The businesses on the Ave might change, but the funky vibe stayed the same. Even on a Tuesday night, this street was packed with fun seekers, street people, and college kids from nearby Puget Sound University, her alma mater.

Her smile widened when she reached Bangers and inhaled the tempting odor of greasy bar snacks. The bouncer was new, big as a mountain with a shaved head and a sweet baby face. He checked her ID then motioned her through.

She stopped in the doorway and let the familiar sights, sounds, and smells transport her back to her college years, when she spent most nights here schlepping beers and burgers. Same wooden bar, dents and cigarette burns preserved under a layer of shiny varnish. Same neon beer signs, same beer coasters and beer ads covering the walls, same TVs broadcasting a hodgepodge of sports, not that anyone was paying attention. Nothing had changed. After all, why mess with perfection?

Same noisy, eclectic crowd, too—snarky old farts hunched over their beers at the bar, frat boys with popped collars, sharp-eyed pool sharks. Way in back, rowdy dart players hooted over good scores and bad ones. Gum-chomping servers wove through the crowd, trays held high, keeping customers well-watered.

Charlie inhaled deeply and grinned. *Good to be home.*

She plunged into the crowd, jabbing with her elbows when needed. At five foot two, she was easy to overlook—but only once. Damned if she was gonna let some bulky behemoth step on her toes. "Coming through. Watch yourself, Bubba." She skirted guffawing college kids in PSU Lumberjack hoodies and climbed onto a barstool.

The lone bartender's long braids flew as she spun from the taps to the counter and back, moved with amazing speed, but Charlie knew from years of experience it'd be awhile before she got something to quench her thirst. The place was slammed.

A woman wearing a Seattle Mariners ballcap atop short gray curls emerged from swinging doors behind the bar, patted the petite bartender's shoulder, and started filling beer glasses. She'd chopped off her dreadlocks and grown a little wider across the seat, but there was no mistaking that mischievous grin, those tawny, freckle-dusted cheeks.

Charlie felt her heart swell in her chest. Dawn was still here.

From the barstool at the end of the bar, a gruff geezer hollered, "A man could die of thirst in this joint." Another familiar face. *What's his name again?*

"Keep your pants on." Dawn turned, foam-topped beer in hand, and froze. Her plump face lit up like Christmas. "Charlie?"

The thirsty man grumbled, and Dawn slammed his beer in front of him, sloshing a quarter of its contents onto the bar. "Shut yer yap, Gus. Don't you recognize our old friend?"

Gus squinted at her, then at Dawn. With a shrug, he slurped his beer.

Dawn leaned her elbows on the counter. "Too pickled to remember much. Been coming here for twenty years, and last week he called me Donna." She pinched Charlie's cheek. "Good to see you, angel. Thought you were living in Portland now. What brings you back?"

“Dad broke his leg on the job. Nasty crash. My sister watches him nights, and I’ve got the day shift.”

Without asking, Dawn handed Charlie a Mac and Jack’s, her favorite. “You still doing that computer stuff?”

“Web design and maintenance. It’s portable, so—” She shrugged and sipped her beer. “Say, do you still serve that burger with the fried onion rings?”

“Sure thing, doll. We’re slammed though, so it’ll take a while.” Dawn snatched a packet of pork rinds from a rack behind the bar. “This’ll keep you alive. I’ll tell Diego to put a rush on it.”

“Diego’s still here?” She tore open the packet and stuffed a handful of crunchy, porky delight into her mouth.

“Best fry cook on the Ave. I’m lucky he hasn’t moved on to one of those fancy new places,” Dawn said over her shoulder as she pulled more beers. “It’s not easy to keep good people. And now Carla, my head server, is back in Minnesota for the holidays. Her mama’s sick. Might be her last Christmas, so I couldn’t say no.”

An idea tickled the back of Charlie’s brain. Hardly any of her college friends still lived in Tacoma, and these past few days cooped up with Dad had her itching for some lively company. If she could still rake in tips like she used to, she’d easily earn enough to go skiing in January. “How long will she be gone?”

“Carla? Till January.” Dawn’s sharp brown eyes narrowed. “Why?”

All her best decisions in life had been made quickly, a matter of trusting her gut. And right now, her gut-o-meter buzzed and flashed like a slot machine. She pasted on a confident grin. “Because I’m stuck here caring for Dad for at least that long. Might as well earn a few bucks on the side. You know I can handle the job. What do you say?”

“Well now.” Dawn slapped her towel onto the bar and grinned. “Looks like my Christmas wish has been granted.” A bell behind her dinged, and a brimming plate appeared on the pass-through window. She set the plate in front of Charlie. “On the house. When can you start?”

“Soon as I finish this.” She lifted the burger, a real jaw-stretcher, and took a bite of cheesy, beefy, crisp-onion, fluffy-bun heaven. Diego’s special sauce oozed out the other side and dripped onto her tots.

“I’ll get the paperwork.” As she headed toward her office in back, Dawn nudged the bartender. “Kiara, say hi to Charlie. She’s gonna step in for Carla.”

Kiara flashed a bright smile. “Howdy, Charlie. Is it Charlene?”

“Charlotte.” She popped a tot into her mouth. Just as crispy as she remembered. “I’d shake your hand, but—” She waved her greasy fingers. “You all alone back there?”

The bartender rolled her eyes. “River’s late. Again. If he weren’t so charming, Dawn woulda canned his ass long ago.”

“Oho, charming, am I?” A deep baritone voice at her elbow spun Charlie around, but the guy had already slid behind the bar. Tall. Blond. Broad shoulders beneath a crisp black shirt. Lean but muscular, more like a dancer than a football player. His hair flopped into his eyes as he bent to scrub his hands. His short golden beard framed plush lips. Mismatched earrings: a small oval onyx on the left, a silver anchor on the right. Thick brown lashes.

Blue eyes, I’ll bet. Breath held, Charlie waited.

Greenish hazel with flecks of amber. His gaze flicked up and held hers for a moment that seemed to stretch on and on. Then those bright eyes scanned her from top to bottom. One eyebrow flicked up as his lips spread in a devilish smile. “Hello, new girl.”

Happy little fireflies danced in her stomach. Words stuck in her throat.

“Not so new.” Dawn smacked a stack of papers onto the bar.

Totally focused on pretty boy’s dazzling smile, Charlie hadn’t seen her old/new boss approach. She took the pen Dawn proffered, cleared her throat, and began scribbling her contact information.

“Charlie used to work here, about—what was it, hon?”

“I, uh—started in ‘09, I think. And I left in ‘14.”

In an instant, River's expression shuttered—brows lowered, eyes narrowed, lips clamped in a tight, straight line. He picked up a bar towel, flung it over his shoulder, and silently turned to the beer taps.

Dawn scowled and elbowed him. "Don't be rude, River. Say hello to Charlie. She's taking over for Carla."

"Hello, Charlie." His voice dripped icicles.

Kiara hip-bumped him. "Be nice, River. Who pissed in your Cheerios?"

Without further comment, he moved to the far end of the bar where a gaggle of college-age girls awaited refreshment. When River greeted them, they erupted in giggles. His high wattage smile reappeared as he muddled mint and cucumber in tall glasses, his forearm muscles flexing beneath tight sleeves.

Kiara leaned on the bar and sighed. "Real lady killer, that one. Earns more in tips than the rest of us combined."

"I feel sorry for his girlfriend." Charlie tilted her head toward the too-pretty jerk.

"Oh, he doesn't—"

"Enough gossip." Dawn shooed Kiara away, then leaned closer. "Sorry, kiddo. River's usually such a charmer. I'll have a word with him."

"No worries, boss. I don't need to join his fan club to work here." She tilted her chin toward the end of the bar where River whipped out drinks with impressive speed and flair. "And I'll give him a run for his money on those tips."

"You always had the golden touch with customers. Still taking those belly dance classes?"

"Yeah, down in Portland." There's another thing she'd miss—she was supposed to dance her first solo at her troupe's holiday party. All that practice for nothing.

Once Charlie finished her dinner and application forms, Dawn introduced her to the rest of the staff: Eddie Volkov, the wiry barback, Jojo Williams, the bouncer; Lana Lopez and Rosie Chu, the harried servers.

"Thank God and little baby Jesus." Rosie tossed her electric blue curls. "Can you take the back section?" She waved toward the pool tables and dart boards. "That's usually Carla's. They're feisty tonight. And thirsty."

Charlie glanced down at her feet, glad she'd chosen flat ankle boots instead of heels. She rolled her head and shoulders like a boxer warming up. "Bring it."

Dawn patted her shoulder. "That's my girl. C'mon, I'll get you a tray and apron."

Charlie followed to Dawn's little office in back and collected her supplies: POS terminal for credit card payments, and a shallow apron with pockets for her cash caddy and pens. She tied the apron around her waist, popped a stick of cinnamon gum into her mouth to cover her burger breath, and sashayed into the crowd.

Funny how, after six years away, it all came back to her, so easy and comfortable: balancing her tray overhead while sliding through the crowd like an otter through kelp, the easy grin and friendly banter that filled her apron pockets with tips. A month of this and she'd have enough spare funds to join her housemates' ski trip to Mount Hood. And maybe, if she spent her evenings away from Dad, she'd have her sanity, too.

Six hours later, Dawn clanged the ship's bell above the bar. "Closing time. Drink up, folks." She twirled the dial on the sound system, and Busta Rhymes' "Get Out" blasted so loud the glasses jingled on their shelves. Jojo detached himself from the door frame and ambled among the remaining patrons, nudging reluctant guests toward the exit while the servers picked up glasses and wiped down tables. Charlie stretched her aching feet and made a mental note to pick up some squishy insoles before tomorrow night's shift. Still, tonight was fun—a throwback to a simpler time when she'd been Bangers' most popular server. She missed those days when she could count on warm greetings the moment she walked through her workplace door. So different from her mostly solitary work as a web designer.

The servers gathered at the bar to count out their cash tips while Dawn figured their share of the credit card totals.

“Seventy-seven, seventy-eight, seventy-nine...” Lana trailed off.

“Eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two.” Rosie straightened her pile of bills.

“Eighty-three, eighty-four, eighty-five...” Aware of several pairs of eyeballs drilling her, Charlie lowered her voice and kept counting.

A thunk on the bar startled her into losing count. She glanced up to find River with arms crossed, lips pursed, glaring as if she were trying to get away with something. His rolled-up sleeves revealed muscular forearms dusted with golden hair.

Charlie narrowed her eyes. “What?”

He tapped the beer mug before him. “Ten percent for the bartenders.” He slammed another mug onto the bar. “Five percent for the barback.”

She regarded him coolly. “I’m aware. Worked here for five years, remember?” While the other two servers counted out the bar staff’s share, Charlie continued counting. “One oh one, one oh two, one oh three.”

Kiara cocked an eyebrow and whistled. “Impressive. You pickin’ pockets out there?”

“I’m engaging with my customers. Making them feel at home.”

River snorted. “More like swishing her ass.”

Charlie straightened her shoulders. “Been watching my ass, have you?” What was this guy’s deal, anyway? She hadn’t done anything to earn his hostility, and she’d be damned if she’d let him get to her.

Dawn snatched up a damp bar towel, whirled it into a whip, and snapped it against River’s flank. “Mind your business, mister. Charlie’s doing me a favor—a big one. Plenty of bars on the Ave competing for customers. If our service is too slow, they’ll try another bar, and that hurts my bottom line—yours too.”

Rosie poked Lana and, giggling, gave her hips a shake. “Bottom line.”

River sucked his teeth, turned away, and busied himself restocking clean glasses.

Charlie collected her jacket and bag from behind the bar and bid the other staffers good night. River glanced up, curled his lip, then went back to wiping the counter.

What the fuck? Sure, she had her faults, but—aside from her dad—she could usually pull a grin from most people she met. Why did this pretty boy take such an instant dislike to her? His problem, not hers, but his scorn stuck in her craw like a stinging hot pepper seed. She pulled her wooly scarf tighter around her neck and strode into the icy night.

Chapter Two

River scrubbed at a stubborn spot on the bar, sneaking glances at the new server as she pulled on her jacket and wound a wooly scarf around her neck. She didn't recognize him, that much was clear. Those midnight-dark eyes held no scorn, just a flash that quickly dimmed when he scowled at her—like the brat he'd been when they first met.

Why should she remember? It was, what, nine years ago? He'd been a skinny kid back then, with long, messy hair and a cheesy wanna-be mustache, slumming on Sixth Ave with his chucklehead friends from Gig Harbor. And she'd been—

He blew out a shaky breath as he watched her sashay out the door into the drizzly, icy night. Bad idea for a woman to walk alone on the Ave at this hour, especially one as stunning as Charlie. But she seemed not one bit concerned, her lush hips swaying beneath her leather bomber jacket, hands stuffed into her pockets, long dark hair wind-whipped beneath her stupid hipster beanie.

Intimidating, that's what she was back then, her scarlet lips twisted in a sneer as her gaze flicked from his fake ID to his face and back. The encounter was seared into his memory: her dismissive hair toss as she hitched a thumb over her shoulder and snarled, "Go home, kid." The mocking laughter of his Kayak Club buddies. Most of them were already twenty-one. Youngest in his class, he lagged behind, an annoying tagalong.

Because his friends were watching, he held his ground that night. "How 'bout I go home with you, sweet cheeks?"

Charlie snorted, stuck two fingers in her mouth, and let fly a piercing whistle. The bouncer—not mellow Jojo, but a nasty dude named Spike—grabbed him by his popped collar and propelled him out the front door, chased by hoots of laughter.

Remembered humiliation heated his cheeks as he scrubbed the bar. She'd been in the right, of course. Since coming to work at Bangers last year, he saw the situation from the other side. Fuckin' tiresome, dealing with underage kids from Puget Sound University, a dozen blocks away. Jojo checked IDs at the door, but when it got crowded, like tonight, he sometimes missed a fake or two. All it took was one underage drinker to shut down the bar, and River's livelihood, sending him back to Gig Harbor.

Still, you could deal with underage kids without shaming them in front of their friends. No need to be an asshole about it.

And now Charlie was back, looking every bit as hot as she had on that long-ago night. Dawn obviously liked her, so he'd have to swallow his bitterness and make nice while Charlie swiveled her curvy ass through the crowd and flashed that brilliant, phony smile. He huffed his hair from his eyes and scrubbed harder on the sticky spot, taking out his sour feelings on something that couldn't snipe back.

Dawn sidled up and nudged him with her elbow. "What's up with you tonight, kiddo?"

He forced a grin. "Nothing, boss lady. Couldn't be happier."

She pursed her lips and scrutinized him from head to toe. "Bullshit."

He kept on scrubbing.

"Do you mind?" She snatched the rag from his hand. "Cost me a lot to get the bar refinished. Don't need you wearing a hole in it. Go help Jojo carry in the Christmas decorations from my truck."

He couldn't refuse, considering she was not only his boss but his landlady, surrogate mom, and all-around guardian angel. So he shrugged into his jacket and followed Jojo to the alley.

The bulky bouncer wiped raindrops from his shaved head before unlocking Dawn's pickup. He hefted a plastic bin and handed it to River, who grunted under its weight.

"What's in here, Santa's dead body?"

Jojo's deep laughter rumbled. "Christmas tree stands. Too heavy for you?"

"I got it." River set his jaw and lurched toward the bar's back door. Just because he didn't spend hours in the gym like Jojo didn't mean he wasn't strong. He preferred a simpler routine—chin-ups, push-ups, planks, running no matter how nasty the weather, rowing on the Puget Sound when it wasn't too choppy. This time of year, he missed being out on the water.

Back inside, Dawn directed him to load the bins in the storage room. "We're getting a late start with Christmas decorations this year. See you at eleven tomorrow if you want to help."

Known throughout Tacoma for its sports-themed holiday decorations, in December Bangers Tavern dripped with blue and green lights, tinsel, and an artificial tree for each local pro sports team. Last year River had a blast decking the halls. He'd love to help out again, but...

He massaged the bridge of his nose. "I kinda promised my Mom I'd meet her for lunch."

Dawn's grin bunched her freckled cheeks. "That's okay, doll. So, whaddya think of our new waitress? Cute, isn't she?"

He shrugged. "She's all right. Hey, I've got a—project to work on. Okay to take off?"

Dawn tilted her head and regarded him for a long moment, eyes narrowed. She spread her arms wide. "C'mere, hon'."

He let her enfold him in a warm, squishy hug.

She rubbed slow circles between his shoulder blades. "Hard on you, isn't it? Your first Christmas after—"

He stiffened in her embrace.

"You know we love you here, but Christmas is about family—even if they're a pain in the ass." She chuckled. "They just want to help, you know."

His sigh came out shaky. "I know. I'm doing my best." He pulled himself free and met her concerned gaze. "I'll visit them on Christmas Day, I guess."

"You better," Dawn said with a firm pat on his shoulder. "Otherwise I'll put you to work."

He grinned. "Doing what?"

"Something ugly. Deep cleaning the grill. Or scrubbing graffiti in the restrooms."

"Hmm." He held up both palms like plates on a scale. "Scrubbing the can or smiling through a mouthful of overcooked turkey while my whole family tries to fix me. Tough choice." He pecked her cheek. "See you tomorrow."

He left through the back door, carrying a bar towel to wipe his motorcycle seat. He fastened his helmet, then drove onto the rain-slicked street, still full of cars and pedestrians despite the late hour and cruddy weather. Christmas lights twinkled from the lampposts and shop windows. He chuckled as he rolled past. It'd serve his family right if he bought their Christmas presents here on the Ave instead of the snooty Gig Harbor shops they frequented. Maybe some old vinyl records for Dad, a vintage sweater for Mom—extra-tacky, with lots of sequins. For his older brother Wilder, a crystal from Crescent Moon Gifts. They must have something to help uptight assholes unclench. And for his sister Chloe, maybe some of that Cannabis-laced lotion from the corner dispensary.

Grinning as he imagined their reactions, he turned onto North Eighth Street and pulled into his spot under Dawn's carport. The icicle lights he'd strung across her roof drooped on one side. He'd have to fix that in the morning. Considering how low she kept the rent for his basement apartment, he gladly helped with whatever little chores she doled out.

He trotted down the side stairs. Beside the basement door, a small plastic bin with a note on top.

Got a few extra lights this year. Christmas cheer for my favorite tenant.—D

He groaned. Why couldn't people get it? Even good-hearted, smart people like Dawn expected him to forget his troubles and feel all fuckin' holly jolly, ho ho ho just because it was

December. He unlocked the door and shoved the bin inside with the toe of his boot. “Bah, humbug.”

After last December, Christmas was something to endure, not celebrate.

River nudged a leaf of kale with his fork, hoping to find another prawn lurking somewhere beneath the frou-frou foliage.

His mother looked up from her salmon tartare. “Don’t you like your salad, dear?”

He shrugged. “Already ate all the good parts.”

“Nonsense.” She shook her head, making her candy cane earrings jingle. “Kale is very good for you. Besides, you need your vitamins, rubbing elbows with all those germ people in that bar.” She pronounced that last word as if it left a bitter taste on her tongue. Which was rich, considering how much Mom loved her vodka.

Right on cue, an apple-cheeked waiter appeared. “Another vodka tonic, ma’am?” Green Tree Restaurant in Gig Harbor oozed with servers like this one, wholesome and fresh-scrubbed—a role River played now and then when bartending for Julie’s catering business. And why not? The pay was good, the leftovers tasty, and Mom would be shocked at how many of her ladies-who-lunch peers wrote their phone numbers on the twenties they nudged into his pocket.

“More sourdough bread?” the server asked.

God, yes. Anything edible. He cleared his throat to dislodge a scratchy chunk of snark. “Please.”

The waiter flashed a sympathetic smile and slid away among the potted palms, leaving River to slouch in his uncomfortable metal chair and gaze out the wall of glass. Below, sailboats bobbed in the marina, some already decked out in Christmas lights and wreaths though the lighted boat parade was still a few weeks away. A big commercial fishing trawler chugged toward its berth, its booms folded like a pelican’s wings. Too late in the year for fishing. What would they be hauling? His granddad would know. A pang of nostalgia and grief knotted his stomach.

Mom followed his gaze and raised an eyebrow. “Bet you’re glad you gave up on that silly idea now. Imagine working out there on a day like this.”

Sleet gusted against the plate glass, and the low, gray sky leached the color from the water, but he’d still rather be out there, hauling nets and gutting fish, than in this snooty, pretentious place.

The waiter deposited Mom’s drink and a basket of steaming sourdough.

Mom sipped, sighed, and turned her gaze on him. “So, darling, we’re hoping you’ll join us for the yacht club’s Christmas party. Everyone’s been asking about you and, well—” Her pale green eyes took on a misty sheen. “I don’t know what to tell them.”

Something odd about her eyes today. He stared, then bit back a chuckle. “Ma, you got lash extensions?”

Her manicured fingers fiddled with her sparkly red and green necklace. “Why, I, uh—” Her pale brows lowered. “How does a boy like you know about lash extensions?”

He squinched his eyes shut to suppress a rude eye roll. “I work with plenty of women, Mom.”

“And yet, you don’t date. Don’t you think it’s time?”

“No, I don’t.” He tore a hunk of bread from the mini-loaf and smeared it with butter.

Ignoring him, she plowed on. “Nancy and Eric’s daughter is back from grad school. Such a lovely girl.” She leaned closer and stage-whispered, “She’ll be at the party.”

He slammed his fist onto the table, making the silverware jangle. “Enough, okay? You promised.”

Mom’s lips pursed in a pout. “But Doctor Takahashi—”

“Said I’d know when it was time. And it’s not.”

“How will you know if you don’t spend any time with—”

“Again, Ma, lots of women at work. Every night. Women coming out of the woodwork.” He shoved bread into his mouth.

“But darling, are they the right kind of women?”

An image flashed across his mind’s eye: Charlie’s thick, dark-chocolate hair swinging to the middle of her back as she sashayed through the crowd, graceful and playful as an otter. As far as his dick was concerned, she was the right kind of woman, all right. But his dick didn’t get a vote. Not this time.

He cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “I know you mean well, but I don’t need your help. I just need time.”

She reached across the table and clutched his wrist. “I can’t help it. No matter how old you get, you’ll always be my baby.” She relaxed her grip and patted his hand. “My sweet, beautiful boy. And it hurts me to see you still hiding from your life. It’s been nearly a year now.”

He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and unclenched his jaw. No matter how off-base her efforts, Mom was acting from a place of love. He forced a grin. “Who’s hiding? I’m right over the bridge. You can visit me anytime.”

“You’re always working. And your friends miss you.”

You mean the so-called friends who didn’t know what to say when Marla died so they said nothing? But Ma had been too busy trying to cushion him from the shock to notice his circle of friends growing smaller and smaller until he was left alone with his overprotective family and his grief.

“I have new friends.” He extricated his hands from her grip. “And work’s keeping me busy. Julie needs me for three holiday parties.” He leaned in and winked. “Including the yacht club’s Christmas soiree.”

Caught mid-sip, his mom spluttered. “Oh, darling, no.” She dabbed her chin with her napkin. “All our friends will be there.”

“Right.” His grin widened. “The ones you’ve been bugging me to see.” He patted her clenched fist. “In fact, I’m working on some holiday cocktails. Wait till you try my spiced pecan old-fashioned. See, I crush spiced pecans and rim the glass with—”

She stomped her foot. “River Erik Lundqvist, you will not humiliate your father and me by attending that party as a, a—”

He leaned onto his elbows. “Bartender, Ma. The most popular guy at the party. But if that’s not fancy enough, you can call me a master mixologist.” He winked. “Got a certificate to prove it. Want me to bring it to the yacht club?”

Mom bounced a chunk of bread off his head. “Boy child, you are impossible.”

“But I’ll always be your baby, right?” He seized her hand and gave it a loud smooch. “I love you, Ma. But I’ve gotta go my own way. I like my work. I like Tacoma. I like Bangers. And someday, I’m gonna use everything I’m learning to open my own place.”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “Well then, I suppose it’s good you’re working at the yacht club as well. At least the clientele is a bit more...” She waved her fingers like a beauty queen on a float.

His jaw tightened. “More what, Ma? Upscale? Exclusive? Posh? Trendy?” He ticked the words off on his fingers.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, River.” She threw her linen napkin onto the table. “You’ve made it very clear you think I’m a snob. But I can’t help wanting the best for my children.”

Dawn’s words rang in his memory: *Christmas is about family.*

His anger deflated. Mom’s idea of ‘what’s best’ was fucked up, but at least she cared.

He rose, stood behind her, and wrapped his arms around her narrow shoulders. Her stiffly sprayed hair tickled his cheek. “I love you. And I promise, I’m not hiding out in Tacoma. I’m getting on with my life. It’s what Dr. Takahashi told me to do.”

His therapist sympathized the last time he spoke to her, a few months back. “I wish I could tell you there’s a time limit—a guaranteed thirty percent pain reduction by the one-year mark. But everyone processes grief on their own timetable.”

“Should I worry,” he asked her, “if I don’t feel like—you know—seeing someone new?”

She had the best laugh, deep and throaty. “Hon’, grief can knock your libido out for a short time, or a long time. Eventually, your mind and body will find equilibrium. When it’s time, the universe will give you a thunk on the head. Until then, don’t stress over it.”

So far, no thunk.

Mom raised a forefinger and opened her mouth, but he cut her off. “And no, I don’t want another appointment. Now I need to get back across the bridge.”

In truth, his shift didn’t start until seven, but he itched to extricate himself from this conversation and his mom’s smother love.

At least this restaurant wasn’t loaded with memories of Marla. He still avoided places they’d visited together—which was challenging, considering how much time they spent wandering around Gig Harbor’s shops and bars, picnicking in Skansie Park, kayaking on the bay. Memories still ambushed him whenever he visited his hometown.

After kissing Mom good-bye and promising to call in a few days, he climbed onto his Honda, fastened his helmet, and rolled onto Harborview Drive. The sleet had abated, and the low winter sun gleamed on the slick pavement. Christmas decorations twinkled from shop windows and hung from old-fashioned streetlamps, and the giant fir tree stood ready in the park. Saturday was the tree-lighting ceremony—carolers, hot drinks, hidden flasks. Last year, he and Marla waited until the crowd dissipated, then burrowed among the lower branches and, with colored lights blinking all around them, kissed until they were breathless.

A week later, she was gone.

The memory tightened his chest and blurred his vision. He pulled to the side of the road and breathed deeply, swiping at his eyes until he could see again. Then he hung a left and rolled up the hill, away from painful memories, back toward the bridge and home.

Chapter Three

Passing with a tray of drinks, Lana hip-bumped Charlie. “He’s watching you.” She angled her head back toward the bar.

“Pffft.” Her new colleague must be imagining things. Every time Charlie glanced at the annoyingly hot blond bartender, his gaze focused on the bar or customers, never her. To test Lana’s theory, she stepped up to the server station and called out, “I need two Kentucky Mules, a G and T, and three IPAs.” She grabbed a stack of cocktail napkins—and waited. Halfway up the bar, River poured purple syrup into a tall, narrow glass, then mint sprigs, lemon slices...

Kiara shoved past him on her way to the beer taps. “Finish your masterpiece, maestro. Server’s waiting.”

He grunted but didn’t glance up. *Jerk.*

“You look festive.” Charlie loaded her tray with the beers Kiara swiftly provided.

Kiara touched the red and green tinsel twined around her topknot. “Trying to get into the holiday spirit.”

“Yeah, the decorations are cute.” Blue and green tinsel garlands and twinkle lights—Seahawks colors, of course—rimmed the bar rail and back bar.

Kiara passed her the Kentucky Mules, frosty in their copper mugs. “Oh, this is nothing. You should stay after tonight and help with the next batch. Dawn’s ordering pizza, and Grump-Ass over there is gonna make some special Christmas drinks.” She called over her shoulder. “Ain’t that right, River?”

He grunted again.

Charlie leaned closer. “What’s his deal, anyway?”

Kiara shrugged. “Hates Christmas for some reason. I don’t know the details. He’s not usually like this.”

Charlie lifted her tray and hustled back into the crowd. She deposited the Mules on a high top. “Here you go, ladies. Sorry about the wait.”

“No worries, darlin’.” The older woman passed her a credit card. “Start a tab for me, will you?” She dropped a five onto Charlie’s tray and winked. “I used to wait tables. Those credit card tips sometimes go AWOL, am I right?”

“Not here. Boss lady’s a peach.” She wove through the throng toward her next table.

After so many years, Charlie worried she might’ve lost her touch at charming tips out of pockets, but she still had the knack. Maybe it was the genuine enjoyment showing through her smile, or the way she found something to joke about with each table she served. Or her good memory for details, which helped her keep drink orders straight. Whatever it was, she grinned through her shift and stuffed the cash tip pocket in her apron until it bulged.

Until that guy. Up by the pool tables, talking too loud to his buddies. Funny how the toxic frat boy look hadn’t changed. The monogramed shirt peeping from his zippered sweater probably cost more than her laptop. But what really set her internal asshole-meter buzzing was the smirk on his shiny face as he scanned her body up and down. Behind him, three preppy dude-bros snickered and nudged each other.

She squared her shoulders, tightened her smile, and waded in. “What’ll it be, boys?”

He shot a slimy grin over his shoulder before aiming it at her. “How ‘bout a big, foamy mug of you, baby?”

She shifted her tray to her front and glanced toward the entrance. Jojo perched on his stool, checking IDs. Noisy tonight, but he'd hear if she whistled. Probably.

"I'm not on the menu, *baby*." She spit out the last word. "Now, you gonna order a drink, or what?"

Frat boy shuffled closer and lowered his voice. "Relax, sweetheart. It was a compliment. Guess you don't get many of those at your age."

This turd is negging me? She growled through clenched teeth, "Dude, I'm not interested in your opinion, just your drink order." With her free hand, she pulled a pen from her apron pocket and clutched it in her fist, clicking it rapidly. In a pinch, she could always poke him in the eye. Usually, this type would back down before she had to call the bouncer.

Not this guy. Frat prick loomed closer, making her suddenly aware how big, bulky, and ugly he was. His rubbery lips curled into a sneer.

"Problem, Charlie?" Lana sidled up, sharp eyes trained on the chuckleheads.

"Seems these guys aren't thirsty."

Lana planted her booted feet wide. "Well, see, boys, this is a bar. If you ain't drinking, you can vacate the premises."

"She's sassy," one of the guys said with a snort.

"Muy caliente," a pink-faced dude added. "Hey, baby, can I take you home? I like a spicy woman."

"Oh, hell no—" Lana shot him a scornful look and stomped toward Jojo's station at the door.

Really? In a bar full of women, at least some looking for a fuck buddy, these guys try to pick up the servers? Charlie clucked her tongue and spun away, but something snagged her hair and yanked her backward. She yelped at the sharp sting and grabbed at the meaty hands clutching her ponytail, but the guy held fast. "Hold on, princess. I haven't placed my order."

Adrenaline flooded her body and revved her pulse. She threw an elbow, connecting with a solid crunch, then stuck two fingers in her mouth and blasted a taxi-stop whistle.

"Fuckin' bitch," Frat Douche growled, hand over his nose, but didn't release his hold on her hair. From the corner of her eye, she spied River vaulting over the bar clutching a baseball bat.

Jojo quick-stepped toward them, but River got there first. A deep flush stained his tanned face. "Let the lady go, dipshit."

She grinned in amazement as the pretty-boy bartender went toe-to-toe with the larger customer. The jut of River's bearded chin and the flash in his eyes did funny things to her core.

Stupid kid was so focused on staring down River he failed to notice the man-mountain closing fast on his flank.

His buddies noticed, though. One shot a panicked glance toward Jojo. "Eric, let's go somewhere else."

"Naw, man. I'm staying right here."

"Dude." His buddy's voice wavered as he tapped Eric's shoulder. "We're taking off."

"Wise decision, young man."

All four idiots swiveled to see Dawn beside Jojo, her phone aloft. "I suggest you get on back home, since in ten seconds every bar owner on Sixth Ave will have your photo. And the police are on their way." Her toothy grin dripped venom. "The party's over, boys."

Jojo's baby face remained impassive, but his deep voice rolled like thunder. "There's the door, numbnuts." With a discreet shove or two, he herded them out.

The two women Charlie served a moment ago rose from their stools and started a slow clap. Other customers joined in, until the whole bar rang with applause and cheers.

For the first time that night, River met Charlie's eye. She felt that sharp gaze all the way to her toes. His nostrils flared on a deep inhale, then he closed his eyes and blew out a breath. When he opened them again, his scowl softened into a crooked grin. He shoved a hand through his wavy blond hair. "You okay, Charlie?"

“A little sore, but I’ll live.” She patted her head, then cleared her throat to firm her shaky voice. “Thanks, River. Very impressive, the way you jumped over the bar.”

He glanced down and shuffled his feet. “Yeah, well—that’s my job, right?”

Was he blushing, or just flushed from physical effort? “Still, I appreciate it, especially considering you can’t stand me.”

Now he was definitely blushing. Like a pretty blond beet. She couldn’t resist poking him a little further. “Why is that, by the way? What did I ever do to you?”

He blinked rapidly, his thick lashes fluttering. “I, uh…”

Dawn hollered from behind the bar. “River. Thirsty people waiting. Back to work.”

He spun away but glanced over his shoulder as he returned to the bar. For the rest of their shift, every time she looked his way, she caught him looking back at her.

Twenty minutes after last call, Dawn poked her head out of her office and pointed at River. “Shut ‘er down, kiddo.”

He rang the ship’s bell behind the bar and hollered, “Closing time,” then drowned out the chorus of boos by cranking up Busta Rhymes. A moment later, Dawn waded into the crowd and shooed reluctant drinkers out the door. “Go on, now,” she told three girls in PSU hoodies. “Staff party tonight. We’re decorating.”

While loading glasses into the dishwasher, he kept an eye on Charlie as she sashayed between tables, stacking glasses and mugs on her tray. Amazing how she moved so fast and never dropped anything. With a frustrated grunt, he forced his gaze back to the task at hand.

She was too damn pretty, and it pissed him off. Not fair he had to watch her flirt with customers all night. And he’d wrenched his shoulder leaping over the bar to save her from that preppy asshole. Still, the way she focused those huge espresso-brown eyes on him afterward made the pain worth it.

River finally snapped out of his obsessive Charlie-tracking when the pizzas arrived. He helped Dawn pull tables together and set out plates and napkins, then dove into cheesy, garlicky goodness.

Lana hopped onto a barstool. “Where’s our drinks, River? Dawn said you were making us something special.”

“Trying out some fancy drink specials for the holidays. First up, cranberry rum punch.” He pulled a pitcher from the cooler, poured its ruby-red contents into ice-filled glasses, and garnished the drinks with fresh cranberries and mint sprigs.

Lana sniffed, sipped, then squealed. “Que rico! Tart, but not too tart.”

Charlie sidled toward the bar, lifted a glass, and frowned into it. Did she think he was going to poison her?

He drummed his fingertips on the counter. “Looking for bugs, princess?”

She took a tentative sip, then arched her eyebrows. “Not bad, surfer boy. And don’t call me princess.”

“I’m a kayaker, not a surfer.”

“And I’m a working woman, not a princess.” She tossed her thick, glossy mane and flashed a sexy smirk.

Rosie slid onto the stool next to Charlie and snatched up a glass. “River’s always trying out his fancy cocktails on us before he serves them in Gig Harbor. What’s in here, Riv? Cranberry juice?”

“My house-made cranberry syrup, plus fresh-squeezed lime and white rum.”

Dawn sampled the scarlet concoction. “Is this what you needed all that sugar for?”

He nodded. “And for the gingerbread syrup. We’ll have those for dessert.”

Rosie wiggled on her barstool. “Gimme some sugar, River.”

Dawn harrumphed. “After you finish decorating, I’m paying y’all to work. I’m only feeding you out of the goodness of my heart.”

“And a good heart it is.” Charlie slid from her stool, but she took her drink with her.

She likes it. He bit back a grin. Why wouldn't she? He put hours into his drink creations to make sure they were balanced, tasty, boozy perfection. No reason for her approval to light him up like Christmas. Speaking of...

He nabbed a slice of BBQ chicken pizza, then called out, "Gimme a job, boss lady."

Dawn set down a plastic bin marked Seahawks X-mas. "Get the ladder from the storage closet. Lana, you're in charge of tape and thumbtacks."

Lana wiped tomato sauce from her chin and saluted.

Dawn continued handing out assignments: Kiara and Eddie would top the back bar with a snowy roof. Jojo and Rosie would set up the artificial trees. That left River and Charlie in charge of hanging lights and snowflakes from the ceiling.

With a loud clatter, River unfolded and extended a tall aluminum ladder. "You afraid of heights, new girl?"

She curled her lip. "Nope. Just smart-ass bartenders who forget to hold the ladder because they're ogling my butt."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she poked his chest. "Don't bother denying it. Rosie caught you staring at my ass."

She started to climb, then pivoted on the first rung, eye to eye with him. Something simmered in her gaze. Mischief? Challenge? Attraction? "For the record, thanks again for chasing off those assholes. Now, you gonna tell me why you don't like me?"

He gulped. "I never said—"

"Not with words. So, what's your deal?"

The pounding in his ears had little to do with the hip-hop rattling the speakers. Holding onto a nine-year-old grudge was stupid. And childish. But resenting her was a lot easier than acknowledging how her swivel hips and smoky gaze made his mind blur and his dick twitch. He cleared his throat. "You don't remember me. No reason you should. It was a long time ago."

Her eyes narrowed, then widened. "Oh God, did we..."

He blinked in confusion, and then his face flushed firecracker hot. "No!"

She played her fingers over her heart. "You scared me for a minute. It's not like me to—ya know, forget. About that. With a guy." Bright pink spread over her cheeks.

Easier to tell the tale if he wasn't looking right into her huge almond eyes, so he stooped to untangle a string of lights. "You busted me for a fake ID. Right here. I was twenty." He shrugged. "You were kind of a dick about it. My friends razed me for months. I didn't come back to Bangers until I was sure you didn't work here anymore."

"Oh." She took lights he proffered and climbed to the top of the ladder, sure-footed as a mountain goat.

That's it? No apology? Nothing? He raked his hair from his eyes. *Just for that, I'm gonna enjoy the view.* Her blouse lifted each time she stretched to affix lights to hooks in the ceiling beams, giving him a perfect view of her plump, juicy, denim-covered ass.

"Earth to River." Kiara snapped her fingers, then pointed to the thick layer of cotton fluff atop the barback. "Snow's drooping. How did we hold it up last year?"

"Try duct tape."

Something tapped his chest. Eyes wide, he jolted and clutched the ladder.

Charlie grinned from the bottom rung. How'd she get down so fast?

"All done." She lowered her voice and leaned so close her hair brushed his cheek. "And hey, I'm sorry I embarrassed you back then. But you know how it is. Can't let Dawn lose her liquor license over some underage kid."

Where's the mistletoe when you need it? Her lips were right there. All he had to do was turn his head and—

He forced a casual grin. "Yeah, that's true." He stepped to the bar, downed a tumbler of rum punch, then dragged the ladder to the next position. "Up you go, Charlie."

An hour later, the bar sparkled with holiday cheer, and River's balls ached from watching Charlie wiggle up and down the ladder. It had been a long time since a woman had such a strong effect on him. Could this be the thump Dr. Takahashi spoke of?

Naw, must be the alcohol. Ironical, but he seldom sampled more than a sip of his handiwork, especially since last December. Too tempting to sink into a boozy haze of memories and grief. He needed his wits about him to power through.

When the Busta Rhymes album finished, Dawn put on some Christmas pop music. "Okay, kiddos, let's trim the trees." From a hand dolly, she and Jojo unloaded plastic bins marked with the names of local pro sports teams.

Grateful for the distraction from Charlie's piercing gaze, River reached for the Seahawks bin, but Jojo snatched it up. "This is for the tallest tree. You couldn't reach the top, squirt."

River stretched up to his full six feet, but the top of his head didn't even reach Jojo's nose. Grumbling, he grabbed the Mariners bin and decked a smaller tree with blue and silver baseballs and compass roses, the team's logo.

"You've added new trees, Dawn," Charlie commented as she hung blue and green Space Needles on the Sounders tree.

"Yup." Dawn straightened and pointed to artificial trees tucked into every available nook and cranny. "We got the Seattle Dragons XFL, Seattle Storm, Tacoma Rainiers, Reign F.C.—"

Kiara interrupted with a whoop and a raised fist. "Go Reign!"

"And the Seawolves," Dawn added, indicating the tree she was trimming with blue and green orcas.

"What are they again?" Never much of a pro sports fan, River preferred activities he could actually do, rather than watch on TV.

"Rugby." Dawn grinned. "Big, burly badasses. My favorite flavor."

Finished trimming the basketball tree, Lana skipped to the far end of the bar. "Can I do the skate tree? It's my favorite."

"Sure, hon'."

"C'mon, Charlie. Help me." Lana popped the lid on a small bin, and the two women hung the tabletop tree with glitter Roller Derby skates donated by the Dockyard Derby Dames.

Soon all the decorations were hung, and the room twinkled with sports-themed holiday cheer. River returned to the bar to dish up his final treat of the evening: gingerbread and espresso martinis in glasses rimmed with spiced sugar.

Charlie took a seat at the bar. The way she bit her lip as she eyed the drinks stirred something warm and tickly deep inside him.

"How do you make it taste like gingerbread?" she asked.

"I made a syrup with cinnamon, allspice, ginger, cloves, and brown sugar." He leaned an elbow onto the bar. "Plus a few drops of arsenic. Gives it that extra zip."

She rolled her eyes and took a sip, then licked her lips. "Mighty tasty. I'm impressed."

He flushed with pride—and lust, if he was honest. He'd gladly invent drinks all night to see her tongue trace the sweet curve of her lower lip again.

"Gather round, kiddos," Dawn called, clutching her phone. "Got some bad news."

Startled out of his horny fog, River looked up to find Dawn slumped on a bar stool. "What's the problem, boss?"

She removed her Seahawks cap and scrubbed her fingers through her short curls. "That old costume shop across the street?"

Lana nodded. "That place has been closed for—what, two years?"

Dawn sighed. "Well, it's opening again. This Friday." She read from her phone. "Defiance Brasserie. Sophisticated small plates and artisanal cocktails." From the disgusted look on her face, you'd think the place was serving roasted puppies.

Rosie shrugged. "So what? Restaurants come and go all the time on the Ave."

“Yeah, but here’s the kicker.” Dawn swiped her screen. “That old ballroom upstairs? Gonna be a dance club. D.J., light show, and nightly drink specials.” She set her phone face-down on the bar and pinched the bridge of her nose.

River reached across the bar and clasped her free hand.

Charlie tilted her head. “And that’s bad because...”

He grunted. “Competition. Right across the street. Couldn’t happen at a worse time.”

Dawn nodded. “Landlord’s raising the rent in January.” She reached for a martini glass. Things must be dire, because Dawn almost never drank. “College kids’ll flock to the new place.”

Charlie raised a finger. “But the regulars will stay here, right? The pool players and the dart guys—”

River snorted. “Cheapskates who nurse a beer for hours. We need to keep the college crowd here.”

“And those yuppies from the Proctor District too,” Dawn added. “Once the new place opens up, they might forget how much they enjoy slumming it here.”

Charlie straightened. “Bangers isn’t slummy. It’s a—”

“It’s a blue-collar tavern, kiddo.” Dawn wiped a palm down her weary face. “Burgers. Tater tots. Punch cards. Seahawks on TV.” Maybe it was the blue and green Christmas lights overhead, but the boss’s tawny cheeks faded to a sickly beige, making her freckles stand out like paint splatters.

Charlie straightened on her stool. “And that’s our strength. We should stick with that.” She waved her hand, taking in the holiday decorations, neon beer signs, and faded photos of long-ago pool tournaments and dart teams. “This place is the antithesis of snooty. It’s real, authentic.” She fixed River with an intense gaze. “You know what I’m talking about, right?”

The fire in her eyes made him want to jump on board with whatever plan she was cooking up. He gave an encouraging nod.

“It’s like home,” she continued. “Bangers is comfortable. You don’t have to impress anyone when you come in here. You can just have fun.”

River smacked his palm onto the bar. “She’s right. You want to attract customers? Give them that. Fun, relaxing, homey.”

“Unpretentious,” Jojo added.

“Right.” Lana slung her arm over Rosie’s shoulder. “Who wants to dress up to have a beer with friends?”

Dawn nodded slowly. “Okaaay, so what we need is...” she tapped her chin.

“Fun stuff,” Charlie said brightly. “Silly stuff. Like a best Santa hat contest.”

The others chimed in: “Christmas bingo.”

“Drink in your pajamas night.”

“Christmas karaoke!”

“How ‘bout a toy drive for the Rescue Mission?” Jojo suggested. “You know, bring a toy, get a beer.”

“Hanukkah tots,” Eddie suggested. “Mash ‘em flat like little latkes.”

Dawn’s glum scowl relaxed into a grin that stretched wider as her crew peppered her with suggestions.

Kiara gave River’s shoulder a poke. “Pretty boy’s good at inventing drinks. Maybe a daily holiday drink special?”

Dawn’s eyebrows flicked up. “And maybe Charlie could dance for us like you did that Christmas back in—oh, what was it, ’10? ’11?”

What kind of dance? River’s imagination lit up with sexy possibilities.

“Now wait a hot minute.” Charlie raised both palms. “All my costume stuff is back in Portland. Besides, I haven’t—”

Dawn waved away her objections. “Borrow something from your old teacher.”

River leaned an elbow on the bar. “You’re a dancer, Charlie? Is that why your hips are so—” He wiggled his butt. “Swivel-y?”

Charlie's cheeks reddened. "Keep your eyes on your bottles and off my hips, Kayak Kid." She lowered her voice. "Besides, you don't like me, remember?"

"I never said—"

"Yeah, you did." Rosie nodded. "Said she was a stuck-up—"

"Enough." Dawn clanged the ship's bell. "Thanks, everyone. The bar looks great, and you've given me lots of good ideas. I'll add an extra two hours to everyone's paycheck. Now, skedaddle."