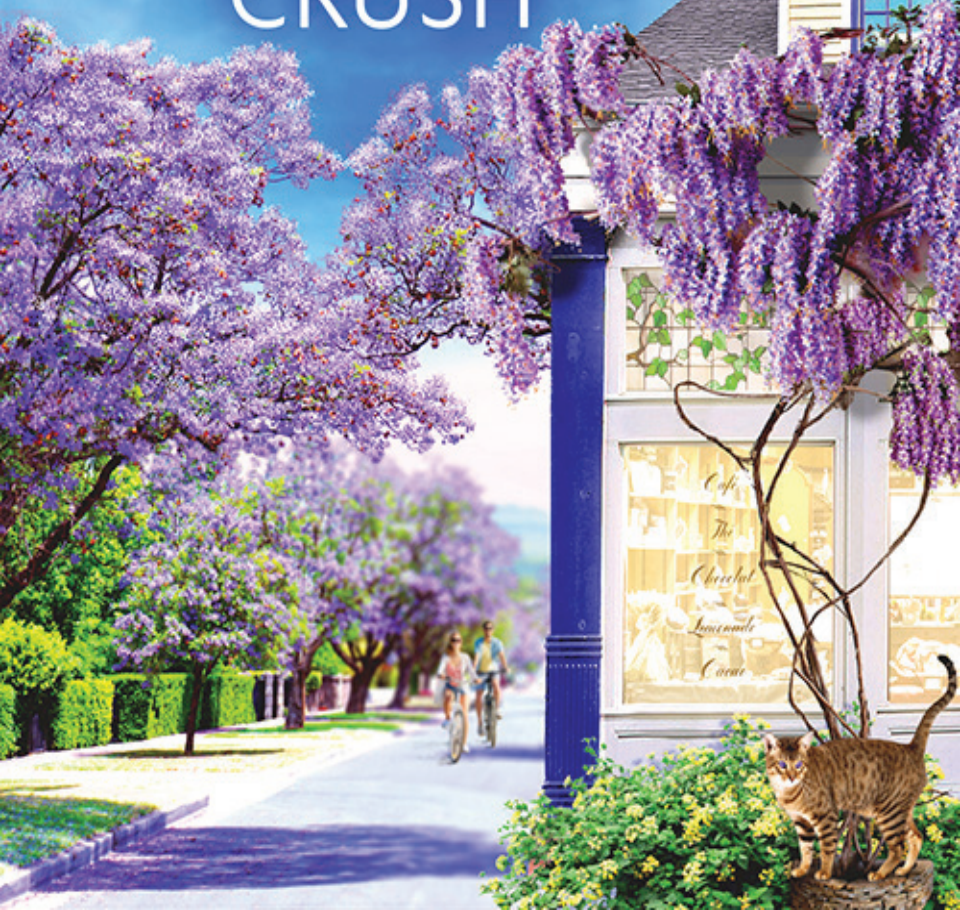


# MIRANDA LIASSON

*the*  
SWEETHEART  
CRUSH



*the*  
SWEETHEART  
CRUSH

MIRANDA  
LIASSON

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For Sandra. Thanks for the pink hair. And most of all, for  
your friendship.*

# Prologue

*12 years ago*

*Dear Diary,*

*I did something awful to my best friend. And now things will never be the same.*

*Today, Logan and I went to the Blossom Festival like we've done every single year since we both could walk. We checked out all the fun stuff, like candles from the candle factory and local honey, quilts from the quilt guild, and paintings and suncatchers and all kinds of cool art, and then we shared a famous elephant ear.*

*We were standing there laughing at how the cinnamon sugar got everywhere. Logan pointed at me and said, "You've got sugar on your face." He*

*reached over and brushed it off—so simple—barely grazing my cheek, his touch as light as the wisp of a feather, but then suddenly everything got still. My heart stopped dead in my chest.*

*I could hear kids yelling and people laughing all around us, the scents of frying dough and sausage and peppers and tacos and french fries, all of it fading away as if someone had paused and muted the whole festival.*

*I'd never noticed how pretty Logan's eyes were, sort of brown and sort of green, with little gold flecks. He was staring right back at me, his eyes wide and with a melty-chocolate look that made my knees want to buckle, and I swear that there was this—this current zapping back and forth between us, binding us in place.*

*My whole body went boneless, like a noodle, and I got hot and cold and shaky all over. Part of me wanted to move, to run away, but my legs were heavy, frozen to the ground.*

*And then Logan leaned over, his face so close I could see the dark shadow of stubble on his cheeks. And his eyes were warm and shiny and—and different.*

*My best friend since we were in diapers was looking at me like—well, like I was that sugary, warm, irresistible elephant ear. Looking at me in a way he never had before.*

*It's not like it would've been my first kiss.*

*But everything inside me just knew it would be my best kiss.*

*My breathing was all messed up, like I don't inhale 22,000 times each and every day of my life.*

*Then he moved even closer. I caught the fresh scent of his soap, like he'd just showered, and his gaze zeroed in on my lips.*

*My mouth went dry. I leaned into him. My lips parted.*

*And then I panicked.*

*My plans, all my plans that I've been working so hard for. To be something. To get out of this town. I couldn't get stuck here like my mom and sister did.*

*After all, they'd been warning me about that my entire life.*

*And so I did something awful.*

*Something so, so awful I can barely tell you what it is.*

*I turned my head.*

*His kiss hit my cheek. So, so awkward. Cringy.*

*I nearly died of embarrassment.*

*When he pulled back, I saw that he was embarrassed,*



*too. No, more than embarrassed. The look on his face reminded me of the day he got that rejection letter about his writing.*

*Hurt. More than hurt. Devastated.*

*I wanted to rewind. Go back one minute, when I could dust the sugar off myself. Never eat the stupid elephant ear to begin with.*

*But life doesn't give you a rewind, does it?*

*Everything is different now.*

*And I think I just lost my best friend.*

# Chapter 1

*Twelve years later*

Viv Montgomery stood in the middle aisle of Christmas Every Day, squeezing her eyes shut, struggling for calm.

Except she'd never been calm a day in her life.

Her boss, Sheila Watkins, stood in front of her, clipboard in hand, surveying Viv's handiwork: three hours of arranging shelves of Santa figurines in the Santa section of the sprawling store. Twenty-five Santas, to be exact, all lined up in perfect order, as if they were about to march in a holiday parade.

*Perfect.* A state Viv could never achieve. But that didn't stop her from trying. Some might call that her superpower. But it was also a scourge.

"Hi, hon," Sheila said. Sheila was her age—they'd gone to high school together—so why she called Viv *hon* as if she were thirty years Viv's senior she'd never know. Sheila was

wearing a cute blousy top and smiling her perfect red-lipstick smile. She'd always been beautiful, a great dresser, and had always dated the most popular boys. Viv instinctively smoothed down her red-and-white striped button-up elf shirt with the giant fabric-covered buttons.

Did horizontal stripes ever look good on anybody?

“You did a *great* job,” Sheila said, eyeing the shelves. “It looks stunning.” Her overly enthusiastic tone immediately made Viv’s spidey-senses start tingling—for the worse. “Unfortunately, though,” she continued, “we need to move the Satans”—she giggled and covered her mouth—“oopsy, I mean *Santas*—over to 12A.”

Viv could relate to the slip. Sheila was the spike in her sole. The hangnail on her thumb. The shoe that looks so pretty on the outside but rubs your toes raw.

Of course, the Santas needed to be moved. Because that was Sheila’s superpower—torture. Specifically, of Viv.

She reminded herself that she was grateful for this job that the sweet owner, Delores Teeter, had given her, and that she was just two thousand dollars away from blowing out of their town for good. And some people just disliked you, Viv thought, no matter how hard you tried to get them not to.

People liked Viv. She got along with everyone. But apparently not her boss, for no reason she could fathom.

“How many Santas are we talking about here?” she asked in as calm a tone as she could muster. She’d organized every Santa by occupation: Santa with a pickup sat next to Santa in his sleigh (means of transport). Sommelier Santa was next to baker Santa. Santa with puppies and Santa with puppies *and* kitties were both beside Santa with a baby on his lap because of the youth theme. The only one that defied

cataloging was Voyeur Santa, which was what she tongue-in-cheek called the Santa with a telescope.

“Oh, all of them,” Sheila said, waving her hand over the full shelf as if that might magically rearrange them in no time. “It *might* require staying a little later.”

It was official. The horrible had finally come to pass: Viv officially despised Christmas. What kind of monster had she become? Was there a Christmas Haters Anonymous? Because, as an elf who hated Christmas, she was on the brink.

“You really are *so* creative,” Sheila said, noticing how Viv had placed all the Santas on different-leveled little boxes covered by layers of fake snow. A stunning presentation, if Viv could say so herself.

As a failed artist who’d studied photography, she knew all about other outlets for her creativity. Like the Christmas tree in aisle two she’d created out of ornament boxes and covered with layers of fake snow and lights. And the display of skinny trees at the front of the store she’d embellished with little stuffed elves dangling from and peeking out from behind the branches. Doing artsy stuff was the one thing she enjoyed about this job.

*Failed.* That was the thing she couldn’t get beyond, no matter how she tried. But she was trying. Hard. She wasn’t even aiming for perfect here—she’d settle for falling smack in the middle of the normal bell-curve range of success, unlike her two high-achieving older sisters who were both waaaay on the high end. They’d made their family proud, Tessa by running her own French pastry shop, and Juliet as a popular marriage and family therapist.

But no matter how much she loved her family, there was

nothing for her here to succeed at in their quaint town of Blossom Glen, Indiana.

“Just curious, why are we moving them?” All the Santas seemed to laugh. One actually did when Sheila abruptly picked him up. There was Santa holding a marlin, Santa with his feet propped up by a toasty fire pondering his list, Surfboard Santa on vacation at the beach—the display showcased Santa living out his life in so many different ways. In Viv’s hands was number twenty-five, the big guy hanging on to the top of a chimney. When you pushed a little button, he belly-laughed a giant *ho ho ho* and wiggled his butt.

Santa was stuck in that chimney, just as she was stuck in life.

“Sorry,” Sheila said, not sounding sorry at all. “We’ve got a busload of enthusiastic shoppers coming from Madison and the display has to be more visible.” She gave a dismissive shrug. “That’s just the way it is.”

Viv didn’t believe her. Not only would the busloads of power shoppers want the stuck Santa, they’d also want anything in the store that wasn’t nailed down, regardless of where it was. People flocked from all over the Midwest to the 365-day Christmas sensation in their little town off the Indiana turnpike. And they snatched up the merch faster than the annual January clearance sale at their famous candle factory.

Sheila checked her watch. “You don’t have a date tonight, do you?” she asked with that same unrelenting smile.

Ugh, no, Viv did *not* have a date.

“Not tonight.” Or any night, for that matter. Nor did she have anything else planned except for hanging out with her

little seven-month-old niece, Rosie. Who was adorable but didn't make up for the fact that Viv didn't have much of a life.

But she was aggressively working on that.

As soon as she came up with two thousand more dollars, she would put plan Bust Outta Here into action.

Until then, her mantra was *Yes, Sheila*.

But that didn't stop her from imagining a Middle-Finger Santa.

• • •

"You must be sexually desperate if you're staring at Santa's butt." A little while later, Viv started at the sound of her best friend Robin's voice. She was moving Jingle-Butt Cowboy Santa, who wiggled his jean-clad hips while waving a lasso of holiday lights. As his hips swung, his drawers dropped enough to reveal a tiny heart tattoo over his right butt cheek.

"Maybe. But I'm *not* doing Bumble again after that guy from Riverton brought his mother on our date," she said.

Robin grinned widely, her brown skin highlighting pearly whites flanked by dimples. The beads on her box braids gently clacked against the stethoscope as she unwound it from around her neck. "Hey, she paid, so it wasn't all bad, was it?"

Viv chuckled. Robin was always 100 percent in her corner. "Why are you here on a Monday morning when every parent in town must be calling for an appointment?" To be fair, as a pediatric nurse practitioner in the group practice in town, Robin was busy every day. But Viv knew from Tessa that Monday morning sick visits were more

valuable than Taylor Swift tickets.

“I only have a minute.” She thrust a copy of the *Blossom Glen Daily News* in front of Viv’s face. And yes, their town still had a daily print paper, something of which everyone was quite proud. The headline read, *Hunk Comes Home to Write Next Blockbuster*.

“Hunk?” Viv’s gaze flicked from the headline to Robin. “I don’t get it.”

“Yes, you do.” She sent Viv an insistent look that sent her colorful tropical fish earrings swaying, the ones Viv had bought her for her birthday and that the kids loved.

That started Viv’s heart pounding with a strange mix of terror and excitement. Her gaze dropped to the paper, where a book cover graced the front page. One that she immediately recognized.

She gasped, not because the name of the book was *Total Terror*, but because the author was Logan Matthews.

She knew the book because she stalked him online—or rather, *ahem*, followed his career.

Which was pretty hard to do, considering that Logan was probably the only author on the planet who didn’t do interviews, podcasts, or have a social media presence.

“Logan’s coming home?” she murmured in disbelief.

Robin confirmed that with a nod. “And look at this.” She flipped the paper so Viv could see the bottom half.

There, before her, was an image of her childhood best friend—well, make that *ex*-best friend—in a sweater and jeans standing against a tree in full fall colors.

Her mouth dropped open. Partly from shock, and partly because the photo showcased Logan, with his casually wavy hair, dark brows, stubbornly square jaw, and lean frame, as a

fully grown, mature man in a way she'd never seen him before.

As a *hunk*.

She folded the paper so hastily she had no doubt the crinkling could be heard throughout the store. "The background on that photo is way too dark, and he looks kind of stiff," she babbled.

"Vivienne, stop using your photographer brain. Look at him!"

That was precisely the problem. She couldn't *stop* looking. And she couldn't resolve the image in her mind of the Logan she knew and *this* Logan. No wavy cowlick over his forehead that possibly resembled an elf curl. No collared, buttoned-up-to-his-neck polos when everyone else had been wearing Maroon 5 T-shirts. And most significantly of all, no warm hazel eyes or wide-open smile.

Her Logan had been open and honest, funny and vulnerable. This Logan...he appeared remote. Jaded. Worldly. Being a creative, Viv prided herself on reading emotions. And being trained as an artist, she understood the importance of conveying emotions in a photograph. But this one sent a little chill up her spine, and she didn't think the effect was intentional.

Maybe she was projecting the things she'd read about him in the press—that he was distant and unapproachable. "I heard he's difficult to interview." She handed the paper back to Robin. "*Grinchy*."

Robin patted her shoulder. "You're spending waaay too much time in here, honey."

The image was no longer before her, but it felt burned into Viv's retinas, so much so that she felt a pang. She acutely missed the skinny boy with the bad haircut, unruly curls, and teenage



acne who lived next door to her for eighteen years. Who'd listened to all her troubles and secrets and dreams, as she had his. Who'd helped her through her father's death. The one who always kept the tires pumped up and the chain oiled on her secondhand bike and kept it faithfully running for years. Who always told her what a great artist she was—or could be.

Well, he'd gotten *that* part wrong.

The fact that she'd lost his friendship was one of the biggest regrets of her life. And it had been all her fault. One stupid turn of her head had ruined it forever.

But had she really had a choice?

Viv forced herself back into the present. Robin was her dear friend, and she was lucky to have her. But even Robin didn't understand the complexities of what had happened with Logan. Or the deep sadness she still carried.

"Hey, snap out of it." Robin flicked her gaze to her watch and then at Viv. "I thought you should also know something's happening today."

Viv frowned. "Not the annual sale at the pharmacy on that moisturizer we love that costs an arm and a leg?" she asked hopefully as she glanced out the window. It was a perfect spring day, the crabapple trees that lined Blossom Glen's Main Street in full, glorious bloom. She needed to lighten up. She gave her head a little shake, as if to get rid of the melancholy.

"He's on the way over here," Robin said, as calmly as if she'd just agreed their moisturizer was way too expensive. "With his publicist or something."

Viv froze. Robin seemed to be speaking in extreme slow-mo. When her brain finally translated the words, she jerked up her head. "Wait. He—Logan? He's on the...what?"

Robin gave her a quick hug. “I gotta go. But call me later, ’kay?”

No sooner had Robin sped off than the bell jingled over the door and a woman stepped in, wearing a white spring coat, a white dress, and matching designer heels. Her hair was as white-blond as her outfit, and her lips were an amazing shade of Gwen Stefani red that Viv had always coveted but could never wear because against her pale complexion, it made her look like a vampire.

“Oh my gosh, it’s soooo cuuuute in here.” The woman surveyed the packed-to-the-gills shelves complete with twinkling lights and a giant animated polar bear near the door, which held a pile of prettily wrapped packages that, in Viv’s opinion, scared rather than excited the children.

The woman walked over and extended a hand. “I’m Freyde Martin from Martin PR. Is Delores here?”

Viv, with full attention on the intruder, adjusted her elf hat, which had suddenly gone completely awry, just like her life.

Before Viv could call out, Delores Teeter, the owner, came huffing out from the back room, a dust of glitter on the shoulders of her Christmas sweater, which today featured a penguin happily tangled in a lit-up string of Christmas lights. “Oh, hello there,” Delores said. “You work for Logan, don’t you?”

Wait. What? This gorgeous creature worked for Logan? And even more concerning, Delores *knew*?

“Thanks so much for letting us shoot a little video inside your store,” Freyde said.

Oh no. No, no, no. Why was a bestselling author of terrifying thrillers going to shoot a video inside a kitschy

Christmas store?

“Feel free to walk around, dear,” Delores said, “and find the best place for your video. I’m happy to help, just give me a shout.”

Then she scurried away faster than a squirrel stealing a nut.

Viv caught up with the older but very spry woman in the ornament aisle, adjusting glitter-covered glass balls hanging from a light fixture. “Not so fast.”

Delores’s look was placid but her eyes were notably a little shifty. “Haven’t you heard?” she said in a too-innocent tone after clearing her throat. “Logan’s back in town to write his next book. Don’t worry, dear.” She nervously patted Viv’s arm. “It shouldn’t impact your work at all.”

Viv barely held in a groan. Also, she was ready to strangle Delores, even though she owed everything to her. She’d given her a job last year when she was out of work and luck. And she treated her very well except for assuming that she loved Christmas as much as she did, which was *a lot*. And then there was the fact that she’d hired Sheila, which she still didn’t comprehend.

“Delores, I do the social media for the store. Shouldn’t I have known about this?” She was going to keep this professional, even if she was wearing shoes that curled up at the toes.

Also, everyone in town knew that she and Logan had been inseparable for eighteen years, but now they barely spoke.

“Honey,” Delores said, her eyes kind, “Logan just asked me for help this morning. I knew it would be good publicity for the store.” She looked like she wanted to say a lot more.

Instead she gently patted Viv's hand and smiled a smile that could have been in a toothpaste ad. "It's going to be so much fun to see him again, don't you think?" she said in an overly cheery voice. "Even when friends haven't seen each other for so long, they usually pick right up from where they left off."

Viv appreciated Delores's compassion as much as she was horrified by it. "I—I just—" How could she tell Delores that she didn't want to see Logan Matthews for the first time in forever wearing Velcro closures and dangling red bauble earrings that lit up?

Would he even speak to her?

Before Viv could say more, Freyde found them in front of the vintage snow-flocked village collection. She was looking around, scribbling notes on her clipboard. "So the plan is for Logan to walk in and pick up some cute props and—I don't know, pretend he's shopping for his mom."

*That* was the best social media plan they could come up with? Viv had been taking PR classes over the past year since she'd been home. Plus, she managed her sister Tessa's pastry shop website as well as the one for this store. For someone—Logan, that is—without a real social media presence, this plan seemed to have the makings of a disaster.

"Well, Miriam is Jewish," Delores said, "and I'm not sure she celebrates—"

"It doesn't have to be accurate," Freyde interrupted. "Just cute."

Viv pressed her lips together to avoid saying the obvious. That authenticity was *everything*.

"Viv, why don't you go check to see if we got our new shipment today?" Delores shooed her off.

She was more than grateful to escape. But as soon as she

got to the back of the store, she glanced up at the reflective security dish mounted near the ceiling just in time to detect someone walking in.

A tall someone with broad shoulders.

She blinked, halting mid-step and staring up at the dish like it was a TV.

The man walking in was...built. Maybe it was Logan's security person. Logan himself was tall but had always been slight. Did up-and-coming authors have bodyguards?

"Mrs. Teeter!" said a familiar voice, a few octaves deeper than she remembered but still absolutely unmistakable. A warmth rushed through her, the kind you feel when you finally see a loved one after too long, and it stirred a flurry of memories. Some funny. Some the heartfelt, deep kind that only very close friends can share. And some sad. Like the fact that she hadn't really heard that voice in ten years, except from afar. "How are you?" He held out his arms to embrace Delores. "You look great."

"Why, Logie Matthews," Delores said as they hugged. She stepped back to assess him. "You're all grown up."

Viv glued her eyes to the big silver dish like she was watching a blockbuster. Logan's body was distorted, making him look enormously tall.

And then he laughed, a deep and resonant sound. Which stabbed her in the heart, too. Because at one time, his laugh had been practically as familiar to her as her own.

Viv pushed aside all her emotions to admit one thing: she needed to leave. ASAP. She was not going to have him see her looking like a fool, being bombarded by a truckload of feelings she couldn't even process.

She couldn't face him now. Not now. Not like this.

It wasn't just the elf suit...it was her life.

Logan had always known what he wanted. He'd written full sentences by six, plays for them to perform by ten, short stories by twelve. And the summer he was seventeen and laid up with a broken foot, his first novel.

Viv still didn't know what she wanted out of life, not really. She'd settle for a decent job, for starters. She hadn't made it in the world of photography, despite all the sacrifice from her family, and that had been hard. Embarrassing. It had kept her down for a while.

But she was digging herself out. Rerouting her dreams. Determined to make her mother's and sisters' sacrifices worth it. She wasn't going to let them down. They deserved better. And so did she.

And if jumpstarting her new dreams meant temporarily dressing up like an elf and dealing with Sheila, so be it.

But there was no need to run into Logan right now. She could control how and when they met. All she had to do was pry her eyes away and keep walking right out the back door and into the storeroom until he left. Easy peasy.

"We're so thrilled you're back," Delores said to Logan. "How long are you staying?"

"About a month." He sounded confident. Composed. Together.

"You'll be here for the Blossom Festival," Delores continued, noting their town's annual spring attraction. "Maybe you can do a book signing for all of us. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"You there. Elfie."

Viv jumped and turned to find the beautiful publicist—Freyde, was it?—right behind her, smiling with those

bright teeth and red, red lips. Who was she to Logan, she wondered? Scratch that. It didn't matter. "I wondered if you'd help us," Freyde said.

In the dish, Viv detected movement. Logan was looking around, probably for his publicist. Time to bolt.

"Would you mind handing Logan a few items as we film?" Freyde glanced around them in the ball ornament aisle, which displayed a complete rainbow-colored collection.

"I'm sorry, but I've got an appointment." Viv inched to the storeroom door. "I've *really* got to go. Sorry." She beelined, exhaling at her narrow escape as she made a final hard right toward the storeroom. Except her blind and panicked exit made her run smack into a hard wall of... Logan. Make that Logan's chest. Which was covered by a soft black T-shirt but was so hard she practically bounced. Her nose tingled with an intoxicating mix of soap and spice that wrapped around her tighter than his instinctive grasp on her arms. Suddenly she was enveloped by him—his fingers pressing lightly into her skin, his startled but concerned gaze upon her, his presence filling all her senses.

She blinked in disbelief. The sound of her own blood rushed in her ears and the sudden surge of adrenaline made her knees wobble.

It was definitely the adrenaline. Not anything else. Not *him*.

It was one thing to see his photo and understand he'd changed. But it was quite another to see him up close—too close—and have his big hands gripping her.

He was so tall that her gaze traveled up and up, passing shoulders as wide as Main Street. She stabilized herself, pushing against the hard, unyielding tank of a chest—wait,

weren't authors mushy from sitting all day?—and met his gaze.

His eyes widened and he stared at her like he'd just seen Santa Claus.

The familiarity of looking into those hazel eyes slayed her. They echoed her same shock and surprise. There was a wariness there, too, a skepticism that suggested he did not trust her one bit. She made sure to steel her own features into that same hardened look.

His hair was wavy and dark and cut in a clean style that tamed his curls into submission and probably cost more than her rent. His jaw was stronger than she remembered, his face shaven but shaded with a trace of shadow that was so...

*Dammit.* Her former best friend was...sexy.

This was the boy who'd taught her to climb trees. The one she'd read every single Harry Potter book out loud with and seen every single movie with and had endless discussions comparing the two. The one who taught her to rollerblade and cuss and explained every word guys used to describe male and female anatomy so she would head into her teenage years informed.

Suddenly her jaw began to quiver and her wall of steel crumbled in Jenga defeat. She willed it to stop by sucking in her cheeks and biting down hard. Even worse, her eyes welled with tears.

“Vivi?” He used that silly nickname he always used to call her. A puzzled look crossed his handsome face. “You *work* here?”



## Chapter 2

Logan Matthews spent his days writing bestselling psychological thrillers, and so he considered himself not easily shocked. But *shocked* was an understatement when he walked into the Christmas store to find that his best friend for the first eighteen years of his life had become... an elf.

A *hot* elf.

A really hot elf.

Vivienne. The girl next door. The person who'd always known him better than he knew himself. Who *clearly* wasn't a girl anymore.

She was staring at him, her bright blue eyes wide with surprise, and her dark curls escaping her silly stocking cap every which way. Cute. Okay, more than cute. If she were any other woman...but no. Not going there.

It had taken him a long time to pack away his feelings for her, but he'd succeeded and moved on.

He just hadn't expected to feel a Class VI rapids rush of feeling within five seconds of seeing her again.

"Yes, I work here." She said it like that was obvious, visibly straightening her spine.

She kept balling and unballing her fists, a sure tell of her own nerves that somehow made him feel a little better. Because he hadn't been this nervous since waiting for his first major book review.

He flashed an uneasy smile and cleared his throat. "I feel like I should hand you my Christmas list or something."

As soon as he cracked that joke, he knew he shouldn't have.

"Don't bother," she shot right back, deadpan. "I'm sure you're on the naughty list."

Somehow, that made him smile even wider, even though he could tell by her frown that she wasn't pleased.

Her name meant *full of life*. Which had always been true. Except, now that he thought of it, maybe she should've been named *Stubborn*.

He'd known he would run into her, but like this?

Over the years, he'd cultivated a cool, detached persona that kept him apart from anyone who tried to intrude into the privacy that he valued so greatly. But he felt it threatening to melt off of him faster than a snowball in Miami.

She was the one thing he'd always had a soft spot for. Although she'd always been a little too pretty, a little too embraced as the baby of her family and the sweetheart of their town.

Her worst flaw was that she'd friend-zoned him and then left, suddenly and without warning. Without even saying goodbye. They'd still had two more weeks of that

fated summer before college to spend together—but it never happened. She scurried away full speed ahead to start her life, leaving him behind.

“You look...” He couldn’t seem to get the words out. “You look...”

“Please don’t make an elf joke,” she interrupted.

“I was going to say nice. You look nice.” It had taken a full sixty seconds for his mouth to reconnect to his brain.

She looked dubious. And she didn’t say, *So do you*. Nope. She was staring at him as if he was a raccoon peeking out at her from under the lid of a garbage can.

“Oh, there you two are.” Delores Teeter walked up and stood by Viv’s side. “Vivienne’s here for a while to work and do our social media, and she’s amazing at it,” she piped in.

“I’m sure you are,” Logan said, looking directly at Viv. He tried to view her objectively, like his dear old friend he hadn’t seen in quite a while, but it was impossible.

Because she was ten times more gorgeous than the day he’d left.

That was his problem. He’d *never* been able to be objective with her.

But now he was a grown man, a dozen years older and wiser. So the mere fact that they were now face-to-face shouldn’t suddenly bring all those hormonal adolescent feelings rushing back. Right?

“The better question is, what are *you* doing here?” she hit him with. She never was one to lie down and take things. His mom had told him that she’d been devastated when her attempt to break into the art world with her photography hadn’t worked out, but her sass reassured him that she hadn’t stayed down for the count.

“Visiting,” he said. And trying to make sense of his life. He’d lost his true north. Needed to find his ground. He wanted to take a break from the spotlight and reconnect with his family. His sister, especially, who’d be heading off to college in a year. And he felt like there was a good chance he might stay in the one place that truly felt like home.

Freyde, who’d been scoping things out, joined them. “We need to get started.”

Viv, ignoring her, asked him point-blank, “Why are you filming in here?”

“It’s for my Instagram account,” he said.

Trying to warm up his psychologically edgy image in the Christmas store might be the worst idea he’d said yes to in a long time. It was just that his publisher told him he’d have to get into the current century and be a partner in his book promotion *or else*.

Logan constantly struggled to understand why he should be judged on anything but his work. When his dad had been alive, his favorite saying had been, *It’s all about the writing*. But then, those days where famous authors like his father led an anonymous life happily answering the occasional fan letter were gone. Not that his father had ever been happy, but that was another story. One he didn’t dwell on.

“Yes,” Freyde piped in. “We’re doing a little hometown shoot so Logan’s readers can learn a little more about him.”

“That is charming,” Viv agreed, then addressed him directly. “But you write thrillers.”

“Yes, I do,” he said, frowning. “What’s wrong with charming? Thriller writers aren’t serial killers.” He paused. “At least I’m not.”

Instead of laughing, tiny frown lines creased her brow.

But hell, even *they* were cute.

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

She shrugged nonchalantly and tapped her lip, deep in thought. “I’m just wondering if this is a good move for your branding.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Freyde asked with an easy shrug. “It’s a human angle. And Blossom Hills is Logan’s hometown.”

“Blossom *Glen*,” Viv corrected.

Waaait a minute. Not even five minutes in, and Viv couldn’t resist offering advice. The irony was that in the past, he’d usually taken it. After all, she was the reason why he’d continued to pursue writing against all odds. She was still a spitfire. Which made him oddly relieved and irritated at the same time. “I see you still have strong opinions.”

She shrugged. “You asked for my *professional* opinion.”

“Actually, I didn’t. But you offered it anyway.” He tried to look angry, but he found his mouth curving upward. She hadn’t changed one bit. And it was oddly reassuring.

No, more than that. Refreshing. And hot. Did he say hot before?

No one in his life bossed him around anymore. Or argued with him. Or gave him grief.

Success was like that. People acted like your friends even when they weren’t.

This inability to trust had worsened with his climb to fame and made him close himself off too much. He was lonely. He wanted to be around people who were genuine—people from his hometown who liked him for the person he was, not the author he’d become.

Delores, looking uncomfortable, intervened. “You

know that Viv made Tessa a YouTube star, don't you?"

"That right?" Actually, his mom had told him about Viv helping her sister with her YouTube baking channel, which had exploded into a great success that had driven sales to her new pastry shop. But why hadn't he heard a thing about Viv's job as resident Elf on the Shelf?

Once upon a time, Vivienne's dreams were way bigger than the size of their town. A talented artist, she'd wanted to photograph her way across Europe. So she'd left Blossom Glen at the age of eighteen to cross an ocean to make a name for herself. She'd gotten scholarships and acclaim rare for someone her age. So why wasn't she doing *that*?

"Did you two...date?" Freyde asked, her gaze ping-ponging from one to the other.

"No!" they both said in unison.

"Absolutely not," he confirmed. That earned him a glare from Viv.

"Because you two are acting sort of like a divorced couple," Freyde added.

"Friends," Viv said, waving a hand dismissively through the air. "We were friends."

He snorted. "Were?"

Viv had the decency to blush.

Freyde cleared her throat. "This is amazing. You two go way back, huh?"

"*Way* back," suddenly flew out of his mouth. After all, they'd shared playpens. Their mothers were best friends. Every first-day-of-school photo he'd taken for thirteen years showed him lined up against the red of the Montgomerys' century-old brick house with Viv and her two sisters. Growing up, their bedrooms were directly across the little

side yard from each other, making it handy to send each other SOS signals when needed. Once he'd tossed a bag of Skittles to her after she'd gotten grounded for breaking curfew with him. It had sailed through the window, hit her floor, and broken apart, scattering a rainbow of candy pieces everywhere just as her mother walked in. Which had caused Viv, by the way, to remain grounded. He'd made up for it afterward by buying her a brand-new bag.

Their friendship had been wonderful and genuine and innocent. Her mother and grandmother never had to worry about him overstepping the bounds with her.

It was only a matter of time, though, before one of them developed feelings that would complicate things and make their easy friendship impossible to continue.

And that would have been him.

"I'm going to grab some props," Freyde said. "Delores, can you help me?"

As they walked away, Logan turned to Viv. "*We were* best friends," slipped out of his mouth before he could stop it. "For eighteen years."

She crossed her arms and lifted an accusing brow. "I never meant for that to end."

He snorted again.

"What was that for?" Viv waved her arms. "You crossed a line."

The ladies who were part of one of the many bus groups that made pitstops at Christmas Every Day had been milling about and chattering excitedly over the finds in the next aisle. But Viv's passionate tone apparently struck them into silence. They stopped grabbing Christmas items and snapped to all-ears attention.

“You call a kiss on the cheek crossing a line?” He tried to whisper but it came out sounding an octave higher than usual. He took a big breath to get himself in check. This was ancient history. Why was he letting her get under his skin?

Viv was up in his grill. “You were aiming for my lips, but you missed.” She paused. “But then that’s what teenage boys do.”

Okaaay, if she wanted to spar, he was going to give it right back. But her elf hat was a little bit crooked, which took her threat level down a notch or two. “I kissed you on the cheek because you turned away.” There, the truth. He saw from her alarmed expression that he scored a direct hit. But somehow it didn’t give him any satisfaction. He crossed his arms. “Trust me, I wouldn’t miss now.”

She rolled her eyes before dropping her voice. “What you did changed *everything*.”

“Vivienne, you cleared out of there faster than an eye blink.”

“I called you *and* texted you every single day for a month,” she said in an indignant tone, “but you hardly responded. You barely managed a *hi* whenever you came home. So don’t you *dare* accuse me of leaving our friendship behind.”

He stabbed the air. “And you went off to Paris. So you weren’t really home much to talk to, were you?”

He suddenly became aware that a dozen gray-haired ladies holding Christmas decorations were not only staring but also rummaging for their phones, searching the screens over their glasses...for their camera buttons? Surely they weren’t going to take videos of this.

Making a scene was absolutely not what he’d planned



for his very first social media appearance.

Viv must have noticed, too, because she dropped her voice. “Well, things change.”

“And so do people,” he shot right back.

He caught her swallowing hard, the first indication that she was upset.

That tiny, barely noticeable gesture made all his bluster dissolve. *Just like that.* He never could stay angry with her for long.

Except for that final time. The anger and the heartache remained, unshakable, despite starting a new life at college. Despite trying to reinvent himself all over again as someone tougher—less likely to dump out his feelings and get hurt. More muscular, too, since she’d described him to her friends as undatable—*he’s like my brother* was the exact phrase. Ouch.

He’d banished his skinny, nerdy, dweeby self forever, transforming into an aloof, mysterious, untouchable author.

And he’d discovered his power over women, many of whom wanted him, even if Viv hadn’t.

Then he’d poured all his heartache straight into a book. Which happened to get published—by a tiny press, but published nonetheless—and started his career.

A book where the villain was the town sweetheart, beloved by all. But in reality, she was spoiled, took advantage of her family, and enjoyed trampling on hearts. Oh yes, and she happened to be a merciless killer of anyone who had a crush on her.

Yes, he’d done that. What a fool.

He was startled back to reality by Viv looking him straight in the eye and saying...nothing.

He stared right back in a giant game of chicken, which they'd done often. Sometimes with food in their mouths, doing anything to make the other one blink. Except this time, it was different.

Their dare-me stare suddenly, startlingly, seemed to devolve into something completely different. Just for a flash, he saw something in her eyes that wasn't obstinacy.

She was no longer the bony girl who wore Converse high-tops and skinny jeans with an oversize Pink sweatshirt.

Just as he wasn't the nerdy boy with no muscles or confidence.

The anger seemed to dissipate around them like glitter in a sunbeam. The air itself seemed to crackle as the whispers of the bus ladies faded away. His pulse throbbed at his neck, his throat was parched, and all he could see was the clear, sweet, lake-water blue of her eyes staring back at him. Maybe even softening.

*She's beautiful.*

No, no, no. He ripped his gaze away.

The intensity of whatever was happening buzzed through him, threatening to thaw the edges of his heart that he'd locked down long ago.

Freyde cleared her throat. He looked up to see her arms full of Christmas props and the tourist ladies staring from over the Santas. And their phones were going *click, click, click*.

He let out a curse under his breath. He was always calm. Never made a scene. Never made waves. What had he done?

"Logan." Freyde held up her own phone. "How about picking up one of those Santas and saying something about how great it is to be back home? Don't be afraid to

step out of your comfort zone,” she coached. “Imagine all those readers who can’t wait to get to know the real Logan Matthews, right in his own cute little hometown.”

A little stunned, he grabbed the first Santa he could find. As he picked it up, the Santa began swaying his hips to “Jingle Bell Rock.” Then his pants dropped down to reveal his butt with a big old heart tattoo on it.

The ladies, chuckling, filmed that, too. He didn’t even know how to post on social media. So seniors didn’t, either, right?

Logan was vaguely aware of the ridiculousness of his situation. Making a scene, quarreling in public, holding a bare-ass Santa.

Sweat trickled down his neck. If this got out, he’d go from a serious writer to a laughingstock overnight, all because his publisher said he’d soon be out in starving-artist world if he didn’t get his face out there.

But like *this*?

“Wait a minute,” Viv said, accidentally bumping elbows with a lady about to take a photo. “Oh, excuse me, I’m so sorry,” she said as she shimmied through the crowd until she stood in front of them. “Give us just a sec, and we’ll get you a really great photo, okay?”

What on earth was she doing?

Viv walked up to him, smiling her prom-queen smile, holding up a glittery, shiny, oversize ornament that looked like a disco ball. She turned him so that they were both facing Freyde—and the bus ladies. “We’re the oldest of friends,” she said, hooking her arm through his and beaming up a smile that still turned his blood to champagne bubbles. It dawned on him that she was helping him. *Rescuing* him was

more like it.

Playing to the crowd, she made a dismissive gesture with her arm. “I’ve known Logie since he was in diapers. Our moms used to put us in the same playpen. And we’re used to teasing each other, aren’t we, Logan?”

“Why, are you the girl next door?” asked a woman.

For a second, Logan’s heart shuddered. Because *The Girl Next Door* happened to be the name of that ill-fated first book.

Good thing he’d written it under a pen name, and it’d had a very, very small print run. Over the years, a few people had recognized his photo on the back. But so far, no one in town knew.

Except soon the whole world would know. His agent had recently told him that first publisher was planning a new print run using his real name.

A wave of guilt ran through him now that he was face-to-face with the woman who’d broken his heart a long time ago and never even known it.

“Yes. Yes, I am the girl next door,” Viv said with an amiable laugh. “Well, here you go, Logan.” She held up the ball for the ladies. On closer inspection, he saw that it said *Auld Lang Syne* across the sparkly surface. “That’s a Scottish saying, did you know that?” Viv spoke in a sincere voice that kept the crowd spellbound. “It means *times gone by*. What it really means is that we are utterly useless if we don’t cherish the relationships from the past and remain in touch with the people who made us who we are today.”

Then she reached over and kissed his cheek.

It stung. It tingled. It throbbed. He fought all of it by clenching his jaw and his fists. Nothing could stop the wave

of feeling that bowled him over.

How ironic that they were starting right where they left off twelve years ago.

Her quick thinking got to him. But her kindness got to him even more.

Even after barely talking for more than a decade, she still had his back.

Cameras flashed. The bus ladies oohed and aahed.

Viv passed him a knowing look and a slight nod, then turned and left, leaving him in the middle of the Santa aisle literally holding the ball.

With his cheek tingling, the entire side of his face numb, and a certain other vital body part responding in a whole other way.

On top of it all, his heart filled with dread. How could he ever explain to her what he'd done?