

A Maple Valley Christmas

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BOOKS THAT INSPIRE!

Chapter One

Erica Holden anxiously awaited the arrival of her third blind date in as many weeks. She hoped this one would be better than the last two. Or maybe she was simply destined to be alone her entire life. Erica glanced at her watch as she tapped her black high-heeled shoe on the burgundy carpet under the table for two. This Peter guy was already ten minutes late—not a good way to make a first impression.

“Can I refill your water?” the waiter asked.

“Oh!” Erica jumped. She hadn’t noticed him approach. “I’m so sorry. I hate to keep this table occupied.” She glanced at the long line at the door.

“Perhaps your friend isn’t coming.”

Erica could feel the impatience drip off his statement. She couldn’t blame him. It was a Saturday night during the dinner rush, and he wasn’t making any money from this table. Truth was, that same thought had run through her mind.

“I’ll give him five more minutes. If he’s not here by then, I’ll leave to free up this table,” Erica said. The waiter’s eyes widened. She didn’t know who was more excited by the prospect of the embarrassing situation being over—her or the waiter.

Erica couldn’t believe her best friend of five years, Julie Parker,

would set her up on a date with someone who wasn't going to show. Julie said he'd been after her for months to set them up after a brief encounter in the elevator of Julie's building. Erica didn't remember him, but Julie said he was a nice guy. Maybe he got stuck in traffic or missed the subway? If that was why he was late, then he could've at least sent a text to let her know. What if he couldn't call? What if something bad had happened to him? Guilt welled up inside her. She'd been so worried about Peter standing her up that she hadn't thought he might not be able to make it. Regardless of why he wasn't there, Erica had to give up her table. She grabbed the cute black clutch she'd brought with her and pulled a five-dollar bill out to leave for the waiter. She'd occupied a table that could have been used to make money, and the least she could do was leave a tip. Fifteen minutes late was long enough. Erica stood to leave, then felt a light touch on her elbow.

"Hi, Erica," a deep voice said.

Erica turned to find a very nice-looking man in a solid white button-up shirt and brown tweed jacket standing behind her. He had the sweetest face she'd ever seen. His full head of dark brown hair was nicely styled, and his dark goatee was freshly trimmed. Erica hadn't remembered him by name when Julie first said something, but she now remembered the face. She suddenly understood why Julie was so adamant about setting up this date.

"I'm Peter," he said and stuck his hand out. "Do you remember me now?" He smiled. Julie must've told him she didn't remember meeting him.

"Hi, Peter, and yes. I remember you now." She shook his hand in return. It was clammy and felt like a limp noodle. *Stop looking for flaws.* "Nice to see you again," she said. The waiter immediately walked over to get Peter's drink order.

"I'll have a mint julep," Peter said.

That's different. Maybe he needed something strong to calm his nerves. She didn't drink very often, but she usually preferred a cold beer.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Got hung up at work."

"Oh, that's okay. I was going to give you fifteen minutes before I left." Erica smiled.

"Just made it, then," Peter said and smiled back.

Erica noticed his perfectly straight white teeth and wondered if Peter had ever been in a commercial. He did look familiar, but she didn't know whether it was from the elevator or the television. "So what do you do, Peter?"

"Julie didn't tell you?" He looked up from the menu with a furrowed brow.

"Nope."

"Hmm. Well, I'm an actor," he said proudly.

"Oh. How nice." She cringed as she stared at the menu on the table. She immediately knew why Julie hadn't told her. If Erica had known he was an actor, she never would've agreed to this date. Actors were not her type. She'd dated one in college.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked.

She already knew this was going to be a one-and-done date and didn't see any need to hurt the man's feelings. So she fibbed. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the way you flinched when I said I was an actor." Peter gently laid his menu on the table.

"I have to be honest with you," she said. "I don't date actors."

"Oh. Why not? We're nice guys." He smiled.

"It's nothing against you. You seem like a nice guy, but I dated an actor once. It didn't end well." She took a sip of water from her crystal glass.

"That's not fair," he said. "We're not all bad guys."

Erica knew he had a point, but after what the last actor she'd dated had put her through, there was no way Peter would ever get out of the shadow of her ex. She knew it wasn't the Christian thing to judge everyone on the actions of one, but at this point, she couldn't help it. She was certain it was because she hadn't fully forgiven her ex for what he'd done. "Like I said, you seem like a nice guy, but honestly, I don't really have time for anything serious."

Peter stared blankly across the table at her. The corners of his eyes began to moisten, and then a tear ran down his cheek. Before she knew

it, his face was buried in his hands, and he was sobbing. It reminded her of her ex. Every time she'd caught him out with another girl, he would cry and insist that it would never happen again. Erica had fallen for it twice because she thought she was in love. The third time it had happened, no amount of crying could save him.

"Why are you crying?" she whispered and handed him a napkin. She took a quick glance to the right and then to the left to see whether anyone else noticed him crying. Her cheeks turned bright red.

"I'm sorry," he said and dabbed at the corners of his eyes. "It's just so hard to meet decent women in this city. When I get a chance to meet a beautiful, smart woman, I'm doomed from the get-go."

She didn't know what to say. She was trying not to pass judgment on Peter for what her ex used to do to her, but she'd never had a man she just met cry in front of her. She didn't think there was anything wrong with a sensitive man who cried, but not the first time she met him. She liked her men a little less vulnerable when they first met. When a relationship grew deep enough for the man to feel comfortable crying in front of her, it was something special and sweet.

"I'm just going to go." She slid her chair back from the table.

"We haven't even ordered yet."

"Then I saved you thirty dollars." She reached back into her clutch, grabbed the five-dollar bill again, and dropped it on the table. "It was great meeting you, and good luck with the acting thing."

"I thought women liked it when men cried," he yelled after her as she walked out of the restaurant.

She hailed a taxi and jumped in the back seat. She wanted to get out of the vicinity of Peter as quickly as possible. She pulled out her cell phone and sent a text to Julie in all caps to get her point across.

PLEASE DON'T SET ME UP ON A BLIND DATE EVER AGAIN! Erica hit send. It took only moments to get a response, but it wasn't a return text. Julie called instead.

"It's over already?" Julie asked. "It hasn't even been an hour. What happened?"

"He cried, Julie."

"He what? Why?"

"I don't know. I mentioned I dated an actor once and it didn't end

well. The next thing I know, the tears were flowing,” Erica said. “Why didn’t you tell me he was an actor?”

“Because you never would’ve gone if you knew he was an actor,” Julie admitted.

“You’re right. Do me a favor. Don’t set up any more blind dates for me, okay?”

“I’m so sorry, Erica. I promise. No more matchmaking. I’m obviously not very good at it.”

“Thank you. See you at the office in the morning.” Erica hung up as the taxi stopped in front of her apartment in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan. It was the trendy new area of the city that all the up-and-coming young professionals called home. She liked living here but would prefer to live uptown. She didn’t go out that much and loved Central Park. If things went well the rest of the year, she may be living there long before she ever thought possible.

Erica paid the driver and walked into the lobby of her building. She immediately noticed the Out of Order sign on the elevator door. She exhaled deeply and dropped her shoulders. *This stupid elevator is out of order more than it’s in use.* She was glad her apartment was on the fourth floor instead of the fifteenth. She worked her way slowly up the stairs and stopped on the landing of her floor to catch her breath. She wiped the tiny beads of sweat from her brow before unlocking her apartment. Once inside, she flopped on the couch, exhausted. She needed to get more exercise, but that would have to wait until after Christmas.



The following morning, the taxi sped Erica up Fifth Avenue toward her office. If things continued to go well the rest of the year, she would certainly make partner at the realty firm where she’d been the top-producing agent for two years running. The snow that started falling when she’d stepped outside already covered the sidewalk with a thin layer of the fluffy white crystals. The weather report said there was a minute chance of snow, but then again, they rarely got it right. She liked the snow. It reminded her of home—a place she hadn’t visited in over ten years. She knew the same old argument

would resurface over her not wanting to take over the family business, so she'd avoided going home.

The streets of New York were decorated for the holiday season, and the snow gave it a winter-wonderland feeling. It had been her childhood dream to live here, and she couldn't believe that she made it come true. She'd had her eye on a flat on the Upper West Side that overlooked Central Park, but even as successful as she'd been in real estate, it was still too pricey for her to afford. Unless she got that partnership.

The cab dropped her off in front of the office at eight thirty, a full half hour before the office opened. Erica attributed a lot of her success to getting to the office early and staying late. It gave her opportunities the other agents missed out on. The snow was falling harder now, and the light blanket was now two inches deep. It was cold, but it lightened her mood on this Monday and made it feel more like Christmas. She couldn't believe it was less than a week away.

The fresh snowfall made walking a little trickier in her three-inch black heels. She swore this would be the last time she believed the weatherman. She managed to navigate the thirty-yard jaunt from the curb to the lobby without slipping or falling.

Clifford, the front-desk security guard, greeted her like he always did. "Good morning, Ms. Holden. How is the best realtor in the city doing this fine morning?" the older black man asked.

Erica wasn't sure how old Clifford was. He had to be in his late fifties but was still in awesome shape. "I'm fine. How are you?"

"I am better now that I've seen you!"

It was the same conversation every day, but she loved it. "Have a great day, Clifford."

"Thank you, soon-to-be partner!"

That made her smile. The thought of being a partner was almost unreal. Part of her wondered: if she made partner at such a young age, what was she going to shoot for after that? Accomplishing her life goal ten years before she'd planned wasn't something she'd thought would ever happen. She guessed once that was done, she would concentrate on finding a husband. That thought made her giggle out loud. Espe-

cially after the fiasco last night. Who had time for a relationship, much less time to find someone who was marriage material?

She stepped off the elevator on the thirtieth floor and was greeted by the enormous Christmas tree in the office lobby. It towered above her, but it paled in comparison with the one outside the window. The realty firm's office overlooked Rockefeller Center, and that was her favorite thing about the location. She took a few seconds to admire the beauty of the center. Their Christmas tree stood six stories tall, and the horn-blowing gold angels that lined the gardens in front of the tree made it magical. The fresh snowfall only added to the majesty.

A noise down the hallway pulled her gaze from the winter scene below. It was odd for someone to beat her into the office. She walked toward the noise and found her boss, Larry Davenport, riffling a pile of papers on his desk. "Good morning, Mr. Davenport," she said from the doorway.

He jumped. "Oh my goodness. You scared me, Ms. Holden."

"Sorry, sir."

"What are you doing in so early?" He went back to flipping through the stack of papers.

"I always get here early. I find it gives me a head start on the day," Erica said.

"Uh-huh," he said, not looking up from his frantic search.

"All right, then." She tapped the doorframe with her hand. "Have a great day, Mr. Davenport." She was sure the man hadn't heard a word she'd said. She turned to head back toward the elevator.

"Ms. Holden?" Mr. Davenport yelled after her.

She whirled around and stepped back into his office. "Yes, sir?"

"Come in. Have a seat. I'm glad you're here." Larry gestured toward one of the cherry leather chairs across from his desk. "Aha! Found it!" He shook a stapled pack of papers in the air.

As the founder of Davenport and Company, Larry was a rock star in the world of real estate in Manhattan and the surrounding bureaus. He'd grown the company from a small one-room, two-agent office in Queens to the largest realty firm in the city. They employed a hundred full-time agents and occupied ten floors of a Manhattan skyscraper.

Erica figured the man was a millionaire several times over, and she was in line to become the firm's fourth partner.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"You are my best agent," he said.

"Thank you, sir. I work very hard."

"I know you do. That's why I need you to handle this for me." He handed her the pack of papers he had been frantically searching for.

She glanced through it quickly.

"The contract you're holding is the largest this firm has ever worked," he said. "When this closes, it will guarantee our survival for years to come."

Erica knew this was big by the way he furrowed his white eyebrows. Although his hair had disappeared years ago, his hazel eyes still burned with an intensity that rivaled men half his age. "Sounds exciting," she said. The fact he picked her to handle it meant the partnership was hers. Her hands shook with excitement, and she cleared her throat before speaking. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to go to Maple Valley, New York, and get the owner to sign that."

"You need me to go to Maple Valley?" She chuckled. "Are you serious?"

"I'm quite serious, Ms. Holden." Larry leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

"Sorry, sir." Erica sat up in her chair. "I've never heard of Maple Valley, and given that Christmas is Friday, I thought you were messing with me."

"Oh. I see," he said. "Well, despite all of that, I need you to get the owner to sign it and get it back to me before Christmas."

"Where the heck is Maple Valley?"

"It's a small town an hour outside of Albany."

"I understand this is a large deal, but why can't we handle this through email and fax?" The thought of having to spend the last week before Christmas outside the city didn't thrill her in the least. She still had so much left to do before the big day.

"The owner may be having second thoughts. That's why I need you to go up there and work your magic to get this deal done."

"I appreciate your confidence in my abilities, and thank you for trusting me with it," Erica said.

"There's no one else I trust more, Erica." Larry leaned forward and placed his hands flat on the desk. "You know we are looking to add another partner to the firm, don't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir. Of course."

"Well, if you get this deal closed, I can guarantee that new partner will be you."

He had her with that. There was no way she was going to turn down that opportunity. She envisioned herself looking out onto Central Park from the Upper West Side flat. She'd have a Christmas tree in front of the large picture window in that gorgeous great room this time next year.

"Yes, sir. I'll get your contract signed," she said with confidence. "I want that partnership more than anything."

"You've worked hard to put yourself in a position to achieve that, and I'd hate to see you lose this opportunity. I've arranged a car for you. It's parked downstairs in front of the lobby. I've also booked you a room at the bed-and-breakfast there in Maple Valley. Good luck, and I'll see you back here in a couple of days." He returned his attention to the stack of papers on his desk.

Erica left Larry's office so excited she almost bounced when she walked. The partnership was hers for the taking. She'd worked so hard, and it was finally going to pay off. The doors to the elevator closed, and she began to whistle "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" on the ride down. She would need Julie to cancel all her appointments for the week so she could make the trip to Maple Valley.

Once she reached her office, she riffled through her daily planner and was happy to see her schedule was light this week. Julie wouldn't have many things to reschedule. Erica prided herself on the customer service she provided, and having to cancel appointments on her clients was unacceptable under normal circumstances. This wasn't a normal circumstance, though, and she figured this one time would be okay.

Julie arrived at the office a few minutes before nine. Erica sat on the edge of Julie's desk, tapping her foot. "What's wrong?" Julie asked as she hung up her wet jacket.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You're sitting on the edge of my desk, and it looks like you're ready to fly out the window."

"I have to make a road trip." Erica filled Julie in on the assignment Mr. Davenport had given her.

"Oh, wow. That's awesome," Julie said. "You're finally getting the recognition you deserve. Well, I think you should get that partnership regardless of the outcome of this contract."

"I appreciate that, but this will solidify it for me," Erica said. "I put a list of my appointments on your desk. If you wouldn't mind rescheduling them for me, that would be great."

"Of course, partner." Julie winked.

"Not yet, but I'm headed out to make that happen. I'll call you when I arrive at the bed-and-breakfast." Erica hugged her friend in celebration.

She rode the elevator back down to the lobby to find a four-wheel-drive black SUV sitting outside the front door. With the now-heavy snowfall, she was going to need it for the six-hour drive to Maple Valley. She hurried back to her apartment and packed an overnight bag for her one-day stay. She was in such a hurry she gave little thought to what she packed. In less than an hour, she was on her way out of the city.