

Once Upon a Christmas Anthology: Dirty Santa

Chapter One

“I don’t care if you’re sorry. It’s over, Barry,” Phoebe said, her voice rising right along with her temper. The man didn’t like being dumped. Well, too bad, because she didn’t much care to be pushed around. Literally. They’d argued the night before over something as trivial as what to eat for dinner, Mexican or Chinese. Barry had gotten so angry with her choice of Chinese that he’d pushed her against the refrigerator and screamed in her face. She’d left his apartment even as he started in on the ‘I didn’t mean it’ spiel.

Now, as Phoebe sat at End’s Brew, listening to him apologize for the umpteenth time, she hit the end button on her cell phone. It was clear there was no reasoning with him. Barry had been that way since the first moment she’d met him, Phoebe just hadn’t seen it as clearly as she was seeing it now. He’d either covered it well or she was just blind to men and their faults. The latter was what concerned her. She didn’t want to be the sort of woman who walked into a relationship with stars in her eyes. But maybe that’s exactly what she’d been doing. After all, Roger, the guy she’d dated before Barry, had also turned out to be a loser. His wild paranoia had driven her to call it quits. Every time she’d walked out the front door, Roger had accused her of cheating on him. When Phoebe had discovered he’d even followed her a few times, she’d gotten as far from the guy as possible. It’d taken a restraining order to keep him away, but Phoebe had eventually won back her freedom.

“That’s it,” she grumbled over the rim of her espresso. “The next guy I date is going to be a nice, mild-mannered accountant or something.”

“I hear that,” Lola, the barista, chimed in from across the counter. “I’m ready to give up on guys completely.”

Phoebe smiled. Ah, a woman after her own heart. “The idea does have merit,” she

offered, staring at the petite redhead with the nose piercing and bright green eyes. Phoebe had been coming to End's Brew for a little over a year. When one of her favorite authors had released a new mystery book, Phoebe had started chatting about it only to discover Lola was a fan as well. A friendship was born.

"My ex egged my car when I broke up with him," Lola muttered, as she mixed a perfect latte for a waiting customer. "As if it was somehow my fault that I caught him doing the nasty with his married neighbor."

"Whoa, he cheated on you and *you're* the one whose car got egged?" Phoebe asked. "That hardly seems fair."

"Exactly what I said." She planted a fist on her slim hip. "Guys suck."

And another thing they have in common. Crappy choice in men. "You won't hear any arguments from me." The softer, more romantic side of her added, "But surely there are some decent guys left out there. They can't all be taken."

A deep rumble came from behind her. "Why do I feel like this is one of those *wrong place, wrong time* things?"

She turned a little on her stool and stared into a pair of the most amazing light green eyes she'd ever seen. Like the color of springtime. She could bask in their brilliance forever. *Talk*, she scolded her inner vixen. But no, Wallflower Phoebe was in control and she wasn't about to allow any sort of conversation.

Mister Dreamy Eyes. He was at least half the reason she came to End's Brew. His powerful over-six-foot frame dwarfed her five-foot-one. She tried not to drool as she let her gaze travel the length of him. He always dressed casually, and it made her wonder what he did for a living. Today he sported a white Rolling Stones concert T-shirt, black jeans that had seen better days, and a brown leather jacket. His midnight-black hair was a bit on the shaggy side. A fashion choice or did he just need a trim? He had a square jawline and facial stubble that she'd imagined

kissing. Too many times to count.

Now would be a good time to say hello and introduce herself. Get the ball rolling. If only her voice hadn't abandoned her. Something about the man made her nervous on a feminine level. As if he had some sort of power over her. It intrigued her, but it was also terrifying. She could so easily lose herself in a man like him.

"You're the exception," Lola stated, as she washed a glass carafe. "But only because you're my brother."

Brother? Now Phoebe knew why the gorgeous hottie came to End's Brew. And it had nothing whatsoever to do with Phoebe. Great. Her day just kept getting better.

As Phoebe stared with total abandon at Mister Dreamy she had the most insane thought of simply reaching out and touching him. Just to check and see if he was real. She'd been coming to the little coffee shop with the sole purpose of catching a glimpse of him. And now he was within touching distance. She couldn't be responsible for her wayward hands, right? He laughed and said something to his sister. The movement caused the wide expanse of his chest to tug on the material of his shirt and jacket. As if at any moment the seams might just give way. If only she were so lucky. It wasn't right to have a body like his and expect a woman not to react. A deep longing filled the pit of Phoebe's stomach. She wanted him and yet she had no clue how to catch his interest. He was sex-on-a-stick and she had no freaking idea what to do with that. She looked around the café and noticed other women staring. Prettier women. Women who weren't quite so curvy. Women who had their shit together. Yeah, no surprise there. Women probably threw themselves at him. Lovely.

His black jeans molded to his muscular legs and lean hips. She'd caught him walking out of the café a few times and she'd never been so hot for a man's ass. His was perfection. As solid and muscular as the rest of him. Still, Phoebe wouldn't mind a little squeeze for good measure. With an easy move of his hips, Mister Dreamy was suddenly brushing against her. She let her

gaze travel upward and was caught by the slow, naughty smile kicking up the corners of his mouth.

“So, guys suck, huh?” the adorable man asked.

Her cheeks heated. Just how much had he overheard? “Let’s just say I’m currently starting to believe that all the good ones are taken.”

His grin widened and his eyes never left hers. “Well, I’m not taken. Does this mean I’m one of the bad ones?” he asked, leaning closer. She could feel his breath against her cheek. He smelled minty. As if he’d just brushed his teeth. She imagined him in his bathroom, standing in front of a mirror with nothing but his boxers on. It was a nice image. It was an image she tucked away and planned to take out later when she was alone. Alone with her vibrator.

“Bad ones?” she repeated in an attempt to catch the thread of the conversation. She glanced over at Lola, and replied, “Well, according to your sister you’re one of the good guys.”

“I see.” His gaze drifted downward briefly then back up. His smile vanished and his green eyes darkened. As if turned on. Was she reading too much into the interaction? Probably. She was a lousy flirt. Lousy at figuring out if a man even *was* flirting. For all she knew he was just hungry. Wanted to get his donut and coffee and go. How’s a woman supposed to know?

“Oh, no,” Lola exclaimed. “Don’t you have that charity dinner, Phoebe? The one where you bring a date.”

Crap. She’d forgotten that. “I was going to bring Barry.”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that creep is off the table.”

“And I’m supposed to dress up as an elf.”

“A what?” Mister Dreamy asked, tuning into the conversation.

She smiled. “I’m an administrative assistant at Riley’s Equipment Rental. Anyway, each year they put on a dinner where everyone dresses up as their favorite holiday-themed character. I’d decided to go as an elf and Barry was going to be Santa. Now, I have no Santa. The proceeds

from the dinner are used to purchase toys for kids in need.”

“How about I go as your Santa?” It was so casual, as if he offered to dress up as a fat guy in a red suit and white beard every day.

Phoebe laughed. “You can’t be serious.”

One eyebrow arched upward. “I’m totally serious. It’s for the kids, right?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Good,” he ground out. “I’ll be your Santa then.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Is this a date?” Was she fantasizing? Had to be that. No way was Mister Dreamy asking her out.

He leaned against the counter and just sort of caged her in. As if trying to keep her from bolting. Yeah, right. Her butt was rooted to the chair. She wasn’t going anywhere. “Yes, it’s a date,” he repeated. “Unless it’s too soon, considering you’re anti-men right now.”

Is that what he thought? That she was anti-men? No way could she let him go on thinking that. “I’m not anti-men, I promise,” she rushed to reassure him. “I’m just anti-Barry. And anti-Roger. And anti-jerk.”

He chuckled. “I get it. I feel sorry for Barry and Roger.”

“Don’t waste energy on Barry.” She shrugged, realizing that Barry was all but forgotten in the face of so much delicious maleness. “I don’t plan to.”

“Glad to hear it,” he replied. “Now, about that date…”

She frowned. Was he for real? “I don’t even know your name.”

“Dax Hale,” he quickly said as he cocked his head to the side. “And you are?”

“Phoebe.” Her breath seemed to be trapped in her chest. She had to concentrate ridiculously hard on exhaling. “Phoebe Martin.” There. Totally in control.

He held out his hand and grinned. Phoebe’s blood sang in her veins. “Nice to meet you, Phoebe.”

Phoebe started to grasp Dax's hand, anxious to touch him, any part of him, but a loud crash interrupted them. She glanced up to see a man waving a gun in the air. Several customers ran out of the door. Lola's eyes widened and she froze. Phoebe got off the stool, then from one second to the next Dax had her pinned to his back with one hand, every muscle tense and ready for battle. Phoebe peeked around his large body and saw the gunman swing the firearm in their direction. Now it aimed directly at Dax. Phoebe realized just how fast life could change. And how much danger Dax was in. He stood between her and certain death. The notion nearly had her knees buckling. *Keep it together, damn it.* The wild eyes of the robber made Phoebe wonder if he were on drugs.

"Open the register, bitch," he shouted at Lola, as spit flew from his mouth. "I want that fucking money now!"

Lola held up both hands in surrender. "Okay, okay," she stated, her voice shaking with fear.

A man seated near the door started to stand, but the movement caught the robber's attention. He swung in his direction and yelled, "Don't even think about it, asshole."

With the robber's back turned, Dax leaped into action and jumped onto the man's back. They both fell to the floor, knocking over chairs and tables as they wrestled on the ground. Several customers fled and a few stragglers hung back, pulling out their phones as if to record the dangerous encounter. Yeah, like that was the important thing to do.

Phoebe quickly dialed 911, giving the address for the café and explaining to the dispatcher what was happening, then ended the call. "The police are on the way," she called out to Dax.

The robber cursed and struggled, but his reed-thin frame was no match for Dax's muscular build. Within seconds Dax sat on top of the man, his hands pinned behind his back. He picked up the gun and held it out. "Sis, take care of this," he bit out.

Lola rushed around the counter and took the weapon from his hands, then placed it on a shelf near the register. “Jesus, Dax. What the hell?”

Phoebe reached for her friend and pulled her in for a hug. “Are you okay?”

Lola shook her head. “I don’t get paid enough for this.”

The man kicked and writhed, cursing a blue streak and forcing Dax to pull his arms harder. “Stay still or I’ll knock your ass out.”

“Fuck you!” The robber shouted, going still.

Phoebe and Lola stood together, watching as Dax took charge of the scene. Customers were offering their heartfelt thanks for his quick thinking. Phoebe had been infatuated with the man before, but seeing him in action sent him into a whole different hot-for-you category. Mister Dreamy had just become Mister Do-Me.

Two hours passed before the whole ordeal was finally over. The café owner had shown up, thanked Dax and Lola, then closed for the rest of the afternoon. Dax had insisted that Lola get a raise and the owner didn’t have it in him to refuse, considering Dax had saved the day.

After the police left, Phoebe’s composure melted away. She stared at Lola and Dax, realizing how close they’d all come to being shot. Tears filled Phoebe’s eyes and she glanced down to see her hands shaking. “I-I don’t think I can drive.”

Dax closed the distance between them and hugged her closely. The scent of leather and man filled her senses, calming her. “Sh, it’s okay,” he murmured in a deep, tender voice. “It’s all over and no one was hurt, right?”

Lola patted her on the back with a trembling hand. “God, Dax, I can’t believe how brave you were. And stupid. He could’ve shot you.”

Dax glared at his sister. “Uh, you’re welcome?”

Phoebe swiped the tears out of her eyes. “He looked like he was on something.” She pushed out of Dax’s arms and stared at her hands. “I’m shaking like a leaf.”

“Hey, you didn’t panic though,” Lola offered, smiling at her. “You stayed in control, that’s the important thing.”

“You too,” Phoebe stated. “I mean, he aimed that gun and you were a rock.”

“Seeing as how the bad guy is in handcuffs, maybe now we can get back to the conversation.”

“Conversation?” Phoebe was lost. All she could remember was the barrel of the gun aimed at Dax’s chest. She’d see it in her nightmares.

“Santa, remember?” Dax explained, a smile lifting his lips. “And you’ll be my elf.”

Her brain must be misfiring. “You can think of that after what just happened?” she asked, unable to resist the gorgeous man.

He shrugged. “Those kids still need presents. We have a duty to perform, right?”

Phoebe shook her head, wondering if he was certifiable. “I don’t know if I want to laugh or cry right now.”

He touched her chin with his index finger. “Life is short. You have to grab opportunities while you can,” he murmured. “So, about that party…”

She squinted up at him, more curious than ever about a man who could fight off a gunman and still have the wits about him to think of a charity dinner. “I can’t believe you’re willing to dress up as Santa. You don’t even know me.”

“No time like the present.” His answering grin did wicked things to her insides. “Besides, I’m just dying to see you dressed as a sexy elf.”

She straightened her spine. Time to put Wallflower Phoebe away and let Vixen Phoebe out to play for a change. “You’re on.” She gave him her phone number, then watched him walk

away.

Lola whistled low. "You're so into him."

Phoebe could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. "Your brother is hot."

"Gross," she muttered, grabbing her purse from behind the counter. "Come on, we both need a drink. And not a latte either."

Whiskey and Coke did sound good. It'd calm her nerves at least. "Good idea."

She patted her on the shoulder, then said, "And you can tell me how long you've had a crush on Dax while we're at it."

Phoebe tripped over her own feet. "Say what?"

Lola arched one knowing brow. "Really? Think I couldn't tell?"

Had she been that obvious? "Okay, fine, I think he's good-looking. He's willing to be my plus-one and I'm grateful. That's all there is to it." Another thought occurred. "Besides, he drives a motorcycle and he's got this alpha male vibe. I'm done with alphas. Give me a beta."

"I call bullshit." She snorted. "Sure, he's the alpha type, but he's also sort of a geek."

Say what? "Seriously?"

"He's into cybersecurity. Not barroom brawls." She paused, then added, "And he's so freaking into *you* too."

The cybersecurity thing intrigued her, but the latter part of Lola's statement definitely needed to be addressed. "He's been coming to the café for months and this is the first time he's spoken a word to me. No, he's not into me. You're way wrong there."

"Jeez, woman, he couldn't take his eyes off you today." She looked her up and down, then grinned. "You are gorgeous so it only makes sense."

Lola's description was so far off that she wondered if the poor blind woman needed glasses. "I'm not gorgeous," she argued. "I'm too plump for starters."

"Yeah, you've got curves," she agreed. "And my brother likes what he sees."

Getting onto the Lola train, Phoebe asked, “You really think so?”

She nodded. “You should make him beg a little. Play hard to get. It’ll do him some good.”

Phoebe tsked, then swatted her friend on the shoulder. “Your brother just saved us from a bullet and that’s how you thank him?”

She snickered, then got in behind the wheel of her red VW bug. “I’m the little sister. It’s my job to make him nuts.”

Phoebe slid into the passenger side, giving Lola’s words some thought. Could she pull off the teasing siren act with Dax? Only one way to find out.

Dirty Santa by Anne Rainey