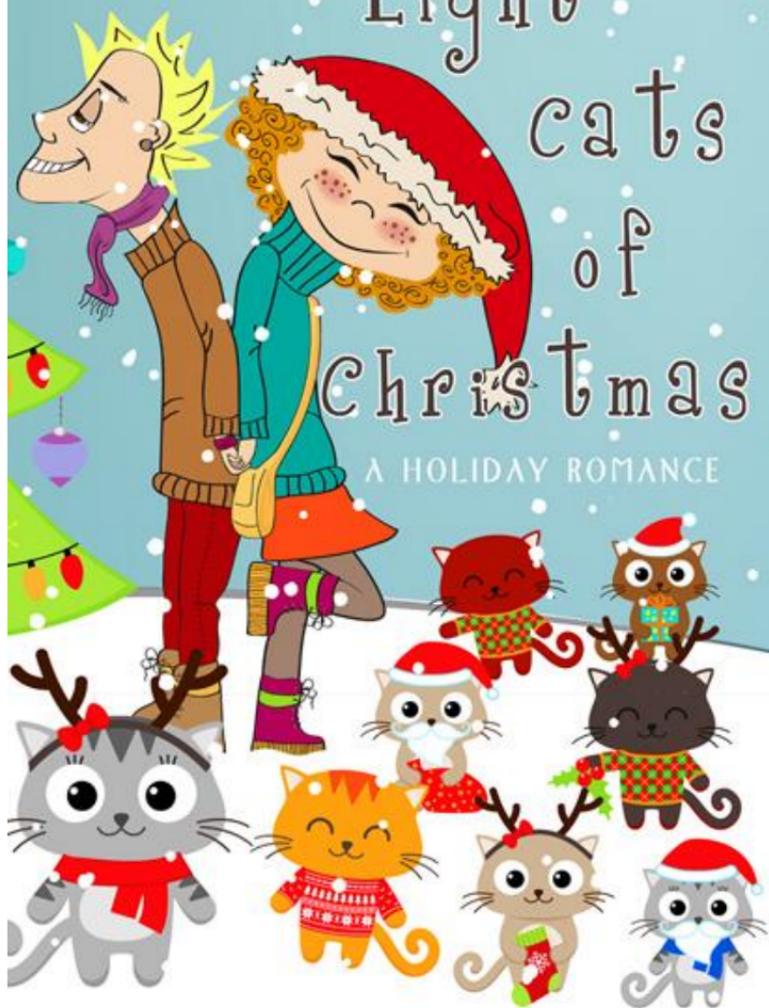


ERIN STEVENSON

Eight
cats
of
Christmas

A HOLIDAY ROMANCE



Eight Cats of Christmas

Erin Stevenson

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Eight Cats of Christmas
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Dedication

For my Un Buddy
and all the cats we've loved.

1

Mia Donovan blew into her family's restaurant and closed the door against the wind. Good. Finn had put up the "closed for private party" sign.

A quick glance told her everything was ready to go. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Mia marched through the saloon doors into the kitchen and shrugged out of her winter coat, unwrapped her long green and white scarf, and hung both on a peg on the wall. Shaking out her long red hair, she frowned at her brother, Finn, who was standing at the stove.

"You got the salads done?"

"Yes, Mia."

"All three sauces?"

"Yes, Mia."

"Are the cheesecakes ready?"

Finn scowled. "You act like I've never catered a dinner."

She wrung her hands. "But Faith's rehearsal dinner has to be perfect."

"It will be, little sis."

Mia grabbed a spoon and sidled up next to him. "Let me taste that," she muttered. She dipped the spoon into the pot, blew on it, and put it to her lips.

“Mmmm. Not bad.”

“Not bad?!” Finn’s tone was incredulous.

“Well...” Mia rocked her hand back and forth.

Finn elbowed her. “It’s better than Dad’s, and you know it.”

Mia giggled. “Well...yeah, but I won’t tell.”

“That’s more like it.” His deep blue eyes sparkled.

She saw his hand coming to muss her hair, ducked, and shot away. “Hey! No messing with the maid of honor’s hair.” It had taken her an hour to tame it.

Finn chuckled. “Perfect Mia.”

Mia went to the sound system and put on some background music. She was happy she could make her brother laugh. He’d had a rough year and buried himself in work. She hummed along and spent the next few minutes putting the finishing touches on the tables while Finn brought all the hot food out to the warming trays. She was just topping off the water glasses when the bell on the door tinkled.

She braced herself for the onslaught of an army of Donovans.

They trooped in, bringing the cold December wind on the tail of their noise and laughter. Her parents, aunt, and uncle along with her cousins and their families. Faith was the youngest of the five girls, the last to be married.

As was their custom, Mia and Faith made a beeline for one another. They were months apart in age, closer than sisters. Faith had been a caboose baby, several years younger than her next closest sister.

Faith took a deep breath. "It looks and smells amazing."

"Finn did every bit of it. Be sure to let him know how good it is."

"Don't worry. I will. How's he doing?" Faith whispered.

"I think he's OK. I'm keeping an eye on him."

Faith cocked her head. "But who's keeping an eye on you, Mia?"

Mia waved a hand. "I'm fine." She didn't want to dwell on the subject. "I can't believe your wedding weekend is here!" she squealed.

The two cousins hugged. "Your dress will look amazing." Faith sighed.

"Mine? What about yours? Oh, it was so much fun choosing our dresses without a whole bevy of bridesmaids." Mia was so proud of her cousin for standing her ground. Faith and Cooper wanted a small, simple wedding, and that's what they got.

Mia accepted a brotherly hug from Faith's fiancé. "Hey, Cooper."

"Hey, Mia." Cooper already felt like family. He and Faith had dated for four years, and Mia had been on the receiving end of his teasing and many practical jokes. She couldn't believe that by this time tomorrow, Cooper would be Faith's husband. The reality both excited and depressed her. Things would be different from now on.

Faith patted Mia's golden red curls. "Your hair looks great."

"I used my new curling iron. Thanks for the early

Christmas present! Your hair looks gorgeous, as usual." Faith's thick, layered blonde hair wasn't nearly as high maintenance as Mia's wild, curly mane.

Faith fingered one of Mia's dangly earrings, a cluster of jingle bells. "Mia, it's only December first!"

"I know! Never too early for me, you know." She touched her matching necklace.

Cooper smirked. "She's already got the Christmas music on, too."

Faith laughed. "That's my cuz." She drew a flat green bag out of her purse. "I couldn't resist this when I saw it."

Mia's face broke into a smile when she opened the journal with three kittens on the front, decked out in lights and Santa hats. "My fave combo, cats and Christmas!" she squealed. "I love it. Thank you!"

Cooper reached into his pocket for his phone. "It's Murph," he murmured. Cooper's childhood friend was on his way from New York to be his best man.

Cooper listened and then winced. "Believe me, I've made that drive dozens of times, and it's a bear. Just stay safe, and we'll see you when you get here. I'll text you the address." He disconnected the call.

He put his arm around Faith. "Bad accident on 90. He won't make it for dinner. He'll meet us at the church."

"I'll have Finn box up a dinner to take to him," Mia said.

Faith patted her arm. "That's so nice of you. Leave it to you to think of that."

A burst of noise came from Faith's nieces and

nephews, and she and Mia exchanged a look.

"Gosh, I'm glad the whole family's not in the wedding party," Mia whispered.

Faith nodded. "Well, it didn't make any sense. If all my sisters were bridesmaids, Cooper would have had to rent groomsmen to make it even." She looked at him lovingly. "He just wanted Bryce, and I just wanted you."

More clatter from the kids. Mia rolled her eyes. "Can you imagine having all of them as flower girls and ring bearer boys and what not?" She giggled.

"Ugh." Faith shuddered.

Cooper looked deep in thought, and Mia poked his arm. "You having second thoughts about joining this crazy clan tomorrow?" she teased.

"What?" He leaned in and kissed Faith on the cheek. "No second thoughts at all. I'm just trying to figure out a safe place to stash my car."

Mia frowned. "Your car?"

Faith put her arms around Cooper, and he rested his head on hers. "When Bryce got married, Cooper did a real number on his car. He's afraid of payback."

Cooper snorted. "Not afraid, certain. Murph's got something big up his sleeve. I know it. If I could just find a place to hide it where he can't get to it, I'd rest easier."

They had to take Cooper's car on their wedding trip. Faith's clunker wouldn't make it out of Boston. Mia gave a little gasp. "Grandma Izzy! She has a two-car garage, and she doesn't even drive anymore. We had to take her car away from her." Grandma Izzy was

Mia's maternal grandma.

"That's perfect!" Faith exclaimed.

"It's not that far from the church, either," Mia said.

Cooper opened his arms and grinned. "Mia, you're a lifesaver."

Mia smiled to herself against Cooper's chest. *I sure am.*

2

Bryce Murphy checked his mirrors and pulled around an eighteen-wheeler. According to the GPS, he'd be at the church in less than ten minutes. He felt terrible for missing the dinner, and now he was late for the rehearsal. Coop texted him that Faith's cousin, Finn, was standing in for him until Bryce arrived. The pastor had another meeting tonight so they couldn't wait.

Bryce wasn't sure what needed to be "rehearsed" anyway. He'd been in both his step-brothers' weddings and did little more than just stand there.

And he'd been in his own wedding and did the same.

Bryce blew out a breath. He'd been telling himself all week that he wouldn't think about it. He hadn't been to a wedding since his own and swore he'd never go to another one, let alone be in one.

But Cooper Atkinson was more like a brother than a lifelong friend. His parents had opened their home to Bryce when he needed one, and they'd been like family to him ever since. No way could he refuse to stand up with Coop.

No matter how much pain it caused his heart.

As wary as Bryce was toward women now, he and

Coop had had several heart-to-hearts, and Coop had convinced him that Faith was nothing like Bryce's ex. And Bryce discovered that for himself the first time he met Faith. He'd jokingly asked if she had any sisters. Turned out she did—four of them, already married.

Bryce needed to rehearse his toast for the reception but wasn't in the mood to think about that now. Man, he wished he could figure out how to get to Coop's getaway car, but Faith didn't have any brothers he could conspire with, and there were no other groomsmen. He knew exactly what he would do if he had a group of helpers. Oh, well. It would have been fun.

Finally, he got off the highway and it was a short trip through side streets to the church. Bryce pulled into the parking lot and exited the car, taking a moment to stretch.

He sprinted up the front steps, through the vestibule and the open doors, and into the sanctuary. As usual, his eye went to the artistic lines of the vast space. What a beautiful building. Coop had told him this was one of the oldest churches in Boston. Bryce wished he were the photographer tomorrow instead of the best man. Then he quickly canceled that wish. He loved photography as an avocation but would never want the pressure of photographing a wedding. Too much drama.

"Murph!" Coop met him halfway down the aisle, smothering him in a back-pounding hug. "So glad you're safe, bud."

Bryce squeezed his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry

I'm late."

"Hey, not your fault. And it's only ten minutes. We just started."

The front pews were sparsely populated with what Bryce guessed were members of the bride's family. He spied Coop's parents and waved to them.

"Hey, Bryce," Faith called out.

"Hi, Faith."

The pastor stood front and center on the platform. Bryce followed Coop, and a tall, lanky dark-haired man stepped away. Coop patted him on the arm as he passed. "Thanks for standing in, Finn."

"No problem." He nodded to Bryce with a kind smile. "Glad you made it safely."

"Thanks."

Bryce took his place beside Coop. "Of course, you know Faith," his friend said. He pointed past her. "That's her cousin, Mia. This is Bryce."

"Hi," Bryce murmured.

Mia smiled and gave him a little finger wave.

The rehearsal continued with nothing unexpected as far as Bryce was concerned. When the pastor gave a thumbnail sketch about the loving and honoring portion of the vows, Bryce tuned him out.

He returned to the present when the pastor said, "Now the best man and maid of honor follow them out."

Oh, that was his cue. Coop and Faith were already halfway down the aisle. Heat rose to Bryce's face. He stepped toward Mia and offered his arm.

Bryce took stock of her short height and prepared

to slow his pace, but she motored right along.

Then she squeezed his bicep, gazed up at him, and uttered four words that shot joy into his heart.

"I've got the car." It came out a little like *cah*, but he knew what she meant.

Bryce stared at her. She had the most vivid green eyes he'd ever seen, showcased with shimmering eye shadow.

"Coop's car. It'll be stashed in my grandma's garage tomorrow, not far from here. He doesn't suspect a thing."

Bryce was so stunned he couldn't form a coherent thought. "I-wow!" he managed to squeak out.

Mia threw back her head and laughed. "I know, right?"

They arrived in the vestibule, and Faith and Coop came right to them.

"What so funny, Mia?" Faith asked.

"Oh, Bryce just told me a joke." She laughed again. Her small, delicate hand still rested on his arm. "Cooper, you didn't tell me your friend was so funny."

"Yeah, that's Murph. Funny, funny Murph." Coop raised an eyebrow at his friend.

Bryce still couldn't speak. All his senses were short-circuiting. His heart skittered crazily, and his palms broke into a sweat.

What was wrong with him?

Fortunately, Coop's parents chose that moment to join them. Bryce greeted them and made small talk. Then Faith took them and Coop to find her parents and discuss more wedding details, and Bryce was left alone

with Mia.

Mia. He didn't even know her last name.

She looked like Christmas personified with her red hair, green eyes, emerald green dress, and red, green, and silver jingle bell jewelry.

Jingle bell jewelry? Beyond cute.

He had to get a hold of himself. He swallowed. "Um, what's your last name?" Did he really just ask that? Heat inched up his neck.

A tiny crease appeared between her perfect eyebrows. "Donovan, same as Faith. Well, until tomorrow. Why?"

Bryce wanted to crawl in a hole, a deep, dark hole. His heart was still galloping. "Oh, I-I was just curious." He palmed the back of his neck. Get your mind in the game, man.

He cleared his throat and looked around to make sure no one would overhear. "I-how did you know I wanted to get Coop's car?"

She grinned, showing perfect, white teeth, and those emerald eyes sparkled again. "He told me you wanted to pay him back for what he did to your car at your wedding." Her smile faded. "I'm, oh gosh, I'm sorry--"

"It's OK. Really." So, Coop had told her about the divorce.

Mia cleared her throat. "Anyway, if you want some help, I'm sure I can get Finn on board, and Faith has four brothers-in-law who will jump at the chance to put one over on Coop."

That was better than Bryce had hoped for.

"I've convinced Cooper that the car will be safe in my Grandma Izzy's garage. It's not far from here. Do you want me to get him to take it there tonight?"

Bryce was still so overwhelmed by her that he couldn't think straight.

She grabbed his arm. "Oh, you have got to be starving! I packed some food for you from the rehearsal dinner. It's in my bag in the sanctuary." She babbled on. "Stay here. I'll grab it, and we can go sit in the fellowship hall."

Bryce just stood there, rooted to the spot, taking in her beautiful hair and face, gazing at the whole package for the first time. She was on the short side of medium but wore platform shoes that put the top of her head even with his shoulders. Her green dress accentuated her small waist and flared out, ending just above her knees. And she wore sparkly black tights. Her golden red curls bounced and shimmered as she flounced away.

And was that faint jingling he heard?

Mia sparkled all over. Her eyes, her face, her hair in the light. Her laugh. That sparkling laugh. It still rang in his ears. The instant he heard her laugh, Bryce was completely, totally gone.

And that was the last thing he wanted.

3

Mia brushed away a lock of hair and fanned her face. Goodness, if Bryce Murphy wasn't the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on. Those baby blues! But he lived in New York, so that was a deal breaker. Mia was Boston born and bred and had no intention of leaving. Ever. Her roots were planted here and grew deeper by the day.

And she wasn't in the market for a relationship now, anyway, even if her mother constantly whined at her like a leaky faucet.

"Uncle Michael and Aunt Angela have seven grandchildren, and we don't have any." *Drip, drip, drip.* "Finn is already thirty and not showing interest in any girl, so I'll never get any from him." *Drip, drip.* "All you ever do is work, Mia. Don't you want a husband and family?" *Drip.*

Mia picked up the glass of ice water, closed her eyes, and told herself to breathe. Then she sailed out to the table where Bryce sat.

She placed the glass in front of him. "Sorry I can't offer you anything but water."

He smiled. Heaven above. "Watah's great. I never drink enough." He took a big gulp.

She crossed her arms. "Are you making fun of my

accent, New Yawk?"

Bryce roared with laughter. "Never. Your accent's great."

"Mine is nothing compared to my parents'. You have one, too, you know. You a baseball fan?"

"Hmm, I should probably plead the fifth." He smiled.

She noticed something sitting by his plate. "Is that an inhaler?"

"Yes. I have asthma."

"Oh." Why had she said anything? It wasn't any of her business. Mia twisted her hands in front of her.

Bryce took another forkful of lasagna, chewed, and swallowed. "You can sit, you know."

Mia's face warmed. Oh, right. What was she doing, standing there watching him eat like it was a spectator sport? She took a seat at the round table, leaving one chair between them.

"Did you make this lasagna? It's delicious."

"Ah, no. That would be Finn, my brother. Are you sure it's warm enough?" She'd reheated it in the microwave.

Bryce nodded and swallowed another bite. "It's seriously good. And the fettucine alfredo is—wow." He tilted his head. "This is from the restaurant Faith's dad runs with—is it your dad?"

"Yes. Donovan's Pub and Grub. Our dads are brothers. My great-grandparents opened the pub when they came here from Ireland. Then they passed it to their children, and then it passed to my dad and uncle. They added the "grub." Started with strictly Irish food.

Then they added American, and then Italian when my Aunt Angela married in." She nodded toward his plate. "Both those recipes are from her family."

"And it's in North Boston? I thought South Boston was more Irish." The church was almost halfway between.

"Yes, but when my great-grandparents came here, North Boston was still almost completely Irish. By about 1880, the Italians had moved in. Most of the North End is strictly Italian now, but we're one of the lone original Irish restaurants and very unique to boot."

Her pride was obvious, and Bryce liked that. "Do you cook?" he asked.

Mia laughed. "I'm not allowed. An incident involving the fire department. My contribution to the restaurant is seating people. Handing them menus, filling water glasses."

Bryce raised his glass and lifted an eyebrow. "I could tell. Best water I've ever had."

Mia burst out laughing. "Oh, my mother warned me about guys like you."

"Me?" He drained the glass but never broke eye contact with her. "I'm as harmless as a kitten." His gorgeous blue eyes twinkled.

Hmm. Had Faith or Cooper told him about Mia and her cats? "Um, where are you staying tonight?" she asked. Cooper had already moved out of his apartment and would move into Faith's condo after their honeymoon.

"Wherever Coop and his parents are staying. He