

ERIN STEVENSON

*A Dream of
Christmas*

A HOLIDAY
CONTEMPORARY
ROMANCE



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Erin Stevenson

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1

Finn Donovan flipped the sign to *Closed*, locked the door, and rested his head on the cold glass. He was so exhausted he could barely move.

He'd made it. He'd survived Thanksgiving.

Donovan's restaurant was an institution on Boston's North End and had been in Finn's family for four generations. Robbie and Michael Donovan, Finn's father and uncle, had taken it over from their parents nearly fifty years ago but were now retired. Between them, they had six daughters—Finn's sister Mia and their five girl cousins—all of whom still lived in the area but were busy wives and mothers with little inclination or time for the restaurant. Finn was the sole proprietor now.

He pulled away from the door and shuffled to the back, turning off lights as he went. When he entered the saloon doors into the kitchen, a wave of exhaustion slammed into him.

The kitchen looked like a war zone.

It was his own fault. Donovan's had always closed for Thanksgiving until Finn had taken over last year, and his decision to open on the holiday was just one more bone of contention between himself and his dad and uncle, who couldn't believe he was giving away all that food. Finn insisted that the neighborhood meeting

place would give people with no place to go a warm meal and community fellowship. It wasn't always about the bottom line.

He'd had help from some of the family today, but once they closed, he shooed them and his crew out. Finn needed to be alone and cleaning the kitchen would be therapeutic for him.

It would also keep him from having to go upstairs to his dark, lonely apartment with nothing but thoughts of the anniversary of this day to keep him company.

Finn took a breath and ran a hand through his hair. The kitchen wouldn't clean itself. He walked out to the soda fountain and grabbed a plastic tumbler. After filling it with ice, he put the cup under the clear soda spigot but then changed his mind. Tonight, he needed caffeine.

The front door rattled as someone pounded on it.

Soda splashed out of the cup onto his hand. Finn tipped his head back and closed his eyes. *No*. He couldn't serve one more meal. But if someone was in need, he wouldn't—couldn't—turn them away.

"Hello! Is anyone there?" A female voice.

Finn strode to the door, and his heart stopped. A woman stood on the other side of the door, surrounded by four children, all bundled in winter clothing. Two of them were tall, boys. The younger two looked like a boy and a girl.

"Finn, is that you?"

It couldn't be. Even in the dim light, in the swirling snow, he'd know those eyes anywhere.

He wrenched open the door. "Come in, come in." The little group trooped in, bringing a blast of cold air and flurries with them, and Finn closed it behind them. He switched on the light.

Charity Sullivan stared back at him, the only girl who'd ever owned his heart. What in the world was she doing here?

Finn was instantly transported back to exactly seventeen years ago when two souls connected in a way that Finn hadn't experienced since. Over a period of a few months, they'd talked for hours, held hands, and one night, under a gently falling snow, shared a kiss that shimmered with hope and promise.

One sweet, perfect, magical kiss.

Finn hadn't seen her since that night.

He stood rooted the spot, drinking her in, and she seemed to be doing the same.

After a few seconds, which felt much longer, she cleared her throat. "Children, this is Mr. Donovan. This is Bobby Jr., Bryan, Nico, and Bridget."

No one said anything. Charity laid her hand on the oldest boy's shoulder.

The teen offered his hand, encased in a thick leather glove. "Nice to meet you," he mumbled. As Finn gazed into the boy's blazing eyes, nearly even with his, a jolt of familiarity shook him.

"Pleased to meet you," the next one offered with a nod. There was a clear resemblance to his older brother, but his expression was more open.

The youngest boy took in everything around them, wide-eyed. "Is all of this yours?"

“Nico.” Charity had that mom warning tone down pat.

Finn swallowed a smile.

“I am very happy to meet you,” the boy stated in a loud, clear voice. He stuck out his hand and pumped Finn’s.

The little girl hid behind Charity’s leg.

“Bridget, say hello to Mr. Donovan.”

One green eye peeked out. “Hello, Mr. Don-va-von,” she stumbled.

Finn was a goner. Little Bridget’s hair was covered by a hat, but he’d bet it was her mother’s exact shade, the color of red maple leaves blazing in the autumn sun.

“Why don’t you call me Mr. Finn.” It was still cold by the door. “Come with me,” he said with a sweep of his hand. “The fire’s almost out, but I’ll get some more wood on it.”

They followed him to one end of the main dining room to an open fireplace with a casual seating area. Charity sat in one of the chairs, pulled Bridget onto her lap, and pulled Nico close beside her. The two older boys stood behind them, looking as if they were standing guard.

Finn pulled several pieces out of the wood box and reached for the poker, but Bryan beat him to it. “I’ll help.”

“Why, thank you, Bryan.”

Within moments, the flames roared to life, and a blanket of warmth settled over them. Finn lowered himself into an armchair and tried not to stare. Of

course, his gaze returned to Charity.

She'd been a beautiful young woman at eighteen and now was stunningly gorgeous. But pain pooled in her eyes, the kind that comes with being beat down by life. Her clothing, as well as the children's, was the high quality that one would expect from one of Massachusetts's longstanding, wealthiest, and most influential families.

But something was off.

Finn could see it in their eyes, and almost feel the desperation coming off them in waves.

"Mommy, I smell something good. I'm hungry."

Charity's face flushed pink. "Nico, shh!"

"Me, too," Bridget whimpered.

Finn jumped up. "Well, it's a good thing I have too many leftovers than I know what to do with," he exclaimed. "We just hosted a big Thanksgiving dinner for anyone who needed a meal. We fed over four hundred people, and thanks to some generous sponsors, the cost was all covered."

Charity still looked uncomfortable.

"If no one eats it, I'll just have to pack it up and take it to one of the shelters tomorrow morning. You'd be doing me a favor."

The little ones looked at their mother expectantly, as did Bryan. Bobby's expression remained set in stone.

Gratitude shown in her eyes. "If you're sure, then."

Finn held his hands out to Nico and Bridget, and they happily latched on. Charity and the older boys followed.

Within minutes, the children had filled their plates and were installed at one of the big, semi-circular corner booths. Finn carried in a tray and set glasses of milk down for all of them.

Charity started to sit with them, but Finn rested a hand on her elbow.

"Will you kids be OK here if I take your mom over to that table so we can chat?"

"We'll be fine, Mr. Finn, we're grown up," Nico piped up.

Bobby glared at him and shoveled another spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

Bryan was seated next to Bridget, cutting her turkey into small bites. "I'll help her, Mom."

"Feel free to get seconds if you want," Finn tossed over his shoulder as he led Charity away to one of the small tables near the fireplace.

He pulled out her chair, and she sat and put her napkin in her lap. "Finn, I appreciate this," she whispered. Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked away.

She looked as if she was about to drop, and he just wanted to get some nourishment into her. "Let me get you something from the fountain," he offered. "Or would you like coffee?"

"Decaf would be wonderful, if you have it."

"I'll be right back."

Finn hurried away, and then slowed. He didn't want to appear too anxious, but he couldn't wait to hear Charity's story.

~*~

Charity spooned a forkful of turkey and gravy into her mouth and closed her eyes. She hadn't eaten since last night except for a banana and a granola bar on the bus. Until she had an income stream in place, she had to make her money last, and her children came first.

She glanced at them. The older boys had just returned to their table with more food for all of them.

Charity's heart gave a painful squeeze. She was the worst mother in the history of the world. What must Finn think of her?

He came out of the kitchen with two mugs, stopped and chatted a few moments with the children and ruffled Nico's hair. Then he strolled toward Charity with an easy, rolling gait. He wore an apron over a long-sleeved t-shirt. The sleeves were pushed up to his elbows, revealing corded arms, and jeans encased his slim waist.

"Here you go." Finn set down a mug with the restaurant's logo, *Donovan's* with a small "7" above it.

That was strange.

He pulled over a small basket with cream and sugar, and Charity added one of each. "Thank you," she murmured. She took another bite of food, keeping her eyes averted.

Because she could have stared at Finn Donovan all night.

At nineteen, he had been tall and painfully skinny. But now, he was powerful and broad-shouldered. His former mop of wild, black hair was now short on the

sides, and the top curved and waved in a totally carefree way. He sported a five-o'clock shadow in contrast to when she'd known him and he'd shaved every other day.

And those amazing crystal eyes. They still bore through Charity like twin blue lasers. She'd met a lot of stunningly attractive men over the last decade, but none of them could hold a candle to this dark Irish hunk.

She glanced at him and thought he was about to say something when Nico skipped up to the table, his dark curls bouncing. "Mama, I'm supposed to ask you if you want anything else to eat."

Charity suppressed a grin. Oh, my, did this one ever keep her busy.

"No, thank you, Nico." She looked at Finn. "It was delicious. Thank you so much."

Nico grinned at Finn, revealing a missing tooth. "We finished our food, Mr. Finn. Can we have pie now, please?"

"*May* we have pie," Charity corrected him.

"*May* we have pie," Nico parroted.

Finn nodded and rose. "That was our deal." He looked at Charity. "Pumpkin, peach, or cherry?"

"I'll let you choose," she murmured.

Nico grabbed his hand and dragged him away.

Charity took a sip of her coffee and suppressed a yawn. It had been such a long day, and it was far from over.

A squeal from Bridget drew Charity's attention to where Finn was with the kids. He'd squirted a small

dollop of whipped cream on hers and Nico's noses. Charity smiled. She knew just what pie flavors each of her children chose: peach for Bobby, cherry for Nico, pumpkin for Bryan and Bridget.

When Finn set a piece of cherry pie before her, pleasure settled in her chest.

"You remembered."

"Of course." He set the can of whipped cream on the table. "But no whipped cream." He tipped his head toward the children. "I didn't think it was a good idea to leave it there."

She laughed. "You were right."

His gaze turned serious. "So, did you ever win a National Pie Championship?"

She swallowed a piece of pie and gave him a weak smile. "No. My life didn't exactly turn out the way I had hoped."

His handsome features were suddenly taken over by a melancholy wave. "Does anyone's?" he murmured.

She ate another couple of bites, set down her fork, and then looked at her children. "But I have them, and that's all that matters."

Finn rested his forearms on the table. "You still married to Bobby?"

So, he knew.

She exhaled. "No. That ended a long time ago. My name is Barbieri now, but I'd love to get rid of that name." She looked at her lap. "But I won't go back to Prescott, and I can't—well, my father wouldn't like it if I took back Sullivan."

Finn smirked. "How is the governor these days?"

She shrugged. "I haven't seen my parents in years. They're retired in Palm Beach."

Silence stretched between them, and Finn emptied his mug. "More coffee?"

"No, thank you." Charity's heart kicked up a notch. It was now or never. She lowered her voice. "May we talk a little more privately?"

"How about I put on a movie for the kids? I'll make sure it's family friendly." He winked, making Charity's heart flip. "There's a seating area in the far corner with a big screen."

When he returned to the table, he'd shed his apron, and his shirt stretched across his torso. *Holy moly*. He gestured for her to follow him to the curved sofa in front of the fire, and they settled in.

"Can I get you more coffee?"

He'd already asked her that. Maybe he was nervous.

"No, I'm fine."

You can do this. "Finn, there's a reason I came here. I need a job."

One dark eyebrow raised. "I'm listening."

"I, um, well, I've never won any awards, but I'm an accomplished baker. I was in Providence earlier this month at the Bakers' Expo."

Finn's eyes widened. "I was there."

"I know. I wanted to come by your booth, but I lost my nerve."

He leaned back and folded his hands on his stomach. "You were there looking for work?"

She nodded.

"Where do you live?"

She picked at a miniscule piece of lint on her sweater. "Until today, Atlantic City."

His eyes widened. "*That Barbieri?*"

"Yes. Salvatore is my father-in-law."

Finn let out a low whistle. "Barbieri's Italian Lounge is legendary. The original flagship restaurant is right on the boardwalk. I was there maybe ten years ago."

"That was before I got there. Bobby, Jr. and Bryan are, as you guessed, Prescotts. Nico and Bridget are Barbieris." She sighed. "I made terrible choices in husbands. I—" She swallowed and blew out a breath. "Wow, this is harder than I thought."

"You don't have to share anything you're not ready to."

She promised herself she wouldn't cry, but Finn's gaze held such gentle compassion, and she was so weary, a tear escaped. He grabbed a clean napkin off a nearby table and handed it to her.

"Anyway, we've always lived at the villa with Marco's family. We had our own wing, but Sal controlled our entire lives." She sighed. "You have no idea how hard I had to fight to name our daughter Bridget. Her middle name is Isabella, and the Barbieris have always called her Bella."

Finn rubbed his chin. "I'm sorry to sound crass, but you've got to be worth millions. Why are you asking for a job in a little Irish family restaurant?"

She scoffed. "I don't have any money of my own."

Sal completely controlled our finances, and I received a monthly allowance. But, um, I'm on my own now. My divorce was final on Monday."

"Just this past Monday?"

She nodded.

His sapphire eyes widened. "Oh."

"My plan was to move out and find work as a baker somewhere in the tri-state area, and then train professionally. But, um, something happened last night, and I had to take the kids and leave."

Finn frowned. "Are you in danger?"

She shook her head vigorously. "No. I promise, no one can trace us here. I haven't used any credit cards, and I got a new phone. We spent the night at the bus station and took the first one out this morning." The enormity of her situation suddenly caved in around her, and her eyes filled with tears. "I—I had to get away from Atlantic City. I didn't know where we could go, and then I remembered seeing you at the Expo and thought maybe you would hire me. I've got enough money for a few nights at a hotel, and if I can start to work for you right away—"

Finn reached out and laid his hand on hers. "Absolutely not, Charity—"

Her heart pounded. This was her last hope. She clutched his hand with both of hers. "I know you're looking for a baker, and I can do that, Finn, I can bake anything. Please, if you'll let me work in your kitchen tomorrow, I'll show you how good I am."

His expression softened "I didn't mean—when I said 'absolutely not', I meant you're not staying at a

hotel." He squeezed her shoulder. "You can stay upstairs, here, and baking for me would be an answer to prayer."

"Finn, we can't stay here."

"It's a huge apartment with four bedrooms. Well, I have my weights set up in one room, and another one is just storage, but we'll make it work."

Charity was so overwhelmed. She covered her mouth with one hand and sobbed.

"Hey," he murmured. "Everything will be fine. You're not alone anymore."

2

Seventeen years ago, October

“Man, can you believe this place?” Patrick Delaney looked around in wonder at Boston’s premier country club.

“No, I can’t. It’s magnificent.” Finn responded to his best friend’s raised hand with a high five.

Patrick rested his hands on the balcony railing. “I’d heard Diamond Hills was beautiful, but this is really something.” He pointed. “Look at that. We’re right on the water. Do you think we’ll see the governor?”

“I don’t know,” Finn said. “I guess it depends on whether they assign us out front or in the kitchen.”

“I heard his birthday cake is five layers.”

“Hey, you two! Get in here.” The assistant caterer, a tall, skinny fellow with dark brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail, waved them in with his clipboard.

“Yes, sir.” Finn didn’t want to mess this up. It was too important. He and Patrick had big dreams. Someday, when Finn’s father and uncle retired, Donovan’s Pub ‘n Grub would become Donovan & Delaney’s.

But now, the fall of their first year out of high school, they were laying the foundation for their

future. They'd both worked at the Pub 'n Grub all through high school—Finn well before that—and now they were there full time. Finn's dad had gotten them on with one of Boston's premier catering companies for one or two events a week. It would be a great opportunity for them to learn a different side of the food service industry as well as get their names and faces in front of some of the movers and shakers in the tight-knit community.

Finn and Patrick gathered with the other staff for the event. "All right," the assistant caterer announced, "As you know, this event has three segments: appetizers, the buffet dinner, and dessert. I have your assignments. You'll either be a filler, a runner, or a waiter. Fillers, you'll be in the kitchen, loading all the trays and pans for the first two segments. Listen for your name."

Finn and Patrick exchanged a glance. Filling was the least desirable of the jobs. They both hoped to be waiters, circulating among the glittering guests with trays of hors d'oeuvres. Then they'd visit the tables filling water glasses and fulfilling requests during the dinner segment, and finally, they'd deliver slices of cake to each guest. Patrick got one of those coveted slots, and Finn was assigned as a runner, taking filled trays from the kitchen to the docking stations just inside the main dining room where the waiters would pick them up, and later taking full pans to the buffet.

"Fillers, to the kitchen now," the assistant caterer ordered. "Everyone, check your appearance. We need to look crisp and professional. If you're a runner and

you spill anything on yourself, you'll need to switch out for a clean shirt or whatever in the back. All right, to your stations."

Patrick gave Finn a fist pump. "Ah, man, I wish we were both waiters."

"It's fine. Maybe next time." Finn smiled. "Have fun out there."

Finn went to the kitchen and within moments was carrying his first fully loaded tray to the dining room. Back and forth he went along the long hallway leading to the kitchen, losing himself in the rhythm of the work.

He'd just deposited his last tray of hors d'oeuvres and was almost back to the kitchen when someone called from behind, "I need help! Can you help me, please?"

Finn turned to see a young woman with long auburn hair in a shimmering silver dress, limping toward him. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

She held up a high-heeled silver sandal. "No, the heel on this stupid thing broke. I can't--I've got to fix it. Is there someone back here who can help me?"

She stopped and Finn's breath left him. She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever laid eyes on. Growing up in Boston, he'd known a lot of redheads, but her shade was unlike anything he'd ever seen, like dark, coppery fire. It fell in thick waves halfway down her back.

Finn felt the world telescope down to just the two of them, and everything went into slow motion. She had the creamiest complexion he'd ever seen, with

high cheekbones and lush, peachy lips.

But her eyes were her most arresting feature, sparkling pools of deep green rimmed with silver shadow and the darkest, longest lashes he'd ever seen.

She seemed to be staring at him, too.

Then she blinked. "My shoe, can you fix it? Maybe with a hammer and nails or something? I just need to get through tonight."

Finn swallowed. "Let me look at it."

She handed the sandal to him. "I'm Charity, by the way."

"I'm Finn."

"Since my dress is tea-length, it'll show." She pursed her pretty lips. "I should have known not to get a pair of cheap shoes at the mall, but I knew they would be perfect with this dress."

Finn was still trying to figure out what *tea length* meant. He wasn't sure he'd ever heard his sister use that term. Then again, Mia wasn't much for dressing up.

One of the other runners hurried by and threw a puzzled glance their way. Finn cocked his head at Charity. "Let's, um, go down here," he murmured. She followed him around a corner where there was a padded bench, and they sat.

After examining the shoe, he rose. "I think I have an idea. It'll take me a few minutes, but just wait here."

She smiled, and Finn wished he didn't have to leave. "Thank you, Finn. I appreciate it."

When he returned, she smiled at him expectantly. He knelt in front of her and slipped the shoe on, trying