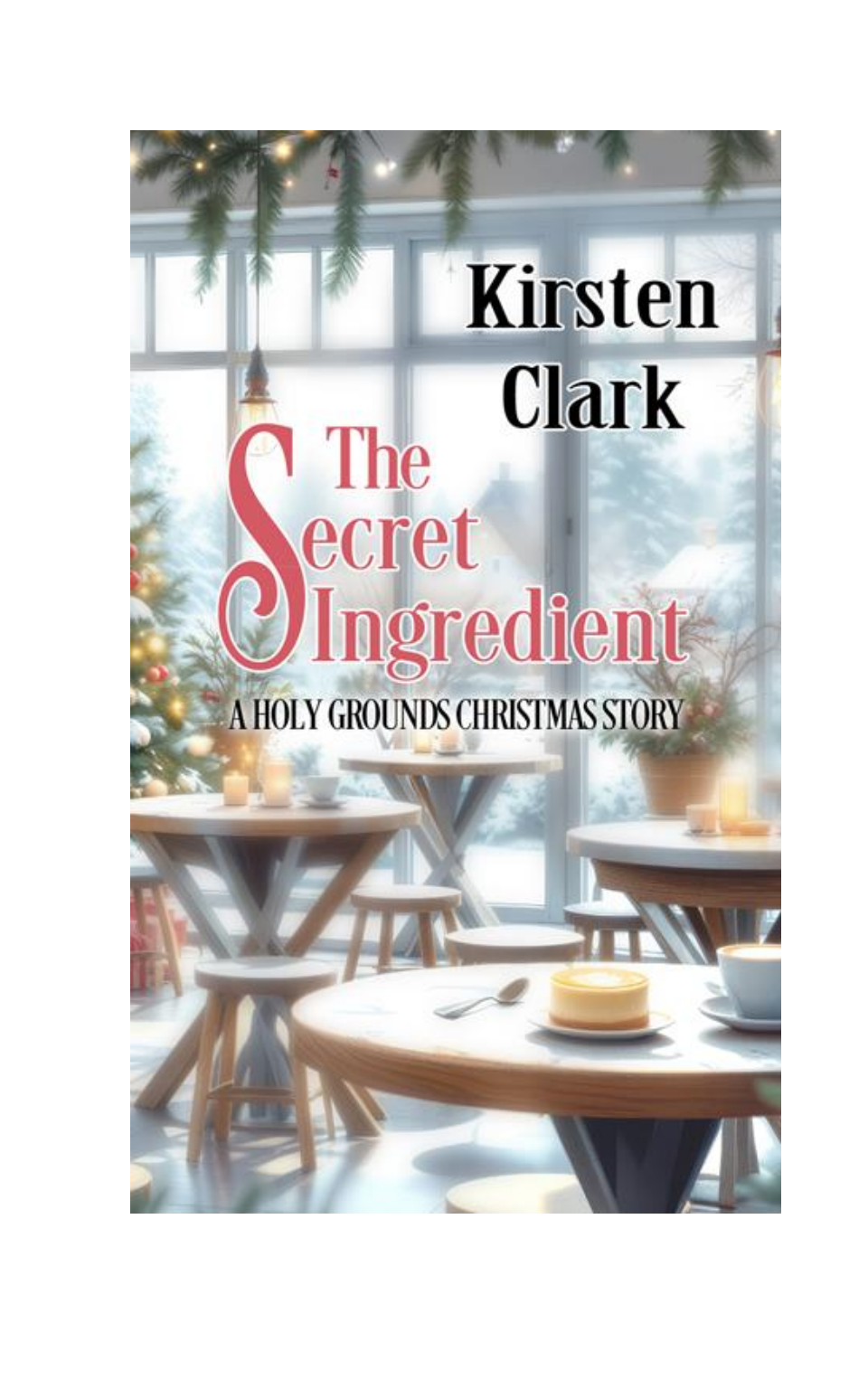




Kirsten
Clark

The
Secret
Ingredient

A HOLY GROUNDS CHRISTMAS STORY

The Secret Ingredient

Kirsten Clark

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

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Dedication

For Henry and Poppy. May you always know the
magic of stories.

CHAPTER 1

The kitchen at Holy Grounds was quiet, Sebastien's apron hanging limply on a hook beside the sink. A stream of hot air escaped from Bridgette's pursed lips, floating her sweaty, flour dusted bangs skyward. And, despite the sweltering temperature from the ovens, there was something cold about the space—like the winter chill from outside managed to creep into the room without Sebastien's presence around to hold it at bay.

She glanced at the clock. 6:55 AM. Bridgette's insides lurched, the coffee she'd drank for breakfast sloshing about dangerously.

It was over four years ago that Sebastien Davenport had marched out of a particularly blustery Bunker Hill rainstorm and through the doors of her little coffee shop, flipped a dripping mop of shaggy blond hair out of his eyes, and thrust a soggy resume into Bridgette's hands. She'd looked up at him, shook her head, and erupted into laughter. But there was no laughter today. Bridgette was exhausted, and she hadn't even opened the shop yet.

At this time of morning Sebastien could usually be found laminating danish dough, kneading sourdough bread, and baking muffins, the aromas of

which drew customers to Holy Grounds like bees to a field of wildflowers, his booming laughter filling the kitchen with warmth all the while. Drat that man. She was drowning without him.

Bridgette pulled a pan of muffins from the oven before silencing a blaring alarm. "Iris, the tops are pointy. Again."

Iris didn't speak but wrinkled her nose as she joined Bridgette in the kitchen, inspecting the latest batch.

"I must've overmixed the batter." Bridgette sucked in a breath in a futile attempt to hold back the tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. "I, I...I made sure to weigh the flour and to set the oven properly to temperature, and I even used a timer for the stand mixer and these darn muffin tops still came out looking like mountains!"

"I see that," Iris said mildly, knotting a forest green apron around her hips before turning to wash her hands in the shiny industrial sink. "Sebastien never overmixes the batter," she shot over her shoulder.

Bridgette swallowed a sigh, resigning herself to the incoming tears. Iris was...Iris. A cosmetology student with purple hair. Chunky silver necklaces. Thick eyeliner. And she was also right. Seb's muffins always came out perfect. What was she going to do?

Bridgette pulled up the bottom of her apron, wiping her eyes. Crying was OK. She was only human after all. But, she thought, clacking a perfectly manicured nail on the shiny metal counter, she also had a job to do. Bridgette allowed a pause, holding up

a hand to admire the sparkles in her latest manicure. The garnet has been a good choice this time. Very Christmassy. She shook her head as if to clear cobwebs. No, no time for pretty things. Focus.

Because even without Sebastien, Bridgette had to have baking to offer her customers. When the usual crowd walked through her front door they expected to be greeted with the nutty, caramel scent of coffee and—in December—the warm spiciness of Seb's famous cranberry gingerbread muffins, just as much as they expected catchy worship music playing over the speakers and Bible verses on their drink sleeves. The muffins were an integral part of what made Holy Grounds, well, Holy Grounds.

"Ansel's going to be crushed if we're out of muffins again," Iris added unhelpfully as she dried her hands on a bleach-stained towel. "Simon will be too. But he's better at hiding it than Ansel."

"I'm aware," Bridgette ground out, reaching deep inside herself in search of a yet untapped well of patience. Ansel, Simon and the rest of the regulars, God bless them, had been understanding over the past several days, but a business was supposed to make its customers happy. And the longer Seb was away, the longer she was pressing her luck in hoping people would be satisfied with her half-rate baking. She was a barista and a businesswoman, not a pastry chef, and it showed.

Iris grinned, green eyes twinkling with mischief. "I'm praying for Ansel's patience as well as yours. When will Seb be back anyway?"

“Hopefully soon. All he told me was he’d had a bad fall and bumped his head. Figures, seeing as it’s so icy outside. Poor guy probably slipped,” Bridgette replied, her voice morose. “Honestly Iris, putting in these 3:00 AM shifts before the shop even opens is taking a toll on me. I’m not a spring chicken any longer. Well, there’s no time to make another batch.” She yawned. “So whether Seb would like it or not, we’ll just have to sell these ones at a discount. Pop ‘em in the display case out front?”

“Of course,” Iris said, giving Bridgette a soft pat on the arm before scooping up the tray and sailing away with a twirl, apron fluttering.

Bridgette glanced at the clock again. Yes, it was time to open. Maybe if things were slower today, she could sneak home for a nap. She flicked open the shop’s security app on her phone and scanned her thumbprint to unlock the front door. Turning to slip the phone back into her pocket, the device hummed to life in her hand.

Seb.

“Hello stranger. How are you feeling?” She threw the phone on speaker mode and scrutinized her reflection in the dull mirror above the sink. Bridgette dug into her jeans pocket for a tube of lipstick. Her tired face needed all the help it could get.

“Bridg...” came a soft male voice that cracked, dropping her stomach towards her toes. Because in the four years she’d known that voice, known the six-four man that voice belonged to, ate his croissants and elbowed him in the side and giggled at his jokes and

scrubbed floors alongside him and prayed with him and signed his paychecks and watched him fully become a part of Holy Grounds, she'd never heard the crackle of fear in his words that she heard now.

"Hi," he said, starting again. And she knew he was trying to sound normal. And she knew that if she let him, he'd tease her about another batch of failed muffins.

"How are you holding up over there?" He continued, spreading a sticky-sweet layer of false cheerfulness over his words. Seb was the most genuine person Bridgette knew, walking through life as his true and authentic self, sharing his faith with an earnestness that she deeply admired.

"I bet you've made a real mess of the kitchen," he continued. "Have you set off the fire alarm yet? We both know how much Iris hates that. It makes her grind her teeth in rage." He let out a laugh that sounded weak, pathetic almost.

Bridgette's heart fluttered, picking up speed like a hummingbird darting from flower to flower. Where was the Sebastien she knew?

"Sebastien," she managed to choke out. "Seb, what's going on? What's wrong? Tell me what's happening."

"It's OK. I'm OK. At least, I think I'm OK. I'm back at the hospital."

"The hospital?" she heard herself echo.

"Yes. I umm...I've had some more trouble."

Bridgette tucked the lipstick back in her pocket and stooped over the sink, splashing cold water onto

her face, waiting for Seb to elaborate.

“Errrr, what I mean to say is I fell again. The good news is it doesn’t appear that I’m just terribly clumsy. The bad news is the doctor thinks this all could be a bit more serious than fainting. I may be having seizures. I’m just waiting on the neurologist now.”

“Seizures?” she echoed, kicking herself. *Say something comforting.*

“Yes.” Sebastien suck in a breath. “Seizures.” His voice crackled again.

The sound of his fear almost knocked her to the ground with its intensity. She placed a hand on the sink, knuckles turning white as she anchored herself upright. Seizures. This was much more than a bump on the head. “Sebastien, are you OK?”

For the second time that morning, Bridgette felt tears gather in the corner of her eyes. “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me,” she murmured, repeating Philippians 4:13 under her breath, God’s promise inflating beneath her like a life raft.

“Do you think you could come to the hospital? I mean, I know the morning rush is about to start, so it doesn’t have to be right this second. But if you could bring my Bible when you have time that’d be great. It’s in my locker—top shelf.”

“Seb,” she breathed, reaching for her parka. “Of course I’ll come. Iris will be fine.”

“Are you sure? You can wait until after the morning rush.”

She pictured him pushing a lock of shaggy blond hair behind his ear as he spoke. Silly man. What did the morning rush matter when Sebastien was alone in a sterile, white hospital room?

"I'll be right there. Text me the room number."

"Bridg?" Seb's voice was soft again, hesitant.

Bridgette zipped up the parka. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"And thank God you're all right. I could've...I mean, we could've lost you. I'll be there soon." Bridgette ended the call and crossed the room to the wall of lockers, stomach quivering. She opened Seb's, pulling his Bible down from the top shelf. She held it against her cheek, inhaling his scent. She'd always taken the odd combination of fresh bread and suede for granted. But now...now it was something special. Remarkable!

"I-ris!" Bridgette hollered, her voice rising an octave. "I have to go."

Iris's head popped around the corner, eyebrows raised. "Everything OK, boss?"

"Seb's in the hospital. He needs me," Bridgette said simply.

And to her credit, Iris didn't protest. Instead, she nodded, sage-like, and flashed Bridgette a thumbs up as she whirled back to the front counter.

The distinctive sound of the coffee pot clattered into place.

"I'll be fine." Iris trilled.

"Please God, help her not to burn the place down," Bridgette prayed softly, grinning.

Bridgette pushed open the back door, flour-dusted ponytail swinging as she shook her head. Bridgette considered herself a very self-aware person. She was a known lover of love. She devoured inspirational romance novels. She set her friends up on dates. She'd often whisper "on the house," to couples visiting Holy Grounds on a first date or milestone anniversary. How had she never realized it before now? She was totally and completely in love with Sebastian Davenport.

CHAPTER 2

“There you go, my dear,” the nurse said, jutting her chin towards the breakfast tray she’d just plopped onto the bedside table, patting Sebastien on the head like he was a child, rather than a fully grown man. She smiled down at him, the curls of her tight, gray perm quivering, and despite his loathing of requiring any assistance whatsoever, he couldn’t help but grin back.

Not that he was usually a man tuned into the ins-and-outs of women’s hair care—his mental reserves were all but filled with the intricacies of tempering chocolate and the differences between French, Swiss, and Italian meringues, after all—but his mama got her hair permed every few months. She always had, and probably always would, the good Lord willing. Sebastien’s nose wrinkled, the movement both automatic and imperceptible; the all-too-familiar chemical residue floating down from the woman’s head was pungent, but comforting. It smelt like home.

And right now, all alone in a glistening white hospital room, wearing a breezy hospital gown, his mama some 1500 miles away, a little dose of home was a gift. Because Sebastien was terrified. Not that he’d ever admit it out loud, of course.

“Nurse...” Seb began, squinting up at the woman’s

name tag.

“Constance,” she replied, evaluating him with a sanguine gaze, the holly-shaped earrings hanging from her earlobes wobbling erratically.

“Nurse Constance,” Seb began again, pasting on his most charming smile as he swept his hair back from his face, “Would you be so kind as to tie the strings on the back of this gown a little tighter? My boss is coming by soon.”

His boss. The title did little to explain Bridgette.

Bridgette, with her penchant for sneaking out of Holy Grounds on clandestine trips to the beauty salon, then returning to thrust her fresh nails under his nose for inspection.

Bridgette, the woman who brought the nutty scent of coffee and floral notes of bergamot and perfectly memorized Bible verses to all those blessed enough to cross her path.

Bridgette, the good sport who laughed at his jokes, no matter how lame, and who green-lighted his crazy pastry experiments, no matter how elaborate and time-consuming.

Bridgette, who begged him to make his Christmas season candy cane cheesecake bars at least once a month, all year long.

Bridgette, the first and only person he’d chosen to call when the ambulance dropped him off at Bunker Hill General for the second time this week, the familiar sound of her voice on the other end of the line cracking open some yet undiscovered chamber deep inside his heart.

Bridgette, who'd given him a job and a place to belong when he'd ventured west, desperately determined to build a life shaped by his own hard work and faith.

Bridgette who, after four years, was suddenly a whole lot more than his boss, and who was rushing to his side at this very moment.

Maybe the bump on his head was affecting his judgment?

"Of course, dear," Constance said, giving his head another pat as she moved the bed forward with what appeared to be a well-practiced flick of a switch. "Lean forward," Constance commanded, not unkindly.

Seb complied, teeth gritted. Ouch. During the first seizure he'd smashed his head on the coffee table, and during the second his ribs had been badly bruised.

"Now that's a good boy. You let me know if sitting up is too much."

Seb grimaced. Too much? Everything was too much. Especially the degradation that came with accepting help for basic tasks.

"One must be careful after a Tonic-clonic seizure, you know," Constance continued as she pulled his gown snug.

Tonic-clonic. Those horrible words the paramedics had murmured to the doctor as Seb had blinked himself back into awareness in the middle of the night, the obnoxious fluorescence of hospital lights assaulting his senses.

"The neurologist, Dr. Denton, should be here any minute to go over both your MRI and EEG results.

Then you'll have some more answers. I'm so very glad your boss could come to be with you. Your file says your family is far away, correct?"

Seb murmured in agreement, his face blank, a lesson learned over and over in pastry school. Be like a duck. Calm on the surface, despite what's happening underneath.

So while Seb knew he looked at ease to Constance, his attention remained focused on his feelings for Bridgette because in the past four days, he'd learned exactly two, no scratch that, three things with great certainty.

One, he loved Bridgette Calloway.

Two, he was having Tonic-clonic seizures. What a name!

Three, both were equally terrifying.

Wait, it was four things...he was also starting to number his thoughts like his friend Simon.

Lord, I'm afraid. Sebastien spoke to God silently through Constance's friendly chatter. *I'm afraid, and I don't know what comes next.*

Sebastien bit down on the inside of his cheek, drawing blood. Would he continue to experience seizures? He wasn't even supposed to drive anywhere. How could he possibly return to the kitchen at Holy Grounds with the very real possibility that he might collapse at any moment?

Lord, I know that you know what comes next.

Constance eased him back to a lying position as she continued her end of a one-sided conversation, strong hands supporting his head.

So even though it's hard, I mean, this is a big test, I'm walking forward in my faith. And I'm putting my trust in you. Amen.

"Sebastien?" Bridgette stumbled into the room, her button-nose pink—it must be cold outside—and her flour-dusted hair making her look like she'd been stuck in a terrible snowstorm. He swallowed again, this time to stifle a chuckle, and caught the metallic taste still lingering.

"Thank you, Nurse Constance," Seb said, plastering on a goofy grin entirely for Bridgette's benefit. Because my goodness, did she look gorgeous. And he knew that if he let her, Bridgette would fuss over him. And Seb didn't want any fuss. He wanted to go back in time to last Monday and start this week over again, this time with no seizures.

"This is my boss. Bridgette." He wanted normalcy. And he wanted the unmistakable glimmer of worry that flickered across Bridgette's face when she looked at him to disappear and never return.

"Nice to meet you, Bridgette," Constance said, her voice warm as she ushered the younger woman to his bedside. "It's such a blessing you could be here for Sebastien's meeting with the neurologist."

"I'm always happy to help out a friend," Bridgette replied, tapping her nails on the little bedside table, and coming dangerously close to a bowl of sad, soggy cereal.

Friend.

Right. He'd do well to remember that.

"All right, I'm off to the next patient," Constance

announced. "The call bell's tucked beside you if you need me, Mr. Davenport." She turned to Bridgette and made a show of shooting her a dramatic wink. "Lovely to meet you. Seb's a blessed man." The nurse dimmed the lights, and pattered out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

"Hi." Bridgette spoke in a soft tone as she leaned forward to wrap him in a hug.

He inhaled sharply, the scent of Holy Grounds that clung to her parka reminding him of the world outside of this hospital room. The rush of her breath against his cheek shot beams of warmth towards his core, reminding him that he loved her.

Love.

A big word.

A scary word.

But the truth.

Constance was right. He was a blessed man, indeed.

Besides, it's not like he was being rash. He knew Bridgette better than he knew anyone.

She pulled back, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ears, and settled into a chair with a cracked plastic seat.

Sebastien peered carefully at her face, taking in the curve of her mouth and the crinkles beside her blue eyes, searching for some clue that her feelings for him had somehow shifted.

But she stared back at him, face impassive, her lips moving silently.

"You're praying?"

She shot him a look of daggers, tossing her head.

“Shhh. Of course I’m praying. For you.”

She closed her eyes then, and Sebastien could’ve sworn she muttered “silly man,” under her breath. *Ahh, well.* He’d been called worse.

“Well ...” he prompted, grunting.

She sighed, but her eyes remained closed. “Well, what, Seb?”

“Don’t you have a Bible verse for me? Something to bring me comfort during this difficult time?” His tone came out almost flippant, but a smile still materialized, dancing across her lips.

“Am I that predictable?” she asked, voice wobbling.

“Not predictable,” he choked out. “Dependable.”

“Philippians chapter four, verses six to seven,” she replied softly.

She reached out, placing a hand with perfectly manicured nails on his arm. She’d chosen a dark red this week, warm and Christmasy and a little dramatic. Seb grinned. Perfectly Bridgette.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

“Amen,” Sebastien said.

“Amen,” she echoed.

“Trouble with the morning bake?” he asked, shooting up a brow as he shamelessly changed the subject. Because friends teased each other, and if he didn’t steer this conversation back into the realm of

friendship he might lean over and kiss her, regardless of a bruised head and ribs.

Her eyes flashed open, cheeks coloring to match her nose. "I did, in fact, have trouble with the morning bake," she said, the grip on his arm intensifying. "The tops of the cranberry gingerbread muffins came out pointy."

Seb's skin tingled, that chamber in his heart filling with something warm and golden, something like honey.

"We need you," she choked out, a single tear rolling down her cheek. "And I miss you."

A tear! So maybe there was a chance she felt the same. Should he tell her how he felt? He tried to live his life as authentically as possible. And after all, wasn't it best to be honest?

"Knock, knock," came a deep voice from the doorway, saving Sebastien from one problem and throwing him into the middle of another at a dizzying speed.

A short, rotund man with curly gray hair and a white lab coat stepped into the room, his jowly face blank.

Sebastien reached for Bridgette's hand, and held on tight, the feel of her soft skin tethering him to safety as she slid his Bible beneath their intertwined fingers. She'd remembered

"I'm Dr. Denten." The man paused, clearing his throat. "And I'm here to confirm a diagnosis of adult-onset epilepsy."

CHAPTER 3

Bridgette spent the morning of December twenty-third buzzing about Holy Grounds like a honey bee desperate to visit all the best flowers in a fragrant meadow, which was simply a nicer way of saying that she ran around the shop like a chicken with its head cut off. Now, for the first time all morning Bridgette paused, chewing her lip as she tightened the strings on her apron, snugging it around her waist like armor. There was so much to do. And she was so tired. In fact, she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with a hot water bottle, pull the covers up under her chin, and sleep until Christmas. Because sleep meant she didn't have to think about seizures and epilepsy and Sebastien. Coward. Since when did she run away from her problems? Plus, even with Iris at the shop to help her, sleeping the day away was not an option for a small business owner.

Restocking the bakery case with croissants, Bridgette hummed along to a favorite Christmas carol, willing herself to carry on as normal, but the notes rang hollow. All she could think about was Sebastien. What did she usually think about, in the days before Seb's seizures? What did she usually think about, when she wasn't existing in a torrential storm of worry? Right.