

*Toronto,  
4 days 'til Christmas*

## CHAPTER 1



A run-of-the-mill cotton swab packed inside a plastic tube, nestled within a padded envelope and stamped with prepaid postage—that was all that stood between Max St. James and the answers he’d craved for decades. Or so he thought when he swabbed the inside of his cheek last night, before he read the fine print.

There was no point even mailing it now. A DNA test could only tell him as much as he already knew. He’d have to be patient, to wait and see what the Office of the Registrar General would be able to share about his adoption.

His phone rang, the caller ID lighting up with INSPECTOR ST. JAMES, as though his father’s spidey senses were tingling, and Max dropped the envelope into the garbage with his over-ripe bananas. He swiped up his keys, answering, “St. James,” so it wouldn’t sound like he cared enough to screen his calls.

“Maxxy,” his neighbor, Selina, trilled from down the hall the moment he stepped outside, and he waved over his shoulder.

“Max, it’s your father.” The Inspector’s voice came through the phone much less cheerful than his neighbor’s.

“You been staying up late watching anime on Netflix again?”

Max asked, locking his apartment and waving again at Selina despite her efforts to flag him down.

“I’m retired. I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” His voice was dry and raspy, like it was squeezing itself into a thin strand to physically travel through the phone. “Can you come by later? We’re doing a food drive for the shelter on Gerard and—”

Max glanced at his watch as he crossed the street, passing a monstrosity of a gingerbread house someone had erected for the holidays, where kids were already lining up to meet Santa, which meant he was running late.

“Yeah, I uh—we’re working a big case, but I’ll get there when I can.”

“Sure, sure.” His father’s words were the creaky timbers of a dam holding back years of disappointment.

“I’ll find the time,” Max promised, even though he’d have to twist himself in knots to get it done. There never seemed to be enough time—just like he was going to be late for his shift if he stopped for coffee.

But last night was the weekly Kyle Family Zoom Game Night, which meant Maggie Kyle, his partner, would be tired and grumpy and crawling out of her skin on the stakeout. Only a peppermint latte would perk her up.

He ducked into the shop, weighing whether he could get away with flashing his badge and skipping to the front of the line. Coffee was official police business, right?

“What about Christmas?” his father’s voice boomed in his ear. “They don’t have you working again this year do they? Because if they’re sticking you with the crummy shifts and overlooking you for promotions, I can have a word—”

“No, sir, it’s fine.”

“I still have some weight I can throw around.”

“I’m good. Honestly.”

“If you’re sure,” he said, his tone turning icy. “I mean, I don’t know, Max. Maybe it’s your shoes.”

## LAST BLUE CHRISTMAS

It was the same argument they'd been having for more than twenty years. Reflexively, Max looked down at his non-regulation Chuck Taylors, black on black, and he smiled because they made him happy. Some people like to wear jewelry, others wouldn't leave home without a ball cap. Max didn't feel like himself unless he was wearing his Chucks and his grandfather's wristwatch. Was that so wrong?

"Next," the barista called, and it took Max a moment to realize she wasn't asking an existential question.

COFFEE SECURED, HE SLIPPED INTO THE PARADE ROOM AS DIX WAS reading through the morning announcements. His friend-turned-supervisor shot him a withering look before turning back to the stack of papers he was shuffling, and Max gave him the courtesy of looking chastened before he scanned the room for Maggie.

She stood off to his left, leaning against the wall. Her head drooped to the side and her eyes were half closed as she listened to Dix drone on about the big King case. Her hair was the perfect amount of messy and her shirt was untucked—a far cry from the buttoned-up rookie Max had met a decade back.

That first day she had marched right up to the group of senior officers and asked for help with her radio because the only thing scary to Maggie Kyle was screwing up. Stunned into silence by her plucky raised chin and defiant hazel eyes, Max had shrugged at her and slipped off to switch the assignments on the job board, ensuring the brash new rookie would ride with him instead of Dix.

They had pretty much been riding together ever since. Except today. Max glanced at the job board. Kyle was partnered with Parker for the stakeout.

Someone had obviously made a mistake.

“With all the extra holiday transit, we can’t take any chances,” Dix was saying.

“I hate Christmas,” Maggie muttered to Castillo on her left.

Max swapped the names back where they belonged and stepped up beside his partner, holding out the peppermint latte responsible for his tardiness. “You love Christmas,” he told her.

She gasped and her eyes lit up as she accepted the cup, not looking away from the staff sergeant to turn the full brightness of her smile on Max—and just as well. It would have blinded him like driving west into the sun.

He watched her take a sip, closing her eyes to properly savor it. “I do love Christmas,” she murmured.

*Yep. Totally worth being late.*

“Something to share with the class, Officer Kyle?” Dix asked, not quite his usual jovial self.

Maggie’s eyes snapped open. “I love Christmas, sir,” she said, lifting her coffee in salute.

Dix laughed and shook his head at her. “You might be the only one. Assignments are on the board. Let’s go save Christmas for Kyle.”

Maggie smirked into her coffee.

“You’re out of uniform, St. James,” the staff sergeant added as he walked by.

“Yeah, yeah.” Max waved him off, flexing his toes comfortably inside his Chucks.

He should probably check in with his old friend after shift. Dix hadn’t asked for the mantle of acting staff sergeant when their old boss had picked up and retired to Belize.

But he had stepped in and stepped up, and it meant changes to most of his years-long friendships.

“Looks like we’re riding together,” Maggie interrupted his thoughts with a slight smirk. Had she checked the board on her way into the meeting? Did she know he made the scheduling switch?

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“Ready to roll?” he asked, before she could comment further.

Maggie nodded. “Just let me...” She gestured toward the women’s locker room and guzzled down the rest of her coffee.



MAGGIE LOVED HOW MAX ST. JAMES WAS ALWAYS A LITTLE BIT OUT of uniform. Those shoes were the first thing she’d noticed about him when they met.

He’d been standing across the room with Dix and some others, filling out his uniform in the best possible way, as Frankie had pointed out.

Except for the shoes.

“Do you think he forgot to change them?” she’d whispered.

“Oh probably. You should maybe go tell him,” Frankie teased.

Maggie had rolled her eyes so hard it hurt, and then Frankie dared her.

Swept up in the moment—and eager to get a glimpse of the handsome officer’s name tag—Maggie had marched right up to the group. But the moment he turned his piercing brown eyes on her, she’d lost all her nerve and asked for help with her radio instead.

Somehow she knew he was a man who didn’t forget anything, and the shoes were deliberate. They meant something. A tiny rebellious streak—but rebellion against what?

That day, Officer Max St. James had become a puzzle Maggie couldn’t wait to solve.

And she had been trying to figure him out ever since.

Tossing her empty coffee cup in the garbage, Maggie entered a stall. She could’ve sworn she’d been assigned with Parker today, but to her relief and utter consternation, she was riding with Max.

Max, who was the only person she wanted to ride with any day of the week, even when she was feeling short with him

because he lacked her ambition and because he had no right to look so good in uniform and because everything about Christmas present was reminding her of Christmases past. Or at least one particular Christmas.

A sign over the sink advertised a precinct-wide gingerbread competition.

“I can’t believe they only gave us three days’ notice for this,” Frankie said, gazing at the same sign as she washed up at the next sink.

“Yeah, good luck getting participants,” Maggie grumped.

She hadn’t baked gingerbread since she was twelve years old, standing beside her mom in matching chocolate moose aprons.

“Come on,” her best friend begged with dancing eyes. “It’ll be fun.”

“Will it?”

“First prize will be! A trip for two to Puerto Rico? Bikinis and salsa dancing in February? Tostones?”

“Tony will want to go with you.”

“Tony can deal. Come on.”

“It’ll be a disaster,” Maggie moaned, turning away from the poster to straighten her tie and double check her boot laces.

“That’s the spirit! We could do a tiny replica of the station! Imagine how impressed St. James will be.”

For a half second, Maggie wondered whether he would be impressed, but then she shook her head. Showing off for Max was not her mission, not this Christmas. No matter how many lattes he brought her.

She needed to pour all her energy into the Bobby King case. When they closed it, the brass would be so impressed they’d force both her and Max into a detective’s rotation, test or no test, and whether Max was interested in the promotion or not.

“You don’t even bake,” she told her friend.

Maggie glanced in her locker mirror and sighed. She should’ve begged off last night’s Zoom call sooner, or else given

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herself time for makeup this morning. St. James certainly wouldn't be impressed with the bags under her eyes.

"I bake."

"You burned your kitchen down and had to move back in with your mom."

"One time. That's why I need you on my team." Frankie took her by the shoulders. "Kyle and Castillo, mixing it up like the old days."

Maggie had the sinking feeling she'd be covered in flour before bedtime. "Do I have to remind you of the epic macaron failure of 2019?" she whined.

"You picked the hardest thing to make," Frankie countered.

"The sourdough fiasco of 2020?"

"Luckily, I know enough to know gingerbread doesn't need yeast."

"You sure about that?" Maggie teased, and her friend blinked, not quite sure. "Come on, the guys will be waiting. Don't want to be a stereotype taking too long in the bathroom."

"Tostones," Frankie whispered gleefully, as she skipped out the door and down the hall to the sally port.