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~~*Mo*~~ ***NO*** *Money, Mo Problems*

Oh, the irony of counting out change for a fifty-dollar bill while "Mo Money, Mo Problems" plays in the background. "Sir, I'm out of tens and twenties," I say. "I'll have to give you fives and singles . . . is that okay?"

It has to be, obviously.

The man smiles and nods enthusiastically. "Perfectly fine," he says, dusting off the lapels of his (expensive-looking) suit. "Matter of fact, keep a couple of those singles and give me a Mighty Millions ticket with the Mightyplier thing. I'll slide a few of the other dollars into the Salvation Army bucket out front."

Despite my desire to snort—I know one shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but based on the Mercedes-Benz key fob lying on the counter, I'd say this guy doesn't *need* two hundred and twelve million more dollars—I force the corners of my mouth to lift. "That's very generous of you, sir." Barf. "Nothing like a cheerful giver!"

The man takes his $43.74 in change, then grabs his mechanically separated meat stick and bottle of neon-green

Powerade. "Thanks so much"—he looks at my name tag—"Rico?"

"That's me!" I chirp.

"Hmm. Interesting name for a cute girl such as yourself. And what interesting eyes you have . . . two different browns!" Now he's winking.

Oh God.

"Thank you, sir. And thank you for shopping at the Gas 'n' Go."

He tosses a *Merry Christmas!* over the checkout counter before rotating on the heel of his fancy shoe and strutting out like he just won the lotto.

Merry Christmas. *Pfffft.* Not much real "merry" about a ten-hour shift on Christmas Eve. It'll almost *be* Christmas when I walk out of this joint . . . and then I get to spend thirty minutes walking home since the one public bus in this town stopped running hours ago. Good thing the crime rate in (s)Nor(e)cross, GA, is relatively low and it's not that cold out.

I look at my Loki watch—a birthday gift from my baby brother, Jax, that I never leave home without despite how childish it makes me look. Ninety-seven minutes to freedom.

"It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" comes pouring out of the speakers (note to self: ask Mr. Zoughbi who the heck made this playlist), and I drop down onto my stool and put my chin in my hand. Truth be told, the influx of holiday cheer really *has* been a nice reprieve. Seems like every day there's a new political scandal or gun attack or government-sanctioned act of inhumanity or threat of

nuclear war, but then Thanksgiving hit, and it felt like a collective exhale.

The bell over the door dings, snapping me back, and the cutest little old lady I've ever seen makes her way toward the counter. She's tiny—definitely under five feet and *maybe* ninety pounds soaking wet—with dark brown skin and a little pouf of white hair. The Christmas tree on her sweater has real lights, and when I smile this time, it's for real.

"Welcome to Gas 'n' Go," I say as she steps up to the counter.

"Why, thank you, dear. Aren't you just lovely?"

Cheeks are warm. "Well, you're looking pretty lovely yourself, madam," I reply.

She giggles.

"I mean it. That's a gorgeous sweater."

"Oh, you stop that," she says. "And anyhow, shouldn't you be at home with your family? Take it from an old bird: you don't wanna work your life away, now."

I smile again. "Yes, ma'am. I'll be blowing this Popsicle stand in a little over an hour."

"Good." She nods approvingly.

"So how can I help you on this cool Christmas Eve?"

She leans forward over the counter a bit, and I'm drawn toward her like a magnet. "Well, I was on my way to church, and between you and me"—she pauses to peek over her shoulder—"I happened to look up as we passed one of those billboards that show the Mighty Millions jackpot. You know what I'm talkin' about?"

I nod. Drop my voice to a near-whisper so it matches hers. "Two hundred and twelve million, right?"

"That's what the billboard said. I wasn't gonna play this time, but then I saw your station loom up on the left, and . . . well, it felt like a sign. So I decided to stop."

Now I'm really smiling. *This* is the kind of person I would love to see win.

"How old are you, sweet pea?" she asks.

"I'm seventeen, ma'am."

"That's about what I thought. You remind me of my granddaughter. She's in her third year at Florida A&M University."

I feel my smile sag, so I look away and pretend to do something behind the counter. Really hoping she doesn't ask about *my* (nonexistent) college plans. I'd rather not deal with another adult customer's judgy raised eyebrow when I explain that instead of college, I'll accept the management position I've been offered here at Gas 'n' Go, and continue to help support my family.

When I turn back to her, she's rifling around in her purse.

"Thought I had a photo somewhere, but I guess not." She shuts the bag and smiles at me. "What were we talkin' about?"

"Umm . . . your granddaughter?"

"No, no." With a wave. "Before that. I've got a nasty case of CRS lately. . . ."

"CRS?"

She leans forward and lowers her voice again. *"Cain't Remember Shit."*

And now I'm really smiling again. Laughing, actually.

"I'm serious, now!" she says. "Where were we?"

"You were about to purchase a Mighty Millions ticket."

"Oh yes, that's right! Let's do that."

I step over to the machine. "Do you have specific numbers you'd like to play?"

"I do! Been playing the same ones since 1989." She calls them out, and as the ticket prints, I stop breathing: three of her white-ball numbers—06, 29, 01—make up my birth date. And her Mighty Ball number is 07. Which is supposed to be lucky, right?

"You've got my birthday on here!" tumbles out before I can stop it. Frankly, I do my best not to pay attention to the lottery at all. Mama's been obsessed with the idea of winning for as long as I can remember, but after years of watching her *make sure* she had a dollar for a ticket and continuing to cling to this impossible hope while our finances literally crumbled around her (no doubt she bought at least one for this jackpot cycle) . . .

Hard pass.

Seeing the day I was born pop up on a ticket, though?

The lady's face is lit up brighter than her Christmas tree sweater. "Your birthday, huh?"

"Mm-hmm." I point it out.

"Well, I'll be! Perhaps you're my lucky charm!"

My eyes stay fixed on the ticket as she takes it from me. What if she's right? Two hundred and twelve *million* dollars could be on that little slip.

"Tell ya what, print me one of those Quick Picks, too," she says.

"Yes, ma'am. Would you like to add the Mightyplier option to this one? For an extra dollar, it'll double any nonjackpot winnings."

"Oh no, we're going for the big bank!"

I laugh. "Coming right up."

The machine spits out the second piece of paper, and I slide it across the counter to her. She grabs it and then holds both tickets up to take a good look at them.

Then she shuffles them around and puts them face-down on the counter. "So whattaya think?" she asks. "Right or left?"

"Oh, definitely left," I say.

She nods and pushes the left ticket across the counter to me. "Good. It's for you."

Whoa.

"Oh wow, that's really nice of you, ma'am, but I can't take that."

"You certainly can," she says. "It's my Christmas present to you."

I look at it and bite down on my lower lip. *God, how amazing would it be to win even* part *of two hundred and twelve million dollars?* The old Bad Boy rappers say, "Mo money, mo problems," but they all had plenty of it. Me? I work at a gas station for $7.75 an hour, and most of *that* goes toward whatever bill Mama hasn't made enough to cover each month (you know, minus the dollars she spends on weekly lotto tickets).

"Go on now. Pick it up," the lady is saying. "Obviously someone over eighteen will have to claim the prize if you win anything, but perhaps one of us will get lucky." She winks. Very different feeling than when Mr. Fifty-Dollar-Bill did it.

Makes my skin tingle a little.

I take the ticket and quickly stick it in my back pocket.

Which is good because Mr. Zoughbi chooses that moment to exit his office. Not sure he'd be real keen on a customer buying his underage cashier a lottery ticket. The lady and I exchange a look. She gets it.

"Well, you've certainly brightened up my Christmas Eve," she says loud enough for Mr. Z to hear. "You finish your shift and hurry home now, you hear?"

I smile and nod again. "You be sure to do the same, ma'am."

"Merry Christmas, baby girl." She turns to leave.

I swear that ticket has turned radioactive and my right butt cheek is expanding in size right now.

When she gets to the door, it swings wide, and I hear her say, "Why, thank you, young man. My, aren't *you* handsome!"

I look up, and there holding it open for her, with his million-dollar smile, is Alexander Macklin ("Zan" to his friends/groupies/loyal horde)—varsity quarterback, all-around teen dream, and heir to the booty-paper throne.

No, for real. His great-great-grandfather or something supposedly patented toilet paper on a roll, and now his family runs Macklin Enterprises, which is legitimately famous for its focus on ass-wipery.

Speaking of ass-wipery, rumor has it he only goes to *our* school because he got kicked out of his fancy private one. Something about a hacking scandal.

And yes, he's handsome.

I'm pretty sure he doesn't have a clue who I am despite the fact that I sit two desks behind him in US History. But

still. Would rather the richest boy in school *not* see me working the cash register at the local gas station. Pretty sure my hair's a frizzy mess and there's a cheese stain on my apron from a hot dog I snarfed earlier.

"Uhh, I need to go to the ladies' room," I say as Mr. Z approaches the counter to restock candy bars.

He looks up at me with an eyebrow raised.

I glance at the door again. The lady is gone, and Zan is stepping inside now. I think our eyes meet, but I turn away too fast to know for sure.

"Girl problems," I say to Mr. Z.

"Ah." He lifts his hands. "Say no more."

I slip from behind the counter. Zan has turned down the chip aisle, so I do my best to make no noise. Avoid drawing attention.

Just as I get to the back, Mr. Z hollers, "Oh, Ms. Danger!" He mispronounces my last name. Doesn't rhyme with "stranger" like everyone assumes. It's actually *DON-gur* and I usually correct people . . . having *Danger* as a last name would be cool if it weren't such a misnomer.

Anyway.

"Check the toilet paper supply while you're handling the lady business, yes?" he says.

So much for a clean getaway.