

Betinna Hansen

**All I Want for Christmas**

*a memoir*

I'm limping down Broadway with a knife in my leg. It's one of those knives with sharp teeth along its blade, used for cutting meat. Some guy working in the reception handed me a clean cloth and a wad of cash when he saw me wobbling down the stairs.

"Here, take a cab," he said in a thick Brazilian accent. "And press that thing against the wound. It'll stop the bleeding."

It's early, a little after 9am. I pass three men lined up on a bench, waiting outside a barber shop for their daily shave.

"What a pity," one of them cries, "such beautiful legs." They all laugh.

I smile back at them and press the cloth against the wound to stop the blood from trickling down my bare leg.

"Taxi!" I yell, the way I've seen Carrie do it in "Sex and the City," and lift my arm toward the clear blue sky. A few blocks away, the Empire State Building shines like a giant compass needle.

Zoom! The yellow cabs fly by, ignoring my hail. I'm not from New York. I'm from Denmark, famous for its biking culture. In Denmark, you don't hail a cab; you ride your bike. Rain or shine. The prime minister rides his bike to parliament. The crown prince cycles the future king to school.

Getting a cab seems hopeless. I bend down and pull out the knife, wriggling it from side to side. A drop of blood falls on my yellow shoe and I feel lightheaded.

"You waitin' for a cab?" a man shouts through an open car window. His beard is long and he's wearing an orange turban. He pulls up in front of me and shoves the newspaper aside to make room for me. "Where to?" he asks and turns off the radio. I ask him to take me to the nearest hospital and he drops me off in front of Saint Vincent's, on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

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"Miss Hansen."

I'm sitting in the waiting room, stretching my leg across an orange plastic seat when the doctor approaches.

"I'm Doctor Taveras," he says in a voice that reminds me of Antonio Banderas. He gazes at me with his chocolate pudding eyes and reaches out his hand to shake mine.

"Betinna," I say.

"So, tell me ... what happened to you?" He's in green scrubs and a V-cut shirt, with a sprinkling of hair showing.

"It was an accident."

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He raises a black eyebrow at me. "An accident?"

"The knife was sticking out of my backpack. I turned around and..." My gaze strays to his crotch, making out the contour of his ... you know. My cheeks start to burn.

He nods and gives a little half smile. "Come with me, Miss Hansen."

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He pushes the needle through my skin and makes me laugh at the same time. I'm 24 years old, but I feel like I'm 14, giggling at everything he says. The sun streams through the window, and I feel the warmth of summer on my back. He takes his time, cutting the thread and carefully tying each of the eight stitches. Once he's done, he leaves the room. A few minutes pass and then he returns with a piece of lined paper in his hand.

"I'd probably lose my medical license if I asked you out," he says. "But, umm ... I hope you'll give me a call." He folds the paper in half and hands it to me.

I smile at him. "I will."

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I don't have a home; I have a backpack. I've got everything I need to survive in the wild, and one pretty dress. It's wrinkled, but the Brazilian in the reception lends me an iron, and besides, the dress is long enough to cover the stitches below my right knee.

Anxious that he won't show up, and nervous that he will, I take the red line downtown to the Meatpacking District – and there he is, waiting for me on the street corner with a big umbrella in his hand.

"Hi there," he says, his hair combed back and glistening after having showered. I give him a hug and he hugs me back tighter. We walk down the cobblestone streets to a Cuban restaurant near the Highline, where he orders a pitcher of sangria, full of strawberries and sliced green apples. As I sit there, spearing a piece of fruit with a thin cocktail straw, he gives me a woven bracelet that he brought back for me from his weekend trip to Mexico. He tells me about his brother's wedding and shows me pictures of a smiling bride and groom at the altar right after saying, "I do." Without thinking, while he's still talking, I move closer and we reach for each other's lips.

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My flight ticket to Denmark is lying in the waste bin, crumpled into a tiny ball. Without a doubt, I've found the man I want to share my life with. The man I want more than I thought I could ever want anyone. My visa runs out in a week, but I've come up with a plan: I'll go to Canada. I'll take the train, stay a few days, visit Niagara Falls, and then return to the US. The immigration officer will take a quick look at me. I'll smile and wear my pretty dress, and he'll smile back at me and stamp my passport. Three more months. It shouldn't be a problem. I look at the alarm clock; it's 5:25am. The studio is dark and quiet. Unable to sleep, I place my head on his heart and listen to it beat, wishing for time to stop.

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"Your passport, please," says the US immigration officer. He's wider than he is tall and one of the buttons on his uniform is missing. I hand him my passport. "You do realize that you're under the visa waiver program?"

"The visa waiver program."

"...which means that you cannot apply for an extension of stay once your visa has expired," he adds.

"I see."

"And your visa expires today."

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't know ... I didn't think going back to the United States would be a problem." A half truth.

"Hmm..." he says. "Come with me, please."

I trail behind him as he steps out of the train and walks toward a red brick building.

"Take a seat," he says. The room is small and, apart from an orange clock going *tick, tock*, the walls are bare. There's a desk in the middle and three chairs. "The terms are very clear here, miss. The kind of visa you've got can be used only for short visits."

Without knocking, another officer enters the room. He sits across from me without saying anything, his face blank as a doughnut.

"I know." The chair has no armrests; sitting on it starts to become uncomfortable.

"So perhaps you're also aware that you cannot just go to Canada for a few days, and then re-enter the US and stay for another three months?"

"I didn't know that, sir." I stretch one leg and cross it over the other.

"We can deny you entry is what it comes down to," the other officer says. "It's that simple."

I cross and uncross my legs like Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*; clearly, it's not working.

"But what about all my things?"

"Now, if you'll step into the adjacent room so that we can scan your fingerprints and take your picture."

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"Happy birthday to you..." I sing as he steps out of the shower, naked. I'm sitting on the bed, holding a cupcake with a burning candle in the middle.

"Ooh!" He laughs. Then he sits at the foot of the bed. Slowly, he moves up toward me and blows out the candle before lying, not next to me, but on top of me. "I'll miss you so bad," he says. We've lived together in the one-room studio flat for almost half a year. He invited me to Puerto Rico and introduced me to his parents. They still live in his childhood home, a white house with so many bedrooms, no one ever has to share. They have cleaning ladies and gardeners and a pool in the back. In the evenings, we'd sat on the patio and talked to his siblings and their spouses, rocking back

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and forth in the old wooden chairs, blankets wrapped around us because it had gotten cold at night. We'd finished the bottles of red wine we'd drunk with dinner and felt so snug listening to the crickets in the garden below us. His parents, being Catholic, had given us separate bedrooms; I'd say goodnight and then, 15 minutes later, he would follow. When the house was quiet, he'd leave his room, not through the door, but through the long window to our shared balcony. I'd lie in bed under my covers in clean underwear and full makeup, waiting for the sound of his flop flops hitting the tiles on the balcony – waiting for the crackling of my own window opening. The next morning, I'd felt so rested when the housemaid, a sweet lady who had worked in their home since he was a boy, woke us with the smell of eggs and coffee.

In less than a week, my visa will expire. I'll be forced to leave New York, a most magical city that has absorbed me much the same way it has absorbed so many other dreamers – people from all over the world, who came and found their own reason to never leave again. But I've been given no choice, I'm being forced to go back home. But *this* is home, I keep thinking, tightening my arms around him, pressing my eyes shut. *This* is what home feels like.

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"Next!" shouts the lady at the US Embassy in a Scandinavian accent. She sits behind a wall of plexiglass that makes me think of the visiting rooms in a jail. She has a thin upper lip and her face looks grey. For seven months – 213 days, to be exact – I've been waiting for this appointment. I've been sleeping on an inflated mattress at my parents' house, every morning waking up in a quiet house, my legs wrapped around the comforter, realizing that you are gone. That I'm alone, and that what seemed too true to be a dream was exactly that: a dream.

"No," she says.

"What?"

"You heard me. You overstayed the visa you were given. And now you tell me that you're going back to the U.S. because of this man..."

"He's my boyfriend. And you're denying me any chance of seeing him. How can you do that?" I look into her watery blue eyes. Then I look past her face at the ladder behind her so as not to cry. A violin-curved woman in high heels is balancing on the very top step, trying to hang mistletoe from a hook in the ceiling. She's singing along to a Mariah Carey song that goes: "I don't want a lot for Christmas, There is just one thing I need..."

"Hmmm," she says. "Well. In this case, I don't feel certain that your intention is to depart the United States after your temporary stay."

*You don't feel certain, my rosy red ass.*

"How can this be your decision alone?"

She takes a bite of a star-shaped cookie dusted with powdered sugar that someone has brought in a small box lined with red and green tissue paper. "If you love this man so much," she says, her mouth full of cookie, "why don't you just marry him?"

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"Marry him. I've known him for a year. One year!" I shout, shooting spit at the plexiglass between us. "And you want me to marry him?"

"Next!"

When I step outside, it's raining, like it always is. I sit on a bench in front of the embassy and cry as if a relative has just died. I'm freezing, not so much because we're in the middle of December, but because nothing in my body seems to work as it should. A woman gets off her Christiania bike to ask if I'm okay.

"Are you okay, love?" She puts her hand into her pocket and pulls out a Mickey Mouse handkerchief. "Take this," she says. It smells like tobacco. Her children, both in yellow raincoats and Y-shaped safety belts, stop hitting each other and stare at me. One of them starts to cry. I am not okay. My heart is racing and I cannot breathe.

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Four months later, we're in Amsterdam, sitting in the back of a small theater filled with the scent of skin and sweat, watching couples have sex on stage. We're staying at a cheap hotel in the red-light district. Yesterday, we bought ice cream cones and walked our rented bikes through the narrow alleys, where women in fishnet stockings danced behind storefront windows, illuminated by chains of red Christmas lights. I'm still not allowed to enter the US, so instead we're traveling together through Europe. I've applied for the K-1 visa: the one that permits a foreign-citizen fiancée to travel to North America and marry. This, of course, does not guarantee that they will grant me the visa. No one can tell us how long the process will take.

"Visit the website to check on the status of your petition," they repeat every time we call. We've waited almost a year now. I've spent the time teaching myself English, so that I can pass the TOEFL test and apply to an American university.

Being without him is excruciating, sitting on the other side of the world, thousands of miles apart, not knowing how many more months I'll have to wait. Or, if they'll ever grant me a visa. I spend my days, which seem without beginning or end, alone at my parents' house, sitting next to a window with a view of the garden. From where I'm sitting, I can see the plum tree that I bought with my mom and planted with my dad. Childhood memories. My first boyfriend and I cut a heart and our initials into the trunk and nearly killed it.

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"Do you take Betinna Hansen to be your lawfully wedded wife?" the woman asks in Spanish. According to the law, we'll have to marry within 90 days of my entry into the US, so we've traveled to Puerto Rico, where everyone has gathered in Old San Juan to celebrate our love for each other. Vases filled with roses dot the white tablecloths and chandeliers hang from the high ceilings of the restaurant.

"Uno, dos, tres..." Three mariachis in sombreros and identical short jackets start playing their guitars. I look into those chocolate pudding eyes of his. He looks into mine and says, "I do."