



A Christmas Sunset

Chapter One

“Violet, *please!* I don’t have time for this.” Indi Hart patted the dashboard and expelled a breath. “I can’t be late today. Please, Violet, just start one more time for Mama. One more time.”

She looked heavenward. “God, please. I know I’m always asking You for one thing or another, but I need a little help *again.*” Then she remembered her father’s admonition to count to ten to give the car time to “catch its breath.” No one knew more about cars than Daddy. Indi inhaled deeply, then slowly exhaled as she counted.

“*Eight...nine...ten.* Come on, baby.” She turned the key, and Violet sputtered to life. “Whew!” Indi shifted into reverse, peeked at her mirror, and backed out of the diagonal parking space at the edge of the town square. She shifted into drive and pressed lightly on the gas.

And Violet sputtered to a stop.

Indi banged her head on the steering wheel. “No, no!” She opened the car door and launched herself out. “Oh Violet, I love you, but you’re really testing my patience today.”

A moment later, Indi was bent over the engine, wiggling hoses and tightening anything that looked loose. Suddenly, a horn blared, and tires screeched. Indi jumped, and her head slammed against the inside of the hood.

Brennan Sweet tapped out a rhythm on the steering wheel and whistled along to the Christmas carol playing on the radio. What could be better than having the sunroof open the first week of December? The warm rays covered him like hot fudge on a sundae.

San Antonio was sure a long way from Cleveland. This would be a good move for him, both professionally and personally. Peace washed over him with the assurance he'd made the right choice. It had been a leap of faith, but God had never let him down, and Brennan was confident He wouldn't start now.

What a charming town. Brennan turned and perused the town square as he drove. It was already dripping with Christmas decorations. Twinkly lights in the trees, a charming gazebo next to a giant decorated evergreen, larger-than-life candy canes, an inflatable Santa, reindeer, and an honest to goodness Nativity set. There were decorations representing other holiday traditions, too. Everything had a Southwestern flavor to it. The adobe structures were the perfect backdrop for all the red and green.

His phone chimed with an incoming call, and Brennan hit the speaker. "Hey, bro," he said with a smile.

"What's shakin', bacon?" His brother's traditional greeting.

"You're such a dork," Brennan said with a grin.

"Are you in Alamo Springs yet?"

"Yeah, I'm driving around the town square."

"It's a cool place. It's only about twenty minutes from us." Brian and his family lived just outside San Antonio.

"And you know someone with a garage apartment?"

"Yep, if it's still available. Want me to text you the guy's contact info?"

"Sure."

“Sorry you can’t stay with us, bro. But with three kids under four, there’s just no room at the inn.”

Brennan grimaced. He wouldn’t get a moment’s peace at Brian’s. “No worries. How’s the baby doing?”

“He’s a beast. Almost twelve pounds already. He’s in the 95th percentile.” The pride was evident in Brian’s voice. He loved his daughters, but he was thrilled to have a son.

“I can’t wait to meet him,” Brennan said.

“It’s gonna be great having you here,” his brother murmured. “I’ve missed you.”

A lump rose in Brennan’s throat. “You too, bro.” He hadn’t lived near family in ages, and the prospect brought joy to his heart. He made a last-minute decision to turn right and spun around the corner.

“Oh, yikes!” he exclaimed, slamming on his brakes. His hand instinctively laid on the horn.

“What happened? Are you OK?” Brian shouted.

Brennan’s heart hammered. “I’m fine. I almost ran into a car. A—purple car?” He couldn’t believe his eyes. It was right in the middle of the street, its hood open. Someone leaned over it from the driver’s side. Brennan’s view was only from the waist down, but what a sight: a short, red skirt floated over curvy hips above a pair of long legs encased in red-and-white striped tights.

“I’ll call you back, Brian.” He clicked off.

A woman emerged from under the hood, and a grin spread across Brennan’s face as he surveyed the remainder of her costume. If this is what elves looked like in Texas, this really was the right move for him.

He unfolded himself from the car. “I’m so sorry. Are you OK?”

The woman picked up her elf hat that had fluttered to the ground and rubbed a hand over the top of her head. “Ouch. That hurt.”

Brennan stepped closer. "Are you, ah, bleeding?"

She put up a hand. "Stop right there. No, I'm fine." She glared at him. "Where do you think you are? The Indy 500?" Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at the license plate on the front of the car. "We have speed limits here. Maybe y'all don't up north." Her Texas twang was, well, adorable.

Brennan had a hard time keeping his eyes off the red top hugging her curves above the flouncy skirt. Not to mention the authentic elf shoes with curled toes. "I really am sorry. But you have to admit, you stopped in a bad place."

Her deep brown eyes blazed. "Right." It came out *raht*. She tugged the hat back on her head with a wince. "How inconsiderate of me. Next time I'll choose a more convenient location for my car to konk out." She spun around, walked to the front of the vehicle, and slammed the hood closed.

"Do you need help calling a tow truck?"

She threw back her head and burst out laughing, causing her long blonde curls to dance around her. "That's a good one. Nope, I'm fine." *Fahn*. "I need to go. I'm late."

Brennan grinned at her. "Making deliveries for Santa?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm taking cookies to the children's ward at the local hospital, so I really do need to go." She waved at him. "Bye, Ohio. Watch your speed. Our cops don't take kindly to outsiders who ignore our laws." With that, she hopped in her purple car, started the engine, and drove away.

Brennan stood with his hands on his hips. "Man, you're losing your touch," he murmured.

When she turned the corner, the decal on the side of her vehicle was in plain sight. *The Sweet Spot Bakery*. Brennan looked at the store in front of him with a matching sign and purple awning.

Well, wasn't that interesting?

Chapter Two

Indi grumbled all the way to the hospital. Why did tall, dark, handsome guys who drove sports cars think laws didn't apply to them? But even if this one had been a troll—which he definitely was not—his voice was, well, amazing. Deep and oh so smooth, like velvet.

A shiver pulsed through Indi at the memory, and she shook it off. She pulled into one of the spots designated for hospital volunteers and glanced at the dashboard clock. Good. She wasn't too late.

In a few minutes she had twenty-four cookie boxes loaded into her canvas wagon. She pulled it up the ramp and into the building. From there it would be clear sailing to the elevators and up to the third floor.

"Indi."

This day just kept getting worse. "Sorry, Caleb. I'm late to an appointment." At one time, the sight of the handsome doctor in his lab coat with a stethoscope slung around his neck would have made Indi's pulse skitter, but no longer. She picked up her speed and headed for the bank of elevators.

His long legs caught up with her. "You haven't returned any of my texts or calls."

"That's because there's nothing to talk about." She punched the button.

"Indi, what do I have to do to make you believe I'm sorry?"

She laughed drily. "Oh, I believe you're sorry—sorry you got caught with that nurse at the drive-in when I was out of town at my sister's bridal shower." Indi had gifted her friend Ruth a certificate for six dozen decorated Christmas cookies for sending her the video.

The elevator doors swooshed open and, thankfully, the car was empty. Indi swiftly pulled the wagon in and punched the button to close the doors. "Have a nice life, Caleb."

Another chapter closed. "Blech," she said with a shudder, as if trying to wash a bad taste from her mouth. It wasn't as if she and Caleb were the love match of the century. They'd only been dating for

about three months, and Indi had always felt uncomfortable that he wasn't a churchgoer. She'd dragged him along a few times, hoping he would get interested in spiritual things, but that didn't happen, and he had recently come up with excuses not to go. If Indi was honest with herself, his indiscretion gave her a way out.

"I ran ahead of you on that one, Lord, but I won't do it again, I promise," she murmured to the empty space. "And I know I said that the time before, too. But from here on out, You're in charge. All I want is a man who loves You more than he loves me, who wants a woman who loves You more than she loves him." Indi winced. Did that even make sense? Even if it didn't, God would figure it out. The Bible said He always understood the longings of His child's heart.

"Just bring me the man you want for me, Lord. Make it obvious. Drop him from the sky," she prayed. "Have him slam right into me—oh, no, not that one, Lord. Someone I already know and trust. Please."

Indi quickly ran through the list of single men at church and sighed. It was a hopeless cause.

Chapter Three

Everything was falling into place. A week later, Brennan was settled in his apartment, and he'd met with his new bosses and was ready to hit the ground running, just after the New Year. It was a blessing to have some downtime between jobs to relax. In the meantime, he spent a lot of time doing research for work, visiting Brian and Selena, and getting acquainted with his nieces and nephew.

Brennan also broke out his running shoes and explored his new city on foot. He still had a hard time believing it was December. Every morning when he checked the Cleveland weather forecast, it brought a smile to his face. Yesterday, he laughed out loud when he saw a winter storm warning and single digits.

The only thing he hadn't done was go to the Sweet Spot Bakery. He'd come close several times but always lost his nerve. The one time he had convinced himself to go for it, it was closed with a cute hand lettered sign (in purple) saying, *Out for delivery, back in 30! Please come back!* He didn't, though.

Brennan couldn't get the cute blonde elf out of his mind. He had hoped to learn more about her by perusing the bakery's website but came up empty. The Sweet Spot had been owned by an older lady named Lucinda Hart for over forty years, and its motto was "*Bringing a smile to every face in Alamo Springs, one cookie at a time.*" The photo of her looked like America's grandma.

A cute, even elf-like motto. But there wasn't one photo of Brennan's elf on the website, which seemed a little out of date. Perhaps she was just an employee, but his gut told him there was something more going on. Even in their short encounter, her passion and dedication were evident.

Brennan finished a simple lunch of grilled cheese and soup, did some work online, and decided to take a nap. Soon he'd be back to a full-time work schedule and wouldn't have the luxury. He'd been up since before six, anyway. He fell asleep to the sound of soft rain.

When he woke, the sun was out, but everything outside was still wet, glistening like diamonds. It looked as if they'd gotten quite a bit of rain. To the west, things were setting up for a gorgeous sunset. Brennan dug his camera out of a box and decided to take a drive. At one time, photography had been an avid hobby, but when his career took off, he had less time to devote to it.

He hopped into his car, opened the sunroof, and headed west out of the city. No online maps this time. He'd just meander, find some country roads, and let them take him somewhere beautiful. Then he'd use navigation to find his way home.

After about forty-five minutes, Brennan crested a hill, and the breath left him. The dusky sky blazed with a palette only God Himself could have come up with, myriad hues of indigo, purple, pink, and peach. "Oh, wow, Lord. Good job with the paintbrush," he murmured. Bible verses about the beauty of God's creation flooded his mind. He'd been raised on God's Word and was thankful the Scripture was rooted in his heart.

He slowed the car and pulled onto the shoulder. Fortunately, there was no traffic. He hadn't seen another vehicle for miles.

Brennan got out, quickly assembled the camera, and made all the necessary adjustments. It all came back like he'd never forgotten. Man, he'd missed this. He snapped dozens of photos using different settings. It would be fun to upload them and play around with them.

When he got back into the car, it seemed closer to the ground than usual. Brennan put the camera away, turned on the ignition, put it in gear, and heard nothing but spinning tires. He shifted into reverse and rocked the vehicle back and forth, but no luck.

He clambered out and looked at the back wheels, completely sunk in mud. *Oh, no.* There was no way out of this. His heart thudded. He'd need to get a tow truck. He called 911 and quickly explained this wasn't an emergency. Brennan was able to pull up his location on his phone and share it with the dispatcher, who promised to send someone to help.

He passed the time taking more pictures and playing with the night settings on his camera. By the time the tow truck rolled up behind him, the stars were out, and all that was left of the stunning sunset were a few streaks of purple.

“I’m sorry to bring you clear out here,” he called as the driver alighted from the truck. “I guess I didn’t realize the ground was so soft from the rain.”

In the dark, Brennan could only make out that the man was tugging on gloves and didn’t look very robust. But as long as he had chains and whatnot on the truck, it didn’t matter.

“Still ignoring our laws, Ohio? There’s a sign back there that says, ‘soft shoulder.’”

Brennan’s jaw dropped as she approached. He turned on his phone light. She wore canvas overalls and a jacket. Golden blonde curls spilled from her hood.

“You?” His mind spun. “Yeah, I guess I didn’t see the sign.”

She pointed a flashlight at his tires. “Wow, you really did a number.”

“How—you’re a tow truck driver?”

“Hart Auto and Towing. Owned by my dad.” She walked toward the back of her rig and Brennan followed.

“But, what about the bakery?”

“Grandma owns that. I help both of them.” She looked around. “I’ll pull in front of you.”

“Wait—I, look. We haven’t even been introduced. I’m Brennan Sweet.” He held out his hand.

One corner of her mouth inched up. She tugged off her glove and shook it with a firm grip. He liked that. “Indi Hart.”

Brennan laughed. “Like the Indy 500?”

She smiled, and Brennan’s pulse kicked up a notch. “No, I-n-d-i. Short for Indiana.”

Brennan was utterly charmed. “Really?”

She pulled her hand from his, and he instantly missed the warm softness. “Really. That’s where we lived when I was born. My parents were hippies back in the day, which they would never admit to, but they were nomadic.” She lifted one brow in a completely adorable way. “My older sisters are Pennie and Minnie.”

Brennan threw back his head and roared with laughter. “Don’t tell me—Pennsylvania and Minnesota?”

“Yep. And the youngest is my brother, Tex. We had moved here by then and stayed.” She opened the door of the truck and deftly hopped up. “I’ll have you out of here in a jiffy.”

That adorable accent again. “Do you think I’ll be able to drive it?”

“We’ll see after I get it out. Might need to put it on the back and take it to the shop.”

“Wait, Indi—could I buy you a coffee when we get back to town?”

Her chocolate eyes sparkled, and Brennan was lost. She winked. “Make it dinner, and it’s a deal.”

I hope you enjoyed this little story!
It’s the opening for a future book, title TBD,
but I’m thinking maybe...*The Sweet Spot!*

