

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

CRUEL WINTER WITH YOU



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALI
HAZELWOOD

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662528392 (digital)

Cover design by Hang Le

Cover image: © kosmofish, © Look_Studio, © Miloje, © Veranika Dzik / Shutterstock



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Chapter One

In an ideal world, Marc Compton would be acting like a total dick. I'm not asking for much. Some gloating, maybe. Obnoxiously raised eyebrows. A sneered, "Well, well, well. Look who showed up unannounced on Christmas Eve." I'm not picky: any of the above would make me feel *exponentially* better about the situation.

But no. Marc opens the front door in a blaze of towering midwestern good looks, and when I look up at his handsome face, all I can detect is genuine surprise to find me standing on his parents' snow-covered porch.

Surprise that quickly morphs into worry.

It's like he doesn't wish me ill. Like he doesn't even hold a grudge over the terrible things I said to him a few months ago or over my fumbled, insufficient apology.

Then again, holding a grudge would require him to spend time thinking about me, which might be something that no longer occurs.

"Jamie?" he says, voice incongruously warm in the freezing dark. It's barely six, but the sun sets so early, it might as well be the middle of the night. "What the hell are you doing out in this weather?"

A good question. To which *I*—a levelheaded professional who keeps her cool under pressure, regularly saves people's lives, and sometimes even manages to make it through an entire Pilates class without bursting into tears—eloquently reply, "Um, yeah."

Marc cocks his head.

Frowns at me with something that looks uncomfortably similar to pity.

Repeats, skeptical: “Yeah’?”

“Um, yeah.” I’m such an accomplished conversationalist. Maybe they’ll give me an award for that. “As in . . . Yeah. Yes. It is me. Jamie.”

“Glad to know you’re not being deceitfully impersonated by an evil doppelgänger.” He takes a step back and roughly orders, “Come in.”

“No!” I say—way too vehemently, judging from the line that appears on his forehead. I walk that back by adding, “Thank you, but no. I really can’t stay. I should go home before the storm gets bad.”

“It’s late December in Northern Illinois. The storm is *already* bad.” I don’t have to turn around to know what he sees over my shoulders: long stretches of no visibility interrupted by large, furious snowflakes flurrying like turbines under the streetlights. The soundtrack—occasional creaking of branches, constant hissing of the wind—doesn’t make the scene any better. “You have to come in, Jamie.”

“Actually, my dad sent me here to borrow a copper roasting pan. As soon as you give it to me, I’ll just head back.” I smile, hoping it’ll get Marc to feel some sympathy and speed things up. I am, after all, just a girl. Cast out to the brutal elements by her only parent, all in the name of a treacherous but essential quest: plundering her childhood best friend’s home to procure a magic pan.

I *am* deserving of compassion.

Especially because the childhood best friend in question didn’t even have the decency to be here. Tabitha is with her parents and husband on a balmy, all-inclusive cruise somewhere in the Caribbean, slurping pure joy out of a coconut. This holiday season, the only Compton in town is Marc. Tabitha’s little brother, who . . .

Well, for one, he’s not little at all. Hasn’t been in a while, really. And he flew in from California a couple of days ago to take care of Sondheim, the Comptons’ geriatric high-maintenance-and-even-higher-misanthropy cat.

I asked Tabitha why they didn’t simply hire a sitter, and her only reply was, “*Why would we, when Marc was available?*” Apparently,

spending Christmas alone with a family pet who daydreams of eating eyeballs right out of their sockets is a totally normal activity for a tech mogul.

And thus, here we are. Out of eight billion people on this floating rock of a planet, Marc is the only one capable of short-circuiting my brain. And he happens to be all that stands between me and my quarry.

“Please tell me you didn’t walk two miles in a blizzard for a copper pot.”

“I did not. Dad’s home is closer than that”—by .3 miles, I estimate —“and what I need is a copper *pan*.”

“Jesus.” He pinches the bridge of his nose and leans against the door.

“It’s probably in the kitchen. And Dad says it’s necessary to bake the ham. So, if you could go get it . . .”

“Who the hell owns a copper pan?”

“Your mom.” I feel a spark of irritation. “Because they’re great. She wanted it, so Tabitha and I went in together to buy one for her last Christmas.” On second thought, maybe I shouldn’t have told him. Tabitha and I could barely afford the one we bought, but Marc is probably just making a mental note to tell his butler to have a baker’s dozen custom made. Seven for his parents and six for my dad, all gold foiled and emerald encrusted. With their initials embossed on it.

It’s so *weird*. Marc—Marc the jock, who charmed his way in and out of trouble; Marc of the coasting grades; Marc the college dropout—got filthy rich at twenty-three and paid off his parents’ mortgage after his company’s first liquidity event. He now has a net worth of millions. Billions. Bajillions. I don’t even know; as decent at math as I am, numbers that large always get slithery in my head.

Meanwhile, Tabitha and I—the dutiful, well-behaved, overachieving daughters—can barely afford appliances of the non-bedazzled variety.

I clear my throat. “Anyway, the sooner you bring the pan to me, the —”

“Hey, there! Aren’t you the Malek girl?”

I turn to the neighboring house, where a vaguely familiar elderly head leans out from one of the upstairs windows. It takes me a moment to place it, but when I do, I swallow a sigh. “Um, hi, Mrs. Nos—”

Hang on a minute. Is Mrs. Nosy her real name, or did we just call her that because she’d constantly bribe us with Werther’s Original to find out gossip about our parents?

“Norton,” Marc mutters, reading my mind.

“Hi, Mrs. Norton. Yup, I’m Jamie Malek.”

“You don’t look one day older than when you left for college. It’s been, what, ten years?”

I try to smile, but my zygomaticus major might be frozen. “Sure has. You look great, too, ma’am.” In truth, I can barely see her. The storm is picking up quickly, whiting out anything that’s more than a dozen feet away.

“You’re a lawyer, right? Like your daddy?”

“Jamie’s a physician,” Marc corrects her, a touch impatient. “Finishing up her pediatrics residency.”

“Ah, yes. You’d know, wouldn’t you?” She looks between us, suddenly hawkish and a little prurient. “I forgot that you two both moved out to San Francisco. Bet you *see* each other all the time, don’t you?”

My stomach tightens. Because now would be a good time for Marc and I to exchange a loaded stare and burst out laughing. Maybe even say, *Oh, Mrs. Nosy, if only you knew what happened last time we were together. We should tell you. It’d make your holiday season. You’d dump a whole truckload of hard candy on us.*

I stay silent, though. Paralyzed. Which means that Marc is on his own when he says, “Yeah, of course. We practically live together. If you’ll excuse us, I can see a snot icicle forming under Jamie’s nose. Merry Christmas to you and your husband.”

A minute later, I’m in the Comptons’ kitchen, having absolutely no clue how I got there. Marc, whose tolerance for bullshit never managed to

grow taller than your average bolete mushroom, must have pulled me inside. He's currently standing in front of me, unzipping my parka like he would for a toddler who has yet to master the concept of zippers.

"I need to—"

"Go back, yes." He plucks the beanie off my head, and halts when the mass of blond waves slips out from underneath it.

My residency has been kicking my butt, and I barely have time to eat, let alone go to a salon. My hair is the longest it's ever been, for the first time in my life—a little past my shoulders—not a bob. Marc must notice, because he picks up the end of a strand and rubs it between his fingers, staring at it in an intense, lingering way that makes me remember something he told me when we were both very young.

You have the prettiest hair in the world. It's dumb that you don't grow it longer.

All this attention from him has me feeling overheated. A true feat, in the current weather.

"You're frozen solid," he mutters, dropping the lock. "I made a fire in the living room. Go stand in there—"

"But what about the—"

"—*while* I look for the pan," he adds, like I'm more predictable than a quarterly tax deadline. "I can't believe your dad sent you here in a damn snowstorm."

"I don't mind," I say. Minding a little.

A lot.

"You don't have to say yes to every idiot thing he asks of you. Especially if it's not safe." Marc's full mouth tightens into a thin line—and then curls ever so slightly, a bare hint of humor that is so exquisitely *him*, my heart loses a handful of beats. "You don't even fucking *like* ham, Jamie."

I huff out a laugh. Of course he'd know. "Dad's trying a new recipe."

"Uh-huh." He unspools the scarf from around my neck. "Unless the new recipe bakes through the ten inches of snow we're getting tonight, he

still shouldn't have sent you here."

"Honestly, ten inches is not that much."

A dark eyebrow lifts.

I realize *why* after a beat and instantly turn scarlet. "Oh my God."

"Harsh, Jamie."

"That's not what I meant!"

"I see."

"No, *really*, I meant—of snow, ten inches *of*—"

My phone rings. I pick up immediately, so grateful for the interruption that I could start a cult based around worshipping broadband cellular networks.

"Hi, Dad . . . Yup, I made it to the Comptons'. Heading back in a minute . . . I will, yes. Of course." I glance at Marc, whose expression can only be described as displeased. Nope, still not a fan of Dad. "Marc, my father wants me to remind you that you should come over tomorrow for Christmas dinner, and . . . Yes, Dad. I *promise* I'll do my best to bring him back. No, I won't be kidnapping him if he refuses, I . . . Okay, sure. I guarantee that if I can't convince him, I'll bodily drag him to our place." I hang up with an eye roll and set my phone on top of the clothes Marc has piled on the counter. It'll be a pain to put them back on, but I must admit that it's nice when my body doesn't feel like it's being stabbed with a million little ice picks. "Um, would you like to come over for Christmas dinner?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"No."

"Got it."

He eyes me expectantly.

"What?"

"I'm waiting for the violent abduction I was promised?"

"Oh. Right." I glance at his height. The way his compression shirt skims his large biceps. The muscular thighs under his jeans. "Let's say that I tried—but you bravely overpowered me."

"Was it a close call?"

“Oh, yeah. I had you in a choke hold for a few seconds there.”

“But then you slipped on a banana peel?”

I laugh. Marc’s face seems to light up at the sound, that bright grin that thickens the air around us, and . . .

He doesn’t look away. Continues staring and staring, like he’s ready to swallow me whole with his eyes. He’s always been like this when it comes to things he wants—ravenous. Larger than life. Acquisitive. And that’s why it’s not good for me to be here, with him. Marc makes my heart leap and my body glow and my brain rest, and that’s not something I could bear to have and then let go of. Whenever I’m with him, I become greedy and reckless, and . . .

It’s too late, anyway. I had my chance and I blew it.

“I need to go,” I say, staring at the tiled floor. “Could you—”

I’m startled by a sudden cracking sound, followed by a metallic thud. I turn in its direction and gasp when I spot what happened through the kitchen window: in the Comptons’ backyard, one of the heavy oak branches snapped and fell on the patio.

It currently lies on top of their furniture, which looks a bit . . . flattened. And maybe broken. In *several* pieces.

Shit. I need to hurry home before the weather becomes unmanageable. *Where the hell is that pan?* I glance at Marc, wide eyed, only to realize that he’s reading my mind. Because he seems to know exactly what I’m about to say, and beats me to it.

“Jamie, let me make something clear.” His voice is calm and very, *very* final. “If you think I won’t tie you up and lock you in my bedroom before I let you step outside in this weather, then you don’t know me at all.”

Chapter Two

The problem is, I do.

Know Marc, that is.

I know him very well since I first met him on the day he was born, in our hometown hospital, which smelled like cough syrup and the municipal pool. In return, he became the shining star of my earliest memory, which included Dad sitting me on a large plush chair and Mrs. Compton handing me a shapeless bundle with the warning, “Be careful, Jamie. Make sure you hold the head—yes, exactly like that.” I was two and a half. Tabitha, who was about six months older than me, had just celebrated her third birthday with a splash-pad party.

Tabitha wasn’t there, though. She was at home with her grandparents, due to what her mom referred to as “a string of attention-seeking tantrums” but what Tabitha would later reframe as “conscientious objection to the imposition of an unnecessary expansion effort.” She had been informed that a new family member would be forthcoming, and was not inclined to share resources that her young mind perceived as finite, such as toys, Frosted Flakes, and parental love.

That’s how I ended up meeting her new sibling before she did, and I was eager to report back that, competition-wise, she had *nothing* to fear. The red creature squirming in my arms had a scrunched-up face, wrinkly nose, pimply cheeks, folded ears, old-man hair, *and* was covered in dried crusts. It reminded me of the sugar cookies Dad would bake over the holidays, in particular the ones that didn’t come out of the oven quite right. *Unfortunate looking*, he’d call them.

The description fit well. The thing in my lap clearly did not have a single ounce of fortune.

“What’s her name?” I asked Mrs. Compton.

“*His,*” Dad corrected me. “He’s a boy, honey.”

Suddenly, everything made sense. “*That’s why he’s so ugly.*”

The adults burst into laughter—very mean spirited, I thought, given that the poor baby was already dealing with the adverse condition of not being a girl. I tuned them out until Mr. Compton asked me, “Jamie, do you know what we named him?”

I shook my head.

“Marc. Marc Evan Compton.”

And maybe the baby already recognized his own name, because in that precise moment, he opened his gray eyes and, after a couple of clumsy attempts, gripped my index finger. *Hi,* his unwavering stare seemed to say.

And: *Stay.*

And maybe even: *I like you.*

He was small, but strong. And at once, an overwhelming sense of love and protectiveness swept over me. *It’s okay,* I swore silently to Marc. *I’ll be your friend. I’ll get Tabitha to be your friend, too. And I will love you. Even if you’re the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.*

It was a heartfelt, sincere promise. One that I broke a million times over in the next few years. Because, in a tragic turn of events, Marc Evan Compton turned out to be the absolute worst.



For several highly gullible years, I was a Marc apologist.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to do that,” I’d tell a seething Tabitha every morning as we walked to school. “Switch out your vitamin gummies with laxatives, that is.”

Or use your favorite shirt to line the hamster's cage.
Stab you in the eye with a plastic fork.
Lock you in the linen closet.
Convince all the neighborhood kids to call you Dumbitha.
Train the dog to behead your favorite Barbie.
Puke up three servings of mac and cheese right in your lap.
Sneak insects inside your bed.

I made up excuses because with *me*, Marc was never a terror. Whatever instinctive love I'd felt toward him on the day he was born, it was reciprocated. Dad and Mr. Compton had been best friends since high school, and our families were constantly in each other's proximity. Mom had left us right after I was born, and Dad, with his very demanding job, appreciated all the childcare the Comptons could offer. Tabitha and I were, of course, inseparable. But I had a special bond with Marc, too.

"I wish you lived with us," he would tell me sweetly when I'd leave Tabitha's room after a weekend sleepover.

And: "You're my favorite person in the whole world."

And: "When we grow up, I want us to get married."

No such thing would happen. I already had a husband picked out: Alan Crawford, an older guy from down the street (or, should that fail, Lance Bass from NSYNC). In my eyes, Marc was a little boy. Nevertheless, I found him adorable. I taught him the alphabet and how to tie his shoelaces. In return, he yelled at a kid who shoved me at the playground, and made me valentines every year.

"You're supposed to be *my* best friend," Tabitha reminded me about once a week. "I knew that noobnugget would steal half of everything. I just didn't think you'd be included."

But I loved them both. And for years, even as the relationship between Tabitha and Marc began involving allergenic substances slipped into each other's lunches, sharp pushpins, and constant threats of mutual destruction, I tried not to take sides. "You don't have to choose between them, honey," Dad would say. "This is just typical sibling rivalry. A phase

they'll grow out of. Just sit it out." And I did—until we were twelve, Marc was nine, and the egg incident happened.

To this day, Marc maintains it wasn't on purpose. That he didn't know our "unhinged school would engage in as deranged an activity as pretending that an egg is a *baby* and having students carry it around for a week without cracking it." But not only did our unhinged school engage in as deranged an activity, it also *scored* us on it. A whole 30 percent of our final Family Sciences grade depended on that damn egg.

Which is why, when I entered the Comptons' kitchen and found Marc eating it—fried, on toast, tomatoes on the side—I didn't stop Tabitha from retaliating. I observed in silence as she ran after him. Said nothing as she tackled her brother, even though he was already taller than both of us. Leaned back against the door and crossed my arms as she pulled his hair. And after their screeches drew Mr. Compton away from his yard work and inside the house, after he separated his children, after he turned to me and asked, "Jamie, what happened?" I spilled my truth.

"Marc started it," I said.

He was grounded after that, though I can't recall for how long. What I do remember, with stunning clarity, is his betrayed look, and the instinctive knowledge that this would mark the end of an era.

The following year, instead of valentines, I received embarrassing nicknames, incessant teasing, and a newfound rivalry with my best friend's little brother.



In hindsight, Marc was less of a "difficult" kid and more of an under-stimulated, high-energy one. Eternally bored, a little too smart for his own good, and definitely too skilled with computers. He was put in every sport under the sun and succeeded at all of them. But there was a

restlessness inside him, and the endless pranks and constant mischief helped assuage that.

“Typical gifted child acting out,” one of Dad’s girlfriends once said. She was a psychologist, and I really liked her. In fact, she may have been my favorite out of all the women he’d brought home. For a while I hoped she’d become my stepmom, but none of Dad’s relationships seemed to last more than a couple of years—a problem, since I didn’t seem to be able to stop myself from growing very attached to them all. But for one reason or another, his partners always left, and even though Dad recovered quickly, their departure never failed to make me feel alone, abandoned, and maybe a little guilty. Was it my fault? Was I too needy? Should I have made myself scarcer when they came over? Was that why Mom had left me right after I was born?

Or maybe this was just the nature of relationships: Transient. Fragile. Finite. Not worth pursuing.

Over time, I formed my own coping strategies. All I could control was my behavior; I needed to be as considerate and high-achieving as possible, and if I accomplished that, maybe people would contemplate sticking around. And if they didn’t . . . I taught myself to be grateful for what they would leave behind. I’m grateful to Dad’s girlfriends for teaching me how to fish, how to use tampons, how to bake bread. And, of course, that Marc Compton was a bit of a misunderstood genius.

I saw hints of it, too. The speed with which he’d finish his homework if it meant getting out of the house to hang out with his friends. The books he’d read sprawled on the living room couch, all above his age level. The surgical precision of his jabs, as though he knew exactly what to say to annoy the crap out of everyone.

But all in all, once Marc stopped being the boy I adored and became something between a little goblin and a full-blown villain, Tabitha and I began spending more time at my house, and that seemed to suit him just fine. For a few years, he seemed to forget my name and didn’t address me as anything but Four Eyes, Shorty, Nerd, Cheese Grater, and a few other

zingers that managed to address whatever physical attribute of mine was most prominent (and most insecurity-yielding) at the time. He eventually settled on Butt Paper, after a mortifying two hours in which I walked around our middle school with toilet paper stuck to my shoe. Marc was the one who told me to get rid of it—Tabitha was at home sick, and I clearly had no other trustworthy friends—but the nickname proved impossible to shed. Then again, since he constantly addressed Tabitha as Her Royal Shittiness, while Tabitha called him Mom and Dad’s Oopsie Baby, things could have been way worse for me.

I pushed back some. Called him Marky, which I knew he hated. He had some funny-looking years, too—he was gangly, tall and skinny to the extreme, his bones too long for his body and too prominently structured for his face. But I still felt protective of him, and deep down I knew the constant badgering was the only way he could relate to us. As we got older, as Marc became busier with his own life, as the teasing morphed into something lazier—something that felt a lot like ignoring us—I almost missed it.

And then he started high school.



“How is my crappy little brother *popular*, and *you and I* aren’t?” Tabitha asked me during PE, in the middle of a partner stretch.

“Well, we aren’t *unpopular*.”

She gave me her best *Are you for fucking real?* stare, but I didn’t back down.

“Tab, we’re fine. We have friends. Boyfriends. We have each other, and great grades, extracurriculars and band, National Honor Society. We write for the school newspaper, and the other day Mrs. Niles said we’re her favorite students—” I realized how shrill and desperate I was starting to sound, and abruptly shut up.

It was halfway through junior year. Due to the incomprehensible sorcery of the school district's calculations, Marc was only two grades behind us. And, shockingly, seemed to have the entire school in his thrall.

"Why on earth have three girls—one of whom is a *senior*—asked me for his number in the last two weeks? Why is half the soccer team hanging out with him *at my house*?"

I blinked. "Isn't Marc a freshman?"

"Yes!"

"Hmm. Maybe you shouldn't share his contact information with a senior, then—"

"I'm not giving out my loser brother's number to a senior or *anyone else*, but I need to understand *why* they want it and *why* he has a giant friend group who seems to have nothing better to do than coming over at seven a.m. to drive him to school!"

I cocked my head and tried to conjure Marc Compton. He was less childlike than even the year before, for sure. His voice wasn't as squeaky and prone to cracking. He had a crooked smile and seemed at ease in his body, and if I *really* applied myself to some method acting, I could maybe figure out what the girls saw in him. "Well, he's growing into his looks. He's good at sports. He's charismatic and probably fun to be around—"

"I once saw him kiss a slug with my own two eyes."

"Oh, I was there. Those other girls, though? They did not bear witness to that opinion-making event. *We* know the real Marc, but who else does?"

Tabitha rolled her eyes, muttered something about how humanity was doomed, and went back to stretching her quads.

But things had changed. In the hallways at school, Marc no longer acknowledged me—not even to make fun of me—and that year I exchanged fewer words with him than with the mechanic who fixed my car at the Jiffy Lube. If a vengeful angel were to drop from the skies and chop off three of my fingers, I could still count our interactions on one hand.

The first was in the school cafeteria, after I patted my pockets and realized I must have left my wallet in my locker.

“I’m so sorry,” I told the notoriously ill-tempered lunch lady, mortified. “I’m going to go grab it and run back—”

“I got it, Butt Paper,” a familiar but surprisingly deep voice said from somewhere behind me. A handful of bills appeared on my tray, but when I turned to thank Marc, he was already immersed in conversation with someone else and I was forgotten.

The second was a few months later, when he walked in on me doing my homework in the Comptons’ kitchen. I’d heard someone enter the room but didn’t look up, figuring it was Tabitha. A couple of minutes later, when I lifted my gaze, I found him stopped in his tracks, quietly staring at me with a soft smile on his lips.

Weird.

“Um, Tabitha’s on the phone with CJ,” I explained.

“Ah.” It came out a little raspy, and he cleared his throat. Surprisingly, he didn’t leave. Instead, he said, “Niall Holcomb, huh?”

“What? Oh.” Niall and I dated for my last two years of high school. He was the ideal first boyfriend—always kind, never pushy, busy enough with his own life not to demand too much from someone whose main priority would always be academics. Namely, *me*. Like Marc, he played basketball. In fact, Marc had basically stolen his spot on the team. “Yeah,” I said. I was surprised he had noticed we were together, since Niall and I kept a pretty low profile.

Marc’s lips flattened. “He treating you well?”

“... Yes?”

“Are you answering me or asking me?”

“Yes. He is.” I blinked, confused. “Why? Are you going to tell me a dark secret about him? Is he a sociopath? Does he keep a family of porcelain dolls in his locker? Always carries zip ties with him? Toenail fungus?”

Marc huffed a laugh. “I wish I could. But he’s a really good guy.”