

THE TROUBLE WITH  
CHRISTMAS



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901  
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EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-494-2  
Print ISBN: 978-1-61258-518-5

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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## CHAPTER 1



“*I*t’s freezing out there.” Lila came into the little blue bungalow, slamming the door behind her. Luke did not come to the front door to greet her. She smiled, picturing him working in his shop despite the temperatures. Guys and their cars.

The perfect opportunity presented itself for her to hide her packages. Lila quickly made her way to their bedroom closet. Luke had given her permission to go shopping in the city for a dress for the holiday party she was throwing. And she had found a perfect dress- she was sure he was going to love it. The one teensy problem was that it was out of the budget he had given her, by a few hundred dollars.

Lila smiled and sighed as she stroked the silky fabric. The classic wrap dress was red, with a plunging neckline and short hem. It accentuated all the best parts of her post-baby body but hid the jiggly mummy tummy.

She thought of her curly haired baby Gracie, as she patted her tummy in the mirror. Every extra pound and stretch mark had been totally worth it. Mommy life was the best. Although she wouldn’t trade it in for anything, she still missed the fashion industry that she had left behind. Especially the clothing.

Hearing the back door shut, Lila quickly zipped up the garment bag, reverently hanging it in the back of their closet. Lila was dying to wear it, but she was not ready to break the news of the purchase to her authoritarian man.

Luke carried the cold in with him as he carefully shut the door, shaking an early snowfall off his heavy boots. He ran a hand through his thick, damp hair. Lila watched as he dried his hands on the back of his Levi's. Goodness, that man could rock a pair of jeans. He had a simple, worn flannel shirt on, tucked in at his trim waist. Lila laughed to herself as she thought about how no one in the fashion world could top how good Luke looked in his simple gear.

"Hi, beautiful." Luke leaned down and kissed her face; his lips felt cold and his cheeks warm.

"Hi yourself, handsome. Gracie still sleeping?"

"Yes. Like an angel." Luke's face glowed with pride that made Lila almost envious of daddy's little girl. She was the apple of his eye, and everyone knew it. She did look like an angel with those golden curls and chubby, dimpled cheeks. Gracie had the sweetest temperament, only cranky when demanding a nap.

Luke started rummaging through the fridge, getting ready to prepare dinner. Their relationship had changed so much since moving to Luke's hometown. Lila going from an executive in a flashy city high-rise, to a stay-at-home mom and spanked wife. One thing would always remain constant, though, Lila was a terrible cook.

Dinner reminded her of the caterer that she was going back and forth with for the big family holiday party. Since it was their first Christmas in town, Lila wanted to bring a little of her flashy city life to everyone and throw an elegant holiday gathering that they would be talking about for years to come. The only thing standing in her way was her handsome, no-nonsense husband.

Lila watched as Luke chopped and diced the vegetables for the roast that he was preparing. She admired his strong, steady hands

and how he stayed focused when completing even the most mundane tasks.

“How do you do that?” Lila asked.

“What?” Luke answered, nonchalantly.

“Get them all to be so—perfect.”

“It’s easy, Lila. If you just slow down long enough, you could do it too.” He looked over his shoulder and winked as he chuckled. Lila was known for her fast-paced nature. Luke likened them to a crockpot and a microwave. Lila got the job done quickly and accurately, while Luke took his time to finish a project, and did so thoroughly.

“That reminds me. Luke, we need to talk food for the party.”

Luke sighed. Spending money and fancy parties were not his forte. She was not going to let him off the hook this time, though, he had married into this, after all. Lila couldn’t help her innate desire for elegance and class. She felt like a holiday should be memorable. The decorations should be breathtaking, the food top notch and the music entrancing.

“How much are we talking here, beautiful girl?” Luke turned and wiped his hands on a towel, giving his full attention to their conversation. He leaned, artfully against the countertop, crossing his arms. The shirt was tight against his muscles; he was beautiful enough to be a sculpture. Luke had no idea how gorgeous he was.

She put her best “you’re going to love this” look on her face. “Baby. Honey. Sugar.” She crossed the kitchen over to him, batting her eyelashes and sliding her arms around his neck.

Luke clucked his tongue at her. “Don’t try to pull a Heather. You know that stuff doesn’t work on me.”

Lila sighed. She had two sisters-in-law. They were both also in a relationship where their man was the head of the household, and a spanker. But for some reason, Heather could sometimes use her sweet, southern ways to bowl over David—an otherwise strict man. Elizabeth could tap into her cute little girl side to get her way from time to time with Cole. Luke was unmovable. Steady, yes, depend-

able, yes, exactly what she needed, but unmovable. And Lila wanted this party.

She wrapped her arms tighter around his muscled back. “Come on, baby. I want this Christmas to be perfect.”

The corner of Luke’s mouth turned up into the crooked grin that she loved. “Lila, we can do this party and stay in our budget. We are down to one income now, you know.”

Lila sighed yet again. He knew her better than she knew herself. When Luke found out that they were expecting, he had convinced her to stay home and continue to work part time, then eventually quit her job altogether, and surprisingly, Lila was glad that he had. She had never been happier and this time with baby Gracie meant everything to her. The much smaller spending limit was a definite drawback and one that she wasn’t sure she would ever be able to stay within.

“Which reminds me,” he continued, “how much did you spend today, Lila?” His eyebrows raised and his stern look melted her to the core.

“Um,” Lila looked away, now trying to wiggle out of his embrace. She had always been a terrible liar. “Not too much.”

Luke grabbed both of her upper arms in his hands to keep her from escaping. “How much, Lila?”

She looked at him. She looked down at the floor. She looked at his large hands that currently had her imprisoned. “A bit more than we agreed on.” It came out as a whisper.

Luke didn’t say anything. He didn’t let go of her. She tried to fill in the big, silent space with feeble excuses. She didn’t get a good look at the tag. The lady may have rung it up wrong. She didn’t realize how much she had spent. It was the most gorgeous dress ever.

Before Luke could respond, Gracie started to cry. Her piercing screams rang down the hall. She did not like waking up alone.

Luke tilted Lila’s chin up with his finger. Her gaze met his. “We will be talking about this later.” Again, the stern look—this time

with the promise behind the words. They hit Lila in the middle, causing a wave of butterflies, mixed with dread to fill her tummy.

His hands moved around to her bottom, which he gave a firm squeeze that had her standing tippy-toe before sailing off to rescue his princess.

Lila sighed for the umpteenth time that day. Why had she spent so much money? Luke had been more than generous, and they had agreed on the amount together. It had seemed perfectly reasonable at the time. Why had she gone to the opulent boutique of her favorite designer, in the first place?



ELIZABETH AND COLE stopped by to let the twins play with baby Gracie on their way home from town. There was plenty of roast and potatoes, so they ended up staying for dinner. Lila was grateful as she wasn't quite ready to face Luke.

About thirty minutes after putting Grace to bed for the night, Luke started looking at the clock and making comments about how late the time was. Lila picked up on her husband's cues before their easy-going guests did. Eventually, he looked at Lila pointedly and said, "I think that we had better call it a night, beautiful girl. We still have a few things that we need to take care of." Elizabeth's head quickly snapped in Lila's direction, and Lila blushed.

Lila loved her best friend and sister by marriage, but Elizabeth was just too curious at times. Lila was hoping Cole's discipline would improve Elizabeth's character flaw, and it had but she was still nosy.

Her snoopy sister-in-law somehow managed to corner her as the men were buckling up the twins. "What's going on, are you in trouble with Luke?" Elizabeth asked. Lila rolled her eyes. Elizabeth was more than willing to share every discipline episode of her marriage. Lila was more reserved when it came to sharing personal details about her life. Elizabeth always seemed to know when Lila

had gotten herself into trouble, or was on the receiving end of her husband's rigid correction. Luke ran a tight ship, did not tolerate disrespect, and had a firm hand.

"I went shopping for a dress for the party today. I may have accidentally overspent, just a smidge," Lila whispered harshly.

It was Elizabeth's turn to roll her eyes. "Lila, you aren't a fancy rich girl anymore. You have got to adjust to small town life. Besides, I was just probably going to wear my dark denim skirt and cowgirl boots that night. What's the big deal?"

Lila cringed. Why couldn't these people just have some class for one night? One night? Was that asking too much? "Liz, you have to dress up. Come on. It's supposed to be a fancy party. Besides, you know Heather is going to wear something amazing, in winter white, no less, to match her perfect platinum hair."

"Yeah, but you know Heather does not have a budget, unlike you or me. My other big brother might be just as strict as Luke, but David still spoils her to death. She never gets in trouble for spending money. Even if we had money like that, Cole would never let me spend like she does. How much did this dress set you back, by the way?"

Lila looked down and mumbled, "Five hundred."

Elizabeth smacked Lila on the shoulder, hard. "Five hundred dollars! What were you thinking? Oh, my brother is going to kill you." Before Elizabeth could continue her rant, the guys came around the corner.

"Ready, babe?" Cole yawned, placing a toned arm protectively around his tiny wife.

"Ready." Elizabeth slipped out of her husband's arm to hug her brother goodbye. She kissed Luke on the cheek, whispering something in his ear. He gave a low chuckle, then passed her back to her husband.

Lila said her goodbyes, blushing crimson when Elizabeth said, "Sweet dreams, Lila." A disapproving look crossed Luke's face at his little sister's jibe.



"You too, Bethy," Luke said. Luke shook hands with Cole saying, "Goodnight, man," and the couple was on their way. The familiar butterflies and angst returned to Lila's stomach.

As soon as the cherry-red front door shut, Luke wasted no time. "Bedroom, now."

Lila held back yet another sigh. She followed Luke to the bedroom.

Luke stood by the closet doors, opening them wide. The gold lettering on the boutique packages in the back of the closet now looked absurd in her cute, but quaint, cottage home.

"Show me." Luke rubbed a hand over his brow, waiting to see Lila's purchases. She went to the back of the closet, pulling the garment bag out.

"That's pretty far back there. It looks like it was hiding." Luke raised one eyebrow at her as her stomach tied in knots. Her bottom started to feel like it was burning and so were her privates. The look that was on his face always left her searing. What was it that made a strong-willed woman melt under the steady gaze of a stronger willed man? Lila snapped out of her daydream, remembering that she was in serious trouble as Luke's eyes roved over the other bags. "More shopping?"

"It had to have accessories."

Luke laid the garment bag on the bed and unzipped it. He pulled the price tag away from the sleek fabric. He looked at Lila. "Is this a joke?" She would have laughed but knew that Luke had no patience for that kind of jokes.

"No. That is just what a designer dress costs."

"Why on earth would you ever need to spend this much on one outfit?"

"Ugh. I liked it better when I was making all of the money and could drop thousands on one dress if I wanted to." She crossed her arms defiantly.

"You spent thousands? On a dress?" Luke's voice was dangerously quiet.

Lila instantly regretted the admission. “I was making good money. And I had to look good. That was part of the job. Besides, you never cared before.”

“Oh, but I did care before, Lila. That was when you did whatever you wanted, and I just played along, miserable, thinking that it had to be your way.” Luke waved a hand in the air for emphasis, then returned it to his creased brow.

Lila tried a softer approach. “I just want to have nice things.”

“More than you want to stay home with Gracie? Having things this ‘nice,’” he waved an exasperated hand over the dress on the bed, “would mean that we will both need to work full-time and maybe even part-time, too.”

Lila agreed with every decision they had made and was glad for them. There was just something about that red devil dress that made her want to fight with her husband.

“What if I miss the flash of the city life? And the paycheck?” She felt instant guilt when she saw the pain that her flippant comment caused Luke.

“Then we move back. Now. The old house was rented and not sold for a reason, in case you weren’t happy living here. Lila, my number one job is to make sure that I take care of you. I’d do anything to achieve that goal.” He looked at the bags, then looked at her asking softly, “Do you need this fancy stuff?”

That was not what she wanted. The job had been everything she had dreamed of and everything that she had worked towards, but that season of her life was over, and a new one had begun. The thought of going back to working long hours at a breakneck pace made her sad. Towards the end of her career, she was drinking bottles of wine every night to deal with her work stress. And she would never trade a cup of coffee at her desk for her current lunches with her work-from-home husband.

Lila couldn’t picture going back to the way things had been. She had the utmost respect for working moms and one day she might

be a working mom, but right now she was enjoying time with Luke and those sweet baby cuddles too much.

“No, I don’t want to go back to work, and I guess I don’t need things that are quite that expensive. I do need to throw the most amazing holiday bash ever, though.”

Luke wrapped his arms around her. “You will, but you need to do it within the limits of our agreed upon budget.”

She nodded.

Luke took a deep breath. He brushed a strand of her hair from her face. “So, do you still want to keep doing things my way?”

She tilted her face up and nodded at him.

Luke moved his hands to her shoulders, locking his gaze with hers. “Are you sure?”

One more nod. Lila knew what she agreed to, and her knees felt weak.

“My way, Lila, is setting rules that are good for our family. And enforcing those rules if they are broken. How much money did we agree on?”

“One hundred,” Lila replied in her smallest voice.

“And how much did you spend today?”

Lila didn’t want to say. The red slinky number was starting to look a little ridiculous for a family holiday party. The amount came up to almost the mortgage payment for their modest home.

“Nine hundred.”

“Lila.” The disappointment in his voice as he said her name was too much for her to bear. She started to cry.

The sight of her tears drained the anger from Luke’s face. He quickly wrapped his arms around her, shushing her. Lila was not normally a crier.

“I just wanted to look good. And I still hate my stomach, but this dress made it look good, and I’m really happy, and I want a nice party, and I’ve never hosted a holiday for your family, and I just wanted everything to be perfect.” She rambled, wiping at her running nose.

“You always look beautiful, Lila. The dress is just wrapping on a perfect package. And my family isn’t expecting a grand ball. We just want to be together.”

Lila sniffed. “I’m still adjusting, you know.”

“I know, beautiful girl. Moving was a big adjustment, and you have been remarkable through all of these life changes. Our marriage has never been stronger. You are an amazing mom. I’m so proud of you, Lila.”

She wiped her tears away on the back of her sleeve. “So, I’m not in trouble?” She stole a glance at her husband. Lila was torn between hope that her outburst had canceled her punishment, and hope that her man would remain her steadfast disciplinarian.

“You are still in a world of trouble. You directly disobeyed me, went way outside of our spending parameters, and tried to hide the whole thing. Tomorrow, we are going to leave Gracie with Elizabeth and take all of this stuff back.” He ran a fingertip down her jaw line to the tip of her chin. “But I do want you to have a dress you feel great in. We will find something you love for the amount that we had discussed.”

“What about, you know?” Lila was feeling guilty and wanted the conscious clearing that a spanking brought to her.

“You will get a spanking, but not tonight. You’re worn out. We will take care of it tomorrow. I think that it’s time to call it a day, now.” He kissed her forehead, then gently rubbed the back of her arms with his hands, sending shivers down her spine.