

CHRISTMAS COVE by Sarah Dressler

EXCERPT

Leo watched as America's eyes lit up. The space was a winter wonderland, complete with dozens of flocked and lit trees. Soft glowing faux candles dotted the room, a live band played at one end, and there was more punch and hot cocoa than one could drink.

"This is beautiful," America said as she took in the atmosphere.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. Though he couldn't see if she heard him, her shoulder moved ever so slightly as though she did. "Is this the Christmas you were hoping for?"

"Close," she said and took a turn around him while delighting in the moment.

America looked like the queen of the ball as they walked to the center of the space, and pride swelled inside Leo that she was on his arm. The crowd hushed and, as though they were witnessing something special, cleared room on the dancefloor.

Though they didn't know who she was, her confident and relaxed posture commanded attention from everyone in the room. She sent Leo a knowing side glance as he twirled her around before catching her in his arm.

He took her left hand in his and her waist in his right. The room stood still in the breath just before the music began. A Christmas waltz. Leo knew this one well. He took her through the steps, and she followed his lead like a pro.

As the music swelled and diminished to a close, he captured her gaze. She radiated happiness.

"Where did you learn to dance like that?" America said breathlessly.

"YouTube."

America whacked him in the belly as she laughed. "You did not!"

He liked teasing her. "Of course, I didn't. My Aunt June insisted on weekly cotillion classes."

"You surprise me."

"I try," Leo said and held her close.

Her arms draped over his shoulders and her head rested near his neck. "Thank you," she whispered. "This is exactly what I imagined before I came here."

“You imagined dancing with a dashing, yet approachable public servant in a snow-themed pavilion with a hundred eyes trained on you while your favorite song is played by a live band, while wearing a stunning gown and falling madly in—”