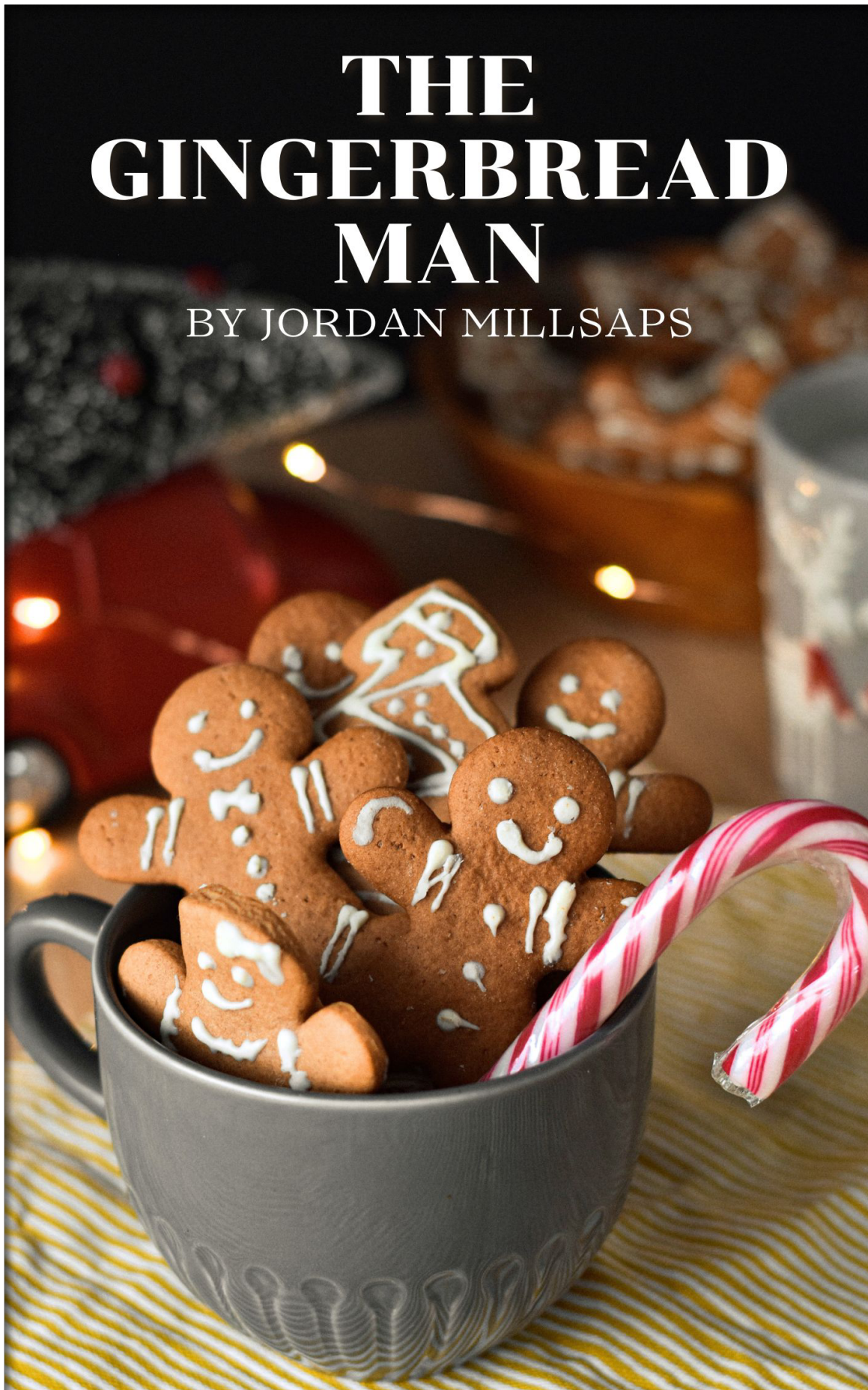


THE GINGERBREAD MAN

BY JORDAN MILLSAPS



“Molasses?”

Brooke gaped at the two gallon-sized jugs of dark molasses in the open cardboard box resting on her kitchen table. Quickly she flipped one brown flap back over to inspect the label for a sender’s address. This had to be another classic Tanner prank. Her brother was incorrigible.

But the return address wasn’t nearly as interesting as the name and address of the intended recipient, which, it turned out, was not her. Her cheeks heated with embarrassment even though she was alone in her little one-bedroom apartment.

Oops. Perhaps a new policy about inspecting labels before opening packages was in order. Now that the deed was done, there was only one thing to do — deliver the package to its rightful owner.

“Derrick Monet,” she read aloud. She didn’t recognize that name, though she recognized the apartment number as two doors down from hers. She shuffled her feet into her favorite Grinch slippers that only made an appearance for one very festive month out of the year, glancing in the hall mirror as she moved toward the door to complete her task. Yikes. Hopefully, she didn’t scare the guy. A consummate messy bun, complete with escaping curls, a stained sweatshirt, and smudged make-up reflected back at her.

For about two seconds she considered fixing herself up a little and then decided she didn’t care. It was Friday night, and she was tired. Plus, it’s not like she was on her way to meet Prince Charming, just a weird neighbor who’d ordered two gallons of molasses.

Brooke stepped out into the hallway with the box, careful not to catch the edge of her giant wreath as she pulled her door closed and set off.

Locating the correct apartment, she tapped on the door and stood waiting. After a moment, she knocked again but didn't hear anyone on the other side. She shifted uncomfortably. The box was getting heavy. Should she just leave it? Maybe she should leave a note. Yes, she should set the box down, then go back for a notepad to explain and apologize for the less-than-pristine condition of this package.

She crouched down, then fell back on her rear when the door flew open just as she released the box. Grinch slippers in the air, Brooke sucked in a breath and tried to right herself as what could only be described as a golden-haired, bespectacled Adonis leaned over her.

“Hey, are you okay?” He reached out a strong, tanned hand to help her up.

“Me? Oh, yeah, I'm great. I was just uh, bringing you some molasses. I mean, the molasses came to my apartment, but it wasn't for me.”

He looked at her quizzically. Clearly, the fall or the surprise had induced some kind of medical event since she seemed to have lost the ability to speak coherently. Brooke breathed deeply through her nose and tried again.

“If you are Derrick Monet then your package was delivered to me by mistake and I opened it before I realized it wasn't addressed to me. Sorry about that.”

“Oh, no problem. Thanks for bringing it over.” He stooped to lift the heavy box with ease, then looked her over. “Are you sure you’re alright? Would you like to come in? I made cookies.”

Suddenly aware of the sweet, slightly spicy scent wafting through his doorway, Brooke’s stomach rumbled. This man baked?

“I mean, if you aren’t busy. I know it’s Friday night, so you probably have plans,” he continued, balancing the heavy box on his jean-clad knee so that one hand was free to push his tortoiseshell frames up his nose. On anyone else those glasses would be the definition of nerdy, but on him? They totally worked.

“Actually, I would love a cookie,” Brooke said, unable to ignore the temptation of the aroma wrapping around them. “But I don’t have much time, my brother is stopping by in a few minutes.” Hopefully, God would forgive her for the bald-faced lie she’d tacked on to her acceptance. It seemed prudent not to give the impression that no one would miss her as she entered a stranger’s apartment.

“Come on in.” He swung the door open wide and ushered her into the open kitchen/living area. She took in the kitchen table and counters, all covered with trays, cooling racks, and baking sheets filled with different varieties of cookies in all stages of preparation. Stack after stack of gingerbread cookies explained his need for bulk molasses.

“Boy, you weren’t kidding when you said you made some cookies! Is this, like, your job or something?”

Derrick laughed, revealing an unfairly charming set of dimples. “Sort of. It’s more of a side hustle at this stage. I just bake during weekends and evenings.” He stepped behind the table, withdrew a plate, and placed two gingerbread men on it. “Here, try these.”

Brooke took the plate and studied the treats. “Oh, my goodness! They look too perfect to eat.”

“Cookies are made to be eaten. But I recommend biting their heads off so they can’t see you doing it.”

Her gaze shot up to meet his and he was smirking with the same twinkle in his eye that Tanner had when he gave her a hard time. She did her best to give him a withering look, but it was actually kind of funny. “That’s not helpful.”

“Maybe a glass of milk would help?”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps.”

“Coming right up.”

As soon as his back was turned, she took a gargantuan bite and moaned in delight. “These are so good. I mean, really terrific.” She swallowed and gestured to the cookies scattered around them as she accepted the glass he held out. “Are these for sale? If so, I will buy all of them. Price is no object.”

“Hmm, usually I charge a premium for my gingerbread men,” he leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms. “But I’m thinking we could make a trade instead.”

“Oh yeah?” He had her full attention now.

“All the cookies you can carry out of here, in exchange for a date tomorrow night.”

The butterflies in her stomach nearly carried her away as she pretended to contemplate his offer. “You drive a hard bargain, but these cookies are pretty delicious. I have a counterproposal.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“The truth is my brother isn’t really coming over tonight and I’m starving. As good as these cookies are, I’d sure love some real food. Make that date tonight?”

“Deal,” he replied immediately, holding out his hand to shake on it. At his touch, Brooke’s butterflies surrounded her heart, making it hard to breathe. “Deal,” she repeated. “But first...” she wiggled her Grinches back and forth. “I should probably go put on some shoes.”