

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author

NOELLE ADAMS

a christmas
road trip



A Christmas Road Trip

Green Valley, Book 3

NOELLE ADAMS

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ABOUT A CHRISTMAS ROAD TRIP

I'VE SPENT MONTHS PLANNING a road trip to visit the best Christmas destinations in North Carolina, but at the last minute my boyfriend backs out of both the trip and the relationship. Since my other friends already have plans, I invite Chase to join me instead.

Some people call Chase a slacker, but I prefer to describe him as extremely laid-back. He has no clear ambitions, and he's always hanging around, making obnoxiously insightful comments but never taking anything seriously. I've known him forever, and he's never boring, so having him as a travel companion is better than going alone.

The trip was supposed to be cozy and romantic, but I've never once thought about Chase that way. Until suddenly I do. Each day of the trip throws my feelings for him into more of a tailspin. I'm starting to see him in entirely new ways, which is only asking for trouble. He's always just been Chase to me. He'll never commit or take life seriously.

But ten days on the road with him for Christmas might change everything.

PAIGE: *Added a new stop to my trip!*

Chase: *Nice. Where?*

Paige: *Small town near Wilmington. They do a big Christmas festival and craft fair every year. Timing works perfect!*

Chase: *G wants to know if you're hitting the Christmas shop in Carlyle on your trip.*

Paige: *Yes, I am! I'm hitting almost every Christmas stop in NC! Did your grandma just ask who you're texting and what you're talking about?*

Chase: *Yep. We're watching local news. She said texting during the weather is rude but if it's Paige, it's ok.*

Paige: *LOL. Glad I'm the exception.*

Chase: *Me too.*

Paige: *???*

Paige: *Sorry—Brian calling. Talk later.*

••••

ON A TUESDAY MORNING, I'm tying on my bathrobe when my phone buzzes with a new text message.

There's only one person it's likely to be at 6:43 in the morning.

It's Chase Park. *You out of the shower yet?*

Yes. On every workday, my alarm goes off at 6:27. After turning it off, I give myself three minutes to wake up before I force my feet to hit the floor. My morning showers take between eight and eighteen minutes, depending on if I need to wash my hair or do extra shaving.

Today is a non-hair-washing and non-shaving day, so the shower I just finished was less than ten minutes.

I wait for Chase's response to come through as I stand in the middle of my bedroom. *I'm at your door.*

After processing the words, I shake my head at my phone and laugh. I've known Chase since elementary school, and he's always unpredictable. Checking the tie to my robe, I walk down the hall of my three-bedroom Craftsman house and open the front door.

Chase is on my porch, holding out a big coconut donut in a clear pastry bag. He's smiling only with his eyes.

I open the screen door and reach for the donut. "Thank you!" It's from the bakery downtown and my favorite. "Why are you out and about so early?"

He lifts his right arm, on which are hooked two grocery bags. "Grandma ran out of orange juice. While I'm here, can I get some cooking oil?"

"Sure." I step out of the way so he can come in. "Why didn't you buy oil at the store?"

He follows me into the kitchen and puts down his shopping bags on my counter while I pull open the cabinet where I keep my oil. "Didn't know I needed it."

“What kind? Olive? Vegetable? I’ve got some fancy stuff.”

“Something cheap. Don’t waste anything good.” He’s wearing faded jeans and a threadbare gray sweatshirt from our high school basketball team. He’s clearly not taken a shower yet. His hair is always too long, and currently it’s a ruffled mess, pieces of it sticking out in all directions.

I hand him the bottle. “Why do you need it?”

“Minor crisis outside.”

Confused, I follow him as he carries the oil out of the house and down my front walk. I’m only wearing my bathrobe and slippers, but the robe is heavy and fleece and covers me as much as regular clothes. At the end near the sidewalk is a small bird with its feet and the tip of one wing stuck to a glue board—the kind used by pest control to catch bugs or mice.

The bird is a female cardinal. She was staying still until we approached, but now she’s flapping and struggling against the sticky board, desperate to escape.

“Oh no! Poor little thing. Where did that thing come from?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone had it in a garage or carport.” Chase is leaning over, reaching for the edge of the board where it’s not sticky so he can hold it steady. “She was probably going after the bugs on it and got stuck.”

“Will the oil get her off?” No matter how hard the poor bird flails, she can’t free herself of the board.

“I don’t know. Figure it’s worth a try.” He pours some of the oil on the sticky surface and rubs it around before very

gently pulling the bird's foot free.

I'm scared and horrified for the small creature, bending over to watch. I make a whimpering sound when the bird reacts frantically to being touched.

"I'm sorry, girl," Chase murmurs as he works. "Hold on just a second and I'll get you loose."

To my relief, he frees the other foot and then works on the wing. As soon as he's pulled the feathers from the stickiness, the bird flaps away in a panic.

"Oh, thank goodness." I watch the bird as she lands in a nearby tree. "Poor baby. That must have been a nightmare for her."

Chase scowls slightly as he folds up the board so the sticky side is no longer accessible. "Yeah. Glad we could rescue her." He hands me back my bottle of oil and walks to the side of the house to throw the board away in my outside trash can.

I'm wide-awake as we go back inside and wash our hands. I wipe down the oil bottle with a disinfectant wipe just to be safe before putting it back in the cabinet.

"Thanks for helping the little bird," I tell him as he's drying his hands.

"It was your oil."

"But you're the one who saw her and knew what to use to free her. It was your rescue mission, not mine."

I pick up the pot of coffee that brews every morning at six forty-five and hold it up to him in a wordless question. When

he nods, I pour him a cup in addition to mine.

He drinks his black. I like just a little half-and-half.

“And thank you for the donut.”

“Got one for Grandma too.”

“Oh yeah? What kind?” I lean over to check the grocery bags.

He clears his throat, and it sounds significant, so I glance up at him. He’s staring fixedly at a spot over my head.

“What’s wrong with you?” I ask.

“You’re coming loose.” He gestures vaguely toward my robe.

I glance down and suck in a gasp as I see that my tie has gotten loose and the robe is gaping open, exposing far more of my chest than is appropriate for company. “Sorry about that.” I tighten the robe, feeling flushed but telling myself it’s no big deal.

Chase is being polite. Not looking. We’ve known each other all our lives and have never thought of each other romantically or sexually. That’s never been who we are.

I’m not sure why I’m hot and jittery over a minor wardrobe mishap.

“I’m decent,” I tell him. “Sorry about that.”

“No worries.” He looks at me again, bland and relaxed and very Chase-like. “I’m the one who showed up while you were getting dressed.”

“That’s true.” I glance at my phone to check the time. I’m running ten minutes late from my normal schedule, but it was worth it to save the little bird.

“You can jump back into your morning routine if you need to,” Chase says easily over the rim of his coffee mug. “I’ve probably already made you late.”

“I’m okay.” I do feel a slight tug of anxiety—the way I always feel when I’m not right on schedule—but I ignore it because it’s irrational.

“Uh-huh.” Once again, his eyes are smiling but not his mouth.

“I *am* okay. You shouldn’t make fun of me.”

“How am I making fun?” He widens his blue-gray eyes in a show of innocence.

“You know exactly how.”

“Okay.” His shoulders shake a few times in silent amusement. “I’ll leave you to get back on schedule. I need to get Grandma her orange juice soon anyway.”

“Just take the mug with you and give it back this evening. Thanks again for the donut.”

“No problem.” He slides the handles of the bags back on his wrist before picking up his coffee. “See you later.”

I say goodbye as he heads for my front door. There’s a bleach stain on the back of his jeans, and I’m smiling as I notice it.

I have no idea why it makes me smile.

••••

THAT SAME DAY AFTER work, I glance up from my laptop when someone pulls out one of the chairs at my table and flops down without invitation.

My friends spend a lot of time in this coffee shop, so I'm not surprised someone is joining me at my favorite table in the corner by the window. I am surprised at his frown.

Dan Mills has been in my social circle on and off for years—ever since his family moved to Green Valley when he and I were in middle school. Unlike most of my friends, he didn't stick around after high school, and he's only recently moved back to town after his grandmother died.

"Hey, Paige," he says rather glumly. "How's it going?" Dan has always been a friendly, easygoing guy, and I'm not used to seeing him without at least a small smile.

"I'm fine. What's wrong with you?"

He gives a slight shrug. "Nothing. Are you still working? They don't expect you to work extra hours, do they?"

I was born and raised in Green Valley, a small town in North Carolina about an hour outside Charlotte. The town is disproportionately wealthy, making it rather insular and ingrown. I went to college in Durham, majoring in business administration, but came back here after graduation six years ago and got a managerial job at a local day spa. I've been promoted twice, so now I'm the supervising manager, but I've always been a fast, competent worker, and my job responsibilities are straightforward enough that I never have to

work overtime. In fact, many days I end up with little to do in the afternoons.

“Nah, I almost never work extra.”

“Then this is your side hustle?”

“Yep.” I glance back down at my laptop screen, on which is the website for the business I started four years ago.

I’m the kind of person who likes to do things, meet goals, check off accomplishments. I’m not very good at sitting around and relaxing, and certain friends have often chided me for having workaholic tendencies. The only way I can maintain any sort of social life is to come here most evenings and hang out. I still get work done, but I’m constantly interrupted by friends and acquaintances, so it prevents me from working late into the evening, which is what I’d do if I was at home by myself.

“How’s that going?”

“Pretty good. I keep getting new vendors. Working on setting up a new one right now.”

For my senior thesis in college, I put together a business plan for a website that could function as a central hub for regional arts and crafts, and shortly after I graduated, I started working on establishing it as a business. I’ve connected with craftspeople from the Carolinas, Virginia, and Tennessee, and I’ve put together a polished site to sell their work online. It’s more locally and thematically focused than Etsy but still centralized enough to market and manage effectively.

It took a couple of years for me to start breaking even on costs, but now the extra income is a great supplement to my regular salary and it gives me something of my own to pour my energy into, which is important to me.

“That’s great. I’ve been hearing more people around here talking about it.”

“Really?” There might be a touch too much excitement in my tone. Overall, I consider myself a fairly secure person. I’m twenty-seven. Smart and organized and ambitious and good at the kind of work a lot of people hate. I’m nothing special in the looks department, but I figure I’m pretty enough with straight brown hair and hazel eyes and a medium height and build.

But I’ve never been the life of any party. I’ve never been the center of attention. I’m the person who would work for hours preparing and implementing a big event but never the one out on the stage, getting the applause.

The idea that people might be talking about me—pleased or proud of what I’ve accomplished—makes me ridiculously happy.

And kind of surprised.

“Yeah. I heard it was about to take off and go really big.”

I give a little snort. “I’m not sure about that, but it’s growing, so that makes me happy.”

Dan’s attention drifts, his face growing sober, and I know he’s thinking about whatever was depressing him before. I

continue, “So you’re not going to tell me what’s bothering you?”

He gives another shrug. “Eh.”

“Not having much luck in the marriage-of-convenience search?”

Dan’s grandmother died early this year and left him a lot of money in a trust he can’t access until he gets married. Ever since, he’s been hoping to hook up with someone in a practical arrangement so he can get past that term of the trust.

It might sound bonkers to people outside Green Valley, but a lot of similar arrangements have happened in this town over the years. So much wealth concentrated in such a small community leads to weird and unnatural behavior.

“No luck.” Dan looks glum again. “Everyone told me to ask someone who could actually use the money, so I did, but she said no, thank you.”

I chuckle at this. “You didn’t creep her out, did you?”

“I don’t think so.” His frown deepens. “I hope not.” He sighs and appears to shake off the reflections. “Oh well. Back to the drawing board. You’re not interested in getting married, are you?”

My eyes widen, briefly distracted because Chase, who has been mopping the floors in preparation of closing, has gotten close to our table. It feels like he’s hovering behind me.

“I’d make it worth your while,” Dan adds in a half-amused, half-seductive tone, leaning forward across the table.

I'm about to laugh when the mop hits the legs of my chair, making me jerk in surprise. I turn my head, looking up at Chase to see if it was intentional. He gives me a bland, clueless look. "Sorry about that."

His expression is so unfocused that I figure he was simply lost in his own thoughts and not aware he'd gotten close to my chair. "No worries."

"Hey, Park," Dan says with a smile. "Is this a hint that it's time for us to get out of here?"

The coffee shop closes at nine on weekday evenings, and it's now 8:51.

"Nope," Chase says, mopping under my chair when I raise my feet from the floor. "Got nine more minutes."

"Then maybe you can help me convince Paige to marry me. It would be a great money-making opportunity for her, which should appeal to an ambitious businesswoman like her."

Chase looks at Dan for several seconds but doesn't answer.

I snort and say, "It's not worth it to me. I don't need the money that bad, and I already have a boyfriend."

"Brian Sanderson?" Dan is frowning again. "I didn't think you and he were serious."

"We're not engaged or anything, but we've been dating for eight months. I'm not going to pick up and marry someone else even if it's nothing but a practical arrangement."

Dan groans and rubs his jaw. "All right. Fine. Another no then. I'm starting to take all this rejection personally."

I giggle. “Has it never occurred to you to actually date someone and fall in love and then ask her to marry you?”

“That seems like a lot of trouble.” With a half smile, he picks up his coffee cup and stands up. “Okay. I’m out of here. See you, Paige. Park.” He nods at me and then Chase and then heads out the door.

Chase immediately mops over his footprints.

I’ve known Chase since the second grade, when his parents died in a car accident and he moved to town to live with his grandparents. Back then, they had money, but his grandfather lost almost everything in a series of bad investments and died shortly afterward from a heart attack, so Chase had to get a job in high school.

He started working at this coffee shop after school, busing tables and washing dishes and cleaning up messes. He graduated with everyone else, but he didn’t go to college like the rest of us. He stayed in town, working full time at the same job and living with his grandmother.

Years later, he’s still doing the same thing, having no interest in moving on and no particular ambitions in terms of career or social life.

I’ve never known anyone less motivated than him, but he’s impossible not to like.

I watch him now as he finishes mopping the floor. He’s about five inches taller than me with an attractive build and an unexpectedly good-looking face. His hair is a light brown that looks golden in the sun, and it’s thick and unruly and always

too long. He'll let it grow until it nearly reaches his shoulders, and then he'll get it chopped off to jaw level, only to let it grow again.

Right now it's about midlength, and it falls forward against his face as he bends over to work the mop. As I watch, I have the oddest impulse to push his hair back behind his ears. I wonder what it would feel like to touch—if it's as soft and thick as it appears.

He glances over his shoulder at me, evidently sensing my regard.

I make a slight summoning gesture with my head.

He nods to acknowledge it, finishes the floor, puts up the mop, and comes over to my table, walking on the part of the floor that's already dry.

"I messed this up," I tell him, gesturing toward my laptop.

There's a slight frown on his face as he draws up a chair next to me and pulls the laptop in front of him. I see his blue-gray eyes scan the screen. He makes a huffing sound.

"I'm not sure how I did it. I was trying to set it up so that the payments are split between the two people since they collaborate on the crafts and want their payments divided on our end, but I seem to have duplicated everything."

"Why didn't you ask me earlier?" His fingers are already moving over my keyboard, moving so fast it's hard to track individual steps in his process.

"I don't like to bug you for everything. You already did all the work to set up the site. I like to do stuff myself. I'm

usually good at things.”

It’s true. I’m used to being able to figure out most tasks and problems and processes, and I can usually get the work done faster than anyone else.

“You don’t have to do everything yourself.” His eyes are still focused on the screen, and his tone is offhand. Almost lazy. “This will take me about two minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Chase comes across as a slacker, and his demeanor is so often bland and distracted that strangers assume he’s either stoned or stupid.

He’s neither of those things. He’s brilliant—and not just with computers. But he’s never had any sort of drive, so he’ll probably never use his intellectual gifts for anything more than helping out his friends.

It’s a shame. Not for the first time do I feel a surge of frustration that he’s not doing more with his life.

But that’s the thing about knowing someone as long as I’ve known Chase. I’ve made every attempt to motivate him in the past, and he will simply not be moved. You’ve got to take him as he is or not at all.

After a minute or two, he slides my laptop back, and I smile as I see he’s got the site set up perfectly, exactly as I intended. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He gets up to roll the cleaning cart back into the kitchen.

I answer a couple more emails and then slide my laptop back into my bag. I wait as Chase closes up, securing the money from the register, turning off the machines, taking out the trash, and then locking up.

We walk out together as he locks the front door behind us.

When I stay until closing, we always walk home together. He only lives five blocks away from me.

We're quiet for a few minutes as we walk through the downtown streets. I pull out my phone and check my messages. I was supposed to hear from Brian this evening about going out this weekend, but he never checked in.

It's still fairly early though. He'll probably text later tonight.

"No word from the boyfriend?" Chase asks in a leisurely drawl.

I slant him a quick look, but his expression is as relaxed and harmless as ever. "He's probably working late."

"Yeah."

"We're supposed to go out this weekend. He said he'll take me into Charlotte and do something nice."

"Got it." He's not looking at me.

I narrow my eyes. "Do you have something to say?"

He blinks. "About what?"

"About Brian? Lately it seems like you might have a problem with him."

“If you’re happy with him, why would I have a problem?”

“I don’t know. And of course I’m happy with him. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You do a lot of waiting around for him to touch base. You’re telling me that makes you happy?”

“Well, no, of course not. I’m not good at waiting. But that’s a normal part of dating.”

“After eight months?”

“Yes.” I’m frowning now, feeling tense and defensive. “Relationships move at different paces. Not everyone is joined at the hip in less than a year.”

“Right.”

“Damn it, Chase, you make me crazy when you do this.”

His eyes widen as he turns to look at me. “Do what?”

“Pretend to be all innocent and clueless when you’ve actually got something to say. Just say it.”

“You don’t seem happy,” he says in a drawl as laid-back as anything he ever says. “Not with him. He makes you insecure. You’re always waiting for him. He’s keeping you in limbo. And you’re not the kind of person who’s good with things not being settled.”

I’m so defensive now that I want to lash out, but I bite back the words. Getting angry with Chase accomplishes nothing. He won’t argue, and he never gets angry back.

After a minute, he goes on, “Now *you* say it.”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“Yes, you do. You want to bite my head off.”

“I do.”

“So go ahead.”

I make a frustrated sound. “I’m sure it looks like that to you, but that’s not how it is between me and Brian. I’m crazy about him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I am.”

“I said *uh-huh*.”

“But it was your skeptical *uh-huh*. You don’t think I’m crazy about him.”

“I believe you believe you’re crazy about him. But if you were in a relationship with a guy who was actually crazy about you, who made you his priority for real, you’d feel the difference. You’d never be so on edge and insecure about his feelings. You’d be happy for real.”

There’s a lump in my throat as I process his words. Wonder if he’s right.

The truth is my relationship with Brian has always kept me holding my breath, adrenaline coursing, unsure of the ground beneath my feet. Sure, it’s kind of exciting that way, but it’s also not secure.

I’ve never been at peace. Not with him.

I've kept telling myself it's still early. Once we truly commit, then I'll have sure footing again. But it's been eight months now, and it hasn't happened yet.

"He's coming with me on my road trip," I say.

"That's what you told me."

"That's ten days on the road visiting all these romantic holiday sites. I think that will make the difference in our relationship."

"Uh-huh."

I sigh. Maybe it's almost a groan. "You don't know everything, Chase."

"Course not. But I know you." He slants me a quick look. "You always assume other people are as honest and committed and hard-working as you are, and almost no one is. He's gonna hurt you. Can't blame me for not wanting to see it happen."

"He's not going to hurt me. I know he was hard to pin down at the beginning, but he's been better lately. I think he's almost ready to commit."

"You're wrong." He's still not intense or angry or upset. Just lazy.

He likes me as much as he likes anyone, but he never takes anything seriously.

"I'm not wrong. So let's not talk about it anymore."

"Works for me."

"Did I tell you I added another stop on my trip?"

“Yep. Christmas festival and craft fair near Wilmington.”

For the past few months, I’ve been planning a long trip through North Carolina, stopping at every holiday craft fair, Christmas shop, and festive destination I can find. I’ve made a meticulous schedule, and I’ve got every step planned to the detail. Part of the trip is looking for new artists and craftspeople, but part of it is just for fun.

I love Christmas, and this is the first year I’ve been able to take off enough time from work to really enjoy the lead-up. I’ve been looking forward to the trip for a long time, and everyone knows I’m excited about it.

I asked Brian early on if he wanted to join me, and he said sure. So I started to make plans for two. After a while, he hemmed and hawed about being able to take so much time off, but last week he said he’d be coming for sure, which I took as a very good sign.

Everything is going well—with my life and my relationship. And Chase really shouldn’t be making me doubt that with his obnoxiously insightful comments.

Brushing off those worries, I tell Chase more about my research on the new stop on my trip. He asks a lot of questions and seems as interested as he is about anything. I have a good time on the remainder of the walk back, and I’m no longer annoyed with him when we reach my house.

My family isn’t as rich as a lot of families here in Green Valley, but they’re quite well off. My grandfather set up a trust for me before he died. It’s not enough to live off of for the rest of my life, but it paid for my education and this house—a cute

little Craftsman with an updated kitchen and bathrooms that I bought when I moved back to town after graduation.

With the exorbitant real estate prices in this town, I'd never have been able to pay for this house with my current salary, so the trust has been a great blessing, and I've always been appreciative to my grandfather for providing for me that way. The remaining money in the trust I'm leaving untouched in case of emergency or to supplement my retirement.

Chase and I pause at the end of my front walk. "All right then," he says.

I nod. "Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow." I glance up at his face and then back down. For some reason, the look in his eyes is unnerving.

It's almost soulful, and I have no idea why. It makes me nervous.

He shifts his weight from foot to foot and clears his throat. "All right then," he says again.

"Yeah. Good night." I'm still lingering, and there's no reason for it. We've said everything that needs to be said.

I'm probably feeling kind of off-kilter and needy because of our conversation about Brian earlier. Chase and I usually talk casually, and that discussion was more intimate than normal.

It gave me all these weird feelings.

But they're not like me. Especially not toward Chase.

Chase has always been a fixture in my life but one in the background rather than front and center. I can't put too many hopes in him. He'll never treat me wrong, but he's also not going to put any sort of effort into getting closer to me.

That's not who he is.

He eases through life, taking the easy route and avoiding anything too hard and upsetting. That's fine for a friend.

But I simply can't take him seriously because he'll never take me seriously back.

PAIGE: *All ok with you?*

Chase: *Sure. Why?*

Paige: *I don't know. Something seemed weird last night. Just making sure.*

Chase: *All good with me.*

Paige: *Ok good.*

Chase: *Any word from the boyfriend?*

Paige: *No. He must be busy.*

Chase: *Uh-huh.*

Paige: *What does that mean?*

Chase: *It means uh-huh.*

Paige: *Do you think it means something bad that I haven't heard from him yet? I thought I wasn't supposed to read into every little thing with guys.*

Chase: *You aren't. But it kind of sucks that he's not replying to you.*

Paige: *He probably forgot I texted. He will soon.*

Chase: *Ok.*

Paige: *Chase.*

Chase: *I said ok.*

Paige: *I felt vibes from your ok.*

Chase: *Don't read into things.*

Paige: *Ugh. Tell G I said hi.*

Chase: *Will do.*

••••

THE NEXT DAY IS THURSDAY, and I'm back at the coffee shop after work. Usually I stop by my place first to change clothes, make a quick dinner, and do any necessary chores or errands. But I've been feeling droopy all day and don't want to make the effort, so I head right for the coffee shop.

As I'm standing in line, waiting to order a grilled sandwich and green tea, Chase comes out from the back with his cart for busing tables. He gives me a nod when he sees me but doesn't get detoured from his tasks. I move to the front of the line, put in my order, grab my favorite table by reserving it with my bag since the line is getting longer, and then go up to get my food and drink from the counter.

After I sit down, I pull out my laptop and work on some accounting for my business while I eat.

I make it about twenty minutes, until I've finished my sandwich, but after that my mind starts to wander.

I don't know what's wrong with me today. I've been blah since this morning. Brian never texted back last night, but I know he's busy with work. A day or two of no communication isn't reason enough for me to fall into this mood.

Seeking a distraction, my eyes follow Chase, who is standing in wait for more tables to empty so he can bus them. He must be caught up in the kitchen, and there're few enough

tables available now that clearing them immediately is important for turnover.

For some reason, he strikes me as more attractive than normal today. I'm not sure why. His thick hair is its normal tousled mess. His outfit is his typical plain T-shirt and khakis. His face is clean-shaven as usual. He's always had good shoulders and a lean strength that, when I notice it, is unobtrusively sexy.

The sun through the windows is hitting the corner where he's standing, and the late sunlight is gilding his light brown hair so it looks gold. His skin looks golden too. He's squinting slightly as he turns to check out the far side of the room. His broad shoulders and straight back and the tight curve of his ass are silhouetted by his position, and I'm suddenly aware of his physicality, his masculinity.

It gives me the weirdest surge of feeling. Not lust as I understand it, although I do suddenly want to touch him. It's more like entitlement.

Like I want him to be mine.

Like maybe he already is.

It's utterly absurd. And highly disturbing.

I've known Chase forever and never felt about him like that.

I must be going through some sort of late-twenties horny period where I'm looking at even the most inappropriate men as potential mate material.

Shaking the thoughts away, I check my phone and sigh at the lack of notifications.

What I need is for at least one of my friends to show up and join me at my table, providing conversation and encouragement and distraction.

Chase comes over when the couple at a table near me get up to leave. After clearing their dishes, he asks, “What’s wrong with you today?”

“I don’t know. I’m in a mood, and I don’t like it.”

“Did something happen?” He’s sprayed down the table and is wiping it as he talks.

“No. Nothing. It’s just a mood.”

“Usually working perks you up.”

“I know.” I slump farther down in my chair. “But it’s not doing it for me today. Where is everyone?”

“It’s still early. They’ll be along eventually, although Rafe and Jules had some sort of wedding thing to do today, didn’t they?”

“Oh. Yeah. They were meeting with the caterer.” I let out a long breath, trying to will myself out of this mood.

“It doesn’t bother you, does it?”

I blink. “What doesn’t bother me?”

“Them getting married.” He’s done with cleaning now and is standing across the table from me, looking down.

“No. Of course not. I’m happy for them. I don’t have marriage fever or anything. You know me better than that.”

“I know you’re not normally like that, but sometimes stray feelings hit.” His face is unsmiling. Not teasing.

“Yeah, I know. But I don’t think that’s what my feelings are. I don’t even know what they are. I just feel... unsettled. Like I’m waiting for something to happen.”

His forehead wrinkles into four horizontal lines. “What?”

“I don’t even know.” I groan, feeling kind of silly and immature for this vague feeling that can’t be defined or explained. “It doesn’t matter. I’m sure it will pass.”

“Oh.” He stands there, staring at me blankly for a minute. Then, “You heard from the boyfriend?”

That’s how he’s always referred to Brian. Never by his name. And never *your* boyfriend. Just *the* boyfriend.

“No. He’s really busy.”

His eyebrows arch, and I expect a sarcastic comment, but he moves on to clear another table.

I make a face at his back since now he’s made me feel bad about my relationship with Brian. I was already in an unpleasant mood. I don’t need that piled on top.

Why the hell isn’t Brian texting anyway? I asked him a question yesterday about the road trip, and he never even answered it, not even a quick note about getting back to me as soon as he can.

Even if he's busy, surely it wouldn't take more than a few seconds to send me a few words to acknowledge my message. And maybe let me know about plans for this weekend.

It seems like basic decency. Assuming he's not sick or in a crisis.

Maybe he is. Maybe that's what happened. Or maybe he saw my message and couldn't answer right away and then forgot about it. That's happened before.

But still...

I scowl down at my phone just as a text message comes in. I straighten up as I see it's from Brian.

Hey something came up. Can't go on the trip. Feels like we're in different places and moving too fast so thinking it's best we take some time off. I'll touch base after New Year and maybe we can get together then.

It takes me a full three minutes to process the words and understand them. When I do, a shaking begins somewhere deep inside me and shudders out to my fingers, knees, and teeth.

I've been dumped. After eight months. Over text. Not even through a phone call.

I can't move. Can't do anything but tremble and stare down at my phone. I have no idea how long I sit there, but eventually the chair next to me pulls out and someone sits down.

It takes a ridiculously long time for me to recognize that person as Chase.

“Can I see?” he asks quietly, reaching out toward my phone.

I nod mutely and let him take the phone from me. He silently reads the text message that’s still pulled up on the screen.

At least Chase will be able to verify whether this nightmare is actually real.

After he’s read the message, he sets my phone down on the table with intentional care. He’s looking at me. I can feel his scrutiny, but I can’t lift my eyes. I can’t do anything.

“Are you okay?” he asks at last. His tone isn’t all that different from normal except it’s quieter.

I give my head a little shake. Then realize what I just expressed.

That I’m incapable of handling a standard breakup.

Of course I’m capable. I’m disappointed. Hurt. But not broken.

I clear my throat and straighten up. “I’m okay,” I manage to say. “Just... surprised.”

“Doing it over text is a shitty thing to do.”

“Yeah.” I hear myself give a little laugh. It doesn’t sound like me. “It’s definitely shitty.”

He doesn’t say anything. He’s breathing heavily. I can hear him. But his expression doesn’t reflect any more than normal.

“It’s happened before,” I say, a painful rasp in my throat.

“What has?”

“Guys break up with me because I move too fast. Make it too serious. I can’t... I can’t be casual. I always jump in all the way. I’m always... too much.”

“You aren’t too much.”

“Guys think I am.”

“Not all guys.”

There’s an odd edge to his tone, so I glance up to check his face.

It reveals nothing. “Don’t you dare blame yourself,” he says. “This is all on him.”

“Yeah. I know.” I give my head a hard shake. “I’m really okay. I don’t think I was in love with him.”

“I don’t think so either, but it’s still got to hurt.”

I bite off the instinct to argue with him agreeing with me about my being in love with Brian. “I’m mostly upset about my trip.”

“Don’t even think about canceling it. You’ve been looking forward to it for months.”

I swallow hard over an ache in my throat, my chest.

“Yeah.”

“You can find someone else to go with you.”

“Yeah.” I meet his eyes. They look gray in the late sunlight. “I can go with someone else. I’ll still have a great time.”

“It might be too soon for you to hear it, but I bet you’ll have a much better time without him.”

••••

THE NEXT DAY, I’M STILL pretty down about the situation, but I’ve talked myself into being mature and reasonable and self-sufficient.

At least acting that way.

I’ve always believed that the first step to feeling better is acting better, so I put on a smile and chat with my friends about what a crappy boyfriend Brian always was and my search for a new travel companion.

They’re all sympathetic and supportive but naturally already have plans for the ten days before Christmas or else can’t get out of work that long. After Rafe and Jules head home, Joey Pendleton helps me brainstorm for other possible people to ask to join me, coming up with a decent-length list of people whose company I’d probably enjoy. We go through the list one by one, texting casual questions to find out their holiday status.

Everyone is busy. When she mentions an ex-boyfriend I still get along well with, I’m considering the possibility until Chase flops down in an empty chair at the table, evidently on his break. He must have been listening to our conversation because the first thing he says is to ask dryly if I’m okay with sharing a bedroom with an ex—since I’ve only booked one room at the hotels and bed-and-breakfasts.

No, I'm not. I admit it and immediately cross my ex off the list I've been making.

Dan comes strolling in. On hearing the topic of conversation, he says he's supposed to work those days but he'd be happy to take some time off if I want to trade the road trip for a marriage of convenience.

Joey and I giggle since he's clearly teasing. Chase doesn't think it's funny. He's scowling as he gets up and strides to the bathroom.

I wonder if he's in a bad mood today. He's never in a bad mood.

The possibility distracts me from my situation for a while, but we eventually run out of new possibilities to add to the list.

It's almost nine, and the place is clearing out just before closing when I finally groan and close my notepad. "It's no big deal. I'll go by myself. I don't mind traveling on my own, and I might even have more fun with it."

"That's a great attitude," Joey says, her big blue eyes slightly worried but not disturbingly so. "I bet you will have a great time. And maybe someone's schedule will clear or something." She glances over to where Chase is mopping the floor in the far corner and asks in a hushed tone, "You've asked him, haven't you?"

"Of course." I sigh as I gaze at Chase's lean back and mussed hair. "I thought of him first since he doesn't have a girlfriend. He said he has to work."

“Surely he can take some time off. Does he ever take a vacation day?”

I shrug. I’ve actually never known him to take a day off, except a couple of years ago when he was sick in bed with a hellish case of the flu. He’s here at least eight hours a day, seven days a week. He must do a ridiculous amount of overtime.

“Oh well. We’ll keep thinking, and maybe someone’s plans will change.”

“Yeah. Maybe so. It’s no big deal either way.”

I sigh, trying to make my emotions match my demeanor.

I’ve always been one of those people who puts on a strong front, who doesn’t let other people see her cry, who holds on to a pose of self-reliance.

I really do think I’m composed and independent for the most part, but I have plenty of moments of vulnerability. And all my life—from the time I was a very little child—I’ve always tried to mask them.

I don’t even know why. It’s just who I am.

I was in school with Joey through our entire childhood, and she knows me as well as almost anyone. She squeezes my arm with a little smile. “I know how hard it is, but you’re doing great. You’re going to be so much happier on the other side of this. You just have to get through it.”

“Thanks.” Her understanding makes me unexpectedly emotional. I swallow over a lump. “I appreciate it, and I think you’re right. I’m going to be fine.”

I don't feel fine, but that doesn't mean I won't be. It's a breakup. People live through them all the time. I'm not going to fall apart.

When a handsome man walks by the glass storefront and waves through the window, Joey perks up and waves back before gathering her stuff. She and Carlton recently got engaged.

"Is it okay if I get going?" Joey asks, turning from Carlton back to me. "You're good?"

"I'm good." I smile at her broadly. Not too fakely. "Chase is about to close up anyway. I always walk home with him."

For some reason, that seems to surprise her. Her eyes widen and shoot over to where Chase is wiping down the cappuccino maker behind the counter. "Oh. Got it."

I frown. "What does that mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. Just I understand." She leans forward and says in a stage whisper, "You should ask him again if he wants to go. I bet he'd take the days off work if you tell him it's important to you."

I flush for no good reason. Something about the significance in her tone. "I don't want to guilt him."

"No guilt. Carlton and I are going skiing for the weekend, but I'll see you next week."

"See you. Have fun." I wave when she turns back for another goodbye, and then I smile and wave at Carlton through the glass. He's been standing on the sidewalk, waiting for her.

As soon as they're out of sight, I slump back in my chair, my smile fading.

I put up my laptop when Chase comes over with his spray and cleaning rag so he can wipe my table.

He slants me a quick look before he starts to work. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. Just tired."

"I bet."

My brows pull together.

He adds, "All that faking has got to be exhausting."

"I'm not faking!" When he just lifts his eyebrows, I go on in a resigned tone. "I'm really not. I'm *trying*. Trying to feel better. There's a difference."

He appears to think about that as he finishes cleaning my table. I push my chair back because he's very close. "Yeah," he says at last. "I get that."

His brief, casual affirmation makes me feel better. I wait for Chase to put up his cleaning stuff and flip the sign on the front door to closed before we walk out.

He doesn't say much as we make our way through the quiet downtown streets. I appreciate the reprieve from acting like I don't feel really sad.

That's one good thing about Chase. He doesn't always insist on filling every moment with conversation. He's totally fine with us walking in silence.

When we reach the residential corner where we normally turn toward my house, Chase says, “Oh, I almost forgot. Grandma made Christmas cookies, and she has yours packed up and ready. She wants to give them to you herself, so is it all right if we stop by my place first?”

“Of course.” It’s only a few blocks out of my way, and I wouldn’t mind even if it was longer. Chase’s grandmother has always been one of my favorite people.

We fall into silence again as we walk down a pleasant, tree-lined sidewalk.

“It’s okay to be upset about it,” Chase says. Quietly and with no prelude or warning.

My head jerks up in his direction. “I’m not that upset.”

“Aren’t you? I sense a lot of wordless angst coming off you.”

I sigh. “It’s not that bad. I mean, sure, I’m upset. We were dating for eight months. It’s the longest I’ve ever had a boyfriend. I had a lot invested in the relationship.”

He’s looking forward. Not at me. “He wasn’t worth what you invested in him.”

My first instinct is defensive, as it often is with Chase’s dry commentary. But I bite back the impulse to lash out because I know he’s trying to help, and I also know it will accomplish nothing. Anytime I get mad at Chase, he simply stares at me like he doesn’t understand what’s happening.

It’s impossible to argue with someone who will never argue back.

“Whatever he was worth,” I say slowly, “it doesn’t mean I won’t be upset.”

“Sure. Makes sense. As long as you know you’re grieving your own hopes and dreams and not really grieving the loss of him.”

That comment surprises me. I have to pause to think about it for a minute. Then my shoulders slump. “Shit. You’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

I roll my eyes to acknowledge the obnoxiousness. A clench in my chest is starting to loosen as I realize that Chase has landed on exactly what I’m feeling.

“You don’t miss him. Not personally. Not at all. Do you?”

“No,” I admit. “Not at all. I miss everything I’d built up in my mind surrounding him. Damn, I must be an idiot.”

“Don’t call yourself that.” His tone is as easy and leisurely as his stride. “You saw him as better than he really is. You’re not the bad guy here—except maybe to yourself.”

“How am I the bad guy to myself?”

His eyes are still fixed in front of us, focused on an empty spot in the air. “Next time maybe latch all your hopes and dreams onto someone who loves you and will never let you go.”

The insight hits me weirdly. Stuns me. Makes that lump grow in my throat again, making me want to choke.

I can’t speak for a minute. When Chase turns to check my face, I nod so he’ll know I heard him. Agree with him.

“And don’t you dare cancel your trip.”

“I’m not going to. I keep saying if I can’t find anyone to go with me, I’ll just go alone.” I sigh. “You sure you don’t want to come?”

We’ve reached his grandmother’s house—a rambling, hundred-year-old farmhouse on a large lot. He pauses on the sidewalk and turns to face me. “I’m supposed to work.”

“I know, but do you really have to work? Dell’s nieces are always in town on college break, right? Don’t they always want to get some temp hours in over the holidays?”

“Y-yeah,” he replies slowly. “You really want me to come with you?”

“Of course.” I blink a few times. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know.”

I don’t understand his hesitation, but I’m suddenly getting excited. Filled with hope and anticipation. Not just because I might not have to go alone but because the trip suddenly feels much better with Chase along.

“I mean it, Chase,” I say when he still appears to be waging a mental debate. “I’d love for you to come. It would be fun. You’d make it... fun.”

“Yeah?” His expression has relaxed. His eyes look very blue.

“Yeah.” I feel myself swaying closer to him. I can’t seem to look away. “I think we’d have a really good time together.”

“I know we would.” There’s an odd texture in his voice.

It gets me ridiculously excited.

Then his face changes. He pulls back. Gives his head a quick shake. “Oh. Sorry. I really can’t go.”

It feels like a kick in the gut. The disappointment momentarily takes my breath.

I pull myself together as quickly as I can and give him the smile I’ve been giving everyone else all day. “Okay. No worries. Just thought I’d ask.”

“I’m sorry.” He starts down the front walk toward the door, and I fall into step with him. “I wish I could go.”

“No worries. I’ll be fine on my own.” My voice cracks, but only slightly. I’m almost positive he won’t have noticed.

He seems kind of subdued—more so than normal—as he unlocks the front door and calls out a greeting as we step inside.

“I’m back! Paige is here, Grandma.”

“Oh wonderful! I’m in the kitchen.” She sounds excited, and her face looks excited as we walk through the entryway, through the formal dining room, and into the pleasant, old-fashioned kitchen. “Paige, honey, you look prettier every time I see you.”

I snort at that. “I look exactly like I have since high school. My hair is the same, I weigh the same, and I never wear much makeup.”

“Then it must be life experience.” His grandmother is small with white hair and the same blue-gray eyes as Chase.

Unlike his, hers are always sparkling and lively. “It sits well on you. Now sit down for a minute with me, honey. I won’t keep you long. Chase, where are your manners. Fix her a cup of tea.”

I giggle at her quicksilver tone changes and take the seat next to her at the big kitchen table. I’m vaguely surprised she didn’t get up to make me tea herself. She always used to. “Thank you.”

“Now pick you out a couple of these cookies.” She indicates a plate on the table. “And I’ve got a whole tin packed up for you to take with you.”

“Thank you so much. I always look forward to your cookies. They’re the tastiest part of Christmas for me.”

Her smile softens. “Thank you for saying that. Chase, she takes two spoons of sugar.”

“I know how she takes her tea,” he mumbles—maybe to her and maybe to himself.

“Hush, dear. I’m talking to Paige right now.”

Chase brings a cup of tea and sets it in front of me, slanting me a quick, amused look. “Sorry, ma’am. I thought when you said my name it meant you were talking to me.”

“Don’t talk back to your old grandma.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” He’s hiding a smile as he checks the garbage can and pulls out a nearly full bag, collecting a few outdated things from the refrigerator and pantry before he ties it up.

“Now tell me about your Christmas plans, honey.”

I explain to her all about my trip, making it sound as fun and lively as possible and not mentioning my lack of a companion.

Chase has left the room to take out the garbage when his grandmother asks, “Now why are you doing such a nice trip all by yourself?”

“Well, I was dating someone who was supposed to come with me, but we broke up. All my friends have other plans.”

She frowns. “What about Chase? He doesn’t have any big plans.”

I feel another pang as I remember my disappointment at his rejection. “I asked him. He said he couldn’t.”

“Of course he can go with you.”

I shrug. “He said he couldn’t. Maybe he just doesn’t want to—”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Of course he wants to go.” She shakes her head and tsks her tongue. “That boy. He thinks he needs to stay here to take care of me. I can’t be alone.”

My lips part. “I didn’t realize you needed someone with you.” She’s always seemed so energetic and independent.

“I haven’t been doing as well these past couple of years. I can’t really manage without someone else in the house to help out. I couldn’t stay in this house without Chase. He knows it and won’t leave because he knows I need him. Now he’s refusing to go on a trip he’d love because of it.”

I'm surprised and touched and weirdly excited again. It doesn't really make much sense. But at least it's a clear reason Chase would refuse the trip when there wasn't any other legitimate excuse.

It's not because he doesn't want to go with me.

"Okay, here's what we'll do. You run out and stall him for a few minutes, and I'll make a couple of calls."

I don't exactly know what she has in mind, but she clearly has a plan. So I head outside through the back door and catch Chase on his way back inside.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks.

"Nothing. Your grandmother wanted me to check on you. She thought you were taking a long time." I block his way up the steps into the house.

"Oh." He frowns slightly. "The can was full, so I had to drag out another one. We always make a lot of trash during the holidays."

Thinking quickly, I land on a method of stalling. "You really need to reorganize your stuff out here. This is the wrong place to put your garbage cans."

He snorts in amusement but steps back and gestures toward the cans. "Well, you're the master organizer. Tell me how to do it."

I manage to kill almost ten minutes, trying out different configurations and discussing possibilities. I could probably have stretched it longer, but I'm starting to shiver in the December air, so Chase insists I come back in.

We're both laughing as we rejoin his grandmother in the kitchen.

She's just putting down her phone. "Okay. I've got it all settled."

"What do you have settled?" Chase asks.

"Darlene is going to come stay with me to help me while you're gone."

"While I'm gone where?"

"On the trip with Paige, of course."

He's clearly shocked. "Grandma—"

"There's no argument. I've got it all worked out. You go with Paige and have a wonderful time. You don't need to take care of me every minute of every day."

He makes a few half-hearted attempts at arguing, but his grandmother won't allow it. In a few minutes, she announces she's getting tired, so he needs to walk me back to my house.

I take my tin of cookies, kiss her on the cheek, and say goodbye before walking out the front door with Chase.

We're quiet for a minute, both of us lost in thought.

I'm a little worried that his grandmother pushed him into something he doesn't really want to do, but I'm not sure how to address it.

As we're reaching my house, I say, "If you don't want to go, it won't hurt my feelings. We can think of some kind of excuse to tell your grandma."

“I do want to go.” He’s straightened up, his eyes wide and confused.

“You do?”

“Of course. I was afraid she’d pushed you into it.”

I laugh in relief. “Oh. No. I meant what I said. I’d love for you to go with me.”

“Okay then.” He’s not meeting my eyes, but he’s smiling slightly. It’s hard to tell in the moonlight, but he must be slightly flushed. “Then it’s settled.”

“Yes. It’s settled.” I gulp. “I’ll text you about plans.”

“Sounds good.”

“Sounds good.” We’re staring at each other. We’ve reached my house.

This is getting ridiculous again.

I brush off the weirdness and give him a smile. “Okay. See you tomorrow. Good night!”

He probably says good night back, but I’m hurrying to my door in a rush, so I don’t really hear.

THREE

PAIGE: *All fine with getting time off for the trip?*

Chase: *Yep. No problem.*

Paige: *Ok good. We'll leave the morning of the 15th and get back middle of the day on the 24th.*

Chase: *I know. Got the agenda you emailed. Very informative.*

Paige: *Don't make fun.*

Chase: *I'm not.*

Paige: *Yes, you are. I can feel you laughing from five blocks away.*

Chase: *You're imagining things. Schedule looks great. Printed a copy for G.*

Paige: *She'll probably mentally follow along at all our stops throughout each day.*

Chase: *Yep. For sure. You ok?*

Paige: *Yes.*

Chase: *Crying your eyes out?*

Paige: *No! Maybe a little but not that much. Glad you're coming with.*

Chase: *I'm glad too.*

••••

FRIDAY MORNING THE following week is trip day. Since I've been planning every detail, my bags and car are mostly

packed when I wake up that morning, and it takes me less than an hour to be dressed and out the door.

Chase and I arranged for me to pick him up around nine. (The “around” was my attempt at being laid-back and easygoing since it’s a vacation.)

I get to his house at 8:38.

He must have suspected I’d arrive early because, although he answers the door in bare feet and with a half-eaten piece of toast in his hand, he’s got an extra-large duffel bag packed and ready on the front porch.

His eyes light up when he sees me, in that smile that doesn’t involve his mouth. “Mornin’.”

“Good morning.”

“You look excited.”

“I am. I can’t believe the day is finally here.”

“I’m almost ready. Come in and say hi to Grandma.” He steps out of the way.

For some reason, my eyes linger on his feet. I took note of his lack of shoes immediately, but now I’m acutely conscious of his lean bare feet on the wide planks of the old hardwood floor. The hem of his faded jeans is slightly frayed. He’s got a long pale scar on the top of his left foot up near the big toe.

I get an odd kind of clench below my belly. I don’t understand it at all.

“Something wrong?” he asks, shifting his gaze from my face to his feet.

“No. Aren’t you cold with no shoes?”

“Eh.” He shrugs.

“You should wear slippers.”

His eyebrows pull together as if he’s thinking through an enigma. “I don’t own any slippers.”

I laugh at that and brush off my weird response as I go back into the kitchen to greet his grandmother.

She’s stirring a pot on the stove, and I clap my hands in delight as I realize she’s made her special peppermint hot chocolate to celebrate the start of our trip.

“I’m not going to delay you here since I’m sure you’re eager to get started,” she tells me. “You and Chase can take it with you.”

“Thank you! But there’s not really a huge hurry. I’ve been prepping myself to be relaxed and easygoing this trip.”

Chase snorts from the hallway, clearly overhearing me.

I roll my eyes. “He doesn’t believe I have it in me to be easygoing. But I’m sure I can manage if I try hard enough.”

His grandma giggles. “Of course you can, honey. You’ve always been able to do anything you set your mind to. We’ve always been so proud of you.”

I’m touched by the sentiment and also curious about who the “we” is in her sentence. Maybe just a generic collective of people from town.

Chase has been getting his shoes on and grabbing an old backpack from his bedroom that I remember him carrying in

ninth grade. “I’ll put my stuff in the car and be back,” he says, pausing at the kitchen door.

“Okay. I’ve got the bags all organized in my trunk, so don’t make a mess of it.”

“I’d never make a mess.” His expression is utterly sober.

I make a face at him. “I’m serious. Keep things orderly!”

“As you wish.”

I chuckle at his mock sincerity.

His grandmother smiles affectionately at his back. “He’s such a good boy.”

It’s quite clear to me that she’s every bit as proud of him as she’d be if he had some sort of high-powered career or was already married and had bestowed on her two or three great-grandbabies.

For some reason, the thought makes my throat tighten and my eyes prickle.

“I’ve trapped him here you know.”

“What?” Completely distracted from my emotion of the moment before, I gape at her. “You haven’t done anything of the kind.”

“Yes, I have. He wouldn’t go to college because he thought I needed him here. Then he wouldn’t move somewhere else or even move out of the house. How can he be expected to live his own life or start his own family when he’s stuck in this house taking care of me?”

I honestly had no idea that she was the reason Chase never moved out of his childhood bedroom. Like everyone else, I assumed it was because he couldn't be bothered. But the guilt in her voice really upsets me. "None of it is your fault. I'm sure you've always tried to encourage him to do anything he wants to do."

"I have." She lets out a long breath, clearly breathing out her momentary angst. She's always been an upbeat, cheerful woman. "He won't listen."

"So there you go. None of it is your fault. He could have gone to college here if he'd wanted to. There are some local places and tons of online options—even back then. I always told him he should."

"He got his degree online a few years ago. Didn't you know that?"

I gasp and straighten up. "No! I had no idea he'd done that. He never told anyone!"

His grandmother shakes her head as she stirs the hot chocolate. "That boy."

"I never saw him doing any work or studying or anything."

"Honestly, I'm not sure he had to study all that much. School was never hard for him."

"I know. He's way too smart. I can't believe he was sneaking around doing that without telling anyone."

"Don't tell him I spilled the beans. He's never liked people making a big deal about him."

“I know. But some things are worth making a big deal about. He should realize that.”

“What should I realize?” Chase comes strolling back into the kitchen, looking breezy and way too attractive in his brown corduroy coat with sheepskin lining and wind-blown hair.

“What makes you think we were even talking about you, young man?” His grandma tsks her tongue at him.

“Of course you were. What other *he* would you be talking about?”

“You’re hardly the only man in our orbit, you know,” I say lightly.

He gives his grandma a kiss on the cheek before taking two travel mugs out of the top shelf of a cabinet. “I’m the only man worth talking about.”

“Of course you are, dear.” She ladles out the hot chocolate into the mugs. “Both Paige and I are completely in awe of you and never let any other male specimens even flicker across our minds.”

I laugh as I accept the mug Chase offers me. “Exactly. We are always waiting around with bated breath for you.”

He meets my eyes behind his grandmother’s back. “You should be.”

My breath hitches strangely. I peer at him, trying to figure out what the uncharacteristically sober comment meant, but he’s already moved on, starting to rinse off the dishes in the sink.

“Oh no,” his grandma says. “You’re not doing the dishes today. It’s nine now. You and Paige need to get on your way.”

“I can—”

“No, you can’t. You’ve made Paige wait long enough.”

There’s another odd moment with strange vibrations in the air. No one speaks for several seconds until Chase picks up his mug.

“Thank you so much for the hot chocolate,” I say, giving the older woman a hug. “And thanks for sparing Chase for this trip.”

“My pleasure. Have a wonderful time and take care of each other.”

I step into the dining room as Chase gives her a hug. I hear her tell him, “No worrying about me, okay? Darlene will be here in an hour or so, and I’ll be just fine with her. You enjoy yourself. You deserve it.”

“Thanks, Grandma. Call if you need anything.”

“I will. But no more putting your life on hold for me.”

I’m waiting by the front door when Chase joins me. When we get to the car, I see he’s left the trunk open, so I glance in at our luggage.

I jerk to a stop and make an outraged sound.

I’d neatly fit all my stuff into one side, leaving plenty of room for his. But he’s completely redone all of it, lining up the bags by size from the smallest one—my cosmetic bag—to his huge duffel.

“You told me you wanted them put in some sort of order,” he says blandly. “So I did my best.”

“But— You... What the... You knew perfectly well that’s not what I meant!”

His mouth twitches slightly, and his eyes are laughing.

“Asshole,” I told him.

“Are you going to fix it?”

It’s a challenge. A very obvious challenge. A strong pull inside me urges me to fix the luggage into a more reasonable order, but then he’d win.

I’m not inclined to give him such a victory before the trip has even started, so I slam the trunk closed. “It’s fine,” I grit through my teeth.

He laughs out loud.

....

WE’RE BOTH IN A GOOD mood as we start off. We drink our hot chocolate, and I play Christmas music. We discuss our route to our first destination today and agree to take back roads instead of the interstate to avoid holiday traffic and make the drive more relaxed.

I’m in a perfectly good mood until about an hour and a half later, when it crosses my mind that Brian should be here.

Not that I really miss him. But it still festers that I got dumped. I fall into silence as I mentally sort out how I’m feeling.

“What’s up with you?” Chase asks out of the blue.

I blink over at him. “What do you mean?” I haven’t made a sound or a gesture. There’s no way he can know my shift of mood.

He evidently does. “I thought you were happy and excited.”

“I am. I really am. But I’m also going through a breakup. That isn’t easy.”

His lip curls up on one side. “Are you heartbroken?” He sounds more grumpy than anything else.

“No,” I admit. “It’s kind of embarrassing since I thought I was so into him, but you were right the other day. I don’t really miss him at all.”

Something in his shoulders and jaw relaxes. “That’s good then.”

“I guess.”

“Why wouldn’t it be good for it not to be hard that he’s not in your life anymore?”

“Just that I should have known better. For me, feeling stupid is almost as hard as feeling sad.”

“Eh. That’s just because you’re good at everything. It’s good for you to feel like the rest of us mere mortals and not always have everything under control. Feeling stupid is good for you.”

“Thanks a lot.”

I slow down around a tight curve in the road, and when I've cleared it, I glance over at him. "What about you?"

"Me? I often feel stupid."

With a huff of amusement, I reply, "Not that. I mean, what about your social life since you're so interested in mine."

"What about my social life?"

"Why haven't you been dating lately?"

"What makes you think I haven't been?"

I frown, thinking through the words. I've been sure for the past six months or so he hasn't been dating at all, which is a shift in his habits since he used to often go out with women. Nearly always casual, but it was definitely a norm for him. "Have you been dating someone and keeping it a secret? Why would you do that?"

I suddenly feel a little sick at the idea that he might have gotten serious about a woman and never given me even a clue.

He doesn't answer. It feels like he's covertly studying my profile, but I can't turn my head to confirm since I don't want him to see what I'm feeling.

"Who is she?" I ask after a minute, forcing my tone into something light and natural. "Are you really into her?"

"I'm not dating anyone."

There's a ridiculous rush of relief that doesn't make sense, given the nature of our relationship.

It's most likely because I don't like the idea of him keeping secrets from me like that.

“Oh. Okay. So why haven’t you been dating?”

“Haven’t been in the mood.”

“Oh.” I risk a quick look at him. His expression is bland and neutral. Normal. “That’s okay then.”

“Glad you approve.”

I roll my eyes. I’m about to ask him more, but he suddenly sees a homemade sign for a “primitives” shop and insists we stop to check it out.

I need to pee anyway, and the conversation is making me weirdly uncomfortable, so I’m happy to oblige.

....

OUR FIRST PLANNED DESTINATION is a small town with a large popular Christmas shop, several antique stores, and a few kitschy restaurants.

We arrive at just after one, so it’s too early for check-in at our bed-and-breakfast. We go right to the Christmas shop and stay all afternoon.

It’s got huge rooms of great, unique items, including a lot of local arts and crafts. Chase is in full form, admiring all the tackiest stuff with wide eyes and tongue-in-cheek comments. When I keep going back to a handmade cuckoo clock that makes me giggle with Santas instead of birds that pop out, he picks it up to buy it for me, despite my attempt to object.

“Anything that makes you laugh that much is worth the money,” is all he says.

As we check out, I talk for a long time with the cashier, who is the niece of the store owner. She gives me business cards for a few of the craftspeople I'm interested in contacting, and then she takes a stack of my cards, saying she'll be happy to pass them out to folks who might be interested in connecting with me.

Pleased with the conversation, Chase and I finally leave the store at four thirty. We've agreed to take turns driving, and it's his turn, so I get into the passenger seat with my cuckoo clock on my lap. It's wrapped up neatly, but I pull down one corner of the paper so I can catch a glimpse of it again.

One of the carved elves on the frame smirks back at me and makes me giggle again.

Chase's face softens from behind the steering wheel as he looks at me.

"Thanks again," I say.

"You're welcome again. But you've now thanked me four times, so that's enough. You're taking me on this entire trip and won't let me contribute anything but splitting food and gas, so I can buy you a clock if I want."

"I know. I'd be paying for the rooms whether you came or not, so of course I'm not going to ask you to help with those. By the way, I'm calling up all the places and switching to two beds if possible. But the cost of the rooms doesn't change because you're with me." I don't say so, but I've got plenty of money in savings, and this trip didn't make even a dent in it. Chase works at a coffee shop and needs to help support his

grandmother as well as himself. Most of my friends might have trust funds, but Chase doesn't.

There's no way I'm going to let him pay much for this trip.

"We can definitely go check in now," I add, changing the subject. "That way, we can settle in and rest a little before dinner."

"Sounds good."

The bed-and-breakfast is cute and cozy if not luxurious. I reserved the largest room because it has the nicest bathroom. The room has two double beds, hefty antique furniture, and a large bay window looking down at the garden. Not that there's anything blooming at the moment, but it's still a pleasant view.

Chase automatically sets his stuff down on the bed in the corner rather than the one in the more advantageous position near the big window and the bathroom. He doesn't appear remotely awkward or self-conscious about our sharing a room. "This is nice. What time do you want to go to dinner?"

"I was thinking around seven if that works for you. If you're hungry, I don't mind eating earlier."

"Seven is great." He glances at his phone. "That will give me time for a nap."

I laugh at that and go to set my stuff up in the bathroom. I resist the urge to really unpack, since we're just here for one night, but I do pull out the clothes I'm planning to wear to dinner and tomorrow, as well as my pajamas for tonight.

Chase is clearly not an unpacker. He's already stretched out on top of the covers on his bed with his earbuds in and his

eyes closed.

I rest for an hour and then decide to take a shower before dinner. I put my clothes on while I'm in there, pulling on a pair of stretchy black jeans and a green sweater that looks nice and festive but still relaxed.

When I come out, I sit down to message a few of my friends and my mother to give them updates on the day while Chase uses the bathroom. He comes out after not too long, still wearing the jeans he's had on all day but changed into a heavy sweater with a dramatically festive green-and-red-checked pattern.

I burst into laughter, even more amused by his blithely innocent expression. "I love it! Where did you get it?"

"Grandma made it for me for Christmas a few years back. She gives me one every year."

"Did you bring more of them?"

His eyebrows twitch. "I brought them all."

••••

I'M IN A GREAT MOOD as we head to dinner. The restaurant is less than a mile away, so we walk. The food is decent and the ambience aggressively country. We have a good time and laugh a lot and split a bottle of the only red wine they have stocked.

We take our time strolling back to the bed-and-breakfast, and it's after ten by the time we get back to the room. I'm tired but happy as I brush my teeth, go through my skin-care

routine, and change into a pair of cotton pajamas pants—pale blue with snowflakes on them—and a tank top.

I glance at myself before I leave the bathroom. My hair is brushed straight and shiny, and my skin is clean and slightly flushed. My pajamas are comfortable rather than sexy, but my boobs aren't exactly small, and the curve of them is obvious through the thin fabric of my tank.

With a shrug, I tell myself there's nothing I can do about that. There's nothing inappropriate about what I'm wearing, and Chase isn't likely to notice my body much anyway.

At least he never seems to have noticed it much before.

Except that morning when we saved the bird. He noticed it then.

I push the thought away and walk back out to the bedroom. Chase has been checking in on his grandmother.

“All right, Grandma,” he says when he sees me come out. “I promise everything is going good and I'm having a good time.” He pauses while she responds. Then adds, “Yes, Paige is having a good time too.” Another pause. “Yes, I'm doing that.... Yes, I mean it. Good night. I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

I'm curious about her final questions, but he offers no explanation when he ends the call. He heads into the bathroom, and I take that opportunity to climb into bed, turning on my bedside lamp and pulling out my e-reader.

Chase comes out a few minutes later.

I'm trying to act casual about sharing a room with him, so I only briefly glance in his direction.

Then I twitch and look back.

He's wearing red flannel pajamas with reindeer on them.
Top and bottom.

I fall into helpless giggles as he gives me a bewildered look.

"You're going to get hot as hell in those things tonight," I tell him.

"I know," he admits, folding down his sheet and covers.
"This shirt will probably be coming off."

"I'm going to read for a while, but you can turn on the TV if you want. It won't bother me."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I know it's kind of early for bed. You don't have to go to bed when I do."

"I don't mind. It's been a long day. But I'll watch some TV if it really won't bother you. I don't mind watching on my phone."

"No need. I've got great focus and powers of concentration."

He chuckles. "I know you do."

For about an hour, I read and he watches TV. Then he turns it off, and I switch off the light.

We're both still awake. Lying in bed in the same room. I can hear him breathe occasionally. Shift position under the covers.

I lie very still.

“You’re having a good time, aren’t you?” he asks into the silence.

I’m surprised enough to ask him honestly. “Yes. I’ve had a great day. Haven’t you?”

“Yeah. I have too. Just making sure. I know I wasn’t your first choice for this trip.”

It takes a minute for me to work out a response to that comment. “No. You weren’t. But I was wrong about Brian. And the truth is I’m almost positive I’m going to have a better time on this trip with you than I would with him.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

There’s a resonance to the silence I don’t recognize. “Okay. Good.”

“But you’re sure you’re enjoying it too?” I add, suddenly slightly anxious. “I know all these crafty things aren’t everyone’s favorite, just because they’re mine.”

“Of course I’m enjoying it.” He sounds surprised and slightly indignant.

“Why of course?”

“One, I’ve almost never had any sort of vacation of any kind, other than twice going to the beach when I was a kid. So I’d enjoy it only for that.”

I swallow as I process his words. “And two?”

“Two, why the hell wouldn’t I enjoy it simply because it’s making you happy?”

I swallow again—more of a gulp this time. “W-what?”

“It’s a lot of fun to be with someone who is in her element, who is doing exactly what she wants to do. So I’m enjoying it only for that.”

“Oh. Yeah. That makes sense.” I’m filled with a rush of both relief and disappointment at the way he’s explained what he meant.

He clears his throat. “So yeah, I’m having a great time. I’m glad you asked me to come.”

“I’m glad too.” I let out a long breath. “Good night, Chase.”

“Good night.”

FOUR

PAIGE: *Sorry. I'm done talking. Where are you?*

Chase: *Outside by the blow-up Santas. Good conversation?*

Paige: *Yeah, she knows a bunch of artists and was excited. Hope you weren't too bored.*

Chase: *I'm never bored.*

Paige: *Really?*

Chase: *Why would life be boring?*

Paige: *LOL. Don't know. But a lot of people get bored all the time when nothing's happening.*

Chase: *Something's always happening. Folks just don't see it.*

Paige: *Probably so.*

Chase: *You coming to me?*

Paige: *Yeah almost there. Ok – see you.*

••••

THE SECOND DAY OF OUR trip is just as good as the first. We sleep in until almost nine—very late for me—have a huge, delicious breakfast, drive less than two hours to a large craft store and antique mall, and spend most of the afternoon there before checking into the hotel.

There aren't any good bed-and-breakfasts around here, so we stay in a regular chain hotel. We have dinner in a local

hole-in-the-wall place that has delicious barbecue pork and corn bread, and we get back to the room by nine.

It's a good day, and Chase clearly enjoys it just as much as I do.

On the third day, we only need to drive an hour so we don't leave until almost eleven. Since there's not much to do in town in the morning, we bring breakfast to the room and watch one of the Chase's favorite Christmas movies—a silly screwball comedy that makes both of us laugh.

Then I reorganize the car before leaving the hotel. We fill up with gas and vacuum out the car (my idea, not Chase's, of course), and we head to a small town forty-five miles away.

This town doesn't have a holiday shop or craft scene, but they pride themselves on being a "Christmas town." They've obviously spent a lot on fixing up their downtown area to attract tourists, and they've really played up the holiday decorations. The biggest draw is their Christmas lights, which are set up in adorable vignettes all over the town land and reinforced by residents who go all out decorating their houses.

Obviously, the lights can't be enjoyed until it gets dark, so we need to kill time until evening. There are a few antique and primitives stores in town, but I'm afraid Chase might be getting tired of them, and they don't look particularly unique or interesting, so I suggest we have lunch and then go on a hike since the day is cool and sunny and I've researched a few popular trails in the area.

Chase likes the idea, although he assures me he'd be happy to look at more stores and insists I shouldn't change any of my

plans because I imagine he wants it. I'm actually glad to do something different today, so we look over the nearby trails over lunch and decide on a four-mile hike that isn't too rigorous since I don't want to be exhausted looking at the lights this evening.

Chase and I go to the bathroom when we're done eating. He's done before I am, and when I come out, I see him up at the cash register, paying for our lunch bill.

I'm shaking my head since he knows I'm supposed to pay for lunch this time. I'm heading over to join him when the sound of someone saying my name makes me pause.

"Paige!" the voice comes again.

I turn around and scan the tables in the corner until I find the source of the voice.

I recognize her immediately. Carly Grant. I went to college with her. She was in the same major, so we often ended up in the same classes. I haven't seen her since we graduated.

"Carly!" I say with a smile, feeling more tired than excited about unexpectedly encountering her. It would be quite rude to convey this, however, so I make sure my expression is happy. "How wild to see you here."

"I know!" She's attractive with auburn hair and freckles. She's smiling widely. "What are you doing here?"

"We're just passing through. Wanted to see the lights." I glance over toward the cash register and see that Chase has finished paying. He catches my eye with a wordless question about whether he should come over or not.

I raise one finger to indicate I'll just be a minute.

Carly's eyes follow the bit of byplay. "Is that your boyfriend? Very, very nice."

I'm not sure what gets into me. It's a petty, immature impulse, no doubt triggered by the fact that I was always insecure around Carly in college. She was perfectly nice to me—and only rarely passive-aggressive. But she was always pretty and popular and smart, and all the guys were into her.

They were never into me.

She clearly likes the looks of Chase, and she thinks he's my boyfriend.

So I hear myself saying, "Yeah. He is."

I flush as I realize I've lied about my relational status with Chase. I'm not the kind of person who does that, and I have no idea why I'm doing it now.

But I want people to think Chase is mine.

I want Carly to think that.

"How long have you been together?" she asks.

"We've known each other all our lives." I glance back over to Chase, who is watching me with his eyebrows drawn together. "I hate to be rude, but we've got plans."

"Of course you do." She's still smiling, looking lively and curious. "Hey, you said you were staying for the lights tonight. If you have some time, we have refreshments in the town hall every evening over the holidays. I'm serving today, so stop by and we can catch up."

“Oh, that sounds nice. I’ll definitely try!” I’m grinning and relieved to make an escape.

It’s my own fault. Not Carly’s. She’s not the one who made me concoct a ridiculous lie for no other reason than to feel better about myself.

“We’ll be there between seven and nine. Be sure to stop by! I’d love to hear all the updates on your life.”

I confirm we’ll do our best and say goodbye, moving quickly to join Chase.

He’s studying my face as I approach. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just someone I knew in college.”

“Oh. Then why did it upset you?”

“It didn’t.”

“Why are you lying to me?” His head is bent down, trying to see my expression past the curtain of hair I’ve let drop.

“I’m not lying. She’s just not my favorite person. Let’s get going.”

“Sure.” He’s stopped watching me so closely as he holds the door open for me and falls into step beside me on our way to the parking lot. But I can still feel him slanting me little looks.

He wants to know what’s going on with me. And he’s not likely to be brushed off for long.

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WE DRIVE OUT TO A PUBLIC parking area where a few of the hiking trails start out. There, we change our shoes and pack some snacks and bottles of water in Chase's backpack with an old blanket I always keep in my trunk.

Before we get going, he reaches a hand out for my phone. He slips it with his own phone in the small front pocket of his pack before sliding it up over his shoulders. I zip up my fleece hoodie, and Chase puts a hand on my back to guide me toward the trailhead.

I'm determined to have a good afternoon and not brood about my conversation with Carly.

For the most part, I do a good job. Chase is as good a hiking companion as he is with everything else. He's pleasant and engaging and doesn't insist on filling every moment with talk, and he's good about helping me up the steeper inclines—even if I don't strictly need the extra support.

It makes me feel like he notices me. Cares about me. Wants me to have a good time.

It's hard not to compare his behavior to how Brian was with me. Once, Brian and I were heading into Charlotte for dinner, and he was driving like he was on a speedway. Something about the weather and the speed and the time of the month combined to make me really carsick. I was close to throwing up, not saying a word and breathing raggedly, and he was still rambling on about his annoying day, completely oblivious to my condition.

I should have known then who he was and what our relationship would always be, but I talked myself out of it over

and over again.

Chase was right a couple of weeks ago when he said that it feels different with someone who treats you right.

Even if he's not my boyfriend.

We hike for about an hour and then decide to take a break right as the trail starts to curve back around and head downhill. We find a sunny, out-of-the-way spot to spread out our blanket, and then we have some water and trail mix.

I eat most of the chocolate and cashews, and Chase doesn't mind at all.

Afterward, he stretches out on the blanket and closes his eyes. I lie next to him, watching his face for a minute and thinking about him. I barely manage to turn my head and close my eyes in time before he catches me looking.

He doesn't say anything, and after a minute I'm curious about his expression, so I glance over.

He's watching me quietly.

"What?" I ask at last.

"Are you going to tell me?"

I swallow. I know exactly what he's asking. He still wants to know what was bothering me after lunch when I was talking to Carly.

I guess that's the problem with someone who really notices you. He's going to notice everything.

"It's nothing really."

“If it’s nothing, then it should be no problem telling me.”

I chew on my lower lip. Then realize it’s a nervous habit and make myself stop. “I knew Carly in college.”

“That’s what you said before. Was she some sort of mean girl?”

“No. Not at all. Overall she was pretty nice. We were in a lot of the same classes, so I was around her a lot. She was usually nice to me. A little self-focused maybe, but it was college. Everyone was kind of self-focused back then.”

“So why did seeing her bother you?”

“It didn’t really. She just made me kind of... insecure. Everyone liked her. All the guys I was interested in were more into her.”

“I thought you dated in college.” His head is turned in my direction, his eyes resting on my face.

“I did. I mean, on and off. With a few different guys. Nothing serious and nothing... exciting. The guys I really liked didn’t want me.” I sigh, doing my best to not be melodramatic. But I still mumble, “Story of my life.”

He thinks about that for a minute. Then says lightly, “Maybe you were into the wrong guys.”

“I was. I always am. But what the hell am I supposed to do about that?”

He doesn’t answer. It feels like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t say it. And I’m suddenly a little nervous, so I don’t push him to get it said.

Eventually he asks, “So seeing Carly just made you feel insecure?”

“Yeah. A little. But the main thing is... is... she assumed you were my boyfriend.”

His expression changes. His mouth softens but his eyes don't. It's an odd, edgy expression for Chase. “Oh, I see. So you rushed to tell her I was definitely not your boyfriend, and now you're feeling guilty because you think it was some sort of betrayal of our friendship.”

I gape at him. Literally gape.

He frowns. “What? Didn't I get it right?”

“No! You didn't get it even close to right!” I sit up, smoothing down my hair, which I pulled into a ponytail earlier. It occurs to me then that the reason I'm so shocked is because Chase is nearly always right when he guesses how I'm feeling.

But he's dead wrong about this.

His mouth still turned down in thoughtful confusion, he sits up too. “Then why did it make you feel bad?”

“Because I...” I clear my throat. “I...”

“Paige? What the hell is going on here?” His voice is almost—almost—serious. Intense. It's not like him at all.

“Nothing!” I blurt out. “She thought you were hot, so when she asked if you were my boyfriend I said... I said you were.”

He blinks. Clearly dumbfounded.

“I said you were,” I admit again. “It was so silly and petty and unnecessary, but I pretended you were. My boyfriend.” I groan and slouch back down into a reclining position.

Chase is completely still for a few more seconds. Then he bursts into laughter. He laughs so much he has to bend over.

“It’s not funny!” I glare at him from my position on the blanket.

“Oh, yes it is.” He finally gets control of his amusement and stretches back down beside me. He’s smiling soft and warm. “Why the hell are you feeling so bad and guilty about that?”

“Well... I lied.”

“So what?”

“I lied! For no good reason. Just because I was feeling insecure.”

“It did absolutely no harm. I don’t give a damn if you want to tell near strangers that I’m your boyfriend, and you’re not likely to see her again anytime soon. So why does it matter?” His tone is light and casual—more like his typical tone—but his eyes are still watching me closely, like he’s looking for signs of... something.

Something.

“I guess it doesn’t really,” I answer at last. I adjust my legs. Fiddle with the blanket beneath me. “I just don’t like to think of myself as a silly, petty kind of person. I don’t normally do things like that. I don’t normally lie.”

“I know you don’t. I’ve told you before. You assume the rest of the world is as trustworthy and straightforward as you are. But we aren’t. We’re much, much worse.” He reaches over and covers my hand, which is still playing with the blanket between our bodies. “And if telling a harmless lie because you momentarily felt insecure is the worst of your flaws, then you’re doing pretty well for yourself.”

“I guess,” I say with another long inhale. His big, warm hand is still covering mine. I really like how it feels.

“You’ve always held yourself to ridiculously high standards.”

“There’s nothing wrong with standards.”

“Of course not. But you’re not perfect, and it’s not fair to expect yourself to be. It’s not fair to yourself. Give yourself a little grace to be human now and then.”

I breathe out a poignant kind of laugh. “Yeah.”

We lie like that for a few minutes. Silent and still holding hands.

I feel a lot better. Like that uncomfortable restlessness in my gut has finally settled.

Then Chase says, “Isn’t it kind of weird to tell someone their boyfriend is hot after a minute and a half conversation?”

I fall into surprised giggles. “Yes. Maybe it is. It didn’t feel weird when it was happening though. And she didn’t actually say you were hot, so don’t get an inflated ego.”

“My ego is currently at a standard size.”

I'm still shaking with laughter. "Okay. Good. What she said was *very, very nice*. So take that as you like."

"Sounds like she was complimenting your taste in men for picking out a specimen as impressive as me."

I squeeze his hand and then realize it's kind of odd that we're still holding hands. I gently pull mine back and pretend I needed to itch my head. "That must be it. An impressive specimen. And I thought you said your ego was standard size."

"Well, think about it. Why assume a standard-size ego is small?"

••••

THE SECOND HALF OF the hike is even better than the first. We have a really good time on our way back, and by the time we're done, it's late enough to check into the cute little inn where we're spending the night.

We shower and rest and change clothes before dinner. I wear a pretty red velvet jacket with jeans, and Chase wears another one of his loud Christmas sweaters.

We eat dinner early because we're hungry after the hike, and then we get in the car to drive around town and look at the lights. We're not the only ones. In fact, there's a steady line of cars going through town, and soon everyone gets in a line and follows each other through all the holiday vignettes and up and down the residential streets with the best decorations.

Chase volunteered to drive, so I have a really good time gawking at the lights and laughing at the tackiest houses. As far as I can tell, Chase is having a really good time too.

It's almost eight thirty when we've seen most of what there is to see. Chase suggests we park and walk around some since a lot of people are out and about.

I agree, not wanting the evening to end yet, but when we get in sight of the town hall, which is well lit with quite a few people milling around outside, I get a little twinge of reluctance.

"What is it?" Chase asks, pulling to a stop.

I didn't make a sound or change my expression in any obvious way. I have no idea what sign he recognized that my mood has changed. "Nothing really."

"Paige."

"Just that Carly said she's working there tonight. She said we should stop by and get some refreshments."

"So what's wrong with that? I could use something hot to drink."

"Me too. But—"

"Damn it, Paige, are you still hung up on that?"

"No. Not really. But if she sees us, then she's going to assume you're my boyfriend."

"So what?"

"I know I should just come clean, but I don't want to."

"There's no reason in the world you have to come clean. I'll just be your boyfriend for a little while."

I blink and stare up at him. There are enough streetlights for me to see his face clearly. “What?”

“You heard me. You need to unclench. Let’s go get something to drink, and I’ll be your boyfriend for fifteen minutes.” He turns toward the town hall, stretching his hand out toward me.

I hesitate for a few seconds but then reach to take his hand. “It’s silly.”

“What’s wrong with being silly?”

“It’s petty.”

“You’re allowed to be petty every now and then. And I’m not convinced this woman is as genuinely nice as you’re saying. I bet part of her enjoyed lording it over you and feeling superior. So it will be good for her to see how great you’re doing and how you found a hot, devoted boyfriend.”

I snicker and speed up to keep up with him. He’s got my hand in a firm clench, and he’s not letting it go. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“So I’m a hot, devoted, ridiculous boyfriend. You could still do worse.”

“I could do way worse.”

That comment comes out a little more genuinely than I intended, but Chase doesn’t appear to notice anything wrong with it. He slants me a quick smile before we step into the brighter lighting in front of the building.

They've clearly set it up to be festive and accommodating to tourists and town visitors. We're greeted by a friendly couple who ask where we're from and if we have any questions. We chat for a minute, and then they tell us to make sure to get some cookies and cider or hot chocolate inside.

We make our way farther into the building and wander through the in-your-face holiday decorations until we see the people serving refreshments.

Carly is standing behind the cider table. She smiles when she sees us.

Chase still has my hand firmly captured in his.

We go through the introductions and get our hot cider, and Carly asks me about where I live and what I do. I tell her about my job, and Chase pulls up my website to show off my side business, talking it up so much I'm almost embarrassed but in a pleased way.

He's finally let go of my hand, but at one point, he slides an arm around me to give me a squeeze and then he doesn't withdraw it.

I lean against him as we chat. I really like how his arm feels around me. And how his warm, firm, lean body feels against me. It answers a kind of clinginess inside me that I've always tried to pretend doesn't exist.

When there's a brief lull in conversation, Chase wraps his other arm around me in a fuller hug. I clench my hand in his shirt.

“Y’all are a cute couple,” Carly says. “How long have you been together?”

I hesitate slightly, but Chase answers easily, “We’ve known each other forever, but we just got together recently. It was a long time coming.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for you.” There’s a slight edge to her tone and her expression.

I suddenly wonder if she’s not entirely happy with her life and she’s somehow jealous of me.

It never once occurred to me that someone like Carly would be jealous of me, but maybe it’s actually possible.

“Yeah,” Chase says, clearly getting into his role as my boyfriend big time. “We’re pretty happy. I guess I’ve been in love with Paige for half my life, and she finally opened her eyes and saw me standing there, adoring her.”

I gasp and look up at him, only half playing a role. “It wasn’t like that at all! I’ve always seen you!”

“Sure you have,” he says with a fond laugh, tilting my head up and leaning down to brush my lips lightly with his.

The kiss sends tingles of intense pleasure all through my body. I have no idea how there’s such an extreme response to such a light touch.

My knees almost buckle. I cling to him even more.

I’m not sure what any of us would say next, but a large family wanders in just then, the kids running to the cookies

and hot chocolate and the parents coming over to the cider table.

Since Carly is distracted, we wave goodbye and step away from her.

We linger for a minute, finishing our cider before we go back out into the cold. I sneak a few looks over to Chase, trying to see his expression.

“How do you think it went?” he asks when he catches one of my looks.

“Pretty good. Do you think...? It almost seems like she might have been...”

“Jealous. Yes. That’s what it looked like to me too.”

“People aren’t normally jealous of me.”

“That’s not true.”

“I think it is. People tend to like me fine, but no one really wants to be me. So it’s a new feeling. Someone being jealous.” I sigh. “I shouldn’t like it so much.”

“Liking it is natural. Don’t expect yourself to be perfect.”

“I don’t expect to be perfect, but I do expect to be mature and sensible.”

He laughs and gives me a little hug. “You are mature and sensible. Most of the time. You can have occasional trips into silliness like everyone else.”

“I guess.” I relax in his arms, wondering why it feels so good, so safe.

So filling.

“She’s watching us. You want to really drive home our pretend relationship?”

I pull away enough to blink up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about this,” he murmurs thickly. Then he takes my face in one of his hands and leans into another kiss.

This one isn’t quick and light and tame like the first one. His mouth lingers on mine, brushing against me with a questioning eagerness that shoots straight to my heart. And also down lower.

He strokes my hair. Teases my lips with his tongue very lightly. Then presses a couple of small kisses around my mouth before he pulls away.

My knees are weak again. My heart is galloping, and my breath is coming out in ragged pants. I stare up at him.

No kiss in my entire life has felt as good as that one did. I have no idea what’s happening here.

“Too much?” he asks, twitching his eyebrows at me. His expression is teasing, but his voice is slightly cracked.

I’m not sure what comes over me. I grab for his head with both hands and pull it back down into another kiss. Harder and deeper this time.

He responds immediately, sliding one hand down my back until it’s settled right where my ass starts to curve outward.

His tongue is actually in my mouth now, and I try to cling to it with my lips, cling to his body with my hands.

I can't seem to let him go. I'm rocked with pleasure and excitement and deep, deep entitlement.

He's mine, and I'm making him so.

He pulls away before I do, gasping raggedly as he straightens up. His face is flushed. His eyes are on fire. He's peering down at me like he's trying to read my mind.

There's nothing to read in my mind at the moment except a rush of confused, passionate feelings.

I can barely stand up straight.

"Whoa," he says at last.

I give a breathy, helpless laugh—unsure of what else to do or feel. "Yeah."

"That was unexpected."

"I know. Sorry about that."

"Why are you sorry?" He seems to have gotten himself under control now. He looks more like his normal self. He pushes a hand through his messy hair.

"We shouldn't have done that."

"Oh. Okay." He blinks a few times and seems to shake something off. "Okay, if you don't want to do it again, then we won't. No worries."

I stare at him.

"You ready to get going?" he asks.

My mouth opens. No words come out.

“Paige? There’s really nothing to worry about it. It was a kiss. No big deal.”

“Okay. No big deal.” I don’t really believe it, but it feels safer to say the words. I let Chase guide me out of the building and into the cold evening air.

I go through the steps of normalcy, but there’s a tangle of confusion in my mind.

And at the moment I’m not sure it will ever get cleared up again.

CHASE: *You ok?*

Paige: *Yes. Fine.*

Chase: *You've been in the bathroom a long time.*

Paige: *Took a shower.*

Chase: *I know but been a long time since the water turned off.*

Chase: *You're not in there getting all upset, are you?*

Paige: *No.*

Chase: *It feels like you're crying.*

Paige: *You can't possibly know that!*

Chase: *So you are crying?*

Chase: *Please don't cry.*

Paige: *I'm not!*

Chase: *Please come out.*

....

CHASE WAS RIGHT, AS he almost always is about me. I *was* crying in the bathroom. I took a shower before bed in an attempt to pull myself together after the kiss, and for some reason I started bawling under the spray.

I've spent the minutes since I got out brushing and flossing my teeth, going through my skin regime, and pulling on my green fleece pajama pants and matching T-shirt with a big wreath on the front.

Instead of going back out to the bathroom, I sit down on the closed lid of the toilet and hug my arms to my stomach, trying to settle the chaos in my mind.

Chase acted perfectly normal on our walk back to the car and the drive back to the inn. I asked him if he wanted to use the restroom first, and he said he was fine. So I went into the bathroom while he stretched out on top of his covers with his earbuds in.

When he starts texting me, checking to see if I'm okay and asking me to come back out, I feel guilty on top of everything else, so I find the courage to join him in the bedroom.

He's sitting up on the side of his bed, holding his phone in both hands. His face is sober as I walk over to my bed and sit down on the edge facing him.

"I'm sorry," he says before I can think of anything to say. "I shouldn't have kissed you. It was a... an impulse, a spontaneous thing, but I should have known it would upset you. I'm sorry."

I nod. I understand exactly what he's saying and why he's saying it. He's worried the kiss has messed up our relationship, and he's trying to defuse the bomb.

I want the exact same thing.

"It wasn't your fault," I manage to say.

His brows lower in that way they have, creating four horizontal lines on his forehead. "Yes, it was. I kissed you."

"No. Yes, you did. The first time. But then I kissed you back. The second time was my fault."

“It wasn’t your fault. We both did it. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. Unless...” He shifts slightly, ducking his head to see my expression better since I’m trying to hide behind my hair. “Unless you want it to be.”

I’m not sure exactly what that means, but I’m too scared to dig into it too deeply. “I don’t want it to be a big deal. I just wasn’t expecting... expecting...”

“It to be good?”

“Right. It... took me off guard.”

“I know it did.” He lets out a long exhale. “That’s why I shouldn’t have started it. We’re friends. We’ve always been friends. That’s what’s most important.”

I nod urgently, lifting my head as I do. “We can’t let anything mess that up.”

“So we won’t. We’ll decide not to let anything get in the way of our friendship, and we’ll hold ourselves to it. Why can’t we do that?”

“I don’t know. It seems... tricky.”

He shrugs. “Why should it be? So now we know we’ve got this chemistry between us, but it doesn’t have to change things. You don’t have to pursue things with everyone you have chemistry with. It can just be there but not paid any attention to.”

“You think so?” For the first time, the storm of emotions is starting to settle into something like hope.

“Yes. I think so. You can have chemistry with all kinds of people. You can have chemistry with people you’ve never met. Chemistry isn’t the most important thing, and people get into all kinds of trouble when they assume it is. We don’t have to do that. Not if we don’t want to.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

I exhale and rub my face, like I’m trying to wake myself up. “Okay. Let’s try it then. I can’t let anything get in the way of what we have.”

“So we won’t. I get it.” He stands up. Gazes down at me.

I meet his eyes. “I can’t lose you, Chase,” I say in a slightly wobbly voice. “You’re too important to me.”

“I get it,” he says, thicker now. Slightly hoarse. “Can you stand up?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to hug you, if you’ll let me.”

I stand up instinctively. When he reaches out, I hesitate. “Just a hug?”

“Yes. Just a hug.” After a moment, he adds, “I need it, Paige.”

There’s no way I can resist the slight vulnerability in his tone. With a little moan, I reach out to him with both hands, and he draws me into a tight hug.

I shake against him for a minute, burying my face in his thick Christmas sweater.

His arms are tight around me. Surprisingly tight for a minute and then loosening into a more relaxed embrace. I stay there for as long as I can let myself, and then I finally pull away.

We smile at each other, slightly sheepish.

“Okay,” I say with a sniff, moving my phone from my bed to the charger I plugged into the nightstand. “I feel better now.”

“Good. We’re going to be fine.”

“Yeah.” I’m exhausted now from all the turmoil—not to mention the long hike and long day—so I climb under the covers, smiling at him when I settle on the pillow. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He’s getting his stuff together for the bathroom, including his flannel Christmas pajamas.

“For being you.”

He smiles at that before he makes his way into the bathroom. He’s in there for about fifteen minutes. He takes a shower like I did, so he smells clean when he comes back out—like soap and toothpaste.

I’ve turned off the light and turned on the television since I don’t feel like reading tonight. I turn it onto a channel with nature documentaries. That’s what Chase has found to watch two of the nights so far.

When we’ve settled into our bed, I say out of the blue, “I don’t think you can have chemistry with people you’ve never met.”

“What?”

“You said earlier that you can have chemistry with people you’ve never met. I don’t think that’s possible.”

“Of course it is.” He sounds amused and slightly baffled.

“But chemistry can’t spark unless you actually meet them. Right?”

“All the parts of the chemistry already exist even if you haven’t met. They might ignite as soon as you meet or maybe a long time later.”

I think about that. “Maybe. But I don’t think it’s chemistry until it actually ignites.”

“Sure it is. That’s what chemistry is. Different elements combining and making new things.”

“Hmm.”

“I’m right about this.”

“If you say so.”

“I don’t appreciate being humored by you.”

I giggle at that. “Then admit I’m right and you’re wrong.”

“I’m not going to admit a basic untruth.”

“Then you’re going to be humored in your wrongness.”

“Stubborn.”

“Not as stubborn as you.”

We’re both smiling in the dark as the conversation ends.

••••

THE NEXT TWO DAYS GO surprisingly well. I'm not nearly as anxious and awkward as I might have expected to be.

There's more driving for the next couple of days as we wind our way through small towns on country roads and stop in a number of different shops, including one seasonal Christmas store that's mostly a disappointment in terms of local arts and crafts. But we have a good time anyway. We take turns listening to each other's music and hit every hole-in-the-wall restaurant we can find—one day eating four different meals just for fun.

On the fifth day of the trip, we finally hit the coast, touring a historic house that gets gussied up for Christmas and then getting to the beach, where we're planning to do the big holiday lights showcase on the main beach strip.

It's only two when we get to town, but the hotel has our room ready so we're able to check in early. It's one of the big chains, and I reserved a suite with a direct ocean view.

It's December—hardly the time of year for sunbathing—but it's still exciting to get a great view. I take a blanket and wrap it around me so I can sit on one of the lounge chairs on the balcony.

North Carolina weather is variable in December. Some years it's up toward seventy and sunny. Today it's in the low fifties with some big, thick clouds blowing over. The ocean breeze is chilly, but it's fine with the blanket.

After Chase calls his grandma to check in, he comes out to the balcony to join me, wrapped in a blanket of his own.

I giggle at the sight of his sober face above his bundled-up form.

“Why is it funny for me but not for you?” he asks as he situates himself on the lounge chair beside me.

“I don’t know. It just is. How’s Grandma?”

“She’s good. She’s been following our agenda step by step as we predicted, and she’s excited about the lights on the beach tonight.”

“I’m excited too. Is she missing you a lot?”

“I don’t know,” he admits, gazing out at the crashing waves. “She wouldn’t tell me if she is. Wouldn’t want me to worry.”

“Oh. I guess that’s true.” I frown. “She does sound all right though, right?”

“Yeah. She does. I think I’d be able to tell if something was wrong. She might miss me a little—I mean who wouldn’t?—but I think she’s doing just fine.”

“Does she get on you a lot for not getting out and doing things?”

“Yeah. That’s why I think she wouldn’t let me know if something was wrong. She’d be afraid I’d turn around and come back home.”

“Well, if there was an emergency with her, Darlene or someone else would call and tell you. And we would definitely turn around and come back home.”

“Yeah. I know. She just worries about me. She thinks I’m giving up too much to take care of her.”

“She was telling me the same thing.” I pause. Then decide I want to say it. “You *have* given up a lot.”

He shrugs and avoids my eyes. “Not that much. So I didn’t go to college. I wasn’t superexcited about that anyway.”

“You were always planning to go when you were younger.”

“Just because everyone else was. The idea wasn’t special to me. I’ve been fine.” He finally turns his head to hold my gaze. “I’ve been fine, Paige. Don’t you start up all that too.”

“I’m not starting anything up. Honestly, I’d be kind of sad if you had moved away.” When he looks surprised, I add, “Well, if you lived somewhere else, I wouldn’t be able to see you every day. I wouldn’t have liked that at all.”

His shoulders shake a couple of times in dry, silent laughter, but I can tell from his expression that he likes what I said.

It made him happy, so I’m glad I said it.

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LATER THAT EVENING, we head down to the beach, walking south to the start of the lights and then heading north on the sand.

I didn’t make any definite plans for dinner tonight since there are a number of small eating places and food vendors along the beach strips because of the light displays. We

wander slowly, admiring every elaborate light sculpture and vignette. There are a lot of other people around, but that just makes the feeling in the area active and festive. It's very chilly now, but we're both wearing our heavy coats, and I've got a cute red set of matching gloves, scarf, and stocking cap to wear.

Chase is wearing his regular cap and a pair of heavy mittens that his grandmother knitted for him.

I'm pretty sure he's wearing them because he knows they'll make me laugh.

For the past two days, I only occasionally think about that hot kiss between us. I've always been pretty good at disciplining my mind, but it's impossible to keep that memory completely at bay.

Sometimes it makes me squirmy and excited.

And sometimes it makes me incredibly worried.

Whenever my mood drops, Chase seems to recognize it. He'll make me laugh or say something to annoy me, and I'll immediately be distracted from my concerns.

He's not going to let things change between us—exactly as he promised.

And I absolutely positively shouldn't be occasionally wondering if maybe I secretly kind of *want* things to change.

When this thought occurs to me yet again, Chase announces he's getting hungry and it's time for us to consider what we want for dinner.

This new mission pulls me out of my thoughts. We're almost at the end of the light displays, so we traipse back up to the coast road. The first thing Chase sees is someone carrying a huge slice of pizza. He asks them where they got it from, and we follow the directions to a pizza joint that's not much in terms of ambience but is clearly very popular.

It's so crowded that we have to squeeze in a tiny table in the far back corner, but I don't care. I'd rather sit down than try to eat while we walk. The pizza is delicious, and we end up chatting with the family seated only a few inches away from us.

Chase can make friends with anyone, anywhere. I have a great time listening to his sober conversation with the youngest boy about a video game I've never even heard of.

We take our time walking back to the hotel. Chase wants to stop at half a dozen places, getting small sweets and buying trinkets.

I buy him a silly scarf since he doesn't have one. It's got a line of elves on surfboards in different poses on it. Then I wind it around his neck and make him wear it.

He laughs and pulls it up over his mouth to show off the elves better. Nothing embarrasses him. He's really quite remarkable. I wish I were more like him.

I'm staring out at the dark ocean, illuminated dimly by the Christmas lights, when a couple of boys come running toward us.

Chase pulls me out of the way automatically, tucking me into one of his arms. Then he keeps it there as we continue to walk.

When the traffic on the sidewalk breaks us apart, he releases me but then grabs for my hand to pull me back to his side. He doesn't let it go, so we end up walking hand in hand.

I glance over at him covertly a couple of times, but his expression is natural, completely clueless. I have to wonder if he's even aware he's holding my hand.

It's not like we've ever done it before—except for the other night when we were faking for Carly.

And kind of on the hike.

I have no idea what to make of it, but I like it too much to pull my hand away. People seeing us will assume we're a couple. And I want them to think that. I want it to look like I'm attached to Chase that way.

I'm not sure what that says about me. I'm not normally a needy kind of person. But I've kind of felt that way lately.

With him.

Before I can sink into more brooding, Chase points out a couple of little kids who are dancing ecstatically to some street musicians playing Christmas music.

I laugh, and we pause to watch them for several minutes until the kids get tired and go back to their parents. Chase puts some cash into the musicians' tip jar before we continue toward the hotel.

We're only a few minutes away, and Chase asks if I'm ready to go back to the room. When I say I'm not, we wander around the back to the pool and large deck overlooking the beach. We stand against the railing, staring out at the ocean. It's so dark now it's not much more than a roaring mass slightly darker than the sky with occasional patches of lighter foam.

Some other kids are playing down in the sand, their activities lit by the flashlights on their parents' phones.

We watch them for a few minutes.

Then I ask without thinking, "Do you remember much about your parents?"

When Chase doesn't answer immediately, I check his face. He's studying me, like he's trying to figure out why I'm asking.

"Just wondering," I add with a shrug. "You never talk about them."

"I know. I was seven when they died. I do remember them, but a lot of it is fuzzy. My mom, I think, was a lot like me. I remember her laughing a lot. Never angry or impatient."

"And your dad?"

"He was maybe more serious. A little intimidating. But I wasn't scared of him. I loved them both. They loved me. They were good to me."

"Who told you they died in that car accident?"

“My grandpa did. I was in school, and they called me to the principal’s office. I thought I was in trouble.” His voice is mild. Uninflected. “And my grandpa was there. He took me out to the car and told me there.”

He doesn’t seem particularly upset. After all, the tragedy is decades old now. But I can sense a quiet ache in him, so I move closer. Reach out and rub his shoulder. He bends one arm and covers my hand that’s settled on his chest.

“So I came to Green Valley and moved in with my grandparents. And I started a new school where they sat me next to a good girl with long hair and hazel eyes who always followed the rules.”

I smile fondly. “It wasn’t actually a very good strategy on Miss Prettiman’s part. Because instead of helping you behave better, I kept trying not to laugh at all your jokes.”

“I know. Every time you almost laughed, it just encouraged me to try harder.”

I’m filled with affection. It’s overflowing inside me. I lean closer, wrapping both hands around his neck and keeping them there. “It was a losing battle on my part. I’d go home and complain to my mom that this annoying new boy kept trying to make me laugh, and if I did, I might get in trouble.”

He chuckles, sliding a piece of my hair back behind my shoulder. “You never got in trouble.”

“No. I didn’t. But I might have, and it would have been your fault.”

“Yes, it would. You can blame me all you want.” His voice is softer now. Slightly hoarse. I catch a glimpse of something deep and rich and almost yearning in his eyes as he gazes down at me.

It thrills and scares me at the same time. I duck my head and reach for anything to break the tension. “Do you still miss your parents?”

He makes an odd noise in throat, as if the question takes him by surprise. “Yes. I do. Not all the time. It’s not always weighing me down the way it used to, although I do sometimes expect—whenever I’m happy—it’s going to be snatched away from me the way it was back then. But I do miss them sometimes. I think about them a lot. Wonder what they’d think of me now.”

The edge to his tone upsets me, so I forget about my shyness before. “They’d love you, Chase. Of course they would. They’d be so proud of you.”

“Would they? What exactly have I made of my life for them to be so proud of me?”

“You’ve done plenty. You finished college and never told anyone.”

He frowns. “How did you find out about that?”

“Your grandma, of course. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It didn’t really matter. I just did it to finish what I started. And it wasn’t like it was a difficult program or anything. Just a basic online degree. And it’s not like I need it for an impressive career.”

“That doesn’t matter. Your parents would still be proud of you. You work hard, and you take care of your grandma. You can get a different kind of job if you want, but if you’re happy at the coffee shop, then that’s fine. They’d hate to lose you. It feels like you do everything there as it is.”

“Well, actually...”

“What?” I’m still hanging all over him. I should back up, but I don’t want to. “At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if you admit to being a part owner of the coffee shop.”

He chuckles. “No such luck. But they did promote me to manager. I told them I don’t really need the title bump, but they did it anyway.”

I laugh helplessly and hug him. “You’re ridiculous! Why didn’t you tell us that?”

“Didn’t feel like a big deal.”

“Well, it doesn’t change how we feel about you, but we could have celebrated your accomplishments. Why shouldn’t we?”

“I guess it doesn’t feel like that much, compared to what all the rest of you’ve done with your lives.” He sounds light, almost dismissive, as if he’s not taking it seriously.

But I really think he is.

“Stop it, Chase. You’re not the slacker you’ve always pretended to be. And even if you were, it wouldn’t matter. Your parents would still have so much to be proud of. No matter what you say, you’ve sacrificed a lot out of love for your grandparents. You’ve been so good to your family. And

you're incredibly smart but not in any way arrogant about it. And you're generous and thoughtful and kindhearted and funny as hell."

"Yeah?" he says very softly. He keeps checking my face.

"Yes. And you've got so many friends. Friends who are crazy about you."

"Crazy about me?" He reaches up to smooth back my hair again since the breeze keeps blowing it across my face.

"Yes. Crazy about you. You notice people in a way that almost no one else does. You know what other people are thinking and feeling, and it matters to you. Most people aren't like that, Chase. You're..."

I've maybe let a rush of feelings get a bit out of control. I'm babbling out all kinds of things that I might not have done on reassessment.

But Chase is leaning down toward me. There's an urgency on his face I almost never see. Like he wants to hear more. Like he's reaching for it. Like hearing what I'm saying is really important to him.

If it matters to him, then it matters to me, so I finish the thought. "You're special, Chase. In so many ways. And... and, for some of us, our worlds just wouldn't be the same—wouldn't be nearly so good—without you." My voice breaks on the last two words.

He makes a weird throaty sound. Leans down closer to me. I know what's in his eyes right now. The hot promise of the need I see there.

I could stop him if I wanted, but stopping him is the last thing I want.

I tighten my hand on his neck and pull him down toward me faster.

Then he's kissing me, and I'm kissing him back.

It doesn't start light and questioning like our first kiss. This one is deep and urgent and needy from the very beginning. His mouth is hungry and demanding, and his hand tightens around a fistful of my hair. I open my mouth against his and try to suck his tongue into my mouth.

He turns us around so my back is against the rail. He holds my head with a grip on my hair and deepens the kiss even more.

Pleasure and excitement are slamming into me in hot waves. I'm making silly whimpering sounds against his mouth.

His free hand slides down to cup my bottom over my jeans. I love how it feels there. The possessiveness of the touch.

The kiss lasts for what feels like a long time. Maybe it's only a couple of minutes. All the feeling and desire coursing through me feels like too much for my body to hold.

I'm honestly not sure what I might have ended up doing had a child's laughter from near us not broken through our hot, hungry haze.

We break apart and look over to see the family who was playing in the sand has come back up to the deck. The kids are

giggling at us.

Confused and embarrassed and still excited, I giggle too and hide my face in Chase's sweater until they've gone inside.

He leans down to whisper in my ear, "It's safe now. They're out of sight."

I straighten up, flushed and jittery. I wonder what he'll say now. If he wants to kiss me again. If he wants to do even more.

With the way I'm feeling right now, I'm not sure I'll be capable of saying no.

He tilts his head to brush my lips lightly with his. He says, "I know. We can't do that anymore. I totally get it, and I'll never push you for more. But I've had a really good evening. Thank you for spending it with me."

I blink up at him, surprised. Kind of relieved and kind of disappointed.

But we said we'd keep our relationship a friendship, and kissing more is not the way to do that. He's trying to be good, and I appreciate it. I need to be good too.

So I smile up at him and say sincerely, "I've had a really good time too, so thank you."

PAIGE: *Where are you?*

Chase: *Sorry. Running on beach.*

Paige: *What time did you wake up?*

Chase: *6. Left you a note.*

Paige: *You did? I didn't see it! Hold on.*

Paige: *LOL. Reindeer is cute, but you put the note in the bathroom!*

Chase: *Figured you'd see it there.*

Paige: *I haven't even gotten out of bed yet! Freaked out when you weren't here.*

Chase: *Real sorry. Would've texted but didn't want to wake you up.*

Paige: *That's ok. When will you get back?*

Chase: *30 min away. I'll grab us breakfast on way back.*

Paige: *Ok thanks. You can run longer if you want.*

Chase: *Already on way back.*

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THE FOLLOWING DAY, after a long morning in the beach hotel, we drive along the coast to the big Christmas festival near Wilmington. It doesn't take very long even with Chase deciding he wants to stop to check out a couple of big beach shops to buy discounted trinkets for all his friends.

The festival is a really good size—with all kinds of tables and vendors selling arts and crafts and food and drink. There's a wide variety of local musicians and a parade of antique cars. Also competitions for the best pie, best chili, and best cider. The weather has warmed up today, so we don't even need to wear jackets.

We have a great time. I talk to nearly every artist and jewelry maker of any quality and make a number of promising connections. While I'm deep in conversation, Chase plants himself next to the dress-up-dogs-as-Santa's-elves booth and watches the transformations with the excited wonder of a little boy.

When I'm done with the business portion of the day, we wander around, checking everything else out and eating way too much.

The day passes quickly, and it's nearly five before we get tired and decide we've done all we can do here. We drive over to a charming bed-and-breakfast to check in and rest a little before dinner.

It's only when the host shows us to our room that I remember that this is the one place on the trip that I wasn't able to get two different beds. All the other places were able to either separate the beds into twins or swap us to a different room with two beds. But this one is a fancy honeymoon-type suite with a big king-size bed, jetted tub, and romantic decor.

I'm slightly flushed as I thank the host and tell him everything looks perfect. Chase's expression is completely

natural. He doesn't look remotely concerned, but I can't see anything but that big bed.

As soon as we're alone, I say in a rush, "I'm sorry. I called about swapping rooms, but they didn't have any others available."

"It's no problem for me. Happy to take the couch thing if you want."

The "couch thing" is an antique settee that's maybe two-thirds the length of Chase's body. "I'm not going to ask you to sleep on that thing! Or on the floor. We'll be fine on the bed. There's plenty of room. As long as it's okay with you."

"It's fine with me." He slants me a look. "You're the one who's uncomfortable with it. And I'm not okay with you being uncomfortable."

"It's mostly because it's fixed up all romantic. I'm sure we'll be just fine on the bed itself. It's plenty big for there to be a lot of room between us."

"All right then." He walks over to the window and picks up the big vase of flowers and puts it inside the walnut wardrobe. Then he collects the beautifully displayed toiletries and the wineglasses and the candles and thick white bathrobes and stuffs them in the wardrobe too. "There. Now it's not so romantic."

I giggle helplessly at his matter-of-fact actions. "What if I actually want to use some of that?"

"Then you can grab them out of there." His mouth twitches slightly as he moves his bag over to the far side of the bed. "So

you're really okay if I'm on the bed?"

"I'm really okay. Do you need the bathroom? I'm kind of hot and sweaty, so I want to take a shower."

"I'm good for now. Go right ahead." He toes off his shoes and stretches out on top of the covers on his side of the bed, relaxing with his music the way he always does.

I take a shower and then lie down next to him on the bed, reading for a little while and then closing my eyes for a fifteen-minute snooze.

And it's fine. There's less space between us than normal since we're both on the bed, but it's not like we're right on top of each other.

We've been doing fine sharing rooms. It will be no problem to share a bed for one night.

I've nearly convinced myself of it by the time we leave for dinner.

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TONIGHT WE EAT AT THE nicest restaurant on the trip. It's significantly more expensive than where we've been going so far. I've changed into good black pants and a dressier top, and even Chase puts on a pair of dark gray trousers and a button-up shirt.

He looks good, and I feel like we're on a real date.

To start with, they suggest the mulled wine they offer for the holidays, which I've never had before, but I'm willing to try. I like it a lot, so I get a second one. Then we split a bottle

of table wine with our dinner. I get salmon, and Chase gets steak. Everything is delicious, including the mousse we split for dessert.

I've never been much of a drinker, and I've got a buzz going when we finally leave. I'm not exactly drunk, but I'm definitely feeling no pain. I cling to Chase's arm as we walk back to the bed-and-breakfast, and I can't seem to stop giggling.

After a couple of blocks, I become aware of the constant ripple of my laughter. I stop walking and blink up at him. "Did I drink too much?"

He laughs. Soft and fond. I love the sound of it. "If you're wanting to drive or operate heavy machinery, you definitely drank too much. But otherwise I think you're good."

"I don't want to drive. But I also don't want to do anything stupid." I giggle. "Have I done anything stupid yet?"

"Nope. Nothing stupid." He puts a hand on my back, rubbing in slow circles and then using the light pressure to get me to start walking again.

"Okay. Good. I don't like to embarrass myself." I'm telling him this in all seriousness, like it's a deep secret I'm sharing.

"I know you don't. But it doesn't really matter with me."

"It doesn't?" I stop walking again and peer up at him.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

“Because nothing you do is going to change how I feel about you.” He murmurs the words—low and light and like they’re nothing important.

Maybe they’re not. My mind is too fuzzy to sort through any significance although I know I really like how they sound. “Okay.” I nod and keep nodding. “That’s good then.”

“Yes. It’s good. You can let go a little bit if you want. I’m gonna be here to catch you.”

I kind of drape myself over him since his body is so deliciously touchable. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He gently peels me off him and gets us walking again. He’s smiling. I might be fuzzy, but I know that much. “I’m glad I’m here too.”

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BY THE TIME WE GET back, I’m exhausted. Like I can barely keep my eyes open. Chase helps me up to the room, and I go to the bathroom and then collapse on the bed with my shoes on.

He takes my shoes off for me and then heads into the bathroom to get ready for bed. He must take a shower while he’s in there because I hear the water running.

He comes out eventually in a white undershirt and his pajama pants. Bare feet and hair that’s slightly damp at the nape of his neck.

I smile up at him drowsily. “You smell like soap.”

“That’s because I took a shower.”

“I know. I heard the water.” I’m a little clearer in the head now, but I still feel like I’ve said something profound.

He chuckles. “You want me to help you get ready for bed?”

I sniff indignantly. “I can do it myself.”

“Then why don’t you? You’ll be upset with yourself tomorrow morning if you sleep in your clothes.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. He always seems to be right. In a slight huff, I roll out of bed, grab a set of pajamas from my bag, and then go to the bathroom to change. I close the door a little too loud, but that’s an accident.

I manage to brush my teeth and wash my face after I get my pajamas on. Then I leave my dinner clothes in a pile on the floor, feeling like that will prove my defiance to Chase.

Then I’m finally done with all those chores and return to climb under the covers with a long sigh.

Chase still has his bedside lamp on. He’s smiling at me from his side of the bed.

“Why are you being smug?” I ask him.

“Am I being smug?” He sounds genuinely surprised.

“I don’t know. It feels kind of like you are.”

“I don’t think so. I think you might still be a little muddled from too much wine.”

“Oh. Could be. I’m not much of a drinker.”

“I know you’re not.”

“I don’t like to feel like I’m not in control.”

“I know you don’t. But you’re safe with me. You don’t always have to be in control. I’ll take care of you.”

I turn on my side and scoot closer. “You promise?”

He reaches out and brushes a strand of my hair back from my face. “Yeah,” he says thickly. “I promise.”

“Okay then. I’m going to sleep now.”

“Good plan. Good night, Paige.”

“Good night.” I pause. It feels like there’s more I need to say. Something lingering that’s bothering me, bugging me, nagging at me. Then I realize what it is. “I love you, Chase.”

His silence is loud, thick. It lasts a long time. It upsets me. I whimper a little.

Then he finally murmurs, “You know perfectly well I love you too.”

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I WAKE UP AT 2:36 IN the morning with a slight headache, a terrible taste in my mouth, and desperately needing to pee.

Rolling off the bed, I groan as my feet hit the floor.

“Y’okay, baby?” Chase mumbles from beside me, clearly mostly asleep.

“Yeah. I’m okay. Just got to go to the bathroom.”

“M’okey dokey.”

I giggle at his groggy reply as I stumble toward the bathroom. I have a hazy memory of drinking too much last night but not a lot of details. After I pee, I splash some water on my face and brush my teeth to help with the bad taste. My head is hurting worse now, so I get some ibuprofen from my cosmetic case and grab a bottle of water before I sit down on the side of the bed.

I take the pills and guzzle about half the bottle of water in several big gulps.

Chase shifts under the covers. He must turn over because his voice sounds closer than before. “Headache?”

“Just a little one. I’m really okay. Go back to sleep.”

“Okay.” He’s definitely more awake than before. I hear him let out a long exhale.

Something about the texture of his breathing gives me a twinge in my chest and a clench in my gut. I suck down more water, leaving only a few sips in the bottle before I screw on the cap.

Then I lie back down and pull the covers up over me, giving them a little tug when it feels like Chase has too many.

He adjusts position again and reaches out toward me. Before I know what’s happening, he’s pulled me over to his side, wrapping one arm around me.

It feels soft and cozy and needed. I snuggle against him, tucking myself under his arm and resting one of my hands on his belly.

The headache is still pulsing behind my right eye, but it's not too bad. Overall this feels pretty good. Safe and protected and cared for.

Taken care of.

I'm not used to feeling that way.

I really like it.

I wonder if, after this trip is over, I'll ever feel that way again.

It's too hard and deep a thought for my current brain capacity, so I let it drift away. Instead, I enjoy the snuggles until I fall back to sleep.

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THE NEXT TIME I WAKE up, there's sunlight coming into the room from the cracks around the curtains and blinds.

I'm still pressed up against Chase. That's the first thing I'm aware of. We've changed positions in our sleep, however. I'm lying farther down his body than I was, and I'm draped halfway on top of him. My cheek is resting on his chest. I can feel his heart beating under my ear.

Its rhythm is faster than I would have expected first thing in the morning.

I smack my lips a few times since my mouth feels dry. But the bad taste and the headache are mostly gone. Once I realize that much, I'm able to lift my head, blinking vaguely around in the hopes that a clock will happen to fall within my eyeline.

“It’s about ten after eight,” Chase says. He sounds fully awake.

“Oh. Okay.” That investigation took all the energy I currently possess, so I collapse back on top of him, trying and succeeding at straightening my legs.

“How do you feel?” he asks after a minute.

“Not too bad, considering. Mostly like I don’t want to move.” My hand has settled on one of his arms, and I idly rub the firm biceps, thinking how nice and lean and strong his body feels.

“It’s still early. You can sleep in.”

I shift some more, wanting to get more comfortable and also feel more of him. My forearm brushes against something interesting beneath his pajama pants.

He stifles a groan and pulls away.

“What?” I ask, lifting my head again and trying to figure out what’s going on. I’m groggier than I usually am on waking up.

“Nothing. But smarter if we don’t cuddle like that this morning.”

“Okay.” I feel kind of pouty about him pulling away, but I’m not out of it enough to try to argue. That would be neither sensible nor mature.

And I’m supposed to be both of those things.

He groans again—softly, like he’s trying to hold it back—as he stands up. I watch as he limps slightly on his way to the

bathroom.

He's uncomfortable, I realize in a burst of revelation.

That must be what's wrong with him and why he didn't want to cuddle.

I reassure myself that it wasn't about me for a couple of minutes until I wake up more and my mind clears.

Then I remember what I brushed against in bed.

I flush hotly. He was hard. I felt him in his pants. No wonder he was uncomfortable and wanted to get out of bed.

I'm wide-awake and trying to hide jittery excitement when Chase comes out of the bathroom, wearing his white undershirt and his worn jeans.

Clearly he's not planning to get back into bed with me.

His expression is relaxed and natural, and he smiles when he sees I'm awake. "I saw a coffee shop just down the block. Thought we could use some good coffee. You want anything?"

"Yes!" I sit up in bed. "Peppermint mocha. With whipped cream on top. Don't let them go easy on the whipped cream."

He chuckles and promises to ensure the appropriate amount. He grabs his phone and wallet and leaves the room.

I sigh and stare up at the ceiling.

I really need to get myself in order. I'm still a bit fuzzy about what happened last night, but I know for sure I drank too much wine.

I was silly and giggly on the way home. Chase had to take my shoes off and coax me into getting my pajamas on.

Embarrassing. That's what I was.

Currently I'm not in a fit state to lose my inhibitions. I'm far too interested in Chase's body, too excited about kissing and touching him, too mentally distracted by the idea of having sex with him.

We agreed to be smart and take care of our friendship, and getting tipsy is a sure way to throw that resolve into the garbage.

It's a miracle I didn't make a humiliating move on him last night.

No more than two drinks a night for the rest of the trip.

With that clear in my mind and a slightly sinking feeling in my gut, I make myself get out of bed because I really need to use the bathroom.

After I go, I wash up and notice the huge, gorgeous, jetted tub. It would be a shame to let that go to waste.

We've got an easy morning today. We don't need to leave until elevenish. There's plenty of time before breakfast for me to take a bath.

I've just turned the water on and am checking the temperature when Chase texts that he's on his way back. The timing is perfect. By the time he's here with my mocha, the bath should be ready for me.

It takes a minute for me to adjust the water to the appropriate level of warmth without being too overpoweringly hot. Then I add some of the fancy bath salts they've provided.

They smell like vanilla and ginger. Delicious.

"I'm here with coffee and a lot of whipped cream," Chase announces as he arrives.

I turn off the water since the tub is full. Then I go out to greet him, reaching for my mocha. "Thank you so much! This is perfect."

He sniffs the air and glances into the bathroom through the open door.

"I'm going to take a bath," I tell him. "If you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. We've got plenty of time. I've got to call Grandma anyway since I didn't yesterday."

"Good idea. Tell her I say hi." I take my hot drink into the bathroom and close the door.

The tub is every bit as good as I was hoping. It's big enough that the water can cover my shoulders and all of my legs. I sit in the still, scented water as I drink half my mocha, hearing the faint sound of Chase talking to his grandmother.

He's such a sweetie. And never makes a big deal about how great he really is.

There's no one like him.

When it sounds like he's ended the call, I turn on the jets to try them out. But they're loud and the churning water isn't as

nice and soothing as I want. So I turn them off again. Close my eyes and soak in peace until my drink is gone.

When I've relaxed so much I've gotten a bit restless, I decide I might as well shave my legs since I'm in the bath. I take my time, enjoying how smooth they feel afterward.

I try to sort through everything that happened last night—mostly to reassure myself I didn't do anything too mortifying.

I was really clingy walking home. I remember Chase gently removing me from his body. That's not great but also not the end of the world. I didn't grope him or anything too inappropriate.

And I was kind of pitiful when I got back to the room, but I didn't undress in front of him. I just said a lot of silly things.

I have a sudden memory of his voice as we walked home, telling me I can let go a little because he's going to be there to catch me.

A sappy smile breaks out on my face. I'm sure I'm not misremembering that.

And I know he meant it. I know it's true. Because for so many years he's always been there for me.

Anytime I need it. Never pushy or demanding. Exactly what I need when I need it.

I told him the truth the other night by the beach. My life wouldn't be the same without him.

Without him, my world wouldn't be anywhere close to as good as it is.

I mentally play with the memory of him saying those words. And something else that's a little less clear about how his feelings for me aren't going to change. The sentiment spreads over me like a cozy blanket, like the first sip of a hot drink.

It fills me. Warms me.

I'm honestly not sure how I functioned so long without understanding exactly what he means to me.

And without recognizing how incredibly sexy he is.

What in the world was wrong with me?

I suddenly don't like that there's a closed door between us. I need to see him. Touch him. Get close to him. I get out of the tub, pull the drain and towel off.

It's only then that another slice of memory pierces into the rising fog of my mind.

I blurted out that I loved him last night. I just said it. *I love you, Chase.*

I have to reach mentally until I recall what came afterward.

You know perfectly well I love you too.

That's what he said. I can even hear the tone he used. Half-dry and half-fond. Kind of tired. Maybe a little resigned.

Resigned. Like he's been living with it for a long time and it's starting to wear on him.

Of course it is. Why wouldn't it? I've been completely clueless about him for way too long.

I pull on the thick robe I retrieved from the wardrobe where Chase stuffed it yesterday. Then I come out of the bathroom to see that Chase is lounging on top of the covers as he often does. Eyes closed. Listening to music through his earbuds.

His body is long and firm and relaxed and strong. Irresistibly masculine. I climb onto the bed, scoot over, and prop myself up over him.

He opens his eyes. When he sees how close I am, his eyes widen and he pulls off his earbuds.

“Hi,” I say.

He gives a huff—half-amused and half-confused. “Hi. What’s going on?”

Now that I’m here, I’m not exactly sure what I imagined I’d say to him right now. Tell him I love him again? And not just like a friend? Tell him I want more from our relationship? I want everything?

That’s way too much. Way too scary. I’m not remotely prepared for such a confession. Not when I barely have a handle on what I’m feeling.

Plus I’ve always been too much for men. Moved too quickly. Wanted more than they were ready to give.

They always eventually pull back because who I am is simply too much.

I’m not going to mess things up that way with Chase.

So instead, what comes out is “I want to kiss you.”

His eyes close slowly in a prolonged blink. “What?”

“I want to kiss you.”

The words are processing in his mind now. His face changes. His eyes light up in that way they’ve always done when he sees me—but hotter somehow, more excited. “Is that right?”

“Yes. That’s right. I was in there and decided that the best thing I could do was to kiss you.”

“All right.”

“All right?”

“Yes, all right.” He shifts slightly, adjusting his head on the pillow. He pulls some of my hair back behind my shoulders so it’s not hanging in his face. “If that’s what you think is best, then who am I to argue?”

My heart is racing now. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He’s completely still, his eyes devouring my face.

“So I should just... just do it?”

He chuckles softly, shaking his body and the bed just slightly. “Well, it was your idea. I think you should take ownership.”

Now I’m nervous as well as excited. My blood is throbbing in my veins, throbbing all over. My cheeks are burning, and my hands are trembling slightly. But he’s issued a very clear challenge to me, and never have I backed down from one of Chase’s challenges.

So I lean down far enough to brush his lips very lightly. It feels good—tantalizing—but it isn't nearly enough. With a silly sound in my throat, I press my mouth to his more firmly.

He's been lying completely still, but at the extra pressure he sucks in a quick breath through his nose and reaches up to hold on to my head.

His fingers tangle in my hair until they're curved around the back of my skull. He moves his other hand to press against the small of my back.

I've bent my arms to get closer to him, but my lower body is beside him not on top of him. I move over so my legs are straddling one of his, lining my body up better over him.

His mouth is moving now. Eager and urgent. His tongue teases mine until I've opened all the way for him. He's making hungry sounds into the kiss, holding my head down with his hand in a grip that's firm but not aggressive.

I can pull away if I want, but that's the last thing in the world I want to do. Because nothing I can remember has felt better than kissing Chase like this. It's involving all of me. Mind and heart and body. All of me is pulsing with how much I want him, need him, love him.

Because I told him the truth last night. The admission might have been accidental, but it was utterly true.

And this right now feels like a manifestation of all those deep feelings. Like I'm finally, finally doing something with the weight of all that care and affection and devotion.

It's pulsing in my head and in my chest and between my legs. There's an ache below my belly that's growing and tightening and seeking. I rub my groin against his hip. Hear him groan into my mouth in response.

I pull back from the kiss to check his face. "Was that a good sound?" I ask. It sounded almost tortured, and the last thing I want to do is hurt him.

He huffs out a ragged laugh. "Yes. That was a good sound."

"So you're impressed with how well I'm taking ownership?"

"Very impressed." The hand that was on the back of my head moves forward to cup my cheek tenderly. "Paige, do you want to tell me what's going on here?"

I could tell him everything. But that would make me entirely vulnerable. And I'd be throwing all of myself into this, at him. No man has ever wanted that, and I can't risk being too much for Chase the way I've been for men so many times before.

I've got to tell him part of the truth—but it can't be everything. "I was... thinking. In the bathtub. And I realized... I realized..."

The words are getting blocked as a surge of nerves and self-consciousness starts to rise. How exactly is an uptight good girl supposed to get this said?

"You realized what?" he prompts gently. "I really want to hear about your bathtub epiphany."

That makes me giggle. I kiss him again—quick and fond. “I was scared before. Since it was all new. And I didn’t... I didn’t know if we could... be different together. But I’m not scared anymore.”

His hand tightens on my face very briefly. But his voice is as mild as before as he asks, “You’re not?”

“No. And I want...” I gulp. “I really want to try this. I want to... *be* with you like this.”

He makes a weird helpless sound and pulls my head down into another kiss. We kiss for a long time. Deep and passionate and ravenous. Until he’s hard in his jeans and I’m grinding against him shamelessly. One of his hands is holding the back of my thigh, curved in toward where I’m hotly aroused.

I’ve never known I could be like this. Openly needy and not even embarrassed about it.

I’m stroking his bare skin under his T-shirt, and I move my hand down to feel his erection beneath the soft, thin denim.

He grunts and turns his head out of the kiss, gasping raggedly.

I lift my head, hot and dazed. “What’s the matter?”

“Let’s take a break for a minute here.” He sounds stretched, almost desperate.

I move my hand from his groin immediately and sit up. I hate climbing off him since my body hasn’t gotten what it needs, but I’d never dream of pushing him. Not in a million years would I do that. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He gives that soft, self-deprecating laugh and props himself up more. “Yeah, I’m good. But I think we’d better... hold off for now.”

I bite my lip, immediately hurt by a stab of rejection. I thought—I was sure—he was as into this as I am. “Oh. Okay.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” He rubs at his face, like he’s trying to wake himself up.

“It’s fine. I thought... but if you don’t want to do more—”

“*Of course* I want to do more. I want to do everything. I want it more than anything.” His face contorts strangely.

That clench of pain relaxes inside me. “Okay. I’m... glad. So what are you worried about then?”

“I just think we should... take a little longer before we have sex.” He meets my eyes and then looks away. “You’re being impulsive, and I’m totally with you. But it’s still new. For us. And in the past, the times you’ve been impulsive, you’ve often ended up... regretting it afterward.” He’s stumbling over the words.

“So you think...” I don’t finish the thought. He’s afraid I’m going to end up regretting this.

“And I’m not okay with that. Having sex with you and then you regretting it afterward. I’m okay with going slow. I’m okay with kissing you as much as you want. I’m okay with trying things out until you can see if this might be what you want. I’m okay with all of that. But I’m not okay with having sex with you and then having you wish we hadn’t.” He’s

searching my face now, urgently looking for a sign of how I'm responding.

It hurts. It does. There's no denying it. He's applying brakes when I want to rush forward.

But he's always been smarter than I am about people. About relationships. About *us*. And I can see he's worried—terrified—that we're going to do something we regret later.

And he's right. That would be terrible. It would be the very worst thing.

“Okay. I get it. I understand.”

“You do?” He reaches over to push aside some of my hair.

“Yeah. You're right. We promised we weren't going to mess up our relationship, and going slow is the best way not to do that.”

He lets out a long exhale. Almost a groan. “You know it's not because I don't want to—”

“I know. I really do.” It's impossible not to see—in vivid, concrete reality—how much Chase wants me. How turned on he is. It's not about not wanting this. It's about being smart.

I thought, for once, I might not have to be smart, but I was silly.

I was wrong.

Of course we have to be smart. When other people's well-being is on the line. Always.

“All right.” He leans over and brushes a light kiss on my mouth. “You all right if I take a quick shower?”

“Yeah. I’m good.” I smile at him. Warm and genuine.
“Kind of funny that I’m supposed to be the careful one.”

“I know,” he says as he stands up. “But this is too important. *You* are too important to me. I’m never not going to be careful with that.”

SEVEN

CHASE: *Wait until you see this stocking I bought you.*

Paige: *What? I told you not to buy me anything else! You've already bought me way too much this trip.*

Chase: *Don't matter. You've got to have this.*

Paige: *LOL. If you say so. Thanks. Can't wait to see it.*

Chase: *I'm hanging outside. Take your time. Talking to this funny old guy.*

Paige: *Ok. Won't be long. Have fun.*

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WE HAVE A LATE BREAKFAST and then drive west, back toward Raleigh. The plan for the day is to stop at a large Christmas store and then tonight go to an expansive botanical garden that's all decked out with holiday lights.

The Christmas store is a good stop, and Chase buys me a silly stocking with an uptight elf with glasses clearly worried about keeping up with his agenda on a long printed list.

I love it—exactly as Chase predicted.

We don't talk any more about our interrupted steamy session in the bed that morning. For the most part, we're our typical companionable selves. He does hold my hand as we scope out the store and wander the gardens together in the evening. And he kisses me every time we separate and come back together, but just light, short kisses. Nothing to lead us back into sexy times.

We've got two separate beds for the night, and that's safer and smarter. Sure, I'm acutely conscious of every breath Chase takes and every small move he makes in his own bed after we turn off the lights, but I don't do anything about it.

He wants to be smart, so that's what we're going to do.

Surely he won't want to be smart forever.

The following day we're supposed to drive to Asheville. There are a number of local pottery and jewelry places I want to visit in the afternoon—and then the next day we're planning to do Biltmore.

We sleep in until around nine and then go out for a big breakfast before we hit the road. The morning is chilly and gray, and the weather is calling for a cold drizzle. The day might not be bright and cheerful, but I'm in a good mood anyway, filled with jittery excitement whenever I see or talk to or get close to or think about Chase.

It's my turn to drive today. Since we have a longer distance to go, we'll take the interstate instead of back roads, and the trip will still be about three and a half hours. There's a lot of traffic since it's only a few days until Christmas, and when a light sleet begins to fall, I have to focus even more.

I hate driving in bad traffic. I hate driving in bad weather. And today the stress seems worse than normal because it's distracting me from my happy Chase buzz.

Chase is a good passenger. He doesn't fall asleep, and he doesn't try to supervise my choices. He's quiet and alert, and

several times I feel him scanning my face and posture, as if he's making sure I'm okay.

The sleet gets heavier, and the roads get slicker. I start to see a few cars pulled over and one that's clearly slid into the guardrail. It wasn't supposed to be coming down like this until later this afternoon—after we already arrived at our destination—but evidently the weather moved in more quickly than they expected.

My hands and shoulders are getting tired from tension about two hours into the drive when Chase says softly, “How 'bout we stop at this exit? I wouldn't mind stretching my legs, and I can switch to driving if you want to take a break.”

“I think I'm okay.” I glance over at him to make sure he's not annoyed with my driving. He looks relaxed, maybe slightly concerned but not impatient. “But we can definitely stop. I wouldn't mind filling up with gas before we get into Asheville anyway.”

At the next exit, I take the off-ramp, driving slower than normal to make sure the wheels don't slip. I get to the first convenient gas station and pull up next to a pump, putting the car into Park and then letting out a long breath.

Chase reaches over to slide his hand below my loose hair so he can rub the back of my neck.

“I'm fine,” I tell him. “I'm a grown-up. I can drive in sleet and freezing rain.”

“I know you can. But it makes most people kind of tense.”

“Yeah.”

I feel kind of silly. Needy. Like I should be stronger or less uptight or not so anxious about a normal winter occurrence. It took me longer than most people to be comfortable driving because I don't like feeling like I'm not in control and not automatically an expert. I was so nervous as a sixteen-year-old that my driving instructor mentioned to my dad in a dry voice, "She could use some more practice," and I was so ashamed I cried. The memory still bothers me today if it happens to cross my mind.

I know logically now—just as I knew then—that I wasn't supposed to be perfect at driving when I was just starting out. And I also know that in Green Valley we almost never have snow or ice, so I have little practice at driving on slippery roads.

But still. I feel a little bit like a failure—like the nervous sixteen-year-old I used to be—and I don't want Chase to see.

Chase pumps the gas while I get out to step my way over the wet pavement to the building so I can go to the bathroom and buy us both a cinnamon cappuccino. When I come outside, Chase is on his way inside, but he takes a detour to carry the cups for me back to the car.

I get into the driver's seat without discussion, and he doesn't object. He heads back inside to go to the bathroom himself.

I try willing myself into calm and composure for the few minutes he's gone. When he returns, he gets into the passenger seat with an exaggerated shiver. "Freezing out there."

“I know.” The sleet looks worse than it was, but it’s still mostly a cold rain. There are plenty of cars still out on the road. It’s not dangerous conditions yet.

It simply makes me anxious. That’s a me problem, not a weather problem.

I put on my seat belt and take a deep breath. It comes out loud and shaky.

“You don’t have to drive if you don’t want,” Chase murmurs, reaching out to massage the back of my neck again.

“I can do it.”

“I know you can. I never questioned it for a minute. But you don’t *have* to do it. Why won’t you let me do this for you?”

I’m ridiculously emotional, and I have no idea why. “I... don’t like to feel like I can’t. I’ve always done things on my own. I’ve always taken care of myself.”

“I know you have. But you’re not alone right now. So maybe share some of it with me.”

My shoulders shake. I turn my head so he can’t see me contorting my face to keep from crying. I’m embarrassed by my irrational breakdown, but I can’t seem to help it.

“Baby, please.” He combs his fingers into my hair and strokes the base of my head.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” I choke on a little sob. “This is ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not. You’ve spent most of your life holding on tight. Making sure nothing slips out of your grip. It’s hard. When you let go. On purpose. It might be even harder than holding on.”

I turn back to face him, my face twisting as I see what looks like tenderness in his eyes. I nod jerkily, a few tears slipping out. “Can you... can you drive?”

Something happens to his face very briefly. It’s like it cracks for a few seconds. He makes a soft, ragged sound. “Yes, baby. I’m happy to drive.”

I let out a few more sobs as I get out of the car. He comes around and hugs me under the covering over the gas pumps.

I shake against him for a minute before I pull away, feeling better. A little embarrassed by my vulnerability but also much, much better. “Okay. I’m good. Thank you.”

He leans down to kiss me. “Thank you.”

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THE WEATHER GETS WORSE as we get into the mountains. By the time we’re on the outskirts of Asheville, there are winter weather advisories and a number of accidents. If we weren’t so close to our hotel, I’d have suggested we just stop, but we’ve almost made it at last.

This evening and next, we’re staying at a luxury mountain resort. It’s the most expensive of all the accommodations on the trip, and I’ve been really excited about it. Chase is doing well on the road, but I’m still tense and nervous on the last

stretch of the drive—the country road we take for several miles to reach the hotel.

It's almost three by the time we get there. We were supposed to stop at a few of the shops and crafters I'd lined up before we check in, but there's no way we're making any extra stops today.

It's a relief to pull up at the door and have the parking valet take the keys.

We're too early to get into our room, so they suggest we get a drink at the bar or hang out in the scenic lounge area. We find a cozy love seat near a fire with a great view of the winter mountain vista.

Chase puts his arm around me, and I can finally really relax.

I rub my cheek against his dark green crewneck. He smells like Chase. Soap and coffee and laundered clothes and a hint of an earthier fragrance. Natural but not strong enough to be unpleasant.

I like it. Breathe him in.

He brushes a few kisses into my hair. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I feel better now. Kind of silly for falling apart."

"There's no reason for you to feel silly. You're allowed to fall apart with me."

I adjust so I can peer up at his face. His eyes are soft and tender again. So incredibly warm. There's a slight hint of a smile on his mouth. "You don't mind?" I ask.

He leans down to kiss me. “To tell you the truth, I really like it. Not that you fall apart but that you trust me enough to not always hold it together around me.”

“Oh.” I snuggle down against him again. “I do. Trust you.”

“Good. I want you to.”

He tightens his arm briefly. Rubs my thigh.

After a few minutes, I say in a small voice, “I don’t think I’ve ever fully trusted anyone but you.”

He makes a throaty sound and tilts my face up so he can kiss me again. It was probably supposed to be another light, sweet peck, but I cling to his lips and the embrace turns deep.

Deep and urgent and hot.

His tongue slides into my mouth, and he holds my head with both his hands. I clutch at his shirt and try to rub my body against his. He’s making those hungry sounds into the kiss that he’s done before. It’s really the sexiest thing. Like he’s so into it—so overwhelmed—that he just can’t help himself.

After a few minutes, I’m hot and needy and inappropriately aroused for a public lounge. I can feel that Chase has gotten hard in his jeans, and one of his hands is holding my thigh possessively.

The sound of conversation from across the room finally distracts me from the hot haze. I turn my head to the side to break the kiss, and Chase moves his hand. We both sit back, flushed and panting.

I giggle when we slant each other sheepish looks.

“How about I go get us a drink?” I suggest, trying to summon the will to stand up and not crawl right into Chase’s lap.

“Good idea. Something cold please.” He clears his throat and shifts his hips. “Very cold.”

I laugh at that, and the amusement distracts me enough to heft myself to my feet. I go to the bar and get Chase a ginger ale and me a sparkling water.

About twenty minutes after I return, one of the front desk staff comes over and tells us our room is ready.

Finally.

It hasn’t really been that long. It’s not even four yet. But the day seems to have lasted forever, and I really want to get to our room.

Chase and I have some important things to do there.

••••

OUR ROOM IS GORGEOUS. Large and airy with floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall and rustic, minimalistic furnishings. I tip the bellman after he brings up our bags and shows us the features of the room.

Then he leaves with a friendly greeting, and Chase and I stand in the middle of the floor, staring at each other.

I’m not sure who moves first. Maybe it’s at the exact same time. One moment we’re standing about three feet apart, and the next we’re all over each other, kissing wildly and pressing

our bodies together, as if there's an irresistible magnetic force pulling us toward one another.

There are no gentle preliminaries. Almost immediately our tongues are tangling, and his hands are gripping my bottom, holding my pelvis tightly against his. I'm clutching his head with both hands, eventually sliding down to his neck and jaw. I'm so enthusiastic—almost aggressive—that I might have been worried had Chase not been in exactly the same condition.

He's devouring my mouth like a starving man, gripping my body as if he's never going to let it go.

The visceral need is heady. Intoxicating. It fills my head, my chest, the core of my being. Soon we're stumbling toward one of the beds. He lifts me up and deposits me unceremoniously sideways on the bed, my legs hanging over the edge.

I don't care about the awkward position because he's climbing over me and kissing me again. And the most important thing in the world right now is getting Chase as close to me as possible, pulling him all the way inside me.

I wrap one of my legs around the back of his thighs, and he starts making a few detours from my mouth to suck on my neck and tweak my earlobe between his teeth.

My entire body is pulsing now, centered between my legs. I try to grind myself against him. Try to ease the ache with clumsy friction.

My jeans become unpleasantly binding. I reach down to unfasten them, lifting my hips in the hopes of getting them off.

Chase is distracted by kissing me at first, but eventually he realizes what I'm doing. Lifting up, he makes short work of his own clothes, taking off everything except his white boxer briefs, while I manage to peel off my jeans.

He's done before I am, so he helps yank off my sweater. He stares down at my red bra, flushed and visibly mesmerized.

I giggle, too turned on to be self-conscious. While he watches, I reach behind me to undo the hooks and pull the fabric away from my skin.

He makes a throaty noise as my bare breasts jiggle slightly from the motion.

Then he's suddenly on me again, kissing me deeply and then mouthing his way down to my breasts to tease and play. It feels so good I whimper and gasp. When he takes one nipple between his lips and sucks hard, I let out an embarrassing yip.

He chuckles and lifts his head to meet my gaze.

"You surprised me," I tell him, reaching for some semblance of defiance, despite my physical condition.

"Uh-huh. Maybe I can do it again."

"If you do it again, I won't be sur-PRISED!" The second half of the word turns into another yelp when he sucks hard on my other nipple.

He laughs again as he kisses his way down to my belly. He tucks his fingers into the sides of my panties and pulls them

down my legs. I lift my feet one by one to help him get them all the way off.

His eyes move hungrily up and down my naked body.

“Well?” I demand when all he does is stare. I sound a little bossier than I intend.

He chokes on another laugh at my tone. “You’re absolutely gorgeous. I’ve never seen anyone I want more. You must already know that.”

I do know that. I can see it on his face. I’ve never in my life dreamed any man would look at me that way. Like I’m the answer to every one of his daydreams. The knowledge fills a hole inside me I never even knew was empty.

I reach for his boxers, wanting to get rid of them. He’s visibly hard, so I do make an attempt to be careful pulling them down over his erection.

He helps, so soon he’s as naked as I am. I leer at his penis. He’s a good size. Not unusually large but firm and substantial. I reach out to stroke up and down the length of him with my fingers.

He groans helplessly, closing his eyes. Then pops them open again and says, “Condom.”

“Oh. Yeah. We better use one.” I pause. “Do you have one?”

“Yeah.” He groans again—with effort this time—and climbs off the bed to limp over to his bag.

I snicker when he unzips a small pocket and pulls out a few condom packets. “Came prepared, did you?”

“No, I didn’t.” His mouth twitches as he returns to the bed. “I never dreamed I’d get so lucky. But I made a quick stop a couple of days ago.”

We’re both laughing softly as he rips open the packet, rolls on the condom, and then climbs back onto the bed.

I open my thighs to make room for him between them.

He feels between my legs, muttering, “Shit, you’re really wet.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve been waiting for this for a long time now.”

He leans over. Kisses me softly. “Not anywhere close to as long as I’ve been waiting. You ready now?”

“Yeah. I’m ready. I want you so much, Chase. I hope you know that too.”

“I do know.” His eyes are hot and soft. “You have no idea how much it means to me.”

“Maybe I do.” I pull him down into another kiss. As our mouths move against each other, he uses one of his hands to line up his erection at my entrance. I moan into his mouth as he slowly pushes in. Pulls out and pushes in again, this time going deeper.

Chase jerks his head to the side, gasping and holding himself still.

“You okay?” I ask softly.

“Yeah.” He turns back with a wry smile. “Not losing it, if that’s what you were thinking.”

“That is what I was thinking.”

“Well, you were wrong. I’m a man of iron control, you know.”

With a giggle, I pull his head down so I can press my lips against his. “Silly. I don’t want some inhuman with iron control. I only want you.”

He makes another one of those helpless sounds in his throat, ducking his face briefly into the crook of my neck. Then he lifts up, withdraws, and slides into me all the way.

We both gasp and shift against each other until we’re used to the penetration. I feel tight, full, but not uncomfortably so. I’m stretched enough for the slight ache to be good. Bending my knees, I lift my legs higher around his hips.

He begins to thrust, slowly at first, but his controlled rhythm doesn’t last long. His face is already twisting, as if it all feels too good for him to contain. I know exactly how he feels. I pump my hips up to meet his thrusts, and when his speed accelerates, so does mine.

Soon he’s pushing into me hard and fast, and I’m moving so eagerly beneath him that I can’t help making breathless little whimpers of effort.

We’re really going at it—shaking the mattress and slapping our bodies together—when he suddenly stops with a stretched groan.

“What is it?” I lift my hands to cup his face since I’m suddenly worried about him.

“I’m just about to lose it. And you’re not there yet.”

“I don’t care about that. You don’t have to hold back. We can go again. I can come afterward. Nothing has ever felt better than this does. Being with you like this. Chase, please let go.”

His mouth twists. “You sure, baby?”

“Yes. I’m sure. Please!” I stroke his face, his neck. Then I start rocking my hips until he’s thrusting again.

It doesn’t take long to build back momentum. Our motion is urgent. Fast. Primitive. We’re both grunting like animals.

I told him the truth. Every part of me feels good, including my heart. I’ve never been with anyone so nakedly. So intimately. So completely.

Arousal is throbbing powerfully between my legs, intensified by the hard friction of him thrusting inside me. But an orgasm isn’t nearly as important to me as what we’re sharing right now.

His grunts get louder and louder until his whole body clenches up like a fist.

“Please come, Chase. I want you to.”

He does. He comes—hard and loud and uninhibitedly. I watch it on his face. Feel it on his body. It’s breathtaking. I’m almost crying with the swell of emotion as his shaking

subsides into a few twitches and a long, shameless moan of release.

When he lifts his head to meet my eyes, we both smile. Then I giggle as he carefully pulls out, holding on to the condom and then getting up to throw it out in the bathroom.

He comes out in a minute with his face damp, like he splashed water on it.

He approaches the bed in a playful stalk, grabbing me and swinging me over so I'm now lying in the right direction on the bed before he climbs over me again.

We kiss for a while before he starts moving down my body, stroking and teasing and building up my arousal again. Since I was already turned on to begin with, it doesn't take long for him to make me come with his fingers while he suckles one of my breasts. He doesn't stop with that. He continues kissing his way down my body until his head is between my legs.

I make a lot of embarrassing sounds as he tongues me eagerly, eventually sucking on my clit until I have to grab onto the headboard and bite back my loud cries of pleasure as I come a second time.

He looks up and gives me an adorably pleased grin—as if he can't believe this whole thing is happening.

The truth is, neither can I. Only two weeks ago, other than a few stray thoughts, I'd never considered Chase as anything except a friend, an easygoing fixture in my life. But now that

it's happening, I can't even imagine anything different—how he wasn't all of this to me all this time.

“Do you feel like you've been transported to a hot daydream?” I ask him, wanting to put into words that mood between us right now.

He shakes his head. Combs his fingers through his wildly messy hair. “No. Honestly, it's more than that.” He drops his eyes and then quickly meets mine again. “You've always been way more than a hot daydream to me.”

My throat tightens. My face tightens. My chest tightens with a heart that's suddenly way too full, too big. “Me too, Chase. Me too.”

He nods in response. Wipes his mouth, which is still kind of damp from my arousal, with the back of his wrist in a hotly carnal move. Then crawls up my body so he can kiss me.

This kiss is slow and deep and purposeful. Almost leisurely. I wrap both arms and a leg around him. It feels so good I can't help slowly rocking beneath him like a gentle wave. The desperate urgency has been answered, but I still want him every bit as much as before.

I'm not sure I'll ever get enough.

We kiss and stroke each other and learn each other's bodies for a long time. All of it feels good. Known and deep and *needed*. Chase slowly grows hard again against me, and an ache of arousal gradually clenches below my belly. When the lust is finally too distracting, I gently push him over onto his back and move over him.

Straddling his middle, I smile down, my hair falling on both sides of my face.

“Oh fuck,” he mutters with a catch in his throat. “You’re sexy as hell up there, baby.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He raises his hands to cup my breasts, which are a good size but could never—even on their best days—be described as perky. “Have you decided to supervise matters for a while?”

I choke on a surprised giggle. “Yes. That’s exactly right. You know me. I like to make things happen.”

“Yes, you do.” His voice and his eyes are very fond.

“And the only thing on my agenda for the next little while is *you*.” I adjust my position so I can kiss him on the mouth. Then trail my lips down his jaw, his throat, his chest, his belly.

I lift his heavy erection upward. Lick a line up the underside.

He jerks and gasps.

I do it again, and he fumbles with the bedding, letting out a long, thick groan.

I wrap my lips around the head and give it a little suck.

He jerks again, so dramatically that it startles me, and I pop my head up to check his expression.

“Sorry,” he says dryly. “Felt too good.”

“I thought I hurt you!” I’m still half giggling. I wonder if I should try to stop laughing and be sexy and serious, but I’m not sure I’m capable of fully stifling the warm joy that’s rippling out of me.

“You definitely didn’t hurt me. But I’m still kind of iffy on control at the moment, so you might be careful down there if you want us to do more this go-around.”

My body shakes with amusement. I make a few gaspy sounds as I try to restrain it. The last thing I want is for him to think I’m mocking anything about him.

“You can laugh, baby,” he says. “I know you’re not laughing at me.”

“I promise I’m not. I’m just so... giddy. I can’t seem to help it.”

He pulls me farther up his body so he can hug me. “I know exactly how you feel.” He kisses my hair. Then my cheek. Then my mouth. “Honestly, I’m kind of giddy myself.”

He is. I can see it in his eyes even if he’s not giggling the way I am. “Okay. You’re trying to distract me from my agenda by all that sweetness, but I’m not one to be swayed from my purpose.”

“No, you’re not.”

I lean over to grab one of the three remaining condom packets from the nightstand, rip it open, and lift his erection so I can roll the condom on. Then I straddle him again, lining myself up as he holds himself in place with one hand.

I lower myself over him, sheathing the length of him with my body. I'm still very wet. Relaxed and eager and clingy. The penetration stretches me again—deliciously.

“That’s my girl,” he mutters, his eyes running ravenously from my flushed face to my bare breasts to the place where we’re joined. “Look at you. You’re the hottest thing ever.”

“Yeah?” I’m already breathless because it feels so good. I start to ride him, shifting my angle until I find the one that feels best.

“Oh yeah. Fucking yeah. Oh fuck, that’s so good. You’re so fucking good.”

I giggle at his enthusiastic reply. He normally doesn’t say *fuck* quite so much, but I love that he can’t seem to help it at the moment.

His warm responsiveness encourages me. Spurs me on. Soon I’m bouncing on him fast and shameless, bracing myself on his shoulders and chasing a building orgasm.

He loves it. He’s bucking his hips up to intensify our motion, muttering out how hot I am, how good I’m doing, how I should keep going until I take everything I want. His hands grip my hips to hold me in place so he doesn’t slip out.

My breasts are jiggling, and my hair is flying into my face. My cheeks are hot, and my entire body is throbbing with exertion and excitement.

When I’m close, I lean backward, grabbing for his thighs behind me and arching my spine. I make a silly sobbing sound when the pleasure finally breaks.

I shudder over him as I climax. Then I feel his fingers between my thighs, fingering me until he finds my clit. He rubs it with firm, circular pressure until another orgasm rises on the heels of the first.

I'm way too loud for a hotel as I come the second time. I don't think I've ever been so uninhibited in my life, and for some reason my lack of control intensifies the pleasure. I'm whimpering and sniffing as I keep moving over him. He rubs me off until the contractions have finally worked their way through me.

Then I collapse forward on top of him. His erection slips out of me in the shift of position. There's a lot of moisture, and since he's wearing a condom, it must all be from me.

I hear myself giggling again as I hide my face against his shoulder.

He strokes my hair and then my bottom. "Baby, you did so good."

His soft voice encourages me enough to lift my head. "You did pretty good too."

"I did manage not to lose it, so I'm pretty proud of myself."

I realize he's telling the truth. He didn't come when I did.

I roll off him. He's still hard. "Oh wow. I'm kind of proud of you too."

We both laugh as he checks the condom. When he decides it might be wise to put on a new one, given our athletic

performance, I'm not sure whether I should be embarrassed or pleased.

Pleased, I conclude, if the look on his face is any indication.

“That’s what happens when you have sex with a go-getter like me,” I tell him.

He chokes on a laugh. “Let me tell you, you can go get me anytime you want.”

“Good to know.”

When he’s rolled another condom on, he turns me over onto my back and moves over me again. As we kiss, we’re both still kind of laughing. I’m not sure why that makes the whole thing better—hotter—but it does.

We kiss for a minute. Then he pulls my thighs apart to make room for him there. He bends one of my legs up and slides himself back inside me. He starts to thrust slow and deep and steady.

I pull him back down into a kiss. His tongue moves to the same rhythm as his hips. I stroke his shoulders, his back, his ass, his thighs. I want to feel him everywhere.

Eventually his urgency takes over, speeding up our rhythm. I don’t actually expect to come again after the intensity of my orgasms before, but a climax takes me off guard as his pushes get harder and faster.

I gasp against his mouth as my channel tightens around him. He grunts and pulls out of the kiss as he takes me harder.

It's intensely intimate. I'm feeling so much I'm afraid my head and chest might explode with it. I'm almost crying when he comes at last, gasping about how much he needs me, how I'm everything to him.

He's everything to me too.

I just didn't know it until now.

His climax wipes him out. He lets his full weight drop on me for a minute. He's big and heavy and relaxed and limp, and it feels like I'm holding him together as I caress him, tell him how good it was, how much I need him.

When it feels like the condom might start leaking, he finds the energy to roll off me. He collapses beside me, holding on to the condom as if he still can't quite make himself move.

Since I'm in better shape than he is, I take care of the condom this time, limping to the bathroom to throw it out, wash up, and pee.

When I return, he's smiling at me from the bed.

I can't help but smile back.

He stretches a hand out, and I take it. Let him pull me back into the bed. This time he simply fits me beside him, wrapping me in his arms.

Being with him like that—needy and needed both—is exactly what I want.

EIGHT

CHASE: *This afternoon was amazing. You're amazing.*

Paige: *LOL you're texting??? You're supposed to be in the shower, and you could just open the door and tell me!*

Chase: *I know. Just wanted to get it in writing.*

Paige: *Ok, then for the record, you're amazing too! Don't be surprised if I'm asleep when you get out. It's been a really long day.*

Chase: *I know. Go to sleep. We can be amazing again tomorrow.*

••••

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up around seven. Go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, get a cup of coffee from the single-cup brewer in the room, and then climb back in bed to check email and scroll on my phone.

Chase is still asleep. Last night, we went down to the restaurant here for dinner, and it was late when we came back up. I wasn't exaggerating when I told Chase over text I might be asleep when he got out of the shower.

Yesterday felt like several months long, but it was also one of the best days of my life.

I occasionally glance over toward Chase sleeping beside me. He's on his side, facing away from me. The covers are pushed down toward his waist, so I get a good view of his naked back, his tangled hair, the top of the Christmas pajama pants he's wearing, sliding low on his hips.

Honestly, I'd be perfectly happy to have him wake up beside me for the rest of my life.

Probably too extreme a conclusion for this early in a relationship. But it doesn't feel early. We've had a fully formed relationship for years—until this one final piece got snapped into place, completing the picture.

There are no more doubts for me. No debilitating fears. Chase always told me a relationship would feel different if it were with the right person. I would be secure. I'd know exactly how he feels about me.

And he was right. I do.

Maybe I'm finally allowed to jump in headfirst—be all of me without worrying that I'm too much.

I'm filled with bubbling giddiness as I try to focus on an email from one of my vendors about their page on my site. I'm not sure if I give it proper attention, but I do manage to compose a coherent response.

Eventually Chase shifts position beside me. His legs twitch. He stretches one of his arms out. Then he rolls over onto his back and blinks up at the ceiling a few times.

“Good morning!” I announce with intentionally obnoxious cheerfulness.

He mumbles grumpily, not forming any clear words.

I laugh and roll over so I'm facing in his direction.

“I smell coffee,” he mutters after a minute.

“I made some for myself.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You want me to make you some?”

“I can do it.” He groans and stretches his back.

“I don’t mind. I have lots of energy this morning.”

His eyes are more fully open now, focused on my face.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” I put my phone on the nightstand and climb out of bed, walking barefoot over to the coffee maker to get his cup started.

As I work, he must find energy to get out of bed too because he slouches toward the bathroom. I hear the toilet flush. The water running. When he comes out, his coffee is ready, so I hand it to him.

He leans over to kiss me briefly. Very sweet. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You’re not going to do something silly like run this morning, are you?”

“No. Way too cold and damp for that. I’m going to get back into bed and drink this coffee.”

“Sounds perfect to me. I still have half my cup left.”

We do exactly as we say, climbing under the covers, drinking our coffee, and catching up with the world on our phones.

When I’ve cleared all my notifications and updated myself on all the news I care about, I set down my phone and coffee cup and turn toward Chase.

He glances over, his eyes warm but his lips sober. “Yes?”

“Nothing. Just looking at you.”

“Why?”

“Because I like the looks of you. Why do you think?”

“Do you?” He takes one last swallow of coffee before he sets down his cup.

“Yes. Of course I do.”

“You never really noticed before.” He doesn’t sound remotely resentful or impatient. More faintly curious than anything else.

“Yes, I did. More often than I was comfortable with. I just never let any of those thoughts take root in my mind.”

“Why not?” He scoots down farther under the covers, positioned on his side the way I am so we’re facing each other.

“I don’t really know, to tell you the truth. Just it seemed safer and more orderly to keep everything in its proper category. And you were in the friend category. I couldn’t let anything shake that. It might throw my whole world into disarray.”

“Why would it mess up your whole world?”

“Because you’re foundational. What would happen if I lose part of the foundation?”

His expression changes as he processes what I say. It goes from thoughtful to understanding to something very soft and tender. “I see. That doesn’t sound too bad then.”

“It’s not bad at all!”

“I always figured I just didn’t do it for you,” he says, mild and light.

I reach over and cup his jaw with my palm. “You definitely do it for me, Chase. To tell you the truth, I’m not sure I ever really knew what *doing it for me* felt like until you.”

His mouth twitches. “Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Okay then.” He shifts onto his back and pulls me over on top of him, sliding one hand behind my head to get me close enough to kiss. “Maybe we can do it for each other some more.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan to me.” I adjust so I’m more comfortable since I’m sprawled out on top of his body. Then I kiss him again.

He tastes like coffee and toothpaste. His body is warm and firm—with hard edges and varying textures and a relaxed strength that is incredibly appealing. He moves his hands up and down my body as we kiss slow and deep—from my head to my back to my bottom to the back of my thighs and then back up again.

Every part of my body feels good, and my heart is both thrilled and at peace. Like I’m flying and safe at home simultaneously. I never knew it could feel like this. Never dreamed I was capable of holding both inside me at the same time.

He gets hard almost immediately. I can feel him growing against my belly, and it evokes a kind of possessiveness in me. Like that part of him is mine. Mine alone. All of him is mine.

His erection clearly isn't pushing him into impatience. His motion is leisurely and thorough. Everything between us feels soft and deep and real and good. When he's caressed my body so much arousal is pulsing demandingly between my legs, he slides his hand down one of my ass cheeks until he's reached the place I'm hot and wet.

He penetrates me with two fingers.

I gasp and twitch on top of him at the sharp slice of pleasure.

"You like that?" he asks soft and thick.

"Of course I like that." I pump my hips a few times, eager and shameless.

"Don't force it, baby. Try to relax into it." His husky voice is a tender caress, as intoxicating as the sensations from his hands.

"I can't relax. I need to come." I make silly whimpering sounds as I try to ride his fingers.

"Shh. I'm going to make you come. Let me do this for you."

My channel clamps down around his fingers excitedly—from nothing more than his sexy words. With a silly sobbing sound, I make myself relax.

“That’s right. You can do it, baby. Let me do this for you. You don’t always have to make it happen.”

It’s harder than I expect to soften my body on his, but something about the act of surrender thrusts my libido into overdrive. I’m ridiculously wet, my entire body pulsing with need. And the more I resist the urge to move, the hotter it all becomes.

He strokes my bottom with his free hand, sliding it down to caress my thigh. He pulls his fingers out of my channel and pushes them in even farther, holding them perfectly still like he did before.

It’s agonizingly good. I pant against his shoulder, my arms stretched out on either side of him, gripping the bedding as the only outlet for my urgency.

“You’re doing so good. You’re gonna come so hard because you wait for it.”

“I need it so bad.” I’m fluttering around the penetration of his fingers now, not coming but so, so close. “I need it, Chase.”

He pumps his fingers a couple of times, curling them to feel my inner walls until I let out a sharp cry when he finds my g-spot.

It takes every ounce of my control not to ride his hand.

He pushes hard with his fingers. “There it is. You’re so good. Just a little longer. Let me do this for you. I’m gonna make you feel so good.”

I'm sobbing for real now, as the pleasure builds up to an unbearable peak. Then I bite down on his shoulder as the sensations explode. My whole body shakes wildly as the pleasure radiates out all through me, all the way to my fingers and toes.

He talks me through it, murmuring about how I've done so good, how hard I'm coming, how he always wants me to feel this good.

I'm limp and exhausted and buzzing with lingering pleasure when the contractions finally fade. His fingers are still inside me. I've soaked his hand. I can feel the moisture leaking out to my inner thighs.

"How do you feel, baby?" he asks after I've finally stopped whimpering.

"So good. So, so good." I've drooled all over his shoulder. I kiss the spot I bit. "I didn't know I was capable of feeling so good. So... satisfied. Thank you."

His moves his hand from between my legs. Rolls me over so I'm on my back and he's on top of me. "You don't have to thank me. That might have been the hottest thing I've ever experienced in my life."

I giggle tiredly and reach up to cup his face. "Well, now it's your turn. How do you want it?"

"Like this is perfect." He fumbles over toward the nightstand where there's one more condom packet. He straightens up so I can quickly roll it on. Then he settles between my legs again.

He helps me fold my legs tightly, lifting them around his hips as he slowly eases his erection inside me. We both groan at the penetration. Then he starts to thrust, slow and deep and rhythmic.

He fucks me for a long time, the whole time focused down on me. I'm shocked when I feel another orgasm rising inside me, but like before I don't push it. I let it come slowly, and I breathe around the rising tension.

He's too far gone to talk much now, but I know he's completely with me. He gazes down like I'm everything, the whole of his existence. Eventually his hips accelerate, his motion intensifies. He's shaking my body now, and the slow-building orgasm breaks in waves of deep pleasure, making me cry out raggedly and arch up my back.

As I clamp down around him, he freezes for a moment and then falls into climax too with a series of hard, jerky thrusts. His lasts a long time, and he doesn't stifle it or hold back.

Nothing has ever been better than watching him come like that, knowing it's because of me that he's able to let go, feel something so deep and real.

He collapses on top of me afterward, and I wrap him in my arms. He gasps against the crook of my neck, completely spent.

He's softening and the condom is loosening when he finally pulls it together, rolling off and taking care of the condom.

We lie together afterward. I reach for his hand, and he holds mine even as he's trying to pull himself together.

The clasp of his hand tells me everything I need to know.

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AFTER OUR MORNING IN bed, the rest of the day is busy and enjoyable. We spend the middle part of the day hitting as many of the places we were supposed to do yesterday as we can, and then we head to Biltmore by midafternoon and stay for the holiday festivities in the evening.

Since we're both tired by the time we return to the hotel, we have some quick, satisfying missionary sex under the covers before we go to sleep.

The next morning, we sleep in, have a late breakfast, and head home.

It's Christmas Eve day. The last day of our road trip. And we've planned to get back to Green Valley by early afternoon so we can have time to rest before spending the evening with our families.

I'm in a good mood as we start off. Chase is driving, we've got peppermint mochas, and I turn on Christmas music for the ride. Everything should be perfect, but as the miles go by and the closer we get to home, the mood between us shifts.

I have no idea why or how it happens.

It's coming from Chase. That much I'm sure of. There's nothing visibly wrong with him. His posture is relaxed. His attention is on his driving, but he listens and responds to

anything I say. But as the time passes, he gets quieter. More inward.

Like he's tense and pretending not to be.

I thought everything was good between us. Me, I've never been happier. But something is wrong with Chase, and my occasional attempts to ask are answered with vague, unconvincing assurances.

He says he's fine. He says nothing is wrong. He says everything is great between us.

But it doesn't feel that way anymore. I was absolutely secure yesterday. I felt safe and loved and needed.

I felt like all of me was wanted, and I didn't have to hold back.

I don't feel that way anymore. It feels like everything I want is about to slip through my fingers, so I'm left clutching at threads again, trying desperately to hold my world together.

We're about a half hour from Green Valley when I try one more time. "You sure everything is okay?"

He turns his head, his forehead drawn into those four horizontal lines. "Yes. Of course. Why?"

"I don't know. You just seem kind of quiet." I swallow hard. "I'm probably imagining things."

He gives a slight shrug and a half smile that doesn't fully reach his eyes. "It's fine, Paige. I'm kind of tired."

"Oh. Yeah. Me too."

He says he's fine. He must be fine. He's never lied to me.

Naturally he's tired. I'm tired too. Exhausted really. But I've been too happy to care.

Now the fatigue starts to wear on me, intensified by the weight of growing anxiety.

It's not unusual. I've always felt kind of stressed when I've gotten invested in a romantic relationship—scared and hopeful at the same time. Shaky. But I didn't think I was going to have to feel that way with Chase.

When we've reached the outskirts of town, my nerves have gotten worked up to an intolerable state. I have to say something.

“So.” I clear my throat. “Should we... should we talk?”

He glances over again. “Talk about what?”

Shit. He usually makes things easy for me. Predicts what I'm going to say. What's gotten into him today? “About us. We've never really... sorted things out.”

His eyebrows lift slightly. “We haven't?”

“No. I mean, not all the way. We're together now, right? So what is that... What is it going to look like?”

The muscle in his jaw ripples as he slows the car down because the speed limit has lowered. “What do you want it to look like?”

My hands are almost shaking. There's no way in the world I should be so nervous right now. It's probably just my normal issues—my need for all questions to be answered—rather than

what I'm imagining is suddenly wrong between us. Absolutely nothing has happened to mess things up since yesterday.

I must be making it up, so I fight through the fear.

"I... I don't want to be the only one deciding that. I've gotten really nervous, and I don't know why. Maybe it's just getting back home, back to real life. I was hoping we could... we could talk it out."

"I guess it's natural for things to feel different once we're home." He darts me a couple of quick looks but is mostly looking at the road in front of him. "We don't have to tell anyone yet. Just take things slow. If that will help."

I'm almost strangling on a lump in my throat now. His suggestion isn't at all what I want. I've been looking forward to telling all our friends, being a couple with Chase now. Openly.

I'm doing my best to hold it together, but he must see something on my face. "If that doesn't sound good, we can do something else. What will make you less nervous, Paige?"

It's almost worse—his kind question and soft tone. He's always done that. Seen the truth I'm trying to hide and gently pulled it out of me.

But I don't want our relationship to be only him taking care of me. I want to take care of him too. I want to give him what he wants and needs even if that means we have to slow down.

We've only been together a couple of days. Dreaming of passionate declarations of eternal love is utterly ridiculous.

Immature. A girlish fantasy.

This is a real relationship in the real world, and his needs are as important as mine. I'm not going to make him feel bad for wanting to take it slower.

"No," I say at last. "That will be fine. It's probably a good idea. Things happened pretty fast, so it's smart to take it step by step. We don't need the pressure of everyone knowing yet. We can keep it quiet and see how things go."

He nods. "Okay."

I wish I didn't know him as well as I do.

I wish I couldn't see that, beneath the purposeful mildness on his face, he's relieved that I've agreed.

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SINCE WE'RE IN MY CAR, he drives to his grandmother's house. I plead tiredness so I don't have to spend too long greeting his grandmother and saying goodbye.

The trip was so good. Without doubt the best ten days of my life. But now it has petered out at the very end, and I still don't quite understand why.

But I do know I'm not going to last very long before I simply break down into tears. I have to get away—get back to my place where I can be alone—so I can finally let go of my composure.

I make it to my house, text my family and friends to let them know I'm back in town, and then haul my luggage out to

unpack and start laundry. I always do that immediately on returning from a trip.

I hate the sight of a bag that hasn't been unpacked.

I cry a little bit as I work, and then I collapse on the couch to wait to move my first load of laundry into the dryer.

My house is the same as it's always been. Neat and comfortable and pleasantly decorated without a lot of clutter.

But it feels different than it did before the trip.

I feel different.

Everything has changed, and I thought the changes were good.

But maybe they weren't.

I manage to talk myself out of despair and check in with Chase over text to see how things are going with him. He says his grandmother is wanting to hear the entire narrative of the trip even though he kept her updated with regular phone calls. And he says I'll be proud of him because he's already unpacked his bag.

I tell him good job, and I feel better when I put down my phone.

He's fine. We're fine. I've been making up problems because of my own need to control every step of a relationship. I need to do better.

I'm not going to sabotage what we have with my own insecurities.

My parents want me to go over for an early dinner before the church service we always attend, and my mom asks me to stop by the store to pick up whipping cream and vanilla ice cream since she forgot them. I tell her I'll grab them before I head over, and then I make sure I leave my house by four thirty since the closest grocery store is closing at five today because it's Christmas Eve.

In the checkout line at the grocery store, someone calls out a greeting. It's Dan, who's hurrying up behind me with a loaf of fresh bread and a big bag of stuffing mix.

"Picking up forgotten essentials too, I see," he says with a grin.

I tell him I am, and he asks me about the road trip. He wants to know all the best things we saw, and I chat with him happily as we buy our items and then walk out of the store.

He's standing near my car, a grocery bag hooked over his forearm, his brown hair gleaming in the orangey light of the lowering sun, when he says in an almost confidential tone, "So did Park finally make a move on you?"

I blink up at him, utterly surprised. Wordless.

He chuckles. "Does that mean yes?"

"That means it's none of your business," I manage to reply in an appropriately cool tone.

"All right. I'll shut up. But I hope he did. The poor guy's been gone on you forever." He gives me a friendly half hug and strides toward his car.

My heart is galloping now with jittery excitement. If even Dan noticed Chase has had feelings for me in the past, then surely those feelings are real.

He's not going to want to put too many brakes on—not if he's really that into me.

It certainly felt like he was into me.

Surely I wasn't so completely wrong about it.

I watch Dan, lost in my own thoughts, until he reaches his car and waves again. I wave back and start to open my driver's side door. As I do, I notice another car has pulled into the parking lot. It's a familiar fifty-year-old pickup truck that used to belong to Chase's grandfather. Chase himself has gotten out and is standing beside it, staring at me.

I blink, surprised by his sudden presence. But then I smile and wave at him, thrilled to see him so unexpectedly.

He waves back. Doesn't smile. Gestures toward his watch and then turns away. "Sorry. I've got to get in there before it closes," he calls out, already striding toward the doors to the store. "I'll see you at the Christmas Eve service."

It feels like I've been punched in the gut.

Like he's rejected me.

But even that reaction is ridiculous. There are only a few minutes left before five o'clock. Of course he needs to rush in so he can get what he wants.

It's not a personal insult. It's not about the state of our relationship. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't think a

thing about it, but at the moment, I'm shaking again, almost in tears.

Because as much as I try to rationalize it away, I know—I know—that something is wrong, something is different.

I'm too terrified to stick around and ask Chase about it when he gets out of the store, so I get in my car and drive over to my parents' house.

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EVERY YEAR SINCE I was born, my family—me, my mom, and my dad—have attended the candlelight service at eight o'clock on Christmas Eve. They'd probably understand if I wanted to skip or do something different, but it feels like a fundamental part of the holiday to me, so I never suggest a change.

My parents are both workaholics who are highly driven by career, so we've never hung out as much as other families I've known, but they love me and do their best to be a part of my life. They ask me all about my trip over dinner, and then we get to the church a half hour early so we can claim their favorite pew in the back.

We chat with folks we know as they come in. Chase and his grandmother usually come, and he indicated at the grocery store they'd be here, so I watch for them.

They finally arrive a few minutes before eight. The only empty rows are near the front, so that's where they go. His grandmother is smiling as she always is. Chase isn't. He glances around once until he catches my eye.

I smile. He nods to acknowledge it but doesn't smile back.

He's too far away for me to see if he's smiling with his eyes the way he sometimes does, but I don't really think he is.

The clench in my gut gets tighter, heavier. Sinks even lower.

I force myself to focus on the service, but my mind keeps drifting to everything I want to say to Chase when I see him.

I'm determined not to mess this thing up because of my normal issues. So I'm going to be honest with him even if it's hard. I can't live with this tension much longer. I need to know what's going on with him, even if it's bad.

When the service ends, my parents and I are the first ones out the door. They like to hurry to the car to get out of there before the parking lot is swarmed, so I tell them I'm going to get a ride back with a friend so they can head home.

I'm planning to sleep at my own house anyway and go back over to my parents' first thing in the morning.

I find Chase's truck in the parking lot and wait near it as the church empties. So many cheerfully chatting adults and happy, running kids. It's Christmas. I should be happy too.

I still have no clear idea why I'm not.

But I can't live in this limbo. I've accepted less than what's best for me too often in relationships, assuming that's what they're supposed to feel like. They're not. I'm supposed to be happy and secure, like I've always been with Chase in the past.

I'm not going to accept any less.

Chase and his grandmother finally appear, talking with an older couple I know by sight but not by name. His grandmother is chatting and smiling. Chase isn't. He looks withdrawn. Unusually subdued.

He sees me waiting by the truck, leans down to say something to his grandmother, and then comes over to where I'm standing.

"Hey," he says, dropping his eyes and then lifting them in a quick glance at my face.

"Hey." I clear my throat, so nervous I can barely get the words out. "Can we talk?"

His mouth twists. He takes a weird breath. "Sure. You want to ride back with us, and then I'll walk you home?"

"That would be great. Thanks." The few minutes it will take to drive home with his grandmother feel like an eternity, so I blurt out, "Are we... are we okay?"

He gives me another quick glance. It's odd. Almost needy. Not like him at all. "I... don't know."

So that answer doesn't help at all.

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CHASE'S GRANDMOTHER is delighted to see me. I get in between them on the bench seat of the pickup, and she sustains a lively conversation about the service and our plans for Christmas and how glad she is we had a wonderful trip.

I do my best to respond appropriately, but I'm intensely relieved when we reach her house. We all get out. His grandmother goes to the door to let herself in while Chase and I start walking toward my place.

It's just a few blocks away.

The silence is heavy between us. Filled with a bleak kind of tension.

After a few minutes, I make myself say something. "I thought... I thought things were good between us."

"I know," he says hoarsely. "They were."

"So what happened? Why are we like this now? I don't..." I choke on a little sob. "I don't understand what happened."

"I know. It's my fault. It's all my fault."

"At least tell me what it is," I plead. A tear is already slipping down my cheek. "You can't just yank the rug out from under me like this without explaining why."

He opens his mouth. Makes a weird choked sound. Stares at the sidewalk we're walking on as he grits out, "I think we moved too fast."

That's what I've suspected but didn't want to acknowledge. What I've been so afraid of.

Ironically, it's exactly what Brian told me.

I force men into the place I want them in my life. Over and over again. Apparently I did it to Chase too.

"I'm sorry." There's a sob in my throat. No way I can hide it. "You said a few days ago you thought we should take it

slow. I should have... listened. I didn't mean to push it."

"You didn't push it. It's all my fault. I thought I could do this, but I..." His whole face twists, like he's fighting overwhelming emotion. "But I can't."

I'm walking, breathing, holding myself upright—all by the force of my will. What I really need to do is collapse onto the sidewalk in helpless tears and beg him not to do this to me.

But I'm an adult. And these things happen. Sometimes we fool ourselves that relationships are the real thing. When they're not.

When they're *not*.

I've done it before. Why am I surprised that I've done it again?

"I'm so sorry, Paige," he goes on. "It's my fault. Not yours. I never should have done this to you. I thought... I let myself..."

He's having trouble finishing, but it's just as well. Because there's no way I can hear more of what he's going to tell me.

Not and hold myself together. "It's okay," I mumble. We've reached my house, and the sight of my front door is a relief, an escape route. "I get it. I really do. It's my fault as much as yours. We can talk later if you want. I'm going to..." I gesture toward my house with a trembling hand.

"Okay," he rasps. It looks like he's going to reach out to touch me, but there's no way I can let that happen.

I sidestep to put some distance between us.

Then I turn around and run away until I've reached the safety of my house, where I can finally fall apart.

PAIGE: *It's probably best we both have some space, but I've got a Christmas present for you. I still want you to have it. I'll drop it by your house sometime today. I'll just leave it on the porch so it's not awkward.*

Chase: *Ok. Are you ok?*

Paige: *Not really but I'll get better. What about you?*

Chase: *Same.*

Chase: *I'm really sorry.*

Paige: *I know. Please don't say that again.*

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CHRISTMAS DAY DAWNS crisp and sunny, all the clouds from the days before blown away.

It might as well be mocking me.

I cried most of the night and wake up heavy and exhausted with aching eyes and a weight in my chest that I'm not sure will ever go away.

And the worst thing is I can't go over to a friend's house and pour out all my woes. It's Christmas. Everyone is busy with festivities. I'd never ruin my friends' holidays with my broken heart.

I'll probably eventually tell a few of them even if Chase and I agreed to keep our relationship private. It's over now, and that's because of him. He can't dictate how I get through it.

Not that I think he would. He's never been selfish or controlling. He's always recognized and cared about how I'm feeling.

I still don't fully understand why he didn't want me after all, when he acted so much like he did.

Maybe I never will understand.

Hearing the full explanation would likely take its toll on my confidence and self-image. The *no* is enough. I don't have to know exactly why.

I go to my parents' as always in the morning for a big breakfast and our presents. We don't eat our Christmas dinner until around four, so after presents there's a lull before we start cooking.

My dad takes a nap in his recliner. My mom turns on an old holiday movie and picks up her knitting.

I decide to go for a walk.

First I head for my own house, which is just a mile and a half away. I can get Chase's present and drop it off on his porch. That way it will be done and no longer hanging over me.

Then I can try to move on.

How is it possibly going to work? How am I going to go to the coffee shop every day and see him there? I'm going to have to change my entire routine. Miss out on time with my friends and that feeling of community.

He works there. I can hardly ask him to stop showing up himself.

It will have to be me who withdraws, which means I'll lose not just him but also so much else.

I'm crying a little as I walk but not completely falling apart. I'm too distracted to pay attention to my surroundings, so a voice calling out from across the street startles me so much I actually jump.

It's my friends. Rafe and Julianna. And Carlton and Joey. They've always been really close and evidently are taking a late-morning Christmas walk like me.

Only not like me. They're clearly all in very good moods.

I cross over to say hello since it seems like the only polite thing to do. As soon as I approach, Julianna asks, "Oh no, what's wrong?"

I shake my head with a smile. I was crying just a minute ago, but there's nothing I can do about the evidence on my face. "Nothing. Merry Christmas."

Joey and Julianna look at each other and then turn to give significant glances to their men. The message is clearly communicated without words because Rafe says he and Carlton have something to do for a few minutes and the men leave me alone with the women.

"I'm fine," I say, touched and embarrassed both. "I don't need any emergency bolstering."

"Well, you can at least tell us what's going on," Joey says. "Is it Chase?"

I open my mouth to deny it, but it's futile and silly. It feels wrong to lie. "Yeah. But it's Christmas. Y'all don't need to—"

"I thought things were going well," Julianna says. "It sounded from your messages like things were... good. I thought you'd finally get together."

I shrug, helpless and emotional again. "I thought they were good. But they weren't."

"Was it too fast for you?" Joey asks with a frown. "Did you get scared? I know it can be overwhelming, a relationship changing like that. But I'm sure Chase wouldn't mind going slow until you got used to things."

Now I'm confused. I frown back at her. "It wasn't too fast for me. It was too fast for him."

"What?" Julianna asks sharply.

"What?" Joey says at exactly the same time.

Their shocked reaction is flustering me. A couple of new tears slip out as I put the terrible truth into words. "He said we moved too fast, and he couldn't do it anymore."

"No!" Joey looks utterly outraged. "No way he said that!"

"I can't believe it," Julianna says, softer but equally confused.

"That's what he told me. Last night. I thought things were..." My shoulders shake in nearly silent sobs. "I thought they were good, but they weren't. Not for him anyway."

"What the hell is that idiot doing?" Joey mutters. "This is the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life."

“I don’t really understand it either, but I did get the gist of it. He told me he didn’t want to move too fast, but I got all into it and I pushed things. I got too... I was too much. He wasn’t as serious as I was, and then he didn’t know how to slow us down so he... he ended it.”

“No. No way. I don’t believe any of that crap.”

“Joey,” Julianna says in a warning tone.

“No!” Joey continues, her blue eyes fiery, indignant. “The whole thing is absolutely wrong. Chase would never. He’d *never* slow things down with you, Paige.”

It’s so upsetting—because she’s expressing what I was starting to believe myself—that I cry into my hands for a minute. “He did.”

“It does seem like wires got crossed somewhere.” Julianna’s face is bewildered but thoughtful. “You didn’t accidentally make him think you weren’t really into him, did you?”

“No! I don’t know how I could have. I was... I was...”

Completely vulnerable. Open. For the first time in my life.

“Then the whole thing is a ridiculous mess.” Joey is scowling at an empty spot in the air. “Because the one thing all of us have always known is that Chase is head over heels for you, Paige. He’s always been. *Always*. If he finally got a shot with you, he’d never say no to it.”

Her words should have given me hope, but they just make everything worse. I wipe my face with my sleeve as it takes a

minute to catch my breath enough to speak. “He did. He said no.”

“He’s absolutely lost his mind,” Joey breathes.

Julianna shrugs. “It does seem that way. Maybe try talking to him. I’m telling you. This doesn’t sound right. Wires have definitely gotten crossed somehow.”

“Maybe he thought he wanted me all this time, but then it wasn’t what he thought it would be.”

Joey just shakes her head, still baffled and indignant. Julianna murmurs, “Please talk to him. One more time. For us.”

“I’ll... see.” That’s the best I can do. I gesture toward the block with my house. “I need to...”

“Okay. Hang in there. Don’t give up hope.” Julianna hugs me as she talks, and then Joey hugs me too.

I have given up hope, no matter what they say.

Because Chase told me right to my face that he couldn’t be with me anymore.

And there’s no misunderstanding that.

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WHEN I GET TO MY HOUSE, I cry some more. Then wash up and put on a little makeup so I don’t look so blotchy.

I grab Chase’s wrapped present and take it with me as I leave the house.

I'm going to leave this on his porch. Then the last gesture will be done.

It might take some time, but I can move on. Eventually I'll be able to return to the coffee shop, once seeing Chase won't be so utterly crushing.

People get their hearts broken all the time.

They get over them.

My throat is hurting when I reach Chase's house. I hurry up the front walk and the porch steps, leaning over to set the gift by the door. Then I gasp and straighten up with a jerk when the front door opens.

"Paige, honey!" It's Chase's grandmother, smiling at me as she steps outside. "What are you doing?"

"I was just leaving this." I gesture toward the present. "For Chase."

"I'm sorry you missed him. He's not here right now."

"That's okay. I was just leaving him the present. I won't interrupt your Christmas."

"You're not interrupting at all. Don't you want to come in and wait for him?"

I shake my head. "I... I can't."

Her expression has sobered, but her eyes are still incredibly kind. Compassionate. "Sweetheart, are you sure you won't wait? I think you both would be happier if you'd talk."

"We... we did."

“No. I don’t really think you did.”

“We did!”

“Then one or both of you weren’t telling the whole truth. If you’d really shared what you’re feeling, then you both wouldn’t be walking around like your poor hearts have been stomped on.”

For some reason, her soft words are the last straw of my control. I burst into helpless tears again, right there on the porch of her house.

She tsks her tongue and pulls me into a hug. She’s smaller than me, but her hug is warm and strong. Substantial.

It makes me feel better despite myself.

“Honey,” she murmurs as she finally pulls away. “Chase has loved you for half his life. No matter what, you can trust in that.”

“But he... he...”

It doesn’t seem fair that she’s doing exactly what Joey and Julianna did. Acting astounded by the reality of what Chase did to me.

“I don’t know what he’s trying to convince you of, but you shouldn’t believe it. Since his folks died, he’s always been fighting this fear that the people he loves will be taken from him. Instead of holding on tight, he pretends it doesn’t matter to him. That’s why it’s been so hard for him to invest in life—in work and relationships and everything else. It does matter to him. So much. But he’s always scared it won’t last. So if it feels like he was completely with you and then he suddenly

pulled away, maybe that's why. He's just scared, honey. He's scared it won't last. He loves you. Don't give up on him."

And those words—her earnest explanation on the porch—is the first thing that has really made sense to me since the conversation with Chase in the car.

They ring true. Feel right. Click into the exact right place in my heart and mind.

They answer everything. It's the real explanation.

And my heart explodes with joy again because now finally there is real hope again.

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AT FIRST I'M SO OVERWHELMED that I have no clear idea what I should do. My mind usually works in a fairly orderly fashion, but when I feel too much, my logical brain gets drowned in all the emotions.

I know I need to do something to address my revelation, but I have no idea what to do. I make some distracted small talk with Chase's grandmother and manage to come up with an excuse to leave.

I'd rather sit on the porch steps and wait for Chase to return so I can waylay him and make him talk to me. But it seems inappropriate to plant myself at a house that isn't mine. And Chase could be gone for hours and hours.

Instead, I start walking with no clear idea of my destination. I end up back on the block with my house on it, so I figure going home is probably the best option at this point.

At least there I can collapse, sort through all these feelings, and figure out what I should do.

The most obvious option is to text Chase to find out exactly where he is. Surely he won't refuse to have a conversation with me. We've been friends for far too long for that.

So as I walk blindly down the sidewalk toward my house, I pull out my phone and text him. *I was hoping to talk. Where are you?*

The three dots show up immediately. So I hold my breath and stare down at my phone screen until the short line of text appears. *Look up.*

I do so without thinking, my eyes landing on my cute little house with its small, neat front yard and wide porch.

Sitting on the porch steps is Chase. He stands up when our eyes meet.

He's wearing his old jeans and one of the thick Christmas sweaters his grandmother knit him. His hair is a wild mess, and he clearly hasn't shaved this morning. He's got dark shadows under his eyes.

He's visibly upset and tense and exhausted.

And beautiful and mine.

With a little sob, I stumble down the front walk toward him. He meets me halfway and grabs for me, pulling me into a tight hug.

I bury my face in his sweater. The familiar scent of him surrounds me—soap and coffee and fresh air and *Chase*. I can barely breathe because of the urgent strength of his embrace.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” he mumbles against my hair. “I got scared and tried to run. I’m so sorry for hurting you like that.”

Because his words are as important to me as his hug, I manage to pull back enough to look up into his face. “If you were scared, you should have told me.”

“I know that. I knew it even as I was doing it.” There’s naked emotion on his face. Nothing like the relaxed blandness that he normally puts on. “But I was getting everything I’d always wanted, and I couldn’t believe it was real. I knew you couldn’t be in the same place as I was, so—”

I open my mouth to counter this statement since it’s clearly based on a wrong assumption.

But he’s on a roll and talks on. “I kept thinking the only way I could truly be safe is if I have everything from you. So anytime there was even a hint that you weren’t all in the way I am, I’d pull back a little more, trying desperately to keep myself safe.”

“But—”

“You don’t have to try to make it better. I did it all to myself. We had such a good beginning, and I know it could have turned into everything I want. But I didn’t let it. I kept reading into your comments and your silences both. I knew you were nervous about everything changing and assumed it was because you didn’t want me enough. Then you wanted to

keep us a secret, which I took as a clear sign that you were holding back. Then I saw you with Dan—”

“Chase! There’s nothing going on between—”

“I know that.” His voice is hoarse, emotional. “I know there’s not. But I was kind of jealous of him before, since he’s always making moves on you, so—”

“He’s never once made a move on me!” I’ve decided to let him talk since it’s all pouring out of him, but this claim is so outrageous I can’t let it stand.

“He asked you to marry him.” Finally there’s a tiny glint of dry amusement in his eyes, a glimpse of his old self.

“He asks everyone to marry him!”

“Maybe, but he seemed kind of interested, so it was already on my mind that he was a threat. So when I saw you with him at the store yesterday—”

“Oh my God, Chase! You couldn’t possibly think—”

“I didn’t think you were doing anything with him. It just confirmed how new and tentative our relationship is, and it fed all my insecurities. I’m telling you clearly, baby, that you didn’t do a single thing wrong. It’s all me and my complete inability to accept good things in my life because there’s always a chance they can get ripped away. I was getting everything I want, and I sabotaged it. I’m not expecting you to be fine with it. I’m not expecting you to forgive and forget. I’m not expecting us to be where we were yesterday.”

“Chase, please, I—”

“I love you, Paige. I’ve always loved you, and there’s not much chance that will ever change. And what I’ve realized is that I love you enough to accept that I don’t need everything right away. I don’t need to feel perfectly safe. I can live with the possibility of losing you if it means I can actually be with you. You don’t have to be where I am. We can take it as slow as you want. I’m willing to wait as long as it takes until you can trust me ag—”

I can’t let him keep rambling no matter how much his earnest declarations are feeding the neediness in my heart. He’s hurting. He’s uncertain. He’s risking everything. Making himself completely vulnerable.

And I can’t let it go unanswered.

So I lunge toward him, pulling down his head and stretching up so I can claim his mouth, silencing his continued rambles with a kiss.

He doesn’t respond immediately. He was really on a roll, so he keeps mumbling a few things against my lips until his mind catches up. Then he holds completely still for several seconds until his responses finally kick in.

He grabs for my head and holds it hard in both hands as his mouth starts moving hungrily against mine.

I melt into the embrace, finally—finally—exactly where I’m supposed to be.

When we break apart, we’re both flushed and panting. He tilts his head down, scanning my face. “Paige?”

“I love you too! All the way. Forever. If you’d let me get a word in, you would have known about five minutes ago.”

He makes a choked sound. A blaze of joy ignites in his eyes. Spreads all the way through his expression. “You do?”

“Yes! I was afraid of telling you too. I was afraid I’d be moving too fast and expecting too much and being too much, too *me*.”

“But too much of you is what I want.”

I make a silly, emotional sound. “I didn’t know any more than you did.”

He groans and pulls me into another hug, kind of rocking me as he tightens his arms. It lasts a long time. Neither of us wants to pull away.

Eventually he mumbles, “So you love me?”

“Yes. I’ve told you before, you know.”

“I know. But you were drunk. And it could have meant... anything.”

“Well, it meant I’m in love with you, and I never want to be with anyone else.”

“Okay. Good. Because I love you too. And if you ever doubt it, you can ask anyone. I thought I was being all cool and careful with my feelings, but they all seem to have known it all along.”

I giggle at that because I’ve heard that exact thing from three different people just this morning. “Good to know. I’ll keep that in mind.”

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WHEN WE'RE FINALLY able to stop hugging, we end up in a bit of a quandary. We don't want to be apart from each other for even a moment, but we've got two separate households that are expecting us as individuals for Christmas dinner.

We start by going to his grandmother's house to tell her that we figured things out. She's as delighted as we are by this news, and she says she hasn't started cooking yet (she wasn't planning anything too elaborate anyway), so we can go over to my parents' house instead.

Neither Chase nor I want to leave her alone on Christmas Day, so I call my parents and ask if Chase can come. My mom doesn't even sound surprised. She says of course he's welcome. Before I can ask about his grandmother, she says his grandma can come too.

So that takes care of the problem. We all eat over with my parents, and it's clear that all of them were simply waiting for the day that this would happen. No one is remotely surprised.

It's a little embarrassing, if you want to know the truth, but I'm far too happy to care.

Later, Chase opens the present I got him. A pair of fuzzy slippers with reindeers on them that makes him burst into laughter and a very expensive watch that he loves.

He got me a beautifully detailed pendant of a to-do list on a gold chain that must have been custom made. It's so lovely and meaningful it makes me cry.

We hang out at my parents' place until evening. Then we take his grandmother home, and he walks me back to my house.

We kiss on the porch. Then we stumble inside and kiss some more in the entryway. Then we end up in my bedroom and do a lot more than kissing in my bed.

We lie together afterward, naked and tangled together. He's told me he loves me about twenty different ways as we were having sex, but now he lifts his head to meet my eyes and says it again. "I love you, Paige. Merry Christmas."

"I love you too. And just so you know, I never want to spend Christmas without you again."

Never in my life would I have expected to say such a thing without any anxiety or insecurity, but I don't feel any of that right now.

I'm just happy—and even happier when Chase's expression breaks slightly with emotion. He says, "So let's don't. Let's spend every Christmas together starting now."

I hug him tightly since it feels like a miracle. Maybe it is one, or maybe it's just us.

Either way, it's Christmas, and I'm exactly where I want to be.

EPILOGUE

ALMOST A YEAR LATER, I'm working on my laptop in the coffee shop at ten minutes until nine on a Wednesday evening.

The place was busy earlier since a lot of Green Valley folks are out and about doing their holiday shopping and get-togethers. The customers have mostly cleared out now, however, and it's down to me and a middle-aged couple left lingering.

I've been working on some accounting for the last quarter of the year, but I'm having trouble concentrating now so I save my work, take the final sip of my lukewarm green tea, and lean back in my chair to watch Chase, who is giving efficient wipe-downs to all the equipment behind the counter.

He's wearing khakis and one of his festive Christmas sweaters. His hair has gotten long and is pulled back in a short ponytail, but several strands have slipped out throughout the day. His mind must be elsewhere because he's going through the routine tasks with an absent expression.

I smile as I watch him.

When he finishes with the equipment, he walks into the back room and returns with the cleaning cart. He starts wiping down the empty tables.

The college girl who works weekend evenings left at eight, but Chase is used to closing up alone. He's been doing it since high school, and I've never once heard him complain.

He's really quite remarkable.

A couple of months ago, the owner promoted him again—to general manager this time. He got a raise and his pick of hours, but he’s still basically keeping the same schedule.

As I’m gazing at him sappily, he glances up from the table he’s cleaning. I see when his disconnected expression shifts into attention as he notices me watching him. His eyes start to smile. His mouth twitches up in a little grin. It’s that look of startled pleasure I often see when he happens to encounter me after being distracted.

Like he can’t believe his luck that I’m there.

It makes my chest tighten.

“You want me to mop?” I ask him.

“Nah. I’ll get it. You don’t have to do my job.”

“Well, you help with my job, so I can help with yours.”

My side business has been doing so well this year I could probably quit my day job, but I haven’t done it yet. Success of that kind is based on luck and timing as well as talent and hard work, and luck and timing can always turn against you.

I’ll want to save up a lot more money before I give up a steady paycheck.

Chase shakes his head, still smiling with his eyes. “I still have ten minutes left and nothing better to do.”

I give up on helping him and instead use the time to close up my laptop, put it into my bag, and check my phone for notifications. By the time I finish replying to an email from one of my vendors, the other couple across the room has

gotten up to leave and Chase has almost finished mopping the floor.

I raise my feet to let him mop under me, and I wait until it's mostly dry before I get up.

When he's finished all his closing duties, we leave together, and he locks the door behind us.

It's been a cold, gray day, but it's not freezing. I put on my gloves as we walk down the downtown sidewalk. When I've done that, Chase reaches over and takes my hand, holding it as we head for our neighborhood.

"You all packed for tomorrow?" I ask him after a few minutes.

"What do you think?"

"I think you're probably not."

"We'll only be gone for four days."

"I know. But I finished packing yesterday."

He smiles over at me fondly. "Of course you did."

"When you end up forgetting several important items because you threw stuff in your bag at the last minute, don't blame me."

"I never do."

I giggle and lean toward him, rubbing my cheek on his shoulder. He evidently takes the affectionate gesture as an invitation because he wraps both arms around me in a tight hug.

I hug him back. I love him so much.

I never knew how it felt to have a real partner like this. How secure it would be. How I'd know without question that I'll be his priority, that he'll always want to be with me, that he'll do anything he can to make me smile.

The past year hasn't been perfect, but I've been happier than I knew was possible.

When he loosens his arms, he tilts his head down to check my face. I'm beaming up at him, and his expression softens. "You look happy," he murmurs.

"I am. You make me happy."

He kisses me and then grabs my hand again as we start walking. "You make me happy too."

We're both smiling as we reach his house. He's still living with his grandmother, although she's arranged for a couple of her friends to come help her on weekends so Chase can often stay with me on Saturdays and Sundays. I spend the night over there sometimes too, so we basically bounce between our two houses.

I don't mind at all. His grandmother can't afford an assisted living place, even if she wanted to move. She doesn't have any other family, and she can't live alone. He's going to stay with her for as long as she's alive, and I'll always support him in that decision.

I'm not going to give up my house, but I wouldn't mind renting it out for a while and moving in with Chase and his

grandmother. Since she stays in the downstairs bedroom, he and I would have the entire upstairs to ourselves.

But she's old-fashioned. She'd never say a word about it, but we know it would make her uncomfortable if I were to move in full-time before we were married, so neither one of us has suggested it.

We have our whole lives. His grandmother is worth making a few small compromises.

I'm spending the night there tonight since we leave for our trip tomorrow morning. This year, we couldn't get as many days off, so we're taking a four-day weekend and staying at a bed-and-breakfast in Asheville.

I'm excited to celebrate a whole year together with Chase.

His grandmother is in the kitchen, working on packing up her Christmas cookies in festive tins to give as presents. I sit down at the table to help her as Chase takes out the garbage.

"Now you both make sure to relax a lot on your trip," she tells me after watching Chase walk outside. "You both work too hard, not to mention having to take care of me."

"You're no trouble at all, but we'll definitely take it easy. We don't have anything big planned, so we'll probably just hike and visit some crafters I like and eat out at fun places."

"That sounds perfect." She gives a satisfied nod. "He's been so happy this year. I've never seen him so happy."

I flush with pleasure. "I've been happy too."

“Good. Because I like to envision him being happy with you for the rest of his life.”

“He will be,” I tell her, my voice slightly hoarse from emotion I wasn’t expecting. “We will be.”

She holds my gaze, and we share a moment of true understanding. Then her face changes to an almost naughty excitement. “Oh, guess what. Next month I’m having someone in to redo the upstairs bathroom.”

My eyes widen. “Really? Isn’t that expensive?”

“Chase and I have figured out how to manage it without going into debt. That bathroom has needed it for ages. I’m not sure how you’ve been showering in that old tub. We’re going to get a new sink, a new toilet, and a walk-in shower. But we’re keeping the pink tile on the walls.”

The bathroom upstairs really is old and inconvenient. I wouldn’t complain for the world, but a new shower up there sounds like a dream. “That’s amazing. And I love the pink tile, so I’m glad you’re not getting rid of it.”

“Yes. It should be really nice when we’re done.” She slants me a little look that feels significant somehow. “Just wanted you to know. For the future.”

“Okay,” I say with a smile, confused but not wanting her to see it. “Thank you.”

Is she hinting I might move in with Chase upstairs? That doesn’t sound like her at all.

I shrug it off when Chase comes back inside.

We have a good time finishing her cookie packages. Then she goes to bed, and Chase and I head upstairs. One of the three bedrooms upstairs has a big couch and television, so we hang out there for a while, cuddling as we watch a few episodes of a show on a streaming network.

When we go to bed, we have some quiet sex under the covers, and he holds me until we go to sleep.

I wake up early the next morning, excited about our trip.

It takes a couple of hours for us to shower, dress, have breakfast, and make sure his grandmother is all set until Darlene arrives later in the morning.

Chase packs the car as I clean up the kitchen.

He's grinning as he comes back inside.

His grandmother is grinning too. It's very odd, and I know something is up, but I have absolutely no clue what it is.

They provide no information, even when I ask what's going on, so we say goodbye. Then Chase and I walk out to the car.

The trunk is open.

I giggle. "Did you organize our luggage again like you did last year?"

He twitches his eyebrows. "Maybe. You should check it out so you can appreciate my organizing genius."

I'm laughing as I go over to peer into the trunk.

As expected, he's lined up our bags by order of size again, just as he did before our road trip last year. I'm shaking my

head in fond impatience when I notice that something new has been added to the trunk—at the very end of the row of bags.

The smallest item.

It's very small. The size of a jeweler's box.

In fact, that's exactly what it is.

I lean over to pick it up, turning around to gape at Chase.

He gently takes the box out of my hand and then lowers himself onto one knee with the most adorable expression of dry amusement and absolute devotion on his face.

“Oh my God,” I gurgle, covering my mouth with one hand.
“Chase.”

He opens the box. Inside is a pretty diamond on a gold band.

I make a whimpering sound.

“You wanna marry me, Paige?”

With a little sobbing sound, I reach out to pull him back up to a standing position. It's a little awkward for a moment, but finally I'm able to throw myself into his arms. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Okay,” he says, his face working with emotion as we separate to look at each other. “That's good then.” He slides the ring on my finger.

We have some more sappy minutes by the trunk of the car. Then we have to go inside and tell his grandmother, who was in there waiting giddily to hear the news.

The redone bathroom upstairs is our wedding present from her so that we'll have a nicer place to live after we get married.

It's another hour before we finally set out on our Christmas road trip to Asheville, but for once I don't mind that we're running late.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: The next Green Valley book is about Dan. It's called [An Engagement Pact](#), and it will be coming out next spring. My next release is the third book in The Worthing series, [Redemption](#). You can find an excerpt from that book on the following pages.

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EXCERPT FROM REDEMPTION

THE EVENING IS UNEVENTFUL, and I head home before midnight, which is still a late night for my friend group.

I'm tired and wired and very slightly buzzing from more alcohol than I've had in years. Trey checks the house before he lets me out of the car. When he's cleared it for me, I go inside, toe off my shoes, drop my little bag, and wander into my studio, staring around blankly at my collection of canvases in various stages of completion.

Weirdly, it feels like my life. A series of attempted starts and restarts, never getting the canvas exactly as I envision it.

It's a bleak thought, and not a rational one. Clearly a result of the alcohol. I shake it off and go to fill up a cup with filtered water and swallow down half of it as I stand by the counter.

"Everything all right?"

The voice surprises me so much I jerk and slop a little of my water. It dribbles down my lips as I turn to find Caleb standing at the kitchen entrance.

He's wearing gray pajama pants and a white undershirt. His hair is kind of ruffled. He clearly got up from bed.

I gulp at the sight of him. Since I have a mouthful of water, it's a convenient gesture.

"Yes," I manage to say after I lower my cup. "Fine."

He narrows his eyes as he peers at me. "Have you been drinking?"

I scowl. "I had two drinks."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I'm an adult, and I'm allowed a couple of drinks if I want."

"I thought you stuck to one." He's taken a few steps closer, so now he's standing directly in front of me, frowning and vaguely intimidating.

It's probably the extra drink, but he's really annoying me right now. "Usually I do. Tonight I had one more. I'm not drunk. I'm not even close. Your job is not to boss me around."

"I wasn't bossing you around. I asked a question. And you didn't really answer it."

I blink, momentarily distracted from my irrational indignation. "What question?"

"Why? You changed your habits. In a way you decided years ago wasn't good for you. I want to know why."

"I can have two drinks without falling off the wagon!"

I've seen Caleb faintly annoyed before. Impatient. Condescending and cool and obnoxiously unflappable.

But I've never seen him angry. I'm not actually sure he's angry right now, but he's closer than I've ever seen him before. He's simmering with something, and it's leaking around the edges of his typical composure. His jaw tightens. His eyes narrow. "I never said you weren't allowed," he grits out. "I'm asking why you felt the need to do so."

“It’s none of your business. I felt like indulging. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

His expression changes, his frown becoming thoughtful. “You felt like indulging?”

“Yes. Occasionally, I don’t want to live like a nun. Is that all right with you?” I feel way too emotional for this conversation. It really doesn’t make sense.

I really don’t want Caleb to see it, so I step around him and try to stride away.

He grabs for my arm, holding it loosely. The grip manages to stop me anyway.

I whirl around with a scowl. “What exactly do you want?”

“I want to know what’s going on with you. Something is wrong, and you won’t tell me what it is.”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“Now you’re lying to me.”

“I’m allowed to lie to you. You’re my bodyguard. You don’t get to pry into my soul.”

If anything, my words make him even angrier. His frown intensifies, as does the tension in his jaw. “Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do, Louisa. If something is bothering you, then I’m the one you tell.”

He means it. I swear he genuinely means it. He sincerely believes that he has every right to hear all the secrets of my

soul.

And the most ridiculous thing is that I believe it too.

My indignation crumples. My mouth twists. “I’m just... restless. Lately. I know my life is good now, but sometimes it feels like I don’t... I don’t quite have enough.”

His face softens at my words. “If you don’t have something you want, then you’re allowed to try to get it.”

My breath hitches. I wonder if he knows what he’s saying, if he knows how I’ll take it.

“But drinking more isn’t the way to get it,” he adds.

“I know that. I won’t do it again. I just... I’m really happy with my life now, but sometimes I’d like to be a little less... good.”

His mouth relaxes even more. Until it’s almost shaped in a smile. “Well, then be a little less good. But maybe do it in a way that doesn’t threaten your sobriety.”

I give a little huff of dry amusement. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“But you don’t have to keep living like a nun, if that’s not what you want.”

I can’t actually believe I said that to him, since it so clear brings up the topic of sex. “You think so?” My eyes have been downcast, but I lift them in a quick, darting look.

Something changes in his stance. He must suddenly understand what’s in my mind.

He evidently didn’t realize it before.

“Louisa.”

“I know,” I say quickly, looking up at him again. “I *know*. But that doesn’t mean I don’t occasionally... want it.”

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YOU CAN FIND OUT MORE about Redemption [here](#).

ABOUT NOELLE ADAMS

NOELLE HANDWROTE HER first romance novel in a spiral-bound notebook when she was twelve, and she hasn't stopped writing since. She has lived in eight different states and currently resides in Virginia, where she writes full time, reads any book she can get her hands on, and offers tribute to a very spoiled cocker spaniel.

She loves travel, art, history, and ice cream. After spending far too many years of her life in graduate school, she has decided to reorient her priorities and focus on writing contemporary romances. For more information, please check out her website: noelle-adams.com.