



a Nanny for
CHRISTMAS

a single dads reverse harem romance

LISA CULLEN

A NANNY FOR CHRISTMAS

A SINGLE DADS REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

LISA CULLEN

CONTENTS

Description

1. [Summer](#)
2. [Summer](#)
3. [Summer](#)
4. [Summer](#)
5. [Luke](#)
6. [Summer](#)
7. [Summer](#)
8. [Summer](#)
9. [Theo](#)
10. [Jax](#)
11. [Summer](#)
12. [Summer](#)
13. [Summer](#)
14. [Summer](#)
15. [Luke](#)
16. [Summer](#)
17. [Summer](#)
18. [Summer](#)
19. [Jax](#)
20. [Summer](#)
21. [Summer](#)
22. [Theo](#)
23. [Summer](#)
24. [Summer](#)
25. [Summer](#)
26. [Jax](#)
27. [Summer](#)
28. [Summer](#)
29. [Summer](#)
30. [Summer](#)
31. [Luke](#)
32. [Summer](#)
33. [Luke](#)
34. [Summer](#)
35. [Summer](#)
36. [Jax](#)
37. [Summer](#)
38. [Summer](#)
39. [Theo](#)

40. [Summer](#)

41. [Summer](#)

[Boss Daddies \(preview\)](#)

© Copyright 2023, by Author Lisa Cullen .

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non commercial uses permitted by copyright law. Unauthorised reproduction or distribution of this work is illegal.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book is intended for adult readers only. Any sexual activity portrayed in these pages occurs between consenting adults over the age of 18 who are not related by blood.

DESCRIPTION

*Three sinfully delicious single dad billionaires.
One fake marriage.
I spend my days in the icy cold Alps, taking care of their babies.
And they tip me generously at nights, like only they can.*

**My Christmas won't be lonely this year... because guess what? I'll have
three men in my bed.**

I never had a family, and then I lost my sanity after sending my abusive ex to
prison.

But these three gorgeous single dads have made me feel more than just their
hot nanny that they can't keep their distance from.

Maybe I *do* have the capacity to fall in love again.

Especially when **Luke**, president of a security company, looks irresistible as
ever.

His power shines through those hazel eyes that I could keep staring into.

Jax, the hot security guard, has messy hair that I love running my hands
through.

He's a bad boy – the kind that any parent would warn their kid about.

Lucky for me, I never received that warning.

And **Theo**, their muscular CEO, would give his life for his loved ones.

I'm included in that list. For now.

I know I'll be kicked off it when they find out what I'm hiding.

And just like that, my Christmas tree will crumble down, along with my
entire heart.

SUMMER

In a sudden gust of bitter cold, the wind picked up around me as I trudged through the powdery snow toward the Belancio Hotel. It was a luxurious establishment where I had spent the better part of the last three years working every available hour in the hopes of climbing to a management position. As another New Year threatened just around the corner, that promotion wasn't looking likely. Still, it lingered in the back of my mind. This time of year not only brought about the prospect of promotion but was also my busiest time of year.

Most people were desperate for time off to spend the holidays with their families, but not me. All I had waiting for me when that fateful day rolled around was a microwave dinner and whatever trash was on TV. As such, I always put myself forward to pick up the extra shifts that no one else wanted, which I was praying would give me the edge for the assistant manager's position I applied for a few weeks ago.

Another cold gust of wind dislodged a few unruly strands of dark brown hair from my carefully placed knit hat. With cheeks pink from the cold, I clutched at the edge of the hat and half jogged the last few steps toward the Belancio. I let out a deep, relieved sigh the moment I was through those gold-rimmed double doors and was met with the well-heated lobby. The light scent of vanilla and cinnamon mingled with the warmth to create a cozy and inviting entrance.

"Evenin' Roger," I beamed up at the doorman as I stamped my feet on the branded mat to dislodge lingering snow and unraveled the wool scarf from

my neck. "It's a wild one today. I saw there's a snowstorm coming down from the north. Hope it doesn't cause too much trouble."

Christmas was just under a month away, and with it, I would get the extra fat bumper check for all my extra hours.

"Yep, wild one," Roger replied. As he checked me over, I noticed he lacked the usual twinkle in his eye, and his smile didn't quite have the same warmth I was used to.

"Long day?" I shrugged off my coat and draped it over one arm, then shook my hair free of my almost dislodged hat.

"Something like that," Roger replied tightly. The door behind me dinged, signaling someone was a few feet behind me, so I hurried forward and headed for the front desk. Two women staffed the desk; Sophie Alcott, who handled the desk during most of the day, and Mary Gilchrist, who often took the night shift. They weren't often seen in the same place due to personal grievances, so I approached them cautiously.

Sophie was my main competitor when it came to the assistant manager position. While she was often bitter, I worked hard to maintain my politeness.

"Evening, ladies!" I offered my brightest smile. "It's cold as all hell outside. Might mean we're in for a quiet night."

"Oh, I doubt that," Sophie replied, her tone tart. Her lips were pursed, emphasizing the wrinkles of age around her mouth. She stood behind the front desk smoothing her hands down the dark blue jacket and pencil skirt of the Belancio uniform. "Dillon wants to see you in his office."

"Right now?" I glanced at the ornate clock behind the desk and frowned. I was ten minutes early for my shift, and I was only just in the door. "Alright, let me change, and I'll head up."

"No," Sophie replied shortly. "Now. He said he wanted me to send you up when you arrived."

"Really?"

Sophie smoothed one hand over her jacket and a small smile teased at the corner of her lips. "Yes, really."

"Did he say what it was about?"

Sophie and Mary glanced at one another.

"No," said Sophie with a light sigh. "But you shouldn't keep him waiting."

It was difficult to ignore the sudden bubble of excitement that rose in my chest as I thanked the girls and hurried toward the elevator. These past few

weeks had been pretty mundane in terms of work, so there was only one thing I could think of that would require a visit to the manager's office.

The promotion.

My promotion. Was it terrible to hope for that?

I wouldn't have to put up with Sophie's stale attitude any longer if I had the power of assistant manager, nor would I have to continuously try the undercooked brownies Steph from accounts often brought in to show off.

Those thoughts and more carried me on clouds as I took the elevator to the fourteenth floor and hurried down the corridor. Finally, after so much hard work, things were starting to pay off. It was almost hard to imagine that I had been at the lowest point of my life four years ago. Battling a drug and alcohol addiction while under the influence of my abusive ex-boyfriend, I had done many things in my life that I was far from proud of.

Some of those things kept me awake at night, wrapped in cold sweats and jumping at noises. Guilt that would never shift despite how hard I had worked to turn my life around. I had started that change the day I sent that abusive, piece of crap ex to prison.

Now here I was on the cusp of a new promotion, and with the money that would bring in, maybe I could finally say goodbye to my dingy apartment.

"Dillon?" I knocked lightly on the door of the manager's office, then tested the handle.

"Come in," boomed a deep voice. I pushed open the door and plastered my brightest smile over my red-painted lips as the large, round form of my manager, Dillon Higgins, came into view.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Ah, Summer." Dillon wetly cleared his throat and leaned into his large metal desk, causing his chair to complain loudly. "Take a seat." With a portly hand, he indicated to the small plastic chair in front of his desk, and I forced my smile wider.

I had little love for the loud, rotund man that held power here, but while his sleaziness had never touched me directly, I knew that staying too long in his office—alone—could result in Dillon getting the wrong idea.

I presumed he was just lonely in the early days of working here, but the years had taught me that he was simply power-hungry. I lowered myself into the seat and draped my coat and items over my knee, trying to keep the excitement at bay. It was wrong to get my hopes up, but I couldn't stop myself.

“I’m sorry, Summer, but we’re letting you go.”

It was as if the winter storm outside had crashed through the walls to deliver those words. The smile faltered on my lips, and my eyes widened as I struggled to understand.

“Wh... what?”

“We’re letting you go,” Dillon repeated shortly. “With immediate effect.”

“I... I don’t understand?” I clutched at my coat, my knuckles bleeding white from the strength of my grip, and I scooted forward to the edge of the chair. “Why? What? Why?! I haven’t done anything, have I? Is it a customer complaint?” I straightened up suddenly, my back as stiff as a board. “Was it Mr. Trunkle? Because he acted against regulations, I even checked—”

“No, Summer.” Dillon raised one thick hand to silence my tirade. “It wasn’t Mr. Trunkle. It wasn’t anyone but you. I’m sorry, but I can’t have someone with your reputation working here. This establishment houses the elite and the upper class, and someone such as yourself... well, I’m sure you can imagine that once our clientele finds out...” Dillon shook his head so violently that his thick chin wobbled. “I’m sorry, Summer, you’re an excellent worker, but I just can’t have your kind here.”

A terrible chill swept through me so quickly that the hairs on my arms and legs shot to attention. My gut clenched painfully, and nausea grew in my throat, teasing the burn of acid on the back of my tongue.

“My... my reputation?” I stammered softly. “What are you talking about? My *kind*?”

Dillon’s large face suddenly flushed darkly, and he cleared his throat. “You’re not going to make me say it...”

“Oh, I am!” I snapped suddenly as the cold dread snapped to heated anger. “Dillon, I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“Your... *outside* work,” Dillon clarified, pressing his fingertips together. “It’s not becoming of a young lady like yourself, and it’s not in line with Belancio’s business practices. I’m sorry.”

“Dillon,” I demanded sharply, “stop talking in riddles. What are you saying?”

Dillon sighed and turned to his computer, tapping furiously at the keyboard for a few seconds, then he turned the monitor around to face me.

“We received several complaints from guests who *stumbled* across your work on other... *sites*,” Dillon explained, but his voice began to fade to the background as the furious thump of my heart began to fill my ears.

Displayed on the screen was row after row of saucy pictures. A scantily clad woman—me—was present in every photo, in various states of undress and in multiple risqué poses. I wanted to defend myself; after all, the pictures weren't the best quality and could belong to any brunette. However, just as those words formed on the tip of my tongue, something Dillon said cut through the fog I was under.

"That's your tattoo, right?" Dillon said, tapping a lower photo with his pen. "The daisy chain on your ankle?"

I stared at the picture until my eyes blurred, unable to comprehend how these pictures still *existed*, never mind how they got put in an e-mail to my boss.

"Who..." I tried, but emotion clogged my throat, and I had to swallow a few times before trying again. "Who sent these?"

"I'm afraid I can't reveal that," Dillon said, "but we received them through various sources and... I'm sorry, Summer, there's nothing I can do. You're fired."

Those words followed me like a ghost all the way back down to the lobby. Those pictures... I hadn't seen them in years. They were old pictures taken by my abusive ex-boyfriend Felix during the thinly veiled *happy* times. Back then, I had been young and more reckless with my body and my life; I had posed like there was no tomorrow. After he was sent to prison, I had done everything I could to destroy those pictures, yet somehow they resurfaced online.

I walked past everyone until Roger touched my arm and pulled me from my daze. The lack of sparkle in his eyes earlier and Sophie's extra tart attitude suddenly made sense. I had no doubt that Dillon could not keep those pictures a secret.

"Summer," Roger said softly, "I'm so sorry."

Still in a daze, I turned my glassy eyes to Roger as he began helping me back into my coat.

"What am I going to do?" I whispered. Roger helped me rewind my scarf around my neck, tucked my hat onto my head, and then settled a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"You need anything," Roger said quietly, "then you call me. Agnes and I would hate for anything to happen to you."

"Give her my best," I smiled slightly, cuddling into my coat. Then I turned and trudged back outside into the city's dying light and the storm's

rising winds. I doubted I would ever see Roger or his wife again, not if she found out about those pictures.

How... how had this happened?

In the space of half an hour, my life had started to crumble, and what should have been an exciting chat about a promotion had turned into a humiliating job loss and resurrection of old wounds. The wind nipped at my cheeks and fingers, threatening to turn flesh into ice, but I didn't have the focus to fight it. The fuzzy, confused cloud that had settled over me continued until I reached the subway station.

I took the steps two at a time, building speed as the prospect of drinking my last bottle of wine and crying my eyes out grew more appealing by the second. Making it down into the dark tunnel, I pulled the hat from my head and stamped my feet to shake off the snow, only to stumble when I turned around a pillar and walked smack bang into a solid back.

"Oh my God," I gasped, jolted out of my thoughts. "I'm so sorry I wasn't —" A powerful wave of disgust flooded me when I lifted my head and came face-to-face with the stranger.

Only he wasn't a stranger.

Blue eyes so light they were almost gray stared back at me, set shallow into a square face topped by a close-cropped shaved head.

"Well, well, well, it ain't time for Summer," drawled the achingly familiar nasal voice of Felix Saunders, my ex-boyfriend.

What the fuck was he doing here?

Felix's hands landed on my upper arms, helping to steady my footing, but he didn't let go when I was still.

"What... what are you... *how* are you...?" I stumbled over my words, trying to work through all the thoughts dislodged by our collision and the shock of seeing him standing before me. The last time I had seen him was when he was dragged away into a police car and arrested for a drunken hit-and-run.

"Oh, how am I here, you mean?" Felix scoffed, and his grip tightened slightly. "And not in prison where *you* put me?"

"I..." Words failed me, and I tried to pull away, but Felix's grip on my arms tightened further.

"What's the matter, Summer? Surprised to see me?"

"Of course I am," I gasped finally. "I never thought I would see you again. What are you even doing here?" The nausea that had faded on the walk

from the hotel to the subway surged up once again, and that familiar acrid taste washed over my tongue.

“I’m getting the train, obviously,” Felix remarked, “but I was hoping to run into you. I wanted to see you after the big reveal.”

“What reveal?”

“Your little showcase of the boudoir shoot?” Felix sneered. “I’m sure your boss will have a pretty wank over those.”

“*You?!*” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, and in a surge of energy I wrenched myself out of his grip. “You sent those? What the fuck is wrong with you?! How did you even know where I worked—you know what, I don’t even care. You’re still just as twisted now as you were back then.”

“Careful,” Felix spat low, “don’t *push* me, Summer. I just wanted to talk.”

“*Talk?*” With the daze gone, the anger of losing my job and the humiliation from those pictures surged up. I threw both my hands forward, shoving Felix furiously toward the track. “We have nothing to say to each other. Do you have any idea how much you’ve royally *fucked* me?”

“Oh, I’m just getting started baby,” Felix laughed and grasped at my flailing fist, only to release me when a sudden surge of people flooded down the staircase and filled the platform.

The train screeched into the station a few seconds later. In a rush, I threw myself onto the train and hurried through a few subway cars, losing myself in the crowd before I took a seat. With a hammering heart and trembling hands, I huddled into my chair and kept my eyes fixed on the doors until they closed. As the train pulled forward, I saw Felix’s square face peering into the cars, so I huddled down further until we were safely away from the station.

Felix was out of prison and back in town.

I couldn’t wrap my head around how he had found me, never mind how he had those pictures to send to my work. Was it some kind of twisted revenge because my testimony sent him to prison? In a flash, my mind was filled with that terrible night. I had been a drunk passenger in Felix’s car as we had crashed into some poor man crossing the road.

Just the thought of the crunch his body had made on the hood caused nausea to swell, and I shifted in my seat, trying to shove those memories away.

After a beat, I pulled out my phone and quickly pulled up a job search engine, anything to distract myself from those memories. What better way

than trying to find a new job immediately? I lived paycheck to paycheck, a lull in funds wasn't an option.

Three stations later, my heart was calmer, and I had scrolled through nearly 100 job listings, each one dampening my spirit a little more, but they were all a decent distraction from the noise in my head. Close to giving up, I almost closed my phone when one job caught my eye.

Someone was looking for an in-house nanny to care for three children. The nanny needed to be capable of traveling over the holiday period. Tapping on the ad, my heart skipped a beat as the paycheck stared back at me in big black letters.

Ten thousand dollars *per day* over a minimum of two and a half weeks with the chance that the trip could be extended into the New Year. Such an amount was *mind-blowing*.

It couldn't be real.

Tapping for more information, I was surprised that the job poster was none other than Luke Ellis, President of Helix. Helix was a security company that covered everything from computer software to in-person safety. It was the primary security provider at the Belancio, so the name was familiar.

Taking care of children wasn't my forte, but how different could it be from caring for whiny hotel guests? And with Felix back in town, a job that took me out of the country would be fantastic.

It took three seconds for me to submit my resume and close the app. It was a long shot, a wild card that I was wildly underqualified for, but it did help calm my mind a little.

I would go home, get intimately familiar with that last bottle of wine, and tomorrow... Tomorrow I would apply for every job under the sun.

SUMMER

Three days later, through some insane stroke of luck, I was on my way to Helix for an interview for the in-house nanny position. How any of the fudged information on my resume had made it past whoever was in charge of the hiring process, I had no idea, but I wasn't in any position to pass it up.

The three days I had spent huddled in my pajamas scrolling through every job website I could find, had resulted in four bites (including the job with Helix), and compared to the other three, it stood out like a beacon. The other three would result in me taking a big pay cut, and who was I to pass up the chance to earn ten grand *a day* looking after some children?

There was such a thing as a Christmas miracle, right?

The confidence I had to bluff my way through any sort of interview, however, promptly died the moment I climbed out of my cab onto the main street and came face-to-face with the sheer glass shard building that served as the headquarters of Helix Security. It wasn't the shining, clear windows or the gigantic Christmas tree propped up against their logo on the building, nor was it the spiral statue out in the front of the building that shattered my confidence. It was the clothing that graced the back of each man and woman I watched moving through the revolving glass door.

Helix was a multibillion-dollar company, so of course, everyone was dressed to the nines, but it wasn't something I had considered until I was standing on the pavement surrounded by melting slush and caressed by a cold wind. I was not rich by any means, and in my faux-confident desperation that morning, I had thrown on my trusty black dress that was one size too small

and had a hole under one armpit. It wasn't *great*, but it had served me well at interviews before.

Interviews for fast food restaurants and high-end hotels, not multibillion-dollar tech companies.

I huddled under my coat and toyed with the end of my scarf, quickly debating how important clothes would be in the interview. They were looking for a nanny. There was no need for me to dress fancy because nannies didn't dress fancy... right?

A chill stole through my body the longer I stood there trying to convince myself that what I was wearing was fine. Then a beautifully tall and slender woman seemed to float out of the door flanked by two bulky men dressed in pristine suits. She had a small, fluffy hat on top of her head and a figure-hugging red dress complete with gold heels while her hands were tucked neatly into a pure white fluffy muffler.

She looked stunning, completely untouched by the cold, and no wonder. Within thirty seconds, she was swept away into a car and driven into the city, out of sight.

The people that worked here, regardless of position, didn't have to dress for the weather, did they? They dressed like they belonged in the upper class and that the weather should bend to them. The picture of that woman lingered in my head as I glanced down at my coat and contemplated how impressive my dowdy dress would look in a place like that.

Fuck.

I couldn't impress them looking like this. I turned on my heel and glanced down the street, spotting my savior a few buildings down. The couture fashion brand Pluxuro had a shop not far, and it was the only place that I could get to, buy something, and get back in time for my interview.

They let people shop on credit in places like that, I'm sure.

Tucking my hair behind my cold ears, I hurried across the street and dodged slushy puddles to the best of my ability, trying to keep the snow to a minimum on my black boots. The last thing I needed was to create a puddle in Helix and send some rich person to the hospital because they slipped.

The thought made me smile, though, and by the time I bundled into the shop, I was breathless with warm cheeks. They flushed hotter the moment I hit the wall of heat within the store, and I quickly shrugged off my coat and draped it over one arm. Blowing my hair out of my face and smoothing a nervous hand down my rumpled dress, I perused the hangers and mannequins

for something that screamed *respectable* and *upper class* but also *capable-of-caring-for-your-snobby-rich-children*.

Everything I looked at took my breath away when I checked the price. Each dress cost five times my rent and then some. There was no way in hell I could afford anything in here, not even on credit. As I wandered the store, I repeatedly checked my watch and counted the minutes as they flew by, bringing me closer and closer to an interview I would surely fail the moment I walked through the door.

And I needed this job. Fuck, I needed this job more than I was willing to admit.

Ten minutes in, I finally settled on a dress that only cost four months' rent and dragged it with me into the dressing room. Wriggling out of my dress was more of a challenge than I was prepared for. The heat from rushing here and the smothering warmth in the store had caused me to sweat profusely. My dress stuck to me over my wide hips and clung to my thighs. By the time I wrestled free, I kicked it into the corner and then stood there, catching my breath for a good few seconds.

"Breathe, Summer," I muttered to myself. "You've got this."

I closed my eyes and counted to sixty, focusing on my breathing and giving my body a chance to cool down; then I grabbed the new dress and slipped it on. It took a few seconds of twisting to get the zipper up in the back, but I almost didn't recognize myself when I stepped out from the curtain to admire myself in the mirror.

The dress was a V-neck, blue floral print ruffle dress made from lightweight contrast mesh. The short flutter sleeves caressed my shoulders with every movement, and the light material meant that the long skirt barely held any weight. It clung to my body in all the right places, accentuating my chest and hips while being light enough that I could definitely picture myself with rich kids by my side.

It was beautiful. And it cost far too much.

"Everything alright here?" asked a tight, feminine voice from behind me. I spun around in surprise and marveled at how the dress moved with me, to find one of the shop assistants standing there clutching her lanyard. Her powdered face showed streaks from the heat, and her faint, over-plucked eyebrows had her looking constantly surprised.

"Oh, no, thank you. I was just... I'm just looking right now," I said, clasping my hands to my abdomen.

“This is your first time here?” she asked, but from the tone of her voice, it didn’t sound like I was supposed to give an answer. “We have a policy that customers can only try on garments that they intend to purchase.”

“That’s dumb,” I muttered without thinking.

“Quite.” The woman pursed her lips and narrowed her wide eyes. “If you would follow me to the counter, I can set you up with a—”

Just as my mind raced for an excuse as to how I could not afford to buy this dress, a clatter of boxes and a soft cry echoed from the back of the store, drawing the assistant’s attention. She stepped back, peering over the racks then she turned back to me.

“Don’t go anywhere, ma’am.” With that, she scuttled deeper into the store, leaving me to return to the mirror and admire myself again.

Fuck.

I couldn’t pay for this dress. It was impossible. And yet it was *beautiful*, definitely something that made me look light and professional while also bringing a homey warmth with it. I glanced at my watch, then over the railing to the back of the store. Time was ticking by too fast, and the assistant was busy helping another employee gather up some fallen boxes and *very* expensive-looking shoes while scolding her severely.

Another glance at my watch. I had four minutes. Four minutes until my interview time.

Fuck.

Suddenly a bold thought burst through my mind, and my heart froze momentarily in my chest.

I hadn’t stolen clothes since I was a teenager, and stealing something this expensive was sure to have terrifying consequences, but if it got me that job then...

I hadn’t even finished the thought when I grabbed my coat and bag and hurried across the store. I threw my coat over my shoulders and bolted through the doors at the same time as another customer who stopped and stared at his own bags when the alarm blared. My heart raced, and heat flooded through me so intensely that I barely registered the cold as I raced up the street back toward the Helix building.

I didn’t stop running until I was across the street, through the revolving door, and safely inside. I stopped inside the foyer, panting desperately with my heart racing so fast in my chest that it was almost under my tongue.

Oh God... what have I done?

Slowly I turned and glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see that assistant hot on my heels, but there was no one there. Not a soul. When I turned back, I came face-to-face with a burly security guard who smiled warmly despite his bushy brows pulling low.

“Are you alright? Were you running from someone?” he asked in a deep voice.

I laughed breathlessly and straightened up, shaking my head and trying to smooth my hair despite the sweat that crept over my scalp and neck.

“No, no, I’m okay. I’m here for an interview,” I said in a rush, feeling incredibly hot and exposed under his dark gaze as if he could see the weird *thief* tattooed over my skin. “I’m late.”

“Oh, you’re with Mr. Hayworth!” called a sweet, tinkling voice. Behind the guard scurried a beautiful, short woman dressed in a rosy pink dress with a square neckline. Her blonde curls were piled on top of her head, and her glittering pink lips pulled into a bright smile when she saw me.

“Summer?” she asked in that sweet voice. I nodded, forcing my most polite smile.

“Your dress is *gorgeous*,” she cooed, then she flapped her hands at the guard. “Shoo, Andrew. I have her from here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Andrew chuckled deeply, and he headed back to his station as the woman spun me out of my coat and motioned with one long pink nail to follow.

“Come along then! You’re a little late, but Mr. Hayworth is also running late, so it’s no sweat!” she called cheerily, leading the way to the elevators.

“No sweat,” I murmured under my breath as I plucked at the dress, trying to pull the mesh away from my torso and allow air to circulate. “Sure.”

“I’m Terri, by the way,” she smiled as we bundled into a large elevator covered in wooden panels decorated with various Christmas wreathes and twinkling lights all around the ceiling. Terri stared at them with a big smile. “Don’t you just love this time of year?”

“Yes,” I replied politely as the elevator swept upwards, leaving my stomach firmly on the ground floor.

Ten minutes later, I sat in a cozy waiting room. With dark red walls and a tan carpet, there was a rustic aura to the room. It contained four chairs, one of which I had sunken into gratefully when realizing the leather was cool, and a single dark oak table. Terri pressed an iced lemonade into my hand that I had drained instantly, hung up my coat, and then vanished into the elevator,

leaving me alone.

Nerves began to build the longer I was made to wait, but adrenaline still flooded my system, keeping the guilt for the theft at bay. I imagined what the rich little kids could be like to distract myself. Taking care of them surely would involve keeping them well-fed and entertained on their iPads, right?

“Miss Bradley?” asked a deep, slightly rough voice like the patter of small stones through the silk of a pouring waterfall. I turned in my seat and fixed a bright smile on my face.

“Yes?”

“I’m Jax Hayworth. This way, please.”

I saw him just as he introduced himself, and my smile faded as my jaw dropped.

Holy... shit.

SUMMER

“Please, take a seat.” Mr. Hayworth—Jax—cast one arm towards the half-moon black leather chair in front of his glass desk. I sank into it with my mind utterly quiet. I couldn’t think of anything to say, I was completely distracted by how *gorgeous* this man was.

Dressed in gray slacks, a white open-collared shirt with the sleeves rolled showing off muscular, tanned forearms, and a black vest, Jax looked simultaneously professional and like he belonged between the pages of a fashion magazine. Black curls sat loosely on top of his head with a few stray strands of hair curling around the frame of his forehead. When he took his own seat behind the desk, the moment he fixed those vibrant green eyes on me, I couldn’t breathe.

The air was warm, and soft Christmas music hummed quietly from a hidden speaker. Jax’s office was decorated much like the rest of the building, with fake snow on the windows, twinkling lights on the ceiling, and tinsel draped over several cupboards and cabinets. It was much more festive than I had expected for an office.

And Jax himself?

He was *stunning*. I was immediately relieved I hadn’t turned up here in my dowdy black dress.

Thick, plush lips pulled into a wide smile, revealing a row of perfectly white teeth, and my heart skipped a painful beat in my chest. I was screwed. This man was gorgeous, carved right out of a dream. I knew the second he asked me *anything*, I would cave and confess my darkest secrets just to get

him to flash me one of those dazzling smiles again.

It was only when his dark brows pulled down that I realized he was talking to me, and I hadn't heard a single word of it. I was too distracted from admiring every inch of his tall stature and muscles that strained against his shirt with every subtle movement.

"I'm so sorry," I gasped, pressing a hand to my breastbone. "I was just... it's hot, y'know? So I was um..." Words failed me.

Suddenly Jax was on his feet again. Apprehension lanced through me, and my mind flooded with a hundred scenarios of him throwing me out for being so unprofessional and not listening to him during an interview.

To my surprise, he busied himself at the oak cabinet that sat against one wall, then he approached me with a glass filled with ice and water that he offered to me the moment he was close enough.

"I'm so sorry," Jax apologized softly, "the heating might be turned up too high, and coming in from the cold like that can always throw things off a bit. Please, drink."

I took the glass and glimpsed various small scars scattered over his forearm. Rather than returning to his chair, Jax leaned back against the desk and crossed his thick arms over his chest. My mouth ran dry. I sipped the water desperately and could not take my eyes off of him. Even when I tried to look away, I was drawn back to his handsome face, square jaw, and those gemstones for eyes.

"As I was saying," Jax began again, and I forced myself to listen. "I'm Jax Hayworth. I'm the head of security here at Helix, so I've taken on the interview process for this particular job as it involves children, my own, and the children of the President and the CEO. I had asked if you were familiar with Helix?"

"Oh yes," I gasped quickly around my glass, having to wipe the corner of my mouth to catch a few chilled droplets. "Helix was the main provider at my last job so I'm familiar with some of your systems."

"You worked at the Belancio Hotel, correct?" Jax asked, his gaze unwavering. I sat rooted to the spot, certain that he could see beneath all my protective layers without me saying a word.

"Yes," I said shakily. "For three and a half years."

"Are you still employed there?"

"Oh... no, not anymore."

"Why?"

“Well... with the holidays coming and how *intense* work can be there, I was desperate for a change,” I lied as smoothly as possible. “Have you ever felt... so completely restless that doing something crazy is the only way to make yourself not feel so impossibly restricted?”

To my surprise, Jax laughed, and it was a warm sound like the first brush of sun on a hot summer’s day.

“Yes,” he smiled, “I know exactly what you mean. Well, I looked at your resume, and it seems you’re quite the job butterfly. Never staying in the same position for too long.”

“Like I said, restless.” Warmth flushed through my cheeks so I tore my gaze away from his intense eyes, looking down at my glass. Condensation rolled down the edge, chilling my fingertips as the rest of my body seemed to ramp up in temperature. I shifted my legs, watching the dress ripple as I crossed my ankles together.

“Do you have much childcare experience?” Jax asked.

“Yes, of course!” Another lie. “As you know, the Belancio is a high-end establishment, and guests often require in-house childcare. I was in charge of that, mostly.” It wasn’t a *complete* lie, I had been asked by a guest or two a few times over the years, so I had stretched it out on my resume to the best of my ability.

“Excellent.”

I glanced back up, and Jax was still watching me, the same warm smile on his face. His forearms flexed slightly, causing my mouth to run dry. In a sudden hot flash, my mind filled with the thought of those arms gripping me tight, throwing me down on the desk, and ravishing me to the point that there was nothing left of this dress to return to that store. That sudden fantasy sent heat flushing through my entire body, and I slowly licked my lips.

“We’re looking for someone to take on the care of three children, as I said, my own and my business partners while we holiday in the Alps for most of Christmas and the New Year at our own private chalet within a resort.” Jax inhaled deeply, and his shoulders lifted, enhancing the curve of muscle I glimpsed peeking through his open collar. “I know what it must look like, three rich guys unwilling to watch their kids over Christmas, but I assure you, this is new for us too.”

“I wasn’t!” I blurted out quickly, shifting forward in my seat an inch. “Sorry, I mean, I wasn’t thinking... anything. I don’t judge.” I flashed him a quick smile and Jax laughed.

“Sure. We usually don’t require outside help, but this year Helix is celebrating an important anniversary, and we have to throw a bunch of parties to celebrate and reassure shareholders—” Jax throws his hands up with a grin. “It’s a whole host of nonsense at a bad time, so we just need the extra help this year.”

“Oh, it’s completely understandable,” I reassured him quickly, finding an urge to soothe his concerns. “Everyone needs a little help occasionally, especially when an important goal coincides with a holiday.”

“Indeed.” Jax’s intense gaze flicked down me—or was that my imagination?—and my heart skipped a beat.

“Do you and your wife visit there every year?” I asked before I could stop myself. There was no way I was going to fantasize about a married man.

“There’s no Mrs. Hayworth,” Jax replied with a sudden tightness in his voice. Guilt bloomed through my chest immediately, despite my instant relief, and I clutched my glass tighter.

“I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s a fair question considering. There are mothers but no Mrs. to speak of for any of us,” Jax explained. “So you could say the children are a little lacking in the maternal area other than their grandmother. We would prefer a female nanny. Are you medically trained?”

“Oh yes.” I nodded quickly. “I’m medically certified in injury management, CPR, the works.” Thank goodness for Belancio’s health and safety department being a stickler for those sorts of things.

“Do you have experience with children outside of your previous employment?”

“Uh…” I hesitated, wracking my brain for anything else I could offer to show I was good for this job, but my silence dragged on for too long. Jax tutted softly with his tongue and smiled.

“Don’t worry, it’s not important. I was just curious. The more I know about your childcare experience, the more informed my decision can be.”

The moment he smiled, an urge swelled in my heart to find a way to constantly make him smile at me like that.

“At the hotel, I cared for children of all ages morning, noon, and night,” I said hurriedly, quickly padding out my experience in the best way I could with some fudged details. “I came up with so many games to play and ensured all the children had access to the best—and the safest toys. Meals! Meals were also catered to all children’s dietary requirements and safety

needs, and I really enjoyed doing that. And I'm... I'm medically certified..." I trailed off, realizing I was repeating myself.

"Nervous?" Jax asked with that warm smile.

I sighed regretfully and nodded. "Very."

"I'd tell you to relax, but I know how hard that can be," he chuckled, and my heart did an entire flip. "When I had my interview from here, I was sure I would pass out from how terrified I was."

"Are they scary?" I asked with a soft chuckle, his words gently calming my nerves. "The other bosses?"

"No, not to me at least. We're more like brothers now. Life has a funny way of doing that to you I find." Jax pushed up from the desk and leaned over me, filling my air with the gentle scent of sandalwood and vanilla. He took my glass, and I stared up at him, mapping out his face in case this was the one and only time I would see him.

"That's..." I swallowed hard. "That's good to know."

"Yes. Well, *if* you make it, the next stage of the interview will involve spending time with the children to see how they react to you. It's all good and well for me to pick someone, but if my daughter doesn't like who I picked... well, she gets the final word, you understand."

"Of course," I said hoarsely, then I kicked myself internally. *Keep it together, girl!*

Jax leaned away and set the glass on the desk behind him, then he clasped his hands and offered me a final dazzling smile.

"Well, thank you, Miss Bradley, I think I have all I need."

"Really?" Already? Oh no, if he cut the interview short, did that mean he could already tell I was unfit for the job?

"As the head of security, I can get a good view of people within thirty seconds of meeting them," he smiled warmly. "Thank you so much for coming in, and whatever the decision, you'll hear from me within a day or two. Plus, I have to go pick my daughter up."

"Oh! Right, of course!" I stood quickly, smoothed my hands down my dress, then turned on the spot, and headed for the door. Jax followed me, and suddenly the tingling warmth of his palm pressed lightly against my back, guiding me out. The touch seared right through my dress, imprinting in my skin, and it took all my focus not to lean into the touch.

"It was really *very* lovely to meet you," Jax repeated, his voice a tad lower when we reached the door.

“You too, thank you, and I look forward to your call!” Trying to stop myself from sounding so eager was impossible. Stepping into the waiting room, I made a beeline for my jacket as Jax stayed near his door.

“One more thing.”

“Yes?” I spun to face him, clutching my jacket in my hands.

“The security tag is still attached to your dress,” Jax smiled, casting his gaze down to the hem of my dress. “Watch it doesn’t get caught, would be a shame to ruin something so beautiful.”

I froze on the spot. Hot embarrassment flushed through me from head to toe, like stepping fully clothed into a burning hot shower. He saw the security tag?! Jax winked at me, then he retreated back into his office and closed the door leaving me standing there with my coat in hand and shame bright red on my cheeks.

Oh God. Could he tell that it was stolen? Or did he think I was just foolish for not removing the tag? Whatever he thought, one thing was certain.

If my weak resume and half-assed answers hadn’t lost me this job, then the security tag definitely had.

SUMMER

“**S**ummer Bradley. I’m here to see Jax Hayworth?”

Speaking into an intercom was always a daunting thing for me. It was so simple, but ever since my teens delivering pizza to scrape together some cash, I’d found it difficult. The flutter of nerves within my stomach grew when the intercom clicked, and I was met with silence.

Great.

Digging around in my jeans, I found my phone and quickly scrolled to the e-mail I’d received from Jax the day after that embarrassing interview. He had expressed interest in me proceeding to the next stage—I had no idea how I was able to pull that one off—and he invited me to spend some time with the children to see how well we would mesh together.

The entire situation was unreal, but my desperation to get out of the city before Felix tracked down my home fueled me to accept immediately. That and some liquid red wine courage.

I checked the address Jax had listed on the e-mail, then stepped back from the building and checked the golden name attached to the sandstone wall.

Yup, I was at the right place. Wrong time maybe?

Just as I scrolled further, the large black door swung open, and a stunning woman stood in the doorway. Her long, brown hair hung poker straight around her narrow, angular face. Her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses three times too big for her face and her curvaceous body was wrapped up in an elegant light blue wrap dress with a cinched belt below her breasts. She was *beautiful*, stealing all thoughts from my mind and air from my lungs.

I had turned up here in jeans and a T-shirt because Jax's instructions had mentioned lunch with the children, but I had never imagined it was a *formal* lunch. Underdressed, yet again.

"I fail to see what the problem is," the woman said shrilly into the phone pressed against her ear as she passed me without even a glance. "I'm not against taking it all if he pushes me, do you understand me?"

No sooner had the woman taken three steps out of the door than one of the numerous black cars in the driveway roared to life and she vanished inside it.

"Can I help you?"

A polite voice drew me from my thoughts, and I turned to face a man dressed in cream slacks and a light gray sweater. I glimpsed an earpiece when he turned his head to watch the departing car, then he fixed me with a cool gaze.

"Well?"

"Oh, yes." I stumbled over my words as my brain kicked into gear. "I'm here to see Jax? My name is Summer. Summer Bradley."

"Oh." With a wave of his hand, I was invited inside.

I stepped over the threshold and shoved my phone back into my jeans as my heart began to race furiously. I was so completely underdressed *yet again* that if that woman was anything to go by, I would stick out like a sore thumb. I had no idea how to talk my way out of this, and my mind raced as fast as my heart while I was led down a winding pale corridor.

"Summer!" Jax's voice drew me from my rampant thoughts, and I lifted my gaze from the wooden floor. Despite being dressed much more casually than when I last saw him, in loose slacks and a checked shirt, he still looked *hot*, and my lips parted uselessly.

"Find the place okay? Thanks, Charlie." Jax waved away the stranger and approached me with a warm smile. "I know it was a long drive, so I'll gladly reimburse your traveling."

"Oh no," I shook my head quickly. "I couldn't ask you to do that. It was only a cab ride." A very *expensive* cab ride.

"I insist," Jax grinned.

"Did..." I hesitated and he raised one brow. "Did you pay for the dress too? Because I went to give it back—I mean I went to return it, but they refused me saying it had been paid for."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jax winked at me, then he

cast an arm wide. “Ready to meet the kids?”

I wanted to press him further because I had returned to that store with a detailed excuse for taking the dress, but they refused to accept it. Now it hung in my closet like a confusing secret, and Jax had been the only person I’d met who had seen me in that dress.

Before I could ask more, Jax turned and headed down another hallway, so I followed quickly.

“I saw that woman, I’m so sorry if I’m underdressed. I didn’t realize this was a formal thing.”

“Nonsense,” Jax smiled, “there’s nothing formal here.”

Jax stepped into the conservatory and immediately, a blur of bright blue and black flew across the room and crashed right into Jax’s legs.

“Daddy!” squealed the child and Jax laughed, ducking to scoop the child up into his arms. She had the same black curls on her head, but they were much longer, pinned into two pigtails, and she wore a bright blue dress dotted with dinosaurs.

“Hey sweetie,” Jax grinned, pressing a wet kiss to the child’s cheek much to her squealing disgust.

“Summer, this is Bonnie, my daughter.”

Bonnie turned her brown eyes on me and immediately fell silent, shoving her thumb into her mouth as she stared at me.

“Hi Bonnie,” I smiled as warmly as possible despite my racing heart. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“Bonnie, do you want to tell Summer how old you are?” Jax prompted.

Bonnie immediately shook her head, curls bouncing.

“She’s four and a half,” stated a matter-of-fact voice, and I glanced down in surprise to see another child, a boy, staring up at me with dark blue eyes and dark skin. “I’m five,” the child stated, and he stuck a small hand out to me. “I’m Kane.”

He was so *formal* that I almost didn’t know how to react. Quickly, I dropped to my haunches and shook the offered small hand. “Hi, Kane, it’s nice to meet you.”

“And that’s Ava.” Kane turned and pointed towards a third child. A small girl with short auburn hair who was leaning over a small, plastic table, crayon in hand and her tongue sticking out in concentration. “She’s four.”

It took until I looked at Ava for me to click how different this room was. It was a normal family room with a television in one corner, some

bookshelves against one wall, and several tables strewn with various colorful toys and books. The table Ava was scribbling on had multicolored legs, and from the ceiling hung rows and rows of paper streamers. Nothing in here screamed *billionaire* and it certainly didn't fit with how luxurious this house had looked from the outside.

"Hi, Ava," I called after processing the room. "My name is Summer."

Ava's head snapped up, and she looked over at me with her tongue still sticking out; then she returned to her drawing which caused Jax to chuckle, reminding me he was still here.

"Ava is Luke's daughter," Jax explained, "and Kane is Theo's son. They're both around here somewhere but there were some issues with the flight plan or something."

I smiled brightly at him and Bonnie, who still remained silent in his arms. "That's no problem. Is there anything in particular you'd like me to do?"

"Not at all." Jax flashed me one of those dazzling smiles, and my slowly calming heart melted. What was it about a handsome man carrying a child that triggered my mind to fill with fantasies of another life? I had scraped by so far with a threadbare family, something like this wasn't for me. And yet, in that moment, I craved it.

"We just want you to spend time with the children, get to know them, and see how they react to you. Lunch will be served soon so you'll get to see how chaotic that is, but other than that..." Jax trailed off as his attention switched to Bonnie, who started to whine softly. "I'm sorry, she's a little shy around strangers."

"That's okay," I reassured her quickly, softening my smile. "I like your dress, Bonnie. I like dinosaurs too."

Bonnie continued to watch me with wide, dark eyes, so I moved closer to Kane, wanting to give her some space.

"So, Kane." I smiled down at him, and he stared at me with awe-filled eyes as if he had never seen someone like me. I kneeled down to his level and leaned close. "Do you want to show me what toy you want to sneak on holiday without your dad knowing?"

"Yes!" Kane burst into action and raced across the room to a colorful toy chest. I quickly discarded my coat and bag and followed. When I reached him, Kane shuffled close with his small hands clutching something to his chest.

"This is it?" I whispered.

“Yeah,” Kane whispered back. “But my dad says I can’t take it because it’s not allowed.”

“Can I see?”

Kane glanced around me to Jax, who was sitting on one of the couches with Bonnie, talking softly with her. Kane nodded and opened his hands. Inside was a well-worn Batman action figure, and I raised my brow, surprised.

“Did Dad say why you can’t bring it on holiday with you?” I asked softly.

Kane sighed dramatically. “Dad says I’m already taking too many Batman toys and that this one is small and will get lost. But I’m small, and *I* won’t get lost.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and placed my hand over Kane’s to cover the toy. “Well... I can’t make any promises, but if you’re already taking a lot of Batman toys, surely one more can’t hurt, right?”

Kane’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“No promises,” I repeated, “but there might be space in my case. You like Batman then?”

Kane nodded quickly and beamed at me. “He’s my favorite,” he declared, “because he helps people, an’ that’s what my dad does.”

“Oh, so your dad might be Batman?”

“Maybe, but it’s a secret.” Kane pressed a small finger to his lips. “Secret.”

“Of course.” I nodded seriously, then I glanced over to Ava, who was still furiously scribbling at the desk. This close, I could see that she was coloring what looked like a gigantic worm, although it was difficult to tell with all the bright colors.

“Hi Ava, what are you drawing?”

“It’s a snail,” Ava declared sweetly. I studied the drawing again, and the urge to correct her rose up. I refrained.

“Are you sure?”

Ava lifted her head and fixed me with a stare, scrunching her nose. “It’s going to turn into a snail,” she said firmly, “so I’m making it look pretty so the shell will be pretty.”

“Ah,” I nodded. “I see.” Ava returned to her drawing, and I glanced around the room as uncertainty took me. I needed anything that could shake off my nerves, break the ice, and give me a chance to show Jax that I was capable.

I caught sight of the perfect thing on the top shelf of the bookshelf, and I wandered closer.

“So, does anyone here like board games?” I asked casually.

“Me!” yelled Kane from where he was dive-bombing Batman off the windowsill.

“Me too!” Ava declared. “But Uncle Jax says only for special occasions.”

“Oh really?” I glanced over to Jax, who was watching me over the top of Bonnie’s curls. “Well, I think Uncle Jax is just scared of losing because he knows you would beat him.” Laughter rose up from the children as I grasped the box off the top shelf and turned to him.

“What do you say, Uncle Jax? Are you scared to be beaten at Twister?”

“Oh,” Jax laughed and stood. “I’m a Twister pro. Prepare to be *decimated*.”

Within ten minutes, we had moved the furniture to clear space for the mat, and Bonnie had taken charge of the spinner since she was still too shy to play. My heart raced, but it wasn’t from nerves this time. Instead, it was from the strain of keeping my left hand on yellow and my right leg on blue while Ava giggled underneath me at how easy her Twist was.

“Kane,” Bonnie declared from her perch on the couch. “Left leg to green!”

Kane twisted down near my legs, groaned dramatically, and began stretching his short leg across the mat. “I can’t,” he grumbled, “I can’t reach!”

“Come on, Kane,” I cheered him on from my upside-down position. “You’re so close to beating Uncle Jax!”

Jax was just as precariously balanced as I was, even more so since parts of Ava and Kane were underneath him, and he shot me a teasing, withering glance.

“You’ve started a war,” Jax chuckled. “I have a reputation to uphold.”

“Oh sure,” I groaned, “reputation for *loser* maybe.”

Laughter bubbled around me as Kane made his green circle and cheered.

“I’m amazing!” he cried, and Jax twisted his head to look at him.

“Yeah, you are kiddo.”

“Daddy,” Bonnie declared. “Right hand to yellow.”

“Oh... fiddlesticks,” Jax grumbled, and I laughed at his family-friendly word.

“Is that losing in your future?” I teased, puffing my cheeks to try and cool

down my flushing face as my hair draped down and created a blanket of warmth.

“Oh, I’m a pro!” Jax laughed as he threw his right hand forward. It landed directly on my own, sharing my yellow circle. His touch was electric, and a wave of excitement flashed through me from head to toe. Here I was, playing Twister like I was part of some normal family, and underneath it all, I was still caught up on how attractive Jax was.

It was almost too much.

“Summer,” Bonnie said shyly as she spun the dial. “Left foot, red.”

“Oh no,” I gasped, fighting the distraction of Jax’s hand against my own. “Here I come, Kane!”

For a second, I managed to drag my foot over to a red circle near Kane, but all it took was for Ava to burst into giggles when my hair tickled her, for all my strength to leave my limbs.

“Nooo!” I yelled dramatically as I wobbled and threw myself into Jax to avoid falling on either of the children.

“Yes!” Cheers rose from the children as Jax and I rolled off the mat and onto the floor, laughing.

Jax’s thick arm wrapped around my waist, stopping me from rolling too far, and he groaned desperately and released an even more dramatic, “Nooo!”

“Adults lose!” Kane yelled, climbing to his feet and starting to dance.

“He’s right,” I laughed, bracing my hands on Jax’s chest and pushing myself up. “Adults lose.”

“Uncle Jax is a loser,” Ava giggled as she rolled on the mat. Jax held my gaze long enough for my heart to skip, then I quickly climbed off of him and brushed my hair back from my face.

“It’s true,” I grinned, “kids are just better.” I glanced at Bonnie and offered her a softer smile. “Thanks being the spinner, Bonnie. That was awesome!”

She nodded and shoved her fingers back into her mouth.

“Again, again!” squealed Ava, and I leaned down to scoop her up from the mat, ignoring the prickle of sweat down my spine.

“Nope, it’s lunchtime,” Jax said as he stood and dragged a hand through his black curls. “Twister is a hungry sport.”

“Want me to get it?” I asked and set Ava down on the couch next to Bonnie.

“That would be great,” Jax replied as he started to fold up the mat.

“Could you take Bonnie’s cup and get her some fresh juice too? The kitchen is through the door on the left.”

“Of course!”

That had been more fun than I expected, and my hand still tingled from Jax’s touch. I grabbed Bonnie’s orange cup from the table and left the room—only to crash into a broad, rock-hard chest.

The cup slipped from my hand, and what was left of Bonnie’s dark drink splashed up and onto the shirt of whoever I had crashed into.

“Oh my God—I’m so sorry!” I gasped, scrambling to catch the cup as the crimson stain spread before my eyes. I glanced up and froze as a pair of warm hazel eyes set in a handsome face stared down at me.

“You must be Summer,” the man chuckled in a voice so deep the vibrations rattled my bones. “I’m Luke.”

LUKE

“I am so sorry, oh my God!”

Summer stared up at me with horrified, ocean-blue eyes, and her pretty pink lips pulled into the perfect O as the cold remains of whatever had been in that cup soaked into my T-shirt. Whatever minimal irritation that had sparked at the moment of collision promptly melted as I admired her. She was *beautiful* and her vibrant eyes seemed to deepen as the flush on her cheeks darkened.

“I’ll—I can get it dry cleaned or something—” Summer gasped and reached forward with one hand, lightly touching my chest before she snatched it back. “I’m so sorry!”

“Relax,” I soothed with a similar tone I used on Ava when needed. “It’s just juice. It’ll wash out. Come on.”

With a hand wave, I indicated for her to follow and led the way into the kitchen. It wasn’t the first time I’d been covered in juice, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last. Weaving around the counters, I approached the sink and flipped the hot tap onto full, then I removed my T-shirt in one swift move and dumped it into the hot water to soak. Tackling the spill immediately would definitely reduce the stain.

A small gasp rose up from behind me, so I turned, and Summer was doing a terrible job of looking *everywhere* except at me. She stood near one of the island counters, clutching the cup to her chest. There was something adorable about the sight. She was clearly trying to be polite about my now topless state, but the crimson splash on her cheeks was not fading.

“I’m Luke, by the way,” I reintroduced myself.

“I’m Summer,” she gasped softly. “I’m—I’m here for the nanny position, although I suppose you would already know that...” Summer trailed off, and her cheeks darkened a shade further. It was cruel to put her on the spot like this when she was clearly already worked up, but she looked so cute I couldn’t resist.

“Bonnie likes fruit juice; there’s some in the fridge.” I pointed and glanced back at my soaking shirt. “And yes, Jax told me all about you.”

He had been interviewing people for two weeks, so when the call came through that he had found someone he thought would be a good fit, I hadn’t expected someone as beautiful as the woman standing before me refilling Bonnie’s favorite cup. There was no way Jax would pick someone *purely* because of their looks, he was smarter than that, but I was pleased nonetheless.

“Ava is your daughter?” Summer asked, keeping her head down and face hidden behind a curtain of brown hair.

“Yes, I hope she isn’t too much trouble.”

“Oh, not at all!” Summer’s head darted up, and she finally looked at me after a not-so-subtle glance at my bare chest. “She’s an absolute dear. We were just playing Twister; she was adorable.”

I smiled brightly and leaned against the counter, finally turning off the tap as I admired Summer’s curvaceous body and how sexy she looked in a simple pair of jeans and a rumpled T-shirt.

“Ah, did you win?”

“Oh no,” Summer shook her head and finally laughed, a soft sound that still contained a little nervous strain. “Bonnie was on fire with the dial, and Jax and I fell.”

“You got Jax to play?” I couldn’t keep the surprise from my voice. Marina had been here; I’d heard her shrill voice echoing in the halls. Jax’s wife—soon to be ex-wife—was a horrible presence, and I couldn’t stand her. Usually after her visits, Jax would hit the gym to work out the tension.

“Yup, should I not have?” Summer’s eyes went wide. “Does he have some sort of medical condition I should know about?”

“Oh, no,” I laughed softly, “he’s just usually more... strict, I guess. That’s not even a great word for it, but you know how it is. It can be tough to get people to loosen up.”

“Sure.” When Summer smiled softer then, I glimpsed a scar gracing her

lower lip that accentuated the pout of her lips. It struck me how kissable they were, and I quickly reined in my thoughts. She was *beautiful*, but she was here to work.

“I hope you don’t think too poorly of us, for needing a nanny,” I said as I pushed off the counter and moved toward the colorful plastic trays set out on the counter filled with lunch for the kids.

“Oh, not at all!” Summer insisted as she stepped up to the counter too. “There’s no shame in needing help.”

“People see fathers needing assistance as some sort of failure, so it plays in the back of my mind sometimes, y’know? Especially this year. It’s Helix’s fifteenth anniversary, and with all the events we have to coordinate, we do need the help.” Reaching for Summer, I gently took the cup from her and placed it on Bonnie’s orange tray.

“Sometimes things overlap,” Summer smiled up at me, and the red in her cheeks faded. “I know that all too well. Seriously, think nothing of it. I don’t want to *presume* that I’ll get the position, but from what I’ve seen, the children are happy and healthy, so you all obviously do an amazing job on top of running a huge company.”

“Are you trying to butter me up?” I grinned and collected two juice boxes from the cupboard. “Increase your chances of getting hired?”

“Is it working?” Summer grinned.

“Maybe.” Placing the juice boxes on the other two trays, I held Summer’s gaze; this time, she didn’t look away. With her cheeks no longer flushed, she looked more in control after our collision, so I placed both hands on the counter to lean closer to her.

“What about you, though?”

“Me?” she asked, gently tucking some loose strands of hair behind her ear.

“Not many people are willing to leave their family at Christmas to tend to someone else’s.”

“Oh.” Summer’s gaze fell away, and she shrugged her narrow shoulders. “I don’t have anyone. My mother passed when I was young, and I haven’t seen my father in ten or so years.”

“Oh.” My heart clenched suddenly, and I immediately regretted asking, especially during a job interview. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be,” she smiled strongly, but a shadow lingered in her eyes. “Trust me, if I’m successful here, you’re saving me from a frozen dinner and trash

TV—”

“Luke!” scolded a sudden familiar voice, and I leaned away from Summer. “Put on a damn shirt boy!”

My mother stood in the doorway with her wrinkled face twisted into a scowl and her gray curls falling loose from her pins as she shook her head.

“Hi, Mom,” I grinned, glancing at Summer. “Summer, this is Tabitha, my mother. She’ll be coming on holiday with us. She’s Ava’s grandmother.”

“Granny to all three of those darlings,” she corrected sharply and strode into the kitchen at a speed unbecoming of her age.

“Hello, Tabitha,” Summer smiled nervously and wiped her hands down her jeans before she held one out. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“Humph,” my mother grumbled and ignored Summer’s hand, making a beeline for the trays instead. “The children will be starving; we can’t dally with their meals like this.”

“Oh, of course!” Summer snapped into action and scooped up two of the trays, balancing them carefully in her hands. “I’m sorry!”

With that, Summer was gone, darting out of the kitchen with the food in hand.

“Mom,” I sighed softly, “remember that talk we had about being nice to the people we bring in to help us?”

“I remember,” my mother remarked tartly. “I don’t remember the part about interviewing her topless though, hmm?” She scowled sharply at me, then it melted into a warm, familiar smile. My mother could be prickly, but she was just protective. With everything me and the guys had been through, she had taken all the children under her wing and given up a good part of her life to help me raise Ava after my accident.

I owed her more than I could ever repay.

“There was a juice incident,” I explained, laughing, “but I understand. I’m sorry.”

“That poor girl,” my mother tutted, picking up the third tray. “She has no idea what she’s in for, does she? Well, I expect you to act like a perfect gentleman, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Mother,” I grinned and leaned over, pressing a kiss to her powdered cheek. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

“I mean it,” she scolded, “I know what you boys are like. You’re bleeding hearts and wandering dicks always get us into trouble.”

“Mom!”

She flashed me a cheeky smile and vanished from the kitchen with the third tray, leaving me to my thoughts.

She was right, in a way. All three of us had been in painful situations because our hearts overruled our minds, but that had nothing to do with Summer. She was beautiful and warm, but that didn't mean anything, right?

And yet, as I tried to reassure myself of that, one thing was already crystal clear in my mind.

I liked her. And as long as the children liked her, she was coming with us. Christmas suddenly got a whole lot more interesting.

SUMMER

With my suitcase pressed firmly against my calf, I leaned forward onto the counter and lightly drummed my fingers on the desk. In the course of a week, Jax had offered me the nanny position, and after a whole host of short meetings about security, a refresher on health and safety, and a check-up at a doctor to ensure I was up to date on my vaccinations and boosters for travel; it was time.

I'd never flown this far before, and the excitement of the trip was the only thing keeping everything else at bay. Felix had somehow gotten ahold of my number, likely from my old work with how much Sophie hated me, and he'd been blowing up my message box with all sorts of threats and promises of destroying every aspect of my life.

Little did he know, I didn't have much of a life to speak of. Glancing around the check-in desk as the clerk checked my plane ticket, I was struck by just how many people there were. Families and couples all preparing to set off on their holidays, friend groups excited for their first trips away, and children already over-stimulated by the noise and bustle. It was exactly like the hotel, only a lot colder.

"I'm so sorry," the clerk said, drawing my attention back to her. "But I can't find your flight."

My heart dropped, and I straightened up. "What? What do you mean? Has it been canceled?"

"No... no it just doesn't appear to be on the system at all." She was a short woman with her blonde hair pulled into a tight bun and a pair of wire

spectacles balanced on the end of her button nose. “Can I ask where you got this ticket?”

Slowly my heart began to pound like a drum. “It was given to me,” I said carefully, “through e-mail. From my uh... my employer.”

“I’m sorry,” the clerk apologized and shot me a weak smile. “I haven’t been here long, I might be missing something. Let me just call upstairs.”

As she stepped away to make the call, a cavern suddenly split open in my chest, and all the anxieties I had ignored in my determination to get out of the city spilled forth.

This was too good to be true. I had known that in the back of my mind. Gorgeous fathers wanting to give me an all-expenses paid trip to go with them for the holiday and provide extra childcare while paying me an obscene amount of money; it was a dream, some sort of scam, surely. The noise of the airport rose up around me, the crowds swelling in an uncomfortable heat, and the overhead voices calling gates and passengers became deafening.

Sweat pulsed down my spine, and my heart pounded harder. I watched her talk in a hushed tone when suddenly a grounding, warm hand landed on the small of my back, and a tall, heated presence loomed over me.

“It’s a private flight,” a deep voice rumbled behind me, “so it won’t be on this system.”

Every instinct to flinch burst through me like a rocket, and I spun around, bracing back against the desk as I came face-to-face with a tall, handsome man. Light brown hair gathered in a quiff on top of his head, accentuated by the shaved sides. Deep blue eyes stared at me from a handsome, tanned face, and his jaw was covered in a short, well-maintained beard. His lips pulled into a small, warm smile, crinkling the edges of his eyes.

“Summer, right? I wasn’t sure I would recognize you.”

“Who are you?” I snapped harsher than I intended, giving some of my building anxiety an outlet.

The man chuckled softly and held out one large hand. Peeking through the sleeve of his puffer jacket was a colorful flower tattoo, and it caught my eye immediately.

“I’m Theo, Theo Moore. CEO of Helix. I had to take care of some stuff at the office, so I booked myself one when I saw you’d requested a later flight.”

“Oh!” Foolishness swept through me, and my cheeks flushed as I grasped his hand. His palm was warm, his grip firm, and the flush that swept across my cheeks continued south, settling in my core. “Your son is...?”

“Kane,” Theo replied, and his smile widened. “Testing me?”

“Sort of,” I laughed. After all, I had never met Theo. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Theo said, dropping his hand back to the rucksack on his shoulder. “That’s the kind of cautiousness I want from the person looking after my son.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” came the clerk’s voice. I turned to face her, trying to quiet the racing thumps of my heart. “Your ticket is for a private charter which isn’t located on this system, but I’ve called security, and they’ll happily escort you to the gate.”

“Thank you so much!” I accepted my ticket back and the clerk’s gaze drifted behind me to Theo, her cheeks flushing pink. “Have a safe flight. Can I help you, sir?”

“No, thank you,” Theo replied, “I’m with her.”

“Oh.” Her eyes darted between the two of us, then she pushed her glasses up her nose and turned back to the line. “Next, please!”

I leaned down to grab my suitcase, but Theo got there first, picking it up with such ease that I couldn’t stop myself from wondering just what kind of muscles were hidden underneath that jacket. Why were all three of these men so fucking hot?

“Ever been to the Alps before?” Theo asked as we stepped to the side to wait on the escort.

“Nope.” I shook my head, fighting to keep my gaze on the crowds and the sickeningly bright lights so I didn’t gawk at Theo like a teenager. “Never.”

“Ohh,” Theo chuckled deeply, the sound warm like honey. “You are in for a treat.”



No one had told me that *private charter* was just another word for obscene luxury. The jet’s inside was so large it hardly qualified for *plane* status. Inside, the walls were lined with marbled wood, with thick curtains gracing each window. The soft carpet looked far too rich to be stepped on, and just a glimpse of it gave me the urge to tiptoe to my seat. The rows were minimal,

with a few luxurious cream leather seats dotted between white and black tables. Each was graced with an attached glass display filled with small flowers, ornate eggs, and foliage. They were quite beautiful.

The steward had taken my jacket upon entering and sat me in one of the incredible chairs, then listed off a series of meals that were so fancy I had no idea what I ended up ordering, much to Theo's amusement. The next hour was a blur of safety instructions, belts, and a take-off that was so smooth I didn't realize we were even in the air until I looked outside and saw the twinkling city that we were leaving behind.

Leaving *Felix* behind.

In the air, the steward took me through the several entertainment systems on board while Theo busied himself with a laptop, commenting that sometimes the work was never-ending. To occupy myself, I stuck on a channel showing *Hallmark* Christmas movies and relaxed back into the seat, my mind racing.

Me... Summer Bradley... was on the way to the Alps to nanny for Billionaires.

My father called me a failure and a disgrace up until the day I had run away. For years, I had blamed him for my collapse into abusing all the drugs and alcohol I could handle. I blamed him for sending me into the arms of Felix, the bad-boy man of my dreams who had quickly morphed into a tyrant of pain and terror. After the *accident* when Felix was sent to prison, and I started to turn my life around, I stopped blaming my father and began to pity him. He'd been given a terrible hand in life, and he had done the worst with it. Grief did horrible things to people.

Sometimes the hand we get dealt in life paves a road we can't get off, and it was sheer luck and determination that I had managed to drag myself out of the streets and into a decent job with clean living. Even with all of my efforts, I had very little to show for it. No friends to turn to, no family to call when the ball dropped on New Year's, and no partner could get close enough to the damage Felix had left behind in my soul.

How did I end up here?

"Drink." Suddenly a glass filled with something orange, topped with cherries and a mint leaf, was placed in front of my nose. I followed the arm—now bare and displaying the full beauty of the floral arrangement tattoo—up to Theo, who was standing over me, the same drink in his other hand. "You've been glaring at the screen for nearly half an hour, so either you're

really against festive romances or you have something very intense on your mind.”

“Oh.” I chuckled softly and took the drink as warmth filled my cheeks. “Sorry, I was just... thinking.”

“Care to share?” Theo dropped into the chair next to me, his muscular bulk filling the chair. Behind him, the laptop was closed and the curtains drawn.

“Um... thinking about life?” I mused softly.

“Life makes you frown like that?” Theo suddenly frowned deeply, his dark brows pulling low as he scrunched up his entire face. Unable to contain my laughter, I balanced the glass on the armrest and a sigh escaped.

“Sometimes. I guess... I don’t know if this is appropriate to tell your employer,” I chuckled, “but I guess this doesn’t feel real.”

“The plane? Or the job?”

“*Everything*. Our worlds are so different, and it’s just a bit of a struggle to connect the two in my head. This past week or so has been a whirlwind, and I think it’s left me feeling breathless deep down.” I lifted the glass to my lips and sipped the fruity drink. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for being honest,” Theo replied quietly. “I understand. Maybe not to the same degree, but I didn’t grow up with a lot. I was an instant noodle kind of guy in college so when Helix took off, it was like a rocket. It just kept going, and Luke and I often felt like we were along for the ride.”

“You created this company in college?” I asked softly, taking the time to truly map out the features of Theo’s face. He was incredibly handsome, dashing so, like out of an old movie. And the way he spoke was so warm and calm that I half wished I could capture it just to fall asleep to his soothing tones.

“Yes. It started as just a simple internet security thing, but like the idiot teenagers we were, we kept pushing it. It got bigger and better, then we expanded into building security, personnel, and more. Suddenly we were in the top one thousand of security companies, then the top one hundred, and then the top ten. All the while, I was trying to figure out how the hell it even happened.” His entire face lit up when he laughed, and a shared warmth bloomed deep within my chest.

“It must have been incredible,” I said.

“It was. But... sometimes, I still feel out of my depth. I’m just pretending

to know what I'm doing, pretending I fit in here with all the other golden spoon boys. Kane keeps me pretty grounded most days, but even then, I feel like I'm just *acting* like his father rather than being one. So I understand the surreal disconnect you're talking about. Sorry if that sounded like I was bragging." Theo's head dipped, and how he looked away reminded me of Bonnie and her shyness.

"It was a little braggy," I teased, "but... thank you. My life has never been anything like this." Sweeping an arm around the cabin, I took another drink. "Only in my dreams. And I still can't believe I got the job."

"Do you want to know why?" Theo fixed me with an even stare, and I nodded as nerves knotted suddenly in my gut.

"Jax is good at reading people. He said you were the first candidate that didn't try to impress him with company knowledge or even ask questions about myself or Luke. He wanted to hire you because you seemed interested in the children rather than the billionaires behind them."

My heart skittered in my chest as Theo spoke.

"Luke's thoughts finalized it. He said you looked like a normal human, ready to get mucky with kids. You didn't dress to impress, and the kids *loved* the games you played. Ava hasn't stopped talking about you since you read *The Princess and the Frog* and did all the voices. So, you got the job just by being you."

I hadn't expected such an honest answer, and the warmth in my cheeks increased tenfold.

"Here I thought it was my glowing references and my *peak* humor," I replied with a grin, my voice slightly strained.

"That too," Theo chuckled deeply. "But... I hope that helps ease your fear enough for you to enjoy yourself while you're with us."

"I appreciate it." His honesty, his kindness, his sincerity. All of it. He was an incredibly charming man.

"Anytime." His eyes twinkled over the edge of his glass, still studying me as I drained my own glass, and then nature called.

"Sorry, excuse me." Unclipping the belt, I stood up and began to ease myself past Theo, but just as I was about to step into the aisle, the plane suddenly lurched violently to one side. I was thrown into Theo's lap with a cry of fright. His thick arms immediately circled around me, holding me tight to his broad chest as the plane lurched again, and my stomach backflipped in fright. I clutched at Theo, my hands turning to claws as I desperately gripped

on and buried my face into his strong neck. The scents of ginger and cotton tickled my nose when the plane lurched once more and then finally settled.

“My sincerest apologies,” crackled the pilot’s voice over the intercom. “We hit an unexpected air pocket but are all good now. It’ll be smooth sailing. My apologies again.”

“Oh my *God*,” I gasped softly. I slowly lifted my head. Theo pressed a warm hand to my cheek, and I would have melted had every nerve not been pounding with alarm.

“Are you alright?” he asked firmly.

I met his gaze and then registered that I was in his lap, my hands wound into his shirt, and his arm still firm around my waist. This close, he was even more beautiful.

“Yes,” I gasped, “I’m alright. Scared the shit out of me, though.”

“They can be intense if you’re not used to them,” Theo said softly, and his eyes skimmed over me from top to bottom. Maybe it was my imagination, but I was sure they lingered on my lips. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. “Although now I *definitely* have to pee.”

“Oh!” Theo laughed and immediately released me.

I climbed out of his lap and skirted past the steward who had come to check on us. My legs were like jelly as I headed toward the bathroom, but as Theo’s touch lingered over my body and his voice rang in my ears, I wasn’t sure it was entirely fear that had my body quivering.

Being so close to him was exhilarating. Spending the holidays with him and the others? How was I supposed to keep my hands to myself the entire time? It was too bold to even entertain such a thought, but then again... I was on holiday and far away from everything.

If an opportunity arose, who was I to say no?

SUMMER

The drive from the airport to the resort was a long one, and conversation between Theo and me died as exhaustion took hold of us both. By the time we had switched cars and been driven up to the private chalet by security, it was a struggle to keep my eyes open, but I pushed through right until the chalet itself came into view.

Nestled into the side of the mountain and surrounded by crisp white snow that twinkled like a thousand stars wherever the light touch it, was the single most stunning building I had ever seen. Rolling log walls and a high-arched roof swept up toward the sky, catching the stars themselves as the snow glistened on the rafters. The carved wooden pillars of the porch shone brightly, wrapped in multicolored lights highlighting the cleared driveway and the other cars already parked there. Solid wood railings draped across the porch and surrounding balcony, and the large bay windows bled warmth from the cozy light within. The snow-covered pine trees finished off the effect of this Christmas card come to life, and I couldn't hide the awe on my face even if I wanted to.

"Beautiful, right?" Theo grinned at me as we climbed out of the car.

"Why not stay here all year round?" I said softly. "I feel like my soul will be cleansed just by breathing this air." Sharp and cold, it filled my lungs like shards of glass, but I welcomed the sensation. It was thrilling.

"I would if I could," Theo grinned, and he patted my shoulder. "I don't know about you, but I'm dying for my bed."

Leaving the guards to bring in the cases, Theo led the way up the wooden

staircase and knocked twice on the gigantic front door. It was an ornate, dark wood with colorful stained glass in the window. A large festive wreath hung from the bottom of the window, and what little snow had gathered on the leaves drifted off when Theo pushed the door open.

We were hit with a wall of heat and light as Christmas music drifted through the air, mingling with the laughter and cheers of the children. Stepping inside, we both stamped our feet to rid our boots of lingering snow and walked into the large lounge. To my right sat an incredible stone fireplace that was lit and blazing away behind several layers of protective glass and frame. A gigantic fir Christmas tree took up most of the left corner. It was covered in a thousand colorful twinkling lights, tinsel, and more decorations than I could count.

At its base sat Luke, kneeling with Ava in his lap as they placed another decoration on the tree together. Jax was nearby with Kane on his shoulders, helping him place a decoration further up while Bonnie danced around Tabitha's legs with a roll of tinsel and tiny reindeer antlers on her head.

"Daddy!" Kane yelled the moment he caught sight of Theo. Everyone turned to look at us, and Theo threw himself forward, catching Kane as he toppled from Jax's shoulders. He immediately bundled his son up in his arms with a happy groan.

"Kane! God, I missed you!"

"Hi, Uncle Theo," Bonnie and Ava cheered in unison, then Bonnie caught sight of me and fell silent, hiding behind Tabitha's skirt.

"Summer!" Jax flashed me a brilliant smile, and my heart leaped. "I trust the journey wasn't too terrible?"

"Theo is an awful traveling companion," Luke chuckled. As he climbed to his feet, I noticed that he seemed to be having trouble with his right leg, but I quickly realized it was probably a cramp from kneeling on the ground.

"Shut up," Theo groaned, his voice muffled as he tickled and hugged Kane.

"He was perfectly pleasant," I smiled. Suddenly, Ava came running toward me with her arms outstretched.

"Hi there," I said as I crouched down to accept her hug.

"Hi!" Ava declared loudly, "Would—would you be able to read to me again? Please? Daddy tried, but he doesn't do it right!"

"You ruined her with those voices," Luke chuckled. "How can I compete?"

My instinct was to agree despite how tired I was, but just as I opened my mouth to say so, Tabitha appeared in a whirlwind of skirts, pulling her cardigan tight over her shoulders.

“Come now, Ava. Summer has had a long trip and Uncle Theo. You were only allowed to stay up until they got here, so come on, time to wash up and head to bed.”

A long, low groan erupted from all three children and Tabitha tutted sharply.

“Don’t make me call Santa! I have him on speed dial, remember?”

Bonnie scurried after Tabitha and, after sending me a forlorn glance, Ava did the same while Kane remained in Theo’s arms and was carried out.

Luke followed after giving me a warm smile, leaving Jax to approach, and he nudged my arm with his elbow.

“See? It’s not so bad,” he grinned. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room. You have the night to relax, so do what you need to do to settle in.”

“This place is amazing,” I gasped and followed Jax up the large staircase connecting the lounge with the upper-floor balcony. From there, Jax led me down a corridor, and I pulled the zipper down on my coat as the warmth built.

“It’s pretty insane, isn’t it?” he grinned. “The kids love it, and the isolation is usually fantastic. Not this year though.”

“The anniversary?” I prompted, searching through my tired mind for the details.

“Yeah. Luckily, this chalet is part of a resort, so we don’t need to hold anything directly here, which I like. It keeps it away from the children, y’know?”

“Of course,” I nodded, stifling a yawn. My eyes were heavier than I would’ve liked when we reached my room, but my initial sleepiness dissipated. Maybe it was seeing Jax again or knowing that I had to search through my suitcases for all my toiletries.

“Here you are. We have you near the children just in case anything happens at night; they’re down the hall through that door,” Jax pointed, “but it should all be smooth sailing. So…” He turned back to me and fixed those gemstone eyes on me. Such a look only added to the lingering heat that had settled in my core ever since Theo’s arms had wrapped around me.

“So,” I smiled, “thank you. For everything.”

“Just hold onto that the first time you face a trio tantrum,” Jax laughed.

He patted my arm once more and stepped away. “Goodnight, Summer.”

“Goodnight, Jax.”

It took me less than an hour to unpack my suitcases. My bedroom was stunning, with a warm oak palette throughout the furniture, from the four-poster bed draped in Egyptian cotton sheets to the polished oak dresser and wardrobe that could surely hold my entire *life's* worth of clothing. The dressing table showed its age with some faded corners and a few speckles on the mirror, but I liked it; it added to the charm of the place. The only thing that was missing was an en suite bathroom, and I was desperate to wash off the stank of the flight and travel.

Grabbing my toiletries bag, I headed out of the room and padded barefoot down the corridor in search of the bathroom. The chalet was soft and silent, with the subtle noises of the wind outside creeping through the walls. The music continued to play, although it was considerably fainter. This place was a maze. The more I wandered, the more lost I became. It wasn't until I decided to give up and return to my room that I realized I didn't know how to get back.

Calling out to someone felt like a stupid idea, given that the children were going to bed. I clutched my bag to my chest and continued walking, testing door handles as I passed. Most were locked, giving me no hints as to where I was or where I would find a bathroom. I was growing desperate until, finally, one of the handles gave way.

“Thank God,” I groaned as I pushed open the door, peeking inside. My heart stopped, and all my breath fled my lungs at seeing Theo inside the room. He was naked, his back to me and his muscular torso rippled back and forth as his right arm jerked back and forth. His left arm was up, bracing on the poster of his bed, and his clothes were scattered around the dark red carpet.

It took a second for me to realize what he was doing. He was *masturbating*. His gorgeous ass flexed, his strong thighs rippling as he shifted his stance, and an explosion of heat pulsed through me, warming my face and tickling down my spine. He was *gorgeous*, but with that realization came the recognition that I was invading his privacy.

And yet, as I was about to lean away and close the door, a name slipped from his lips, killing all thoughts of leaving and sending a needy ache sweeping through my lower belly.

“Summer,” Theo moaned again.

My name.
He moaned *my* name!

SUMMER

Rooted to the spot, all thoughts of bathing and sleeping vanished from my mind. Theo's head dipped forward, and the muscular curves along his back rippled back and forth. His breath trembled and my mouth watered as I took in every gorgeous inch of that man. Never in my life had I seen someone so beautiful.

Never had someone *that* beautiful ever moaned out my name. Felix was my one and only. He was a wiry man with muscles that were only highlighted because of how skinny he was from the drugs. He was also painfully unfamiliar with the term *lovemaking*. A man such as Theo was nothing more than fantasy. I bit my lower lip to refrain from any possible noise slipping out of me and shifted my weight back in order to leave the room and return Theo to privacy.

The door had other ideas.

The wood creaked slightly as I shifted, and the door hinge complained. The second it started to whine, I panicked and threw myself forward, shoving the door closed so that no one else would glimpse Theo if they happened to be walking past. The moment wood clattered against wood, Theo spun around on the spot, and I froze like a deer in headlights.

So did he.

From here, his glistening chest heaved with each breath, and a dusting of soft hair graced his pecs. His abs clenched and his right hand remained still, curled around his thick, flushed cock while his eyes blinked wide and a deep red flush spread from his cheeks all the way down his throat. There was

shock in his eyes, mingling with a dark lust, but there was something else there. A soft shyness I hadn't expected, and warmth flooded over my own cheeks.

"Summer," Theo croaked, his voice husky from arousal. "I-I was just—"

"Wanking to me?" I asked boldly, surprising even myself. That was supposed to be a thought, not vocalized. Theo's cheeks flushed harder, and he angled himself away.

"I'm so *sorry*, I was just—after the plane when you were in my lap, and so—I'm sorry I didn't mean any disrespect—shit—" Theo turned away fully and leaned over, grabbing the duvet. He began to jerk it free, but the tightly tucked corners fought against him on every pull as I slowly walked forward.

Had Theo been turned on from the plane? I'd felt it too, a pulse of desire, but I'd ignored it, trying not to get caught up with how attractive these men were or how long it had been since I'd had any much-needed attention.

Now, here Theo was, laid out like some mouthwatering platter using *me* to seek out his pleasure after such a short moment together. That was one hell of a confidence boost.

"What were you thinking about?" I asked, continuing to walk closer.

"What?" Theo, still distracted by trying to free the duvet in his panic, didn't notice I was closer until I placed one hand on his arm, and his movement stilled. He glanced at me, an apologetic look that reminded me of a puppy who had done wrong but didn't regret a single thing.

"You were thinking of me?" I said softly as the heat from his forearm seared into my fingertips. "I want to know what you were thinking."

"Oh." Both of his hands dropped to cover his hard cock and my heart fluttered in my chest as our eyes met. "I was thinking about—about how beautiful you were, and how I should have acted on the plane. Not letting you out of my lap, I mean. What you'd feel like against me... how your hair and lips would feel on my skin as I held you close and... I'm sorry, this isn't appropriate."

He was right. It wasn't. He was technically my employer.

And I didn't care.

With little thought, I followed the warmth beading in my core and sank down to my knees in front of him. His knuckles tightened around his cock just an inch from my face and he rocked a half step back.

"Summer..." Theo gasped, and his eyes darkened.

"Well?" I asked breathlessly, tilting my head to the left and staring up the

tasty muscular plane of his body. “Let me...”

In the few seconds Theo took to consider, my mind went quiet. There were no thoughts about how stupid this decision could be or what the consequences would be. I was tired from the flight, tired of stress and life, tired of Felix and everything before him. I’d spent days mulling over how sexy Jax and Luke were, and now Theo was added to that list. I was turned on, and it would be foolish to pass up just one chance to be with someone so gorgeous.

Theo slowly dropped his hands away from his thick cock, and his throat bobbed visibly when he swallowed.

“Thank you,” I murmured softly. Pre-cum glistened on the tip of his cock and when I took his length in hand, the weight made my core *throb*. The thought of it inside me made me press my thighs together and rock my hips against myself. I tightened my grip and stroked just once from base to tip so I could feel every throbbing inch of his cock.

Then without breaking eye contact, I opened my mouth, leaned forward, and took his length into my mouth.

“Summer,” Theo gasped the second my tongue made contact with his cock, and a delighted shiver curled down my spine. He lifted one hand to his mouth, and the other by his side curled into a fist, restraining himself as I pressed forward and took inch by thick inch into my throat. When the crown nudged the back of my throat, my lashes fluttered, and I finally had to look away to focus.

My mind remained quiet, and my body heated as I set up a slow, steady rhythm rocking back and forth on Theo’s cock, and he whimpered *constantly*. They were sweeter sounds than I expected from a man of his size, but after he leaned back against the bedpost for support, he became butter in my hands. His chest heaved and his cock twitched in my mouth every time I curled my tongue up against the sensitive bundle of nerves just behind the crown. The heat was intense, and I closed my eyes, relaxing my throat as I took him deeper and deeper on each plunge.

Suddenly Theo’s hand appeared in my hair, and the silence in my mind was ruined by the cold memory of how harsh and demanding Felix’s hands could be. Cruel claws pinched against my scalp controlling every movement and breath, and the warmth building in my core stuttered.

Only... Theo wasn’t like that.

His hands stroked through my hair gently, never turning into a grip or

drawing even a glimpse of pain. He petted me gently, and his whining whimpers quickly grew into panting moans. He was so close already, his hand having already brought him so close. The rhythm and warmth radiating from Theo were enough to lull me into a blissful quiet until his voice drifted down.

“Summer, I’m gonna—I’m close if you—”

I lifted one hand and grasped onto his strong thigh, keeping myself as close as possible. The clearest message I could give that I was okay with that. Only then did Theo’s hips start to lightly thrust into my mouth. His hand left my hair, and his pleasurable noises washed over me in tingling waves. Then his hips stuttered and suddenly my mouth was flooded with his cum, which I obediently swallowed as quickly as possible. Pulse after pulse swept through Theo and his moans fell silent, nothing but gentle whimpers escaping his lips. Only when his cock ran dry, and I had swallowed all of his seed did I pull back slowly and wipe the corner of my mouth.

I didn’t have a chance to look up at Theo when suddenly I was swept up in his strong arms and thrown down onto the bed. I squeaked in surprise as I bounced on the firm mattress. Theo was over me, his dark eyes pinning me in place as my heart flew wildly beneath my ribs.

“Theo!” I gasped, and he leaned down as if to kiss me but hovered just a few inches from my lips.

“Can I?” he asked, his voice cracking from his orgasm. I’d never been asked like that before, and words failed me momentarily as I basked in the heat rolling off his body.

“Yes,” I gasped, and Theo kissed me hard and hungry.

An explosion of excitement swept through my chest, tingling all the way to my core as his hands roamed over my body, pulling at my clothes. Nothing else mattered at this moment; all thoughts of responsibility evacuated my soul, and I put all my energy into helping Theo tear off my blouse and rid me of my pants. He was gentler with my undergarments, taking my bra off slowly, but when his mouth descended on my breasts and his lips teased my nipples, he could have ripped everything off and I wouldn’t have cared.

I threw my head back against the bed and arched my body up into his tantalizing mouth while his fingers hooked around the edge of my panties and whisked them away. The chill of the air on my pussy lasted only a second then Theo’s fingers stroked through my slick folds, grazing over my clit, and the resulting spark of pleasure was almost too much.

“Can I, Summer?” Theo asked again, his voice so low that it vibrated right through me.

I grasped at his muscular shoulders, unsure exactly what he was asking, but I nodded quickly. I wanted everything and anything he wanted to give me. Theo kissed me again, hard and deep, so I wound my arms around his shoulders and pulled him close. Arching into him, my stiff nipples dragged against his rocky muscles, and he settled between my spread thighs. One strong hand grasped my thigh and pulled it around his hip while his other arm remained steadfast, bracing against the bed to keep him up.

“Ready?” Theo asked when he pulled back.

I could only gasp as I stared up at him then suddenly, his thick cock speared into my pussy with such controlled force that my vision flashed white, and I was suspended in pleasure. Theo’s hips were careful, moving with practiced ease as he sheathed himself fully inside me, and when we were pressed hip to hip, he paused.

This close, it was too easy to get lost in the deep blue of his eyes. I slid one hand around to his jaw and stroked through the soft beard, then I nodded. Theo started to move, and I was completely at his mercy. With powerful, strong thrusts, Theo began to fuck into me, and the simmering heat that had been building in my core exploded into a roaring fire of desire. I arched off the bed again and tried to rock my hips down in time with his carnal thrusts, but I may as well have been made of jelly. Every slam of his cock dragged against that bundle of nerves hidden inside me, and his wandering hand that stroked over my breasts and down my body made several lingering passes over my clit.

I was so close so quickly. Everything that had built up came flooding to the forefront of my mind, and I was powerless to do anything but ride the powerful waves of pleasure that rocked through my body. His touch left trails of fire on my oversensitive skin, and I scarcely had time to draw in a breath before a moan would be fucked right out of me.

Theo had complete control over me, and I adored it. My moans pitched, reaching a crescendo I didn’t know I had in me, and with a ripple of desire in my core and a flutter in my chest, I came hard. Every nerve lit up like a firework as I was thrown over the edge into a sea of ecstasy, and I dragged my nails over Theo’s back, drawing a warm whimper from his lips.

This truly was heaven.

THEO

Her orgasm lit her up like an angel and I didn't stop. Not when her nails bit into my shoulders and carved half-moon scratches into my flesh. Not when she writhed against me and breathlessly chanted *yes* over and over. Not when her thighs clenched around my hips and her skin shone with sweat. I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

She had walked in here like something out of my very own fantasy, and I still wasn't over the fact that she sunk to her knees instead of running from me in horror. I wanted to make her come again until her legs were shaking too much to move, and her moans were as hoarse as my own. So I didn't stop fucking into her, renewing the force of my thrusts as she writhed against me and teetered on the edge of over-sensitivity. I was sated, but I was far from finished with her.

"Theo," Summer moaned breathlessly, and I leaned down, kissing my name right out of her mouth. She was stunning. From her curvaceous body and large breasts right down to the dimple in her hips when she'd flex her thighs against my own. I was addicted so quickly it should have been concerning, but I didn't care. Leaning up, I admired how her lashes fluttered against her cheek and how her chin jutted up slightly each time she shifted against me. Her cheeks were flushed cherry red, and her lips parted with every whimper, teasing me with the prospect of another kiss. With her hair spread out around her like a halo, it was hard not to believe that this was a dream.

Summer's hands moved from my shoulders to rake down my chest and I gasped, slamming my hips harder into the liquid heat of her core. Her pussy clung to my cock like a velvet pocket, and I didn't want to leave her, not even for a second.

"Too fast," Summer gasped, "I'm gonna—"

"Need me to slow?" I asked between pants.

"No," Summer growled, and I couldn't hold in my laugh.

"Okay, okay." Maintaining what she needed was my goal here, so I kept up my punishing rhythm, fucking hard into her as she tossed her head back and forth, and her moans began to pitch again. She was close. So close.

Dipping my head, I kissed down the length of her throat and grasped her breast, massaging the flesh and pinching her nipple while she twisted and writhed against me. Suddenly her pussy clamped down around my cock like a vice and I gasped, her hips stuttering. Her back bowed, arching into me, and I slid my arm around her for support. With her mouth open and a moan caught in her throat, I held her for the few moments she was caught on the cusp. Then she gasped, her pussy rippled around my length, and she came with a cry. I continued to fuck into her until she began to relax down into my arm, and only then did I begin to slow my thrusts. The more she relaxed, the slower I moved until she was panting, flat on her back again, and my hips stilled.

But I was far from satisfied.

"Fuck," Summer gasped as she lifted one hand, pushing strands of hair away from her damp forehead. "That was—what are you doing?"

She cut herself off the moment I pulled out of her and began moving down between her legs.

"I'm not finished," I said softly, "unless you are?"

We were strangers, mostly, so Summer's vocal consent was the most important thing about this. She stared at me, her face rosy and flushed and her chest still heaving, then she gave a small nod.

"No, I'm not finished."

With her permission, I sank down between her legs and placed both her thighs on my shoulders, then I buried against her heated pussy and slowly, tenderly stroked my tongue through her folds. Summer gasped loudly and collapsed back down onto the bed, her whole body bouncing with the bed.

"This... is some kind of dream," she moaned softly.

I couldn't respond, focused instead on lapping against her core and

tasting the sweetness of her juices. The heat was incredible, and I was well aware that working a third orgasm out of her would take care and dedication. Two things I prided myself on. With long, sure tongue strokes, I kissed and lapped everywhere I could reach. I danced my tongue over her clit, grazing my teeth ever so slightly against the swollen bud, and her noises from above flowed like a waterfall. Each twist of her hips and press of her thighs against my head guided me on what she liked the most, what pressure drew the strongest reaction, and which side of her pussy was most sensitive. It was like learning an instrument, and I wanted to play her perfectly.

I happily lost track of time buried between her thighs, and before long, her moans began to pitch slightly, and the rhythmic clench of her thighs increased. She was closer. I continued my attention and wrapped both of my hands around her thighs to stop her from rolling away if the pleasure was too much.

“Theo,” she gasped, and her voice was *wrecked*. Hoarse and breaking, with a lilt each time she gasped. Pride swelled in my chest that I had made her sound like that, and I turned my full attention to her clit. Summer cried out and started to rock against my face, grinding down and flooding my already soaked beard with her juices. I *loved* it and buried deeper against her, seeking to bring her to the most fantastic end.

Summer came with a scream, her thighs clamping down against my head and momentarily trapping me against her core, not that I minded. I continued to kiss and lap at her until her thighs relaxed and slumped off to the side; only then did I pull back and lick my lips, her taste well and truly soaked into my tongue.

“Do you think anyone heard that?” Summer panted, one arm thrown over her eyes as she gasped for air.

“Doubtful,” I reassured her softly. “The walls here are thicker than you’d expect.”

“Holy shit...” She didn’t move, so I grabbed the edge of the duvet—which uncurled after the first tug this time—and draped it over her naked body to help soothe her. Then I settled next to her and rested my head on my upturned palm.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like jelly,” she groaned, finally removing her arm so I could take in her rosy face. “I’ve never had three like that before.”

“I’m honored,” I grinned, “although I hope this won’t affect our working

relationship.”

“Tip me like that, and I’ll work for you for the rest of my life,” she chuckled hoarsely, then she turned her ocean-blue eyes to me and I wanted to drown in them. I wanted to drown in all of her and the strength of those feelings caught me by surprise.

“What sort of work would you do if the tip was that good?” I mused.

Summer bundled the duvet up to her neck and rolled her eyes softly. “Anything and everything you could ever want.”

“Such promise from a nanny,” I teased, and Summer laughed.

“Thank you. This was uh... unexpected.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Next time you want to wank over me, give me a call.” She flashed me a bright smile, and what lingering shame I had at being caught faded into nothing. This could have ended so terribly awkward, and I was still in shock that she had given herself to me like this.

“Understood,” I nodded. “Anything I can get you? Water? Food?”

“I want to sleep for a week,” she said softly, and one gentle hand landed warm on the side of my neck. “But all I really want is to find a bath, soak, and go to bed.”

“Is that what you were trying to find?” I asked.

“Yeah, why are all the doors locked?”

“This place is used to housing double figures and more. We lock what we don’t need,” I explained softly, and, unable to resist, I leaned down and pressed a light kiss to her nose. “I can take you to the bathroom, though.”

“It’s okay,” Summer said softly, “if you give me directions, I’ll find it. I don’t know if we can be trusted alone in a place like that.”

“You think I can’t keep my hands off you?”

“Three orgasms,” Summer groaned. “Pretty hardcore evidence.”

“Fair,” I laughed. “Take a right from here; three doors down, there’s a hallway on your left. The fourth door on the left. It’s actually closer to your room.”

“Thank you.” Summer pulled herself up, and her dark waves caressed down her back in such a gentle way that I was almost jealous.

“No,” I murmured, “Thank *you*.”

Within minutes, Summer had redressed and slipped from my room with a sultry wink, leaving me to the warm silence of my thoughts. I hadn’t been thinking, not really. Not beyond sinking inside her and mingling our pleasure.

Her absence, however, highlighted the recklessness of my actions, and as I lay back in bed and stared at the ceiling, Jax and Luke popped into my head.

God, what would they think? Jax had already mentioned a passing attraction to her.

Oh God.

What would Tabitha say?

That woman scared me more than shareholders on a stock crash week.

Future Theo could deal with that. Right now, present Theo was going to soak up the bliss of sleeping with such an incredible woman.

It was just mutual attraction.

Nothing more... right?

JAX

“**Y**ou took her *out* of the country, Jax. Did you really expect me to just sit by and let it happen?”

Marina’s barking words, even through a video call, still had the ability to jerk me right back to when I was *nothing* compared to her. The reckless bad boy entertaining the pretty rich girl while her friends and family looked on in disgust and treated me like dirt. Back then, those feelings were easier to manage with alcohol and the belief that Marina loved me. Now they swamped me, settling heavily like static in my chest, and I curled one hand tightly to try and ease the sensation.

“The lawyers cleared it, Marina,” I replied sharply. “Like they do every year. If you had such an issue with it, then maybe you should get a better lawyer. And since when do you give a shit?” I straightened up, rolling my shoulders as the static sensation grew. “You’ve never given a shit about Christmas.”

“You’ve taken *my* daughter,” Marina snapped. “Of course I fucking care.”

“Do you have some sort of Gala to attend where you need her in the photos so people can think you’re actually a mother?” I scoffed. It wouldn’t be the first time. Marina had always treated Bonnie like some kind of decoration rather than a child, which was my main case point in our custody battle.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jax.” Marina rolled her eyes and curled her well-manicured fingers around a cigarette. “I love my daughter.”

“You’re smoking again?” I raised a brow. “That’s an excellent thing to do around a child.”

“Well, it’s not around Bonnie, is it? Because you took her away! You’re not going to get away with this, Jax.”

“There’s nothing to get away with,” I replied sharply. “Our lawyers cleared it as they’ve done for the past two years. So like I said, talk to your lawyer if you have an issue. I’ll see you when we’re back in the States.”

Marina’s perfectly painted lips parted, but I hit the end call button before hearing another word from her. As the call died, I slid both hands into my hair and groaned low. It was difficult to understand how I had fallen insanely in love with her all those years ago. She had been my world; this beautiful, rich, perfect person who had somehow been interested in someone like me.

I wasn’t anything special. I scraped by in life; my mother died young, and my father had been in prison for so long that I had no idea if he was even alive. The rough, bad boy aesthetic had certainly appealed to Marina when I’d been the Bouncer at clubs helping her break the rules carefully placed by her parents. However, Bonnie’s arrival highlighted one major difference between us; I was over the moon to be a father, but Marina quickly realized I had no intention of ever giving her the lavish lifestyle she was used to. Even securing a job at Helix wasn’t good enough for her, even as I climbed the ranks.

Nothing crumbles a relationship faster than money.

“Jax?” Luke’s voice drifted over me, and a warm hand landed on my upper back. “You okay?”

I lifted my head and shot him a tired look. “The witch is pissed that I brought Bonnie here.”

“You always bring her.” Luke frowned and moved past me to the coffee machine. “Since when did she care?”

“Something must have come up that she needs her for, I don’t know,” I groaned. “I did it right. I got legal permission. I haven’t done anything wrong, but... she has this knack for making me feel like a worthless father and an even more worthless person just with a look. It takes me right back to when we were married, and she would yell at me for not being there for her when I was working.”

“I’m sorry, Jax.” Luke poured his coffee and turned back to me, placing a hand on my shoulder and squeezing. “What you had to put up with is more than anyone should. You’re doing the right thing; you always have. For as

long as I've known you, your focus on Bonnie is what will win you this."

"You think so?" I finally glanced up at him, and Luke offered me a warm smile.

"I know so. Besides, we're pretty fucking rich as well, so you've got good people in your corner. I don't care if she's an heiress or whatever she wants to call herself."

"Thanks." The static remained in my chest, so I straightened up and stretched my arms over my head to try and loosen up my muscles.

"You need a distraction," Luke mused with a mischievous smile, and he slid into the stool opposite me. "Like Summer."

"Summer?"

"Yeah, she's a pretty distraction in all meanings of the word, don't you think? How did you even find her?"

"Honestly? Pure luck," I replied, settling back against the counter. "She was the last interview that day, and she was like... the smell of fresh grass after a heavy rain."

"You're fucking corny."

"I know, but it's true," I laughed softly. "She came in like a person, she acted like she was real and... honestly, when she left, she made me laugh. I also realized she was just someone looking for a lucky break. And we could give her that."

"So, nothing to do with the fact that you want to sleep with her?" Luke's eyes twinkled over the edge of his cup.

"Not at all!" I stated. I wanted to say I would never put her in that position but that would be a lie. "Not unless she wants me to."

"I knew it," Luke grinned. He blew lightly on his coffee and took a sip. "But I'm the same. I haven't felt such a strong urge like that since Flora."

"It's been too long for you, for all of us," I groaned softly. "Have you heard from Flora?"

Luke shook his head. "Not a peep."

"You're in need of a distraction just as much as me then."

"Maybe." Luke set his cup down and rested his elbows on the counter. "That's the tricky part though, isn't it. How do you get back out there and have fun when there's a child at home that could get attached too easily?"

"You just gotta go for it," Theo grinned as he appeared in the doorway. "Like I did. Last night."

A stunned silence falls over Luke and me.

“No fucking way.” I gaped at him. “Who?!” As if the answer wasn’t obvious.

“Summer, who else?” Theo grinned, keeping his voice low.

“What?” Luke gasped.

“How? When?” I demanded.

Theo moved past us to the fridge and ducked his head inside, returning with a yogurt and a warm smile. “Last night. She got lost and wandered into my room. I was uh... *taking care of business*, and she walked right in on me.”

“And she didn’t flee in horror?” Luke laughed.

“Nope. She...” He paused, seemingly debating internally. “She was very receptive to me; that’s all I’m going to say.”

“I can’t believe you.” I pointed a finger at him. “You’re supposed to be the responsible one!”

“Why?” Theo chuckled, settling next to me.

“Because you’re the mature one that keeps us on the right track,” Luke pointed out. “I can’t believe it. You’re serious? You actually slept with her?”

“I did.” Theo had a proud smile on his face, and my heart warmed for him. We all had it rough, but Theo had a particularly painful set of baggage with taking on a child that wasn’t his and constantly trying to get Kane’s mother into rehab. Theo was the most decent man I had ever known, and here he was, grinning like the cat that got the cream.

The cat that got Summer.

“What was she like?” I asked without thinking.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Theo grinned. “But she was amazing. Maybe it was because it’s been so long since I did that, or because she’s just so... sweet, y’know? I don’t know, but it was incredible. I slept like I hadn’t slept in years afterward.”

“Fuck,” Luke sighed dramatically. “There go my chances.”

“I’m sorry.” Theo opened his yogurt and sought out a spoon. “Maybe not though. I mean, we didn’t exactly talk or anything like that, but she’s single. Nothing to say that was an exclusive situation.”

“We are on holiday,” I pointed out, “the rules kind of go out the window. Sort of.”

“So, you’re saying she’s fair game?” Luke glanced between us, a smile growing.

“Respectfully,” Theo added. “She’s her own woman. We’re all single. All

I'm saying is... whatever happens, happens."

"Respectfully," Luke repeated.

"Yes," I agreed. It was only after a few moments of contemplating whether Summer would even be interested that I noticed the static tension in my chest had faded. The lingering muscle ache was fading, and my heart beat lighter.

Whether that was from talking with my closest friends or the thought of Summer, I couldn't tell.

All I knew for sure was that if Summer wanted me in any regard, I would be there in a second. I hadn't known her for that long, but I couldn't get her smile out of my head.

And I didn't want to.

SUMMER

This seemed like a fantastic idea when they'd announced it back at the chalet, but halfway up the snowy mountain, the weight of my white lie was beginning to settle on my shoulders. After a day for everyone to beat jetlag, settle in, and come to terms with anything they may have done that they shouldn't have, the first family activity on the schedule was skiing. Standing in the lounge when Theo had asked me if I could ski, all I could think about was how sweet his whimpers had sounded when we were together, so I had said yes without much thought to the consequences.

Now, as the gondola pulled in at the top of the mountain and the three children spilled out, flanked by their fathers, I realized how stupid that lie was. I could not ski. I could barely even sled, and that was far easier than skiing.

"Bonnie, come and put your boots on!" Jax called as he settled on a bench and lowered the kid's skis down beside him.

"Coming!" Bonnie called, and after giving Ava a hug, she scurried over to her father. It was the most animated I had seen her, although she still sent me shy glances occasionally.

"Here, Summer." Luke appeared and pressed two skis into my hands with a warm smile, then he moved away to get Ava set up while Theo had Kane in his lap, carefully clipping the skis onto his boots. I stood there, holding the skis to my chest as warmth spread over my cheeks and reality hit me. There was no way I could fake this. But admitting my lie would mean they would have to deal with my inability to ski, and I was already churning up inside

being this close to Theo without talking about what we'd done together.

As my mind raced with excuses, I didn't notice Jax approach until he was standing right in front of me.

"Summer?" he asked softly, and I flinched in surprise. How did all three of these men still look hot as hell when bundled into thick ski jackets and goggles.

"Yeah?"

"Do you need some help getting your skies on?"

"Um..." I fumbled, and my cheeks flushed hotter.

"You've never skied before, have you?" Jax asked after a beat, a smile growing.

"No. I'm so sorry, I panicked," I gasped out. "I didn't want to be a hindrance."

"Don't be silly," Jax chuckled, and he took the skies from me. "The kids can't really ski either, so we can just teach you all together."

"I can ski!" Ava piped up as she peered around Jax's leg, one boot on and one boot off. "I'll teach you!"

"How will you do that without your other boot!" Luke laughed as he appeared, scooped Ava up into her arms, and carried her back to the bench.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, and the heat blazing on my face could have melted the entire mountain.

"It's okay." Jax gave me an encouraging smile. "Trust me, it's a lot easier than it looks."

Jax was right, for the most part. The slope we took the children on was a very soft incline, and the nerves I had started to melt away as the morning wore on. The mountain itself was beautiful, with crisp white snow and a scattering of pine trees lining each of the ski runs. Bonnie stuck close to Jax, often balanced between his legs as they shuffled down the slope. Ava had a lot more confidence and would push off from Luke, slide down the slope, and then turn with her arms crossed, waiting for her dad to catch up. Kane was uncertain but determined, and his focused little face warmed my heart each time he slid past with his knit hat pulled low against his tiny goggles.

"That's it, Bonnie," Jax cheered to my left. I glanced up, one hand clutching for dear life to Luke's arm, and watched as Bonnie took her first solo run down the slope.

"Yay!" Cheers erupted from the group, and Bonnie clapped her gloved hands together as she turned at the bottom. Jax pushed off and slid down to

her, then Luke's voice rumbled close to my ear.

"Now Bonnie is showing you up," he chuckled, and warmth tingled down my spine. "Come on, you can do it."

"Keep your knees bent," Ava instructed matter-of-factly, "and your toes pointed in, okay?"

"Okay." I smiled down at her, let go of Luke's arm, and pushed off. For a second, I was certain I was about to end up face down in the snow once more, but as I moved off, my balance stayed up. I straightened my arms, helicoptering them slightly, but through a stroke of luck, I made it to the bottom in one piece.

"Yes!" I yelled, and excitement burst through my chest. I did it! A moment later, Ava crashed into the back of my knees, and we both tumbled into the snow with a screech of laughter and a clatter of skies.

The rest of the morning passed swiftly, with Bonnie and I becoming more confident on the slope and Ava sticking by my side like glue to guide me each time. Kane also grew in confidence and even turned a full three-sixty on one of his descents which earned him *uber-cool points*, according to Ava. Any worries in my mind fled in the cold wind, and nothing else mattered, only the snow and the cold and the laughter from kids and fathers alike.

Each time I reached the bottom of the slope and turned to see Jax, Luke, and Theo with their children, my heart clenched painfully. It was so heartwarming to see, and there wasn't a single sad face. Only face-splitting smiles and red, rosy cheeks. Their family dynamic was so much more than individual fathers and their kids. Together they were a huge family I was being granted a chance to help, and such thought only added to the flutter of guilt I had in my gut each time I looked at Theo.

The longer we went without getting a chance to talk, the more I worried I had overstepped.

"Alright!" Jax called eventually. "Grandma is up at the lift, so you know what that means."

"Lunchtime!" all the children yelled, and they made a beeline for the gondola as fast as they could through the snow with skis attached.

"Wait!" I called with a laugh. "Detach your skis first!"

Ava obeyed immediately, then Kane and Bonnie followed. Then Ava ran up to me and shoved her small, gloved hand into mine.

"Are you having lunch with us?" she asked, wiping at her cherry-red nose. Before I could answer, Jax appeared.

“Not yet,” Jax said. “Summer’s going to come down the hill with me.”

“You can’t be serious,” I laughed as we headed up to the gondola. “I could barely do the kiddie hill.”

“You picked it up fast,” Jax said. “Trust me, you’ll take to it like a pro. Unless you’re too chicken...”

“Oh, really?” I laughed. “Are you challenging me?”

“Well, you already lost at Twister, so maybe *loser* is just in your blood,” Jax grinned, and I couldn’t hold in my snort.

“Okay, fine, I’ll try your slope but when I break my leg, I expect triple injury pay.”

“Oh, you’re on,” Jax chuckled.

At the gondola, Luke made a beeline for Tabitha, who stood in the doors wrapped up in a hundred scarfs and a thick coat.

“Hey, Ma.”

“Fun morning?” she asked. Ava released my hand and threw herself across to Tabitha.

“Granny!”

“Hey little ones. Who’s hungry?”

“Me!” cheered a small chorus.

“Granny, Summer helped me on the hill,” Ava began, and she immediately launched into a long story giving every detail of our ski escapades as they climbed into the gondola. For the first time, Tabitha gave me a light smile as the doors closed and I smiled back; then I was faced by Theo, Luke, and Jax who all grinned exactly like their children.

“Ready?” Jax asked slyly.

“As I’ll ever be.”

The slope wasn’t as steep as I expected, but it was definitely more daunting than the children’s slope. Flanked by the three guys, my heart began to pound like a drum as I stared. There was no way I was ready for this, and yet at the same time, I wanted to show that I had learned and prove to Jax that I could face his challenges with ease.

“Alright, remember,” Theo said. “Knees bent, toes inwards, and you’ll be fine.”

I repeated the words over and over in my head and watched as Luke pushed off with a laugh and swept down the hill in a flurry of snow.

“Come on!” he yelled.

I glanced at Theo, then at Jax.

“On three?” Jax offered.

“Sure.”

“Okay. One... two... three!”

On three, I closed my eyes and shoved myself forward, then I snapped them open as we began to rush down the slope. Theo’s words vanished from my mind as the cold wind whipped past my warm cheeks and pulled at my hair. Theo was to my left, and he raced down faster while Jax held back, keeping pace with me. Faster and faster we went, and it was exhilarating. The speed meant the wind’s chill barely seemed to touch me, and the snow was smooth like butter.

At the bottom, Theo met Luke, and the moment I thought about reaching them, my legs wobbled. With a cry, my skis swept far too inward and caught on each other, locking up. Within a second, I was in the air, then tumbling down in the snow round and round. I hit something soft, and suddenly Jax’s laughter rang in my ears as I slowly tumbled to a stop. As my head stopped spinning, I realized that Jax had caught me when I fell, and I’d pulled him with me as I tumbled. He lay underneath me, laughing heartily, and I braced my hands on his chest to push myself up.

“Oh my God,” I cried, “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Jax laughed. Nestled in the snow, he looked beautiful with that dazzling smile and rosy cheeks. His eyes sparkled like the snow, and his hands clutched at my waist. “Are you okay? No injuries?”

“I... I think so,” I answered breathlessly, giving myself a quick once over to check before my gaze returned to his. “You?”

“Nope, all good,” he grinned.

For a moment, a single quiet moment, I was struck with the sudden urge to lean down and kiss him to see what his smile tasted like. The urge lingered, and I glanced down at his lips just as Jax licked them slowly.

“Summer...” he said softly. “I—”

“Are you okay?!” Luke and Theo slid into view, and I quickly pushed myself up and rolled off of Jax. Luke’s hands slid under my arms, helping me to my feet as Theo picked up Jax.

“We’re all good,” Jax laughed. “Does that count as a forfeit?”

“No way!” I cried out, brushing snow from my jacket and pushing all thoughts of kissing from my mind. “I did the slope; you didn’t say I had to do all of it.”

“She’s got a point,” Theo laughed. “Come on, I’m starving.”

With Luke's arm firmly looped in mine to prevent any more falls, we began skiing slowly down the slope toward the resort. Food sounded amazing, yet all I could think about was how close I had come to giving in and kissing Jax.

After sleeping with Theo, that was probably the worst thing I could do.

And yet... I was single and didn't owe anyone anything. So what if I entertained the thought of them all? Did that make me a horrible person?

Maybe, but something about how Jax had looked at me had a yearning growing in my chest. Maybe it was loneliness. Maybe it was something more.

Whatever it was, this holiday had just gotten a lot more confusing.

SUMMER

After a lunch of chicken sandwiches, fruit, and small slices of cake that ended up on more faces than in bellies, we all relaxed in the lounge in front of the large roaring fireplace nursing aching muscles. Bonnie cuddled up on Jax's lap flicking through a picture book, Kane spread out on the floor with a jigsaw puzzle, and Ava, keeping up with her current attachment, soon abandoned her coloring and crawled into my lap instead.

"Summer?" she asked, smacking her lips together.

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you going to—going to be here at Christmas?"

"Of course!" I smiled softly and dabbed at her nose. "I'm here to make sure Santa can find you all easily."

"Will he get lost?" Ava asked, her eyes wide.

"Well, there's a lot of trees and snow," I said with mock seriousness, much to Luke's amusement to my left. "But with his magic and my know-how, he'll be here, no problem."

"Hmm, okay," Ava decided, settling back against me. "As long as he knows to bring your presents here too."

"Oh, definitely," I nodded firmly, although I hadn't really thought about that. I hadn't celebrated Christmas in so long, and simply sitting here with the fire blazing and the tree glittering in the corner, my inner child was overwhelmed.

Suddenly Ava yawned, and like a wave, Bonnie and Kane followed. After their morning activities and with the food having had time to digest, it was

clear what was next.

“Nap time,” I declared.

“Nooo,” Ava whined softly, “I’m not tired.”

“Me... neither,” Kane mumbled around two large yawns. Bonnie sent me a shy glance and didn’t say a word, but her eyes didn’t leave me.

“Oh, I think we all know that’s not true,” I chuckled. Standing with Ava in my arms, I glanced over to Kane. “Come on, nap time.”

“No,” Kane grumbled.

“Remember Kane,” Theo piped up from where he was curled up with the laptop. “We agreed. I work while you nap, and we can play some video games after, right?” Theo sent Kane a look and the mention of the games spurred him into action. He leaped to his feet and darted forward to take my outstretched hand. With Ava balanced in my other arm, I was about to ask Tabitha if she could help with Bonnie when Jax climbed to his feet with her in his arms.

“Come on Bonnie, let’s go lie down.” Bonnie hid her face in Jax’s neck, and he shot me such a dazzling smile that I was instantly jerked back to being on top of him in the snow. It surely wasn’t a good idea to be alone with him, but I couldn’t say that so instead I followed him up the stairs without a word.

“I’m not tired,” Ava yawned, and I pressed a light kiss to her cheek, making her giggle.

“Trust me Ava, when you get older, you’ll miss naps,” I grinned.

“No, I won’t,” she said grumpily. “I wanna stay up *forever*.”

“Goodness, you’d be so tired!”

“I wanna play video games,” Kane whispered as he headed down the hall, and I gently squeezed his hand.

“You will. Soon as you wake up, I’ll make sure Dad is ready for you.”

“Thank you.” Kane glanced up at me, his tired eyes filled with warmth, and I was struck by the urge to bundle him up in my arms too. By the time we reached the kids’ room, tiredness had taken over. It didn’t take long to wiggle the children out of their jackets and shoes and into comfy clothes. By the time all three were tucked in bed and I was four pages into *Jack and the Beanstalk*, they were all fast asleep.

Jax pressed a warm kiss to Bonnie’s forehead and led the way out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.

“Nap time here is always easier here when they’re tired,” Jax murmured, and he slowly led the way back down the hall.

“Oh, I can imagine,” I chuckled softly.

His presence next to me was like a flame, and I was a willing moth ready to get burned.

Rein it in, Summer.

“I should get changed too, actually,” I said as I turned down the hallway toward my room. Jax followed.

“Do you feel it?” he asked softly, and my steps slowed as I approached my door.

“Feel what?” I sent him a glance, and Jax’s eyes were fixed on me. If I lingered for too long, I’d be trapped in those gorgeous green eyes.

“What I’m feeling.”

“Which is?” Reaching my door, my hand lingered on the handle but something was stopping me from stepping through. I turned to face him, and while Jax kept a respectable distance, a cheeky smile rested on his lip.

“I think there’s something between us, don’t you?” He lifted one brow and my heart started to race. “I thought there was at the interview, but I wanted to remain professional. That maybe I was just overthinking things. But on the mountain, I’m pretty sure you felt it too.”

I glanced at his mouth and the urge to taste his smile rose again.

“I...”

“Full disclosure,” Jax continued, “I know you slept with Theo.”

“What?” Heat pulsed through me from head to toe, and my heart punched up into my throat. “How do you—why did he—”

“Hey,” Jax cut me off softly. “I don’t care. None of us do, really. We’re all adults, and we’re all single. Whatever happens, happens, and I don’t at all mean to presume anything. I’m... I’m here because I feel something and I’m taking a chance to see if you feel something too.”

Hot embarrassment shot around my body and with it, the flames of irritation. I couldn’t believe Theo told the others what had happened, and yet just as my annoyance swelled, it was also unfair. We never discussed keeping it a secret or anything like that, so could I really be mad at him?

“I don’t sleep around,” I said eventually, and my grip tightened on the door handle. If Theo had given the impression that I was *easy*, then Jax was in for a shock. “I was... when I walked in on him, I was—”

“Please,” Jax cut in gently. “You don’t have to explain or justify anything to me. It... isn’t sleeping around, at least not to me. We’re both single and I’m attracted to you, Summer.”

Hearing those words rooted me to the spot. Theo was a *dream*. A kind soul with a gorgeous body and sweet whimpers but a dream all the same. Having Jax interested in me too? This had to be some sort of elaborate fantasy. Did I hit my head coming down that slope?

“But,” Jax continued, “I will respect you and your wishes. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable or place you in any kind of position that makes you unhappy here.”

Jax took a step back to leave and smiled that wide, glorious smile. Whatever sane thoughts I had about maintaining a professional air around these men instantly fled.

I acted without sense, surging forward before I even really knew what I was doing. Just a taste; I only wanted to see if that smile tasted as sunny as it looked. I cupped Jax’s strong jaw and crushed my mouth to his, straining up onto my tiptoes as my hand remained locked around the door handle.

The kiss lasted a few long seconds, and my heart froze as I waited for any kind of reaction from Jax. Those seconds lasted a lifetime in my mind.

Then Jax surged forward into the kiss, and he crowded me against the door, his lips pressing hard against my mouth and his tongue stroking past the seam of my lips as his hand landed on mine around the door handle.

I parted my lips, letting his tongue lick into my mouth and deepen the kiss while pressing down on the handle. The door gave way at my back, and we stumbled into my bedroom, barely able to get the door closed before he was pressing me up against it with the bulk of his body.

“Are you sure?” Jax gasped against my lips, and his warm breath tickled over my skin. I leaned away from the door just enough to discard my jacket onto the floor.

“Yes,” I gasped.

His jacket joined mine then his lips were back on me, kissing me with a heated passion I hadn’t expected so soon. It ignited a fire deep in my belly, and I cupped his face with one hand, sliding my other up into his hair and gripping on for dear life. His warm fingers glanced under my shirt and skimmed along the top edge of my pants. Without a word, he shoved a hand down my pants, and I gasped, breaking the kiss and arching back against the door. The press of Jax’s body and the way he latched firmly onto my neck gave me no space to resist, and my heart flew wildly under my ribcage when his hand dipped between my thighs and strong fingers stroked through my pussy.

“You’re already wet,” Jax grinned, his words writing into my skin with his kiss. I had been since I’d straddled him on the mountain with snow biting my skin and the wind in my hair.

“Yes,” I whimpered, tugging softly at his hair. “You have that effect on me.”

My words ended in a moan as his deft fingertips located my clit. I rose up onto my tiptoes and pressed firmly back against the door, my heart racing and sweat pulsing down my spine. He didn’t pause, not even as his teeth grazed my collarbone. He stroked and rubbed against my clit, then his fingers slid through my folds once, twice, then suddenly he was inside me.

Two fingers slid deep into my core, and I whined loudly. I was powerless to resist and happy to do so as Jax set up a rhythm of pumping his fingers deep inside me while his thumb and palm worked against my clit and core.

“Fuck,” I gasped as pleasure coiled like a snake in my gut and warmth trickled through me. My heart pounded, and my skin tingled while Jax rocked against me and his soft panting breath stroked against the hollow of my throat. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, and my eyes fluttered closed as all my focus centered on the heat and pleasure building between my legs.

Jax was *skilled*, each twist of his fingers inside me sent sparks dancing behind my eyes, and the strokes and patterns of his thumb teasing my clit were more than I could handle. My orgasm swept up like a wave. I was given only a few moments to embrace the pleasure before light exploded through my core, and I came with a gasping cry around his fingers.

He didn’t stop as he pressed up against me so that I didn’t fall, and his fingers continued to move. When my eyes fluttered open, his glittering eyes were locked on me while that fabulous smile warmed my soul.

“Beautiful,” he purred low. “We’re just getting started.”

SUMMER

Jax stepped back, giving me a moment on unsteady legs, and I pressed back against the door, panting heavily. That had been so sudden and so incredible at the same time that I couldn't form the thoughts to thank him. Not that it mattered because Jax stripped off the rest of his clothes in a matter of seconds, and then he was back on me, helping me out of my pants and underwear.

"Jax," I gasped finally as his knuckles grazed my hips and his lips traced down my neck once more. "Are you sure?"

He leaned back and his eyes darted over my face, studying me. "Yes. Are you?"

"Oh, yes." He silenced my words with a sudden hard kiss. Pulling me from the door, we stumbled a few feet until my back hit the warm wall. His strong hands swept down my legs, grabbed my thighs, and hauled my legs up around his waist. I squeaked in surprise and clawed at his shoulders for balance, then all sense fled my mind when the thick, solid ridge of his cock slid against my pussy.

"Oh... God," I gasped, and Jax broke the kiss to grin at me.

"Still good?" he asked breathlessly, and the rosy flush of his cheeks somehow made his eyes sparkle more.

"Yes."

With one hand secure in his hair and the other clutching his shoulder, my core *throbbed* with a need for that cock to be buried deep. I didn't want to be teased, I wanted to be fucked. Jax lifted me up higher for a moment just to

lavish attention over my rapidly stiffening nipple, and when he dropped me back down, he slammed his hips upwards and sheathed his cock deep inside me in one powerful thrust.

I *screamed*. Nothing could stop me as I was suddenly stretched and filled to the very brim, and I swore I could feel his cock nestled under my ribcage on my next breath. Jax laughed softly and peppered kisses over my jaw as I flexed my legs around his waist and shifted to settle the weight in my core.

“Fuck,” I gasped out hoarsely.

“As you command,” Jax growled, and he started to fuck me in earnest. Digging my fingernails into the strong muscle of his shoulder, I clung on as he set a rapid, powerful pace of fucking up into me with strong, sure thrusts. I bounced against him, my nipples catching over his skin and his mouth peppering adoring kisses over my throat and collarbone.

I moaned openly. There was nothing capable of silencing me as I tipped my head back against the wall. Heat washed over my body from head to toe and sweat prickled up and down my spine. My pussy ached from how thick his cock was, but the repeated bursts of pleasure from each thrust had me barely registering the ache. My toes curled and my core tightened as oversensitivity from my previous orgasm had my next burst of pleasure rapidly flooding my core. It was too much too fast, and yet I couldn’t find the words to express anything but the utter carnal desire raging inside me.

“Fuck,” Jax groaned, and his deeper moans vibrated right through me. His teeth grazed along my throat, and I whimpered repeatedly as his thrusts began to pick up their pace.

“Yes,” I gasped wetly, arching off the wall and into his body. “Yes, yes!”

I didn’t care who heard me, if anyone. I didn’t care what this would mean; all my focus was on the ecstasy rising. My heart raced and my oversensitive skin flared up with each touch of his wandering hands and mouth. My core tightened and Jax’s thrusts broke rhythm. His forehead pressed against my shoulder and his heated breath ghosted over my skin as I wound both arms around his head and cuddled him close.

“Jax!” I came with a cry, my body tightening up like a spring snapping after being pulled too far. A deep, guttural moan escaped Jax, and suddenly, amidst the pulsing ripples of pleasure through my body, heat rushed into my core as Jax came with me. His thrusts slowed and his lips pressed a single, lingering kiss to my shoulder as he panted heavily; and I mirrored those gasps, sharing air.

My limbs tingled, my core throbbed, and as Jax slowly pulled his cock free, an emptiness opened up inside me, making me immediately miss him. As he slowly set me down on the ground, my jelly legs had me sinking to my knees but rather than helping me up, Jax stood over me. He looked down with a dark lust in his eyes and stroked his fingers over my cheek.

“Clean me up,” he murmured, “you made a mess.”

An unexpected pulse of aching arousal shot through me at his request, and I eyed his cock, glistening with our combined pleasure. I’d never been asked to do something like that before, and trying to gather thoughts through my orgasm-muddled mind was difficult. So I leaned up, lightly grasped his thigh, and opened my mouth. With gentle kisses and strong tongue licks, I lapped over his cock and tasted the slightly salty mixture. Over the still very hard shaft I cleaned, right up to the glistening crown; I licked and swallowed obediently until Jax leaned down and lifted me back up.

By the time we collapsed down onto the bed, my heart had calmed slightly, but nerves still twitched occasionally around my body.

Jax cuddled me to him, his heaving chest gradually slowing as he pressed his lips to my forehead.

“How was that?”

“Um... unexpected,” I chuckled hoarsely as I settled my head on his chest. I skimmed my hand over his abdomen, and my fingertips caught on several small scars littering his body.

“A good unexpected?” Jax asked.

“Oh yes,” I nodded. “I’ve... I’ve never done anything like this before and I don’t want you to think badly of me, with Theo and everything...”

“I couldn’t ever think badly of you,” Jax murmured as his fingers lightly traced up and down my upper arm. “When Theo told us... we all agreed that we were single and that whatever happened would happen within the limits of whatever *you* wanted. I wanted you, and I’m glad you gave me a taste.”

While embarrassment had led me earlier, a subtle warmth blossomed in my chest when I really considered them all speaking about me. “Does that mean Luke...”

“Has a crush on you too?” Jax finished and laughed, a deep sound that rumbled under my ear. “Yes.”

“Hmm.” Learning that they had shared my interest was surreal, but lying here wrapped up in Jax’s arms in this fancy chalet in another country, I was happy to let this dream continue. I skimmed over more scars and slowly

leaned up to take a better look.

“What are these?” I asked softly, finding a longer scar near Jax’s hip. “You have so many scars.”

“I wasn’t always the good guy,” Jax replied. “I spent many years working doors, bouncing for clubs and things like that. Drunk people get violent, and I had more of a hands-on approach to dealing with them.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed out. “I mean, scars are sexy.” I lifted my head and set him a wink. “But I’m sorry you had to go through all of that.”

“It was a choice. Easy money and I... when I was younger, I had very little, so it was the only way I could make money without people asking questions. I was a typical leather-clad bad boy able to get in and out of far too many fights.” Jax chuckled and continued stroking my arm. “Sexy, huh?”

“Scars tell a story,” I murmured, continuing to map them out.

“Like the one on your lip?” Jax asked. My fingers paused. The scar on my lip was from Felix and a glass bottle. Somehow pouring that out to Jax was *terrifying*. My real past threatened to collide with my dreamy present. I couldn’t let it.

“Exactly,” I said softly, and, thankfully, Jax didn’t press.

“Well, I don’t get scars much these days with Helix. I just take care of the people that do,” he said as he lifted one arm, tucking it behind his head. “My wife didn’t care for them.”

“Your wife?!” My back went poker straight, and I snatched my hand away as a thousand terrifying thoughts flooded my mind—mainly *home-wrecker*. “I thought ex?”

“She’s still my wife on paper,” he chuckled. “Sorry, bad wording. I’m... in the middle of a very ugly divorce and a custody battle over Bonnie. Not what you want to hear after sex though.”

“I’m interested,” I said, poking him in the ribs and drawing a chuckle. “Only if you want to share.”

“My wife... she is everything I’m not. She’s rich, beautiful, and successful. But she views motherhood as a chore, and while I was the charming bad boy when she wanted to rebel against her parents, that quickly died when I became her husband. She realized I wouldn’t be giving her the lifestyle she was used to,” Jax explained. “Now... well, now she sees me as the devil, and while I’m just a *bad memory*, Bonnie means she can’t completely cut me loose.”

“So... she wants Bonnie?” I asked softly, settling back down against his

chest.

“Yes. She wants Bonnie because I do, though she barely knows how to care for her.” Jax sighed deeply, and something rough slipped into his voice. “It was a smooth divorce until I asked for sole custody. Now she’s throwing everything at me to make me look like a terrible man and an even worse father.”

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured as I slid upward, pressing a light kiss to his jaw. “That’s awful.” No wonder they needed extra help. Struggling with that on top of Christmas approaching and Helix’s anniversary; it was a lot.

“Luke and Theo help,” Jax reassured me, and he cuddled me close. “Makes it difficult to uh... explore, one might say. So thank you. For being so...”

“Gracious?” I teased lightly. “Beautiful? Helpful? A glorious lay?”

“All of the above,” Jax laughed, and my heart swelled full of light. I hadn’t expected such a heavy tale attached when Jax seemed so full of life and Bonnie seemed happy and cared for. Her absent mother, however, at least helped explain her shyness around me.

This... whatever this was turning out to be, made one thing clear to me as I cuddled further into Jax and closed my eyes.

Between Theo and Jax, I was going to have one hell of a holiday.

SUMMER

“Kane, sweetie!” I called, leaning over the back of the couch.

“Yeah?” Kane came running toward me, a plastic figure of Batman in one hand and a crumpled, empty juice box in the other.

“What do we do when we’re finished?” I asked, pointing at the box. Kane eyed it, licking his upper lip, then glanced toward the kitchen.

“Trash can?”

“Exactly, off you go buddy.”

Kane scurried away, and I kept one eye on him as I swiveled back to Ava.

“Okay lovely,” I smiled down at her. “What color next?” Ava had propped herself up against me on one side and was using the Twister spinning wheel to dictate what colors she would use to color in her latest victim—a tiger. A very red and blue tiger. Ava spun the wheel, and the arrow landed on the green.

“Green!” Ava giggled, and she selected the green crayon then scribbled with all her effort all over the tiger’s tail.

“Green indeed,” I grinned, then I turned to Bonnie, who was also tucked up on the couch next to me. She wasn’t as close and had been hugging a plushie elephant so tightly that its neck was surely at risk of detachment. Her eyes were fixed on the television where a bright cartoon fairy danced across the screen.

“Can I get you anything, Bonnie?” I asked gently.

Her wide eyes slid to me, and she shook her head, then she focused back on the show.

“Done!” Kane came running back, showed off his empty hand and then settled behind the couch which he had recently designated the Batcave.

“Proud of you,” I grinned down at him, then glanced at the clock. All three fathers were caught up in some meeting about the upcoming Helix celebration, something they were loath to take part in, but it was why I was here; to keep the children happy and cared for in their absence. I enjoyed having them on my mind, especially as Jax had been particularly loving before we parted ways yesterday, and this morning both Luke and Theo had winked at me.

I yearned, briefly, for someone to talk this over with, but my life was quiet. My past had restricted my social circle to nothing, and I was very much alone.

Suddenly the house phone blared into life, and I flinched, eyeing the device where it hung on the wall next to a jolly stocking. It was an internal line and usually meant someone from the resort was calling up to the chalet. I patted Ava’s leg and then rose to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Put John on,” demanded a sharp female voice. I soured immediately.

“Excuse me?”

“Hello?” the voice barked. “Put John on the phone.”

“I’m sorry but—”

“I don’t have time for this. John! Now!”

“Pardon me, but there’s no one staying here by that name,” I replied sharply. How awfully rude this person was.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly that,” I said. “There’s no one called John here. You have the wrong number.” I promptly hung up before anything else could be said and returned to the sofa.

“Summer?” On cue, Tabitha came scurrying down the stairs. “Who was that?”

“Granny!” Bonnie, suddenly animated, slid from the couch and darted towards her with her arms outstretched.

“Wrong number,” I smiled across at her, already putting it out of my mind. “Everything okay?”

“The boys are still busy,” Tabitha groaned as she hunched over slightly to try and give Bonnie a cuddle. “Would you mind popping down to the resort and picking up the groceries? I’d call down for some help but this late in the

afternoon I won't get what I need for dinner."

"Oh, sure!" I patted the top of Ava's head and stood. "Will you be alright with these three?"

"Oh, of course," Tabitha chuckled. "I'm an old soldier."

That she was, but in the past couple of days, the ice had melted around her a little. I no longer got the impression that I should walk on eggshells around her. Her family was precious to her, and hopefully my actions had soothed her beliefs that I wasn't here to be a problem.

"Whose name will it be under?" I asked as I headed for the coat rack.

"Ellis. It shouldn't be too much."

"Can I come?"

My hand paused on my coat, and I glanced around to see that Bonnie had taken a few steps toward me, her eyes wide. I glanced at Tabitha, who looked as surprised as I felt.

"Well..." I started to say, watching Tabitha's face for whether this was a good idea or not.

"I think the walk would be fun for you, Bonnie," Tabitha decided. Permission granted. I smiled and reached for Bonnie's coat.

"Sure you can, sweetie; we just have to make sure we bundle you up nice and warm, okay?"

Thankfully neither Kane nor Ava expressed interest in coming with me. I didn't have the confidence to wrestle three children and groceries up and down a mountain, but Bonnie, I could manage.

Bundled up in her coat, complete with gloves and scarf, we headed out into the snow and took a cable car down to the resort.

Inside, the resort was almost as fancy as the chalets dotted all over the mountain. Like a gigantic shopping mall, the resort had everything from restaurants to shops as well as dance halls and a scattering of buildings to be used for parties and functions. It reminded me briefly of an airport as Bonnie and I wandered through the winding hallways and admired the Christmas displays in all the shop windows on our way to the grocery pick-up kiosk.

"Summer?" Bonnie spoke up so softly I almost didn't hear her. I saw her black curls poking out of her hat and her eyes fixed up at me.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Do, um..." She paused, and I slowed our walk so she could focus easier. "Do you know if... if Santa will still bring presents if I was bad?"

"Were you bad?" I asked gently.

“Only one—once.” She held up a small hand, and my heart ached suddenly.

“Oh sweetie, yes Santa will still come. You know, you can be bad sometimes, but Santa looks at everything over the whole year. As long as you are good more than you’re bad, you’re okay.”

“Okay.” Bonnie fell silent once more.

“What did you do that was bad?” My curiosity couldn’t be calmed.

“Mummy says it sometimes,” Bonnie murmured. Bonnie’s mother, Jax’s ex. She sounded awful from the little info I gained from Jax yesterday, but I couldn’t say a word, not in front of her child.

“Well, your Daddy told me you were the best little girl this year, so I think you’re fine,” I smiled and squeezed her hand gently. She looked at me again, her eyes brighter and her cheeks rosy, then she fell silent.

As we turned the last corner and approached the kiosk, my phone vibrated harshly in my pocket. I peeled off one glove with my teeth, dug the device out of my pocket, and pressed it to my ear without glancing at who was calling.

“Hello?” I asked, expecting Tabitha.

“Summer,” came Felix’s nasal drawl. My heart plummeted to my gut and my blood ran cold.

“Felix.”

“Surprised to hear from me?”

“Hardly. You’re like a cockroach.” Yes, I was fucking surprised. I hadn’t given him a proper thought since arriving here, not at length anyway, but in the back of my mind, I knew it was only a matter of time before he slipped through my blocks. “What do you want?”

“Well, I wanted to check in with you and see how you were,” Felix said. My steps slowed. “After all, you thought you could fuck off halfway across the world, and I wouldn’t be able to find you?”

Instinct had me glancing around at the passing crowds, searching faces and more for any glimpse of familiarity. I saw none.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied quietly.

“Bullshit, Summer,” Felix snapped so harshly that I jumped. “You can’t escape me, Summer. You ruined my fucking life you twisted little bitch, and there’s no corner of this world that you can run where I can’t get you. The fucking *Alps*? How did you manage that one, huh?”

“It’s for work,” I replied hoarsely, and my heart began to pound. How did

he find that out? How did he always find these things out?

“Bullshit, you got fired, remember?” Felix’s laugh sounded cold and hollow. “You really tried to build a little life for yourself while I rotted away, didn’t you?”

“You deserved it,” I snapped, trying to keep my words low for the sake of Bonnie.

“We were both in that car,” Felix growled.

“You were *driving*.”

“Doesn’t fucking matter.” He snorted and that laugh scraped through me once again. “I had a lot of time to think. A lot of time to plan exactly what I will do to you when I get my hands on you properly, Summer. You’re not safe. You’ll never be safe—”

I hung up before he could say any more. My heart thundered in my chest, and I stared at my phone until my eyes blurred and something tugged at my hand. Blinking slowly, I glanced down to see Bonnie staring up at me with wide eyes.

“You’re hurting me,” Bonnie whined.

“Oh God...” In my fear of Felix, I’d accidentally tightened my grip on Bonnie’s hand. In a flash I had her in my arms, cuddling her close.

“Bonnie, I’m so, so sorry, I’m sorry.” I apologized repeatedly, cuddling her close and rocking her slightly, more to soothe myself than her as she seemed relatively unphased.

“It’s okay,” Bonnie said softly as she patted one small hand against my cheek. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry.” I apologized right up until we reached the kiosk. As we stood waiting for the parcels, I couldn’t stop that tickling feeling crawling over my spine. Everywhere I looked I caught glimpses of Felix, but he would vanish at a second glance.

He was miles away and yet it was as if he was right here, breathing down my neck. By the time I had the groceries, my heart was pounding so hard that I was certain I would be sick if I wasn’t careful. With the parcels in one arm and Bonnie in the other, I hurried back through the resort to the cable cars.

Once I was back at the chalet, everything would be fine.

I was miles away, halfway up a snowy mountain.

I was safe.

Wasn’t I?

LUKE

“Hey, Ma!” I called through to the lounge. “Did Ava get her juice box?”

“Yes, dear,” my mother called back. “Honestly, Luke, you’d lose your head if it wasn’t attached. A sharp squeal of laughter rose up from my daughter, and my mother added, “Honestly, Ava. What would he do without me?”

I’d be lost without her for sure. Most people distanced themselves from their parents when their child was born, wanting to do their own thing. Life had taken a different turn for me; I’d been savagely hit by a car the night Flora gave birth to Ava and I missed it. The accident shattered my bones in four different places in my right leg, leaving me bedridden for *months* and countless hours of therapy after. Instead of having the loving support of my fiancée, Flora had revealed during an argument that she was only with me for a green card and I’d taken too long to marry her.

Flora had returned to France. I was bedridden with a child and completely at my wit’s end. My mother had stepped in without complaint, nursing me back to full health—aside from the scar on my thigh and a leg that ached in the cold—and caring for Ava; I owed her more than I could ever express.

As my thoughts wandered, she appeared in the kitchen doorway, and I pointed my wooden spoon at her.

“Ma, sit. You’ve done enough. Let me finish this.”

My mother raised her hands and chuckled. “Sure, but Summer is back.” Stepping out of the way, she melted back into the lounge, and Summer took her place, arms filled with paper bags.

“Summer!” Her cheeks were pink from the cold and her hair stood up slightly from the static of her hat. She flashed me a tight smile and crossed the kitchen to the other counter, where she started unloading the bags.

“Nice trip?” I asked, unsure how to approach her. She had spent time with Theo *and* Jax, but there was no way I was going to assume she had any kind of interest in me. Simply being in her presence and seeing how Ava enjoyed her company was enough for me.

“It was okay,” Summer said distractedly. I returned to the stove and resumed stirring the vegetables that were lightly frying in the pan.

“I love the resort,” I said, trying to strike up a conversation. “It’s like a spark of normality if the mountain ever gets a touch too lonely, y’know?”

“Yeah...” Summer packed away most of the dry goods in one cupboard, and I glanced over my shoulder, watching as she remained present as she worked and yet miles away at the same time. I finished my work, tipped the vegetables into the simmering tomato sauce, and turned down the heat.

“Summer?” I approached her but she didn’t face me. “Are you alright?” Whether through nerves or pure bubbiness, I’d never known her to be this quiet before, then again, I didn’t know her all that well.

“I’m okay,” Summer snapped slightly, and she shoved a few cans into another cupboard. As she went to close the door, one can wobbled and toppled back out, but I caught it before it crashed into the counter.

“Are you?”

“I’m... I’m sorry,” Summer sighed, and she took the can, placing it gently on the shelf. “I’m just... antsy, I guess. I...” She turned to me, and her wide blue eyes held a thousand secrets. “Just homesick. Being at the resort just... reminded me of home.” She couldn’t quite meet my eyes after that, and I murmured softly in my throat.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked softly. From my understanding, she hadn’t traveled much before coming here.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, if there is anything, no matter how small, we’re here for you. You’re doing so much for us already, and I—” My words died as Summer suddenly threw herself into my arms. Her warm, soft lips crashed against mine, and the heated line of her body filled my arms. Instinct took over, and one arm wrapped around her body to keep her steady while I stood there in shock.

Then reality hit—anyone could walk into the kitchen at any time,

including Ava, and I was not ready to have that conversation. My hesitation must have sent a message as Summer wrenched herself back and her trembling fingers brushed over her lower lip as her cheeks flared crimson.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped quietly, “I think I... I just needed a distraction, and I...”

I couldn’t resist. In one move, I surged forward and used my bulk to back Summer through the swinging door and into the pantry. The moment the door closed behind me, I leaned down and kissed her hard. Summer gasped against my lips, and her hands curled into the front of my shirt.

“The others,” she whimpered as I backed her up against the wall. “I’ve —”

“I know,” I growled softly, parting the kiss to lean back and take her in. “I know about them and I don’t care. We’re on holiday; no one cares.”

They were my last words, the last permission Summer needed. She pulled her T-shirt over her head and dropped it onto the floor, then her hands latched onto my jaw, and she pulled me back in for a series of frantic kisses. I kept one hand around her waist while the other worked at her jeans, tugging at the denim with all my strength. She dropped one hand to help me, wiggling the fabric down enough that I could shove her panties down mid-thigh.

Her hand tugged at my own slacks, so I stepped back, spun Summer around to face the wall, and pushed my slacks and boxers down halfway. My cock was swelling quickly at the sight of her bubble ass and the tingling warmth her kisses had left on my lips. I was hooked.

“Luke,” Summer moaned, pressing her hands to the wall on either side of her head.

I crowded up against her and shoved my hardening cock between her heated thighs, using what little space existed due to her jeans to push up against the hot, slick line of her pussy.

“Wet already?” I growled in her ear, and Summer whimpered, trying to widen her stance but she couldn’t, trapped in her jeans but unwilling to separate us in order to push them down further. Her sweet slick coated my cock within seconds, and she panted against the wall as I buried my face into her hair and breathed her in.

Then I angled my hips and lifted her up a bit. When she dropped back down, my cock speared into her core, and she would have cried out had I not shoved my large hand over her mouth to silence her.

“Don’t want anyone hearing us now, do we?” I groaned against her.

Summer whimpered, her breath tickling my fingers and her eyes rolled back in her head. The angle was perfect for me to drive up into her, and with her thighs trapped and closed, she was almost impossibly tight.

That didn't matter. Fueled by the suddenness of her actions and the *thrill* that she did want me, I started to fuck into her with as much force and speed as I could manage, surrounded by shelves of food. Thrust after thrust, I pounded into her, and Summer was putty in my hands.

Her fingers curled against the wall, nails scraping lightly at the paint. She tried to rock back against me, chasing her own pleasure as each silken stroke of her tight pussy dragged me toward my own. Her muffled moans were like sparks of dynamite in my core, fanning the flames and throwing me toward orgasm faster than I'd ever experienced before. I wanted to lay her out and spread her open, fuck her like she deserved to be fucked, but in this moment, I was her distraction.

No thought of home would make it past the pounding of my cock.

Summer started to tremble in my arms, her head tipping back onto my shoulder, so I tightened my grip and kissed down the side of her neck while increasing the pace of my thrusts. I was close, so fucking close, and fire licked across my skin as Summer trembled harder and harder.

Suddenly her tight pussy locked up around my cock, and without thinking, I sank my teeth into the soft meat of her shoulder to silence my cry of surprise. She moaned wildly, muffled by my hand, and then her pussy rippled repeatedly around my length. That and her quivering body in my arms was enough to crack the dam and three thrusts later, my own orgasm crashed through me.

I came inside her, pumping my cum deep with each powerful thrust, and I didn't stop until her quivering had faded and the last tingles of pleasure had left my cock. Only then did I lift my hand from her mouth and slide my spent cock from her pussy. Summer sagged against the wall, gasping and she cast an eye over her shoulder.

"Distraction enough for you?" I grinned at her, tucking myself back into my clothes.

She nodded and flashed a warm smile. "Oh yes," she said hoarsely. "Thank you."

"Anytime." I don't think she noticed how deeply I meant that. I hadn't fucked anyone since Flora, and I was usually much slower at approaching the subject. Screwing in the pantry was a new one for me.

On shaky legs, Summer redressed herself and I helped her, then pressed a much more tender kiss to her lips as an apology for the roughness of my hand.

“Go get some rest,” I instructed softly. “I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.”

“Are you sure?” Those stunning blue eyes held me in place. “I can help.”

“Rest,” I repeated then I sent her back toward the door. She gave me one more smile then scurried away, and my heart soared. So, that was what Jax and Theo had meant by *incredible*. She was like a drug; even after one taste, I was addicted. My arms ached at the loss of her warmth, my cock throbbed at the loss of her pussy, and pressing my lips together did nothing to replace her softness.

I wanted her again, immediately, over and over.

I sucked in a breath, waited until I was certain Summer had left, then I stepped back into the kitchen.

“Ma!” My mother stood by the stove, rapidly stirring the sauce.

“I smelled burning,” she said, and she sent me a sharp look over her shoulder. “We have to be *careful* about these things, Luke.”

I got the distinct feeling she wasn’t talking about the sauce.

“I’m careful,” I said softly, “I was taking care of it.”

“Hmm.” She set the spoon down and raked her gaze over me. “Be sure that you do.”

With that, she scurried from the kitchen, and I returned to the stove. I *was* being careful. It was just sex. Distracting sex because Summer was homesick and needed something else to focus on.

That’s all it was; no problems could arise when we’d already discussed how Summer was fair game so long as she wanted us.

And yet, underneath my skin, my heart beat with the thrum of a liar as if it knew more than it was willing to tell me.

SUMMER

In the days that I had been here, I hadn't had much time to think over what I'd been getting up to. I'd slept with Theo, Jax, and now Luke; all because I found them utterly irresistible, and Luke had been the perfect distraction from Felix and his threats.

The only problem was, as soon as it was over, Felix invaded my thoughts once more, and he was harder to shake in the quiet of the night.

Luckily there was one thing that was more reliable than sex when it came to keeping my mind busy; the children. I had only been their nanny for a week, but I'd quickly learned just how much constant energy was required to keep them occupied. I rose to the challenge, especially when they would start to get antsy at the absence of their fathers.

"Stay," Kane whined, clinging onto Theo's leg as he tried to step away. "Stay!"

"Kane," Theo scolded sharply, then he crouched down to his son's level and brushed his cheek. "I'm sorry buddy. I have an important call to take, and I know, I know it's not supposed to be like this but as soon as I'm wrapped up, I'll be back with you until bedtime, okay?"

"So boring," Kane huffed, and he turned, stomping his feet back to the activity table I'd set up. A flash of pain crossed Theo's face, and I flashed him a sympathetic smile.

"He'll be okay," I reassured Theo quietly.

"I feel like I'm becoming one of those parents I hate, putting work first." Theo sighed and dragged a hand over his jaw.

“It’s just one thing,” I said, trying to soothe. “He’ll have forgotten by the time you’re back and tucking him into bed.”

“I hope so.”

“Theo!” Luke poked his head over the banister above. “Need ya, buddy. Hi Ava!”

“Go away, Daddy!” Ava yelled, throwing her small body over the project she was working on. Luke laughed and promptly vanished.

“I better go. Good luck.” With that, Theo turned and hurried back up the stairs. Once he left, I moved to the activity table where Ava whined sharply as her movements had shifted her carefully laid paper-mache.

“I ruined it,” Ava whined as I settled next to her.

“Oh, sweetie, no. We can fix it. Let me look. Bonnie, are you getting on okay?”

Bonnie lifted her head, and I bit back a laugh as a strip of crepe paper came with her.

“I’m okay,” she smiled, then she returned to her work.

My idea had been for each of them to create their own handmade decorations to put on the tree. Bonnie was working on a star that had so many points I’d lost count. Ava had taken a photo of her and created a frame for it which was why she was so intent on hiding it from view. Kane, however, other than throwing down a splotch of paint onto the ball he had created, had fallen out with the project.

After smoothing out Ava’s paper-mache and checking that Bonnie wasn’t getting glitter anywhere she shouldn’t, I scooped over to Kane.

“Hey, have you thought of what you’d like to make yet?”

“No.”

“What about something to do with Batman?”

“No.”

“A star or a frame like Ava?”

“No.”

Great start, Summer. “Do you want to tell me why you don’t feel good?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me what Batman does when he’s grumpy?”

Kane’s mouth made the *no* shape, then he paused and glanced sideways at me. “He fights bad guys.”

Aha. “What kind of bad guys?”

“*Bad* guys,” Kane emphasized. “Like Joker.”

“Even at Christmas?”

Kane turned to face me fully. “Crime never sleeps, Summer.”

It took every ounce of strength I had not to chuckle at how serious he was.

“Okay, but that means at Christmas, Batman helps people, right?”

Kane tilted his head slightly. “Yes.”

“Well, how about you help me put the rest of the lights on the tree, then we can see how you feel?”

Kane glanced past me to the tree that had been getting decorated over the course of my time here. The thing was massive, so I wasn’t surprised it was taking so long.

“You can go on my shoulders,” I offered. Kane finally smiled.

“Okay.”

“Alright champ, let’s go.”

The next hour was spent winding strings of lights around the rest of the tree, around and around, until I was certain the world was spinning the other way just to make it harder on us. From twinkling flower lights to colorful stars and a few light-up lanterns, by the time we were done, the tree was a twinkling, shining beacon. Kane was more than happy to return to his decoration then, and with help from Bonnie and Ava, we finished up his Batman decoration. We hung all three proudly on the tree as Jax appeared down the stairs.

“Oh my God,” he chuckled, “the tree looks amazing!”

“Daddy!” Bonnie made a beeline for Jax while I balanced Kane in my arms, and Ava spread out flat on her back with a yawn.

“Now, a little birdie told me that Uncle Theo has a surprise for you three upstairs,” Jax grinned. Kane immediately began to flex to escape my arms, so I set him down and helped Ava to her feet.

“Really?” Kane gasped, and he sprinted up the stairs.

“Be careful!” I called as Ava followed, and Jax set Bonnie down, allowing her to do the same.

“A surprise?” I asked as all three children vanished.

“Zoom calls with classmates.” Jax flashed me a dazzling smile. “Had to sugarcoat a few parents to make it happen, but it’ll keep the children happy.”

“That’s so sweet.” I moved back to the activity table and cleared up the paint and glue. “I was a little worried Kane was about to start his villain arc earlier.”

“Ah,” Jax sighed and settled in to help me. “He struggles with attachment sometimes, especially at this time of the year.”

“Anything I should know?” I didn’t want to pry but the more I knew, the easier it could be for me to help.

“I’m not sure I’m the one that should tell that story,” Jax said softly, “but he’s old enough to remember his mother *and* father not wanting him.”

“Wait... his father? Theo isn’t his father?”

“Biologically, no.” Jax closed the paints and lined them back up in the case. “Kane’s mother cheated on Theo and fell pregnant. He stayed with her thinking it was his. By the time Kane was born, Theo already loved him. So, when the real father gave up his rights, Theo wanted to step in.” Jax straightened up and sighed. “He ended up fighting for sole custody after Tiffany, Kane’s mother, rejected motherhood like a champ.”

“Oh my God.” I hadn’t lingered on the fact that Kane’s skin was dark and Theo’s was light, but learning how Theo had fought so hard for a child that wasn’t even his was incredibly heartwarming. “So Kane, he gets scared Theo will abandon him too?”

“I think so,” Jax nodded. “So we work hard to make him feel loved.”

“Understandable.”

“Anyway.” Jax placed both his hands on my shoulders as I stood from closing the toy chest. “Enough of that. You need to go upstairs and get dressed.”

I glanced down at my jeans and T-shirt in alarm. “Have I been naked all this time?!”

“No,” Jax laughed, “but we want to treat you. We want you to come to dinner with us. It’s a bit of a fancy function because it’s a shareholder dinner, but we get to dress up, drink wine, and relax a little.”

“Me?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t have a fancy bone in my body, certainly not a shareholder party one.

“Of course you,” Jax laughed, squeezing my shoulders then he stepped away. “Think of it as a thank you for surviving the first week.”

“I—I mean, I couldn’t; I don’t have anything to wear—”

“There are three dresses laid out on your bed. Pick one.”

“Jax, I—”

He turned to face me, and I fought with a flurry of thoughts that consumed my mind. Rejection, shock, and excitement all at the same time.

“Thank you,” is what I settled on, and Jax grinned at me.

“Excellent.”

Upstairs, three gorgeous dresses draped over the bedspread and choosing one looked to be impossible. There was a blue wrap dress, a green gown, and a red off-the-shoulder sparkling dress that clung like a second skin to every part of my body. While I tried the other two on and loved them, the red became my favorite the second I slipped into it.

Despite being formfitting, the material was light and breathable. The sparkles glittered at me with every move, and the off-shoulder netting draped lightly across my upper arms like a warm caress. The bodice hugged me tightly, providing support for my tummy and pushing my boobs up enough that I fell in love. Even my ample hips—usually impossible for me to style—flowed neatly under the dress. It was insane, almost as if the dress had changed my body.

Complete with a red clutch and black platform heels, I returned downstairs after dragging a brush through my hair and throwing on some light pink lipstick.

“Jax?” I called, reaching the lounge. My heart began to race, and heat flushed through my chest. None of them had seen me dressed up before; it wasn’t something I did even before coming here, so as thrilling as this was, I also kept comparing myself to an overstuffed glitzy Christmas stocking.

Jax didn’t seem to be anywhere in the lounge, and as I approached the stairs to find the rest of them, a sharp rapping knock echoed around the room.

Someone was at the door?

I presumed catering or groceries as I hurried across the lounge, grabbed the handle, and pulled open the front door.

“Yes? Hello?”

Standing on the other side was a stunningly elegant woman. Her brown hair was curled tightly and gathered to one side of her head, and her sharp eyes narrowed at me, making her angular face cut even sharper under the porch’s light. Her torso was hidden under a large, fluffy white coat, and a light purple skirt spun around her legs as she stepped forward.

“I’m here to see John,” she said sharply. Behind her, several men dressed in black and white suits hovered on the steps.

“I’m sorry,” I frowned, “there’s no one with that name here.” Was this the woman that had called the other day?

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the woman barked, and her voice cut through me like shards of ice. “I know he’s here. John? John!”

As she pushed past me, I clutched at the door to stop falling and barely noticed the rush of cold wind that followed her.

“Excuse me, you can’t be in here—”

“Marina?” Jax stood in the doorway to the kitchen, a glass in hand and his face pale. He could have been knocked over by a feather if I had one on me.

Marina? His soon-to-be-ex-wife? She tossed her head, curls flying and as she sent me a withering glance, it clicked in my mind that I had seen her before. Back at Jax’s house, she’d not even spared me a look when leaving.

“John,” Marina sighed briskly. “What on earth is going on? I called and called but I was told you weren’t staying here. Then I turn up here, and this... this *stranger* tells me you aren’t here when you clearly are. What are you hiding, huh? What’s going on that you’re avoiding me?”

“I’m not avoiding—”

“Don’t give me that,” Marina scoffed. “I dragged myself across the world to ensure my daughter is safe, and you don’t even invite me to the dinner tonight?”

“Marina, I didn’t—”

“Not that I needed an invitation, but this is ridiculous. You think you can do this to me, John? Did you forget who I am? Keeping a mother from her daughter isn’t going to look good for you now, is it?”

She spoke like a tornado, a flurry of bitter words that cut through the air and silenced Jax each time he tried to speak. Slowly, I closed the door as the chill danced around my ankles.

“Where is she?” Marina demanded. “I want to see her.”

“No,” I spoke up boldly. “I’m sorry, but she’s down for the night.”

Marina spun to face me, and her eyes, like knives, cut right through me.

“And who are you?” She turned back to Jax. “Who is this? You know how I feel about strange people around Bonnie. Are you even serious about this case? You really are just doing it to hurt me, aren’t you, throwing all the rules out the window. Well, this won’t stand. Who is she?” She spun back to me. “Who are you?”

I took a breath, and Jax answered for me.

“My fiancée,” Jax said suddenly. “She’s my fiancée.”

SUMMER

*F*iancée?!

Frozen in place, my mouth moved like a goldfish as Jax stepped across the lounge and slid an arm around my waist. This close, I could feel the tremble moving through his body, and when he looked at me, his pleading eyes silenced all truth in my heart.

“What?” Marina barked shrilly. “Fiancée? Her?”

Immediately heat flushed up my neck, and I fixed Marina with a cold stare. What the hell did she mean by that?

“Yes, me,” I replied sharply, “so I don’t appreciate you barging your way in here shouting while children are trying to sleep. From where I’m standing, you’re causing a disturbance, and you’re being obnoxiously loud so if you would be so kind and *lower* your voice.”

Marina gaped at me, then her eyes narrowed hatefully toward Jax. “Since when are you even dating?”

“That’s... none of your business,” Jax said as his hand curled tighter to my waist.

“It absolutely is my business,” Marina scoffed. “Any new person in your life that can affect my daughter is *my* business.”

“Summer, could you give us a moment?” Jax offered me an immensely apologetic look and I nodded, although I didn’t really want to leave him alone with her. What he’d told me had not at all prepared me for what she was actually like. Still, I took my leave and headed for the kitchen as Marina started another tirade toward Jax. I made a beeline for the fridge and sought

out one of the bottles of light beer. With shaking hands, I popped the lid and took a swig to try and calm the frantic patter of my heart and the churn in my gut.

Fiancée.

Three mouthfuls and I started to feel calmer. The door slammed, and a few moments later, Jax appeared.

“Summer—”

“Fiancée?” I barked at him. “What the hell? And your name is John?”

“I know, I know!” He stepped forward, his hands twisted together at his abdomen. “I’m so sorry, I panicked. She’s so... she does have this thing about people being around Bonnie but it’s not from concern. She knows of my past. Back then she found it exciting that I was rough around the edges, y’know? That I knew shady people and got up to things that were less than legal. She’s hell-bent on catching me in the act, convinced I’m still like that, and I didn’t *intentionally* forget to tell her we’d hired a nanny I just...”

“But I’m a *nanny*,” I stated, pointing the bottle at him. “There’s nothing shameful about that.”

“I know, I know. But it means you’re around Bonnie a lot, and I panicked. I just *panicked* that it would be that one mistake, and I would lose Bonnie to her so I just said the first thing that popped into my head.” Jax placed his hands on the counter and his face was so crestfallen, his words so heavy that what little anger that simmered inside me promptly fizzled out.

“I...” I couldn’t think of anything to say, then I sighed. “Did she buy it?”

“I think so,” Jax groaned. “Fuck. I’m so sorry I’ve put you in this position. It’ll be forgotten quickly I promise, I just...” As he fell silent, searching for words, I found myself nodding.

“I understand, in a way. Having bad things in the past shouldn’t define how you move forward, and when someone pops up intent on dragging you back as if you haven’t changed...” The similarities between Marina and Felix cut closer to home than I’d like.

“Yeah... exactly. Plus... if she somehow did find out that we’ve slept together then she absolutely will make sure that ruins my custody attempts.”

“Does that mean we can’t do it again?” I joked softly. “What a short engagement this will be.”

“I didn’t say that,” Jax smiled, and finally some light reignited in his eyes. “I am sorry.”

“I believe you. I guess I should prepare some amazing tale if I ever run

into her again.” Which was likely if she was attending the same party. “I’m surprised though. When you told me you were a bad boy, I had pictured a fight here and there. Was it more than that?”

“Nothing I’m proud of,” Jax said softly. “I did some bad things, found peace at the bottom of a bottle. Things like that. I’ve worked my ass off to change my life, to make things right, but all it takes is one wrong thing. I’ve made sure nothing like that will ever be around Bonnie.”

Felix flashed in my mind again, and I set the bottle down, determined. “Alright, well if I’m your fiancée now, we should agree on one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Who asked who?”

“Oh, I definitely asked you.” Jax approached slowly, his face relaxing. “Have you seen yourself? You look absolutely beautiful in that dress.”

The dress! I’d forgotten all about that. As Jax reached me and slid an arm around my waist, I patted his chest lightly.

“It works then?”

“Oh yes.” Jax leaned in close, and the spice of his aftershave tickled my nose. “If I can’t keep my hands off you, it’ll certainly make things more believable.” His lips brushed my cheek and I laughed, then plucked at his checked shirt.

“You’re going dressed like this?”

“Shit.” Jax pulled away and glanced down. “Maybe not the best idea.”



After changing, Jax escorted me down to the resort, and we made our way toward one of the ballroom suites. While a few swigs of beer had calmed my initial panic, as I entered the ballroom, my nerves came cascading back. The place was beautiful, larger than I could see at a single glance. The lights were low and crystal chandeliers glittered above like painted stars. The tables dotted around the room were covered in white silk table clothes and adorned with festive ribbons and wreathes, complete with champagne bottles and gold utensils. Each corner had a massive Christmas tree, and glittering streamers

danced across the room, moving in the heat.

It was stunning, and at the far end of the crowd, I glimpsed the Helix logo.

“You look amazing!” Theo appeared beside us, and he pressed a warm kiss to my cheek. “I knew you’d pick the red one.”

“Oh, was there a debate?” I chuckled, and Luke pressed a cool glass of champagne into my hand.

“A heated one,” Luke grinned. “Although I hear congratulations are in order?”

My heart sank and Jax groaned. “Oh no.”

“She’s telling everyone,” Theo said softly. “I’m sorry, Jax.”

“It’s fine. It’s my mistake,” Jax sighed. He stroked my lower back and murmured another apology before he stepped away. “I better do some damage control.” With that, he vanished into the crowd, and my heart settled low in my gut.

“So,” Luke grinned, “what does he have that we don’t?”

“Such a fast engagement,” Theo teased, “I’m jealous.”

“Well, it was his maniac ex-wife that really sealed the deal.” I drained my glass in a few seconds. “There’s nothing like it.”

“Well, there goes my chances.” Theo sighed dramatically and began leading the way to our table.

“Your ex isn’t insane?” I asked.

“Not like Marina. Tiffany is...” He paused, searching for the words. “She just wasn’t meant to be a mother. I loved her, and I still care for her, but that might just be because she’s Kane’s mother. I’ve been trying so hard to get her clean and into Kane’s life but she makes it impossible.”

At our table, Luke pulled out a chair for me, and as I sat another glass appeared in my hand.

“Clean?”

“After Kane was born, she rejected motherhood so fast. Went back to partying and everything. Her old ways from before I met her. We broke up when I saw Kane and found out she had cheated, but I still tried to be there for him. It was me they called every time she got arrested and when she was declared unfit, I fought for him. I’ve been paying for her rehab for years trying to help her.” Theo stopped a passing waiter and requested a scotch.

“That’s amazing,” I gasped softly. “He wasn’t yours and you fought for him anyway.”

“He’s my son, no matter what anyone says,” Theo shrugged.

“No wonder he thinks you’re Batman,” I chuckled. “He thinks you keep people safe, and you adopted him like a little Robin. It’s so cute.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that before,” Theo grinned, taking a sip.

“What about you?” I turned to Luke. “Any volatile exes I need to be aware of? I should start charging.”

“No. Flora and I...” Luke sighed deeply. “Flora wanted a green card. That was it. I was too slow, apparently, and when Ava was born, she thought that would secure her a place in the States without me. Sadly, it doesn’t work like that.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry.” I reached across and gently squeezed his arm.

“It’s okay. She’s back in France and I try to keep her in communication with Ava, but I won’t allow anything serious until Flora commits to being there for her.”

“Wow.” At a glance, it was too easy to wonder what they had done to be left single with the children, but each of them had their own pain, their own private battles outside of Helix where they were just trying to do the right thing. The growing attraction to each of them was rising.

“What about you?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Theo added, “any exes we need to know about?”

This was my chance to tell them about Felix. But just as I considered it, I caught myself. Felix was everything I hated, and the moment they learned what he was like, what I was *really* like, and the things I had done... I couldn’t imagine them being as forgiving.

After all, I looked after their children. They had all fought against people with drugs and more in their background to keep their kids safe, and while I was a changed woman, Felix was a risk. He was a dark shadow, and on top of that, I didn’t want them to pity me. I didn’t want to see that warmth change to sadness when they learned I was little more than his punching bag.

“No one important,” I grinned, and I reached for their hands. “Come on, let’s dance!”

The night passed in a whirlwind. Dancing and celebration flowed along with countless glasses of champagne. I grabbed a new one every time a stranger stopped me to offer congratulations on my engagement, something I accepted with a smile. I wasn’t going to blow the secret, but the constant attention was smothering. I lived my life on the fringes, not slap bang in the center. Dancing with Theo, Luke, and Jax proved the best distraction

especially when I turned things a little saucy as we twirled past Marina. I moved and flowed until Felix was gone from my mind and this fantasy had replaced him.

A world of sparkling riches, festivities, and a loving, warm family.

As the night drew to a close, I ended up in Jax's lap panting from the dancing with one sleeve from the dress dangling down my arm like a ribbon. My cheeks were rosy and my heart full as I played with the buttons on Jax's shirt.

I just caught the glance he gave to Theo and Luke, then he wrapped a strong arm around my waist and stood.

"Come on Summer, let's get you home."

"No," I whined, "I'm having such a good time!"

"How much have you had to drink?" Luke chuckled.

"Same as me, no doubt," Theo grinned.

"Besides," Jax added as we headed toward the door. "I didn't say the fun had to end, did I?"

SUMMER

No sooner had we stepped through the door of the chalet than my fantasy continued in a whirlwind that I never wanted to end. Jax's hands hadn't left me and now that we were behind closed doors, they wandered across my waist and up my back as I stumbled, less than gracefully, up the stairs. Having lost count of how many drinks I'd had, the world wasn't as stable as I'd like, and my reasonable thoughts had melted.

As soon as we hit the top floor, I pressed into Jax's arms and claimed his lips in a deep kiss. He moaned in surprise and his grip tightened around my waist, leaning into the affection until we stumbled back and hit the wall.

"Mmm, I'm horny," I whined softly against his mouth and Jax groaned, his teeth snagging on my lower lip.

"Are you sure? You've had a lot to drink." He pulled back and studied me, his eyes sparkling like diamonds and the budding warmth in my core swelled.

"I'm *more* than sure," I said and Jax didn't need telling twice. He guided me backward, and we spilled through the first door that opened for us. Jax's mouth warmed my throat with small kisses and bites as I closed my eyes, sliding my hands into his thick hair for grip.

"Um..." Theo cleared his throat. "That's my room guys."

I opened my eyes. Theo and Luke lingered near the doorway, and a devilish thought pulsed through me as I stared at them. It was bold, yet the thought was so thrilling, my mouth moved before I could even finish thinking.

“Well, get in here then, unless you’re both too scared.”

Theo and Luke glanced at one another, and Jax lifted his head to look at me.

“All of us?” Jax asked uncertainly.

I bit my lower lip and nodded, looking at all three of them. “Unless you can’t handle it...”

They all exchanged glances, and Theo’s warm face brightened with a smile. “All three of us.”

The door closed and I was whisked into the air by Jax. I squealed in delight as he threw me down onto the bed, and his warm fingers grazed my thighs as he bundled the skirt of my dress up high. One more kiss and he vanished from view, his hot breath suddenly ghosting over my inner thighs. Deft fingers tugged my panties free, and I had just enough time to part my legs wide before Jax’s teasing mouth pressed against my pussy and I moaned low and deep.

“Oh, fuck!” Whether it was the alcohol or my lack of worry about *anything*, Jax’s mouth was amazing, and I pressed my head back onto the bed and arched up to rock my hips down. Suddenly, Theo’s face appeared above mine and his eyes danced across my face then settled on my mouth. He was waiting, and I was impatient.

Sliding my hands around to the back of his neck, I yanked him down for a kiss and he came willingly. His mouth was soft and warm, molding to mine with each movement, and I gasped against him as Jax’s tongue teased through my folds and flicked repeatedly over my clit. As I grasped at Theo, I realized he was now shirtless, and his gorgeous body was mine for the taking. My hands wandered, stroking over limbs and muscles as his tongue teased into my mouth.

A second mouth, Luke’s, kissed along my shoulder and began to remove the straps of my dress. As the material shifted, his mouth trailed over my chest and down to my breasts where my bra was swiftly removed. Luke’s tongue and teeth danced lightly over my stiff nipples, teasing the nubs to harder peaks as I tried to rock into his mouth while also grinding down on Jax’s face. I was caught in a sea of pleasure and was utterly hooked.

Suddenly two thick fingers pressed into my pussy, sinking into my core, and my back bowed from the bed as pleasure took over.

“Oh fuck, fuck—” I gasped into Theo’s mouth. He kissed me repeatedly, and I couldn’t tell where one man ended and the other began. Warm, rough

hands stroked my over-sensitive skin, my nipples were pulled and suckled, my body caressed, and my core lit up like a dozen fireworks when Jax focused all his attention on my clit and fingered my core.

I was lost and my orgasm crept up hard and fast. I didn't have time to register the building; suddenly I was consumed by heat and tingling pleasure as my orgasm exploded through me. Every muscle tensed and for a few moments, I was simply suspended. Then I gasped, stealing the air from Theo's lungs, and ripples of ecstasy flashed through my body, head to toe. Pulse after pulse, Jax drank me down... and didn't stop.

As my orgasm faded, hands worked together to remove my dress completely, and strong hands grasped my hips. I was flipped over onto my stomach but rather than the bedsheets stroking my breasts and stomach, I landed on someone's chest. Glancing down, Theo grinned up at me and my heart fluttered excitedly.

"Hey," I panted.

"Hey," he smirked.

All other thoughts fled my mind as suddenly Jax's heated mouth landed on my ass. I squealed in surprise, and he paused, his hand stroking down my bare lower back.

"Too much?" came his voice from behind.

"No," I gasped, "not at all."

It was all he needed, and his mouth was back on me, teasing my tight hole and gently stroking my thighs with his hands. I placed both palms on Theo's chest and arched up with a moan, coming face-to-face with a kneeling Luke who had his cock in hand. I didn't even think; I turned my head and took his length into my mouth with one slow movement. Luke moaned, and Theo's mouth attached to my breasts, gently licking and suckling over my nipples and increasing the pleasure pulsing from there. Theo's hands cupped my ribcage, providing support as I bobbed my head back and forth on Luke's cock. My eyes fluttered and his moans rained down on me like a velvet curtain as Jax's talented mouth worked against the resistance of my tightest hole.

His tongue became a well-slicked finger, and I moaned low and deep as he pressed inside me. I dipped away from Luke's cock with a gasp as the stretch pulled all my attention south. Luke's hand stroked gently through my hair, and one of Theo's hands lifted to cup the side of my neck.

"Summer? You okay?"

It took me a few seconds to adjust, then I nodded and lifted my eyes to Theo.

“Amazing,” I whimpered, returning my attention to Luke’s cock. One finger became two, then three, and I moaned deeply, losing pace on Luke’s cock as I adjusted each time, but he didn’t seem to mind. His touch in my hair remained caring and gentle, and Theo’s hands constantly shifted to stroke and caress over my body. Too many pleasurable sensations tackled my mind and I didn’t know where to focus. It was too much and not enough all at the same time.

Suddenly Jax retracted his fingers and I gasped, lifting my head from Luke’s cock as I was struck by a sudden aching emptiness inside me.

“Please,” I gasped, searching behind me for Jax but I couldn’t see him through the curtain my hair kept creating. Turned out I didn’t need to as I was swiftly guided down onto Theo’s cock. His thickness stroked into my pussy, spearing me wide and I gasped, but not as loud as when Jax’s well-slicked cock thrust into my ass. I threw myself back with a cry and Jax caught me as my back hit his torso. I screamed as I came suddenly and hard from the double penetration.

Luke’s hands grasped my hips, helping me remain steady as I shuddered against Jax, and my body rolled and clenched like a wave around the two cocks stuffed inside me. It was beyond any pleasure I had ever known, and I was swimming in sensations that I didn’t want to end. Panting heavily, Jax stroked over my abdomen and up to cup my breasts.

“Easy,” he purred in my ear. “Only when you’re ready.”

Two orgasms in, tiredness was tingling my peripheral, but I ignored it and rolled my hips down on their lengths.

“Okay,” I groaned, “I’m good.”

I sank down and pressed one hand to Theo’s chest to keep myself balanced. The other grasped the base of Luke’s cock and as I took his delicious thickness back into my mouth, Jax and Theo began to move.

I couldn’t hold back the moans that spilled forth as they set up a slow rhythm, moving in tandem with one another. Their cocks stroked me from every angle, reaching pleasure spots I didn’t even know existed, and it became a struggle to focus on Luke’s cock as pleasure took me. He seemed to notice as a gentle hand stroked down to caress the side of my face, then both his hands settled in my hair and his grip increased pressure, taking over control.

I allowed it and floated in this warm bubble of pleasure created by all three of them. My mind was quiet and my body sang high. Hands stroked over my body, grasped at my hips, tweaked at my breasts, and soft words of praise and warmth washed over me even though I was too lost to decipher them clearly. Jax and Theo began to increase the pace of their thrusts and I could only gasp as moans were fucked out of me. My core tightened repeatedly, and a sharper ecstasy began to build deep inside me as oversensitive nerves flared hotter and hotter. I started to writhe, lost to the plunge of their cocks even as Luke thrust deep into me and sealed off my airway once or twice, never leaving me without air for long. Desperation began to grow in my chest and all my focus dropped to the building tightness in my core.

My third orgasm. I was so close, so close and desperate. Around me, their combined moans created a deep, vibrating music, and I wanted to wash myself in the sound again and again. Then my racing heart skipped a beat, my core clenched, and the tightness building inside me snapped.

I came hard with a muted cry, and my body locked up around both of the pounding cocks inside me. Jax moaned sharply behind me, Theo gasped underneath me, and Luke cried out suddenly. He came with a final thrust, his seed flooding into my mouth and spilling down my throat. I scarcely had time to swallow as ripples of pleasure crashed over me, and as soon as my mouth was empty, I pulled away from Luke and threw my head back with a desperate moan. The pleasure just kept coming, wave after wave, and I trembled like a leaf, losing all strength in my arms. I would have fallen onto Theo had Jax not tightened his grip around my body as he came a second later with a hard thrust deep inside me. His movements and pleasurable moans were mirrored by Theo as he found his end inside me, and together we rocked through the thrilling ecstasy together.

When muscles had stopped twitching and cum was packed deep, I was exhausted. I slumped down onto Theo's chest with a satisfied groan, and Jax pulled himself slowly from me. His mouth landed on my ass, kissing gently over my over-stimulated flesh, and after Theo slipped from my pussy, Jax kissed me there too. I panted heavily, dragging in breath after breath as Luke and Jax settled on either side of me. A blissful silence descended over us, and if I could move I would have returned the gentle caress that I was feeling over my body from their warm hands and trailing fingertips.

"That was... amazing," I said finally, unclear how much time had passed.

My body still twisted slightly, and a pleasant ache had settled in my core. Moving was a distant thought that started to grow the more that sense came back to me.

“You’re fucking amazing, Summer,” Jax murmured from one side.

“Agreed,” Luke said.

“Me three,” Theo chuckled as he pressed his lips to my temple.

“Oh, I know,” I smirked. “You’re welcome.”

Warm laughter rose, and I smiled, nuzzling into Theo’s chest as satisfied contentment settled in my chest. This was the *best* night of my life.

Eventually, tiredness crept up, and despite how I could lay there all night, I climbed off of Theo. Jax helped me redress.

“You can stay here,” Theo said, remaining on his bed and propped up by an elbow.

“I’d love to,” I yawned. “But the kids will need me in the morning, and I want to be there for them.”

“I can do that,” Jax said, sliding the straps up my arm as I smoothed down the dress.

“I like it,” I smiled. “Besides, I don’t want to affect the routine.”

That and, as I slid back into my shoes, I was growing aware of the attachment I was starting to feel to these men now that the alcohol started to fade. It would be reckless to get attached, especially with Felix, my past, and their children.

“If you’re sure.” Jax kissed my cheek and I nodded.

“Sleep well,” Luke said, and I gave a small, flourishing bow and darted from the room. Closing the door softly, I took a deep breath and blew it out as my body still tingled faintly. Then I turned—

And came face-to-face with Tabitha. She was wrapped up in her usual cardigan with a mug of hot cocoa in hand.

“Tabitha!”

To my surprise, she simply gave me a cheery smile and continued down the hall.

“Goodnight, Summer,” she called.

“Good... goodnight!” I scurried off to my room, ready for bed and trying not to dwell on what Tabitha might think of me now after catching me coming out of Theo’s room.

Maybe that part can stay a dream.

JAX

Had we really done that?

The early morning sun glazed through the window of the kitchen, creating a delicate pattern on the countertop as it bled through the lace curtain. I studied the pattern as I nursed the steaming cup of coffee in my hand, but my mind was elsewhere. On Summer and how our drunken escapades last night had resulted in one of the sauciest nights of my life and the best orgasm I'd had since... well I couldn't remember anything that had felt that good. All night I had tossed and turned, fighting with myself because the urge to go to Summer's room and hold her had been too intense to ignore. I'd made it as far as far as her hallway before I'd turned back, not wanting to be overbearing. She was her own woman; she was likely fine.

Yet that desire stayed with me, even now.

"Morning!" Luke wandered into the kitchen with a yawn, stretching his hands high above his head. "Fuck, I slept amazing last night."

"Oh, I wonder why," I mused over the edge of my cup.

"Summer in December, who would have thought." Chuckling at his terrible joke, Luke poured his own cup of coffee and added far too much milk for that drink to still be classed as such. "I saw Summer was up with the kids. Ava told me to leave because she's having *girl time* with Summer. Apparently, Theo doesn't count so he was allowed to stay!"

Luke rambled on and I half listened, enjoying the drone of his voice as thoughts about Summer ran rampant through my mind. Then he turned to me, cup in hand, and immediately frowned.

“Jax? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied immediately. Luke raised one unbelieving brow and I sighed. Nothing got past these guys, not anymore. “I’ve just been thinking. About Summer.”

“Ah,” Luke grinned. “About last night?”

“Yeah, but more... I think I’ve put her in a terrible position with this fake engagement thing. I didn’t mean to do it at all, it just slipped out, but Marina was standing there with that look on her face, like she’d already won and I’d never see Bonnie again. And it just... came out.” I waved one hand and then stared down hard at my coffee. “I’m fucking lucky Summer went along with it.”

“Jax...” Luke sighed deeply and slid into the stool opposite me. “We all know you’re in a tough spot with Marina. That bitch doesn’t care about anything other than her name and her status. Hell, we know the only reason she wants Bonnie is that being declared an unfit mother would stain her family name and nothing more. Summer might not know all the details, but I think she understands enough.”

“You think so?” I lifted my gaze to him and a chill stole down my arms. Everything about Marina was enough to make me feel ill. It was hard to believe I had loved her enough to marry her; her true colors had been nothing but nauseating.

“I know so. Summer is smart and nothing forced her to go along with it,” Luke pointed out. “Besides, we all know Marina would pitch a fit if she discovered that Summer was the nanny.”

“She’d say I was unfit; no time for Bonnie,” I murmured. “I can hear it already. Every time she looks at me, I’m right back in that bar with her yelling at me for taking the job at Helix. *You’re working for a company my family employs? How low can you sink?!*” I mocked softly.

“Hey, you deserved everything about that job, and look at you now. I can’t imagine life without you,” Luke grinned.

“That’s because I saved yours,” I pointed out with a chuckle, but he was right. I worked my ass off and saving Luke’s life had given me an opportunity. All the work I put in to rise up the ranks was mine and mine alone.

“Not the point I was making but sure,” Luke grinned.

“It’s not... just that,” I continued cautiously. “I can’t actually get Summer out of my head. I’m thinking about her all the time and last night was just...”

I'm feeling things I haven't felt in a long time. Mostly things I was certain Marina had crushed in me but..." I sighed and set my cup down, dancing my fingers along the rim. "I feel like a teenager."

"She is quite the woman," Luke agreed. "And I feel... similar. But we don't really have the luxury of entertaining that, do we? With the children and all the responsibility of keeping their lives safe and not confusing."

"The kids love her," I pointed out, but I wasn't sure if I was trying to persuade Luke or myself.

"They do," he agreed, "but Summer never signed up to be a parent."

"That is... true." Regardless of my feelings, Summer hadn't come here looking for anything. The sex and the flirting were amazing, but if I wasn't careful, my unruly feelings would result in nothing but heartbreak. For Luke too, and Theo if I knew anything about him.

"Speaking of parents," I said, eyeing Luke as he drained his coffee not coffee. "Is Flora going to make it for Christmas?"

A shadow passed over Luke's face, and he thumped his cup onto the counter.

"No," he grimaced. "I've been on her for months trying to get something out of her, anything for Ava, but she's been so flakey. Then she had the cheek to ask me to bring Ava to France. I told her no. Ava barely knows her, and she needs to actually use the plane tickets I send her to come and get to know her daughter." Luke's shoulders slumped forward and his lips pressed into a thin line. "She just doesn't care."

"I'm sorry." My heart went out to him. While I was being smothered by Marina, Flora barely batted an eye. Her claims that she needed her daughter with her were never backed up with action despite Luke's constant attempts to get Flora visitor visas and more.

"If it's not us coming to France, she doesn't want to hear it, and I refuse to take Ava to a place outside her comfort zone to get to know a stranger," Luke grumbled.

"It's the right thing to do," I agreed. "There's no telling how Ava would react and having her in a place she feels safe and secure is the best way to handle something like that. Maybe... maybe next year?" As soon as the words left me, I knew they were false. Luke sent me a defeated glance and nodded.

"Maybe."

"Or tell her you're engaged," I chuckled, "that gets so much fucking

attention.”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” Luke laughed.

“Hi!” Summer appeared in the doorway and Luke brightened up instantly, leaning away from the counter. I hid my smile; I felt it too though. Her presence was so warm and light that it was difficult to hold onto unhappy feelings.

“Hey Summer, everything alright?”

“Oh absolutely,” she grinned and there was a mischievous glint in her eye. “If you two are finished fueling up, it’s time for you to get your butts outside because today we’re having a snowman building competition! And let’s face it, the adults are painfully on the losers side after Twister, so come on! Get outside!”

With that, she turned and vanished. Luke laughed and set his cup in the sink. “Alright, it is on.”

“We’ll be losers no more!” I laughed, sliding from my stool as warmth flooded my chest. Just a few seconds of Summer and my heart felt lighter. With a clearer mind and warmer heart, we headed to get changed.

This competition was in the bag!

SUMMER

“Are you ready?” I asked in a hushed whisper. All three children around my legs nodded. As soon as Jax and Luke appeared out the back door, I stood up and yelled. “Attack!”

With loud squeals and giggles, the children launched their snowballs at their fathers who were hurrying down the wooden stairs. Surprised cries rose up from each man, but they leaned into it, throwing themselves into the snow and scooping up handfuls to return fire. A snowball launched from Theo and caught my shoulder so who was I to remain a bystander after that? The children relied on their carefully prepared pile of snowballs while Jax, Theo, and Luke had to gather ammo while under attack.

Their combined laughter floated through the air like birdsong, and their faces quickly became rosy from the cold and the exertion of running through the snow. As everyone ran around, Jax slipped on the snow and landed face down with a grunt and a laugh. As he rolled onto his back, Kane and Bonnie immediately pelted him with snowballs, and the soft thud of snow on his jacket almost drowned out his laughter.

Ava was much more tactical and tried to run around behind everyone to launch her attacks but was eventually scooped up by Luke who spun her around in his arms as she squealed and giggled.

“Nooo!” she screeched over her laughter. Jax managed to scramble up and dump a bunch of snow over Kane who laughed so hard he almost turned purple, while Theo took time to launch a few snowballs straight at me.

“You’re a traitor!” he laughed. “You’re supposed to be on our side!”

“What can I say?” I called back. “They’re just cuter than you!”

The fight lasted until the children’s ammunition was depleted, and Tabitha, who had taken up residence on the porch to watch from above, clapped her hands. “I declare the children the winners!”

Each child cheered, tangled up in their father’s arms as each man groaned their faux disappointment.

“But why, Ma?” Luke groaned.

Tabitha peered over the edge; her flushed, wrinkly face tucked up neatly in a large cotton scarf. “Because the children used smarts and the element of surprise,” she grinned, then returned to her knitting.

“Fair,” Jax laughed. Each child was set down and Ava ran over to me as I brushed snow out of my hair.

“Snowman time?” she asked, her glittering eyes staring up at me.

“Snowman time,” I grinned. “Alright! It’s kids versus parents and I will provide assistance to the children because I am like... what was it again, Kane?”

“You’re Alfred!” Kane declared as he stomped about in the snow.

“That’s right, I’m Alfred apparently. Dads, you can build over there by the trees, and children, we’ll build over here by the porch. Both teams have one hour, and Tabitha will decide the winner. All good?”

“Traitor,” Theo whispered to me with a grin. I stuck my tongue out in response.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Bonnie bounced up and down in the snow, and it was cute to see her so active and excited for the activity. Within moments, both teams split up and began gathering snow. I glanced over at the guys and watched as they immediately fell into some sort of tactical discussion. My heart warmed for each of them in ways I knew I should stop but I couldn’t help myself. Not only had they made me feel amazing, but they also still treated me like a person.

My only experience of such things was with Felix; he had never been kind. He’d certainly never gone down on me with the enthusiasm Jax had, never mind multiple orgasms in multiple sessions. The attraction was settling deep in my chest and was growing with each passing day, blocking out all of Felix’s threats, and I was happy about that. Reality could wait until this holiday was over.

“Come on!” Ava slid a gloved hand into mine and tugged me backward, distracting me from my thoughts. “We need to win!”

“I’m coming,” I laughed softly.

The next hour passed in a flash. Gathering snow and rolling it around into three balls was the biggest workout I’d had in months, as was piling them on top of one another. Kane gathered sticks for arms, Bonnie took stones from an outside planter to use as buttons and a nose, and Ava vanished inside with Tabitha to get a carrot for the nose. By the time Tabitha called out her five-minute warning, our lopsided snowman had the biggest smile and a somewhat disproportioned body, but all in all, he was adorable.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the guys had a much stronger-looking snowman; in fact, the way his body was smoothed together had him looking much more artisanal. Same for the way one of the guys had sculpted his face rather than using stones.

Showoffs.

“Alright! Judge says it’s time to stop so she can go and get started on lunch,” Tabitha said. The children gathered around me next to the snowman and waited with excited panting and wide eyes as Tabitha inspected their snowman, then she wandered over to where the guys were looking almost too proud of themselves. Tabitha remained silent, inspecting carefully, then she returned to the back porch and faced us all.

“Kids win.”

“What?” Jax gaped at us as cheers rose up from the children. “Why?!”

“No carrot nose,” Tabitha stated with a mischievous grin. “Instant fail.”

“What?!” Luke looked ready to burst and he whined dramatically. “I sculpted and everything!”

“We did it!” Bonnie yelled and she began to dance as Ava tugged on my arm.

“We did it, Mom!” Ava squealed, then fell completely silent.

Mom.

Heat rushed over my cheeks, and I stared down at her, stunned. I had no idea what to say and my lips parted, searching for the words. Ava realized what she said a second later, her eyes went wide, and she let go of my hand, sprinting full pelt into the house.

“Ava!” I called after her.

Luke followed quickly without even a glance at me, limping slightly, and my heart plummeted to my gut. What was I supposed to do? What was the right thing here? Tabitha sent me a sympathetic look and waved her hands at Bonnie and Kane.

“Come inside before Jack Frost decides you’ve been outside for too long!”

Oblivious, the other two children raced up the steps with Jax on their heels.

“Don’t worry,” Theo said softly as he appeared beside me. “It happens.”

“What?” I glanced at him, all my thoughts swimming to Ava and the word *Mom*. “She calls people *Mom*?”

“Oh, no,” Theo chuckled softly, and we started walking slowly toward the chalet. “That’s a first but kids can get confused.”

“She seemed so...” I searched for the word.

“Genuine?” Theo offered, and I nodded. “I think she yearns for a mother figure. She’s never really had one beyond Tabitha.”

“Her mother, Flora was it? She isn’t... around?”

“Not even a little,” Theo sighed. “See, Luke and Flora met when they were young and they had a whirlwind romance, at least that’s how Luke saw it. But he’s a gentleman. He moves slowly, and with Helix taking off and being young, he wasn’t ready to settle down. Flora on the other hand was desperate to get married and claimed it was because she loved him so much. Then she fell pregnant with Ava and Luke tried to sort out what it meant to be a father. Only, Flora gradually became colder and colder, so Luke tried harder.”

“Wow,” I murmured under my breath as we climbed the steps, not wanting to interrupt.

“On the night Ava was born, Luke was on his way to the hospital when he was struck by a drunk driver. This asshole just drove through him like he was nothing and left him on the side of the road like trash.” Anger licked into Theo’s words then and he held the door open for me. “Luke doesn’t remember much, but he’s pretty sure he saw an angel that night.”

“An angel?”

“Yeah. After he was hit, he was convinced this angel came to help him. A woman or something. Anyway, Jax was driving on the same road and he found Luke. Did CPR, called an ambulance, and saved his life.”

“Is that how you all met?” I asked, stomping snow from my boots and winding my scarf off my neck.

“Yup. Easy to give Jax a job when he’d saved the life of my best friend. Luke got taken to the same hospital Flora was giving birth in, so he missed it but when he woke up a few days later, he got to meet Ava. It was then that

Flora told him she was only after a green card and that Ava secured that for her. She was *wrong*, but at the time, you can imagine how much that broke his heart.”

“My God,” I murmured. To be injured and miss your child’s birth only to have your heart broken. And yet, as Theo spoke, there was a gnawing sensation in my gut. Some details in the story were almost too close to home. “What happened?”

“Well, you might have noticed that Luke limps sometimes. His leg was shattered so he had a long recovery ahead of him. Healing, therapy, that kind of thing. It turned out Flora was months past the expiry date on her visa so giving birth alerted authorities. She was sent back to France, and Tabitha took over caring for Ava and nursing Luke. Jax and I helped wherever possible; ever since Flora has sent gifts but refused to be a mother. So Ava, I think she yearns for that especially since she likely still has early memories of Luke in recovery.”

“Geez. I had no idea.” Warmth tingled through my body as the cold faded, yet the gnawing sensation in my gut refused to leave. “And Ava is... four, right?”

“That’s right. So I hope you won’t think too badly of her; it’s just a slip of the tongue, y’know?”

“Oh, of course!” I reassured him quickly. “Please, I don’t mind at all. It was kind of cute really.”

Before I could say more, Kane sprinted from the kitchen to find his father. As Theo tended to him, my mind raced.

Ava was four. So Luke’s accident was four years ago.

Four years ago, I had been a passenger in Felix’s car when he’d run over someone in the dark. In my darkest dreams, I could still hear the crunch of their body as they flew over the car. I’d tried to help, forcing Felix to pull over, and I’d tried to give CPR to the victim before Felix had dragged me away, thrown me in the trunk, and left me there all night.

Hearing Luke’s painful story... the crossing similarities were chilling and the gnawing in my gut increased tenfold when I arrived in the kitchen and saw Ava and Luke up to their elbows in dough.

It was just a crazy coincidence... right?

SUMMER

My mind became a hamster on steroids ever since Theo told me Luke's story. I knew he had offered the information as a way to explain why Ava had slipped up and why she might be so attached so quickly, but it was the details of Luke's accident that stuck with me all through the night and plagued me as I headed down the mountain the next day for some Christmas shopping.

It was movie day, and the guys were settling in with their children to binge all their favorite movies, and it was the perfect time for me to slip away for some festive shopping by myself, especially with Christmas fast approaching.

Yet, even the twinkling lights and decorated fir trees throughout the resort couldn't distract me from mulling over Luke's accident and what had happened with Felix. It was too similar. The hit and run, Luke seeing an angel while I had tried to help the victim—was it too crazy to be a coincidence? As I wandered the shops, I tried to persuade myself that hundreds and thousands of people get hit by cars daily. Four years ago, when the police came knocking for Felix and I handed him over without a second thought, I hadn't needed to go to court; as my own statement had provoked an angry confession from Felix and that had sent him away to prison.

No court trip meant I never learned anything else about the victim. An officer told me he was alive, but I was never given any more information.

Was it Luke?

Was I his angel? Or rather a devil in disguise.

Those thoughts spun on a carousel in my mind, mingling with the growing warmth and affection I had for Luke and the others. In a short time, they had made me feel more cared for and more loved than anyone else in my life. They were a proper family and welcomed me with loving arms and good sex; who was I to look a gift horse in the mouth? Even Ava calling me *Mom* had given an unexpected uptick in my affection for her and the other children.

But my heart swung like a yo-yo between adoration and confused guilt. What if I was a wolf in sheep's clothing, partially responsible for Luke's injury? No one would care that Felix was violent and often scared me into obedience or that I had tried to help and he'd dragged me away. All they would see is the passenger that hit Luke.

All Ava would see is a monster that hurt her father.

Then again, maybe it was a coincidence.

I sighed deeply, alarming the cashier behind the till and I flashed her a quick, apologetic smile. Taking the cardigan I had bought for Tabitha, I added it to my bags and wandered out of the shop with my head still spinning. It was times like these that I yearned for someone in my corner, someone I could talk to that would listen and support me.

In my distracted walking, I wasn't looking where I was going and continued down the corridors lost in my own little world until a shadow blocked my path. Still distracted, I merely sidestepped with a quiet apology until a vice-like grip wrapped around my arm and jerked me sideways. My heart leaped into my throat as I stumbled and lifted my gaze, ready to give whoever it was an earful for touching me.

The words turned to ash in my mouth and my blood turned to ice as I looked at the stranger.

"*Felix?*" Like a recurring nightmare, he stood before me dressed in a T-shirt and leather jacket with his thin face twisted into a smirk.

"Summer. Did you really think you could run away from me?"

"What... what are you—*how* are you..." Too many thoughts rushed through my mind and the panic in my chest solidified into heavy fear. Instinct had me pulling away sharply and his grip slipped on my arm. Taking a chance, I started to run but only made it a few steps before his molten hand was back on my arm, searing into my skin and pulling me back under the canopy of a shop already closed up for the evening.

"Uh, ah!" he tutted as I struggled against him. "You're not trying to run

away from me, are you? After everything I did to find you?”

“What the fuck?” I gasped and his unrelenting grip finally had me standing still. My heart pounded slowly in my chest and a tremble swept down my arms.

“When I followed you to that fancy-ass house a few weeks ago, I never expected you to just vanish like that,” Felix snarled with a twisted grin. “Thought I’d lost you for good until the news was flooded with that upcoming Helix anniversary and how the CEOs were able to party thanks to their new nanny. Didn’t take me long to use a few old contacts and track you down, Summer.”

I couldn’t speak. The very fact that he was here, crashing my reality into the fantasy bubble I had created was too much to comprehend.

“You *stalked* me across the world?” I choked out.

“Like I said, I’m not done with you, Summer. I had four years to think about how I was going to repay you; you can’t just run away like that. I *deserve* to watch you suffer.”

“You’re insane!”

“And you?” Felix glanced around and scoffed. “Pretending your blood is rich enough to be in a place like this? How do they feel, letting a drug addict around their children?”

“Ex,” I spat out, trying to pull myself free. “While you were getting what you deserved, I turned my life around. I got clean without you stabbing needles into me in my sleep.”

Felix laughed as if such a thing had just been *good times* between friends. “You think you’re better than me, Summer?”

“I know I am,” I growled.

“We’ll see what that fancy family thinks when they find out what you’re really like.” Felix bared his teeth and a whimper caught in my throat.

“They’d never believe you.”

“Wouldn’t they? I looked up who you worked for; I think you’ll find I’m quite familiar with one of them.”

“Is everything alright here?” A man and a woman paused nearby, the man a full two heads taller than Felix and broader too. The woman by his side sent me a sympathetic glance as I ripped my arm away from Felix.

“It’s fine, fuck off,” Felix spat.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped. With my arm free, I took my chance and broke into a full sprint racing down the corridor with my bags flying wildly. The last I

saw of Felix, he was being body-blocked by the tall stranger giving me a chance to escape. I ran until my heart was ready to burst right out of my chest and I could barely breathe, only stopping when I made it to the foyer and into the quiet line for the cable cars.

I didn't care who was looking; all I cared about was getting into that cable car and getting back to the chalet as fast as possible.

Felix was here. That monster was here! He tracked me across the world like a fucking stalker all because he's hellbent on making me pay for handing him over to the police. I couldn't fathom his presence even though his grip still burned like a phantom on my arm.

What if he followed through? If he got in contact with Theo or Luke or Jax and told them about my past? Would they believe him or would they trust me?

"Summer?"

My rampant thoughts halted abruptly when a familiar pinched voice said my name, and I turned to see none other than Marina standing a foot away, her thin lips pursed and her gorgeous green dress hugging her body like molded silk.

Fuck. I was never leaving the chalet again.

"Marina."

"What on earth... why are you so sweaty?"

I straightened up and forced a few calming breaths, gripping my bags.

"It's hot."

"Is it?" She arched a brow and slowly glanced me up and down. Her gaze was like a heated laser, sweeping over me and judging every thread. More heat flushed through my body and a sharp, prickling warmth stole down my spine.

"Yes."

"I have to say I'm surprised to see you without Jax."

"Why?"

"Well, you're engaged, aren't you?"

Shit. "Yes. And?"

"And he's making you go out by yourself?" She glanced down and delicately inspected her perfectly painted nails. "He never left my side when he was with me, so protective..."

"And now he's with me, so how did that work out?" I snapped. I didn't have time for this. My nerves were frazzled, my skin burned, and my world

was teetering on an abyss with Felix near. All I wanted to do was get out of the resort and not have to face anyone else.

Marina lifted her gaze and eyed me sharply. “Quite. Well, I suppose anything after me is a downgrade so I can hardly blame him if his romantic tactics slip.”

The cable car arrived and the doors slid open as anger and fear swelled in my chest.

“Fuck you, Marina,” I snapped and her face went wide. “Who the fuck do you think you are anyway, always looking down on people?”

“I’m Marina Hemmingway,” she replied tartly. “Heiress to Hemmingway Jewels?”

“Oh.” I paused. I was more than aware of Hemmingway Jewels. They had advertisements every five feet here and back home. They were always on the news for dressing celebrities and royalty. “Well, I don’t care. You’re looking down on me and making all these little digs as if you’re not the sad woman who couldn’t hold onto a wonderful guy like Jax.”

“That’s because I know my worth,” Marina replied sharply.

“No, you don’t. You’re a royal bitch who treats people like things and is going to end up sad and lonely because the only thing you value is going to fade with time, meanwhile Jax and I and Bonnie will be happy and living the best life. You’re rotten to the core and when people find out what you’re really like, you’ll be left with shadows on the side of the road,” I snapped loudly, drawing attention. All the tension and fear from Felix poured out of me into those words.

It was momentarily exhilarating to get some of the tension off my chest, and as Marina gaped at me, I hurried into the cable car and threw myself onto the seat. Her stunned face stayed with me all the way up the mountain as my heart pounded and my gut twisted.

Felix was here and I had just insulted *Marina, Heiress to Hemmingway Jewels*.

Christmas Eve was going to be wild.

THEO

“**A**nd then Mrs. Smith said that I was—I was the best in the class!” Clapping his hands together, Kane wriggled in my lap and his delighted words had him grinning ear to ear.

“We’re really proud about that, aren’t we?” I said over his shoulder, keeping one arm around his waist.

“Yes!” Kane declared.

“You’re getting to be as smart as Tim.” After Summer’s reference to my adoption of Kane being like Batman and Robin, I’d done more research. Kane turned his head to look at me with wide, amazed eyes.

“Yes!” He bounced in my lap, then turned back to the laptop where his mother, Tiffany, was displayed on the screen as she listened to Kane’s stories. It was difficult to get her on video calls these days, and I monitored each one closely for Kane’s sake.

The courts had generously awarded me full custody of Kane, but I never desired to cut Tiffany out of his life. If the time was right and her health seemed well, these calls were the glimpses Kane was allowed when it came to his mother. Something that was bound to get harder as he got older and asked more questions.

“That’s... amazing,” Tiffany said lazily and her small smile slipped. Her eyes closed briefly, and immediately my suspicions were raised.

“Are you tired, Mom?” Kane asked innocently.

“Sure, baby,” Tiffany sighed gently. “Just tired. Tell me about Christmas, I’m sad you’re not here with me.”

I had to fight back a scoff. Tiffany had only spent one Christmas with Kane when he was seven months old. She'd left him in his crib and gone out partying because she *deserved a break*. I'll never forget the chill that stole over me that night when the police turned up at my door with Kane seeking me out because it was Christmas and finding a foster family at that time of night was impossible.

"Maybe you can come here?" Kane asked. "It won't take long, Dad has very fast planes."

"Maybe." Tiffany's speech slurred ever so faintly, and the warning bells in my mind exploded.

"Kane, buddy. Why don't you go and see if you can find the decoration you made with Summer?"

"Okay!" Kane slid from my lap in an instant and hurried out of the study and into the lounge where the largest tree held their handmade decorations. I grabbed my phone and sent a quick text to Jax asking if he could swing by and take Kane with him to play with the others. He answered immediately and agreed, no questions asked.

None were needed when it came to video calls with Tiffany.

"Tiffany," I started sternly. "Tiffany, look at me."

She lazily glanced over at me and sighed. "What is it, Theo."

"You're fucking *high*, aren't you?"

She rolled her eyes. "No."

"You think I don't know the signs by now? What the hell? You knew this call was scheduled, you knew how important it was for Kane, and you couldn't keep your hands away from a needle for forty minutes?" Anger began to build, stoked by the flames of irritation at Tiffany's lack of effort and my own weakness for buying into the hope that this time would be different.

"I needed it, okay?" Tiffany blinked slowly. "I was nervous."

"So take a brisk walk," I snapped. "Like a normal person."

"Why? When this works, it's all I need."

"Don't you care at *all*? About Kane? Do you have any idea how excited he was to talk to you?"

"Of course I care!" Tiffany straightened slightly and her dark eyes, sunken into her pasty skin, flashed. "I love my son."

"And yet you can't stay sober for an hour to spend time with him." My words were sharp, but the frustration was spilling over. "I'm trying to help

you here. I have been ever since—you're just making it impossible."

"Oh sure, I'm the impossible one. The terrible, unfit mother who cheated. I'm the scumbag, I'm the asshole, a wicked woman." She droned on with little to no emotion in her voice.

"Stop it," I snapped, "your pity parties don't work on me anymore."

"Whatever. Just—just bring Kane back. I want to see him."

"No," I decided. "You had your chance, and I don't want him seeing you in this state."

"What the fuck?" Finally, some emotion bled into her voice. "You can't stop me from seeing him!"

"I have *never* done that," I snapped. "If you had stuck with the rehab center I paid for, you would have gotten clean, and you could have been here for Christmas. But you didn't, did you?"

"I tried," Tiffany whined. I'd done this dance too many times before, and my sympathy was lacking.

"Did you? Because from where I'm sitting, you left that place within a week. They would have helped you, and you chose drugs over your own son —"

The screen went dark as Tiffany hung up the call. Frustration swelled inside me, sudden and hot, so I slammed my fist down on the desk and sighed raggedly.

Fuck.

I tried. I poured thousands into rehab centers for Tiffany, I paid her rent to keep a roof over her head, I sent care packages; I did everything I could to try and keep her clean and alive so Kane had a mother he could get to know as he grew up. She sabotaged me at every turn.

"I got it!" Kane suddenly came sprinting back into the study, Batman decoration in hand, followed by an alarmed Jax who mouthed *sorry* when our gazes met.

"Kane..."

Kane sprinted up to the desk and stopped when he saw the blank screen. His bright face fell immediately, and my heart crumbled.

"Where did she go?"

"I'm sorry kiddo. She had to go. Work stuff, you know. It's a busy time of year." The cracks in my heart bled wider at having to lie to him, but it was for the best. Sadly, Kane was getting older and didn't look like he believed me all that much.

“Okay,” he said softly, his entire stance dropping. “Doesn’t matter.” He set the decoration down on the desk and walked away. I rose to follow, intent on comforting him but as soon as I did, he sprinted past Jax and vanished.

“Fuck.”

“I’ll see he’s okay,” Jax assured me, and he followed after Kane.

The handmade Batman decoration sat awkwardly on the desk, so I picked it up and then headed through to the lounge. The large tree was a pillar of lights and sparkles, a beacon of Christmas, and yet it brought me no joy as I crouched under the glitter and placed the decoration back on the tree.

Suddenly, a sharp clatter rang out from the kitchen, and I flinched, then headed over to see what was happening. I stopped in the doorway when I saw Summer; her hands were in her hair, and she was stomping her feet slightly, cursing under her breath as coffee beans spilled over the counter.

“Summer?”

She jumped and turned to me, eyes wide, and dropped her hands from her hair. “Sorry. I was just—I dropped the bag and the beans went... everywhere.”

Her voice was slightly strained, her posture stiff, and her eyes were wide and darting as if she couldn’t settle on where to look.

“That’s okay.” I gave her a soft smile and joined her by the counter. “These things happen. There’s plenty of beans; trust me I think Luke even has *backup* beans just in case.”

My joke didn’t even grant a small smile from Summer, and I frowned lightly. As we started to gather up the beans, her hands were shaking, and she dropped the beans almost after she picked them up.

“Summer? Are you okay?”

“What? Yes, I’m fine,” she said quickly, turning her back to me as she poured beans back into the bag. “Why? Are you?”

“I’m okay,” I replied, moving past her to add more beans to the bag. “Are you sure? You seem um...”

“What? I seem what?” She looked up at me, and for a moment, it was as if she expected me to give her trouble or worse, similar to the look Kane gave me when I caught him awake past bedtime.

“Just... on edge. If there’s anything you need, to talk or a break or anything then you can let me know,” I offered.

“Oh.” Her head dipped, going back to scooping up spilled beans, and her hair fell forward, creating a soft curtain that I was struck with the urge to run

my fingers through. I resisted. Something about her aura suggested touch would be a bad idea no matter how her presence calmed me.

“Do you ever feel like there’s some things you can’t escape, no matter how hard you try?” she asked suddenly.

My hands paused, cold coffee beans trailing from my fingers as Tiffany popped sharply into my mind. “All the time,” I sighed softly. “Why, has something happened?”

“Oh. No. I just... I’ve just been thinking. Sometimes it feels like things are firmly in the past, and then, y’know, they creep back up like they happened yesterday, and it feels like you haven’t moved on at all. Like all the changes are just fake, and you’re just pretending.” She lifted her head and glanced at me although she could not meet my eyes.

I deposited more beans in the bag and nodded. “I feel like that more days than I care to admit.”

“So, what do you do?”

“I...” I paused. I wanted to ask for details, to delve deeper into whatever thoughts were bothering her, but she was dancing around the point for a reason, and I respected her privacy enough to know that she wasn’t ready for me to press. “I guess... I try to think about how we all have a past that we’d rather forget. If you will, Jax has his bad-boy days where he cared more about alcohol and partying because that’s all he knew. Look at him now; he’s an amazing dad and he’s head of security at a billion-dollar company. I think about Luke and his accident and how he was rock bottom and clawed his way out.”

The last of the beans were scooped up by Summer, and she closed the drawstring on the sack.

“I think about myself and Tiffany. How I found out she cheated on me because Kane’s skin color differed from ours. I think about how I used to let her walk all over me because I was young and in love and was scared to be alone. I think about all of that, and then I compare it to what we all are now. Different people with different minds, different lives. Sure, sometimes the past doesn’t feel that far away at all but, Summer...”

I moved closer, and she finally lifted her gaze; a lingering sadness reflected back at me.

“Your past doesn’t define you. It doesn’t define any of us. What it does is show us how we’ve grown and moved past things we regret or are not proud of. That’s where our worth lies.”

She stared up at me momentarily, and then her gaze fell away. “Thanks. I —” For a second, it seemed like a confession lingered on her tongue, the real reason for asking, but the moment passed. “I’m going to take a shower before I get started on dinner.”

“Sure thing.” I watch her dip past me and vanish from the kitchen, leaving nothing but a deep yearning to comfort her filling the space in my chest. Despite everything else, one thing was becoming clear in my mind, fueled by the protective urge to follow Summer and try to keep her safe from whatever thoughts plagued her.

Love was growing for Summer in my heart, and I had no intentions of fighting it. I just had to ensure no one’s past, including mine, got in the way.

SUMMER

“Pass me the parsnips?”

“Summer?”

“Sweetie?”

It wasn't until that soft name and warmth touched my forearm that I realized I had zoned out for the past ten minutes and was simply staring out the window at the gently falling snow, a knife in one hand and half a chopped parsnip in the other. I blinked, crashing back to reality, and glanced to my right. Tabitha's concerned face hovered there, and she gave me a small smile when I looked at her.

“I'm so sorry,” I gasped. “I was miles away.”

“It's alright dear, but I really need those parsnips.”

“Of course!” I resumed chopping the vegetable into thin strips, shaking my head slightly. “Sorry, my mind just drifted.”

“Too much nooky will do that to you,” Tabitha replied. I whipped around to face her, heat flushing over my cheeks as her words sank in.

“Excuse me?”

“Nooky? Is that not what the kids call it these days?” Her smile was warm yet mischievous. “I'm not judging you, dear. In fact, you being here, it's the first time I've seen any of those boys smile for longer than five minutes so you will hear no complaints from me.”

“You—I—” I couldn't think; my mind short-circuited at the realization that Tabitha knew exactly what had happened between me and Theo, and the other two. “I'm sorry,” I gasped, the only word I could think of as the

reflexive urge to apologize rose.

“Don’t you dare.” Tabitha brandished a wooden spoon at me. “Those guys are *smart* enough to know what they are doing, and they seem happy. So do my grandkids and that’s all I care about.” She returned to stirring her pot and I stared at her for a few long moments, then she lifted her head once more.

“Summer?”

“Yes?”

“Parsnips.”

“Oh!” I set the knife down, lifted the board, and darted over to her with the chopped vegetables. Shock still tingled high over my skin, but I grew more stunned that she was accepting of what was happening. Each night I had told myself that it was fine, we’re all consenting adults and it was nothing serious—despite how my heart was yearning otherwise—but to hear Tabitha talk so casually about it when she had been so cold to me in the beginning was a shock.

“I’m sorry I just...” I paused and returned to my workstation. “I didn’t think you knew. And I... I’m being careful and having fun. I just haven’t spoken to anyone about it, y’know? I was just surprised.”

“Not even your mother?” Tabitha added the vegetables and sprinkled in some seasoning as she stirred.

“My mother died when I was a teenager.”

Tabitha’s hand paused. “Oh sweetie. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I flashed a small smile. “She found peace at the bottom of a bottle. I almost followed her for a while after my father abandoned me.”

Peppers were next on my list, so I began chopping them quickly, not wanting to focus on that part of my past.

“So what do you normally do for Christmas?” Tabitha asked. “No other family?”

“Nope. I have uh... I don’t really have anyone other than a crazy ex. Frozen dinners and TV for me.”

“Hmm,” Tabitha grunted softly. “Well, it’s Christmas Eve and we’ll show you how it’s supposed to be. Who knows, if you enjoy it maybe you’ll still be here next year.”

I laughed softly. “Maybe. I half feel like I don’t even deserve to be here.”

“Why ever not?” Tabitha busied herself with the oven.

“Just... guess I’m cut from a different cloth.”

“Don’t be silly,” Tabitha snapped sharply. “It doesn’t matter where you came from or who you were before now. What matters is what you’ve done here, and I don’t know if you have noticed but everyone in this house is happy. The kids. The boys. You must stop lingering on the past and focus on the future!”

She moved next to me and patted my arm. “I know it’s hard. But look at the boys; you know some of their pasts. Look where they are now. The present, the future... that’s where your mind should be.” She stepped away to the pantry and pulled out more ingredients. “I’ve seen you, Summer. You fit in here like a puzzle piece I didn’t even know what was missing.”

Her words were so kind and honest that a sudden warmth flooded behind my eyes, and I forced my eyes back on my work. Tightness swept through my chest and I forced a deep breath. Those children weren’t the only ones lacking and yearning for maternal love.

It was difficult to dwell on my anxieties like Felix and his threats, however, when Christmas Eve seemed to be as big of a deal as actual Christmas. All day I’d been bouncing between games, shows, and cooking with Tabitha as we all prepared for Christmas Eve dinner and honestly, it was a blast. Being busy kept my mind quiet and focused, something I was clinging to, and it was even easier when the children spilled into the kitchen ready to get their hands dirty.

With dinner bubbling away on the stove, dessert became the focus. I took Bonnie and together we whipped up mounds of cream that Luke stole a mouthful of as he worked nearby with Kane molding gingerbread men. Theo and Ava were on decorating duty, and Jax helped Tabitha with the baking and the oven. The entire kitchen was buzzing with life and laughter, giggles when flour would go the wrong way or cream would fly out of a bowl. With Christmas music drifting through the air, it was an incredible heartwarming time and I soaked it all up.

Until Luke nudged me with a bright smile. “Nothing quite like it, is there?” he grinned. Flour dotted his nose and his eyes sparkled with life as Kane leaned down on the counter with his tongue out, intently working on posing a gingerbread figure.

“Like what?” I asked, trying to scoop the cream into a piping bag while stopping Bonnie from eating it all.

“Family,” Luke said softly. He returned to Kane as the noise dulled and the world fell away.

Family. Did he mean that? Did he see me as part of this, more than just a nanny and the woman they were sleeping with? In a rush, Felix swarmed my thoughts and my gaze dropped to Luke's leg. Before, I had been suspicious but desperate to persuade myself that Luke's accident and my past were nothing but a coincidence. Until Felix had said one thing that I hadn't registered until I lay in bed trying to calm down that night.

"I looked up who you worked for; I think you'll find I'm quite familiar with one of them."

Familiar with Luke. That connection had stabbed into my heart like a thorn and it wasn't going *anywhere*. My doubt had been erased, and now I was convinced that Luke indeed was the man Felix had run over, the man I had tried to give drunken CPR to in the dark and pouring rain. His life had crumbled that night and I had been a part of that.

How the fuck was I going to tell him? Should I tell him? Maybe I didn't have to. It was in the past; it couldn't be changed. Once the holiday was over and I was returned to the cold city alone, it wouldn't even matter. Even if a part of my heart yearned for this to never end.

Cold dread bled from those thoughts, mingling with the warmth of being referred to as part of the family and Tabitha's acceptance. I was growing more and more confused and with it all, an itch bubbled under my skin.

One word from Felix and it'd be my world in tatters.

"Summer!" Bonnie squealed, bringing the warmth of the kitchen rushing back to me, and I glanced down to the cream spilling out of the piping bag.

"Oh no! It's okay, I've got it." With a quick scoop, I gathered the cream back into the bag and Bonnie cheered, clapping her hands together. "See? Easy peasy."

I shoved all thoughts away and focused on Bonnie as she took the bag from me and we began to pipe the cream into the choux pastry. Blob after blob, we worked slow and steady as Luke and Kane finished their gingerbread men. Theo and Ava decorated like a masterclass, and Jax helped Tabitha add the final touches to the roast.

"Crap," Tabitha muttered softly, and the kids giggled sharply at her gentle curse.

"What's wrong?" I glanced over my shoulder. Tabitha was by the freezer and her flushed, rosy face pinched.

"I forgot to order more ice," she sighed.

"Oh, that's okay. I can nip down and get some before the resort closes," I

said, ready to step in since that was, after all, what I was hired to do.

“Nonsense,” Jax said as he brushed past me, a hand trailing on my lower back as he did so. “You and Bonnie are doing important work. I’ll go and get it.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, watching as he weaved through the kitchen. Jax spun on the spot and flashed me a dazzling smile.

“Of course! Just save me some of those pastries; they’re my favorite.”

“You want company?” Theo asked, lifting his head but Jax brushed him off with a shoulder pat and a warm smile.

“Make sure you bundle up!” Tabitha called, and Jax laughed, that warm sound melting through me and easing all lingering thoughts of worry. Catching my eye, Jax winked quickly.

“Don’t have too much fun without me. I’ll be back in no time!”

With a flourish, Jax was gone.

SUMMER

With the pastries filled to the brim with cream, the gingerbread men decorated in their best attire, and a crackling fire in the fireplace, it was game time. I was foolish to think Twister was the most competitive game this family had played; getting through Charades was a completely different ballpark.

With Jax out to get the ice, I took his spot on Bonnie's team with Ava, while Theo and Luke took Kane, and Tabitha was the game master. From movies to TV shows, time fled from our minds as I acted out a very dramatic rendition of Finding Nemo, guessed by Bonnie much to her delight. We laughed until our ribs ached and lungs cried for air at Theo's awful attempt at showing us Lady and the Tramp, and true to his love, Kane aced Batman. As the game wore on, we remained neck and neck until it was Bonnie's turn.

One movement and Ava screamed "Frozen!" at the top of her lungs, winning us the game. I scooped both girls up in my arms with a yell, and we had a celebratory dance while Theo, Luke, and Kane all dramatically complained about their loss.

Then it was time for their annual game of hide-and-seek. Luke quickly reeled off the rules; you could only hide on the first floor, no hiding inside anything with locks, and when the word 'oranges' was yelled, they had to reveal themselves. Then it was hiding time. As the winners, my team was seeking first, and we huddled around the fireplace carefully melting some marshmallows while the boys hid. Then Tabitha called time and the seeking began.

To my utter surprise, everything soft and gentle about Bonnie fell away when it came to hide-and-seek. She moved like a bloodhound, and when she found Theo hiding behind a curtain in the lounge, there was absolutely no sympathy in her voice when she pulled it back and told him to hide better next time. I laughed so hard I almost choked, and Theo's shocked face would forever be locked in my mind.

By the time the buzzer dinged for dinner, Kane was declared the winner after remaining unfindable for two rounds—one hiding spot was under the desk in the study and the winning spot was hiding under the growing pile of presents under the tree right in the lounge.

Very Batman-esque.

Jax however, had still not returned with the ice.

Luke and Theo exchanged a few silent glances, and as Tabitha and I served the roast, I spotted Theo in the lounge on the phone. When he returned to the dinner table, there was too much excited noise about the food for me to ask anything so I stayed by Bonnie's side and helped fill her plate with everything she desired. Theo and Luke tended to Ava and Kane, then Luke served Tabitha and lightly scolded her when she tried to serve herself.

"You made this," Luke scolded softly. "So let me serve."

Tabitha had rolled her eyes but agreed and bundled up in her cardigan. I could see the happy sparkle in her eyes.

The ham roast itself was *amazing*. Tender meat that fell apart to the touch and a crackling skin that had snaps echoing around the table. The meal was rounded out with a vegetable medley—complete with my badly chopped parsnips and peppers—two types of mash, chicken fillets, and even a pot of spaghetti for Ava; it was the biggest meal I had ever seen in my life and I couldn't imagine how Christmas dinner would compare.

Jokes were shared, laughter flowed, and everyone ate happily—but Jax's chair remained empty. It was difficult not to focus on it in the midst of everything, and a tight sensation began to build in my chest. I wanted to ask where he was, if something had happened, or if there was something I should know, but I couldn't get Theo or Kane alone long enough to ask.

Until Bonnie did.

"Where's Daddy?" Bonnie asked finally, licking cream off her fingers while clutching a half-eaten gingerbread man in her other fist.

"He's busy with Santa," Theo answered immediately. "Getting things ready for tomorrow."

Bonnie accepted that without another word and she never mentioned him again, not through the after-dinner movie, bath time, or when I was tucking her up into bed. I kissed her curls and started to read the children a story, but the good food and warmth of the bath had them all falling asleep halfway through the first page.

I closed the door, and the warmth of the family dinner left me abruptly.

Where the fuck was Jax?

Taking the stairs two at a time, I hurried downstairs and found Theo and Luke near the fireplace mid-conversation.

“—he wouldn’t. He just wouldn’t,” Theo sighed, pain licking around his words.

“He’s been going through a lot, maybe it just got to be too much?” Luke asked. “With Marina constantly on him... maybe we missed it.”

“No—” Theo turned and stopped the moment he saw me. “Summer.”

“What is it?” I asked breathlessly. “What’s happened? Where’s Jax?”

They exchanged a glance.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Theo said, his voice strained. “I’ve been calling and calling. He hasn’t picked up, he hasn’t answered any of our texts. Security hasn’t seen him and it’s taking all my influence to stop them from sending out a search party because...”

“Marina,” I finished for him.

“Exactly. If she got wind of him vanishing, even for a second, then she would twist it, regardless of why,” said Theo.

“We just don’t know why,” said Luke, starting to pace. “Unless everything with her is getting to him. She never cared, not really. He was literally just a sexy bad boy she could use to make her parents mad when she was feeling rebellious. She never cared about the man underneath, never cared about Bonnie until her parents recognized it would make them look bad if she lost custody of her child.”

“She wasn’t even supposed to be here. He did everything right; he took all the correct legal routes to bring Bonnie here like he does every year, and this year she just...” One hand curled into a tight fist and Theo’s words trailed off into a growl.

One thing. All it could take was one thing to ruin everything and all I could focus on was how rude I had been to Marina yesterday. Was this my fault? Did I push her too far?

“He... what would he do?” I asked weakly.

“Jax?” Luke slowly sank down onto the sofa. “I... he’s been fighting so hard for Bonnie. Constantly trying to prove he’s changed, that he’s a good man and a decent father. But it drains him. I see it every day. Fuck. We were...” Luke glanced up at Theo. “We were going to surprise him tonight.”

“With what?”

“We want to make him a partner at Helix. Promote him to be equal to us, not that his title has ever stopped him being equal, but he’s so fucking good at his job,” Luke explained. “And he saved my life. And on paper, it would make him look even better against Marina. That wasn’t why we were doing it, but it would help.”

“We’ve been planning the paperwork for months,” Theo added. “It was the best present we could think to give him and now...”

“Now you’re scared all of this new pressure from Marina has cracked him and he’s found peace at the bottom of a bottle.” I quietly filled in the blanks and they both looked at me, then nodded. “I argued with her,” I added softly.

“What?” Theo approached. “What happened?”

“She—yesterday, I was stressed, and she cornered me. She was saying shit about him, and I got angry. I called her a bitch, I called her so many awful things, and—is this my fault? Did she take it out on him?”

“Oh, Summer,” Theo chuckled softly, and he pulled me into a tight bear hug. “We’ve all called her that and much worse to her face. This isn’t on you.”

“Then where is he?” I gasped against Theo’s chest. His grip tightened, and I buried into his shoulder.

“Fuck this,” Luke growled. “I don’t care about Marina or how this looks. We have to look for him. Get the whole resort out if we have to.”

Theo pulled away and a deep sigh escaped him, his internal struggle clear on his handsome face. “Alright. I’ll call them.”

“I’m going to look for him myself,” Luke declared as he moved to the coat hanger, grabbing his jacket.

“I’ll come too!” I pulled away from Theo and darted over, mostly fueled by the guilt of my words to Marina.

“No,” Luke began as he pulled open the door. “You should stay here just in case—”

His words stuttered to a halt, and I bumped into him as he held the door open.

Jax stood on the other side, his head hanging low and stance unsteady. He

had one arm up braced against the door frame and his clothes were utterly soaked. It wasn't until he slowly lifted his head and gave a crooked smile that I glimpsed his beaten face, and my heart dropped to my gut.

“Lil’ help?” Jax slurred and he sagged forward into Luke’s waiting arms.

SUMMER

“I ’m okay,” Jax said weakly as Luke dragged in him inside.

“Shut the fuck up. No, you’re not,” Luke growled. With one arm around Jax’s waist, Luke hauled him inside, slammed the door, and then half carried him toward the couch in the lounge. He set him down on the seat closest to the fire where Theo was by his side instantly, working to remove his soaked jacket.

“What happened?” Theo asked in a tone similar to the warm one he used on Kane. “Where were you?”

“Let me... let me catch my breath,” Jax gasped, and a pained groan escaped past his gritted teeth as his jacket was finally removed.

I’d not moved from my spot by the door from the moment I had seen his wounded face. My heart had fallen and an icy chill swept over my skin. He looked *awful*, and with it came a hundred different terrible scenarios in my mind as to what could have happened. It wasn’t until his groan of pain that I snapped out of my trance and into action.

I ran into the kitchen, pulled the cupboards apart for the medical kit and some water, then ran back into the lounge. Luke sat on the coffee table across from Jax while Theo sat beside him, both men crowding around like a protective shield. I slid onto the table next to Luke and popped open the case.

“Let me see,” I said gently, my fingers trembling as Jax gave me a small smile that pulled at some of the grazes and wounds on his face. Fuck I didn’t know where to start. Never had I been more thankful for first aid training.

“What happened, Jax?” Theo asked firmly.

I scooted forward to the edge of the table and began to dab gently at his bleeding wounds with some cotton. His skin was chilled to the touch and concern churned the acid in my gut.

“I don’t... fully know,” Jax said, his face pulling with small wincing at my touch. “I bought the ice, and I was coming back from the cable car and I—ahh!”

“Sorry,” I whispered, dabbing at where the skin had split above his brow. “This... I think this might need stitches.”

“I’m calling an ambulance,” Luke said as he started rummaging in his pockets for his phone.

“No,” Jax groaned. “I’m fine, honestly.”

“Bullshit,” I snapped, the acid sweeping up my chest. “You’re not fine and you were—you’re not fine.”

“Summer—” Jax tried.

“You’re not fine,” I snapped, then I caught myself. I had to stay focused.

“Keep going,” Theo coaxed.

“I was... I was walking up the path and then something hit me over the head from behind and I...” His brow dipped, searching through fogged thoughts for details as Theo rose slightly and gently began examining the back of Jax’s head. His fingers came away bloody, and he sent me a glance. I passed the kit over to Theo and he got to work.

“It was so sudden and so hard it didn’t even hurt,” Jax said, his voice slowly gaining strength as he spoke. “I went down so fast and then I don’t... I don’t really remember much after that. Just punches, so many over and over, and I...” He sucked in a breath and winced sharply. “Then it was just darkness. I woke up in the snow, alone, and I... fuck, I don’t know. It took me ages to get back up here.”

“Why the fuck didn’t you take security with you?” Luke snapped.

“To get ice?” Jax asked, his lips pulling into a smile.

“Yes,” Luke continued. “You’re fucking important, Jax.”

“I’m not taking security with me to get ice, Luke. Not ever.”

“You should have,” Luke growled.

I understood where he was coming from; the same fire licked at my own heart. If he had taken security with him, this wouldn’t have happened. Although, I understood Jax was unwilling to disturb the security guards staying down at the next cabin, on Christmas Eve, just for some ice. Trying to organize those thoughts into words was impossible, so instead I focused on

his wounds until something he had said caught in my mind.

“When you were out, were you in the snow?”

Jax nodded.

I glanced at the clock, then back to his pale, chilled skin and the ever so slight tremble that was moving through him. “You might be in the early stages of hypothermia; we really should get you to a hospital.”

“No,” Jax said immediately. “Not on Christmas.”

“Jax,” Theo warned, dabbing at his head wound. “Please.”

“No,” Jax repeated. “I’m fine.”

I opened my mouth to insist but Jax caught my wrist. “I’m fine.”

It put us in a difficult position, but no one was really willing to argue. With the suspected risk of hypothermia, Jax was stripped out of his wet clothes and bundled up in blankets near the fire. Theo poured a hot chocolate down his throat after patching up his head wound, and I remained silent as I placed a few butterfly bandages on his brow and cleaned up the grazes from whatever had been used to beat him. Luke warmed food in the oven.

Within forty minutes, Jax was patched up the best we could, and I used what ice he had saved to create a makeshift compress around the dark bruising bleeding over his rib cage. As food warmed, Luke darted upstairs and used a video chat to show Bonnie to Jax as none of us would let him leave the warmth of the fire. Seeing his daughter calmed him down a fraction, and soon Jax was slowly eating some leftovers while we bundled around him, watching.

Was this Marina? Had she turned to terrible tactics to try and bully Jax into submission, or was it something else? I couldn’t decide, and my mind couldn’t settle either. The same questions seemed to flash over the faces of Luke and Theo as they watched over Jax like hawks. It was heartwarming to see, and the concern was only broken by flashes of anger or the odd curl of a fist; likely each man fantasizing about taking care of whoever did this to Jax.

After some silence, Luke finally sighed and moved closer to Jax.

“While you were out napping in the snow,” Luke began, “you missed something.”

Jax snorted, then winced. “Ah. Don’t make me laugh. Who won Charades?”

“Bonnie and Ava and me,” I smiled softly.

“More than that,” Luke continued with a glance at Theo. “We wanted to tell you at dessert, but you had to go and upstage us with this.”

Jax lifted his head from his plate. “What is it?”

“We’re promoting you,” Theo said. “Or rather... we want to make you a partner.”

“At... at Helix?” Jax’s eyes widened. “You’re serious?”

“Deadly,” Luke smiled. “It’s all ready for you; all we need is your signature if that’s something you’d want.”

“Holy shit... I’m too dizzy for this,” Jax chuckled, then he winced once more. “Fuck I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” I prompted gently. Jax looked at me and his smile lingered.

“Alright. Yes! I... thank you, I can’t even—” His words were smothered as Luke and Theo hugged him the best they could without harming him, and I pressed a gentle kiss to his bruised cheek. Luke and Theo agreed they would talk more about it after Christmas and the night wore on with all eyes on Jax making sure he ate and drank until sleep called. Both were unwilling to leave Jax though until I stood between them.

“Go to bed,” I insisted. “I’m medically trained. I’ll stay up with him. You both need to be rested for Christmas tomorrow, okay?” It was the strongest speech I could give and one that was thankfully, accepted. Luke and Theo kissed my cheek and reluctantly went to bed while I set Jax up on the couch and sent a text to security warning them of Jax’s condition just in case he took a turn for the worse.

“You’re going to be my nurse?” Jax asked softly, huddling down in his blankets. I settled beside him, unable to keep my eyes from scanning his bruises and injuries.

“If you want me to be.”

“My sexy nurse?”

“You’re hardly in any condition,” I pointed out softly. “Jax... I’m so sorry this happened. I can’t even fathom what *monster* would attack someone in a place like this.”

“Even rich places have scumbags,” he murmured, and his head dipped down to rest against my shoulder. I kissed the top of his head and nodded.

“Indeed they do. Don’t go to sleep Jax, not yet. Need to keep you awake for a little bit.”

Jax groaned but complied, and I began to hum softly in my throat to keep him awake. If this was Marina’s doing, no amount of riches or jewels would keep her safe from me.

I’d make her regret ever lifting a finger to harm him.

JAX

Every muscle in my body ached, a throbbing chorus of drums under my skin that wouldn't fade no matter how many painkillers Summer had pressed over my tongue. The dying fire behind the grate provided the most relief and warmth to wash away the chill that had soaked into my very bones from being out in the snow for so long. Every breath, as slow as I made them, pulled sharply at my bruised ribs, and it was pure luck that none of them seemed to be broken.

Perhaps only morning would tell about that. As I pressed back into the sofa, Summer's keen eyes locked onto me instantly, and she rose slightly from her seat.

"Jax? Are you alright?"

Her words dripped in concern, something that I would have turned away from if it was anyone else, but somehow, from her, it was all I wanted to hear. Hearing her sweet voice and seeing her sparkling eyes, she had been my first thought after Bonnie when I had woken up, and she lingered, even now, as she shifted closer.

"I'm alright," I assured her quietly. "I'm tired. Y'think it's safe to sleep yet?"

Her eyes darted to the clock and her brow dipped. "Do you have a headache?"

"Yeah. Well, the back of my head hurts. An actual headache? No."

"Any nausea?"

"Nope."

“Trembling?”

“Nope.”

“Cold, warm?”

“A bit of both.” I tilted my head slightly to one side. “Summer.”

“Hush, I’m thinking,” she scolded slightly. “I... you don’t tick any of the boxes of a serious concussion, but...”

“But?” I prompted gently.

“I... I just want you to be okay.” Her voice was soft, and her eyes started to shine as she stared at me, so I reached out to her with one hand.

“I’m okay,” I assured her gently.

“No hospital? Not even the cops? That doesn’t strike me as okay.”

“You know what Marina would do if she found out,” I pointed out, fighting back a wave of creeping pain across the back of my head. “And I don’t want to spend Christmas in the hospital.”

Summer’s face twisted slightly, doubt clear in her eyes even as she took my hand and gently stroked my knuckles.

“Okay,” she said finally.

“Help me to bed?”

With minimal reluctance, Summer helped me to my feet, and we slowly climbed the stairs together. By the time I reached the top, my movement had loosened my stiffened muscles, and the tiredness that had crept up while resting near the fire began to fade. That and each breath I took still sent shards skittering through my chest, so I hoped I would be in much better shape tomorrow. Keeping Summer close, we moved down the corridor and slipped into my room, where she then began to unbundle me from my blankets so I could get into bed.

“Summer?”

She didn’t look at me as she flattened one blanket out, so I caught her wrist when she came to take the second.

“Summer. I’m okay. Really.”

“I know,” she said softly, “I was just so worried you wouldn’t walk back through the door, and I didn’t know what to think. I know we haven’t known each other that long, but I really care about you, all of you, and if something terrible happened I—”

I gently silenced her by pulling her down to my level, then gently kissing her lips. Her words caught in her throat and a soft sob escaped instead, a sound that I swallowed as I kissed her. I held the kiss and her wrist until her

lips stopped trembling, then I pulled away.

“I won’t deny that it was bad, but I’m right here. You took care of me; you all did. I’m okay. Right as rain.” Her eyes darted between mine, and then her teeth sank into her lower lip, an uncertain look crossing her face. Since words weren’t calming her, I tried another tactic. Releasing her wrist, I grasped her shoulder with one hand and cupped her jaw with the other. I pulled her into a stronger kiss this time, and she went willingly.

Our mouths collided firmer and when her lower lip quivered, I pressed my tongue to the seam of her lips and licked my way inside. Summer’s mouth opened easily, and I greedily swallowed the small, surprised moan that escaped her, trading her for one of my own. The heat of her tongue and the warmth of her kiss soothed the aches down in my very soul and grounded me in the moment and not the shadowy memory of the attack. Summer curled a hand against my chest, her warm palm like a brand against my skin, and her other slid carefully into my hair, mindful of my injuries.

I wanted her. I wanted everything about her to erase every awful detail of the night and carve out a pocket for her right beneath my aching ribs. Getting carried away, Summer pushed into the kiss, and I let her, kissing her slowly and repeatedly as our lips danced and we breathed the same air. Until Summer’s arm straightened, and she pulled herself away with flushed cheeks.

“Jax, we can’t. You’re in no condition,” she said breathlessly. A small whine rose in my throat.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re such a *man*,” she groaned. “Your bravado isn’t sexy.”

“That’s your job,” I teased, stroking my thumb over her lower lip. “You’re my sexy nurse.”

“You’re impossible.” The smile was back on her lips though, and warmth blossomed across my chest, sweeping down to my gut as we eyed each other. I lifted my brow slightly, trying to entice her, and then Summer rolled her eyes.

“Fuck... fine.”

My desire was to feel her against me, to taste her sweetness and feel her warmth in every pore, but Summer had other, safer ideas. She helped me back against my pillows and then disappeared between my legs. I almost grabbed the duvet to hide the bruising, but Summer was focused, and her body settled against one leg as her hand stroked over my thigh.

“The moment you feel pain, I stop,” she said. There wasn’t any part of

my pain that beached the fog of desire that descended the second I glanced down at Summer looking up at me through her lashes. She was beautiful and kind, and then her warm hand was on my cock, and all other thoughts vanished.

“I... promise,” I gasped out. Muscles in my abdomen clenched and rippled as her stroking, warm hand was replaced by the impossible sultry warmth of her lips. Her soft lips kissed over my shaft and crown, her tongue kitten-licked where she could reach, and then she parted her lips, and my hardening cock sank desperately into the lush heat of her mouth.

“Summer,” I moaned out, pressing my head back into the pillows. Thankfully they were soft against my head wound, but it was far from my mind. Her talented mouth stroked me repeatedly as her head bobbed carefully. My chest constricted, and one hand darted down to wind my fingers into her hair. Not to control, only to touch and feel more of her. As she sucked me down, my heart began to pound, and an ache built within my chest through each rapid breath I dragged in, but I ignored it all. I focused on Summer and her mouth, the building pleasure in my gut and the tightness coiling through my balls.

One last stroke and the fire ignited. Heat pulsed through me like a bullet and I cried out, moaning with each breath as I came hard and sudden. Flexing my fingers in Summer’s hair, I threw myself into the pleasurable sensations, pumping cum down her willing throat until she was sucking me dry. Only then did I relax and slump back down onto the bed, panting. The heat of Summer’s mouth vanished from my cock, and I opened my eyes as she settled next to me, wiping the corner of her mouth with her brow low.

“Good?” She asked me with a voice slightly hoarse.

“So fucking good,” I whimpered. “I want to do you now.”

“No,” Summer declined. “Not in your condition. But you can owe me.”

“Deal.”

I studied her face, her gaze wandering over my body until she pulled the blankets over me and thoroughly tucked me in. Then she settled next to me as I draped an arm over her shoulders.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I admitted softly. “More than... more than I ever expected.”

“That’s the painkillers and orgasm talking,” Summer replied softly.

“No, I mean it.”

Her body shook lightly as she chuckled. “I know, I’m teasing. I’m... I’m

really glad I'm here too."

Part of this was terribly dreamlike, almost as if I was still lost out in the snow somewhere, the victim of a random violent act, and just left to dream of bliss while passed out. Yet, no matter how often I blinked, Summer remained by my side. Her warmth was constant, as was the ache in my body and the satisfied curl in my gut. That sensation stayed with me as tiredness came, and Summer kissed my forehead. It remained when my eyelids got heavy as Summer bade me a quiet goodnight, and it lingered as I spent a painful half hour trying to find a comfortable way to sleep.

That feeling only faded when I gave up and climbed out of bed. Dressed in a robe, I limped through the house until I reached the kids' room. The moment I saw Bonnie fast asleep with her curls splayed out around her head, the feeling started dissipating. She was my *everything*, and in those sharp moments when I had first been struck, she was all I could think about.

Bonnie shifted in her sleep and grumbled softly but didn't wake. I was almost disappointed. After a few moments of watching her sleep, I lowered myself slowly down into the chair near her bed and released a slow breath. I was okay. I was home. Bonnie was safe.

Whoever was behind the attack, whatever their reasoning, I would deal with it after Christmas. Until then, my focus would be spending every possible second with my daughter.

That certainty and the soft sound of her snores finally sent me off to sleep with only a shadow lingering in the back of my mind.

SUMMER

Christmas Day arrived with a chorus of screams from the children that echoed throughout the entire chalet and pulled me from a slumber filled with dark dreams of Jax never returning home. Random acts of violence were common all over the world, but even in my dream I couldn't shake a feeling of responsibility after what I had said to Marina.

I woke with a jump, alarmed that I had slept later than intended and the children had gotten up without me. This worry was soothed when Tabitha met me in the bathroom, halfway through hurriedly brushing my teeth and dragging a brush through my hair, to tell me that she had let me sleep in because Jax had gotten up early with the children. She patted my shoulder, pressed a new dress into my hands, and waved away any thanks I tried to give her.

Then she vanished and left me to get ready.

The dress was green cashmere with silken straps and a firm bone bodice worked into the stitching of the fabric. Slipping it on, it fit me *perfectly* and hugged my waist and supported my boobs. The skirt was looser, brushing just above my knees. As I zipped it up, I glimpsed the holly and berries stitched in a pattern around the sweetheart neckline. It was beautiful and far more expensive than I deserved. A spot of cherry lipstick, a flash of mascara, and I headed downstairs to join the others.

"Summer!" Bonnie scrambled up from a sea of Christmas wrapping paper and made a beeline for me as I reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Morning sweetie," I grinned, crouching to catch her and scoop her up in

my arms when she reached me.

“Morning!” Ava and Kane called from somewhere in the present pile. Theo was by the tree, a cup of steaming coffee in one hand and a gingerbread man in the other. Jax was carefully placed on the couch, and in the light of day his bruised face looked ten times worse, the sight of which pulled my heart into my gut. He was awake and okay though, even though I still wanted to take him to the hospital. Luke was with the children on the floor helping organize presents between desperate hands.

“It’s Christmas!” Bonnie grinned, bouncing in my arms, then she turned very serious. “Daddy had to fight off the Grinch last night. He won, but the Grinch is so nasty!”

I glanced at Jax who winked at me. If that was the story they were going with, who was I to challenge it?

“Aren’t we so lucky that Daddy caught him in time?” I said softly, stroking her back. Sitting on the couch, Bonnie settled in my lap and sighed deeply.

“Yes,” she declared, then she slid from my lap and vanished into the present pile. My attention immediately locked onto Jax.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly. “No... side effects from taking on the Grinch?”

“None,” he answered easily, “you look beautiful by the way.”

My cheeks flushed, half at the compliment and half at how openly he said it in front of everyone else. The warmth spread down my chest, and I nervously tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Thank you—”

“Like a princess!” Ava interrupted and she appeared next to me, then dropped a *curiously* wrapped item into my lap. “For you!”

“What?” I stared down at the item, my heart skipping a beat. “A present?”

“Yes!” Ava grinned excitedly. “Open in!”

Kane stood up, paper falling from his shoulders like a cape. “Mine too!” He darted over, his paper cape flying behind him, and he set a present down in my lap too. It took all my effort not to let the sudden sting behind my eyes turn into tears. I hadn’t even thought about presents for myself, the dress was already too much, but gifts from the children? My heart overflowed with warmth.

“Thank you,” I managed to say, and I started to unwrap Ava’s present. There was more tape than paper, turning opening the present into quite the

challenge, but eventually, I was able to tear the paper off revealing a small wooden deer set inside a miniature snow globe.

“When you shake it, it snows!” Ava exclaimed. “See?”

As requested, I shook the globe and a flurry of snow rushed down over the deer.

“Dad helped me pick it.”

I glanced over at Luke who smiled mischievously. When he had time to get this, I had no idea.

“Ava, it’s beautiful,” I grinned as I leaned down, pressing a light kiss to her forehead. “Thank you so much. I know exactly where I’m going to put this at home.” Right on my bedside table so I can always be reminded of this heartwarming moment.

“My gift!” Kane demanded.

Setting the globe aside, I unwrapped Kane’s present and burst out laughing when the Batman figure I had helped him sneak here fell from the paper.

“You can borrow him *all* day,” Kane said seriously. “But only for today.”

“I will do all the Batman things I have never had the chance to do before,” I declared. I ruffled his tight curls and kissed the top of his head, then Kane dove back into the presents. I blinked quickly, fighting to keep the tears at bay. My plan had been to remain on the sidelines, keep my distance while this family shared the day together, yet here I was, dragged into the middle.

“My turn,” Bonnie said, and she darted over to the tree, then returned with something in her hand as Theo approached me with a mug of hot chocolate. The sweetness of the marshmallows and the spice of the cinnamon tickled my nose, and I accepted the cup while Bonnie held out her hand. With one hand I accepted, and a bright smile blossomed across my face as a tiny paper-mache robin was dropped into my hand.

“I made it!” Bonnie gave me a toothy grin, and Jax chuckled from where he reclined. “Okay,” Bonnie corrected, “Daddy made it but it was my idea!”

“It’s adorable, Bonnie. Thank you so much!”

Bonnie grinned once more, then she ran away to join the others. I sat the robin down next to the other presents and hugged the mug of hot chocolate to my chest, taking a sip. Theo sat down next to me and gently nudged my shoulder.

“You look amazing,” he smiled softly. “You okay?”

“Oh, I... thank you. I wasn't expecting gifts is all,” I admitted, and I glanced over at him, taking in his cozy yet ugly Christmas sweater with a tiny Rudolph and a hundred snowflakes.

“You think we didn't see the presents you snuck under the tree?” Theo teased. “Just because you snuck out on that movie night to go shopping doesn't mean we didn't notice.”

“I just wanted to say thank you,” I murmured. “For everything.”

“So did we,” grinned Luke.

“Ditto,” added Jax.

“Boys,” Tabitha chuckled, and she appeared dressed in the soft coral cardigan I had purchased for her. “She's already blushing like a reindeer; the poor girl will have no blood left at this rate!”

“Sorry Ma,” Luke laughed. “Alright kids, have you had enough presents?”

“No!” they chorused.

“Are you sure?” Theo asked.

“More!” they all yelled, and I laughed, taking slow sips of my drink.

“Well,” Jax groaned softly, “I *think* I saw the Grinch trying to hide some of the presents in the firewood cupboard.”

All three children scrambled up and ran to the door which Theo reached first and opened for them. Several more presents were grabbed and brought back to the tree where the kids began tearing into them.

“They're savages,” Luke laughed loudly.

“Nothing compared to you,” Tabitha replied sharply. “Do you remember that Christmas you got your first bicycle? Never had I seen you move so fast to get to it, and the tantrum you threw when your father told you it wasn't for you.” Tabitha chuckled so hard that her face took on a rosy glow. “Then you tore it open like a terror, all my careful wrapping gone to waste!”

“It was the best present though, hands down,” Luke grinned.

“Y'know, I can picture that.” Theo grinned. “You're a menace with anything wrapped up all pretty.”

Luke glanced at me, winked, and my cheeks warmed. I focused on my drink, setting the empty cup aside when I was done, and shifted closer to Jax.

“You're okay?” I asked softly. “Nothing terrible?”

“Sore but okay,” Jax replied as he took my hand, squeezing firmly. “Thank you.”

It did little to calm the lingering worry in my heart, but it soothed my

mind enough that when Bonnie needed help opening more presents, I could do so with a grin. As the presents slowed down, I turned the wrapping paper into a game to help clean up. This time, none of the children minded when Luke and Theo won that game even with the victory candy that went with it. The softness of my dress meant I was easily able to get on the floor and play Batman versus Joker with Kane, give Ava attack tickles, and join Luke in engaging Bonnie in a light game of tag so she could run around in her new light-up sneakers.

By the time Tabitha called for lunch, hearts were full and tummies were hungry. I escorted all the children into the dining room where a large finger food spread was laid out. From mini sausages, quiches, mozzarella sticks, and more; there was more than enough to satisfy everyone.

“This is your lunch tradition?” I mused to Jax who sat down near me and settled Bonnie between us.

“Yup. We tend to eat dinner late so having a lunch where the kids can pick what they want keeps them happy *and* gives us all more time to cook later,” Jax explained.

“Makes sense,” I grinned, taking a couple of mozzarella sticks.

“Why—what about your family?” Bonnie asked, her bright eyes staring up at me. The question caught me slightly off guard, and I forced a smile.

“I don’t really have one right now,” I explained softly.

“Why not?”

“Well...” I glanced up at Jax, unsure how to approach the topic of *death* at a time like this. “They’re just not with me anymore. That’s all.”

Jax shot me a sympathetic smile as Bonnie nodded, licking some sauce off her fingers and watching Jax spoon some spaghetti hoops onto her plate.

“That’s okay,” Bonnie said. “You have us.”

It was such a simple phrase, yet it warmed my heart more than I could ever imagine. A glance around the table and Tabitha was having a discussion with Kane about how Batman couldn’t go swimming in the gravy. Theo was laughing saying that surely the Clay Monster was buried in the mash and wouldn’t Batman be better there, much to Tabitha’s horror. Ava was having a dinosaur chicken nugget battle with Luke on her plate while they both wore tinkling reindeer antlers.

I watched it all, listening to the laughter and the warm words, the hubbub of family and *love*. Then I glanced at Jax who was watching me intently as Bonnie snacked on her mozzarella sticks.

“She’s right,” he said quietly. “If you want it. It’s right here.”

I smiled and warmth stirred behind my eyes. I did want it. I wanted this feeling to never end, this warmth and protective family dynamic to be something I could take with me all the way back to the States. And yet even as I gave Jax the smallest of nods, Felix remained not far from my thoughts, skulking in the back of my mind.

One word from him, and all of this would be dust.

SUMMER

“Here, two is all I can give you,” I said softly, pressing two painkillers into Jax’s waiting hand. “They’re maximum strength so it should help. At least until we can get you to a doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor,” Jax replied with a smile, then he tossed them back into his mouth, chasing them with a large gulp of water.

I raised a brow in doubt, but it was Christmas so I wouldn’t argue. “I should go and make sure the kids are going down easy for their nap.” Stuffed full of lunch, despite their determined complaints about not being tired, heavy eyelids and yawns had secured that even Christmas Day wasn’t safe from naptime.

“Theo and Luke have that under control,” Jax murmured as he caught my wrist, preventing me from leaving. A flicker of heat rushed through me, and I tilted my head slightly, running my eyes over his bruised face. This close, his warm breath ghosted over my skin and the slightly sharp scent of antiseptic cream tickled my nose.

“They might need help,” I murmured back.

“I need help.”

“Like a doctor?”

“Like a nurse...” Jax closed the distance and pressed his lips to mine, capturing my mouth in a soft kiss with just enough pressure for me to take the hint.

“You’re far too injured,” I said, writing those words against his lips. Jax’s tongue danced over my lower lip, and he stepped forward into me, increasing

the gentle force behind the kiss and placing one hand against the side of my neck.

“Not for what I want to do,” Jax said huskily as he broke the kiss, then trailed a few soft kisses down my jaw.

“And what do you want to do?” My words escaped breathlessly as my heart ticked up a few beats. We were standing in the kitchen, anyone could walk in, and it scared me as much as I also didn’t care. My eyes fluttered closed, sinking me into a warm darkness as I tracked Jax’s wandering mouth down my neck to my shoulder and the silken strap of my dress.

“Give you your present.” Jax straightened up, and I opened my eyes to meet his glittering ones, then he used the grip on my hand to pull me with him. We went out of the kitchen, through the lounge filled with festive music, and into the study; and my heart skipped another beat. A present? I hadn’t even expected such a thing, and my mind ran away with itself as Jax closed the door. His hands landed on my waist, his mouth on mine and a low moan drifted from his throat.

“Care to guess?” he asked, breaking the kiss for air.

“I-I have no idea,” I gasped, winding my arms gently around his shoulders.

“Other than a Christmas bonus in your paycheck, there’s only one thing I could think that I wanted to give you today.”

“And that is?” The words barely left my lips and Jax was on his knees, burying underneath the skirt of my dress. His sudden heated presence had me stumbling back a few steps with a gasp until I hit the bookcase. Books rattled as I thumped backward and Jax’s warm, strong hands stroked around my thighs to help keep me steady.

“Jax!” I gasped hoarsely and his hot, damp tongue pressed against the fabric of my panties. The heat was searing, soaking right through to my pussy and I arched up onto my tiptoes. That didn’t put him off though; with his hands supporting my thighs, he encouraged me to widen my stance, and I did without a second thought. I was addicted to this man, to all of them, and nothing silenced my mind faster than a physical connection with any of them.

Jax hummed softly, the vibrations tickling against my pussy and I whined, throwing my head back into the books while his mouth continued to work between my legs. Through saliva and my own slick, my panties were quickly soaked, and only when Jax was satisfied did he slide them past my hips and discard them. Then his mouth was back on me, his hot tongue

swiping in a pattern through my slick folds. From here, I couldn't find the right thing to hold onto. His head was buried under my dress thus I couldn't clutch at his hair, and the shelves behind me were too cold to satisfy my desire for contact.

In the end, my hands went to my own breasts, and I squeezed my full flesh, pressing the heels of my palms against my nipples for an extra shock of pleasure. My thighs quivered and my heart started to race as Jax buried against me. Over and over, he stroked his tongue over me with quick, firm strokes, and every few licks he would press the tip of his tongue against my swelling clit and flick. Jolts of pleasure moved through me like trickles of lightning, and I shifted my stance back and forth, rocking down onto his face as the heat in my core built up to a tight ball.

I was desperate. I never wanted this to end, the filthy desire for Jax to go down on me at a snap of my fingers just to feel the heat of his tongue and hear those moans like I was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. I wanted it all for the rest of my life. Suddenly, Jax's tongue delved deep into my core in one stroke, curling teasingly inside me. That sudden spark of pleasure threw me closer to the edge, and a gasp escaped in between my desperate pants. I wanted to rock down harder, but I held myself back, aware of Jax's injuries. Not that it mattered; Jax's tongue dragged back through my folds and settled on my clit where he suckled *hard*. My eyes rolled back in my head, and I cried out sharply when I came. It hit like a forceful wave, starting in my core and then rippling outward. I gasped repeatedly, moaning softly until I was interrupted by a mouth landing on mine and the soft tickle of a beard against my chin.

When I opened my eyes, Luke's hazel eyes blinked back at me, and I whimpered when the kiss broke, placing a hand over my mouth. I hadn't even heard the door, and warmth flooded my cheeks as Luke smirked at me.

"She's all yours," Jax said, climbing back to his feet as I came down from my high and recognized that we were no longer alone.

"Thanks," Luke smiled. I glanced at Jax who wiped the corner of his mouth and winked at me, then Luke filled my vision.

"Merry Christmas," Luke grinned. I chuckled softly, and he kissed me, sudden and hard. Looping my arms around his strong neck, Luke's hands grasped my hips as he pulled me away from the bookcase and toward the floral couch on the other side of the office. I closed my eyes while his tongue danced into my mouth, mapping every inch. I floated along, safe in his arms

until our knee's bumped into the couch. Then Luke dropped away from me, and I opened my eyes to him lying flat on his back with a mischievous grin on his handsome face.

"Take a seat," he grinned. I started to drop into his lap but he raised a knee and tutted softly. "Not there. Here..." Luke tapped a finger to his chin and licked his lips.

"Are... are you sure?" I asked, my mouth running dry. It was one thing to have Jax between my legs when we were standing but to actually sit on Luke's face?

"So fucking sure," Luke grinned.

"But what if you—if you can't breathe?"

"Summer, bring that pretty pussy over here and sit on my face. I don't want to ask twice, but I'll beg if you want me to."

The power in his words sent a flush of burning heat down my spine, and warmth prickled around my ribcage as I climbed over the top of him. I hesitated though, trying to work out what would be most comfortable for him when Luke grasped my hips and pulled me up to his face. I scarcely had time to move my skirt out of the way before I was seated on his face and his devilish tongue was dancing through my pussy. Sensitive from my previous orgasm, reflex had me shifting upward but the second I moved, Luke tightened his grip on my hips and kept me down. My thighs shook and muscles ached as I still tried to keep myself hovering over Luke but through the strength of his grip and my own muscles giving in, I sank down onto his tongue with a long, low moan.

"Fuck," I gasped. Luke's tongue eagerly lapped through me with particular attention to my clit with his lips. He kissed me, sealing his lips around that bundle of nerves and suckling hard, then his tongue stroked through me once more and dipped inside me. His movements were eager and excited; what care I had for his breathing soon faded as my hips rolled with a mind of their own. Luke wasn't injured, so I didn't have to hold back.

I clutched the back of the sofa with one hand and grasped the armrest with the other, letting my hips take over. I ground down on his face, rocking back and forth and chasing my building pleasure with each tongue lick and soft graze of his beard against my inner thighs. My eyes closed, my mind filling with all sorts of lewd thoughts of what we could get up to when Jax was better. I wanted to feel them all again, splitting me open and filling me so full I couldn't move. My core tightened like a burning brand and the muscles

in my gut rippled as each rock shifted my dress against my over-sensitive skin. I lifted one hand, pinched at my nipples through the fabric, and then came in an explosion of light and heat.

No cry made it past my lips as my body locked up. I was suspended in a bubble of warmth and desire for a moment. Then, like a crashing wave, I collapsed down and gasped. Pulse after pulse of pleasure warmed through me, and my hips continued to roll against Luke's talented mouth, wringing out the last of my orgasm. Only then did a gasping moan escape me and I slumped into the back of the couch. Luke's hands tightened around my hips, lifting me up just enough to slip free. The moment I glimpsed his beaming face, I smiled warmly.

"Fuck," I whimpered, slumping down on the couch. "Merry Christmas indeed."

"Good?" Luke asked softly, settling next to me. I pulled my legs up onto the couch, nodded, and let my head fall back onto the edge.

"So good."

"And look, I could breathe fine."

"I can see that," I moaned softly. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"This. For... everything." This place, this exciting twist in my life, the warmth of family that I'll treasure forever even if it was just an illusion for today.

"You don't need to thank me for that," Luke said softly as he leaned over, kissing my jaw lightly. "I better get cleaned up, but don't worry, you won't be alone."

"Hmm?" I lifted my head and flinched slightly in fright as Theo stood before me, his muscular body so defined even through his festive green silk shirt. "I didn't even hear the door."

"You were busy," Theo teased. Luke kissed me again and bowed out, passing me over to Theo, who sat on the couch and pulled me into his lap. I groaned softly as my sensitive pussy settled over the rough fabric of his pants and Theo chuckled.

"What?" I asked, settling my hands against his chest.

"I'm going to take care of you," Theo murmured. One strong hand disappeared beneath my dress, and I arched up with a cry as two thick fingers slid their way inside me. My hands turned to talons, gripping Theo's thick shoulders.

“Fuck.” I trembled as Theo’s other hand cupped the side of my neck.

“You’re like lava,” he murmured, and I could only smile. My head fell forward, and our foreheads rested together while Theo’s fingers began to move.

With slow, controlled movements, he fucked into me with those fingers and stroked over the hidden bundle of nerves inside me. Each breath became a moan, and I was lost to sense, a puppet in his hands. Where their mouths had teased me, Theo’s fingers filled me in the most satisfying way, and we shared the same air as he gently fucked me with two digits that became three after a few thrusts. His thumb danced occasionally over my clit, adding sparks of over-sensitive pleasure to my rapidly building third orgasm. Silk crushed under my palms and sweat tingled down my back as heat flushed my thighs and calves. I almost wanted to shift, to move just to escape the warmth, but Theo held me in place.

When I came for the third time, Theo kissed me hard to swallow my moans. Color exploded like fireworks behind my eyelids. I was boneless, overheated, and overstimulated but I *loved* it. Every second of it, and only when the ripples of my walls around his fingers had subsided did he set me aside. I watched lazily as he licked my juices off his fingers, his eyes twinkling, then he leaned down and kissed my damp forehead.

“Rest, Summer,” he coaxed softly. “I’ll come get you when it’s dinner time.”

I could only moan out my agreement, and when Theo stood and draped a cashmere blanket over me, there was a part of me deep inside that felt utterly cared for; a part of me that felt warm and safe at being tucked in on Christmas Day.

Was this love? Is that what sang high in my veins and ached in my gut as I watched Theo leave me to recover?

If it was, I was tangling myself up in one hell of a mess.

And I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to get free.

SUMMER

“Now, I know everyone gets bored of the speeches, so I’ll keep this short,” Luke said, standing at the head of the table with a glass of wine in one hand, and an incredible feast spread out on the table before us thanks to the kind work of the chalet staff.

“Yawn,” Theo said with a chuckle, helping Kane spoon some sweet potatoes onto his place.

“Boo,” murmured Jax to my left who had Bonnie in his lap, bouncing her slightly as the last of her cranky tears faded. Despite being against a nap earlier, she had been unhappy about being woken up ever since Tabitha had done so.

“Boo!” Ava copied, and she brandished her fork toward her father. “Boo!”

“Alright!” Luke laughed, a warm sound that filled the air like music. “I said I’d keep it short. It’s been a crazy year for all of us. Some of us had the scary job of starting kindergarten.” Kane rolled his eyes. “Some of us did amazing in preschool, and... Helix came forward in leaps and bounds. The contract we secured this year with Romanian royalty really secured our position in Europe. And I’m happy to announce that as of an hour ago, Jax signed on the dotted line and accepted his new role as partner!”

Theo and Tabitha cheered, and the kids copied with excited cheers of their own. Jax stood slowly with Bonnie in his arms and bowed, grinning.

“Thank you, thank you.”

“That’s amazing!” I smiled at him, lightly clutching his forearm as he sat

down. “Absolutely amazing.”

“Thank you.” He flashed me one of his dazzling smiles as Luke continued.

“And I think I speak for all of us when I say, Summer—”

My heart leaped into my throat and my eyes widened. *Me?*

Luke continued, “She has done an amazing job of providing care and support for our three rascals while we were planning the Helix celebration—which has taken us away more than we would like. Summer, you have been a breath of fresh air—no pun intended—and we could not have done this without you. In just a few weeks, the impact of your kindness, your love, and your *presence* has been incredible, and I know I will forever be in your debt.”

“Yes!” Bonnie cheered suddenly, tears forgotten as she clapped her hands together.

“To Summer,” Luke said, raising his glass.

“To Summer!” Around the table, my name was uttered with such love, raised glasses, and bright smiles from the children. Even Tabitha watched me with warmth in her eyes, and a knot of emotion coiled in my chest.

“Thank—thank you,” I managed hoarsely as warmth stung behind my eyes. Never in my life had I ever had anything like this, and with the twinkling lights, Christmas music, and the scents of all the food, it felt like a dream.

“Alright, let’s eat!” Luke declared, and chaos broke loose as I gathered my emotions and held myself back from bursting into tears.

Dinner was exactly as expected. Lots of food was consumed, terrible jokes were told by all, and at some point, someone (Kane) flicked some nuts across the table at Ava but refused to own up to it. We ate, laughed, and talked until the candles in the center of the table had nearly burned out and each child yawned so wide you could almost see right down to their bellies. After a dessert of cake, custard, cookies, and pastry, we retired to the lounge to watch *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, and then it was bedtime. Luke, Theo, and Jax scooped up their children and headed off to tuck them into bed, so I gathered up some dishes and headed into the kitchen to help Tabitha with the cleanup.

“Nope!” No sooner had I entered that Tabitha scooped the dishes out of my hands. “Go, relax. It’s your Christmas too!”

“I can’t leave you to clean all this up,” I said, shocked.

“Me? Oh, sweetie no, the resort will send people tomorrow. I’m off to

have a sherry and video chat with my bingo girlies before they get too drunk to answer the phone,” Tabitha chuckled. “Don’t you fret dear; it’s relaxing time for *everyone*.”

I eyed the bright spark in her eye and couldn’t keep the smile from my face. “Okay, well if you’re sure.”

“I am! You can’t work all the time!” Setting the dishes down, Tabitha turned and flapped her hands at me. “Go! Shoo!”

“Okay, okay!” I laughed.

“Also…” Tabitha clasped my hand on her way past and her wrinkled face beamed up at me. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Whatever you’re doing. Luke hasn’t spoken like that in years; none of them have so whatever you’re doing… thank you.” With that, Tabitha patted my hand and vanished, leaving me in the warmth of the kitchen.

Was it that noticeable? I didn’t know them beforehand but if I pictured how they were when I first met them, compared to how they were now… there were subtle differences. With everyone else wrapped up in their own nightly routines with the children and bingo buddies, I poured myself another glass of wine and wandered through the lounge and out onto the deck.

It was a small area wrapped in a railing to stop any small child wandering off the edge. Twinkling lights wrapped around the wooden beams above and pearlescent netting draped down from each corner post gave a cozier feel despite the bite of the cold that drifted over the snow-covered mountains. I added a log to the blazing firepit, gathered up the thick blanket, and settled into the wicker couch, nestling among the thick cushions. Just beyond the glow of the lights, snowflakes drifted down from above, and I sipped lightly on my wine, watching each one dance through the air.

It was beautiful. This place was stunning, and I couldn’t keep the smile from my face as my heart brimmed with love. This was what Christmas was supposed to feel like. Good food, good people, love in the air. Theo, Luke, and Jax trickled into my thoughts and my smile bloomed wider, unable to keep in an excited giggle. Did they feel the same? After that speech and the attention earlier, they had to feel the same. I couldn’t be the only one where the lines between lust and love blurred.

I closed my eyes and tipped my head back, soaking up the warmth from the fire and the blanket in between the light tickle of the cold air. This place, these people, this *dream* was heaven, and I never wanted to wake up.

A light buzzing caught my attention, and I opened my eyes, lifting my head to scan around. It wasn't until the second buzz that I realized it was coming from me. Seeking out my phone, I pressed on the screen unsure who would even send me a text this late, and then something awful caught my eyes. Nestled between the Christmas well wishes from Roger and his wife was a text from Felix.

Did Jax enjoy his present? Didn't even say thank you but I'm sure it's made Christmas a real riot? Right? Call me, or maybe I'll dole out another gift.

Present?

My blood ran cold, and not from the biting wind that grew around me, tearing at the edge of my blanket and the strands of my hair. *Present.* No... did he mean?

Jax's attack.

Was that *Felix*? Such a thing should have been impossible, and yet I had experienced his violent ways in the past. This was exactly something he would do. How could I have been so stupid as to think it was Marina? There was no way. It was Felix. He had attacked Jax; why? To send a message?

The world spun slightly and the wine turned sour in my gut. I scarcely had time to throw the blanket back and rush to the railing before I threw up my wine and part of my dinner out into the snow below. I coughed and choked, gasping desperately as the cold spun into my veins, and the happy bubble in my chest shattered into a thousand painful shards. Tears flooded my eyes and my hands shook violently as I stumbled back over to the couch.

Just like that, my dream was over.

Felix had attacked him because of me. Now I was responsible for the pain of *two* of those wonderful men. Poor Jax hadn't done anything to deserve such savagery, and the thought of anyone else getting hurt at the hands of Felix turned my stomach further.

Fuck.

A million thoughts assaulted my mind all at once; from panicked crying, running away, confessing and dealing with the hatred, and more. Through it all, one thought shone stronger than the others, and I dropped my head to my hands in despair.

How the hell was I going to appease a maniac like Felix?

SUMMER

This was a bad idea. I knew in my gut it was a bad idea, but I was out of options. Backed into a corner like a rabbit with nowhere to run. Getting Felix to meet with me was surprisingly easy; so a couple of days after Christmas, while the guys were busy with the final touches to the Helix anniversary party at New Year's and Tabitha was spending the afternoon teaching the kids bingo, I slipped away to meet him.

Felix had chosen to meet at the resort bar. As I stepped over the threshold into the warm, golden glow of the lights, the scent of alcohol and citrus tickled my nose, and my heartbeat started to pick up. The confidence I had talked myself into on the ride down the mountain began to fade, and I clutched at the strap of my bag to try and steady my hands as I headed further inside.

The bar was rather empty. Most people were likely still enjoying the post-Christmas high with their loved ones. One bartender hovered behind the sleek black bar, polishing glasses with a pristine white cloth. She caught my eye and shot me an expecting smile, ready to take my order if I stepped forward and slid onto one of the padded stools. If I was here of my own accord, maybe I would have.

Instead, I slowly weaved my way through the neat tables and chairs, casting admiring glances at the black table clothes and black glass vases filled to the brim with red flowers that created each centerpiece. They were a distraction from my target, and as I approached Felix in a booth, his back to me, my heart began to pound harder. Slow, powerful beats that I was sure

would shatter my rib cage if I wasn't careful. In the heat of the moment, meeting up with him to have it out with him had been a great idea.

Now, foolishness swept over me like a cloak, but I was powerless against the movement of my own feet.

"Felix." I greeted him dryly and slid into the booth opposite him. His thin lips pulled into a sinister smile and the drink he had been nursing, a dark liquid, was placed down in front of him.

"I gotta say Summer, I didn't think you'd actually have the balls to show."

"I called the meeting, didn't I?"

"You think I can trust you at your word?" Felix sneered. "You swore you'd watch my back with the cops and look how that turned out."

"You nearly *killed* someone, Felix," I hissed back, clutching my bag in my lap. "That's different."

"Not to me it wasn't." He leaned forward into the table. "So your word is as strong as your loyalty. *Pathetic.*"

"You want to talk about pathetic? Who the fuck jumps someone on Christmas Eve?! You could have killed him!" Just thinking about Jax and his injuries flushed heat down my spine and nausea churned in my gut.

"I didn't do *anything*," Felix purred with a shit-eating grin. "But if I *had*, I would have just been having a little fun. Sending you a nice little reminder all wrapped up in a bloody bow."

"You're insane."

"Me?" Felix laughed suddenly, a loud bark that briefly drew the attention of the bartender. "You're the one shackled up in a rich chalet playing fucking nanny to the poor fucker we ran over. Does he know?"

"*You* ran him over," I snapped. "I tried to help him, remember? And you fucking locked me in the trunk all night to stop me."

"You were in the car, Summer. Signing a fucking confession blaming me doesn't absolve you of guilt." His eyes narrowed to dark slits. "He doesn't know... does he?"

My lips parted but words failed me for a moment, and I pressed my back flat against the booth. "I didn't know," I said finally. "I never saw who he was; I never learned his name. You confessed so I was no longer needed in person."

"That's so fucked up," Felix scoffed. "You're sleeping under his roof, tending to his fucking child, and all the while..." Felix blew out a soft

whistle. “And you say I’m the psycho.”

“You are!” I snapped loudly, then I hunkered down slightly in my seat as the bartender glanced over once more. “What you did to Jax... you aren’t going to get away with it.”

“What I did?” Felix picked up his glass and swirled the liquid. “I’ve learned a few things since I got here. Namely, you can’t prove shit. But if you want to start that fight, Summer, what do you think will happen when your precious rich buddies find out an ex-drug addict with a terrible alcohol addiction has been watching their kids?”

“I was never an alcoholic,” I shot back, “that was you and your twisted ways of slipping drugs into my drinks.”

“Oh, was it?” he laughed softly. “Point still stands. I can’t imagine they’d be too happy.”

“They’d... they’d understand.” Like a child, my voice wavered, betraying my doubt and I glanced down at the table, mapping out a few of the scratches and scuffs from use. I lifted my bag and set it on the table to distract myself. “You don’t know them.”

“Oh my God,” Felix snorted, and my eyes darted back up.

“What?”

“You have feelings for one of them, don’t you?”

“What? No!”

“You liar. I know you, Summer. It’s written all over your fucking face. You’re in love with one of them. All of them?”

“You know *nothing* Felix.”

“I know you’re engaged.”

My heart stopped. Felix wore the smarmiest, cockiest look I had ever seen on his thin face, and he smiled wider as he took a sip of his drink.

“What?” I hadn’t forgotten about it, but I hadn’t expected the news to reach anyone outside our bubble. Then again, Marina had been telling anyone that would listen so it wasn’t unexpected for the news to spread as gossip.

“You’re engaged, right? To John? I just wondered if you would be honest with me.”

“John?” Oh, right. Jax.

I pressed my lips together, debating quickly. I could tell him the truth; after all, there was nothing Felix could do that would impact Jax’s custody battle. Then again, if he thought I had someone in my corner, someone who loved me and cared for me, then maybe he would back off and leave me

alone.

“Yes. I’m engaged to Jax,” I lied. “So nothing you say to him or any of them will matter. They’ll believe me over you in a heartbeat.” My heart continued to pound so loudly that I was certain Felix could hear the lie in every beat.

He set his glass down and smirked. “You think the pictures I sent to that hotel are the only ones I kept?”

My breath caught in my chest and I swallowed hard. “What?”

“You think in all the years I spent thinking about how I was going to make you suffer, that lewd pictures when you were high were the *only* things I kept, Summer?” He laughed dryly. “You can’t run from your past, and I’m going to make sure your precious fiancé and his buddies know exactly what kinds of fucked up person is looking after their kids.”

“It won’t matter,” I shot back desperately, unsure if I was trying to persuade Felix or myself. “They trust me. I’m a different person; they won’t care—”

“They will!” Felix snapped and slammed his hand down on the table, making me and the glass vase jump. “I’m going to show them everything. Can you picture how Luke will be crushed knowing the person who sent him to the hospital for so many months has been caring for his daughter in his home? Or how that same person also got John attacked? They’ll see you for what you are, Summer. A twisted liar with no loyalty, a fucking whore who doesn’t know her place, and I’m going to show them.” Felix heaved a breath and his eyes turned wild, anger bleeding into them.

“I’m going to split you open so they can see everything, so those kids know to be scared of you, and I’m not going to stop until you come crawling back to me like the dog you are.” He spoke so ferociously that spit rained down on his fist. “And then I’m going to kill you, Summer. Slowly, for every *month* I spent rotting in that jail cell because you couldn’t keep your fucking mouth shut!”

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. His words were vicious poison and yet delivered with such intensity that I had no choice but to believe them. Given his violent history, it wasn’t hard to believe that he would make good on his threats. Bonnie, Ava, and Kane flooded my mind, their beautiful shining faces staring up at me filled with love that quickly morphed into fear. Luke’s face filled with horror when he learned I was in the car, Jax learning I was the cause of his attack.

Reality was crashing into my dream with the force of the Titanic.

“No...” I managed, and Felix laughed.

“Yes, Summer. Or...”

Or? The prospect of a deal shouldn't have given me hope but I found myself grasping at it, anything to stop this tidal wave of terror he was aiming at the people I had come to care for. The people I loved.

“Or, you tell them yourself.”

“What?”

“Tell them yourself,” Felix sighed, slouching back in his chair as if his outburst of anger hadn't just happened. “Tell them yourself and no one gets hurt. Not physically at least.”

I stared at him until my eyes blurred, and those tears gave the bottled emotions in my chest permission to flood forward like an over-shaken soda.

“You're a fucking monster,” I barked at him. “You're insane. I'm not doing anything for you, and you—you'd do well to stay the fuck away from me because Jax has enough money to bury you in—”

“You forget who holds the power here,” Felix snapped, interrupting my splurge of desperate threats. “I hold it. Don't you understand? I fucking own you, Summer. So, either you destroy them, or I will do it, and trust me when I say it won't be bloodless from me—”

“Is everything alright here?” The bartender appeared at the booth, her hands clasped together in front of her golden waistcoat. Behind her, a member of security lingered with his brow furrowed. I hadn't even seen them come over, and Felix shrunk somewhat in his seat.

“Yes, everything is fine,” Felix snapped.

“I wasn't asking you,” she responded sharply, and Felix flinched as if he had been physically struck by her words.

“Ma'am?” She turned her eyes to me, and the softness I found there pulled painfully at my chest. A sob ripped out of my chest before I could stop it, and the bartender moved forward to comfort me. I couldn't stop it, and my lower lips trembled as I tried to find words to explain.

“She's fine!” Felix snapped as he half rose in his seat.

“Sir, remain in your seat,” the guard barked. Like a feral dog, Felix rose to the challenge and stood, squaring his shoulders at the guard. Just as I was sure he would throw his curled-up fist, something seemed to rein him in, and he took a deep breath.

“She's just had too much to drink,” he said firmly.

“She never ordered anything,” the bartender replied. Felix rounded on her immediately. I couldn’t wait to see what he was going to do. In a burst of frantic energy, I shoved out of my seat, snatched my bag, brushed past the bartender and the guard, and bolted at breakneck speed out of the bar, leaving Felix to deal with them.

Tears flowed unchecked down my cheeks, and my heart hammered so hard in my chest that iron coated the back of my tongue and my head throbbed.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

What the hell was I going to do? I was trapped between a rock and a hard place, and the only way out would be to cut myself away from those I loved in order to save them from Felix’s insanity.

I’d known this dream could never last, but it was heartbreaking to feel it crumble through my fingers while being powerless to stop it.

It was me or Felix.

And I had only one clear thought as I sped through the resort.

I had to leave. I had to leave before Felix’s bloody threats became a reality.

LUKE

“Where is he?” Stomping the snow from my boots, I set down the chopped firewood in the basket near the fireplace as my mother hurried over to me, her face twisted with worry.

“He’s in the study,” she explained quickly. “I haven’t seen him like this in a long time.”

“The kids?”

“Summer took them out to lunch at the resort and Theo is upstairs.”

“Okay. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of Jax.” Whatever had gotten him into such a state, we could handle it. I was sure of it. We’d all been through so much together that when my mother hurried out into the snow to tell me Jax was upset, I already knew we could sort it.

That feeling wavered slightly as I entered the study. Jax was at the far end near the windows pacing back and forth with a hand in his hair. The desk was messy, with items strewn across the top and spilling onto the floor. Even a few of the books were scattered about as if they had been thrown. Jax’s entire posture was rigid, and he didn’t look up when I entered, didn’t acknowledge me until I was on the other side of the desk.

“Jax?”

He lifted his head with a flinch and the hard, angry lines on his face softened a fraction when he looked at me. “Luke.”

“What’s wrong? You’ve got my mother all worked up. What’s going on?”

“Ah, shit.” Jax sucked in air through his teeth. “I thought she’d gone to

lunch with the others.”

“No, she’s here. Talk to me, Jax.”

“Marina,” he said, his face twisting as if the word tasted as sour as it sounded.

“Is she bragging about her new boyfriend?”

“Boyfriend?” Jax’s eyes snapped back to me. “Who?”

“No clue. Before our meeting yesterday, I was down at the resort meeting with the catering staff for New Year’s party. On my way back I saw Marina in the bar with some guy.”

“What guy?”

“I don’t know. Kind of tall, rough around the edges. Square face, almost completely shaved head. You know, her type.”

“Ah.” Jax sighed deeply and finally stopped his pacing. “Doesn’t matter. Not now.”

“Why?” I moved around the desk, bringing myself closer to try and force Jax to talk to me clearly.

“I got a call from my lawyer.” Jax lifted his eyes to mine and the shadow of defeat lingered there. “He claims her lawyer called him, said Marina has evidence of me keeping Bonnie in unsafe conditions and around dangerous people. Her lawyer has seen the evidence and it’s enough, more than enough to push up our court dates. It doesn’t look good, not at all.”

“What evidence?” What shock I had experienced initially melted quickly into anger. What the fuck was Marina playing at?

“I don’t know. Todd hasn’t seen it yet, but he’s requested it be sent immediately so he can look it over. He sounded worried. Apparently, Marina’s lawyer was so confident; like he’d just stumbled on some sort of jackpot.”

“This... this doesn’t make any sense. There’s nothing unsafe about living here. The chalet and the resort are fully certified... and as for dangerous people? We run a security company; we’re the safest fuckers on the planet.”

“That’s just the thing...” Jax’s gaze turned out the window to the large mountains rising beyond the cloud line. “Marina called me after, and she... she was so *happy*. So fucking smug. Whatever she has, she thinks it will secure her in the divorce and the custody battle, and I—I can’t think, Luke. She said Bonnie was hers, and I was always going to be the waste she picked up in a bar. As soon as those words left her, I just lost it. I yelled at her, I called her all the foul things under the sun and just gave her more ammo in

the process.”

Defeated, Jax slumped down in his seat with a soft groan and his head fell forward between his shoulders.

“Is that why the desk is a mess?” I joked softly, processing through everything he had told me.

“Yeah. Sorry. And if I scared Tabitha... I’m sorry.”

“Apology not necessary,” I reassured quickly. Falling silent, I moved around the desk and began to gather the tossed books, spilled paper, and thrown pens while working through what had happened. Marina had proof of child endangerment, to the point that her lawyer was involved. That wasn’t good, regardless of what this proof was.

“I can’t lose her,” Jax murmured brokenly. I immediately abandoned the clean-up and crouched in front of him.

“You won’t.”

“I *can*’t.”

“Jax, you won’t. We’ll fight this. There’s nothing dangerous here. There are no terrible people or anything. It’s just family and snow. Whatever Marina *thinks* she has is utter bullshit because looks around. Bonnie is happy and healthy and safe.”

“But...” His voice cracked and my heart crumpled with it. “She has something. I don’t know what, but she has *something* and whatever it is... I don’t know how to fight it. I’ve been doing everything by the book but somehow I—” Emotion got the better of him and he screwed up his eyes, fighting the rest of the tears that threatened to follow the couple that leaked down his cheek.

I clutched at his arm and squeezed. “Jax, we will fight this. You won’t lose her.”

“Lose who? What—what’s going on?” Summer stood in the doorway, her face paler than normal, but since she’d been with the kids through the snow I brushed it off. Her eyes were wide, and she huddled near the door as I glanced up at her. Jax immediately turned toward the window to hide his spiraling emotions.

“Summer.”

“Sorry, I—I didn’t mean to listen in. I was just...” She trailed off and cleared her throat. “I was just sticking my head in to let you know we’re back in case you wanted to see Ava or Bonnie. Have you seen my keys anywhere? I’m sorry.”

“No, no come in.” I straightened and waved her closer. Her presence was the most soothing thing I had ever experienced so if there was a chance she could calm Jax down then I was going to encourage it. “Jax has just had some uh...”

“Bad news,” he croaked, and I gripped his shoulder, rubbing in a small circle as he worked to regain control of himself. Summer, somehow, paled further as she approached the desk.

“Bad—bad news?”

“Yeah. Lovely fucking Marina, in the spirit of being the Christmas witch and all that nonsense, has decided she has proof of Jax being a terrible person for keeping Bonnie in unsafe conditions.”

Summer’s brow furrowed and her eyes darted back and forth between the two of us. “Unsafe conditions?”

“Apparently,” Jax said huskily, wiping at his eyes.

“And around dangerous people,” I added.

“Dangerous people...” Summer whispered. Her eyes glazed over slightly as if lost in thought, but her face softened when a tight sob escaped Jax, and she leaped into action.

“Jax, sweetie.” Around the desk, she moved until she was beside Jax, and she hugged his hunched-over form. “You’re a fucking fantastic father, you hear me? I’ve seen how much you dote on Bonnie and how much you love her. How much effort you put into her care. You have a fantastic case against Marina because you actually love Bonnie and...” Summer paused, shooting me a stressed glance. I felt the same stress in my own heart.

“Marina is just a bitch for not waiting until at least after the New Year. I mean who tries to start any kind of shit at this time of year? This week between Christmas and New Year’s barely even exists. It’s just a weird limbo which tells me how desperate she is.”

Summer’s words would have made me laugh in any other situation.

Jax slowly lifted his head, his eyes still shining, but he appeared to no longer be struggling with preventing himself from sobbing his heart out.

“You’re just saying that,” he muttered.

“As your fiancée, I don’t just say things,” Summer joked dryly but her face turned serious momentarily. “But even if... I mean, if something changed, I know you would act on it to the best of Bonnie’s interests. You can’t always be in control of outside consequences but that’s not your fault.”

“What do you mean?” The adoration for Summer was clear in Jax’s eyes

even as he frowned.

“Well, I mean people that are in the resort and things like that. You don’t know their past or their histories or what they get up to in the dark, so you can’t be blamed for having Bonnie around them, y’know? Like maybe Marina just thinks that’s what she can use, that maybe there was someone at the resort that she deems as *awful* and that’s what she’s doing.”

“She’s grasping at straws,” I agreed.

“It’s not *like* that though; you weren’t here, you didn’t hear her.” Jax pulled away from Summer and stood, pacing around the desk and rubbing his neck as if trying to shake off an invisible noose. “She was *confident*, and she might be a bitch but I know her. She has something. I just don’t know what.”

“How?” I asked with a sigh. “There’s nothing dangerous here. The worst threat is my own mother when she can’t get through to her bingo girls, or Theo when he decides to sleepwalk out onto the balcony. There’s no one dangerous here. The chalet is safe.”

“She said I was blind. She said I was *stupid*, and that if I took just a second to look I would see what was in front of me, but she was laughing, glad that I couldn’t because it made the case so easy for her.”

“Jax,” I tried but he cut me off quickly.

“No, Luke. You don’t understand. This is different! Whatever she has, I could lose my child over it. Bonnie could be gone. Do you have any idea how terrifying that is?” Jax’s voice started to pick up and he gasped faintly, rubbing at his chest. “I could lose her. I could really lose her this time.”

“Jax, please—”

“I... I think I know,” Summer spoke up, silencing myself and Jax, who paused his pacing and looked at her with doe eyes.

“You know?” Jax asked. “Did she say something to you?”

Summer looked paler, almost sickly and her fingers twisted together in front of her abdomen. I hadn’t ever seen her look like this before, and my heart, already beating a drum of worry for Jax, added a stuttering beat for her too.

“Summer?”

She looked between us with shining eyes.

“I think... I think there’s something I should tell yo—”

“Luke!”

My mother’s cry from the other room silenced all words, and without a second thought, I bolted from the study and into the lounge. Jax and Summer

followed behind me.

“Ma? Ma, what’s wrong?”

My mother stood by the open front door, bundled up in her thick cardigan with the chill air ruffling her gray curls. She gripped the door with one hand, her knuckles white, and all other thoughts evaporated, leaving only concern for my mother.

“Luke, you need to talk to them,” my mother said, glancing over her shoulder.

“Talk to who?” I approached the door and stopped just in front of my mother, my heart freezing at the sight of several resort security guards standing on the porch. “Can I help you?”

“Mr. Luke Ellis?” The resort security captain stepped forward.

“Yes.”

“Can we come inside?”

Every alarm bell started ringing in my mind. “What’s this about?” I wasn’t ready to let them in just in case this was some sort of trick from Marina.

“Sir, we’ve been informed of an illegal drug stash on the premises, and as per resort policy, we need to investigate. Please, step aside.”

SUMMER

It was crumbling.

My dream-like life was turning to ash in my fingers, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Hanging back from Luke and Jax, I peered through the gaps in their bodies at the security staff waiting out in the cold.

“Drugs?” Luke choked on the word, he was so surprised. “You can’t be serious. Stephen, you *know* us.”

“I do,” the captain—Stephen—replied, “but this claim comes from someone higher than me.”

“Higher than you? Who would ever...” Luke trailed off and both his hands curled into fists. “*Marina*.” Her name was uttered like poison, and his stance stiffened even as his shoulders dropped. “Alright. Do what you have to do.”

“But if you even think of scaring any of those kiddies,” Tabitha remarked sharply, pointing a finger at the men. “You’ll answer to me!”

“Absolutely, ma’am,” Stephen replied.

As they talked, my mind raced. Drugs? Here? This was too much of a coincidence after my fallout with Felix yesterday, but at the same time, that had nothing to do with Marina. Were we really being attacked from both sides? My heart raced as fast as my mind, and as Luke stepped aside to let Stephen and his men through, Jax touched my arm and pulled me back in time to avoid the smaller member of their team.

A sniffer dog.

“You’ll find nothing here,” Jax hissed, “just wasting time.”

“I have a protocol to follow, Jax,” Stephen said and to his credit, he did seem uncomfortable. “I’m sorry. We’ll be in and out.”

Jax rolled his eyes and I shrugged off his touch, unable to handle how the walls were closing in around us. Stephen’s gaze lingered on me as he passed, then his attention turned to the dog dressed in a vest.

“Seek.”

Immediately the dog’s nose was on the ground, and it began sniffing every inch of the lounge. I watched, worrying my nail with my teeth. Jax paced to my left while Tabitha followed Stephen like a protective hawk, ready to strike the second she thought the children would be affected.

Then the dog barked and Stephen straightened up.

“Seek,” he instructed again, and the dog took off up the stairs with its trainer right behind. We followed like a snake, weaving up the stairs and through the halls all certain that the dog would find nothing.

Blood burst over my tongue when I bit too hard into the flesh of my thumb as the dog came to a stop outside a closed door and began scratching at the bottom.

The outside of *my* door.

My heart plummeted like a rock and a tremble settled into my limbs. What the fuck. What the fuck?! I didn’t have anything, yet the dog was acting as if an entire chemical factory was behind that door.

“Are there any children in here?” Stephen asked, adhering to Tabitha’s earlier request. Everyone turned to look at me, and the air punched out of my lungs at the weight of their confused and concerned gazes.

“No,” I managed to answer. “They—they’re with Theo.”

“May I?” Stephen asked Luke.

Luke frowned deeply at me, then he nodded. Stephen opened the door and the dog bolted inside, making a beeline for the dresser in the far corner. Time around me slowed almost to a standstill. Each slow, pounding beat of my heart echoed in my ears for an eternity. Every step closer to that dresser was like sludge, and a sharp heat mingled with a chill across my skin resulting in various bursts of prickly goosebumps.

Tabitha hovered with me by the door, and her wrinkled hand landed slowly on my elbow, perhaps trying to comfort me. The touch was searing and I could barely stand it. Luke and Jax stood in the room, silent as the grave while the dog scratched at the dresser and Stephen began searching the drawers. Three drawers down, in my underwear drawer, he found what he

was looking for.

His hand came away clutching clear baggies of white power, and a hurricane started in my gut as Luke and Jax turned to face me, the shock and horror etched onto their face. Even Tabitha removed her touch on my elbow.

“Whose room is this?” Stephen asked.

“Mine,” I choked out before anyone else could. “But I—those aren’t mine, I *swear*. I wouldn’t even know where to get drugs in a place like this; they aren’t mine!”

“You are Summer Bradley?” Stephen asked, and I frowned. How did he know my name?

“Y-Yes... that’s correct.”

“Stephen?” Luke turned back to him. “What’s going on?”

“The information we received was that a Summer Bradley was in possession of narcotics. It came with some further information that she has a history with drugs and has slipped back into old habits,” Stephen replied tightly. “We have to take all these accusations seriously, you understand.”

“A *history*?” Jax snapped suddenly, and I flinched, looking at him. The pain and anger in his eyes was like iron, and I struggled to swallow around my heart that seemed to have nestled into my throat.

“Yes,” I gasped, “but that was a long time ago. So long ago and it wasn’t even my—” I stopped before the excuses started to sound crazy. “Please, I would never!”

“This has to be a mistake,” Tabitha spoke up. “This place is secure and only those with keys can get in and out of here.”

“That doesn’t make her look good, Ma,” Luke hissed.

“Well yes, but...” Tabitha turned to me and her eyes were shining with tears and confusion.

“Where are your keys?” Jax asked bitterly.

“What?”

“Where are they? Earlier you asked if we had seen them.” His voice tightened and just as I was sure my heart was about to explode in my chest, an odd silence settled over my mind like a blanket. A cold, muted realization that no matter what I said in this moment, it wouldn’t matter.

Distrust swam in the eyes of the people before me, and I hadn’t seen my keys since last night, though that hardly helped my situation.

“I don’t know,” I whispered as tears prickled behind my eyes. “But this... this wasn’t me. This *isn’t* me.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you’re under arrest for possessing narcotics.”

“Arrest?” Theo’s warm voice breached the air, and we all turned to see him standing in the hallway, his eyes wide. He glanced from me to the security staff, then the drugs in Stephen’s hand before back at me. “Summer...”

The soft, shocked way he said my name brought the tears crashing down my cheeks as the cold metal of handcuffs sealed around my wrists.

“I’m sorry,” I wept. “I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“This can’t be right,” Tabitha muttered as I was led back down the hallway. “What’s going to happen to her?”

“I’m afraid that’s not for me to decide,” Stephen stated as we descended the stairs. “That’s up to my boss.”

“Explain,” Theo barked to anyone that would listen. “Drugs? Here?”

“She has a history,” Jax remarked bitterly. “Summer, how could you do this? Do you understand that I could lose Bonnie because of this?!”

His raised voice only fueled more tears and as they marched me through the lounge, I spun to face him.

“Jax, please! I would never do this. You have to believe me. I know what it looks like and I—I know you’re worked up because of Marina but this, you know me! Please...”

“Don’t,” Jax barked, raising a palm.

“Oh Summer.” Tabitha pressed a hand over her mouth, her eyes swimming. There was a mix of confusion, anger, and sympathy flowing from all of them, and yet how could they believe me in the face of the drugs clutched in Stephen’s hand?

This was *Felix’s* handiwork. I didn’t know how, but it had to be him. Luke stepped away suddenly as his phone blared into life and he pressed it to his ear as Stephen helped me into my coat to protect against the snow.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Theo stated. “Stephen, please. We’ve known each other a long time. Isn’t there something we can do to help get to the bottom of this?”

“I have my orders,” was Stephen’s only response. My tongue thickened in my mouth and I coughed out a sob, then I froze on the spot as if an icicle had speared right into my spine.

Luke’s face stood out amongst the rest as he slowly lowered the phone from his ear.

“Summer,” he said in a voice so strangled that everyone turned to look at

him, and Theo darted forward to grasp his arm as he went as white as a sheet.

“Luke? What is it?”

Luke lifted his confused, hollow eyes to mine, and he frowned.

“Summer... the ex you told us wasn’t important, he was—”

“Please!” I gasped as realization struck me. He can’t know. Please, not now!

“He was *Felix Saunders*?” Luke choked out. “The asshole that ran me over?”

Like the splinters of a mirror, my world imploded, and I couldn’t hold in the wail that ripped from my chest.

“No,” I whispered.

“Don’t *lie* to me!” Luke yelled suddenly, his voice so deep that nearly everyone jumped, myself included.

“Please,” I gasped through my tears. Not like this. I didn’t want him to find out like this.

“Summer?” Theo prompted, softer than Luke.

My heart pounded one last time, then fell silent in defeat.

“Yes,” I gasped out. “He’s my ex. And yes, I was in the car that night.”

LUKE

The silence after Summer's departure was smothering, her confession swirling around my mind like a wasp with nowhere to land. The entire room was silent; Theo by the door trying to process what he had walked in on, my mother seated on the sofa with her hands wringing together, and Jax, a rigid statue next to me. It wasn't until an obnoxious squeaking reached my ears that I remembered Marina was still on the phone.

I lifted it to my ear, my arm as heavy as my heart. "Marina."

"How delightful!" she squawked. "I thought the news had killed you dead. Wouldn't that be a thing? Then again learning that the woman living in your house was responsible for your accident is quite the terrible thing. I know I was positively *astounded* when I found out. You don't come across things that juicy every day and I—"

Her words vanished as Jax snatched the phone out of my hand.

"Marina, fuck right off your miserable cunt!" he yelled, and the phone landed in the middle of the couch after he hung up. "I fucking *hate* her," he seethed.

I swallowed hard and nodded, just once, then my mother stood suddenly.

"You boys need to talk and work this out," she said sharply. "Because this? I don't know enough but I do know Summer, and this doesn't *fit*. So put your stupid heads together and work it out!" She turned and stomped toward the stairs.

"Ma?" I called. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to take care of those poor children so you three can take care

of Summer,” she snapped back, then she raced up the stairs at a speed unexpected for her age. It almost made me smile if not for Marina’s revelation pulsing through my veins like a threat.

Summer had been there that night. The night I had been rushing to the hospital to be with Flora and ended up being so violently struck by a car that I had spent the next three months in hospital and missed the birth of my daughter. She had *been* there. How could she be a part of that and face me each day? Lay with me in bed? My thoughts were in such turmoil that I didn’t notice I was being ushered toward the study by Theo until the door closed behind us, sealing out the quiet Christmas music that had droned constantly through the air.

“We need to think about this carefully,” Theo said quietly. “Start at the beginning.”

“Summer had drugs in her room,” Jax remarked bitterly, dropping into the leather chair by the desk.

“No, the beginning,” Theo demanded. He walked to the drinks cabinet and quickly poured three scotches, then he handed them out as Jax quickly explained the call from the lawyer and the next call from Marina. As he spoke, his computer dinged and Jax trailed off, then he downed his drink in one gulp and smacked his lips together as he read what was on the screen.

“It’s always fucking Marina,” he spat at the monitor. I crossed over to him, and Theo followed with the bottle, filling up Jax’s empty glass as we read the new e-mail from Marina.

It was Summer’s criminal record, and Felix’s, while detailing their relationship together. It had spanned some years until Felix went to prison. The e-mail ended with a sneering comment about how this was all she needed to prove that Jax was an unfit parent and incapable of making safe decisions for his daughter. Her malicious comment about Jax needing better taste in fiancées was followed by a not-so-generous offer to *maybe* give him visitation if he dropped custody on his own.

Jax drained his refilled glass in seconds. “Fuck,” he said hoarsely. “I’m screwed. I’m so fucking—” His grip tightened on his glass, and for a moment I feared he’d launch is across the room. Defeat got the better of him though, and instead, he set it down with a deep, bone-rattling sigh.

Jax was on the cusp of losing his daughter because of this, and Summer was the woman I had glimpsed from that night. She had to be. I had always thought that vision of someone trying to help me had been an angel. Now I

wasn't so sure.

"No." Theo straightened up. "No, let's think about this, okay? Or, as the only one with their heart not crumbling right now, I'll think about it."

He moved and began to pace around the room, swirling his drink in his hand. "Marina's information proves Summer is connected to Felix, the man that ran you over. Her record says she provided evidence that secured his conviction, so that's a positive."

"Is it?" I asked bitterly. "Because right now I'm having a hard time accepting that with the fact that she was here, in my home, in my *bed*, and didn't say a word."

"Okay that, I admit, is fucked up, and I can't answer that part," Theo admitted. "But if she helped put him away then they definitely parted on bad terms, and she did the right thing." Theo sent me an apologetic glance. "I'm not going to tell you how to feel; I'm just... thinking out loud."

"Fine," I muttered, sinking into the nearby armchair.

"Marina contacted her lawyer and called you, Jax, long before security showed up which means... which means she already knew the drugs were on the premises. How would she know that?"

"She appears to know fucking everything," Jax grumbled, and he poured himself another drink.

"Fair. Money talks and she has bucketloads. I can presume she looked into Summer after finding out about the engagement—"

"So it's my fault?" Jax cut in. Theo paused his pacing.

"You're hurting, I get that. Let me finish."

Jax waved one hand.

"She looked into Summer, maybe stumbled upon Felix, and would have known the connection to you, Luke."

"It didn't come up when I did a background check on her before she started working for us," I said with a sigh.

"The records were sealed," Jax piped up, clicking about on the computer. "Even a deep check wouldn't have flagged these. Marina must have gone deep, looking for anything she could use."

"So, she was desperate," Theo reasoned. "Desperate because she knew she was going to lose the custody battle, and she needed something, *anything* that would give her the upper hand."

"Well, Summer handed it to her on a fucking silver platter," Jax grumbled. My heart went out to him. Just the thought of losing Ava made my

gut twist up into shards; I couldn't fathom facing that as a reality.

"Hey," Theo scolded after a drink. "You of all people know what it's like to have a past, Jax. We can't hold that against Summer, not if she's turned her life around. That's not fair."

"Whose side are you on?" Jax snapped.

"I'm not *against* you, Jax. This isn't about sides; this is about the truth and the woman we *love* being tangled up in something awful."

"Losing Bonnie will be fucking awful," Jax continued angrily. "I poured my heart out to Summer about my past and what Marina did to me, and not once did she tell me anything about this. Not even the drugs, something we basically share. If she had, we would have been prepared."

"Maybe she was ashamed," I offered, trying to follow Theo's words as betrayal beat in my own heart. "Maybe of the crash too." For me though, that was more unforgivable. I had also poured my heart out, and Summer hadn't said anything.

"Ashamed," Jax scoffed. "She was among friends."

"Things moved fast. We all felt that. Have you poured your darkest secrets to her? No. Me neither." Theo paused at the desk before Jax poured himself another drink.

I had to admit, he had a point. Jax remained silent, indicating his disgruntled agreement.

"Right then. I don't know about you, but I never saw any sign of Summer being on drugs. Not around us or the kids so I'm likely to believe she's telling the truth there. We're agreed?" He looks at the two of us and we nod. "So that just leaves how the drugs got here and how Marina even knew where to plant them, never mind what drugs Summer was even partial to."

"It's not on her file," Jax says, reading through the pages. "Maybe she stumbled upon Summer's room."

"Maybe," Theo mused, "but she barely knew Summer. Certainly not enough to know what clothes she wore. Besides, some of Flora's old stuff is still here right and they have similar styles."

"What are you saying?" I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees and balancing the glass on my fingertips.

"I'm *saying* those details aren't something Marina could get from a file. She either spoke to Summer or someone that knows her," Theo mused. "And if Summer wouldn't confess that to us, there's no way she'd confess it to Marina."

“She doesn’t have family,” Jax said, draining his glass. “Doesn’t seem to have many friends either.”

“That leaves...” Theo paused by the bookshelf and turned back to us. “Felix.”

“Released on good behavior six months ago,” Jax recited from the files. “You think Marina somehow got ahold of Felix?”

“Wouldn’t be too hard, given her money and her reach,” Theo mused. “He’d know enough about Summer to have the info on the drugs, he’d know her style, and since they dated, he’d be familiar enough with her to pick her room out and not Flora’s.”

“That’s insane,” I breathed. “You think Marina somehow got in touch with Felix, they had a nice chat, and Marina got enough information to *somehow* plant drugs on Summer in order to frame Jax for being a terrible parent—all to win a custody battle?” It sounded insane and yet once I said it out loud, it didn’t sound that impossible.

The longer I thought about it, the more plausible it became.

“We know Summer,” Theo said. “I know emotions are running high, but if we peel that back and look at what we know and love about her, she wouldn’t endanger those kids. Not for a second.”

Silence fell as we mused over Theo’s conclusion, then Jax took an audibly deep breath. “Okay, so how did the drugs get in here?”

“She lost her key,” I said, thinking back to earlier. “That’s why she was looking for it. Maybe she didn’t admit that because it would make her look forgetful, but... that’s got to be it. Anyone with that key would be able to get in here and plant the drugs.”

“Okay, when?” Jax asked. “It’s a tight window of opportunity to sneak in here and do that.”

“Helix.” Theo snapped his fingers. “We’re so fucking *stupid*.” A dry laugh escaped him. “So distracted by Summer and Marina—we need to check Helix. The security logs will tell us when and where Summer’s key was used. If it was activated here at a time when she was clearly somewhere else, then we’re on the right track!”

“Alright.” I pushed out of my chair. “Let me make a call.”

SUMMER

I hadn't believed Felix would go this far. Famously unable to commit to things, his threats seemed for show more than anything else; something to try and scare me into obedience or into going back to him. But I was stronger now.

I thought I was stronger.

Sitting in the resort holding cell, surrounded by cold, beige walls, and with only a stainless steel toilet and bars for company, I now knew different. I wasn't stronger than Felix. All that work I had done to better myself from those days, to put distance between myself and who I was back then was just an illusion. At my core, I was still that scared little girl, just a puppet at Felix's command. He'd made good on his threats, and my dreamlike life lay scattered in ashes at my feet.

It was over.

The guys surely hated me. I'd never see those kids again.

A cavernous ache opened up in my chest when I was placed in this cell, and the reality of my situation echoed around the chamber like the constant ringing of a bell that deafened all other feelings except for pain.

Drawing my legs up to my chest, I wrapped my arms around them, pressed my face into my knees, and sobbed.

Jax's horrified face swam around my mind, mingling with Luke's angry words. *Drugs*. Drugs in my room. It didn't matter that I didn't know how they got there, their very presence had surely destroyed Jax's attempts at sole custody of Bonnie, and it was *my* fault. If he lost her, that was on me.

I cried until my throat was raw and my eyes were swollen, and even then the tears kept coming. Every spiraling thought lingered on either the pain I caused or the family I lost—if I could even call them that. They had welcomed me in, opened up to me, and *doted* on me, giving me the best Christmas I had ever experienced. Now, it was all in tatters. On top of that, I couldn't work out what would happen to me. Would I be arrested and tried here? Would they deport me back to the States and charge me there?

I half wished for that. My presence here surely shouldn't linger as Jax, Luke, and Theo worked to pick up the pieces of my disaster. And with the Helix anniversary party in just a few days? The tears fell harder, soaking into my jeans while my cries bounced off the cold walls and surrounded me in my pain.

I cried until I couldn't cry anymore, until my tears ran dry, and the burst of upset faded into nothing but empty defeat. Slumping back against the cold wall, I let one leg drop back to the floor, and I breathed out a rough sigh that scraped through my chest.

Felix had gotten his wish. My life was over. I closed my eyes and darkness took me.

“Miss Bradley?”

The touch to my shoulder made me jump, and I flinched awake, blinking through raw eyes to the security guard standing over me. It was impossible to tell how much time had passed. He offered me a tight, polite smile as I rubbed my eyes and sat up. I must have fallen over in my sleep.

“What? Sorry,” I croaked. “I was just...” Reasoning felt useless. He was surely here to cart me off to prison. I held out my hands, wrists together expecting the cold clasp of those cuffs, but instead the guard handed me my coat.

“You're free to go.”

My heart skipped a beat, and I stared up at him in shock. “What?”

“You're being released.”

“What... why?”

“The situation is being handled,” was all he said, then he retreated from my cell and left the door open. I stared after him, swallowing hard around the sticky lump in my throat. What did that even mean? Where was I supposed to go? Was this another part of Felix's game?

Rising slowly, I slipped the coat on and approached the door, fighting back a yawn. With no idea how long I had been here, I wasn't even sure what

part of the resort would offer me solace if they knew I was coming from a security holding cell; the chill and the stale smell of it seemed to follow me into the corridor.

There, I stopped in my tracks at the man standing at the other end with his hands in his pockets and a tired, stern look on his handsome face.

Jax.

The last person I ever expected to see.

“Come on.” He barked out the words—or at least that’s how they seemed to my over-sensitive, distraught senses. Jax turned on his heel and pushed open the glass door into the dark, snowy landscape outside. I hesitated, unsure if it really was the best idea to follow him, but what other choice did I have? Find the bar and wait for Felix to come and find me, deliver the next part of his twisted plan?

I glanced at the guard as if he could guide me, but he remained busy behind his desk. This turmoil was mine and mine alone.

Taking a deep, steady breath, I followed. The cold wind speared through my coat no matter how tightly I crossed my arms together as I trudged through the snow, following Jax’s footsteps toward a waiting car. Jax climbed into the back, and after a hesitant glance around at the empty parking lot, I followed suit.

The moment I sat down, the car started to move. Inside was much warmer than I expected, but I was too nervous to move with Jax next to me. Locked in place, I decided to just suffer with the building heat, and I kept my hands curled in my lap, waiting. Why was Jax even here? Was he going to yell at me? Was he here to demand answers I didn’t have? My mind ran in circles as the silence dragged on until I couldn’t stand it anymore, and words burst out of me like vomit.

“If you’re going to yell at me, can you just get it over with?!”

Jax glanced over at me, clear sadness lingering in his eyes, but his brows pulled down in confusion and his lips pressed together.

“Excuse me?”

“The waiting, it’s pointless. Just—just say what you want to say, and then we can both just go our separate ways, right?” Now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop. “If you’re taking me to get my things before you ship me off to prison then I don’t care; just send me there immediately.”

“Summer—”

“No, I don’t want this nightmare to drag out. I don’t have any defense. I

don't have anything, and I don't know why you're even here so just drop me back in my cell or send me off on a plane. I don't care."

"Summer, you're not going to prison." Jax studied me with those soft, sad eyes and then he sighed, a slight groan rolling with the air. "At least, not because of us."

"What... I don't understand."

"Y'know, that almost makes two of us. I didn't want to do this in the car." Jax's gaze dragged over me, and heat flushed through my already overheating body. "Summer, take off your coat before you boil to death."

"Oh." A thin sheen of sweat had started to build inside the coat, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I removed it and set it on the opposite seat. "Sorry."

"Tell me about Felix."

"What?" Straight to business without even a warning. I didn't know what to say but Jax didn't repeat himself, he simply watched me expectantly, and the lump in my throat turned to stone, making it harder to swallow as I considered where to start.

"Um... Felix. He uh—I met him when I was a teenager. My mom was dead and my dad might as well have been, so I really had no one. I partied a lot, drank more than I should have, and then I met Felix. He was, well he was older, and his life seemed... together. I guess I liked the security that offered." I couldn't look at Jax and instead focused on a loose thread on my jeans. "He wasn't a good guy though. He was incredibly passionate, but he was also incredibly violent. He was a drug dealer, and he slipped drugs into my drinks more often than not... got me addicted to things I could barely name at that age."

Jax remained silent as my words started to come faster and faster, nearly matching the pace of my heart while the noise of memories surged in my mind.

"He wasn't good at staying in control. People were scared of him because he was crazy, because he was so violent... but he was always sweet with me, at the start anyway. I felt so grown up when I was with him, so I made excuses for him. But then I started to doubt things, and anytime I tried to go home or leave, he would..." Words caught in my throat, and I had to squeeze them out. "He would hit me. He actually gave me this scar—" I lightly touched my lip. "—with a glass bottle when I told him I didn't like how the drugs made me feel. But he always apologized afterwards, so I just..."

Talking so fast made breathing difficult, and I gasped suddenly but it was too much. My history, like vomit, was pouring out of me and I couldn't stop it even if I wanted to.

"Then one night he got drunk, really drunk. I did too. I think we were celebrating or something and he wanted to go for a drive. We argued because it wasn't safe, but Felix always gets what he wants. The next thing I know, we're driving, and Felix is still drinking and part of me was hoping we'd crash so that it could all be over, and then... then..." The next part of the story got trapped behind the stone in my throat, and despite being all cried out, tears stung at my eyes.

"You hit Luke," Jax said quietly.

"Yes," I gasped. "I didn't see him. I don't know if Felix did. One moment we were driving; the next there was this sickening wet crunch and something heavy was rolling over the car. Felix stopped, and I got out and saw him just lying there in the road. I don't remember much, just the rain and the noise when we hit him. I tried to help him, I swear!" I glanced up at Jax and his face was carefully unreadable. "I tried to give him CPR and everything."

"His angel," Jax murmured.

"A demon more like," I scoffed, turning my eyes back to the thread I was working free. "Felix stopped me. He kept pulling me away, and then he threw me in the trunk and drove away. He left me there until the next day and made me swear not to tell a soul. He told me I'd go to prison too, and I believed him. I was only twenty-two." Slowly my heartbeat began to calm and with it, my words. "When the police finally tracked his car and came looking, I was the only one there. They asked me about the car and if I knew of any accidents and I—I said yes. I told them everything. I couldn't stop thinking about Luke; it was the only way."

I blinked and tears gently skimmed down my cheeks. "When they arrested Felix, he was furious. When they told him they had my witness statement, he confessed so angrily that they didn't need me anymore. I was never called to court. I swear I never knew it was Luke until..."

"Until?" Jax prompted.

"Until last week, when we were all talking, I realized Luke's accident sounded familiar. I suspected, but I couldn't be sure and then... then I ran into Felix here and he confirmed it. I had no idea but Felix did, and he was so *angry*. He um... before you gave me this job, he got me fired from my old job. Turned out he got early release because of good behavior and hunted me

down. I thought taking this job and leaving the country would give me some time to think but he followed me and he...”

I hurriedly wiped my eyes, but the tears kept coming. “He kept threatening me, and I was scared. Scared of him, scared of what he would do... and then you came back on Christmas Eve after that attack, and I realized I couldn’t protect anyone.”

“Of course that was him,” Jax muttered grimly. I glanced up, skimming over the bruises on his face, then I nodded slowly.

“So I tried to threaten him, and he... well, this happened.” I laced my fingers together so tightly that my knuckles bled white and the lump in my throat turned to iron. “I’m *sorry*.”

Jax suddenly reached across and his warm hand landed on top of mine. The contact was a shock, and I almost pulled away if not for how much I yearned for his comfort.

“Summer, I... thank you. For telling me all of that. I *wish* you had trusted me and told me he was here, and that you were scared of him.”

I lifted my gaze to his, and through my tears his eyes seemed to sparkle.

“How could I? Everything that’s happened here, with you and the others and the kids... I loved it. I’ve loved every second of it, and the moment I told you any of it, it would be over. Everything I loved here would be gone, and my reality would be back. I didn’t want this to end. I didn’t want to fuck it up like I’ve done with everything else.”

“Oh, Summer...” Jax suddenly pulled me close, and what little restraint I had left crumbled, and I sobbed.

It didn’t matter now. Everything I loved was already gone.

Felix had made sure of that.

SUMMER

“Can I get you anything? Something to drink? Eat?”

Jax’s questions seemed alien in nature. I couldn’t fully understand why he was being so calm and nice to me. After crying on his shoulder in the car, he’d brought me into the chalet and sat me down in the lounge where Luke and Theo were settled on the opposite couch. It was almost as if I was on trial, so the thought of putting anything inside me was an immediate no; I had no clue if I’d be able to keep it down.

“No, no thank you,” I replied quietly. My hands came together on my knees, twisting together while my heart pounded in my throat as if trying to dislodge the lump that remained there. Sweat pulsed down my back, and I was unable to look anyone in the eye as I waited. This was it. I was seconds away from being told to pack my bags and get the hell out of there.

“We know you didn’t bring drugs in here, Summer,” Theo said calmly.

“What?” His voice was distant to my ears, and his words almost didn’t register while I was so tangled up in my own thoughts.

“We know it wasn’t you,” Theo repeated. “After you... left, we had a discussion that—” He glanced at Jax and Luke, then slightly shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. What does, is that after the shock and hurt passed, we remembered you mentioned you lost your key, so we used Helix to track it. Every key for the chalet is coded with a personal identifier, and because Helix is also in charge of the security for the whole resort, key card checkpoints allowed us to track your key.”

Jax moved suddenly and disappeared behind me as Theo spoke. He

returned a moment later with a laptop and set it in front of me. Theo's words repeated in my mind as Jax hit the spacebar and a video played.

"We think you lost your key in the bar last night," Jax said, "because the time you came home yesterday didn't match with your key. Your key went on a journey to a hotel room, but we were able to confirm that you were here."

"I didn't notice because Tabitha let me in last night," I murmured, watching the screen. The video showed the lounge, and my heart punched through my chest when Felix suddenly slipped through the door. "Felix."

"He slipped in when you were busy with the kids at lunch, and Jax was busy with Marina," Theo said. "I hope that you will be able to forgive us for reacting so quickly at the information. It was a lot of panic and pain to process."

I glanced at Luke who hadn't said a word. His eyes were on the Christmas tree in the corner, his hand up to his mouth as if deep in thought. If there was one thing that was unforgivable, it was surely my role in his accident.

"So Felix was here?" I asked hoarsely, eyes back on the screen.

"Yes. We don't have cameras in the bedrooms, but he is on the feed going into that corridor," Jax said, "which is good enough for me but not for a smart lawyer."

"So luckily, I'd seen Felix before," Theo said.

I glanced up at him. "How?"

"When we were looking into things, we only had the photo in his criminal record to go by; thanks to Marina. When I saw the footage of him though, I realized he looks different, and that I had seen him before in the bar. With Marina."

"Marina?" My eyes widened, and I looked at Jax, who shrugged.

"She never could resist a bad boy," he muttered.

"They seemed pretty close, so it definitely wasn't their first meeting," Theo said.

"But... how?" Marina and Felix knowing each other was so unexpected that I had no idea how to process the information.

"Unclear," Theo admitted, "but she'll crack soon, I'm sure. As Jax said, she likes the bad boys, and if they both frequented the bar, it's not difficult to see how they could have crossed paths. With her desire to screw over Jax, and his desire to ruin you, they probably thought they were a match made in

heaven.”

“Hell’s more like,” Luke scoffed. I glanced over at him, willing him to look at me, but his gaze still avoided mine. Understandable.

“It gets even better,” Jax sighed deeply. “Marina called exactly two minutes before Felix broke in. And she kept me on the call until two minutes after he had left. Which wasn’t hard with the shit she was saying, but the timing is enough that she was surely just playing distraction. With you all at lunch and Marina causing a big enough stink that the guys would support me, Felix was free to sneak in, plant that shit, and leave.”

In all my wildest theories during my time in that jail cell, this didn’t even come close.

“Holy shit,” I murmured, watching the footage loop in front of me. “That’s insane.”

“Insane enough to be true,” Theo pointed out.

“Marina has been grasping at straws to make me look like a terrible father,” Jax sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I think hearing about our fake engagement scared her. She saw us becoming a perfect family while she had nothing.”

“Felix... knew I was engaged,” I said softly as I remembered our argument. “And he kept calling you John like she did the first time I met her. I just... I never made any kind of connection there.”

“I doubt anyone would have,” Theo said, “but the evidence speaks for itself.”

Nausea churned in my gut and I swallowed hard, pressing my trembling hands flat against my thighs. “So... I’m not going to jail?”

“No.” Jax touched my arm. “Not at all. I’m sorry—we’re sorry for not trusting you immediately. The shock of the drugs after that call with Marina, it was all a lot to process, and I let my feelings get the better of me.”

Fighting tears at this point was impossible. Jax’s words almost didn’t breach the fog of relief that descended over me. I wasn’t going to jail?

I wasn’t going. Fuck.

“I understand,” I said croakily. “You have your kids to think about and—and a lot was revealed.” I glanced at Luke who finally lifted his gaze to meet mine, but his expression was unreadable. It added to the unsettled feeling in my stomach, and I pressed my lips together.

“I’m so sorry,” I gasped as the tears spilled down my raw cheeks.

“We’re sorry,” Jax said, sliding an arm around my shoulders.

“No, no, no. I’m sorry for everything I did, everything I was involved in. If I’d told you about Felix from the beginning, none of this would have happened.”

“We can’t know that for sure,” Theo said softly, rising from his seat and settling next to me. “Marina might have just found another way to fuck us over.”

“So... so what’s going to happen?” I asked, gulping through the tears I couldn’t wipe away fast enough. “Should I leave? Am I still in trouble? I’m so *sorry*.”

“Oh Summer...” Jax and Theo wrapped their arms around me, cuddling me tightly, but their comfort only made the tears flow harder. Even if this was a trap, my involvement in Luke’s accident was still crystal clear.

“The footage has been sent to the authorities, and Jax had the great pleasure of informing Marina that her plan backfired. If she wasn’t panicking before, she sure is now,” Theo laughed softly, and he pressed a kiss to the top of my head, one that I surely didn’t deserve.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Jax assured gently. “This was on us, reacting without thinking.”

“Being protective over your kids isn’t reacting without thinking,” I whimpered. “I understand.”

“Still,” Jax said as his grip tightened, surrounding me in warmth and pressing so close I was sure he could hear how wildly my heart was beating. “We know you. We should have trusted you from the start.”

Theo’s hug also tightened, and together they held me close as the relief slowly worked its way through the cracks of grief in my soul. It had all been a trick, a trap set by Marina because she was losing her fight. I couldn’t blame Jax, he’d already been wound so tight that his reaction made sense, and despite it, they had immediately started looking for the truth. No one had ever done that for me before. Luke’s shock also made sense since Marina had spilled that secret too with all the subtlety of a foghorn in a nursery.

That didn’t ease the fear that this was just a fleeting moment, and Felix was waiting around the corner to try again. As reassuring as Jax and Theo were being, Felix’s vicious threat still stuck out in my mind.

I knew him. He wasn’t going to let this beat him.

Through all the comfort, there was still one person missing. Luke, who remained on his own couch and away from me. I understood why and yet I ached to reach out to him, to throw myself at my feet and apologize.

Jax and Theo were asking for my forgiveness, but would Luke ever grant me his?

JAX

Sending Summer to bed before dinner was the easiest decision; she was in no condition to see the kids, and frankly, she was exhausted. The last thing she needed was three children clamoring at her asking where she'd been, although their sadness at her absence was a huge testament to how much they adored spending time with her.

Halfway through dinner though, Tabitha pulled me aside with a stern look I knew far too well.

"What is it?" I asked, keeping my voice low as I poured Bonnie some more juice.

"Luke," Tabitha said. "I know he's taking this hard, but can you talk to him?"

I glanced over my shoulder and realized Luke had vanished to the bathroom some time ago and never came back.

"I'm worried that..." Tabitha took a deep breath and for the first time, her warm face twisted slightly with worry. "I'm worried that because he has a lot of pain from that time in his life, he won't be thinking things through properly. He deserves good things, and I don't want to see him lose that because of that *bitter* woman." She patted my arm and shook her head so hard that her tight curls bounced, then her attention was drawn back to the table when Kane sent a forkful of mashed potatoes flying towards Ava.

Heading back to the table, I handed Bonnie her juice and kissed the top of her head as Kane and Ava descended into a small brawl, egged on by Theo.

"Go on Ava," Theo laughed, "show him who's boss!" It was a lively

sight, and yet it was duller than what I had become accustomed to with the absence of both Luke and Summer. Dinner drew to a close when Theo received a call from the police about Helix access, and it was time to get the children ready for bed. However, Tabitha shooed me away and pointed out to the porch where Luke lingered.

Right. Time to talk.

Pouring two scotches in the study, I headed out onto the porch and bit back a wince at the rush of cold air that chased away the warmth I had gained at dinner. Luke leaned on the railing, absent a coat, and stared out into the darkness where the mountains melted into the skyline. I didn't need to be a mind reader to know what was on his mind, what had surely been on his mind since the moment Marina called.

"I know it was horrible for you," I said as I approached, and Luke jumped faintly at my voice. "But your accident was the best night of my life."

"Excuse me?" Luke glanced over his shoulder, then down to the glasses in my hands.

"If I hadn't found you on the side of the road and saved your life, you never would have offered me that job. I never would have become friends with you and Theo, I never would have had your support or the monetary ability to face down Marina. I would probably still be bouncing nightclubs back home without Bonnie by my side because Marina would have wiped the floor with me."

I settled against the railing and held out a glass to Luke.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" he asked, reluctantly taking the glass.

"Not exactly. More to adjust your perspective." I sipped my drink, focusing on the warmth as the alcohol ignited a fire down in my gut.

"I'm glad the worst night of my life was so good for you," Luke scoffed dryly, and I chuckled.

"In the moment, sure it was the worst. But if you look at it as a whole?" I tilted my head, trying to get Luke to look at me. "The bigger picture is a whole lot prettier, don't you think?"

"Is it?" Luke tipped the glass back and forth, watching the copper liquid coat the sides of his glass.

"Of course it is! You gained me as a friend for one," I smiled, "you got to spend time with Ava in the hospital. You learned Flora's true intentions and gained quality time with your mother that secured her as Grandma of the

Year for all three of our rascals. You survived.”

Other than a slight scoff, Luke barely reacted. I bit back a sigh, trying to work out how best to reach him in a way that would stop him from spiraling down. Time to change tactics.

“I was going to propose to Summer,” I declared. “For real.”

Luke’s head snapped up. That got his attention. “What?”

“Yup. I haven’t really given the ‘how’ much in-depth thought but at Christmas, after she patched me up, I realized that in such a short time, she’s brought so much love and light into my life, into Bonnie’s life. And you know Bonnie, she’s usually so shy, but she adores Summer. I want her in my life, in our lives, for as long as possible. I realized I loved her enough that I want to put a real ring on her finger. Not a fake one.” It had been a sudden realization, but my love for her hadn’t faded even when I was consumed with anger that she had brought drugs here.

The love had stayed, and a love like that in the face of such turmoil, was a love I didn’t want to let go.

“I understand how you feel,” Luke said quietly, still tipping his glass back and forth. “I... I realized how deeply I loved her when Marina revealed the truth. My first thought was *no, not Summer. I love her. How can the woman I love be involved in such a horrible thing?* And then they took her away and I... I haven’t known how to feel.”

“Talk it out,” I offered, “it can help.”

“I don’t know how,” Luke admitted. “There are too many conflicting feelings.”

“On the drive up, she told me some more about Felix,” I said, taking another sip to rinse that bastard’s name out of my mouth. “He abused her. And that night, she got out of the car and tried to help you. Tried to give you CPR. Honestly, her efforts probably kept you alive long enough for me to find you. And that rat, he locked her in the trunk all night to stop her. She tried to help you, and I know you have a lot of pain about that night; you have scars and the limp that won’t ever go away but... she did try to save you. That’s got to count for something.”

“I remember her,” Luke replied with a sigh. “Not her exactly, but the angel I dreamed of, the one I was so convinced had saved my life... that was her. It’s simultaneously fitting and crazy that she is that angel. But when I think of that night, of missing Ava’s birth, of the pain I endured... there’s just anger.” Luke placed a hand low on his chest, at the base of his ribs. “It never

shifts.”

“Then focus on what you feel about Summer here.” I leaned over his arm and gently tapped above his heart. “She wasn’t driving. She tried to save your life, and she didn’t know who you were until that bastard turned up here threatening her. I’m not saying you have to feel a certain way by any sort of time but...” Pausing, I drained my glass and then nudged my shoulder into Luke’s. “We’ve all been through a lot to get here. We all thought we were used and dried-up men set to be single fathers for the rest of our lives, then she turned up and injected this whole new warmth and love into everything. Don’t linger too long on the past when she’s shown us there’s still a life and future to face.”

“What if I can’t?” Luke turned to me, his brow pinched together. “What if, when I look at her, all I can think of is that night?”

“Is that what you saw when she walked in earlier?” I prompted gently.

“... no, not exactly.” Luke groaned deeply, then raised his glass and drained it in one gulp. “I thought about it, but I also thought about how much I missed her. My mind is going in circles because I love her, but she’s connected to that awful part of my life, and I don’t know where to land.”

As Luke turned to face me, I reached over and grasped his shoulder. “Honestly? It sounds like you think you *should* feel those things because she was part of that night, and it’s conflicting with the love you actually feel. There’s no easy answer of course but think about it; what are the chances that the angel that tried to save your life, that you’ve thought about constantly, ends up turning back up in our lives when we needed her.” I chuckled softly and squeezed his shoulder. “That sort of thing doesn’t just happen.”

“You think she was always meant to come back to us?”

“That night connects all of us,” I shrugged, “it’s kinda fitting that she found her way back after all these years. And they say there’s no such thing as a Christmas miracle.”

Luke nodded slowly, lifting a hand and rubbing his jaw. “That’s an interesting way to look at it.”

“Just don’t be too hard on her. Or yourself. Felix is the real villain here, and I’d hate to see you both lose a good thing because of him. But at least you settled on one sure thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You love her,” I grinned at him. “And that’s more important than anything else in the past. Focus on that, Luke, and the future might be bright

for all of us.”

SUMMER

The last day or two had been torn from some sort of nightmare, but through the fog of fear and the terrifying rush of almost being arrested, there was warmth and light. Pouring my heart out to Jax had given me a release I had been denying myself for years, and he had accepted me. Theo had too. Luke was a different story, but he *was* talking to me now which was a great improvement.

I was a patient person.

Standing in the kitchen, I slowly stirred my tea and stared out into the snowy landscape beyond the window. Earlier that morning, there had been a snowstorm warning, and it looked like it was going to hit by New Year's. Jax had assured me it wouldn't affect the party, but honestly, I didn't care. I just wanted to spend time with them and the kids and try to reinsert myself into the life I had come to love.

"Summer?" Theo approached from the lounge and flashed me a soft smile when I turned to face him.

"Hey, want some tea?"

"No thanks." He shook his head and leaned on the counter next to me. "Luke and Jax are going down to the resort to put some final touches to the party."

"It's getting close," I smiled, squeezing out my tea bag and tossing it in the trash. "Doesn't feel real after everything else." Speaking of—"Do we know what's happening with Marina and... Felix?" Saying his name out loud to Theo was still an alien sensation. That dark part of my history was now

common knowledge amongst all of them; it was as scary as it was reassuring.

“A little. The police got in touch last night to get some more data from Helix, and they told me that when Marina was confronted, she turned on the waterworks and put the sole blame on Felix. She claimed he coerced her, and she was too scared to say no.”

“That can’t be true,” I scoffed. “I mean, Felix was determined but there’s no way he did all of this by himself. He wouldn’t even be able to get the drugs without her help, surely?”

“We know that but... Marina is rich. She’s an heiress so even if they try to slap her with something light, she’ll be able to buy her way out of it. Her family won’t let anything circumstantial stick.”

“So we’d need something solid?”

“Maybe.” Theo shrugged. “But the only witness is Felix, and when they find him, his version of events won’t matter. They’ll bury him.”

“Deserved but... after everything she’s done, what she’s put Jax through? She’ll just get away with it?” I couldn’t believe that was going to be the outcome. They both deserved to go down for this, and at the very least Marina deserved a mark against her name for what she had put Jax through.

“Rich people, eh?” Theo scoffed dryly. “Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. I have one final meeting with the caterer, but we could hang out after?”

I nodded, distracted by the thought of Marina getting away with this. Typical of people like her. Theo leaned down to kiss my cheek, and I turned, catching his lips in a kiss instead. A note of surprise rose up from his throat, and when the kiss broke, he was smiling.

“Definitely hanging out later,” he grinned.

As Theo left the kitchen, I turned back to my tea and resumed stirring, but my desire for the drink was gone. I had been *useless* against Felix. I’d fallen for his threats and walked into his trap, but I couldn’t let Marina get away with her role in this. A swell of confidence rose in my chest, and I grabbed my phone, abandoning my tea and strolling out onto the deck. The cold barely touched my skin as I swiped through the directory and located Marina’s number.

Two rings in, she answered. I flicked my phone on speaker and hit record.

“Hello.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Summer. I wanted to congratulate you.”

“Oh.” Marina’s light voice turned bitter in seconds. “What on earth are

you going on about? Aren't there laws against you contacting me?"

"Since when did you care about the law?" I scoffed. "There's nothing to stop us chatting. I just wanted to say congrats."

"For what?" she asked suspiciously.

"For what you and Felix pulled off. Very clever. Shame it didn't work, but I admire the creativity."

"Darling, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," Marina replied sharply. "Felix was a—a handsome man in a bar that tricked me and *blackmailed* me, forced me into giving him information. I'm nothing but a victim in that man's schemes."

"Bullshit," I snapped hotly. "We both know he isn't smart enough to come up with something like this on his own. His only desire was to hurt me, and you're saying he chose to do that by hurting Jax? Planting drugs? That's a lot more complex than anything he's capable of."

"Oh, I wouldn't know," Marina said softly, "I barely know him."

"I know him. I suffered under him for years, and I know that he's a man that talks with his fists, not subtle schemes like this." I forced a breath as my heart started to race. "But having money means you can get away with anything right?"

"It has its perks," Marina replied, "but as I said, I am as much a victim as anyone in all of this. My name is being dragged through the mud by that foul man." Her voice gave a fake shudder, and my grip tightened around my phone to the point that the edges dug into my palm.

"True. I suppose you'll have to shell out quite a bit of money to make sure that tracing the drugs doesn't lead back to you," I said casually.

"There is no trail to lead back to me," Marina sighed. "I don't have time for this. Goodbye, Summer."

"Although that might be tough," I continued on, "since Helix runs the security at the resort. You do know that any testing of narcotics would surely go through *them* at this time of year. And the CEOs of Helix have enough money to rush a job like that and get the results sent straight to them. Once they see that those drugs are far too rich for Felix's blood, where do you think they will look next?"

Marina was silent.

"As if the video footage of you both at the bar wasn't enough, I suppose you could try and bury that too," I mused. "Sure, maybe you can try and lie about that, but the doubt will linger, won't it? How is that going to look at the

custody trial when you have ties to a known drug dealer—”

“You know nothing,” Marina snapped suddenly. “You’re just a stupid little girl that doesn’t even belong here. Did you forget who I am? I am Marina *Hemmingway*. I have more money than you will see in several lifetimes. You think you have any power just because John decided to put a ring on your pathetic finger?”

I glanced down at my bare finger as Marina laughed sharply. “And yet he chose me over you.”

“And what did that get him, huh? You brought a poisonous drug dealer right to his front door and endangered his child. He might have been trying to build that perfect family to make himself look good, but you know what he forgot, Summer? I always get what I want.”

“And what’s that?”

“To remind people why I’m on top. I wanted to buy up several stores in New York, and my daddy did it in seconds. I wanted the clothes of royalty? And they’re mine. Did John really think he stood a chance against me, trying to take my daughter?”

“Your accessory you mean?” I scoffed.

“You know nothing of me and my daughter,” Marina snapped. “I *love* her. I didn’t put up with that *disgusting* man slobbering all over me for nothing. He did what I needed him to do; he showed how lax the security is around John and my daughter. Felix might be dumb, but he was useful enough to prove how poor John’s decision-making is when it comes to women. I really didn’t even need the drugs, they were the cherry on top, and now my case is open and shut.”

“You really think it’s going to be that easy? That you can just lie and manipulate your way to sole custody?”

“Darling, when you’re as rich as me, everything is that easy. *Merry Christmas.*”

With that, the line went dead, and I slowly hung up as my heart hammered. Another tap and my recording of the call ended.

I got her.

Would it be enough? I had no idea, but it was as close to a confession as I was going to get, and it would have to do. My steps were lighter as I headed inside, nervous energy pulsing around me while I searched through the chalet for anyone who could tell me who to send this recording to. Jax and Luke were down at the resort, and Theo was somewhere in the building on call

with catering, which left Tabitha.

The moment I entered the game room, Bonnie came flying across the room.

“Summer!” she squealed. I ducked in time to scoop her up into my arms with a laugh, and hugging her began to calm my racing heart.

“Summer, look!” Ava held up her latest painting, colorful streaks decorating her face as Tabitha chased her with a washcloth.

“Ava please, you’re not supposed to wear the paint!” she chuckled, trying to clean the streaks. Kane leaped off the couch, a crepe paper cape trailing behind him.

“Hey Batman,” I called. Kane’s face lit up and he posed with his hands on his hips.

“Gotham is safe,” he declared in a croaky voice. I laughed and gently rocked Bonnie in my arms.

“Tabitha, could I ask you something?”

“Of course, dear.” Tabitha stood, then yelped as Kane’s excited superhero moves had him bumping into the activity table and bottles of paint fell over like dominos.

“Oh, Kane!” Tabitha scolded. “Look what you’ve done!”

“Batman is on the case,” he croaked, grabbing a towel just as the doorbell rang through the chalet. Tabitha threw her hands up, and I laughed softly.

“I’ve got the door,” I chuckled, setting Bonnie down and kissing her head. She whined as I left the room and hurried over to the door, opening it quickly as I didn’t want to leave Tabitha alone for too long.

“Can I help...”

Felix stood on the doorstep, silencing my words the moment I saw him. The strong stink of alcohol wafted off his body as his thin lips pulled into a twisted smirk.

“Hey *Summer*,” he muttered.

I immediately threw my weight against the door to try and close it, but Felix was faster than me. He shoved his whole shoulder into the door, pushing it open, and the wood slipped from my grasp as I stumble backward. The cold gust of air that followed Felix as he stalked inside was nothing compared to the chill that shot down my spine at the steel glint of a large knife in his hand.

“I think it’s time we had a final chat, don’t you?”

SUMMER

“T abi—” I tried to scream for her, to warn her so she could get the kids to safety but Felix was on me in an instant with his hand around my jaw and the tip of the knife grazing against my abdomen through my shirt. Fear closed my throat, and a whimper managed to slip past as he leered at me, alcohol breath ghosting over my face.

“Ah, ah, ah, none of that,” he snarled. “Don’t want to ruin the surprise now, do we?”

“What—Felix, wh-what are you doing?”

“Y’know, I keep asking myself that. Over and over again, what am I doing? If I had my way, you’d be dead already, and this place would be nothing but a scorch mark in the mountainside but Marina? Oh, no, no, no, she had other plans. Big plans!” His eyes widened, showing me the entire white around his irises, and in a flash, I was twenty-one again, back in that shitty apartment with no way out.

“I-I can help you,” I stammered, “with Marina—”

“Don’t *lie* to me, Summer,” Felix hissed, and the sharp prick of the knife against my stomach increased in pressure. “All you rich bitches stick together. Doesn’t matter. She was supposed to pay me, Summer, for what I did for her, but she didn’t. So I’m here to collect.”

“Money? Felix I-I have nothing, I—”

“Summer?”

My stomach dropped like a rock as Bonnie’s small voice drifted up from behind me. The moment Felix looked behind me, my heart stopped.

“Who is this?”

“Felix don’t you dare, don’t you fucking dare!” I grasped his wrist and dug my fingernails into his flesh, twisting out of his grip as he yelled in pain.

“Bonnie! Go get Tabitha or Theo!” I yelled but Bonnie just stood there clutching the hem of her T-shirt with doe eyes.

“Grandma’s getting my juice,” Bonnie said. She took a step backward, and Felix’s hand fisted into my hair, pulling sharply. I yelled and fought against him, not caring about the pain of my hair ripping out at the roots. Felix was stronger than me and he bore his weight down on my shoulder, forcing me to my knees.

The blade grazed my throat.

“Bonnie, eh?” Felix said, his dark eyes on her as she took another step over. “C’mere.”

Bonnie glanced between the two of us, and I shook my head. Felix tightened his grip and jostled me.

“C’mere Bonnie,” he snapped, and she jumped, tears filling her eyes.

“Leave her alone,” I croaked, hyperaware of the blade as my racing pulse pushed against it every split second.

“Call her over,” Felix snarled.

“No.”

“Call her over!” He leaned down, his lips stroking against my cheek as he spoke. “Or I’ll gut you in front of her and traumatize her for life.”

Fear consumed me, wrapping tight, cold coils around my limbs, but even as I tremble in his grasp, my resolve didn’t waver.

“No,” I said hoarsely.

“You’d die for her?” Felix growled in my ear, and I nodded shakily.

“Yes.” Never had I been more sure of anything in my life than in this moment. Bonnie’s tears fell, her mouth opened, and she wailed. At the same time, the door to the game room opened, and Kane appeared in the doorway.

“Where’s Grandma? I’m thirsty!” he declared, only to trail off when he spotted the three of us. His little face crumpled. “Summer?”

Felix suddenly threw me to the side, the cold edge of the knife slicing over my throat, and he launched himself forward. I hit the ground hard and he reached Bonnie in three leaps, scooping her up into his arms. She yelped just once as he manhandled her under his arm, a hollow laugh echoing from his lungs. I pressed a desperate hand to my throat, half-expecting the rush of blood but the knife had thankfully only nicked my skin.

I was fine.

I stood slowly, suddenly very aware of every single movement Felix made with Bonnie in his arms. He twirled the knife in his other hand and started to pace at the bottom of the stairs while Kane, his eyes filling with tears, lingered by the door.

“Kane, sweetie,” I began softly, wrestling to keep my voice steady. “Go back inside.”

“No,” Felix barked as Kane stepped back. “Come out and play.”

“Kane, stay.”

Kane, unsure what to do, clutched at his crepe paper cape and cried. “I-I want my dad...”

Felix’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Is your dad here, little champ?” he asked, holding Bonnie as if she was nothing more than a sack of flour. Kane looked at me and I shook my head softly.

“Felix.” I approached as cautiously as I dared. I had no plan other than to get Bonnie away from Felix; I didn’t care where the knife ended up in my body. “Felix put Bonnie down.”

“No!” Felix snapped, whirling back to me and successfully turning his attention off of Kane and onto me. “You never *listen* to me, Summer. That’s the problem, the real problem. You didn’t believe me back in New York, did you? I told you I was going to make you suffer, and what did you do? You thought you could just move on with a new job, fly across the world. Did you really think I wouldn’t find you?”

I raised both hands and pressed my lips together, taking another subtle step forward.

“I know.” I forced my voice to be steady even though my legs had turned to jelly, and I could no longer decipher heartbeats with how rapidly my heart was pounding. Bonnie continued to sob, her arms flailing, and every noise of distress from her was cutting through me sharper than Felix’s knife ever could.

“Do you?” Felix snapped, and he tapped the knife to his own temple. “You never gave me credit, Summer. Following you here was as easy as following you back then. Every time you tried to run away, I found you. Did you forget that?”

“No,” I whispered. “Although I guess I thought time in prison would have changed you.”

“It only changed how I feel about you. Look at you Summer, living in

this big place with men and *children* as if any part of this life could actually be yours.”

“You’re right!” I didn’t have a plan, not really. Appeasing Felix in any way seemed the only path I had. “I don’t belong here. I’m not rich. I’m not good. There’s nothing here for me. I don’t belong here, you’re right.”

Felix’s brows narrowed, and he slowly lowered the knife from his own temple. “You belong with me, Summer. You have to *pay* for everything you put me through. You actually thought you could get away with that?”

“I was stupid,” I said, taking another shuffling step forward. “You know me, I don’t know what’s good for me. But Felix...” I wet my lips and fought not to look at Bonnie. The second I did, my resolve would crumble. “You have to put Bonnie down.”

“What?” Felix’s hand waved dangerously, the blade glinting sharply in the light. “You think I’m stopping now? I’m here to hurt you, Summer.”

“I know,” I said hurriedly. “I know. But... but if you hurt Bonnie then you won’t have a chance to hurt me, don’t you see?” I wet my lips again, my throat running dry as I shuffled forward. “The second you hurt her, or any of them, the full weight of Helix will come crashing down on you, and I know—I know that doesn’t seem like much, but they will crush you before you get a chance to do what you want to me. You see?”

I held out my hands, palms spread. “You won’t be able to make me suffer all the ways you dreamed if things end here.”

Felix, in his drunken state, actually seemed to be finding some logic in my words, and the knife lowered a fraction.

“Think about it. You worked with Marina right, and did that get you what you wanted? No. Because when the rich are around, it goes their way, not yours. These kids are the same. It won’t work the way you want, and that’s—that’s not fair.”

“But you care about them,” Felix spat, his arm straightening.

“No, I don’t,” I lied, “I’m paid to care for them, there’s a difference.” Uttering those words with both Bonnie and Kane nearby was torture, but at this point I would do anything to save them. “It’s a paycheck, Felix. Nothing more.”

“You’re engaged,” Felix challenged.

“I’m not! It was a lie. A lie to make Jax look good in front of Marina. Just another job,” I swore to him. “See? No ring.” Lifting my hand, I turned my palms flat and back to show him. “You know me, I’ll do anything for

money.”

“I don’t believe you,” Felix hissed, and I forced a small smile, taking another step forward.

“You know me, Felix, better than anyone. You can tell when I’m lying. Look at me. Am I lying?”

I had never prayed harder than I did at that moment as Felix studied me with narrowed eyes and his stance swayed slightly. He was definitely more violent when he was drunk but years as his girlfriend had taught me how to manipulate him in order to protect myself.

“Put Bonnie down, and I’ll come with you,” I said, fighting to keep the plea out of my voice. “We’ll leave all this behind and you can... you can do whatever you want. I’ll do whatever you want to show you I’m sorry just pl — put her down.”

“You’ll both come,” Felix decided, and he stepped forward. I threw up my hands to block his path.

“No! No, I mean, sorry,” I gasped. “You can’t. She’s a child Felix, and they’re rich, you know they track their own children. They’ll find you, and you’ll be back in prison like that.” I snapped my fingers as Bonnie whimpered brokenly.

Felix actually seemed to believe me, and he glanced down at her, then back at me. “But not you?”

“I’m just the nanny, they don’t care about me,” I replied, my hands shaking despite how I willed them to stop. “If I go willingly, there’s no reason for them to look.”

Felix looked like he believed me, and his lip curled in disgust.

“Fine. But one sniff of a lie, and I’ll come back and gut them all.”

His arm opened and he dropped Bonnie. For a moment she was just in the air, and my heart froze, then my body moved on instinct as I threw myself forward to catch her. She wailed but landed safely in my arms as I fell, then I rolled to get both of us away from Felix.

Felix yelled, Bonnie sobbed, and Kane screamed.

“Dad!”

The yell unraveled all my work in calming Felix. His rage returned, fire in his eyes and he bolted to where Bonnie and I had landed by the couch, his knife raised.

“I’ve got you,” I gasped as Bonnie clutched at my shoulders and buried her face into my neck. Curling over her, I tucked Bonnie underneath me and

buried my face into her curls, breathing in her soft scent as I waited for the inevitable blow from Felix.

I didn't care if it would hurt, didn't care what he did as long as my body protected Bonnie long enough for Tabitha or Theo to react to Kane's scream.

Felix's boots thudded down next to me, and I whimpered, tightening my grip on Bonnie as I braced for the pain that was surely seconds away.

Suddenly, an almighty clang ran out above me, and Felix's angry yell stuttered off slightly. The pain didn't come, so I slowly lifted my head. Felix was standing over me, the knife raised and ready to come down on my body, but he didn't move. Instead, his mouth opened and closed, and his eyes rolled back in his head while he stumbled backwards. Then Felix collapsed like a sack of bricks down onto the floor, and my heart leaped up into my throat.

"Tabitha?!"

Behind him, brandishing a cast iron skillet, was Tabitha, and she puffed out her cheeks as she nudged a toe at Felix's now unconscious form.

"What a foul, foul man," she declared.

THEO

“Dad!”

I was used to Kane screaming. He was an excitable kid, and his game of running around saving Ava’s plushies from supervillains was a common occurrence.

This scream was different.

In a second, I had muted the lead designer for the New Year’s party, ending their rather boring rant about the importance of tassels over ribbons, and pulled up the security feed for the house. Ever since the drugs were planted, I had kept a closer eye on things. What was displayed on my screen made my heart drop like a rock. I wasted no time in processing; I flew out of my chair and sprinted out of my room, down the corridor, and all but leaped down the stairs two at a time.

“Kane!”

I glanced at the scene in the lounge; Tabitha standing over the crumpled body of Felix, Summer cowering on the floor with Bonnie in her arms. Kane was my priority and the moment I saw him in the doorway, tears streaming down his face, I scooped him up into my arms and all but crushed him to my chest in a strong hug.

“I’m here buddy. I’m right here.”

Safe in my arms, Kane started to sob, and I bounced him gently back and forth, then turned back to the others.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Language,” Tabitha scolded, aiming the skillet at me with a stern look in

her eye.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “Summer? Are you okay?” Comforting Kane, I closed the gap to Summer and held out a hand to help her to her feet. She climbed slowly with Bonnie clinging to her like a koala bear.

“I-I,” she began shakily but her words died when Ava wandered out of the game room.

“Granny? I’m hungry.”

“Oh Ava!” Tabitha scurried over to her and took her hand, pulling her close and I immediately changed tactics.

“Dinning room, everyone, now.” A glance at Felix told me he was down for the count, and I escorted everyone into the dining room, though I lingered by the door so I could keep an eye on that asshole. Summer lowered down onto a wooden chair and Bonnie refused to let her go. Tabitha set Ava on her own seat and then crossed to the drinks cabinet.

“Someone please explain,” I demanded as I hunted for my phone.

“He uh... he just shoved his way in. I couldn’t...” Summer gasped but the words caught in her throat. She was as white as a sheet, bouncing Bonnie on her knee and staring at me with such wide eyes that I ached to gather her up into my arms alongside Kane.

“It’s okay,” I soothed my son, rubbing his back. “I’m here.”

Tabitha, having poured herself a sherry, turned back to me and drained the glass in one gulp before she spoke.

“He pushed his way inside. I was in the kitchen getting drinks for the kids, and when I opened the door, I saw Bonnie in his arms, and he had a knife. He was threatening everyone, and Summer was persuading him to put Bonnie down. Said she’d leave with him if he did.”

“No.” The word tore from me without thought. “I’d never allow that!”

“You weren’t there,” Tabitha pointed out.

“It was all I could think of,” Summer gasped, her eyes filling with tears that she was fighting to keep at bay. “I was trying to appease him the best I could so no one got hurt and he... he just kept...”

Bonnie wailed, and as Summer spoke I sent a text to Luke and Jax, then one to our head of security. How the fuck Felix got past them, I had no idea.

“He was going to,” Tabitha continued, draining her second glass. “He dropped Bonnie and Summer dove for her like something out of those sports shows you like so much. And I... I just grabbed the skillet and whacked him with it.”

She mimicked the blow with the offending item still clutched in her other hand. “He went down like a rock.” Suddenly a giggle escaped Tabitha as she placed a hand to her chest. “Oh goodness, I’m so sorry! I haven’t had this much excitement in years! This calls for another.” She turned back to pour herself a third Sherry, and something about her giggle brought a slight smile to my own face.

“Summer—” My question died as a long, low groan erupted from the heap on the floor. I set Kane down by Summer’s side and sprinted out into the lounge. Felix had barely made it to his feet before my fist slammed into his face and he reeled back, tripping over his own feet.

“You *bastard!*” I snarled.

“Language!” Tabitha called from behind me.

“You absolute *shit*, coming in here and threatening my family. Who the fuck do you think you are?!” Anger poured out in my words as I punched him repeatedly, grabbing his collar so he couldn’t escape. “You come here, threatening Summer? Scaring my *son*? I’m going to kill you, you son of a bitch!” Everything this man had done, from running over Luke all those years ago to scaring my children and the woman I loved; it flooded through me like lava, and I couldn’t stop myself.

Rage, blood red, and searing hot fueled every fist that slammed into Felix’s pathetic face over and over. He tried to fight back but his stinking, drunken state was no match for me. Blood sprayed under my knuckles, and I attacked him until two sets of hands wrapped around my upper arms and hauled me back.

“Theo!” Jax’s voice cut through the fog of rage that had descended over me, and I stumbled back, panting harshly.

“Theo it’s okay,” came Luke’s voice, and I glanced to my left to see him.

“You’re here?” I gasped.

“We were already on our way home,” Jax explained.

Felix stumbled back, blood pouring from his mouth and nose, and he *laughed*. Suddenly Luke flew forward and punched Felix so hard he flew back into the wall cabinet, and members of our security team that had followed Luke and Jax inside had to pull Luke off him.

“That’s for running me over you sob of a bitch,” Luke spat, then he raised his arms calmly as security pulled him back.

Felix was hauled up and restrained as Jax kept a tight grip on me, likely afraid I would maul him to death if I had the chance. Staring at his beaten

face, I was certain I would. My chest heaved desperately, and a dull ache settled in my knuckles as the adrenaline started to wear off.

“I hope you *rot*,” I snarled at Felix as he was dragged away. “And someone find out how the fuck he got past security!”

“Where’s Summer?” Luke demanded, spinning on the spot. “Where is she? Theo, your text said Felix had attacked, is she okay?”

“I’m here.” Summer’s small voice drifted from the doorway, and we all turned to see her with Bonnie in her arms and Ava clinging to her leg. Jax and Luke shot forward, gathering their children into their arms, and both of them crowded around Summer.

“Are you okay? What happened? Are you hurt?” Luke demanded. He caught her chin, lifting her head to reveal a thin red line across her throat. “He did this?”

“I’m okay,” she assured quietly, and the anger rose in me once more. The only thing that stopped me from chasing Felix down again was Kane who came running out of the dining room and threw himself into my arms.

“Dad!” he squealed, his cheeks still shining with tears. “You’re like Batman!”

“Oh buddy,” I chuckled lightly, cuddling him close.

“It’s true,” Jax said, sending me a concerned glance. “I’ve never seen you lose your cool like that.”

“He threatened my family,” I muttered, “that’s just the first time I’ve seen the prick face-to-face.”

“Language!” Tabitha scolded sharply as she appeared, skillet still in hand. “Honestly!”

“Luke, I’m okay,” Summer insisted, and she laughed softly as he continued to look her over head to toe. “He didn’t hurt me, not really.”

“I was so scared,” Luke admitted, running a hand up and down Ava’s back as she chewed on her own fingers. Suddenly he leaned forward and claimed Summer’s mouth in a deep kiss, squashing Ava between them. Jax immediately beamed at me. He’d told me some of the struggles Luke had been having with Summer’s involvement in his accident.

It looked like he had found peace with that.

As the kiss broke, Ava cheered, and Jax pressed a sweet kiss to her temple, then he stepped back to fully focus on Bonnie who had sobbed herself hoarse.

“I’m so sorry,” Summer said, her own voice just as hoarse with emotion.

“Felix, he grabbed her, and I couldn’t—I did everything I could to help her, but he had her for a while.”

“Oh sweetie, oh baby it’s okay. Daddy’s here now,” Jax soothed, cradling Bonnie to his chest and rocking her. “It’s okay, I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

“S-Summer protect’d me,” Bonnie gasped out through several hiccups and sobs.

“Yes she did,” Jax agreed. He kissed Bonnie’s head and held her close. “Thank you, Summer. I can’t—I can’t explain how much that means to me. *Thank you.*” He moved closer to her, and Summer’s lips parted, but her words were lost as Jax kissed her hard. Bonnie nuzzled in, and I glanced between all three children. We had worked so hard to keep our feelings and relationship quiet and away from them, just in case. After the craziness of this day, what was one more thing?

When the kiss broke, Summer’s cheeks were rosy and the tears that had lingered in her eyes faded.

“I’m... I have no words,” she admitted, shaking her head.

“I do,” I said, closing the gap. Kane groaned dramatically in my arms.

“Put me down! Kissing is gross!” he declared, and I obeyed, but he still remained by my leg as I cupped Summer’s neck.

The scratch was glaring against how pale her skin was but her eyes were shining. My hand trembled slightly, knuckles swelling from the punches I had landed, but it all melted away when I leaned in and kissed her. Her soft lips melted against mine, and I kissed her until my lungs burned and she gasped against me.

“We love you,” I said softly as we parted.

Summer waved a hand and gave a warm smile, trying to brush off the affection, but I wanted her to swim in the love she deserved.

“I—I love you too. All of you. Even the rascals,” she murmured, nudging a soft knuckle against Ava’s cheek. Ava giggled and as I stepped away, Kane whined to be returned to my arms. I scooped him up immediately.

“Ma?” Luke glanced at Tabitha. Her cheeks were now rosy from alcohol, yet she still brandished the skillet. “Are you okay?”

“Oh yes!” She said cheerily. “It’s all quite exciting, isn’t it? Bad guys vanquished, love is in the air... it’s like one of your stories, Kane!”

Luke laughed and Kane bounced in my arms, waving an arm before he settled in, and I cuddled him tightly.

“Alright,” I decided, quickly running through how best to keep the

children safe and calm while soothing everyone at the same time. “I think we head upstairs, get in our pajamas, order some food, and watch movies all day. What do you think?” Calming the children was the only thing that mattered right now.

All three children cheered softly, their attention swiftly moving on from the attack and to better things. Luke walked up to me and scooped Kane right out of my arms.

“You can join us after you clean up those knuckles, okay?” he said. “And tend to Summer’s throat. And find how... how he got through here.”

“Of course.” I nodded quickly and kissed Kane. “I’ll be up soon buddy.”

“Okay, Dad.”

As the others left, I approached Summer and gently took her hand.

“Summer?”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “It sounds awful but what you did to him, I’ve dreamed of doing for so long so... thank you.”

“I’ve got you,” I promised quietly. “And, you’re welcome. I ask for only one thing in return.”

“What’s that?” She glanced up at me, her face open and honest and her eyes wide.

“Stay with us, Summer. Properly. Stay with us.”

SUMMER

New Year's and the Helix anniversary party arrived with a flurry of activity. While all holiday it had been just the eight of us, suddenly the chalet became a hubbub of attention and chaos with people and investors from all over popping by to offer congratulations and ask nosy questions about Felix's dramatic arrest.

News had spread quickly that he had slipped through security by attempting to follow Marina back to her own chalet and ended up in the wrong cable car. He'd fallen asleep there after having too much to drink and the lack of cable car function due to the impending storm meant that security didn't inspect as closely as they should have.

A scary oversight that Jax fiercely reprimanded the security team for, and each one swore something like that would never happen again.

It satisfied me enough to know Felix was safely behind bars, and no amount of *good behavior* would be saving him this time.

I avoided the fuss, focusing on keeping the children happy and distracted. It was a blessing that they were so young, Felix's attack was like water off a duck's back, but that didn't stop us from being extra attentive to their needs. Theo had set up therapy appointments for when they returned to the States. The length they went to protect those they loved was the main reason Theo's request for me to stay with them permanently hadn't left my mind since he'd uttered it.

They loved me. They wanted me to stay, outside employment, as part of the family.

It was surreal.

“Summer? Sweetie?” Tabitha pulled me from my thoughts as she stroked a brush across my cheek, and I blinked rapidly, refocusing on the task at hand. The party was already in full swing down at the resort and Tabitha, dressed to the nines in a sparkling pink dress complete with a pinned feather boa, was helping me get ready while the children played together in the next room.

“I’m so sorry.” I shot her a smile. “I was miles away.”

“Understandable,” Tabitha assured me. “It’s been a long week. A long month!” Her tightly scrunched curls bounced on top of her head as she chuckled. “Are you alright?”

“I was just... thinking. About everything.”

“Penny for your thoughts?” Tabitha, with a steadier hand than one would expect from someone her age, began to smoothly apply liner to my eyes, and I sank into darkness, trusting her. No one had ever done my makeup before, and having Tabitha do it was surprisingly more emotional than I had anticipated.

I’d never had something like this with my own mother.

“I think...” Words failed me as I focused on the cool, feather-light touches of the liner. “Theo asked me to stay. With him, with all of them, and I just... I’m not sure what to say.”

“Oh sweetie.” A dab here and a dab there, then Tabitha clicked her tongue, and I opened my eyes. “What does your heart tell you?”

“It tells me that I’ve only been with the family for about a month and a half. That I’m their nanny, and that complicates things. That I’ve brought too much pain to them already—”

“Summer,” Tabitha interrupted gently. “I asked what your *heart* tells you. Not your head.”

“Oh. My heart...” It had been saying the same thing for days, a promise written in every heartbeat. “It says yes.”

“Then what’s stopping you?”

“All the aforementioned reasons,” I chuckled weakly. “It’s a lot of noise.”

“That’s all it is,” Tabitha said warmly. “It’s just noise. You’re young, you all are, and this past week has surely shown how quickly things can change. You want my advice? Enjoy your youth, put stock in the fun risks, and take a chance. Take it from an old gal like me, don’t let your only excitement become thwacking someone with a skillet.”

“Tabitha!” I chuckled and clutched at her hand as she turned back to the dressing table. “You’re wonderful. I was so sure you hated me when I first met you though.”

“Hated? Oh dear, no.” Tabitha reached for a deep red lipstick and held it aloft as she turned back. “I was protective. I still am. Now pout for me.”

I obeyed.

“I see all of them as my sons, as much as I probably shouldn’t. I watched Luke crumble under Flora, I watched Theo fight for Kane, and Jax face hurdle after hurdle with that awful woman. I didn’t want to see any of them hurt again, and I could tell right from the start how they all had their eye on you. I just wanted to make sure you were a good egg.” She applied the color swiftly, only pausing to add a lighter red in the middle of my lips and blend it together with a swipe of a finger.

“Did I pass?” I asked softly, looking up at her.

Tabitha lightly cupped my chin. “Summer, you saved my boys and my grandkids. I’m gonna put you in my will!”

Emotion surged up like a wave, and I rose quickly, pulling Tabitha into a warm, solid hug. She squeaked in surprise, then chuckled and gently patted my back.

“Thank you,” I said, my words thick.

“Don’t you dare cry and ruin my work!” Tabitha scolded good-naturedly. “But, of course. Now, hurry along and get dressed, we don’t want to be late!”

Breaking the hug, Tabitha patted my arm and then stepped through to join the children, leaving me to my thoughts.

My dress hung against the closet door, fluttering through the garment bag. I approached and unzipped it, once again amazed by the beauty of the gown. Tabitha had picked it out for me; a silver cocktail dress dripping in glitter and rhinestones with a silver fringe along the skirt and a corset bodice with a plunging neckline.

It was a stunning gown and undoubtedly too good for someone like me. Still, I couldn’t resist. Looking like a princess for a night was every girl’s dream.

Slipping into the dress, I paired it with some black heels, a black choker to hide the scratch left by Felix’s knife, and a black clutch. Admiring myself in the mirror, complete with Tabitha’s dark eye makeup and deep red lips, I barely recognized myself.

Was this what I looked like, finally free of Felix?

It was a good look.

I turned and grabbed my phone from the bedside table, but as I was about to slot it into my purse, it lit up with a text message that delivered the most unexpected yet incredibly welcome news. My heart soared, and I scarcely could contain the excited giggle that burst from my chest as I read the message repeatedly, then slipped my phone into my clutch and took a steadying breath.

Tonight just got *even* better.

I glanced in the mirror one last time to check the hold on my curls, then stepped into the next room unable to keep the beaming smile from my face.

“Summer!” Bonnie, dressed in a glittery ball gown complete with a silver wand and tiara, came sprinting toward me with her curls flying and her eyes wide. “We look like princesses!”

“Yes sweetie, we do!” I crouched down carefully and planted a delicate kiss on the top of her head. Kane was by Tabitha getting the final tweaks to his Batman symbol-shaped bow tie, dressed in a smart little suit, while Ava stood nearby swinging her little basket and dressed in her fuzzy onesie pajamas.

I had overheard the solid argument Ava had given Luke about her desire to wear that tonight and Luke simply could not resist his daughter. Or me. Ever since Felix had burst in here, whatever apprehension Luke had about me appeared to have faded away, and I couldn’t be more relieved.

“Ava,” I called softly, “are you ready to go? Anything else you want to take with you?”

“Nope!” Ava smacked her lips together, popping the P as she continued to swing her basket. “I just wanna eat all the cake.”

“Who said there would be cake?” Tabitha asked, patting Kane’s shoulders.

“I saw!” Ava declared. “Uncle Jax had it on his phone, I saw! It’s a birthday cake!”

“That it is,” I grinned, scooping Bonnie into my arms when she tugged softly on the edge of my skirt. “It’s Helix’s birthday, which is...”

“Safety and security,” Kane recited dramatically. “Because my dad is basically Batman.”

“He really is,” I teased. “I’ve seen the suit.”

“What?!” Kane’s eyes went wide and his mouth agape. “Really?!”

“Oh yes.” I nodded seriously. “But it’s a secret, okay?”

Kane pressed a hand to his lips, then he crooked his elbow and offered it to Ava. “Milady.”

It took all my strength not to chuckle at the adorable sight, and Tabitha winked at me as security arrived at the door to escort us down to the resort.

Showtime.

The drive down the mountain was smoother than expected as a lull opened up in the snowstorm, meaning we could carve a gentle, slow path down the mountainside with minimal chill or wind disruption. Bonnie remained in my lap, waving her wand and casting spells while Ava cuddled into Tabitha and Kane drew patterns in the condensation on the window.

It was comforting. Familiar.

Throughout the entire drive though, I couldn’t keep my leg steady. The new information burning in my mind from that text message was churning knots in my gut, and the closer we got to the resort, the more I was certain I would burst before I even stepped inside.

It was the first time I hoped—I *prayed* I would run into Marina. Seeing the look on her face when she learned exactly what I learned would be the sweetest icing on the tastiest cake.

The celebrations were in full swing by the time we reached the resort and made our way to the ballroom, and it was clear not a single expense had been spared for New Year’s or Helix’s celebration.

The company’s logo hung from the ceiling, dripping in diamonds and surrounded by glittering lights and tassels. Half the room was sectioned off for tables graced with black table clothes and decorated with crystalline sculptures, each depicting a different animal. The chairs were wrapped in glittering ribbons, and multicolored flowers dotted the placemat at each table, alongside buckets of champagne and little wrapped-up presents for each guest. Sparkling Christmas trees stretching up to the ceiling lined the room every few feet, wrapped in Happy Birthday banners and colorful lights. It took a glance or two before I realized that every tree had a different flag wrapped around the star at the top, each depicting a country Helix was successfully operating in. At the far end, a large stage was filled with a band playing lively music while the dance floor was filled with people either too drunk or too happy to care about what dance moves were in season.

It was *beautiful*. The sight took my breath away, and I momentarily forgot about the bubbling excitement in my chest while Tabitha and I guided the children toward our table. The sculpture at our table was a swan, and

Bonnie clapped her hands together at the sight of it as I helped her into her chair.

“Swan!” she yelled.

“I’d rather have an alligator,” Kane decided, taking his seat.

“Maybe next year,” Tabitha chuckled, settling Ava into her chair. Next to their chairs was a chair for Jax, Luke, and Theo who had arrived hours ago to greet the important guests. Their dinner jackets were discarded on the back of each chair; jet black for Jax, purple for Theo, and turquoise for Luke.

“Now children, remember what we talked about?” Tabitha stood and looked at each in turn.

“We can eat what we want,” Kane said firmly.

“But not too much,” Ava said.

“And we have to be polite,” Bonnie recited slowly, “like a real princess.”

“Exactly, and in return what will you all get?”

“Disney World!” all three children declared excitedly. Indeed it was the safest way to strike a bargain of good behavior according to Theo, and given how well-behaved they had been on the drive down, I think it was working.

“Precisely,” Tabitha smiled. “Now if you need to go to the bathroom, speak to me or Summer and we will help you. Never leave the table without us or one of the team, okay?”

As Tabitha repeated the safety rules, my attention drifted around the room in search of the guys, mainly Jax. I needed to talk to him as soon as possible before the secret I held burst out of me like a jack in the box. I felt like a child on Christmas, so eager to deliver news that I vibrated in my seat.

“Where’s Dad?” Bonnie whined slightly as I placed a cup down on her tray and lightly brushed her curls out of her face.

“I don’t know sweetie. How about I go look for him?”

Bonnie nodded and glanced up at Tabitha. “Is that alright?”

“Yes of course!” She smiled and flapped her hands at me. “Go find them before the party gets too intense!”

I kissed Bonnie’s head, then Ava and Kane’s in turn—much to his faux disgust—then I gathered my clutch and wove into the crowd in search of my men.

Tonight was going to be a night none of them would forget.

SUMMER

A hundred faces flashed past me as I weaved through the crowd, scanning features for the familiarity I loved so much. As I moved, gently weaving past gorgeous women and handsome men all dressed to the nines, my heart started to race with excitement. What sense of calm I had grasped while caring for the children effectively slipped away when the only loud thought in my mind was the text message I had received back at the house.

I was about to *burst*. Half a loop of the ballroom and I located Jax, Theo, and Luke lingering by the bar with drinks in hand, and happy yet tired faces turned to each other. It was impossible to keep the skip out of my step as I approached, and upon reaching them, I tapped Jax on the shoulder, beaming.

“Summer!” Jax swept around and pulled me into his arms with no warning. He held me close, my nose filling with his familiar aftershave and the anxious patter of my heart ticking up somewhat at being in his arms. He pressed a kiss to my cheek and then stepped back as Luke and Theo swept in and repeated the act of affection. Such love in the face of such a large crowd, but they didn’t seem to care.

I liked that.

“Sorry I’m late,” I apologized quickly.

“Nonsense,” Theo chuckled, “there was no start time.”

“Your darlings are here, seated at the table, and on their best behavior. Disney World is looking more and more likely.”

Three pairs of eyes lit up before me and glasses were placed on the bar.

“They arrived all in one piece?” Luke chuckled, pushing off where he had

settled on the bar. “You really are a miracle worker.”

“Better say *hi* before someone with a camera snaps a picture of them alone, and we end up on the front page,” Theo chuckled, but as they moved off I shot out a hand and grasped Jax’s forearm.

“Actually... there’s something I want to say first if that’s okay?” Nerves punched my heart into my throat, and my gut released a thousand butterflies into my chest cavity.

“Is everything okay?” Jax’s wonderful smile wavered slightly.

“Has something happened?” Theo flexed his bandaged hand, white stripes hiding the damage from his assault on Felix.

“Summer?” Luke stepped forward, and I held up a hand to force him to keep his distance. Knowing my luck, my resolve would collapse the moment one of them touched me.

“Everything is fine,” I assured quickly. “More than fine actually, I—” I clasped my hands together, my fingertips running repeatedly over the rise of my knuckles as I searched for the right words. Nothing seemed powerful enough to explain what I was feeling. Studying them, the noise of the party faded from focus, and I took a deep, steadying breath.

“I want to say thank you for taking a chance on me all those weeks ago. I know I didn’t exactly showcase as the most *put-together* person, but you took a gamble on me, and I can’t ever express how thankful I am for that. And also because you—you make me feel loved in a way I’ve never experienced before. It’s intense, and sometimes it scares me a little—what you will do for me.” My gaze lingers briefly on Theo. “But at the same time, it’s exhilarating, and I never thought someone like me even deserved this kind of love after... after everything.”

A lump started to form in my throat, and I swallowed hard, trying to force it away.

“Not only that, you welcomed me into your family and accepted me, trusted me to care for your children, and in turn the love they have given me is... well I never saw myself as someone destined for something like that, but now I can’t imagine my life without them. Or you. And I just...” I paused as my lower lip trembled, and Jax took a half step forward when my words shook but I continued on. “I love you. All of you. And I know it’s messy and not traditional and I don’t fully understand it, but I’m here. If you still want me. I want to stay and I’m so over the moon that you’ve allowed me to be a part of all your lives for so long and I’d like—I’d really like to keep going.”

“Summer,” Luke began softly, “you have no idea how happy—”

“Wait” I cut him off gently. “There’s one more thing, and I need to get it out before I lose all confidence speaking like this with God knows who else listening.”

Each man remained silent.

“Jax... you need to call your lawyer. He couldn’t give me specifics because I’m an outsider, but a few days ago, I called Marina and we chatted. Or more, I was a bit of an asshole, and she taunted me, but the things she said—she basically confessed to me. Tabitha helped me send it to your lawyer, and he is expecting your call.”

Jax’s rosy face paled slightly, and he immediately rummaged for his phone and stepped away.

“Summer, what did you do?” Theo asked softly, stepping closer.

A short, nervous laugh escaped me as I pressed a steadying hand to my abdomen, the ridges of my corset nudging into my palm.

“She confessed and I just recorded it. I don’t know how well that stands up in court but for a woman so obsessed with her reputation... I thought we could do something with it.” Tearing my gaze away from Jax, I looked up at Luke and Theo.

“So, you want to stay?” Theo asked softly, and I nodded.

“With us?” Luke repeated. I nodded again.

“If you’ll have me,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Always,” they said in unison. Their heads ducked and for a sweet moment, there was nothing but the warmth of their hands on my skin and their lips writing love gently onto my jaw.

“Summer!” Jax’s tight voice cut through the moment. Theo and Luke pulled back just before Jax swept me into his arms. The ground disappeared, and he spun me around, grinning wider than I had ever seen him. “You absolute star!”

“Was it good?” I asked breathlessly as he set me down. Jax clutched my jaw and peppered several kisses over my mouth. When he pulled back, his eyes were shining.

“My lawyer took your recording straight to a judge who, after reviewing everything and the severity of Felix’s actions, aided by Marina, signed off on my case. She’s mine! Bonnie is mine!”

“Full custody, baby!” Theo yelled and Jax was pulled from my arms into a bouncing group hug with Theo and Jax. They ruffled his hair and hugged

him hard, congratulations spilling from them as Jax bounced between excited laughter and overwhelmed sobbing.

“I-I need to tell Bonnie!” Jax kissed Luke on the head then sprinted away through the crowd. We laughed, then paused as Jax reappeared and threw himself at me. Our mouths crashed together in a frantic kiss, and I scarcely remembered to breathe.

“*Thank you,*” he said, then he was gone again leaving the three of us to chuckle.

“Summer, what you did, that’s incredible.” Luke touched my arm, and a warm shiver swept across my shoulders.

“It was the least I could do,” I said softly as the lump in my throat rose higher, cracking behind my eyes and warming me with tears.

“The least indeed,” Theo replied.

“Honestly, she’s so cocky that getting her to talk down to me was the easy part. I just had no idea if it had any worth.”

“Money can buy you out of a lot of things, but I think Felix attacking Bonnie thanks to Marina was the final nail,” Luke snorted. “Summer... you’re incredible.”

“Pfft.” I waved one hand, blinking back tears. “Nonsense.”

Luckily, they didn’t listen to me. I was swept up into their arms and cuddled tightly, only released when the desire to see their children took over, and together we slipped back through the crowds to our table.

Halfway there, I caught sight of Marina through the crowd. She was dressed beautifully in a figure-hugging floor-length golden dress that looked like she had been dipped into a gold pool. She stood in the corner with her phone pressed against her ear, and while only a few words made it across the crowd, I knew precisely what news she had just received.

“Lost?! What the fuck do you mean? The Hemmingways don’t lose!”

Her obsession with her name and her reputation was the real smoking gun here. While victory was sweet, I couldn’t help but hope this would shock her enough to change her ways and try to be a good mother to Bonnie.

At the table, celebrations were wild, and after an excitable show of love from Jax, he ended up sitting down and sobbing as the relief and the rest of his emotions overwhelmed him. He had been fighting so hard for so long that the end had seemed impossible far away. Now it had paid off. He was a fantastic father, they all were, and as I sat down, it warmed me right to my bones.

The family was core here and being welcomed into it was beyond a dream.

The night wore on quickly, creeping closer to midnight and the New Year. We ate good food, drank good alcohol, and danced until the children were exhausted and my feet ached from my heels. At one point I spotted Tabitha in deep conversation with one of the musicians and she winked when she caught my eye. I happily left her to it and with the children all busy with their fathers, I enjoyed my freedom of dancing with the warm knowledge that no more surprises were lurking in the dark.

Marina was taken care of, Felix was in jail, and the guys knew my secrets and loved me anyway.

I danced until the heat of the ballroom became smothering and my feet ached. The desire to cool off and breathe in some fresh air that wasn't a musk filled with cinnamon, alcohol, and sweat grew strong, so after the next song ended, I stumbled through some double doors out onto an empty veranda.

The bitter chill of the open air stole over my overheated skin. Still, initially, it was delightful, and I moaned softly, breathing in deep lungfuls of the cold. The veranda was lined with fencing and each pillar supporting the roof was wrapped in twinkling colorful lights. Satin mesh draped between each post like silk curtains and two large Christmas trees nestled against the building, decorated in silver stars, flashing white lights, and candy canes. From the room, a million twinkling white lights hung like falling stars, suspended just above my head, and I admired them as I walked toward the edge of the railing. Just beyond, the mountain stretched high up into the darkness, and the perfect snow spread out from the resort like an undisturbed glittering ocean.

I was going to miss this place. It was like something out of a fairytale.

“Summer?”

I spun around in fright, pressing a hand to my racing heart as Jax appeared behind me.

“You scared me!”

“Sorry,” he chuckled, “I wanted to check on you.”

“Oh, I'm okay,” I assured him. “It was so hot I was getting a little dizzy and needed some air. What about you? How are you feeling?”

“Well,” Jax laughed, “I feel like I'm in a dream. I've called my lawyer three times just to get him to tell me everything again, to remind myself that it's real.”

“It’s very real,” I smiled warmly as Jax stood next to me. “You deserve this.”

“Do I?” He turned his gorgeous eyes to me, and they darted slightly, studying my face as we stared at one another.

“Of course! You’ve a fantastic father, an incredible friend from what I’ve seen, and you spend your life making sure other people feel safe and protected while putting up with all the shit Marina put you through. You and Bonnie, that’s how it’s supposed to be!” Never had I felt so strongly, but I understood Jax’s caution. It was almost too good to be true.

Only time would soothe that.

“You’re right,” Jax smiled and the same dazzling smile I had grown to love so much flashed over his face. “Thank you, Summer.”

“Anytime,” I grinned, then I frowned. “Well maybe not any time, unless you have another kid and psychotic ex hiding somewhere?”

“No, no,” he assured me with a chuckle. “I don’t ever plan on having another ex.”

“Makes sense. They’re hard work,” I chuckled.

“Actually...” Jax sucked in a deep breath and cleared his throat, a flush of pink dusting over his cheeks. “There’s actually something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Now?” I glanced over his shoulder to the party locked away behind the doors. “It’s almost the New Year.”

“Yes, now.”

“Okay.” I smiled up at him encouragingly. Was this something to do with Bonnie?

“The kids... they adore you. More than anyone else I’ve ever seen. When Bonnie warmed to you, I knew there was something special about you. Although, I think I saw how special you were in the interview. You’ve... you’ve done so much for us, healed wounds we didn’t know needed healing, loved us and our children without question.”

“Kind of easy to do,” I teased softly, and my heart started to beat faster.

“I love you, Summer. More than I thought was possible. It’s like you’re right down in here—” He touched his chest. “And I never want to lose you. Not to Felix, not when we go back to America, not anything. I want you with us for as long as you want to be so... so the guys and I had a talk. It was a short talk, and then we spoke to the children to see how they felt about it.”

“Felt about... what?” My heart beat faster and faster. Suddenly, Jax

dropped onto one knee before me and my heart *stopped*. Taking half a step back, I clutched at the railing as Jax looked up at me with intense adoration in his eyes. Around us, the cool wind faded away and suddenly we were surrounded by hundreds of falling snowflakes. They spun out of the sky like a whisper as Jax pulled out a small box and opened it.

“I don’t want us to be fake engaged anymore. I want to be *really* engaged. I love you, and I want to love you for the rest of my life. I want to spend every day with you, whether that be cooking or taking care of Bonnie or sharing a bad movie together, or fucking until we can’t move. I want it. I want to spend every second with you because I love you, Summer. And I want to marry you for real.”

My heart remained stunned in my chest as I stared down at Jax. In the small black box was a beautiful ring. A silver band with a large diamond shape filled with a stunning moonstone that glittered fiercely with all the twinkling lights above. Just below the moonstone sat a smaller onyx and just below that, a smaller sapphire that twinkled up at me.

“I—” I began, and my throat closed over the word. This had to be something out of a dream. Had I come out here and passed out? Was I still asleep and dreaming?

“Before you say anything,” Jax added hurriedly. “I know how you feel about Luke and Theo so... so we had a talk and...”

“Well,” came Luke’s voice from beside me, and I whirled to see him and Theo standing there. “We had a talk, and while you might only be able to marry one of us...”

“There’s an arrangement we can put in place that enters all four of us into a partnership of sorts,” Theo finished.

“So, there’s a stone for each of us,” Jax said, and I turned back to him, his face blurring with the tears that flooded into my eyes. “We each have a matching stone embedded into our watches—or we will if you say yes. If you want me—us. If you want... this.”

“I...” The word blurred harder, and my still heart suddenly kicked back into life. I already knew the answer. I’d known it the second Jax had taken a knee in front of me but knowing that saying *yes* wouldn’t have me choosing between any of them was the icing on the cake.

“If it helps,” Luke said softly, moving closer. “The kids adore you. But whatever you choose, whatever you decide, we’re here for you regardless.”

“Always,” Theo agreed, “we’d just really like to spend the rest of our

lives with you.”

“All of you,” Luke murmured.

“Because we love you to the moon and back,” Jax finished.

“Yes,” I gasped, the answer escaping me as more of a hoarse squeak than anything else. All three looked at me in slight concern, and a bubble of emotional laughter escaped me.

“Yes!” I cried. “A thousand times yes!”

Fireworks suddenly erupted in the sky in a flurry of color and light as I was swept up into the arms of the three men I loved more than life itself. Cheers rose up from inside the building as the clock hit midnight, and while the bells rang out across the resort, Jax slipped that gorgeous ring onto my fingers. I cupped his face, lost in a sea of tears and laughter, and kissed him hard until I couldn’t breathe. Only then did I break the kiss, giving the same passion to Luke and Theo as the sky split above us in color and fire.

“I love you,” I gasped, “all of you.”

“I love you too,” came three happy replies, and my heart overflowed with love.

Sharp giggles signaled the arrival of the children, but their cheers barely breached through the cloud of shock I found myself in as I was bundled up in strong arms and hugged for all I was worth.

“Happy New Year!” Tabitha called from somewhere on the veranda and I could only laugh and cry all at the same time as I was peppered with love and kisses.

Never in my life had I been surrounded by such love and warmth. I’d never looked forward with hope, forever faced only with bleakness and regret in my lonely life.

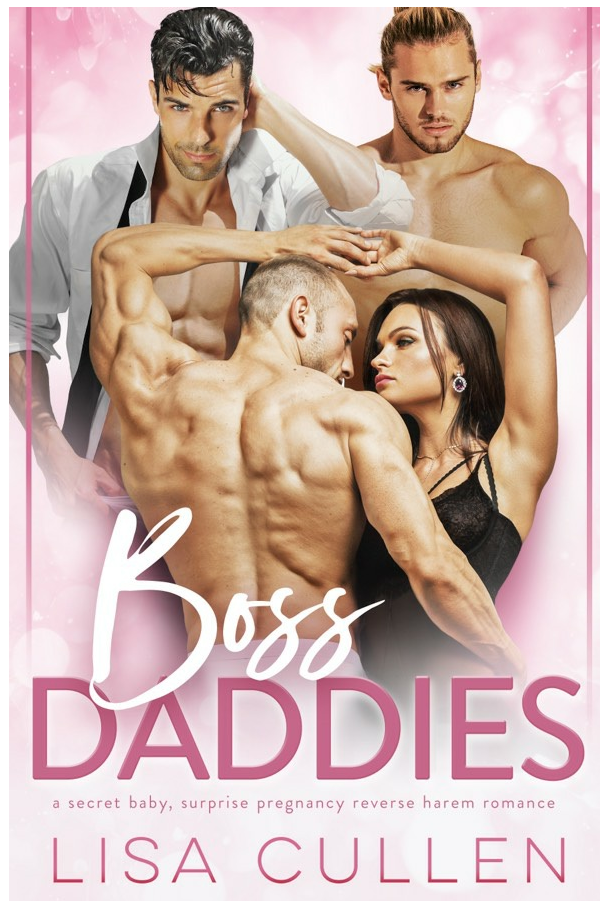
Now, with three incredible loves by my side, and children I utterly adored, there was light in my future.

Happy New Year indeed.

Thank you for reading ‘A Nanny for Christmas.’ I hope you enjoyed it.

[Check out Boss Daddies, the next book in the series, here.](#)

BOSS DADDIES (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

It was meant to be a swimwear modeling job.... But now my three bosses have me on my knees asking for more.

One of them is my baby's daddy... and *he has no idea.*

What was I thinking, accepting a modeling job in a freaking bikini? I *used* to be a model, but my life is so different now... I'm a single mom trying to make ends meet when they hire me.

There's **Harper**, the tall, tattooed, serious and gorgeous billionaire who wants to change the world.

Player **Desi** is the confident, handsome stylist on set, teasing me relentlessly and making me want more...

And there's also quiet **Silver**, the irresistible shy photographer for the shoot.

I may be wrong... but I think they all want *me*.

I know not to mix business with pleasure. My main worry is making enough to pay for my daughter, but my money worries are soon erased as the three fashionable billionaires shower me and my little girl with expensive gifts.

Temptations arise at every opportunity and I succumb to my irresistible bosses... but soon, the fire between us sparks hotter, and I end up with a baby in my belly...

And no idea whose it is.

LUNA

“I ’m sorry but I just don’t believe you.”

The words washed over me like the first burst of a cold shower on a hot summer's day. It took all of my self-restraint to keep the smile on my face as the growing warmth from the cup in my hand teetered towards painful.

“I can assure you,” I replied as sweetly as I could manage, “I definitely used oat milk.”

“I was watching you,” the customer replied, “and I didn’t see you use that oat carton at *all*.” The lilt in her voice matched the sharp way she pointed a manicured blue-tipped finger at me. The tart disbelief in her tone was abundant and as we stared each other down, I knew I didn’t have a chance in hell of winning this argument. I could have made this drink right in front of her salmon-spectacle-clad eyes and it wouldn’t have been good enough. Judging by the purse of her lips and the blonde bob of her hair, I was pretty sure she was simply spoiling for an argument.

“Ma’am, as you can see, we’re really busy today and I’m having to make multiple drinks at the same time—”

“That’s not my problem!” She cut in with such glee that I had to fight the reflexive urge to toss the cup at her and storm away.

“I understand that, I’m just trying to explain that you’ve seen me making other drinks—”

“I don’t care,” she interrupted again. Her raised voice caused several seated patrons to glance up from their various drinks and meals to check out the commotion. Fuck. The muscles in my face were already aching from my

forced smile and keeping that up with an audience was even harder.

“I *want* another coffee. Made correctly this time.” Her beady eyes narrowed behind her glasses, and for a few seconds, I entertained the rather abrupt intrusive thought of dragging her over the counter and giving her a close-up view of the difference between our milk cartons.

That fantasy would be my only retribution today.

“Right away, ma’am.”

I didn’t miss the victorious smirk that curved across her lips as I turned away, and the image burned into my mind as I discarded the oat latte—and it *was* oat, we may be busy but I made that drink correctly—and started on another. Unsatisfied groans about the extended wait rose up from the queue that had formed behind Mrs. Oat Milk during her little rant. The sound sent a wave of burning, embarrassed heat across the back of my neck and down my spine.

Spending every available hour working my fingers to the bone serving coffee and cake to Chicago’s business elite was not how I wanted to spend my days, but it was a job. A job I’d poured my heart and soul into for the past five years just to make ends meet. Yet, every time I came face-to-face with someone like Mrs. Oat Milk—someone who took pleasure in making the jobs of service workers that much more difficult for their own twisted pleasure—I contemplated my survival rate if I just quit and lived on instant noodles until the end of my days.

A sweet, selfish fantasy that didn’t take into account my adorable daughter, Hazel, and her hatred of noodles. The desire for something better burned hotter with each passing day.

Coffee remade, I turned back to the customer and offered her the drink with the same fake service smile fixed upon my face. She sniffed and opened her sleek black purse. That thing likely cost more than my entire month’s wages.

“You could learn a thing or two from this,” she said stiffly. “If you’d done the job correctly the first time then we all wouldn’t have had to stand around waiting for you to fix your mistake. It’s coffee, how hard can it be?” A tinkling laugh followed her words, a sweet sound that was so detached from the smarminess of her words.

I cast a quick eye down the queue with as much apology as I could muster in my eyes, but there wasn’t a sympathetic gaze to be found. Of course not, these people were all the same. Running around the world with their fancy

jobs, fancy clothes, and not even five minutes to spare standing in a queue.

“You ought to be more careful,” the woman continued and the embarrassed heat from earlier was slowly morphing into anger mixed with tension in my chest. “I’m doing you a favor, coming to drink here instead of at the office. Without people like us, dinky little coffee places like this would go out of business. And you think it’s okay to try and poison me with *dairy*?”

She tossed a few coins onto the counter so hard that one bounced against the hard surface before it rolled off the edge and clattered somewhere on the floor.

“Well, I’m not picking that up.” Her beady eyes narrowed at me once more and the building anger within my chest snapped. My smile vanished.

“Without people like *you*—”

“Luna!” A warm, cheery voice tinged with the slightest hint of a French accent cut right through the wick of my explosive response and a warm hand landed on my shoulder.

I turned to see Cerise, my best friend and suffering co-worker by my side. Before I could react, she had taken the coffee from my hand and set it on the counter.

“Here’s your drink, have a lovely day!” she called cheerily as her hand hooked around my elbow and dragged me a few feet away from the service counter.

“Cerise...” I began and my chest clenched like the snap of a rubber band as the anger I almost released on that awful woman stalled with nowhere to go.

“Luna,” Cerise warned softly, “I know. Awful people with awful requests, but if you had yelled at her, there’s no way Dickie would still let you off early. I swear, your temper runs as hot as your hair!”

Just like that, a small laugh bubbled in my chest and broke through the tension of frustration. Cerise was, of course, referring to my flaming auburn hair. At the mention of Dickie, I sought out the clock on the wall and groaned.

“Shit...” Cerise was right. It had taken me days to sweet talk my boss, Dickie, into letting me off early today to coincide with my daughter getting an early release from pre-school. If I was late and my mother found out, I’d never hear the end of it.

“Take five minutes. I’ll handle this.” Cerise patted my elbow and swept past me before I could even respond. Her cheery voice filled the cafe as she

began apologizing for the wait and rapidly taking orders from the disgruntled queue. I took my leave and darted through the gray double doors into the back of the cafe.

Cerise always had my back, ever since she'd stumbled upon me sobbing amongst the garbage cans not two weeks after I'd started working here. She'd been so kind as I'd poured my heart out about not knowing how I was going to afford diapers after Dickie had shot me down about an advance on my wages. The next day, I'd come into work and she had left a baby care package outside my locker with all the essentials. I'd never been more grateful for such a kind act, and from then on we were best friends.

I stumbled into the toilet, locked the door behind me, and sank down onto the chilled toilet seat with a groan. Already my heart was beginning to slow without the crowded bustle of the cafe. I took a few deep breaths and the tension that burned like static in my chest started to ease.

Fuck.

I had almost lost my cool and something like that could easily have cost me my job. Losing this would turn the blogging site I freelanced for into my sole income and that was definitely not enough to live on.

"Come on Luna," I sighed, "keep it together."

It was just a shitty customer. Another hour and I would be out of here. I dug around in my apron and pulled out my phone. If I had any chance of making it to the school on time, I would need to call an Uber, an expense I was loath to create but in the interest of getting to Hazel before school finished, it was essential. I flicked through to the Uber app, added my details and request, then tapped on my emails to wait for the booking confirmation. Upon opening my inbox, however, something new caught my eye.

New Leaf

A pulse of confusion shot through my gut as I opened the email.

Dear Miss Luna Quinn,

I hope this email reaches you well. Please forgive my forwardness but I am writing to you in regard to a modeling opportunity that I believe will be extremely lucrative for us both. I came across your account on Instagram and I was blown away by your pictures.

If you haven't heard of us, my name is Harper Saunders. I am the Lead Designer and co-owner of New Leaf. We are a luxury fashion brand that specializes in lingerie, swimwear, and more for those needing a little boost to their confidence after physical alterations. Each year we put together several

calendars for charity. These calendars showcase each of the designs of that year. If you haven't seen us around in stores, I've included a few links in this email for you to take a look at.

I understand that this may seem rather presumptuous but I think your style and confidence would really enhance the New Leaf brand. If you are interested, I would like to offer you an interview at our downtown office to discuss this opportunity more.

The opportunity includes a three-week all-expenses paid trip to one of our beachside shooting locations as well as compensation for any disruption this may have to your regular life. Childcare is included and you will be paid a total of \$1, 000, 000 upon completion of the calendar.

I've included my details below and I very much look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

Harper Saunders

CEO, New Leaf

A million dollars?! This was a joke, right? I read the email several times, unable to comprehend what I was reading. Harper Saunders, *the* Harper Saunders had emailed me? The billionaire CEO of one of the most famous fashion brands in the entire *world* had emailed me? No. No way. This had to be fake.

Despite my doubts, I quickly checked the email and all the attached information against what was on the New Leaf company website and it matched. It was *real*?

I had been following New Leaf on all their socials ever since I stumbled upon one of their charity showcases not long after Hazel had been born. I was drawn to them immediately as they had been showcasing lingerie and underwear for mothers who no longer felt sexy after going through such a powerful change to their bodies. A few of their photographs had even become the inspiration for some of my own designs.

Before Hazel, amateur modeling was my passion but pregnancy had definitely hindered those plans. I had been working to rebuild that confidence on my Instagram. With a modest following, I couldn't complain, but the thought of those pictures catching the eye of Harper Saunders?

"No fucking way," I breathed out and returned to the email, reading it over again and again. The amount glared back out at me.

One million dollars.

An email like that direct from a billionaire CEO... there had to be a catch. Men as rich as him surely had assistants for this sort of thing, right?

However, no matter how many times I checked, the information remained the same and everything provided looked legit.

Was I dreaming? I had to be. This was too good to be true.

“Luna!” A sharp rap of knuckles against the bathroom door made me jump, dragging me back down to reality, and yet even as my boss’s dull tones drifted through the door, the email remained on my phone staring up at me.

“Luna! You’ve been peeing for ten minutes, get the fuck back to work!”

Suddenly, the prospect of going back out there to face my overly handsy boss and a cafe full of people much richer than me was exhausting and I glanced back down at the email. The temptation was rising.

“Luna!” My manager knocked rapidly on the door again.

“I’m coming!” I called back as sweetly as I could. I still needed him on my side in order to get out of here early. As I flushed the toilet, I shoved my phone back into my pocket but the email was crystal clear in my mind’s eye.

It was just an interview, right?

I opened the toilet door and came face-to-face with my boss and his stubbled jowls broke into a toothy smile when he caught my eye.

“About damn time, I don’t pay you women to fuss about in there.”

“Sorry, Dickie.” I gave him my sweetest smile and slipped past him, narrowly avoiding the usual pat on the ass he liked to give anything with a skirt.

It was just an interview... and the prospect of anything that wasn’t this place was *exciting* despite my disbelief.

If I said yes... what was the worst that could happen?

LUNA

“An’ Mrs. Walker said, she said I wasn’t allowed in the sand pit but—but Adrian was in the sand pit and I wanted to be too!” The grumpy way my daughter stamped her feet next to me as she talked made it difficult to hide my smile, even as she turned her bright face up at me complete with a furrowed brow and pursed lips.

“I’m sorry honey,” I replied, keeping the amusement out of my voice. “That doesn’t sound very fair at all.”

“Yup!” Hazel stated matter-of-factly. “But it’s okay ‘cause I went on the swings with Hailey and we didn’t let Adrian on.” Just like that, the pout changed into a devilish grin and Hazel burst out laughing as if she had just revealed to me the intricate details of some diabolical plan. It was impossible to hold in my own laughter then and I squeezed her hand lightly. I certainly wasn’t going to get involved in the playground disputes of five-year-olds, but knowing Hazel had enough of a spark to defend herself definitely brought me comfort.

The warm afternoon air made the walk home pleasant, and I happily listened to Hazel as she recounted the wild and exciting things that happened that day. Maisie’s water bottle exploded at break time and *another* marker was missing from the bucket but Hazel didn’t care because it wasn’t the blue one she loved so much. All these little details were things I was soaking up as we strolled, and it was difficult to imagine how my life could have been anything other than this.

Six years ago, I was a single, struggling college student and I had the

world at my feet to make all the bad choices and crazy mistakes people are supposed to make at twenty-one. Now I had a five-year-old and the opportunities at my feet were vastly different... and limited. I wouldn't change it for the world though, not with how much light and life Hazel has brought to me. But because of my limited options, the offer from New Leaf looked all the more tantalizing.

I kept an ear on Hazel and her story as we turned the corner towards the park and our apartment building came into view, while the other half of my mind replayed Harper's email over and over. *One million dollars*. What a mind-blowing amount of money. It would more than pay for everything I needed, and that kind of cash would open up a world of prospects to Hazel that I wouldn't be able to offer her on my own. That was the main attraction here and the moment I realized that, the harder it was to try and wave the offer from my mind.

Three weeks posing for a calendar and we would be set. No more shitty jobs, no more pervy bosses, and getting yelled at by obnoxious know-it-all customers. Hazel could have all the markers in the world and then some, and I could give her everything I never had. At the end of my shift, I had sent off a quick reply stating my interest and asking when he would like the interview. To my surprise, Harper had replied almost instantly stating that he was happy to accommodate me and my schedule, but that it would need to be before the end of the weekend as he was only in the city for a few more days.

Knowing my schedule, I had only *one* window of free time and that was Saturday afternoon. The only problem was, I couldn't bring Hazel to the interview which meant I would need to find a babysitter.

Only one person I knew would be free and it was the one person I didn't want to ask.

My own mother.

"Mommy!" Hazel's demanding tones pulled me from my thoughts, and I glanced down to see her beaming up to me.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Look!" Hazel thrust her free hand, curled into a small fist, right towards me and I paused to lean down.

"What is it?"

Hazel opened her fist and to my horror, revealed a small spider she had snatched from the passing hedge. I recoiled immediately with a yelp and Hazel fell into peals of giggles.

“Hazel!”

“It’s just a spider Mommy, you’re so silly.” Hazel gave her new friend all her attention as we resumed walking, and I fought the curl of repulsion that shot through my gut. Ever since a wildlife expert had dropped by her pre-school to teach the children about animals and insects in the wild, Hazel had become obsessed with anything with 8 legs. God, what I wouldn’t give for this obsession to pass swiftly.

“Well, make sure you drop her off before we get home,” I said stiffly, clearing my throat and keeping a keen eye on the spider.

“I wanna keep her!” Hazel exclaimed, and when she lifted her face to meet mine, that stubborn pout was back.

“You can’t keep her. She probably has lots of babies that need her, you learned about that right? She has lots of little spiders to take care of so it wouldn’t be fair to take her all the way home.” I had no idea if that was true, but it seemed to work as Hazel gave a slow, knowing nod.

“Of course,” she said seriously, and I had to contain my smile as she crouched down on the ground and let the spider scuttle away from her palm. “Goodbye.”

The rest of the walk home was spider free, thankfully, and it didn’t take long to get Hazel situated and settled as I started to make lunch. The fridge was a little light, so I settled on whipping up a chicken salad while Hazel sat at the counter with her activity book and several coloring pencils spread out before her.

“What did you do today, Mommy?” Hazel asked. Her voice was slightly muffled by how far she had hunched over her book to color a particularly vibrant elephant. The question made me smile though, warmth settling in my heart as I chopped up the lettuce. I had been working hard at making sure we communicated our days with each other so I could keep track of how Hazel was feeling and progressing. As a result, she started asking the same of me and I would respond in kind.

“Well, I worked really hard, and it was really busy,” I explained, giving her an abridged version of my day. “I did have to face down a really grumpy witch though.”

Hazel’s head snapped up, her eyes wide. “A witch?!”

“Oh yes,” I nodded seriously, tossing the lettuce into a bowl. “She was very grumpy and in need of some very specific potions.”

“Did she have warts?” Hazel asked, her eyes still saucers.

“Yup. And only one tooth.”

“Ewww!”

“It was very scary,” I continued, “but I was saved by Auntie Cerise, and we were able to send that witch on her way.”

“Wow,” Hazel breathed out, then she quickly returned to her drawing. “I’m happy Cerise was there.”

“Me too,” I murmured, casting a warm eye over Hazel. The salad was completed with some chopped-up cucumber and tomatoes, as well as some slices from a somewhat sad-looking yellow pepper, but before I could tend to the chicken, the tune of my phone ringing filled the kitchen. I glanced over my shoulder at the screen and my heart immediately sank into my stomach as ‘Maggie Quinn’ blinked back at me.

Of course, she would answer my text with a phone call.

My relationship with my mother was strained at best. She had me at sixteen, and I did occasionally feel pulses of sympathy as to how scary that must have been for her. That sympathy was usually quickly drowned out by the memories of her absences in my life growing up, or the multiple men that visited like a constant revolving door. I had planned to cut her out of my life, not that she had much of a presence to begin with, but she had flourished with enthusiasm when Hazel was born as if she saw Hazel as *her* chance to do things right a second time.

I glanced at Hazel to check on her, then I answered the call and stepped a few feet away.

“Maggie.”

“What exactly are you planning on getting up to on Saturday that you can’t spend time with your own daughter?” My mother’s dry, demanding voice filled me with dread each time I heard it, and this was no different.

“No, ‘Hi, hello, how was your day?’” I asked.

“Don’t give me that,” she snorted. “I haven’t heard from you in weeks and now you need me to babysit?”

The urge to hang up on her rose like vomit, but unfortunately, she was my only hope as Cerise had been taking all the weekend shifts to allow me time at home with Hazel. I had to play it nice.

“Well, if you must know, I have an important job interview and it’s an amazing opportunity. It’s too good for me to pass up, but it came up on short notice so I thought you would like to spend some time with your granddaughter,” I explained carefully.

“A job interview, on a Saturday?” My mother’s three-pack-a-day habit had added a huskiness to her tone that grated against my very soul. “Don’t be ridiculous. What are you really up to? Why do you need another job interview, did you get fired? I’m not surprised.”

“No, I didn’t get fired,” I snapped back. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Hazel lifting her head and quickly reined in my frustration. “If I get this new job though, I would be able to quit the cafe. It would mean more regular hours too and better pay, both of which are good for Hazel don’t you think?”

“If you moved back home with me and accepted that job at the library like I *told* you to do, you wouldn’t need to be running around willy-nilly to interviews, and Hazel would be cared for. When was the last time you even bought her some new clothes?” Maggie replied shortly.

“There isn’t enough money in the world that could persuade me to move back in with you,” I grumbled. Not even a million dollars. As Maggie’s voice hitched up in anger, I moved the phone away from my ear and called loudly to Hazel, loud enough that my mother would still hear me at least.

“Hazel! Do you want to spend Saturday with Grandma? You haven’t seen her in *ages* have you?”

“Grandma!” Hazel yelled, and she clapped her hands together. “Yay!” As much dislike as I had for my own mother, she had always doted on Hazel, and I was not going to be the one that ruined that. Maggie would ruin it in her own way, I was sure.

“See?” I pressed the phone back to my ear, having missed whatever tirade my mother had sent my way. “Hazel is excited to see you, and you wouldn’t want to disappoint her, would you?”

Maggie muttered under her breath, words I couldn’t decipher but didn’t really care.

“Fine,” she replied. “I’ll see you on Saturday but if you think—”

I hung up before I could hear any more. As much as I could hold my ground against her, she still made me feel sick to my stomach even after all these years. A childhood of neglect and absence did that.

I turned back to the chicken and tried to shake the sickly, anxious feeling that had settled in my gut as Hazel broke out into a rough rendition of the wheels on the bus. It was a nice distraction as I set the chicken down on the pan, then quickly sent an email off to Harper asking if Saturday afternoon would be good for an interview.

It was only after I sent it that I realized I should have confirmed with him *before* making plans with my mother, but it was too late now.

No sooner had I set my phone down than it pinged with an immediate response, and my heart jumped slightly in my chest. I tapped with one hand as I flipped the chicken with the other.

Dear Luna,

Saturday afternoon is perfect. I'm eager to get into discussions with you as I think you will find this to be a very exciting opportunity. I have included the address and directions below; but if you need travel assistance, please let me know, and I can send a driver.

See you then.

Best wishes,

Harper Saunders

CEO, New Leaf

He would send a *car*? To be expected of billionaires I suppose, but the prospect still excited me a fraction, soothing the remaining anxieties from talking to my mother. The chicken sizzled softly, Hazel sang louder, and my heart skipped a beat.

Stuff like this didn't happen to people like me but I couldn't help but feel that if I played my cards right, maybe this could be the start of something *amazing*.

End of preview. [Get the entire story here.](#)