



Beauty and the
GRUMP

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

WALL STREET JOURNAL & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WINTER TRAVERS

Beauty
and the
Grump

Wall Street Journal & USA Today Bestselling Author

WINTER TRAVERS

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Chapter One

Stevie

“I’m fine.” I pressed the speakerphone button and tossed my phone on the kitchen table.

“Are you really?” the familiar voice of my best friend, Jane, echoed in my kitchen.

I rolled my eyes and yanked open the fridge. “I have no other choice but to be fine, Jane.” I surveyed the slim pickings of my fridge and grabbed an apple that was mere hours away from rotting. “But I am going to have to go grocery shopping or order food so I don’t starve.”

December 7th, I was supposed to have tied the knot and hopped on a plane for Hawaii for thirteen days with my new husband. I had eaten all the perishable food from my fridge the days before the 7th since I wouldn’t be around, but those plans had fallen through seven days ago.

Hell, I also was living in a maze of boxes that had been packed to be moved when we got back from our honeymoon.

Get married, go on a lush honeymoon, and then come back to move in with my new husband.

Instead, I got ditched at the altar, crawled back to my apartment, and had been living off of canned food and contemplating adopting ten cats since I was destined to be forever alone. A few cats seemed like the next step into spinsterhood.

It was now eleven days before Christmas, and I was anything but in the holiday spirit.

This was normally my favorite time of year, but I just couldn’t seem to get into the spirit since my plans for the rest of my life had gone up in smoke. I planned to dig out my tree at some point, but it was just sitting in the closet right now.

“If you do starve, you can add that to the list of things that are Paul’s fault,” Jane spat. “I never liked the man but sucked it up because you loved him. A woman’s intuition is never wrong, and mine knew that man was no good.”

I huffed. “My intuition told me to marry the man, Jane.” And that was

one hundred percent wrong. “I don’t think I can rely on my intuition anymore.”

“Then go off of mine,” Jane ordered. “You are better off without that assclown.”

“Shouldn’t you be enjoying a Hawaiian sunset right now, Jane, instead of hounding me about being okay?” I grabbed the phone off the table and flopped onto the couch.

Jane huffed. “Your brother fell asleep half an hour ago. We have dinner reservations in half an hour, but I’m really contemplating just letting him sleep and ordering room service.”

“Let him sleep. Enjoy some time to yourself.”

“I still think you and I should have used your honeymoon, not Tony and me,” Jane whined. “I love the man, but after three margaritas, he’s ready for a nap while I’m ready to turn up and have some fun.”

I rolled my eyes and turned on the TV. “Please don’t say turn up ever again, and I’m good right where I am, Jane. You and Tony getting the honeymoon you never got three years ago is good with me. That’s the only good thing that came out of all of this.” I didn’t want to be in paradise with Jane when I should have been there with my new husband.

“As soon as we get home on the twenty-first, I am coming over. I know I’ll be sick of Tony by then and will need a break from your brother.” Jane sighed heavily. “I’m kind of sick of his butt right now.”

“Oh, please,” I laughed. “You and Tony are made for each other, and you know it. You might have talked to me first, but we both know the only reason you started talking to me was to get to Tony.”

“I plead the fifth, and I need to go. I have a few deliveries heading your way in the next couple of days, okay?”

“Deliveries?” I asked. “What did you do, Jane?” Groceries were the only delivery I wanted. Or maybe a pizza.

“Just some things I think you need right now. I’ll call you tomorrow and try not to cry too much into your pillow tonight.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not any more than I did last night, promise, and I don’t need any deliveries, Jane. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.” I looked at the apple in my hand and cringed. “Though if you are having groceries delivered, I won’t say no.”

“Make sure you answer the door tomorrow,” she called. “I love you,

Stevie.”

“Bye, Jane, and I love you, too,” I sang. I ended the call and dropped the phone on the couch.

Oh, Jane. She meant well, but I really did just want to be left alone.

I didn't have to be back to work till after the first of the year, and while I had planned to spend my time nesting and enjoying marital bliss, I now wanted to wallow in my heartache while eating anything I could shove into my mouth while watching cringy reality TV.

Life had done a one-eighty on me, that was for sure.

So, in order for my plans to wallow in my heartache to move forward, tomorrow, I would finally venture out of the house for groceries and get my favorite foods for dinner.

Or maybe I should wait to see just what Jane was having delivered.

I slouched down and kicked my feet up on the coffee table.

One more day of wallowing, and then I could move on to the next step in my plan of moving on from Paul.

I wasn't sure what that was, but I would figure it out.

Eventually.

*

Chapter Two

Stevie

Fresh pajamas: check.

Cheesy Christmas movie: check.

Four boxes of Christmas decorations and a Christmas tree: check.

All I needed was my favorite meal delivered right to my front door.

Sesame chicken, crab wontons, egg rolls, and those soft, pillowy, sugary donuts. But I'll be honest and say I was most looking forward to the egg rolls. I had ordered one dozen of them, after all.

"Let's do this," I mumbled. And this would be a good time to have half a dozen cats, so I wouldn't be crazy talking to myself. I could be talking to the fluffy furballs. Way saner than talking to myself. "At least you're not answering yourself, Stevie." I held my hands in the air. "Thank god no one is around to hear that." I nodded and lifted the lid off the nearest tote. "Totally."

I closed my eyes and cringed.

It was a good possibility I had a screw loose. Or two.

I was digging through the second tote of decorations when the doorbell rang.

It hadn't been the first time it had rang today.

Around ten this morning, a delivery of groceries had appeared on my front porch thanks to Jane, and then again at three, I had a delivery of chocolate-dipped strawberries and assorted nuts.

At least this time, when the doorbell rang, I knew who was on the other side of the door.

Egg rolls!

"Coming," I called. I grabbed my wallet off the kitchen table and threw open the front door, ready to embrace all the delicious Chinese food I had ordered.

My jaw dropped open, and my wallet dropped to the floor. "What the?"

Claus True was standing on my front porch wearing a black leather jacket, dark, tattered blue jeans, and a Santa hat on his head. He also had my Chinese food in his hands.

I racked my brain to get a coherent sentence out, but nothing came.

Claus was my brother's best friend, and he was standing on my front

porch. I peeked behind him, wondering if maybe Tony was there, too, but he wasn't.

No one was there but Claus.

"Let me in, sweets."

Let him in?

Sweets?

I blinked rapidly.

This was not the Claus I knew.

Not at all.

The Claus I knew was grumpy growly and did not show up on my porch. Ever.

He had been at my house once, and that was the day I moved in. Tony had managed to wrangle Claus into helping me move all of my furniture, and Claus had left before I could even say thank you.

Claus and Tony had been friends for as long as I could remember.

I had been the annoying little sister who always wanted to hang out with them, but they didn't want me around since I was three years younger than them.

Growing up, our mom and dad worked a lot, and Tony was always in charge of watching me. Claus would come over every day after school, and most weekends, he was there, too.

Sure, our parents worked a lot and weren't home a ton, but it wasn't as bad as how Claus had it.

His dad had died before Claus was even born, and his mother was in and out of rehab from the time he was born until she died when he was seventeen.

Mom and Dad had a rule that friends weren't allowed in the house while they worked, but that never applied to Claus.

They knew that our house was a safe place for him, and they weren't going to take that away from him. Hell, after Claus' mom died, he lived with us that summer while he worked to save enough money to get his own place.

Claus was always thankful for what my parents had done for him, but he never got too close to us.

Well, I should say me.

He wasn't mean to me, but it wasn't like he went out of his way to ask me how my day was or anything.

He was just Claus, my brother's hot, grumpy friend.

Claus who was on my front porch and had just called me sweets.

That was new.

And odd.

“Uh, hello?” I croaked.

He held up the large paper bag. “What the hell did you order?”

I blinked slowly and tipped my head to the side. “Am I in some alternate universe right now?” My eyes darted from Claus to the bag. “Did I die or something?”

“No alternate universe and you are very much alive, sweets. Let me in before this gets cold.”

I didn’t move because none of this was making sense. “Why are you wearing that hat?” I asked.

“You gave it to me.”

I furrowed my brow. “Uh, I did?” I had no memory of that. Though, if I were in an alternate universe, I wouldn’t have a memory of it.

He nodded and stepped toward me. “Senior year. There was a Christmas party on the last day before winter break, and everyone was supposed to dress up. You gave me this hat to wear.”

That sounded like something I would have done. But why did he still have it? “Uh, okay.”

He moved closer. “You gonna let me in the door, or are we gonna eat on your porch?” he asked.

“I don’t share my egg rolls,” I blurted out. “I got a lot of them, so I’ll have them for leftovers for the next couple of days, and if you eat them all, I won’t have any leftovers.” Yeah, that was what I was concerned about, egg rolls.

“That all you got in here?” he asked. “I’m not a fan of egg rolls, sweets.”

“Uh, well,” I mumbled. “There’s more than just the dozen egg rolls in there.” I couldn’t remember what else, but I knew there were more than egg rolls. I wrapped my arms around myself and shivered slightly.

“Sweets, let me in the damn door so you’re not out here freezing.”

“Do you work for China House?” I asked, completely ignoring him. It was chilly out, but I didn’t even notice it with Claus on my front porch.

Claus shook his head and laughed. “Not at all.”

“Then why do you have the food I ordered?” I couldn’t wrap my head around what the heck was going on.

“I rolled up when the delivery guy did. I paid him, and here I am,” he explained as if I should have known why he was standing on my porch. “Let me in.”

“But why did you roll up?” I shook my head. That sounded as bad as when Jane said, ‘turn up.’ “Why did you come here?”

He shrugged. “Thought you could use some company, Stevie. Now, you gonna let me in, or you wanna eat on your porch?”

I hesitated for a second but then stepped to the side. “Just put it on the kitchen table.”

He walked into my house as if he lived there and headed to the kitchen. “Plates?” he called. “Beer?”

I closed the door and leaned against it. Plates and beer? I had both, but why did he care if I did? “Uh, plates are in the cabinet to the right of the sink, and there should be some beer in the fridge from Paul.”

I watched Claus move around my kitchen and open the fridge. “Pussy Paul’s beer?” he asked. He grabbed a can and inspected it. “I should have known the jackass liked light beer.”

I knew nothing about beer. I had just bought what Paul said to buy. “Uh, you don’t like light beer?” I asked.

Claus cracked open the can and chugged half of it. “I like my beer to taste like beer.”

Again, I had no idea what that meant. “Um, okay.”

“Come and eat before it gets cold, sweets,” Claus called.

I held my breath and pinched my arm. “Ow,” I whispered. I looked around, expecting to be transported back to my bed because this all had to be a dream.

Claus was in my house with Chinese food, drinking Paul’s beers and calling me sweets. Things that would happen in a dream, not when I was awake.

“Are you drunk?” I blurted. I could count on one hand the amount of times I had been around drunk Claus and that had to be what was going on right now.

He held up his beer. “I’m not a lightweight, Stevie. Half a beer does not do me in.”

I wasn’t talking about the beer he had just drank. “You must have drank before you came over.”

He shook his head. "I drove here. I don't drink and drive."

"Then why are you here? You never come here, and suddenly you're here, and I don't understand why." I sighed, and my shoulders slumped. "Why are you here?" I asked again.

"Dinner," he replied simply. "We both gotta eat."

With every word he said, I just had the same question. WHY?

"Stevie," he called softly. "Just eat, and stop thinking so hard about everything. I'm here to eat dinner with you."

I held back the urge to scream why and just pushed off the door. "Do you want to eat at the table or in front of the TV?"

"I'm not fancy, sweets. We can set up in front of the TV. Fire up one of those Christmas movies you love."

I grabbed two plates from the cupboard and two forks. "How do you know about my Christmas movies?" I asked.

Claus shrugged. "Ever since I have known you, as soon as November hit, you always watched Christmas movies or listened to Christmas music. I can see that hasn't changed." He nodded to the TV, where a scene from *Christmas Vacation* played. "I am surprised you don't have your tree up, though."

I pushed the plates into his hands and grabbed the bag of food. "Sit," I grunted.

He plopped down on the couch, and I set the bag of food on the coffee table.

"Though it does look like you're going to put it up."

I sat next to him and pulled all of the containers out of the bag. "I was thinking about it. I just..." I just thought I would be putting my tree up at Paul's place with a wedding ring on my finger. "Just trying to get in the mood," I finished simply.

Claus had been at my non-wedding. He had been in the back of the church watching as Tony announced to the guests that Paul had a change of heart and there wouldn't be a wedding. Claus watched along with everyone as I pasted a smile on my face and acted as if my heart hadn't been ripped out of my chest without a thought.

Tears threatened to fall, and I swiftly shook my head. "I'm glad you don't like egg rolls because I only ordered a dozen, and they are all mine," I repeated and hurriedly filled each of our plates. I slid Claus' in front of him

and wanted desperately to change the subject.

“You don’t need to make a plate for me, sweets. I appreciate it, but you should just worry about yourself.”

His words penetrated my brain, and something broke.

I always made Paul’s plate for him. It was something he expected. Something that I did because if I didn’t, he was upset. I tipped my head to the side and frowned. “I always needed to have Paul’s plate made before I could eat.” It came out more of a question than a statement, but that was because I realized how ridiculous it was that I needed to feed Paul before myself. Before I could take care of myself, I had to take care of Paul.

Jesus Christ.

Claus grabbed his fork and stabbed a piece of chicken. “Any other bullshit that guy did?” he asked. “Maybe make you do his laundry while he played video games?”

My eyes dropped to my plate.

“Fucking hell, Stevie,” he grunted.

“He said he liked how nice my clothes always smelled, so I just did his laundry.” I thought I was doing something nice for him, but it was bullshit that even when I was dog-tired from work and just wanted to relax, I would have to do Paul’s laundry. If I didn’t, he would throw a fit like a five-year-old. I just got to the point where I did his laundry to keep him from complaining.

“You add some sort of fucking magic potion to that laundry, sweets? Because if you just used fucking soap off the damn shelf, the douchebag was just fucking dicking with you.” Claus tossed his fork down and stood.

I closed my eyes. Didn’t I look like an idiot?

“Fucker wasn’t good enough for you, Stevie, and I thank god he ran.” He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and stalked to the door. “I’ll be right back. Eat.” He stormed out the door and slammed it behind him.

I flopped back on the couch and couldn’t hold back the tears.

*

Chapter Three

Claus

My anger rolled off of me.

She had to make his plate before she could eat?

She did his fucking laundry while he did jack shit?

I took a deep drag off my cigarette and gazed down the street. Taillights faded in the distance, and a dog barked next door.

From the day I had met Paul, I knew he was a piece of shit.

I could just feel it when I was around him.

Now Stevie had cemented everything.

I had to get out of her living room before I blew, and Stevie thought I was mad at her.

I was anything *but* mad at Stevie.

“Fucking bastard,” I growled.

Tony and I had always had a suspicion that Paul was a dick, but we never had proof in front of our faces. Stevie always gushed about him, and he always seemed to be on his best behavior.

Fucking narcissist.

He had left Stevie at the altar under the guise of changing his mind and not wanting to hurt Stevie. What a crock of shit.

I had done a little digging into Paul the past few days and found that Stevie was not the only person in his life. He ditched Stevie because how was he supposed to have four girlfriends when he was going to make Stevie his wife sitting at home?

I hated the guy when I found out about the cheating, but now I wanted to kill him for treating Stevie like a servant.

“Claus.”

I spun around, surprised, and saw Stevie standing on the threshold. “Jesus,” I mumbled.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “Uh, I just wanted to tell you that you can go home. You don’t need to stay. I’m not even hungry right now.”

“Not leaving, sweets. I just needed a moment.”

“You were only here for five minutes and needed a moment?” she asked.

I needed a moment to keep myself from finding Paul and killing him. I

didn't need a moment from Stevie. "Had nothing to do with you."

"Well, whatever. You can go. I'm getting tired and plan just to fall asleep."

I tossed my cigarette on the ground and stubbed it out with the toe of my boot. "Not leaving." It had taken me days to get the nerve to show up at Stevie's door, and I wasn't ready to leave yet.

"Claus," she sighed. "I don't feel like entertaining."

I shook my head. "When have you ever had to entertain me, sweets? I stayed at your house more than I did my own. Let's eat dinner and watch TV. You don't even have to talk to me if you don't want to."

She leveled her gaze at me. "All I wanted to do was eat Chinese food until I felt like I would throw up and decorate my living room while watching Christmas movies."

I nodded and stepped toward her. "Sounds like a chill night to me. I'm in."

"Claus," she protested.

"I'm not leaving, Stevie." My words were final. She didn't even have to speak to me as long as she let me in.

"I'm not kidding when I say I just want to decorate my tree."

I tugged on the end of the Santa hat I was still wearing. "I'm just the man to help with that job."

She backed into the house and held the door open for me. "Not a peep," she muttered.

I zipped my fingers across my lips and pretended to toss the key over my shoulders.

I slipped back into the house. I was still pissed about what a tool Paul was, but I didn't want to show it. I didn't want Stevie to think that I was mad at her or that anything was her fault.

Our plates were still on the coffee table, and I sat in front of mine.

This would be the first and last plate Stevie would ever make for me.

I was a thirty-one-year-old man who was more than capable of making my own plate.

We ate in silence while we stuffed our faces. I filled my plate a second time with more delicious food while Stevie grabbed another egg roll.

I had been around Stevie a good bit of my life, but not for a few years.

Life had happened, and while we both had stayed in our hometown, our

paths didn't cross much unless it was on purpose.

Tony and Jane getting married. Tony's birthday every year. Holidays.

That was about it.

That was the past, though.

This holiday, and every day after that, things were going to be different between Stevie and me.

It had taken seeing Stevie walk down the aisle away from me to realize what I wanted.

Paul running had broken Stevie's heart, but it had woken me up.

If I was ever going to have a shot with Stevie, it was now.

Too bad I wasn't allowed to talk for the rest of the night.

*

Stevie

I stood back and took in my pretty tree, all lit up.

"Looks good, sweets," Claus called.

Those had been the first words he had said since I let him in the front door the second time. We ate dinner without talking, just like I wanted. It should have been awkward and uncomfortable, but it wasn't. Things were never uncomfortable with Claus.

After, he helped me put away the extras, and then I camped out on the floor sorting through all of my decorations.

They were all pretty worn and in need of replacing, but they would do for this year at least. My plan had been to buy all new decorations and ornaments after moving in with Paul, but yet again, that plan was not going to happen.

So plans I had made were just not going to happen.

"You think?" I asked.

"You always had a flare for making it look like Santa threw up all over," he smirked.

"Claus," I gasped. "It's called festive." Every branch had at least one ornament on it, and then there were all the glittery branches I tucked into the tree that shot out all over.

Colorful and festive were great words to describe my tree.

"Right," he drawled.

I turned toward him and folded my arms over my chest. "I'm sorry, but I do recall you showing up at my door with a Santa hat on. You were festive first which was surprising since you are always a grump around the holidays."

Claus shrugged and kicked his feet up on the coffee table. "I never really had much to be happy about when everyone is hanging with their families and opening presents." He held up one finger. "Shit parents," he added another finger, "no money for presents. Not exactly the recipe for a happy holiday when you're a kid."

I propped my hands on my hips. "Well, I can't argue with you on that, but you did have Tony growing up. And my parents."

Claus nodded. "I did, sweets. Pretty sure if I hadn't, I wouldn't be here right now. You guys were the only thing that gave me hope."

"But you never came over on Christmas morning. Mom and Dad always had presents for you." Now that I thought about it, I never saw Claus on Christmas day. He would always come over the next day and act like he hadn't missed Christmas. "Why did you never come over on Christmas day?" I demanded.

"Christmas is family time, Stevie," he replied simply. "And I will forever be grateful for the presents your parents bought me every year, but being at your house on Christmas wasn't right."

"You're joking, right?" I tipped my head to the side. "You were like Tony's brother."

"Like and actually are two different things. Just drop it, sweets. I was fine on my own for a day."

"What did you do?" I asked. "Sit at home waiting for the clock to turn the twenty-sixth?"

"Basically," Claus laughed. "Though I did start volunteering at the homeless shelter when I got older. This will be my fifteenth year dishing out Christmas ham."

How did I not know this? "You just blew my mind. How did I not know this about you?"

"Because you had your own life to worry about, sweets. Why would you care about what I was doing?"

Because I cared about him. Even if he was my brother's best friend, I still cared about him and didn't want him to be spending the holidays by

himself. “So, what are you doing this Christmas?” I asked.

“I told you. This will be my fifteenth year volunteering.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Well, then, I guess this will be my first year volunteering. And also Jane and Tony’s first year. We can all meet here, then head to the shelter after breakfast and opening presents.”

“You don’t have to do that, Stevie,” Claus called.

I shrugged and turned back to the tree. “You’re right, I don’t, but I want to.” And plus, it would maybe help me feel better because I felt selfish and self-absorbed for not knowing all these years Claus was alone on Christmas. I glanced at him over my shoulder. “Kind of like you didn’t need to come over tonight, but here you are. I’m sure Jane put you up to it since she’s not here. I about had to put her on the plane to Hawaii because she was so worried about me.” I looked up at the tree and sighed. “Did you know she hated Paul?”

“Pretty sure we all hated Paul besides you, sweets,” Claus chuckled. “All we needed was to print up some shirts, and it would have been official.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Well, I’m part of the Paul hater club now. I just don’t understand why he couldn’t have told me before the wedding. Just tell me he didn’t want me anymore and not do it in front of a room full of our friends and family. Would that have been so hard?” I whispered.

“He wasn’t a good guy. Thankfully, the trash took itself out.”

Wasn’t that the truth? “Why didn’t you guys tell me?” I turned back to him. “I had no idea any of you didn’t like Paul until after he ditched me at the altar.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t think it was my place.”

“So you were just going to stand by and watch me marry that asshole?”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Look, sweets, I don’t have the right thing to say. Should we have all said something? Yes. Did we not because we didn’t want to be wrong or be the one to break your heart? Yes, but if I could go back and do it all over again, I would have told you to ditch the tool the first time I met him. And based on the shit you told me about him, you would have been better off the past two years.”

“You want to know the crazy thing?”

He nodded.

“I don’t even know why he called it off. I haven’t even talked to him.” I motioned to the boxes all around. “My whole life was packed up, and he doesn’t even have the decency to tell me why he doesn’t want me.”

“You’re better off not knowing and just moving on, Stevie.”

“Am I?” I whispered. “I mean, you spend two years with someone, and then they leave you without a word, and you think it’s better I not know why?” I dashed away the tear that streaked down my cheek.

“Stevie,” Claus called.

Ugh, I could hear the pity in his voice.

I didn’t want that.

Not from Claus.

Give me grumpy and growly Claus over him feeling sorry for me.

I mean, here I was crying over a guy who, looking back, was not very good for me, and I wanted to know what was wrong with me that he didn’t want me anymore.

I threw my hands up in the air. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. I don’t want to think about Paul ever again.” I glared at Claus. “This is why I said you could stay but couldn’t talk. We talk, and then suddenly, we’re talking about Pussy Paul.”

“Is that what we’re calling him now?” A smirk spread across Claus’ face. “Because I can get behind that.”

“No, because we’re not talking about him.” I pointed at the TV. “We are going to finish watching *The Grinch* while I put the garland on the banister, and neither one of us is going to speak one single word.” I should kick him out, but I knew he wouldn’t go. And if I was being honest with myself, I liked having him here. Even if he wasn’t talking, he was helping to distract me from wallowing in my misery. “You got it?”

Claus held up his hands and nodded.

“Good.”

Claus stared back at me.

“Great,” I chirped.

He tipped his head to the side.

“You’re really good at this no talking.”

He nodded.

“Do you want some ice cream? Jane sent over groceries, and she must think I’m drowning my misery in ice cream because she sent over every flavor of the grocery store’s ice cream.”

He again nodded.

“Do you care what kind?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“I know I told you we weren’t going to talk, but can you please tell me what kind of ice cream you want?”

He shook his head and stood. He strolled into the kitchen, and I moved into the entryway to watch him go into the freezer, then grab two bowls, and make two heaping bowls of ice cream.

He put everything away and then walked toward me with the two bowls. He handed me one but didn’t let it go when I reached for it. “You never have to wait on me, sweets. You’re the one who deserves to be waited on.” He let go of my bowl and headed back to his spot on the couch.

My vision blurred as I looked at my bowl of ice cream, realizing he had picked my favorite. Pistachio. “How did you–.”

“Tony and I were on the way home from the movies one night, and you called to ask him to bring home ice cream. Pistachio. It’s your favorite.”

That sounded like something I would have done, but I didn’t remember doing it. “And you remembered?”

“I remember the important things, sweets.”

I walked into the living room and stood in front of him. “My favorite ice cream is important?”

He shrugged and leaned around me to look at the TV. “It is to me.”

I plopped down on the couch next to him and tucked my legs under me. “I think it’s best if we go back to no talking.” I didn’t know how to deal with Claus thinking my favorite ice cream was something important he needed to remember.

I had always thought Claus was gorgeous, and more than once had wondered what it would have been like to kiss him, but never in a million years did I think that he thought there were important things about me he needed to remember.

“Whatever you want, sweets.”

And there was that. Sweets.

I had always just been Stevie. No nickname. At least not from Claus.

Now he knocked on my door and called me sweets.

That was... sweet. And totally confusing because I didn’t know what it meant.

I mean, I would know what it meant from anyone but Claus.

I leaned back into the couch and tucked my legs under me.

I couldn't think about this anymore. It was going to drive me insane.

It was time to go back to no talking and shutting my brain off. For the rest of the night, all I wanted was to sink into cheesy Christmas movies, and that was it.

Whatever the heck Claus wanted and was up to could wait until tomorrow. Or one hundred years from now.

Tonight was not the night.

*

Chapter Four

Claus

I slowly slid out from next to Stevie and managed to wedge a pillow under her cheek.

A small grumble rumbled from her lips, but she didn't wake up.

After she had gotten over the fact that I knew her favorite ice cream, we had gone back to silence, but it was a good silence.

It was just good to be around her.

We didn't need to be talking constantly and trying to impress each other. We were just natural with each other, and that was such a rare thing.

So rare that I had never had it before.

I had known Stevie for twenty years, but we never hung out like we did tonight.

Just each other.

I ran my fingers through my hair and watched her sleep.

Stevie's beauty never escaped me.

I would have had to have been blind not to see it.

Her wavy light brown hair was always down and flowing around her. Her golden-brown eyes were always warm and welcoming. Her smile could light up a room, and her sweet, innocent face could make a grown man stutter.

Growing up, I had watched her go from a gangly teenager into a beautiful woman with curves for days. Curves that haunted me in my dreams.

Curves that I wanted to make mine.

She had wondered why I was going to let her marry Paul even when I thought the guy was an asshole.

It was the same reason I hadn't made her mine all of these years.

Stevie deserved someone better than me. Someone better than a kid who wasn't good enough for his own parents.

Stevie deserved the world and whatever she wanted.

She had wanted Paul, and I wasn't going to be the one to take that from her.

Thankfully, Pussy Paul had taken himself out.

Now I knew I wasn't going to be able to let her go again.

I had almost lost her in that church.
It wasn't going to happen again.
Stevie was going to be mine.
I just had to trick her into thinking I was worthy of her.

*

Chapter Five

Stevie

“Oh, I thought you had moved. Did your husband decide to move in with you?”

I struggled to juggle my mail in my arms and pasted a smile on my face. “Oh, uh, no, Mrs. James. I’ll be living here.” *For the rest of my life, along with my ten cats.*

“Well, it will be nice to have a young married couple next door.” Mrs. James was bundled up with a stocking hat on her head and a shovel in her hands.

I didn’t know what she was going to do with that shovel, though. We were predicted to get a couple of inches of snow tonight, but that was hours from now.

As opposed to me living here the past three years as a single woman? Mrs. James was losing a few marbles upstairs. “Actually, it’s just going to be me. We decided not to get married.” I wish there were a way to have a billboard broadcasting the fact Paul and I did, in fact, not get married, and I would be adopting my first cat in the new year.

“Oh my, honey. I’m so sorry to hear you weren’t able to keep that man.” She tsked and shook her head. “Dating is so hard these days.”

My. God.

As if this ninety-year-old bat knew anything about dating these days. “Actually,” I started.

“Stevie!”

I whirled around, my mail flying all over the sidewalk, and watched with my jaw dropped as Claus walked up the sidewalk toward me.

“Maybe the husband is back to patch things up,” Mrs. James called.

I didn’t plan on moving, but Mrs. James might make me change my mind so that I could get away from her.

Claus tipped his head to the side and smiled at Mrs. James. “Hey there. I’m Claus.”

“Not the husband,” I called.

“Just the brother’s best friend,” Claus added.

“Single? Mr. James kicked the bucket a few years ago, and I’m always

looking to open up my roster. Oh, and Stevie needs a replacement since she can't seem to hold onto a man." Mrs. James added.

I rolled my eyes and crouched to grab my mail. "God help me," I muttered.

"For the moment, I am single." Claus got down on one knee and helped me grab my mail. "Hello, sweets," he whispered to me.

My stomach did a little flip, and I had to remind myself this was Claus, my brother's best friend.

"Have someone in mind?" Mrs. James asked.

"Please stop engaging her," I whispered. "She's innocent but senile. If we keep talking to her, we'll never get back in the house."

"Does that mean I am invited inside this time?"

I rolled my eyes and snatched the letters from his hand. "If you can silence Mrs. James, then yes. You are more than welcome to come in."

Claus winked at me and stood. "Well, we'd love to stand around and chat, Mrs. James, but it seems that Stevie just took me off the market. I do have an uncle who lives upstate who might be interested in taking you on a date."

"Uncle?" Mrs. James called. "About how old is he? I may be in my nineties, but I'm still a spring chicken."

Oh. My. God.

This was not at all how I thought Claus would get us away from Mrs. James.

Claus grabbed my arm and pulled me up. He wrapped his arms around my waist, pressing my front to his side, and pressed a kiss to the side of my head. "He's seventy-nine. All the ladies in the nursing home love him."

What was happening? Why was this happening?

All I had wanted to do was get my mail that had been piling up the past week, and instead, I was in Claus' arms while he talked to Mrs. James about getting her a date.

"Oh," Mrs. James gasped. "A ladies' man, and I do love a little bit of a competition. Give him my number and tell him to give me a call. Stevie has it."

"Will do, Mrs. James. Have a nice day," Claus called.

She shuffled up her walk and back into her house with her shovel in toe.

"What do you suppose she is going to do with that shovel inside?" I

asked.

Claus chuckled and squeezed his arm around my waist. "God only knows, sweets. Let's get inside before she comes back out."

"You can let go of me."

He looked down at me but didn't move his arm. "Do I have to?" he asked.

I blinked three times, trying to figure out what was going on now. "Whenever you are around, Claus, I have no idea what is happening."

"Keeps you on your toes, Stevie." His arm dropped from around my waist, but he threaded his fingers through mine and pulled me up the sidewalk.

"I didn't know I needed to be kept on my toes."

He pulled me through the front door and tugged the door shut behind us.

I dropped my mail on the table by the front door and looked down at our hands which were still connected. "I think you can let go now."

He dropped my hand but smirked. "For now," he muttered. He moved into the living room and slowly looked around. "I see you've done some more decorating since I left."

I had.

I had woken up somehow rejuvenated, even though I had spent the night on the couch with a pillow shoved under my head, thanks to Claus.

"And unpacking," he observed.

There was a stack of empty boxes by the front door, ready to head out to the garbage.

"Well, I guess I decided to embrace the fact that all of my plans I had have gone away, and it's time to get on with life." Though moving away from Mrs. James was appealing now.

"And now you've got new plans?" Claus asked.

"Actually, no. Not at all. I think the one thing I learned from all of this is that you can't plan too much because the universe has a way of making its own plans." This might explain why Claus was on my couch again because I hadn't planned for him to come over, and yet here he was. "Don't you work?" I asked.

Claus smiled. "I do, sweets, but I managed to clear my schedule through Christmas. A perk of being my own boss."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay. Well, then, don't you have something better to

do than sitting on my couch and hooking up my neighbor with your uncle?" I shuffled through my mail, looking for anything interesting, but it was nothing but bills and junk.

"There are a few things I could be doing right now, but none of those things were as appealing as spending some more time with you."

I glanced up at him. "I can't tell if you're patronizing me or actually serious."

"Serious, sweets." He kicked his feet up on the coffee table. "Are we ordering dinner, or do you want me to cook?"

"You can cook?" I asked.

Claus tsked and shook his head. "Sweets, do you know what I do for a living?"

I cocked my head to the side. "Uh, well..." Jesus, I had no freaking clue what Claus did. "Why don't I know what you do?" I asked.

Claus shrugged. "Because I'm just your brother's best friend who you don't see often?"

I rubbed my hand over my chest. "I feel horrible that I don't know what you do for a living. Even more horrible than I did last night when you told me why you never came over for Christmas." I swear I wasn't that self-centered that I only cared about myself, but the fact I didn't know what Claus did for a living was a big red flag that I was.

"I'm a chef, sweets, and it's okay you didn't know. Not like I run around broadcasting it."

"Where do you work?" I asked. There were only a few restaurants in town, and I figured I would know if Claus worked at one of them, but he said he was his own boss.

"Depends."

I tipped my head to the side. "Depends on what?" I asked.

"On what day it is. I'm a private chef, Stevie. I have a few regular clients, but I also have clients who hire me for parties and whatnot."

Claus was a private chef.

Wow.

"How did I not know this? And who around here can afford a private chef?"

Claus stood and wandered into the kitchen. "I have two local clients; the rest are out of town. How do you feel about Italian?"

“I feel that you should check my cupboards before promising me Italian food for dinner. A frozen lasagna is probably going to be the closest we’ll get with what I have in my house.”

Claus cringed. “We can do better than frozen lasagna, sweets. Mind if I look around to see what you’ve got?”

I splayed my hand out. “Have at it, but you will be disappointed.” I sat at the kitchen table and watched Claus rummage through my cabinets. “Who are your clients in town?” I asked. It wasn’t like we lived in a tiny town where everyone knew each other, but I would like to think I knew who would be able to afford a private chef.

“One manages the Walmart on the outskirts of town, and the other is a recluse author who lives in the Circle Valley.”

I furrowed my brow. “We have a recluse author in town?” That was news to me. Hell, it seemed like everything Claus was telling me was news I didn’t know.

“Matt would be happy to know that you don’t know about him. He likes it that way.”

“Does Matt have a last name? I might have to give him a little *Google*.” I pulled out my phone.

“You can figure it out on your own, sweets. He’s not too hard to find.”

My interest was piqued even more.

Five minutes later, I was trying to pick my jaw off the floor when I figured out the town's recluse author was none other than Matt Miles, who wrote the wildly popular Phoenix Tower series.

“Well, you really don’t have much when it comes to ingredients, but I think I can whip together something for dinner,” Claus called. “We can loosely call it Italian.”

I flitted my hand at him. “Have at it. My kitchen doesn’t see much action other than the microwave going for a whirl most nights.”

Claus shook his head and shrugged off his leather jacket. He moved behind me, draping it over my chair’s back. “Find out who the recluse author is?” he asked softly next to my ear.

“Matt Miles?” I breathed out.

“Good job, sweets.”

I closed my eyes and felt those three words to my core.

“Stevie,” Claus called.

I opened my eyes as I turned my head slightly and tipped my head back. My eyes connected with his, and the air whooshed from my lungs. “Yes?” I whispered.

He leaned close till his lips brushed against the curve of my ear. “Thank you for letting me in, sweets. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

It was happening again. No clue what was going on, but this time I liked it. I liked having Claus in my kitchen making me dinner and his breath on my neck.

I liked it a lot.

*

Chapter Six

Claus

“Oh my god.”

All I could do was just sit back and watch.

“Sweet Jesus, Claus,” Stevie moaned.

“Good, sweets?” I asked.

Stevie closed her eyes, and her head dropped back. “How did you do that? I have never in my life had anything like that before.”

“There’s a lot of things you can do to jazz up a tin of tomatoes and some noodles, Stevie.”

She opened her eyes and looked me dead in the eye. “You are a miracle worker, Claus. Whatever Matt Miles is paying you is not enough. Tell him he needs to double it, or you’ll never cook for him again. I am not your agent, and I say you need to be paid a ton more.”

“Sweets,” I chuckled. “I am paid fairly, but I will let Matt know my services are in high demand with you.”

Her cheeks tinged pink, and she wiped her mouth. “Um, okay.”

“You up for some dessert?”

She licked her lips. “Um, well, what did you have in mind?”

I chuckled and nodded to the fridge. “Well, you do have a freezer full of ice cream, but if you’re looking for something else...” I trailed off.

“Ice cream is great,” she jumped. “Uh, let me clean up, and I’ll get you a bowl.” She reached for my plate, but I grabbed it before she could. “You’re not cleaning up after me or fixing me a bowl of ice cream, Stevie.” I wasn’t kidding when I told her last night she wasn’t going to make a plate for me again. “I will take you sitting at this table sipping your wine while I clean up. It’s always nice to have company.”

She licked her lips and nodded. “Uh, I think I like that arrangement. I could put on some music if you want.”

I nodded and gathered our plates. “Whatever you want, sweets.” I dropped our dishes in the sink full of hot, soapy water and rolled up my sleeves.

A few seconds later, the festive opening notes of *I’ll Be Home For Christmas* started.

“Are you really surprised I picked Christmas music?” she laughed.

I glanced at her over my shoulder and couldn't help but smile. “Not at all, sweets. Though I was hoping you'd put on something we could dance to, but I can make this work.” I dried my hands on the dish towel and sauntered over to Stevie. I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my arms.

“Claus,” she gasped.

“Shh, Stevie. I can't tell you how long I've wanted this.”

Her eyes widened, and she tipped her head to the side. “Dancing with me?” she whispered.

She laid her hands on my chest, and I wrapped my arms around her waist. “Among other things, sweets.”

We swayed back and forth, just enjoying the slow tempo of the song and the feel of Stevie in my arms.

“What are we doing, Claus?” she asked as the song faded out and *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* started.

My eyes connected with hers. “Something I've wanted to do for a while but never had the balls to do it.” I leaned in, my lips a breath away from hers. “You deserve so much more than I can give you, Stevie, but I can't seem to stay away from you. I managed to for years, but now I can't.”

Her eyes darted down to my lips and then back to my eyes. “Are you going to kiss me?” she asked softly. “Because I thought about kissing you a lot when I was younger.”

My world rocked on his axis, knowing Stevie had thought about kissing me before. The summer she turned eighteen, I started wondering what it would be like to kiss Stevie. Before then, she had caught my eye with her blossoming looks, but that summer, I wondered what it would be like to make Stevie mine. “You still want that?” I asked. Now I was going to get my chance.

Her breath hitched, and she slid her hands up my chest. She bit her bottom lip and nodded. “Yes, please.”

I didn't hesitate.

I didn't give her a chance to change her mind.

Stevie was going to be mine.

I closed the distance between us, and my lips touched hers.

The world around us seemed to fade away as the gentle pressure of her lips on mine sent a thrill through my entire body. It was a delicate dance, a

hesitant exploration that spoke volumes without a single word. She delved her fingers into my hair, and her lips melded against mine. A moan rumbled from my chest, and I held her tight against me.

“Claus,” she gasped against my lips. “More,” she pleaded.

Our lips met again, and time seemed to slow. It was a gentle and tender kiss that was a dance of vulnerability and curiosity as we both tried to wrap our heads around being in this moment. The soft pressure of her lips on mine sent a shiver down my spine.

She pulled back slightly. “Wow.”

“Yeah, wow,” I agreed.

“Have you really wanted, I, uh, mean... You really want to kiss me and not just because you feel sorry for me?” she blurted.

I brushed my thumb across her bottom lip. “Ever since you turned eighteen, Stevie. That summer, we went to the lake for a swim because it was so hot, and you in that black bikini has been burned in my brain ever since. I dream of that day. I dream of you, Stevie.”

“But that was years ago,” she whispered. “You’ve wanted me for years and never told me?”

“You deserve so much more than I can give you, sweets. I’m a selfish man, but I knew I couldn’t make you mine. Not back then.”

“And now?” she asked.

“I tried to give you up. Paul was supposed to be your forever, the guy who could give you what I couldn’t, but thank god he fucked it up.” I shook my head. “I never liked that asshole.”

She slapped my chest. “Claus,” she scolded. “You’ve wanted to kiss me this whole time, but instead, you were going to let me marry someone else?”

“You were happy, and I didn’t want to ruin it.”

She rolled her eyes. “If I hear you say I was so happy and you didn’t want to ruin it one more time, I am going to scream. You can see where that supposed happiness got me. Left at the altar with no explanation.”

I cringed. “Uh, well, I know Paul didn’t give you an explanation, but I did do some digging into him.”

“What?”

Right after our first kiss was probably not the best time to have this discussion. “He wasn’t a good guy, Stevie.”

“You better tell me exactly what you’re talking about, or I swear to god I

will never kiss you again, Claus.”

That was a threat I was not willing to test. “He had another girl... or two.”

“No,” Stevie gasped. “How? What? HOW?” she cried.

I cringed and kept my arms around her. “I didn’t dig too deep into it, sweets, but the guy seemed to be stringing quite a few women along. From what I can tell, you were the most serious, but he cut ties with you when...”

“When what?” she demanded.

“When he found out one of the other girls was pregnant.”

Her jaw dropped, and I didn’t know what was going to come next.

Anger at being cheated on?

Rage at the fact Paul had gotten another woman pregnant?

Neither of those happened.

Nope.

Stevie threw her head back and let out a loud laugh.

A cackle.

She straight-up cackled like I had just told the funniest joke.

“Oh my god,” she cried. She wiped her brow with her hand and couldn’t stop laughing. She collapsed into my arms and she pressed her forehead to my shoulder.

“Uh, sweets? You okay?” I asked gently.

She raised her head and smiled up at me. “I am so freaking relieved that I wasn’t as unlucky as whoever he got pregnant. That poor woman is forever tied to Pussy Paul now. And that poor baby,” she sighed, “that poor little baby has Pussy Paul as their dad.”

Yeah, this was not at all how I saw Stevie taking the news that she had been cheated on.

“My god, did I dodge a bullet, Claus.” Her body relaxed into mine. “There is a tiny part of me that is pissed the hell off he was cheating on me, but the rest of me is relieved. So freaking relieved.” She raised her hand in the air. “Thank you, sweet baby Jesus, for making Paul a pussy who ran for the hills.”

“So, this means you’re not mad at me for checking out Paul?” I winced.

Stevie scoffed and laid her hand over my heart. “If you wouldn’t have done it, I know Tony would have once he got back from Hawaii next week.”

She was right. “Or even Jane would have,” I pointed out.

Stevie nodded. “Yeah, she would have, too. You just beat them to the punch. You want to know what *I* just figured out?”

“Am I going to like it?”

She nodded. “Yeah, totally. There are two things.”

“Lay it on me, sweets.” Nothing could knock me off the high I was on after kissing Stevie. Throw in the fact I told her what I knew about Paul, which meant I had zero secrets from her now, and I was never coming down.

She held up one finger. “I like it when you call me sweets. Please don’t stop doing it.”

I nodded and chuckled. “I can do that.”

She held up another finger. “I am so over Paul. It was eating me alive trying to figure out what I had done wrong, but now I know he was just a complete douchebag that I, unfortunately, wasted two years on, but now he will never get another second of my time.” She leaned up and pressed a soft, sweet kiss to my lips. “Now you get all of my seconds.”

“That right there,” I whispered. “That is why I call you sweets.”

“You called me sweets before you kissed me,” she pointed out.

I shrugged. “Foreshadowing.”

“Claus,” she laughed. “You knew this was how we were going to be? Dancing in my kitchen to Christmas music after you cooked me the best meal of my life?”

I shrugged. “The fine details I wasn’t too sure about, but I knew I couldn’t go another day without you knowing I wanted you. Pussy Paul was a wake-up call for me. I knew if I didn’t make you mine now, you were going to find some other tool to marry.”

“Are you criticizing my choice of men?” she asked.

I tipped my head to the side. “You were going to marry Pussy Paul, sweets.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed away from me. “And now I’m standing in my kitchen kissing you. What does that say?”

I reached for her hand, but she ducked to the left and pranced into the living room. “Stevie,” I called jovially. “You’re already running from me?”

“Yes, but I’m hoping you’ll follow me,” she sang.

Oh, sweet Stevie.

I would go to the ends of the earth and back for her.

I had waited years for her, and I was never going to let her go now.

*

Chapter Seven

Stevie

“You left me.”

I leaned against the door and crossed my arms over my chest.

“You saw me out there struggling and just left me.” Claus climbed the porch stairs with a coffee in each hand and a bag tucked under his arm.

“You’re the one who started it with Mrs. James last week when you told her you would hook her up with your uncle.” I pushed off the doorframe and grabbed one of the coffees. “She’s just waiting for you to pay up.”

He took a sip of his coffee. “You wouldn’t happen to know a man in his seventies who is looking for a date, would you?”

“Claus,” I gasped. “Did you lie to poor Mrs. James about having a hot-to-trot uncle at the nursing home for her?”

He shrugged and handed me the bag under his arm. “I have no family, Stevie. At least not any I know about.”

“You’re crazy, Claus.” I reached up on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “But I like it. Maybe we can contact the nursing home later and see if someone fits the description.”

“You sure do know how to have a good time, sweets,” he chuckled. “Now, get in the house before I ravage you on your front porch for the whole neighborhood to see.”

I rolled my eyes but ducked back into the house. “Did you bring me a treat?” I shook the white bag and peeked inside.

“That is one of the best donuts in a fifty-mile radius. Luckily, I worked with the pastry chef a few years back, and he hooks me up when I give him a call.”

I reached into the bag and pulled out a chocolate iced Long John. “It doesn’t look special,” I mused.

Claus grabbed the donut from me and held it up to my mouth. “Trust me on this, sweets. Have steered you wrong yet?”

He had known and hated Paul since he met him and never told me, but if you looked past that, Claus had always shot straight with me.

I took a bite, and my eyes rolled back in my head. That seemed to be a normal reaction whenever I ate anything Claus made or now recommended.

“Good, right?” Claus called through my heavenly haze.

My eyes fluttered open, and I reached for the rest of the donut. “You better pray you bought two; otherwise, we are going to wrestle for that one.” I snatched it out of Claus’ hand and flopped onto the couch.

He rolled up the bag and headed into the kitchen. “I got three. I ate mine on the way over, and the other one is for us to share later.”

I hummed and enjoyed the chocolatey goodness.

“Stevie.” Claus’ tone was low and rumbled through me. He was standing in front of me, and his eyes were filled with lust. “What did I tell you about moaning like that?”

I finished the last bite and licked the frosting off my fingertips. “Not to do it unless I wanted to take things to the next level.”

It had been five days since Claus had kissed me, and every day since then we had spent together rediscovering who we were. And also discovering each other’s bodies.

I was ready for the next level.

“So knock it off,” Claus growled.

I shook my head. “Nope, sorry. The only thing that is going to get off is you and me.” I jumped up from the couch and launched myself into Claus’ arms. “I’m not into waiting anymore, Claus. I want you, and I don’t care what you say.”

He grunted and wrapped his arms around me to keep me from crashing to the floor. “It’s not that I don’t want you, sweets, I just want you to be sure that this is what you want. I’m already addicted to your taste, and I know once I get all of you, I’m not going to be able to let you go.”

I trailed a finger over his lips and smiled. “Then take me, Claus, because I plan never to let you go either.”

Claus’ mouth assaulted mine, and all I could do was give in and hope he never stopped. I had never been kissed with such passion or need before. His tongue swept into my mouth, caressing and tasting as he took everything I had to give. Both of his hands were tangled in my hair, and I moaned low as I pressed my body flush against him and held on as I tried to feel everything at once.

“Tell me you don’t want this, sweets. Tell me to fucking leave you alone,” he growled against my lips. “You’re too good for me.”

Wrong, wrong, and wrong.

Claus was everything I wanted, needed, desired.

I panted as I leaned back and looked into his dark brown eyes that were pools of desire. A desire that Claus felt for me. “No,” I whispered. That was the last thing I wanted right now. Claus was the only thing I could think of. I knew deep down that this was going to be so much more than anything either of us knew.

“I waited so long for this, baby. I plan to take my time with you tonight and taste every inch of you.” He leaned down, his lips next to my ear, and a tremor rocked my body. “You deserve so much more than you’ve ever had, sweets. So much more,” he mumbled. “And I’m going to be the man to give it to you.”

Claus cupped my cheek and ran his thumb over my lip. “I’m not good enough for you, but I don’t care anymore. I’m going to make you mine and treat you like a fucking queen until the day I die.”

His lips descended on mine, firm and unyielding. His hands slid down my body, winding around my back, and he grabbed my butt. He lifted me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. “I’m not waiting any fucking longer,” he growled against my lips. My arms circled his neck, and he moved up the steps, his lips never leaving mine as he stalked down the hallway and into my bedroom.

“Aren’t you going to turn on the lights?” I asked as I ripped my lips from his and looked around the dark room.

Claus chuckled low and flipped on the lights. “They’re on, sweets. I want to see every inch of you.”

He tossed me on the bed, and I pulled my shirt over my head. I unhooked the clasp of my bra and let it fall to the floor. “I’m ready.”

*

Claus

Her lush, round, perfect tits were on display, and all I could do was stare. “You’re fucking killing me, sweets,” I croaked. Her hands went to the zipper of her jeans, and I stopped breathing as she slowly pulled the zipper down.

She shimmied out of the pants and kicked them onto the floor.

I stepped to the bed and reached out to wrap my arms around her and pulled her flush against my body. “Hmm, I think you have too many clothes

on, Claus,” she hummed.

“I guess you’re going to have to help me get out of them.”

Her fingers went to the hem of my shirt in the back, and she worked the shirt over my head, flinging it over my shoulder. Her lips were a breath away from mine, and I couldn’t resist her any longer. I threaded my fingers through her hair and slammed my lips down on her mouth.

She whimpered and wrapped her arms around me, her body melting into mine as I ravaged her mouth. I grabbed the waistband of her underwear and slowly worked them down her legs. I tore my lips from hers and kneeled on the bed in front of her as she kicked off her underwear.

She fell back on the bed, and I kneeled between her spread legs.

“So beautiful,” I growled as my fingers traced over the lips of her pussy that were wet with her desire.

Her body trembled. “Claus, please,” she moaned as I grabbed her lush thighs and pulled her sweet pussy to my lips as I leaned down.

“Mine,” I growled as my tongue parted her moist lips, and her sweet taste hit my tongue. My tongue flicked her clit, and I felt a tremor rock throughout her body while her fingers delved into my hair, trying to hang on. “Spread your legs more, sweets.” I looked up, her golden brown eyes fogged with desire, staring back down at me.

Her legs dropped open, giving me more access to touch and taste. Her breathing became labored, almost panting, as I resumed my assault on her sweet clit. I nipped her clit between my teeth, then quickly soothed it by sucking it into my mouth. “Claus,” she moaned.

My fingers parted the lips of her pussy, and I quickly flicked her clit with my tongue. She panted softly; her legs tensed as I flicked her clit one last time, and she came all over my tongue, her pussy drenched with her desire. I climbed up her body, and as she buried her face in my neck and wrapped her arms around me. “What the hell did you just do to me?” she gasped.

“Gave you what you deserve, sweets.”

She hummed as her body came down from her climax and wrapped her arms even tighter around me. “This is all a dream I’m going to wake up from, and I’ll be in my bed alone. This is too good to be true.”

“It’s not a dream. Dreams don’t feel this fucking good,” I grunted.

“The only thing that would make this better would be if you didn’t have pants on.” She ground her pussy into my jeans-covered erection, driving me

even more insane. “These need to come off,” she whispered into my ear.

I snaked my hand between us and yanked the zipper down. My need for Stevie multiplied times one hundred as her hand cupped my dick through my underwear.

I toed off my boots, kicked them off the bed, and pulled my pants and boxers off in one sweep. I wrapped Stevie in my arms and fell back on the bed.

Stevie leaned back, her hand grabbing my dick, and she stroked up and down. A drop of cum dripped down, and she smeared it over the tip with her thumb. “Just one taste,” she mumbled right before she shimmied down, and then her mouth surrounded my dick as she bobbed her head up and down while her tongue caressed every inch of my cock.

“Stevie,” I moaned as she gagged on my cock but didn’t back off. She grabbed her hair with one hand, holding it back while the other hand grabbed the base of my cock as her mouth continued to work me over. “God damn,” I growled when I felt the tip of my cock hit the back of her throat.

She hummed low, and the vibrations went straight to my cock, adding a whole new feel to the heaven she was giving me. I pumped my hips, itching for more, knowing she would give it to me. She gagged again, and I knew I couldn’t take anymore.

I grabbed her hair, prying her mouth off of my dick and hauled her up my body and slammed my lips down on her mouth. I delved my fingers into her hair, holding her right where I needed her. Her hand slid down between our bodies, and she grabbed my dick, stroking it as my tongue invaded her mouth.

She lifted her hips up, slowly sliding down onto my cock, her sweet warmth wrapping around me. I growled low when she was fully seated but didn’t move. “Claus,” she moaned, resting her forehead against me. “You’re mine now,” she whimpered as she slightly lifted off of me but slammed her pussy back down.

“I think that is my line, sweets.” I grabbed her hips, my hands relishing the feel of her soft skin beneath them, and lifted her up. “This is where we belong. This... this is mine.” I thrust my hips up, slamming into her wet pussy, and felt the walls grip my dick, and it took everything I had not to fill her up with my cum in that instant.

“Yes,” she screamed as I pounded into her over and over. Her panting

and moaning mingled with my grunts and growling as I felt my release approach. I gathered her hair, fisting it in my hand, and pulled her head back, exposing the graceful arch of her neck. My lips went to her neck, sucking, tasting, and licking as she grasped my shoulders and her fingernails dug into my skin.

I flipped her over, my hips still pounding into her, and her arms wrapped around my back, pressing her body against my chest. "Please, please," she chanted. "Make me yours, Claus."

I leaned back, grabbed her knees, spread her legs apart, and watched as she grabbed her tits, pressing them together. "This is what you need, baby. This is what you deserve." I thrust hard, reaching for everything her body was giving me.

She thrust her hips into me, taking everything I had and demanding more. "Claus," she moaned as her orgasm crashed into her. Her body tensed around me, and her pussy milked my dick, coaxing me into joining her in ecstasy.

My hips thrust one last time into her, and she stole my breath as my cum poured into her. "Mine, all mine," I vowed as I collapsed on top of her and buried my face into her neck.

She started giggling when we were both panting, trying to catch our breath.

"Sweets, what is so funny?"

"Why did you wait so long to tell me you wanted me? We could have been doing this for years," she laughed.

I smiled and pressed a kiss to her neck. "I was too much of a chicken. Figured there had to be something out there better than me."

"Well, you figured wrong, Claus. You were want I needed and wanted all along."

I sighed and gripped her tightly as I rolled onto my back. "Can I just say, for the record, that you were a hell of a lot wilder than I thought you would be, sweets? Like, damn, we are going to have to do that exactly the same way again because it was so good."

She laughed and laid her head on my shoulder. "Whatever you want, Claus. However, at some point, we will have to take a break and figure out what we will tell my brother when we pick them up from the airport tomorrow. I know you're his best friend, but I'm not sure how he is going to

react when he sees us together.”

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I’m not worried about it at all, sweets.” I shouldn’t be, right?

*

Chapter Eight

Stevie

“That could have gone better.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Um, yes, but I’m sure Jane will come around, though. I’m sure she’s jetlagged and needs a good night’s sleep in her bed.” That had to be it.

Yeah, that was right. Tony had no problem with Claus and me being together.

It was Jane who had a few qualms with it.

The main one was that she thought Claus was a player and was just going to hurt me like Paul had.

That was laughable to me and Claus, but obviously, Jane was still traumatized by Paul.

“Jane has loved me for as long as I’ve known her. Why does she suddenly hate me?” Claus grumbled. He headed in the direction of my house and threaded his fingers through mine. “I helped her plan Tony’s birthday party last year, and this is how she acts when she finds out you and I are together?”

He took a sharp right turn, and I gripped the door. “Um, I understand you being upset, but maybe you could try not to crash, yeah?” I giggled.

My phone rang, and I pulled it out, surprised to see Jane’s number. I connected the call and put the phone to my ear. “Did you forget a suitcase or something?”

“I’m sorry,” she blurted. “You just shocked the hell out of me, and I didn’t know what to do because I was prepared to have a blabbing and crying Stevie, not a happy and carefree Stevie. I’m the one who normally helps fix you, and this time you didn’t need me. So, it’s a me problem, not a you and Claus problem.”

“I have to say,” I sighed, “I knew you would eventually come around to Claus and me, but I didn’t think it would be before we got back to my house.”

Jane was silent for a beat. “You and Claus?” she asked. “I wasn’t dreaming that, right? I’m jetlagged as hell, and I wouldn’t doubt it if I am hallucinating.”

I laughed and squeezed Claus' hand. "Me and Claus, Jane. Surprised the hell out of me, too, but it feels right."

"Well, it's not like you need to get to know him or anything. You've known him since you were eight and he was eleven," she sighed.

"Well," I drawled. "I didn't know what he did for a living, so I guess there are some things we need to learn about each other."

"Stevie," Jane called. "How the heck did you not know he's a private chef?"

I still didn't know how I missed it, but I knew now there wouldn't be a single detail about Claus that I didn't know. "In my defense, I never thought Claus would ever look at me as more than Tony's sister, okay? If I had known he was a private chef, I would have fallen in love with him years ago because you know how much I hate to cook."

"The truth comes out," Claus called. "She's using me just to make her dinner for the rest of my life."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm going to go now, but you guys are still coming over on Christmas, right?" I asked.

"Don't we always?" Jane asked.

"Just make sure you wear some comfy shoes. We're going to be on our feet for a bit of the day."

*

Chapter Nine

Stevie

“I should have known I would find you back here.”

Claus looked up from the ham he was carving and set his knife on the counter. “Oh, you think just because you’ve known me for twenty years, you know where to find me?”

I shook my head. “Actually, I only knew to find you back here because I started paying attention a week or so ago,” I smirked and stood on the opposite side of the table. “And also, one of the other volunteers said they got kicked out of the kitchen by some grumpy chef.” I tipped my head to the side. “I knew that had to be my Claus. Jane and Tony just took off, so I thought I would find my grumpy chef.” I smiled wide and snatched a small piece of ham off the carving board.

“I am not grumpy,” Claus insisted. “Just because I know what I am doing and don’t have a problem telling people what to do, does not make me grumpy. It makes me decisive.”

“Right,” I drawled. “I’ll tell that to the volunteers left crying in your wake.” I leaned forward, and Claus pressed a kiss to my lips. “You’re a grump, Claus.”

“Fine, I’ll be a grump, but you soften me up by being my beauty.”

I cocked my head to the side. “I thought I was your sweets.”

He winked and leaned back. “How about you be both, Stevie?”

“I’ll be whatever you want as long as you’re mine, Claus.”

“Deal.”

Coming Soon

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Blake Marshall Says He Needs Me

He Says Series
Book 3
January 19th, 2024

His Claim

Banachi Family Series
Book 2
January 29th, 2024

About the Author

Wall Street Journal and USA Today bestselling author Winter Travers is a devoted wife, mother, and aunt-turned-author born and raised in Wisconsin.

After a brief stint in South Carolina, following her heart to chase the man who is now her hubby, they retreated up North to the changing seasons and to the place they now call home.

Winter spends her days writing happily ever afters and her nights being a karate mom hauling her son to practices and tournaments. She also has an addiction to anything MC-related, puppies and baking.

Winter loves to stay connected with her readers. Don't hesitate to reach out and contact her.

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Check out the first chapter of
[Wilder Presley Says He Loves Me](#)

Chapter One

He's back...

Shelby Lyn

“He’s back.”

I snagged the last roll of black ribbon and dropped it into my basket.

“I saw him this morning at the diner. When he walked right by, I was getting my two scrambled eggs with wheat toast and maple sausage.” Missy clicked her tongue. “He looked as fine as fireworks on the fourth of July out on Mason Lake, let me tell you.”

My eyes searched the shelf for the second time hoping for more black ribbon to magically appear. “Maybe they have more black ribbon in the back,” I mumbled. I needed at least five more yards to ensure I had enough to finish the wreath Mrs. Baxter ordered. Halloween was fast approaching, and I needed to get a jump on my yearly orders.

“Shelby Lyn.” Missy snapped her fingers in my face. “Have you heard a word I’ve said?”

I stepped back and swatted her hand out of my face. “Yeah, you ate your breakfast this morning, and it was as good as the fourth of July fireworks.”

Missy scoffed. “You missed the important part.”

Missy spoke a mile a minute, and while I’m sure most of what she said was necessary to someone somewhere, most of the time, I tuned her out. After almost twenty years of friendship, I learned that if I missed something important that came out of her mouth, she tended to return to it until I heard her. This was one of those times. “Then tell me the important part while we wait for Jack to get his ass out of the backroom and help me.”

“You know he’s probably reading the old *Playboys* back there.” Missy visibly shivered. “Thank god I never had a boy. I don’t think I could have handled the crusty socks and forty-minute showers.”

“Missy. Did you need to go there?” Dear god in heaven. I did not need that mental picture painted in my brain. “I doubt Jack is doing anything in the

backroom. Please, he's eighteen. I hope he can control himself till he gets off work."

Missy shrugged. "Girl, you remember how boys were when we were eighteen. Horn dogs looking to rut."

"Uh, rut?" Was she talking about men or deer? *Sometimes the lines did blur.*

She scoffed and grabbed the dark blue ribbon. "Dad was watching the hunting channel last time I stopped by. What about this one?"

I shook my head. "It's navy."

"Nonsense. This is black," she insisted.

I grabbed the ribbon from her and set it back on the shelf. "It's navy, and it won't work." The backroom door swung open, and Jack walked out. "There's Jack."

"Oh lordy. See, he's tucking his shirt in." Missy hissed. "Whatever you do, do not touch his hands," she advised.

"Jack," I called. "Can you check to see if there is any more one-inch black ribbon in the back?"

Jack gave me a two-fingered salute and backtracked to the backroom.

"Gonna be ten minutes before he surfaces again. You gave him an excuse to read a few more pages," Missy laughed.

"You're a nut, Missy." I moved over to the selection of orange ribbons and tried to figure out which shade would be perfect. It needed to be bright, but not neon bright.

"Can we get back to what we were talking about before?"

"Your breakfast? It must have been pretty good if you want to keep talking about it." I fingered a light shade of orange and wondered if it would clash with the dark shadow of orange I already had at home. Mrs. Baxter was as sweet as pie, but she would have a bird if the colors weren't right for her fall wreath.

Missy scoffed. "Wilder Presley is back, Shelby," she shouted.

I dropped the light orange ribbon, and Missy's words hit me like bullets to my head. "Uh, what?" There was no way she had just said *that*.

No.

No, no, no.

Missy snapped her fingers in my face. "Now you're gonna listen, huh?" she laughed. She shook her head and turned to the rack of ribbon. "What if

you did a dark purple instead of black?” she suggested.

I grabbed her shoulder and spun her back to face me. “We’re not going to talk about ribbon right now,” I spat.

“You’re about a minute behind on your shock, Shelby. I’m over having to tell you about Wilder.”

“I was listening all along,” I muttered.

“Wilder Presley is back in Adams, Shelby Lyn, and you look like you saw a ghost.”

I glared at Missy. “I heard you the first time you said it.”

Missy cackled. “Second time I said it, you heard, but I had to repeat it because the look you get when I say his name says so much.”

I didn’t get a look when she said his name. There was no reason why I would get a look. *None*. “Where is Jack with my ribbon?” I grumbled.

“So you’re just going to act like I didn’t tell you *the* Wilder Presley is home?” Missy smirked. “You can’t act like this with me, Shelby. You told me what you said the day he left.” She wagged her finger in my face. “I have known you for nineteen years and one hundred ten days.”

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t acting anyway, just like I hadn’t had a look when she said Wilder’s name. “And this isn’t his home,” I insisted. “When you leave for more than nine years, the place you go to becomes your home.”

“Is that a rule?” Missy questioned.

“Here ya go,” Jack called. He held up three rolls of black ribbon. “These are the last of them.” He made his way to me, and I grabbed the rolls from him.

“Thanks.” I nodded to the orange ribbon. “I need to grab a couple of rolls of orange. I’ll meet you at the register.”

Jack nodded. “Sounds good.”

I grabbed two shades of orange and hoped they would work for the wreath, but my mind was too wound up about Wilder to even notice what I grabbed.

“Shelby,” Missy called.

My eyes darted to her. “What?”

“What is going on in that head of yours right now?” she demanded.

I shrugged and dropped the orange ribbon into my basket. “I think I have two days to finish this wreath, and then I need to start thinking about the Christmas wreaths for the church while I work on the twenty other orders I

have for fall or Halloween wreaths. I'm busy, Missy."

Missy tipped her head to the side and crossed her arms over her chest. "You are so full of shit, girlfriend. The man you had a crush on all of your life is back in town, and you're going to tell me you're thinking about wreaths? That you didn't tell him you loved him?"

I nodded my head. "Yes, you will believe that because you are my best friend, and you know I don't want to have this conversation at the craft store. And I told him I loved him as a friend. It was a "Have a great life, buddy. I love you." Turning on my heel, I headed to where Jack stood behind the check-out counter.

"You know I'm just going to come over to your house after I get off of work," Missy called after me.

I raised my hand over my head. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Missy." Missy had been my best friend for almost twenty years. She had moved to Adams when we were both ten and had become one of my close friends that summer.

"You want wine or hard booze?" she asked.

I needed a damn tranquilizer if what she had told me was true. "Bring the Southern," I replied.

"Woo, wee," Missy chuckled. "This is going to be a fun night."

I rolled my eyes and set my basket on the check-out counter. "You wouldn't by chance have a bottle of booze behind the counter, would you, Jack?" I blew my hair out of my face and sighed.

"Uh, well, I think my dad might have a bottle hidden in his office," Jack stammered. "I could see if I could get you a glass."

Oh, sweet Jack. He was just a little too naïve for his good.

I nodded to the basket. "I think I can make it home without a glass. Thank you, though."

Jack looked visibly relieved.

Five minutes later, I was sitting behind the steering wheel of my truck and closed my eyes.

Wilder Presley was back in town.

Twelve years ago, I had watched that man drive out of my life with not so much as a backward glance. He had broken my heart that day, and he hadn't even known it.

Wilder Presley was back, and so were all those feelings I thought I had

buried.

No amount of Southern was going to make this any easier.

*

Check out the first chapter of [Playboy](#)

Chapter One

Playboy

Just another Saturday?

“Where are you going?”

I dropped my cigarette to the gravel and snuffed it out with the toe of my boot. “Bed.”

Jet inhaled deep on his cigarette. “Alone or you got company joining you?” he wheezed before blowing out a plume of smoke.

“Right now, alone, but we both know that can change from here to my bedroom door.”

It was early Saturday morning at the Sacramento Skinz strip club, and I was ready to call it a night. Most of the dancers were offstage and done for the evening which meant I was going to have my pick of the girls to warm my bed tonight.

“Barracuda talk to you?”

I nodded. “Tried to avoid him, but he tracked me down.”

“That means you’re in charge of the new weekend muscle?”

That was exactly what it meant. “He tried to shine it up by saying I was the head of security, but we all fucking know it means I’m the one throwing out drunk assholes Friday and Saturday nights.”

Jet chuckled. “Well, at least you have a week to get used to it.”

“I’d rather Barracuda work out whatever shit is going on with the security company than have the club do security.”

“Hey, just think of it like when the club first opened Skinz. We rotated nights, and it worked.”

That was before the club became so well known. Now, with Skinz being popular, there were easily one hundred and fifty people in the club at any time. When there was an event going like jello wrestling or bubble parties, that number almost tripled.

“Well, I can handle it for a little bit, but I fucking hope Barracuda is looking for a new security company.”

“You’ll have your first shot at the girls if you’re working security.”

I rolled my eyes. I had first shot at the girls either way. I wasn’t called Playboy for nothing. “I’ll catch ya later, Jet.”

I opened the door to the club, and the loud thumping of the bass hit me along with the smell of whiskey and cheap perfume. God knew these girls made a shit-ton of money, but it seemed like they all wore the same fucking overly sweet scent.

Normally, I knew what girl I wanted. They seemed to rotate through with barely any lasting more than a few nights. Tonight, it was different.

I made my way through the back of the club, my eyes darting to the changing room for the girls.

“You need some company tonight, Playboy?”

My gaze fell on Raine. She waltzed over to the door and leaned against the frame.

“What do you have in mind, sugar?”

She shrugged and draped her arm over her head. “Whatever you want, baby.”

Raine was one of the first girls I had slept with when the strip club opened, and she had been clamoring to get back into my bed since. “Don’t you think Tank and Rebel will mind me honing in on you?”

She reached out and trailed a finger down my chest. “You know they won’t mind. Hell, Tank would probably join us.”

That was true, but it wasn’t anything I was interested in. “Maybe another time, Raine.” She should have gotten the hint by now that I wasn’t interested in her anymore, but obviously, she hadn’t clued into it yet. Adding Tank into the equation was her latest ploy. *Hard pass.*

“We all know you don’t want to be alone tonight, Playboy.”

I gently grabbed her hand and dropped it. “Who said I was going to be alone?”

She scoffed and pushed off the doorframe. “Waste of my damn time,” she mumbled under her breath.

My eyes darted around the room filled with loads of mirrors, half naked women, and a plume of hairspray that hung in the air. Nothing held my attention for more than a second. “Have a good night, ladies,” I called.

I made my way down the hallway and pushed into the main room with a nod to one of the prospects who was guarding the door from the dressing

rooms into the club.

Next Saturday, I would be one of the poor saps making sure the drunks don't get too handsy and try to run back to the girls when they get off stage. I was going to make sure the prospects took all the shit duties, and I can hopefully find a corner to sit in and just keep an eye on everything.

Prospects were supposed to have the shit jobs. I had been down the prospect path, and I had no intention of heading back down it even if Barracuda told me to do it.

Vivid Vanessa was on the stage, and she had the attention of every dick in the room. The one girl who had yet to look my way, and I was strangely okay with it. She had moves like no other on the pole, but something made me take a step back from pursuing her. She seemed like she would want a whole hell of a lot more than I had to offer. She didn't mess with any of the club guys, and she just had a classy air about her.

I was at the door when a petite hand grabbed my arm. "Looking for company tonight, Playboy?"

Bray. I looked her up and down and smiled. "Maybe, but you might want to put on some more clothes. It's pretty chilly on the back of my bike."

Bray flitted her long lashes. "Give me ten minutes? I need to count my drawer and change."

I nodded. "Meet me at my bike." Bray wasn't exactly what I was looking for, but she would keep my bed warm for a bit.

"Ten minutes," she promised. She turned on her heels toward the bar, and I pushed open the door to the outside.

My bike was in the front row and off to the right. Four other bikes of club members stood parked by mine, and there were about twenty other cars in the lot. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it up to my ear.

"Sup?"

"Where you at?" Six-Gun asked.

I sat down on my bike and pulled my keys out of my pocket. "Just leaving the club."

"You got someone here looking for you."

I stuck the key in the ignition but didn't turn it. "Who is it?"

"A chick."

That wasn't really surprising. "You wanna be a little bit more specific than that?"

“Brown hair. Dressed like a fucking librarian. Possibly hot if she took off the glasses and her eyes stopped darting around like a scared animal.”

I knocked up the kick stand. “She got a name?” I had no idea who the hell Six-Gun was talking about, but I was fucking intrigued.

“Won’t tell me. I asked her twice, but all she did was shake her head.”

“She’s still there?”

“That’s why I fucking called you, brother. She’s here, and she wants to talk to you.”

I glanced over my shoulder toward the club. “I’ll be there in five minutes.” I shoved the phone in my pocket and started up the bike.

Bray was going to have to find someone else to keep her warm tonight.

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