



Bragg's
Christmas

D.E.HAGGERTY

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The Bragg Brothers #5

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Introduction

If I'm going to survive Christmas as a brand-new single dad of a five-year-old, I need a nanny. Preferably a nanny I can keep my hands off of.

The last thing I expect when I arrive for a job interview is to discover Damon Bragg hiring a nanny for his five-year-old daughter. A daughter no one in our small town of Winter Falls knows about.

There's no way Damon will offer me the job considering the one and only time I saw him, he kicked me out of his brother's wedding.

But when I meet his adorable daughter, Skye, I can't help begging for the nanny position. I don't know who's more surprised when he offers me the job – him or me.

Living with Damon and Skye is a dream come true. Experiencing snow and Christmas in Winter Falls with the single dad and his daughter is everything I've always wanted but thought I could never have.

And then there's Damon. His thick brown hair and warm brown eyes are enough to snag my interest. Add in his six-pack abs and strong shoulders, and I'm ready to jump him. If he weren't my boss, I would. I might anyway.

Santa, all I want for Christmas this year is to become a family with a single dad and his daughter.

Welcome to Christmas in Winter Falls!

This single father small town romantic comedy features a woman who has screwed up a lot in her past but is trying to make up for it now, a brand-new single father who knows he should keep his hands off his nanny but doesn't want to, an adorable five-year-old girl no one can resist, five brothers shocked to find out big brother's been hiding a five-year-old secret, and a whole town of hippies convinced they're the best matchmakers this side of the Mississippi.

Bragg's Christmas is a **standalone** novel in the *Bragg Brothers* series.

Series complete!

Bragg's Truth – Riley and Moon's story

Bragg's Love – Miller and Eden's story

Perfect Bragg – Elder and Harmony's story

Bragg's Match – Brody and Soleil's story

Bragg's Christmas – Damon and Love Hill's story

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Chapter 1

Damon Bragg – a man who's about to get the biggest small surprise of his life



March

Damon Bragg

I groan when the doorbell rings. It's after eight on Friday night, and I just made it home from work. I'm exhausted and have no interest in opening the door, let alone talking to whoever's on the other side.

I flop down on the sofa. I'm ignoring whoever it is. My friends know better than to drop by uninvited and my family would have called if they were in town.

The doorbell rings again. This time the intruder presses the button and doesn't let up. Damn it. There goes my choice in the matter.

I haul my ass to the door and open it with a scowl on my face. When I notice the woman and small child standing on my porch, I force myself to smile.

"Can I help you?"

It's the woman's turn to scowl. And she does it way better than me. Her scowl clearly says I'm an idiot who should know who she is.

I study her. Her curly blonde hair, blue eyes, and freckles are familiar. I dig into the recesses of my memory.

"Maria?"

"At least you remember my name."

Barely. Maria is a woman I had a one-night stand with a few years ago. I don't usually remember my one-night stands, but it's hard to forget a woman who yells 'Giddy up, cowboy!' when she comes while pretending to lasso my dick. Which would have been fine *if* we had been role-playing. We weren't.

Add in my dad just passing away and the absolute shit show my life was back then and it's a time in my life I've tried hard to forget.

"How did you know where I live?"

We met at a bar and I don't remember giving her my address. I don't think we bothered exchanging phone numbers.

"I'm not stupid."

I raise my hands in surrender. "No, you're not. I didn't mean to insinuate you were."

"I need your help."

Crap. This is why I don't have one-night stands. There's no time to discover if the person you're having sex with is a nutjob until she decides to lasso your dick.

"What's up?" I say instead of asking how I can help. I'm not making any promises here.

"I need you to babysit your daughter for the weekend. I have a conference for work and I can't bring her with me and my neighbor's out of town."

I scratch my beard. "You want me to babysit your daughter for the weekend? I barely know you."

"Not my daughter. *Our* daughter."

Our daughter? Is she saying we have a child together? She has to be wrong. I am not my father. Screwing my way across the country and leaving devastation in my wake.

"But I used protection."

"You were also drunk as a skunk."

"I hate skunks!" the little girl says, and I peer down at her.

She has her mom's blonde curly hair and freckles. But when I look closer, I notice she doesn't have her mom's blue eyes. No, her eyes are brown. The exact same shade of brown as mine.

Shit. Is this girl my child?

Chapter 2

*Love Hill – a woman who's made her bed
and now needs to lie in it no matter how
uncomfortable it is*



November

Love Hill

You have to do this, Love. You need the job.

I roll my eyes at my inner voice. Of course, I need the job. I need any job I can get. My small town of Winter Falls isn't exactly teeming with career opportunities. Assuming anyone would hire me anyway.

The whole town hates me. Trust me. The feeling is mutual.

But what if he remembers me?

I blow out a breath and shove the fear battering at my sides away. I'll cross the 'he remembers me'-bridge when I get to it.

I climb the stairs to the second floor of the hotel in White Bridge where Damon Bragg is currently staying. I have no idea why he's staying here and not in Winter Falls where his brothers live and I have no idea why he needs an assistant. But I can't be picky. A job is a job is a job.

I knock on the door and wait. When no one answers, I stick my ear to the door to listen. Maybe no one's home? A woman giggles and a man swears.

I check my watch. It's barely ten a.m. The ad posted on the online job board said to show up between ten and noon.

Does he still have a woman here from last night?

Before I have time to wonder what's going on, the door flies open. I gasp at the sight in front of me. Holy cows have come home.

Damon Bragg is one handsome man with his brown hair sticking up at all angles, a few days' worth of growth on his chin, and warm brown eyes. But I didn't expect him to have a rocking body with six-pack abs and strong shoulders. Shoulders that appear strong enough to carry any burden. Must be nice.

He frowns at me but it doesn't lessen his attractiveness one tiny bit. "I don't know what you're selling. But I'm not buying."

"I'm not selling anything."

"Good. Since I'm not buying."

He starts to close the door, but I block it with my foot. "I'm here for an interview."

"An interview?" Confusion clouds his eyes for a few moments before he scowls. "No. You are not watching Skye."

I guess he remembers me and how I threw myself at him at his brother's wedding. Like he's one to talk.

I motion toward his topless state. "You can hardly fault me for hitting on you when you obviously don't have a problem with one-night stands."

His brow furrows. "One-night stands?"

"There's no need to be coy. I heard the woman giggling."

"Skye was giggling."

"Good for you. You remember her name."

"Why wouldn't I remember her name?"

Because most men don't remember the name of the woman they hooked up with for the night. Damon Bragg is obviously not most men. Duh. Most men don't resemble cover models.

“It doesn’t matter.” I clear my throat. “Can we get on with the interview now?”

“I already told you. You’re not watching Skye.”

“Why would I watch the woman you hooked up with?”

He runs a hand through his hair and I’m mesmerized as the muscles in his shoulder bunch with the movement. My fingers itch to get my hands on those muscles, that naked skin.

Patience, Love! You can’t make a pass at the man you hope will be your new boss. At least. Not until you secure the job. I tighten my hold on my purse to stop my hands from wandering where they want to.

“Look,” Damon begins. “I think there’s been a mistake.”

“A mistake?” I interrupt before he sends me away. “The ad on the job board clearly said to show up here between ten and noon for an interview as your assistant. I’m here to interview for the position.”

“There is no assistant position.”

Damn. The assistant position appeared to be the perfect opportunity. I don’t want to leave my hometown of Winter Falls. Correction. I refuse to leave Winter Falls. I can’t. But – without a job – I’m going to be forced to move.

I could get a job here in White Bridge, but I don’t know how I’d manage the daily thirty-minute commute without a car. And there’s no money for a new car. As it is, I borrowed one of the town’s vehicles to come to this interview today.

I’m not ready to give up yet, though. “Why did you put the ad online if there’s no position available?”

His hand lifts and I glance away before I get sucked in by those flexing muscles again. My gaze lands on a dollhouse. A dollhouse? Strange. Does he make dollhouses for a living?

Someone giggles before a door flies open and a little girl runs out. “Daddy! Daddy!” she shouts as she runs toward Damon.

Holy bananas! Damon Bragg has a child? No one in Winter Falls said anything about him having a child. And, trust me, the people of Winter Falls would know. They're the biggest snoops on the entire planet.

They think they know everything. They don't. They get things wrong sometimes. You won't hear them admitting to it, though.

The little girl comes to a halt next to Damon. He places a protective hand on her shoulder and my stomach clenches as memories of my dad flood me. He was the only person in the world who ever protected me. He's been gone for nearly two decades now, but I still miss him.

"Who are you?" the girl asks.

I study her. She has blonde, curly hair and pale skin. If it weren't for her brown eyes, which are the exact same shade of brown as Damon's, I wouldn't believe she's his daughter.

I kneel in front of her. "I'm Love."

She giggles. "Your name is Love?"

"Yep."

"I'm Skye."

Skye? As in 'you're not watching Skye'-Skye? Now I understand why there's no assistant position. Damon's searching for a babysitter, not an assistant.

"What a beautiful name."

"You're pretty. Can I touch your hair?"

She doesn't wait for an answer before she steps forward and lifts her hand. I flip my hair over my shoulder so she can reach it.

"It's really long," she murmurs as she pets my hair. "Daddy won't let me have long hair."

"Long hair is a lot of work. You have to brush it really good in the morning and at night before you go to bed."

She sticks her bottom lip out and pouts. "Daddy says so, too."

“Daddy’s not wrong.” I wink at her.

She giggles and grasps my hand. “Come play dolls with me. Daddy doesn’t play with me.”

“He doesn’t? Maybe he doesn’t know how?”

She rolls her eyes. “I teached him. But he no listen.”

We settle on the floor in front of the doll house and she hands me a barbie doll. “You’re Stacie, my best friend.”

“Hi, Skye! What are we going to do today?” I ask as I make Stacie wave.

“I’m not Skye. I’m Barbie!”

“Oops! I forgot.”

She scrunches her eyes. “You know how to play dolls?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I know how to play dolls.”

I think. I never played dolls with anyone other than my dad. My mom died before I turned one and I don’t remember her. By the time my stepmom arrived on the scene, I was already ten and much too old for playing dolls.

Although, Priscilla wouldn’t have played dolls with me anyway. She never paid much attention to me unless my dad was around. Why my sweet dad married that step-witch is beyond me.

Damon clears his throat behind me and I nearly startle. How could I have possibly forgotten the man competing for sexiest dad alive is standing less than five feet away from me?

“Squirt, Daddy needs to talk with Love.”

Skye’s face scrunches up. Uh-oh. I recognize a temper tantrum when I see one. Lord knows I’ve had enough of them myself.

“It’s okay, Skye,” I reassure her before her tantrum explodes to full-blown. “We’ll play dolls as soon as I finish talking to your dad.”

“Promise?”

I place my hand on my heart. “I promise.”

Her bottom lip wobbles. “You won’t leave me and never come back?”

Who left this beautiful girl? They should be hunted down and forced to watch re-runs of *Seinfeld* for hours on end. You don’t abandon children. Full stop.

I grasp Skye’s hand. “I promise I won’t leave you. I will be back to play with you after I talk to your dad. We always have to listen to Dad, don’t we?”

She stares at me for a long moment before nodding. “Okay. You can play with Ken.”

“I get to be Ken? He’s the best. I can’t wait. Be right back.”

“I’ll get Ken for you.” She starts digging around in a suitcase next to the dollhouse.

I stand and turn around to confront Damon. I notice he’s put on a shirt to hide all those delicious muscles, but I refuse to be distracted. I promised Skye I’d play with her today and I will. Damon won’t stop me.

He motions for me to follow him into the hallway. I stay close to the door. He’s not locking me out.

“I understand,” I begin before he has the chance to speak. “I know you don’t want to hire me to babysit your daughter, but I promised I’d play with her today. And I don’t break my promises to little girls.”

“Actually, I think I do want to hire you.”

I open my mouth to argue my case but snap it shut again when I realize what he said. “You do?”

He clears his throat. “We need to talk.”

Chapter 3

*Can you do a background check for me? ~
Message from Damon to his brother Brody
who can find out anything about anybody*



Damon

I can't believe I'm going to do this. I'm going to hire Love Hill – the woman who threw herself at me when I was tasked with kicking her out of my brother's wedding – as the nanny for my daughter.

I've regretted not having sex with Love Hill for months. If it hadn't been for my brother's wife telling me to be careful, I wouldn't have thought twice about accepting her offer.

The woman is temptation wrapped up in a short package. She has these dark exotic eyes I find intriguing, pouty pink lips I long to kiss, and long brown hair I want to fist in my hands as I taste those pink lips.

And now she's going to be my daughter's nanny. She isn't the kind of woman I thought I would want around my daughter. But when her eyes flashed with anger and her hands fisted after Skye asked if she would abandon her, I knew I had found the person to care for my daughter.

"I need to explain."

Love Hill raises her eyebrows.

"About how my daughter came to live with me."

"Came to live with you?"

"I didn't know Skye existed until a few months ago when her mother showed up on my doorstep and handed her to

me.”

“Hold on. Her mother handed her to you? Is this the woman who left and hasn’t come back? Where does she live? Someone needs to teach her a lesson,” she growls and a muscle in her jaw twitches.

“Keep it down,” I order. “Skye doesn’t know her mother left her.”

“I hate to break it to you, buddy, but the gorgeous girl in there knows her mother abandoned her. What the hell happened?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Maria, Skye’s mother, said she had to go away for work for the weekend but she couldn’t bring Skye with her. When she didn’t show up on Monday, I called but—”

“The phone number she gave you was disconnected.”

I nod. “I should have checked the number before she left but I was a little distracted. What with finding out I had a daughter who was nearly five and I never knew about her.”

“And you’re certain Skye is your daughter?”

I can’t stop the smile from crossing my face. “She has my eyes.”

“She does but there are more people in the world with warm brown eyes.”

“I did a genetic test to make certain since ...” I trail off. I don’t want her to know why I needed to be sure.

“Since your family has a bunch of money?”

“We’re not rich.”

She snorts. “Okay. You’re not rich.”

Sarcasm drips from her words but I change the topic. I’m not discussing my wealth with someone my sisters-in-law describe as a man-eater who drinks the blood of her victims to stop her face from aging.

“The genetic test confirmed I’m her father.”

“And her mother? Have you had any contact with her after the first weekend?”

I scowl. “Skye doesn’t need her mother.”

Pain flashes in her eyes before she blinks and it disappears. “Little girls always need their mothers.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She frowns. “You didn’t. I got over my mother dying before I was one a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize your mother died when you were a baby.”

“It’s fine.” She waves away my apology. “We’re discussing Skye’s mother, not mine.”

I understand her avoiding the subject. I don’t enjoy discussing my father’s passing either.

“I contacted a lawyer and they were able to locate Maria. I wanted partial custody but she said she was done being a mom and gave me full custody.”

Love Hill gasps. “She gave you full custody? Does she have visitation rights? Has she been to visit Skye since the first weekend?”

“Maria hasn’t seen Skye since she dropped her at my doorstep.”

“What a horrible person. She doesn’t deserve to be a mother. If I had a child—” She clears her throat. “Poor Skye. She deserves better.”

Her words reinforce my decision. Whatever else Love Hill’s problems are, she loves children. “I want to offer you the position of nanny.”

“Nanny? Not a babysitter?”

“I work more than full-time. I need someone to be available more often than a babysitter.”

“Where are you planning to live? I can’t leave Winter Falls.”

She can't leave Winter Falls? Why can't she leave the small town? What's keeping her there? From what I understand, she doesn't have many friends in town.

Although, I don't know for certain she doesn't have any friends. All I know is the gossip around town claims she's friendless. Considering my current situation, I'm not one to judge a person based on some gossip. I will make up my own mind about Love Hill.

"I'm moving to Winter Falls."

She smiles and those exotic eyes I'm quickly becoming fascinated with fill with happiness. I want to see her happy all the time.

Knock it off, Damon. She's your daughter's nanny. You will not get involved with her. No matter how tempting she is.

"Wonderful. You living in town solves the whole car problem."

"Car problem?"

She rolls her eyes. "You know Winter Falls is proud of being the first carbon neutral town in the world?" I nod. "Carbon neutral means they hate cars, which means I don't own one."

I have a feeling there's more to the story, but I don't pry. She's entitled to her secrets.

"I have an electric car you can borrow when you need to drive Skye somewhere."

"You'd let me drive your car?"

"I'm letting you care for my child. The car is immaterial."

"Good answer."

"I guess we should discuss compensation and benefits."

"I didn't say yes yet."

"Oh, I assumed since you came here for a job..."

“I came here for an assistant position. A nanny is not an assistant.”

I scratch my beard. Well, shit. I didn't expect this. I thought she'd jump at the chance to be Skye's nanny. They seemed to be having fun. I guess some women aren't cut out to be mothers. Skye's mother did a thorough job of teaching me that lesson.

She bursts into laughter. “You should see your face. You look constipated.”

I cock an eyebrow. “You're teasing me? You're going to be trouble, aren't you?”

She smirks. “You know it.”

The smirk has me questioning my decision. I don't want a nanny who's going to hit on me all the time.

“Ken!” Skye shouts. “Are you coming to play? You promised!”

“Coming!” Love Hill answers before addressing me, “We can figure out compensation later. I have dolls to play with.”

“Okay, but this is a trial period.”

“Of freaking course, it is,” she mutters.

She starts toward Skye but I stop her. “Are you okay helping out here at the hotel until we move to Winter Falls?”

“I don't have a car,” she reminds me.

I open my mouth to offer her my car to commute but snap it shut again. It's one thing to allow her to use it when she needs to for Skye. It's another thing to practically give it to her. I don't know her well enough to trust her with my car for daily use.

“What if you stay here with us in the suite? There are two bedrooms and I'll share with Skye.” I'm quick to reassure her. I don't want her to get the wrong idea. Especially after the way she threw herself at me at the wedding.

“I'll need to go home and pack a bag.”

“We’ll make a field trip out of it. Skye hasn’t seen Winter Falls yet.”

“Ken!” Skye shouts before stomping toward the door and peeking into the hallway. “Are you done, Daddy?”

My phone rings and I check the display. “I need to answer this.”

“Go ahead.” Love Hill grasps Skye’s hand and leads her back into the suite.

I hope I’m not making my biggest mistake as a parent yet. Is hiring a nanny who threw herself at you worse than telling your daughter to calm the hell down when she’s in the midst of a temper tantrum?

And what about hiring a nanny you want to fuck? No. I don’t want to fuck her. I *wanted* to fuck her. Past tense. She’s now the woman I hired to care for my daughter, which means she’s off limits.

I stare at Love Hill’s ass and how snug her jeans fit as she returns to the hotel room. Fine. Maybe I still want to fuck her but I won’t.

I force my gaze away.

Chapter 4

*Does anyone have a pumpkin pie recipe? ~
Message from Damon to the Bragg brothers*



Love Hill

“What’s Thanksgiving?” Skye asks as I comb her hair a few days later.

We’ve settled into a routine at the hotel. A routine which involves Damon working in his room all day long and then, after dinner, he tells me to get some rest, which is code for *Go to your room*.

If I didn’t desperately need the money to repair the roof of my house – the home my father left me when he died – I’d be out of here. Love Hill is not someone you send to her room. At least, not alone.

“You know Thanksgiving,” I tell her. “It’s the holiday when you eat a big meal with all of your family.”

“You mean Daddy and you?”

My heart warms at the idea of this adorable child thinking I’m part of her family. I’m not. And I’ll never have any children of my own. I’d love to have a child. Children are the best, but I don’t have any choice in the matter.

“Yes, of course with your daddy, but...” I pause. I hate to bring up her mother, but I have to ask. “What about with your mommy and her family. Did you have big meals with her on holidays such as Thanksgiving?”

Her nose scrunches. “I don’t remember Thanksgiving. What is it?”

She doesn't remember Thanksgiving? Surely, she celebrated with her mom before.

"There's turkey and cranberry sauce and stuffing and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie."

Her lip curls. "Pie made from pumpkin?"

I'm starting to get mad now. Was her mother a complete waste of space?

"Have you never had pumpkin pie?"

"Sounds yucky."

"It's really yummy."

"Blech. No way."

Starting to get mad is over and done with. I'm officially pissed. I finish Skye's hair and set down the brush.

"Play with your dolls. I need to speak to your dad for a second."

I wait until she's occupied before I march to Damon's bedroom. His door is ajar and I don't bother knocking. I storm inside.

"We have to go to the store now! This is awful. How could someone do such a thing? If I had a child, she'd damn well know what Thanksgiving is and she certainly wouldn't think pumpkin pie is gross."

"Hold on," Damon says.

"I will not hold on. Where are your keys?"

I've never driven his car, but he offered before.

"I meant for the person I'm on the phone with to hold on," he says as he shuts his laptop.

"Oh sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt, but this is an emergency."

"An emergency? Is Skye okay? Did she have an accident? I knew this was a bad idea." He rushes to the door but I block him.

“She didn’t have an accident but her mother is going to when I get my hands on her. I’m going to strangle her before I let her recover for a bit and then I’m going to strangle her all over again.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “Maybe you should explain before the police get involved and you end up in jail.”

I point to the other bedroom where Skye is playing. “Your daughter doesn’t know what pumpkin pie is.”

“Okay?”

He doesn’t get it. Typical man. Completely clueless.

“She doesn’t know what pumpkin pie is because she’s never celebrated Thanksgiving before.”

His brow wrinkles. “But she’s five.”

“Thus, my plan to strangle your ex-girlfriend.”

He scowls. “Maria is not my ex-girlfriend. I barely remembered her name when she showed up at my front door.”

I hold up a hand to stop his explanation. I do not want to know this. I do not want to know he has no qualms about sleeping with women he doesn’t know as long as I’m not the woman.

Nope. Pushing those thoughts to the back of my mind where I can examine them over and over again late at night until any possibility of sleeping ceases to exist.

“I don’t care. I care how Skye doesn’t know what pumpkin pie is. How she had to ask me what Thanksgiving is this morning.”

“Fuck,” he mumbles.

I hold out my hand. “I need your keys.”

“My keys?”

“I need to pick up the supplies for a pumpkin pie.”

“You’re going to bake a pumpkin pie?”

“No. Skye and I are.”

He opens a drawer and snatches his keys. I jiggle my hand but he nods to the door. "I'll drive."

I frown. Does he not trust me? Something else to contemplate in the middle of the night while I lay in a bed mere feet from him not sleeping.

"Skye!" I shout. "We're going shopping!"

"Yippee!"

Damon groans at her shout of excitement but when his daughter flies out of my bedroom, he grins and picks her up before twirling her around.

"We're going to the grocery store."

"But there aren't any dolls at the grocery store."

He tweaks her nose. "Do you need more dolls?"

"Don't be silly, Daddy. You can never have enough dolls."

The trip takes longer than expected since Damon decides to buy every Thanksgiving related item available in the grocery store. When we arrive back at the hotel, we're loaded with shopping bags. Even Skye is carrying a bag as we trudge up the stairs to the hotel suite.

Damon stops at the door. He tries to pull his keycard out of his pocket but his hands are weighed down with bags. I giggle and he glares at me.

"It's not my fault you decided to buy the store out."

"You're the one who started this adventure."

"I was planning to make a pumpkin pie. Not an entire Thanksgiving meal. You do know Thanksgiving is two weeks away?"

"Skye's never had a Thanksgiving meal." He shrugs and his cheeks darken.

Damn it. This is unfair! Damon is not allowed to be attractive *and* nice. No man is attractive and nice. The two attributes do not go together in my experience.

“I hope you know how to prepare the turkey and the stuffing because I don’t.”

“The turkey’s already cooked and the stuffing comes in a box. How hard can it be?”

Considering my oven broke and I didn’t realize it for half a year, pretty dang hard.

“Daddy!” Skye tugs on his coat sleeve. “Need to go potty.”

I drop my bags and push my way past Damon to the door. I swipe my card and open it to allow Skye to run inside. When she makes a beeline for the toilet and slams the door behind her, I blow out a puff of air.

“Close call.”

I gather the bags and carry them into the small kitchen in the suite. While Skye’s in the bathroom, I read the directions on how to make pumpkin pie on the back of the can. Looks easy enough.

“Are you ready to make some pumpkin pie?” I ask Skye when she returns. At her nod, I point to the sink. “Wash your hands with soap first.”

“I already washed my hands.”

“It’s the first rule of baking. Always wash your hands.” I sound as if I know what I’m talking about. I don’t.

I nudge the stepstool she uses to reach the sink. She sighs and climbs the stool.

“Okay,” I say once we’ve washed and dried our hands. “Time to get started. We’re going to cheat a bit.”

Her eyes widen. “Cheat? How do you cheat?”

I lift up the pie crust. “Usually, you make this from scratch.”

“What’s scratch?”

“It means you use flour to make the crust.”

She claps. “Can we do that?”

“Next time we go to the grocery store, we’ll buy the supplies to bake a crust.”

I cross my fingers behind my back and hope she doesn’t remember my promise since I don’t have the first clue about how to make a pie crust from scratch. Do you even use flour? I think so.

“Yeah!” She throws her arms in the air and nearly falls off her stepstool.

“Careful, little miss. If you fall, you can’t have any pie.”

“Daddy lets me have ice cream when I fall.”

I wink at her. “Because you have your daddy wrapped around your little finger.”

She lifts her pinkie finger. “This one?”

“Yep.” I tap her nose. “Now, are you ready to learn how to make a pumpkin pie?”

A barstool scrapes against the floor as Damon pulls it out. “Aren’t you going back to work?”

“And miss culinary school? No way.”

Culinary school? Not hardly. I’m using the recipe on the label of the pumpkin puree and hoping it works since I’ve never made a pumpkin pie before. Or any other pie for that matter.

“First, we need to gather our ingredients,” I tell Skye.

“What’s ingredients?”

“It’s the stuff we put together to make the pie.”

I read the ingredients off the label. Maybe Damon will believe this is a teaching moment for his daughter and not realize I have no idea what I’m doing. “Sugar, pumpkin pie spice, salt, eggs, pumpkin, and evaporated milk.”

Skye helps me line the ingredients up on the counter.

“Now what?”

“Now we mix all the ingredients in a big mixing bowl.”

I hand the can of pumpkin puree and a can opener to Damon. “Make yourself useful.”

“Three-quarters of a cup of sugar,” I murmur to myself. “How do we measure three-quarters of a cup?”

“Are there any measuring cups in the cupboard?” Damon asks.

Oh right. Measuring cups. I search through the cupboards but don’t find any measuring cups. Shoot. Someone who can bake can probably guesstimate how much three-quarters of a cup is.

“Why don’t you pour some sugar into the bowl?” I tell Skye.

I help her lift the bag of sugar. I bite my lip as the sugar piles higher and higher in the bowl. How much is three-quarters of a cup? Why didn’t I think to buy measuring cups?

“I think you have enough sugar,” Damon says.

Oops. The bowl is half full. Has he figured out I have no idea what I’m doing? I straighten my shoulders. This isn’t about me. This is about showing Skye some Thanksgiving traditions. I soldier on.

“Now we add the spice.”

“What is spice?” Skye asks.

“Spice is what makes everything taste good.” Sounds vaguely correct, I hope. “We need the pumpkin pie spice.”

Skye grabs the tin. “Pour it in?”

Even I know better than to add a whole jar of pumpkin pie spice to a pie. I hand her a spoon. “Use this to measure.”

She tips the jar over the spoon and a mound flies out. I grab the tin from her. “I think we have enough.”

“Now, let’s add the pumpkin.”

I help Skye to scoop the pumpkin out of the can and into the bowl. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice her lifting her hand to her mouth. I catch her before she can stick her finger in her mouth. “No licking while you’re baking.”

“But licking the bowl is the best part of baking,” Damon says and I glare at him. He chuckles as he shrugs. “It’s true.”

I wouldn’t know. Dad didn’t teach me to bake and my step-witch didn’t bake. Priscilla barely ate healthy food. No way was she baking an unhealthy pie.

“Now the eggs and evaporated milk. We’re nearly finished.” Thank goodness.

I pick up an egg. This I know how to do. At least there’s something I can do. I break the eggs and add them to the bowl.

I open the evaporated milk and hand it to Skye. “Add this.”

The milk splashes over the sides of the bowl as she pours. “Oops!”

More than half the milk ended up in the bowl, so it’ll be fine. I hope. “Time to stir.”

I stick a big spoon in the bowl. I begin to stir, and milk and eggs fly into the air and onto my face. “Shit.”

Damon bursts into laughter. “Here. Let me. You’ve obviously never baked a thing in your life.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Not knowing how to measure sugar kind of gave you away,” he says as he begins to mix.

I start to respond but forget how to form words when his biceps flex beneath his sweater. I want to jump him and discover if those biceps can hold me up as he pushes me against the wall.

Too bad Damon normally avoids being in the same room as me. Although, I’ve never let a man’s resistance stop me

before. I usually dial up the charm until his resistance disappears.

“Can I taste it?” Skye dives for the bowl but I manage to grab her before she lands.

Being Skye’s nanny and living with them makes sleeping with Damon complicated but this situation isn’t forever. Soon enough we’ll move to Winter Falls and then it’s game on.

Chapter 5

Surprise! ~ Message from Damon to the Bragg brothers



Love Hill

“There,” I say as I finish braiding Skye’s hair. “All ready for the party.”

“I’m a princess,” she says as she twists her head back and forth to flick her braids.

“You are.”

Skye is literally the most adorable child to walk the earth. From her blonde curly hair to the freckles covering her face – adorable.

“Thank you, Nanny Love.”

Damon enters the room. My stomach dips and my breath catches. This waiting to seduce him until we move to Winter Falls is harder than I thought. I’m not used to denying myself what I want.

“Are you ready, squirt?”

Skye jumps off the bed and runs to him. “I’m ready, Daddy!” She lifts her arms and he immediately picks her up and twirls her around.

My chest warms as I watch them together. For someone who had a five-year-old dumped on his doorstep a few months ago, he’s taken to fatherhood like it’s his calling. Usually, a single dad is a complete turn off for me but with Damon? Everything he does revs my libido.

“How about you, Nanny Love?” Damon asks.

I frown. I hate him calling me Nanny Love. My name is Love. But no one calls me Love. Not since my daddy passed away.

“Are you ready?” he asks when I don’t respond.

“Me?” I point to myself. “I’m not going to the party.”

“Yes, you are.”

I stand and back away with my hands raised. “I didn’t agree to this.”

Go to a party in Winter Falls where everyone hates me and have Damon learn how reviled I am? I’ll pass.

He frowns. “You agreed to be my nanny and care for my child. I need you to care for my child.”

“But you’ll be with her at the party. It seems a bit ostentatious to bring me as well.”

“My brothers are going to discover I have a child for the first time. I don’t want Skye to be forgotten about while I deal with their bullsh— bologna.”

Fiddlesticks. He’s not wrong. Chaos is going to erupt when Damon confesses the existence of Skye to his brothers and mom.

Damon has four brothers and a half-brother who are all close. If I had had siblings to support me when my shit went down, I would have leaned on them to stop me from feeling all alone. But Damon decided to go it alone and not tell his brothers or his mom about Skye. I don’t get it.

I scowl. “Fine, I’ll go.”

“Yeah!” Skye cheers. “Nanny Love is coming to the party.”

“Are you ready?” Damon asks me.

“I need a minute to prepare Skye’s bag.”

“We’ll wait outside by the car.”

I wait until the door closes behind him before collapsing on the bed. This is bad. No, not bad. Bad isn’t a

strong enough word to convey what a shit show this is going to be.

The people of Winter Falls are going to lose their ever-loving minds when they discover I'm the caretaker for Damon's daughter. I'm going to lose my job. I clutch my chest as fear rolls through me.

I wish I was exaggerating. I admit I'm prone to dramatics but in this case, I'm not being a drama queen. I wouldn't put it past the people of Winter Falls to call child services to have me banned from being in Skye's presence. This day sucks.

But I'm not going to hide in this bedroom like a scared mouse. Been there. Done that. Didn't help the situation one iota.

I stand and march to the suitcase in the corner of the bedroom. I put together a bag of essentials for Skye before squaring my shoulders and trudging out of the room to the parking lot. Damon already has his daughter strapped in the back seat when I arrive.

"There's no reason to be stressed about meeting my family," he says as he accepts the bag from me and places it in the trunk. "My brothers will be too busy freaking out about me having a child. They probably won't even notice you."

Wow. Way to make a woman feel wanted. I nod before settling in the passenger seat for the thirty-minute drive to Winter Falls.

Neither of us speak during the drive. It's not awkward, though, as Skye prattles away from the backseat. She doesn't appear to notice our lack of response.

"Where does my brother Brody live?" Damon asks when we arrive in Winter Falls.

"Turn left here," I say as I direct him to the house where his brother and his girlfriend, Soleil, are having a baby shower. My chest tightens as we get closer.

It's not a big deal, Love. People have babies all the time. Just not me. Never me.

We park across the street from the house. My hands tremble as I release my seatbelt. Fortunately, Damon doesn't notice as he's already up and out of the car to help Skye.

He opens my door and holds out his hand. "Come on. We'll do this together."

I grasp his hand like it's a lifeline. We don't make it two steps before his mom, Daisy, rushes toward us. I haven't officially met her but Winter Falls is a small town. I recognize everyone.

"Damon! I didn't expect you." Her brow furrows as she realizes he's not alone. "With a small child and woman. What's going on?"

"Mom," he greets and kisses her cheek. He nods to his mom's fiancé. "Lennon."

"What's going on?" she repeats her question.

"I'll explain everything inside."

She narrows her eyes on him. "You'll explain everything this minute."

"I don't want to tell the story multiple times."

Lennon nudges her. "He's right, Petal. Let's go inside where he can explain to everyone at one time."

Daisy growls at him. "You're siding with him?" She huffs and rushes inside the house with him chasing after her.

"This is going to be fun," Damon mumbles.

Skye rolls her eyes. "It's a party, Daddy. Parties are fun."

He tweaks her nose. "Yes, they are, squirt."

I clutch Damon's hand as we make our way to the house. His presence next to me feels strong and protective as if he can defend me from whatever storm awaits me inside. Too bad it's all an illusion.

"Go on. No one's going to bite you," he encourages at the doorway and I step inside the house with him.

"About damn time," his brother Brody declares.

“I have some explaining to do,” Damon begins.

Chapter 6

I knew Damon's secret. I knew Damon's secret. ~ Message from Brody to the Bragg brothers



Damon

I stare at my brothers and mom who are all staring back at me with their mouths gaping open. Thankfully, everyone else at the party has been herded into the backyard by Love Hill.

How do I begin?

I'm not used to having to explain myself to these yahoos. I'm the oldest. They're the ones normally trying to defend themselves from whatever hair-brained scheme they got themselves into.

Except. I'm not the oldest anymore. Peace is. He's our half-brother we found after we discovered our dad was a serial cheater. And by 'we' I mean Miller and Elder. My fraternal twin brothers found him through one of those home genetic tests.

They actually moved to Winter Falls and started a brewery here in order to meet him. It took them until the start of this year to gather their balls and actually talk to Peace. Once all hell broke loose, my other brothers Riley and Brody decided to join them here.

Riley and Brody are identical twins who have pulled every twin trick in the book. Switched classes in school, switched girlfriends – you name it and they did it. They think they're hilarious. I think they're tricksters.

Although, my brothers aren't the ones tricking anyone now. They're the ones settling down and putting roots down in this town with their partners.

Riley was the first to fall in love with Moon. They actually met in San Diego but Riley ran when he found out Moon lives in Winter Falls. He's lucky she gave him a second chance.

Then, Miller fell for Eden. Although they pretended to hate each other for quite a while before they finally gave in to their desires.

Elder was next. He had his eye on Harmony from the moment they met. When Harmony got custody of her baby niece, Robin, he seized his chance and they're married now.

Last to fall was Brody. He had a thing for Soleil but she wouldn't give him the time of day. So, he maneuvered a way for them to be roommates. Somehow, she fell for my prank-loving brother and now they're pregnant.

Oh wait. Brody wasn't last. Mom fell in love with a Winter Falls local, too. A hippie named Lennon. I'm starting to think they put some weird love potion in the water in this town.

And I've missed it all. Because I've been hiding from them. I'm done hiding.

I straighten my back and begin. "This is my daughter, Skye."

Skye smiles and waves. "I'm Skye!"

Mom's bottom lip trembles. "I have a granddaughter?"

Elder scowls. "I think you mean another granddaughter."

His wife elbows him. "Knock it off. This isn't 'one-up my brother'-time."

Elder snorts. "Where have you been? It's always 'one-up my brother'-time."

Brody smirks. "In which case, I'm one-upping you since my girlfriend is pregnant." He wraps an arm around

Soleil's shoulders and brings her near before kissing her forehead.

"How are you one-upping me?" Elder asks. "I already have a daughter."

"Enough," Miller growls. "Can we stop discussing your children and let Damon explain about Skye?"

Riley chuckles. "This from the man who thinks he has super sperm."

Eden slaps Miller's stomach. "You need to stop telling everyone your sperm is super sperm."

"What's sperm?" Skye asks and I grimace.

"Maybe this is why I didn't tell my brothers about my daughter," I grumble before kneeling in front of Skye. "Why don't you go play with Nanny Love while I talk to your uncles?"

She sticks out her bottom lip. "But I want to play with my uncles. I never had uncles before."

"There's a big playground in the backyard," Brody chimes in.

Is he serious? "You have a playground in your backyard? Your baby hasn't even been born yet."

Soleil sighs. "Since the man admitted he's a millionaire, he's been spending money like it's going out of style."

Moon rolls her eyes. "The man built you a pottery shed. I wouldn't complain if I were you."

Riley frowns. "You don't have anything to complain about either."

She plants her hands on her hips. "Your twin didn't have any doubts about his woman. Sound familiar? It shouldn't since you are Mr. Doubter."

Riley sighs. "Are you ever going to let it go?"

"And lose the chance to make you feel guilty at every opportunity? Have you met me?"

He draws her close. “I’ve met you. I know exactly what you—”

“Ahem.” I clear my throat. “Maybe keep the s-e-x and s-p-e-r-m talk to a minimum in front of my five-year-old daughter.”

“Daddy.” Skye tugs on my hand. “Can I go play on the playground?”

“Of course. Nanny Love will go with you. Be safe, sweetheart.” I kiss her nose. I motion to Love Hill who’s been hovering at the back door to lead Skye out of the room.

The second the door shuts behind them, the room explodes.

“How could you?” Mom shouts.

Moon rubs her hands together. “This is awesome!”

“What did I miss?” Peace asks as he strolls into the room with his fiancée, Olivia.

“This is the best baby shower,” Moon declares and Olivia high-fives her.

“I’ve got twenty bucks on Mom,” Riley says.

“No bet,” Brody responds. “I’m not betting against Mom.”

“Enough!” Mom yells and everyone snaps their mouths shut. “I want to know why my oldest child has a child of his own who happens to be five years old and this is the first I’m hearing about it.”

“Did you hear the one about—”

“No.” Mom slashes the air in front of Elder. “No jokes. No pranks. No twin antics. I want answers and I want them now.”

Lennon wraps an arm around her. “We’ll get you answers, Petal. Don’t you worry.” He narrows his eyes on me. “Start talking.”

And here I was worried the old hippie wasn’t a good match for Mom. It appears I may have judged too quickly.

Here's hoping no one judges me.

"I found out I have a child when a woman dropped Skye on my porch a few months ago."

"The woman is Maria and the date was March fifth," Brody adds and I snarl at him. "What? Details are important."

"Stop spying on me."

"I will," he grins, "as soon as you stop hiding secrets from your family."

I collapse on the sofa and my family gathers in the seats around me. "I barely remembered who Maria was. I couldn't believe Skye was my daughter."

"But she is your daughter?" Mom asks.

I nod. "Yeah. I had it confirmed with a DNA test."

"And where is Maria now?" she asks.

"And why did she wait five years to let you know you're a dad?"

I shrug at Elder's question. "I honestly don't know. She showed up on my doorstep. Told me I'm a dad. Handed Skye off and said she'd be back on Monday."

Moon's hand shoots into the air. "Ten bucks says she didn't show on Monday."

Riley pulls her hand down. "Of course, she didn't show."

I ignore their antics to continue my story. "When I rang the number she left for me, it was disconnected."

"Who's not surprised?" Moon starts to raise her hand in the air again but Riley shackles her wrist to stop her. He mouths *sorry* to me but I'm not bothered since I'm used to my family's antics by now.

"I hired a lawyer to locate her. My intention was to share custody with Skye's mom. Instead, Maria signed away her parental rights."

"Signed away her parental rights?" Miller asks. "Does she not visit her daughter at all?"

I glance outside to check Skye is occupied and not anywhere nearby where she could accidentally overhear our conversation.

“She doesn’t want visitation rights. She’s done being a mother.”

“What’s her last name?” Mom asks.

“I’m not giving you her address,” Brody answers.

Mom huffs. “I don’t know why not. Someone needs to teach the woman a lesson.”

“But if you’re in jail you won’t be able to spend time with your grandchild,” Lennon points out and I want to hug him.

Mom studies him for a moment before nodding. “I’ll let it go as long as Damon and Skye are here in Winter Falls to stay.”

“They are. He rented the big house on the other side of town,” Brody answers on my behalf.

“You can’t help yourself, can you?”

He bats his eyelashes at me. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“If you don’t show off your computer skills, you’ll burst.”

Soleil purses her lips. “But he didn’t have any problem keeping his wealth a secret from anyone.”

“I want you to love me for me and not my money.”

She growls at him. “If you want to live to witness the birth of your child, you’ll never say those words to me again.”

“But—”

“Children,” Mom calls and Brody snaps his mouth shut. “Can we concentrate on Damon now?”

She waits for them to nod before speaking again, “Is it true? You’re staying in Winter Falls?” Her eyes are full of hope. I’m glad I don’t have to disappoint her.

“We’re staying.”

“But why did you keep your daughter a secret from your family for all these months?”

I shrug. I really don’t know. “At first, I wanted to make certain Skye was my biological daughter. Afterwards, I was dealing with lawyers and custody. Months passed before I realized I hadn’t told anyone about her. And then it seemed too late to tell anyone.”

“Damon Bragg, I’m your mother. You don’t let months pass before telling me I have a grandchild again. You hear me. Never again.”

Never again? I fucking hope this situation doesn’t present itself again. I am not my father. I don’t sleep with every single woman who catches my eye.

I frown. Except I did have a one-night stand with Maria. But I’ve sworn off sex until Skye’s older. And definitely no more faceless fucks. I’m a serious man from here on out.

My gaze wanders to outside where Love Hill is laughing as she twirls Skye around.

Don’t go there, Damon.

She’s your daughter’s nanny. And a maneater. She isn’t what you need.

Too bad my cock perks up whenever she’s near.

Chapter 7

Bragg Brother Group Text



Riley: Are we more surprised Damon has a daughter or that Brody knew about Skye and somehow managed to keep it a secret?

Brody: I can keep a secret.

Elder: Keeping a secret about being wealthy doesn't count.

Brody: Why not?

Elder: I asked seven CEOs what the secret to success is and they all said the same thing. Get out of my house.

Peace: I don't approve of this joke.

Riley: Of course not. You're a fuddy duddy.

Peace: Considering your brother is spying on all of us, joking about breaking into someone's house is not funny.

Elder: Brody is your brother, too.

Riley: I tried to suffocate him in the womb. #failure

Brody: Who says I'm spying on all of you?

Damon: Me!

Brody: It was for your own good.

Damon: You're the baby of the family. How are you doing anything for my good?

Brody: I'm not a fucking baby.

Peace: I know I'm not yet used to this brother thing, but shouldn't we be giving Damon a hard time now?

Brody: It's always time to give a brother a hard time.

Riley: There are no rules about taking turns.

Miller: I want to know the real reason Damon kept his daughter a secret.

Elder: Me too!

Riley: Me three!

Brody: Me four!

Brody: Peace, you're supposed to write me five!

Peace: I'm a grown man. I'm not writing 'me five'. I'm not a child.

Riley: But you know who is a child?

Miller: Skye Bragg.

Elder: Wait. Is her last name even Bragg?

Damon: It is. Maria named me on the birth certificate.

Miller: If she named you on the birth certificate, why didn't she tell you about your daughter?

Damon: If I knew, I'd tell you.

Elder: You would? You wouldn't keep it secret?

Damon: I didn't keep Skye a secret on purpose.

Elder: No? Did you forget to tell us? Like oops! I have a daughter I forgot all about.

Damon: I did not forget about my daughter.

Peace: But you did forget to tell your family about her.

Brody: Ah, look at Peace. Learning how to be the big brother.

Damon: I'm the big brother in this family.

Peace: I have a birth certificate that proves otherwise.

Miller: Enough! Damon, why did you keep your daughter a secret from us?

Brody: Even after we asked if there was a reason you wouldn't move to Winter Falls.

Riley: And asked if you had someone you didn't want to abandon in San Diego.

Damon: Guilt tripping me won't help anything.

Brody: But it makes me feel better.

Riley: Me too!

Peace: I believe big brothers are supposed to guilt-trip little brothers.

Damon: If you call me little brother one more time, I'm going to tell Olivia you're taking up skydiving as a hobby.

Peace: Olivia would love to go skydiving.

Riley: Yeah, she'd probably have you signed up for lessons in no time.

Elder: And the townspeople would love to hear how you're using a gas guzzling airplane for your hobby.

Peace: Planes don't use gas.

Brody: Because jet fuel is better for the environment?

Peace: I don't think I want to have brothers anymore.

Damon: Tell me about it.

Riley: You love us and you know it!

Brody: I'm his favorite!

Miller: Enough with the twin antics!

Riley: We're the ...

Brody: Super Twins!

Riley: Because we're real twins.

Brody: Fraternal twins are siblings. Not twins.

Elder: I hope Soleil has fraternal twins.

Brody: Elder, Elder, Elder. Everyone knows only the mother's genetics matter with regard to the chances of having a twin.

Miller: ENOUGH!

Brody: Uh-oh. The grump is mad.

Riley: I hope he doesn't pillage the village in a rage-fueled fury.

Miller: Damon, tell us why you kept Skye a secret before I end up killing two of my siblings.

Brody: It was nice knowing you Elder.

Riley: And Peace.

Peace: I can arrest them. Keep them in jail overnight.

Brody: Boy's night!

Riley: I'll bring the snacks!

Brody: I'll bring the booze!

Miller: Let Damon answer before I have to buy a shovel to bury your bodies.

Peace: My mom has a shovel you can borrow.

Riley: As if Damon's going to answer anyway.

Brody: As if we need Damon to answer.

Riley: Yeah, we know why Damon kept Skye a secret.

Brody: It wasn't hard to figure out. Although my being a genius definitely helps.

Damon: Okay, genius. Tell me why I allegedly kept Skye a secret.

Brody: Because you're afraid you're the same as our dad.

Riley: Which is completely silly.

Brody: Exactly. You didn't cheat on anyone when you slept with Maria.

Damon: I have shit to do.

Riley: Which is Damon-speak for 'Riley and Brody are correct. They're so smart. I wish I was as smart as them.'

Damon: Smart ass and being smart are not the same thing.

Damon has left the conversation.

Miller: Get him back, Brody.

Brody: Say 'Brody, you are magnificent. The smartest of the Bragg brothers bunch. I am in awe of you.'

Miller: Don't make me come to your house and punch you.

Brody: Don't make me tell your fiancée you threatened me with physical violence.

Miller: Eden will understand.

Peace: Let me know when I need to show up to arrest you.

Riley: Having a cop for a brother is not nearly as much fun as I thought it would be.

Brody: Because he's a fuddy duddy of the highest order.

Riley: We should make him a medal.

Elder: What happens when a fuddy-duddy uses a computer? Nothing because all computers come with anti fuddy-duddy shields.

Miller: I've got shit to do.

Miller has left the conversation.

Peace: I'm with Miller.

Elder: Said no one ever.

Peace has left the conversation.

Elder: Do we need to do something about Damon?

Riley: He's being an idiot thinking he's the same as Dad.

Brody: Why does this sound familiar?

Riley: Not fair. I figured my shit out.

Elder: I guess we assume Damon will figure his shit out as well.

Brody: It's going to be one hell of a truth or punch.

Riley: When are we going to stop playing that childish game?

Elder: As long as one of us is still capable of screwing up, we'll be playing the game.

Brody: I guess we'll be playing forever.

Chapter 8

You could have warned me there are five crazy old ladies running around Winter Falls. ~ Message from Damon to the Bragg brothers



Damon

“This is our house?” Skye’s gaze ping pongs around the room.

I may have gone overboard with our new house in Winter Falls. In San Diego, I had a small two-bedroom ranch, whereas this house is a massive two-story colonial. It has more room than Skye and I need, but when my daughter saw the house online, she got excited about the princess house. So, now we’re living in a princess house.

“Yes, this is our house. And you get to pick out your room.”

“I get to pick out my room!” She jumps up and down. “Nanny Love! Help me pick out my room.”

Love Hill enters the house carrying a box and I scowl.

“I told you not to carry anything.”

She rolls her eyes. “Because I’m a defenseless woman and need a man to do everything for me?”

I know better than to respond to those words. “No. Because you’re supposed to be watching Skye.”

My daughter rushes to her and snatches her hand before dragging her away. “Come, Nanny Love. We can pick

out my room.”

Love Hill cocks a brow at me. I lean close to whisper. “It’s the first room on the left upstairs.”

She guides Skye toward the stairs. “Dad says the bedrooms are upstairs.”

Dad says? She makes it sound as if we’re together. Why does the thought excite me? It shouldn’t. Love Hill and I are not together. We will never be together. I’m not going to fuck my nanny and screw up my daughter’s life.

“Hello!” a voice calls from the front entrance and I force thoughts of Love Hill and all the things I want to do to her body out of my mind.

I open the door and smile at the five elderly women standing on my porch. “Hello. How may I help you?”

One of the women snorts before pushing her way past me into the house. The rest follow her. I trail behind.

“It’s not how you can help us, but how we can help you.”

I scratch my beard. “How you can help me?”

“Maybe we should introduce ourselves to the latest Bragg arrival,” another woman says.

“You know who I am?”

One of them giggles. “Of course, we know who you are. We know everything happening in our town.”

What is going on here? My brothers didn’t warn me five old women would invade my home. Although, considering the secret I’ve been keeping, I’m surprised they didn’t swarm my house already and demand we play a game of truth or punch.

Truth or punch is played exactly how you’d think. Tell the truth or you get punched. Plus, there’s drinking. Lots and lots of drinking.

“I’m Sage,” the woman who stormed the house says. “I’m the queen of the gossip gals.”

“The gossip gals?”

She motions to the women. “We’re the gossip gals.”

“But she’s not our queen,” one of the women mutters.

Sage rolls her eyes. “But I am in charge.”

“No, you’re not,” the woman grumbles at her before smiling my way. “Hi, I’m Feather. I own the ice cream shop *Feather’s Frozen Delights*. I’m also your best source for sexy books.”

“Sexy books?”

“You know. If you need any inspiration in the bedroom.” She winks.

“Um, I think I’m okay.”

“Really?” another woman asks. “Are you married? In a relationship? Dating anyone?”

“My relationship status is a private matter.”

They burst into laughter at my response.

“What’s funny?”

Sage points at me. “You.”

“Thinking you can keep your relationship private,” Feather continues.

What the hell have I gotten myself into? My brothers never told me there were five crazy old ladies running around Winter Falls.

One of the women pats my hand. “There’s nothing to be frightened about.”

“I’m not frightened.”

“He’s cute,” is her odd response.

“Not cute. Sexy.”

“All the Bragg brothers are sexy.”

“Including Peace.”

“Peace isn’t a Bragg,” I point out.

“Peace may not have the Bragg name, but he’s a Bragg through and through,” Sage claims.

I hold up my palms in a placating gesture. I don’t want to argue with these ladies about Peace. There’s nothing wrong with the man. He’s a nice guy and fits in the family. But, unfortunately, when I look at him, all I see is Dad’s betrayal of our mom.

Good old Dad was on a business trip on the California coast when he met Peace’s mom, Clementine. Poor Clementine was heartbroken and allowed Dad to talk her into bed. Peace arrived nine months later.

I put my most charming smile on my face. “Who are the rest of these lovely ladies?”

“I’m Petal.” I grasp her hand and kiss her palm. “Oh, he’s a charmer.”

“Riley’s the charmer of the family,” I remind her.

“You hold your own, Damon. I own *Sensual Scents* for all your candle needs. And by candles, I mean wax play candles.” She winks at me.

I nearly swallow my tongue. This woman who’s old enough to be my grandma sells wax play candles? What kind of town is Winter Falls?

A woman shoves Petal out of the way to stand in front of me. She offers me her hand and I kiss it. “I’m Cayenne. I used to run the yoga studio, *Earth Bliss*, but don’t you worry, young man. I’m still as flexible as I used to be.”

“Oh boy. She’s going to show him how she can do the splits,” Sage grumbles.

Cayenne frowns at her. “If you could do the splits, you’d show off, too.”

“And who is this?” I ask the remaining woman before anyone has a chance to do the splits.

“I’m Clove and I’m a happily married woman so none of this charming stuff for me.”

Feather giggles. “Which is why you pinched Peace’s butt last week.”

“Daddy! Daddy!” Skye comes running down the stairs.

“Be careful on the stairs, Skye,” Love Hill orders as she chases after Skye.

Skye jumps down the last three stairs and rushes to me. “I have a princess room!”

I pick her up and twirl her around. “Of course, you do. You’re a princess, aren’t you?”

“I’m a princess!” She squeals.

I settle her on my hip and kiss her nose. “You’re Daddy’s princess.”

I notice Love Hill retreating to the kitchen. “Nanny Love, come meet our guests.”

She freezes and her eyes widen. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’s scared of five old ladies. She clears her throat and waves toward the kitchen. “I need to unpack the dishes.”

“Don’t be rude. Come say hi.”

“No need. I know the gossip gals.”

I frown before marching her way. I shackle her wrist and lead her back to the living room.

“Let me see if I can get the names correct. This is Sage, Petal, Feather, Clove, and Cayenne.”

She waves at them. “Hi!”

Sage purses her lips as she studies Love Hill. “I don’t know. Maybe my instincts are wrong about this.”

“Your instincts wrong?” Feather scoffs. “Let’s get this in writing. Sage was wrong about something.”

Petal sighs. “This is going to be my favorite project ever.”

“This is going to be the most difficult project ever,” Cayenne grumbles.

Love Hill yanks her wrist from my hold and backs up while holding her hands in front of her. “No, this isn’t a project. You hate me, remember?”

“Who hates Love Hill?” Sage asks. “Come on. A show of hands.” When no one raises their hand, she grins. “What’s your next excuse?”

“Hold on,” I say as I step closer to Love Hill. “You’re making Nanny Love uncomfortable.”

“He’s a protector.” Clove nods. “I approve.”

“I can practically see the tension in the air between the two of them. Time to find some sexy books for them to read.” Feather rubs her hands together.

“And I better prepare new candles,” Petal says.

“Maybe you can explain what’s going on to me.” I aim my question at Sage as she appears to be the ringleader.

“Don’t you worry, junior. All will be revealed soon enough.” She pats my cheek. “I believe our work here is done.”

She marches out the door with her friends following her.

“What just happened?” I ask Love Hill once they’re gone.

“Trust me. You don’t want to know.”

She marches to the kitchen before I can question her further. My gaze drops to her pert ass in those jeans. My fingers itch to dig into her flesh.

I scowl. No can do. Love Hill is my daughter’s nanny. And I don’t appreciate her refusing to explain what the gossip gals mean about having a ‘project’.

There’s more to Love Hill than meets the eye. But I’m unsure if ‘more’ is good or bad. Best to keep my hands to myself.

Chapter 9

Who has the binoculars? I swear I saw Love Hill running down the street in the rain. ~ Message from Feather on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

Crack!

I groan at the unmistakable sound of thunder. I guess I won't be getting any sleep soon. I roll out of bed and make my way to the kitchen to gather some buckets.

I wander around the house placing them under the spots where I know the roof leaks. I need a new roof big time. Which is the whole reason I took the job with Damon to be Skye's nanny in the first place.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. Skye is an absolutely adorable little girl. Being her nanny is no hardship.

And then there's Damon. He intrigues me more than any man I've met before.

Plop.

A raindrop falls onto my forehead to remind me why I shouldn't pursue my boss. Not if I want a new roof on my house sometime this decade.

I wipe the rain off my forehead and scoot the bucket over a few inches to ensure no more water ends up on the floor. I straighten and peer down the hallway. There are five buckets arranged on the floor.

Dad would be beyond disappointed in me if he could see the house he left me now. I never should have let the roof get this bad, but I didn't have much choice. When Priscilla was living in this house, she refused to allow me to make any repairs as they'd 'interrupt her beauty sleep'. Apparently, she couldn't take a break from sleeping and spending Dad's money.

Enough of this. Thinking about my step-witch never helps anything. At least I don't have to share space with her anymore since she finally left Winter Falls. Too bad she left with the rest of Dad's money.

I shuffle into my bedroom and fall onto the bed. Sleep will help. All the demons come out in the dark but they fade away in the daylight.

My phone rings before I can fall asleep. What now?

"Hello," I answer without bothering to check who's calling.

"Nanny Love," Damon says, "can you come over?"

I sit up in bed. "What's wrong? Is there an emergency? Do you need a doctor? I can ring Dr. Blue."

"No need for a doctor but there is a bit of an emergency."

"I'm on my way."

I hang up and jump out of bed. I don't bother getting dressed. I throw a sweatshirt on over my flannel pajamas, shove my bare feet into boots, and hurry outside.

As soon as the cold, wet air hits me, I swear. By the time I arrive at Damon's house three blocks away, my hair is wet and plastered to my face. I'm soaked through and through.

I don't bother knocking and rush inside. "What's wrong?"

"No!" Skye screams.

She sounds terrified. Is there an intruder? I run up the stairs and burst into her room. I scan the area but I don't notice anything untoward. Except for Skye standing on her bed, her face red and her hair in disarray.

“What’s going on? What’s the emergency?”

Skye notices me and launches off the bed into my arms. “Nanny Love! You’re here.”

I wrap my arms around her and hold her close as my hands roam her body searching for injuries.

Damon collapses on the bed. “I couldn’t get her to sleep.”

“Is it the storm?”

There hasn’t been a thunderstorm since I’ve been working for Damon. This time of year is usually more about snow than rain and thunder.

“Daddy wouldn’t read me a story,” Skye pouts.

Relief fills me. There’s no emergency. Skye is merely being a typical five-year-old and having a temper tantrum.

I wipe the tears from her face. “He wouldn’t?”

She sticks out her bottom lip. “It’s true.”

Damon sighs. “I read you five stories.”

“But not *Matilda*! I want *Matilda*!”

“Why don’t I read you a chapter from *Matilda*?”

“Yes!”

“But you have to promise to go to sleep after one chapter. Promise?”

“I promise!” She jumps out of my arms onto the bed. She pushes her dad out of her way before crawling under the covers.

My shoes squeak as I make my way to the chair next to the bed and pick up the book.

“You’re soaked,” Damon says.

“Excellent observation skills. Give the man an A plus.”

“I’ll get you a towel.”

I wait for him to return and place the towel on the chair before sitting down.

“What are you doing?”

“There goes your A plus for observation.” I hold up the book. “Reading to your daughter.”

“No. I mean with the towel.”

I roll my eyes. “What do you think? I’m sitting on it so the chair won’t get wet.”

“You’re supposed to be drying yourself off.”

“I’m fine.” I shoo him away.

I wait until he’s gone before I open the book and begin reading. I’m halfway through the chapter when Skye falls asleep. I close the book and place it on her nightstand before tiptoeing into the hallway where Damon is waiting for me.

He grasps my hand and tugs me down the hallway to the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” I hiss.

“Drying you off.” He grabs a towel and throws it over my head before starting to dry my hair.

I slap at his hands until he gives up and drops the towel.

“I don’t need to be dried. I’m going to get wet again when I walk home anyway.”

“Walk home? Is it safe to walk home in the middle of the night?”

Did he forget I walked over here less than an hour ago?

“It’s Winter Falls.”

“Why does everyone think saying ‘It’s Winter Falls’ is an answer. It’s not.”

It is. He’ll learn soon enough. “Winter Falls is a small town. I’m perfectly safe walking home by myself.”

“But it’s dark out and raining.”

“There are those awesome observation skills again.”

“Don’t be a smart ass. I’m worried about you.”

Worried about me? I don’t think anyone’s been worried about me since my dad died when I was in ninth grade. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

“Maybe you should live here.”

“Why? I told you. It’s perfectly safe.”

He runs a hand through his hair and his bicep bunches with the movement. Why am I fighting moving in with him? I should be jumping at the chance to live in the same house with him.

“It’d be handy having you around at night in case Skye has a nightmare.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Don’t you mean in case Skye has a temper tantrum and you don’t know what to do?”

He sighs. “Yeah.”

I squeeze his bicep. “You got this, Damon. You’re a great father.”

He stares at my hand on his bicep and I force myself to drop it. Our eyes meet and the interest in his is clear to see. I bite my lip and his eyes flare. Oh yeah, I’m doing this.

I step toward him but he retreats until he’s at the bathroom door. What’s he doing? Does he want me to chase him?

“We should discuss this downstairs where tiny ears won’t hear us.”

Oh yeah. Skye.

Once we’re in the living room, I bite my bottom lip and peer up at him from beneath my lashes. “What do you want to discuss?”

“I’ll increase your pay by twenty percent if you live here.”

His words throw water on my desire. I guess we’re not doing this tonight. I clear my throat and wrangle my

hormones into submission.

“What?” I ask since my mind is a bit foggy.

“I’ll increase your pay by twenty percent if you live here,” he repeats.

I quickly calculate. A twenty percent pay raise would mean I’d have enough money to repair the roof by January.

“You won’t be at my beck and call. You’ll have several evenings off and as soon as Skye starts school, you’ll have your mornings off as well. There’s a mother-in-law suite. You’ll have your own bathroom and sitting room.”

I consider all the angles. I smirk when an idea occurs to me. Once January comes around, I’ll have enough money to repair the roof. I won’t be in dire need of funds anymore. I can make a real pass at my boss and it won’t matter if things get awkward. I could walk away.

But if I walk away from Damon, I won’t see Skye anymore. I can probably babysit or visit her or something. I’ll figure something out.

All I have to do is keep my hands to myself until January. I’ve never been good at self-discipline but I figure Damon will be worth the wait.

“Come on, Nanny Love. You know you want to.”

“Make it a thirty percent pay hike and we have a deal.”

He sticks out his hand. “Deal.”

We shake and I enjoy the feel of his warm hand in mine. His hands aren’t full of callouses from manual labor but they’re not too smooth either. I bet they’ll feel wonderful gliding over my skin. I can’t wait to find out.

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning with my things.”

“I still don’t like the idea of you walking home in the dark. But I need to be here for Skye.”

I know he’s concerned for me because I’m his daughter’s nanny. Still, it feels good for someone to care about my well-being.

“I promise I’m fine.”

“Text me when you get home.”

“Sure thing, boss man.” I wave goodbye.

Things are looking up for me. I’ll have my roof repaired within two months and then I can take Winter Falls’ most eligible bachelor for a ride. It’s going to be a wild one. I can’t wait.

Chapter 10

Did you hear? The Braggs are celebrating Thanksgiving. ~ Message from Sage to the rest of the Gossip Gals



Damon

Love Hill slows as we approach my mom's place. "Maybe I should go back to your house."

Skye stomps her foot. "Nanny Love, you have to stay. It's Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is for families. You said so."

"We don't usually celebrate Thanksgiving in Winter Falls."

I chuckle. "Try explaining why to a five-year-old."

Love Hill narrows her eyes on me. She knows I'm right. A five-year-old isn't going to understand how the hippies who founded Winter Falls think Thanksgiving is politically incorrect. Hell, I barely understand it myself.

She glares at me. "This is all your fault. You didn't need to insist I join your family for Thanksgiving dinner."

"And miss out on how uncomfortable you are? No way."

"Gee, thanks. Always what I want to hear from my employer – I enjoy how uncomfortable you are."

I roll my eyes. "It's a family dinner, not a torture session."

The door opens and Mom steps out. "Are you going to stand out there on the sidewalk debating all afternoon?"

“Yes,” Love Hill mutters.

“Grandma!” Skye tugs her hand from mine and runs to Mom.

Once they disappear into the house, Love Hill tries again. “I’m serious, Damon. I don’t think I should join your family for Thanksgiving.”

“It’s fine. Growing up we used to have all the stray kids from school come over for Thanksgiving all the time.”

“Now I’m a stray. The next thing I know you’re going to buy me a collar.”

“Nah.” I shake my head. “Not my thing. I’m a straight up vanilla sex guy.”

Her eyes flare. Shit. *No making sexual innuendos toward your nanny, Damon.* I’m not going to sleep with her no matter how tempting she is. She’s my daughter’s nanny.

Peace and his fiancé stop on the sidewalk next to us. “What are you doing here?” Peace asks.

What a strange question. “It’s Thanksgiving at my mom’s house.”

“I meant Love Hill.”

She grasps the opportunity. “I’ll be going.”

I snatch her hand. “No, you’re not. Come on. Let’s get inside. I’m hungry.”

“Why are you being mean to Love Hill?” Olivia asks my half-brother.

I march to the front door since I don’t want to hear Peace’s answer. I enter the house into complete chaos. Skye is running around while my brothers chase her, Harmony is bouncing a screaming Robin in her arms, and Mom is yelling at Lennon to check the turkey.

Love Hill’s eyes widen as she surveys the scene. “Oh my.”

“Don’t worry. No one bites.”

Riley stops chasing Skye to ask me, “How do you know I don’t bite?”

“You’re lucky my hands are full of stuffing,” Moon yells from the kitchen.

“Or what?”

“Olivia, smack my fiancé for me, will you?”

Everyone freezes.

“Fiancé?” Mom asks with tears in her eyes. “Are you and Riley getting married?”

“This is all your fault, Riley. I am never making you chocolate chip cookies again.”

“You never make *me* chocolate chip cookies.”

“I won’t make any cookies in our house ever again. I’ll do all my baking at the diner.”

Riley swears under his breath before marching to the kitchen. “I’m sorry, Mom, but Moon and I aren’t engaged. Yet.”

“You had to add the ‘yet’. Do you want me to slap you?”

Riley wiggles his eyebrows at Moon. “Maybe I enjoy it when you’re violent.”

“Someone better kick Riley out of the kitchen if any of you want stuffing for dinner!”

“I got him.” Lennon shuffles Riley away.

Mom claps her hands. “Dinner won’t be for another hour. Why don’t the men go downstairs with the children to watch some television?”

Soleil fists her hands on her hips. “Why the men and not the women?”

“Soleil dear, soon-to-be mother of my grandchild, you are not doing any work,” Mom says.

Soleil rubs a hand over her round stomach. “I’m pregnant. Not an invalid.”

“Dear, I had five children. Four of whom were twins. No one’s working in my house when she’s pregnant.”

Soleil makes a face. “I’m glad this little guy is all by himself. There’s not enough room for two Bragg offspring in my womb.”

Mom gasps. “Guy? Are you having a boy? My first grandson.”

Brody wraps his arm around Soleil. “Yep. And we’re naming him Ackbar.”

Soleil elbows him. “Enough with the Star Wars names. We are not naming our child Ackbar. And we don’t know if we’re having a boy or a girl yet.”

“But Ackbar is a good name,” Brody says as he leads her down the stairs to the TV room.

“I swear, Brody Bragg, you are going to be the death of me.”

While the women gather in the kitchen, my brothers and I go downstairs. Miller seizes the remote control and switches on a football game.

“No football!” Skye says and slaps Miller’s thigh.

My brother stares at her as if she’s an alien.

“Damon, your spawn hit me.”

I snatch the remote from Miller. “Call my daughter spawn again and you’ll wish she was the one hitting you.” I change the channel. “The Thanksgiving Day parade is on.”

Soleil motions to Skye. “Why don’t you come sit next to your Aunt Soleil?”

Skye settles on the sofa next to Soleil. “Why do you have a big belly?”

“There’s a baby in there. Your cousin.”

“Can he come out to play?”

Soleil wraps an arm around Skye and cuddles her near. “You have to wait a few more months before you can play with him.”

I settle in a chair. I ignore all the conversations around me and close my eyes knowing Skye is safe amongst my family. I'm tired. I got up at the butt crack of dawn to work so I could quit early to attend this family dinner.

I'm nearly asleep when my daughter announces, "Daddy. Me thirsty."

"I'm thirsty. Not me thirsty," I automatically correct.

"I'm thirsty," Skye mimics.

I sigh before standing up. "What do you want to drink?"

"Juice box!"

"I don't know if Grandma has juice boxes, but I'll look."

I climb the stairs. Love Hill is alone in the dining room setting the table.

"Where is everyone else?"

She motions toward the kitchen. I frown. Does she have a problem with my family?

"Skye's thirsty. She wants a juice box. I seriously doubt Mom has juice boxes," I say as I push open the kitchen door.

"Let me know what kind of juice box and I'll buy some," Mom says. "In the meantime, maybe she'll drink some punch?"

"Hold on. I have some juice boxes in my purse." Love Hill digs through her purse before offering one to me.

"Can you take it to Skye?" I ask.

"Of course."

Once she's gone, I collapse in the chair. I lean back and rest my eyes while the women gossip in the kitchen.

"I can't believe Damon hired Love Hill of all people to be his nanny," Moon grumbles.

“Why? What’s wrong with her?” Olivia asks. “Is she a troublemaker?”

Eden snorts. “More like homewrecker.”

“Homewrecker? Tell me more.”

“She doesn’t go after men who are single. Oh no, not Love Hill. She prefers to steal men from their women,” Harmony explains.

“Not to mention the whole ninth-grade thing,” Eden says.

“What happened in ninth grade?” Olivia asks.

“She dated the teacher!”

Someone gasps and I open my eyes to discover Love Hill standing in front of me. Her eyes are full of hurt. She clutches the chair and her knees wobble.

I stand. “They didn’t...”

I trail off when I realize I have no idea how to comfort her. Even if what my sisters-in-law say is true, she doesn’t deserve to be gossiped about at a family gathering. Family gatherings should be safe places.

She swipes at the moisture in her eyes. “I’m going to...” She whirls around and runs out of the house.

“Watch Skye!” I shout down the stairs. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I wait until Peace responds. I know he’ll watch Skye and, unlike with my other brothers, I won’t have to worry about spending the rest of my life finding glitter in my daughter’s hair.

I snatch my coat from the hallway and run outside.

“Love Hill! Wait!”

Chapter 11

I should always be in possession of the binoculars since my home is closest to Love Hill's. ~ Message from Sage to the Gossip Gals



Love Hill

Crap. Crap. Crap. Damon's going to fire me. I'll never get a new roof now. Maybe I should leave Winter Falls.

No, I can't leave. I promised Dad I'd always care for the home he built for my mom.

Damon grasps my shoulder and spins me around. "Love, stop!"

The surprise of hearing him say my first name without my last name attached to it has me skidding to a halt. No one ever uses my first name. Not on its own at least. It's always Love Hill or Nanny Love or that Love woman.

Never just plain Love. The name my father picked out for me. The name my father thought fitting since, as he always used to say, 'How can they not love you, Love?'

"I apologize on behalf of my family," Damon says. "Family gatherings should be safe spaces. They shouldn't have said the things they did."

"It's okay."

I should be used to it by now. None of the people in this town have liked me since the ninth grade. Never mind how they got the whole situation wrong. Never mind, no one bothered to ask if *I* was okay.

Except Dad. Dad knew what really happened. But he was already sick at the time and couldn't be my defender anymore. I had to defend myself.

"No, it's not okay. I invited you to Thanksgiving. My family should have known better than to gossip about you."

"I think I'll take the day off. Tell Skye I said goodbye. I'll be back tomorrow." I start toward my house.

"I'll escort you home."

I roll my eyes. "No need. I'm perfectly safe here."

"Except from gossiping sisters-in-law," he mutters.

My heart warms at his words. He's the first person since Dad to get annoyed by what people say about me. What I wouldn't give to have him as my protector. But it's a pipe dream. No one looks past all the rumors and gossip to see the true Love Hill.

He falls into step with me and we continue to my house in silence. I can practically feel his curiosity attempting to burst out of him, but he doesn't speak until I'm opening my front door.

"Is what they said true?"

I scowl. "I'm not a homewrecker."

If men can't keep it in their pants, it's not my fault. It's *their* fault. But somehow, I'm always the bad guy in the scenario.

"You don't go after married men?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"You're a part of my daughter's life. I think I have a right to know if the person she spends the day with has no morals."

"No morals?" I hiss at him. "You have no idea what —"

I pause when I notice Sage strolling past my house. And by strolling, I mean moving super slow to be certain she doesn't miss a word.

“Let’s discuss this inside.”

He follows me into the house and I shut the door behind us. He frowns as he studies the living room. I realize the interior of my house could use some updating, but first I need a new roof.

New roof. Good reminder. The roof is the reason I’m working for Damon in the first place. The reason he’s allowed to ask me questions I don’t want to answer. Questions I usually refuse to answer since no one in Winter Falls cares about the truth anyway.

“This is a big house for one person.”

I motion for him to have a seat on the chair while I sit on the sofa. The second my butt hits the sofa I remember why I always sit in the armchair. The padding on this sofa is pretty much non-existent. I wave my hand in front of my face. It’s also dusty.

Damon clears his throat. “It’s important to me my daughter be around someone who has a solid moral ground. Especially since I don’t think her birth mother paid much attention to her for the first four years of her life.”

At his explanation, my will to fight him evaporates. I don’t want to argue with him about my morals and values. What happens when he decides I’m not someone his daughter should be around?

“Maybe I should quit.”

He rubs a hand over his beard. “Quitting seems kind of drastic.”

I shrug. “What’s the alternative? You basically want me to sit here and defend every decision I’ve ever made in my life to prove I’m worthy of your daughter. I won’t do it.”

He flinches. “I don’t want you to defend *every* decision you’ve made.”

“Really? You already asked me if what your sisters-in-law said is true.”

“I’m in uncharted water here. I don’t know what to do. Skye hasn’t been in my life for very long. I don’t want to

screw things up for her. I don't want to screw her up."

I frown. "You're not going to screw Skye up."

"How do you know? I didn't exactly have a good example growing up."

I've heard all about how his dad was a philanderer. It's not hard to know his family's story. When you live in a small town, secrets and privacy are a thing of the past.

"Your mom is a good mother."

"Mom is the best. Why she put up with my dad is beyond me."

I snort. "Seriously? You don't know why?"

"Dad was a cheater."

"He was also the father of her children."

"Mom didn't stay with Dad because of us."

Of course, she did. Daisy Bragg is a fighter. She'd never stay with someone who disrespected her without a reason. And she had five big reasons starting with Damon, Jr. and ending with Brody.

"Anyway," he begins.

"It sounds as if the only solution is for me to quit," I say when he doesn't continue.

I don't want to quit. If I do, I won't be able to fix my roof anytime soon. I'll have to suffer through another Colorado winter without proper insulation. But what else can I do? Baring my soul about my past is out of the question.

"I hate to say it, but I think you're right."

I force a smile on my face. "You hate how I'm right?"

He chuckles but he's not amused. "You'll think I'm a complete jerk for asking this, but can you stay on until I can hire someone else?"

I scowl. If I'm no longer going to be part of Skye's life, I want a clean break. Not a long drawn-out mess.

"You don't have to live with us."

Good. Because there is no way in hell I'd continue living with them. Pretending to be one big family when it's all a lie? I'd rather stab myself with a rusty knife over and over again.

"Skye starts school on Monday," Damon continues. "I need someone to help get her to school in the morning and bring her home after lunch."

"And after lunch?"

Is Mr. Workaholic going to skip work every afternoon? Not likely.

"Maybe you could stay a few hours."

"A few hours?"

"Until dinner."

"Summing this up. You want me to come over in the morning and get Skye ready, help her to school, and, when she's finished, bring her home and stay with her until dinner."

"I know it's a lot to ask."

A lot to ask? Is he serious? He's basically asking me to continue being Skye's nanny after he fired me.

"In the meantime, I'll search for a new nanny."

I flinch and he sighs. "I'm sorry, Love Hill. I really am. But I don't see an alternative."

There are alternatives. Plenty of them. But, naturally, he won't take my side. No one ever does.

"It's fine." I stand and point to the door. I'm over this conversation. "You can let yourself out. I'll see you on Monday morning."

"Happy Thanksgiving," he says as he exits my house.

Happy Thanksgiving? Is he freaking serious? What's there to be happy about? His entire family hating me? Losing my job? Knowing I will never have a chance with Damon?

Yep. Tons and tons to be happy about.

Chapter 12

Has anyone seen Love Hill? I lost track of her. ~ Message from Petal to the Gossip Gals



Love Hill

“Hey, Dad,” I greet as I kneel in front of my father’s grave. “Sorry, it’s been a while.”

I’m not certain what I’m doing here. I’m not entirely certain how I got here. I was wandering around this morning and somehow, I ended up at the Winter Falls cemetery.

It’s a small place. The population of Winter Falls isn’t very big after all. Still, I scan the area to check I’m alone before I continue.

“I think I’m screwing up my life,” I whisper. “I think I got on the wrong track and I don’t know how to get back to the right one.”

Tears well in my eyes and I sniff to stop them from falling. I’m not going to be some cliché woman crying in the cemetery for my daddy who’s been gone for nearly two decades.

“Priscilla’s gone. She left a while back after she used up the inheritance you left her. I don’t know what you saw in her. All she ever did was drink, eat, sleep, and pick up strange men.”

I freeze. Those are the exact same words the people of Winter Falls have been saying about me for years. *All she does is pick up men. I don’t think she’s ever had an actual job. Does she sleep all day?*

The tears I was holding back fall down my face. “I’m a mess, Daddy.”

What I wouldn’t give to hear his voice one more time. I need his advice on what to do. But I’m surrounded by silence. Birds chirp and water gurgles on the river nearby, but no Daddy telling me everything will be okay.

“I lost my job. Did I tell you I got a job? I’m a nanny for the cutest little girl in the world.”

I clear my throat. “Or, rather, I was the nanny. My boss fired me because of the rumors he overheard.”

I pause. I never lie to my dad. Not even when he’s dead and buried.

“I guess they aren’t rumors. I have dated a few married men in my life. Okay. Okay. I’ve strictly dated married men. But I was merely testing them. After what happened in ninth grade ...”

You’re making excuses to explain your behavior.

Damn it to hell and back. I *am* making excuses. While it’s true no one listened to my side of the story in ninth grade, it’s also true the things they’ve said about me and men since then are correct – mostly.

It’s time for change, Love.

But how do I change?

Start today with small steps.

No more married men. No more blaming your bad reputation on your peers. Time to own up to your mistakes.

Own up to my mistakes? Gulp. Do I have to?

Oh, jeez. I’m not going to run around apologizing to everyone I’ve ever hurt. I’m not in one of those twelve-step programs.

Be a better person.

“I don’t know if I can be a better person, Daddy. I think I might be a bad person.”

I'm thirty-four years old. Can I change my life? Can I be a better person?

I think I have to be. I can't continue as I am. I'll turn into Priscilla. I don't want to be the same as my step-witch.

That does it. I get to my feet. I am going to do better. Or, at least, try to do better and be a better person.

How hard can it be?

I check my watch. I need to get to Damon's house or I won't have time to get Skye ready for her first day of school. I increase my pace. The first day of school is important. She needs to wear the perfect outfit to make a good first impression.

"Good morning, Forest," I say as I pass the pet shop owner out walking his squirrels.

He scowls.

I had to ask how hard it can be to change. Never mind. I can't expect the people of Winter Falls to believe I've turned a new leaf from day one. I need to show them.

I hurry to Damon's house. When I arrive at the door, I stare at it. Do I knock? I don't live here anymore. Okay. I'll knock.

Knock. Knock.

When no one answers, I try the bell. I'm about ready to push it again when the door flies open.

"Nanny Love, why are you knocking?" Damon asks and shoos me inside. "Skye's having a meltdown about what to wear for her first day of school."

Good thing I came prepared. "I know the perfect outfit," I say as I make my way up the stairs to Skye's room.

"Nanny Love!" Skye throws herself at me. "I don't have nothing to wear."

I set her on her feet. "You don't have anything to wear," I correct.

"That's what I said."

I grin. "I have an idea."

I open her closet and begin pulling out clothes. “How about this cute plaid skirt with your black sweater and a pair of tights?”

“Yeah!” Skye squeals.

I help her get dressed before braiding her hair.

“You ready for breakfast?” I ask as I put down the brush.

“Ready!”

I hold her hand as we walk down the stairs to the kitchen where Damon is sitting at the table reading from his tablet.

“Daddy! Daddy! Look at me.”

Skye twirls around and Damon claps. “You’re beautiful, squirt.”

Once we’re finished with breakfast, I help Skye into her boots and jacket before we make our way to my old school.

It’s one building with all grades from kindergarten through high school. Winter Falls isn’t big enough for a school but all of the surrounding towns send their children here since the town refuses to send their children to other schools where they might learn about the evildoers of the world. In other words, they want their children to be taught all about saving the environment and how violence is wrong.

I escort Skye into the building to the administration office.

The principal, Mrs. West, comes out of her office to greet us. “You must be Skye.”

“I’m starting kindergarten today.”

“You are? How exciting!”

“Hello, Mrs. West,” I greet.

Mrs. West smiles at me but there’s no warmth in her expression. In fact, the look in her eyes could freeze all the melting sea ice in the Arctic Sea.

My eyes narrow. Before I manage to snark at her, I remember my vow. I'm going to be a better person. I need to do better. Be better.

“Do I need to register Skye?”

“I believe all of her paperwork is finished. Debbie,” she calls for her assistant, “can you escort Miss Skye to her classroom?”

There's no chance of keeping the smile on my face now. I know the parents and guardians of young children are allowed to escort children to their classroom. I remember my dad taking me to school every day when I was Skye's age.

Skye clutches my hand. “No! Me want Nanny Love.”

I kneel down in front of her. “It's okay. Debbie will go with you.”

“No.” She stomps her foot. “You!”

“It's fine,” Mrs. West says. “I'll show you the way.”

I don't bother reminding her I know the way. We walk in silence through the halls bustling with students rushing to make it to their classrooms on time.

“Hazel,” Mrs. West greets the teacher, “meet our newest student, Skye.”

Skye hides behind my legs. “I'm sorry, Hazel. Skye isn't usually shy.”

“It's fine.” Hazel kneels in front of Skye. “Hi, Skye. Are you excited for your first day of school?”

Skye peeks around my legs. “Y-y-yes.” Her bottom lip trembles.

I unhook her hands from my leg and kneel next to her teacher. “You're going to have the best time. I bet you get to paint and play and ...” I trail off since I don't remember what children do in kindergarten.

“And we're currently reading Dr. Seuss,” Hazel fills in.

“Dr. Seuss?” Skye inches forward. “Who’s Dr. Seuss?”

Hazel stands. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

“Okay.”

The teacher holds out her hand and Skye grasps it.

“She didn’t say goodbye,” I murmur as I watch them join the circle of students.

Mrs. West pats my shoulder. “They usually don’t.”

I grin at her and she drops her hand.

“Of course, Skye isn’t your child.”

Pain shoots through me at the reminder that I will never have a child of my own. I open my mouth to lash out at the principal. It’s usually what I do when I’m hurt or angry.

But I’m not going to do what I usually do anymore. No more lashing out at people to cause them pain when I’m in pain.

“Skye is a wonderful child,” I say instead.

“And beautiful.”

I roll my eyes as I follow her out of the classroom. “Naturally, she’s a Bragg.”

“The poor boys of this town won’t know what hit them once the Bragg girls are older.”

“I doubt any of the Bragg brothers are going to let their girls date until they’re in their twenties.”

“It’s not a bad policy,” she murmurs.

She’s not referring to her daughters. No, she let her five girls run wild when they were young.

She must be referring to me. Because I’m not as good as her girls. I have to lock my jaw to stop myself from making a snarky response.

Ugh. This being a better person stuff is tough.

Chapter 13

Did someone manage to snap a picture of Damon Bragg running? That man is sexier than any of my book boyfriends. ~ Message from Feather to the Gossip Gals



Damon

My heart pounds as I run to the school. Love Hill called and told me to get to the school as fast as I could. I don't know why. Was there a school shooting? Is Skye hurt?

Please, please, don't let my baby girl be hurt.

I fly through the door and stop. I don't know where I'm going. I notice a room marked administration and run toward it.

The door bangs against the wall as I rush inside. "My daughter. Where's my daughter?"

"She's okay, Damon." I whirl around at Love Hills' response. She's sitting in a chair along the back wall. "She's in trouble, but she's not injured."

"Thank god," I murmur as I collapse in a chair next to her to gather my breath.

"What happened?" I ask once there's enough air in my lungs to speak without gasping.

"I don't know. I'm waiting to find out."

"Why did they call you?"

She winces. Shit. I'm a callous asshole.

“I don’t mean they shouldn’t call you. But why didn’t they call me first?”

“Mr. Bragg, Love Hill, the principal will see you now.”

I march to the door the woman indicates. I look around the room but Skye isn’t in here.

“Where’s my daughter?”

The woman behind the desk stands. “Your daughter is fine. You can talk to her after our discussion.”

“No.” Love Hill took the words straight out of my mouth. “I’m sorry, Mrs. West, but I insist Damon is allowed to visit with his daughter and confirm for himself she’s fine before we continue with this meeting.”

Mrs. West scowls. “You are not in charge here.”

Love Hill narrows her eyes. “I will not allow this school to make another mistake that harms a child for the rest of her life.”

I clutch my chest. “What are you talking about? Is Skye injured? Do we need a doctor?”

My worst nightmare is coming true. Skye’s hurt and I didn’t protect her. I thought she’d be safe at school. Do I need to homeschool her? Where do I find someone to tutor her?

The principal’s sigh stops my thoughts before they can spin out of control. “Follow me.”

I motion for Love to go first as we trail behind the principal to a room two doors down.

“Daddy!” Skye rushes toward me. I pick her up and hold her close.

“Are you okay, baby girl?”

Her bottom lip trembles and tears gather in her eyes. “Meadow was mean to me.”

“What did Meadow do?”

“She said...” Skye heaves for breath. “She said...”

Love Hill rubs a hand up and down her back. "It's okay. No one's going to be mean to you here."

"Promise?"

Love Hill doesn't hesitate to answer. "I promise no one will be mean to you if I'm around."

What was I thinking? Firing this woman? She's clearly made mistakes in her past but everyone deserves a second chance. Especially since she obviously wants to shield my daughter from any future hurts.

The principal clears her throat. "Perhaps we can return to my office to discuss the situation now?"

I hesitate. I don't want to abandon my daughter.

"I'll stay with Skye," Love Hill offers. "You go."

It's the perfect solution but I don't approve. I want Love Hill to be with me. To stand by my side as I navigate this new territory.

"I'll mind your little girl. Don't worry," the nurse says. "Do you want a lollipop, Skye?"

Skye's tears are forgotten as she pushes away from me and rushes to the nurse and her container of colorful lollipops.

We follow the principal back into her office and settle in chairs across from her.

"Who's Meadow? And why was she being mean to Skye?" I ask before she can speak.

She frowns. "Meadow is a local girl. The problem isn't Meadow. The problem is Skye's reaction to her words."

"Stop!" Love Hill growls. "You are not going to say, 'sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me' because it's complete and utter bullshit."

"Curb your language, Love Hill."

Love Hill slaps her hand on the principal's desk. "I will not curb my language. Words can hurt. They can hurt worse than broken bones. You should know this. You're supposed to

be this great educator who came to Winter Falls to save us uneducated ogres.”

“Be careful, Love Hill. The chief of police can be here in five minutes to arrest you.”

“I don’t care. Have your son-in-law arrest me. What I care about is ensuring that little girl in there,” she points toward the nurse’s room, “is treated with the care and respect I never got in this school.”

Mrs. West frowns. “I wasn’t principal at the time.”

“I don’t care.”

“What are you talking about?” I interject.

Love Hill waves away my question. “It’s ancient history.”

“It doesn’t sound as if it’s ancient history.”

She ignores me to stare down the principal. “What did Meadow say, Mrs. West?”

Mrs. West clears her throat. “She said Skye doesn’t have a mamma because her mamma doesn’t love her.”

Love Hill explodes out of her seat. “Who are Meadow’s parents? Where are they? Why aren’t they here answering for what Meadow said?”

“I thought it was more urgent to discuss Skye slapping Meadow.” Mrs. West focuses on me. “Violence is not tolerated in Winter Falls. Skye will be suspended for three days.”

“What about Meadow? How long is she suspended for?” Love Hill asks before I can.

“Ahem. She’s been reprimanded.”

“No.” Love Hill crosses her arms over her chest. “I am not moving from this seat until Meadow is given the same punishment as Skye.”

“I guess I’ll be phoning my son-in-law to arrest you.” Mrs. West picks up her phone.

“Lyric is welcome to try. This is a non-violent protest.”

The principal sets the phone back on the desk. “You are not in charge of deciding the punishments in this school. I am.”

“Obviously, you need some help with your decision making if a little girl can tell another little girl her mamma doesn’t love her without repercussion.”

“She was given a stern talking to.”

Love Hill snorts. “You don’t get it, do you? You have no idea how it feels to be an outsider in this town where everyone is welcomed with open arms. You have no idea how it feels to be the only person in the classroom who doesn’t have a mother. Or the only person who doesn’t have a father. Or the only person no one will listen to when you’re accused of a heinous crime.”

I glance back and forth from Love Hill to Mrs. West. “Heinous crime? What’s going on here?”

Love Hill deflates. “Nothing.”

“I think I made a mistake,” Mrs. West mutters.

Love Hill nods. “I agree. Meadow should be suspended for as long as Skye is suspended for.”

“I wasn’t referring to Meadow...” Love Hill growls to cut her off. “I’ll call Meadow’s parents. I didn’t think...” She shakes her head. “I think we should discuss our non-violent policy at a town meeting.”

Love Hill stands. “Can we take Skye home now?”

“I’m serious, Ms. Hill. I’m ready to discuss this.”

Love glances away. “I’m not.”

I squeeze her hand. I have no idea what’s going on or why Love is hurting. The only thing I can do is squeeze her hand and stand by her side. I have a feeling no one’s stood by her side in a long time.

Including me. I couldn’t fire her quick enough based on some nasty things a few people said.

“Let’s go get Skye.” Love nods. “Goodbye, Mrs. West.” My voice is clipped. I may be clueless about what their

discussion entailed, but I have a feeling this woman did something to hurt Love. Something she's yet to recover from.

Mrs. West nods. "Thank you for coming in."

"As if we had a choice," Love mutters.

I drag her away before they can get into another verbal skirmish I don't understand.

Skye is waiting for us in the nurse's room.

"Come on, squirt. Time to go home."

She appears confused. "I have class with Miss Hazel."

"Or we can get some ice cream," Love suggests.

"Ice cream?" I shiver. "It's freezing out."

Love grasps Skye's hand and leads her out of the room. "Isn't your daddy silly? He thinks it's too cold for ice cream. It's never too cold for ice cream."

Skye giggles. "Daddy's silly."

I grasp her free hand and lead her out of the school. I peer back as we exit. I thought a small town would be a great place to raise my daughter. But now I'm wondering if I was wrong. If I should have stayed in San Diego all along.

My gaze catches Love smiling down at Skye as my daughter tells her all about her morning at school. Maybe there are things in Winter Falls worth staying for after all.

Chapter 14

Does anyone have any advice on how to learn to pick a lock? Strictly academic, of course. ~ Message from Sage on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

“We need to talk.”

Damn. I knew this was coming. Damon already fired me, but after the incident at the school today, he’s really going to fire me.

And I can’t blame him. I completely lost it. I acted like a woman possessed. Like? There was no like about it. I *was* a woman possessed.

Because I remember Mrs. West. She was the English teacher when I was in ninth grade. Since she’s a woman, I thought she would listen to me. She wouldn’t.

I learned not to trust other women the day I asked to speak to her and she told me she couldn’t help me. Everyone in town thinks she’s the bee’s knees. Ha! She’s more the bee who stings you and cackles as she flies away.

“I understand,” I tell Damon. “I’ll get my things and go.”

He stops me with a hand on my shoulder. “Go? Why would you go?”

“Because you’re going to fire me. Again.”

His brow wrinkles. “I’m not going to fire you.”

“You’re not?”

He urges me toward the living room and I settle on the sofa.

He perches on the coffee table in front of me. “I want to check if you’re okay.”

I must be hearing things. No one checks if I’m okay. No one gives the first shit if I’m okay. I open my mouth to snark at him but I’m not *that* Love Hill anymore. Or, at least, I’m trying not to be.

“You want to check if I’m okay?”

“Listen.” His hand reaches forward as if to touch me but he shakes his head and drops it before he can reach me. “I don’t know what happened in the principal’s office but I’m one hundred percent certain it wasn’t all about Skye slapping Meadow.”

“You’re not mad I lost it with the principal?”

“Mad?” He cocks an eyebrow. “Why would I be mad you stood up for my daughter and ensured she was treated equally to the other children?”

“But I yelled and slammed my hand on Mrs. West’s desk.”

“I know.” He grins. “It was magnificent.”

“Magnificent? Are you feeling okay? Do I need to call Dr. Blue? He makes house calls.”

He chuckles. “I’m not sick.”

“If you say so.”

He clears his throat. “It’s clear Mrs. West hurt you in the past. You don’t have to tell me what happened, but I want you to know I’m here and ready to listen.”

Yeah, sure. Ready to listen. He’ll hear my story and decide I’m a tramp and send me on my way. He won’t believe me. No one ever does.

“Hey.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Where did you go?”

“I’m sitting right here.”

He taps my forehead. “In here. Where did you go in here?”

I purse my lips. I’m not telling him anything.

“I have a feeling wherever you went isn’t a pleasant place to be. I don’t think there’s any ice cream there.”

I roll my eyes. “Now you understand the draw of ice cream in December.”

“I think I got it when you and Skye lost your minds over eating huge mounds of ice cream while it’s freezing outside.”

“It’s not freezing outside.”

“And you’re avoiding the subject.”

Of course, I am. I’m an expert at avoiding the subject. When you realize no one believes a word you say, changing the subject becomes a necessary life skill.

“I don’t remember what the subject is.”

“I’m serious, Love. I’m here if you need to discuss anything. Anything at all. I don’t have any preconceived notions since I don’t know the people in town yet. I’ll listen to whatever you have to say and I won’t judge you.” He raises two fingers in the air. “Scout’s honor.”

“Were you really a boy scout?”

“Boy scout?” He scoffs. “I was an Eagle Scout.”

I stare at him with my mind whirling around in circles. Since it became obvious no one would believe my side of the story, I stopped wanting to tell anyone my side. But somehow, I find myself wavering.

Would he listen? Would he understand?

Or.

Would he call me a whore?

“No matter what you say, I want you back as Skye’s nanny. I never should have fired you in the first place. I was

wrong. I apologize.”

He was wrong? He apologizes? Except for my dad, I’ve never heard a man admit he was wrong before. Is this some kind of trick?

I study his face for signs of deception but he stares back at me as if he has nothing to hide. I gulp. Am I going to do this? Am I going to tell him what happened? What really happened? Not the story everyone in town believes. Here goes nothing.

“I was fourteen and in ninth grade. My dad was sick with cancer.”

Damon squeezes my hands.

“School didn’t seem very important at the time. Especially not math. Who uses algebra in daily life anyway?”

I’m getting off track. I clear my throat.

“Mr. Simon was my math teacher. He asked me to come to his office. I figured it was because I was failing. I didn’t care if I had to repeat a grade. What did it matter? My dad was the only thing that mattered.”

Damon wipes the tears from my face. When did I start to cry? It doesn’t matter. He can’t touch me while I tell this story. I won’t be able to finish if he’s touching me. I sniff and lean back until he’s forced to drop his hands. He frowns but I don’t have time to deal with his feelings now.

“Mr. Simon said I didn’t need to fail class. I could do extra credit instead. When I asked him what kind of extra credit, he pushed me against the wall and kissed me.”

I shiver at the memory of his clammy lips on mine. His tongue pushing into my mouth.

“I tried to get away but he put his hand around my throat and squeezed. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. I was frozen in fear. When he finally released me, I ran home. I skipped the rest of the day of school.”

“I’m so sorry that happened to you, Love.”

I hold up a hand. “I’m not done.”

He nods for me to continue.

“The next day when I came to school everyone was talking about how I was dating Mr. Simon. Someone had seen us through the window in his office door and instead of checking to make sure I – a fourteen-year-old girl being mauled by an adult – was okay, they spread rumors.

I tried to complain but I was too late. Mr. Simon had already spoken to the principal about how I went to him begging him to let me pass the class and when he wouldn't let me do extra credit, I attacked him. No one would listen to my side of the story.”

“What a son of a bitch!” Damon explodes.

I know it shouldn't. But his anger on my behalf warms my heart. No one's been angry on my behalf in a long time.

“And now you know all about the ninth grade ‘incident’ your sisters-in-law were discussing.”

“I'll call my brothers. They need to know the truth.”

“No!”

He freezes with his phone in his hand. “Why not? They unfairly judged you. The truth needs to come out.”

“I don't want everyone to suddenly like me or pity me because they found out I was molested in ninth grade. I want people to like me for who I am. Or for who the person I'm going to be.”

Because I'm starting to realize his sisters-in-law might be right. I might have been wrong to flirt with those married men. I know I'd lose my mind if anyone flirted with Damon if we were together.

Which we're not. But my statement stands. *If* Damon and I were together, I'd lose my mind if some woman flirted with him.

Damon squeezes my hands. “You're already a good person, Love.”

“No, I'm not.” Especially since I'm currently eviscerating any woman who would dare to flirt with him in my

mind. "But I'm going to be."

"You're great with Skye."

"Because she's the best child in the world." And because I love children but will never have one of my own. Skye's not mine but I can treat her as if she is.

He grins. "I can't argue with you there."

"Anyway." I yank my hands from his hold. "Now you know. You promised not to judge and I could keep my job."

"I'm not judging you but I sure as hell am judging Mr. Simon. Does he still work at the school?"

"No."

"Do you know where he lives? Never mind. I'll ask Brody. He can locate anyone."

"Stop. You're not going after Mr. Simon. You can't go to jail. You have a little girl sleeping upstairs who needs you. You can't abandon her. I won't let you."

"Relax, Love. My brother's a cop." He winks.

Not good enough. His brother, Peace, is a straight and narrow cop. He doesn't play favors with anyone.

"Promise me," I insist. "Promise me you won't do anything to jeopardize you and Skye being together."

He sobers. "I promise."

"Good." I stand. "I'm going home. It's been a day."

"I'll be over tomorrow to help you move your stuff back in here." I don't know what he means. "Since you're my live-in nanny again."

I forgot all about moving back into Damon's house. It's easy to forget when you get dragged back to memories you never want to think about again.

But Damon believes me. He really, truly believes me.

Warmth flows through my body. Damon Bragg is the best man I've ever met.

Old Love Hill would be all over him. But I'm not that woman anymore. Being a better person means I can't seduce my boss.

Besides, Damon Bragg deserves a better woman. He deserves the best, which I am not.

Chapter 15

Motion activated cameras are hereby illegal in Winter Falls. No more spying on your neighbors. ~ Message from Peace on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

“Skye,” I whisper as I shake her shoulder. “Wake up.”

“Me tired.”

“You can go back to sleep...” I wait until she turns over to continue. “Or you can get up and see the snow.”

“Snow? There’s snow?”

“You have to get out of bed to find out.”

“What’s going on?” Damon asks as he stumbles into Skye’s room.

He’s all ruffled with his hair sticking up and his face soft from sleep. Geez. I thought he was sexy before. But sleepy? He’s sexy smothered in chocolate sauce with a cherry on top.

Skye jumps out of bed and runs to him. “It’s snowing, Daddy. Snowing!”

He chuckles as he reaches down to lift her up. “It is? Are you sure?”

“Nanny Love said so.”

“Let’s go check, shall we?”

I hand him a blanket and he wraps his daughter up before carrying her down the stairs and out the front door onto the patio.

“It’s pretty,” Skye whispers.

The awe in her voice is totally worth being awake at three a.m. When I saw the forecast for snow before I went to bed last night, I set my alarm to wake me in the middle of the night just in case. Nothing can compare to viewing the first snow when it’s dark outside. It’s magical.

My dad used to wake me up every year with the first snow and we’d sit outside on the porch and drink hot cocoa while watching the snowflakes float in the air. I miss him. I miss him so much. My eyes itch and I blink fast to stop myself from bawling and ruining this beautiful moment with Skye.

“I wasn’t sure about living in Winter Falls,” Damon says. “But this? This makes the move worth it.”

“There’s nothing better than snow in Winter Falls.”

“Daddy, down! I want to touch it,” Skye insists.

Damon rubs his nose against hers. “You don’t have any shoes on, squirt.”

Before she can protest, he carries her into the front yard. Skye throws her arms out. “It’s cold and wet.”

“Can you catch a snowflake on your tongue?” I ask as I join them.

“How?”

I lift my chin and stick out my tongue. When I feel cold on my tongue, I shut my mouth. “Caught one.”

“Me next. Me next!”

Skye flies backward and Damon quickly switches his hold before he accidentally drops her. She sticks out her tongue but keeps her mouth closed.

“You’re not going to catch any snowflakes with your mouth closed.”

She responds by opening her mouth as wide as she can. “I got one! I caught a snowflake!”

Damon throws her in the air to celebrate. “Good job, squirt.”

I notice Skye shiver. She’s not used to the cold. And she’s not dressed for it.

“Who wants hot cocoa?”

I don’t wait for an answer before herding them inside.

“Can we play in the snow?” Skye asks as I bustle around the kitchen.

“In the morning. Once we’ve had a few more hours of sleep.”

“But what if the snow is gone in the morning?”

“Don’t worry. It won’t be.” I wink. “We can make snowmen and snow angels and go sledding.”

I set a small cup of hot cocoa in front of her. “Drink your hot chocolate and then it’s off to bed.”

“Okay, Nanny Love.”

I return to the stove to finish the hot cocoa for me and Damon. When I turn around, Skye is sound asleep with her head on the table. I begin toward her but Damon waves me away.

“I got her.”

He picks her up and she cuddles into him in her sleep. Secure her daddy will always be there for her.

I never imagined being with a man with children. I never actually imagined being with a man long-term. Not since I was labeled a jezebel by the entire town.

Come on, Love. Your behavior after ninth grade didn’t help things.

“Go on to bed,” Damon whispers to me.

“I’m going to sit outside with my hot cocoa and watch the snow.”

“I’ll join you as soon as I get her down.”

“You don’t have to...” He’s gone before I can finish protesting.

I grab my mug and gather an extra blanket from the sofa before returning outside to sit on the porch. There aren’t any rocking chairs on his porch but there’s a bench I can sit on.

I love this time of day. The world is asleep. There aren’t any nasty thoughts or horrible things happening at this magical time at night before day breaks.

The screen door creaks as Damon steps outside.

“Room on that bench for me?”

I scooch over and lift the blanket for him.

“It’s peaceful,” he murmurs.

“It’s my favorite time of the day.”

“Do you often get up at four a.m. to observe the sunrise?”

I chuckle. “No, but my dad always used to wake me at the first snowfall. We’d sit outside and rock on the porch while drinking hot cocoa. It was magical.”

He squeezes my thigh. “You made my little girl’s first snow pretty magical. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. The excitement and happiness on Skye’s face when she saw snow for the first time was thanks enough.”

“Tell me about your dad.”

“He was wonderful.” I sigh. “The best dad in the world. Present company excepted.”

He snorts. “I’m not winning the award for best dad anytime soon.”

“Are you serious? You’re wonderful with Skye.”

“I didn’t know she existed until a few months ago. She lived the first years of her life thinking her daddy didn’t care about her.”

“Stop,” I order. “It’s not your fault you didn’t know she existed.”

“I should have known.”

“Do you think you should have sensed she existed somewhere in the universe? You’re not a comic book hero no matter how much you may resemble one.”

He smirks. “You think I resemble a comic book hero?”

I tap my chin and feign studying him. “Maybe The Thing. A massive, orange rock man.”

“I’ll show you orange rock man,” he grumbles before tickling my ribs.

“Stop!” I hold my mug in the air where it’s safe. “The hot cocoa will spill.”

He stills. “I wouldn’t want to waste chocolate.”

I nod. “Exactly. Spilling chocolate is akin to murder.”

He chuckles. “I’ll have to ask Peace to add ‘spilling chocolate’ to the list of crimes in Winter Falls.”

“Don’t joke. The people of Winter Falls have a penchant for criminalizing the weirdest things.”

“Give me an example. And not any of the weird environmental rules either.”

“Weird environmental rules?” I widen my eyes. “You better hope the gossip gals are tucked up in their beds fast asleep and not aiming their binoculars at us now.”

“Why? What are they going to do? Tar and feather me?”

“Shush. Don’t give them any ideas. They actually made a request to the Chief of Police for town pitchforks because you can’t quote ‘run someone out of town without a pitchfork’.”

“Those little old ladies would never run anyone out of town.”

I sigh. “Oh, how naïve the newcomers can be. Those little old ladies are a force of nature. They do yoga several times a week to stay in shape in case they ever need to chase a suitor again.”

“Chase a suitor? Again? One of their suitors?”

“Have your brothers not explained how things in Winter Falls work to you? I thought all of you were close.”

“We are close. We’re also brothers.”

“You need to explain. This only child doesn’t understand.”

“Did you wish you had siblings?” he asks instead of explaining.

A sibling who would stand by me and believe me when the whole town didn’t? Hell yeah. A sibling who could shoulder some of the hate my step-witch threw at me? You know it. A sibling to mourn my dad with? To remember my dad together with?

I shove those morose thoughts away. They’re not helpful. Besides, morose thoughts are not allowed during the first snowfall of the season.

“I asked first. Didn’t your brothers tell you about Winter Falls?”

He sips on his hot chocolate before answering. “Honestly, I wasn’t paying much attention. Between finding out I’m a dad, discovering we have a half-brother we didn’t know about, and my brothers falling in love, I had enough on my plate.”

“Busy times. I guess it’s my duty to explain how the gossip gals are not to be messed with. They are the leaders of the gossip network and they also think they’re the best matchmakers in Colorado.”

“Matchmakers? How does it work? Do they have an office and single people sign up for their services? Do they have mixers?”

“Not even close. They decide on two people they think should be together without asking those people for their

opinions and then they get all sneaky.”

“I don’t believe you. Give me an example.”

“You don’t think I have an example? Being an outcast doesn’t mean I don’t know what happens in my town.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you’re an outcast.”

I wave away his apology. I’m supposed to stop snarking at people.

“Forget what I said.” I wait for his nod before continuing. “Remember how there was only one bed at Soleil’s house?”

“Because my idiot brother Brody destroyed his bed.”

“True. What’s also true is Brody immediately ordered a new bed but the gossip gals cancelled the delivery. Thus, forcing Brody and Soleil into a whole one bed situation.”

Hmmm... I wonder if I could ask Sage to make my bed here at Damon’s house disappear. He’d be forced to sleep with me and before you know it clothes would disappear and his lips would be on my body and—

Nope. *Stop it, Love!* You are not seducing your boss. It’s rule number one in the ‘how to be a better person’-handbook.

“Wow,” Damon murmurs. “I think I’ve underestimated the gossip gals and their scheming capabilities.”

“I have more stories,” I begin and tell him all about how Sage and her crew have helped to pair up every couple who’ve gotten together in the past two years in Winter Falls.

I wonder who they have in mind for Damon. They must have found his match by now. He’s been in town for a few weeks. Normally, they’re revving to go after a day.

A big ball of something nasty forms in my stomach as envy and hate for an unknown woman grows. I want to be the woman with Damon.

I know I can’t be. I’m not good enough for this man. But I want to be his.

Chapter 16

*I'm winning the bet on this project. ~
Message from Clove to the Gossip Gals*



Love Hill

“Nanny Love! Nanny Love!” Skye screams before she jumps on my bed.

I push my hair out of my face. How did I get here? The last thing I remember is talking with Damon on the porch. Did I fall asleep?

I guess there’s a first time for everything. I’ve never been comfortable enough with a man to fall asleep with him. Not even after sex. I don’t sleep with my sexual partners. You have to trust someone to sleep with him. And trust doesn’t come easy to me.

“Wake up, Nanny Love.”

I grasp Skye’s leg and pull her down next to me before she bounces on the bed. “No bouncing on the bed. You might break it.”

“But you said we could go sledding and make angel men in the snow this morning.”

I tickle her ribs. “I did, did I? Are you sure you weren’t imagining things?”

She swats at me as she giggles. “Stop, Nanny Love!”

“Do you need me to rescue you?” Damon asks as he rushes into the room. He pauses next to the bed with his fists on his hips and his chest jutting out. “I’m Super Dad.”

I bark out a laugh. “What skills does Super Dad have?”

He wiggles his fingers. “I am a super tickler.”

“No, Daddy, don’t!” Skye squeals as he attacks her.

“Should we tickle Nanny Love instead?”

I hold up my hands and slide as far away from them as I can without falling off of the bed. “No tickling Nanny Love.”

Damon dives on the bed and he and Skye attack my ribs. I try slapping them away but I don’t want to hurt Skye.

“Uncle! I call uncle.”

Damon stops and lays back against the headrest next to me before pulling his daughter into his arms.

“What’s uncle?” Skye asks.

Damon scowls at yet more evidence of what a shitty birth mom Skye has, but he quickly covers it up.

“It means you win because I give up,” I explain.

“Yes! I win!” Skye wiggles a happy dance.

My gaze catches on the mirror above my dresser. The reflection shows the three of us laying in my bed. We resemble a family. Mom, Dad, daughter.

A sense of yearning hits me so hard, it knocks the breath out of me.

I must gasp out loud because Damon grazes my thigh with his hand. “You okay?”

Knowing I can never have what I want? That the vision in the mirror isn’t real? Sure, I’m doing awesome. Couldn’t be better. I swallow my snarky response and force a smile. “Fine.”

He frowns. “I know better than to accept fine at face value from a woman. What’s...” He trails off before muttering a few choice swear words. “We’re intruding in your private space.” He helps Skye off the bed before rolling off himself.

“You don’t have to go.”

“I promised you privacy when you accepted this job. I don’t break my promises.”

Stop being perfect! I want to scream at him, but I don’t. I’m his daughter’s nanny and nothing more to him. He doesn’t need or want to know how I long for him to be more. He deserves better than me anyway.

“Get dressed. And we’ll go outside to enjoy the snow after breakfast,” I tell Skye.

She whoops before rushing out of the room.

“Again, I’m sorry,” Damon says as he closes the door behind him.

I bury my face in my hands. Why did no one tell me being a better person was this hard? Because it sucks. It sucks knowing I will never have the man I want in my arms.

I want to crawl into bed and feel sorry for myself but I hear a thump in Skye’s room. I throw off the covers. There’s no time to wallow in depression.

“What do we do first?” Skye asks as I help her into her snow boots and jacket after we’ve eaten breakfast.

“I’ll show you how to make a snow angel and then we’ll make a snowman. After lunch, your dad promised to go sledding with us.”

“Nope. Dad’s off and we’re going sledding now,” Damon proclaims as he joins us.

“Don’t you need to work?”

“It’s the first snow day. Isn’t it a state holiday?”

I giggle. “You have a lot to learn about living in Colorado if you think a few inches of snow merits a holiday.”

He rubs his hands together. “It does to me. Now, let’s go sledding.”

“Do you have any sleds?” I ask as he herds us to the car.

He stumbles to a halt. “Agenda change. First stop, the store to buy sleds.” He leans close to whisper. “Can I buy a sled

in Winter Falls?”

“I have a sled. If you stop by my house, we can pick it up.”

“You sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be sure? You’re not planning on destroying my sled, are you?”

He smirks. “Super Dad is pretty strong.”

I roll my eyes. I had to mention how he could be a comic book hero with his good looks.

I’m not surprised there’s already a crowd at Lover’s Ridge when we arrive. The people of Winter Falls love outdoor activities. The more environmentally conscious the better. And what’s more environmentally conscious in the winter than careening down a big hill on a wooden sled?

We exit the car and I make sure Skye is bundled up while Damon gets the sled.

“Hold this.” Damon hands me the sled before lifting his daughter onto his shoulders. “Ready, squirt?”

She points to the top of the hill. “Up, Daddy.”

Damon holds out his hand for the sled but I don’t give it to him. The least I can do is carry the sled up the hill. He wrestles it from my grip. “I got it. You lead the way.”

I make my way toward the bottom of the hill.

“Love Hill! Love Hill!” To my surprise, someone is hollering my name. Normally, the locals ignore me. I search the area until my gaze falls on Clove waving to me. Oh boy. A gossip gal. Here we go.

I paste a smile on my face. “Hi, Clove. Can I help you?”

“Oh no, dear. I’m fine. But I wanted to say what a lovely family you have.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t be a troublemaker, Clove. You know I’m the nanny.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Just the nanny?”

I wag a finger at her. “You better not be betting on any project related to me, Clove, or I’ll tell everyone in town you use cheap coffee beans that aren’t environmentally friendly.”

She gasps and clutches her chest. “You wouldn’t?”

“The same way you wouldn’t bet on me?”

She scowls. “At least confirm you got into a hair pulling fight with Principal West.”

“No hair was pulled but it was close,” Damon says from behind me.

I slam my fists on my hips. “I did not pull anyone’s hair.”

“I didn’t say you did. I said it was close.”

Clove’s gaze bounces back and forth between us. “Petal is right. This is going to be the best project ever.”

“Clove,” I growl in warning. She can’t seriously think Damon and I are the next gossip gal project.

She widens her eyes. “What?” She bats her eyelashes. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Come on, Love.” Damon nudges me toward the hill. “Squirt can’t wait to go on her first sled ride.”

Clove sighs. “Such a lovely family.”

Pain slices through me at her words. Damon and Skye are not my family.

“Race you up the hill,” I call to Damon.

Even with him carrying Skye and the sled, I have no chance of winning. But as I reach the summit of the hill – out of breath and laughing at Damon’s victory dance – the pain of Clove’s words has faded, which is a win in and of itself.

I snag the sled from Damon. “Let’s get on the sled before someone decides your daddy is having a seizure.”

“Don’t be a sore loser.”

I ignore Damon’s taunt and motion to the toboggan. “You’re in front, Skye. I’ve got the back.”

She climbs in and I hand the ropes to her before sitting behind her. Damon climbs in after me.

“What are you doing? This toboggan isn’t made for three people.”

He points to several families on toboggans. “Beg to differ.”

“Whatever,” I mumble since I can’t deny he’s right.

I scooch forward so I’m not cradled between his strong thighs. No, not strong thighs. Legs. Merely legs. Nothing exciting to feel here.

“Ready, Skye!” Damon shouts.

“Ready, Daddy!”

He pushes us off with his hands and off we go. As we build up speed, I’m forced back into Damon’s arms. I have my arms around Skye while he has his arms around me. So much for not thinking about what Clove said.

“Steer to the left, Skye!”

She pulls the ropes to the right.

“Your other left!”

Uh oh. We’re headed straight for a big snowbank. I yank the rope to the left but it’s too late. We careen straight into the snowbank with an oof! And come to an abrupt halt.

“Skye, Skye, are you okay? Are you injured?” I claw at the snow to get to her.

She giggles. “Can we do it again, please?”

I fall back against Damon as relief hits me. “You took a year off of my life.”

He barks out a laugh. “Welcome to the life of a parent.”

I wish, Damon. I wish.

Chapter 17

I'm offering a reward for anyone who catches the gossip gals with listening equipment. ~ Message from Peace on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Damon

Love stops pacing the hallway when I tiptoe out of Skye's room. I grasp her hand and lead her down the stairs into the living room where Little Miss Won't Go To Sleep can't hear us.

"Is she asleep?" Love asks.

I collapse on the sofa. "Finally."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything about picking out a Christmas tree."

"It's not your fault. If there's anyone to blame here, it's her mom for being a shitty person." I growl. "Every single time I discover there's another thing Skye should have experienced as a child and hasn't yet – pumpkin pie, Christmas tree, you name it – I want to hunt Maria down and choke the living hell out of her."

"Maybe I should poison her. No one will suspect me."

I cock an eyebrow and she shrugs.

"I always did want to poison my step-witch."

I chuckle. "I'm surprised you didn't."

"Damon Bragg, I am not a murderer."

I raise my hands. “I’m not saying you are. But I’ve been on the wrong end of enough of Brody’s pranks to know there are ways to poison a person without killing them.”

“Really?”

“Syrup of ipecac for starters.”

“What does it do?”

He shivers. “It makes you vomit and vomit some more.”

“Priscilla would probably enjoy extra vomiting. Keeping thin was an absolute must for her. Once Dad passed away, I was lucky if she fed me more than a few carrots for dinner.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope. Mostly it was celery because it has negative calories.” She shrugs. “Don’t ask me what it means. I survived on school lunches until I graduated from high school.”

“And afterwards?” My jaw is beginning to hurt from how hard I’m clenching it. Her fucking stepmom starved her. What the hell? Did no one else in town notice? Did no one else in town care?

She dips her chin to her chest but not before I notice the blush blossom across her cheeks. “I discovered if I dated a man, he’d buy me dinner. And sometimes give me a little spending money.”

I pinch her chin and force her to meet my gaze. “You did what you had to in order to survive.”

She purses her lips. “I took the easy way out.”

“You survived.”

“I should have gone off to college.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Her eyes drop to her lap where she wrings her hands. “Dad was wealthy. When he died, he left half of his money to Priscilla and half went into a trust for me. I couldn’t touch it until I was thirty. But Priscilla could.”

“Wait. What are you saying? Did Priscilla spend your trust money?”

“Every last dime.”

“I changed my mind. Syrup of ipecac is too gentle for her.”

Love laughs but her eyes are full of sadness. Her eyes should never be full of sadness. They should sparkle with mirth and joy.

My gaze dips to her mouth. Those pouty pink lips I’ve wanted to taste since the moment I met her at my brother’s wedding. At the time, I thought she was a maneater. I’m beginning to wonder if my judgment was off.

I’m lying. I suspected my judgment was wrong the second I saw Love with Skye. No one who’s a horrible person can be kind to a child the way she is with my daughter.

And after she told me what happened in ninth grade, I knew for sure. What you see is not what you get with Love Hill. She’s hiding layers and layers of herself from the world. Layers I want to peel away one at a time until the real Love Hill is revealed.

She bites her bottom lip and all my resistance flees. I dip my head until my lips touch hers. A little graze meant to tease. She makes this adorable sound in the back of her throat and I palm her neck to bring her closer.

When she clutches my shoulders, I dive in to explore her mouth. She tastes of cherries, the coffee we had after dinner, and a bit of the forbidden. It’s addicting. And dangerous. And I don’t care.

Love sighs and I stroke my tongue against hers. The feel of her fingernails digging into my skin spurs me on. I wrap an arm around her waist and haul her onto my lap. My hard cock presses against her core and she begins to rub herself against me. Hell yeah.

I wrench my lips from hers to plant kisses along her jaw until I reach her ear.

“How about we take this to the bedroom?”

She freezes. Her eyes fly open and she stares down at me.

“I didn’t...” She crawls off my lap and cowers in the corner of the sofa with her arms wrapped around her knees.

Holy hell. She doesn’t resemble a woman whose world has just been rocked. She’s terrified. My heart races until my chest aches. I’m the one who terrified her. I hold up my palms and inch away from her.

“I didn’t mean to force you.”

Her eyes narrow. “What? You didn’t force me.”

I wish I could believe her but her body language isn’t a lie. I motion toward her. “You cowering in the corner says otherwise.”

She releases her knees and straightens her back. She’s trying to appear tough, but her eyes continue to flash with fear.

“You didn’t force me.” She clears her throat. “I didn’t mean to come onto you.”

My brow wrinkles in confusion. “Come onto me? I’m the one who kissed you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I should go to bed.”

I want to go to bed with her but I don’t think my wish is going to be granted today. Before I figure out what to say, she speaks again.

“This can’t happen again.”

I run a hand through my hair. I’m confused. She seemed into the kiss but now she’s running away. What happened?

“Why not?”

“I’m the nanny. You’re the boss. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

“We can keep our private relationship separate from our work relationship,” I say even though I doubt we can. We live together. She’s helping to raise my daughter. We breathe each other’s air twenty-four-seven.

But I'm done resisting her. Love Hill is not who she appears and the person she is? She's irresistible.

She raises her eyebrows. "We can?"

I shrug. "If you want to."

She studies me for a moment before a flip switches in her. I can see the moment her mood changes from guarded to pissed off.

"You think I'm an easy lay."

"I—"

"All those mumblings about how I should have been treated better by my stepmom and how teachers should have listened to my side of the story. They were all b.s., weren't they? You don't care about what happened to me. You just want in my panties."

"No. I mean I do want in your panties, but I didn't lie about anything."

Her shoulders hunch. "I get it. I'm the slut who'll sleep with anyone."

I growl. "Hang on a minute. I didn't say you were a slut."

"It's true, though, isn't it? I'm the homewrecker, the hussy of Winter Falls."

"Love, people saying those things about you doesn't mean they're true." I tap my chest. "In here, you know who you are. You don't need the approval of anyone from this town."

"They are true." Her nose scrunches. "Mostly. I didn't sleep with all of those married men. Mostly it was just kissing, maybe a little groping."

"Okay," I say because I have no idea what else I can say. I don't think she wants me to say I'm relieved she didn't sleep with all those men. Those words wouldn't go over well.

"I don't want to be that woman anymore."

Pride fills my chest. Love Hill is a wonderful woman.

"It's never too late to change."

“I’m thirty-four.”

“So? Mom finally found love and she’s in her... Let’s say she’s older than you.” I know better than to utter my mom’s age out loud. Her mom’s intuition would have her rushing over here to spank me regardless of how old I am.

“Okay.” She stands. “I’m going to try to be this better person.” She inhales a deep breath and lets it out before speaking again. “Damon, thank you for the lovely kiss but you are my boss and it’s inappropriate for us to have relations.”

Have relations? She’s freaking adorable.

“We shouldn’t kiss again.”

She waits for my nod before whirling around and bounding up the stairs. I wait until she disappears into the hallway before dropping my chin to my chest.

What have I done? I could have Love underneath me right now screaming my name in ecstasy. Instead, she’s off to bed. Alone.

You know she’s right, my mind manages to chime in through the want for Love pouring through my body.

She is. And I’ll respect her wishes. Because I have a feeling witnessing Love Hill become the woman she was always meant to be is going to be a spectacular show. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.

I adjust my cock. “Time for a cold shower.”

I predict a lot of cold showers in my future.

Chapter 18

Friendly reminder: Trees are not meant to end up in landfills. ~ Message from Eden on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

I stare at my closed door.

Come on, Love. You're not a scaredy-cat.

Yes, I am. I'm terrified of entering the kitchen where Damon and Skye are. Maybe he's decided to fire me after last night. I wouldn't blame him. I practically mauled him while we kissed. And then when he asked me to his room, I told him I didn't want any more.

I'm a tease. I snort. Now there's a word no one in Winter Falls has called me before.

Skye squeals as she rushes downstairs. No more delaying. I have a job to do. Or, at least, I do until Damon fires me.

I straighten my spine. Time to deal with the consequences of my actions.

I enter the kitchen where Damon is working at the stove.

"Oh shoot." I hurry to his side. "I'm late. I got this."

He nudges me away. "I'm perfectly capable of cooking a few eggs and bacon for breakfast."

I wring my hands. "But I should be making breakfast."

“Why don’t you help Skye set the table?” He nods toward his daughter who’s carrying three plates with glasses stacked on top. The glasses wobble and I rush to help her before they fall.

I keep an eye on Damon while Skye and I set the table. He doesn’t appear to be ready to sack me. Although, maybe this breakfast is a last hurrah! I don’t know. I never stick around for breakfast. I don’t do awkward.

Correction. I didn’t do awkward. But now awkward is my new middle name. Love Awkward Hill. Has a good ring to it.

“Stop staring at me as if you’re scared I’m going to attack you,” Damon mutters when he sets a plate in front of me.

“I don’t think you’re going to attack me.”

He cocks an eyebrow.

“I don’t.” I fidget with my fork. “I wouldn’t blame you for firing me, though, after last night.”

He checks Skye isn’t listening before stepping closer. “Last night was more my fault than yours.”

“But I teased you.”

He smirks. “I did some teasing of my own.”

I feel my face heat at the memory of his tongue gliding against mine. His hot breath against my ear.

He chuckles as he steps back. “All is well, Love Hill. All is well.”

“I’m done!” Skye shouts.

Her cheeks are stuffed full. She reminds me of a squirrel preparing for a long winter slumber. I tap one cheek. “You need to chew your food and swallow it.”

“But Daddy said we can pick out a Christmas tree as soon as I’m done.”

I cringe as she speaks with her mouth full.

“No talking with your mouth full.”

“Why not?”

Damon clears his throat. “I said we’d go pick out a Christmas tree when *everyone’s* finished with their breakfast.”

Skye crosses her arms over her chest and glares at him. He tweaks her nose. “Be good, squirt. Or we won’t go at all.”

She opens her mouth but before she has a chance to shout or scream or cry or throw a hissy fit, I elbow her. “He’s lying. He can’t wait to go pick out a Christmas tree.”

She sticks out her bottom lip and pouts. “Daddy.” At least she’s swallowed her food in the meantime.

Damon ruffles her hair and she dissolves into giggles. My heart catches. I want to experience this every morning. After a sweaty night spent in Damon’s bed.

I push those thoughts away. It’ll never happen. Damon isn’t mine. He’s meant for someone much better than me. Someone who doesn’t have a checkered past. Someone he wouldn’t be embarrassed to be seen in town with. Someone his family doesn’t gossip about during family dinners.

“Christmas tree!” Skye shouts and reminds me now is not the time to sit around and regret every single decision I’ve ever made in my life.

“You know,” I say once we’re on our way to a Christmas tree farm in White Bridge. “Winter Falls used to have a Christmas tree farm.”

“What was it like, Nanny Love?”

“It was magnificent. There was a Winter Wonderland with a treasure hunt.”

“What’s a treasure hunt?”

As I explain the concept to her, Damon smiles over at me. He also lays his hand on my thigh and squeezes. Heat courses through my body at his simple touch. Before I have a chance to figure out how to respond, he returns his hand to the steering wheel.

Thirty minutes later we arrive at the Christmas tree farm but when I notice the clients are carrying trees with no roots, I refuse to get out of the car.

“We can’t buy a tree here.”

“Why not?”

I point to the tree a man’s carrying toward his car. “They chopped it down.”

Damon chuckles. “I think they have to chop it down. We can’t exactly take a tree home while it’s still planted in the ground.”

“Don’t be a smart Alec. I mean the roots are gone. The tree is going to die.”

Killing a tree is worse than murder in Winter Falls. I may not believe or even understand most of the rules in Winter Falls, but this one is clear. I won’t be participating in a tree ending up in a landfill.

“Die? I don’t want our tree to die, Daddy.”

Damon scowls at me. “What now?”

I dig my phone out of my purse. “I’m sure there’s another Christmas tree farm in the city.”

“Aha!” I shout when I find one. “Let me put the address into your GPS.”

“I hope this place is acceptable,” Damon grumbles as he parks his car along the side of the road.

“Do you want the people of Winter Falls to run you out of town with pitchforks?”

“Peace would never allow me to be run out of town.”

I chuckle as I open my door. “You’re naïve.”

“What’s naïve?” Skye asks.

“It means your daddy is being silly.”

She giggles. “Daddy’s silly.”

I wait for Damon to help his daughter out of the car. Skye skips to me and grasps my hand. “Come on, Nanny Love.”

When we reach the entrance, her eyes widen to the size of saucers while her mouth gapes open. “It’s magical.”

I grin down at her. “And you get to pick out a tree.”

“I can pick any tree?”

I raise my eyebrows at Damon who merely shrugs. I have a feeling he’s going to regret not giving her any boundaries.

“Any tree.”

Skye squeals and yanks away from me before running toward the trees. I start to chase after her but Damon throws an arm around my shoulders to slow me down.

“Let her run. We can’t lose her with her blonde curly hair and bright red jacket.”

I slow my pace and enjoy the feel of Damon’s arm around me. I feel safe and secure with him and his musky scent surrounding me. But it’s only an illusion. An illusion I can’t get used to.

I shrug his arm away and increase my pace until I’m behind Skye.

“This one, Nanny Love.” She points at a scraggly tree and Damon groans behind me.

I ignore him. “It’s a lovely tree, but we won’t be able to hang many ornaments on it.”

“Ornaments? What are ornaments?”

I whip out my phone and show her a picture of a Christmas tree fully decorated.

Her eyes widen. “We’re going to make our tree look like this?”

“Yep.”

“We need a bigger tree.”

Uh oh. I’ve created a monster.

After several attempts at getting the biggest tree in the lot, Damon and Skye finally compromise on a normal sized tree.

Damon pays and one of the workers helps him carry the tree to his car.

I cringe when I notice them lift the tree to the roof. “You’re going to strap the tree to the roof of your car?”

“Naturally. How else do you expect me to get the tree home? The trunk isn’t big enough.”

“I thought you’d pay someone to have it delivered.”

“I haven’t been in Winter Falls long, but even I know the townspeople would cause an uproar if I had a tree delivered.”

He’s not wrong. “But you’ll scratch your paint.”

“It’s paint. I can get the car detailed after the holidays.”

“But it’s a really expensive car. Maybe we should get an artificial tree instead. They come in boxes.”

“Love,” he calls to get my attention when I continue to stare at the tree on the roof of his pricey electric car. “It’s okay.” He squeezes my hand. “It’s just a car.”

“But it’s expensive.”

He rubs a thumb against my wrist to calm me but the move has the opposite effect. It causes my blood to heat and warmth to spread throughout my body. I wrest my hands away. I can’t catch feelings for my boss. I’m the new and improved Love Hill. I no longer sleep around.

But it wouldn’t be sleeping around, Love.

I ignore my inner voice. It usually causes me trouble. I don’t need any more trouble.

I swallow. “Okay. I’ll stop complaining. I mean. It’s your car. You can do with it whatever you want. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Damon chuckles.

“And I’ll shut up now.”

“You’re cute.” He squeezes my hand one more time before returning to the car.

I can't help but watch him saunter away from me. I need to keep my distance from him before I land in trouble.

Except. I think I'm already in trouble. Deep trouble. The kind that ends in heartache.

Chapter 19

*Eden from Eden's Garden is a tattletale. ~
Message from Brody on the Winter Falls
Facebook page*



Damon

I knock on the door of Elder's house before strolling inside. Brody looks up from the sofa. His eyes widen when he realizes it's me, and he jumps to his feet.

"Everyone hide! Damon's here." He rushes off to who knows where.

"What's up with him?" I ask Riley who's standing with Elder in the dining area.

"You expect me to know?"

"You're his twin."

Riley scowls. "I'm his twin, not his keeper."

"I don't need a keeper," Brody yells as he runs back through the living room.

"He's worse than having a five-year-old," I grumble.

"Welcome to the jungle." Elder hands me a beer.

The door opens and Miller enters with Peace.

"Where's Brody?" Peace asks without bothering to greet anyone.

Riley grins at him. "Hello, Peace. How are you?"

Peace points to him. "If you're in on this, I'm going to arrest you, too."

Riley holds up his hands. “In on what?”

Peace fists his hands on his hips. “As if you don’t know.”

“I don’t know. What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Brody!” Peace shouts instead of answering me.

“Brody isn’t here. Leave a message at the beep. Beep!” Brody shouts from somewhere in the house.

“I know you’re here. Your baby mamma grassed on you.”

Brody rushes into the room. “Don’t you dare call Soleil my baby mamma.”

“Is the baby not yours?” I ask.

He narrows his eyes on me. “You’ll get yours, Damon Bragg. You’ll get yours.”

“Call my wife and tell her you sent the flowers and I won’t call Soleil your baby mamma anymore,” Peace says. “Tonight.”

Brody bats his eyelashes. “What flowers?”

Peace marches toward him. “The flowers with the note saying *I still miss you.*”

“Not okay, Brody,” Miller grumbles.

Brody’s still feigning innocence despite everyone knowing he damn well sent those flowers to Peace’s house. “I don’t know what flowers you’re talking about.”

Peace’s patience is done. He grasps Brody by the sweater and hauls him close. “Enough lying, Brody. I know it was you.”

“How could you possibly know it was me?”

“Because Eden said you stopped by her store to ask for flowers,” Miller chimes in.

Brody glares at him. “Traitor.”

Miller glares back at him. “Making a man’s fiancée think he’s cheating on her is not okay, Brody.”

Peace sighs. “Olivia doesn’t think I cheated. She’s convinced some old lover is obsessed with me. She can’t wait to meet the woman. She thinks they have a lot to discuss.”

Riley groans. “Don’t you dare tell Moon. She’ll want to join Olivia on some adventure.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be telling Moon a thing. Your girlfriend has lived in Winter Falls her entire life. Together with the gossip gals, they know every woman I’ve ever dated. They’d have a list compiled with color coding to indicate their favorite suspects before Olivia could ask them.”

Brody bursts into laughter. “I love your woman. She’s the best.”

“Better than your baby mamma?”

Now, it’s Brody’s turn to haul Peace near. “Careful, half-Bragg. I will not stand for you disparaging my future wife.”

Peace cocks an eyebrow. “Future wife? Did you propose?”

Brody shoves him away. “I’m not proposing to Soleil while she’s pregnant. She’ll think I want to marry her for the baby. I’m not a dickhead.”

“In which case, she’s not your future wife.”

“Of course, she is. Don’t be obtuse.”

“Uh-oh, baby brother’s using big words.” Elder rubs his hands together. “Why can’t pirates learn the alphabet?”

I groan. Elder’s jokes have gotten worse since he started living with his wife, Harmony, and their baby girl, Robin.

“Because they spend years at C.” When no one laughs, he looks around. “Get it? C as in the letter C but also sea as in a body of water.”

“If you have to explain the joke, it’s not funny,” I say.

“Or my brothers aren’t the smartest bulbs in the bouquet.”

Brody grins. “I like tulip bulbs.”

Peace launches himself at Brody. “I knew it! I knew you sent the flowers.”

I step between them. “I thought tonight was poker night.”

I don’t want to be here listening to their silly jokes and stupid pranks. But after ghosting my family since Skye’s arrival in my life, I need to make good. Personally, I’d rather be at home on the sofa watching *Frozen* for the millionth time with Love in my arms and Skye cuddled next to me than play poker with my brothers.

Brody points to my face. “He’s thinking about Love Hill.”

Riley agrees. “There’s no way his goofy grin is for his daughter.”

“You better not get hard in front of us, bro,” Miller grumbles.

“Ew. My wife and child live in this house,” Elder adds.

“Love isn’t his wife,” Riley says.

“Nope, she’s his something *something* on the side.” Brody thrusts his hips. “Oh, Love. Harder. Faster.”

I smack him upside the head. “You will not disrespect Love Hill.”

Brody sticks out his bottom lip in a pout. “Daddy’s mad.”

“Love Hill is a good person. You have no idea what she’s gone through.”

“What she’s gone through?” Peace asks. “Do you mean the ninth-grade incident?”

I can feel my nostrils flare as I glare at him. “Don’t you dare start. You went to school with her. You should have protected her.”

Miller pushes his way between me and Peace. “What are you talking about? What happened in the ninth grade?”

“I don’t know,” Peace claims.

I snap my teeth at him. “Don’t know my ass. In this small town where everyone knows everyone’s business?”

Peace raises his hands and retreats. “I was a sophomore when Love Hill was a freshman. I was too busy trying to make the varsity football team to pay any attention to freshmen. I seriously don’t know what happened to Love Hill.” He clears his throat. “I do know the principal is working on new policies for the entire school since Skye got in trouble.”

“Skye got in trouble? Who do we need to beat up?” Brody lifts his fists and begins to shadowbox.

Riley slaps his twin’s shoulder. “We’re not beating up anyone. Violence isn’t the answer.”

“Dude, I’m about to be a father. Violence is definitely the answer if someone’s bullying my niece.”

“It’s taken care of.” I smirk. “Skye slapped the little girl.”

Brody grins. “Go, Skye!”

Peace clears his throat. “Violence is not allowed in Winter Falls.”

I growl at him. “No.”

“No what?”

“No, I will not sit here and listen to you advocate love and peace and holding hands and singing Kumbaya.”

“First of all, you aren’t sitting.”

I ignore his sarcasm.

“When a little girl tells my daughter her mother doesn’t love her, Skye can react however she deems appropriate.”

“Motherfucker,” Miller grumbles.

“Because you know damn well and good it wasn’t Meadow who thought Skye’s mom doesn’t love her. Her parents told her.”

Peace drags a hand down his face. “Shit. What were her parents thinking?”

“They were thinking Winter Falls is non-violent and their daughter can say whatever she wants without repercussion.” I smirk. “They’re wrong.”

Peace groans. “I am not feeling much excitement for this part of parenting.”

“Is Olivia pregnant?”

“Crap.” Peace scans the room. “You can’t tell your wives or girlfriends or fiancées or nannies.”

Riley grins. “It’s cute you think they don’t already know.”

“Does everyone know?” he asks.

Riley shrugs. “Pretty much.”

“I didn’t know,” I say.

Riley rolls his eyes. “Because you’re too busy going blind while thinking about your nanny.” He feigns jerking off and I slap his hand.

“All of your girlfriends knew?” I ask the room.

“Of course, this is Winter Falls,” Riley says, and the rest nod in agreement.

I fist my hands. More evidence Love has been shut out of the community. This inclusive community where everyone’s welcome. Welcome my ass.

But ordering my brothers to be nice to Love and ask their partners to include her will get me nowhere. Instead, I need to show them Love isn’t the woman they think she is. She’s had issues in the past. Sure. But whose past is squeaky clean. Besides Peace’s? The man was born with a police badge in his hand and a whistle in his mouth.

“Do we actually play poker at these poker nights?” I ask since I’m done discussing any of this.

“We do.” Elder motions toward the table all set for poker.

“As long as Brody didn’t mark up the deck of cards,” Miller adds.

We make our way to the table. I clap Peace on the back. “Congrats, brother.”

The expression of pure joy on his face makes my stomach churn. I missed Maria’s pregnancy with my child. I missed Skye’s birth and the first five years of her life. And I will never forgive Maria for it.

But maybe Skye needs a younger sibling. Someone she could boss around.

I shove those thoughts away. Love has made it perfectly clear nothing is going to happen between us no matter how much she wants it to. And I will respect her decision. Enough people have not respected her in the past. I’m not joining the line.

Chapter 20

You can now order your holiday sugar cookies from me. Don't tell Riley. ~ Message from Moon on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

When I reach the school to pick up Skye, I notice a few women waiting outside for their children.

In the past, I would have ignored those women. Okay. Fine. I wouldn't have ignored them. I would've made snooty comments to them about their men. But I am not that woman anymore.

I straighten my shoulders and paint on a smile.

"Hello," I greet.

One woman's eyes narrow on me. "Great. It's the nanny who gets children in trouble."

I eye the opposite side of the street. Why didn't I wait over there? Oh right. Because I'm trying to be a better person. This shit is hard.

"Are you Meadow's mom?"

She crosses her arms over her chest. "It's Mrs. Evans. And what are you going to do about it?"

Is she seriously challenging me to a fight in front of the school? I raise my palms.

"Nothing. I was merely asking."

She leans close to hiss in my face. “You better keep your mouth shut from now on.”

“Oh?” I widen my eyes. “The same way Meadow will no longer tell a little five-year-old girl her mother doesn’t love her.”

The woman behind Mrs. Evans gasps. “Meadow told Skye her mother doesn’t love her?”

“And Skye slapped her,” Mrs. Evans growls.

“I would have slapped her, too,” the other woman mumbles under her breath.

The bell rings and the children come rushing outside. I wave to Skye who’s skipping outside holding hands with another little girl.

Mrs. Evans marches to them and rips the two apart before dragging her daughter away. What the hell?

“It’s about time *Mrs.* Evans got her comeuppance,” the other woman mumbles before grinning at me. “I’m Cherry by the way.”

“Love Hill,” I say as we shake hands.

“Welcome to the jungle,” she says before sauntering off to claim her child.

Huh. Maybe I can do this. Maybe I can be a better woman.

Skye runs over to me. “Nanny Love!”

“Skye Bragg. How was your school day?”

“It was fun!” she begins and doesn’t stop chattering away until we arrive at Damon’s house.

“How do you feel about decorating Christmas cookies?” I ask as I help her out of her snow gear.

We won’t be baking the cookies. Baking and I are still not besties. I bought some cookies from Moon instead. Besides, decorating is the best part.

“How do we decorate?”

“I have different colored frosting and sprinkles.”
Frosting I also bought from Moon. Being a better person doesn’t suddenly make me Holly the Homemaker.

“Cookies!”

I herd Skye into the kitchen where I’ve laid out the supplies. She jumps onto her step and immediately sticks her finger into the red frosting. I shackle her hand before she can suck the frosting off her finger.

“If you want to help decorate, you can’t eat the frosting,” I berate as I wash her hand.

“But I wants to try.”

“You want to try,” I correct.

“Yes!”

I give up on correcting her poor grammar. She’s too excited to listen to me now anyway.

“Let me show you how to spread the frosting on a cookie.” I place some red frosting on my knife and spread it across a cookie. “See? Easy peasy.” Thank goodness. Otherwise, I couldn’t do it.

“My turn.”

I hand her the knife. She digs it into the bowl of red frosting and adds at least half of the bowl to the knife.

“You don’t want to put too much frosting on one cookie.”

“Frosting is yummy,” she proclaims before throwing the glob onto a cookie.

“But now you can’t put sprinkles on it because there’s too much frosting.”

“Why not?”

I indicate the mountain of frosting on the cookie.
“They’ll fall off.”

She frowns.

I remove ninety percent of the frosting from the cookie. “If you make a nice smooth layer, you can add sprinkles.” I shake a few green sprinkles on top of the red frosting. “See?”

“What if I don’t want sprinkles?”

I put on a sigh. “Too bad since I’m pretty sure Santa prefers sprinkles on his cookies.”

Her eyes widen. “We’re making cookies for Santa?”

I shrug. “I thought we’d practice since we want Santa’s cookies to be perfect.”

“Okay. I try again.”

I hand her a cookie and help her to spread a layer of frosting over it. The layer is still too thick, but we’re getting there. I help her with a few cookies before letting her do some on her own.

“Can I add sprinkles now?”

I hand her the sprinkles. “Gentle. You don’t want to ___”

She pours half of the jar onto one cookie. “Perfect!”

Before I can stop her, she stuffs the cookie into her mouth. The sprinkles fly everywhere, but land mostly on her face as she chews. She brushes them away with her hands, but since her hands are covered in frosting, her face is now decorated in red frosting and green sprinkles.

The door to Damon’s study squeaks open and I glance over as he strolls into the kitchen. I nearly sigh at the sight of him. His sleeves are rolled up and his hair is a mess as if he’s been running his hands through it all day.

“Daddy!” Skye drops the rest of the cookie and runs to him.

He chuckles as he picks her up and swings her around. “Have you been eating cookies, squirt?”

“We’ve been decorating.”

“Decorating cookies or your face?”

“Cookies. Daddy’s silly.”

“Sorry.” I rush forward with a wet washcloth. “Little Miss Loves Frosting shoved a cookie into her face before I could stop her.”

Damon wipes Skye’s face with the cloth while she bats at his hands.

“We’re making cookies for Santa,” Skye announces once he finishes and lets her down.

He raises an eyebrow at me. “For Santa?”

Oh no. Does he plan to tell her Santa doesn’t exist? Did I screw up? Too late now.

“Santa needs cookies to keep up his energy for flying to all the little boys and girls to give them presents on Christmas night.”

Damon’s gaze dips to my mouth. “Santa does enjoy sweet things.”

My cheeks warm as memories of our kiss on the couch assault me. I’ve never been thoroughly kissed the way Damon kissed me. I felt owned the moment his tongue touched mine. A feeling I’ve never felt before. A feeling I want to experience again.

“Does Santa prefer red or green frosting?” Skye asks and brings me back to reality.

A reality where Damon and I never kiss again. Where I’m his nanny and he’s Skye’s dad.

“I don’t think...” I trail off when I notice Skye’s lips are red. “Have you been eating the frosting?”

“No.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Why are your lips red?” She shrugs. “And your hands red?” She hides her hands behind her back. “And why is there frosting in your hair?”

Damon chuckles beside me and I elbow him. “What’s so funny?”

He throws an arm around my shoulders and hauls me near. “You thinking you could decorate cookies without making a mess.”

I sigh. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Are you Daddy’s girlfriend, Nanny Love?” Skye asks and I realize how Damon’s holding me.

I shove him away. “No, I’m your nanny.”

“Meadow says you and Daddy are boyfriend and girlfriend.”

I groan. I’m going to kill Mrs. Evans. What is her problem? Why is she trying to turn the entire town against me? Does she not realize no one’s on my side to start with?

“Would it bother you if Nanny Love and I were boyfriend and girlfriend?” Damon asks and I throw daggers out of my eyes at him. He doesn’t even bother to pretend to be affected by my daggers, which I know are lethal.

Skye shrugs. “I want Nanny Love to stay. Not go away like Meadow’s dad did.”

Ah. Things are beginning to make a whole lot of sense now. Someone’s taking her anger about her husband leaving out on me. I recognize the tactic since I perfected it myself years ago. But I don’t want to be the catty woman anymore.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I tell Skye. “You’re stuck with me.”

She rushes toward me – her red frosting covered hands aimed at me – but I hold her at bay. “Someone needs a bath.”

“Can I have a bath in Daddy’s bathroom?”

I point to Damon. “You need to ask your dad.”

She sticks out her bottom lip. “Please, Daddy.”

“Of course, squirt.”

She claps and rushes up the stairs. Before I can chase after her, Damon tags my hand to stop me.

“What’s wrong?”

His gaze dips to my mouth for a second before he clears his throat and releases me. “The towels are in the drawer underneath the sink.”

I’m pretty sure he didn’t stop me to tell me where the towels are, but I let it go. I don’t want to know what he’s thinking. And I certainly don’t want to discuss us being boyfriend and girlfriend. Skye might not have a problem with the concept but I do.

Sure, you do, Love. Sure, you do.

Chapter 21

Does coercion and guilt tripping amount to kidnapping? ~ Love's question she's too scaredy-cat to post on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

The doorbell rings and I rush to answer it before the sound wakes Skye. Although, she's probably still awake, the little sneak. But the doorbell will give her an excuse to escape her bedroom. An excuse she doesn't need.

I open the door to Feather, Petal, Sage, Cayenne, and Clove standing on the porch. My brow wrinkles. What are the gossip gals doing on Damon's doorstep?

"Can I help you?"

Sage grins. "You certainly can. It's time to go."

"Go? Go where?"

Cayenne rolls her eyes. "Smutty book club, of course."

Clove bounces on her toes in her white, orthopedic shoes. "It's Christmas paint and sip night."

Feather scowls. "But we are still discussing the book."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't read the book."

I don't even know what the book for this month's smutty book club is. I try not to pay attention since I'm the last person Aspen, who runs the bookstore *Fall Into A Good Book*, would want to attend her book club.

I don't blame her. Not anymore. Since I'm done blaming other people for my problems. Because I'm now taking responsibility for my actions. No matter how much it sucks.

Feather widens her eyes. "You haven't read *Ignite*? The book by Melanie Harlow?"

I have. Scorching hot single dad romances have become my go-to read recently for some reason. But why do I get a feeling they already know? I hope these nosy women don't have access to my Kindle library.

Talk about embarrassing. Do I need to explain to them I don't want to get kidnapped and held captive in a basement? How it's merely a fantasy?

Petal sighs. "I love when the book club book coincides with the project."

The project? She better not be referring to their matchmaking projects. Who am I kidding? Of course, she's referring to their matchmaking projects. But they can't honestly plan to match me with Damon. They hate me. I don't care how much they protest otherwise.

Besides, Damon and I aren't meant to be. He's my boss. And he deserves better than to date the woman who practically has a scarlet A tattooed on her forehead.

"It was lovely of you to stop by," I begin, "but I'm not joining you at book club."

Sage snorts. "Of course, you are. Get your shoes. I don't want to be late."

I desperately search my mind for an excuse. Oh wait. I don't need an excuse. I have a good reason not to go. "I need to watch Skye."

I sense Damon's presence before I feel him behind me. He rests one hand on the door above me and I don't shiver at the feel of him near. Nope. Love Hill is not the shivering type of woman.

He winks at the gossip gals. "Good evening, ladies."

Feather sighs. "Daisy sure makes sexy sons."

He chuckles. "I'll let Mom know you think her sons are sexy."

Clove giggles.

My mouth drops open. Holy frosting. The gossip gals are flirting with Damon. He's young enough to be their grandson!

"The gossip gals are leaving." I try shutting the door but Damon stops me.

"Why don't you go with them? I've got Skye."

I glare at him. He knows darn well I don't want to go. His response? He winks. He freaking winks. He's lucky the gossip gals are here. Otherwise, I'd kick him in the nuts.

"Wonderful. It's settled," Sage says.

"Get your boots and coat on. It's cold outside," Feather adds.

I stomp to the closet and grab my things. Stupid gossip gals. With their stupid plans. They've left me alone all these years. Why start bothering me now?

And you've complained about them ignoring you for years, a little voice reminds me.

Whatever.

"Have fun." Damon kisses my cheek before practically pushing me out the door.

I'm totally putting raisins in his pancakes and telling him they're chocolate chips tomorrow morning.

The gossip gals herd me along until we're on Main Street. When we reach *Fall Into A Good Book*, they push me toward the door until I'm forced to enter first or fight them.

"You can't be serious," Aspen grumbles the second I stumble into the bookstore.

I retreat but I don't make it two steps before the gossip gals are urging me back inside.

"Be nice, Aspen. I changed your diapers," Sage says.

Aspen rolls her eyes. “I don’t care, Sage. I don’t want her here.”

My face heats until I’m certain it could be used as a beacon in an airport during a snowstorm. “I’ll ... ah...” I point to the exit but the gossip gals step in front of it to block my flight.

Moon stares at me for a long moment. “Maybe she deserves a second chance.”

Aspen crosses her arms over her chest and huffs.

Eden moves to stand next to Moon. “It was over a decade ago.”

Soleil rubs her pregnant belly as she looks between Aspen and me. “Why don’t you two try to get along for the sake of everyone else’s evening?”

Aspen glares at her. “Do you always have to be rational?”

Harmony giggles. “She wasn’t very rational when she found out she was pregnant.”

I pat my chin to check my mouth isn’t gaping open. Are the women of the Bragg brothers actually defending me? After the nasty things they said about me at Thanksgiving? What’s changed?

Damon better not have revealed what happened in ninth grade to his brothers. His brothers who tattle to their girlfriends about everything. I don’t want anyone’s pity. Pity’s the worst.

“Come on.” Moon grabs my hand and leads me toward an easel. “We’re set up over here.”

“Um. What’s happening?”

I must be dreaming. There’s no way I’m in the bookstore in Winter Falls and other women are being nice to me. No one’s nice to me.

For a reason, Love. For a reason.

“It’s paint and sip night.” Moon motions toward the tray with drinks. “Pick your poison.”

“What are we painting?”

“Not a sexy cop,” Sage complains.

“Sage.” Aspen glares at her. “I told you. My husband will not be posing nude for any paint sip night now or in the future.”

Aspen’s husband, Lyric, is the chief of the police. He’s also the reason Aspen hates me. It’s a long story.

“Stop complaining, Sage. There are plenty of other sexy young men in this town,” Cayenne says.

Eden raises her hands. “Don’t blame me. I asked Miller to pose but he refused.”

Harmony giggles. “Did you seriously expect Mr. Grump to say yes?”

“Hey. He’s not as grumpy as he used to be.”

Moon snorts. “You keep telling yourself that.”

“It’s true. He’s sweet and kind and...”

Soleil pats Eden’s arm. “We don’t care if he’s a grump. We care if he’s good to you.”

“He’s good to me.”

Judging by the blush on Eden’s cheeks, the ways he’s good to her are carnal in nature. Lucky girl. I wouldn’t mind finding out how good a Bragg brother can be to me in the bedroom.

Except you turned Damon down, Love.

Of course, I did. He’s my boss.

Never stopped you before.

I scowl at those thoughts. I’m trying to be better. I swear I am. But old habits die hard. Especially habits ingrained in you since ninth grade when you decided you might as well be a tramp since everyone in town thought you were one anyway.

“Whoever thought you and I would date twins?” Harmony asks Eden.

Moon wags her finger at them. “Nuh-uh. Riley says Miller and Elder aren’t really twins.”

“I beg to differ,” Daisy says as she joins us. “I carried those boys in my womb – together – for nine months.”

Moon clears her throat. “Sorry, Daisy.”

“And if it wasn’t enough to carry twins once – bam! – I got pregnant with a second set. What are the chances?” Daisy grumbles as she sits at the easel next to mine.

I wave in greeting. “Hi, Mrs. Bragg.”

“Call me Daisy.” She winks at me. “We ‘need a second chance’ women stick together.”

My brow furrows. Need a second chance women? Why would Daisy Bragg need a second chance? She’s perfect.

This is where knowing the gossip in town would come in handy. But it’s hard to learn the gossip when most of the women in town cross the street as soon as they see you coming. I don’t have cooties.

Aspen claps her hands. “Shall we begin?”

“Begin discussing the book? Sure. I made notes.”

Aspen stops Feather before she can dig out her notebook. “Later. First, we’ll begin with our painting portion of the evening.”

Moon raises her wine glass. “And the sipping.”

“But what are we going to paint if we don’t have a model?” Sage asks.

“This is Christmas paint and sip.”

“A sexy Santa?” Clove suggests.

“Oh yeah. With his coat open, bearing his six-pack abs.” Cayenne fans her face.

“I said no model.”

“Who thinks Aspen’s become a fuddy-duddy since she got married and had a son?” Moon asks as she sticks her hand in the air.

“Call me what you want, but we aren’t painting sexy Santa. We’re painting a winter scene.” She points to the large canvas propped on the counter in front of the cash register.

While everyone else complains about the lack of a male model, I get to work. I always did enjoy painting in art class at school.

When I finish, I glance up and realize everyone’s getting ready to leave.

“What time is it?”

“Time to go,” Daisy says.

“Huh. I didn’t realize how quick the time went by.”

“You were pretty in the zone there.”

“You can pick your canvasses up in a few days once they’re dry,” Aspen calls out.

I clean up my workstation before heading to the front door. I had a good time tonight. It was a bit uncomfortable, but nothing I couldn’t handle. Maybe I need to get out more. Show the residents of Winter Falls there’s more to me than the supposed homewrecker.

I’m nearly out the door when Aspen shackles my wrist and hauls me near. “You might have the rest of Winter Falls fooled you’ve turned a new leaf, but I know the truth about you, Love Hill.”

I wrest my wrist free. “No, you don’t.”

My words sound confident but as I walk home, I can’t help playing in my head over and over again what happened between me and Lyric. How I single-handedly destroyed their relationship.

Maybe I don’t deserve a second chance after all.

Chapter 22

Who's on Damon and Love duty? I've got a good feeling about tonight. ~ Message from Sage to the Gossip Gals



Love Hill

“What happened?” Damon asks when I return to his house.

I keep my attention focused on unlacing my boots. “What happened where? What are you talking about? I barely walked in the door.”

“You look like someone shot your dog.”

I rear back. “Shot my dog? I don’t have a dog. And who would shoot it? This is Winter Falls, not the Wild West. The entire town staged a sit-in when the police department started carrying weapons.”

He scowls and crosses his arms over his chest. “Stop avoiding the question.”

I toe off my boots and put my coat away. “What question?”

“What happened?”

I roll my eyes. “You pushed me out the door to attend paint and sip evening, so I went to paint and sip with the gossip gals and the rest of the ovary-toting members of Winter Falls.”

He coughs. “Ovary-toting?”

I shrug. “Sounds better than ‘the havers of boobs’.”

He chuckles. “Did you not have fun?”

“It was okay. Your mom was there.”

He rocks back on his heels. “She was?”

“Why do you sound as if you’re lying? You...” I frown when I realize there’s only one reason he’d be lying. “You asked your mom to go. No wonder she was late.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “You appeared a bit frazzled when you left the house.”

“Frazzled?”

“Sounds better than scared out of your mind.”

“And yet you kicked me out the door.”

“I wouldn’t say kicked.”

“I would.”

“No feet were involved.”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I’m going to bed.”

He snags my hand before I can climb the stairs.

“After you tell me why you were wearing a sad face when you came home.”

“Is this about my non-existent dog who was apparently shot?”

He leads me to the living room. “Talk before I have to find a dog to shoot.”

I gasp. “You wouldn’t.”

“No, but I would call my brothers to find out what happened.”

“Ha! A whole lot of good that would do. None of their girlfriends were around when— Shit.”

I collapse on the sofa and bury my face in my hands. Damon pries my hands away.

“What happened, Love? Who do I need to kill?”

“Why all this talk of killing? Are you some sort of secret assassin? Is that what you’re doing while you hide in your office all day?”

He laughs. “How exactly does it work? I kill people remotely? Do I have a drone?”

I snap my fingers. “Exactly. You have a drone and you’re a highly paid hitman who hides out in this small town in Colorado where no one realizes you’re actually the Angel of Death.”

He cocks a brow. “Angel of Death? You had quite the vivid imagination until my assassin name turned out to be Angel of Death.”

“I’ll work on it.”

He squeezes my hands. “I hate to ruin your fantasy but I’m not an assassin. I’m an extremely boring financial advisor.”

“Why do you do it if it’s boring?”

“I don’t think it’s boring, but I know from experience people fall asleep at parties when I explain what I do in detail.”

I blink and rub my eyes. “Huh? What did you say?”

“Smart ass,” he growls but his eyes are full of humor and he’s smiling.

“My ass has been called many things – firm, sexy – but never smart.”

His eyes heat. “I think your sexy ass is smart.”

Abort! Abort! No flirting with the boss, Love. Did you forget?

But he’s so sexy.

Boss. B – O – S – S!

I clear my throat. “I should be getting to bed. Skye will be up and at ‘em first thing in the morning.”

“First tell me what happened this evening.”

I roll my eyes. “So, you can send your drone off to kill people?”

“Joking time’s over. I want the truth.”

“What if you can’t handle the truth?”

“I’d have to use my drone to take me out.”

I study him as I try to come up with some reason why I’d be sad when I entered the house. Because I don’t want to tell him the truth. He doesn’t need to know what a harpy I used to be.

What am I thinking? He knows exactly how big of a harpy I used to be. He was kind of there when I hit on him within five minutes of meeting him while he was kicking me out of his brother’s wedding.

It sounds worse than it is.

No, it doesn’t.

Crap. It’s true. It’s as bad as it sounds.

“What if I don’t want to tell you?”

He leans close and places his palm on my cheek. I close my eyes and lean into his touch. Just for a second, I’ll enjoy how safe and coveted he makes me feel before I ruin it by admitting the truth.

“You can tell me anything.”

“I know,” I whisper with my eyes still closed.

“But if you don’t want to tell me, I’ll understand.”

He starts to remove his hand but I shackle his wrist to keep him where he is. If I’m telling this story, I need his support. Never mind how it’ll be gone the second he knows the truth.

“Aspen West owns the bookstore, *Fall Into a Good Book*.”

“Okay.”

“She’s married to Lyric Alston, the chief of police. They have a son together – Sterling.”

Thus far, I haven’t told Damon anything he doesn’t know already. He doesn’t push me, though. He cradles my face with one hand while his other hand squeezes my thigh in support.

I wish we could stay in this moment forever. His warmth surrounding me, supporting me. But we can't. Love Hill isn't going to get a fairytale ending.

Because you don't deserve it.

I clear my throat and continue. "Aspen and Lyric were apart for a decade because of me."

There, I said it. I drop my hold on Damon's wrist and try to stand. He places his hands on my shoulders and pushes me down.

"I need more."

"More? I'll give you more. I'm a horrible person who shouldn't be around children. There! You happy now? I'll move out in the morning."

"Whoa. I never said anything about firing you."

I slump against the cushions. "But you will." Eventually.

He scowls. "I'm not firing you. I'm listening to you. I'm supporting you."

Supporting me? He's lying. No one supports me. I open my mouth to call him a liar but snap it shut when I notice his warm brown eyes are staring at me with sincerity.

I don't want those eyes to switch from support to loathing but he's going to find out the truth eventually anyway. Maybe it's better he hears it from me now. Before I get too used to living this fairy tale life with him. Here goes nothing.

"After Aspen and Lyric graduated from college, they returned to Winter Falls. Or, at least, Lyric did. Aspen wasn't ready to settle down. She wanted to go on an adventure. She went off to Dallas while Lyric stayed here. They were going to try a long-distance relationship, but I made sure they broke up."

I pause. Big breath before the finale.

"Lyric's brothers dragged him to the bar the night Aspen left. He got drunk. Totally annihilated. I took advantage of the situation. Aspen saw me kiss him and became convinced Lyric was a cheater. End of story."

I stare down at my hands in my lap. I refuse to witness the disgust in Damon's eyes. He pinches my chin and forces me to face him. I slam my eyes shut.

"Open your eyes, Love."

"Nope. I'm fine here in the dark."

"Please, Love."

Ugh! I never could resist a man who pleads. I open my eyes, but when I meet his gaze, his eyes aren't full of disgust. They're full of curiosity.

"I know there's more to the story."

"More to the story? What do you mean?"

"Love, when it comes to you, there's always more to the story. You're complicated and full of layers and layers I need to peel back until I finally discover the real you."

Wow. No one's ever realized there's more to me than meets the eye before. Does Damon see the real me? Does he want to?

Words tumble out before I can stop them.

"I saw the way Lyric looked at Aspen. The way he treated her with love and respect. And I wanted what she had. The men I dated. They..." I swallow the lump in my throat. "They didn't treat me the same way. Sure, I was jealous. But it was more than jealousy. I wanted a man to handle me with care the way Lyric did Aspen."

"I understand." Damon brushes his lips against my forehead. "What happened tonight? Did Aspen say something to you?"

"She said I had everyone fooled about being a changed woman."

He growls. "She's wrong."

"How do you know?"

Maybe I am the same woman. Maybe this whole becoming a better person is all a ruse. How does he know better?

“Because I see how you are with Skye.”

“She’s a little girl. I would never mistreat her.”

“Which is how I know Aspen’s wrong.”

“But...”

Damon doesn’t let me figure out what I was going to say. He palms my neck and draws me close. Close enough for our breath to mingle.

My heart batters against my chest. I should stop him. But I don’t want to. I remember how those lips feel against mine. I remember how he worshipped my mouth. And I want to feel it again. Especially tonight. After the reminder of how things will never change. No matter how much I want them to.

Damon groans and then his lips are on mine.

Chapter 23

*Brody Bragg, you are hereby forbidden from
buying the Gossip Gals binoculars. ~
Message from Peace on the Winter Falls
Facebook page*



Damon

I press my lips to Love's. She makes the adorable sound in the back of her throat I'm obsessed with and I dive in. I stroke my tongue against hers and her taste of cherries and the forbidden hits me along with a bit of wine she must have drank tonight.

I groan and tilt her head so I can dive deeper into her mouth to explore every inch, every crevice, every single space. I want to own this woman. I want to taste every single inch of her body. Explore every curve. Discover every hot point that makes her squirm.

Her fingers digging into my shoulders spurs me on. I thread one hand through her hair to keep her head right where it is while my other hand travels down her neck to her breast. I test the weight before squeezing and she shoves her chest into my hand with a sigh.

I glide my hand further down her chest to the hem of her sweater. I flirt with the hem before I remember. We're out in the living room where Skye could catch us at any moment. She'd have some serious questions I am in no way ready to answer.

I slow the kiss until I can withdraw. We're both panting for breath. Love's eyes are bright and unfocused and her

lips are swollen. The things I want to do to those lips.

“How do you feel about continuing this in my bedroom?”

I know I’m taking a risk. The likelihood Love will snap out of her haze and say no is high. I know I could kiss her again and carry her to my room with a bit of persuasion. But I’m not dragging her to my bedroom. I am not a caveman. She deserves to make the choice herself.

“Can you make me forget?”

“Angel, I can make you forget everything except how good I make you feel.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Sounds like an offer I can’t refuse.”

I chuckle as I gather her in my arms and stand. “Say yes, Angel.”

“I’m no angel.”

I wiggle my eyebrows. “Maybe I’m the devil who’s ready to dirty an angel.”

“In which case, Mr. Devil will you show this angel how to get dirty? Please.”

“Hell, yeah, I will.”

I hurry up the stairs to my bedroom. I flip on the light before shutting and locking the door and laying Love on the bed. She scoots backward until she’s laying in the middle. Her hair is fanned out behind her and her chest is heaving.

“We have a problem.”

She blinks. “We do? Did you—”

I cut her off before she begins to doubt herself. “You’re wearing entirely too many clothes.”

A blush spreads across her cheeks. “Can you switch the light off first?”

Surprise at her question has me pausing. She must be used to men observing her in the light. She’s been with— I cut

those thoughts off. I'm not thinking about Love's past while she's in front of me waiting to be ravished.

Besides, Love has proven she's trying to be a better person. I want to be her biggest supporter. Not the man who questions her every time she says something suspicious.

"How about if I switch the light in the bathroom on with the door mostly shut?"

I phrase the words as a question but I don't wait for her response before marching to the bathroom to switch on the light there. "Okay?"

"Better," she whispers – the relief clear to hear in her voice.

I frown. I want her to be comfortable with her body in front of me. We'll work on it I decide, before pushing the issue out of my mind for now. I've got better things to concentrate on at the moment.

"Now." I kneel on the bed. "I believe someone has too many clothes on."

I toy with the hem of her sweater. "This has to go." She raises her hands above her head and I don't hesitate to whip the item off of her.

Miles and miles of smooth, light olive skin is revealed. I plan to touch every inch. Taste every inch. No, not taste. Worship. Angels are meant to be worshiped.

And those breasts. They strain at the bra containing them. I want to flick her bra open and watch those breasts spill out. I can't wait to play with them.

Why am I waiting?

I lean close and lick a line from her belly button up her chest, past her breasts, to her collarbone where I nibble on the skin.

"May I remove your bra?" I ask before biting her earlobe.

She moans and writhes beneath me. I love how responsive she is.

She arches off the bed and reaches behind her back. I shackle her wrists and place her hands above her head.

“I got this.”

Her eyes flare. “Okay.”

Does she enjoy being ordered around? I’m not dominant in bed but I do prefer to be in charge.

I unsnap her bra and draw the straps down her arms before throwing the garment over my shoulder. Her nipples are a light pink color to match her lips. They stand out against her olive skin.

I lightly trace my finger across one nipple and it immediately puckers. Talk about responsive. I try again with the other nipple and get the same response. Love’s breasts are officially my new favorite toy. And it’s time to play.

I lean over and suck one nipple into my mouth. Her back bows and nearly throws me off her. She’ll have to try harder to throw me off, though, because I’m not going anywhere until the two of us are sweaty and spent.

I continue to suck on her nipple while I knead and massage her other breast. She squirms underneath me and I know exactly what she wants. I pinch her nipple and she moans long and hard.

“Can you come this way?”

Even with the bathroom light as the only illumination, her blush is visible. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know because you’ve never tried? Or you don’t know?”

She turns to the side to avoid my gaze. I straddle her before cradling her face in my hands.

“There’s no reason to be embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed.”

She is, but I don’t argue with her. I’m not ruining the mood. Not any more than I already have at least.

“What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is you’re not fulfilling your promise to make me forget everything.”

I kiss her forehead. “Don’t you worry, Angel. I will fulfill my promise and then some.”

She grunts.

“First, I want you to explain what happened.”

She bites her lips as she studies my face. I give her time. I know whatever she has to say isn’t easy for her. I can wait.

My cock disagrees. He wants to know why we’re not pounding her into the mattress already. I inhale a deep breath through my nose to gain control over my body. I’m in charge. Not my cock.

“It’s embarrassing,” Love murmurs.

I smile in encouragement.

“I’ve never had an orgasm before.”

My eyes widen and I think I gasp.

“I mean. I have had an orgasm. Of course, I have. I’m thirty-four years old. But I’ve... ah... never had one I didn’t induce myself.”

What the hell were all those men she was with doing? Do they not know how to bring a woman pleasure? Or did they not care? Were they treating Love the way the rest of the town has treated her? With no respect?

I open my mouth to berate her former lovers but shut it before those idiotic words come out of my mouth. We are not discussing her former lovers in my bed when she’s half naked. No way. No how.

“Challenge accepted.”

Her eyebrows fly off her forehead. “I didn’t challenge you.”

“Angel, you did. You mostly certainly did.”

I scoot down her body until I reach her jeans and snap the button open.

“What are you doing?” she asks but she’s not scared. She’s heaving for breath again. Yep, my angel enjoys a man who takes charge in the bedroom. Duly noted.

“I’m going to make you come with my mouth.”

“With your mouth?”

I growl. If she tells me none of those fuckers went down on her, I’m going to burn down this entire town of idiots. Better not to ask.

“With my mouth. Maybe with my fingers. And definitely with my cock.”

My cock perks up. *My turn? No, not your turn.*

“I think I’m going to enjoy this challenge,” Love murmurs.

“Good. Because it’s happening. And I’m winning.”

She smirks. “I think the idea is we both win.”

“You first.” I wink.

And then it’s time for the talking to end and the challenge to begin. I unzip her jeans before dragging them down her legs with her underwear. She helps me kick the garments off.

“Open your legs,” I growl.

She doesn’t hesitate to obey my order. Good. She’s starting to trust me. I’m going to earn her trust.

I glide my hands up her silky-smooth legs before fitting my shoulders between her thighs. “Are you ready for me to rock your world?”

“Promises. Promises. Pro...”

Her words cut off with a moan when I run my nose up and down her outer lips. I’m not wasting another second teasing her, though. It’s time for the main event.

I use my fingers to open her up to me and dive in. I suck her clit into my mouth and she bows off the bed. I place an arm over her stomach to keep her where I want her.

I alternate nibbling with sucking her clit while I circle her entrance with a finger. Excitement leaks from her every time I pull on her clit.

Damn, she's responsive. How the hell hasn't she ever orgasmed with a man before? Her body is primed and ready to go off and I've barely begun.

I work one digit into her opening. She's hot and wet and tight. Oh, so fucking tight. I can't wait to bury myself deep inside her. To not know where I end and she begins. My cock presses against my zipper. He's ready. But I need to get her off first.

I pump my finger in and out of her as I suck on her clit. It's not long before she's riding my face. Chasing after the pleasure no man has given her before.

Hell yeah. I'm going to be the first man for her. The first real man.

I add another finger and speed up my thrusts until I feel her inner walls tighten around me.

I glance up at Love. Her head is tilted back and a small smile plays on her lips. Time to find out how she looks when she comes.

I curl my fingers in her channel while sucking as hard as I can on her clit.

Her eyes fly open and she gazes down at me. "I'm going to ..."

I can't order her to come. My mouth is busy. But I don't need to.

"Yes," she groans as her body clamps down on mine.

I continue to work my fingers in and out of her to draw out her climax. When she collapses on the bed, I pull out and lick my fingers before standing and pushing my jeans down. I grab a condom from my bedside table and roll it on before joining Love back on the bed.

"You ready for round two, Angel?" I ask as I notch my cock at her opening.

She gazes down at me. Her eyes are unfocused and she appears thoroughly satisfied. I could fall in love with that look. The thought has me startling.

Knock it off, Damon. Now is not the time for deep contemplation.

Chapter 24

All bets are closing soon. ~ Message from Sage on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

The second I wake up, I know something's wrong. I'm not in my bed and I'm not alone. How can I not be alone? I don't sleep with men. Not sleep as in a euphemism for sex. No, sleep as in relaxing enough to trust to be out cold with another person in the room. That, I don't do. Ever. Except...

I sniff and Damon's musky scent fills my lungs. I stuff my fist in my mouth before I moan out loud. What have I done? I've ruined everything.

What was I thinking? Clearly, I wasn't. I wanted to not think. The whole point was to stop thinking.

I inch toward the edge of the bed. Damon groans and rolls away from me. Phew.

Time to get out of here. I promise I'll deal with the consequences. But not here. Not right now. Right now, I've got a little girl to get ready for a Christmas party.

I manage to shower and put on some clean clothes before Skye wakes. Considering how excited she is for today's Christmas party, I'm surprised Damon got her to sleep last night at all.

"Good morning, Little Miss. How did you sleep?" I ask as I enter her room.

"Party time!"

I giggle. I guess her excitement hasn't waned.

“What do you want to wear?”

Once Skye is dressed in a cute red dress with Christmas tights, we make our way to the kitchen for breakfast. I’m preparing her breakfast while she watches cartoons when Damon prowls into the kitchen. He stalks straight to me.

“What the hell, Love?”

I swallow. Is this when he fires me? Can’t I at least eat breakfast first?

“What the hell what?” I keep my gaze on the pan of eggs I’m scrambling.

He leans close until I can feel his breath on my neck. “You snuck out of my bed.”

“I didn’t want Skye to find me there. It would have been awkward.”

Because this situation doesn’t have awkward written all over it. There’s a reason my new name is Love Awkward Hill after all.

“Never again, Angel. Never again.”

Does he mean we’re never having sex again? That was the plan all along. I don’t want a repeat.

Liar.

But thanks for the clarity, Damon. I got it. Sex with me is not worth a repeat.

He bites down on my earlobe. “You hear me?”

If he doesn’t want to have sex with me again, he needs to stop pushing my buttons. He knows what biting my earlobe does to me.

Wait. Does he want to have sex again? I’m confused. He did say ‘never again’, didn’t he? Before I can ask him what he’s talking about, Skye runs into the kitchen.

“Daddy!”

Damon steps away to lift his daughter into the air. “Good morning, squirt. How are you this morning? Any plans for the day?”

She giggles. “Today’s the Christmas party, Daddy. Did you forget?”

He tickles her ribs. “Forget? Are you saying your daddy is old and forgetful?”

She squirms and he sets her on her feet.

“Is the table set?” I call over my shoulder. “Breakfast’s ready.”

We settle at the table to eat. I hand Damon his plate and our fingers touch. Electricity zaps through me. Does he feel it? Judging by the heat in his eyes, he does.

Off limits, Love. Off. Limits.

I don’t know how I’m going to keep my hands off of him now that I know how it feels to have him bring me to climax. I wasn’t kidding when I said a man had never managed the feat before. I didn’t believe a man could.

Damon not only accepted the challenge. He killed it.

No sexy thoughts. Damon already made it clear he doesn’t want a repeat. You can keep your paws off the man.

But did he?

I somehow manage to finish my breakfast without demanding Damon explain himself. It helps that his daughter is sitting next to him. A daughter who’s squirming in her seat.

“Do you need to go potty, Skye?”

She shoves the last bit of eggs in her mouth and her spoon clanks to the ground.

“Skye,” Damon warns. “Nanny Love asked you a question.”

She swallows – thank goodness – before answering. “Yes.”

“You may be excused.” She jumps to her feet. “To go potty. Not to play,” I clarify because lord knows she can ignore her bodily needs when it’s playtime.

I begin to clear the table as Skye runs to the half bath in the hallway.

Damon wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me near.

“What are you doing?” I hiss and push him away.

“Kissing you good morning since you snuck out of my bed.”

“We agreed last night was a one-time thing.”

He cocks a brow. “We did?”

“You said never again.”

He prowls toward me. “I meant never again will you sneak out of my bed.”

He did? He wants a repeat of last night? With me?

I have about a gazillion questions but it doesn't matter how many questions I have. Now is not the time.

“We don't have time for this. We have a Christmas party to get to. And there's a little girl with big ears down the hallway.”

He stops prowling and leans against the kitchen top. All relaxed. “Are you nervous?”

The change of topic has my mind whirling.

“Nervous about what?”

“Spending time with my family.”

I'd managed to conveniently forget his family will be attending the party. Elder's the only one with a child. The rest of them don't need to be there.

But this is Winter Falls. When there's a party – even if it is a kid's Christmas party – everyone shows up.

“Should I be nervous?”

“My family wasn't exactly nice to you at Thanksgiving.”

Gee. Thanks for the reminder. I nearly forgot about how his brothers' girlfriends gossiped about me. Although, they weren't being catty last night. No, they were almost friendly.

“About them...” I peer down the hall to check if Skye is still preoccupied in the bathroom. “Did you tell your brothers about my past?”

“I would never,” he growls. “I know I haven’t been the best dad and I make mistakes, but I would never reveal your secrets.”

I blow out a breath.

“Except.”

Shit. My relief was premature.

“I think you should tell everyone.”

I rear back. “Tell everyone? Have you lost your mind? Did too many drone kills splinter your brain?”

He grasps my chin and draws me near. “There’s no reason to be ashamed.”

“I’m not ashamed,” I claim even though I can feel my cheeks heat with – you guessed it – shame.

“You’re the victim in this story. Mr. Simon is the one who should be ashamed,” he snarls.

I feel my eyes swell. I blink quickly before the tears can fall. No one’s defended me since my dad. I forgot how fantastic it feels. How it fills your heart with love and—

Love? I don’t love Damon. Even inside my own mind, I can hear the lie in my voice.

Shit. *I love Damon*. A man who’s my boss. Who I don’t deserve. Whose family hates me.

This is not going to end well for me. No surprise there.

Chapter 25

*Gossip gals, Holiday sweaters on! ~
Message from Clove on the Winter Falls
Facebook page*



Love Hill

We enter the community center where the children's Christmas party is being held to complete chaos. Kids are running around screaming, people are packed into every corner, and someone is doing a deafening guitar solo of *We Wish You A Merry Christmas*.

Damon's eyes are wide as he looks around. "This is not what I was expecting."

"Welcome to Winter Falls."

He grins. "Winter Falls is awesome."

On occasions such as today, I agree. At other times, I'm not so sure.

"Aunt Eden!" Skye shouts and wrenches her hand from mine. I chase after her. She should be safe here amongst the people of Winter Falls, but it's hard for me to trust them. To trust anyone.

Eden notices Skye rushing toward her and kneels down to hug her. "Do you want to make a wreath?"

Skye jumps up and down. "Can I, Nanny Love?"

I ignore the slash of pain at hearing Skye call me Nanny Love. I am the nanny. I'm not an aunt or another member of the family. The nanny is all I'll ever be. Good reminder.

I force a smile on my face. “Of course.”

“Yes!” She cheers and runs to the table where Eden has her supplies laid out for wreath making. She waves to Miller. “Hi, Uncle Miller.”

“Hi, squirt.” He winks at her and his face changes from grumpy to hot.

Eden bumps my hip as she passes. “Now you know why I couldn’t resist the man.”

“Good morning,” I greet Miller. I get a grunt in response.

Eden rolls her eyes. “Don’t mind the grumpy giant.”

“We preferred the grumpy asshole when we were kids,” Damon chimes in.

“Shush you. Little ears. All around you.” I point to Skye.

He shrugs. “Grumpy jerk doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Judging by the roll of his eyes, Miller doesn’t care whether everyone thinks he’s a grump or not. I’ve never spent much time around the man. His grumpy demeanor puts me off. It reminds me of... I shiver.

Damon wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Are you cold?”

“No, I’m...” I shut up when I realize I was about to confess how Miller reminds me of Mr. Simon. *Way to go, Love.* Way to keep your secrets secret.

Damon frowns at me. “This is why I think you should tell everyone.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Tell everyone what? I have poor circulation and can’t warm up?”

His eyes flare. “I can warm you up.”

I push him away. “Knock it off, Angel of Death.”

He chuckles.

Behind me, someone claps. I whirl around to find Moon grinning at us.

“Why are you clapping?” There isn’t a reason to clap. The guitar soloist is in the middle of the longest rendition of *We Wish You A Merry Christmas* known to man.

She cocks an eyebrow. “Because I think you might have earned yourself a Bragg woman t-shirt.”

“A Bragg woman t-shirt?” What is she talking about?

“Where’s Riley?” Damon asks before she can answer.

“Riley didn’t come today. But Santa did.” She winks. I guess we know who’s playing Santa today.

The door opens and Aspen enters with her baby boy on her hip. When she spots me, she scowls and hurries past with her husband trailing after her.

I glance away with a sigh. I notice *Bake Me Happy* has a stand set up with baked goods and coffee. Good enough excuse to run away from memories of what I did to Aspen and Lyric. I motion toward it.

“Anyone want a coffee?” When Damon steps forward as if to join me, I hold up a hand. “Someone should watch Skye.” I can’t run away from memories with him on my heels.

“I’ll watch her,” Eden volunteers and thwarts my brilliant escape plan.

“Come on.” Damon urges me toward the stand.

We barely make it five steps before Sage steps into our path. “Good morning, Love Hill.”

Her cronies surround her. Oh no. What do they want now?

“Morning, Sage.” I try to sidestep her but she moves with me as if we’re dancing.

“Good morning, ladies,” Damon croons. “You’re looking particularly lovely this morning.”

Feather bats her eyelashes at him. “What do you think of our sweatshirts?”

They're all wearing the same bright pink sweatshirts with the words *Gossip Gals Bring the Christmas Joy* written on them in gold lettering.

"I bet you bring the joy." He winks.

They preen at his attention.

"And here we thought Riley was the charming Bragg brother," Cayenne says.

He smirks. "Who do you think taught his little brother all the moves?"

"Ho ho ho!" Santa shoves his way into the middle of our little crowd. "Merry Christmas, sweet ladies."

I groan. Are we going to have a contest of the sweet talkers? How do we know who wins?

Clove waggles her eyebrows at Riley. "Now, here's a Santa I wouldn't mind climbing down my chimney. Hubba hubba."

Cayenne elbows her. "Ask Sirius to dress up. This Santa's all mine."

"Don't worry, ladies. There's enough of me to go around." Riley waggles his eyebrows.

"How does Moon put up with you?" I grumble underneath my breath but he hears me.

"She loves me."

"You certain it's not because she's as crazy as you are?" I point to where Moon's dancing around the Christmas tree while Daisy's fiancé Lennon plays *Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree* on his electric guitar.

"I believe my dancing partner is calling my name." He bows and turns to leave but stops. "Almost forgot." He digs a package out of his sack. "I have a present for you."

Damon accepts the wrapped gift with a sigh and Santa skips off to the Christmas tree where he begins to dance the twist with Moon while Lennon plays *Feliz Navidad*.

“There must be eggnog somewhere at this party. Spiked eggnog,” I mutter as I watch them.

Damon chuckles as he throws his arm around my shoulders. “Darling Sage, where can I find some eggnog?”

At his question, Sage studies him. Her eyes zero in on his arm around my shoulder. I should shrug him off, but I don’t want to bring any more attention to how he’s touching me. Although, guessing by how wide her smile is, she hasn’t missed a thing.

“I have all I need. Thank you.”

The ladies depart and we continue on our way to the coffee stand.

“Did she not hear my question? All she needs? What did she mean?”

I shrug since I’m not explaining how I think we’re the latest Gossip Gal project and his arm drops. I don’t miss his warmth surrounding me. The protection his closeness makes me feel. Nope. Not I. Love Hill is a one-woman show.

“Who knows?” I lie. “The residents of Winter Falls love to bet on everything. She probably has some bet going on how long I’ll last as your nanny.”

“And I’m winning it, girl,” Bryan says when we reach the coffee stand.

Bryan works at the *Bake Me Happy* bakery. He’s also a Winter Falls implant and one of the few people in town who are nice to me.

“Hi, Bryan.”

“What bet?” Damon asks.

Bryan bites his lips and studies him. “Damn. Those Bragg brothers are some sexy dudes.” He sighs. “I don’t suppose you’re gay or bi-curious?”

Damon chuckles. “Sorry. Nope. Boring straight guy.”

There was nothing boring about Damon the straight guy last night. No, siree Bob. The way he made me feel. How he made me... I fan myself.

“This is good. Very good.” Bryan smirks at me. “Girl, you are going to make me some money.”

I roll my eyes. “I wouldn’t bet on it. Pun intended.”

“But I would,” he sings.

“We’re searching for the spiked eggnog,” Damon says.

“There’s a bar in the corner.”

I blink. He can’t be serious. “What?”

He chuckles. “You’re not used to attending Winter Falls’ events, are you?”

I duck my chin before he can notice the blush spreading across my cheeks.

“Not shaming you, girl. Now, go get yourself a hot mulled wine or spiked hot cocoa. You’re going to need it.”

“And you aren’t?”

He lifts his mug with a wink.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Skye crashes into Damon. “Look what I made.” She shows him her wreath.

“It’s beautiful. Good job.”

This is one of those rare occasions when a parent is not actually lying about his child’s crafting abilities. The wreath is gorgeous.

“A present!” Skye squeals when her gaze catches on the gift ‘Santa’ gave Damon. “You got me a present.”

Before Damon can protest, she snatches it out of his hands. She tries to rip the wrapping away but doesn’t succeed. I kneel down to help her and notice there’s a note. *Twist here to open.*

“You need to twist it open.”

“No, don’t—” Damon tries to stop us, but Skye ignores him.

“This way?” She twists and there’s a pop before confetti bursts out of the package.

She throws her arms in the air to catch the confetti.
“Whee! Can we do it again?”

“I’m going to kill Brody,” Damon mutters as he marches off toward his youngest brother who runs away laughing.

I sigh as I watch them. It must be wonderful to be part of such a big family. Soleil rubs her pregnant belly as she watches Brody tease Damon. A growing big family.

I always wanted brothers and sisters. But it wasn’t to be since my mom passed away soon after I was born. I thought Priscilla’s arrival when I was ten was my chance for siblings. Not likely. No way would the step-witch have children and ruin her figure.

I would love to be a part of Damon’s family. Be a part of the family with the man I love? It’s a dream I don’t dare dream. Some people don’t deserve a happily ever after.

Chapter 26

Don't worry. I have a plan. ~ Message from Daisy on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Love Hill

“I’m the flower girl,” Skye announces from where she stands at the front of the makeshift aisle.

We’re at *Electric Vibes*, the only bar in Winter Falls, and the place where Damon’s mom is getting married. Daisy wanted a full-on church wedding and Lennon wanted to elope to New Orleans. They compromised and now they’re getting married in the bar Lennon used to run.

“Throw your flowers, Skye,” I urge as she’s supposed to be rehearsing for tomorrow’s wedding.

She tips her basket upside down. “All empty.”

“Can you pretend?”

She nods before skipping, twirling, and hopping down the aisle while pretending to throw flowers. When she reaches the end, she jumps into Damon’s arms where he’s standing next to Lennon as the groom’s best man.

The rest of the wedding party is comprised of Damon’s brothers and their partners. Since Damon doesn’t have a partner, he’s escorting Daisy’s best friend, Mrs. West, down the aisle.

Mrs. West has tried to corner me no less than five times. The last time I ran into the women’s restroom to hide from her Damon was waiting for me when I got out to ask me if I was having tummy problems and needed to go home. Guess

I'm doing a spectacular job of living up to my new middle name – Awkward.

The rest of the rehearsal goes off without a hitch. Considering Sage is officiating the ceremony, it's a miracle. Once we're finished, we're off to the brewery next door for the rehearsal dinner.

Naked Falls Brewing is owned by Damon's fraternal twin brothers, Miller and Elder. They started the brewery as an excuse to move to Winter Falls after they discovered Peace was their half-brother. While they worked up the courage to speak to Peace, they made a big success of their microbrewery.

The inside of the place is amazing with brick walls, exposed ductwork, and an industrial vibe. The wedding party has the entire upstairs reserved.

I hold Skye's hand as we ascend the stairs behind Damon. I order myself not to watch his ass muscles bunch as he climbs. It doesn't work. Those muscles are far too fascinating for me to ignore. Especially since I know how they feel.

"Grandma!" Skye shouts when she catches sight of Daisy. I release Skye's hand and she runs to her.

"How is my favorite granddaughter?"

"I'm a flower girl."

"Hey! How come Robin isn't your favorite granddaughter?" Elder asks as he approaches with his baby daughter in his arms.

Damon puffs out his chest. "Probably because I'm her favorite son. Naturally, my daughter is her favorite granddaughter."

Harmony groans. "Here we go again."

Elder snorts. "Being the oldest doesn't make you the favorite."

"Everyone knows the youngest is always the favorite," Brody says. "Mom finally stopped trying for perfect when she had me."

“And I’m your twin, which means we’re perfect together.”

Riley and Brody bump fists before shouting, “Twin powers activate!”

I giggle and everyone’s attention switches to me. I hold up my hands. “Sorry. I’m leaving. Have a lovely evening.”

“Why are you leaving?” Harmony asks.

“Don’t be silly.” Eden grasps my elbow and tries to lead me to the table. I plant my feet. I’m not going anywhere.

“We promise we only talk about you behind your back. Not in front of you.”

My mouth gapes open at Moon’s announcement.

“Kidding. I was kidding. Can’t anyone in this crowd take a joke?”

Elder raises his hand and his brothers groan. “What’s the definition of embarrassment?”

Me. At this moment.

“Running into a brick wall with an erection and breaking your nose.”

Damon growls at him. “No dirty jokes when my five-year-old is within hearing distance.”

“Skye doesn’t know what an erection is yet,” Elder claims.

Moon points to Mrs. West who’s sitting with Daisy and Skye. “I wouldn’t count on it. Mrs. Teach The World About Condoms is here.”

Damon steps forward but I stop him. “I’ll get her. You enjoy this time with your family.”

He scowls. “This is your night off.”

I roll my eyes. “Which is why I was leaving.”

“Don’t you enjoy being around my family?”

“Uh-oh. Mommy and Daddy are fighting,” Brody whines.

Soleil slaps his shoulder. “You’re supposed to be an adult now.”

Brody smirks. “I have an exemption for when my entire family is gathered together.”

She moans. “What did I get myself into?”

He wraps an arm around her shoulder and pulls her near. “Love and orgasms for the rest of your life with a bit of laughter thrown in for fun.”

I want what she’s having.

I don’t realize I spoke aloud until Damon’s gaze meets mine and he cocks his eyebrow.

Backpedal, Love. Backpedal like there’s an alligator in the road and he’s giving you the ‘I haven’t eaten in a week’-look.

“It was a joke. Elder tells bad jokes all the time and everyone ignores him. Ignore me now. Please, ignore me.”

“Hey! I don’t tell bad jokes.”

Harmony rolls her eyes at her husband’s denial. “He does. He really does.”

Phew. Attention’s off me. Time to sneak out of here before I make a fool of myself yet again in front of Damon’s family.

I’m down the stairs and nearly at the door when Damon places a hand on my lower back directing me away from the exit and down the hallway to the restrooms. Someone walks out of the family room and he catches the door before urging me inside.

“What are you doing?” I hiss at him when he locks the door. “Your entire family is going to think we’re in here having hanky panky.”

“Having hanky panky? When we fool around, Angel, it’s not hanky panky, it’s hot and sexy.”

True, but I’m not giving him the satisfaction of agreeing with him.

“We don’t fool around anymore, remember? It was a one-time thing.”

He stalks toward me and I retreat until my back hits the changing station. “I never agreed to us being a one-time thing.”

“Damon.”

“Love.”

I tremble at the sound of my name in his growly voice. No one calls me Love. It’s always Love Hill or homewrecker or – the top of my least favorite list – babe.

“You’re my boss. We can’t be messing around.”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “But it’s fun.”

It most certainly is. But I’m done doing whatever I want and not thinking about the consequences.

He palms my cheek and I use every ounce of willpower I have to stop myself from leaning into his hand. “Come to the wedding with me tomorrow.”

“I’m going to the wedding. Duh. I’m Skye’s nanny.”

He scowls. “Not as Skye’s nanny. As my date.”

My brow wrinkles. “We discussed this. I’m not dating material. I don’t have any morals, remember?”

“I already admitted I was wrong, Love. Do you need me to apologize again? Because I will.”

“The Angel of Death was wrong?” I feign a shiver. “Scary.”

“You’re coming tomorrow as my date.”

My body heats at the growl in his voice. But no one is ordering me around. Not anymore.

“Excuse me? You can’t order me around. I’m your employee. Not your servant.”

“Never said you were.”

Which is why he just ordered me to come as his date tomorrow. I raise an eyebrow.

He clears his throat. "Love Hill, would you please accompany me as my date to my mom's wedding tomorrow?"

"Maybe I don't want to date you."

His eyes flare with heat. "I have one night that proves you're wrong."

"It was just sex."

"Angel, I know you don't sleep around with men anymore."

"Everyone can slip up once."

He comes closer until I can feel his breath on my skin and his warmth surrounding me. His musky scent filling my lungs. My knees nearly buckle with the force of the desire pouring through my veins.

The things this man can make me feel. It's dangerous. Another reason to say no.

"I promise my family will behave."

"I know."

They behaved today, after all. The only side eye they gave me was related to Damon touching me. Their curiosity is practically palpable in the air. If they find out we're in this bathroom together, we won't be able to hold back their questions any longer.

"I should go."

He smiles. "You'll be my date tomorrow?"

"No, I mean I should leave. It's my night off, after all."

"I..." He cuts himself off before stepping away. "I won't force you. It's your choice."

"Thank you." I skirt around him and rush to the door.

"But I won't stop asking."

I flip the lock. "Yeah, you will."

Everyone gets tired of me eventually. I have enough experience to know this is true. I can wait for Damon to give up.

But he needs to give up soon. Before I give in again. I can't give in. It's bad enough I'm in love with him and his entire family. If we start to date and he gives me a glimpse of how wonderful life with him could be and then pulls away, I won't survive.

It's better to keep my distance.

Chapter 27

*Stay out of my supply closet! ~ Message from
the owner of Electric Vibes on the Winter
Falls Facebook page*



Love Hill

“This isn’t your seat, Love,” Soleil says as I settle at a table in the corner of *Naked Falls Brewing*.

The guests from Daisy and Lennon’s wedding are gathering at the brewery for dinner following the ceremony and before returning to *Electric Vibes* for the party. I’m supposed to be watching Skye and keeping her out of trouble. But the gossip gals have kidnapped her. And by kidnapped, I mean offered her candy.

I scan the room, but I don’t notice a seating chart. “I didn’t think there were assigned seats.”

She grasps my elbow and urges me toward the front of the room. Since she’s pregnant, I don’t wrench my elbow away and allow her to lead me to the main table.

“Here we go.” She tries to push me into a chair.

“I’m not sitting here, Soleil. This table is for the wedding party.”

“And their partners.” She winks.

I scowl. “I’m not Damon’s partner. I’m his nanny.”

“He wasn’t looking at you the way a man should look at his nanny when he dragged you to the restroom last night.”

I bury my face in my hands. I knew someone would see us. You can't do anything in this town without someone finding out.

"Damon and I are not a couple." No matter how much I love the man.

She smirks. "But you want to be."

"No, no. I'm his nanny. Nothing more."

"The lady doth protest too much."

The door opens and the rest of the wedding party enters. I need to get out of here. Pronto. I try to maneuver my way around Soleil but she blocks me.

"This isn't fair. You're pregnant."

She snorts. "Why do you think I was chosen for this assignment?"

"Assignment? What do you mean?"

She winks. "Show time."

"Oh good. You're here," Daisy says as she joins us.

Is she speaking to me? I peer behind me but Soleil is nowhere to be seen. How does a pregnant woman sneak off?

"I'm off to find my seat."

"Don't be silly." She pushes me into a chair. "This is your seat."

I wait for her to turn around before I try sneaking off. I don't make it out of my chair.

"Where are you going?" Damon stands behind me and blocks my escape.

"To find my seat."

"You're in your seat."

I throw my hands in the air. "What is it with your entire family determined I sit up here with them when they know I don't belong?"

He bends over to whisper in my ear. "Maybe if my entire family wants you up here, you do belong."

I shiver at the feel of his breath against my skin. I am such a sucker for this man.

He squeezes my shoulder. "Please stay. Don't leave me up here alone."

I look up and down the table and realize Damon would indeed be alone. "Where's your matron of honor?"

He points to a long table where Mrs. West is sitting with her husband and their five children and spouses.

"You wouldn't be alone. Your brothers are here. And your mom."

"Stop fighting me, Angel."

I practically melt into my chair when he calls me angel. No one's ever mistaken me for an angel before. I enjoy it way too much.

Is this what happens when you fall in love? You become an idiot willing to do anything to make the person you love happy? Is this why my dad married my step-witch? He loved her and didn't see her for who she really was?

I'm not blind. I see Damon for who he really is. A loving father. A caring son. A considerate brother. A gentle and passionate lover. No wonder I'm gaga for the man.

Too bad I can never tell him as much. He deserves a better woman than me. A woman he doesn't have to hide dating from his family. Although, he's not hiding me from his family now.

"Fine." I give in. "But you better behave."

He sits in the chair next to me and throws an arm over my shoulder. "Where's the fun in behaving?"

I elbow him. "I'm serious. Behave."

Guessing by the way he throws his head back and laughs, behaving is the furthest thing from his mind.

I make one more attempt to help him see reason. "What about Skye?"

“What about her? Is she okay? Do we need to rescue her?”

I motion to the table where she’s sitting with the gossip gals. The elderly ladies are grinning at her as she regales them with a story.

“She’s going to be hopped up on sugar and not able to sleep tonight. Putting her to bed is going to be an adventure of the not fun variety.”

Damon toys with the ends of my hair. “Good thing we don’t have to put her to bed then.”

“What do you mean? Of course, we do. Who else would put her to bed if we didn’t? Wild wolves?”

“Sage. She’s having a sleepover with her tonight.”

I scowl. “No one told me.”

And why does my heart feel like it’s being cut out of my body? It’s no big deal. I’m not Skye’s mom. Damon can make decisions about her well-being without me. It’s his right as her father.

None of those reasons make me feel any better.

Dang it. I want to be Skye’s mom. I don’t merely love her dad. I love her. I want her to be mine. I want to watch her grow into the amazing woman I know she’s going to be.

Damon tugs on my hair and I tear my gaze away from his daughter. “Which means we have the house to ourselves tonight.”

I gulp as heat and want flares to life in my body. I want to spend as many nights as I can wrapped up in the arms of the man I love. Before he comes to his senses and realizes I don’t deserve him.

But I can’t. If I do, I won’t recover when we end. I have a feeling Damon leaving me will feel worse than my dad dying. I’ll lose his family. The semi-acceptance from the town. I’ll lose everything. I can’t risk it.

“We agreed. No more sex.”

He chuckles. “You decreed. I didn’t agree.”

“No more sex, Damon.” I try to sound stern but I don’t think I manage to pull it off.

His gaze focuses on my lips. “Think about it, Angel. Think about it.”

Several hours later, I’m still thinking about it. The possibility of sex with Damon pushes all other thoughts aside and crowds my brain. I barely noticed the wedding speeches or the cutting of the cake. The cold as we traveled outside from the brewery to the bar couldn’t cut through the heat emitting from my skin.

I’m a mess of hormones. I’m a live wire. One touch will set me off.

“It’s time for the bouquet toss.”

At Mrs. West’s announcement, I do a U-turn and march toward the restrooms. I am not getting involved in the bouquet toss. The last time I did there was a little mishap.

And by little mishap I mean I tried to steal the bouquet. But I am not that woman anymore. No more knocking down bridesmaids to steal the bouquet.

Damon snags my hand before I can enter the women’s restroom.

“I’m not catching the bouquet, Damon. And you can’t make me.”

“That’s a change,” someone mutters. My face warms in response, but I ignore it. I only have myself to blame for her snippy remark.

Damon drags me into the supply room.

“I don’t care about the stupid bouquet toss,” he growls. “I care about this.”

And then his mouth is on mine. I should protest. I shouldn’t let this happen again. But then his taste hits me. He tastes of chocolate cake, coffee, and man. And, suddenly, protest is the furthest thing from my mind.

The only thing I can think of is how good it feels to be kissed by this man. To be worshipped by this man. I moan and

he slips his tongue into my mouth.

Our tongues battle, our teeth clash, and my panties grow damp. He presses his hard cock against my stomach and I hitch my leg around his hip. I want to feel his length pushing against other parts of me.

He palms my ass and lifts me. I wrap my legs around his waist and now I can feel him exactly where I want him. I rub myself up and down his length.

He growls and wrenches his lips from mine before kissing a path along my jaw to my ear.

“I want you, Angel. I want you spread out naked on my bed. Better than any buffet I’ve ever eaten before.”

I shiver at his words and he licks the skin beneath my ear.

“What do you want, Angel? Do you want the same thing? Or do you want me to set you down and follow you back outside to my mom’s wedding reception?”

I know what I should say. I should say ‘Put me down. Let’s go back to the reception.’

But, let’s face it, I’ve never been any good at doing what I should.

“Take me home, Damon.”

Chapter 28

Are you going to follow any of my rules for Skye? ~ Message from Damon to Sage



Damon

Take me home, Damon.

Those four words have officially been moved to the top of my list of favorite words. Hell, yeah, I'll take you home and make you scream my name, Love.

"Let's go."

I help Love lower her leg and make sure she's steady on her feet before shackling her wrist and dragging her from the supply room toward the back exit.

She tugs on my hold. "Shouldn't we tell Skye we're going?"

Crap. I nearly forgot. I need to say good night to my baby girl. My cock protests but I wrangle control over my body and turn around to return to the party.

Sage stands at the end of the hallway blocking us. "I'll tell Skye you said good night." She shoos us back toward the exit.

"But..."

"But nothing. Now go before the entire town gets in on the action."

"Gets in on the action?"

"Are you betting on us again, Sage?" Love asks.

"I'm supporting you," she answers, which isn't a no.

I don't care who they bet on. Skye's in good hands and Love wants me to take her home. I drag her toward the exit. "Let's go."

She hesitates for a moment before following me.

"I feel bad about not saying goodnight to Skye," she says as I help her into my car.

I pause. She's chewing on her lip and studying the exit. She's genuinely concerned for my daughter. Her care for Skye warms my heart.

This is why I love her. *Whoa. Hold up, Damon.* It's a bit early to be thinking about love, isn't it?

"Should we check on her?"

Love's question brings me out of my contemplation.

"Sage has her, but if you want to go check on her, we will."

She stares at me for a long moment. "She's your daughter. If you're okay with not checking on her, I am, too."

I want to tell her Skye can be *our* daughter, but I don't. Deep discussions about our future are not happening when my cock is trying to drill a hole in my pants.

I kiss Love's forehead before shutting the door and running around the front of the vehicle to jump in the driver's seat.

"Are you in a hurry?" Love giggles.

No sense denying it. I am in a hurry. I've wanted Love back in my bed since the second she left it. And with Skye away all night, we don't have to be quiet. I can tease Love until she's begging me. My cock twitches. Hell yeah, I'm in a hurry.

We arrive at my house within five minutes. I'm out of the car and running to her side before I can stop myself. I lift Love up and carry her to the house.

"Don't drop me."

I pretend to falter on the stairs. She squeals and clutches my shoulders. When I chuckle, she slaps my back.

“Not funny.” She sounds grumpy but her eyes twinkle with delight.

We reach my bedroom and I lay her on my bed. “We can be as loud as we want tonight since Skye’s not home.”

“I’m not loud.”

I puff out my chest. “You also didn’t have an orgasm with a man until I came along.”

She groans and covers her face with her hands. “I’m never going to hear the end of that, am I?”

Nope. She isn’t.

“Let’s find out how loud you can be when I rock your world.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Rock my world?”

I crawl on top of her. “What do you prefer? Bring you to climax? Make you see stars?”

“I thought Elder was the jokester of the Brody family.”

“He is. I’m not joking.” I’m dead serious.

I’m going to make her come so hard she’ll never want to be with any other man. Only me. Always me. Because I am not letting Love go. She’s mine. She just doesn’t realize it yet.

She laughs and I can feel her breasts pushing against my chest. I want to feel them against my naked skin.

I get to my knees. Time to unwrap my present.

I glide my hands under Love’s sweater. I toy with the silky-smooth skin of her stomach until she squirms beneath me. Only then do I remove the garment.

I groan when her red silk bra is revealed. It barely contains her breasts. I trace the lacy edge. She moans and her head falls back as she arches her chest into my hand.

I know an offer I can’t refuse when I encounter it. I pull the cup of her bra down to reveal her light pink nipple. I play with it while she twists and turns beneath me. I’m happy

she enjoys me playing with her breasts because I intend to play with them a hell of a lot in the future.

I pull the other cup down. I massage and mold her skin until her nipples are hard peaks. Then, I lean over and blow a breath over the peak before nibbling on it. Her hands thread through my hair to keep me right where I am.

Don't worry, Love. I'm not going anywhere. Not until I find out how far I can push her by merely playing with these beauties.

While I torture her nipples, I press my cock against her center. She wraps her legs around my hips and rubs herself up and down me. My cock weeps in response. He doesn't understand why he isn't allowed to join the party yet.

"You taste so fucking good," I murmur against her skin and she shudders. "I could spend all day tasting you."

"Sounds good," she gasps.

"Or I could fuck your breasts."

Those words earn me a long moan. I move buying lube to the top of my to-do list.

I scrape my beard against her soft skin as I nibble my way from one breast to the other. I pinch one nipple while simultaneously grazing my teeth against the other one, and she freezes before letting out a long moan.

She rubs herself against my cock faster and faster as she climaxes. I help draw out her climax by punching my hips against her core while praying I don't come in my pants.

When she collapses, I lift my head to study her. Her face is flushed, there are beads of sweat on her forehead, and she has a tiny smile on her lips.

Tiny smile? Not good enough.

"You ready for round two?"

Her eyes fly open. "I don't know if I can..."

"You can and you will."

"You don't know my body."

“Angel, I do.”

She stares at me for a moment before issuing her challenge. “Prove it.”

“Happy to oblige,” I murmur before scooting back so I can remove the rest of her clothes. Once her skirt and tights are gone, I smirk.

“Matching red silk underwear. Did you plan for me to see this tonight?”

Love freezes. “I didn’t plan anything. I didn’t set out to seduce you. I promise. I’m not that kind of woman anymore. I merely—”

I’m a fucking idiot. I place a finger against her lips to quiet her.

“I know you didn’t plan this.” I practically had to beg her before she agreed to get in bed with me again. “I was teasing you.”

Her shoulders relax. “Oh.”

“But I know better now. I won’t tease you.” I waggle my eyebrows. “With words.”

She bites her lip. “Maybe I should tease you.”

“Nope,” I growl. “I’m in charge.”

If she teases me, I will come in my pants like a damn teenager. And the only place I’m coming tonight is buried deep inside the woman I love.

She waves a hand my way. “Are you going to stare at me all night or show me how you can be in charge?”

I unbutton my shirt and shrug it off. Her eyes flare as she studies my chest.

She sighs. “Is this how you show a woman you’re in charge?”

“I’ll show you in charge,” I grumble before I grab hold of her underwear and tear the garment in two.

“How’s this for in charge?” I plunge two fingers inside her and she clenches around me.

I growl as I pump my fingers in and out of her. “Is this good enough for you?”

“Want you,” she gasps out. “Not your fingers.”

My cock is on board with this plan. In fact, he insists we follow it. I flip Love onto her stomach.

“On your knees, Angel.”

She doesn’t move.

“I said. On your knees.”

I’m done with teasing.

She shakes her head. I fist my hand in her hair and tug until I can see her face. The vision that greets me has my heart stalling in my chest. She’s not teasing me. She’s ashamed. I release her hair and cover her with my body.

“What’s wrong, Angel?”

She squeezes her eyes shut.

I rub a hand up and down her back. “You can tell me.”

“It’s stupid.”

“Nothing’s stupid.”

I’m barely able to breathe as I wait for her to explain.

“I don’t enjoy doggy style,” she finally murmurs.

“Okay.” I roll her over until she’s on her side next to me. “No more doggy style.”

“You’re not going to make me do it anyway?”

I growl. “Who the fuck made you do doggy style when you didn’t want to?”

She flinches and glances away, but I grasp her chin and force her to meet my gaze.

“Angel, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“You didn’t yell.”

“I raised my voice and I’m sorry. I was mad.”

“Why?”

Her question breaks my heart. How can she not know why I'm mad?

“Because someone hurt you.”

She draws figure eights on my chest with her finger. “No one hurt me. No one forced me to do anything I didn't want to do.”

Then, why the hell did you freeze when I said get to your knees? Thank fuck I manage to keep the question from spilling out of my mouth.

Tread carefully, Damon. Tread carefully.

“You appeared ashamed when I told you to get to your knees,” I say as gently as I can.

She blows out a breath. “Not ashamed. Just embarrassed.”

“Okay.” I can roll with this. “Why are you embarrassed?”

“Doggy style makes me feel like I'm being used.”

I frown. There's more to the story, but I don't know if I can hear it all without losing my mind. Hold on. I'm being unfair. She lived it. I can listen to her story.

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Why?”

She lays her hands flat against my chest. I grasp one of them and hold it to my heart. This is the only way I know how to give her strength.

“There was this guy.”

I swallow my growl. I can do this.

“He didn't kiss me or...” She coughs. “He was always in a hurry. He said he couldn't wait to get inside me. He'd flip my skirt up, bend me over the couch, and ...”

I can fill in the dots. “He didn't make it good for you?” I ask before she can say anymore.

She wrinkles her nose. “No.”

I kiss her forehead. “Okay, Angel. No doggy style.”

She clears her throat. “What if I want to try?”

“Angel, I will give you anything you want but not tonight, okay?” Not when she just told me yet another story that makes me want to whip all the men in Winter Falls until they fall to their bloody knees and apologize to her.

Her hand trails down my chest until she reaches my pants. “But you didn’t finish.”

“Ignore it. It’ll go down by itself.”

She presses a hand against my erection and I see stars. This woman can bring me to my knees.

“I can help.” She glimpses up at me from beneath her lashes and I’m a goner.

“Help how?” I grunt.

“This way.” She unbuckles my pants and lowers my zipper. Her hand dives into my underwear. At the feel of her soft skin against my hardness, I nearly blow.

I’ve dreamed of her hand on me. I’ve jerked off while pretending it was her hand on me. It feels better than I could have ever expected.

“Is this okay?” she asks as she begins to pump up and down.

I lift my hips and push my pants down to my knees. Once I have more room to maneuver, I place my hand over hers and show her how I enjoy being touched.

“Squeeze harder and twist your wrist.”

“What about this?” Her free hand cups my balls and my hips nearly fly off the bed as my eyes roll backward in my head.

“Good,” I croak.

She massages my balls with one hand while I help her other hand to jack me off. It’s not long before I feel the telltale tingle in my lower back.

“I’m going to come.”

She scoots down until my cock is aimed at her breasts.
“Come all over me.”

“Fuck,” I moan as I come in her hand and over her chest. The vision of my come on her skin prolongs my climax until I collapse back against the bed.

“You’re going to kill me, Angel.”

Chapter 29

Someone needs to take my shift today since I missed a night of sleep. ~ Message from Sage to the Gossip Gals



Love Hill

“You’re still here,” Damon murmurs.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Did I read the entire situation wrong? Does he want me to leave? I thought... Never mind. It doesn’t matter what I thought. It matters what Damon wants.

“Do you want me to leave?”

His arm tightens around me. “You’re not leaving.”

His scratchy just woke-up voice saying those words sends warmth through my body. There may even be some tingling and a few butterflies in my stomach. It’s official. I’ve reverted back to being a teenager when her crush says he likes her.

Although, I’ve never been a teenager whose crush liked her. Considering the Mr. Simon situation, good boys didn’t want me. But the bad boys sure did. I shove those thoughts out of my mind. I’m done dwelling on my past. It’s time to concentrate on my future.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Damon asks.

“What, what means?”

He squeezes my middle. “Me and you in bed.”

“It means we had sex and fell asleep sometime after round two.”

He chuckles. “No.”

I roll until I’m facing him. “No, we didn’t have sex? Do you have a body double somewhere pretending to be you giving out orgasms while you do your Angel of Death duties?”

He growls. “I do not have a body double.”

“Just checking. Your entire family consists of twins after all.”

“Not my entire family. I’m the first born and I’m not a twin.”

I raise my eyebrow. “You sure? You don’t have a twin locked up in the basement to do your dastardly deeds for you?”

“I think you’d have figured out if I had a man locked in the basement by now.”

I feign a shiver. “The basement’s scary. I avoid it. You could be hiding a meth lab down there for all I know.”

“What is your obsession with me committing crimes?”

I shrug. “Evil villains are hot.”

“What about superheroes? Are they not hot?”

“They’re always squeaky clean.”

He nips my earlobe. “Was I squeaky clean last night?” I shiver at the feel of his breath against my skin. “When I came all over your chest?”

I bite my lip and peek up at him from beneath my lashes. “I don’t know. Maybe I need a reminder so I can review all the possible angles.”

He grins. “I think you’re the evil genius.”

My stomach revolts at being referred to by Damon as evil. Everyone else can think I’m evil but not him. He’s supposed to see the true me.

He’s teasing you.

Oh right. Teasing. I knew that.

I bat my eyelashes at him. “Are you stalling?”

He growls and hauls me near. “We need to get one thing straight before I ravish you.”

“What?” I press my legs together to reveal some of the pressure. “Let’s get to the ravishing.”

“We’re officially a couple now.”

My libido disappears. She packs her bags and hitches a ride with the first car to pass her. She is gone, gone, gone.

I scoot away from Damon. “We can’t be a couple.”

He scowls. “Why not?”

“Let’s start with you’re my boss.”

I’ve never actually had a boss before, but I’ve read enough romances to know boss/employee relationships are a bad idea.

“Are you worried about your performance review? Or what your colleagues think of you?”

“I don’t have any colleagues and you’ve yet to give me a performance review.”

“Exactly. This isn’t your typical boss/employee relationship. You don’t have to worry your colleagues think you’re getting favorable treatment.”

He’s not getting it. “But what about when this ends? And you fire me because you don’t want me around?”

“We already agreed on a three-month severance package.”

I slap his chest. “I don’t care about the money. I care about Skye. I can’t imagine not having that little girl in my life every single day.”

“I will never stop you from visiting Skye. No matter what happens. Your relationship with Skye is separate from my relationship with you.”

Is he for real? I study him. His warm brown eyes shine with honesty.

“What’s your next problem?”

“What do you mean?”

He taps my temple. “You obviously have a whole list of reasons why we can’t be together all ready. Let’s hear them.”

I want to deny it, but he’s right. I do have a whole list of reasons. Starting and ending with I don’t deserve him.

I try to stall him. “This is going too fast.”

He snorts. “Angel, this is me moving slow.”

“Slow? We’ve only known each other for a few weeks.”

He shrugs. “I know what I want.”

He thinks he knows what he wants, but he doesn’t know me. The real me.

“You hardly know me.”

He squeezes my hip. “I know the important things. You’re kind and caring with my daughter. You’re funny when you let your guard down. And our chemistry in bed is explosive.”

His words warm me from the inside out. No one has ever said such nice things about me – Love Hill, the homewrecker. Except for the chemistry is explosive part. Men always claim explosive chemistry with me although I’ve never experienced the chemistry Damon and I have with anyone else.

“What’s your next objection?”

“Maybe I’m not finished with the previous one,” I claim.

“Angel, you are.”

Yeah, I am. But he doesn’t have to be so smug about it. Time to wipe the smug look clean off his face.

“I’m not good enough for you.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. Wherever we go, people look at us funny because I’m this horrible person who ruins people’s relationships.”

“First of all,” he grumbles, “I don’t give a shit how people look at us. Let them look.”

Oh my. My body tingles in happiness in response to those words. This is not helping me resist him.

He cradles my face in his hands. “You are not a horrible person who ruins people’s relationships.”

“But what I did to Aspen...”

“It was a misunderstanding and you were twenty-one years old. We all do stupid shit when we’re young.”

“There’s a difference between stupid shit and being a complete and utter bitch.”

“You are not a complete and utter bitch.” He clears his throat. “And you’re not that person anymore.”

“Maybe I am. How do you know I’m not?” I hate how whiney I sound but I can’t help it.

“Love, why are you working for me?”

My brow furrows. “Because I need the money to repair the roof at my house.”

“And what have you done for money before?”

I close my eyes as I feel my cheeks heat. “Asked my dates for it.”

“And this is how I know you’re not the person you used to be. How I know you’re trying to be better.” I open my eyes to meet his gaze. He seems sincere but I don’t know. “You knocked on my hotel room door knowing I would remember you and what happened at my brother’s wedding and you knocked anyway.”

“To be honest, I was hoping you forgot.”

He chuckles. “I tend not to forget when a beautiful woman promises me a night to remember.”

“Whatever,” I mumble.

He kisses my nose. “You are not a horrible person, Love Hill. Have you done things you regret? Sure. But we all have our regrets. You get me?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

“Are we done with your bullshit excuses now?”

“My excuses aren’t bullshit.”

“I think I proved they were.”

I frown. “You didn’t.”

“I did.”

His smug tone has me seeing red. He couldn’t accept my perfectly reasonable excuses? He has to make me admit my deepest, darkest secret?

“How about this then? We can never be together because I can’t give you what you want!”

“What I want? You’re already giving me what I want.”

“I don’t mean sex.”

“I didn’t mean sex either.”

“I meant I can never have a long-term relationship with you because I can’t give Skye a brother or a sister.”

“A brother or sister?” His eyes cloud with confusion for a few seconds before he blinks and pity fills his gaze.

I stab his chest. “Don’t you dare pity me.”

“I can feel bad for you without feeling pity.”

Whatever. “And now you know why we can never have a long-term relationship.”

I start to crawl out of the bed but his arms wrap around me to trap me.

“I’m sorry you can’t have children, but it doesn’t factor into my decision.”

“But I’m damaged goods. No one wants damaged goods.”

“Who told you this bullshit?” He narrows his eyes. “Let me guess. Priscilla, the step-witch.”

“She’s not wrong,” I whisper.

He pinches my chin and forces me to meet his gaze. “Yes, she is. Any man who would let the woman he cares for go because she can’t bear his children is no man. If our relationship continues and we decide we want to grow this family, we have options.”

“But—”

“No. I’m not listening to the woman I care about tear herself down anymore. You hear me?”

I open my mouth but no words come out. *Care about?* Does he seriously care about me? Love Hill – the homewrecker?

You’re not a homewrecker anymore.

“You hear me,” he mumbles before his lips crash down on mine and I forget all about all the reasons why this is a bad idea.

The biggest one being he’s going to break my heart and I’ll never recover.

He presses his hard length into my stomach and I realize I don’t care. I’m going to grab hold of every single moment with him I can. I’ll worry about the future when it happens and not before.

Chapter 30

How hard can it be? ~ Famous last words of Damon Bragg



Love Hill

The door slams open. “Daddy, Nanny Love!”

I rush to the entrance to catch Skye before she can run around the house in her dirty boots.

“Good morning. Did you have fun at Sage’s house?”

“It was awesome!” Her entire body lights up with her answer. “We made ‘smores in the fireplace. I dropped my first marshmallow but then Grandma Sage showed me how to put the marshmallow on the stick and then I didn’t drop any more. Except one more. And then we drank hot chocolate and played with her dolls. Grandma Sage has lots of dolls. She even has a dollhouse. It’s not as good as mine. But it’s nice.”

“Whoa. Slow down there, squirt,” Damon says as he joins us.

“Daddy!” Skye launches herself at him. I can’t help but sigh at how cute they are.

“Mission accomplished,” Sage says.

“Mission? What mission?”

She places a finger over her lips before backing out of the front door. I debate running after her and questioning her, but it’s futile. Sage does what Sage wants.

“Thank you for watching Skye,” I holler after her instead. She waves as she trudges away in the snow.

When I return to the living room, Skye is twirling around in circles.

“Grandma Sage doesn’t make breakfast. She buys it. We went to Grandma Clove’s and had chocolate.” She freezes. “Oops. I wasn’t supposed to tell you.”

I giggle. I think we already figured out she’s on a sugar high.

“It sounds as if your day was already quite adventurous. I guess we won’t go ice skating after all.”

“Ice skating! I want to go ice skating. I’ve never been ice skating before. Is it hard? I’ve been roller skating. Is ice skating like roller skating on ice?”

“Lesson learned. Sage is not allowed to babysit my daughter,” Damon whispers as he stands next to me.

I want to snuggle into his side, but I know better. We don’t need Skye to start asking questions. I can imagine the type of embarrassing questions she’d ask.

“All I ask is can I be in the same room when you tell Sage she’s never babysitting your daughter again?”

He groans. “This town.”

Skye tugs on his pants. “Can we go? Can we? Can we? Can we?”

“Is there an ice skating rink in Winter Falls?” he asks me.

“The only place to ice skate in Winter Falls is on the river when it freezes over. But White Bridge has a skating rink. They also have a Christmas light route to drive once it gets dark.”

“Sounds perfect, Love.” He kisses my cheek before kneeling down in front of his daughter.

What the hell is he doing? Kissing my cheek in front of his daughter? We need to keep our relationship secret from Skye.

“Go change into some warm clothes.” Damon barely gets the words out before Skye is running up the stairs.

“No running in the house,” I shout after her. I don’t know why I bother. She doesn’t listen. Like father, like daughter.

“Do not kiss me in front of your daughter,” I hiss at Damon.

He widens his eyes. “Why not?”

I wag a finger at him. “Don’t you dare act innocent with me. I know you’re nothing of the sort.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “And you benefit from my lack of innocence.”

“Do not go all sexy on me.”

“All sexy?” He puffs out his chest. “You think I’m sexy.”

“No. I sleep with random men who happen to be my boss all the time.”

I slap a hand over my mouth when I realize what I’ve said. I’m such an idiot. Why don’t I go ahead and remind Damon of what a slut I am? Good idea. Great way to start a relationship.

“I don’t sleep with random men,” I mutter behind my hand.

He pries my hand from my mouth. “I know you don’t, Angel.”

I hear Skye in her room and am reminded of more important things than my checkered past. “We can’t tell Skye.”

“Why not?”

“When this doesn’t work out, she’ll be hurt.”

“When?” His jaw clenches. “I think you mean if.”

“If.” I bob my head as if I agree. There’s no way this will work out in the long run. Love Homewrecker Hill isn’t lucky enough to get a happily ever after.

Judging by the muscle ticking in his jaw, Damon knows I’m placating him. Lucky for me, a door slams and Skye

comes bounding down the stairs before he has a chance to call me out.

“Ready!”

My eyes widen when I notice what she’s wearing. “Are those your pajamas?” They are her pajamas. Her flannel winter pajamas with snowmen on them. They’re adorable and completely inappropriate for ice skating.

I grasp her hand. “Let’s go change.”

“But Daddy said to wear something warm. These are warm.”

“True, but they aren’t waterproof. You don’t want to walk around with a wet bottom all day, do you?”

Her lip curls. “No.”

We arrive at the ice skating rink in White Bridge an hour later. We rent skates and then find a bench to sit on while we change into our skates.

“I think I should confess,” Damon says.

I don’t bother looking at him as I lace my skates up. “What?”

“I don’t know how to ice skate.”

I gasp. “How can you not know how to ice skate?”

“I grew up in San Diego.” I raise my eyebrows. “Until we moved to Winter Falls, I never lived anywhere else.”

“Can you roller skate?”

He frowns. “How old do you think I am?”

“What does your age – which is thirty-four by the way – have to do with anything?”

“I don’t roller skate. I rollerblade.”

“Great. Ice skating is pretty much the same thing.”

“Except it’s on ice and the blade is razor thin,” he grumbles.

I hip check him. “Don’t worry. I won’t let you embarrass yourself. Too much.”

I kneel in front of Skye and help her lace up her skates. “You ready to show your daddy how it’s done?”

She cheers, and I help her to stand.

“Do you need any help?” I ask Damon and he snarls at me. I’ll take his answer as a no.

“Come on, Skye. You’re going to love this.”

The sky is cloudy over the outdoor rink and snow flurries are falling from above. Add in the Christmas lights hanging from the boards surrounding the rink and it’s magical.

I love this place. My dad used to take me skating here until Priscilla came into our lives and declared I was too old to go ice skating with my dad. That was the moment I knew having a stepmom was not going to be the fun addition to our family Dad had claimed she would be.

“You ready?”

I hold Skye’s hand and skate backwards on the ice.

“Don’t try to walk. Just glide.”

We slowly make our way around the rink with me skating backwards while Skye holds onto my hands.

“Faster, Nanny Love. Faster!”

“Try pushing off with your foot.”

I keep one eye on Skye as I help her and one eye on Damon who’s made it to the skating rink but is holding onto the boards for dear life. We stop in front of him.

“Did you see me, Daddy? I was skating!”

“Great job, squirt.”

He’s gripping the handrail with such force his knuckles are white while sweat beads on his forehead.

I swallow my humor and ask, “Do you want my help?”

“I got this.”

He totally does not *got* this but he’s an adult and can make his own choices. No matter how stupid they are.

“Okay. Come on, Skye. Another round. Maybe this time I’ll let go.”

We circle the rink two more times before stopping in front of Damon again.

“Why aren’t you moving, Daddy?”

“Yeah, Daddy, why aren’t you moving?” I mimic.

Damon frowns. “I can move. If I wanted to.”

“Come on, Daddy. We’ll go around together.”

“You stay with Nanny Love, squirt.”

We begin another round of the rink while Damon gathers his courage. He keeps one hand on the handrail as he slips and slides forward. I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing at him. He’s trying. He’s failing, but at least he’s trying.

Skye waves to him. He waves back. And promptly falls on his ass. I rush over to him.

He shoos me away. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

I ignore him and help him to his feet. “You sure you don’t want my help?”

“I can do this. It’s like rollerblading on ice.”

He glides a few times while holding onto the rail. He’s actually not bad. If he weren’t the most stubborn man in Colorado and would accept my help, he’d be skating in no time.

“I got this,” he declares before releasing the handrail and increasing his pace.

He reaches the end and kicks out his right leg to go around the corner. His leg slips away from him until he’s nearly doing the splits. Instead of slowing down for the curve, he’s speeding up.

“Watch out,” I shout.

He barrels forward with his arms flailing. He’s heading straight for a family with two small children.

“Make way,” he yells but they must not hear him as they don’t move.

He tries to change his direction but he’s lost all control. He windmills his arms as he flies forward. *Bam!* He slams into the family at full force and knocks them down like bowling pins.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes as he scrambles away from them.

“Sir,” a security guard yells from outside the rink. “I think you should leave.”

“It was an accident,” Damon claims as he tries to stand. I rush to help him. He tries to push me away but I don’t let him.

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” the guard says.

I help Skye and Damon to the rink exit under the watchful eye of the security guard. As soon as our skates are off, he snags them from us. “I’ll return these. The exit is over there.”

“I’ve never been kicked out of an ice skating rink before,” I quip as we settle into the car.

“Shut it, Angel,” he growls.

I crack up laughing. I finally discovered an activity Damon doesn’t excel in. In fact, he sucks at it.

It only makes me love him more. I want to reach over and grasp his hand but Skye’s in the backseat. I settle for patting his thigh a few times.

Chapter 31

*You better watch your back, Brody Bragg. ~
Message from Damon to the Bragg brothers*



Love Hill

I squeeze Damon's hand to stop him. "I don't think this is a good idea."

He sighs before releasing my hand to cradle my face. "You don't need to be scared. No one's going to treat you badly."

I lift my eyebrows. "Really?"

He kisses my forehead. "You said my brothers' partners were nice to you at Mom's wedding."

I scowl. Does he have to remember what I said? Most of the men I've been with didn't bother to remember how much I hate getting flowers – they just die – and yet Damon remembers—

I cut those thoughts off. I will not compare Damon to the men in my past. He's different. He's the man I love. Not someone I'm using for free food and gifts. Which I don't do anymore. Nope. Love Hill is a changed woman. An in-love woman.

"It's okay to be nervous."

My scowl deepens. "I'm not nervous."

"Scared then."

"Do you want me to hurt you?"

He wiggles his eyebrows. “We could do some wrestling.”

I roll my eyes. “Let me guess. Naked wrestling.”

“Is there any other type?”

“Such a man.”

“I’ll prove to you I’m a man.” He winks.

Skye shoves her way in between us. “What are you doing?” She glances back and forth between us. “Why are you touching Nanny Love, Daddy?”

Oh boy. This is not the conversation I want to have before a Bragg family dinner I’m already nervous about.

Yes, I lied to Damon. I’m nervous about the dinner. Can you blame me? The Braggs are all Brady Bunch good and wholesome whereas I’m Love Hill. The woman the entire town of Winter Falls loves to hate.

Damon kneels in front of his daughter. “Does it bother you if I touch Nanny Love?”

Skye’s nose scrunches up. “No?”

Despite the hesitation in Skye’s voice, Damon plows on. I retreat a step but he grabs onto my calf to hold me in place. Dang it.

“What if Daddy and Nanny Love are boyfriend and girlfriend? Would that bother you?”

“Damon,” I hiss. “What are you doing?”

We’ve been dating for less than a minute. He shouldn’t be telling Skye about us. And we agreed we wouldn’t tell her yet.

“What?” He looks at me with wide innocent eyes. Innocent my ass. Everyone thinks Brody’s the troublemaker in the Bragg family. They’re wrong. Damon is worse. Because he acts all straight as an arrow and then – BAM! – hits you with a curveball.

Before I can yell at him, Skye speaks.

“Nanny Love is your girlfriend?”

Damon nods and I'm torn between wanting to run away in fear and sweeping him and Skye up in my arms in joy.

Skye throws her arms in the air. "Yes!"

"You're okay with Daddy dating Nanny Love?" Damon asks to be sure.

She rolls her eyes. "Duh, Daddy. Nanny Love is awesome."

She wraps her arms around my legs. "Are you my new mommy now? My old mommy wasn't very nice. But you are."

My hands tingle, and heat radiates through my chest. I have to inhale a few deep breaths to get my body under control before I start bawling in happiness.

Being Skye's mom is my dream. I love her as much as I love her dad. She and her dad are the family I've always wanted but never thought I could have.

I kneel next to Damon. My hands shake as I reach forward to touch Skye's shoulder. Damon squeezes my hip. He knows how much this means to me.

"I'm not your new mommy."

Skye's bottom lip trembles. "B-b-but..."

I squeeze her shoulder. "I'm not your new mommy, *yet*," I clarify.

"When will you be my new mommy?"

I've apparently entered the minefield of keeping a little girl happy while trying not to give her false hope or lie to her. Geez. This is one serious minefield. And I don't have any protective gear on.

"I don't know. Your daddy and I are new to being boyfriend and girlfriend."

Skye stares at me for a minute before nodding. "Like me and Atlas?"

"Who's Atlas?" Damon grumbles.

"He's my new boyfriend."

“Boyfriend?”

I grasp his arm before he can stand. “She’s five,” I remind him.

“Exactly. She’s five. She shouldn’t be having boyfriends.”

“Daddy!”

“Go get your shoes on, Skye,” I order her. “We don’t want to be late to see Grandma and Grandma Clementine.”

“Yeah!” She runs off to find her shoes. Lucky for me, five-year-olds are easily distracted.

I turn to Damon. “It doesn’t mean anything. They don’t kiss or even hold hands.”

“Atlas better not try anything with my little girl.”

“He won’t. He’s super shy. I don’t think he even knows he’s Skye’s girlfriend.”

He blows out a breath. “Okay. But Skye isn’t dating until she’s twenty-five.”

I snort. “Have fun with that.”

“I think you mean *we*’ll have fun with that.”

My heart flips in my chest. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“Who says I am?”

“Damon, we’ve barely started dating. You promised you’d take it slow.”

“I am.” He stands and offers me his hand. “Come on. We have a family dinner to attend.”

Dang. I nearly forgot about the family dinner. I guess today is drama day. First, Skye asks if I’m her new mommy. And now I have to attend dinner with the entire Bragg family.

“Naked wrestling is still on the table to help with your nerves.”

I shove him. “Knock it off. I’m not nervous.”

He chuckles. “And I’m not going to research who this Atlas boy is.”

“My boots don’t fit.” Skye stumbles into the living room wearing my boots.

“Probably because those aren’t yours.”

She peers down at them. “Oh.”

We fix her boot situation before walking the few blocks to Clementine’s house for family dinner.

Clementine isn’t technically part of the Bragg brood. She’s Peace’s mother. When the Bragg brothers arrived in town and claimed Peace as one of their own, she adopted the five of them and insisted they’re part of her family now. I think she’s amazing.

Damon knocks on the door but doesn’t wait for a reply before entering the house.

“The best Bragg brother has arrived.”

“Dude, I know. I’m already here.” Riley puffs out his chest.

“Why are you pretending to be a peacock?” Brody asks. “Everyone knows I’m the best Bragg brother.”

Daisy claps her hands. “I love all of my sons equally.”

“But I’m the favorite,” Damon says.

“Nanny Love is going to be my new mommy,” Skye announces to the room and everyone else within a five-mile radius since she has no idea what an indoor voice is.

I feel my face heat. “It’s not... She’s confused... We’re dating but ...”

“Another one bites the dust,” Olivia sings and begins to dance.

Damon purses his lips. “Be nice or I’ll tell everyone your news.”

She rolls her eyes. “Everyone already knows I’m pregnant. The betting about the baby’s name is already up to five hundred dollars.”

“Congratulations, Olivia,” I say because I didn’t know she’s pregnant. People are being nicer to me but I’m still not part of the Winter Falls’ grapevine.

“Thanks, but I kind of envy your situation. You don’t need to worry about getting stretch marks. And bang! You have a five-year-old daughter.”

I would love to get stretch marks. I would love to complain about cankles and have weird food cravings. I wait for the feeling of jealousy to burn in my stomach the way it usually does anytime someone gets pregnant. The feeling is absent this time, though. Because Olivia’s right. I am lucky.

“This is awesome! I’ll order you a Bragg brother t-shirt.” Moon whips out her phone.

Elder smiles at me. “Welcome to the family, Sis.” Miller grunts in agreement.

Damon leans close to whisper in my ear. “Told you there was no reason to be nervous.”

I elbow him and change the subject, because there’s only one appropriate response when your boyfriend is right – avoidance. “How can I help?”

Clementine points to the table. “Can you get the table set?”

“Of course.”

Everyone scatters to fulfill their tasks to prepare for dinner while I head for the table. I set the stacks of dishes and silverware on the sideboard and pick up the tablecloth.

Clementine frowns. “I’ve never seen that tablecloth before.”

“Stop!” Damon shouts.

“What?” I ask as I snap the fabric of the tablecloth in the air to unfold it. Confetti rains down and spreads all over the table and floor.

Damon growls. “Brody Bragg, you are a dead man.”

“Yeah!” Skye yells as she twirls around in the pieces of confetti floating in the air.

“I’ll get the broom.” Brody nabs a broom from behind him.

“No!” Miller yells.

Damon doesn’t bother shouting this time. He rushes across the room and tackles Brody to the floor. When they fall, Brody drops the broom and flour spills out.

“I want to play, too, Daddy.”

I hurry after Skye but she’s faster than me. She kneels down and sticks her hands in the flour before throwing it in the air. “Whee!”

Damon and Brody wrestle on the floor as Skye twirls around in the flour cloud she created. I cover my mouth but there’s no hiding my laugh.

This family is crazy. And they appear to accept me. I couldn’t ask for anything more. Maybe I get to have a happily ever after, after all.

Chapter 32

*I will get you back, Damon. This means war.
~ Message from Riley to the Bragg brothers*



Love Hill

“It’s snowing!” Skye jumps off the porch into the yard. “Let’s make snow angels.”

I rush after her and manage to catch her before she can lay on the ground. “You’re not dressed for snow angel making.”

“I’m not?”

“Do you want to attend the Yule festival with wet pants?”

Her nose wrinkles. “Everyone will think I peed my pants.”

“Which is why we’re not making snow angels.”

She huffs. “Okay.”

“Come on,” Damon calls from the sidewalk. “I thought you wanted to watch the parade.”

“Parade!” Skye rushes to him. He snatches her hand before she runs into the street. We don’t have many cars in the streets of Winter Falls, but it’s still good to be careful.

“Did you bring the presents?” I ask Damon as I join them.

He holds up the bag. “I did, but I don’t understand why.”

I don't explain since I want it to be a surprise for Skye. "You'll see."

I take Skye's free hand and we walk toward town like any other family. Except we're not a family. Not really. Or is it, not yet?

Damon glances over at me and smiles. The happiness in his warm brown eyes has hope filling me until I'm ready to burst. I want this to be real more than anything else in life.

"Wow. I didn't realize there'd be this many people," he says when we reach Main Street.

The street is crowded with Winter Falls' residents and guests alike. The stores have booths set up on the sidewalks to sell their wares. There are also games and crafts such as wreathmaking to entertain the visitors. With the snow falling lightly from the sky and the fairy lights illuminating the scene, it feels magical.

"Yule is Winter Falls' biggest event of the year."

"It's Christmas!"

Before I have a chance to correct Skye, Sage steps in front of us. The rest of the gossip gals are behind her. Uh oh.

"Love Hill and Damon Bragg."

I bite my tongue. Literally. I can taste blood. I don't want to get on the bad side of the gossip gals, but they haven't exactly supported me in the past. Yet, now they're all up in my business. What's changed?

You have.

I'm trying. I really am.

Petal claps. "This is my favorite project."

I frown. I don't understand how our relationship is one of their 'projects'. There certainly hasn't been any of their usual scheming. Thank goodness.

"If this is your favorite project, why didn't you make them any candles?" Clove asks.

"We don't need any candles," I'm quick to say.

Especially not Petal's candles. She makes her own sex candles. Hot wax will not be touching my skin. No thanks. Damon's touch is scorching enough without actual fire.

I glance over at him from beneath my lashes. Yep. He's just as handsome as he was this morning when he snuck into my bedroom before Skye woke and kissed me senseless.

I was ready to strip him bare and lick every inch of his body – multiple times – but we need to be careful with Skye around. She'd be in therapy for years if she witnessed the things I want to do to Damon.

My body heats at the ideas flying through my head. Damon raises an eyebrow. Darn. My face must be flushed and telegraphing every idea in my mind straight to him.

I ignore him and tell the gossip gals, "We're on our way to the gazebo."

Cayenne grins. "How exciting! Skye's first Yule."

"I can't wait to see what she'll pick," Clove says.

"We'll see you later," I say in an attempt to shake them off, but I know it's useless. They'll follow behind us as we make our way through the crowds. Unless I can distract them.

"Oh no." I point to Moon and Riley standing outside of Moon's Diner. "Are they fighting?"

"Gossip gals, head out," Sage orders and they rush off to the diner.

"You're cruel," Damon says but there's a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes.

We continue down Main Street until we reach the town square.

"Nanny Love, why are there presents on the ground?"

I kneel in front of Skye. "What if I said you can pick one of those presents?"

Her eyes widen. "I can?"

"Yep." I nod. "Just as soon as you help me and your daddy hide the presents we bought."

“Daddy! Daddy!” Skye jumps up and down and pulls on Damon’s sleeve. “Give me the presents. We need to hide them.”

“This is why we brought presents?” Damon asks.

“Yep. Isn’t it wonderful?” I sigh. “My dad always brought me here on Yule. He let me pick two presents. One for me. And one for him. But the one for him was really for me. He was the best dad.”

Damon wraps an arm around my shoulder and tugs me near. “I’m sorry you lost him.”

“It’s been years. I should be over it.”

“Who says?”

“Everyone.”

“Screw everyone.”

I grimace. “Tried that. Didn’t work out well for me.”

He scowls. “Stop it. You didn’t screw everyone and we both know it.”

“Everyone else thinks I did.”

“Screw them.”

“There’s an awful lot of screwing going on in your life for being a professional assassin.”

He chuckles. “You’re crazy.”

“I’m from Winter Falls. It’s kind of a requirement.”

Skye jumps up and down in front of me. “Nanny Love, can I pick my present now?”

“You need to hide the presents we brought first.”

She rolls her eyes. “I already did.” She points to the three packages laying under the bench in the gazebo. “See?”

“I guess it’s time to pick out your own present then.”

“I can?”

Damon pulls on the pompom on top of her winter hat. “Of course, you can, squirt.”

Skye makes a beeline for the biggest package on the town square.

“How do we know the present is kid-friendly?” Damon asks.

“All presents are kid-friendly. But presents meant specifically for children are wrapped in green paper.”

“Now I understand why you threw a fit when I wanted to use the green wrapping paper.”

“I didn’t throw a fit.”

I don’t throw fits anymore. I am no longer a drama queen. I’ve officially retired my crown. The press release has been sent.

“You tackled me to the ground and smacked me over the head with the roll of wrapping paper until it was ruined.”

I snort. “You think what I did was a fit?” I shake my head. “So naïve. And utterly unprepared for having a teenage daughter who dates.”

He glares at me. “You’re cruel.”

“But I didn’t throw a fit.”

Skye returns dragging a huge box with her. “Can I open it? Can I?”

Damon smiles at her. The love for his daughter is clear in his eyes. My dad may have been the best dad ever but Damon is a close second.

“Go ahead, squirt. Let’s see what you got.”

I kneel down and help her rip the wrapping paper off the gift. This is Winter Falls. We usually try to recycle wrapping paper. But there’s no way I’m stopping this precious girl from enjoying tearing wrapping paper off of her gift.

“It’s a water gun!” Skye giggles in delight while Damon groans.

“It’s too cold for a water fight now,” Damon says as he places the toy in the bag he’s carrying.

Skye sticks out her bottom lip. “You’re no fun.”

“And I’m cold.”

I wink at Skye. “Your daddy is a big wuss about the cold weather.” She giggles as she places her hand in mine. “Shall we get some hot chocolate to warm him up?”

“Yes!” She skips and I hurry to keep up with her.

We make our way to the booth set up in front of *Clove’s Coffee Corner* next to the town square. We join the line behind Aspen and her husband Lyric. Their son, Sterling, is balanced on Lyric’s hip playing with the badge on the chief of police’s uniform.

Aspen glances over her shoulder but the smile on her face dies when she realizes who’s standing behind her.

I swallow. I don’t blame her for not liking me. I did come between her and Lyric’s happiness after all. I inch backwards but Damon places his hand on my lower back to stop me. Dang. I guess this is one of those times I need to be the new and improved brave Love Hill.

“Hello, Aspen. Are you having a good time?”

She frowns at me. “I was.”

The implication is clear. Her good time was ruined when I showed up.

“We’ll just...”

“Uncle Riley!” Skye shouts and yanks her hand from mine before running toward Damon’s brother. I use the excuse to flee.

I make it two steps before Damon shackles my wrist and pulls me into the alley next to the courthouse. He presses me against the wall and frames my face with his hands.

“Are you okay?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He scowls. “Because Aspen was incredibly rude to you.”

“She has every right to be rude to me.”

“No, she doesn’t,” he growls. “What happened is in the past. She needs to get over it already. And her husband should have said something.”

“What are you going to do? Sic one of your drones on the chief of police of Winter Falls?”

I’m joking but Damon’s not. “Maybe I will.”

I blow out a breath and squeeze his wrists. “It’s okay. I deserve it.”

“You do not deserve it. You deserve to be treated like the angel you are.”

Oh my. Butterflies explode in my stomach. This is why I love this man. He thinks the best of me despite knowing my past. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him and Skye as a family.

Chapter 33

*This is my least favorite part. ~ Message
from Petal to the Gossip Gals*



Damon

Love sticks her head into my office. “Are you busy?”

“Never too busy for you, Angel.”

She rolls her eyes. “Corny.”

More like horny. We haven’t had sex since the night of my mom’s wedding and I’m about to burst. Love’s afraid Skye will walk in on us getting down and dirty. No matter how many times I’ve explained how locks work, she won’t give in.

She wants to take things slow. And I respect her decision. I respect her. My balls on the other hand... they don’t understand what the problem is.

“Come in.”

As soon as she’s close, I capture her wrist and yank until she lands on my lap.

“What are you doing?” Her words sound indignant but her eyes sparkle with joy.

“Getting you right where I want you.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Right where you want me?”

“Yep.” I lift my hips so she can feel how hard I am.

Her cheeks darken. “Damon, it’s eleven o’clock in the morning.”

I don't understand what the problem is. "And?"

"And you should be working."

I brush her hair away from her face. "I'm due for a break."

She frowns. "I'm not."

"What's wrong?" Skye's at school this morning. She should have time to fool around.

"The contractor called. He has an opening in his schedule and can stop by to have a look at the roof to make an estimate."

I help her to her feet. "You better get going."

She hesitates. "I don't know how long I'll be. Can you pick Skye up from school?"

I kiss her nose. "Of course."

Her smile lights up her face. I want to draw her near and kiss those pouty pink lips until she's breathless, but I don't want to detain her. I know how important it is for her to repair the house her dad left her. I settle for a quick hard kiss. Her eyes flare with heat and I groan. Such a temptation.

I smack her ass. "Get out of here before I change my mind."

"I'm going. I'm going."

"Good luck," I call after her.

I set an alarm to remind me to pick up Skye and get back to work.

I huddle into my jacket as I walk the three blocks to the Winter Falls' school to pick my daughter up. Love wasn't kidding when she said I'm a wuss when it comes to the cold. In my defense, it's freezing out here.

I make it to the school as the bell is ringing. Not a minute later my girl comes running out of the building, her blonde hair flying behind her.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

I pick her up and twirl her around. “Surprise!”

“Can I go on a playdate?” she asks once I set her down.

“With whom?”

She points to a little girl waiting behind her. “Meadow!”

I frown. Meadow is the little girl she fought with. And now she wants to go on a playdate with her?

A woman beside me clears her throat. “I’m Mrs. Evans, Meadow’s mother. We’d love to have Skye over. She’s welcome in our home anytime, Mr. Bragg.”

I study her. She appears genuine. “Okay.”

Skye and Meadow shout and jump up and down.

“But I need your contact details and Skye needs to be home by dinner.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Evans gives me her address and phone number before corralling the children toward her car. I wave to Skye as she skips away hand-in-hand with her friend.

I start to walk home, but then decide this is the perfect opportunity to stop by Love’s house. After all, it’s past eleven now.

I whistle as I climb the stairs to her porch. The door is open. I call Love’s name but when she doesn’t answer, I go inside to search for her.

I frown at the state of her living room. I don’t remember it appearing this dilapidated when I was here before.

“Love?” I shout as I climb the stairs to the second floor.

I notice the buckets full of water in the hallway and scowl. Love wasn’t kidding when she said she needed a new roof. I peek into the rooms as I pass, but there’s no sign of Love or her contractor.

I hear voices at the end of the hallway and head toward them. When I enter the room, the smile on my face dies

at the scene in front of me.

What the hell? The contractor has his tongue buried in Love's mouth.

Fury blasts through me. I can't believe I got taken in by her sob story. It was all a pack of lies. No wonder she didn't want to tell my family the truth about her past.

I stomp out of the room, down the hallway, and out of the house.

My heart pounds as I walk home. Good thing Skye isn't there. I don't want her to see me this way. With pent up anger coursing through my body.

I yank my phone from my pocket and message Love.

We're through.

I stare at the phone as I wait for a response. Fifteen minutes pass before those telltale dots appear. Fifteen minutes during which she was probably scrambling to put her clothes back on.

Okay.

Okay? What the fuck? Okay? I break up with the woman I love and her only response is okay. No, not the woman I love. The woman I thought I loved doesn't exist. Because everything Love said was a fucking lie. No wonder she's an outcast in this town.

And to think, I defended her. I was ready to fight the chief of police for her. I can really pick 'em. Skye's mom and now Love. I'm better off alone.

And you're fired.

I don't wait for her reply. I throw the phone on the couch and go in search of the bottle of whisky.

Chapter 34

*Damn. I think I was wrong about Love Hill. ~
Message from Aspen on the Winter Falls
Facebook page*



Love Hill

My mouth drops open. “Twenty thousand dollars for a new roof?”

I knew a new roof would be expensive but twenty thousand dollars is more than I’ve earned in my entire life. I hope I misunderstood.

The contractor, Murray, nods. “At least.”

Crap. No misunderstanding then. I gulp. “Can you make some repairs to keep the roof together until I can afford the complete new roof?”

He smirks. “Maybe we can make an alternate arrangement.”

Alarm bells begin to ring. The way he’s leering at me is creeping me out. “Like a payment plan?”

He shrugs as he begins stalking toward me. “Call it what you will.”

I hold up a hand to stop him. When he doesn’t, I retreat. But there’s nowhere to go. I bump into the wall. I eye the door but he’s blocking my exit.

“You should go,” I tell him. My voice is shaky, so I try again. “You should go.”

“Why? I’m right where I want to be.”

“You’re not where I want you to be.”

“Don’t lie, darling.”

He palms my neck and his head descends toward mine. I try to twist away but he uses his hold on my neck to keep me where he wants me. His lips crash into mine. They’re hard and mean and not what I want.

Memories of ninth grade and Mr. Simon rush to the forefront of my mind. As does anger at the fallout from what happened.

Who the hell does Murray think I am? He can’t kiss me because he wants to. I get a choice too. I’m tired of men stealing my choices. I gather all my courage and push him away.

“Get off of me, asshole.”

He stumbles and I use the opportunity to run out of the room. I don’t stop running until I’m at the police station.

I whip the door open and slam into Lyric. He steps away but grasps my arms to steady me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I-I want to report a sexual assault,” I spit out and then promptly burst into tears.

He wraps an arm around my shoulders and leads me into his office. “Sit here,” he orders before shoving a bunch of tissues into my hands.

I inhale deep breaths through my nose to stop the tears. It doesn’t work. The tears continue to stream down my face.

“I-I-I’m sorry,” I stutter.

Lyric sits in the chair next to me. “There’s no need to apologize.”

“Okay. I’m not sorry.”

He smiles at my lame attempt at a joke. “Can you tell me what happened?”

At his question, I remember the asshole Murray forcing his hands on me and shoving his mouth against mine. I

shiver.

“It was awful,” I wail. “It was just like ninth grade all over again.”

Someone gasps behind me, but I don’t turn around. I plow forward, determined to get the story out before I lose my nerve.

“He backed me into a corner and forced himself on me. I managed to shove him away and ran here.”

“Who’s he?” Lyric asks.

“Murray, my contractor.”

“He was at your house with you?”

I nod. “I left him there and ran here.”

He stands. “Stay here.”

I nod. I’m not going anywhere. He squeezes my shoulder as he passes me. “Go in there and comfort her. I’m going to send Peace after the contractor.”

Who’s he talking to? I glance over my shoulder. Aspen. Of all the people who I want to see me this way, Aspen is at the very bottom of the list. She’s only on the list because she’s a native of Winter Falls and lives here.

“Here.” She holds out tissues toward me.

“Um, thanks.”

“Let me.” She scrubs the skin underneath my eyes. “There. No more raccoon eyes.”

Silence falls. But the last thing I want is to sit in silence. The thoughts rattling around in my brain won’t be drowned out by silence.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt.

Her nose scrunches. “Sorry for what?”

“For trying to steal Lyric from you. It was wrong. I shouldn’t have done it.” I stare at my hands as I wring them in my lap. “But it’s Lyric. He treated you with respect. I’ve never had a man treat me with respect.”

I laugh but there's no humor. "Except my daddy. He was the best."

I clear my throat. I can't be thinking about my dad today. "Anyway, I'm sorry."

She pats my hand. "It's okay. I'd want to steal Lyric, too, if he wasn't mine."

My phone beeps and I pull it out. A text from Damon. Relief courses through me. Damon will come. He'll help. He'll support me so I'm not alone. Except when I read the text, it's not a message asking how I am or where I am. No, it's the message I've been dreading.

We're through.

My vision blurs as more tears form. Just when I started to believe in a happily ever after for us. My hands shake as I type in my response.

Okay.

"It's just like ninth grade," I mutter.

"What do you mean?" Aspen asks and I jump. I forgot about her.

I sigh. "I don't want to talk about it."

I already know she doesn't believe me. We were in the same grade at school after all. She knows what happened. She was there.

"Did Mr. Simon force himself on you?"

Now she's asking? It's nearly twenty years too late.

"No," I snarl. "I jumped him to get a better grade. Don't you remember?"

She cocks her head and studies me for a few beats before sighing. "I'm starting to think I was wrong."

Lyric strides into the office before I can figure out how to respond. He leans against his desk in front of me.

"We went to your house but your contractor was gone. Peace made sure no one was in the house and locked up. He found these." He hands me my purse and keys.

“Do you want to file a complaint?”

I open my mouth to respond but Aspen gets there before I can. “Of course, she’s filing a complaint.” She reaches over and grasps my hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll be here with you the entire time.”

“Um...”

My phone beeps with another message from Damon.

And you’re fired.

Aspen snatches my phone from me. “We’ll deal with this bullshit later.”

Bullshit? Did she read the message? Does she know I’m now jobless and my boyfriend dumped me?

“It’s not bullshit,” I whisper.

“Damon Bragg is an idiot if he doesn’t want you.”

There’s my answer as to whether she read the earlier messages. My face warms.

She points a finger at me. “Don’t you dare get embarrassed. *You* are not allowed to be embarrassed. The asshole contractor who thinks he can put his hands on you without your permission should be embarrassed.” She raises her eyebrows. “As should Mr. Simon?”

I open my mouth to tell her to forget about Mr. Simon, but I snap it closed again. She shouldn’t forget about Mr. Simon. No one should. What he did was wrong and he should be held accountable.

I nod. “Yes, he should.”

I spend the next hours answering questions from Lyric and telling him what Murray did over and over again. Until I feel like a parrot.

“Okay,” he finally says. “We have what we need.”

“What happens now?”

“Since Murray doesn’t live in town, we’ll contact the prosecutor’s office in White Bridge. The prosecutor’s office has the discretion to decide whether or not to pursue the case.”

“And if the case is pursued?”

Lyric snaps his notebook shut. “They’ll be a trial.”

My hands shake and my stomach dips to the floor. A trial? I’d have to tell everyone what happened in a courtroom? Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I shouldn’t file the complaint. Maybe I should forget all about it.

“No,” Aspen growls.

“What?”

“You aren’t going to withdraw your complaint.”

“But a trial? He only kissed me. He didn’t... you know...”

“Did you want him to kiss you?”

I rear back. “No!”

“Then, what he did was a crime. And he should be punished for it.”

I gulp. “But...”

“What if he does this to other women? You ran away. What if there are other women out there who couldn’t get away?”

The idea that asshole Murray could hurt another woman – could assault another woman in a much worse way than what happened with me – has my body tensing. I’m no longer afraid. I’m angry. Why do men think they can do whatever they want without repercussion?

“Okay.” I nod. “I’ll do it.”

“You won’t be alone. I’ll be with you,” Aspen vows. “Every step of the way.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

She frowns. “You don’t need to thank me. In fact, I should probably apologize to you for being a bitch.”

Lyric growls. “You’re not a bitch.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ignore him. A man in love is not a good judge of character.”

A man in love? I wish I knew how it feels to have a man who loves me. I thought maybe Damon could be the one. But I was wrong. He dumped me without a second thought.

“Come on.” Aspen stands. “I’ll escort you home.”

“I—”

“I wasn’t asking.”

I may not know how it feels to have a man who loves me, but I have a woman who’s willing to fight in my corner for me. It’s a new experience, but it feels pretty fantastic.

“Okay.”

Chapter 35

*It's truth or punch time. Finally. ~ Message
from Miller to the Bragg brothers*



Damon

I'm laying on the couch with a whisky bottle in my hand when my front door opens.

"Skye, are you home?"

I stagger to my feet. Shit. How much have I had to drink?

"He's a mess."

"Good thing Mom has Skye."

I narrow my eyes until my twin brothers Riley and Brody come into focus. "Why is Skye with Mom?"

"Duh."

"Because you're a mess."

Since they're not wrong, I glare at them. "What are you two doing here?"

"I'm here, too." Elder slams a bottle of vodka on the coffee table. "It's truth or punch time."

Truth or punch? Nope. No way. I'm not drinking shots all night. And there's no fucking way I'll allow my brothers to punch me if I don't tell them the truth when they ask their stupid questions. The truth is none of their business.

"No." I shake my head. "I'm not playing some childish game."

He cocks an eyebrow. “Are you going to tell us what crawled up your ass?”

“Nothing crawled up my ass.”

Miller stands next to his twin and crosses his arms over his chest and grunts, “No?”

Oh goodie. The gang’s all here. “I’m surprised you didn’t rope Peace into joining you.”

Elder looks at Miller and raises an eyebrow. Miller shrugs in response. They’re doing their secret twin communication thing, but I’m not going to ask them about it. For once, I don’t care. All I want is for them to go away.

I collapse on the sofa and rub a hand over my face. I don’t want my brothers here to watch my humiliation. I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been. I’m the oldest. I’m supposed to know better than to be fooled by a woman.

“It’s time,” Brody sings as he sets several shot glasses down on the coffee table in front of me.

Elder opens the bottle and fills the glasses. He offers one to me. I ignore him.

“I can stand here all day.”

“What about Harmony and Robin?” He hates being away from his baby girl and wife.

He frowns. “They’re busy.”

I open my mouth but Riley cuts me off, “All of the women are busy before you ask.”

“And you decided to come bother me?”

Brody chuckles. “Yeah, sure. Let’s pretend that’s why we’re here.”

Riley elbows him. “We’re not pretending. We’re here because he’s a mess.”

Would they stop saying I’m a mess? I know I am, but how did they know? I’ve been sitting in my home minding my own business while enjoying some quality time with a whisky bottle. How the hell did they figure out I’m torn apart inside?

I haven't spoken to anyone since I got home. With one exception. I messaged Love.

"I get it. Love told you."

"What was she supposed to tell us?" Elder asks.

I wave a hand. "You know."

Miller grunts. "Are we going to do this or what?"

Elder shoves the shot glass at me. I grab it before it can drop to the floor. I have a five-year-old. I can't have glass shards all over the floor.

"Truth or punch!" Brody shouts before downing his shot. "Ugh. Vodka. Why can't we use tequila?"

No one bothers to answer him. Everyone in town knows better than to let Brody drink tequila.

I swallow the vodka. I've barely set my glass down on the table before Elder fills it again. As if I need any more alcohol in my body.

"Is there any way I can pay you to get out of this?"

Brody snorts. "I've seen your portfolio. I think not."

I scowl. "I liked it better when I thought you were a poor videogame-obsessed kid."

"Don't be jealous just because I'm living with the woman I love and she's having my baby."

"I don't have a woman I love," I grumble.

Elder slides the shot glass toward me. "Time to start."

I glare at him as I pick up the glass and down the shot.

"Do you love Love Hill?" he asks.

I snort. "I don't know who Love Hill is."

Miller rubs his hands together. "He didn't answer the question. I get to punch him."

"You're not punching me. I answered the question."

"Nope." Riley shakes his head. "You avoided answering the question. And, if I recall correctly..."

“You do recall correctly.” Brody doesn’t hesitate to back up his twin. Those two always stick together.

“Avoiding the question is equal to not answering,” Elder says.

Miller cracks his knuckles. “Which means it’s punch time.”

Great. It appears both sets of Bragg twins are ganging up on me today.

I growl. “You’re not fucking punching me.”

Elder crosses his arms and glares down at me. “Then, answer the fucking question. Do you love Love Hill?”

“I don’t know Love Hill. Therefore, I can’t love her.”

“He’s lying.” Miller stalks closer. “A lie means I still get to punch him.”

“Why do all of my brothers suddenly care about my feelings for Love Hill? It’s not as if you like her.”

Miller grins. “Do I get to punch him every time he avoids a question?”

“You’re not punching me!”

He leans close and gets in my face. “Tell us the truth or I *will* punch you.”

“I thought I loved her.” I throw my hands in the air. “Okay. There. Are you satisfied?”

“And why don’t you think you love her anymore?”

“Because she’s a lying, manipulative bitch,” I snarl.

Elder hands me another shot glass. I don’t bother fighting him about it this time.

“My turn,” Miller declares. “Why do you think she’s a lying, manipulative bitch?”

“I don’t think it. I know it.” He cocks his brow. “I saw her, okay?”

Elder places another shot glass in my hand.

Riley nudges the shot glass. “Saw her what?”

I hang my head. “Saw her kissing some other guy.”

“What guy?” Brody asks.

“Some guy at her house. I didn’t stop to ask his name.”

“Raise your hand if you think the guy Damon is referring to is the same guy Love is at the police station reporting for assaulting her?” Riley asks and everyone raises their hand.

“Assault? What are you talking about? I saw them. They were kissing.”

“No,” Miller growls. “You saw *him* kissing *her*. Without her permission.”

“Shit.” I surge to my feet. I have to grasp the back of the sofa to stop myself from keeling over. “Why didn’t you tell me this right away?”

“Because you would have gone off half-cocked,” Brody says.

“Now you’re too drunk to cock,” Riley adds.

“Why do you think Peace isn’t here?” Elder asks. “He’s trying to catch the guy.”

What? I’m having a hard time following this discussion. “He’s trying to catch the guy? The police are after him?”

“Damn straight they are. If a man forces himself on a woman, the police should be involved. Although,” Miller’s grin is downright scary, “I wish she would have come to us first. I wouldn’t mind punching the asshole in the face.”

“I need to get to Love.” I try weaving my way through my brothers but they form a circle around me.

Miller pushes me back onto the couch. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“But Love’s alone and scared and I just abandoned her.” I should be with her. I should be holding her.

“She’s not alone,” Riley claims.

“How do you know?”

He sighs. “He’s really not getting this whole small town thing.”

Brody shrugs. “He’ll figure it out. Eventually.”

“Big brother’s not the smartest guy in the room.” Elder smiles. “This is fun.”

“Fun!” I explode. “What the hell is fun about my woman being assaulted?”

“Your woman?” Brody cocks a brow. “I thought you dumped her via text?”

“Dude. Beginner mistake. Good thing I’m here to help you with your game.” Riley winks.

“This is not a fucking game. Let me out of here.” I shove Riley but he doesn’t budge.

“Who wants to tell him?” he asks.

“Now what?”

Miller squeezes my shoulder. “Love doesn’t want to see you now.”

“How do you know? Did you ask her? This is bullshit.”

His fingers press into my skin until I still. “It doesn’t take a genius like boy wonder Brody over there to know Love is going to lose her mind when she realizes you broke up with her because you thought you saw her kissing another man when she was actually being assaulted.”

I drop my chin to my chest. Fuck. I shouldn’t have run out on her. I should have protected her. I let the woman I love be assaulted because my pride was hurt. What kind of asshole am I?

“I’ve lost her.”

“You haven’t lost her, but you can’t go rushing after her now without a plan.”

A plan? I can make a plan. I can show Love how much I love her. How much I need her. How sorry I am.

“Any ideas?”

Chapter 36

*Don't forget the wine this time. ~ Message
from Moon to Eden*



Love Hill

“Thanks for walking me home,” I tell Aspen when we reach my house.

I bite my lip as I stare at my home. I don't want to go inside. This place used to be my sanctuary, assuming step-witch Priscilla wasn't home. But now the roof is falling apart and some guy—

I cut those thoughts off. I don't want to think about Murray. He's taken up more than enough space in my head today.

“We're here.”

I whirl around to find Moon, Eden, Harmony, and Soleil bustling toward me.

“Why are you here?”

“We're your cheerleader squad.” Moon lifts a basket. “I brought snacks.”

Eden holds up two bottles of wine. “I brought the booze.”

Harmony waves the bag she's carrying. “I brought some movies.”

Soleil rubs her pregnant belly. “And I'm here to make sure everyone behaves.”

Moon rolls her eyes. “When have I ever not behaved?”

Eden giggles. “How about every single second of your adult life?”

“Don’t forget about my earlier escapades.” Moon winks.

I’m more confused than ever. “I still don’t understand why you’re here.”

“I called them,” Aspen says. “You’re welcome.” She waves before jogging down the stairs to the sidewalk.

“Aspen called you. You know about—”

“How Damon dumped you via text?” Harmony scowls. “We know.”

“But we don’t know anything else,” Moon claims. “Nothing at all about why you were at the police station.”

She’s clearly lying, but what does it matter? I shrug before opening the front door and walking into my house. It’s not so scary with four women accompanying me.

I don’t make it two steps inside before Harmony steers me toward the couch in the living room.

“Just relax. We’ll take care of everything.”

“Ha!” Moon shouts from the kitchen where she’s digging around in my drawers. “She means I’ll take care of everything.”

Soleil rubs her belly as she joins me on the couch. “I can’t do anything. I’m pregnant.”

I stare at her hand on her belly and tears well in my eyes. She has everything I’ve ever wanted. A child on the way. A man who loves her.

I will never have those things. I had them – a man I love and a precious girl I wish was my child – but I lost them.

Soleil snaps her fingers. “Tissues. I need tissues.”

I swipe at the tears now coursing down my face. “Why do you need tissues? Are you sick?”

She giggles as Harmony slaps a box of tissues in her hands. “May I?”

She doesn’t wait for my response before she begins wiping the tears from my face. “You can cry as much as you want to.”

Eden hands me a glass of wine. “Personally, I’d be ranting my ass off. How dare Damon break up with you by text? What an asshole.”

Harmony shakes her head. “I can’t believe he didn’t stop that pig contractor from assaulting you.”

So much for not knowing why I was at the police station.

“You know about Murray?” They nod and I begin to furiously explain. “It’s not my fault. I didn’t do anything wrong. I swear. Please believe me. I can’t handle it if everyone doesn’t believe me. It’ll be just like ninth grade. I-I-I...”

Soleil grasps my hand. “Take a deep breath.”

I hold her gaze as I gasp for air.

“Inhale through your nose.” She smiles when I follow her instructions. “Good. Now exhale through your mouth.”

I blow out a breath.

“There you go.”

I cling to her hand. “Please tell me you believe me. I promise I didn’t come onto the contractor. I would never. I love Damon. I’m not a cheater.”

“I believe you,” Moon says as she sets a charcuterie board on the table in front of the couch. She searches for somewhere to sit but shrugs when she notices there isn’t anywhere besides the couch and sits on the floor next to Eden.

I study the room. It’s pretty bare bones. I should probably buy more furniture since I’ll be living here full-time again. But first a new roof. Or, rather, a new contractor to fix the roof.

Eden raises her hand. “I believe you, too.”

“Me three,” Harmony says.

“And I believe you, as well,” Soleil adds.

The tension in my shoulders releases and I let out a breath of relief. “Thank you.”

“We also believe you about the ninth-grade incident,” Moon says.

“What?” My chest tightens. “But at Thanksgiving—”

She waves a hand in dismissal. “I was a bitch.” She glances around the room. “We all were.”

Soleil’s cheeks darken. “I’m sorry. I should have listened to your explanation and not believed the rumors in town.”

“You were away at college.”

She frowns. “Still. I should have supported you. It’s what we do in Winter Falls.”

I drop my chin to my chest. It might be what the people of Winter Falls do, but I never got the memo. No one’s supported me since my dad died.

“I didn’t live in Winter Falls then,” Harmony begins, “but I’m appalled with how the people of town have treated you.”

“Even if you were getting jiggy with Mr. Simon.”

My growl cuts Moon off.

“I said ‘even if’. It means I believe you.”

Oops. I might have growled too quickly. I wave for her to continue.

“Even if you were getting jiggy with Mr. Simon, you were fourteen years old. He was obviously taking advantage of you. The town should have stood behind you.”

I feel tears well in my eyes again. “It’s all in the past.”

“No, it isn’t,” Soleil declares. “If it were in the past, we wouldn’t be having this discussion now – twenty years after the fact.”

She's got a point, but I don't want to discuss Mr. Simon or Murray, the contractor. Or how the entire town didn't believe me until now. None of it matters at the moment.

The only thing I can think about is how I've lost my family – the man I love and the little girl I wish was my daughter.

“Drink your wine,” Eden suggests.

“And eat tons of food,” Moon adds.

“It's the best cure for a broken heart,” Harmony says.

“As is bashing the man who broke your heart,” Soleil says.

I shake my head. “I'm not bashing Damon. It's not his fault.”

“Not his fault? He broke up with you by text because he thought you were cheating. He didn't stop to find out what was happening. He jumped to conclusions. Asshole,” Eden snarls.

“Damon broke up with me because he thought I cheated?”

I hear glass break and realize the glass I was holding is now laying shattered on the floor. I start to stand but Moon stops me.

“I'm on clean up duty today.”

Eden cringes. “I'm sorry. I thought you knew. I'm a bitch.”

Harmony pats her shoulder. “You're not a bitch. A big mouth maybe, but not a bitch.”

“I stand corrected. I'm a big mouth bitch.”

I'm not following the conversation. I'm stuck on Damon walking into my house, seeing Murray attack me, and thinking I'm cheating.

“He never believed me,” I whisper.

“Never believed what?” Soleil asks.

“He never believed I’m not the slut the entire town thinks I am. He doesn’t think I’m trying to be a better person. He never loved me the way I love him. I’m so stupid.”

“No. No. No. You aren’t stupid. Don’t say you’re stupid,” Soleil pleads.

“Why not? I’m obviously an idiot thinking a man like Damon Bragg could ever love me, Love Hill, man-eater of Winter Falls.”

“Crap. I need to apologize,” Moon mutters.

Soleil nods. “We all do.”

I wave away their apologies. I don’t need their apologies. “It’s fine. I was the town bitch. I made it seem as if I was sleeping with every man in town. It’s my own fault.”

“Enough!” Eden points at me. “Enough already. I’ve gotten to know you over the past month and I’m ashamed to admit I was wrong about you. You aren’t the man-eating whore everyone makes you out to be.”

Harmony nods in agreement. “Damon Bragg is an idiot for dumping you.”

“Let’s prank him,” Moon suggests.

Soleil wags her finger at Moon. “No! No pranking.”

“What kind of prank?” I ask. I’ve never done a prank in my life. Obviously, an oversight on my part.

“Now, you’ve done it,” Soleil mutters. “If Moon does a prank, Brody will think he has to better it.”

“But Moon isn’t doing the prank, I am. Moon is my prank sensei.”

As Moon and Soleil debate the pros and cons of beginning a prank war in Winter Falls, I glance around the room. I never thought I’d have a group of girlfriends to have my back, but here they are. They aren’t choosing Damon’s side because he’s their brother-in-law. They’re here for me.

I may have lost the family I thought I was building with the man I love and his daughter, but I think I gained a

different family. A family of friends. A community in Winter Falls.

I will always love Damon and my heart will yearn for him for the rest of my life, but I won't be alone.

Chapter 37

*Locked doesn't mean blocked. ~ Message
from Moon on the Winter Falls Facebook
page*



Love Hill

Someone bangs on the door and I groan. There's another bang and I cover my head with the blankets. It's Christmas Day. There's no reason for anyone to bang on my door. Not when I'll be spending the day alone.

I thought this Christmas would be different. I thought I'd have a family this year. I thought wrong.

Instead, I'm going to hide in my bedroom and watch spy thrillers while eating the food leftover from the charcuterie board Moon brought over the other night. And hope my roof doesn't collapse on me in the meantime.

I hear the window screech open and scream. "HELP!"

The covers are ripped off of me. "What are you screaming for?"

At the sound of Moon's voice, I open my eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"You wouldn't answer the door so..." She shrugs.

"So, you decided to break in?"

"It's not breaking in if the window wasn't locked."

"The window was locked."

"Oops."

“Are you always this crazy?”

“Yes, she is,” Harmony answers from the doorway.

“How did you get in?”

“Your backdoor was unlocked.”

I shake my head. “No, it wasn’t.”

I live alone. I know I made sure all the doors and windows were locked before I went to bed. This may be Winter Falls where random crime is pretty much non-existent, but I wasn’t feeling very safe after the whole Murray incident.

Eden walks into the room. “Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

“Is the entire town in my house?”

“Nope. Just us,” Soleil says as she joins us.

“Good to know. Now, please leave. I’m sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” Moon snorts. “More like having a pity party.”

“I’m allowed to have a pity party. It’s Christmas Day and I have no family to spend it with.”

Eden rolls her eyes. “Exaggerate much?”

“What are we? Chopped liver?” Harmony asks.

Soleil groans. “Don’t mention liver. The idea...” She feigns gagging.

“Talking time is over.” Moon shackles my wrist and pulls until I’m forced to sit up or fight her. Since she’s the queen of revenge pranks, I sit up. I don’t want to come home to discover a fishy smell in my house that I can’t get rid of.

“Why are you here? What’s happening?”

“Christmas brunch!”

My stomach rumbles in response to Moon’s announcement, but I’m not ready to stop fighting them.

“I’m not going to Christmas bunch with you. The Bragg brothers will be there and the last person in the world I want to see today is Damon the jerk Bragg.”

“I thought we settled on Damon the heartbreaker Bragg.”

“Personally, I preferred Damon the idiot.”

“Or Damon the ass.”

I hold up my palm. “If I agree with all of the name calling, will you go away?”

Soleil sits on the bed next to me and pats my hand. “You’re cute. You have no idea how tenacious we can be.”

“And here I was happy to be included in your friend group,” I grumble.

“We’ll make friendship bracelets another day. For now.” Moon claps. “Chop. Chop.”

“I’m serious. I don’t want to run into Damon today of all days.”

“You won’t,” Eden claims.

“Yep.” Harmony nods. “The Bragg brothers are not invited to Christmas brunch.”

“Because they’re busy with other things.”

My eyes narrow on Moon. “Busy with what?”

“Never you mind. Butt out of bed and into the shower. Now. We have a reservation to make.”

“Reservation?” And here I thought I was starting to understand the current situation.

“At *Clove’s Coffee Corner*. She puts out a spread on Christmas morning for the residents of Winter Falls who have nowhere else to go.”

I frown. Why didn’t I know this? *I* have nowhere else to go.

“Have mercy on me. Baby Bragg is starving.” Soleil bats her eyelashes at me. “Will you please get dressed and go with us to Christmas brunch?”

I sigh. I can’t resist a pregnant woman.

“Fine. I’ll go, but I’m going to be grumpy the entire time.” I stand and walk to my bathroom.

“No one’s grumpy when mimosas are involved!”
Eden shouts after me.

Chapter 38

*Locked most definitely means blocked. ~
Message from Peace on the Winter Falls
Facebook page*



Damon

“Thanks for helping,” I tell my brothers as we set the Christmas tree in the corner of Love’s living room.

“No need to thank us,” Riley says.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Brody adds.

Elder chuckles. “The wonder twins are right. None of us would miss this.”

Miller grunts.

Elder rolls his eyes at his twin. “Except for the grump. But we ignore him.”

Miller grunts again.

“And Peace since he’s on duty this morning.”

“Thanks for getting your women to keep Love distracted.” I couldn’t have managed this today of all days without them helping to get Love out of the house.

“You owe me,” Riley says. “Moon is mad she’s eating at the competition today.”

“But her diner isn’t open on Christmas anyway.”

Riley snorts. “Moon and logic do not belong in the same sentence.”

Brody wraps an arm around Riley's neck and runs his knuckles over his hair. "If she were logical, she never would have given you three chances."

Riley pushes Brody away. "As if you didn't need another chance with Soleil."

Brody waggles his eyebrows. "Soleil couldn't resist me."

"Guys!" I shout. "Can we get the tree decorated? We don't have all day."

"Because someone wants to do his grand gesture on Christmas day," Elder says.

I don't deny it. Of course, I want to do my grand gesture on Christmas day. I know how lonely Love's life has been – especially on family holidays. I want to show her it doesn't have to be lonely anymore *if* she'll forgive me.

"Whatever. Let's get this done."

Three hours later, Love's living room is unrecognizable. In addition to the Christmas tree, there's a new sofa with matching chairs, coffee table and side tables, and a new rug. Plus, the entire room is decorated for the holiday.

"Moon messaged." Riley wiggles his phone. "They're on their way back. Or, at least, I assume that's what this means."

Brody leans over to read the message on Riley's phone. "Dude, your woman is smashed."

Crap. I hope Love isn't smashed. I need her sober to hear me out.

"Out the back door." I herd everyone to the back entrance.

"Good thing I set up a surveillance camera," Brody mutters.

I wrap an arm around his neck. "You better not be spying on me, baby bro."

He ducks under my hold. "I understand the sanctity of privacy."

Riley barks out a laugh. “Since when?”

Someone steps onto the front porch. I shoo my brothers away. “Get out of here before you ruin the surprise.”

I slide the door shut as quietly as possible before tiptoeing to the living room. The front door opens and closes as Love enters the house. She drops her purse before beginning to climb the stairs.

She can’t go upstairs! She’ll ruin the surprise.

“Where are you going?”

Love screams and I rush to her.

“It’s me. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

She clutches her chest. “What are you? The ghost of Christmas past?”

“I’m not a ghost.”

“Then why are you standing in my house in the dark scaring the crap out of me on Christmas Day?”

I grasp her elbow and lead her down the stairs to the living room. I hit the lights. “Tada!”

She blinks as she scans the room. “What did you do?”

“I decorated your house for Christmas.”

“Because you don’t want me in your house for Christmas!” She bursts into tears.

Crap. This isn’t going the way I expected it to. I haul her into my arms.

“I’m sorry, Angel. I wanted to do something special for you for the holidays. I didn’t mean you aren’t allowed in my house anymore.”

She pushes away from me. “You dumped me and fired me. Why would I be allowed in your house? To pick up my things? I’m surprised you haven’t boxed them up and sent them over. Wait. Maybe you have. Maybe they’re in my room.”

“This is not going the way I expected.”

She glares at me. “What did you expect? I’d take one look at the Christmas decorations and jump into your arms.”

Kind of.

“And forget all about how you walked in on me being assaulted and assumed I was cheating on you!”

Fuck me. I screwed up.

“Will you at least hear me out?”

“The same way you listened to me when you thought I cheated on you?”

Damn. She’s not supposed to know I dumped her because I saw her kissing another guy. Or thought I saw her kissing another guy. But this is Winter Falls. Of course, she knows.

“I’m an asshole.”

“You won’t hear me arguing with you.”

“In my defense, I’ve never been in love before and it scares the living crap out of me.”

She purses her lips. “You’re seriously using love as an excuse?”

I rub a hand down my face. “I suck at this.” I decide to give humor a try. Nothing else has worked. “This is the part where you say I’m not that bad.”

“I try not to lie.”

I blow out a breath. “Let’s start over, shall we?”

“I’m not going outside and walking back in and gushing over how awesome the living room is.”

I smile. “But you think it’s awesome.”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t beg for compliments. It’s not attractive.”

I step closer to her. “I don’t know. I think it’s awful sexy when you beg.”

She sniffs and sticks her nose in the air. “I do not beg.”

I run my nose along her neck. “Yeah, you do, Angel.”

The vein in her neck throbs. I want to bite it and then lick it and make it all better. My cock hardens at the image of my mouth on Love’s skin.

I force myself to retreat before I end up pushing my cock against her stomach. Using sex to get Love to forgive me is manipulative. I don’t want to manipulate her. I want her to forgive me because she accepts me and understands I made a mistake.

“My biggest regret in life is not staying in the room when I thought I saw you cheating on me.”

She frowns.

“It is, Angel. I would give away all the money I have to be able to go back in time. I didn’t protect you. I should have protected you. I was your boyfriend. What kind of boyfriend was I if I believed the worst of you without asking for an explanation?”

“I protected myself.”

I place my palm against her cheek. “And I’m damn proud of you for doing so. I just wish you hadn’t needed to.”

She gestures to the room. “I can see you regret it and wish it was different but what about the next time something happens. What if some guy flirts with me? How will you react then? How can I ever trust you again? Loving a man you don’t trust is a surefire way to cause yourself pain.”

Hope fills me. “You love me?”

She scowls. “I didn’t say I love you.”

“I’ll say it first.” I cradle her face with my palms. “I love you, Love Hill. You’re the best thing to ever happen to me. Besides Skye. I’ve loved you since the moment you fought me about my daughter. You were determined you wouldn’t break your promise to play with her and I fell head over heels. Anyone who fights for my daughter is a woman I want in my life. Forever.”

“Skye’s easy to love.”

“But I don’t only love you because you’re good with Skye. Although when your Mama Bear came out at the school, I wanted to bend you over the principal’s desk and have my wicked way with you.”

Her eyes flare. I want to fan those flames with her but I need to finish this apology first.

“I also love you because you’re you. You haven’t had it easy. In fact, you’ve had it pretty hard. But you aren’t bitter about it. Have you made some mistakes? Yes, but we all have. Witness me breaking up with the woman I can’t live without.”

“Can’t live without?”

“Angel, I haven’t slept since the day I sent you that text. According to my brothers, I’ve been pretty unbearable to be around.”

She bites her bottom lip and I clench my muscles to stop myself from pulling her lip away from her teeth.

“I don’t know. I can’t survive you not believing me again.”

I place my forehead against hers. “I promise to always listen to your side of the story. And, if I’m a complete idiot again, I give you permission to tell the gossip gals.”

Her eyes widen. “You do realize the gossip gals will tar and feather you if they get the chance.”

I smile. “I have it on good authority Winter Falls adheres to a policy of non-violence.”

“Okay, they might not tar and feather you, but they will make you walk around in the cold without the twenty layers of clothing you usually wear.”

“I do not wear twenty layers of clothing.”

“Sure, you don’t.”

I smile. “Does this mean you forgive me?”

“I love you. You decorated my house for Christmas. You had me at ‘Where are you going?’”

“But you had to torture me first?”

She rolls her eyes. “Duh.”

“I love you, too, Angel. I promise you won’t regret giving me another chance.”

She pushes up on her toes to meet my mouth. I sigh in relief when her soft pouty lips hit me. I missed this. I missed her.

I won’t screw up again. I will protect Love until the last breath leaves my body. And, afterwards, I’ll haunt anyone who dares to touch a hair on her head.

Chapter 39

Cash – a rocker whose time is up



Cash

“**S**top,” I growl. “This isn’t working.”

“No shit,” Dylan grumbles.

I glare at the rest of the band. “Anyone else want to complain about my lyrics?”

Fender, Gibson, and Jett hold up their hands. They know better than to mess with me when I’m in ‘a mood’ as they say.

“Why don’t you go for a walk?” Dylan suggests.

A walk? I don’t want to go for a fucking walk. I want to nail these lyrics and get out of Winter Falls. Coming here was a mistake. Especially since I’ve been too chicken shit to deal with the reason I insisted *Cash & the Sinners* record our latest album in this tiny town in Colorado.

Don’t get me wrong. The recording studio – bizarrely named *Bertie’s* – is top notch and many hits have been recorded here. But my reason for choosing *Bertie’s* has nothing to do with its reputation and everything to do with my past.

I rub a hand down my face. “A walk sounds nice.”

“Nice?” Dylan chuckles. “Since when do you use the word nice?”

I ignore him. Dylan enjoys pushing my buttons. Usually, I push back. I’m not in the mood to spar with him today, though.

I stand from the stool I've been sitting on for hours and stretch my back. "Anyone want to join me?"

Fender, Gibson, and Jett glance away. I guess I've been more than a bit of an asshole today. I should probably apologize. Ask me if I'm going to.

Dylan sighs as he stands. "I'll go with you. Don't want you getting into a fistfight with the locals."

I scowl. "One time. One time I got into a fight. And it wasn't my fault."

"Your fist just happened to ram itself into the reporter's face?"

"He called me a womanizer."

I know I sound crazy, but I can't stand it when anyone accuses me of being a man whore. So, sue me. I have issues. Who doesn't?

"We'll pack up," Gibson volunteers as Dylan and I make our way out of the recording booth.

"Thanks." There. I'm not a complete asshole. I thanked my band for doing their jobs. I deserve a pat on the back.

We step outside and I shiver. I'm not used to the cold of Colorado after growing up in Southern California. I stuff my hands in my pockets and turn right away from *Naked Falls Brewing*.

"You want to grab a beer?"

"Nope." I do not want to grab a beer at the brewery.

"We should take some time off," he suggests.

I frown. I don't want time off. All I do in my free time is obsess over my past. All the mistakes I've made. All the fuck-ups it's too late to fix.

"Are you sleeping?"

I ignore his question. He knows I'm not. The only time I ever slept peacefully was when she was in my arms. But I ruined that.

A girl bumps into my legs. “Are you my uncle?”

I peer down at the little blonde girl in front of me.

“Excuse me?”

Her nose wrinkles as she studies me. “You look just like my uncles. I have five.” She holds up her hand and begins counting them off. “Riley, Brody, Miller, Elder, and Peace.”

Peace? I don’t know the name Peace. The rest? Yeah, I know their names. I’ve researched them.

A woman rushes up to us. “I’m sorry. She got away from me. I hope she’s not bothering you.”

“I’m not bothering them. This is my uncle.”

The woman looks up at me and I can tell the moment she recognizes who we are. Her eyes widen and excitement sparks. To her credit, she doesn’t remark on it.

She smiles down at the little girl. “This man is not your uncle.”

“But he looks just like Uncle Riley and Uncle Brody.” The girl looks up at me. “They’re twins and they’re my uncles.”

“Sorry, kiddo. I don’t know them.” Because I’ve been too chicken-shit to confront them.

A man saunters up to us. “I hope you’re not bothering these men, Skye.”

She huffs. “Of course not, Daddy.”

He ruffles her hair before looking my way. His eyes spark with recognition. And this recognition isn’t because *Cash & the Sinners* is an internationally recognized band. No, he knows. Fuck. My time’s up.

“Let’s go, Skye. I’m sure we’ll be seeing him again.” Yep. He recognizes me all right.

I watch them saunter down the sidewalk. The father glances back one more time before yanking his phone out of his pocket. He’s probably messaging all of his brothers. All five of them. Six if you count me.

“Ah,” Dylan says once they’re out of hearing range. “It all makes sense now. I thought you were being an asshole because of Indigo.”

My teeth clench. I don’t need anyone to remind me of how I fucked up with the woman I love. “Don’t say her name.”

“But it’s not about Indigo. You’re still hung up on her, but coming to this small town in Colorado to record our latest album isn’t about her. This is all about your dad.”

There’s no sense denying it. Dylan’s known me since we formed the band in middle school. He knows I found my biological dad and his family years ago.

“Yeah.”

Chapter 40

*I don't hate surprises anymore. ~ Message
from Love to Damon*



March

Love Hill

My feet drag as I return home with Skye after an all-day school activity. I don't know whose idea it was to put a group of five to ten year olds together and run them around a field all day, but whoever it was should be burned at the stake. Too bad violence is shunned in Winter Falls.

Skye skips toward the front door. She hasn't slowed down one bit. Probably because she's been mainlining candy since eight a.m.

"I can't wait to tell Daddy I won the potato sack race."

I can't wait to tell her father he owes me for today. Big time. Several orgasms-time.

I open the door. "We're home."

The house is dark and cold. Weird. Damon is a California boy and always has the heat cranked up. Even on a mild Spring day.

"Damon!"

When there's no response, I start to worry. Did something happen to him? I whip my phone out of my pocket afraid I've missed a call, but there are no messages and no missed calls.

"Damon!"

I rush to his office and yank open the door. I enter and gasp. The entire room is empty. No furniture, no files. Hell, there's no dust in here. What is going on?

I run down the hallway toward the living room. It's the same story in here. No furniture. Nothing. Did Damon get abducted by aliens? And why did they steal his furniture? Do they need to furnish an alien planet? Do aliens use furniture?

I need to phone the police. Something's definitely wrong.

I'm dialing emergency when arms wrap around me. I scream.

"Help! Help! I'm being abducted by aliens!"

"Aliens? Since when is your boyfriend an alien?" I can feel Damon's body vibrating with humor.

I whirl around to confront him. "Where the hell have you been? And why is the entire house empty? What happened? Are you leaving? Are you leaving me?"

He grasps my hands and hauls me close. "Nope. I'm not leaving. But we are moving."

"Moving? What's wrong with Winter Falls? I thought you liked living here."

"Don't worry. You're going to love this."

Hasn't he figured it out by now? Surprises scare me. Change terrifies me.

He holds out his hand to Skye. "Come on, squirt."

We exit the house and walk toward Main Street.

"Any chance you'll let me blindfold you?" he asks.

"If I'm not letting you blindfold me in the bedroom, I think you know the answer."

Skye tugs on my hand and jumps up and down. "Pretty please."

"She knows the surprise?"

Damon removes a blindfold from his pocket. “No. But she’s a good sport.” The implication is clear. I’m not a good sport if I don’t allow him to blindfold me.

“Fine. Blindfold me. But if I trip and fall, we’re going to have problems, mister.”

He ties the blindfold around my head. “Don’t worry,” he whispers into my ear. “I would never let you get hurt. If I do, I’ll give you control of my killer drone.”

“I want the manual, too.”

“Naturally.”

He leads me along the sidewalk. Winter Falls is a small town. I should be able to figure out where we’re going, but being unable to see has me disorientated, which was the idea, I’m sure.

“Three steps,” Damon says as he helps me navigate them.

“Grandma!” Skye shouts.

Why is Damon’s mom here? What’s going on? Before I can ask any questions, a door opens and I’m pulled inside.

“You ready, Angel?”

I nod. “Get this blindfold off of me.”

“Ta-da!”

The blindfold drops. I blink my eyes a few times to adjust to the light.

My mouth gapes open when I realize I’m standing in the house I grew up in. Except it doesn’t resemble my childhood home. The walls have been painted, and the floors redone. Plus, there’s furniture everywhere. The furniture from Damon’s house in fact.

“What’s happening?”

“Our family is moving in here.”

“But we live at your house.”

He wraps his arms around me and sways me from side to side. “I know you want to live in your childhood home. The home you grew up in with your dad.”

I do. I can’t deny it. “But your house…”

“Was a rental.”

“But the roof leaks and don’t get me started on the kitchen.”

He kisses my nose before releasing me. “There’s a new roof.” He drags me forward past the living room to the kitchen. “And a new kitchen.”

My mouth drops open at the sight of the hunter-green cabinets, marble countertops, and brand-new stainless-steel appliances. I glide my hand along the marble. It’s smooth and more gorgeous than anything I could ever have imagined in here.

“Damon, what did you do?”

He wraps his arms around my middle from behind and perches his chin on my shoulder. “I made your childhood house into *our* home. Assuming you’ll let me and Skye live in here with you.”

I tap my chin as I pretend to consider the question. “I don’t know. What’s in it for me?”

“Orgasms. Lots and lots of orgasms,” he growls into my ear.

I shiver at the feel of his breath on my skin. I like this plan. I like it a whole lot.

“Ready to get started?”

One thing first. “Please tell me you made a girl’s room for Skye.”

“I updated your old childhood bedroom. I hope you don’t mind.”

My eyes itch. “I would love for her to grow up in my old bedroom.”

He grins at me. “I thought you would. I love you, Love Hill.”

“And I love you, Damon Bragg.”

“Can I come in now?” Skye shouts from the front door. She doesn’t wait for an answer before rushing inside. “Now are you my new mommy?”

I can’t speak due to the tears threatening to escape. I glance at Damon who nods in encouragement.

“If you want me to be,” I croak out.

“I do!” She throws herself at me.

I pick her up and cuddle her close. I’m never letting her go.

Damon clears his throat. “Let’s go show our daughter her new bedroom.”

At the words new bedroom, Skye scrambles out of my arms and rushes up the stairs. “I want to see!”

I sigh as I watch her. “We’re going to grow old in this house.”

“Damn straight we are.”

“Thank you, Damon. I can’t thank you enough.”

“There’s no need to thank me. But...” He waggles his eyebrows. “you can spend the rest of your life trying if you want.”

I want. I very much want. In the meantime, “Our daughter is waiting.”

A daughter I never thought I’d have. I never thought life could be this wonderful. I was wrong. Life can be more wonderful than I ever imagined. All thanks to finding the love of a good man and his daughter.



Thanks for reading! Raise your hand if you knew there was more to Love Hill than being a blood-sucking man-stealer?

Raises hand

Surprise! *Bragg's Christmas* is not the final book in the Winter Falls world. The spin-off series, *Cash & the Sinners*, continues in Winter Falls. The first story features Cash and Indigo. Scroll to the next page to read the first chapter of their story. [You can pre-order *How To Date A Rockstar* here.](#)

Can't wait to read *How To Date A Rockstar*? [Join my Ream subscription service for early access to the novel as I write it.](#)

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Thank you for reading *Bragg's Christmas*. Word-of-mouth is crucial in the cutthroat world of publishing. Seriously, it's totally cutthroat. Too bad there's no swashbuckling. That sounds like fun. Spoiler alert – I have no idea what swashbuckling is.

But seriously, it would be a huge help if you could leave a review of *Bragg's Christmas*. It doesn't have to be more than a sentence, maybe two. Just follow this [LINK](#).

An Excerpt from How to Date a Rockstar

Chapter 1

Indigo – a woman who does not suffer fools, especially when he's in her shower



Indigo

The sign welcoming me to Winter Falls comes into view and the tears I'd barely managed to wrestle under control burst from eyes once again. My hands shaking I pull to the side of the road. Grief, shame, and loss pour from me as I stare at the sign.

Why didn't I come to visit Grandma in the last five years? Yes, Mom forbade me, but I'm a grown woman. I don't have to follow mommy's rules anymore.

And why didn't Grandma tell me she was sick? It's not as if we weren't in touch. We spoke every Saturday morning while I drove to yoga class. She told me all the gossip in Winter Falls – who got caught skinny dipping at the river, who snuck off to White Bridge for a 'secret' date everyone knew about, what sexy book the book club was reading – but she never said a word about having cancer.

And now Grandma's gone and I'm here to settle her estate. Clean up the house Grandpa built for her and sell it. I

took a leave of absence from teaching since Mom still refuses to step foot in Winter Falls.

I don't know what Mom's problem is. While I was growing up, we came to Winter Falls every summer. It was magical. Swimming in the freezing river, playing softball with the other kids, sleeping in a tent in Grandma's backyard.

But then I graduated from high school, and Mom and Grandma had their big fight. Grandma never would tell me what it was about. Neither would Mom. Although, I never expected Mom to tell me a thing. The two of us have never been close since judgment is her middle name.

Meow!

I glance back at my kitty in her cage in the back seat. She bats at the bars.

“You wouldn't have to stay in the cage, Katy Purry, if you didn't try to drive all the time.”

Meow!

“I'm going already. Geez.”

Katy Purry is one demanding cat. I'm not kidding when I say she sits on my lap when I drive and tries to steer the car.

I park on the street in front of Grandma's house since she doesn't – didn't – have a driveway. Most houses here don't since cars are practically banned. Winter Falls' claim to fame is being the first carbon neutral town in the world. Which means cars with internal combustion engines are not allowed.

I stare at the Colonial house. The wraparound porch where I fell and skinned my knees. The hunter green exterior I painted when I was in high school. I had green paint in my hair for the first month of school.

And the bright red front door smack in the middle of the house. The closed front door. When I pulled up to the house in the past, Grandma's door would be open and she'd be waving at me to hurry up and get inside. Not this time.

I inhale a deep breath and force myself out of the car. I open the rear door to release Katy Purry from her cage. She

immediately jumps out and into my arms.

“You ready for this, Katy Purry?”

Meow! Meow!

Uh oh. Those are ‘I’m hungry. Feed me now, peasant!’-meows.

I scratch her neck as I walk to the front door. “I bet Grandma has some nice tuna for you.”

I’m lying. Grandma would never have canned tuna in her house. The one time I asked why she gave me a lecture about dolphins and mercury and I don’t know what. I was five. I never asked for a tuna sandwich again.

I try the door. As I suspected, it’s unlocked. People in Winter Falls don’t usually lock their doors. Not when ‘Winter Falls is the safest town in the world’.

The scent of cinnamon and apple hits me the second I enter. It smells as if Grandma has been baking her famous apple pie all afternoon. But she hasn’t. She’ll never bake her delicious pies again.

I—

Hold on. Do I hear water running? I listen closely. I do. There’s water running somewhere upstairs. So much for safest town in the world.

I clutch Katy Purry to my chest. She must sense my apprehension as she doesn’t fight me. There’s a first time for everything.

I creep up the stairs making sure to skip the third step. It’s the one that always got me in trouble when I tried to sneak out of the house during the summer. Before I learned to climb out of my window onto the tree in the backyard.

I reach the landing and pause to listen. Dang it. There is definitely water running in the bathroom.

Did Grandma leave the bath on? I nearly snort. What am I thinking? The people of Winter Falls would notice if an empty house was using water. Unnecessary water usage is a sin

in this town. Think I'm kidding? Ask me why I have a scar on my chin sometime.

Which means someone is in Grandma's house. How dare they? Who thinks they can use my Grandma's house when she hasn't been gone a week?

I march to the bathroom and yank open the door. Steam fills the air preventing me from seeing anything, but I can see an outline of a person on the other side of the shower curtain.

Someone using Grandma's shower without her permission? Not on my watch.

I haul the shower curtain open. "What do you think you're doing?"

The man whirls around. His eyes widen when he sees me. As do mine.

This can't be happening. I must have fallen asleep on the plane from San Diego to Denver. No way is *he* in my grandma's bathroom. Cash Evans. The rockstar sensation of *Cash & the Sinners*. And my high school sweetheart who dumped me on graduation day.

I pinch myself and yelp. Darn it. I'm awake. This is really happening. My life sucks.

I can't help but notice Cash is no longer the boy I fell in love with. He's a man. His gray eyes that used to sparkle when he looked at me now have laugh lines. The bump on his nose from a brawl he had after a concert is new.

The boy I knew couldn't grow a beard, but this man standing before me has several days of growth on his chin and cheeks. The look suits him.

My gaze travels further to his chest. Oh my. The skinny boy I gave my virginity to no longer exists. This man is all lean, sinewy muscle. My fingers tingle with the need to touch him. To feel every single inch of his skin.

My heart speeds up and warmth spreads throughout my body at the memory of nights spent in this man's arms.

I force those thoughts out of my mind. No, not this man. I don't know this man. The boy I knew no longer exists. He hasn't for a long time.

I growl at Cash. "What are you doing here?"

Katy Purry snarls at him.

Cash points to my kitty. "What the hell is that?"

I cuddle her close. "This is Katy Purry."

"Katy Purry?" He spits out. "You named your cat after a pop star? A pop star?"

"Do not start with me. My musical taste is not up for discussion."

He snorts. "Taste?"

I stomp my foot. "We are not discussing what music I listen to. We are never discussing what music I listen to. What are you doing in my shower?"

He gulps. "Your shower?"

"Have all those concerts caused hearing loss?" I tap my chest. "My shower."

"But I'm renting this house."

"You can't be renting this house. My grandma owns it."

"Grandma Saffron?" He smiles. "I can't wait to meet her."

My breath hitches and tears well in my eyes. "You can't meet her. You can never meet her. She's gone."

"I'm sorry, Indy." Warmth fills those gray eyes and he reaches for me. I step back. He can't touch me. If he touches me, I'll end up naked in the shower with him. No can do.

Katy Purry must agree as she snarls. I tighten my hold but she's a kitty on a mission. She launches from my arms straight at Cash.

He bats her away as he steps back. His foot slips on the shower floor and he flails his arms to keep his balance. Katy

Purry lands on his chest and tips him over. They slam to the floor of the shower.

My kitty bats at his face and he grasps her to hold her away from him.

“Save me! Your kitten is the devil.”

I stare at him wriggling on the floor while trying to keep my kitty from clawing him. I wish I was the type of person who could be cold and cruel and get her revenge by allowing my cat to claw him until red welts appear all over his body. But I’m not.

I throw a towel over him before snatching Kity Purry from his hands.

“Get dressed. We need to talk.”

His jaw clenches. Cash hates talking. Explanations? Not if he can help it.

But I’m not accepting no for an answer. If he won’t tell me why he’s showering in Grandma’s house, I’ll phone the police and have him removed from the premises.

“You have five minutes before I call the police.”

He rolls his eyes. “You won’t call the police.”

I lean over and hiss in his face. “You don’t know me anymore.”

Pain flashes in his eyes, but I ignore it. It’s his fault he doesn’t know me. Not mine.

I whirl around and march toward the hallway.

“And the name is Indigo,” I holler over my shoulder.

Cash was the only person to ever use the nickname Indy. But he’s no longer special. He’ll refer to me as Indigo the way everyone else does.

○○○○○

[Pre-order *How to Date a Rockstar* now!](#)

Can't wait? Gain exclusive early access to *How to Date a Rockstar* by joining my Ream [subscription service here](#). Your comments and suggestions may even be incorporated into the final version!

Thanks!

First and foremost, thanks to my friends and family who allow me to bounce ideas off of them at the most random and sometimes inappropriate of times and locations. There is a point to my questions – I promise! A special thanks to all my acquaintances who inspire me with their stories and funny antics. Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

The hubby deserves special mention for designing my book covers, being a beta reader, and just being all-around Mr. Supportive. Sometimes I worry he's going to figure out that my characters feel more genuine to me than real life, but he still puts up with me after some twenty-odd years, so I guess he isn't totally turned off by me not being entirely normal.

And then there's my editor. Thanks, Carol for continuing to make time for me when you have a gazillion other things going on in your life.

I also want to throw a general *thank you* out into the digital universe to thank all the book bloggers who have helped me promote my books and especially those who take the time to read and review one or more of my books. You can't believe how thankful I am there are bloggers out there who not only read my emails begging them for a review but also actually take the time to answer. Thank you!!!

Of course, I can't forget to thank you, the reader, for buying the book and reading it. I would be extremely honored and thankful if you could write a review—even if it's just a line or two. You can do that [here](#).

If you want to keep up with what I'm writing next and maybe get some good deals on books, too, sign up for my newsletter [here](#). Or you can just follow me on social media, where I'll probably say lots of inappropriate things thinking I'm being hilarious.

About the Author

D.E. Haggerty is actually just plain old Dena, but she thinks using initials makes her sound like one of the cool kids. She was born and raised in the U.S. but has spent the majority of her adult life abroad living in cool-sounding places like Istanbul, Heidelberg, and The Hague. She has job hopped from military policewoman to lawyer to B&B owner. She finally jumped off the job hopping bandwagon a few years ago when she decided to turn her addiction to romance novels into a career. If anyone has ideas on how to turn a love of wine into a job, she's all ears.

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