

a Country
CHRISTMAS

CELEBRATED
Love

EMBER DAVIS

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Celebrated Love (A Country Christmas Series)) by Ember Davis

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For those who want something low angst with very little
conflict to get lost in this holiday season.

Happy holidays!

Table of Contents

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

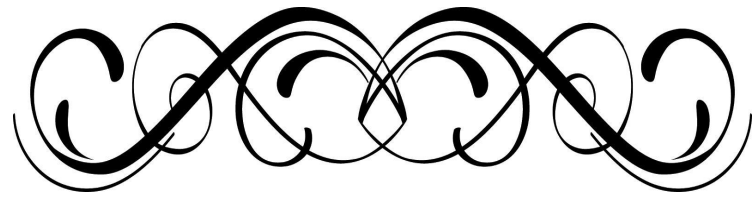
[CHAPTER 8](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[A COUNTRY CHRISTMAS SERIES](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY EMBER](#)



CHAPTER 1

ASTER

The little ones are my favorite to teach. They're all in leotards with soft, sheer skirts, and ballet shoes that are only made of hope and fun instead of technique and expectations. They're here, in my dance studio, because they want to dance.

Sure, I teach them all the positions and there are steps they need to memorize and practice, but the foundation is joy instead of posture and arm positioning. If they stick with it, those things will come later. I can only hope the foundation they get now, when they're young, will give them something to hold onto and remember when things get tougher, and more is expected.

The girls, and a few boys, are all smiling around me. I don't think they'll ever know the light they bring into my life.

"That's it, feel the rhythm of the music. Remember to find the steady beat," I gently remind them as we tap our toes, stretch up to the sky and then wiggle.

Will our little routine win a competition? Nope. I'm more than okay with it.

These little ones, all between two and a half and four, will have a deeper understanding of rhythm, how to move their bodies, and better fine motor skill development. This isn't about being a prima ballerina, although many of them might have those big dreams, this is just about loving dance.

They're so pure and it brings a smile to my face. This class always does.

"Good," I encourage them. "Stretch as high as you can, get those fingers in on it and reach for the stars."

Emotion threatens to pull me down, but I push it away. Reaching for the stars sounds like a pretty package wrapped up in dreams and hope. For these little ones, that's all it is. For me, it's something different.

It's deferred dreams and shattered hopes. I used my talent and my dreams, the ones fostered in classes just like this one at first and then honed through years of training and hard work, to reach for something big. Then I thought I knew best and believed I could achieve everything I saw in the bright lights of a fame filled future.

I was naïve.

But isn't that what you're supposed to be when you're 18 with talent and drive? Maybe it's because growing up in Sweetwater Valley sheltered me, but it's not like I didn't know the world could be cruel. I just didn't think it would be cruel to *me*.

I thought I was above it because I had magic swirling around me when I danced.

I wasn't above a damn thing. I was just like so many other young girls with big dreams. Then I was shown the gritty reality of what people will ask of you for even the smallest chance to make those dreams into a reality.

So much was stolen from me while I was chasing what I thought would be so easy for me. I don't think I'll ever get that innocence back. The worst part? It wasn't even as bad as it could have been. Still, I came back to Sweetwater Valley with my tail between my legs and my eyes opened. I was a different person than I was when I left with rose colored glasses fixed over my wide eyes.

As the song ends, my students giggle when we all do an exaggerated wiggle move and fall to the ground. Being a little over the top dramatic never hurt anyone. At least not at their age.

When we stand and I look at the eager faces of the kids around me, I find myself smiling as well. They'll never know how much they've healed me. I'm still not great around some adults, but the kids? I love being around them. They give me their trust and I give them the same in return.

"Circle up," I round up the class and my heart soars as I take them all in. "Let's stretch to finish the class."

I take them through the cool down stretches we always finish with and remind them about how important it is to stretch at the beginning and end of our class. I remind them to drink water and be good to their bodies because they allow us to have such a fun time with each other.

The class for this age is about so much more than dance and I'm proud of it. I want every kid to appreciate their bodies, to fall in love with them, and to know how to take care of themselves.

The last stretch we do is completely silly as we shake our entire bodies from our heads to the tips of our fingers and all the way down to our wiggly little toes.

“Thank you for being amazing dancers today,” I chirp. “Enjoy your days until I see you again and remember that Christmas is in a few weeks. Santa and his elves are watching so you better be as good as you are here all the time.”

I catch the grateful looks from some of the parents who are patiently waiting. This class is always open for the parents to stay and watch. They can even participate if they want to, or if they're talked into it by a cutthroat pint-sized negotiator.

I have a few hours before my next class since this one really caters to little ones who aren't in school and takes place during school hours. I make sure everything is cleaned up and the playlist is changed over for my afternoon class before I head out of my studio. I wrap my chunky cardigan around my body while locking the door behind me.

I head toward Sit & Sip because Lana has the best coffee and a little caffeine boost sounds like the perfect thing during my small break. I take a deep breath as I'm walking, glad to be here in Sweetwater Valley and not in New York City anymore.

Not only did most of my dreams die there, but it was too busy, noisy, and dirty. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath there no matter how much I tried. Everything was about rushing and never about enjoying.

I might not see my name in lights in Sweetwater Valley and I'm not dancing in front of theaters full of people, but I have

something real here. I have something I didn't have to trade myself for.

I love my dance studio and being able to pass down my love of dance to others. I did get some amazing training while I was in New York and being able to bring it back to those who want to learn here is a blessing.

The town has been decorated for the holiday season since before Thanksgiving; the pops of green, red, and white are beautiful. The best thing about the holidays here is that people genuinely enjoy the season and see it as a time to spend real time with their families.

When I had to celebrate Christmas in the city, I didn't feel the family focus. Maybe I didn't want to see it, but it felt so much more materialistic. It really affected my love for the season.

Lana has a pretty holiday display in the front window of her shop featuring holiday themed books and a decorated tree. It looks like a cozy scene where you could crawl inside with a cup of cocoa to wait for Santa to show up. When I walk into the Sit & Sip, the scent of peppermint and fir hits me and gives me a feeling of warmth in the middle of my chest.

Aurora, who has been working for Lana for years, has a huge smile on her face when she sees me. "Hi, Aster," she chirps, "did you just finish up with the little ones?"

Okay, so maybe I'm a creature of habit and I frequently need a caffeine pick-me-up in the middle of the day. I figure it's part of boosting the economy of my small town. Right?

Aurora is a beautiful young woman. She isn't much older than 18 and her cheery, carefree attitude is kind of infectious. I've never heard any rumors about her dating, and, trust me, if there were rumors to be had then they would be all over the place.

In high school it was something that bothered me about the town, but I've learned to appreciate it. Sometimes the gossip can be catty and mean-spirited, but I've found it comes from

concern or people being genuinely happy for someone else most of the time.

“I did,” I can’t help but smile at Aurora. “They were so cute in their outfits.”

“I bet,” she grins at me. “I can just imagine them twirling around in their little tutus and shoes.” She leans over the counter slightly and lowers her voice as if she’s telling me a secret, “Sometimes their parents will bring them in after so they can grab a drink or a little treat and they are precious. I also only hear the best things about your studio.”

Tears sting the backs of my eyes. Not because that isn’t gratifying to hear, but because it is. So much.

I fought with myself for a long time about how long was too long to continue to chase a dream that was killing me slowly. I allowed a lot to happen and took on a lot of people pushing my boundaries, sometimes even obliterating them, in the name of my succeeding at being a dancer. Still, that doesn’t mean deciding to pack it up and come back home was easy to do.

I struggled with it. Setting my focus on opening my studio and teaching dance helped, but it’s hard to know if you’re doing the right thing when you’re in the middle of it all.

“Thank you,” I whisper, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. I clear my throat and shake off the emotional heaviness. “Can I get a chai tea latte, please?”

“Coming right up,” Aurora practically clicks her heels together and turns toward the fancy machines behind the counter.

I look around Lana’s store and smile. She renovated the space to help promote the bookstore side of things and it seems to have worked for her. There is a weekly book club that meets here. Actually, there are two. One is for men, and one is geared more toward women, but both focus on romance books.

“Hi Aster,” I almost jump out of my skin as I whirl around and press my hand to my chest where my heart is racing.

“Ida,” I gasp. “Oh my gosh, you scared me,” there’s an admonishment in my tone which has her giving me a sheepish smile.

Ida is the honorary grandma of Sweetwater Valley, and she is a busybody who doesn’t seem the least bit put off by people thinking that about her. I’ve seen her stick her nose in people’s business more times than I can count, but it’s always done with love.

“It’s so good to see you, Aster,” she breezes right past her scaring a few years off my life like it’s nothing. “I was going to come by your studio to see you, but now I don’t have to because I caught you here.”

The way she says she’s caught me has my hackles rising and my eyes narrowing. She certainly did catch me, but the twinkle in her eyes is telling. She has something up her sleeve.

“It’s always nice to see you,” I hedge carefully.

“And you, my dear,” she drawls while patting my arm affectionately. Almost like she’s buttering me up for something. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but the annual toy drive is short a few volunteers. Volunteering is so important to the community,” she implores me.

I soften at the mention of the toy drive. It’s kind of difficult not to, even though I have a feeling Ida can smell the blood in the water at my reaction to her.

“Of course, volunteering is important,” I try to sound diplomatic.

“It is,” she nods, her face solemn before she brightens and claps. “I knew we could count on you, Aster. You love the kids you teach so much, and I have no doubt you have a whole well of holiday compassion for those who are less fortunate. They’ll need you at the community center tomorrow night.”

I blink at her a few times, trying to understand what the hell is going on. Did she just volunteer for me? Did I agree to this?

I run the conversation over in my head, but I don’t think I agreed to anything.

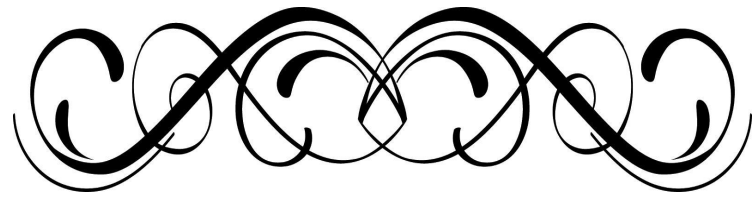
She pats my arm again and smiles at me. “I just love it when you young people are ready to jump in with both feet and help.”

Before I can say a word, she’s hustling away from me and right out the front door. Young people? I mean, sure, compared to her, but I’m 32.

I turn toward Aurora who has my drink ready, my voice kind of dazed, “What just happened?”

Aurora giggles and shrugs one shoulder like she’s seen this happen many times before. “You’ve just been Ida-ed.”

Well, shit.



CHAPTER 2

BOWEN

I was tricked into being here. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm all about giving back to my town and helping where I'm needed, but I didn't seek out this opportunity to volunteer at the toy drive. One moment I was being my normal charming self and chatting with Ida when she came into The Goose while I was working. Then I was being told they'd expect me at the community center.

I have no idea how she managed it, but I'm pretty sure some alphabet soup agency of our government should be taking advantage of her skills. The woman is a damn witch or something. I'm sure I even thanked her before she walked away with a surprising spring in her step considering she's getting up in the years.

It was probably because she siphoned off some of my youth while talking to me. Maybe a smidgen of my soul.

Also, she had a suspicious twinkle in her eye, like she knew something I didn't the entire time we were talking. It should have made me wary of her, but being nice to the customers is part of my job as a waiter and what harm could she do? She's at least 70, maybe older. I don't know because I'm smart enough to know you don't ask a woman how old she is.

There are a few other volunteers in the main room of the community center who are busy sorting things, stuffing envelopes, and making signs. It looks like everything is covered and it makes me wonder what in the world Ida needed help with.

She's one of the women in charge of the annual toy drive. I have to hand it to them because every year they help a lot of kids have a better Christmas than they would have had without their efforts.

I'm all for kids having an amazing Christmas.

When I was growing up, it was my favorite time of year. It's hard not to get in the swing of things with all the decorations, holiday spirit, and happy faces surrounding you. It was a time for good memories to be made and a lot of family time.

I'm sure it helped that my parents were comfortable money wise. We never had gifts overflowing from under the tree, but I didn't need anything that extravagant. I usually got one big thing I asked for and then things I needed.

No, I wasn't thrilled to get socks in my stocking, but now that I'm an adult and buy my own socks? I wouldn't be sad about some socks showing up from Santa. Just saying, the big guy can put those on my Christmas list anytime.

I make some fairly good money at The Goose since it's such a popular spot and Maverick, one of the owners, pays us a nice hourly wage as well as getting tips. He doesn't do that server pay stuff, which is great and one of the reasons I applied to work there.

It's not like I have a lot of skills I can use to get a job. I opted not to go to college since right before my senior year of high school my mom got sick. I was just like most of my classmates and thinking about college, but her getting sick felt so much more important than going off to school. Dad needed my support and so did Mom.

I stayed and did some manual labor jobs in and around Sweetwater Valley. It was hard work, but it helped to keep my family afloat while Mom battled cancer. When she went into remission, I moved out of my parent's house. I started looking for a different job, one with hours where school might be a possibility on the side, even if I only did online courses.

The Goose would be perfect for that, but I've never taken the leap to add classes to the mix. I'm not sure I will now. I like my job and the freedom it gives me. It doesn't hurt that some beautiful women have come through there and I've gotten to pick them up from time to time.

I'm no fucking saint and I never claimed to be.

I figure since I'm only 23, I have some time to figure out what my life looks like and what I want to do with it.

Wasting time without strings has been fun and I don't regret the nights I've spent with the women I've been with, but something has been tickling in my brain. It almost feels like I'm forgetting something. Or missing something.

I've tried to tell myself it's just because Maverick found the other half of his soul and is disgustingly happy. Clint, the other co-owner of The Goose, has found his woman as well. I swear there's something in the water.

When I first started working there almost two years ago, I would have balked at the idea of only being with one woman or settling down and making a commitment. Hell, I probably wouldn't have been on board even a few months ago.

Now? I'm starting to feel like something is missing. Something big.

I could be spending this holiday season making memories to last a lifetime. I think, for the first time in my life, that is something I want instead of just having fun in the moment.

Who the hell am I?

I'm not even sure right now.

Maybe Mav and Clint's happiness and obsession with their women is rubbing off on me or something. Hell, then there's Nash, who used to come into the bar pretty frequently. At least until Lark's sister moved in next door to him and he fell in love with her. They're all loved up and happy in their little bubble as well.

It's damn close to an epidemic at this point. I can track patient zero, but there's no indication on who is going to go down next.

"Bowen," Ida greets me from across the room, practically yelling my name and making me duck my head slightly.

Everyone turns to look at me and, thankfully, they're pretty much all familiar faces because of my job. I've also never

been one to shy away from attention. It's easy for me to plaster a big, mostly real, smile on my face and head toward Ida.

The older lady is grinning from ear to ear and she's practically rubbing her hands together in excitement. Which is a little strange, even for someone who is all about community and volunteering.

Ida shifts slightly and that's when I notice the woman standing a little bit behind her. Trust me, for Ida to hide most of this woman, ya gotta know she is tiny. Ida isn't exactly an Amazonian, but this woman is smaller than her.

She has a lithe body and blond hair that hangs a little past her shoulders. Everything about her is delicate and there's a fragility in her that reminds me of a crystal statue that my mom always had on display when I was growing up. I used to stare at it for hours and wonder how something so breakable could look so strong at the same time. And so beautiful.

I didn't understand it as a boy and I'm not sure I understand it now.

I study her in profile and am instantly curious about her. I would have remembered her if she had come into The Goose. I doubt she's new around here if she's volunteering in town. Well, with Ida involved, I suppose she could be. But it is highly unlikely she's just passing through.

When the woman turns towards me, my breath hitches and I stop walking for a few heartbeats. Her eyes are blue, but the blue of waves during a storm. Her lips are plump with her bottom one just begging for me to nip at it. I wonder if she would moan or gasp when I do it.

I want to look her over again and again because I know, somehow, I would find something new to focus on every time. The thing is, I can't seem to look away from her eyes.

There's something in her eyes that makes me want to wrap her up in my arms and never let her go. It feels like she's calling to me to protect her and give her a haven, somewhere she can dance with abandon while never worrying about the world encroaching on her.

“Bowen,” Ida coos, “I’m so glad you could make it and only a few minutes late.”

I feel my cheeks heating slightly because Ida is scolding me like I’m a child in front of the most stunning woman I’ve ever met. I’m not usually one to blush or be embarrassed about most things.

“I’m sorry about that, Ida.” I try and come up with a plausible lie, but nothing comes to me. I guess my quick wit has finally failed me. “I’m here now and ready to work.”

Ida’s grin widens. Perhaps it’s because of the way I flexed my arms while telling her to put me to work. I may not have ever been in a committed relationship with a woman, but I’m not daft. Aren’t you supposed to lead with your strengths?

“Oh, where are my manners,” Ida pretends to chastise herself, but I see through it.

From the way the woman bites the edge of her lip and glances away while amusement dances in her eyes, she does too. How is it that I’ve never seen this woman before?

This really is amazing timing. I was just thinking about how it might be time to change and find something real. Then I have the woman destined to be mine placed right in front of me.

If we’re not careful Ida will gobble up all the accolades for us being together. Small price to pay in my opinion.

“Aster,” Ida’s voice becomes gentle and coaxing, “this is Bowen.” The older woman’s eyes come to meet mine as she gives me an encouraging look. There’s something else there as well, like a warning. “Bowen works for Maverick at The Goose,” she tells Aster. She explains, for my benefit, “Aster owns On Pointe, the dance studio in town.”

“Aster,” I whisper her name, needing to feel my lips form it for some reason. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

“It seems my work here is done,” Ida’s voice is pure smug amusement.

She glides away from us and is dealing with something else before I even realize it. “She didn’t even give us an assignment,” I grumble.

“It’s okay,” Aster’s voice is gentle, wrapping around me and caressing me, “she told me what she wanted us to do right before you got here.”

She starts to walk away from me and I fucking panic. I can’t let her get away. I need to possess her and make sure nothing touches her. I need to protect her, and that includes protecting her from whatever has caused her to put so many walls around herself.

I can see the shadows of them when I look at her. There’s something full of light begging to be opened in her, but she has it pushed down and caged. Is she afraid of overshadowing everyone else?

It wouldn’t surprise me if that’s the case. People like Aster aren’t always encouraged and nourished the way they should be. My gut is telling me it’s something else, something deeper.

“Lead the way, little Spark,” I murmur. “I’ll follow you anywhere.”

Aster’s cheeks heat a little bit before she turns away from me and scurries over to a table. Her movements are fluid and graceful. Knowing she owns the dance studio in town, makes perfect sense now. I think I’ve overheard Mav and Clint talking about her now that more of my brain is starting to come back online.

When we sit, Aster starts showing me how we’re going to assemble the free goodie bags. They’re a standard gift for any child who is getting a gift through the toy drive. I’m thankful for the repetitive task because I need a moment to process. The silence between us isn’t awkward and I don’t try to hide the small looks I keep stealing at her.

She whispers out of the side of her mouth, “Why do you keep looking at me?”

“You’re the most gorgeous woman I’ve ever seen,” the words spill from me with little finesse. They’re true, so I

figure there's no reason in holding back. "I was wondering how it's possible that I've never noticed you before."

Aster shrugs one slim shoulder, her eyes focused on the task in front of her. "I don't go out very often. It's usually only when my best friend, Taylor, won't let me turn her down. Even then we'll just hang out at one of our places."

I make a humming sound even though I want to ask her a million questions about why she's hiding and who she's afraid of. I know who Taylor is. I'm sure everyone in town does. She's a realtor, one of the best around. She's also a frequent patron at The Goose.

I've never seen Aster with her though.

We sit together and work, the chatter between us infrequent and light. It's nice though. There's something oddly comforting about not feeling the need to fill every second we're together with meaningless words. I learn little things about the woman who has turned my world upside down, but not enough.

Not nearly enough.

"I'd love the chance to take you out, Aster," I try to keep the giddy feeling bubbling up in me out of my voice. "Can I?" I clear my throat because I just sounded like an eager child on Christmas morning, and it is not a good look on me right now. "I mean," I try again, "would you go out on a date with me?"

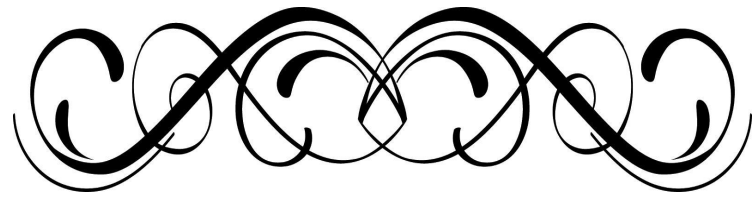
I cringe internally at how formal I sound, but I don't want her to misunderstand my intentions. I don't want to be her friend, even though I'll be her best friend from here on out. I don't want what is between us to be casual or short lived.

She's my forever. That's all there is to it.

I don't need to explain it or understand it to know it's real.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Bowen," she looks at me, regret swimming in her blue eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispers, "I'm not the woman you're looking for."

She's wrong. She's the woman my soul has been crying out for. I'll find a way to prove it to her. I just need a little time.



CHAPTER 3

ASTER

When I step outside my studio doors, the day finally done, I'm exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. Today was a good day. My students worked hard, and they were all in with me while they were dancing. What more could I ask for?

Maybe someone to share that joy and pride with.

I barely stop myself from groaning out loud. My mind has been trying to push Bowen to the forefront for days now. Ever since he asked me out. I've been second guessing telling him no since the words slipped out of my mouth.

I'm just not sure if he's the kind of man I can trust or not. There are a lot of reasons and, yes, most of them are colored by my experience in New York. I know it's not fair, but it's the truth. I have reasons for not saying yes to Bowen that don't have anything to do with my past as well.

I guess only one. He's much younger than me. Around ten years younger than me.

That kind of difference might mean a fun time in bed, and I emphasize the might part there, but in a lot of other areas it'll spell disaster. Does he have the experience to be in a relationship with me? With all my baggage?

He asked you out on a date, it wasn't a marriage proposal.

Okay, that's fair and true, but there was something in his eyes. He looked at me like he was seeing so much more than I wanted him to see. There was a determination about him I found surprising.

I've heard about Bowen around town, especially since he started working at The Goose. I might not go there often, or ever really, but I have ears. People talk in this town. It's practically a hobby and a past time all rolled into one.

He's not a bad guy from what I understand. He's a typical young guy who has his pick of women and doesn't make any

of them any promises. I can respect that, as long as he isn't out in the world stringing people along and pretending to be something he's not.

Which is why I had to say no. He promised so many things without words. Promises I'm not sure he would be able to follow through on. Then there are my own fears about letting a guy in.

I dated a little in New York, but it was hard between taking dance classes anywhere I could and auditioning for limited spots in a sea of talented dancers. Then there were the times when I would get a job and the rehearsal and performance schedule could be brutal.

I barely had enough time for me. Adding another person into my life just wasn't going to happen.

Then there was the bitter taste in my mouth around men. Encountering men in power who thought they could talk a young, impressionable woman into trading her body for a job made me wary. I never gave into those casting couch offers, which didn't do my career any favors. I was lucky because I only dealt with people who were overly handsy and not forceful.

And isn't that just a shame? That I can do mental gymnastics about the level of assault I encountered as if it really makes a difference. I know it doesn't, but it's how I can still close my eyes at night and not be lost in the nightmares living in my memories.

I would have given up long before I did if I hadn't found there were still good people in the industry. Not enough for me to stay, but enough for me to keep trying for a while. Then one director went too far, pushed too hard, threatened too much.

I was done.

I packed my bags and grieved my dreams. They died that day in so many ways.

From those ashes, something else rose.

I hop in my car and head toward the grocery store because I haven't been shopping in too long and I know sad cabinets and

an empty fridge will be greeting me at home if I don't make the stop. I both love and hate grocery shopping. I like wandering the aisles and planning meals, but knowing I'm only shopping for myself makes loneliness creep in.

It's one of the reasons I do a lot of meal prep stuff so I can make larger batches than single serving meals. Is it any better? I don't know, it's not like meal prep makes someone magically appear to share my meals with or anything.

Leaving my career behind means I am no longer worried about every calorie I put into my body like I used to be. I'm more than willing to admit it's a welcome change. I even have ice cream in my freezer now, and I bake things, when I never did before.

I guess there are some good tradeoffs here.

And, of course, not having to worry about being molested by someone in the name of getting a job.

I climb out of my car and head into the grocery store, already annoyed at myself for not making a list between classes today. I'm always a little bit of a mood shopper and not having a list makes it so much worse. I'm likely to go off the rails and start getting things I'll never eat or things that just look good when I don't have a plan for them.

Oh well, worse things have happened.

Since I want to go through the cold stuff, meat, and produce last, I start roaming up and down the aisles. Even when I have a list, I walk every aisle. It's a whole thing. What if I miss something or get an idea for a new recipe because I walked down a certain aisle?

It's not like I'm in a rush to get home to anyone. No one is timing me or expecting me. I don't even have a pet.

Maybe I should get a cat. I've always been more of a dog person, but I'm gone most of the day every day. That probably wouldn't be fair to a dog.

"Aster," a man's familiar voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I look up to find Bowen studying me intently. Something about the way he's looking at me makes me think he's called

my name more than once. “Ahh. There are those beautiful eyes, little Spark.”

I huff at his nickname for me, going for indignant, even though I really do love it. It makes me feel all warm and melty inside. Which is dangerous. He grins at me and one of his dimples pops out. Yup, totally fucking dangerous.

“Hi Bowen,” my voice is hesitant as hell, and I stand a little taller since I don’t sound tall at all. “What are you doing here?”

“Just grocery shopping,” he looks into my cart pointedly, “same as you it seems.” I nod, unsure of what to say or do, but he doesn’t seem to have the same problem. He takes a step closer, and I lock my knees to stop myself from stepping back. “You were a million miles away just now. What were you thinking about?”

“I was considering if I should get a cat even though I’m more of a dog kinda girl, but I’m away from home too long at the studio for a dog,” I blurt out the full, unfiltered truth.

Bowen throws his head back and laughs. Even though I desperately want to cringe or, at least, melt into the ground and disappear for oversharing, I can admit his laugh is nothing short of superb. It’s a full sound that causes you to almost feel his joy wrap around you.

I find myself smiling at him even though I should be scowling. He’s laughing at me, after all. I just can’t bring myself to do it.

And that, more than anything else, is proof Bowen is trouble. Big time trouble.

“You’re adorable,” he whispers when he’s gotten his laughter under control.

I scrunch up my nose because I’m not sure how I feel about being called adorable by a man so much younger than me. He’s already taller than my 5’7”, which always put me on the taller side of the ballerinas I was up against and the source of why I was always careful about my weight and diet. I didn’t need anything else working against me in an audition.

Bowen's movements are slow as he steps closer and raises his hand. I'm kind of surprised when I don't flinch as he tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear which has fallen loose of the messy bun on the top of my head. I suppose it's because he's treating me like I could be spooked easily.

He's not fucking wrong but being coddled, like he's doing, usually pisses me off. With him it's comforting.

And not something I can process now.

"Can I walk with you while you're shopping?" The sweet hesitancy in his question is what makes it impossible to say no.

"Sure," the word slides easily from my tongue.

As we start walking, he asks me about my day, the ages of classes I teach and which ones I enjoy the most. When I tell him it's the little ones, he gets a soft look on his face. Which, again, is something to examine another time.

The conversation flows easily, and I even manage to ask him about his job and his day. I've never been one for small talk, probably because I grew up with so much of my focus on dance. Most of the people I spent time with spoke the same language I did—movement, choreography, and fluidity.

Taylor never cared if we didn't talk constantly when we were around each other. She didn't seem put off or offended when I didn't ask her for details about her life, or who she was spending time with. I figured it was because she liked having a respite from gossip. I could give her that.

Maybe there was more to it, but it doesn't matter at this point.

"You know," I tease him when we're walking through the last aisle before I start hitting the periphery of the store, "if I were a different person, I might think you're stalking me."

I'm not entirely sure he's not. Before the other night at the toy drive, I could count on two hands how many times I would see Bowen in a year. But in the last few days I've been seeing the man almost wherever I go. If I were one to believe in fate,

I would think we're being thrown together and I shouldn't ignore it.

If I were to believe in fate.

I'm not sure I do anymore, but Bowen certainly is bringing something out in me. It's been a long time since I felt hope, but there's a little flicker of it in my chest. It seems to grow whenever I'm around him.

"I'm not stalking you, Aster," his voice is smooth and reassuring, battering against some of the rough and jagged pieces of myself that I've kept sharpened for my own protection, "but I won't lie and say I don't like bumping into you."

I make a humming sound while I look at fruit, trying to give myself a distraction. It's not working very well. His woody scent wraps around me, trying to comfort me when my instincts tell me to bristle and run as far away as I can.

"Will I see you at the toy drive tomorrow night?" There's an eager curiosity to his question.

As much as I want to tell him I won't be volunteering again, it would be a lie. "I'll be there."

We finish our shopping in silence, but it's not oppressive and there aren't any expectations. The more time I spend around Bowen, the more I start to see him in a new light. He doesn't lay on the charm as much as I assumed he would. He just is.

I both admire and envy the way he's so comfortable in his skin. I feel like I'm crawling out of mine more often than not. I wonder if that's a guy thing or a him thing. I wonder if I can soak up some of his confidence and self-assuredness. I'd like to if I can.

But that would mean spending more time around him, right? I don't know if that would be a good idea.

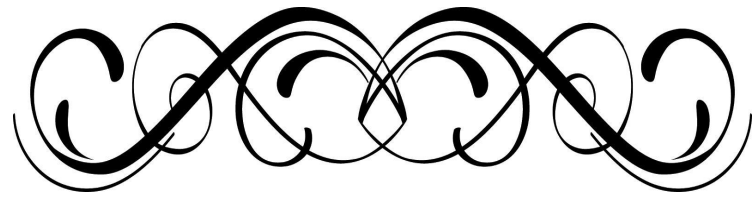
Bowen walks me to my car and helps me load up my groceries, a promise sparkling in his eyes that I don't want to examine too closely. He's dangerous to the wall I've built for

my own protection. He could send it raining down around me if I'm not careful.

Just before I get in the car, he grabs my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. The warmth from his touch settles in the middle of my chest and radiates through my body. When did everything turn so cold? Why is he making me feel this way?

"I'll see you tomorrow, little Spark," he whispers, gives another squeeze, and then steps back.

I slide in my car and drive home trying to shake off the feeling. It's impossible. Even hours later, I can still feel the press of his hand against mine and the reassurance in his touch.



CHAPTER 4

BOWEN

Going slow with Aster is pure torture. All I want to do is sweep her up in my arms, run away with her, and show her how good we'll be together. I know she's not ready for that yet and it's easy enough to see that she has her reasons.

I've taken to watching her, seeking her out in town even, and usually she has no clue I'm even there. When she joked that I was stalking her, it took a lot for me not to admit that I'm bordering on it. The difference is my obsession is innocent enough. Well, except for all the ways I want to strip her and bury myself in her body.

I want to protect her. I want to make her smile and laugh without whatever it is that weighs so heavily on her and brings her down. She shies away from happiness, as if she doesn't think she deserves it or something. I've never met anyone quite like her and I'm desperate to figure her out.

I did get a little bit of information today from my boss, which was an unexpected source. I shouldn't have been surprised since I found out they graduated high school in the same class, along with Clint and Lana.

I hadn't thought about her being older than me until I found that out. It sure as fuck isn't a turn off. I'm digging it.

She's so innocent and wounded that it's easy to forget, I suppose.

Maverick scared the shit out of me as I was rolling some silver for the next shift and trying, unsuccessfully, to not glance at my watch constantly. His voice came out of nowhere and made me jump a little, "You seem a little on edge, Bowen."

I tried to deflect his attention away from me by teasing him, "Do you sneak up on Lark like that?"

He narrowed his eyes at me, clearly remembering the first time Lark came into The Goose, before they were even together. She had just moved to Sweetwater Valley, and I flirted with her. You can't blame me, she's a gorgeous woman with curves for days. I wasn't even put off by the kids, but I most certainly got the message when I saw the murderous intent in the eyes of my boss when he said Lark was his.

Maverick stood at his full height with his feet apart and his arms crossed over his chest, "Spill it. You've been checking your watch for hours. Hot date? Or is something else going on?"

I grumbled under my breath, "Something else is going on." When all he did was arch an eyebrow, I sighed. "I'm volunteering at the toy drive tonight."

He started to laugh, but when I didn't crack a smile, he quickly sobered up. I saw the lightbulb go off in his head and he nodded. "Ida got you, didn't she?" When I gave him a deadpan look he smirked. "That lady is slippery. She'll have you volunteering and so twisted around you'll end up thinking it was your idea from the start."

I groaned and nodded. "That's how she got me. I don't mind giving back and spending the time or anything."

"There's something else going on. Are you going to tell me, or do I need to call in the big guns?"

I glanced around to make sure no one was close by. I might have grown up in town right alongside the gossip, but that didn't mean I wanted to spread it myself. Mav looked around as well, and we were in full-on covert op mode.

"I met someone the first night I volunteered." His eyebrows shot so high on his hairline; I was almost concerned for the man. "Aster," I let her name fall between us as a fact, not a question.

"Aster? As in the owner of On Pointe? Aster who I went to school with?" His voice was rising with each question, and I was sure I'd have to grab him and put him a headlock or some shit to get him to calm down. He pointed right at me, a snarl in

his voice, “You better not be fucking with her. She’s a good person and a good woman.”

I wasn’t at all intimidated. He may be my boss, but I got right in his face, unwilling to back down or be misunderstood. “She’s mine,” I growled.

Maverick transformed right in front of my eyes. His shoulders relaxed and he took a step back before rubbing the back of his neck and shooting me a wide-eyed look. “Well, I’ll be fucking damned.” He barked out a quick laugh as if he couldn’t contain it. “Not going to lie, considering your whole fun loving, I don’t give a fuck attitude about pretty much everything, I did not see this one coming.” He rubbed his hands together and muttered, more to himself, “Lark is going to love this.”

“You’re not going to tell her anything,” I insisted.

Maverick shot me a look as if he thought I was out of my damn mind. “I don’t keep anything from my wife,” his voice brokered no room for argument. I sighed and rolled my eyes, knowing damn well it was true. “Evie loves going to Aster’s ballet class and Lark is a fan of the woman. She’ll be happy for you both. You might need an ally,” he pointed out, “because Aster has walls about a million miles high.”

“I’ve noticed,” I sounded like a toddler about a second away from a temper tantrum.

“She came back different,” he whispered, and my eyes snapped up to his from the ground. “Growing up her dreams were always much bigger than our small town. Everyone knew it was only a matter of time before her name would be in big lights in the big city where she’d find success dancing.” I swallowed hard, not sure if I wanted to hear any more. “When she left, she was bright and bubbly, but when she came back, she was,” he paused as if looking for the right word, “muted. No one knows what happened as far as I know.”

“There are times when I see so much pain and regret in her eyes,” I admitted, unsure if I’ve said too much.

Maverick nodded and reached over to give my shoulder a squeeze. “If she’s yours, don’t let her push you away. I have a feeling being with her will be good for you and you’ll be good for her. When you feel that pull, it’s something you can’t ignore.” He winked and smirked at me before he held his arms out to his sides. “Just look at me.”

I gave him a little shove that had us both chuckling. But I did understand his point. Maverick was known as a manwhore. Then Lark showed up and he changed in an instant. He never looked at another woman. She was it for him and still is. He has a woman he’s devoted to, he has a family, and the man is practically fucking giddy with joy. It would be disgusting if it wasn’t so damn heartwarming.

His words are replaying in my mind now as I walk into the community center after I went home to shower and change. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what he told me. I wonder what the hell happened to her when she left and why she came back. If she had such big dreams, why did she give them up?

My stomach twists at all the possibilities, most of which are too damn horrific for me to even consider. I imagine being a dancer, especially in a big city which would attract a lot of talent, wouldn’t be easy. Is it that simple? Did she find out she wasn’t as talented as she thought? Or did something sinister happen?

When I spot Aster across the room, already assembling more of the goodie bags, I push those thoughts away. I want her to give me her secrets when she’s ready. I want her to give me all her pain and her burden. My shoulders are strong enough and broad enough to help carry the load.

First, I’m going to need to earn her trust.

I plop down in the chair next to my little Spark, and her eyes snap to mine, the surprise on her face quickly melting away to something like acceptance. It’s not excitement, but I’ll take it for now. It, somehow, feels like a victory to get that much.

“Hi, little Spark,” I bump my shoulder against hers, “I missed you. How was your day?”

Her eyes narrow on me before she goes back to stuffing bags with a few coloring books and crayons, sticker sheets, bubbles, and a small stuffed animal. It’ll be a good gift for the kids to get, no matter what other toy they walk away with. It feels damn good to be helping the community.

I was lucky growing up. I know it.

“It was good. Normal,” she tries to dismiss my question and totally glosses over the whole missing her thing.

I don’t let it get to me. I’ll find a way around her defenses.

I find I can’t help myself and push her a little more. “What’s one thing that was awesome today?”

She gets the sweetest smile on her face, and it makes my heart pump faster in my chest. “My intermediate class nailed their choreography today. It looked like they were floating across the studio floor.”

“You love teaching them, don’t you?”

“I do,” she gets a far away look in her eyes but shakes it off quickly. “I love all my classes. I love the determination of the older kids and the pride when they master something they were finding tricky.”

“You said before the little kids are your favorite classes. Why?”

“They’re just starting out and I get to foster a love of dance, music, and movement in them,” she admits while blushing a little. “It’ll help them in so many areas of their life and they don’t even see it, because they just love to show up and have fun.”

“You’re beautiful when you talk about dance,” I whisper the words.

Aster’s stormy blue eyes meet mine and her blush deepens. It’s fucking adorable. I want to kiss her, but I hold myself back. I don’t know what she would do if I tried.

“Do you ever just spin and spin until you’re too dizzy to spin anymore?”

She looks at me and starts laughing at my question. When she laughs, everything holding her back falls away. She glows from the inside out and I’m a lucky fucking man to be able to witness it.

“You’re ridiculous,” she admonishes me when she stops laughing.

I shoot her a grin, not bothered in the least. I got her to laugh. I’m flying high on the victory of such a small thing.

We continue to chat while we work, and our time together is far too short. As we start to pack up along with the other volunteers, my heart clenches. I don’t want to leave her. I want more time.

I don’t know how to get her to trust me other than to keep trying. I’m hopeful that I’ll get my Christmas wish this year. Her; it’ll always be her.

We’re quiet as I walk her to her car. I take a chance and grab her hand, lacing our fingers together and giving her hand a squeeze to thank her for not pushing me away. It’s not a lot, but I’ll take it.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide and a little worried when we get to her car. “Thank you for walking me out,” she whispers.

The pull between us is almost overwhelming and holding her hand isn’t enough. I need more, even if it blows up in my face. It’s time to take a small leap and hope for the best.

“Aster,” I murmur her name, moving closer to her and wrapping my arm around her waist. She doesn’t struggle against me, and I risk taking just a little bit more. “I’m going to kiss you. Tell me if you don’t want me to.”

I pause, our eyes locked together until she licks her bottom lip, and my gaze is drawn to the movement. I make sure to close the distance between us slowly even though everything inside of me screaming to slam my lips against hers.

The first brush of our lips is like an explosion with how much it rocks me. Her lips are soft and sweet. I instantly want more.

I press my lips against hers a little harder, only wanting to push her so far. I don't let my tongue out to push between her lips. I want to, desperately, but I'm willing to wait.

I nip at her bottom lip, causing her to gasp, as I pull away. When our eyes open, hers are a little dazed and I'm sure mine are hungry as hell. I want her, but I want her forever. Not only one night.

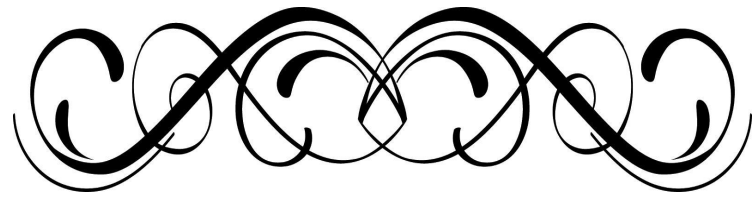
Forever is the only thing that will work for me.

"Can I take you out, Aster? Please," I plead with her, hoping she'll see how sincere I am.

"Okay, Bowen," she nods slowly as she answers.

With a kiss on her forehead, I help her into her car and barely stop myself from doing a victory dance in the parking lot. I might do one later, when I'm alone at my place. Okay, I definitely will.

I have a date. With the woman of my dreams. Christmas miracles are real, and I've been granted one. I won't squander it.



CHAPTER 5

ASTER

I think this third date with Bowen might be the one that goes well. Maybe I should have cut my losses after the first two, but there's something about him that won't let me walk away. Not yet at least.

He has this strange ability to get past my walls no matter how much I try and reinforce them. He's charming, sweet, and so damn sexy there are times when I can't breathe around him. Our dates haven't shown me who he is, but the time we've spent at the toy drive has.

He probably doesn't even realize it, but he has the ability to make everyone around him feel seen, safe, and at ease. I'm sure it helps him when he's working. It's also incredibly endearing that he doesn't even realize he has this superpower.

Our first date, or attempt at our first date, didn't get off the ground because his tire had a blowout, and he didn't have a spare. I could practically see his embarrassment rolling off him, but he never took it out on me. He just kept apologizing as we waited for roadside assistance to come and save the day.

The wait was a lot longer than either of us anticipated, but we didn't let the time go to waste and talked for the hour it took to get help. We were going out to dinner a few towns over, so we weren't in Sweetwater Valley when the tire blew. If we had been in town, the rescue probably would have been a lot faster.

By the time we got back on the road, it was getting late, and I asked him to just take me home. The look he gave me, full of so much remorse and sadness, had my heart clenching in my chest.

As we were driving, the quiet descended until he broke it with a hesitant question, "Does this mean I blew more than just my tire?" He glanced over at me with a small, forced smile on his face. "Did I blow it with you too?"

“No,” the word was out before I could even really think about it, but I quickly realized it was the truth. I reached over and took his hand, the first time I initiated contact with him. “You didn’t blow anything. These kinds of things happen, but I hope you’ll ask me out again. It might not have been dinner, but I had a good time.”

The more I talked, the wider the smile on Bowen’s face grew. It made me feel good and not just because I could alleviate his fears. I genuinely liked spending time with him and the more I was around him, the more I found the reservations I had were washing away.

He brought my hand up to his mouth and kissed the tips of my fingers. “I’m glad. We’ll plan a second date. Maybe in town this time,” he chuckled softly as he rested our combined hands on his thigh, “just in case.”

I was waiting for dread to fill my gut, but it didn’t happen. “I’d like that,” I whispered.

Date number two was two days after our first attempt and it was better, but there were still some hiccups. It was endearing and adorable, really, but I didn’t tell him that. Not when his brown eyes were filled with so much worry as we looked at each other over the burned dinner he tried to cook in his small apartment.

I wasn’t judging him for either thing, honestly. I couldn’t remember the last time a guy had put in so much effort to impress me and his place was clean. It was clear he put time and thought into our date which earned him a lot of respect in my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he grimaced and ducked his head. “Mom offered to come over and cook dinner for me because she knows I’m not very skilled, but I wanted to do it myself.”

The way his chest puffed up with pride at the thought of feeding me something he cooked made my heart melt and a big portion of the wall I built around myself fell with a resounding thud in my soul.

“It was a very ambitious meal,” I whispered. It really was.

If only the mustard chicken wasn't undercooked while the asparagus was burnt, and the mashed potatoes were like wallpaper paste. The rolls were fine and that's what we ended up putting butter on and munching on while we talked.

The way he let the mistakes roll off his back instead of dwelling on them and letting them take the night into the dumps and keep it there was admirable. It reminded me that when things don't go right, you can try and find a way to make them better or you can dwell.

I'd always been someone to dwell. I agonized over forgetting choreography or doing a step wrong. It would eat me up inside, especially when I was growing up and while I was in New York. Since I opened my studio, I would tell my students to let it roll off their back and then keep going, but it was advice I had never been able to internalize myself.

Bowen didn't let the ruined dinner stop him from spending time with me and being in the moment. He still gave me his whole focus, after, of course, throwing all the food away except for the rolls. It was like nothing got the man down when he was around me. It made me feel important and cherished.

No one else had ever made me feel that way before. Which is why I agreed to this third date and it's going a lot better.

Even if he hadn't made me feel important and cherished enough to try a date again, I would have agreed after watching him last night at the toy drive. The toy drive which has been prepped, the toys have been donated, and now families who qualify are coming in to pick out toys for their kids. I could see some of the parents were ashamed because they couldn't provide their kids with Christmas gifts without help. It made me feel for them.

I wasn't at all surprised when Bowen stepped in with those people, put them at ease, and made them laugh while helping them find the perfect toy. I was kind of in awe of him and couldn't take my eyes off him all night.

Ida stepped up next to me at some point, her voice low and filled with barely contained excitement, "Bowen really is

something, isn't he?"

I glanced at her but couldn't look at her long. I needed to keep watching Bowen, not wanting to miss a moment of the magic he was weaving. "He is," I admitted quietly, and not just to her, but myself as well.

"I thought he might be the perfect man to help you heal, Aster." She clapped her hands together and I could only shake my head at her. "You can't keep hiding. You need to come back out into the light."

Tears welled up in my eyes and I knew they would fall if I looked at her, so I kept my focus on Bowen. He must have sensed me looking at him because he turned his head and winked at me. I might have swooned; not like I'd admit that to anyone.

For our third date, we got to the restaurant, and we got through dinner, which wasn't burnt or undercooked. All in all, things have been going swimmingly. The conversation has flowed between us easily while we've gotten to know each other even more.

When I first met him, I thought for sure we wouldn't have anything in common, but that's not the case. I'm a little embarrassed with myself because I made some big assumptions about him. I would hate it if someone did the same to me, but here I am.

His hand is at the small of my back as he leads us back out to the car, the one that didn't have any tire issues tonight, and I find myself smiling. He kisses my temple, and my body relaxes a little even though I'm still worried about what happens next. I don't want to move too fast, but my body is needy and achy whenever I'm around him.

I'm not afraid like I expected to be.

Everything about Bowen is kind of throwing me for a loop.

"You're so beautiful, my little Spark," he murmurs right before he opens the passenger side door for me.

I slide in, feeling my cheeks heat up as I do. My stomach twists a little bit in anticipation of what happens next. Part of

me doesn't want the night to end, but I want another kiss from him. Maybe more?

Yeah, definitely more.

When we're heading toward my house, his hand finds my knee and I feel the heat from his palm against my skin. It's an intoxicating feeling. I want to feel his large hands roaming all over me.

The thought of him touching me has my thighs clenching together. If he notices, he doesn't let on.

As he's walking me to my door, butterflies are swarming inside of me. It's been years since I've even considered being with a guy again. Even before I locked myself away, metaphorically speaking, none of the guys I was with made me feel anything close to what Bowen does.

I let routine take over as I unlock my door and walk inside. I'm not sure whether Bowen is going to follow me or not, but he does. His eyes are dark and tinged with lust when I turn toward him. The gasp I let out is loud in the quiet of my house as he picks me up, presses me against my closed door, and my legs wrap around his waist.

The skirt of the dress I'm wearing hikes up and the feel of his large hands on my thighs has me arching my back and moaning as my eyes slide closed. I don't want to think too hard about this; I want this. I shouldn't let the fear the demons of my past carry stop me from enjoying what is being offered to me readily.

"Little Spark," Bowen whispers as he buries his face in my hair. He kisses up the column of my neck before nipping at my earlobe and causing goosebumps to cover my skin. "Can I touch you?"

"Bowen," I gasp as his beard rubs against my skin. I never thought a beard was sexy until him, now I can't unthink it. "Please. I feel like I'm burning up."

"I got you," he promises, and his words sink in so much deeper than this one moment. I can hear what he doesn't say. *I won't let you down.*

I hope he's right. My body relaxes as his hand slides up and down my exposed leg, pushing my skirt higher with every pass. Does he have any idea how wet I am for him right now?

"Fuck, I can feel the heat of your pussy pressing against my cock, Aster," he growls.

As if his control, which has been so damn strong up until this point, snaps, he stops teasing me and buries his hand between my thighs as he slams his mouth down on mine. He kisses me with desperation on his tongue and fierceness in his heart. As he slides my panties aside and stokes my wet slit, I moan into his mouth.

He swallows the sound down as his tongue plays with mine. There's something fun in the way Bowen kisses me. It's lazy and unhurried while still being passionate and powerful. His fingers slide along my flesh in the same way.

The hand he has against my lower back slides up until he's gripping the hair at the base of my neck. There's something so possessive about the way he holds me, and I suck in a breath, waiting for the panic to set in. It never comes.

When he plunges two fingers inside of me while his thumb circles my clit, my entire body jolts. Bowen is right there to hold me steady, and my fingernails dig into his shoulders. My hips start to rock, seeking relief for the need he's been building inside of me since the first night at the toy drive.

"That's right," he coos, "you're going to come all over my hand, my little Spark."

I moan his name as I pull my lips from his and my head presses back against the door. He presses down on my clit with just the right amount of pressure and my pleasure skyrockets. I'm unable to hold it back any longer and my pussy tightens around his fingers as I come hard.

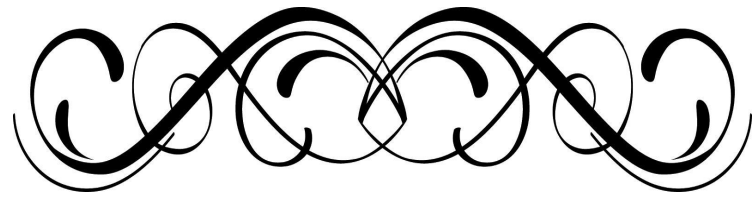
I lose time as the feeling wraps around me, obliterating anyone else's touch and reminding me I'm alive. In this moment there are lifetimes.

I melt into his chest as Bowen gentles his touch and then pulls his fingers from my sensitive pussy. When he licks his

fingers clean and hums in satisfaction, I can barely keep my eyes open. I should return the favor, or something, but my limbs are offline.

He only chuckles and covers my face in tiny kisses. The feeling of moving, while I'm still secure in Bowen's arms, is easily ignored. Even when he lays me on the bed, my eyes don't open. I just feel safe and sink into the feeling while hoping I get to feel it again soon.

Sleep overtakes me just as I feel his lips on my forehead and his whispered words slide over my skin, "Goodnight, my little Spark. Sweet dreams."



CHAPTER 6

BOWEN

Who knew that delayed gratification would be something I'd be into? I have a feeling it's only because it's her I'm waiting on. I know if I push for too much and take this too fast then I'll lose her forever. I can't stand the thought of that.

She's starting to open up to me and everything she reveals about her time in New York is a gift. She hasn't told me exactly what happened to bring her back to Sweetwater Valley, but she's alluded to certain things. The thought of someone putting her in a position to trade her body for her dream makes me sick.

I can't deny things like that don't happen, I'm sure it does. It just kills me to know that's the choice she felt she had to make—between her morals or what she had been working toward her entire life.

I wish I could find those who put her in that position and make them pay, but I can't. All I can do is hold my woman and support her as I help her heal.

The way she's started to open up to me and isn't fighting me every step of the way shows me it's working. She's leaving the past where it belongs while looking toward the future without the same pain in her heart that she's been carrying around for so long.

I was off work today and I've been waiting for the chance to see my woman since I opened my eyes. Last night was our third date and leaving her in her bed without sliding in next to her was hard. But I had a feeling she wouldn't have reacted well to me taking such a liberty without her knowing.

I can't believe she's continued to give me chances after our first two dates didn't go as I had planned. She didn't have to, but she stuck with me.

She's so damn special and she doesn't even see it in herself.

When I walk through the doors of her studio, I smile when I hear the music coming from down the hallway. I've never been here before, I didn't have a reason to, clearly. There are a few parents in the large reception room which seems to double as a lounge area. I nod to those I recognize.

The rumor mill must be working to our advantage because no one looks surprised to see me. I'm fairly sure I catch a smug smile or two as I head toward the music. When I get closer, I can hear my little Spark's sweet voice talking to her students.

"Let's go through our stretches to cool down. You all did an amazing job today," the praise she gives them is from her heart, I can hear it in her voice.

I step into the room and slide into a corner, not wanting to get in the way. My Aster is a vision in the leggings and oversized shirt she has on. It might be big on her and hanging off her shoulder, but it still molds to her curves like a fucking wet dream. It would be entirely inappropriate to pop a boner in her studio, but it's difficult to get my cock to remember that.

When she turns and claps her hands to get everyone back to attention, her stormy eyes meet mine and she smiles. It's not a hesitant, small smile. It's like the sun peeking out through the clouds of her eyes and my heart fucking stops for a second before it starts again in a new rhythm.

I know it now, more than I did before. I love this woman. She's mine. I'll stand in front of her and take on the world to ensure she's never touched by ugliness again.

I don't know how long it takes for the kids to shuffle out of the room and the sound of them greeting their parents and leaving On Pointe to fade, but I don't take my eyes off my woman the entire time. It's only when we're alone and she's done puttering around that she steps toward me.

"I didn't expect to see you today," her voice is a soft touch against my skin, and I shudder.

When she's close enough, I snag her around her waist and pull her to me. As her arms wrap around my neck, she looks

up at me with her eyes sparkling. Her happiness is right there to be seen and appreciated instead of hiding behind walls that reach the clouds.

“I missed you, little Spark,” I murmur. “I wanted to come by earlier, but I didn’t want to be a distraction or share your focus.”

She pouts slightly, a teasing lilt to her voice, “Were you needing some attention?”

I let out a growl and swoop down to kiss her. The moment my lips touch hers, I’m fucking gone. I scoop her up with an arm under her ass and spin us until her back is pressed against the wall and I’m grinding my cock against her sweet pussy.

When she gasps, I slide my tongue into her mouth to taste her. The little whimpers she makes as we kiss has my cock going from hard to fucking steel. I need to be inside of her and I’m not sure I’m going to be able to stop myself from taking her here and now.

I force myself to pull my mouth away from hers, our chests heaving as we suck down gulps of air and stare at each other. As I press my forehead against hers, I calm. Because of her. Always because of her.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay after last night,” I admit.

Her eyes are wide, and hazy with lust as she looks up at me. “I was a little surprised to wake up without you in bed with me,” she blushes with her words and looks away.

I don’t let her get far. I need to see her eyes for this conversation. While gripping her chin, I turn her head back to look at me. I kiss her lips softly, then her nose, then her forehead.

“I didn’t know if it would scare you and I was afraid you wouldn’t like it or might feel like I took more than you were willing to give.”

Her body melts into mine and her eyes get glassy with unshed tears. “Oh, Bowen,” she sighs, and my heart starts to pound in my chest. I have no idea what she’s thinking, and it

kills me. “You could have stayed. I’ve decided I want this, with you, whatever it is. I can’t keep myself in hiding because of things that happened a long time ago. It’s making me small, and I don’t want that anymore.”

I kiss her hard again, recognizing her words as the gift they are. Pride swells in my heart as my hands start to roam over her body. The need to be buried balls deep inside of my woman is overwhelming. In the back of my mind there’s a little voice telling me I shouldn’t do this here.

When I try to pull away and set Aster back down on her feet, she tightens her legs and arches her back as she grinds down against my straining dick. “Please,” she keens, “I want to feel your cock filling me. I need it. I burn for it.”

That little voice gives up with a tip of their hat. I’ll always give my woman what she needs.

I reach between us and pull her top off slowly to make sure I don’t drop her. When her tits, encased in a front closure bra, come into view, I start to drool. They’re a perfect mouthful and I can’t wait to find out how responsive she is.

Her fingers scramble to pull my henley up and off. With a groan, I put her down with a pointed look. “I don’t want to drop you, Aster,” I explain when she starts to pout at me. She starts to reach for her leggings, but I give a sharp shake of my head. “I’m going to undress you.”

The way she bites her lip as she looks up at me has my cock leaking in my boxers. I can’t wait to be inside of her. When I reach back and pull my shirt off, her hands are on me immediately. Her touch is like fire against my skin, and I tug our clothes until we’re standing naked in front of each other.

Aster’s eyes roam over my body, full of appreciation and I’m right there with her. She’s a fucking goddess. When I reach for her, my hands skim over her hips and up her chest to cup her tits in my hands as I pinch her nipples.

“I should be taking you on a bed for the first time,” I grumble.

Her laugh is a tinkling sound that I feel all the way down to my balls. “I think this is perfect,” she whispers as she looks up at me, her stormy blue eyes open and bright.

I grab a condom from my pocket and roll it down my length, feeling her eyes on me before I lift her back into my arms. The way her legs wrap around my waist feels natural. When I slide a hand between her legs, I find her pussy soaking wet and ready for me.

“I don’t know how you feel about kids or if you’re on birth control. I’m clean, little Spark, but I’ll always protect you,” my words are muffled against her skin as I trail my lips across her shoulder and down her chest.

Before she can respond, I suck one of her nipples between my lips, loving the way it hardens against my tongue. I roll it against the roof of my mouth, and she yells out, the sound full of pleasure and needy as hell. When I pop off her nipple, I dive toward the other and give it the same attention.

The way my woman responds to me has my cock throbbing and begging to be buried inside of her. As a thought occurs to me, I jerk slightly and press her harder against the wall.

My voice is strained at the thought of having to leave her, even if only for a second, “Do I need to go and lock the door?”

“No,” Aster gasps, as she reaches between us and grips my cock before sliding the head between her pussy lips, “I locked it using my app.” When I give her a curious look, she blushes and shrugs one shoulder. “Sometimes I stay after hours and dance. It’s easier to just lock it from here.”

Without anything stopping me, I kiss her hard and feel when the crown of my cock notches at her entrance. We both suck in a breath as I start to sink into her tight, wet heat. Her hands come up and latch onto the back of my neck, the pads of her fingers running against the hair there and making tingles flow over my skin.

We let out a combined groan when I’m seated all the way inside of her. It feels like the world pauses for a minute as we

soak up the sensation of being joined. Fuck, I already know I'm not going to be able to last this first time.

“So tight,” I grit out through my teeth.

“Move,” there's a note of desperation in Aster's voice and I'm fucking powerless against it.

I start to move, slowly at first as I pull out until only the head of my cock remains inside of her before I punch my hips forward and fill her to the hilt. She whimpers as her body melts against me, and I lose all sense of going slow and taking my time.

I fuck her harder and faster with each stroke, the sound of our bodies meeting fills the room, echoes, and returns in time with my movements. She clings to me as I stare at her, taking in every facial expression and memorizing it.

When she looks over my shoulder, she gasps, and I can't help but glance as well. Seeing us embraced in passion in the mirror, I growl in the back of my throat.

I bury my face in her neck and speak against her skin, “That's right, little Spark. Watch as I fuck you.”

Her fingernails dig into my skin and my balls draw up as I grip her hip and use it to pull her down my cock as I thrust into her. It's primal and needy, but I'm too far gone to care.

The moans that come from my woman are too much for me, and I command, “Touch your clit. You need to get there. You feel too fucking good, and I can't hold off much longer.”

I watch as her hand slides down her body toward her pussy with rapt attention. When she touches her clit, her pussy pulses around my length. I know she's close. She's right fucking there.

“Bowen,” she moans, “gonna come.”

“That's right,” I encourage.

It only takes a few more thrusts and she's falling apart in my arms. It's the most glorious sight I've ever seen, and I feel myself being pulled to her even tighter, our souls seeking and finding, linking and merging.

I slam into her one more time and my knees go weak as I fill the condom with my cum, every pulse of my dick answered by a clench of my woman's pussy. I barely keep myself standing for a moment before I pull her from the wall and press my back against it as I slide down to the floor with her still impaled on my cock.

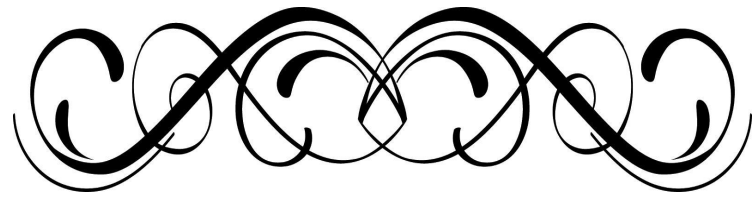
We're panting and sweating when our eyes meet. She starts to giggle, and I can't help but laugh with her. She looks so damn light right now. She has no idea how she glows or how beautiful it is.

I kiss her softly, wanting even more of a connection.

While looking into her eyes, I confess, "I love you, Aster." Her mouth opens in surprise, and I grin from ear to ear. "I know you're not ready to say it, but I don't want you to ever question what you mean to me. You're it for me. I'm all in. I love you."

She buries her face in my neck, and I feel her heart pounding against my chest. I won't give up until I have this woman's love for the rest of my life. We'll have a love that we'll be able to celebrate for the rest of our days and I don't mind waiting for her to be ready to say it back.

It'll be more than worth it.



CHAPTER 7

ASTER

Bowen kisses up my neck and I melt back against him from where I'm standing in front of my bathroom mirror. I was trying to curl the ends of my hair, but he's very distracting. I don't even remember the last time I pulled my curling iron out from the cabinet before Bowen came into my life.

The first time I did, I had to really ask myself if I had slid that far from taking care of myself as I danced in the darkness. The answer was a resounding yes. I realized I only had myself to blame because I allowed others to steal so much more of myself than just my dreams.

"You look so damn sexy, little Spark," he breathes against my neck.

I'm up and in his arms before I even realize what is happening, the movement making me laugh. That's what this man does to me. He makes me feel carefree, he's given me back the sunshine in the darkest areas where I've been lost, and he looks at me with so much love.

I still haven't told him that I love him too. I'm not even sure what is holding me back, but it's right there. I just need to let it out.

He's not at all shy or ashamed when it comes to him admitting how he feels about me. It's refreshing and I never feel like he's pressuring me to say it back. The need he has to make sure I know where I stand is genuine and there are no strings attached to it.

As he lays me down on the bed, his large hands glide over my skin and remove my bra and panties so fast I barely register it. I gasp as he kisses down my body. "I need your sweet taste on my tongue before I bury myself inside of you," his words are spoken against my skin, sending vibrations of pleasure through me.

“We need to get going. We’re going to be late,” my protests become moans as my fingers dive into Bowen’s hair as he swipes his tongue along my slit.

My back arches when he sucks my clit into his mouth. His glorious fucking mouth. I can’t believe I resisted this man as much as I did. I’m almost on the edge already, something that happens every time he touches me.

When he crawls up my body, I’m not at all surprised to find him naked. He’s a magician like that.

Ever since our first time together in my studio, which is something I never saw myself doing, we haven’t been able to keep our hands off each other. Sure, it might have only been a handful of days, but I’m still surprised at how unbothered I am about being with him.

He makes me feel like a goddess and I figure the only thing I can really do is embrace it. It’s not like it’s a hardship. The way my body sings and my soul sighs when I’m with him is a beautiful thing.

Bowen sits back on his heels as he rips open a condom and rolls it down his length. I want to tell him to fuck me raw, but I know it’s hormones and some need to walk on the wild side that has the words almost bubbling up. I’m not on birth control because there wasn’t a need and the pill used to make me feel off when I was younger.

I’m not even sure I want kids. Naked and wanting him to fill me with his cock is not the time to have that conversation. Maybe kids with him would be okay.

With his arms on either side of my head, I’m caged in and feeling even more delicate and protected. As I wrap my legs around his waist, my feet hook on the back of his thighs and tug him forward as I wrap a hand around the base of his cock. When I guide him to my entrance, he sinks into me slowly.

“Fuck,” I groan, “that always feels so good.”

Bowen’s lips capture my own as he gives me more of his weight and I can feel his heart beating against my chest. It

both arouses and grounds me. This man, my man, is a mess of contradictions and I love every moment of it.

I love him.

It's right there on the tip of my tongue, but I only moan his name and urge him on.

As if he can hear my thoughts, he grunts, "Love you, little Spark. So perfect. So beautiful."

When I arch my back, my nipples rub against the smattering of hair on his chest, sensitizing my skin and pushing me closer to the edge. Our bodies move together, the rhythm something instinctive and natural. Just like being with him, no matter how much I tried to fight it.

"Need you to milk my cock, Aster," he grits out through his teeth.

When I meet his gaze, his brown eyes glitter with intent and adoration as he pounds into me. His hips snap forward faster and harder, making me moan, beg, and plead. When I fall over the edge, it's hard and sudden, a wave which crests too fast to get my feet underneath me before it sweeps me out into a sea of pleasure.

My name is a growl on his lips as he joins me. I can feel every pulse of his cum filling the condom and the irrational part of me peeks out again, wondering what it would feel like with nothing between us. Maybe one day I'll give a voice to those thoughts, but not today.

When Bowen rolls onto his back, he takes me with him. His hands smooth over my body as we come back to ourselves. By the way his eyes light up when I prop my chin on his chest, I have no doubt that I have a goofy grin on my face.

When he smiles, his dimple makes an appearance and I just soak up the feeling of being with him. It feels so good to float in this happy feeling without caring about anything else in the world. Except we have somewhere to be today.

I gasp and sit up suddenly as I scold him, "Bowen, we're going to be late." My hands fly up to my hair and I groan.

“Now I have sex hair,” I whisper hiss as if someone else would be here to hear the accusation.

“You look like you’ve been thoroughly loved,” he’s smug as he tucks his hands behind his head, looking pleased with himself. His eyes move down my body and then back up to meet mine. “Can’t say I’m hating this view, little Spark.”

I huff and roll my eyes as I climb off the bed while turning my back to him so I can hide my smile. He doesn’t need to see that right now. It’ll only make him walk around like some prized bull.

My legs are a little wobbly as my body still recovers from the orgasm that he gave me. I get myself under control and head into the bathroom to get cleaned up and then get ready, again, to head to town square.

It’s Christmas Eve which means the gazebo is going to be all decked out and Santa will be visiting. It’s one of the not to be missed events in Sweetwater Valley. This is the first year I’ll be there with someone and I’m sure everyone will be gossiping about it. As if our relationship hasn’t already made the rounds.

Bowen comes up behind me and kisses my neck as his strong arms wrap around me. I try to bat his hands away, but he just throws his head back and laughs.

“Trouble,” I grumble.

“Worth it,” he chortles before kissing my neck again and sauntering out of the bathroom.

Do I take a second and stare at his ass as he goes? Yes. You don’t pass up a show like that.

It doesn’t take long for us to get ready and head out. My leg is bouncing up and down as we drive, my nerves starting to get the best of me. I’m not at all ashamed of being with Bowen, but this feels like we’re debuting our relationship in a new way.

Bowen reaches over and puts his hand on my knee while he chuckles under his breath. “It’s going to be fine, Aster,” his voice is soothing. When I glance at him, he smirks while

keeping his eyes on the road, “Do I need to make you come again and calm you down?”

“No,” I practically shout, and it makes him laugh harder. I clear my throat and tilt my chin upward. “I mean, I’m good. Thank you.”

He gives my knee a squeeze and I can feel the amusement coming off him. I can only roll my eyes and try to get myself under control. It’s not as big of a deal as I think it is, I get it. It won’t change anything either.

It’s just that coming out of the shell I had burrowed deep within has been a process. I’ve been getting better though, and I *feel* better because of it. I didn’t even realize the impact of how much I had been isolating myself.

The other night I actually went out to The Goose with Taylor, Lark, Lana, Poppy, and a few other ladies. It was so much fun. I had kind of forgotten how much fun being out with friends for a girl’s night could be.

Bowen was there working, and it was hard not to keep my eyes on him the entire night. The ladies around the table were having a lot of fun teasing me about it too. Most of them are very happily married or in relationships and they had this knowing glint in their eyes that made me feel welcomed and seen.

Not only was I unable to tear my eyes away from him, but I also watched as women tried to flirt with him. It made me flush with anger, but he quickly rebuffed them. It was gratifying to see. It had me falling deeper in love with the man.

Then when his shift was done, he was at my door and kissing me until I couldn’t breathe. He carried me to bed without saying a word. There wasn’t really any need for them anyway; we could feel what was between us.

The town square is full of people once we arrive, and Bowen leads me to the gazebo with his arm around my shoulders. I let his warmth envelope me and settle me as I take

in the lights and the eager smiles on the faces of the little ones as they wait patiently for a moment with Santa.

My students who are milling around wave at me and I give them a bright smile and wave right back. I even get some hugs as Bowen leads me through the throng of people to where Aurora is running a hot chocolate stand. The poor girl almost bounces right out of her boots when she sees me approaching with Bowen wrapped around me like someone is going to try and steal me right out of his arms.

“Hi Aster. Hi Bowen,” she chirps and then pretty much shoves hot chocolate in our hands.

I can only giggle and smile, something that doesn’t feel so foreign anymore. “I’m pretty sure the whole town is here,” I muse and Aurora nods excitedly.

She’s always a ball of energy. I used to find it a little exhausting, but it’s just part of who she is and I’m finding, as the shadows of my past recede, I can appreciate her love of life and the way she lives it even more.

Bowen kisses the side of my head and nods to a group of ladies who are standing and talking. “Go and catch up.”

I notice the men who belong to the women are standing close by, their heads together while they look around suspiciously at any other man who comes too close to the group. “Are you going to go over there and join the alpha brigade?”

He puffs out his chest and rumbles, “I’m a full-fledged member now, little Spark.”

I shake my head as Aurora presses her hand to her chest, her voice an awed whisper, “Little Spark. That is the most adorable thing I’ve ever heard.”

I stick my tongue out at her and head over to the ladies where I’m quickly pulled into the circle and hugged. It takes me a moment to assess if I like it or not. I shied away from touch for a long time, but I know these women aren’t a threat and that they are only welcoming me with open hearts and arms.

I relax even as I feel Bowen's eyes on me. When I glance at him, he's looking right at me in a way that has my pussy clenching and warmth flowing through me.

Taylor whispers in my ear, "So, you're a goner for him, huh?"

I shuffle on my feet a little and give her a sheepish smile. "I really am." I lower my voice a little and confess, "He tells me he loves me all the time. I haven't said it back though."

"Well, you better get on that missy," Ida's voice is really fucking loud from the other side of me, and I let out a small yelp of surprise. I swear the woman didn't make any noise at all and came out of nowhere.

"Jeez, Ida," I admonish her, "where did you come from?"

She laughs, the sound remarkably close to a cackle. "I was right over there," she points without really looking which is a little suspicious. "I just came over to thank you for your help with the toy drive and tell you how excited I am to know you'll help make it just as successful next year."

I narrow my eyes at the woman, but I already know I'm done for. I'll be helping next year, and I'll make sure Bowen is right there with me. The mischief in her eyes tells me she knows she's got me.

"Of course," I resign myself to my fate and even though I might sound a little put out, I have a wide smile on my face.

"Now," she pats my hand in that classic grandmother way she has about her, "you make sure that man knows how you feel about him. He's a catch and an exceptionally good match for you if I do say so myself," she sounds very smug.

Before I can say anything, she just winks at me before she floats away to scare the crap out of someone else. I can only shake my head as Taylor giggles and wraps her arm around my shoulders, the action full of affection.

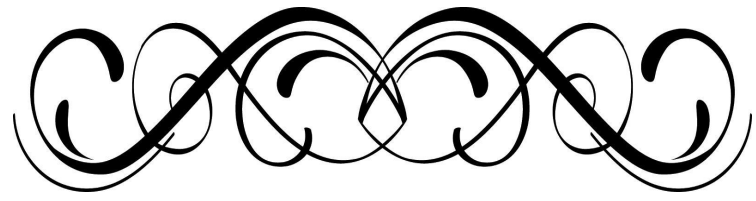
"Watch out or she'll work her magic on you one day," I warn my friend.

Taylor's eyes turn sad for a moment before she shakes her head. "I doubt it. She's already tried with me, but I'm a lost cause."

I wrap my arm around my best friend's waist and give a squeeze. She's wrong. She might be a little lost, something I recognize easily, but she's not a lost cause. I'm pretty sure I know who her heart is waiting for. We'll just have to see how it all works out.

When I look up again, I meet Bowen's brown eyes, soft with love, and I know which gift he'll value the most when I give it to him in the morning. The smile he shoots me, the one where his dimple comes out, has me thinking we might not be hanging out tonight for very long.

I'm more than okay with it.



CHAPTER 8

BOWEN

The giddy feeling of waking up on Christmas morning hits me hard as I slowly realize this is the best Christmas morning of my life. I have my woman in my arms, her naked body is pressed up against mine, and today is just the first of many holidays with her.

Because I'm never letting her go.

Because I'll work to be worthy of her for the rest of my life.

Because showing her that she thrives in the light is the greatest honor I have ever been given.

I wrap my arms around her and bring her tighter against me and let my hands roam over her soft skin. I soak up the feeling because it's fleeting. Today is a big day full of firsts. Our first Christmas together is the most important to me, but I know it'll be the first of many. It'll be one for the memory books.

Then we'll be heading to my parent's house and her parent's house to see them and graze on whatever food there is to have there. I think she's nervous about meeting my parents, but she shouldn't be. I've already told them all about her.

The squeal my mom let out when I told her I had fallen in love with Aster was high pitched and full of excitement. She was patting my arm over and over like she couldn't control her excitement and all I could do was laugh along with Dad.

"You better treat her right," Mom admonished me. "Whenever I've seen her, she always looks so sad. I've always wondered what happened to her when she went off to the big city," she mused.

"It wasn't good," I mumbled. She looked at me sharply and I gave a shrug in response. "She hasn't told me everything, but I know her dreams of being on stage in a ballet company slowly died as she auditioned, not only for a spot at a company but for other productions as well. Casting directors wanted her

to give more than she was willing to compromise herself for. That's about all I know."

Mom's eyes went soft and filled with tears. Dad's voice was in full-on pissed off dad mode, "It's probably better she didn't give details because then your mom would be bailing both of us out of jail and I hear the legal system is not as kind up there."

He certainly wasn't wrong, and it warmed my heart to know my dad would have my back like that for my woman. I wasn't surprised and it felt really fucking good.

"Well, you treat her like a princess," Mom sniffled with her words.

"A queen," I gently corrected her, and the smile on Mom's face turned from sad to brilliant.

"Guess we raised him right, hum?" Dad's voice was teasing and had us all laughing.

I'm only a little bit nervous about meeting her family. It's not like I don't know them or anything but meeting them with their daughter on my arm is different than knowing them from around town. It's not going to change anything for me either way.

I love Aster, and nothing is going to run me off. Not her past, not her fear, not her walls. I'm in this until I take my last breath and I'm more than willing to walk next to her as we navigate life together.

Aster rolls over in my arms and pulls me from my thoughts. Her eyes look darker and stormy blue when they blink open, the remnants of sleep hanging around and making her look cozy and adorable. I kiss her lips softly, needing the connection.

"Good morning, little Spark. Merry Christmas," my voice is rough.

"Merry Christmas," she whispers back and burrows deeper into my chest.

I revel in the way she feels in my arms and how she fits so perfectly. It's hard to remember it was only weeks ago when I didn't have this, didn't have her. My life has changed so quickly, but it was a change I welcomed with open arms because she stole my heart with one look.

"I want to give you your first present now," she murmurs against my chest.

I run my hands over her back and hips and then back up. I tease her, "Are you hiding it somewhere close by?"

She peeks up at me with a smile on her lips and joy dancing in her eyes, "It's not a present you can touch or hold, it's something you can feel."

My eyebrows shoot up and my cock, which is already hard, throbs against her belly. She giggles softly and shakes her head.

"Now you have me very curious."

Her smile shifts a little from something bright into something softer and my heart stalls in my chest. "I love you, Bowen."

How is it possible, with only four words, everything in existence tilts? I slam my lips down on hers, kissing her with everything in me and pouring my thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams into the kiss.

When my lungs are burning, I pull away from her only to gasp, "I love you, Aster."

"I know," she shoots back at me while a saucy smile graces her lips.

I roll us until I'm hovering over her, her legs opening in invitation as I settle my hips down against hers. It would be so easy to slip inside of her right now, but I hold off. I love our physical connection, but this moment is so much more than that.

"Say it again," I plead.

"I love you."

“Again,” I demand.

“I love you,” she shouts, putting her entire body and soul into it.

I tilt my head back and take a deep breath, letting the feeling of her love envelope me in the most delicious way. When I look back down at her, she’s studying me with a knowing look in her eyes.

“There’s one more thing,” she says softly. “I didn’t plan on it, so I don’t have something for you to open for this one, even though I could if I had thought ahead.”

I shake my head and press our foreheads together gently. “You’ve already given me plenty. Your love was my Christmas wish this year.”

“Move in with me,” she blurts and I still.

I study her face, needing to see if she’s really asking or if she’s doing it because it’s what I want. “Are you serious right now?”

She bites her lip, uncertainty crossing her features before she pushes it back. “It makes sense. I have this house and the room. You have your apartment, but you’re hardly ever there.” She takes a deep breath and gives me a decisive nod. “I want this. I want you here. I want to live with you and love you. I’m serious. I’m sure. I’m ready.”

I kiss her again because I can’t *not* kiss her. With a push on my shoulder, I’m rolling, and she comes to rest on top of me, settling back on her knees and looking down at me with lust and love in her eyes. She reaches into the bedside table on my side of the bed, and I can’t help but feel a burst of joy because I have a ‘my side of the bed’ here. With her.

I’m lost in the pleasure of the moment, my focus and attention soaking it up instead of paying attention to her. I hardly notice when she rolls the condom down my length, but I can’t miss when she starts to sink her tight pussy down my cock.

I groan as my hands go to her hips and hold her steady. Her hands cover mine, our connection forged and unbreakable. A

completed circuit.

“What are you doing little Spark?” My voice is strained as I take in how fucking glorious she is above me.

“Convincing you to move in.” Her lips are curved into a wicked smile and by the way her eyes gleam she knows I don’t need any convincing at all. “You seemed a little unsure,” she sasses me.

“Convince away,” I grit out through my teeth and settle in for the show and ride of my fucking life.

Her body is pure magic as she rides me, her hips swiveling and circling as she rises and descends. I help her along, my fingers tightening on her hips when I’m right on the edge. From the way her pussy pulses around my shaft, she’s right there with me.

We come together moaning out our bliss.

“Best Christmas ever,” I pant when she collapses over me, her hair a mess splayed out over my shoulder and her tits pillowing against my chest.

She huffs out a breathless laugh. I run a hand up and down her spine, loving the softness of her against me.

“Of course, I’ll move in with you, Aster. There was never any other choice.” I pause and then wonder out loud, “I wonder if anyone would help us get it done today.”

She shakes her head and admonishes me, “How about we let everyone enjoy the day with their families? Santa has already been busy bringing our town enough Christmas magic. They’ll help another day.”

My voice is hopeful, “Tomorrow?”

She dissolves into giggles on my chest. “Yeah, probably tomorrow.”

I hold her close with a big smile on my face and I know she’s probably right. In this town, a love like I’ve found is celebrated and we pull together when help is needed. I bet some people *would* be willing to help today. It’s not like I have a ton of stuff anyway.

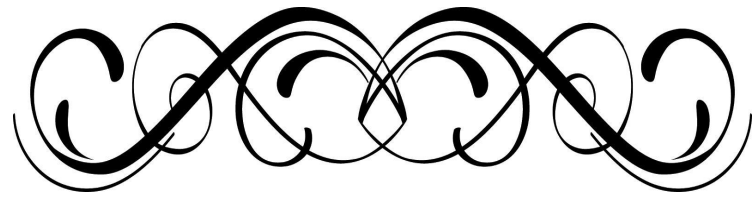
Still, I know my little Spark is right. We have too much stuff to get done today as it is. Tomorrow will be soon enough.

Then I need to find the perfect ring because there is no way I'm not going to make Aster my wife. But one thing at a time.

One day we'll talk about kids again. I'm in no rush and neither is she. If it's not something we decide to do, then that's okay too. I'm more than happy with the life I have because I have my woman in my arms and her love in my soul.

Life and love come to you when you're ready for it and it never gives you more than you're capable of taking on. Even when you can't see through the darkness. Even when you aren't sure of what you'll find on the other side.

I hold her tighter and kiss the top of her head because there is nowhere else that I'd rather be right now. This moment is ours and ours alone. The time will come soon enough when we share our joy and the people who love us will celebrate with us.



EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER *ASTER*

I smile as I look around at the women surrounding me, the glow kissing us from the lights on the huge gazebo in the town square which is decorated for Santa to bring the children of Sweetwater Valley a little more Christmas magic. They whisper in his ear about what they want for Christmas and his joyous, booming laughter carries on the crisp evening air.

It's perfect.

Just like this last year has been.

I never knew I could find someone to share my life with like I share it with Bowen. I know bliss every single day because he walks beside me as we take on whatever life has in store for us. I know he is proud of me, and I turn that pride right back on him.

The love we have is special and it's to be cherished.

It's the same love most of the women surrounding me have found as well. When I look over, the men who love us aren't far away, their eyes filled with humor as they watch us laugh and joke with each other.

I look a little closer and furrow my eyebrows together when I don't see Bowen in the group. He was there just a moment ago. I could feel his eyes on me.

"Looking for someone in particular?"

I jump a little, turn toward Ida, and give her a pointed look that only has her laughing. The woman is still silent on her feet and still up to no good. I wouldn't expect anything else from her.

She grabs my hand and holds it between both of hers. "You made this year's toy drive the best it's ever been. Thank you," her voice is thick with emotion and her eyes get glassy with unshed tears.

“Thank you, Ida, for tricking me into volunteering last year. I don’t know where I’d be if you hadn’t.”

“I didn’t trick you,” she has the nerve to sound affronted even though we all know she did, in fact, trick me. Or manipulate me, at the very least.

I make a humming sound and she only smiles. “I was thinking,” she starts, and I know whatever she’s about to say is going to be big because of the serious look on her face, “I’m not getting any younger and I would really like to hand off the responsibility of the toy drive to someone younger. Someone who can ensure the kids around her are taken care of for years to come.”

“Ida,” I breathe, and she shakes her head.

“Just think about it.”

I find myself nodding mutely, hating the idea of Ida not being around to meddle in anyone’s life. I don’t think that is going to happen any time soon, but I can understand why she wants to pass on her legacy to someone else. I’m honored she would think of me.

And of course, I’ll do it because the toy drive is special. Not just because of the people it helps, but because it brought me the love of my life.

Ida gives my hand a squeeze and then she’s off, I’m sure to get someone else to do her bidding. I watch her walk away and smile as I shake my head. When I turn back to say something to the ladies, I gasp.

Because kneeling in front of me while holding a ring box in his hand is my Bowen.

He smiles at me, and his dimple comes out to make me feel weak in the knees. The man already is playing dirty, and he hasn’t even said a word.

“I’ve had this ring for almost a whole year,” he starts, and I glance at the ring and barely stop myself from ripping it out of the box and slipping it on because it’s beautiful and perfect, “and there were so many times I wanted to drop to my knee and ask you to marry me. I only waited because I know how

special tonight is. One year ago, we showed up at this event and showed the town the light we found in each other. I wanted to celebrate this year by asking you a very important question.”

Bowen’s dad grumbles from close by, “Well, ask her already, the anticipation is killing me.”

I giggle and Bowen shoots his dad a quelling look. When his brown eyes come back to me, I get lost in the depth of love I find there. I know I’m ready for this next step. I was so scared to take a leap last year when we met, but he helped me every step of the way.

“I’m not afraid anymore, Bowen, you showed me how to live in the light,” I whisper. “Ask me.”

“Aster, my little Spark, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I shout the word and throw up my hands before doing a little spin and then launching myself at him.

He catches me easily with one arm wrapped around my waist as he keeps a hold of the ring box. I watch, barely able to contain my excitement as he wrestles the ring out of the box with one hand, unwilling to let go of me with the other.

When he slips the ring on my finger, I grab his face in my hands, the light hitting the stone in my ring and looking like a spark.

I press my lips to his and whisper, “I love you, Bowen.”

“Again,” he mumbles right back.

I don’t say the words again, I show him. I’ll be showing him for the rest of my life. Happily.

Everyone celebrates around us, but I can’t focus on them. I’m focused on the man in front of me, the man who holds me so close, the man who chased away the darkness I allowed in when I thought my dreams had died. Now, I know that they just changed.

And they led me right to where I was supposed to be.

With him. Always with him.

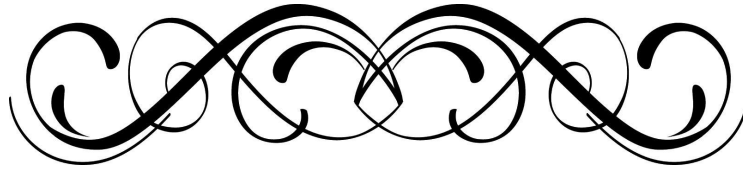
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

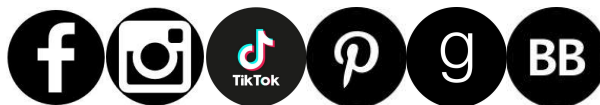


Ember Davis loves alpha heroes with a range of emotions, but a strong sense of how to take care of their women. She loves her heroines from all walks of life, just like her heroes, and she wants them to be real and relatable. Her heroines tend to be sassy, opinionated and smart.

Ember is a stay-at-home mom of two who recently refound her love of books and all things romance and is so glad that she did. She's always been creative but writing and creating stories that she would love to read satisfies dreams she had as a little girl. She loves butterflies, the color purple and enjoying time with her family.

Psst...it's totally a pen name, but everything above is 100% true.

If you enjoyed this book, or even if you didn't, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review and/or a star rating on Amazon! This is a whole new world for me so any feedback you're open to giving, I'd love to have.



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