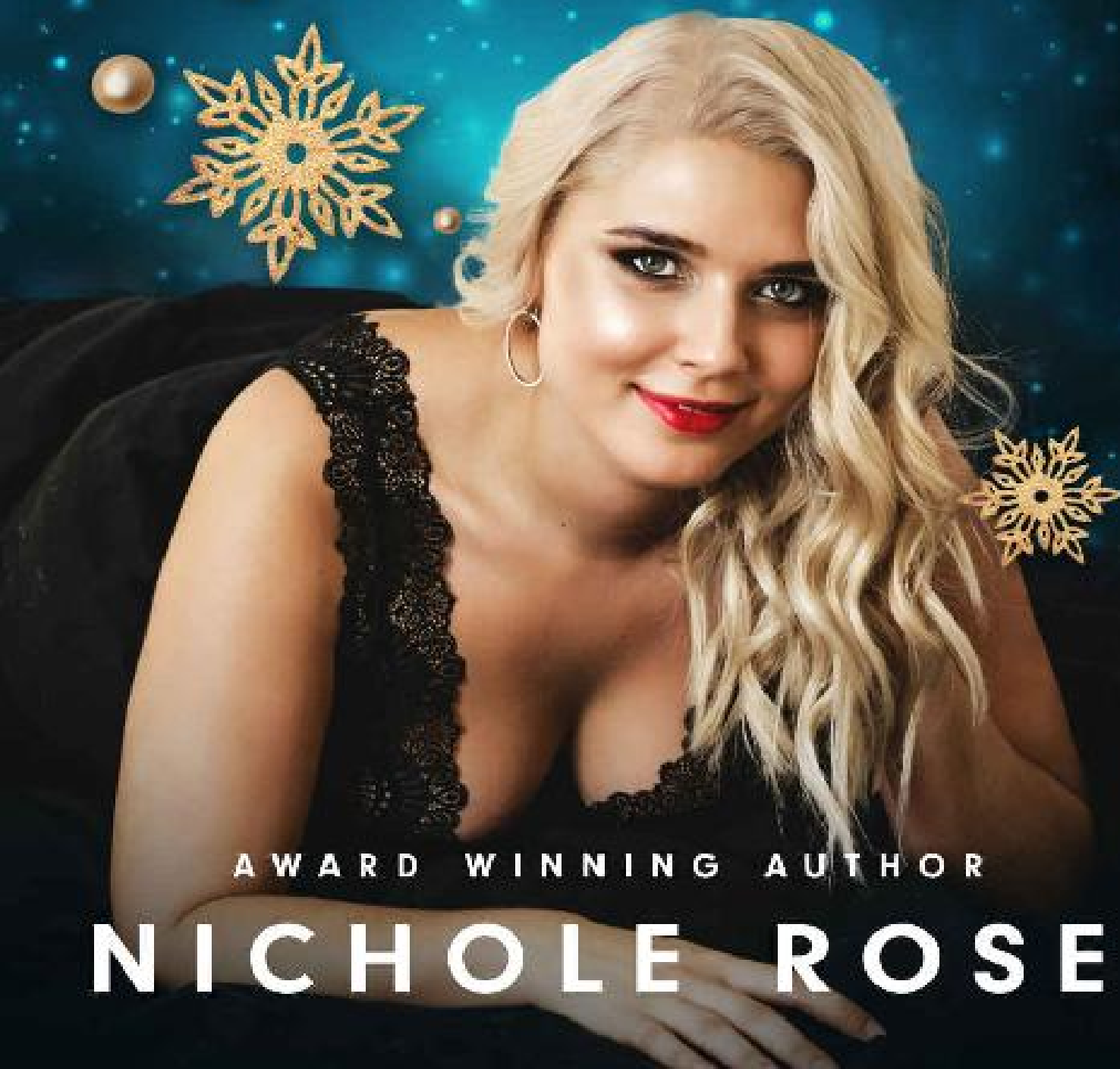


THE NAUGHTY LIST

Chasing
CHRISTMAS



AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

NICHOLE ROSE

Chasing Christmas

Nichole Rose

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“She warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within.”

Disney’s Beauty & the Beast

About the Book



All this curvy girl wants for Christmas is the scarred, growly former stuntman who sets her world ablaze.

Kaiden

Call me a Scrooge, but I've never been big on holidays.

When you spend them alone, there isn't a whole lot to get excited about.

Until Laura Groves waltzes into my life and turns it upside down.

Hollywood's curvy It Girl is too young and beautiful for a scarred, used-up man like me.

But that doesn't stop me from claiming her anyway.

Except now the world thinks she's hiding a big secret, and it's up to me to put the rumors to rest.

I'll protect her, even if it means taking a job on her new Christmas movie, *The Naughty List*.

Laura

I have one Christmas wish this year: Kaiden Huxley.

He's the sexiest man I've ever met.

When he kisses me, the whole world falls out of focus.

There's only one problem.

A horrible accident left him scarred, and he doesn't think he's good enough.

But when my life spins out of control, he doesn't hesitate to face his past for me.

Now, it's up to me to teach this incredible man just how perfect he really is.

Before this movie wraps on Christmas, this grumpy former stuntman will be all tied up in a bow.

If the world stops throwing us curveballs, that is.

Chapter One

Kaiden



N ovember
“Hello? Is anyone here?”

Shit. I throw myself against the wall, keeping my body carefully obscured in the darkened recesses of the old gym as a beautiful blonde peeps around the corner, her expression screwed up as if she expects to be kidnapped at any moment.

Laura Groves. The curvy little bombshell currently taking Hollywood—and the world—by storm. The girl is a fucking knockout. My heart slams against my ribcage, my cock swelling against the confine of my jeans. It’s late November, cool even by California standards, yet sweat trickles between my shoulder blades as I stare at her.

I have her generous curves to thank for that.

She isn't reed thin like most starlets in this town, starving herself to fit some ridiculous standard of beauty that no one could measure up to without a whole lot of movie magic and thousands of dollars to throw into the endeavor. She has meat on her bones. And eyes green enough to shame the brightest emerald.

“Oh,” she whispers, coming to a dead stop when she sees me skulking in the shadows.

“What are you doing here?” I growl, not stepping forward to meet her. I don't hide to frighten her. Thanks to the nasty scar across the right side of my face, most women in this town look at me in revulsion or pity. They shrink away as if they expect me to try to snatch them off the streets...or whisper behind their hands as if my scar somehow prevents me from hearing what they say about me. As far as I'm concerned, one reaction is just as bad as the other.

I may look like a nightmare now, but I was one of them. Funny how quickly people in this forget when you're no longer useful to them. As soon as my star faded, I became persona non grata to all but a few.

“Um, hi.” Laura lifts one hand in a self-conscious wave. Not that she has anything to be self-conscious about. Jesus, she's the brightest little star in this town.

“I'm looking for Kaiden Huxley. Jackson Reed said I could find him here.”

“You found him.”

She blinks long, sooty lashes, briefly hiding her eyes. I want to gnash my teeth as soon as her gaze leaves me for that split second. The feeling isn't rational, but it's there all the same. There's something pure in her eyes, something untouched. That's rare in this town.

It's a tale as old as time. Bring an innocent girl to this town, and it'll chew them up and spit them out in short order. Not this one. Even after a decade, she's still fresh-faced and innocent, still filled with a sense of wonder. She's an anomaly, the rare woman who never hardens or grows jaded or bitter no matter what this town throws at her. And it's thrown a lot of shit her way, thanks to those generous curves.

"I'm Laura Groves," she says.

"I know who you are." How could I not? She's been a fixture in the film industry since she was sixteen. Her beautiful face has graced the cover of every magazine and gossip rag from here to India. She's been one of Hollywood's *It* girls since right after my accident...and yet she clings to innocence and grace as if it's an ingrained part of her. No matter what they throw at her, she meets it on her feet with her head held high and a smile on her face.

"Oh." A question bobbles on her lips before she fights it back.

I desperately want to demand she ask it. I want to know what she's thinking. But I resist the urge. The less I know about this girl, the better. Pretty little stars like her aren't for washed-up has-beens like me. Maybe in another life, I would have asked

that question. I would have listened to the voice screaming for me not to let this one out of my sight.

In another life, I might have been someone worthy of listening to that voice.

That was a long time ago.

Once upon a time, I was the most sought-after stuntman in Hollywood. I was fearless, capable of pulling off stunt sequences others wouldn't even dream of attempting. An on-set accident several years ago changed all of that. Save for the people who were there that day, no one knows what happened. In a town where gossip reigns supreme, rumors fly hot and fast, but not even a whisper of the truth has slipped past loose lips. All anyone knows for sure is that I was gravely injured.

No one knows that the lead actor lost his mind when he discovered the director was trying to fuck his seventeen-year-old baby sister. He drove his truck through the director's trailer. And I was the unlucky bastard in said trailer at the time.

I spent months in the hospital being carefully stitched back together. The first two years were an endless parade of surgeries, skin grafts, and rehab. It felt like living my childhood all over again...sidelined by something I didn't choose. Back then, it was a heart condition.

This time was worse.

By the time they finally cleared me to resume my everyday life, my career was long over. The things I once did with ease

were no longer possible. The life I'd built for myself was just fucking gone. People who once worked side by side with me couldn't stomach looking at me. The whispers and jokes were endless.

Jackson Reed, my business partner, took on the brunt of the work. I faded into the background, training stunt doubles to do what I used to do. Every once in a while, an actor will seek me out, wanting to learn what I know, but those instances are few and far between. Most don't want to risk their pretty faces when those pretty faces make them millions.

I can count on one hand the number of times a woman like Laura Groves came looking for me. Those who did took one look at me and never returned. In a city where physical beauty is the golden standard, I'm a walking, talking reminder that the clock runs out on everyone eventually.

“Why are you here, Laura?”

“I need you,” she blurts.

A menacing growl erupts from my lips before I can call it back. Fuck, I want to hear her say that while she's spread eagle on my bed and her first orgasm still coats my tongue.

“Say that again,” I demand, even though I know she doesn't mean it.

“Um, I need you?”

I step toward her, compelled by the throb in my cock from my hiding place. Yes, I'll give her what she needs. I'll fuck her

right and proper, let her make a mess of my back with those pretty nails. Whatever she needs.

She isn't short, yet I tower over her, dwarfing her. Christ, my sheer size eclipses her like the moon swallowing the sun. She doesn't shrink from me, though. There's strength in this innocent little starlet, courage that goes bone deep.

“What does a girl like you need with a man like me, princess?”

“Your scar,” she gasps, her green eyes filling with distress.

I flinch, taking a step back as her reaction cools the fire running through my veins. “Doubt that's what you need from me.”

She shakes her head, her cheeks turning pink. “I'm sorry. That's not what I meant. I didn't realize....” She trails off into awkward silence. I can practically see her fighting the urge to squirm from foot to foot in her thousand-dollar heels. “I'm so sorry. I promise I'm not usually so rude. You just caught me off guard.”

“I'm used to it,” I rasp. “Most of you react the same way when you first see me.” I rake my gaze over her, hot and predatory. She's so fucking pretty. Does she know how badly I want to put my filthy hands all over her? “Your world is glitz and glamour, not scarred old relics.”

“My world is faker than a can of spray tan,” she mutters.

One dark brow rises, pulling the edges of my scar taut.

“You were injured in a stunt.”

My face falls into a scowl. As far as the world knows, that's precisely what happened. That's the story we all told. We certainly didn't do it to protect Alastair McDonald, the director. His predatory ways were revealed long ago. He was one of the first to be tossed into a cell when women in Hollywood started speaking out. I popped a bottle of champagne that night. But Damen Montero and his little sister deserved protection. Had Marissya been my sister, I would have driven a truck through McDonald's fucking trailer too.

"Sorry." Laura grimaces. "I'm nosy. And nervous."

"I make you nervous."

"Yes," she admits, slipping her hands into her coat pockets to hide the way she fidgets with her fingers. "You're a legend. I've heard stories about you since I came to Hollywood. But no one told me that you're so...."

"Uncouth? Hideous?" The left corners of my lips turn up in a sardonic smile.

"Sexy," she blurts.

I throw my dark head back, a burst of rusty laughter escaping my lips.

"I don't appreciate being laughed at," she growls, scowling up at me.

I slowly tip my head down to look at her. "And I don't appreciate being played for a fool," I growl. "Whatever you want from me, you don't need to butter me up to get it."

“You think I’m lying to you to get my way?” She gapes at me, her plump lips parted in shock.

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Indignation stiffens her spine. “You don’t even know me.”

“Like I said, most of you react the same.”

Her face turns red with fury, her emerald eyes shooting sparks in my direction. She opens her mouth to issue a scathing retort and then bites it back before she can give it a voice. Something shifts through her eyes too quickly for me to read, but her expression falls. So do her shoulders. My little starlet deflates like a balloon.

Is she acting, or did I hurt her feelings?

When tears well in her eyes, I have my answer.

I rub one hand along my jaw and curse. “Are you crying?”

“No.”

“You are, aren’t you?”

Her withering glare confirms my suspicions. She is crying. And I’m an asshole.

She whirls around, giving me her back. I stare at her, not sure exactly how we ended up here. Or why she’s here at all. Or how to fix it. But I’m all but positive that I fucked up.

“I don’t know what’s sadder, Kaiden,” she finally says, speaking quietly. “The fact that you don’t know how damn sexy you are, or that you’ve let this town reduce your sense of self-worth based on something that happened *to you*. With or

without that scar, you're still a legend. Anyone who treats you as anything less than that isn't worth your time."

"Don't pity me, Laura."

"Pity you? I'm mad at you," she sniffs, making me want to smile. "The Kaiden Huxley I heard so much about wouldn't give a damn what anyone thought about him. He certainly didn't when he was doing things everyone said couldn't be done."

"How do you know so much about me?"

She shrugs noncommittally. Interesting. Laura Groves is not like any starlet I've ever met. This one is...*mine*. Fuck, that's not what I meant. And yet, it's *precisely* what I meant.

"What do you need my help with, princess?" I ask, my voice softer, gentler. It's still gruff and gritty, but there's nothing I can do about it.

"I need you to spend Thanksgiving weekend with me," she blurts, shocking me to the core.

Did she come here to ask me to spend the weekend with her? My cock throbs, pounding out my answer against my zipper. I think my fucking heart does too. Yes, yes, yes.

She turns to me, her face screwed up like she's ready for war.

"Don't say it if you don't mean it," I growl, the only warning I'm capable of giving her. *Don't invite me into your life if you're just going to kick me out again later. Because once I'm*

in, I'm not fucking leaving, princess. You'll be mine. I won't let you go.

“I told you that you don't know me.” She sashays toward me, putting a slight sway in her hips that has me fighting for my damn life, and pats me on the chest. “If you did, you'd know I mean *exactly* what I say.”

I reach for her with a groan, desperate to get my hands on her.

She steps out of my reach, smiling brighter than the fucking summer sun.

Just that easily, my heart falls into her hands.

Chapter Two

Laura



“Jesus Christ,” Kaiden growls, raking a hand down his face. A mangled bouquet is clutched tightly in the other. I think they were lovely at one point today, but the petals droop, and the stems are crushed as if he’s been clenching them in his fist. The sight of them still brings a smile to my lips.

“You came,” I say, throwing my front door open wide. I wasn’t sure he would. I’ve been a nervous wreck all day, thinking he wouldn’t show up despite agreeing to spend the weekend with me. He doesn’t strike me as someone who spends much time around people. Actually, I don’t think he spends much time at all around people anymore.

I've been asking about him ever since my agent told me I was up for a role in a big action film after the holidays. It's the one genre I haven't tackled, and I'm woefully unprepared. But I want to nail the part, and Kaiden can help me do that. He can teach me how to be an action star, considering he was one in real life.

Every studio in Hollywood scrambled to sign him to projects. He could have been a leading man if he'd wanted the job, but everyone who knew him said he didn't have the patience to learn lines or play the game. He wanted to do his part and be done.

He doesn't even do that much now. After his accident a decade ago, he just sort of...faded into the background. Most people I talked to couldn't remember the last time they saw him. Most couldn't even remember the last time they spoke to him. They all deal with his business partner, Jackson Reed, now.

But Jackson Reed isn't the man who worked on all my favorite movies. Kaiden is. So I sought him out two days ago to offer him a job. Instead, I invited him to spend the weekend with me. I didn't mean to do it, but I think it was the best decision I ever made.

I've never been one to back down from a challenge, and this man has *difficult* stamped all over his hulking body. But he's the sexiest man I've ever met...and that's saying something because I've met a lot of men the world considers beautiful.

There's something about this one, though, that eclipses every single one of them.

He isn't pretty. He isn't put together. He isn't carefully coiffed or groomed to within an inch of his life. His appeal doesn't come from a stylist, his bank account, or any plastic surgery. In fact, I'm quite sure he's had none of the latter. A nasty scar runs from the corner of his right lip to his temple, as if a sword ripped him open. The edges are puckered, the skin surrounding it mottled as if melted. It's painful to look at...if you see it at all.

He exudes so much raw magnetism that it's hard to focus on anything but how damn fierce he is. This man is as real as they come, completely unrefined. He's the man it takes special effects and CGI to turn actors into; only there is no green screen here. There's only him, those wicked gray eyes, and the way my entire body hums when he's close to me.

"Told you I'd be here," he growls, staring at me as if he's trying to see into my soul. The flames in his eyes heat me to the nth degree, making silent promises I desperately want him to deliver.

My stomach trembles, my insides quivering with anticipation. God, he's primal, almost like a wild animal. He's husky, towering over me in a way that's far too appealing. His black button-down stretches over his barrel chest and down the thick slab of his stomach, barely containing his bulk. His black slacks hug his powerful thighs. I fight the urge to press my

legs together, wondering what it'll feel like to have him on top of me.

I've been clinging to my virginity since I came to this town, refusing to give it up for anything less than the fairytale romance I've always dreamed about. I always swore that no panty-dropping smile or Sexiest Man Alive would talk me out of giving it up. But Kaiden Huxley? Well, he didn't have to talk very fast at all.

I tear my gaze from him before I beg him to touch me right here on the front stoop. My eyes fall to the flowers still clutched in his hands. "Are those for me?"

He thrusts them toward me, petals drifting toward the cement at his feet. "Sat on the damn things in the car," he mutters. "You can throw them out."

"No way," I say. "They're beautiful, Kaiden." I bring the bouquet to my nose and inhale, humming softly as the soft scent of the orchids, peonies, dahlias, and roses swirl together. I peek at him over the top of the battered flowers, smiling in gratitude.

"You look like a princess." He scrubs a hand through his hair. "That dress is...it's something."

"Thanks. You look pretty handsome yourself." I beam at him, glad he approves. I tore my closet apart, looking for something to wear tonight. Clothes still spill across the floor like a tornado hit it. The red dress is a short, off-the-shoulder tulle dress with a short asymmetrical hem. It's bold and sexy on my curves without being too much. I paired it with a pair of

ballet flats. I spend far too much of my life in heels to don them willingly.

“It’s just a button-down, princess.”

“Well, I like it.”

The right corner of his lip lifts into a smile, crinkling the bottom edge of his scar. He should smile more. It softens him and makes him seem less like a grump. Though I’m beginning to think grumpy is his natural state.

“You should come in,” I say, stepping aside for him to enter. “Dinner is ready.” At least, I hope it is. I’ve never tried to cook for anyone else before. I spend most of my time alone. This town hasn’t exactly been kind to me, either. Kaiden and I probably have more in common than he thinks.

“You cooked for me,” he says.

“Yes.” I look up at him through my lashes. “At least I tried. I make no promises that it’s any good. I’ve never made a turkey before, Kaiden. Or dressing.” I grimace. “It might not be edible.”

“I’m thinking I should stay right here,” he mutters, not moving an inch.

“I’m just kidding. I tasted it. It’s all edible,” I promise. It’s not the best meal I’ve ever tasted, but it’s not the worst either. It’s not half bad for a first attempt.

“If I follow you inside, the first thing I’m eating tonight is you, princess,” he growls, his heated gaze rolling over me like a hot wind.

“Oh.” I squeeze my legs together this time, unable to help myself. I want that. Maybe more than I should. It’s pretty much all I’ve thought about since meeting him the other day. I’ve spent every night tossing and turning, dreaming about him. Not even touching myself brings any relief.

“Tell me to leave.”

“No.”

“Dammit, Laura. Tell me.”

“Stay,” I whisper, far more bravely than I feel. My heart threatens to pound right out of my chest. But I hold his gaze, refusing to back down. I’m not afraid of this man. If he thinks I’m going to run, he’s wrong. I feel the heat between us. It’s hot enough to send the whole city up in flames. And I like the way it burns. “I want you to stay.”

“If I get my hands on you, it’ll take a goddamn miracle to pry them off again,” he says, his voice dripping with warning. “I won’t share you. I won’t let you go. I’ll be a goddamn territorial son of a bitch every minute of the day.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be shared.”

He growls my name, another dark warning that sends heat ripping through me. “I don’t belong in your world, Laura. You should be running in the other direction.”

I step outside, step right up against him. The heat from his body sears mine. He’s like a transformer humming with electricity. It crackles in the air around him and zips through me when I press my body against his. He’s rock hard, his

erection a heavy bulge against my abdomen. And oh, my goodness, this man is big and unyielding everywhere. “Shut up and kiss me already, Kaiden.”

I was wrong about him. I thought he was all cool self-possession and raw magnetism. He isn't. He's an unruly beast, as wild as he is massive. He launches at me like a lion snapping the chains holding him prisoner. His arms lash around me, dragging me up against his chest. His mouth crashes down on mine, his kiss hot and hungry.

I cry out in relief as his savage growl rips right through me, shaking loose every carnal desire and every wanton thought I've had about him in the last two days. He doesn't kiss me. He consumes me like a man starving for a taste of salvation. His hands in my hair mess up my curls, sending bobby pins flying. They hit the cement at our feet with faint pings that barely register over the harsh panting of his breath and the rush of blood in my ears. The flowers fall from my slack fingers.

His tongue flicks against my lips and then tangles with mine, impatient and possessive. I kiss him back the same way, my body clenching in delight as pleasure floods through every nerve ending. I've been kissed before. Of course, I have. I'm an actress. But they were always cold, passionless kisses. They never made me ache and burn like this. My head never clouded like this. The blood in my veins didn't sing like this.

“You taste like strawberries,” he mutters.

“Cheesecake.”

His rough hands grip my ass, yanking my legs around his hips. His body is so broad, my dress rides up, exposing my panties.

A string of curses falls from his lips when he sees them, his gray eyes dark and predatory. Does he see the wet spot on them? Does he know they've been like that since I saw him standing on my doorstep? I don't get the chance to ask either of those questions.

He stomps inside the house. Every step bounces me against his erection.

“Kaiden!” I dig my nails into his shoulders, desperately trying not to come. Except it's too close. I need it too badly. Oh, God. What is he doing to me? I bury my face in his shoulder, crying out as the first waves of an orgasm roll over me. His name erupts from my lips again. I let the pleasure take me, falling into the waves, confident that he'll catch me.

Somehow, I'm confident this grumpy, complicated man will always catch me.

When I open my eyes again, I'm plastered against the door, and he's on his knees, holding me balanced on his forearms. His eyes are on fire with need, his face blazing with it. Arousal rips through me, desire spiking faster than I can even process.

“Again,” he snarls. “On my tongue this time, princess.”

“Oh my—”

His eyes never leave mine as he flicks his tongue out and takes one long lick of me. I cry out, grasping for his shoulders,

hair...anything to root me to reality before he sends me spiraling into heaven. He growls against my center, his eyes fluttering as if he just tasted the sweetest wine.

“Go ahead and scream while I eat it, princess. Let me hear how much of a good girl you can be for me,” he growls before licking me again and then again. As if he can’t stop himself. “Let’s see how well you can behave. Don’t come until I say.”

“I c-can’t behave,” I cry, already on the edge. “I can’t!”

“You can.” He laves the flat of his tongue against my clit. “You will.” He touches the tip of it to my clit and then jiggles it. “If you want my cock for dessert, you’ll be real good, princess.”

I sob his name, my core clenching as his sinful voice and wicked tongue work in unison, wrecking my senses. Kaiden Huxley is a bad, bad man. And God help me, I think I love it. “Kaiden, please,” I sob, pulling fistfuls of his hair. “Please!”

“Not until you give me what I want. Scream for me, princess.” His tongue circles my entrance and then dips inside. “I want to hear that pretty voice breaking on my name while I have my tongue buried in your sweet little cunt.”

“Kaiden!” I scream as the need to come becomes unbearable.

“Now. Give it to me,” he growls, attacking my center like I’m his last meal. He buries his face in me, working it back and forth as his lips and tongue work unholy magic on me. He

snarls and curses as he eats me, and I'm not sure which of us is enjoying this more.

Every muscle in my body clenches as the orgasm erupts in my core and then flows outward, consuming me. It unmakes me from the inside out, leaving me crying out his name as pleasure melts to ecstasy and then to pure rapture.

I fall limp against the door, gasping for breath.

“Up, princess,” he murmurs, dragging me into his arms. “I’m not finished with you yet.”

“Mm,” I moan, allowing him to cradle me against his chest. He holds me gently, as if I’m something precious and worthy of great care. His hand runs through my hair, smoothing it away from my face. I pry my eyes open, staring up at him in wonder.

He’s so damn fierce. So damn beautiful.

“Where’s your room?” he asks.

“Upstairs, first door on the right.”

He jerks his head in a nod, striding toward the stairs.

I lift my hand to touch his scar. He tenses but doesn’t pull away.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

“Used to hurt like a motherfucker,” he mutters. “Now it just hurts to look at.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Wasn’t talking about me, princess.” His eyes meet mine as he ascends the stairs, moving stiffly...as if he has trouble with his leg. If carrying me bothers him, though, he doesn’t show it. He barely seems to notice my weight at all. He’s powerful and confident. “I see the way people look at me.”

“I’m not them, Kaiden. I’m not looking at your scar when I look at you, okay?”

“Yeah? What are you looking at?”

“You,” I say simply. “I’m looking at you, Kaiden Huxley.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not nearly good enough to kiss your feet, let alone lick that perfect little cunt, princess. But so long as you aren’t telling me no, I’m not questioning my luck.”

“Good because I’m not telling you no. We’ll work on the rest of it later.” My teeth sink into my bottom lip as a thought occurs. One I should probably tell him now before he finds out on his own. “Um, just so you know...I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what?”

“This.” My cheeks heat with embarrassment. “I’m, um... well, what I’m trying to say....”

“You trying to tell me you’re a virgin, Laura?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

He graces me with one of those rare smiles. His hand drifts down the side of my face. “Believe me; I’m well aware.”

“Really? Wait. How?”

He chuckles, carrying me into my room. And then he pauses and glances around.

“Nice,” he murmurs.

“Thanks.” I smile, glad he approves. My room is my sanctuary. It was designed for comfort and relaxation. The gray and black walls make it feel a little like a giant cave with plants and flowers trailing from hangers in the corners. When the curtains are open, natural light pours in from the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the valley on the far side of the room. The gold furniture and purple bedding add pops of color. Lighting hangs from invisible wires, seeming to float suspended in midair.

“I could taste it on you.”

“What?”

“Your virginity.” He strides toward the bed, stopping at the foot. He dips his head to look at me again, his eyes dark. His lips trail down the side of my face and then brush across mine. “Tastes like it’ll belong to me soon, princess.”

I groan as my stomach turns a flip, heat flooding my system all over again.

He sets me on my feet in front of him, keeping me anchored to his body with one hand on my hip. His mouth touches mine again in a soft kiss. And then he dips his head, kissing along my cleavage. I throw my head back, moaning his name.

I moan it louder when he tugs my dress down to pull one hard nipple into the hot cavern of his mouth. God, his mouth is delightful. And sinful. He's very good with it. Too good, perhaps. My legs tremble, my knees threatening to give out as he licks and bites my nipples, driving me crazy all over again.

I'm a stuttering, sweaty mess. And he's still fully dressed. That doesn't seem entirely fair to me. I want to see him too, *touch* him too. I reach for him, working through the buttons on his shirt with thick, uncooperative fingers.

He stops long enough to help me strip it from him.

I was wrong. So wrong. He isn't the sexiest man I've ever seen. He's the sexiest man, period. His body is incredible. He isn't ripped. It's obvious he doesn't spend hours at the gym or working with a personal trainer. He's thick and solid everywhere, firm and unyielding. And that is so damn sexy to me. God, he's beautiful, like a massive, wild bear.

The scar across his face isn't the only one. Everywhere I look, I find another etched into his skin. Like the one across his cheek, they're puckered and mottled, as if something rent his flesh and then consumed it in fire to seal the wound.

The surgical scar down his sternum is so old it's silver.

"You had heart surgery," I whisper, placing my hand over it.

"When I was a kid."

"Are you...?"

"I've fine, princess," he rumbles. "I was sick for a few years, but that was a long time ago."

“I’m sorry.” I lean forward, pressing my lips to the scar, and then brush my fingertips across the mass of scar tissue beneath his ribcage. It looks as if someone poured acid directly onto his flesh. “It wasn’t a stunt gone wrong, was it?” I ask, tracing the area with trembling fingers.

“No,” he says after a moment.

I want to ask for more, but I don’t. We have plenty of time to learn everything there is to know about each other later because I’m not letting this man go. I’ve already decided that I’m keeping him. I lean forward and place my lips against his scar. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“For what?”

“For trusting me.”

“Jesus,” he rumbles, pulling me back into his arms. His mouth comes down on mine. This time, his kiss is tinged with softness, a sweetness that has emotion welling in my chest. I’m falling in love with this beautiful, complicated man. It shouldn’t be possible...and yet it’s happening anyway.

We undress each other slowly, neither speaking as we kiss and touch, learning each other. He’s every bit as big and hard as I suspected. My core clenches at the thought of feeling him inside me. I want it more than I want my next breath. I want *him* more than I think I’ve ever wanted anything.

“Goddamn,” he hisses, bucking his hips into my hand when I wrap my fingers around his shaft, stroking him. He shoves his hand between my legs in response, playing with me.

We work together, driving each other crazy. I've never touched anyone like this, but all I have to do is watch his face to know what he likes. When I squeeze, he growls. When I trail my fingers over his balls, he curses.

He loses it completely when I lean down and lick the head of his cock. I barely have my lips wrapped around him before I'm flying through the air. I land on the bed with one very turned-on man looming over me.

"We agreed that you were going to behave," he growls, shoving my legs apart.

"No, you agreed," I say sweetly, smiling up at him. "I did no such thing."

He growls at me again, leaning down over me. "I'm not coming down your pretty throat, Laura. The first part of you wrapped around my cock will be that cunt. Once you're dripping my cum, then you can suck me off."

"Yes," I moan.

"Wrap those sexy thighs around my waist, princess."

I scramble to obey, moaning when his erection bounces against my clit.

"You like that?" He grips his erection in one meaty fist and smacks it against my clit again. When I moan a second time, he does it again, a little harder this time. "Fuck, of course, you like it. You were made for me, weren't you?"

"Yes."

He kisses me, hot and wet. “This will be fast, princess,” he whispers apologetically. “I’m fucking dying here.”

“Then get in me already, Kaiden,” I demand, writhing beneath him. “I need you.”

“It’s going to hurt, baby.”

“I’m trying not to think about that part.”

He makes a miserable, wounded sound. And then I feel his erection at my entrance. Our eyes lock. I stare into forever as he pushes forward, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. The look in his eyes...God, if I live to be one hundred, I’ll never forget it. There’s so much hope there, so much softness. He looks at me as if I’m a miracle, something he can’t live without.

“Laura,” he whispers. “Princess.”

“Kaiden,” I whimper, my eyes tearing up as the stretch starts to burn. He’s so big. How is it possible to feel this perfect and hurt like this at the same damn time? I grip his hands tightly as the burn intensifies.

“Breathe, princess.”

I inhale a breath...and exhale it on a strangled cry as a flash of pain lances through me. It’s over before it even begins, but Kaiden bellows like a wounded bear, regret filling his eyes.

“I’m sorry, princess,” he breathes, pressing his forehead to mine. “Christ, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“I’m okay,” I promise. “I’m okay.” Already, the pain is fading, taking the burn with it. My muscles relax, allowing me to breathe. I shift slightly, and an entirely new sensation ricochets through me. “Oh!”

“Fuck,” Kaiden growls, lifting his head. His eyes flash to mine. “Do that again.”

“D-do what?”

“Squeeze my cock like that again, princess.”

I concentrate for a moment and clench my inner muscles.

Kaiden’s eyes turn black with lust. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good.” He nips my bottom lip, and then he begins to move. He isn’t graceful or elegant. He’s a force of nature, powerful and vast. Every deep thrust has me crying out his name and clawing down his back. I cling to him, pleading for more, more, more. He grunts and gives it to me, pounding into me until his balls smack against my ass hard enough to sting.

It feels like flying. Only I’m flat on my back and five hundred feet off the ground simultaneously. Only he’s looming over me, pinning me to the bed with his hips as he takes me again and again, growling my name in the gritty, gravelly voice that grates across my womb every time I hear it. Only this is far better than flight could ever be.

“You gotta come,” he growls, untangling our hands to slip one of his between our bodies. His thumb finds my clit,

running in tight circles around it. “This perfect little cunt feels too good, princess. I need you to come.”

“I...I...” I try to tell him I’m going to, but the words get caught in my throat.

“Fuck, yes,” he sighs, yanking my leg over his shoulder. The change in angle allows him to go deeper. He drives into me in powerful thrusts that rock the bed beneath us.

My body locks down around him, my mouth open in a silent cry of bliss. I buck and writhe as my orgasm sends me freewheeling into rapture. Bright lights flash and dance behind my eyes. My heart pounds, thrumming so loud I hear the blood rushing through my veins.

Kaiden growls a curse as he goes still, buried to the hilt inside me. And then I feel him coming too. He spills into me in heavy pulses, sending aftershock after aftershock ripping through me.

“Kaiden,” I whisper when I float back down to earth and land in his arms.

“You’re going to own me, princess,” he groans, chasing my lips with his as he wraps me all up in him. “Much more of that, and I’ll crawl through hell just to make you happy.”

Chapter Three

Kaiden



“**Y**ou’re not hitting me hard enough.”

“I don’t want to hit you at all!” Laura cries, throwing her hands up in the air in exasperation. “Honestly, Kaiden. This is ridiculous.”

“Do you want to be an action star or not, princess?”

“This isn’t action. This is...is...insane,” she splutters in outrage, her cheeks pink with exertion.

I fight a smile. Fuck, she’s sexy when she’s pissed.

Her eyes narrow on me, her hands landing on her wide hips. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“You’re wearing a sports bra.” I rake my gaze over her curvy body, hot and slow. “You’re sweating. I’ve had you pinned to

the mat beneath me. You bit me. *Twice*. Fuck yeah, I'm enjoying every minute of this." I stalk toward her, grunting when she takes a step back and then visibly checks herself. "There isn't a single fucking part of this that isn't doing a number on my cock right now."

"Kaiden," she groans. "You're incorrigible."

"I'm honest."

She snorts, shaking her head. She can't hide her smile or those deadly dimples, though. My little star may think she's fooling me, but I've spent every waking moment of the last few days obsessing over her. Hell, I've spent every sleeping moment obsessing about her too. She loves the way I tell her exactly what I think without holding back.

With her, there is no other option. The truth just spills out. I have no control over it. That's just what she does to me. She has no fucking clue how completely she owns me. It's been a matter of days, and already, I'm utterly obsessed with her. Everything she does fascinates me. I'm falling for her. Hard.

I don't fucking deserve her, but I'm falling anyway. We've spent every moment together since Thanksgiving. Being with her is effortless. I don't find myself eager to escape into the shadows. I'm not crawling out of my skin around her. She doesn't stare at me like I'm a goddamn freak of nature or somehow beneath her. She looks at me like I hung the damn moon just for her.

It's not an act, either. When I touch her, she goes up in flames for me. My little star can't keep her hands off me.

We've fucked like rabbits all over her house, and we're still not satisfied. I've already been late to work twice because I can't keep my dick out of her long enough to get there on time.

"I don't want to hit you," she mutters, lifting her gaze to mine.

"Why not?"

"Because you matter." Her earnest green eyes make my heart pulse. "Because...because it's cruel, Kaiden. You aren't even trying to defend yourself."

"Princess." I bite back an amused smile. She's so goddamn cute when she's upset on my behalf. It's been a long time since anyone felt that way about me. Shit, I can't even remember the last time it happened. "You aren't going to hurt me."

"I might."

"I can't teach you how to redirect a punch if you won't throw one."

"I did!"

"No, you poked your arm in my general direction."

She scowls at me.

"You hit like a girl, Laura."

"Is that supposed to offend me?"

"I don't know. Is it working?"

"Maybe."

I smile.

She huffs and throws an actual punch, allowing me to redirect her arm at a forty-five-degree angle. I do it carefully, fully aware that I'm about three times her size and could easily hurt her. That's the last thing I want to do. But she wants to learn what I can teach her, and I won't tell her no. Fuck that. Even if she never uses it for a movie, she can use it to defend herself, and that's reason enough to teach her.

"Whoa," she whispers, blinking wide eyes at me. "Do that again."

"But you don't want to hit me," I remind her.

She shoots me a dirty look, making me chuckle.

"Aim right here." I tap my jaw.

She throws the punch, aiming exactly where I pointed. It's cute as hell. She concentrates hard, her brows furrowed and the tip of her tongue peeking from between her lips. I don't think she's ever thrown a punch a day in her life. When she tries, she puts force behind it, though. I deflect it again, pushing her fist away at an angle.

"See what I did?" I ask and then guide her through the steps, showing her how to do the same thing. I reach toward her several times, allowing her to redirect my hand in the same manner.

"Throw a punch," she says, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Uh, fuck no."

“Come on. I can deflect it.”

“I’m not fucking throwing a punch at you, princess,” I growl, glaring at her. She’s lost her damn mind if she thinks that’s gonna happen. Hell will literally freeze over first. “We’ll practice like this.”

“You’re no fun.”

“This isn’t supposed to be fun.”

“It was fun when you were pinning me to the mat.”

My dick throbs at the reminder. I grab her around the waist, dragging her into my arms to kiss the smirk from her face. She laughs against my lips, wrapping her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. I don’t pin her to the mat. This time, I pin her to the wall, prying her arms from around my neck to hold them hostage above her head.

She moans, grinding against my erection.

“You don’t know how to behave, do you?” I growl, kissing a trail down her throat.

“You love the way I behave,” she gasps.

I bury my face in her cleavage, breathing her in. Trying not to fuck her against the wall even though that’s exactly what I want to do. I have no restraint around her. As soon as I get my hands on her, nothing else registers. Nothing else matters. She consumes every thought in my head, turns me into a snarling, greedy beast who only wants to fuck and feast and then do it again.

Somehow, I manage to ease off before we get carried away. I press a kiss to her heart and then press my face to her throat, simply holding her. She runs her fingers through my hair, scraping her nails against my scalp.

“This is nice,” she whispers after a moment.

“Shit. I’m smothering you.”

“No.” She tightens her legs around me, trying to keep me where I am when I go to pull back. “Don’t move yet. I like when you hold me.”

“Good. I like holding you.”

“Yeah?” I hear the smile in her voice. “I’ve never been held before.”

I hold her tighter, wrapping her up in the safety of my arms. She’ll never be held by anyone else if I have a say. Only by me. Christ, how did she become something so precious, so vital, so quickly? I don’t know, but she did. She swept into my life and stole every goddamn piece of my heart.

“Never held anyone before,” I murmur against her skin.

“Really? You never dated?”

“Nope.”

“Not even before...?”

“I wasn’t a saint,” I say. “I went on a few dates and did a few things I’m not proud of. But I was never in a relationship.”

“Oh,” she whispers, her nails still scraping through my hair. “For the record, I never asked for a saint, Kaiden. I’ll take a

sexy former stuntman any day.”

I snort. “The only sexy one here is you.”

“Then you need to get your eyes checked.”

I shake my head, still baffled that she finds me sexy. I know what I look like, and I sure as hell don’t look like the goddess in my arms. Men kill to be close to a woman like her. Women cringe when they’re close to a man like me. We are not the same. But she means what she says. I don’t doubt her for a minute.

“My eyesight is fine, princess.” I pull back to look at her. “It wasn’t damaged at all.”

Her gaze flits across my face. “I want to ask about that day,” she whispers, biting her bottom lip. “But I don’t want to push you to talk about it.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know. I don’t have any secrets from you, Laura.” The time for those is long passed. Shit, I think it passed the second she drew me out of the shadows on day one. “There isn’t much to it. The director tried to talk the lead actor’s underage sister into a compromising relationship, and she finally confessed what was happening. He snapped when he saw the things this motherfucker was sending her.” I swallow hard, forcing back memories. “Damen drove his truck through the director’s trailer. He didn’t know I was inside.”

“Oh my god.” Tears of distress well in her eyes.

“I was pinned beneath the truck when the trailer caught on fire. Once Damen realized I was in there, he waded in and dragged me out. He never intended for me to be hurt.” I brush tears from beneath Laura’s eyes. “No one on set blamed him. I certainly didn’t.”

“That’s why you let everyone believe it was a stunt gone wrong,” she says.

I nod. “Damen didn’t deserve a prison sentence for what he did. He didn’t know I was in that trailer. Hell, I’m not even convinced he thought the director was in his trailer. He was just trying to protect his sister from a fucking monster. Had it been me, I would have done the same fucking thing.” Shit, had it been me, I think I would have mowed his ass down right there on set. Men like that...well, they aren’t worthy of the goddamn name. They’re monsters, not men.

“Oh, Kaiden.” Laura throws her arms around me in a fierce hug, her shoulders shaking as she cries quietly.

“Don’t cry for me, princess. It was a long time ago.”

She jerks her head up, her cheeks wet with tears, her eyes hot with emotion. “I’ll cry for you if I want to, Kaiden Huxley,” she says, her bottom lip quivering as more tears spill down her perfect cheeks. “You’re worthy of being cried over.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, closing my eyes as a swell of emotion chokes me. Does she even know what she’s doing to me? How quickly she’s becoming the center of my entire world? She deserves so much better than me—God knows she does—and yet...and yet I’d kill to keep her anyway.

“I want something,” she whispers.

“Anything.”

Her watery gaze flits across my face, her expression hesitant. “I want you to spend Christmas with me.” Her teeth sink into her bottom lip. “Please? It’s my favorite time of year, and my parents are on a cruise this year.”

The holiday is a few weeks away, but her house is already covered in Christmas shit. I don’t even own a stocking. I haven’t celebrated Christmas in...shit, not since my dad passed away fifteen years ago. When you’re alone, there isn’t much to celebrate. Since the accident, there’s been even less than that. Truthfully, the whole holiday tends to remind me of how things used to be, which pisses me off. There is no magic in the world. At least there never has been for me.

“Please,” she whispers.

Fuck. I can’t tell her no. Not with those big, hopeful green eyes on me.

“Yeah,” I mutter gruffly. “I’ll spend Christmas with you.”

Her eyes light up with happiness, stealing my breath.

Christ. If there is magic in the world, I’m pretty sure it’s here in my arms. This little star is my magic. She’s my Christmas wish.

For the first time since the accident, I pray.

Please, God, let me be strong enough to deserve her. Teach me to be gentle enough to love her. Help me be good enough to

keep her.

Chapter Four

Laura



“Have you seen the news?” Roni shouts as soon as I step into her office.

I grimace and rub my ears. Jeez. She’s loud. “Um, no?”

“It’s everywhere!” she cries, her curly red hair bouncing in frustration as she bends her head over her keyboard and starts clicking away. “*Celebrity Teatime* was the first to run it, but everyone has it now. They’re making a huge deal about it. My phone has been ringing all morning. I finally turned the damn thing off.”

Oh no.

My stomach sinks, dismay filling me. They found out about Kaiden.

He's going to flip out. We've spent every waking moment together for the last few weeks, but we haven't told anyone we're together. I want to shout it from the rooftops. I'm not sure how he feels about it, though.

He's already been through so much. He almost died as a little boy and spent his childhood watching the world pass him by. And then finally got to live his dream only to have it ripped away. The day he told me what really happened to him, I cried. He carried the truth in silence to protect his friend from jail. Only for people in this town to then treat him as if he's somehow less than because of the scars he carries. They have no idea how selfless he truly is or how amazing. He's been through hell and back. They could never understand the sacrifices he's made or the kind of man he is because they will never be that genuinely *good*.

I don't want to put him through a public spectacle...and once people find out we're together, there will be no way of stopping that. People pay way too much attention to who dates who in Hollywood. I worry that the fact that he's been out of the limelight for so long will only add fuel to the fire.

Apparently, it already has.

I don't want to hide him, however. I'm so in love with him. I think I fell our very first night together. He's the best man I've ever met. He may be gruff and grumpy, but beneath that, he's kind, gentle, loving, and so damn *good* to me. No one has ever treated me like he does. When he touches me, I feel like I'm a priceless work of art, someone worthy of devotion. When he

kisses me, the entire world disappears. And when he's inside me, I breathe for him.

I want the world to know how I feel about him. I want them to know that he's the man I chose. But I don't think *he* wants them to know. Not because he's ashamed of me. But because he thinks I'm too good for him. It kills me that he feels that way. But after everything he's endured, I can't ask him to give up his privacy. It wouldn't be fair of me when my life is so public.

Except I may not have a choice now. Somehow, someone found out about us.

"How bad is it?" I whisper, dropping heavily into a chair across from my publicist. My stomach churns, and nausea climbs up my throat. All morning, my stomach has been unsettled. Maybe my body just knew something terrible was coming.

"Hollywood's shining star, Laura Groves, is MIA. Could it be because she's got a secret?" Roni reads from whatever website she's pulled up on her screen. "Rumor has it that our favorite curvy darling isn't as happy with her body as we've all been told. Sources close to the young starlet say she's vanished from the scene because she's recovering from an unspecified weight-related procedure. It looks like someone will be debuting a brand-new body just in time for the New Year!"

"What?" I shout, immediately jumping to my feet. My face blanches, white-hot anger rushing through me. "That isn't

true!”

“Of course it isn’t,” Roni scoffs, a look of disgust crossing her face. “I doubt they even have a source. It’s a slow news day, so they’re just fabricating a story out of the fact that you’ve missed a few holiday parties and charity events.”

“I’ve been busy,” I mutter.

“Bullshit. You’re in love.”

“I...”

She spears me with a stern look. “I know you, Laura. You have stars in your eyes.”

My cheeks heat, and I shift my gaze away from hers, glancing at the awards hanging behind her desk. Hollywood loves giving out awards. We have them for everything. She’s won a lot of them over the years. She’s good at her job. Too good, maybe. I can’t get anything past her.

“Who is he?”

“No comment.”

“I see.” She sighs heavily. “So you’d rather let them run with this story than give up his identity.”

“I...” My stomach churns uneasily. I expel a slow, heavy breath. “The last thing I want is the whole world talking about my weight again. I’m sick and tired of my body being a subject of discussion. But things are...complicated.”

“Uncomplicate them.” She stands from her desk and crosses to me, her heels clicking on the floor. She slips her hands into

mine, concern stamped across her lined face. “I’m asking as your friend, not your publicist.”

“I’m seeing Kaiden Huxley.” I don’t have to say anything further. Roni knows everyone in this town, and she’s diabolically smart. She’s one of the first people I talked to when I wanted information about him.

“Oh.” Her hazel eyes widen. “*Oh.*”

“I’m so damn in love with him.” I laugh softly, tears in my eyes.

“What do you want to do, honey?” she asks, leaving the ball in my court. This is why I love Roni. She may be diabolical, but she’s always on my side. She believes in people and never feeds her clients to the wolves. She wouldn’t feed Kaiden to the wolves either. When we talked a few weeks ago, she had nothing but good things to say about him.

“What can I do?” I ask helplessly. I’ve advocated for body positivity and loving yourself since I came to Hollywood. If they’re claiming I’m in hiding because I had weight-loss surgery, people will rip me to shreds no matter what I do. Even if I show up with the same body I’ve always had, the paparazzi will edit the photos to make me look thinner, claim I’m wearing a fat suit, or make any other number of outlandish claims to support their false narrative to keep the story going. Gossip is a vicious cycle that feeds itself. And the only losers are the ones caught in the eye of the storm.

If I tell the truth and admit that I’ve been MIA because I’ve been spending time with the love of my life, maybe I sway

hearts and minds. But I do it at the expense of Kaiden's privacy. I force him into a position he didn't ask to be in. The gossip becomes about him. Maybe they're kinder to him this time, or perhaps they say the same cruel, heartless things they did last time, as if he's fair game because he chose to go into a career in stunt work knowing the risks.

I can't let that happen. I *won't* let that happen. If they want to spread lies about me, then fine. They can say what they want. But I won't let them talk badly about the man I love.

"Let them run with it," I say, my decision made. "I'll post a few pictures on my social media to mitigate the damage, but leave Kaiden out of it."

Roni wraps me up in a warm hug, squeezing me tight. "We'll figure out a way to fix this, honey. Just leave it up to your agent and me."

"Okay," I mumble, unsure how they plan to do that. It's almost Christmas. There's not a lot going on in Hollywood right now aside from parties. And God only knows how reporters will spin it if I dive back into the fray and attend any of those. They'll claim I went straight from surgery to the party circuit...and that's the last thing I need right now.

Chapter Five

Kaiden



“Hey,” Laura says, shutting the lid of her laptop and lifting her gaze to mine when I walk through the kitchen door. A tired smile tips the corners of her lips up, but it doesn’t reflect in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I growl, instantly on alert.

“Nothing.”

I drop my keys on the counter and pace toward her, not buying that response for a second. She may be an actress, but she’s a shit liar. I’ve learned how to read my little shining star. I know when she’s happy and when she’s sad. I know when she’s telling the truth and when she’s editing her responses to make them more palatable. And I know when something is weighing heavily on her.

It is right now. It has been for several days now. She's been quiet and withdrawn. The furrow between her brow grows deeper every day. This morning, she was throwing up. She's anxious as hell about something, and it's eating at her.

The last few weeks between us have been the best of my life. I plummeted into love with her, sinking like a fucking stone. She's perfection from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. When she touches me, my entire world lights up. When she laughs, the goddamn angels sing. I've never been the kind of man who believes in love at first sight or soulmates and any of that flowery shit...but meeting Laura proved me wrong.

I don't merely love her. I breathe for her. There is nothing I wouldn't do to make this woman happy if she asked it of me. But she rarely asks for anything. She's content just being with me. The fact that she isn't talking about whatever is bothering her is worrying the fuck out of me.

Every spare moment we have, we spend together. We mostly live together. After that first weekend together, I just never went back home. We never discussed it. We didn't need to discuss it. By the time I got off on Monday, we were both fucking dying to see each other again. I raced back here, breaking every fucking speed limit on the way.

By the time I made it to the front door, she had it open and was leaping into my arms.

We fucked in the foyer, her chest pressed against the wall.

All of my shit has slowly found its way to her place in the weeks since. Whenever I bring more, she lights up like I just

bought her a diamond tiara. My clothes hang beside hers in the closet. My shit mingles with hers on the bathroom counter.

I want to fuck her every time I catch her smiling over it.

When she marries me—and she will be marrying me—I plan to deposit whatever she paid for this place into her account. She loves her home. I won't ask her to give that up. Call me old-fashioned or whatever the fuck you want, but I take care of my woman, not the other way around. Her money is her money. God knows I have plenty of my own sitting in the bank. She won't ever want for anything. Neither will our kids.

I cage her in with my arms on either side of her and lean down to kiss the frown from her face.

She melts beneath me with a soft sigh, but the furrow doesn't leave her brow.

“Tell me what's wrong,” I demand, determined to get to the bottom of it here and now. If she's thinking about trying to end things between us, I need her to say it outright so I can fix whatever I did to upset her. She's not getting rid of me. I'm hers until the day I die.

“Nothing is wrong,” she lies. “I was just reading a script for a Christmas movie, *The Naughty List*. I think I'm going to take it. It's a short production.” She bites her lip. “But it starts filming in two days. It's, literally, a last-minute project for some new studio.”

“This late in the year?”

“Right?” She shrugs. “Don’t ask me what they’re thinking. Maybe it won’t air until next year? I’m not sure, but the script is fantastic, and the pay is great.”

“Where is it filming?”

“Here.”

I exhale, relieved she won’t be dashing off across the country yet. I know it’ll happen eventually. If she gets the part in the action movie she’s auditioned for, she’ll be filming in Canada. That’s going to drive me up the wall. But I won’t stand in the way of her career. Hell no. I’ll swallow my own tongue before I tell her no.

“Take it, princess,” I murmur, brushing my thumb across her soft bottom lip. “A Christmas movie is right up your alley.” She’s got me watching the damn things on the Hallmark channel every time she gets her hands on the remote. Last night, I dreamed we were stuck in one of the fucking things.

“I love Christmas movies,” she whispers. I’m trying like hell to tone down my dislike of the holiday for my little star, but I don’t think it’s working much. My surly attitude about the holiday riles her up, which means I get to calm her back down. Which means we end up fucking. Gotta say...it’s not a lot of incentive to change my Scrooge-like ways.

Any excuse to get her naked is a good excuse in my book.

I want this year to be magical for her, especially since her parents aren’t here to celebrate with her. Especially since it’s our first year together. I already know what I’m getting her.

But like I said, I'm not good with flowery shit, and I *need* this woman to fall in love with me.

I know what life is like without her, and I can't go back to that. She's the best part of every day. I don't know why the fuck she chose a man like me when she's lightyears out of my league, but she chose me anyway. I'll walk through hell to keep her now that she's mine. Whatever it takes.

"Are you ready to tell me what's been bugging you?" I ask.

"Nothing is bugging me, Kaiden."

"Are you tired of me, princess?"

"What?" She gapes at me in shock. "Of course not! I could never be tired of you."

"Then what's going on?"

"Nothing." Her gaze darts to her laptop and then quickly away.

Whatever is going on has to do with her computer.

I pick her up from her seat, depositing her on the island beside her laptop. She grumbles under her breath about me being a caveman, but I ignore the comment. I am a caveman when it comes to her, and I'm not apologizing for it. She fucking loves it, and we both know she does.

I slide into her seat and flip open the lid of her laptop.

"No!" she cries, trying to slam the lid closed again.

I shoot her a quelling look and gently pry her hands off the lid.

“Please don’t look,” she whispers.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t,” I growl.

“It’s going to make you mad.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s just stupid gossip.”

My blood pressure spikes. “Who are they saying you’re fucking?”

“What?” She blinks at me in obvious consternation. “No one.”

Well, that’s surprising.

“Tell me what they’re saying about you,” I say, my voice soft.

She stares at me for a moment, and then her shoulders slump. “They’re saying I keep missing events and haven’t been seen out in a while because I have body image issues,” she whispers, tears welling in her eyes. “They think I had weight-loss surgery.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter in disgust, my blood pressure spiking higher.

“It’s not true!” she cries as if I’m not already well aware of that. *I’m* why she’s been missing events and hasn’t been seen. I’m the only thing she’s been hiding. And they’re fucking gossiping about her, tearing her to shreds as if she isn’t a real person with real feelings who has to read the shit they write about her.

I wiggle the mouse attached to her laptop, bringing the screen to life. She has a web browser open to an article on *Celebrity Teatime*. I skim the article, fury pulsing through me as I read their hot take on why she's been MIA the past few weeks. It's all bullshit. And it's all my goddamn fault. She's been keeping a low profile to protect me, and this is what they spin it into. This is what they do to her.

I close the lid of her laptop in disgust and pull her off the island and into my arms. She wraps around me like a koala bear, burying her face in my shoulder. She doesn't cry. My little star is far too strong to cry over gossip, but I know she's hurting over it. The fuckers. As if her body isn't perfect exactly the way it is. My God. Men would kill just for a chance to be close to her.

Goddamn. What is with this town and its sick fascination with women's bodies? They're dying over this shit, and still, these assholes keep publishing this crap as if they have any right to comment. It's abhorrent. Laura is perfect exactly the way she is. And if she did have weight loss surgery, it wouldn't be any of their goddamned business.

I want to find everyone who has published this bullshit and rage. But I can't do that. I have to protect her. Going on the defensive will only add fuel to the fire. Instead of shutting the story down, it'll only grow. That's how it works in this town. The more you protest, the more they think you have something to hide. The more vicious they become.

No one deserves that, least of all the woman in my arms.

“What can I do?” I ask, pressing my lips to her temple as guilt washes through me in a flood. This is all my fucking fault, and she’s been dealing with it alone to protect me. Fuck that. It’s my job to protect her, not the other way around.

“Just hold me, Kaiden,” she whispers. “Make it all go away.”

As if she even needs to ask.



When my phone rings three hours later, Laura is naked and sleeping peacefully in my arms. I made love to her softly, sweetly, until she couldn’t take any more. She drifted off in my arms, unable to hold her eyes open a moment longer. I’ve been wide awake, my mind spinning in dizzying circles.

I need to fix this for her. But where do I even start?

I want to shout from the fucking rooftops that she’s mine, and she’s been too busy with me to bother with their inane bullshit. But is that fair to her? She’s a goddamn knockout. I’m a washed-up has-been, a stuntman who can’t stunt. One most people in this town can’t even look at without flinching. She’s lightyears out of my league, and everyone knows it.

What will being linked to me do to her professionally?

I don't fucking know. I never thought that far ahead when I claimed her. Part of me refused to think that far ahead, perhaps because I already knew the answer. It's not just the scar on my face that puts her out of my league. I'm a grumpy, reclusive bastard. I'm out of shape. I'm twice her age. She's sunshine. I'm dark alleys.

She's mine anyway. Mine to protect. Mine to claim. Mine to love.

But how the fuck do I do that without hurting her career?

Ironic that they accuse her of having body image issues when I'm the one with a whole fucking boatload of those. But the thing is, I don't even fucking care what people say about me anymore. I survived that storm once. I can do it a second time. I care what people say about *her* because of me.

My phone rings again.

I gently slide out from beneath her. Her brow furrows in her sleep, her lips pursing into a pout that has my cock twitching. Swear to God, every expression that crosses her face fascinates me. She's enchanting in her unguarded moments, so excruciatingly beautiful it hurts.

I grab my phone and slip from the room.

"Hello?" I growl.

"Mr. Huxley?"

"Speaking."

“This is Nick Saint. I spoke with Jackson Reed earlier in the day but wanted to speak with you as well,” the man on the other end of the line says. “Heart & Soul Studios is putting together a last-minute production of a Christmas film I wrote, and we’d like to hire you.”

“For what?” I ask, leaning against the wall outside of the bedroom. “I don’t do stunt work.”

“Oh, of course not,” Nick Saint says. “Mr. Reed will oversee stunt coordination, but I understand that you do most of the training. We’d like to have you on hand to help with any training issues that might arise. It’ll be a short production, filming right here in Hollywood.”

“What’s the name of the movie?” I ask, going completely still. There’s no fucking way it’s the same one Laura just told me about a few hours ago.

”*The Naughty List.*”

Son of a bitch. It *is* the same movie.

I’m not one who believes much in signs from above or fate, but if I were...well, this would be a pretty big sign that it’s time for me to get my head out of my ass. The universe is throwing me a bone here, and I’d be an idiot not to take it.

I haven’t been on a film set since I almost died on one, but being with me is causing Laura problems she doesn’t need. If this is how I fix it, then this is how I fix it. It doesn’t matter if people stare or judge me. It doesn’t matter if I’m

uncomfortable as fuck or if turning to face the past is painful.
All that matters is my little star.

She needs to know that she can count on me to have her back and do what is best for her, no questions asked. I'll face any discomfort and jump through any hoop. I can't hunt down every gossip that posts something negative about her, but I can make her life easier. Starting here and now.

It's time for me to rejoin the world. Beginning with this movie.

"I'm in," I growl to Nick, my decision made.

Chapter Six

Laura



“**W**hat do you mean you took a job?” I gape at Kaiden, my toothbrush dangling from the corner of my mouth. “What kind of job?”

“A film job,” he grunts, wrapping a towel around his waist. And dammit. Now I can’t see his naked ass in the bathroom mirror. That’s the best part of sharing a bathroom with him. Watching him walk around naked after we shower.

I spit toothpaste into the sink and quickly rinse my mouth before spinning to face him. “Explain,” I demand, crossing my arms over my chest. He didn’t say anything about this yesterday. In fact, he hasn’t said anything about taking a film job at any point ever.

“I got an offer last night.” He runs a hand through his damp hair, tousling the dark strands. “I accepted the offer.”

“Kaiden!” I stomp across the bathroom toward him. “You don’t do stunt work anymore.”

He slowly tips his head down to look at me. Those piercing gray eyes meet mine. “I won’t be doing stunts, princess. I’ll be on set to help with training.”

I relax slightly, my gaze roving over his face. “This is because of me, isn’t it?”

“Do you want to know what movie it is?” he asks instead of answering, reaching out to brush his thumb across my nipple. It instantly responds to his touch, hardening. My core clenches, heat rushing through me. I swear they get more sensitive every day I’m with him. “You’ll never guess.”

“An action movie?”

“Nope.”

“A spy thriller?”

“Nope.”

“A buddy comedy?”

He pinches my nipple, making me moan.

“I give up.”

”*The Naughty List.*”

I blink wide eyes at him. “Seriously?”

“Mmhmm,” he hums, slipping his hand down my belly. He plunges it between my legs, making me moan and grasp onto his arms to keep myself upright. “I’ll be on set with you every day.”

“Kaiden.”

“I can keep my eyes on you.” He flicks my clit and then presses his thumb against it.

“Kaiden.”

“You can be my afternoon snack.”

I cry out his name when he plunges two fingers inside me and curls them up, striking against my G-spot. Rational thought flees as pleasure rips through me, leaving me a stuttering mess in his arms. I ride his hand, moaning and whimpering.

Somehow, he manages to fuck me with his fingers and undo his towel. It falls to the floor, his cock springing free. I wrap one hand around his thick shaft, gripping him tight. He growls my name, and then he’s spinning me around to face the mirror.

I lean against the counter as he steps up behind me, filling me in one deep thrust.

“Fuck!”

“Kaiden!” I cry at the same time, rising on my toes.

“Goddamn, I was just in this pretty little thing an hour ago,” he grunts, pounding into me. “And I still want to wreck it.”

“Then do it.”

He growls my name, his hand coming down on my ass in a sharp smack.

I cry out, bucking my hips to take him deeper. He thrusts his hand into my hair, holding me still as he drives into me again and again. His eyes tangle with mine in the mirror, his expression stealing my breath. Intense bliss sears me. God, he's beautiful like this. So fierce and wild. So damn sexy.

As soon as he reaches around and pinches my nipple with his free hand, I know I'm not going to be able to hold back. I cry out as the first waves of my orgasm wash over me. It's powerful and vast, threatening to drown me in ecstasy. I bite my tongue, trying not to scream.

"Give me what I fucking earned, princess," he snarls, not letting me get away with that.

I open my mouth and let the sound come.

He roars, yanking me back on his cock as my scream sends him over the edge. His cock pulses as his seed spills into me in thick ropes. I writhe on his erection, grinding back against him...greedy for every drop. He made me this way. Turned me into this wanton, greedy woman. I live for this, breathe for it. God, I never want it to end.

Eventually, it does. The waves recede. He dips his head, pressing a kiss to my back before he reluctantly pulls out of me. We both groan in regret as his semi-hard cock slips from my body. He stoops, grabbing the towel from the floor to clean me up.

“Come here.” He scoops me into his arms, cradling me against his chest like I’m something precious and delicate. Neither of us speaks as he carries me back into the bedroom and settles onto the bed with me in his arms.

“You don’t have to do this,” I finally whisper.

“It’s just a job, princess.”

It’s not just a job, and we both know it. For him, this is huge. He hasn’t been on a film set since he almost died on one. But he’s going back to one now. For me. He may not have said the words yet, but if this isn’t proof of how he feels about me, I don’t know what is. This grumpy, beautiful man loves me. Enough to jump into the fire for me.



“**F**uck,” Kaiden growls, staring in dismay at the film set early the next morning. Christmas decorations glint from one end to the other, turning the entire lot into a literal Christmas fairytale. One section of the lot is even covered in fake snow, with more of it drifting down from snow machines set up overhead.

“Grinch,” I giggle from beside him, trying to lighten the mood. He’s been tense and anxious this morning. Despite trying to act like it’s no big deal, I know this isn’t as easy for him as he’s trying to pretend. The fact that it’s a Christmas

movie probably isn't helping matters. My man is not a fan of the holiday. I'll win him over to the Darkside one way or another, though.

He shoots me a dirty look that makes me laugh again. The whole set is eerily quiet. No one seems particularly thrilled to be here. I think Kaiden may fit in more than I do. Everyone is scowling or glaring or grumpy. I seem to be the only one excited by the prospect of making this movie. Then again, I'm the only one walking into work with the world's hottest man by her side.

"I'll show you what grows six sizes if you keep smiling at me like that," he grumbles.

"It's three sizes."

"I've been in you, princess. Mine grows a helluva lot more than three sizes, and you know it."

"Yay for me," I sass, flashing him my dimples.

He shakes his head, a ghost of a smile flashes across his lips. Finally.

And then we come to the trailers. He stops walking mid-step, his gaze drifting along the row until it lands on the one with my name on the door.

Crap.

"We don't have to go in," I rush to assure him. "We can hang around out here until the set meeting."

"I'm not afraid of the trailer," he says quietly.

“Oh.” I swallow hard, wringing my hands together. I search for something to say, floundering wildly out of my depth. “I don’t know how to help,” I finally admit in a whisper. “I want to make this easier for you, but I don’t know how to do that.”

“You make it easier simply by existing.”

“Kaiden.”

“Let’s go check out your trailer.”

“Are you sure?”

“Laura,” he growls.

“Let’s go check out my trailer!”

He chuckles and nudges me in that direction. I think I may be more nervous than he is about this. Jeez. He’s so damn brave. I wish I had his courage. I’d be unstoppable if I did. But I’m a coward at heart, and he’s a warrior, willing to face any battle.

He hesitates for a split second on the threshold of the trailer before stepping inside. The trailer is small with him inside. The kitchenette is to the right, with a coffee pot and microwave and a two-seater table. A sitting area to the left boasts a small couch, a glass coffee table, and a television. The hallway leads to a bathroom and a small bedroom. A bouquet of red and white roses rests on the table in front of the sofa, along with a note welcoming me to the cast. There’s a gift basket of goodies as well.

Kaiden grunts when he sees the flowers, a shadow passing in front of his eyes.

“They send them to everyone,” I say softly, fighting a smile.

“I should have bought you flowers.”

“You’re here. That’s better than flowers any day,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around him and leaning up on my toes to kiss his cheek. At least that’s my plan.

He hooks one arm around my waist, anchoring my body to his. His free hand plunges into my hair, angling my head as his mouth comes down on mine. He kisses me hard and deep, not letting me up for air until I’m practically climbing his body and purring.

“Fuck.” He bucks his hips into my hand when I cup him through his jeans and squeeze.

“I want you.”

“Horny little girl.” He bites my lip, dragging it through his teeth. “Take my cock out then. Take what you want.”

“What if I want you down my throat?”

His hand in my hair tightens, his eyes darkening.

“You want to choke on my cock?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“On your knees then,” he orders, his voice a rumbling growl.

I obediently drop to my knees, eager to taste and please him. He has his mouth on me at every opportunity, eating me until I’m pleading for him to fuck me. But he rarely lets me get my mouth on him. When I do, he loses his mind. I love it so much. Nothing is sexier to me than watching him unravel above me.

He undoes his pants, his eyes on fire as he pulls his cock out.

I moan at the sight, my mouth watering.

He fists it in his hand, yanking roughly.

“You live for this dick, don’t you?” He pants as he stares down at me.

“Yes.” I squeeze my thighs together, not denying it. Before him, I never understood why people were so obsessed with sex. Now, I get it. God, do I ever. I want him every moment of the day. When he isn’t in me, I ache for him. When he is in me, I want more, more, more. He can’t fuck me often enough or hard enough to please me. He claimed me and turned me into a greedy little addict. Except he’s the only one I want. Him and his cock, his touch.

He steps up in front of me, running the head of his cock across my lips. He bounces it there, teasing me. Always, he teases me, toying with me, seeing how far he can push me before I crack. Before I beg. It never takes long.

“Please,” I plead. “Please, Kaiden.”

“Suck me, princess,” he growls. “Be a good girl and suck it hard.”

I lick around the head, moaning as his taste hits my system. God, I love it. I dip my tongue into the slit, making him growl and curse. His hand tangles in my hair, his expression turning savage. His lip curls up, ecstasy washing over his face. It softens his features and hardens his eyes.

I suck him into my mouth, wrapping my tongue around the head.

“Goddamn.” He rocks his hips against my face, unable to help himself “Ah, princess. That hot little mouth of yours.”

I moan around him, his praise spurring me on. I never have to wonder if he enjoys what I do to him or what we do together. He tells me. Praise falls from his lips in a filthy flood. He’s crude and dirty, saying things no one has ever said to me, at least not to my face. When he says them, though, I love it.

“That’s right. Suck it like the greedy girl you are,” he demands. “Take it all.”

I try. God, I try. I plunge down, taking so much of him that I gag. Still, I can’t fit him all in my mouth. My eyes water, and I pull back, taking a breath before I plunge down again. My lips stretch wide around him as I fight for every inch.

“Ah, God, princess. I can feel your throat closing around me.”

I moan and push forward again, swallowing around his length.

“Laura!” He chokes out my name as his dick slips down my throat. “Ah, Christ. I’m going to come, princess.”

I wrap my hands around his thighs, refusing to let him go as he tries to pull back. He curses, trembling above me. And then the first splash of cum hits the back of my throat. I swallow the salty tang and then pull back slightly as he spills into my mouth and down my throat repeatedly.

I barely have time to swallow the last drop before he drags me into his arms. His wild gray eyes meet mine, his breath a ragged pant. And then his mouth slants over mine, his kiss hard and insistent.

“Fucking perfect little princess,” he growls against my lips.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I whisper, beaming.

“My turn.” He reaches for my zipper.

Bang, bang, bang.

Kaiden whips his head in the direction of the door.

“Two minutes until the set meeting, Ms. Groves!” someone shouts through the door.

“Son of a motherfucking bitch,” Kaiden curses.

I bury my face in his shoulder, laughing loudly.

Chapter Seven

Kaiden



“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, dodging boxes of Christmas shit as I scour the set in search of Laura. This place looks like the North Pole took a shit right in the middle of it. I suppose it’s not entirely terrible. It has a certain charm about it.

Or maybe Laura is softening me. I don’t fucking know. All I know is that being here isn’t nearly as intolerable as I thought it would be. I’ve mainly stuck to the edges of the set, keeping to myself since the set meeting ended an hour ago. But being here feels a little like coming home. I didn’t expect that. I expected it to hurt a whole helluva lot more, truth be told.

For months after the accident, I woke in a cold sweat, plagued by nightmares. The sounds of the trailer caving in on

me haunted my mind. Small spaces gave me full-fledged panic attacks. The myriad of bandages and the never-ending parade of surgeons and specialists drove me insane. All I wanted to do was fucking forget what happened to me, but it was everywhere.

I was almost relieved when people stopped coming around. When they stopped asking how I was doing. It allowed me to move on and put it behind me. I just never realized until today how far I'd moved on. It doesn't hurt like it used to hurt. Being back on a film set feels good in a strange sort of way.

It's bittersweet.

I round a corner and nearly bowl down Audrey...at least I think that's her name. She works in hair or makeup or something like that. I wasn't paying attention when everyone was introduced. I was too busy staring at Laura. She thinks it's hilarious that someone interrupted us before I got to eat her cunt in her trailer. She'll change her tune when I finally get my hands on her.

"Shit, sorry." I take a quick step back into the shadows out of habit, not that it matters. Everyone here has already seen the scar across my face. There were a few uncomfortable stares and lingering looks. No one commented on it, though. Then again, they usually don't say anything to my face. They wait until my back is turned to start whispering.

"You look lost," she says, giving me a friendly smile. She focuses on my eyes, barely even glancing at the scar. Interesting.

“Not lost,” I mutter.

She ignores my surly attitude and presses forward with the conversation. “You’re Kaiden, right? Kaiden Huxley?”

“I am,” I growl and then huff out a breath. Fuck. I’m being an ass. I’m trying to rejoin society, not make everyone hate me. I need people to root for my relationship with Laura, not go out of their way to destroy her reputation for choosing to be with me. I don’t get the impression this woman would do that, but still. I’m supposed to be playing nice. “Sorry.” I grimace apologetically. “Yeah, I’m Kaiden.”

“I’m Audrey Jones. It’s been a long time since you were on a set, hasn’t it?” she asks softly.

I jerk my head in a nod.

She smiles kindly. “Well, I’m happy to see you back on one, Kaiden.” Her expression turns knowing. “And so is your girl.”

“My girl?” We’ve been on set for all of an hour and a half. How the fuck does work travel so fast? Not that I personally object to the world knowing she’s mine. Fuck no, I don’t. But I don’t want to make her life more difficult than it already is, especially right now.

The last thing she needs is to be linked to someone like me.

“If you’re looking for her, she’s over in Wardrobe,” Audrey says instead of answering. “They’re fitting her for tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” My gaze flicks over her shoulder as Luca Regis, the director, spots us. His eyes narrow as he looks between us, his broad shoulders tensing. His gaze lingers on me for a

moment, cool and assessing. Even from here, I can read the hot stamp of possession in them, the territorial warning. Ah, goddammit. He's read the situation all wrong, and he's pissed.

Right on cue, he charges toward us like a bull, his dark eyes spitting fire.

Audrey glances over her shoulder at him.

I decide to beat a hasty retreat. The last thing I need is to piss off the director on day one, especially over a woman I have no interest in pursuing. Laura owns me, heart and soul. He's welcome to this one.

"Erm...which way is Wardrobe?" I ask Audrey.

Luca steps up beside Audrey, spearing me with a dark look. "How would Audrey know? She's hair and makeup. Wardrobe is Edie's department."

"Right," I mutter, shaking my head. Guess I'll be finding it by my damn self then.



Halfway to Wardrobe, Laura's love interest in the movie stumbles out of his trailer with his assistant hot on his trail. Abel Clarke. He's one of the biggest stars in Hollywood. He's also one that can't seem to stay out of the papers.

Everyone has an opinion on Clarke, and most aren't great. He's known for being difficult.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about the fact that he's starring alongside Laura in this movie. It has nothing to do with his dark good looks and everything to do with his reputation. The last thing she needs right now is a bad boy on his redemption tour fucking this up for her. And I'm not nearly dumb enough to believe he decided to do this movie of his own free will. I'm guessing he's one more scandal from serious trouble, and this is him paying his dues.

"They're going to make such a good couple," a woman sighs.

I whip my head in her direction. "Who?"

She turns wide eyes on me, blinking as if just noticing me. Her gaze darts to the scar across my cheek, her heavily made-up face paling slightly. I don't know who she is. She wasn't there when Laura introduced me earlier. And then I see the studio badge clipped to her shirt. *Loraine Templeton. Production Assistant.* She works for Heart & Soul.

"Oh, um, Abel and Laura," she says.

"They aren't together," I grit out through clenched teeth.

"Oh! Of course, of course," she stammers. "I mean their characters. People are going to go crazy when they see them on screen together, you know. He's so freaking hot. And she's gorgeous. Audiences will eat it up. Especially once they see

that sex scene in the candy shop.” She fans her face and laughs. “It’s going to be the talk of the town!”

My brows pull together in a dark scowl. Fucking hell. She has a sex scene with him. I mean, I *knew* she had a sex scene with him. But I didn’t think about the ramifications of her having a sex scene with him. He’ll be touching her. People will see them together. People will see *her*.

“Are...are you *growling*?” Loraine asks.

“Where the fuck is a copy of this script?”

Loraine shuffles through the stack of papers in her arms and thrusts a copy of the script at me. I take it and spin on my heel, stomping back toward Laura’s trailer. I fling myself inside, my heart pounding. I want to hunt Abel down and break his pretty face. But I can’t do that. Laura will fucking kill me. And it’s not like he’s even done anything wrong anyway. I’m rational enough to realize that, even with possessive jealousy roiling through me in a dark cloud.

Instead, I read through the scene, said jealousy eating me alive. This is her job. I knew that when I fell in love with her. I’ll swallow my own goddamn tongue before I ask her to quit, especially right now. But fuck my life. I did not consider the fact that I’d have to be here and see this scene unfold when I took this job. If I had....

If I had, nothing. I’d still be here. Fuck. I’d still be right goddamn here. It doesn’t fucking matter if he touches her for a movie. It doesn’t matter if he pretends to make out with her or if he pretends to fuck her. And I don’t give a fuck if every

viewer on the planet sees it and cooks up some fantasy of the two of them living happily ever after. It'll never happen.

She's my little shining star. No sex scene and no movie will change that. Neither will Abel Clarke. I don't care if he is "*freaking hot*," as Loraine said.

I fling the script across the trailer, scrubbing my hands down my face.

"Get it together, Kaiden," I mutter to myself. It doesn't help. Truth is...I'm losing my mind here. Since the day I met Laura, I've been in a freefall. Long dormant instincts have taken over. Jealousy and hot possession ride me every minute of the day. All I think about is her. All I dream about is her. Half of me wants to keep her all to myself. The other half wants to shout from the rooftops that she's mine and no one else can have her.

The two sides constantly war with one another. Knowing she's being dragged through the mud is fucking me up. I don't like it at all. She deserves the world. This woman was made to be adored. And goddamn, how I adore her.

If her name is going to be linked to anyone else's in the press, I want it to be mine. Not Abel Clarke's, not some other actor, but *mine*. The man who fucking worships the ground she walks on. I'm in love with her, and I want everyone to know it.

Until the day I got trapped in that fucking trailer, I never cared what people thought about me. I did what I wanted to do, and I didn't make apologies for it. But I've spent the last ten years caring too goddamn much. Now, I'm frozen by

inaction when it counts the most, terrified that Laura's reputation will take a hit if she's linked to me.

But her reputation is *already* taking a hit, isn't it? She's already suffering, isn't she? People are already saying vile shit about her. And still, I'm letting their opinions shape our future. I'm allowing what they might have to say dictate what I do.

It's bullshit.

People don't have to like me. They don't have to think I deserve her. I don't care if they tear me to shreds in the papers or say she can do better. Maybe there are a thousand other men out there who look better than I do. It doesn't matter because not a single fucking one of them will ever love her harder or worship her like I do. That much, I can guarantee.

Let them do their worst. It won't change a fucking thing.

I'm claiming my girl. It'll be my name linked to hers or no ones.

Anyone who doesn't like it can get fucked.

Chapter Eight

Laura



“Whoa. Who is that?”

“Is that...Kaiden Huxley?”

I glance up from the script to see Kaiden barging through the space like a bull in a China shop, his eyes locked on me. He’s wildly out of place amongst the rows of costumes, standing head, and shoulders higher than everyone else. The intense look on his face steals my breath.

“Hi,” I whisper, my stomach turning flips when he reaches my side. “Are you done for the day?” I’m not filming my first scene until tomorrow, but he has some training stuff today, so we’re here for the duration.

“Not yet.” He leans down, brushing his lips across mine.

The collective intake of breath is sharp enough to suck the oxygen from the room. Everyone goes silent, and I know all eyes are on us. Oh, my goodness. What is he doing? We didn't talk about this. Not that I'm objecting. He can kiss me anytime, anyplace. But there will be no hiding our relationship once this gets out. And it *will* get out. Some gossip is too juicy to ignore.

"I missed you," he murmurs, something dark and wicked in his eyes. *Possession*.

I shiver as it rolls over me in a hot wave. "I missed you too."

"Do you need anything, princess?" he asks, cupping the side of my face. He keeps his back to everyone else in the room, using his body as a barrier to shut them out. But it's so quiet you can hear a pin drop. They're hanging on every word. It'll be all over the set in a matter of hours. It'll be all over town by the end of the week.

Does he know what he's doing?

Judging by the steely determination in his eyes, he does. He wants them to talk.

This crazy, beautiful man is...claiming me.

He's the Grinch, but *my* heart grows three sizes.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. I place my hand against his cheek, covering his scar with my palm. "I don't need anything."

"Are you feeling okay?"

“Kaiden, I’m fine.” I haven’t been nauseous at all today. In fact, I’ve felt fantastic. Hiding the truth from him for the past few days has been tough, but now that it’s out, I feel so much better. I’ve been worried about him, but that’s all.

He presses a kiss to my forehead, lingering there for a moment. “I’ll find you when I’m done this afternoon.”

“Can I come with you?”

“You want to watch me work?”

I nod eagerly. Watching him work is far more enticing than running lines and watching Edie sew any day. He’s so sexy when he’s being all bossy and commanding. I love how confident he is and how controlled. He doesn’t second guess himself or his decisions. He trusts himself and his instincts fully. He’s teaching me to trust mine too. Well...he’s *trying* to teach me. We usually end up naked after an hour or so when he trains me. My instinct tends to be to jump his bones at every available opportunity. It counts as cardio, right? Right.

He takes my hand, helping me up from my chair.

“I’ll finish getting this stuff ready for you,” Edie says, offering me a bright smile. Her gaze darts to Kaiden in curiosity and then quickly back to me. There is no malice in the look, just genuine curiosity. I’ve never worked with her before, but she worked on Luca’s last film. I think he brought her on for this one. I like her. She’s warm and friendly and has gone out of her way to put me at ease.

“Thanks.” I smile at her and then let Kaiden lead me from the trailer with his hand on the small of my back. Everyone else watches us the entire way.

“Think they’re alerting the media already?” Kaiden asks, his voice suspiciously calm once the door closes behind us.

“What are you up to?” I ask, eyeing him sideways.

“Nothing.”

If there’s one thing Kaiden isn’t, it’s innocent. But I let him get away with playing the part, for now, knowing I’ll get the truth out of him sooner or later. I have my ways. He may look tough, but he’s not so hard to break once you know how. It just takes a little bit of effort.

Yay for me.

He leads me across the back of Stage 6. We dodge equipment, stepping over bundles of wires, ducking under balloon lights, and a camera boom. Kane and Scarlett are filming a fight on the main set, so most of the crew is over there, leaving this part of the set eerily abandoned. Then again, the dark corners have always been my favorite parts of film sets.

“When I first started acting, I used to climb up into the rafters and hide out,” I murmur as we skirt around the edges of the set. “I liked being able to watch everything unfolding down below.”

“Jesus, princess,” Kaiden says. “You’re lucky you didn’t fall.”

“Oh, I know. When I got caught, the director threw a fit. He threatened to fire me if I ever did it again.” I smile at the memory, laughing quietly. “It scared me straight. Well, at least until I met Gage Bronx. He coaxed me back into the rafters when we were filming together. He was smart enough to secure us with straps so we didn’t fall.”

“Gage Bronx.” Kaiden repeats the name, a furrow between his brows. “He quit acting years ago.”

“Yeah. His brother had a heart condition like you,” I say. “Gage only ever got into acting to pay for college. Once he did what he needed to do, he walked away and never looked back.” We don’t cross paths often since he left acting behind, but I’m always happy to see him and Troian when we do.

Kaiden stops walking and pulls me into a small recess where two large beams connect. He tucks his hand beneath my chin, lifting my gaze to his. “Why are you telling me this, princess?” he asks, his gaze searching my face.

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“You do know.”

“I...” I swallow the lie when he frowns at me, the bottom edge of his scar pulled taut. “I don’t know. I sometimes think leaving it all behind wouldn’t be so terrible if I did it for the right reason, that’s all.”

“I’m not the right reason, Laura.” His firm tone sends my stomach sinking like lead. “You aren’t giving up your career because you think it’s what’s best for me. I won’t allow it.”

“I...”

“So if that’s what you’re thinking, the answer is no,” he growls. “You aren’t giving up a fucking thing for me.”

“Kaiden.”

“No,” he growls.

“You can’t just order me around!” I cry, stomping my foot as tears well in my eyes. “It’s my life. I get to decide what I do with it, Kaiden.”

“Are you mine, princess?” he asks, his expression softening.

“Maybe.”

“Don’t piss me off.” He wraps his hand gently around my throat to bring my face close to his. “I’ll have you screaming my name right here.”

“You wouldn’t.”

He eyes me levelly, and I know he means it. I see the truth peeping out from the depths of his wild gray eyes. He’ll make me come here and now, just to hear me screaming his name. Just to remind me that I’m his and no argument will change that. This man loves me so much that he’s here right now, doing what he hasn’t done in years. And he’s doing it for me.

“Of course I’m yours,” I whisper, the fight draining out of me. How can I be upset with him when he’s literally facing his worst nightmares and memories for me?

“Then you aren’t giving up the career you love to be with me,” he murmurs, brushing his lips across mine in a gentle

pass. “It’s my job to take care of you, not the other way around. You haven’t sacrificed and worked your ass off for this long just to throw it away because you think I need to be protected. I’m a big boy. I can handle whatever they want to throw my way.”

“We don’t have to go public.”

“I’m not hiding you,” he growls, fire flickering to life in his expression. “They’re not linking you to Abel fucking Clarke or anyone else in the goddamn press. It’ll be my name next to yours.”

“Is that what this is about?” I ask, biting my lip to hide an amused smile. “You’re jealous?”

His scowl is dark enough to make me shiver. “I’m not jealous. I’m pissed that Clarke will have his fucking hands on you tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t mean anything, Kaiden,” I whisper. “I have no interest in Abel. We’ve barely even spoken two words to one another.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He quirks a brow. “This is your job, princess. I know that. Of course, I know that. But I’m a possessive asshole when it comes to you. No one should touch you but me. No one should look at you but me. You’re mine,” he growls, dragging me closer to his body. He claims my mouth in a hot, possessive kiss that leaves my senses reeling. “I’m not rational when it comes to you. Christ, Laura, I’m so goddamn in love with you I can’t think straight.”

The breath leaves my lungs in a shocked exhale.

“I know you feel the same way. You wouldn’t be willing to give up your career to protect me if you didn’t. You’re in love with me.”

“I am,” I mouth, barely able to force out the sound. “So in love.”

He presses his forehead to mine, exhaling a shaking breath. “Fuck,” he whispers, his breath washing across my face. It trembles on his lips. He’s discomposed, rattled. I love that I can do that to him. That one simple truth has the ability to shake this giant to his very foundation. “I’ve been waiting a lifetime to hear you say that, princess.”

“I love you.”

“Laura.”

“I love you.”

“Laura,” he growls.

“I love you.”

“Now you’re just trying to get yourself fucked,” he mutters, biting my bottom lip.

“I am not.” I totally am. “I’m trying to make you forget about tomorrow.”

“It’s not working. I read the fucking script.” His mouth works against mine, his kiss possessive and hungry. “I want to break his pretty face.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” I moan against his lips.

“Oh, you’ll definitely be making it up to me,” he mutters. “When we get home, you’ll make it up to me by sitting on my face until I’m satisfied. And as soon as that fucking scene is finished tomorrow, you’ll be making it up to me while you’re bouncing on my cock.”

“Kaiden,” I moan.

“Come on.” He kisses me hard and then drags me out of our hiding spot, gently pulling me up against his side. “Let’s go before I say to hell with this movie and decide to let you start making it up to me right now.”

“I like option B.”

“Of course you do,” he says, shaking his head. “You horny little thing.”

I smile, hiding my face in his chest. “You made me that way.”

Chapter Nine

Kaiden



“Oh no,” Laura cries, sitting upright in bed.

My eyes spring open just in time to see the color drain from her face. She clamps a hand over her mouth and practically launches herself out of bed, making a beeline for the bathroom.

“Fuck,” I growl, flinging the covers back to follow behind her. Early morning light pours in from the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the valley. My little star likes to wake with the sun spilling across her face, albeit not like this.

What the fuck is going on with her? This is the second time this week that she’s woken up sick. I don’t like it one bit. If this is what stress does to her, I may revise my decision not to hunt down the assholes who run the sites currently printing

their bullshit lies about her. It's nearly Christmas. She should be floating on cloud nine, not stressing like this.

I'm not taking good enough care of her. As soon as she finishes filming her final scene on Christmas Eve, I'm whisking her away to spend Christmas in the mountains. We have to be back in time for the wrap party on New Year's Eve, but we'll have six days to ourselves. I can't fucking wait. It'll be just the two of us, naked in a cabin. The only thing she's allowed to wear is the ring I plan to put on her finger on Christmas morning.

Fuck, I can't think about that right now. She needs me.

Focus, Kaiden. Focus.

I stride into the bathroom to find her crouched in front of the toilet, dry heaving into the bowl. She looks so tiny and vulnerable. My heart aches at the sight. My poor little star. She's too damn perfect to be this miserable.

I hurry toward the sink and wet a washcloth in cool water before crossing back to her.

"Go away," she moans when I kneel behind her, pulling her into my lap. She said the same thing the other morning too. It didn't work then, either.

"Never." I press my lips to the back of her neck and then place the cool cloth against her skin, holding her cradled in my arms as she dry heaves again, whimpering pitifully. I feel completely fucking helpless, so I rub her back, murmuring to her.

Eventually, the dry heaves stop. She slumps weakly against my chest.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re stressed out. We need to get you in to see a doctor.”

Where the fuck is Gage Bronx when you need him? I forgot she knew him until she brought him up the other day, but either it’s a small fucking world or the universe put this shining star in my path for a reason. My best friend from childhood, Tate Grimes, went to medical school with Gage. As far as I know, they’re still friends.

“I feel fine. I just wake up in the morning, and I’m...” Laura trails off with a little gasp. “Kaiden, what is today?”

“The day of your sex scene with Abel Clarke,” I growl. I haven’t forgotten that bullshit. Nope. Not even eating her perfect little cunt until every lick had her pleading for mercy last night made me forget that.

Shit. She hasn’t felt well, and I’ve been all over her like an asshole. No wonder she’s so stressed out. I need to give her a break and keep my damn hands to myself for a few days.

“No, the date!” she cries.

“It’s the twentieth.”

“Oh no.” She jumps out of my lap, elbowing me in the chin. Before I can even ask where she’s going, she’s running back into the bedroom, her blonde hair bouncing behind her and that perfect ass jiggling.

My cock stirs at the sight.

“Forget it. You’re riding the bench,” I growl, glaring at him as I toss the washcloth toward the sink and then flush the toilet before following her back into the bedroom.

She’s seated on the side of the bed, her phone hanging limply in her hands.

As soon as I step into the room, she bursts into tears.

What the fuck?

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” she cries.

“Didn’t do what?”

“K-keep it from you.”

What the fuck is she talking about?

I stalk across the room toward her, prying the phone out of her hands. I go to toss it across the bed, not giving a shit what’s on the screen when she’s in tears, but then I see the name of the app out of the corner of my eye, and everything falls into place like an anvil cracking me in the head.

The fact that she throws up in the mornings. Her question about the date. The fact that we’ve been fucking like rabbits for a month straight. She isn’t sick.

She’s pregnant.

Holy shit. My little star is carrying my baby.

“You’re pregnant.” My knees cease functioning. I land on my ass on the bed beside her.

“I don’t know.” Her bottom lip quivers as her big, watery eyes meet mine. “I should have started last week. I didn’t even realize I was late until you told me the date. I’ve been so focused on other things; it never even crossed my mind. I swear I didn’t realize, Kaiden. I would have said something if I had.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, my mind reeling. She could be carrying my kid right now. My star...pregnant with my baby. Goddamn, I like the sound of that. A whole helluva lot.

“You’re mad.” Her expression crumbles.

“Mad?” I shake my head, shocked that she could think that. “Never,” I growl, cupping her cheeks in my hands to brush away her tears. “Christ, princess. I don’t know how I feel right now, but mad isn’t even close.”

“Upset? Afraid? Annoyed? Outraged? Crushed?”

“Hopeful,” I whisper, making her sob my name. “Awed. Elated. Overjoyed. Humbled. Grateful.” Emotion swells in my throat, threatening to choke me. “So fucking grateful.”

She throws herself into my lap, sobbing. I catch her, wrapping her up in my arms. My hand goes to the back of her head, cradling her to me. She presses her face to my throat, her hot tears soaking my skin as she cries.

“I want it so bad,” she says, her words muffled. “I didn’t know how much until I realized it was possible.” She pulls back to look at me, her face wet with tears, still so fucking

perfect it hurts. “I want your baby, Kaiden. I want so many of your babies.”

My dick turns to steel at the thought.

“Then I need you to stop crying so I can go buy a test, princess.”

“Okay,” she sniffles.



“**W**ait!” Laura cries an hour later, spinning around so fast she bumps into me.

I grab her before she bounces off and lands on her ass in the middle of the bathroom floor. She’s carrying my kid. Falling could hurt both of them. We can’t have that.

“You know you aren’t watching me pee, right?” she asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Fuck, I know,” I mutter, blowing out a breath. I’m not sure which of us is most nervous. I think I bought every damn test in the drugstore. The clerk looked at me like I was crazy. I wanted to growl at him that he’d understand one day, but then I thought about all the people who never get to experience this and kept my damn mouth shut.

My little star is turning me soft. Before her, I don’t think that thought would have ever crossed my mind. But now? I think

about shit like that now. I think about what she would say and how I would want people to treat her.

“You’re nervous,” she says.

“So are you.”

“I’m scared it’ll be negative.”

“Me too.”

“Really?”

I nod, reaching out to stroke her cheek. “Now that I’ve thought about you carrying my kid, I want it, princess. But if you aren’t pregnant this time, that doesn’t mean you won’t be next time. I’ll keep you stuffed full of my cock and cum until you’re good and bred.”

“Kaiden,” she moans, her eyes darkening.

“Go pee on the stick so we can both see that you’re already carrying my kid.”

“Okay,” she whispers. And then she hesitates and reaches for my hand. “Maybe you should wait outside the door. Just in case I need you.”

“I can do that,” I murmur, grateful as hell she’s not kicking me out of the room entirely.

She takes a deep breath and then marches into the bathroom with the test in her hand. I pace in restless circles outside the door, my heart in my throat. It takes an eternity before she finally pulls the door open.

“What does it say?”

“We have to wait three minutes.”

I scowl at the test in her hand. “Who the fuck made that rule?”

“I don’t know.”

“Give me the test.”

“It says we have to wait! It takes time for it to process.”

I arch a brow.

She huffs and reluctantly hands the test over.

I glance down at it, but the little box that’s supposed to say pregnant or not pregnant doesn’t say anything. “This one is broken,” I complain. “Pee on a different one.”

She laughs, pushing her way into my arms. “I told you we have to wait three minutes.”

I scowl at the test, positive it’s broken. Only...that little box isn’t empty this time.

“Holy shit,” I wheeze, my heart skipping a beat before it slams against my ribcage in a resounding thud that shakes me to my core.

“What?” Laura asks.

I tilt the test so she can see it.

“Oh my god,” she whispers, bursting into tears.

I drop the test to the floor, scooping her up into my arms.

“You’re carrying my baby,” I growl, claiming her lips in a deep kiss.

She sobs against mine.

Chapter Ten

Laura



I watch out of the corner of my eye as Kaiden paces around the edge of the lot where Abel and I are filming a snowball fight for the movie. He moves back and forth like a lion, his gaze never deviating from me. I have a feeling he's going to watch me with the same intensity for the entire duration of this pregnancy.

This pregnancy.

I'm pregnant with Kaiden's baby.

I fight the urge to jump up and down and squeal like a giddy schoolgirl. I also fight the urge to burst into happy tears again. I've cried enough this morning, thank you very much. Thank goodness Audrey works miracles with makeup because it took one to cover my puffy eyes and splotchy face.

A snowball whizzes past my head, barely missing me.

Crap. I'm not focused at all.

I quickly launch one in Abel's direction, only to realize at the last moment that he's also lost in his own world. The snowball smacks him directly in the face. He barely notices. He's staring at his personal assistant, oblivious to the rest of the world. I think he's in love with her or falling in love with her. With Abel, it's hard to tell. He holds his cards close to his chest.

I wince as Luca marches onto the set, headed straight for my costar. "We don't have a problem, do we, Abel?"

"No, sorry," he says, tearing his eyes away from Scout. "But this is why I became an actor instead of a baseball player when the Angels called."

A few members of the crew laugh. I bite my lip to hide a smile. Abel is incorrigible.

Luca nods. "Sure, let's take five and let Abel rest his major league arm a bit. Reset the scene, please."

Abel smiles gratefully and then murmurs his thanks to me before stalking toward Scout.

He barely makes it two steps before Kaiden's baring down on me like a freight train. "I don't like this scene," he growls for the tenth time this morning. "They're throwing shit at you."

"It's snow, Kaiden."

“I don’t like it.”

I shake my head, smiling at him as he holds a bottle of water toward me. “If you ever decide you’re tired of teaching people stunts, you’d make a great director,” I tease, taking a sip of water. “I hear that they, too, like bossing people around on sets.”

He shoots me a dirty look.

“Just saying.”

“Are you mine, princess?”

“You know I am,” I whisper.

“Are you carrying my kid?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll be as bossy as I need to be to make sure my girls are taken care of,” he growls, his eyes dark as they rove over me. “Now, say you’re welcome and finish your scene before I decide to be really bossy and carry your sexy ass out of here.”

“I like option B,” I groan.

He takes a step toward me, intent clear in his gaze.

I quickly jump backward, knowing full well that he’ll carry me out of here in a heartbeat, this scene and the shooting schedule be damned. When it comes to me, I’m quickly coming to learn that Kaiden doesn’t care what anyone else has to say or what they think. All that matters to him is me.

“You want a girl?” I ask.

“Hell no. I want boys. One of you is enough to worry about, princess.”

“You said your girls.”

“You want a baby girl,” he says in a rumbling growl, satisfaction glinting deep in his eyes. “And I don’t ever tell you no, Laura.”

My heart flutters, and love for this man threatening to burst out of me. I don’t know what I did to deserve him, but I need to keep doing it. He’s the sweetest Grinch I’ve ever met. I was wrong the day I met him. I thought he was difficult, but he isn’t. He was guarded, hiding behind the walls he erected to keep people out. But he’s not hiding anymore. He’s finally living again.

“I love you,” I whisper.”

His lips lift into a smile, his expression soft. “Go finish your scene.”

“Yes, sir.” I salute and then pass him my water bottle before turning to head back toward where we’re filming.

He hooks a hand into the back of my coat at the last second, pulling me back to him.

“Wha—?”

His lips come down on mine, his kiss hot and insistent. He wipes every thought from my mind, sends my body up in flames, and then releases me. “Just in case you think I’ve forgotten about that fucking sex scene,” he growls and then walks off, leaving me gaping after him.

“Laura!” Luca calls.

I whip around to find everyone on set staring in my direction. I’m pretty sure they just saw that. I’m pretty sure Kaiden intended for them to see it. Oh, my goodness. He’s a crazy man. But he’s *my* crazy man.

I giggle to myself and hurry forward to take my place.



“Hey, Max?” I peek my head into the cramped break room, searching for Max Sawyer, our set medic, pulling my robe tight around me. I feel ridiculous running around in my costume, but our sex scene starts filming in a few minutes, and I don’t know if I’ll get a chance to talk to her again before we wrap.

She lifts her gaze from the array of medical equipment spread across the tabletop, her blue eyes running over me. “If you’re here to proposition me, the answer is no,” she says in her firm British accent, brushing her dark hair off her shoulder. “I’ve already chased the set double out of here.”

I blink at her, not sure if she’s serious or not. Max is a tough cookie to crack, a little grumpy, but she knows her stuff. “Um, I came to ask a question.”

“Does it involve dates?”

“No?”

“Oh.” Relief steals across her face, softening her expression.
“You can come in then.”

I hesitate for a moment, rabidly curious about what the set double, Andrew Briggs, did to stress her out, but quickly decide the less I know, the better. Other people’s business is not mine for a reason. I slip into the break room, closing the door behind me. And then I hesitate again.

“Is anything I say to you confidential?” Max isn’t one to gossip, but the question slips out anyway.

“It can be.” She cocks her head to the side, her gaze growing concerned. “What’s up, Laura?”

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt, feeling a little like I’m revealing a state secret. Kaiden and I haven’t discussed when we would tell people yet. We didn’t have time. We barely had time to process the news ourselves before we had to rush to set to make my call time.

“Well, now you’ve got me gobsmacked. I did not see that coming,” Max says, her accent deepening.

“Me either.” I place my hand over my belly, awed all over again. Will it be this way the whole time? Probably, I quickly decide.

Max watches me intently. “Judging by the look on your face, you aren’t here to talk about your options, are you?”

I quickly shake my head. There are no options as far as I’m concerned. Kaiden and I are having this baby. We’re going to

love him or her with our whole hearts. I never even considered anything else, and I wouldn't. I would have kept the baby even if he hadn't been happy. I would have raised our child on my own. He or she is a part of Kaiden. How could I ever give up or regret something that's part of him?

“What can I help you with then?” Max asks.

“I'm up for a role in an action movie,” I explain quietly. “It starts filming in February. I'm just wondering if it's safe for the baby for me to take a role like that.”

“Women take roles all the time while pregnant,” Max says carefully, rearranging a row of bandages on the table. “But I won't lie and say it'll be easy because it won't be. There are risks. Action roles are physically demanding. They put your body through a lot, and so does pregnancy. Trying to do both at the same time can really take a toll. Obviously, there are risks, especially if you'll be doing any sort of stunt work yourself. Accidents happen.” Her gaze flits across my face. “But I think you probably know that better than anyone.”

It takes me a minute to realize what she means. *Kaiden*. Of course. The whole world still thinks he was injured in a stunt gone wrong. They still don't know the truth. I doubt they ever will. He'll take the truth to his grave to protect his friend, and I would never do anything to undermine his decision. But I wish everyone knew the incredible, selfless man I know.

Maybe then they wouldn't see the scar across his face when they look at him or a reminder of what could have been. They'd see his heart, his courage, and maybe, just maybe, this

town would be a little bit better for it. Maybe, just maybe, we'd all learn that true beauty is found within.

“Thanks, Max,” I say, giving her a tiny smile.

She returns my smile and then hesitates. “It’s not really my business, but how are you doing otherwise? With the pregnancy, I mean. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’ve had a little morning sickness, but that’s it.”

“How far along are you?”

“Just a few weeks, I think.”

She nods. “It’ll probably get worse before it gets better. Try ginger ale and crackers as soon as you wake up. They might help. If it gets really bad, your doctor can prescribe you something, but they try not to do that unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Mine can’t see me until after the holidays.”

“That’s okay.” She gives me a calm, reassuring smile. “It’s perfectly normal to wait a few weeks before you’re seen. Unless you start having problems, it’ll be okay.”

“Thanks,” I whisper. I’ve been nervous about it. I know Kaiden is too. The odds of him passing on his heart condition are non-existent as it’s not hereditary, but I think we’ll both probably worry until we see the doctor and he reassures us that the baby is healthy and we have nothing to worry about.

“Good luck.”

“Um, you too.”

I have a feeling she’s going to need it with whatever is going on with her and Andrew.

Chapter Eleven

Kaiden



I pace around outside the set like a caged lion, four steps in one direction, six in the other. What the fuck is taking so long? They've been filming for an hour already. How long can it possibly take for them to get this scene marked and over with?

Luca closed the set for it. I have a feeling he did it to keep me out here. The rational part of my mind is grateful to him for that. The less rational part is mad as hell. My little star is in there right now, and she's pregnant with my kid. I can't see her. I can't touch her.

I don't even fucking care about Abel or the camera crew. None of them even register. None of them even matter. All I

can think about is my shining star and how goddamn badly I want to be the one putting my hands all over her right now.

A thousand versions of the scene run through my head, each dirtier than the last. In every single one, she's with me, and this isn't a movie. I have her spread across the candy counter, eating her cunt while she's coated in sugar. I drive into her, fucking her from one orgasm to the next while everyone watches. She moans for me...begs for me. Screams my name repeatedly as I drill her tight cunt harder, faster.

I pace faster, a growl rumbling in my throat.

My hands clench and unclench. Sweat drips from my brow.

"They're together," a familiar voice whispers from behind me. "Like *together* together."

"Wow. She could do so much better. Have you seen his scar? Dreadful."

"Seen it? I talked to him," Loraine says.

"You didn't!"

"I did. He's quite rude. I don't know what she sees in him."

"Well, it's not his looks," her friend says.

"Or his personality."

"They won't last. As soon as word leaks, she'll drop him."

Jesus Christ.

My stomach clenches in disgust, white-hot anger pulsing through me. I wheel around, having heard more than enough. I have no idea what I'm going to say, and I don't get the chance

to find out. Loraine and her redheaded friend slip around the corner, their heads bent together as they whisper back and forth.

“Fuck,” I snarl, scrubbing a hand down my face. The action doesn’t erase their words. It doesn’t erase the yawning pit in the middle of my stomach, either. The shit they just spewed is mild compared to what other people will say once word about our relationship leaks.

I know because I’ve heard it all before.

Freak. Scarface. Krueger. I didn’t disappear for the fun of it. I got sick of seeing my picture online and reading the endless parade of comments. I know what they’re putting Laura through now because I’ve been there. People can be vicious, especially in this town. Especially when they think no one is looking.

Now, Laura will hear the same names. She’ll endure the same whispers. Only, it’ll be worse for her because she has more to lose. Because her heart is so goddamn big. What they say about me will wound her, hurt her. How is that possibly healthy for her or the baby? How is any of this healthy for her or the baby?

I’m the last goddamn thing they need in their lives.

“You know what I really hate?”

I glance back toward the set to find Scarlett Cassidy watching me with her head cocked to the side. Her brunette hair is pinned back from her face, her white blouse

shimmering beneath the lights. She looks regal and composed, every inch a star. She doesn't stare at me in pity but with fire in her amber eyes. She heard every word Loraine and her redheaded friend just spoke.

“What's that?” I ask.

“People who have nothing better to do with their time than talk about things that are none of their business.” Her lips compress into a thin, disapproving line, her amber eyes narrowed after Loraine and her friend. “In my experience, they're never worth the time we waste internalizing what they've said.”

“You're probably right about that,” I say quietly.

“Laura is glowing. If you're responsible for that, good for you.” Her lips tip up into a small smile. “I hope jealousy eats the catty bitches alive while she's living her best life.”

I jerk my chin in a nod of thanks, not sure what to say to that. Scarlett doesn't wait around for an answer. She sails past me, her heels clicking across the floor as she continues on her way to wherever she is going. I watch her for a moment and then expel a sharp breath.

Shit. Maybe she's right.

I let this fucking town and the people in it chase me into the shadows last time, let myself become a shell of the man I used to be. My scars defined me; their words buried me. I lost myself. Lost everything.

But I'm not that man anymore.

I'm Laura's now. She dragged me out of the shadows and breathed life back into me. Little by little, she reminded me what it means to live...to *truly* live. I'm on a film set again because of her. I'm facing my fears because of her. I remember the man I used to be because of her, the one I buried long ago. And that man? He wouldn't slink away. He'd fight.

He'd fight like hell.

So where the fuck is he right now?



By the time Laura emerges from the set an hour later, the wild tangle of emotions running through me has cooled. The yawning pit of anxiety has settled, my doubts falling silent again. I'm settled, my course set. I know what I need to do now, and the framework of a plan is in place.

Laura may kill me when she finds out, but it needs to happen. To protect her and the baby, it's the only thing I can do. It's what I *need* to do.

"Hey," she says, walking straight into my arms.

I pull her into me, cradling her gently. "I missed you."

"Having someone else's hands on me didn't feel right, Kaiden." Her somber eyes meet mine. "I didn't like it."

I brush my lips across her forehead. “Then maybe I should erase the memory of them, hmm?”

“Yes, please.”

I chuckle at how politely she says this. She’s so full of grace that it bleeds out of her. I hope to God she never loses that. No matter what the world throws at her, I hope it never turns her bitter or hard. I hope she’s always this fiercely gentle and powerfully bright. I hope our child is just like her.

I sweep her up into my arms and stalk toward her trailer, more than willing to erase this memory for her. If this is the last time I get to touch her before everything changes, I want it to be here...in the place where she reminded me that there is magic in this world.

She sighs in contentment, wrapping her arms around my neck.

Scarlett was right. She is glowing. Goddamn. How did I miss it? She’s the brightest little star in this town, but every day since I met her, that shine has intensified. It pulses in the air around her, stamping her with a luminescence that’s impossible to miss.

Please, don't let her lose it, I pray.

“I love you,” she says, reaching up to cup my cheek in her palm. She doesn’t shy away from my scar. Since day one, she hasn’t shied away from it. She places her hand over it, her fingers gentle, her gaze soft. As if to remind me that she loves all of me, that she accepts all of me.

I don't say anything until we're in her trailer and she's sprawled across the bed in her elf costume. She's supposed to look adorable in it. Instead, she looks entirely too sexy. I yank my shirt over my head, kick my boots off, and crawl onto the bed with her.

"You're my magic," I murmur, leaning down over her.

Her lips curve into a soft smile. "Your magic?"

"My Christmas magic."

"You hate Christmas." She runs her fingers through my hair, tousling it.

"I hated the reminder of everything I lost," I murmur, raining kisses across her face. "I hated being alone. I hated watching the world go soft when it felt so goddamn cold to me."

"Kaiden," she whispers.

"It's not cold anymore, princess." I kiss each corner of her lips, lingering as I reach for the buttons on her top. "I'm not cold anymore."

Her eyes light up, my little star glowing brighter than the sun. "Then burn with me, Kaiden," she breathes, clutching me to her. "Make me forget everything but you."

"Gladly." I seam my lips to hers, undressing her between long, languid kisses that have her eyes turning dark and her lashes fluttering. I take my time, running my hands over every inch of skin, worshipping her the way she deserves. I don't fuck her. I love her.

By the time she's naked beneath me, she's trembling, her chest shuddering with each soft exhale. Lips replace hands as I drive her higher, whispering sweet words of devotion into her skin. Every damn word is the truth. I do worship this beautiful little star. She is a goddess. My heart does beat for her and her alone. The surgeon might have repaired it when I was a kid, but she healed it and brought it back to life.

"Kaiden!" she cries, back arched, hands reaching for me as I part her folds and lap at her clit. Somehow, she's sweeter. Her juices flow like wine across my lips as I eat her like we have all the time in the world. I don't concern myself with anyone outside this trailer. They don't fucking matter. They never did.

She comes in a heated rush, her sweet voice breaking on my name.

I free my cock, lifting her into my lap.

Her nails score my back as she sinks down on me.

"Oh, God. Oh, God," she chants, her face buried in my throat as she writhes in my lap. "What are you doing to me?"

"Making you forget everything but me." I run my lips across her forehead. "Burning with you." Lift her up my cock. "Loving you." And then slide her back down.

She sobs my name, clinging to me as I take her slowly, so goddamn slowly it hurts. She's a priceless weight in my arms, a heavenly vise around my goddamn heart. The tightest grip around my cock. Every part of her is perfect. Every part of her is mine.

We fall together, her sheltered in my arms and my heart even more firmly in her hands.

Neither of us worries about her sex scene again. In one perfect moment, it simply ceases to matter at all.

Chapter Twelve

Laura



“**W**here are you?” Roni demands, panic in her voice.

“I’m at the studio. Why?” I ask, yawning into the phone. Today is my last major scene, a mall scene with Abel. Once it’s finished, I just have a few minor scenes left over the next two days, and then we’re finished. It’s bittersweet.

“Is Kaiden with you?”

“Yes,” I say, glancing over at him. He’s a few feet away, talking to Jackson Reed and the assistant director about something involving stunts or stunt coordination or training. I’m not sure. I wasn’t really paying attention, but Jackson’s daughter, Cam, is with them, soaking in everything they say. She’s an adorable girl. She and Hailey look tiny next to Kaiden and Jackson.

Filming ran late last night, and everyone is tired. Kaiden and I played hooky this morning and stayed in bed. After I woke up sick again yesterday, Kaiden ran out and bought ginger ale and fifty different kinds of crackers. They seem to have helped today. I didn't wake up throwing up, at least. I'm just ridiculously tired. I barely got here in time to get into hair and makeup.

Now, Abel is MIA. Luca is ready to blow a gasket because we can't start this scene without him.

"Shit. I was hoping he wasn't there," Roni mutters.

"Why? What happened?" I ask, instantly on alert.

Kaiden peeks over, checking on me.

I give him a tight smile, not wanting to alarm him. He worries about me enough as it is. The more I think about it, the less I like the thought of taking on an action movie when I'm pregnant. I haven't talked to him about it yet, but I think I'm going to turn down the role if they offer it to me. There will be other opportunities, but I'll never forgive myself if something happens to the baby because I'm pushing myself beyond my limits every day just to prove to the world that I can.

"There's an army of reporters waiting for him outside the studio," Roni says quietly.

"Word is out?" I guess, nervous energy humming through me. I'm ready for the world to know about him. But I'm anxious as hell about how people treat him.

Scarlett told me what happened while Abel and I were filming our scene the day before yesterday. I *hate* that Kaiden had to hear such vile, disgusting gossip. He won't have to listen to it from Loraine Templeton again. I may not be able to keep people from talking, but I can damn sure keep them away from Kaiden. She and her hateful little friend have been banished from the set. I've never thrown my weight or my name around, but I'll do it a thousand times if that's what it takes to make it clear that people like that aren't welcome anywhere near us.

When I told Kaiden that, he just shook his head and called me his fierce little star. And then he kissed me until I forgot I was mad at him for not telling me what happened. He makes it very hard to stay angry. We make quite the pair, always trying to protect one another. But that's what you do for the people you love, isn't it? You protect them. You fight for them. You put them first. He'll always come first to me. If I have to take on every petty Betty and gossip magazine in this town, then that's just what I'll do.

"Not exactly," Roni says. "There are murmurs, but that's not why they're out there."

"Then why?" I demand.

"Damen Montero and his sister, Marissya, released a joint statement about two hours ago, Laura. Everyone knows what really happened to Kaiden."

The breath leaves my lungs in a strangled rush, shock surging through me. Oh, my god. I cut my eyes in Kaiden's

direction, only to find him scowling at something in the distance, utterly oblivious to what's happening over here.

“This is bad,” I hiss at Roni. “You have to get them out of here!”

“You know I can't do that, honey,” she says gently. “This is big news. Wild horses won't drag them away until they get a statement from Kaiden or find a bigger story to run with.”

She's right. I know she is. But crap. What was Damen thinking? Why did he pick *now* of all times to come forward with the truth? Kaiden barely has one toe out the door, and now....

“Holy shit,” I whisper, realization hitting me with all the force of a hammer blow. *Damen* didn't pick now to come forward with the truth. Kaiden did. He orchestrated this. I don't know how or when, but this is his doing. The secret he's carried for all these years is finally out. *He* revealed it. But why?

I don't get the chance to ask.

A loud clatter echoes around the studio.

“My bad,” Abel slurs, weaving his way toward the main set, his Santa suit practically falling off him. His beard is crooked, the belly peeping from the bottom of the coat. He attempts to right the camera stand he knocks over, only to send a balloon light toppling.

Jackson murmurs something to Hailey and then quickly takes his daughter's hand and leads her away.

“I’ll call you back,” I murmur to Roni, quickly disconnecting and shoving the phone into my pocket. I can only deal with one crisis at a time, and right now, the train wreck in front of me takes priority. What in the world is Abel thinking?

As he draws closer, I catch a whiff of him, and the question answers itself. I’m pretty sure his blood is pure alcohol at this point. He reeks of it. My stomach rebels at the strong smell, nausea climbing up my throat. I quickly stop breathing, praying he passes by me quickly.

I’m not that lucky.

He stops right beside my chair, grinning at me.

“You ready to work, beautiful?” he asks, his eyes bloodshot. Even then, I see the pain in them. The liquor dulled it, but it didn’t kill it. Whatever drove him to this state is killing him.

“Get the fuck away from her,” Kaiden snarls, appearing at my side. My gentle giant is gone, replaced with a possessive, territorial beast. His fierce expression screams danger, his eyes shooting off sparks.

I place my hand over his, silently trying to calm him down.

Abel flicks a baleful look in his direction, as if Kaiden is entirely beneath him. And for the first time this week, I find myself disappointed in Abel. Maybe this is the man he was before he came here, but this isn’t the actor I’ve been working with all week. This isn’t the Abel Clarke who has been chasing his PA around the set with stars in his eyes. This Abel Clarke...well, I don’t like him much.

“Don’t think I was talking to you,” Abel slurs.

A menacing growl rumbles from Kaiden.

Oh, jeez. This is bad.

I jump up from my chair, getting between the two of them before this turns into a full-fledged fight. The last thing either of them needs right now is for the press to find out they almost came to blows because Abel is drunk and being a jerk.

I glance around for help, only to sigh in relief when I see Luca storming across the set in our direction, cold fury stamped across his face. Luca is an incredible director and a good man. But he does not tolerate bullshit, especially on his sets. Some people think he’s a bit of a tyrant, but I don’t think that’s true at all. I haven’t known him long, but I’ve seen how kind he can be.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Clarke?” Luca growls, his voice deadly quiet. I don’t think it’s intentional. I think he’s just that pissed.

“Came to work,” Abel says, patting his belly like he really is Santa Claus. “We have a scene to film.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Luca pinches the bridge of his nose.

Hailey steps into the fray as if sensing trouble. She’s far calmer than Luca. The two of them put their heads together, conversing quietly. I can’t hear what they say, but they’re obviously talking about Abel, trying to decide what to do with him. We have to finish this scene today. But I don’t think he’s in any condition to do it.

Kaiden keeps one eye on me and one on him, still bristling.

“I’m fine,” I whisper.

He grunts but doesn’t say anything.

“Abel, can you hold it together long enough to get through this damn scene?” Luca growls, spearing our unraveling actor with a severe look.

“I’m fucking fine,” Abel snaps.

No one believes him. I don’t even think he believes himself.

Luca and Hailey share a look, and then Luca curses and looks at me.

Kaiden stirs uneasily.

“We can do it,” I say quickly, forestalling whatever argument he’s about to make. I just want to get through this scene. Preferably sooner rather than later. Because we have a whole other situation to deal with as soon as we’re finished dealing with this one.

“Let’s do it then,” Luca says, sounding resigned.

“About fucking time,” Abel mutters, stumbling toward the set. He trips over a cable guard and nearly falls on his face.

Thank God he’ll be sitting on Santa’s throne for most of this scene because this is already shaping up to be a disaster.



“**A**nd what do you want for Christmas?” Abel slurs, looking at me through bleary eyes. “A ride on Santa’s — Oh, shit.” Abel reaches out to pull me into his lap and misses, falling face-first off his throne.

I jump back, barely avoiding being dragged down to the floor with him.

“Cut!” Luca yells in disgust from off-sides.

The cameras stop rolling. The lights come up.

Luca stomps onto the set in a fury.

“What the fuck are you playing at, Clarke?” he practically hisses at Abel, his face flushed with anger.

“You’ve got your tasty bit on the side. What do you care?” Abel tips his chin toward Audrey, who is standing off to the side. She hears him and goes rigid in shock, her face paling.

Oh, Abel. What are you doing?

I don’t know what’s gotten into him, but this is horrible!

Luca shudders in rage, moving so fast that I barely have time to process what’s happening. His fist connects with Abel’s jaw in a solid uppercut. Abel’s head snaps back, the sound of bone on bone chilling.

Abel roars in rage and lunges at Luca, fists flying.

I gape at them; my feet rooted to the spot as a cry goes up from the crew, and several of them rush forward from the edges of the set.

I cry out, falling backward as Abel collides with me, knocking me off balance. My arms windmill wildly as I grab for something to keep me upright. My fingers close around a piece of holly, ripping it from Santa's throne. It does nothing to stop my momentum.

But I don't hit the ground.

Kaiden's arms close around me, his bellow of rage echoing from the rafters as he drags me up against his chest.

"She's fucking pregnant!"

Silence falls across the studio. Luca and Abel freeze. For a moment, action just...stops.

"Jesus," Luca whispers then, shoving Abel away from him in disgust. His lip is split and bleeding. His hair is a mess. His shirt is torn. He looks awful.

I don't get a chance to see Abel or what condition he's in.

"She's not stepping another goddamn foot on this set until he's sober," Kaiden snarls to Luca. "Get him under control, or she isn't finishing this scene." He doesn't wait for Luca's response. He storms from the set with me in his arms, his body rigid with tension. And even though he's furious, he still holds me like I'm the most precious thing in the world.

I burst into tears as soon as we make it through the throng of onlookers and crew members.

“Shh, princess,” he whispers. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Kaiden



Laura bursts into tears as soon as we're out of view, breaking my fucking heart. She worked her ass off today, trying to make the scene work despite Clarke. I want to put my fist through his face for fucking up the scene. And then I want to strangle him and Luca both for putting her in danger. And then I want to kick my own ass for announcing her pregnancy like that.

I've never had a kid, but I know enough to know announcements are supposed to be joyous, not bombs dropped in the middle of a fucking fight. But shit. My goddamn life flashed before my eyes when she fell. Abel is lucky I was already racing toward her at a full sprint. Had anything happened to her or our baby, I would have ripped this damn studio apart in fury.

I carry her up the steps to her trailer, slamming the door behind us to shut everyone out. Her hot tears soak my throat, her fingers wrapped up in my shirt. Holding her carefully in my arms, I sink down onto the sofa.

“I’m sorry, princess,” I breathe. “I didn’t mean to tell the world like that.”

She cries harder.

“You’re breaking my heart, baby.”

“Y-y-you told your secret.”

“What?”

She takes a deep, shuddering breath and releases it on a sob. Christ, she’s killing me here. I’d rather tear my own damn heart out than watch her cry. It’s not fucking right, watching an angel weep like her heart is breaking. Especially when you’re the bastard who broke it.

She lifts her head, tears falling freely down her face. Her stage makeup is ruined. The glitter Audrey put on her eyelids covers her cheeks and shimmers in her lashes along with her tears. She really is a shining star, twinkling as she cries.

“You told your secret,” she says, her bottom lip quivering.

“Our secret.”

“I’m not talking about the b-baby.” She sniffles.

“Oh.”

”*Oh?*” She dashes tears from her cheeks to glare at me.
“That’s all you have to say? Why, Kaiden?”

“Because of something you said to me on the day we met,” I say quietly, rubbing glitter off the side of her face. “You told me that the Kaiden Huxley you heard so much about didn’t give a damn what people said about him. You brought that man back to life.” I expel a breath. “But carrying this secret around has gotten real fucking heavy, princess. I don’t regret the decision we made back then. I’ll never regret keeping a good man out of prison. But at some point, carrying that truth became so goddamn heavy that I got lost beneath the weight of it. It became an albatross around my neck.”

“Kaiden,” she whispers, a fresh wave of tears coursing down her cheeks.

“I’m ready to put it down, Laura. I’m ready to move on.” The statute of limitations is up. Damen Montero can’t be prosecuted for what he did. His little sister is an adult now, living in Europe. She’s ready to tell her story. There’s no one left to protect except the woman in front of me and the child growing in her belly. She brought me back to life. But it’s up to me to *live*.

And I realized the other day that the only way I’ll ever be free to do that...is if I let the past go. So I called Damen. I think he’d been waiting for that call for a while. He wasn’t surprised to hear what I wanted. He didn’t try to talk me out of it. He understood. I think maybe he’s ready to let it go and do a little healing of his own.

It is the season for it, after all.

Huh. Maybe Christmas isn’t so terrible.

“The press is outside the studio gates,” she says, placing her hand over my heart. “My publicist called before Abel decided to have a breakdown.”

“Okay.”

“They’re here for you.”

“Okay.”

She eyes me in awe. “You really don’t care, do you?”

“Not particularly.” I shrug. “They’ll print what they want to print, and people will say what they want to say. It doesn’t fucking matter.” The truth is out, and the weight is gone. What people decide to do with it...well, I’ve got more important things to worry about now. I made my decision two days ago when I almost let malicious gossip sink me into the pit I had just crawled out of. My choice is Laura. My choice will always be Laura.

Besides, I have a feeling they’ll be leaving with far more than they came for today. Thanks to Clarke’s swan dive into a deep bottle, Damen’s statement about an accident ten years ago probably looks like old news. My announcement about Laura’s pregnancy probably won’t rate that high either. I have a feeling that a fight with a director and a ruined shoot will rate higher than the two of us. And if that doesn’t do it...well, there’s plenty of other salacious gossip around here right now because Laura and I certainly aren’t the only two fucking like rabbits all over this set.

Either Nick Saint is a genius, or love is in the air this holiday season.

“You mean that, don’t you?” Laura whispers, awe in her voice.

“I do.” I rain kisses across her face, drying her tears with my lips. “I’ve got something worth fighting for now. And she won’t let me hold onto the bad shit.”

“That’s because she loves you.”

“Lucky me,” I breathe against her lips.

“Lucky her,” she whispers back, looping her arms around my neck.

When I let her up for air, she isn’t crying anymore. She’s glowing again.

Precisely like a star should.

Chapter Fourteen

Laura



“Wake up, princess,” Kaiden rumbles, his lips drifting across the back of my neck in nibbling passes. His strong arms surround me, holding me tight against his massive body. His hard cock nudges insistently against my folds. “It’s Christmas.”

I shiver, pressing my ass back against him in silent invitation as my body responds, heat flooding my system. Waking up this way is better than waking up nauseous any day.

“There you are,” he breathes, lifting my leg to drape it over his, effectively opening me up to him. One hand slips between my thighs, a soft growl of pleasure rumbling against my back when he finds me wet and ready for him. “You were dreaming about me.”

“I’m always dreaming about you,” I moan. It’s nothing but the truth. My sleeping mind is as consumed by thoughts of him as my waking mind is. He owns me, mind, heart, body, and soul. And I know he feels the same way about me. I’ll never question that. He changed his entire life, faced his past, and let go of the things still haunting him. He’s not the same man who stepped from the shadows four weeks ago. He’s mine now.

“Good,” he rumbles, grinding his thumb against my clit. “Because I’m about to make a few of those dreams come true, little star.” His cock nudges at my entrance.

We moan together when he tilts his hips, slipping inside. I bite my lip, my nails digging into his arm as his length stretches me. God, he’s so big, so hard. No matter how many times he’s in me, the first thrust always takes my breath. I hope it never stops.

As soon as he’s buried balls deep, he reaches for my hand.

“Marry me, princess.”

“Kaiden.” I stare in shock as he slips a brilliant round-cut diamond ring on my finger. Smaller diamonds are pavé set in the platinum band and in elegant swirls all along the side. It’s stunning.

“I’ve been holding on to this since you asked me to spend Christmas with you,” he murmurs. “I wanted to make our first Christmas together one you’d never forget.”

I'd say he's more than accomplished that. As soon as we wrapped yesterday, we left Los Angeles in the rearview and headed to Lake Tahoe. We have an entire cabin to ourselves for six whole days. There are no cameras trying to take our photos. There's no internet connection. No long days on set. It's just the two of us until the New Year's Eve wrap party at Avalon Hollywood. It's already the best Christmas I could have asked for...and he just made it a thousand times more magical.

“Yes.”

“You can't tell me no, princess,” he says, getting worked up. “You're mine. Our baby is mine. You have to make an honest man out of me, so the goddamn press doesn't think I got you pregnant and expect you to live in sin for the rest of your life.”

They were too busy gossiping about Abel to worry about us too much, but they haven't left us alone entirely. Our pictures have been splashed across every gossip website in existence for the past few days. Despite Kaiden's fears, they've been... kind. Their story about my weight disappeared as soon as news about my pregnancy broke. They're too busy trying to figure out how long Kaiden and I have been together, how far along I am, and whether I was MIA because of pregnancy complications. They're shameless, honestly. But they aren't talking negatively about Kaiden, so I don't really care what they say. Damen's statement about what happened to Kaiden embarrassed a lot of people. They're facing a public reckoning over how they treated him and the horrible things they've printed about his scars and body in the years since.

I have no sympathy for any of them. Perhaps I should. Maybe I should be gracious and forgiving, but it takes zero effort to be kind. They had ten years to treat him with the respect and dignity he always deserved. Regardless of what happened to him or how he was hurt, words and what we do with them have power. It shouldn't have taken the truth for people to realize that he deserved better. *He always deserved better.*

“Say yes,” Kaiden growls.

“I already said yes!” I cry, laughing softly. He's so bossy. Lucky for him, I don't mind. There's something damn sexy about this man when he's being all commanding and demanding.

He goes entirely still behind me, and then his big body shudders. “Fuck,” he whispers. His lips touch the back of my neck in a reverent, worshipful kiss. “You mean it, princess? You aren't just fucking with me?”

“I mean it,” I whisper. “All I want for Christmas is to be yours, Kaiden. You're all I've wanted since the day I met you.”

“Jesus.” He exhales a shaky breath. And then he starts to move.

I cry out as he fucks me, bucking his hips into mine in powerful thrusts. I bounce with each one, unable to do anything but take what he gives me, and cry out for more. His thumb presses against my clit, his free hand wrapping around my throat as he tilts my head back to claim my lips.

He swallows my sounds, breathing them into my lungs and exhaling them back into my mouth in grunts and curses. I take each one eagerly, tasting their shape on my lips, marveling that I have this much power over someone so much larger than life. I wreck and ruin him without even trying, shaking him all the way to his foundation.

He's beautiful when he's discomposed and raw.

He's beautiful when he's vulnerable.

He's beautiful, period.

If I'm a star, he's the sun, eclipsing me with his light. It's so damn bright that it's blinding. And I get to spend the rest of my life basking in it. I get to spend the rest of my life just like this.

Epilogue

Laura



C hristmas Eve, Five Years Later

“You hab to be quiet!” Clara whispers to her three-year-old sister, Noelle. “Otherwise, mommy is going to find us!”

I bite my lip, trying to contain my laughter as I stand outside of the coat closet, listening. I put them to bed two hours ago, but when Kaiden went to check on them, they were missing in action. Neither of us was surprised. Clara has been peppering us with questions about Santa for days now. She’s highly suspicious of the jolly old guy. As far as she’s concerned, someone coming down the chimney with a sack of toys made by little people has to be seen to be believed.

She's spent far too long in Hollywood to be dazzled by magic. Unless she sees it with her own two little eyes, it's fake news.

I don't think her daddy is going to fit down the chimney, but he refuses to let the magic of the season die for either of our girls. As soon as he realized they were out of bed, he put two and two together. He's on a mission to satisfy her suspicious little heart and save Christmas.

I swear, he gets sweeter every year. There's nothing he won't do for his girls. We're the most pampered princesses in Hollywood, guarded closely by our stuntman. A lot has changed in the last five years...and some things haven't changed at all.

Kaiden no longer relegates himself to the shadows. It took him a while to readjust to life in the spotlight, but the first time I had to attend a premier dressed to the nines, he quickly decided he was going on my arm. He spent the whole night glowering at anyone with a penis who even tried to get too close.

He's spent every premier and party since doing the same thing. It doesn't bother me in the least. I adore seeing him out in the world again, interacting and socializing. I love seeing him commanding the respect he deserves. And I especially love knowing that when the night ends, I get to go home with him.

I don't care who might be looking at me because he's the only man I see. I know he feels the same way about me. His

gaze never drifts far. We're two magnets, constantly drawing one another nearer. I love every minute of it. He's everything to me.

His scar made people nervous at first. But with the truth out in the open and the true depth of his sacrifice known, it changed how people see him. He carried a huge secret for such a long time, and he did it in silence, regardless of the whispers and unkindness tossed his way. He didn't do it for recognition. He didn't do it for an award, applause, clout, or anything people in this town chase daily. He did it to protect a man trying to protect his sister.

I think people in this city look at him now and *know* they'll never measure up. They'll never be half as good as him. It's been a humbling experience for a lot of people. You can't compete where you don't compare, and a lot of people simply don't compare to Kaiden. They never will. He's one of a kind.

And he's all mine. Gossip rags and photographers still bug us once in a while. But it's rare now that the new and shiny has worn off. We're old news, boring news. My life revolves around my husband and my babies. It's hard to make a target out of people who just can't be bothered. Celebrity Tea Time tried once to run a story questioning the status of our relationship right after we found out I was pregnant with Noelle.

Since we weren't out in public much, I guess they thought it was the perfect time to claim our marriage was on the rocks and we were hiding out because of it.

We shut them up two months later when we announced my pregnancy. Kaiden looked like a fierce, possessive warrior with one hand on my belly and the other wrapped around me. He stared into the camera so defiantly he nearly set it on fire. Everyone remembers those pictures. They don't remember the dumb gossip that came before them.

No one has tried questioning the status of our relationship since, either. Those pictures said everything that needed to be said. The way he looks at me says it. The way he touches me says it. And so does the way I can't take my eyes off him. If we're together, it doesn't matter who else is with us; he's the most important person in the room to me, and everyone knows it.

I never knew love like this existed outside of the movies, but I'm so darn thankful it does. Had I known he was waiting for me in the shadows of that old movie lot, I would have gone running to find him a lot sooner. I'll forever be grateful to Heart and Soul Studios for convincing him to take the job working on *The Naughty List*. Having him on set every day brought us so much closer together.

"I wanna see Santa," Noelle pouts from inside the closet. "You said we would see Santa, Cwara."

"You hab to be quiet, then. If mommy catches us, we'll neber find out if he's really real."

"He is real!" Noelle says indignantly. "Daddy said so. He said Santa bringed mommy to him."

"Santa doesn't bring people."

“He bringed mommy!”

My heart melts. Of course, Kaiden would tell the girls that, the sweet man.

“He bringed us too.”

“Did not.”

“Did so. Daddy said that he put us in mommy’s belly for Chwistmas.”

I’m not so sure Santa had anything to do with that, but we’ll go with Kaiden’s version. It’s far more kid-appropriate than the truth.

The girls bicker back and forth for several moments before I hear bells jingle across the room. I quickly scurry to the kitchen on silent feet, hiding in the doorway so the girls don’t see me as Kaiden opens the front door to let himself in. He must have exited from the patio in our room and circled around.

My eyes light up. I bite my tongue to keep from laughing out loud as my giant husband steps inside, stomping fake snow from his boots. How he manages to make a Santa suit look good, I don’t know, but he does. The red coat and white beard don’t look generic on him, but handsome as he hauls a big red bag into the house over his shoulder.

His eyes meet mine, his eyes full of love.

I point toward the closet, letting him know where the girls are hiding.

He gives me an imperceptible nod before turning toward the giant Christmas tree set up in front of the windows. More fake snow falls from his boots and his sack as he hauls the bag across the room.

“Cwara! Cwara! It’s Santa!” Noelle whisper-shouts from the closet, trying—and failing—to speak quietly.

“It is him,” Clara breathes, awe and reverence in her voice.

“I telled you he was real!”

The bells on his bag jingle as he lowers to the floor near the tree. He doesn’t speak as he pulls it open and rummages inside for a moment before pulling out two gifts wrapped in pink paper with matching bows. They’re little dolls the girls wanted. We always try to get them something reasonable from Santa instead of giving outrageously expensive Santa gifts. It makes me sad to think of the little kids whose parents aren’t as fortunate as we’ve been, wondering why Santa doesn’t like them as much as he likes the other kids because some kids get expensive Santa gifts, and some don’t have that luxury. We want to raise our girls to be grateful and empathetic and understand they live a privileged life. Lord knows, not everyone is as fortunate.

The girls watch through a crack in the door in silent awe as “Santa” places their gifts under the tree and then straightens to eat the cookies and milk they left out for him. He even pockets the treats they left for the reindeer and carefully tucks away the card Noelle drew for him.

Once he's finished, he glances toward the closet where the girls are hiding, being careful to keep his face hidden so they can't see the scar. It'll give him away immediately.

"Little girls should be in bed," he whispers, disguising his voice.

Noelle squeals before the sound abruptly cuts off as if she slapped her hand over her mouth. She darts out of the closet, scurrying up the stairs as fast as her little legs will carry her.

Clara emerges a little slower, her eyes on the floor at Kaiden's feet. She looks adorably contrite in her snowman PJs and messy hair.

"Sorry, Santa," she whispers before following Noelle up to bed more slowly. She peeks over her shoulder at Kaiden several times on the way up as if to make sure she's really seeing what she's seeing.

Kaiden waits until he hears their bedroom door close before he winks at me and exits the house the same way he entered. He's covering all of his bases. I quickly shut everything down and then tip-toe to our room to meet him. I pause outside the girls' room but don't hear even a peep from inside.

I guess getting busted by Santa settled them down for the night.

Kaiden's already back in our room, stripping out of the suit by the time I slip inside.

"They're going to believe in Santa until they're thirty," I murmur.

“Good.” He pulls the beard off, shoving it into the sack before he prowls across the room toward me. His gaze roams over me, dark and hungry. “My girls should always believe in Christmas magic.”

“Yeah?” I lean up on my toes, wrapping my arms around his neck. “That’s a pretty big statement from a man who hated the holiday a few years ago.”

He boosts me into his arms, making me squeal with laughter.

“That was before.” His lips descend on my throat, seeking out all those places he’s learned so well.

“Before what?” I breathe, throwing my head back as my core temperature shoots upward.

“Before I fell in love with a star who turned my entire fucking life into magic. Every day feels like Christmas to me now, Laura.”

“Kaiden.” I tip my head forward, my expression soft. “That may be the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“You think so?” His lips turn up into a smirk.

“Yes.”

“I can think of something sweeter.”

“Oh, really? Let’s hear it then.”

“All I want for Christmas is you.”

“I’m yours,” I say without hesitation. “Forever and ever.”

“I like the sound of that, but you didn’t let me finish.”

“Oh. Continue, then.”

“All I want for Christmas is you sitting on my face.”

“Kaiden!”

“I said I could think of something sweeter.” He flips the lock on the door before carrying me toward the bed. “You’re the sweetest little treat I know, baby.”

“We still have to put the presents out.”

“No. You have to let me eat. Then, I’ll put the presents out.”

“I don’t have to help?”

“Help?” He grins, his scar pulling taut as he lays me out on the bed beneath him. “Baby, you aren’t going to be able to *walk*.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “Then Merry Christmas to me.”

Author's Note

Happy Holidays! If you enjoyed this steamy little story, please consider leaving a review.

Next up is *Truly Mine*, a steamy rom-com featuring a bossy bodyguard and the curvy girl he can't live without. If you've been waiting for Zayne and Emma's story, this is it!

The Naughty List



Eight of your favorite authors are putting the “Naughty” into “The Naughty List.”

When the cast and crew are summoned to Heart and Soul Studios to film a last-minute Christmas movie, *The Naughty List*, the mood is more *bah, humbug* than *merry and bright*.

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As Christmas Eve approaches, will these star-crossed lovers go their separate ways, or will they choose to stay on The Naughty List... together?

Series Link: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CK525NZ2>

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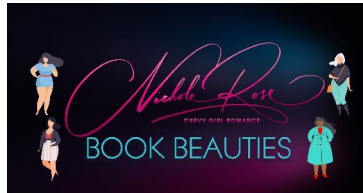


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Dillon's Heart

Razor's Flame

Ryker's Reward

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Garrett's Obsession

About Nichole Rose



Nichole Rose writes filthy romance for curvy readers. Her books feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who consume them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to instalove and over-the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling in love into a one-size-fits-all box.

When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and everything supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a proud mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies. She and her husband live in Arkansas.

You can learn more about Nichole and her books at authornicholrose.com.

