

THE NAUGHTY LIST

*Claiming*  
CHARITY



VIOLET RAE

# **Claiming Charity**

**The Naughty List**

# Violet Rae

Claiming Charity by Violet Rae

Published by Violet Rae

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# Chapter One

## Ryder

What could be worse than Christmas? Having to work on a damn Christmas movie a week before the “big day.”

The only consolation is that Charity is also working on this movie. Unlike me, all this festive shit lights her up brighter than a fiber-optic Christmas tree. Luke, her brother, was the same. I push down the pang of grief that thinking about him always brings.

Luke and I met when we were eighteen, and his parents more or less adopted me. My father ran off when I was a kid, leaving my mother to raise me alone. She later remarried and moved to Washington with her new husband, but I stayed in Virginia. I was always included in the Pine family festivities at Christmas—the holiday season was a big deal in their household.

Luke and I enlisted together. The Navy gave us our basic training, but the SEALs made men of us. I came home from a mission five years ago ... but Luke didn't.

Charity was only eight when I first met Luke—a skinny kid with a freckled nose and pigtailed. She was seventeen when Luke died. I'll never forget the devastation on her face when I came home and Luke didn't. She threw herself into my arms like I was her only lifeline, sobbing her loss into my shoulder. Charity and her parents didn't blame me for what happened to Luke—I blamed myself enough for everyone. Hard not to

when Luke took the bullet meant for me. Passed straight through him and into me. I survived, and he didn't.

Despite years of therapy, the memory is burned into my psyche, along with the promise I made to Luke as he died in my arms. I vowed to protect his baby sister for the rest of my life. I owed him that much.

His death cut deep. Drowning in guilt, I made some shitty choices, not least of which was asking the wrong woman to marry me. It's taken years to accept that loneliness was the driving force behind many of my decisions and weaknesses.

I was a Navy SEAL. Deployed most of the year, risking my life while she was seeing someone behind my back. Nothing like finding your fiancée in bed with another man—on Christmas Eve, no less—to drive a cold and thorny spike into your heart and take the jingle out of your bells. Since that fateful Christmas Eve, I haven't been with a woman.

So, yeah, me and Christmas? Not a good combination.

But here I am, working on a damn Christmas movie. The first day on set is a flurry of activity, with people rushing around, setting up lights and cameras. I keep my head down, trying to avoid the garish decorations and the syrupy Christmas carols playing in the background.

Charity, on the other hand, is in her element. She's wearing a bright red sweater with a reindeer on it and a Santa hat perched on her head. She's got a smile that could power a small town, and she greets everyone who comes her way with an abundance of cheer.

And all the while, the image of Luke's lifeless still burns behind my eyes, and Charity's grief-stricken sobs still echo in my ears.

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## **Charity**

What could be better than Christmas?

I mean, there's nothing, is there?

What could be more perfect than snowy days, Christmas trees twinkling with colorful lights, and being able to eat reindeer-shaped sugar cookies instead of healthy, balanced meals? The gold-foil wrapping? The big family meal? The carols, the sleigh bells, the festivities?

And don't get me started on the variety of gorgeous hot cocoa flavors that suddenly become available. Being able to drink a gingerbread house is an experience. And the candy cane whipped cream is a must-have treat.

So, from my huge list, it's clear I love Christmas. The only thing that makes it more amazing is being asked to be the props manager on the Christmas movie *The Naughty List*.

My heart swells with pride. All my dreams have come true—well, almost all of them. Luke would love this. He adored the holiday season. But the magic of Christmas can't bring my brother back any more than it can make the man I've been pining over for years fall in love with me—a man who just so happens to be working security on this movie. Daily temptation in the shape of Ryder Thorne.

I've been in love with the man since I knew what love was. It started as hero worship when Luke brought him home for the first time. At eighteen, he was ten years older than me, and I thought he was the bees-knees. I was a skinny kid back then, with pigtails and braces, but Ryder was always kind and made time for me whenever he visited. He became an honorary member of the Pine family and spent many a Christmas at our house.

I'm not sure when my feelings for him morphed from hero worship to something ... more. Maybe it was a gradual thing. All I know is that, at sixteen, I got all fluttery whenever he was near and couldn't stop blushing whenever he spoke to me.

Then, everything changed when Luke was killed in action. He threw himself in front of Ryder when they were ambushed. The bullet that killed Luke also injured Ryder. He wasn't the same when he eventually came home. His physical wounds



were healed, but it was clear the psychological wounds ran deep. He was colder and harder, his dark eyes tormented.

Still, he's never been far. I've seen him less in the last two years since I moved to L.A. His security company is based back in Vermont, but whenever I need him, he's always there, looking out for me. I'm not completely surprised we've ended up working on the same movie. When I heard his company had been contracted for the security, I expected him to send one of his men, but I should've known Ryder wouldn't leave a job like this to anyone else. I offered him my spare bedroom, but he said he'd already organized a hotel because, God forbid, he should set tongues wagging by staying under my roof.

I think Luke would be proud of me. My business has gradually grown since I started Pine's Props two years ago. Being signed by Heart and Soul Studios as their props manager on a last-minute Christmas movie has bolstered my confidence.

It was tough growing up with dyslexia. Being laughed at and teased because I couldn't read as well or as quickly as the other kids in class. The words danced about on the page in front of me, and I was convinced I'd never get on in life. Then, when I was thirteen, I discovered I had a gift. I may not have been comfortable with the written word, but I was great with my hands. My catnip was anything creative: painting, sculpting, drawing, or model-making.

I got involved in all the drama productions at school, spending hours and hours making and sourcing props for everything from *My Fair Lady* to *Beauty and the Beast*. The limelight wasn't for me, and staying firmly behind the scenes suited me perfectly. I'm happy to leave the bright lights to actors like Scarlett Cassidy and Kane Remington, the two stars of *The Naughty List*.

The cast and crew are an eclectic bunch, but rumor has it the movie's writer, Nick Saint, handpicked everyone. I've only worked on small, low-budget projects over the last few years, so to say I was shocked when Julianna, the owner of the studios, contacted me to offer me this job would be an understatement.

Hopefully, this job will lead to more regular work in the industry I love, one that supports me, my dyslexia notwithstanding.

As I walk around the set, I see Jackson, the stunt coordinator, enter and head toward Ryder. Ryder is dressed in all black, his muscles bulging under his shirt. My heart races at the sight of him, and I remind myself to keep my cool. Even so, I find myself stealing glances at him every few seconds. As if sensing my stare, his piercing gaze surveys the area before it lands on me, and my knees turn to butter. He looks edible, with his dark hair and sharp jawline accentuated by a hint of stubble.

Sucking in a breath, I force my eyes away.

*Focus, Pine.*

Luke's voice whispers through my mind. He always called me by my last name when my attention wavered as he helped me with my reading.

I pull my long blonde hair onto the top of my head in a messy bun held together with a pencil and head onto the set with my arms full of boxes.

# Chapter Two

## Ryder

I'm eating a turkey club from the long table with cold-cut sandwiches and bottled drinks when my friend, Jackson Reed, saunters in. He's got a face like a smacked ass and looks like he wants to be at this meeting even less than I do.

A few years older than me, Jackson is also an ex-SEAL, and our friendship is forged in fire and loyalty. He didn't know Luke like I did, but he knew what happened and was there for me during a dark time. Jackson listened to me as I ranted, raved, and demanded to know why Luke gave his life for me and why I wasn't enough for Jennie.

In hindsight, her cheating on me was a good thing. We wouldn't have worked because I didn't love her. I didn't realize it then, but I was seeking solace in the arms of the wrong woman because the woman I truly wanted was off-limits. Would always be off-limits because Luke already gave his life for me—I couldn't screw up his sister's life too.

Jackson is among Hollywood's most respected stunt coordinators and one of the reasons I'm here at the studios today—although once I knew Charity was on staff, it didn't take too much convincing. Jackson did me a solid by recommending my company, Thorne Operations, to the studio owner, and I'm now contracted to provide security services for the movie's duration. I take my job seriously and have already familiarized myself with the floor plan, the entrances and exits, and everyone working on this movie.

Jackson grabs a cookie shaped like a candy cane and shoves it in his mouth. The man is a terror for anything sweet and sugary.

“You look thrilled to be here,” I say sardonically.

We’re near the back of the room, and the director, Luca Regis, is talking with one of the executive producers near the stage.

Jackson drags a chair over and slumps down heavily into it. He lets out a long sigh before answering. “Meetings are boring,” he states. “I don’t have any stunts planned for the rest of the day, so I could pick up Cam if I didn’t have to stick around for this.”

I frown. “Pick her up? Shouldn’t she be at home with the nanny?”

Jackson shakes his head. “Ms. Young has her family in town for the holiday, so she can’t come to my place like she usually does. Luckily, the woman loves Cam like she’s one of her grandkids, so she’s happy to watch her at her house.”

Jackson is a single parent to his ten-year-old daughter, Cam. He’s devoted to his little girl, but I’ve seen how tough it’s been for him over the years, juggling his responsibilities as a father with his career and suitable childcare for Cam.

“How’s your Christmas shopping coming along?” I ask with a knowing smirk. I remember last year when Jackson was out shopping for gifts for Cam on Christmas Eve, cursing himself for leaving it so late.

“I’ll have you know that I’m finished with it.” He grins, grabbing another cookie off the plate. “I got started in October this time. No more holiday shenanigans for me. I’m going to finish this movie and relax.”

The studio owner, Julianna Kensington, clears her throat and starts the meeting, cutting our conversation short. I listen with one ear, casting my gaze around the various actors and crew gathered for this impromptu movie.

I’m so absorbed in my thoughts that I almost miss Julianna’s announcement that Hailey Walker will be replacing the

previous assistant director, whose wife went into premature labor.

“Hailey Walker ...” I glance at Jackson, who looks shocked. “Isn’t that—”

“Yes,” he cuts me off, his mouth tight. “It’s her.”

“The woman you were crazy about all those years ago?” I ask, keeping my voice low. “That was when you first got into the business, right?”

“Yeah.”

“The one you haven’t stopped obsessing over?”

“I’m not obsessed,” he says harshly, glaring at me. He takes a breath and softens his tone. “I think about her from time to time. That’s all.”

“How do you feel about her taking over for Bryce?”

“I’m fine. Good for her. I’m sure she’ll do a great job.”

Jackson’s expression is shuttered, and I know better than to push. He’ll talk when he’s ready. Or not. I’m not one for deep and meaningful conversations, so I respect his privacy.

“Charity?”

My head whips up as Julianna says her name, and my eyes seek out the woman who’s haunted my dreams for more years than I care to remember.

Charity is standing on the periphery near the stage. Tall and blonde, with sparkling blue eyes and a perpetually sunny disposition that puts my grumpy ass to shame. Despite her positive outlook, she’s shy. She’s uncomfortable being the center of attention and almost drops the lampshade she’s adjusting on a small table when she hears her name.

Embarrassed color runs up her neck into her cheeks as everyone turns to look at her. “Sorry, yes. I’ll be here,” she says, answering Julianna’s question and confirming she’ll be on set today.

I know she’s nervous, and I clench my hands into fists at my sides, resisting the urge to stalk over there and sweep her up in

my arms. This is her first big job, and making a good impression means a lot to her. She's worked damn hard in the last few years to get her passion off the ground. I'm damned proud of her, and I know Luke would be too.

Did he know how I felt about his sister? I thought I'd hidden my feelings for his younger sister well. Not that it matters now. Jennie cured my love of Christmas, and my promise to Luke put the brakes on any romantic thoughts I may have had about Charity.

The meeting finally ends, and I stand, ready to get to work. Jackson does the same, heading off to talk to the director. My cock stirs as I watch Charity walk off stage, following the sway of her heart-shaped ass. What would it be like to hold her, taste her lips, and mold her body to mine? She's always been off-limits, but being here with her, working on the same movie, it feels like the universe is taunting me.

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## **Charity**

This afternoon, I'm tasked with setting up the first scene for Scarlett and Kane, the leading actors. I carefully drop the props onto a table and begin arranging everything. Luca Regis, the director, was specific about what he wanted, and I stick to the brief as closely as possible. No way do I want to upset that man on the first day of filming. While it's exciting to be working with such a talented, high-profile director, he's not known for his warm and fuzzy disposition—unless he's around Audrey, the hair and makeup artist. Luca looks at her as if he wants to gobble her up like a succulent turkey with all the trimmings. Okay, that's probably not very complimentary to Audrey, who is stunning with her long, chestnut hair, slim figure, and warm personality.

I frown as I notice the way the lights have been set up. Something isn't quite right. Can't have Scarlett or Kane cast in shadow. I narrow my gaze, inspecting the area until I find the cause of the shadow.

The great big false Christmas tree provided by the studio. A dusty plastic monstrosity one of the stagehands must have placed here.

An involuntary shudder runs through me. *Ugh*. I hate fake Christmas trees with a passion. Give me the real deal any day with its glorious pine and woody fragrance. Add the aroma of crisp peppermint candy canes, cinnamon sticks, and freshly baked sugar cookies, and you've got the embodiment of Christmas right there.

I quickly stride over to the tree. A closer inspection only confirms my suspicions. It's an ugly monstrosity. I turn to see Luca scanning the room. His gaze lands on me and then the fugly tree. A jolt of nervousness whips through me as he walks toward me.

"Is everything ready, Charity?" he asks, stopping in front of me.

"Yes, everything's set up according to your specifications," I reply confidently, trying to hide my nerves.

"Good. I trust you'll be able to make it work," he says, looking at the tree.

I swallow hard. "Actually, Mr. Regis, I think this tree is too big and will cast shadows on Scarlett and Kane. I'm sure that's not part of your vision for the scene."

Luca raises an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go ahead and remove it then."

I nod. "I'll do it right now," I say, feeling a rush of relief as he moves away to deal with another issue.

I stand back and look at the tree, trying to figure out the best way to move it without bringing it crashing down on the set. The thought makes me shiver.

The door to the set opens and in walk Scarlett and Kane. Scarlett looks stunning, as always. She's a tall, leggy brunette, her eyes a startling shade of amber. Kane is a typical Hollywood heartthrob with his dark blond hair, blue eyes, and swoon-worthy smile.

“Hey, Charity,” Scarlett greets me warmly, taking in the set. “This looks amazing. Great job.”

“Thanks,” I reply, a little shy in their presence. I’ve never worked with actors this famous before. “I just need to move this old Christmas tree, and I’ll be out of your way. I didn’t want it casting a shadow on you both.”

Kane grins at me, his eyes sparkling. “Thanks for looking out for us, Charity.”

My cheeks heat as I return his smile. “Just doing my job.”

“Kane! Scarlett! I need to speak with you.” Luca summons as he spots the actors.

“Duty calls. Catch you later.” Scarlett winks before she and Kane join Luca.

I try not to squeal. Rubbing shoulders with honest-goodness movie stars is surreal. And who says they’re all high maintenance? Scarlett and Kane strike me as good people.

Shaking off my fan-girl moment, I observe the tree, trying to figure out the best way to move it. Muttering reaches my ears, and I glance behind me to see Kane and Scarlett locked in a heated conversation. Their voices are too low to make out what they’re saying. Rumors are rife about a romance between Kane and Scarlett, but I’ve never been one to pay too much attention to gossip. I hope whatever is going on between them won’t make things awkward on set.

I shrug and turn back to the task at hand. Getting on my knees, I wriggle beneath the tree on all fours to see how it’s been fixed to the floor.

Clips.

Great, I can work with clips. I pull them off and shuffle backward, standing and snapping the clips onto the hem of my T-shirt so I don’t lose them. I thrust my arms into the spiky monstrosity, grab the central pole, and wiggle it away from the overhead light.

A loud bang resonates through my eardrums, and all hell lets loose ...



# Chapter Three

## Ryder

Once the meeting is finished, I conduct a perimeter check and ascertain who's staying on-site to film the first scene before heading back to the main set.

Sticking to the shadows, I watch Charity drop an armful of stuff onto a table, moving things until they're just so and attaching strings of lights to the walls. She stands back with her hands on her hips to admire her work while I try not to admire her. Looking out for Charity has become more than a duty, more than my promise to her brother.

A strange sensation tugs at my gut every time I see her, a feeling I've been trying my hardest to ignore. Maybe it's her infectious smile, her passion for her job, or her unwavering optimism. Whatever it is, it's becoming harder and harder to resist.

As I continue to watch her, I realize I've been holding my breath the entire time. She's too fucking captivating for her own good.

I sigh, pushing my feelings down for the thousandth time. I'm here to do a job.

Charity turns, a frown neatly etched over her beautiful features. Something is wrong with the Christmas tree. She wriggles underneath, and my gaze is drawn again to her rounded, jean-clad ass in the air. With her blonde hair and angelic blue eyes, she looks like she tumbled from the top of that Christmas tree.

Desire courses through me. But it's not just her looks. It's her. Charity may be shy and lacking a bit of confidence, but she has the heart of a lion. She's not afraid to get her hands dirty and does whatever it takes to make everything run smoothly—putting others above herself.

She reappears and snaps the clips holding the tree in place to her T-shirt before pulling the old tree toward the back of the stage. Unbeknownst to her, the lights are plugged into an overloaded socket. I call out a warning, already moving toward her, when an almighty bang follows a spark and a flash.

I leap at Charity as she flies backward from the tree, grasping her as she's thrust into me. The tree goes up in flames, and the acrid stink of burning plastic and years of dust permeates the air as the decorations melt away to a vague memory.

A smoke alarm shrieks and the whoosh of a fire extinguisher assaults my ears as puffs of white powder are sprayed over the tree.

I glance down at Charity, and my heart seizes when I see she's unconscious.

“These old trees are a fucking death trap,” Jackson curses once he's successfully put out the fire. He casts a concerned look at Charity. “Is she okay?”

I check her pulse and breathing to find both are steady and rhythmic, but she has a nasty burn on her hand. Without acknowledging Jackson or the crowd gathered around us, I lift Charity and carry her from the stage, heading straight for the medic's trailer.

Max Sawyer, the set medic, looks up in surprise as I barge through the door with Charity in my arms and set her gently on the examination table.

Charity groans, and her eyes pop open. “Ryder?” She tries to sit up, but I push her down firmly.

“What happened?” Max asks, moving to stand beside Charity. She pulls on a pair of examination gloves and begins to check

her over with brusque expertise, assessing the burn on her hand.

“She electrocuted herself,” I say grimly, fury replacing my fear now I know Charity’s not mortally wounded. “This place is a goddamn health and safety hazard.”

Charity reaches for my hand with her good one and gently squeezes it. “It was my fault. Stupid mistake. I didn’t realize the tree was still plugged in.”

She hisses as Max cleans and dresses the burn on her hand, and I touch her cheek gently. “I got you, Sparkles.”

“Sparkles?” Max raises an eyebrow as she removes her gloves.

“Old nickname,” Charity says softly.

“Strange,” Max observes, her mouth twitching.

“Her brother decided to turn her into a Christmas decoration when she was nine by covering her in glitter,” I explain, a smile pulling at my mouth at the memory.

“I was still finding bits of glitter two weeks later,” Charity says with a roll of her eyes.

Max chuckles. “Kids will be kids, I guess.”

Charity shakes her head. “Oh, Luke wasn’t a kid. He was nineteen.” She pauses and smiles wistfully. “He was always doing goofy stuff like that.”

“Well, I would say the nickname is even more appropriate now you’ve been electrocuted by a Christmas tree,” Max sniggers. “You don’t have much luck, huh? I’m surprised your hair isn’t standing on end.”

Charity touches her hair as if to check. “God, I’ve been on set for two hours and already caused chaos.” She pauses and looks at me. “The tree? Is it ...?”

“A pile of melted plastic? Yep. But better the tree than you,” I say gruffly, still recovering from seeing her fly across the room. *Jesus*, she scared me.

Tears well in Charity’s eyes as Max fastens a blood pressure cuff around her arm. “I need to find a new tree in”—she lifts

her arm to look at her watch—“less than an hour.”

Max shakes her head. “What you need is to get checked out at the hospital. I don’t think there’s any lasting damage, but your blood pressure is elevated, and I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

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## **Charity**

“I can’t go to the hospital. I don’t have time.” I stand, a little woozy from being zapped, and try to move away from Ryder.

Being near him lights me up like the bolt of electricity I just received, only in a far more pleasurable way. The pull he has over me is faintly scary. I have zero experience with men, but the tightening of my nipples and the ache between my thighs are constant side effects of being in Ryder’s proximity. Not that he’s ever shown any indication he feels the same. He’s never shown any interest in me as a woman—or in any woman—since the stunt his ex-fiancée pulled on him.

“Come on,” he says, placing a hand beneath my elbow to steady me.

“I told you I can’t. I need to get another tree.” I look into Ryder’s dark eyes, and his expression is tormented for a split second.

Was he worried about me? I know he cares about me like a sister. He feels responsible for me since Luke’s death. But I’m an adult now, and I don’t want him looking out for me because of some misguided sense of responsibility. I don’t want him to see me as a sister. I want him to see me as his woman, as his equal. I want him to pull me into his arms and kiss me until I don’t know which way is up. I want him to throw me down on soft sheets and lick my naked body until—

“You’re shivering,” Max says, making me blush as she breaks across my little fantasy. “I’m not signing you fit until you get checked out at the hospital.”

“Great. Two of you ganging up on me,” I grumble, shooting them both glares.

“Hey, don’t blame me,” Max says, holding her hands up. “You’re the one who decided to get all watt and bothered with the Christmas tree.” She snorts, looking pleased with her clever pun.

Ryder shakes his head. “On that note ...”

“Thanks, Max,” I call over my shoulder as Ryder herds me toward the trailer door.

“Any time. Remember, you’ve had a *shock*, so take it easy for the rest of the day.”

Ryder and I groan as we exit the trailer. Seems our medic missed her vocation as a comedian.

Ryder pulls out his radio, notifying Luca about the fire and assuring him it’s been contained. Once done, he turns his attention to me. “I’m taking you to the hospital. Then, I promise to go with you to get everything you need. They can manage without a tree for one scene.” The shutters come down on his emotions, and his tone leaves no room for argument.

“This is my job, Ryder,” I point out, my shoulders sagging in defeat.

“I know, sweetheart. It won’t take us long to get you checked out.” He’s already gently nudging me toward the parking lot.

*Sweetheart? That’s new.* He’s never called me by anything other than my name or Sparkles. I practically melt at the endearment, then tell myself to get a grip. Doesn’t mean anything, even if my heart disagrees.

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The hospital lights are a little too bright as I sit, pen in hand, trying to fill out all these blasted forms. How is all this stuff not on some centralized computer system? It seems antiquated to use a pen and paper in this day and age.

“Ugh. I hate this,” I grumble, scratching my name into a box. The type is too small, and the words start to roll around on the page, sending a bloom of anxiety through my bloodstream.

I fidget in my seat. Filling out forms is my nemesis. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“What’s wrong?” Ryder’s dark eyes are concerned as he looks at me.

His soft tone and kindness almost unravel me, and I swallow my tears. “It’s been a long day, Ryder. The tree going up in flames is serious. It was the only one available on the set, and it’s going to reflect badly on me.”

“You’re more important than a goddamn tree, Charity,” Ryder growls, taking me by surprise. He scrubs a hand down his face. “I’m sorry. You gave me a scare. It won’t take long, and you’re not leaving here until you’ve been checked over.”

*Oh.* Is it wrong that I’m turned on by his growly protectiveness?

I force my attention back to the paperwork, but a minute later, I drop the clipboard on the hard plastic seat beside me with a heavy sigh. “I can’t fill this out right now.” My voice breaks. “I feel so stupid in situations like this.”

“Here, let me. You’re still a little foggy. And I never want to hear you call yourself stupid again.” His voice is firm as he reaches across me to grab the papers from the chair.

I expect him to ask me for the information he needs to complete the form, but a few minutes later, he’s done and hands them back to the receptionist. *Hmm.* Seems he didn’t need my input. I guess he does know pretty much everything about me.

“I can’t believe I burned down the tree.” I close my eyes and lean my head back, willing the tears away. God, I’m an emotional wreck today. I love Christmas, but it’s always tough without Luke. “Now I’ll forever be known as the props manager who set a Christmas tree on fire.”

“That wasn’t your fault. The outlet was dangerously overloaded. You could’ve died,” Ryder huffs, his face dark with anger and something else, something unfamiliar I can’t put my finger on.

I open my mouth to reply, but the nurse appears and calls my name.

“I’m Erin. I’ll be looking after you. Would you like your boyfriend to accompany you?” she asks kindly.

“Oh, he’s not my boyfriend. He’s”—*My lover? Husband? God, yes, please*—“just a friend.” I blush, following the nurse to an examination room.

“Your pulse is all over the place,” Erin says five minutes later. “Though I don’t think it’s anything to do with the electric shock.” Her grin and knowing look have me blushing.

“He is ... *was* my brother’s friend,” I mumble.

Erin frowns. “Was?”

“My brother was killed in action.” Saying those words never gets any easier.

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry,” Erin says gently, squeezing my hand.

I summon a smile. “My friend Ryder out there,”—I point toward the waiting room—“feels responsible for me now Luke’s gone. They served together. Luke threw himself in front of Ryder and saved him from the bullet that killed him.” I’m unsure why I’m sharing this with a woman I’ve only known for five minutes. Erin seems kind, and it’s cathartic to confide in a stranger.

Erin shakes her head and clucks her tongue. “I don’t think that man’s motivation is *responsibility*.”

I almost laugh aloud at Erin’s insinuation. Whatever Ryder feels, it’s certainly not the aching, yearning longing I have for him ... and never will be.

# Chapter Four

## Ryder

Charity is back within fifteen minutes, her right hand wrapped in a fresh bandage with instructions to take it easy.

“So, there’s a Christmas tree place close to the studio. It’s still open if their website can be trusted.” Charity sounds determined.

I heft a sigh. I did promise. And I don’t break promises, no matter what. “Come on then, Sparkles.”

“Ha, ha.” She gives me the evil eye.

A smile spreads over my face as I guide her from the hospital.

The Wright Tree is a few miles past the studio, and even though I have an avid dislike of all things festive, I have to admit, it’s pretty cool. Trees of all kinds stand in rows, and Charity seems to know exactly what she’s looking for as she moves with ease through the gaps, stopping to gently feel the branches of a couple of potential replacements.

Temporary floodlights have been erected so shoppers can see in the dark, and they cast a warm glow over her, highlighting her high cheekbones, long neck, and cute button nose with its smattering of freckles.

“Why aren’t you wearing a scarf?” I ask as I catch up with her, unwinding mine to place around her neck.

“I didn’t get a chance since you went all Neanderthal on me and insisted we go to the hospital.” Her full mouth twitches with a smile, softening her words.



That smile does all kinds of things to my body—namely, my cock, which is swelling behind my zipper. “I wasn’t about to take any chances with you.”

“Right. Why would you?” she mutters so quietly I almost miss it.

I frown. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ooh! I think I’ve found it!” she squeaks in excitement, ignoring my question.

She’s looking at the fluffiest Christmas tree I’ve ever seen. Its branches are full and lush, and it has a perfect, even shape.

“It does look good,” I admit.

We pay for the tree, and Charity says something about fetching a staff member to help load it on the truck. I shake my head and pretend it isn’t as heavy as it looks as I load it onto my truck by myself, nearly giving myself a hernia.

I secure the tree, and we’re about to climb into the truck when Charity’s head snaps around. “Oh, my God, I forgot about the Magic Beanstalk!” Her blue eyes light up as they land on the truck parked outside the store. “I knew I could smell Christmas cocoa. It’s the best cocoa in the—” She breaks off, looking at her watch. “We don’t have time.” She casts her eyes down, looking sad for a second before shrugging and sliding into the truck.

I can’t stand the disappointment she tries to shrug off. “Woah, there. What’s an extra five minutes?”

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, and my shaft twitches again. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. And I could use a hot drink. But we’ll have to drink it in your truck on the way to the store.”

I nod. “Fair enough.”

The queue is short, and within a few minutes, Charity is ordering a medium Gingerbread House for herself and a large Peppermint Chocolate for me.

And she’s right. It is delicious.

“Why don’t we get this all year round?” I demand, surprise thickening my words as whipped cream coats my top lip.

She laughs. “They wouldn’t taste so amazing if we could spoil ourselves every day.”

She closes her eyes, savoring the warm spices of her drink. I lick the cream from my lips and open the truck door for her to climb in. She thanks me and gets herself comfortable, placing her frothy drink in the cup holder between the seats.

“Where now?” I ask.

“You know the big store about twenty minutes from here?”

I think for a moment and groan. “Bevans?”

“That’s the one.” She grins.

Bevans is renowned for going all out at Christmas. Lights, grottos, more lights, people dressed as elves, music, fake snow, and lots of fucking cheer.

*Ugh.*

“You promised. It’s the best and closest place for decorations and lights for that beast of a tree.” She gestures to the top of the windshield, where the top of the tree overhangs the roof of my truck.

“This is madness,” I grunt, but her musical laugh pulls the corners of my mouth into a reluctant smile.

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## **Charity**

I grab a cart and begin filling it with boxes of colorful decorations. Ribbons and bows, little boxes wrapped to look like Christmas gifts, tiny angels, and a huge star for the top of the tree. Box after box of warm golden lights follow the decorations—I ensure I have plenty. Hopefully, they’ll last for years since they’ll only be up for a few hours at a time.

“You sure know how to do Christmas,” Ryder says from beside me as we place everything on the conveyor belt and

prepare to pay.

“You spent enough Christmases in the Pine household to appreciate our love of the season,” I remind him softly.

I immediately regret the words as a dark shadow falls over Ryder’s face. I know we’re both thinking of Luke. How long will Ryder continue to blame himself for his death?

I place a hand over Ryder’s, my eyes on his. “He’d want us to enjoy it. He wouldn’t want us to be sad. He made it easy to love Christmas, and I won’t let go of that.”

Ryder nods, his eyes searching mine. “I’m glad you can still enjoy it.” *But I can’t.*

He doesn’t say the words, but they remain unspoken between us. Poor, tortured man. He has so much guilt weighing on his shoulders. I wish he could find a way to release it. Luke wouldn’t have wanted him tormenting himself like this. I want to pull him into my arms, kiss away the sorrow around his eyes, and absorb some of his pain.

We continue to the checkout, and everything is bagged and ready to take back to the set. Ryder grabs the bags, and we head back to his truck.

“What made you want to do this for a living?” he asks, wedging the bags between the side of his truck and the tree.

His question takes me by surprise. He’s always supported my career, but we’ve never discussed it in detail. “It’s what I’m good at, and I’m usually left to get on with my work without electrocuting myself and bursting into flames.”

“Right.” He gives me a look before pulling out of the parking spot.

“What?”

“You attract disaster.” He laughs.

“I do no such thing,” I object, unwilling to admit he may have a point.

Ryder laughs harder and shakes his head. “What about the time you got snagged up in that barbed wire fence, and Luke

and I had to cut you—and your hair—free? Or the winter you fell in the river trying to reach a stray kitten on the other side and ended up in bed with the flu? And then there was—”

“Okay, okay!” I hold up a hand to interrupt him. “I’m a little unlucky, is all.”

“Just promise me you’ll be more careful,” he says as we approach the studio where the set is waiting to be decorated.

I look at him, ready to argue that I *am* careful and it’s not my fault if gravity affects me differently than everyone else. But something in his eyes stops me. All the mirth has left his expression, and I realize my reassurance is deeply important to him.

“I promise I’ll be more careful,” I murmur.

He nods, satisfied with my reply. “Come on, Sparkles. Let’s get this stuff inside.”

When we get back, Ryder asks Jackson to help him with the tree, even though he didn’t seem to struggle loading it. They maneuver it into position, dropping it into the stand.

I set to work unwrapping the decorations from their boxes. I’ll need to catalog all of these later as my personal inventory and ensure I keep the details safe, so should another Christmas tree go up in flames, I can claim it back on the insurance.

“Oh, Charity.”

Julianna’s voice makes me jump, and I turn to face the owner of the studios.

“These are so beautiful.” She plucks a tiny glass angel from the safety of some crushed tissue paper and examines it. “I heard about the accident. Are you okay?”

I smile sheepishly. “Yes, thank you. I chargined my hand, but the nurse gave me some ointment and directions on changing the bandages.”

“I’m glad Ryder was there to take you to the hospital,” she says with a perceptive look. “Be sure to take breaks when you need them,” she adds kindly before moving off to speak to Luca.

I go about my work—lights, ribbons, and what seems like five hundred ornaments are quickly placed on the tree. With Ryder’s help, I’m done with minutes to spare as Scarlett and Kane, the lead actors, arrive on set.

Ryder and I stand back, and I cast a final eye over the set, pleased with my work. A buzz of excitement runs through me as the cameras begin to roll.

Filming of *The Naughty List* is officially underway.

# Chapter Five

## Ryder

I know I shouldn't, but I can't help watching Charity as she works. She moves around the tree in a dream, and when she pulls the step ladder over and climbs it, I find myself racing across the studio to hold it steady for her. We don't need another trip to the ER today because she's fallen and concussed herself.

Charity places a large star on the top of the tree, and within seconds, Luca has the actors out and everyone in place. She smiles at me as I fold away the steps and rush them from the stage. We make ourselves scarce, leaving the sound engineers, lighting technicians, camera operators, and actors to do their bit.

---

The next few days pass in shouts of "action" and "cut." The second morning of shooting the movie, I discovered that Grace, one of the camera operators, was locked in the break room with Landon, the caterer, all night, and they were found early the next morning by the cleaner. Not the best start to my security stint. Working with Charity is a distraction.

Charity flits about the place like a real-life Christmas fairy, ensuring everything is perfect before the actors are called on set. From time to time, I find her with her head buried in a brief from Luca, her brows furrowed in deep concentration. I think about reaching out to Luca and asking him to provide

Charity with colored paper for the briefs. Colored paper makes reading easier for Charity with her dyslexia as it reduces the stress on her eyes, but I don't want to overstep. She looks relieved once she's finished reading and dashes off to do another task. Pride fills my chest, knowing how much she struggles. I can almost see her confidence blossoming, and it's great to see her doing what she loves and achieving her potential.

"Dude, you're staring holes in the poor woman."

Jackson appears beside me, and his opinion is unwelcome right now. "Shut up, asshole."

Jackson grins and continues unabated. "What are you buying her for Christmas?"

My jaw flexes. "Who?"

"Don't give me that shit. You know who."

I turn to look at him. "We're not together. We're friends."

Jackson shakes his head, tutting. "What about when you took her out after the hospital?"

"What about it?" I try not to be irritated by his line of questioning.

"You took her Christmas tree shopping and to Bevans," he points out. "And everyone knows the Magic Beanstalk makes the most amazing Christmas-flavored cocoa."

"It was to get props. Hardly date material. And how do you know we got cocoa?"

"Saw the take-out cups with their logo in your truck when we untied the tree. Seems like a date to me—"

"She's Luke's kid sister. I'm looking out for her, that's all. You know why," I grunt. Jackson is the only person who knows about my promise to Luke.

"Hate to break it to you, buddy, but I don't think Luke meant for you to put your goddamn life on hold. Ask her out already," Jackson says bluntly.

I grit my teeth. I know what Luke meant. I was with him as he took his last breath, goddamnit.

I shake those dark thoughts from my head and focus on the task at hand. “I need to check the perimeter. Julianna is concerned some celebrity gossip types are trying to get a scoop since this is a last-minute project.”

Jackson releases a frustrated breath. “Okay. But take a piece of advice from someone who knows. Don’t do what I did. Don’t throw away the best thing that could happen to you because you think you’re doing the right thing. It’s not always that simple.”

His words hit me in the gut. Am I throwing away my chance at a future with Charity? Does she even see me as anything other than a brother figure? And then there’s Luke, still hovering between us like the ghost of Christmas past. I’ve seen action and survived. I carry baggage. I have scars—emotional and physical. Pretty damn sure I’m not the kind of man Luke envisioned for his sister.

I turn, leaving Jackson without another word.

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## **Charity**

It’s getting closer to Christmas, and work on the movie is moving along nicely. I’m not needed on set on the fourth afternoon of filming, so I take some downtime to shop for gifts for my family before I head home to Vermont for the holiday on Christmas Eve.

But when I climb behind the wheel of my car, it won’t start. The engine turns over repeatedly, but nothing happens beyond some unhealthy-sounding splutters.

“You need to stop doing that.” Ryder’s voice comes loud and clear through my closed window.

I open the driver’s door, climb out, and slam it shut. My breath comes out in puffs of condensation as the temperature drops. “I can’t believe it’s broken down this close to Christmas.” I



glare at my little Chevy for a moment before shrugging. It's too magical a time of year to get upset about stuff.

"I'll call a garage and get it towed," Ryder offers immediately. "In the meantime, consider me your personal driver."

I hurl myself at him and wrap my arms around his solid frame. "Thank you so much. I was worried I wouldn't finish my Christmas shopping in time."

Ryder groans. "Shit. Spoke too soon. Didn't realize you were going shopping."

I punch his arm lightly. "Ha! Too late now, buster. Bevans, no less."

Ryder smacks his hand to his forehead before pushing it through his thick, dark hair. The tattoo on his neck comes to life with the lift of his shoulder, and I bite down on the urge to lick him there. God, he's gorgeous.

"Fine. I'll take you to Bevans, but I'm not shopping. I'll push the cart."

My grin is still in place as he marches to his truck and opens the passenger door for me to get in.

I poke my tongue out at him. "Deal, Mr. Scrooge-Pants."

When we pull into the parking lot at Bevans, most shoppers are heading home, meaning fewer crowds. I make my way into the large, brightly lit building, with Ryder following closely behind me, and it only takes me a short time to choose gifts for my family and friends back home.

"I need another cocoa-gingerbread hit from The Magic Beanstalk before we go," I tell Ryder once I've paid and we're headed back to the truck. "I want the recipe, but I'm guessing it's a closely guarded secret." I scrunch my nose at the thought of being unable to make my own gingerbread-flavored hot drink.

"Your wish, my command," he says tongue-in-cheek, resigned to driving me around.

# Chapter Six

## Ryder

A few minutes later, I pull into The Wright Tree's lot, and Charity leaps from the truck like an excited kid.

"Same again?" she asks as we approach The Magic Beanstalk truck.

"My treat, this time." I give her a wink as we join the short queue.

I order our drinks and give Charity hers with an extra gingerbread man on top.

"They're so cute." She beams as she pulls the gingerbread man from his creamy bed and pops him straight into her mouth.

She moans and closes her eyes as she crunches the cookie, and my blood heats as I watch. I want to lick the blob of cream on her lower lip, but her tongue darts out and beats me to it.

I lead her to a nearby bench and we sit, our shoulders touching as we sip our drinks in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"It's a beautiful evening," Charity murmurs, tipping her head back and gazing at the sky.

Darkness has fallen while we were in Bevans, and the stars twinkle like Christmas lights in the clear night sky.

"It is," I agree, but my eyes are on her lovely face. She shines brighter than any of those heavenly bodies with her rosy cheeks and sparkling blue eyes. She's fucking adorable.

“He was so proud of you,” I murmur, surprising myself with my words as much as Charity.

She turns to face me, her eyes shimmering. “I know,” she whispers. “He told me all the time. He wasn’t afraid to show his emotions. Being a SEAL, he knew his time could be up at any point, and he never wanted to leave anything unsaid. He lived his life to the full. He loved all the seasons and all the holidays, but he particularly loved Christmas.”

Charity’s expression is wistful as she loses herself in memories.

She takes a sip of her cocoa. “He never told you this, but every year, he dressed up as an elf with me on Christmas morning, and we handed out presents at the children’s hospital in Vermont.”

“He never said a word.” I shake my head with a smile. That was Luke all over. He was unselfish with his time and energy. “Luke was like that when we were deployed, too, you know.”

“Like what?” Charity asks, her blue eyes fixed on my face.

“A goofball. The life and soul. His enthusiasm rubbed off on everyone. The times we were deployed at Christmas, he cut paper into tiny pieces to make snowflakes and stuck them everywhere. One year, his Christmas gift was a pair of old socks that already belonged to me.”

Charity bursts out laughing. “Yeah, that was Luke all over. That’s why Christmas is so important to me. I honor his memory every year by making it the biggest and best holiday possible.”

A tear tracks down her cheek, and she hastily wipes it away. I pull her close, sliding an arm around her, and she rests her cheek on my shoulder. My heart swells as I drop a kiss on the top of her head. Having her in my arms feels right. How can something so right possibly be wrong?

But then the guilt kicks in. Will I ever be free of it? I don’t deserve to be happy when Luke is in the cold, hard ground. Survivor’s guilt is real. It dug its claws into me the day Luke died, and I’m not sure how to get the beast to release me.

I stand reluctantly and hold out a hand, helping Charity to her feet. “I should get you home. You’ve got all that wrapping to do.”

Charity masks her disappointment with a smile that punches me hard in my aching heart.

“Okay.” She walks toward the arch that leads to the parking lot. Suddenly, she stops and turns. She gives me a wicked grin and then looks at something above her head.

I frown. “What is it?”

“Mistletoe,” she whispers conspiratorially.

*Oh, no.*

“It’s bad luck not to kiss when caught beneath the mistletoe,” she says, her eyes bright with mischief.

I glance at the innocent-looking white berries wrapped in red ribbon and wonder if some greater force is working against me.

“Fine,” I say abruptly. One peck on the lips can’t hurt.

I brush my mouth across hers and pull back. Charity’s blue eyes sparkle with fascination and invitation, and suddenly, that light touch isn’t enough.

I cup her face and drop my mouth to hers again, more firmly this time. Her warm, spicy sweetness invades my senses, and with a groan, I sweep my tongue over her lips, needing more of her addictive taste. I nip at her bottom lip, and she gasps. I take advantage and slide my tongue inside to meet hers.

A soft moan comes from somewhere in her throat, and my entire body reacts. My cock hardens to steel in my pants as I tug her against me, and she winds her arms around my neck. My hands find her hips, pressing her delicious curves tightly to my hardness, and I’m about to deepen the kiss when a blinding flash startles us.

I look across to the source of the flash, pulling Charity closer to me, protecting her from whatever is coming our way.

A voice chirps about photos only being five dollars and how they would make a lovely Christmas card.

Reality returns with a vengeance.

*What the fuck was I thinking?* I wasn't. Not with the head on my shoulders, anyway.

I blink away the remaining blindness and tug Charity to the truck, her taste still clouding my senses. With one kiss, everything has changed.

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## **Charity**

I'm struck dumb as Ryder pulls me away from the woman with the camera and thrusts me into his truck. My body throbs and tingles. I want to rub myself all over him and beg him to make the ache go away.

I was only expecting a light kiss. I genuinely didn't think he would go any further. But when his lips met mine, something happened. His tongue swept over my lip, and he nipped it lightly, sending little sparks flying around my body like a pinball machine.

And then it was over. Cut short by some woman with a camera.

"I'll take you home," Ryder says, breaking me from my thoughts.

I'm still gathering my wits, unable to reply.

The drive home is quiet. When he pulls up outside my place, he leaps from the truck, pausing only to gather my bags from the truck bed and deposit them at my door. I walk slowly up the short path to my small home and unlock the door.

"Would you like to come in?" My question is hesitant, but it seems only polite to offer after his help today.

My nerves are frayed. One kiss from Ryder, and all my defenses are toppling like a stack of cards. Now he's kissed

me, all the urges and desires that have lain dormant are wide awake and throwing a full-blown mariachi parade in my panties.

“I need to get back,” he says gruffly.

“Okay.” I open the front door and take my bags from him.

“Will you need a lift tomorrow?”

“Yes, please.”

He nods abruptly. “I’ll get your car towed first thing, too.”

“Thank you,” I say to his retreating back.

*Oh, God. He kissed me, and he hated it.*

The knowledge is excruciating.

I unpack the gifts before showering and changing into my fluffiest pajamas. I climb into bed, trying to shut down my brain, but whenever I close my eyes, I relive that scorching kiss. It’s seared into my memory. It was a whole new experience. Is this all I’m destined for? Reliving the memory of the best kiss of my life? Okay, the *only* kiss unless you count Anthony Lewis in seventh grade, who left a trail of snot on my upper lip.

Sadness blankets me, and the harsh reality that Ryder will never kiss me like that again settles like a rock in my chest.

# Chapter Seven

## Ryder

I try to calm my pounding heart as I knock on Charity's door the following morning. I can't let my loss of control change things between us. I need to be the guy I'm supposed to be in her life. Her brother's friend. Her secret protector. *Not the man who kisses her senseless under the mistletoe like I'll never get enough of her.*

Fuck, that kiss has messed me up.

I couldn't sleep last night. Couldn't think straight. Nothing makes any sense anymore. My feelings for Charity are fucking with my head, pitting my desire for her against my loyalty to Luke. I'm angry at myself for betraying Luke's memory and my promise to him. And I'm angry at Luke for dying, for giving up his life for mine. His family needed him.

An image burns through my head of Charity meeting and marrying some guy, settling down behind a white picket fence, and having a brood of children that don't belong to me.

The thought almost brings me to my knees. I don't want her with another guy. What if he doesn't treat her right? What if he doesn't know she's allergic to dog fur but loves cats? That she likes two sugars in her coffee, but only one if she has creamer? What if—

"Hey," Charity says, opening the door.

Her eyes glance off mine shyly as if she's also remembering our hot kiss. Dear God, she looks edible in blue jeans that hug her curvy thighs and a yellow T-shirt with a rainbow on the

front. That's precisely what she is—all the colors of the rainbow.

“Come in. I just brewed a fresh pot of coffee.” She turns and walks down the hall into what is presumably the kitchen, leaving me to follow.

Finally, I get my brain to engage and step inside, closing the door behind me. When I reach the kitchen, she's busy pouring coffee into two mugs.

“Not quite Magic Beanstalk standard, but it's the best I can do. We've got time for a quick caffeine shot before work,” she says with a grin.

Charity seems happy and relaxed. Maybe our kiss didn't affect her as it did me. Her face is free of makeup, and her hair hangs loosely around her shoulders in soft, pale gold waves. I'm desperate to fist it in my hand and tug her head back so I can lick and suck the tender flesh of her throat.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, noticing I haven't moved from the kitchen doorway.

No. Everything is not okay. Not since I tasted her sweet lips last night. It's stirred something primal and possessive in me. Something that wants to feast on her beautiful, perfect soul. Something that wants to make her mine.

I hear a rumble, and it takes me a minute to realize it's coming from me. Charity pauses as she pulls the chair from beneath the small round table, her bright blue eyes wide and questioning.

I close the distance between us in two long strides, yank her against me, and seal my lips to hers.

---

## **Charity**

Something shifted between us after that kiss last night. It was in Ryder's dark eyes when I opened the door, which burned with an emotion I'd never seen in them before.



And now ... now he's kissing me like he needs me to survive. His hands drop to my ass, and he squeezes before dragging me against his hard body.

This kiss isn't like yesterday. It goes from zero to hot and needy in a split second. He delves his tongue into my mouth, sliding it hungrily against mine. His hard shaft presses against my stomach, and heat pools between my thighs. I grind my pelvis against his hardness, and oh, God, I think I may combust.

He snakes his hands down the backs of my thighs and lifts me so my legs automatically circle his waist. Core to core, he strides from the kitchen into the living area, placing me gently on the sofa and following me down.

Breaking the kiss, he pushes my T-shirt up so it bunches beneath my chin, revealing my practical white bra. If I'd known he'd be seeing my underwear today, I would've worn the lacy set stashed at the bottom of my drawer saved for this occasion—not that I expected Ryder to touch me like this any time before Hell froze over.

All thoughts flee as he yanks the cup down, and his mouth finds my nipple. I whimper when he cups my other breast, squeezing it in his big hand. His touch on my heated skin is incredible, and I forget everything but the sensation of his body against mine as his tongue curls around my nipple.

“Oh,” I breathe, jerking as the caress sends fire blistering to my core.

Ryder looks up at me as he grazes my nipple with his thumb, and the intensity in his eyes is the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Another pulse of need slides directly to my core, and I welcome his mouth as he kisses me again, slicking his tongue against mine even as his thumb teases my other nipple to an aching peak.

“Fuck, you're beautiful,” he mutters.

I tremble with anticipation as he looms over me like some dark god. If I'm beautiful, he's utterly breathtaking.

“Need to taste you,” he mutters, tugging at my jeans.

I lift my hips so he can slide them down my thighs, dragging my panties with them. He moves lower, flicking his tongue down my stomach, fueled by my needy little cries. I shiver with need, my arousal leaking between my thighs. Oh, God, I need him to touch me there.

“Please,” I whimper, tangling my hands in his hair and urging him where I need him.

“Jesus, you’re so fucking wet,” he grunts, hooking a big hand around my thigh and opening me up.

He stares at my soaked pussy for so long that I start to think something is wrong. Am I different from other women? Do I have extra bits? Missing bits? God, why didn’t I do that mirror thing my girlfriends talked about in high school?

Ryder’s nostrils flare slightly as he inhales, and then it’s as if something inside him snaps, and his mouth devours me in a blaze of desire.

There’s no time to be embarrassed as he ravages my slick center, his tongue swirling, his lips pressing and sucking. Words try to form but dissipate into smoke before they reach my lips. His mouth is doing things, glorious, amazing things, and I’m making sounds that are completely foreign to me.

I choke and gasp for air as he works my pussy ravenously with his tongue, which seems to be everywhere at once. He licks every fold, delves into every crevice, and God, it’s incredible. I squirm and pant and quiver as I fall apart, one piece at a time. Then his tongue flicks across my clit ... once ... twice ... and everything in me explodes.

My cry echoes around the room as my pussy tightens around fresh air. My physical release washes through me with such force that I lift off the sofa. I hold his head tight against me as I rock and grind against him. Nothing has ever felt so good. The only thing that could top this would be having Ryder deep inside me.

And then, as suddenly as the pleasure came, it’s gone, replaced by a sensitivity that leaves me twitching each time his tongue swipes at my center.

“What ... was that?” I say through heaving breaths.

It’s not that I’m unfamiliar with orgasms. I know enough to sort myself out from time to time. But it’s never been close to what I just experienced—so intense that I thought I was going to pass out.

Ryder stands, looking down at me, his hair ruffled, his mouth shining with my release. “Has no one ever done that for you before?”

I shake my head no, still panting.

He doesn’t say anything, adjusting his hard length in his pants. I look at his crotch. Is this where I’m supposed to reciprocate? I want to, desperately. But I’m afraid he’ll realize how inexperienced I am.

“It’s okay, Sparkles,” he says gruffly. “I don’t need you to do anything.”

He looks at my slick core and pulls his member from his opened jeans. My eyes widen. That’s ... a lot of dick.

I should be embarrassed, sprawled on my sofa with my legs open, but I figure he’s been up close and personal and likes what he sees, judging by the size of his erection.

His cock is thick and long, the head shiny as it strains toward me. As I watch, a pearl of liquid beads on the end and slides down his length. It’s fascinating and sexy, and my core throbs with renewed lust.

Ryder grips his shaft and begins pumping. Long, firm strokes, his dark eyes moving between mine and my slick center. I can’t take my eyes off him as he speeds up, squeezes tighter, and comes with a guttural grunt. His legs almost buckle beneath him as rope after rope sprays from the tip and splashes between my legs.

“Charity,” he pants as the last drops leave him.

His eyes bore into mine, burning with possessiveness. I think I’ve just been claimed.

# Chapter Eight

## Ryder

Once the strongest orgasm of my life has subsided, regret swallows me whole.

What the fuck have I done?

What happened to duty, honor, and everything I've lived by my entire life? I close my jeans, searing the scene before me into my brain so I can cherish it forever. I'll never forget how Charity looked as she came apart on my mouth—most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I grab a clean washcloth from the kitchen and run some warm water before carrying it back to Charity. She blushes bright red as I gently clean her up, and guilt eats at me again.

"I'm sorry. I ... lost my head," I say hoarsely.

"Why are you apologizing?" she asks, sitting up on the edge of the sofa and adjusting her clothes.

I sigh. "You know why."

She stands, zipping her jeans and placing her hands on her hips. "If I didn't want it to happen, I would have said so, Ryder. I'm not a little girl anymore. I wish you could see that."

Her voice is sad, and knowing I'm responsible for that sadness kills me. I *do* see it. Every damned day. And I have no fucking idea what to do about it.

"We should get going. I'll grab my coat," she says quietly when the silence stretches.

She turns and leaves the room, taking the light with her. Emptiness swallows me. I rake a hand through my hair, overwhelmed by a jumble of conflicting emotions. I'll never regret what Charity and I just shared, but I don't know what comes next. Nothing's changed. I'm still the same fucked up guy I was before I put my mouth and hands on her soft curves.

Loyalty is everything between brothers in arms, and if there's one thing I learned from my days as a SEAL, it's to assess all risks. And I can't risk ruining our lives when I can't give her a whole man. I left pieces of myself behind on that last deployment.

She has more reason than anyone to grieve Luke. I know she misses him every day, but she's moving on with her life. Luke would be proud of her. Would he feel the same way about me?

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I barely see Charity over the next few days—I know she's busy with the movie, and I've been burying myself in work. Even though I'm in L.A. I still have to manage other team members on security jobs back in Vermont, where my business is based.

The garage calls to say they've replaced the starting motor on Charity's car, and I arrange for them to drop it at the studio lot later today so she has it to drive home.

Despite the movie being kept low-profile, manic fans still try to get to Scarlett and Kane, and I've had to escort one fan from the premises who was taking selfies outside Kane's trailer. They were on social media within seconds, and Julianna, the studio owner, was livid. Understandably.

I've been distracted. The sweet memory of Charity coming apart for me the other morning is on repeat in my head and has kept me awake at night.

But I'm here to do a job. My company has a reputation to uphold. Since the incident with the trespassing fan, I've kept things professional with Charity because when it comes to her, something happens to my brain, and it ceases to function

rationally. Probably a lack of oxygen because my blood supply insists on filling my cock instead of circulating to the rest of my body whenever I'm around her.

Despite the few bumps, the filming of the movie remains on schedule. Although, an unusual amount of people seem to be getting up close and personal on this movie—Luca, the director, and Audrey in hair and makeup. Max, the set medic, and Andrew, Kane's body double. And then there's Kane and Scarlett—definitely sparks flying between the two lead actors, and rumors are rampant that they have a history.

When I arrive at the studio on the penultimate day of filming, I can't help checking the security feed to see where Charity is, as I do every morning.

It doesn't take long to find her, nose deep in a brief as she twists a lock of hair around her index finger. It's a habit she's had since she was a kid.

I never saw her as anything but Luke's kid sister until the day she graduated high school. I was so fucking proud of her that day. She had a tougher time than most with her dyslexia, but she never let it hold her back.

It was a bittersweet day, almost a year after Luke's death. I was in the audience with Charity's parents. I'll never forget the mixture of joy and sorrow on her face as she climbed the stage to receive her diploma—joy at her achievement and sorrow that Luke wasn't there to share it with her. Once all the diplomas were handed out, she flew toward me and threw herself into my arms, wrapping herself around me. That's the moment I realized my feelings for her were far from platonic. It's also when the guilt started, and I've been fighting the attraction ever since.

Until I kissed her under the mistletoe.

And ate her sweet pussy like a ravenous animal before marking her with my cum.

Yeah, definitely crossed a few lines there.

I scrub a hand through my hair. I need some fresh air. Leaving the office, I head off to make a perimeter check, first inside

and then outside. Once I'm done, I review last night's surveillance, checking for anything untoward.

The days drag. I'm glad the production is winding down tomorrow morning, and I'll return to Vermont a few hours later. The thought of leaving Charity is ... painful. Unless ...

Charity usually comes home for the holidays. It suddenly occurs to me that I haven't even asked her what her plans are.

I check the time. It's getting late, and people are starting to head home. I scan the security feeds to see where Charity is. It takes me a minute to find her. She's in one of the storage rooms behind the stage, sifting through boxes. I frown, wondering what she's doing back there all alone, and before I know it, my feet are carrying me in her direction.

My question dies on my lips as I open the door, and my eyes fall on Charity as she lifts a gun from the box. My vision narrows. My heart stops. My lungs seize. I'm back in Helmand, acrid smoke filling my nostrils and gunfire ricocheting all around me ...

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## **Charity**

During a lull in filming, I decide to sift through some of the boxes of props I noticed on the first day. Anything to distract me from thoughts of Ryder and what happened the other morning. I know he's avoiding me. To be honest, I've been avoiding him, too, because it will kill me to see the regret and rejection in his eyes.

I head to the storage room behind the stage and pull one of the crates from the shelving unit. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, I sift through the various items. It seems no one has notarized the contents of these crates because there's a diverse assortment of props—everything from phones to plastic flowers to remote controls. The props nerd in me itches to make an itinerary.

The next item has me raising my eyebrows. A gun? Not a real gun, of course. Not even a working prop gun, as the safety protocols around those are as strict as a real gun these days. No, this one is made of heavy resin but looks very realistic.

My head jerks up as the door opens, and Ryder stands there staring at me. He sees me holding the prop gun, and his face pales. I stand as he strides toward me, a strangely detached look in his eyes. Suddenly, the gun is torn from my hand, and he's up in my face, anger rolling from him in waves.

“What the fuck, Charity? You shouldn't be handling a goddamn gun! It's my job to protect you—to protect everyone!” he shouts, waving a hand around him.

I gape at him, wondering what he's ranting about. His dark eyes are frantic, and sweat beads his brow.

*Protect everyone?* Is that what he thinks he has to do? And, *oh, shit*. Did seeing me holding the gun trigger him? He's used to handling weapons, but he's not used to seeing me holding a gun, fake or not, and we both know how clumsy I can be.

I cup his face. “It's okay, Ryder. It's just a prop,” I state slowly and calmly. “It isn't real.”

His brow wrinkles a little as he looks from me back to the prop gun now in his hand. He's shaking. “I ... fuck, what's wrong with me?”

The look of vulnerability in his eyes turns me inside out. I swallow my tears as I wrap my arms around him. “It's okay. I'm safe, and I've got you. You're here with me. No one is going to hurt you.”

I continue to murmur soft words of comfort, smoothing my hands along his back until the tension finally drains from his muscles. His arms come around me, almost crushing me with his strength, but I don't care. He needs this. He needs me. And I'll always be here for him.

I pull back to look at him, but his mouth is on mine before I can speak. The kiss is hot and wild, almost desperate, as his tongue spears into my mouth, tasting every inch of me. I



moan, wrapping my arms around his neck, giving him everything, every part of me.

Ryder kisses me like I'm his air, his sole reason for being, and I melt into him as our mouths mate and our tongues tangle.

And then he breaks the kiss. A shudder spirals through him as he buries his face in my neck.

"Talk to me, Ryder. Please," I whisper, stroking my hands through his hair.

He blows out a tortured breath. "I promised him I'd take care of you."

I pull back to look at him. "Him, who? Luke?"

"Can't break a promise," he mutters.

"What about you, Ryder? Who takes care of you?"

He shakes his head as if he can't understand my question. "I take care of myself."

I shake my head sadly. "No, you don't. You torment yourself with guilt and regret. Luke was my brother. He was your best friend. We both loved him, but he's gone, Ryder."

"Yes, *he's* gone, and it should've been me!" he snarls, pulling away from me and raking a hand through his hair. "He should be hanging decorations and dressing as an elf on Christmas morning. He should be here with his family. Not me."

I feel his pain as if it were mine. "But he's not here, Ryder. What happened was a terrible tragedy for all of us. But Luke knew what he was signing up for, just like you did. He lived his life on his terms and made his own decisions. And he wouldn't want to see you like this. He'd want you to live in the moment, not in the past. He'd want you to be happy. To live your life like each day is precious. Because it is."

I pause as I realize I'm crying, but I'm not done. "I loved what we did in my house the other morning. I loved having your hands and mouth on me. I loved the simple pleasure of sitting on a bench and drinking hot chocolate with you. I loved it all because I love *you*, Ryder. I've loved you for years. I loved you before that last deployment in Afghanistan, and I loved

you even more when you came back because I know the devastation you battled through to return to us. And I won't hide how I feel anymore because my love for you is a part of who I am. Somewhere along the line, you became my heart, and I'm not ashamed of that."

The only sign that Ryder has heard me is the slight flinch of his eyelids. His expression is blank, remote, like he's gone somewhere else. My soul dies a little. I can't reach him.

I suck in a calming breath. Time for some harsh truths, then. "You say Luke saved your life that day, but it doesn't seem like it. Because what you're doing? It's not living. It's not even existing. It's torturing yourself. And I love you too much to stand by and watch you do that to yourself."

*Now* I'm done. I've laid everything on the line. Rolled the dice. It's up to him now. He needs to want to participate in life. I can't do it for him.

I wait. And wait.

Ryder is still silent, his hands clenching at his sides. I guess I have my answer.

Without another word, I leave the room, quietly closing the door behind me.

# Chapter Nine

## Ryder

I slide to the floor, my back against the shelving unit behind me. I'm lost in a personal hell of my own making. Charity loves me. She's loved me for years—*me*, the man who returned when her brother didn't.

When I saw her holding that gun, my brain short-circuited. I was back in Helmand, under fire, with the dying screams of my brothers-in-arms ringing in my ears.

Charity brought me back a little at a time, holding me, murmuring soft words of comfort until the nightmare faded, and she filled my vision, my soul, and every pore of my body.

And then she gave me a dose of home truths, the likes of which I've never heard before, not even from my therapist. Her words were brutal, and they shook me to my core.

But everything she said was true. I've been living a half-life. Punishing myself day after day over things I can't change, for surviving when Luke didn't, and for falling in love with his sister. I regarded it as the ultimate betrayal, but what if it's the ultimate gift? Charity is right. Luke's not here, but I am.

I've allowed guilt to dictate my decisions, but no more.

The second I acknowledge it, a weight lifts from my shoulders. Not completely. But enough that I can breathe easier and see things clearly for the first time in years.

*Holy fucking shit.*

I love Charity.

More than I ever imagined loving someone.

For the first time, I allow it to wash over me, to *feel* it. I don't want to be a part of her life out of some misguided sense of duty and obligation to her brother. I want to be in her life as her lover, her mate, her husband, and the father of her children.

Everything in me wants to find her this second and throw her down on the nearest horizontal surface so I can show her with my hands and mouth and words how much I love her.

But I want to do things right. She deserves the flowers and the ring and the whole damn proposal. A plan begins to form in my mind. Tomorrow, after filming has wrapped, I'll—

A crash from the set pulls me from my thoughts. Instantly, I'm on red alert. I check the time, surprised to see it's after midnight. I've been sitting here for hours, lost in my thoughts.

And now it seems we have an intruder.

I don't switch on the lights as I leave the storeroom. Instead, I pull the small flashlight from my shirt pocket and keep a hand on the Glock at my hip. I move silently along the corridor and approach the stage slowly, my training kicking in, my senses attuned to every sound.

Movement catches my eyes, and the beam of my flashlight falls on ... *Santa?*

"Fuck," Santa curses, covering his eyes with his arm and squinting at me.

No. Not Santa.

"Abel ... Clarke?" I remove the beam from his eyes and off to the side so it illuminates his face without dazzling him. Abel is one of the supporting actors and made no secret that he wasn't too happy about taking a role in this movie. Something about improving his image with a wholesome Christmas movie.

"Hey, man." He drops his arm and flings himself into the chair on the stage.

"Uh, you know the set is closed, right?"

“You sure? I thought they were filming a dining in the dark scene.”

I stare at him for a moment before realizing he’s being a smart-ass. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Sure, give me a second. I tripped and knocked myself out a few hours ago.”

“Hours?” Shit, the guy’s been lying here unconscious for that long? Looks like I’m not the only one wallowing in the dark. “Do you need me to call an ambulance? You could have a concussion.”

Abel waves a hand at me dismissively. “I was drinking—drunk. That probably didn’t help.”

We lapse into silence as I wait for him to say something else.

When he doesn’t, I clear my throat. “Listen, I need to a sweep before locking up. I have somewhere to be.”

“Right.” Abel grabs the arms of the chair and rises, swaying slightly. Attempting to take a step, he misses, and I swoop in, saving him from another nasty fall.

“Easy there.” I wrap an arm around his waist and haul him up. The stench of alcohol hits me, and I clear my throat. “How much you had to drink?”

“Enough,” he mutters, trying to steady himself.

“Listen, I’m not judging, but aren’t you like a big movie star or something? Why the hell are you drinking on set?”

“Bad day,” he says, pulling away abruptly.

“Yeah, okay. We all have those, but that doesn’t mean you go looking for comfort at the bottom of the bottle.” I don’t tell the guy I hit the bottle pretty hard myself for a little while after Luke died. “It’s Christmas, and I would’ve been the last to say this a few days ago, but ... don’t you have someone you want to spend it with?”

A pained look crosses his face. “I thought I did, but I was wrong.”

I frown at him, rubbing the back of my neck. Seems like I'm not the only one tied up in knots over someone special. "Yeah, I know how that is. But if you're wrong, or even slightly wrong, this time of year ..." I pause, thinking of Charity. "Well, a lot can happen and change—some good, some bad—but it's also a time when the last thing you expected to happen can and will. So, if there's someone you want to be with, and maybe you think they don't want to be with you, it's worth letting them know." I shrug casually, but my emotions are anything but casual. I'm giving this guy advice on his love life, but I may as well be talking to myself. "What's the worst that can happen? You get drunk and knock yourself out past lights-out at work? You've already done that."

A small laugh forces its way out of his throat. "Then I meet Mr. Six-foot-Something Built-Like-A-Brick-Shithouse."

"Most people call me Ryder." I flash a grin.

"Well, Ryder, I don't need to tell her I want to be with her. She made it clear she never wanted to be with me. I was just a stepping stool for her career, and she didn't mind stuffing her heel into me on the way up."

"She said that?" I ask in surprise.

"Not in so many words, but I overheard it."

"Hang on. You overheard her saying something but didn't ask her about it to her face? God, you actors are all drama queens." I shake my head. "Go and speak to her. You know what they say about assuming. Makes an ass out of you and me."

"You're seriously calling me an ass right now?"

"Yeah, because you are if this is how belligerent you get over something you don't know for sure—total asshole move."

My blood runs cold as I register my words. Isn't that exactly what I did? Totally different and tragic circumstances, but didn't I take Luke's dying words and put my own interpretation on them? He asked me to take care of Charity, nothing more, nothing less, but I allowed my guilt to twist those words into something else entirely.

I'm barely aware of Abel patting my shoulder and weaving his way off the stage. Abel doesn't have the monopoly on belligerence or asshole moves. I could give him a run for his money and lap him several times.

I know it won't happen overnight, but it's time to throw off the shackles of my past. Time to seize life and start living it with the only woman I've ever loved.

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## **Charity**

I don't sleep. I toss and turn, my thoughts on Ryder. Was I too harsh? Does he hate me? I bared my soul this afternoon, and he stood there like a statue. I love him. Always will. But I want someone who loves me the way I love them, and I won't settle for anything less.

Eventually, I cry myself to sleep and wake the next morning exhausted and puffy-eyed. I drive to work on auto-pilot and busy myself with getting everything ready for filming the final scene. I just need to get through the next few hours, and then I'm on a flight to Vermont.

The thought of seeing my parents lifts my spirits. There's nothing like the love and hugs from Mom and Dad. I'm sure Ryder will be returning to Vermont for the holidays, and I'll see him at some point. He usually stops by to see Mom and Dad, who think of him as a son. I'll deal with that when I get there.

The fact that Ryder hasn't tried to find me hurts. I haven't glimpsed him once this morning. The tiny part of me that hoped he'd come racing in and sweep me off my feet withers and dies.

"Charity?" Luca calls, pulling me from my thoughts. "We're done with the tree now."

I nod at him and smile. I guess that's a wrap—on the movie and any chance of a future with Ryder.

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Three hours later, I board the plane to Vermont and close my eyes, trying to push away the forlorn hope that Ryder might change his mind and turn up at the airport at the last minute, like in the romantic Christmas movie we just filmed.

But as the plane taxis and takes off, I come to terms with a future without him in it—not how I wanted, at least.

It's time to forget what could have been and focus on Christmas with my family and the kids at the hospital. I wonder if I can find anyone to fill Luke's suit this year, but if not, I'll do it alone again. I know Luke will be with me in spirit, and that's all that matters.

The plane lands, and I clear passport control and customs to be greeted by my parents. They're waving a sign with my name, and I laugh at them and their silly joke. But as I get closer, the tears I've been holding at bay finally win, and the floodgates open.

Dad takes my bag and gives me a hug before turning and walking a couple of steps ahead so Mom can talk with me.

“Darling, whatever's the matter?”

“Ryder doesn't love me.” I don't need to say anything else. I think my parents knew how I felt about Ryder before I did.

“Oh, my baby.” She hands me a tissue from her purse and holds me close as we exit the airport and head for the car.

“I honestly thought that boy would come to his senses,” Dad says, shaking his head.

I laugh at Dad's description of Ryder as a boy.

“Come on. Let's get you home. Supper and a good night's sleep, and you'll be ready for those kids at the hospital in the morning,” Mom says, hugging me tightly.

“No matter what happens, remember that you're the sunshine in so many people's lives, including the kids at the hospital,” Dad says, his voice gruff.



I nod and squeeze Dad's hand, fighting tears again. "I love you guys."

"And we love you. Come rain or shine."

# Chapter Ten

## CHARITY

I arrive at the hospital bright and early the following morning, dressed in my elf costume with a sack full of presents. The kids adore the annual ritual, and I'm glad I can bring a smile to their faces on this Christmas morning.

Mike, the ward doctor, is dressed as Santa, and we move from bed to bed, handing each child a present and watching the excitement on their little faces as they tear the wrapping from their gift. I allow memories of Luke to warm me, how he had the kids in stitches doing a silly dance or performing a terrible magic trick. The memories still carry an edge of grief, but more than that, they're comforting and make me feel as if Luke is still here in spirit.

Of course, Ryder is also never far from my thoughts. No text, no phone call, nothing. I'm not even sure if he's back here in Vermont or if he stayed in—

“Charity, it looks like you do have some help this morning, after all,” Mike says, pulling me from my thoughts. His eyes are full of laughter as he looks over my shoulder.

I turn to look, and my breath abandons my lungs in a whoosh.

Ryder marches toward me, looking like the biggest elf Santa ever chose to be his helper. He has big red circles painted on his cheeks, and his skin and hair sparkle with glitter. It's clear he's wearing Luke's old costume, as it's too small for his big frame. The top strains over his wide chest and shoulders, and

the sleeves and legs are too short. He looks ... ridiculous. And utterly wonderful to my greedy eyes.

I laugh before the pain in my heart reminds me of our last conversation. My laughter strangles in my throat, and I clamp my mouth closed.

“Oh, look, kids. Another of Santa’s elves is here to help,” I say with as much false cheer as I can muster.

Avoiding Ryder’s eyes (is he wearing glitter eyeshadow?) I point at the sacks at the nurse’s station. “Grab one of those as you pass.”

Then I return my attention to a pale little girl, Lottie, and smile. “What would you like from Santa this year, sweetie?” I ask softly.

“Well.” Lottie looks at her mom sitting in the chair at her bedside. “I asked for a dollhouse.” She drops her gaze to her small hands, fidgeting with a doll. Her voice drops to a whisper. “But really, I want my leg to get better so Mommy can be happy too.”

These kids never cease to astound me with their bravery, and I swallow the enormous lump in my throat.

“You’ll be out of here in no time, Lottie,” Mike says with a big smile. “That leg is healing great, and you’ll be back to your gymnastics in no time.”

I blink away the tears, handing her a small, wrapped gift. I know she’ll like it because my mom is amazing and asks the parents in advance. Then she pops their name on it when she wraps them, so I know which gift to give.

I’m ultra-aware of Ryder as he comes to stand beside me. “Uh, this is Santa’s newest elf, Ryder. Santa sent him away from the North Pole because he was naughty.”

Lottie’s eyes open wide as she stares at Ryder. “What did he do?”

“He ate all the peanut brittle Mrs. Claus made especially for the reindeer.” I risk a glance at Ryder, who has the decency to look contrite.

“It’s okay. Santa doesn’t stay mad for long, and I’m sure they’ll forgive him soon enough,” I whisper conspiratorially to Lottie.

We make our way around the rest of the children, each so grateful for their gift. Ryder talks to the kids and has them laughing at his lame jokes. This is a different side of him, and I wonder what prompted the change. I have so many questions.

Once we’re done, we fold up our empty sacks, and Ryder and I move toward the nurses’ break room.

I look at him fully for the first time since he turned up so unexpectedly, and the intensity of his gaze turns my knees to butter. “Why are you here?”

He takes a step closer. “Because I love you. And I figured this was the best way to show you.”

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## **Ryder**

Charity’s mouth drops open. “I ... You love me?”

I nod, taking another step closer. “It took everything in me to stay away from you yesterday, but my plan to show you how I feel about you depended on it. I needed to make a statement, and it needed to be big, memorable, and personal to you. Something that could only happen here in Vermont.”

Charity’s eyes shimmer with tears. “You dressed in Luke’s elf costume and covered yourself in glitter for me?”

“For me. For us. For the kids. To honor Luke and to tell you that everything you said was true. I’ve allowed guilt to dictate my life for too long. I don’t want to live that way anymore. I want to be with you, love you, and have you love me for the rest of our days if you’ll have me. I’ve been your friend and protector, but now I’m standing before you as the man who loves you more than anything. And I’ve never been so scared that it won’t be enough for you. That *I* won’t be enough.”

Tears pour down Charity's cheeks, running through the rosy circles she's drawn there. She's never looked more beautiful to me, dressed in her elf costume with her makeup smudged and glitter in her hair. She may be dressed as an elf, but she's always been my angel.

"You've *always* been enough for me, Ryder. But it killed me that you weren't enough for yourself. That you didn't value and love yourself the way Luke did. The way we all do."

"You're unlike any woman I've ever met, Charity. Your name fits you perfectly—giving, kind, and loving. Your joy of life kept my heart from freezing over. Feeling anything was too damn painful after Luke, but you kept me going, Sparkles. And it's more than physical. It's the connection with the one person who understands you better than you understand yourself. You keep me grounded. You give me a sense of peace I haven't experienced for years. And if you give me another chance, I'll never take those gifts for granted again."

Charity shakes her head in disbelief. "I ... But what about our jobs? Most of my work is in L.A., but your company is here in Vermont."

"Then I'll move to L.A.," Ryder states. "I don't care where I am so long as we're together. I can hire someone to keep an eye on things here and set up another branch in L.A. I'll do whatever I have to do to ensure you're in my life."

With a sob, Charity launches herself at me, and then my mouth is on hers as I wrap her in my arms. I kiss her with all the hunger and yearning and love inside me, pouring it into her and allowing her love to fill me in return. It's so much more than a kiss. It's an act of healing and renewal. It's the joining of two souls who've eventually found their way to each other.

I'm vaguely aware of cheers and giggles when we finally break apart. Charity's entire face turns the color of her cheeks as she realizes we have an audience.

"Santa's elves are making out," one of the kids giggles.

I chuckle as she buries her face in my throat with an embarrassed groan.

“There’s something else.” I reach into my elf costume and pull out a small gift, holding my breath as I hand it to her.

Charity frowns at the colorful paper. “What is it?” she asks breathlessly.

“Open it and see.” I fold her fingers around the gift.

She undoes the messily tied ribbon and slides her fingers beneath the seam in the wrapping paper, pulling lightly until the tape gives way and the paper opens.

“Oh,” she gasps, looking at the image of us kissing beneath the mistletoe, now in a silver frame with holly and berries in the corners. “How did you do all this?” she asks in wonder as more tears spill down her cheeks.

“I went back and got the picture from the woman and bought a frame—”

“Not that!” She huffs. “All this.” She waves her hand at my elf suit and the hospital in general.

I smirk. “I had help.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Mom and Dad?”

I nod. “I called them as soon as filming wrapped yesterday. We had a long talk about ... everything.” My throat closes up at the memory. Tears were shed on both sides, but it was one of the most healing conversations I’ve ever experienced. “I told them how I felt about you and my plan for today. They were only too happy to help.”

Her blue eyes widen. “They knew?” She shakes her head. “Oh, they’re *good!* And now on *my* naughty list for keeping secrets. What did they say when you told them that ... you loved me?” She pauses over the words as if she still can’t believe them.

I chuckle. “Your mom burst into tears, and your dad said it was about time.” I pause, lifting her hand to my mouth and placing a kiss on her palm. “He also gave me his blessing.”

“What for?”

“To ask you to be my wife.”

Her mouth drops open for the second time.

“I understand if you need time,” I say gruffly, “but I don’t. You’ve shown me what it is to be accepted, to be loved as I am, warts and all.”

I pull the box her mom gave me from the other pocket hidden in my elf costume. I open it to reveal the diamond engagement ring which once belonged to her grandmother. “I love you, Charity Pine. Will you marry me?”

Charity covers her mouth with her hand, looking at her grandmother’s ring and then back at me, her eyes shining with joy. “A proposal on Christmas Day? How could I possibly say no? I love you, too, Ryder Thorne. And yes, I’ll marry you.”

And then she’s in my arms again, her kiss soft, tender, perfect, and beautiful. Just like her.

“Wanna get out of here?” I murmur next to her ear, smiling as she shivers.

“Yes,” she says breathlessly, pulling back to look at me with her heart in her eyes.

We wave goodbye to the staff and kids, and I link her fingers with mine as we leave the hospital to festive wishes, cheers, and a round of applause.

“I’m going to be sparkling all over the holiday, aren’t I?” I ask sheepishly as we step outside into the biting air.

“Oh, yeah, you are.” She sniggers, squeezing my hand. “We’re gonna be finding glitter for weeks.”

Snowflakes drift and land on her hair, and we both look up. Charity laughs delightedly as the flakes drop on her upturned face.

I smile as I wrap her in my arms. This woman has given me back my life. And maybe, just maybe, she’s restored my love of all things Christmas.

# Chapter Eleven

## CHARITY

What could be better than Christmas?

Getting naked with my fiancé, that's what.

We returned to Mom and Dad's house, and after being hugged to death and congratulated, we all sat down for a delicious Christmas dinner.

It was the most wonderful yet torturous day. Wonderful because I got to spend the day with the people I love most in the world. Torturous because all I wanted to do was be alone with Ryder so I could finally make him mine in every way. And yes, I'm talking about sex. If the intense looks Ryder sent my way through dinner were any indication, he was feeling it, too.

But now that we're finally alone in his hotel room, my nerves return with a vengeance. Ryder closes and locks the door, prowling toward me with single-minded intent. His arms come around me, and I flatten my palms against his chest.

"You should know that I've never done this before," I whisper, tipping my head back to look at him.

He trails his fingers along my cheek. "I guessed as much. When I touched you that morning at your house, it was as if no one had ever touched you that way before."

"Oh, God, was it that obvious?" I groan and bite my lip. "I might not be any good at this sex stuff."

"If it's any consolation, I'm as nervous as hell."



His words calm some of my anxiety. “You are?”

He nods. “I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“Pah!” I snort. “As if you could, big guy. I’ve already seen the goods, remember? And I guess you’ve seen mine, too,” I add, blushing at the memory.

I watch, mesmerized, as Ryder throws back his head and laughs. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him laugh like this, and the sound fills me with so much joy that it brings tears to my eyes.

Ryder cups my face in his hands, his dark eyes fixed on mine. “In case I haven’t been clear, you’re it for me, Charity. No one who came before matters because it’s you and me from here on out.”

“God, I love you,” I breathe.

“Love you too, Sparkles.”

I gasp when he takes me by surprise, lifting and carrying me toward the bed. Placing me gently in the middle of the king-size bed, he follows me down. He kisses me deep and hard, his big hand at my nape as he angles my mouth where he wants it. I moan into his mouth as his other hand slides up my jean-clad thigh and pops open the buttons.

“Too much clothing in the way,” Ryder growls. He strips me of my jeans and panties in seconds, leaving me in my Christmas sweater with the words “When I Think of You, I Touch My Elf” on the front. “Not sure whether to take this off or leave it on,” he says with a sexy smirk.

I decide for him, shucking out of my sweater and bra and tossing them on the floor.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” Ryder growls, his heated gaze sliding over my naked body.

“Ryder,” I moan, trying to catch my breath as he trails kisses down my neck. Sucking and nipping at my sensitive skin.

He stands suddenly, making quick work of his jeans and T-shirt. We showered at Mom and Dad’s to remove the worst of the glitter before lunch and changed into regular clothes.

And, oh, my god, he's gorgeous. Broad shoulders, wide chest with a smattering of hair, and muscular arms. He carries a little more weight than when he was on active duty, but it suits him. My eyes trail down the tattoo on his neck, which extends over his left pec to the scar below his heart.

Kneeling on the bed, I reach out to touch it, looking up at him. "Badge of honor," I whisper, stroking my fingers over the puckered flesh.

His throat bobs as he swallows hard. "Second chance."

And then he's on me, his body covering mine, his tongue delving deep into my mouth.

I love kissing him, but now I need more.

As if reading my thoughts, Ryder trails kisses down my body, circling my nipples with his tongue and teasing them into tight peaks. His hot mouth continues its delicious journey, nipping and licking my quivering stomach before he pushes my legs wide. My whole body is tight with need, and the pulse between my thighs thrums with desire.

Ryder looks up at me as he kisses my mound, his dark eyes locking on mine. Then he takes one long lick. I almost come off the bed, but he grips my hips, holding me in place as he continues to lick and suck at me, taking what he wants.

"Ryder," I gasp, writhing under the lap of his magical tongue.

His hands slide down to grip my thighs, pulling me even wider. "You even taste like sweet honey here, too. I knew you would," he growls against my clit.

He pushes a thick finger inside me, and my head drops back to the pillow as my eyes fall closed. My orgasm is already building, and I try to close my legs because I'm not sure I'm going to survive it.

"Ryder, I ...I ..." I can't form words as he licks and sucks while his big finger works in and out of me.

"Give it to me, Sparkles. I want to taste your pleasure on my tongue," he grunts.

He sucks my clit into his mouth, and I come undone. My orgasm explodes through me, and I shout his name as I shake and shudder and melt into the mattress.

Ryder nuzzles my quivering inner thighs, and I jerk at the brush of his tongue against my sensitive flesh. My body is still on overload from the powerful orgasm.

Laying his head against my inner thigh, he looks up at me with a smug grin, his mouth shining with my juices and ...

I burst out laughing.

A frown immediately replaces his grin. "What's so funny?"

I cover my mouth, snorting with laughter and shaking my head.

"What?" he demands, crawling up my body and giving me a confused look.

"You have a little something here." I wipe his upper lip. "And here." His chin. "Aaaand here." The tip of his nose.

He grabs my hand and looks at it, roaring with laughter. "Guess that glitter really does get *everywhere*."

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## **Ryder**

I knew intimacy with Charity would be incredible, but I never expected it to be fun. I should've known better. Everything about her radiates sunshine and joy, and I'm content to bathe in her healing light.

The sight of her almost has me spilling on her soft stomach.

I wrap my hand in her silky blonde hair and take her mouth in a blistering kiss. My beautiful fiancée. The one person who means more to me than anything in this whole fucking world. My balls draw up at the thought of her becoming my wife. She'll carry my name, and no one will ever be able to take her from me.

I stare down at her, absorbing her beauty. “I want you so bad, but I need to go slow with you.”

Charity wriggles against me. “I don’t want slow. We’ve been going slow for years. I ache, Ryder, and it won’t stop until you’re inside me.”

I drop my forehead to hers. “You’re killing me here.”

She licks my ear. “Not yet, baby. First, you need to jingle my bells. Light up my tree. Tickle my tinsel, and”—I slide a hand between us, opening her folds and circling her pearl with my thumb—“make merry with my clit?” she finishes in a strangled voice.

My shoulders shake with laughter. God, this woman. So fucking precious.

Charity moans, raising her hips, wanting more, and I give it to her, slipping a finger inside her. She huffs my name as my finger slides in and out of her tight sheath, slick with her juices.

Pure primal need overtakes me as she bucks her hips, begging me to sink inside her and end her torture. I remove my finger, line myself up, and slide inside her with one firm thrust.

She gasps, and her eyes fly open, fixed on my face. I nuzzle her nose with mine, scattering kisses over her cheeks as she adjusts to my length and girth. I rest my forehead against hers, whispering words of love and encouragement. My muscles shake with the effort to hold still inside her.

A tear slips down her face.

I kiss it away. “Charity.”

I start to pull out of her, but she wraps her legs around my waist and holds on tight.

She gives me a watery smile. “I’m crying because I’m so happy, Ryder. I never understood why people cried when they were happy, but I get it now. You’re mine, and I’m yours. You’re my everything.”

*Ah, fuck.* I’m done for.

“Make love to me,” she whispers, lifting her hips.

I growl as her movement pulls me deeper into her tight warmth. “You were made for me. I should have known we’d fit perfectly.”

“Yesss,” she moans as I pull back and slide inside her again. She tilts her hips and grips my ass cheeks. “So good.”

I grind against her slowly and sensually, rubbing her clit with my pelvis. Her hands move to my shoulders, and she thrusts against me, her moans growing louder

“You’re incredible,” I pant in her ear, increasing the pace of my thrusts.

Unable to speak, she kisses my neck, her inner muscles clenching around my cock. Our hips dance in harmony as I glide in and out of her, and the only sounds are those of our guttural moans and the slap of our bodies coming together.

My thumb finds her clit again. “Gonna make you come. Need to feel you come while I’m inside you. Tell me you’re mine, Charity. Need to hear it.”

“I’m yours, Ryder. All yours.”

“Always,” I growl. I quicken my pace, thrusting hard and bottoming out inside her. “Mine.”

My heart beats in time with hers, and every cell in my body is alive with primal pleasure. Charity’s pussy tightens around me spasmodically as I slam inside her, my thrusts becoming choppy as my balls draw up with my impending orgasm.

“Ryder, I’m close,” she pants, her fingernails digging into my shoulders.

“Come with me,” I grunt as she twitches beneath me.

I stare deeply into Charity’s clear blue eyes as her orgasm washes over her, and my release barrels through me. I roar as she convulses and contracts around me, her pussy milking and kneading every last drop of cum from my pulsing shaft. Stars swim in my vision as I empty inside her, filling her to the brim with my hot, life-giving seed.

“Wow,” Charity sighs up at me, her eyes drowsy with satisfaction.

“Yeah,” I pant, sucking in air. “That was fucking incredible. You okay, Sparkles?”

“Mmmm, more than okay,” she mumbles, a sated smile pulling at her mouth.

I roll so she’s sprawled across my chest, her body draped over mine. My cock is still hard inside her. Guess it’s gonna take a while before I’ve had my fill of my woman.

I wrap my arms around her and tip her head up for my kiss. “Merry Christmas, Sparkles.”

She smiles against my mouth. “Best Christmas ever.”

# Epilogue - Charity

## **A Week Later**

The Avalon Club is the perfect venue for our New Year's Eve wrap party. The place is ultra-modern, with a sleek black lacquered bar centered in the expansive, black-and-white chevron-floored room. Walls covered in glittering gold letters lead to a raw oak slat ceiling, and the flickering lights of the metallic curtains make the bottles of champagne sparkle. The brick walls are adorned with the artwork of Lucas Moretto, a talented artist who'd designed spaces for several A-List celebrities.

A live band plays laid-back jazz and blues music on a small stage at the back of the room, providing the perfect ambiance as the guests talk and laugh, enjoying the extensive selection of finger foods beautifully laid out on the table running the length of one wall.

Tonight, we're back in L.A to celebrate the movie's success and see in the new year with our friends and colleagues.

The place is buzzing as I sip my wine at the bar. We almost managed two hours before Ryder had to duck out to take a call from one of his security guys. It may be New Year's Eve, but he still has to be available to his team.

I scan the room, taking in the merry scene before me. Christmas has always been my favorite time of year. I love everything about it. Seeing the love fill the room tonight makes me all the merrier.

Many of the cast and crew of *The Naughty List* were Christmas humbuggers, called to make a movie at the eleventh hour. Those people got a lot more than they bargained for, including a reminder of what the festive season is all about—sharing it with loved ones.

And there's certainly an abundance of love tonight. I've done the rounds and chatted with everyone tonight, discovering they all have their own stories to tell from *The Naughty List*.

Jackson and Hailey, for starters. Ryder filled me in on their story. Those two went through a lot to reach their happy ending, and now plan to move in together.

I spot Andrew, Kane's body double, kissing Max, the set doctor, under the mistletoe. He lifts her left hand and presses his lips to the antique gold ring she's wearing. The engaged couple is leaving for Texas, where I know Max will continue to make a huge difference as a doctor.

Scarlett calls Andrew's name as she and Kane stroll over to them. I chuckled at her flushed cheeks and wild hair when they arrived. They were late, so no prizes for guessing what they were up to before the party. They're a beautiful couple, and their chemistry is off the charts. There's no doubt that they're *the* Hollywood couple.

Scarlett hugs Max, and they admire each other's rings while the men shake hands and clap each other on the back.

My gaze moves across the room to where Luca is standing with Audrey. The man is practically undressing his fiancée with his eyes. Who knew the brusque director had such passion bubbling beneath the surface? But only for Audrey. I wouldn't be surprised if they ran off to Vegas for a quick wedding.

Abel and his Scout linger a few feet away, talking with some crew members. Like Luca, Abel can't keep his eyes off Scout. Ryder told me about his midnight meeting with Abel on the set. It seems Ryder's advice did the trick because Scout looks radiant, and Abel looks like a man who's finally found peace. As his PA, Scout was fundamental in his shift in attitude and lifestyle choices. She simply gave him a better choice—her.



But they're not the only new-engaged couples. Landon, the set caterer, and Grace, the camera operator. Even Julianna, the studio owner, has found love with the movie's writer, Nick Claus.

And me? I couldn't be happier. Ryder and I eventually found our way to each other, not by letting memories of Luke fade but by remembering and cherishing them. Together.

As if my thoughts have summoned him, Ryder appears beside me, sliding an arm around my waist. "Looks like someone barfed up a Christmas lovefest in here," he grumbles, looking at all the couples.

I turn my head to look at my fiancé. God, he's gorgeous. And all mine. "Not getting all Grinchy on me again, are you, big guy?"

He lowers his head, his mouth close to my ear. "Only because I have to share you. I've been hard all fucking evening watching you glide around in this dress."

I shiver as his heated breath teases my ear. If I were wearing panties, they would be ruined.

My red dress is demure by Hollywood standards with its high neckline and long sleeves. However, the deep V at the back ending just above the dimples at the base of my spine is driving my man crazy.

"Christmas may be over, but I can't wait any longer to unwrap you and put my mouth all over this delectable body."

Oh, God. Is it possible to orgasm from words alone?

I turn and loop my arms around his neck, the ring on my left hand sparkling under the muted lights. "Do I get to unwrap you too?" I ask with a sultry smile.

"Sparkles, you've got me so on the edge, I'll be lucky to get your panties off and my pants unbuttoned before I slide inside you," he growls.

Yep. Starting to believe in a hands-free orgasm.

I lift on my toes and whisper in his ear, "I'm not wearing panties."

He groans and drops his head to my shoulder. “Jesus, fuck, woman. Are you trying to kill me?”

I laugh softly. “You think it’d be rude if we left now?”

“Two hours is more than long enough,” Ryder rasps, nipping my earlobe.

“Another minute won’t hurt,” I say as the band strikes up a rendition of Bing Crosby’s “Let’s Start the New Year Right.” Couples take to the dancefloor, melting into each other’s arms.

Ryder lifts his head, his expression tortured. “I’m about to come in my pants like a fucking teenager rather than inside my fiancée, and you want me to wait another minute?”

“Please. It’s almost midnight. Then you can do whatever you want to me for however long you want.”

Ryder’s jaw twitches. “Deal. But the second the clock strikes twelve, we’re out of here. We need to christen that king-size bed in our hotel room.”

I shake my head, the wine making me bold. “I want to fuck you in that huge jacuzzi bath first.”

“Goddamn, Sparkles. You’re gonna pay for this,” he mutters, grinding his cock against my stomach.

I grin. “Can’t wait.”

Ryder closes his eyes briefly, and when they open again, they blaze with so much love and desire it takes my breath away.

Ten...Nine...Eight...

The band leader grabs the mic and begins the countdown.

Seven...Six...Five...

“I love you, Ryder Thorne,” I whisper, gazing up at my man.

Four...Three...Two...

“Love you, Sparkles.” He cups my face and tilts it to his.

I don’t hear the final count or the cheers of “Happy New Year.” I’m too busy kissing the love of my life and thanking Luke, my spirit of Christmas past, for giving us a nudge in the right direction.

## Epilogue - Ryder

“RYDER!” Charity yelps my name as I kick the hotel door shut behind us and swing her into my arms.

The witchy red dress she’s wearing has been driving me insane. All. Fucking. Night. The New Year’s Eve party was great, but concealing my huge boner from everyone? Not so much.

And then learning she wasn’t wearing any panties? *Fuck*. As soon as the clock struck midnight, I swept my woman out of there and into a cab. I contemplated hitching her dress up and sliding inside her in the elevator, but didn’t think the elderly couple in there with us would appreciate the show.

“Gonna strip you bare now, Sparkles, and make you beg me to let you come,” I promise, heading for the bathroom in our hotel suite.

I swallow Charity’s gasp with my mouth, slipping my tongue inside to twine with hers. It’s hot and erotic and almost causes my cock to burst through the front of my dress pants.

Charity whimpers as I lower her to her feet next to the jacuzzi tub, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her flush to my aching body. She presses into me so her breasts are crushed against my chest, but I need her closer, always closer, until we melt into each other completely.

“Ryder,” she breathes my name into my mouth like a prayer.

Hearing her whisper my name so reverently does something to me. I feel it down to my soul, and it makes me wild. I cup her face, stroking my hands over her cheeks as I devour her

mouth. Apart from that glorious night when she gave me her virginity, we've had precious little time alone, and I'm fucking starving for my woman.

I finally break the kiss, and we both pant as we come up for air. Charity's eyes are hooded with passion, her lips swollen, cheeks flushed. Her hand is pressed against my chest over the scar where the bullet passed through Luke into me.

I cover her hand with mine. "Look at you. Jesus, you're so beautiful. So perfect. How can you touch me like this?" I hear the naked vulnerability in my voice as I press her fingers against the raised scar tissue.

Charity's loving gaze captures mine, turning me inside out. "How can I *not* touch you, Ryder? You're everything to me. We all carry scars, visible or not, but they don't diminish us. This"—she traces the scar through my shirt—"only makes me love you more. Makes *you* more, not less. I see parts of you that no one else sees, and I want each and every one of them, Ryder, even the parts you think are ugly and unloveable. And if you're not ready to cherish those parts of you, I'll do it for you until you are. And I'll continue to do it for the rest of our lives."

I open my mouth, trying to speak past the emotion clogging my throat and tell her how much I love her. That I would die for her without a second of hesitation.

She tugs my head down and gently presses her lips to mine. "I know," she murmurs against my mouth. "I feel the same."

*Jesus*, this woman.

Her tongue flicks across my bottom lip. "I don't need your words right now, Ryder. I need you to fuck me. Then make love to me."

I lose it. "I'll buy you another dress."

"Huh?" She pulls back to look at me, then yelps as I rend the dress from throat to waist, creating a front V to match the back.

Her breasts spill out, perfect globes of flesh tipped with rosy nipples I want to suck and bite.

“Ryder!” She squeaks, automatically covering those perfect tits with her hands.

“Don’t hide yourself from me,” I growl, tugging her hands down and replacing them with mine. I press my thumbs to her nipples. “These tits? Mine.” I tug the dress so it pools at her feet and cup her pussy. “This tight little cunt?” I lean close so our faces are inches apart. “*Mine.*”

Charity’s breath comes in pants. “God, yes. All yours, Ryder.” And then she slays me again by taking my hand and pressing it to her heart. “Along with this.”

“Ah, fuck, Sparkles,” I rasp, unzipping my fly and pulling out my cock before hoisting her into my arms. “Can’t wait. Promise I’ll go slow next time.”

Her legs wrap around my waist as I pin her to the wall. Lining my cock up with her entrance, I slide inside her with one brutal thrust.

“Oh, God,” Charity chokes, her eyes fluttering closed. “This is so hot. So good.”

“Sweet Jesus, you feel amazing,” I hiss, forcing myself to hold still while she adjusts. “Fuck, I can’t get close enough, deep enough.”

My lips crash to hers as my hands roam her gorgeous body, trailing over every inch of skin I can reach before cupping her breasts. I flick my thumbs back and forth over her nipples, turning them into deliciously hard little buds.

“Shit,” I groan, taking one hardened peak in my mouth as I pull out of her tight heat and slam back in.

Charity whimpers and her head lolls against the wall. “Please, Ryder.”

“Please, what?”

Her eyes open, locking on mine. “Please fuck me hard. I need it. Need you.”

“You’ve got me, Sparkles. Every piece of me. Even those ugly pieces you love so much.”

“Good. I want it all. Everything you have. Give it to me, Ryder,” she demands, clenching her walls around my throbbing cock.

The world narrows to her and me. “Only you, Charity. It’s only you for me. If this sweet little cunt needs anything, you bring it to me, and I’ll take care of you. I’ll sit you right on my cock, and you can bounce all over your man until you fall apart.”

She clenches around me. “Dear God, Ryder.”

I swell even more, and the pressure in my balls grows. Charity clutches my shoulders, her thighs squeezing my hips as I hammer into her.

“Fuck, Sparkles. You saved this little virgin pussy for me, didn’t you?” I rasp in her ear. “Saved it all for me because you knew I would take care of it. And I’ll take care of you too. I’ll do anything for you. Tell me you’re mine. Fuck, I need to hear it.”

“I’m yours, Ryder. Always,” she huffs, meeting me thrust for thrust.

“Mine,” I repeat, ramming into her even harder.

Her fingernails rake my shoulders. “I’m coming. Oh, God, I’m...”

“That’s it. Come for me, Sparkles,” I bite out.

Charity shatters into a thousand pieces, riding my cock wildly. “Ryder!” She screams my name as her release washes over her.

“Fuck!” I growl, following her into heated bliss and spilling inside her. My body spasms with a blinding pleasure unlike anything I’ve ever known, my orgasm so intense, I blackout for a second.

I bury my face in Charity’s throat as we both come down from our climaxes. I stroke my hands through her hair, dropping kisses on her forehead, cheeks, and lips.

“So good,” Charity sighs, looking utterly sated.

“Not done with you yet,” I mutter, ensuring she’s steady on her feet before moving to the jacuzzi bath. “I seem to remember a certain demand to fuck you in here before christening the super king-size bed.”

“Going for a triple tonight, big guy?” she teases with a wicked smile.

Triple? I could make a marathon out of being inside this woman.

I turn on the water and add some of the scented bubbly bath shit supplied by the hotel before stalking back to her. God, she’s gorgeous, blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders and totally naked apart from the sparkly stilettos she wore with her dress. Seeing my love bites and the marks on her body where my stubble abraded her soft skin unleashes something primal in me.

I bend to remove her heels, placing a kiss on the instep of each foot. Standing, I quickly remove the rest of my clothes and tug Charity toward the tub. I check the water, turn off the faucets, and sink into the warm water. Holding out a hand, I help her in, pulling her onto my lap so she’s straddling me.

After our frantic coupling against the wall, I want to take my time with my woman, kiss every inch of her body and love her slow and sweet.

But it seems Charity has other ideas. Her small hands find my cock beneath the water, which twitches back to life under her featherlight ministrations. My head falls back as she teases her fingers over my sensitive flesh, swiping her thumb over the slit at the crown.

I suck in a breath. “You’re determined to give me a heart attack, woman.”

She chuckles and places her hand over my heart. “Oh, no. This heart needs to keep beating for a long time yet. Lots of good times ahead, my love.”

For the first time in a long time, I believe in those good times. Look forward to them. All because of this woman in my arms.

This woman who's breathed new life into me, gave me new hope, and—

“Ah, fuck.”

—this woman who's currently lowering herself onto my needy cock.

I grip her hips, trying to still her. “I wanted to go slow this time,” I grit out.

Charity leans forward to claim a kiss. “This is slow, isn't it?” she asks, moving her hips languidly. “I could do this all night.”

I bite back a curse. “All night, huh?”

She lifts up and sinks down on me again with a moan. “All Night.”

Turns out, my woman is right.



Thank you for reading Claiming Charity. I hope you enjoyed Charity and Ryder's story. Sign up for my newsletter to read a bonus epilogue: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/9om269juv5>

Be sure to check out the other books in the series here: [The Naughty List](#)

Want more in the Claiming Series? You can read the books in two handy collections here:

The Claiming Series Collection 1: <https://geni.us/claimingseries1>



The Claiming Series Collection 2: <https://geni.us/claimingseries2>

Thanks for choosing my books—I hope they allow you to escape for an hour or two.

Much love,

Violet.

# Bonus Content

## Claiming Noelle Sneak Peek

**HE'S SPENDING the holiday alone...until a fallen star crashes into his life.**

### **Noelle**

Like a million other people, I'm headed home to spend time with family for Christmas. But unlike those who make it home for the holidays, I get stuck in a ditch in an unfamiliar small town in Colorado. When a gruff stranger helps me out of my predicament, we both end up stranded in the winter storm...in his cozy, secluded cabin nestled in the trees outside of town.

Callum Stone is a man of few words, and his grumpy demeanor is enough to put most people off, but I see beneath his frosty exterior to the wounded man—a man I'm already falling for.

### **Callum**

I'm still reeling from the sudden loss of my parents a year ago. I don't want to put a damper on everyone else's holiday festivities while I fake my way through the season, so I retreat to my cabin on the outskirts of town to wallow in self-pity. I'm on a tight deadline to finish the book I started before tragedy struck. The last thing I need is to rescue a damsel in distress on my property, even if she does look like a gift-wrapped angel who fell from Heaven.

But as I spend time with Noelle, her gorgeous brown eyes, bubbly personality, and zest for life seep under my defenses, making me realize that there's still something worth celebrating—her.

**When the storm passes and things begin to thaw, will our feelings for each other melt away, too?**

## **Chapter One**

### **Noelle**

“Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!” I sing, increasing the volume by pressing the button on the steering wheel.

I love Christmas, and this is one of my favorite songs. I bob side to side as I sing. It doesn’t matter that I’ve heard this song a gazillion times as I belt it out at the top of my lungs.

My ringtone interrupts the song, and I smile as I glance at the screen on my dash. My cell phone is connected via Bluetooth, so I hit the button to answer the call.

“I’m still a couple of hours away, Mom,” I answer Mom’s question before she can ask it. She’s called me three times since I left home this morning. It’s a long journey, and I wanted to make it to my parents in Denver before it gets dark.

“Is it snowing?” Mom’s voice comes clearly through the speakers.

I almost laugh at her question. Snowing? It’s more like a blizzard. I’ve been in Utah for the last two years, and it doesn’t snow like this.

“Yeah, it’s snowing, but it’s all good. I’m on the interstate, and the roads are pretty clear right now.”

Visibility is my biggest worry. The windshield wipers are at full speed and still struggling to clear the thick flakes.

“Okay, honey. Drive safe. We can’t wait to see you.”

“I’ll be there before you know it, Mom. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Angel,” Mom replies, using the nickname she gave me the day I was born—Christmas Day.

Yep, that’s right. I share my birthday with the biggest holiday date of the year, and Mom says I was the best Christmas present she ever had twenty-two years ago. She and Dad tried

for a baby for years with no success. They were about to give up and accept that it would only be the two of them when Mom found out she was pregnant at thirty-nine, and I became their Christmas miracle.

Some people might resent it, but I love that I was born on Christmas Day. Mom and Dad have never let the day pass without making it a double celebration and thoroughly spoiling me.

The Sat Nav interrupts my thoughts as the male AI voice tells me to take the next exit. I've nicknamed him George because he sounds just like George Clooney.

"What was that?" Mom asks.

"Just the Sat Nav, Mom. I'll call you back when I'm half an hour away. I need to focus on where I'm going."

I hit the button to end the call. I don't want to worry Mom, but I'm unsure why the Sat Nav is telling me to take the next exit. Don't I usually take the one after? I've only driven this route a few times since moving to Utah for work, but everything looks different with a blanket of snow.

That's when I see it. A sea of red taillights up ahead beyond the next exit. Ah, so that's why George is taking me off at an earlier exit. I shrug. There must be an issue up ahead. If I don't get off the interstate here, I could be stuck in traffic for hours. Big no-no.

I indicate to turn off the interstate and take the exit ramp. Vehicles in front of me are making the same decision, and I leave plenty of room between my car and the vehicle in front. Unease trickles down my spine. I'm taking an unfamiliar route, and visibility is worsening by the minute.

"It's okay, Noelle. You've got this," I tell myself. Better to arrive late than not at all. The light at the bottom of the ramp changes, and the traffic starts moving.

"Turn right," George says.

I frown as the vehicles in front of me turn left. Do they know something I don't? Is George having a senior moment and

sending me the wrong way? I check the navigation screen, which has an arrow pointing right.

“Why are we going right, George?”

I know it’s silly to talk to a piece of tech. Listening isn’t one of George’s strengths. He just tells me where to go—literally.

The man in the car behind me honks impatiently and revs his engine, alerting me that I’ve hesitated a little too long. I gently lift my foot off the brake, let the car drift forward, and carefully apply pressure to the gas pedal. Mr. Testosterone can learn patience. The exit ramp is covered in snow, and I have no idea how slick it is.

I glance in my rearview mirror as I reach the end of the ramp and turn right. My heart skips as I see the vehicles behind me turning left. I’m the only one going in this direction. Not a good sign. Maybe they’re all headed somewhere else, and I’m the only one traveling to Denver?

“Trust George, Noelle,” I murmur.

I’m half a mile down the road when George says. “Recalculating.”

“What? Uh, no, George,” I snap, glaring at the navigation screen.

“Turn right in one mile,” George announces smoothly.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, George,” I huff. “Trying to find me a safe spot to turn around, huh?”

I’m the only vehicle on this road stretching in front of me. The verges on either side are piled high with snow. It’s been falling here for hours, maybe days, and it’s getting worse as I drive. Hopefully, once I’ve turned around, I’ll head to an area with less severe weather.

Suddenly, without warning, the road becomes harder to navigate. Okay, maybe there was one of those signs with curvy lines. I didn’t pay much attention. But all the signs in the world won’t make me feel better about this drive. Sharp bends in the road and snow doesn’t bode well.

Then, as quickly as it goes from straight to curvy, the road evens out again—a long stretch of road with no bends in sight. I let out the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

“In five hundred feet, turn right,” George says.

“Finally!”

It's okay. I'll quickly turn around, get back on the interstate, and be home free. Maybe the traffic jam will have cleared by then, and I can hop back on. After this little detour, I'd rather take the interstate than—

A moving object launches onto the road. Some kind of animal. A deer? Oh, God. I think it's a baby.

I react instinctively, yanking the steering wheel sharply and missing the fawn by inches. Panic quickly replaces my initial relief when the car careens wildly into a skid.

*Don't hit the brakes. Don't hit the brakes.*

Sheer terror overrides common sense, and I hit the brakes, sending the car sideways toward a ditch. It seems as if I teeter for an eternity before my little Chevy lands driver's side down in a lump of snow with a bone-jarring *thwump*.

The engine dies. I sit there for a minute, my knuckles white on the steering wheel.

“Okay. It's okay. You're okay,” I tell myself.

I try to start the engine again—I'm unsure why because I can't go anywhere.

The engine cranks but doesn't start.

“Great. Fucking great,” I mutter.

Even if I could get it started, I'm lodged sideways in a ditch, so unless my little Chevy suddenly morphs into Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and flies me out of here, I'm going nowhere—no fine four-fendered friend coming to my rescue.

A half-hysterical laugh escapes me at the thought as the adrenaline kicks in. I take a few deep breaths to calm my pounding heart and shaking hands.

I look out the driver's window, which is pressed against the bottom of the ditch. I'm going to have to climb out the passenger side. This should be fun.

Pulling my keys from the ignition, I grab my purse, which has somehow ended up dangling by the strap from the rearview mirror. Crossing it over my body, I wriggle into the passenger seat and reach overhead to open the door. It's surprisingly hard to open when it's above my head, but I manage and finally scramble—not so elegantly—from the car.

I haul myself from the ditch and stand on the side of the road, taking a moment to check that all my limbs are intact. My left wrist chooses that moment to throb painfully, and I vaguely remember jarring it on the wheel as I hit the ditch. Thankfully, it's my non-dominant hand, and hopefully, it's just a sprain.

It's mid-afternoon, and the frigid wind cuts through my sweater and jeans, causing me to shiver. My thick winter coat is in the truck, along with my suitcase.

Reaching into my purse, I pull out my phone to call my parents, gritting my teeth as the pain in my wrist increases. No signal. I move around, trying to get at least one bar on my phone, to no avail. Shit. I sigh in frustration. I can't even call a tow truck.

I have no idea where I am. Correction—I'm in the middle of Nowheresville. The only place for miles is a cabin nestled among the trees at the end of a long driveway. I'm getting colder by the minute and need to get out of this wind before I catch pneumonia. My wrist now throbs with the thump of my heart. I pull up my sleeve to see it's starting to swell. I don't think it's broken, but there's no way I can clamber back down the ditch for my coat.

I look around again. Apart from the cabin, there's no building as far as the eye can see. Hopefully, someone will be home. I can use their phone and wait in the warm until the tow truck arrives. My car will be pulled from the ditch, and I'll be on my way. Yes, I'm an optimist—don't judge me.

Decision made, I lock the car and trundle up the long drive to the cabin. I check my phone on the way, praying for a signal,



but the bars remain empty. Even if this place doesn't have a phone signal, they'll hopefully have internet. That's if someone is even home. This could be a vacation place. As I approach, there's no sign of a car, but the driveway disappears around the back of the cabin, so maybe it's parked there.

Shivering, I take the porch steps and halt before the front door. I give three harsh raps on the glass and wait. A minute passes with no answer. I knock again. Nothing.

Tentatively, I reach for the door handle. What will I do if it's unlocked? I don't want to add breaking and entering to my list of woes—although I wouldn't technically be “breaking,” just “entering.”

It's a moot point because the door is locked.

Stepping back, I consider my options. Maybe the back door is unlocked? My hands are numb, and I'm pretty sure I have an icicle forming on the end of my nose. If I can get inside for a little while, I can warm up and form a plan. As it is, the cold is numbing my brain.

I descend the porch steps and walk around to the rear of the property. Spotting the back door, I knock again. No reply. I try the handle. Locked.

“Fuck,” I grunt, my breath pluming in the air.

Standing on my tippy-toes, I peek through the window into what looks like a kitchen. I'm about to turn away when a man's face appears on the other side. I shriek and stumble backward, losing my balance and landing in the snow with a thud. The air leaves my lungs in a whoosh, and I lay there gasping like a floundering fish as I stare at the snow-heavy sky.

A door opens, and heavy footsteps scrunch through the snow. I turn my head slowly to see a man approaching. He's enormous, and he looks pissed. His dark hair falls over his brow, and anger flashes in the deepest brown eyes I've ever seen as he looms over me.

He glares at me like I'm the enemy. “Who the fuck are you, and what the fuck are you doing on my property?”

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