

KB. ROW

HIM for
Christmas

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Stalk me!

Also By

Dedication

To all my Christmas loving hoes

Chapter One

Eloise

THE BEST CHRISTMAS GIFT I ever got for Christmas was from my ex. Michael Bublé Christmas concert tickets. Sure, he only bought one ticket and I had to go alone because he didn't want to go—which is a huge red flag. How I ignored him not wanting to see Michael Bublé, I'll never know.

I guess love really is blind.

This Christmas, however, should be even better. Not than Michael, but the only reason my ex got me those tickets was to dampen the blow of him telling me he's in love with my sister. So, yeah, last Christmas sucked, but Christmas in Wintercrest has always been a dream and now I'm getting to live it.

Wintercrest is the cutest little Christmas village carved in the side of the Snowpeak Mountains a few hours north of us here in Deven. Mom and Dad used to take us girls when we were kids for all the Christmas activities they have every year. Three weeks in a cabin just outside the town sounds like my dream Christmas vacation, but the company is anything but a dream. Three weeks in my ex-boyfriend's dad's cabin with him, his dad, my sister, and my

parents? Not ideal, but Wintercrest is so desirable and the rentable cabins run way more than I'll ever be able to afford.

The decision to go wasn't an easy one, but in the end my love for the snowy Christmas town overpowered my dread for the company I would be with. Now that we are actually on the road I'm wondering if my decision making is flawed. Especially when I've had to hear my parents singing—if you can call it that—for the last three hours. I love my parents and put up with their quirks because they are my parents, but them on top of everything else is a headache in the making. Cindy promised I would have my own room so if they get too unbearable I can always lock myself away, I suppose.

“It's just so beautiful up here, isn't it, dear?”

“Better than I remember.”

Mountains covered in trees and snow tower along each side of the road. It really is beautiful. When you're a kid, you don't appreciate scenery. I pull my phone out and snap a few photos. The sky is bright blue despite it being freezing outside, according to the temperature on the dash.

“Why did we stop coming up here?”

Dad shrugs from the driver's seat. “Life, I suppose. You girls got older, we stopped being so cool.” He smiles in the rearview mirror. “And you guys preferred to hang out with your friends.”

“You mean Cindy wanted to hang out with *her* friends.” Unlike Cindy, I didn't have friends. I was friendly with everyone but no one I would consider a real friend, who I even hung out with outside of school.

Cindy was beyond popular. Everyone loved her and she loved everyone. She wasn't a mean girl like a lot of popular kids are expected to be. She was genuinely nice to everyone. It used to irritate me, not that she was nice, but that everything seemed to come so easy to her. The pretty sister, the athletic

one, the sociable one. It was easy for her to make friends wherever we went, and I struggled to hold conversations with people I saw every day.

I've grown since then, and while I wouldn't say I'm a social butterfly, I'm not so awkward I can't carry, or even start, a conversation. Confidence goes a long way. In school, I was always the biggest girl, and while no one made fun of me—which I think is because no one wanted to upset Cindy—it was easy to tell they were nice just to be nice and not because they wanted to be friends. My body has since filled out in a womanlier way, and along with that, came confidence I never had before.

“Oh, look!” Mom cuts through the awkward tension in the air with her cheer. She points out the window at Wintercrest.

“It looks the exact same,” I mutter, mostly to myself, but excitement bubbles in my chest.

Carved into the mountains are about two dozen buildings making up a small village. It's light out, but I can imagine the glowing yellow lights from each cabin scattered across the mountain range when dusk hits.

Instead of venturing into Wintercrest, Dad takes an exit that has us traveling toward the top of Snowpeak. According to the GPS, we still have thirty minutes before we arrive. Geesh, Mr. Woods lives in the middle of nowhere. I think Kevin once mentioned it being more toward the peak of the mountain, like the *Grinch*.

The view has to be killer, and I can't wait to see it with my own eyes.

So far, this trip has been good, but the part I have been anxious about for weeks has yet to happen, and based on a phone call between my mom and sister when she thought I was napping, Cindy and Kevin aren't getting in until tomorrow. So I have at least one night to breathe before the inevitable.

My ears pop the higher up we go, and just when I think we can't go any

higher, Dad pulls into a driveway. Guess Kevin wasn't kidding when he said he lived on the peak, as the road ends just after his driveway in a roundabout with a lookout. I would be terrified driving this but it's so cool being a passenger. Dad lets out a sigh of relief when he's off the road with a clear drop-off on one side.

The driveway is surrounded by trees, and if we didn't have GPS, we probably would have drove past to the lookout because it's not entirely noticeable. Almost like he doesn't want visitors.

"Do you guys know anything about Kevin's dad?"

"Not really." Mom says it like it's no big deal we are staying in a stranger's house.

"Must not be a people person if this is where he lives," Dad comments with a hefty laugh.

My stomach drops thinking about him. The fact I will be staying in his house for the next few weeks and no one knows anything about Mr. Woods is unsettling. Not like I'm worried he's a serial killer or anything, but as far as I know, he doesn't make it off the peak often. I mean, I never met the man and dated his son for two years. He can't exactly be a people person, and I've been so worried about being around Cindy and Kevin that I didn't consider the possibly feral mountain man who will also be there.



Snow crunches under my feet, and I smile. We get snow back home, but nothing like this. There are hills taller than me of snow that's been plowed away for people to park.

I gaze over the landscape in front of me. A large two-story log cabin framed by snowy trees sits as the main focus, making it look like something straight out of a magazine. It's beautiful. I can't believe Kevin had the choice of living here and chose to live in the apartment with his mom. I know nothing about his dad, but if he picked the small apartment in the city instead of here, he must not be that great. Nausea swirls low in my stomach.

Mom climbs out and stops next to me, taking in the sight in front of us. She wraps an arm around my shoulders. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I nod against her shoulder. "Like my dream house."

"Kevin mentioned it was nice, but this is better than nice."

I'd say.

Mom lets go of me to help Dad with the luggage. The faint trickling of water running filters through the air. I wander toward the noise to see what is making it.

Pushing through a grove of trees, I step into a clearing behind the cabin to find a stream.

The stream is only the beginning of the most beautiful view I've ever seen. Being at the top of the mountain is worth that terrifying drive when this is in your backyard. I feel like I can see the world from up here. Glancing over my shoulder, I notice he's building an addition wrapped in contractors paper, then a balcony on the second floor over it. If I can get onto that balcony, I'd love to see the view from up there. The trees scattered around me add to the rustic feel I love about cabins. The base of the neighboring mountain range is covered in thick pines, just like this one, and as you go up, they disperse until the top is only rock and snow.

I dig my phone out from my sweatshirt pocket and hold it up to take a few photos. I don't know if I'll ever get to experience anything like this again, so

I need to embrace it while I can.

Loud barking echoes around me, and I jump. The biggest black dog I've ever seen stands beside the house staring in my direction, barking its head off. My heart thunders in my chest, but before I panic, a deep voice booms over the barking.

“Moose, sit!”

The dog's butt drops to the ground, but he doesn't remove his eyes from me.

The door on the side of the boarded-up part flies open, and my mouth gapes at the man stepping out. If I thought the dog was big, he is nothing compared to this . . . *giant*. I don't know how tall he is, but he has to duck through the door. His mouth moves, but I can't hear what he's saying to the dog, then his head swings in my direction. I'm frozen in place, and not from the cold, but from the weight of his heavy stare. He finishes slipping on his flannel as he heads my way. It's mostly buttoned by the time he stops in front of me, but his chest hair is visible, and I happen to like the flecks of gray within the dark. I drag my eyes from his chest up to his sharp face and swallow the lump in my throat.

A thick beard covers what I'm guessing would be a sharp jaw, full lips rest under a thick mustache. His nose is straight. Then his light eyes surrounded by thick eyelashes narrow on me. This man oozes *masculinity* and it wasn't obvious who he was I would never assume he is Kevin's dad. They look nothing alike.

“Who are you?” His voice is clipped, annoyed even.

“Uh, I'm Eloise. Kev—er, Cindy's sister.”

Chapter Two

Morgan

THE LAST TIME I saw Eloise, she didn't look how she does today and I'm struggling to keep my mind innocent. Full breasts hardly hidden under the cream sweater clinging to her full body like a second skin. Her jeans are tight in all the right places, showing off her wide hips and round ass. Her upturned nose and high cheekbones resemble a mythical creature, like how I imagine an elf would look. She's fucking beautiful. People's looks rarely change a lot in two years, but hers have. When I saw her at my son's graduation, she was a sliver of who she is now—following Kevin around like a lost puppy, and zero confidence in her moves. Her clothes were ill-fitting, hiding her mouth-watering figure. We never officially met since I prefer not to be in crowds and ducked out after saying goodbye to Kevin while she was in the restroom. I don't know why I avoided meeting her, but it just worked out that way. Now I'm wondering if my heart was trying to tell me something back then.

It doesn't matter that she is perfect, or that there is nothing more I would love to do than sink my head between her thighs until she's screaming my name. She's my son's ex, and she's not here to be ravished by the wild

mountain man. I should have called an old fling to release some frustrations before the guests arrived, but I didn't figure there would be a temptation as great as the short blonde staring at me with bright-blue eyes.

Kevin didn't tell me she would be coming on the trip. Honestly, when he mentioned them breaking up, I was a little relieved I would never see her again and wouldn't be tempted to cross that line with my son's girlfriend.

When he started dating Cindy, he raved about how in love they were. I thought he had moved on quick from a two-year relationship with it only being weeks since he told me about the breakup, but who am I to judge? I split from my wife fourteen years ago and never moved on—not because I'm still in love with my ex-wife, but because being more than fuck buddies hasn't been appealing to me since.

Kevin said he and Cindy have an awkward past; I assumed it was something minimal not that she was his ex's sister. I don't know what my son was thinking, but I want the full story once he gets here. Learning his new girl is his ex's sister shouldn't have come from the *ex*. Being bamboozled isn't enjoyable, and I'm not interested in any drama this situation might bring over the next few weeks.

I focus on Eloise again, pulling myself from my head.

Her cheeks and nose are now a bright red, and I swear she looks more beautiful than she did five minutes ago.

“Morgan.”

I shove my hand out between us, she slips her dainty hand in mine, and my heart fucking skips a beat. She might as well have grabbed my dick with the way my body is reacting to such an innocent touch.

Kevin won't be here until tomorrow, maybe I can still head to town and fuck the first girl I come across who isn't my son's ex. Wintercrest might be

small, but few of the single women in town would say no to an Anderson brother. My last name might be Woods, but I hold the same level of prestige as the rest of my brothers. Normally, I wouldn't take advantage of my unofficial last name but desperate times and all that.

Such as right now when I can't seem to find it in me to let go of Eloise's hand.

"Are you . . . are you Kevin's dad?"

I jerk my hand from hers as if I've been bitten. Mentioning my son is a sure-fire way to bring me back to reality. Eloise is not a townie I can just lay down as I please. Wanting to fuck my son's ex? What does that say about me?

"I am."

"He looks nothing like you." She tilts her head, biting her lip as she eyes me up and down.

"No." I shake my head. "He looks like his maternal grandfather."

"Oh, right. Missy showed me a few baby photos when we were together." She cringes. Does that mean she's not over it? Dammit, I'm going to ream my son. If she's not over it, then why would she agree to spend three weeks with him? Won't seeing her ex and her sister together be painful? I definitely wouldn't want to see any of my brothers shacking up with my girl if I had one.

The awkwardness settles over us like a thick blanket. Thankfully, Moose trots over now that he knows she's not a threat. Dogs are funny; like Eloise could ever be a threat to me. I'm at least a foot taller and probably eighty pounds heavier than her. Just thinking about the size difference has image after image flashing through my head on how I could toss her around. I could so easily pin her against the side of the cabin and fuc—

“Oh, snowdrop-buttons. Look how beautiful the property is, Clark!” A woman with shoulder-length gray hair wanders through the small path along the side of the house. Once again, I have to call Moose off, but she doesn’t even seem to notice the hundred-and-fifteen-pound dog that was ready to rip her head off. Too busy looking around, which I understand. Especially coming from Deven, which looks nothing like this.

“It is a beaut.” A guy, who I assume must be Clark, nods. Glancing between the middle-aged couple, Eloise definitely looks more like her dad than her mom, and the few photos I’ve seen of Cindy, she seems to favor her mom.

“My parents,” Eloise murmurs, embarrassment thick in her voice.

I pat Moose on the head, muttering for him to be nice before heading toward her parents. I’m not exactly a host, nor am I used to having people on my property, let alone staying in my house for weeks, but Kevin swore it was very important for everyone to be here. I don’t fucking know why, and right about now I’m regretting it. My anxiety is spiking with each step. I don’t like crowds or new people. I’m a man of habit, and I like things my way, other people ruin it.

“My, oh my.” The woman’s eyes blow wide as she takes in the size of me. Not an uncommon reaction with new people. Being six seven isn’t exactly common. “You’re a giant. Clark, look how tall he is.”

Clark steps next to his wife and wraps an arm around her shoulders. He scowls. Or what is meant to be a scowl, I think. “Uh-huh. I have eyes, Martha.”

“Clark and Martha.” He shoves a hand forward, and I take it in mine. “You met our youngest daughter, Eloise.”

I glance over my shoulder to Eloise. She’s crouching and petting Moose’s

stomach. Some guard dog. It's a cute sight, though.

"Even your dog is big." Martha laughs.

"Dog? More like a bear," Clark comments with a grin to match his wife's. Being around these two for thirty seconds, I can already tell they are goofy as hell and unfortunately will probably get along with my mother.

"His name is Moose," Eloise tells them. "He's a Newfoundland, right?"

"He is." I'm surprised she knew that. Most assume he's an all-black Saint Bernard because Newfies aren't as common.

"I love dogs," she says as she pushes to her feet. "We could never have one because my sister is allergic."

I flick a look at her parents. I'm assuming Kevin would have mentioned I have a dog. I'm not making him stay outside for three weeks.

"Kevvy told her about Moose," Martha says. "She went to the doctor to get medication, don't worry."

I wasn't. Her being allergic isn't my problem, it's hers.



I take the time to show everyone their rooms. Martha and Clark are on the main floor, the room I reserve for my mom when she stays with me for a week during winter, which she has done since Dad died. She gets lonely in that big house all by herself. Once full with five boys, her, and our dad, is now just her. My brothers take turns seeing her daily, but it's not the same as living with someone. I can't get down there once a day, but I do spend a weekend with her once a month when I head to town to shop.

The room I had planned for Cindy's sister is the spare room connected to Kevin's through a bathroom, but as we head there, I change my mind and turn for my office instead. There's a couch in there that pulls into a bed for my brothers to crash on, and it's a good bed. I've passed out on it a time or two even though it's right next door to my room. Honestly, my office is probably more cared for than the spare since it actually gets used on the regular, and it has doors that lead out to the master balcony. I had planned this room to be a nursery if Missy and I ever had more kids since it shares a wall with the master. Though, after she left and I started the addition, I didn't change the blueprints. I guess a part of me back then still dreamed of having more kids.

Now, however, I use it as an office.

I push open the large wooden door, allowing Eloise to go first. She's hesitant and looks up, darting her eyes around, which I've seen her do numerous times since we stepped into the cabin. I don't know what she's looking for, but she seems anxious for some reason.

"It's my office, but I don't use it often, so I won't be in here bothering you."

Eloise spins slowly in the middle of the room, taking in everything before stopping when her eyes land on me. "Your home is beautiful. Exactly how I imagined a cabin in Wintercrest to be."

"Thank you. I'll let you get settled. There are extra blankets in the closet, and the bathroom is two doors to the right." I point in the direction of my room and the bathroom she will be using. I could let her share a bathroom with Kevin and her sister since it is a few steps closer, but I want her in my space. Why? I'm not sure. I hate having people in my space. Everyone but my son's ex, apparently.

“Okay.” She smiles, but it doesn’t meet her eyes.

“I need to go do some outside work. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen, with the TV. Anything. Relay the message to your parents, please.”

“Okay. Thank you, Mr. Woods.”

It’s my turn to cringe. When I decided to keep my last name after the adoption, I thought I was doing the respectful thing for my biological family. Until I found out years later that my grandpa actually went to prison for DV charges. I should have changed my name after that, but I was twenty and it seemed irrelevant. Having the same last name as that monster doesn’t mean I’m also a monster. Still, I don’t like being called Mr. Anything.

“Please, call me Morgan.”

“Morgan.” She smiles, and it’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. “I like that name. It’s sweet.”

There’s a pull between us, and I wish I could bend her over my knee and spank her for using *me* and *sweet* in the same sentence. Even if she was just talking about my name.

I step closer to her, far too close to be appropriate. She cranes her head back, and her mouth gapes, just begging for me to shove my tongue, cock, fucking *anything* between her lips. Her throat bobs with a swallow, and her Christmas-cookie breath fans my face. Like an addict, I take a deep breath, hoping it stays in my nose forever.

“My name is the only sweet thing about me, *little elf*.”

Chapter Three

Eloise

CINDY IS LUCKY. SHE can take medication for her problems. I wish my fear of bugs could be cured with medication. I'm irrationally afraid of bugs—all of them, I don't discriminate. If it flies, crawls, jumps, whatever, I hate it, and it will send me in to a total freak out. Something I don't want to happen in front of Morgan. My parents are fully aware of my irrational fear, Dad even said he would check the bedroom out before he and Mom crashed after dinner, but I guess he forgot.

I don't know if it's because it's a cabin and the wood everywhere just seems like it would be a bug haven, or the fact Morgan is usually alone, so how often does he really use these rooms and keep the bugs at bay? My guess is not often enough, and it's really freaking me out.

Morgan's heavy footsteps thump against the wooden steps; he must have just finished the dishes. I offered to help him clean up after dinner, but he insisted he didn't need help. My parents went to bed almost right after, and I figured I would try and do the same, or at least work on some orders, but as

soon as I stepped into the office, I knew I wouldn't be able to settle. It's not that it's not clean but an easy enough place for critters to go unnoticed.

Once his bedroom door shuts, I pad down the hall to the bathroom, hoping if I brush my teeth and run through my bedtime routine, it'll calm me down enough to sleep.

I tug open the bathroom door and jump when I find Morgan on the other side—in a towel. He's not wet, so I don't think he has showered yet. Either way, why am I still standing here staring at him?!

“Sorry! Sorry!” I slam the door shut, pausing outside before I sprint back to my room.

Holy sugar cookies.

Morgan is a beautiful man clothed, but he's godly without. I've not seen many naked men. Only Kevin and that one guy I rebounded with a week after we broke up, but I don't remember his name, much less his body. I do know I've never seen a body like Morgan's before. So big and *manly*.

Minutes pass, but I don't know how many before I poke my head out of the door. I need to pee, and he didn't show me any other bathrooms. It's fine, he's probably in his room—hopefully.

I hurry back down the hallway, and no light creeps from under the bathroom door this time, so I knock and open it slowly. An empty bathroom greets me, and I blow out a breath and lock the door behind me. I'm not interested in being walked in on.

In need of a washcloth for my face, I walk over to the door opposite the one I came in and instead of a closet, I find another bedroom. It's bigger than the one I'm in with a giant bed in the middle and a wooden table on each side. There's a dresser across the room with a TV sitting on top, and a fireplace matching the one in the living room—other than size—sits in the corner. I

frown at not a hint of Christmas decorations. The rest of the house is barren of any, so I'm not shocked but disappointment sits heavy in my stomach with this being the perfect house for decorations. A large tree in the living room to match the tall ceiling. Garland down the banister and across the beams. It would be beautiful, yet there's none.

A lamp on the end table lights the room.

Curiosity gets the best of me, so I step over the threshold. I should close the door, finish what I was doing, and head for my room, yet I take another step. His room is toasty, due to the fire blazing, and a layer of sweat beads on the back of my neck even though I'm wearing pajama shorts.

My eye snags on the double doors that match the ones in my room, more so the man standing outside them. He's looking over the balcony, completely unaware I'm here. My heart thunders in my chest.

He's naked. It's dark outside, but the low light from the moon shines against his bare body, showing off all his rolling muscles.

I should turn around and pretend I didn't see anything.

But then he moves.

I can't see what he's doing, but his arm moves in a familiar way in front of his body and . . . *Holy jingle bells*. He's touching himself!

I can't see anything besides his arm flexing, but it's obvious what is happening. On the porch? In the cold? It's like in the teens outside, and there he stands, buck ass naked. Not like anyone can see him, but I could have. If I had been by my balcony doors, the angle is enough that I'm sure I would be able to see his dick. Does he know that? Did he *want* me to see?

No, that's crazy, Eloise. Of course he doesn't want you to see. I shouldn't be seeing him now or be in his room at all.

I back away before I'm noticed, but I didn't think to look where I was

going. The corner of the bed catches the back of my leg, and I fall with a thud. I scurry to get up but am stopped when Moose lunges at me and attacks my face with kisses.

I scoot away but he follows me. “Okay, okay, I love your kisses, but I gotta go, Moose!” My voice is a panicked whisper, but he doesn’t get the hint and continues his assault.

Until someone else says his name.

“Moose, sit.”

His butt drops to the ground, and he turns his head in the direction of his owner.

Embarrassment is heavy in my chest and grows more when I lift my gaze to meet Morgan’s but snag at his groin. He’s still naked, and his dick hangs like an elephant’s trunk between his legs. I don’t know why I’m surprised when the rest of him is giant but . . . *holy night*, it’s *huge*.

He clears his throat, and my eyes snap to his. The room is dim, so I hope he can’t see the heat burning up my neck to my face. I can’t get a read on his face, but he’s making no attempt to cover up.

Figuring I should be the one to say something first since I’m in his room and he probably knows I was watching him, I gulp, then open my mouth. He holds up a hand, halting anything I was about to say.

“Run, little elf. Before the big bad mountain man gets you.”

Chapter Four

Morgan

ELOISE HASN'T LOOKED AT me once today despite me never taking my eyes off her when we are in the same room. Maybe I spooked her last night, but she was the one watching me jack off. I knew she was there; she wasn't quiet and left the bathroom light on. Knowing she was watching me, dropped my time tremendously. Too bad it went to waste and not in or on her.

It's not right, these thoughts about my son's ex, but Kevin won't be here for another few hours, and I told myself as long as he's not around, she isn't his ex. She can just be a girl who's staying in my house. The age gap still isn't right, but there's nothing I can do about that.

I bring the axe down on another piece of wood, then grab my shirt from my back pocket and wipe the sweat from my forehead. It's below freezing, but chopping wood never ceases to make me sweat.

You'd think living where I do I would be a winter guy, but summer is my favorite. Growing up on the streets—freezing more nights than not—that kind of cold never really leaves you, and I don't enjoy being cold now. That's

why my house has a fire burning at all times. The seclusion of the mountain and living near my family keeps me from moving anywhere warmer.

I finish chopping what I'll need for today, then as I'm wiping my forehead again, my eye catches on something. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't scanned the office for a glimpse of Eloise. It's not the office I find her in but instead in the living room, sleeping in a chair against the window. Her bright-blond hair is a mess on top of her head. She looks radiant, even from here. I had thought she looked tired when I passed her in the kitchen this morning. I should ask if the bed is comfortable enough. My brothers have never complained about it, but they can sleep everywhere.

It's snowed another six or so inches since they arrived yesterday and the new fallen snow crunches under my feet. I lean the splitting maul against the wall and slip out of my boots before venturing through the house. Martha and Clark are at the dining table playing cards. She lifts her finger to her mouth and points to the living room.

"El is sleeping."

Yeah, lady, I know. "Why?"

She shrugs and sets her cards on the table. "Said she didn't sleep. If I had to guess, I would assume it was because of her fear of bugs."

Her what? Clark must see the question on my face.

"Ever since Eloise was small she's been terrified of bugs, and not in a normal way."

"Yeah, she would have panic attacks, we thought she was just being dramatic." Martha laughs.

Clark nods in agreement, like they aren't talking about their daughter having panic attacks. "Total freakouts. Anyhoozle, she tends to not settle into new places, and I'm guessing because this is a cabin she's worried there

might be an insect of some kind hiding where she can't see. I should have looked the room over like I always do when we go somewhere new, but it slipped my mind."

Slipped his mind. How does his child's comfort just slip his mind? I shrug them off and storm into the living room.

Eloise is beautiful, and it nearly knocks me on my ass every time I see her. She looks so peaceful snuggled under a blanket I don't recognize. Moose must think so too because he's passed out at her feet. When he was a pup, he would follow me all around the property but now that he's older, he'd much rather sleep next to the fire. I'm glad to see her using that chair, it's my favorite too—an oversized chaise to fit my body. It's not unusual for me to fall asleep there, but I don't look that cute when I do.

I stride across the room, careful not to wake her. Moose's eyes open, exhaustion heavy on his face from a deep nap. I chuckle to myself and pat his head. My hand brushes Eloise's knee, and I pause. Moose drops his head back to the chair, and I find myself fighting the urge to drag my hand up her leg. It's okay since there's a thick blanket between us, right?

Fuck, even through the blanket my mind is going wild with the thought of touching her bare leg. Last night she was in a pair of tiny shorts and a cropped shirt that failed to hide her stiff nipples. Nipples I would kill to see bare.

I'm a man of structure. I have the same daily routine I never stray from. My family knows not to come over until after 9:00 a.m. because that's when I finish my outside morning duties. My mom knows I won't answer my phone before 7:00 p.m. I have my ways and don't care to venture outside of them, ever. Even my hookups know the deal, and it's the same every time: I make her come in some way, then it's doggy. I don't care to look at their faces, I

just need to get off, and sometimes my hand isn't enough, but most of the time it is.

Eloise, however, makes me want to abandon every ounce of structure I've built over the last forty-two years of my life. She makes me want to take her to bed and fuck her until she can't walk, wake up the next day, cook her breakfast, and bring it to her in bed, then stay there feeding her until I'm sure she's full. It makes no sense for a woman I officially met yesterday to give me such strong feelings, but she does.

Had she told me about her fear, I would have done whatever I needed to do to make her feel comfortable. Hell, I would have invited her to sleep with me so I could be sure no critters attempted to come for my girl while she slumbers. As far as I know, I don't have any bug problems. I see the occasional spider, but I also am not paying attention or hunting for them. If I see one, I'll deal with it, but I'm not going out of my way to find any—until today. As long as Eloise is in my house, she will be comfortable.

First, she needs proper sleep. I pull my hand from her leg and turn for the steps.

After thoroughly checking her room—every corner and under all the furniture—I'm sure it's safe. Then I tread downstairs, happy to see her still asleep. I'm tempted to just pick her up and carry her, but I have to pass the dining room, and her parents would see us. A large part of me doesn't care, but there is the smaller, more logical part which knows it's not smart, and that side wins.

I jiggle her leg, not to startle her.

Her eyes flutter open until the bright blue is staring up at me, sleep heavy in her gaze. “Oh, sorry—”

“Come with me.” I step back, giving her room to get up, but she makes no

move. “Please.”

“Uh, why?” Her chest caves and expands with a deep breath.

“I checked your room for insects.” She shudders at my mention of bugs. She really does have a fear. I can’t imagine being afraid of something so common. They are everywhere at all times. It must be exhausting. “It’s clear. I want you to sleep in your bed.”

Her eyes fall, a deep pink spreading across her face, and she chews on her plump bottom lip. “How did you find out?”

“Your parents.”

“Of course,” she grumbles.

“Let’s go. I will double-check it, but you need proper sleep.”

I help her to her feet, then reluctantly let go of her hand even though it’s the softest thing to ever exist.

Once in the room, I make a show of checking everywhere, just as I had before I woke her.

“You really don’t have to do this Mr. Woods. I can get my dad—”

I stretch to my full height and my spine steals. Stopping in front of her, I tilt her chin for our eyes to meet. “One, the only man I want entering this room is me.”

It’s a crazy declaration to make, but I don’t care. The thought of another man taking care of my girl—being in the space she sleeps—even her father, twists my insides painfully tight.

She should argue, throw me out and call for her parents, tell them I’m a crazy man, but she doesn’t. She nods against my fingers still on her chin.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

I double-check the bed, and when she’s satisfied, she climbs in and

snuggles into the middle. The temptation to climb in after her is almost higher than I can handle.

“Moose,” I say, attempting to get him off the bed. He’s never once slept on the bed with me. Not because I don’t allow it, but when I try and call him up, he doesn’t come. Bastard. I’m the one who feeds him.

“Can he stay?” Eloise’s voice is so fucking sweet that even if I wanted to say no, I couldn’t.

“He can.”

Knowing there is nothing left for me to do, I turn, only to be stopped once again by her soft voice.

“I’m sorry about last night.”

I’m not. The only thing I’m sorry for is letting her run out of the room and not finishing how I wanted to.

“I will wake you for dinner.” I pause in the door. “Oh, and, two, I told you to call me Morgan. That’s the second time I’ve told you. The third time, I’ll be forced to turn your ass pink, little elf.”

Chapter Five

Eloise

I KNOW THE MOMENT my sister enters the cabin because my mom squeals with excitement. I haven't been able to fall back asleep since Morgan walked out of here. Everything he said has been swirling through my mind, so I've spent the last few hours working on the orders I didn't get to last night and avoiding Morgan. These orders didn't need to be done until after the new year, so if I can get them sent out while here in Wintercrest, people are going to have some surprise Christmas presents.

Truthfully, I don't know what to think of Morgan and the things he says to me. What I do know is they cause a fluttering between my legs I've never felt before.

Knowing it won't be long before someone comes to get me, I climb from the bed, stretch, and pray these weeks won't be as bad as I thought.

I change from my lounge clothes to a pair of black leggings and a nice sweater. Attempting to tame my hair, I brush it out but give up and toss it back into a bun, then pull out a few strands to frame my face. I look into the mirror and can't help the pit growing in my stomach. The pit I've had since

second grade after Ian Jergins asked my sister if the reason she was skinny and I was fat was because I ate all of her food. Of course I had noticed the difference between us, but I never really thought about it. That day after school when Cindy came to walk home with me, changed everything. Cindy wasn't just my big sister anymore, but she was someone I strived to be like. I wanted to look like my sister more than I wanted to breathe, and each year that passed and I didn't, it ruined something inside me I've never been able to get back. It was like we were in competition, but it was always one-sided. Cindy didn't notice my bitterness because I was never bitter with her, just that I couldn't be like her.

That's probably why when Kevin and her admitted their feelings, I cut them off. It wasn't because I was in love with Kevin, it was because she had won. If I thought about it, I could have seen our relationship ending soon anyway because he had just graduated and we were just at different times in our lives. Kevin was the only thing I had over my sister, a semi-steady relationship. She had dated guys, a lot of them, but not by choice. She's always been a hopeless romantic but has awful taste in men. When Kevin left me, it was like I was back in second grade when I found out I was fat, sixth grade skipping meals to try and lose a few pounds, and ninth grade being the only girl in my class to not get asked to homecoming.

The breakup set me back years, and cutting them off was better for my mental health and theirs. If I would have just sucked it up and pretended everything was okay, I would have ended up snapping, and I don't like to think about what I might have done or said.

I apply some simple makeup and turn from the mirror so I don't cry off my mascara. I'll never be Cindy, and that's fine. I truthfully am past that part of life, but it doesn't mean those engraved feelings just go away.

“You won’t believe it, Mom! I got a strike on the first try!”

“Oh. I’m so proud, pumpkin.”

“A chip off the ole block.” Dad chuckles, and I can imagine the goofy grin from here. I’ve been standing on the steps for a few minutes, trying to get the courage to go in there, but it hasn’t come.

“I like to say my girl is the reason I got that promotion. My boss was so impressed.” Hearing Kevin’s voice is like nails on a chalkboard. Especially hearing him talk about “my girl.”

I hit the main floor and shoot a look at Moose cuddled up in front of the fire. *I wish I were a dog right about now.*

Forcing a smile, I step through the doorway to the dining room.



Morgan

It’s good to have my son home, but it’s different this time. Knowing he broke up with Eloise for her sister makes me see him in a different light. It shouldn’t because he’s my son, and it’s obvious he loves Cindy, but I can’t help but think about how betrayed I would feel if it were my brother.

I’m a strong believer in you can’t change the past, but as I look across the table at Eloise’s painful smile, I wish I could. Not to the point of her and Kevin getting back together, but maybe back to before they met to save her the heartache. Save them both the heartache because I know it affects Kevin too, knowing he hurt someone he once cared about. I catch the way he keeps

glancing at her and the slight frown full of guilt that follows. I also catch the way Cindy drags his attention back to her when he does. She's jealous, that much is obvious, but I'm not sure why. It's her thigh he is holding, he chose to be with her, so I don't understand, but I've never understood women before, I'm certainly not going to start now.

"We're thinking of hitting up the Christmas market next weekend," Kevin says. "Is it still as boring as I remember?"

Cindy elbows him playfully. "Would you quit it, Scrooge. He must get that from you?"

I cock an eyebrow, and she giggles a high-pitched sound.

"I mean, there's no decorations and it's December. Dad is dragging our tree from the basement November first, right Dad?"

Clark nods. "Sure am. Right at midnight too."

"You set your Christmas tree up at midnight on November first?" I've never heard anything so crazy.

The four of them nod, though.

"I tried to fight it the first few years of marriage and managed to get Martha to hold off until after Thanksgiving, but then Cindy was born, and it was impossible to say no to two begging girls. Happy wife, happy life, you know?"

No, quite honestly, I don't, and I can't imagine setting my Christmas tree up a month and a half before Christmas. Actually, I don't even do a tree at all. Well, I haven't since Kevin stopped coming here for the holidays. I usually spend my Christmas Day in town with my family, so there's no point in having a bunch of decorations I will spend more time taking down than I did enjoying.

"Nah, Dad is a 'my way or the highway' kind of guy. Not sure anyone

could convince him to change his ways.” Kevin slaps my shoulder with a hesitant smile across his face. I think he meant that to be a joke, but it’s true.

“Well, that’ll all change once you find the one person in life whose happiness is more important than your own.” Clark assures me as if I’m some eighteen-year-old kid who needs relationship advice and not the same fucking age as him. Or close to anyhow.

“Isn’t that right, Kevin?” Martha asks, and my eyes flick to Eloise.

She winces, but it’s probably not noticeable to someone who hasn’t watched her stare at her plate all night. Anger bubbles inside me. It’s fucking ridiculous no one seems bothered that Eloise is upset. First with her dad falling asleep knowing his daughter wasn’t going to be able to sleep, now they’re all playing happy family but excluding a member. I may have grown up an orphan, but I know how families are meant to work, and you’re not meant to prioritize one child’s comfort at the expense of another. Maybe they aren’t doing it on purpose. Maybe Eloise is a good liar, or they just subconsciously choose to not see the pain deep in her crystal eyes, but it makes me want to break something.

By the end of dinner, I’m clenching my jaw so tightly I’m sure my dentist is going to complain at my next appointment. Not one time did anyone ask Eloise anything, and when she attempted to engage in the conversation, she was blatantly ignored. It wasn’t malicious, but it didn’t stop her from shutting down more and more each time it happened.

When it comes time to clean up, I make it a point to call Kevin to help me and turn everyone else down. The four of them head for the living room, and I grab the plates and order Kevin to grab the condiments that were pulled out.

“How’s work going?” Kevin has always hated silence, but I’ve never minded it. He’s like his mom in that sense.

“Fine.”

“Well, what about the tree farm?”

“Good. Your uncles have expanded the farm another two acres since you’ve been here.”

He spins, eyebrows inching up his forehead. “Oh, yeah? Are we going to go pick out a tree this year?”

I cock an eyebrow, and he rolls his eyes, even though he knows I hate when he does that.

“Come on, Dad. It’s Christmas and you don’t even have a tree. What are we meant to put presents under?”

I hadn’t thought about that because I don’t do presents either. I don’t want anyone else getting me anything, and I don’t buy for other people. My brothers love to say it’s because I’m cheap, but I’m not. I just don’t like spending money. When you grow up not having it, the fear of reaching that point again is always a worry, even when you have more money than you’ll ever need.

“I suppose we can pick out a tree.”

The only time I see myself in Kevin is when he smiles. It’s not something I do a lot, but we look similar when I do. “Can I use a chainsaw to cut it down instead of the hand saw like when I was a kid?”

“Have you ever used a chainsaw?”

“No.”

“Then, no. But I bet if you ask Reed, he would do it for you.”

Kevin chuckles and shakes his head. “You never change, Dad. I’ve missed you.”

“Me too, son.” I’m not a guy for emotions, especially showing them, but I’m not above telling my son I’ve missed him. “You and Cindy seem pretty

serious.”

His eyes brighten at the mention of her, and it solidifies what I thought. He’s definitely smitten.

“Yeah, we are.” He scratches at the back of his neck. A move I’ve seen him do a handful of times when he is hiding something from me, so I tell him to spill it. “Well, there’s a reason I wanted to come to the peak for Christmas this year and asked to invite all of Cind’s family.

“Cindy used to come here when she was a kid and loves it, and I’ve been thinking about proposing . . . since we first started dating. Our one-year anniversary is Christmas Eve Eve, so I figured there would be no better place or time to propose.”

Propose? After a year? Is my son insane? “Are you sure you’re ready for all that?”

As if I just cracked a joke, he laughs, but I’ve never been more serious.

“Yeah, Dad, I’m sure. I’m serious when I say Cindy is it for me. I can’t imagine spending my life with anyone else, and I want that future to start as soon as possible. We have kind of been walking on eggshells since, you know, how we started, but I’m ready to take that next step. Her lease is up in February, and we want to move in together.”

“You can live together without being engaged.”

“I know, Dad.” His eyes roll once again. “But I want my ring on her finger, and she’s been hinting at it too.”

I pull him in for a hug, something I don’t do as often as I should, that’s for sure. Hugging Kevin now is the same as hugging him when he was four. He’s not much smaller than me, a few inches and a good amount of weight, but he will always be my son.

When his mom came to me and told me she was pregnant, I was less than

pleased. We were seventeen, not even graduated from high school yet, but that's not why I was upset. Honestly, I've always wanted a family to come home to. I thought that would be my start, just a little early, but I was worried about my parents' reactions. They weren't pleased, but they did everything they could to help us. Even let us live with them until Kevin was born and I was awarded my inheritance from my biological mother. She died years before that, but in her will, she left me a very large sum of money that would be available whenever my first child was born or I turned twenty-five. I never let Missy, Kevin's mom, know about the money, just said my parents were going to help us out. Looking back, I'm glad I didn't because I'm sure she would have stuck with me for the wrong reasons.

"I'm happy for you, Kev. I just want to make sure you've thought it through." I push him to arm's length to look into his eyes.

"I have, Dad. Like so many times. I've even almost proposed a few times, but I always wanted to wait for our anniversary, so here we are. I know it seems sudden, but I love her, Dad. I really do."

Hearing my son talk about a woman the way he is, has tears pricking my eyes. "I'm happy for you, Kev."

"Thanks, Dad. I was worried you were going to try and talk me out of it." He nudges me before turning back to the dishes.

A year ago, I might have. Hell, a week ago I might have, but ever since meeting Eloise, getting engaged after a year of dating doesn't sound so crazy.

Speaking of Eloise. "Is Eloise aware of the plans?"

He cringes. "Uh, yeah. I asked Martha to warn her. That's not something you really want to surprise someone with, is it?"

Well, at least he thought about Eloise's feelings too. I'm impressed he seems to have thought about everything. It really shows how much he has

grown up. Also makes me realize just how old I am.

I'm impressed Eloise agreed to come on the trip knowing what is going to happen. To expose herself to something that will probably hurt shows just how much she loves her family. She's a bigger person than I am. If it were me, I'd probably be getting drunk at the local bar, and I don't get drunk often.

Chapter Six

Eloise

EVERY DAY I STEP onto this balcony and can't believe just how pretty it is out here. I wish I didn't have to go home, but of course I do. We've been here five days, and I can't believe how fast time is going by, nor how well I'm handling being around Kevin and Cindy. Kevin is usually dragging Cindy away to show her something else on the property. I think they are just sneaking away to have sex, but I'd rather not think about it.

For the last four nights, I've had vivid sex dreams about Morgan. Seeing him naked on that first night really fucked with my head. Unfortunately, watching him swing the axe shirtless is the closest I've come to seeing him naked since. All the dreams start the same: him sitting in the chair in the corner of my room. I wake up to find him staring at me, and things progress from there. The first night, he just touched my pussy and I came, so it wasn't really a sex dream. Actually, we haven't actually had sex in any of them, but we've done enough for me to wake up sticky each morning. Even now, I feel slickness between my legs.

I should have waited to shower when I heard him telling Kevin he needed to help with the wood this morning before we head to the Christmas tree farm. They've been at it for hours, and you'd think I've been watching porn for how worked up I am.

The balcony door opens, and I turn, expecting to see my mom but pause when Cindy steps through and closes it behind her. We've not been alone since she got here.

"Hey."

"Hey."

She shivers and rubs her arms even though she's wearing a thick sweater. On the other hand—I'm roasting. I even took off the cardigan I was wearing because I am breaking a sweat. You can see our breath when we talk, but Morgan Woods has some weird effect on me that makes my body heat up like a furnace.

"Are you warm?" Cindy's eyes widen as she looks at the cardigan discarded onto the bench behind us.

"I am."

She rambles about something before stopping next to me and looking out over the scenery.

"Wow."

"I know."

Her hand moves like she wants to grab mine, but she doesn't. My heart aches, there was a point when Cindy and I were closer than close. We begged our parents to share a room because we hated being apart, even to sleep. Even when we were in high school we more often than not shared a bed. Now, we feel like strangers. Or at least strangers with a history, which, I guess, we are.

If you would have told me I would go almost a year without seeing my sister, I would have laughed in your face because I couldn't even go hours.

Everything is different now. Everything but Cindy. She looks the same. Long blonde hair, bright-hazel eyes, and an even brighter, infectious smile. The only thing that's changed is she's put on a little weight, but it looks good on her.

"Now I know why Mr. Woods put you in the office instead of the spare bedroom."

I shoot a look in her direction and frown. Her smile slips a hair. "There's a spare bedroom?"

Cindy tilts her head. "Um, yeah? The room attached to mine and Kevin's. They share a bathroom."

There's a whole other bathroom? *What the hell?* He never told me that. If he would have, I could have used that bathroom the night before Kevin and Cindy got here and saved myself the embarrassment from walking in on him. Why wouldn't he tell me? It doesn't make sense why he would have me stay in an office if there's another spare room. Cindy said it shares a bathroom with them, so maybe he was trying to keep me from any awkwardness with them . . . but in doing so, he put him and me in awkward positions.

My gaze lands on him just as he slams the axe into another piece of wood, splitting it perfectly in half. The pieces go flying in separate directions.

Like he can hear us talking about him or something, he lifts his head, and our eyes collide. I stiffen. I wish I could read his mind when he looks at me because it seems like he is thinking a lot of different things, but I can never tell if they are good or bad. Like right now, I can't tell if he's pissed off or . . .

"Is there something going on between you and *Mr. Woods*?"

Cindy's judgmental voice pulls me away from Morgan. I scowl at her.

“What? No.”

She laughs, but it’s humorless and the smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “Oh, good. That would be so gross.”

Even if she’s trying to joke with me, it’s not funny. In fact, it really pisses me off. “Yeah? Like getting with your sister’s boyfriend? I don’t think you are in any position to judge me for who I may or may not have a thing with, *sis*.”

Whatever humor she was trying to hold onto, falls, and a deep frown replaces it, but I keep my eyes forward. “Ex. We never did anything physical before you broke up.”

I roll my eyes because this is the same bullshit they tried pulling a year ago. “Sure, you didn’t, but emotional cheating is still cheating.”

She knows I’m right, and *I* know I’m right, so there’s no room to argue. We stand off for a few seconds until the tears flood her eyes, and I’m taken back a year when they sat me down and Cindy was the one who ended up crying and Kevin chose to comfort her instead of me. She turns away, storming toward the door.

“I came here to try and talk with you like we used to but of course you had to ruin it like always.”

The door slamming causes me to flinch. Tears well in my eyes, but not from sadness, at least not all from sadness. Somehow in my delusional ass family I’ve been turned into the bad guy for all of this. It’s such bullshit. Well, I knew this was coming. The moment when the trip went to shit; took longer than I thought at least.

Chapter Seven

Eloise

THERE'S DEFINITELY TENSION IN the air between Cindy and me, and I think Mom sensed it because she made sure we rode in separate cars to the tree farm. She's also not spoken with me the entire twenty-minute trip here, but that's fine because I don't feel like talking to her either if she's just going to take Cindy's side without even speaking to me. I shouldn't be surprised Cindy ran and complained to Mom after our argument. If you can even call it that, it was more me just calling her out and her storming away, but whatever. I'm used to it.

Dad follows Morgan down the mountain, complaining that it's even worse than going up and he's going to need new breaks once they get back. Eventually, we get off the steep of the mountain, the road levels, and Dad's shoulders relax. Morgan leads us right down the main strip of Wintercrest. It's daylight, but it's still so beautiful. Exactly what I remember. Every store is decorated for Christmas. There's a coffee and hot chocolate stand I definitely want to check out when we come down for the Christmas market next weekend. We have to drive around an ice rink that's in the middle of the

town, and it has to be the cutest ice rink ever. I giggle watching a dad attempt to teach his daughter to skate.

“Remember that being us?” Dad looks at me in the mirror. “You were awful.”

“Dad!” I slap his shoulder with a smile. “Maybe I was only awful because my teacher was awful.”

He grunts something about how that can’t be it, and when Mom giggles, they get into a friendly bicker. Dad tells her to tell him he’s good, and she promises he’s great at a lot of other things. In the end, Dad huffs and Mom winks at me.

We pass a huge sign reading *Anderson’s Tree Farm* right before Morgan pulls onto a gravel road that goes on for a while, passing pine tree after pine tree until we hit the parking lot full of other cars.

Decorations line the road, but it’s nothing compared to how decked out everything else is. There’s a large barn with lights basically everywhere. I can imagine just how pretty it is at night. I hope we are here late enough to see that.

Dad parks and I jump out, excited to look at everything else they have to offer. My eyes aren’t sure where to look first. There’s a life-size wooden train for kids to play on, on one side and one of those photos things you put your face in for photos on the other. Up on the hill is a house, small in comparison to the shop, but it’s cute, nonetheless. Everything in Wintercrest is cute. I’ve seen most of the town, but we never came to the tree farm when I was little. I wish we would have because Cindy and I would have loved this place as children. It’s so festive.

We get to work right away finding a tree. Morgan really knows his way around for not even having a tree yet.

He lets Kevin take the lead on picking out a tree, and it's quite fun watching Kevin tease his dad about finding the perfect one but changing his mind.

"I thought that was you."

I turn to see who is speaking. The man walks toward us, wearing a snowsuit and beanie and carrying a chainsaw over his shoulder. "Briggs said you were here, and I said, 'Nah, not my baby brother, Grinch, who lives on the hill.'"

I don't know who this man is, but he's funny. I giggle into my hand, and he winks at me as he steps by and pulls Kevin in for a hug. It's obvious they know each other, and wait—did he say brother?

"Hi, Uncle Reed."

This is Morgan's brother? They look nothing alike, other than this man being tall as well. Not as tall as Morgan, but way taller than me. Blonde hair dusts his chin, and his eyes are dark. They don't share any similar structures. *Interesting.* I know Cindy and I aren't exactly replicas, but we have similarities.

"Hey, kiddo. What brings you to town?"

"Dad, of course." Kevin smiles at his dad, but Morgan doesn't return it.

Reed claps Morgan's shoulder and grins at him. Morgan still doesn't budge, and Reed turns his attention to the rest of us. "Who are your friends?"

Kevin tugs Cindy into his side, and she poses like a dog at a dog show. "This is my girlfriend, Cindy."

Reed takes a hold of her hand and kisses the back of it. She giggles, and he winks at her. Kevin introduces the rest of us, and he does the same to Mom but offers a simple handshake to Dad. Then he gets to me and goes to kiss the back of my hand, but a low rumble comes from behind him, and he pauses, side-eyeing his brother over his shoulder, then turns back to me with wide eyes. "You are Kevin's girlfriend's sister?"

“Uh, yes?”

“Older or younger?”

I squint, not sure what game he’s playing. “Younger by a year and a half.”

Reed looks back to his brother, and they seem to have some kind of conversation with their eyes that none of us can understand. Whatever it is they are saying makes Reed break into a smile. “I’ll be damned.” He laughs so loud I’m tempted to cover my ears. Then he throws an arm around my shoulders and *kisses* my forehead.

All of us look at him like a crazy person, well, everyone besides Morgan who glares at him like he’s going to kill him.

“Welcome to the farm, ya’ll.”



Morgan

I’m going to kill my brothers. Not just Reed, but Briggs and Coast too. The only one who won’t be dead before the night is up is Ledger because he’s the only one not participating in who can piss off Morgan the most.

Ever since that growl ripped from my throat when Reed went to kiss Eloise’s hand, he caught on to whatever I’m feeling and wasted no time filling in our other brothers with the news that their brother has the hots for his son’s girlfriend’s *little* sister.

They still don’t know she is his ex, and I plan on keeping that to myself as long as possible. It’s bad enough already and I knew bringing Eloise here it

wouldn't be long before word got out about my *feelings*. My brothers can read me better than anyone and not once have I ever been protective over a girl and word spreads fast in the Anderson family. Secrets don't stay secrets for long.

They are all but harassing the poor girl, and with each comment, her brows furrow. At least she's unaware of everything happening. I think her sister is catching on, but Kevin has since pulled everyone away to warm up in the barn while I help Reed get the tree we picked out wrapped up.

"Sooo, tell us about the girl." Reed urges.

"Yeah, how did that happen? Who saw who first?" Coast flashes that same shit-eating grin I swear he was born with.

"There's nothing to tell."

"Oh, come onn! You fucking growled at me, bro. For a fucking *kiss* on the *back of her hand*."

"Yeah, you're not the growly type, at least not over a girl," Coast says like I'm not already fucking aware this isn't normal of me. I'm not the guy who gets worked up over a girl, ever. I've never once been jealous, yet the thought of another man touching Eloise makes me want to rip them apart. Apparently, even my brother.

Knowing they aren't going to rest, I sigh and drop my head against my truck. "She's Cindy's sister, got here the day before Cindy and Kev showed up and"—I shrug—"I don't know. There's some kind of pull between us."

"No, shit." Coast barks out a loud laugh.

"Morgan was bitten by the love bug." Reed's eyes flash with mischief.

"Both of you shut the fuck up. Her sister is starting to catch on to your dumbass looks and comments, so it won't be long before her parents do too, okay?"

“You sound like a teenager not wanting to get caught by your girl’s parents.” Coast grins. “It’s nice to see you worked up over something, Morg.”

“It doesn’t feel nice, so shut the fuck up.”

Reed slaps me on the shoulder. “Ease up, brother, love is meant to be the best feeling in the world according to Ma.”

“Man, Ma is going to be so happy one of her boys is in love.”

“No, she’s not because you’re not going to tell her shit because I haven’t admitted to shit. Keep it to yourselves because in two weeks she goes home and everything else goes back to normal.”

They lose their smiles and frown.

“You’re just going to let her go back?”

I’m trying not to think about that because I don’t know how I can. “It’s not like I have a choice.”

“Fuck you don’t, you tell her she’s staying here, then you fuck her until she can’t remember the way home.”

Reed is going to find himself in jail—again. The Anderson brothers are known for doing what we need to get our way, but usually that doesn’t involve breaking the law. Holding a girl against her will is pretty illegal. Unless it wasn’t against her will . . .

I shake the thought from my head. I can’t go down that road. I’m already trying hard enough to not fuck her every time I’m near her, and thinking about her wanting me as bad as I want her drives me crazy.

“Well, whatever you do, if you need some help tying your girl up, call Ledge.”

Chapter Eight

Eloise

I BRUSH MY FINGERS over the handcrafted bear, appreciating how smooth it is. There are several different statues, all carved from wood, and each one as beautifully intricate as the last, but the bear is my favorite. The biggest one here, and yet he looks so friendly.

“Are you interested in a statue?”

I glance at the sweet elder woman and smile. “Oh, no. I’m only here to visit, and if I were to tell my dad I bought this, he’d have a cow trying to fit it into the car.”

She laughs. “I understand completely. When my son first picked up this hobby, I didn’t know what we were going to do with all his creations. Thankfully, they found a home here and now bring beauty to people’s homes all over the town.”

Now that she mentions it. I did see a few wooden statues on the way here. I wonder if they were all made by her son. Wait—her son?

“Oh, wow. Your son made all these?”

Pride blooms across her face. “He did. All my boys help around the farm. Family business and all that.”

“Wait you mean you own the tree farm?”

She smiles brightly, and I see just how proud she is to say yes. “I do.”

“I’m so jealous. I have to say I have never been anywhere like this. It’s so festive.”

“My husband loved Christmas; I was a bit of a scrooge myself before we got together. Never had a great Christmas experience, you know? But now, it’s my favorite time of year. It’s when I feel closest to my Scott.”

Sadness tugs my smile into an empathetic frown. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Just like me, the old woman’s face fills with sadness. “Thank you, darling. What did you say your name was?”

“Oh, I didn’t, but it’s—”

“Mother.” Morgan steps behind me, and the hair on the back of my neck raises. “Are you harassing Eloise?”

This is *his* mom? I guess that makes sense since all his brothers seem to work here. I wonder why he doesn’t. She said her son carved these statues. I wonder which one is responsible for that.

“Eloise, what a beautiful name.” She swats at her son who is still behind me. “And you, don’t make me out to be some crazy old woman. I was just talking to her about your beautiful creations.”

His creations? Does that mean he made all of these?

I spin to face him. “You made these?”

Something that looks a lot like embarrassment, and maybe annoyance with his mom for telling me, flashes across his face. “I did.”

I scan the several wooden animals. “Wow.”

“See, she’s impressed.” The old woman smiles, still staring at me with a

look I can't quite read. "How old are you, deary?"

"Mother." Morgan growls. "Enough."

She waves him off, and I can't help but giggle. I think I kind of love her.

"I'm twenty-two."

She opens her mouth to say something else, but we're interrupted when Morgan's brother drops in and kisses his mom's cheek. He grins at me, mischief resting in his dark eyes.

"Oh, I see you met Kev's girlfriend's *younger sister*." I don't understand why he emphasizes some of that, but I get the feeling Reed likes to goof off a lot. So very different from his brother's stoicism.

But what he said is enough to get a reaction out of the woman. "Oh! Kevin, as in your son Kevin?"

Morgan nods. "What other Kevin do you know?"

"Well, now, now. No need to catch a frost."

Catch a frost? She must notice my confusion, because it's relatively warm in the barn.

"Catch a frost means get an attitude here in Wintercrest," she clarifies. "I'm Mary, by the way."

"It's nice to meet you." I giggle.

She eyes me for a minute more. "Yes, it was. I do hope to see you again, Eloise."

"Me too."

"Oh, I bet you will." Reed taps his mom's shoulder and bounces away, still laughing to himself about something I don't understand.

Morgan doesn't let another minute pass before he's dragging me away.

"Talk to you later, Mom."

"Come see me before you leave!"

“I was looking at stuff, you know,” I complain as he drags me past all the other stuff I wanted to see.

“Your parents want photos.”

Of course they do. Mom insists on taking photos for her “scrapbook” that has a single page in it, and there’s not even a photo in it. Mom spent so long making the page pretty that when it came time for the photo, she didn’t feel like it anymore, and she hasn’t picked it up since.



Morgan

“Your statues are beautiful, by the way.”

I grunt because I don’t enjoy talking about that. There’s a reason no one knows who makes the carvings other than my family. I don’t want praise or anything for my work. I just like carving, and my garage became too full, so Mom suggested bringing them down here to try and sell. It’s been a success, not that I need the money, but it’s nice people are enjoying them. And I’d be lying if I said driving by the houses that display my work so proudly doesn’t make something in my chest twitch.

“When I get a house, I want one.”

My feet fumble, but I carry on toward the photo area with her in tow. I’m no longer dragging her because we were getting weird looks.

“Yeah? Of what?”

“I really like that bear.”

Me too. The thought of Eloise displaying my work doesn't feel as nice. Probably because she's talking about having it at *her* house and not *ours*. It's a fucked-up thought, but it doesn't stop me from thinking it.

"Do you take requests?"

"Depends on the request." I joke, but it doesn't come across that way.

She grins anyway. "Well, eventually I want kids." My stomach twists. "I think it would be cute to have a whole family of bears. One for each family member, you know?"

With a tight throat, I say, "Yeah."



I walk away for ten minutes and come back to Eloise and her sister arguing. It looked like they were arguing this morning on the balcony, but when I asked Kevin, he just shrugged. Cindy is being loud, but Eloise isn't talking, only worrying her bottom lip. *That fucking lip.*

"Girls," Martha hisses.

Like a switch, Cindy stiffens. She glances around and brushes some hair from her face, and all the anger dissipates from her body.

Kevin takes a wary step toward her and turns to me. "I think we are going to stay at Nana's tonight." He flicks a look in Eloise's direction. She's hugging herself, and my chest fucking aches. No one makes any move to comfort her. I might not know what they were arguing about, but Eloise deserves comfort as much as Cindy.

"Okay." My voice is clipped.

“They are playing *Home Alone* in the theater tonight. You know how much I love that movie.”

Yes, I do; he’s loved it ever since he found out he and the main character share a first name.

“Okay.”

“I think we are going to head back to the house. I don’t want to be driving in the dark,” Clark says, and Eloise’s shoulders slump again. She says nothing. Probably because she knows no one is going to fucking listen to her.

“I know you wanted to see the lights in town when it got dark, but maybe another night,” Martha tells Eloise and I snap.

“She can stay with me. I need to help around here for a bit longer. Probably be dark by the time we leave.” That’s not true, but if she wants to see the lights, she’s going to get to see the fucking Christmas lights.

Clark, Martha, and Cindy faces shift, each with a more suspicious look than the last. Eyes narrowed, lips tight. Cindy the most. My son, who is the only opinion I care about, isn’t paying attention.

Slowly, Martha turns toward her youngest daughter. “Do you want to stay?”

Eloise glances in my direction, and I offer a nod of encouragement so she knows I’m not just staying behind for her, even though I am.

“Yeah, if Morgan is okay with it.”

“Morgan?” Cindy gasps as if she just called me daddy or some shit.

“That’s his name,” Eloise growls. Cindy turns her attention to me, and her eyes narrow.

“Yeah, but—”

“You better get going if you want to see the town before the movie, Kev.” My voice is firm. “Don’t wreck your pa’s truck.”

He grins. "I won't. I like my head attached to my body."

Mom lets anyone in the family borrow Dad's truck when they need, but she always says if there's so much as a scratch on it when it's returned, she will mount you like a deer.

"Good. Then go."

Chapter Nine

Morgan

“SO, WHAT KIND OF work to do you have to help with?”

“I don’t.”

Eloise cranes her neck to look at me. I’m leading her back to the barn because it’s cold as shit out and she’s hardly dressed for the weather in jeans and a sweater. She is at least wearing a headband over her ears and matching red gloves, but she needs a proper jacket. I wonder if Mom has any of my old ones.

“What do you mean? You just told—”

“I lied.”

“But . . . why?”

I meet her eyes for a moment, then shrug. “You wanted to see the lights.”

She stops midstride, but I continue forward. “Come on, little elf. I bet Mom can find something for us to do until dusk.”



Eloise

I don't know where Morgan was dragged off to, but his mom assigned me the task of checking people out while she mingles with the customers. Morgan said something about her needing to hire a full-time checkout person, but she waved him off. If I lived here, I would definitely do it. I love it, even though I've only been doing it for a short time. The barn is pretty warm, and everyone is in a good mood. It's great.

It's dark outside, but I'm not sure what time it is. I think I read that the tree farm closes at seven during the week. It's slowed down a bit, so while people look around, I decide to straighten some of the items. They have everything from real wreaths to Christmas ornaments and even tabletop décor.

A couple walks in, and I greet them with a smile.

"Wow, look how beautiful," the woman tells her husband, standing in front of Morgan's carvings.

"Very." The guy agrees. I don't know why, but I'm filled with pride over people acknowledging his work. He didn't seem eager to talk about it, but I don't know why. If I could make anything as cool as that, I would be telling everyone.

I wander toward the couple. "The owner's son makes those." I figure that's safe enough to tell them. Mary told me and didn't know who I was.

The woman looks impressed. "Does he?"

I nod. "Sure does. Are you guys in the market for a carving?"

The woman looks to her husband. He wants to say no, but before he does, I grab the small moose statue off the shelf and hold it up. He's wearing a

moose on his shirt, so I figure it's a safe bet. "Look how intricate the work is. One of a kind."

She tugs on his sleeve, and when he rolls his eyes, I know I've got them.

"Fine. We can get the moose."

"Oh, well you wouldn't want the moose to be lonely, how about a . . ." I scan the shelf, attempting to pick one to go with it, but the woman grabs a deer before I can. Perfect.

"A deer!"

The guy sighs but offers his wife a gentle grin. "Okay. Moose and a deer. How much are they?"

Actually, I don't know. I flip it over. "Five each."

"Five! Oh, we can get a few more, then!" The woman squeals. "These will make the best gifts! A horse for Addie. An eagle for my dad, and oh! What about a chipmunk for the baby's room!"

I love her. All I can do is grin as she loads her arms with seven different carvings.

"Thanks a lot," the guy grumbles while smiling at me.

I lead them to the counter with a smile on my face, then it grows when the woman insists they *need* a wreath for their door.

"Are you expecting?" I know it's not appropriate to ask, but she did just mention a baby room.

The woman laughs, undoes her jacket, and flashes a huge stomach. My eyes widen, and she laughs again.

"Like any day now."

"Oh, my goodness, well, congratulations!"

"Thank you, his due date is in three days, but he's not giving any hints that he will come out anytime soon."

“Maybe you’ll have a Christmas baby.”

The woman slaps her husband’s shoulder, and wide smiles stretch their faces. “We have a bet going. I think he’s going to wait until after, but my husband thinks he’s coming on Christmas.”

“What’s the bet?” I giggle.

“Winner gets to pick where we vacation next year.”

What an amazing bet with no real loser. I love it. “Well, best of luck to both of you.”

“Thank you very much.”

I finish ringing up the items. I’m wrapping up the chipmunk when she tells me the theme of their nursery is woodland creatures.

“Cute! These will be perfect, then.”

“See!” she tells her husband. “Do you think the man who carved these takes requests? I mean, I would love more for the baby’s room.”

I debate whether to say yes because he said sometimes, but I don’t know what that means. I also don’t know what she wants or what he can do. I end up taking their names and numbers and promising someone will be in touch before sending them on their way with two candy canes which Mary told me to pass out to everyone who entered.

“Creating more work for me?”

I jump at Morgan’s deep voice behind me. Spinning, I meet his eyes but spot his brothers standing in a line behind him, grinning like they know a secret I’m not a part of.

“I said I would *ask*. I made no promises.”

His eyes darken. “You cleared me out of small carvings.”

I glance over my shoulder at an empty shelf. *Huh, well, how about that?* I didn’t even realize. I shrug and turn back to him. “What can I say? I’m a

natural saleswoman.”

“I say we keep her. She could have every tree sold in a week.” Reed pipes up.

“I say three days,” another brother says.

A goofy smile stretches Morgan’s face. I think this is the first time I’ve seen him smile, and I think I kind of love him. *It*. I love the smile, not *him*. *Santa on Tuesday, where the hell is my mind trying to take me? Love?* I don’t think so.



At the end of the night when everyone else has gone home, the boys walk through the farm to look for any lost and founds or trash people may have left behind.

“Ellie needs a jacket,” Reed says.

“Yeah, you’ll freeze your tits off,” Coast adds, followed by a smack to the back of his head from Morgan.

“I think I have an old jacket around here,” Ledger, the eldest brother, grunts. He’s a lot like Morgan, maybe grumpier.

“I have one,” Morgan says, walking back in from wherever he disappeared. He’s holding a faded red-and-black flannel jacket.

He passes it to me, but I don’t even attempt to put it on. I know how these things go. Men are not a good judge on clothing size. Morgan might be bigger than me now but if it’s an old jacket, I don’t even want to attempt to put it on just to be embarrassed when it doesn’t button.

“I’m fine, really.” I hold my arm out, but he just stares at it.

“Put the jacket on, Eloise.” There’s no room for argument in his voice, but I’m not about to humiliate myself.

“No, really, Morgan, I’m warm.”

His jaw locks. “It wasn’t a suggestion.”

I glance at his four brothers who seem amused by us. Like we are some kind of movie for them.

I drop my voice and look deep into his eyes. “It probably won’t fit.”

There’s a short pause before all five of the boys break into a laugh. Reed and Coast laugh longer than the other three, but Morgan continues sporting a smirk. “Put the jacket on, little elf.”

Whatever, if they want to laugh at me, they can deal when I start to cry when . . . it . . . doesn’t . . .

It fits. In fact, it’s *big*. Hanging a few inches above my knees and plenty of room for a sweatshirt if not two under it. The sleeves hang way past my hands, but I’m just so shocked and happy it buttons.

Morgan rolls up the sleeves so we’re able to see my gloves. He tilts my chin up. “You really think I would embarrass you by bringing a jacket that didn’t fit?”

“It’s not often other people’s clothes do.”

His brothers headed out as he was rolling my sleeve. He takes advantage of the privacy and invades my space. “Look how big I am, little elf. I could break you in half.”

I can’t tell you the last time I felt small, but I feel two inches tall, and I kind of love it because he’s right. He’s taller and wider than I am, and I bask in that.

Chapter Ten

Morgan

EVERYONE KNOWS CHRISTMAS LIGHTS are appealing to the eye, but I don't think anyone appreciates them like Eloise. After helping my brothers clean up the grounds, we piled into my truck to head to town. It's getting late and I want to get back to the peak before the night snowfall sets, but fuck, I wish I could watch Eloise's excitement forever.

"You skate, Ellie?"

I don't know where my brothers got that nickname, but I fucking hate it. Eloise doesn't seem to mind them calling her it, but I didn't tell them to call her anything but Eloise.

"No," she snorts. "My dad tried teaching me when I was a kid, I never caught on."

"Maybe you didn't have the right teacher," Briggs says, but he better not offer to teach her. He might have played hockey in college, but it doesn't mean he's going to teach my girl to skate. If anyone is going to teach her, it's me.

"Probably, but I'm not exactly graceful either."

Briggs grunts a deep laugh. “Us either.”

“Come on.” Reed tugs on her. I glare at him, but he ignores me. “Let’s skate.”



“Come on, little elf.”

“Morgan, I can’t.” Her eyes dart around to the several people skating by us, including my brothers.

We’ve had our skates on ten minutes, but I’ve not been able to get Eloise on the ice. She set one foot down and it slipped, so she refuses to step again.

“I’ll help you. I won’t let go.”

“I’m going to embarrass you.” I hate when her face drops and her voice gets low like that. It’s absurd she thinks she could ever embarrass me. I don’t give a shit what anyone thinks, especially about my girl.

I move closer, we’re not touching, but I smell the faint sweetness from her skin. “Trust me, little elf. I got you.”

I hold a hand out, and after a minute, she grabs it. I let out a deep sigh, enjoying the feel of her hand in mine, even in her thick gloves.

She’s hesitant at first, but after a few minutes, she’s only cutting off half the circulation in my hands.

I stare at her hands in mine. It’s amazing how natural this feels even though it shouldn’t.

“Where did you get your gloves and hat thing?”

“I made them.”

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead. “You made them? You knit?”

She nods, not taking her eyes off the ice beneath us. “I do. I have a small shop online where I make and sell knitted things. Surprisingly, I make an okay amount monthly. Enough to pay a few of my bills. Of course, after graduation, I’ll need to get a big-girl job. I’ve been looking, but it’s been slim pickings.”

“What’s your major?”

“Marketing. It’s a vague enough degree, and I thought it would help my small business, and it has but not enough, and, *surprisingly*, not many places are looking for a marketing major with no experience,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“Kevin had the same problem with his degree.”

She nods a few times. “I know.”

Of course. I keep forgetting who she is and why she’s here. She’s not here to be my plaything. She’s here because she is my son’s girlfriend’s sister. And ex. Can’t forget that.

“Are you okay being here?”

She lifts her head just enough to meet my eyes, her brows pinched, and we wobble, but I even us out quick enough.

“What do you mean?”

“Being around my son and your sister. Is it hard?”

Eloise lets out a long sigh. “Kind of. Not because I’m in love with Kevin or anything.” Her nose scrunches for a split second. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She’s allowed to have sour feelings toward my son. Kevin would probably even say the same thing.

“But because Cindy was my best friend. We were closer than close. Probably a lot like you and your brothers. When they sat me down and told me about their feelings, I felt betrayed by not one but two of the most

important people in my life, and the worst part is no one around seemed to understand why I was upset. It was just expected of me to accept their feelings because *you can't help who you love.*" She scoffs.

Unfortunately, I happen to agree with that statement. Especially when our eyes collide once again. My heart skips a beat, and I know I'm done for.

I push it aside because the last thing she needs right now is *that*.

"I'm sorry my son hurt you."

"It is what it is." Her lips twitch. "They seem happy, and I guess that's all that matters."

That's not at all true. "Your happiness matters too, Eloise."

A genuine smile pulls on her lips, and I'm glad I was the one to put it there. "Thank you, Morgan.

"I really am happy my sister's happy, but I wish it wouldn't have been with my ex. At least I wish he would have dumped me, waited, I don't know, a week before they got together."

"How long did they wait?"

"They didn't." She laughs. "They sat me down, broke the news, then he moved all his stuff from my room to hers within thirty minutes."

What?

"Excuse me?" My fists tighten but not enough to hurt her. She does cringe, though. Like maybe she regrets telling me that.

"I shouldn't have told you that. I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget who you are."

Yeah, you're not the only one.



Eloise

Wintercrest is like being in a movie. It would be so nice to not have to leave and continue living this dream, but the talk with Morgan got me thinking about my future. I do not want to live with my parents after graduation so finding a job is a necessity. I love them, but I don't want to live with them again. Especially when I know Cindy and Kevin will be there all the time. I'm over her being with my ex, but what I'm not over is how Cindy has been treating me since the other morning. Like I'm doing something wrong when I'm not even doing anything. She has it in her head there is something going on between Morgan and me, which is crazy. Sure, he's made a few comments, and sure, I think he is ridiculously beautiful, but it's all superficial.

The dash on his truck reads 11:17, and I can't believe we were out that long, but I had the best time. He even got me a hot chocolate for the ride home from that little shop I saw on the way to the tree farm.

"I really liked working at the farm tonight. That was fun."

"Yeah? I guess it's something I always took for granted because us boys didn't have a choice." He chuckles.

"I think it's really nice you all live around and help your mom. Says a lot about your family."

He falls quiet for a few beats. "I'm very lucky to have them."

“How come your name isn’t Anderson? Is that your mom’s maiden name or something?”

“No.”

The air shifts between us, like I overstepped and said something I shouldn’t have. I open my mouth to backtrack, but he cuts me off.

“When I was eight, the Anderson’s adopted me.” I turn my attention to him and wait for him to go on, he shifts in his seat as he does. “My parents were too young when they had me. They thought they could handle being parents in high school, but they couldn’t. I was two when they placed me in foster care, and I was in and out of homes until I met the Andersons.”

Oh my. I can’t even imagine how that must have been for him. Moving closer, I rest my hand on his arm. It’s innocent enough.

He glances at my hand. “I hated being passed around, so I spent a lot of time on the streets. It was easier than families wanting me, then deciding they didn’t.”

“I’m so sorry, Morgan.”

“It is what led me to the Andersons. I was sleeping on the bench in town when my dad sat down next to me and asked if I liked being homeless.” His lips lift into a longing smile. “I said, ‘No,’ then he brought me home. Looking back, I should have been wary of strangers, but I was cold, hungry, and tired, and he seemed nice enough.”

“And you’ve been with them ever since?”

He nods. “Ma found out she was pregnant just weeks after I moved in. I worried they would kick me out, but they didn’t. It was like I belonged to the family my entire life. I never felt like an outsider, I was an Anderson without being an Anderson.”

“How come you didn’t change your name?”

“I felt like I owed it to my biological parents to carry on their names, even if they couldn’t care for me. Mom and Dad never pressured me to change it. Said I could if I wanted to but it was okay if I didn’t.”

My heart aches thinking about a child living on the streets. Then it aches more at how giving the Andersons are. “The Andersons are really great for taking you in, no questions asked. But I wish you never had to go through all those nights alone.”

Morgan drops one hand from the steering wheel onto my thigh. My heart rate speeds up, but I don’t want him to remove it, so I pretend to be unaffected.

“I believe everything happens for a reason, little elf. Sure, those rough nights were long, and I wasn’t sure they would ever end, but they led me to the Andersons. So, it all worked out how it was meant to.”

I don’t know why, but I lean up and press my lips against his rough cheek.

“What was that for?” His voice is low.

“I don’t know. I just wanted to.”

Chapter Eleven

Morgan

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU have all these decorations and never decorate.”

I glance in Eloise’s direction across the attic. She insisted on joining me to look for the decorations before Kevin and Cindy got home.

“Why would I decorate for myself?”

Her lips tug into a frown. “I guess that makes sense.”

We’ve found five whole totes full of shit, but only two are for the tree. I stack the two we need and trail across the room. She’s bent over digging through another tote when I stop behind her.

I stare at the leggings stretched thin over her beautiful ass. Each day is getting harder keeping my space, and after her innocent kiss to my cheek last night in the truck, it’s damn near impossible. There is something between us, but we are doing our best to ignore it.

She knows I’m here because she’s stopped digging. Slowly, she straightens, the top of her head only coming to my chest, and she doesn’t turn. We’re not touching, but that doesn’t stop my body from reacting like we are.

“Why are you alone?”

If that's not a heavily loaded question.

"I've not found someone worth disrupting my life." Until now.

She blows out a shallow breath and ever so slightly leans back into my chest. "That's too bad. This house would make the perfect family home."

"I built it with a family in mind."

Eloise turns but doesn't step away and her full chest brushes against mine. I blow out a sharp breath.

Her eyes are wide, almost excited. "Did you want more kids after Kevin?"

"Yes, two or three more. I've always wanted a big family."

She nibbles her lip, biting back a hesitant smile. "Me too."

I narrow my eyes because what is she doing to me? What game is she playing? My body is on fire from the closeness alone, but add what she's saying and it's like a volcano waiting to erupt. *Me too*. Is she hinting at something, or is this an innocent conversation I'm reading too much into? I open my mouth to ask, but Kevin's voice carries up the ladder, calling for me instead.

Eloise all but jumps away, busying herself in the tote once again. I rip a hand through my hair and pinch my eyes close.

This is so fucked. I want to pump my son's ex full of my cum more than I want to fucking breathe.



Admittedly, the house looks better with a tree in the center of the living room. I forgot how homey Christmas lights make a place feel. Martha and the girls have been busy in the kitchen since we finished. Something about a

tradition I didn't catch before they disappeared. Kevin and Clark are playing a game of chess and I'm sitting in the recliner with Moose laying on my feet. I'm a man of habit and I like my own company, but I have to say, the soft sound of laughter coming from the kitchen and Christmas music playing in the background, is nice. The cabin has never felt empty, but I have a feeling when this trip is over, it's going to feel abandoned.

My heart twists at the thought.

Luckily, the girls trail in, each carrying two mugs of something and huge smiles on their faces. Martha passes her second to Clark, Cindy passes hers to Kevin, and Eloise stops in front of me, holding out her second mug with a bright smile on her pretty face.

"Hot chocolate."

I take it from her and glance at the mug full of whipped cream. Somewhere under the pile is hot chocolate now warming my hand. The other girls take their seats next to their respective partner, leaving little room for Eloise. I'd gladly pull her onto my lap, but she spins and drops on to the floor next to Moose.

"You can sit here." I move to get up, but she shakes her head.

"I'm fine here." She lays a hand on Moose's stomach and he rolls on my feet, stopping me from getting up even if I wanted to. Eloise is resting against my leg, and I drop my free hand to the back of her neck and sink my fingers into her hair. Her family is busy picking out a movie, but I know I will not focus on it with her head resting on my knee.

It's so natural between us and the more time that passes the more pissed I get. The other couples are curled under blankets, watching the movie, not knowing how easy their life truly is. Eloise said her family told her you can't

help who you love, so why is it so wrong for us to be together? If that's what she really wants. It seems she does, but I've not asked either.

Fuck. This is why life is easier alone. I'm just not sure easy is what I really want anymore.

In fact, as I look at a sleeping Eloise on my knee, I know it's not. I don't want easy.

I just want her.



Eloise

It used to be a tradition to write Santa letters after we decorated the tree and we would leave them in the tree for Santa to “pick up”, but we haven't done that in years.

Tonight, however, as I sit in my room unable to sleep, I'm itching to write a letter to Santa. I know I won't be able to get what I want without a little magic, so what can it hurt?

I grab a piece of paper and a pen from Morgan's desk and sit down to write my letter.

Dear Santa,

I want something extra special for Christmas this year.

No, not toys.

Or money.

Or anything you can buy at the store—er, make in your workshop.

No, what I want is in the room right next to mine.

Him.

My ex-boyfriend's dad.

Even if it's just for the night. . .

I want him for Christmas.

Love, Eloise

Something inside pinches as I read over the letter. A night with Morgan will never be enough, but I don't want to push my luck anymore, so I'll take what I can get.

I pad across my room, push my door open, and look around. The hallway is dark. The only light is bleeding up the steps from the Christmas tree below. Morgan was hesitant to leave it on, but I'm glad he did. The floor creaks under my feet, but I hurry down the steps. Stopping in front of the tree, I twist my lips. I can't leave the letter there, that would not be smart at all. I glance at the fireplace and sigh before tossing it into the burning fire. The fire is low but only takes seconds for it to consume my letter, leaving behind nothing but ash.

I wander to the kitchen, grab out a glass, and fill it with water. I grab a cookie from the container we made earlier. Looking out the large window above the sink, large snowflakes fall from the sky.

Just stepping out of the kitchen, I flick the light and gasp when I run into a large chest.

“Easy, little elf. It's just me.”

Morgan tilts my chin so I'm forced to look at him. He so nice to look at.

“You scared me.”

He smiles, his bright white teeth cutting through the darkened room. “That wasn't my intention.”

“Did I wake you?”

He shakes his head. “No, I've not been able to sleep.”

Me either.

He leans closer, and I lick my lips instinctively.

“You smell good enough to eat.”

“I had a cookie.” Embarrassment burns across my face. I lift my eyes to not see the judgement in his. I don’t know if it’s there, but it’s a habit of feeling judged whenever I eat something unhealthy. Or anything at all, honestly.

I stiffen, and Morgan follows my eyes above us.

“Mistletoe.” He grunts.

We meet eyes and he drags his tongue seductively across his lower lip. “Your move, little elf.”

A million thoughts cross through my head, but the main one—how badly I want nothing more than to kiss him right now—is the loudest. Santa didn’t waste any time, I guess.

I lay my hands against his bare chest and he shudders. I don’t know if it’s because my hands are cold and he’s hot, or because he feels the same way I do about finally touching.

He’s too tall for me to kiss him, even on my tiptoes.

“Kiss me.” My voice is low.

Without another beat, Morgan lowers his lips to mine. Fireworks bloom behind my eyes. He kisses me slowly, sinking one hand in my hair, the other one lands on my ass and he tugs me close. “Fuck, Eloise.”

I sink my hands into his hair and kiss him hard. Heat burns inside me, like gas poured onto a low burning fire that is now out of control. Unafraid of burning anything in its path until it gets where it wants to be.

Morgan is the first to pull away, and he drops his forehead to mine, our heavy breaths mixing. Words catch in my throat. I’m tempted to word vomit everything I’m feeling, but I don’t.

It was one kiss and only happened because of the mistletoe.

Right?

Chapter Twelve

Eloise

AS MUCH AS I hate bugs all the time, there are three places you never want to stumble across one. In bed, on the toilet, and in the shower.

So, you can imagine the horror that rips from my chest in the form of a scream when something black catches my eye during my shower.

The bathroom door slams against the wall, and before I get a word out, the curtain flies open.

“What’s wrong?”

I point in the corner of the shower as tears pour down my face. Morgan curses under his breath.

“What do you want me to do? Help you out or kill it first?”

“K-kill it.”

“Okay, grab my hand.” When I don’t, he takes it on his own. He disappears, and now I know why he wanted me to grab his hand. To know he’s still here even though I can’t see him.

I can’t pull my eyes from the spider; it moves and I squeal. He hurries, and without removing any of his clothes, he steps into the shower to squish the

spider, then steps out and discards it in the toilet and flushes. I pull the curtain shut but find it difficult to move or close my eyes like I need to, to wash my hair.

“Are you okay now?”

I chew on my lip, unsure how to answer. If my mom were the one who was here, I would ask her to come into the shower with me to calm my nerves. In fact, where are my parents? If they heard me screaming, surely they would be here.

“Is my mom here?”

“No. Everyone went for a hike.”

They all went for a hike and didn’t even invite me? “Well, why are you still here?”

There’s a long pause. “Because you’re here. I’m not leaving you alone, and now I’m glad I didn’t.”

Me too.

“Eloise.” His voice is firm, and I kind of like that he seems worked up by this too, as if he really cares about me. “Is there something else I can do?”

I can’t ask him to come in here with me to watch the corners while I shower. That would be insane.

I don’t even get the chance to ask before he is pushing the curtain back and stepping into the shower with me like he can read my mind. Fully clothed—which is probably a good idea. Being naked in the shower together doesn’t seem like a smart move.

After our kiss I’ve all but avoided him. I ran away and it’s been awkward since.

It’s only been a few days but those feelings come back tenfold when he tugs the curtain closed behind him and his eyes drop down my body.

Chapter Thirteen

Morgan

HER NIPPLES ARE RED, just like her swollen lips. I can't even pretend to not be looking at her perfect body. Eloise naked would test my lack of self-control in a way I didn't think was possible, but Eloise naked and sudsy is like my own personal heaven on earth.

I've been trying to keep my distance after our kiss because I can't stop thinking about what happens when she leaves, but the answer is simple. Nothing. Nothing will happen when she walks out my door, and the thought of giving in to my urges—again, and knowing the only ending is her going back home is not something I'm interested in. I'm not a long-distance guy, and I can't ask her to stay here with me when she has a life elsewhere.

Her gaze is locked on mine, until it's not and begins its journey down my body. I'm still in a T-shirt and jeans, so she's not going to see much, but you'd think I was in my birthday suit with how her eyes won't leave my body. My dick jerks against my zipper when her eyes land there, like he's performing or some shit.

Her throat bobs with a swallow, and her eyes dart back to mine. Heat and need burn deeply inside them. She inches her hand toward my cock, but I shoot a hand out and grip wrists in my mine.

She gasps. “W-why?” Her voice is soft, maybe even a little embarrassed. “You’re hard. I could help.”

Fucking almighty, this girl is trying to get mauled. I push her back against the shower wall, pinning her arms above her head, and smirk when she gasps as the cold tiles press against her bare body. I crowd her space so the only thing she can see, feel, and hear is me.

“You don’t even know what you are offering, little elf. That kiss was tradition, but there is nothing behind this,”—I press my hips to hers—“besides animalistic want.”

“Then show me.” It’s a beg, and it sounds so good coming from her lips. The beast inside me rattles against the cage I’ve securely locked him in. If he gets out . . .

I shake my head. “I can’t, and trust me when I say it is better this way.”

Her bottom lip puffs out in a pout. “But—”

I’ve wanted to kiss Eloise since that first moment she walked into my life. I wanted Eloise since the first day and every day since. I’ve wanted, I’ve wanted, I’ve wanted. I’m tired of wanting.

I descend onto her lips without another thought. Not kissing her slow and sweet like last time but feverish like I’ll die without her.

She pushed me here. If she wasn’t so fucking irresistible all the damn time, we would never have gotten to this point, but here I am, in the shower, kissing my son’s ex. At her gasp, all that shit goes out the window. She’s no longer my son’s ex, she’s the girl who’s been in my house two fucking weeks, tempting me with her spankable ass and wide eyes. A man can only

be so strong before he caves under pressure, and every time Eloise looks at me, the pressure grows tenfold.

I take that pouty lip between my teeth and bite until iron ignites my taste buds. Eloise doesn't pull away, but she whimpers, and it's enough for me to pull back. She stares up at me with wide, excited, and slightly terrified eyes.

“You keep looking at me like that and my self-control is going to fucking disappear.”

“Maybe that's what I want.”

“You can't handle the wild mountain man, little elf.”



Eloise

He says I can't handle him, but I sure would like to try. Unfortunately, with my arms pinned above my head, there's not much I can do. He's close, but we're not touching, so I change that, thrusting my hips forward until I make contact with his dick over his jeans. I sigh at the friction.

He, on the other hand, growls. A low, brutal noise straight from his wide chest.

“Please, Morgan.” I roll my hips, never breaking eye contact with him.

His eyes are locked onto me, and he's not moving. He's frozen, jaw tight as he grips my wrists, letting me do what I want. I don't know how long he will, so I take advantage of it.

Wrapping one leg around his thigh, I pull him against me so the bulge in his jeans hits exactly where I want. The need to come blooms inside me like never before. Nothing has ever felt so good, and he's not even touching me. Not really.

I can't imagine what would happen if he did. I might explode.

I moan, grinding like my life depends on it because right now it feels like it might.

I'm just about to come when someone calls my name and that need is replaced. At first, I think I imagine it, but then Morgan pulls his eyes from me and looks over his shoulder in the direction of the noise.

"It's my mom," I whisper, eyes wide when she calls my name again.

"I know," he growls. "Come."

"I can't come now!"

He presses his body against mine. "I said come, little elf. Don't make me force you."

I wonder how he would do that . . . I'm tempted to wait and see, but Mom shouts for me again right outside the door. Morgan glares at me, and it's obvious he's not going to let this go.

He slips his leg between mine, and that need tingles low in my toes.

"I'm i-in the shower!" I shout.

His face pinches, but he still doesn't do anything, letting me take the reins, so I drag my pussy up and down his thigh until my orgasm is cresting once again. I wish I could touch him. I wish he was shirtless.

"Take your shirt off." I whimper.

"No."

"Dad?" A new voice shouts from outside Morgan's bedroom door.

But I'm so close.

I want to cry when he steps away.

“Fuck it,” he grunts, and his leg is replaced with his fingers. My jaw drops, and he’s kissing me again. I’ve never kissed someone with facial hair before, and I think I love it. He drags two fingers over my pussy, then shoves them in without warning, catching my surprised gasp with his mouth.

“You gotta be quiet, little elf. If anyone else hears you come, I’m going to punish you.”

“O-okay.”

He’s not gentle as he assaults my pussy with his large fingers, but I’m not complaining because it feels so good. I’ve masturbated, several times, but nothing has ever felt as good as this. I can only imagine what it would feel like to actually have sex with him.

I drop my head to the wall, imagining it’s his dick inside me and not his fingers.

“Come, little elf. Come all over my hand.”

And I do; he pushes me to the edge, and I dive headfirst into oblivion. Morgan doesn’t stop thrusting until he knows my orgasm has stopped. He pulls away, brings his hand to his lips, and licks his fingers.

Holy Christmas.

His eyes roll back as if that’s the best thing he’s ever tasted. I whimper.

Morgan tugs on his jeans with the same hand, undoing the button. He pushes them down just enough so his dick is free. And before I know what is happening, he is jerking himself just like I saw him doing outside. Only, this is better because I can see his dick. I can see the angry red head as he jerks it with vigor as his arms flex and his jaw clenches and unclenches.

Morgan Woods has forever ruined porn for me because nothing will ever compare to this scene. I wish I had photographic memory so I would never

forget what Morgan looks like when he's coming.

Thick white ropes of cum cover my stomach and chest, more cum than I thought could come from one person.

When the last rope shoots out, he releases my wrists for the first time. They ache, but he brings each one up to his lips and kisses right where my pulse beats.

"El?" I glance at the bathroom door, Cindy calling for me this time. "Have you seen Mr. Woods?"

"Holy fuck," Morgan growls. He drops his lips back to mine.

"She thinks there's something going on between us."

Morgan cocks an eyebrow, smirking. He drags two fingers up my stomach, scooping up what's left of his cum, then I open my mouth and he shoves them inside. "Now why would she think that?"

I wrap my tongue around his fingers, imitating what I could do to his dick. He groans low, then pulls his fingers out with a pop.

"You don't know what you've done, little elf."

Chapter Fourteen

Morgan

“SO, MORGAN,” MARTHA SAYS in a sickly sweet voice. “We’ve been here two weeks now and have no clue what it is you do for work.”

You would if you were fucking observant. I work every day in my shop, but it mostly goes unnoticed. By everyone besides Eloise, that is. I catch her watching me more often than not. We’ve not had another moment since the shower, because her family has kept her busy every day, so by the time I sneak into her room at night, she is passed out. I don’t have it in me to wake her, so I usually just end up sitting in the corner and watching her as long as I can stay awake. My sleep schedule is fucked, but it’s worth it for some alone time. Even if she’s not awake.

“Family business.” It’s the easiest way to explain what I do.

“Well, what’s that mean?” Clark chuckles.

My jaw tics. I don’t appreciate people being in my business. A positive to the mountains and a lot of the reason I hardly leave.

“His family owns the tree farm, remember?” Eloise tells everyone while looking at me for permission. I nod.

“Oh, that’s right.” Clark’s eyebrows knit together. “But I thought it was called Anderson Tree Farm. Isn’t your last name Woods?”

“It is.”

Awkward silence falls over the table.

“Why don’t you have the same last name?” Cindy pipes up, and I guess that pushes Eloise over the edge.

She scoffs. “Why are you guys being so nosy? Sometimes people don’t share last names. That doesn’t mean they aren’t family.”

I love this fucking girl.

“Well, we never said that, honey. What’s gotten in to you?”

I wonder if Eloise is going to tell her mom off, but she doesn’t, and I’m not surprised because she’s smart enough to know it won’t get her anywhere. She wasn’t kidding when she said everyone sees her as the bad guy for not accepting Kevin and Cindy’s relationship. And the few times I saw her being civil with Kevin, Cindy would glare in their direction. I have to admit I didn’t enjoy it very much either.

Eloise pushes from the table. “I’m not hungry. Sorry.”



After an awkward dinner, Cindy volunteers to help with the dishes. I think she’s doing her best to make a good impression on her boyfriend’s dad, which I can appreciate, but I’m not a sociable guy. Not that she noticed much. She did a lot of the talking and didn’t seem to mind I hardly replied. I also think she was baiting me to talk about Eloise, which I’m not going to do. Eloise was right about her sister being suspicious of us.

Kevin pops into the kitchen as soon as Cindy places the last dish in the dishrack, and I wonder if he was standing there the whole time so he didn't have to help.

I've never wanted a dishwasher before, but if I have to continue to suffer through awkward conversations during dishes, I might invest in one.

"Come on, babe. I want to show you something in the barn." There's a glint in his eye, but I pretend not to notice. I remember being young, but it doesn't mean I want to see that look on my son's face.

"Don't let the horses out," I tell him as he drags her away without worrying about jackets.

"We won't." They duck out the door, giggling like—well, like kids. Even if they are midtwenties, they are a hell of a lot younger than me. Which brings me back to Eloise.

There are a lot of odds against us. She's my son's ex, she's twenty-two, not even graduated from school yet, and she's heading back to school in a few days. She obviously wants me, but how much? And should I even allow it? Is it weird? Yes. Is it illegal? No. But does that make it better? I don't fucking know.

What I do know is I need to feel her pussy clench around my dick, and soon.

I pass by Martha and Clark on the couch watching a Christmas movie and chatting happily on my way up the steps.

I don't bother knocking on Eloise's door, I just turn the metal handle and push it open.

She's staring at the door as I walk in, and she sighs. "Hi."

I wait until the door is closed and locked before replying.

"Are you okay?"

“Are you? I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize. People are curious, I’m used to it.”

“Still.”

I stop off at the low-burning fire and toss in two more pieces of wood. Then I turn for the bed. Eloise is knitting something, a blanket if I had to guess by the pale-green rectangle laying across her lap. “What’s that for?”

“You know that couple that purchased all those small carvings?” I nod. Eloise has tried to get me to call them to set up whatever it is they want, but I have yet to do so. “Well, she’s pregnant, and I thought I would make them a baby blanket.”

She’s too fucking sweet.

I fall on to the bed on the other side of her and cross my ankles. Moose groans from the disturbance, but when I pet his stomach, I know I’m forgiven.

“Are you trying to steal my dog?”

“Maybe.” She grins mischievously. “If I do, you’ll be forced to come and get him.”

My hand freezes, much to Moose’s dismay. I eye her, waiting for her to laugh to show she’s joking, but she holds my stare with that same cheeky smirk.

“Maybe I won’t have to come get you.” I wait for her to let go of the needles before pushing it away so I can climb over her. She lies down, and I place hands on each side, hovering over her. “Maybe I’ll tie you up and keep you here.”

A half-excited, half-nervous bubble of laughter bursts through her lips. I grin and press my lips to hers. Still just as soft, still just as sweet. Fuck, this girl drives me insane.

I sink into her, deepening the kiss, and of fucking course someone knocks on the door.

“Get rid of them,” I growl.

“Who is it?” she calls.

“It’s Kevin.”

Well, that’ll sober someone up. I pull back to a sitting position and glare at the door. “Why does my son want to come into your room?”

“How am I supposed to know?” she asks as she crawls from the bed. My eyes blow wide seeing her only in a thong.

“You better put on some pants.” I skim up her soft waist to the tank top that hardly covers her full breasts. “And a shirt.”

“Why? Nothing he hasn’t seen before.”

I think that’s meant to be a joke because she giggles, but it’s not funny. I catch her by the wrist and tug her so she’s standing between my legs.

“I’m kidding!” She chuckles.

“Keep kidding, little elf. You’ll see how funny I can be.”

“Yes, sir.”

I smack her ass on the way to the door. “I prefer *daddy*.”



Eloise

Daddy. He’s got to be kidding me. Why did he say that right before I’m about to speak to his son?

I throw on pants and a sweatshirt since I don't want to worry for the state of my pussy. He's going to fuck me at some point, and I'd like to be able to walk the next day.

Apparently, I'm meant to talk to Kevin in the hallway because Morgan makes no move to leave the bed, lying down and petting Moose like it's the most normal thing in the world. Which I guess it is, but not in his son's ex's room.

I pull open the door just enough to let myself out. He attempts to come in, but I shut the door behind me before he can.

His eyes narrow, but I don't acknowledge it.

"You need something?"

"Uh, yeah, well, no. I mean, I just wanted to ask if you were okay, like, with everything." His eyes keep bouncing over my shoulder, and it makes me nervous, like he's somehow going to see his dad lying on my bed.

"I'm fine."

"Well, I know tomorrow—" A loud thump comes from inside my room. If I had to guess, that's Morgan's warning I'm taking too long.

"I really appreciate you checking on me, but I'm fine. All good over here."

"Um, okay . . . well, I better get back before Cindy gets out of the shower."

"Totally." There's another thud, and this time, I jump because it's just on the other side of the door.

"Is everything okay in there?"

"Yep! Just Moose."

"Oh." He studies the door for another moment. "Have a good night."

"You too."

I don't know how Morgan knows, but as soon as Kevin ducks into his room, my door flies open and I'm being pulled inside. Morgan shuts the door,

locks it, and pins me up against it. He drops his mouth to my neck and sucks.

“I don’t like you speaking to other guys.” He drags his teeth over the spot he just sucked, and I shudder.

“He just wanted to check on me.”

His chest rumbles against the back of my head with a growl. “I heard.

“I don’t need anyone checking in on *my* girl. That’s my job.”

“Your girl?”

He spins me, pushing my back to the door and crowding my front right before he slams his lips into mine he smirks. “I warned you, little elf. Now you’re trapped with the big bad mountain man.”

Chapter Fifteen

Morgan

I'M GOING TO FUCKING wreck this girl, and there's nothing anyone can do about it now. The beast has been released, and he won't go dormant until he's satisfied, and the only way he can be satisfied is by Eloise. I was naïve to think the need for Eloise could ever be patched with someone else. There's no one else on earth who would be able to make me feel how Eloise does. Which reminds me we have to say goodbye in less than a week.

I can't think about it, or I really will tie her up and force her to stay here against her will.

I hook around the backs of her legs and lift her. She gasps, scrambling to wrap her arms around my shoulders.

“You make me feel weightless.”

“You are. Just like a little elf.”

She's smiling when I lean back in to kiss her. The thought of Eloise not being appreciated for everything about her—including her size, makes me crazy. To me, there's nothing better than how soft her stomach is, or how round her hips and thighs are. She's not small. I'm not worried about

breaking her with my big size. I can fuck her exactly how I please, and I plan to do just that.

I walk right past her bed toward the balcony doors. She gasps when I pull the door open and step out into the frigid winter air. Even Moose lets out a groan behind us, like he's complaining about it.

"Where are we going?"

"My room." I kiss her nose, holding her ass with one arm so I can grab my patio door. "It's the farthest away, more soundproof, and if I'm going to fuck you properly, I need a bigger bed."

I toss Eloise onto my bed and grip my jeans. "Strip."

Thank fuck she listens because I'm desperate to feel nothing between us. I pull off my clothes, and she drops hers onto the ground.

But she moves under the blankets and holds them above her tits. That's just not going to work for me. I know she's not cold, because it's blazing in my room, like always.

I grip the end of the blanket and pull. It takes hardly any force to slip from her grip.

She squeals and attempts to hide her full body but, thankfully, fails.

"Do not ever cover your body from me again."

"I, just, I—" I kneel onto the bed, slowly making my way up, and love how her eyes fall to my dick like a magnet.

"Your body is beautiful." I drop a kiss to her calf, then her thigh, moving up. I drag my tongue over her pointed nipple, and she shudders. "To think it's anything but perfect would be a disgrace and just a flat out lie."

I push her tits together and bury my face between. Rutting her leg so she knows just how serious I am.

"Have you ever had someone with a beard eat you out?"

She better say no.

She shakes her head.

“Good.” I fall to my back. “Climb up.”

She’s not so innocent to not know what I mean so I don’t understand her hesitancy. Maybe she doesn’t want to do this with me like I thought. I know she’s been teasing me, but now that we are here, naked in bed together, maybe it’s overwhelming.

“If you’ve changed your mind, we don’t need to do this.”

“That’s not it,” she blurts, and I bite back my smile at her urgency. “It’s just, uh, I’m not exactly . . . *light*.”

Light? For fuck’s sake. I’d love to meet whoever it was that made her so insecure in herself. Someone as beautiful as Eloise, no matter her weight, should never feel anything but perfect. If I have to spend the rest of my life convincing her and proving just how true that is, then I will.

I’m a starved man for her pussy, and if she’s not going to sit on my face, then I’m going to do it for her.

I grip each side of her waist and lift her onto my chest so she’s forced to straddle me. Her hands fall onto the headboard, and she blows out a rush of air.

“I can’t believe you just lifted me like that.”

“I’ll do it again if I have to. Now sit on my face.”

She purses her cute lips. “Are you sure I’m not going to suffocate you?”

“If only I could be so lucky,” I mutter, smirking. “Now get up here before I force you to.”

Eloise settles her knees on either side of my head. I grip her hips and pull her down so her full weight is resting on my face. Any real man knows if we are smothered while eating pussy, there is no higher honor.

“Holy jingle bells,” she breathes out.

I cock an eyebrow, but her eyes are closed, so she doesn’t see.

I know when I hit right where she wants because she whimpers the most beautiful sounds. She squirms when I lap at her pussy and shudders when I lift a hand to her nipple and roll it between my fingers. Latching onto her clit, she bucks, chasing that sweet release I’m so willing to give her.

My name has never sounded so sweet as it does when Eloise moans it as she comes. My beard is soaked, and I don’t think I ever want to shower again.

She rides out the orgasm as long as she can, and when I know she’s done and her pussy is throbbing, I lower her to the bed and climb over, pressing a deep kiss to her lips. She doesn’t pull away at how wet I am, instead she kisses me hard. I groan, and it mixes with her moan.

“You were right.” She breathes against me, and the sweet scent of her pussy fills my nose. “The beard makes everything so much better.”

“Remember that,” I growl, pulling her back into me. She kisses me again, harder this time.

She pulls away, and I grip the back of her neck to bring her right back, but she shakes her head, lowering her lips to my neck.

Fuuuck.

Her lips leave behind a fire burning all the way down my stomach. My head is heavy, but I lift it to look down. She meets my eyes, then goes lower. I hiss feeling her hot breath blow over my dick, and when she kisses it, I nearly bust. A bead of cum glistens on the tip, and she licks it off.

“Get up here so I can fuck you,” I say between gritted teeth. I’m already not going to last too long with how worked up I am, so if she sucks me at all, it’s over.

“You tasted me.” She pouts. “I want to do the same.”

And before I can say anything, she leans down, arches her back to show off her ass, and my dick disappears between her lips.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*. The heat of Eloise’s mouth is intoxicating. I can’t fucking focus on anything. I should push her off so I can fuck her, but with each lick, bob, and pop of her mouth, I lose that battle more and more until the only thing I can do is lean back and enjoy the ride.

I clench my teeth and grip her hair to halt her movement. She smiles at me. “I’m going to cum. If you don’t want to swallow it, you need to pull off.”

Letting go of her hair, she takes me back into her mouth. She’s not even getting half of me down her throat, but she’s using her hands and the lubrication from her spit, so I’m in fucking ecstasy.

I grunt, and she gags as the first shot of cum leaves me and enters her.

Then everything goes black.



Eloise

I’ve heard about blacking out after coming, I just didn’t think it was possible until I watched Morgan’s eyes roll back and a second later he was snoring. The fact I made someone as big and tough as Morgan pass out with a blowjob has spiked my confidence quite a bit.

I throw the blanket over him in case anyone decides to walk in while I’m in the bathroom. In fact, I don’t know if he locked his door at all. I pad over and

check the handle, happy to find it locked before heading for the bathroom. Deciding to just take a shower, I dip back into the bedroom to find a shirt I can borrow from Morgan.

His snores are loud, and I giggle to myself, wishing I had my phone to video. I don't know what I would do with the video since in a few days I'll head back to college and probably only see him in passing at family events if Kevin and Cindy last, but he looks so cute when he sleeps.

Why does that thought hurt so much? I just met the guy a couple weeks ago, but it feels like I've known him forever. Morgan is so sweet and easy to talk to once you get past the broody mountain man shell. And that shell makes sense when you hear everything he's been through. I walk over to the side of the bed and brush some of his black hair from his forehead.

I'm beginning to think my Christmas "list" to Santa isn't going to be enough anymore.

And that scares me a lot.

Chapter Sixteen

Morgan

I STUMBLE FROM MY room, annoyed to have woken up in my bed alone. It took me a while to realize what happened, and I'm still not a hundred percent sure, but I think I passed out after I came.

My feet are heavy, and I feel like I've been hit by a bus, and when I find Eloise's door locked, it takes everything inside me not to break it down. I don't know when she left my room, but I should not have woken up alone.

I know there is a spare key in my room, so I turn back but am stopped by Kevin.

"Early night last night, Pops?"

"Something like that," I grumble.

"You feeling okay, Mr. Woods?" Cindy asks.

"I'm fine." I turn to face them, happy I was alert enough to put on clothes before I walked out of my room buck ass naked. "Where's Eloise? I mean, Moose?" Fuck, my head. "Eloise and Moose, he was with her last I knew."

Cindy is for sure suspicious, but I don't care right now.

"Oh, they were playing outside last I saw," Kevin says.

“You saw them? When?”

“When I was doing the dishes, babe. Why?”

Cindy crosses her arms over her chest. “You seem to be *seeing* her an awful lot.”

Kevin, like me, is left speechless. Cindy storms for his room and slams the door behind her, and all I can do is lift an eyebrow at my son.

He raises his hands and shrugs. “I don’t know what is going on.”

“She’s obviously jealous of you being around her sister.”

Like he never thought about that, his eyebrows pinch. “Huh? Why? I left her sister for her.”

I push away the anger that bubbles with that, not because I wish he stuck with Eloise, but he didn’t go about it the right way, and I plan on speaking to him about that when I can fucking think straight. “That’s probably why. She’s insecure that you are going to do the same to her.”

“But I don’t like Eloise like that.” *Yeah. We better keep it that way.* “Don’t tell me that, prove that to Cindy.”

“How am I meant to do that? I can’t prove I don’t like Eloise without being a dick, and I don’t really wanna do that.”

“I’d hope not.” I harden my stare. “Prove to Cindy you love her, not that you don’t love Eloise.”

“Ahh, right. Thanks, Pops. Don’t forget about tonight.”

Oh, right. I totally forgot tonight is when Kevin is proposing to Cindy. His plan is to propose to her in the middle of town in front of everyone. I’m pretty sure he’s planned a whole day of stuff, but we are meant to be in town around seven to see it go down.

“I hope the day goes how you want,” I tell him before ducking back into my room. I need to get myself sorted before I go and find Eloise.



“Okay, one more, Moose.”

Eloise drops to a knee in front of Moose, and he trots forward, licking all over her face. I chuckle to myself, but it must not have been as quiet as I thought because they look at me. Moose runs over with some kind of knitted thing wrapped around his body. Eloise pushes to her feet, a deep pink stains her cheeks, and heads my way too.

“You make dog clothing?”

She giggles as she undoes the thing around Moose. He rubs against her as if saying to put it back on, so she does and he trots away. “Well, kind of. It was my first one, and I was trying to get photos of him to post on my website to sell.” She twists her lips, and her cheeks deepen in color. “I hope that’s okay. I should have asked, but he’s the best model.”

“Of course it’s okay.”

She sighs, but that pink stays in place, and she doesn’t meet my eyes.

The snow crunches under my boot when I take a step. “I’ve tasted your pussy, I think you can look me in the eyes, little elf.”

“Stop it.” She swats at me, a playful smile across her face. “By the way, did you have a good nap?”

I flatten my lips. “I woke up to an empty bed.”

“You slept like fifteen hours, Morgan. Someone had to get up, let Moose out, and fill the wood stove.”

“I slept fifteen hours? What time is it?”

“I don’t know, like eleven?”

It's eleven? I can't fucking remember the last time I slept past seven. Fuck.

"Wait." I pause my train of thought. "You filled the stove?"

"I did."

"But how do you know what to do?"

She rolls her eyes, and I narrow mine. "I watch you do it all the time, Morgan. Besides, YouTube was helpful."

YouTube? Like the video streaming service Kevin used to watch ridiculous videos on? I don't know how that could be helpful in showing her how to load a woodstove.

"Stop freaking out and go look for yourself, but I warn you to be prepared for perfection."

Well, I'll be damned. She really did fill it, and she's pretty spot on about perfection.

"Well?"

"It looks like I filled it."

"See! I could be a mountain woman."

If only. After yesterday, I know I can't just let her go. The days are ticking by, and I just wasted one of the last sleeping.

Well, I'm not going to waste a minute more.

"Get ready and meet me in the kitchen in twenty."

"What? Why?"

I turn, shouting the answer over my shoulder, "Be ready and find out."

"What do I wear?"

"Something warm!"



Eloise

I can't imagine what Morgan wants to do today, but I can't wait to find out. He seemed excited, well, in a Morgan way, anyway.

I'm all dressed in the kitchen when I hear his heavy feet on the steps. I bounce in place, unable to cap my excitement any longer.

The moment he steps through the door, I throw myself at him. He's unprepared but wastes no time wrapping his long arms around my body and finding my lips with his.

"I wouldn't mind being greeted like that every time I enter a room."

I grin against his lips and pull away. "I like surprises."

He brushes a piece of my fallen hair behind my ear. "I think you are really going to enjoy this."

I already do.

Morgan leads me hand and hand to the barn, and Moose trails behind, still in his little outfit.

I never thought about animal clothing, but Moose always lays by the fire, and I wondered if he could maybe get cold. So I made a sweater for him. If he hated it, then we would never use it again, but he loved it and I'm so glad. Plus, he looks so stinking cute.

I'm so excited for Morgan to open his Christmas present from me. I hadn't planned on getting him anything before coming here, but he always makes it

a point to touch my knitted stuff, so I thought maybe he would like something of his own. Then I spent most of last night making a blanket for him, in hopes it will remind him of me when I'm gone.

It was so nice the bit I did get to sleep in his room, and it took everything to pull me from his warm bed when my alarm went off early in the morning, but I knew it wouldn't be great if I got caught in his bed or not in mine. Sneaking around isn't for me; I want to be able to hold his hand and kiss him when I please. I want to be in a real relationship after watching my parents and Cindy and Kevin. More importantly, I want that with Morgan.

He stops next to a blue tarp covering something large.

I blink at him. "Wow. It's . . . great."

He huffs and tugs off the tarp to reveal a beautiful sleigh. Like how I would imagine Santa's but it's wooden and not red. There are beautiful engravings along the sides—a show of Morgan's talent.

Moose dances around, whining, and Morgan pats his head. "Excited, old boy?"

"Excited for what?" The sleigh is great, but I'm not sure why Moose would be excited for it.

"I've mentioned having horses." He did, briefly. I haven't made it out here because I'm always too worried I'm going to walk in on Cindy and Kevin fucking. "Well, they were actually my mom and dad's horses. When he died, they became too much for Mom to handle alone, so I took them. Every year, Dad used to hook the sleigh up to the horses and take it to town dressed as Santa and pass out gifts, food, drinks, and even money."

"Your dad sounds like an amazing man."

He brushes my cheek with cold fingers. "He was, and I know he would have loved you. Someone who loves Christmas as much as he did."

I smile, and he pokes my nose. “Anyway, I have been fixing up the sleigh because it suffered some damage on the trip up here. It’s not yet usable, but hopefully next year.”

Disappointment tugs on my heart. I was hoping he was going to tell me he was taking me on a romantic horse drawn sleigh through the woods.

He moves closer, leans against it, and pulls me to him. “If you come back next year, I promise to let you have the first ride.”

My stomach flutters at the thought, but what would be the reason? It’s not like we can do long distance. There’s hardly any service here, and even if there was, it’s just not practical. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“I hope you do.”

Moments pass of us looking in each other’s eyes, but I haven’t forgotten my surprise.

“So, if you’re not taking me on a horse drawn sleigh, what are we doing out here?”

He chuckles. “No sleigh rides just yet, but I thought you could help me do a carving. Since, you know, you are the one that sold them all.”

Maybe it’s not a horse drawn sleigh ride, but this sounds just as cool. I’ve watched Morgan from the living room window that overlooks the barn for days, and I’m always tempted to sit in here and watch him up close, even maybe help, but nervous that maybe he doesn’t like an audience.

Morgan helps get me all dressed for woodworking, and the more layers he adds, the more nervous I grow. I’ve never used a chainsaw or any machinery actually. I tell Morgan of my worries.

“I’m going to be here the whole time. Okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

I don’t know what I expected wood carving to be like, but it’s not as easy as

Morgan makes it look.

Even with him behind me and holding onto the chainsaw, it got away more than a few times, and the only reason I know that is because Morgan shook with laughter each time it happened.

I don't know how long it takes, but I start to see a bear head and not just a lump of wood. He asked what I wanted to carve, and I chose a bear but didn't tell him why. Bears remind me of Morgan, in more ways than one.

He lets me duck out when I become uncomfortable so he can finish and I can just watch, which I prefer to do anyway. Who knew a chainsaw vibrated so much? I wonder if I'm going to wake up tomorrow sore.

When he's done, he rips off the safety glasses and lifts his noise-canceling headphones to the top of his head.

“So?”

“It was fun!” I think I overcorrected with too much excitement, and he laughs. “Okay, so, it was fun, for about thirty minutes, but I love watching you do it.”

He drops a kiss to my lips. “Fine, you stick to your knitting.”

“Thank you very much.” I cross my arms and lift my chin.

“I think we've worked up an appetite, what do you think about lunch?”

Well, I've never turned food down, so I'm not going to start now.

Chapter Seventeen

Morgan

MAKING LUNCH WITH ELOISE is easy. Doing anything with Eloise is easy. It's like we are in sync. When I move one way, she goes the other. We work around each other seamlessly.

I knew carving would be a toss-up if she would like it or not, but I'm glad she got to feel what I feel when I do it since she watches me enough.

"I was thinking I could teach you to knit."

I pause with a sandwich halfway to my mouth. "You think?"

"Mm-hm." She swallows her bite and lowers her sandwich to her plate. "I carve, you knit. It's like a fun couple exercise." She pauses and her cheeks blossom. "I mean, it's just, uh, since I did your hobby, maybe, you, uh, would like to try mine?"

I love when she stumbles over her words because she's embarrassed.

"I'd love to."



Eloise grabs all her knitting stuff and meets me on the couch. She drops a ball of yarn to my lap with two needles poking out of it. “I don’t know your favorite color, but brown reminds me of you.”

“I don’t think I have one, so that works.”

She blinks at me, then waves away my comment and takes her place next to me with her own ball. She shakes out the blanket next to her and drapes it over our laps, I watch her intently.

“Habit.”

“I’m not judging.”

Her lips close over her teeth, but she holds a smile. “I know.”

Who knew knitting was so fucking difficult? Not me, that’s for sure. You think it’s easy when you see other people doing it because they’re just moving their hands back and forth, but no, that’s not it at all. You have to hook, but there’s certain loops you have to make sure you hook, and others you don’t. Honestly I gave up after ten minutes and have just been pretending, but Eloise is so lost in whatever she’s making that she hasn’t noticed.

“Are you sleeping?”

I jolt and open my eyes. “No.”

“I can’t believe you!” I’m surprised to see a whole ass baby blanket finished on her lap. She glares at me as she wraps it up and shoves it in her knitting bag on the floor.

“I’m sorry.” I nudge my nose against her cheek. “I bet there’s something I can do to make up for it?” To hint at what I mean, I press a deep kiss into her neck.

She lets out a heavy breath. “Fine, but no passing out this time.”

That’s a promise I can keep. “That isn’t common.”

She smiles proudly. "I know."

I push Eloise onto the couch and follow after her. "Where are your parents, by the way?"

"They followed Cindy and Kevin into town."

Thank fuck.

I sink my hands in her hair and revel in the taste of her lips. She ate a few cookies after lunch and tastes exactly like a chocolate chip cookie. It's addictive.

My tongue slips past her lips and dances with hers. She tugs on my shirt, and I waste no time pulling it off. I tug hers up after, pleased to find her braless. Kissing down her body, she whimpers when I suck her nipple in to my mouth. I play with the other one, ensuring both are being stimulated.

Her hips buck, but they don't get far with my weight on her.

I'm feeling just as needy, so I pull us to sit up and place her on my lap. She tangles her hands in my hair, then strokes down my beard, to my chest. Eloise's touch is fucking euphoric and sends my body into a frenzy with the gentlest touch.

Need zaps its way up my spine. I grip her neck and force her off so I can see her face. Hunger burns in her eyes, and I groan.

"I need to be inside you."

She nods, scrambling to get off my lap. I make do of getting my pants off while she does the same.

I'm leaning over and notice something has fallen out of her knitting bag. I pick it up and examine it in my palm.

"That's a small mitten."

I look in her bag, noticing the several other pairs, all ranging in size. "Do you get a lot of orders for that stuff?"

She nods. “Yeah, but those aren’t orders. Those are for the homeless shelter back in town. I make stuff every year to bring to the people there. I went by last month to check on the numbers, and there was a young family. The dad was in a bad accident, leaving him without an arm, so he was laid off from his job. Anyway, with the medical bills, they couldn’t afford to stay in their house.” Her voice drops. “They have three kids, one just four months old. He was so tiny. That mitten is for him.”

I turn the little mitten over in my hand. Emotion builds in the back of my throat. I can’t believe she does that. I drop the mitten into her bag and grip her now naked waist, tugging her back onto my lap.

“Just when I think you can’t get any more perfect.”



Eloise

When Morgan kisses me this time, it’s not the same. It’s not that feverish kiss like before. It’s a slow kiss. One you’ll remember forever. One that lets you feel everything they are.

It’s passionate, emotional, and raw, and I never want it to end.

“I should warm you up.” He kisses me harder. “But if I’m not inside you in the next two minutes . . .”

“Don’t worry. I want it. I’m ready.” He eyes me. I stroke the side of his face and nod.

He urges me to lift, adjusts his dick to line up with my opening, and pushes me down. Not hard or fast, slow and gentle. I stretch around him and scream because this angle causes his dick to go deeper than I've ever felt anything, but then he kisses me, and I turn my focus away until we are flush and he is seated completely inside of me.

“Holy fuck, you're tight.”

“I think you're just big.” I breathe a laugh. It's not easy to talk when you have a dick as big as Morgan's inside of you.

His head falls back, but he keeps his eyes on me. He stills, giving me time to adjust and letting me take the lead. Which I do. When the burning goes away, I lift almost to the end and sit again. I do that over and over, slower each time. His hands tighten with each painfully slow thrust.

“Eloise,” he grits out between his teeth.

I giggle, and that sets him off. He stands up, still seated inside of me, and backs me into the wall. The wood is cold against my back, but when he thrusts, I lose all my senses.

I meet his thrusts as best as I can from my position, but he is doing just fine without.

I've never been fucked so brutally before, yet I want more. I dig my nails into his back, and it only edges him on.

His grunts are feral and shoot straight through my ear to my pussy. I've never been so wet in my life, and the sound of wet skin hitting wet skin echoes through the cabin.

Morgan moves us back to the couch, pulls out, then orders me to kneel on the cushion and bend over the back. He moves behind me and thrusts without a warning. I cry out at the brutal force that grows with each thrust.

Like all the frustrations he's had since I got here are being fucked out of

him.

“I’m not letting you go home.” He bites onto my shoulder. “I can’t fucking let you go, Eloise.”

My heart thunders, and I drop my head onto his shoulder. “Then don’t.”

He moves his hand between my thighs and fingers my clit. I gasp, and he turns my head and shoves his tongue into my mouth.

“Tell me you’re going to stay.”

“I’ll stay.” My voice is soft and hoarse.

He nips at my lip like he did when he made me bleed. “Louder. Promise me you’re going to stay.”

My head’s not right. My orgasm is so close. That’s the only explanation for my next words.

“I promise.”

Chapter Eighteen

Morgan

THIS AFTERNOON WAS PERFECT. I've never had a better time, and sex? It's never been so good.

Now she's curled into my side on our way to town to watch my son get engaged. Surprisingly, she seems calm about the entire thing, maybe even a little excited, but I assume that's just for her sister. I'm not sure she's totally over the whole situation, but I'd like to think if she is, I had a hand in it.

"You look beautiful," I mutter before kissing her knuckles.

"And you look sexy." She stretches up, but I still have to lean down so she can kiss my cheek.

"Easy, little elf. Your pussy needs time."

She giggles, and I can't help my own smile from forming.

I don't know if what she said during sex was true or more of an in the moment kind of thing, but I meant what I said. I can't watch her walk away. She has school, but when she is done, I want her here with me. Until then, I'll drive to her every weekend until we can be together full time. I'm not keen

on a part-time relationship, but I'll do it for Eloise. I'd do anything for her, besides let her go.

It's too good with her. Everything is so easy. She fits into my life like the missing puzzle piece I didn't know I was looking for. One day I'm content in life and the next, Eloise walks in and tilts it on its axis, and I don't regret a single moment.

I throw the truck in park, and she sits up. "This is where we pretend we aren't into each other?"

Fuck. I hate that. I hate pretending anything, but I especially hate pretending I'm not in love with Eloise.

But my son is getting engaged tonight. I don't want to risk ruining the night for him. I'm not sure why it would, but Cindy is already acting weird and glaring at me anytime she sees me looking at her sister. I'm not sure how she's going to handle it when we do come out as a couple, but we can cross that bridge when we get there.

I lift her hand in mine and press a long kiss to the back of it. A little promise of *soon*.



The Christmas market is always a popular weekend in Wintercrest. Honestly, it's probably the most popular. Which explains why it was so easy to lose Eloise. I've never been bothered about her height until right now. Even with me towering over everyone, she's not easy to spot. When I do spot her, I find her next to a caricature board with her sister, laughing to the point of tears falling down their cheeks.

I stride over, hoping to look casual. “You get a drawing done?”

Eloise jumps at my voice like she does most times I sneak up on her. She takes the drawing in her hand and shoves it behind her back. “No.”

I cock an eyebrow, hoping she can read my face well enough to see my threat without actually hearing it.

“Show him. It’s so funny, Mr. Woods.”

“I am not showing him.”

Cindy tilts her head and wipes her face from tears. “Okay.” She shrugs, and just as Eloise lets her guard down, she grabs the photo from her and drops it into my hands.

I’m mortified. He drew Eloise—well, both girls, in a terrible light.

I snap my head up and find the artist drawing another set of people. I take a step, ready to lay into him, when Eloise places her hands on my chest.

I shoot her a glare.

“It’s meant to be awful, Morgan. We knew what we signed up for. They are literally paid to point out your flaws.”

Why the fuck is that even a thing? I see this booth every year, and I thought it was some wholesome drawing booth.

“You wanted him to do this?” I hold the photo up just in case they forgot what it looked like.

But they nod, not at all bothered by it. “Yep.”

I don’t understand, but instead of trying, I pass the photo back to Cindy. “Well, fine.”

“Ease up, big guy. It’s all in good fun,” Cindy says before bouncing away to find something else to do.

Eloise steps closer, still giggling. “You’re impossible.”

“I don’t enjoy you being made fun of.” I scowl at the artist again.

“Intentional or not.”

She squeezes my hand but lets go a second later and trails after her sister. I’m trying to keep my distance enough so Cindy won’t question why I’m following her around, but I’m already sick of this pretending bullshit.

Hours pass and the sky darkens. The lights keep Wintercrest as bright as it is during the day, if not brighter. People scurry around to all the vendors, but it’s nothing I’ve not seen before, so I keep near Eloise.

Briggs steps by my side, my nephew in tow.

“Hey, kid. What’s new?”

Milo shrugs. “Not much, I guess.”

I glance at Briggs in question, but he just shrugs as well. Milo is Briggs’s kid from a random hookup from eight years ago, and it’s shocking he is the only kid us Anderson brothers have wandering around beside Kevin. Briggs doesn’t have him as often as he’d like, especially now that his mom moved a few towns over with her new boyfriend, but he comes up every other holiday, and I know Briggs goes there as often as he can to see him. Before Milo, Briggs was a completely different person. Irresponsible, drunk a lot of the time, kind of an asshole, especially when you called him out for being an asshole. Now he’s chill, and he doesn’t drink much anymore. I think the call that Jenny was pregnant with Milo really woke him up, and I know a lot of people doubted his capabilities to be a dad, but he’s a damn good one if I do say so myself.

“What did you ask Santa for?”

Milo narrows his eyes at me. Fuck, he looks like his dad when he does that.

“I know.”

Ahh. “That sucks.”

He nods again. “Yep.”

Briggs shakes his head, obviously not happy about his son's gained knowledge. "Jenny thought he was old enough to know. So she told him. The day before I picked him up."

What kind of parent wants their kid to know that shit? You let them find out themselves like everyone else. Now I get why Milo is pissy; I would be too.

"Sorry, kid."

He shrugs and wanders off into the crowd. Briggs is right behind him, and I slap his shoulder on his way by. What a fucked situation, but I hope Milo knows how lucky he is to have a dad that cares for him as much as Briggs.

I glance at the clock above the courthouse, and it's almost time for Kevin to propose. I need to find Eloise.

Took longer than I would have liked, but I find her talking to the vendor at one of the stalls I actually enjoy.

The vendor smiles when I walk up behind Eloise. "I didn't think I'd see you this year, Woods."

Eloise spins, slapping a hand to her chest. "You gotta stop sneaking up on me like that."

"Oh, you know each other?" Cady asks.

"We do," I tell her, holding Eloise's stare. I cock an eyebrow. "Can I get my usual, please?"

"Two chili cheese dogs, minus the cheese, extra pickles, coming right up."

Eloise pauses midbite. "No cheese?"

I shake my head. "Never been much of a fan."

Her eyes blow wide like I just said I don't like puppies. "Well, I don't know if this is going to work between us after all." She drops her empty hot dog container in the trash and grabs a candy cane from the bucket that reads "Take one" before disappearing through the crowd.

This girl. Cady passes me my food, then I pay and snatch up a candy cane before heading in the direction Eloise went.

I've finished my food and have eaten most of the candy cane by the time I find her. This time, she's sitting on a bench looking into the sky. I ditch my trash and toss the rest of the candy cane into my mouth.

“Stop walking away from me.”

She slides over to give me room on the bench, and sighs. “It's not easy being around you and pretending like I don't want to hold your hand or kiss you.”

Her crystal eyes flick my way for a second before she looks away again.

“I know.” Knowing it's not the smartest but not caring, I place my hand on hers on her thigh and squeeze gently.

“What's everyone gathering for?”

“Oh, is it that time already? We better go so we can see.”

I keep her hand in mine to keep her from wandering away again and drag her through the crowd to the front. Normally in crowds, I stay to the back because of my height, but this is my son's proposal, and besides, Eloise is short. She wouldn't be able to see over everyone's heads like I can.

Kevin stands just at the base of the tree in the center of town.

“What is going on?”

My eyebrows bunch at Eloise's confusion. “The proposal?”

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she looks over the scene as her sister is led to him with a blindfold over her eyes by her mom. “Wait . . . like—” She swallows hard. “Their proposal?”

It's obvious to me now that Eloise was in fact not aware of the plans for this trip. Someone is going to get a fucking earful from me. Surprisingly,

she's not reacting much. Well, she's not reacting at all as the scene in front of us breaks out.

Kevin drops to his knee.

I lower my lips near her ear. "Are you okay?"

She swallows but nods. "Yeah, no, I'm fine. It's just . . . weird, I guess. Kevin's spontaneous proposal doesn't surprise me, though. Where did he get a ring last minute?"

Last minute? Spontaneous?

"Eloise, this wasn't last minute." I narrow my eyes. "Weren't you aware of the purpose of this trip?"

She stares into my eyes, and I know she was not, in fact, aware of the purpose.

Fuck.

Chapter Nineteen

Morgan

ELOISE LOOKS BACK OUT just as Kevin slips the ring on her sister's finger. She doesn't seem bothered by it at all, but I know something isn't right.

"Do you want to leave?"

"No."

"Talk to me, little elf."

She squeezes my hand and forces a smile. "I'm fine, really, Morgan. Just surprised, I guess."

"He said he wanted to propose on their anniversary." I shrug. "I guess."

And whatever calmness she was holding disperses right in front of my face. "Excuse me?"

"What did I say?"

"Their anniversary?" I know by her voice, she's pissed, but I don't think it's at me.

"Didn't you know?"

She shakes her head, and her face turns red. “He dumped me on Christmas Eve. The night of Christmas Eve, I should mention.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s the day before Christmas Eve. Meaning their relationship started before we broke up.”



Eloise

This entire year, my parents, Cindy, and even Kevin have told me nothing happened until we broke up. Well, that’s not true now, is it? I cannot believe I was so stupid to believe that. I don’t care about their proposal, but I care about them lying to me. They’ve made me seem crazy the entire year for being upset since “no one cheated.”

Morgan pulls into the driveway, and we sit. Neither of us said anything on the way home. I feel bad because I’m not mad at him, but I hate his son a little bit. A part of me feels like I shouldn’t be upset, it was a year ago and I’ve moved on . . . with his dad.

But then the betrayal hits me like a brick. Saying congratulations to them after the fact felt like acid. Her ring is gorgeous, though. Very Cindy and so perfect.

I should be happy for them, and I am, but you can be two things at once, and I’m happy and pissed.

And a little bit horny.

I shoot a look in Morgan's direction, and he lifts a questioning brow. He looks so hot tonight. A flannel that hugs his arms and hangs over jeans that are molded to his ass.

My parents pull up beside us, and I sigh. At least Cindy and Kevin are staying in town tonight.

We climb out and head inside. Mom and Dad are exhausted and head to bed almost immediately but not before Mom talks to me about the wedding plans her and Cindy discussed already. Apparently she wants a summer wedding on a beach.

I say goodnight like normal and bound up the steps.

It's not fair everyone else in their life can be with who they want, but I have to hide my relationship like I'm embarrassed of it because it's a little taboo. Well, not anymore. I love Morgan, and I think he feels the same. I think we could have something real between us, and I want to see what it is.

It's only fair I get to be happy too.

Morgan is letting Moose out, so I know I don't have long to set up what I want to before he comes looking for me. He's so worried I'm upset about the proposal, and as sweet as it is, I feel bad because I don't think he understands how much I care for him. I don't care that my ex has moved on, it was never about that, but it's certainly not about that now. Kevin and I were never going to work.

But Morgan and I could.

I just hope he feels the same.



I change positions for the hundredth time because Morgan is taking forever to come to his room.

After the breakup, I was reading blogs online about how to move on. One of them mentioned buying lingerie for yourself. Don't buy it in hopes someone else will see it, buy it for yourself and wear it whenever you need a confidence boost. So, that's what I did, and it worked. There's just something about wearing a matching bra and panties that makes you feel like you can take on the world.

I brought a few different ones for the trip, assuming no one would see them, but now that I know someone is going to see it, specifically Morgan, I'm a little nervous.

What if I don't look good? It's too tight here and baggy there. Or it just doesn't fit how it should.

But I know it fits because I know my size and have ordered from this company a few times who specialize in flattering plus-size lingerie.

Still. Since he's not here yet, I pad to the bathroom and double-check myself. It's just my insecurities, because I look hot.

The red lace frames my breasts perfectly. The high-waisted thong accents my wide hips and curvy thighs. I think being with Morgan has spiked my confidence. The way he looks at me—clothed and not—it's addicting, like I'm the best thing he's ever laid his eyes on, and I kind of love it. No, not kind of. I really love it.

I'm back kneeling on his bed, a new confidence keeping my spine straight.

Finally, his heavy footsteps echo in the hall. He stops at my room. I giggle to myself about what he's seeing. I made it look like I was lying in bed with my knitting stuff under the blankets. The bed squeaks, then squeaks again.

I don't know how, but I can tell his footsteps are angry when he hits the

hallway again. The handle on his bedroom door rattles, but I locked that too.

“You’re going to regret this, little elf. I hope you know that.”

Nerves come out as a giggle, one I know he heard, but to my surprise, he doesn’t break down the door. He retreats to my room, and I get the best idea. I run toward the patio, planning to lock it, but he’s quicker than I am, and the door is blowing open before I can even get to it. I stumble back, only to trip over his bed, just like that first night he stared down at me, but this time, he’s not the naked one.

His shoulders heave with heavy breaths, and his eyes dart around my body, unsure where to look first. I scurry to my knees.

He tsks, shaking his head slowly.

“You wrapped my Christmas present.”

I nod eagerly.

“Then you locked it away from me.”

Another giggle bubbles out of me.

“You really shouldn’t have done that.”

Morgan lunges, grabs me, lifts, and tosses me onto the bed. I bounce, and he’s on me, bruising my lips with harsh kisses I gladly accept. He nips at my lip.

“Bad girl, little elf.” I arch my back, and he drags his teeth down my throat. Taking my strap in his mouth, he jerks his head, and it snaps.

I shudder but complain—I liked this outfit.

“You shouldn’t have wrapped my present if you didn’t want me to”—he grips each side of my panties and pulls, ripping them as well—“rip into it.”

He dives between my legs, licking up the wetness that’s been building while I waited for him. “You’re soaked.” His voice is muffled by my thighs.

I arch to meet his thrusts. “You took forever.”

He hums against me and nips at my inner thigh. I sink my hand into his hair and grip. He grunts.

His beard tickles my thighs, and between that and his skill with his tongue, I'm inching closer to an orgasm faster than I ever have before.

Just before I hit that point, he pulls away. I gasp out loud and glare at him.

"I told you, you were going to regret it, little elf."

Oh my, Santa, he can't be serious. "I just wanted to tease you a little!"

"And this is me teasing you." Morgan slips from the bed and tugs his shirt over his head. My pussy aches with the need to come, and if he won't do it, then I will.

I move my hand to my throbbing clit. It's painful when I touch it from being so close to an orgasm.

Morgan growls, grips my hand, and pulls it away. "You. Do. Not. Come. Without. *Me.*"

I whimper, and he sucks my finger into his mouth.

"No. Since you can't keep your hands where they belong, I will just need to restrain them."

"No!" I hated not being able to touch him back when we were in the shower. I do not want to go through that again.

He grabs my legs and yanks me down the bed. Using my panties, he forms some makeshift handcuffs and ties my arms behind my back, and the only thing I can do is let him. I pretend to fight, but it's no use with how big he is.

He leans back, and I'm fully secure and grin like a mad man. This is the first time since I've been here that I'm actually seeing the feral side of my mountain man. It's a bit of a turn-on.

Wishing I could touch him, I wiggle my wrists, but there's no way I'm getting out of them.

“Maybe next time you won’t try and keep me from what’s mine.”

My stomach flutters. I love hearing him call me his.

“Do you mean that? I’m yours?”

His exterior softens for just a moment. “With everything I have. Now, roll over and put that ass nice and high for me.”

When I don’t do it as quick as he likes, and not because I’m being stubborn but rolling without your arms isn’t as easy as you’d think, he grips my hips, flips me, and hikes my ass up how he wants.

He groans almost like he’s in pain. Without being able to use my arms, I’m unable to look back at him. I really hate this.

Morgan’s jeans drop to the floor with a thud from his belt, then he’s lining up with my entrance and thrusting in without warning. I cry out, and he places a hand on the back of my head, burying my face into his bed to mute my cries.

My pussy is so full with him inside me like this, and I thought he was rough last time, but it’s nothing compared to right now. Thrust after thrust is brutal, and I’m not sure I’m even healed from the first time, but I love the burn of my body trying to stretch enough for him. It’s still so tight, even with how wet I am.

My mind grows foggy from lack of oxygen, and like he can sense it, he lifts my head by my hair. I gasp for a big breath to replenish my lungs.

He drags me up and holds me against his chest, still fucking me but not as hard. “I know fucking you is wrong—” He grunts and slams into me the hardest yet. “But I can’t stop. You are irresistible to me, little elf. Your body was meant to take my brutal fuck, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

He fucks me until the brink of no return, then stops. Again. He drops me

onto the bed, and this time, an actual tear drops down my cheek. I roll over and glare at him. I don't think I've ever been so sexually frustrated as I am right in this moment.

He doesn't seem to be in much better shape than me. Eyebrows knit, jaw tight, and his cock looks ready to burst with how angry the tip is.

"Have you learned your lesson yet, little elf?" he asks through gritted teeth.

"I have. Please make me come."

"Thank fuck."

Morgan fucks me, facing each other this time, and drops kisses between my lips and tits. At one point, he growls in my ear, and it pushes me to come harder than I ever have.

He slaps a hand over my mouth to mute my screams and latches onto my shoulder with his teeth. His thrusts are haphazard, and his grunts are just as untamed. Like a wild animal.

I wrap my legs around his hips. One of his hands drifts down my thigh, and he grips my ass.

Sitting up, he places a hand on each thigh and spreads them, giving him a better angle to fuck me. I can feel his need to burst, and his eyes roll back and his dick throbs inside of me, shooting his hot cum deep.

That's when I realize we've not once used a condom. I'm on birth control, but he never asked, and pregnancy is still possible.

"I could get pregnant, you know." My voice is a whisper.

He opens one eye to look at me. "That's the hope, Eloise."

I gasp. "*What?*"

"If that's the only way I can keep you, so be it."

Chapter Twenty

Morgan

“YOU WANT TO CARVE the ham this year?”

Kevin stops in the middle of the kitchen with a casserole Martha made in his hands. “You don’t?”

Reed claps him on the back, careful not to drop his plate of deviled eggs. “You’re engaged. A big boy now.”

Kevin scowls, and Reed and I chuckle. “It’s true, Kev. If you want to take my carving this year, you can.”

It’s been a tradition in my family for years that the men take turns carving the ham for Christmas Eve dinner. I thought with Kevin being home, it would be a good idea to let him do it. One day he will be the head of his family, so it’s good practice.

We wander into Mom’s dining room and place the last of the food onto the serving table. I find a curly blonde head in the group of people, and my heart skips a beat. She looks radiant tonight, like always, but the dress she’s wearing is the perfect deep red to complement her pale skin and light hair,

and it fits like a glove. Black tights cover her curvy legs, and I smirk at the set of Christmas slippers on her feet.

Someone steps next to me, and without looking, I know it's my eldest brother, Ledger. He has something about him that you know when he's around. Out of all my brothers, I was always closest with him. We did everything together, and our personalities are the most alike. Even now he will find me in a crowd because he doesn't like to talk to anyone but me. He loves the rest of our family, but we have an unbreakable bond. I think it's because he was with Dad that day he saw me sleeping on the bench. I'm not sure, but I appreciate that Ledger confides in me. We all need someone.

“That the girl I keep hearing about?”

“It is.”

“She's pretty.”

I flick a warning look at him, but I know he's just making an observation. “She is.”

There's a moment of silence, but it's not awkward, this is just how Ledger is since the fire. “I'm happy for you.”

“Thank you.”

If you didn't know Ledger, you wouldn't notice the pain in his eyes when he says, “Hold onto her.” But I do know him, I see it, and I wish more than anything I could change my brother's past because no one deserves what he was dealt.

He walks away, and I take in Eloise again. A heaviness fills my chest at seeing her smile. The thought of one day not getting to see her is like a brick to the face. Especially knowing that day is coming as soon as it is.

Mom calls everyone to gather for a prayer before the food. She calls me to serve the ham, and I find Kevin in the crowd. He shifts on his feet but

eventually takes that step toward me.

I place my hands on his shoulder and turn him toward our family. “I’m letting Kevin take my year. One day he’s going to have his own family to carve for.” I glance at Cindy who has a big smile on her face, then Eloise who is also smiling. “This seems like a good year for him to start.”

“Don’t fuck it up!” Coast shouts, and Mom slaps the back of his head. The room falls into easy laughter.

I help Kevin slice the ham, only assisting when he needs. When he’s finished and everyone has their plates, I set up his plate. He gets to his seat but doesn’t sit down.

“I have something to say.”

The room falls silent, and Kevin’s cheeks turn a deep red. He scratches at the back of his neck and laughs. “I’m just going to get into it. My beautiful bride to be”—he looks down at Cindy—“is expecting.”

It takes longer than it should for his words to register in my head. Everyone is staring at me with smiles while I get where I need to be.

Martha is hugging her daughter, bawling her eyes out. I stare at Kevin as he waits for my reaction.

“You’re going to be a dad?”

He chuckles awkwardly. “Yeah. I guess so. We found out a few weeks ago.”

The room bursts with congratulations for the couple, then I take my seat, and Ledger leans my way.

“You good, *Grandpa*?”

Grandpa. I’m going to be someone’s grandpa.

My eyes fly across the room to Eloise, and she’s already looking at me. That same apprehension on her face as I’m feeling.

“I . . .” Am I? I’m beyond happy for my son, and this shouldn’t change anything, but I’m going to be a grandfather. I knew our age gap was big before, but this is huge. Eloise hasn’t even graduated from college and I’m going to be a grandpa.

“It just hit you how old you are?”

He’s not being a dick but asking with genuine curiosity, but I scowl at him anyway.

“It doesn’t change anything, Morg. She wanted you before, she’s going to want you after.”

Yeah, but for how long? Are we going to be together and one day she just decides I’m too old and she doesn’t want me? I’ve been cast aside for being too old before. The worst part is, this time I wouldn’t even blame her.

“It doesn’t change anything, Morg. Get out of your head.”

Maybe he’s right, but why does everything feel different now?



Eloise

Morgan is freaking out, and all I can do is sit here and watch as he spirals. I saw him congratulate Kevin and Cindy, but as soon as they turned away, his forced smile fell. I’ve been trying to get to him since dinner ended, but he’s constantly being dragged away by someone else.

My anxiety is sky high by the end of the night. And I think it’s been a little noticeable because Morgan’s mom calls me to the kitchen. Supposedly to

help, but when I walk in there, the kitchen is spotless. I knew the boys were cleaning after dinner but geesh. They finished that in no time.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Are you seeing my son?”

My mouth gapes at her sudden question. I snap it shut. “Uh . . .”

She places her hands on her hips and impatiently taps her foot. “Well?”

Heat burns up my neck. I’m not used to being confronted about anything, but especially about something like this. I know there is no point in me lying because I’ve never been a good liar. “Yes. I think?”

Mary grins the widest I’ve ever seen, and she pulls me in for a tight hug. “I thought there was something between you that night. I saw it in his eyes. A look I’ve never seen from my Morgan before.”

Relief flows out of me, and I laugh a happy sound. “Well, I’m glad.” It feels so good to get this off my chest, to be speaking about our relationship with someone who’s not in my head. Like it’s real. Just as Morgan is acting weird . . . Great.

She asks me several questions about how we came about, and I’m beyond glad to tell her. I leave out the bits I don’t think a mom would enjoy hearing, and by the end, we’re both bouncing with joy.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for one of my boys to find love. I thought I had done something wrong raising them. Made them too independent and they would never find someone they wanted to share a life with, but here you are! You’ve blossomed a new hope for the rest of them.”

“Oh, I don’t know about all that.”

“Well, I do.” Her voice is firm.

All I can do is smile. I think it’s really sweet she’s this excited about her son “finding someone.”

“Aren’t you a bit worried about the age gap?”

She waves me away like that’s the most ridiculous thing anyone has ever said. “You are a grown woman; you know what you want and don’t. No one can fault you for that. Besides, you can’t help who you love, can you?”

I grin. “So I’ve been told.”

“You go enjoy the rest of the party. I’m sure I will be seeing you around.” She winks, then shoos me away.

I’m laughing when I walk back into the living room.

“What did Kevin’s grandmother want to discuss?” Cindy comes from out of nowhere, scaring the shit out of me.

I slap a hand to my chest over my beating heart. “Jeez, Cind.”

“Well?” She urges with annoyance in her voice.

I know I’m not ready to tell my sister about Morgan and me, especially when she’s acting like this. I push by her. “Nothing really.”

She catches up with me and scoffs. “There comes a point when you have to stop playing the victim card, Elle. So I got with your ex and am now engaged and pregnant. It’s not like it would have ever been you. You told me you couldn’t see a future with him.”

“I said I didn’t know.” I frown at her. “Either way, the only one playing the victim right now is you. Not everything is about you, sis. Mary wasn’t speaking to me about you or Kevin at all.”

“Then what?”

“None of your business.” I can feel the anger radiating from her, and a few days ago, I would have returned it, but I’m not bitter anymore. I’m still not happy about their timeline, but it’s water under the bridge. “Just leave the past in the past and move on, okay?”

“I wish you would! You’re the one who’s been acting weird since Kevin

announced I was pregnant. Are you upset it's not you? I'm the older sister, Elle. I'm meant to be doing all this first."

"I am fully aware who is older, Cindy." Even if she's not acting like it. "I am not upset. I was not acting weird. I'm just awkward. That's all." It's not technically a lie. All of Morgan's family is here. Five large men with over-the-top personalities is a bit intimidating. Especially the eldest. I don't know what it is about him, but it feels like he has a dark secret. I've caught him looking at me a few times, usually when chatting with Morgan, and I'm curious what was being said.

"That better be all, Elle. I don't need you trying to get back at me or something by sucking up to Kevin's family, making them think you are a better choice."

She's just being ridiculous, and I don't care to engage in this conversation anymore. I grab my sister's hand and look deep into her eyes. "I'm not trying to get back at you. I'm happy for you, Kevin, and my future niece or nephew. There's nothing else to the story, okay?"

Finally, I think I got through her thick skull. Her eyes fill with tears, and she throws her long skinny arms around me. "I'm sorry I've been a bad sister. And so crazy."

"You're pregnant, it's okay."

She pulls away, and I wipe her face. "You're going to ruin your makeup. Stop crying."

"No, it's waterproof."

I grin, because of course it is.

Chapter Twenty-One

Morgan

I CAN FEEL ELOISE'S anxiety, and it's killing me. She tried to get to me all night, but I told my brothers anytime she looked like she was going to approach me to pull me away. I'm fully aware how immature it is to avoid her, but I don't know what to say.

Which is a problem because now we are stuck in the truck together. I thought about asking Reed to come crash just so someone else would be in the truck but figured that would only piss her off, and that's the last thing I want to do right now.

She doesn't even sing along to the Christmas songs on the radio. That's how I know I've fucked up.

Minutes pass of nothing but unsung Christmas carols until I can't stand it any longer. "Elo—"

"You're forty-two, right?"

Well, I think I can kiss not pissing her off out the window.

"I am."

“Right. And considering your son is twenty-five, engaged, and soon to be living with his fiancée, I think it’s fair to assume a baby could come along at any point, yeah?”

She doesn’t wait for me to speak before continuing.

“Yeah, I was aware of that. I knew getting into this there would be some awkward moments in our relationship, like you being a grandpa before I’m even a mom. I knew this, Morgan, and I was okay with it. You spent all night in your head without even asking me how I feel about everything.” She hugs her midsection and sighs a shaky breath. “You didn’t even give me a chance to defend our relationship before you made up your mind to end it.”

My eyes flick to her just as a tear drops down her cheek.

“Because that’s the conclusion you came to. Isn’t it?”

My silence is answer enough. I tried thinking of every different scenario but all I could think about was a toddler calling a woman in her twenties grandma.

I throw the truck in park and sigh. “Your life is just starting, Eloise.”

Her scoff is loud. She shoves the truck door open and turns to face me, tears rolling down her cheeks and the saddest pout tugging her gorgeous face into a frown. Meanwhile, anger still burns behind her crystal eyes.

“Yeah, you’re right. A life I was hoping to have with you.”

She slams the door, and I’m stuck sitting in my truck, watching her storm up to the cabin.

Maybe she’s right. I didn’t give her a chance, but she would have just said none of it mattered. But it does. We are at two completely different stages in life, no matter how bad I want to look past all that shit, the important shit will eventually come into play. It’s better to confront it now than after we were married, or God forbid had kids I would have to only see part time again.

I'm the bad guy right now, but in the future when she is married to an age-appropriate man living an easy life, she will be thankful.

But fuck if that doesn't suck for me. I know Eloise is my last real chance at finding love in this lifetime. So it fucking sucks that I don't get to keep her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eloise

MY EYES BURN, AND I'm not sure it's from the sun shining directly into my room or from crying myself to sleep last night.

Probably a bit of both.

I'm trying to not think about yesterday, because it's Christmas and dammit, I said I was going to have a good Christmas, so I plan to do just that. I'm no longer allowing anyone to affect my holidays and how I enjoy them.

However, that is the second Christmas Eve in a row I've been broken up with and I'm starting to think I have a stigma about me or something.

Good day, Eloise. I can cry tomorrow.

I push the covers back and stretch my arms above my head. My room is freezing compared to how it usually is, and even though I added a log before bed like always, the fire is nearly burned out. Weird.

Mom got us all matching Christmas pajamas, so I pull them on before heading to the bathroom. I don't know if anyone else is awake, but I'm kind of hoping not. I'd like a moment to feel sorry for myself that way I can slap on a smile once everyone is awake.

The moment I step on the stairs after using the bathroom, I freeze. Unsure where to look first, I take in the garland twisting down the banister. Lights cover each beam, and the farther down the steps I go, the more I see. The entire living room is decorated to the max in Christmas décor.

Moose bounds over to me, licking at my hand to get me to pet him. I scratch behind his ears, then down his chin. I press a kiss to his nose, and he's so kind to give me one back.

“What happened in here, Moose? Who did—”

The front door slams, followed by a string of curse words. I stiffen, wondering if I have time to run back up the stairs, but Morgan and Dad walk into the room before I can decide. Dad smiles when he sees me, but Morgan's back is to me since they are carrying . . . What the hell is that?

“Good morning, sweetheart. Merry Christmas.”

Morgan's gaze darts to me, following Dad's attention. He stumbles seeing me but doesn't drop the carving.

Dad and Morgan set the carving next to the tree. Dad comes my way, kisses my cheek, and gives me a knowing look. “You can't help who you love, right?”

Tears sting my eyes. “I guess not.”

He squeezes me before disappearing into his and Mom's room, leaving me and Morgan alone.

“You weren't meant to be awake yet.”

“I wake up early on Christmas.”

He dips his chin and glances around the room. “Well?”

“You did this?” I scan the decorations with a new appreciation because the Grinch himself decorated the entire room. “Why? Did your heart grow three sizes overnight?”

He scratches the back of his neck and I think attempts a smile but it falls short. “Because I fucked up.” He takes a hesitant step toward me, but I take one back, and he stops. “Please listen to what I have to say.”

I don’t really want to, I’ve cried enough, but it’s Christmas—the season of giving. “I’m listening.”

He nods, pulls his work gloves off, and tosses them onto the couch before moving toward me, staying a few feet away.

“I fucked up.”

“You already said that.”

“I know, but I wanted to say it again because it’s true. Last night, after Kev announced that they are expecting, everything hit me. I tried to not think the way I did, but it was impossible. I knew I would probably be a young grandpa because I had my son young, but you didn’t sign up for that.” He holds his hand up when I open my mouth, I snap it shut. “My point is, you were right, I made up every decision in my life without even thinking about or asking what you wanted. I thought I was doing the right thing by letting you go. I was up all night thinking about it.” He holds his arms out, hinting at the decorations. Obviously I knew he did it because he just said, but I didn’t really think about how long this had to have taken. Like hours.

“I went back and forth on what was right, and wrong. If I am the best decision for you, or if I took the decision away from you altogether.

“We both know the answer. So . . .” He takes another wary step. “I’d like to ask your decision but first . . .” He moves to the side, and my eyes glide to the carving in front of the tree. I slip by him to see it, and my heart skips a beat.

“It’s us,” I mutter, unsure he will hear me.

“It can be,” he answers.

I lift my hand and gently place it on the smaller bear's head.

"Careful, it's not completely sealed yet."

I drag a single finger down to the initials M and E that were carved in.

"I can't believe you did all this."

He shoves his hands into his pockets and shrugs. "I fucked up."

My laugh is breathy because I'm still not sure I forgive him.

"There is one last thing before you answer."

Morgan leads me outside, only stopping to let me get shoes and a jacket on. The one from his mom's, it has grown to be my favorite because it's just so warm.

He stops at the top of the steps, and I look out over the front yard at the two horses and . . . a sleigh behind them. The same brown one he showed me in the garage.

I bring my hand to my mouth and walk down the steps toward it. I pat the horses on the face, then move to the sleigh and touch the cold wood.

The snow crunches behind me, but he stays a good distance away still. I'm glad because all I want to do right now is kiss him.

"I thought you said it wouldn't be ready for another year?"

"Ledger came over to help; turns out it didn't need that much work."

He called his brother in the middle of the night to help him fix this sleigh just to surprise me with it?

I'm starting to forget why I was even mad.

I spin in place, biting back my excited grin. "Do we get to go for a ride?"

"If you want."

"I can't think of anything I'd want more, quite honestly."

Morgan meets my grin with his own, but it still doesn't meet his eyes.

"After you." He holds a hand out to help me up, but I remember what I

have sitting under the tree and tell him to hold on before running back inside. I grab his two presents and hurry back outside.

“We’re doing presents later, little elf.”

My stomach flutters hearing him use my nickname once again. “Just open them, they will be useful.”

He cocks an eyebrow but rips the first one open and smiles when mittens and a hat falls to his lap. I help him adjust them and get them on, pleased to see they fit. I knew his measurements would be larger than I was used to, so I added some extra stitches.

“Thank you.”

“Now this one.” I drop the other one on his lap.

He tears the paper and smiles. He examines the blanket with the sweetest face, *shakes it out*, and lays it over our laps. He tucks the wrapping paper into the side of the seat and grabs the reins. “Ready?”

“Hold on!” Someone shouts behind him. I peer around to find my sister running out of the house waving her arms.

“Cindy?” I laugh seeing her night gown. It has a large Mrs. Claus face on her chest and I laugh harder when Kevin walks out behind her wearing a sweater with Santa’s face.

“What the fuck are they wearing?” Morgan mumbles only for me to hear.

I wrap my arm around his and giggle.

Cindy stops next to the sleigh. She eyes my arm wrapped around Morgan’s and her lips flick up. “Here I was thinking you were getting close to Mr. Woods to get with his son.”

We share an awkward laugh. Kevin steps next to her and scratches the back of his neck.

“So, you two are. . .”

Morgan glances at me. “Hopefully.”

“Well, I support it. Not that it really matters, but still. You have my blessing.”

She’s right. It doesn’t matter. “Thanks, sis, and you guys have mine. Officially.”

Kevin slaps his dad’s back. “Good choice, Dad.”

I drop my head to Morgan’s shoulder. Knowing he is grumbling on the inside, I giggle when he says a clipped, “thanks.”

They back off, letting us get on with our ride, only after Cindy makes Kevin promise to take her after.

Neither of us force conversation, just enjoy the sound of the horses trotting through the snow. It’s barely snowing but the snowflakes are large, the fluffy kind that get stuck in your hair.

Morgan passes me his hat but keeps the gloves since I can use the blanket to keep my hands warm. It’s way too big, and brown isn’t my color, but I take it happily and slip it over my messy morning hair.

I don’t know how long we trot around for or where we went but somehow we finish at the lookout at the end of his driveway. He calls the horse’s to stop in the perfect spot to enjoy the Christmas morning.

A few minutes more of peaceful silence pass before he breaks it.

“I know I hurt you. I can’t apologize enough, Eloise.”

“You did.” I lick my lips and turn my gaze to him. A giggle pours from me, finding a few snowflakes stuck to his beard.

His eyebrows bunch. “What?”

“You have a few snowflakes stuck to your beard. A bit more and I could call you Santa Claus.”

He runs his hands through his beard, wiping the flakes away. “Give it a few

years, I'll probably look that way without the help from the snow."

"I can't wait to see that."

His eyes bounce around my face. "What are you saying?"

Am I completely delusional to forgive him? Maybe, but he was only doing what he thought was right. He couldn't have been further off, and we will need to work on him letting me make my own decisions, but I'm confident in my choice to see where things go between us. I've never had a connection so strong and so soon with anyone before. I think it would be a loss to just walk away from it. And not that my family's opinion really matters, but it's nice to know they support us anyway.

I reach over and grab his hands in mine. "I'm saying that I forgive you.

"And I can't wait to see you with gray hair."

Morgan takes a few seconds to react, a large goofy smile stretches across his face. "I can't wait to be the old man with eye candy on his arm."

I shove him, and he chuckles, pulling me against his chest and kissing my forehead.

"No more making decisions for me, okay?"

He pulls away and lifts an eyebrow. "Well, I can't promise that; I like ordering you around."

I like it too. "Okay, then no decision that would hurt me or us."

His smirk slips a hair as guilt bleeds into his emotions. "I promise."

We start the short trip up his driveway, hand in hand.

"You know your mom said I give her hope for the rest of her sons."

Morgan's laugh is loud and booming, echoing off the trees, and I think I even saw some snow fall because of it. "She can dream."

"Hey." I nudge him. "If this mountain man can find love, I bet the rest can too."

Morgan flashes me a mischievous smirk and shakes his head. “You won’t believe it, but I’m the tame brother.”

He’s right, I simply won’t believe it.

I drop my head to his shoulder.

“Merry Christmas, little elf.”

Merry Christmas indeed.

The End

Acknowledgements

Thank you for reading! I hope you all have a very Merry Christmas <3

Stalk me!

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