

# HOLIDAY NIGHTS



K WEBSTER • SKYE WARREN • LAURELIN PAIGE  
C HALLMAN • ALTA HENSLEY • DANI RENE • LYRA PARISH  
JENIKA SNOW • XAVIER NEAL • EVE DANGERFIELD

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A VERY DIRTY CHRISTMAS

LYRA PARISH

# CHAPTER ONE

Hayden

“**J**INGLE BELLS, BATMAN smells,” I say as I stock the shelves at the bookstore with the upcoming releases. I can’t believe Christmas is in just a few days, and then it will be a brand new year.

“Robin laid an egg,” Kinsley continues, carrying a stack of hardcovers she can’t see over. She sets them down on the counter and takes in a deep breath. “Books are heavy as hell.”

“You can say that again,” I tell her. Even though she works as a reporter for the newspaper, and since we officially got back together, she’s been working with me on the weekends. It’s free labor, though. It’s just like old times, me helping customers and her reading romance books in the comfy chairs in front of the fireplace.

Since it’s mid to late December, the temperatures have significantly dropped. Last week, we even saw some snow, but it hasn’t really stuck. However, the light dusting always puts me in the holiday spirit. Kinsley and I danced in it, but then we tried a snowball fight, and it melted in our hands before we could toss it.

I move across the room toward her and slide my lips against hers. The kiss deepens, and she grabs my shirt with her fists. Before we can progress any further, the bell above the door opens.

“Seriously,” her brother Harrison says, catching us. His cowboy hat rests haphazardly on his head, and he’s wearing a shit-eating grin.

Kinsley groans. “You’ve got the worst timing in the world, I swear.”

“Learned it from you, sis.” As he walks toward us, his boots shuffle across the floor. “I need y’all to help me pick out a book for Grace.”

Grace and Harrison have been best friends since they were kids. Everyone in town thinks they have a thing for one another, but they’ve denied that for years. Considering they have both dated other people and never crossed the line, I’m inclined to believe them. But I’m not fully convinced when I see how they look at one another. Everyone gives them a hard time, though. I try to stay out of it.

“I don’t think we have any books about dating your best friend,” Kinsley says.

Harrison rolls his eyes. “She’s looking for this one with dragons and erotica or some shit. I dunno. It’s on her Christmas list. Do you know which one I’m talking about?”

“Christmas is in three days.” Kinsley gives him a death glare.

“And?”

Before they can get into a full-blown argument, I walk past Harrison and grab the book he’s referring to. “Here you go.”

“This is it?” He looks at the cover. “It looks...*harmless*.”

Kinsley snorts. “It’s hot as hell. And when she’s done with it, you should read it, too.”

“Right.” He flips the book around and reads the blurb on the back.

I go to where we keep the accessories and pick up a few dragon bookmarks and a coffee mug we just got in.

“Get her these, too,” I tell him.

“Thanks, man. Anything else you think she’d like?”

Kinsley chuckles. “An engagement ring.”

“You’re wearing out my balls with this,” he says as Kinsley hands him a few more romance books.

“She’ll like them, trust me. I’ve read this one at least three times,” she explains.

Harrison walks up to the counter and sets everything down. He snags a fresh chocolate chip cookie from the tray we keep filled for our customers. It’s a tradition my mama started years ago.

“Damn, these should be illegal,” Harrison says around a mouthful, grabbing two more. I scan his gifts for Grace and place them in one of our tote bags with Main Street Books printed on the front. He scans his card and gives me a thank you.

“After she opens her presents, tell her she can text me or chat about that book at work. Trust me when I say she’ll need a support system at the end,” Kinsley tells him.

“Will do.” He grabs his bag, a couple more cookies, and he’s out the door.

Kinsley turns to me. “Where were we?”

I pull her into my arms and slam my lips against hers. Our tongues twist together as Christmas music drifts through the bookstore. She groans, fisting my shirt, and it takes everything I have inside me not to lead her to the back of the store room and devour her for lunch.

“Shit. I need you so damn bad,” she hisses. When I pull away, our lips are swollen. Kinsley reaches down, rubbing her palm against my swollen cock, and smirks. “Seems it’s mutual.”

I chuckle. “Always. I can never get enough of you.”

After we decided to give our relationship a second chance, I left Houston and moved in with her. Sure, we see each other all the time and are basically connected at the hip, but I’m insatiable when it comes to her. The more of Kinsley I can have, the merrier I am.

Taking her hand, I lead her down one of the long aisles of books. Her back presses against the shelf as I slide my tongue

back into her mouth. She moans against me as I move my hand inside her pants and panties. “Fuck, girl. You’re so damn wet.”

She moans when I rub circles on her hard little clit. I tug her bottom lip into my mouth and suck. “You’re going to come for me like a good girl,” I whisper in her ear, trailing kisses down her neck.

The fact that anyone could walk into the store right now as Kinsley hangs onto my biceps for dear life turns me on. I slide two fingers inside her slick cunt, and she lets out a guttural moan.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she pants out. “I’m already...so close.”

I flick my thumb across her sensitive bud as I finger fuck her. She grinds her hips against me as I give her what her body needs. Her hand finds its way into my hair, and she tugs hard.

At moments like this, I’m glad we don’t have security cameras in the store. Otherwise, my family would get a show.

“Hayden,” she whimpers, and then, as if I opened the floodgates, she comes. Her pussy clenches around my fingers, and she nearly loses her balance. I catch her, holding her against my chest as she comes down from her high. She laughs before falling to her knees in front of me.

“Kins,” I whisper, looking down and meeting her blue eyes.

“What? You worried someone might walk in?” Scandalously, she unzips my jeans and pulls my cock out, then places her hot mouth around me. “I manifested this, Hayden. Let me make you feel good.”



## CHAPTER TWO

### Kinsley

**H**AYDEN LOOKS DOWN at me and watches as I place his hard as fuck dick in my mouth. He fists my hair, and the Santa hat I was wearing falls off my head. Right now, all I'm worried about is returning the favor, but I also want to tease him as much as I can.

I move his jeans down, giving me access to his balls so I can massage them while I suck. His hips buck forward, his length pressing into the back of my throat. Thankfully, I don't really have a gag reflex, so I take all of him in.

He groans out, tugging my hair as I meet his brown eyes that roll to the back of his head. "Kins."

I take a break to stroke him, going from the base to the end, using spit as lube. "I can't wait to taste you."

"Keep it up, and your wish is my command."

Pre-cum glistens at the tip, and I lick it up and go back to sucking him slow and hard. My cheeks hollow, and his grunts grow louder.

"Fuck," he hisses as I pick up my pace. As his muscles tighten, I know at any moment he's going to lose himself, so I continue, using my hand to stroke as I suck.

Moments later, his hips are bucking forward. "I'm about to..."

He doesn't get the words out before I open my mouth, catching every drop of him. White-hot cum spurts onto my tongue, and he watches me intently as I close my mouth and swallow.

"You're so goddamn sexy," he whispers, helping me to my feet. Just as he's putting his cock of mass destruction away, the bell above the door rings out.

“Shit,” he says, his face flushed. We both have *that* look on our faces.

I know my hair is a mess from his hands running through it. I try to smooth it down on my head, then pick the Santa hat up from the floor and reposition it where it was. I stand, my legs feeling like gelatin.

Hayden tucks his shirt back into his jeans and sucks in a deep breath.

“Hello?” I know that voice. It’s his sister. Hailey.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Her timing might be worse than my brother’s. I know she’s moving through the bookstore right now, and I glance at Hayden, who chuckles.

Moments later, Hailey walks past the row we’re on and stops when she spots us.

“I don’t even want to know, do I?” she says, but she’s smiling. This isn’t the first time she’s caught us after the act, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Hayden said he couldn’t get enough of me earlier, and well, the feeling is mutual. He’s the love of my life, the only man who’s ever made me feel complete. This will be our first Christmas together since we broke up all those years ago. I just hope I can make it special for him.

“You’re here early,” Hayden says, grabbing my hand and leading me down the aisle.

“I was bored. Thought I’d come in and relieve you early since I know you two have to get ready for the Christmas party Summer is throwing.”

Summer is my best friend who runs the bed-and-breakfast on the Horseshoe Creek Ranch with my older brother Beckett. The two of them have been inseparable after they got past their stubborn ways and decided to give one another a chance after hating each other for a decade.

I smile. “That’s sweet of you. Apparently, I signed up to bring banana pudding.”

“Yeah, what’s the real reason you’re here?” Hayden isn’t convinced.

“That is the *real* reason. I was sitting at home, bored out of my mind. My house is spotless, so there’s nothing else to clean. I’m in a reading slump, so nothing sounds good. I’ve watched Hallmark until my eyes have bulged out of my head. So I thought I’d come to work and be productive. I know we got a shipment in, and some dusting could be done,” she explains, her eyes flicking up and down him before turning to me. “You just both look so damn guilty.”

“Don’t we always look like this?” I ask, then glance at Hayden.

He snickers because we do. It doesn’t matter where or when, if there’s an opportunity to satisfy one another, we *always* take it.

Hailey clears her throat. “The way you two can converse without saying a word is impressive. Anyway, I’ll cover the rest of the afternoon if you wanna get out of here.”

“I won’t argue with ya,” Hayden says, grinning as we walk past her. He hums “Jingle Bells” as he grabs his keys from behind the counter. I snag a cookie as Hailey lifts the stack of books I carried from the back and brings them to the thriller section.

“Thanks, sis! If you need anything, holler,” Hayden tells her as we make our way toward the exit.

“I will! Merry Christmas. Have fun tonight!”

“Oh, we will,” he says just as we step outside.

The cold air hits me, and I shiver. He wraps his arm around me, pressing me close to his body as he unlocks the car, then opens my door. I slide inside, and he quickly goes to the other side and joins me. After he starts the car, he presses the button to turn on the heated seats. They instantly get warm.

“I almost forgot about the party tonight,” I admit as we drive back to my place.

“Me too. I’m glad Hailey reminded us. We need to make sure we wrap our White Elephant gifts, and you make that puddin’.”

Summer wanted us to bring gag gifts for an adult gift exchange. All of my brothers and sisters will be there, and several locals from town, but it will be a smaller shindig than typical. She’s expecting around twenty people instead of the usual hundred that show up when Summer or Beckett throws a party.

Finger foods, adult gifts...it’s bound to be a fun time.

As we pull up to my house, we get out, and my eyes are drawn to the lit Christmas tree in the front window. I honestly love holidays, but Christmas is one of my favorites. Everyone in a fifty-mile radius seems to be in high spirits. The weather has been cooperating, and I love how our small town transforms into something you’d see in a Hallmark movie.

Hayden leads me inside, and as soon as we enter, his lips are back on mine. All the lights are out except for the warm glow of the Christmas tree.

“I love you so much,” he whispers.

“I love you, too,” I say, and he twirls me around in the living room.

“If we didn’t commit to this party tonight, I’d spend the rest of the day snuggled in bed with you until Santa Claus comes,” he admits.

I chew on my bottom lip. “Tomorrow, that’s our plan. The only person who I’m making come is you.”

He kisses me again. “Wanna take a shower?”

My brows lift with excitement. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

Hayden and I undress and make our way to the bathroom. Of course, we fool around until we're both satisfied, then crawl into bed naked. We have seven hours until we have to be at the B&B.

"Are we still wearing our matching ugly sweaters tonight?" I ask as he holds me in his arms.

Hayden snickers. "Whatever you want, babe."

"You know my brothers are going to say you're whooped."

He leans over and tucks damp hair behind my ear. "I don't give a shit what your brothers say. When it comes to you, I'll happily be whooped."

I lean over and kiss him. "I think you're really going to love what I got you for Christmas."

A small smile plays on his lips. "I've already got everything I want—you."

"Let me give you one gift right now," I beg.

"Okay, okay."

I slide out of bed and walk to the living room, then pull one of the gifts from under the tree. I sit on the edge of the bed, and Hayden doesn't take his eyes off my naked body as I push the perfectly wrapped present toward him.

He carefully unwraps it and then lifts the lid from the box.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to fit in this," he says, holding up a red thong and a lacy bra.

I laugh. "Now, that would be a sight to see."

"So does this mean you're my gift?"

"I want you to do very bad things to me while I wear this," I explain. "Knock some of those sexual items off my bucket list."

He swallows hard as he looks down at it and then back at me. "Tonight?"

"On Christmas Eve."

Hayden's mouth crashes against mine. "Fuck, I don't know what I did to deserve you. You're the perfect combination of naughty and nice."

"And lucky for you, you've been a very good boy this year."

He chuckles against my lips. "It seems like I'm going to have a *very* dirty Christmas."

"You're right about that."

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If you enjoyed this special bonus scene set in the Valentine Texas Series, check out Lyra's books to see more of these characters. Hayden Shaw and Kinsley Valentine are seen in [SPILL THE SWEET TEA](#). Each book in the Valentine Series is a small-town contemporary romance with a happily ever after!

HIS FOR CHRISTMAS  
SKYE WARREN

“Fall on your knees  
Oh hear the angel voices  
Oh night divine  
Oh night when Christ was born  
Oh night divine  
Oh night divine”  
– from “O Holy Night”



## CHAPTER ONE

THE GUARD BEHIND the glass grunted as he pulled a manila folder from the stack. “Angel Cole,” he said, sounding bored as the contents of my life slid onto the counter.

A half-empty stick of gum. A dull pencil only a few inches long.

Twenty dollars and change.

I was surprised the twenty bucks hadn’t been taken by a guard, honestly. The sad collection of items didn’t make me feel anything. I didn’t even remember using that pencil. I didn’t remember what the gum tasted like. A two year sentence had been lenient, according to the public defender, due to my age. Only two years, but it felt like my whole life—and whatever came before a distant dream.

The guard slid a clipboard to me. “Check that everything’s there, and sign at the bottom.”

I scanned the list and found something new had been added: a diploma. Two years had counted for something, after all. It was only an associate’s degree, but it was something. With any luck, I could make a new life for myself. One that didn’t involve drugs or scummy boyfriends or jail time.

I signed.

“You got a place to go?” he asked, though his gaze remained on the fuzzy TV in the waiting room behind me. The empty waiting room.

No. “I’m not sure.”

He dropped an orange sheet of paper onto the small pile. *Resources for the Homeless Community.*

My chest felt tight.

I shoved everything back into the envelope but left the flyer on the counter. That seemed to catch his attention. He looked me over. His gaze traveled down and up, crawling slow, leaving chills on my skin.

“I may know someone with a place,” he said slowly. “They’re hiring.”

My bullshit meter had been finely honed the past two years. “What kind of work?”

A humorless smile, almost a smirk. “The kind that pays.”

Shame ran through me, in that deep groove where it had been so many times before. I was too broke, too stupid, too desperate to get a real job. That had been true at sixteen, and my worst fear was that it wouldn’t be all that different. And now I was getting propositioned by the freaking guard. Whether he wanted me to sleep with guys or run drugs, it didn’t matter. I was going to get a regular job or die trying.

Having lived on the streets before, I knew dying was a real possibility.

“No thanks,” I said breezily like the dirty offer didn’t hurt. “I’m heading to New York City anyway.”

He snorted. “In this weather? You’ll freeze.”

“I have enough for a bus ticket.” Totally bluffing. I had no idea how much a bus ticket cost, and I had no money for food or housing once I got there. But the odds had to be in my favor sometime, didn’t it? I figured I was overdue.

“Good luck,” he said, in a voice that meant the exact opposite. His attention returned to the football game on TV.

Clutching the envelope in my gloveless hands, I pushed the door open. Cold blasted my face—and my body, through the thin fabric of my T-shirt. Just my luck, getting arrested in July. My clothes were no match for the December weather.

The parking lot was mostly empty, the cars parked and covered with a thin layer of snow. No one idled at the street.

My daddy hadn't come. It had been a long shot, but I'd been desperate enough to write him. He hadn't answered.

Probably for the best anyway.

I really was due for that good luck, even if the guard hadn't meant it. The winter-bright sky made me squint. Chilly air skated over my skin like the guard's cold assessment of me, raising goose bumps. I shoved my hands under my armpits and started walking toward a bus stop.

## CHAPTER TWO

**M**AYBE MY LUCK had turned after all, because I found a house with a room to let in New York City. The owner of the house was an older woman with knowledge in her eyes, like she knew where I'd been and what I'd done—and didn't judge me for it. And she agreed to let me pay rent only after Christmas.

As if that weren't enough, I landed a job.

It was only a temp position, but to a girl like me it felt like a freaking miracle. *We don't usually hire people without experience*, the HR woman had said over the phone. *But one of our assistants had a family emergency and with the holidays... your application showed up at the right time.*

I smoothed my beige skirt and turned my face up to the white, wintry sky. The pale sun wrapped around the spire at the top of the building, blinding me, and I wobbled on my high heels. A cab honked at me from behind, and I jerked forward, realizing almost too late that I was standing too close to the edge.

I shivered.

"You lost?" said a thready voice.

An older man was watching me with a concerned expression on his lined face, his dark skin a contrast to the white fluff that lined his red suit. This particular Santa manned the donation bucket right in front of the door I needed.

"Not lost," I admitted. "A little nervous."

"Ahh." He turned back to look up at the building. "You going to work for the Big Bad?"

I wasn't exactly current with the rich and famous. There were TVs in prison and the occasional magazine, but I preferred to keep my head down. But even I knew what the *Big Bad* meant. Gage Thompson was the owner of Thompson

Industries. The press had dubbed him the Big Bad Billionaire after a particularly dirty takeover of a competitor.

Then there had been that unfortunate quote that had aired again and again. He'd been on an interview with some finance show as part of a "Billionaires Under Forty" feature, looking cool and crisp in a custom-tailored suit.

*I don't make the rules, he'd said. I just win the game.*

Apprehension twisted my stomach. But it was just a silly nickname, right? The newscasters said it with an ironic twist of their lips—and a wary light in their eyes.

I tried to laugh. "He's not really that bad, is he? I figured that was just, you know, for show."

The man lifted one shoulder clad in red felt. "I hear a lot of conversations coming in and out of the building. Sounds like the man lives up to his reputation."

A knot formed in my throat. "Oh."

I shouldn't be afraid of anyone after where I'd been. No matter how big or bad he was, he was unlikely to shank me while I took a shower. The worst he could do was fire me. Although if he found out I'd lied on my application, he might report me to my parole officer. The slightest offense could get me thrown back inside. I'd heard enough stories from people who'd made it out for a few months only to get arrested for some small offense. The courts weren't kind to repeat offenders.

Lying had been stupid and desperate—and necessary.

The man smiled. "Well, you won't have to see him up close, right? Young thing like you probably start at some desk far away from him."

Or not that far. From what the lady on the phone had said, I would be temping for Mr. Thompson's personal secretary. The pay would cover all the money I owed for rent, plus extra for food.

So much freaking luck I felt sick with it.

I forced a smile. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

The man smiled. “That’s the spirit.”

I dug a dollar out of my pocket. There weren’t many more where that came from, but if there was one thing I’d learned on the inside, it was that someone always had it worse than I did. Maybe by acknowledging that person and helping them, however little, I’d feel less alone.

Less lonely.

“Merry Christmas,” I told the man, dropping my dollar into the slot.

“Merry Christmas to you. By the way—” he called to me, and I turned to face him. His eyes crinkled. “Mr. Thompson puts money in the bucket every day. Always nods hello to me too. You can tell a lot about a person by how they treat people in passing.”

Some of my worry cleared. Mr. Thompson couldn’t be all bad. I smiled a little. “Thanks, mister.”

He tipped his Santa hat. “Take care now.”

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*Have you ever been convicted of an offense or violation of the law anywhere?*

I STARED AT the black letters on white paper as my heart beat a million times a minute. I’d known there’d be paperwork to fill out my first day, and with my luck, I’d known they would ask about a criminal record. Just my mumbled answer on the phone with the HR person wouldn’t be enough. I’d have to put my lie down on paper, for the record.

I’d just hoped the question would be vague, maybe only asking about felony acts committed in the New York state limits while over the age of eighteen. Because then I could have truthfully answered no. My crimes had been misdemeanors in the backwoods of upstate New York, where paperwork seemed optional and rule-following even more so. And I had been a minor. Which maybe explained how they’d

found no record of it when they'd run the preliminary background check the HR person had mentioned.

My hand trembled as I checked the box that said *No*.

The security guy had a sour look on his face. He spent a long time looking over my form. He even left me in the front office while he made some calls, and I squirmed in the plastic bucket seat. God, what if they found out? I'd only been released four weeks ago. Not even long enough to get used to regular food and regular clothes and regular *outside*. It seemed like he wanted to refuse me, but in the end, he handed me a freshly printed name badge and sent me to an elevator around the corner.

"Oh, thank God," a dark-haired woman said when she saw me. "I thought you weren't going to show up."

"I'm sorry," I said, too quickly. At least that much I was used to, being slow and late and wrong.

*You've always been a few cards short of a deck*, my daddy had said, shaking his head. *But at least you're pretty*.

The woman blew out a breath. "It's okay. Security can be a little overzealous, but that's what they're there for, right?"

"Um. Right."

*Not overzealous enough, though*. Because I'd passed their checks. But I wasn't going to do anything bad here. Wasn't going to steal or whatever they thought ex-convicts would do. And I definitely wasn't going to store a few boxes for my boyfriend without knowing there were drugs inside. Even if I had a boyfriend, which I didn't. Billy and I had officially broken up when his lawyer tried to argue I'd been the dealer. The judge hadn't believed that, thank God, but he'd still given me eighteen months.

The woman smiled, looking frazzled. "I'm all over the place today. I was just so worried, because today's my last day before I leave. We've only got a couple hours to get you up to speed. I'm not sure when you'll have time unless... Can you stay late?"

“Oh.” I looked around, feeling a little disoriented. Everything was so shiny and reflective. It felt more like a swanky fun-house mirror ride than a place of business. I’d been so worried about getting found out that I hadn’t thought much about actually working here.

“Maybe you won’t have to. If you just explain to Mr. Thompson what happened, with security taking up all that time and—”

“I can stay late,” I assured her. I didn’t want to bother Mr. Thompson. And I definitely didn’t want him asking security about me. Besides, the temp job was hourly. Staying late meant more money, and I was grateful for the chance.

“You’re a doll,” the secretary said, clearly relieved. “What’s your name again?”

“Angel. Angel Cole.”

“Angel, the thing you have to know about working here is that Mr. Thompson is harsh but fair. Some people say he’s cold but...he’s also generous. You know what I’m saying?”

*Not really.* “Sure.” I tried for a smile. “Fair is good.”

Especially when people had done the right thing. But if they’d lied...then the fair thing to do was to turn me in to the authorities.

My stomach turned over.

Christy gave me an apologetic look. “Just do what he says and you’ll be fine. Now let me show you how the phones work.”



## CHAPTER THREE

AFTER HOURS AT the desk, my neck ached and my shoulders were tense. I stretched, the cracking sound of my joints loud in the wide-open space.

Mr. Thompson had the only office on the floor, which had startled me when I first realized that. His office was spacious, as was the waiting area where I worked, and the hallway from the elevator. But still not as large as the entire building. Apparently the rest of the floor was blocked off for some other department, but you had to take the regular elevators to get there.

This elevator was reserved for the CEO. And for the two weeks that I worked here, for me too.

*The Big Bad Billionaire.* I hadn't met him yet, and I wasn't really looking forward to it. What if he could see right through me? With his reputation for razor-sharp intuition, he could take one look at me and know what I was hiding.

Maybe he was traveling so much he wouldn't be in the office—for two entire weeks.

Yeah, not likely. And it was also unlikely he'd be able to tell I'd been in prison just by looking at me. But sometimes I felt like my time behind bars was written on my skin, grit and grime and shame embedded into me like glass. It was always a surprise when people treated me normal, even pleasant, like the Santa outside. I stood to leave, wincing at the soreness in my legs. It hadn't even been that long, only... I glanced at the clock and frowned. Wow, it had gotten late.

And it was pitch-black through the tall windows.

I still wasn't used to keeping my own schedule. A loud bell would tell me it was time for lunch, or a guard would come round us up for shower time. But here on this floor I was alone, and so I'd kept working. As if I were some kind of

windup doll that ran into a wall, unable to think for herself. *A few eggs short of a dozen*, my daddy said.

I gathered the stack of files I'd completed and carried them into Mr. Thompson's office like the secretary had told me to. But I didn't leave right away after setting them down.

Curiosity held me at the edge of his desk, let me take in every detail, every clue to the man who normally sat in that empty wide-backed chair. A plump glass paperweight shaped like a teardrop, with bubbles inside like snowflakes. A legal pad was half torn out with scribbled writing—unreadable. And a sleek black pen, its thick cylinder shell shining as if it wasn't used much, even though I was sure it had been.

Without realizing it, I leaned across the desk and picked up the pen. It was cool to the touch, but I imagined it warm—warm from the hand that held it, stroked it. I ran my finger pad over the smooth casing. What was this made of anyway? Not plastic. Not wood. Some kind of metal?

Rich people even had different pens, and this struck me as wildly important, a sign of just how little I belonged with them, in a building like this.

My stomach clenched, and I tense, pen in hand, when I felt something brush across the back of my legs. Air. Then came the subtle scent of cologne.

I wasn't alone.

A chill raced over my skin. I would have turned, but a hand on my hip stopped me. A hand. *On my hip*. The shock of it was enough to render me frozen, and I stared down at the pen in my hand, almost accusatory, as if the beauty of it had led to this. As if this was my punishment for being where I didn't belong, for touching what wasn't mine. For lying so I could get this job.

"Thank fuck," a low male voice murmured behind me.

My mouth opened, but only a faint squeak came out. I tried again. "Excuse me?"

“They told me they weren’t sending anyone.” He began to stroke me, from the dip of my waist, over my hip, and trailing down my thigh. “I’m glad they lied.”

*The HR department?* My cheeks were flaming hot... because his hand was still on my hip. His hand. My hip. My mind couldn’t quite wrap itself around that. He was touching me, caressing me, and I hadn’t even seen his face.

“I was getting desperate,” he said, “with the holidays coming up.”

I tried to imagine what desperate looked like, tried to fill in the space of his body, his face, using only his dark-whiskey voice as a guide. The picture in my mind looked nothing like the cold face that graced business magazines. That glossy image was calculated and posed. This was a warm hand on my body and breath against my hair. This was goose bumps all over my skin.

I cleared my throat. “Mr. Thompson, I—”

“No, there’s no time for that. It’s been too long, and Jesus, look at you. Where did they find you?”

I definitely didn’t want to talk about that, about the ad I’d answered or the lies I’d told. “I needed the work,” I whispered.

There was a pause where his hand froze midstroke. I held my breath, unsure whether I wanted him to stop or continue. If he stopped, he might make me leave. And the hot touch of this stranger had to be better than working the icy streets.

“I’m sure they told you about me,” he said conversationally. “They were supposed to.”

Who was supposed to tell me about him—his secretary? The security guard? *The man outside dressed like Santa?* And what were they supposed to tell me? That he liked to touch his secretary? Had he touched the other woman too? Or was he only touching me because I was a temp? Or maybe he’d found out about my past, found out that I’d lied, and he knew I’d have to do anything he wanted just to stay out of jail. Oh Jesus, this was too crazy. I felt crazy. With a little shimmy, I

managed to step aside. I turned halfway, only to be arrested by the sight of him.

I'd have wanted him to be handsome. No, he *was* handsome, when he showed up on glossy magazines and TV news reports. He was facing the camera with a fierce expression or carefully turned away, thoughtful. Proud. Strong. Composed.

He was none of those things now.

Now he looked...hungry. Like a wolf who'd been denied too long. A wild beast staring at a doe. I shivered. "I'm sorry that I..." I glanced down at my hand, still holding his pen. I'd encroached on his territory, and now I was paying the price. "I'm sorry I touched your pen."

"Keep it," he murmured.

"Oh, I—" My gaze flickered from the pen to him and back again, and they were almost the same—both cool and dark and *belonging here*. "I couldn't."

But I couldn't let go of it either. I couldn't even move. I just stood there, holding the smooth-metal pen, feeling guilt and shame and fear. Had he thought I was going to *steal* it? He could report me for that, even if he didn't know about my record. But he didn't look angry, exactly. He looked menacing, and sure, as if he would have put his hand on my hip whether I took his pen or not. As if he knew my hip belonged to him as much as the pen did.

His eyes darkened as I met his gaze. "What's your name?"

"Angel," I said quickly.

His forehead creased for a moment, but just as quickly, whatever question he'd had faded from his eyes, replaced by something I knew well. Lust. Desire. Possession. Men had looked at me enough times that I could recognize it.

*At least you're pretty.* The night I'd seen that look in my daddy's eyes was the night I'd left home, too young and too stupid to make anything of myself. At sixteen I could do little

more than shack up with a guy. He'd promised me the world, but in the end all I'd gotten were two silver bracelets and a one-way ticket to jail.

Mr. Thompson was older, smarter, and a heck of a lot richer. But he might give me the same things if I wasn't careful.

"Turn around," he said, his voice gruff.

And so I obeyed him. Because I understood what he wanted from me. Because the consequences of refusing him were so much worse. And because I'd been trained to follow orders for eighteen months at the state correctional facility.

*Just do what he says and you'll be fine.* That was what the secretary told me. Had she meant this? Had she meant turning away and feeling him step close, shivering at the firm grasp of his hands on my hips, my back flush against his front. My eyes fell closed. Did he do this to her? Did he *think* I was her? But I had dirty-blonde hair and the secretary's was a dark brown. My breath whooshed out.

He groaned. "You're too fucking pretty, and it's been too long. I need you. Now. Do you mind?"

Did I...mind? Oh God. Was this how billionaires propositioned women for sex? By touching them, by making them burn, and then asking, almost politely, if they minded getting used? And the worst part was, I didn't know if I minded. But I knew I couldn't tell him to stop, couldn't risk him asking questions. "I'll do what you say."

He grunted in something like approval.

And I knew I *should* mind. Regular women didn't like this. A normal woman would get offended and maybe even slap him, but I'd been too well conditioned to do what I was told. Too desperate to keep this job. Both of those were reasons I let him touch me, but not the only ones.

But I didn't mind his warm hands on me or his hard body behind me, holding me up when my legs began to shake. I didn't mind seeing what else he could make me feel. The truth

was, I was starving for human touch. After two years behind bars, I hungered for it. Feared it. Needed it. But when his hands slipped back to cup my ass, I tensed.

The pen fell, almost silent, on the plush carpet.

“Am I going too fast?” he murmured. “Christ, of course I am. I’ll make sure you’re ready for me. It won’t hurt.”

It seemed like such a small thing to offer me. *It won’t hurt.* And such a huge gift. I felt offended and grateful at the same time, shamed and eager, and my body reacted by pushing my ass into his touch. He squeezed, and a moan escaped me, low and needy, as he pulled me against his body, showing me his arousal in the hard brand of his erection.

He hissed at the contact. “Jesus.” His hands moved from my waist, skimming over my shirt. “I want to make you feel good. Can I do that? Can I make you come?”

He was asking...*permission?*

Something about this seemed off—that he’d touch me like he had every right to but ask almost meekly if he was allowed to make me come. The world felt off balance, but I didn’t question it. I couldn’t question it, not with my employment and my housing and my freedom at stake. Couldn’t question the sudden relief that ran through me. The thin cots and cool metal chairs in prison hadn’t felt good. The bare walls and coarse sheets on my bed didn’t feel good either. But he could make that pain go away. He would make me feel good, I knew he could.

Two minutes in his arms and I already knew so much about his skills in this department. This was a form of interview, his hands cupping my breasts, broad fingers finding my nipples through the fabric.

“Please,” I whimpered.

He stroked my breasts with agonizing gentleness, weighing them in his hands, lifting them, and squeezing softly. Warmth coursed through me, heating me inside the confines of my clothes. My arms were trapped beneath his, and it was a

relief. A relief to know I didn't have to move—that I *couldn't* move. He was directing me, commanding me. This was a man used to being obeyed, and power coursed through every caress of my breasts.

His breath whispered across my temple. “More?”

It wasn't enough. Not after two years of impersonal touches from the guards or dirty looks from the other inmates. Not after coarse uniforms and cool concrete and smooth metal bars. “Mr. Thompson, *please.*”

His cock seemed to surge at my words, flexing against my ass, as if it were punching through so many layers of fabric, as if it could push inside me. My inner muscles answered by squeezing around nothing, and I knew my panties would be damp. And still he only touched me, caressed me, stroked me outside my clothes. It felt too dirty and not dirty enough. I was breathing hard, each intake of air pushing my breasts into his hands. The friction made my nipples peak, ready for him to grab.

And he did grab them, so carefully, between his forefingers and thumbs. The thin fabric of my bra and my shirt barely hindered him at all when he pinched me, and I cried out, pressing my legs together.

“Pretty,” he murmured, and the word made me shudder, close enough to what my daddy had told me. “These are so pretty. What color are your nipples, sweetheart? They're going to be wet from my mouth before this night is over. You know that, don't you?”

“No,” I said, almost a moan. I had no idea what he would do to me or how far he would go.

His hands paused. “Can I see you, Angel?” he asked, his voice raw. Almost pleading. “Let me see you.”

In answer, I let my head fall back on his chest and closed my eyes. *Let him.* I could let him do anything. I wasn't sure I could do much more than that, but I could lean against him, using his strength, while his hands undid the buttons of my

shirt. He pulled the sides apart, and cool office air rushed over my skin, raising goose bumps.

He sucked in a breath. “Fucking pretty.”

He must have been telling the truth when he said it had been a long time. A man like him would be used to gorgeous women who had the best diets and makeup and clothes. My bra was from the dollar bin, made of cheap beige satin stretched in the wrong places. I shouldn't have been anything special to a man like him, but he sucked in a breath and stood unmoving. He must have been staring at me. Must have been...awestruck.

Or at least luck-struck, and for me, that was close enough.

When he reached one hand into my bra cup, my body slid closer to him, his hold on me almost too tight—and perfect, like that. I reveled in the feeling of being pressed against him, within the embrace of his body, the unbreakable hold of it. He was all hardness and strength, all confidence and a deep, endless well that only my body could fill.

Without my consent, my hips rocked against his, and he responded almost violently, pushing me forward, his cock an almost painful rod against my hip, his fingers tightening around my breast.

He made a rough sound as he exposed me fully, tugging down the cups until my small breasts plumped. I looked indecent like that, breasts thrust forward, begging for his touch—but then I was indecent. I was filthy and shameful and somehow aroused. My blood rushed so fast all I could hear was the beat of my heart, and his.

Instead of cupping my breasts again, he tugged my skirt up.

“Just a little more,” he muttered, and I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or himself.

Then it didn't matter, because his fingers slipped inside my panties. The shock of his rough skin in my private place made me gasp. I pushed up on my toes, but the high heels didn't



leave me anywhere to go. I was caught by his arms and my shoes, pinned in place as his fingers stroked through my folds, finding dampness, finding need.

“It’s been...a long time,” I gasped, because I needed him to know that. Needed him to go slow. Needed him to go *fast*, because oh God, I was dangling over the cliff, already there.

He groaned. “Then how...?” He pressed his mouth down my neck. “Never mind. Don’t answer that. You don’t have to say that stuff. You don’t have to lie.”

“What?” But then his fingers found my clit, and I shuddered, helpless, unable to demand answers, unable to do anything but rock against his hand in an age-old rhythm. I was like the ocean, pressing against the beach with every wave, feeling rough sand sift through my slickness.

And I couldn’t have stopped him for anything. Not the sun, not the moon. Not even for the temp job I needed so badly.

“I want to make you feel good, that’s all,” he murmured against my neck. He nipped at my earlobe, and I jolted in his arms. Then he reached lower, dipping his fingers inside, this thumb stroking my clit. “Want to make you feel good,” he repeated, again and again, while the waves crashed and I finally broke, coming apart around his callused fingers, crying out his name. *Mr. Thompson.*

Then there was only the ragged sound of my breathing. Soft caresses brought me down slowly, like he knew how tender I felt, how vulnerable.

How afraid.

He pulled his hand from my panties, and before I could register what he was doing, he pressed his fingers against my lips. “Taste yourself,” he ordered gruffly.

I opened my mouth—to protest?—but he pushed inside, swiping the musky flavor on my tongue. I closed my lips around him and sucked his fingers clean. I’d never done that before, but it felt right. It felt especially right when he made a choked sound that I knew was arousal. I slicked my tongue

against the seam of his fingers and closer to the tips, pretending they were his cock, miming the actions I'd use to pleasure him and lap the precum from the head.

But he didn't spin me around then. Didn't push me to my knees like I thought he would. Wasn't that what rich men in suits wanted from the women around them?

Instead he gently straightened my bra so it covered my breasts and began buttoning my shirt. I was still half-delirious from the orgasm. I was completely dressed by the time I could speak.

"What about you?" I whispered.

He stepped back. I couldn't see him move, but I could hear him, *feel* him, as he removed his strength and warmth. And then I was standing alone. Again. Reeling from an orgasm I should never have had.

"I'm fine," he said in a clipped voice that proved his words a lie. He was *not* okay, and it was my fault. All of this was my fault, because I'd sneaked into this situation, clearly unprepared.

I whirled to face him. "What *was* that?"

It shouldn't have been that hard to figure out. The big bad billionaire had taken what he wanted from the secretary. If I kept working here, he'd probably keep taking it from me, again and again. Why did the thought of that make me clench? I should be horrified, disgusted. I should be angry, but when I looked into the dark, troubled eyes of the man in front of me, all I felt was anticipation.

"I mean we're finished," he said gruffly. "You've done your job. Now get out."

My eyes widened as hurt lanced through me. I should be running out the door. Heading straight to the HR department to tell them I quit. But all I could think was, *You promised my nipples would be wet from your mouth*. He hadn't tasted them yet. I hadn't tasted him yet either. How could we be done?

He didn't want to be done.

I could see that in the stress around his mouth. Tense, because he hadn't gotten any relief tonight. Not yet.

I stepped closer, and I could almost feel his wariness. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice clipped.

"I'm returning the favor."

"That's not how this works." He swore softly. "They're supposed to give you instructions."

Well, they hadn't. Did that mean he touched all his secretaries? The thought made me tense, even though it shouldn't have been a surprise. "What instructions?"

His eyes hardened. "That you do what I want. And don't ask questions."

My hands clenched into fists at my side. I hated being helpless... although I felt most comfortable that way, with a guard telling me where to sleep and what to eat and when to bend over. And I liked it too with a stranger telling me when to come. He'd proven that much, and I hated that my own body seemed to have turned against me. Tears pricked behind my eyes.

He leaned forward, placing two fingers under my chin—the two fingers that had just touched me intimately—and looked me in the eye. "It's not personal, Angel. I request a girl when I need one. I use her until I'm done. Understand?"

I swallowed hard, not breaking eye contact. It was just business, the way he'd cupped my breasts and slid his fingers deep inside me. Just business the way he'd groaned into my hair. But no one could be that cold, even him. Especially him. I stared into those murky depths, wondering what pain he was hiding. "Yes, sir."

His eyes flashed white-hot, and I knew he liked me calling him *sir*. But when he spoke, his words lacked any of the warmth he'd imbued into every touch. His hand dropped away, and I lost even that bit of connection.

“Now tell me, Angel. What happens next?”

*Leave.* He wanted me to leave. He also needed me to stay. I felt that in every cell of my body. But it wasn't my job to fix a lonely billionaire. I didn't even have that power if I wanted to.

“And tomorrow?” Because I really did need this job, and I hated the idea that I should have to suffer—and possibly get evicted—just because he had intimacy issues.

“What about tomorrow?”

“Do I show up to work?” Anger rose up in me, even if I didn't have the right to feel it. “And you could maybe tell your HR department not to bother with the background checks and all that if you only want people working here for one day.”

His eyes flashed, and I remembered exactly why I'd thought he looked mean. He looked more than mean; he looked terrifying. My heart pounded in my chest, so heavy it felt like it must be visible through my clothes—but he wasn't looking at my chest anymore. He looked directly into my eyes.

“What did you say?” His voice was deceptively soft.

“I said...” My accusations faltered. He may have done something callous, but I had no right to call him on it. I should walk away with my head held high and count this as a lesson learned. And I would do those things, but I felt myself breaking down under the stress of the past few months. And years. Living on the streets, getting caught, prison. And then after, wondering if I'd made it this far for nothing, if I'd starve before the New Year even came. That orgasm had unwound something in me, something vital, something that made me lash out. “The HR person said this was a two-week job. I don't have anything else lined up.”

“The HR person,” he said, his voice sounding strangled.

“This was the only job I've found in weeks. I know it's not your problem, but rent is due. And my fridge is empty. I *need* this job.” Bitterness shadowed my voice. “And it turns out you only wanted me for one night. For *this*.”

He walked stiffly to the window and looked out. His silhouette was tall and imposing, even against the impressive backdrop of the city.

“I worked hard today.” I didn’t know why I was explaining myself to him. It seemed important that he understand. I was *willing* to work hard. “I can do this job while your secretary is out. I won’t screw it up if you let me stay.”

“Christ,” he said.

My chest tightened with humiliation. And fear for what I’d do next. Was this what I’d been reduced to? Someone to get called in, to fuck and then discard? Was this my life now? My throat felt thick, and I had to force the words out. “I’ll just go now.”

Leave, like he’d told me to.

“Wait, Angel. Is that your real name?”

I turned back, my hand on the door. “Yes, Angel Cole.”

He looked pained. “Ms. Cole. I’ve made a mistake. A big mistake.” The words sounded so rusty I knew he hadn’t used them often. He probably hadn’t made a mistake in years.

And I still didn’t know what he was talking about. “Sir?”

He turned and gave me a half smile. Or a snarl. “You weren’t supposed to go through HR. You were supposed to be sent by the discreet agency. A very expensive, very exclusive agency with a stable of girls who are trained to do what I tell them to. But you weren’t, were you?”

I shook my head silently.

A rough exhalation of air. “You weren’t sent for me to use. Not like that.”

From the guilt on his face, I knew he meant what he’d said. He had thought I was some kind of escort sent for him. And he really didn’t know about my criminal record. My secret was still safe. “It’s...it’s okay.”

He grimaced. "It's not okay. I forgot my secretary was going on vacation. It wasn't planned, so I didn't... I just saw you standing in my office and assumed..."

Because I looked like an escort, apparently. Heat flooded my cheeks. "So can I keep working here?"

He faced the dark windows, and all I could see was his reflection, almost haunted. "It's late," he said finally. "Go home."

"And tomorrow?"

He glanced back. His gaze met mine, eyes as flat and cool as the glass behind him. "Tomorrow I'll figure this out."

## CHAPTER FOUR

I BARELY SLEPT that night, very aware that he could figure *me* out come tomorrow. Figure out who I was, figure out that I'd lied. And then the fact that there'd been a misunderstanding in his office would only be foreplay for my return journey to prison. Wham, bam, and thank you, ma'am. Lying on an application may not be a crime... but lying about my criminal record was a crime.

There was something else that kept me tossing and turning: complete and utter humiliation at my reactions to him—all while he'd thought I was a prostitute. The temp job was only for two weeks, but I'd managed to make a mess of it in a single day.

Or maybe he was as embarrassed as me. Maybe he'd pretend the entire thing never happened.

By four a.m. I gave up on sleeping and got dressed. At least I could actually finish that stack of files Christy had left for me before Mr. Thompson figured me out and fired me. At least my security badge still worked. The floor was still dark when the elevator opened at five a.m. Floor-to-ceiling windows revealed the city skyline still dark with night. The walls were smooth—no light switches—but the glow from my computer monitor gave me enough light to work.

I worked through a few of the files before a sound distracted me. Had that come from Mr. Thompson's office? I went back to work, trying to focus, hoping it would be enough to keep this job...

*That noise again.*

I walked closer. The door was open, and the overhead lights were off just like the rest of the floor. It looked empty. So what had made that sound? Or who?

It didn't escape my notice that this was exactly how I'd gotten in trouble last time—going into the boss's office while he wasn't here. But I had to see for myself, make sure everything was okay, now that I'd heard a sound.

It was a little spooky on the floor all alone.

But it turned out the boss *was* here. He was sitting in his chair, wearing what appeared to be the same suit as last night, or maybe he had an entire closetful of custom-tailored suits. This one looked a little more rumpled than last night, tie loose, the top button undone.

His head rested on the leather back of his chair, and his eyes were closed. Was he sleeping?

I started to back away without making a sound.

“Come in, Ms. Cole.”

Okay, not sleeping. I took a deep breath. “Good morning.”

“Sit down.”

I sat. *Oh God*. He was going to fire me. That was the only explanation for him wanting to talk to me about it. So much for pretending it never happened.

He opened his eyes—and even in the shadows I could see he looked furious. And terrifying, all over again. Whatever softness I'd imagined while he'd touched me was gone now. In its place was only Gage Thompson. I'd faced down people who wanted to hurt me with my chin held high. I had to, because weakness only made them hurt you longer. But they were junkyard dogs to his big bad wolf. Deep inside I began to shake.

“Mr. Thompson, about last night—”

He stood and circled the desk, and I couldn't help it—I cringed back. His expression was too angry. He looked exactly like the Big Bad Billionaire. I didn't think he'd hurt me, but I hated the thought of him being angry at me. I had always been a people pleaser. It was just how I was built. I would have done anything he said.



He set something down in front of me on his desk. His phone, black and sleek and forbidding.

“You can call from here.”

My voice trembled. “Call who? The temp agency?”

“I suppose you should call them too, after. But no. I meant the police.”

Fear spiked inside me. No no no. He must have realized who I was. Had he already reported me? Or was he waiting for me to call, to turn myself in? I couldn't do it. “Please no,” I breathed.

“The police,” he said, his voice clipped. “I'll leave the room if it makes you more comfortable. I'll remain on this floor, so they know where to find me.”

“To find... you?”

“You can wait here, of course. You'll be comfortable. I won't bother you.”

Uncertainty wove its way around my limbs and chest, a tight sort of comfort. He was telling me to call the police and assuming they'd come here. But why was he being so solicitous while he did it? Why would it matter that the criminal who'd lied to him was comfortable?

“Mr. Thompson,” I said slowly, “I know I'm not the brightest bulb. But it almost sounds like... like you want me to call the cops on you.”

“That's exactly right, Ms. Cole.”

“Angel,” I corrected absently. “But *why* would I call the cops on you?”

“Because I raped you.”

He did *what* to me? Shock held me breathless for a moment. I couldn't even feel relieved that I was off the hook, because this was too crazy. I blew out a breath. “No, you didn't.”

“I did.”

“I was there. I would have noticed.”

He cleared his throat. “I penetrated you with my fingers. Without your consent. You need to report me. I won’t contest it.”

Penetrated with his fingers. God, it sounded so cold. And somehow hot. But regardless of how he said it, he hadn’t hurt me. “It wasn’t against my consent.”

He made a scoffing sound. “Of course it was. You wouldn’t have let me touch you. A stranger. A stranger like me.” Before I could even ask what he meant by *like me*, he continued, “But you knew I was the boss. You felt coerced. Of course you did. Anyone would.”

“Well, I’m glad you have me all figured out, but it’s not true.” Not to mention that even if it had been against my consent, I would hardly be calling the cops on him. That would only expose the fact that I’d lied to get this job.

“You didn’t feel coerced?” An eyebrow rose. “You didn’t know I was the boss?”

Heat rushed to my face. Of course I’d known he was the boss. He only had to speak, only had to stand behind me, only had to put his hand on my hip, and I’d known who was in charge. “I let you touch me because... because I was surprised, at first. And then I was confused. And then I didn’t want you to stop.”

His brow furrowed. “Why not?”

Because I didn’t have a choice. But that would only prove his point. And besides, it wasn’t strictly true. “It felt good,” I whispered.

For a second his eyes darkened, and I knew he was remembering the feel of my body climaxing against his fingers, the sounds I made as I came. He shook his head as if to clear it. “Whether you enjoyed it or not isn’t the question.

What I did was immoral. If you won't call the police, at least call the workforce commission. Or human resources."

He wanted me to report him to his own employees? I blinked. "I'm not going to tell anyone what happened."

He ran a hand through his dark hair, clearly frustrated. "Jesus. I never wanted this to happen."

Never wanted to accidentally finger his secretary? It seemed like a very specific worry. "I don't understand."

A humorless half smile twisted his lips. "It's irony, that's all. The thing I was doing to prevent the problem led to the problem."

"You're not making sense. And I'm not very sharp to begin with, so could you please just... explain it to me?"

He frowned. "You keep saying that—that you aren't smart. Why?"

My stomach tightened. "Don't change the subject. Why would you think you hurt me? Why would you think you *would* hurt me?"

He studied me for a moment, then blew out a breath. "I'm not surprised that I'd hurt you. I hate myself for it, but I'm not surprised."

My blood ran cold. "What do you mean? Have you hurt a woman before?"

I knew for damn sure he hadn't raped me last night—whether he believed me or not. But he still could have hurt some other woman. Maybe that was why he was so afraid to do it... again.

His jaw tightened. "No, but I could have. Every so often I need..." A sound almost like a growl escaped him. "I need to use and to hurt. I need... fuck, I need relief. And I *won't* risk it with a woman I know and care about. I use a service, and every woman that signs up knows exactly what she's getting into."

A small sound escaped me. Of surprise. Of disgust? But not at him. At whatever strange darkness he felt he had to hide. That he put himself through this just to take care of ordinary needs. Needs like sex. Like human touch. Like intimacy.

“They tell the women what to expect, make sure they understand the kind of man they’re coming to service. I pay them above their asking rate to compensate for the risk.” He paused. Regret flashed through his eyes. “Not like you.”

“Mr. Thompson. It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“It does,” he snarled. “Last night proved that. It proved I’m an animal who can’t even ask what you’re doing here. Can’t even figure out whether you’re there to file papers or fuck me. I just saw you bent over, and I *wanted* you, and I took you.”

I knew from his voice how much that hurt him, the thought that he’d acted on impulse. He held himself so rigidly, left no room for error, pretended he wasn’t even *human*.

“So tell me what you want,” he said, his voice rough. “If you won’t report me, let me repay you. Money, a car, anything. Name it, and it’s yours.”

I couldn’t help but gasp. “I don’t want anything.”

“There has to be something.” His voice sounded tight, like a steel cable in a bridge, holding thousands of pounds of metal and cars, keeping the two sides of land apart. What would it take for him to snap?

I closed my eyes against the need in his expression—need to atone for ever touching me? Or need to touch me again? “Can we pretend this never happened? That’s what I’m asking for, Mr. Thompson. Let me finish my temp position. That’s all I want.”

And if my voice trembled on the lie, he was kind enough not to mention it. “Then stay,” he said instead, gruff and almost angry. “Stay.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

I KEPT MY head down for the next week, working through the files Christy had left. I also answered the phones and greeted visitors who met with Mr. Thompson. Despite that, I didn't have much interaction with him. By tacit agreement, we spoke quietly to each other and with the minimum amount of words. Even when I'd hear him yell at some poor asshole who'd overpromised or underdelivered, he would always speak to me courteously and succinctly.

*Thank you, Ms. Cole. If you please, Ms. Cole.* It was like he'd never had his hands under my bra or inside my panties. As if he'd never spilled what was obviously his darkest secret to me.

We were strangers, as we *should* be, but it still felt like a loss.

The only other room on this floor space besides his office was the supply closet. Closet wasn't really the right word—it was bigger than the bedroom I had rented. The whole building was spacious, but this area, the secured area reserved for the CEO, was an oasis of space, so much space I sometimes felt choked up with it, as if my body didn't know how to react to open air without bars or grime or violence to block me in.

I spent a lot of time in the supply room struggling with the copy machine. It spit out page after page of nonsense characters in rapid fire, the case hot to the touch. I pressed the buttons to make it stop, almost frantic, but it wasn't listening to me. I wasn't great with technology. I was good with people—but the only person here was avoiding me.

Sighing, I pulled the stack of printed pages out. The question marks and strange diamond boxes mocked me. Totally ruined.

I tossed them into the recycle bin.

The copy machine blinked red. Out of paper. Of course it was. And I needed to try over again with this print job, so I went to the metal shelves to get a new ream of paper. Up high, almost out of reach, but I barely got ahold of it and dragged the box closer, tipping it over the edge, almost there, balancing the heavy weight of it on my fingertips...

A throat cleared behind me.

My heart jumped, and the box slid from the shelf, off balance, falling down onto me. I flinched, expecting to be hit. Arms reached around me and lifted the box. A wisp of air was all I felt. I whirled to face a grim Mr. Thompson.

His face was set in stern lines, mouth a brutal slash. His eyes glinted like a threat. “You could have hurt yourself,” he said. “You should have called me.”

Call the CEO of a major corporation to help me get a box down? Not likely. “I had it.”

He set the box on the floor as if it weighed almost nothing. His eyes took in everything—my disheveled appearance, blouse tight around my breasts, skirt a little higher than usual because I’d been reaching up. They took in the pile of ruined pages in the recycle bin too, and I rushed to explain.

“I sent the file, and it worked once. Then when I hit the Repeat button it just started—”

“The thing’s a menace,” he said almost absently, dismissing the problem. Instead he focused on *me*, like I was the problem. Like I was a menace. I took a step back, but there was nowhere to go. The coolness of the metal shelves seeped through my clothes, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I’ll fix it,” I said, too quiet.

His eyes were dark, expression severe. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I know.” But I looked away, and I knew he didn’t believe me. I wasn’t afraid of him hurting me. I was just plain afraid. I’d lived my life like that—afraid—and I didn’t know any other way to be.

“Angel.” He looked surprised at himself, rearing back, snapping himself back to the formality where he was clearly more comfortable. “Ms. Cole.”

He seemed massively uncomfortable, holding himself stiffly, not quite making eye contact anymore, and it made me want to go to him. To reach out to him. But the years had taught me not to. They’d taught me to be wary. “Mr. Thompson?”

“I want you to know... what happened that night. I don’t do that often.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant. He didn’t feel up his secretaries? Or he didn’t hire a woman to visit him in his office, late at night, when everyone else was home. “Okay.”

“I only do it when I can’t—when I need—It’s not that often.”

I wondered if he knew how much he’d revealed, that it was a struggle for him. That he put his needs last.

“Why does it matter what I think?” I asked softly.

His voice was gruff. “I don’t know. But it does.” He turned away to look at the copy machine. And those awful ruined pages, proof of just how incompetent I was, how little I deserved even this temp job. “Maybe because I disrespected you, and I’d like your forgiveness.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.” My throat tightened. I had no right to his past, his privacy, when I kept my own secrets. But I wanted to know. “I just... Why do you think you need to do that? To hire someone?”

I didn’t bother mentioning that he was handsome or rich. Or that he could do amazing things with his hands. He was too self-aware not to know those things. But he’d picked an almost

painfully impersonal way to fulfill his needs instead, and curiosity had eaten at me all week.

There was a long pause, and I almost thought he wouldn't answer. "I don't talk about this much." A self-deprecating smile. "Don't talk about it ever, really. I suppose if anyone deserves the full story, it's you. And maybe then you'll be convinced you need to report me."

He crossed the room and leaned against the shelf, giving me a clear path to the door. All his grace fled, and he seemed so weary, as if the walls and floor and metal rebar in the building were holding him up—instead of the other way around.

I raised my chin. "I won't change my mind."

"My father was Benedict James." He seemed to be waiting for a sign of recognition.

I shrugged helplessly. The name meant nothing to me.

"He was a serial murderer." He looked down. When he met my gaze, his dark eyes were filled with pain. "And a serial rapist. He raped and murdered seven women that they know about. Because they found the bodies."

Shock stole the air from the room. "That's horrible."

His expression was stark. And etched into him.

"There was one other woman, except she survived. She managed to escape his cabin and get to the road. She got herself free."

My stomach dropped. I knew where this was going. He'd already told me how the story ended—with him sitting in front of me, hating himself. "I'm so sorry," I whispered.

I wasn't sure he could hear me. "Not completely free, though. Turned out she was pregnant. She decided to keep the child. I'm not sure why. Back then abortion wasn't as accepted or available. And adoption...well, for whatever reason, she kept me."



“She loved you,” I whispered.

His gaze met hers. “Did she? I suppose so. She tried to raise me right. To understand the difference between right and wrong.”

“You do understand, Mr. Thompson. The fact that you’re worried about me proves that much.”

His eyes seemed to burn. “She gave me her last name and left the line on the birth certificate blank, so the press never found out. And I’ve tried to keep myself away. To keep myself locked up. In this office, in my penthouse. Away from people I could hurt.”

Oh God. “You didn’t hurt me.”

He’d touched me. He’d made me come. But he hadn’t hurt me. He also hadn’t done anything for himself, stopping before he could get off, stopping before he knew he’d made a mistake with me.

He cleared his throat. “I use the service when I need it. To keep myself in check.”

I laid a hand on his arm then. I couldn’t stop myself, even knowing I might get burned. Almost wanting it. “You don’t have to do that. You’re a regular man, capable of... doing regular things.”

Regular sex. Regular relationships. And I almost laughed at myself for the sad spark of hope deep inside, as if he might have regular sex with *me*. A regular relationship. With me.

He shook his head, gaze locked on mine. “Maybe this is all I have time for.”

If that were true, if he really preferred this, then he wouldn’t feel the need to justify it. And he certainly wouldn’t make the appointments so spread out that he was dying to be with a woman, so hungry for one that he didn’t even notice she was wearing the most old, threadbare clothing. Like I had been.

“I don’t think so.” I had no right to tell him anything, but the tortured look in his eyes wouldn’t let me stay quiet. I raised my chin, stubborn. I could be stubborn when it mattered. He mattered. “I think you want more. And you deserve more.”

A curious light passed through his eyes. No, curious was too benign a word. This look was determined. This was the way he might look at an opponent across the boardroom, digging deeper and deeper until he’d found their weakest spot. “Why are you so understanding of this? I think most women would have reported me. Or at least quit.”

“I don’t know if that’s true. I’m not that special.” Ignoring his doubtful look, I continued. “But I know what it’s like to have people make you feel bad for things that are true—and things that aren’t.”

He looked almost amused. “No one’s trying to make me feel bad, Angel.”

He didn’t seem to notice the slip of my real name. “You’re trying to make yourself feel bad, Mr. Thompson. But the thing is, I’m not going to let you.”

He opened his mouth. Closed it. “Nothing special. Is that right?”

My cheeks heated. “That’s right,” I said, pretending like I had no idea what he was talking about. It wasn’t hard to pretend. Often enough I didn’t know what people were talking about.

“I think I’m not the only one trying to make myself feel bad,” he murmured.

I thought in that moment that he saw me better than anyone ever had. That he *wanted* to see me more than anyone ever had. His head bent toward me... *He’s going to kiss me.*

He didn’t kiss me.

He licked my lips instead. I parted them on a gasp, and he bit my bottom lip, tugging it and worrying it between his teeth.

Then he slipped his tongue into my mouth, sliding it against mine.

It *was* a kiss, the most carnal kiss I'd ever gotten. Like animals mating. And I realized that the nickname *Big Bad Billionaire* must have been given by someone who had met him, maybe even by someone who had been fucked by him, because it completely applied to this. He was a wolf. He'd hunted me, he'd taken me down. And now he devoured me.

I let him. I did more than that—I kissed him back. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to me, to my level. His hands went under my skirt, curving around my ass and lifting one thigh so that when he pressed me against the copy machine, my sex was flush against him. Even through the clothes I could feel his erection. Feel the heat of him.

That wasn't enough for him. Not enough for a man used to taking what he wanted.

He lifted me onto the copy machine, so I was sitting on it—no, lying down on it. He spread me out and stole my panties. He took over my body with the control and precision he must apply to business, and I was bared to him, spread open, left without any defenses.

He stared down at my pussy so long I began to squirm, acutely aware of the hard plastic lid I was lying on top of. My head barely rested on the edge of the copier. When his eyes met mine, they were molten—dark, almost red, or maybe that was just the reflection from the Empty Tray light.

“I can't wait to taste you,” he said, his voice low, and excitement raced through me. Especially when he leaned down and placed his mouth against my lower lips—oh God, especially then. He kissed me there without any hesitation or delay, as if he really couldn't wait, as if he needed to lap at my tender skin, as if he was desperate to press his tongue between them and draw out my juices.

His moan vibrated through my skin, the movement almost excruciating against my clit, in the very best way. My legs stiffened in reaction, falling off the edge of the copier. He caught them and put them on his shoulders. His hold on my thighs widened me, opened me to him, so he could press his face even deeper against me, sliding his tongue up and down the slick folds until I thought I would scream.

“Please, please, please,” I moaned.

His gaze met mine. “What do you need, Angel? Tell me.”

He wanted me to say it, and just the thought of it, the faint humiliation of begging and the prospect of being denied, made me clench. He noticed—because his finger was inside me now. He’d slipped it in when I was busy writhing against his mouth, so wrapped up in his tongue and my clit that I’d hardly noticed the intrusion. But I noticed it now as my muscles squeezed him tight, just that one finger—how would it feel to have something thicker? Like two fingers, three? Like his cock, pulsing and heavy, wrapped with latex and shoved inside me?

“Make me come,” I whispered.

His expression was strained, almost desperate, and he went at his task like a man starving. He ate at my pussy with harsh, angry strokes, using his lips and his tongue and even his teeth to bring me to the edge.

“Not yet.”

I gasped a breath. “Mr. Thompson.”

He groaned. “Jesus. Not yet.”

It took all my strength not to come, all my willpower as my body surged toward orgasm, hovering on the brink. I shuddered on top of the copy machine, writhed against the plastic made warm by my body, almost turned on by the faint texture of the casing, by the cool wash of air from the vent above us. Every touch on my skin turned me on—because of him. Because he was here, staring at me like he’d never seen anything sexier. Because he was touching me, tasting me.

Because he made me wait.

“I want to see you again. Want to see those pretty tits flush pink when you come.”

A shudder ran through my body. My arms were boneless, useless, bound at my sides by their own sex-drenched laxity, and he used his free hand to unbutton my shirt. He pulled the cloth aside and tugged the bra down, all while steadily, slowly pumping his finger inside me. And then another, stretching me, giving me the faintest burn as my walls accommodated the extra width.

“What did I say I’d do to your nipples?”

“M-m-my nipples?” My voice was shaky, trembling. My whole body was trembling.

“That’s right, baby. What am I going to do to them?”

“You’re going to make them wet. With your mouth.”

His dark gaze was approving. “That’s when you come. When my lips are wrapped around your nipple, I want you to come on my hand. Understand?”

He didn’t wait for my answer. His hand sped up, circling my clit, almost there, already painful. That was how he wanted it: painful. This was what he longed for, what he needed, what he gave in to sometimes. With a woman he paid, like me. Only not like me, because they usually came from an agency. Me, I’d gone through HR.

He leaned down, so close, and I almost came in anticipation. But then he kissed the side of my breast instead. He worked lower, to the underside, grazing his teeth along tender, almost ticklish skin. And all the while his fingers worked me, bringing me higher, until my hips were rising to meet them, hungry and needy and so beyond shame now.

The urgency made me whimper, and he jolted at the sound. His mouth found my nipple, his lips closed around me. He’d given me permission to come when he did this. No, he’d given me an *order* to come, and I could have. With his fingers inside

me and his thumb stroking my clit and his mouth at my breast, I could have come so hard. But it was the expression on his face that arrested me—at once tender and dark, both generous and cold.

My body shot into orgasm with all the power he used on me, the confident strokes of his fingers and the steady sucks of his mouth. I soared through my climax, seeing stars and blinking red lights and snowflakes falling, falling, coming back down to earth in a blanket of warm, white snow, but it wasn't the ground at all, it was his arms, and he was holding me, soothing me while I floated back into myself.

“What about you?” I mumbled.

“Shh.”

I blinked rapidly, clearing my vision. “You really aren't going to come?”

“I can't,” he said tightly. But I knew he could. He could slip inside me and come so easily. He could pump into my fist or my mouth. He just wouldn't do those things, because he was too afraid of hurting me. The irony was almost painful as he held me sweetly, believing the worst of himself while he treated me better than anyone ever had before.

## CHAPTER SIX

ON THURSDAY MORNING the elevator dinged. I looked up to see the doors open. All of Mr. Thompson's appointments came through that elevator. It was the only way in or out. Sometimes they were men, all wearing suits and ties and nervous expressions. Other times they were women, and I had to wonder if he was *using* them the same way he'd used me. He left the door open a crack, so I knew he wasn't. Which just made me wonder *why* he'd left the door open. Did he know I'd wonder? Bottom line: I was slowly going insane.

This arrival was a man. Or a boy, really, younger than most of the execs who had appointments. He had pale blond hair and a grin that almost hid his unease.

He stopped in front of my desk. "Noah Waters. I'm here to see Mr. Thompson."

I double-checked the calendar in case there'd been any last-minute changes from when I'd memorized it at the start of the day. Despite the rocky start, or maybe because of it, I was determined to be freaking great at this job. And copier battles aside, I'd mostly managed it—even if all it had earned me were grunts and clipped thanks from the boss.

*Your ten o'clock is here,* I typed into the company IM system like Christy had taught me to do.

Mr. Thompson didn't immediately answer, so I figured he was on a call or something.

"He'll just be a minute," I told Noah with a nod toward the waiting chairs. The uncomfortable waiting chairs, which I'd found out one day when I'd sat in them. Had to be some kind of intimidation tactic, because the company could afford plush luxury on all the floors, especially the top. Not to mention my own chair behind the desk—Christy's chair—which was an ergonomic masterpiece.

But Noah didn't sit. "Are you new here?" he asked instead.

At my questioning look he gave me a sheepish smile. "I didn't see you at the Fourth of July picnic."

"Oh." I blushed. I wasn't sure *why* I blushed except there was something in his eyes that looked like interest. It had been a long time since I'd seen interest that didn't also come with a threat, like the guards in prison or strangers on the street. Or a certain billionaire just a few feet away. "I'm just temping until Christmas," I explained. "Nothing permanent."

He seemed disappointed but undeterred. "What's your name?"

"Angel. Christy will be back after the holidays. I'll be gone soon."

His smile finally faltered. "Me too, I think."

Sympathy tightened my lips. Dread and I were old friends—old enough that I could recognize it in someone else. I wasn't sure I should ask but... "Is everything okay?"

"Okay? No, not really. It's a mess actually. A really big screwup."

Oh no. "I'm sorry. Maybe Mr. Thompson will understand. He's harsh but fair." I had slowly learned what Christy meant by that, watching Mr. Thompson in action. He was a lot of bark, but he only bit when it was really warranted.

Noah shook his head. "He won't understand this. Someone's going to take the fall, and it's going to be me."

The way he said it was full of conviction, as if he was determined to be the one. As if there might be someone else to do it.

Mr. Thompson's message appeared on my screen. *Send him in.*

"He's ready to see you now." I tried for a supportive expression—but I was pretty sure I failed. I'd seen exactly how the boss could be when he was pissed, and apparently he was pissed at Noah Waters. I had a feeling we were going to



see the *Big Bad Billionaire* very soon, as if the white-winter sun outside was a moon, ready to turn the man into a monster. He would howl, and he would snap. I just hoped Noah would still be standing when Mr. Thompson turned back.

As Noah walked to the office and opened the door, another message popped up in the IM console. *Do the other assholes that work for me flirt with you?*

I stared at the message, shocked more by the tone of intimacy than the actual question. The tone of possession. It almost sounded like he was jealous. Which was ridiculous considering he'd touched me, he'd kissed my skin. He'd made me *come*, and then discarded me like it was all a big mistake.

*It had been a mistake*, I reminded myself. So where did he get off acting jealous?

I typed into the IM console. *Noah was just being nice.*

I glanced at the office, where the door was cracked open. I couldn't see inside, but I imagined Noah sitting in one of the chairs in front of the desk, waiting nervously for Mr. Thompson to acknowledge him. But Mr. Thompson must have been typing because a new message appeared.

*Like I was nice to you?*

I rolled my eyes. Sometimes smart people could be very stupid. *Have a good meeting*, I typed and shut the window.

Except it wasn't a good meeting. Over the next twenty minutes I listened through the opening in the door as Mr. Thompson blasted Noah for some mistake that had cost the company a lot of money. Based on the way Noah was defending himself—or rather, wasn't defending himself—it was a valid criticism. Still, I winced as Mr. Thompson's anger seemed to grow stronger with every passing minute.

And I couldn't help but wonder if I'd somehow made it worse by talking to Noah while we waited. Even though I knew I'd done nothing wrong.

“Pack your shit,” I heard Mr. Thompson say. “And get out of my building.”

My eyes widened. Without thinking out a plan, I was up from my seat. I crossed the short space and pushed the door open in time to see a defeated Noah standing up, his shoulders slumped and smile long gone.

“I’m sorry for disappointing you, sir,” Noah said stiffly.

“Wait,” I said. “You can’t fire him.”

Mr. Thompson sent me an icy glare. “What *are* you doing?”

Noah’s eyes widened. Concern creased his forehead. “Yeah, Angel. What are you doing?”

Of course Mr. Thompson didn’t miss the use of my first name. His eyes narrowed. And the truth was, I didn’t know what I was doing. This was how I got myself into trouble, doing things without thinking them through. Leaving home because I knew I couldn’t stay. Holding my boyfriend’s boxes even though I knew they held illegal stuff, because he’d protected me on the streets. Lying on the job application because it was the only way I could work.

And now here I was, standing in front of the Big Bad Billionaire, probably about to lose my job for an entirely different reason. I licked my lips, fighting with myself. How the hell was I going to get out of this? But I was already neck-deep and sinking fast. “I’m just suggesting you rethink your position. Maybe he could find a way to fix his mistake at the beginning of the New Year.”

“He lost the company over a million dollars.”

My eyes widened. That was a lot of money. Still... “It’s a week before Christmas,” I said weakly. “You can’t fire someone right before Christmas.”

“Can,” Mr. Thompson said. “Just did. It’s called making a point. In fact, I can do it again if you want another demonstration?”

Oh shit, I couldn’t be fired. Not when I’d done everything right. *Except for keeping my mouth shut.*

“Angel,” Noah said. “Don’t get yourself in trouble over me. It’s not worth it.”

“Listen to him,” Mr. Thompson said. “He’s really not.”

I narrowed my eyes. I may not be the brightest person in the room—definitely wasn’t—but I knew how to stand up for myself. In fact, getting picked on my whole life had taught me not to back down. “Is that supposed to impress me? The Big Bad Billionaire is going to blow my house down?”

Noah sucked in a breath. “Angel.”

Challenge sparked in Mr. Thompson’s eyes, and I almost thought... he *liked* when I talked to him this way. Either that or he hated it, and he’d ruin my life and get me thrown back in prison.

“No, I’ve got this,” I said. “I’m not scared of him. All my life people have tried to tell me to sit down and shut up, but guess what? I’m not going to. You’re firing someone who doesn’t deserve it, who’s taking the fall, and if I’m the only one with enough balls to say it to your face, then so be it.”

Both men looked shocked. The tension was as thick as the snowstorm I could see through the window.

“Taking the fall,” Mr. Thompson said quietly.

I took a deep breath—and a gamble. “Are you telling me that Noah was responsible for over a million dollars without a single safeguard in place? Without one other person checking his work? So where are they?”

“Mr. Waters?” Our boss drew out the name in a way that was somehow scarier than when he was yelling.

Noah shifted. “I told you I’m taking responsibility for this, and I am.”

There was a long silence. Finally Mr. Thompson sighed. “I appreciate loyalty. I value it. But your loyalty needs to lie with the company. I need a *complete* report of what happened on this project. It’s not just about protecting the people around

you, especially since they didn't do the same for you. It's about making sure this doesn't happen again."

After a beat Noah nodded. "I'll tell you everything. But you need to understand, it was a culmination of mistakes that led to us losing that deal. And some of it was just plain bad luck. But I was the team lead, and I take responsibility for the outcome."

"Sit," Mr. Thompson said gruffly. Then he turned to me. His eyes narrowed. "And you. Outside. Now."

I scurried out of his office. Unfortunately that didn't provide much protection because Mr. Thompson followed me. *Damn it.*

Nerves ate me up from the inside like acid all through my body. My heart was pounding. I started babbling. "Look, I'm only here for one more week, but if you want me gone early —"

"Ms. Cole."

"Just so you know, I'd never even met Noah Waters before today and never plan to again, so it wasn't *anything* like flirting or—"

"Angel, listen to me. Part of the reason I was firing Mr. Waters was because I could tell he was holding back information about the project failure. I assumed he was covering his own ass. But we handle large-volume deals all the time. Losses happen. Mistakes happen."

"Oh."

"I don't go around firing my employees right before Christmas for making mistakes." He paused. "Or for speaking out of turn."

Relief coursed through me. "Cold but generous," I murmured.

His eyes darkened. "Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm a good man, Angel."

“Too late.” The words came out a whisper.

He reached for me, his hand one inch from my face. I was sure he'd cup my cheek. Sure he'd lean down and kiss me, standing outside his office with Noah Waters waiting inside. And I wouldn't have turned away. I told him with my eyes just how much I wanted to feel his lips on mine. I didn't always do the smart thing. Almost never, in fact. I did what felt right, and this felt right. His eyes locked on mine, his hands on me. *He* felt right.

“You do something to me,” he muttered. “I don't like it.”

And just like that, a splash of cold regret doused any desire I had. Any hope. I may as well have rolled around in the snow for how I felt as he went into his office and shut the door.

*I don't like it.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I CLOSED THE last of the files, satisfied that I'd finished my work before leaving. A bittersweet feeling because today was my last day.

It was also Christmas Eve, and most of the building had already left. At seven o' clock, it felt much later. Snowfall had grown heavier all day. It verged on a storm now, darkening the streets as people rushed to get home with last-minute packages. Lights were on in Mr. Thompson's office, and I knew he was still there, because he'd come in early this morning—and hadn't left yet.

I stared at the office door, which was cracked open. In invitation?

That was wishful thinking. I couldn't see inside, but maybe that was for the best. Even if I went in there, what would I say? He wouldn't care that I was leaving. For good, this time. I was just an awkward situation he'd be glad to get rid of.

But I cared. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I hated myself for being so transparent. How had I started to fall for my boss when I'd only worked here for two weeks? When the first time we'd met, he'd made me come so hard I couldn't breathe? When he watched me and listened to me and even flirted with me in that gruff, brutal way of his?

Okay, so maybe the crush wasn't that far-fetched considering.

Still, I shouldn't be thinking about saying anything else to him. Not even goodbye. I left a quick note for Christy letting her know the work I'd done, so she'd know where to pick up. Then I grabbed my purse and headed for the elevator.

I refused to look back at the office. Refused to care. I made it inside the elevator. The doors slid shut behind me... until a hand pushed in to stop them.

*Mr. Thompson.*

“Going down?” he asked.

I averted my eyes and nodded. Outwardly I remained calm and collected, but inside my senses went haywire like they did every time he was nearby. The size of him, filling up every spare inch in the elevator. The heat of him, making my skin tingle.

The musky male scent of him, turning me to liquid. *God, I need to get out of this elevator.*

Either that or I needed never to leave it.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched him step inside and press the button for the lobby. The elevator began moving.

“Do you have plans?” He cleared his throat. “For Christmas Eve?”

I blinked. Why was he making small talk after avoiding me for two weeks? And how embarrassing would it be to tell him no, I didn’t have any plans?

I was saved from that embarrassment when the elevator shuddered to a stop, well before we would have reached the ground floor. The lights flickered and went off. I blinked as low yellow lights appeared from the bottom of the walls, giving me just enough illumination to make out the shadows.

The elevator doors didn’t open.

“What’s going on?” I whispered. Something about the darkness made it seem like I should be quiet.

He pressed the buttons, but they weren’t even lit. “The storm must have taken down the grid.”

Crap, just what I needed, to be trapped with the man I had an inappropriate and completely unrequited crush on. My heart began beating faster, as if this was some kind of private makeout session instead of just bad luck. “Security will know to look for us, won’t they?”

“Yes.” A beat passed. “Maybe not. There aren’t many people with access to this elevator. And most people leave early on Christmas Eve. In fact, why are you still here?”

“I don’t have any family in town.” I didn’t have any family at all, but he didn’t need to know that. My daddy hadn’t responded to my letter from jail, and maybe that was all I deserved after running away from home, for not trusting him enough to stay. *Stupid girl*, he’d called me.

Sometimes I thought running away had been the smartest thing I’d ever done.

“I see,” Mr. Thompson said.

And I thought that, somehow, he may have figured it out. Who spent the night before Christmas filing papers for a boss who didn’t even like them? I did, apparently. Who stuck around at the end of a temp job because they didn’t want it to be over? Me again.

*Stupid girl.*

I’d always believed I’d prove my dad wrong, but I never had, and days like this, I thought I never would.

Mr. Thompson pulled out his phone. Light from the screen filled the elevator with a blue glow, making it feel more intimate, more wrong. And more clear, as the faint light lit his face. “Damn,” he muttered. “Signal is shit in here. Try yours?”

“I—I don’t have a cellphone.”

He glanced at me, and I felt his surprise overcome his frustration. “Why not?”

A blush heated my face. Thank goodness it was too dark for him to see the proof of my embarrassment. At least I hoped so. I certainly couldn’t see the tan color of his skin or dark mahogany of his hair. He was all angles and shadows to me now, more a dream than reality, which made it easier somehow to tell the truth. “I can’t afford one.”

I expected him to look away. I *wanted* him to look away, to give me some relief, but instead his gaze sharpened even



further. And I knew he was taking note of my clothes that didn't quite fit or the winter jacket with holes in it. "How long have you been working temp jobs?"

Oh God, was he going to find out now? At the very end? It wouldn't matter if he fired me, but if he found out I'd lied and told the authorities, I could be put back in jail.

"This is my first job out of school," I said vaguely, desperately, hoping it would be enough.

"Have you applied for permanent positions?"

"Um. Yeah." I'd applied to a hundred positions, both permanent and not. Each time disclosing my criminal record. And then, when I'd gotten hungry enough and scared enough, I'd skipped the disclosure. And the HR person for Thompson Industries called me the next day. "Haven't found one yet."

"Why not?" The question was blunt. And painful.

"There are a lot of people looking for jobs. And not that many jobs. And, well, I'm not the brightest bulb. I know that too."

He made a dismissive sound. "That again."

"It's the truth," I said. *Liar*. "But I think I can do a good job. If I can find someone to take a chance on me."

*Like you*. But I didn't say that. All I was hoping for now was that he wouldn't ask any more questions. If I could make it out of this elevator, out of his sight, he'd forget all about the mousy temp assistant he'd had. And I'd be safe.

"I'm sure I'll find something soon," I said hastily, attempting a smile.

"Jesus," he muttered. Then without warning, he banged on the elevator doors. *Bang bang bang*. I jumped back, startled, my heart jumping into my throat.

The silence that followed rang in my ears. No footsteps came running. No shouts asked if we were okay.

No one was there.

I bit my lip. “Mr. Thompson?”

“I think, considering all that’s happened, you can call me Gage,” he said wryly.

My eyes lowered in the dark. “How long do you think it’ll be?”

“Not long.” A longer pause this time. “I don’t know. There’s always someone from security on standby even when the building is mostly empty. But they might be patrolling the grounds. They might be unable to get here due to the storm. For all I know, they could be in one of the elevator cars, stuck just like us.”

“Oh.”

With a muttered curse, he started pacing. Since the elevator car was small and his stride was long, he could only go one-and-a-half steps before turning. And with each turn, his movements got a little more jerky, his stride a little more clipped. He practically vibrated with tension; it filled the air, making me jittery and hot.

“Don’t like small spaces?” I asked.

He turned to face me. “What?”

“Small spaces. They make you stressed? That’s understandable.”

He laughed shortly. “No, the space isn’t the problem.”

Was the problem... me? It seemed crazy that a girl like me could impact him this much, but clearly he was upset. Hurt arced through me. He’d already told me he didn’t like me, didn’t like the way I made him feel, but it still hurt to be reminded of it. “I’m sorry,” I said, hating how my voice shook. “I’m sure they’ll get us out soon.”

He swore. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“You can’t see me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Angel. I can see you in the dark. I can see you with my eyes closed. I see you in my

dreams. I can't seem to stop seeing you."

The air rushed out of me. "Mr. Thompson?"

"Don't *Mr. Thompson* me. You know exactly what effect you have on me with those goddamn ugly skirts and those goddamn ugly heels. And that smile. So fucking innocent. Do you practice that?"

Tears stung my eyes. "Why do you talk like that to me?"

I waited for a sharp retort, something angry and cutting, but it never came. "Because I'm an asshole," he said shortly. "Because I don't know how to deal with you. With *this*."

Pain laced his words, and my anger melted away. "You don't have to deal with me."

*I won't be here tomorrow. Won't see you again. Am I the only one sad about that?*

"I want you," he said, his voice raw and rough like an open nerve. "I *need* you. But I can't touch you."

Because of what he'd told me? It seemed impossible that it would hold him back if he really wanted something, wanted *someone*, and yet he seemed so torn. Like a wolf with his paw caught in a trap—except the trap wasn't a physical thing made of metal. The trap was his own past, his own mind. His own fears. My heart broke for the mother who'd seen her rape every time she'd looked at her child. It broke even more for the child who'd seen that shame in her eyes and understood he was the cause of it.

*I can't touch you.*

If he couldn't touch me, then I could touch him. I could be the bridge between us, my hand on his arm, his skin hot under my palm. His whole body stilled at the contact. I felt his muscles flex under my hand as a shiver ran through him.

"Don't do that." Almost a growl.

"Why not? You won't hurt me." To prove my point, I squeezed gently.

For a moment, his whole body leaned toward me. I was sure he would kiss me, but then he yanked himself away. “God, Angel. Do you want to be raped? Is that what this is about? Some sick game of chicken? Because I will do it. I’ll hurt you, and I won’t even feel sorry for it.”

His words sickened me—not because I believed them, but because he did. He really believed he was capable of hurting me. I knew otherwise. And as for feeling sorry... he was already suffering deep, searing regret for things he hadn’t even done, for crimes his father had committed.

“I’m not afraid of you,” I whispered.

“Then you’re an even bigger fool than you thought.”

I winced. He’d said it to hurt me, and it had worked. For a moment, I turned away, facing the corner as I blinked back tears. But I knew how badly he wanted me, and that was enough to lend me courage. The courage to help him. Nothing I said would convince him. So I would have to show him instead.

With trembling fingers, I began unbuttoning my dress shirt, just like he’d done two weeks ago.

Despite the darkness, he noticed immediately. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Making a point,” I said, repeating what he’d told me in the office that day with Noah Waters. I pulled my shirt from the waistband and faced him.

His breath caught. “Stop that right now.”

I dropped the shirt on the floor and toed off my shoes. He backed up—but there was nowhere for him to go. His back hit the elevator wall, and he leaned back, pressing his head against the wall and staring at me through slitted eyes. His jaw must have been clamped shut the way the words came out. “I. Said. Stop.”

“I heard you. But I’m not going to listen.” I gave him an apologetic smile. “I stopped working at noon. It’s Christmas

Eve, you know.”

“Not funny.”

I reached behind me and unclasped my bra. I held it to my breasts as the straps fell down around my arms. “This isn’t a joke.”

“It’s not going to be a joke when you’re lying there, broken, hurt, because you didn’t fucking take me seriously.”

I didn’t want my fingers to tremble as they worked at my skirt and my stockings, but I couldn’t help it. Not with his threat hanging in the air.

“Angel,” he said sharply.

I stilled, looking down. “What is it you like to do to girls?”

“Not girls, Angel. What I did before—that was scratching a fucking itch. What I want to do to you... is take you. Without a care for whether you like it or want it. Without making sure you can even *move* after that.” He laughed shortly. “No, that’s not true. The truth is I don’t want you to be able to move. I want you fucking shattered underneath me. Understand?”

Oh, I understood. I understood that he thought he would hurt me, just like his father had hurt his mother. That he saw those impulses inside himself, the ones that wanted to pin me down and fuck me, and saw the pain and shame and hatred from his own conception. I understood that he saw the past repeating itself, and he cared enough about me to warn me away.

I couldn’t bear the thought of him in pain, believing the worst of himself. Because he wasn’t his father. He wasn’t a rapist. And he wouldn’t harm me, not really. I believed that—and I was about to stake my life on it.

I released my hold on the bra and let it fall to the ground.

He turned his head away as if the sight of my bare breasts—even in the shadows—was painful. Then he slid to the ground. “I don’t want to hurt you,” he muttered hoarsely.

“You won’t,” I promised him.

But he didn’t believe me. Of course he didn’t believe me; that was why I needed to prove it.

I sank to my knees in front of him. He started to reach for me... and then pulled his hands back. He reached up and grabbed the shiny metal bar that wrapped around the elevator walls. “I’m not going to touch you. You may be fucking suicidal, but I’m not going to help you do this.”

A rough edge of fear marked his voice, and it hurt me to hear. But it also strengthened my resolve.

I put my hands on the bar beside his and leaned forward, my breasts right in front of his face.

“Oh God,” he muttered and leaned forward, rubbing his face over my breasts, feeling them with his cheeks, his nose, his eyelids. Running the five o’clock shadow of his jaw over my tender flesh, abrading me. “So fucking beautiful.”

He was lost in me, learning the shape of my breasts, breathing me in. And I was lost in him, gripping the bar tight through the pain, moaning softly when he caught one nipple in his mouth. He sucked, making it wet, just like he’d promised that first day, and my legs clenched together in response.

“Feels so good,” I whispered. “Want more.”

I knew my words were slurring as if I were drugged, and I *was*, high on the pleasure coursing through me, but he needed to know I was okay. It must have worked, because he did just what I asked. He licked and sucked and bit his way to my other nipple and sucked me there until I cried out.

He never released his grip on the bar.

I felt a little mean for teasing him this way, even though I hadn’t meant it as a tease. I pulled back, and he groaned, sounding almost desperate. Then the sound changed, grew more urgent as I began unbuttoning his dress shirt.

“Wait,” he gasped. “It’s enough. Just let me... let me touch you again. Let me use you.”

I knew exactly how good it would feel to let him do that, like he had the first day. And I knew it would end there, with me feeling wonderful and him still afraid of his own dark desires. I couldn't do that to him, even if he wanted me to.

Underneath his dress shirt was a white tank. I pushed it up out of the way, revealing the hard planes of his abs, his chest, lightly furred and clenched tight with restraint.

“So sexy,” I murmured.

He laughed, unsteady—more an exhalation of air. “Angel, enough.”

“No.” I trailed a finger down his chest, enjoying the ripple of muscles, all the way down his abs and over his belt, to the bulge in his pants. It pulsed at my touch. “I don't think it's enough.”

He made a muffled sound that I took as wholehearted agreement. With him, that was as close as I would get.

I stroked him through his pants. “Keep holding on to the bar if you want.”

“Okay.” He shut his eyes. “I'm going to.”

He said it like a threat. It made me smile. I was still smiling when I unzipped his pants and pulled out his cock. How pretty. He wouldn't like that word, but it was perfect for his cock. Long and thick and impossibly smooth. Already wet at the tip, because he wanted me that much. What could be prettier than that?

I leaned down and kissed the tip. He jerked in my hand. His whole body shuddered, but he didn't release the bar. When I pulled back, my lips were wet from his arousal.

“More?” I asked.

“I can't control it.” He was pleading with me now. For me to keep going? Or for me to stop? Maybe both. Maybe he wanted to hurt me and have me forgive him.

I leaned down and closed my lips around the head of his cock.

“Fuck,” he shouted. The word bounced off the walls, filling the elevator.

I used my hand to pump his cock while I sucked the head and swirled my tongue around. I tried to draw out every drop of salty precum, swallowing it down and searching out more. It was hard to take him deep in this position, with him sitting up straight. He was practically holding his body up, gripping the bar and pushing his hips toward me. I took him as far as I could, letting the wetness slide down and coat him, using it to lubricate my fist as I worked him.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

I barely understood what he was saying, or why, until I saw his arms come down. As if released from a spring, they grabbed me before I could blink. He rocked forward, shoving me down to the floor, climbing on top of me. *Sorry, sorry, sorry.*

My breath was coming fast and then not at all. Was this it? Was he going to hurt me now, like he’d sworn he would? But I wasn’t afraid of him. I was afraid *for* him. How much would he hate himself if he *did* hurt me? And I knew I would let him do anything to me. I’d never say no. Never make him regret anything we did together.

I let him move me, let him yank down my panties and spread my legs. Let him put his mouth against my sex, and God, God, it wasn’t a hardship at all to let him suck my clit. He dipped low and slid his tongue into my folds, drawing out slickness and pleasure, making me shudder and cry out. Then he went high again, lashing my clit with steady, urgent strokes, begging me to come, demanding it.

“*Mr. Thompson.*”

His voice was muffled, but I heard him anyway. “God, yes. Again.”



He pressed one finger inside me, working it along the inner walls until I clenched around him. He added another finger until I felt full—but not enough. Not even his wicked tongue on my clit or his deft fingers in my cunt were enough.

Tears fell down my cheeks. “Mr. Thompson,” I whispered.

He lunged forward until his body canted over mine. His eyes were dark orbs above me, almost cruel. He notched his cock against my body, a warm and urgent threat. “I’m sorry, Angel.”

Then he pushed inside me, relentless, giving me no time to adjust, no time to do anything but stretch and burn and ripple around his hard flesh as I sobbed his name. Immediately he pulled back and thrust inside me again, his pace faster than I could breathe, his movements so hard I felt like the whole elevator car was moving instead of just him.

It felt like his entire body was slamming into my clit, the friction too painful to come, but then he shifted position and his cock pressed a place inside me. I wrapped my legs around him and held on as he battered that place until I was begging him, asking for something with incoherent moans and stuttered breaths. Needing to come.

He pinned my arms above my head. “Angel. Oh fuck, Angel. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

I didn’t have enough air to respond. I was barely holding on as he rode me. In the end it wasn’t his cock filling me up or his hands on my wrists that made me come. It was his cheek brushing against mine that pushed me over, the unexpected intimacy of the moment, my heart swelling along with my clit as I shuddered beneath him.

My climax caused his, and he made a choked sound as he pressed himself into me, somehow deeper, somehow harder, straining against me while he filled me with his seed.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I GROANED. “OH God, that feels so good.”

Gage’s white smile was like the Cheshire cat’s in the dark. “Too much?”

My toes scrunched up as he ran his capable hands over my heel. An extremely intimate sound escaped me. A footrub in a stalled elevator was officially the most decadent thing that had ever happened to me, and I never wanted it to end.

“Just right,” I said on an exhale.

His voice grew serious. “You work too hard.”

I had to laugh. “You’re telling me that?”

“I own the company. I have a vested interest in its success. But you... you weren’t even getting overtime. I checked.”

Thank goodness it was dark so he couldn’t see me blush. “I guess I thought if I did a good enough job, I might be considered for a permanent position.”

Of course I’d known what a long shot that was, if only because it might require a more in-depth background check, one that might turn up sealed records.

But Mr. Thompson was silent, and I knew that he had never even considered offering me a permanent position. Not surprising, considering our first encounter, but it still hurt to know that he hadn’t wanted me. I’d thought I did good work, but maybe I was wrong. Or maybe that didn’t matter.

*A few cards short of a deck*, my daddy had said.

I tried to lighten the mood. “Not sure I’d want to work here anyway. What’s with offices being so high and spacious? I’m more of a burrower.”

“Angel...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll find another temp job. It’s not a problem.”

“Angel, I don’t understand why you’re trying to get a job like this. Filing papers? Filling out forms?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just like paying my bills.”

He barked a laugh. “Fair enough. I meant it isn’t you. That isn’t where your strengths lie.”

“What strengths?” I wasn’t fishing for compliments. I was genuinely curious if there was any way to earn a living while being both gullible and hopeless. Preferably not on my back.

“Angel, you’re caring, you’re courageous. You’re also pretty damn smart no matter what you say. But as much as I’d love to see you every day, it’d be distracting to have you as my secretary. I don’t think it would make you happy either, would it?”

“Well, I’d have food and clothes and maybe even my own apartment. They say money can’t buy happiness, but those things make me pretty happy.”

“You need to do *something*. You don’t need to do this. There are a lot of jobs in the world that aren’t being an assistant to assholes like me.”

“There aren’t,” I said flatly. “But I guess my daddy was right after all. I can’t make it in the real world.”

“This?” He made a sweeping gesture at the shiny metal walls of the elevator, at the marble floors. “This isn’t the real world. This is a boxing ring, and you aren’t going to be happy here because you don’t like to hit people.”

“I appreciate the attempt, but I know the real reason I’ll never make it.” And it wasn’t even the criminal record I had to disclose on every job application. The real reason was what had gotten me in jail in the first place. Too trusting, too blind, and too...

He groaned. “Jesus. You need to stop with that. You’re not stupid.”

I gave him a look. Which probably would have been more effective if he could see my face. “Don’t patronize me. I know what I am.”

“Fuck, Angel. You of all people know me better than that. I’m not a nice person. I’m not going to tell you things just to make you feel better, not if I don’t believe them.”

That was true, he wouldn’t.

“Who told you that?” he demanded. “Your father? If so, he’s an asshole.”

Something shifted inside me to have Mr. Thompson acknowledge that. Because my daddy had been an asshole. He hadn’t cared when they’d diagnosed me with some kind of learning disability, and he definitely hadn’t gotten me the help they’d recommended. No, he’d been too interested in me for all the wrong reasons, kissing and hugging me while he insulted me, hoping I was too stupid to figure out why he really liked to hold his thirteen-year-old daughter so close. I’d learned to keep my head down. Learned to stay under the radar.

Learned to be stupid, so no one would ever pay attention to me.

Or maybe I was just fooling myself. Maybe I was just stupid and desperate enough to make up reasons.

A cold sensation wrapped around me, gripping me with its fingers and squeezing tight. There were no more reasons to make up. No more excuses. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said flatly.

He blinked, clearly not used to people talking to him that way. But he didn’t get angry. Instead his eyes softened. “I know you’re smart in everything that matters. You’re smart about people. You’re smart about the way I treat you and the way you treat me.” He paused. “You’re smart about us.”

About us. Oh God. I wanted there to be an us. And how stupid was that? “I have a record,” I whispered.

“What?”

“I have...” Damn it, this was harder than I’d thought. And I’d thought it would be pretty freaking hard. “I have a criminal record, okay? I got out of jail six weeks ago. I was inside for two years, for conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute.”

He stared at me, mouth open. His brown eyes were no longer angry or fierce. They were shocked, and for the first time I noticed his dark lashes. They made him seem younger, almost vulnerable. He was like the building, hard steel and concrete—and the thin layer of glass that I’d slammed into like a sledgehammer, breaking it with no care at all, only concerned about what this job would mean to me.

He shook his head slowly, disbelieving. “You were... a drug dealer?”

A short bitter laugh escaped me. “That would require some level of intelligence. And in that case, I wouldn’t be broke. No, I was just the dumb girlfriend of the dealer. I kept the boxes in the room I was renting because he’d asked me to. And when the cops showed up to search them...”

“Jesus, Angel.”

“I do have my diploma,” I said somewhat defensively. “At least that part was true. I got my associates degree while I was there. But I didn’t disclose my crime on the application. That’s the only reason I got this temp job.”

He was silent a moment, the darkness almost suffocating as I waited for him to judge me. He couldn’t say anything worse than I’d already told myself. But it would still hurt, from him.

“How the *fuck* does a minor get two years in prison for someone else’s crime?”

Surprise held me suspended, almost floating above the cool elevator floor, hanging by a breath. He didn’t seem mad... at me. It had to be a mistake. A temporary reprieve. Just one more thing I didn’t deserve. “The judge said I needed to learn my lesson. That running away from home had proven

how little responsibility I took for my life. He said that even if I hadn't meant to, I should have known better."

"That's ridiculous. What was his name?"

"The judge?" My eyes widened. What did he want to know that for? "I'm not telling you."

"I'll find out easily enough."

"It's sealed. My record is sealed. The judge did that much for me, at least."

My heart seemed tight, my chest too small to contain it. I found myself clutching the elevator floor, almost bracing myself for whatever would come next. Whatever he would say, whatever he would do—except before he could say anything, footsteps approached from... above? Through the door, but it almost sounded like the floor was halfway up.

Gage was on his feet in a flash. "Hello," he shouted. "Anyone there?"

Someone shouted back. "I hear you. You okay in there?"

That almost sounded like the man out front...except I didn't know his name. "Santa?" I called, feeling silly.

There was a laugh. "Yes, ma'am. I knew you went in this morning and never came out. Figured I better check on you."

I smiled. "Thank you. We could use your help."

"Call security." The Big Bad Billionaire was back. "Tell them Mr. Thompson is in elevator bank three and to get their asses down here."

"Will do."

It got quiet, and Mr. Thompson sent me a sideways glance. "How do you suppose he got in with the doors locked?"

He must have found some way in, maybe a way that wasn't totally kosher, but I wasn't going to complain about that. Or let him get in trouble. It was my last day, and even if it

hadn't been, I'd have been fired after that confession. "The chimney, of course."

## CHAPTER NINE

AFTER ADJUSTING A strand of glittery tinsel, I stepped back to examine my work. The little household plant bore its Christmas trappings with dignity... kind of like a dog forced to wear a Halloween costume. Well, a Christmas tree wouldn't fit in my room here. Not that I'd been able to afford one.

I dropped onto my couch and sat back. Maise wandered over and curled up on my lap. I stroked her absently. "It's nice, isn't it?"

Maise purred.

"Just don't eat the tinsel. I'm pretty sure it won't digest well."

A knock came at the door. I frowned. The owner of the house had gone to visit her son in Alabama. I was watching Maise until she got back, though to be honest, the gray and white striped cat had taken up residence almost since I'd gotten here. There were a few other people living in the house, but they were at work.

Which meant I had no idea who was knocking on the door.

I pushed a reluctant Maise off my lap and went to peer through the peephole. Oh God. "Mr. Thompson?"

"Gage," he said.

My heart started beating like crazy. What was he doing here?

Was he finally going to turn me in?

He looked about cold enough to do it, his mouth set in grim lines. In fact his face seemed starker than it had been, shadows under his eyes and a shadow of scruff on his hard jaw.



And deep inside, stupid hope beat against my ribs, clamoring to get out, and God, I didn't want to be wrong. Not again. Not about this. I needed some kind of protection around my heart, but seeing him standing outside my door in that ratty hallway tore down every defense I might have had.

"It's Christmas," I said, stalling.

"That's why I came today," he called. "I knew you couldn't turn me away on Christmas."

Damn him, he was right. Just like I'd told him he couldn't fire a guy a week before Christmas. Fear and a small, strange excitement warred inside me as I opened the door a crack.

His expression was reserved. He held up a small box wrapped in red and gold. "I come bearing gifts. Well, one gift."

If there were handcuffs in there, I was ready to be seriously pissed. Well, unless he had a different use planned for them... But worrying would get me nowhere. I had no choice but to open the door and show him up to my room. Then close the door and take his coat, as if he would be staying awhile. Doing anything else was physically impossible.

"I didn't take you for a cat person," he said as Maise twined between his legs.

"She's not mine." Just to be contrary I said, "But she's sweet. I could've had a cat."

"I see you with a dog. Something small but energetic."

I'd have done anything for a dog. Only, even as a young girl I'd been smart enough not to ask for things. Maybe I hadn't always been stupid. I'd just spent my brain cells on survival, on staying under my daddy's radar so he'd never have leverage against me. Never touch me. "I'm not allowed to keep pets here anyway. Maise belongs to the owner of the house."

He wandered farther into the room. He stooped to examine my pathetic houseplant Christmas tree. I felt overexposed with

him seeing where I lived. How I lived. He looked sharp in a suit—even outside of work, on Christmas day. That was him, covered in masculine linen and silk, wrapped like a present.

“I’m starting a new trend,” I said lightly.

When he glanced back at me, his expression was solemn. He looked less like a stranger, more like the Gage Thompson I knew from the office. The Big Bad Billionaire... but even with his stern face, I wasn’t intimidated by him anymore. If he wanted to ruin me, it would be only too easy. With his money and his power, he could ruin anyone. I was completely at his mercy, and I found, for some reason, that I liked it here. It didn’t feel scary.

It felt safe.

I didn’t think he was here to turn me in. “Did you come to offer me a job?”

He glanced at me sideways. “Do you want one?”

“Depends what I’d have to do.”

A small smile turned his lips, challenging and intimate. “What if I said you had to come to my office, late at night when no one else is there?”

My stomach knotted. “I’d say that sounds familiar.”

He withdrew something from his pocket. Folded paper that he opened. “Angel Marie Cole,” he read.

My heart sank. “What is that?”

But I knew. I knew what it was even before he said, “Your job application. And let me tell you, this wasn’t easy to get on Christmas Eve at midnight.”

“You own the company.”

“And as such, I’m considering a complete overhaul of our filing system. It took me two hours to find this.”

Despite my distress, a smile tugged at my lips. He hadn’t wanted to disturb his employees on Christmas Eve, in the

middle of the night, so he'd done it himself. I imagined him bumping into file cabinets, swearing under his breath, and thumbing through stacks of files.

But no matter how adorable the image was, it didn't change what was on that paper.

Anger rose up in me, which was a whole lot easier than dealing with the truth. I didn't like him being disappointed in me. Didn't like being disappointed in myself. "You had no right to pull that out."

He gave me a dark look. "I had every right."

"You can't fire me. I'm not your employee anymore."

His expression softened. "And why would I fire you?"

I stared at him. "Because I lied."

"Angel... your juvenile record was sealed. That's why we didn't find it during the background check. And that means you don't have to disclose it."

My gaze narrowed. "What?"

And more importantly, how the hell did he know that?

The question must have shone in my eyes because he gave me a half smile. "I do numbers for a living. I could work out the dates here between your birthday, your GED, and your associates degree. And the date you submitted this application."

That much made sense, but... "How do you know about not having to disclose juvenile records?"

"I'm a business owner," he said lightly as if his business wasn't a billion-dollar conglomerate. "It's my responsibility to understand basic hiring laws." His cheeks darkened. "Plus I may have called my lawyer to confirm that this morning."

Blood had started to pound thickly in my ears. I felt close to crying, and that somehow seemed the worst travesty of this whole thing—crying in front of the man I wanted, the one I'd never deserve to have. "Why didn't I know about that?"

“You should have. Your parole officer should have gone over all this.”

I just shook my head, remembering the flyer of homeless shelters and the offer to make money on my back. I’d known then that it wasn’t how things were supposed to be done, but a lot of rules got broken in prison. And not all of them by the inmates.

He stepped forward, his finger raising my chin. “You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Worry? I had plenty to worry about. He didn’t understand that in his thousand-dollar suit and his supreme self-assurance.

I shook my head. “I can’t even blame my criminal record. It’s not like I was so freaking successful before I got arrested. The truth is, I can’t cut it, okay?”

“Never going to cut it?”

Why was he making me spell this out? God, it was so obvious. And so depressing. “I’m never going to make a bunch of money, got it? Never going to be one of those fancy people in a business suit. Never going to take the elevator to the top of the glass building.”

“Well, we can’t all be Willy Wonka.”

*Don’t smile, you’ll only encourage him.* But I couldn’t help it. I was glad he’d told me about the disclosure thing, and a deep sense of relief filled me. It meant I hadn’t broken any rules getting that temp job. It also meant I could probably find another job, without a criminal history—and possibly with a positive recommendation. “You are such an asshole.”

Or maybe without the recommendation.

He didn’t seem bothered. “I’ve heard that before.”

“Well, I’m not very original.”

“Do not start with the smart stuff again. You’re smart.” When I snorted, he pressed on. “Very smart. The smartest woman I’ve ever met.”

I glared at him. “Stop.”

“It’s true,” he insisted. “I wish I had half your skill with people. I generally have to take over someone’s company to get them to listen to me. Sometimes it feels like overkill.”

“Only sometimes?” I asked wryly.

“But you, you just smile in that open way and say something sweet, and people are eating out of the palm of your hand.” Something fell, then, in his eyes—a wall. A barrier. He took it down and let me see the truth of his words. “It worked for me, anyway.”

My chest felt tight. “Not smart enough to get a job. The real kind. Not pouring stale coffee.”

“You had a rough start,” he countered. “You *survived* on the streets. And now look at you. Do you think I don’t know how far you’ve come? Do you think I don’t realize how hard you had to work to get to this point without a family, without a home?”

Yeah, kinda. “You’re rich.”

His expression softened. “I wasn’t always rich. But you’re right. I was never homeless either. So let me help you.”

“What?”

“Let me give you money,” he said bluntly.

Ah, there was the Big Bad. It was almost comforting that he wouldn’t be cheesy or romantic about this. He was giving it to me straight.

“I’m not visiting your office, Gage. Not at night. Not at any time of the day.”

“That’s not what I’m asking for. I seem to recall you telling me I deserve more. That’s what I want. From you. I want you with me when I go home. I want a reason to actually go home.”

“And I’d be what? Your kept woman? Your mistress?”

“I was thinking girlfriend.”

I fought against the wave of inappropriate happiness inside me. “This isn’t right. The money. The imbalance. It’s like you paying a woman to come to your office. That’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

He took my hands and pulled me close. “Angel... I want to be with you. Near you. Is that wrong?”

I should pull away. I really should. And I would just as soon as I leaned in close and soaked up all his warmth. “No, you know that isn’t wrong. I want that too.”

“And I want you to have food,” he continued in that persuasive tone of his. I imagined him using that tone when negotiating a multimillion-dollar deal, and felt strangely flattered by the comparison. “I want you to have clothes and your own apartment. Is that wrong?”

“No...” I drew the word out.

“And I want you to be happy.” He pulled me flush against his body, his mouth against my temple. “So let me buy you a little happiness,” he whispered.

I bit my lip to stop the laugh, but it came out anyway. “I did set myself up for that one.”

“You can figure out your next step. You can try out different jobs. You can do whatever the fuck you want, but do it near me. That’s all I want.” He looked down at me, his eyes dark and somehow bright. “That’s my happiness.”

I swallowed thickly. “Oh, Gage.”

His expression was tight, almost pained in its uncertainty. This wasn’t a man used to uncertainty. “Is that a yes? Will you let me make you happy? Will you be mine?”

“It’s a yes, please.”

And he was good to his word, giving me the happiness I needed and wanted, bending his head to brush his lips across mine, deepening the kiss until I was lax in his arms and he was

breathing heavy with need. One of his hands was threaded through my hair, cradling my head as he delved his tongue into my mouth. His other hand roamed my body from my breasts, down my stomach, to cup my ass, and then started the trek all over again—with a kind of urgency born of denial, as if he thought he'd never get to touch me again and had to prove to himself that he could.

When he pulled back, his eyes were hazy with desire. They focused on me with slow-burning intensity. “Show me your bedroom, Angel.”

“Why?” I looked up at him, coy. “Do you have something to show me?”

“I have several things to show you,” he growled. “Right here on the floor if you don't take me to your bed.”

Ooh, I liked him growly. “Wait. First I need to see what's in the box.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Mercenary. I approve.”

I shrugged, unapologetic. I was way too curious about what he'd gotten. Besides, it had been a long time since anyone had given me a present. As soon as he handed me the box, I pulled aside the ribbon and tore the paper. Lifting the lid, I found a gleaming onyx pen inside. His pen. I picked it up, admiring the smooth shine.

Only then did I notice the engraving along the side. *Property of the Big Bad Billionaire. Please return if found.*

My jaw dropped. This was exactly how he'd gotten his reputation. And just like the man in the Santa costume had said, he lived up to his reputation. “Oh, you're very bad.”

“So they tell me. Big too.”

I swatted him. “Arrogant, overconfident, egotistical—”

“But you didn't think I meant... *you*, did you? Only the pen is mine. That's what I meant.”

“I see,” I said, even though he was such a tease. A sexy tease, and I never wanted him to change.

I loved him like this—demanding and confident like he should be, none of the hesitation and self-disgust he’d had before. Sometimes we were the worst judges of ourselves. He wasn’t a rapist, no matter what his father had done. And I wasn’t stupid, no matter what my daddy had said.

“But you can use it. Now that you’re my girlfriend, I don’t want you going around, borrowing other men’s pens.”

“Not when you have a perfectly good one.”

He leaned down and kissed me, murmuring between hot presses of his mouth on mine, “Perfectly. Good.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight for what I was sure would be rough and wild and absolutely decadent. My lips close to his ear, I whispered, “You’re too pretty, and it’s been too long.”

His lips curved against my neck as he recognized the same words he’d spoken to me. “Do you know what you’re asking for?”

Better than he did, almost. And I wasn’t afraid.



## CHAPTER TEN

**H**E DIDN'T REACH for me right away. Didn't pull me close or pin me down. Not yet.

Instead his gaze was appraising, weighing my sincerity. Wondering whether I could take him. I raised my chin. I'd survived on the streets. Survived prison. If there was anyone strong enough to survive him, it was me.

"It's too late to back out now," he warned.

"Use me," I said softly. "I won't break."

He cocked his head. His gaze took me in, from my nipples pebbling underneath my threadbare cami to my bare feet, visible beneath the hem of my too-long pajama bottoms. Not exactly the sexiest outfit, but the hunger in his eyes left no doubt that he wanted me. And I knew exactly how he wanted me: hard. Rough. And fighting back.

"Will you tell me if I go too far?" he asked, almost conversationally, in the same tone he might use to wonder if we'd have a white Christmas. *Will it snow?* he'd ask. *Will I know when I break you?* he'd wonder. *After the fact, when it's too late to matter.*

Being with him was putting my trust in him. "You won't."

He shut his eyes. He could handle touching me, holding me, pounding me, but the trust was too much. And just right. When his eyes opened again, they glinted with lust—and hard steel. "Then we'll pick up where we left off."

And I knew he didn't mean after in the elevator, with my lips around his hot, pulsing flesh or my legs spread wide for him. He meant before that. He meant the very beginning, in his office.

My voice came out small and somehow more confident than I'd ever felt. "You were making me come."

“That’s right,” he said, approving, the same way he’d tell me I’d turned in the reports on time or followed his directions exactly. The tone of command and condescension sent a wash of humiliation through me—quickly followed by arousal. This man was power. He was threat and generosity wrapped into one sleek package, and I wanted more. I’d never get enough.

“Turn around.” His voice was rougher now. Colder.

I turned willingly, nerves fluttering in my stomach, a tight knot lodged in my throat. Tonight was a test, whether he meant it that way or not. He’d either bend or break me, and if he did the latter, I feared for him more than myself. He’d never forgive himself if he hurt me, which was why I needed to be strong.

I reached to flip off the lamp. A brush of air was my only warning before hands gripped my hips. He pulled me back, pressing my ass flush against his body, his erection an iron bar, threatening and hot even through our clothes.

The soft fabric of my cami gave way to his rough hands, slipping under my breasts and plumping them up.

He groaned, looking down. “The first time I saw these...”

His hands seemed large or my breasts seemed small. His hands tanned and rough against my pale skin. In every way he was stronger, darker, more powerful. I shivered, overpowered and subdued before I’d even thought to fight back.

“What did you think?” I asked, imagining that night when he’d thought he was a prostitute. And he wasn’t that far wrong. I’d been desperate then—to keep the job, to survive. Desperate to please him, the same way I felt now. The same but different, because this time I knew I could say no.

“I thought you were more beautiful than I had any right to. And I felt better that I was paying you, because at least then you’d be getting something in return.”

“I’m getting something. I’m getting you.”

A low laugh. “We’ll see if you still think that when I’m through with you. When I’ve bruised and bitten your pretty little tits. When you think you can’t take it in any deeper or harder, but I force you to.”

My inner muscles clenched, preparing myself and wanting at the same time. I could have told him I wasn’t afraid, but we were beyond that, into the place where he threatened me because it turned me on—and because it turned me on too. He didn’t need my reassurance; he needed my fear, and my body responded with obedience, sending my blood racing through my veins, my breath coming fast.

“What else?”

“Do you want to know what I’m going to do to you? I’m going to bend you over this bed, with my hand on your back to keep you down. Then I’m going to slide into that hot, wet heat of yours and get myself off with the friction of your cunt.”

I moaned, afraid and hungry. “Wait,” I said uselessly.

He didn’t wait. When I tried to stand, but his hand touched my lower back, holding me down, bent over.

Exactly like he’d said he would.

My hands braced on the bed, but it wasn’t enough. Not when he shoved a hand underneath my cami and squeezed—not a careful caress like he’d done before. He squeezed my soft flesh until an anguished cry left my lips, and then he didn’t let up. He found the nipple between his thumb and forefinger and pressed, deliberate and cruel.

“Like this,” he muttered, and I wasn’t sure if the question was meant for me or himself.

But then he pressed harder, and a whimper escaped me. “No,” I whispered.

That seemed to be what he wanted, because he started to move then, using my breasts like handles, pulling me back onto his cock, jerking himself off with the softness of my ass.

Breathy, pained sounds filled the air around me, and I realized I was making them—almost a song, a sick kind of rhythm.

A large hand reached around and cupped my sex. “It will hurt more if you’re dry,” he said, his voice low and more menacing for how calm he sounded. Like he wanted me to hurt.

My clit pulsed at the warmth of him, desperate for more. I didn’t think dryness would be a problem—not with the way my body was already responding to him, slick and hot. But he could still hurt me.

He probably would.

I ground my clit down on his palm, seeking him, and he groaned. “You don’t care what I do to you, is that it? You get off on the pain, don’t you?”

I flinched, because I hadn’t been expecting him to call me out on it. I should have, though. I should have known he’d want to hurt me and make me want it and make me feel humiliated for it too. Should have known he’d wring every last drop of sensual torture from our play, or he wouldn’t really be Gage Thompson.

The female body was made to be invaded, made to be entered, but he fanned his fingers over my sex and then squeezed, making me feel small and owned and *fucked* without even slipping his fingers inside me. My muscles clenched around nothing, aching, bruised and needy. “God, don’t,” I moaned. “*Please.*”

“It’s really too late for that,” he said in his cool, calm CEO tones. The same tones he’d used telling Noah he was fired. “Give me your hands.”

My hands were the only things holding me up off this bed. If I gave them to him, I would have no leverage left, no protection. No control. And that was exactly the way he wanted me.

I reached back, and he clasped my wrists together, deft and sure. And just as quickly released me. I only had seconds to

register my freedom before he took it back, reaching around me, grasping my cami—and oh God, pulling, yanking it. A strap tore. The sound ripped through the air. And then the ruined fabric was pulled back, wrapped around my wrists, holding me effectively, leaving his hands free to touch and roam and pinch.

A cry filled my throat, low and desperate.

He laughed softly. “So pretty. This is how I imagined you that night, when I saw you bent over my desk.” His lips found my ear, and he traced them along the curve. His voice came soft, then—I had to strain to hear. “And now I have you.”

“Please,” I whispered. But I didn’t just want his dark words, his harsh promises. I wanted him to touch me, to force me. I even wanted him to hurt me, as long as he took care of me too. Those steel bars had kept me imprisoned—and they’d kept me safe. He was steel, and he would hold me, keep me. He’d protect me.

He pulled back and pushed down my pants. Cool air washed over the backs of my legs. His fingers skated up my thigh, teasing the hem of my panties. I squirmed, aching for more, harder, now, but he held me still. He held me with his hands and my bunched up cami. With a single muttered word: “Stay.”

I stayed. I stayed while he hooked his fingers into my panties and dragged them down my legs. He pulled them taut around my ankles, spreading my legs just far enough to hold them there.

He was silent, but I felt his gaze like a touch. On my pussy, on my legs. On my ass. He watched me with total patience—the kind of patience that came with possession. There was no hurry, because he knew he’d have me for as long as he wanted. Because he knew he’d have me for a long time.

The first touch between my legs wasn’t from his hands. He kissed me. He pushed his face between my thighs, shoving them apart until I bent my knees. He licked and sucked at my

pussy, only reaching the outer lips. Every nip and suck made me push back harder against his face, aching for more.

“God, I can’t—” My fingers grasped at nothing, at air.

“You can,” he said, returning to his torment. When he finally added a finger, it only got worse. And so much better, the sweet stretch of him, the brutal rhythm.

I choked on my next refusal when he stood. A zipper running down. A rustle of clothing. A tear of foil. My whole body tensed, ready for him, waiting.

He notched his cock against my opening, hot and blunt where I was slick.

Then he was inside me, shoving all the way in before I’d had a chance to breathe, too fast for me to even cry out. He impaled me, and I shuddered in a kind of sensual shock, pinned down by him, laid bare. There was nothing to do but take it, nothing to hold on to, no gravity at all except the hard, implacable length of him pushing me down on the bed.

It was exactly what he’d threatened—what he’d promised—and exactly what I needed. I need to know that he would be there, keeping his word, hurting me and protecting me. I needed to know, when I was alone in the world, when it was Christmas Eve, that someone wanted me enough to take me.

“This.” His voice was choppy, breathing rough. I wasn’t the only one breaking apart. Wasn’t the only one crashing. “This is what I imagined doing. Fucking you until you couldn’t breathe. That’s what I want.”

And he’d gotten it, because God, I couldn’t. Couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. My body was a mass of burning sensation, like the sun. I was heated from the inside and melting on the surface. It hurt to look at anything, blinding, so I shut my eyes tight. But the light found me there, flares of red and electric white light. I couldn’t escape the burn. It consumed me, flames licking at my skin, molten deep in my core, the temperature rising until I came, calling his name,

*Gage*, clenching around him, feeling his body tense behind me as he growled out his climax.

We remained like that, me bent over the bed, him collapsed on top of me, my muscles pulsing around him, his flexing inside me, our bodies communing while our breaths slowed down. When he finally moved and his cock slipped from inside me, I felt the loss acutely, the space he had filled now empty.

He found another way to fill it, with firm and gentle touches, moving my body onto the bed, settling me under the covers before he disappeared into the bathroom for a few minutes. When he came back, he had a warm washcloth that he used on me, soothing the secret places on my body, tender spots he had used roughly, bruises he had left.

My limbs were limp as he arranged me, moved my legs apart to give him access, and then slid them closed again. In all that we'd done, this was the first time I'd gotten a clear view of his body, the sinewy muscle and dark hair. Carefully banked power treating me gently.

And then he was behind me, pulling me against his chest. I was helpless against his warmth and so damn sated. And half-asleep when we heard the city clock chime twelve times.

"Merry Christmas, Angel," he murmured.

"Merry Christmas," I whispered back.

The rumors hadn't lied. He was big and he was bad, but he was mine. And I was his.



Thank you for reading *His for Christmas*! I hope you loved *Gage and Angel's* story. If you enjoyed this, then you'll really enjoy my sexy, gritty Chicago Underground series, starting with the FREE book [Rough](#).

TEN DIRTY DEMANDS  
LAURELIN PAIGE



## CHAPTER ONE

“NOT HAPPENING,” I say, adamant despite Sabrina’s pleading expression. I don’t know which is harder to look at—her puppy dog eyes or the red and white monstrosity on the hanger she’s holding.

She takes a step toward me. “But Donovan...”

I don’t let that *but Donovan* go anywhere. “Not a fucking chance.” I scoot past her to adjust my bow tie in the bedroom mirror. Or to pretend to adjust it so that I don’t have to look at her, which backfires because, well, mirror’s happen to be reflective, and I can still see the pout of her mouth and the tension in her chest as she holds her breath, praying I’ll change my mind.

*Knowing* I’ll change my mind.

Because don’t I always when it comes to her?

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

She obviously hears me since her smile is hopeful when I turn around. I glance at her lips and then again at the suit. The thing has to weigh a ton. Wearing it over my tux, I’m sure to get heat stroke, and no way am I putting that rented piece of shit against my bare skin. I shudder to think about who else has sweated into the fabric.

No. It’s too awful. “Nate would be a better option for this.” I have no qualms about offering up my business partner for the job. He’d do the same for me. “Or anyone else at the office. Stan. Or that new guy in sales.”

She’s shaking her head before I even finish talking. “This party is a gift for the staff. We’re not asking anyone to do anything. This is their night off. And Nate...well, I already asked, and he said you’d already bribed him to show up so no.”

Of course he'd say no, not just because he has other things he'd rather do with a Saturday night. He has self-respect and isn't wrapped around Sabrina's little finger. Not for the first time, I lament that our other partner Weston is in France, running the Reach office there. He'd have done it. I might have had to twist his arm, but that would have been easy enough.

If I do this, he'll find out. Across the ocean or not, he'll find out and he'll never let me live it down.

He's my best friend, but I hate giving the asshole the satisfaction. "We don't have to have a Santa," I insist. "It's not like there are kids at the company party. No one is going to miss him."

"I'll miss him."

And that's why I'll do it. That's why I'll put on this fucking outfit and sweat like a pig, because this year she took over the Reach holiday party for the first time, and if it doesn't go as she planned—if there's no stupid Santa giving out the holiday bonus checks because the man who'd been hired got the goddammed flu at his mall gig earlier in the day—then she'll consider the whole event a failure.

She'll consider *herself* a failure, and as the man who loves her more than life itself, I cannot allow that thought to even cross her mind.

Which is why I'm about to consent to playing Santa myself.

Kill me now.

"Fuuuuuck," I say again, drawing it out on a sigh. "Will it even fit? The thing looks pretty large."

Excited now that she knows I'm about to relent, she throws the horrible thing at me so she can pick up some round puffy thing from the bed. "You wear this to fill it out," she says. "Makes you jolly."

“Honey, it’s going to take a whole lot more than a pillow strapped around my waist to make *me* jolly.” I take it from her, though, and inspect it before tossing it back to the bed. I’d rather be dressed baggy than wear the stifling padding.

I transfer the suit to my other arm as she steps toward me to run her hand over my chest. “I was hoping my outfit would be what made you jolly.”

God, she’s good. The seductive tone in her voice, the flutter of her eyelashes, and yes, the super short Santa’s helper costume she’s donned is much appreciated. It’s red and fake-fur lined, and the cleavage she’s sporting has me imagine ways I could add a bit of white to her look. “I’d be jollier if I could skip this whole party and spend the evening getting you out of that outfit instead.”

“Think of that as your reward after the party is over.”

“You can’t offer what’s already mine as a reward.” I slip my hand under her dress, and to remind her just who belongs to who, I squeeze her ass. Too bad she’s wearing panties.

“I’ll owe you one,” she says, suddenly serious. I can feel her awareness of the ticking clock. I’m well aware of the time. We don’t have all night to negotiate, but we don’t have to rush quite yet.

“Oh, you’ll owe me more than one.” I release her so I can examine the suit. The beard is attached to the hat—clever—but it’s scratchy as hell.

“How much will it take?” She crosses her arms over her chest, and I wonder if she realizes that the gesture makes her breasts even more pronounced, if that’s a tool she’s wielding purposefully or if it’s entirely coincidental.

Honestly, she could just stand like that for another few minutes and let me have my naughty thoughts, and I’d be...

Well, I’m not going to be happy. Not playing fucking Santa Claus, but I’m not exactly not happy. It’s hard to be discontent with my life at all when she’s in it.

Not telling her that though. Especially when I see an opportunity to salvage this night another way. “Ten.”

“Ten favors? I owe you *ten* favors for this one?”

“Yep. And I decide the favors.”

“So ten demands, you mean.” She knows me so well.

“Ten *dirty* demands.”

“Fine.” She scowls, but I know how much she likes this kind of play. Her pretending that she doesn’t is part of the kink.

“Okay, then. Give me your panties, and we’ll seal this deal.”

She doesn’t jump up and down, but she’s as giddy as she gets as she scrambles to get her panties off over her heels. She bunches them into a ball, as though they’re something she wants to keep secret, and passes them over. She gives me a peck on the lips. “That’s one,” she says.

I want the kiss to go longer and deeper, but she’s already started the countdown, and this isn’t where I want to spend my demands.

Before I can deliver another one, however, she’s poking me with her finger. “Get dressed, Santa.”

“No fucking way am I going outside in this get-up. I’ll change when we get there.”

She twists my wrist so she can look at my watch. “Then we better leave now.”

We’ll be plenty early, even if we delay departure for another fifteen minutes, but just then, my cell rings with the tone that indicates the limo’s waiting downstairs, and now that I think about it, what I have in mind can easily be taken care of on the ride over.

I stuff her panties into the inside pocket of my tux. “Lead the way, my love.” And lucky me, I don’t even have to

demand the show she gives when she bends down to put on her heels on the way out. She gives it to me absolutely free.

## CHAPTER TWO

**W**E'VE ONLY JUST pulled away from the curb when I make my next demand. "Play with yourself. Get yourself wet."

She glances toward the front of the car. The glass is closed between us and the driver, but it's clear, which I'm guessing is the reason that she keeps her legs closed and her skirt covering her hand as she slides it underneath. "Three," she says, counting off this task like there's an invisible checklist.

"No, no, no. I need to see."

I try to pull up her skirt, but she shoos my hand away. "That will cost you another demand."

"Like hell it will. How do I even know what you're touching? You could be rubbing the top of your thigh for all I know. I need your legs spread and your cunt glistening for it to count."

She hesitates, her eyes flicking again toward the glass. When I don't offer to close the current, she moves to the seat facing me, which I wholeheartedly approve of, because then she pulls up the tiny skirt and spreads her thighs apart and the view is better than what's out our window, Rockefeller Center, all lit up with Christmas.

I remain stoic, but my eyes are transfixed as she draws her finger up and down her seam before nestling it inside her folds where her clit is buried. "I still say it counts as two demands."

I know her better than I know myself, and there's no doubt in my mind the argument isn't genuine. She likes the fight, just as much as she likes the submission. Just as much as she likes the fact that she's baring her pussy to me while another man sits in the front seat unaware.

"Don't try to reduce your sentence, Sabrina. The demand is that you play with yourself for my entertainment, and that

means doing whatever you need to make sure I'm entertained."

"I could do the job with sound alone." She's already breathless, and she's right—the little moan that passes her lips as she speeds up the swirl of her finger against her clit is quite entertaining.

Despite her words, she brings one heel up to the seat next to her ass, tilting her pelvis backward, giving me an even better view, and fuck she's wet. Not only can I see it, but I can hear how slick she is as she draws the moisture from her entrance to her clit, and it's all I can do not to lean forward and draw that swollen little bud into my mouth and make a feast of her.

But we're only a block away from Reach, and her rhythmic whimper and inability to keep her eyes open says she's close to coming, and that means it's time to... "Stop," I say.

"Stop?" Her hand doesn't rest. "But I'm almost there."

I lean forward and grab her hand before she explodes. "I know," I say when she opens her eyes to give me a questioning glare. "That's why I said stop."

This time, her scowl is authentic as she understands what I'm up to. "You asshole."

"You love it."

She drops her foot from the seat with a stomp and throws her skirt down to cover herself, much like a little girl having a tantrum. "Don't be so sure of yourself," she huffs.

"So frustrated. And so entitled. It's almost as though you forgot these demands are supposed to be about satiating me, not you."

"Like I said—asshole." I'm still holding her hand, and when she tries to pull it away, I clutch tighter.

She responds by yanking with more force, so I move over to her side of the car so I can keep hold of her hand and put

my other arm around her while I continue to patronize her. “You didn’t think I’d make this easy, did you?”

The car starts to slow and pull toward the curb, and she seems to recognize the futility of wrestling with me further when we don’t have the opportunity to let it turn into anything fun. “That definitely counts as number three,” she says. “The show was one, the stopping was another.”

I’ll give that to her, though I don’t admit it out loud. Instead, I bring her still wet fingers up to my nose and sniff. Her eyes are dark as they widen, and a shudder runs through her.

But then the driver opens the door on her side, and when she jerks her hand back, this time I let it drop.

She climbs out, managing to keep her skirt down as she does—believe me, I look. As for myself, there’s no hiding how aroused I am. Perhaps I should be grateful that I have the Santa suit to carry as I step out of the car.

No, that’s going too far.

But she’s wet and aroused and without panties, and knowing this evening will be difficult for both of us sure makes it a whole lot less dreadful.



## CHAPTER THREE

TWO AND A half hours later, the party is in full swing, and while the Santa suit is just as hot and stifling as I'd imagined, I'm surprised to find that intermingling with my employees in the get-up isn't all that terrible. There are even some unexpected benefits. It reduces the need for small talk—I fucking hate small talk—and I'm able to throw around the word "Ho" without having to be worried about a lawsuit.

The downside, however, is that, as Sabrina had expected, everyone loves the idea of Santa for Grownups, which has meant I've been surrounded all night long. The event photographer has basically been glued to my side, and while Sabrina has been as well, there hasn't been much opportunity to demand anything dirty.

Finally, all the bonus checks have been distributed from my bag of gifts, and most of my employees are either huddled around tables with their favorite coworkers or making a spectacle of themselves on the dance floor. Someone has opened a door to the balcony, so a cool breeze sweeps through the ballroom just as Sabrina puts a tumbler of scotch in my hand.

"I'm very happy right now," she says before she takes a sip of her champagne, and I have a feeling the source of her mood is not the alcohol. The party's a success, and she's thrilled, and she credits a good deal of that to her husband dressing up as Kris Kringle, which is fucking bullshit. The event is a success because of *her* and her alone. I could tell her, I *should* tell her, but I actually am an asshole when it comes to expressing how I feel with words. I'm much better with action, and that means it's time for another one of my demands.

Because, despite what I said earlier, the demands are about her, not me. Just like everything I do is about her. My greatest,

and perhaps only, gift is being able to know exactly what she needs, and right now I know she needs a reward.

I get the chance to give her one when her assistant approaches us. “I got my gift earlier, but I need a photo with Santa,” Roxie says. “Weston will never believe you did this without proof.”

Of course it would be Roxie who betrays me. She was Weston’s assistant for the first five years the company was in business. Sabrina inherited her when he moved to France, and she took over his job.

“You traitor,” I (mostly) tease. “If it had to be anyone, I’m glad it’s you, I suppose. Hop on.” Praying that my Human Resources director isn’t watching, I spread my legs wide so she can perch on my knee without being too inappropriate. Then, I look at Sabrina. “Santa’s helper should get in on this too, don’t you think, Roxie?”

“Oh, yes! The more the merrier.”

Sabrina takes my drink from me and sets it down nearby along with hers before settling herself on my lap. Wrapping an arm around her, I scoot her back so that her ass hangs a little over my thigh, giving me access to what’s underneath her skirt. Her breath hitches when she feels the first stroke of my finger around the rim of her cunt.

“Stay still. Don’t make a sound,” I whisper-demand in her ear.

“That’s four,” she whispers back.

“I said don’t make a sound.” I pinch her sensitive skin in reprimand, and good girl that she is, her lips part, but she’s silent.

Of course I have to torture her. The tip of my finger slides easily inside her. Has she been wet all night in anticipation of whatever I’d make her do next?

My dick jumps at the thought, and when the photographer prompts us all to say, “Be Merry!” instead of the traditional

“Cheese”, it’s a real smile I deliver.

She shivers, but she manages to suppress sound, even when I insist on several more shots, “Just to be sure we got a good one,” before agreeing with Roxie that we probably did.

Sabrina—and my finger—are soaked when I allow her to stand. “Well played,” she says.

“Well taken,” I say in return, despite the fact that she bobbles when she tries to take a step.

I stand up, but I’m not quick enough to catch her. Fortunately, Nate is. “Whoa there. You okay, Sabrina?”

“Got up too fast,” she lies. Her blush would only give her away to someone who’s good at spotting dirty goings-on.

As it happens, Nate is particularly talented in that area.

It’s not him, however, that calls her out. “I’ve used that excuse a time or two myself,” Trish says with a wink.

Sabrina’s blush deepens, and I have to bite back a smirk before I greet my partner and his...well, his Trish.

The two aren’t married. They don’t even like the term “partners”, but they’re together. She claims she’ll never live with anyone, but Nate bought the place right next to her, and last I’d heard, they were breaking down a wall to connect the two.

He’s head over heels for her, and she’s as devoted to him as she’ll ever be to anyone. Of course, they’re also regular members at the city’s most elite sex club, and more than once, Nate has invited me and Sabrina into their bed.

To which I’ve said no thank you.

No shame on open relationships, but I’m not keen on sharing, and I don’t believe anyone else can give Sabrina what she needs like I can. If I did, if she wanted something more, then I’d have to revisit my reservations. Thankfully, I don’t foresee it as an issue.

Meantime, I don't see any harm in using their sexual proclivities to our advantage. After looking to be sure no one else is in earshot, I pull out my next demand. "Sabrina, why don't you tell our friends just what you're blushing about?"

She throws me a look of outrage that suggests that maybe she isn't quite as on board with sharing her shame as I thought she would be.

Nate reads it as such, anyway. "She doesn't have to—"

"Actually," I interrupt. "She does. If I demand it."

"Ah, it's that kind of game." Nate pulls Trish into his side. "We were playing a game like that earlier, weren't we, Trish?"

She nods. "Except in our version of the game, I got to be Santa. If Santa is synonymous with Sir."

"How else do you think she got me in this suit?" I'm staring right at Sabrina, looking for any cues that tell me I'm pushing her too far, divulging too much. Her breathing has picked up. Her pupils have darkened. She swallows. Yes, she's into this. Timid about it, perhaps, but into it.

"Trish makes a wicked Domme. If you need any ideas," Nate offers.

But I don't need ideas, and the panicked flit of Sabrina's eyes says that's out of her comfort zone. "We're good, thanks. Or we will be good as soon as Sabrina tells you what we were doing. Unless you'd rather we show them?" I address the last part to her. It's an empty threat, but one meant to push her into action, and it does the job.

"Santa did bad things to me while I was sitting on his lap." She keeps her gaze locked on mine.

"Oh, I love stories that start with bad things and laps." Trish waggles her brows. "Tell me more."

Knowing Sabrina won't be specific if I don't prod her, I add, "Be specific."

She narrows her eyes, and I feel that adrenaline rush that accompanies so much of our sex—the thrill of pushing her to her limits of humiliation or degradation. The joy from knowing that she’ll go there with me. Of knowing that I’m the one she trusts to take her there.

Bravely, she tells them. “He put his finger inside me while the photographer took pictures.”

Put that way, it sounds even dirtier than it was.

I don’t bother to clarify. “Inside you...where? Use your words, Sabrina. Even if they’re naughty.”

“Especially if they’re naughty,” Nate agrees, then seems to reconsider. “Is this considered creating a toxic work environment?”

“Yes. Definitely. I’ll give her all my shares if she decides to divorce me because of it.”

She doesn’t seem to have a problem with it, though, since she responds with, “Donovan slipped his hand under my skirt, put his finger in my pussy, and told me not to make a sound.”

“And did she?” Trish seems genuinely interested in the answer.

“Not a peep,” I say, proudly.

She flashes her hand at me, fingers spread, and it takes a second before I realize she’s telling me that was my fifth demand.

“You’re about to get number six,” I say quietly so that only she can hear as I pull her to my side and rest my hand on her hip. I love how it makes me feel like she’s mine, and of course she is mine, but there’s a part of me that is still surprised everyday that I wake up with her next to me. I’ll never tire of claiming her with these small gestures. “I believe I promised you something that would make this night worth your while, Nate.”

“That you did. Is it hiding in there?” Nate nods to the now empty Santa bag at the side of my abandoned chair.

“Worth too much to leave it there. Sabrina, would you mind going out to the coat check and get the box of Cubans I stowed in there earlier?” She turns toward me, her brow wrinkled at the request, having expected a demand, not realizing it’s still to come until I dip my mouth to her ear and whisper. “Grab three, but before you come back, put one of them—the one that you intend to give to me—inside your pussy first. I want to be able to taste you when I light it up.”

She gives me a half-scandalized, half-exhilarated look, and I’m half-expecting she’ll push back, but she surprises me and just says, “Okay.”

Then, with her body angled so that no one can see, she puts her hand directly on my already half-stiff cock—not an easy feat to find under the baggy suit—and squeezes before going on her way.

God, she’s filthy. How the hell did I get so lucky?

My mind is already ten steps ahead of where she is physically. Twenty. Imagining her slip into the coatroom, her apology to the attendant who lets her in because of her credentials, Sabrina’s furtive glances toward him as she waits until he’s distracted before taking a thick cigar out of the box and slipping it quickly inside her. Imagining how much the entire scenario turns her on.

“She’s coming along,” Nate says, pulling me from the fantasy.

I bristle at his words. *Coming along.*

As though she’s an animal who needs training.

As though she’s playing tonight simply for my benefit.

As though she’s not already exactly who she should be.

I level a stern stare at my partner. “The game is for her,” I say, even though I don’t owe him any explanation, and I certainly don’t expect him to understand. For him, love is about both partners exercising their passions together.

For me, it’s about Sabrina.

“You’re good at giving her what she wants.” I suspect Trish says it in an attempt to smooth my feathers.

I don’t need validation, but I’m not the type to play humble. “I try,” I say in a tone that says *I know*.

“How good is she at giving you what you want?” Nate asks, and the way he seamlessly picks up where his...Trish... left off, I almost feel ganged up on.

I pivot my whole body when I turn toward him this time. “What are you suggesting, Nate? That there’s something lacking in our relationship? There’s not.”

He raises his hands in surrender. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. You can back down.”

Telling me to back down is the best way to get me to do the exact opposite, but because of the occasion—because Nate is my friend, and I know he means no harm—I convince myself to take a breath before I respond. “What, then, are you saying? I’m interested.”

“I’m saying that you give all you are to making sure her every passion is met. You look after her in every way possible—look after all the people you care about, for that matter. It’s admirable how much you sacrifice for us, leading us all to what we want most. I’m just curious if she takes care of you? If you’d let her.”

It’s a fair enough question, though the point is moot. The thing I want most, the thing I care about most—it’s her. Keeping her is all I need.

“She would take care of me,” I assure him. “If I—”

“Needed taking care of,” he finishes for me, correctly predicting my thought. “Got it.” He manages not to roll his eyes, but I can still hear the hint of it in his tone. He’s the type who believes everyone needs taking care of. He’s not wrong about that.

He’s just wrong to include me with *everyone*.

Sabrina returns with a clipped pace that I am certain is attributed to excitement. “Delivery on Santa’s behest!” She’s the perfect little elf as she hands Nate and Trish each a cigar, her smile widening when she gets to me.

There are two left in her hand, and I’m impressed. Not just because my wife is not usually fond of joining in on my smoking habit, but because I have no doubts that she’s “prepared” each of them the way I asked.

I choose one and copy Nate, bringing it in for a sniff. It’s woody and sweet and Sabrina all wrapped up in one scent, and fuck if it isn’t the most glorious thing I’ve ever put to my nose.

“Cohibe Behikes,” he says. “Excellent taste.”

He has no idea.

I’d prefer to drag Sabrina off to a dark corner at this point, but I’d never dream of offering a cigar without offering to smoke. And I’m particularly eager to smoke this particular puro myself.

I’m equally eager to see Sabrina put a stick between her lips, so I make the only suggestion that makes sense: “To the balcony, then?”



## CHAPTER FOUR

IT'S COLD OUTSIDE, which isn't a surprise on a December night in New York City, not that I can feel it with the Santa suit still on. I'd be concerned about Sabrina dressed in her skimpy outfit if she hadn't requested high-power heaters to be set out.

That party planning detail was specifically because she knew I'd want to come out here at some point for just this reason. *See, Nate? She does take care of me.*

Of course, I only knew she'd prepared it because I'd been told when I went to put in the request myself and discovered she'd already done it.

Not the point.

Nate, thankfully, has a lighter in his pocket and a straight cutter on his keychain, which means I don't have to fumble with my costume to find mine. Soon enough, the ends are trimmed and lit, and I take my first puff and sigh.

"It's really good," Trish says while I'm still savoring the first draw.

"Best cigar I've ever tasted." I'm aware that it sounds self-complimentary, but I only care that Sabrina hears it.

Even in the poor light of the heaters, I can tell her cheeks pink.

Nate's a fellow connoisseur, and it takes a moment to assess the flavor. "It's rustic and dry and do I detect a floral note?"

"Definitely a floral note," I say, eyes pinned on Sabrina. It's all I can do not to lick my lips, the taste of her is so powerful that I don't even mind that it's tainted the purity of the Cuban.

I'm aroused, of course. But I tend to live my life with a constant semi since Sabrina's been around, so I'm used to the

mild discomfort of being turned on. Knowing she's also aroused, that she's on the edge with anticipation, makes it all the more bearable.

Until she pulls her cigar from her mouth and sweeps her tongue around her lips. Then she says, "I'm not usually a fan of cigars, and even I like this one."

...and my cock officially decides it's time to whittle this party down to two and move it elsewhere. "That's it. I'm going upstairs to change out of this costume." I put out my cigar first, then take Sabrina's from her and put it out as well, which causes her to gape in surprise.

"I was enjoying that," she exclaims.

"No, you weren't. You were enjoying how much I was enjoying it." I manage to locate my tux pocket inside the Santa suit and stuff the cigars inside. "In case you aren't here when we return," *if* we return, "Trish, Nate, always a pleasure. Sabrina, let's go."

After somehow being persuaded to take Nate's camera to his office for him—why he brought his own down when there was a hired photographer is beyond me; that's artist's for you—I grab Sabrina by her elbow and direct her inside and through the ballroom.

She quibbles with me the entire time about whether her leaving with me counts as a demand or not:

"Doesn't count if it's not dirty," I remind her.

"It's going to get dirty soon enough."

"You don't know that."

"Yeah, right I don't."

"Not to mention that if it were a demand, you would have to actually do the thing I asked, which from my standpoint, you haven't, since I'm dragging you along."

"You're only dragging me because you're too impatient to let me walk at my own speed. It's seven. It counts."

By the time we reach the elevator, I'm done with the argument. Once the doors close and I've pushed the button to our floor, I slam her against the back wall and pin her there with my hand on her throat. "It doesn't matter if you do or don't cross off number seven. With or without it, you aren't any safer from what's to come."

She swallows and her pulse picks up, and even though I've given into her, I consider it a win. The whole point of the demand setup is that she enjoys being forced to do naughty things. The hand I have pressed against her windpipe is a reminder to us both that I don't need words for that.

Now that I have her attention, I let my gaze drift down to her mouth. I trace her bottom lip with my thumb. "Could you taste yourself like I could? When you puffed on that stick, did you enjoy the flavor of your cunt?"

She nods as well as she can with my hand keeping her in place.

"Please say you didn't go to the ladies' room to get them wet."

A smile appears as she shakes her head no.

"Tell me what you did."

"The attendant recognized me so he let me in without question. He kept chatting with me while I looked for the cigars, but as soon as I found them, a couple came to the window with their coat tickets. While they were talking, I turned my back to him, lifted my skirt, and put both cigars inside me at once."

My hand wanders lower as she talks, sneaking inside her dress to play with her nipple, and when she reaches the end of her story, I have to fight back a groan. "Santa's going to have to put you on the bad list, I'm afraid, Sabrina. Because that was so very, very bad."

"Does that mean I won't be getting anything for Christmas?"

“Not a chance.” I’m ready to give her a thick steel rod right then and there.

Except then the elevator dings, and the doors open on our floor. “Telling me what happened in the coatroom—*that* counts as seven,” I say, then release my hand from her neck. “After you, my dear.”

She pouts in my direction for a full beat before she moves to leave. I follow behind, grinning at her frustration. It’s not that it’s not real—I’m sure it is. I’m sure that she’s pissed that I’m the one who gets to decide what counts as a demand and what doesn’t. Pissed that I’ve taken her from her party before it’s ended. Pissed that I didn’t push the emergency button and fuck her in the elevator.

But I also know that people can be wired to be many contradictory things at once. Sabrina’s wired to get pleasure from being pissed. Or scared. Or degraded. Her fury right now is her favorite form of foreplay, and what she needs will follow soon enough.

She’s only two steps down the hallway when she stops. “Where are we going?”

I’d planned to send her to my office, but the camera sling on my shoulder gives me an idea. “Nate’s office.”

My master will unlock his door, but I’m glad when I see he’s left it open, and I don’t have to dig around for my keys. Sabrina walks past the threshold and leans a shoulder against the wall, seemingly waiting for me to return the camera and then usher her elsewhere.

Instead, I turn on a lamp to illuminate the dark room without having the brightness of the overheads, and gesture toward the desk. “Hop up, helper.”

I haven’t forgotten I’m still in my costume. There’s nothing sexy about the Santa situation, and I’m burning up inside the stifling fabric, but I have one more demand before it can come off. “Keep the dress on, but get your tits out where I can see them.”

“Is this eight?” she asks coyly, as though she wants to agree upon the terms this time before following through.

“It’s eight if you do it before I come over there and do it for you.”

She doesn’t hesitate after that, pulling both the dress and her bra down to expose her breasts. The cinched material acts like a bustier, pushing her tits up and out in an obscene display. Her nipples are sharp and pimped and practically begging to be sucked, and it takes me a second or two before I remember what I want to do next.

“Thighs spread, skirt up.” When she obeys, I lift Nate’s camera and center her on the display, and fuck. She’s a goddess. A portrait of filth and lust. Her hooded eyes, her wet mouth, her glistening cunt...

I hadn’t planned on taking a picture. I’d meant to just make her believe I was loading our Art Director’s memory card with naughty images rather than actually doing it, but seeing her on the screen, I have to push the button.

She hears the click of the device, and her lids pop open. “Isn’t that Nate’s camera?”

“Yep.” I turn the camera out of landscape format and click again.

“You’re planning to delete them after, right?”

She’s both aroused by the prospect and mortified. This isn’t the same as the time when I fucked her on Weston’s desk in front of his security cameras. Then, the chance that he’d ever go back through the footage was slim. Of course, I sent him the tape to be sure he’d seen it, but that was neither here nor there.

What mattered was how scandalous it had felt while I was fucking her, and that had been just scandalous enough.

This was a great deal more scandalizing, because there was very little chance that Nate wouldn’t look through his pictures of this evening at some point, and even if there were other

pornographic images on his card—which would not be surprising—there was very little doubt that he'd see these.

I don't even consider easing her mind. "We're missing something." I'm not just attempting a redirect. The *pièce de résistance* has yet to be added. With the camera in one hand, I reach for a sharpie from Nate's desk organizer with the other. After uncapping the lid with my mouth, I bend down to write along the inside of Sabrina's thighs in big bold letters, traveling from left to right across her skin: **Santa's Dirty Filthy Slut.**

She glances down to read what I wrote, and her breath hitches. When she lifts her head again, I'm ready. The camera flashes as I click several times in succession, filling the screen with image after image of unadulterated erotica that makes my cock so hard, I can barely see straight.

Her voice is barely heard in the heavy fog of lust. "Donovan? The camera?"

Unable to hold back any longer, I toss the camera down on Nate's chair and tear off my hat/beard as I stride over to the desk. I wrap her long hair around my hand and pull her head back, forcing her lips to part as I do.

I lower my mouth until it's hovering an inch above hers. "The camera isn't any of your business, Sabrina. You made an earnest exchange—one favor at the price of ten demands" I know her cunt from memory, and she gasps when my finger lands directly on her clit. "If I demand you pose for me like a dirty, filthy whore, then you'd do best to oblige."

I maneuver my hand so that I can keep massaging her bud with my thumb while probing her with two fingers. "And even if you hadn't made that agreement, you do remember that you belong to me? That I decide who sees you and who doesn't."

"You said no one sees me but you." Her words come out uneven, and the next time I swipe my thumb across her clit, she jerks.

“Did I say that?” I remember plain as day that I did. I’d meant it. I still do. In fact, I swiped the memory card before I dropped the camera.

But she’s so close, and I’m not going to kill her climax with the truth. Instead, I tease it out of her with my fingers and my empty threat. “Well, maybe I changed my mind.”

Her body tenses, her muscles frozen as her orgasm crashes over her. Then a keening sound escapes from her lips. Her hips buck against my hand, and I cover her mouth with mine, desperate to swallow her cry. As though I can capture her pleasure inside of me and hold it there like it’s mine because isn’t it? Isn’t every ounce of my happiness, my joy, my gratification sourced from her? There is nothing else I need. There is nothing else I want but this. The ability to give her *this*. The ability to love her like she deserves to be loved. To love her hard, and rough, and rich.

She’s still cresting the wave of her climax when I pull her to her feet. Her knees buckle, and I let her brace her hand on the desk instead of reaching for her so that I can finally get out of this damn sweaty wool garment. She seems to find her balance before I’m free so I issue my next demand. “Number nine: Put your tits against the window. Show the city how slutty you are for me.”

Too cum-drunk to even think about arguing, she staggers over to the window and presses up against the glass, her skirt gathered at her waist and legs spread without me even asking, and damn if I wouldn’t pay a million dollars to have a picture of her from the other side. We’re several stories higher than the building across the street, though, so no such picture is possible, but it feels like she’s on display for all of Manhattan, and I understand why that idea thrills her like it does. It lets her feel vulnerable and safe all at once. Lets her feel like she’s being violated without the downside of actually being harmed.

That she trusts me to care for her like this...

As soon as I’m free of the Santa shit, I get my pants down far enough to let my cock out, and then I slam into her from

behind. Fast and hard. One thorough strike that hits the end of her.

She cries out, but I don't stop to be sure it's a sound of pleasure. With a hand braced on the window and the other wrapped around her so I can grip her breast, I pound into her with no regard to anything but the finish line. This is the place where I lose my focus. The only place. These are the moments when I struggle with control. When I'm buried inside of her, her cunt squeezing my cock like a vise, chasing my release like a hound that's hot on the tail of the fox. In these moments, my motives are singular and self-serving, and I drive after my pleasure with unyielding commitment. In these moments I only want to take. I want to defile. I want to use her and hurt her and love her too, but I want it to be messy and hard earned and unbridled and for me.

*This is what she gives me.*

*This is what I'm owed.*

*This.*

*This.*

*This.*

*This.*

*This.*

I'm back to my senses as soon as I've come. She's limp and out of breath, and I'm grateful she found release as well, but I'm also mad at myself. Ashamed. Not for how I've treated her because I know that she loves it. She'll consider the bruises I've left on her hips badges of honor. The guilt is because I didn't have control when I put them there. The shame is because I am not entirely without need. There are parts of me that are selfish and inconsiderate of others—inconsiderate of *her*—and like the monk who fails at keeping his eyes fixed on God, I consider this my sin.

I don't tell her this.

I've never told her this.



There isn't any point, and the confession of it would only draw more attention away from her and toward me. That's the last thing I want. I'm already weak.

I wrap my arms around her waist and kiss her neck, an attempt to recenter myself. She sinks into me and murmurs I-love-yous, and maybe that's what does it. Maybe it's how solid she is in my arms, how safe she makes me feel, or maybe it's Nate's words from earlier. Whatever the reason, my greed lingers, and I find myself considering other things I might want, other things I might take, other things she might give.

I don't think before I speak. "Have a baby with me," I say, my mouth near her ear.

It's the dirtiest demand of them all because it's all for me. We haven't talked much about children, really. It hasn't come up. I haven't brought it up, mostly because I've been afraid I wouldn't be able to detach my wants from hers in the conversation, and while many couples might find that method of sharing dreams a healthy part of their relationship, it's not normally how we operate. Our modis operandi is she desires and I provide. As much as possible, I provide before she even has a chance to articulate the desire. I pride myself on knowing what she wants and needs, but this one thing—a baby—eludes me.

I don't know what she wants because I want it too badly for myself.

For better or worse, I've named that now, and there is no relief in the admission because now I'm alert, reading her cues, studying her reaction.

She tenses slightly, but it's brief. I've likely surprised her, and that's fair. With her next exhale, she's softer.

But then she pulls away.

Not entirely, just enough to turn around and face me. It's almost comical how serious she is, still in her Santa's helper outfit, her hair mussed, her tits hanging out.

"You want a baby?"

“Yes.” My voice sounds raw, only barely not a squeak. I clear my throat. “Yes, I believe I do.”

She nods, but she’s not meeting my eyes. She’s focused on her hand as it runs over my shirt, up the plane of my chest then back down. “I just...I’m still adjusting to the job,” she says. “And Audrey’s twins are due next month. I’m looking forward to being a really devoted aunt. Traveling back and forth to London to see her... I just don’t think now’s a good time.”

As soon as I register the disappointment, I brush it off. “Of course. Right. Of course.”

I straighten her clothing then attend to mine. I kiss her to let her know everything’s good between us, to let her know I understand what she needs.

I *do* understand what she needs. Sometimes better than she does.

Nine dirty demands fulfilled instead of ten. She didn’t say not ever. She said not now. I’ll drop it for the time being. Let’s just say she owes me one.



**Sabrina owes Donovan...will he get what he wants? Find out in [Kincaid](#).**

*Past and present weave together in Donovan’s point of view for the next chapter in Donovan and Sabrina’s life.*

She was supposed to save me.

In a twist of fate, I rescued her. Since then, I’ve lived for her, breathed for her, overreached with my love.

She’s still here, so I must be doing something right. But now I want more.

Except, a dangerous secret from my past threatens to come between us, forcing me to confront what kind of man I am.

And whether I’m the one who can save our future.

**Kincaid** *follows the Dirty Duet. It's not necessary to read all the books in the Dirty Universe before reading this, but it is recommended for a better reading experience.*

DYSFUNCTIONAL  
EVE DANGERFIELD

## CHAPTER ONE

I'M A BUSY person.

I don't mean that in an 'I have sixteen mindfulness apps open right now' way. I'm a fifth-year psychology student. I'm finishing two unpaid placements—one at a men's prison, ("nice tits, love!") another at a ritzy psychologist's office in Collingwood, ("Mark bought them a Cavoodle just to spite me. He always said he *hated dogs.*")

My mother has MS and my sister Tansy has chronic fatigue and can barely get out of bed. I'm the primary carer for both of them and since my dad walked out without so much as a backward glance or a ten-dollar bill, money is tight. Government payments barely cover our bills, so along with being a full-time student and carer I'm a waitress at the Diamond Hill Country Club and Function Center. Ah, country clubs, where men drive personalized golf buggies and women order eye fillet for five-year-olds. A lot of people ask me if I like my job, usually while I'm serving them. I always say 'it's a way to make ends meet' because that's about all it is.

Life's not fair. I don't know if anyone told you that before, but it's really, really true.

So, that backstory settled, I'm running late for the tram and I'll make this quick. I have bad taste in men. Yes, I know everyone says that, but I'm not talking about your typical, unmotivated, emotionally repressed, sexting-your-best-mate, jerks. I'm talking about those guys to the *twelfth degree*. The pathological liars, the chronic cheaters, the pullers off of condoms mid-shag. Those are my guys. There was a stage in my early twenties when I'm fairly certain I was walking around with an invisible sign on my back that said '*Kick me (but only if you're a psycho!)*' The men I dated screwed my mental health, my bank balance, my ability to get up in the morning and so eventually, after a lot of tears and heartache, I

put a stop to it. I gave up fuckwits and if you'd like to do the same, I'm willing to teach you.

### **How to not fuck fuckwits\***

- 1. Acknowledge you have a problem.** I have daddy issues. Is it a cliché that I'm attracted to terrible men? Probably, but that doesn't stop it from being true. My daddy issues mean I never get happy-tummy butterflies about anyone who isn't a complete nutcase. Knowing that gives me power instead of taking it away.
- 2. Deal with your shit.** My last boyfriend abandoned me on a road trip, taking my car, my luggage, and my laptop. I was in the motel reception office weeping when I decided enough was enough. I changed my phone number. I deleted my social media accounts. I sicced the cops onto Justin and got my stuff back, then I quit the three D's: drinking, drama, and dating. Also dick. Four D's. People had been telling me to get my shit together for years, but no one could have made this move except me and once I did, my human experience was fifty million times better.
- 3. Maintain your shit.** It's not easy to be single. Everyone assumes the primary goal of life is to pair off and you have these irritating hormones telling you to fuck and bond with your fellow humans. So you need to promise yourself that no matter what happens, you're not going there. You're committed to having a life that doesn't involve some guy setting your Alannah Hill jacket on fire because he thinks you're sleeping with your general manager (Franco). Once you stop looking for the person who's going to waltz in and make life worth living, the sooner you can see life is already worth living.

### **Practical day-to-day steps**

- 1. Be your own boyfriend.** You know how men are terrible at romance? How they lack spontaneity, imagination, and the ability to pick a restaurant that

you haven't already been to nine times? I am my own best boyfriend. I buy myself flowers, I take myself to secondhand bookstores. I always let myself watch the movie I want to see and I tell myself I'm beautiful and funny and smart. It was weird at first, but eventually, I realised it's weirder to want to hear it from someone who doesn't mean it.

2. **Speaking of...** Get a dildo. Get seven. Do you know how good dildos are? Dildo technology has come hella far, people. They can vibrate, thrust, jiggle and shake. Pair them with vibrators, butt plugs, nipple clamps, sexy lingerie, and a glass of wine (for drinking, not whatever else you might do with a glass of wine.) Screw yourself. Often. Pleasure isn't something you need to wait to get from anyone else and let's get real here—you weren't coming when old mate was grinding against you like he was trying to grate cheese. You were faking it. But you don't have to do that anymore.
3. **For those who desire more...** Do not underestimate the power of a super-intense, deep tissue massage. The pleasure/pain of getting destroyed by a silent, disinterested masseuse has kept me from jumping on some terrible, future ex-boyfriend more times than I'd like to admit.
4. **Write down and repeat the reasons having no boyfriend is aces:** no getting jealous, heaps of time to pursue your own goals, not having to listen to all the stuff they can't talk to their male friends about because men tend to think feelings are gay...
5. **Buy a timer safe to lock your phone in:** throw your phone in there whenever you've been drinking and after 7 pm every night and keep it there until you wake up in the harsh light of dawn, far less likely to booty call someone.

6. **Love your friends and your family as loudly as possible.** Give them hugs and birthday presents and make plans to have dinner and go over to their houses. Before there was marriage there were tribes. People need people, even non-romantics like me, to find some good ones and make them your priority.
7. **Don't get mad at yourself if you get lonely and fed up sometimes.** Just remember you're never really alone. You always have yourself.

So, that's about all the wisdom I have regarding my vow of celibacy (VOC). Good luck ladies. I wish you well!

*\*If you're worried that someone with such shite taste in men is becoming a psychologist, don't be. I'm going into forensic research.*



SHIFTS AT THE country club are always hectic—the place runs two bars, a huge restaurant, and a function room for seminars, posh birthday parties, and weddings. Still, it's hard to describe how insane the place gets around Christmas. At Christmas, the restaurant is packed from one in the afternoon until midnight, the chefs grinding out steaks and soufflés until they threaten to gut the kitchen hands. At Christmas drunks wearing tinsel hats make bartenders cry by demanding cocktails we have neither the time nor ingredients to make. The function center is booked every night for end-of-year parties and Christmas get-togethers, the room packed with suits humping whatever coworker they've had their eye on all year. The amount of people Candy and I have found screwing in the toilets is unhinged. And the *rudeness*. Certain people are always rude to waitresses, but my God, around Christmas they get extra salty.

I could talk all day and not come close to explaining the horror that is the fourteen-hour shifts I work the week before Christmas, but here's the thing—you get paid double. My boss, Mick, is a parasite huckster who openly watches porn on his office computer, but he knows what side his bread is buttered on. Double pay means a service for mum's car, a new screen for Tansy's cracked phone, it means a little extra grease



on the wheels of life. I always sign up for the whole week knowing that it's worth it, but when I walk up to the glass double doors to start my shift, my stomach always sinks. It's not easy, being a waitress at Christmas. In fact, I'd take the men's prison over a midday shift every day of the week.

“Jessica! Hey Jessica, I need to talk to you!”

For the hundredth time that shift, I turn around, almost knocking a plate of confit salmon to the ground. It's Colin, the club's newest kitchen hand, out of breath and red as a ripe apple. “Can I talk to you?”

“Yeah, quickly. What's up?”

“We're almost out of dishwashing liquid and the back cupboard is empty, I checked and there's no more anywhere. We're almost out of olive oil, too. The chefs are freaking out.”

I tried not to swear. I'd just come from the liquor room to discover we were out of Sauvignon Blanc with at least ten hours of service to go. “I'm going to go see about the stores Mick right now, come with me.”

Colin's face grew even redder. “I thought you knew...he's gone. He left with a client.”

I felt my skull contract in an instant headache. “What?”

“He's gone. He had a meeting with someone. He told Duncan you could handle anything that came up because you've been here the longest.”

I resisted the urge to scream. Of course, he had. Mick owned and ran the club, but he scheduled himself manager shifts to save money and cut out whenever he felt like it, leaving me and whatever other suckers were on hand to sink or swim. “Gosh, Mick's a lizard.”

“Yeah.” Colin shifted his weight from foot to foot. “So, uh, what should we do?”

The thought *'this isn't my problem'*, clanged through my brain, but I set it aside. The boss was out, I was in and, as

Colin said, the most experienced staff member on hand. So for all intents and purposes, this *was* my problem.

“Have you got your full driver’s license?” I asked Colin, scrutinizing his patchy stubble and hoping it put him at over eighteen.

“Uh, yeah?”

“Great.” I pulled my notepad out of my staff apron and wrote ‘*10 x dishwashing soap, 20 x chardonnay, 10 x extra-virgin olive oil.*’ I tore off the page and handed it to Colin. “Go to Aldi right now and grab this stuff. Take the credit card on the register and be as quick as you can, okay?”

“I think I’m meant to stay here. I don’t want to get in trouble.” Colin glances at the door and I know he’s thinking of head chef and certified twat-lord Duncan. He rules the kitchen hands with an iron fist and he won’t be happy to hear a kitchen hand’s going on a wine run.

“There’s no point in staying here if you can’t wash dishes,” I remind him. “Don’t worry about Duncan. If he says anything, I’ll shut him down.”

Colin grins “Great. I’ll be half an hour, tops.”

He dashes away and I can’t help smiling at his enthusiasm. It’s understandable—he gets to leave the sweltering kitchen and get away from Duncan. Duncan has a plaque in the hall of men who fucked with my heart and brain.

I’ve been avoiding him, I usually do when I’m on shift, but with Colin in mind, I duck into the kitchen. My ex is standing behind the stainless steel bench sipping what looks like water, and I know is Bacardi. Illegal of course, but that’s never stopped him. No one else has stopped him either. Mick doesn’t give a damn what chefs do as long as the lamb comes out medium-rare. And if you know chefs, you know that what they do is substance abuse. Lord, do they do substance abuse.

Duncan spots me and his face splits into a smirk. “Feeling good this evening, Dr. Rommely?”

He always calls me that. He thinks it's cute.

"You better not bully Colin when he gets back from the shops," I tell him. "I needed him to go get stuff, it was my idea."

Duncan's smirk widens. At thirty-nine, he could still pass for late twenties, at least until you saw the patronizing quirk of his mouth, the amused glint in his eyes. He sees twenty-somethings as playthings, not peers. A fact that I realised far too late.

"Shit-Beard needs bullying," he says. "He's broken three plates tonight already. You shouldn't have sent him to the shops. Mick'll lose his shit."

"What do you want to do? Run the kitchen with no soap or oil? We're almost out of white wine in the function room, and we're running a Christmas party for Mick's mate. That big fancy business guy."

Duncan shrugs, taking another sip of Bacardi. "What's he gonna do, sue us?"

"He might, considering he's a big fancy business guy who's used to getting what he wants."

For a moment I indulged the idea of the Country Club being sued into oblivion. Mick reduced to bankruptcy, Duncan forced to pack up his expensive knives and work at a restaurant that doesn't endorse banging barely legal waitresses and getting pissed beside the oven. Then I remembered that if Diamond Hill Country Club and Function Center went out of business, I'd have to get another crappy low-paying job that let me work around school and care for my mum and sister.

I refocus to find Duncan staring at my tits. "Can you not?"

He doesn't look away. "When you're done tonight, come out for a drink. The crew's heading to Blazer for cocktails."

By 'crew' he means the other chefs, wait staff, and bartenders. They'll get drunk on larger and high on trash pills, even though most of them will be back tomorrow, serving

more high-strung, pre-Christmas customers. I understand the impulse. The holiday season stretches in front of us like an unbreakable desert horizon. We want relief and the only kind on offer is chemical.

“I can’t afford it.”

“It’ll be my shout. Come on, Jessie. It’s almost Christmas.”

I look at him, tall and muscular, his beard almost obscuring the mean quirk of his smile. It’s hard to believe this guy once had a hold on me. Poor, naïve, nineteen-year-old Jessica. That girl had had a lot to learn. “I’m not coming out for drinks. Don’t be a dick to Colin or you’ll regret it.”

I turn on my heel to leave the kitchen but before I can manage it, Candy, my best friend at the country club bursts through the swinging door. She shoots Duncan a contemptuous glare before turning to me. “Jessums, we need your help. Urgently.”

Candy has only worked here for six months and she hates it. Usually, she demonstrates this by stealing napkins, but this week she’s protesting Mick’s ‘No Christmas paraphernalia’ policy by wearing cheap reindeer earrings and a green tinsel halo.

Despite her ominous words, I smile. “What’s up?”

“The bar TAB is about to run out for the Christmas party.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? The sooner everyone has to pay for their own drinks the sooner they’ll bugger off.”

“It would be good, but Mick’s mate, that Mr Delaney-Ford guy, wants to top the TAB up by another five thousand dollars. Right now. He keeps shoving his American Express at me. It’s all heavy. I don’t know what to *do*.”

*Jesus Christ.* “We can’t add more money to the TAB without getting it on paper first. Tell him to call Mick.”

“I would, only he’s completely fucking drunk and refusing to listen to anyone.”

I eye Candy warily. It would be just like her to get carried away and give such a person the ear-bashing of a lifetime. “You haven’t said anything bad to him, have you?”

“No! He sulked off to chain-smoke, but his, like communications guy, has taken up the mission. He wants to have a meeting with a manager and since Mick’s not here and there’s no one else around I was wondering if you would...?”

Candy bats her huge brown eyes at me, begging without words.

“Have a meeting with this communications rando...?” I shake my head. “No way. Tell him to call Mick, or withdraw five thousand in cash to pay for the booze, or leave and go somewhere else. I don’t have time to have a meeting. We’re short-staffed as it is.”

Candy winces. “I know but the guy’s standing by the bar and he won’t leave. He says he knows we have a conference room and blah-blah and, can you *please* just talk to him before I freak out and glass his ass? You’re good at this kind of thing and I am seriously about to lose my shit.”

I wince. Candy’s not a subtle girl and I can tell her frustration, and the threat of glassing is legit. The country club has been hectic all afternoon and we’ve got hours of work ahead of us—the last thing we need is more drama. “Okay, look, I’ll come with you right now.”

“And you’ll talk to the guy?”

“Yes. I’m not having a meeting with him, but yes.”

She beams at me. “Thanks so much! The communications guy isn’t an asshole like Mr American Express. You’ll know how to deal with him.”

Duncan clears his throat. “If this dickhead gives you a hard time, send him down here and I’ll sort him out.”

Candy and I look at each other and then look away so we don’t laugh.

“Yeah, great. Thanks,” I tell Duncan. “Please don’t be a dick to Colin.”

“No promises.”

Candy takes my arm and steers me toward the function room. “You better not be going for drinks with Dunny after work.”

“I won’t.”

“Are you sure? It’s been years since you’ve boned, which despite your insane man-replacing plan, means you’re probably close to the Dunny tipping point.”

“I’m not going to sleep with or have drinks with Duncan,” I say, as I wonder if it’s true.

I’m an addict of terrible men, and for an addict, relapse is always a possibility. Lately, my desire for two-person sex has been mounting and while Duncan was many things—a perv, a borderline alcoholic, a knob-head—sleeping with him *was* satisfying in a way that rechargeable devices aren’t. I relapsed a few times in the early days of my vow of celibacy because the convenience of an ex-lover nearby was too tempting to resist, but it’s been three years and I have faith it won’t again. It can’t. No matter how insane the week before Christmas makes me, I will not—*can not*—sleep with Duncan.

“So, what’s this communications guy like?” I ask Candy, needing to change the subject. “I dunno, all corporate and polished. American, I think, but I couldn’t really hear him over the music.”

“Sure.” I wipe my hands across my face, feeling the layer of grease that accumulates during every busy shift. “God, I don’t want to deal with this. Mick should be here.”

“He should,” Candy agrees as we reach the door to the function room. “And we shouldn’t have to be here waiting on these Christmas party twats but we are. So shoulders back Jessica, for one day you’ll be a successful psychologist, but tonight you’re a lackey!”

I smile. "I am. Okay, I'll talk to him, you ply the party people with whatever they have left on the bar TAB and hopefully, this will all be over in a tight five minutes."

"Sounds good, compadre." Candy raises her fist. "Fuck bitches, get money."

"Fuck no one, get money," I correct, bumping my fist against hers. "Talk soon."

## CHAPTER TWO

THE FUNCTION ROOM is packed with shouting, sweating bodies in expensive suits and tight dresses—a sight I know well. Candy launches herself behind the bar, rejoining Hamish and Samira in pouring pints, shots, and glasses of wine as fast as they can.

I scan the area for the guy who wants a meeting with overworked country club staff. I don't have to look for long. He's standing by the bar trying to get Candy's attention. He's tall, that's the first thing I notice. At least six-foot-three with wide shoulders and thick, slightly curly, chestnut hair. He leans forward and says something to Candy who points to me.

The guy follows her fingers with his gaze, our eyes meet and...

*Oh, god.*

*Oh, god.*

Brown eyes. All I can see are brown eyes. They're taking up my whole brain, the whole room, the whole world.

*Who is this?* I ask, as my stomach turns to water. *Who is this guy?*

It doesn't matter. Even in my state of numbness, I know this is bad. Not because of the bar TAB—screw the bar TAB—but because my hands are tingling and my teeth are aching and adrenaline is coursing into my veins Attraction, the kind that knocks you off your feet is here. It's come for me.

The brown eyes move toward me as the DJ pumps Cardi B's, *I Like It* into the air. I take in the whole man—the square jaw, the wide mouth, lashes that look as long as my arms. Whoever this guy is, he fills out his suit like it was made for him, which it probably was. I smooth down my black apron and wonder if I could get away with bolting. I'm pretty sure



my tongue is going to fall out of my mouth if I attempt to talk to him.

“Hey, I’m Austin,” he shouts over Cardi B.

I twig an accent, but not where it’s from. It could be American like Candy suspected. It could also be German or British or South African. “I’m...Jessica. Rommely. I’m Jessica Rommely. I work here.”

It’s the worst string of sentences I’ve ever heard, but Austin smiles like I just quoted Keats. His smile is almost as beautiful as his eyes. It makes my pulse flip like a wind-up frog.

*Careful, Rommely, be very careful. Remember your vow.*

He leans down slightly, his lovely gaze locked on mine. “I’m sure your colleague Candice filled you in on the issues with the bar TAB. Could we possibly head to the conference room and discuss it? Or at least somewhere you don’t have to shout over Cardi B?”

I swallow. My mouth feels like it’s been spackled over. “We’re, um, not supposed to use the conference room. I don’t want my boss to get upset.”

Austin grins. “I wouldn’t worry about that. I had a meeting in there yesterday and I’m sure Mick won’t mind if we use the room again.”

His confidence, reference to a prior meeting, and the fact he knows Mick’s name, eases a little of my tension. “Are you sure we can’t just agree that the TAB is going to end? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“It would,” he agrees, in his as-yet-unknown accent. “But there are a few other things I’d like to discuss. I promise I won’t take up too much of your time, Jessica.”

I’d be lying if I said I lead him away from the party for altruistic, work-based reasons. No, I led him toward the conference room purely how he said my name. Slow and fluid, like a trickle of warm syrup. We don’t talk as we walk up the

corridors, but I can feel him looking at me. It makes my heart hammer unnaturally fast and wonder how big of a lying, cheating scumbag Austin Randomaccent must be to make me feel like this.

There are a tonne of drunk people milling the hallways of the country club. One of them, a bald fifty-something, whistles as I walk past. “Over here, please, Missy.”

I cringe. I want to look cool, calm, and collected in front of Austin, not like a restaurant flunky. But that’s what I am. A restaurant flunky. I smile at the bald man. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Toilets’ busted,” he says, pointing to the door behind him. “There’s a huge mess in there. You’ll want to get onto that.”

*Yeah, there’s nothing I want more than to clean out a men’s toilet on a Friday night.*

I give him my sweetest smile. “I’m sorry sir, but the restaurant staff isn’t responsible for sanitation. It’ll have to wait until the cleaning staff arrives tomorrow. There’s a bathroom around the corner you can—”

“I don’t want to use the toilet around the corner,” he snaps. “Just get someone in there and sort it out. A boy or something if you’re too *delicate* to handle it.”

Imagine refusing to walk an extra ten meters to a toilet and calling other people ‘delicate’ in the same breath. Imagine what an enormous dickhead you’d have to be to do that. I smile even brighter. “I’m sorry sir, but—”

“No!” The man’s eyes bug out. He’s drunk I realise. He’s drunk and he’s not happy.

“Don’t give me that shit, Missy. Go and get a mop and bucket and—”

“Now, let’s just hold on a second.” A warmth brushes my side and Austin Randomaccent is beside me, scowling at the bald man. “Sir, Ms. Rommely has more than adequately explained why she’s unable to help you with your frankly,

disgustin', request. I'd suggest you go to the WC up the hall and get on with your evening. What do you say?"

He speaks with a sexy, flowing drawl. He must be American. Southern, if the WellRed Podcast has taught me anything.

The drunk man squints up at him. "Who are you?"

"A man who isn't tryna get a woman to scrub shit on a Friday night," Austin says. He places a hand on my shoulder. "Let's leave this gentleman to his business, Jessica."

Sparks shoot through my skin where he's touching me.

*Yeah, Jessica. Do what the hot guy says.*

We walk up the hall, ignoring the bald man's reply. I want to turn and see what he's doing, I want to ask Austin about his accent, but mostly I want to puke because I can't believe this is happening again. Infatuation has hit me like a two-tonne truck and there is nowhere to hide. No matter what happens next, this is going to hurt. I can feel the promise of it crackling in the air. I like this man, I'm attracted to this man and instead of being a huge airborne jerk, he rescued me from a horrible customer. Now, if he's a huge airborne jerk it'll hurt and if he continues to be kind it'll hurt because nothing can happen. *Nothing can happen.*

"Does that happen often?" Austin asks as we reach the door to the conference room. "Customers makin' requests like that? Bein' rude to you?"

Two powerful urges rise. I want to snort and ask him where he's been living that people aren't dicks to hospitality workers *and* I want to giggle and thank him for saving me and kiss him and smell his cologne. I decide against both. "They don't usually ask me to clean toilets, but yeah, people are generally rude. You put on an apron and suddenly you're not a real person to them. You're just staff."

He nods thoughtfully, seizing the conference door by the handle and swinging it open. "After you."

The conference room is styled in that 1950s, Mad Men décor—brown leather armchairs around a faux mahogany table, emerald green lampshades, and a polished wood bar tucked into the corner. I walk in and flick on the lights. In an attempt to be bold and matronly instead of nervous and turned on, I round on Austin and clap my hands. “Okay! Where do you want to sit?”

He pauses in the doorway. “Hang on.”

He walks up to the nearest dark green lamp and turns it on, then he heads to the next lamp and does the same thing, then a third. When they’re all aglow, he rejoins me by the door, flicking off the main switch so the room is entirely lit by the lamps. “That’s better.”

I frown at him, taking in the glossy hair and all-American jawline. “Are you...eccentric or something?”

He laughs. “Isn’t everyone?”

“Yeah but there’s ‘eating biscuits for dinner’ eccentric and ‘having a weird thing about lamps’ eccentric.”

Another laugh. “I’m probably a little of both.” He moves toward the bar. “Like a drink?”

*Isn’t that my line?* “Um...well I am at work, so I probably shouldn’t.”

“That’s fair.”

I watch as he lifts a crystal decanter of whiskey, removes the stopper and inhales. “Decent. So, do you like working here?”

“Pardon?”

“Do you like working here? For Mick? At the Diamond Hill Country Club and Function Center? I promise you can be honest.”

His promise does absolutely nothing to convince me to share my inner thoughts. A paranoid theory pops into my brain. “Are you an undercover employee reviewer? Like,

you're going to isolate me, get me to talk shit about this place, and then narc me out to Mick?"

He grins. A dimple appears on his left cheek. "No."

"Are you from health and safety services?"

"No."

I put my hands on my hips. "Then why are you here trying to have meetings with everyone while we're crazy with Christmas parties? This isn't about the TAB is it?"

"It's partially about the TAB," Austin counters, glopping whiskey into two polished tumblers. "But it's also about your opinion. You and your friend Candice both seem like smart cookies, I wanted to get your read on this place."

"I can't drink," I remind him, even as my mouth waters. I love whiskey. I love the way the first sip tingles on your lips and burns in your stomach. I love the heat, the smoke, the smoothness—but how the hell would he know that? For all Austin knows, I drink iced pinot and nothing but iced pinot.

"You can't drink," Austin agrees, but he carries both glasses over to the table and places them on coasters. "Will you please sit down? I swear I ain't gonna get you in trouble with your boss and I don't want to waste your time."

I can hear the music from the party thumping below. I think about Duncan and Colin and the no doubt dozens of restaurant-related problems that have already sprung up in my absence and I'm suddenly and wholeheartedly relieved to have been drawn into whatever the hell this meeting is. "To be honest, I wouldn't mind you wasting my time."

He laughs again, a warm and somehow soothing sound. "Then please, sit down with me."

I hesitate, then drop my ass into the chair opposite his. My feet and calves throb with pleasure, relieved at not having to carry my weight after days of twelve-hour shifts. Austin slides the coastered whiskey across the table. My hand curls around the glass automatically. I love the feel of the heavy indented

crystal against my palm. I watch Austin take a swallow of his drink, admiring the strong lines of his throat. “Where are you from?”

I immediately worry that’s presumptuous, but he gives me another easy smile. “I was born in Melbourne, actually. But I’m guessing that’s not why you asked?”

I feel myself blush. “Not exactly. I noticed your accent. I like it.”

His dimple pops out again. “My mother’s a Georgia girl. When my parents divorced, I went back South with her.”

I feel the same pang I always feel when someone mentions divorce—another couple who said ‘forever,’ only for it not to be true. Why do we do it to ourselves? I mentally swipe the melancholy thoughts aside. “You grew up in Georgia?”

“Sure did. It’s a beautiful part of the world. You ever been?”

I haven’t. Except for that one terrible road trip, I’ve never left the state of Victoria. I can’t afford to and even if I could, mum and Tansy couldn’t spare me for longer than a few days. I wonder how ridiculous that would sound to the handsome, normal guy in front of me. I try to think of a classy way of telling him I’m broke and tied to my relatives, then I decide not to bother. He’s a stranger and if he judges me for my poor life circumstances? Well, then he’s exactly the kind of guy I *would* be desperately attracted to and good riddance.

“I’m broke and my mum has cancer,” I tell Austin. “I can’t afford to go anywhere that doesn’t pay me a check or help me get a psychology degree, but I’d like to go to America one day. I’d like to go to a lot of places”

Austin frowns. “Your momma has cancer?”

“Yeah, it’s not life-threatening, but she can’t work until it goes into remission and that might be a while. Plus, my sister has chronic fatigue. She needs me to help her out, too.”

Austin’s frown deepens. “I’m real sorry to hear that.”

“It’s cool, it’s just how it is.” I sip at the whiskey without thinking, the familiar warmth heating my mouth. “Oh, shit. I shouldn’t have done that! Don’t tell anyone!”

The creases in his forehead smooth out. “I promise I won’t.”

“You promise a lot of things,” I say, as though the whiskey bypassed my stomach and went directly into my brain.

Austin’s brown eyes twinkle. “An’ I mean every last one of them.”

I almost believe him. Say what you will about my judgment but Austin doesn’t look like a flake. He’s too... something. Something bad and good at once. He takes another swallow of his whiskey and I watch his hair glow in the light of the fancy lamps. I wonder what it would feel like between my fingers.

“You never answered my earlier question, Ms Jessica. Do you like working here?”

Hmm. On one hand, I probably shouldn’t shit-talk my work while at work, but then I did say I’d be honest and he really doesn’t look like a narc. “I loathe working here.”

Austin gives me a ‘go on’ nod.

“Uh, so, the pay is terrible, the management structure is non-existent. The staff turnover is insane. You’re always training new people only to have them vanish a week later. The cleaners only come in once every three days, which isn’t enough, and you would not *believe* the things Mick makes us do.”

Austin’s expression goes cold. “Like what?”

“Oh not like that,” I say quickly, though if you consider the porn watching in his office it is kinda like that.

“What is it like?”

Fuck. I shouldn’t have started unloading on him. I need this job. Austin can’t know about the leftover chips that are

thrown into the deep fryer and served again, or the bottom shelf spirits poured into the Smirnoff and Ballantyne's bottles, or the fact I've *seen* Mick's kids steal out of the tip jar and buy chocolates with the money.

"Just the usual restaurant stuff," I tell him. "Restaurants are all pretty uniformly dodgy, you know?"

He inclines his head. "Of course. Thank you for being honest with me. In the spirit of fairness, I'm goin' to be completely honest with you, Jessica."

I like the way he says my name. *Jayssica*. "Okay."

"My father is the man who hired the function room for our staff party tonight."

My stomach feels like lead. "You're the big, fancy man's son?"

"I'm Mr Delaney-Ford's son, if that's what you mean."

Jesus. Mr Delaney-Ford is a big deal. His company hosts parties at the country club all the time and he and Mick go way back. At first I wonder about the potential father-in-law problems this would cause, then I mentally slap myself back to reality. "So you work for your dad?"

Austin nods. "I'm not telling you because I want to intimidate you. I wanted to discuss the company with someone who knows it well, but isn't invested in its success. You see, my father has just bought into this place. That's why we were here having a meeting yesterday.

I try to arrange my expression into something that isn't 'abject horror.' Being a restaurant pleb is awful enough without having this gorgeous man hovering over me in the hierarchy. "I...see...So your dad's going to be my supervisor?"

Austin smiles. "No, he's just investing in the place as a whole, but he wants to make sure he hasn't committed to financing something that will negatively hurt his name. His brand, I guess you could say."



“Right, right, sure. Sure. Right.”

I wonder if I’ve irrevocably screwed my day job and take another involuntary sip of whiskey. Although this one is more like a gulp if I’m being honest.

Austin is saying something.

“...So I’ll take your comments back to my father and then bring them up with Mick. I think we can forget the issues with the TAB tonight. You and the rest of the staff clearly have enough to deal with.”

“Cool,” I mumble. “Very cool.”

“Which brings me to my real reason for wanting to meet with you.”

I frown. “Oh yeah?”

Austin gives me a look that heats me from the inside out. “I’d like to take you on a date, Jessica Rommely.”

It’s ballsy. That’s my first thought. He didn’t ask cagey questions to see if I already had a boyfriend or was gay or a total serial killer, but here he is, asking me out. How American. My second thought is that I would really, really love to say yes, because I know a date with Austin Delaney-Ford would be a date to remember. My third thought is that I need to slam my hand down on the ‘how not to fuck fuckwits’ kill switch before this goes way too far.

“I’m sorry, I can’t go on a date with you.”

Austin nods slowly, like he’s the psychologist and I’m explaining that I need to masturbate to cooking programs. “May I ask why?”

I wish he’d stop being polite—it’s too American and nice and distracting. It makes what I have to say next even harder. “I don’t date, ever, and I can’t change that for you as much as I might be tempted to.”

His gaze flicks to my mouth and I think about him kissing me. A heat spreads down my throat and into my chest.

“Why don’t you date?” he asks. He’s smirking at me, as though he can feel what I’m feeling.

I could lie of course, I’m a master at the subtle lie—but I’ve already been honest about mum and the country club, why stop now? I take a big sip of whiskey, feeling the warm mellow slide across my tongue and burn my throat. “I have the world’s worst track record with men and the mere fact that I’m all weak in the knees over you means you probably strangle cats for fun.”

Austin stares at me for a moment, then bursts into loud, barking laughter. I grin, stupidly pleased to have amused him. “I’m not joking. You can laugh all you want, but there is undeniably something very sick and wrong about you.”

He beams. “And what if there isn’t? What if I’m just a regular guy who wants to take you on a date because he thinks you’re pretty and funny and he wants to get to know you better?”

“Then you would be lying to try and shred my organs. Obviously.”

“Right.” His look of amusement dims. His expression becomes utterly determined. “So you don’t date; are you interested in having a boyfriend?”

My stomach flutters and I wish it wouldn’t. This isn’t a line of conversation I can believe, let alone get excited about. “I’m not interested in a long-term thing, or a short-term thing. I don’t even do the one-night thing. I’ve been celibate for three years.”

Austin’s eyebrows shoot to his hairline. “You’re joking?”

“Nope,” I say, a little smug. “I have a vow of celibacy and a whole philosophy based around not sleeping with terrible men. It’s very successful. It’s called ‘how not to fuck fuckwits.’”

He laughs again. “I’m not a fuckwit.”

“You don’t seem like one,” I agree. “That just makes you more dangerous.”

“Ah, of course.” Austin leans forward, all businessman energy. “Do you want to know why I asked you out?”

*No.*

“Yes.”

“I already told you I think you’re gorgeous and funny, and that’s true, but it’s not the whole reason. When our eyes met, it felt like I’d spent the whole night waiting for you to show up.”

I stare down at my whiskey. “Th-thanks.”

“Anytime. So here’s the thing—I don’t want to pressure you, but I haven’t felt this for girl in a long time. And seein’ as it’s almost Christmas and good luck’s in the air, I’m gonna ask if there’s a chance you might want to have a drink with me. Verify I’m not a cat strangler or a serial killer. I think there’s heat between us and it seems a shame to waste it.”

This honesty, this self-assured vulnerability it’s going to kill me. Is Austin Delaney-Ford even human? Hasn’t he heard of shame? Fear in the face of the unknown? I fix him with my beadiest stare. “Are you a pick up artist? One of those guys who takes internet courses on how to seduce women?”

Another big barking laugh. “No.”

Of course not, he’s too hot and charming for that shite. For a moment, just a moment, I consider saying yes to that drink. Then a wall of terror falls on top of me. I can’t, I just can’t. Not after banging on about celibacy for all these years. Not if he’s potentially going to be my boss. I open my mouth to tell him no again, but a loud knock at the door beats me to the punch. Austin and I both start. I hide my whiskey glass under the table.

“What’s up?” I call.

“Nothing,” Candy shouts back. “Just wondering what the deal with the TAB is?”

“Ms Rommely and I are discussing it,” Austin says. “We’re going to let it run out peacefully.”

“Cool! What about your boss and his snarkiness?”

Austin grins. “If my father protests, remind him about the Browning incident and suggest the staff would probably benefit from drinking less at corporate events.”

“Sure,” Candy says brightly. “I’ll let him know. One more thing—Jessica, Dunny’s looking for you. He heard you’re in a secret special meeting and he’s all ready to ride to your rescue.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. “What next?”

“Who’s Dunny?” Austin asks.

“No one—”

“He’s Jessica’s ex-boyfriend and the head chef,” Candy calls through the door.

Austin’s smile fades. He looks at me. “I thought you didn’t date?”

Goddamn Candy.

“It was a long time ago,” I raise my voice. “Okay, thanks for letting me know, Candy. Can you please tell Duncan I’m absolutely fine and to leave me alone?”

“Sure.”

I can hear from Candy’s tone she’s not taking me seriously. She’s going to go back to the kitchens and tell Duncan I’m alone in a room with a hot guy. I dash to the door and open it just enough to stick my head out. Candy immediately stands on her toes and starts trying to see what’s going on behind me. “Why are all the lights dimmed? Are you guys hooking up? Where’s the sexy—”

“Listen to me,” I say, grabbing at her shirt collar. “You need to make sure Duncan stays away. If he comes barging in here it to make a scene could ruin his career and get me sacked. *Trust me.*”

Candy's eyes narrow. "Oh god, you're serious. What's the deal?"

"The deal is Austin's father—Mr. Delaney-Ford—has just bought into the country club with Mick and we need to play it very cool if we don't want to get shitcanned."

"Oh damn," Candy says, but I can tell she doesn't actually care. She's still craning her neck trying to see Austin. "So are you going to break your vow of chastity or what? For that mouth, *I* would. And now it has the bonus effect of helping your career."

"This isn't my career," I say through gritted teeth. "Get out of here you gremlin."

"Is everything okay?" Austin calls.

"Fine!" Candy and I say simultaneously.

"Look," I tell Candy. "Please just get out of here, I'll wrap up this situation and be back at the bar, ASAP. Please just don't let Duncan embarrass the fuck out of me?"

Candy's mouth softens. "Of course I won't let him do that. But you don't have to rush things. Just stay up here and keep chatting with the hot guy."

"That wouldn't be fair."

"Life's not fair. Why can't it be unfair in a way that benefits you for once?"

I laugh. For all her mania and total inability to wipe down the bar tops properly, Candy's always got a great way of saying things. "Thanks, but I mean it, I'll be down in five. See you soon."

"Fine, good luck."

She snicks the door shut and I turn to face Austin, readying myself for a barrage of questions about Duncan and Candy. What I get is that gorgeous face staring at me in a way that makes my pulse jack up. "What?"

“You’re exquisite. The way you move...” Austin shakes his head slightly. “I can’t say it in a way that doesn’t sound lame as hell, but I could watch you forever.”

I put a hand to my face like that might conceal the blush I feel blazing across my cheeks. “Thanks. You’re really nice and, um, thanks for talking with me, but I should probably go back to work.”

His smile doesn’t move, but some of the brightness leaves his eyes. He stands, draining the last of his whiskey from the tumbler. “Not a problem. Thank you very much for your time. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“You too.” I feel the desire to curtsy or bow, or do something to acknowledge this meeting is over. “I hope you meet another girl you feel a pull toward really soon and... thanks.”

A little warmth re-enters Austin’s eyes. He steps forward, his hand raised like a functioning human. “Have a lovely evening.”

We shake hands and shaking hands is a mistake because the instant our skin touches electricity zaps between us. Not the shit kind that comes from dragging your feet on carpet—the lovely, dangerous kind that tells you sex with this person would totally blow your mind.

I look up at Austin for confirmation he feels it too, and that’s another mistake because his face is very close and his body is very close and we’re still shaking hands though the appropriate time to end the handshake was ten seconds ago. His gaze falls to my mouth and his thoughts aren’t hard to follow. They’re my thoughts too.

“We can’t kiss,” I say, because someone has to say it.

He smiles and gives me another small shake before releasing my hand. “Your eyes are like mirrors.”

I look down at my feet, the backs of my eyes tingling as though in recognition. My irises are my favourite part of myself. Even when I get down on my looks, like any girl in the

Instagram era, I still love the colour of my eyes. They're bright gray. Jewels I get to wear in my face, because I didn't have to pay for them. "Thank you."

Austin drops my hand and heads for the door, straightening his collar, readying himself for the world outside of this dimly lit conference room. "Goodbye, Ms Rommely."

"Goodbye," I say, my chest aching.

He turns the knob but it doesn't turn. He laughs and gives it a hard rattle. It doesn't so much as budge. I stop laughing. Austin is making confused, sputtering noises, but I know exactly what's going on. Candy, that little witch, has locked us in. She's locked me in with the new bosses' son, right before dinner service. We're both going to get fired, but that isn't even the biggest problem, the biggest problem is that, I'm trapped in a room for the foreseeable future with the biggest temptation to my celibacy since I was in the same airport bar as the Richmond football club.

This is bad. This is very bad.

## CHAPTER THREE

**I**T WOULD BE obnoxious of me to say that I'm good with women, wouldn't it? No one likes that guy. No one respects that guy. But I *am* good with women, I always have been. I like them. I like the way they see the world, I like the way they laugh, and most go out of their way to make other people feel comfortable. Maybe I gravitate toward women because I have seven aunts who raised me while my mother was at galas and parties, looking for the man to replace my father. But maybe that's making a Freudian message out of some plain old facts. Maybe, I just like women. I liked them before I hit puberty, and afterward? Hoo boy...

Yeah, liking girls and having them like me was the easy part. It wasn't until I was fifteen and dating I realised I wasn't good at that thing where you're only meant to like *one* girl at a time. In the early days, I fucked up. I hurt and got hurt the way only a straight boy with fifteen female best friends can. Then, when I was twenty-two I came up with the magic rules.

- 1. No being friends with girls I know want something more.** And I always knew when they wanted something more, I just didn't have the balls to talk to them about it.
- 2. Be clear about what I want.** When I date casually, I make sure women know we're dating casually, when it's a sex thing, I tell them it's a sex thing. They're free to take it or leave it and if I get any hint of angst or long-term relationship goals on the girl's behalf, I calmly and kindly end things.
- 3. I am a natural flirt and I have a lot of female friends.** I make that clear and if that's a problem, a girl needs to bow out at the beginning of a relationship, not call me in six months screaming because a friend tagged me in a brunch photo.



#### 4. **No lies.** Ever. Even when it hurts.

The rules have held me in good stead all through my twenties and early thirties. I've had a lot of fun, most of it free of the drama that obliterates my friends' lives. I'm not going to lie, until this afternoon I thought I'd hacked the system. I'd yet to find the girl I could buy a diamond ring and call my own, but I was sure that was only a matter of time. I understood how it all worked. I was good at meeting women. Then I saw *her*. The minute those big gray eyes found mine, I knew I was looking at a game-changer. A girl for whom everything would be different. And I was right, this girl, this game-changer, has taken a vow of *celibacy*.



I WATCH JESSICA rush around the room, pressing her hands against the walls as though there might be a secret door she hasn't found yet. We've already tried to call the restaurant but the line's dead and in a twist of fate I refuse to call bad luck, neither of us has our phone. Jessica's is in her staff locker, mine is in my coat pocket back in the function room. Jessica didn't believe me when I told her that at first. "Why wouldn't you keep it in your pants, like a normal person?"

I had to give her my whole 'I don't want a tiny microwave anywhere near my balls' speech before she took me seriously.

We tried using the office phone to call the restaurant but the line was dead and neither of us know any useful numbers by heart. Except triple zero, but we both agreed it was a bit early to call the cops.

"I can't *believe* Candy's done this," Jessica said. "I know she's a loose cannon and she wants me to date, but I didn't think she'd stoop to locking me in an office with a complete stranger."

Is it bad that I kind of want to send Candy flowers? I kind of want to send Candy flowers.

"We don't have to be strangers," I remind Jessica. "You could sit down, finish your drink and we could get to know

each other?”

She shakes her head, dark blonde curls falling loose from her bun. “That’s exactly what Candy wants me to do.”

But is it what you want to do?

I study the fluid motions of her body, the natural grace at odds with her frustration. When I first saw her it was like everything else faded into the background, even now, all I want to do is watch her. Still, I can’t be creepy. I asked her out and she said no. The fact her friend trapped her in the same room as me isn’t some Hail Mary pass, it’s an HR clusterfuck waiting to happen. I need to sit tight and keep myself to myself while we’re locked in this room. Still, I don’t have to feel sad about it.

“She’s going to come back,” Jessica mutters. “I bet you any money she’ll come back once service is over and let us out. Until then there’s nothing we can do.”

I don’t mention I could break a window. I tell myself it’s because that would be property damage. “When’s service over?”

Jessica checks her watch. “Three hours from now. Give or take.”

I whistle.

“Yeah.” She strides back toward me, her eyes narrowed and her mouth a thin line. “They’re going to think I walked off on my shift. God, I can’t believe Candy. It’s almost Christmas and we’re already short-staffed and Mick’s not here. I’m so getting fired.”

“You won’t.”

She shoots me a look. “Thanks, but you don’t know that. And even if I don’t get fired, I bet he’ll dock my pay for the time we’re in here.”

The panic in her gray eyes makes me want to do a lot of things—hold her, pull out my wallet and give her everything inside it, punch Mick in the face. But I don’t do any of those

things. I reach across the table, pick up the whiskey decanter and pour a decent measure into my tumbler. No sense in stopping the party now. "I'll speak to Mick and make sure nothing happens. He's desperate to keep my old man happy, he'll listen to me."

Jessica gives me a look that is both impressed and a little disgusted.

"I know," I tell her. "Nepotism is slimy as hell, but you'll get to keep your job and your check. Now, do you want your whiskey?"

Jessica's face softens. "Sure."

She sits down where she was before and drains her glass in one. Then she holds her tumbler toward. "More, please?"

I smile and dutifully pour her and myself another couple of fingers. When I'm done, she holds up her glass in a toast. "To being trapped."

"To being trapped," I agree.

We drink.

"You don't have to worry about the whiskey," she tells me. "I'll replace it when we're let out. I'm pretty sure it's just the no-label stuff we keep in the kitchen."

"It tastes that way," I agree. "But I wasn't worried. Mick told me to have as much as I wanted during the meeting yesterday. I assume the offer still stands within a twenty-four-hour gray?"

She laughs and my stomach flutters like a damn hummingbird. I think about what she told me, how she hasn't been on a date or even slept with a man in years. The idea turns me on. She wants something she's denied herself for so long, at least I think she does. There's so much goddamn heat between us and I'd like to be the guy who reminds her how good sex can be.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks suddenly.

“You,” I tell her. Truthful enough.

“What about me?”

Risky. But then, rule number four is ‘no lies. Ever.’ “I was thinking about the fact you’ve not been with anyone for years.”

She straightens her shoulders. “Is me being voluntarily celibate so surprising?”

I grin. “Yes and no. I’m not judging you, but I was, uh, voluntarily celibate for a year in college. It was rough.”

She raises a brow. “Why were you VC?”

“I had a girlfriend who transferred to Berlin. We did the long-distance thing for a while.”

“Ah.” She sips at her whiskey then licks her lips. “You know I’m not VC because I don’t like sex. I do. I miss intimacy and dates and getting to know guys and falling in love. It’s just safer this way.”

“Because you have terrible taste in men?” I say, quoting her earlier statement.

“Exactly. I know it sounds dramatic, but I mean it. I have terrible taste. Take Duncan...wait, forget I said that! You could be his new boss, or your dad could me and I don’t want to... it’s no one’s business but mine.”

I want to insist she tells me, *demand* she tells me, but I know better. “I’m assuming Duncan’s the chef who wanted to bust up our meeting?”

Jessica nods. “He’s the head chef here and he’s done some stuff on TV. MasterChef and Ready, Steady Cook. That kind of thing. Customers know who is. He’s Mick’s pride and joy.”

I take a big swallow of whiskey. “And you guys dated?”

Jessica avoids my eyes, tugging on the collar of her shirt. “I wouldn’t say ‘dated.’ I started here when I was nineteen and I’d never worked at such a fancy place. Duncan kind of...took me under his wing.”

She flushes and takes a generous sip from her glass. Heat flicks at my neck and shoulders and I work to unclench my jaw. I know I won't like this story, but I have to hear it. If only to establish how dedicated I should be toward getting this asshole fired. "How old was he when he was taking you under his wing?"

Jessica flushes. "I don't..."

"What you say in this room stays in this room," I tell her. "Anything we talk about, it's all off the record."

"That's easy for you to say, you haven't said anything embarrassing yet."

That's a fair call. I think for a second. "When I was seventeen I got so drunk at a party I passed out in my ex-girlfriends bedroom and pissed all over her Emily the Strange sheets."

Jessica stares at me for a second, her mouth slightly open, then she tosses her head back and laughs. It sounds kind of like a helicopter taking off. I fucking love that sound. I'm addicted to that sound. The instant it fades I want to hear it again.

"Okay," Jessica says, wiping her eyes. "We can have a cone of silence. When I first got here I was nineteen and Duncan was thirty-one."

I've heard of relationships with a big age gap that are positive, but I know this wasn't one of them. "So you guys got together? Became a couple, I mean?"

She laughs in a way that's completely different from the full body chuckle I just heard. It's tight and cold.

"No, we were never together officially. Why would we have been? That would have only created obligation on Duncan's behalf. We just hung out after service and drank or got KFC. Went back to his place at two in the morning, which I realised later was so his neighbours didn't see me and go 'hey, why are you humping that teenager, you pervert?'"

I can hear the bitterness in her voice, the shame. She can meet my gaze, but she's looking at me like she expects me to call her a slut. Like she already knows I'm not going to be as nice after this. That I won't want to go out with her anymore.

*Baby girl, I think, who hurt you? And where do they live?*

But vigilante justice won't help me say the right thing, to make Jessica understand I don't care about her past and I certainly don't judge. I rumple my forehead in mock-confusion. "A chef took you to KFC? How the fuck does that work?"

There's another short pause and then the laugh—that gorgeous helicopter laugh—starts up again. "That's seriously your question?"

"Of course," I say. "You put up with his bullshit and you weren't even getting decent meals out of it. You should sue."

She giggles. "Maybe."

"So what happened between you and him? You haven't been together for a long while?"

Jessica drains her tumbler, making a face. "Not long enough. I wish I could tell you I wised up and ditched Duncan as soon as I realised he was using me, but I didn't. I hung around being his booty call, watching him pick up the other girls we worked with. Eventually, I got another terrible boyfriend and Duncan let me go. To an extent anyway."

My teeth grind against one another. "What does that mean?"

"He still asks me out and talks shit about me to the other chefs and staff if they like me, or want to ask me out. In his head I'm still 'his' if that makes any sense. Even if we don't sleep together, he still thinks I belong to him or something. It's a power trip. He won't give up the ghost until I'm out of here." She smiles then, taking the edge off of my anger. "You don't have to hate him for me."

“I’m not,” I lie, wondering if I’ve got the guts to go back on our cone of silence and get this sleazy asshole fired—and if that would make me as sleazy as he is.

*No. There’s no way I’d sleep with a teenager. Or take her to KFC.*

“Austin?”

I glance at her. “What’s up?”

“You’re not going to revenge Duncan for me, are you?”

“Nope.” I refill my tumbler. I was already a couple of glasses of wine down when I asked Jessica for this meeting and I haven’t eaten anything since I left the office. My hands and lips are tingling. I make a mental note to hold off on the booze...just as soon as I finish this glass.

“So, why d’you hang out with Duncan if not for the food?” I hear myself ask. “Since you’re a clever person and he sounds like an all-around asshole.”

“He is.” Jessica shrugs. “The sex was always better than average. And I really like sex.”

I give a loud bark of laughter—I can’t help it.

Jessica freezes. “I should not have...I’m so sorry.”

“It’s totally cool,” I say, but she’s already pressing her hands over her face. “I did *not* just say that.”

“You did, but it’s cool. Liking sex is the human condition. It’s basically what we’re all here for.”

“This is the whiskey’s fault,” she says through her fingers. “I haven’t eaten anything and I’m stressed about my job and Christmas...next I’ll be telling you about my vibrators.”

I sit up a little straighter. “What vibrators? I can talk vibrators. Tell Uncle Austin all about the vibrators.”

She gives a little snort of laughter and shakes her head.

“I’ll tell you about my vibrator,” I counter. “It’s one of those cordless wands with the squashy heads. A Doxy.”

That gets her to move her hands. “You own a vibrator? Like, it’s actually yours?”

“Yup. Bought it last year.”

Her brows rise. “Why?”

“Well, I don’t want to be offensive—”

“We’re in the cone of silence.”

I smile. “So, I was listening to this podcast that said like, eighty-five percent of women can’t orgasm from penetration and that kind of blew my mind. I thought about my old girlfriends, and started wondering if any of them had faked it during sex and at first I was kind of annoyed, like, why wouldn’t they have said anything? Then I realised that was the problem—I wasn’t giving them a way to say it without offending me. And if they couldn’t say they weren’t coming during sex, how could they tell me how to make them come? So I spent a week brainstorming, talking to a few friends, listenin’ to more podcasts. I heard the best way for most girls to get off is with a vibrator, but there’s zero chance they’re gonna have one in their purse and give it over during sex, even if it’s what they need to come. So, I bought the vibrator and if I’m sleeping with someone I bring it out and say I’m really into watching girls use it. If they’re interested they give it a try and even if they don’t it changes things. The girls open up more, tell me what they want without being as self-conscious. It just makes things better.” I clear my throat. “So yeah. Vibrators. I’m a fan. And I promise I clean them. I bought a whole heap of that sanitary spray mess.”

I finish my little speech, feeling self-conscious. Jessica doesn’t say anything, just stares at me like there’s a crossword on my face and she’s trying to finish it. I clear my throat, resisting the urge to say something else. I bet she thinks I’m a pervert, a wannabe sex guru who—

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

The question comes at me like a stray bullet. I stare at her, a little confused. “No, I’m not seeing anyone. That’s why I



asked you out. Why—”

“Do you eat pussy?”

I have no idea what’s going on, but I like it. “Yeah, I love to.”

“What’s your dick like?”

I laugh. “Excuse me?”

She flaps her hand at me. “I’ll explain soon I promise, just answer. Is it weird or bent or too small or ridiculously massive or peppered with red spots?”

I sit back in my chair, laughing so hard it hurts my stomach. I hold my hands the appropriate space apart. “About this big, pretty straight and I got tested a month ago. I’m all clear.”

She considers the space between my hands. “Is that legit?”

“It’s the size of my erect cock, if that’s what you’re asking?”

“Some people would say that’s too big.”

I grin. “Do *you* say it’s too big?”

“Well it has been three years. It’s not exactly going to be training wheels.”

I stare at her, my heart hammering against my chest. “Hang on now. Before this goes any further you’re gonna have to explain what it is you’re suggesting to me.”

Jessica runs her tongue along her lower lip. “I’ve decided I want to sleep with you Austin Delaney-Ford. Tonight. But only once and only if we never talk about it again.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

**T**HIS IS THE right decision. I can feel it in my bones. And other more sexual organs. But Austin doesn't seem so sure, he holds out his hands a 'be-reasonable' look on his face. "Wait just a minute. I don't think you've thought about—"

"The ramifications of doing you in the conference room?" I stare at his wide mouth and feel the whiskey tingling on my lips. I want to kiss him. God I want to kiss him. "Trust me I have."

"I meant the ramifications of breaking three years of celibacy with a man you barely know from Adam."

I laugh because I can tell his concern is genuine, just like I can tell that he's forcing himself to be a good guy and say it. His hands have balled into fists on the table and his gaze keeps dropping to my mouth. He wants me, I knew it even before he asked me out.

"You said we could have a drink and get to know each other and we wouldn't be strangers," I remind him. "Isn't that what we've done?"

He shoots the door a nervous look. "A little. I guess I was thinking we'd do a little more talking than just exchanging vibrator histories."

It's a joke but I can't laugh. The vibrator talk was exactly what tipped my hand from 'I wish I could be with this guy, but I can't' to 'holy fuck I can't leave this room without touching him.' I've never heard something so filthy and sweet and kind. Austin Delaney-Ford definitely has some fatal flaw—that's why I'm attracted to him—but that vibrator talk was legitimately adorable and whatever happens, I'll regret not making a move. I stand, steady in spite of my aching feet, nerves and alcohol. "Austin, do you want me?"

He rubs a hand through his thick caramel hair. “I do, but look, someone could come up here at any moment and catch us. Your friend Candy, or your ex.”

His face darkens at the mention of Duncan and I want to kiss him even harder. I walk to the door and flick the latch over. “That takes care of that problem.”

He swallows hard. “Jessica...”

I love that he’s eager and trying to hide it, it makes me want to do this all the more. I step toward him, feeling self-conscious and excited and kind of like I’ve forgotten how to walk. He’s still sitting in his Mad Men chair. How exactly am I going to get this off the ground? Throw myself into his lap? Grab his cheeks and turn his face up to mine? The room is so quiet I can hear the bass pounding from the function room, *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* by Whitney Houston. I can hear my heart pounding in my ears, as well. I’m so nervous I’m shaking. It’s been so long since I’ve made a move and I’m probably completely void of game.

“Ms Rommely,” Austin’s voice is lower, his gaze locked on mine. “Before we do anything else, how about you sit on my lap and we have ourselves a first kiss?”

Heat unfurls in my middle, snaking between my legs. That voice, the easy way he asked, I’m more than ready for this. “That sounds like...a good idea.”

He doesn’t smile, he just pushes his chair back and opens his arms. “Come here, pretty girl.”

I walk over to him and now I’m as unstable as a newborn foal. I practically collapse on top of him and he grasps my hips and guides me sideways onto his lap. I’m dimly aware of my greasy work skirt and know I should warn him before he ruins his lovely suit. “Austin?”

“Yeah?”

His hands slide up my arms, his fingertips warm and strong. In that moment stop thinking and *feel*. I try to feel everything as totally as I can because it’s new and old and

uniquely lovely. I've missed being touched like this and yet I've *never* been touched this.

"Ready?" Austin asks, his brown eyes twinkling.

"More than ready."

His lips find mine and oh my god...

It's a light kiss, more exploratory than passionate but the voltage that passes between us makes me want to scream. My heart is hammering so hard I feel on the verge of passing out. To be touched with desire is so powerful, so goddamn *nice* I can hardly believe I've gone this long without it. Austin's lips press hard against mine, his tongue slides into my mouth and my brain kind of bursts. I wrap my arms around his neck and give him everything I have.

I feel like a car starting up after three years in the garage, rusty but desperate to *go*. Austin doesn't flinch. His hands slide down to my hips and I'm rearranged in his lap so we're face to face. I shove up my skirt and settle close to him, feeling his chest, his stomach and holy god, the proof of his attraction, hard against my thigh.

I grind against his erection because, why wouldn't I? Austin wasn't lying, he feels insanely huge. My hands are greedy as hell, smoothing themselves down his neck and across his shoulders, grasping his biceps through his fancy shirt.

"You're so big."

Not the most original sexy-talk but it's true. Every part of him is huge and after so long without a man's I've forgotten. I've forgotten how rough their stubbly cheeks are, I've forgotten how hard they kiss and how big their hands are. My breath is coming out in chips. I want everything, I want everything *now*. I unfasten the top button on his shirt and move down to the next.

Austin drags his lips from mine. "Jessica, we're just getting started. No need to rush."

“I’m sorry but there is a need to rush. I’ve been starving for three years and you just invited me to the world’s sexiest...” I struggle to think of an appropriate word. “Barbecue.”

He gives a strained laugh. “Barbecue?”

I undo the next button. “I couldn’t think of the right word, but you know what I mean. Please, just kiss me?”

He does, thrusting his tongue into my mouth and pressing my hips against his. Yet when I undo another button he stops again. “I mean it, we don’t need to rush.”

“Yes. We, do.”

He gives a strained chuckle. “Okay, maybe it feels that way but, uh, I should have said earlier, I don’t have any condoms.”

I feel like a kid at Christmas, a kid whose tree just got jacked by the Grinch. No condoms? My brain immediately starts trying to combat the declaration. “Okay, so no sex. *That* kind of sex. There are other kinds of sex.”

Austin grins. “What other kinds of sex?”

“Why don’t I show you?”

He plants a light kiss on my mouth. “Or, we kiss now, then when we get out of this room, you come home with me and I fuck you senseless.”

God the way he says it makes me want to give in, but my stomach twists and I think about mum and Duncan and that hideous road trip and the life I built around not being that girl. I shake my head. “Whatever this it, it can’t leave this room. I’m not trying to be a dick, I promise. You’re gorgeous and lovely but I just...can’t.”

He brushes the hair out of my eyes. “No problem, pretty girl. You know somethin’?”

“What?” I mean to sound a edgy, but I don’t. I sound breathless as a Jane Austen heroine.

“I think I’m falling for you.”

My chest contracts, a hard, tight squeeze. “Please don’t.”

“It’s too late for that. You were already at risk, lookin’ so gorgeous in your uniform, telling me working in this place is a nightmare but you need to work to care for your family, but now that I’ve kissed you…” He lets out a loud sigh. “You’ve got yourself an admirer.”

“This can only last tonight,” I warn him. “My vow of chastity clicks back in the minute I leave this room. This is just a fling. An interlude.”

Austin’s smile is easy. “Sure. Well, if that’s the case…”

His hands slide under my knees and I find myself lying flat on the table, a gorgeous American between my thighs. Austin kisses me hard, more demanding than it was before, as though he’s trying to change my mind about me going home with him via his tongue. His hands slide up my sides and along my rib cage.

“Can I touch you?” he mutters, his lips moving along my jaw. “Under your clothes.”

I fist his hair, adoring the silky feel of it between my fingers. “I think I might die if you don’t.”

He smiles as he begins to unbutton my shirt. “I’d better comply. I don’t want your body on my hands. At least not that way.”

I laugh then moan as he pulls my shirt open exposing my plain black lace bra—not a bad pick considering I had no idea this was going to happen. He lowers his mouth to my breasts and I gasp.

Even though I’m breaking my vow of celibacy, in my gross work uniform, in what is essentially a Candy-induced hostage situation, I’m *happy*. I can barely remember the last time I had sex, but I definitely can’t remember ever being this happy. Austin’s fingers slide beneath my underwire, lifting my

bra over my tits. He sucks my right nipple and my abdomen clenches hard. “Oh my god!”

“Good?”

I grip his hair by way of answer and he smirks before sucking at me some more. The sensation is gorgeous, but I can't handle it for long. The ache between my legs is excruciating and Austin grinding against me as he sucks my nipples isn't helping. “Austin...”

“You want a little more, huh?”

I nod, wordless with lust and unable to say the words that would officially end my run of celibacy. Until now it's been kissing, dry humping and second base, part of me was hoping we could leave it at that. But the hot throb between my legs has other ideas. She wants the whole shebang.

His hand slides up my plain pencil skirt and I whimper, actually whimper, like a needy puppy. I'm not wearing tights or stockings, so there's nothing between his hand and my bare skin. He caresses my thighs, but he doesn't waste time toying with me. Within seconds his hands are pressed up against my panties, rubbing in a way that has me arching my back. “Austin...”

“Yeah, pretty girl?”

There's nothing soft about his smile now, nothing jovial or kindly. His brown eyes are hungry. He's all business and the knowledge has my insides tightening. “I need more, I need you inside me. It's been so, so long.”

“You know, if you'd let me take you home, I'd could give you the right kind of more. I'd slide my cock into your tight, tender pussy and rub you until you come. I'll make you come so hard you pass the fuck out.”

I moan, even as I shake my head. “Has to be here. Now.”

“I know it does, darlin'.”

Two fingers slide over and inside my underwear—plain blue cotton, but you can't have everything. Austin tracks a fast

line through my public hair and down my slit, stroking over my clitoris with just enough pressure to make me squeal. His free hand gently clasps my mouth. “I love the sounds you make, sweetheart, but we can’t have people runnin’ up here finding us.”

I would point out that such a thing might actually be helpful, but I like him covering my mouth and I like it even more when he says, “I’m gonna touch you now, darlin’.”

His fingers press inside me, stretching me in a way that somehow manages to feel twenty times better than a dildo. I don’t know how that’s possible, dildo technology being what it is, but they do. They fill me to an insanely perfect degree, curling in a way that makes my hips buck and my clit throb.

“Austin,” I mumble against his hand. “Do me, please?”

He can’t have heard me, but he must have gotten the gist because his fingers start to move and it’s all fucking over. I am not the world’s easiest comer. I need time and space to orgasm, even when I’m by myself, but as soon as Austin’s fingers work inside me I see stars. I arch my head and fight not to come within seconds, like a teenage boy.

“That nice?” he asks, his voice like dripping honey. “That what you need, Jessica?”

What I need is for him to ride me like a pony, but I know we can’t and we shouldn’t. I grip his biceps and nod as hard as I can.

His thumb joins the party, lightly rasping over my clit. “Glad to hear it.”

“Oh god,” I moan. “Oh god, oh god, oh god.”

He bends over and kisses me hard. “There’s another name I’d like you to say, darlin’. A more appropriate name.”

“Austin,” I amend. “Austin, that feels so good.”

“I know it does, sweetheart. You’re so fuckin’ wet. I want to taste you. Do you want me to do that?”



I bang my head against the table, nodding to the extent my neck will allow. Austin doesn't waste any time, shoving me up against the table, hiking my skirt and pulling my panties down my thighs. I have only a second to worry about my aroma before his mouth is on me, sucking with the same firm pull that turned my nipples to aching points.

*He meant it, I think dazedly. He does love doing this.*

You can always tell. Even the most appreciative attempts are no match for this heady enjoyment, these slow licks. I know without a doubt he's hard. Austin's fingers find my cunt and resume their slow pumping, as his tongue sucks and laps and draws on my clit. I stare between my legs and want to pass out at how fucking nice his curly hair looks at the apex of my thighs. Our eyes meet and even though Austin's mouth is occupied I can tell he's smiling. A second later he pulls back and confirms it.

"If I was smart I'd ask you out again," he says. "I'd make you promise to see me once this is over before I make you come all over my face."

"Don't be mean," I beg, pushing his head back down. "I'm desperate. I'm so fucking close."

And I am, I'm swollen and soaking. Just having him away from me for a few seconds is painful. Luckily, he doesn't follow through on his threat. His tongue slides over me and it's gorgeous, torturous relief. I close my eyes and feel everything he's doing to me with a humming, longing certainty that this will be an orgasm to remember. His teeth gently rub against me and I'm done. My hands ball into fists and my thighs shake, warmth pours from my cunt and seems to heat every molecule in my body.

"Austin! *Austin!*"

He keeps going for a little bit, the way they always do when they like it, when all they want is to make it happen again. I shove his forehead away, gasping and laughing. "Please, have mercy."

“Mercy granted.” He stands up, adjusting himself through his pants. Just as I thought—he’s rock hard beneath the fancy wool. He doesn’t ask for anything though, doesn’t touch me. I can tell by his expression that he’s about to declare this little interlude over.

“Well, that was fuckin’ glorious, what should we—”

“I don’t think so.”

I shove launch myself at him, seizing his shoulders and shoving him into the abandoned wooden chair. “You’re not going anywhere.”

He laughs. “What’s wrong, Jessie? You want another kiss?”

“No.” I fall to my knees in front of him, my hands fumbling for his belt buckle.

“Oh no, honey, you don’t have to…”

I ignore him and pull open the clasp. He makes some protesting noise, but when he doesn’t stop me, I open his top button and shove down his fly. His cock is straining against some expensive looking underwear, big and hard like a pornographic dream. I reach for it and his hand closes around mine. “I was happy to just take care of you, you don’t have to \_\_\_”

“I want to do this.”

And I do. I want to make this big, sexy guy come as hard as he just made me. “Please?”

There must be some serious desperation in my voice because Austin grins down at me. “If you’re sure, sweetheart, I ain’t gonna say no.”

That’s all the encouragement I need. I unwrap him from his fancy underwear, lightly grip the base and lower my lips to him. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this but the rules haven’t exactly changed—at least I think they haven’t. I suck hard and fast, the aftershocks of my orgasm driving me faster

than I would normally go. I just want more, and with sex off the table, I know this is as good as it's going to get.

Austin exhales. "Honey, you keep that up you're gonna make me come in five seconds."

"Good." I lick the head of his uncircumcised cock. "Please keep talking? I love your voice."

He obliges me, groaning out a series of 'sweethearts' and 'honeys' as I suck him like my pleasure depends on it. He doesn't come in five seconds, but it's not long before his hips are rocking in the chair, silently begging me not to stop. He goes still when he comes, his hand cupping the back of my head like he's scared I might vanish mid-orgasm. I swallow everything he has to give me, feeling stupidly pleased at his ragged exhalations, his muttering of 'goddamn, god-fuckin'-damn.'

I pull away from him, wiping a hand over my mouth. "There's a more appropriate name you could say."

He laughs. "Very true. Sorry Jessie."

I smile at him and take in the room anew—the walls and slightly faded green carpet. The big wooden table and the anonymous black phone resting on it. I'm still horny enough that I don't care what I've done, but I do feel shy. Along with how good this kind of thing can feel, I'd forgotten the awkwardness that follows shoving someone's genitals in your mouth for the first time. And that 'someone' has never been a super-hot American who also might be my new boss.

"Jessie..." Austin's hand cups my cheek. "That was incredible."

He bends down and before I know what's happening I'm in his lap again. He kisses me deep, surprising me. Most men won't kiss you after you've gone down on them. I feel another of my personal bulwarks crumble. When I saw Austin Delaney-Ford, I knew he was hot and confident, I could have predicted he was clever and good at sex—but I never would have guessed he was kind.

“I’m so going to get a crush on you,” he announces to the room at large.

I bite down my smile. “Oh, are you?”

“Yup, I’m going to write shit poetry about you and think about you all the time. It’s gonna be fuckin’ tragic.”

I giggle, trying to think when I last felt so light. I want to float, I want to bubble up to the ceiling like champagne. Outside I hear the music from the function room party, cars pulling up and leaving the restaurant, customers laughing and talking and dancing. For the first time in ages, I’m not resentful of them. They’re enjoying themselves and so am I, in the most lovely and unexpected way.

Austin’s fingers run in circles around my back, I can practically hear him thinking. He’s wondering how to ask me out again in a way that’ll make me say yes. I smile into his chest and know that if he manages, I’m going to go out with him. It feels too good not to. I don’t want to think past the next ‘yes.’ He clears his throat, sitting back so I can see his face. “Jessica Rommely...”

My heart thumps. “Yes?”

There’s a loud rap at the door. I know instantly it isn’t Candy. The knock is too high, too hard. It’s a man, I’d bet my right hand. And I’d bet my life that I know which man. Austin and I both act as though we knew this was going to happen. He silently eases me onto my feet and we move away from each other, wiping our faces, quietly tugging and buttoning our clothes back into place. The man knocks again, even louder this time.

“Hello?” I call, trying to sound professionally brisk and not like I just had my brains blasted out my vagina. “Who is it?”

“What are you doing in there?”

My guess was correct but a jolt of panic goes through me all the same. It’s Duncan, hella-fucking-lujah. “I’m having a meeting.”

The doorknob rattles. “In a locked room? Bullshit? Are you in there with that American guy?”

Austin’s face darkens. He’s straightened up and he looks taller and wider than ever. I need to get this situation under control or I’m going to have a manly-man-man fight on my hands. I press a light fingertip to Austin’s chest, praying he’ll stay quiet.

“Duncan, I need you to listen to me. I was talking to Mr Delaney-Ford about the function room TAB, but we got locked in. Can you please go and get the key?”

“You got locked in?”

“That’s what I said.”

“By who?”

I can tell he doesn’t believe me, that he thinks Austin and I snuck up here to bang. I don’t want to sell Candy down the river, but what choice do I have? No one else would have locked my ass in the conference room with a random American.

“Candy locked me in. She was pulling a prank or something. I’ll explain everything once you get the keys and *unlock the damn door.*”

There’s a short pause. “Candy did this?”

“Yes.”

“Why? And why isn’t that guy saying anything?”

Of course a man whose motto is ‘I speak, therefore I am’ would be confused by a guy letting a woman explain a situation. I shoot Austin a warning look advising him not to buy into this shite, but it’s already too late.

“Good evening,” he says, his voice velvety. “What is it you’d like me to say?”

The contempt in his tone is thick enough to drown in. There’s a short pause.

“Uh, nothing. I’ll go get the key.” Duncan gives the door an awkward little rap. “Be back soon, Jessica.”

We listen to him walking away. Austin’s upper lip is curling and as soon as Duncan’s out of earshot he turns to me. “I instantly and completely hate that man.”

I try to smile. “Join the club.”

“I hate that you have to work with him and I hate that he has the nerve to talk to you that way. Like you’re his goddamn assistant. His fuckin’ lackey.”

I cringe. I like to tell myself no one else can see the lazy contempt Duncan directs toward me. “It’s just a job. I punch in, work, get paid and punch out. And it’s not forever, just until I’m finished studying.”

“And how long is that?”

“Another couple of years.”

“You’re a strong woman. I wish you didn’t...but it’s not my place to say...” Austin blows out a hard breath, and his expression changes. I bet he’s realised he only has a couple of minutes to click this thing between us. He looks at me, a hard mischief in his eyes. “So, it’s almost Christmas.”

“It is...”

“In the interest of Christmas cheer, I was wondering if I can hang around until you’re done. Take you out for a drink?”

He smiles at me and I think to myself how bizarre it is that his mouth was bringing me to orgasm less than five minutes ago. I won’t say it, but I’m fucking smitten with him. But talking to Duncan let all the old memories back in—waiting around for texts that don’t come, first arguments, irritating in-laws, discovering those habits you can’t stand, and most of all the crushing disappointment that comes from turning a fascinating stranger into a regular, run-of-the-mill, evil boyfriend. A boyfriend who hurts you because people are like that, bumping around the world trying to be happy and failing nine times out of ten. Suddenly my feet hurt and my eyes are

tired and all I can think about is how my shift is less than half over. Austin will return to his free food and wine and I'll go back behind the bar and pour Prosecco until my arms ache. "I've had an incredible time. Seriously, I think you're an amazing guy, but I can't see you again."

His smile doesn't fade. "But it's Christmas, don't you deserve something nice? Even just for one night?"

Except it won't be for one night. He's going to play for keeps, using the 'one night' thing as a Trojan horse and we both know it.

I smile, because I really do like him. "Maybe, but I don't have time to get something nice. I need to make money and study and make sure, I don't get the sack. You're sexy and fun and I don't regret breaking my vow of celibacy with you, but this can't be anything else. I've never slept with someone who didn't make me regret."

Austin's stance widens, his shoulders expanding beneath his shirt. "You won't regret it."

I roll my eyes. "Dude, you just want what you can't have. This is a challenge now."

"It ain't. I won't let it be one. I can't predict the future, but I think we're a good match."

"You might be right, but I don't want a match, that's what the vow of celibacy is about. I don't want a boyfriend or a husband or a lover. I just want my life to be good."

"And you don't think I'd make your life good? You don't think I'd work my ass off to make you happy?"

I don't reply because I can't. There's so much sincerity in his face that it hurts. This feels like a cosmic challenge, an attempt to make me lose my mind in the face of hard-won stability and spinsterhood. "I can't Austin. I just can't."

His smile drops. "Okay, I'm sorry. I'll leave it."

My stomach shrivels like a chip packet on a naked flame. "I don't... I'm sorry."

“It’s okay.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “You should know that you’ll probably see me around after this, though. I won’t be stalking you, but my father’s bought into this business and my job is to assist him.”

“Sure,” I say, wondering how it will feel to be near him. To remember what happened in this room. Like shit, probably. But it’ll be easier to look at him from behind the bar or restaurant counter while he hobnobs with suits—both of us in our proper place.

We both hear Duncan approach, his heavy chef’s shoes ringing on the floorboards. I rush over to the door and flick open the internal latch. Austin drains both our whiskey tumblers and stands the glasses and the decanter back on the bar. I hear Duncan fumble with the key chain and knowing I only have seconds I hold out my hand to Austin.

“I’ll miss you,” I say, which is both true and excruciatingly embarrassing.

Austin turns my hand over and plants a gentle kiss on the palm. “Look after yourself.”

“I always do.”

It feels like a lie, but I don’t want to think about why that is. The door swings open and suddenly Duncan is sneering at me. Duncan with his bright blue eyes and scruffy beard, his gaze flicking between me and Austin, probably scanning for hickeys and semen stains. “What’s been going on in here?”

I feel a pleasurable flare of anger, so much better than all this murky confusion. Telling him that he can shove his bullshit up his arse is possibly the only thing that can make me feel better. But before I can open my mouth Austin strides forward. “Ms Rommely and I were discussing some issues with the function center.”

Duncan’s smirk widens. “Is that right?”

“It is.” Austin gestures to the door and I head toward it.



Duncan reached out and grabs my waist. “You’ll be happy to hear Colin made it back from the shops alive.”

I shove his hand off me. “Great.”

“Can I have a word with you?” Austin asks. I know he’s not talking to me. I turn and see a towering wall of testosterone glaring at my not-quite-ex boyfriend. I consider telling Austin not to bother, but I know it’s no use. Austin is going to have his say, possibly because I just rejected him and getting mad at Duncan is as equally an appealing method of release to him as it is to me.

“A word?” Duncan sneers. “About what?”

Austin’s smile calcifies into steel. “This and that. Do you have a moment?”

“Sure thing, bro.”

I roll my eyes. *You’re almost forty, Duncan. Why are you saying ‘bro’ you silly twat?*

There’s no space for me here. I adjust my clothes and head back to the kitchens. I wait for something else to happen—for Duncan to burst out of the room, for Austin to follow me, for my shaking legs to return me to the place where I felt happy for the first time in ages, but none of those things happen. I just go back to the kitchen and help Colin unpack the white wine and olive oil.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**How to get over a sweet, handsome, intelligent, well-dressed guy who eats pussy like it's his job and asked you out, but you turned him down because you've built a life around being bitterly single**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Do you think I have any answers here? Seriously?



CANDY NO LONGER works at the Diamond Hill Country Club and Function Center. Locking me and Austin in the conference room was the first in a series of pranks she committed on her last shift. She gave away free shots, cooked Duncan's car keys in the oven, cut the phone line to the restaurant *"so you couldn't call and get someone else to let out. Also, so idiots couldn't ring up and ask what time we close—like that information isn't already on the fucking internet."* The crown jewel in her chaos however was dropping a bunch of tampons into the toilets. I don't know what the overall damage bill was, but the impairment to the ancient plumbing alone was immense.

I was there when Mick showed up at one in the morning and hauled her into his office, red in the face and threatening to call the cops. Candy was cool as a fucking cucumber. She swaggered out five minutes later, looking like a cat who had licked up every ounce of cream in the world.

"Come on Jessums," she said. "We're leaving."

She looked so authoritative, and I felt so fucking drained, that I followed her to the locker room without a word. She drove me to Argyle, the nearest open bar, and pushed a gin and tonic into my hands.

“So you’re fired?” I asked.

“I quit,” she said, taking a big swig of martini.

“Are you going to jail for what you did to the toilets?”

“Nope. I told Mick it was just a bit of workplace anarchy and to get over it.”

I gaped at her. “That worked?”

“Not exactly, I also had to tell him that if he went to the cops I’d tell them about all the illegal bollocks we do, including the liquor swapping and that his mate groped Sophia and he gave her a hundred bucks not to tell anyone. He told me I’d get my last pay invoice in the mail and I left.”

“Holy shit.”

Candy nods. “I know, it was amazing. I completely *ruined* those toilets. Anyway, what happened with you and the sexy Pointer?”

“Excuse me?”

“The sexy Pointer,” she repeated. “You know, the American guy.”

“Why are you saying he’s a Pointer? What’s a Pointer?”

“A gun dog. He reminds me of one, kind of sleek and well trained. Sexy. I’ll show you.” Candy pulled out her phone and found a picture of a Pointer. I would never say this to Austin’s face but he *did* kind of look like a pointer. His attitude also reminded me of a gun dog, there was a profound openness about him, a non-judgment and loyalty that was almost canine. Although, I knew that was almost certainly post-hookup nostalgia setting in. No man was perfect, Austin included. I tried to remind myself about that as Candy reminisced about how angry Duncan had been when she cooked his keys.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “Cook his keys and tell him Austin and I were having some super sexy meeting. I assume it was you who got him all razzed up so he came looking for us mid-dinner service?”

Candy shrugged. “He’s a dill and I hate him. I hate that whole fucking place. You should get out of there, too. Quit before you have to spend another Christmas waiting on Nobbleberries hand and foot.”

“We get triple pay on Christmas day,” I remind her. “I can’t quit, I need the work.”

She sighed. “There’s more work out there. Anyway, forget that shithole for a minute. What happened with you and the sexy Pointer in the meeting?”

I considered not telling her anything as revenge for locking me in the conference room, but the gin and the memory of the clogged toilets had me pouring out the whole story.

Candy listened with her mouth open. “So he told Duncan to fuck off?”

“No idea. Duncan wouldn’t look at me when he got back to the kitchen, so maybe.”

Candy nodded slowly. “Are you going to go out with the sexy pointer?”

“No.”

“Did you give him your number?”

“No. Are you seriously forgetting that I don’t date?”

Candy drained the last of her martini. “No, but I was hoping you had. That guy’s beautiful and super charming.”

“You date him then,” I said, ignoring the hot stab of jealousy.

“I don’t want to date him and I do what I want to do. You should try following my lead sometimes. Fuck counting consequences all day long.”

I looked at Candy, all big eyes and fuck-you Christmas paraphernalia. I want to tell her that she had no idea, she didn’t have the weight of a sick mother and sister on her back and a dating track record that made Elizabeth Taylor look lucky in

love. But no one likes a preacher and I'm was too damn tired to bother. "Maybe I will sometime, but not right now."

I expected Candy to argue, but some of what I was thinking must have shown on my face because she changed the subject to what she was going to do now she was free of Mick's oppressive regime.

That was three nights ago. I've worked at the function center every day since, but I haven't seen Austin. I'm ashamed to say that I've been looking. Not only looking but dressing up—eye shadow, push-up bras, polished shoes, and lipstick.

Duncan noticed and has started making kissy sounds every time I walk into the kitchen. His good behaviour bond didn't last long. He cornered me in the stockroom the night after Austin and I were in the conference room. He accused me of siccing Austin onto him via my mystical female vagina powers. I told him he had no idea what he was talking about, but he didn't believe me. Maybe because I was blushing my ass off. Still, I know he has no idea what we did on that fake mahogany table. Austin wouldn't have let that slip. He's classier than that. Smarter, too.

I arrived at the country club at three in the afternoon on Christmas Eve and immediately got put out to work in the restaurant. I generally prefer it to the function center and the back bar—there are fewer drunks and no loud music. But, on the other hand, there's more drama, screaming children, and demands for well-cooked lamb that make the chefs swear and throw things. I punch in and head onto the floor praying the shift passes quickly so I can get home with the energy to wrap presents. And I see him.

Austin is sitting at a table with a dozen other people, broad-shouldered and lovely, his caramel hair shining in the afternoon sun. There's a gorgeous woman on his right. I watch as she strokes his arm with red-tipped nails. My stomach falls through my feet. I knew this was going to happen, I *expected* this to happen. How should I be in any way surprised?

Yet I am.

“Heya, Jess!” Sara, the floor manager taps my shoulder in the mock-friendly way of authority figures demanding your attention.

I turn away from Austin, a loud ringing in my ears. “Hey! How’s it going?”

“Good. Look, we’re really short-staffed, so I’ll need you to listen up while I run over the game plan.”

I listen to Sara with all my might, but I can’t stop seeing the red fingernails caressing Austin’s arm. New girlfriend? Casual acquaintance? Office flirt? Can I get out of going to their table? Send one of the newbie waitresses hovering at Sara’s elbow?

“...I’m going to need you to take special care with table twelve.” Sara leans in conspiratorially. “They’re Mick’s contacts. They’re only on entrees, so make sure you’re clearing and taking drink orders every second they’re here, okay?”

“Okay,” I squeak. Table twelve is Austin’s table because of course it fucking is.

Sara claps her hands. “Great, I’ll just introduce you to your new coworkers and then I’ll get out of your hair. Jessica this is Brittany and Kenna, they’re both starting trial shifts today.”

I smile at Brittany and Kenna who don’t smile back. I can’t blame them, it’s Christmas Eve and they’re working for free. Both are wearing bored expressions and heavy makeup. Neither looks older than twenty. I make a mental note to keep Duncan away from them and wish with all my heart that Candy had waited a couple more days before committing workplace anarchy and bailing the fuck out of here. I have a feeling this shift is going to get ugly.

Sara leaves and I direct Brittany to the kitchen to collect table fives’ meals. I send Kenna to table seven to clear dirty plates. It’s a test to see if they could possibly handle table twelve, Austin’s table, without me. Brittany carries the dining plates one by one, essentially dumping them in front of each

customer in turn. Kenna knocks over a water glass at table seven, dousing a guy in a linen suit.

They're awful. Well, I'm sure they're nice people, but they're awful waitresses. I'll have to take on table twelve myself. I keep my face blank as I approach and ask the closest man, a thin guy in his thirties, what he'd like for mains. As I work my way around the table, I see Austin realize it's me. His face breaks into a big grin and he stops chatting with Lady Red-Nails, waiting for me to reach him. When I do, he beams at me. "Hello, Jessica."

"Hey Austin, can I take your order?" I will myself to sound professional, even though all I can think about is the feel of his cock in my mouth, his hips bucking, and his fingers shifting in my hair.

He ignores my question. "How have you been?"

"Good, pretty busy."

Lady Red-Nails looks from him to me. "Do you two know each other?"

"No," I say, just as Austin says, "yes."

We laugh and some of the tension leaves my body.

"We know each other a bit," Austin corrects. "Jessica helped me during the Christmas break-up party. A small issue with the TAB."

"Oh, I heard about that." Lady Red-Nails touches his arm again. "You boys sure can drink, can't you?"

There is a moment when I think jealousy will eat my whole head. Fortunately, it's interrupted by a nudge at my elbow. I turn and see Kenna, audibly working on a piece of gum. "Brittany left."

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"She left. She didn't really want to work here, to be honest, it was her mum's idea. She only came because she

thought she was going to get paid and since we're not, yeah..." Kenna shrugs. "She just kind of left."

*Oh god.*

I scan the restaurant, noting the glut of people that have come in. Sara is greeting them and directing them toward their tables where they'll expect service, obviously, and they will be expecting in vain because there's no way one waitress and one trainee can handle this. Dizziness swells up inside me.

"Is everything okay?" Austin asks.

"Sure, we're just a bit short-staffed. Kenna, can you please go and ask Sara to call a replacement waitress? And can I please grab everyone's order quickly?"

Everyone does what I ask in a way that tells me they feel sorry for me. I finish off the orders for confit duck and roast vegetable salad. I can feel Austin watching me but I don't make eye contact. On one hand, this staffing issue is an unmitigated disaster and I'm going to be run off my feet all night. On the other hand, I won't have time to think about Austin, his wide lips or his big cock or his lovely, lovely laugh.

I enter table twelves orders into the staff computer and turn my attention to the swell of drink orders at the bar—that's not a good sign, it means people at the tables are getting impatient. I help Martin, the bartender dispel them with beer and glasses of prosecco and as soon as I get a window of freedom I power-walk into the kitchen. Mick and Duncan are chatting by the ovens as the latter turns steaks—exactly who I need to see.

"Hey, guys, what's the deal with the restaurant staff tonight?"

Duncan ignores me, but Mick looks over. His eyes are red and puffy in a way that says he's hungover or in the process of getting that way. "What do you mean?"

"Sara and I are on the floor by ourselves with only a trainee. The other trainee just cut and ran. We've got a full house booked. We need more staff. Is anyone available?"



“It’s Christmas Eve,” Mick says, as though I might not have considered this. “You’re just gonna have to do your best.”

“Do my best?”

“Yup, do your best. You’ll be fine.”

I stare at Mick, utterly dumbfounded. The workplace conditions at the Diamond Hill Country Club and Function Center have always been terrible, but this is beyond the pale. Outside I hear the staff bell ring as a no doubt salty customer, dings it.

“That’s the bell,” Duncan says. “You better get going.”

Anger burns in my gullet. “I’m not going anywhere. Mick, are you hearing me? We’ve got a full house and one and a half waitresses. It doesn’t matter how fast we go, mistakes are going to be made and customers are going to get angry at us.”

Mick’s smirk fades into a look of irritation. “Well, you should have thought about that before you let your little friend fuck up our plumbing. I can’t afford to put anyone else on. It’s you, Sara, and the new girl and that’s all there is to it.”

My mouth falls open. “Are you seriously blaming me for what Candy did?”

“No,” he says, though he’s clearly lying. “I can’t afford to have anyone else on, so you’ll just have to suck it up.”

I hate that expression and I hate it even more coming out of the mouth of my so-called boss. “I’ve *been* sucking it up. For years we’ve run the restaurant with five staff instead of seven, but we can’t do it with *three*.”

“You can if that’s all the people we have.”

The staff bell dings, louder this time.

“You better go get that,” Duncan says in a sing-song voice.

I thought I was angry before, but I was only at base camp one. These people and their lazy, up-their-own-arsehole attitudes. It’s Christmas Eve and they’ve stranded Sara and me

with a girl who doesn't know one end of a notepad from another. There are a hundred diners booked and at end of this service, they're going to spit in our pockets before they tip. I can hardly breathe I'm so angry. I think of Austin, sitting at table twelve with Lady Red-Nails and the words just come out. "I quit."

For a moment no one reacts, then Mick laughs. "You're not quitting."

As though I threaten this all the time, as though I haven't always shown up to this place and done the best I can, gone above and beyond what I'm paid to care about. I untie the back of my apron and pull it loose. "I mean it. It's Christmas Eve. Candy's gone, Brittany's gone, I'm gone too. You deal with this mess without me."

Mick stares at me. "If you leave now, you won't get paid for this shift. You won't get any references."

I laugh. If he'd tried to reason with me, if he'd begged me to stay, I'd have cracked like a cheap face mask. But the fact that he's threatening me gives me all the permission in the world to see this through. "I don't care. I'll work a pole before I do another shift in this shithole."

Mick steps backward like he's been slapped. Duncan reaches for my arm but I back away. "And you... You can fuck off too. If I ever see you again it'll be too soon. You can shove that spatula up your—"

"What seems to be the problem in here?"

I turn to see Austin, larger than life and so sternly attractive I almost laugh again. "What are you doing here?"

"Things aren't going so well in the restaurant and you vanished, so I thought I'd come and check it out."

"There's no problem," Duncan snaps. "Get the fuck out of the kitchen. Staff only."

Austin looks at me. "What's wrong, Jessica?"

I swallow, then realise I don't have a single reason not to tell the truth. "We're crazy short-staffed and there's no one coming to help. I'm quitting. I'm not going to spend Christmas Eve getting yelled at by customers."

As if proving my point, the staff bell goes again, five impatient rings.

"I see." Austin turns to Mick. "What are you doing about this?"

Duncan heaves an angry laugh. "How is it any of your business, mate? Mick, tell him it's none of his business."

Mick ignores him in favor of giving Austin a helpless look. "What can I do? Jessica's made up her mind and my other trainee just bugged off. It's Christmas Eve. We can't get another waitress in this late."

Austin nods slowly then pulls off his suit jacket and folds it over his arm.

"What are you doing?" I ask, nervous he's about to ask Mick or Duncan or both to head outside and fight this out. But Austin just grins. "I'm helping. Got any spare aprons?"

We all gape at him, equally unsure if we're picking up what he's putting down. I recover first. "You can't help us on the floor."

Austin unbuttons his right shirt cuff, rolling it up to his wrist. "Why not? I waited tables in college. I can't imagine it's too different here. I'll put in a few hours, cover the dinner service, and then we'll have a discussion about what to do next."

I look at Mick and see he's seriously considering it. "Mick you can't."

Austin straightens up. "Mick, trust me, this is good. My father wanted to find out the inner workings of the restaurant, what better way than this? Okay, Jessica, show me the ropes."

Warmth spreads through my middle, a warmth I know is well and truly premature. "You can't be serious?"

His eyes twinkle at me. “I am, I think—”

“You can’t do this,” Duncan interrupts. “Occupational health and safety and all that. You need to get out of here, mate.”

Austin gives him a pitying look. “My family just bought into this business, so if you’re in any way interested in keepin’ your job, I’d suggest shutting the fuck up.”

The statement hangs in the air like diamond baubles and again I want to laugh. Probably hysterically, but still. Kenna bursts through the staff door, rescuing me for the second time.

“Jessica, you need to come out here,” she begs. “Everyone is going *nuts*.”

Austin and I look at each other and head for the door.

“Wait,” Mick says. “Are you still quitting?”

I shrug. “Probably. But I’m not going to bail on Sara and Kenna. I’ll show Austin what to do.”

The crowd at the bar is three deep. I tackle the orders while Austin follows Kenna to her tables. Over the next half hour, I witness him taking orders on a spare notepad and clearing plates with ease. When he returns to punch in the food for table two, I put a hand on his arm, ignoring the swell of muscle and the swoop of my anxious heart. “You don’t need to do this.”

“I know I don’t. What’s the button for chicken cacciatore?”

I show him. “Seriously, don’t you care what your friends think about you being here?”

“No. They think it’s hilarious, see?” he gives his friends a wave and they all wave back, big grins on their faces.

“What do you need me to do next, boss?”

Warmth, so much fluttery lovely warmth courses through me that I think I’m going to drown.

“Are you seriously doing hospitality work to impress me?”

“I am,” Austin says brightly. “I also dragged all my friends here tonight hoping to show you I’m a good and sociable person and to ask you out again. Is any of it working?”

I’ve never wanted to kiss someone more. I bit my lower lip to keep it in as I pull out my notepad and hand it over. “I’ll handle the bar, table three and seven need drink orders taken. Report back in five.”

He gives me a salute. “Whatever you say, ma’am.”

## CHAPTER SIX

AUSTIN AND I leave the function center at ten-thirty, the earliest I've ever left a restaurant shift. The night air is warm and slightly damp, like the moment you step out of a bath. My handbag is full of cash. Austin's friends kept shoving money in my apron, ten and twenty dollar notes they refused to take back.

"It's Christmas Eve," Lady Red-Nails, whose name is Aubrey, said. "I can't believe you have to work on Christmas Eve!"

"It's not too bad," I told her and for the first time I meant it. My shift was actually fun. Austin did the work of three people, smiling and pulling perfect pints of beer and carrying three plates at once like a pro. I don't know where he waited tables at university but they'd trained the hell out of him. Though they do always say Americans give the best service.

"How are you feeling?" Austin asks me as we dawdle from the entrance to the car park.

"Good. Unsure of what just happened, but good. Did you actually threaten to kick Duncan's ass when I came in with those dessert plates. Or was I imagining things?"

He shrugs. "We might have exchanged words."

"About what?"

"You and your right to work in a place without being sneered at by a forty-year-old neckbeard."

I laugh. "Did you now?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure if you're still thinking of quitting, but on the off chance you're stayin' I thought it would be in everyone's best interest to put the fear of God into that asshole."

I give him a small curtsy. “Thanks. I’m not sure if I’m going to stay or not, but thank you.”

“No problem. You know that once my father and Mick make things official there will be some big changes at the Diamond Hill Country Club and Function Center.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yup. A new manager, a total review of working hours, and staff hiring. Probably a pay raise for those people who stick around to train new employees.”

I turn away so he can’t see me smile. “That could be good. Not that I’m staying, but if I do, it would help to make a little more cash while I finish up at uni.”

“Of course.” Austin clears his throat. “So, coworker; can I give you a lift home?”

“One shift and we’re coworkers, huh?”

“I thought so.” Austin scratches his head. “Hang on, wait...didn’t you get fired?”

I swat his arm. “No, I didn’t, I threatened to quit, and now that I think about it. I don’t think I should be fraternizing with upper management. It’s not a good look.”

“It isn’t?” Austin’s voice is light, but I can hear the nerves beneath it. I take a deep breath and slide my hand into his. “On second thoughts, kissing my boss might be hot.”

His face almost splits in half with smiling. “Glad to hear it.”

Kissing him is exactly as sweet as I remember. Our lips seem to meld as we transmute days of longing and confusion into the simple bliss of being together. We kiss until a group of drunken women walk past whooping and cheering and loudly lamenting their own lack of romance.

“Should we get out of here?” Austin whispers in my ear. “Hit up a bar or a restaurant that isn’t this restaurant?”

I consider his suggestion. I think about all the unwrapped presents on my bed. I know it'll wait, it's one of those nights where I could roll in without any sleep and still be fine in the morning. My mum and Tansy don't need me. I'm free. "I could use a shower, is there one back at your place?"

"You'll be surprised to know there is!" His hand tightens on mine. "Are you sure?"

I look up at him, the solid planes of his face, those warm, kind eyes. "I've never been so sure of anything. Besides, it's almost Christmas, don't I deserve something nice?"

He raises my hand and kisses my fingers. "Everything nice."



### **How to have a relationship with Jessica Rommely**

1. Always let her know when I'm going to visit her at work. She's proud and she likes to be wearing lipstick and a clean shirt when she sees me, even though I think she looks beautiful with bare lips and gravy stains on her chest.
2. Don't push her to meet her mother or sister in a few weeks they'll insist on meeting you and then you can show up at their house with flowers and a pecan pie and become one of their favourite people.
3. Help her study for her exams, mostly by bringing her small glasses of Sauvignon Blanc and seducing her whenever she starts to look too stressed.
4. Keep the good vibrations coming. Constantly.
5. Wait six months to tell her you love her, then tell her every single day.



### **How to have a relationship with Austin Delaney-Ford**



1. How do you *not* have a relationship with Austin Delaney-Ford?



Thank you for reading *Dysfunctional* by Eve Dangerfield!  
Want more steamy romance? Be sure to read [BEGIN AGAIN AGAIN](#).

CANDIED  
JENIKA SNOW

## CHAPTER ONE

“THIS IS GONNA be great.”

I looked over at my sister, Dorothy, feeling my eyes narrow. She wasn't watching me, but her grin spread, and I knew she could tell I wasn't sharing the same sentiments as her.

“Yeah, this will be a blast,” I muttered with all the sarcasm I felt and looked out the passenger side window.

We were entering the small Vermont town of Candied. It was a picturesque little town, something you'd see in a Hallmark movie or on a postcard. And why were we driving five hours, crossing state lines right before a winter storm? All because my sister met a man—on one of those dating apps—and he'd talked her into coming up for Candied's Annual Maple Festival.

No way was I about to let my younger sister travel alone to meet some random guy. So here I was, suffering in silence, or as silent as I was.

“If we get stuck in this town because of the snowstorm, I'm never gonna let you live this shit down, Dorothy.”

Dorothy sighed, but it was one filled with pleasure. “I hope we get stuck.”

I snapped my head in her direction and narrowed my eyes. She looked at me for just a second, a smirk covering her lips.

“Can you just imagine being stuck in a perfect little town like this? Even the name is too freaking cute.”

“It's nauseating,” I shot back.

“It beats the hell out of the city, am I right?”

I rested my head back on the seat and didn't respond. She had a point, to an extent, but that didn't mean I wanted to get

stranded in Candied, Vermont, during a snowstorm while my sister most likely shacked up with some maple-tapping lumberjack.

“Just the thought of this town gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

She snorted and shook her head. “You not only exaggerate about everything, but you’re also the damn Grinch during the holidays.”

I couldn’t argue with that. The holidays had never been my thing. I didn’t mind Halloween, but probably because it wasn’t cutesy and filled with love and all that bullshit. Valentine’s Day? Christmas? I internally cringed. My sister and parents liked to give me a hard time, because I was not only antisocial, but I also didn’t really do the whole affection thing.

But I was fine with that. It’s who I had always been. My mother said I just hadn’t found the right person to break through that icy exterior. I didn’t think anybody would put up with my lack of... all that was affectionate and lovey-dovey.

But I guess if I did find a man who could put up with my lack of enjoying that sickeningly sweet shit, then he’d be a keeper.

Or maybe he’d convert me.

An hour later, we were finally entering Candied, Vermont. I expected a holiday-ish feel from the town, especially this time of year and of course their name; but what I wasn’t prepared for was the fact that it looked like all things Christmas had thrown up right in the center of town.

The street lights were decorated to resemble candy canes, and snowflakes were strung between them. Every window of every business that was on either side of us was decorated so heavily with the holiday theme I could practically hear Santa ho-ho-hoing his ass along, smell sugar cookies in the oven, and taste the peppermint on my tongue.

It was enough to make me gag.

“Oh my God, Dorothy,” I muttered under my breath as I stared out the passenger side window. “What the hell have I let you talk me into?”

Dorothy was all animated, sitting beside me, nearly bouncing on the seat. I glanced at her and rolled my eyes for what felt like the hundredth time during this trip. She wore a huge grin, and her eyes were wide as she looked around.

“Oh my God, Penny. This is incredible.”

I closed my eyes and rested my head back on the seat, letting out an exaggerated sigh. “You owe me bigtime for coming with you.”

“I owe you the biggest of the biggest,” she said with so much glee in her voice I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You’re so ridiculous.” I opened my eyes and smiled at her. I did like seeing her happy. I may’ve been a Grinch, but seeing my little sister smiling that big made me feel good.

Of course she would find this the most incredible experience of her life. But right now, I was in the seventh circle of hell.

## CHAPTER TWO

**M**Y SISTER PULLED into the parking lot of the small bed and breakfast we'd be staying at for the next couple of days, and although it was just a weekend trip, I felt like I'd be here for an eternity.

There was a light flurry of snow that wrapped around me as soon as I got out of the car, and the bite in the air was enough to have me catching my breath and chills racing up my arms and legs. I could practically smell the storm coming and prayed that we'd at least make it out of this town before it hit full-on.

After grabbing my overnight bag, I followed Dorothy inside. The interior was decorated as if elves had come down from the North Pole and pissed their festivities all over the place. Maybe I was exaggerating in my description, but it felt pretty accurate to me.

Probably only to me though.

As Dorothy checked us in, I looked around the front office. It was quaint, with a classic bed-and-breakfast feel to it. There were pictures on the walls of what I assumed were from the festival from prior years, as well as local businesses when they'd had their grand openings.

I kept looking at each one, the pictures seeming to be in chronological order. I stopped at the last one, showing the woman behind the front desk standing with two men. She stood in between them, an arm wrapped around each of their waists.

The three of them stood in front of a storefront with a big **Grand Opening** ribbon strung in the window. The one on the left wasn't as muscular and wore a boyish expression on his face. I wondered why he looked so familiar. It was then I realized it was the guy Dorothy was supposed to meet while we were here.

But the other man—the one who was tall and wide, muscular, and screamed *male*—had an air of experience surrounding him that I could practically feel even through the picture. He was broad, with wide shoulders and thickly muscled biceps. He stared at the camera with just a hint of a smirk playing across his face.

My insides clenched painfully as I stared at him. Arousal so strong lit me up from the inside out, and I squeezed my thighs together to try to stem off that insatiable need. It was primal and raw. It was the kind of need a female got when she saw a powerful male and wanted him to claim her.

*God, I'm losing my damn mind.*

“Are you two here for the annual festival?” The lady behind the front desk sounded just as animated as my sister had been, and I tore my gaze from the picture to face her.

She looked like she belonged as one of Santa’s helpers, or maybe Mrs. Claus herself. Her gray-and-white-streaked hair hung loose around her shoulders, but she’d teased the hell out of it. Her makeup was thick, her eyes having a light-green hue, her cheeks over-blushed, and her lips red like a candy apple.

Her sweater was red, with tinsel-looking threads woven throughout it. Her earrings looked like Christmas balls, shiny, bright, and green. And the scarf she wore had candy canes printed all around it.

I knew I was going to throw up several times in my mouth being in this town. They took it to the extreme.

She noticed I’d been focused on the picture, and her smile brightened. “Have you visited the Sugar Shack?” At my blank stare, she gestured to the picture I’d been staring at.

I glanced over my shoulder, acting like I was seeing what she meant, when I damn well knew. It was just an excuse to look at Mr. Hot and Sexy Lumberjack again.

Dorothy came up to stand beside me, and I heard her sharp intake of breath when she clearly saw the guy in the picture was who she was hooking up with while here.

“Oh my God, it’s *him*, Penny.”

“You guys haven’t swung by the Sugar Shack yet?” The front desk attendant sounded shocked, like we committed some sin by not stopping.

I looked over my shoulder when I heard her shuffle toward us. She wore this huge grin as she stared at the picture.

“Those are the Wyatt brothers. That’s Henry, the youngest.” She pointed to the man my sister was probably going to let bone her this weekend. “And that’s Charlie, his older brother. They opened up the Sugar Shack a couple years ago. They specialize in all things maple related. Handmade soaps, syrups, candies, even body lotions.” She shook her head, that grin still in place. “They make everything themselves. They’re famous in town and a bit with visitors.”

I stared at the other man.

Charlie.

My insides clenched once more, and my mouth had gone dry, my pulse picking up. Never in my life had I felt this way, especially not over just the image of a man.

“This was a couple of years ago,” she said and pointed to the **Grand Opening** sign in the picture. “Here,” she added before hastily shuffling back toward the front desk.

She started rustling around a stack of paperwork before pulling out two small squares of what looked like cardstock. When she handed them over, I looked down at what were clearly coupons. One was for half off any one item, and the other was for a free Wyatt Brothers Signature Maple and Brown Sugar Mini Muffin.

“Thanks,” Dorothy said excitedly as she snatched the coupons from my hands and started fanning herself with them.

“Are you guys this enthusiastic every year?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking, and when Dorothy snapped her head in my direction and glowered at me, I just shrugged.



I was genuinely curious if this was the norm for them. The front desk lady, who I still had no idea what her name was, beamed as if she were proud of me taking notice of that.

“Yes, ma’am,” she said excitedly. “We plan all year for this festival. Tourism increases every single year.”

I nodded slowly. *Great.*

“We are so excited to be here to experience it,” Dorothy replied with a huge grin. I couldn’t help but chuckle. My sister was loving it, and I couldn’t begrudge her for that.

## CHAPTER THREE

AFTER WE WERE all checked in and shown to our rooms—plural, because I sure as hell didn't want to interfere with whatever sex plans Dorothy had this weekend—I set my bag on the bed and took a shower right away. I was still chilled from the short walk from the car to the B&B, and it felt like this place didn't want to go above sixty-five degrees.

After I stood in the scolding hot spray of water for longer than I probably should've, I dried off, dressed, and used the complimentary blow dryer on my golden-brown locks. I slathered on some moisturizer, spread some Chapstick on my lips, and then just looked at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I didn't think of bringing my straightener, so my hair had a slight wave to it despite using a brush and blow dryer to try to tame it.

I sighed and shook my head. "She's a grown-ass adult," I said to my reflection. "She can handle herself."

I shouldn't have come; I knew that. My little sister wasn't so little anymore. At twenty-three, which was five years younger than I was, she had a good head on her shoulders, plans for the future, and didn't make life-changing mistakes.

Unlike me, who hadn't finished college because it just wasn't for me, was currently a waitress at a little mom-and-pop restaurant back in the city, and had no friends really and certainly no love interest.

"Twenty-eight, and what do I have going for me?" I lifted an eyebrow at my reflection, like it was going to respond back. "A whole lot of nothing but a grouchy attitude, and forcing myself on my baby sister's weekend sex trip, because I'm too protective of her."

I sat on the bed and looked around. The room was cute and quaint, with an overabundance of a flower theme going on. Like everywhere. And it was the flower design you'd find in

the '90s at your grandma's house—all pinks, tans, and burgundy shades with bursting blooms.

*What have I agreed to?*

I let myself fall back on the bed and closed my eyes. It was only when I heard knocking at my door that I sat up, realizing I'd fallen asleep.

“Penny?” Dorothy called through the closed door, and I rubbed my eyes before standing and opening it, staring at her clearly dressed to go out in the frigid weather. She eyed me up and down, her eyebrow lifting as she took note that I was not ready for what she had planned.

“What?”

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “So, you wanted to come with me to check out this guy for yourself, but you've been napping?”

I shrugged. “I'm tired from the trip.”

She rolled her eyes, but after a moment, I could see her starting to become excited. “He called me, Penny. We made plans for tonight. Dinner.”

*Great.*

I nodded. “Okay, well, I'll go but take a different table.”

She scowled and shook her head. “Um. No.”

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. “D, I'm not letting you meet some guy alone—”

“It's a very *public* restaurant, Penny.”

*Oh. Yeah. Good point.*

“But...” she trailed off, and I waited for her to drop whatever bombs she was about to tell me. “I kind of told him my sister came with me.”

“Okay.” I let that one word hang between us.

“My very *single* sister.”

I closed my eyes and groaned, because I knew exactly where this was going.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I STILL COULDN'T believe I'd let Dorothy talk me into this, but as I sat at the table staring across at her and Henry, the attraction they clearly had for each other strong enough they couldn't keep their hands off the other, I knew I couldn't blame her wholly.

I wanted to meet Charlie, to see if my heart stopped and restarted when I saw him in the flesh like it had seeing the picture.

The very idea of me having a blind date sprung on me—although, was it really a blind date if I knew what the guy looked like—should have been abhorrent to me, especially where it concerned my sister as the matchmaker.

But the prospect of seeing Charlie in person had my entire body lit up like I'd been set on fire.

In the picture, he seemed so big and rugged, so manly and strong. Maybe in real life it was the complete opposite, or at the very least not so intense?

I prayed so, for the sake of my libido.

But the longer I sat here listening to my sister giggle at whatever Henry just whispered in her ear, it made me want to excuse myself for the rest of the night.

And then Henry glanced up and lifted his hand to motion someone over, a big smile spreading across his face. Charlie had to be over six and a half feet tall, looking like he could crush bone in the palm of his hand.

Every part of me tingled and came alive, as if my body knew this was a real man... all male. It felt primal, instant in my need to mate with him.

It was insane. I was crazy.

I squeezed my thighs together, my sex clenching almost painfully. I was very aware of how hard my nipples instantly became, digging against the material of my shirt. My breath moved in and out of my mouth faster and harder the closer he walked toward us.

His thighs were as thick as tree trunks, the dark denim that covered them not hiding the sheer power of those limbs. The black jacket he wore was left unzipped, showcasing the gray shirt underneath. And that gray shirt didn't hide how defined and hard I knew he was underneath.

I let my gaze travel right on down to the very defined, very big bulge at the front of his pants. Hell, the denim could barely contain all that cock.

I felt like my mouth was hanging open as I stared at him as he came forward. It was then I saw *he* watched *me*, his deep-blue eyes locked on mine. My cheeks were on fire as I realized he caught me checking him out... staring at his dick bulge.

And then he was sitting next to me, his thick arm brushing against mine. I felt like I was starstruck as I craned my neck back to look into his face. He made me feel so... small.

Henry introduced Charlie to everyone, and I shifted slightly in the chair so I could smile up at him, but my heart lurched in my chest at the dark desire I clearly saw reflected in Charlie's eyes. There was no denying it. It was the same look I'm sure I wore.

I held out my hand on instinct, which I felt shaking slightly from the adrenaline mixing in my blood. And when he took my much smaller one in his massive palm, I felt liquid fire pool between my thighs. My clit throbbed in time with my pulse. Hell, that bundle of nerves had its own damn heartbeat right now.

The air left me violently, and I quickly snatched my hand back and tucked it under the table in my lap. I snapped my head in Dorothy's direction, fearing they'd seen my reaction to Charlie. But they were too engrossed in their own

conversation, with the little touches they gave each other, with the breathy whispers they passed between them.

They didn't notice shit. Thank God.

Maybe Charlie hadn't noticed my instant reaction to him. But when I chanced a glance at him, that hopefulness died. He wore an expression of sensual wickedness.

Oh, he'd noticed the effect he had on me.

I could see that in the way he looked at me. I could see it in the way he wore that expression, how his jaw worked under his scruff as if he couldn't control himself either.

I had absolutely no idea what was going on, why I felt like this, but what I did know was that I didn't want to ignore it. I wanted to explore it.

Henry started talking about the Sugar Shack, how they started it, the history behind it. As much as I wanted to act like I was interested, listen, I couldn't focus on anything but the feel of Charlie right next to me.

I swear he kept his forearm and thigh pressed to mine purposely. It was like he enjoyed making me feel on edge, knowing he affected me so profoundly I couldn't breathe.

I was slowly dying of arousal, but God, what a way to go.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**F**OR THE NEXT hour, it was Henry and Dorothy who did all the talking. We ate... and I drank. I needed the alcohol to get through this, hoping it would tame this incessant arousal burning inside me. It had been a damn mistake.

It made me hotter, needing Charlie more.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit to picturing what it would be like to have him take me. He was just so big and strong that I imagined being under him as he braced his forearms on either side of my head, as he thrust those no doubt massive inches into my wet, willing body.

And God, I'd be so wet. Soaked.

"Are you sure you're okay with us going to catch a movie?" Dorothy asked after we'd been finished with dinner for about twenty minutes.

She wore a smile on her face, a grin that told me she wouldn't care if I was or wasn't okay with it. She'd go regardless.

I held up my third "Santa's Little Helper," tilting the fancy-looking adult beverage in her direction before bringing it to my mouth and taking a long sip. "I think we'll manage," I said and grinned up at Charlie, who said nothing but stared at me intently.

He watched me how a lion watched a gazelle before he attacked it.

My throat tightened at the look he gave me. He'd worn it the entire dinner, only really speaking when asked a direct question. But the majority of the time? He looked at *me*.

God, my body was positively zinging with electricity at his close proximity. My lips and tongue were numb from the



alcohol, and the buzz moving through my veins had a slow, what I knew was a sensual, smile playing across my face.

“Text me when you’re back at the room.”

I snapped my head in Dorothy’s direction and felt myself automatically nod. “Text me when you’re leaving,” I said back.

She smiled, nodded, and stood, and after Henry helped her with her jacket, she came over to me and leaned in close to whisper, “I have every intention of going back to his place, Penny, if you know what I mean.”

I scrunched up my face in disgust and looked at her as she pulled back, that mischievous smile still on her face. Dorothy might’ve been an adult, but she was still my little sister, and the very thought of her doing *that* grossed me out.

And then they were gone, leaving Charlie and me alone. I didn’t waste a second in ordering one more holiday-themed drink. I needed the alcohol to get through this, because I was very aware of *him*.

The size of his body. The warmth coming from him. The smell of his cologne. The feel of his arm pressed to mine, of his thighs parallel with mine.

I was hot and ready, primed and wet, and the more I felt that liquid courage wash through me, the more I wanted to throw caution to the wind and just tell Charlie to take me somewhere, anywhere, so he could relieve this ache.

He shifted in the seat, and I noticed it was so he could look at me better.

“You don’t talk much,” I said, my cheeks hot from the alcohol, and no doubt red. My face always flamed when I drank, a sure sign I was feeling *good*. “Or drink much either,” I murmured. He still didn’t say anything, but I noticed him looking at my lips then dragging his eyes up to mine before lowering them back to my lips.

I licked them on instinct. He watched the act, and I swore he groaned, swore his pupils dilated.

This was insane. I didn't know this man from Adam, yet the instant attraction, the lust at first sight, was so strong and potent that I didn't want to deny it.

He just seemed so... animalistic.

And when he leaned in close, so close I felt his warm breath move across my lips, I tried to force myself not to shiver. I failed, of course.

“What are your plans tonight, Penny?”

The way he said my name was filled with possessiveness. I didn't even know that was possible, but hell, he said it like it was his, like he owned every part of it.

“My plans?” I whispered then cleared my throat and smoothed my hands over my thighs.

He nodded slowly, his gaze bouncing between my lips and eyes.

“I—I don't know. I don't really have plans,” I lied. Well, it wasn't a lie. My plan had been to go back to my room after buying enough junk food from the little store by the motel, popping on some sappy romcom, and vegging out until I could get out of Candied. He didn't need to know my depressing details though, and the longer I looked him, the more I didn't want to be alone... if you get my drift. “What are your plans?” I asked back.

He was silent for a moment but then leaned back, allowing me to suck in a lungful of air. “Do you want to know what I planned on doing, or what I want to do instead?”

God, the desire and the promise laced in those words were my undoing. I'd never been wanton, never been bold. I didn't go home with men, especially not ones I just met. But I'd also never felt this connection, this arousal. It was insane, but it made me hungry and thirsty. I was starving. I was parched.

And I had a feeling the only antidote for those kinds of needs was the man right in front of me.

And so I nodded slowly. My lips felt swollen, the blood rising below the surface of my skin. They were probably red as hell, because I kept biting at them, pulling at the flesh.

“I think what you and I want to do are on the same level, wouldn’t you say?”

I nodded again. “You feel it?”

God, I’d really asked that, said it out loud. I could have kicked myself, but when he let out a low growl, I sucked in another breath.

He leaned in close again. “I fucking feel it, Penny.”

What in the hell was I doing?

Throwing caution to the wind? About to agree to let this mountain man fuck me every—any—way he saw fit?

And as I stared into his blue eyes, the answer was simple.

I sure as hell was. I only lived once and was only in town for the weekend. Why not go balls to the wall?

## CHAPTER SIX

**I** WAS DRUNK. Well, not *drunk*-drunk, as in I didn't know what I was doing or who I was going to do it with. But buzzed enough that this wild energy hummed through me.

Charlie had held my hand in a vice-like grip as he led me out of the restaurant and to his dark SUV, which was parked right in front of the establishment. Then, once we were both inside the vehicle, the heater blasting to stem off the chill in the air, he'd grabbed my hand again and hadn't let it go until we were in his house.

And that's where I was now, standing in his bedroom, looking at him, at all the raw, very male power that spilled from him like gasoline onto a fire.

I thought about dinner, how I felt when I sat next to him, how I'd been wet, ready, and the small, innocent touches had only whet my appetite, made me greedy for more.

I'd consumed far more alcohol than I normally did, and he hadn't drunk a drop of booze, just water, as I felt his eyes on me the entire time. In fact, I don't think he stopped looking at me until we were in the car and he had to focus on driving.

*This is crazy. This is so damn senseless... yet I've never felt anything more perfect.*

"Is this what you want?" he asked in that deep voice that sounded so very raw, so very male. "Am I what you want?"

I licked my lips and nodded, because frankly I didn't think I could have formed a coherent word in that moment. My nipples were hard, pressing against my shirt. They ached, the mounds feeling heavy. I was wet—soaked, in fact. My panties were drenched, rubbing against the most intimate part of my body.

"I've never done this," I blurted out suddenly, wanting to make it known that I didn't just go home with strangers and

fuck them.

“Neither have I,” he responded deeply, darkly, and took a step toward me.

I couldn't breathe. The air was so thick, so hot. I'd only gotten a quick glance at the exterior of his place before he pulled me inside.

Two-story log cabin.

A wraparound deck.

And the only holiday decoration he had was a small potted pine tree right by the front door. His lack of holiday shit covering his place... turned me on.

Once inside, I'd only had a moment to glance around before we were all but hauling ass to his room.

His home was rustic, with exposed wooden beams on the ceiling, a massive fireplace, the kitchen and huge living room all one room. I smelled pine. And lemon. And *him*.

But I didn't come here to take inventory of his place. I'd come to let this very potent male fuck me.

And the way he looked at me said he planned on doing just that.

“I've never had a one-night stand,” I said when he took another step toward me. He crowded me. All I smelled, felt, saw, heard was him.

God, he smelled incredible, like soap and pine and everything that made me feel like a female. He was just so big, so tall and broad, muscular and powerful. I could imagine him out in the woods wearing a flannel and holding an ax, about to chop down a tree so damn easily, as if he were breaking a toothpick in half.

I didn't know him, which made this irrational, but at the same time, I felt like I'd known him my whole life. He ignited this fire inside me the likes of which I'd never experienced before.

The rational side of my brain said I needed to remember the whole stranger danger rule. Isn't that why I came here with Dorothy, to "save" her from something just like this happening?

But then another side of me, the one that controlled the fact that I wanted him to fuck me so hard he made me forget my own name, overrode everything else.

Neither of us said anything else for long seconds, but the intensity in his stare had me feeling dizzy, sick with my desire for him.

"Good," he finally said, responding to my whole "I don't do one-night stands" spiel.

A shiver raced up my spine at the way he looked at me, the way he checked me out. He raked his gaze over the entire length of my body, and I curled my hands into tight fists at my sides. I could feel how hard my nipples were, and there was no doubt in my mind that he could see them pressing against the material of my shirt, like tight little buds begging for his mouth.

"Good?" I asked softly.

"You won't ever have another one."

I felt my eyes widen at that declaration he let slide from his mouth like it was a sexual touch along my body. Was he telling me I wouldn't have another one, because he thought they were "bad," scolding me like I was a child? Or was he telling me I wouldn't have another one, because if I'm going to be bouncing on dick, it'll be only his?

The latter was obviously my fantasy, a ludicrous one at that, but right there at the forefront of my mind nonetheless.

I clenched my thighs together as I imagined doing just that, riding this big mountain man until I climaxed so hard I saw angels.

"What do you want?" He took another step toward me.

He knew exactly what I wanted. I was here, in his room, wasn't I?

Did he want me to go full-on raunchy, telling him I wanted to have his cock in my mouth so I could get it nice and hard, wet from my saliva, before he shoved it in deep? I'm soaked as it is, but if he's as big down there as the rest of his body, he's going to have to really work to fit that glorious dick in my pussy.

I was so aroused that all I wanted to do was tell him to rip off my clothes and fuck me raw. I wanted to be sore in the morning. I wanted to have trouble walking because he pounded into me like a madman, like the only thing that mattered was finding his own release.

He still didn't speak, just watched me as he grabbed the bottom of that gray shirt that couldn't hide all his male power. For a second, he didn't move, but then he all but ripped it off over his head, tossed it aside, and went for his jeans.

I swallowed the lump that suddenly lodged itself in my throat.

"Undress for me," he demanded.

I found myself doing what he wanted without any hesitation. Who was I kidding? I was like a horny teenager right now.

I was speechless, my throat tight, my mouth dry, as I stood there completely naked, watching as he slowly removed those jeans. And when they were off his glorious male body, my jaw went slack at the third fucking leg he sported between his thighs. The girth was as wide as my wrist, making my insides seize up. I didn't know if I could take all of *that*, but I sure as fuck would try.

"You see what you do to me?" he asked but didn't elaborate, didn't specify, and certainly didn't grab himself to make his point known.

But I knew what he meant, and I nodded.

“How wet are you for me?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was soaked, but a slow shake of his head stopped me.

“Run your fingers over your cunt and show me.”

*God.*

A little moan left me as I followed his command. I slid my hand between my legs, running the digits through my slit, moaning again at how good it felt. And when I held the fingers up, showing him how they glistened, a rough growl left him.

“Drenched” was all he said.

Before I knew what was going on, he was in front of me, his hands wrapped around my waist, his lips on mine. He was kissing me hungrily, like he'd been starved for me all damn night. I knew I'd been that way for him.

He kissed me for so long my lips were pleasantly sore by the time he pulled away. He nuzzled my neck, licked and sucked at my flesh, and then he was lifting me easily and carrying me to the bed. But then he sat down, placed me on his lap chest-to-chest, and started kissing me again.

The position had my legs spread on either side of his body, my bare pussy grinding right over his hard cock.

He pulled back but kept our mouths only an inch apart. “I can smell how ready you are for me, how much you want this.” His words vibrated against my lips, and another low growl left him. “I can smell your sweetness.” He ran his tongue over my lips, and I shuddered on top of him. “Ask me to fuck you, Penny.”

God, did he really think I *wouldn't* ask him? I wanted to beg him to work all that cock into my pussy.

I found myself leaning in that last inch, our lips now touching, and said, “Fuck me, Charlie.”



## CHAPTER SEVEN

CHARLIE'S COCK WAS so hard I swore I felt it jerk between us after I told him to fuck me.

Just the thought of having his massive dick all up inside me made me feel like this was my first time.

"Grab it," he said huskily, and I didn't even hesitate before I reached my hand between our bodies and grabbed him. His entire body jerked at that first contact, and the harsh strain in his voice had my pussy becoming impossibly wetter.

His cock was like velvet over steel, hot and thick in my grasp. Hell, my fingertips weren't even able to touch because of his girth. I tipped my head slightly back and stared into his face, gauging his reaction. His body was so taut, his fingers digging painfully into my sides as if I was the only thing stabilizing him.

His eyes were hooded as he watched me. He looked a little bit drunk despite him not having a drop at dinner. It was all because of me and the pleasure I was giving him right now.

That was one hell of a power trip for a girl.

"Go on," he growled. "Stroke it."

I started breathing harder, faster. He did as well.

"Do it." Charlie's voice got rougher, more demanding.

Shivers raced along my body at the tone.

I glanced back down at his dick, the slit at the tip already dotted with pre-cum. And because I felt like a hungry slut, my mouth watered for a taste of all that male potency.

I didn't stroke him, didn't do what he wanted. I was doing what I wanted, and that was tasting that glorious cock of his.

I was on my knees between his tree-trunk thighs a second later, staring up at him, seeing that primal male desire on his

face. He didn't stop me, not as I leaned forward, gripped his shaft again, and pulled the tip to my lips. While I stared into his eyes, I sucked the crown into my mouth.

His essence, the very male saltiness that made up Charlie in the most primal way, exploded across my tongue. I couldn't help but moan. He tasted so good, woodsy and clean, potent and addicting.

I closed my eyes and hummed around him as I started bobbing my head up and down his length, trying to take as much as I could into my mouth. The tip of his cock hit the back of my throat, and I gagged slightly, which in turn had him groaning and spearing a hand into my hair. He kept me right there as he lifted his hips, pushing his dick into my mouth again so I gagged once more.

“*Yeah,*” he said in a raspy voice.

I renewed my effort, sucking on his shaft, running my tongue along the underside of the length, and sucking off the pre-cum that was a steady flow at the crown.

I swore I could feel him getting harder the longer I sucked his cock.

And then I felt his body tighten, knowing he was about to come. I went even harder, faster, needing his seed in my mouth, down my throat. I was starved for it. But to my disappointment, he pushed me away gently, and I was left sitting on my knees, staring at his glossy, hard cock that bobbed between his legs.

I looked up at him, my chest rising and falling as I breathed heavily, so hard I still couldn't catch it. My lips felt swollen, a little numb, but God did that turn me on knowing why they were like that.

“How badly do you want me to fuck you, sweet girl?”

I couldn't even formulate a response to that. Couldn't he see in my face, feel in my body, just how much I was ready for this?

“Tell me how much you want me to shove my big dick right up your tight little pussy.”

I couldn't breathe. I felt lightheaded. I was dripping cream down my inner thighs with my need.

Here I was on my knees, my legs slightly spread, and Charlie looked right at my pussy like he'd never seen anything hotter.

“I have a sweet tooth, Penny,” he said low, smooth as silk. He lifted his eyes to look into mine. “And you're the only thing that can sate it.”

My pussy throbbed, my pulse beating in my clit like it had its own heartbeat.

“I want you to tell me how much you want my big fucking cock deep in your tight little cunt.” Those words were this animalistic growl from his full, masculine lips.

I could hear my heart racing in my ears, and my palms started to sweat.

“I want that—”

He shook his head, leaned forward, and braced his forearms on his thighs. “Tell me the *right* way.”

I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat.

I couldn't help but glance down at his erection. “Charlie,” I purred his name and watched as his body got harder right in front of me. “Shove that big, hard, magnificent cock deep in my little pussy that's so wet for you.” I leaned forward and pushed his arms away so I could brace my hands on his strong knees. “I want you in me so deep it hurts.” Before I could anticipate what he was doing, Charlie hauled me off the floor, placed me on his lap, and dug his fingers into my hips, growling like the primal beast he was.

“If you want it, then take it with that pretty pink pussy, Penny.”

Well then. Challenge accepted.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I PRESSED MY breasts to his chest, feeling the soft hair that covered his pectoral muscles, and moaned at how good it felt. My pussy contracted along his cock on its own, his length framed by my lips.

“Go on, girl,” he taunted.

I reached down and wrapped my hand around his cock. He was all but bursting in my palm.

“Slide all that wet hotness on me. Ride me, Penny.” His words were getting shorter, deeper. I could tell he was slowly losing his control. “I want you to milk the cum from my balls with that tight cunt of yours.” Charlie’s words were harsh, guttural.

I rose up slowly but didn’t impale myself on him, and instead I rubbed the bulbous head of his shaft up and down my slit.

“*Christ*,” he gritted out. “Do that again, baby.”

I did that over and over, running the flared head up and down my length, letting him feel how hot and wet I was for him. He cursed, shifted enough he could open his bedside dresser drawer, and pulled out a condom.

He tore at the corner with his teeth, pulled the latex out with his free hand, and slid it down, sheathing himself and placing the tip at my entrance. Placing my hands on his pectoral muscles, I didn’t deny myself any longer as I started to slide down his cock, engulfing him.

The sound of his teeth clashing together was strong, and when I felt his very male, blunt nails dig into my flesh, I knew he was just as gone as I was.

His broad chest heaved as he sat still, letting me take all of him in my body. But I could tell his restraint was slipping.

He hummed and whispered so low I wasn't sure I heard him correctly. "I'll never get enough."

And when I had all his dick in my pussy, when I slowly ground myself on him, hearing the grind of his teeth, I knew I wouldn't last. "Oh. God," I whispered and started rocking back and forth on him.

"Fucking bounce on this cock."

And I did just that.

"Yeah," he hissed, and I swore his eyes rolled back in his head from his pleasure. "That's it. I've never had anything like this." His voice was rough, full of need. He stared into my eyes so hard that I felt it like a physical touch. "Watch me as I fuck the hell out of this tight, sweet pussy." My chest ached from the force of his words. "Watch as I push all this cock into your primed cunt."

I looked down the length of my body, seeing where his cock met my pussy. I started lifting up and falling back down, and in turn, he pumped his hips up, meeting my movements. Over and over again, harder and faster. I saw his dick disappear into my body before coming almost all the way out, the length glossy from my cream.

When his cock became visible, I saw how shiny it looked from my wetness. Everything in me tightened at the sight. He stretched me so good, and the burn of the pleasure was still there. I didn't want this to end.

"Fuck, I've never seen anything hotter than all your pussy juice covering my dick."

My arousal pumped through me, the overabundance of adrenaline and pleasure making me feel high and drunk and like I was no longer in my own body.

And I rode him harder, faster still.

My pussy sucked at his cock, his big dick stretching me wide, making me feel like I was going over the edge again and

again until it was maddening, and I accepted that I'd never be the same after him.

I moved up and down, the breath leaving me in uneven gasps, my tits bouncing as I rocked myself on him, seeking more of that delicious burn, that addicting pleasure I felt only he could give me.

And when I felt his hand make contact with my ass, that *clap* of his skin meeting mine, I went off.

My orgasm rushed forward, and I felt the world disappear, but not before he grew impossibly harder in my body. I didn't want to stop it. I never wanted this to end.

"Look at me," he demanded, and I peeled my eyes open, not realizing they'd been closed. Sweat covered his chest and forehead, and his jaw clenched tightly as if he was trying to hold off the inevitable. But I wanted him so mindless that he couldn't think or even breathe. I wanted him to feel what I felt in this movement. So I used my inner muscles to clamp down around him, a gasp leaving me at the same time he cursed out vulgarly.

He groaned, and his eyes were nothing but blue glowing slits in the darkened room. "You see what you do to me?" he asked, but I had a feeling he spoke to himself, not meaning for those words to actually spill out.

I could see he was right at the edge, that it wouldn't take much to make him go over. And I wanted to witness that so damn badly. But I didn't know how much longer I could last. I already felt myself gearing up for another mind-blowing orgasm.

I clenched my pussy muscles around his dick again, and the growl he gave me had power consuming every single inch of my body, right down to my soul.

His fingers were digging deep into my skin, and I knew there would be bruises tomorrow. Good, I wanted his mark. I wanted the proof that this night actually happened.

I was clearly not going fast enough, because before I knew it, Charlie had both hands curled around my waist in a vice-like grip and started lifting me up and slamming me back down on his cock. The wet, sloppy sounds of our sex filled my head. I didn't think about anything else but this moment and the leisure I felt.

I didn't care that this man was a stranger, that after this night, I'd have to leave. It felt... wrong. But I told myself that was the reality.

“So tight.” He bared his teeth as he stared at my face. “So hot. So fucking wet. And it's all for me. Only me, isn't that right?”

I gasped and nodded even though his words were as crazy as what we were doing.

He slammed me down hard on him once more, stilling, letting me *feel* how much he filled my pussy with his monstrous cock.

Charlie groaned, his neck muscles standing in stark relief in the shadowy room, his body seeming bigger than life at this moment.

I wanted his cum, wanted it filling me, coating every inch of me. The fucking condom was a barrier I never wanted again when it came to Charlie.

And as I let him bounce me up and down on his length, knowing this was his pinnacle, his peak, all I could do was hold onto his shoulders and let him fill me up. And God, did he do that so damn good.

He grunted once, growled after that, and on the third thrust into my pussy, he buried his face in the crook of my neck and came.

After long moments, when I finally felt his body start to relax, I allowed myself to run my hands up and down his back. Our skin was damp, our bodies sated. I'd never felt so... complete before. He kissed the side of my neck sweetly, softly, running his tongue over my flesh, lapping up the beads of

sweat I knew dotted it. I heard him inhale again, and again, and I closed my eyes and let this feeling imprint in my mind forever.

His dick was still hard inside me when I shifted and rolled off, my limbs like noodles, my heart racing.

God, he made me a fiend.

I didn't know what I was supposed to do now. Leave? Do the walk of shame? But before I could really think about it, he had his hand curled around my waist and pulled me right up against his body. I swear I heard him purr in pleasure.

“Stay with me. Let me hold you. Let me fuck you all night.” My toes curled at his words, and I closed my eyes and purred myself. I rubbed my body against his like some kind of cat in heat, feral for his touch.

“I couldn't leave if I wanted. You drove,” I teased, and his deep chuckle speared right through my core.

“I wouldn't let you leave anyway. I'm keeping you forever.”

I smiled even though he couldn't see it. That sounded... magical, even if it wasn't realistic. Right? It wasn't, was it?

And as I let him hold me, as I felt the drugging wave of sleep slowly start to take me, the only thing on my mind was that I never wanted this night to end.



## CHAPTER NINE

**W**HEN I WOKE up, I knew the spot beside me was empty. I felt his absence as clearly as I felt the oxygen moving in and out of my lungs.

The sun came through the window and washed my face, but it wasn't warm, not with how cold it was outside.

I hadn't even opened my eyes, and the headache that was slowly starting to form behind my eyes pounded fiercely.

Hungover. That's what I was.

I rolled onto my back and peeled my eyes open, blinking a few times as I stared at the wooden beams above me. I slid my hand beside me, the sheets cold where Charlie had slept last night, where I remembered him holding me close to his body, my back to his chest, his hand between my thighs all. Night. Long.

Despite him fucking me so thoroughly that I was actually tender down there, desire started waking me up even more. My pussy throbbed, not just from being sore from the pounding Charlie had given me, but because I wanted to go for round three, four, and round five.

I noticed a thick-looking robe draped across the end of the bed and pushed the blankets off me before grabbing it and quickly wrapping the plush material around my body. The wooden floor was cold beneath my bare feet, and I went over to the dresser and pulled one of the small top drawers open, seeing it was filled with socks. I grabbed the thickest ones I could find, not the least bit shy that I was wearing his clothes.

The way I'd given myself to him last night had all shyness leaving me.

I left the bedroom and made my way out to the kitchen. The scent of coffee was strong and had my mouth watering.

After pouring myself a cup, I walked over to the French doors that lead out to the back deck. I just stared outside, at the freshly fallen snow dotting the trees, covering the ground and even the deck. I saw footprints on that freshly fallen powder, and a second later, I watched as Charlie came around from the side of the house.

His arms were filled with chopped firewood, and the only thing he wore was a pair of dark boots, worn denim jeans, and a long-sleeved black Henley. He looked rugged and handsome, those pieces of lumber cradled in his arms looking small compared to his size.

My pulse started racing the closer he got, and when he was stepping up on the patio, coming toward the doors, I moved to the side.

He pulled one of the doors open and stepped inside. His focus was on the ground as he took each log off with one hand and set it aside, still holding all that lumber with his free arm.

And when he lifted his head, I swore I saw his nostrils flare as if my very presence made him uncontrollable. A low growl left him at the sight of me, as he swept his eyes up and down my body, seeing I wore the robe he laid out for me. His eyes dropped to the socks I wore. The corner of his mouth kicked up at that, and I felt a wave of warmth encompass me.

He didn't say anything as he walked past me and headed toward the fireplace. But right before he cleared my path, he leaned down slightly, brushing his nose along the top of my head. I swore I heard him inhale deeply, as if he were taking my scent into his lungs.

I watched him walk over and set the logs beside the hearth, adding a couple more pieces to the fire and stoking it.

The flames licked over the wood, eating it, the oxygen giving them life.

Charlie gave me life.

I stared at his muscular back, the way he was on his haunches, how his shirt was stretched over his broadness, and

the strength that poured from him was so potent every female part of me sung this high-pitched tune to mate with him. I found myself taking a step toward Charlie. He stood and turned to face me, and I froze, not sure what the hell I was actually even going to do.

What was I going to say to him?

We stood there, a handful of feet between us, our eyes locked, the heat that bounced in-between our bodies having nothing to do with the flames from the fire. And then he was striding toward me, slipping his hand along the side of my throat and cupping my nape, using his thumb to tilt my head back just slightly so I could fully look into his face.

He looked down at my lips for only a second before he leaned in and claimed them, stroking his tongue along the seam until I opened and allowed him entrance.

I sucked on that muscle, drawing it into my mouth before pushing mine into his. We did this over and over, back and forth, our lips and tongues fucking the other's.

I was needy and desired him right then, my pussy wet, my cream sliding down my inner thighs because I wore nothing underneath this robe.

I gripped his biceps and curled my nails into his taut, firm skin. He pulled back, both of us breathing raggedly as if we'd just run a marathon.

“Stay with me the rest of the weekend,” he growled, leaning in again and kissing me once more. “Stay with me, and let's see where this goes.”

When he pulled fully back this time, my head was dizzy as if I were still drunk. I blinked up at him, not sure I fully understood what he meant. He wanted me to stay the rest of my time in Candied with him? To see where what went?

I assumed this was just a one-off for him, a romp with someone from out of town. Of course that's not what I wanted, but I was too much of a coward to actually say anything about

it. I'd been ready to chalk it up as my one sexy encounter with a lumberjack kind of man in Vermont.

But the connection we had, the electricity I felt move between us, was far more potent than anything I could ever explain.

I already realized this was insane, that how I felt for Charlie wasn't normal or rational. But I was crazy enough to see just how far we could go, how far this would go.

"And then what?" I questioned, my hands still wrapped around his biceps, because I refused to let him go, refused to let his body move away from mine.

"You can't deny that what's between us is pretty fucking powerful." His voice was so deep.

I licked my lips in response and slowly shook my head. "No, I won't deny it."

He groaned and leaned down to capture my mouth in a searing kiss before pulling back again. It was torment, agonizing ecstasy.

"And then I'll come to you next weekend." He smiled slowly. "I can't let you just walk out of my life."

Anything I could have said died in my throat.

"What I felt the first moment I saw you was fucking crazy, but I'd never felt it before. It has to mean something more, and I want to explore that."

I was so stunned by what he was saying and asking, by what he wanted, that I actually took a step back. How was this even possible? I didn't want to say no. It was almost abhorrent to me, the words refusing to spill from my mouth. I had absolutely no idea where this was going with Charlie, but it felt right.

It felt perfect. It felt like it was what I'd been missing my entire life. So when his hand, which was still curled around my nape, pulled me back toward him, I said the only thing that felt right.

“Okay. I’ll stay. I want to see where this goes too.” I’d never been more excited for what my future held until I looked into a pair of bright blue eyes and saw the promise of more.

✧ ✧ ✧

Thank you for reading *Candied* by Jenika Snow! Want more hot alpha heroes? Read her Real Man series starting with [LUMBERJACK](#).

SLEIGH BRIDE

XAVIER NEAL

# CHAPTER ONE

## Lark

**H**OW IS IT I always get roped into this type of thing?

Do I just have “Will Do Anything for Nephew” tattooed on my forehead?

Does my older brother, Sparrow, just have a sixth sense about this shit that he passed down to his kid?

A seductive feminine voice softly purrs, “You look good with a beard, Lark.”

I turn around and toss the beautiful woman who has come to be one of my best friends over the past year a sarcastic look.

“And, the overnight beer gut?” Da’Nika Martin fakes a swoon and fans her caramel-colored complexion. “*Hot.*”

“Excuse you,” the stern tone of voice is accompanied by a point to the fake stomach, “this is *all* cookies, thank you very much.”

Giggles escape her, and she swiftly tries to catch them in the palms of her dainty hands.

Of all the people that I’m stuck doing this with, I’ll freely admit, I’m glad it’s her. Pretending to be Santa for a bunch of preschoolers is one nightmare, but having to pretend to be Santa with someone like Megan Storwell – a woman whose smile clearly belongs starring in another horrific *Krampus* movie rather than anything associated with the classic Tim Allen holiday franchise – would’ve had me roasting his *chestnuts* over an open fire. With Da’Nika as my partner in holiday crime, I, thankfully, know exactly what is in store for the next two and a half hours. Our friendship started over a last cookie negotiation during a cultural event we were attending for the minis that run our lives – despite the fact they aren’t *directly* our minis. Da’Nika’s Goddaughter and my nephew,

Oren, are not only in the same class but often each other's preferred playmates.

They're, basically, two parts of the same chocolate chip cookie.

And, in weird ways, so are we.

She pushes up her tiny Mrs. Claus glasses, "Is your newfound plumpness from cookies or *muffins*?"

The alluding to what it is I do outside of this stuffy, itchy, red suit successfully gets me to chortle. "Hey, why *don't* we leave muffins for Santa? You know? Mix the shit up? I'm more of a muffin man, anyway."

"Because tradition dictates *cookies*."

"Eh. Depends on the tradition."

"Is this...*really* the debate you wanna get into two minutes before show time?"

"Nah," I casually brush off, "but after it? We will absolutely be settling this shit over pizza, Guinness, and hockey highlights."

Excitement instantly rushes into her dark brown gaze.

Our shared love of hockey is one of the many reasons this friendship works.

It also helps we share a love for the same team.

Go Dalvegan Dragons!

My head motions towards the door to imply we should get going, and Da'Nika twirls that direction to saunter off. The two of us exit the classroom designated for hiding our belongings at Little Elves Private Preschool in relaxed silence and head down the hall for the event room where families are waiting.

Everything here in Mistletoe, Montana is Christmas-themed down to the snow shoveling services that are offered. With a name like Mistletoe – where it's been established to



embrace the holiday season year round, especially considering the high tourist population we get even in the “off season” – sticking to the theme is crucial to the survival of any business, whether it’s big or small.

Schools are not an exception.

Neither are neighborhoods.

Nothing manlier than telling chicks you’re hoping to fuck that you live in Gingerbread Grove.

“Can’t believe I’m giving up one of my only mornings off to let strange children cry in my lap,” I grumble a little closer to the doors we need to enter. “Do you know what I could be doing instead?”

“Anything,” Da’Nika says on a snicker. “Like, literally *anything* else would be better than wearing these costumes kids are gonna sneeze and wipe frosting on like we’re just giant napkins.”

There’s no stopping the cringe that crosses my face.

Fuck, she’s right.

So right that I can practically already see the snot caked on my jacket.

“Yeah,” my agreement is muttered at the same time I admire the coat’s cleanliness one last time, “doing *anything* else would probably be better than this.”

“Lark!” An unexpected squeaky voice calls to me. “Lark, honey!”

Okay.

*Almost* anything else.

I cautiously lift my head to see my mom and dad frantically waving.

Having two parents who, oddly enough, look like descendants from the Keebler dynasty isn’t something that’s easy to ignore, whether they’re happily waving like lunatics or

scolding you for sneaking into the house at 3 a.m. after an unsuccessful attempt to lose your virginity to Shelly Vega as a high school freshman. It's also hard to look past the fact they're both five foot nothing and have two sons that are over a foot taller than both of them. Come to think of it, their grandson is probably going to be able to look down on them by his first day of Kindergarten.

Dad takes his turn to call my attention. "Hey, son!"

"Are those your parents?" Da'Nika questions under her breath, hand dropping to her side instead of reaching for the handle. "Or...lost elf helpers?"

"My. Parents," I, reluctantly, reply prior to greeting them. "Hey!" They finally reach me and immediately receive warm hugs. Afterwards, I pull back and speedily question, "What are you guys doing here? You know you really can't handle the cold anymore."

Their need for warmer temperatures due to aging bodies and breathing conditions is what transferred them from all they've ever known and loved here to down south where they bask in the sunny weather and have fallen in love with gardening clubs.

"We know, we know," my mom sighs, hand tossed lovingly my direction, "but when *neither* of you boys could come down to visit, we figured, garsh darn it, why don't we just come up to you?"

"Because of Dad's lungs, your knees, and the fact neither of you should be trudging through snow."

Dad rolls his eyes at the answer. "We'd never let a little thing like snow stop us from seeing *both* our boys."

"Plus, we figured, this is an extra hard Christmas on your brother but an extra special Christmas for you, so we couldn't miss it!" Mom's mouth moves faster than I can mine. "So, is this her? Is this your fiancée? Is this the future Mrs. Wellington?!"

Da’Nika’s head tilts in bewilderment, “The future Mrs. What Now?”

“Yup.” Nodding quickly, I repeat the words as though they’re completely true and not an extension of the lie I told. “Bride. Her.” A small head motion is thrown in my friend’s direction. “Future...Mrs...Put. Ring. Um...” I shake away the inability to form a coherent sentence and state, “This is DaNika. DaNika this is Agatha and Walter, my parents.”

Despite the fact her confusion remains, she croaks out, “Hi?”

“Hi! Hi! Hi!” Mom sings and tangles her tiny arms around DaNika’s midsection. “It’s so good to finally meet you!”

She shoots me a baffled glare that has me swiftly peeling my mother from where she’s suctioned herself. “Mom, Dad,” I begin while executing the action, “I’m gonna guess you came here with Sparrow and Oren, who are probably waiting on pine needles for you to join them at one of the cookie stations, so why don’t you go ahead and get back to them, and we’ll all catch up afterwards.” Once my mother is back at my father’s side and pouting, I force a wide grin on my face. “Okay?”

“Fine.” Her big blue eyes—that Sparrow and I both inherited—bulge at my female friend. “You should know you’re prettier than I was expecting.”

“Aw,” Da’Nika sweetly coos in response. “Thanks.”

She happily nods, pats my chest, and pushes past us for the doors we should be following them through.

As soon as it’s just us, again, in the empty hallway, I gripe, “I don’t know how the fuck to take that last thing.” Our eyes reconnect. “Like, did my mom just say I have ugly taste in chicks?”

“You kinda do.”

“I do not.”

“You definitely do.”

“I—”

“There was Maureen, the female lumberjack, whose name was definitely the only feminine thing about her. Remember the small goatee she was *proud* of having?”

My face flashes a small cringe.

“There was Tonia, the truck driver with the unibrow and the full blown 80s bush, you hooked up with in the bathroom of that diner that’s like *right* on the outskirts of town.”

I push my lips together.

“And, don’t forget Cyn, that chick you met online, who you drove over an hour to meet in *her town* only to find out she used her sister’s Christina Applegate doppelganger picture to lure you there and really looked like the frizzy haired lesbian from *Workin’ Moms* with a botched boob job.”

Yeah, that was when I fucking gave up on the experiment of “putting myself out there” more.

Accepted I would never have what my parents have.

What Sparrow *had*.

That work would be my wife and recorded hockey games—my mistress.

“Now, can we fast forward past those mistakes but rewind back a teeny-Tiny Tim moment? I mean...I just need to know – are you having a mothball induced stroke, or am I? ’Cause I feel like you just told your parents we’re engaged.”

“I did.”

“But...we’re *not*.”

“Can we pretend?”

Bafflement blasts back onto her face.

“Look...I...wasn’t in the mood to be nagged about being alone another Christmas season or to hear about how Aunt Milly’s kids are all having kids, and they can’t wait for me to give them grandkids. I just wanted *one year* where, instead of

having to listen to ‘when you finally settle down’ speeches, I got to actually eat my Christmas ham in peace...or to the sound of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. You’re never too old for that one.”

“True.”

“I told them that I couldn’t come home because I was going to propose to my girlfriend a few days before Christmas and wanted to spend our first Christmas as a couple *here*, where Christmas is everything, something I swore would get them off my back, not convince them to catch an impromptu flight and, inevitably, crash at my house because that’s where they always stay when they come into town.”

Da’Nika slowly nods, the ball of her hat bouncing around. “So...you lied.”

“Like, a little white lie.”

She promptly shakes her head in argument.

“Fine a big, red Rudolph nose lie.”

“You know you’re gonna get coal in your stocking for this shit.”

I can’t help from joining her small chuckles. “Help me out?”

Her honey brown eyebrows that match her actual hair lift in question.

“It’ll just be for a few days. For a few things. I’ll break the news to them that things didn’t work out when they’re back in Florida buying new garden gnomes and happy to be back in the heat. Swear.”

A longer stretch of silence than I like passes prior to her throwing her hands in the air in a caving fashion. “Ugh. Fine.”

I immediately give the air a victory punch.

“*But*, it’s gonna cost you.”

“Price?”

“Because I’m a good friend—”

“An *amazing* friend.”

“All I’m requesting is free coffee from your shop for the next year.”

“The next *year*?!”

“That’s only three hundred and sixty-five cups *if* I drink it every day, although if I skip a day, I can have it roll over to the next one, and get a two on one day sort of deal – that way, my hard-earned cup doesn’t, necessarily, go to waste. I can give it to Pammy as a work treat kind of thing or maybe, occasionally, Suzie, though she only likes chai tea lattes, and I don’t really like ordering those.”

“Why do I feel like you’ve just been waiting for a reason to make this bargain or blackmail me into this?”

“Because it’s an expensive habit, and you know as well as I do that your shop, while tasty, is pricey as fuck.”

A loud, snort-filled laugh immediately erupts from me, and it’s hard to ignore the fact she’s one of the only people besides Sparrow and Oren who gets that sound out of me. I offer her a wide grin and an extended hand, “Deal.” The instant our hands drop post shaking, a sigh from me follows. “Alright, *Mrs. Claus*. Let’s go put on a show for the kids *and* my parents.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### Da’Nika

**L**ARK GRINS WIDELY at the same time he nods in approval regarding the green “Baahumbug” sweater that features a sheep wearing a Santa hat and matching boots amongst falling snowflakes. “Did you have to go out and buy this?”

“Nah,” I swiftly shake my head. “You’re just used to seeing me in my non-work gear. Store policy is actually to wear red, green, or Christmas-themed clothing, so I’ve got a ridiculous amount of fun, ugly sweaters and t-shirts to choose from year-round.”

Major drawback to living in this real-life Whoville is the lack of other colors that manage to make it out of my closet aside from those and different shades of gray. Then again, I guess there’s no real need. I don’t exactly do much besides watch sports or horror movies with Lark, work at Mistletoe – the award winning florist shop – and hang out at home with Pammy – the best friend I followed states away when she dropped everything in Vlasta, Wisconsin to move her and her daughter, Kamilla or Kammy, here to run the place since her grandmother died and her mother was just going to sell it. Admittedly, I know next to nothing about flowers or plants, but I do have amazing customer service skills and am sort of a quick learner.

Lark lightly laughs, again, at my comment, pulling another loud one from me.

However, here is a prime example of when I’m a little slower than the average reindeer.

You’d think by now I would learn it never works out well for me to do these types of favors, yet I always agree to them.

I always try to do whatever it is my friends need me to do.

They're basically all I have.

“Okay, what’s our backstory?” I move the conversation along, not really wanting to keep it going in the arctic-like temperatures we’re experiencing while chatting beside my car. “How’d we meet? How long have we been together? Was it love at first sight? How many of these questions have you already answered in the three hours we’ve been apart? And, why am I not *wearing* my engagement ring? Too big? Too small? Wrong shape?”

“There’s a *wrong* shape?”

My tsking is done with another shake of the head. “Oh, such a guy question.”

Lark sneers at the comment prior to asking, “Why does it feel like you’ve done this before?”

“Because I have.”

“What?”

Reluctantly, I explain the shame that brought me to this small town I’m happy to call home, “I did something similar back in college when I was a sophomore. A friend at the time needed my help, I needed the cash he was offering as compensation for my time, and it led to ruining my reputation for the next two years, which made the decision to follow my best friend here – a million miles from home – a thoughtless one.”

Lark’s brow furrows. “Ruining it how?”

“Slut for Hire was the um...general consensus,” I uncomfortably mumble. “Never mind the fact I *never* slept with him or anything close.”

His cut jaw twitches, though I’m not sure if it’s in anger or disgust or sadness.

Lark Wellington is one of those tall, dark, and brooding-looking types that no matter the emotion he looks sexy executing it. He’s almost six foot three with dark hair and dark blue eyes that can melt your panties or freeze your heart.



Dealer's choice.

He's a beautiful contrast to the almost always too bright and too chipper persona most people in this town put on.

"How about we forget about that," I swiftly push forward, "and get back to *us*. What are the deets?"

"The deets to what?" Sparrow's voice unexpectedly startles us both.

"Fuck, man, you're like a ninja!" Lark gripes as his older brother shuts the door to his SUV. He turns around so he's standing at my side, facing him. "We didn't even hear you pull up."

"Uh-huh," Sparrow brushes off, halting the choice to open the door to retrieve Oren, "deets about what?"

I casually inform, "Our engagement."

He braces one of his large arms against the window and tilts his head in curiosity. "*Whose engagement?*"

Lark casually motions to me and him. "Mom and Dad think we're engaged."

"Why the hell would they think that?"

"Because that's what I told them."

"Oh, well then, yeah, that would make sense why they think that..." His pair of blues that are the opposite shade of Lark's immediately roll. "Why would you *tell* them that?"

My fake fiancé gives his chin a quick uncomfortable scratch. "Because instead of just telling our parents that I didn't wanna spend another Christmas listening to them basically beg me to get my shit together and find 'Mrs. Right', I told them I had already found her and that I was proposing. That I wanted to spend our first Christmas *here* with her, which they could easily appreciate considering how they feel about this time of year and this town. And, I thought I was out of the woodwork until they showed up this afternoon *with*

*you* – fuck you for the lack of heads up by the way – and I had to find a fiancée on the spot.”

“Hi,” I insert in a high pitched, teasing tone.

Sparrow shoots me an amused smirk. “Always good to see you Da’Nika.”

All of a sudden, a small displeased grunt crawls out of Lark that has us both looking his direction. He does his best to play it off by clearing his throat; however, it’s obvious to us both it was more than that.

He has *nothing* to worry about there.

Out of the Wellington brothers, who practically look like twins with the only true differences being Sparrow has a dimple and looks the five years older that he is, Lark is the only one I’ve ever wanted to *nest* with.

Bird pun so intended.

But, we’re friends.

Practically *best* friends.

And, we’re probably better off as just being that.

Otherwise, things would’ve already changed by now, right?

Sparrow chooses not to acknowledge the noise but the explanation, “Lark, this is the shittiest idea you’ve ever had, and I’m including that one summer when you were eight and thought you could trap a real Keebler elf to interrogate and find out if our parents are *actually* related to them.”

“That was a great plan!”

“It was stupid,” Sparrow sighs, “and so is this.” He shakes his head in obvious disapproval at the same time he tugs the door handle. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, baby bro.”

“I won’t.”

“Uncle Lark!” Oren squeals from his car seat.

“Hey, buddy!” Lark quickly greets and rushes from my side to his brother’s. “I missed you!”

“I missed you, too!” Oren echoes as he switches from his father’s arms to his uncle’s. “You not see Santa with us!”

Preserving his childhood innocence and the conversation takes precedence over the discussion we should be having, but it doesn’t bother me even in the slightest. I totally get it. I’m the exact same way when it comes to Kammy. “I know, big guy. I know. I had to work. Why don’t you tell me and Da’Nika all about it?”

“Da’Nika!” He joyfully sings at the sight of me.

“Hey, my favorite little man!” After giving him a high-five, I encourage him to keep talking, “I definitely want to hear all about you seeing Santa!”

Our attention flies to the three-year-old whose fourth birthday is just a week away – something I know thanks to both his excited uncle *and* his excited best friend, who I took shopping for the “perfect” gift because her mother had to handle some bullshit with the accounting.

Needless to say, I think pretending to be his uncle’s fake fiancée will be a much less painful experience than having half-hearted arguments about Superman being better than Shazam.

The transition from talkative preschooler to talkative pretend in-laws is done pretty painlessly. One minute I’m listening to how he made reindeer food at the event on the way inside the house and the next I’m listening to his grandmother describe the garland treats we’re going to decorate the outside trees with, something she insists they’ll munch on after gobbling down the glittery oats he made earlier in the day.

Bowls of cranberries, string, and popcorn – fresh and stale – are splayed across the hardwood floor of Lark’s living room, a place I don’t have to pretend to be comfortable with because I actually am. We sit side by side with Oren and Sparrow as the separator between us and his parents. The T.V.

blares *The Grinch* while the six of us rifle through the ingredients we're supposed to sew together. Sadly, I struggle more with the activity than the small child on the other side of me who is stitching his shit together like he's being filmed for an episode of *Project Runway*, child prodigy edition.

"How are you this bad at stringing popcorn together?" Lark playfully teases. "And, how did I not know this sooner?"

I point the needle – that I swear to myself is a dud – directly at him. "Don't make me use this thing in ways it wasn't intended."

He leans his face forward to whisper, "Did you...mean for that to sound frightening or sexy? Or like...*both*?"

Bewilderment is only allotted a moment on my expression due to his mother intervening, "You are being a very bad fiancé, Lark. You can see your future bride is *struggling* with something, and your job is to help her and support her, not kick snow on her when she's down...Although, sugar plum, he brings up a very valid question, how are you not better at this? Did your mom not teach you this sort of thing?"

"She didn't," I casually confess. "We're not really close. And, Christmas was never about stuff like this growing up or really at all until I moved *here* a little over a year ago. The whole Christmas, all the time thing was a little intense at first, but...I've come to love it."

"You could say the same thing about my son, huh?" she sweetly sighs.

Actually...yeah. Lark was a little intense at first and definitely lived up to being the grumpier of the Wellington brothers; however, once you get to know him, it's easy to see he's not hard to handle if you're willing to put in the work.

The blush that heats my cheeks is as unexpected as is the answer that falls off my lips, "Definitely."

Sparrow shoots me an incredulous stare that has me looking back at the activity I'm failing.

“Maybe I should just stop trying? Stick to *just* eating handfuls of popcorn?”

“Help the poor girl out, son,” Walter promptly encourages. “Show her, she’s picked a good man that can do more than sing her a pretty song.”

His obvious bird reference has my face snapping to meet his gaze. “You do have a good set of pipes. I mean no one sings, ‘H.’ or ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’ quite like you.”

“Those are *vastly* different, babe, yet I still appreciate the compliment.”

Our expressions of surprise over the term of endearment are simultaneously exposed and then shifted as if it’s an everyday type of thing.

It’s totally not.

But, I find myself wishing more and more that it was.

“Let me um...let me show you how it’s done.” He abandons his own strand, scoots over so his body is behind mine, and grabs a fresh piece of thread. “Why don’t we start by getting you a whole new string?” Once it’s in his possession, Lark assists in the knot tying process, face lingering over my shoulder. “Remember to tie a fat knot at this end.” His breath tickles my neck, sending shivers down my spine. “And then carefully string this one...” Feeling his hard body pressed so tightly against mine knocks the air out of my lungs and banishes my ability to speak. “We’re gonna start with a cranberry first,” he continues to guide, his hands now executing every move for me, causing goosebumps to litter my skin. Together, we skillfully pierce the fruit prior to slowly sliding it towards the opposite end. The action successfully steals the small breath I had managed to gather, and Lark smirks as though he knows it. “Then, we string a piece of popcorn, which is a little...*harder* than you expect.”

That’s exactly how I would describe the situation pushing against me from his crotch companion.

We force the needle through the stubborn stale food and glide it the same direction as well as the same gradual speed as we did the previous piece. Afterwards, his voice is gravely and just above a whisper near my ear. “You think you got it, or should I keep helping?”

I want to remind him *he's* really the one getting the help at this very moment given the amazing show we're putting on yet choose to ignore my usual sass for a softer approach, all because I can't remember the last time a guy was this sweet to me, let alone the last time a guy I had a minor crush on showered me with this much attention. My head turns so we're eye to eye, mouths too close for resisting one another if we stay in these close quarters much longer. “Maybe...um...just a couple more?”

“Yeah...” Lark's eyes steal a glance at the parted area clearly preparing to press his lips to mine. “I can...absolutely do that.”

“Uncle Lark,” Oren enthusiastically calls, breaking up the tension-filled moment. “It's called a pattern!” He flashes his perfect put together string. “See. It go. Canberry.” His tiny finger points to the appropriate object. “Popcorn. Canberry. Popcorn...”

We collectively watch on and coo at how impressed we are with his skills and vocabulary.

I, myself, need to take a lesson from this.

I can never do another fake fiancée favor again.

It's most certainly one personal pattern I need to stop.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Lark

**T**HE PHONE RINGS more times than my sanity can handle.

Finally, the female I'm hoping is going to save my ass, sleepily answers, "Hello?"

"I need a favor."

There's a loud yawn preceded by the sound of her shuffling around. "You mean *another* one."

Grumbles fumble out of my mouth until I eventually grunt, "*Technically...yes.*"

Her snickers somehow erase the stress I've let land on my shoulders. "What kind? Tell me it's something easier like you need a fitness friend for your new app or a kidney."

"Giving me a kidney is easier than being my fiancée?"

She evades the question, and I don't like not having an answer. "What do you need, Lark?"

"Sonya backed out of helping me judge the Gingerbread House competition here at the shop. Her dog ate an entire loaf of bread and is super sick or some shit, so she can't leave him, and I need a third person to complete the panel."

"That sounds like work *before* I have to go to *actual* work."

"It'll be fun?"

"More fun than sleeping in?"

My back hits my office door at the same time I lower my voice to plead, "Come on, Da'Nika, I need you..."

A long moment of silence is given prior to a soft, defeated sigh. "*Fine*, but it's gonna cost you giving me free scones for a year."

“Deal.”

“I’ll see you in twenty.”

“Can you...make it fifteen?”

“Can you make it a scone *and* a muffin?”

“Twenty it is.”

We each hang up on that note.

I disappear back into the main part of It’s Beginning to Look A Latte Like Christmas, which is hustling and bustling with various contestants decorating their gingerbread houses on one side and regular customers coming in for their usual coffee on the other.

Thankfully, avoiding my family, who are gathered together helping my nephew work on his entry for the kid’s competition, is rather easy. As much as I love them, evading the impressive amount of questions regarding my fake romance is taxing. And, considering I’m the one currently on deck for running our family-owned and operated coffee shop so that my brother can do the dad thing, the added stress of an invasive interrogation about a lie I created isn’t really needed.

Though...after having her in my arms the night before last I’ve started to wish it were true. That our relationship was real and that kissing her, which I wish like hell I would’ve done when I had the chance, wouldn’t feel like it was a production for the world’s worst Christmas play.

Da’Nika arrives right on schedule, and seeing her in a “Get Baked” sweater with a gingerbread man on the front of it instantly pulls a grin onto my face. Her style and attitude are far from wholesome, much like my own. Sometimes I think it’s *why* we get along so well. Neither of us are squeaky clean in a town that expects exactly that.

We’re both more likely to watch horror movies even during the actual “Holly Jolly” time of year.

We’re both more likely to be caught listening to Tool as opposed to something sponsored by Disney Radio.



And...we're both most likely to be seen grabbing a case of beer from the grocery store instead of eggnog.

I greet my fake fiancée prior to giving her a quick rundown on how it all works while we wait for her cinnamon deluxe latte to be made and she eyeballs the latest round of Kringle's Catering treats that have hit the shop. Afterwards, I lead her over to the judging area to introduce her to our other helper, Ethel – an eighty six-year-old woman who has been doing this shit since my grandparents were running the place. She decides to stay put until it's time to place ribbons and judgments on the creations, while the two of us casually stroll around observing the crafting. At some point, a contestant accidentally bumps into us, and our hands link to stop from stumbling. Rather than pull them apart, we leave them together, and I can't deny that I love every second of it.

“Um, what. Is. That?!” Da’Nika gasps, breaking our hold to point to a bowl of frosting at my nephew’s station. “How did he get glow in the dark green frosting for his house?!”

“Aggiepie’s magical trick,” Dad replies at a low volume with a wink. “Woman always knew her way around frosting.”

“That sounds kinky,” Da’Nika thoughtlessly retorts.

“It’s because it is.”

“*Dad!*”

“Oh, lighten up, Lark,” he chortles prior to suggesting something to the woman at my side. “You should try it. And, by it, I mean sampling the frosting...Tastes quite amazin’ if I do say so myself. My wife makes all the frosting for these things from scratch.”

Da’Nika slightly cringes. “That sounds...exhausting.”

“Don’t forget *extremely loud*, which is why you should be thankful you didn’t sleep over last night.”

Not for lack of pressure from my parents. God, making up reasons why she had to bail and then explaining the whole waiting to move in until after the holiday thing was a

nightmare. One that actually *gave* me nightmares about this all blowing up in my face. Add those to the ear splitting sounds my mother was making at an unholy hour, and you get the perfect recipe for a grumpy goose.

Ugh.

More bird references.

This shit always happens whenever I'm around my father for extended periods of time.

Da'Nika tosses me a sweet, sympathetic smile before asking Dad, "Is that why you're here all alone, Walter? They leave you to guard the secret family frosting while they went to spy on the competition?"

"No, no," he casually retorts and swipes up a gum drop. "Sparrow took Oren to the restroom and Aggiepie went to say hi to a few friends over at the counter."

My friend hums in comprehension while I redirect my gaze to where I can see my mother gossiping with a couple women her age, the entire group shooting skeptical stares in our direction.

Oh, shit.

That's...that's not good.

That's...really bad.

*Really fucking bad.*

All of a sudden, there's a wet glop on my nose that breaks up the panicking that's mentally begun ensuing. I shake my head in confusion and discomfort alike. "What the f—"

"*Language, Lark,*" Dad chuckles. "There are lots of little elf ears around..."

I quickly wipe away the frosting that ended up on my nose and scowl at a snickering Da'Nika. "You think that was funny?"

“You mean, *Snack Frost* nipping at your nose?” Her pun gets another laugh out of my dad. “Yeah... a little.”

She’s given a slow nod proceeded by me swiftly replicating the action on a different part of her body.

“Hey!”

“Now, he’s nipping at your neck.”

Her fingers instantly go to wipe it away.

“It’s gonna look like you let The Grinch give you a hickey.”

Dad laughs harder, and Da’Nika puts her drink down to go for another frosting attack. She dips all five of her fingers into the neon frosting and lunges at me like an evil leprechaun. Dodging her is easy. Not laughing is impossible. I capture her wrists and keep them far away from my off-white sweater she’s clearly gunning for. Da’Nika wiggles around, her entire frame fighting to take back some sort of control, determination as adorable as the giggles escaping her. The sound is much too enticing.

Much too commanding.

Calls to me to capture it.

To taste it.

In one less than graceful action, I lean forward and press my mouth to hers, ceasing the thrashes. Her body melts against mine at the same time her lips part to allow our tongues to touch. Sweet flavors from the combination of frosting and coffee pale in comparison to the amazing ones that she naturally possesses. I swirl my tongue around and around, savoring each stroke more than the last. Light whimpers hit my ears causing me to abandon her wrists to wind my arms around her lower waist. Where her sticky appendages land doesn’t matter to me. The only thing I care about is how delicious each press exchanged is. How perfectly she fits against me. How hard my cock is from hearing her moan because she’s enjoying it, too.

An overdramatic throat clearing unexpectedly breaks up the sweet, sticky moment.

We abruptly part to see my family beaming brightly at us, with the exception of Oren who seems uninterested in anything other than shoveling handfuls of M&M's into his mouth while no one is theoretically watching.

Da'Nika meekly apologizes on our behalf, "Sorry...Guess we um...Guess we got a little carried away."

Mom gleefully grins and offers her a wet wipe to clean her hands. "No need to be sorry, sugar plum. Sometimes when the moment takes you, it takes you."

The moment didn't take her.

*I did.*

And, I wanna fucking do it again.

And, I wanna kick my ass for having not done the shit sooner.

My fake fiancée offers her a sweet smile as she begins to scrub the frosting off her fingers.

"You know," Mom slyly begins, "the ladies from my old cards club said they hadn't heard about your engagement yet, and that they didn't even *know* you two were an *item*..."

"Oh..." Sparrow viciously smirks. "I bet they do now."

"After a kiss like that, it's impossible not to," Mom happily reminds me with an overly exaggerated wink.

Da'Nika and I promptly lock gazes to silently agree we need to assess how to handle the new issue.

However, to my surprise, there's no trace of truly caring that we had an audience.

No flicker of concern about the gossip it's surely ignited.

No tinge of regret regarding what thoughtlessly occurred.

Maybe she wanted to be kissed as bad as I've been wanting to do it.

Maybe pretending to be a couple wasn't the worst idea I've ever had.

Maybe...just maybe...it was the greatest.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Da’Nika

LARK KEEPS HIS voice low just in case one or both of his parents surprises us, something they’re really good about doing. “You sure you’ve got everything you need? Like all the weird, girly shit you use for bed or in the morning or I don’t know, whatever you sprinkle on after your midnight snack.”

“You’ve never had a woman sleep over, have you?”

“I *have*, just not...*like this*.”

“One-night-stands?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t that, basically, what this is?”

His icy stare grows colder at the accusation. “*No*.”

I wanna ask then what the fuck is it, but something tells me that would be a very bad idea.

You know, on top of the already very bad idea of pretending to be his fiancée. And, cuddling during holiday movies with his family. And, kissing in his coffee shop in front of half the town. And, now sleeping in his bed. Albeit, *alone*, but still.

I’ve got enough bad ideas already in my stocking to last me at least the next four Christmases without adding more.

Lark spews his apprehension rather than swallowing it down like me, “Are you okay with doing this?”

“Sleeping in your big ass sleigh bed for one night to convince your parents the reason we don’t live together is because I was waiting for a ring on my finger while you have to crash on the floor?” I playfully phrase. “Yeah, I think I’ll be alright.”

He lightly chuckles and pulls his beanie down to cover his ears, unknowingly, keeping my attention during every action.

I definitely had a little, tiny, bite-size snowflake crush on him before this terrible fake couple shit, but now that I've experienced what it's like to actually *be* his girl, I kind of hate myself for not speaking up sooner...almost as much as I hate myself for still not speaking up about it.

I don't think I could stomach losing my friendship with Lark.

The guy back in college was one thing.

Lark is...well, Lark means more to me than that guy ever could've.

"Change of plans!" Agatha, enthusiastically announces upon her surprise approaching.

Geez, I swear she's got Hobbit feet.

Perfect for sneaking up on people.

"Walty and I are going to ride with you two while Sparrow and little O ride by themselves."

Lark's tone is cloaked in suspicion. "Was this *his* idea or yours?"

"His."

"Shocking," my fake fiancé mumbles under his breath.

"But, he brought up a good point."

"Was it that Dad shouldn't be riding in these things at all, considering how often he needs his inhaler now?"

"No."

"Was it that *you* shouldn't be riding in these things at all, considering how hard it is for you to climb in and out of them?"

"*No.*"

Her son snidely bites, "Then, what was it?"

“That this is their first Christmas together without Jeanie.”

Our shoulders swiftly drop in tandem.

“He thinks it’s important that the little guy knows that even with his mom missing from their world, his dad still loves him. Still cares. Still will do everything to make this time of year magical. That they still have *each other*.”

It’s hard to ignore the ache the explanation creates.

I didn’t know Jeanie that well before she died of pneumonia earlier this year. We’d only met a handful of times, and, most of them, I spent more time talking to her brother-in-law than her. She seemed nice enough, and Lark never had anything bad to say about her. Shortly after she died is when he started making more of an effort to really date instead of just working all the time. I guess having someone close to him die encouraged him to want to live a little more.

“I’m sure you both know that’s part of the reason why he didn’t wanna fly down to Florida for Christmas this year. He believes it’s important that they had that connection this year, so we’re gonna respect it – sort of – and let them ride in their own sleigh while we ride with you two!” She claps her chubby little hands together. “This is good! It’ll give me and Walty the chance to really get to know you more as a couple!”

Oh, yay. A holiday interrogation sponsored by Hallmark.

“We’re up, Aggiepie!” Walter calls from closer to the shiny red sleigh.

She giddily squeals like the cartoon character she appears to be and hastily hurries that direction. We, less than excitedly, follow behind side-by-side with Lark calling to her to be more careful than she is.

It’s not that his parents aren’t warm or welcoming, in fact, their faces should be next to those definitions in the dictionary, it’s just...I’m beginning to feel shitty about deceiving people who are *this* good-hearted.



And...I'm not loving the thoughts of never getting to be around them again due to some shitty arrangement I entered into with their youngest son.

During the sleigh ride – a Wellington tradition for many generations I'm informed – his parents tell tales of Lark as a young “chick”. Most consist of some sort of trouble his curiosity got him into, yet all make it easy to see the roots of the personality I adore so much. The stubbornness. The love of laughing. The “grouchy” label he's forced to bear in comparison to his sprightly parents. What I love more than the stories is *seeing* the love between the three of them. It's a deep connection I don't have with mine. They didn't even seem to think twice about me announcing my move via text or the fact that it was states away from them. They barely even call to check in unless it's *actually* Christmas. It's probably why I've attached myself to Pammy and Kammy so hard. And, why I hate the idea of letting go of two new people who are more than willing to invite me into their family, a feeling I've longed for since I was younger.

Guilt grows profusely in the pit of my stomach, prompting me to confess everything to the innocent pair, when Lark wraps an arm around my shoulder to pull me into him away from the wind.

What if...what if we're not exactly lying anymore?

What if this is really us starting to date?

Transitioning into being a real couple?

If that's the case, how horrible of a person am I really?

On a scale of like Dexter to Jason?

“Alright you two, it's time for you to tell us,” Agatha unexpectedly states in a serious tone causing bile to wrench up the back of my throat. “The moment of truth is here.”

God, I'm gonna throw up.

Literally, everything I ate today.

Day old chili and Christmas-themed Rice Krispy treats are not a good combination.

Can I blame the smell on the horse?

Her small smile shifts to a big, glistening beam. “When did you two *know* you were it for each other?”

The racing in my heart swiftly subsides, and I release a deep breath of relief. “Ohmygod, that’s so easy.”

“It is?” Lark grunts in bewilderment.

“Don’t take it personally, honey.” Agatha tosses a white mitten hand his direction. “Women have a tendency to *know* long before men do.” She doesn’t pause for comments or questions regarding that opinion-based statement. “Tell us, Da’Nika! When did you know my son was ‘the one’?”

“Yes, Da’Nika, tell us when you knew I was the one...” Lark prompts as if I need an extra moment to gather my thoughts.

“It was the week of Valentine’s Day, and I needed an extra buzz to survive my shift. Orders were backed up and vendors were late, and it was just...*insanity*.” The memory continues to smoothly unfold in my mind. “I got there, ordered two Santa, Baby lattes, only to have forgotten my wallet at the store and didn’t have time to go all the way back to get it and then come all the way back to pay, especially since it was a shorter lunch break than normal. I swore I’d come by after work and pay him back or that he could have the sheriff hunt me down and give me a ticket for failure to pay, but Lark told me not to worry about it. That it was on him. He even threw in a couple Santa, Baby brownies to go with it, which are the ones that have Christmas tree *and* heart sprinkles on top of the chocolate frosting, and said, ‘I just hope this makes your day a little better’.” I momentarily pause, letting the feeling freely wash over me. “I knew right then, any day with Lark in it automatically made my day *a lot* better and that he was one person I didn’t wanna be without.”

There's a small poke from his thumb in my arm that forces my stare to his. As soon as he has it, he asks, "Seriously?"

Shocked by my own admission is what has me barely able to even nod.

"Aw!" Agatha coos loudly, calling our attention back to where she's fanning her face. "That's so sweet!"

It's also, absolutely, so true.

Can't believe I'm actually admitting it.

"Your turn, son," Walter encourages from across the tiny aisle. "You better make it a good one, too, or I foresee someone sleeping on the couch tonight."

Lark uncomfortably chuckles prior to clearing his throat. "I guess for me it was the night she accidentally fell asleep on the aforementioned couch."

My head cocks in confusion.

His stare falls back to mine at the same time he recalls, "You'd come over after work to watch hockey with me, which you know, isn't unusual. You brought an extra-large sausage and black olives pizza. You always fold your slices like some sort of anarchist—"

"I don't want the toppings to fall off!"

"You didn't even finish your beer before you were dozing off that night. Half-awake you had mentioned that it had been a rough couple of days at your apartment. Kammy had been having nightmares, waking up screaming like Freddy Krueger was after her, and you had been helping Pammy get her back down because...well because you're always there when a friend needs you."

Veneration immediately blooms in my gaze.

"You, eventually, just crashed. Head on my shoulder. Tiny body curled under the Dragons blanket Sparrow had gotten me for Christmas. I lied the next morning and told you we both just drifted off there, but the truth is, I stayed there on purpose."

I...*liked* the feeling of falling asleep next to you. Waking up next to you. Just...*being* next to you.” His Adam’s Apple dives deep before proceeding. “It just felt right.”

“Awwwww,” Agatha chimes in, again yet receives neither of our stares.

Being stunned almost completely silent leaves me incapable of whispering out more than one word. “Really?”

“*Really*,” Lark whispers back.

Excitement and disbelief collide into one another, pushing my mouth towards his. Unfortunately, I’m a split second too slow. Snowflakes interrupt what could’ve been our second kiss – one that we would *actually* talk about, unlike the first – by landing in the small space between us.

He leans back and smiles widely. “Ever caught one on your tongue before?”

“No.” I quickly shake my head. “No. No. No. We were always indoor people when the snow hit. My mom hates what it does to her hair, and my dad hates what it does to his nicer suits.”

“The boys have been catching flakes on their tongues since they were babies,” Agatha describes, now receiving our attention. “We didn’t even teach ’em that.”

“Nope,” Walter lightly chortles, despite the small wheeze we can hear. “They just opened their big mouths wide, moved their tongues to the best of their little ability, and tasted Christmas all on their own.”

“We still do it,” Lark informs at the same time he tips his head back, opens his mouth, and extends his tongue to catch one. As soon as one lands on it, we lock eyes again. “Give it a shot.”

“Ooo,” Agatha giggles and pats my knee, “you should, sugar plum. It’s a silly, fun thing we all do. See.” She mimics her son’s actions only seconds prior to her husband doing it, too.

Not wanting to stick out, and a little curious what “Christmas” tastes like, I follow suit. With my head leaned back, I open my mouth wide to let the little flakes dance across it. There’s no special taste or mind-blowing flavor, but the sounds of everyone snickering about how silly they look and feel are the real treat.

One long, laughter-filled sleigh ride later, me, Lark, and my backpack are slipping into his room while his parents relocate to theirs. He makes sure to lock the door behind us in preparation for a terrible scenario such as his mother bursting into the room unannounced – her favorite thing – and seeing us sleeping separately.

Honestly, after what we said about each other on the sleigh, part of me is hoping we’ll be doing it *together*.

Nervousness rushes up my spine, causing me to unconsciously shiver.

Lark doesn’t miss the action nor does he let it go unnoted. “Cold?”

I fear the truth may very well be much more arctic than I’m slightly feeling. “A little.”

“It’s probably the hardwood floors,” he states at the same time he steps closer making it harder for me to breathe. “They don’t exactly help.”

“No...they...um...they don’t.”

“Want me to warm you up?”

Unsure of what exactly he’s implying or if he’s implying exactly what I want him to, I stay glued in place and let hope flood my stare. “Whatcha thinkin’? Hot chocolate? Bourbon? Bran—”

Lark’s lips crush mine with more force than they did the day before. Yesterday’s was caked in curiosity. Caution. Today, it’s packed with precision. Purpose. The loud whimper that breaks free prompts him into roughly pulling me closer, lifting me up by the ass, and effortlessly carrying me over to

his bed. I'm gingerly thrown on it, and he swiftly blankets my body before I've even had a moment to breathe. Our tongues and limbs tangle like they've been waiting for a moment like this to appear. Kelly Clarkson's famous tune threatens to echo throughout my mind; however, Lark's rapid yanking at my attire annihilates the opportunity.

There's no stopping the snowballing speed we've stumbled into. He tugs away one article followed promptly by another. His determination resembles that of a child who can't focus on anything other than unwrapping the one present he believes is everything he's ever wanted. I paw at the material blocking my view in a similar fashion, knowing I've dreamed about this happening too often to be considered healthy. Our mouths only part far enough to give us the space to get naked, and, once we are, we only allow ourselves the briefest moment to admire each other in our new states.

Lark beams brightly as though he's been blessed with some sort of mind-blowing miracle, while I simply do everything in my power not to drool over the collection of abs, biceps, triceps, and huge dick that make up the man I'm, undoubtedly, crazy about. He keeps his crystal gaze glued to me, sweeping my shape curve by curve, but uses his right hand to brush past me for his nightstand drawer in a fumbling pursuit of protection.

Everything that happens next is done in what feels like a single blink.

I swear, one moment I'm watching him tear open the condom and the next he's covering my mouth to muffle my screams. We seem to bypass all the things branded "love making" to fuck like fresh to the industry porn stars with something to prove. He groans loudly against my ear. Huffing. Cursing. Clamping the lobe each time he harshly thrusts. I cry against his palm in tandem to my pussy wailing around his cock. My legs are wound tightly around him as though the smallest amount of space given will somehow end everything. The muscles in them flex and squeeze to the same pattern the

ones between my hips are, trapping him in a tornado of titillating tension.

Lark drops his hand from my mouth to my hip, his face to the crook of my neck, and lets out a hungry howl. The majority of his weight rests on his other arm, yet the bit that doesn't adds delectable pressure in all the right ways.

My nails eagerly roam his tan skin, scratching my approval into it every time he dives to the deep depths I haven't had anyone visit since I moved here. Our moans oscillate to the same rhythm of our hips, and the constant colliding calls to us both to cave, a command that we can't continue to ignore for much longer. Grunts are exchanged for greedy gasps. Harsh heaves rewarded for the nips taken at his shoulder. Surges of wetness are greeted by more and more swelling from his cock. The harder he gets, warning of how close he is to truly breaking, the more my back bows off the bed in desperation to do the same.

On a shared sigh of surrender, the two of us let go together. Our bodies shake simultaneously, and our moans of satisfaction are smothered by our mouths frantically moving against one another.

Well, damn.

Just when I thought I couldn't want to be his *real* future bride any more than I already did...*this happens*.

I'm starting to wonder...am I too old to write to Santa and request Lark Wellington for more than just one phony Christmas proposal?

## CHAPTER FIVE

Lark

**H**AVING DA'NIKA MARTIN in my arms all night is the best Christmas gift a guy could ever ask for.

Waking up to her sucking my cock on Christmas Eve morning, however, is a close second.

She spins her tongue masterfully around the tip, teasing the slit. The light touches create an aggravating need to shove her head down, and not submitting to the urge is what forces me to clutch the bedsheet in restraint. Darkness throughout the room prevents me from watching her taunting actions, but I'm thankful for it. Something tells me if I could watch the little seductress do what it is she's doing, I would be blowing my load long before she even gets off one good suck.

Inch by inch my dick is finally allowed to glide further through the wet confines of her mouth. Each step of the way, the suctioning increases, skillfully locking my swollen shaft inside. Strong brushes are given on the underside, coaxing my cum to crawl from where it's slumbering in my balls to savagely spray the back of her throat. My hold on the fabric tightens as she begins to slowly bob. Sounds of spit being sloshed around, up and down my dick, ruthlessly bounce off the walls, quickly shoving me even closer to the edge. Her thin fingers caressing and fondling and gently tugging my nuts without being told, without being asked, without being prompted cause louder and louder groans to pour out of me. Da'Nika happily hums in approval from the bursts of pre cum continuously seeping free in my struggle to hold back, and the unneeded added vibrations result in me swinging a pillow over my face to muffle the barked curses that need to escape. I grunt and groan against the blockade while lifting my hips to meet the increasingly sloppy slurping. The hysteria of my movements is echoed by the haste of hers until she's awarded



scorching surge after surge to swallow. I abandon the sheet to let my fingers tangle lovingly in her locks, wanting her to not only stay in place while she guzzles it down, but to know I approve of the action.

Appreciate a woman who isn't afraid to devour every drop.

When I finally let go of her hair, she removes herself from the area and coos, "Merry Christmas Eve, Lark."

"Merry fucking Christmas Eve, babe."

"What?"

Banishing the pillow back to the bed, I repeat myself, though sweeten the sentiments, "Merry Christmas Eve to you, too, babe."

Da'Nika's fingertips lightly stroke my thighs at the same time she says, "I love when you call me babe."

I let a smile slide onto my face. "I love it, too."

Silence momentarily settles between us, and I use it to prepare an easy segue.

One where I declare that's not the only thing I love.

One where I declare I was too stupid to not just give in to these feelings before.

One where I declare she's mine and she's always been mine and she'll always be mine.

My mouth cracks open to begin, only to be interrupted by a faint buzzing sound.

"Do you hear that?" Da'Nika cautiously asks. "Is that...is that a vibrator? Do you have a vibrator?"

"What the fuck would I have a vibrator for?"

"Are you asking me like what are they used for, or why they're imperative to a happy sex life?"

"Wh—"

“Wait, is that my phone?” Her body peels itself off of mine, and a low growl of disapproval is immediate. “I think that’s my phone.”

“Your phone makes more sense than a random vibrator.”

“Does it?” She teases during her shuffling around.

I lightly snicker at her retort and sit up completely, anxious to know *who* is texting her at this time of night.

Correction.

*Morning.*

Who the fuck is about to be very disappointed she is no longer available for pre-work hook ups or coffee dates?

Her phone suddenly illuminates her early morning face and keeping jealousy out of my voice increases exponentially. “Who was it?”

“Missed call from Pammy.”

My shoulders promptly sink in relief.

“*Several* missed calls from Pammy, actually.”

“You think something’s wrong?”

“She only *calls* when there is.”

“Oh, shit,” I thoughtlessly mumble out.

“Yeah, I’m gonna go downstairs to the kitchen, get a drink – you know to wash away the taste in my mouth – and call her back. Want anything while I’m in there?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks for the thought.”

“Anytime,” Da’Nika sweetly announces prior to stating, “but you should know, I’m too lazy to look for my clothes, so I’m throwing on your sweater from last night instead.”

Another big, bright grin crawls onto my face. “Not a problem for me, babe.”

It’s impossible not to hear the happiness in her response. “Good.”

I watch Da’Nika use the light of her phone to find the discarded gray sweater, shimmy it on, and slip out of the room.

Talk about a sight I can’t wait to see again and again.

The woman I’m in love with walking around my house like it’s hers too.

One day it will be.

One day soon, I hope.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Da’Nika

“PAMMY, WHY ARE you yelling at me?” I quietly question as I lean against the island in Lark’s kitchen.

“What do you mean why am I yelling at you?! You’re not in your bed like you’re supposed to be!”

“I—”

“Why didn’t you call me or text me that you weren’t coming home?”

“I—”

“Do you have any idea how worried Kammy was when she got up at two in the morning to crawl into bed with you, and you weren’t there?!”

“I—”

“Where are you? Where the hell are you? I’ve been texting you and calling you like crazy! Tell me you’re somewhere safe! Tell me your car didn’t break down, again, and you had to sleep in it or something. It’s below freezing outside!”

“I’m fine,” I finally say, now that I’m given the chance. “I spent the night at Lark’s.”

“What? Why?”

“Seriously? I told you all about this before I left work yesterday.”

There’s a small pause proceeded by, “Did you? I mean, was I *really* listening or doing that thing where I think I’m listening because I’m multitasking but really I’m accidentally ignoring you and will be completely clueless about whatever it is you’re talking about when you bring it up later in conversation?”

“Gonna go with context clues here and say *that* one.”

She sucks in a breath and quickly apologizes, “I’m sorry, Da’Nika. Everything was so crazy with order mix-ups and mislabeled paperwork that I totally spaced.”

I pull my hair to one side of my face and poke the situation, “*Obviously.*”

“Yeah, shit friend extraordinaire here. You can chew me out about that later, but you can refresh my memory *now*. Why’d you spend the night at Lark’s again?”

“He needed a favor.”

“Like...a favor with your clothes on or off?”

The latter definitely happened, too.

But, since we both got off the three times we went at it, is it really a favor at that point?

“Da’Nika...”

“He um...He just needed me to pretend to be his fiancée for a few days to impress his parents.” I turn around to grab the water bottle I had put down when she picked up. “No big —” Agatha and Walter’s equally appalled and angry expressions have me whispering out the last word. “—*deal*...I-I-I...gotta go.”

“But—”

“I’ll see you at the store.”

Another sound is made from my best friend, but it’s cut off by me hanging up.

Uncertain there’s anything I can say that *won’t* make the situation worse, I simply wince in discomfort and press my lips together.

“Lark!” Agatha shouts at the top of her lungs sounding like a tea kettle. “Lark!” She barely pauses to demand, “You come down here this instant! This very instant, young man!”

We wait in awkward, eye-avoiding silence for him to join us.

The moment he comes barreling into the room, he frantically asks, “What?! What?! What happened? What’s wrong?! Is it Oren?! Is it Sparrow? Did something happen to Sparrow?!”

His mother motions her hand my direction. “Care to explain this?”

“My half-naked fiancée getting a drink of water in the kitchen?” He lightly chortles despite my cringing. “Not exactly worth all the yelling, Mom.”

“You mean your *fake* fiancée,” she snips.

Lark’s eyes immediately widen.

“Yeah...” Walter lets out a disappointed sigh. “We... overheard Da’Nika on the phone—”

“Is that beautiful name even really hers?!” Agatha squawks.

“Yes, that’s my real name,” I quietly interject.

Her disapproving gaze soars my direction.

“And, that’s my real cue to...go...” Clearing my throat, I prepare to swiftly exit the kitchen, yet pause to say, “Look, Mr. and Mrs. Wellington, I’m sorry for lying to you both. I really am, but I was just trying to be there when my friend said he needed me. I’m sorry it hurt either of you. You’re both just the sweetest people. I...,” another broken sigh falls free, “I’m grateful you let me spend this time with your family during the holidays. It’s more than I’ve ever really had before.”

A glimpse of sadness flashes in their stares.

“Merry Christmas, Wellingtons.”

Lark does his best to speak, “Da’Nika—”

“It’s okay,” I speedily say as I move past him. “I’m just gonna get my stuff and head to the store early.”

“But—”

“Lark,” his mother cuts him off, commanding his attention.  
“We want an explanation.”

“A damn good one...” Walter echoes.

Our eyes don't meet again, which is probably for the best.

Not sure I could take seeing sadness, betrayal, and the truth that everything we were experiencing was, most likely, just make-believe that we took a little too far.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Lark

**I** KNEW THIS morning was too good to be true.

I knew everything was a little too sweet and smooth to last.

Like a good glass of Guinness, it came and left too quickly.

Now, I'm sitting at my kitchen table being denied homemade waffles, sitting next to my brother, who is chuckling like a stereotypical comic book villain, while my nephew basically bathes in syrup on the other side of him as he watches Christmas cartoons on his tablet.

"You can explain yourself now," Mom insists from behind her cup of coffee. "Now that we've all had food—"

"I haven't had food," I quietly mutter under my breath.

"—and don't have to process this information on an empty stomach."

"Told you this shit would blow up in your face."

"You knew??!" Mom squeaks in outrage.

Seeing the opportunity not to be the only one in trouble has me childishly confessing, "He did, Mom. He knew, and he didn't even try to stop me."

"Sparrow!"

"I—"

"How could you?" She snatches his half-eaten plate away and puts it out of his reach. "How could you help your brother *lie* to us?"

He hits me with narrowed eyes and a displeased smirk. "I hope Santa shoves coal where I plan on shoving my foot when we get up from this table."



“Dad, *no one* should want Santa to give them coal,” Oren offhandedly says, proving he’s somewhat listening.

I’d take coal over the giant, gaping hole that’s in my chest.

Da’Nika didn’t even say goodbye when she left.

Just grabbed her shit and bolted.

Hard to blame her, considering my mom sounded like she was channeling her inner Charlie Brown’s teacher with all the incoherent babbles and blubbing.

I would’ve made an excuse to go, too, if it were an option.

“Lark,” Dad quietly begins from where he’s standing beside the island, guarding the waffles from my consumption, “why’d you lie? Why’d you put on this whole production just to deceive us, son?”

I give my unwashed hair a small ruffle prior to admitting, “I was tired of all the relentless questioning of when I’m going to settle down. When I’m going to give Oren a cousin to play with. When am I gonna help grow this family? I just...,” my hands fold on the table in front of me, “wanted one Christmas where my lack of love life wasn’t the key subject. And, I knew with...this being the first year without...,” I silently say her name not wanting to upset my brother or his son, “that there was no way it wasn’t going to happen. I knew your speeches would start revolving around life’s too short to work so much and live so little, and I just didn’t wanna hear it. So...I. Lied. I made up having a girlfriend and planning to get engaged. Figured I could get through Christmas in peace. Tell you she said no or called it off after the holidays and have one year where I didn’t feel like shit for being single.”

“Aw, Lark, honey,” Mom sweetly states at the same time she places her hand on top of mine. “We don’t mean to make you feel bad for not being married yet. We just don’t want you to end up having missed out on so much because you were so busy trying to build the business up.”

“Son,” Dad takes over steering the conversation, “we’re so proud of you and where you’ve taken the shop. You’ve

expanded on all the ideas. Added your own. Turned our little business into something that was recognized on national television.”

“We show that TV clip to people every chance we get.”

“You have secured the family legacy in very important ways, but we don’t want your dedication to that to supersede the one of living a life outside of the office.” He does his best to offer me a smile. “We just want you to know life is better when you enjoy all it has to offer instead of just part of it.”

“They’re right,” Sparrow unexpectedly chimes in. “You do work...*way* more than you have to. I mean, I’m grateful for all the extra hours you put in, which has always made it easier for me to be with my family, but *you’re* my family, too, Lark. I wouldn’t mind more time together to catch a game or grab a beer or really anything that isn’t shop related. I know you’ve been making more of an effort this year since...,” he stops short of expressing the obvious why, “and it’s appreciated by all of us, but I wouldn’t mind seeing my little brother experience some of the happiness I’ve been fortunate enough to have.”

Guilt has me gliding further down into my chair.

Arranged the whole fake fiancée thing to *avoid* this lecture, and yet it still happened.

Karma?

Is that you dressed in a Santa suit?

“I don’t approve of you lying to us, Lark,” Mom scolds, steering my stare back to her, “but what I disapprove of more is you two lying to each other.”

Confusion has me scrunching my brow.

“You two may have been pretending to be engaged, but you were *far* from pretending to be in love.” She gleefully giggles and lifts her cup to her lips for another drink. “It was so cute to see!”

“We’re not...” The sentence abruptly stops mid forming thanks to me shaking my head. “I’m not...” I immediately cut off what I know is another lie. “*She’s not...We’re...*”

“Two of the worst actors in the whole world,” Sparrow playfully criticizes.

“Agreed,” Dad lightly laughs. “You’re crazy about each other. And, the only thing crazier than you are about one another is the fact you’re not already together.”

My family’s shrewd observations render me completely speechless.

“Swear to me you’ll go get her to make your relationship *real* when she gets off of work and that you won’t lie to us again, and you can have a waffle,” Mom warmly informs.

That’s exactly what I want.

I want Da’Nika here with us for this holiday and *all* holidays.

I want her laughing and smiling and sassing me and my brother.

I want her learning our traditions – not because she’s trying to con my parents into believing she’s about to be part of this family but because she *is* part of this family.

I want that more than anything else I’ve ever wanted in my entire life.

Including the chocolate chip pecan waffles taunting me from the countertop.

“I swear I won’t lie to you again.”

Dad gives me a pointed look. “*And?*”

“And, I swear to go get my girl as soon as she gets off of work.”

“That’s my boy,” Dad joyfully states as he brings over the plate.

“She can help me cook tonight!” Mom enthusiastically proclaims. “Ooo, I can even show her the super special secret to making perfect twice-baked, mashed potatoes.”

“Isn’t it just butter?” Sparrow casually questions.

Her glare lands on him. “For that, you don’t get your waffles back.”

“I’ll take ’em,” I playfully volunteer.

Laughter swirls around my kitchen causing the noticeable ache in my chest to increase.

It’ll be gone in just a few hours.

Gone for good.

Forever.

Once Da’Nika’s officially mine, that feeling will disappear permanently.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Da’Nika

“**H**AVE A MERRY Christmas!” I joyfully state to our last customer of the day.

The woman adjusts her grip on the candy cane floral arrangement she’s taking to her mother at the nursing home. “You, too!”

Pammy waits until she’s exited the store to sigh, “Is it wrong I wish we were open regular hours so I don’t have to rush off to spend more time with my parents?”

There’s no need to hide my giggling. “Maybe a little.”

“Ugh,” my best friend groans and leans her lanky frame against the counter. “They’re just so...*exhausting*.” She toys with the end of her braided black hair. “*Plus* arguing about me keeping this place over glasses of wine at their winter cabin is like the least holiday-spirited thing I can think of.”

“Sorry...” I offer her a sympathetic smile. “That does sound sucky. Not as sucky as sitting all by yourself on the uneven couch eating a turkey and cheese Hot Pocket while watching *Gremlins*, but it’s definitely up there.”

Her face winces in response to the description. “You know you’re always welcome to join me and Kammy. I can just take you with me instead of dropping you back at the apartment. You know your goddaughter *loves* having you around, and my parents won’t mind...And, even if they do, fuck ’em. It’s Christmas.”

“Weird pairing of words, but I’ll be okay.” I let out a soft sigh and fold my arms across my nerdy Rudolph sweater. “Really.”

“You’re lying.”

Oh, I most certainly am.

I thought not telling someone how you truly feel is the worst thing you can do in a situation like the one we were in. Turns out, the worst thing you can do is develop *real* feelings in a *fake* romance. Or, more accurately, *expose* your real feelings in a fake romance. God, you'd think I've never sat through a Lifetime Channel holiday movie marathon with the chick flick-loving Latino beside me and learned that this whole scenario was only going to end badly.

Which it did.

What hurts even more than knowing I hurt good people in the process is this longing for someone who was never really mine to begin with.

Who will never really be mine.

"I'm sure after the holidays," my gaze drifts to my feet, "and everything blows over and Lark can forgive me for fucking up his Christmas plan—"

"*Scheme.*"

"—things will be back to normal."

"Is that really what you want, though?"

Her question warrants my stare.

"To just go back to being friends?"

The opportunity to answer is cut off by the chiming of the door.

"Sorry, sir," Pammy states slowly, "but um...we're closed. You can't come in here."

"Can you make an exception?"

Lark's unexpected voice causes me to whip around in surprise, while my best friend slowly backs herself inconspicuously out of the situation. "Wh-wh-what are you doing here?"

"I came to pick up *my* Mrs. Claus," he casually states and points to the Santa hat on his head. "Isn't it obvious?"

I do my best to keep my voice steady. “You know, we don’t have to pretend to be married any more or *almost* married.”

“What if I don’t wanna pretend?” His body parks itself right on the other side of the counter. “What if I was never really pretending to be in love with you?” Lark leans a little closer. “What if I know you were never really pretending to be in love with me?”

My heart pounds rapidly against my rib cage.

“What if this whole fake bride thing was just a weird, Christmas miracle to bring two people who have been wanting to be together...*together*?”

Hope overwhelms my stare as well as my smile.

“Two people who were, initially, being held back by their fears or their past or just their own stupidity but were allowed a chance to see how great they are together, how they *belong* together, through unusual pretense.”

I plant my palms firmly on the counter and close the gap between us even more. “*If* that’s the case—”

“Oh, it absolutely is.”

“Then I’ve only got one question...”

“What’s that?”

My head tilts teasingly to one side. “Where’s *my hat*, Mr. Claus?”

“In my *sleigh*,” he motions his head in the direction of the door to imply his truck. “Along with a fresh cup of hot chocolate and a cinnamon delight cookie decorated courtesy of Oren.”

“Aw, he decorated me a cookie?”

“Pretty sure he decorated *me* – Santa – a cookie but being that you’re my other half and all I’m willing to share.”

We exchange wide mouth laughs and smiles that are only ceased by Pammy shooing us out of the store. “You two go ahead and get out of here.”

I glance over my shoulder at her. “You sure? I can help you close up. It’s not a problem. It doesn’t exactly take that long.”

“Nah,” she happily sighs, “go start...a new holiday tradition where your dreamy boyfriend comes to pick you up for work on Christmas Eve to do more than eat hot pockets and watch horror movies in your PJs.”

“That doesn’t sound half bad,” Lark nonchalantly replies. “Not nearly as amazing as traditional steak and twice-baked, mashed potatoes but a close contender.”

“How awful is your Mom’s cooking that *that’s* a close contender?” Pammy immediately gags.

“Oh, no, that shit’s fucking great,” he informs while I grab my purse from the cabinet underneath the counter and make my way around to him. “It’s just hard to pass up a night on the couch eating crappy food in comfy clothes.”

“*After* they leave,” I insist at the same time I grab his hand. “We do that the day after they leave.”

“Can we have pizza?”

“Yup.”

“Beer?”

“Always.”

“*Black Christmas?*”

“Something we should make a new tradition of watching the day after actual Christmas.”

“Deal.”

The two of us happily snicker in agreement, warmly bid my best friend goodbye, and relocate to his toasty truck.



Sure enough, there's a hot chocolate and cookie waiting, prompting me to tease, "Is this coming out of our year's supply arrangement, or is it on the house since I, technically, didn't order it?"

Lark lets the corner of his mouth pull upward prior to leaning over to purr, "It'll always be on the house for you, babe. Perk of being my future bride. Fake *or* real."

Instead of questioning the marriage comment knowing someday I want it to be real, too, I simply press my lips softly against his, signaling the true end of our phony relationship and the sweet start of our future one.

## EPILOGUE

Da’Nika

*Almost two years later...*

“THERE’S MY OTHER favorite girl,” Lark coos as he transfers Wren, our six-month-old, from her nursery teacher’s arms to his. “Daddy’s missed you both like crazy.”

“That’s what happens when you go away with Richard to a tax seminar in Vegas for three days,” I sassily remind him while retrieving her diaper bag.

“Doesn’t matter where I am or how much fun I *may* be having...if I’m not with you two, I miss you.”

It’s not like he didn’t call or video chat us while he was away. It’s also not like it was total misery without him. Wren and Sammy, Pammy’s baby with her husband Richard who does the store’s accounting and now gives tips to my own husband in the same avenue, are only a couple weeks apart in age and baby besties. They’re always playing together in their small class at Little Elves Private Preschool, plus whenever we can, we have “family days” in which she brings her family over and Sparrow – who is still single – comes over with Oren to eat, play games, and, sometimes, make crafts together. Occasionally, we’ll watch a movie, but the kids prefer when we’re being active, and honestly? I like keeping couch dates for after Wren has gone to bed or is sleeping over at her Uncle’s type of thing.

Helps keep me and Lark connected to how we became friends.

How we spent many of our early days.

How he proposed to me for real only a month after Christmas passed.

Despite the commentary from some that we were moving too fast and that we wouldn't last, we had no doubts that we would. We promised to keep being honest about our feelings with one another after hiding them for too long, which has made our relationship ten times easier. He asked me to move in the day his parents officially left. Told me he was ready to marry me any day I wanted. I kept the line of communication open when expressing I could care less if my parents were there – which they weren't because of an already paid for vacation in Bali – but had to have his around. I was also blunt as fuck when I told him, on our honeymoon night, I wanted to have his baby. From the outside, it looks like everything has happened in a whirlwind, but to the two of us? Well, things are soaring along at the perfect speed.

I drape Wren's *Nightmare Before Christmas* bag over my shoulder, check the paperwork on her classroom assigned tablet, and wish her teachers to have a good weekend.

Lark echoes my sentiments prior to him saying, "Can Daddy have a kiss?"

Her bright blue eyes widen, and a split second later, she's full on headbutting him.

I helplessly laugh at her unmastered ability. "Warned you about teaching her to headbang so young."

"Oh, this act of war masked as love is *my fault*?" Lark teases back while exiting the main doors to the building.

"Well, it's not my fault. I'm graceful."

"You spilled your cold brew all over me the morning I left."

"Maybe that wasn't an accident..."

"Was that an act of war masked as an accident?" His tone maintains light and playful. "Because, I'm starting to feel my girls have started a coupe. Who planted the seeds of discourse while I was away? Sparrow? Oren? *Dad*, when I wouldn't fly him out to join us in Vegas?"

More snickers spring from both of us, and regardless of the fact Wren has no idea what we're laughing about, she joins in.

Agatha and Walter love their grandchildren so much they're debating on moving back to be with them. We've had many family meetings and debates on the subject; however, ultimately, it's going to be whatever they choose. They want to spend the time they have left being happy, which is something Sparrow and Lark seem to understand on a deeper level since having lost Jeanie. Her presence is missed at the holidays and gatherings, but I do everything I can to give Oren the best aunt experience possible. I know it pales in comparison, yet it doesn't stop me from trying or Sparrow from expressing his appreciation.

A few steps away from the truck, Lark abruptly stops and asks, "Did you see that?"

"See what?"

He lets a beat pass before pointing to the object. "First snowflake of the season."

The corner of my lip tugs upward. "Strangely enough, this makes me wanna sing 'It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas'."

"Nope. No-huh. Too early."

"So's the snow!"

"Even if it is, no—"

His objection is abruptly cut off by the sweet sight of our baby girl, tipping her head back with her mouth wide open to try to catch one. She sways back and forth in his clutches determined to taste whatever it is that's falling from the sky. Her father immediately starts coaching her through it, demonstrating how it's done, and seeing the Wellington tradition alive and well swiftly swells my heart.

I never thought a little bit of pretending would lead me to the realest experiences I've ever had in my whole life.

And, maybe to an outsider it wasn't the most traditional way to start a relationship, but it was definitely Christmas-themed, making it the Mistletoe, Montana way, without a doubt.



Thank you so much for reading Sleigh Bride by Xavier Neal. You can read about romances that take place at the university Da'Nika graduated from in [CAN'T BLOCK MY LOVE](#).

AUSTIN'S CHRISTMAS SHORTCAKE

DANI RENÉ

## PROLOGUE

*2 years ago*

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re doing this,” I tell her. Those long dark lashes frame her deep blue eyes as she blinks at me. She doesn’t respond. I knew she wouldn’t. When I walked in earlier and saw the suitcases, my heart stopped. It fucking shattered the further into our apartment I stepped.

“You’ll be fine, Austin. She is your daughter too. Can’t you watch her for a little while? I need to find myself,” Moira says. I don’t understand. She’s twenty-seven. She has an incredible career as a Marketing Executive. She wants for nothing more than a few days off with her friends each month. And even then I support her when she tells me that she thinks better without the noise of our daughter.

“Find yourself? Are you fucking kidding me?” My tone is incredulous. I can’t handle the agony that’s slicing through my chest. The woman I loved since I was nineteen, the mother of my daughter, is walking out and she doesn’t seem to care.

“Yes, Austen, I’m not as lucky as you to have everything I want.” The frustration in her tone, the words she utters finally breaks me. “I mean...” she tries to backtrack, but there’s no taking back what she just said. There’s no way she can deny it.

“Fine. Take your shit and get out of my house. Make sure that when I get home with Chels this afternoon every damn trace of you is gone. And when my daughter asks where her mother went, I’ll tell her that you just weren’t good enough to be a mother.”

I don’t mean a word I say. They’re spat in anger and the way she looks at me tells me she doesn’t care either way. Perhaps it would be easier if she’d just left without a word. Maybe then I wouldn’t have to look at her and see how much she doesn’t love me, or my daughter.

“You don’t deserve happiness after what you’re about to do to Chelsea.”

She doesn’t respond, instead she stalks by me and into the bathroom. I can hear her moving about and I make my exit. I can’t deal with this right now. I have a little girl to look after and this time, no woman is going to fuck me over.



# CHAPTER ONE

## Austin

AS WE GET closer to the festive season, people tend to come in with the flu more often than not. Especially kids. The winter has hit us hard this year and now that I'm hoping things will wind down in time for Christmas, I have a feeling I'll be run off my feet instead.

I knew today was going to be busy, but this is ridiculous. As one patient walked out, another three had walked in. Running my own medical practice has been a dream of mine since I was a young boy listening to my father tell me about his job. And now that my dream has materialized, I can't imagine my life without it.

It's days like today I forget the hurt and pain I felt when Moira walked out. She upped and left Chelsea and me without so much as an explanation further than *I need to find myself*. My daughter has become my life. Outside of the regular patients, she's the only other thing in my life that's kept me from depression. From the constant nagging in my mind that I wasn't man enough to keep my own wife from leaving.

Glancing at the time, I notice it's five. I better get home. Lily is with Chelsea and I hate when they're alone late into the evening. Not that it's dangerous, but... if I was being completely honest, I just want to see Lily.

She stormed into my exam rooms a year ago. She'd fallen on some ice and twisted her ankle. Even then, with her tear streaked face and those pretty brown eyes, I can't stop thinking about her. When she mentioned she does a few babysitting gigs, I jumped at the chance to offer her a job.

Twelve months later, and Chelsea is as content as if Lily was her mother. Only twenty, the young student has taken a hold of my life, and somehow weaseled her way into my mind

at every second. Yes, I've developed feelings for my babysitter. But, as a divorced, thirty-three-year-old man, she'd probably turn up her nose at the thought of a date with me.

It's been a while since I even thought of a woman in that way after Moira left. Not to say there aren't any women who'd agree to a date, just none that caught my interest. Also, when you tell some young woman you have a child, the first thing she'll do is run the opposite way. Nobody wants to become a step-mother. And I wouldn't allow them into my life if I didn't trust them wholeheartedly anyway.

But with Lily, it's different. She's different. Each time she steps into my home, it's as if she belongs there. The way she cares for my daughter it's alluring. She's a temptation. One that I cannot let myself succumb to.

Even so, it hasn't stopped my fantasies. I've spent nights in bed, in the shower, thinking about her. Finding myself hard as steel. My hand relieves the tension, but only until she bounds into my house with her strawberry blonde hair and those doe eyes.

Her sweet smile seems to set my life right, but I can't go there. This is the girl who looks after my daughter. Those dark brown eyes that remind me of a strong black coffee, seem to look through me. As if she sees the pain, but also recognizes the man I once was. Before Moira ruined my life.

Shaking my head of the stupid thoughts, I grab my keys and make my way out to my Merlot-colored X5. It's one of the possessions that I bought after becoming a single dad. It has space for Dash, our Golden retriever, and the back seat is spacious enough that I can do our shopping, and have Chelsea in her car seat beside me.

The roads are quiet. A glance at the time tells me it's almost six. I don't live far from the practice, and in no time I'm pulling into the drive beside Lily's little red Mini Cooper. Killing the engine, I exit the car and push the lock button on the key fob.

Before I reach the door, it swings open and Chelsea comes bounding out. “Daddy!!!” Her sweet voice stills any tension I may have felt during the day and I can’t help smiling at my little princess. My beautiful girl is my life. She jumps into my open arms and I lift her up, spinning her around, only to be gifted with her squeals of delight.

“Hey, munchkin. Have you been a good girl for Lily?” She nods, her little head up and down which causes her to bounce her pigtails that she’s probably begged Lily to pin for her.

“Always, Daddy,” she giggles.

“Good girl,” I smile, planting a soft kiss on her forehead. As soon as I step through the door, the scent of food hits me and I can’t help groaning. Setting my little girl down, I shut the door and head toward the kitchen where the smell of spices, herbs, and something delicious is wafting from.

The sight that meets me is more than decadent. Lily’s dressed in a pink summer dress that’s got a pattern of tiny white flowers. It hugs her torso tightly, but flares down to her knees. She’s got white ballet flats on her feet and I notice a small butterfly tattoo on her ankle. I’ve seen it before, and I wondered if she had any others hidden from sight, but I never asked.

Her strawberry blonde hair is pinned up in a messy bun with long wavy strands framing her face and slender neck. A delicate gold chain hangs from her neck with the tiniest of pendants in the shape of a shortcake.

She’s got flour on her left cheek, her hand is furiously mixing batter of some sort in a large bowl. When I step into the kitchen, her head lifts and her dark gaze meets mine. A smile both beautiful and sexy lights her face and my heart thuds against my ribs. “Mr. Bailey, I’ve made some dinner for you and Chelsea. I hope that’s okay?” She questions in her melodic tone. The same innocent voice I’m yearning to hear her moan my name.

I can't find words to respond. She's baked with Chelsea before, but she's never cooked us dinner. The tension in the air is stifling. Her body stills, waiting for me to respond.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Lily

**H**E STARES AT me for so long I think he's angry, but then he grins. It stops my heart. The man is handsome. With sharp features, a full head of messy black hair and those eyes. They're as blue as the sky. Like windows into the man himself. I love getting lost in them. I always find myself staring at him for a little too long.

He's dressed in a light blue dress shirt and gray slacks. The local doctor. He's loved by everyone in town, even me. He's thirteen years older than me, and totally off limits, but it doesn't stop me fantasizing about him. He doesn't look old, in fact he looks like he's in his late twenties.

It started the day he helped me when I twisted my ankle. I was in so much pain. When he's strong hands touched my skin, heat jolted through me. And it wasn't from the agony of my injury. Ever since that day, I've been plagued with thoughts of him touching me again, in places only one boy has ever touched.

"Lily, I told you, call me Austin. I'm not that old," he chuckles and his eyes shimmer with mischief and... *desire*? "And you really didn't have to. I'm sure I could've—"

"It's my pleasure," I cut him off immediately. "And it didn't take very long." When I smile at him, his gaze lingers on me. Almost too long. "I'm making short cake too. It's my mom's favorite recipe." I continue mixing the dough. The strawberries I found in the fridge will be perfect on the top of these with some whipped cream.

*God, that sounds like an erotic fantasy waiting to happen.*

Stifling a giggle, I watch Austin grab three plates and set them on the small dining table, with cutlery and some napkins. As I watch how he moves, I find myself enthralled with the

man. I've known him for a while and each time I'm around him, I see him as a father, but also as a man I'd love to be with. He continues moving around the kitchen until the table is set for three.

"You're joining us. No questions asked, okay?" Blue eyes pin me to the spot and I have to swallow the lump that forms in my throat. He's so beautiful.

Quickly, I nod, "Thank you. I didn't expect to—"

"I insist." This time it's him interrupting me, but I can't stop the smile on my face. Dropping my gaze, I ready the mixture for the pan to ensure we have dessert in time for our after dinner treat. We both move in sync around his small kitchen making it feel almost normal. Like I'm meant to be here.

It's strange that for a successful doctor, he's never bought a bigger house. Yes, he drives a flashy car, but there's something down to earth and humbling about him. I turn in time with him and we find ourselves inches apart. His body heat sears me for a moment.

Lifting my gaze, I meet his eyes. "I..." My mouth is dry, it feels like I haven't had anything to drink in months.

"Lily," he murmurs my name, leaning in, his mouth is so close to mine I'm sure if I stood on my tip toes, I'd be able to kiss him. Do I want to? Yes, yes, I do.

"Lily!" A shriek from the beautiful little girl echoes through the room. Without a second thought, I'm racing into the living room to find her dancing in front of the television to one of the pop bands I'd been listening to earlier. "Look!" She points at the man on screen, the lead singer, who strangely resembles her father. "It's your boyfriend," she informs me with a giggle which is sweet, yet mischievous.

Shaking my head, I respond. "I don't have a boyfriend, silly." When I turn to get back to the kitchen, I slam into a solid form, warmth cascades through me, over me, straight to the spot between my thighs. "Sorry, Mr. Bai—" catching

myself on his name, I amend by murmuring, “Austin,” it comes out breathy. Glancing up into his eyes, I notice it. The hunger in those depths swirling like a pool of heated desire. He does want me. But he’s never made a move. There’s never been a moment where he said it right out or even tried to kiss me. Since he’s come home tonight, it’s twice that we’ve found ourselves so close the electricity shoots through me, causing goosebumps to rise all over my skin.

His hands are on my shoulders. Our bodies pressed tightly together. But, as soon as the moment arrived, it’s gone when Chelsea squeals with excitement at the songs on the TV.

“I should...” I gesture to the kitchen and he nods. Releasing me from his hold, Austin steps back. Once he releases me, I feel cold. I miss his touch. I want it. More than I’ve ever wanted a man before. If I’m being completely honest, I want this. Him and Chelsea. I’ve grown to love them both in my own way.

Pushing past him, I make my way into the kitchen. I inhale a deep, cleansing breath to calm my erratic heartbeat. This is going to be a long night. My shoulders tingle where he was holding me and I wonder how much longer we can skate past each other. I’m unsure what’s happened today, but he’s never been so attentive. Unless, I’ve just never noticed it before.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Austin

**S**HIT. SHE'S SO perfect. Her body, warm and inviting, curled into mine as if she could mold herself to me. Her touch, exciting and thrilling and I need to feel it again and again. There's no doubt about it. I want this girl. But that's just it. She's a girl. Too young. Too off limits. My employee.

"Daddy, dance with me," my little angel squeals. Grabbing my hand, she tugs me over to the living room rug and starts spinning around causing her pigtails to fly out, slapping her in the face. Instead of crying, she's laughing more than I've ever seen her do.

"Chels, you're going to get dizzy," I warn, but she's having too much fun and I can't help chuckling at her. At five, she's a wonderment to enjoying yourself. For two years all I've done is stress, worry about how Chelsea would take having her mother leave, but she's been stronger than I've been. Perhaps she is too young to really remember her mother. And the fact that I took all her photos down means she's never reminded of the woman who chose another life.

The paperwork came not long after Moira left. Divorce. I didn't foresee my life ending up this way, but since Lily's been in my life, it's as if I was always meant to be alone for her to burrow her way into my sadness and diminish it with her pure beauty.

"Lily!!! Come dance with us!"

Her shrieks echo through the space and when the beauty who's captured my mind strolls in. "Honey, it's almost dinner time," she coos at my daughter and my heart leaps to my throat. It hammers in my chest with surety that I will have Lily in my life one way or another. This girl is perfect for Chelsea, but can she be perfect for me?



The song changes and immediately the two girls start swaying around. Ed Sheeran sings “Shape of You” and the lyrics have my mind wandering as Lily’s body moves across my home with my daughter on her hip. The sight has me smiling from ear to ear and for the first time in two long years, I’m happy.

They’re both giggling, and its music to my ears. This home has been barren since Moira left, but every time I’ve had her—*the babysitter*—here, it’s been filled with warmth.

“Daddy, you should dance with Lily. She can be your girlfriend,” my daughter’s big blue eyes burn into me with excitement. As if she’d just figured out my secret. I chuckle, trying to hide my embarrassment.

“I’m sure Lily has a boyfriend, Munchkin,” I murmur, reaching for her and she falls into my arms, holding onto my neck.

“I don’t actually...” Her words taper off as she regards me with curiosity and longing. The air hangs heavy with her confession and I know she wants this as much as I do. Our eyes are locked in what can only be described as an agreement. She smiles, a soft lilt to her pretty mouth and I’m tempted to lean in and kiss her.

“Let’s have dinner,” I tell her, looking directly into those pretty brown eyes. As soon as I voice the words I notice the disappointment on Lily’s face.

*Does she really want me? An old divorced man? A father?*



DINNER GOES BY without incident. I’m finishing the washing up when Lily strolls into the kitchen. “She’s passed out. I’ve tucked her in. I hope you don’t mind?” Her words are tentative, shy almost and I find myself wanting to calm her down. To hold her in my arms and tell her she’s welcome to be around my daughter anytime she wants.

“Thank you. I mean, tonight was...” Scrubbing my hand over my jaw, I try to find words, but I can’t. *How can I thank*

*her for what she did tonight?* For giving me a makeshift family for a few hours. The presence of happiness was here for a split second and I basked in it. Now that we're alone and I don't know what to say to her, I'm worried it was all just a dream. A fantasy of us playing fake families for the evening and tomorrow we're back to normal.

"You don't have to thank me. We didn't even get to eat dessert." She gestures to the shortcake stacks sitting on the small side plates.

"Eat with me?"

Her mocha eyes dart to mine in surprise. "Really?" she whispers with a smile.

I nod. Pushing one plate between us, I grab a couple of forks and hand her one. We both tuck into the decadent sweet and I can't stop the moan of satisfaction that rumbles in my chest.

"These are incredible," I tell her truthfully.

Her sweet face glows with happiness. Getting a small piece, with some freshly whipped cream and a half-cut strawberry on the fork, I offer it to her. Mischievously, she leans in and wraps her lips around the fork and slowly pulls it off the metal utensil. It's the most erotic fucking thing I've ever seen and my dick decides he enjoyed the show just as much as my eyes. Even in her innocence, she's a vixen if ever I saw one.

A smidge of whipped cream on the side of her mouth has me instinctively reaching for it swiping it with my thumb. It's an intimate gesture and it alights the need in my veins. My blood is boiling with desire for her.

I lose all inhibition when I place my thumb on her lips and they part on a soft gasp. Sucking the tip of my finger into her mouth, she flicks her tongue over the digit and I'm groaning in unadulterated lust. It's been two years since I've been near a woman in a sexual way and just that tiny movement is enough to have me coming like a teenager.

“Jesus.” My grunt is raspy. Her eyes are hooded with desire which I’m certain match my own as I watch her. I place the fork on the plate and turn to her.

Gripping her hips, I tug her against me and lean in, licking the seam of her mouth. A moan filled with longing, tumbles from her plump lips as I lean in further.

“Shortcake,” I murmur against the corner of her mouth. “Do you want me as much as I do you?” I question, holding my breath, waiting for her response.

“Please,” it’s a plea, a whimper of need, and who am I to deny such a beautiful woman. Lifting her up, I wait till she wraps her legs around my waist and walk her down the hall and into my bedroom. Shutting the door behind us quietly, I set her on the bed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mr.—Austin,” she giggles, a blush rising on her cheeks.

“Take off your dress, Shortcake. I want to see those curves.”

With torturously slow movements, she shrugs the dress down her body. Once it pools at her feet, I lift my gaze, trailing it up from her feet, to those toned, tanned legs taking her in inch by inch. The pastel pink panties she’s wearing are cotton and I’m dying to rip them off.

My gaze lifts to her breasts that are encased in a bra that matches the shade of her panties. Her body is curvy, but toned. Her belly button has a little jewel piercing and I wonder what else she’s pierced.

“You’re... incredible...” I murmur in awe of the stunning girl before me.

“Thank you,” she blushes. “Your turn.” Her words are shy, but I don’t care, I want her to see me. I need her to look at me. Unbuttoning the shirt, I shrug it over my shoulders and place it on the bed. Unhurriedly I unzip my slacks and shove them

down my legs. With my socks and shoes off, I step out of the trousers. We're now both exposed in the same way.

"I've wanted... I mean... It's been a long time." My words are a jumbled mess filled with confused emotion. I'm not unsure of wanting her, but more of what to do with her. I really do feel like a teenager with his first girlfriend, only, I don't want to do that to her. I want to make sure she enjoys this moment and not remember a fumbling old man who can't figure out how to pull her panties off.

She shrugs. "I like you, Austin. If you need my assurance, then you have it. I want you." Those are the only words I needed. Stepping toward her, I pull her against me. Her smooth, soft skin against mine has me groaning.

"You feel good," I breathe against her lips. Reaching around, I unhook her bra and she shoulders it off, dropping it on the floor. Her breasts are a handful, with rosy peaked nipples that make my mouth water.

I move without hesitation, dipping my head, taking one hardened pebble into my mouth and suck it gently. Her fingers tangle themselves in my hair, pulling me closer, gripping me with force as I graze my teeth over her flesh. "Oh, god, Austin," her moans and whimpers turn me feral. My mouth is all over her. My hand finds its way into her panties, finding a thin landing strip that leads me to bare lips. Dipping a finger into her pussy, I find her drenched.

"You're wet for me," I say in awe of how slick she is. Her heat is intoxicating, her scent envelops me and my mouth waters.

"Always." Her word is a confession. A vow. A promise. I start fingering her sweet cunt. Driving two fingers in and out, my thumb circling her hardened clit. When she starts trembling, I don't relent. I want to see her come. To fly apart. And she does. Like a bird taking flight, she soars like an eagle taking to the skies.

Her face is euphoric. I watch her ride out the waves of pleasure. When she starts coming down from her orgasm, I slip my hand from her panties, and lick both fingers, tasting her sweetness. “You taste like shortcake.” I inform her on a smirk.

“I want you... inside me.” Her words have my cock thickening against the material of my boxer briefs. I’ve thought about this moment for so long. Every day for months I’ve pictured her above me, below me, it didn’t matter how, I wanted to feel her body pulse around my cock.

“Take off those wet panties, lie down and spread your legs, I want to see that pretty pussy.” Her blush is gorgeous, but she obeys. The vision of this woman on my bed, her body open for me is more than I can stand and I almost come right there.

Reaching for the nightstand drawer, I open it, grab a condom and place it on the bed. In one swift movement, I shove off my boxers and rip the foil wrapper open. Once I’m sheathed, I settle between her thighs, my mouth hovering over hers. “Ready, Shortcake?”

“Yessss...” She hisses as I roll my hips, inching into her tight heat. And fuck is she tight. *Fucking Christ*. Her heels press into my ass, pulling me in further and I allow her to set the pace. Her body undulates beneath me.

We move in sync. Perfectly. Beautifully. Erotically. Our dance is hot, passionate, and there’s one thing I’m certain of, no woman has ever felt so good around me. “You’re perfect, Lily. So fucking perfect.”

“Fuck me, Austin, please.” She begs and I do. I give her everything she wants, and she allows me everything I need. Her hands come up around my neck as she pulls me closer. Our mouths find each other and I kiss her without restraint. I let go. Finally, I allow myself to feel what I’ve been hiding for so long. Her nipples pressed against my chest, her nails dig into my shoulders and her lips mold to mine.

We fit. Perfectly.

My hips thrust back and forth, my cock driving deep into her heat feeling every pulse of her pussy. She whimpers in my ear, my name on her lips repeatedly like a chorus. I want to hear it forever. I need it. I hungered for it and now that I have her, I'm never letting her go.

Her pussy tightens, pulsing around me and I know she's close. My hips thrust faster, deeper into her. We're moving together as if we're on entity. There's nothing else that matters in that moment than me being inside her. With her nails clawing themselves down my back, I plunge into her heat needing her to drench me in her sweet arousal because as much as I want to claim her for my own, I want her to mark me as hers.

"Yes, please, oh... God... Austin... Deep... Oh..." Nothing she's muttering makes sense, but I watch her face. Dark eyes roll back, her body bows and her sweet cunt sucks me into her body.

"Come, baby. Give me your orgasm."

As soon as her release hits her. Mine explodes through me.

Euphoria.

Pleasure.

And in that moment, I don't think about tomorrow. All I think about is right now and this perfect woman who no matter what, will be mine. I'll do anything to keep her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Lily

**Y**ESTERDAY I SLEPT with my boss. After we did the deed, I pulled on my clothes and rushed out of his house without so much as a goodbye. *What do I do now?* I need that job to pay for school. And little Chelsea is my world. She's the most adorable little girl ever.

Rolling over, I notice it's already nine in the morning. It's spring break and since I have nothing better to do, I find myself wanting to go over to Austin's place and spend the day with Chels, but to see him again would be embarrassing.

I'm not sure why, but all I want is for this to blow over. Even though I know it won't. The buzzing of my phone drags me from my thoughts of what I'm meant to do. When I pick it up, I notice the name flashing on screen. Hitting ignore, I settle under the covers, hoping he'll go away, but he doesn't. My phone rings again, alerting me that Austin is calling.

Inhaling a deep breath, I swipe my thumb over the screen. "Hello?" My greeting is tentative, nervous and I know he can hear it over the line.

"Thank God, Lily I need your help, please?" He sounds frantic and my heart thuds in my chest. Fear that something has happened to Chelsea makes me cringe at the thought of me hiding from him when he needed my help.

"What's wrong?" Immediately I'm swinging my legs over the edge of the bed, ready to pull clothes on and rush to his rescue.

"I need you to come over. Please?" Without waiting for my response, he hangs up leaving me gaping at the phone. "Ugh!" My sweatpants are lying on the chair beside my bed, so I grab them and tug them up my legs. The white tank top I normally

wear for gym is next and once I've pulled those on, I rush into the bathroom to freshen up.

Once I look relatively normal, I race down the stairs to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine. Since she's been home after her knee operation, she's been listening to the doctor and taking it easy. Needless to say, that my Dad would have a fit if he knew she did so much more around the house than she's meant to. I help when I can, but my mother is stubborn and making sure she sits back and relaxes is not an easy feat.

"Hi honey," my mom smiles as I enter the kitchen. "Where are you going so early?"

"Mr. Bailey called, he needs my help with something."

"Poor man, that good for nothing wife left him with a little girl, you know," Mom shakes her head as if she's angry for Austin. Perhaps my parents wouldn't be against me dating him. Shaking the thought out of my head immediately, I grab a bottle of water and listen to her chatter on about him. "If he can find a good woman to be there for him it would make all the difference." She continues and my heart plummets. *What did I think?* They're just going to send me off to live with a man who's more than ten years older than me and his daughter.

"I know, Mom. I have to go." Planting a kiss on her cheek, I race out the door, toward my car. I could walk, but if it's an emergency, I'd rather get there sooner rather than later.

Moments later I'm pulling into the driveway. Austin rushes out of the front door pulling on his white coat. A doctor. So sexy. Once I exit the car, I take him in. His hair is messy in a *just fucked* way. As soon as the thought enters my mind I can't stop the blush that heats my cheeks.

"Hello, Lily. Thank you so much, Shortcake. I have an emergency at the rooms. I'll be back as soon as I can." He tells me absentmindedly leaning in, he plants a kiss on my lips and rushes to his car. Spinning on my heel, I watch him slip into



the driver's seat of his SUV without thinking about what he's just done.

"Lily and Daddy sitting in a tree!!!" Cringing at Chelsea's little sing song which she seems to want to tell the whole neighborhood, I turn to her.

"Shh, come on, let's get you inside, missy." She giggles, racing into the house, without waiting for me. I'm still in shock when I step inside the house. "Where are you?"

"In here!" I find her sitting in the living room watching cartoons. Thankfully, this gives me a moment to recover from Austin's kiss. I'm sure he didn't mean to do that. *Did he?*

I suppose, we did have sex. The best sex I've ever had, but then again, I don't have much experience to go on. My ex wasn't exactly experienced. Neither was he a divorced man with a child who's obviously had years of practice.

"Lily," the gentle tone of Chelsea comes from behind me. When I turn to regard her, she's watching me with the inquisitive stare that only a child can do. "Are you and Daddy boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"No, Chels. What makes you say that?"

"He kissed you like he would kiss a girlfriend. Like they do on TV. Daddy likes you," she smiles then, happy with herself divulging something that I don't think her father would want her saying.

"What do you mean, sweet pea?"

She shrugs, "He doesn't kiss girls on the mouth. Only you." Children have a way of noticing everything. And I mean *everything*.

"I'm sure he didn't mean to and besides how many girls do you see your daddy with?" I question. More because I want her to tell me that I'm the only girl she's ever seen him with, but then again, that reminds me I'm a girl. I'm not a woman who can seduce a man like Austin Bailey. The thought of last night, how gentle he was with me, how much time he took to

ensure I felt pleasure only alights the need I have for him even more.

“I want him to,” she confesses in a whisper as if he’s here and he can hear her.

“And why is that?” Crossing my arms in front of me, I crouch so I’m at eye level with the little munchkin. If he knows she wants me to be here, perhaps that would persuade him to give this a try. There are too many obstacles though. My parents for one will not take the news as easily as I would hope.

“Because you can be my mommy,” she says nonchalantly like she’s just told me she wants a grilled cheese for lunch. Her words still my heart.

I’m only twenty and I’ve never given a thought to having kids. At least, not yet. But with her, it comes easily. Naturally. And with Austin, it causes my heart to stutter against my ribs. His touch, his kiss, his smile, and his daughter.

*Would I be able to do this? Be a mother?*

“Listen to me, Chelsea, grown-ups are difficult. Sometimes it’s not as easy as liking someone. Maybe we should keep this our little secret. Don’t tell you daddy until he’s ready,” I tell her. Sighing, I realize how stupid I am. I’m trying to convince a four-year-old that her father needs to make his own decision regarding his love life.

As much as I want her to be right, I know it’s up to him to confess. He has to tell me what he wants. Because after last night, I know what I want. And that’s him and his little girl.

“We’ll keep a secret,” Chelsea giggles, pressing her finger to her lips. “Shh, Daddy is a boy and boys don’t listen to secrets,” in her mind, this is as innocent as playing with her dolls. But to me, it’s so much more.

“Why don’t you go watch your cartoons? I’ll make us something for lunch okay?” She nods, turns and leaves me in the kitchen with my thoughts. Perhaps I can make him a lovely dinner for when he gets home tonight.

Maybe, just maybe I can seduce him. With my cooking skills and desserts. Smiling, I head to the fridge to ensure I have what I need for dinner. And once again, short cake will be on the menu.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Austin

**T**HE SCENT OF her perfume lingers as I drive to the hospital to see my client who's called in the emergency. I can't believe I kissed her when I ran toward the car. In all honesty, it was a reaction that came naturally. After our night together, at least, the moments were made love, I felt as if I needed to feel her lips on mine again. As if I was hungry for more of her delicious flavor. I plan to talk to her when I get home.

*Would she date me?*

I'm a father, I'm too old for her, but I can't stop thinking about her. It's as if she's taken hold of my mind and she's invading my every thought. Last night was utter perfection. Feeling her around me was addicting, and I'd like more, so much more.

As soon as I'm parked, I exit the car and rush to the entrance. Stepping inside, I find my emergency patient. "Oh, thank God you're here doctor." The mother rises, tugging her son behind her. "He fell from the tree, and his arm is broken. I think, I mean I don't know, but he's—"

"It's okay, Mrs. Bryson, we'll have him checked out soon. Follow me," I offer a calming smile, hoping it will alleviate her stress about her son. The little boy looks as if he's proud of the fact that he probably has a broken arm giving me a toothy grin. "Come on, little man," I open the door, allowing him and his mother to enter first. Once the door is shut, I shrug off my jacket and pull on the white coat.

"It hurts," he mumbles when I step over to the bed where his mom has propped him up.

"That's definitely going to happen when you fall out of a tree. Now can you tell me what you did?" I ask, hoping to

distract him as I touch his arm tentatively to figure out how bad it is.

“I was playing with my friends and they dared me to do it.” He shrugs nonchalantly causing me to chuckle. “Ow!” As soon as I lift his arm at the elbow, I he flinches. It seems the shoulder has taken most of the fall from the way he cowers when I move it.

“Okay, little man, we’re going to do an X-ray and then we’ll fix you up. You may need a cast, and no more climbing trees. You got that?” I ruffle his hair and he nods in response with a sad pout on his chubby face.

I turn to set up the X-ray machine. This will ensure that I know nothing is broken or fractured. Offering a smile to his mom who looks like she’s about to pass out from stress, I ensure everything is ready before turning back to her.

“He’ll be fine,” I assure her.

Boys can be hard work. I remember myself as a child, I was a handful. The thought makes me wonder if I’d ever have another child. Perhaps a son. The image brings Lily to mind and I can’t help smiling at that. I’d love to see her pregnant with my baby.

“Let’s go little man, I need you to stand really still. Can you do that?” He nods at my question. A challenge for him because I can tell he’s ready to head back up that tree. One thing about boys, they tend to be stubborn.

“Thank you, Doctor,” his mom murmurs behind me and I cast a glance toward her seeing the relief painting her features. This is what I love about my job, making people smile, treating them so they feel better, heal, and stay healthy. It’s always been a passion of mine to see someone smile. Whether it’s from relief that you’re giving them good news, or just from the fact that you were there for them in their time of need.

It’s a pleasure. That’s why I’m here.” I focus on getting the X-rays done and ready for examination while she waits for her

little boy to get his arm in a sling. And my mind is once again on Lily.



THE HOURS PASS quickly and when I glance up at the clock, I note that it's been four hours since I rushed out of the house this morning. Guilt settles in my chest when I realize I left in such a rush this morning, that I didn't tell Lily I'd be this long. I know she's finished with her studies, and even though she's on vacation for the holidays, leaving her and Chelsea alone so close to Christmas causes me to worry. If she feels I'm taking advantage of her, or perhaps she has plans with someone. That thought has jealousy skating through my veins. I don't want her to have anyone else, but me.

Also, I haven't had the courage to call her since I arrived. Even though I had a few moments to spare, I wasn't sure a phone call would suffice what I want to say. Also, to be honest, I'm fearful of her telling me to go to hell.

This morning when I left, it was the most natural thing to plant a kiss on her full lips as I headed to work and I didn't miss my daughter's little rhyme. Cringing, I sigh as I rise from my chair and shrug on my coat. For Chelsea, this isn't something trivial, having another woman replace her mother in that way is not something I wanted to put her through till I was ready to move on. At least, till I was sure that there was a chance for me and Lily.

Making my way out the door, I head to the parking lot and unlock the car. When I slip into the driver's seat, I take a long cleansing breath before starting the engine and making my way home. The town is quiet since it's two days before Christmas and we haven't yet had a snowfall.

My mind is replaying what to say to her when I see her in a few moments. The girl I want more than I ever thought I would, and also, there's something that I want to talk to her about. The words I need to say to her before I chicken out.

Even being away from her for a few hours, busying myself with work and patients hasn't diminished the image of her on my bed, spread open to my hungry gaze. The drive home is a few minutes longer than normal because I'm satlling, but not near enough time for me to figure out what I'm going to say to Lily when I finally see her.

Pulling into the garage, I shut off the engine and exit the car. A small body bounds into me as soon as I step into the laundry room which is just off the kitchen. "Daddy! Lily made me dinner! And she made shortcake!!" Chelsea screeches loudly and excitedly as I lift her up. The aromas coming from the kitchen would bring a grown man to his knees and I'm almost there. I'm tempted to keep Lily here with me and my little girl forever.

The thought stills me for a moment before I manage a response to Chelsea. "Did she now?" I question as I step into the kitchen and find the beautiful woman sitting at the table about to devour a piece of sweet dessert. Her long wavy hair is tied in a messy knot on top of her head, thin tendrils of strawberry blonde hang around her face making her look angelic. Her large doe eyes peek up at me under long lashes.

"Mr.—"

"Austin," I interrupt her causing a gorgeous blush to warm her cheeks.

A swift nod of understanding, she smiles. "Hello, Austin," her voice is timid, with a slight tremble. There's emotion rolling off her in waves and it matches the way I'm feeling about her. Nervous, excited, and enamored. I can see it in her eyes, affection so deep and pure it steals my breath.

"Daddy," my little girl murmurs in my ear conspiratorially. "Are you going to kiss Lily again?" Darting my surprised gaze to my daughter, I open my mouth to respond, but I can't find the words.

Setting her down, I straighten and glance at my babysitter who is now blushing furiously. Chelsea may be young, but

she's picked up on the tension between the two adults in her life. And that's what Lily is, an adult.

"Munchkin, can you give me a minute to talk to Lily about something? I'll come find you after okay?" I say, giving her a kiss on the top of her head.

"Okay, daddy." She nods, her pigtails bouncing as she races into the living room. Now that we're alone, the air shifts and there's evident desire hanging between me and the beauty at my table.

"I'm... I made some dinner. I don't know if—" Closing the distance between us, I grip her face in my hands and crash my mouth to hers. I don't care what I'm doing. Every risk and rule flies out the window when my lips touch hers. A soft whimper falls from her lips and I swallow it. I want all her sweet sounds, I want to taste her essence. Everything this woman is, I want it all.

She rises, her hands snaking their way around my neck and her body molds to mine. Her mouth is warm, sweet, and so fucking delicious. Her arms twine around my waist, holding onto to me as if I'm her lifeline, but I don't think I am, because in this stormy ocean, she is mine.

Each day I watched her grow closer to my daughter. And every moment she spent in my house as my babysitter, she burrowed her way into my heart. Nothing is going to stop me having her now. She feels perfect, utterly perfect in my arms.

"Austin," she mumbles to my lips. "My parents." Two words and I'm stepping back. I know we need to tell them, to let them get to know me and Chelsea. And what better time to do it than Christmas.

"I'll go with you. I want you, Lily. Nothing is going to stop this," I'm earnest in my words. She needs to know this isn't a one night stand. I'm here and if she'll have me, I'd like to keep her for far longer than just a night.

"Let me talk to them first," she pleads and I know why. Her father, the sheriff, is not an easy man to please and I don't



blame him. I'd be the same with Chelsea.

“Okay. But then I want to be by your side after. I need to be. To show him I'm worthy of you, Shortcake,” I mumble against her pink lips.

“Always.” Her murmur is a promise. A heartfelt, honest vow and I nod.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Lily

“LILY,” MY MOTHER looks at me with emotion shimmering in her eyes. “This man, he’s too old for you. And he has a child,” she implores me, telling me everything I already know. Her voice is thick with confusion and as much as I love her, she doesn’t realize that this is something I’ve thought of for a lot longer than she can imagine.

“Mom, he’s a good person. I’m not running out to marry him, we’re taking things slow. Please trust me?” This time, I’m the one begging her. I need her to understand. To see that I’m not an immature child. I’m not going to do anything stupid, and I know Austin better than he sometimes knows himself, he is a responsible person. He would never do anything to put Chelsea in harm’s way, whether it’s physically or emotionally.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt, honey. I don’t doubt that he’s a good man, I’ve seen him with his little girl, he is caring and loving, but becoming a step-in mom for her is not going to be easy.”

I nod in response. This is something that I’ve mulled over in my mind for a few days since Austin asked me to go out on a date. It’s a fear that’s kept me up at night. I don’t want to be a replacement, but I feel so at ease with her and she seems comfortable with me around.

“Why don’t we all have dinner together? I’ll make my famous roast with those rosemary herb potatoes you love so much. We can get to know Dr. Bailey and his daughter,” she smiles kindly, offering me an alternative. My father, who’s been quiet all this time looks serious as he considers my mother’s suggestion.

We both look at him for any acknowledgement that he's not going to kill Austin if he walks in here. I've always been my father's little girl. He's cared for me, supported me, and now that I've fallen in love, I think it's the idea that I'll no longer be under his care that bothers him the most.

"Come on, Dad. It's almost Christmas and I don't want us at odds over the holidays," I ask, my voice a mere whisper because if I have to be honest, he has always scared me. His strict upbringing has been good, but deep down, I wish he'd trust that I'm grown up enough now to make a decision that will be good for me.

"Lilypad," my dad sighs, using my nickname he gave me when I was a kid. "I've always believed you were a strong woman, independent, beautiful, and I know when you decide on something it takes a lot to sway you. I'm not trying to, all I'm going to say about this is that I hope and pray that he doesn't break your heart because I will have to kill him." My father is dead serious. Being the Sheriff in town has had its drawbacks growing up, and now, as an adult, it's still the bane of my existence.

"Dad, you can't kill him because he won't break my heart," as I say the words, I'm sure of them. There isn't a doubt in my mind that Austin will not hurt me.

"Fine. Then he and his daughter can have dinner here tomorrow night." He huffs, pushing off the chair, he stalks toward me, leaning down and planting a soft kiss on my head. "And I wasn't joking, Lilypad, I have a gun," he tells me earnestly.

"Go to work you'll be late," Mom chastises him for his grumpy remarks. "The man is insufferable." I can't help giggling at the two of them. Even after all these years, they're still in love. Happy together that when they're apart even for a few hours, you can tell they long for each other. I hope one day I have that, and I wish it's with Austin Bailey.



“Do I LOOK okay?” Austin asks as he fiddles with his black tie. He’s dressed in a suit for dinner tonight and I can’t help laughing at how nervous he is.

“You do realize it’s an informal dinner?” I quip, watching him in the mirror.

His eyes meet mine, I can tell he’s nervous as he offers me one of his sexy smiles. “I do, but your father isn’t impressed I’m stealing his daughter. If he kills me tonight, at least I’ll look good.” Once he turns to regard me fully, I’m breathless at how handsome he is.

“He is not going to kill you, besides—”

Chelsea come leaping into the bedroom dressed in her Princess gown which sets off my giggling. “I’m ready!” Her squeal echoes off the walls.

Shaking my head, I narrow my eyes at her mischievous smile. “Come on, Princess, you need to dress in something a little less formal.” I tell her, shooing her into her room.

“I like this dress,” she pouts up at me. Her face the picture of innocence.

“How about you wear it tomorrow, on Christmas and today, you can wear this?” I pull out her Frozen jumper with matching sweat pants. Her trainers are blue with silver sparkles. For a girl, she loves blue.

“Okay, I love Elsa,” she tells me confidently. “Like Daddy loves you,” the words fall easily from her mouth causing me to halt in my movements.

“What?”

“Daddy loves you,” she says in her innocent way.

Shaking it off, I help her dress and moments later, we’re all in Austin’s SUV heading to my parents’ house. My heart patters against my ribcage at the thought of my dad meeting Austin, but I know deep down, he’ll see the good man inside. The father, the doctor, and the man who according to Chelsea loves me.

We pull up to the house, exit the car, and the little munchkin is already at the door while her dad and I follow up the steps. The door swings open and my mother is all dressed up in a beautiful pencil skirt and white blouse. Her hair's been done and I can tell she's even wearing make-up.

"Come in you, beautiful little angel," she coos at Chelsea who revels in the attention. As soon as we reach her, she glances at Austin and my hands interlinked and smiles. "It's a pleasure to properly meet you, Dr. Bailey."

"Please call me Austin, Mrs. Abrams," he tells her, shaking her hand and leaning in to peck her on the cheek. *Ever the gentleman.*

"Call me Sandra, please."

"Sandra, it is," his smile is beaming bright as we enter my childhood home.

"Welcome," the deep gruff tone of Dad comes from behind us. I watch in awe as he shakes Austin's hand without being too rude. "I take it you like my daughter?" The question stills everyone. We're all waiting for Austin's response. I'm holding my breath, when he finally nods.

"I care for her very much, more than I've even admitted to her," his hazel eyes meet mine, then he gifts me a smile. "I may be in love with her, Sir," he says turning back to my father. "But I'm not rushing this, I wanted to meet you both to tell you that I have her best interests at heart and I promise to keep her heart safe."

My father is silent, his eyes give nothing away. No emotion. My heart leaps into my throat, for more reasons than I care to admit, because deep down I know I'm in love with Austin as well.

"I'll be watching you, closely," Dad says, leaning in. "And don't for one second think the I won't use my gun."

"Dad!" I admonish my father.

Everyone starts laughing and the tension in the air dissolves easily. Chelsea is curled up on the sofa watching the television when we enter the living room. Once we're all settled, the conversation flows easily and I feel happiness envelop me, my heart, and my mind.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Austin

THE LIGHTS OF the tree twinkle causing Lily's hair to shimmer like golden honey. She's dressed in a pair of pink sweatpants that match Chelsea's. They've grown closer over the past few weeks and I couldn't be happier.

She's smiling at something my daughter has told her and I can't help staring. Her face lit up with happiness I haven't ever seen in her expression. They giggle and I stroll over to where they're seated on the plush carpet.

"Girls, you do know that whispering while we have company is rude?" I crouch down, tapping Chelsea's nose with the tip of my finger.

"We weren't, Daddy," she pouts, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Lily is going to make us cookies," Chels informs me with a bright smile. Her happiness means more to me than anything and to see her face filled with excitement only makes me heart fill with more love for the woman beside me.

Dragging my eyes to hers, I wink. "I prefer Lily's shortcake," I chuckle. The woman who I'm dying to devour blushes a beautiful soft pink. She's wearing a bright red Santa hat that has a white trim and bauble attached to the end which jingles each time she moves.

"Daddy, cookies are yummy," Chelsea tries to convince me, but nothing will ever change my mind from the decadent taste of Lily and her baking.

"Why don't we go get you some, Munchkin?" My daughter runs to the kitchen, but I grab Lily before she can disappear and plant a soft kiss on her full lips.

"Tonight, I want you wearing just that hat," I tell her in a husky whisper which causes her to shiver.

“And what will you be wearing, Santa?” She quips playfully.

“Nothing, you can take a ride on my candy cane,” I coo in her ear, causing her to gasp at my naughty innuendo.

“You’re insufferable. Can you behave for just a few hours?” her playful swat on my shoulder has me chuckling. She passes by me, the scent of strawberries following her as I watch her padding toward the kitchen.

Flopping onto the sofa, I breathe deeply as I recall the gift I have hidden in the bedroom for her. We’ve opened everything under the tree, but I have a special surprise for her when we get to bed tonight.

It’s been a long time coming, and now that we’ve made our relationship official, I need to ask her the question that’s been on my mind for weeks, probably months if I had to be honest.

She’s mine and I want her with me all the time. There’s no longer a choice in the matter. The girls return with plates of sweet treats. I scoot up, allowing Lily to curl up beside me with one of her romance novels and Chelsea climbs onto my lap, holding out a choc chip cookie.

“It’s yummy, Daddy,” she says. Her eyes shimmering with childish excitement.

I take it and as soon as I bite into the crunchy treat I can’t stifle the groan. “This is incredible, Lil,” I tell my girl.

“They’re a new recipe, just testing it out. Tomorrow I’ll make some cinnamon ones.”

“Yes!” Chelsea squeals. There’s something about the spice that my little girl loves. The TV is on and A Christmas Carol comes on which drags Chels’ attention immediately. She’s on the carpet in seconds, her plate of dessert beside her with a glass of milk.

I rove my gaze over the scene, me, Chelsea, and Lily and I know I’ve finally got the family I’ve wanted all this time.





“YOU WANTED THE hat, Santa?” Lily teases seductively when I enter the bedroom. Once the movie was over, Chels fell asleep almost immediately and we put her to bed. The sight before me though is pure temptation. Lily is sitting on the bed her back to the door wearing black lingerie with the red Santa hat I requested she wear, earlier.

“I wanted so much more than that, Shortcake,” I tell her, stalking toward her, tugging my shirt from the waistband of my jeans. As soon as it’s free, I’m unbuttoning it and shrugging it off. Her eyes roam over my exposed chest, heating my blood like only Lily can.

“I do prefer you without your shirt Mr. Bailey,” she smirks, her lips curl seductively and I’m dying to see just how pretty they look wrapped around my dick.

“I have a gift for you, before I make you moan and whimper,” I tell her earnestly. Reaching into the pocket of my jeans, I pull out the small velvet box. Her eyes widen at the gift as I hand it to her. Tentatively, her delicate fingers snap the lid open. Inside is a silver key.

“Austin,” her whispering my name does things to me. “What is this?”

Settling beside her on the bed, I take her hands in mine. “I want you to move in with me and Chelsea,” my words have never been surer.

“That’s a big step.” She’s right. It is. But I know deep down this is what I want and need. “I mean... Can I think about it?” Her question stills my heart for a moment, but I understand. She has her life ahead of her and I can’t expect her to drop her plans for me.

“Sure, just...” I lift her hands to my mouth, kissing her knuckles as I meet her eyes. “Don’t think too long?” She nods with a smile, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“I won’t.”

Then she sets the box on the nightstand and turns to me. The air shifts from tentative and emotional to heated and lust-filled.

“Time for your gift,” she reaches behind her, unclasping her bra. Once it’s on the floor, her panties follow and all she’s wearing is her Santa hat. Her long legs are toned, and lit by the golden light of the candle that sits on the dresser.

“You’re exquisite. I couldn’t want anything better.”

“There’s more,” she winks, turning to the small table that’s behind her, she lifts the champagne and saunters by me toward the bathroom. I follow her, confused at what she’s doing when I see it. Every inch of the room is decked in red and gold candles. The corner tub is filled with bubbles and I watch her step into the warm water.

When she turns to look at me, she lifts the bottle and trickles the liquid over her tits, allowing it to follow a path down to her pussy.

“How about that dessert, Doctor?” She quips and I’m a feral animal let loose from my cage. I join her, my mouth immediately on her peaked nipples, sucking and licking the sweet alcohol from her equally delicious skin. Her moans echo around us as my mouth gives her the pleasure she craves. My fingers move over her bare skin, two fingers taunting her slick folds, stroking her. As soon as I dip two fingers into her molten core, she cries out, the sound catching in her throat.

I settle back, sitting in the tub and guide her over me. “I want you on my face, I’m eating your sweet cunt until your legs are shaking and you can no longer stand,” I inform her as she positions herself over my mouth. Her essence is intoxicating as my mouth claims her beautiful body.

Her hips roll and undulate as she takes her pleasure from my tongue that’s delving into her hole.

“Yes, yes, Austin, oh god,” she moans as her hands attempt to grip the tiles. Her knees tremble, but my mouth doesn’t relent. I need more. I want her. My fingers tease her, wetting

one digit with her arousal, I trail my way to her forbidden entrance. The tight puckered hole pulses and she grunts when I slip it inside her. “Fuck, oh fuck,” her words are raspy as she mumbles incoherent pleas.

I continue my assault on her until I feel the familiar pulse. Both her holes suck my finger and tongue into their depths as she finds release, soaking me in her delicious juices. Slowly she lowers herself into the water and onto my waiting cock.

“You’re beautiful when you come,” I tell her, earning me an incredible blush. “Take your pleasure from me, Shortcake. Ride me dick,” and she does. Her body moves over me. Her breasts in my face, and I revel in every inch of her.

And all that’s on my mind as she finds her release along with me is that she has to say to moving in. I want her here and I won’t stop until she’s right beside me every morning and every night.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Lily

**T**HE CINNAMON AROMA of the baking cookies causes my mouth to water. Chelsea giggles at the animated story on screen and I'm curled up with a book on the sofa. Since Austin left a few hours ago to see one of his patients, I've made two trays of shortcake, and one of cinnamon cookies. For some reason, Chelsea is addicted to them and her dad has a preference to the strawberry decked sweet stacks.

"Lily," the tiny voice from the carpet calls to me, dragging my imagination away from Austin and what he does with the shortcake.

"What's up, munchkin?"

"Can we have cookies now?" Her bottom lip sticks out as she pouts at me. The puppy dog eyes she has down to a T make me giggle.

"No cookies till I get home," Austin's voice comes from the doorway causing her to leap to her feet and race toward him. She's in his arms in seconds. He looks tired, but the five o'clock shadow that graces his jaw makes him look so sexy.

Pushing off the sofa, I pad over to him and plant a soft kiss on his cheek. He turns his head and gives me a sloppy wet smooch on the lips only get an *eeew gross* from Chelsea.

"Behave," I tell him as he sets her on her feet. She's forgotten about the cookies when her favorite TV show comes on and leaves us to talk. When Austin asked me to move in, I had to think about it. My parents didn't accept us at first, but each time they saw us together, they noticed that he makes me happy, and so does Chelsea.

"Are you ever going to give me an answer?" I know what he wants, but I planned the surprise and if I give him my

answer now, it will spoil everything.

“No, Austin. Give me time, please?” When I meet his gaze, I notice the hurt flashing in them. My heart aches at the sight. I never want to see him sad. I’ve never felt so strongly about someone before.

“Anything for you,” he murmurs and heads toward the bedroom, leaving me alone in the kitchen. I’m about to follow when a knock on the front door that I’ve been waiting for comes. Chelsea is already pulling it open when I reach it to find my mom and dad standing in the entrance.

“Hi sweetheart,” mom says, pulling me into a hug. “Does he know?” She whispers in my ear. I shake my head when she steps back. Once I’ve given my dad a hug, I step aside and they make themselves comfortable on the sofa.

“I’ll be back with Chelsea’s things. Thank you for doing this,” I say before heading toward her bedroom. They’re chattering away to her about taking her to the mall to go ice skating when I find Austin in her bedroom.

“My folks are here to take Chels to the mall,” I tell him. He nods, but doesn’t respond. “Look Austin, I wanted to tell you this later, I planned a whole dinner surprise, but since you’re acting like a four-year-old, I’ll tell you now.”

His gaze snaps to mine in shock at my words. With both my hands on either hip, I narrow my eyes and glare at him for spoiling it.

“My answer is yes, I’ll move in with you and Munchkin. I’d asked my parents to take her out for a couple hours so we can have alone time, but since you’re—”

He doesn’t allow me to finish my sentence. He’s on his feet, his mouth crashes against mine in a heated kiss. I moan under his warmth, his tongue sweeping against my lips and I allow him to taste me. A groan so low and hungry rumbles in his throat and I can’t help smiling against his mouth.

When we finally break apart, my breathing is ragged, so is his and my body is tingling with anticipation of being with

him again. This man makes me crave things that I never knew possible.

“Do I still get my surprise?” He questions on a sexy, sinful smirk.

I shake my head. “No, you ruined it.” His hands trail down to my ass, giving it a playful squeeze.

“I never ruin anything, besides, now we can celebrate with that bottle of bubbly and some whipped cream.” He releases me, striding confidently from the room. The man is insatiable, but so am I. There’s no way I deny him anything.

Quickly, I grab Chelsea’s jumper and her boots and head back to the living room to find Austin chatting to my dad about taking a family vacation next year and my mother and Chelsea playing with Barbie doll’s dressing them up in the tiny fur coats she got for Christmas.

“I’m ready!” She squeals excitedly. If it weren’t for her, my parents would still be on the fence about Austin and me, but because of her personality, she’s won them over in record time. My heart soars when I think of how happy I am with my new family.

“Come on, Sweetheart, let’s go before the ice melts.” Dad teases as he grabs his keys, shaking hands with Austin and the three of them make their way out the door. And then we’re alone.

“Now, Shortcake, it’s time for me to devour your sweet pussy,” he murmurs in my ear sending heat traveling all the way to my toes.

“You’re going to kiss me with that dirty mouth?” I quip, spinning in his arms.

“I’m going to do so much more than kiss you,” he smirks, lifting me by my ass, I wrap my legs around him as he walks us into his bedroom. I’m already wet and needy when he slides my tights and panties down my legs.

“You’re so beautiful, Shortcake,” the words he tells me every day send my heart soaring.

“And you’re so handsome, Doctor,” I wink down as he leans in between my legs. His lips feather soft kisses from my ankles to my knees. He moves slow, torturously slow. My body bows off the bed and I can’t help fisting the sheet. “quite taunting me,” I tell him. All I get in response is a chuckle.

His mouth is warm as he moves higher, just missing my drenched core. “You know,” he says between kisses, “I could lick,” kiss, “devour,” kiss, “and play with you all day.” Another kiss, but this time, he sucks the sensitive skin of my inner thigh into his mouth, sucking on it until I’m sure he leaves a bruise.

He continues on the same way to the other thigh and I’m ready to explode when he gently strokes my pussy with two fingers. Up and down my slit causing me to shudder and my legs to tremble.

“BEacause,” he says, blowing cool air on my core. “I love watching you come apart for me, Shortcake,” his words are husky and low. Then, before I have time to respond, or think of anything more, his mouth lands on my slit, sucking my clit into his mouth and I’m unraveling like a ball of string. My cries are loud and I’m thankful that Chels isn’t here because I’m sure the neighbors can hear me.

My eyes roll back as he dips two fingers inside me, pumping them in and out, another orgasm so fierce hits me that I’m certain I’m about to pass out. He doesn’t relent. I’ve drenched his mouth, face, tongue and I can’t stop chanting his name.

“That’s my sweetness,” he utters with reverence.

I’m still coming down from the high when he rises and I notice he’s already naked. He settles himself over me, between my thighs and nudges my entrance. Easily, my slick heat accepts him and I wrap myself around him like I’m trying to climb into him. As if we’re about to become one person.

“Austin,” his name on my lips is pure pleasure as he moves with me. Our bodies are synced as always. His cock plunges into my depths causing me to claw at his back, pulling him deeper. “More, please,” I cry out as the crown of his dick hits that spot and I see stars.

“Yes, baby, come for me,” he growls and I do. I fly apart around him, pulsing and sucking him into my body. I’m needy. I want all of him. Always. Forever.

“I love you, Austin,” I whisper into his ear.

His eyes meet mine and they crinkle when he smiles. “And I love you, Lily.”



Thank you for reading Austin’s Christmas Shortcake! If you want more steamy romance from Dani René, be sure to read [KNEEL](#).



THIS CHRISTMAS

C. HALLMAN

# CHAPTER ONE

Hannah

**M**AN, DRIVING FOR ten hours by yourself in a beat-up 2001 Honda is so much fun... said no one ever!

My butt hurts, my neck is stiff, I'm hungry, and I have to pee like a racehorse. Of course, for the last thirty miles, there has been no gas station, no convenient store, or any other place I could possibly pull this car over.

I could just stop at the side of the road, but my car has a habit of cutting off when it comes to a stop and then needing a jump start to get going again. So, yeah, that's not an option.

Briefly, I entertain the thought of trying to pee in a bottle while driving, but then remembered I'm a girl so that probably wouldn't end well either.

Ten minutes later, and about five minutes from my bladder exploding, I finally spot a sign for a gas station. I hit the gas instead of the breaks as I turn into the exit with my tires squealing. Barely making it through the curve, skimming the grass on the side. I don't stop at the stop sign either. Like some madwoman, I drive up to the gas station convenience store. Parking right up front, I jump out of the car and sprint inside.

"Bathroom?" I yell at the teenage boy behind the register. He looks at me uninterested, clearly not understanding the seriousness of this situation.

*We'll see how uninterested you'll be when you have to mop up urine from the floor.*

Raising his arm, he points to the back of the store. I race in the direction he indicated with a speed that would rival Usain Bolt's.

When I finally get into the stall and pull my pants down, I start peeing before my ass touches the seat all the way. My pee

is coming out like a flood and with a ferocity that reminds me of a firehose shooting water thirty feet in the air.

*Ahhhhh, sweet baby Jesus... relief.*

My whole body sags, finally relaxing as my bladder releases what feels like five gallons of pee. When I'm done, I feel like a deflated balloon, one that was overfilled and is glad to be flat now.

Reaching over, I feel for the end of the toilet paper roll under the plastic holder. Just to find it, yup, you guessed it... empty. Of course, it's freaking empty.

*Motherfuckingfuck!*

As I see it, I have two options. One, I walk to the next stall. Two, I let my ass air dry. Not wanting to have pee dried on my skin for the rest of the drive, I go for option one. With my pants still around my ankles. I open the door and scurry to the next stall, almost falling over my own feet.

To my utter shock, no one actually comes into the bathroom on my little trip, and I do find toilet paper in the next stall.

After washing my hands, I walk out of the bathroom and back into the store. I'm so hungry I would eat anything right now. Suddenly, a delicious savory smell meets my nose. Pizza?

“Hey, kid, is that pizza I'm smelling?”

“Yeah, that's my lunch, lady. Made it in the microwave. We don't actually sell pizza. We do sell nuts,” he points to the shelves with crackers and peanuts. Then he adds with a grin, “We have salty nuts. Do you not like salty nuts?”

“Funny,” I roll my eyes. “I'll give you ten bucks for your microwave pizza.”

“Fifteen,” he counters. I don't know if I want to slap his shoulder and tell him good job or slap his face and tell him to go to hell.

“Ten, and I’ll show you my boobs.”

His eyes go wide, and he slightly leans forward.  
“Seriously?”

“No, you perv! I’ll give you five and not call your mom and tell her what a little punk you are.”

“Okay, okay.” He says, holding his hands up in the air before disappearing into the back room.

I grab a coffee and a soda before I pay that little weasel. He puts the steaming pizza on a piece of cardboard and hands it to me. With everything in my hands, I walk outside, making a little bell ring above the door as I open it.

Unable to wait any longer, I take a bite of the pizza before I make it to the car. The melted cheese hits my lips, and I swear it burns the first few layers of my skin right off. I jerk at the pain and my coffee tips over, spilling all over the front of my shirt.

*Damnit.*

Wishing the day would already be over, I walk to the car and get in. Saying a silent prayer that my car will start now. I turn the key in the ignition, and thank god the engine roars to life. I really should get a new car. My parents have offered to buy me one a million times, but I’m too proud to take the money.

I have enough gas in the tank to make it the thirty miles I have left to the cabin, so I don’t stop again for anything.

Forty minutes later, after a trip that has seemed endless and traumatic to both my bladder and lip, I pull up to my family’s cabin. The place looks just as it always has. Like one of those cabins you see on the side of the road that you keep driving past. You know, the ones where the door is half hanging on and is deserted. Just kidding, it looks like your typical family cabin. A homey, rustic, wooden cabin pressed against the picturesque mountain skyline.

My dad is a contractor and did most of the work himself, it's his pride and joy. We spend every Christmas here, also other holidays and long weekends as well.

My feet haven't even touched the first step going up to the porch when the door flies open, slamming into the side of the house, and my sister Laura appears. "Hannah," she squeals. "There you are..." She stops mid-sentence, her eyes roaming over me, paying special attention to my burned lip and my coffee-stained shirt. "What happened to you?"

"Don't ask," I tell her, my swollen lip feeling funny as I do. She shakes her head, suddenly not interested in my day anymore. Well, fine, I wasn't going to tell you anyway.

"Oh my god, Hannah, you won't believe who is here," she squeals again and this time her voice remains high-pitched, excitement pouring out of her.

"Mhhh, Santa?"

"Don't be silly. He won't come until Christmas Eve. Come in, and you'll see." She jumps up and down like a little kid and waves me into the cabin. As soon as I step in, my mom comes rushing out from the kitchen.

"Hannah, it's about time. We were about to send a search party out for you."

"Hi, Mom." I hug her, holding on a little longer than I normally would. Mom-hugs always make everything better. Until they ruin it by saying something stupid, which happens every single time.

"Is that herpes on your lip?" she whispers into my hair.

"No," I answer, releasing her. "I burned myself on some cheese pizza."

"Oh, dear, come in. I'll bring you something to make you feel better." My mom scurries away, heading back into the kitchen. Which is technically her second home during the holidays. I'm pretty sure she has a makeshift bed in the pantry.

I turn back to my sister, who is shifting on her legs impatiently, or maybe she has to pee? *I know that feeling.* “Everybody is in the living room.” She grabs my wrist and starts pulling me down the hallway.

“Why are you so excited? Who is here?” I’d much rather hide in the kitchen than be dragged across the house. Haven’t I endured enough today, Satan? It’s the holidays for heaven’s sake.

“Just wait... It’s a surprise. You’ll be so shocked to see who I have been dating,” she swells with excitement, her eagerness almost infectious... *almost.*

Pulling me into the living room, she yells at the top of her lungs, “Surprise!”

Surprise in fucking deed. Sitting in my family’s living room like I expected is my father. As always, he is glued to his trusted recliner. However, there are two guys I didn’t expect to be here. Jake and Jonas Wilder. One of which I had planned never to see again. Jake isn’t so bad. Jonas though... Sure he’s gorgeous, with dark hair and a sparkle in blue eyes, but he’s really the devil. An evil, wicked, ruin everything devil.

*Jonas Wilder*, my childhood crush... my archenemy. One look, and I’m ready to run back out to the car that I know won’t start. This can’t be happening right now. And yet my feet won’t move. I can’t stop staring.

“What the hell are they doing here?” I say out loud before I can stop myself. Laura is sprinting across the room and flops into Jake’s lap. He throws his arms around her and pulls her into a kiss. I guess that answers my question.

“Hey, sweetheart,” my father says, without looking up from his football game.

“Nice to see you too. Is that herpes on your mouth?” Jonas grins, “I guess better on your face than down below, right?” He burst out into laughter, slapping a hand against his knee. No one else laughs, especially not me.

“Ignore him,” Jake says, lifting his chin toward his brother.

“I’ll try my best,” I say under my breath. Turning around, I walk right out of the living room and back into the kitchen. My mom cuts in front of me, a plate of snowman-shaped cookies shoved into my face.

“Here, have one. I made your favorite,” she smiles, but the smile is fake and suspicious, very suspicious. She is up to something.

“Why are you giving me a cookie?” I question, shoving half the thing past my lips. For safe measure, I grab a second.

“Grandma is on her way too, but she didn’t want to make the drive on her own, so she is bringing Darla.”

“Ugh, not Darla,” I whine like a toddler not getting her way. Darla is my least favorite cousin. She is snotty, uptight, and a complete grinch. She’ll suck the happiness out of the room for sure.

“There is more,” she admits, shoving another cookie into my mouth. I don’t think I can handle much more. “Since we have some extra people in the house, I’ve had to shake up the sleeping arrangements a little.”

*Oh god...*

“Shake it up, how?” I barely get the words out, my mouth overflowing with sugary goodness.

“I gave Laura and Jake the guest room at the end of the hall, Grandma the one next to it, Darla insisted on sleeping on the couch because she needs the TV to go to sleep. So that means—”

“No, Mom... no.” I shake my head, knowing exactly where this is going. I did the math in my head, there is only one room left and two people. “I’m not sharing a room with Jonas.”

My mom frowns, “Don’t be dramatic, sweetie. You’re both adults, and it’s not like you have to sleep next to each other. There’s a bunk bed in there, remember?”

“Mom I really don’t want to...” I try not to whine but the thought of sleeping next to my arch enemy makes me damn near break out in hives.

“Hannah please, it’s for a week, not your entire life.” *Ugh*, she’s right but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Still she’s my mother, and it is Christmas and the last thing I want to do is ruin our family trip.

“Fine,” I mutter. Grabbing all the cookies from the plate in my mom’s hand, I turn and walk back to the front door. “I’m getting my stuff out of the car,” I mumble, my mouth still filled with sugary goodness. The only freaking good thing about today are these cookies.

Santa better be bringing me something amazing this year. Especially if I have to share a bunk bed with Jonas Wilder.



## CHAPTER TWO

Jonas

“THIS IS GREAT, Anita,” I tell Hannah’s mom, as I spear another piece of her herb-crusted chicken and toss it down the hatch.

“Well, thank you, Jonas. You’re so sweet,” Anita smiles, and Hannah snorts next to her at the word *sweet*. I watch with amusement as she takes her fork and stabs her chicken like she is about to murder it. Is she imagining I’m that chicken? The way she glares up at me, then back down at her chicken, tells me I’m spot on with that thought.

I don’t blame her for hating me. I was a class A jerk to her in school. It started when we were little kids. Throwing worms and frogs at her. Which later turned to tugging on her pigtails and telling her she smelt like old people. None of those things took the cake of what my stupid ass did in high school. Just thinking about it has my stomach churning.

*“Oh my god, Jonas, I can’t believe you got this! You’re the man!” My best friend, Erin yells, making half of the kids on the bus turn their heads.*

*“Shut up and give me back the picture.” He was never supposed to see it in the first place. No one was supposed to see it. Taking the picture was wrong, keeping it was simply dumb, carrying it around in my backpack... the biggest mistake of my life. I can’t believe I did this.*

*“Let me keep it for a day, I’ll give it back to you tomorrow,” Erin grins.*

*“No way, give it back,” I growl as I snatch it out of his hand. He rolls his eyes at me, and I’m seriously thinking about punching him.*

*“Fine, loser,” he whispers, before he says much louder, “Hey, Hannah.”*

*We sit all the way in the back of the bus, while Hannah sits three rows ahead of us. She looks up from the book she’s reading and turns in her seat. Looking over her shoulder, her beautiful big eyes find mine, then swing over to Erin.*

*“Hannah, I was wondering if you wear a push-up bra or just stuff socks in a regular bra?” Half of the bus starts snickering, and I jab Erin in the side for being such an asshole. It’s one thing when I’m a dick to her, but it’s another for him to be.*

*“Screw you,” Hannah snaps and turns back around in her seat.*

*Smirking Erin continues, “’Cause I know you must be doing something. I know for a fact your tits are much smaller than they look right now.”*

*Hannah turns back a furious glare in her eyes, “Don’t flatter yourself. I would never show my boobs to you.*

*“But you already did,” he laughs, and I watch Hannah’s glare morph into confusion before she twists back around once more. I watch her silky brown hair settle onto her now stiff shoulders, and I tell myself I’m going to burn that damn picture as soon as I get home. No one else can ever get their hands on it. No one.*

Shaking the thought away, I bring my attention back to the chicken.

“Where did you say your parents went again?” Dave, Anita’s husband, asks, probably trying to better the mood with some small talk.

“Hawaii,” I tell him. “My mom has been talking about it forever, so they finally went this year. They won’t be back until after New Year’s.” This is the reason I’m here in the first place. Jake insisted I come so I wouldn’t be home alone over the holidays. I jumped on the opportunity to come here, and not because of it being Christmas. Well, maybe a little, but

mostly it's because of the brown-haired beauty sitting across the table, currently staring daggers through me.

She's adorable like always with her cute button nose, tempting green eyes, and full lips.

Truth is, I've always liked her. It started in kindergarten with an innocent crush, but of course, like every six-year-old boy, I didn't know what to do. I just wanted her to pay attention to me, and I didn't care how I made it happen. Turns out, I ended up pushing her away more than pulling her in.

"Hawaii is nice and all, but Christmas there? What are you supposed to decorate? A palm tree? A rock on the beach? Besides Christmas should be spent with family—" Anita shakes her head and elbows Dave in the side.

"Sorry," Dave says sheepishly.

"We're very happy to have you and your brother here," Anita dismisses her husband with a side glare.

"Speak for yourself," Hannah shoves the green beans on her plate around.

"Hannah," Anita scolds. I can't help but smile, Hannah wears her hate like a comfy sweater, the one you never want to take off.

"What? You want me to lie?" She put a huge piece of chicken into her mouth and starts to chew it like she is angry at it.

"Can you just get over whatever you are mad at him for?" Laura asks, shooting her sister a pleading look.

"No," Hannah simply says, without any further explanation, and I'm glad she doesn't elaborate. I don't think her dad would let me sit at this table if he knew what I'd done to his daughter in high school.

"Ugh, why do you always have to be so difficult?" Laura whines, and I think she stomps her foot under the table. "And don't double dip in the cheese fondue! I don't want your herpes."

“It’s not herpes!” Hannah full-on yells now, her cheeks turning a soft pink. “I burned myself on pizza!”

“Girls,” Dave’s voice rises above everyone else’s, and I know he’s just trying to calm his daughters, but that seems to only cause more tension. Clearly fed up, Hannah gets up, grabs her plate, and stomps out of the room. Ten seconds later, a door slams shut, somewhere off in the distance. After that, the room falls into an awkward silence.

Jake clears his throat, “Thank you for having us. We really appreciate you taking us in for the holidays.”

“I’m sorry about Hannah,” I apologize for her. Only when the words have left my mouth, do I realize how weird that sounded. “I mean, I’m sorry about Hannah and me...” *Nope, that’s not better.* “I should have told you that Hannah and I don’t get along.” *Saved it.*

“It’s not your fault, she is being a big baby,” Laura says.

“Whatever happened between you two is in the past, I’m sure you’ll figure it out. It’s Christmas, after all. What better time than now to bury old hatchets and become friends?” Anita smiles.

“I hope so.” Although I doubt it. She hates my guts, and I don’t think eggnog and mistletoe are going to help change that. After dinner, I help Anita and Laura clean up in the kitchen. It’s better than having a run-in with Hannah.

Luckily, we manage to stay out of each other’s way for the rest of the night. The cabin is pretty big, so I didn’t think it would be a problem, at least not during the day. But right now, it’s not daytime, it’s eleven o’clock at night, and after being up since five this morning, I’m ready to hit the hay. Making my way through the house, I pray that she’s already asleep so I can just sneak in, and I won’t have to talk to her.

Turning down the hallway, I freeze mid-step because standing at the other end of the hall is Hannah. The moment she looks up and finds me standing there like an idiot, her face falls. She must have been upstairs this whole time.

“I was just getting ready to go to bed,” she announces, and I’m not sure why she is telling me this. Like I care when she goes to bed.

“Okay, I’m not stopping you. I’m going to bed too.” Is she expecting me to turn around and come back later? I don’t understand. Forcing my legs to work again, I head toward the bedroom we are about to share for the next week.

A deep scowl forms on her face, and she heads toward me. I open the door, and she walks in before I can, shouldering right past me. Well, that’s rude as fuck. When I came in here earlier, I had deposited my bag on the bottom bunk bed.

Since then, my duffle bag has been replaced by a deep purple suitcase, one that I’m assuming is Hannah’s. My bag, of course, is on the floor, half of the stuff spilled out since the now open bag looks to have been thrown off the bed, maybe even kicked?

“What did my bag ever do to you?”

“The bag did nothing, it’s the owner that’s a total jerk.”

“That’s fair,” I mumble and start picking up my stuff. I glance up at her and catch a surprised look covering her features. Does she think I don’t know that I’m a jerk? Or was. Before I can think much about it or even say anything, she starts talking again.

“I’m sleeping on the bottom bunk.”

“I gathered that much,” I say sarcastically. She huffs and disappears into the attached bathroom with some clothes tucked under her arm.

While she is gone, I strip out of my clothes, down to my boxers. I didn’t know I would be sharing a room, so I didn’t bring anything to wear to sleep in. She’ll just have to deal with it. I’m about to climb up onto the top bunk when the bathroom door opens, and she steps back into the room wearing some candy cane flannel pajamas and a white camisole. Unable to hide my amusement from the way her face reddens, I smirk.

“Can’t you put some clothes on?” She stomps across the room and flops onto her mattress like a hormonal teenager. The bed creaks with the movement. Hopefully, she doesn’t move a lot in her sleep. Otherwise, neither of us will get any sleep.

“Nope. Besides, you looked like you enjoyed the view. I think I might have even seen some drool.”

“Shut up!” She yells.

I chuckle deeply and start climbing up the wooden slats of the bed. The entire bed sways with each move I make, and for a moment, I’m worried it will give out under my weight. After all, this is a bed made for kids, not full-grown adults. Carefully, I proceed onto the mattress, the whole thing creaking as I go.

“Okay, stop! I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to die tonight,” Hannah yells from down below. “Get off the top, before the bed collapses on top of me.” She scurries away as if the bed is going to crumble into a million pieces at any moment.

“Calm down,” I soothe and climb off, jumping to the floor when I’m halfway down the ladder. Without another word, she brushes past me and climbs up the ladder, which seems to be going much better with only her weight.

I wait until she is over the edge so I can get a nice view of her perfectly shaped butt as she bends over. I don’t feel bad about checking her out, mainly because I know she checked me out just now, and I’m wearing nothing but my underwear while she is nearly fully clothed.

As soon as she is in bed, she turns away from me, settling onto her side. Shaking my head at her stubbornness, I slam down onto the bottom bunk and tug the covers up and over my body, stopping once they reach my chin.

“Good night, sweet cheeks,” I yawn, thinking about that firm, ready to squeeze ass of hers. I wonder what it would look like all pink?

“Shut up, creep,” she grumbles, making me smile. I think about apologizing to her for being such a prick when we were younger but decide to hold my tongue. Truthfully, I like Hannah like this; snarky and sarcastic.

This Christmas might turn out to be one hell of a good one.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Hannah

CLIMBING OUT OF bed, I stomp to the bathroom, making sure I'm extra loud, so I wake Jonas up. Or at least annoy him a little. I purposely avert my vision as not to look at his half-naked body. It was enough having to go to sleep knowing he was right there, lying under me.

"So, you're not a morning person, I guess." Jonas's voice is sleepy. He groans like he is stretching, and I have to force myself not to turn around and gawk at him. I need to remember how much I hate him. How much he hurt me in high school.

*"Hannah," Lily calls my name again, knocking softly at the bathroom stall. "It's gonna be okay."*

*"Nothing is okay," I sob. "Everybody saw the picture. The whole freaking school."*

*More tears stream down my face. What did I ever do to him? Why would Jonas do this to me? I hate him so much. I will always hate him for this.*

Stepping into the small bathroom, I slam the door shut behind me. I wish the thing had a lock, but of course, it doesn't.

Gazing into the mirror, I have to agree with him for once. I am not a morning person, none whatsoever, and if it weren't for him being in the room making me uncomfortable, I would probably sleep all day. Especially knowing that my mom would eventually bring some food to my room. Ahh, those were the days. When food was brought to you, and you had no bills, and you could do whatever you wanted all day.

Without looking, I grab my toothbrush from the sink and smear some toothpaste on it. I count to sixty and hum the



jingle bells tune in my head while brushing. When I get to fifty-two, my eyes catch on something odd sitting next to the sink.

*My toothbrush.*

It takes me a whole two seconds to put one and two together, and when I do, I pull the toothbrush out of my mouth and look at it. *OMG! No.* Instantly, my gag reflex kicks in. Spit flies everywhere, covering the mirror and the sink in a flash.

Turning on the water, I hold my head under the faucet to rinse out my mouth.

This is so disgusting. I'm pretty sure I just had Jonas's toothbrush in my mouth. All over again, I start to gag.

"Hey, are you okay in there?" Jonas's muffled voice filters through the closed door. "You sound like you're choking. Need me to do the Heimlich?"

Without bothering to wipe my face, I open the door, holding his toothbrush out like I'm showing him what he did wrong.

"Is this yours?" I ask, spit and water dripping down my chin.

"Yeah," he says, confusion coating his voice. My stomach churns, and I feel the need to wash out my mouth again, maybe with bleach this time. *Definitely with bleach.*

Frowning, I admit, "I just used your toothbrush."

Like the asshole he is, he starts laughing like I just told him the funniest joke he's ever heard. "It's kind of like you frenched kissed me."

"Eww," I whine and push past him and into the room. His skin burns against mine, and as my gaze drifts over his body, I realize he is still in nothing more than his boxers. "And for the love of god put some clothes on! This isn't your apartment. It's a family cabin, and it's Christmas. Not a GQ spread."

How the hell am I going to keep my head straight with him flaunting his abs, bulging pecs, and muscular shoulders? Suddenly my mind drifts... I bet he could hold me up while fucking me against the wall...

*Stop! Do. Not. Think. Like. That.* Jesus, look at me already drooling over the jerk-face.

“Does my nakedness bother you?” Jonas snickers.

“No, it’s just you, all of you... every single part of you.”

“I’m sure that some parts of me don’t,” he says, teasing me. He even winks, or maybe he’s got something in his eye. Wait, is he flirting? No, he is being an asshole, that’s all. Ignoring what he said, I sit down and put my wool socks on.

Just as I’m pulling the second one on, I hear loud laughter carrying through the house. Getting up, I open the door, and I’m met with my grandma’s cheery voice, which is coming from downstairs. Excitement grips onto me, and I speed walk down the hall and down the stairs doing my best not to trip along the way.

“Nana!” I squeal like a five-year-old. To be fair, I haven’t seen my grandma since last Christmas. That seems to be the only time we can manage to all get together as a family.

The front door is still open when I reach my grandma and wrap my arms around her. Cold wind from outside whips against my face, making me shiver.

“How are you, Hannah, my sweet grandbaby?” she coos, rubbing her warm hands down my back.

“Nana, I’m twenty-five. Not a baby anymore,” I giggle, another gust of wind comes from the outside. “Can someone close the door already?”

That’s the moment Darla chooses to walk into the house, looking like a designer boutique threw up on her. With oversized Gucci sunglasses covering half of her face, a white fur coat, dark skinny jeans, and high-heeled boots, one would think she was going to a nightclub or out with the girls, not a

family gathering. Then I notice that she is pulling a large pink suitcase behind her, big enough to hold clothes for three weeks instead of one. *What the hell? Who is this girl?*

“Hannah,” she greets me while looking me up and down with a judging eye. “I have another suitcase out in the car, do you mind getting it for me?”

*Is she freaking serious, right now? Of course, she is, it's Darla.*

“Hello to you too, Darla. I do mind, considering that I'm in my pajamas and that I'm not your butler.”

She opens her mouth, no doubt about to come back with a snarky remark when something behind me catches her attention.

“I can get your suitcase for you,” Jonas chimes in, coming down the stairs completely dressed. Darla's eyes go wide as she takes in Jonas. She licks her lips and takes off her too-big sunglasses. *Dear Lord in heaven...*

“Oh, hi. If you could get it for me, that would be super nice,” she chirps while batting her coal-black eyelashes at him.

“No problem,” he winks at her and walks out. A nasty icky feeling creeps up my spine and coats my insides. It's almost like... it feels like it might be. No, it can't be. *I'm not jealous!* I yell at myself in my head, but it doesn't make it any less true.

“I was going to apologize for forcing you to room with this guy, but after seeing him, I should say you're welcome,” my grandma giggles.

“Nana...” I shake my head at her. She has no idea. Not the first clue about the kind of guy Jonas is.

“What? He is a fine male specimen, and if I were your age, I would climb that man like a tree.”

“Nana! Oh my god,” I can't help but laugh at her dirty-minded humor, feeling lighthearted all of a sudden. My nana has always known how to make me smile. Of course, Darla takes that moment to sour my mood.

“Is that herpes on your face?” Darla’s annoying voice makes the whole thing even worse. All I want to do is get away from this. From him and now from her.

“I swear if I hear the word herpes one more time...” I leave the threat wide open, mostly because I don’t know what’s going to happen. Maybe my head will explode, fake herpes going everywhere. Or maybe I’ll lose my shit and punch them in the face. Russian roulette.

“Whatever, I’m going to go enjoy a hot shower. Tell the hottie to bring my suitcase into the living room, will ya?” She shoves past us, going to greet the rest of the family.

“His name is Jonas,” I growl through my clenched teeth, feeling the unwanted jealousy returning with a vengeance. What the hell is wrong with me? I should be glad she’s here, those two are made for each other. Mean, egotistical, and selfish. I swear you couldn’t have put two better people together.

“Do I sense some hostility?” Grandma snickers and I can already see that she’s piecing the puzzle pieces together.

“No, Grandma, whatever you’re thinking it’s a no. I’m going to go take a shower, and then I’ll come back down, and we can catch up with some hot coco?”

Grandma smiles, and my body warms all over, there is nothing like your grandma. She’s like your favorite blanket, the one that has been with you through everything.

“Of course, hurry along.” She ushers me away, and I shake my head, a smile still on my lips. Walking back the way I just came, a little slower this time, I head into the room. As soon as I enter, I’m greeted with Jonas’s intoxicating scent. He smells like pine and cinnamon, and man. I have got to stop thinking about him like this.

He’s nothing, just some jerk that made every day of my life growing up horrendous. Searching through my suitcase, I find some Christmas leggings and a long-sleeve T-shirt. Then I go into the bathroom and strip out of my clothes.

Turning the water to hot, I wait till the bathroom starts to fill with steam before I step into the shower. Yes, a shower was exactly what I needed. Slowly the water helps to ease my tense muscles, that wouldn't be so tense if it weren't for Jonas. Shoving the jerk from my mind, I wash my hair and body. I rinse thoroughly and then hop out.

It isn't until I'm standing there on the bath mat, dripping like a wet dog that I realize I don't have a towel. *Shit*. Of all the things to forget to grab. Standing there, I try and figure out what the hell I'm going to do. Tiptoeing to the door, I'm startled when I hear a loud commotion in the bedroom. A scream catches in my throat as the door comes flying open, and Jonas of all people appears in front of me.

"Get out!" I squeal like a pig, trying to cover my vag and boobs at the same time, while quickly realizing I don't have enough hands.

"Fuck, Jesus. I'm sorry," he says, his features tight, although his eyes don't stop their perusal over my body. I can see carnal need reflecting in his dark depths, and I have to remind myself that he is a complete asshole.

"Oh my god! Stop staring at me. Grab the towel on the bottom bunk, jerk-face," I order, and almost sigh in relief when he absentmindedly turns, grabs the towel and tosses it at me. I wrap it around myself, wishing it was as big as a comforter so it could cover every inch of my flesh. I feel so bare and exposed right now. As if he's in shock, he just stands there staring at my now partially covered body.

"Jonas," I yell his name this time, and that does it. Suddenly, he's snapping out of it, his eyes go from feral to annoyed in a second.

"It's not my fault you were in here, and you don't have to be such a prude. You don't have anything I haven't seen before."

I roll my eyes and point out of the room, "Get out!"

Shaking his head, he turns and slams the door. I'm certain that my embarrassment is over, but then he goes and opens his mouth again.

“I will say you have nice tits though.”

Growling, I tip my head back and stare at the ceiling. I can't believe my archenemy just saw me naked, and worse yet, he thinks my boobs are nice.

*What the hell?*

Santa, please, help me. Orange isn't a good color for me, and murder is looking better and better with each second.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Jonas

ALL DAY AND all night, I could only think about one thing. Hannah's naked body. Her perky, fill-my-hand sized breasts, her small waist, and wide hips leading me right to the most important part nestled between her thighs.

Her pussy was bare besides a tiny groomed landing strip above her slit. I really want to touch it and see if it is as smooth and soft as it looked. Just the thought has my cock stirring in my pants.

"Jonas, could you hand me the butter, please," Anita's voice drags me out of my little fantasy. A place I shouldn't have let my mind wander, to begin with. It's only then that I realize I have been standing in the middle of the kitchen staring at the white wall. All while running naked pictures through my mind like one of those porn machines they had in the fifties.

"Ah, sure. How much do you need?" I ask, opening the fridge. Anita roped me into helping her get the dough ready as soon as I came downstairs. Almost everyone in the house, including Hannah, is still asleep. I'm kind of an early riser, so I wasn't surprised.

"All of it," she tells me, and I stare at the pile of butter. It's filling the complete bottom shelf of the fridge. *Holy butter...*

"Mhm, all of it?" I need to confirm this is right. Does she know how much is in here?

"Yes," she chuckles. "We're making eight batches of cookie dough, and I need three sticks of butter for each."

"If you say so." I shrug and start to get the butter out, lining the sticks up as instructed by Anita.

"You've been sleeping well?" Anita asks out of the blue.

“Me? Yeah, of course. Why? I mean, why wouldn’t I?” I stumble over my words, probably sounding as guilty as I feel. Does she know about yesterday? Did Hannah tell her? No, she couldn’t have unless she snuck out last night, which I doubt since I was up most of the night thinking about her.

“Oh my god!” Anita yells in a high-pitched voice. I’m mentally preparing myself to go upstairs, pack my bag and drive home to spend Christmas by myself. Looking over at her, I get ready to explain myself when I realize she isn’t even looking at me. Instead, she’s looking out the window. I follow her gaze and immediately know what she is squealing about.

“It’s snowing,” I point out the obvious.

“Yes! Now it’s going to be a perfect Christmas,” she smiles widely, her happiness infectious. A warm feeling settles in my stomach as I watch the small crystal flakes fall from the sky and start to settle onto the ground outside.

Soft footfalls echo as someone comes down the stairs, and excitement grips onto me. It’s funny to think of how excited I am to simply see Hannah. Especially since I saw her right before I came downstairs. I turn around, expecting to find my brown-haired beauty with the spunky attitude, but I’m utterly disappointed when I see Darla instead.

“Ohhh, it’s snowing,” she says, clapping her hands together like a seal doing a trick at SeaWorld. Anita returns to her work, mixing ingredients together, and then kneading the dough.”

“Yeah, maybe it will snow enough today that we can go sledding tomorrow,” I suggest.

“*Sledding?*” Darla says the word like she’s never heard it before. “I can’t risk breaking a nail. I don’t even know where the nearest nail salon is.”

I have to fight both urges, to laugh and roll my eyes.

“Maybe we can relax in the hot tub instead,” she tells me, touching my arm right over my biceps. Of course, that’s the moment Hannah comes down the stairs. Her eyes immediately



fall onto Darla's hand that's casually resting on my arm. At the sight, her face twists into a deep frown, and I step away and around the counter. I don't want her to think something is going on with Darla even though it wouldn't matter if there were.

Opening the refrigerator, I get out a small bottle of orange juice.

When I turn back around, Darla has sat down on a barstool at the end of the island, her attention on her long-manicured nails, the same ones she was so worried about a second ago.

"Good morning, Mom," Hannah greets, ignoring her cousin and myself. She walks up to the fridge, averting her gaze, clearly trying to look anywhere but at me. I watch her pour herself a glass of milk before she takes a seat at the island as well. It's the one on the other side, the furthest away from Darla.

"Why don't you come sit with us?" Darla coos. I notice how she said *us* when she clearly meant *me*.

"Sure," I fake smile. I walk around the island, cornering the side Darla is sitting on, but instead of taking the seat next to her, I pass the two empty seats and sit down on the one right next to Hannah. Neither says a word, and silence blankets the room.

Opening the bottle, I take a sip of the tangy liquid and peek over to my right. Darla's staring at me, her nose tipped up, a permanent scowl on her face. I know what I've done, that I've made my choice between the two of them known. As if there would be any other option but Hannah. Without a word said, she gets up and walks out of the kitchen with her head held high as if she is too good for us.

*Bye Felicia.*

"Well, I guess she didn't want to help make cookies." Anita shrugs, clearly having not paid attention to what just took place. Hannah stares into her cup of milk like it holds all the answers, ignoring me completely. Am I that disinteresting?

“Will you two help? It’s a family tradition, and I have a ton of baking to do.” She turns to both of us, batting her eyelashes as if we could actually say no. This is what it’s all about, cookies, sledding, spending time together as a family. Even though my parents aren’t here, I still feel like I’m surrounded by family, minus the grump currently sitting beside me.

“Of course, Mom. I love making cookies. You know that.” Hannah finally looks up from the glass and at her mom. Her want to please her mom must be greater than her want to get away from me. Or maybe she thinks I’m going to back out? Think again, sweetheart.

“I’ll help too. I have nothing to do.” I smile and turn to Hannah, who is now staring at me like she is willing grenades from her eyes. I’m pretty sure if she could kill me and get away with it, she would.

“Yay! Okay, so here is the first batch of dough. The dough needs to be rolled out, and then you can use the cookie cutters to make shapes.” A rolling pin and every cookie cutter in the county is moved from the counter to right in front of us.

A second later, Anita plops a bowl of sugar cookie dough down in front of Hannah.

“Oh, and don’t forget the flour,” she grabs a canister of that from the cabinet and shoves it at me. “Always coat the dough with lots of flour, or it will stick to the pin and the table. Get to work, kids.” With a smile, she turns away from us and starts another batch, humming a Christmas carol as she mixes.

“I really, really don’t like you,” Hannah mutters under her breath as she grabs a handful of flour and sprinkles it over the countertop. Next, she takes the blob of dough and deposits it on top of the flour. Using her fist, she punches the dough to flatten it, I guess, or maybe just to get out some of her penned-up aggression toward me.

“Are you imagining the dough as my face?”

“Damn straight I am,” she shamelessly admits, giving it another good punch. Unable to resist, I take a pinch of flour

between my fingers and throw it at her face. She freezes, then slowly turns her head so she can full-on glaring at me. Her cheek is covered in the white powdery substance, and I can't help but grin from ear to ear.

Without ever breaking eye contact, she reaches for the flour container to grab the scoop inside. I barely have time to close my eyes before she catapults the entire scoop's contents into my face. When I open my eyes again, I find her gaze has softened, and her lips are pulled up into a smile.

"You're gonna regret that," I warn, just before all flour-hell breaks loose. Like little kids we both start to grab handfuls of flour and throw them at each other, knocking over the whole container in the process. Within three seconds, the kitchen is engulfed in one big cloud. You can't see anything but white powder.

Both of us are smiling and laughing, and for the first time since we were little, I feel like we're friends instead of enemies.

"Are you serious?" Anita yells through the chaos, causing both of us to pause mid-throw. "What in the world are you two thinking?"

Immediately, I feel bad. Like really, really bad. "I'm sorry, Anita." I frown, letting my hands fall down to my sides.

"He started it!" Hannah defends herself.

"*He started it?*" Anita asks, her voice so high-pitched it almost hurts my ear. "What are you, five? You two are acting like children. I don't care who started it. I want this cleaned up right now."

Anita storms out of the kitchen, frustrated with us, and now I actually do feel like a child. The white cloud settles around us, and when I peek over at Hannah, she looks just as disappointed in herself as I am. Actually, she looks worse than that, she looks like she's about to cry.

*Oh, god, please, don't cry.*

“This is my mom’s favorite time of the year, and we’re ruining it,” she mumbles in a low voice, flour falling off of her gray-looking hair like fresh snow.

“Let’s clean this up,” I offer, “and then we’ll act like adults the rest of the week. I know you don’t want me to be here, but I am, and I’m not leaving to spend Christmas alone. So, can we just call it a truce, at least for the rest of the time that I’m here?”

Hannah stares at me for a long hard second. I hold my breath, thinking she is about to say no for sure, but after another minute, her shoulders sag, and she lets out a defeated sigh.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I do actually agree with you. Let’s call it a truce, and we’ll at least try to get along for the next few days. It’s Christmas after all,” she huffs, holding out her powdery hand. “Truce?”

“Truce,” I repeat, taking her tiny hand into mine. Now let’s just hope we can keep it that way.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Hannah

**A**FTER WE SCRUBBED the kitchen and apologized to my mom, the rest of the day actually went pretty well. We helped Mom bake cookies. Nana, Laura, and Jake all came and joined in while Darla and my dad only came by to eat the cookies.

“Those all are really good, but I seriously don’t think I can eat another one. I’m so stuffed,” Dad says, patting his belly.

“I know how you feel,” I grunt, touching my own stomach.

“That’s what Christmas is about. Getting stuffed with good food until you can’t walk and have to pop open the button on your pants,” Nana tells me while knitting a scarf. Sitting on the recliner with her reading glasses on, she couldn’t look more like a grandma. A sweet old lady knitting her grandbabies things to keep them warm. It’s hard to believe that this is the same woman who, on a regular basis, says things like, “That’s a fine piece of ass” or “I’d hit that.”

“Dave, honey. Can you put some more wood into the fireplace, please?” Mom yells from the kitchen. She is making eggnog right now. Seriously, I don’t know why she doesn’t pull a bed in there, so she doesn’t have to leave that room at all.

“Yes, dear,” Dad replies and gets up from his recliner with a grunt.

“Welcome to Park Place, brother, and thank you for staying at my hotel, Jonas,” Jake gloats. I look over to the dining room table, where Jake, Jonas, and Laura are playing Monopoly. I declined the invite to a board game, being much happier cuddled up on the couch with my kindle. Darla also opted out to paint her toenails instead.

“Great, I’m broke... unless you want to give me a sibling discount and let me stay for free?”

“Pfft, you can pay double if you want.”

“I was getting bored anyway,” Laura admits. “Let’s call it a game. I would rather go and soak in the hot tub for a while.”

“Hot tub?” Darla perks up from the other end of the couch. “I’d love to sit in the hot tub with you guys.”

“Why don’t you kids all go,” Nana says, looking directly at me. Darla is already up from her seat and hovering over her suitcase, digging around for her bikini.

“My nails are dry now. I’ll be ready in two minutes,” she says, almost shaking with excitement.

“Yeah, come on,” Laura chimes in, “Hannah, get your bathing suit on.”

For a moment longer, I stay wrapped up under my thick blanket, clutching onto my kindle a little bit harder. Do I really want to get undressed, walk out into the freezing cold just to sit in some hot bubbly water for a while?

The word *no* is sitting on the tip of my tongue, but then Jonas walks past me and out of the room. My eyes are glued to his muscular back, his muscles moving under his sweater as he walks. My insides tingle a little at the thought, and I’m reminded of how he looks with much less clothing on, and suddenly, I’m on my feet.

“Fine, I’ll come too.” I push up from the comfort of the couch and follow Jonas up to our room.

“I’ll change in the bathroom,” he tells me after he finds his swimming trunks. “You can change in here if you want. I’ll knock before I come back out.”

“Sounds good,” I agree and fish out my own bikini from my bag. He closes the door between us, and I quickly undress and slip into my swimwear. Luckily, I shaved last night, so I have one less thing to possibly be embarrassed about.

A moment later, Jonas knocks on the door, “You good?”

“Yeah, come in.” The bathroom door opens, and Jonas’s hunky body fills out the wooden frame. His eyes roam my body the second he steps back into the room. I can feel them on me, burning a path of fire over my skin and deep into my belly as he takes in every inch of me.

“You look... *nice*,” he finally says. I can’t shake the feeling that *nice* wasn’t the word he meant to say. What else was he thinking? Hot? Sexy? Fuckable? ’Cause those are all the words running loose in my mind as I let my gaze trace over all his perfectly sculpted muscles.

“You look *nice* too,” I grin. “There should be robes and slippers in the linen closet.”

Standing there for a second longer, he turns and returns back to the bathroom to retrieve them and hands me one of each. I slip into the fluffy robe and white slippers. Watching him do the same.

“I think Jake was more excited about the hot tub than anything else,” Jonas tells me on the walk down.

“Yeah, it’s pretty amazing. Especially when it’s so cold outside. There is just something magical about sitting in the cool fresh air, but your body is all warm and cozy.”

Jonas just nods, and I don’t want to know what’s going on in his mind right now.

“Have fun, kids!” Mom yells from the kitchen as we pass, and I say a silent prayer, hoping that my grandma keeps her catcalls to herself as we walk outside.

Jonas opens the door for me, and a freezing cold gust of wind whips through my robe. Shit, this is cold. My nipples harden, and I start to shiver right away. Speed walking the five feet to the hot tub, I consider just jumping into the bubbly hot water but decide against it. I’d rather have a dry robe to return to the house in. As quickly as I can, I slip out of the robe and slippers and climb into the steaming tub.

As soon as I lower myself into the cozy water, every muscle in my body relaxes. Jonas is right behind me, and I have to force myself not to stare at him while he moves. All that hulking muscle and those perfect ridges.

“You’re staring again,” he points out with a sly grin.

“No, I’m not,” I blatantly lie. The door to the inside opens, and the rest of the gang floods outside to climb into the tub one by one. It’s a six-person tub. With two seats on three of the sides. Just like in the kitchen, Jonas chooses to take the seat next to me, leaving Darla to sit on her own.

Darla climbs in last, wearing a golden triangle bikini that barely covers all her bits and pieces. I catch Jonas glancing over at her, and even though I have no right, the nasty feeling of jealousy runs through me. In that moment, Jonas’s leg touches my thigh, and all those unwanted feelings melt away, tuning into something else entirely.

Shoving the tingling feelings away, I have to remind myself that even though I’m being nice to him, we’re still technically enemies. I’m pretty sure I have my feelings under control when he lifts his arm and places it against the back of the hot tub, millimeters away from my own skin.

Darla openly gawks at Jonas, sending him so many signals he has to know she’s interested by now. Ignoring them, I stare down at the bubbling water. Maybe I should’ve stayed on the couch with my book? Laura cuddles deep into Jake’s side, whispering into his ear. I see her hand moving to his crotch under the water. Jake’s face heats, and I roll my eyes. Can they not stop having sex for this trip?

As if Laura could read my mind, she straightens up and clears her throat. “Sorry,” she giggles.

“Ugh, that couch is so uncomfortable.” Darla starts rubbing her neck. “Honestly, I don’t know if I can sleep on that again tonight. Maybe you could switch with me, Hannah?”



“I thought you couldn’t sleep without the TV running?” I ask, trying not to show my anger toward her.

“I could probably turn my phone on YouTube or something. I can figure it out,” she smiles and bats her eyelashes. “So, you don’t mind, right? I can move my stuff after we get out.”

*What the hell?*

“I do mind, actually. I’m already settled in the room.”

Darla snorts, “Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.” She shoots Jonas a glance before getting out of the water, shaking her barely covered ass as she does. Ripping her robe from the hook, she pulls it on and storms inside, damn near slipping in the process.

“Okaaaaay,” Jake mumbles. “What the hell was that about?”

“I don’t know, baby, but I can’t take this anymore. Take me to our room,” Laura’s voice turns to silk as she damn near climbs onto Jake’s lap again.

Fake gagging, I grimace, “Eww, can’t you two stop?”

“Nope,” Laura snaps and halfway pulls Jake out of the hot tub. They scurry through the cold winter air and into the house, leaving Jonas and me alone. Though it’s colder than a witch’s tit out here, the air couldn’t be anymore electric between us.

“Why didn’t you trade with Darla?” Jonas asks his words bridging on curiosity.

*Oh, shit.* That’s a good question? Why didn’t I? I could’ve gotten rid of him. That’s what I wanted, right?

“I don’t like Darla, and I don’t ever want to give her what she wants. She’s used to getting her way, and sometimes it’s nice to show her you can’t always have what you want.” That’s not a lie.

Biting my lip, I ask him a similar question, “Why didn’t you offer to trade with her?”

“Cause I’d rather sleep with you.” His words shock me. Especially since they have two meanings. I know he meant, *sleep* with me, as in the same room, but his words have me fantasizing about a different kind of sleep entirely, one that involves a lot less clothing.

I feel my cheeks heat, and it’s not because of the hot water I’m sitting in.

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t offer because I would rather sleep in the bathtub than in a room with Darla.”

“Wow, and I thought I was your least favorite person in this house,” Jonas laughs. When the last chuckle runs through him, he turns to me with a somber smile. “Hey, I wanted to say sorry, for you know... being such an ass to you when we were younger. I was a total jerk, and I really don’t have an excuse for it. I’m just sorry.”

“Oh,” I say surprised because that’s literally the only thing that comes to my mind right then. “Ah, okay... I don’t really know what to say to that. I definitely didn’t think you would apologize or even care,” I keep nervously rambling on, “anyways, I appreciate you apologizing and—” Jonas cuts me off then, his lips gently pressing against mine.

I’m so shocked, I forget to close my eyes for the first second. His lips colliding with mine awakens so many feelings inside my body that for a moment, I’m simply overwhelmed. A bolt of electricity ripples through me, and I feel like I’m buzzing.

Then his lips start moving against mine, and my eyes flutter shut. My body melts into his touch, and when his hands find my hips, and he pulls me onto his lap, I let him. In that moment, I want nothing more than to sink into him, to become one.

His fingers trail along my back and shivers run down my spine. One of his hands makes it all the way up to the back of

my head, where he cradles me. Deepening the kiss, he holds my head in place, his fingers tightening in my hair, pulling on the strands. The moment my scalp stings from the pull, I am reminded of how he used to pull my hair when he was sitting behind me on the bus. How he tossed a toad at me and told me I was ugly. Every little bad thing he ever did to me appears in my mind.

As if someone poured a bucket of ice water over my head, I snap out of it. Pushing against his shoulders, I shove him away and climb off his lap. Water sloshes outside the tub as I move away from him. His eyes are wide like he doesn't understand why I suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" he asks his voice deep, and honeyed. It sounds like a sin, but I remind myself in an instant that this is nothing. Jonas is all games, all torment and pain.

Shaking my head, I get out of the water, ignoring the cold air that bites my skin. I dash into the house without even grabbing my robe. Leaving a trail of wet footprints behind, I run through the house, hoping that no one sees me. I can't believe this. I can't believe I just let Jonas Wilder kiss me, and even worse... I can't believe that I liked it.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Jonas

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, JONAS,” Anita smiles as she hands me a gift wrapped in festive wrapping paper. I set my cup of coffee down and take it from her, feeling horrible that I didn’t get anyone else anything.

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I tell her.

“I know I didn’t, but that’s not the point. I wanted to.”

“Well, thank you.” I set the gift down at my feet and watch as she hands out all the other presents. My eyes instantly gravitate toward Hannah, who is sitting on the couch stuck between Darla, Laura, and Jake. There’s a scowl on her face, and her arms are crossed over her chest. She looks like the unhappiest person in the room.

“It’s Christmas, turn that frown into a smile, Hannah,” Anita scolds. Hannah perks up then, plastering a fake smile onto her lips.

*Lips that I kissed.*

A part of me knows that I’m the cause for that look. I never should’ve kissed her, or even agreed to come here. I knew right away that it was going to be a mistake, and still, I did it.

The need to see her after all this time was too strong, the offer to stay here too good to pass up on. Lost in thought, I almost miss when everyone starts to rip into their gifts. Darla squeals when she finds out she got a gift card to one of her favorite shoe stores.

“Aunt Anita, thank you so much.” She jumps off the couch and wraps her arms around her, hugging her so hard, I swear, Anita is losing oxygen.

Laura is next, revealing beneath the wrapping paper a personalized wine set. Jake opens his gift, which is a gift card, and then all eyes are on Hannah, who unwraps her gift slowly, her eyes twinkling with actual excitement as she does.

She reminds me of a small child so excited to see what Santa brought in the morning. With the wrapping paper pulled away, a set of books come into view.

Her eyes grow to the size of the snowman cookies in the kitchen, “Oh my god, Mom, you didn’t... I don’t even know what to say.”

My gaze drops from Hannah’s shocked face and down to the gift in her hands. It’s a Harry Potter book, but judging by the way she’s acting, it’s not just any book.

“Of course, I did, sweetie. You love reading, and the Harry Potter books were what started your love affair with fiction.”

“Yeah, but how did you get these signed?” Getting up, she sets the books down on her seat like they’re newborn babies and walks over to her mother, wrapping her arms around her.

“Oh it’s nothing, you know I do anything to see you happy,” Anita says.

Our eyes collide as she hugs her mom, and I can’t help but smile at her. At her love for reading, at how beautiful she is. When everything settles back down, I open my gift, which is a do it yourself beer making kit. I was just talking about doing this right before we came up.

Smiling, I turn to Anita, “How did you know?”

“Oh, I have my ways,” she giggles and turns to Jake, giving him a wink. All I can do is laugh. I sip my coffee and watch as everyone finishes opening up their gifts. Deep in my soul, I feel as if I’m home as if I’m surrounded by the family I was meant to be a part of. Don’t get me wrong, I love my parents, but they aren’t always about for the holidays.

After a short while, everyone filters out of the room, everyone but Hannah and me. Snowfall picks back up outside

again, and I peek over at Hannah, who is nose deep in her brand new books. She's so damn adorable, it should be illegal.

"Stop staring at me," she mumbles under her breath, her gaze colliding with mine. Instantly, I can feel her lips on mine again. My cock starts to grow hard at the thought of doing that all over again.

"I'm not staring at you," I reply, sipping at my coffee. I should really switch to whiskey. It's already the afternoon, and everyone else is drinking and singing and eating.

"You're looking in my direction," and just like when we were kids, she sticks her tongue out at me.

"It's a free country, and why stick your tongue out at me? Is that supposed to scare me?"

"No, is your face supposed to scare me?" she taunts back. Her antics might be to irritate me, but they have the opposite effect. Instead, they make me smile, and smile I do, from ear to ear.

"I mean, if I bother you so much, then why do you stare at me all the time?" I shrug, deciding to play along with her little game. Her cheeks flame and she knows that I'm right. I've caught her staring at me more than once since our little kiss.

"I really don't like you..." She growls, slamming her book closed. With a heated glare in her eyes, she stands and walks over to me. "And if you ever kiss me again with those ugly lips of yours, I will..."

"Goodness gracious children, why don't the two of you just bang already? That's the only way this is going to end," Hannah's grandma yells loud enough that the whole house can hear, and I can't help myself. I start laughing, and so does Hannah. I'm not sure why, but the idea seems hilarious, especially since she couldn't even stand kissing me.

"I'm not kidding, bang and I promise all your problems will disappear," she waves her hands in the air like she's doing some type of magic.

“Okay, Grandma,” Hannah snorts, “did you get into Mom’s wine again?” She walks over and wraps an arm around her, guiding her back into the kitchen.

“Of course, honey, and I’ve got another bottle calling my name.” Shaking my head, I remain sitting by the window, watching the snow fall, wondering if maybe Hannah’s grandma is right. Maybe one hot romp in the hay would do us both good?



DAY GIVES WAY to night, and after a hearty dinner, we all retreat to the living room. Christmas music blares from the TV, and I find the tension between Hannah and me has evaporated. She still taunts me, and every time she gets up for a new drink, she intentionally walks past me swaying her ass in a way that beckons my cock toward it. Laughing and singing and drinking, we all become one. With each drink I pour myself, I start to wonder more and more if she’s thinking what I’m thinking? Getting up for another beer, I make my way into the kitchen, colliding with her small body as she’s exiting.

“Watch it, hunk of beef?” She smirks.

“Did you just call me a hunk of beef?” I lift an accusing brow.

“I sure did.” She sets her wine glass down on the island and narrows her gaze, mischief flickering in the depths. Before I realize what I’m doing, I’m reaching out to her, my fingers skating over her skin, before sinking into it to tickle her. As a kid, I remember tickling her so bad she peed her pants. Maybe we can relive that moment?

“Oh my god, no Jonas...” She squeals at the top of her lungs as I tickle her sides. She tries to escape me, but she’s trapped between the counter and my body.

“Take it back. I am not a hunk of beef...”

“But you...” I tickle more, giving her a stern look as she smiles, happiness pouring out of her like an overflowing sink.

“Remember that time I made you pee your pants?” I tilt my head to the side and pin her with a stare.

Her face turns serious for half a millisecond, “Jonas, I swear to God,” she barely gets the words out before I’m on her again, tickling her until she’s red in the face, with tears streaming down her cheeks. She laughs so hard that she even snorts a little when she sucks air back in, which only makes her laugh even harder.

“Oh, god, oh, god. Okay, okay, you’re not a hunk of beef.” She pants, finally, and I pull away, a smirk on my face. Touching her skin and being close enough to smell her sweet scent has encompassed me. I want her more now than I did ten minutes ago.

It must be the alcohol.

“Good, now that wasn’t so hard, was it?” I’m proud of my win as I grab another beer from the fridge.

“Bet you can’t shotgun that beer?”

“Do you know who I am, Hannah?” I tease.

“Do you know who *I am*?” She teases right back, and I’ll be damned if this doesn’t feel a little bit like flirting.

Grabbing a knife from the counter, I stab into the beer can and bring it to my lips before it can spray all over the kitchen. The cool liquid fills my mouth instantly, and I suck, swallowing every last drop till I crunch the can and bring my gaze back to Hannah.

“Do that a couple times, and you’ll be on your ass.” I burp.

“You’re disgusting...” Hannah snarls her nose, and she looks so cute. I want to kiss her again, run my fingers through her hair, feel every inch of her body beneath mine as I move in and out of her.

“Let’s do shots,” Hannah impulsively says next, heading to the cabinet to grab some shot glasses. Oh, god, does she know what she’s doing to me, to us?



“If you wake up in the morning and say ‘it’s all your fault, Jonas,’ I want you to look back on this moment, ’kay?”

“Psssh, shut up and help me find the shot glasses, hunk of beef,” she snickers, looking at me over her shoulder.

“Oh, you’ll pay for that...” I growl, smiling the entire way over to her.

I help her get the shot glasses out of the cabinet, and she sets them on the counter before turning to grab a bottle of spiced rum.

This close, I can feel the heat of her skin against mine, and I wish we had less clothing on.

She fills each glass haphazardly, leaving drops of rum on the counter as she goes to the next glass. When she’s done filling them, she shoves one at me and says, “Bottoms up,” before downing her own.

I grin and bring the shot to my lips. Squeezing my eyes shut, I down the shot, letting the burn resonate through me and warm my body from the inside out.

“Pussy,” she teases, “why did you have to close your eyes?”

“Not all of us are professional drinkers, sweetheart. I’m not much for liquor.”

Instead of replying, she refills our glasses. Shoving another at me, she waits till I’m ready to take mine. Our eyes lock, and I swear, I can see every memory we ever shared in her eyes. Why didn’t I ever tell her I liked her? That I wanted her to be my forever?

“1... 2... 3...” she counts down, her pink tongue flitting out over her bottom lip. Mmm, to taste those lips again. I barely snap out of my fantasy fast enough to take my shot with her. The burn of the rum is a little less the second time around, and as I’m wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, her grandma comes walking into the room.

“Shots? And you didn’t invite me? I’m wounded. Give Grammy one.”

My eyes bulge out of my head at her words, give her a shot?

“You sure?” I ask.

“Don’t worry about me, boy. I could drink men like you under the table back in the day.”

A deep chuckle leaves my chest, and Hannah complies with her grandma’s request for a shot. Pouring her a full one and sliding it over to her.

Hannah giggles, and her grandma winks at me before taking the shot like a college coed. *Holy shit. She just took the shot.*

Immediately she starts coughing, and Hannah reaches out to pat her on the back.

“You okay?” she asks, and as soon as her grandma opens her mouth to speak, something flies out of her mouth, and skids across the counter and onto the floor. For one entire second, I stare in confusion. *Was that... no way.*

“Grandma, you spat your teeth out.” Hannah starts to laugh as she walks over to where the dentures landed. I can’t help myself, the laughter inside of me can’t be contained.

My laughter causes Grandma to start laughing, and together, all three of us laugh.

Muffled, Grandma says, “Who needs teeth? Get me another shot.”

Hannah pours us all another shot, and as we take them, I wonder if she’ll remember how much fun we had tonight, or if she realizes how much fun we could have together.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Hannah

I WAKE UP slowly and painfully, very painfully. My head feels like it got hit with a baseball bat a few times, and just thinking about that makes my brain hurt even more. I don't move, not even my eyelids because I know every little thing is only going to intensify the pain.

*I'm never drinking again.*

Of course, I've said that many times before. How is it that you always forget how bad this hurts the next time someone offers you a drink?

Even with my eyes closed, I know it's daytime because I hear birds chirping outside. *Be quiet, stupid birds.*

Ignoring the wildlife and the rest of the outside world, I try to go back to sleep. Willing myself back into a dreamless sleep where the throbbing behind my eyes can't reach me.

"Ugh," someone groans next to me. It takes me a moment before realization settles in. Someone groaned *next to me.*

My eyes fly open, and I ignore the pain that comes with that. Despite the fact that I feel like someone just jammed a meat fork into my ear canal, I sit up straight. I scan the mattress next to me and realize that, indeed, someone is in bed with me. That someone being Jonas.

A scream lodges in my throat, the only thing stopping me from whaling like a banshee is knowing that everyone in the house would come to check to see what's wrong.

Jonas turns to face me, his hair sits in a disheveled mop on his head, and his eyes are barely open. My gaze trails down his bare chest, and only then do I realize that he might be naked under that blanket. I scoot a few inches away from him, the

soft comforter rubbing against my naked skin... *my naked skin?*

“Oh, hell, no!” I yell, grabbing the blanket and clutching it to my chest. “Why am I naked? Oh, god... did I... did we?”

Jonas props himself up on his elbow, completely unfazed by the situation. His lips tuck up into a sly grin. “What do you think we did?”

I try to rack my brain, what the hell did we do? My mind is so hazy, I only recall small bits and pieces from last night. Like a thousand-piece puzzle, I try to organize all the pieces, trying to see the big picture. I remember drinking, singing Christmas songs, some more drinking, and then... my grandma losing her dentures? The last thing I remember is dancing and then... nothing.

“I don’t remember. Are you naked?” I carefully ask.

“Why don’t you take a peek under the blanket and find out for yourself?”

“Ugh, you’re unbelievable!” Without looking over to him, I get up, pulling the blanket covering us off the bed as I go. Wrapping it around me, I dash to the bathroom. Slamming the door behind me, I pace across the small bathroom floor and try to recall the events from the night before.

*Shit! Did we? No. No! I would definitely remember that. Right?*

I drop the blanket to the floor and lower my hand between my thighs. I’m not sore, I don’t feel like we had sex, unless it was super gentle. Sucking in a deep breath, I try to calm myself. When I collect myself enough, I brush my teeth and take a quick shower. By the time I’m done and step back into the room wrapped in a large fluffy towel, Jonas is sitting on the bed completely dressed.

“We did not have sex,” he says. “When we came back to the room, you started taking off your clothes and asked me to cuddle with you.”

“I was drunk,” I say in my defense. I don’t question him at all because, in fact, I do like to cuddle when I’m drunk.

“So was I, nevertheless, I enjoyed it, and you seemed like you enjoyed it as well. You were like a little kitten rubbing yourself all over me—”

“Okay, stop, I get it,” I cut him off, holding my finger right in front of his lips. “This won’t happen again.”

Disappointment flashes across his face, but he nods anyway.

“I’m going to get some breakfast or better lunch,” he says, looking at his watch. “Meet you downstairs?”

“Yes, I’ll just get dressed, and then I’ll be down.” I watch him leave the room, clutching on to my towel a little tighter. I don’t know why I’m feeling so down all of a sudden, almost like I just broke up with someone. Must be the hangover messing with my head.



THE NEXT DAY, we all get up early to go tubing, and by early, I mean nine o’clock. We’re on vacation, after all.

“Is that what you are wearing?” I ask Darla on the way out.

“Yes, what’s wrong with my outfit?” She sounds seriously confused.

“You are wearing skinny jeans.” I look around at everybody else. All of us are wearing snow pants, thick jackets, and boots. The stuff I’m wearing is a tad big on me and completely mismatched colors, but at least I know I’m going to be warm.

Darla looks like she just stepped out of a winter edition fashion magazine. Her white fur boots are paired with a matching jacket, light pink gloves, and a fluffy scarf, even the earmuffs match. Her pale blue jeans are so skinny, I doubt she’ll be able to sit down without showing her ass crack.

“Didn’t you see the pants I laid out for you, dear?” My mom asks from behind me.

“Yeah, but they really didn’t look good on me,” Darla explains, not really caring. I roll my eyes so hard it hurts. We’ll see how much she cares about how she looks when her jeans are soaked, and she is freezing her ass off.

Dad has already blown up the tubes with the air compressor out in the shed. He hands each of us one of the rings, and we all get ready to walk up the hill. “Have fun, kids, I’m going to take your mom and nana to town for groceries.”

“Okay, bye, guys,” I wave as they all pile into the car. “And bring me some more marshmallows for the hot chocolate, please.” I grin, and my mom gives me a look that says as if I’d forget your marshmallows.

“How far is this?” Darla asks in a whiny voice. Of course, she starts complaining before we’ve even started.

“It’s a five-minute walk up the hill, then we’ll come back out right here,” Laura explains, pointing to the clearing next to the cabin.

“Ugh, five minutes? That seems so far,” Darla groans again. Instead of standing there, listening to her whine, I keep walking with my tube in tow. She is not going to ruin my day, neither is Jonas. I’m staying away from both of them. I’ve always loved tubing, and I’m glad it snowed enough for us to go now.

I basically run up the hill, leaving the rest of my family behind. Four and a half minutes later, I’m standing at the top of our makeshift tubing track. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve raced my sister down this hill, each time more fun than the last. We even built a little ramp, a few years back. I wonder if it’s still in place or if nature wiped it out over time. I guess only one way to find out.

Just then, I hear voices carrying up the small path I just climbed up, I get onto my tube and use my hands to push off. As I start picking up speed, the icy wind blows through my

hair. I can't stop myself from smiling as I start to forget the world around me.

Everything about this takes me back to a time when I had no worries, and I was just a kid that didn't have to think about boys, work, or how to get a new car. The world whooshes past me as I fly down the hill, my smile never falling.

About halfway down, I spot it. The ramp Laura and I built. Using the handles on the side of the tube, I steer to the right, heading straight for the ramp.

When I'm about five feet away, I notice that half of the ramp is sunk in, and there is no way I'm going to make it over it in one piece. It's too late though. I am too close and going too fast to do anything about it, let alone stop. All I can do is go with it and hope for the best.

Gritting my teeth, I hit the ramp at full speed, but instead of jumping up and back onto the track, I'm flying left and into a tree. I'm thrown from my tube, my foot catching on the tree trunk. A string of curse words leave my mouth before my body even registers the pain.

*Well, at least it wasn't my head that hit the tree.*

I lay in the snow and assess my situation. Trying to move my foot, I quickly realize that my ankle hurts like hell, and I don't know if I can walk down this stupid hill. Ugh, couldn't I have fallen *after* a day of fun? Did it really have to be on my first time down the hill?

Of course, it had to be, because the universe hates me!

Leaving my tube behind, I crawl up to the track just as Darla, Laura, and Jake zoom by me. I wave my arms, trying to get their attention.

"Hey! Guys!" I yell, but Darla is screaming so loud the entire way down that they can't hear me. *Great, just great.*

I punch the snow below me, frustration burning through my veins. When I catch someone else coming down the hill, I

start to wave my arms once more. I don't care that it's the one person I had planned to stay away from.

"Jonas!" I yell at the top of my lungs.

Immediately, his head snaps in my direction. As soon as he spots me, he digs his heels into the snow, his tube slowing down. When he comes to a stop, he gets off and walks over to me.

"You okay? Did you fall?" He seems genuinely concerned, so instead of giving him a snarky remark like *no everything is fine, I'm just chillin' out here*, I just nod yes.

"I tried to jump that stupid ramp, and it catapulted me into this stupid tree, and then I twisted my stupid ankle."

"Wow, that's a lot of *stupid*s," he points out, a tiny grin on his stupidly handsome lips. "Here, let me look at it."

Kneeling down, he tries to loosen my boot. It hurts so much I almost kick him with my other leg out of reflex.

"Maybe don't take the boot off right now," I growl, slapping his hands away.

"Hate to say it, but your tubing days are over. We can go back to the cabin to look at it. Maybe after we get some Advil in you. Can you manage to walk?"

Shrugging, I say, "I don't know. I'll try."

"Come on, I'll help you," he offers while looping his arm behind my back and pulling me up. I put all my weight on my good leg first and try to transfer some onto my bad one but stop right away when the pain gets to be too much.

"I don't think walking is going to happen. Maybe you can put me on the tube and push me down slowly?"

"And how the hell are you going to stop with only one leg? You want to run into another tree and hurt your other ankle?"

*Ugh, he has a point there.*



“I guess you can just leave me here for now. Maybe have my dad come with the four-wheeler when he gets back from town.”

Jonas gives me a look that says over my dead body.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m gonna give you a piggyback ride down the hill.”

“*Piggyback ride?* What are we, five? The last time you gave me one, you dropped me on my ass, and I had a bruised tailbone for weeks.

“Don’t be dramatic. Come on,” Jonas turns around and bends his knees for me to climb on his back. He can’t be serious right now? “Let’s go, princess, my feet are getting cold standing here.” Rolling my eyes and gritting my teeth at the same time, I climb onto his back. He wraps his arms under my legs, and we start down the hill.

“If you drop me, I will kill you,” I yell over the howling wind.

“You can try, baby, you can try...” he replies, hiking me up his back with a tiny lift that gets my heart pounding and my insides tingling.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Jonas

WITH EVERY STEP I take down the snowy hill, her body bounces on my back a little. I can feel the heat of her body seeping into my own. Her pussy is so close but yet so far away. *Shit*. She's hurt, I shouldn't be thinking about screwing her.

Shaking my head, I finish my descent down the hill and make it to the cabin in record time. Hannah doesn't say anything until we reach the house, and I take her into the living room, setting her down on the couch.

"Thank you," she says, tugging at her jacket.

"Of course, and let me help you." I grab her hands and move them out of the way. Unzipping the jacket, I help her out of it and then start on her snow pants. When I've got them unzipped and pushed halfway down, I move to her boots.

"Ugh, why do I feel like I'm going to hate this part?"

Pulling the boot off her un-injured foot, I toss it over my shoulder. It lands loudly. Very gently, I reach for her hurt ankle.

"Please, if you're going to slug me, try to hit my chin. I don't want to have to explain a black eye when I get back to work."

"Sure, I'll see what I can do," she grunts, speaking through her teeth. Her jaw clenches and her hands ball into tiny fists when I undo the boot.

"This part might hurt a little, but I promise to make it all better afterward," I tease, attempting to ease the tension.

"Just pull the damn boot off."

Without giving her a warning, I tug on the boot. Of course, her other foot comes up and collides with my forehead, sending me backward and onto my ass.

*Fuck.*

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry, Jonas.” She moves into a sitting position and reaches for me. Even with an injured ankle, she’s worried about me. Grabbing onto my head, she tugs me toward her, her fingers pressing against my forehead over the spot she just kicked.

She inspects it, while I inspect her face, my eyes glued to her beautiful pink lips. Since the night we kissed, I’ve wondered when the next time would be that we’d kiss again. As if she can sense me staring, her eyes drop to mine, then move over my face.

My heart pounds in my chest, and everything tells me to kiss her, but my need to make sure she’s okay overrides my need to kiss her in that moment, and I pull back. She releases me like I’m a hot pan, and as gently as I can, I lift her foot and push back the leggings she was wearing underneath the snow pants. Her ankle comes into view, and from what I can see, it’s swollen and most likely going to be bruised.

“I’m not a doctor, but I’m pretty sure it’s a sprain,” I tell her.

“Will I ever walk again?” She gasps dramatically, making me smile. Her sense of humor is out of this world, and her body, and lips, and Jesus... I need to go in the other room before I maul her alive.

“Yes, yes, you will. Let me get you some Advil, water, and then I’ll carry you up to the bedroom so you can rest.”

Disappearing into the kitchen, I take my time getting both things and also take off my outside gear. When I come back into the living room, I give her the meds and a bottle of water. She takes them both, and I turn, giving her my back while I kneel on the floor in front of her.

A second later, she climbs on, and I lift her, being careful not to bump her ankle as I bring her legs around the front of my body.

“I’m sorry about your forehead. I really didn’t mean to kick you.” She leans forward and whispers into my ear. My stomach twists into a nervous knot.

“You can kiss it all better if you want?”

“You wish,” she giggles.

We make it into the bedroom without a hitch, but as I turn to deposit her on the bed, I misjudge the space I have and end up smacking her head on the bunk bed.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I apologize.

“We’re a mess,” she laughs, and this time when I let her go, she lands softly against the mattress. I take a seat on the edge of the bed.

“Now we’ve both got head injuries.” I tap my forehead.

Hannah shakes her head, her eyes are bright as she looks up at me, licking her lips as if she’s hungry.

“Will you... will you stay?” she asks, and I swallow thickly. I should say no because I can feel the spark between us, and it’s going to start a forest fire if I stay. But when I look into her pleading eyes, I don’t find the strength to say no to her.

“I mean, yeah, but what do you want to do?”

“This...” she whispers before pouncing. Like a tiny kitten, she lunges forward and wraps her arms around my neck, tugging me forward and on her body. I barely catch myself as I land on top of her. With one hand on the back of my head, she is kissing me with so much urgency and need that I can feel what she’s feeling the moment her lips touch mine.

She’s like the rain after a drought, like a glass of water to a man who hasn’t tasted water in years, and I’m going to consume her, drink up every last drop.

Moving a hand into her hair, I deepen the kiss, needing more of her, wanting everything she is willing to give. Her hands become adventurous and move underneath my shirt, tracing the hard plains of my muscles. I revel in the feeling of her fingers on my skin, and peel off my shirt wanting her to touch every inch of me.

“I want you,” she pants into my mouth, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to regret this,” I whisper against her lips, tracing them with my own.

“Please,” she pleads, and I know I’m already too far gone to say no. Without blinking, I make quick work of our clothing, taking care not to hurt her ankle any more than it already is.

Once we’re both naked, I take one single second to look at her perfect body. Tiny waist, plump hips, and tits that are full, with little pink nipples. I want to suck them, to taste every inch of her flesh, and I will, eventually, but not right now.

“Get over here and fuck me,” she orders, and all I can do is grin.

“So bossy,” I kneel on the bed and spread her thighs apart, admiring the glistening of her folds, that tells me she’s already swollen and ready for me. I’ve wanted this since I was a teenager, to make love to her, to make her mine.

“Always, you should know that by now.” She takes her bottom lip between her teeth, and I swear, I almost come then. She looks so fucking sexy. Fisting myself, I give myself a couple strokes, realizing quickly that I’m missing something.

“Shit, I don’t have a condom. I didn’t expect to have sex while up here. So... I can pull out though,” I move over her body, my lips finding one of her hardened nipples. Swirling my tongue around the bud, she sighs and arches her back, pressing her breasts into my face.

“I’m on birth control and clean. You don’t have to if you don’t want to. Unless, of course, you have some STD you

know about. Do you?”

Releasing her tit with a pop, I knead the other breast, pinching her nipple between two fingers. “No, I do not have an STD, and of course, I want to come inside of you...” I let a hand roam over her body, down her belly, and to her mound. At the touch of my fingers against her folds, she spreads her legs wider, beckoning me closer as if she can’t get enough of me.

“Jonas,” she whines, her eyelashes fluttering. All I can do is smile while slowly sliding my fingers down between her wet folds. With two fingers, I enter her, stretching her tight entrance. Fuck, she’s so perfect. I can’t wait to claim her.

“Patience, sweet cheeks. I’ve got to make sure you’re ready for me.” Pumping in and out of her a couple times, I lick my lips, imagining what she will taste like on my tongue.

“Jonas, please. I-I need you.” She pleads, and this time my resolve snaps. Withdrawing my fingers, I climb back up to her, spread her legs, and center my length at her entrance. Staring into her eyes, I enter her slowly, so slowly, I clench my jaw and pray to fucking God that I don’t come right this second.

“Oh, god, it feels so good.” She gasps, her eyes falling closed.

“Open up, beautiful. I want to see your face. I want to look into your eyes and see how much you enjoy this.” And I do just that. As soon as her eyes open again, I start moving, pistoning my hips, thrusting deep, filling her tight channel with hard strokes. At the end of each stroke, I swivel my hips and watch as her eyes roll to the back of her head. I must be grazing her g-spot. *Fount it.*

“Jonas... I’m... shit...” She whimpers, biting my shoulder, probably to stop herself from screaming. Her thighs quiver, and I feel a flutter within her depths. My own pleasure is building, tugging me closer to the cliff’s edge.

“Come, come for me...” I growl into the crook of her neck while nipping at her throat. Like a rocket, she goes off, her

walls clamp down on me, making it hard to move, but I continue to thrust, my own release just on the horizon.

One stroke. Two strokes. Three strokes. “Fuck, I’m coming...” I hiss, and like a volcanic eruption, I explode. I feel like my heart is about to beat out of my chest. My entire body vibrates as I fill her tight channel with every single drop of anger, frustration, want, and need that have accumulated over the years. This is what it’s come down to.

Raising my head, I look into her eyes. Fuck me, I love that look on her. Flushed cheeks, chest rising and falling rapidly. Her hair is a mess, her lips are plump and slightly parted. She looks thoroughly fucked, but more than that, she looks happy, peaceful, and content.

Right then, I realize something crucial, I want this moment to happen again, and again. Opening my mouth, I go to tell her exactly what I’m thinking, but before a single word comes out, I’m interrupted.

“Hannah, sweetie,” Anita calls. I freeze, any euphoric pleasure evaporating in an instant. Hannah blinks, and the just-came glaze that filled her eyes a moment ago disappears. Brick by brick, I can see her walls coming back up, the girl I’m falling for slowly fading away.

“Hannah, are you okay?” The stairs creak as someone starts to climb them.

*What the hell do I do?*

## CHAPTER NINE

### Hannah

“**Y**ES, MOM, I’M okay,” I answer, doing my best to keep my voice normal, and make it seem like I totally didn’t just have sex. Oh my god, I just had sex... with Jonas.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asks again, the stairs creaking once more.

“Yes, Mom. I’m fine.” I keep my gaze on Jonas’s sweat clad chest. I can’t bear to look at him, and not because of something he did, but because of what I did. I let us cross that line. We went from friends to enemies to... What are we now?

“Oh, okay...Laura said she saw Jonas carry you up to the house.”

“Yeah, he did. I’m fine though...I just twisted my ankle. I’m going to take a bath and relax for a bit,” I yell back and pray that, that’s enough for her. The last thing I need is her barging in here, asking if we used protection. *Jesus*. As soon as I hear her descending the steps, I sag into the mattress.

“Thank fuck she didn’t come up here,” Jonas sighs into the air as he moves off of me. I feel strange at the loss of his body heat, and I don’t understand why. My heart does this strange pitter-patter in my chest.

Rolling away from him, I wince, suddenly reminded of my injured ankle. Stupid tube. Stupid tree. Stupid ankle.

“Did I hurt you?” Jonas questions, his voice soft and gentle. *Did he hurt me?*

“No,” I whisper, finally building up the courage to look up at him. Staring into his eyes, I can see every emotion running through him. Confusion, excitement, want and need. It all blurs together...becoming one, and the weight of each of those feelings slams into me. I drop my gaze to the floor.



In a second, he's in front of me, his fingers grasping onto my chin, forcing me to look at him. "Hannah, it's okay. What we did...it's okay. It doesn't mean anything unless you want it to mean something."

I chew on the inside of my cheek, indecision weighing heavily in my gut. The sex was hot as hell, I had never come so fast before, but...that didn't mean anything could come of this. Jonas's eyes burn into mine.

"I... I don't know. We hate each other, don't we?"

Jonas shrugs and then grins at me, "After what we just did, I'm not sure. Plus, I never hated you." My cheeks heat and a slow simmering fire builds in my center. I can feel the wetness of his release against my thighs. Ugh, I need to clean myself up, but there is no way I'm going to be able to stand for a shower.

Releasing me, he presses a kiss to my forehead and then helps me to stand.

"Let's take a shower." He says, and I couldn't be more relieved that he's going to help me. Using him as a crutch, I hobble to the bathroom. Keeping a firm grip on my hip, he turns on the hot water, and we wait for the water to get hot. Once the room starts to fill with steam, we step into the shower together, the hot water spraying against my skin.

I lean against the wall while Jonas squirts some soap on a washcloth and starts to wash my body from head to toe. The entire time, I watch him with a mixture of awe and disbelief. No way is this the same guy I've hated for so many years. The guy who bullied me and embarrassed me over and over again when we were kids. It's like night and day.

Now we're in the shower together, his gentle hands roaming all over my body, taking care of me in a way no one else has before. With a lazy smile on his lips, he takes his time caressing every inch of flesh.

My body is humming, completely relaxed, the pain in my ankle almost forgotten. I know I should keep my mouth shut

right now and enjoy the moment, but I can't help myself. I'm curious, and I need to ask this, even if it ruins everything good that just happened.

Looking up at him through my lashes, I ask the burning question, "Jonas, why were you such an ass to me when we were younger?"

His smile vanishes at the reminder, and my heart fractures in my chest at the image. Damn it, I already regret saying anything. I should've just kept my mouth shut. Looking me in the eyes, a somber expression overtakes his features.

"Honestly, I don't have a great excuse. I kind of always liked you."

*Liked me?* That makes no sense.

"You had and still kind of do, have a terrible way of showing it."

Flashing me a dimpled grin, he responds, "I know. In middle school, I just wanted you to pay attention to me, and then... in high school, when I realized it, you already hated me, it was like what the hell is the point now?"

Frowning, I ask, "So, you took a picture of my boobs and showed it to everybody to embarrass me?" Jonas blinks slowly before his gaze widens as if he hadn't realized what I had asked right away.

"What? No...God, is that what you think? That I took that photo to show everyone?"

*Kinda.* I shrug. "I mean, what else am I supposed to think?"

Jonas smiles, his eyes softening, "Hannah, that tit pic was my prized possession. I took it, so I could hold on to that moment. I didn't think I would ever see those glorious boobs of yours again, so I kept the picture. I never planned on showing it to anyone! Stupid Erin saw it by accident, and then it just blew up into this big mess before I could do anything to stop it."

“Why did you end up showing it to the rest of your friends?”

“I didn’t. Erin stole it from me and started showing it around, someone made a copy of it and you know the rest.” Yes I do, the rest being that every guy in school had a picture of me changing into my bathing suit behind a tree.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean or that to happen. I swear.”

I let his words sink in. I guess this is better than what I have been thinking all these years. Still, it’s pretty messed up, and when he says prized possession, I can’t help but wonder if that’s code for spank bank.

“Well, if it weren’t for that, I would have probably hated you a lot less.”

Jonas’s face falls. “Yeah, I still kind of hate myself for it, but I can’t go back and change what happened.”

We finish our shower together, and Jonas helps me dry off and dress. The entire time I’m thinking about the conversation that we just had. How he wished he could go back in time and change what happened. Does that mean he still likes me? I push the thought away. No point in thinking about something that will never work.

Despite our past and what happened between us today, Jonas and I are polar opposites. It doesn’t matter that the sex is great. Some things you just can’t get over.

“Ready?” Jonas asks. I nod, listening as the commotion from downstairs filters up the stairs. Everyone is in the house now, and I already know that as soon as we enter the living room together, everyone will be looking our way, and making assumptions.

Slowly, and carefully we descend the stairs, Jonas keeping an arm wrapped around my waist, and giving me his firm body to lean on.

“There you two are,” my mother greets us with a smile.

Darla looks up from inspecting her nails and over to us, “Why are you limping?”

“I was coming down the hill, and a tree was in my way. Everyone zoomed past me. Probably because people were distracted by you screaming like a banshee. Jonas was the only one who stopped to help.” Darla rolls her eyes and goes back to inspecting her nails. Does she have some kind of love affair with her nails, or is she simply obsessed?

Jonas helps me to the couch, and I take the spot next to Grandma, who is working on her third scarf. Taking a pillow, I situate myself, so my foot is elevated. As soon as I’m seated, he walks away and out of the room. This strange emptiness fills my heart at the loss of his body being near mine.

I shouldn’t want him. I should hate him. And yet, my body and my heart are acting like he’s of importance to me, and I don’t understand why.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my grandma smiling. Twisting toward her, I give her a confused look. Then she winks, and her eyes dart to the door Jonas just walked through.

*She doesn’t know...does she?*

I swallow, my cheeks burning up to my hairline. Shaking my head, I try and ignore her prying eyes, but there isn’t any point in denying it. When Grandma knows something, she knows.

Leaning into my ear, she whispers, “At least tell me if it was good? Is he big? I bet he is.” She pauses, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from smiling.

“He is, isn’t he?” Grandma smiles so wide, I swear, I’ve never seen her face light up that much. “I knew it. I knew he would be.” She says a little louder, and I’m forced to lean over and answer her.

“Shhh, Grandma. I don’t want everyone to know...”

“Know, what?” She winks, “It’ll be our little secret, kiddo.”

It'll be mine and Jonas's too because there is no way we can have sex again. There is no way feelings can be developing between the two of us. And yet, what I'm feeling seems like a whole lot of feelings.

My gaze darts across the room, stopping on Jonas as he returns to the room with a first aid kit and a bag of ice in his hands. Kneeling right in front of me, he gently takes my foot into his large warm hands.

"I'm going to at least wrap it, and then we can put some ice on it. Keep it elevated, and you should be back to normal before you know it."

"Okay, doctor," I tease. He winks at me, and only then do I realize that I don't even know what exactly he does. I already know he is not a doctor, but what exactly does he do? "Wait, if you are not an actual doctor, what are you? A nurse?"

"No," he laughs as he starts wrapping my foot. "I work in finance, investments, and stuff like that. I did play football, remember? I know all about sprains, bruises, and swollen ankles."

"Sounds boring... your job, I mean."

"And I'm guessing your job is very exciting?"

"Kind of, yeah, or at least, it is when I have a lot of clients." Which I haven't had a lot of lately, hence my falling apart piece of crappy car. "I have my own business. Graphic design," I explain.

"Oh, phew, for a moment there, I thought you were a stripper or a hooker."

"Ha, ha," I slug him in the arm playfully, and he rubs it like I actually hurt him. Then he puts the ice on top of my freshly wrapped ankle and gets up.

"There you go, all done," he gives me a panty-melting smile before walking over to the other couch and sitting down next to Jake. They fall into a conversation, and I pull a blanket over my arms, getting warm and cozy. I think about grabbing

my kindle and reading but decide that staring at Jonas is just as much fun.

*Damn it.* He's so handsome, and perfect, and sweet, and what the hell am I going to do? We're supposed to hate each other, so why does it feel like we're falling in love?

## CHAPTER TEN

Jonas

**I** KNOW THE exact moment realization hits me... this is going to be the last night I'll have with Hannah. It's New Year's eve, and tomorrow everybody will go back home, carrying on with their lives, and me, I'll go home too, back to a life that will not include Hannah.

Leaning against the wall, I look out of the window, watching as more snow falls from the sky. When I check the time, I notice it's almost midnight. All night, everyone has been having a great time, eating cookies, drinking cider, talking, and laughing. Jake and Laura are on the couch, making out like teenagers. Hannah's grandma is dancing, like no one is watching in the center of the room.

I stand on the sidelines like a loser wondering what the hell I'm going to do now.

Ever since Hannah and I had sex, things have grown hotter. I can't be in the same room as her without noticing her presence. Without feeling her in my bones. Wherever she is, my body gravitates toward hers. I wish I could say the feeling is mutual, but Hannah has been distant toward me.

Because she couldn't climb up the bunk bed, we've been sleeping together in the bottom bunk. I wanted to make sweet love to her, but she's shut me down every time. However, she has let me hold her every night, and I was perfectly content with that. If I could just hold her for the rest of my life, I would be a happy man.

"So, you and Hannah?" Darla saunters up to me, dragging me out of my fantasy.

"What do you mean?" I ask like I didn't know exactly what she was talking about.

“Isn’t she the reason you didn’t want anything to do with me?” Her eyes glitter with the chance of a possible tryst. “Because if you and Hannah aren’t a thing, I would like you to kiss me at midnight,” she says seductively, but all I can think of are Hannah’s lips.

Speaking of Hannah... she hobbles in from the kitchen, our eyes collide, and every thought of the woman beside me evaporates. What was I saying? I gulp as Hannah starts walking toward me.

“That’s what I thought,” Darla huffs and walks away, but all my attention is on the brown-haired angel heading my way.

All over again, I’m that teenage boy who wanted her so badly, he would do anything to get her attention. Only difference is, now I’ve got all of her attention.

“Why you standing over here all by yourself?” she asks once she’s closer. I don’t even think as I reach for her, wrapping a protective arm around her, I pull her closer. Blinking slowly, she places her hand on my chest and peers up at me, an unreadable expression on her face. Her lips part slightly, and I zone in on those plump, kissable pink lips.

“Ohhhh, watch, this is my favorite part. When the ball drops and the confetti goes everywhere...” Anita squeals in excitement, the sound of the countdown clock ticks down on the TV. I look from Hannah’s eyes down to her lips. I want to kiss her so badly. *No*. I need to.

Cradling the back of her head, I lean in and slant my lips against hers just as the clock strikes midnight. The room erupts with hollers and joyful yells while my own heart beats furiously inside of my chest. All their joy and excitement zings through me.

Pulling away, I lean my forehead against Hannah’s, both of us breathing heavily. Her eyes drift closed, and we stand there, holding each other for a long moment. Both of our families are probably staring at us, definitely talking, maybe even



snickering, but I couldn't care less. All that matters is us. I'd happily drown out the rest of the world for Hannah.

I know then that it's now or never. If I want a chance, I have to go for it. Like my dad always said, you can't win if you don't hit the ball.

"Hannah, I want to ask you something..." I try and hide the nervousness from my voice. Her eyes flutter open, and she watches me curiously.

"What is it?" she asks.

"I've always cared about you, even when it seemed like I didn't, I know I fucked up when we were kids, but that is all in the past now. I was just wondering if maybe we could see each other again. Have dinner? Go for drinks? Get to know each other?"

*There I asked... no going back now.*

Pulling away, Hannah's gaze drops to the floor. Time seems to slow down, It feels like an eternity passes without her saying anything. She looks as if she's in pain, and deep down in my gut, I know I'm not going to like what she says.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Jonas, but this..." She gestures between us, "It isn't anything serious. It can't be. Yes, we've had fun the last few days, and I enjoyed it. I'm glad we became friends..." *Friends...* I didn't think the simple word could hurt so much.

"Hannah..." I say her name like a prayer, but every other word gets stuck in my throat.

Then she continues, "I have a job when I return home, and so do you. I don't even know where you live. Plus..." She swallows, her throat bobbing. Before she says the next sentence, she looks up at me, something resembling sadness and remorse flickers in her eyes.

"You hurt me too badly. It might have been a long time ago, but that doesn't change what happened. Our past will

never change. We can't build anything serious on how our relationship started."

And just like that, she takes my heart, throws it on the floor, and stomps on it. I nod but don't say anything. I don't want to be a dick to her. I've done enough of that in the past. I've hurt us both by being an asshole. Taking a step back, I force my gaze to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Jonas," Hannah whispers, her voice filled with pain.

"Don't be. I deserve this... I really do." I force a smile and turn and walk away. So much for a new year, with new beginnings. Spending the rest of the night in the corner nursing a beer, I watch Hannah from afar, knowing this may very well be the last time I see her for a long, long time.



I'VE BEEN BACK at work for three days, and I can't stop thinking about Hannah. What is she doing? Is she thinking about me like I've been thinking about her? I should just let it go, she already gave me her answer, and she's not going to change her mind.

She has every right to hate me, and it was wrong for me to even ask. Before I left, I asked Laura where Hannah lives, just to find out she is three hours away from me. Just another reason why we would never end up together.

I try not to mope as I work through the day. I'm about to go and get another cup of coffee when my intercom rings. It's probably my secretary reminding me of the meeting tomorrow afternoon. Even though I don't want to, I push the button and answer the call.

"Yeah?" I know I'm being an ass to my secretary, but I just can't bring myself to even try.

"There is a woman here for you, Jonas."

*Ugh.* I can't deal with one of my exes right now, but if I have her send whoever that is away, she'll just come back or

call me later.

“Let her through.” Better to nip it in the bud now, so she’ll leave me alone for good. A moment later, a soft knock fills my office.

Because the blinds are closed, I can’t see who it is, so I get up, cross the room and pull the door open. Opening my mouth, I attempt to say something, anything, but I’m too shocked to make my tongue work.

*What? How? I don’t understand...*

Right there standing in front of me, is none other than the girl I’ve been thinking about every day since I left the cabin. She smiles, her beautiful eyes pierce mine, and I swear, if she is here to hand my heart back to me, I won’t survive a second round.

“Ah... hi...” She wrings her hands in front of herself, nervously.

“Hi...” Is all I can manage to say at this moment.

“I umm...” She blows out a long breath, “I came here to tell you that I’ve changed my mind. When I got home, I realized that people make mistakes, they do bad things, but that doesn’t always make them bad people. We were just kids back then, and you’ve grown up since high school. You showed me that week at the cabin that there is more to you than our past. You can be kind, sweet, and tender. I really didn’t believe you at first, but I guess you really do like me, and I kind of do like you...like you a lot.”

I lift a hand to my cheek and pinch myself. “Is this real?” I speak out loud, which causes Hannah to giggle softly.

“Yes, it’s real.”

I can’t. This has to be a dream. I’ve fallen asleep at my desk, and my boss is going to come into the room at any second. I seriously cannot believe that she is standing here, right outside my office, confessing her feelings to me.

“I... I’m sorry. I’m shocked. I didn’t think you would...” I’m flabbergasted, and my shock shifts to something else when Hannah pushes up onto her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine. Everything in the world fades away. It doesn’t matter that we’re at my work, or that I’ve screwed up in the past. All that matters is that we’re together, that she is here, and willing to give us a chance. A chance that I know, given our past, I don’t deserve.

Pulling away, I cup Hannah by the cheeks and whisper against her lips, “I promise to make this work. I might mess up, but I will never hurt you again. Never.”

“I know you won’t, Jonas, you aren’t the same dumbass you used to be, you’re a gift, the Christmas present I secretly wished for this year.”

Grinning, I ask, “Did you just call me a Christmas present?”

“Yes, it’s either that or a hunk of beef, which would you prefer?”

“I’d prefer to be yours, only yours.” I shove a strand of hair behind her ear. This is it, we’re doing this, we’re going to try. I can’t believe I thought this year was going to be a crappy one, turns out, Santa might just be real.

He did end up giving me the best gift of all...

## EPILOGUE

Hannah

*One year later*

**E**IGHT, SEVEN, SIX... Everyone is counting down for the new year. The family is back at the cabin like every year, but it feels different this time.

Five, four, three... Jonas is looking at me, grinning from ear to ear, and my lips start to tingle, knowing that he's going to kiss me at midnight.

Two, one... I pucker my lips and close my eyes, waiting for the kiss to come, but a heartbeat passes, and nothing happens.

The room goes silent. Instead of the normal hollering of *happy new year*, we are blanketed in silence. I blink my eyes open, ready to ask what is going on, but my tongue turns to concrete when I find Jonas in front of me, but instead of standing, he is down on one knee.

*Oh shit...*

My eyes fall to the small velvet box nestled against his palm. The large tear-shaped diamond reflects every color of the Christmas lights around the house.

“Hannah... I know our story didn't start in happiness, but I hope it ends with it. The past year has been the best of my life, and I was hoping you would do me the honor of becoming Mrs. Wilder?”

My lips part, and I gasp. *Oh my god.*

For a moment, I can't speak. I'm just so shocked. We've been doing great, amazing actually, living together, and being a couple, but I can't say that I was expecting *this*, even with as great as things have been.

“Say yes,” my grandma slurs behind me. The room erupts with laughter, and I peer around the room and find everyone is smiling, everyone except Jonas, who looks like he’s about to puke.

“Yes!” I blurt out, not wanting to torture him any longer. “Yes, yes. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Thank fuck!” He lets out a heavy sigh and pushes up off the floor to stand. In one swift move, he has me wrapped up in his arms, pulling me into his chest, his lips finding mine. As the kiss deepens, I get lost in him and forget everything around us.

I can’t believe I’m getting married to Jonas Wilder.

Someone clears their throat next to us, breaking up the moment. Pulling away, I find my father is standing a few feet away, glaring at Jonas. “I said you can marry her, not mount her in the living room.”

“Oh, shut up, Dave, and let the kids be.” My mom giggles, elbowing my dad in the ribs playfully.

“Go ahead and put the ring on her finger already.” My grandma walks up, brushing her shoulder against Jonas’s. “And congrats, by the way. I knew you guys were meant to be.”

“You’re the only one,” I mumble, and everyone breaks out into laughter again.

The rest of the night is filled with congratulations and well wishes. The ring fits snugly on my finger, which makes me wonder how he got my ring size to begin with.

“Did you measure my finger while I was sleeping or something?” I ask while plopping down on his lap.

“Maybe.” Jonas chuckles and then turns serious. “What else was I supposed to do? Ask and ruin the surprise?”

“Speaking of surprises…” My cheeks burn. “I might have one waiting for you upstairs.”

“Oh?” Jonas perks up, and I can feel the thick organ hardening between his legs. “Let’s go see that surprise.” Before I can reply, he stands up, pulling me right along with him. “We’re gonna call it a night, guys.” He informs the rest of the family while rushing toward the stairs.

I don’t even attempt to dig my feet into the steps, and instead, let him drag me up the stairs. When we reach the bedroom, he opens the door and walks in.

Turning to me, his brow furrows. “Where is the surprise?”

All I can do is grin as I press my palm to his firm chest, forcing him to step back. He’s still looking at me with confusion, but he connects the dots when I grab the doorknob and pull it closed behind me, turning the lock into place.

When I face him again, he’s smirking like he knew all along.

“Did you figure out your surprise?”

“You. You’re my surprise, aren’t you?” He smiles and reaches for me, but I bat his hands away and push him back onto the bed. Looking up at me, there is a seductive shine in his eyes, and I latch onto it.

I nod and grip the hem of my shirt, tugging it up and over my head. The shirt falls to the floor, and I slip my thumbs into the waistband of my yoga pants and shove them down my legs. When I look up, I find Jonas’ eyes bulging. Clearly, the Christmas red bra and matching panties did their job.

Jonas licks his lips, and I can see his pulse beating in his throat, his hands fist the sheets, and the distinct bulge in his jeans makes my mouth water. Inching closer, he again reaches for me, but I shake my head.

“As your future wife. I want to show you how much I appreciate you... I want to suck your cock.” Jonas’s head tips back, and the muscles in his throat tighten.

Wedging myself between his spread legs, I sink down to my knees and reach for the button of his jeans. Jonas looks

down at me, his eyes hooded.

“Fuck.” He hisses through his teeth.

I unbutton his jeans, and he lifts his ass, helping me to get them, as well as his boxers, down his legs. His hard cock is standing at attention, and my core clenches in anticipation. Jonas leans back on his elbows, and I sink my nails into his thighs while leaning forward to suck the thick mushroom head into my mouth.

“I swear to god, I am the luckiest man in the world.” Jonas groans into the room.

I suck the head a little harder, eliciting a slew of curses from his mouth. If I could smile, I would. I lick him like a lollipop, up and down, taking him deeper into my mouth, gagging around his length when he hits the back of my throat.

He cradles my cheek, watching me with a haze of lust in his eyes. I’m soaked, my core tightening, my nipples as hard as diamonds.

I pull back and move to take him back into my mouth when his hand drops from my cheek and presses against my shoulder. My eyes dart up to his, and I find him shaking his head.

“I’m close to coming, and I want to be inside of you when I do,” Jonas rasps.

I nod, and my stomach swarms with butterflies. Tugging his shirt over his head, he tosses the fabric away, and then he’s on me. His fingers sink into my hair, and he guides me forward, kissing me with a red hot need. A soft whimper escapes from my lips between our kisses. Jonas swallows each sound I make. I’m so caught up in him that I don’t even realize he’s shoved the straps of my bra down and is pushing the cups of my bra away to expose my breasts until the cool air kisses the pebbled tips.

“Oh god,” I hiss, writhing against his hard cock.



I'm wearing nothing more than a thong, so it wouldn't take much effort for him to slip inside of me. Jonas pinches a nipple between two fingers, and my hips start to move all on their own, my soaking center becoming slicker by the second.

"I want you like this forever... writhing and desperate for my cock."

I grab a fistful of his hair and tug his head back. "Fuck me, Jonas."

Something flashes in his eyes, and I can't pinpoint what it is. His fingers skim down my backside, and the moment he makes contact with the fabric of my thong, he grabs it, pulling it hard enough to snap it.

I let out a small gasp that slowly turns into a moan when I'm lifted and dropped down onto his thick cock. My entire body quivers and my lips part. It feels like heaven and hell have collided within me. It's never been this hot between us, but I'm not complaining.

Fisting my hair in one of his hands, he uses his other to hold me in place, his fingers digging into the flesh at my hip. Then he starts to move, his thrusts are hard, deep, intense, and all I can do is grip onto his shoulders to stop myself from flying into the wall.

"You feel amazing. I want you to come... to squeeze the release right out of my balls." Jonas grunts, each time his cock hits the back of my channel. "Come for me, Hannah." I can hear the plea in his voice, and I can't help myself.

I have to give in to his demand because it feels like I might die if I don't.

Every muscle in my body tightens, and I bear down, clenching his length so tightly all he can do is follow right behind me. He erupts like a volcano, his sticky hot semen filling me to the brim. Falling back onto the bed, he wraps his arms around me, and I press my ear to his chest; the heavy beat of his heart and my own breathing are the only two things I can hear.

After a minute, I whisper, “How was that for a surprise?”

I can’t see his face from this position, but I can tell he is smiling, “It was the best surprise ever, and I can tell you, it won’t be long till you’re pregnant if you keep up these kind of surprises.”

“Oh, is that right?” I grin.

I don’t want a baby yet, but soon, probably after we tie the knot.

“Of course. I can’t wait to put a baby inside of you and make you my wife. Accepting the invitation to come here was the best choice I ever made.”

I couldn’t agree more. We were sworn enemies, neither of us suspecting that love could possibly bloom, but we were wrong. Now, I couldn’t see myself without Jonas.

“I love you,” I whisper, drawing a heart against his pec.

“I love you too,” he whispers back, and I know I’ve found my forever, and always.



Thank You for reading This Christmas by C. Hallman. For more steamy romance, check out [THE HATE VOW](#).

WHEN THE SNOW MELTS

ALTA HENSLEY

## CHAPTER ONE

*MOUNTAIN LIVING IS the best living.*

I remember the words carved into a sign that hung over the reception desk of Mill Creek Resort. And as a child, visiting the 1930s mountain resort that consisted of over twenty cabins, nestled on thirteen acres of wooded perfection, I truly believed those words to be gospel. There was no better place to be than in the Lassen National Forest, living in a log cabin, surrounded by evergreen giants at a family-run resort.

“We aren’t used to having guests in the off season,” the young woman checking me in said. I saw from her nametag, that her name was Ellie. “Are you sure you know what you’re getting yourself into?”

I nodded as I signed the paperwork. “Yes. I used to visit here all the time as a kid. I also got your emails warning about the snowstorms and being buried in when they come. But frankly, it’s exactly what I need right now in my life. No escape.”

“Two months is a long time,” she said. “But I’m happy you’re staying. It’s just me and my brother, Ethan, here in the winter usually, but I really want to go visit our parents this year. I hated the idea of leaving him completely alone, so I feel a lot better knowing there will at least be another human here just in case.” She looked at me and added, “It said in your email that you’re an author writing a book while here. What’s your name so I can look for one of your books?”

“Jade Breken,” I answered, trying not to blush at the attention. It always seemed odd when people wanted to read what I wrote.

She scribbled my name down on a Post-it, and reached for the key with a carved mountain lion keychain to my cabin and handed it to me. She picked up a walkie talkie and spoke into

it. “Ethan, our guest—Jade Brecken—is here. I’m having her go to cabin six.”

A man’s voice came back and said, “I’m on my way there.”

Ellie looked at me. “I don’t know if you remember how to get to cabin six, but go down this road and you’ll see it,” she said as she pointed toward the right. “It’s the only one that has firewood stacked up outside. Out of all of our cabins, I feel this one has the best view, and if you listen closely, you can hear Mill Creek flowing. That is, until it freezes over, which shouldn’t be long from now.”

I nodded with a smile. “I remember.”

I hopped in my car and drove the short distance to the cabin. I could have walked there if it weren’t for my luggage. And as I pulled up and took it all in, it was like stepping back in time. Nothing had changed at all.

Log cabins lined up along a dirt road, evergreen bushes all around, and squirrels running up and down the bark of the massive pine trees.

“Well, what do you think?” a deep voice asked from behind. “Is it how you remembered?”

I turned to see a tall, denim-clad man approaching. The setting sun behind his body formed a silhouette, keeping his appearance a mystery. Before I could get a good look at him, he was opening the hatch of my car and removing the suitcases. His tattered baseball cap with the words *Mill Creek Resort* scrolled across in forest green obscured my view even more.

Without getting a good look at the man, I turned my attention to the place I would be staying in for the duration of my winter season. There was no denying the rustic cabin had charm with its small wooden porch, cedar logs perfectly chinked, and gingham curtains framing the double-paned windows.

I smiled as memories of my childhood came rushing in. “Yes, it’s just like I remember it.” I tried to glance at the man again, but he was still not in clear sight unless I made it obvious I was trying to check him out. “You’ve taken really good care of the property. I don’t know why, but I expected it to be a little more worn down. Older.”

“Family owned, means family pride,” Ethan casually countered.

“Is there strong Wi-Fi?” I asked. I had made sure there was at least some sort of Wi-Fi before booking, but I hoped it wouldn’t run at turtle speed.

“Yes, it has Wi-Fi,” he answered as he began to walk toward the cabin with all of my luggage under his arms. “But I’ll give you the password for my personal one. It’s stronger, and since it sounds like you plan to be out here during the upcoming storms, you’ll thank me for it.”

I let out a sigh of relief knowing I would at least be able to plug in my laptop and get some work done while I was here. It wouldn’t be like living in the eighteen hundreds at least. Yes, I needed to get a book written, but I didn’t want to be completely off the grid.

As I crossed the threshold of the cabin, I couldn’t help but feel at ease and instantly cozy with the room I would be living in. The theme of the décor was definitely *Mountain Living*. There was a log-framed queen size bed covered with a handmade quilt and embroidered pillows stacked neatly on top. The fabric had deer, bears, and pinecones covering it. The hardwood floor had a thickly woven circular rug placed in the center of the room. There was a small, wooden, two-person dining table and chairs that looked as if they were custom made. To the right of the bed was a large gingham armchair with an old-fashioned reading light next to it. The dresser’s shabby-chic appearance made it obvious it had been passed down from generation to generation. An antique mirror hung right above. The walls were cedar logs, and landscape pictures of the resort were strategically placed throughout. In the

corner of the room was an old, iron, wood-burning stove that had obviously seen many years. It added to the rustic charm of the small cabin. A smile escaped my lips, and I was in awe knowing I had made the right decision in coming here. The room was warm, inviting, and would serve me well.

“Oh... it’s everything I had hoped it would be,” I exclaimed.

For the first time since his arrival, Ethan turned around and fully faced me. Light blue eyes met mine, and a smile formed on his lips. A faint scar crossed his sun-kissed cheek, giving him a rugged masculinity I had never seen in a man since my childhood coming here. Broad shoulders, lean hips and tight muscles towered over me. Mountain living had treated him well.

“I’m glad you like it. It’s one of our smaller cabins, but it’s my favorite out of all of them,” he said warmly, never taking his eyes away from mine. “It’s nice to meet you.” He reached out his hand for me to shake.

I took his hand lightly and felt an odd tingle rush through my body as his work-worn hand encircled mine. “Nice to meet you, but actually this isn’t the first time we’ve met. It’s been forever, however.”

I could feel the blush forming on my cheeks. How such a simple greeting was causing me to feel like a high school adolescent, amazed me. I would be lying if I didn’t admit that I always had a little bit of a weakness when it came to mountain boys. They all had that woodsy, down-to-earth, active, and genuine vibe. They all liked to hike, fish, loved nature, and enjoyed the simple things in life like how a sunset looked over the tops of sugar pine trees.

“I always loved coming here as a child.” I smiled at him. “I remember playing with you and your sister when I came.”

He looked up with wide eyes. “You did? What’s your name again?”

“Jade Breken. My family and I came for a week every summer—and occasionally a winter—until we moved too far away because of my father’s job.”

“The Brekens!” he said. “I remember you now. You had a brother too, right?”

I nodded. “We used to roast marshmallows together and play Red Rover in the meadow.” Happiness rushed in as I recalled some of the best childhood memories I had ever had.

He looked me up and down, and said, “You aren’t the little girl I remember now.”

I laughed. “And you aren’t the little boy who used to catch frogs and chase me with them either.”

“I had the biggest crush on you. Jadey B. I remember you!”

“Yeah, well you had a funny way of showing it.”

Wow... Jadey B...

I’d forgotten about that carefree, wild girl who loved Mill Creek Resort. I truly hoped I could find her again.

Ethan removed his hat revealing his dark brown hair that haphazardly encompassed his face. “Well, I’m glad you came to stay at my resort for a while. We aren’t used to having guests in the winter often, but I do think it’s the prettiest time of year here.” He smiled again. “I’m looking forward to getting to know the grown up Jadey B.”

◇ ◇ ◇

ETHAN HAD LEFT so I could rest a little and get settled in. I quickly unpacked my suitcases and then turned my attentions on setting up my makeshift office at the small dining room table. I was anxious to check my messages and deal with any business that I had missed during the trip. Technically, I was on a writing trip, but I couldn’t resist the urge to deal with things as they came up rather than waiting for my return. Not to mention that two months seemed like an eternity to be away. Stepping away from my author business completely so I



could only write was just not something I felt I had the luxury to take.

I was startled when I heard a knock at the door. I had been staring at my laptop for so long, I had completely lost track of time. The sun had set, leaving me in a darkened room, lit only by my computer. It took a moment to regain my surroundings as I walked toward the door.

“I figured you might feel awkward about having dinner up at the restaurant since it’s just you staying here, but it is part of the package you paid for. I thought you might like if I escort you to the restaurant,” Ethan offered as I opened the door.

He took a moment taking in the full length of my body, as I stood on the threshold of the door, before he looked over my shoulder at the dark room behind. His friendly smile turned into a look of concern.

“Um... no thank you,” I said, a bit embarrassed that I had lost track of time. “I’m not really hungry right now.”

Ethan still had the frown on his face as he pushed past me and walked into the room. “Is the power off? I swore I turned it on.” He flipped on the light switch and refocused his attention toward me standing with my mouth open in surprise that he just walked in uninvited.

“Oh, sorry. I just assumed something was wrong. I’m shocked that you were sitting here in the dark,” Ethan commented.

“I was busy working, and I lost track of time. Now, if you don’t mind, I would really like to get back to—”

“I do mind,” Ethan interrupted as he took a couple of steps toward me, closing the space between us. “You can’t be at Mill Creek and not have our First Night Dinner. You know it’s tradition. My grandfather would roll over in his grave if I allowed one of his guests to skip it.”

Annoyance boiled inside my core. The entire purpose of renting a cabin in Mill Creek was to get away from all

distractions. That included the sexy mountain man standing before me.

“I know I’m technically a guest, and you’re going to want to give me that Mill Creek Resort hospitality, but I’m really okay to just be forgotten about. I know this is off season for you, and I really don’t expect the same red-carpet treatment.”

“Too bad. Off season or not, we treat our guests the same. It’s ingrained in me.”

“I’m telling you that I don’t want to have First Night Dinner,” I snapped. “What part of that are you not understanding?”

And there it was. The city bitch in me came out swinging. I instantly regretted the words and the edgy tone of my voice, but there was no taking it back now.

I was tired.

I needed to rest.

And I needed to be alone.

Ethan took another step toward me, so he was looking down into my eyes. His jaw was tight, and his blue eyes darkened. My heartbeat sped up as I desperately wanted to take a step back to gain some space between us. Yet, I refused to let him know I was intimidated. Ethan was so close to me that I could feel his hot breath against my face.

“Let me make something very clear. This is my resort, my rules. We’ve run it a certain way for generations, and you know that. A special dinner was made for *you*. Because *you* chose to come here. You’re a guest on my land and for a longer time than we normally allow. I’m going to ask you not to speak to me in that tone of voice again,” Ethan stated.

I was at a loss of words. I had no idea what to say or how to respond. I had been rude, but having him strike back was... awkward. My cheeks heated by the confrontation as well as his close proximity. I wanted to go hide in a corner

somewhere, and at the same time, I wanted to... well, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

Ethan glared for the longest moment into my eyes. The silence between us was thick with tension, yet neither of us would look away. Ethan was the first to break the connection by walking over to the computer and shutting it closed.

"First rule," he stated. "You have to enjoy Mill Creek at least a little."

I lunged toward my computer to try to stop his dictate. "What? You can't just come in here—"

Ethan grabbed me by the arm and stared into my eyes again. "My resort, my rules," he interrupted. "Second rule," he continued, never releasing me of his stare, "you allow me to meet your needs and take care of you for the entire time you're here. It's my job to do so."

I was getting uncomfortable with his dominant presence. Ethan had always been a bossy kid just like his grandpa was, and clearly he still followed in his footsteps. Mr. Davis had been a cantankerous old man, but still beloved. When Mr. Davis spoke, all listened. It was part of the charm of Mill Creek Resort. In Ethan's case, however, I wasn't sure if I should fight back or submit to his rules. His hand on my arm was like a hot iron, branding me with his will. His eyes mesmerized me with the strength present. Ethan had complete control, and I could do nothing more than listen.

"Third rule," he stated, pulling me a little closer to his body. "You take this time to relax and reconnect with nature even though you're here to write. You can do both."

Ethan leaned in closer to me. So close, that for a moment, I had the absurd idea that he may kiss me. I lightly licked my lips, getting ready for the touch and was surprisingly disappointed when he stepped back and offered his arm for me to take. Oh God, what was I doing? What was I thinking? This man was a near stranger, and I seriously doubted I would have stopped him from kissing me!

Ethan smiled again, like he'd done when I had first answered the door. "Let's try this again. Good evening, ma'am. I thought you might like for me to escort you to dinner," he said again in a playful tone, breaking me out of my sinful thoughts. "Ellie's busy packing to leave tomorrow, so it's just you and me."

Not understanding what just happened, and why some crazy emotions attacked my body and brain, I allowed Ethan to place my hand on his arm and walk me out of the cabin and toward the main house for dinner.

## CHAPTER TWO

I HADN'T HAD a home-cooked meal in years. Everything about the dinner and the company was perfect. Ethan had a way of making me feel warm, comforted and relaxed. I ate more than I would normally and talked more about myself than I would ever do. I guarded my past, my present and my future. I opened up to very few and had found it was easier to survive. It was easier to protect. I did, however, open up slightly to Ethan. I felt comfortable enough to discuss my business, my childhood memories of Mill Creek and lightly touched on how I was sort of at a crossroads in life. I was sick of the city in more ways than one. I wasn't happy with where I lived, who I socialized with, or pretty much anything. I needed a change, and this getaway was going to help me figure out what that change would be.

I took the last bite of my meal and leaned back in my chair. "I'm so full, I could explode. I haven't had real food in what feels like forever. I live off of take out and the microwave."

Ethan smiled warmly. "I'm happy that Mill Creek can remind you of what a good meal should be like. We're known for our good food, good air, and a good night's sleep."

I chuckled. "Thank you for this. I now remember how much First Night Dinner was a favorite of mine. It really does set the tone of the place."

A silent calm washed over us as we both just looked at each other. Ethan's eyes were soft and gentle. He casually had one arm slung over the back of the chair, giving off a sense of comfort and a feeling of home. I realized we were both staring at each other and grew uneasy.

"So, what's there to do around here during the off season?" I asked to change up the mood that was being created. "Everything nearby is closed right?"

Ethan took a moment to continue to stare. “Mostly. We aren’t usually open during this time either. We made an exception with you.”

“Why?”

“Normally, we close up due to the road. When the first big storm hits, we can’t get in and out without a snowmobile. It’s not a great place for tourists. But when your email explained you planned to stay homebound writing, had grown up coming here as a kid, and it had been years since you had been back... it seemed like I needed to say yes.”

I smiled and straightened my back. “I’m glad you did. And I remember the winters here. I know what I’m getting myself into.”

Ethan’s face grew serious. “I know I made it clear via email, but we really do get snowed in here. I don’t mind, and I plan for it by stockpiling food and firewood, but you won’t be able to run into town to get anything for days. I can’t be out there plowing the roads nonstop for you.”

When I had booked the cabin, I was sent several messages warning me that there was one road that ran from the main highway to the Mill Creek Resort. Because it was private property, the county wasn’t responsible for snow removal, and if we wanted to reach civilization, it was going to have to be done by Ethan unburying us out.

I nodded. “Being snowed in is part of the appeal for me.” The smile left my face, and I looked down at the ground. “I have a lot of work to do, and I also need some time to plan that next step chapter in my life. I feel it’s time for a change and coming to a place I once loved to come up with a plan was ideal. But I don’t want you to worry about me. I don’t want to be a burden or anything.” The conversation was beginning to cause the familiar anxiety I had run from to work its way back into my body. I took a deep breath in an attempt to soothe my nerves.

Ethan reached across the table and lightly grabbed my hand. He didn't say anything, but the soft touch was enough to make me feel calm and relaxed again. He gave a gentle squeeze before pulling his hand away.

"You won't be a burden, and I'll make sure there is plenty of food in the kitchen for you to have access to, but I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. I love it up here when the snow falls. It's my favorite, but I also know it's not for everyone," Ethan said. "My family has always lived in Mill Creek year-round when others run off to warmer and less harsh weather. Or at least my entire family all used to. It's just me and my sister, Ellie, running the resort now."

"What happened to the rest of them?"

"Grandpop died when I was a teenager. My mom and dad ran this place up until about ten years ago. Dad has some health issues and needs to be near a hospital. His body made the decision for him, or I think they would still be here today. But you would have to drag my sister and me off this property kicking and screaming before we'd leave."

We sat in silence again. I noticed how easy it was for both of us to just sit and be content in each other's company. We both could stare into each other's eyes, taking the time to just observe. I liked how Ethan's eyes would light up when he smiled. I liked how he was confident enough not to look away. I liked how he had a way of holding my stare, demanding my eyes stay connected with his. I liked... well, I liked Ethan.

"I admire that you run a business that's been in your family for generations," I said. "But do you ever get tired of being so isolated out here?"

"City life just isn't for me. Mill Creek is in my blood. And not just because of the business. I truly love everything about living here. I can honestly say I believe it to be one of the most beautiful places in the world. The creek that runs through the property is always full of trout and salmon. The trees surround us, the view of Mount Lassen in the distance, the deer that come to my yard every morning, the bald eagles, the

squirrels.” He chuckled. “Yeah, I think it’s fair to say that I belong in the mountains.”

I crossed my arms across my chest and just listened to the way he spoke of this place with so much passion. “It seems like it’s a lot of work to run this property. All the cabins, feeding the guests. I’m amazed you can do it all yourself.”

“We have seasonal help. But yes, winter is just Ellie and me. And we get some cabin fever when it really buckets down snow,” Ethan admitted as he continued to relax in his chair. “But other than winter, the resort is booked solid. We aren’t ever really alone. I’m kept pretty busy, so I actually welcome the winter for a break.”

“I’m glad to hear the business is still going good. I remember it always busy growing up too.”

“I love it. I don’t necessarily love all the clients who come, but the tradeoff is well worth it. Fresh air, bright stars, and just pure mountain living.”

“Funny,” I began, “I didn’t think conversation like this came with the First Night Dinner. I wouldn’t have tried to get out of it had I known.”

Ethan leaned forward and put his arms on the table. “Well as you can see, other than my sister packing to leave, I don’t really have a lot of options for conversation. So, you’re it.”

“I feel like we’re playing twenty questions.”

Ethan smiled. “Ask away. I’m an open book.”

I took a moment to think of a good question. I wasn’t sure if I would get this opportunity to ask anything of my liking again. The one-on-one time of the First Night Dinner was nice. I knew I needed to make it a good one.

“Okay, so why aren’t you married? Kids? Someone your age, living out here alone, it seems like a fair question.” I blushed with how forward I was being but continued on. “You have to give me honesty, nothing simple or general.”



Ethan smirked. “So, saying I haven’t met the right woman is considered general?”

“Yes.”

Ethan took a moment to just stare at me. His blue eyes narrowed a bit and his jaw tightened. “I’m bossy.”

I shook my head. “That one doesn’t count because it’s *obvious*.” I giggled at my own comment.

“I’m demanding.”

I shook my head again. “Nope, that was too close to bossy, and don’t I know it,” I said with another giggle.

“I prefer mountains.”

I pouted out my lip. “You can’t just give brief answers. Not fair.”

Ethan chuckled. “Okay, okay. You’re pretty damn cute when you pout.” He took a deep breath and repositioned his body in his chair. “My focus has been on my land and keeping up the resort. It hasn’t always been easy, and the last thing I needed was to have a family to focus on as well. When we had the recession, it was really touch and go for a while. We came pretty close to losing it all. And then,” he opened his arms to show off the empty restaurant we sat in, “not everyone is willing to live out in the middle of nowhere. City lights are more appealing to most than starlight.”

Ethan paused and looked slightly uncomfortable for the first time since I had arrived at the resort. He fidgeted in his seat for a few moments before taking a deep breath in what appeared to be an attempt to control his demeanor again. I just watched him, listening in curiosity at his confession.

“My focus hasn’t been on love,” Ethan confessed.

I couldn’t resist a smile. “So, you’re just as much as a workaholic as me?”

“Yes, I think that’s fair to say,” he replied.

“Well, I don’t see what’s so wrong with that. I think ambition is sexy.” I blushed the minute the words left my mouth. I was flirting, and I couldn’t help it. Calling a man you just met sexy was not okay in my book. It wasn’t who I was... and yet, here I was doing it.

Ethan smiled so big that wrinkles framed the corners of his eyes and a slight dimple formed in his cheek. “So, you’d like an ambitious, workaholic, type of man?”

“Yes, yes, I think I would.” I continued to flirt. It was obvious... at least to me.

Ethan leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms against his chest. “What about you? I don’t see a ring on that finger. Hiding here at Mill Creek from someone? There’s got to be some sordid tale as to why a beautiful woman is spending the holidays up here alone.”

I gasped and choked on the air that rushed out of my chest. The blush that took over my entire body made me hot instantly. I took a few moments to regain my composure before barely squeaking out, “Beautiful?” I rolled my eyes. “Hardly, but nothing sordid to tell. I keep all the action and suspense in my books. My life’s pretty dull.”

“You *are* beautiful,” he said again.

There was a moment when Ethan and I just stared deep into each other’s eyes again. I searched for some further explanation. I searched for some clarity as to why I felt so incredibly turned on by what he just confessed to. Why was I being so flirty and open when that wasn’t like me at all?

Ethan sat on the other side of the table refusing to break the stare. Silently letting me know he was dead serious. I was the first to sever the connection. I looked down at my hands and felt his gaze burn my already red-hot skin.

Taking a moment before looking back into Ethan’s eyes, I asked, “So you’re just like me. Too busy for love.” I giggle, mostly out of awkward nerves rather than humor.

“Oh, I would find time. I’m ambitious in other ways too,” he said with a wink. Ethan reached across the table and swallowed my hand in his. “I want to offer all of me when the time comes.”

Why was he holding my hand?

Friendly companionship?

My head swirled.

“And what is all of you?”

“I’m strong, but I’m soft as well. I protect, I nurture, I care, and I love. I like to be in charge—otherwise known as bossy—but my number one goal would be to make my woman know she is loved every minute of every day. That’s what I want.” Ethan removed his hand, sat back and shrugged. “So that’s why I’m not married. I haven’t found another mountain gal who wants the same things.”

“I think you just nailed what every woman wants in a relationship,” I replied.

“So, did I answer your question?” Ethan asked with a smirk on his face.

I looked up to meet his devilish grin. “Yes, Mountain Man, you did.” I took a large drink of my wine, trying to wash out the images of Ethan as husband material.

## CHAPTER THREE

**W**RITING IN A cabin as it snowed outside was about as close to perfection as one could get. The cold, the fire, the snow on the pine trees, and the magic of winter was everything I could have imagined when I planned to come and stay for the season. I had done so much work, that when Ethan insisted I take a break and go outside for some fresh air with him, I couldn't refuse.

I stared at myself in the mirror, self-conscious about my appearance. Ethan would be arriving soon to take me snowmobiling, and I wasn't sure how to look. I had my hair up in a ponytail, and then finally settled on leaving it long, cascading past my shoulders. I couldn't decide on what shirt to wear with my jeans and boots; finally settling on a V-neck cotton long-sleeved shirt that revealed an ample amount of cleavage. I realized that I was nervous getting ready. I wanted Ethan to be pleased with the way I looked. I actually *cared* what Ethan thought.

I forced myself away from the mirror annoyed that I would let some guy I barely knew to have such a hold on me. I shouldn't be thinking this way at all.

Sure, he might be the sexiest man I had ever seen in person, but I was not going to let those thoughts have the upper hand. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, only to recognize that he *did* have the upper hand.

The dinner between us a couple nights ago had been comfortable, relaxed and the conversation we'd shared had seemed to flow so fluidly. Never had I felt so open with someone, and it was never like that with any man on the "first date". He talked of the resort mostly, but the love that shone through his eyes was absolutely captivating. But what I couldn't get out of my mind was the fact that even when I was alone in the cabin, he kept intruding in my thoughts. At this

particular stage of my life, I had no intentions of becoming involved with any man, but Ethan was making it very difficult to keep my mind on my work.

Ethan was so confident, so determined, so damn sexy... and not reachable.

I'd look out my window during the day and watch him split and stack wood preparing for what he said was going to be the first real storm of the season coming. I saw him drive around in his Jeep as he winterized all the other vacant cabins.

I watched.

I fantasized.

I obsessed over him as he performed his normal daily activities.

Why did the idea of being with Ethan give me tingles? Why did the idea of having Ethan kiss me send quivers to my core? Why did the idea of Ethan being my man sound so tempting?

My heart skipped when there was a knock at the door. I quickly opened it to find Ethan Davis looking even more stunning than he had when he'd shown up to escort me to First Night Dinner. The heavy jacket he wore gave him an aura of rugged masculinity. Knitted cuffs of a white long-sleeved thermal shirt peeked out from the sleeves of his jacket, the white a vivid contrast against the bronzed perfection of his skin. My mouth watered as I cast a quick glimpse at the bulge pressing against his snow pants.

"Jade," Ethan said as he tilted the tip of his baseball cap—that he wore practically every day—in a polite greeting.

"Ethan," I replied with a little curtsy, playing along with the polite etiquette charm. I was doing everything I could not to let on that butterflies were fluttering in my stomach at the sight of him.

Ethan reached for my jacket hanging on the coat rack and extended his arm to me. "Do you want to build a snowman?"

Ethan gave a wink and a slight smirk, giving me a peek into his playful side.

I giggled at the Disney play on words, and answered, “Snowmobiling sounds far more exciting.”

When Ethan had suggested snowmobiling the night before, I hadn’t wanted to seem like some city slicker, so I’d readily agreed. That and I desperately needed to get out of my cabin. I concealed the fact that I hadn’t been on one since I was a kid visiting the resort, and even then, I didn’t do it often.

As I approached the machine, there was a moment I wondered if I should fess up.

How hard can it be? I thought to myself. It was just like riding a bike. I was sure to remember how... or so I hoped.

The snowmobiles had already been pulled out of the garage and were ready to go when we got there. Ethan assisted me up on one of them, and I quickly scanned the controls to remind me just how to actually drive one. Amazed that I was able to turn it on with little difficulty, I smugly sat on my snowmobile as Ethan mounted his and began to lead us on our winter wonderland trip.

“I thought I would take us down to the mouth of the creek a few miles south,” Ethan suggested over his shoulder. “There’s a waterfall that tends to freeze over after the first snow. The icicles are really a sight to be seen.”

I held on as tight as I could, terrified that my snowmobile was going to slide off the path and into a tree. I could see how at ease Ethan was on his ahead of me, and I was pretty sure that I was slowing him down, but I could force my cowardly self to go only so fast.

“That sounds great,” I lied. My legs were shaking against the seat. I was cold and had wished I dressed warmer, but I was also scared.

The rest of the trip went smoothly to my relief. I managed to follow Ethan’s lead, and without overturning in a snowbank or taking down any trees. I was even able to relax enough to

take in the beauty of the wooded acres. The resort's thirteen acres were far more stunning than I remembered them being as a kid. I also couldn't help but watch Ethan who slowly guided us to our destination. His broad shoulders filled out his jacket quite nicely, but the thoughts of what lay beneath all that down-filled nylon were captivating. I was so enthralled by the way his body moved in perfect harmony with the machine beneath him that I didn't notice we had reached the destination until he had come to a complete stop and I'd almost run into him.

Ethan dismounted from the snowmobile and walked over to me. "You ride well for a city gal. I guess you haven't forgotten," he complimented as he pulled a blanket and a green tarp out of a saddlebag on my snowmobile.

"Thank you," I replied, proud that I was able to pull off my ruse.

Ethan placed the tarp and then the worn quilt onto the bank beside the creek and then returned to where I still sat mounted on my snowmobile, reaching for my hand to help me off. As I let go of my death grip, I realized my fingers were white with little sense of feeling left in them. Ethan paused as he noticed my tense grip and looked into my eyes concerned.

"Are you all right? Were you afraid?" He quickly grabbed both of my hands into his and began rubbing life back into them.

My face heated at the sudden concern and the touch of his big warm hands encircling mine.

"You should have told me you were afraid of snowmobiling. I would never have let you ride by yourself had I known."

I wasn't sure what to say or what to do. My body was so close to his, his hands still massaging mine. I looked up into his eyes and could do nothing more than smile. His eyes were shining, brightened by the sunlight reflecting off the snow-covered ground.

I took a deep breath. “Truth... I haven’t been on a snowmobile since I was kid—here at the resort one winter—and even then, I was afraid of being on one.”

Ethan’s fingers stopped massaging and tensed around mine. Bright blue eyes of only a few moments before were now turning a steely gray. His mouth tensed with a slight twitch. There was no question about it, Ethan Davis was not happy.

He pulled his hands away and took a step back from me. “Why would you do such a foolish thing? You could have been hurt. You could have been killed! I asked you if you knew how and you said you did. Otherwise, I would have gone over all the instructions, rules, and I sure as hell wouldn’t have driven as fast as I did.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to think I couldn’t ride. Besides, I did just fine.”

“I could have made it far less stressful and white-knuckle scary. I could have taken an easier trail. You have to have trust in me enough to share some basic facts.” Ethan took a deep breath to calm his annoyance. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt. Promise me in the future that you won’t keep things from me.”

I stood in silence. I was amazed that a man I hadn’t seen since childhood could care about my well-being. I wasn’t used to it. I learned a long time ago, that there is only one person you could count on, only one person you could trust. That one person was yourself and only yourself. Yet, here was a strong man showing some interest in my welfare. It made me speechless.

“Jade. Promise me.”

I snapped out of my daze enough to whisper, “I promise.”

“You’re just lucky you didn’t fall off on your ass or roll it,” Ethan grumbled.

I smiled to myself. The alpha male was extremely sexy.



Ethan placed his hand on the curve of my lower back and led me to the blanket by the creek. We sat in silence for a while just staring into the crystal waters that still ran between the icy banks, the frozen waterfall, and feeling the crisp breeze against our faces. The calm, the stillness, was exactly what I needed. Quieting my mind was something I had very little practice in doing, yet neither one of us felt the need to talk for quite some time. Ethan was the first to break the blissful silence.

“So, tell me more about you.” Ethan leaned back onto his arms and turned his head to face me.

“I feel like I talked your ear off over First Night Dinner. What else do you want to know?”

Ethan continued to stare at me. “Tell me why you’re so shielded. You seem to want to be alone which isn’t really normal for most.”

I looked at Ethan in shock. “What? Why would you say that? I’m not shielded. I talked openly and freely with you. And yes... I do like to be alone. I think it comes with my occupation. Writers are usually very isolated beings.”

A very small smile crossed Ethan’s face. It was a look that said he knew a secret of which only he held the key. “Okay, then why don’t you tell me why you work so much.”

I leaned back onto my arms and stared straight ahead, avoiding his stare. “I don’t know. I guess because I have to. I have to take care of myself, because who else will if I don’t? You have to work hard for what you want out of life.”

“Nothing wrong with working hard.”

I took pause at the simple way Ethan ended the conversation. I had already started prepping myself to defend my lifestyle and what I did for a living. I was ready to tell him to mind his own business. I was getting ready for battle if he even dared make it sound like writing wasn’t a real job like I’d been accused of in the past. Yet, Ethan just casually relaxed on

his arms, with obviously no intent to continue. He didn't push for anything more... he didn't judge.

"So, Ethan, let me ask you something. Do you like entertaining guests who come onto your land and use the resort?" I asked in order to get the conversation redirected.

Ethan's relaxed composure suddenly tensed. "No. I don't like strangers being on my property pretty much nonstop. But it's a means to pay the bills for this land." He paused a moment to take a deep breath. "Not everyone is bad, but there are definitely a handful who make me bite my tongue. There can be a lot of self-entitled assholes. But at the same time, I can't imagine doing any other job." He pointed at the frozen waterfall. "Where else do I get to do things like this?"

"You are pretty lucky."

He gave me a small nod. "Many would trade places with me in a second."

I took in the scenery. "It really is pretty here. It's so quiet. I can see why you like it so much—especially in the winter."

"There's also something special about keeping the family business alive."

"I envy that," I said as I turned and smiled at him. "I'm really happy for you. I'm glad I chose to come out here and spend a majority of the winter here."

"I'm glad you came." He paused for a moment then added, "I really like spending time with you."

"I enjoy spending time with you as well," I confessed.

Heat took over my entire body without warning. I quickly looked away and tried to regain my composure.

Ethan smirked. "I like the way you blush so easily."

I slowly turned my head to look into Ethan's smiling eyes. The soft wrinkles at the edges gave his boyish charm a sense of maturity. He kept my stare locked within his for what seemed like an eternity. His gaze was single-handedly melting

my heart. Ethan Davis had a power over my emotions that I was not used to allowing. His strength, his casual demeanor, his aura just screamed out, *Man*.

Without looking away, Ethan slowly leaned in toward me until his lips were only inches from mine. "I'd really like to kiss you."

I looked down at his mouth and then back into his eyes and softly whispered, "I'd like that."

Ethan sat up straight and placed a hand on each side of my head and softly pressed his lips to mine. The touch sent tingles through my entire body. Never had a simple kiss given me such a powerful, intense reaction. His lips moved slowly along mine until I could feel his tongue lightly press past my lips to touch my own. The warmth, and the wetness, increased the desire building inside of me. His fingers caressed my hair softly as his tongue continued to explore. A kiss while being surrounded in a snowy paradise was more than I could imagine. I wanted more. I wanted the kiss to last forever. Never wanted his lips to leave mine. Never wanted to leave this frozen paradise.

"Mmm... you feel so right," Ethan murmured between our lips.

The sound of his voice, muffled by the kiss, made me gasp. Never would I have thought I would feel so much power from a simple kiss. At that moment, the only thing I wanted was for Ethan to never end this connection. Ethan's hands moved down my back, and he pulled me closer. My breasts pressed firmly to his rock-hard chest. As our bodies merged, our kiss became more frenzied, my lips opening wider, my tongue dancing with his. My breath mixed with his, my gasps swallowed by the kiss. The all-consuming, most mind-blowing kiss. A kiss that I never knew could exist. With one single kiss, Ethan had captured my heart.

He slowly pulled away and looked deep into my eyes. His blue eyes were glazed over and desire coursed across his face. He ran a single finger along my jawline and traced it along the

edge of my lips. A small seductive smile formed as he leaned forward and kissed the tip of my nose.

“I didn’t expect that to happen when I woke up this morning,” he said.

“I didn’t either. I—”

“Shh, don’t overthink this right now,” he said, barely above a whisper.

I had so much I wanted to say. I had so much I wanted to get out, but the kiss had stolen all words from my mouth. I could only stare into his eyes and smile.

“You have the prettiest smile,” Ethan complimented as he brought his lips to mine again to give them a light brush, reminding me of the epic kiss only moments before. “It’s getting cold, and I think more snow is coming soon. I think we should head back.”

I didn’t know what to do, or what to say. We kissed and now we were heading back as if nothing had happened. The only thing I did know was I wasn’t prepared to have this discussion. I couldn’t until I wrapped my head around what was happening. So, for now... I had no choice but to follow Ethan back to the cabin.

Could a kiss just be a kiss?

## CHAPTER FOUR

**M**OUNTAIN LIVING WAS no joke. It was hard work, but I was so grateful that Ethan allowed me to have a taste of it during my writing breaks. I took every opportunity I could to leave my cabin and get outdoors, especially when I saw Ethan outside working and milling about. When I saw him splitting and stacking wood again, I was quick to run outside and offer a hand. He of course had tried to refuse, told me I was the guest, but I was insistent and won.

But as I said... mountain living was no joke.

Ethan wrapped an arm around my body, leading me out of the woodshed. “Come on. Let’s get you back to the cabin so you can get warmed up and get some rest.”

When we reached the cabin, Ethan opened the door for me and followed me in. He walked over to the woodstove and added another log to the fire, and then walked to the bed and pulled down the blankets. I stood in shock not sure what to make of what he was doing.

Ethan turned and smiled warmly and patted the bed. “Okay, come lie down. Take a nap, and I’ll be back later to get you for dinner.”

I shook my head and laughed. “I don’t take naps. But it’s all right. I need to check in with emails and catch up on a few things, so—”

“No work,” Ethan interrupted. “It’s Sunday. You are due a day off from that screen.”

“I wish it were as simple as that. I’m one of those people who have to stay busy. Why else do you think I offered to help you stack wood?”

Yes, the real reason was that I wanted to be in his presence, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Mill Creek Resort is about relaxation too.” Ethan’s face grew stern.

He walked over and grabbed my hand softly and led me to the bed. He sat me down and took off my boots without ever saying another word. He then took off his own and stretched out onto the bed, pulling me into his arms.

“If you aren’t going to rest by yourself, you’re going to lie here in my arms and sleep.” Ethan kissed my forehead and wrapped his arms tightly around me. “Now close your eyes, quiet your mind, and just lie down with me.”

He said the few words I needed to hear. It was as if he knew me so well. In such a short time, he understood how difficult it was for me to just stop. He understood that unless he was to lie with me, force me, make me do what was needed, I wouldn’t be able to just shut it down. He understood me.

I pressed my cheek to his chest and could hear his heartbeat beneath my ear. His arms were wrapped around me, and his steady breathing was like a balm that washed over my soul. For that very second, I could just be relaxed. I could just be calm and be soothed. This was a sensation that I was not comfortable feeling, but before I could really process the emotions going through me, I fell asleep in Ethan’s strong arms.

I don’t know how long it had been but, my eyes fluttered open to find shadows cast against the walls of the cabin. Outside the window I could see the sun was setting. I tried to stretch awake and was restricted by strong arms wrapped around me. I was on Ethan’s chest as it softly rose with his steady breathing. The smell of his manliness invaded my senses, and the desire to move my hand that rested on his chest to his lower region was almost unbearable. This man had a power over me that I had never experienced before.

I was still sleepy, but my body was very awake.

His arms tightened around me and pulled me a little closer to his body. “Did you sleep well?”

His simple question sent fire through my body. It was the way his voice sounded husky but caring. “Yes... I did. Thank you. I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“A nap once in a while isn’t a bad thing. Mill Creek Resort was built on the concept that relaxation is needed.”

I adjusted my head so I could look into Ethan’s eyes. “Which is why I came here. So, thank you for reminding me of that.”

We both stared at each other for a few moments, scanning each other’s face, searching for a peek into our souls.

“I don’t usually lie in bed with a man like this. I don’t usually kiss... well this is just not like me.”

“This isn’t me, either. I actually have a very strict rule of no guests allowed.”

I took a deep breath before speaking. “So, if this isn’t the way we are. Then why are we lying here? Why did we kiss? Why do I want... more?”

Ethan lowered his mouth to mine. He kissed with more passion, and more excitement than before. He rolled me over onto my back and pressed his body on top of mine. His mouth continued to claim as I could feel his desire building. I gasped at the sudden change in our energy but pulled him closer.

“I can’t explain this. I can’t explain why I want you so badly, so quickly. Tell me to stop and I will. Tell me no, and I’ll get up this second.” Ethan paused from his onslaught of kisses to examine my face. “I should follow my no guests allowed rule, but I can’t. I don’t want to.”

I smiled at the look of concern mixed with passion on his face. “I want this, too. Don’t stop.”

He moved his mouth to my neck and started to place soft kisses, while his hand slowly worked its way under my shirt. His palm cupped my breast, and I arched my back to meet his

touch. His lips moved to my ear, and he lightly nipped. I could hear his ragged breathing and feel his body tense with pent up passion.

I lowered my hand to his bulging erection pressing against his jeans. When my fingers made contact, Ethan moaned in desire.

I undid his belt buckle, unbuttoned, and unzipped in one fluid motion and wrapped my hand around his throbbing cock. If there was any question in his mind on what I wanted, I hoped to have clarified it now.

A growl worked its way past Ethan's lips as he began to rip off my clothing in a fire of fever and excitement. I met his crazed desire by stripping him bare as well. Within seconds, our bodies were nude and entangled together.

There was no turning back now.

The snow fell outside, the fire smoldered beside us, but the real heat was between our bodies.

Ethan reached for his pants, his wallet, and then pulled out a condom from it. I had never been more grateful for his planning ahead as I was right then. He grabbed me by the hips and in one hard thrust, drove himself deep within the warmth of my body.

I wrapped my legs tighter around his back and thrust my hips to meet his sensual assault. Moaning, I felt like a sex-crazed vixen beneath this man as he pumped in and out with a force and speed demanding my completion.

He took a handful of my hair and pulled my mouth to his. Dominating me with the pull, with the thrust of his hips, and with the power he had over my impending orgasm.

“Come for me. I want to hear you, feel you,” Ethan demanded with a deep sensual voice.

As if knowing I should never go against one of Ethan's commands, I let the climax take over. The electricity worked its way from my pussy all the way to every nerve ending in my



body. My moan became louder, louder until it became a mewl of absolute pleasure released.

With the sound of my cries mastering the room, Ethan pumped hard one last time, filling me with his seed.

After several minutes of heavy breathing, he lightly kissed my lips. “Jesus Christ, that was... Jesus Christ.”

I suddenly tensed up and began to maneuver my body from underneath his. I sat up, grabbed the sheet to wrap around me and glanced over my shoulder to look at Ethan who was watching me closely. The body had been satisfied, but my mind... my mind went into a dark, lonely place. There was a reason I didn't have a man in my life... my body may say yes, but my mind screamed no.

“That was definitely a nice perk of coming to Mill Creek Resort. Thank you,” I said with a shaky voice as I bent down to start picking up the clothes that were scattered around.

Ethan sat up, and his relaxed face slowly changed. One eyebrow raised and his jaw clinched. “What are you doing?”

I tossed his clothes on to the bed. “What do you mean?”

“We just had sex and you hop out of bed like it was just a fuck or something.”

I suddenly stopped and turned in his direction. My eyes widened at the disbelief painted on his face. “Sex? Fucking? Isn't it really just the same? I mean, it was a casual good time.” Yeah I was an asshole, but assholes didn't get hurt.

Ethan stood up and put on his jeans in a fluid motion, never taking his eyes off of me. Leaving his chest bare, he walked over to where I stood and placed a hand on each side of my arms. He softly kissed my forehead.

“You aren't fooling anyone, Jade.”

Okay, so maybe I wasn't an asshole... even though it would have been a lot easier if I were.

I pulled away and took a couple of steps back. I tightened my grip on the white sheet covering my body. “We don’t need to make this awkward or anything.” I shrugged my shoulders, trying to seem casual.

“Stop,” Ethan softly ordered.

I knew I was pushing him away. Spiraling out of control because I didn’t know how to handle emotions. I knew I was doing what I always did. It was easier this way. Easier to keep up the wall and keep him at bay. Soft kisses, whispers of love were dangerous and just wasn’t the way I did things. And for Christ’s sake, I still had weeks of being snowed in here. I couldn’t let this get weird.

“You should go.” Is it what I wanted? No. But I didn’t know what to say or to do.

“I said, stop.” Ethan’s voice was growing stern.

He closed the distance between us and lifted my chin so I was looking into his eyes. Very slowly and very softly, Ethan kissed me. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to feel the kiss. I allowed the familiar feelings his touch gave me, to chip away at my wall.

With my eyes still closed, and my lips still near his, I whispered, “What do you want from me?”

Ethan kissed me lightly again. “I want you to stop.”

I didn’t know how to feel. I had no idea what to make of the most stunning man before me. He was so strong, so masculine and yet so soft and sensual. Ethan made me want to open up... to be free. But as quickly as I wanted to be open, I realized that staying closed was safer. Nothing could become of this. Nothing at all. We lived in two different worlds. He represented these mountains, and I was simply the guest.

“Okay, I’ll stop,” I replied while putting on my classic smile.

The smile that I had mastered.

A smile that could conceal all the real emotion.

A smile that could hide everything.

Ethan traced his finger along my lips. “No. Not with me, Jade. The only time I want to see this smile, is when I see the smile in your eyes, too.”

The artificial smile melted away under his touch. “No guests allowed, remember?” I looked at him to see if I could read his true thoughts, but he gave nothing away.

“That was my old rule, but I’m willing to make an exception,” he said. “Let’s just take this day by day. No worries, no overthinking. Let’s just focus on the simple. Nothing more. Okay?”

My eyes looked deep within his, and I whispered, “Okay.” I wasn’t sure I could do that, but I nodded in agreement anyway.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“COME ON, I have something I want to show you,” Ethan said as he grabbed me by the hand.

We were taking a walk, side by side on the property, enjoying the brisk air. The last two weeks had been wonderful. Ethan and I had spent a lot of time together. He still gave me time to write while he did work around the resort, but we didn't go long being out of each other's sight. We talked, we laughed, and we kissed. I had started to let down my wall. I began to trust Ethan enough to confess my wishes and my dreams. Ethan listened, he advised, and he accepted. He never judged me for being a workaholic writer. He never made me feel like I was anything less than perfect. Ethan had a way of making me feel safe and protected.

I liked being around him. I liked seeing his rugged, mountain man charm. I didn't want the next week to end. Each minute of each day, I was falling deeper and harder for this man, and trying my best to simply live in the moment and not overthink. We hadn't brought up the fact that we lived in different parts of the world and this was temporary. It was messy, complicated and most likely unsustainable. We both knew that, but we didn't want to face it. Or at least that was how I was seeing it. A winter at the resort to live a fantasy life, and then back to reality. What harm could hiding my head in the sand do?

But eventually the snow would melt.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Over there.” Ethan pointed to a cabin on the top of a snow-covered hill. “That's my new place. It's finally completed. I've been living in the old family cabin, but always wanted a place that is completely my own.”

“It's amazing. You built it?”

He nodded with a smile of pride on his face.

I leaned in and kissed him with excitement. “I am so impressed. You never cease to amaze me. Can you show me the inside?”

We walked hand and hand to the cabin Ethan had put his heart and soul into. I could feel the love he had, the pride of building his home on his own land. I had never found Ethan as attractive and sexy as I did as we approached the door.

As we walked in, I was shocked to see there was no furniture.

“It’s empty.”

Ethan smiled. “Yes... My sister said she would help, but I haven’t taken her up on it. I definitely need a female’s eye. Maybe you should do it.”

I blushed, unsure of why I found his simple and casual statement so awkward.

Ethan smiled and wrapped his arms around me. “I know I have said this before, but you are so damn cute when you blush.”

He kissed my forehead, my cheek, the tip of my nose and then my lips. I pressed my body into his, moving my tongue past his lips to touch, to combine. Something about this man made my body sizzle. His soft, genuine show of affection was like a shot of adrenaline to my libido. He wasn’t cocky or arrogant, but sweet and sincere. Sure, he could be bossy as hell, but the truth of the matter was Ethan was a great guy, and I had never been turned on more.

I tried to press Ethan back up against the wall. I wanted to take him right there and then. His hard, muscled body wouldn’t budge an inch.

Ethan shook his head. “Having sex once, and I can keep the relationship casual. The second time means you’re mine.”

“Really?” I smiled seductively up at him. “Maybe I want to be yours.”

“Jade...” he warned.

“Ethan...” I countered, feeling the air sizzle between us.

He took hold of me and pushed me hard up against the wall. He grabbed my hands and pressed them above my head and held them firm with one hand, while his other began to rip off my clothing. He yanked, he tugged, and he had me naked before I could even take my next breath. His lips pressed against mine with such force, such fierce passion.

Ethan moved his lips to my neck and began to kiss, suck and bite. With my arms still pinned above my head by his massive hand, I had no choice but to allow Ethan to do as he wished.

I felt the sting of his teeth on my neck and gasped, “I like the word *mine*.”

He stood before me and took off all of his clothes in the same rush and fury that had landed me up against the wall. His ripped, tight body stood before me as he seductively smiled.

“I like the word *mine* as well,” he said. “And that’s exactly what you are about to become.”

Ethan kissed one breast and then the other. He sucked each nipple, slightly nipping with his teeth. I gasped, I moaned but he ignored my sounds and continued his descent down my abdomen with kisses. He reached his final destination, kissing every ounce of flesh, licking my entire mound until I was hungry with desire. I was dying to feel his tongue delve into me. I wanted to feel the invasion, the penetration.

I was practically climbing the wall.

My body frantically searched for release.

Finally, he lowered me to the ground, moved his body on top of mine, and captured my gaze and never released it. He stared deep into my eyes, joining our souls, linking our energy.

Ethan pressed deep within and stopped moving. Taking that moment did something to me. There was a connection and

closeness I had never felt before. I looked into Ethan's eyes and just watched. I watched the man as we became one.

"I'm yours, Ethan," I softly admitted.

"I wanted nothing more than to hear those words."

I moved my lips to his and kissed him until I felt that our lips had melted together. His breath was mine; my breath was his. His tongue lightly moved along mine, his hands caressed, and we embraced.

Ethan moved his body in and out of mine in a slow, sensual pace. He caressed my hair and smiled softly while looking into my eyes.

Without saying a single word, he kissed one breast then the other. He sucked one nipple and quickly moved to the next. He kissed, and he licked every part of my stomach. I couldn't get enough. I couldn't get enough of his touch. I needed more. I needed Ethan like I had never needed anyone in my life.

He positioned his body so that he could thrust his cock inside of me once more, driving his sex deep within me. He pulled out quickly, only to drive back in with a force of pure lust.

"Look into my eyes," he said.

Ethan's gaze penetrated my soul, demanding for me to stare into his eyes, never looking away.

I reached for his face and slowly traced the edge of his jaw with my fingertips as he brought my orgasm closer and closer.

Ethan pressed harder into me once again and began to kiss a trail of soft kisses along my neck. "Mine. Mine."

The animalistic fire burned deep within my core. I whispered into Ethan's ear, "Yours."

Ethan flipped over, allowing me to straddle him. My lean thighs on each side of his body made me anxious for more. My hair cascading around my face made me feel sexy and seductive. I felt perfect in his eyes. In his eyes, my breasts

were firm, my stomach flat and I could see in his eyes the desire he felt. Never had I felt so beautiful.

I closed my eyes and began to rock my body in a rhythmic motion. My hips sensually pulsed to the music created by the heavy breathing of two lovers. We rocked, we turned, and we moved with each gasp, with each moan, with each passionate word.

The fire worked its way throughout my entire body. The inferno built, hotter with each driving force, hotter than I could ever have imagined. The heat caused each moan to get louder, each gasp to grow more ragged. I flung my head back and reached for Ethan's hands. I placed them on my breasts as I began to ride with wild abandon. I went down as he went up. I moved my body faster, stoking the fire until I finally screamed out his name.

We rocked our hips together until every last bit of completion was removed from our bodies. I collapsed onto Ethan's chest and could barely breathe. Ethan rubbed my back as our heartbeats struggled to regain a normal cadence as the snow blanketed the cabin around us.



I RELAXED INTO Ethan's warm embrace. His arms wrapped around me completely. I snuggled into his body and inhaled slowly, imprinting his scent mixed with the cedar of the log cabin onto my heart, hoping never to forget it. We had started out as erotic and wild, it but had ended soft and romantic. The sex had turned so loving, so full of... love.

My heart rate sped up and my stomach flipped. Instantly, my once satiated body became tense and stiff. Panic was setting in. My wall had slowly come down the last week, leaving me vulnerable.

"I'm not going to let you do this again, Jade," Ethan murmured sleepily as he wrapped his arms tighter to secure my body to his.



“I can’t do this. This was supposed to be casual, and right now I’m not feeling very... casual. Whether we like it or not, getting close will only make me leaving difficult. I’m just a guest for a short time. I wish that fact was different. I so wish that we could explore the option of being together, but we can’t.”

I was surprised with my honesty. Although at this point, what did I really have to lose? This didn’t feel like a winter love affair. It felt like more, and the realization of that made the vise on my heart tighten even more.

“Nothing about what I’m feeling right now is casual. I warned you what having sex twice meant. You’re mine whether you want to admit it or not.”

I continued to panic. “This is a dangerous road to go down.”

Ethan brushed his lips lightly against mine. “This is a road I want to go down together.”

I gasped in shock. “What? Are you crazy? This road ends! This road ends as soon as the snow melts!”

I grabbed my clothes that had been haphazardly thrown around in passion. I dressed in a hurry and was out the front door before Ethan could even wrap his head around what just happened.



IN THE SAFETY of my cabin, I busied my mind with checking in with work. I returned emails that had been piling up ever since Ethan had set his mandate of mandatory mountain living and taking time to enjoy myself. I smirked to myself, amused that I’d let a man tell me what to do. Never again, never again would I let my shield down. Anger flashed through me for allowing myself to feel vulnerable.

I didn’t do flings.

This was going to end up ugly and painful unless I did something to stop this now. I didn’t want my memories of Mill

Creek Resort be that of a love affair gone wrong.

I stopped typing to look out the window at the beautiful snowy landscape before me. I looked at the land that Ethan loved so much.

I could see Ethan.

I could feel Ethan, and if I tried, I could smell Ethan.

What was it about Ethan that made me swoon? What power did he have that made my thoughts be consumed by him? I had no answers for why I felt so... in love in such a short time. I loved his swagger, his way. I loved... I loved him.

A knock on the door snapped me out of my deep thoughts. I rushed to the door and opened it to find Ethan standing before me. His Mill Creek baseball cap shadowed his eyes, making it hard for me to read his emotions. The uncertainty of his mood made me feel uncomfortable. We stood in silence for what seemed like a lifetime. I decided to make the first move by wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I’m sorry. I run. I get scared, and I run. It’s what I do. I’m sorry.”

Ethan wrapped his arms around my lower back and slightly lifted me off the floor and carried me back into the room. Placing me down softly, he just looked at me in silence. The quiet made me uneasy. I looked down at my toes, praying that Ethan wasn’t about to end it all.

He lightly lifted my chin so I was looking into his eyes. Very slowly, he kissed me. He kissed me tenderly, his touch sensual and full of love. His lips were soft. His tongue was light. The kiss was beyond anything I had ever felt. It was a kiss of acceptance, of understanding. Ethan embraced my face with his work-roughened hands. The texture of hard mixed with the gentle kiss, sent shivers through my body.

“I don’t want this to end. Not now, and not when the snow melts,” Ethan confessed as he wrapped his arms tightly around me. “Yes, we live apart. I have no intentions of leaving Mill Creek, and I can’t expect for you to give up your life to move

here. But I think we can work past it. I feel it deep in my gut that we can overcome that obstacle. And I definitely don't want to stop now because we're afraid of tomorrow or the next day."

I turned my body into his. "I don't want it to stop either. I know it seems like I do because I keep putting the brakes on... but it's because I'm scared."

"Which isn't what I want," he said. "I don't want to scare you. But I want to see what this road has in store for us for what's left of the winter. I want to see if we can continue down the road even beyond. I want to work on us for the time we have. I want to work hard to make the road go on." He smiled. "And one thing about the both of us is that we're hard workers."

"I've never worked on a relationship or on anything that involves someone else. I've always been a solo workaholic," I confessed as I pressed my body closer to his.

"Me too. But that's okay. I don't mind a little turbulence along the way. Just as long as I get a happy ending." Ethan kissed my neck and then softly whispered in my ear, "I love you, Jade. I'm not going to hold that feeling back."

He said the words that would have made me run.

He said the words that would have made me tense up and seek escape.

But he also said the words that I had always wanted to hear.

I turned my head so I could look into Ethan's eyes. I decided that I would fight against my urge to flee. I would allow myself to say the words I'd never wanted to say. I decided to stand on the edge of the icy cliff. I needed to have trust that Ethan wouldn't let me slip and fall. I needed to have trust... and I needed to feel love.

"I love you, Ethan. No matter what, no matter our circumstances, I know that I *do* love you. And I don't want to live my life in fear for when the mountain snow melts."

## CHAPTER SIX

**T**HE KNOCK ON the door gave me the flip in my stomach I had grown to love. I hated being away from Ethan and was always happy to have him back with me. I ran to the door and flung my arms around his neck the minute I saw him.

Ethan kissed my cheek. “Well hello. I sure do love those types of greetings.”

I smiled flirtatiously. “Come on in here, and I may just give you a greeting like no other.”

Ethan smiled and reached for my coat and handed it to me. “Later. I’ve got dinner ready back at my place. We don’t want it to get cold.”

We walked in the cold faster than normal. The chill in the air had a bite as a new storm was supposed to hit us that night, and both of us were anxious to get back into a warm house. As we walked in the door, I smiled to see a blanket spread out on the floor in front of the fireplace, with the fire already going. There was a large pizza and a bottle of red wine with two glasses. The romantic image was so sweet, and so touching.

“Pizza!”

“It’s too cold to use the brick oven in the back of the main restaurant, but I managed with the one in the kitchen. Pizza is one of my specialties. Since you haven’t picked out any furniture for me yet, we have to resort to the floor.” Ethan smirked mischievously.

I giggled. “Oh really? And how exactly am I supposed to go shopping to add that lady’s touch? Last I checked, we were snowed in.”

Ethan grew serious. “I can’t believe I’m saying it, but I hope the snow never stops.” Ethan grabbed me by the hand and led us to the blanket. “Let’s eat before this gets colder than it is.”

Dinner was spent talking about the resort. We laughed over stories about our childhood and our parents. We talked about our memories of playing together, trying to not avoid the topic of what was our reality. We also talked about his business. Ethan beamed with pride whenever the resort was discussed. His love and his passion for his land were remarkable. I watched and listened. The man before me was more than I could ever dream of. He was masculine, lovely, sexy, rugged, charming and so full of life.

“So, do you really want me to pick out furniture for you?” I asked. “I mean, when we can dig ourselves out.”

“Well, unless you want to eat on the floor for the rest of our lives.” Ethan smirked.

I looked at my wine glass and then looked up slowly. “How do you talk about the rest of our lives like it’s actually a reality? You make it seem so simple and obtainable.”

Ethan looked at the fire and shrugged. “Isn’t it? The way I see it, the hard part is over. We found each other; we love each other. Rest is pretty easy.”

“What about when I leave?” I asked as panic worked its way into my heart.

Ethan looked deep into my eyes. “Well... let’s start with option number one and the one I hope you choose. Don’t leave. I want you to stay.”

“You do?”

“I do. I understand if you don’t want this, and I would never hold it against you, but... I think you could write some amazing books here... with me as inspiration.” Ethan smiled with a wink.

I chuckled. “You definitely are inspiring me.” I went solemn and took a deep breath. “But are you really serious? Stay at Mill Creek... permanently?”

“I could be wrong, but I get the feeling that you weren’t exactly happy where you were. Or why spend an entire winter

here? Most people plan to be with loved ones during the holidays, and as we approach that time, you haven't even hinted about being sad or lonely. You said you were trying to figure out the next chapter in your life. Well... Help me with the resort. Help me make this *our* dream and not just mine. Write and create like you've been doing. Start the new chapter here with me."

"My new chapter..."

"At least try it out. If it doesn't work, then we figure out option two. But regardless, we'll figure it out together."

The fire blazed in front of us, and Ethan and I relaxed on the blanket, entangled in each other's arms. I had my back pressed up against Ethan's chest, while he traced his fingers along the outer curve of my hip. His warmth wrapped around me tightly, his breathing in time with mine, made me feel safer than I could ever imagine. Ethan reached for my left hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the top of it gently and then intertwining his fingers with mine. Never was a word spoken, never did he say *I love you*, but I had never felt Ethan's love as much as I was feeling right now.

"This feels nice," I purred.

Ethan continued to kiss my hand. Placing a single kiss on each one of my fingers tenderly, pausing slightly to give a second kiss on my ring finger. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to just feel warm, loved, cherished... to feel whole.

Ethan was there.

Ethan was holding me.

Ethan had become my everything.

"Jade. Do you love me?" he asked in the softest of whispers.

"Yes."

"Do you think I can make you happy?"

"Yes."

“Would you consider giving Mill Creek and me a chance?”  
Ethan asked softly again.

“Yes.”

There was no pause, no hesitation. I knew that the only thing I wanted, the only wish I had, was to be with Ethan for the rest of my life.

I loved Mill Creek Resort, but I loved him more.

Ethan placed a gentle kiss on my neck. “Do you mean that? You would stay? On my resort? With me?”

“Yes. Mountain living has grown on me,” I said with a smile.

Ethan repositioned our bodies to a sitting position facing each other. He never released my hand as he slid an antique gold ring onto my finger. He brushed a loose hair behind my ear and softly smiled. He paused to look deep into my eyes. He allowed for the sensual moment of pure love to connect with me. I smiled. I loved. My heart danced.

Ethan paused for a moment. He then wrapped his arms around me and placed the softest kiss to my lips. “I’ll always be the man you need.”

I pulled away from the kiss just enough to whisper, “And I’ll always be the woman you desire.”

He pressed his lips to my neck and gently kissed. I rubbed his back lightly with my fingertips.

“So, when the snow melts...”

He smiled and tenderly placed a hand on each side of my head. His fingers combed along my hair, while his eyes watched the way it looked against his palm.

“When the snow melts... we begin the next chapter.”



We hope you loved reading *When the Snow Melts* by Alta Hensley. If you want more steamy romance, be sure to read the

fairy tale retelling [THE TRUTH ABOUT CINDER](#).



A MERRY CHRISTMAS WITH JUDY  
K WEBSTER

# CHAPTER ONE

Judy

*December 22, 1967*

**“BABY JESUS IS missing!”** Margaret Thurston cries out, throwing her hands in the air, her gray curls bouncing around her round face.

Several members of the Washington High School faculty gasp in shock, and I pause from rummaging around in a box pulled from storage to frown at her. Mrs. Thurston is the school secretary and my co-chair for the school Christmas production. A missing baby Jesus will not do. No, that will not do at all.

“Are you certain?” I ask, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth.

“Someone stole him,” she whispers dramatically.

Two of the other teachers snigger. I, however, am not amused. This is my first year to head the production—an annual event that everyone in the community looks forward to. Also, the first year two women have been put in charge. I’d wanted to prove to everyone at the school we were every bit as capable of making the production a success as the male staff were.

“I’m sure he’s only been misplaced,” I tell her, scanning the room filled with boxes. “Did you check over there?” I sweep my hand in the direction of yet more boxes that need to be unpacked.

“Not to be disrespectful, Miss Holland, but yes. I’ve checked everywhere.” She puts her hands on her hips and shoots a nasty glare toward Mr. Beck and Mr. Newton. “It’s almost as if someone has hidden him.”

Mr. Newton snorts with laughter, but doesn't argue, and I narrow my eyes at him. Mr. Beck walks my way with his hands splayed in a placating way.

"I'm sure he's around here someplace, Miss Holland," he says, his blue eyes twinkling as they drag down the front of my dress and linger. Mr. Beck is a nice man, but he's not my type. Sure, he's handsome with his blond hair and sharp style. He's just not...

"Mr. Kaufman," Margaret hisses.

My cheeks heat at the mention of our school's history teacher. A horrible, wretched man who's made me nearly cry on several occasions. Nearly. I never gave him the satisfaction of my tears. I've worked at this school for four years and he's been rotten all four of them.

But still...

I turn, away from Mr. Beck's perusing gaze to hide my blush. The fact is, Kent Kaufman is a dream. All in looks, of course. He towers over my small frame and chews on the end of his pipe, even though he's not allowed to light up in class. Where the other men here wear cardigans and blazers, Mr. Kaufman wears a black leather jacket and a perpetual scowl. Just thinking about him does my head in. I can't stand the rude man. It's a shame God made him so lovely to look at.

"Mr. Kaufman," Mr. Beck repeats, making me shiver. "You know, Margie, I bet you're right. It's like he watched that movie, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, a couple of years ago and has been playing Mr. Grinch himself."

Mr. Newton chimes in. "Now that I think of it, I think I did see him striding down the hallway earlier with a giant plastic Jesus under one arm. Tossed the thing in the back of his shoreline gold Mustang. What year is that, Paul? A '65?"

Mr. Beck huffs. "You're an uncultured beast, Roy. It's a 1964 and a half Ford Mustang coupe. 271-horsepower V8 engine." He whistles in appreciation.

“Jesus,” I mutter, gaining all three of their attention. “Focus. We’re looking for Jesus, not discussing all the cars in the parking lot. The production is tomorrow night. If Mr. Kaufman stole Jesus, we need to get him back.”

Mr. Beck smirks at me, lifting a brow. “And how do you plan on doing that, Miss Holland? Asking him nicely?”

A loud, obnoxious laugh bursts from Mr. Newton. “So naïve, Miss Holland.”

I rise from the box and dust my hands on my navy-blue shapeless shift dress with a white collar—my loveliest dress and absolutely the worst dress to have worn for unpacking dusty, dead moth-ridden boxes. “I beg your pardon,” I huff, pursing my lips as I glower at Mr. Newton.

“If Mr. Kaufman stole it, which I think he did, then it’s as good as gone. He’s a cantankerous man,” Mr. Newton explains, slowly, as though I’m a dimwitted child.

“Perhaps I won’t ask nicely,” I snip, lifting my chin. Often, the faculty here thinks of me as an uneducated, brainless woman. I may be the youngest employee at Washington High, but I’m far from ignorant.

“Then perhaps I should escort you,” Mr. Beck says, his brows furrowing together. “I may have to speak firmly to him.”

“I can speak firmly myself,” I huff, feeling quite insulted. Aunt Georgina raised me to be a tough gal, not some doormat to be trampled on.

Before he can respond, the principal, Mr. Whitehall, bursts through the doors. “Oh, there you all are!” he cries out, his cheeks red from exertion. “The weatherman on the radio said it’s coming down hard. They’re predicting twelve to eighteen inches. The worst snow we’ve had in decades. With it being dark, I’d feel better if you all went on home before the roads become impassable.”

“But what about the production?” I ask, irritation in my tone. I’ve only planned this for months and months. To have it

canceled would be devastating.

Mr. Whitehall waves a hand at me. “I’m sure they’ll have the roads cleared by tomorrow, but if not, that’s the way it goes. Go on home, Miss Holland, there’s always next year.”

Everyone but me seems happy to get out of unpacking the boxes this evening as we gather our coats and belongings. I pout the entire way out of the building, until I’m hit with a blast of icy air the moment the doors open.

“Golly!” Mr. Newton cries out. “Mr. Beck, you ought to take the ladies home. No woman should be driving in this mess.” He stomps his dress shoes in the accumulating snow as if to make his point.

“I’ll certainly take you up on that offer,” Margaret says.

I shake my head. “I’ll drive myself.”

Before they can argue, I trudge along the snow-covered walkway, trying not to slip in my white Mary Jane strap shoes. While they’re lovely to wear to teach class in, they’re impractical for snow. I finally make it to my used Oldsmobile and smile a bit to see the snow has lightly collected on the windshield, but someone must have been generous to scrape it in the last hour. I scan the yard, looking for Mr. Whitehall to call out my thanks, but he’s already back inside.

As soon as I’m inside the safety of my vehicle, I ponder Mr. Newton’s words regarding Mr. Kaufman. It makes sense he would steal baby Jesus—the man is wretched. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile in all the time I’ve worked here. He’s not friendly to anyone. Simply arrives each morning, does his job, and escapes nearly as quickly as the students do. It’s not an unknown fact that the man does hate Christmas. So, it’s not far off that he’d be the one to try and sabotage those who do love it.

Growing up, I lived with Aunt Georgina because I never knew my father and Ma died of pneumonia when I was five. My aunt works as a nurse at Washington Memorial Hospital. Every Christmas, they work her long, hard hours. While she

has been wonderful in providing for me, she said Christmas was a waste of time and money. So, each year we'd find time on Christmas Day to have dinner at one of the only open restaurants downtown, exchange a small gift each, and then watch our programs while eating a slice of fruitcake before bed. I'd always dreamed of having a big, flashy Christmas, but it never came. One day, when I'm married and have a home of my own, I'll do just that.

I pull out of the parking lot and wave to Mr. Beck, who is still scraping his windshield. He's asked me out on a few dates, but I always decline. I'm not sure what it is about him, but I'm not attracted to him, so dating would be a waste of time.

My neck burns despite the chill of the air when I think of whom I *am* attracted to.

Tall, dark-hair, broody.

Intense brown eyes.

Scruffy cheeks.

*Stop that, Judy!*

I let out a huff and have trouble keeping my giant boat of a car from slipping into a ditch. Luckily, I manage to keep it on the road. I pass the street toward the neighborhood where I still live with Aunt Georgina.

I'm not going home.

Not until I have Jesus.

My memory is fuzzy, but once, I drove Margaret to Mr. Kaufman's home when he was ill for a week with the flu. She'd made homemade chicken noodle soup. Unfortunately, the ungrateful man didn't answer the door so she was forced to leave the soup on the doorstep. He lives in a small cottage on the outskirts of town. I do hope I can remember the way.

It takes a few wrong turns and nearly spinning into an oak tree, before I am winding down his road. The only light comes from one of his windows a quarter mile up the road. At least I

know he'll be home. I'm squinting to see if I can make out his car in the drive, when I lose control of my car once more. This time, before I can correct it, I spin out and land hard in a ditch. My breath is nearly knocked out of me when my chest hits the steering wheel. I blink away the dizzying stars and frown to see the headlights have been buried in a snowbank.

"Darn," I grumble. "Darn! Darn! Darn!" I pound on the steering wheel as I throw a tiny fit over my predicament. "Darn." Tears prickle my eyes but I'm not typically a crier. Granted, usually I'm not stuck in a ditch in the middle of a snowstorm either.

After several attempts to back my car out of the ditch, I decide to do what I came here for in the first place. Get Jesus and get out of here. A crazed laugh bubbles from my throat at the silliness of it all.

"Off to see the Grinch," I mutter, as I push open the door. I pull my handbag over my shoulder and climb out of the safety of my vehicle. The wind whips at me as though to warn me away from Mr. Kaufman's cottage. I shiver against the cold, but there's no stopping me now. I'm a woman on a mission.

The walk to his cottage is bitterly cold and dangerous. By the time I reach his doorstep, I can't feel my legs and I'm shivering so hard I think I might pass out. I rap on his door, pain smarting through my knuckles being that they're frozen from the cold.

"Mr. K-Kaufman!" I holler, as I pound on the door. "I've c-come f-for J-Jesus!"

The door swings open and the scent of tobacco permeates the air. I'm stunned for a moment by the man before me. A murderous scowl on his handsome face. His dark, wavy hair no longer gelled back, but instead mussed, as though he's been raking his fingers through it. The dark hair on his cheeks that is in need of a fresh shaving but somehow beckons for me to touch.

“Miss Holland,” he growls, his voice as icy as my toes. “You’ll catch your death out here, bellowing about Jesus. Get inside and by the fire. Did you walk here?”

My teeth chatter as I point to my car in the distance. “I r-ran off the r-road.”

He reaches forward, grabs my wrist, and jerks me into his warm home. I cry out and swat at him, but my frozen limbs are useless. As soon as he closes the door behind me, he corners me.

“You did what?” he seethes, his chocolate-brown eyes glimmering with rage.

I blink at him in shock. I’ve never had someone’s anger directed at me, not like this. I should fear him and his intensity, but I refuse to. He’s a Christmas decoration thieving grump.

“Give me Jesus and I’ll be on my way. I’ll dig myself out,” I huff back, meeting his glare with one of my own.

The corners of his lips twitch, breaking the fierceness of his scowl. “Jesus? What on God’s green Earth are you ranting about, woman?”

“For the production!” I cry out, shoving at his solid chest.

Instead of being pushed away, he presses against my cold hands until our bodies are nearly touching. The ice in my veins is quickly being chased away by a lava of lust for this man. Despite his meanness, I’ve harbored a silly crush that will not fade, no matter how many years pass. It’s ridiculous and his fault why I can’t allow myself to date normal men like Mr. Beck. Almost as though my heart holds out for the off chance that Mr. Kaufman will one day realize I’m a catch and want me on his arm.

“You think I have your precious Jesus?” he asks, quirkling a brow in question.

I despise how charming he looks wearing a near-playful smirk. “Mr. Newton said you did.”

He scoffs. “Roy is a moron.”



“Mr. Kaufman!”

His lips curl into a half-smile that makes me blush. “Call me Kent.”

“There’s no need to be rude and call him names,” I grumble, even though Mr. Newton *is* a moron. “Mr. Newton said he saw you leaving with Jesus. I’m here to get him back.”

“Look, lady,” he says, his features returning to their permanent scowl. “I don’t know why he’d tell you such horseshit, but I don’t have your Jesus. Perhaps you shouldn’t believe everything that idiot says. Look where it got you.” He gestures toward his living room where a fire burns in the fireplace, begging for me to come admire it up close. “Stuck with me.”

“Oh,” I retort, my voice turning shrill, “I am *not* stuck here. I’ll be leaving now, thank you very much.” I reach for the door and his palm slaps the surface above my head.

“You’re not going anywhere, woman.”

“Judy,” I snap.

His grin is wolfish and I hate how it heats me from the inside out. “Well, *Judy*. Since you weren’t thinking with that head of yours, and decided to drive out to the middle of nowhere in the middle of a snowstorm, you’ve secured yourself at least a one-night stay at the glorious Kaufman Inn.” He runs his knuckles down the lapel of my coat and shakes his head. “Now sit down by that fire while I make you a hot drink.”

I open my mouth to argue and he reaches up. His warm fingers brush under my chin and then he firmly closes my mouth.

“You can argue,” he grunts, pointing to the fire, “when you’re warm.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### Kent

**H**ER GREEN EYES flicker with fury. I always knew Judy Holland was a feisty one beneath her polite smiles and conservative outfits. She always managed to keep her emotions in check.

Until now.

Somehow, she let that shit-for-brains Roy Newton convince her that I had accosted a plastic Jesus and was holding it hostage. The situation would be comical—which I need some comedic relief in my life—except for the fact she endangered her life driving out here. And for that, Roy will pay. Next time I see him, I’m going to give that goober a firm talking-to.

My mind strays to the past and I attempt force it away to no avail. It was five years ago this Christmas that my wife Dorothy and our infant daughter were killed in an automobile accident. She’d taken the family car over to her mother’s so our daughter Susan could have her picture taken with Santa. I’d stayed back to wrap the last of the presents and to make sure the ham didn’t overcook. I was singing along to an Elvis Christmas tune when the sheriff showed up on my doorstep to deliver the news they’d been hit in a head-on collision on the way back home, killing them both on impact.

The familiar pain of that night clutches its devastating grip around my throat, robbing me of breath. I rush away from her toward the fire, needing an escape. After tossing several new logs on the fire, I slip into the kitchen to make her a drink. I’d just been heating up some cinnamon water for my bourbon when she arrived, so I mix a couple of hot cocktails and garnish them with cinnamon sticks.

“You have no Christmas decorations,” she snips when I return to the living room.

She's removed her coat and kicked off her shoes, as though she belongs in my living room. Wearing a frown that's somehow directed at me despite my hospitality, she points one foot out toward the fire and wiggles her toes.

"You have no manners," I bite back, handing her the cocktail.

*"Thank you."* Her voice drips with sarcasm.

I smirk. "You're welcome. Drink, woman, and for Christ's sake, sit."

"I'll stand," she says primly, tucking a strand of wet, dark brown hair behind her ear.

"Suit yourself. We'll stand." I walk over to her and stand where I can breathe in her scent. "You smell like you've been crawling around in dust."

She gapes at me, her adorable upturned nose turning pink. "Are you always this rude to your houseguests?"

"Always."

For a moment, she seems at a loss for words. My attention is drawn to the way she bites on her bottom lip and a line of worry creases between her brows.

"For five minutes, Judy, stop running your mouth and drink. When you're warm and the threat of hypothermia is gone, then you can chew me out all you want."

She narrows her eyes and makes an exaggerated show of drinking her cinnamon bourbon. It must be a little more stout than she's used to because she coughs, barely choking her sip down. "Did you mix in some kerosene?"

A small chuckle rumbles from me, surprising us both. "Bourbon. It'll grow hair on your chest."

Her cheeks blaze red. "You really didn't steal Jesus?"

"I most certainly did not."

She swallows more of her drink down, this time able to keep from choking. “He sent me here, knowing it would be awkward and embarrassing for us both,” she whispers.

“I’m entirely entertained,” I argue.

Her green eyes flash with fury. “Are you always this maddening?”

“Always.”

She sips her bourbon and steps closer to the fire, away from my proximity. “Why are you always so unfriendly to me?” Her anger has slipped away as genuine confusion morphs her pretty features.

*Because you’re the only light that seems to flicker in my dark world.*

*Because you make me forget about Dorothy when I look at you.*

*Because you tease me with happiness when I’m destined to have none.*

“I’m unfriendly to everyone,” I bite out, shrugging.

“But the others don’t care.” Her nostrils flare as she looks into her mug. “I do.”

My chest aches at her softly-spoken words. “You shouldn’t,” I grumble. “You should care about people worth caring about. People like Mr. Beck.”

Her lip curls up slightly and she drains the rest of her hot drink. “Do you have a phone I could use? My aunt will be worried if I don’t call.”

“You live with your aunt?” I ask, even though I know the answer. I know a lot about Judy Holland. She’s single. Gorgeous as hell. Sassy as can be. Smarter than any woman at that school. A damn catch if I ever saw one. Too bad I’m not fishing.

“I’m saving up for my own place,” she tells me proudly, but sadness flickers in her eyes.

I can't help but admire her beautiful face. Full, pouty lips. Rosy cheeks. Longest lashes I've seen on a woman. Her dark brown hair is usually curled into prim curls, but after being soaked with snow, the strands hang straighter than normal and slightly unruly. The beast inside me that's been caged for far too long craves to run his fingers through her messy hair. My cock lurches in my slacks in agreement.

"The telephone is there," I say gruffly, pointing to the wall in the kitchen.

She hands me her mug as she prances over to the phone. Most women I know are so fixated on their appearance and manners and such. Judy is carefree and doesn't seem to notice her unkempt state. It's refreshing, and I'm reminded of how comfortable Dorothy was in our home versus when she'd gussy up to go see her mother. I feel another painful squeeze inside my chest.

As she makes her call, I set to pouring her another drink. I drain mine and refill it before turning back to her. She's bent over the counter as she twirls the yellow cord around her fingers in an absentminded way. I admire her bottom and the curves of her calves. When she turns and catches me staring at her, I nearly spill our drinks. Instead of letting on what I was doing, I hand her the mug as she says her goodbye.

"That was strange," she says, her features scrunching up.

"Your aunt?"

"She told me to have fun." She scoffs. "I am not having fun. Why on Earth would she think I would have fun being stranded for God knows how long with you?"

The barb stings but I suppose I deserve it. People are too pushy, especially my colleagues. After Dorothy and Susan died, they made it their life's mission to pry into my life and well-being. I quickly learned to develop my own defense mechanism. If I shut them down the moment they open their mouths, I don't have to talk about the most painful time in my life.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her words soft. “I’m being terribly rude. You’ve been hospitable. I’m overwhelmed is all. With the production, the missing Jesus, and now the storm, I want to crawl into a hole and cry.”

“You don’t strike me as the crying type,” I point out.

Her lips curl into a sweet smile. “Precisely. Normally, I handle all things in stride. I was just looking forward to the production. To see all of the Christmas decorations and to be involved as the students sang the songs. I was excited. And now”—she sighs, waving a hand toward the window—“the snowstorm has not only ruined that, it’s also exiled me here.”

“Does it help that I’m a great cook? If you’re going to be stuck with me, at least I can feed you well.”

She grins from behind her mug as she sips down the bourbon. “That helps a lot, actually. I can’t tell you the last time I had a home-cooked meal.”

“Settle by the fire and I’ll cook something up.”

“I think I’m warm now,” she says, her cheeks growing redder.

“That’s the alcohol.”

She gulps down the rest and thrusts her mug at me. “Then, by all means, fill me up and warm my soul, Mr. Kaufman.” Her green eyes are hooded and I have trouble pulling away from her gaze.

I pluck her mug from her grip and linger my stare on her pouty lips. My cock has been in hibernation until tonight, but it’s now awake, hungry to make sweet little Miss Holland its first meal.

“Go on, woman,” I grunt, my voice husky as I try to ward off my erection, which proves to be difficult with this beautiful woman standing barefoot and looking all too delicious in my kitchen.

“Not without my drink,” she sasses.

I turn my back to her, hoping to hide my semi hard-on from her. I'm busying myself making her another drink when I feel her heat at my back. I stiffen at her closeness.

"Lemon juice. I knew there was a secret ingredient."

Chuckling, I turn to hand her the refilled mug. "It wasn't a secret. You just never asked."

She tilts her head up to look at me. I can't help but run my gaze down the length of her pale throat. My mouth waters to taste her there and turn her flesh bright red as my scruff scrapes along her soft skin.

"Why don't you date?" she asks, her voice tender.

Irritation blooms inside me. "I just don't."

"Because you haven't found the right woman yet?"

A growl rumbles from me. "I found her already and she was stolen from me. Lightning doesn't strike twice, lady."

She flinches at my words. "Oh...I meant...I mean, I heard about your wife and daughter...I'm sorry..." She trails off, a helpless look on her pretty face. "I should go."

"You'll not be going anywhere," I snarl.

Her eyes widen but she wisely leaves me to my anger. One of the doors within the house slams shut and a pang hits me right in the chest as I wonder if the girl who doesn't usually cry is now crying in my bathroom.

I should go after her and apologize for my behavior.

Instead, I gulp down the bourbon and begin banging around the kitchen as I start supper.

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DINNER WAS QUIET and eaten in silence. When she offered to do the dishes, I waved her out of the kitchen. I'm not sure what she's doing, but I'm thankful it's away from me. I need to think. I need to understand why this woman seems to light a

fire inside me, when I don't want to burn. I just want to be. Why can't she just let me be?

Grief, an ever-present emotion, tugs and gnaws at me. It's been eating me from the inside out for five years. Obviously, Christmas is the worst. The snow is a bitter reminder of what was stolen from me. Each year, I look forward to the winter break from class so I can drink myself into oblivion. The season passes by in a blur and I'm safe from it for another twelve months.

I spend nearly an hour washing every inch of the avocado-colored Formica countertops. Even my kitchen is a reminder of my pain. Dorothy and I had just remodeled our kitchen and spent a fortune on the upgrade. I keep it pristine for her, as though she might return at any moment to admire what she so proudly helped design.

An ache burns in my chest and I blink back hot tears. My tears are for me and me alone. Now, I have a witness to my agony. I hate that I have to hold it back. The last thing I want is for Judy to see me in such a state. Pity isn't something I enjoy, especially from a woman who turns the icy blood in my veins hot.

I exit the kitchen but she's not sitting by the fire as I had anticipated she would be. Instead, I follow her sweet, soft humming—"Santa Claus is Coming to Town" by The Supremes—and find her near the front door. My heart stammers in my chest for a moment as fear clutches at me at the thought of her leaving because of my surly attitude. It's entirely too dangerous for her to go out there. I will not lose another woman to the wickedness of winter.

"I found this stack of unopened Christmas cards sitting on the table there and I thought I'd help you out. There was some tape in the drawer. I hope you don't mind," she chirps, as she tapes a card to one of the windows beside the door.

Anger surges up inside of me, chasing away grief and old memories. "What have you done?" I roar, making her flinch with my furious words.



Her hand trembles as she turns to face me. “There are years’ worth of unopened cards, Kent. I was only trying to help.” Her dark hair has dried and her cheeks are rosy. She bites on her plump bottom lip, distracting me.

“Christmas doesn’t belong in this home,” I snap, gesturing at her handiwork on the windows.

She straightens her spine and steps closer to me, her finger pointing right at my chest. “Maybe it should. Every home should be decked in holiday cheer.”

“There is nothing cheery about Christmas for me,” I seethe, glowering down at her pretty face.

Her gaze softens and her lashes flutter across her cheeks as she blinks slowly. “Did Dorothy like Christmas?”

My deceased wife’s name on her lips strikes me like a whip. I stumble, my back hitting the wall behind me. “What? How do you know her name?”

Her lips press into a firm line as she picks up one of the older Christmas cards that’s addressed to us both. “I’m sorry for your loss, but Kent, you can’t live like this.”

I close my eyes and swallow down my emotion. Having the beautiful, but prying, Judy Holland in my home is too much. I can barely keep the devastation at bay. My eyes jolt back open when she takes both of my hands in a comforting gesture. With her head tilted up and her plump, pink lips barely parted, I have the urge to kiss her.

My heart is shredded with agony. Half of me wants to push her away because kissing her in my home would be a betrayal to Dorothy. The other half of me reminds me Dorothy is gone and Judy is sweet and beautiful.

Before I can stop myself, I tug on her hands until she staggers against my chest. I pull my hand from hers and cradle her feminine cheek.

“Woman,” I say gruffly, my lips inches from hers. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

And apparently, neither do I, because I press my lips to hers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Judy

**T**HE BOURBON AND cinnamon drink must truly have been laced with kerosene because the moment his lips touch mine, my heart ignites. Fire burns its way down my chest, through my stomach, and to my core. Heat surges through every nerve ending as I part my lips and allow this man to kiss me better than anyone has before.

His tongue lashes out and strikes mine—as though we’re in an intense battle. Never one to back down, I kiss him just as violently. All the kisses before this were dull and empty. Kent Kaufman’s kiss is fueled by a desperate longing. Unlike the other fellas, Kent takes what he wants and doesn’t ask. It’s thrilling to be kissed with so much vigor. I’ve never felt anything like it. A small, raspy moan erupts from me. Embarrassment heats my skin but it only seems to encourage him. His arm wraps around my waist and he draws me closer.

“Mr. Kaufman,” I whisper against his mouth, my fingers clutching his white button-down shirt. He tastes like bourbon and cinnamon and a hint of tobacco. Such an addictive taste.

He groans, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip. I can feel his erection between us and excitement surges through me. Aunt Georgina says the desire to have sex is natural for a woman and not to let the rules society has dreamed up dictate my life. Of course, I’ve never had sex with anyone, but I certainly don’t feel opposed to it right about now. If Kent carried me into his bedroom, I’d let him ravish me if he chose to do so. I’m just imagining dirty, illicit thoughts—thanks to the bourbon burning through my system—when he pulls away from our kiss.

“We can’t do this, Miss Holland.” His voice is sad, but final.

Shame ripples through me. I'm not some loose woman who beds any man she comes in contact with. The fact that he must think that horrifies me. I wriggle, attempting to slip from his grasp, but his grip tightens.

"You're beautiful," he rumbles, pain flickering in his brown eyes. "But I...you deserve someone better than me. I'm just a sad old man with a broken heart. You need to find someone like Mr. Beck, who has his whole heart, not pieces of one. My body craves you, but my heart isn't capable. I'm sorry."

His moment of vulnerability is heartbreaking and I manage to pull away from him. Hot tears flood my eyes. Only Kent Kaufman has ever been able to evoke such emotions from me. Either he's being cruel to me at the school, or dismissing me in his home. It's crushing and I need to escape his presence. Darn this storm!

I slip into his bathroom and lock the door behind me. My reflection reveals a disheveled, upset woman. Green eyes are glassy with tears and my nose is red. I bring my fingertips to my lips and chin that are rubbed raw from his scruffy face as it touched mine. The reminder stabs at my heart and I open cabinets, looking for a washcloth. I wash my face with cold water and feel lots better when I'm done. Maybe I can wait inside the bathroom until the storm passes. That would be preferable than making a fool out of myself in front of this insufferable man.

Another sob climbs up my throat but I swallow it down. After fifteen minutes or so, I take in a deep breath and exit the bathroom. Kent stands, leaned against the wall, right outside the bathroom. He wears a sorrowful expression on his handsome face.

"Miss Holland," he starts, his voice gruff, "I'm sorry for my behavior."

I sniff and lift my chin. "I'm sorry for mine. Can you escort me to where I'll be staying for the night? I'm rather tired."

He prowls forward until his chest is inches from mine and he has to look down to see me. His scent envelops me, and I'm once again drawn to him despite the way he hurt me. I flinch slightly when his hand rises and he swipes a strand of hair away from my eye, tucking it behind my ear. The touch is gentle and filled with affection. Oh, he confuses me so!

"You know what an awful man I am," he rumbles. "And yet you stand here, with your pretty eyes drinking me in and your plump lips parted, just begging for a kiss. Why, Miss Holland, must you do this to us?"

I tilt my head to the side as I inspect him up close. He's older than me. If I had to guess, nearing forty, but he's handsome in a rugged sort of way. All the other men I know are refined and glossy. He's so real. And his kiss was the best one of my life, until he ended it and sent me away with hurtful words.

"You don't kiss like an awful man," I say grumpily. "Maybe avoiding you would be a lot easier if you didn't kiss so well."

One corner of his lips tilts up. "You're not like most women. Your mouth has no qualms about saying whatever it is your mind is thinking. I admire that about you."

"But not enough admiration to kiss me again," I say, dejected.

He winces but nods. "I'm not the man you're looking for."

I wish my heart would hear the words, but it does a silly flop, ignorant of his wishes.



I WAKE TO a pounding in my skull and the scent of bacon in my nostrils. I'm curled up on the sofa, a giant quilt wrapped around me. Kent's house is cold but I can feel heat coming from the fire nearby. My eyes travel their way into the kitchen where Kent busies himself making breakfast. Between him and my Aunt Georgina, they've squashed all the normal ideas I've been taught about men and women's roles. Aunt Georgina

is a working woman, with no time for cooking or housework or social gatherings. Kent, despite his surliness, is quite hospitable and an excellent cook. He seems to enjoy spending time in his gorgeous green kitchen. My eyes linger on his backside.

He's so relaxed.

Last night and every day at school, it's as though he's coiled so tight, he might snap at any second. This morning, his shoulders don't have their normal tension. He wears a maroon Shetland sweater that fits him well, showcasing muscles I didn't know existed because they were normally hidden underneath his dress shirts he'd wear at school. His white chinos hug his bottom. Right now, he looks every bit like an Ivy Leaguer—a darker, more intense version of JFK—dressed in his casual wear.

I sit up and realize I'm still in the dress from last night and my dark hair is a tangled mess. I've never felt so awful in my life. Hoping to escape his attention, I rush from the living room into my safe haven of the bathroom. As soon as I shut the door behind me, I find an unopened toothbrush near the sink. But what has me softening toward the man is a stack of neatly folded clothes and a handwritten note.

***I'm sorry about last night. I know you came here with only the clothes on your back. Feel free to borrow some of Dorothy's things if you like. – Kent***

My heart aches knowing how difficult it must have been for him to offer me her clothes. He's still so clearly broken up over the loss of his family. I decide that I need to put my own feelings away so that I can help Kent. He needs a friend, not some floozy woman throwing herself at him after a couple of drinks in her. Shameful. With a sigh, I help myself to the shower and then dress in a pair of dark blue denim high-waisted bellbottoms that fit surprisingly well. I pull on the creamy, billowy blouse and tuck it into the pants. There's a hairbrush in the drawer, so I set to brushing through my tangles and then braid my wet hair over the front of one

shoulder. I don't have anything to tie it off with, but it'll stay for now. He didn't leave out any socks and my feet are freezing. Oh well, beggars can't be choosers.

I exit the bathroom and make my way into the kitchen where Kent's pouring coffee into two mugs. Breakfast smells delicious and my stomach grumbles loudly.

"Miss Holland," he greets, not making eye contact with me.

"You don't have to be so formal," I say softly. "Judy is fine."

His eyes dart to mine and I'm locked in his intense stare. "I see the clothes fit well."

"Yes, thank you."

He nods and motions for me to sit. All manners fly out the window as I start filling my plate with food. Bacon, cheesy scrambled eggs, pancakes. I haven't eaten this well, ever, and I'm embarrassed how happy this breakfast makes me. When our eyes drift to each other again, he's amused at my ravenous eating.

"This is absolutely delicious," I praise. "You promised good cooking and you do not disappoint."

He sits a little straighter in his chair, pride glowing from him. "Cooking is one of my favorite things to do. Not often do I get to cook for others."

I sip my coffee and level my gaze at him. "Kent, may I be frank with you?"

His brows furl together but he nods. "I'd like that."

"Last night, the bourbon had me acting irrationally. Truth is, this must be hard for you. I burst into your home unannounced, and then threw myself at you. You're so clearly hurting from the loss of your family. It was wrong for me to have expectations of you. Please accept my apology. I would like to be your friend. You don't strike me as the type to have many, and I'd love to be one of those people."

He studies me for a long moment. “I don’t accept your apology.”

I gasp, my eyes wide in shock.

“Because you did nothing wrong,” he continues, a wolfish grin on his handsome face. “It felt right for a moment having a woman in my arms, but once my brain caught up, it felt like a betrayal to her. I was lucky enough to find love once in my life, and it doesn’t feel right searching for more of it.”

His sad words break my heart. “Oh, Kent...”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine. I’ve learned to accept this about myself. You, on the other hand, deserve someone who can give you everything. And now that I’m thinking about it, not some panty waist like Mr. Beck.”

I giggle at Kent basically calling Mr. Beck a boy with a weak personality. “Mr. Kaufman,” I chide, playfully. “You shouldn’t name call.”

He smirks as he picks up his coffee. “You deserve better is all I’m saying. Better than anyone in this town.”

*I may deserve more, but I want you, Kent Kaufman.* My cheeks burn red at my unspoken words.

“Thank you,” I say, smiling. “How is the weather today? Will I be able to make it home?”

His face grows serious. “Unfortunately, no. The weather has worsened and your car is all but buried. They were saying on the boob tube this morning that the roads may not be cleared until after Christmas.”

I gape at him.

“Don’t worry, woman,” he assures me. “I’ll take care of you until then.”

His words are innocent, but they hang in the air for us both to dissect them until they’re not innocent at all. He clears his throat and I look down at my plate to avoid the awkwardness in the air.



“What I meant,” he says slowly, “is that I have enough food to feed you. You can borrow my late wife’s clothes. You’re my welcomed houseguest until it’s time to leave.”

I lift my gaze to meet his brown eyes. “And what then, Kent? Do we go back to the way we were? You ignoring me when I speak to you in the hallways?”

He frowns and his chiseled jaw clenches. “I have never ignored you. No one can. Have you taken a look in the mirror lately?”

“I beg your pardon?”

His features soften almost imperceptibly. “You’re beautiful, Judy. Everyone looks at you. Everyone is drawn to you. Your laughter is like tinkling bells.”

“Then why wouldn’t you speak back to me if I’m so wonderful?” I demand, a little too much anger in my words.

“Because it would hurt too much,” he murmurs. “Speaking to you felt like moving on. I’m not ready to move on.”

All fury melts away. I reach across the table and pat his hand. “I’ll say it again, Kent Kaufman. You need a friend. No one is asking you to run off and get married, but you can’t lock yourself away from everyone. I imagine Dorothy would be devastated if she knew how you closed yourself off from everyone. Am I right?”

He nods and turns his hand, taking mine in his. “A friend would be lovely,” he rumbles. “As long as you understand I’m unable to give more.”

Our fingers link and it feels anything but friendly, but I don’t mention that. Instead, I give him what he yearns for. Friendship.

“Friends, it is. Now, tell me you have some boots and socks I can borrow. The snow is too beautiful to ignore this morning. Perhaps a snowball fight to start the day?” I suggest, my brow lifting in question.

He opens his mouth like he might say no, but then a sly grin spreads across his face. “A snowball fight? With me? You do remember I’m the meanest man in this town. And you’re not some lady I’m romancing, you’re a friend. Friends don’t get a free pass.”

I rise to his challenge. “I lived next door to Bobby and Beau Hawkins growing up. Those two twerps knew how to throw a snowball. Let’s just say I learned from the best. Eat your words, Kent, because you don’t get a free pass either.”

Real joy shines in his eyes and pride thumps inside my chest for putting it there.

“Try not to cry,” he says with an evil grin.

“I won’t cry for you,” I reply in a haughty tone. “Not sure you can say the same for me. Better bring a tissue in your pocket for when I beat your tail.”

His eyes twinkle. “It’s on, lovely.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Kent

SHE CAN BARELY walk in my oversized boots she's wearing, but that doesn't stop her from being a worthy adversary. From her perch beside my 'Stang, she pummels me with well-aimed, hard-packed snowballs. Three have already nailed me in the forehead, and my car is too precious to throw anything hard back at her. As soon as she took her spot behind my car, I knew her strategy would be a winning move.

"Come out into the open," I taunt, tossing my snowball back and forth between my gloved hands. "Stop hiding, little girl."

*Thwap!*

She nails me in the chest this time. Her laughter is sweet and wonderful, despite the gloom of the wicked winter storm whipping all around us. "Stop standing there, letting me hit you. At least make it difficult for me," she challenges back.

I wade through the snow that's damn well near my hips, on a hunt for the little vixen. She watches me from over the top of my car. Her cheeks and nose are bright red and her teeth are chattering, but her green eyes glimmer with happiness. The fact that I've put the beautiful smile on her face is shocking to me. I'm not sure I've made many people smile in the past five years, and making her do so puts one on my own face. I almost forgot what it feels like to have fun.

Crouching down low, I hide from her as I make my way around the vehicle. She knows I'm coming for her, so I'll no doubt get pelted with snowballs, but I figure she can only get one, maybe two, thrown before I'm on her. As I round the car, the first one whizzes past my ear. The second one hits me in the neck. Then, I pounce.

Her squeals echo through the air as I tackle her into the snow. We sink down into the thickness of it. She laughs, loud and happily, at being caught. And in this moment, I'm caught too. Caught by how stunning she is. The need to kiss her is overwhelming. What's happening to me? I told her we could be friends. My body ignores my promises though, because my lips seek out hers. The moment mine press to her cold ones, she lets out a whimper of surprise. Then, her mouth parts, inviting me in.

"We'll catch our death out here," I murmur against her lips, teasing her with small kisses.

"Maybe it won't find us," she breathes.

My lips fuse to hers and our tongues dance desperately together. She tastes sweet and I want to kiss her until we're breathless. Desire swims through me, eager to do more than just kiss. With her beneath me, small and perfectly fitted against my body, I can't help but imagine scenarios where we're in my bed. Naked and writhing together. My lips and tongue tasting her everywhere.

"Kent," she moans against my mouth. "Friends don't kiss like this."

I kiss her anyway.

An extra hard gust of wind sends snow tumbling into her face. She sputters and I sit back, pulling her out of the snow hole. I chuckle as I dust away the flakes from her pretty face. We're a tangle of limbs, but I hold her to me, not eager to let her go.

Her smile falls as she looks off in the distance to her buried car. "The Christmas program was supposed to be tonight. The children worked so hard. I'm sad we won't get to do it."

"There's nothing you can do. No sense in getting worked up over it."

She nods and brings her attention back to me. "We should get back inside. I'm cold."

I stand and help her to her feet. The trek back to the house is laborious, but we eventually manage to get indoors. After peeling away our wet, snowy outerwear that's soaked down to our clothes, I grab onto her hand to guide her to my room so she can pick out something else to wear. As we enter my room, I can practically hear the questions bouncing around inside her head.

*Why are your wife's things still sitting about?*

*Why are the drawers still filled with her socks and undergarments?*

*Why is the closet still half full of her clothing?*

She's quiet though as I guide her to the closet. It's a long L-shaped closet. In the very back are boxes of shoes hidden in the nook.

"You're welcome to wear any of it," I tell her, my voice gritty.

Her brows are furled as she runs her fingertips along Dorothy's clothes. "Five years, right?"

I nod, the pang in my chest ever-present. "Five years this Christmas."

She gives me a soft smile. "As your friend, I could help you box some of this stuff up. You shouldn't keep it forever, Kent. You know that, right?"

Guilt washes over me. If Dorothy were here, she'd playfully swat at me and tell me I was being sentimental, not practical. I can't help but be sentimental though. "Maybe one day," I mutter.

"When that day comes, I'll be here," she promises before turning to my side. "Do you have anything warm?" Her fingers land on a sherpa sweater. "Can I wear this?"

Male pride thumps in my chest at the idea of her wearing my sweater. "Of course."

She tugs it from the hanger but doesn't move to leave the closet. Her green eyes sparkle with an attraction for me that I can't ignore. No, like a light in the dark, it beckons for me. Before I can remind myself we're friends, I'm prowling her way. She squeaks when I back her up against the far wall.

"Do you need help with those wet clothes?" I ask, my voice husky with need for her. Shame courses through me at how badly I want her. My mind reminds me that I'm still in mourning, but my body seems to be unable to keep away from her.

"Yes," she breathes, her lashes fluttering closed.

I fumble with the buttons on her blouse and untuck it from her bellbottoms. She lets out a sharp breath when I tug the material down over her shoulders. My eyes are greedy and I can't help but step back so I can see her creamy flesh. Her bra nearly spills over with her full breasts—breasts my mouth waters to taste. She hands me the sweater as she lets the blouse fall to the floor. Instead of removing her bra like I want, I help her into the oversized sweater. It swallows her, but I like how small she looks in it. Like maybe she needs protecting and I'm just the man to pull her into my arms and do it.

"These too?" I ask. I slip a finger into the top of her pants and tug.

"Those too." Her whispered words speak straight to my cock.

I unbutton them and run the zipper down. Her hands rest on my shoulders as I kneel to work them down her hips. Her sweet scent invades my nostrils and reminds me of how much I want her. Pale yellow panties come into view, drawing out a low growl from me. I manage to pull her pants from her without burying my face between her thighs, which is quite a feat.

"Are you cold?" My palms slide up the sides of her legs, stopping just shy of where the sweater hangs mid-thigh.

She shivers. "I am."

I linger for a moment longer, inhaling her sweet scent, before rising to my feet. “Borrow whatever you want. I’ll go put on some coffee.” I hightail it out of there before I do something regrettable, like make love to her on the closet floor beside my dead wife’s shoes.

*Get ahold of yourself, Kent Kaufman, or you’ll break this poor girl’s heart to match yours.*



AFTER A QUICK lunch of sandwiches and soup, I turn on the boob tube, bypassing all the Christmas programs. I find a station where the fella talks about the state of the economy, and smoke on my pipe. Judy peruses my bookcases and settles on a novel before sitting beside me on the sofa. She pulls her quilt over her from earlier and rests her head against my shoulder.

Her familiarity with me should alarm me, but I find myself warmed by the gesture.

“I teach Charles Dickens every year,” she murmurs as she opens the book. “Not *A Christmas Carol* though, which is funny, considering it’s one of my favorites.”

“Used to be one of my favorites too,” I admit. “What do you teach instead, Miss Holland?”

She turns to flash me a smile. “*A Tale of Two Cities*, usually. While the students find it rather boring, I always enjoy the story.”

“You enjoy teaching literature?”

“I do,” she says, pride in her voice. “Teaching is a rewarding job, as you well know.”

“I wouldn’t do anything else,” I agree.

“History seems boring to teach,” she says, a teasing lilt in her voice.

“Not for me. I enjoy reliving the past.”

“You don’t say,” she says dryly.

A chuckle reverberates through me. “Are you always this saucy?”

“Always.”

I slide an arm around her. “Good. Don’t ever change.”

We both relax, her reading her novel and me watching the tube. Eventually, we fall asleep, nestled against each other.



I WAKE TO a chill in my bones. It’s dark, aside from the dying embers of the fire, which means we’ve lost power. I groan as I untangle myself from Judy and stand to add logs to the fire. Soon, the blaze is hot, warming the room.

“The electricity has gone out,” she says, her voice thick from sleep.

“As long as we stay in here, we’ll be fine. I don’t imagine they’ll make us suffer for long. Stay under the blanket and I’ll make some dinner.”

I leave her to rummage around in the kitchen, lighting candles to give me light for my task of cooking. The gas still works, so I cook some canned chicken noodle soup. I’ve just poured the soup into two bowls when I feel arms wrap around my middle. The hug is so warm and comforting that I am stunned.

“You know,” she says, her hot breath against my back, “we should decorate your house for Christmas. Surely you have decorations stowed away in the attic. Christmas Eve is tomorrow, and—”

Ice freezes my veins and it has nothing to do with the dropping temperature.

“No,” I hiss out.

She steps away from me. “I just thought that maybe—”

Swiveling around to face her, I try to rein in my anger. “Don’t think, Judy. Just don’t.”



Her eyes blink several times in shock as her mouth pops open. “You don’t have to be unkind.”

I grit my teeth. “And you don’t have to keep poking a wound that continues to bleed for me.”

She takes a step back, as though my words physically hurt her. “I’m only trying to help cheer you up.”

“Well, don’t,” I bite out, turning to grab our bowls of soup.

Once again, we have a quiet, awkward dinner. Because of me. I hate that I can’t get past the pain and give the girl in my home a chance. But it’s like, just when I think I might be headed in the right direction, I’m set back ten paces and all twisted around.

This time, when she offers to do the dishes, I allow her to. I grab a bottle of whiskey and retreat to my cold bedroom, where I sit on the edge of the bed and sulk. She hums a Bing Crosby Christmas tune that sets my teeth on edge. Christmas is an awful reminder and yet she insists on bringing it into my home at all costs. The whiskey quickly warms me and soon, fire is blazing through my veins. This was supposed to be my Christmas. Where I was free to wallow in my whiskey and drown in my grief. Not babysit a perky girl who dreams of a perfect man and a perfect holiday. She got herself trapped in the wrong home.

“It’s too cold to spend too much longer back here,” Judy says from the doorway. She’s a shadowed silhouette from the living room firelight.

“I feel like being alone,” I grumble.

She walks slowly into the room and takes the bottle from me. It makes a *thunk* sound as she sets it down on the dresser. “You can be alone later, not when the house is freezing.” Her hand extends out for me to take.

I grip her wrist, and pull her to me. She stumbles and falls into my arms. Tumbling back onto the bed, I press her against me, enjoying the warmth of her body on mine.

“Mr. Kaufman,” she murmurs. “We’re friends, remember?”

I roll her onto her back and nuzzle my nose into her hair. “Perhaps I don’t want to be your friend, Miss Holland.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Judy

**I** WOULD TAKE his words as an insult except with his teeth tugging at my earlobe and his thigh between my legs, it's hard to formulate words. No, I do what any sane girl would in this position, and I push him away. Oh, who am I kidding? I don't push him away. My fingers thread in his hair and I breathe heavily as I wonder how far he'll take us this time. Earlier, in the closet, I was just sure he was going to make love to me. When he pulled away, I nearly screamed at the loss of his hot hands on my legs.

"When I'm with you, I lose my mind," he grumbles. Despite sounding angry, his lips find my neck and he kisses me in a way that says he's anything but mad at me.

"I'm pretty lost too," I admit breathily.

"You make me forget, damn you." His teeth nip at my throat and I moan. "I don't want to forget and you make me do it anyway."

"I just want you to find peace," I murmur. "Your mind is at war and you're always losing. Time to wave that white flag, Kent. Admit defeat and move on. Find peace with your past and allow yourself a future."

"I can't," he croaks, pulling away slightly so our faces are inches apart. "You make it sound simple, but it is not simple. It's the most difficult thing I've ever faced outside of the tragedy itself." His lips press to the corner of my mouth. "I was supposed to drink myself into a stupor, Judy. Not bring you into my marriage bed and have my way with you on the eve of their deaths. It's ruining my mind, you being here. Do you understand?"

His words aren't meant to be cruel, but they hurt anyway.

I'm about to mutter an apology, but then his lips are crushing to mine. He kisses me with desperation—as though our kiss is an answer. I moan into his mouth and a thrill shoots up my spine when his large palm slides beneath the sweater. He cradles my ribs in a reverent way, rubbing his thumb over the flesh. I want his hands to delve deeper, to undress me and caress me. I want Kent Kaufman to crumble down his walls and let me inside. For him to make love to me.

“So beautiful,” he rasps, his hand sliding deeper beneath my sweater until his palm covers my breast over my bra.

A loud moan escapes me when he pulls down the cup and his thumb slides over my hard nipple. He pinches the flesh, making me cry out, and then chuckles against my lips.

“The things I want to do with you...” He trails off, his voice deep and husky.

“So do them.” My tone is brave, but I feel anything but.

His hand slides behind me and he expertly unhooks my bra with one hand. Then, his hand is back on my breast, this time beneath my loosened bra. My panties have grown wet from his touches and I squirm with need. I'm a virgin and don't really know how to ask for what I want. All I know is I want him. In any way he'll have me.

I whimper when his hand leaves my breast to trail to my pants. He fumbles with the button and zipper for a moment and then his hand finds its way inside. The moment his finger brushes along my sex over my panties, I jolt in surprise. “That feels good,” I whisper.

“This?” he growls, his finger rubbing on a part that makes my back arch off the bed.

“Yesss,” I hiss. “Right there.”

He lazily rubs the spot until I'm writhing in pleasure. Stars glitter around me as I cry out his name, ecstasy bringing all my nerves alive at once. The elusive orgasm. I've heard women talk about them, but I've never experienced one myself until now. My thighs quiver and I feel weightless.

“You came and I barely touched you,” he murmurs against my mouth.

“Sorry,” I breathe.

He laughs. “Sorry? It was wonderful, lovely.”

I relax until his hand makes its way under my panties. His fingers slide through my wet folds, seeking entrance. When he pushes a finger inside me, I cry out in surprise. In and out, he slides his finger. Stretching and filling me. Preparing me for his cock. My body breaks out into a sweat despite the cool temperature. Our clothes are in the way and I want them gone. I want him to take me with nothing in between us.

“You’re a virgin,” he says, easing another finger inside me. “I can tell. You’re so tight.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” he growls. “It makes you a temptation I could never ignore.”

“Oh good,” I tease. “You know I hate when you ignore me.”

My words send him into a stony silence and I feel stupid for saying them to ruin the moment. I’d beat myself up over them, except he doesn’t stop what he’s doing. His fingers are on a mission to reach as deep as they can inside me. When he curls them and the heel of his hand presses against the same place he rubbed an orgasm from me, I tremble in anticipation. Pleasure zings from within me at his ministrations. I clench around his fingers, crying out.

“That’s it,” he croons. “Relax and let me make you come this way too.”

His words have barely left his mouth before I’m crashing again. Reality seems to tilt and spin around me.

“This is turning out to be the best Christmas ever,” I mumble, overcome with pleasurable sensations.

He stiffens and roughly pulls his hand away. I'm left feeling cold and alone as he stumbles from the room. Shame has me hurrying to right my pants and hook my bra. It only worsens when the electricity flickers back on and I'm bathed in light, as if to put a spotlight on my recent rejection. As soon as I'm decent, I rush from the room to search for him. I find him leaning against a closed door with his forehead.

"Kent?" I whisper. "What did I say? What did I do wrong?"

His body flinches at my words.

Slowly, I approach him and place my palm on his back. "Don't shut me out. Please."

He turns so quickly, I nearly fall, and would have, if it weren't for his hands grabbing my arms, keeping me in front of him. "That night, I stayed home, Judy. I stayed home and let my wife drive our infant daughter to her mother's, to see Santa. She called me to tell me she was on her way home and I could hear Christmas music playing in the background. Dorothy was jazzed about the holiday. I'd never heard her so happy." His voice cracks. "We said our goodbyes and I wrapped presents, goddammit. Presents. While my wife was hit by another car and bled out in the snow, I was tying bows on packages. While they searched for Susan's body, I was sampling the ham." He shudders violently. "The sheriff showed up on my doorstep and told me they were gone. One second, they were here, then the next, they weren't."

Tears well in my eyes and race down my cheeks. My heart aches for him as he continues.

"The decorations that Dorothy had spent weeks putting in place were a constant reminder of what I'd lost. One morning, I'd had enough and..." He trails off and turns the knob. "I threw it in here."

He pushes inside the room and flicks on the light. At first glance, it's a storage room for Christmas, but as I look around, I realize it once was a nursery. Susan's nursery. The aluminum

tree, decorations and all, has been tossed into the room, sitting on its side. Unopened gifts litter the space. It's a mess and a terrible reminder. All of it. My heart breaks for him.

“Oh, Kent, I am so sorry.” I clutch his hand and squeeze it. “I never meant to force this reminder on you.”

He jerks his hand from my grip. “But you did. You knew it was painful and you kept at it.”

He's hurting, so I allow him the outburst, but I don't back down. “You must learn something about me too,” I say softly, moving toward him again. He doesn't tug from my grip when I take his hands once more. “I grew up with no Christmas. My mother died when I was five, and my aunt never did a thing for the holiday. I've always yearned for a Christmas like on the films. It's silly and childish, but I always wanted to sit by the tree and open gifts.”

His jaw flexes as he regards me, his bloodshot eyes wild with pain flickering in them. “Then by all means, Miss Holland, have your beloved Christmas.” He waves at the unopened gifts scattered about.

“I didn't mean...” I trail off, frowning.

His anger fades as he pushes some décor from a chair onto the floor and sits heavily. “I can't move on. You're right. I can't move on because this has been waiting for me behind that door for five years. Just...” He pinches the bridge of his nose and a tear races down his stubbly cheek. “Just open them. These were for them and they were always meant to be opened.”

I swallow down my emotion and nod as I kneel on the floor. The closest gift to me is wrapped in bright-red foil paper and adorned with a white, frilly bow. *To my dearest Susan*. My heart cracks open as I carefully tear away the paper. A doll in a box with curly blonde hair smiles back at me.

“She was too young to play with the doll but she had the same curly blonde hair. Dorothy and I thought she'd grow up to love it,” he rasps out, his teary eyes locked on mine.

“She must have been awfully beautiful,” I utter, running my fingertip along the side of the box. “What will you do with these gifts once you open them?”

“Throw them in the bin,” he barks out, followed by a harsh laugh.

I purse my lips, fighting to hold back words, but end up spilling them anyway. “My Aunt Georgina works at the hospital, and every year the children there are in need of new toys and clothes. You should donate them.”

He swallows and his nostrils flare. “Dorothy would have liked that.”

“I think Dorothy and I would have been great friends,” I say with a smile. “She seems to have kept you on the straight and narrow.”

His lips twitch as he almost smiles. “She’d have liked you. And you would have liked her. Dorothy had that air about her.” I’m snared by his intense stare. “Same air you have about you.”

I take it as a compliment and smile back before picking up another gift. *To Dorothy*. My gaze flits back to his in question and he simply nods. With a sigh, I set to opening this gift as well. It’s a beautiful scarf with a groovy orange and brown pattern on it.

“This would make a nice donation to The Salvation Army. They’re always looking for clothing and accessories,” I tell him as I fold the soft fabric in a neat square.

He doesn’t respond. His stare bores a hole into me. I straighten my spine and reach for another gift. Opening these and eventually cleaning out this room will bring him peace. Kent Kaufman has been battling the pain in his heart for five years. It’s time for him to be given peace. He’s a good man beneath all his gruff exterior, and he deserves to move on with his life.

“This one is for you,” I say, holding the package to him as an offering.



He clenches his jaw and for a long moment, I'm afraid he won't take it. But just as I start to pull away, he leans forward and accepts the small gift. "To Kent," he whispers, his brown eyes glistening with tears. He's not as careful as me with the paper, and tears through it. "A Cricket." He chuckles. "She bought me a butane lighter, even though she asked me every day when I was going to quit smoking tobacco."

"That's sweet." I pick up another gift with his name.

He opens all of his gifts, smiling through his tears. And he watches me, with pain flashing in his eyes, as I open all of theirs. When we're finished, I swipe away my own tears and look at him in question. He rises from his seat and steps toward me, careful of the mess of presents all around me. His hand extends down toward me and I take it without hesitation. I'm pulled to my feet and into his arms.

"Judy," he murmurs, his lips hovering near mine. "Thank you."

I don't get a second to reply before his mouth presses to mine. His kiss is sweet and tender. I've never been kissed with such adoration, and it makes my knees weak beneath me. When I wobble, his arms wrap securely around my waist. His palms slide to my bottom and he grips me tight, lifting me up. It feels right to hook my legs around him, and based on the growl from him, I'd say it was what he wanted. He carries me from the nursery and back down the hall to his room. I'm eased to my feet and then his hands are frantically pulling away my sweater. His smoldering gaze as he drinks up my bare flesh is enough to make me nearly catch fire.

"You're an incredible sight," he praises, running his palms up the sides of my ribs.

"I could say the same for you." A shy smile tugs at my lips.

His hand slides around my back and he unfastens my bra for the second time tonight. This time, he pulls my bra away and tosses it into the floor. He bends over and sweetly kisses

one of my nipples. I gasp at the sensation and thread my fingers into his hair.

“Kent,” I mutter. “Before we do this...”

His tongue circles my nipple and I whimper. “Yes?”

I shudder at the way his hot breath seems to zing through all my nerve endings. “I, uh, I...”

He pulls away and stands, his brows furrowing. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I assure him, my palms cradling his cheeks. “I just want you to know I’m not some girl who sleeps around. I’ve liked you for a long time. This is special for me. If you’re just needing a release, perhaps we should stop before it progresses further.”

His smirk is my undoing. “This is more than a release, lovely. This is me living my life, and with someone whom I also have liked for some time.”

I gape at him in shock. “You have never liked me.”

“If I didn’t like you, why do I always scrape the ice from your windows on your car so you won’t have to do it?” he challenges, his brow lifted.

“I thought that was Mr. Whitehall. It was you? All these years, every time it snowed?”

He grins. “I couldn’t let Mr. Beck win your heart.”

“You could have at least clued me in on the fact that you were trying to win it,” I grumble, but still smiling.

“Trying?”

“You haven’t won it yet, Mr. Kaufman. But I like it when you try.”

“I assure you,” he growls, his palm resting over my beating heart. “This will be all mine. You’re not going anywhere, Miss Holland.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### Kent

**H**ER GREEN EYES search mine, trusting me to lead the way. This is the most precious gift of the night. Judy Holland. Naked from the waist up and waiting for me to show her what comes next. And I'll spend the entire night showing her. Tasting her. Making love to her. It's the least I can do. She patiently navigated these choppy waters with me as I fumbled through my grief to find some semblance of peace. I'm going to gift her every part of me I have left to give.

I sure as hell hope it's enough to keep her.

Because, deep down, the moment she walked through that door, I think I knew. She had always been something I wouldn't allow myself to have. Someone I appreciated from afar—a woman I might pursue had my life been different. But when she stepped into my home, looking beautiful and mouthing off about Jesus, she'd unknowingly walked into my heart, and I have no intention of letting her go.

Gently, I squeeze her breasts and suck on her nipples, going back and forth between them. When I've teased her enough, I unbutton her pants and push them down her thighs. She clutches onto my shoulders as I slide them down her legs until she's wearing nothing but a pair of socks and panties.

"You're perfect," I murmur, kissing down her toned stomach as I kneel before her. I tilt my head up to find her staring at me with her fat bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "I'm going to see all of you now, lovely. I'm going to taste all of you now."

She blinks innocently at me and then lets out a gasp when I start tugging her panties down. Dark curls, the same color as her hair, cover her mound, hiding her pink center from me. I lick my lips, eager to open her like my very own gift.

“Lie down on the bed,” I order, my voice husky with need. “Part your legs, Judy. I want to taste your sweetness.”

Her face flames red but she sits down on the edge of the bed. She lies back and I pull her socks from her legs before positioning her feet beside her ass on either side. I grip her knees and ease her open. From behind her curls, her clit peeks out. I’d fingered it earlier, but seeing it up close and personal, I take a moment to appreciate how soft and delicate it is.

“Looking at you like this makes my cock so hard,” I growl. “It takes everything in me not to strip down and take you right now.” I massage the inside of her thighs, lower and lower. “But I want to give you something you’ll never forget.”

She lifts her head slightly to look down at me. “I’m nervous.”

I grin at her. “Don’t be. Soon, you won’t have a care in the world besides coming.” I press a kiss to her clit, loving the way she shudders at my small touch. “I want you to be vocal, Judy. I won’t know what feels good unless you tell me. I want to know what you like best, so I can do it over and over again until you scream. Can you do that for me?”

Her head nods, but she’s as quiet as a church mouse.

So, I suck on her clit without warning.

“Oh God!” she cries out, her fingers latching onto my hair.

I chuckle against her pussy. “Good girl. Just like that. Talk to me. It turns me on just like me tasting you turns you on.”

Using my thumbs, I part her lips and run my tongue from her opening to her clit. She whimpers and squirms. I smile before circling her clit with the tip of my tongue.

“T-That,” she whines. “I like that.”

I suck her clit into my mouth and she arches off the bed like she’s stepped on a live wire. Her body jolts and spasms. To give her a reprieve from the intensity, I go back to circling her tiny bundle of nerves. Juices from her pleasure leak from her and I abandon her clit to lap them up. She groans when I

push my tongue into her opening. So tight. After five years of not getting laid, I'm going to come the moment I thrust into her, that's for damn sure. My cock strains in my pants, eager to play, but I ignore it for now. It's all about Judy at the moment.

Once I'm sure I've sucked away her arousal, I slide my tongue along her slit back to her clit. It doesn't take much longer of my teasing for her to detonate. She comes, screaming out my name. I tongue her and revel in the way her body trembles with aftershocks. When she relaxes, I pull away and stand, licking her sweetness off my lips.

“Did you like that?”

She smiles at me with hooded eyes. “I loved it.”

“I loved it too.” I yank off my shirt and feel her gaze on my chest. Lifting a brow, I smirk at her. “See something you want?”

“You,” she breathes. “I want you.”

Male pride surges through me at seeing the want I feel for her reflected in her own eyes. I unbuckle my pants and send them to the floor. Standing in just my jockey shorts and socks, I peer down at her.

“Sit up and take me into your hand. I want you to feel how hard you make me, lovely,” I tell her, my voice low and guttural.

Her cheeks burn red again but she sits up. She tries to bring her knees back together, but I step between them. I run my fingers through her messy brown hair that's long slipped from her braid and tug until her head is tilted up at me. Leaning forward, I kiss her roughly—more passionately than I have yet. She moans into my mouth, and I let out a groan of my own when her palms run down my abs to the waistband of my underwear.

“Touch me, woman.”

She smiles and I kiss the corner of her mouth.

“Do it before I die of suffering. I’m dying to feel you,” I murmur.

Her thumbs hook into the waistband and she pushes down. My erection springs free—heavy and pointing at her in an accusing way. She gapes at my cock as though she’s unsure what to do with it. But she doesn’t hesitate to wrap her small hand around my rock-hard girth. I hiss in pleasure.

“Damn,” I growl, slightly thrusting into her firm grip. “Goddamn.”

“You’re so big,” she breathes, her voice shaky with nerves.

“A man likes hearing those words,” I tease, running my fingers along her temples. “Put your thumb on the tip. Feel my cum already leaking from me. You make me that crazy with need, Judy.”

She flits her green eyes to mine and determination blazes in them. Once again, she bites on her bottom lip—a maneuver that’ll surely be the death of me—as she swipes her thumb across the bead of cum on my tip. Her thumb doesn’t stop there. She runs circles around my crown, using the wetness as a lubricant. Then, like a vixen straight from the fires of Hell, she brings her thumb to her lips and sucks on it.

My cock jolts as I watch her hungrily. I’m thrumming with the desire to push her onto her back and shove my cock into her. I want to drive into her over and over again, until we’re both nothing but useless bones in a bed.

“Salty,” she says, pulling her thumb from her lips. “I like it.”

“I’m hanging on by a thread,” I rasp out. “Scoot back and let me see your pussy again.”

Her mouth pops open. “Mr. Kaufman!”

Smirking, I shrug at her. “Crude words can be hot in the bedroom, lovely. Trust me.”

She must trust my words because she slides back and once again parts herself, inviting me in. I prowl over her tiny frame,

rubbing my eager cock through her soft curls, and kiss her pouty mouth. Her legs hook around my waist and her heels dig into me, urging me forward. I tease her with my tongue, enjoying the frustrated growl from her when I deliberately don't enter her body.

“Is it this you want?” I taunt, as I grip my cock and slap it against her clit. “Are you aching to have me fill you to the point of pain?”

She whimpers, but it's the good kind of whimper. Her eyes burn with lust and her lips have curled into a sultry smile. “I'm ready. So ready, Kent. Make love to me before I die from need.”

Chuckling, I press my tip against her lubricated opening. Slowly, because I don't want to hurt her, I ease into her tight body. We both let out strangled groans the deeper I sink into her. I have to slide out and then back in a few times to properly wet my cock with her juices. Once I'm fully seated inside of her, I bring my lips to hers and kiss her sweetly.

“You feel so good,” I murmur against her mouth. “So good, I'm not sure I'll ever want to leave.”

Her brows are furled and her lip trembles slightly. “Is it supposed to hurt?” A single tear slides down her temple.

I lean to the side and capture the saltiness with my tongue and then kiss her temple. “The first time does, lovely. Don't worry, I'll go slow and gentle for you. Your body will grow used to my size.” I kiss her mouth and then nuzzle her nose with mine. “Talk to me. You let me know if I need to slow down or stop. Okay?”

She nods and blinks away the glassy tears in her eyes. “Okay.”

I fuse my lips to hers and kiss her deeply. My hips ache to thrust into her, but she's still adjusting to me. We kiss and kiss, each moment with more petting and softly murmured words and, eventually, begging. She keeps whispering, “More,” and clenching her body around my cock. Reaching between us, I

run my fingers over her clit and love the way she arches up off the bed in response.

“Ohhhh,” she groans. “That feels good.”

I grin at her and then nip at her bottom lip. “I’m going to make you come like this. Just like this.” My thrusts are lazy as I focus on her clit. With each drive of my hips, I slide in and out of her more easily as her body grows more aroused. I can tell the moment she loses her mind to ecstasy because she cries out and shudders beneath me. Her head tilts back, baring her throat to me, and I latch on. Sucking and biting. I mark this woman as mine with my mouth, as I drive into her, until I’m exploding with pleasure too.

My balls seize up and my cock throbs out its release, filling this beautiful woman with my seed. The desire to make her mine—forever—has never been as strong as it is in this moment. Something cracks inside of me—like a crevasse down the side of a glacier—and warmth bleeds from me, blanketing her.

She’s mine.

The possessive thought is nearly maddening.

I want to keep this sweet, sexy woman in my cottage forever.

My body runs out of steam and I collapse against her, pinning her slight frame to the bed. I nuzzle her neck and press kisses along her sweaty flesh. Her fingers are soft and nurturing as she combs them through my unruly hair. I slide my palm between her breasts, resting it against her chest. The erratic beating of her heart matches mine, and a smile tugs at my lips. I’ve smiled more for Judy in the last two days than I have for everyone combined in the last five years.

The reminder of my reason for not smiling stings, but it’s not a gutting kind of pain like usual. It hurts but it’s better with Judy in my arms. Like she was sent to me to help heal me. A wonderful gift waiting for me, after having endured unimaginable pain.



What a sweet, perfect gift.

“Are you okay?” I rumble against her neck.

“Perfectly okay,” she murmurs. “Maybe a little sore.” Then a giggle. “Maybe a little messy too.”

I lift up and admire her rosy, apple cheeks and big green eyes. Such a beautiful soul. “Need me to kiss it all better?” I flash her a devilish smile as my cock thickens inside her.

“Mr. Kaufman!”



AFTER A QUICK snack in the kitchen, and a long, hot shower, we finally crawl into bed for the night. I pull her naked body against mine. It feels nice having her back pressed against my chest where I can cup her breast and inhale her hair. She’s addictive, and I don’t think I can let her go now that I’ve had her.

We’ve turned off the lights, but I can tell she’s wide awake. I can practically see her thoughts blinking in the darkness.

“Kent?”

“Hmmm?”

“What happens tomorrow?”

I run my thumb along her nipple, loving the way it hardens at my touch. “Well, I’ll get up and make breakfast. Maybe we’ll read by the fire. We can do whatever you want.”

“And the next day?”

*Christmas.*

“We take one day at a time,” I murmur.

She’s tenses in my arms. “What happens when school starts back up?”

“I let Mr. Beck know you’re mine now,” I growl.

A sweet giggle erupts from her. “So, we’re an item now?”

“We’re an item from here on out.”

“I like the sound of that.” She twists so that she’s facing me and her breasts are pressed against my chest. “I’m not all that sleepy...”

Her hand slides down and she grips my cock that’s been at attention since the moment we slid into bed together.

I groan in pleasure. “Are you suggesting I entertain you until you get sleepy?”

“Maybe.”

Gripping her hips, I slide her across my waist as I roll onto my back, so that she’s straddling me. “How about you entertain *me* since you’re wide awake?”

“Like this?” she utters, in shock at our position.

“Exactly like this,” I reply, my palms greedily roaming her bouncy breasts. “Just slide down my cock and go for a little ride.”

She laughs nervously but then she rises up on her knees.

“Wait,” I say, stopping her movements. “Get me wet first, or it’ll hurt.”

“How?”

“However you want.”

I’m curious as to what she’ll do. After a few moments, her wet palm curls around my shaft, making me groan.

“Did you just lick your hand?” I ask, amused. I’d wondered if she’d suck on my cock for a bit, but this is cute.

“I did,” she replies with a haughty tone. “It’s wet now.”

“My *cock*.”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

She grumbles. “Your *cock* is wet now, kinky Mr. Kaufman. Better?”

“Perfect, woman,” I rumble. “Now, stop torturing me and get on.”

Once again, she sits up on her knees and then slowly, she eases my tip into her opening. Gravity takes care of the task as she slides all the way down, wrapping her tight body around my cock. I grab her fleshy bottom and then slap her hard enough to get her moving. Her palms fall to my chest and she starts rocking her hips, using her knowledge from round one to guide her through round two. I continue to grab her ass with one hand, but the other slides to her clit. Pinching and rubbing and teasing. I play with her sensitive clit, loving the way her body gets more enthusiastic with each passing second.

“Ahh!” she cries out. “I’m so close.”

My fingers move quickly and I urge her hips to rock faster. From the bottom, I thrust up, meeting her movements with frantic ones of my own. We go on like this until she screams out in pleasure. Her entire body shakes violently. I spurt out my orgasm, filling her once again. If I keep at it, I’ll knock her up by Christmas. The thought is one that buries itself deep in my heart and refuses to let go. It just grows and grows until it’s something I can’t control.

When she finally falls against me, depleted of energy, I run my fingers through her hair and kiss her head.

“If we keep making love with no protection, you’re going to get pregnant,” I tell her, feeling like I ought to be the responsible one here, even though it pains me to warn her.

“I thought you were keeping me,” she mutters sleepily, her breathing now heavy as sleep finally threatens to steal her from me.

I smile against her hair and run my fingers up her spine. “Oh, I’m keeping you, Miss Holland. I think that was established the moment you walked through my door and I didn’t let you go.”

“About time.”

My heart thunders in my chest as it finally wakes from a five-year slumber.

About damn time.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Judy

“WAKE UP, LOVELY,” a deep voice croons, waking me from my slumber.

I pull the pillow over my face, hiding from my human alarm clock. “Why?”

He laughs, and it’s beautiful. A laugh I haven’t heard from him before. Light and happy. My heart does a flutter in my chest. As memories from last night flood my mind, I can’t help but sigh and peek out at him from beneath the pillow.

“There she is,” he says, his grin wide. “You’re not a morning person?”

“Not when someone keeps me up until all hours of the night,” I tell him with faux grumpiness.

He leans forward and kisses my nose. “I didn’t exactly hear you complaining. At one point, in fact, I am sure I heard you begging for more.”

Heat floods to my cheeks and throat. “Mr. Kaufman!”

His eyes twinkle as he flashes me a devious smirk that makes my stomach clench with anticipation. “We’re in the bed. I’m allowed, remember?”

“Who made up this rule anyway?” I challenge. “You?”

“It’s a good rule. Admit it.”

I swat at him with the pillow, but he easily snags it and tosses it away. His features soften as he strokes my hair away from my face. The way he regards me, as though I’m something precious to him, has my heart stuttering in my chest.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he murmurs. “I’m a lucky bastard.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “I feel lucky too.”

Happiness shines in his eyes. “You should get up and dressed. I have a surprise for you.”

“Pancakes and bacon?” I ask, wagging my eyebrows.

“Well, that’s a given.” His brows furl together. “This surprise is better. It’s special.”

All playfulness fades and I realize whatever surprise he has for me is something that is meaningful to him. I sit up and kiss his handsome mouth. “Give me five minutes.”

“Any longer and I’m coming back for you,” he warns.

I roll away from his warm touch and climb off the bed. The bathroom that’s attached to his bedroom is much nicer than the hallway one. I spend at least four of my five minutes admiring the baby blue color scheme. The sink and toilet are the same shade of blue, and I marvel at how pretty it all looks. For a moment, guilt tugs at my mind as I worry I’m intruding on his wife’s space. But then, I try to think practically. If his wife loved him—which I believe she did because he’s wonderful—then she’d have wanted him to be happy. No one would ever wish loneliness and despair on the one they loved.

“I’ll take care of him,” I vow, even though she—wherever she is—can’t hear me.

Quickly, I use his toothbrush to brush my teeth and I wash my face. The sleep gets cleaned away, but the smile is permanent. I rush about until I find a robe from his closet. It’s a beautiful brown and yellow swirly pattern that’s very becoming. I wrap up my bare body in the robe, and then go on a hunt for Kent. When I open the door and step into the hall, I nearly run right into him. His hands grip my biceps, a tortured expression on his face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I utter, my eyes searching his pained brown ones.

He releases one arm to run his fingers through his messy hair. “I...I just hope you like it. After you fell asleep, I tossed

and turned, thinking about you and all you deserve. It's the best I could do on short notice." He takes my hand and brings my knuckles to his lips. "But next year, I promise it'll be even better. And every year after."

I'm stunned by his promises. Next year? More after that? I want to jump in the air with happiness, but something holds me back. Apprehension. I'm a little worried at his expression.

"I'm sure I'll love it," I assure him.

He blows out a breath of relieved air. "I hope so. Come on." Our fingers thread together and he leads me into the living room.

"Oh, Kent." Tears flood my eyes as I admire the space. "What have you done?"

"I did my best. Some of it was broken. The aluminum tree leans a little," he says sheepishly.

But, to me, it's perfect. He's transformed the space into a Christmas wonderland. The decorations that had been dumped into the nursery have been pulled out and strewn about in a festive way.

"Are those bubble lights?" I gasp, as I leave his grip to admire the lights on the tree. "They're beautiful!"

I flutter about the space, admiring each and every decoration. This must have taken him all night, and I wonder if he even slept. I'm overwhelmed by his sweet gesture.

"I missed decorating for Christmas," he says wistfully. "I didn't realize it until I started doing it last night. I'd wanted to surprise you, but next time, we'll pick out new things together."

Next time.

My heart is full.

I rush over to him and throw my arms around his neck. "Kent, you're a wonderful man. Thank you for this. I know it

must have been hard for you, and yet you did it anyway for me. That's the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me."

He leans forward, resting his forehead against mine. "Believe it or not, I'm not always a Grinch. There's plenty of nice things I want to do for you."

I stand on my toes and kiss him with all the passion I have in me. "I want to do nice things for you too," I murmur, kissing his lips over and over again.

He chuckles and squeezes me tight before spinning me around. "*You* are the nice thing. That's all I need. You, lovely. All I need is you." He slows to a stop and runs his fingers through my hair. "Stay with me. When the snow melts, stay. Don't go."

I blink at him in surprise. "What exactly do you mean, Mr. Kaufman?"

"Exactly how it sounds, Miss Holland."

"Are we being irrational if I say yes?" My heart is pounding in my chest with excitement. This is unheard of, and rushed, and—

My thoughts fade away as he kisses me deeply. His palms roam to my bottom and he pulls me to him. I melt into his muscular frame, happy to stay right here forever. After a long kiss that leaves me weak in the knees, his mouth kisses a trail to my ear.

"Say yes, and to hell with everyone else."

I giggle and bury my face against his chest. "Yes. Now feed me pancakes."

He snorts with laughter at my bossiness. "Yes ma'am."

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"YOU SPOIL ME with your cooking," I tell him, as I stand from the table and carry my plate to the sink.

His chair scrapes across the linoleum as he prowls my way. "I spoil you with my tongue too."



I drop my dishes into the sink and whirl around to gape at him. “Mr. Kaufman!”

He lifts an amused brow. “Hmmm?”

“You’re supposed to save the crude talk for the bedroom. Your rules, not mine.” I swat at his chest, making him laugh.

“Well, since I made the rules, I can break them,” he says with a wicked glint in his eyes. “Just like now, I’m going to break all *your* rules too.”

“I have rules?” I mutter, wide-eyed.

“No sex in the kitchen. Sounds like a rule you’d like.”

“Maybe I have no rules,” I challenge hotly.

He reaches out a hand and tugs at the neatly tied bow on the robe I’m wearing. It loosens when he pulls it and the robe falls open, baring my nakedness to him. I lift my chin to meet his heated gaze when he slides the material off my shoulders, but don’t chicken out. It falls to the floor without a sound, leaving me fully naked standing in his kitchen. If he wants to have sex in the kitchen, then by golly, I’m going to give him what he wants.

“Look at you,” he praises. “Gorgeous and nude.” His hand rubs over his cock through his pajama pants. “See how hungry you make me?”

His cock strains through his pants and it turns me on. I grow wet with arousal between my thighs. My nipples harden to attention, aching for his touch.

“Turn around,” he orders, his voice husky. “Let me see your round ass, lovely.”

I blush at his bold words, but my heart rate spikes at hearing them. I like this. Him talking to me this way. His intense attraction toward me. Turning, I grab onto the edge of the sink and look over my shoulder at him. “Now what?”

He approaches until his body heat warms me. Leaning forward, he kisses my shoulder. “Now, you’re going to stay

still and let me put my fingers in you.”

Heat floods through me and I bite my bottom lip to the point of pain. He palms my butt cheek and then teases his fingers along my crack. I’d be embarrassed, but he does it in such a reverent way that I can’t help but feel admired and adored. His finger seeks out my entrance from behind. I’m already aroused, so his thick finger slides easily into me. I moan and spread my legs a little to grant him more access.

“You’re perfect,” he growls. “So damn perfect.” His finger thrusts into me, mimicking the way his cock does. All it does is tease me though.

“I need you,” I murmur.

“What do you need?” He bites on my shoulder in a way that sends a thrill shooting down my spine. “Say it, Judy.”

“I need your cock. Please.”

He kisses my shoulder and then pulls his finger from me. “Since you asked so sweetly...” He pulls down his pants and underwear before sliding his erection down my crack. “I’m going to enjoy taking you from every position, and in every room I can think of.”

His cock slides through my folds, soaking up the wetness only he can create from within me. Then, he grips my hip before pushing into me. Not as gently as before, but I like the desperation in his touch. He curses under his breath—a word foul enough to make a sailor blush—and yet, I can’t find it in me to scold him. Not when he’s bending me over his sink full of dirty dishes, stretching me to my body’s limits. His palm slides up my spine in an almost reverent way before he roughly slides almost all the way out of me and then slams hard into me.

“Ahh!” I cry out, my fingers grasping tight onto the edge of the sink.

His skin slaps against mine as he thrusts again. Over and over. The almost violent way he takes me has me dizzy with desire. I love all the different ways he makes love to me.

Sweetly and not so sweetly. They all feel good in their own way.

“You like it when we take our crudeness outside of the bedroom, don’t you, lovely?”

I cry out in pleasure. “I do!”

“Good, because I’m going to make love to your sexy little body all the time,” he growls. “All over the place. You’ll always be sore inside that greedy little pussy of yours. Always dripping with my seed.”

His words are like sensual touches all on their own. I close my eyes and give into them. They caress my flesh, seeking out my pleasure with every naughty kiss. He pistons into me from behind, rubbing gloriously at a place within me that drives me wild. Soon, my own orgasm leaks from me as I nearly sob his name.

“Judy,” he groans, his fingertips bruising the flesh on my hip as he grinds out his release. “Goddamn you, beautiful woman.”

He kisses my shoulder and doesn’t let me go, as though he can hold us in this moment forever. I wish he had that power because I’d stay right there with him if I could, locked in a second of time. The two of us, all alone—sated and happy.

And in love.

I don’t voice it, but I certainly allow myself to think it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Kent

*January 2, 1968*

**G**OD, I MISS her. You'd think I could go a night without her, but apparently, she's already burrowed her way so far in my heart, I'll never get her out. Not that I would want to. In fact, I'm going to do whatever it takes to keep her. Hence the night apart. After our Christmas vacation spent wrapped in each other's arms, there was no way I couldn't always have her by my side. I asked her to stay with me. Permanently. It started as keeping her after the snow was cleared away during our break, but then, I quickly realized I couldn't let her go at all. She agreed to stay, but wanted to break the news to her aunt gently and then pack up all her things. I spent my night alone, packing up Dorothy's things in her closet for donation, to make room for Judy.

I thought I'd cry and want to drown myself in the bottle as I pulled all her dresses and shirts from their hangers. Instead, it was just the goodbye I needed. It was time to put away the pain of my past so I could make room for my future. Judy is bright and happy and loving. She's the beaconing star I've always needed.

When she'd said yes to officially moving in with me, I was over the moon with joy. I even shouted out my excitement, causing her to giggle. I'm looking forward to her laughter filling my house every day. She's truly a Christmas miracle. A gift that keeps on giving.

I pull into the parking lot next to her car. It has a dent in the bumper, but once the snow cleared away, we were easily able to back it out of the ditch. For as ugly as her 1960 Oldsmobile 98 is, it's durable and safe, which I'm thankful for. Had she been driving the 'Stang, she might not have been so lucky.

Climbing out of my car, I flip up the collar on my leather jacket to protect my neck against the cold. I bite on the end of my unlit pipe as I reach inside for my briefcase. Once it's in my grip, I hit the door with my hip and shut it. Mr. Newton and Mrs. Thurston both watch me with uneasy expressions.

I pull my pipe from my mouth and tilt my head at them. "Morning. Hope your Christmas and New Year's were joyful." I whistle "All You Need Is Love" by The Beatles as I pass by them. Several teachers and students gape at me, as if I've lost my mind. Perhaps I have. For five years, I've scowled at everyone and kept the door to my heart slammed shut. I must be quite a sight strolling into the school, smiling like a sonofabitch.

Once inside, I pass my own classroom to make my way to Miss Holland's. Her door is open and she's smiling at a student. When our eyes meet, hers light up. So often, she'd peek her head into my classroom to chirp out a cheerful, "Good morning," and I'd only grunt at her. Even all those times, I'd felt something around the beautiful, sweet brunette. It wasn't until she stumbled into my house that I allowed myself the fantasy of having something meaningful in my life again.

"Miss Holland," Mr. Beck calls out from across the hall in his classroom doorway, stealing her attention. "I forgot to tell you. We found Jesus when we were packing the stuff back up over break. He was sitting on the floor in storage, abandoned behind some boxes. I had a good chuckle, knowing you were nearly ready to give ol' Kaufman a stern talking-to." When he sees me approaching her, his eyes widen.

Judy lifts her chin and sashays over to me. "You have a little tobacco on your shirt," she says, dusting away the particles. Her hands smooth out over my chest and she doesn't remove them. If we weren't in school, I'd grab her waist and yank her to me for a proper good morning kiss.

"Mr. Kaufman," Mr. Beck says coolly.

"Mr. Beck," I greet back without inflection.

“I actually did have to have a stern talking-to Mr. Kaufman,” Judy says to him. “Looks like I straightened him all out for the better.” Her twinkling green eyes flit back to me. “Right, Mr. Kaufman?”

I grip her wrists and wink at her. “Right, Miss Holland.”

“Oh,” Mr. Beck mutters. “Oh, I see.”

Unable to keep the smug grin from my face, I pull her to me and hug her despite what the rules state about public displays of affection. “We’re seeing each other now,” I tell him, loving the way his face pales.

“Wonderful news,” Mr. Beck grumbles before stepping back into his classroom.

Judy looks up at me and shakes her head. “You’re awful.”

Lifting a brow, I smirk. “Why’s that?”

“Marking your territory like that. Did you learn all about how cavemen behave in your history books, Mr. Kaufman? Because that was so very Neanderthal of you.”

“My history lessons don’t go back forty thousand years,” I say with a smile. “I learned that all on my own.”

She narrows her eyes. “Well, keep up the good work. I quite like being yours.” The bell rings and she pulls away as kids rush into the rooms. “See you soon,” she says, blowing me a kiss.

I look around to make sure we’re alone and I tug her back to me. “Not soon enough.” With a grin on my lips, I kiss her passionately enough to have her pretty cheeks blazing bright apple red.

“Go to class, Kent.”

Reluctantly, I release her and give her a small salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

◇ ◇ ◇

*Two months later...*

I'VE JUST PUT a roast in the oven when I hear the front door slam. But instead of greeting me with a kiss, she disappears without saying hello. I wipe my hands on a dish towel and hunt for my woman. After a quick search, I find her locked in the bathroom. I rap on the wood with my knuckle.

“Everything okay, lovely?”

When I hear sobbing, panic rises up inside of me. Is she hurt? Did someone upset her? She'd gone to see her aunt at work after the school day was over, and I wonder what Georgina might have said to her to make her cry like this.

“Judy, love, open the door,” I say firmly. “Let me hold you.”

The door unlocks and she pulls it open. Today, she's beautiful in one of her shift dresses with the dainty white collars I enjoy seeing her in. But what I don't like seeing are her red eyes and tears streaming down her cheeks. I step forward and cradle her face in my hands, my eyes searching hers for answers.

“What's wrong?” I demand, my voice hoarse with worry.

“I just want you to know I love you,” she whispers.

My heart aches at her proclamation. So often I've murmured these same words to her, in the dark while she slept, too afraid to say them in person. Afraid of her response. But knowing she loves me too is life-changing.

I kiss her forehead. “I love you too, Judy Holland. I loved you the moment you stepped into my home.”

Relief flashes in her eyes. “Do you promise to love me always? No matter what?”

My brows furrow together. “Of course. Now, tell me what's bothering you. Who do I need to pummel? Mr. Newton? I'm kind of itching to give that balding idiot my right hook.”

She giggles. “No, you don't get to beat anyone up.”

I feign disappointment which has her giggling more. When the laughter fades, she stares up at me with a worried expression.

“Kent,” she whispers. “I went to see my aunt. I’d had a feeling but I wanted a blood test to be sure.” She bites on her plump lip. “I’m pregnant.”

It takes a moment for me to process her words and then I’m scooping her into my arms, spinning her around. She shrieks and her eyes are wild with confusion.

“You’re happy?” she asks.

“You bet your ass I’m happy,” I say with a grin, but it quickly falls as I fear she may not be. “Aren’t you?”

“I’m thrilled,” she squeaks out. “But...”

“But,” I urge, setting her back to her feet. “But what?”

She steps away and wrings her hands together. I take the moment to exit the bathroom and give her something I bought weeks ago. When I return, she still wears a nervous expression. I kneel right in front of her and hold up a gold ring with a pretty diamond on the top.

“Miss Holland, will you marry me?”

Her hand flies to her mouth as tears well in her green eyes. “You really want to marry me? You don’t feel rushed into this decision?”

“I wanted to marry you the second I made love to you, Judy. But I knew I had to woo you and not scare you off. I love you and you’re having my baby. It’d make me the happiest man on Earth if you’d let me give you my last name.” I pull her hand down and slide the ring on. “And in return, I’ll give you the world.”

She falls to her knees in front of me and plants a wet kiss on my mouth. “Yes,” she breathes against my lips. “The answer would have been yes then, it’s yes now, and it’ll forever be yes.”



We stand back up and I hug her tightly to me.

“I always wanted a family,” she says, her voice happy and light.

“And I want to be the man to give it to you.”

She tilts her head up and smiles. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” I say with a wolfish grin. “I haven’t even given you your celebratory gift.”

“Always so hungry, Mr. Kaufman.”

“Hungry for you, lovely. I’m just hungry for you, and I’ll never be sated for as long as I’m alive and breathing.”

Her voice becomes a sultry purr. “Then we better get you fed.” She reaches between us and rubs her hand over my cock through my denim pants. “Because I’m hungry too.” The little vixen winks and I’m left dreaming of all the ways I’ll feed her pouty mouth.

She pulls away and flashes me a saucy look. “You’re drooling.”

I slap her ass, making her squeal. “Someone’s sassy today.”

“Just today?” she teases, cocking her head to the side.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I haul her to me and kiss her. My palm roves over her ass, gripping her through her dress. When she moans in such a needy way, I think maybe I might have to make love to her right against the wall, even before I have a taste of her sweet pussy.

“The roast will be ready in an hour,” I growl. “And there are so many things I can do to make you scream in that hour.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and I lift her so she’s straddling my waist. “I’m counting, Mr. Kaufman. Better make it worth my while.”

I nip at her neck and she squeals. “That’s one, and I haven’t gotten my teeth anywhere near your needy, delicious

clit yet.”

“Mr. Kaufman!”

## EPILOGUE

Judy

*December 24, 1976*

“**M**OMMA, PWESENT,” ANNIE pleads, giving me the cutest, saddest, brown eyes I’ve ever seen. She holds up a box and juts out her bottom lip. At only two, she’s mastered the art of manipulation. Her father and I can only be amused because she looks so adorable doing it.

“I don’t know, sweetie. Daddy wants us to wait until Christmas morning to open our gifts,” I tell her softly, stroking her silky brown hair that’s been pulled into pigtails.

“Aw, Annie,” David, our eight-year old son, says, taking her little hand in his. “Maybe we can get Daddy to put on your favorite Christmas record and we can dance instead.”

She scrunches her nose and gives him a toothy grin. The girl adores her big brother.

“Dance! Dance!” Pauly yells, as he runs from the kitchen where he’s been helping his father, into the living room.

Kent saunters in behind him, a look of amusement on his handsome face. His pipe is wedged between his teeth but it remains empty of tobacco, and unlit. All it took was Annie playing with it once when he wasn’t looking and getting a mouthful of tobacco for him to decide he wanted to quit. He’s sentimental toward it though, because he carries it around much like Annie does her stuffed bear.

“What’ll it be, kids?” Kent asks, as he makes his way over to the record player. “Elvis or Bing?”

“Bing!” they all cry out.

Bing Crosby is a household favorite at Christmastime.

Kent starts the album and soon the festive tune of “Jingle Bells” fills our home. He pulls me from the sofa and into his arms to dance. David, a wonderful big brother, starts dancing with Annie. She giggles and squeals before falling on her bottom. Pauly assists her back up and then they all three dance together. With the kids’ laughter ringing around us, I can’t help but snuggle against my husband, happy for the life he’s given me.

Which is why I love when I can give it right back.

“Mr. Kaufman,” I murmur, looking into his chocolate brown eyes that used to be so sad, but are always shining with joy these days.

“Yes, Mrs. Kaufman?”

“What do you want for Christmas?”

He nuzzles his nose against mine. “This. More of this. Every year.”

I kiss his lips and smile. “Good.” I grab his hand and pull it to my slightly swollen stomach. “Merry Christmas. Again.”

“Again?” His sharp gasp of surprise has me giggling. Then, his lips are on mine, kissing me passionately enough to make the kids laugh at us. He eventually pulls away, a wide grin on his face. “You’re giving me another baby.”

“Well, you keep giving me your heart, so it’s the least I could do,” I tell him with a smile.

His features soften and he strokes my face tenderly. “Thank you, Judy, for coming into my life. I get to live again because of you.” He kisses my nose. “I get to *love* again because of you.”

“Merry Christmas, Kent.”

He holds me tight like he might never let go. I hope he doesn’t.

“Merry Christmas, lovely.”



Thank you for reading A Merry Christmas with Judy by K Webster. If you enjoyed Kent and Judy in this book, then you'll love Bentley and Caroline in [The Road Back to Us!](#)

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