



Just One
Wish

MICA RAE

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An Age Gap Christmas Novella

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*For anyone who loves Christmas stories, but wants one with a little more
angst and a lot more heat.
Enjoy!*

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Attention Reader

CONTENT WARNING: THIS BOOK REFERS TO A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SITUATION. If this is upsetting to you, please proceed with caution (or not at all).

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS IN AN UNSAFE SITUATION AND NEEDS assistance, please visit www.thehotline.org for more information.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Chapter 1

Nick

“PLEASE, LET ME BRUSH YOUR HAIR,” I BEG MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, while I take measured breaths to remain calm. Getting dressed and ready to walk out the door is the absolute hardest part about raising a daughter.

She scrunches up her nose, shaking her head no. With her arms crossed and her sassy attitude on display, she reminds me of her mother. It doesn't help that she has the same white-blond hair and bright green eyes. Sadie's a smaller version of the woman who gave her life. I flare my nostrils, shaking my head to rid myself of thoughts of *that woman*. I'm not going there today, or any day. I'll get too angry.

I take a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Sweetie, Daddy has to go to work, and I can't take you to your grandma with your hair looking like rats have taken up residency.”

She raises her eyebrow, smirking as she cocks her head to the side. “Nana don't care,” she retorts.

I press my lips into a fine line, trying to keep from raising my voice. It's not Sadie's fault I'm running late. Still, this whole gentle parenting thing sucks at times like this. I wish I could force her to comply, but the parenting books no longer recommend raising kids the way my generation was raised.

“Doesn't,” I correct.

“What?”

“Nana *doesn't* care,” I repeat.

“See.” She points at me and puts her hand on her hip, widening her eyes as if saying, ‘I told you so.’

How the hell did my little girl outsmart me yet again? I shake my head. “I was telling you the correct way to say it, not agreeing with you.” Though, Sadie's right. My mom doesn't care what her granddaughter looks like when she shows up for their slumber parties. I just need Sadie to let me get her ready easily. First grade starts next fall and, from what my neighbor has told me, I'm already late in starting the preparations. While Sadie's doing okay in her private kindergarten class, her teacher told me her behavior won't fly next year when she enters public school. She's far too smart for her own good, and her teacher says she needs to be challenged more. I'm just trying to keep her

alive and well-adjusted enough that she grows up to be a kind human who doesn't hate me. Who knew there was even more shit for me to worry about?

She huffs, relenting. "Fine, but only if you give me three ponies." She points to the top and both sides of her head, indicating where she wants her ponytails.

"Deal."

After much wrangling, Sadie ends up looking like she belongs in Whoville, but at least we're out the door on time.

It's not until I'm at Lush switching on the open sign and settling in behind the bar that I feel like I'm back on schedule. For a Type A planner, my life has gone a bit off the rails over the last few years. That tends to happen when a one-night stand shows up out of the blue with a baby in tow that she drops off at your bar before vanishing into thin air. And I do mean thin air, despite the cliché of it all. Miranda left without a trace. Even if I wanted to contact her, which I don't, I'd have no way of finding her. She didn't even put her name on Sadie's birth certificate. It's just me, which I guess is fitting for our situation.

Miranda oozed sex appeal in a way I couldn't resist. I usually have a strict rule of not 'shitting where I eat,' but when she showed up at my bar dripping in pheromones and ready to rock someone's world, I gladly let it be mine. Back then, I was forty-six, but I still knew better than casual sex with a patron, especially unprotected. Stupidly, I let my dick do the thinking, and he always gets me into trouble.

Fast forward nine months, and I was suddenly a single dad, something I don't regret. No, I'm grateful for Miranda because she gave me Sadie. What makes me want to bend metal each time I think about her is the fact that she walked out on the most perfect little human. Try as I might, I can't make up for that rejection. So instead, I focus all my efforts on my bar and my baby girl.

Women will have to wait.

TEN HOURS LATER, I'M EXHAUSTED AND ALL I WANT IS TO GO HOME AND crawl into bed. The bar was slammed with the preholiday crowd tonight. So much so that it's nearly 4:00 in the morning, and I'm just now taking out the

trash. My two bartenders, Liza and Dan, left an hour ago. I needed help closing but couldn't make them stay so late. They've agreed to take on extra hours during the holiday, allowing me to be home with Sadie more. This is the first Christmas she's old enough for us to begin creating family traditions. I owed it to Liza and Dan to stay late tonight. With Sadie at my mom's for the night, it's not like I have anything else to do.

As soon as I step into the alley that houses the dumpsters for all the businesses on First Avenue, the hairs on my arms stand on end. You don't get to fifty-three without developing an awareness of what's going on around you, and you don't own a successful business without knowing when something isn't right. Every fiber in my being is on high alert.

I look around, but nothing seems amiss. Still, I keep up my guard. When I open the dumpster, I pause, my head on swivel when I hear something that sounds like a dying cat. No sooner do I take two steps, the noise stops. I shake my head. Maybe I'm imagining things. Yes, this is downtown Seattle, but this is a pretty safe area.

Not wanting to stick around if there's danger lurking, I toss the two huge bags of trash into the dumpster. The top slamming closed echoes in the silent alleyway. As I turn to head back to the bar, I'm stopped in my tracks as the sounds intensify. I pull out my cell phone, ready to call 911 as I walk further down the alley to investigate. It's probably a homeless person who's overdosed. We get a lot of those in this area. It's an unfortunate drawback of city life.

As I get closer to the sound, I'm certain it's not an animal, but a human, like I suspected. "Hey, you okay?" I call.

A groan answers me, telling me someone's behind the dumpster that belongs to Le Petit Café. Preparing myself in case this is a trap, I tuck my phone in my pocket and open the knife I keep on me at all times. I'm a big guy and I definitely won't go down without a fight.

It's dark. The twinkling holiday lights from the front of the shops are hidden from the alley, leaving most of it in shadows. There's only the light from my bar illuminating the dark alleyway. I round the dumpster and gasp. A child is curled on their side with their legs drawn to their chest. Their hair is dark and matted to the side of their head. I can't tell if they're a boy or a girl, but I'd guess based on the size of the kid, they're maybe in middle or high school.

"Hey, kid?"

They groan, lifting their head and moving their legs, shocking me. It's not a kid. This is a small woman. I drop to my knees.

I reach out, helping her sit up. "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head no.

"I'm calling you an ambulance." I can't tell what happened, but the blood dripping down her face and the mottled skin around her cheek and eye lead me to believe she's been assaulted.

She shakes her head no, reaching for me. When she does this, I can see her shirt is torn almost completely down the middle, baring her breasts to me. I pull off my button-down flannel and cover her.

As the father to a daughter, seeing her in this shape does a number on me. I swallow hard, hating that someone's capable of hurting a woman like this. "I need to take you inside so I can see what's injured. Can you walk?"

She moves to stand, but collapses gasping in pain.

"I'll try not to hurt you," I say, slipping an arm behind her back and one under her legs, lifting her into my arms.

She's small, not too much heavier than Sadie. The thought makes my stomach tense. I'm afraid of what happened to this girl. What's worse is someone just left her back here to die.

Once she's inside the well-lit bar, I can see she's in her upper twenties, maybe thirties even, and not a kid at all like I'd thought. She has tattoos on her arms and a nose ring. Dark purple streaks frame her face. It's hard to tell what her face looks like because she's so swollen and bruised, but her eyes are captivating.

"I'll take care of you. My name is Nick, and I own this bar. You can trust me." I'm going to do everything in my power to keep her safe.

I feel an inexplicable draw to her, and my pulse races at the implication. In my fifty-three years on the planet, I've never once felt a pull to another person like I do with this woman whose name I don't even know. I rub my hand down my face. Surely this is my exhaustion talking. Otherwise, why would I feel this toward a woman I don't even know?

She nods, but doesn't tell me her name. Poor thing. She's no doubt traumatized by whatever happened to her.

"Can I?" I hold up a wet towel, motioning to her cheeks.

She nods.

I carefully hold her chin, wiping away the blood from her nose and the eyebrow that's torn open. I move down her chin and neck, stopping when I

get to my shirt she holds against her chest.

I hate to ask, but I need to know. "What happened?"

She shakes her head no, closing her eyes.

"I need to take you to the hospital." There's no way I can treat all of her injuries, and she's going to need stitches above her eyebrow and possibly her nose reset. At least her jeans are intact, telling me a rape kit probably isn't necessary.

She whimpers, grabbing my hand and shaking her head no.

"Can you talk?"

She pinches her eyes closed.

"Look, I'll stay with you, but we have to go to the hospital."

Swallowing hard, she looks at me with tears in her eyes. "Okay."

Chapter 2

Nick

ONCE WE'RE AT THE EMERGENCY ROOM, TRYING TO CHECK IN, I REALIZE I didn't think this through. I've brought in a young woman who isn't saying a word and whose name I don't even know. Not to mention, I'm a big guy with long hair and a neck tattoo. It's becoming increasingly obvious that the nurses all think I'm the one who harmed her, and that's why she won't talk.

"Look," I tell the nurse at the check-in for the tenth time. "I own the bar Lush over on First. When I was taking out the trash, I found this woman huddled next to a dumpster in the alley. I don't know her. She won't talk, and I don't want to leave her alone. I didn't do this."

The woman clings to me as I hold her. I'm struck again by how small she is in my arms. The father in me wants to make sure she's taken care of and safe, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the man in me wants that just as much. Now that we're under the harsh fluorescent lighting in the hospital, the fine lines around her eyes reassure me she's old enough for my attraction to her to be okay. I may not be able to tell exactly what she looks like, but I'm undeniably drawn to her, nonetheless. No woman has sparked interest for me since Miranda. My attraction to her is more than just me being lonely. It's almost as if she was placed in my life for a reason. Maybe even fate?

A different nurse than the one checking us in comes up to us with a wheelchair, and I carefully set the woman down in the seat. She clings to me with wide eyes.

"Do you want him to come back with you?" the nurse asks.

The woman nods, never letting go of my arm.

The nurse nods in understanding. "How about you let me take you back and get you settled? Then I'll come back out and get him."

The woman shakes her head no, gripping me tighter. She's terrified, and it makes me want to protect her even more.

I squat down so we're at eye-level. "Go back with the nurse. I need to make a phone call anyway. I promise I'm not going anywhere. As soon as I'm finished with my call, I'll come find you."

The nurse gives me a tight smile and nod before wheeling the woman away.

Once I'm alone in the waiting room, I shoot a text to my mom, telling her the situation and asking if she'll keep Sadie a few hours longer than usual today. By the time she responds in agreement, the nurse is ready to take me back.

"Did she tell you her name?" I'd be lying if I didn't admit I'm curious about who this woman is.

The nurse shakes her head no. "She hasn't said anything other than screaming no when I asked her if you were the one to hurt her." I must make a mean face because she holds up her hands. "Hey, don't get mad at me. I'm required by law to ask."

"I'm not mad at you for asking. I'm upset someone did that to her and just left her in that alley. What would've happened if I hadn't found her?" I work my jaw, trying to keep my anger in check.

"She might have frozen to death. You saved her life."

The thought of the woman whose name I don't even know dying causes a twinge in my heart. She's a stranger, but I can't deny there's some sort of invisible string tying us together. The urge to protect her is inexplicably strong. For someone who's sworn off women, I find I can't help but want to know everything I can about this silent stranger.

A doctor is stitching the woman's eyebrow when I walk into the room. She's gripping the sides of the bed, her eyes screwed shut in pain. I fold myself into the chair next to the bed and reach for her, placing my hand on hers. Her watery eyes meet mine, making me want to soothe her.

"You're going to be okay," I reassure her.

She bites her lower lip.

"Can you please tell me your name?" I need to know everything I can about her.

She opens her mouth to tell me, but snaps it shut, moaning in pain.

When the doctor finishes with her stitches, I lean forward, placing a kiss on the woman's forehead like I do when Sadie is injured. "Shh. It's okay, you don't have to tell me right now. Just take deep breaths."

She grips my hands, chest heaving. Her jade green eyes never leave mine. I can't look away from her. The intensity of this moment has my heart picking up speed.

Does she feel it too?

Chapter 3

Holly

SELECTIVE MUTISM.

That's what my gran called it. I hate that name. It sounds like I have a choice, like I selected being mute at times, which couldn't be further from the truth. I want to tell the kind-hearted man my name. I want to tell him what happened, so I can be safe, but I can't. Every time I open my mouth to speak, words won't form.

When I was a young child, my parents were killed in a car accident. After that, I went to live with Gran. It was the first time anyone paid attention to me. My parents were always too busy for what they saw as an awkward child who only spoke to family members. It's not that I didn't want to talk to other people. I literally couldn't.

Gran took me to a doctor when I went to live with her who diagnosed me with selective mutism. The cognitive-behavioral therapy helped, but when Gran died, I reverted back to the silent child she took in all those years ago. After what happened tonight, I've retreated back into my mind even further and, try as I might, I can't get my voice to work. Hopefully, once I'm alone with Nick, I'll be able to tell him my name and what happened to me. He may be a stranger, but I feel safer with him than I have with anyone since Gran died. Despite his massive size, long hair and tattoos, he has a gentleness about him. It's obvious he's a protector.

We've been at this hospital for hours. All I want is to go home and go to bed. There's only one problem. I don't have a home. Not anymore. Randy made sure of that earlier this evening. He's always been possessive, even when we were kids, but tonight was the first time he ever hit me. He didn't just hit me. He tried to kill me. Just because I rarely speak, doesn't mean I'm his. He's acted like I belong to him since Gran and I moved into the house next door to his family. I never should've let him claim me as his when we got to high school. I thought it was easier than having to reject the guys that were interested in dating me. When Gran died during my junior year of college, Randy moved me in with him. I've been there ever since. In the time I've lived with him, things developed into a physical relationship. I wanted to feel loved and thought sex would give me that. It didn't.

Tonight was the last straw. He brought home yet another woman from a bar and had sex with her in our bed. He gets off on making me watch. When she left, I pulled out a suitcase and packed my things, ready to finally leave. I only stayed with him because my crippling anxiety kept me there. But I couldn't allow him to mentally abuse me any longer.

When I tried to leave, he hit me before throwing me against the wall and choking me. The rest is a blur of dodging punches and kicks. When he brandished the knife, I knew I had to run for my life. I only made it a few blocks before collapsing in an alley. All I know is when Nick found me, I knew right away I was safe.

Now that the doctor has stitched me up, I'm ready for release. The only problem is I have nowhere to go. I have money, but I can't access it right now because I've hidden what I need in my apartment. Randy's assault means I can't go back there until it's safe. Thank God, my gran was smart enough to leave me everything in a trust he couldn't access. He controls my bank account, which is why the only thing that goes in there is my paycheck from the library. Crap. How am I going to get a hotel room? Maybe Nick will lend me some money until I can get away from Randy and access my inheritance.

"Before I can sign off on your discharge papers, I need to know you have a place to go," the doctor says.

I'm surprised no one has pressed me further for my name. I have the sneaking suspicion Nick has something to do with that. He stepped outside with a nurse and was gone for a while earlier. When they returned, the pestering me for information stopped.

"She's coming home with me," Nick tells him. His tone leaves no room for questions or argument.

My eyebrows shoot up at his revelation. I reach out and squeeze his hand, hoping he understands how grateful I am.

JUST AFTER 7:00 AM, WE PULL INTO THE DRIVEWAY OF A A SMALL craftsman home in West Seattle. The neighborhood is nice and sleepy, a far cry from the downtown apartment I share with Randy. Shared. I'm never going back. When he's at work, I'll get my things. It's not like I have much.

When Gran died, I put most of her things that I wanted to keep in storage, unbeknownst to Randy. All I have at the apartment are a few books and clothes.

Nick puts the car in park and turns to me. “We’re here. It’s not much, but it’s home.”

I smile. This house is everything. He’s not kidding when he says it’s home. I never understood the saying about a house being a home until seeing this. The front porch is decorated with Christmas lights and a blow-up snowman dances in the yard. The house is a buttery yellow that’s inviting. It tugs at my heart, reminding me of what I’m missing. I haven’t had a home since Gran.

As soon as we step inside, I realize Nick doesn’t live here alone. The dolls on the sofa and picture books on the coffee table tell me he has a child, which means there’s probably a wife. My eyes shoot to his left hand, but his ring finger is empty. I want to ask about the mother of his child, but I still can’t speak. My mind is racing too fast for me to feel comfortable enough to talk.

He rubs the back of his neck, looking around the room as if trying to see it through my eyes. “Sorry, it’s a mess in here. Gloria hasn’t had a chance to clean this week.”

I frown. Gloria? I bet she’s exotic and beautiful. She has to be to land a guy like Nick. I glance around, trying not to look like I’m soaking in every bit of information about the man in front of me from the things around the house. Especially now that I know he’s off-limits.

He clears his throat, gesturing toward the hallway. “I’ll show you to the guest room. You can shower and then sleep. I’ll bring you something to wear while you shower and leave it on the bed.”

I nod.

“Be careful not to get your stitches wet.”

I want to talk to him. Inside my head, I’m screaming, but my voice is useless. Instead, I stand there staring at him. He holds my gaze long enough that I start to lean closer to him. It’s as if he’s the sun, and I’m drawn into his orbit. He must notice this because he shakes his head and turns, walking toward the hallway. I follow behind, embarrassed at how close I was to trying to kiss him without even realizing it.

He shows me around the guest bedroom and bathroom. Even though I don’t respond, he still talks to me like he would anyone else. Most people

talk to me like I can't hear them, or worse, like I'm stupid. Nick doesn't do that.

When he starts to leave, I grab his arm. His eyes meet mine, a question on his face.

"Holly," I whisper. My voice comes out hoarse from lack of use. I can't remember the last time I spoke. Most adults with selective mutism aren't as severe as me, but they don't have someone like Randy filling them with anxiety on a regular basis. When Gran was alive, I spoke a lot more. Life was good, and I was happy.

Nick grins. "Your name's Holly?"

I nod, suddenly feeling shy, as if I'm standing naked in front of him.

He licks his lips, and I can't take my eyes off his pink tongue. "Thank you for trusting me." He smiles.

I open my mouth but can't figure out what I want to say.

"It's okay. You don't have to talk to me until you're ready."

I bite my lower lip. It's probably a good thing I can't speak. I'd probably say something creepy because I feel like I've known this handsome man my entire life rather than a few hours. Still, what I wouldn't give to be able to talk to him.

Chapter 4

Nick

I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HOLLY'S CONDITION OTHER THAN WHAT I overheard the doctor say. All I gathered is her not saying anything has something to do with her feeling scared and uncomfortable. The fact that she told me her name just now proves she's beginning to feel comfortable with me. I'm not going to do anything that will damage her trust, which is why I'm placing one of my t-shirts and a pair of sweats that I'm sure are way too big for her on the guest bed and keeping my eyes away from the bathroom door that's open while I gather her clothes from earlier. Her shirt is ruined, but the jeans and undergarments are salvageable. I try not to give much thought to her silky panties. That's not what she needs right now.

I must have been lost in my thoughts a little too long because I missed hearing the water turn off and I'm jolted when Holly lets out a squeak when she sees me. She grips the towel around her tighter.

Fuck me.

She's beautiful. Even with the bruises on her face and around her throat, she's attractive. I swallow hard, trying desperately not to ogle her.

"Um, I brought you something to wear. My bedroom is next door. Just come get me if you need anything." I point to the nightstand. "I left you some water and a granola bar in case you're hungry." As an afterthought, I hold up her clothes. "I'll wash these for you."

She grins, looking down, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Okay, um. . ." I point to the door. Not wanting to make things more uncomfortable, I spin around to leave and bang my head against the door frame.

She giggles.

I turn around to see that she's holding her hand over her mouth. The way her eyes are alight with laughter makes me want to do it again just to make her happy.

"Get some rest." I rush out of the room before I can embarrass myself further.

Thank god I'm still wearing my jeans from earlier. Otherwise, she'd have noticed my dick thickening behind my zipper.

I'm screwed.

I'VE BARELY LAID MY HEAD ON MY PILLOW AND CLOSED MY EYES BEFORE I'M jolted awake when Sadie jumps on my stomach. I groan, gripping her tightly to keep her from accidentally kneeling me in the balls, something that's a regular occurrence with the way she flings herself about.

"Daddy, you need to wake up and make me lunch."

My mom stands in the doorway, arms crossed. "I wish you would hire more help at the bar. You look exhausted."

"I told you what happened last night. I don't usually make middle of the night hospital runs." I try not to sound defensive, but Mom's always scolding me about not taking good enough care of myself.

She harrumphs. "You're getting older, Nick. It's important to prioritize sleep."

I try not to roll my eyes as she parrots the latest wellness podcast she's obsessed with. Since my father died from a stroke seven years ago, my mom has become fixated on health and wellness. It's an obsession bred out of grief and anxiety, so I try to be patient, but sometimes it's hard not to snap at her.

I move Sadie off me and get out of bed. "Do you want to stay for lunch?"

"Honey, you know I have my cardio class today."

I throw on a shirt, then kiss my mom on the cheek. "How could I forget?"

"Will you bring Sadie over tonight before you go to the bar, or do I need to come pick her up?"

"I'm taking off tonight. Dan is covering the bar for me. I promised Sadie we'd trim the tree today."

Sadie jumps back onto my bed with her arms above her head, hands in fists. "Woohoo! Daddy-daughter day!!"

"Get down," my mom and I scold at the same time.

Sadie falls backward on the bed, missing banging her head on the headboard by millimeters.

My mom smirks. "And here I thought raising you was nerve-wracking."

I purse my lips. "Hush. I was not nearly as bad."

"I have medical bills that say otherwise," Mom teases.

I pick Sadie up and toss her over my shoulder, carrying her toward the

living room as my mom follows behind. I pause briefly at the guest room door, but don't hear Holly stirring. Good. Sadie can be loud, and I want Holly to get plenty of rest.

My mom kisses me and then kisses upside down Sadie. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye Nana!"

"Bye Mom."

Once Mom closes the door, I set Sadie down on her feet by holding her hands and letting her flip over my shoulder. "Grilled cheese?" I ask.

She gives me a look that has me worried about her teenage years. "Duh."

Now I just have to figure out how to tell Sadie about our houseguest.

Chapter 5

Holly

MY FACE THROBS WHEN I WAKE, REMINDING ME OF LAST NIGHT'S TRAUMA. I peel open my eyes, feeling like I'm not alone. I gasp, jerking in surprise when I see a young girl with blond pigtails leaning over me. She's holding a stuffed dog that's seen better days.

"Who are you?" she asks.

"Holly," I whisper, my voice thick with sleep. "Your dad rescued me last night," I tell her, figuring she'd like to know her dad is a hero. I have no problem talking to children. For whatever reason, it's only adults I struggle to speak to.

Her eyes widen, and she squeals. "Like Superman?"

"Just like Superman." I hope Nick doesn't mind, but I figured she'd have questions about my bruised face. Kids don't miss much.

"My daddy is the best," she agrees. "He made us grilled cheese and tomato soup."

The little girl can't be very old. I'm guessing she's around five or six, but she talks like a teenager. I wish I could string together words with as much confidence as she does.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Lady Catherine Elisabeth Princess Van Helsing, queen in training." She bows with a flourish, making me grin despite the throbbing in my face.

"Sadie," Nick scolds from the doorway. His arms are crossed, highlighting his bulging biceps and broad chest, which I was too upset to fully appreciate last night. "We don't share our aliases with people." The lightness of his tone belies his teasing.

"Sorry, Captain Batman Prince Charming."

He rushes over and picks her up, tickling her. "That does it. You're in trouble now," he jokes.

She giggles, and it's the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

This is how a father's supposed to treat his daughter. I feel a pang of jealousy, reminding me I've never had moments like this with anyone. My cheeks heat when I think about how Nick may have heard me talking to his daughter, but if he did, he doesn't acknowledge it. It's not that I don't want

him to know I can talk. I just don't want him to pressure me to tell him what happened to me before I'm ready. Despite escaping, Randy still has a hold on me through the seeds of terror he's planted throughout the years.

He sets her down. "Go set the table, Sadie Bug."

She nods, racing out of the room.

"How are you feeling?" He looks me over, frowning when his eyes land on mine.

I sit up, groaning.

"That good, huh?" he teases.

I bite my lower lip. At least the bruising on my face probably hides the blush I know I'm sporting.

"Are you hungry?"

I nod. "Uh, huh." At least I managed to make a sound. Unlike with most people, I'm not struggling to speak to Nick because he makes me anxious. I can't talk to him because I'm nervous. He's the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

"I made lunch. You can join us in the kitchen whenever you're ready."

I pull the covers off my lap and he gasps, eyes widening. I look down and see the t-shirt he gave me is up around my waist, showing him I'm not wearing any panties. The sweats he lent me were far too big. Now I'm regretting not making them somehow work.

He quickly turns his back. "Uh, I'll see you out there." His cheeks are red. It's cute the way he's flustered.

"Okay," I say, my voice barely a whisper.

Mortified doesn't begin to describe how I feel. What's worse, I'm turned on by the fact that he saw me like this. I want his touch, something I've never wanted from any other man. Randy always just took what he wanted from me. It was easier to let him than to try to stop his pursuits. With Nick, I'd give him anything he wants. Too bad he'll never want what I have to offer.

Chapter 6

Nick

I RACE TO THE BATHROOM, NEEDING A SECOND TO CALM DOWN BEFORE I GO into the kitchen where my five-year-old daughter is setting the table in a princess dress and oversized high heels from the thrift store. My dick hasn't been this hard in ages. It doesn't help matters that I haven't had sex since before Sadie was born. Being a single dad isn't exactly good for a man's sex life, especially since I swore off one-night stands after Miranda. I thought I was past that stage in my life, but seeing Holly's juicy pussy made me revert to a horny teenager. She's so damn perfect. In another life, I'd plunge headfirst into her sweet cunt, but I'm a dad now. One who can't let my hormones lead me. Seeing me with a woman might confuse Sadie. If I want to pursue Holly, I need to make sure my daughter's comfortable with her first.

I lean against the sink with my eyes closed, trying to focus on anything other than the quiet woman who has taken over all my thoughts and fantasies. Bringing her here and letting Sadie be near her was a bad idea, but it's nearly Christmas. From what I can tell, she doesn't have anywhere to go. Yeah, I could take her to a shelter, but I don't know if I could live with myself if I turned her away after everything she's been through. She needs me. Who am I kidding? It's more than that. I don't want her to leave. She's a puzzle I want to solve.

When my dick has deflated enough that it isn't making an obscene tent at the front of my joggers, I join my girls in the kitchen. My girls? I pause. Where the hell did that come from? I shake my head, trying to stop thinking about Holly in those terms, but damn if she doesn't make it difficult when I see her drinking out of a tea cup, pinky out, giggling with Sadie. Both wear tiaras. The pang reminding me that Sadie doesn't have a mom is so strong I have to rub my chest.

"Daddy! Dame Maribelle Ariel Princess Mona knows how to drink like a lady!" Her eyes sparkle as she smiles at her new friend.

Holly's eyes jerk to mine, and she blushes.

"Is that so?" I wink at Holly, setting the soup and sandwiches on the table. The grilled cheese is cut into triangles and the soup is in fancy bowls.

Sadie and I eat all our meals out of the mismatched China I've collected from thrift stores over the last few years because I can't say no to my girl. She likes to pretend she's a princess, and what's more regal than dining from fancy dishes?

Sadie nods as she leans closer to me. "I think she's really a princess. She's like Ariel, and the sea witch made her voice not work good."

I glance at Holly. If what Sadie said upset her, she doesn't show it. She just smiles, drinking her invisible tea.

"We're decorating for Christmas today," Sadie tells Holly. "You can wear some of my princess accessories. Daddy will wear a Santa hat. After we're done, we'll drink hot chocolate and watch *The Grinch*."

"Sadie, Holly may not want to do that. You need to ask."

Sadie's bottom lip juts out. "But it's tradition."

I roll my eyes. "No, it's not. You just made up all that." I turn to Holly. "Don't feel like you have to do anything you don't want to do. If you want me to take you somewhere after lunch, I can."

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head. "No!" Her voice is loud and panicked, making me wonder just what happened to her. I'm trying not to press, but I need to know the full story if I'm going to help. Judging from her injuries, whatever happened was bad.

She takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "I want to decorate. I mean, if that's okay with you." Her voice is husky, something unexpected from a person as delicate as Holly.

"You can stay here as long as you'd like," I tell her.

Sadie claps her hands together. "Yay!"

Holly smiles timidly and takes a bite of her sandwich.

I'm worried Sadie's becoming too attached to our houseguest. Who am I kidding? It's not Sadie's growing attachment causing concern.

It's mine.

Chapter 7

Holly

SADIE RUNS AROUND, TOSSING TINSEL ON EVERY SURFACE OF THE ROOM, while Nick and I put the ornaments on the tree. As a librarian, I've been around children who visit for story time or to borrow books, and Sadie seems mature for her age.

"She's precocious." Nick smiles and shakes his head as if reading my mind. The ball on the Santa hat he wears bounces against his scruffy cheek.

I grin at him. He's not kidding. She's something else. I'm wearing the lime green boa she gave me over one of Nick's oversized t-shirts. He washed the jeans and panties I was wearing last night, so at least I have underwear on now. Since it's too hot for the jeans, I'm bare-legged, wearing a pair of Nick's tube socks pulled up to mid-calf. The tiara Sadie gave me earlier rests on my head. I feel silly, but she's not someone I can say no to. Nick better hope she harnesses her power for good, because if she chooses evil, the world is in trouble. This girl is a force.

"Next year she starts first grade, and I'm a little worried. Her behavior might be a problem," he admits in a low voice only I can hear.

I cock my head to the side. Why would he think that? She's delightful.

"She hasn't spent much time with other kids her age except for this year in kindergarten. To say it's been an adjustment is an understatement. My mom is her best friend. I'm afraid she won't be able to stay out of trouble."

I frown. Sadie is the opposite of how I was as a child. My childhood was miserable because everyone thought I was stupid. People don't understand mutism. Throw the word selective in front of it and people really don't get it. Everyone always assumed I was stubborn and refused to talk until they realized I couldn't. After that, I was treated like a piece of furniture. For most of my life, I've barely existed.

I place my hand on Nick's forearm. "She's special." My voice is soft, but firm. I raise my eyebrows and nod, hoping to encourage him. I wish I knew what to say to calm his fears, but even if I did, I'm not sure I could get the words out.

He places his hand over mine. "Is there someone waiting for you at home?"

I frown, trying to pull my hand away, but he holds it in place.

“Not like that. I’m not saying I want you to leave. A woman like you must have someone who cares.”

“My gran. . . she died.” Even though her death was ten years ago, tears sting my eyes, and I sniffle. “I didn’t want to go with him, but there was nowhere else for me to go.”

Nick’s eyes darken. “Who?”

I look down, shaking my head.

He grips my chin, tilting my face upwards so I’m facing him. “Did he do this to you?”

I nod, biting my lip.

“Holly, you’re safe with me. Tell me who did this. We’ll go to the police. I won’t let him hurt you ever again.”

I want that, but I can’t bear to say what happened out loud. How will I get the police to listen to me if I can’t speak?

Chapter 8

Nick

HOLLY HAS RETREATED BACK INSIDE HER MIND EVER SINCE I QUESTIONED HER. I wish she would tell me what happened. How can I keep her safe if I don't know who's a threat? She continues to put the finishing touches on the Christmas tree with Sadie while I make our hot chocolate.

The laughter from the living room fills my heart in a way I didn't realize I needed. I haven't allowed myself the opportunity to get close to a woman in years. I didn't think I needed love, but having Holly here has been nice. It feels right. Maybe it's time I started dating again. I'm just not sure the woman I want to date is ready.

When I step into the living room, I can't help but laugh. There isn't a single space that's not filled with holiday cheer. "Looks good out here. The cocoa's ready. You just have to pick your toppings."

Sadie grins. "Daddy, you're under the mistle-toad."

"Mistletoe," Holly corrects in her soft voice that sends tingles throughout my body. I wish she'd speak more. I could listen to her all day long.

I open my arms wide. "Come give me sugars, Princess Sadie."

She jumps into my arms and kisses me on both cheeks before smacking one right on my lips. I set her down, and she grabs Holly's hand. "Now you kiss Daddy."

"Sadie, Holly may not be comfortable with that," I scold, secretly wanting to high five my pint-sized wing woman.

"It's the rules," Sadie insists, giving us both a look that has me nervous about her teenage years.

Holly laughs. "True," she agrees.

Holly steps close to me and places her hands on my shoulders. She's on her tiptoes, but I still have to lean down to get our faces closer. I brush a quick kiss across her cheek, loving the pink tint warming her skin.

"Now it's Grinch time," Sadie declares, settling into the middle of the sofa. "Daddy, I want marshmallows and a candy cane in my chocolate."

"Coming up. Holly, do you want to come pick out your toppings?"

She nods, licking her lips, and I suddenly have the urge to kiss her for real. Instead, I abruptly turn and go back into the kitchen.

I'm over fifty, damn it. My dick should not be this reactive. I find myself reciting baseball stats while I watch Holly prepare her cocoa. She's like a kid in a candy store, piling on the marshmallows, whipped cream, chocolate shavings, and sprinkles. When she takes a sip of her drink and a trail of whipped topping is left behind, it's all I can do to keep from dragging my tongue across her lip. I'd like to lick that sweetness off her entire body, savoring every inch.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"Huh?" I have no idea why she's thanking me, but I'm pretty sure it's not because I was daydreaming about feasting on her cunt.

"It's been a long time since I've celebrated Christmas. Not since Gran died."

My dick wilts at the thought of her being sad for the holidays. I open my arms, and she comes willingly. "I'm sorry. You deserve better," I whisper against the top of her head.

She nods against my chest. I rub my hands up and down her spine, savoring the feel of her body pressed against mine. Despite our size difference, we fit together perfectly. She looks up at me, eyes locking on mine. Her words may be few and far between, but her eyes tell me everything. She feels our connection, too.

"Daddy," Sadie yells from the living room, interrupting our moment.

Thank god for the little cock blocker because I was seconds away from kissing Holly. "I'm coming," I holler back, gathering our mugs. "I'll see you out there," I tell Holly.

I'll see you out there? I close my eyes, stifling a groan. What in the hell is wrong with me? I know it's been a while since I've been with a woman, but back in the day, I was quite the lady's man. Now, it's as if I have zero swagger. I can barely string two words together without sounding like a total buffoon.

Back in the living room, I find Sadie has covered the sofa with stuffed animals and dolls. The only free place to sit is my overstuffed chair. It's big enough that Sadie usually sits beside me when we watch movies, so I'm surprised to see her camped out on the couch.

I hand Sadie her drink before settling into my chair. "Aren't you going to sit with me?"

Sadie shakes her head no, then takes a sip of her cocoa. She puts her fingers to her mouth, making a chef's kiss. "Perfection."

“Are you getting too big to sit with Dad?” I’m trying to tease her, but the thought of her outgrowing me stings. My little girl is growing up way too quickly.

She points to the spot beside me. “Holly, you sit with Daddy. His snuggles will make you feel better.”

Holly’s cheeks turn pink as her eyes dart to mine.

“Sadie, Holly doesn’t want to sit snuggled up to me.” Although judging from the way her nipples are puckered beneath my t-shirt she’s wearing, that may not be true.

“Um, I don’t know if there’s room,” Holly whispers, just loud enough for Sadie and me to hear.

Sadie points to the chair. “Park it, Missy.” Hearing her parrot my words would make me laugh, but there’s no way she’s getting away with talking to an adult like that.

“No, ma’am,” I scold. “We do not tell adults to ‘park it’ nor do we call them ‘missy’.”

Sadie’s eyes widen as she looks Holly up and down. “You’re a grownup?”

Holly nods. “I’m thirty.”

“I’m five, and Daddy’s fifty-three.”

I clear my throat. “Sorry, Holly. We don’t have much company other than Nana.”

Holly smiles, and I’m momentarily stunned. She’s beautiful even with the bruises on her face, but when she smiles, she’s stunning. “Scoot over, Daddy,” she jokes.

My cock lurches in my pants when she calls me the name usually reserved for Sadie. I clear my throat, trying to pretend like her playful words didn’t turn me on. I move over, leaving a space for her. It’s a small space, but she’s a small woman, so I know she’ll fit.

My arm is over the back of the chair, allowing her to sit in the crook of my arm. Her entire right side presses against my left side, shoulder to calf, once her feet are on the ottoman. I’m struck yet again by just how well we fit together.

“Daddy,” Sadie says impatiently, reminding me to get my head out of the gutter since my daughter is less than ten feet away.

I clear my throat. “Is everyone ready to visit Whoville?”

Sadie and Holly both cheer as I start the movie. For the first time since I

held Sadie in my arms after her birth, I want more. I never realized how much Sadie and I were missing the presence of a woman in our little family. I want this.

I want Holly. And I'm pretty sure Sadie does too.

Chapter 9

Holly

I'M NICE AND TOASTY, SNUGGLED INTO THE OVERSTUFFED CHAIR WITH NICK. Usually, I hate to be touched, but I'm beginning to think maybe that's not true. I think what I disliked so much was being touched by Randy. He was forceful and all of his touches were uncomfortable or hurt.

Not Nick's touches.

He's a big guy, at least half a foot taller than Randy with a lot more muscles, but he's soft and tender. I'm sure it has everything to do with the little girl curled up on the sofa, surrounded by a pile of stuffed toys. He's so good with her. I don't really remember my parents. Not just because they died when I was so young. I don't remember them because they were never around when they were alive. My childhood memories are filled with Gran. She was wonderful, but I've never been around many men. Only Randy. I thought all men were like him, but Nick proves that wrong.

He removes his arm from the back of the chair and leans forward to check that Sadie's sleeping. "I'm going to put her in bed and I'll be right back."

I lift my legs so he can push out the ottoman and stand. With his focus on Sadie, I unabashedly stare at him. His shirt stretches tightly across his shoulders and his pants hug his muscular thighs. He has the body of a lumberjack. The long hair, pulled into a man bun at the nape of his tattooed neck adds to the image. I lick my lips, imagining those tattooed arms and hands chopping wood.

He picks up his daughter as if she weighs nothing and carries her out of the room. My mind shifts from him holding an ax to him carrying me that same way. I remember how safe I felt in his arms. Part of me wants to pretend I'm asleep when he comes back so I can experience his hold again.

"What are you doing?" I ask when he comes back into the living room and begins clearing off the couch.

"Cleaning off the couch so I can sit here."

I curl my nose. "Oh."

He grins. The fine lines at the corners of his blue eyes give him a distinguished look. I love the way they deepen when he smiles. "You sound disappointed."

I bite my lower lip. There are a million things I want to say, but flirting and seducing a man has never been a part of my repertoire. Instead, I stare at him, willing him to read my mind.

“Do you want me to sit there with you?”

I nod.

He slides back into the space he vacated earlier, only this time we're closer. I tuck my hair behind my ear and it tugs the stitches on my face, eliciting a hiss. Nick pushes the ottoman out of the way and stands in front of me.

“Are you okay? Did you pop a stitch?” He gently pulls me forward, dropping to his knees and leaning closer to look at my injury.

My cheeks heat at the feel of his calloused fingers brushing a circle around the gash the doctor stitched closed.

“Looks good,” he says, his voice husky with lust, causing my panties to dampen.

“Nick.” His name leaves my lips like a moan.

He sits back on his heels, his large shoulders between my knees. The way his pupils darken when he glances between my legs tells me he can see evidence of my attraction to him.

My pulse kicks up several notches when he places his palms on my bare thighs. No one has ever made my body come alive like Nick does. I crave his touch. I want to worship every inch of this man in a way I've never once desired to do with Randy. And I want him to do the same to me.

“Please,” I whisper.

He closes his eyes, taking a moment. I trace my finger along his forehead, moving the stray hair that's fallen out of the elastic away from his face. I could stare at this man's face for the rest of my life and never get tired of the view. Nick is the first blossom of spring after a harsh winter. He's the hope of better things to come.

He gathers my hands in his, tracing the backs of my hands with his thumbs. “I need you to tell me you want this.”

I swallow hard, nodding in anticipation as my mouth waters at the thought of tasting his lips.

“I need your words, Holly. I won't kiss you without your consent.”

“Kiss me,” I demand, throwing my arms around his neck, slamming my lips against his. The kiss is hard and fervent as I attack his mouth.

He grips my shoulder and carefully pushes me back. “Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Slow down. We're not in a race here. Let's just enjoy this moment."

This time when he leans in to kiss me, it's unhurried and tender, causing my toes to curl. This kiss is nothing like I imagined it would be. It's so much better.

Chapter 10

Nick

UNTIL NOW, I HAD NO IDEA KISSING SOMEONE COULD LIGHT ME ON FIRE THE way Holly's lips on mine set me aflame. As much as I want to keep kissing her, Sadie is just down the hall, asleep in her bedroom. The thought of her walking out here and seeing me with a raging hard on, kissing a woman I barely know, has me ending the kiss before I strip Holly naked and taste every inch of her body right here in the living room.

She whimpers when I pull away, leaning in, chasing the kiss.

I grip her shoulders, keeping her at arm's length. "Sadie could wake up and come out here. I don't want her to find me out here kissing some woman."

Holly's face falls.

"Shit. No. I didn't mean it like that. You're not *some* woman. I just. . ." I exhale slowly, rubbing the back of my neck. "Sadie's mom was the last person I was with."

"Where is she now?"

"Hell if I know. She was a one-night stand. I barely remembered our night together when she showed up at the bar one night right as I was closing up and dropped Sadie off with me. Haven't seen or heard from her since."

Holly gasps. "How could anyone leave that sweet little girl?" Tears form in her eyes, making me fall that much harder for the woman in front of me.

I stand, holding out my hand for her to take. "Let's go to my bedroom. We can kiss each other senseless until the sun rises."

"Just kiss?" She bites her lip. Her head is tilted down, causing her to look up at me through her long lashes.

"Just kiss."

"And what if I want to do more?"

I groan. "I'm trying to be a gentleman here."

She slips her hand in mine, smiling. "Lead the way."

We tiptoe past Sadie's room, making me feel like a high school kid sneaking my girlfriend into my bedroom after curfew. Holly covers her mouth, stifling her giggles.

I hold my finger to my lips. "Shh."

Under the soft light of the lamp on my nightstand, Holly's bruises from her attack are less visible, but they're still there, a stark reminder on her otherwise flawless skin of how we met. I'm not going to have sex with Holly until I know what happened. She alluded to a boyfriend or partner doing this to her. I can't get involved with her if she's going to bring danger to my door. I have Sadie to think about.

Who am I kidding? I'm already in deep with this woman. Whoever hurt her is going to pay.

"What's wrong?" Holly's soft voice pulls me back into the moment.

I shake my head, trying to push aside my revenge fantasies. Too bad it doesn't work. I frown. "Who hurt you? I need you to tell me."

"I don't. . . I can't. . ." She freezes up, and I know I've pushed her too far, and she's retreated.

"Please, Holly. I can't have danger showing up at my door."

Holly frowns. "He can't find me here."

"I can't risk Sadie's safety."

Covering her mouth with a hand, her eyes widen. "I didn't think."

She pulls away as if she's going to leave. I reach out, snagging her by the wrist to keep her from trying to run away.

"Talk to me." My eyes beg her to trust me with the truth.

"I didn't want to belong to him. After Gran died, I had no one. I could barely speak. Randy took care of me." Her voice wavers as she fights to keep from crying.

"Who's Randy?"

"He was my neighbor. Then he became my. . ." She looks down at her hands.

I tilt her chin up so she's forced to look at me. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"No. He thinks he is, but I don't love him. I don't even like him."

"Then why are you with him?"

"I had nowhere to go. He was sweet at first. But he got mean. He brings women home and has sex with them in our bed. He makes me watch."

I hiss.

"The last time, I'd had enough. I started to pack. I was going to leave." She shudders, a sob wracking her body.

"Fuck, Holly, baby, I'm so sorry. He's the one who hurt you." I don't ask because I know.

She nods.

“You have to go to the police.”

“I can’t.”

“I know you have a hard time speaking to strangers, but I’ll go with you. You can’t let him get away with this.”

“No one will believe me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He told me that the first time he got a little rough. He didn’t hit me before the other night, but he would grab and push me. This was the first time he tried to hurt me.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll have my mom watch Sadie while we go to the police station. This is non-negotiable.”

“But—“

I place my finger to her lips, silencing her. “I won’t leave your side.” I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her flush against my body. “Now that we’ve settled that, I’m going to kiss you. If you don’t want me to, tell me now.”

She places her hands on my chest, and for a second, I’m afraid she’s going to push me away until she curls her fingers into my t-shirt. “What are you waiting for?” She licks her lips.

I lift her up so her legs are wrapped around my waist and sit on the side of the bed. She straddles me and the best parts of her line up with the best parts of me. I kiss her, groaning into her mouth as she rolls her hips. The need to come has me gripping her hips, stopping her from moving as I deepen the kiss.

This must be what heaven’s like.

Chapter 11

Holly

MY ENTIRE BODY IS ON FIRE. NICK'S KISSES BRING LIFE TO PARTS OF ME I thought didn't work. My clit throbs against his zipper. I try to move against him, wanting to chase the feeling that's just out of reach, but his hands hold me in place.

I pull away from the kiss. "Please. I've never. . ."

His eyes widen. "What?"

"No. I've done *that*. I'm not some thirty-year-old virgin. I've never had an orgasm before."

"Not even by yourself?"

I shake my head no, embarrassed at how inexperienced I must seem. It's bad enough Nick has twenty-three years on me, but now he probably thinks I'm broken.

"You can't keep riding me, or I'm going to come in my pants like some teenage boy, but lie back on the bed. We'll remedy your situation ASAP."

He stands, turning to place me on the center of his king-sized bed. I've long since shed the boa and tiara Sadie had me wear earlier. The only thing standing between Nick seeing me naked is the oversized t-shirt he lent me, a pair of socks, and the small polka dot cotton panties I'm wearing. With my bruised face and mottled skin, I must be far from sexy.

He drags his gaze up and down my body. "So fucking beautiful," he whispers, more to himself than me.

My eyes widen when he strips off his shirt, leaving him in a pair of gray joggers. He's hard beneath the pants. I have to do a double take because surely that bulge isn't all him.

He squeezes his cock. "If you don't stop looking at me like that, all my willpower is going to fly out the window."

I gasp.

"No, not like that. I'd never lose control with you, or force you to do something. I just mean. . . shit. I'm so bad at this. It's been six years."

"I'm not scared. Your words excite me. I trust you." There's an unexplainable connection between us that I can't deny.

He leans over me, spreading my legs so he can fit between them, kissing

me. "I want you to tell me if I do anything you don't want. If you ask me to stop, I will. Right away."

He traces his finger from the outside of my calf up to my hip, sending chills throughout my body, drawing my nipples into peaks and causing goosebumps to break out on my skin. It's too much and, yet, not enough.

I want more. "Touch me," I beg.

"I am touching you," he says between the soft kisses he places along my neck.

I push him away so I can take off my shirt. When I begin to remove the socks, he stops me.

"Those stay on."

I raise an eyebrow. "School girl fantasy?"

He grins, a pink blush staining his cheeks. "Something like that."

I trace my finger along the waistband of my panties. "What about these?" I've never been this bold in my life, but Nick makes me desire things I've never wanted before.

"Those need to go." He places his hands at my hips and tugs the panties down my legs. He spreads my thighs, staring down at my most private of places.

"Fucking beautiful." He traces along my seam, then lifts the finger to his face, inhaling deeply before licking my juices from his finger. He closes his eyes, groaning with pleasure. "Delicious. I need more," he says, settling between my legs. His expansive shoulders push my legs open wider. He places a closed mouth kiss on my clit, and my back bows off the bed.

No one has ever gone down on me before. Randy's the only person I've been with, and I would just lie there while he rutted against me like some animal. It wasn't pleasure. It was the price I paid for him to take care of me. This is different. Nick isn't taking. He's worshiping.

"Nick," I moan, fisting his hair in my hands, pulling it from the elastic.

"Let go, baby. I'll catch you." He drags his tongue up my slit to my navel then blows cool air against my damp skin, tracing the line he licked with his breath.

"Please," I beg.

He chuckles, suckling my clit as he slips one of his thick fingers inside me. I tighten around him as my body goes rigid. He adds another finger, sucking harder, and I thrust my hips against his lips, my orgasm wracking my body. Nick continues to suckle me until I'm spent.

He sits back on his knees. “Wow,” he whispers.

I open my eyes, finding his face dripping with. . . well, me. I gasp, seeing the liquid. “I’m sorry. That’s never happened before.”

He grins. “Don’t be sorry. You’re the first woman I’ve ever made squirt like that. I feel like a fucking king.”

I sit up, reaching for the waistband of his sweats.

He grips my wrists. “Don’t.”

I frown.

“I’m just saying you don’t need to reciprocate or anything like that. I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“No one has ever. . .” I trail off, embarrassed to admit just how lacking in experience I am.

“If no one has ever feasted on your sweet cunt, you’ve been with the wrong men.”

“Man. There’s only been one, and everything between us was born out of obligation. To be honest, until I met you, I never felt desire for someone. I didn’t trust anyone enough to bare myself to them.”

He settles onto the bed, pulling me against his side, holding me as if I’m the most precious thing in the world. “You’re safe from him.”

I trace my finger along his chest, down the happy trail of his stomach, before palming his erection. “Show me how to make you feel good.”

He thrusts against my hand. “Grip me tighter.”

“Take off your pants.”

“Bossy.” He smirks, bridging his hips so he can slide off his sweats and underwear in one fluid motion. His cock smacks against his stomach, leaving a slick trail of precum. He tosses his pants to the floor, then relaxes back against the pillow with his hands behind his head, allowing me to look at him.

I reach for him, brushing my fingertip over the clear bead of liquid on his slit. His cock jumps against my fingers, and I jerk my hand back in surprise.

“You’re killing me, Holly,” he pants.

I grip his shaft, brushing my thumb across the slit, hoping to make his cock jump again. To my delight, it pulses in my hand, dribbling more precum onto his belly button. I lean forward and swipe my tongue across his tip. The salty tang of him makes my mouth water, so I lick him again.

He threads his fingers through my hair, but doesn’t grip it and strokes my cheek with his thumb. I’ve never sucked a cock before. With Randy, he

would skull fuck me while I tried not to gag and choke. This is different. I'm in complete control.

And I love it.

Chapter 12

Nick

THE MOMENT HOLLY SUCKS THE HEAD OF MY COCK INTO HER MOUTH, MY HIPS buck, and I almost come. If not for her tight grip on the base of my shaft, I'd be blowing my load with the first swirl of her tongue. Her eyes never leave mine as she slides down to the middle of my dick before dragging her lips back up to the head. She pulls off me with a pop.

"Is that okay?" Her eyes widen as she waits for feedback.

"I almost came. If you keep that going, I won't last long."

"Good." She grins, taking my cock back inside her mouth.

I let go of her hair, gripping the sheets as I fight to stay in control. Then. . . she hums. The vibrations dance up and down the length of my shaft, drawing my sack against my body as I fill her mouth with cum.

She swallows it down, continuing to suckle the head of my cock as I shoot three more bursts. With a final swirl of her tongue along the slit of my dick, she lifts her head, grinning.

"That. . . you were. . ." I pant, trying to catch my breath.

She licks her lips. I grip the back of her neck and pull her face to mine. She turns away when I try to kiss her.

"What's wrong?" Shit. I should've warned her before coming. "Did I hurt you?"

She gasps. "What? No!"

I frown. "Then why won't you kiss me?"

"I didn't think you'd want to taste yourself."

I pull her against my lips, slipping my tongue between her lips, moaning when I taste myself on her tongue. "I taste good on you." I dive back in for another kiss.

I pull away before either of us are ready, placing a chaste kiss on her forehead. "Get some rest."

She scrunches her nose, giving me an adorable pouty look. Until Holly, I'd never met a woman who's both sexy and cute at the same time.

"Stop," I scold. "We both need sleep." Hell, I'm in my fifties. I'm not one of those dudes who can fuck all night anymore. Sleep is important to us old men.

She nods, settling into the bed next to me. Having Holly in my bed feels right. One thing is becoming clearer with each second I spend with her. I could kiss this woman forever.

I just hope she'll let me.

I'M JOLTED AWAKE BY SADIE PEELING OPEN MY EYELIDS. "MY HUNGER monster is screaming for donuts."

Holly snuggles closer against my side, her thigh brushing my cock. I grip her leg to keep her from awakening the sleeping beast.

Sadie tilts her head, studying the scene in front of her. "Why's Holly sleeping in here?" Her voice carries a note of jealousy.

I look over, making sure Holly's covered. "Uh, Holly had a nightmare. I let her sleep in here like I let you when you have a bad dream."

Sadie jumps on the bed, frowning. "No fair! I wanted to slumber party with you." She gasps when the comforter pulls down, baring Holly's breasts.

"Daddy! I can see Holly's boobies!"

Holly's eyes pop open, and she bolts upright, jerking the comforter up to cover herself.

"Sadie," I scold.

My daughter, ever the precocious one, steps closer to the bed with a worried look on her face, replacing the wary one from moments ago. "Do you need pajamas? Daddy can buy you some."

I'm relieved Sadie's no longer jealous. "Good idea, Sadie Bug. Go get dressed, and I'll take you and Holly to get breakfast. When we finish, we can go buy Holly some pajamas."

"Me too?" She pulls her nightgown off and throws it on the floor. "My jammies don't fit anymore either."

I laugh. "You can get some too. After our shopping trip, I'll drop you off at Nana's. I have to run an errand before work."

Sadie's eyes light up as she claps her hands together. "Holly, you'll love staying at Nana's. We get to do whatever we want. It just has to be 'within reason', or Nana will say no."

Holly and I laugh at the way she makes air quotes around the words, within reason.

“Holly’s not going to Nana’s,” I tell her.

Sadie narrows her eyes at me. “What’s she going to do when you go to work?”

“She’s coming to the bar with me.”

“A bar is no place for kids,” she says, throwing my words back at me.

Holly chuckles. “Sadie, I’m a grownup.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.” Sadie’s eyes widen before she squints, tilting her head to the side. “Wait. Why did you need to sleep with Daddy after a bad dream?”

“Ummm. . .” Holly’s eyes dart to mine.

Fuck me. This kid is way too damn smart. “Go get dressed, or no one’s getting donuts and new jammies.”

Sadie grabs her nightgown off the floor and races out of the room, hollering, “Last one to the front door has to buy the donuts.”

I give Holly a cautious smile. “Sorry about that.” I guess it’s a good thing she’s getting a taste of what my life’s like up front.

“You don’t need to apologize. I’m the one who should. Sorry your daughter saw my tits.”

I reach over, pulling down the comforter and rolling one of her nipples as I palm her breast. “Maybe later you can make it up to me.”

She giggles. “Yes, sir.”

Her words send a thrill straight to my dick. I have to force myself out of bed, so I don’t defile her with my daughter waiting at the door to go get donuts. I hand her a sweatshirt. “Get moving before I have to eat *you* for breakfast.”

Chapter 13

Nick

AFTER THREE PINK DONUTS WITH SPRINKLES, ONE STOP AT THE STORE FOR matching holiday pajamas for everyone, and a short visit with my mom as we dropped Sadie off for the evening, Holly and I are standing in front of an officer filing a police report on her assault.

The officer is patient as Holly struggles to speak.

“Take your time,” he says, offering her a kind smile.

Holly frowns, her frustration evident.

I wrap my arm around her, squeezing her hip. “Holly has selective mutism. In high anxiety situations, she can’t speak easily.” I’m glad I overheard the doctors say this at the hospital. It’s helped me make her more comfortable without forcing her disclose something she may not be ready to talk about yet.

The officer nods. “My daughter is six, and she’s the same way. It can help her if she knows what to expect. Let me walk you through what will happen, and then, I’ll take your statement.”

Holly presses her lips together and grips the counter in front of us.

“In a situation like yours, I’ll share your report with a detective who will follow up with you. Once that happens, they’ll issue a warrant for your ex-boyfriend’s arrest. He’ll be booked into jail and await his arraignment. That should take about a day, unless he’s arrested on a Friday. If that’s the case, it could be Monday before he’s arraigned. After arraignment, he’ll go before the judge and be released on bond. At that time, he’ll be read the emergency protective order. That will keep him from contacting you or trying to harm you again.”

I frown. “So he’ll just be walking free until his trial? That could take months.”

The officer chuckles without humor. “That’s if you’re lucky. I’m guessing it will take closer to a year or so.”

I flare my nostrils, trying to stay calm. The last thing anyone needs is for me to lose my shit in a police station.

“He hit me.” She points to the stitches above her eye, then holds out her arms that are covered in fingerprint sized bruises intermingled with her

colorful tattoos.

The officer nods. "Tell me more. Start with his name."

"Randy Evans is a monster. He brought a woman home and, um, you know, um. . ." She swallows hard.

"I don't know. You're going to have to tell me." The way the officer smiles and nods, encouraging Holly, tells me he's a good father. I'm glad he's the one working the desk right now. Someone else might not be so patient.

"They had sex in our bed. I tried to leave, but he told me I belong to him. He wouldn't let me go. I tried to fend him off, but I was no match for his strength. He grabbed me and threw me into the wall. When I hit the mirror, it broke, cutting my back."

I growl when she says this, something I had no idea people actually did in real life.

"He punched me as hard as he could." She places a hand above the stitches in her eyebrow. "I was so dizzy and nauseated."

I can tell she's fighting through her anxiety to tell the story of what happened. "You're doing great, babe. I'm so proud of you." I lean down, kissing her temple.

"He pulled out a knife and threatened me with it. I thought he was going to kill me." She swipes away the tears in her eyes. "I was so dizzy but I had to escape. He was going to stab me."

"I found her in the alley a few blocks from her apartment," I tell him. "She was unconscious and bleeding from the cut over her eye and the one on her back."

The officer nods. "I think that's all we need for now. You did a good job, Holly. I hope my daughter grows up to be as brave as you."

She smiles, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Thank you."

"Someone will be in touch." He pins me with a hard look. "Take care of her."

"I will. Thank you, Officer."

GIVING THE POLICE HER STATEMENT EXHAUSTED HOLLY, SO I TAKE HER BACK to my house to nap before we have to leave for the bar. I expect her to go

right to sleep, but Holly surprises me when she strips off her jeans and my sweatshirt, and stands next to the bed naked.

“Fuck. I’m glad I didn’t know you were going commando.”

She giggles. “I want you to make me orgasm again. That felt better than anything I’ve ever felt before.” Despite being timid, she’s not afraid to ask for what she wants.

“I’ve created a monster,” I tease.

“After you make me come, I’ll make you.”

I glance at the clock on my nightstand. “We don’t have time for all that, but I can kiss your pussy until you drench my face. Then I’ll be smelling and tasting you all night.”

She bites her lower lip, grinning as she sits on the bed.

“You like me talking dirty, don’t you?” I take off my shirt, setting it aside. “Don’t want to get that wet.”

She spreads her legs, showing me she’s already dripping her sweet honey. I lean forward, dragging my nose up her slit.

“Nick,” she pants.

I spread open her pussy, diving right in. She tastes even sweeter than I remembered. She’s so responsive that I know as soon as I slip my fingers inside her, she’ll be tightening around my digits and soaking my face.

I press my hips forward against the side of the bed, needing the pressure to ease the ache in my cock. The hardwood floors dig into my knees, but I don’t want to stop when Holly’s so close to coming undone. I ease down my zipper and pull my cock out, stroking it to keep from fixating on the pain in my knees.

I add a finger while tracing figure eights around her clit with my tongue. My cock pulses in my fist when her sweet nectar floods my tongue. Her legs tighten around my neck as her orgasm hits. And by hit, I mean she drenches my beard. I fuck my fist harder, spilling my release onto the floor.

As soon as Holly relaxes her thighs, I stand, tucking my cock back inside my pants. She sits up.

“Don’t move. I need to clean up the floor.”

She looks down, giggling when she sees my cum. “What. . .?”

I shrug. “What can I say? I get off on your pleasure.”

“I’m so glad it was you who found me.”

That makes two of us. Now I just have to figure out how to convince her to stay.

Chapter 14

Holly

WATCHING NICK MOVE AROUND BEHIND THE BAR GIVES ME A PEEK AT WHO HE is when he thinks no one is looking. He's in his element here. His smile stretches wide as he interacts with his patrons, making them feel special. The man is sexy. My pussy tingles when I think about the mind-blowing orgasm he gave me earlier. Nick's the most selfless person I've ever met. It's a good thing he's an honorable man because, despite us just meeting, I'm falling hard for him. Sadie, too. I can't fight these feelings. I want a place in their world. Permanently.

Nick shoots me a wink as he places a soda and plate of mozzarella sticks in front of me. "You look like you're thinking awfully hard over here."

I shrug. "Just admiring the view."

Pink highlights his cheeks when he grins at me. I love how his smile transforms his entire face. The man is exquisite. His humility is an added bonus.

A woman down the bar holds up her glass to him to get his attention. He blows me a kiss before going to help the customer. The beautiful woman's eyes light up when Nick leans over the bar so he can hear her above the noise. Seeing how he affects other women doesn't make me jealous. Instead, it turns me on. Those women may want him, but he sees only me. Even with my bruised face, wearing his oversized sweatshirt over a pair of jeans, he looks at me like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world. For the first time in my life, I feel desirable.

The bartender stops in front of me. She grins when she sees me ogling her boss. "Nick's something else, isn't he?"

I smile. "He really is."

"I've worked here for a few years and never seen him give a woman the time of day. I was beginning to think he took a vow of celibacy or something. Guess he just hadn't met the right woman."

My cheeks heat at her implication. "Oh, I'm not. . . I mean, we're just. . ."

She laughs. "Right. And I'm Santa Claus."

"It's just. . . this is new."

I can tell by her smirk she doesn't believe me. "Maybe so, but you're in

love.”

“I’m not—“

She holds up her hand, laughing. “Keep telling yourself that.”

It isn’t until she walks away that I realize I spoke to her with ease. Usually, I struggle with strangers. Could whatever Nick and I have going on be changing me for the better?

IT’S LATE BY THE TIME NICK CLOSES THE BAR. I MUST’VE FALLEN ASLEEP ON the car ride home because, before I know it, he’s carrying me inside the house.

I yawn, looking around surprised. “We’re home?”

“Just got here.”

“Put me down. I can walk.”

He presses a kiss on my forehead. “I like taking care of you.”

I press my lips together. No one has taken care of me since I first went to live with Gran. By the time I was in middle school, her health was failing, and I had to take care of her. My eyes water when I think of how hard it was to slowly lose Gran one day at a time over the course of six years.

“Hey, babe, what’s wrong?” Nick’s voice is filled with concern.

“It’s been so long since someone cared about me.” I struggle not to cry over what I’ve just admitted.

He walks us to the bedroom, placing me on the bed. “It’s been a long time since I’ve felt such a strong desire to care for a woman.”

“Who takes care of you?”

He shakes his head. “Nobody.”

I pull him down to the bed, rolling so I’m on top of him. “Then let me take care of you.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But I want to.”

I slowly kiss down his body as I unbutton his flannel shirt. With each new button undone, I trail kisses along the newly exposed skin. He rolls his hips beneath me. I sit up, scooting backward so I can pop open the button of his jeans. His cock springs out when I lower his zipper, slapping his abdomen.

“Holly,” he moans, gripping the back of my neck and pulling me up to

meet his lips.

Before he can deepen the kiss, I move back down to his cock, flashing him a grin. I lower my head, drawing the silky skin between my lips, tasting his salty precum.

He cups my face, stroking my cheek with his thumb. "Don't stop, babe."

I slide my lips up and down on his dick, savoring the power I have over him right now. I love the feeling of having complete control. With fluid motions, I take more of his cock into my mouth.

He taps my shoulder, letting me know he's about to come. Instead of letting up, I keep sucking until I swallow his release.

When he's finished, I kiss back up his chest to his lips. He opens his mouth, sucking my tongue into his. The kiss feels like a promise.

I just hope he can feel mine too.

Chapter 15

Holly

THE DETECTIVE I SPOKE TO YESTERDAY TOLD ME THEY'RE SERVING RANDY'S arrest warrant this morning, making this afternoon a good time for me to go to the apartment and gather my things. Nick insisted on having someone cover the bar for him so he could come with me. I would've been fine on my own since Randy is locked up until his arraignment, at least, but I'm glad Nick insisted on coming. Having him near makes me feel safer.

After seeing Nick's home, I'm embarrassed for him to see the way Randy and I live. Lived. I'm never coming back here. Our apartment is nice enough, but it's sparse. We sleep on a mattress on the floor. And while I always kept our place clean, in the days I've been gone, Randy hasn't tidied up, so there are dishes piled in the sink, clothes on the floor, and trash from takeout littered throughout the small one-bedroom apartment.

"It's not usually like this," I explain. The urge to clean is overwhelming, but I bypass the kitchen, going to the bedroom for my suitcase.

Once inside the room, I gasp. The closet door is open and the hangers where my clothing once was are empty.

Nick grimaces when he sees the look on my face. "We can go shopping, babe. Clothes are replaceable."

"I know. I have money he can't access. It's just hard."

He pulls me into a hug, cupping my chin, kissing me softly. "Grab what you can. We'll replace whatever's missing."

Inside my nightstand, I find the battered copies of *Little Women* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* that my Gran read to me when I was growing up. Thankfully, they're still in good condition. The money I kept in here is gone. So is my jewelry. None of it mattered, though. My parent's wedding rings are in my safe deposit box, and Randy doesn't have the key. It's tucked inside the hollowed out copy of *The Great Gatsby* beneath my two actual books. My passport is there too. I'm lucky Randy never bothered with my books. Otherwise, this stuff would be missing too.

I hold them up. "It looks like this is all I have left here."

Nick frowns, hugging me again. "Babe, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I show him the key to my storage unit. "When Gran died, I

put everything of value into storage. I knew Randy would try to take what little I had.”

Nick flares his nostrils. “Let’s go.”

I nod, casting one last look around the place I used to call home. How did I live like this for so long?

Sighing, I open the front door. Randy stands across the threshold from me with his arm up, key in hand, unlocking the apartment door.

“What are you doing here?” My voice is shaky.

Nick moves in front of me, taking a protective stance. A deep growl emanates from him.

Randy’s eyes narrow. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m the guy who found Holly bruised and nearly bleeding to death in the alley behind my bar,” he snarls.

Randy rolls his eyes. “Holly’s always been dramatic. You should’ve seen the way she carried on after her grandmother died. She refused to talk for almost a year.” He scoffs, shaking his head. “You can go now. Thank you for returning what’s rightfully mine.”

Inside my head, I’m screaming, but I can’t form words. Randy’s power over me is strong. I can’t fight it.

“She’s a person, not a possession,” Nick growls.

Randy wastes no time rearing back and punching Nick in the face. Since he wasn’t expecting it, Nick’s head snaps to the side, and he stumbles a few steps backward, slamming into me. I fall to the floor, landing hard on my ass. Even from behind him, I can tell Randy clocked him good.

I gasp, brushing myself off as I stand.

Nick wastes no time returning the blow. Despite being prepared and dodging the first hit, Randy is no match for Nick. Where Randy is soft and out of shape, Nick is hard and fit. He delivers blow after blow until the police show up. A neighbor must’ve heard the scuffle and called them.

They pull Nick off Randy, and put him in handcuffs. Randy tries to hit him, so he winds up in a pair of handcuffs as well.

Another officer leads me into the apartment. I can tell he thinks Nick’s the aggressor and, based on my healing face, he thinks Nick is the one who hurt me.

“Ma’am, can you tell me what happened here?”

I close my eyes, taking calming breaths. I have to find my words. Nick’s freedom depends on it.

I point to Randy and then to my battered face. “He did this. He was supposed to be in jail, so I came to gather my belongings.” Tears sting my eyes as I try to peek over the officer’s shoulder to look at Nick. “Please let Nick go. He was protecting me.”

The officer holds up his hands. “As soon as we get everything sorted, your friend will be free to go. We cuffed him because we needed to stop the fight.”

The other officer pokes his head inside, informing this one of Randy’s protective order. He turns to me. “Looks like your ex earned himself another visit to jail. He’ll be bonded again, so I suggest you find a safe place far away from the guy.”

Nick steps inside, placing his arm around me as we watch them take Randy back to jail. “Let’s go home,” he says, kissing my temple.

I nod, wiping away my tears. Will I ever be free of Randy?

Chapter 16

Nick

HOLLY HASN'T SPOKEN A WORD SINCE WE LEFT HER APARTMENT. SHE'S IN MY bedroom, pretending to nap. The last time I checked on her, she was lying on my bed, staring off into space. I'm worried today has caused her to regress back to the silent woman I rescued in the alleyway.

My mom smiles sadly across the table from me as she and I have lunch with Sadie. "How's your friend?"

I shrug. I told her everything after I brought Holly home from the hospital and again when I called her an hour ago to tell her she could bring Sadie home.

"You care about that woman a lot." She's not asking because Mom knows me better than anyone else does.

I swallow hard. "I'm worried she's going to shut me out after what happened today." Sadie's wearing headphones and watching a show on her tablet, so I don't hold back. "I know it's sudden, but I think I'm falling in love with Holly."

Mom smiles. "That's how it was for me with your father. God rest his soul. I loved him from the moment he walked into my family's restaurant. Back then, women didn't ask men out on dates, but I needed to get to know him better. Love is a wild ride. All you can do is strap in and enjoy wherever it takes you."

"What if she doesn't feel the same way I do?"

My mom frowns. "I know Miranda leaving Sadie the way she did messed with your head, but—"

I hold up my hand. "I never loved Miranda. She was a one-night stand."

"Maybe so, but her walking out on Sadie did a number on you. Sadie's already smitten with Holly. She talked nonstop about her last night. You're not just scared of Holly rejecting you. You're also worried about her rejecting Sadie."

I close my eyes, sighing. Mom's right. "It's not just about me anymore. It won't be for a long time."

She pats my arm. "You're such a good father. I'm so proud of you."

I swallow the lump in my throat. "Sometimes I worry." I watch Sadie as

she chomps on her peanut butter and banana sandwich, smiling at her show. “I love her so much. What if Holly decides this is all too much?” I hold my arm out, motioning around the room to imply my messy life is a lot to ask Holly to accept.

Mom gives me a pointed look. “Then she’s not the woman for you.”

I nod. She’s right.

Sadie finishes her sandwich and pulls off her headphones, smiling. “Daddy, it’s time to play Barbies.”

My mom laughs. “On that note, I’m heading home. I had my fill of Barbie last night.”

“No fair,” I tease quietly enough Sadie can’t hear. As much as I pretend to hate playing with dolls, there’s nothing I won’t do for my daughter. “Okay, Bug. Lead the way.”

Chapter 17

Holly

MY OVARIES QUIVER AS I WATCH NICK PLAY BARBIES WITH SADIE. I'VE never wanted kids before, but I think that had more to do with Randy than it did me actually not wanting children. With Nick, things would be different. I shake my head, frowning. Nick and I barely know each other. I'm getting ahead of myself. Sure, he's letting me stay here now, but this isn't forever. Here I am planning a future when he's probably counting down the days until I leave. As soon as Christmas is over, I need to go to a hotel until I can find a new place to live. I hope Nick will still be here once I get everything sorted.

I know the moment Nick realizes I'm watching him play with Sadie because the tops of his ears turn bright red.

I grin. "Can I play?"

Sadie's head whips up. "Holly! I thought you were under a spell and going to sleep for a hundred years!" She jumps up, racing to where I stand.

I'm almost knocked over when she throws her arms around my hips, hugging me with all her might. I place my hand on her back.

Nick rises to his feet, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Whoa, be careful, Sadie Bug. Holly's still healing from her accident."

She pulls away, looking down. "Sorry."

"It's okay. Your hugs must be magical because I feel lots better."

Sadie looks up at me, beaming. "I *am* a princess, so that makes sense."

My laughter dies in my throat when I see the expression on Nick's face. I can't tell what he's thinking, but with his brow drawn like that, it can't be good.

He clears his throat. "There's a plate for you warming in the oven."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Come on, Sadie. It's time to clean up and then get you to bed."

"Aww, do I have to? I wanted to play with Holly."

"Sorry, Bug. It's after 8:00."

I leave them in the living room and go get my plate. Sadie grumbles the entire time. If I wasn't so worried about Nick's cool demeanor, I'd laugh. As it is, I'm afraid he's going to tell me I've overstayed my welcome. Just because I'm falling in love doesn't mean he is.

I must be lost in my thoughts because I've barely touched my food when Nick comes into the kitchen after he's finished putting Sadie to bed. He sits across from me at the table, watching me in silence. I want to ask what he's thinking, but I can't.

"Are you not hungry?" he asks, frowning.

I shrug, not wanting to admit I'm bothered by his change in attitude. "I'm just tired. This whole thing with Randy is draining. I never should've let him control me for so long."

"Do not take on the burden of his bad behavior. He took advantage of your grief."

"But Gran died years ago. I let this go on for more than fifteen years because I was afraid to be alone." I don't say it, but what if I'm jumping into things with Nick because I'm incapable of being independent?

Nick stands and moves next to me, kneeling as he turns my chin so I'm looking into his eyes. "Hey, don't do that."

"Do what? Be honest?"

"Don't question this thing between us because you regret being with Randy. I know everything is moving fast, but what's happening with you and me is different." He leans forward, kissing me with a gentleness only Nick has.

Smiling, I pull away. "I'm happy you feel it too. Now, take me to bed."

"You women and your one-track minds." Chuckling, he gathers me into his arms and takes me back to his bedroom. Once inside, he sets me on my feet and divests me of my clothes. It's easy since I only have on the pajamas he bought me the other day. I frown, biting my lower lip. Other than the clothing I was wearing when Nick found me, they're all I have. Randy destroyed the rest of my wardrobe.

"Hey, where'd you go?"

I frown. "I don't have any clothes."

"We can go shopping."

"I just. . . Am I too much of a drain on you?"

It's Nick's turn to frown. "Don't think that Holly. If I didn't want you here, you wouldn't be."

I nod, reaching for his shirt. He helps me get it over his head, and then I lean forward, kissing the center of his chest. The short hairs tickle my lips. He's still in his jeans where I'm completely bare.

"Strip," I command.

“Not yet.” He grabs the back of my thighs, lifting so I fall backward onto the bed with a giggle. “I need to kiss you first.”

He crawls between my legs, leaning down to place a kiss on my inner thigh. His tongue darts out of his mouth, tracing the area he just kissed.

I moan, feeling the pulse of my clit as desire drips from my pussy.

“Always so responsive,” he whispers, moving down my leg. His tongue leaves behind a damp trail that tingles when the cool air hits my thighs.

When his lips wrap around my big toe, my back arches off the mattress as I hum my appreciation. I never thought I’d be someone who likes having my feet adored, but when he drags his tongue along the arch of my foot, ecstasy zings throughout my body.

He chuckles. “I think you’re ready.” He blows cool air where his mouth just vacated.

“Stop teasing me,” I beg.

He reaches into his nightstand, pulling out an unopened box of condoms. I’m glad he has them. I’m even happier he hasn’t used any of them until me. He strips out of his jeans. His cock bounces with his movements. I’ll never get tired of seeing this man naked. He’s breathtaking.

I bite my lip, watching him roll the condom up the length of his dick. He notices me watching and shoots me a wink before settling over me. The crown of his cock nudges my thigh. I spread my legs wider, raising my hips in hopes of taking him inside me.

He lines up his cock, but pauses. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I frown, worried he wants to back out. “Don’t you?”

“I want inside you so badly it hurts, but I have to warn you of something first.”

My stomach drops. I suspected the depth of my feelings are one-sided, but the fact that he’s a millimeter from being inside me and about to tell me this is only sex still hurts. I swallow back the tears stinging my eyes. “What?” I whisper, preparing myself for heartbreak.

“Once we do this, I won’t be able to let you go. I need to know you want more with me. Tell me you’re feeling what I’m feeling.”

“What are you feeling?”

“I’m falling for you.”

I smash my lips to his, pulling him down against my chest. His cock penetrates me in one thrust. I’m full, but deliciously so. He waits for me to adjust before rocking his hips. His movements are slow and purposeful. I’ve

never felt so cherished.

“Fuck, babe. You feel so good.” He lifts up on his elbows, leaning down to take one of my nipples between his lips. He sucks, rolling the turgid peak between his lips as he thrums the other with his thumb and forefinger.

I throw my head back, delighting in the orgasm quaking through my body.

He lifts his head, kissing me as he continues to roll his hips. “Open your eyes.”

I look into his eyes, watching him as his thrusts pick up speed. The eye contact intensifies the moment, and it’s not long before I feel another orgasm hit. This time he gives one final thrust as his entire body tenses and he unloads into the condom.

We stay locked together, staring into each other’s eyes. For the first time, I feel something I’ve never felt with a man.

Love.

And it scares the hell out of me.

Chapter 18

Nick

“DADDY, HOW DOES SANTA GET INTO THE HOUSE? WE HAVE THOSE LOGS IN our fireplace. There’s no room for him.” She’s sitting on the floor in front of Holly, who’s braiding her hair. “And how does he get toys to all the kids in the world?”

One thing about having such an intelligent daughter is I have to stay on my toes. She’s always thinking, so I can’t get much past her.

Holly wraps a rubber band around Sadie’s braid, then leans to the side so she can look into Sadie’s eyes. “Do you believe in Christmas magic?”

Sadie nods.

“That’s how Santa can do everything he does. He has helpers all over the world, so he’s able to make everyone’s Christmas wishes come true.”

I smile at Holly, mouthing, *thank you*. I don’t think I could’ve come up with something that’s true and keeps the belief alive at the same time.

“Is magic invisible?”

“It is. That’s why you have to be asleep for Santa to work his magic,” Holly explains.

Sadie fake yawns. “I’m sleepy. I think I’ll go to bed.”

I laugh. “It’s 2:30 in the afternoon, Bug. You’re going to have to wait a few hours before it’s time for Santa.”

“We need to decorate the cookies,” Holly reminds her.

“Plus, Nana’s coming for dinner. You don’t want to miss that.” I’m looking forward to my mom and Holly spending time together. I want them to like each other.

Earlier this morning, we baked cookies for Santa. Sadie insisted we use the spider cookie cutters from Halloween because she’s convinced Santa will love them. I’m pretty sure it’s actually because her favorite book right now is *Diary of a Spider*. Her kindergarten teacher read the story to her class the first week of school, and Sadie insisted we buy a copy of it to read at bedtime. I’m hoping the new books Santa’s bringing will replace it. The story is cute, but four months of reading it every day is enough to last a lifetime.

Sadie grabs my hand, trying to pull me up from the chair. “Let’s go decorate Santa’s cookies.”

Holly and I follow her into the kitchen. I set out the decorating supplies while Holly ties an apron around Sadie's waist. Seeing how comfortable they are together nearly takes my breath away. I thought I'd be single until Sadie graduates high school. Now that Holly's come into our lives, I can see what my daughter and I have been missing.

"Are you even listening, Daddy?" Sadie's hands are on her hips and her eyebrows raised, telling me she's been talking to me for a while.

"Sorry, Bug. I was thinking about how happy I am to be decorating cookies with you and Holly."

Holly grins.

Sadie rolls her eyes. "Then start decorating, Mister."

I chuckle, reaching for the sprinkles. "Aye, aye, Captain."

"Don't you mean Princess?" Sadie raises her eyebrows as if challenging me to call her anything else.

I laugh. "What was I thinking? Of course, I meant Princess."

Holly giggles.

As we work on decorating the cookies, Holly and Sadie chat about books. As a librarian, Holly knows about all of Sadie's favorite stories and even suggests some new ones. The doorbell surprises me. I've enjoyed listening to them so much that I didn't realize the time.

"Nana!" Sadie jumps down from the chair, racing toward the door.

"Wait," I call, stopping her in her tracks. "We need to make sure it's really Nana at the door." It's probably my mom, but I can't forget the threat of Randy still exists. With as quickly as he was released on bond last time, I bet Holly's ex is already free.

Holly frowns, and I can tell she's reading my thoughts. I lean over and kiss the top of her head before making my way to the door.

I pat Sadie on the shoulder. "Go help Holly while I answer the door."

She nods, skipping back into the kitchen.

I open the door to find my mom loaded down with presents. For as long as Sadie's been alive, we've done Christmas with Nana on Christmas Eve. My mom always felt it was important for Sadie and me to have our special time, just the two of us, on Christmas morning.

She kisses me on the cheek as she hands off a mountain of presents. The hot pink wrapping paper tells me she's spoiled Sadie despite me telling her not to this year. Sadie doesn't need so many things when there are other children out there with next to nothing.

“Mom, you’re on a fixed income,” I scold, placing the gifts under the tree.

“Oh, hush. I’m your mother. You don’t get to tell me how to spend my money.” She sets two gifts in red wrapping paper under the tree, telling me Sadie’s not the only one she spoiled. “Now, where’s my grandbaby?” she calls.

“We’re in here, decorating our spiders,” Sadie yells back.

My mom raises her eyebrow at me. “Spiders?”

I shake my head. “Don’t ask.”

She holds up her hands, laughing.

I follow my mom into the kitchen. “Mom, I’d like you to meet Holly. Holly, this is my mom, Alaina.”

Holly holds out her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

I’m surprised at how strong Holly’s voice sounds. She’s a far cry from the anxious woman who could barely speak when I found her. It goes to show how safe she feels with me. I smile, glad she’s comfortable here. To me, this is where she belongs.

My mom bypasses Holly’s outstretched hand, pulling her into a hug. “You don’t know how happy I am to meet you.”

Holly swallows hard as her cheeks turn pink.

“Nana, did you know Santa’s bringing me a puppy?”

My mom’s eyes widen. “What?”

I shake my head no. “Sadie, Santa isn’t bringing you a puppy.”

She crosses her arms, jutting out her lower lip. “But that’s all I asked for in my letter.”

Having read the letter, I know that’s not true. “A puppy wasn’t even on your list,” I remind her.

“I wrote a new one yesterday,” she says with a huff.

I frown. I don’t want Sadie to be disappointed. She’s old enough to remember this Christmas for the rest of her life, and I want it to be perfect. For that reason, I bought everything on her original list.

“That’s after the Christmas Wish deadline,” Holly tells her. “Plus, Santa doesn’t really like to give children pets because that’s a parent’s decision.”

Sadie tilts her head, thinking about Holly’s words. After a few seconds, she nods, satisfied with that answer. “Daddy, I think we need to discuss getting a dog.”

My mom covers her mouth with her hand, hiding her laughter.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I tell her.

“Woohoo!” Sadie jumps off her chair, holding her fists up in victory. Unlike with my mom, where that meant not a chance in hell, Sadie knows with me it’s as good as a yes.

By the time we finish decorating the cookies, Sadie is covered in icing. “Come on, Bug. We need to get you into the bath before I mistake you for a cookie and try to eat you,” I tease, tickling her.

She giggles as I throw her over my shoulder, carrying her back to her bathroom.

This right here is everything I’ve ever wanted.

Chapter 19

Holly

“HE’S A WONDERFUL DAD,” I SAY ONCE NICK IS OUT OF EARSHOT.

Alaina nods. “He is. Sadie’s birth mother left him with no choice.”

I frown, hating how she just abandoned her infant. “I can’t imagine walking away from her. Or him, for that matter.”

“Did he tell you about his ex-wife?”

I shake my head no. It shouldn’t surprise me that Nick was married before. After all, he’s fifty-three. Still, why didn’t he tell me?

“She was his college sweetheart.”

“What happened?”

“She left him after she realized he’d never be a billionaire. He has a degree in finance, but his dream has always been to open a bar. She was tired of being married to a bartender.”

I gasp. How could anyone think of Nick like that?

“He was devastated. But it explained why she never wanted to discuss having kids. After she left, Nick closed off his heart to love.”

“I see.” My voice betrays how much the thought of Nick not being able to love upsets me.

She places her hand on top of mine. “That is until you.”

My head jerks up.

“Holly, my son is a good man. He deserves a happy life. If you can’t give him that, please walk away now. Because if you decide to walk away after he’s given you his whole heart, I don’t think he or Sadie would survive it.”

I frown. “I don’t want to leave.”

“But there’s something that has the power to come between you two, isn’t there?”

I gape at her. How does she know?

“A mother’s intuition is never wrong.”

“What should I do?”

“Take care of whatever’s keeping you from opening up completely to my son. I’m not saying I don’t want you to be with him. In fact, it’s the opposite. You make him happy in a way he hasn’t been in his entire adult life. That’s why I’m asking you to be sure you can give him and Sadie everything.”

I stare at this woman for a long time, realizing the sincerity of her words. I also realize it's not fair of me to drag Nick and Sadie into my mess with Randy. Until that's settled, I need to leave.

"I think I should go," I admit.

She smiles, nodding sadly. "Wait until after Christmas. They deserve happiness tomorrow morning."

I close my eyes, swallowing back the pain of what I have to do.

IT'S ALL I CAN DO TO KEEP IT TOGETHER WHILE WATCHING SADIE OPEN HER presents from Alaina. She's such a happy child. As much as I'm falling for Nick, I'm also falling for his little girl. I want to be a family, but part of being involved with a man who has a child means sacrificing your happiness for your child's safety. I can't bring danger to Sadie. I'd never forgive myself if Randy hurt her trying to get to me.

Nick pulls me onto his lap, kissing my temple. "You're awfully quiet."

"I'm just enjoying tonight." My voice wobbles, and I'm afraid I'm going to start crying.

He frowns. "Did my mom say something to upset you?"

I shake my head no. "I'm just a little overwhelmed. That's all." I bite my lip, turning my attention back to Sadie, not wanting to lie to Nick.

His stare burns into the side of my face, but I remain expressionless. I can't give away what I'm planning. Otherwise, he'll try to stop me.

It's time I leave this fairytale behind and go back to the real world. Too bad wishes don't always come true.

Chapter 20

Nick

SADIE'S SPRAWLED OUT ON THE FLOOR UNDER THE CHRISTMAS TREE, PLAYING with her new dolls, while Holly watches from the chair, drinking her coffee in silence. Something's off with Holly. It has been since yesterday when I left her and my mom alone in the kitchen while Sadie had her bath. I cornered mom when I walked her to her car last night, but she swears she didn't say anything to upset Holly. Mom has never lied to me before, but I can't shake this feeling that she wasn't being completely honest with me.

"Who wants reindeer pancakes?" I ask, deciding I can't stay in here and watch Holly retreat further in her mind.

"I do! I do!" Sadie hollers from the floor.

"Holly?"

She turns to me as if she's just now realized I'm in the room. "Huh?"

"Are you hungry?"

She shakes her head no.

I sigh, walking to the kitchen. I'm losing Holly. And the worst part is I have no idea why.

"WHICH ONE DO YOU LIKE?" I ASK SADIE AS WE WALK UP AND DOWN THE aisle at the pet shelter.

Holly stayed behind, saying she had a headache, but I could tell she wasn't telling the truth. Maybe she'll open up about what's bothering her when Sadie and I get back with our new dog.

"These are my dogs," Sadie announces, stopping in front of a pin that has two black and silver German Shepherd puppies that look nearly identical, except one has an entirely black face and muzzle.

"We're only getting one."

"But they're brothers. They can't be separated," she argues.

I look at both dogs who are giving me the most pitiful looks and feel myself cave. I sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. "We don't need two dogs."

"But they can keep each other company when I'm at Nana's and you're at

work.”

I frown. I can't believe I'm considering adopting two puppies that will grow up to be such large dogs.

“They can be our guard dogs.” Sadie gives me a pleading look.

It would be nice to have them there with Holly and Sadie while I'm at work.

She turns to the dogs. “Okay, Salt and Pepper, get ready to go to your new home.”

I sigh. “We can adopt both, but we're not naming them Salt and Pepper.” I have to draw the line somewhere.

An hour later, Sadie and I pull into the driveway with Salt and Pepper asleep in the backseat. I shake my head. If Sadie can get her way this easily now, her teenage years are going to be hell. Hopefully, I'll have Holly by my side to help.

Speaking of Holly, I'm surprised when we walk inside the house and don't find her in the living room. I thought she'd be excited to meet the new puppies.

“I'm going to see if Holly's taking a nap,” I tell Sadie. “You can show the puppies your bedroom.”

“Come on Salt and Pepper. I'll show you where you're sleeping tonight.”

“The dogs are not sleeping with you.”

Sadie rolls her eyes.

“I mean it. I spent \$200 on dog beds and expect the puppies to sleep in them.”

She picks up the edge of both beds and drags them to her room.

Yep. I lost that battle, too.

To my dismay, Holly isn't in my bedroom napping. In fact, there's no trace of her. Worried, I go to the guest room and again come up short. My stomach sours. I don't like where this is headed.

I dial the number to the cell phone I gave Holly this morning for Christmas, but it goes straight to voicemail. Something's not right. I run through the house, looking for any sign of her. I stop in the kitchen when I see a note on the table.

Dear Nick,

Thank you for a wonderful Christmas. I loved spending time with you and Sadie. This was the best holiday I've had in a really long time. I think it's time for me to let you get back to your life and start mine.

*All my love,
Holly*

I crumble the note in my hand, anger bubbling inside me. She left. She fucking left. How do I explain this to Sadie? I never should've let Holly get close to her.

"Daddy, Holly, come see Salt and Pepper," Sadie calls.

I sigh, trying to figure out how to tell Sadie Holly's gone.

I step inside Sadie's room and see she's wrapped a pink scarf around Salt's neck and a purple one around Pepper's.

She holds her arms out. "Ta da."

I chuckle. "They look wonderful."

She frowns. "Where's Holly?"

I swallow hard. "Holly needed to go away for a bit."

"But why?" Sadie's lower lip juts out the way it does when she's trying not to cry. "What did I do?"

I pick up Sadie, sitting on her bed, hugging her close. The dogs jump up next to us, resting their heads on my thighs, whimpering.

"You didn't do anything. It was time for Holly to go home, and she hates goodbyes. They make her really sad. She left a note saying she loves you very much."

Sadie sniffles. "Why am I the only little girl who can't have a mommy?"

I close my eyes, trying not to cry at Sadie's devastation. I hold her until she cries herself to sleep. One thing is certain. I'll never let another woman walk out on Sadie ever again.

Chapter 21

Holly

I TRY NOT TO THINK OF HOW SAD NICK SOUNDED ON HIS FIRST MESSAGE AND how angry he was on the last. As much as I want to call him and try to explain that I had to leave because I wouldn't be able to live with myself if Randy found me at his house and hurt him or Sadie, I can't tell him that. He'd never let me do what needs to be done. I care about Nick and Sadie too much to put them in harm's way.

When I left Nick's, I took one of his sweatshirts. It smells like him, making me never want to take it off. My first stop was a chain store to get some clothes and a few necessities. The entire time I was at the store, I felt like someone was watching me, so I chose a hotel close to Nick's bar. Just knowing he'll be close for a few hours a day makes me feel safer.

Not wanting to venture back out into the cold, I order room service. While I wait, I lie on the bed, remembering Nick's touch. He was the closest I've ever been to love. He probably hates me now. Not that I blame him. I took the coward's way out when I left. But I knew if I told him I was afraid Randy would find me and possibly hurt Sadie, Nick would convince me to stay.

A knock at the door alerts me that my room service has arrived. It doesn't feel like half an hour has passed. Maybe I fell asleep for a bit while I was waiting. In a hurry to eat away my sadness, I swing open the door without bothering to check the peephole.

Big mistake.

I scream as Randy pushes me backward, knocking me to the floor as the door closes behind him. He rears back, punching me in the face, splitting my stitches. "You thought you could leave? Don't you get it? You belong to me."

Fear slices through me, swallowing my words. All I can do is hold my arms up, trying to block the punches. When he wraps his hands around my throat, I try to close my eyes and think of Nick's smiling face. If Randy kills me, I don't want him to be the last thing I see. I want it to be Nick's face.

Just as I'm about to lose consciousness and slip into the abyss, Randy's pulled off me by two men.

A woman rushes inside, kneeling next to me. "Oh, my god! Are you

okay?”

I shake my head no. “Nick,” I whimper, closing my eyes. The throbbing in my skull makes focusing on anything besides the inside of my eyelids impossible.

“She needs to go to the hospital,” a voice says.

I’m too tired to argue. Instead, I close my eyes and dream of a different life. One where Nick and Sadie are my family.

I WAKE TO THE BUSTLE OF THE EMERGENCY ROOM. I’M ALONE BEHIND A curtain so I can’t ask what happened. The last thing I remember is leaving Nick’s and checking into a hotel. I close my eyes, taking inventory of what hurts. My head and body ache as if I’ve been hit by a truck. How did I get here?

The sound of the curtain being pulled open draws me back into the present. I open my eyes to see a handsome doctor closing the curtain behind him.

“You’re awake. Good. The police want a statement in a few days once you’ve healed enough. As soon as we get some information and someone comes to get you, I can sign your release papers.”

“Nick,” I whisper.

“You want us to call Nick?” He points to the cell phone Nick gave me for Christmas that’s on the table next to me.

I nod.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“Holly,” I whisper. My throat feels like it’s on fire and for the first time, it’s my body keeping me from speaking and not my mind.

“I’ll have one of the nurses call him for you. It’ll be hard for you to speak for a few days since you were strangled. There’s significant swelling and bruising around your trachea.” He shines a light in my face and looks me over. “I’ll be back in a bit to stitch up that eye again.”

I nod, biting my lower lip as tears spill down my cheeks. I’m lucky to be alive. Randy almost finished the job from that first night.

I go in and out of consciousness while I wait for the doctor to come back. I have no idea how long has passed when I hear the curtain open again. This

time, when I open my eyes, I gasp.

“Nick,” I whisper.

He drops to his knees next to the bed, taking my hand in his, kissing next to my IV. “I was so scared when they called me. Why did you leave? I could’ve protected you. Don’t you trust me.”

I close my eyes, fighting to keep from crying.

“You could have—“ He turns his head away, working his jaw.

“So sorry,” I croak.

“Promise me you’ll never put yourself in danger like that ever again.”

“Sadie. . . safe.”

“You left to keep Sadie safe?”

I nod.

He swears under his breath.

“Mad?”

“Not at you. I’m mad at the fucker who did this to you. I could never be mad at you for sacrificing yourself for my daughter’s safety. But Holly, don’t ever leave like you did. Sadie thought you left *because* of her. She doesn’t understand that it was *for* her. You broke her heart.”

Oh, god. What have I done? Tears sting my eyes as I realize how badly I’ve hurt Sadie. I know her mother abandoned her, and I turned around and did the same thing. It doesn’t matter the reason. I hurt the little girl I was trying to protect. And where did it get me? Almost killed.

“My mom told me what she said to you. She blames herself for you leaving. I have to know. Is she the reason you left?”

I shake my head no. “Love,” I croak.

“I don’t understand.”

“Love. . . you.”

“Oh, babe, I love you too. That’s why you leaving like that damn near broke me. I’m sorry I left you that hateful message, telling you to never come back. If you’d have just told me—“

I place my finger on his lips, stopping him from continuing to beat himself up over my mistake. “Home.”

He stands. “Let me get the doctor and then, once he’s finished with you, we’ll get your stuff from the hotel, and I’ll take you home.”

“Randy?”

“The arresting officer requested an impossibly high bond. He won’t be getting out before his trial. We can put him behind us. You’re safe now.”

“Safe with you. . . always.”

Chapter 22

Nick

GETTING THE CALL FROM THE HOSPITAL THAT RANDY HAD BEATEN UP HOLLY again was one of the scariest moments of my life. I understand she thinks she was doing the right thing by leaving, so Randy wouldn't find her here and put Sadie in danger, but she was safe with me. Now, as I watch her sleep, I want to do everything in my power to keep her close.

She wakes up, smiling. "Why are you staring at me like that?"

"Because I'm afraid if I blink you'll be gone."

She rolls so her leg is over mine and rests her chin on my chest. "I promise I'll never leave like that again." She kisses my bare chest. "Ever."

I tug her so she's completely on top of me. "Maybe you should beg for my forgiveness." I roll my hips, allowing her to feel my hardness. "You could start apologizing by kissing my cock."

"Daddy," Sadie yells. "Salt peed on the floor."

"Fuck," I swear under my breath as Sadie flings open the door.

Her eyes land on Holly who tries to scurry off me. "You came back!"

Holly sits up in time for Sadie to tackle her.

"Be careful," I scold.

Sadie frowns at me. "Can you go clean up Salt's mess, Daddy?"

Holly nods. "I'd like to talk to Sadie privately, if I can."

I sigh, getting out of bed to go take care of the dogs I don't need while the girls I can't live without make up.

As I leave the room, I hear Holly apologize to Sadie. I want to stick around and hear her explanation but give them the privacy they deserve. I trust Holly.

I step inside Sadie's room, immediately regretting not turning on the light first as my foot slides across a puddle of piss. "Shit!"

I flip on the light to find Salt and Pepper huddling in the corner. "Outside you two," I hiss, pointing toward the door.

They slink past me with their tails tucked between their legs. I let them outside and go back to clean up Sadie's floor. Tomorrow we're going to have a long talk about what it means to be a responsible dog owner.

Once the floor is clean and the dogs are back inside, the three of us make

our way to my bedroom. Inside I find Sadie hugged up to Holly. Both of them are sleeping soundly. Salt and Pepper jump up onto the bed to enjoy the party.

“Get down,” I hiss.

Like my daughter, they both ignore me, settling in to sleep on either side of my girls. My girls. Everything I could ever wish for is right here on that bed.

I’m one lucky man.

Chapter 23

New Year's Eve

Holly

NICK'S BAR IS PACKED WITH PEOPLE READY TO RING IN THE NEXT YEAR. I SIT at the end of the bar, sipping my drink, watching as my man serves his customers with a smile. He's been home with me a lot while I've been healing, so it's nice for him to be back in his element.

I bite my lip, enjoying the way his shirt and vest combo hug his muscles. The tattoo on his neck peeking out from his collar is visible since his sandy blond hair is pulled back into a man bun. Usually, I think men with their hair like that look silly, but on Nick, it's sexy. Even in my fitted jeans and black sweater that dips so low it gives the illusion of cleavage, I feel plain compared to him. He's so damn beautiful.

Nick catches me staring and winks.

I rub my cheeks, feeling them heat. This man, twenty-three years my senior, is old enough to be my dad, but he's the sexiest person I've ever laid eyes on. I'll never tire of looking at him.

He tosses his rag onto the counter behind the bar, telling his bartender something before stalking toward me. He takes my drink and puts it on the back counter before coming around from behind the bar and gathering me into his arms.

"It's almost midnight, and you owe me a dance," he whispers. His breath warms my ear, sending tingles down my spine. He grins when he sees my nipples pebble beneath my thin sweater.

I follow him onto the dance floor as he pushes his way through the crowd. He pulls my body flush against his and begins swaying in time to the music. I slip my hands into his back pockets, squeezing his firm ass.

He growls in my ear.

I giggle as people begin counting down to the new year.

We count down with our eyes locked onto each other. When we get to one, the entire bar erupts in a chorus of cheers. Nick leans down, flicking his

tongue along my lower lip before drawing it into his mouth, kissing me deeply.

Right when I'm about to melt into a puddle, he pulls away. "Happy New Year, Holly."

"Happy New Year, Nick."

"I plan on spending the rest of my years with you just like this."

My eyes widen. I know he's it for me, but we haven't known each other for long.

"I realize we're moving fast, but I'm a grown man. I know what I want. And what I want is you."

"I want you too."

"Good. Because this time next year, you'll be wearing my ring."

I grin. "Is this a pre-proposal?"

He chuckles. "It's a promise. I love you, Holly."

"And I love you."

Forever.

Epilogue

One Year Later: Christmas Eve

Nick

MY HEART HAMMERS IN MY CHEST, AND THE VELVET BOX BURNS A HOLE IN my pocket while I watch Holly and Sadie make Christmas cookies for Santa. Salt and Pepper lie on the floor under the table, pretending to sleep as they secretly wait for something yummy to drop on the floor. Everything I could ever want in life is right here in this room. Now I just have to make Holly mine. Officially.

I finally feel like Holly's ready for marriage. Holly was afraid to leave the house without me for the first few months. She'd been through so much, and I worried she'd developed a trauma bond with me, so I urged her to see a counselor. After a year of therapy for the two of us, both solo and as a couple, our relationship has grown beyond the whirlwind attraction we felt initially into the forever kind of love and respect.

Sadie keeps throwing me wide-eyed looks of encouragement because she's practiced her part in the proposal several times. Still, I'm terrified. What if Holly says no?

Not wanting to wait for me any longer, Sadie hops off her stool and wraps her arms around Holly.

Holly stops icing the cookie in front of her and turns so she's facing Sadie and can hug her properly.

Sadie crawls onto Holly's lap and looks up at her. "I want to call you Mom."

Holly gasps, holding her hand to her mouth as tears fill her eyes. "You do?" She looks at me as if asking permission to let Sadie call her that.

I step forward, dropping to one knee as I pull the engagement ring from my pocket. I pop open the box, holding it up. "And I want to call you my wife."

She throws her arms around me, squishing Sadie between us. "I want us to be a family. That's all I've wished for since last Christmas."

Sadie pushes us apart. “Put on your ring.”

Holly laughs through her tears as I slide the diamond onto her finger.

“I love you. I know I’m supposed to make some flowery speech, but all my words have left me. Just say you’ll be mine and Sadie’s forever.”

Holly laughs as tears stream down her face. “I want us to be a family forever and longer.”

I grin, kissing her, then kissing Sadie on the cheek. “Nothing could make me happier than I am right now.”

Holly bites her lower lip. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Holly reaches behind her and snags a gift bag off the counter, handing it to Sadie. She doesn’t say anything as Sadie rips into her bag, holding up a t-shirt. She reads the shirt, then squeals in delight.

“What does it say?” I ask, assuming it’s some shirt of a movie or toy she likes.

She flips it around, showing it to me.

Big Sister.

My eyes jerk to Holly’s. “Are you serious? You’re pregnant.”

She nods.

I laugh. It’s my turn to cry tears of joy. “I was wrong before. Now I have everything I’ve ever wanted. I love you.”

Holly hugs me. “You finding me was the best thing that’s ever happened. You saved me in more ways than one.”

“You saved me too. And I promise to cherish you every day until I take my last breath.”

And I will.

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Acknowledgments

So many people support me and make sacrifices so I can do the thing I love most in the world. For that I will forever be grateful.

To my family, friends, teams, and readers, from the bottom of my heart:
THANK YOU!

XOXO

~Mica Rae

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About the Author

Mica Rae is a contemporary romance author. She writes stories with flawed characters who experience the best and worst life offers. Her books are about heartbreak, hope, and healing. No matter what she puts her characters through, a happily ever after is guaranteed.

To stay up-to-date on all things Mica Rae Romance, sign up for her newsletter [here](#). When you join her mailing list, you'll get a free novella.

