



Merry Me
BARTENDER

NYLA LILY

Nyla Lily

Merry Me Bartender

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Joyce

“Christmas decorations?” I repeat slowly, like I’ve misheard. Wiping down the bar, I scrub at a spot of dried sauce. “The boss really said that?”

Next to me, Carol works on restocking the bar with clean glasses. She nods much to my surprise.

We’ve worked with Kade Wheeler the longest, and we know well enough that our boss is not the type of guy to celebrate holidays. Especially not Christmas. Heck, I don’t think he even celebrates his own birthday.

He did take the birthday shot I made him earlier this year though, if that counts.

“He told me we’re going to get a tree and decorate it so the customers have something nice to look at,” she explains as glasses clink together. “He’s offered overtime to stay over and help get the place looking better fit for the season.”

Looking away from the bar, I search for the boss man himself. I find him messing around with the old jukebox, tinkering with it.

That explains all the silence in here. With a lack of bodies inside to make any sort of ruckus, it’s slightly unsettling.

However, a possible solution to all this silence makes my heart pick up.

If he's attempting to add some Christmas music...

My chest swells with excitement. I *love* Christmas. Unlike some people in this town, I'm the type to start listening to music in October.

I haven't mentioned that to Kade have I? Maybe it's my appreciation for all the snow that's given it away or the festive scrunchies I normally tie my hair back with.

Oh, if he starts playing tunes, he's going to start getting complaints from the customers. My singing voice is easily compared to nails on a chalkboard, but I can't help myself.

"This is going to be bad," I murmur as I watch our boss scratch at his head. "Real bad, Carol."

"Why are you smiling then?" she asks, scoffing at me with a shake of her head. She doesn't look so pleased with this upcoming change.

Giving her a shrug, I throw the towel over my shoulder and take a look around, trying to imagine how this place is going to look after a day or two. It'll be so different, both the customers and the bartenders are going to get whiplash.

The Rusty Tavern got its name from its rustic look. I can't imagine lights and reefs swirling around the wooden posts that keep the building standing. Are the lights going to twinkle and flash? Will Kade choose solid white lights or multi-colored ones?

Will he hang mistletoe at every entrance? Oh, I hope so.

Not only to watch two strangers come together to share a tradition, but because Kade Wheeler is not the kind of boss who sits in an office. He's a man who roams and makes sure to keep all the rowdy customers calm. He's a man who walks through many doors.

Oh, I'll accidentally bump into him through every entrance in this place without a doubt.

He'd *have* to kiss me, right? It's not like I'd ever have the courage to ask him to do it any other time. Kissing Kade is much easier in my head or my dreams. When it comes to reality, that's a challenge too difficult to face.

"Instead of staring at that jukebox, why don't you go make some requests? I already know he's not going to want to crack that thing open again after this." Carol puts out the offer like she thinks I'm worried about his music tastes. If only she knew what kind of thoughts were running through my head.

I know well enough that if I even try to approach that man and ask him to put on my favorite hits, I'm just going to sputter on my words and leave him thinking I'm incompetent. No, instead, I'm just going to keep on working.

Dragging my eyes away, I go over and collect some abandoned glasses on the other side of the bar. "Overtime sounds nice. Are you thinking about taking the extra hours?"

Money is always nice, especially with all the gift buying. Then again, Carol doesn't look like she's in any need of some

extra cash. Me on the other hand, I wouldn't mind.

Is Kade going to help decorate? Will he stay through the late hours hanging up ornaments and sweeping up fallen pine needles? Oh, I don't think he knows what he's getting himself into at all.

She shakes her head at the opportunity. Her loss, seriously.

"I think I'll take the hours, even if it's only a couple." Feeling a prickling sensation on the back of my neck, I know it's not one of the few customers inside looking my way. This kind of sensation only happens when I've garnered the attention of the boss man himself.

Sure enough, as soon as I try to sneak a look behind me, hard steel-colored eyes are pointed in my direction. Shoot, he's not going to yell at us for holding a conversation, is he? We're staying busy for the most part.

I'm almost able to see my reflection from how much I've wiped it down. Still, that doesn't stop my hand from moving along the surface.

Breathing in slowly, I turn away and scrub at an invisible spot. I'm no slacker, and Kade knows that. I'm one of the last people he'd yell at for not working.

So, why in the world is he still looking our way? Is he searching for a problem?

With the cold season upon us, the bar is basically empty. Outside of the four regulars cradling their glasses, this place is

a ghost town. The best thing we can do to keep busy is do some extra cleaning.

Is *that* why he wants us to decorate? Maybe it'll pull over new customers and we'll get more business. That's a smart boss move.

By the time I have the courage to look back over at Kade, I'm relieved to see his attention has moved back to the jukebox. He's cursing under his breath and looking like he's ready to tear up the manual. The older man really isn't the best when it comes to technology.

Should I offer to help? It'll be like setting up the POS system all over again.

Clean, Joyce. If he wanted your help, he'd ask.

Tossing my towel down, my face sours as I move to sweep. So much salt residue stains the wooden floor and I can't wait to give it all one good mop. No matter how many customers stroll inside, I'm forced to take in the trail of white.

As I sweep, I find myself moving closer and closer to Kade. Each brush of the broom is one step closer. Eventually, I can breathe in his faded cologne and hear his frustrated grumbles more clearly.

"Putting in some holiday tunes?" Attempting to act casual, I keep my eyes to myself while making sure to sweep around him to look busy. "This'll be great."

Looking my way, his manual droops in his hands. He doesn't look as excited as I feel. Those brows of his are all

bunched, his jaw set. If Santa Claus came in to spread some cheer, I have no doubt this man would deck his halls right out of the bar.

When the thought makes me smile, he lifts a brow. Shoot. The last thing I need is for him to think I'm making fun of his struggles.

“If I can get it to work.” His agitation rumbles out as he straightens up. Hunched over for so long, his back cracks and my gaze lifts with his body.

Sometimes, I forget that Kade is a bear. Huge in all ways possible, he towers over everyone he meets and every time he looks down at me, well, I feel like a tiny animal in comparison.

Sometimes, the way his eyes rest down at me, it feels like he could eat me right up too.

“Do you need help?” I ask, the words coming out before I can stop them. Gripping the broom handle in hand, I wait for any form of rejection. Or, even better, an invitation to do more work.

Unless he yells at me, I'm not going to be able to stop drifting toward this man. Kade has never yelled at me, not once. Not in the two years I've been around.

Before I can react, he's thrusting the manual in my direction. Clearly frustrated with the device, he scowls down at it.

Resting the broom against the wall, I accept his book and take a look at the thickness. From the way the pages are curled and yellowed, I imagine this instruction manual is as old as the man in front of me.

Brushing my finger along each page, I try to understand the words I'm reading. So far, I feel like I'm reading a foreign language here. No wonder he's all frustrated.

"Might be time to upgrade and get a stereo system. Play music off our phones and whatnot." Scratching the stubble on his cheek, I can't stop my smile this time around.

"I like this jukebox. Gives the bar more charm. Even if we can't get it to work again, maybe we can keep it around for decoration." Departing if he'd even care, my mouth twists up.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand again and I don't have to look this time to confirm he's staring. No, this bear man is hovering behind me, pointing at a certain part in the book with his thick finger. For a moment, I lose myself in counting the hairs on his knuckle before snapping out of it.

"Okay, yeah, none of this makes sense. Maybe it is time to upgrade and take advantage of some deals," I agree with a nod. Giving up rather quickly, he chuckles and fills my stomach with butterflies. "But, how about we close it back up and pretend you didn't break it?"

I shouldn't be trying to joke with this man, yet, I'm on a streak here. If he chuckles again, I might as well be a champion when it comes to making Kade laugh.

After working on the jukebox for so long, he looks all but relieved to call it quits. “Haven’t opened that thing in half a decade. Never going to open it up again after this.”

While he’s cleaning up any extra screws he finds laying about, I’m grabbing the broom again and thinking more out than in.

“You should let me make a playlist,” I suggest before adding quickly, “if we’re going to play music off our phones. It’ll be easier if there is a set handful of songs, you know?”

Lifting one of those thick brows, he considers my question for all of two seconds before nodding his head in agreement. Less work for him and he won’t have to struggle with technology.

I have to fight to keep my feet on the ground. Don’t need to look childish by jumping up in the air. We’re both winners with this decision to upgrade.

“You won’t regret this,” I tell him with a grin, already thinking of what songs I’ll want to listen to for the next couple of weeks.

Okay, he’s definitely going to regret this. Without a doubt.

Kade

A few hundred dollars later and a new sound system installed with the help of my bartenders, I watch Joyce all but dance around as she pours drinks.

I don't think I've seen the younger woman so energetic in my life. That's coming from the person who spends too much time watching her instead of running his business.

Tonight is going to be rough, I can already feel it.

Not because the bar will be packed for a few hours thanks to the rush the weekend brings along, but because I only got one volunteer to help decorate this place for the season.

Personally, I don't care too much about the holiday. Christmas is just another day of the year when you don't have anyone special to spend it with.

This year is different. All it took was one overheard conversation for the idea to pop into my head.

If music makes Joyce vibrate with excitement, how will she feel once the Rusty Tavern turns into a light show?

Electricity bill be damned, I will be the reason behind that woman's smile.

Even now, she's mouthing words to the current song, trying her hardest to keep her voice from coming out. I can tell she wants to sing. Even if that woman squawks, I'd kill to sit through a song or two so I can listen to her perform.

For two years now, I've been deep for this woman. Just digging a hole for my grave to die alone in with this one-sided crush of mine. One inch deeper each time I share the same room with her. At this point, I might as well be on the other side of the world.

Even if I'm a terrible boss for pining after one of my bartenders, I can't help what I want. As someone who doesn't normally give a damn what people think, the only thing stopping me from spilling my guts, and possibly anything else inside, is the thought that people in this small town will talk badly about *her*.

A young thing going after some old bar owner? Without a second thought, she'd be in the spotlight for a few weeks. Can't go having that. Not when she's already so shy on a normal day.

For now, I'll take what wins I can get. Sure, I can't go kissing her under some mistletoe, but I can sure make her shifts more enjoyable by listening to the same songs sung by different people for hours on end.

At least I have a new reason to call myself crazy. There are only so many times I can listen to *All I Want for Christmas is You* without going nuts. It's her favorite song too, by far.

With the bar somewhat empty, I stroll by and look around. Like I'm actually doing my job and making sure everything is in order, I'm not surprised that Joyce is running this place on her own.

Imagine that. This place *could* run by Joyce's hand. She controls the front and I keep up with the back. We'd be great partners.

"Boss?"

There I go again, letting fantasies take over my mind and distract me. Without even realizing it, I've drifted too close to the woman. Now she's looking at me with those large doe eyes.

"Looks good." I tap my finger against the bar and clear my throat. "Doing a fine job, Joyce."

Fuck, I'm awkward. Can't even compliment her without an itch forming in the back of my throat. I'm fighting a war not to cough.

We're both a little bad at conversation. This woman is the only one who makes my weakness feel amplified.

She looks at my finger as if she expects to find me pointing at a missed spot. Noticing nothing but my pudgy finger, her smile quickly returns.

"Thank you." After the word leaves her lips, she moves on, drifting down the bar to double check everything is stocked for rush hour.

Somewhere on break, Georgia is nearby. Probably in the kitchen stealing some fries. Thankfully, she's not around to see me get all flustered.

Watching her reach up to grab two bottles of liquor off the shelf, I hold my breath until my lungs burn. Aching to help her, I stand there doing nothing but watching.

Maybe I'm not just a terrible man, but a boss too. Can't even offer her help without my palms going sweaty.

Tonight is going to be hell. Even if I secretly hoped this would be the outcome, I know I'm punishing myself.

"About tonight," I start back up, moving a little closer to her from the other side of the bar. "Thanks for offering the help. The amount of stuff I bought is too much for one man to do by himself."

Maybe if she shows a little disinterest, my concerns for tonight can shrivel up and I can remind myself that *nothing* will happen.

Twisting around quickly, Joyce's eyes *sparkle*. Her cheeks grow flushed, and her smile immediately widens. "Please, don't thank me. I can't wait until the bar closes."

Fuck. So much for that.

We're both excited for two different reasons. Hopefully, by the time tonight rolls around, I won't leave her disappointed. After all, everything I'm doing is for her.

* * *

“You really went all out,” Joyce says at my side as she looks down at the multiple shopping bags. Her fingers are curling at her sides, her breathing hitched.

This woman and Christmas are a bad pair. She looks like she’s about to foam at the mouth if I don’t hurry up and give her permission to dig through my purchases.

“Honestly, I just grabbed different things and threw them in the cart.” Confessing the truth, I rub the back of my neck. “Got an artificial tree too, should be pretty tall.”

“As tall as you?” she asks, looking my way. Suddenly, her cheeks turn pink, and her mouth snaps shut like she’s said something terrible.

“I hope not. They’ll be a pain to cover.” Cracking a smile, I hope she doesn’t think she’s offended me. I know my size alone is enough to draw attention.

Joyce twists back around, kneeling to dig in the bags without any cue to start. I hope she doesn’t feel uncomfortable now. That’s the last thing I want.

“We should get started. I’d hate to keep you out all night.”

Fuck me, she definitely feels uncomfortable now. The best I can do is nod and crack open the box that contains the tree. While I’m pulling out instructions and reading them over, I can’t help but wonder what in the hell I’m going to do with all of this stuff once Christmas is over.

Probably stuff it above the bar. Plenty of room up there.

After about ten minutes of silence from Joyce, I eventually catch her humming to herself. She's working on opening ornaments and I'm getting tangled up in tinsel.

The mess this stuff is already making is making me want to trash it. We're going to have to sweep up the whole bar again.

Joyce gets one look at me and sputters out a laugh. "If you want to stay like that, I can hook a few bulbs on you and we'll have a second tree."

Okay, maybe the mess is worth it.

Her laugh is nothing but rich as she sets her package down and moves toward me. The warning bells don't start ringing in my head until she's working on getting me untangled.

"You're not too good at this, Kade. Not good at all." Keeping her eyes lowered, she works on undoing the knot around my arm without damaging the strand. "It's a shame no one else wanted to stay and help."

A real shame. If it means I get to spend a night alone with this woman, I'll pay them all to stay away. Call me greedy, but I'm loving all this attention she's sending my way.

Her knuckles graze the hair on my arms and they might as well be standing on points. All too soon, she takes control of the tinsel and bundles it to her chest. Looking up at me, she stirs.

She's going to have silver strands sticking to her clothes if she's not too careful. I tell her that too, earning myself a laugh.

“So will you.” Reaching forward, she plucks one off from my stomach. I feel the heat of her fingertips straight through my shirt. “This stuff really does get everywhere.”

She lingers there for a moment, so close that I’m practically touching her. If only she’d let me.

I’m the one to turn this time, not wanting to test my strength. Hunching over, I look through what other random items I’ve purchased. There are plenty of lights to hang up, both on trees and the banisters holding this place up.

Doing the best I can, I keep my attention forward and make sure my hands stay busy at all times.

Joyce

Kade bought two bundles of mistletoe. He's hanging up one by the entrance of the bar. That doorway will be the one spot where most people will get a kick out of the tradition that comes with it.

In my hands, I try to decide where I want to hang the second bundle. Sure, I can put it over the bar and deal with drunk people cracking jokes about it all night, or I can find a better place. There's one I have in mind already.

Taking one of the barstools, I carry it all the way to Kade's office. If there is any place to have any accidental encounters, this will be the spot. While he's turned his back, I can superglue the artificial plant on the doorframe so we never have to take it down.

Unfortunately, the stickiest thing Kade bought is tape. For now, it'll do.

Getting the stool in place, I pluck off a piece of tape and climb up to the top. Who needs ladders anyway? When it gives a little rock, I gasp softly and clutch the frame of the door.

Okay, so standing on the stool is not that great of an idea. That *could've* gone a lot worse.

Laughing at myself for a moment, I fix the piece of tape on my finger and attach the mistletoe right in the middle. Perfect.

Now, once I need something from Kade, he'll have more than enough of an excuse to kiss me.

“You sure that’s the best place to put that?”

Not hearing the thump of his boots, I jump at the suddenness of his voice as I spin around. Before I can even think to say something out loud, the barstool tips, and I’m two seconds away from plucking splinters out of my teeth.

Thankfully, Kade has a great reflex, as he catches me mid-air. He looks more startled than I do, and when he realizes he’s touching me, the man looks outright horrified. Immediately, he sets me down and curls his fingers at his sides.

Ouch. Assuming he’s going to scold me for not getting a ladder like I should’ve, he’s looking at my work with furrowed brows.

In my plan, I expected him not to even notice it was there until I had the courage to ask him to kiss me.

This is not going to plan at all. He looks so bothered by it.

“Um, I thought...” Biting the inside of my cheek, I look away when his eyes lower. “I didn’t want the customers to take advantage of any of the bartenders if I hung it near the bar. You know Carol will get charged for punching a drunk person.”

Attempting to crack a joke, my words fall a bit flat. Stirring uncomfortably, I watch the taller man scratch at his cheek like he's thinking deeply.

“What about the risk of having it here?” he looks back at the mistletoe, his jaw flexing before he attempts to smile. “I suppose no one will want to kiss the owner either.”

Gosh, we're both terrible at trying to be funny.

“I will.” The words slip out before I have the time to register them and it's far too late to stuff them back into my mouth. I might as well have bought a one-way ticket to Awkward Town. There's no going back now. Especially since he's now staring down at me, looking more surprised than anything.

As if he really believes no one would take claim to such a wonderful deal. He doesn't know that I've thought about doing more than kissing him for as long as I can remember working with the guy.

“I mean, it's a shame to break a Christmas tradition.” Choking on my words, my cheeks feel so hot it's not even funny. Should I just throw caution to the wind and let all my feelings spill while I'm at it?

“What about now?”

My next breath is stuck in my throat at his question and for a moment, I think I misheard the words. When I realize Kade is simply standing there, waiting for a response, I'm left realizing that this is definitely real.

Nodding my head in a rush, I'm left speechless as this man cracks a smile. I'll never get used to him being amused.

He reaches forward, hesitant at first. His chest goes still like he's stopped breathing too. Are his lungs burning like mine?

When his thumb swipes against my cheek, I'm right back to thinking this is all a dream. One I never, *ever* want to wake up from.

"Traditions," he mutters, shaking his head. Ducking his head, he tilts my chin up and kisses me right there without another word. From zero to one hundred, *I'm* the one getting kissed.

My eyes widen in surprise before sliding shut as I'm whisked away into the sweet warmth that is his mouth.

I'm pretty sure mistletoe kisses aren't supposed to last longer than a minute. However, once I feel his warmth against my mouth, I can't find the strength to pull away. He's cradling my chin so gently and meeting me halfway.

I don't think I'm the only one who wanted a kiss. From the way his free arm slithers around me and tugs me flush against his chest, I'm left with nothing but a racing heart.

What a Christmas miracle this all is.

Pulling away after what feels like an eternity, I rock back and accidentally stare. With my brain fried, I struggle to think of something to say.

Kade reaches up and plucks the mistletoe off the doorframe and cradles it in his hand.

“Don’t want to have to kiss the bartenders,” he mutters as he looks around for a better place for it to hang.

Oh. *Oh*. He said it himself. *Traditions*.

Now my heart is in my throat and I really can’t talk.

He hated the kiss. Must’ve only done it because I basically begged him to.

My cheeks burn with humiliation. The best I can do is nod my head and try to finish my work so I can go home and try not to cling to the memory of tonight.

* * *

I don’t mention the kiss to anyone, not even Carol. Even though my chest swells up every time my lips tingle and I accidentally remember.

I’m not very good at telling myself not to cling to feelings that aren’t matched.

Kade hasn’t looked at me once today. If anything, he’s been hiding away in his office or the storage room doing whatever he possibly can to avoid me at all costs.

“You think he’d come out and help,” Carol grumbles at my side like she can hear my thoughts. While she pours four shots, she huffs and puffs. “How many times does he need to count inventory?”

We've had a streak of nice weather lately, and the bar is running like usual. Numbers aren't looking too shabby, but two women can only handle so much.

Wincing, I swallow down an apology. Knowing well enough that it's my fault why he's hiding, I try to pick up my own speed. Maybe if I work at the speed of two people, it'll be alright.

Dropping a glass, my body stiffens up at the shattering sound, and I flinch.

Awesome job, Joyce. Seriously, good going.

With the crowd going silent, my cheeks burn in embarrassment and I hunch down to pick up a few of the shards. By the time I've got the third piece in my hand, I hear the heavy thud of his boots. Double awesome. Now Kade is going to see I broke one of his cups.

"What happened?" He's standing next to Carol and I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck shoot up. He's looking at me alright.

"We need your help," Carol tells him instead, refusing to put even more attention on my slip-up.

He grunts, and steps away long enough to grab a dustpan and handbroom. When he kneels down in front of me, he takes the pieces carefully before I can damage my hands too.

"Don't cut yourself," he orders, cleaning up my mess. "Wash up and let's take care of this."

Pursing my lips, I nod my head and do as he says. Everything feels so freaking awkward now and I don't know what to do with myself. I definitely can't look the man in the eye, that's for sure.

The crowds resume their conversations and my mistake is easily forgotten. With a held breath, I work alongside the other two and pour drinks.

Kade

I shouldn't have kissed her.

Ever since that shared moment, I can't even look this woman in the eye.

Tradition she says. Knowing damn well how much she loves Christmas, it's no surprise that she'd feel obligated to kiss me. If it weren't for the way she melted against my touch, I'd almost be fooled into thinking that she *wanted* to kiss me.

After these last few days, I'm confident that even some plant isn't enough for her to breathe the same air as me, let alone share a kiss.

“You didn't get hurt, did you?”

Joyce is sitting on one of the barstools looking absolutely wrecked. After closing up, and wincing when Carol volunteered to go home first, she's been resting against the bar since.

The longer I look at her, the more twisted up inside I feel. She's cradling her hand, staring down at her palm. Even though I don't see a cut, she's staring down like she sees a gash.

Her nose is scrunched, her brows furrowed. After a few seconds of leaving my question unanswered, she blows out one frustrated sigh. Normally bright and cheery, an angry Joyce is not one I'm accustomed to.

“You didn't have to actually kiss me, you know?” Her fingers curl and she thumps her hands against her thighs. Breathing in deep, her chest swells before her body deflates. “If I knew you'd purposely avoid me and make everything awkward...”

Fuck. I've upset her.

“I wasn't—” My mouth snaps shut when she sends me a look.

Okay, yes. I was definitely avoiding her these last few days. In my defense, I felt weak. After *finally* getting a taste of the one woman I've wanted for the last few years, I knew the moment we were alone, I was going to cave and kiss her again. Mistletoe or not, I'd ravish this poor woman.

We're all alone now, but the heat I felt before is nowhere in sight. Right now, I just want to apologize for hurting her feelings.

“Should I quit? I mean, I clearly overstepped the whole boss and employee line here. I don't think I can keep working shifts like this.” Stirring in her seat, she shrugs.

Quit? What? No. Out of the question.

“I wanted to,” I blurt out, “to kiss you, I mean. I just...”

Fuck, expressing feelings are hard. Running a hand down my face, I consider pouring myself a glass of something strong. Something to take away the heat forming on the back of my neck.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to kiss me because of some plastic plant.” Plucking at my shirt, I’m feeling warmer and warmer.

Joyce stares at me. For a moment, I can’t tell what she’s thinking. Her lips part as she squints. “You think I only kissed you because of the mistletoe?”

My ears have to be red now too, no doubt.

“It was my excuse, Kade. I...didn’t have the courage to ask you to kiss me any other way.” Covering her blush with her own hands, I soon realize that we’re both clearly bad at this. ”That’s why I thought you kissed me in the first place too.”

We’re both terrible at this. It’s laughable.

“There’s none of that plant near us,” I point out as I look over to the front door. The one that’s a good twenty feet away. “So, you’d let me kiss you again?”

I’ve only thought about doing it every night since we got all these decorations up.

Peeking at me through her fingers, she sputters a laugh. “Seriously? Right now?”

When she shakes her head, my heart sinks low for only a moment.

“Promise me you won’t hide in the storage room anymore. Your office too. I won’t let my lips near you if you keep running away.” Putting her foot down, she lifts her chin. “If you can, then I’m sure one more kiss can’t hurt us.”

Nodding my head, I step toward her. “Joyce, you’re going to beg me to stay away. Once I stick to your side, you won’t ever be able to get rid of me. I kept my distance because I thought you wouldn’t want me kissing you again. Now that I know you’re alright with it...”

A gasp leaves her lips when I pluck her up from the stool and sit her right on the bar. Need her more to my height.

Tucking my body between her thighs, I cement my promise with a kiss.

There’s nothing more pleasing than feeling her sigh against my mouth. She might struggle to say what she wants, but once she curls her fingers around my shirt, she gives one tug to pull me in her direction.

Even if we just closed up the bar, I know well enough that we’re not going to be leaving any time soon.

* * *

Even if I want to keep my feelings about Joyce a secret, everyone in the bar has to know by now.

Call me a lovestruck fool, but I’m a goner for this woman.

I’ve been lingering near her for so long that I’m falling behind on my own work now. From my office, I can’t go

pinching her hip like I am now.

Behind the bar, customers are clueless. If they knew, they'd probably be too busy wondering what in the world such a cute woman is doing messing around with a brute of a guy like me.

After admitting my worries about how others would look at her, she reassured me that she really did not care. The only thing she's worried about is having me at her side and not hidden behind some door.

Carol likes to tease us by blowing out scoffs whenever she spots me touching her friend. Always making small remarks like '*get a room*', I always want to tell her that I'd love to.

Fuck, of course I want to. The best place I can sneak her off to is the storage room and kissing her over a case of beer is not exactly the most romantic setting out here.

"You've got your face all pinched up again," Joyce points out, throwing a worried look over her shoulder. "What's on your mind?"

"You," I admit without thinking twice. That's the normal answer I've been giving lately because this woman is always on my mind. However, I can't exactly go admitting why I'm thinking about her. Not while there are customers waiting for their drinks.

Pulling away from her, I try to help out where I can. Instead of letting my thoughts drift off in the direction of how

badly I want this woman, I'll remember that I have a business to run here. Need to focus.

I'm almost thankful for when it starts snowing halfway through our shift. The customers slow down, not wanting to get out in the mess once the snow starts sticking. When we find a minute where the bar is empty, we step outside for a breath of fresh air.

After sending Carol and the kitchen staff home before it gets too bad out here, I'm left stuck at Joyce's side with a slight smile on my lips.

She stares out at the snow in admiration. Knowing well enough how much she enjoys this time of the year, I can only imagine the awe happening on her part.

"It's supposed to drop below freezing temps. It'll suck driving home." Mumbling her concerns, an idea pops into my head immediately.

"I could drive you home if you want." Body shifting, I blow out a puff of white air. "Or, you could stay at my place for the night. They'll have the roads cleared by the time the sun is up."

Fuck, there's heat collecting on my skin once again. I haven't invited her over yet, not since we cleared up the air.

Looking at me, her brows are lifted high. Right, the invitation might feel a little odd.

"I mean, I just didn't think you'd want to—"

“Staying at your place should be alright,” she interrupts, nodding as a smile forms on her lips. “Sounds great.”

Here’s to hoping my home is clean. If I knew I’d have the courage to invite her over, I would’ve cleaned the place spotless.

For now, I can only hope she’s able to accept me as I come. Honestly, I think my mind will be too occupied with trying to keep my hands to myself. That itself is a challenge on it’s own.

Joyce

Am I really doing this?

“You’ll have to let me borrow some clothes,” I mumble as his truck rumbles around us. Snow continues to fall and I’m more thankful for the inconvenience than annoyed.

I’ve been dying to get some alone time with the guy. I can only do so much with the man in his workplace. Especially when the other workers are sprinkled here and there, everywhere has a set of eyes with the risk of seeing something they shouldn’t.

“I’m sure I have something I can give you.” He looks my way once before putting his eyes back on the snow-covered road. “As long as you don’t mind our size difference.”

Oh, I don’t mind one bit. Actually, I’d love to swim around in one of his shirts. I’d do laps all day, breathing in his scent mixed with laundry detergent.

“How much longer?” A bit of my excitement slips out and I have to sit on my hands to stop myself from figeting.

“Not long,” he confirms, reaching out to double-check his heating settings. If he thinks my goosebumps are from the cold, he’s got no idea.

He's telling the truth, because we arrive at his home in no time. It's just a one story home that matches the surrounding ones. Definitely beats my apartment.

Once we abandon his vehicle and he lets me inside, I dust off the snow from my body and take in my surroundings. I can already say without a doubt, that Kade's home is looking quite bare. He hardly has anything on his walls or stands.

Honestly, it kinda looks like he just moved in.

Biting back a smile, I keep my opinion to myself as a strip away my coat and hang it up.

"Hungry?" he asks, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm sure I have something in the kitchen."

My stomach is currently too full with butterflies to have any room to put food in. Shaking my head, I abandon my boots with my coat and walk further into his home. Everything smells like him, so that's a nice touch.

"A shower sounds nice if that's okay. Definitely spilled plenty on me during my shift."

Not because I want to be clean in case something comes out of staying the night at his place, of course.

"I'll get you something to wear." Shuffling deeper into his home, he abandons me long enough to return with a shirt. Showing me where his bathroom is, he scratches at the back of his neck.

Are we always this awkward? Right now, it feels very noticeable.

“Take your sweet time, we can go to bed right after.”
Trying to be nice, he says words that make my shoulders sink.

What if I don't want to go to bed right after? What if I want to stay up with him until the sun greets us in the morning?

Unable to tell him what I actually want to do, I purse my lips together and nod. Thanking him softly, I slipped inside the room and shut the door. Resting my back against it, I breathe out a sigh and hug his shirt to my chest.

I feel like this shouldn't all be so complicated, but here I am overthinking everything.

If I really want something, maybe I shouldn't keep waiting for it to come around. Instead, I need to be more forward.

After this, I swear I'll be more forward.

Once I've figured out how to work his shower and am underneath the delicious heat, all of my worries slip along with the stream of water and down the drain.

* * *

When I get out of the shower and find him sitting on his mattress, I take in the appearance of his bedroom. It's so basic and, well, *boring*. What it needs is a little bit more decoration. Compared to my own room which is covered in fairy lights and has a few potted plants inside, this place is unsettling.

I'm going to buy him a cactus for Christmas. Maybe a picture frame too with some kind of art.

Humming quietly to myself, I clutch the front of the shirt that I'm wearing and walk toward him.

Kade looks up and I see his throat bob as he swallows. While I'm feeling a little nervous, this guy looks like he's planning everything out in his head.

He's definitely thinking too hard.

Stepping between his parted knees, I take his face into my hands and lean down to kiss him. It's a nice distraction we both need from all the thoughts spiraling in our heads. No more overthinking this.

Before I get too lost in the kiss, I pull away and offer him a smile in return.

Even if I really want something to happen between us, we don't have to do anything if it's going to lead him to overthink everything. The last thing I want him to do is something that he will regret.

Pulling away, I crawl onto his big bed and spread out. What is this, a king-size mattress? I suppose for a guy his size, he'd need something like this. Gosh, I feel so small in comparison.

Twisting around, he cracks a smile in amusement. He doesn't understand the difference of what I am in comparison.

"Might have to stay here more often," I mumble, curling against the blankets. "If that's okay, I mean."

Kade curses under his breath, nodding his head. "I will let you stay every night if that is what you want."

Letting his eyes lower, he takes in the shirt I am wearing. While it might fit nicely on his body, I am basically swimming in the thing. The longer he looks, the sooner my body betrays me.

Nipples hard beneath the faded logo, my stomach rises and falls with each steady breath. A heat collecting between my thighs is nearly impossible to ignore thanks to having him so close by.

He's not helping me in the slightest by staring, his own hunger apparent. So much for thinking he won't want this. No, right now, I can't help but think that he is holding himself back.

Biting my lip, I decide to test my theory by bending my knees and parting my thighs. His eyes follow my movement before another string of muttered words leaves his lips.

"No underwear?" Shaking his head, he rubs at his tired face. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I swallow down a laugh. "Didn't want to put them back on. They were dirty."

Not putting my underwear back on has to be my greatest idea yet.

He glides his hands up my thighs, pushing them apart with a held breath.

"You sure this is okay?" He asks, lifting his gaze for only a moment before dragging it back down the length of my body.

He wets his bottom lip with his tongue in my stomach fills with tingles.

Nodding my head, my cheeks feel so warm at all of the attention I'm getting. Tugging his shirt up to my hips, I can feel the cool air brushing my slick skin. Every time I'm with this man, this is how my body reacts.

I've gone so long without putting out the fire twisting around in my stomach, it's about time he touches me. Honestly, I'm not sure I can go another night without knowing how it feels to have his fingertips against my skin.

Nodding his head, the mattress creaks as he shifts his weight further down. Settling between my legs, he pushes my thighs even further apart before leaning in. Breathing in, I swear I hear this man growl in satisfaction.

Oh boy. Here is to hoping I can survive this.

Kade

I must be dreaming. I've lost count of the times I've imaged Joyce withering in my sheets, clinging to my blankets.

Well, here she is now. She makes my shirt look good, especially when it's pushed up her stomach and not covering her bottom half.

"You taste as good as you look," I confess against her thigh, kissing the goosebump-covered skin. "So delicious."

One of her hands moves to cover her eyes as I kiss her glistening sex next. "You should hear yourself sometimes, Kade."

I'm smiling now, without a doubt. Running my tongue along the seam, my chest rumbles with a groan. My poor cock is digging a hole into the mattress. "It's the truth."

Having already come undone once, she swats my head away when I try to drink up the aftermath. What a shame. She really does taste sweet.

Kissing a path up her stomach, I take a moment to pluck my shirt off her body. Mesmerized by the way her breasts lift and fall with each breath, I cup one of them with my hand. Somewhat small, it fits nicely against my palm.

Dropping her hand away, she watches as I draw the other into my mouth.

“Kade...” My name sounds so weak coming out passed her lips. She groans when I pull away, soon frowning when I rest my weight on my knees. Then her eyes lower and she *stares*. Sucking in a breath, her knees curl up.

I don't need to look down to know what she's looking at. No, the way my cock throbs is a reminder of itself. I want inside this woman. Freeing myself, I hear her breathing shift.

“Everything about you is big,” she mutters in disbelief.

Not going to let that one go to my head.

“Will you let me inside?” I ask, giving my cock one unforgiving squeeze. At the rate I'm going, I feel like I'm not going to be able to last long at all. “I'll make sure not to hurt you, sweet girl.”

Biting her lip, she nods her head. Rolling onto her stomach, I curse under my breath when she lifts her hips. Making matters even worse, she throws a look over her shoulder.

“You're going to make it hard for me to last,” I confess as I reach out to squeeze her hip.

Joyce is so soft and squishy, basically the definition of everything I need in my life.

Still slick from my tongue, I have no issue pressing my way inside. There's a stretch, one that leaves her gasping.

She feels like she's swallowing me up whole, consuming one inch at a time. It takes us a moment, but we eventually get there. Once she's fully inside, I'm left panting alongside her. Holy hell she feels amazing.

"You're going to make this harder than I thought," I groan, aching to move. "You feel amazing, Joyce."

As if I need to tell her that. Once she looks back at me again, I'm sure my feelings are written all over my face.

This woman is mine, and I love her so much. After going this far, we're in it together for good.

I don't care if she's my employee. Here in the future, I'm going to make Joyce my wife. Then I'll get a ring on her finger and promise myself to her for an eternity.

When I confess my thoughts, her walls squeeze around me in response. I can basically feel the way her pulse races at my promise. Now she's got a smile on her lips that looks like it won't be going anywhere anytime soon.

"Please, Kade. Move already." Sounding desperate, she pushes her hips back, bumping flush against my skin.

Deciding to put the both of us out of our misery, I give her what she wants. Pulling back, I snap my hips forward and enjoy each gasp and moan that leaves her lips. I lose count of how many times I hear my name come out of her mouth.

Leaning over her, I swallow up her hand with one of my own. She's got a death grip on the blanket, clinging on for dear life.

Turning to look at me, our mouths meet, tongues tangling. Everything is so sloppy, yet feels so right.

Heat forms in my gut, sizzling and bubbling until it is impossible to ignore. Each push and pull of my hips brings me closer and closer.

Her body shakes and shivers, covered in a layer of sweat. The way her breathing grows faster, I know damn well enough that I can get off on the sound alone.

Already so sensitive from her earlier release, her body twitches and jerks as she gets closer and closer to her peak. Gasping out loud, she soon clamps around me and shakes.

Grunting, I release inside her, burying myself deep and flooding her core. Blowing out a sigh, I have to use my arms to keep my body up to avoid crushing her.

She's the first to collapse with a groan, fighting to catch her breath. Once I pull out, she rolls around to get a better look at me.

Her smile can only be compared to a breath of fresh air. Even while looking worn out, she reaches out for me like she's ready for a round two.

“Yeah, I might need a few minutes before I can go throwing myself into a new position.”

Blowing out a laugh, she tugs me down for another kiss. This one is much slower and more relaxed. Her arms curl around my neck, giving me a tug down to keep me pressed up against her.

If we keep this up, I'm sure I'll be ready to go in no time.

With a woman as energetic as her, I'm sure I have plenty of time to learn how to keep up.

Joyce

One Year Later

I'm roaming through the bar when I find a man looking at the jukebox resting against the wall. Tattooed fingers scratch at his stubbled chin. Without even seeing his face, I feel like he's annoyed that the machine isn't working.

It hasn't worked since Kade tried taking it apart and lost interest in fixing it.

Against his side, he's got a box that has a logo with that popular bakery in town. Fancy.

"Sorry, but that thing is out of commission," I tell him once I erase the distance between us.

When he turns, I almost trip on my own feet.

Very familiar steel-colored eyes meet mine, matched with a frown I see every day. Either Kade has a doppelganger, or my future husband suddenly went out and got a bunch of ink on his body.

Who is this guy?

"Shame. Has a good selection to pick from, better than what's playing now." The voice doesn't match, a few notches

deeper.

With holiday music playing in the background, I'm only partly offended. Keeping a smile on my face, I bundle my hands together at my front.

"You must not be from around here. The Rusty Tavern vibrates with Christmas themes this time of year." I wave my hand to show off all the lights we hung up only a week ago. "How about a drink to help put you in the spirit?"

His nose scrunches at my offer before he shakes his head. "No thanks. Just came to meet someone."

Okay then. Well, if he doesn't like the music and doesn't want to drink, then he picked a terrible place to do his business.

"Just holler if you need anything," I press, trying to stay friendly.

The moment I run away, I hunt for Kade. Finding him in the back where we keep the supplies, I let out a loud gasp to catch his attention. He almost drops his clipboard, the pen in his grip not sharing the same luck as it clatters against the ground.

"Do you have a secret twin?" I ask, throwing myself in front of him. "One that you haven't told me about?"

Kade doesn't talk much about his family, and he's definitely never mentioned any siblings.

He lifts a brow, confused. When I explain to him what happened, his brows furrow as he sets down his clipboard.

Muttering a curse, he takes my hand and pulls me back toward the main floor.

“Not a twin.” Suddenly sounding stressed, he gives my fingers a squeeze. “But a brother I haven’t seen in a long time. He wasn’t rude to you, was he?”

I shake my head, my cheeks warming at his care. The way his fingers squeeze at mine, he might as well have his grip on my poor heart.

The man is still hovering by the jukebox, looking the same as I left him when we reach our destination.

“Jason.” Kade recognizes the man immediately, letting out a long sigh.

Side by side, there is no doubt about it. The two are definitely siblings. However, Jason does look a little older now that I’m staring.

Jason offers the box to Kade, a slight smile coming to his lips. “Heard you were getting married. Came to give my congratulations.”

He sounds genuine as Kade looks down at the box and sighs when his brother opens the offering. Two very adorable reindeer cupcakes are inside, but the noses are a bit smashed in, the icing coating the top.

“Cute,” I mumble, already reaching for one. Feeling the stranger’s stare, I sputter out a laugh. “I’m the fiancée.”

Kade doesn’t let me have a cupcake, not without inspecting them first. Does he expect them to be poisoned? He

frowns when I steal one away, sinking my teeth into one. They look incredible and I'm impulsive.

“Delicious.” The eyeball is crunchy and the chocolate tastes rich. Pretty good for a gift.

Jason gives me a look over like this is the first time he's seen me. Our previous conversation doesn't count. At least he didn't make a complete ass out of himself or anything.

“I know it's been a while,” Jason starts back up, clearing his throat, “but I've decided to come back and stick around. Find a job, get a place. All that.”

“Bar isn't hiring, so don't try applying.” Kade's words are immediate as he offers the second cupcake to me.

It's hard to say no to sweets and I can't help but indulge. It's a nice distraction from the heaviness of the air split between the two.

“There is that room above the bar that's open,” I offer up before licking some of the frosting off my thumb. “Needs a little cleaning, but it's livable.”

Kade nearly gets whiplash looking at me, struggling between frowning and not. His brows come together.

“What? You're not some kind of criminal, are you?” I scoff and look the guy over. “Better get used to the music, the floors are thin.”

“Not a criminal,” he confirms, looking thankful. “Just a man who got a little lost on the path of life. Drifted too far from home.”

“A little lost is an understatement. It’s been a decade,” Kade huffs before running a hand through his hair. “You can stay until you get a job, and that’s that.”

Trying to put his foot down, he crumples when I offer him a chunk of cupcake. Such a softy. I’m sure he’ll let the guy stick around once they spend a little time catching up on everything that’s been missed out on.

Personally, I want to know everything about my future in-law. As an only child myself, I can’t wait for them to tell me all their stories. For now, that can wait. Drinks need to be poured and customers need to be made happy.

“How about you get him settled and I make sure everything here stays in order? You two are catching quite the attention,” I point out as I look around.

One giant in a bar is one thing, but *two*? This place might as well be the eighth wonder of the world.

Kade nods, giving me one last look before leading the other man away.

Well, my day has gotten a little more exciting. Can’t wait to learn more about him.

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