

MAN OF
THE MONTH

November

Mister

WRITE

CANDY  CANE KEY

ELYSE KELLY

Mister
WRITE

ELYSE KELLY

She's sunshine in a dress... and it's driving me crazy.

But that's my fault for agreeing to spend the next 30 days in Candy Kane Key with Teddie, a sexy-as-sin redhead who I'm pretty sure shits reindeer glitter.

I'm stuck in a holiday-themed hell with the most cheerful woman I've ever met. And to top off the freshly baked cookies she keeps serving up, I can't seem to keep my hands to myself whenever she's around.

But that's exactly what I don't need when I have a career-ending deadline looming over my head while struggling with the worst case of writer's block I've ever had.

Yet this annoyingly sweet girl is determined to help get my words flowing again, no matter what it takes. Even if she has to be more naughty than nice.

Maybe Teddie is just *write* for me after all...

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to my world of Smutlandia!
Please remember this is just a book, not a dick.
So, don't take it so hard.
Now, relax and enjoy the smut!
XO, Elyse ☐

MISTER WRITE

CANDY CANE KEY

MAN OF THE MONTH CLUB

ELYSE KELLY

Nate

“Listen, Nate, you’re a fantastic writer, but I’m not sure how much longer the company can hold out,” Emily, my publisher, warns through my computer screen. “Your contract for this book will be up soon, and so far, you’ve submitted *one chapter*. Which was already part of your pitch.”

Gritting my teeth, I rub my hand over my jaw and cheek, feeling my five o’clock shadow scratch my palm. Frustration, disappointment, and fatigue wash over me. “I know. I’m just... still in the middle of my writing process, you know?”

She sighs and pushes her bulky black glasses up her nose. “Is it about the money?”

“What? No, I—”

“Your series has been a big hit.” Emily crosses her arms over her chest and leans back in her plush chair. “*Max Klein* has been on the bestseller list since the first book came out, and now you want a larger cut of the profits. Is that it?”

I raise an eyebrow and look around my home office. The walls are freshly painted light gray. I have a bookcase lined with first editions, and I’m sitting at an expensive writing desk made of solid wood. “No,” I repeat, trying not to roll my eyes. “It’s not about the money. I’m doing fine in that aspect. It’s mostly—”

“Oh!” She jumps forward until her face fills up the screen. “Maybe you’re not ready to say goodbye to these characters, and you’re subconsciously avoiding finishing the book since you know it’s the last in the series?” She nods her head as though she’s affirming her own conclusion. “You know, this happens to a lot of writers. I have a great therapist you could talk to! He’s worked with a bunch of my clients. Hmm, let’s see where I put his business card.” She rummages through her desk off-screen.

“Emily,” I sigh, feeling drained by this entire conversation. “I don’t need a therapist. My writing is just... slow right now.”

She eyes me wearily. “Alright, if you’re sure.” She pushes away the notion of counseling with a dismissive hand. “Regardless, we need your manuscript soon.”

“I didn’t forget.” I rake my fingers through my hair while trying to create a timeline in my head. “If I can have an extension, I’ll have it ready for you in two months.”

She clicks her tongue. “One month.”

“Six weeks,” I bargain, feeling silly for negotiating like this, yet I’m unsure what else to do.

Emily taps her index finger on her desk, and her eyes dart left and right like she’s looking at a pendulum. After a few seconds, she relents, and her shoulders slump.

“Okay,” she says before jabbing a finger at the camera. “But I’m serious, Nate. I can hold off the vultures for six weeks, not a day longer.”

“Yes, I understand.” Relief floods my body. “I’ll have the completed manuscript to you in six weeks.” I look at the time on my screen. “Right down to the minute. I’ll send my email before 4:47 p.m.”

Emily scoffs and rolls her eyes with a faint smile. “You don’t need to be that precise, kid.” Then, her look turns serious. “I’m giving you this extra chance because you’ve been my client for almost a decade, and I know what you can deliver. Don’t make me regret it, Nate. You better not fuck it up.” On that note, she ends the virtual call without any attempted send-off, and I’m left looking at my haggard reflection on my dark computer screen.

I’ve been working with Emily since I graduated from college, so I know she always means well, but *damn*, that woman is intimidating. She’s twice my age, but interactions with her always leave me feeling like I got kicked in the balls. Exasperated, I drop my face to my hands. At least I won’t have to talk to her for another six weeks.

“*Fu-uck me,*” I groan out loud to no one. I may have received an extension, but that doesn’t help me with my problem: the biggest bout of writer’s block I’ve ever experienced. What good is having additional time if I still won’t be able to deliver a single damn page?

My words have been jammed up ever since I pitched this novel. As soon as the contract was drawn up and I gave them the first chapter, I couldn’t write another word. It’s as if I went to bed one night chock-full of ideas, yet the next morning, when I woke up... *BAM!* My creative channels were clogged. And the shitty part is I know what I want to write. I just don’t know how to write it.

When I experience a block, I can usually work past it. Sometimes, all it takes is a hot shower to get my creative juices flowing. Other times, it takes a few days. So I go to the gym, run, swim, or even clean out my closet. Once, I was stuck for almost two weeks, but I finally got the words streaming with a random walk around Central Park. I stumbled upon a cellist playing underneath a small bridge, and the acoustics gave her music a deep, robust sound that I could feel in my bones. After listening to her for a while, I knew exactly how to fix the plot holes I backed my story into. Since then, I’ve added classical music to my “writer’s block quick-fix guide,” but even that has failed me recently.

Nothing is working. And while it was frustrating at the beginning, it’s become worrisome now.

What if I can’t finish my novel? What if the publishing house drops me? What if I can never write again?

Sharp raps on my office door pull me out of my sulking. “Hello-oo! Anyone home?” A mocking, falsetto voice pierces the silence of the room.

“Oh, fucking hell,” I grumble, pushing away from my desk and walking to the door. When I rip it open, I’m face-to-face with my older brother, Peter. “I’m starting to regret giving you my spare key.”

Peter presses a hand to his chest with dramatic flair. “Your words wound me, dear brother.” He pushes past me into the

room and collapses onto my small leather couch. “Besides, if I didn’t drop by every now and again, the only people you’d be interacting with are your publisher and the guy who delivers your *Uber Eats*.”

“It’s not always the same guy,” I retort with a scowl.

He quirks a single brow. “Right, because that makes it *so* much better.”

I glare at him, barely resisting the urge to stick my tongue out, as that would be childish. Even though we’re in our thirties, we’re always just one comment away from acting like obnoxious teenagers again. I suppose that’s the curse of having a brother, though.

Eventually, I yield and drop my crossed arms. “What’re you even doing here, Peter?”

He shrugs and stands from the couch. “Just wanted to check in. I tried calling earlier this week, but you never answered.” He nonchalantly walks around my study. Picking up a snow globe from my bookcase, he shakes it, then puts it down several inches from where it was. Then he plucks a stack of papers from my desk and lazily thumbs through the pages.

A muscle jumps in my cheek as I watch him disturb my belongings. He knows what he’s doing annoys the fuck out of me, but he doesn’t care. Or rather, that’s the reason *why* he does it. He’s always doing shit to get a rise out of me. I hold back for as long as I can until he pulls at the strings of my window blinds, leaving the slates at an angle instead of perfectly parallel to the ground.

“Knock it off!” I snap, shoving him out of the way and fixing my window treatments. “Did you ever think maybe there was a reason I never answered? I’m not taking any calls right now.” Once the blinds are as they should be, I go over to the bookcase and put everything back in its correct place.

Peter smirks. “And yet, you talked to your publisher.”

Moving to my desk, I put my papers back in order. “And I deeply regret it.” Flipping around to face him, I add, “Are you done here?”

“Nope.” He obnoxiously pops the *P* and leans on my desk, once again pushing around various documents. “I wanted to tell you about an idea I have.”

Feeling a headache forming, I rub my temples and groan. “Please, do not pitch me any more ideas. I don’t need my mind cluttered up with more of your useless crap.”

“Okay, no worries.” He shrugs before whipping out his phone.

“What’re you doing?” I cautiously inquire. A sense of foreboding looms over me as I attempt to peek at Peter’s screen over his shoulder.

He moves away, so I can’t see his phone. “Don’t worry about it.” He taps the screen a few more times, then gives me a shit-eating grin.

Before I can even ask him what he did, my phone dings with a notification. I pull the device from my pocket and see I have a new email. “It’s a confirmation.”

I narrow my glare at him, but he gestures for me to keep reading. My eyes race over the words, but I only see the ones that stick out: *congratulations, month-long stay, Florida Keys vacation home.*

“What. The. Fuck? You booked me a trip to *Florida*?” I’m about to pounce on him and knock some sense into his lunatic head, but he’s almost to the door.

“You can thank me later,” he teases in a singsong tone as I chase after him.

“I won’t be *thanking* you. I’ll be *killing* you! You asshole!”

Peter laughs. “No, you won’t. You love me too much.”

“I don’t love you as much as you think, dick. And it’s out of obligation, not a choice.”

“Tomato, to-mah-to.” Like a toddler, he blows a raspberry and opens the front door, letting the cool fall air invade my home. “This is for your own good, Nate. You need to get out of your head. So, try something different. This place in the Keys is just what you need. Trust me. I’m your brother.”

I snort. “You do realize I’ve written twenty-seven novels plotting out the perfect murder. I can’t believe you’d do something this underhanded.”

He grins and wags his finger at me. “I can’t believe you think you plotted them perfectly.” He skips down the steps of my brownstone and strolls along the sidewalk.

“Wait! Get back here, Peter! How do I cancel this?!” Passersby turn to stare at me.

But the jackass doesn’t turn around. Instead, he gives me a one-finger salute while instructing, “Be sure to tell me all about your trip when you get back!”

“Fucker,” I curse out loud. A woman walking by with her young child shoots me a dirty look and covers her kid’s ears.

I cringe and silently apologize before closing myself inside the house. As I lean against the door, I struggle not to spiral.

I can’t believe he did that. Jerk!

He knows I’m having a tough time right now, and I need to focus on my writing. If I don’t get my manuscript to Emily soon, I’m royally fucked, and my career will be up shit creek without a paddle. I don’t have time to go on some trip to Florida, dealing with sand in my shorts and sunburn on my back.

Peter’s words taunt me: *You need to get out of your head. So, try something different.*

I haven’t had much luck here in New York. Maybe going somewhere else will give me some new ideas. Perhaps a different environment will spark my creativity again.

At this point, it couldn’t hurt to try, right?

I pluck my phone from the back of my jeans to check the itinerary Peter set up for me. My flight leaves tomorrow morning.

Guess I better start packing.

Teddie

Completing my morning routine, I hum “Jingle Bells” while checking all the lights, watering the flowers, and picking up any rogue trash blowing around outside from the tourists. The sun shines above me, and the air is warm, but thankfully, it’s not too humid. Some days, the humidity is so high here that you have to avoid going outside. So it’s nice to take advantage of these dryer bouts. And doing my eight a.m. walk of the property helps me gauge what kind of day it’ll be.

Raising my arms, I tilt my head back to feel the warm rays soak into my skin. *Today is going to be a good day. I know it!*

Once content that everything is picked up, I head back inside to make my usual coffee. My eyes flick up to the clock, where I see it’s about a quarter to nine. So, I grab a second mug, the sugar bowl, and a few of my homemade flavored creamers. There’s a knock at the door, but before I can even think about answering, it opens, and my neighbor, Rose, pops her head in.

“Damn golf cart zooming by. This isn’t a racetrack. People live here!” she grumbles as she enters the kitchen. My grandmother’s best friend brushes past me to sit at the table, raising the hem of her long, yellow dress just enough to slide out her legs and cross her ankles. She always sits like this, insisting that her calves get sweaty if she doesn’t *air her legs*.

I smile as I pour the steaming brew into our cups. “Are the tourists driving you batty again, Rose?”

“You’re darn right they are!” She shakes her fist as she silently curses them. “They drop in, act crazy for a week, and then rush out, forcing the folks who live here to put up with the mess they leave behind!”

I pour some of my vanilla-cinnamon creamer into Rose’s coffee and some mint chocolate into mine. Handing her mug to her, I soothe, “I’m sure they don’t realize they’re doing it.

They're on vacation, so they're just not thinking about that kind of stuff."

Rose sniffs her coffee, taking a cautious sip before smacking her lips. "That's exactly my point. It's rude that they don't think about others, even if they are on vacation." She gestures to her beverage. "This is delicious, by the way. Is it a new recipe?"

"It's Gram's. I just added a tad extra cinnamon." I sip my drink and allow the mint-chocolatey goodness to flood my taste buds. "Still, don't you think it's better to cut people some slack rather than assume everyone has the worst intentions?"

She taps the table with her finger and raises an eyebrow at me. "You know, this is exactly why your grandmother told me to look out for you."

"Why, because I'm nice?"

"Precisely. Too nice," she confirms.

I laugh. "I know, Rose. You tell me every day. But even with your constant reminders, I'm always happy to have you here," I wink. "Your wisdom knows no bounds. Now, what kind of cookies should I bake today? I'm doing a double-batch."

She sets her empty cup on the table. "A double-batch, huh? You only do that when you have guests coming."

"Ding, ding, ding! And the next one is arriving later today. They'll be here for a *solid month*." I can hear the excitement in my voice. "I wonder what it's like to be able to go on vacation for thirty whole days." I sigh wistfully.

Rose snorts at me. "My dear, you've been on vacation for *six months*."

"I'm not on vacation," I insist, sitting straighter and pushing back my shoulders. "I live here now. Gram left this place to me." I gesture to the interior, which is adorned floor to ceiling with Christmas decorations. My family has appropriately dubbed it the "Holiday House."

“Riiight.” Rose nods slowly. “But you don’t have a job. That’s a vacation, Teddie. Maybe you kids call it a *staycation* nowadays since you’re technically staying home, but I fail to see the distinction. My point is you don’t have to keep to a schedule, and you don’t have to worry about a paycheck. Sounds pretty blissful to me.”

I hold in my sigh as I prepare to defend myself. “The house may be paid off, but I still need money, Rose. So, I *do* work. This place is a VRBO. The guests who come here *pay* to stay, and I try my best to give them a five-star experience so they *keep* coming back. I may be lucky enough to work from home, but that doesn’t mean I’m not working.”

“Oh, phooey.” She swats the air. “No matter how many times you explain this house-hotel thing to me, I’ll never understand it.”

Chuckling, I grab both of our mugs and carry them to the sink. “I’ll gladly explain it to you a million more times. I know you’re bound to understand it eventually.”

She scoffs. “Good luck with that. You know what they say about teaching an old dog new tricks.”

“That it’s super easy and successful a hundred percent of the time?” I flash Rose a cheesy smile.

She shakes her head, but her bemused expression tells me she enjoys that I don’t let her make excuses. “Oh, Teddie, you keep me young.”

“I try to.” Once the mugs are thoroughly washed, I place them upside down on the drying rack and clap my hands together. “Now, back to the crucial topic at hand. What’s on the cookie docket today?”

Rose hums, then suggests, “It’s been a while since you’ve made sugar cookies, right? I know I wouldn’t mind having any extras you bake.”

“I think sugar would be perfect.” I tap a finger against my chin as I mentally run through my ingredients. “I can add royal icing, but I only have red food coloring. I’ll have to go to the store and get more—oh! And I need more tinsel for the tree.

I'm getting sick of the gold, so I'll switch it to silver this month."

I walk out to the living room, where the magnificent eight-foot tree stays year-round. It currently has bats, spiders, and skeletons on display for Halloween, but now it's the first of November and time for a change.

I'm examining the tree as I speak to Rose. "It's too early to decorate for Thanksgiving, so I'm doing another holiday instead. I'm gonna do a bookish theme to celebrate National Authors Day. Did you know that's today?" I turn to give her a big smile.

She followed from the kitchen and is presently sitting on the plush green sofa, using one of the Christmas tree pillows to prop up her arms. "I know you like to pick a different holiday every month, but seriously, Teddie? National Authors Day? That's not a real holiday, is it?"

"Of course, it is," I insist, putting my hands on my hips. "You can Google it. And, as we all know, if Google says something is true, it definitely is."

She stares at me for a minute, like she's trying to figure me out, before giving up and settling back on the couch. "I'll never understand how you're so... perky, Teddie. What's the point of celebrating all of these holidays and redecorating your tree every month?"

I shrug. "I don't know. It's fun, don't you think? It's nice to have something to look forward to."

"I suppose," she concedes before eyeing my tree. "But isn't it tiring to take down all those decorations so frequently? It would be much easier to leave them on and put the entire thing away until it's in season again next year."

"That would take too many trees if I did it that way." I laugh. "Besides, where would I keep all of them?" I jokingly shoot her a pointed look. "And some of us don't *cheat* by recycling our decorated trees..."

"Who, me?" She has the audacity to look confused.

“Yes, you. I know you use the same tree every year. You think you’re so clever, don’t you, Miss Rose?”

She pushes some of her white curls away from her face. “I prefer to think of myself as resourceful and efficient. After all, I had to help your grandmother with her decorations too.”

“Ha! As Gram said, you sat around sipping spiked eggnog while critiquing her work.” I give Rose a chiding finger.

“Wha—I would never!”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Uh-huh, likely story.”

“Come on now, Teddie, who are you going to believe? Little ol’ me who checks on you every morning and eats all your extra cookies? Or the woman who lied to you about Santa and the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny?”

I pretend to think for a second. “Call me biased, but I’m gonna have to go with Gram on this one. She wasn’t much of a liar. Unless you count fairy tales.”

Rose raises her hands in defeat. “I suppose that’s true. I did have to convince her to stretch the truth every once in a while, for a good reason. But, to be fair, she also kept me honest most days.” Her eyes soften. “Now, I don’t know what to do without her. She was my partner in time.”

I always like hearing Rose talk about my grandmother. “Don’t you mean *crime*? Partner in crime?”

She barks out a laugh. “Oh, please, Teddie. We knew each other for decades. I was her partner in *time*.”

I giggle with her. “That’s sweet, Rose. I like that.”

“Well, I loved your grandmother. And I know you did too.” She gets up from the couch and grasps my hands, giving me a stern look. “Which is why I’m concerned you’re not grieving.”

I hold her hand in mine and give her a faint smile. “I *am* grieving, Rose. Everyone just grieves differently.”

She drops my hands. “But I haven’t seen you shed one tear.”

I pop out my hip. “And you never will. Gram raised me to be a lady, you know. We only cry in private.”

“Oh, really?” Rose asks incredulously. “And what do you do in public?”

“Bake,” I reply simply, tilting my head toward the kitchen.

She tuts her tongue. “You may bake, but you don’t eat. I swear you get thinner every day.” She pinches my waist, and I jump back, covering my mouth so I don’t start laughing. She knows how ticklish I am and is never afraid to use it against me.

“Honey, are you sure you like this... this *turbo* stuff?” Disbelief is evident on her face.

“*VRBO*, Rose,” I snicker. “And, yes, I do.” She’s not convinced, but I keep going. “This is my life now. I want to share this holiday home that my Gram loved so much with others who’ll enjoy it. I entertain guests, I decorate the tree, and I bake. I don’t think it’s a bad life. Do you?”

A smile spreads across her face, and she places a knobby hand on my cheek. “It’s not a bad life at all, dear. I just want to make sure it’s the life you *choose*, not the life you’re stuck with.”

I bite my lip to hide my smirk. “So, you’re saying... you feel stuck with me?”

Rose blows out an exasperated sigh and takes a step back. “I can never have a serious conversation with this girl!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Rose. I’m just teasing.” I giggle, placing a hand on her shoulder. “But I *am* happy.” I let her see the sincerity in my eyes. “Moving down here, working in this house, and spending time with you have been some of the happiest times of my life.” Her eyes get misty, and I interject because I can’t have her crying on my shoulder for the rest of the morning. “Well, would you look at the time? I’ll have to head out to the store now if I want to have those cookies done when my guest arrives.”

“Yeah, yeah. Alright.” She walks toward the door, still favoring her right hip. “You don’t have to tell me twice,

Teddie. I'll see you tomorrow. And I'm expecting some of those cookies." With a final wave, she heads across the yard and back home.

I exhale, relieved, and my shoulders slump.

I love Rose. I do. But I don't love constantly having to defend my life choices. I know she means well, but it gets a little tiring after a while.

She's not the only one, though. Several friends and family members thought I was crazy when I announced I was moving to Candy Cane Key. They didn't understand that I needed a change. Stuck in a rut, I wanted a new adventure. And fortunately, this adventure brought me closer to my late grandmother. I feel her here when I'm baking or sprucing up the flowers or decorating the tree. Sometimes, a gust of warm air brushes my shoulders, and I swear it's as if her arms are embracing me.

I blink back tears, swiping at my eyes to clear up my vision. This is no time for crying. A guest is arriving soon, and I still have loads to do. "Right," I affirm aloud as I twist my long, red hair into a high ponytail. "Time to get to work."

Nate

T *his place sucks.*

My first impression of Florida could be better. I've only been outside for a few minutes, and I'm already sweating my balls off. My shirt sticks to my chest like a second skin, and my palms are damp. The sun is too bright and hurts my eyes, and the air smells like salt and fish.

I'm gonna kill Peter as soon as I get home.

When my Uber finally pulls up to the curb, I send a small thanks to whatever merciful god is listening to my prayers. Well... he couldn't have been listening too hard because the car that arrives is a large black SUV with fucking reindeer antlers attached to the sides and a red *nose* on the front grill.

The window rolls down, and an older gentleman with a full white beard smiles joyfully at me. "Pick up for Nate?"

Any hope I had that this disgustingly festive vehicle was not for me vanishes completely, and I sigh. "That's me."

The driver opens the trunk and helps me plop my suitcases into the back. I internally groan when I see he's wearing a red shirt covered in candy canes. I guess the locals really lean into the whole Christmas theme, but I hope the rest of the town isn't like this. If I'm surrounded by tinsel and ornaments 24/7 for the next month, I think I'll have an aneurysm.

"The address you supplied is still good?" he questions once we get into the car. I confirm with a sharp nod. "Wonderful! Looks like you'll be in the middle of the island. It's pretty nice out there, and the drive shouldn't be too bad. We'll be there in a jiffy!" I can tell the driver wants to talk more, but he closes his mouth once my phone goes off.

I huff and roll my eyes but still reach for the device in my pocket. *The Imperial March* from *Star Wars* tells me a certain jackass is calling. Pressing the phone to my ear, I bark, "What?"

“Well, good afternoon to you too, dear brother!” Peter’s jovial voice crackles through the speaker. I grunt in response, making him chuckle. “Oh, come on. It can’t be that bad. You’ve only been there for half an hour!”

“That’s half an hour too long,” I insist, and he laughs again. “You’re an asshole, you know that? I know you’re doing this on purpose.”

“What am I doing on purpose?”

“Don’t bother trying to play innocent, Peter. You sent me to my own personal hell... in an Uber disguised as a damn reindeer.” When the driver sends me an offended look, guilt flashes through me. “No offense, man.”

“Did you seriously say that *in front* of the guy?” Peter stifles another laugh. “You probably shouldn’t piss off the entire town on your first day. I mean, you’re gonna be there for a month. You should space out how many enemies you make.” I barely contain my growl. “Wait. Is your driver dressed like a reindeer? That’s fucking hilarious!”

“The car, Peter. The car has antlers.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling my patience for my brother wearing dangerously thin. “It’s got a red nose and everything. I’m half-shocked it’s not covered in fucking flocking.” The driver scowls, clearly not happy I’m mocking his decorations. I hunch down in my seat and lower my voice. “I suppose some of your advice isn’t total garbage. I *should* pace myself with how many people I piss off. That shouldn’t be too hard. In fact, it’ll be a breeze if I stay in my room the entire time, assuming you actually booked me a room and not some couch with a view.”

“Of course, it’s a room!” Peter scoffs as if *I’m* the one being ridiculous. “Why wouldn’t it be?” I can hear the gears in his head turning. “Is that a thing? ‘Cause if it is, I’m gonna add that to the list for your next trip.”

“There isn’t going to *be* a next trip,” I snap. “There’s barely a *this* trip. You know I have my routines and need to stick to them.”

He clicks his tongue. “Right, those oh-so-important routines that currently *aren't* helping you write? You mean those?”

His sarcasm raises my hackles more than I care to admit. “You’re the one who blindsided me, you dick. You’re lucky I’m desperate enough to roll with it. As it is, I can’t imagine what a month-long trip set you back.”

Peter hums and takes his sweet time answering. “It cost me nothing,” he admits.

“What do you mean, *nothing*? The trip was free?” My face twists with disbelief. “You’re full of shit. You don’t travel enough to stack up points or earn rewards. Does VRBO even have a points system? I would’ve preferred a hotel anyway. Staying in someone else’s house is just weird.”

“You’re weird,” Peter says, like a ten-year-old whose sole purpose is to urge me to punch him. “And I didn’t use points. I said it didn’t cost *me* anything.”

I stare blankly out the window for a few seconds, watching multi-colored houses and manicured lawns fly by. “I’m not following.”

“And they say you’re the smart one.” *Why couldn’t I have been an only child?* “Remember when you gave me a key?” His tone has an air of fake innocence, and I don’t like it.

“Yes,” I grumble, recalling that fateful day. “And I’ve come to regret that decision ever since. Exhibit A: Yesterday, you barged into my home without asking, reminding me of my poor life choices.”

“Well, do you also remember that part where you gave me power of attorney because, and I quote: *As my only living relative, I don’t want you to have to fight for the money I leave behind when I keel over dead at my computer from pouring all my blood, sweat, and tears into my book.*” I can hear his eye roll through the phone. “You can be quite dramatic when you’re about to miss a deadline, you know.”

I inhale a cleansing breath and rub my forehead, feeling a headache coming on. “Yes, I remember that unfortunate

decision. So, why do I get the impression you're gonna make me regret that?"

"Probably because I'm about to tell you I used that illustrious power, as well as your banking information—speaking of, you put Mom's maiden name as the answer to one of your security questions? I didn't expect you to be so cliché, Nate."

"Spit it out, Peter." My patience is waning.

"Right. I abused the authority you gave me to book your trip. Surprise!" I have no doubt if Peter were here, he would throw confetti in my face to magnify this bombshell. But he's not here, and that's for the best, because I'm ready to beat the shit out of my big brother.

"I'm not dead yet, you asshole. How were you able to just... spend my money?" I ask between gritted teeth.

"*Technically*, you authorized me," he responds in a way that doesn't sound technical at all.

"Yeah, in the event I'm incapacitated. And, clearly, I'm fine!" I gesture to myself, even though Peter can't see me.

"You're not fine, Nate. You can't work. You're not sleeping or eating. Ergo, you're incapacitated." When I try to sputter out a response, he cuts me off. "Hey, at least I spent your money *on you*. Besides, how much do you think *I* make?"

"Loads!" I accuse into the phone. "You have a high-paying, low-effort corporate job, you asswipe. Hell, if I had a cushy gig like you, maybe I'd have time to go on a vacation and write books without cracking under the pressure."

"Uh... you *did* have that job," he reminds me. "You quit to be an author, remember?"

I'm out of witty comebacks—because he's not wrong—and the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, "I hate you, Peter."

Fuck, now I'm being immature.

He laughs at me, enjoying my pain and misery. "Come on, Nate. Stop lying to yourself. Our parents and Jesus can see

you.”

“I’m hanging up now, asshole.” Before he can utter another word, I disconnect the call and drop my phone into my lap. “Jesus Christ on a bicycle with Mary on the handlebars,” I mutter, rubbing a hand over my eyes as exhaustion sets in.

This day is just one shitshow after another.

I’m startled when the Uber driver clears his throat. My asinine conversation with Peter made me forget I was in a car with someone else. “So... you here for vacation? Seems like you need it, bud.” The corners of his lips tip up into a nervous smile.

“Yes. No. It’s, uh, it’s complicated.” My response is clipped.

“Oh?” His curious tone suggests he wants me to elaborate. I’m not going to.

“Yup.”

We lapse into an awkward silence. I have nothing personal against this guy. I’m just not the best company, especially not now in my fucked-up state of mind.

“Well, would you like some music for the rest of the ride?”

He turns on the stereo, and Christmas carols fill the SUV. It’s on-theme with his whole getup and the *reindeer* car, but it’s not what I need right now. I close my eyes and sink into my seat, trying to imagine myself anywhere else but here.

After a few minutes of failing to drown out the obnoxious, joyous singing, I open my eyes and ask, “Are there a lot of Uber drivers in Candy Cane Key?”

“Nope, just me! There aren’t any rental cars on the island either, so I usually get to know the tourists pretty well during their trips.”

Great. I’m trapped in the middle of nowhere, and the only Uber driver is some Santa Claus look-alike who only listens to Christmas music. Guess I’ll be staying in a lot.

I'M STUCK IN THE REINDEER MOBILE FOR SEVERAL MORE minutes before we pull into the driveway of a quaint white house. There are light-up snowmen on the front lawn and poinsettias on the patio. My lip curls with disdain, but considering what the rest of the island looks like, I shouldn't be too surprised.

As soon as we pull in, the front door opens, and a young woman in her mid-twenties comes out, enthusiastically waving while carrying some sort of tray. The first thing I notice is her hair. It's like a flame flowing behind her as she walks. It's a brilliant red color, unlike anything I've ever seen. And it's pulled high on her head in a ponytail with a few shorter pieces framing her beautiful face. Her light-blue tank top showcases freckled shoulders, and dark jean shorts draw my gaze to her cream-colored thighs. My hands twitch as I think about how those thighs would feel wrapped around my waist.

Fuck, Nate. Get yourself together!

I mentally slap myself, chalking it up to a few sexless months. That has to be why I'm suddenly feeling like a horny teenager. It has nothing to do with how gorgeous this woman is.

She approaches the SUV with a bounce in her step. "Welcome!" She greets me with a clear, high-pitched tone, like a bell, perfectly matching her dazzling smile.

I exit the car, and the driver helps me remove my luggage from the trunk. I grab my things before gesturing goodbye to him with a polite smile. I'm sure he thinks I'm an ass, but he waves as he pulls out of the driveway. Even though his music made me want to rip my ears off, I'll be sure to tip him generously since he put up with my shit.

"Glad you made it!" the young woman exclaims once it's just the two of us.

She's stepped closer, allowing me to see more of her features. Light-colored freckles are dusted along her nose and

sprinkled on her soft cheeks. And her topaz-blue eyes remind me of tropical waters. When her smile widens, I notice her plump lips have some sort of gloss across them, making them appear inviting and delicious.

She eyes me before looking around and seeing my hands are full. I'm about to ask her what she's searching for when she promptly shoves something into my mouth. My tongue is assaulted with sugar and vanilla as I instinctively start to chew.

"Happy National Authors Day!" she says in a singsong voice. "I don't know if you're into books or not, but I'm a *big* reader, so I'm kicking off my next month of holiday celebrations with National Authors Day!"

I drop my bags and remove the cookie from my mouth. When I glance back at the girl, I notice the tray she's holding is piled high with cookies of various shapes and colors.

So many things have happened in the past few minutes, and my mind is slowly trying to catch up. "Is that a real thing? Authors Day?" I ask once my brain registers what she said.

She huffs and pushes a stray tendril behind her ear, but it doesn't stay and falls right back to her cheek. "Yes, it's a real thing," she insists before her voice drops low. "Why does everyone ask that?"

"Because it's weird. What's the point of celebrating authors? It's not like they're actually important, right?"

"They are—"

"And what did you say? Your *next* celebration? Do you celebrate a holiday every month or something?"

Not happy with me cutting her off, she straightens her posture to look more imposing. But I'm still almost a foot taller, so the gesture does nothing to make her appear intimidating.

"What's wrong with that? Shouldn't we all find a reason to celebrate whenever we can?" Her expression says her line of thinking is perfectly rational.

I glance at the sweet treat crumbling in my hand. “Then I guess I should celebrate not choking to death on this cookie. If you *do* plan on killing me, you probably shouldn’t do it before I can leave a review. Death by cookie will not bode well with new customers.”

She laughs as though I’m joking rather than giving sound business advice. “Why would I want to kill you? You’re my guest.” She looks at me as if I’m the ridiculous one. “Oh! Where are my manners? Please, come inside. I’ll help you with your bags!”

I try to tell her I can get them, but she wrestles one away from me before I can stop her, with a smile still plastered on her pretty face while expertly balancing the tray of cookies. Her bubbly personality may be mildly grating, but her strength and agility are impressive. I could leave her five stars for that alone.

Once we get inside, my jaw drops as my eyes dart around. It’s like I’ve stepped onto the set of a Hallmark holiday movie. Holly, tinsel, and Christmas decor cover every available surface, and I can’t look in any direction without seeing tiny Santa figurines. In the front corner of the house is an artificial tree decorated with at least a hundred miniature books.

What is this place?

The girl grunts as she sets down my heavy bag. “Let me put away the cookies, and I’ll help you to your room.”

The thought of this cheery stranger coming anywhere near the bed I’ll be sleeping in makes me jumpy because it’ll torture me the whole month, my mind wandering to images of her lying next to me. *Or beneath me...*

“Listen, you seem like a nice girl...” I trail off as I suddenly realize I don’t know her name.

“Teddie,” she supplies, smiling, because of course she is.

“Teddie,” I repeat. “You seem nice and everything, but you can go now. I prefer to get settled in by myself. Just point me in the direction of my room.” She doesn’t move, so I add, “I’ll call if I need anything.”

Confusion deepens on her face. “What do you mean, *go*? Where would I go? I live here. Didn’t you read the terms of the rental before booking?”

Surely, I didn’t hear her correctly.

“It says in bold text that we’ll be sharing the house for the duration of your stay.” Her face smooths out into a grin while mine sinks into an expression of horror. “We’ll be great friends, Nate!”

My eyes widen at her use of my name. For some reason, I didn’t think she knew it.

“Now, come on.” She lifts my bag again and walks farther into the house. “I’ll show you which room is yours.” I watch in absolute befuddlement as she turns down the hall.

I’ll be staying in *Santa’s Workshop*... with a gorgeous, peppy pipsqueak who has rainbows shooting out her ass... for a month.

Forcing down my annoyance, I close my eyes and count to five.

Fuck you, Peter. You’re the worst brother ever.

Teddie

Ever since Nate entered his room a few hours ago, he hasn't come out.

He seemed a little stressed about settling in, so I offered to bring him more cookies—they make everything better. But he didn't appear excited about that, so I told him I could make a different flavor if he wanted—chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, snickerdoodle... I listed more options, but the door closed before I could finish. Sometimes, the air conditioning causes a stir, so I just shrugged it off. It's not like Nate shut it in my face while I was talking, right? I mean, that would just be plain rude.

I know he needs time to rest after all the traveling he did today, but I'm anxious to get to know him. Learning about my guests is my favorite part of running a rental house. There are so many things I want to ask him—like where he's from, what he does for work, what made him take a month-long vacation... But I can't burst into his room and interrogate him, so I'm waiting at the kitchen table, trying to keep myself busy with the latest thriller I picked up at the bookstore.

When I hear a door open, my head whips up, but the sound doesn't come from Nate's room; it's the front door. Rose walks in, and I deflate a little. I'm happy to see her. She just wasn't who I was expecting.

"I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow," I say, closing my book. "Did you forget something?"

She comes over and pulls the seat out across from me. "I promised your grandmother I'd look out for you."

I nod, thinking back to our earlier conversation. "Yes, I remember."

"So I need to check out this guest." She cracks her knuckles and rolls her shoulders back, like a geriatric boxer of some sort.

"But you don't normally meet my guests," I point out.

“Your guests don’t normally stay so long. They’re here for the weekend, a week tops. Why does this guy want to stay for a full month? He could be some sorta psycho.” She drops her phone onto the table. “I’ll just take a picture and get a description of him in case we have to submit it to the police for evidence.”

I laugh at the absurdity. “Rose, have you been watching those crime shows again? That stuff doesn’t happen in real life, you know. Besides, he seems normal. A little quiet, maybe. But normal.” Nate’s door finally opens, and I sit taller in my chair. Rose still has her phone out, so I whisper a warning, “Please be civil, Rose.”

“What do you mean?” she questions at her usual volume. “I’m civil. This is civil. We’re just two civil ladies sitting together talking about civil things.”

When Nate steps into the kitchen, he doesn’t acknowledge me or Rose. Instead, he makes a beeline for the cabinets and starts opening and closing them.

I jump up and hop over to him. “What’re you looking for? Can I help you?”

He sighs and turns to me. At this angle, under the overhead light, I have a better view of him. I thought he was handsome earlier when he stepped out of his Uber, but now, with a halo of light shining around him, as if he’s some kind of Adonis, I almost swallow my tongue.

His skin is tan with warm undertones, so I know a few days in the Florida sun will make him glow. His hair is dark brown, so dark it’s almost black, and lightly tousled like he’s been running his hands through it. High cheekbones and a five o’clock shadow showcase his sharp jaw. When he leans against the counter, his shirt bunches tightly around his chest and biceps, revealing thick muscles that I’m sure took time to cultivate.

“Cups,” he mutters.

“Hmm?” I ask, blinking out of my trance.

“I’m looking for *cups*.” His voice has a hard edge to it. A flare in his dark eyes lights up with annoyance at having to repeat himself.

“Oh, sorry!” I laugh and open the right cabinet to get him a tall glass. “Sometimes I get lost in my head and don’t pay attention.”

He doesn’t answer; he just plucks the glass out of my hand and turns around to face the sink. At that moment, a bright flash goes off, startling both of us.

Rose sighs and lowers her phone. “It wasn’t supposed to do that.”

“And yet, I’m blind now,” Nate quips in a dry tone while blinking rapidly. “Who’re you anyway? Don’t tell me you’re staying here too.”

“Oh, no.” Rose waves a hand in front of her face. “I’m Rose, Teddie’s neighbor. I just stopped by to make sure you’re not some psycho. Teddie said you looked normal, but we can’t always trust her judgment.” She lowers her voice to a stage whisper. “She’s an overly optimistic weirdo, who tends to downplay anything negative. I think it’s a coping mechanism. But, *eh*, what can you do?” Then she turns to me. “He does look normal, so he’s probably not a psycho.”

Nate gets a thoughtful look on his face, and I’m pleasantly surprised when he indulges Rose with continued conversation. “There’s a common misconception about psychopaths and sociopaths, thanks to social media and thinly veiled gossip rags masquerading around as news outlets.”

Rose blinks, looks at me, and jerks a thumb at Nate. “He’s talking, but I have no idea what he’s saying.”

He clears his throat. “What I mean is, psychopaths and sociopaths *do* look like everyone else. For all you know—”

My happiness at his contribution to our interesting chat vanishes when I realize where he’s going with this. I clap my hands loudly to disrupt our current direction. The last thing I want is for Rose to be freaked out by my new guest, who is just a tad bit socially awkward.

“So, Nate, what do you do for work?”

Thankfully, he stops talking like a serial killer and hesitantly answers, “I write thrillers, which is why I know so much about psychopaths. I’ve done a lot of research to give my readers authentic characters.”

Rose gasps quietly and turns to me, her eyes bugging out of her head. I’m sure my expression matches hers.

“I’m in the middle of writing a novel right now,” he continues, “and I’m on a deadline. If you don’t mind, I’ll just fill up my glass, and get back to work.”

A smile grows on my face, and Nate starts to look worried.

“You’re telling me you’re a writer who just *happened* to show up on National Authors Day?”

“Seems that way.”

I jump up and down and let out a giggle. “It’s fate!”

“It’s not,” he deadpans.

“Of course, it is! How can it not be when the only writer currently on the island comes to the only house celebrating National Authors Day?” My mind races, trying to think of the possibilities that can come out of this fateful meeting. Maybe I’ll be featured as a character in his next book, or he’ll use the island as the setting for one of his scenes. Or maybe he’ll ask for my help with his plot, and I’ll finally be able to dip my toes into writing.

Nate takes a step back. “Look, I didn’t even book this trip. My idiot brother did.”

I take a step forward. “Because fate guided him!”

Rose interrupts our back-and-forth. “You won’t win with her, young man. Just give up arguing now and save yourself the trouble.”

Nate weighs his options in his head before admitting defeat. “Fine, it’s fate. Now, about my water?” He waves the glass in front of my face.

I step aside and let him access the filtered water attached to the faucet. Without another word, he gets his drink and returns to his room. My shoulders slump as I watch him leave. I hoped he would stay and talk more, but I guess he's too busy with his work to chat.

Oh, well. It's not like I can force him to hang out.

Rose stays a while longer, but once she leaves—with a plateful of cookies, of course—I'm left to my thoughts again.

Nate isn't anything like I'd imagined. Previous guests have been wonderful, interacting with me and asking me for recommendations. They've all been so lovely. Well, except for that one couple who, for some reason, thought I was running a *different* kind of vacation spot. Once they explained, I took down all the pineapples decorating the interior and exterior of the house. I only had a slight momentary pause when I considered whether or not Gram knew what the fruit decor meant when she chose it. But, nah, surely not *my* Gram. That being said, I prefer an awkward misunderstanding over Nate's silence.

I'm still new to this VRBO thing, so it's important I make sure my guests are comfortable. I need to find a way to do that for Nate. Every review counts, and I don't want his poor experience to come back to bite me in the butt. Surely, there's a way to break the ice. But how?

I look at the pile of uneaten cookies and sigh. "That man is one tough cookie."

Nate

I 'm gonna lose my shit.

I've taken walks, gotten hopped up on sugar, and breathed in the ocean air, but nothing seems to be working. It's been nearly a week, and all I have to show for it is two lousy chapters.

I confirmed with Emily that my novel needs to be at least ninety thousand words. When she emailed back to tell me that a hundred thousand would be even better, I faceplanted onto my desk and groaned for a solid minute. I'm even further behind than I thought.

This is the fucking worst.

And because my day just keeps getting better, my phone rings out with ominous music. It's Peter beeping through on FaceTime.

"And the hits keep coming," I say as I answer the call.

Peter gives me a faux-offended look. "I'm just checking in on my dear little brother! For all we know, your Tracey—"

"Teddie," I answer before I can stop myself. I immediately regret opening my mouth when Peter gives me a mischievous grin.

"Right," he drawls. "Tawney—"

I suck on my teeth. "Pete. Petey. Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater..."

He snorts and raises an eyebrow. "I thought you were never going to call me that again."

"Well, you're intentionally goading me."

His grin quirks up at the sides. "I'd call it more of a test. You failed, by the way."

"What? How could I fail?" I blurt out before relaxing back into my seat. "I mean, I don't know what you're testing, but

I'm good at taking tests. I'm quite intelligent."

Peter shakes his head in amusement. "And yet you fall for my tricks every time. I can't lie, though. I rather enjoy it."

I'm getting annoyed that he's beating around the bush. "What was the test?"

"Well, I thought I'd check and see how you're getting on with... Teddie." I narrow my eyes at him, and he rolls his before adding, "Yeah, I knew her name. And the fact that you corrected me means you know it too."

I lift an eyebrow. "Of course, I know it. We've been together for five days, fourteen hours, and twenty-seven minutes. Give or take."

"So, you'd say your routine has been shaken up? And how does that make you feel?"

"Don't lose sight of your qualifications, Peter. You're a pencil pusher, not a therapist."

He shrugs. "My plan is working. I don't care what you say. You obviously like her since you've felt bothered enough to remember her name. She might be just what you need."

I grunt and lean back in my chair, far enough to crack my back. "What I *need* is peace and quiet. What I *need* is time alone. But what I *get* is Teddie."

"What do you mean?" Peter cocks his head to the side like a dog trying to understand his owner's gibberish.

"She's everywhere, all the time! Whenever I leave my room, she's in the kitchen baking cookies or cakes or whatever the fuck she's making for the day."

Peter gives a low whistle. "Sounds rough."

I glare at him, trying to think of other things I find annoying about Teddie. "She's always... humming or singing."

"Yikes. Can't carry a tune?"

I throw my hands up. "No! Always on-key with perfect pitch, which makes it even worse! She's like an angelic little

songbird.”

Peter gives me a sarcastic look through the screen. “Ah, yes, that must be fucking horrible.”

“And she’s practically sunshine in a sundress. I’m losing my goddamn mind.” I run my fingers through my hair as if to showcase the point. “I know this is all some sort of cover, like she has a nefarious plot to snuff me out before I can leave a bad review or something.”

Peter shakes his head at me. “Oh, my sweet, naïve little brother... You’re in a mess—that’s for sure. Let me tell you what’s actually going to happen.” He leans in closer, so I mimic his movements. “You’re going to fall in love with this woman and stay in Christmas Key forever.”

“It’s Candy Cane Key,” I reply robotically before realizing what he said and sputtering. “That’s *never* going to happen!”

Peter starts laughing so hard he doubles over.

Fed up with him, I huff, “Goodbye, Peter, you devious dolt,” before hanging up.

I lay my phone face down on the desk and try to refocus on my laptop. I have my manuscript open in front of me, but my cursor is just blinking back at me—mocking me—as I try to come up with the next sentence to write. As I’m thinking of how to continue with the scene, the smell of cinnamon wafts into my room, distracting me. Teddie must be baking. Again.

Why does she have to do this every day? How does she expect me to write under these distracting conditions?

Finally fed up, I push away from the desk and stand. I stride with purpose into the kitchen, where I see her standing with her back to me. She’s humming a song I don’t recognize, but I’m sure it’s Christmas themed.

“What’s in the oven?” I demand.

She stops humming and turns around. Our gazes meet, and her wide, disarming smile causes me to falter. Sparkling blue eyes crinkle at the corners, and I swear my heart stops beating in my chest.

It's so unfair. How can someone so annoying be so attractive?

“Snickerdoodles!” she replies gleefully.

Trying to focus, I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest. “Didn’t you bake oatmeal chocolate chip cookies yesterday?”

She raises an eyebrow. “Yes.”

“And weren’t there some kind of meringue cookies the day before that?”

“Good memory,” she quips, leaning against the counter.

“And the second day I was here, you made... What were they? Hidden Kiss cookies, right?”

Her lips twitch up. “Yes. I’m starting to think you didn’t read any of my terms before booking. It clearly says *fresh-baked cookies every day*.”

I figured she would do it often, but *every day*? I’m unable to stop the next word from tumbling out of my mouth. “Why?”

She shrugs like it’s no big deal to constantly be whipping up homemade goods. “Because my guests like fresh cookies.”

I throw my arms out in front of me. “Nope. Nuh-uh. I’m not buying it.”

“What do you mean?” Her brow wrinkles. “I thought you liked my cookies.”

“I do.” When she starts to smile again, I backtrack. “I mean, I’m sure anyone with tastebuds likes your cookies, but there *is* a possibility of too much of a good thing.”

Teddie ignores the fact I complimented and insulted her in one breath. “Well, most guests don’t stay an entire month.”

“Most guests aren’t under a soul-crushing deadline. Which brings me to my next question—”

She groans. “Lord, here we go.”

I disregard her adorable snark. “I heard you in the kitchen this morning. Around seven? Is that a normal occurrence?”

“Yes.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m an early riser. Should I add that as a warning on the VRBO listing too?”

I push back my shoulders and ignore the way Teddie’s eyes momentarily flicked to my chest. “Possibly. You wake up early every day?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I was afraid of that.”

She waits for me to elaborate. When I don’t, she asks, “Is there anything else you need?”

I think for a moment. “No. That’s all. Carry on.”

She gives me a distrusting look but turns around to grab more ingredients from the fridge. With her back to me, I grab a cookie from the pile on the Santa plate.

Surely, she won’t notice just one missing, right?

When I get back to my room, I sit down at the desk, feeling no more motivated than I did ten minutes ago.

Teddie seems to be the common denominator when it comes to why I can’t write anything, but it’s just because she’s always around. If I try to write when she’s not, I’m sure I’ll be able to bang out at least five chapters in one sitting. I’ll do it late at night when she’s sleeping. I’ll even be able to use the kitchen counter, so I have more space to spread out my notes. I bite into the sugary confection I just swiped.

If there’s ever a moment when Teddie’s not using it for cookies, that is.

Teddie

The house is dark and quiet, with the only illumination coming from the warm, amber glow of the stove light.

The still of the night makes the ticking of the grandfather clock across the room seem much louder than it actually is. It's late. Well, technically early morning, since it's after midnight. I'm sitting at the bar in the kitchen, researching the menu I want to prepare for tomorrow. Even though I have the most energy in the morning, I do my best thinking at night. I'm sure it has to do with how silent and calm the world is at this time. It's relaxing and puts me at ease.

I'm scrolling through a chicken recipe when I hear a faint creak. A smile spreads across my face when I turn around and see Nate walk out of his room with his laptop tucked under his arm.

Fresh from a shower, his damp hair is slicked back. It gives me a clear view of his gorgeous face, and my breath catches in my throat. His black tank top hugs his body, showing the contour of his chiseled abs. *Where does a writer get abs like those?* And his muscular arms are displayed in all their mouth-watering glory.

But all of that I can ignore. I can pretend it doesn't turn me on to see his biceps flex as he pushes his hair back or imagine how his bare chest would look if he ripped off his shirt. I mean, that's what I've been doing for the past two weeks anyway. But I've pushed down my growing attraction to Nate because it's unprofessional, and I don't want to freak him out.

That being said, what really gets my heart pumping is how he struts out of his room with a sliver of his toned stomach peeking from under his shirt. Coupled with low-slung sleep pants that showcase the sharp V of his hips, I have to force my gaze away from where that V is pointing. Yet, when I look up, Nate is frowning at me.

My face flames, and I'm about to apologize when he grumbles, "You're here."

I tilt my head, and my eyebrows cinch together. “Well, I live here.”

“No.” He shakes his head and rubs his eye. “I mean, *here*. In the kitchen, at—” He glances past my shoulder to look at the clock on the stove. “Almost two a.m.”

I clear my throat. “Of course. A lot goes into running a VRBO, you know.”

He keeps staring at me like I have two heads. “But I mean...” He looks around, seemingly defeated. “Do you sleep here or something? Is there a pillow hidden in the dishwasher that I missed?”

His joke catches me off guard, and I laugh. He also seems surprised at my amusement, and his face softens.

“No,” I tell him, tucking my hair behind my ear. “But that’s not a bad idea. I’ll have to look into some waterproof pillows.”

He shifts his laptop to his other hand. “I ask because I’ve never *not* seen you in here. Are you getting enough sleep?”

I blow a raspberry and return to my laptop, clicking a new recipe link. “I sleep... Dad.” I snicker.

“Clearly not enough,” he scoffs from somewhere behind me. “How are you so alert? And perky? Is it drugs? It’s drugs, isn’t it?”

I roll my eyes as I scroll down the webpage. “Maybe she’s born with it. Maybe it’s methamphetamines,” I sing to the tune of the familiar cosmetics commercial. When he doesn’t respond for a few seconds, I get paranoid that he didn’t catch my sarcasm, so I turn my head to assure him. “I’m joking. I don’t do dru—”

The rest of my sentence dies on my tongue when I notice he’s come so close behind me that I can smell the bergamot of the shampoo he used. He glances at my laptop, but then he blinks, and those dark eyes are on mine. I thought his eyes were a deep brown, but up close, I can see the tiny flecks of gold in his irises. He’s so beautiful it makes my chest ache, and my gaze dips down to his lips.

I want to kiss him is the only thought that ricochets around in my head.

When I look at him again, I'm genuinely worried that, for a split second, he can read my mind because his eyes are *burning*. His stare is so intense that I swear the few centimeters of air between us spark with electricity.

I suck in a shaky breath, inadvertently inhaling more of his delicious scent, and my pussy throbs. The world is frozen for a few moments—or maybe it's hours—until I feel like I'm about to burst.

“*Nate?*” His name is a whisper, or a moan, or a plea. Maybe all of the above. I'm not entirely sure, but it causes him to spring into action.

He closes the small gap between us as his lips crash into mine. It's like a dam has burst, and all of the awkward, pent-up tension that's been brewing for the past two weeks is finally released.

I gasp against his mouth, and he takes advantage, slipping his tongue inside. I shiver in my seat as my core throbs again. This isn't like any other first kiss I've ever had. This is consuming and passionate and *hungry*. He's devouring me, and I'm not going to do a thing to stop him.

His mouth moves over mine as if he's been holding back until this exact moment, and that thought makes my head spin. He trails his kisses from my lips, to my jaw, up to my ear. Like he can't bear the concept of not kissing me. Then he whispers something that stops my heart midbeat.

“Tell me to stop, Teddie.” His voice is husky with lust and desire.

My trembling hand fists his shirt. I'm panting as my arousal begins to slicken my pussy. My brain is scrambled, but I've never wanted anything more than to lie naked beneath this man.

“Don't stop,” I moan, wanting his mouth back on mine.

He doesn't make me wait and captures my mouth again. Only, this time, his kiss is slower, more sensual. He wants this

too, and that ratchets up my desire to a level I didn't think was possible.

In one swift movement, Nate scoops me up from my chair, wrapping my legs around his hips and cupping my ass through my thin shorts. I yelp in surprise, but he quickly swallows the sound. I want to tell him he doesn't have to carry me since I'm not exactly a light-weight. But he doesn't struggle in the slightest, and I'm distracted when his large hands massage the globes of my ass.

He glides his thumbs beneath the flimsy cloth of my shorts, and for once, I'm thankful it's laundry day and I ran out of clean panties. Now, I get to feel his calloused fingertips caress my bare skin. He gathers the fabric together like a thong, firmly tugging it so it rubs against my clit. I moan and tighten my legs around him.

The world is spinning, and I barely register that he's walking us to his room. I'm lost in his kisses when he drops me on top of his bed and crawls over me. His gaze slides up my body, and goosebumps break out on my skin.

He notices the rapid rise and fall of my chest, and zeroes in on my breasts. His eyes return to my face, and he holds my stare while snaking his hand under my shirt. Slowly, my stomach and chest are exposed, and my nipples harden from the chilled air. Excitement swirls inside me while I anticipate his next move.

After what feels like an eternity, he glances down to my bared skin and lets out a hiss. "*Fuck*, Teddie. Do you have any idea how sexy your body is?"

The answer is *no*, but he doesn't give me a chance to respond. He leans down and closes his lips around my nipple, massaging my other breast until my body arches into his touch.

"*Nate!*" I cry out when he nibbles my sensitive flesh, a jolt of electricity running straight to my pussy. My hands fist the sheets, and my head tosses to the side as I try to control the moans begging to escape.

His mouth moves to my other breast while his hand slides down between my legs. I gasp as his tongue lavishes me with attention and his fingers stroke my glistening slit through the opening of my shorts. They need to come off so I get more of his exquisite touch.

“Off,” I pant, wiggling my hips. “Take them off.”

He smirks before relieving me of the offending garment in less than two seconds. I have no idea where he tosses it, but I couldn’t care less as long as he’s touching me. His fingers slide up and down between my lips, coating them with my arousal as he teases my clit. I’m so turned on it hurts, and all I can think about is how much I want him inside me.

“Please, Nate,” I keened, circling my hips beneath his hand.

“Soon, baby.” He licks at my breast, pulling my nipple between his teeth before biting the sensitive skin of my neck. “I have to stretch you first. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I want to scoff and protest that I’ll be fine, but then he drops his hips against my thigh, and I feel something incredibly hard and almost as thick as a soda can rub against me.

Where’s he been packing all that?

I whimper with need, but now understand why he wants to take his time. I’m grateful, though. I haven’t exactly had a thriving sex life in the past six months or, to be honest, the past year. And when I have guests in the house, including Nate, I don’t feel comfortable using any of my, *ahem*, mechanical boyfriends that I keep tucked in a box underneath my bed. That being said, I’m sure things could use a little... loosening up.

But I’m pulled out of my head when two long, thick fingers finally slide inside me. Breathless, I grab his shoulder to tug him closer, and he obliges, slotting his body between my legs while my mouth drops open with pleasure.

The repeated drag of his fingers along my walls is enough to have me coming undone. But that’s clearly not what Nate wants, and he slows his movements, hovering his hand over

my core so his palm doesn't rub against my clit. It drives me crazy in the best possible way.

He must read my thoughts because he slips a third digit in and begins to stroke my walls, ramping up the intensity. His fingers slowly pump in and out, curling toward him and brushing against my G-spot. My arousal soaks my inner thighs and drips down my ass, no doubt wetting the sheets beneath me. My hips roll as I fuck myself on his fingers until Nate suddenly pulls away. I mewl at the loss of his touch while my empty pussy clenches around nothing.

"Na-ate," I cry, lifting my hips and spreading my legs. If I were in my right mind, I'd be embarrassed by my behavior. But, in this moment, I feel drunk on desire, and the only thing that can appease my need is getting Nate—any part of him—back inside me so I can ride him to completion.

"Holy shit," he breathes out. His free hand drops to my thigh, massaging close to my core. I moan and lift my chin so I can see him. He's staring at me in awe and lust. "Look at you, Teddie. Who knew under all that tinsel and Christmas cheer, there was a needy little elf begging to be fucked."

I can't help the pout that forms on my lips, and I want to tell him he's wrong—that I'm not needy and would be fine without him. But we'd both know that's a lie because if he doesn't make me come soon, I just might die.

He chuckles, and the rich, deep sound makes my pussy twitch, causing me to whine. "I'm sorry, baby. Did the Grinch hurt your feelings?"

I nod because I don't trust my voice, and the side of his mouth curls up into a smug smile.

"Well, I'll tell you a secret, Teddie Bear." His voice drops to a growl as he lowers his body over mine. His clothed chest brushes my bare nipples, and his lips graze the shell of my ear. "I like seeing you like this, dripping wet and begging for me."

"Please, Nate." My body begins to writhe beneath him.

He puts me out of my misery, rising off me to remove his clothes. I only get a second to appreciate his muscular

physique before his thick, hard dick glides through my slick lips, making me gasp. He's not inside me yet, but I can feel how big his cock is.

I whisper his name in a breathy plea, and he *finally* presses into me.

I drag in a lungful of air as heat flashes through my body. He's moving agonizingly slow while he fills every millimeter of space inside me, the delicious stretch burning so good. I'm thankful he took the time to loosen me up because it's still a tight fit, and I can't image the pain I'd feel if he hadn't. I force myself to relax while my pussy accommodates his large size.

"That's it, Teddie," he rasps, his face still tucked into my neck. "Fuck, you're squeezing my dick, but you fit me so well."

Without thinking, my walls clamp down at his compliment. He groans, his hips stuttering their movement.

After a small eternity, he's fully seated, with our hips flush together. My breaths are choppy while I acclimate to his intrusion. "Gah, you're so big, Nate," I slur, pushing my hips against him to get friction on my clit.

He presses on my hip and holds me in place. I want to complain, but he rises on his elbow, and I see his gorgeous face. Flushed cheeks and dilated pupils. His nostrils flare with each hard breath. My heart flutters when I realize he's just as affected as I am. After two weeks of him always being put together, it's nice to see him come undone.

"No, baby. Give it a minute, because once I start, I won't be able to stop."

His words send a shiver down my spine and do nothing for my patience. I push against his hand, but he keeps me firmly in place. He won't let me fuck myself on his cock. Instead, he lowers his face and captures my lips in a kiss.

This isn't like before. There's no clashing of tongues or teeth; there's no desperation that either of us is going to suddenly disappear. Right now, it's tender... Almost chaste.

If his dick weren't inside me...

His mouth moves carefully, delicately against mine. It makes what we're doing feel sinful and indulgent, the dichotomy making me tremble.

I shift away until our lips barely touch and beg, "Now, Nate. *Please.*"

My words release whatever restraint he has, and he sits up, grabbing my hips with both hands. Without another word, he slides his cock from my core before rolling his hips to fuck it back into me. With a sharp, swift thrust, the air is forced from my lungs, and I begin making noises that would have a porn star blushing.

Yeah, it feels that good.

His cock fills me perfectly, and the way he's gliding in and out, rubbing against my walls and reaching the deepest parts of me, has me seeing stars and stuttering my words.

He starts off slow, maybe still worried he's going to hurt me. But upon reading the enjoyment on my face, he moves faster and harder until he's slamming inside me like he can't get deep enough.

"*F-fuck!*" I cry as ecstasy runs through my veins. "Nate! *Mmph! Oh!*"

"You look so beautiful like this, Teddie Bear. All fucked out on my cock." His voice is a growl, and every word takes me closer to the edge.

I whimper and drop a hand to my clit, rubbing small circles.

"Aw, are you close to coming, baby? You gonna come on my cock for me?" He smirks, but his tight abs and twitching dick says he's close too.

My loud moan is all the answer he needs, and he smiles at me. Leaning down, he nips and licks at my neck, receiving the same heated response he elicited from my body earlier. The way he's pounding into me, the flick of his tongue against my skin, and my quick strokes across my clit have me coming undone in a matter of seconds.

My pussy clamps around his cock, and I come with a gasp. I throw my head back, and he captures my lips, kissing me passionately and heightening my orgasm. He slows his movements but doesn't stop, relishing the sensation of me clenching around him.

In post-orgasmic bliss, my hand falls to my side, and he takes over teasing my clit. His casual thrusts and gentle touch keep me floating high beyond the edge. Then, my pussy gives a final flutter before my body relaxes against the bed, my limbs consisting of jelly.

"I'm not done with you, Teddie Bear." He pushes my thighs back and apart, as his hips pick up speed.

"Na-ate," I whine, both hating and loving that he's still going even though I can barely handle it.

"I'm almost there, baby," he confirms breathlessly before pinching my nipple and making me cry out. "Be good for me and make me come."

My eyes close, and my core spasms at his words. I move against him, fucking myself on his thick cock as wetness drips from my throbbing pussy. His weight bears down on my legs while he plunges his dick deep inside me with short, hard flicks of his hips. Euphoric tears roll from my eyes, and I drag my nails down his back, trying to ground myself to something. My knees are almost to the mattress, and I feel him everywhere, seemingly as desperate to come as I am to see it. Another orgasm stirs in my belly, and I pray he's close behind me.

Just as my hips rise, my hands find purchase on his muscular forearms, and my climax rips through me, a primal groan escapes his lips as he comes inside me. Tightly gripping my body, he continues fucking me through his release in an almost hypnotic state as he watches his glistening dick glide slowly in and out. I can't explain it, but I find it so erotic and sexy.

I'm suddenly caught off guard when another orgasm takes me by surprise as I think about Nate's cum being deep inside me. I'm on birth control, so I'm not worried about that. It's

more about being marked by this insanely gorgeous man and knowing I'm the one who made him lose control.

We stay where we are, my rounded fingernails repeatedly running down his back while he gently rests on top of me like he can't bear the thought of our bodies separating. I slightly turn my head, once again inhaling the fragrant scent of his bergamot shampoo and spicy sandalwood soap. His fingers stroke the delicate skin of my sides, lulling me into a relaxed state until my legs release from around his hips and fall open to the sides.

My heart rate finally slows, and Nate pulls back, dragging his softened cock through my walls one last time before it pops out of my deliciously sore pussy. I feel his cum dripping out of me, but I can't be bothered to clean it up. Exhaustion has hit me like a freight train, and I'm no match for the seductive mistress of sleep.

Nate stirs above me, and my arms limply fall onto the bed as my heavy eyelids begin to drift closed.

"Teddie," he whispers, his tone lacking some of the confidence it held only moments ago. Like he's afraid to shatter this fragile moment between us. "That was..."

"*Awesome*," I slur out, giving into the heaviness setting into my limbs.

He chuckles, warm and rich, and brushes a stray tendril away from my face. "I was going to say something perhaps more poetic. But, yes, that was certainly *awesome*."

The bed shifts, and I focus my vision to see him getting up and walking away. A mix of annoyance and dejection rises in my throat at the sight of his back when he moves to the bathroom door, and I prop myself up on my elbows.

"Where are you going?" I hate how pathetic and immature I sound, but the idea that he would leave immediately after being intimate terrifies me.

He pauses and turns around, seeing my hackles raised, before tilting his head and smiling softly. "I'm just going to get a washcloth. I can't imagine *that*..." His gaze darts down

to the sticky mess between my spread legs. "...is all that comfortable." It's not the best view from this angle, but it's enough that I can see him stroke his cock a few times, as if the sight of my cum-filled pussy gets him riled up again. But he pushes aside his arousal and clears his throat. "Lie down, Teddie Bear. I'll be right back."

Before I can say anything, he struts into the bathroom and out of earshot. With nothing else to do, I follow his instructions and curl up on the bed. I try to stay awake, knowing we should talk about what happened. But as soon as my head hits the pillow, my eyelids flutter closed.

Surely, I haven't been dozing long when I feel something warm and wet dragging in gentle circles along my swollen pussy. I wince softly as I crack open an eye, spotting Nate crouched on one knee by the bed, holding a washcloth against my skin. He's working carefully and reverently, cleaning up every drop of arousal and cum from my tired body.

When he sees me watching him, his mouth forms a lopsided grin, and he moves forward to press an affectionate kiss to my lips. He's worn me out, and I can barely pucker up to kiss him back, but he doesn't seem to mind.

"Go to sleep, baby. I'll get you cleaned for the morning."

His honeyed voice is a lullaby singing me to sleep, and my eyes slip shut again. I embrace the slumber, relishing the first time a man has ever taken care of me.

Maybe this is something a girl should get used to.

Nate

For the first time since arriving in this godforsaken state, I'm not awakened by blinding sunlight in the morning.

Instead, what has me alert and conscious as I blink open my eyes is the unexpected empty space on the opposite side of my bed. Suddenly, I'm wide awake and immediately push up on my elbows.

Where the fuck is Teddie?

My fingers test the sheets, feeling the warmth of the fabric. At least I know she hasn't been gone for long, but that does little to put my mind at ease. I frown as I stare at her recently vacated spot, as if the void in my bed will leave a similar void in my chest. I've slept alone for this entire trip, but now, for some inexplicable reason, that fact seems to piss me off. I have no good explanation for it, and I've never felt this way before. But it's as if Teddie carved out a piece of me last night, and she took it with her when she snuck out on me this morning. Although I'll never admit this to anyone, I already miss her lying next to me.

Determined not to overthink this—as I typically do all things—I throw the covers off my body, deciding to prepare for the day. I hear the faint whir of the dishwasher in the kitchen, and when I hold my breath, remaining as quiet as possible, I can barely make out the sound of subtle humming.

There she is.

My muscles relax when I confirm her proximity, then I silently chastise myself for acting so clingy after a one-night stand.

What the fuck did you expect, Nate? That she'd be cuddled up in your arms and you'd wake her up with dick and kisses? That you'd make her breakfast in bed, instead of her cooking for you like usual?

I rub my eyes, removing the sleep and ridding myself of the ridiculous fantasy I had foolishly concocted. No, of course,

she wouldn't want that from the tourist vacationing in her house. Pushing away all thoughts of cuddling Teddie, I step over to the desk and open my laptop.

This has been my routine every morning, pulling up my manuscript to reread what I've previously written before trying to draft the next scene. The key word is *trying* because I've had little to no success with this technique. I usually stare at the screen for half an hour before giving up and getting my first coffee of the day.

However, today must be special because as soon as I open my document, I start typing. Rapid-fire typing without stopping.

Ideas are formalizing quicker than they have in years. The words are flowing, the dialogue is progressing, and the descriptions are almost lyrical and poetic. My fingers move hurriedly across the keyboard, attempting to keep up with the frenzied thoughts in my head.

And before I realize how long I've been working, I've added two more chapters to my growing manuscript. Sure, I'll have to revise them later this afternoon, but I know they're some of the best ones I've written in a while.

Laughing, I slump in my seat and rest my head on the edge of the chair back as I look at the ceiling. I'd once thought my writing mojo was gone for good and I'd never get it back. Yet it seems like all I needed was a beautiful Christmas sprite to get my head on straight and make the words start flowing again. But it'll be a cold day in hell before I ever tell my fucking big brother he was right.

I stand and stretch my arms over my head, feeling my bones shift with a satisfying *pop*. Thinking it's past time I washed up, I step into the shower and turn the knob, adjusting the temperature until the spray is shy of scalding. I never did get dressed this morning, so it takes no time to strip out of my black boxer briefs from last night. Once I'm beneath the running stream, I tilt my face toward the showerhead, allowing the hot water to relax my body.

Gliding a sudsy cloth along my heated skin reminds me of when I cleaned up a sexy little elf lying in my bed. Truthfully, I didn't want to. *God, I didn't want to.* I wanted her just the way she was, with a delicate sheen of sweat making her curvy body glow in the moonlight—her full tits soft and supple, tipped with hardened, mouth-watering nipples.

She was so vulnerable for me, as I pressed her thighs back and open, revealing her pretty pink pussy. The same pussy that was swollen and throbbing and still clenching even as she drifted to sleep with my cum inside her. Like an arrogant jerk, I couldn't stop my smirk when I saw it trickle down the cleft of her ass. Our cum mixed together on the beautiful canvas of her smooth, bare skin made it physically hurt to wipe away all traces of what we'd done. My primal instincts wanted to leave it as some sort of claim that would keep other men at bay. Yet the more sensible side of me thought better of it and wanted her to be comfortable while she slept.

But the image of her perfectly cream-pied pussy is seared into my brain forever. And even now, hours later, the thought of it makes my cock hard. I try to ignore my mounting arousal and continue with my shower, but the washcloth dragging along my hip only reminds me of cleaning Teddie's warm, pliant flesh. I can still hear her sleepy gasps when I would brush too close to her sensitive clit.

I laugh, remembering being jealous of a scrap of cotton that was close enough to *taste* her pussy. I was dying to put my mouth on her, to let my tongue slowly glide through her swollen pussy lips and bring her back to the edge of an orgasm. But she was quickly drifting off to sleep, and I didn't want to be a selfish asshole. That doesn't stop me from thinking about it now, though, and wanting it just as much as I did last night.

Fuck...

My cock aches, now hard as steel, as I register the sting of the water when it hits the scratches she left across my back. She may seem annoyingly sweet and bubbly, but beneath all the tinsel, she's a vixen who drives me crazy.

I grab the base of my cock and lightly squeeze, mimicking her pussy wrapping around me. She felt so good last night, so *right*, as if the two of us were pieces of a puzzle finally fitting together. I'm chasing that feeling again while knowing this'll never come close.

I can still taste the sweetness of her skin on my tongue, like those damn sugar cookies she keeps baking. What I wouldn't give to tease her with a few licks, knowing every inch of her would be fucking delicious.

I usually draw my orgasm out, letting myself enjoy the buildup. But this one's coming on fast because I can still see Teddie's pretty pussy covered with cum every time I close my eyes. I taste her every time I swipe my tongue across my lips. Feel her luscious curves pressed against my body.

And when my name begins to repeat in my head in her breathy little moan, I completely lose it. My hips stutter, and my hand is a blur as it moves up and down my throbbing cock. Cum spurts out, landing on the shower wall, and I'm left as breathless as she was in my memory while I stroke myself through my release. A few remaining trickles of cum continue to drip until I'm fully satisfied and my cock softens. Then, the post-nut clarity sets in, and I'm embarrassed by what I've done.

I rinse away the evidence, then quickly finish washing my body, trying to push every sexy thought of Teddie out of my mind. She's not my girlfriend, or fuck-buddy, or even really a friend, so I don't exactly have the right to think of her while I'm masturbating, right? Even if that was one of the best solo sessions I've had in months.

I dry myself off and attempt to shut down my brain, but every avenue of thought leads back to her.

These are pretty nice towels. Probably because Teddie always wants her guests to be comfortable.

I wonder if it will rain today? If it does, Teddie won't have to water the plants outside.

A good night's sleep helped me finally get some writing done. Who am I kidding? Sex with Teddie helped me get some writing done.

“This’ll be fine,” I tell my reflection as I brace my hands on the bathroom sink. “Just steer clear of her for a while and you’ll put her out of your head. Spend the day writing, and stay out of the rest of the house unless you absolutely need something.”

Yeah, that’s a great game plan. I’ll just get some coffee from the kitchen and then hole myself up in my room for the rest of the day. Everything will be fine.

It’s gonna be fine.

I slip on a t-shirt and mesh basketball shorts before heading to the bedroom door.

Everything will be fine, I repeat to myself. *As long as I don’t see—*

Teddie is standing outside my door when I open it, with her usual bright, cheerful smile. I’m blinded by her sunshine for a second and don’t immediately notice the navy-blue coffee mug that she’s holding. Without a single word, she thrusts it at me, and I instinctively reach to take it.

I look at her, look at the mug, then back at her. “I use this cup every morning.”

Her eyes crinkle at the corners in a way I refuse to acknowledge as *cute*. “I know,” she confirms, no hint of condensation in her voice, just pure kindness.

“How?” I’m still astonished, and she giggles.

“Because, unlike some people, *I* pay attention to those around me.” Her tone is still light, and a flush goes through me when I realize she’s *teasing* me.

I clear my throat and straighten my posture, trying to cover up any fluster she may have caused. “It’s a nice gesture, Teddie, but I like it—”

“With a hint of cream and three heaping spoonfuls of real sugar.” She counts off her fingers and then glances back at me

as if daring me to prove her wrong.

“You really *do* pay attention. That’s borderline creepy, you know.” I resist the urge to roll my eyes at myself.

Can’t I ever not be a dick? Why can’t I accept this with a charming smile and a wink? It’s times like these I wish I were a little more like Peter and able to wear my heart on my sleeve.

But Teddie isn’t deterred by my asshole behavior and laughs it off. “*You* would know.” I blink at her, and she rolls her eyes playfully before clarifying. “You know, because you write thrillers and other creepy stuff?”

Afraid I’m going to say something to piss her off—which is highly likely—I just nod in response.

She steps forward and tilts her head to the side. For a moment, I’m both terrified and relieved that it seems like she’s going to kiss me. It’s been less than twelve hours, and I already miss the way her lips feel against mine.

As my eyes slip shut, her hand lands on my chest, and she gives me a gentle press backward into my room. My feet shuffle, and my eyes pop open.

“Go write,” she directs, before pulling her hand away. “We’ll talk later.”

My mouth gapes open and closed like a guppie, but I nod and take my coffee before closing the door. A part of me was hoping she would stop me from putting that barrier between us. But when my door fully shuts, I sigh and resign myself to my fate for the day. It’s what I said I wanted, but it still feels wrong.

I settle into my chair and log into my computer. Again, the words come as easily to me as they did an hour ago and I send a silent *thank you* to whatever god is in charge of writing and books.

Maybe there’s hope I’ll finish this manuscript on time after all.

Teddie

“Yoo-hoo, anyone home?” A familiar voice greets me from the front door.

“I’m in here!” I shout from the kitchen as I squeeze some food coloring into the frosting mix.

Rose saunters in and glares at me as she sits down at the table. “It’s been a lifetime since I’ve seen you, girl. What gives? Is Mr. Big Time Writer keeping you *that* busy?”

My hand stutters and I laugh off her accusation, although it’s the truth.

It’s been three weeks since Nate arrived here and almost one week since we had sex. And we’ve fallen into a routine from that first night. Every morning, I bring him coffee in his navy-blue mug, switching up the creamer to determine his favorites. Then, I let him write for a few hours before knocking on his door for lunch. We always eat together now, out on the lanai. And lately, he insists on doing the dishes after every meal. I’ve tried to tell him it’s literally my job to clean up after my guests, but he brushes me off and snatches up my plate before I can stop him.

In the afternoons, he writes some more, until I drag him from his laptop to eat dinner. I appreciate his work ethic, but authors need to eat too. Then, after dinner, we sit on the couch with my daily batch of fresh cookies and enjoy the glow of the Christmas tree still decorated with miniature books for National Authors Day. We never snuggle like I so desperately want to, but we’re usually close enough that his thigh presses against mine and he teases me with innocent touches. It’s torturously chaste, and I both love and hate it.

Every night, we talk about his book. He reads me passages and we brainstorm subplots while munching on cookies—sugar cookies are his favorite, so I make them often. He even asks me my opinion on certain aspects of his work. He’s a brilliant writer, and I’m honored he cares what I think.

Usually, I agree with the direction he's going for the plot or his characters, but occasionally I offer a different perspective. He never gets offended or defensive, which honestly surprises me. He just gives me an appreciative smile, making the butterflies in my belly flutter more with each passing day.

We don't have sex every night but we can't deny the attraction that's constantly simmering between us. Some nights, he's focused on his writing and I don't want to distract him. But I can't say it doesn't hurt a little to sleep without him now that I know how it feels to spend the night in his arms. So, on those nights, I end up shoving my hand down my panties, remembering how hot it was watching his face as he came inside me. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

But I try to push all those thoughts aside and focus on Rose in front of me.

She impatiently taps her finger on the table. "Well?"

"Well, what?" I press a hand to my warmed cheeks in an attempt to cool them down. "Sorry, I lost my train of thought. What were we talking about?"

Her eyes narrow, then she opens her mouth to reply, but suddenly Nate joins us in the kitchen. I can't stop my instant smile, but I notice the suspicious look Rose gives me before turning her attention to my guest.

"Nate, you remember Rose, right?" I keep my tone light, hoping Rose will do the same in spite of our previous interaction.

"Mr. Author only cares about his book. I doubt he remembers a feeble ol' lady like me," she grumbles, turning her nose up. She apparently did not pick up my hint.

Nate doesn't take the bait and, instead, he just smiles and nods at her. "Of course, I remember. Nice to see you again, Rose."

She mutters something under her breath, but Nate and I ignore it. Turning toward him, I ask, "Do you need something?"

He sheepishly raises his coffee mug. “Just a refill.”

“Coming right up!” I twirl around to grab the carafe I just finished brewing and pour the steaming liquid into his cup. Before he can say anything, I add a shot of peppermint vanilla creamer and three spoonfuls of sugar.

“Thanks, Teddie.” He takes a sip as I hold my breath, waiting for his verdict. It’s strange. I never cared much about what people thought about my cooking and baking before. But every time Nate tries something I’ve made, I feel like I can’t breathe until he gives me his opinion.

“Mmm, I like it,” he moans. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

I giggle at his compliment and give him a wave as he retreats to his room. When the door clicks shut, Rose snorts, causing me to jump. I’d completely forgotten she was here.

“Geez! What’s that for?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Well, I may not know what Teddie in mourning looks like, but dare I say I know what Teddie *in love* looks like.” She gestures to me with a sharply raised eyebrow.

“Wha... That’s not... It isn’t...” I sputter before clearing my throat and shaking my head. “You’re so silly, Rose.”

She grunts. “I’m serious. And I’m a little worried too.”

I return to the frosting I abandoned and continue to mix the green coloring into the sugary goodness. “You have no reason to be worried. I’m not in love,” I insist.

“He’s *vacation people*,” she explains as if that’s supposed to mean something significant.

“Um, I know...”

“Do you?” Her voice is high-pitched with worry. “He’s going to leave, Teddie. His life is elsewhere.”

My mixing gets harsher as I consider her words. “I know that, but he’s an author. Technically, he can work anywhere.”

Rose sighs and shakes her head. “But you do know that after this month, there’s a good chance he won’t work from *here*, right?”

I bristle, dropping the mixing bowl onto the counter. “I know that, Rose.” We’re both surprised by my clipped tone as I’m not usually short with her. My shoulders sag and my voice softens to a whisper. “It’s just... for now... can’t you just let me be happy?”

Rose stands and walks over to me, placing her hand on my back. “Oh, my sweet girl. I don’t want to see you get hurt. That’s all.”

I turn and wrap my arms around her in a warm hug. “I know. And I truly love you for that.”

She sighs again, then gives me a squeeze. “Okay, Teddie. Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” She playfully tugs on my hair. “But you enjoy that sexy hunk of man back there. Even for a little while.”

Laughing, I pull back and kiss her wrinkled cheek. She reminds me so much of my grandma. She stays a while longer, being my taste-tester for the frosting, as well as eating some leftover cookies. By the time she leaves, I’ve pumped her full of sugar and she’s happy, insisting she doesn’t need a take-home container because if she eats another cookie, she’ll explode.

So dramatic.

By the time noon rolls around, Nate resurfaces for lunch, and we eat on the lanai. As we dig into our chicken salad on croissants, the sun reflects off his finger-length locks, drawing my attention to him like a spotlight.

“You know,” I swallow my bite. He flicks his gaze to me, still chewing slowly. “I think your hair has gotten lighter since you’ve been here. The sun does that to some people.”

He rubs a few strands between his fingers. “Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

I shrug and go back to my sandwich, shoving it into my mouth before I accidentally say what I really want to: *I*

noticed. I've noticed everything about you since you got here.

I try to stay in the moment, letting the midday rays shine down on us, and laughing when Nate gets chicken salad on his nose. But it seems like there's a storm coming, one I can't avoid.

Because—even if I try to pretend that isn't the case—this time next week, Nate will be gone... and I'll still be here, wanting to be with him.

Nate

I can't sit still.

I'm at my desk with bouncing knees and fingers that tap on everything other than my keyboard. The deadline is looming, and my stress is compounding by the minute. I'm making great progress, but I'm stumped yet again. This latest chapter is giving me a headache, and I don't know how to fix it. Of course, it also doesn't help that my brother keeps calling me almost every hour.

My phone rings, and I don't even look at the caller ID before picking up. "Are you done yet?" Peter questions, forgoing any pleasantries.

"No, dipshit," I growl, dropping my forehead to my hand. "And stop asking. Better yet, stop calling too while you're at it."

"When will you be done?" Peter prattles on as if he didn't hear me say that last part.

"You do realize this is the author equivalent of having a kid in the car asking *are we there yet*, right?"

"Maaay-be." He draws out the word like the twat he is.

"Definitely," I confirm. "Besides, I don't have time for your shit right now. I'm... a little stuck."

"Well, why didn't you say so, baby brother? Anything I can do?" My brother is annoying as fuck, but he's genuinely trying to be helpful, in his irritatingly immature Peter way. But the most helpful thing he can do right now is to stop calling me and that's never going to happen.

"I'm all set."

"Oh?" Peter knows I'm full of shit. "How many words have you written?"

"Eighty-six thousand." I squint at my word count. "Give or take."

Peter whistles. “My evil plan worked! You’re writing! Ha, I told you so!” *Such an ass.* “Guess I’ll have to start baking you cookies when you get writer’s block from now on.”

I snort. “It’s not the cookies.”

“Oh!” Peter chirps through the phone. “Well, even better. My baking is shit. So, what’s the new strategy then?”

I dodge the question. “You just want me to make as much money as possible before I keel over and leave everything to you.”

“You know, I’m getting sick of your empty promises. You always say you’ll *keel over* but never do. And right now, you don’t sound sick at all. In fact, you’ve never sounded healthier, happier, even—” He cuts himself off with a gasp. “Fuuuuuck!”

“What?” I ask, sitting straighter in my chair, on high alert.

“Your new ritual.” He snickers.

“What about it? I mean, what ritual?” I try to cover up my slip, but it doesn’t work because Peter begins to laugh uncontrollably.

“It’s Teddie, isn’t it?” There’s a pregnant pause when I don’t respond. “You and Teddie...” His voice trails off with a bad imitation of terrible 70s porno music.

“It’s not like that.” My face flames even though I know he can’t see me. “There is no *me and Teddie.*”

“Oh, yes, there is. And I want no part of... that particular ritual, so you’re on your own. I’m into kink, but not that kind.” The amusement in his voice seeps through the receiver.

“Good,” I say before I can stop myself, and Peter just laughs harder. “And by good, I mean *goodbye*, you twat-licker!”

Five minutes on the phone with my annoying brother and suddenly I’m fifteen again.

Peter tries to say something, but I hang up and immediately put the phone on silent. I want absolutely no more of his nonsense today.

Sighing, I look back to my computer screen, staring at the blinking cursor as it taunts me. After a couple minutes with nothing coming to mind, I push back from the desk and wander out to the kitchen.

Teddie is there, of course, and gives me her signature smile before opening up the oven. Just seeing her makes my shoulders relax, and I feel all of the tension from my call with Peter slip away.

“I’m just pulling out the last batch for today. Want one? They’re sugar cookies again, your favorite,” she sings, thinking it’s the cookies I like and not realizing the fact they’re the closest thing to her taste.

I swallow hard and watch her turn around to face me. “No, that’s not what I need right now.”

“Oh,” she says, confusion clouding her face. “Do you need a drink? I can grab a sweet tea for you.”

I shake my head and take a step closer to her. “I’m not thirsty either.”

She begins to worry. “Then what’s wrong?”

Not wanting her to feel used—because this somehow seems wrong but I know it’s what I need to clear my head and get me past this last block—I give myself one last second to back out. But I’m a selfish asshole. I want her, and I have to finish this book. “I’m stuck... with my writing.”

Understanding replaces her confusion. “*Oh!* Do you want some help? Maybe we could talk through some scenes?” She’s all too ready to jump in, taking off her red apron and hanging it up.

Her skin is flawless in a tank top and shorts. There’s a dusting of flour at the top of her ample cleavage that only adds to her charm. But it’s the fact that she’s completely unaware of her beauty that makes her so sexy.

“I don’t think talking is what I need right now.” My voice deepens as I inch toward her.

She doesn't move away. Instead, she tilts her head up, maintaining eye contact while allowing me to get lost in her clear blue eyes. I see her throat work as she swallows.

"Then," she whispers. "What do you need, Nate?"

My response is only the quiet press of my lips to hers. That sugary-sweet taste invades my senses as I swipe my tongue across her lips. She opens her mouth, letting me in, and I close the space between us, resting my hands on her hips.

"I need *you*, Teddie Bear. Can we—"

She doesn't let me finish my question before she brings her hands to my face and kisses me back, not at all quiet or gentle. It's like she can't bear to let me go. I'm about to suggest we go to my room when she starts walking backward, tugging me by my waistband without breaking our kiss. Our mouths work together as I keep us from walking into any furniture or walls.

When we finally make it to my room, we collapse onto the bed, where I catch myself on my forearms so I don't crush my precious muse underneath me. She giggles against my lips, and I have to stop myself from grinding against her because she's so *cute* it's almost infuriating.

Then I remember our current position—Teddie on her back and me between her legs—and I decide this *is* the perfect time to grind against her. I give into my urges, pressing my hard cock against her core and she gasps into my mouth. I do it again and she trembles.

"You see what you do to me, Teddie Bear?" I don't want to think about how easily the pet name falls from my lips. "You turn me on so much, and you're not even trying."

"R-really?" she asks, her pink lips swollen and her pupils dilated by lust.

"Yeah, baby, you don't want to know how many times I've come in the shower to the thought of you. I can't get you off my mind. I can never get enough."

"Me too," she admits softly, meeting my thrust. "I just... I didn't wanna say anything."

A twinge of guilt twists in my chest, but I ignore it. She's not in love with me. This is just sex. Something we both want. So I keep going.

"Oh, yeah?" My lips travel across her cheek and up her jaw, to her ear. "Has the naughty hostess been touching herself to the thought of her guest in the next room?"

"Yes!" she cries out when I rub her clit hard, and I feel a thrill of success rush through me.

I pull back and look at her again. Her hair is tousled, and her cheeks are pink with arousal. She's fucking gorgeous like this.

"Show me."

"W-what?" She must think she didn't hear me right.

"Show me," I repeat. "How you touch yourself when you think of me."

She swallows and looks away. I'm worried I've pushed her too far, and I'm about to tell her she doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to do, when she shoves lightly on my chest. I sit back, afraid I ruined the moment. But she hooks her thumbs into her shorts and panties, tugging them off and flinging them across the room.

My mouth goes dry as I watch her lie back down and spread her legs open to give me a perfect view of her bare pussy. I drop to my knees at the foot of the bed, panting as she slides a hand down her supple, curvy body and parts the lips of her glistening pussy.

"Holy shit, Teddie." I'm dying for a taste, to rub my face in her sweetness. To make her come with only my tongue.

Fuck, my cock hurts.

She teases her slit, her breath hitching every time she brushes her clit. I know she's enjoying it because her hips begin to roll and her belly quivers.

"That feel good?"

"Yes," she breathes.

“You’re so fucking sexy. I could watch you all day, baby.”

She’s hypnotic, the way she delicately moves, changing the pressure and speed to keep herself on the precipice of orgasm. Her arousal drips from her, coating her hand as her nimble fingers glide in and out. She lifts her hips to meet her circling fingers as her thighs begin to shake. I can hear her soft moans as her free hand tweaks her nipples, keeping me transfixed by the erotic sight in front of me. As quickly as my mouth dried, it’s watering now while I watch as she works herself up to her first release.

My cock rests heavy and hard between my legs, begging for attention. But I can’t take my eyes off Teddie long enough to give my dick a moment’s consideration.

When she uses two fingers to rub hard, fast circles on her clit, I know she’s close to coming. And there’s not a chance in hell I’ll let her waste one drop of that while I’m here waiting to taste it. She yelps when I grab her ankles and drag her to the end of the bed, leaning close to her quivering cunt. I nudge her legs apart to fit between them as the light catches on her slick inner thighs.

“Beautiful,” I mutter before bending down to *finally* get my taste of Teddie’s pussy. I’ve been dreaming about this moment for weeks, and my cock grows harder when I inhale her spicy, sweet scent.

Teddie gasps as I work my tongue, licking long strokes up the center of her core. She arches her back, pushing against my mouth, so I grip her thick, luscious thighs to keep her in place. Her arousal wets my face, dripping down my chin, but I lap her up like that damn frosting she makes. There’s no contest between the two, though; Teddie’s pussy tastes better.

When I dip my tongue inside, she tightly grips my hair, just as she did in my dreams. Her fingernails rake along my scalp once I add two fingers, drawing out her sweetness and savoring every drop. My mouth suctions around her clit and I flick it back and forth with the tip of my tongue. Now, she’s really moaning and I know her orgasm is within reach.

I keep up what I'm doing, going harder and faster until her sinful body is shaking on the bed. There's no warning that she's coming, just the sensation of her thighs closing around my head, trapping me in place as she rides my face. I drink down her orgasm, lazily petting her G-spot while she continues to drench my cheeks. The world could fucking end right now, and I'd be happy to go buried face-first in Teddie's pussy with her cum in my mouth.

When her trembling stops, she releases her clamped thighs and brushes away the hair from my forehead. I stay put, gently licking and kissing her pussy, committing every inch of her to memory. She stares down at me, her lips bitten and swollen with a deep blush from her cheeks to her neckline. Her eyes are hooded, and her greedy expression begs for more, which I'm all too happy to provide. My cock jerks again, demanding his turn, and I think it's time I gave it to him.

Rising up, I hook a hand over my back to remove my shirt. When I catch her eyeing my sculpted chest, I smirk, internally gloating that all those hours in the gym have paid off. I push my shorts down, my thick cock slapping against my abs as precum leaks from the tip. I move closer to her body, her feet planted on the mattress with her ass at the edge, exactly where I left her.

I give myself a few strokes, then line my cock up with her dripping pussy. Teasing her opening with the tip, I ask, "You ready, Teddie Bear?"

She nods without hesitation, her gaze heavy with lust.

Good, because I've run out of patience.

I push completely inside, her primed body only giving slight resistance to my large size. I don't want to hurt her, but I need to feel the deepest part of her *right now*. Her lips part on a sharp inhale as I fill her to the brim. Taking full advantage, I lean forward, licking into her mouth. Then her shock dissipates and she returns my kiss, moving her hips to meet my thrusts.

"That's it, baby," I praise, giving us both a moment to breathe. "See how good it feels when you're ready for me?" I

rock into her, angling myself to hit the spots that make her cry out most. I need to see her come again, *feel* her come on my cock.

I keep my pace consistent and steady, rolling my hips and grinding hard against her. She's so soft and warm and wet, fitting me so well as her tight little pussy sucks me back in every time I pull out.

"Nate!" she cries, gripping the sheets beneath her. "I'm... *mmph.*"

"What's that, Teddie Bear?" I reach down and pinch her clit, making her cry out louder. "You're what?"

"I-I—you know!" she whines, avoiding eye contact with me. But it doesn't work since I'm hovering above her, keeping myself in her line of sight.

"I *don't* know," I taunt, abandoning her clit and slowing my thrusts. She grunts in frustration, digging her heels into the bed and lifting her hips. My lips brush the shell of her ear when I lean over her. "Use your words, baby."

Her heart beats rapidly as her chest presses against mine, and her breaths come out in short puffs while she holds my gaze. But I know how to wait, even if it means edging us both all fucking night. Because I want her to say it.

"I'm, I'm..." Her voice trails off into a moan when I fuck my dick deeper inside her. "Nate, I'm—" She tenses and locks her arms around my back, keeping me flush against her. "Fuck! I'm going to come again!"

Just what I wanted to hear.

I settle into the crook of her neck, sucking on the delicate flesh. "Good girl. I needed that." Her pussy clamps down on my cock, and I pick up my pace.

Reaching beneath her, my hands grip her shoulders, and I pull her down on my dick, slamming my hips against her ass. It feels fucking amazing and my vision becomes hazy as I roughly fuck her sweet pussy. The sound of our bodies slapping together and the feel of her core clenching around me

push me over the edge with her. Then my hips stutter, and I come inside her with fireworks exploding behind my eyelids.

We ride out our orgasms together, both of us trembling and gasping to catch our breaths. After several moments, we finally collapse onto the bed and I reluctantly slide out of her. Turning onto my side, I prop my head on a hand and she mimics my position.

She's glowing, looking so beautiful, but I don't want to think about the warmth it causes to spread through my chest.

"Soo..." She's adorably awkward, looking for something to say after that mind-blowing sex we just had. "Having trouble with writing, huh? And this is what you do to get unstuck?"

I shrug. "Only recently."

She's quiet for several seconds until the pieces click into place. "Recently... How recently are we talking?"

I don't say anything. I just look into her innocent doe eyes because I'm an asshole who doesn't deserve her.

"Oh." She looks down at the bed and fidgets with the sheet.

"Since coming here, I've been able to write about ninety percent of my book. I hadn't written a word for a few months before that," I admit.

"Really? Well, that's great!" I can tell she's genuinely happy for me, but there's a subtle sadness in her eyes too. "I'm glad being here was helpful then." A small smile tips the corners of her mouth.

My gaze softens. "Being with you was helpful. I'm almost finished with the book. I just can't figure out how to end it."

She chews her lip as she plays with the bedding. "Not everything has to end, you know."

I laugh and roll to my back, crossing my arms behind my head. "Books do."

“Okay, yeah. That’s true. Books *do* need to end. But didn’t we talk about an ending last night? I thought you liked the idea I gave you?”

“I did. I *do*. It’s a good ending,” I profess. “But it feels... too much like *you* and not like *me*.”

“So, make it yours then,” she quips, as if it’s that easy.

I sigh and drag a palm over my face. “I don’t know, Teddie.”

“Or stay longer!” Her voice raises an octave. “Then we can brainstorm some more. I’m sure if we had more time, we could—”

“Vacations end too, Teddie.” My tone isn’t unkind, but my heart squeezes when I glance over and see her crestfallen expression.

Her voice is small when she replies, “I thought you said you could work from anywhere. I didn’t think staying a few more weeks would be a big deal.”

“It’s not.” Her eyes spark with hope and it physically pains me to watch that spark die when I continue. “But I need my life. And this...” I gesture around us. “...could never be it.”

Teddie rears back like she’s been slapped, with obvious hurt written all over her face. I want to comfort her, tell her I didn’t mean it as harshly as it sounded. But I don’t want to send her mixed signals either. No, it’s better this way, ripping the Band-Aid off in one swift pull.

She blinks away her tears as she stares at me like I’m a total stranger rather than the man who’s shared her home—and a bed—for the past four weeks. A block of ice forms in my stomach and I feel like the biggest dick to ever walk the earth. When she gets out of bed and covers her body as if she can’t bear to be vulnerable with me anymore, a thick shroud of shame washes over me.

“Wait, Teddie. You don’t need—”

“You know what, Nate?” Her voice is harsher than I’ve ever heard it, and it makes me flinch. “You’re right. You

leaving *will* be good for us. Then we can *both* get back to our normal lives.” She doesn’t give me any time to respond before she grabs her clothes from the floor and walks out.

I have no right to chase after her. Besides, this is for the best. *Isn’t it?* But that feels like a lie as I collapse back onto the bed, my words going right out the door along with a certain gorgeous redhead.

Now, I’m really fucked.

Teddie

I *'m such an idiot!*

I knew about his deadline. Of course, I did. It's the only reason he's even here. It's also obvious how stressed he is about it and how seriously he takes his work.

And even after what just happened between us, I can't stop myself from worrying about the grumpy dope and how this might impact his stupid writing.

Okay, his writing isn't stupid and that wasn't very nice, Teddie. But still!

I didn't leave him in a happy mood—*me either, buddy*—so, surely, he can't finish the book tonight, right? Not in that headspace.

I sit on my bed and gnaw at my thumbnail, debating what to do.

I'm so mad at Nate right now, *pissed* even. But ultimately... I care about him and don't want him to fail. After getting to know him over the past four weeks, I can recognize he's stressing his way right into high blood pressure and a stomach ulcer. And he has a *ridiculous* amount of talent. I can't sit back and watch him struggle when he's come so far. Even if he doesn't want us to be together, even if he wants to go home and never think about Candy Cane Key again, I care too much to not help him succeed.

But there's no way I can face him right now. I've embarrassed myself plenty, and I don't need his pity. It'll be bad enough when Rose finds out, but I'll worry about that later. I can still help Nate, though. I just have to avoid him for the next several hours until I can execute my plan, which shouldn't be too hard. I'll hole up in my room and only go out when I know he won't be there.

This'll be the first time since moving into this house that I don't make a daily batch of cookies. It hurts not keeping up

the tradition, but it would hurt more to face Nate's rejection and I've had enough of that.

I steer clear of him all day, listening to him hover occasionally at my door or shuffle around in the kitchen, scrounging for food. Meanwhile, I've fleshed out three possible book endings, narrowing it down to the one I think fits him and his writing the best. I stay in my room for a while longer, until I'm sure the coast is clear, and then I tiptoe out into the house.

I stealthily make my way to Nate's room, patiently waiting until I'm positive he's asleep. Then, I carefully turn the knob, slowly popping the door open to minimize the sound. He's lying in bed, facing away from me. But I can see the slow and steady movement of his body with each sleepy breath. The small nightlight from the hallway illuminates the side of his gorgeous face, urging me to snuggle behind him and be the big spoon to his little one.

But that isn't what he wants, and I need to remember that.

Reminding myself what I came to do, I rise on the balls of my feet and sneak over to the desk to grab his laptop. Prize in hand, I creep back out and into the safety of the hall. Relief floods me when I silently close the door with a sleeping Nate still soundly tucked in his bed.

Mission accomplished.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I turn the laptop on and wait for the log-in screen to appear. Without hesitation, I type in the password I've seen him use almost every day since he arrived. Maybe I should warn him about his lack of cyber security, but I can't deny his misstep has been to my advantage.

His desktop is easy enough to navigate with all his files neatly organized. In no time at all, I have his manuscript pulled up, scrolling through it for any recent changes he's made. When I get to the last written page, I realize my suspicions were correct. Nate hasn't been able to write any more today, and his story is still missing an ending.

I stretch my neck and roll my shoulders, preparing for the long night ahead of me. Then I start writing. And writing. And more writing. More than I've ever written before. By the time I make it to the last sentence, my eyes are dry, my fingers ache, my neck is tense, and my ass is numb.

Is this how Nate feels every day? Ugh! Even staring at the screen is giving me a headache.

As I click the save button—again, for the tenth time, just in case—I look down at the clock in the corner of the screen. It's almost five a.m. and my eyelids refuse to stay open a minute longer. My limbs feel weak and unsteady as I wrap up at the table and start my perilous mission to return Nate's computer. After successfully completing my task, I hightail it back to my room where I forego pajamas and drop onto my bed, ready to pass out.

Nate leaves in a few hours. I'll catch a nap, so I can see him before he goes. Now that we've both had some time to cool off, we can at least say goodbye, right?

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT TIME IT IS, BUT I NEED MORE SLEEP. MY mouth is dry, my eyes are crusty, and it hurts to push myself out of bed. My body screams at me to lie back down, but a glance at my alarm clock tells me I'm going to sleep the day away if I don't get up now. Besides, it's Nate's last day here. The thought of seeing him one last time motivates me to shove off the covers and throw on some clothes.

The house is eerily quiet, like it was in the middle of the night. But it hasn't been like this since Nate arrived, and that makes me uneasy. Maybe it's silent because he's having his coffee on the lanai. But when I get to the kitchen, his favorite navy-blue mug is freshly washed and hanging on the drying rack. Then I step into the hall and my stomach dips.

"Nate?" I tentatively call out. But there's no response, and my stomach drops to my toes.

I round the corner and see his door is open, so I take a step inside. Only I'm filled with disappointment when I find an empty room. The bed is made, the towels are folded, and there's no suitcase or duffle bag in sight. He left it just like he found it, as if he were never here in the first place.

Suddenly, my knees go weak and I catch myself on Nate's bed—I mean, the *guest bed*. My breathing becomes choppy as my chin quivers and my vision blurs.

Why? Why did he have to leave like this?

Unable to remain calm, my emotions spin out of control and tears soak my cheeks. I don't know how long I spend crying in his room, but eventually a shadowy figure appears in front of me. I wipe at my eyes, a flicker of hope blooming in my chest that maybe he came back. But when I blink the tears away, I see it's Rose, giving me the same sympathetic look as when I first moved here and my grandmother's death was a fresh heartbreak.

"R-rose," I try to say as sobs mask my voice. "H-he... he left."

She sits on the bed with me, gathering my hands in hers. "I know, dear."

I cry harder. "He... he didn't even say g-goodbye. I just wanted the chance..."

She collects me in her arms and I rest my cheek on her shoulder. When she starts to rub my back, the shakes that have been racking my body finally begin to slow.

"I'm sorry, Teddie," she murmurs against my hair.

My eyes are stinging and my throat hurts. "How could he leave when I... I lo... I—" I can't get the words out. It would hurt too much to say them now, especially when Nate can't hear me.

This time, Rose doesn't say anything. She just holds me tighter. But she knows. She's known this whole time. I've done a terrible job of keeping my feelings a secret. It seems Nate is the only one who couldn't figure it out.

That jerk.

Rose brushes the hair away from my face. “Honey, can I ask you something?”

I lift my head off her shoulder to look at her. “Of course.” I sniffle.

“Do you think some of these tears might be for another reason?”

Curiosity shifts the features of my face as I tilt my head.

“Not to sound like a broken record, but you haven’t shed *one* tear since your grandmother passed away.”

I’m initially defensive, but I bite my tongue when I realize her words hold truth. “Who are you? My therapist?”

“Yes. I’m also your financial advisor, your wellness coach, your legal counsel, and your religious officiant.” She grins while rubbing my back. “And I’m still your neighbor.”

“You’re more than my neighbor, Rose.” The smile I give the woman I’ve known my whole life is filled with affection.

“Your grandmother was my best friend, so you’re family.” Rose turns away and stares out the window. “She was *my* family for over forty years.”

“I know you loved her too.”

“There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t miss her or think about her, wanting to hear her laugh or fuss with me about some silly TV show.” She faces me again, her eyes soft with emotion. “It’s okay to miss her, Teddie. You’re allowed to, you know.”

My eyes well with tears. “I know I am. I just wasn’t prepared for it to hit me today while sitting in this empty room. Another person has suddenly left my life—someone I care about—and I have no control over the situation. There were no parting words, no hugs goodbye, nothing to comfort me in their absence.” I blink back the heartache threatening to spill over. “And it just... it triggered all the pent-up sadness I’ve been holding back since Grammy’s funeral. Lying to myself because I didn’t want to feel pain. Yet, here I am,

heartbroken because some stupid boy didn't like me back." I roll my eyes at myself, annoyed by my feelings.

Rose lifts my chin with a chastising expression. "You know he did. At least, this time, you can do something about it."

"There's nothing to be done, Rose. His life isn't here. You said it yourself: he's *vacation people*."

"Oh, I know what I said." She *tsks* her tongue at me while waving a dismissive hand. "But I'm just an old woman. Why are you listening to me anyway?"

"Because you're a *wise* old woman. And my advisor of all things."

The corners of her eyes crinkle with amusement. "Maybe Mr. Psycho Writer Man will come to his senses and realize the mistake he's made. And believe me, he made a *big* mistake."

"He's not a psycho. He just writes them," I correct while she ignores me. Bringing fresh air into my lungs, I loudly exhale and wipe beneath my eyes. "Maybe he will realize it, but maybe not... I just know that I've kissed a lot of frogs in my life and no one made me feel the way Nate did. It may have been only the two of us here, but it felt... right. It was never formal or awkward or uncomfortable. We're opposites, sure. But somehow, we fit together perfectly."

"Then tell him that," she urges with a nudge to my shoulder.

"I'll think about it."

Who am I kidding? I won't think about it. Because the truth is I need to let him go. We had our time together, short as it was. And I enjoyed every minute of it, especially the minutes spent naked. But I shouldn't have to convince him to stay.

I deserve better than that.

Nate

I lay in bed for over an hour, dreading getting up. But today, I depart from this terrible, yet wonderful vacation that I know I'll remember for the rest of my life. Dragging my feet, I head to the kitchen, and I'm surprised Teddie isn't here, making a fresh pot of coffee.

I wouldn't call it a fight, *per se*, but we certainly weren't on pleasant terms when she walked out of my room yesterday. I didn't intend to be harsh—I would never purposefully hurt her—but the words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. And you can't put the genie back in the bottle. Still, I thought she would put it all aside for my last day in her home. But hours pass, and she still doesn't emerge from her room.

She does remember I'm going home today, right?

With a resigned sigh, I finish packing my bags and set them by the front door. Then, I anxiously pace the living room while waiting for my Uber, wondering what my next move should be. I just need to see her face one last time, and maybe the knot in my throat will loosen so I can breathe. Perhaps that's selfish of me, since I was the asshole here, and I don't deserve another minute of her sunshine.

But I'm a dick, and I can't help myself. I want Teddie, even if it's only for a few moments.

So I try to make noise without being too obvious, shutting cabinets in the kitchen and running water in the powder room sink as if I'm washing my hands. I loudly clear my throat outside her door, wishing she'd pop her head out and tell me to quiet down. But, no matter what I do, there's not a stir from her room and the house remains quiet. I'm holding out hope that she'll come out any second now, but then I receive a text that my ride is here, and I know I can't wait any longer.

For a few moments, my gaze lingers on her bedroom door. Then, I silently tell her goodbye and gather my bags to meet my driver out front. As I walk down the steps, a final thought

occurs to me that perhaps she's not even here and left before I woke up.

If that's the case, where did she go? And why isn't she back yet?

I pause next to the idling vehicle, handing my luggage over to the driver. "Just a moment, please."

He nods before carrying my things to the trunk.

There's a small female figure crouched in front of the house next door. She's pulling weeds and pruning dead flowers, with a wide-brimmed straw hat covering her head. *I recognize that hat.* Making a brief detour, I cross the yard to speak to her.

My mouth has suddenly gone dry, so I lick my lips and call her name. "Rose."

She cranes her neck, shielding her eyes with a gloved hand. But when she sees it's me, she scowls and returns to her gardening. "Yes, Mr. Fancy Writer Man? What can I do for you on this fine morning?"

Wow, I really should've tried harder to make nice with her.

"Just wondering if you've seen Teddie. Did she leave early to run an errand or something? I haven't seen her at all today."

Or yesterday, after she left my bed, I mentally add.

Rose barks out a sharp laugh, then gets to her feet with a grunt. "I highly doubt that girl has been anywhere yet." She plants a fist on one hip. "I saw her kitchen light on in the wee hours of the morning when I got up to get a drink of water. She probably pulled an all-nighter—Lord knows doing what—and she's sleeping in." Rose narrows her eyes at me, and before I know it, freshly sharpened garden shears are pointing in my direction. "Now, tell me something. Why was Teddie up so late last night?"

How the hell should I know? She wasn't even speaking to me. I open my mouth, then snap it shut, realizing I don't have an answer.

Rose starts to say something else, but a loud honk says my driver is ready to leave. “I don’t know what she was doing last night, but can you check on her later, please? I’m sure she’ll be exhausted and need some help today.”

“I always do. It’s my job to look after her.” With a swift nod of her head, Rose goes back to her gardening. Somehow, I got off on the wrong foot with that woman and I wish I had more time to fix it.

I wish I had more time to fix a lot of things.

Without any parting words, I walk away and climb into the waiting vehicle. After buckling my seat belt, I finally acknowledge the same driver who dropped me off a month ago. He did warn me he was the only ride-share on the island.

“Ho-ho!” he says in his best Santa Claus impression. “Hello again, sir! It’s been a while!”

I wish I could share his gleefulness, but I’m sure by now he realizes that I’m a grumpy ass.

Christmas music fills the car as we pull away from the house. I watch it grow smaller from over my shoulder as we cruise down the residential street. I’m still expecting Teddie to race out the front door, laughing about how she forgot to set her alarm this morning. Because, of course, she would never miss seeing me off, even if our last day together didn’t pan out the way we wanted. But she never appears and I swallow a hard lump, facing forward in my seat when the house is finally out of view.

“DID YOU HAVE A GOOD TRIP? MOST FOLKS WHO VISIT CAN’T wait to come back!” *Santa* smiles in the rearview mirror.

I slump down and cross my arms. “Yeah, well, I’m not most folks. I probably won’t ever come back to Florida again.”

The man hums. “You never know. The future can surprise you.”

I scoff at his optimism. “What do you mean by that?”

He just shrugs and smiles mysteriously, turning up the music to end my questions.

The short ride is one big blur, and before I know what’s happening, my car door is opened. After thanking the jolliest Uber driver south of the North Pole, I retrieve my luggage from the curb and head inside the airport.

My mind is fuzzy, clouded with a million thoughts, as I speed through security and wait at my gate. Deciding to bite the bullet, I email my manuscript to my publisher, knowing it’s unfinished but hoping to buy some time. Surely, I can crank out two or three more chapters to end this damn book?

That’s a lot of words to come up with when you don’t have your muse.

I try to push the sabotaging thoughts out of my head as I board my plane. For once, I’m glad there’s a crying baby on my flight to drown out the traitorous voices I wish didn’t exist in my subconscious. By the time the plane lands, I’m tired and irritated and completely spent, almost crying with relief when I arrive at my front door.

But that relief is shot to shit when I spot Peter sitting in my office with his feet propped on my expensive desk. “Welcome home, Natey boy!” he cheerfully exclaims with open arms.

“Of course, you’re here,” I groan, dropping my computer bag to the floor as gently as I can manage in my current state of fatigue. “What do you want, jackass?”

“Can’t I come over to hear all about my little brother’s trip?”

“No,” I deadpan.

“Oh, c’mon. Don’t be such a dick. Tell me all about it.”

I swear he’s worse than a sixteen-year-old girl sometimes. I widen my stance as I cross my arms over my chest. “You just wanna know if your evil scheme worked and I wrote my book.”

He hops up from the chair. “Well, did you?”

I glare at him. “No, not exactly. Yes, I did some writing, but the novel isn’t done. I sent it anyway, praying for an extension. At this point, I’m ready to lie to save my ass, if I have to.”

“Aw.” My brother feigns a sympathetic frown. “Dog ate your ending?”

I growl my annoyance and shove past him so *I* can sit in my chair. “No. I thought I’d go with *whoops, must’ve been the wrong draft.*”

“Classic,” Peter replies while nodding his head in mock agreement. “Sounds like a great plan.”

I lift a shoulder with indifference. “I’ve seen it work before for other authors. Why not me? And if it doesn’t, I’ll be researching how to start an Only Fans account.” I shoot Peter an inquisitive look. “You don’t happen to know how to do that, do you?”

He chuckles. “No need to bring out the big guns, Magic Mike. Keep your pants on and let’s strategize a different alternative.”

My head *thunks* on my desk as I groan loudly. And being the bastard he is, Peter laughs at my misery.

“Quit stalling and tell me about this trip already.”

Still face-down, I grumble, “There’s nothing to tell.”

“You’re a shitty liar, you know that?”

“What do you want me to say?” I question, sitting up in my chair, and he shoots me an impatient look. “Fine. You wanna know what happened? I’ll tell you.” I release an exasperated sigh. “Yes, I went down to stupid Candy Cane Key and met the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen with shimmering red hair and a body made for sin. And for the first time in six months, I was able to fucking write.”

“That’s awesome, man. I mean it.”

“Yeah, well. Like I said, I didn’t finish the book, so...”

“So, what happened?” His interest piqued, Peter tilts his head and waits for my response.

Not wanting to admit what I’ve done, I shrug. “Nothing happened.”

“You know, your pants are gonna catch on fire if you keep telling lies like that. Do I need to remind you that Jesus can see you?” he chastises me.

“No, I don’t need a reminder.”

Peter’s eyebrows lift as he rolls his hand, gesturing for me to get on with it.

“I fucked up, okay? Are you happy? I said it. I fucked up.”

His mouth splits into a wide grin. “I am not surprised by that in the slightest. Classic Nate behavior,” he states like it’s obvious.

Offended, I rear back. “What’s that supposed to mean? Explain.”

“Let me ask you a couple of questions. Were you enjoying yourself down there? Were you getting your work done, work you haven’t been able to do in months?”

“Okay, yes.” I feel my hackles rise and my brows draw tight. “What’s your point?”

“You were having a good time with Thelma, right?”

“It’s *Teddie*, you dick.”

“Right, right. *Teddie*. So, everything was great until you fucked it up.”

“Yeah, yeah. I fucked up. I said that already.”

Peter laughs, shaking his head. “You always do this, man. Anytime you get something good going, you find a way to piss on it. Like you don’t deserve to be happy or some shit.”

“No, I don’t,” I argue, barely hiding my pout.

“Oh, yes, you do. That’s why you suck at relationships.” He’s full of shit. I *don’t* suck at relationships. They’re just not for me—that’s all. “Remember Brenda?”

“*Becky*, you loose twat.”

“Oh, right. *Becky*. You guys dated for what? A year?”

“And? Like most eighteen-year-olds going off to college, we ended it. Long-distance would’ve been stupid at that age and we were headed in different directions.”

“I see.” He lifts a single brow. “So what about Jasmine, then?”

“You’re doing this shit on purpose to goad me, but it won’t work. And her name was *Jessica*.”

His mouth twitches, making me want to punch him in the face.

“We dated in college until she went crazy and decided she wanted to get married. Who does that?”

“Gee, I don’t know, Nate. Probably a lot of people.”

“No, they don’t. This isn’t the 1950s.”

“Lemme get this straight. You kicked her to the curb because she wanted to marry you?” he attempts to clarify, and I give a sharp nod. “What a monster! How *dare* she wanna spend the rest of her life with you. Good riddance!” The sarcasm is palpable as he pretends to dust his hands clean.

This guy—always busting my balls.

“We were twenty, man. What the fuck did we know at that age? Divorce would’ve been imminent.”

“And, now, with Teddie? Why isn’t it gonna work with her?”

I shake my head, my patience wearing thin with this conversation. “Because my *life* is here. Not in Florida.”

Peter throws his head back in amusement. “What life, man? You don’t see anybody unless I come by. You don’t go anywhere. You don’t do anything. Your life has become so boring you can’t even work.”

Well, that’s harsh.

“You don’t have to be such a dick about it,” I mutter.

He reins in the criticism and softens his expression. “I’m not being a dick. I’m being your big brother. This isn’t the life that our parents wanted for you before they died. This isn’t the life *I* want for you.” Ninety-eight percent of the time, Peter acts like an over-grown, goofy man-child. So, whenever he takes a serious tone with me, I tend to listen.

“There’s nothing wrong with my life, Peter. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine.” He pushes back, crossing the room to lean on the edge of my desk. “You’ve become some sort of hermit. It’s not good for you.” He goes quiet for a moment and fiddles with a stack of papers. “And it’s not good for me either.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Listen, Nate. I’m worried about you. You do a shitty job of taking care of yourself, and if I weren’t here, constantly reminding you to eat, hydrate, sleep... you’d probably be dead.” His pointed expression says he knows he’s right.

“I’m neurodivergent. What can I say?” I shrug. The truth is, I’ve been pretty good at masking for thirty years, but sometimes it’s harder to manage. I’m easily overstimulated and cling to my routines—although I’ve gotten better about that over time. But I still become so hyperfocused on tasks that I often forget to eat or drink, or will go days at a time taking two to three-hour naps at night instead of getting real sleep.

Maybe Peter’s right, but I’m not ready to give him that satisfaction.

“I know you’re not happy, Nate. I don’t know if something has changed or what, but you’re not happy. Except when you were in Candy Land.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “*Candy Cane Key*, you douche canoe. And you’d be happy too, with a tempting little Christmas elf baking you cookies every damn day. If it weren’t for the sex, I probably would’ve gained ten pounds.”

“Is that all she was to you?”

“No, of course not.” I fall back against my chair, my chest aching as I remember the last few weeks with Teddie. “She understood me. She quickly picked up on my weird quirks, but

never made them into a big issue. And we'd work on my book together every night. I'd be one character and she'd be the other as we ran through dialogue and scenes and plot development. It was as if we were two pieces of the same puzzle. Until I fucked it all up and said stupid shit that I can't take back. Then, she stormed out—"

"Was she naked?" Peter wiggles his eyebrows at me.

"Fuck off." I flip him the bird. "She stormed out and never came back. But I also never saw her again, because she wouldn't come out of her room. At least, not while I was around. But then it was too late and I had to go, or I'd miss my flight. And I've been sick over it ever since."

"I love you, baby brother, but you're an idiot." I want to be mad at Peter, but he's right. I *am* an idiot. "So, how are you gonna fix it?"

"What am I supposed to do? Pretty sure she never wants to see me again."

"I know I wouldn't. Especially if you didn't try very hard—which, to be clear, you didn't—to at least apologize for breaking my heart."

Did I break her heart? Mine sure feels like shit.

"I wasn't thinking and I made a mistake. I'd take it all back if I could. But I'll have to think about that later. Right now, I've gotta come up with an ending to this book or I'm dead. Then, I'll figure out how to fix things with Teddie."

"Don't wait too long, Nate. It was great to hear the humor in your voice again, the excitement. And if some cute redhead in Florida can give that to you, you'd be a fool not to take it." He clasps my shoulder and gives it a subtle shake. "Now, let's get outta here and get something to eat. I'm fucking starving."

"Can't. My phone's been blowing up this whole time and I know it's Emily."

Peter shivers with a pinched expression on his face. "That woman scares the shit out of me."

"That woman scares the shit out of everybody."

“This is true. I’ll get out of here so you can talk to your publisher. Just think about what I said.” I nod as he heads to the door. “Catch you later, dickface!” he yells as he closes the front door while I check my texts.

Emily: I know you’re home, Nate. Video conference at 6 p.m. We need to talk.

Fuck, how many women can I piss off today?

I RETRIEVE THE VIDEO-CONFERENCING LINK FROM MY EMAIL and promptly connect my laptop at six p.m. Taking a deep breath to calm my racing heart, I’m ready to talk fast in an attempt to avoid her wrath. I click *accept* and join the call, Emily’s live image filling my screen once we connect. As soon as she starts talking, my shoulders tense.

“How long have we known each other, Nate?” Emily’s question is immediate without any precursor.

“What?” I’m taken aback by her abruptness.

“How *long* have we known each other?” She pauses briefly before answering her own question. “For years. *Years!* And you, my friend... well, you’ve been holding out on me.” A goofy grin spreads across her typically stoic face.

I’m dumbfounded at what’s happening right now. “What do you mean, *holding out?*”

“Your book, Nate! Your book! It’s the best one you’ve ever written.” *Did she read the right file?* “And that ending! It was so different from your usual stuff. Not that your usual stuff is bad, mind you. But this... *this* was mystery and intrigue and *romance.*” She shimmies her shoulders and I’m starting to freak out.

Who is this woman, and what has she done with Emily?

I’m so confused right now. “Well, I—”

“It’s brilliant! And it’s the perfect lead into a phenomenal new series.” She lowers her voice and edges closer to the

computer. “They’re willing to give you a hefty advance—bigger than the ones you’ve received in the past—if you can pitch five books.”

My jaw drops. I couldn’t finish *this* book. What makes them think I can do five? And what ending is she talking about?

Emily continues, singing my praises and explaining all the new opportunities that could come down the line. But it all fades to white noise when I open my manuscript and scroll to the last few pages.

Oh, there’s an ending, alright. Just not one that I wrote.

I rack my brain, trying to come up with a plausible explanation for what the fuck is happening. *Was I hacked? Did I write this in my sleep? Is sleep-writing even a thing? I’m being ridiculous.* But I don’t understand how someone accessed my file. The only people in proximity to this laptop for the past six months have been me, Peter, and Ted—

Oh... Oh!

Emily prattles on while I skim the last three chapters and it all falls into place. Of course, Teddie wrote this. The ending has several of the elements we discussed as possible options to wrap up this series. And the writing is actually damn good. I have to stop myself from smiling with pride. Not only is she gorgeous, she can cook and bake, and sing, and apparently write books. Is there anything that woman *can’t* do?

“—and they want the proposal by next week.”

“Huh?” I lack eloquence as I tune back in to what Emily is saying.

“Getting the proposal completed by next week shouldn’t be a problem, right?” My voice catches in my throat as I choke on an answer. But I’m saved by the bell when Emily spits out a goodbye and hangs up to answer another call.

One week.

Closing my eyes, I inhale a slow, controlled breath. I can do this. I know I can. It’ll be just like the dozens of other

times. Plan a five-book series and develop a pitch for my publisher. And I know exactly where I need to start.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I select the number I need, then wait for the call to connect. For once, I'm relieved to hear Peter's voice on the other end.

"Did Dragon Lady Emily eat you alive? Are you homeless now? Am I about to find out I'm the sole heir to nothing?"

Ignoring his snark, I get straight to the point. "Where did you find Teddie's rental? No, wait. Better yet, if you already have a VBRO account, book me for another week. And a flight too. Whatever is the next available. I don't care how much it costs."

"Do I look like your fucking assistant?" He sounds perturbed but I couldn't care less right now.

"Yes. And you brought this on yourself when you chose to meddle in my life." Before he offers a snide reply, I hang up the phone and rise from my chair.

It's a damn good thing I haven't unpacked yet, because I'm headed back to Candy Cane Key. And I'll do whatever kind of groveling Teddie wants, if she'll just forgive me.

Only a dumbass would walk away from a girl like her. And, apparently, I'm the biggest dumbass there is.

Teddie

Nate didn't call.

Not that I expected it, but I secretly hoped he would. Maybe from the airport, or when he finally got home and noticed that I finished his manuscript. I imagine he'd be surprised, or even a little impressed. Though, at this point, I'd take him calling just to yell at me for touching his precious book-baby.

Silence is far worse than any yelling would be.

For the first time in a long time, I feel defeated. My spark has dimmed and my body feels heavy. There's an ache in my heart that twists in my chest, and the one thing I need to make it better I can't have. I try to ease my distress by focusing on the warmth of the coffee mug cradled in my hands as I sit with Rose. But none of my grounding techniques seem to be working today.

"I shouldn't have gone to sleep." My voice cracks, but Rose doesn't flinch as she tops off my drink. "Why didn't I stay up to see him off? It was only a few more hours. Maybe then... maybe he would've called by now."

She rubs soothing circles on my upper back. "You don't know that, Teddie. There's no sense in torturing yourself over what might have been. He's not worth your tears, honey."

"I'm not crying," I insist, pinching my lips together to hold back my emotions.

She's quiet for a few moments before perking up in the seat next to me. "I know what can cheer you up! Let's decorate the tree. It's time for the Christmas decorations anyway."

"We skipped Thanksgiving," I remind her.

She huffs. "No, we didn't. We ate it. Don't you remember?" She's referring to our mini-Friendsgiving we had to celebrate the holiday. Nate had been deep in his writing cave all week, and we'd barely left the house. We didn't

realize it was Thanksgiving until the day of. So, after a quick trip to the grocery store, I whipped together a roasted turkey breast and some side dishes for us to enjoy while watching movies in the living room. It was wonderful, and I'm happy we spent the day together.

But today, I'm not in the mood to decorate or be cheerful. "I think I'll pass, if you don't mind."

"What about some baking? I haven't seen you in the kitchen all day. I can pull out the ingredients for you." Her gaze is filled with encouragement, but I can't seem to find the energy.

"I don't want to bake either." I stare at the dark liquid inside my mug.

"But you love baking. It's your happy place."

"Yes," I admit. "But not today."

Rose seems to be running through a mental list of fun ideas. "Well, when is your next guest coming? I'll help you get the house ready."

Without looking up, I give her the news. "I turned off my listing. I'm not really in the mood to entertain right now."

She sighs, worry etched on her elderly face as the two of us sit in silence. I'm swallowing the last sip of my coffee, when there's an unexpected knock at the door. Rose rises from her chair, but I stop her, assuring her I can get it myself.

I'm sad, not completely helpless.

I shuffle to the front of the house, my feet like a pair of cinderblocks that I drag along with me. Opening the door, I'm preparing to recite the canned response I use for salespeople, but I do a double take when I see who's standing on the other side.

Nate is here. He came back...

Looking sheepish with his hands crammed in his front pockets, he stands on the front porch, acknowledging me with a lift of his chin. I don't know how he did it, but he's managed

to become more attractive in the last forty-eight hours. And it makes my heart both soar and shatter as I look at him.

I swipe beneath my misty eyes, steeling my composure. “What are you doing here?”

Not my kindest greeting, but he takes it in stride, seemingly relieved I’ve said anything at all. “You finished my book?”

I swear there’s wonderment in his voice, but surely, I’m imagining things. I lift my chin and push my shoulders back, feigning confidence I don’t have. “Yes, I did.”

His lips twitch. “My publisher—”

I panic, thinking I’ve gotten him into trouble. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I was only trying to help. I’m sorry, Nate. I —”

“I love you.” We both widen our eyes upon hearing the words slip from his mouth.

“What?” I question, not believing my ears.

“I mean, uh... *my publisher* loves you.” His nerves get the best of him, and he reaches up to scratch the back of his head.

“Oh. I thought... Well, it doesn’t matter.” My voice trails off as my shoulders droop again.

He tentatively steps forward, inching closer as I stare at my feet. “Actually, I had it right the first time. I love you, Teddie.”

My head snaps up and my gaze locks on his. “You... *you* love me. Not your publisher?”

This better not be some kind of joke.

“No. I mean, yes.” He groans before clarifying his declaration. “Yes, my publisher loves you. But so do I.”

The ache in my chest begins to melt away, but I resist giving in too easily. Instead, I purse my lips and regard him coolly. “Oh. Well, that’s very nice.”

Nate frowns as worry creases his brow. “*Nice...* That wasn’t the reaction I was expecting.”

Doesn't feel good, does it, mister?

I keep quiet, wanting to see what else he has to say. But Rose joins me and speaks over my shoulder. "She loves you too, you know." Her tone is very matter-of-fact.

I turn my head to glare at her. *Traitor*. And she doesn't even have the decency to look ashamed.

Nate's eyes bounce back and forth between Rose and me. "What was that?"

I put my arm in front of my meddling neighbor, wanting to block her from answering for me again. My eyes never leave Nate's when I ask, "Why are you even here?" I can't hide the sadness in my voice, but I'm not embarrassed for him to hear it. After all, he is the one who caused it.

His remorse is evident on his face, and he swallows hard. "I wanted to give you the news in person. My publishing house has asked me to create a proposal for a new five-book series."

My hip rests against the doorframe, and I cross my arms over my chest. Maybe this'll keep me from reaching for him like I desperately want to. "Congratulations. But what's that got to do with me?"

"I want it to be *our* proposal," he clarifies with a warm smile, taking another half-step forward.

"Seems too soon for a proposal, if you ask me," Rose mutters from beside me. Subtly lifting her nose in the air, she conveys her hesitance. "We barely know this man and he seems a bit unsavory."

That may be true, but I want to hear what he has to say even if he doesn't deserve my time. "Thank you, Rose," I dismiss with a volume louder than necessary. "I think I have it from here."

She reluctantly heads home after kissing me on the cheek and warning Nate with a stern, grandmotherly look.

I stare at him for a moment before relenting. "I suppose you can come on in."

He follows me inside and joins me on the couch, where we sit—stiff and awkward—next to each other. Not at all cozy like we were just a few days ago.

His fingers drum anxiously on top of his knee, then he finally breaks the ice. “So, five books is a great offer, but developing concepts for all of them is going to be a challenge.”

“Are you stuck?” I side-eye him while picking at the corner of a throw pillow.

His rich, baritone laugh rocks through me, and I realize how much I’ve missed it, even if it has only been a few days. “Stuck in more ways than one. I tried booking this place again, but it wasn’t available. I have no idea where I’m sleeping tonight.”

“Oh. I, um, turned off the listing,” I explain, resisting the urge to face him.

With a frustrated sigh, he stands and paces in front of me. “Fuck, Teddie. I’m sorry. I know I’m a terrible asshole, but I —” He grips his thick, dark hair with both hands, searching for the right words. “I’m no good at relationships, you know? I do better at writing them than being in them because I get caught up in my own head. And I know I come off as a dick sometimes. Well, *all* the time. But I swear I don’t mean to. I just tend to be more factual than emotional, which apparently is off-putting to some people.”

He’s distressed and I want to comfort him, but we’re not there yet. He’s taken a significant first step by returning, but I’m still hurt that he left to begin with. My emotions are at war as I bite my lip. “Maybe you haven’t found the right woman to be with. Someone who understands all of that.” I glance up at him through my eyelashes to gauge his reaction.

Stopping in front of me, he nods slowly. “I suppose that’s true.”

“And you weren’t a dick to me when you were here. Not the whole time, anyway.” Regret flashes across his face as he registers what I’ve implied. “Maybe it took you a minute to

warm up to this place, but then we fell into an easy routine. And it worked for us.” I shrug as my mouth shifts into a lopsided smile. “I liked taking care of you, Nate. Making sure you ate, fixing your coffee just the way you like it. I loved our midday breaks on the lanai, rocking in the porch swing.”

He crouches down to my eye-level. “It felt good, didn’t it?”

“It did. But my favorite part of the day was helping with your book, escaping into the fictional world you created.” Warmth spreads through me, and my mood brightens, my gestures becoming animated. “It was like magic happening in my very own living room. Something extraordinary manifesting between the two of us.”

“It was. It still is,” he assures me while gazing into my eyes. “I’ve learned that the right person can bring out a completely different side of you, one you never even knew existed. That’s what you did for me, Teddie.”

“I did?” I’m surprised I had that kind of effect on him, but I’m happy I was able to. He certainly affected me and I never saw it coming.

“You did,” he confirms, rising to his feet and reclaiming his seat next to me. He lifts a hand to cup my cheek and I lean into his palm, relishing his touch. “Every minute I’m with you, I feel more like... *me*. Like I’m finally in my own skin and I don’t have to be anyone else. But, to be honest, it scares the shit outta me.”

I like Nate just as he is. I would never want him to pretend with me. “Why does it scare you?”

He caresses my cheek with his thumb. “My life back in New York is simple and familiar—a consistent schedule and minimal stress. But all the structure I built into that life kept me from actually *living* it. It took my pain-in-the-ass brother pointing it out to make me realize... I was stuck. Bored and impassive and... *unhappy*.”

I take his hand in mine and lace our fingers together. Yeah, I probably should make him grovel more for what he said the

last time we were together. But the vulnerability he's showing calls to my compassionate heart, and I don't have it in me to be petty right now. I want to be whatever he needs, knowing he'll give me the same in return.

He lifts our joined hands to his lips and lightly kisses the tops of my knuckles, making me blush. "That's why my writing dried up. I was missing that spark, that vibrant energy that makes the world brighter. But I found it again. Here, with you."

He searches my eyes for a reaction, yet all I can offer him is confusion. "And being with me... scares you?"

"Not being *with* you, being *without* you, even though you deserve better. Because I always find a way to fuck things up, Teddie."

"Yeah, I see that," I laugh nervously while nodding my head. "Let's maybe... stop doing that."

"It's a plan." He grins before sobering his reaction. "I'm so fucking sorry for how I acted. Please say you forgive me. I'll do anything you want."

Now, this would be the time to make my demands. But I'm not that kind of girl. Because we all deserve grace and mercy, even when we say and do stupid things. Nate's acknowledged that he was an idiot. Well, those are my words, not his. And I believe he's learned from his mistakes and will do his best not to repeat them.

Besides... I've wanted to wrap myself in his muscular arms since I saw him standing apprehensively on my front porch. Who cares what anyone thinks of him, or us, or what we're doing? If this is my chance to be with him, then I'm taking it.

I kiss the inside of his palm, whispering against his skin. "This is crazy, you know that?"

"I wanna be crazy with you," he stage-whispers back, making me giggle.

Is this really happening?

A man I've known—technically lived with—for four weeks is staying here to be with me. No one will believe this story, but it doesn't make it any less true. It's *our* story and it's perfect. Nate makes me happy, and I want to take this leap with him.

Teddie

“**T**hen let’s be crazy together.”

I scooch in closer and smile at him. Instead of replying with words, Nate leans in and presses his lips to mine. It doesn’t matter if we’re here or New York or anywhere else, because as long as I’m kissing this man, *I’m home*.

His mouth works slowly and gently, silently asking for my forgiveness for what happened. I grant it to him with my parted lips. Our tongues move together as perfectly as they did that first time almost a month ago. And the familiarity of his skin touching mine and his bergamot-sandalwood scent make all other thoughts vanish from my mind. He has my complete focus now.

As if he’s afraid I might disappear, he presses his strong hands against my back, caressing me and tugging me closer. Then he deftly shifts and lies back on the couch, pulling me down with him until I straddle his waist. But I want him to know I’m stronger than I look, and though I forgive him, there are consequences for his actions.

Feeling a swell of confidence as I sit on top of him with my thick thighs holding him in place, I press his wrists to the sofa and roll my hips against his. His expression is full of surprise since he’s usually the one in control. But it quickly morphs into arousal and his cock hardens beneath my ass.

“You didn’t think you’d get off that easy, did you? You still need to make it up to me, Nate.” I tease us both by rubbing my heated core along his length.

His full lips break into a wolfish grin as his body relaxes into the cushions. “I’m happy to oblige with plenty of orgasms, Teddie Bear.”

My heart stutters with adoration upon hearing his pet name for me. “Let’s get this off, shall we?” I lift the hem of his worn cotton t-shirt, rocking back on my ass to give him room to move.

When he sits up, I help him pull his shirt off, leaving his sculpted bare chest on display for me. For all the times I've seen him naked, I've never allowed myself a moment to stare. So I use this time wisely to visually appreciate his sexy body.

Lightly tanned skin stretches over his hard, smooth pecs. Chiseled abs seemingly carved from stone. A faint trail of dark hair disappearing beneath the waistband of his jeans. I gingerly drag my fingertips across his chest, feeling his heart beat beneath my touch. Running my hand down his stomach, the muscles of his core begin to twitch and flex as if demanding my attention. I take my time, slowly stroking his body, allowing my fingers to dance along his skin. Then I circle his nipples, loosely pinching them between my fingers, simultaneously giving both subtle tugs.

"Fuck, Teddie, where did you learn to do that?" His eyes drift close as he focuses on what he's feeling.

"Hmmm... you like a little nipple play, huh? I'll be sure to keep that in mind."

His hips buck underneath me, but I still his movements by sinking down and firmly pressing my pussy over his jean-covered dick. "I want you to stop teasing me," he hisses between clenched teeth.

No, this is too much fun.

Seeing him so responsive to my touch turns me on more than I thought it would. I understand why men find this so appealing. My damp panties cling to my skin as I grind against him, eliciting hushed moans from both of us. When my pussy begins to throb, an ache stirs inside me, and I quickly learn I don't have the patience to play the long game.

I climb off Nate as carefully as I can, pulling him up to stand with me. He reaches out, but I playfully bat his hands away before I flick open the button of his jeans. I yank them down, taking his boxer briefs too while freeing his thick, rigid cock to bob in my face while I rid him of his clothes and shoes.

Unable to resist, I get a little taste and lick the head before undressing myself. He groans when I tease him, but he keeps his eyes on me as I strip off my shirt and bra, followed by my leggings and panties. We gaze at each other's naked bodies, the tension growing thick and palpable between us.

I look up at him, my eyelids heavy with lust. "Take me to my room, Nate. It's time for that make-up sex you owe me."

He grins as he lunges forward, scooping me up in a bridal carry as if I weigh no more than a feather. I feel sexy and feminine and ready to let him take control. His ravenous gaze scans over me in his arms while he walks us to my room. I yelp when he tosses me onto the mattress, then joins me on the bed and rolls me over him. Once again, he's got me on top.

He tightly grips my hips while his cock twitches below my slick pussy. "Is it my turn to play now?" He stares at where our bodies come together.

"I'm all yours."

He glances to my face upon hearing the sincerity in my voice, and he knows I'm talking about more than just sex. "Maybe this isn't the best time to say it, but the words are still true. I love you, Teddie."

My heart melts with emotion. "I know everything is happening so fast, but I love you too. I'm happy you're here with me." I bend down, needing a kiss to ground me.

After passionately taking my mouth, he whispers against my lips, "It's not fast when you know it's right."

I hum my agreement before rising up and positioning myself so the tip of his cock glides through the lips of my pussy. Precum spills from him while he coats his length with my arousal. He uses it as lube and eases his way inside me. I gasp with pleasure as he fills me up, stretching my walls to accommodate his size. I'm still trying to figure out where he keeps this thing hidden all day.

Nate groans when he's fully seated. "Is this what you wanted?"

I relax my body, allowing my weight to sink me down a little more. “It’s exactly what I *needed*.”

I start off slow, rocking against him while focusing on the sensations of each movement. I enjoy the way it feels, but I’m not sure it’s going to get me—

Before I finish that thought, Nate massages my clit with his thumb and heat flashes through my body. My rhythm falters, but I fall back into my steady pace, rolling my hips with each glide of his dick.

My breaths are choppy as I pick up speed. “Oh... *yes!*” I rasp, throwing my head back and balancing with my hands on his chest.

“Yeah, baby, just like that.” Nate’s voice comes out thick and husky with arousal. “Ride my cock, Teddie.” He flexes his hips while pulling me down, forcing his cock deeper.

Unable to form any coherent sentences, I moan my satisfaction as ecstasy floods my senses. “*Na-ate*,” I whine, my movements becoming erratic as my orgasm surfaces faster than I expected.

“I’m there too. We both need this.” He pulls me to his chest, digging his heels into the mattress as he fucks my pussy hard from beneath me. “Come for me so I can feel that sweet cunt squeezing my dick. I wanna see my cum drip from your pussy.”

My eyes flutter closed and I bury my face in the crook of his neck, letting his dirty words push me over the edge. My body tenses as his balls slap against me with each thrust, and I have to admit I love how he uses me to get us both off. My walls tighten around him just like he wants, until our orgasms explode and he releases inside me, filling me with his hot cum.

I slump against his chest, cradled in his arms while he slowly fucks my trembling pussy. A blissed-out smile teases my lips and I press soft kisses to the sensitive skin of his neck. It’s unusual for us to finish this fast, but maybe it has more to do with making up than the actual sex. I think he was right; we *did* need this.

Neither of us moves as we revel in the surge of endorphins. Nate strokes my back and twirls strands of my hair while his cock softens inside my cum-filled pussy.

I brush my fingertips along his collarbone. “So, still need a place to stay? At least until the next five books are written,” I tease as a peaceful calm washes over me, feeling his heart beat with mine.

He sweeps away a few tresses stuck to my dampened skin, then presses a kiss to my forehead, one that he holds for longer than necessary. “I’ll stay for the next five lifetimes if you’ll let me.”

A million butterflies take flight in my belly, my lips tipping up into a pleased grin. “I’m sure we can work something out. I know the management here.”

EPILOGUE

Nate

We finished our book series a month before it was due, catching Emily completely by surprise, which I admit felt great. She's not the type to let anybody get one up on her, so she hounded me until I shared my secret. But the truth is, it wasn't a secret. My new writing partner and co-author just knows how to keep me in line. And her threats to cut off sex are also highly effective.

Teddie and I just work well together. We inspire each other and can bounce ideas back and forth. I never dreamed I could have this kind of partnership with someone, and I don't mean that in a strictly professional sense.

Halfway through writing, I realized I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. Even if there was never another book or we ran out of cookies—although that would be a travesty—as long as I was with Teddie, my life would be perfect. I knew she'd say yes, yet I was still nervous when I asked her to marry me. But all my anxiety was for nothing because she topped me over with her ecstatic answer.

Neither one of us has many family or friends, so we celebrated with an intimate but elegant affair. Our special day was idyllic, even with Peter continually assuring Teddie she still had time to make a run for it. At least I'm not alone in dealing with my jackass big brother anymore. But Peter will have to find someone else to annoy for the next two weeks. Teddie and I have just arrived in Fiji for our honeymoon. This place is a slice of tropical heaven on earth, but the two of us are so exhausted that we head straight for the master suite and faceplant on the mattress.

"I'm never leaving this bed," I vow, my words muffled by the plush comforter. "We crammed too much work into this month and now I can't move."

Teddie shifts beside me with a groan. "Well, I'm the idiot who thought making elaborate cookie boxes for each guest the day before the wedding was a brilliant idea."

“Hey, don’t call my wife an idiot,” I chastise, but she just giggles. “Besides, they were great. Everyone loved them. If this whole author thing doesn’t work out, you should open a bakery.”

“Or I could go back to doing VRBO. Although, I don’t have the greatest track record since I made the mistake of marrying my best guest.” She rolls onto her side to face me, showing me her beautiful smile.

“Wow, our marriage isn’t even consummated yet, and you’ve already decided it’s a mistake. You’re breaking my heart, Teddie Bear.” I dramatically smash my face into the mattress, making her laugh. I’ll never get tired of hearing that sound.

“Guess I better make it up to you, huh?” Her delicate fingers tease my side and I turn on my back.

“And just how do you plan to accomplish that?”

She shoots me a mischievous smirk before climbing over my body and straddling my hips. My fingers slip beneath her thin tank top and I savor the feel of her smooth, supple skin.

She draws small circles around my nipples, teasing them through my light cotton shirt. “Oh, I can think of a few ways.”

I catch her left hand in mine, lacing our fingers together while she smiles adoringly at me. This woman is my everything when there was a time I didn’t think I wanted anything. I just hadn’t found *her* yet. Now, I can’t imagine my life without her.

I raise our intertwined hands, pressing a long kiss on her finger, above her set of wedding bands.

Then she lifts my left hand and reciprocates the action. “I love you, Nate. My amazing husband.”

I place both her palms on my chest, over my heart, and cover them with mine. “I love you more, Teddie Bear. I could never write a story more perfect than ours.”

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CHAPTER 1

EMERGENCY. GET HERE ASAP.

When you receive a text like that from your best friend, who you serve as head of security, you drop *everything* and rush to his office—especially when he’s a high-profile, billionaire tech mogul.

I was in the middle of writing a contract for a new club in the city. It’s a sweet gig, requiring twenty members of my team to work as security for the venue, but the paperwork will have to wait. Everything comes second to David Scott and his family. He’s a brother to me in everything but blood. We went to school together, served in the military together, and now he trusts me with not only his own life but those of his parents and his younger sister, Harper.

When I arrive at the Scott building, the receptionist, Kala, greets me with a broad grin. “Hey, Vince,” she says, batting her eyelashes.

I hear giggling from the office behind her and catch other female staff members ogling me. I flash them all my most charming smile and wink.

Kala flushes but recovers quickly. “Mr. Scott is in his office. You can go on up.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” I reply, striding towards the elevator and leaving Kala fanning herself with a sheet of paper. I smirk as I step inside.

It would be easy to feel inadequate around David. Not only does he come from affluence, but he's a genius and has developed a few software apps that have made him independently wealthy. And on top of that, he's good-looking as hell. Now, I'm a straight man, and even I can admit that David wouldn't be out of place in Hollywood or on the runway. That is one beautiful Black man.

Anyone else might be jealous of a guy like him, but I'm not anyone, and if someone can rival my best friend in the looks department, it's me. Not to sound like an arrogant asshole but, well, if the boot fits...

I step out of the elevator and into the large office where almost every wall is covered in windows, offering scenic views of San Francisco Bay. In the center is a large black tempered-glass desk, and sitting in a leather chair behind it is David, looking more frazzled than I've seen him in years.

"What's going on?" I get straight to the point. Our friendship has surpassed empty pleasantries, and David's in trouble. He needs my help, so the small talk can wait.

I drop into the seat opposite my friend, who rakes his hands through his short, tight black coils. "There's been another threat."

David has been getting terroristic messages for months now. That's nothing new. He's gotten several over the years from all kinds of crazies. Women want to marry him, and men want to be him.

"Okay, and what do they say?" I reply, wondering why this has my friend so on edge. Sure, getting death threats or blackmail demands is never pleasant, but we faced worse overseas, and usually, these low-life hackers just want to extort money from him. It only takes my cyber-security specialist Elliot a couple of hours to trace the IP addresses and pass all the relevant information on to the FBI.

"That's the thing; they've made no demands," David says, his eyes darkening. "Only threats. Threats against Harper."

The world stops, and I feel all the blood drain from my body. No wonder David is so rattled. No one messes with his kid sister. He's always been overprotective of Harper, especially since her social media influence has skyrocketed and she's been thrust into the spotlight.

"Now, I know you don't like her..." David begins, and I glance away.

My best friend thinks I don't like Harper because that's what I want him to believe. The truth is, I've wanted her since she was sixteen. But I'm five years older, and she's David's sister, making her strictly off-limits. So, I do the only thing I can do; I pretend not to like her.

Is it petty? Sure. Immature? Most definitely. That's easier than dealing with the truth because, in David's eyes, no one is good enough for his little sister. Not even his best friend.

"I don't... *not* like her," I reply cautiously, narrowing my eyes. "We just rub each other the wrong way."

David smirks. "I know, and I know she can be a handful sometimes. But I don't trust anyone else. Vince, you're my best friend. I need you."

I heave out a sigh because I know... Even if Harper gets under my skin. Even if she drives me crazy. Even if nothing can ever happen between us, I won't let David deal with this alone. And I'll *never* let anything happen to her.

"Don't worry. I know somewhere I can take her to keep her safe. We'll lay low for a few days, and in the meantime, I'll have Elliot and his team work to find out who's behind this."

David lets out a long breath. "Thank you, Vince. I know I'm asking a lot—"

I wave him off. "It's nothing. You know I'd do anything for you. For all of you."

He smiles. "I don't want her freaking out about this. I don't want to scare Harper by telling her exactly what's happening."

I nod my agreement. “Right. We’ll tell her someone’s after you, and everyone needs to leave town for a bit.”

“You know she’s not gonna like this.” David chuckles as he picks up his phone, puts it on speaker, and calls Harper.

“Hey, big bro. What’s up?” she says upon answering, and I feel my chest tightening at hearing her angelic voice.

“Hey, I need you to leave town for a few days,” David says, and even though I can’t see Harper, I can perfectly imagine her rolling her honey-colored eyes.

Harper laughs, and the sound makes my dick twitch. “You’re kidding, right? Is this a joke? You do know it’s the Fourth of July weekend? I’ve been planning a getaway with my friends on our parents’ yacht for months. I’m not canceling my plans because some lunatic is after you. *Ah-gain*. This is nothing new, D. Just have Vince take care of it.”

“I am,” I say, letting her know she’s on speaker and I’ve been part of the conversation this whole time.

“Ugh! Can you *not* do that, you creeper?” I laugh because she’s cute when she’s riled up. “Tell my brother you’ll catch whoever is sending him threats and that I don’t need to leave town.”

“Actually, I agree with David. I think he and your parents should lay low too.”

“Seriously? I can’t believe this. Mom and Dad know how to keep safe, and I’ll be on the boat with my friends. What could go wrong?”

David cuts in, his voice laced with concern. “Do you need me to spell it out for you, Harp? You’re not exactly private on social media. Everyone knows your plans for the weekend. So, if someone wanted to get at me through you, they wouldn’t have to search very hard.”

Knowing we need time on our side, I command, “Just pack your bags and be ready to leave in an hour.” The longer we stay on the phone debating this shit, the longer before we can leave and get to safety.

“You can’t just order me around, Vince,” Harper hisses. “Besides, I don’t have time for this. I have a date tonight.”

Her confession stabs at my heart, and I’m about to ask *with who* when David beats me to the punch. “With who?”

Harper’s dating life is another point of contention between the siblings. I know her last several attempts at dating have failed because they all seem to only want to get closer to her brother to pitch him a business idea. Or they think Harper is like David and lives a flashy, expensive life because she’s a social media influencer. But she’s not like that. Not really. That’s just her *business* persona. In reality, she’s a sweet, down-to-earth girl.

And those aren’t the only reasons her attempts have failed. I’m not ashamed to admit that David and I have run all her potential suitors off by scaring the shit out of them whenever an opportunity presents itself. You know, to keep her safe.

“Mind your business, D,” Harper replies. “I don’t stick my nose into your love life, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t stick yours in mine.” Her singsong voice sounds sugary sweet, but it doesn’t hide her annoyance.

I suppress a smirk. Harper *does not* want to know what her older brother gets up to when he isn’t working. I’m into some wild shit, but that man is kinky as fuck!

“I’m sorry,” David says, and he genuinely sounds it. “I’m just looking out for you. I know this ruins your plans, and if there was any other way, I wouldn’t be asking. But you know I’d never forgive myself if something happened to you, Harp.”

I smile because that was smooth. Nevertheless, everything David is saying is true. Neither of us would forgive ourselves if something happened to Harper; however, it also pays to remind her of that fact and tug on her heartstrings, so she does what we want.

Harper sighs with obvious frustration. “I know, and if it was any other weekend... I’m not trying to sound like a brat. I promise. But it’s not just the boat trip I have planned. This

date is important to me. I like this guy, D. It took me *months* to get reservations.”

“Oh yeah? Where are you going?” David asks, adopting a softer tone. I know what he’s doing, even if she doesn’t. While his brotherly interest is genuine, it serves another purpose. If we can find out where Harper will be tonight, we might be able to catch her before the date. In person, she won’t be able to ignore our pleas for her safety.

Predictably, Harper falls for the bait. Though, even if she disagrees with David’s methods, it doesn’t stop the siblings from being close, and she can’t wait to share her exciting news with him. “I got reservations at Deseo!”

Deseo is the hottest new Columbian restaurant in the city, owned by Michelin star chef Alejandro Hernández, and has a three-month waiting list for reservations. Harper must have planned this date *well* in advance to get a table, which indicates how into this guy she is.

I scowl and clench my fists. *Harper is free to date whomever she wants*, I remind myself. That being said, and even without all the facts, I’m confident he isn’t good enough for her.

David lets out a low whistle while giving me a sly look. “Wow, sis. I’m impressed. So, what’s his name? What’s he like?”

“Oh, no, I’m not stupid,” Harper says, and I can picture her beautiful eyes narrowing. “If I tell you anything about him, you’ll only look him up. Probably run a background check with your little spy friend over there. And don’t you *dare* think of turning up at the restaurant.”

David glances at me and raises a brow. *Is he thinking what I’m thinking?*

“I won’t. I swear,” he promises. He never said anything about *me*, though.

I nod to let David know I understand his plan and quietly slip out of the office while the siblings continue to chat. I leave his building, flashing another charming smile at Kala and the

other ladies as I head out. I drive back to my own building across town, where my team is hard at work.

I make my way over to Elliot's desk. "I have an important assignment for you to prioritize above everything else."

Elliot looks up at me with his hazel eyes, pushes his glasses back into place, and smiles. "Sure, what is it, boss?"

"Someone is sending threatening emails to David Scott. I need you to access his system and track this fucker. Find out *everything* about them and report back to me. I need to know every detail about this guy." Elliot nods his understanding, and I clap my hand down on his shoulder. "I'm going to be out of town for a few days, but I'll be in touch. Message me as soon as you know who is behind it."

"Will do. Is there anything else you need while you're away?"

"Just keep an eye on things here, please?"

"Of course," Elliot assures me, and I know my company is in good hands with my cyber-security specialist. Next to David, Elliot is the closest friend I have, and he's never let me down.

Confident that everything is sorted, I go back to my apartment and pack up an overnight bag. The place I'm taking Harper is already fully furnished, and I have a procedure for groceries to be delivered, but a few home comforts won't go amiss. All that's left is to shower and get ready for a night out.

I have a date to crash.



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Cocky CEO Drew reluctantly agrees to show his best friend's sister around the city for the weekend. But one look at the sweet and innocent Elissa, and he knows she won't be staying in the guest room.

ALL FOR YOU

When Lex finds herself in more trouble than she can handle, a Viking Sex God known as Rhys comes to her rescue. She didn't want to be the damsel in distress, but if this sexy heartbreaker was her knight, she'd let him save her any day. Who knew Prince Charming rode a motorcycle?

THIS IS FOREVER

Bella's life was perfect until the boy she loved with all her heart walked away with no explanation, vanishing into thin air. Now he's back and still as gorgeous and sexy as the day he left. And with just one smoldering look, she knows she won't be able to tell him no. But if she's honest with herself, does she even want to?

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE STANDALONES

SENTINEL: SATAN'S DISCIPLES MC BOOK 1

Bad girls don't get what they want, Emma. Bad girls get punished... I thought coming to this unknown town in the middle of nowhere would keep me out of

trouble, that it would be the perfect place to hide and start a new life. Instead, I found myself a different kind of trouble. The kind of trouble that makes good girls like me want to be all kinds of bad.

DAD BOD DOM: DAD BOD 2.0

He may look a little soft, but don't let his DAD BOD fool you! With just one look, this Daddy Dom will have you on your knees like a good little girl! And there's no escaping the sexy, single dad who sets my panties on fire with his Southern charm and killer smile. But I know something those thirsty moms at the playground don't know. I get the dominant, protective side of Logan Montgomery that he saves just for me when I'm a good girl. Because when I'm a good girl, I get *Daddy*.

ROOM FIFTEEN: TIED UP WITH THE DARK

Dark, mysterious, and lethal... That's how most people describe the three men in my bed. And yet, to me, they're my salvation. I asked them for a simple favor, but what they demanded in return was something far more profound, something that would indefinitely tether the four of us with an unbreakable bond.

My fate was sealed in Room Fifteen.

And I will forever be theirs.

PUCK ME: NY STORM HOCKEY SERIES

Alex is used to getting what he wants, but he can't have Chloe. The smart, sexy, nerdy analyst refuses to give the hockey f*ckboy the time of day. He thinks being her brother's best friend would count for something, but all she sees is a cocky NHL defenseman known for wild nights and casual sex. But Alex swears he's done with all of that, and Chloe is his new weakness. He just has to convince her it's true.

GAMBLE: DIRTY SINNERS MC

Gamble is a Sinner who doesn't play; he only wins. He can be ruthless and deadly when he needs to be. Except when it comes to her—Dove. He refuses to lose her for a second time and let her get away from him. She will fly again, his little bird. She will be his. His Dove.

HOPE FOR ME

Tris Bailey almost got away with it but instead found herself sentenced to mandatory community service. But she's not prepared for the program director, Carter Jensen—aka Mr. Sunshine—to turn her world upside down and make her feel things she swore she'd never feel again. Now, Tris must find it in her heart to let go of her past hurt or risk losing the man she never planned on but knows she can't live without.

COMING IN HOT

The man Harper hates the most just crashed her dream date. So, how did she end up in a secluded cabin with Vince for the next two weeks instead of being on a yacht for the Fourth of July like she had planned? Now, she's stuck with her nemesis - who also happens to be her brother's best friend - in Sycamore Mountain, North Carolina. And the man she thought she wanted nothing to do with is now lying in bed with her after the hottest night she's ever had.

MR. ARROGANT: A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

Eden's new boss is the sexiest man she's ever seen... but she just might have to kill him. And right when she's about to give in to all the sexual tension that's been

brewing between them, Chase proves he really does deserve to be called nothing less than Mr. Arrogant.

TRIPPED UP

Reese came to Kismet Cove hoping her Singles Week vacation would end with at least a few good memories and some potential dating prospects. But nothing could have prepared her for Mr. Life of the Party, Connor Wolfe, who's gorgeous and everything she's not, pushing her to her limits in the best of ways. So, what happens after a week of explosive chemistry and sexy hidden rendezvous?

WANTING MY BEST FRIEND

Noelle is in love with her best friend, Max, who's been by her side since the first grade. But they're all grown up now, and it's time to move on to the next chapter of their lives. Will telling him how she feels run him off? Or will she get a sweet surprise and find out Max feels the same way?

TANGLED IN TINSEL

When Quinn moves to the city for her new job, she never dreamed she'd run into her old friend, Mason. It's obvious ten years has done her high school pal a lot of good, and the once awkward teen is now warming cold fronts with all his gorgeous hotness. But he's keeping a secret that Quinn isn't too sure about, one that's bound to leave her tangled up. Guess she'll have to wait until Christmas to find out what he's hiding...

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Elyse Kelly 

PANTY MELTING ROMANCE WITH A HAPPILY EVER AFTER.