

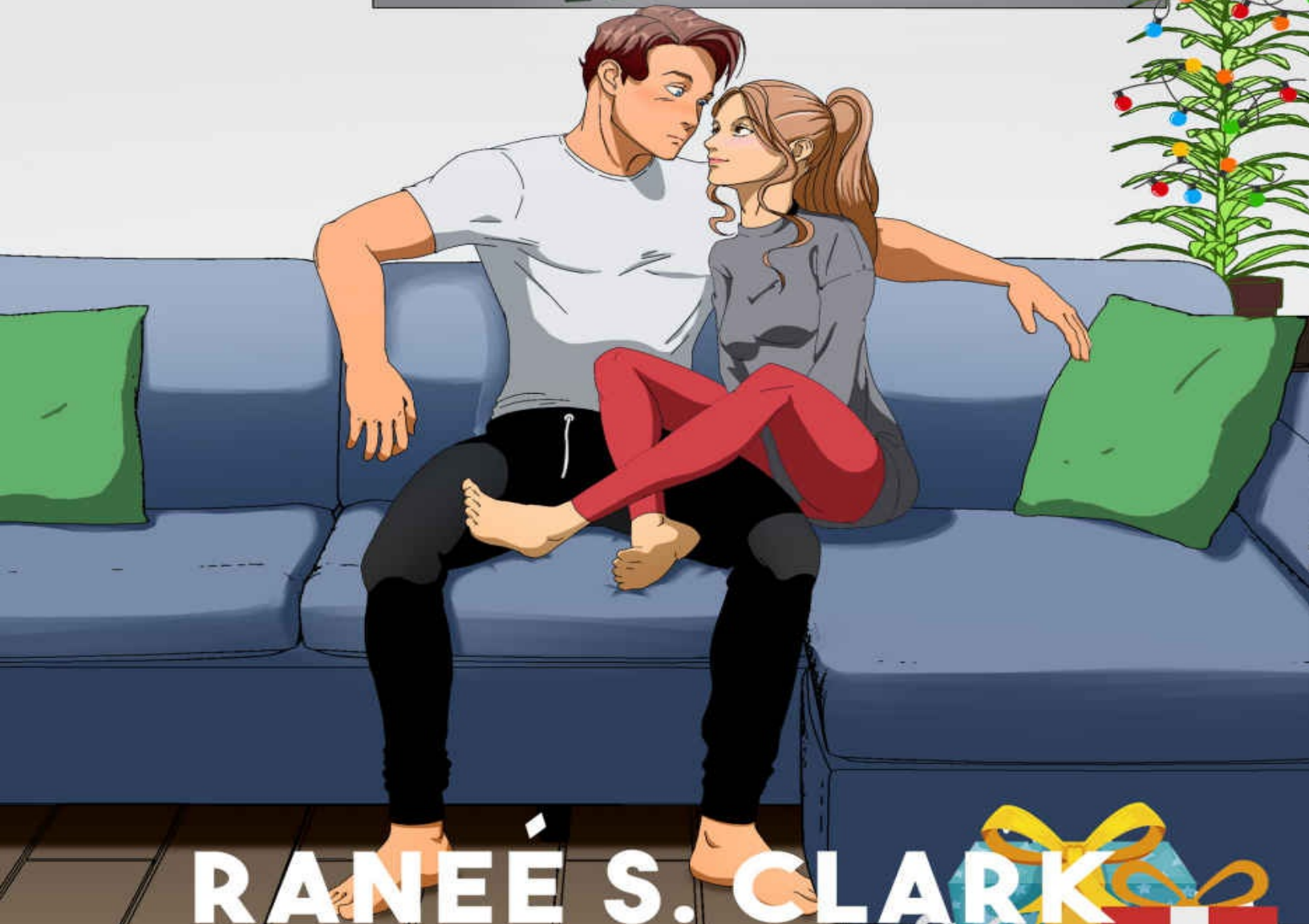
a best friends christmas novella

MISTLETOE

Kisses

& SOMETHING

MERRY



RANEE S. CLARK

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CHAPTER 1

MILA

“Final Boarding call for passengers Mila Dash, Preston Banks, and Javier Torres. Flight 4916 with service to George Bush Intercontinental Airport will be leaving the gate. Passengers Mila Dash, Preston Banks, and Javier Torres, please check in at the desk at Gate 41.”

I can see the bored ticket agent from my seat at Gate 41 as she announces the impending departure of my flight to Houston and scans the crowd milling around us. The gate is fairly empty since all but three of the passengers on Flight 4916, doors closing in about three minutes, have boarded the flight.

But I can barely move. I was a little off and extra tired when I left my apartment this morning to come to LAX, but somewhere between the security line and finding my gate, the flu has hit me hard. Aches have taken over my entire body, head to toe, and there’s a slick of sweat across my forehead. The four times I’ve taken off and put back on my LA Rays hoodie has sapped all the energy I had left, which leaves me in a conundrum. Not enough energy to get on a three-and-a-half-hour flight to watch my brother’s Christmas Day game in Houston. Not enough energy to get out of this metal chair and get back to my apartment, where I could snuggle into my bed and die in peace.

A prickle in my stomach that says cramping, and possibly puking, is in my near future.

Decision one: I cannot sit through a flight. Not with my limbs so heavy it

feels like a chore to lift them. Just putting my hoodie on left me out of breath and panting. I start to shift my position to sit up, but the motion makes that slight prickle turn into a dangerous roil.

What do I do now?

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the chair. At least the chairs here at LAX are wide and kind of comfortable. I mean, relatively speaking. I kick my feet up on my carry-on. I'd be so much more comfortable if I got the blanket I always travel with from the front pocket of the small suitcase.

Too. Much. Work.

I wrap my arms around myself for warmth. I'll rest here long enough to recover enough to make it back through the terminal so I can go home.

I drift off to the last call for Mila Dash and Preston Banks, so Javier must have made it. Good for Javier.

I dream of a cake the size of my bed, with a fondant topper that looks like my comforter and two expertly crafted pillows complete with frosting ruffles. I'm about to use a huge machete to cut myself a slice when my phone buzzes in my pocket and startles me awake. My stomach only gives a minor protest at the movement, so perhaps the short nap has done some good.

My brother Eli's picture shows up on the screen, and I tap the green button to answer. "Hey."

"Hey. The stalker app says you're still in LA, but your flight left half an hour ago. Did you miss it?"

Can I blame my brother for jumping to that conclusion? Not really. I dropped my life in Phoenix to move to LA with him six months ago to pursue acting, and then I promptly fell for the biggest tool in Hollywood, who dumped me ten seconds after he got his first big part.

Oh, and did I mention that he got my roommate pregnant before he started dating me but pretended like their relationship had been no big deal? He's a winner.

One impetuous decision after another is what landed me here in LA, and Eli will never trust me to act like a responsible adult again.

Ugh.

“I did miss my flight, but I was here on time.” Each word feels like it costs too much. I rest my head back again and close my eyes, channeling the strength I have left for talking to my brother.

“Mila?” Eli’s tone immediately shifts into concern, so he must hear something in my voice. “Are you okay? You sound off.” He pauses, and I’m still building up the energy to explain more so I can’t stop him when he goes on. “Did you see Jack at the airport or something? Was he a jerk? Did he try to charm you again —”

“I’m sick,” I finally break in, although talk of Jack makes my stomach twist even more. That man. Can’t stop making my life the worst even though he’s still over two-thousand miles away, filming. “Like really, really sick. I couldn’t get on the plane and suffer for three hours. I’m sorry.”

Eli sighs. “*I’m* sorry, Mila.” There’s a beat of silence. “Why are you still at the airport?” He must be checking the “stalker app” as he always refers to the app on our phones that shares our locations with each other. “Are you going to try and catch another flight?” There’s a note of hope in his voice that’s endearing. My brother had big plans for this week. His Christmas Day game is tomorrow, and he’s starting, even though Tucker Jones is healthy by all reports. I love that my brother is finally out of his slump, playing like the all-star he is. Then we were going to head down to the beach for a couple days to spend time as a family. My parents are already in Houston with Eli and his girlfriend, Court. I think he might even be proposing—he’s been acting kind of cagey about this trip, insistent that everyone needs to be there for Christmas. They’ve only been dating a few months, but Court and Eli have some kind of magical connection, and they’re so adorably in love that I’m jealous 24/7.

“Not today,” I say. I hate that I have to let him down. Eli paid for my

flight. When I'm feeling better again, I'll argue with him about paying him back. "I'm sorry. Honestly, I'm just trying to figure out how I'm going to drag myself home. I feel so awful, Eli."

"Mila..." His voice is sympathetic. I have the best big brother of all time, even if he's too overprotective.

I mean, fair. I should've listened when he tried to get me to slow down with Jack, but I'm almost twenty-four years old. A full-grown adult. "Sit tight," he says. "I'm going to make some calls."

"Eli. Enjoy your time with the family and focus on your game. You're supposed to be checking into the hotel any minute, and your coach won't like you worrying about me instead of about the game against the Pumas tomorrow."

"It'll take me less than half an hour to help you with this. Let me do it, okay?"

I give in quickly and without my usual arguments about him not believing I can take care of myself. "Okay." Because the truth is, I'm having a hard time focusing on this phone call, even as short as it is. I'm too miserable to be independent. And my stomach is really starting to take center stage right now. Plus there's the aches I'm still dealing with.

"Mom wants to talk to you," Eli says.

I groan. I love my mom, I do. And I am always happy to talk with her for hours on end. She's the only person who really listens to me, although Eli is making a lot of effort lately to stop seeing me as the flighty little sister he has to fix messes for on a regular basis.

It's my stomach that causes the groan, honestly.

"Sweetie?" Mom's voice makes tears prick in my eyes. I'm so mad I couldn't get on the plane and spend the holiday with my family.

"I'm fine, Mom. Just the stomach flu. Nothing a fully grown adult like me can't handle."

She chuckles. "I'm going to hop on a flight and come take care of you."

“No, you aren’t.” It’s the first thing I’ve been able to say forcefully since I sat in this chair. “This weekend is important to Eli. You’d come to watch me puke and sleep, which is not important. Stay for him, please.”

She lets out a long breath, probably because she knows I’m right. “Mila...”

“Seriously, Mom.” I drop my voice. “I think he might propose. He’s been acting so funny. You really should stay.”

“Oh! Well...if you’re sure?”

The way her voice goes up an octave makes me almost giggle. If I wasn’t too exhausted for giggling. “Really sure.”

“Okay...” Her tone says she’s torn, but she won’t come rushing to LA for me. “I’ll call and check in with you later.”

“Sounds good. Have fun, and take lots of pictures.”

“Of course.” She says goodbye, and the phone call—thankfully—ends. I close my eyes again. I’ve never been this tired in my life, and all I want to do is sleep and find some Tylenol to see if they can ease my achiness. Why am I not the kind of person who carries that in her purse? I promise myself from now on that I will always have Tylenol in my purse. I act like period cramps don’t even exist. Sheesh. No wonder everyone thinks I’m irresponsible.

“Miss Dash?” I crack my eyes open to find an airport employee standing next to my chair.

“Yeah?” I push myself to sitting.

“I’m here to escort you to your car.” She gestures to the walkway behind us, where there’s one of those airport golfcarts waiting. “Do you think you can walk over to that?” she asks gently. I must look bad.

I *feel* so bad I don’t even care.

“Yeah,” I say. She puts out a hand to help me up and doesn’t say anything as I lean on her to make my way over to the golfcart. She dashes over to the seat for my carry-on, settling it onto the back of the cart, before hopping into the driver’s seat.

She drives through the crowds of holiday travelers slowly, which I'm thankful for. As eager as I am to get home and lie in my bed, my stomach can't take a lot of jerky movements without me throwing up right now.

She drives me right out the doors for pickup, and as soon as we arrive on the sidewalk, a black sedan pulls up in front of her. The woman hops out of her seat and comes around to take my arm and lead me to the car, settling me gently in the back, behind the passenger seat, while my driver retrieves my carry-on.

"Can I have my bag back here with me?" I ask, thinking of my blanket. The driver nods, sliding it in beside me from the driver's side. "Thank you ... Kristin," I tell the airport employee, noting her nametag for the first time. "I seriously appreciate this."

"Of course." She smiles at me in a genuine way. "Get better quickly. And Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you too." I give her the best smile I can muster before she shuts the door.

"Do you need my address?" I ask the driver as I rest my head back against the head rest.

"Already taken care of," he says in a soothing voice.

I'm not going to complain anymore about how overprotective my brother is. Or how, even though he's usually a penny-pincher, he definitely threw some money around today to make sure I'm comfortable. This isn't any old Uber. These seats are the softest leather I've ever laid my hands on. The driver is also the best I've ever had in LA. He drives as smoothly as Kristin drove her golfcart, like LA traffic isn't even a thing.

But my stomach protesting for no good reason? That's still a thing. The cramping and rumbling are getting worse and worse, despite the sips of water I keep taking from my water bottle. My breakfast is coming up very soon, and this car is so immaculate, there's not even an old soda cup I can barf into.

I frantically look around, noting we're in the middle lane on the 405 and

there's no way he can pull over. I have two options: on the seat of this really nice car or inside my carry-on.

I yank the suitcase toward me. Merry Christmas, Mila, here's a bunch of laundry to do while you're sick.

CHAPTER 2

LONDON

I push open the door of my building with a smile. As much as Layla whined about spending extra days at her parents' house, she was happy when I dropped her off. I do the best I can taking care of her, but she needs some spoiling. I'm confident when I see her tomorrow at our grandparents' house for dinner, she'll be bouncing around, even if she is almost six months pregnant.

My phone buzzes with a text, and I expect it's from Layla, sending me something that's half-whining, half-grateful about her mom smothering her or something. Aunt Amy and Uncle Jason were surprised when Layla told them about the baby, but they were immediately supportive. Neither Aunt Amy nor Layla will tell Uncle Jason who the dad is, and I've been sworn to secrecy too, based on the "talking to" Uncle Jason wants to give him. I think Layla's worried he'll convince Jack to "do the right thing," which is the last thing Layla wants.

Not that Jack could be convinced to do anything that doesn't benefit him in some way, but Layla still has rose-colored glasses when it comes to him. He's disappointed her so often the last few months, but I'm not going to be the one who points out that he's going to be a selfish jerkface the rest of his life.

When I pull out my phone, I see that the text's from Eli Dash. If you'd

told me a few months ago that I'd end up friends with the starting quarterback for the Rays, and would actually know a few things about football, I would have laughed a lot.

Eli: Mila isn't coming to Houston because she got sick. Would you mind checking in on her the next couple days?

I chuckle. Eli and his girlfriend, Court, have been not-so-subtly trying to matchmake me and Mila ever since they started dating. Listen, I'm not opposed. Mila is the sweetest, kindest woman I've ever met. She's full of energy and passion that's addicting, and the truth is I've been trying for weeks to figure out if she's ready to move our friendship to the next level. Jack did a number on both the women I care about, and I don't want to take advantage of any lingering heartbreak Mila has after the way he treated her. There's a hesitancy to her when it comes to me and her, and I don't want to push those boundaries. I'm happy to be there as a friend until she's ready for more.

Her brother knows a lot about how it feels to love someone that's put you firmly in the friend zone, and he seems to think that matchmaking efforts will solve everything. He's fully supported by Court and her aunt, Sophie.

Did I mention that my inner circle basically includes a famous pro-football player and a famous actress? I mean this *is* LA, but still.

Landon: I'm happy to, of course. Good luck tomorrow!

Eli's response is a GIF that Mila showed him how to make of himself after he rushed his first touchdown with the Rays. He's doing this weird, wide-stanced walk and flexing his arms, head back and yelling in excitement. The Rays players around him are all bouncing up and down, screaming too. The hilarious thing about this GIF is that it's the most un-Eli thing I've ever seen. He's so chill, even on the football field, always focused and calm. Maybe that's why we all love it so much. Mila sends it to me on a regular basis, like last week when she sold out within an hour after trying a new recipe for peppermint-frosted sugar cookies.

When I push open the door to our floor, I see that Mila has made checking in on her easy. She's leaning back against her door, head resting on the frame, completely asleep. Her legs are splayed out in front of her on the welcome rug, and her carry-on is standing up next to her. I have so many questions, like, is this as far as she got leaving for Houston before she called her trip off? Where are her roommates? The number of people living there *has* dropped pretty significantly the last couple months—Layla moved in with me, Jack's on location filming the Phantom Hex movie, and his room roommate, Ethan, found another place to live. But the other three women who live there usually have people swarming this apartment. So how long has Mila been here, and why hasn't anyone let her in?

Also, how is she still so beautiful, even when her face is pale and her hair is sticking out at all angles?

Mysteries of the universe, I guess.

I crouch down next to her and then wrinkle my nose at the smell emanating around her, trying not to laugh. It smells strongly of vomit, but I can't see anything on her clothes. I take a careful sniff of her hair, but it shockingly smells really good, like it always does, like lavender and mint, from the shampoo she's told me she can't really afford to buy but still does. She only washes her hair once a week, and she told me proudly that's not just because it makes the shampoo last longer but because it's better for her hair. She has me half-convinced to lengthen out my wash schedule as well, though she did admit that with my much shorter hair, I probably wouldn't notice a huge improvement in the health of my hair. Did I let my hair grow out a little longer on top because of her? It's possible, yes.

"Mila?" I gently put a hand on her arm, and she blinks up at me. "What are you doing out here?"

She blinks a few more times and doesn't move from where she's leaning on the door. "I got sick at the airport," she says, grimacing. That explains the carry-on. "Eli got me a driver, but he dropped me off downstairs. I think

that's because I threw up in his car." Now I grimace, and she rushes on. "Well, not in his car, but in my suitcase, actually. But I was in his car when I threw up in my suitcase." And that explains the smell. "Anyway," she says, "I can't find the right key, and I'm so, so, so tired, Landon." She holds up her keychain, which has exactly two keys on it—the key to this apartment and the key to the guesthouse at Sophie's where Eli lives. I think him living there still is a lot more about proximity to Court these days than it is about affordability. I won't complain. If Eli moved out to a bigger place, Mila might move back in with him.

I take the keys from her. "Let me help." I gently help her stand, holding her up as I unlock the door and guiding her inside. I leave the carry-on by the door. Everything in there is going straight to the laundry.

"What can I help you do?" I ask when we get inside.

"I just want to sleep," she says.

"Okay, to your bedroom." I help her across the living room and to one of the two bedrooms in the apartment. There's no one else here. Gianna and Logan, the only roommates left, must be working or gone for Christmas. I think there's a new woman moving in after the new year.

"Nope, nope, nope," she suddenly says, covering her mouth and turning for the bathroom, which is down the hall from the room opposite hers. I don't want her to fall, so I keep a hold of her shoulders as we hurry forward. She stumbles inside, kneeling in front of the toilet.

I've always had a stomach of stone, one of those people that can eat pretty much anything and never be bothered. I lived in Argentina for about a year in the middle of college and ate the grossest things imaginable without blinking an eye.

Besides, I lived with Layla during some rough months of her pregnancy. So the puking has no effect on me except to make me feel awful for my friend.

I grab a headband that's lying on the sink nearby and kneel down next to

Mila, pulling it over her head to hold back the stray hairs that have escaped the (very) messy bun on top of her head. She looks at me with gratitude before turning back towards the toilet.

When it's over, she pulls the hand towel down from next to the sink and wipes her mouth with it, then sits with her back against the sink cabinet. There's a sheen of sweat across her forehead, and my heart aches for how badly she's feeling right now. I hop up and grab a washcloth from the closet in the hallway, next to the bathroom door. I lean over her to get it wet in the sink and then hand it to her.

"Thanks." She wipes it over her face. "You didn't have to stay here for that. It was so gross."

I chuckle. "I live with a pregnant woman, Mila, remember? This isn't even the first time this week that I've seen someone throw up."

She studies me while taking a deep breath and swallowing. I hop up again. This time I hurry into the kitchen and grab her a glass of water and find some Tylenol. She's burning up and hopefully puking now will mean she can keep it down long enough to help her fever. She cringes when I hand over the pills, but nods with determination. Once she's swallowed the pills, she hands me back the glass of water.

"You're something else, Landon," she says softly. "You're just so ... I don't know. You're amazing."

I shake my head, thinking of Jack. "You have a low bar."

She mimics my action and winces. "You know my brother."

"That's different." Eli would be here doing all these things if he could. In fact, if he hadn't already left for Houston, I wouldn't put it past him to have stayed home to take care of his sister. "He's your brother." I raise an eyebrow and she smiles.

"I'm saying, you're almost as cool as he is," she says.

"I appreciate the compliment. Ready to go to bed?" I snap my mouth shut and widen my eyes as I realize what I said. "I didn't mean —"

She holds up a hand. “Of course you didn’t. Stop making me laugh.” She puts a hand on her stomach as her shoulders shake weakly. Then she scrunches her nose. “I think I’m going to need a shower first.”

I stand and back out of the bathroom. “I’ll be right here. Let me know if you need me.”

She nods but doesn’t move from her seat next to the sink. I step back into the bathroom and turn the water on, waiting for it to heat up before pulling the knob to start the shower.

“Thanks,” she says weakly. She doesn’t move.

I crouch down next to her. “How can I help?” I ask softly.

The first color I’ve seen in her cheeks since I found her in the hallway sweeps up her cheeks. “I can’t think of any way to say this without…” She trails off and looks down at her hands.

Heat pools into my own cheeks because I know exactly what she needs. I basically had to carry her into the apartment and down this hallway in the first place, so it’s no surprise that she’s sapped of energy. I start with her shoes and socks without saying a word. I reach for the bottom of her hoodie. “Arms up,” I say, channeling as much of my mom’s vibe when she did this for me as a kid as I can. I’ll keep picturing my mom and make this as objective as possible. Just helping my friend.

She has a t-shirt on under the sweatshirt. So far things are fine. She leans her forehead against my shoulder, and I toss the sweatshirt into the hallway and wrap my arms around her.

“Okay,” she says after a minute, pulling her head back up. The pink is gone, leaving behind pale cheeks, and it’s like getting the sweatshirt off took everything she has left.

I finger the hem of her t-shirt and then squeeze my eyes shut. She laughs, barely a breath of air, and I repeat, like before, in my automatic voice. “Arms up.” I will not think about what I’m doing right now. I will pretend like the gorgeous woman in front of me doesn’t even exist. I’m a robot with no

feelings.

Then my fingers accidentally graze the soft skin at her side and suddenly it's hard to breathe. Because I'm really not a robot right now. I'm so glad Mila has her eyes closed because I can't let her know how crazy it's making me to be this close to her.

I toss the shirt aside and help her get her sweats off with me still looking everywhere but at her, and yet being able to imagine everything I'm not seeing. Robot Landon keeps lecturing me about how this is not the right time to be thinking about Mila like this. She's sick, man. Get a grip.

"I'll be right out here if you need anything," I reassure her when I step out. She nods.

I slide down to sit next to the door and listen to make sure she's okay. I run a hand down my face. I'd do all of this and more in a heartbeat for Mila, but taking care of her while her brother's out of town is going to test the strength of my will to resist her.

CHAPTER 3

MILA

When I open the door of the bathroom, I'm relieved to see Landon still sitting outside the door. The last several minutes before I got in the shower were embarrassing for us both. And even if he hadn't been squeezing his eyes shut or looking up at the ceiling, it's not like he would have seen anything he hasn't seen at the beach. I was even wearing a sports bra, and my underwear was a pair of comfy boy shorts since I was going to be traveling. So I think the only thing that made it embarrassing, at least for me, is how much I care about Landon. How much I wish something real for us could work.

I stop that thought.

Landon is the best guy I have ever thought about dating. We could say I have a type. Eli would definitely say I have a type, and unfortunately that low-life Jack fit right into it. But honestly, if you had met Jack, even before he got the Phantom Hex part, you'd have thought about dating him. Imagine that you met Tom Holland at a Starbucks and he asked you out. Would you say no? Of course you wouldn't, so that's my only justification.

So the thing is I don't want to mess it up with Landon. Like *really* don't want to mess it up. Before I started my bakery truck, I hopped from job to job to job, and the truth is I've only been a baker for a couple months. Despite how much I love it, I'm terrified that in six months I'm going to be tired of it. Eli tries to tell me that's fine, but it's not. I'm twenty-three years old. I have

to be an adult but I can't settle down.

And what if I do that with Landon—jump in and then hurt him? I would never, *ever* forgive myself.

Even if the way he squeezed his eyes shut was stupid adorable.

Even if the way he held me against him made me know, despite the fact that I feel like Eli's entire offensive line ran me over, everything would be okay. Because everything is always okay with Landon.

Ugh.

Ugh.

I press a hand against where I've wrapped the towel around me. Luckily it's one of those big bath sheets that Eli bought me as a housewarming gift a couple months ago. Actually it was one of several housewarming gifts that ran along the same theme: Two of Mila's roommates are guys, and she will need to cover every inch of her body.

He also gave me three oversized Rays hoodies, one of which Landon is sitting on like a cushion outside the bathroom, waiting for me.

He hops up. His gaze sweeps over me but very quickly moves to my eyes and stays there. "Do you mind helping me to my room?" I feel bad asking so much of him, but standing up for the five minutes it took me to wash myself off was hard enough. And I was already completely exhausted. I wish I could ask him to carry me, but I think that would be going too far considering my current attire.

"Of course." He wraps an arm around my waist and moves slowly with me the short distance from the bathroom to my room. Then he sits me on the bed. "Stay here. You look like you're about to collapse. I'll find you clothes."

It's such a relief to sit on the soft mattress. I want to curl up and lie down, but I'd be a lot warmer if I had clothes on, so I'll wait.

Landon rifles through my small dresser, and I try not to laugh at the pink in his cheeks when he lays another one of my comfy sports bras and a pair of underwear next to me. I want to congratulate him on how well he chose and

how he didn't grab the first thing he found, but I think that might embarrass him even more than touching my unmentionables.

I lean back against the stack of pillows on my bed and close my eyes for a minute.

“Mila?”

His voice snaps me awake, though I have no idea how long I might have drifted off for. “Mmmm?” When I open my eyes, he's standing next to my dresser, looking sorry that he had to interrupt my brief nap.

“I can't find anything comfortable like sweats and tees or something.” He frowns at me.

I laugh, but it's a weak, breathy thing and a shaking of my shoulders. “I did one load of laundry in my rush to get ready to go to Houston, and all my clean clothes were in that carry-on.”

His frown disappears as he chuckles with me. “I'll go over to my place and grab something. I'll be right back.”

This is a good thing. It gives me the opportunity to put on my underwear without him worrying about what to do next. Working my way into my bra and panties does take far longer than it should, so just as I wrap myself up in the big, fluffy, minky blanket I have (housewarming gift number three, and the only one that had nothing to do with keeping me away from Jack—unless it's because it's generally too hot to share this blanket with anyone), Landon returns.

He has a pair of butter-soft, wide-leg yoga pants that are Layla's but that she can't wear right now despite being the cutest pregnant lady ever and a Los Angeles City College sweatshirt that must be Landon's.

“Layla's sweaters and stuff must be packed away still because she's been so hot all the time, so I grabbed one of mine to be quick. Hope that's okay.” He crouches by the bed like he did in the bathroom before he helped me take my hoodie and tee off.

“Absolutely fine.”

“Do you need help?”

I want to laugh again at the torn expression on his face. I won't pretend like I don't know that Landon likes me, or that right now I'm having a hard time remembering why I'm keeping him at arm's length. That's probably my muddled mind and this sickness though. I need to stay strong until I'm strong again.

I'm not sure that makes sense.

“I had a little bit of a rest. I think I can do it,” I tell him. They're stretchy sweats. I can handle that.

He nods. “I'm going to go get you something to drink and some crackers.” He closes the door softly behind him.

The yoga pants slip on easily and so does the sweatshirt, but I still flop back down on the bed in relief that now I can sleep.

Except that this sweatshirt smells like Landon, and it's faint but still powerful. It's like he's hugging me, and let me tell you, Landon Delaford gives the best hugs ever. Maybe it's because he has a way of letting it just be a hug, his arms tight around me, my face nestled into his chest. His hands never wander the way Jack's always did—he could never hug me without his hands straying within thirty seconds. Until Landon's hugs, I kind of thought it was cute the way Jack couldn't keep his hands off me. Or maybe it's that now I know how slimy Jack is.

I'm going to have to figure out a way to not give this sweatshirt back.

Landon taps at the door, and I call for him to come in. He has a package of crackers, which he opens and sets on the nightstand next to my bed, and a sports drink.

I pat the bed next to me with my sweatshirt-sleeve covered hand, and Landon sits down.

“Thank you so much. I would've had to sleep smelling like puke without you. And then I would've had to wash my sheets and blankets and everything, and that sounds so so exhausting.” I give a long sigh. My eyes are

already drifting closed, but I want Landon to know how much this means to me. “You really are amazing, Landon. Layla is so lucky to have you.”

“You’re welcome.” His voice is a little husky. “You need sleep. And liquids, if you can bring yourself to sip it.” He holds up the sports drink bottle.

“I will,” I promise. I rest my head against his arm. I feel him lean over me and place a gentle kiss on top of my head.

“Get some sleep,” he says.

It’s probably my fever making heat sear through me and *not* the touch of his lips. “Thank you,” I repeat, and it sounds a little strangled. This was a bad time to get sick, with Landon the only person around to help me. Gianna and Logan both got parts in a live Christmas special, and they won’t be around at all the next couple days. I can’t picture either one of them putting a headband in my hair to keep me from getting vomit in it. Actually, both would have run from the apartment the minute they smelled the puke in the first place.

I’m drifting, but not far enough that I don’t hear Landon say softly, “Mila Dash, you know I’d do anything for you.”

I’m in so much trouble.

CHAPTER 4

LANDON

Mila is completely out within thirty seconds. I sit next to her for longer, a little too enamored with the way she looks in my sweatshirt. She shivers, and I reluctantly pull up the soft blanket around her shoulders, obscuring my view of the shirt. It's silly to get worked up over her in my clothes, and I didn't realize it was a thing I'd really like until it happened. I want this woman to be mine. I want to give her a dozen hoodies and sweatshirts and t-shirts and watch her lounge around my apartment in them. Well, when she's not sick like this. I run a hand over my face again like I can scrub away these images from my mind, but the effort is half-hearted at best. I like it too much.

I slip off her bed, trying to move as little as possible, and then quietly grab the laundry basket from her closet. I'm so tempted not to wash her clothes—she's going to need more soon if the puking continues—so I can bring over more of my things for her, but in the end I take it and the carry-on full of puke over to my place to start a load. Mila's apartment doesn't have laundry hookups and they have to use the laundromat down the block, but I've been here for a while and the building manager likes me. I've had hookups for over a year. I hold my breath when I open her carry-on. Luckily her makeup bag was buried under some clothing, as well as the tennis shoes she had packed in there, so they come out unscathed. I set aside a curling iron to use a disinfectant wipe on and then throw the rest in one of my laundry

baskets. There's a red velvet dress with puffy sleeves that I gingerly set aside. There's no puke on it, although it definitely smells like puke, but I'm not sure it's the kind of thing I should throw in the washer. I start the load and text my mom.

Landon: I'm helping a friend do laundry because she's sick. She has a velvet dress that needs washed. Washing machine or no?

Mom: What is it made out of?

I hold my breath while I search for the tag.

Landon: Viscose and nylon.

Landon: Um, I guess I should have thought of this, but the tag says handwash, so that answers that.

Mom: *laughing emoji* Are we calling Layla "a friend" now?

Landon: No, it's Mila. The woman who lives next door? I think I've told you about her.

It takes a long minute for Mom to answer, and I roll my eyes. She wants me to keep talking to her about the women I meet, so she's always careful not to overreact or get too interested or whatever she thinks might make me stop sharing. I can guarantee she's overthinking right now what she should say given she knows how much I like Mila.

Mom: That's really thoughtful of you. I'm sure she'll appreciate that help, especially being careful with a dress that was expensive.

She adds the heart-eyes emoji and I chuckle. Mila *will* appreciate it, and she'll tell me so. She's never been shy to compliment me and how I treat her, always telling me what a good friend I am. Sometimes she hesitates on the way she says friend, or there's something in her eyes that makes me think there's a spark for her too. I don't know why she's holding back, but I'll be patient until she stops. I'll try to at least. Already in the last hour since I found her on her doorstep, I've been so tempted to confess how easy it is to care for her, how I can see this future for us. How I want to be there for her in all possible ways even when it's hard or gross.

I couldn't help letting something of that slip as she fell asleep, but I don't think she'll remember. She was pretty out of it.

But if she did? I won't be mad. It's an easy way to let her see that my feelings for her are real and they aren't going anywhere. Neither am I.

Landon: Thanks, Mom. I'm going to miss out on presents and stuff in the morning, and also dinner with everyone. I want to make sure Mila's not alone, even if she's feeling better tomorrow.

Mom: We'll miss you! I'll bring your gifts and some leftovers over tomorrow evening.

I thank her, not surprised that she didn't try to talk me into changing my mind, and then I Google how to wash this dress and what kind of detergent to use. Given my cousin's pregnancy, this actually isn't the first time I've helped handwash a delicate item. I've just never done velvet before, and my mom is right. I don't want to ruin Mila's dress. It's probably expensive and maybe one of the few expensive items she owns. I wouldn't be surprised if she splurged on it for this trip. She's told me she thinks Eli might propose. (He is. I hid the ring in my bedroom until he left yesterday.) She wanted to look her best if he did.

Once I've washed it, I hang it up in my bathroom over the tub to drip dry. By the time that's done, it's time to switch the load from the washer to the dryer. I set a timer on my watch for the dryer cycle, and head back over to Mila's to check on her.

She's still sleeping. In fact, she hasn't moved from the position I left her in. I lay the back of my hand lightly on her forehead, cringing at how high her fever is. She hasn't touched her drink or the crackers, which isn't all that surprising. I doubt she's even woken up.

I head down the hall to the linen closet, take out another washcloth, and wet it with cool water in the bathroom. I lay it over Mila's forehead, hoping it will cool her down.

While I was washing the clothes, I texted Layla and asked her to get in

touch with Logan and Gianna and warn them they might not want to come home and risk getting whatever bug Mila has. She said they both were working late tonight on parts they got for a Christmas special and that they'd been warned to crash somewhere else, at least for the night. It makes keeping an eye on Mila that much easier, knowing that her roommates won't be wondering why I'm hanging around their apartment while Mila sleeps.

I leave to go grab the dry clothes when the timer goes off and then quickly shower and change before going back over. I check on Mila again. The washcloth has dropped to the side of her face, and she's lying on her back with an arm thrown over her eyes and half the blanket kicked aside.

In the dim light from the hallway, she doesn't look sick and pale. The shadows hide all of that. Instead, she looks adorable. I lay a light hand on her forehead again and decide to keep the blanket off for now instead of re-tucking it around her. She's still burning up.

I leave the basket of clothes in her bedroom. I'd fold them for her, but she has some, um, intimate items that she'd probably rather I didn't handle. I head straight to the couch once I'm in her living room. Eli likely didn't intend for me to go full-on nursemaid with Mila, but she's so sick. I don't want to leave her on her own, even for a little while, just in case she needs something.

To be honest, I have to be here for her. It's a compulsion I can't control. If I go back to my apartment, I'll worry about her and if she needs help. At least here, I feel like I'm helping. I slip over to my apartment long enough to grab a book so I won't bother Mila with the TV, and then settle in on her couch.

CHAPTER 5

MILA

I wake up shivering.

I've kicked off my thick blanket sometime in my sleep—I do vaguely remember feeling like every inch of me was on fire at some point—so I quickly wrap it around me. It does little to combat the chills, even as thick as it is. If I thought I could stand for any length of time, I'd head back to the shower and take one as hot as I can get it. Gianna's bed is empty and still made, meaning she hasn't been home to hog all the hot water. I love my actress friends, but maybe Court and Eli will want a quick engagement, and they'll move into a nice condo or something a little more appropriate for the starting quarterback of the Rays. Then I could move into Sophie's guesthouse. We'd have such a blast together.

I pull another blanket from my bed on top of me and try to get comfortable. A glance at the clock says it's two in the morning, which means I've been sleeping somewhere in the vicinity of twelve hours. Despite still feeling way past exhausted, I can't fall back asleep. Not shivering like I am.

I reach toward the nightstand and grab the sports drink, taking a few tentative sips. I cringe as my stomach gurgles unhappily at the prospect of the new addition. It might take me a minute to get to the bathroom, and without Landon here to help, it's probably a good idea to head there now just in case. I lean on the doorframe when I leave my bedroom, huffing a little with the

exertion and still shivering. I should've put socks on. That would've helped warm me up.

I glance toward the living room and suck in a breath when I see someone sprawled across the couch.

Wait, it's Landon. My heart races even faster than when I thought it was some random stranger Gianna or Logan had brought home. There's a book upside down on the coffee table in front of him. I bet it's one of those weird math books he reads.

I could love this man forever, couldn't I? How could this warmth inside me ever fade? Landon has been taking care of me like we've been dating for years, not like we've been friends for less than six months. The man stood by me while I was puking, for heaven's sake.

I head for the bathroom and shut the door softly behind me. I'm a quiet puker, so unless he has some kind of sixth sense—which I wouldn't put past him—I don't think I'll wake him up. Eli has told me before that he thinks it's creepy how silent I am, that it's against nature.

I hold myself up against the sink cabinet when the dry-heaving finally stops and brush my teeth. It makes me feel a little better and the minty smell even settles my stomach the tiniest bit. Landon is still sleeping when I head back to my bedroom. He'd hate that I didn't wake him up for help, and the thought almost distracts me from how miserable I am.

Once I'm back in bed, the shivers return ten times worse than before. I stare around my room, wondering if I have clean socks, and that's when I spot the basket of laundry next to my dresser. Light from the streetlight outside streams into my room. Normally I close my black-out curtains at night because the constant light makes it hard to sleep, but I was so out of it this afternoon I didn't even think to ask Landon to do it for me.

Thanks to that light, I can see a pair of jeans that I packed in my carry-on yesterday sticking out of the basket. There's also a sweater that was in my dirty laundry basket earlier today.

Landon did my laundry.

Layla has told me time and time again how wonderful her cousin is. Listen, Eli and Court are not the only ones trying to matchmake us. I've never doubted all the stories Layla tells me about the things he does for her. I've seen so much firsthand. But today, the way he's taking care of me solidifies how incredibly *good* he is. How crazy I would be to let him go.

As I stare at that laundry basket, I know that I'm already half in love with him, if not all the way gone. The idea of losing him has terrified me for weeks. It's the reason I can't jump all the way in with him.

But it *has* only been a few months since I met him. I can't really know any of my feelings. So many times I thought I have—the way I was sure that acting would be the thing that stirred my passion, the way I thought Jack really loved me, the way I was so sure I was meant to be a dancer, and then a cosmetologist (I lasted three weeks in cosmetology school). It feels impossible to know for sure. And what if three months in with Landon, I realize I was wrong? That seems impossible, but so did so many other things.

The shivering will not stop, and it's distracting me from my very serious thoughts. I'm never going to be able to fall asleep. I have a heating pad somewhere in the living room, and maybe if I put that on my feet or the back of my neck, it will help warm me up. I'm also due for more Tylenol.

I push myself out of bed, but before leaving my bedroom I head over to the laundry basket and kneel next to it, digging through it for a pair of socks. They're not very thick. I don't think I own a real cozy, thick pair of socks right now, not living in Phoenix before this and now LA, but these ones will do for now. I sit on the floor for a few minutes, taking stock of the state of my stomach before slowly pushing myself up. I wrap my arms around my stomach and make my way into the living room.

Though I'm quiet, Landon lifts his head after I take only a few steps into the living room. He sits up. "What can I do?" he asks, his voice soft even though there's no one here to wake.

I wobble a bit on my feet, blinking against how dark the living room seems, and reach out for a non-existent wall to brace me. I'm in the middle of the living room now. It's then that I realize the black on the edges on my vision isn't because of the dimness of the room. I throw out my other arm like that will somehow stop me from falling to the floor.

Just before I drop, Landon dives from the couch toward me.

Which is maybe why it doesn't surprise me that I've somehow landed on top of Landon and not on the floor.

"Babe, you scared me," Landon says in a husky voice that rumbles through me.

Babe.

Landon Delaford is hard to resist under normal circumstances. Landon watching me puke and doing my laundry and sleeping on my couch to watch over me is the hardest thing I've ever had to resist.

Landon calling me babe, like I'm his?

I give up. I have no resistance left.

"I'm dizzy," is the brilliant thing I come up with to say.

He chuckles, and it rumbles through his chest. "I gathered." I've made no effort to move, and I realize it's because my shivers have stopped.

"You're so warm," I whisper. I snuggle into him, and his arms come around me, holding me even though it can't be comfortable for him, lying on the hardwood floor.

"Chills?" he guesses.

I nod into his chest. "I was coming out for my warming pad. It's around here somewhere." I lower my voice. "You're better though."

His arms tighten, and I feel his breath hitch. Can I do this? I want so badly to love him and trust that it will be forever.

"I think you'd be more comfortable on the couch, and I'm happy to serve as your heating pad." He gently shifts me to the side, and then stands to help me up and lead me to the couch. "Snuggle up here," he instructs. "I'll go get

your blanket and Gatorade.”

I nod, watching him as he heads down the hallway. He’s wearing a pair of dark joggers and a white Rays shirt that Eli gave him early for Christmas, and I make a mental note to thank Eli, given the way it fits Landon perfectly, putting on display the understated muscles of his arms and his broad shoulders. Landon turns before he goes in my room. In the darkness, can he tell that I’m staring at him? Not that I’ve been subtle in the last few minutes about what my feelings are for him.

I’m leaning back against the pillows on the couch when Landon returns with my big blanket. He promptly wraps it around me and then hands me the Gatorade.

“Did you get another one?” he asks with a raise of his eyebrows. I cringe. “Drink,” he commands handing it over.

I take an obligatory sip before setting it on the coffee table. He moves to sit next to me on the couch. This couch is one of the best things about this apartment. When Eli was avoiding Court because he thought she was pushing him aside for her awful secret boyfriend at the time, he spent the night at my house on our old couch, even though Landon told him to use his. A few weeks later, when one of his teammates was getting rid of this one, Eli claimed it for us. It’s wide enough for some great cuddling. I’ve accidentally slept on this couch more times than I can count, mostly because it’s so comfortable that you don’t wake up in the middle of the night after falling asleep there, wondering why you’re not in your bed. Landon slips his arms around me and pulls me up against him. Warmth envelops me, and although the chills don’t immediately go away, I’m more comfortable than I have been in hours.

“I don’t know how to thank you for taking care of me today,” I say.

“Not necessary.” His voice is soft and soothing, and it makes my eyes feel heavy. It might be the warmth too. It’s definitely the security of Landon with his arms around me. It’s so different than any other guy I’ve dated, and

maybe that's what scares me so much. It's easy to admit that Jack was a type. That striking, charming, slightly bad boy that's irresistible. Landon is so far outside that type. He's hot. There's no getting around that. He has dark hair that's thick and slightly wavy. I've been dying to get my hands in it for weeks, which I admit is creepy, but I like to think it's remnants of my brief stint with cosmetology.

"You've gone above and beyond," I insist.

"Not ... really." His voice holds hesitancy, begging for some kind of assurance from me. He's not doing this because he's some good guy. Because he's a good neighbor or friend or something. Landon is here because he cares about me, and I've never been blind to that. I never wanted to play games with him. I respond to his flirting, even if I've been slow in letting us take it to the next level. I want him to know how much I care about him too, even if I'm terrified that this wonderful thing I've discovered won't last.

That I'll screw it up somehow.

I tilt my head from where I've nestled myself close to Landon so I can look up at him. Streetlights coming in from the big sliding glass door that leads to the balcony make this room brighter than my room, and up close I can see his hopeful expression as he stares down at me.

"I really, really like you," I whisper. It's such an understatement, especially given everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours. I drop my voice even further. "But I'm so scared."

Understanding fills his expression and he dips his head to kiss me on the forehead. I close my eyes and revel in the warmth of his lips on me, and not just because of the chills. I've never been afraid to make vulnerable statements to Landon, and this reminds me that no matter what, he'll be there for me. Even if I told him, sorry, I don't feel the same, it wouldn't change anything that Landon has done the last several hours or the way he treats me in the future. And not because he'd be hoping I'd change my mind (even if maybe he was), but because he's good at really caring for people no matter

what.

“Oh?” he asks, his voice still that same soothing tone.

“I’ve bounced from thing to thing to thing for the last five years and had enough boyfriends that Eli teases me over it. I don’t want to mess things up with you. You’re too special.”

“Mila,” he says in a husky tone, and his arms tighten. Shivers course through me again but for a whole different reason. “Isn’t that how everyone comes into a relationship? Hopeful but never sure.”

I shake my head, burying it back in his chest. “I’m different. I’m sure Eli has told you how unreliable I am.”

A breath of a laugh escapes Landon. “Your brother has never said anything like that to me.” Probably because he didn’t want to scare off the one good guy who was interested in me. “Get some rest,” he whispers, using the hand wrapped around me to lightly stroke up and down my arm. My eyes grow heavier, and even though I’ve been sleeping for hours already, the toll this bug is taking on my body catches up.

“Mmmmm,” I murmur. I melt against him. Maybe in the light of day, when I’m not dizzy and out of it, we’ll both see the reality of our situation. Landon will realize that it’s better for him to move on than risk anything with me. The thought twists my heart around, and I’m pretty sure that’s not my iffy stomach’s work.

But for right now, I’m snuggled next to a man who’s been bending over backwards to take care of me, and I’m going to enjoy it while it lasts.

CHAPTER 6

LANDON

Faded, early morning light filters through the windows of the apartment when I wake up with Mila in my arms. I grin. Even if she was using me for warmth last night—totally worth it. I touch the back of my hand against her forehead lightly, relieved that her fever has broken and her temperature has returned to what feels like normal. A few of my students emailed me last week about missing class because of a quick-acting bug like this one, and all were back in class about a day later. I'm hoping this is what Mila has, and she'll feel well enough to enjoy Christmas day. I don't move, even though I might lose my left arm given how numb it feels right now.

Also, worth it.

That's the giddiness in me talking. The fact that Mila admitted something last night that I've suspected. She has feelings for me too. And it's good to know that her hesitancy is all about her distrust in herself and nothing to do with me.

I watch her shamelessly as she sleeps. She didn't wash her hair in the shower yesterday, so the headband that I found for her has slid backward, and half of her hair has escaped it. Some is still up in the messy bun she came home from the airport in, but most of her hair is scattered around her.

Mila told me a couple months ago that she doesn't think the acting thing is really for her, but she'd have a future there if she wanted it. Jack might

have gotten the big part, but Mila Dash is stunning. I've never tried to date Layla's friends in the past because they're all well out of my league. Mila is the queen of out of my league, and that's apparent in how gorgeous she is at 6:00 a.m., no makeup, and tendrils of hair sticking to her forehead and cheeks. I want to brush them away and feel the silkiness of her skin, but I don't want to wake her. She needs the rest.

My phone buzzes loudly on the coffee table, and I scowl. Thankfully, Mila doesn't stir.

With my right arm, I carefully reach over and pick up the phone, moving as little as possible. It's Layla calling, but I silence it and open a text message.

Landon: Can't answer. Mila's sleeping.

Layla: I'm going to need more information than that. Like why would you talking on the phone wake her up?

Landon: Because she's asleep right next to me.

Layla: LANDON?!?!

Landon: NOT the way you're thinking. She's been sick. And she had the chills last night so I snuggled her to help warm her up.

Layla: Purely altruistic motives, I'm sure.

Layla: So ... are you guys ...?

I have no idea how to answer that. I ponder for long enough that Layla sends a follow up message.

Layla: Landon?

Landon: I don't know what any of this means right now. I'm just taking care of her.

Her response is a line of crossed fingers, which I smile at. I slip my phone into the pocket of my sweats and then close my eyes. The couch is comfortable enough that I got some pretty good sleep before Mila woke up and joined me here, so I don't think I'm tired enough to fall back asleep.

I put my brain to work figuring out what to do for Mila for Christmas.

She's missing out on her brother's game and time with her family, so I want to do something that will still make the day special for her. She'll want to watch the game since Eli's starting. If Mom's bringing us food later, maybe I could grab some snacks for us for the game.

Mila draws in a long breath, and when I turn to look at her, she's slowly blinking at me.

"Oh, Landon!" she gasps. "I made you sleep here like this all night? You probably have the biggest kink in your neck."

"I'm not sure I can feel my fingers," I tease, grinning at her so she knows I'm joking. "Totally worth it, no matter what."

Pink dumps into her cheeks, and it's good to see color back in her face. She was so deathly pale yesterday, and after she almost fainted, she had me worried.

"Stop it," she says, smiling anyway. She pushes herself up so I can pull my arm out from under her. It's definitely sore, and I am going to be feeling it, but I wasn't lying that I'd do it again in a heartbeat. I snag her Gatorade from the coffee table and hand it to her.

"Drink," I command, like I did yesterday. She nods, takes it and sips, then keeps it in her lap. This tells me that her stomach is probably feeling better too. Last night she was reluctant, so I suspect she wasn't keeping anything down. "Do you feel like eating?"

She hums and takes another short sip. "Maybe toast?" She sounds so unsure, and I don't blame her. She was so miserable yesterday.

"Coming right up." I move to sit and then lean in close. "Merry Christmas, Mila." After her confession yesterday, I need to show her that she should take the risk with me. So I close the distance between us and plant a light kiss on her cheek. "I know this wasn't what you had planned, but I'm glad I get to spend it with you."

She puts her hand to my cheek. "Thank you, Landon." Her touch sends electricity down my back and all through me. She's so close to giving in and

forgetting her fears. Am I worried that I'll be a "stage" in Mila's life, another passion that came and burned out quickly? Not really. There's been something real and tangible between us since the day we met, even if it took her time to see it. After she broke up with Jack, it only intensified. But I'm willing to risk it all for the chance.

"You're welcome." I grab her fingers as she's dragging them from my face and kiss the tips. She sighs and tilts her head at me, smiling in a dreamy way. That's probably lack of sleep, but I like to believe I can scramble her brain the way she does mine. I head to the kitchen. A quick search shows that there's no bread here, so I walk back to the living room. Mila's sitting up on the couch, legs on the coffee table, and patting her hair with a grimace. I bite back a chuckle. I like the disheveled look—a lot. Especially since I got to wake up next to it, and it kindled all sorts of plans for my future with her.

"No bread. I still have the loaf you brought over the day before yesterday, so I'll go grab that." Living next door to Mila has meant that I haven't bought bread in weeks. She's always got an extra homemade loaf for me, and her bread is as good as her cookies and cakes.

She nods as she pulls the headband off and starts working on the hair tie that's tangled up in her long hair.

When I come back a couple minutes later with another Gatorade from my fridge and the loaf of bread, Mila's no longer sitting on the couch. My heart rate bumps up a bit as I listen for her in the bathroom. I hope she didn't take a turn for the worse again.

"Mila?" I call, but there's no answer. I set the bread and Gatorade on the table and then hurry down the hall. The bathroom door is cracked, so I push it open slowly, expecting to find her there. But the light is off and the room is empty. "Mila?" I call again. Her bedroom door is shut. She might have gone in there and collapsed again. She's definitely dehydrated, especially after puking all day and then not drinking a lot. She might have knocked herself out.

I put my hand up to knock when the door opens and she gasps to find me right there. “Hey,” she says breathlessly.

I brace both my hands on the side of the door, trapping her there in my relief. “There you are.”

She furrows her brows. “Was I lost?”

I chuckle, but it’s breathy with my unfounded fears. “Sorry, I overreacted.”

She smiles and bites her bottom lip as she studies me.

My heart rate is dangerously high right now. “What?” I ask to distract myself from her smile and her lips and *her*.

“I love that you just admitted that. That you were worried and you overreacted and it didn’t even bother you to admit it to me.” Her smile goes soft in a way that has me so ready to drop my head and close the distance between us.

“Should it?” I ask, teasingly.

She shakes her head. “Some guys can’t do that.”

I swallow. “Again, I think your bar is low, Mila.”

“Maybe.”

I glance up, mostly to keep myself from staring at her lips, and notice a sprig of mistletoe above her door. So much for that distraction. “Well, well, well...”

She looks up too, her eyes widening and that pretty blush returning as she notices it. “Gianna put that there,” she says. It’s then that I notice she brushed her hair and pulled it into a bun on top of her head. That must be what she was doing in her room.

I lean close to her. She has full, heart-shaped lips. The kind that actresses who make a lot more money than her spend a lot of money trying to get. She’s got a heart-shaped face that I’ve been dying to cup in my hands and pull toward me. This is the perfect opportunity.

“We can’t let this go to waste,” I say, nodding up at the mistletoe.

“Especially on Christmas.”

Her gaze goes to my lips, and she draws in a breath. “Aren’t you afraid of the germs?” she asks in a tentative voice. But she’s leaning in too.

“Too late to be worrying about that.” I’ve been right next to her through the worst of it—gladly—so my exposure is a given at this point.

She laughs and lays her hands on my chest. “Maybe ... maybe you take a rain check.” Her slight resistance might be because she’s sick and feels bad. Or might be something more. Either way, I’ll respect it.

I don’t move an inch though. I don’t want her mistaking my motives, even a little bit. “Maybe this time,” I concede. “But if I find you near this mistletoe again, I make no promises.”

She giggles. “Fair.”

I can’t step away with nothing, so I kiss her forehead, and she leans into it. I pull my hands from the doorframe and wrap my arms around her. She melts into me the way she did last night, and we stand there for several moments before I remember the toast and the Gatorade and my job to take care of her.

I slide my hand down into hers, interlocking our fingers, and she lets me, giving me a shy smile. “Let’s get you that toast, hmmm?”

Her smile shifts to something full and genuine, and for a moment I wonder if I *have* caught her bug because my knees go a little weak at the way it lights up her whole face. I restrain myself from nudging her back under that mistletoe and ignoring any thoughts of germs.

Raincheck, I promise myself.

CHAPTER 7

MILA

When I start yawning in the middle of *Home Alone*, Landon orders me back to bed for a nap. I may be feeling about a million times better, but I am exhausted, so I don't fight him. When I wake up a couple hours later, I find a text from him from about thirty minutes ago.

Landon: I went out to find some plain snacks for Eli's game. Crackers, popcorn, and tortilla chips are on the list. More Gatorade, of course. Text me if you wake up with any requests.

Landon: Apples and bananas as well, btw.

I send him back a heart and a thumbs up. Then I fall back into my pillow and grin. When he leaned in close to me earlier, about to kiss me under the mistletoe, all I could think about was how badly I wanted him to. If I gave Landon this bug, I'd feel so bad. And then I felt bad for thinking that it's only a 24-hour thing and maybe it would be okay if I risked it. I had just finished brushing my teeth a few minutes before, after all.

I'm hopelessly lost to him and now more terrified than ever.

I send off a text to my brother. His game starts at noon, and since I can't be there, I want him to at least know I'm thinking of him.

Mila: Good luck! I wish I could be there!

I'm surprised when my phone rings with a call from him. "Hey," I answer. "Aren't you supposed to be on the field or in the locker room or

something?”

“I’ve got a minute,” he says. “I can’t think of a better way to focus than to know that my little sister is doing okay.”

“I’m much better. It’s a quick bug.” My heart warms at Eli taking the time to do this, and also that talking to me helps center him. In the past he’s snuck calls to Court before games for this reason, so I feel doubly lucky to have him. “Are you still planning on doing the thing later?” I ask.

“What thing?” His voice is so faux-innocent that it basically confirms that he really is going to propose.

“You know what I’m talking about, Dash.”

“I’m really confused right now,” he counters, but there’s laughter in his voice. “Listen, Sophie made some calls. If you’re feeling better, she’s got a friend with a jet ready to bring you here. Maybe you could meet up with us for our get together tonight?”

“I can’t believe you just told me a private jet could bring me to Houston like it was an everyday thing.” He’s totally proposing, and I tear up to think that he wants me to be there so badly. If he’s serious, I will. I *do* feel much better, and a flight on a private jet is totally different than flying commercial. I mean, probably. I actually have no idea since I’ve never flown on one.

“I really want you to be here.”

“You’re totally doing it, aren’t you.” I laugh at the excitement in his voice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but Mom is so insistent that she be the one to take care of you.”

“I already have someone here that would rival Mom in how well I’m getting taken care of,” I say quietly.

“Landon?” Eli guesses. “I’m glad he’s checking in on you.”

“He’s done way more than check in.” I grin as I think about all the stuff he’s done for me since he found me on my doorstep yesterday. “He’s been with me pretty much non-stop since I got back from the airport. He was even

there for me while I was puking.”

“He sounds like a keeper, Mila.” Eli’s voice has a heavy dose of “I told you so.”

“How did you know?” I ask. “How did you know it was really *it* with you and Court? That she’s yours forever and you’ll never look back.”

His tone sobers. “I know that I can’t live a day without her. There’s no doubt she’s my forever.” He pauses, and I hear him take a deep breath. Tears prick my eyes as I think about the happiness and joy he’s found with Court, even if it’s only been a few months. “Sometimes we have to take tiny steps into the dark, Mila. Even when it’s scary.”

I shake my head a little. “Is it really a step in the dark when I’ve been here a bunch of times before and I know what’s going to happen?”

He grunts. “You’re *afraid* of what you think will happen. It’s different. Trust yourself and take the step forward, even if it’s not a leap. Baby steps will be enough. I think you’ll be surprised at the light you find there when you do.”

His words fill me with a burst of warmth, but I chew on my lip anyway. “Me messing up is a real risk,” I counter.

“Of course it is. We all mess up, Mila. The question is, is he worth fighting for?”

Is he? Absolutely. I will never meet a better man than Landon. I will never find someone as willing as he is to do all the hard things. He’s already doing them with me.

“Thanks,” I whisper. “Good luck. And arrange the jet stuff if you’re for real. As long as I can bring a friend.”

Eli chuckles. “Of course you can. I’ll have Court call you. Love you, Mila.”

“Love you, Eli.”

We hang up and I stare up at my ceiling. I think about the hiccups and bad days with my bakery truck and the number of times I’ve been tempted to

give up because it would be easier. But I love that bakery. It doesn't feel like a passing passion. So I keep on pressing forward and fighting for my goal, and not because I want to prove something, but because I love it. Landon is worth ten times my bakery truck. Of course I'd fight for him.

My phone buzzes in my hand. I look down to see a text from Landon.

Landon: I'm back. Can you let me in?

I'll have to tease him about not taking my keys with him. I push myself off my bed and head for the living room, pulling the door open for him. When he steps inside, I take the grocery bag from his hand and set it aside, then wrap my arms around his waist.

"Hey." I tilt my head back to gaze up at him. "So, do you want to ride in a private jet with me to Houston?"

CHAPTER 8

LANDON

There's a whole list of things that have happened today that I would have never expected yesterday.

1. Riding in a private jet.
2. Being picked up from the airport by a private car.
3. Sitting on a couch in the GetAwayHome with my arm around Mila Dash and having her lean into me.

Her eyes are tired, which might be contributing to the way she's snuggled up against me. The plane ride was pretty comfortable—private security screening in a lounge before we boarded the plane in LA and wide seats on the jet that Mila leaned back in and took a nap for half of the flight. Still, she's entitled to feeling tired after a long day when she spent the previous night fighting the stomach flu.

I'm definitely not complaining about any of it.

Mila's mom keeps glancing over toward us, checking up on Mila. Mila laughed when her mom arrived at the airport in Houston to pick us up with a Gatorade in hand, and she held up the one that I made sure she brought on board with her. Her mom had turned to me with a wide smile. "I'm so glad to know that she's been taken care of."

“Totally taken care of,” Mila had said, turning to look up at me with a smile that matched her mom’s.

Her family has opened a handful of gifts they have for each other. I haven’t given Mila the one I brought for her. I always planned on giving it to her when we had a moment alone, even before everything that’s happened the last day and a half.

Has it really only been that long? It feels like so much longer. Maybe because I’ve been waiting for this moment since I met Mila.

Eli pulls one last present from under the three-foot tree on top of a side-table in the living room of the GetAwayHome he rented for his family to stay in for the next couple nights. It actually didn’t fit underneath the tree. I have to laugh since I have a strong suspicion about what’s in that box, considering that he’s taking it over to Court. It’s huge. At least three feet by three feet.

Court frowns in contemplation at Eli from the recliner she’s sitting on the edge of. “You already gave me my present.”

“I couldn’t resist this one,” he says with a shrug, crouching in front of her and handing it over.

She leans toward him. “Big bonuses don’t mean you need to spoil me.” She arches an eyebrow. Eli’s care with money is a well-known trait of his. But surely Court has noticed that one thing he will spend money on is his girls.

He leans in as well, placing a light kiss on her lips. “Try and stop me,” he says. She pushes at his shoulder with a laugh, and he falls back, then gets up and sits on the arm of the recliner to watch her open the present. I glance down at Mila. She grins from ear to ear, and the anticipation of what’s in that box is evident in the way she’s sitting up now. She’s still pressed into my side, but she’s more alert right now than she has been all afternoon. If Court glanced over here, she’d see that something was up.

Mrs. Dash sits back in the oversized chair she’s sitting in, smiling. The same excitement that seems to be radiating off Mila dances around in her

eyes. Eli's lucky that Court's eyes are all for him and she hasn't noticed the extra anticipation in the room. Mr. Dash is sitting on the couch next to Mrs. Dash's chair. He's leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees as he waits. The conversations in the room, which were a sporadic, low hum as the presents were opened, have ceased. Court's aunt, Ms. Edwards has a sly smile on her lips. She's sitting on the opposite end of the couch from Mr. Dash, and she turns to Mrs. Dash, both of their smiles widening.

Court has gotten through the wrapping paper to the box, which she pops open. She shakes her head and laughs at the mound of tissue paper inside the box. Once she's pulled out about half she looks up at Eli.

"Seriously?"

He laughs.

She keeps digging. Mila looks up at me, her smile widening in anticipation. She confessed that Eli never told her what he planned this weekend, but she'd guessed a while ago given how intent he was on the plans for the family to be together for his Christmas game. I didn't let on that I actually knew about Eli's plans, but I agreed that he had something up his sleeve. She has her hand on my thigh, and she squeezes as Court pulls out the last of the pile of tissue paper that Eli packed tightly into the box. Court stares down inside, her eyes widening and her hands going to her mouth. I can't see inside the box, but I imagine that nestled in the bottom is a black velvet box that I've been keeping at my apartment for the last two weeks.

"Eli?" She looks up at him, her hands moving to her cheeks as she whispers his name.

He smiles at her as she reaches inside, tears shining in her eyes. Mila leans her head on my shoulder. A glance down at her shows the same shimmering in her eyes, and I squeeze her shoulder. She lets out a sigh of contentment. I'm already picturing this moment with Mila, even though it seems crazy. We haven't even kissed yet. Telling her I'm already planning on forever might scare her though, so I'll keep it to myself.

I'm unashamed. When you know, you know. That's what Eli told me when he brought the ring over and asked me to keep it for him. I know exactly what he means.

Court pulls the velvet box out and flips it open. Thanks to the way she's holding it, I can't see the details from here, although I already know that it's a large round diamond on a band embedded with smaller diamonds. She sucks in a breath.

"It's beautiful, Eli."

He's fallen to one knee in front of her. "I love you, Court." He says with feeling. Goosebumps scatter across my arms at the ferventness to his statement. I kind of feel like a trespasser, with everyone else here being family, but I'm also glad that I get to witness this moment between my friends. "You've been my best friend," he continues. "You've become so much more. My heart has been, and will always be, yours. Will you marry me?"

Court nods, and when she draws a breath, it shudders with a held-back sob. She nods harder and throws her arms around Eli's neck. Her whisper of, "Yes, yes, yes," is almost too quiet to hear as Eli stands with her in his arms, wrapping his arms around her waist.

There is a small cheer around the room, and not many dry eyes. Ms. Edwards and Mrs. Dash are first to reach the couple, oohing and ahing over the ring and hugging them. After a few minutes, Court makes her way over to the couch where we are, and Mila sits forward to take Court's left hand and admire the ring up close.

"I'm so happy for you both," she says when Court leans over to hug her.

"I'm so glad you got to be here," Court replies.

Mila chuckles as they pull back from one another and Court perches next to her on the couch. "Weren't you suspicious when he was so insistent I come—that he arranged a private jet so I could be here?"

Court laughs. "Now that I think about it, I should have been. But he's

always been so protective of you. It didn't even cross my mind that he might have some kind of plan."

Mila shakes her head. "I don't know how he hid it. It was obvious to me that something was up." She turns to me. "Right?" she asks, seeking confirmation.

"I couldn't say." I shrug. "I've been hiding the ring."

Mila gasps. "And you didn't tell me!"

"I was sworn to secrecy." I hold my hands up in defense.

"Hmmm," she says archly. She folds her arms and stares me down. Her sassiness is so attractive. If her whole family wasn't watching me now, I'd wrap her up in my arms and kiss those sexy, pursed lips.

Eli comes over and puts a hand on Court's shoulder. "Should we go call your parents?"

She stands. "Yeah, we should." She leans over and gives Mila a quick hug. Ms. Edwards and the Dashes are back to their conversation on the other side of the room as Court and Eli go into the kitchen to call her family.

Mila puts her hand in mine and stands up. "Come here. There's something I want you to see."

CHAPTER 9

MILA

Landon's expression is immediately curious as he hops up next to me. I lead him out of the living room. My parents and Sophie glance at us as we walk by them, my mom's gaze lingering on me before she smiles and turns back to Sophie to respond to something Sophie has asked.

I take Landon down the hallway to the bedrooms and the stairs that lead to the loft where I'm sleeping. He hasn't noticed yet, but on the door at the top of the stairs is the mistletoe from my apartment.

By the time I'd eaten the chicken noodle soup that Landon had brought home with the snacks for the game and then packed my bag for the trip, I was feeling so much better. When I spotted the mistletoe, I made sure to snag it. I was so ready for that first kiss with Landon. If it's half of what I'm anticipating given the sparks that flew between us in that moment earlier today, it's going to be a doozy.

Yes, I own that wording. Doozy.

Plus, I'm really hoping he's going to recreate the way he braced his hands on the door frame, his muscles on display. I nearly have to fan myself thinking about it.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I put my back to the door. We're still holding hands, so I take his other one in mine, pulling him close to me. He's standing on the step below me so I'm maybe an inch or so taller than him. I

pull our entwined hands between us.

“You keep saying that I don’t need to thank you for taking care of me yesterday and today —”

“You know why,” he says, stopping me. His expression is serious now, eyes boring into me.

I nod. “I do.” He wants to be there for me. He’s wanted that for a long time, and I’ve been too scared to let him be important to me. “Since the day we had that talk about Layla.” He nods, and I go on. “I think I started to figure out that day how amazing you are and how much I want someone like you. And even though I’m so terrified that I’ll do something to hurt you, I also know, deep in my heart, that I’ll do anything for you. For us.”

“Same,” he says solemnly. “We’ll get through anything that comes at us together. I promise.”

“I know.” I tilt my head upwards, looking at the mistletoe.

He follows my gaze, and his eyebrows shoot upward. “I warned you what might happen if we encountered that again.”

I grin slyly. “I’m counting on you being true to your word.”

His own smile turns the slightest bit wicked and maybe the top of a set of stairs is a bad place for this, because my knees turn so weak at how sexy that look is on him, I might slide all the way down them. He leans toward me but I stop him.

“Um, can you just put your hand here ...” I lift one of our entwined hands and place his on the door frame on my left side. “...And your other hand here.” I repeat the process with his hand on my right side. Landon’s eyes dance as he studies my face, gaze darting between my eyes and my lips. He steps up to join me on the top step, his body close to mine as he well and truly traps me in this doorframe.

Here's a confession. I thought I wanted to be an actor because the scenes in movies like this made my toes curl and I was always smiling and giggling as I watched. I wanted those moments for myself, but the truth of the matter

is that one, I was so far from getting a part like that, it would've taken years to experience it; and two, the rare times I got to witness these scenes on set, they were so scripted there was no chance of romance.

Now, here I am, living one of those scenes, and it's utterly breathtaking. The blue of Landon's eyes is so crisp and startling. And then there's that dark hair. He's just as hot as Jack but more understated. He moves slowly toward me, his lips inching closer and closer, and I wait, enjoying the heart thumping, electrifying feel that intensifies with every centimeter he advances.

Then his mouth is on mine and the toe-curling starts. I slide my hands from where they were resting on his chest to around his neck and then—yes—into those beautiful locks.

Friend, let me tell you I am not disappointed. I might need to know this man's haircare routine to figure out how his hair is so soft.

Despite my placing his hands on the doorframe, he moves them to wrap around me, pulling me into him as our kiss deepens. He tastes slightly of the chocolate cookies Mom and Court made after dinner, which makes me smile against his lips.

This kiss is *everything*.

The depth of feeling that has been building in me the last day—no, the last few months—makes every sensation of this kiss bigger and more amazing than any other kiss before this. There was a selfishness to Jack's kisses, the roaming of his hands or the hunger in the way his mouth moved that made it feel like our connection was only about what he got from it, only how it pleased him.

Landon's kissing is attuned to me. He's gentle, kissing me lightly a few times and then somehow reading my mind and kissing me deeper, lips pressed against mine with intensity. The way this feels, the swirling warmth that's arcing into fire inside me, coupled with a safety and security that's somehow tangible, makes me wonder how I ever thought that my feelings for Landon would fade.

His kisses have injected me with a certainty that I will love him forever. Admitting that I wanted to take this risk was the step into the dark that Eli advised, but that step has led to an incredibly blinding light of conviction. I will love this man forever. There's no doubt.

"Wow," I can't help whispering when he pulls away from me slightly.

"Yeah," he agrees. A smile stretches across his face. "That was ..."

I nod. "Merry Christmas."

He bursts into laughter. "Merry Christmas."

A throat clears at the bottom of the stairs, and I look over Landon's shoulder to see Eli and Court standing there, my brother's eyebrows raised very high, a look of faux disapproval on his face.

"What's going on here?" he asks. It sounds so much like that day he came out onto the balcony, and I was crying over Jack having to leave so soon. I cringe at the memory and how foolish I was, how shallow his feelings for me were and how well I can see that now because of Landon's love.

"There was mistletoe," I say with an innocent shrug. "I couldn't let it go to waste."

Eli snorts, and Landon drops his head onto my shoulder, his own shoulders shaking with laughter. I take Landon's hand and start down the stairs. "Come on, babe," I say. The minute the word slips so naturally from my mouth, Landon's grip on my hand tightens, and I know he feels the shift, how right and perfect it feels to say it. For him to be mine. "Eli wants a turn." I wink at my brother as we pass him and his fiancée in the hallway.

"Touché," he mutters, and when I glance behind me, Eli has hauled Court into his arms and is carrying her up the stairs toward the doorway. I'm going to have to file away that move for later. Well done, big brother.

Before we leave the hallway and return to the living room, Landon stops me and pulls me back, dropping his head for a light kiss.

"Meet me in the kitchen?" Landon asks softly. "I want to give you your Christmas present."

I nod. I'll have to give Landon his later. It's up in my suitcase and my door is currently blocked by a newly engaged couple. I smirk in their direction and head for the kitchen.

I sit on an upholstered stool at the island, and Landon returns quickly. His bag is in Eli's room, although Landon will be sleeping on the couch tonight. Eli hadn't counted on him coming when he booked the house, but Landon didn't mind. I feel bad since it will be the second night in a row that he's sleeping on a couch.

He holds out a small box. *Not* a ring box small, though my heart skips at that thought. I take it and rip off the wrapping. I lift off the top of the white box inside and I draw in a breath at the very, very lovely necklace sitting there. It's so *me*, totally something I would pick out for myself if I'd come across it, and that thought makes tears prick in my eyes. How can he understand me so well in just a few months of friendship? How does he notice every little thing like this?

It's a small locket that looks vintage Victorian but is probably new. Still, the pretty floral design scrolled across it is perfect. I open it up curiously. Inside is a tiny, folded note.

I glance up at Landon and then carefully unfold it. *I am completely in love with you. -L*

"You don't have to keep that in there," he says quickly. "I thought I should put something in it and telling you how I felt seemed like the right thing."

I squint at him. "When did you write this note, Landon?"

He swallows and his cheeks turn red. "When I bought the necklace."

I put my hands around his neck and pull him toward me, kissing him lightly. "And if yesterday hadn't happened, would you have given me this with the note in it?" I watch him as he prepares to answer.

He laughs softly. "I went back and forth on whether you'd be ready. Even before I found you in the hallway yesterday, I was leaning toward keeping it

in there. I was ready for you to know.”

“I already knew,” I whisper. It was in every action toward me—fixing things around the apartment, cooking me dinner and bringing it to me at the bakery truck, coming to help whenever it got too busy for me and Layla to handle (which has been a lot lately, a good problem to have, I guess).

“I was ready for you to love me back,” he says.

I smile. “I already do,” I whisper against his lips as I kiss him again. “I love you, Landon. Completely.”

We keep the kiss short and light considering my family is everywhere here, but it still sends shivers through me as I stare up at him when we pull away.

“This has been the best Christmas ever,” I say, still resting my arms around his neck when we pull away. “Even with the whole flu-bug thing.”

“Agreed,” he says, dropping a kiss on my nose.

“And, as amazing and wonderful as this locket is”—I nod toward where it’s sitting next to me on the counter—“you’re my best Christmas gift.”

As answer, Landon ignores the fact that my father is in the next room and kisses me absolutely senseless.

EPILOGUE

MILA

It's crazy how tired I can feel and yet how I know I'm not falling asleep anytime soon. The house is quiet. After the long day with Eli's game and the excitement from the engagement, everyone was pretty much ready to crash by eleven o'clock. I thought I was too. Landon walked me up to my room and we took advantage of the mistletoe for a few minutes before my yawning made the kissing more hilarious than anything else. He insisted I go to bed and made me promise to finish my latest bottle of Gatorade by the morning.

It's one a.m. now, and I'm sneaking carefully back down the stairs. I tiptoe into the living room and cover my mouth to stop from laughing at the sight of Landon curled up on the too-short couch. I wish my present to him earlier had been a bigger couch and not some lame dress shirt that I bought before I realized I was in love with him. His gift was so much cooler, and yet he was just as pleased with the shirt.

He pushes himself up onto his elbow, so apparently I didn't stifle the laughter enough. I hurry over and he sits up, pulling me down into his lap to snuggle with him.

"Go upstairs and sleep in my bed, Landon. It's an order."

He laughs. His lips are on my temple, so his warm breath stirs my hair. "There's no way I'm doing that."

"You slept on a couch last night," I point out.

“So did you,” he counters.

“Mmmmm.” Thinking about sleeping snuggled up to him is a good memory. “I do think I slept better than you did, though.”

“I didn’t end up losing my arm, so I think it’s a win-win for both of us.”

I laugh quietly and shift so that I can rest my head on his chest. “I think I have the chills again,” I say innocently.

“Oh, do you now?”

“Mmm-hmm. Absolutely.”

He pulls his blanket over both of us, wrapping us snugly together. “Yes, the couch is so much more comfortable now,” he murmurs.

I lift my head slightly. “I do have something very important to ask you, Landon.”

He widens his eyes at me. “Oh?”

I shift off him and kneel on the floor. He shakes his head at me, his grin growing. “Landon, will you be my boyfriend?”

He takes my hand and says very seriously. “I’ve been waiting a long time for you to ask me that. Yes, absolutely, Mila Dash.” He pulls me back up into his arms and we snuggle back together. I should leave and let him try to get some rest, even though I wish I could convince him to go use my bed.

But this is Landon. This is the man I fell in love with. He’ll sacrifice everything for me, always, and he won’t hear of it any other way.

Honestly, neither will I.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



In a house overrun by boys, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Raneé loves football and enjoys watching (and playing!) other sports as well, like basketball and baseball. When she's not chauffeuring three busy boys to various activities (and sometimes while she is!), Raneé is either writing, reading (usually romance), obsessing over clothes in the form of her online boutique, or figuring out how to get a Crumbl cookie in rural Wyoming. When her real-life love interest can drag her away from imaginary worlds, she doesn't mind spending some time with him in the great outdoors that he loves.

You can find out more about Raneé's writing on Facebook and Instagram.

