

NAUGHTY & NICE EDITION



Mistletoe
MADNESS
A REVVED UP WORLD NOVELLA

ARIANA ST. CLAIRE



MISTLETOE MADNESS
A REVVED UP CHRISTMAS NOVELLA



ARIANA ST. CLAIRE

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*For everyone who has ever wished for someone to kiss under the mistletoe.
Be careful what you wish for. True love just may find its way into your life.
Naughty and Nice. Because why choose?*

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PROLOGUE



'Twas the night before the Rossetti Autosports Annual Christmas Eve Party, and not everyone knew they were in love. The heart is a tricky thing, and often lets the head dictate its thoughts.

Alex Anders and Luc Rosseti triumphed over the trials of things no one saw coming when they were kids playing at the race track. From feuding parents and rival race teams, beach nights filled with fervent kisses of youth and a betrayal that nearly broke them both, they almost lost each other just as their roads met once again.

A few careless moments that spiraled out of their control and they almost lost the most important thing you can find. True love.

But true love is a miracle, and not just at Christmastime. It can happen at any given moment, if the stars align. And they did. Star-crossed became a thing of the past. Not Christmas Past, but that's neither here nor there.

Broken hearts mended, truths were uncovered and in the end, love won the day. And this year, family won out over any rivalry. Because even as the men of the world struggle to let love in, it cannot be denied.

Neither can Mrs. Rossetti herself once she takes on the mantle of spreading the Christmas Spirit in all its red, green, and gold glory. The holidays are magical, and she was the maestro of making sure her family always felt the love and spirit of giving. Even when her children tried their best to have the kind of fun children inevitably have.

Luc asked for Alex's hand, with the help of all their family and friends in Vegas, where not all things that happened in Vegas stayed in the famed Sin City.

That doesn't mean everything began as a fairytale or ended up with a

Happily Ever After.

Not yet, in any case.

In fact, a few things began long before, secrets and guarded hearts longing for only the kind of fire that love can light and stoke with every passing moment.

Which begs the question, does what happens in Vegas really stay there?

Not for Luc's little sister, Bri. Or one of his best friends, and teammate at Anders Racing, The Rookie everyone protected and watched over. Little did they know the sometimes awkward still finding his way as a driver only had eyes for Bri. Bodhi might seem like the sweetest and most innocent person in this tale, but looks can be deceiving. Especially when he finds the one person we all wish for. A sunset that feels like home, no matter where you are.

Isn't true love a disastrously beautiful thing?

And to fall for someone almost at first sight is the thing of fairytales and dreams. But the reality and consequences of actions aren't always easy. Especially for someone trying to get out from under her family's legacy and shadow.

Too bad Bri can't point out to her mother that she doesn't have to nag her, lovingly of course, about her love life any longer. Family dinners over their parents house would take on an entirely different tone, and one Mrs. Rossetti gladly wishes for every day. And not just on Christmas Eve.

Having her children happy is the only thing she worries about. Because she has seen how living under their famous father's shadow could steal that all away. Which might explain why she isn't afraid to make Sal Rossetti, three time IndyCar Open Wheel Champion sleep on the couch or even kick him out of the house when warranted.

But, back to our Christmas Eve tale...

What happened in Vegas most definitely didn't stay in Vegas, no matter how much she wishes it did. Or was it her head trying to convince her heart that was the case? It's a good thing Bodhi has enough faith to never let go of true love.

Fingers crossed their roll of the dice turns out to be the best gamble either of them made in the early morning hours with hearts and stars in their eyes.

Now, here's where our story gets more complicated.

These hearts had stories they've hidden far longer than anyone knew. Including the two of them.

When your bestie is falling but you don't know for whom...

But maybe you do, because Cowboys and Tigers rarely meet unless the stars align.

Gia Cardinale, Alex Anders' best friend, meets Jagger 'Van' Sullivan and her heart falls for his heated gaze and sweet southern drawl. Until she finds out he's Alex's half brother, and the rising country music singer who never needed anyone to keep his heart safe.

Until he met Gia, and knew from the first moment he laid eyes on her that she would be the one whose heart would be even more hidden by her head. Even the magic of mistletoe might not be enough to convince her head about her heart needs. And maybe his heart won't let him walk away.

Only time will tell if there's enough Christmas magic left in a sprig of mistletoe for true love to triumph...

CHAPTER 1

LUC



*C*hristmas Eve

THE ALEXA SPEAKER blared Mariah Carey's number one Christmas hit of all time. I tossed the towel I wrapped around my waist onto the bed. Humming along, and though I'd never admit it out loud, that fucking song gets me in the Christmas spirit.

Especially after last Friday night, when I came home to find Alex waiting for me, a can of whipped cream in her hand. And the sexiest red bra and panty, complete with a bow on her ass that teased the thigh-high stockings, driving me wild.

Damn, if there's one thing I love more than anything, it's my girl. And dessert.

Fuck.

Now I had a raging hard-on.

The prospect of Christmas Eve at my parents' while keeping my hands off Alex sounded less and less fun. I smirked as I pulled on the black boxer briefs she bought me, grabbed my sweater and jeans, tossing them on the bed. Sneaking off to my old room or the brewery Nick set up wouldn't be easy, but damned if I was going to spend an entire night with my father and not enjoy my girl.

At least T.R. and I were on better terms and he was coming, and so was Bri, to act as a buffer. I swear if my dad even looked at Alex in a way I didn't like, we were out. Nick texted earlier, saying the flight delay might make it

tricky, but he'd do his best so I didn't have to deal with him all alone.

And Bri, pain in the ass, warned Alex about our family traditions. Like the White Elephant thing. Every year, we did a gift exchange on Christmas Eve, and the only rule was that it had to be the craziest present that made our mom drink a bottle of wine all by herself.

Last Christmas, Bri got me a glass sculpture of a beaver with a rather large extra part. I still hadn't forgiven her. The damn thing sat in the office Alex and I shared, much to both Bri and Alex's amusement.

But, this year, Bri was going to regret getting the damn thing. And it wouldn't be coming from me.

"Mav, do you think we can pick up Bodhi?" Alex called from downstairs, the soft falls of her footsteps nearing the door as she came up, peeking her head in. Her eyes followed a path down my body, and I smirked as she bit her lower lip.

"Darlin'," I growled in warning.

"What? You can't stand there, in," she fluttered her hand at me, "those, and not expect me to look. Or get ideas."

I arched a brow, stalking towards her, pulling her body flush against mine, loving the way her blue maxi dress clung to her curves. "Wait, why do we need to pick up Bodhi?"

Her hazel eyes sparkled with mischief. Lips tilted in a smile, "Canceled flight, and he has no one to spend Christmas with. Jett drove home yesterday, Ry left a few days ago to be with his mom in Cali, and I don't want him alone for the holidays." She lifted a shoulder. "It's on the way to pick up Bri. Shouldn't be a problem, right?" A whisper of her hand along my cock brought me to attention.

I pulled back with a groan as she skirted out of my reach with a laugh.

She nodded, licking her lips, gaze wide and not innocent in the least. "Looks like the snowstorm is wreaking havoc. Flights canceled all day." With a grin, she added, "I already called your mom. She was excited."

"I'm sure she was," I muttered, imagining the smile on her face at the prospect of a full house.

"Especially when I told her Van was coming."

"Van? What the fuck? Is everyone crashing my parents' Christmas Eve?"

"Yep. Full house, Mav." She grinned as I glowered. "You know your mom is ecstatic. She loves all the 'kids' being back together."

"Maybe she'll terrorize them, and leave us alone," I growled, gripping her

waist. Her body flushed against mine, eyes heated with desire. She pulled her lower lip between her teeth as her hips moved, her ass rubbing against my straining cock. “Darlin’, don’t start something we can’t finish right now.” I claimed her lips, the soft moan making me so hard I was afraid I was going to come like a fucking teenager.

She tried to spin away with a disgruntled and entirely not Alex sound, but I caught my girl around the waist. My cock ground into her ass, and she stifled a whimper as I chuckled darkly. “What’s wrong, darlin’? Feeling more naughty than nice?”

“We have to go.”

Breathy and full of desire, I took advantage of her state as she tilted her neck to the side.

An appreciative hum escaped me as I grazed my lips along her ear, loving how she arched against my cock. The sound of her breaths quickening. Vanilla, her shampoo. Fuck. I wanted her so badly I might say to hell with it and revert to my seventeen-year-old self.

Or the thirty-plus-something I was, and fuck her hard, fast, and dirty.

Either way, she’d scream my name before we left.

“We have a little time,” I murmured. “Just enough to get us through the night.”

A chuckle vibrated through her body as she leaned back against me. “Oh, Mav, haven’t you learned by now? It will never be enough.” She canted her head to the side, her heated gaze locking with mine over her shoulder. I glanced overhead. “And, mistletoe.”

I growled, running my hand up between the valley of her breasts. “Oh, I know how insatiable you are, darlin’.” Dipping it lower, fisting the fabric of her dress, and pulling it up until I could snake my way underneath. Alex let out a gasp as I slid a finger beneath the tiny silk of her g-string, grazing her, teasing. “And I fucking love knowing that if I touch your pussy, I’m going to find out how wet you are for me.”

“Luc,” she whimpered. “We have to-”

I slipped one of my fingers into her core, her pussy clenching as her thighs opened, adding a second.

“Yes, we do, Darlin’. Now, be a good girl, and let me fuck you nice and hard. Then we can spend the evening pretending I didn’t make you scream my name.”

“Please,” she whispered, and I smirked, my breath brushing her cheek as

she shivered with anticipation.

Damn.

This woman undid me.

I yanked up her dress the rest of the way, moving the thin scrap to the side as I ground against her. Eager hands reached behind me to pull my cock out, hard and ready for her. I gripped the back of her neck in one hand, the other lining up my straining cock at her entrance. "Anything for you, Alex." I thrust into her, and she let out a moan that nearly made me come. But I held on, pulling out with a deliberate motion as she whimpered in protest. "Not going to take this slow, Darlin'."

Spinning her so that she faced the wall and braced her hands against it, pushing her ass against me, meeting my eager strokes as the sound of her skin smacking against mine as I drove into her over and over. Harder, faster.

Each thrust caused her to become louder and more vocal.

Fuck yes.

"Go ahead, scream my name when you come, darlin'. Fucking tell me who this pussy belongs to," I growled in her ear as her inner walls tightened around me as she came and I followed right behind her. I held nothing back, driving my cock into her heat at a relentless pace until we both gasped, coming so hard I almost blacked out. One hand fell in front of her, holding myself up as she sagged with a satisfied sigh. The only sounds in the room our desire filled breath as we both came down from what our bodies experienced.

A soft giggle escaped her lips as I pulled out of her sweet pussy and planted a kiss on her hair. "Don't move." I grabbed her ass with an appreciative growl and then headed into our bathroom. When I returned, Alex was smoothing her hair, dress still hiked up, giving me the best view I could hope to see.

Other than the smile my girl gave me whenever I caught her hazel eyes. Sweet, sexy and so fucking full of love.

Damn, I was a lucky bastard.

With a soft yet filled with promises kiss on her full lips, I gently cleaned between her thighs with the warm cloth in my hand. Alex twisted, catching my eye as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth with a mischievous expression. "I love how nice you are to me, Mav. Especially after being so naughty."

"And I love doing naughty things to you, darlin'."



THREE HOURS LATER, we pulled along the driveway to my parents' house.

Driving out to the airport to pick up Bodhi ended up being a shit show, we drove in the ever-worsening weather out to my parents' house. Between the canceled and delayed flights, and the few trying to land, the traffic had been hell. Seeing Bodhi so fucking sad over missing his family for Christmas made me happy he was coming home with us. At least my mom would love spoiling yet another member of Anders Racing.

Admittedly, I was looking forward to rubbing it in my dad's face. The Champ and Rookie of the Year in his house. Both from his long-time rival's team. For the holidays. Along with the goddess at my side. It was the biggest fuck you I could imagine for all that he had done to Alex's family.

Which included every member of Anders Racing.

I knew my mom gave him shit about everything. At least from what Nick and Bri told me. I avoided my dad since the awards banquet two months ago.

And that was fine with me.

As I pulled into the long driveway leading to the main house, Bodhi let out a sigh from the back seat of my Jeep. "Thanks for having me, Luc. Are you sure your mom won't mind?"

I quirked a brow at him in the rearview. "Rook, she is going to be ecstatic to have another person to spoil tonight. Trust me. Bri will love having someone else to divert her attention. Mom's been hell-bent on bugging her about her love life. She's the only one not hooking up with anyone, so..." I shrugged with a grin as Bodhi coughed and focused out the window, studying the landscape as we neared the house.

Snow fell in thick flakes, blanketing the ground in a rare white wonderland.

"Ooooh!" Alex let out a squeal as the lights and decorations Mom had me and Nick put up a few days ago lit her face up. "Luc!! It's beautiful!!"

Putting the Jeep in park, I lifted the hand I held the entire drive over and kissed the back of it. The diamond engagement ring sparkled in the glow of the Christmas lights. I smirked. "Thought you might like it."

"We stopped putting up lights when they divorced. It used to be my favorite thing. Van surprised my mom once, but he almost fell off the ladder," she added with a chuckle. "And she forbade him from doing it

again.”

Bodhi snorted. “My mom would’ve made me get up and try again.”

“She and Bev have a great relationship, and she told him she refused to be the reason two grown women couldn’t get along over a silly man.”

“I love your mom.”

“Me too, Bodhi.”

CHAPTER 2

ALEX



Being squished by Mrs. Rossetti as we walked through the door brought a tear to my eye. To think of the years her husband and my dad spent competing on the track, and then the things that happened when Luc left the country, made my heart tighten.

But I knew she tried to make Sal make things right once she discovered the truth. And to be honest, there was so much of her in Bri, it was like I knew her already.

Without the alcohol and girls' nights out, of course. Bri possessed a wilder side than her mom.

The house filled with the sounds of laughter, holiday music, and the freshly cut balsam fir in the air made my heart swell with happiness.

But as she released me, she grabbed Luc's hand, and her gaze darted back and forth between us. "Sal's plane was delayed, and he won't be home until tomorrow at the earliest." A frown flashed across her features, but then she smiled at us both. "And I, for one, am so happy to have both of you here. And you, too, Bodhi. I'm so sorry you aren't able to spend Christmas with your family, dear."

Bodhi blushed, and his cheeks flushed in typical style. "Thank you for having me, Mrs. Rossetti." She shushed him, telling him he was more than welcome.

Until a hurricane blew open the door, and everyone turned as Bri barged in, arms overloaded with gifts, bags, and a bottle of champagne teetering in her grasp. "Listen, it might be the Eve of Christ's birth, but the actual miracle tonight is that I made it up the driveway without dropping a single thing in this blizzard. Wearing these boots."

Silver short dress, hair styled, cheeks flushed, her eyes darted to one of the many boughs of mistletoe strategically placed around the house as she twirled and came into view.

She stopped short when she spied the three of us, losing her grip on the bottle of bubbly. Bodhi caught it just before it hit the hardwood floor, along with a large red box topped with a white paper elephant, glittered and looking fabulous. He looked up at her, down on one knee, holding the champagne and gift box as if he was going to propose to her.

I snorted, thinking how big of a ring it would hold.

Then again, it was her White Elephant present, and I was pretty sure there wasn't a proposal coming her way. At least not from Bodhi. Poor guy could barely talk around her. Unless it had to do with fuel strategy.

Huh, might be something to that, I thought.

The two of them seemed locked in a battle of wills, until Luc clapped Bodhi on the back, taking the bottle from him. "Watch out, Rook, or my mom will have you proposing to Bri for real if she has the chance."

Bri whipped her head to Luc, her eyes widening her gaze darted to Bodhi, who was still on one knee before her. "Get up!" She hissed out the words, her face flushed as he rose to his feet, never breaking eye contact with her. She snatched the box from his hands, and I couldn't help a flash of amusement. Rarely, if ever, had I witnessed Bri not confident, full of fire, even when she overindulged on our girls' nights.

And for once, Bodhi looked as if he was in total control of his normal adorable blush that would've crept along his face around her. Or any other attractive girl he didn't work with.

"Bria, why don't you put everything in the kitchen and then grab something to drink," Luc's mom suggested, a twinkle in her eye. "Maybe Bodhi can help you?"

With a huff, Bri glared at her mom and brushed past him, who followed her into the oversized kitchen with a determined expression.

"Well, now the only child of mine missing is Nick. Your Uncle T.R. is in the living room or somewhere, brooding. Make sure you cheer him up," Mrs. Rossetti said with a smile as she squeezed my hand. "Come on, let's get you a glass of wine, and celebrate family."

The open floor plan of the house meant there were few places to slip away, except for the bathroom off the kitchen and the stairs leading up to the second floor, which made me even more glad Luc and I got a bit of each

other out of our systems before we picked up Bodhi.

Though with the way Luc's eyes kept dropping to check out my ass, I wasn't sure we'd make it until we were home for round two. With a smile, I accepted the glass she handed me with a wink as she answered the doorbell. I went toward the kitchen to see if Bri needed help with anything and to catch up.

Luc winked at me as he headed over to where a few of the guys from his dad's team were talking, along with T.R. Ever since he came back from his little escape from the beach, Luc's Uncle seemed, if it was possible, even more broody and withdrawn. My gaze sank lower, and I smiled to myself as I realized Luc wasn't the only one not able to keep their eyes up high. Damn, the way that man wore a pair of jeans was just not fair.

Yeah, we might not make it home without sneaking off somewhere tonight. Bodhi was staying at our place for a few days since his lease was up, things were going to be interesting. I grinned as a mischievous thought came to me, and pulled my phone from the hidden pocket in my dress.

Yep. Pockets. Brilliant. If nothing else, I would shop at the boutique Kylie's sister owned for pockets in all my clothes alone.

I began typing a text to Luc as I neared the door, stopping just outside the kitchen as I finished before hitting send.

ALEX: I can't stop thinking about you. Inside me, Mav, and screaming your name. Might have to keep me quiet later.

As I hit send, Bri's voice carried out into the hallway.

"What the fuck are you doing here? You promised you wouldn't tell-"

"And I haven't, Bri. I would never lie to you. You're my-"

"Tell what to who?" I asked as I entered the room. The two of them jumped apart as if I had caught them in a worse compromising position than I wanted to be in with Luc right now.

Which was ridiculous.

I was pretty sure Bodhi was saving himself for marriage if Luc's drunk ramblings the other night were any sign. My Mav rambled when tired plus just past the point of a good buzz.

Bri shot a last glare at Bodhi before spinning on her knee-high boots with a forced grin. "Luc. About my White Elephant present. I think this year Mom won't have to drink the entire bottle after he opens it. But," she added with a chuckle, "you might want to hide this one, Alex."

I lifted a brow at her, but she just laughed and walked out of the kitchen,

glass in hand, leaving me and Bodhi staring after her. His eyes stayed on her as she walked away, lowering to her ass. “Hey, eyes up before Luc catches you checking out his little sister.”

“I wasn’t-”

“You weren’t what?” Van asked as he came up behind me, and I turned with a squeal. It had been almost a month since I saw him last, his tour ending three nights ago.

He engulfed me in a big hug with a loud chuckle.

“Missed me, Alex?”

“Oh, I’m sure she’s just excited about that bottle of Falling Leaves you brought.” Gia breezed in behind him, yanking the bourbon from his hands and grabbing two glasses from the counter next to the sink. She poured two fingers in each before handing me one. “Mrs. Rossetti said to bring her a glass, too, before Luc and Bri exchange their gifts?”

I let out a snort as Van squeezed me one more time before stepping back.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

Raising our drinks, Gia and I shared a look before taking a drink. Bourbon might not be my favorite, but I had to admit, Res knew his stuff. “Wait, weren’t you going home with Dante for the weekend?”

“He had some big project for Res. My flight got delayed, then canceled because of this damn snow storm ravaging the coast from Maine down. Eight hours sitting at the airport. My phone died, the wire on my charger got caught in the car door and snapped when I caught a cab. Which, by the way, is totally random now, because I couldn’t get an Uber without my phone. I ran into Van,” she narrowed her eyes, and Van returned her gaze without flinching, “at the race shop when I went to grab my extra charge cord and tried to call you. And then I remembered you were coming here tonight-”

“And so was I-”

Gia cut him off like he hadn’t spoken a word. “For Christmas Eve with Luc’s family. Two birds, and all that jazz.” And with that, she tipped back the rest of what remained in her glass, poured another, snatched a full glass, and left the kitchen.

Van stared after her. The two of them had avoided each other since Vegas and the awards banquet. Gia refused to talk about anything related to Van. Even when his song hit number one, I was ninety percent sure was about her.

“What did I miss?”

“Nothing. Not a single fucking thing.” My brother practically growled as

he stalked out, leaving Bodhi and me staring after the two of them.

“Well, tonight’s only been mildly uncomfortable.” Bodhi shifted his feet, then smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry if I ruined anything for you guys. If my lease wasn’t up and all the hotels were booked because of the weather, I’d just ordered a pizza and-”

“Oh no, Rookie, we would never let you spend Christmas Eve, let alone Christmas day by yourself. Come on, let’s go see what devious gift Bri bought Luc this year, and just how much Mrs. Rossetti is going to need that bourbon.”

CHAPTER 3

BODHI



*M*y eyes found her no matter how hard she tried to hide from me. Christmas carols played, and the party carried on with laughter and the smell of cookies or whatever else I could get my hands on. They weren't my mom's or the ones I was sure all my sisters had stayed up baking with her, but Mrs. Rossetti had this way of making everything feel like home.

Twinkling laughter hit me in the chest, and my eyes found Bri, standing near her and Luc's Uncle T.R., who even though he laughed at whatever she said, still wore a sad expression.

Jett, the right front tire changer for Luc's crew whistled under his breath as he followed my gaze.. "Oh, Rookie. That one is a firecracker. And Luc would probably kick your ass for looking at his baby sister the way you are right now."

I groaned inwardly because I knew all of this already. Luc had become one of my closest friends when he joined Anders Racing, even though he was older than me, and worked with me instead of against me like my previous teammate, Chase Scott. But Bri Rossetti wasn't as young as Jett made her sound when he called her Luc's baby sister.

In fact, she was right around Alex's age, Luc's fiancé.

And I was four years younger than her. But that didn't matter. Not to me. Not since the first day I saw her and lost my ability to speak coherent words for a moment in time.

"Rookie?" Jett snapped his fingers in front of my face. His eyes narrowed. "Something you want to tell me?"

I cleared my throat. *Only that I was thinking her last name wasn't exactly Rossetti, but this is so not the time or place Shit.* "Only that I know who

pulled your name in the Secret Santa and I'm not telling. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find the bathroom." Before he could respond, I made my way toward the hall of the main living area I was pretty sure had at least one door that could be a bathroom.

The sounds of the party lessened as I entered the darkened hallway, but before I even made it halfway down the hall, Gia brushed past me. The Anders Racing head of PR looked flushed, but I guessed she'd had some of the bourbon Alex mentioned earlier. "Hey, Gia."

She stopped, appearing startled at finding another person in the hall, but quickly recovered and offered me a grin. "Looks like we're both missing family time, huh, Bodhi?"

I nodded, and stuffed my hands in my pockets. "I do miss my mom. And my sisters." I jerked my head towards the party. "This is just as loud, so it feels like Christmas. Kind of."

She placed her hand on my arm and smiled. "I get it. But this?" She gestured behind her. "They're family, too. Just don't drink too much. Or, you know what? Less than Vegas, ok?"

I blushed, not because I was embarrassed, but because Vegas and the championship banquet for last season held memories and moments. "Got it, boss."

Gia threw her head back and laughed. "I wish." Her lips pursed suddenly as she stopped laughing as she glanced over my shoulder. I tried to turn to see what caught her attention, but she squeezed my arm again. "Have fun, Bodhi. But avoid the damn mistletoe. It's a trap."

Puzzled, I turned around, but only caught a glimpse of someone leaving the hallway that I assumed led to the kitchen, if my sense of direction was right.

Which it always was. Just like how I knew exactly where Bri had been every second tonight so far.

Served me very well on the track, but even more considering Bri was doing her best to avoid me all night. I found the bathroom, and after I washed my hands, I glanced in the mirror. One way or another, we had to talk. Because after Vegas, one thing was for sure.

Bri Rossetti was now Mrs. Bodhi Vincent. Even if she couldn't remember all the details, I did. From the way her eyes sparkled when we were dancing, when she told me how much she loved unicorns and those little Christmas gnomes, to her favorite movie that she watched over and over when she was

blue, to how much she wanted to get out from under her family's shadow. And how much it broke her heart that she felt that way.

Bri loved her family more than anything. Just like I did. After a fortifying breath, I opened the door, only to see the object of my thoughts standing in the dimly lit hallway. Breathtakingly beautiful even as she glared at me then wrinkled her brow.

"Tell me you didn't come here just to see me, because you know this," she wagged her hands between us, adorable and unfailingly beautiful, "can't happen. I'm perfectly happy not having my brother kill one of his best friends-

I grinned. "Is that the only reason you don't want this," I mimicked her hand motion so perfectly that she sputtered, "to happen? Luc won't kill me. Teammates. He might kick my ass, but he'd make sure nothing jeopardized the team. So, probably kick my ass early enough so I could heal. And that means there's no reason not to tell them-

"Why would we do that??" She squeaked, eyes round. Pulling me into their brown depths. Just like a damn California sunset. Bri looked and felt like home. Which was why I wouldn't push her yet. Just maybe plant the idea, let her get used to the idea. "Truth bomb, Bodhi. There's nothing to tell, and I will not mess up my mom's holiday over any," hands flailed again, "what happens in Vegas-

I stepped in closer, breathing in her scent. Clean, apples, sweetness, and all Bri. Sunshine and happiness. Hopeless romantic. She might want to play like she didn't remember, or that she chose to feign an amnesiac Vegas excuse, but I would only give her so much. "Doesn't have to stay in Vegas, Bri."

"Bodhi!" She opened her mouth to say more, but I took full advantage of her tells (Jett's poker lessons were paying off). Pupils dilated, breath coming faster, moving closer to me the way she mirrored my body position. "Yes, it does. All the nineties hip hop in the world-

Fuck, she even knew my favorite genre of music.

"Mistletoe," I murmured.

When I grabbed her by her waist and sought the nape of her neck with my other hand, her eyes widened. And when I touched her soft, full lips to mine?

I knew something with every fiber of my being. That she tasted like home, and summers at the track. Bare feet in the grass, or dancing to a favorite song in the middle of the night with the lights off. And she did, too.

The most beautiful, intelligent and sassy woman I'd ever met was meant to be mine. In more than just in name only.

Seeking, searching, tasting. A moan left her and I took full advantage, yet stopped myself from doing anything that might make her uncomfortable.

Bri molded her body against mine, and her moan made me so hard the zipper of my pants dug into my hard-on with fierce determination. When her hands snaked around my chest, nails digging into my back, I groaned into her mouth. It was ethereal and magical and everything I waited for.

Until she pulled away, her hands pushing against my chest. "Wait, stop. No. Luc *will* kick your ass. Over...nothing. This? Can't happen. Isn't. Didn't."

"Didn't?" I asked, eyes locked on her kiss swollen lips, and my mind went back to the night we celebrated Luc's championship in Vegas. The flashing lights of the nightclub. The shots of vodka. The taste of lemon and sugar on her lips. Giggles. Unicorns. The Christmas gnomes she collected. Singing songs from *The Descendants* when we walked the strip, because it was her happy place. Stumbling but steady because I wouldn't let her fall.

Bri, in all her loud, giddy, boisterous and never taking any bullshit glory was beautiful when she let go of her family's legacy.

She might not think I noticed, but being a world famous race car legend like Sal Rossetti wasn't just hard on Luc. Bri might not race cars, but she was held to different standards than other people. I saw it in the way she talked about her parents, and worked relentlessly on the restaurant she was opening with her other brother, Nick.

And fuck, it was sexy.

"Yep, didn't." Pink tipped nails smoothed the skirt of the silver dress that clung to the curves of her body. Bright, and enchanting, and full of unexpected things like the pocket I might've slipped a little something in it without her noticing.

Girls loved pockets.

Things you learned with sisters.

"Really?"

She nodded, glanced down the hall one way, then the other. She pointed toward the opposite way I had come. "You go that way, and I'll go this way. No one will even know we were here."

"That way?" I let one side of my mouth quirk. A hand smoothed her hair, the motion bringing attention to her neck and the curve of her breasts visible

beneath the v shaped neckline.

“Kitchen, and hopefully dumbass won’t notice.”

“Dumbass?” I asked, loving watching her brain work. Work out the logistics of how we were going to separately return to the party. I didn’t care that she didn’t want anyone to see us. The fact that she hadn’t walked away yet because she believed Luc would actually try to kick my ass. Did I think he would? Probably, but not without cause. But she cared about what happened to me. Wanted to make sure I was ok. Not beaten to a pulp by her brother.

One of my best friends. Yep, my hard on was for my best friend's little sister.

Eye roll. *Fuck, why did that make me even harder?*

“Luc!” Exasperated, she grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me until I faced the other direction. “Go!”

CHAPTER 4

BRI



There was no way in hell what just happened actually just happened.

I did not kiss the one boy, no man, I swore I wouldn't. In a dark hallway, at my parents Christmas party. Where my brother, and Bodhi's *best friend*...wait was he? Shit. Bodhi was younger than Luc. Younger than me. If anything, Bodhi was in the circle. And Ryan, Van, and even Res were in it. With Bodhi.

Which meant there were lines I couldn't cross.

No matter how hard I wanted to.

Not if I wanted to break free of the things that had kept me from living my own dream. Away from Dad's legacy. Out from his shadow. And not in the same way Nick or Luc had found their own way. Luc might have driven his way into his life, and was marrying Alex despite all the bullshit they had gone through. Nick? The minute he put up the brewery, I knew he had found his passion.

Which somehow had led to mine. Not that I could cook beyond the basics. But food has always been a love language in our family. That legacy?

I loved it, and made it my own. Day by day. Farm to table. Learning the basics, and finding other people who believed in it like I did. Finding people who wanted to make eating out with friends and family a love language, too. My brothers were pains in my ass, but they loved me.

And it kept Mom from asking when I was getting married. For the most part.

Bodhi didn't fit it into that plan. Making my way.

Because he was Bodhi Vincent. Racecar driver for Anders Racing, and Rookie of the Year. Hell, I looked up the sites and social media fan accounts.

It might have taken a few glasses of wine to tolerate reading the damn comments from the thirsty as fuck female fans.

Ok, fine a bottle. That song 'Hole in the Bottle' by Kelsea Ballerini? My theme song for the evening. Or week. Maybe longer.

Because something about Bodhi unnerved me. Made me want to change my mind.

And he was younger than me, which shouldn't matter. Wait, did it?

Racing? I needed to leave it behind, and not let it define me. Not as the daughter of Sal Rossetti. But as Bria Rossetti.

Girl on fire.

"Bria? Sweetheart, gift time! And I just know you and your brothers are going to make me regret having all these amazing people here to celebrate Christmas with us. Witness my children torturing their poor mother," mom came up behind me and put her arm around my shoulder. She smiled. "Ready? Let's embarrass Luc in front of Alex. Endless hours of entertainment."

My heart leapt into my throat. If my mom found out what happened in Vegas, she'd never forgive me. Okay, so maybe she would, but the guilt trip would have no expiration date.

CHAPTER 5

LUC



I stared down at the obnoxiously huge box Bri plopped in front of me with a gleeful yet evil smile when we passed out our gifts. We only opened one gift on Christmas Eve and then the rest the next morning. A few years ago, Bri and I, on a dare from Nick, started exchanging White Elephant gifts, trying to see which one of us could get Mom to swear first at the other. But no matter how much we tried, she just drank away her embarrassment over us while Nick laughed his ass off. And of course, since we exchanged them at our annual party, everyone expected our little exchange.

Much to the chagrin of our poor, wine consuming mom.

Who currently held a glass of Falling Leaves Bourbon, courtesy of Gia.

Who was going to show up next? Resnick fucking Gentry and his assistant? The entire Anders Racing Team?

Laughter and people filled the house, and Mom flitted about, filling plates from the mountains of food she prepared as well as things from the restaurant Bri and Nick were opening in a little over a month.

Farm to table, and every dish was fucking delicious. I made a mental note to tell Bri how kick ass she was. After our gift exchange. Or maybe before so I didn't have the whatever hanging over my head from her gift. Fucking little sisters.

She was lucky I loved her so much.

Mom wrapped extra gifts so everyone at the party received a present.

Something from local small businesses or artists. No one was left out, and that was because when you spent Christmas Eve with us, you were family.

"You go first, Luc. Think of it as me fulfilling Mom's greatest wish, and throwing the attention off of me," Bri snickered.

“Bria,” Mom chided as she readied herself, drink in hand, for whatever torture her daughter had planned for me.

Alex smirked, nodding at the box, the white elephant on top taunting me. I huffed out a sigh as Bri bounced on her toes with excitement, holding the gift bag dotted with elephants in Santa hats in her hands. Courtesy of my fiancé’s Amazon purchase to fit in with the ‘rhyme scheme,’ as she put it.

Throwing one last glare at Bri, I ripped open the wrapping paper, balled it up, and tossed it at her. She ducked, and it hit Bodhi, who was standing right behind her with a silly grin on his face. And I wasn’t positive, but I think he checked out her ass.

Hell, maybe that drink I had with T.R. was getting to me.

With a jerk of my head, I opened the box, pulling out a wooden statue. Great, another fucking thing for the shelf in our office. But, I had to admit, this one was tame compared to the other gifts Bri and I tortured each other with over the years. I raised a brow.

“Read the card that comes with it, dumbass,” she said with a smirk.

“Bria!”

“Sorry,” she laughed, not looking the least bit sorry.

At all. Brat.

A white card buried beneath the almost foot-and-a-half statue in the tissue. I handed it to Alex, who read it out loud.

“Kokopelli, a Native American deity of fertility and-” she dropped the card like it was on fire. “Bri!! We do not need a fertility deity in the house!!”

I stared down in horror at the thing in my hand, realizing what it was, and glared at her. “Bri,” I growled, but my baby sister just let out a giggle. Looking way too satisfied and gleeful at my discomfort.

“Told you I’d distract mom away from badgering me about my love life,” she laughed, and raised her glass in a salute.

“Bria, let the two of them get married. Then we can talk about how much I’d love babies to spoil.” Mom chimed in from across the room.

T.R. shrugged helplessly next to her with a chuckle. I couldn’t help but notice his laughter didn’t quite reach his eyes. Ever since we came back, I noticed more and more how the weight of the past sat on his shoulders. It shouldn’t, but he took the brunt of the situation upon himself. Fuck. Even his escape to the beach hadn’t seemed to really help. But then Bri let out a squeal as she opened the gift Alex helped me find, and I grinned evilly.

If Bri thought she got away with what she thought was going to draw

attention away from her, she had another thing coming.

“What the hell?” She pulled out a crystal shoe, a delicate heel, just like the one she lost somewhere in Vegas the night of the awards banquet. Engraved on the bottom were the words “My husband has the other one somewhere in Vegas” in graceful script.

“Well, you know what they say, what happens in Vegas...” I let my voice trail off as she hit me with her patented death stare. “Just saying, maybe you got married by Elvis to keep Mom off your back, but don’t want to tell anyone, and lost your favorite shoe to your mystery hook-up that night.” I lowered my voice so no one would hear the last sentence. Alex and I had caught her sneaking back into her room the morning after the big celebrations and my proposal, hair and dress askew, with one shoe in her hand.

“Listen, dumbass, the only one getting married around here is you. And there was no ‘mystery hook-up’, thank you very much.”

Bodhi cleared his throat loudly, shifting on his feet as Bri jabbed me in the chest with a finger.

Van wandered to where Gia stood. Her attention focused on the eight-foot tree Nick and I had chopped down in the back woods a few days ago. We decorated it with all the cheesy and delicate ornaments from over the years.

Alex nudged me as Gia steadfastly ignored him when he leaned in to speak to her.

Beside me, Bri spun the shoe in her hands, then shrugged. “It does look like my poor shoe. And it is sparkly. I just won’t let anyone read the bottom. Who doesn’t want to be Cinderella? Without all the cleaning and evil stepmother stuff, obviously.” She grinned, and stood, knocking into Bodhi, who had bent over to pick up the wrapping paper and discarded gift bag from the floor. They froze, locked in a game of chicken, until Bri straightened her spine, clutching the gift to her chest before hurriedly scampering away.

Leaning in, Alex whispered in my ear. “We might not need a deity to remind us that practice makes perfect, Mav. And I love practicing with you.”

“I believe you said I’d have to keep you quiet again sometime tonight.” I raised a brow, and I canted my head to look at my girl.

“Want to see my old bedroom? You’d be the only girl I ever snuck into it.”

She snorted. “Somehow I doubt that. I grew up around you, remember?”

“Never said there weren’t girls out in the barn. But you’re the only one I want to sneak into my room, darlin’.”

With a glance to make sure my family was preoccupied, I tugged on her hand, stealing us away.

CHAPTER 6

VAN



Why the fuck had I thought this was a good idea?

The cacophony of holly jolly surrounding me wasn't the distraction I thought it would be. When my plans changed at the last minute, Alex invited me to stop by after assuring me Mrs. Rossetti wouldn't mind. I popped in at the shop, using my key to get in to grab a gift I'd stashed there a few days ago, and almost forgotten about.

Fuck, I was such a damn fool.

And heading to the shop before hitting the party dealt me with a damn Christmas surprise I wasn't expecting.

Box in hand, I turned the corner at the darkened shop at Anders Racing to head down the stairs when I noticed the light on in an office down the way. Outside, snowflakes fell, a result of the arctic blast drifting across the country. Which had delayed my trip, and countless others. An eerie silence filled the empty shop.

The voice that drifted down the hall hit me in the chest.

Tearing out my heart like it had a thousand times before.

"Come on, I know you're here. Aha! Found you! Now, be a good boy, and do exactly what I want."

The blood roared in my ears, clouding my judgment. And fuck if I was going to stand here and let her have her way with some guy when I was just down the hall.

"Don't fucking touch her if you want to walk out on your own," I barked, knocking the door open wide as I barged into Gia's office.

Only to find her, bent over the desk, plugging in a...charging cord?

She straightened, her green eyes flashing, dark hair tumbling down her

back in careless waves. “What are you going to do? Beat up my charger? I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t, at least not until after I get an Uber anywhere but here.”

“Tiger, what are you doing here?” My hands unclenched, the fists I didn’t remember making fading as I looked at the woman who had ruined me. Fingers twitching with the need to touch her. Make her remember how I made her feel.

How she could only let go with me.

“Canceled flight. My phone died. And I took a cab here. Which is not as easy to do as it sounds.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder, the soft cream sweater clinging to every curve, making my mouth water, needing to possess her.

Fuck. Me.

“And you came here?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I didn’t want to go back to an empty apartment. Not yet. She ducked her head, and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the woman who came apart under me.

The one who never let go with anyone else.

Except me.

The words came out, low and rough, before I could stop them. “Come with me.”

“What? No.”

“Yes.”

The air stilled between us, heavy with words we couldn’t say. Words she wouldn’t say.

“Alex will be there. And Bodhi.”

Those green eyes hesitated. Haunted, and wanting.

“Wait, aren’t you supposed to be leaving? Or were you lying to me?” Her chin jutted out in defiance, and my hands twitched again with the need to remind her how I brought out things in her. The place I kept for her, and her alone. She must have sensed it, her eyes darkening as she licked her lip. Her eyes said more than her words ever did.

“Flight canceled, no getting out for now. Looks like we’re stuck together, Tiger. Come with me.” This time, it wasn’t a request. A simple command, and hell if the way her eyes flared even as she tried to find a way out didn’t do things to me. Like they had since the very first time I laid eyes on her. A bonfire, the burn of the moonshine, the night air. Stars.

She studied me for a moment. “Fine. But don’t think this means I’m going with you. You’re just a means to an end.” Brushing past me, she refused to meet my gaze until I caught her by the elbow.

“Just like always, Tiger.” I challenged her, knowing she’d take the out. Like she always had.

With a scowl, she yanked her arm free, and helplessly, I followed behind her.

Silence filled the truck as I drove to the Rossetti place. Tension thick as honey, and just as achingly sweet hung in the air.

Mrs. Rossetti had always been nice, and now that Luc was one step closer to being family, things were changing. For the better.

I hoped Sal Rossetti stayed far away. I hadn’t forgiven him for the shit he pulled.

I doubted I ever would.

Staring out the window at the swiftly falling snow, Gia refused to meet my eyes, sitting in silence as I drove. Defiant and sexy as hell.

Her red lips begging to be ravished.

Her secrets wrought from her.

There was no way she’d give in on her own. Not tonight, at least.

Teetering on the precipice, I knew she had enough going on in that head of hers that she’d bolt just as soon as I tried to reach for her. Something was putting her on edge, and if she needed a target to aim her fury at, I would give her one.

I’d always be anything she needed.

Parking the truck, I reached behind her, handing over a bottle of Falling Leaves. “Alex warned me we might need this.”

“There’s no *we*, Van.”

I huffed out a breath, frustration building in my veins. “You might not want to admit it, Tiger, but there sure as fuck was a *we*. You walked away from that. Not me.” I turned away, almost missing her hurt expression before getting out and slamming the door closed. I hung my head, flexing my fists to keep myself from yanking her out of the car, reminding her of every single touch and night we had spent together. The sound of her door opening, then clicking shut, cut through the air. The crunching of the newly fallen snow beneath my feet broke the silence as she followed behind.

But now, sitting here, watching Gia in all her fury and fucking fierce glory? I made a decision.

If she wanted to play it like that, I'd just have to remind her of every whispered promise, every touch, and moment she spent begging under me. Silk ties, the cuffs.

The loss of the tightly held control she thrust out into the world. How the place she felt free of enough to let go was with me.

As if she could hear my thoughts, her green eyes caught mine, fire and ice in their depths. With a defiant toss of her head, she turned her back on me, and headed down the hall leading away from the celebrations. After a quick glance around to ensure no one was paying attention, I stalked after her.

Determined to take back what was mine.

CHAPTER 7

GIA



*S*hit. Shit. Shit.

Why the hell had I agreed to come here? With *him*??

I was so screwed. After they canceled my flight, all I wanted was to find a bottle of bourbon, curl up on the couch in my office, and drink until I passed out.

Merry Fucking Christmas.

Sorry, Jesus. But I'm just not feeling it this year.

But Van showed up and wrecked my crummy plans.

Why the hell couldn't I just say no?

His heated gaze on my skin for an hour broke me, and I needed air. Away from the people celebrating family and love. Fuck, even seeing Alex happy with Luc was making me feel like such an asshole. The void in my chest widened as I stood so far from the one person who could destroy me.

But I couldn't. I wouldn't.

No one would ever break down my walls again. I'd seen how love could turn on you. Hurt you. Make you bleed.

I would never fall for that trap.

The room started spinning, and not from the booze, either. The hallway and quiet beckoned me.

Pushing down the sensation of drowning, I snuck out. But not before allowing myself one last piece of him. His hazel eyes bore into me. Stripping me bare.

Shit.

The hallway led away from the party, lights dim as I followed it to the back of the house. Doors closed here and there, scattered along the way until

I reached the one leading outside. Wrapping my arms around myself, I welcomed the cold. Snow fell as the air chilled me to my bones, the weather turning in the last hours as everyone celebrated the most wonderful time of the year.

Shit.

Footsteps sounded behind me, but before I could react, someone yanked me back against the hard planes of a body I knew all too well. A strong hand snaked around my waist, making its way up with excruciating slowness, between my breasts with agonizing purpose. Rough calluses from strumming a guitar played along my skin. His palm gripped my throat.

Leaving me exposed, panting, and heat pooling between my thighs.

“Fine, Tiger. You want to play? Let’s play.” With a growl, Van spun me around, his grip on me like a hand necklace, eyes burning into mine as he pushed me against the side of the house and claimed my mouth for his own.

CHAPTER 8

BRI



My flannel pj pants, a glass of wine, and a good book. It should be everything I needed to make my night everything I needed. But my thoughts were racing, filled with thoughts of the thing I'd successfully avoided all night.

Well, not all night. The damn hallway had been a moment of weakness.

The wine glass in my hand suddenly felt like a lifeline, and the memories came flooding back in a rush. Not that I hadn't replayed every moment right up until things got fuzzy. Award banquets were nothing new, but successful avoidance had been easy since dad technically retired. The team had a few championships under its belt since its inception. Yet the daughter of Sal Rossetti was not expected to be in attendance unless her father was the one holding the trophy at the head table.

But this year, for nefarious baby sister reasons, Vegas beckoned. Mostly because I didn't want Luc to pull a dumbass move and mess up his proposal to Alex in front of the fountains at the Bellagio. Plus, I had helped Gia orchestrate the entire thing, and there was no way I was missing a moment of the getting down one knee and pledging all things love and happily ever after.

Don't lie to yourself, Bri. You also wanted to get a little time with Anders Racing Rookie of the Year.

Even if I wanted to get from under my father's shadow, I loved racing. The behind the scenes logistics and engineering, the teamwork, the technicality of it all had fascinated me before I picked up my first Barbie. Puzzle pieces sliding into place, the tiniest detail and making your own luck appear through sheer force of will was something I knew far too well.

When the stars aligned, it was magic. And that same tingle sent

shockwaves through my body when I met Bodhi. He didn't back down or make me feel like being a girl who knew about a male dominated sport meant that I was dumb or just a pretty face. He challenged me, argued, and even when I had first thought he was avoiding me because he didn't like me, he still did something that bordered on unnerving to me.

Even when I flirted with him despite knowing where he fit in with my big brother, Luc's, circle, it was there. The respect. He let me argue and met me word for word, point for point, never treating me like Sal Rossettie's daughter, but as an equal.

And fuck, it made me feel empowered and sexy. Growing up around it all, I had taken for granted that I was always simply there because of my last name. Luc had done his best, but his demons ran far deeper than I knew. At least my pressure didn't come from being better than my dad.

Mine? Being a woman. And as a woman, I was passed over in every conversation that revolved around anything racing unless it was how beautiful the paint scheme shined in the California sun at Laguna Seca or how I liked the festivities leading up to race weekend.

The worst was when I was asked why I hadn't tried taking up the mantle and driving. No one was ever serious, which made me even more determined to get away from it all.

If I wanted to race, why the hell shouldn't I? My damn vagina didn't hinder me. If anything it gave an advantage because I had learned to tolerate a ton of bullshit.

But driving wasn't in my blood the way it was in Luc's. Racing would always be somewhat tainted by those experiences.

Vegas gave me a chance to create new memories alongside the ones I gathered over the past year.

Maybe I let things go too far, but my emotions ran so high that I let go of all the things holding me down. Giggled and laughed, danced, talked, and maybe did a few things that were fuzzy around the edges.

Draining the last of the wine from my glass, I set it down on my bedside stand and sat with my legs crossed. Glared at the phone I had tossed onto the bed when I came home and changed after driving so damn slow in the icy weather I dreaded going back to my parents the next morning.

Flights canceled and delayed, yet here I was not sure if Bodhi being at the party unsettled me or made things more clear on what I had to do.

"Fuck it. Truth bomb time, Bri."

I swiped, and hit send, breath held and heart racing.

“Bri?”

Words refused to come, and all I could think of were those cheesy horror films where the girl gets a phone call late at night. Cue the cheesy sound effects and heavy breathing. Except Bodhi was not a damsel in distress, and I didn’t apply for the role of crazy stalking murderer in a campy horror film.

On the other side, Bodhi chuckled. “Caller ID, Bri. I know it's you. Talk to me. Please?”

Shit. There it was. The uncanny ability to know when I needed something.

“Did you find my gift?”

My breath caught, and the surety that he heard every silent gasp and nuance of emotion building in my blood filled me with both dread and utter happiness.

The small, red and green wrapped gift lay on the bed where it had rested when I pulled it out earlier. Not near my phone. Because I had picked up and put down so many times I had lost count. Giddy that he thought of me, and hell if i wasn’t impressed at how he had somehow slipped it into my pocket.

See, pockets and dresses? So worth it. Alex and I had a love of pockets in common.

Oh my God, I was smiling like someone had just told me a Disney Descendants movie marathon was on and Hades was hosting. In my living room. And Bodhi was there to watch it with me, rubbing my feet.

Wait? Where the fuck had that come from?

“Bri?”

“What? Oh, yes, I did. Very slick, Bodhi. Slipping that into my pocket while you distracted me with those tingly kisses.”

His laughter snuck through the phone, down my spine, low and sexy. It brought me back to when we were dancing on that dance floor in Vegas, and he was explaining his LL Cool J music taste. Nineties hip hop had never been so sexy except in that moment. “Pockets are very convenient when you need to slip something into them without someone knowing you are.” He paused, and I could just picture the adorable, sexy smile. And the damn heat in his eyes once he got over blushing everytime we were in the same room.”Tingly kisses, huh?”

“I can admit it. A moment of weakness in a dimly lit hall is nothing to be ashamed of. A girl has needs, and when they haven’t been met in awhile,

things can happen. And even if your lips weren't intoxicating and making me swoon, the soap and whatever the hell else you smelled like kept trying to hypnotize me into behaving very inappropriately at my parents house."

This time when he answered, his voice sent shivers straight to my traitorous lady parts. Stupid romance novels. Book boyfriends were not real, no matter how many times I wished they were. Book club rhetoric's influence on my very non-existent sex life was making me delusional, I decided.

Yep. That was it.

"You wanted to behave inappropriately with me, Bri?"

Exasperated, I sat up straight. "Is that all you got out of that?"

"That, and the fact that your needs haven't been met in a very long time."

"I can't believe I am having this conversation with you," I said as I reached for the damn present. The holly jolly wrapping paper mocked me, begging to be opened. "You really bought me a present?"

"Yep, and wrapped it myself. My mom made sure I knew how to wrap so that I'd never have to have someone at the store do it. It means more, the effort. Shows you care." He paused for a beat. "Open the present, Bri. It's the first from your-"

"Don't say it, and I'll open it. Okay?" I tucked my knees under my chin, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear with one hand, and clutching his gift in the other. It fit in the palm of my hand, and felt like more than just a simple gift.

It felt like a moment. A moment that you look back on and realize it had been something that had changed your life. Forever and irrevocably.

"For, now, Bri. Open it," he said, his tone a warning that though he let it go now, he wasn't going too far for long. "But FaceTime."

I froze. "FaceTime?"

He chuckled. "Our first Christmas. I want to watch you open it, Bri."

"But I'm a hot mess, Bodhi."

"I doubt that, Sunset."

"Sunset?" I asked.

"Yep." His voice dropped. "Let me see you, Bri."

Nothing in the world had prepared me for Bodhi Vincent. Not the adoring fans who loved my dad, or the boys who only wanted to date me to get close to him, or the boys who didn't date me for that reason but always left me wondering if there was more.

But book boyfriends? They made me wish that men like Bodhi existed.

Despite the fact he was three years younger than me, after that kiss, I would never see him as younger ever again.

“Hold on.” I leaned over and grabbed a stack of books and my ereader and propped my phone on them so I could be hands free. “But no making fun, or else I will hunt you down, understood?”

“Damn, that’s a threat I might actually get you to turn into a promise, then reality.”

I rolled my eyes as I made it so he could see me. When his face popped up on the screen, his smile and tousled hair were more than I was prepared for. “You look like you ran a marathon. And no comment about the hunting you down.” I was tempted to tell him it wouldn’t take much more to get to climb him like a damn spider monkey, but my head prevailed.”

“You interrupted something, Sunset.”

My brow wrinkled, a green monster nudged me with the possibility that there was another person messing his hair for nefarious reasons even if it was an impossibility. Bodhi might be a racer, but I had never heard even a peep about another girl in his life other than his sisters and mom.

“What’s that look for, Sunset?” Brown eyes and kissable lips locked me into place, my glare melting as he grinned in only the way he could.

It was then that I noticed the slight blush in his cheeks. My mouth opened, then it was my turn to grin as I realized exactly what his *extracurricular* activity was. “Bodhi, were you doing naughty things on Christmas Eve? Tsk, tsk. Santa might put you on his naughty list.”

“You have no idea how naughty, Bri. No idea. But I would love to show how naughty my fantasy is.” The heat in his eyes and the way he ran his teeth over his bottom lip had me catching my breath and shifting.

Now it was my turn to blush. There was no doubt in my mind who was the object of his fantasy.

I shouldn’t admit it, but I did before I could stop myself. “Truth bomb. I might’ve been a little naughty a few times, too.”

“Tell me.” My eyes widened as I finally realized what he wore. Bare chested, sculpted pecs and abs tempting and so lickable, and briefs that did nothing to hide the bulge.

“I thought you wanted me to open my present?”

“Fuck, yeah, I do. Then you’re going to tell me all about how naughty you want to be, Sunset.”

Again, teeth along his bottom lip, but this time, God how I wanted to be

the one biting it. I shook my head. My nipples were hard against the material of my thermal henley sleep shirt, perfectly visible and begging for his attention if the way his eyes darted down with a smirk were any indication.

“Open it.” This time, his smile was sweet with heat.

That little bolt went straight to my core, but I smiled as I grabbed the present. “It’s such a shame to ruin such a fantastic and thoughtful,” I bit my lip, “wrapping job.”

“If it makes you look like that, I’ll wrap all kinds of presents for you, Bri. Just open it. Please?”

I carefully slid my finger along the seam of the paper, green trees and red bows. Tiny yet the simple weight of it went far beyond the tangible weight of it in my hands.

It was the first present he gave me. As the paper tore, revealing parts of the gift, I bit back a sad noise, wanting to preserve the paper. But that tear was a memory, too.

As careful as he was, I still tore what he gave. Made it my own. Good or bad, there was no turning back. Truth bomb.

The excitement I had went far beyond the gift. It was the sentiment. When the last piece of wrapping fell to my lap, I smiled and squealed.

“You remembered,” I breathed, tears and happy laughter spilling from me.

“I remember everything, Bri.”

The tiny stuffed Christmas gnome fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. The tiny black and silver crochet hat covered where the little rascal’s eyes would’ve been, the bulbous nose holding it in place. The long, fluffy beard. And all the Christmas cheer I loved. I peered closer when something caught the light.

I gasped. “Bodhi!”

The happiness in his voice was so evident that I felt his joy as if it were my own. “When we were dancing, and you giggled when I asked you what you loved, you told me,” he cleared his throat, “Christmas gnomes, unicorns, sparkly things, and Villains who were misunderstood. I remember every moment, every word. Every look. Your favorite pair of shoes. Songs.”

Tears glistened, blurring my vision for a split second. I blinked, and there it was.

A beautiful unicorn pendant with a tiny sapphire. “And it’s blue!”

Fuck. Me. Bodhi was slowly tearing through the barriers I built since

coming back from Vegas. The avoidance tactics were melting, the reasons we should most definitely not do whatever it is we were doing. Starting. Continuing? Remembering things I said that were inconsequential at the time, or so I thought. But Bodhi heard me. He listened. Challenged me. I'd be lying if I didn't say the way he argued about fuel strategy with, in the middle of all the guys made me look at him in such a different way.

Before, he'd been the cute rookie driver for Anders Racing. After that conversation?

Bodhi, the adorable, intelligent, and sexy as fuck respectful man who was off limits because he was one of my brother's best friends. End of. Truth fucking bomb.

With only the light next to my bed illuminating my bedroom in a soft light, I stared at the most thoughtful gift anyone had ever given me.

"Turn it over Bri."

The small pendant felt hot in my hand, and as I turned it over, the date he had engraved on it made me sigh. "It's the date of the Championship Awards Banquet."

"No, Bri. It's the day after."

Fuck. I closed my eyes. "What do you remember about the day after?" I whispered.

His smile held secrets I thought I only knew, but he said his next words slowly, as if he were afraid I would run away. "I remember everything."

Talk about a truth bomb. Because so did I, but I'd never admit it out loud. I couldn't, no matter how much I wanted to. Dreams were hard enough to chase, let alone make come true. Getting out from underneath my dad's shadow had been all I ever wanted for as long as I could remember.

If he knew what had happened between us, his daughter and the star rookie driver for the team that was owned by his greatest rival, I'm not sure even Mom could make things work out. Let alone the fact that I had worked so hard to get away from the track and racing.

"Bri?"

He wasn't wrong. I wanted to run, far away.

Maybe just for tonight, I wouldn't. My fingers clutched the tiny Christmas gnome tightly before I set it down on the bed next to me. I looked right at him through my phone as I reached up and clasped the necklace around my neck, and grinned. "Guess it's my turn to tell you how naughty I've been."

CHAPTER 9

BODHI



Gia had been partially right. The damn mistletoe Mrs. Rossetti had hung just about anywhere she could was a trap. But damn if I didn't trap the very person I'd hoped to.

When I stepped out of the bathroom and she had been there, I thought she had finally been ready to talk about what happened between us in Vegas. How every moment had led up to her becoming mine. The most incredible fucking night of my life turned into the a depressing as fuck moment when I woke up alone the next afternoon. Still clothed, and the pillow beside me still warm and smelling like Bri Rossetti.

No, not Rossetti. Bri Vincent.

Damn, I loved the sound of that. I wasn't a total caveman, and if Bri told me she wanted to keep Rossetti I would shout it to the sky at the top of my lungs.

The only thing that mattered? Us.

Part of me lived with the fear she would tell me she wanted out, and that what happened in Vegas was definitely staying in Vegas. I tried to talk to her over the last month, but she avoided me better than I avoided all the girls who kept showing up in my trailer after I won races back home.

I had no shame in the fact I waited until I was married to sleep with someone. Growing up with my parents, and seeing how in love they were was all I needed to realize that was what I wanted, too.

Not that I was a boy scout. Hell, no. But until I found the person I was going to spend my life with, a partner, I kept that part of my life separate. When Luc and Ry found out, it wasn't a big deal. Sure, it felt a little strange at first, but fuck, it wasn't like I hadn' had a blow job or returned the favor.

Call me a hopeless romantic, but making out with a girl you liked? Kissing and feeling how soft her skin was under your fingers?

Heaven. The rest? That was for the person I would spend forever with. Learning each other, and finding out all those secrets people shared with one they loved.

Fuck. Yes.

For me, there was no other way. If the woman I fell in love with didn't feel the same before me, I didn't care. It didn't make her less in my eyes. If anything, if she knew what she wanted? Even fucking better.

Bri Vincent was the kind of woman who knew what she wanted. Which might be why she intimidated the hell out of me at first. Until I really talked to her. Then I knew. I fell hard and fast.

The damn screen on my phone was way too small for what I really wanted, which was Bri right here, in bed beside me. Maybe not at her brother's house. But I was pretty sure Alex and Luc were otherwise occupied.

"Tell me how naughty you've been, Sunset."

"Like, show me yours and I'll show you mine? Okay," she canted her head to the side. "After you tell me why 'Sunset'?"

I leaned forward, wishing I could smell her skin. "Well, I have a few reasons. First, sunsets remind me of home. And the first time I looked into your eyes, Mrs. Vincent—"

"Bodhi," she warned, but I continued on like she hadn't spoken.

"Sunset eyes, all the way. And watching the sunset with you in Vegas is still my favorite memory."

"Bodhi." This time, it wasn't a warning but an endearment.

"So, naughty?" I wagged my eyebrows, and bit my lip. Her eyes tracked the movement and yep, full mast mode activated.

Bri adjusted, the undone buttons of her sleepshirt offer a glimpse of her breast. I almost groaned but didn't want to embarrass myself. Pursing her lips. "But what if my naughty is naughtier than your naughty, Mr. Vincent?"

"Shit, keep calling me that in that tone, and I'll show you just how naughty I can be," I murmured, not bothering to shift to hide the fact that she made me hard as fuck without even being in the same room.

"Are we having a Naughty Contest?"

"A what?" This was the Bri I loved the most. The one who was sexy, carefree, and had eyes that sparkled with all the things racing around in her brain.

“A Naughty Contest. Like a staring contest, except we try to out Naughty each other.”

I laughed and when she joined in, I never heard a sexier sound in my life.

“Fine, but you start.”

“Why should I start?” Her eyes wide, she asked me, a smile still playing on her pouty lips.

“Because you were supposed to in the first place.”

“Only because I play by the rules, *Mr. Vincent-*”

“Oh, I know you don’t always play by the rules, *Mrs. Vincent-*”

“I’ve used my vibrator thinking about the kiss we shared in the elevator going up to the main floor after the nightclub.”

“I thought you didn’t remember anything?”

She shrugged. “I lied.”

“See? Not playing by the rules.”

Again, her eyes sparkled. “And when I say used, I mean I may have moaned then screamed your name as I came. On my hands and knees.”

Silence. My jaw dropped. “Fuck.”

“Your turn.” Smile smug as she pouted her lips. “Out ‘Naughty’ me, Bodhi. Please?”

“Fuck, I might out ‘Naughty’ you now.”

She scooted closer, her breast pressing against her pj’s as I peered into the phone. “If I asked really *nicely*, would you?”

“What? Finish what you interrupted when you called?”

“I did?”

I nodded, palming my erection. Loving how her eyes caught the act with such hunger in them that fuck, I wish she were here so I could really show her how I felt. “You really fucking did. I was imagining what would’ve happened if I spun you around in the hallway back into that bathroom, and hiked up your skirt and licked your pussy until you screamed my name. And hopefully no one would notice when we walked out and you were glowing like you were all mine.”

“Holy. Shit. Yep, you out ‘Naughtied’ me. But, why not just fuck me, watching our reflection in the mirror?” she sighed, licking her lips. Fuck, her mouth did things that were so unfair.

“Bri,” I said, scooting closer and mirroring her posture, “the first time I have sex, it will be either in a bed, on a couch, and not a quickie in a bathroom at your mom’s Christmas Eve party. Especially with my-”

“Don’t you mean we have sex.”

And here it was. “Nope. I mean me, Bri.”

“Wait, what?”

I waited a few beats, eyebrows raised as she digested my words and their meaning. When her eyes widened, and she gasped I almost laughed out loud.

“You’re a virgin?” I nodded. “Bodhi!”

“Bri.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I was saving myself for-”

“Don’t say it.”

“-marriage.”

She sat back with a loud thump and buried her head in her hands. “Oh. My. God.”

“Bri? Did I still out ‘Naughty’ you?”

CHAPTER 10

GIA



“Easy, Tiger,” Van murmured, the street lights and houses decorated with lights illuminated the planes of his face. His damn teeth practically glowing in the dark as he smirked. A flash of a smile.

As if he loved the fact he unsettled me to the point that my entire body vibrated with need and want and desire and a flight or fight response.

He reached behind my chair to the back seat and retrieved a small silver and blue wrapped package. Silver snowflakes teased me, winking in the moonlight, holding space between us like fractal cupids trying to shoot us both with Christmas magic.

Falling would only lead to more broken promises and tear filled midnights waking up alone.

And at least one house decorated Clark Griswold style illuminated his face as he handed it to me. When I stared at him in disbelief, he huffed out a breath. “Take the damn present, Tiger. No strings.”

I crossed my arms across my chest, refusing to give in. “Cornering me in the damn hallway by that fucking mistletoe was low, Cowboy.”

“Gia, open the gift. Please,” his eyes darted to mine in the rearview mirror.

The ice storm finally turned to snow, and as much as I wanted to argue because it held my feelings at bay, I didn’t want us to get stranded on the side of the road. It might not snow often in North Carolina, but when it did, everything shut down.

Snowed in was all fine and dandy if it was a luxury cabin, but as nice as his truck was, I was more of a glamping vs camping kind of girl. Call me high maintenance, but I also needed a glass of bourbon to calm my nerves.

Doubtful that Van had a fluffy blanket or a bottle of Falling Leaves Bourbon in his back seat. The Gentry Distillery Liquor might be the sponsor of his tour, but I doubted he kept a bottle handy for photo ops.

Though, it was just the thing I wouldn't put past him.

I glanced behind me. Sure enough, there was a black bag, embroidered with gold, burgundy, and burnt orange leaves.

The smirk on his face made my cheeks burn as he caught me. "Open it," he said softly, but the command left little to no room for argument. It was pointless since we both knew I would listen and had the curiosity of a damn kitten.

With a huff, I tore open the paper, steadfastly ignoring the pounding of my heart. No one outside of my family, not including Alex, ever bought me a present at Christmas. My heart was trying to convince me that this meant something, but I refused to listen. Just because Van did something nice for me didn't mean there were feelings involved.

Catching feelings wasn't a risk I could afford to take. As a woman working a primarily male driven field, I had to work harder and be smarter. There were more and more women working in sports in general, but it has not eradicated the boys club mentality that still prevailed behind closed doors. Whispered and not so quiet comments about sleeping around to gain a position or get ahead might not be said to a woman's face, but she sure as hell knew they were from the looks some men shared when she walked into the room.

The paper crinkled and made the kind of noise that brought back magical Christmas memories from a time when I hadn't known how cruel the world could be. My favorite memories of tearing open the few gifts left under our tree with my brothers, throwing paper at each other and laughing while our mom watched with a tired if not happy expression on her face.

Our father still passed out and asleep, our magical morning a secret we kept to ourselves.

My tongue darted out to wet my lips as I opened his gift. The paper fell like an errant snowflakes as a small smile began before I could stop it from forming. "I hate that you remember how much I love Star Wars socks, Cowboy."

"And I hate that you keep running from me, so let's agree to disagree for now." His hands gripped the wheel as he turned the corner carefully, the tires of the pick up doing everything they could to keep up with the weather.

Something dropped out of one of the socks, sparkling and tiny. I sat the Princess Leia socks on my lap, and reached down to pick it up.

It was a small pendant shaped like...

“Oh, Cowboy. Couldn’t resist, could you?” I asked, sucking my bottom lip into my mouth to keep myself from saying anything. “You would get a girl the Falcon to try to get into her pants.”

He scoffed. “Not just any girl, and I think I’ve done a hell of a lot more than get into your pants, Tiger.”

My cheeks flushed at the memory because he wasn’t entirely wrong. “If I recall correctly, I wasn’t wearing any.”

His groan quickly turned into a low, feral growl. “Actually, to be precise, you weren’t wearing much else, Tiger. And I had you exactly where I wanted you. Where you needed to be.”

Shit. I squirmed in my seat, still holding the magnificent starship in my grasp. The way he reminded me of the late night rendezvous had my inner slut shivering with anticipation. *Wait, did I want more of that, even though I promised myself I didn’t?*

Unsure of how to answer, I slipped the necklace on, securing the clasp and sweeping my hair up to ensure there were no more errant strands fluttering about.

“12 parsecs, huh?”

“With you, it would never take twenty. Always, Tiger.”

My eyes widened with the reference. “So you’re saying I’m too fast?”

He chuckled, a sound twinged with whiskey and late night promises. “Tiger, it means I’d find any way to get to you, and risk everything.”

Fuck. Me.

CHAPTER 11

VAN



“Wait, this isn’t the way to-”

“No, it’s not.” The war waging inside her to either yell at me or do other things I knew she wanted to play in her eyes. The small Millennium Falcon charm caught my gaze on her neck, and I couldn’t help the smirk that spread across my face.

Green eyes narrowed she asked, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I shrugged, my gaze returning to the road. Snow and ice were rare in North Carolina, but I’d driven in snowy weather around Nashville plenty of times. Still, people around here acted as if the world was under the type of snowstorm that only came once a century when even a slight flurry fell.

“Gia, I always look at you like this. Always have. Always will. One day, you’ll believe it.”

Silence dragged on because my Tiger had a stubborn streak longer than the damn line at a Ryhlan Morgan concert meet and greet.

“Fine. Where are you taking me then? Kidnapping isn’t exactly your specialty.”

I smirked. “But tying you up is, Tiger.”

“Oh my GOD.”

I could picture the look on her face, my eyes glued to the road.

“Alex is going to wonder where I am, Van.”

I shook my head. “No, she isn’t. Because she and Luc are taking Bodhi home, and she definitely had a few extra moments under that damn mistletoe with Luc. The only thing they’ll be thinking about is getting Bodhi home, and sneaking off to have mostly quiet Christmas alone time. So, now that we’ve almost killed the hard on I have from seeing you wear my gift, can we talk

about something else?”

“Fine. Let’s talk about the fact you aren’t taking me back to my place, then, Cowboy.”

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. “Tell me the truth, right here and now, and I’ll turn around right now, and take you back home, Gia. Tell me that you want to spend tonight alone. That being alone on Christmas is what you want. Sleeping by yourself, waking up alone. With no one to wish you Merry Christmas. Tell me you don’t want my arms around you in my bed. Making you cum at least three times before falling asleep naked, exhausted from my tongue, my hands...my cock. Tell me, Tiger, and I’ll take you home.”

The damn look of sadness I’d seen in her green eyes so many times before returned, and the guilt I felt at being the reason it was there nearly ripped a hole in my chest. Until she turned to me, and said. “I don’t want to be alone, Van.”

CHAPTER 12

GIA



*H*is hand rested on the small of my back, and even as my breathing became more labored, fingers lightly traced agonizingly slow circles as the elevator hummed. Nothing felt real, not my body, not the way that simple touch made me want to put all my trust in him. And definitely not the fucking way he had pushed me up against the wall right before his fingers skimmed their way up my body, encircling my throat with just enough pressure that I swear made my thighs clench together so tightly I thought I was going to have an orgasm right there. When his lips descended on mine, the angle he created elicited a throaty moan that I realized in a haze had been me.

Me.

I was fucking moaning over the way his hand kept me in place for the fucking sexiest kiss I'd ever experienced in my life. I'd never been overly fond of kissing, until the moment he first kissed me. I wanted his lips everywhere. But then his other hand gripped my wrist dragging it above my head, immobilizing me in the most delicious way possible. And damn, how I wanted to be devoured by him. To stay exactly where he put me and took what he wanted. My heart beat faster even as something deep inside my belly whispered that this was where I was meant to be.

His.

In every fucking way possible. My brain tried to argue, telling me to push him away, because he wanted things I couldn't give him. Then his hand, there with just enough pressure so I could still breath but not move, tightened slightly. My body responded instantly, and a desperate sound escaped from my lips against his, his tongue taking them and everything else he desired.

Van might not be using every weapon in his devastatingly sexy arsenal yet, but I knew tonight he was showing me a few more of the cards he held close to his vest.

The ones that told me even though he wanted me, and not just the light parts, he wouldn't stay in the dark. He wanted my dark, but he wouldn't hide it from the world.

From his little sister, and my best friend.

The ding of the elevator as it arrived at his floor brought me out of the calm stupor his hand had helped me drift into. Tingles raced along my body, lighting up, but the sense of safety he gave me both felt so damn right and terrified the living hell out of me.

I could no more turn away from him at this moment as I could stop myself from breathing.

Instinct, strong and sure, ran through my blood with the knowledge Van would catch me when I fell.

And fall I would. Even farther than I already had. He would catch me, and though it might break me, let me walk away after.

Because I couldn't give him what he wanted.

I couldn't give that to anyone. Ever.

The past, my past, had made cracks so deep and wide that nothing could heal them. Broken before I understood what it meant. To love, be cherished. To trust. Feel safe.

The light poured into the darkened room as he slid his card on the reader, and the door opened with a click. The gentle yet insistent tug as he pulled me willingly into the darkened suite caused a throb in my core. A desperate whimper escaped my lips.

"I won't let you fall, Tiger," he murmured, a layer of intense certainty that I fervently wanted to believe.

The fall was inevitable. It was only how hard and fast Thoughts of the future impending implosion of us, this, caused panic to evade my senses.

"Shh, look at me," he commanded, voice rough and centering. "I. Have. You. Always. In the light, dark. I will always, even if you won't accept it or see me, Tiger. Always." The words were spoken with such reverence. My eyes closed as the door clicked closed with a nudge of his foot. Hands tracing up my body, a hum of appreciation rumbling in his chest. "As fucking amazing as this dress is on your body, I can't wait to see it on the floor. My floor. With you before me, that look in your fucking eyes, naked, and mine."

He stepped in closer to me, and hell if I didn't tremble with want, need coursing through me in ways it never had before.

Lightheaded yet more grounded than I ever knew I could be, I forced my eyes to stay closed. Focusing on the touch and sounds of his breath. My breath. The whimpers I failed to hold in.

“Open.”

Whether he meant my eyes or my mouth, I didn't know. But my lips parted as a whisper of breath escaped. My eyes met his hazel and darkened with desire and something seeping into my entire being. I refused to give it a name, and surrendered to the moment. To his touch, his heated gaze. To the myriad of sensations washing over me.

A muted glow filtered into the room from the sliding glass doors leading to a balcony. The night sky outside offered a way to hide away, for tonight. Snow fell blanketing the world in an expanse of white. To pretend we could be more, and this night was just one of many.

Of unending acceptance, passion, and fulfilling desires no one else could touch.

But only for tonight.

Tonight was all I had it in me to give, even when Van demanded more. He wouldn't push me. He never did. Instead he stood behind me, a silent and steadfast reminder.

One last time.

CHAPTER 13

VAN



Gia trembled, her back to me. Implicit trust in her posture. Here and now, she trusted me in ways she never showed in public other than behind closed doors.

Every time we came together, I hoped she would let me in. Stay after. But I was a fool, because as soon as it was over, the bliss faded and the doubt and walls came back to her in full force? She left.

Not even a glance over her shoulder as she walked out the door.

Regret didn't enter it. I doubted she regretted a moment. No, it was something else entirely. The idea of letting go and putting faith in someone for more than a few stolen moments scared her to the point of making her need to flee as soon as the moment ended.

For me, it never ended.

For once in my life, I didn't want it to end. But I didn't want to be her dirty secret. Fuck if I could get the damn courage to cut it off, though.

As much as she ran through my veins, the innate need to help her see things she couldn't wouldn't let me walk away.

Like she did. So fucking easily.

“Take off everything except your shoes and your bra, Tiger.” My breath teased the shell of her ear as a shiver visibly worked its way down her body at my command. The usual stiffening of her spine absent, she did as I asked. Slow, as if she knew I watched every single movement. Savored the way her curves moved, the light accentuating every inch of her skin. Silkened strands slinking down her back, bare now save for the sheer black bra crossing her skin. Straps beckoning for my fingers to slip them off her shoulders. “Perfect. Now, get on your knees for me, Tiger in front of the window, facing it. Hands

behind your back. I want you to see how fucking beautiful you are, and how much power you have over me, even when you think you don't."

Her eyes caught mine in the reflection, widening, but she knelt, arms where I asked. I reached for the belt at my waist. With deliberate precision, I looped it around her wrists, binding them together. Back arched, her breast nearly spilled out of the gossamer cups. "Look," I said with a jerk of my head at the window. I stood behind her, hand teasing and touching her hair. The parting of her lips as I gathered the thick weight of it in my hand made my cock hardened even more. If I didn't get inside her soon, I'd either cum in my pants or have a nasty zipper mark for days, maybe even weeks.

Breaking eye contact, her eyes slid down. And fuck, she was beautiful. "Do you see how hard it is for me to not take you right this second? And how fucking gorgeous you look, letting me stand behind you? Make no mistake, Gia. Everything I've ever done, I've done for you." She licked her lips, and I nearly lost control. "Stand up, Tiger. Let me give us both what we need."

Slowly she stood, my hand resting on her elbow to help her rise without using her hands that were bound behind her back. I spun her around and claimed her mouth, demanding, roughly, as if she might run right then and there. She didn't, pressing her body against mine, grinding her core against the hard ridge of my cock. Arching her back

"Van," she whimpered, needy and begging, breaking the kiss. "I need you."

"I know, baby. I'm going to give you exactly what you need. Bend over the couch. Let me see your pretty pussy. Are you wet?"

She bit her lip, nodding, seemingly unable to speak.

"Good girl. Go."

I watched with hooded eyes as her ass jiggled as she walked around to the back of the couch. When she bent, giving me the perfect view of her glistening pussy, I growled. "Fuck, baby." Not wanting to waste a second, I unzipped my pants. She squirmed at the sound, whimpering. "Ready for my cock, Tiger?"

She nodded, spreading legs further. I lined up my cock, and entered her in one quick thrust. Unable to control myself after watching her all night, I fucked her with a relentless pace. Only pausing long enough to spank her round ass, loving how it reddened beneath my palm. When she started mewling and whimpering, I fucked her harder until I felt her pussy contract around my cock, taking every drip of my cum. I shuddered one last time,

bracing my weight on the couch so I didn't crush her.

“Van-”

“Shhh. Just for tonight, don't.”

She nodded, and I helped her to stand, undoing my belt from her wrists. I kissed each one, then scooped her up in my arms and walked toward the bathroom.

And prayed that when she walked away this time, it would kill me.

CHAPTER 14

ALEX



*N*ew Year's Eve...

“SHUT THE FRONT DOOR!!” Piper’s eyes widened as the rest of us lost it in a fit of uncontrollable giggles.

“I swear! Truth bomb!” A snort escaped from Bri as she waved the hand gripping her glass, sloshing the lime green liquid onto the sand next to her. “And then, he had the gall to ask me to pay the bill, since I wouldn’t be putting out.” She slammed the rest of her drink down, grimacing. “Stupid fuck face.”

I glanced around the bonfire and couldn’t help the grin spreading across my face. Mildly buzzed from the third margarita I finished only seconds before, I giggled loudly as Bri continued the story of her last disastrous blind date, gasping for breath.

Gia and I talked the girls into upholding our New Year’s Eve tradition of wearing our favorite party dresses and heels. Before, we stayed in to watch the ball drop, all gussied up. Then, precisely five minutes after the clock struck midnight, we changed into our comfiest jammies and ate every type of hors d’oeuvre we could get our hands on.

But tonight, all of our friends gathered around, basking in the glow from the beach bonfire Luc and Ry built. While they pretended to grunt and acted like crazy cavemen as the girls and I laughed uproariously at their antics.

I did like when Luc acted like a caveman. But that was when he slung me over his shoulder and did naughty, delicious things to my body.

Or made me do naughty, delicious things to his body, I thought with a wicked grin.

We sat around the glowing bonfire, the best girl squad I never knew I needed, minus Kylie, who I was determined to add into the mix sooner rather than later. Being the only female owner in a male dominated industry was tough. Gia and I faced our fair share of bullshit on a weekly basis from some of the less enlightened people in our industry.

Though it was becoming less and less of an issue, thank fuck.

When you win a championship, it shut people up pretty damn quick.

The oversized wooden Adirondack chairs we made them drag out surrounded the contained blaze, with piles of driftwood sitting far enough away that tossing a log or two in wouldn't be a problem.

And keeping them from catching fire.

Piper and Bri arrived just as the fire reached its optimal bonfire on the beach status. Bodhi called last minute, hitching a ride with them, and I couldn't help but notice Bri was doing her best to ignore the youngest member of Anders Racing. My mouth twisted as I concentrated on their antics. The way they behaved in Vegas after the awards banquet had me thinking a spark of something brewed between them.

Guess I was wrong, I thought with a shrug.

"I mean, yes, if he wasn't a total dick, maybe I would've considered it. But who the hell orders dinner, then right before pouring you a glass of wine, tosses a hotel key on the table and asks what color panties you're wearing? Or if you're wearing any? Without letting a girl have a drink to prepare her for your crazy?" She shrugged, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "So, I stood up, and he must've thought I wanted to go up to his skanky room, because he stood, too, and then," she sighed dramatically as a twinkle of mischief entered her brown eyes, "knead him in the balls!"

I howled with laughter as Gia high fived Bri, and they clinked glasses. "Bri!!"

"What? He deserved it."

"He deserved a fuck lot more than a kick in the balls," Bodhi muttered under his breath as he dropped a silver bin filled with ice, bottles of champagne sticking out of it. Two bags of my favorite chips courtesy of Luc, I was sure, sat on top of the pile of necessities. Bodhi scowled, shooting a look at Bri, who turned away and intently studied her now empty glass.

"Uh uh, Rook, only girls for another thirty minutes, that was the deal,"

Gia chided, shooing him away as she snatched the bag of chips from atop the ice. “Boys get to join after the girls dish out all the dirty details. Then, and only then, we might consider letting you sit around the bonfire. With us.”

He snorted and frowned, brows drawn together. With one last glance at Bri, who was doing her best to avoid his gaze, he spun on his heel in the sand and sulked back to the deck leading to the beach house. Which Luc and I bought from his parents a few weeks after the awards banquet. Substantially below market value.

Though truth be told, his mom refused our first offer and said it was more of an early wedding present when she countered.

Living with him when we were here, at our special place, making new memories. Bliss.

“Ugh, at least you’re getting offers. I’m done. Over. Between the missed flights, the schedules, and me begging to get laid, I can’t take another get all hot and bothered for a weekend of hot, sweaty, sexy times. Then nothing! My poor vibrator gave out last week, and it was my favorite! I hate ordering a new one!” Piper sighed dramatically and pointed at me. “The last time we ordered online, it was such a dud!”

“Drunk sex toy shopping is always a gamble! Though, I’m sure Luc loved that-”

“Stop!” Bri threw her hands to her ears, shutting her eyes tightly. “Listen, I can tolerate the sex talk, even a few sordid details, but I do not,” she emphasized in a loud voice, “want to know my big brother’s proclivities when it comes to sex toys!”

“Girl, there’s so much more than only the sex toys! Trust me,” Gia chuckled, clinking her glass with mine. “Thank fuck I can separate myself from Luc, the driver, and Luc, the man of my bff’s dreams.

“Now we have to get Piper laid so she can stop pouting and breaking her toys,” she guffawed, wiping tears from her eyes.

Piper rolled her eyes and stuck out her bottom lip. “Or at least find someone who wants to help me break my toys!”

A loud grunt sounded from behind us, and Piper gasped as she turned to see Res. Standing, holding a bag of marshmallows and several sticks to roast them with in his hands as he locked in on her. I stifled my laughter, my eyes dancing between the two of them. Res glared at me as my smile grew wider, but then Piper squeaked out. “Go away!! No boys yet! There’s a deal in place here!”

Res growled out, “I’m not sure you girls should be left alone out here much longer. Who knows what mischief you’ll get into on your own.”

Gia harrumphed, standing as she relieved him of his bounty, then shoved him back in the direction of the house with the rest of the guys. “I can assure you, Mr. Fancy Pants Bourbon, that these girls need no one to watch over us. Ever.” Tossing the bag of marshmallows next to the silver metal ice bin, Gia scowled. “As if we need a man making sure we don’t get into mischief. I like getting into mischief, dammit.”

Bri and Piper howled with laughter, raising their glasses with glee. I vaulted to my feet, spinning to face my best friend. “To mischief!”

“Hell yes!!” Bri jumped to her feet, squealing and bouncing on her toes, an excited gleam in her eyes. “Oooh!! Since those boys think we can’t handle ourselves, ever,” her eyes sparkled with a wicked gleam, “I say we play Never Have I Ever.”

“Absofuckinglutely!” Piper grinned as she bounced up to her feet. She licked her lips, glancing back at the deck where Bodhi, Luc, Van, Res, and Ry stood. “Let’s get into even more mischief.”

“Ooh, I like how you think!” Bri linked her arm through Piper’s. Her eyes shot to the guys, drinking and eyeing us warily. They glared back, knowing we were up to something.

“This reminds me of our last girls’ night out! When you dropped me off at Luc’s and he took my panties-”

“Gah!! Stop before my ears burn with the details! Please!!!” Bri gasped as G, Piper, and I dissolved into a fit of giggles. She glanced over her shoulder with a twist of her mouth. A huffed out a breath and narrowing her eyes as she slammed back the rest of her drink. Sticking the now empty glass in the sand with vigor, she straightened her spine, hands on hips, and grinned. “I say we hit them with ‘Never Have I Ever’, since they keep hovering like a bunch of old ladies who can’t wait for the gossip train to start.”

Eyes darting around between us, my grin spread as my brain caught up with what my wonderfully evil, soon to be sister-in-law suggested. Oh, yeah. I most definitely owed Van and Res a little discomfort as payback.

If the two of them thought I’d forgiven them for keeping their bromance a secret, they were going to be sadly mistaken. And about to hear a few things I’m sure they’d rather not. I loved embarrassing my big brother, and Res. And he deserved every uncomfortable second. “Oh, I am so in.”

Gia threw back her head with an obnoxious giggle. Arm wrapped around

her waist, she nodded, bending over to take off her silver heels.

Yep, we were all wearing our sexiest party dresses. Short, sequined, with heels glittering in the moonlight. Walking in sand in heels? Not the easiest task, but Luc loved me in heels. And teasing my fiance was one of my favorite pastimes. Especially when he looked at me with a promise to pay me back for it later. Talk about melting my panties.

My BFF caught my eye. “Fuck yes.”

Spinning on her heel, Piper cupped her hands around her mouth, yelling, “Oh, boys!! Better grab some of Mr. Fancy Pants and a few red solo cups!! Time to play!!”

Mr. Fancy Pants? I mouthed to Gia, who just shrugged.

“We can hear everything you’re saying,” Ry called back with a shake of his head.

Yeah, so maybe we were a bit loud. But these boys would never see what hit them.

And if they did, it would be worth every single second.



LUC STUDIED ME, a smirk on his face, then leaned in to whisper in my ear. “I don’t know what game you ladies are playing, darlin’, but this reminds me of Vegas. Might not need to fold this time, though, for your attention, darlin’.”

I shivered as his breath tickled my ear, my finger spinning the engagement ring around my finger, as I turned my head, letting my nose slide along his cheek, breathing in his seductive scent. “Mmm,” I murmured, and flinched when a marshmallow ricocheted off his forehead and hit me in the chest.

“Hey!”

“I would say get a room. Do whatever kinky thing the two of you have planned for these fucking marshmallows.” With a lift of her brow, Gia flung the bag into the air. “But we have a game to play.”

I grinned as Luc caught it with a smirk.

After all, s’mores were kinda our thing. She was spot on about his love of dessert, and me. Together.

“Ew, again, brain melting out of my ear over here,” Bri complained, hands over her ears once again as she gave Luc and I the stink eye followed

by a wink.

Next to her, Bodhi shifted and mumbled, “Imagine bunking next to him when they FaceTime. There are things I’ve overheard I’ll never forget.”

I elbowed Luc square in the chest, and he grunted. “I thought he was asleep.”

“Enough small talk, people. It’s game time,” Gia demanded, glaring at Van, who sat across from her, next to Piper. Who was glaring at Res. Who squeezed in next to me, wearing a suit, sans jacket, looking like a disgruntled pelican. Poor Ryan sat wedged in between Gia and Bri. Both grinning and itching to see the boys squirm. She poured a splash of Falling Leaves Bourbon into a red solo cup, then handed it to Ry. “Pass it down to Mr. Girls-Throw-Their-Bras-At-Me-On-Stage, and keep it going until everyone has one.”

“Now I see why you invited me,” Res muttered dryly, watching as Gia unceremoniously poured his top shelf liquor into the offending plastic cups.

“You might enjoy yourself if you take that stick out of your ass,” Luc retorted, and I kissed him soundly on the cheek.

“Exactly. Be prepared to remove that stick, Res.”

“Ahem,” Gia cleared her throat as the last cup hit Bodhi. She glared at him. “No drinking and driving, Bodhi. That goes for all of you.”

Luc snorted, and I elbowed him. “There’s three spare bedrooms-”

“Two. Two only on the main floor. Alex and I get the second floor to ourselves. No eavesdropping, Rook.”

Bodhi, who focused on Bri as she glared back at him, snorted. “Trust me, I wish I could forget-”

“And I will walk back to my house, thank you. If anyone wants to crash in my spare guest room, also on the main floor, it’s available.” Van took a swig from his cup, refilled it. Never taking his eyes from Gia, who glared right back, fire in her eyes.

“I’ll start,” she smirked. “‘Never Have I Ever’ lied about who I was.”

“Fuck,” Ry muttered, whistling low.

Van locked his gaze with Gia, with a defiant lift of his chin, and took a drink. “Comes with the stage name, Tiger.”

“My turn!” Piper bounced on the wooden chair, tucking her feet under her. “Never have I ever done a walk of shame.”

Groans sounded from just about everyone, except Bodhi, as everyone else took a drink while he sheepishly shrugged.

“You’re kidding?” Bri scoffed, wiping her mouth with a grimace.

“Nope.”

“Never have I ever filled Bobby Anders’ RV with foam, and got away with it.” I giggled as Luc took a drink and Van barked out a laugh. “Sorry, Mav.”

The glint in his eyes made my eyes widen. “Never have I ever,” he started, then winked at me before continuing, “dressed up as Superman at the track Halloween party just to impress the trophy girl, who turned out to be thirteen. And illegal.”

“Fuck,” Ryan growled as he took a drink.

“No way!” Piper elbowed Bodhi, who winced.

“She was really mature for her age,” he protested. “But her cousin...”

“Ew, CK!” Gia squealed.

“I have one,” Piper said. “Never have I ever,” she shifted, and I grinned as Res’ eyes dropped to where her dress rode up her thigh a few inches, “ridden a golf cart at 3 am in only my underwear.”

“Fuck,” Ry cursed, pushed his glasses up his nose and drank again.

“What the hell, CK? I thought Rook was the one I had to keep in line! Or at least Luc!” Gia’s jaw dropped.

“Someone forgot his damn hat,” he glared at Van, “and Rook and I went to get it. But my flannel pants caught on freaking bush on the way back, and I lost them. Along with the key card to our room. Traitor. I knew we should’ve never stayed in your room after the Gala.” He threw a playful glare at Piper, who winked back.

And Res looked like he just might rearrange Ry’s face if he kept staring at Piper.

I cleared my throat. “Never have I ever broken my B.O.B. because I desperately needed to get laid.”

Piper gasped, and cried, “Listen, that was a sad, sad moment! I can’t believe you would be so disrespectful, Alex Anders!!” She drank a long swig with a giggle, and Res’ eyes darted back to the redhead, his gaze smoldering.

Luc groaned, and when he caught my eye, jerked his head to his sister, who was still drinking.

“What? I went through three this year.”

“What’s a B.O.B.?” Bodhi asked, and Gia squealed with laughter.

“Oh, Bodhi, I love you so,” she wheezed.

Bri took one more drink, then bit her lip. “Battery. Operated. Boyfriend.”

He just shot her a confused look.

She fluttered her hand at him. “Vibrator, Bodhi. I broke three vibrators because I haven’t had a decent orgasm in over a year. Truth bomb, ok?”

“Bri!! Now my fucking brain is melting!” Luc growled.

“Don’t worry, Mav, I’ll make you forget all about it soon.”

He growled in my ear, and damn. I was ready to finish this game. Gia flicked the bag of marshmallows at us. I shot her a glare.

“Never have I ever dressed up in a metal bikini to let-”

“All right!! Game over!! Midnight is in three minutes, people.” Gia shot to her feet, and Res joined her, and began filling champagne glasses.

Bodhi grabbed a glass, and handed one to Bri. Van edged closer to Gia, but she spun away to hand Luc and I two flutes.

“Ten..nine..eight...”

The world melted away. I stared into the whiskey brown eyes of the man I was going to marry, grinning. And, If I had my way, have dirty, crazy sex to start the year.

With or without those damn marshmallows.

“Happy New Year, Darlin’,” Luc murmured as he captured my mouth with his, drawing a groan from my lips as my body melted against him.

We parted, and I murmured, breathless. “Oh, it will be, Mav. It will be.”



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(Track Me Down/Turn Me Loose, available now!)



Bodhi is the the rookie driver for Anders Racing, and well, let's just say hasn't been as naughty. And when Luc joined Anders Racing he took Bodhi under his wing. Luc might've introduced him to his little sister, Bri, and didn't realize there were sparks flying that led to a crazy night in Vegas after Luc won the open wheel championship.

(You get a sneak peek in Alex and Luc's book, but their story is coming in 2024 in Fame, Fortune, and F*ckups, a charity anthology.)



Still here?

Gia is Alex's BFF. Hardcore, ride or die. One fateful night before their last year of college, Gia and Alex attended a bonfire party at Alex's half brother, Van, mom's place in Georgia. She met a cowboy and they fell into instalust. Then, Jingle Bam! The cowboy she wanted to get naughty with over and over turned out to be her BFF's brother. But, he's a up and coming country music star that uses his real first name, Jagger, onstage.

(Claim My Heart, coming 2024)



Decide for yourself who should be on the Naughty or Nice list!

And keep reading for a sneak peek of Be My Secret Santa and a preview of Touch Me Down, my first football romance series, Overtime.

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BE MY SECRET SANTA SNEAK PEEK!

RES



“Res, ‘Never Have I Ever’ doesn’t leave the New Year’s Eve bonfire.”

More than slightly amused, I eyed Alex Anders as she swayed on her feet, and chuckled when her fiancé, Luc Rossetti, gave me the look of ‘is she ok’? I tipped my chin and did my best to keep my expression serious. Alex would give me hell if I didn’t, and seeing that she was one of my closest friends, I let her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted her.

Piper.

The taken, forbidden fruit I desperately wanted to take a bite out of, but wouldn’t. I respected boundaries.

Even boundaries that weren’t meant to last. The spunky and sexy as fuck redhead was nothing like the women I usually dated. Hell, different was what I was searching for when I almost made a play for Alex. Until I realized she and Luc, despite having fathers who were bitter racing rivals, were meant to fall in love.

Then I nudged the two of them into realizing it. Luc more than Alex. All’s fair in love and war. And love was a war I loved seeing someone else win at.

Especially people who deserved happiness. And Piper deserved it more than most. She just didn’t know how to let herself be happy.

Yet. All in good time.

Alex poked me in the chest with her finger. “Hear me, Mr. Ego?”

I smirked as I turned my attention back to her. “Loud and clear. Not a word. Unless absolutely necessary.”

The girls had joined in on the tradition Alex and her best friend had

begun a few years ago of dressing up but watching the ball drop without all the bells and whistles. Sequins, heels, hair, makeup, the whole nine yards. And a game of 'Never Have I Ever' with margaritas or champagne.

The girls had pre-gamed long before the guys had showed up.

It had been interesting, to say the least.

Her eyes grew wide as she noticed who I had been staring at. Then her expression turned sad. "I can't believe that jerk canceled on her. Fucker," she muttered. "And the stupid picture! Jerk can't even hide it." Her hand flew to her mouth before she begged, "You can't say anything, Resnick Fucking Gentry."

"Resnick Fucking Gentry?"

She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "It's what the girls call you after a few drinks."

The girls. Alex, her best friend Gia, Luc's sister Bri, and Piper. And tonight definitely qualified as a few drinks.

I canted my head. "Picture?"

My adorable and very drunk friend shook her head and made a locking her lips motion, then threw away the imaginary key. Alex swayed on her feet as Luc came up behind her to steady her. "I got this one."

I glanced at Piper again, who was giggling with Bri, the dress she wore showing off her toned legs and stunning body. Cue half mast status. "I'll make sure Piper gets home."

A scowl crossed Alex's face, then she giggled. "Remember what I said. And take care of my girl."

Piper chose that moment to notice me, smiling and sweeping her shoulder length red hair up with a grin. "Oh, I will. Trust me."

TOUCH ME DOWN

CHAPTER ONE



Serena

“What do you mean your flight was canceled, Kellan?” The North Carolina air, not quite stifling, but enough that I really wanted my iced coffee, but the damn line hadn’t moved in three minutes.

“That’s why I’m calling, Serena,” Kellan Thorne, my boss and owner of Fortress Sports Agency, and one of the best damn sports agents in the business, growled. And not just because he had multimillion dollar contracts.

Kellan cared for his clients as if they were family, and made sure they not only got the contract, but they were where they wanted to be. Each and every one of our clients *were* family.

“How’s Peyton and Lena?”

“The baby is adorable, but T.R. is losing his shit because of the delay. Lena and I are having way too much fun messing with him,” he chuckled, but my spider-sense tingled. “It’s weird as fuck having my best friend as my damn son-in-law. And-”

“First vacation in ten years, and you get stranded on a tropical paradise. With your daughter who doesn’t call you dad, and your best friend. And that baby! Grandpa,” I teased as I breathed a sigh of relief as I finally made it to the counter. “Large vanilla iced double shot coconut with a dash of cinnamon.”

Kellan chuckled. “Hold on. T! Peyton won’t even remember if you missed her first swim in the ocean. I’ll lie. And Lena got watermelon. Sorry, T.R. got Lena lunch, and we took Peyton into the water off the deck and he’s freaking out.”

Knowing the two of them as well as I did, I could just imagine how well things were going. I laughed, then remembered he still hadn't told me why he was calling.

"Kellan-"

"I need you to fly to Hurtsboro, Serena."

I mouthed *thank you* to the barista and stuffed a five in the tip jar. She grinned and slid a small brown bag my way, undoubtedly with white almond cake pop. The girls at the shop knew how to hit my sweet spot. "Hurtsboro?" I laughed. "The only team in Hurtsboro is the Hummingbirds-"

No. He wouldn't do this to me.

"Kellan." I warned.

"I don't trust anyone else to go, Rena."

"KELLAN."

"I know-"

"THE HUMMINGBIRDS ARE A FREAKING FOOTBALL TEAM. I. Don't. Do. Football. I told you. No."

"Rena, Knight is a special case. I can't get into details until I get back to my room, but I need you to take care of this. Personally. For me. I'll owe you."

I sucked half of my coffee down, and closed my eyes as the sweet liquid washed over my tongue. Trying to calm myself before I lost my shit. Football was the only sport I refused to deal with as part of my job at Fortress, and Kellan knew that.

"I'll owe you, Serena. Please. You have a way of seeing things other people don't. He needs that. I need that."

No amount of coffee would help the headache coming on and the thought of dealing with the one thing I hated more than anything.

Football.

Because if Kellan was asking, he really didn't trust anyone else to take care of whatever he was supposed to fly to Hurtsboro for.

"So, what, I'm your 'fixer' now?"

"Serena, you know you are. And damn good at it, too."

"You will owe me, Kellan. And I'm not talking small. Big, Kellan. Huge."

His sigh through my phone was like an affirmation that whatever favor I was owed, it was going to be worth every moment of watching him sweat it out. "Got it. You fly out tomorrow."

“Tomorrow?”

“Yep. And the earliest we’re getting out of here is the day after, but call me if you need anything. I’ll send over my file.”

Thank God for iced coffee. And cake pops. I hurried back to the office, shoving my sweet treat into my mouth and mumbling, “Two.” I said around a mouthful. “Two favors, Kellan. And tickets to Rhyland Morgan’s next show. Not crappy seats, either. And whatever else I ask for. Understood?”

“Thanks, Serena. It’s all yours.”

Ugh. I ate the rest of the cake pop, and pushed open the door to the building.

“I hope I don’t regret this, Kellan.”



“Kellan Thorne, you owe me big time. The humidity alone is enough to piss me off. And the only person I’m not mad at right now is Peyton. And Emmaline.” I shoved my bag into the trunk, and rounded the side of the midsize SUV that my boss should’ve been driving to meet the football player who needed his agent and was getting me.

The girl who hated football more than celery or people who talked in movie theaters.

The late October air should have been crisp. Or at least not as oppressive as it was.

But, almost three weeks into the NFL season, the air in Hurtsboro felt more like a hot Southern day than autumn football weather.

I hated it even more because of it.

Slamming the driver’s door shut, I stuck my phone in the holder on the dashboard. With a sigh, I started the engine, and hit speakerphone.

“If I could be there, I would. But with the delays, we can’t get a flight off the island until tomorrow. At the earliest. Gabe has been on my calendar for a few weeks, and there’s no way I can get there. You’re the only one I trust to take care of things the same way I would. To make it right.” He breathed into his phone. “You read the file?”

“Yes, but I’m not you. I don’t know what-”

“Rena, you handled Chase Scott and his attitude, you’ve got this. Knight is a good guy. Cocky, but he has every right to be. He played with Jett before

he was traded a few years ago, too. That's part of the reason I needed you to go for me."

In the back of my mind, I remembered Jett telling me about a good friend from college that played professional ball. But since he was a football player, I had pushed his name out of my mind. But now I connected the dots.

I decided that going to see Gabe Knight disheveled from the plane ride was not in my plans, and instead hit the GPS for the hotel.

"This hotel better be as nice as the one you're in," I teased, making my way along the route the robotic voice dictated.

"If you found a hut over the water with a floor where you can watch fish swim in water as blue as Peyton's eyes in Hurtsboro, I'll owe you three favors."

"Ha! Go be a grandpa, Kellan. Leave the egotistical football player to me."

"Like I said, Knight's a good guy, Serena. And you've handled far worse."



Once I showered and changed, I sent a text off to Gabe Knight, knowing that Kellan had informed him that he was stuck in paradise, and asked if we could meet to go over why he needed Kellan to fly out.

Even though I knew some of the details, Kellan himself didn't even know exactly why Knight asked him to fly out personally. I wasn't holding my breath that the trip would go smoothly.

Football and I didn't mesh. Never had, never will.

I finished getting ready, and waited.

Two hours later, hungry and pissed, because Gabriel fucking Knight ignored my text.

Not a peep. Or a reaction.

Even my new non-iPhone Android phone could react to texts. So, if Mr. Knight saw my texts, he was ignoring me.

On purpose. Wasting my time. Time I could be spending on clients who weren't asshole football players with communication issues.

They answered texts and emails because they were adults.

Not imbecile children.

Sighing, I sent another text.

Serena: Mr. Knight, I would appreciate a response. If I don't hear from you by this evening, I'll be at the Hummingbirds training facility in the morning.

I sipped the Starbucks iced coffee I grabbed on the way, answering emails and going over contracts. Reviewing the files on our newest acquisition, Damon Ward. A retired highly decorated Olympic swimmer who was transitioning to the Rough Water swim circuit. And could surf a mean board.

Hmm. Maybe Hawaii would figure into a Kellan favor. I hear the North Shore had the best bodies on the beach. And heaven knows I could expense a shopping trip at Ala Moana Shopping Center.

Best of both worlds. The beach and city life. Coffee, shopping, and pineapples mixed with lava rock beaches and Mai Tais at sunset.

After an hour of waiting for a reply, I gave up, threw on some clothes, and slipped into a pair of heels before grabbing the car keys and heading out to find dinner.

Fucking egotistical football players. Too bad Gabriel Knight didn't know who he was dealing with.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I hope this finds you filled with the spirit of Christmas and the Holiday season.

Every time I sit down and get to write one of these, my heart is filled with so much gratitude and love.

To my amazing team. You are the reason I get all giddy and still have energy to to write. The love and support you give not only me, but all the authors you love leaves. Me in awe.

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Ryan, Daisy, and Darley. My author friends and true friends even if we never wrote another word. Thank you, for all the laughs. Words of support. And things no one will ever understand quite like we do!!

Gabby and Jasmine. Sigh. I can't say enough, or even find the right words. I love you both so much. Thank you for helping me work through all the things. Author and not. I cannot wait to hug you. And eat Chipotle. Coffee. Margs. Whatever, as long as we do it together.

My boys. You will never understand how you've changed my life. NPJ, I hope you're ready to write our book, buddy! And my LL. The hugs have meant so much to me. I love you so much. More than dark chocolate and Disney.

To my husband. I promise to one day draw that map, but for now it lives in my head. You've made it possible to live my dream, listen to me freak out, and give the silliest suggestions that somehow lead to the best things. I love you. Always and forever.

And to all the readers, not just mine.

You are the reason we write. Thank you. You've made magic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ariana can be found getting her Zen on while practicing hot yoga, going for a run, reading her favorite authors in the middle of the night, or having a bourbon on a Saturday while plotting the lives of her characters as they whisper and sometimes yell in her ear.

She lives her own Happily Ever After with her amazing husband, who shares her love of racing, comic books, and Firefly, along with her two spirited also amazing boys who love reading books under a blanket just as much as she does.

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