

MISTLETOE

mistake



NICHOLE GREENE

MISTLETOE MISTAKE

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Cover Design: Enchanting Romance Designs

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*For Misty, Jennifer, and Melanie,
Your support as I navigate my own autoimmune illness
diagnosis is so deeply appreciated.*

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A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for picking up Mistletoe Mistake. This book does not have many triggers but it does deal with strained family relationships and newly diagnosed chronic illness. As always, there is explicit sex.

CHAPTER ONE

STELLA

Numbers have always been my thing, my safe place. Until twenty-four hours ago when I was given life-changing news. It's wild how one sentence can carry the weight of your future. My doctor's voice still echoes in my mind as she sat across from me, compassion lacing her tone and earnestness in her expression.

"Stella, you have lupus." She then proceeded to explain all the numbers on her chart, multiple factors all leading to a life sentence of chronic illness. Treatable but not curable.

The technical term for my diagnosis is systemic lupus erythematosus. It was the last thing I thought I would be diagnosed with when I went in for an irritating, low-grade fever and joint pain that wouldn't go away. I expected to be given a prescription for an antibiotic and sent on my merry way. Instead, I was sent to a rheumatologist and walked away with three prescriptions that I haven't had time to fill yet.

Luckily for me the fever seems to have subsided just in time for my vacation to Iceland to celebrate the engagement of two of my closest friends. I just have to hold it all inside for the next five days and pretend everything is great. It should be easy between my love for Clara and Ash and the ridiculous antics of our friend Nico, distractions will abound.

The sky is deceptively blue and cloudless, but a cold wind blows under my scarf and down the collar of my trench coat as I exit my town car and walk across the tarmac to the company private jet. I give the pilot a nod as I walk up the steps. Clara greets me with a hug and Asher a smile as I step into the cabin. I glance around looking for our fourth but don't see him.

"Nico's running a few minutes late." Asher glances back up at me from the screen of his laptop.

"Least surprising thing I've ever heard," I say, deadpan. "Are you guys excited to spend the next four days celebrating your engagement?"

"Yes," Clara exclaims, her eyes bright and brimming over with happiness. "I've always wanted to go to Iceland."

I look over at Ash and his eyes are on Clara, warm and loving. I'm so happy they found each other last October. They deserve the world. Asher, Nico, and I have been friends since our days at the prep school we attended starting in sixth grade, and it's comforting to see at least one of us find love.

The only love I've found is unrequited, painful, longing love for someone who would rather fuck a different woman every night than settle down. In the end it's all worked out. I keep my two best friends, and Nico never has to know how I really feel about him. It doesn't matter anymore, now, I have too much to figure out with my diagnosis. Adding a partner into that feels overwhelming.

"Are you okay?" Asher's brow is furrowed as he looks at me. This is the pitfall of decades long friendship; they can read me like a book.

"Yeah." I plaster a smile on my face. "Just annoyed that we're waiting on Nico, as usual." Eventually I'll have to tell everyone, but our trip to celebrate their engagement isn't the time. I've managed to keep the joint pain and other symptoms I've been dealing with for the past year quiet so I can do it for another four days.

"Right? And he planned this vacation." Ash shakes his head and goes back to work.

Clara pats the seat beside her in invitation. After removing my trench, folding it, and tucking it out of the way, I sit down beside her. Her outfit is wild as usual, a big black sweater with a cat face on it and orange leggings covered with images of Michael Myers. I'll never stop being entertained by the most uptight person I know falling in love with the most free spirited. If opposites attract has a picture in the dictionary, it's of those two.

"Do you know what the itinerary is for the trip?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Just general things, like where we're staying and a couple tours."

"Sorry I'm late." Nico strides into the cabin, his arms full. "I had to make a couple pit stops."

Ash stands and takes a box out of his hands. "What's in here?"

"A surprise." Nico wiggles his brows and bends to kiss Clara's cheek and then mine. "No peeking."

"I have a surprise for you guys, too." Clara bends down and rummages for her tablet in her bag. "I calculated our carbon footprint for this trip and found three charities to choose from to donate and volunteer with."

The three of us share a less than enthused look.

"Listen, climate villains, you know the deal. If we fly private, we volunteer. It's the least we can do for the planet. All three of these organizations work to keep the Great Lakes clean from plastics and other pollutants. We could make a whole day out of doing a beach cleanup."

"I'm down." Nico gives her a wink. "Especially if I get to watch fancy pants over here picking up trash."

We all settle into our seats as the plane takes off. Clara curls up beside Ash with a book while he works on his computer. Nico lays across the sofa and shuts his eyes; God knows where he's been or what he's been doing the last twelve hours.

I take the opportunity to pull up my patient portal from the doctor and start reading through the material uploaded on my condition. It looks like we caught this early enough that there's been no complications with my kidneys or liver, but they've determined I have Hashimoto's Disease, as well. My doctor left a note to schedule another appointment to go over my treatment plan for that. After the third article saying the same things and absolutely nothing useful, I close my laptop and slide it into my bag.

A cloud of desolation settles over me as I close my eyes to hold the tears back. I wish my mother and I were on good enough terms that I could call and confide in her. A ten minute conversation with murmured platitudes and a suggestion to resign from my job is all I'd get though, so I stifle the urge to reach out.

Luckily for me, Ash says my name quietly and pulls me from my depressing thoughts. My eyes are dry when I open them and pull on the pleasant mask I crafted early in life to hide my feelings. He opens a file I sent him on the financials of the new office in San Francisco as I take a seat on his other side. Without even trying he gives me exactly what I need to lose myself and my worries in numbers.



The sky is overcast when we land in Reykjavik, but that doesn't temper the excitement that Clara has. She'd never really traveled until last year when she was hired on as a temporary administrative assistant while Ash's permanent AA was on maternity leave. Her exuberance at the new places she's gone over the past year is honestly refreshing.

I grew up wealthy, wealthier than even Ash. It's the kind of money that effortlessly replenishes itself without anyone in my family needing to lift a finger. That's one of the reasons my relationship with my parents is so strained. My brother took over the family business, as the men do, and I was expected to find a husband, bear children, and volunteer on charity boards.

Instead I went to college and grad school, earning multiple degrees in business and finance and then came back to Chicago to join my two best friends with a tech startup. In the few years we've been in business it's been wildly successful, putting all three of us on multiple media lists as power players under forty.

Everyone but my family is impressed.

But that's life, and there's not much I can do to change my family's opinions, so there's no reason to dwell on that while I'm on vacation. As the luggage is transferred from the plane to the SUV waiting for us on the tarmac, I make a promise to myself to let go this week. To live in the moment and only focus on what's happening here and now.

No worrying about my family.

Or my diagnosis.

Fun and good times only.

CHAPTER TWO

NICO

“Okay, I fucked up just a bit.” I hold my hands out in front of me like I’m trying to calm a wild animal. To be fair, Stella is stalking from one end of the one bedroom cabin to the other like a lioness about to pounce. I wouldn’t mind. “I truly thought this cabin was a two room suite.”

“You have to be more thorough.” She spins to look out the wall of glass situated across from the bed. Even the muted gray light filtering through the overcast skies can’t dull her beauty. She’ll be irritated by this inconvenience where I’ll be fucking my fist raw every time I step in the shower.

I’ve been head over ass in love with Stella James since the very first moment I laid eyes on her. Perfectly polished and poised with the type of sass that keeps a man on his toes. Even as a charity case scholarship student at Thomas Reed Prep, I knew she was special. I was assigned as Asher’s roommate, and he and Stella knew each other from old family connections, so I had my in. Only, the more I got to know her, the more I realized I was way out of my league.

We became inseparable, and they never batted an eye to pick up the check when we were allowed off campus. My second year I noticed my closet was full of brand new uniforms and casual clothes that they had both bought for me. I had to blink back tears of gratitude, but before I could thank

them, Ash's hand slapped my shoulder and squeezed, accepting my thanks without any words spoken. That's basically the extent of our emotional exchanges, quiet acceptance is our comfort zone.

Stella, on the other hand, never hesitates to put me, or Ash, in our place when needed. I'm sure a lot of it has to do with how driven she's needed to be to step out of her family's tall shadow. She could have easily taken the nepo baby route and gone into the family business, but she didn't. She forged her own badass path from our prep school, to Yale, to Wharton, and then landed back in Chicago with us, starting up TechJet.

I walk over to where she's standing, her arms crossed protectively over her chest. When I glance at her reflection in the window, it looks like there are tears gathering in her eyes.

What the hell?

I step quickly between her and the glass, trying to get a better read on the situation. I've seen her cry maybe three times in the nearly two decades I've known her. She turns quickly from me, but there are no tears on her skin so maybe it was just a trick of the reflection.

"I'm sorry," I say the words as genuinely as possible because I do mean them. "I can see if there's another hotel nearby."

"No, don't be ridiculous. You planned the trip for us. We can make this arrangement work for a couple days." She looks down at the bed. "At least it's big enough to share."

I'm guessing I won't get much sleep. Our bags are still by the door so I walk over to get them, but as I get closer, I hear a buzzing noise coming from her bag. Her phone is on top of her purse, so I'm puzzled about where the noise is coming from.

"Something is ringing in your bag," I tell her over my shoulder.

"Probably my phone. Hand it to me, please?"

"It's not your phone," I grab it and hold it up for her to see, but a flashing red light at the bottom of the bag catches my attention.

My fingers close over the vibrating object, but I'm confused because when I pull it out; it looks like a tube of lipstick. I'm even more confused when I look for the familiar Chanel label because it's all Stella wears, but there's nothing. Just the flashing light and a black tube.

I pop the top off and realize what I'm looking at. A bullet vibrator shaped discreetly like a tube of lipstick, and if that's not just the most Stella-like thing I've ever seen. I turn with a Cheshire cat grin, absolutely living for the pink stain on her cheeks when she sees what's in my hand.

"Oh my god," she screeches. "Put that down. Turn it off."

I smirk as I hold down the power button.

"Don't say a damn word, Nico."

I hold my hands up, her vibrator tucked between my thumb and palm. "I'm not saying anything."

"Your eyes are saying it." She stalks forward and plucks it from my hand. "No jokes."

"I never joke about orgasms."

"Oh my god," she says again, covering her eyes with her fingers. "I'm so embarrassed." Then her hands drop from her eyes, and she looks at me accusingly. "How did you know how to turn it off so easily?"

"Toys are teammates not opponents."

She half scoffs, half laughs and turns away from me with a shake of her head. "I'm never living this down, am I?"

"I'm not going to tell anyone about it."

In fact, the thought of anyone else ever having this type of knowledge about her infuriates me. I'm the only one allowed to imagine her in expensive lingerie, her fingers teasing her nipples as her other hand moves the toy beneath her panties. I would give up just about anything to be able to watch her use the tiny toy in her hand.

"I guess I brought it for nothing, huh?" She gestures around the room. "I can't use it with you laying beside me in

bed.” She laughs like it’s a funny joke, but my dick throbs against the material of my Armani jeans.

“Don’t let me stop you,” I say with a raspier tone than I’ve ever heard from my own lips.

Her blues snap to my brown eyes, and a pulse of energy bounces between us. I probably imagined the flare of heat I thought I saw, but now I definitely need a shower.

“I’m going to take a quick shower before dinner. Do you need anything first?” I ask.

“No, you go ahead.” She clears her throat and grabs her jacket. “I’m going to go walk around a bit and explore.”

The bathroom is just as incredible as the rest of the cabin. This entire resort is centered around the experience of seeing the Aurora Borealis so one side and half of the roof is seamless, heated glass giving every room a view of nature’s light show. I walk over to the glass walled shower and turn the knob on to heat the water.

My jeans and sweater are neatly folded on the counter before I step under the hot spray. Almost immediately my thoughts drift to Stella and her pretty little vibrator. It only takes about two seconds for my dick to wake right up, but that’s not surprising. She’s been the star of my fantasies forever.

I can close my eyes and see her laid out on the bed before me, her legs splayed wide while she glides the toy up and down her pussy. There’s no way she’s loud while using it solo, but if I ever had the chance to join in, she’d be crying out my name. My fist begins to fuck my cock in earnest as the fantasy heats up.

Her eyes lock with mine as I crawl up the bed and work myself between her thighs. My mouth fucking waters as I imagine her flavor exploding over my tongue. I squeeze my cock tighter, my fist moving quicker and quicker as her name flies from my lips.

The orgasm hits me hard and fast, leaving me breathless against the wall. Fuck me, I’m going to be showering three

times a day the entire trip just to relieve the tension.

I finish showering off quickly. There's a few more things I need to take care of with the resort staff in terms of meals and activities over the next few days. This trip is so important to me, not only to celebrate Ash and Clara, but to also show how much I love and appreciate their and Stella's friendship.

Until a few weeks ago, I was just a minor investor in the company and corporate counsel, but they sat me down and offered me the position of Chief Operating Officer. They've never made me feel less than them for having a different background, but being offered the COO title of the company we've built together feels like an acknowledgment of how far I've come.

I've worked so hard to get where I am, and sometimes I think people see my lavish taste in clothing and think I'm just another rich asshole obsessed with their money. I am to a point, I love money, I love having it. My closet is full of designer suits. I have a box at Soldier Field. Traveling is my favorite pastime. Spending money on things I love is a simple joy I didn't have as a child.

But I also built my parents and sister their own houses. I was first in the family to own instead of rent. I quietly join Clara serving meals at the shelter she helps run, and I love all the things she finds for us to volunteer and donate to.

All that to say that Ash and Stella are intrinsically tied to the fiber of my success and making them proud pushes me to keep reaching. It's what drives me when things go sideways. I never want to let either of them down.

CHAPTER THREE

STELLA

A cold wind sends strands of my blonde hair loose from the easy braid I pulled it into before stepping out of the plane earlier today. One of the things I was most excited about with this resort are all the walking paths connecting the cabins to common buildings and restaurants. Our cabin is second farthest out with Clara and Ash's being about a hundred and fifty feet beyond it.

All the buildings are situated at the foot of some rolling hills facing in the same direction to optimize chances of seeing the Northern Lights. It's comforting to know that while the cabins are full of windows, there's reflective coating on them, so those passing by can't see inside. The land feels almost barren with barely any trees.

Following the path away from our cabins, I head toward the spa. I want to book a few services while we're here. I used to love getting massages regularly, but over the past few months with the flares of joint pain, I just don't want to be touched anymore. The idea of deep tissue work makes me cringe because there are moments that even the brush of my clothing can become unbearable.

I step into the building and drag a deep breath in at the scent of cedar and orange that fills the air. A man in all white looks over at me with a polite smile.

“Halló,” he says. “What can I help you with?”

I walk over to ask for a list of treatments and spend some time weighing my options. He shares his thoughts, and after a little bit of deliberation, I settle on a facial and full body wrap combination. My skin is always so dry now, and beneath my makeup there’s usually a red flush to my cheeks.

Once everything is scheduled at the spa, I continue on my walk to find the coffee shop they have on site. The path winds through a few small copses of trees that provide a break from the wind. I walk past the main building, where the lobby and two restaurants are located, to the small cafe.

Once I have a latte in hand, I find a seat by the crackling fireplace in a large leather armchair. I didn’t bring my laptop, but I have a few emails I need to send so I open my phone. A message sits unread from my mother. I debate opening and ignoring it, but the sooner I respond the sooner I can go back to ignoring her.

MOM

Cecilia Patterson saw you coming out of a rheumatologist’s office this week.

Yes

Why?

I’m out of the country, can I come over when I get home and explain everything?

I’ll have Leigh send you my schedule.

I don’t bother to respond, and sure enough, less than a minute later, an email from her assistant with her calendar pops up in my inbox. With a shake of my head, I clear the app without even opening the email. I’m not fucking scheduling a time to tell my parents about my diagnosis.

My mom only parents when it looks good, I'm sure the only reason she's checking in with me is because she didn't have an answer for Cecilia. God forbid she gets caught looking like she doesn't know what's happening in my life, even when it's true. She obviously didn't say anything to Dad because he would have at least called me instead of just sending a demanding text.

I do send my assistant a few texts just to check in while she's in San Francisco. There's never been a time where all three of us vacationed together beyond the holidays when we close the office for two weeks. I'm honestly surprised at how well Ash has done so far, although it's only been about ten hours now. I'm sure Clara will keep him occupied the next few days.

My phone rings with another text notification as I'm staring into the flames at my left. My cheeks heat when I glance down and see who it's from.

NICO

Where are you?

Stuck in the eternal hell that is him finding my damn vibrator, I honestly consider not responding, but that only delays the inevitable. I'll be sharing a bed with him for the next four nights.

Coffee shop

On my way

After an appraising look at the fireplace, I decide I'm too big to fit. I'll just have to live with the embarrassment. He doesn't even give me the grace of at least ten minutes to gather my

wits, walking through the door less than two minutes after his last text.

His warm brown eyes find mine as soon as he walks in. The smile he hits me with is one that has never failed to send butterflies flying as my stomach bottoms out. It's a little higher on one side, and he pairs it with a cheeky wink.

I keep my eyes on him as he orders, flirting playfully with the barista. He's traded his dark wash jeans for casual black pants that hug his ass just perfectly. The deep charcoal color of his cashmere sweater amplifies his tall, dark, and handsome appeal. When he takes his coffee and turns to join me I don't miss the wistful look on the woman behind the counter's face.

You and me both, sister.

He surprises me by bending down and placing a kiss on my cheek before dropping into the chair beside me. It's not that he's never done that before, but it's definitely not regular, and certainly not when I just saw him an hour ago.

"What was that for?" I ask as I take a sip of my latte.

"Can't a guy just show affection to the most beautiful woman in the room? Especially when they'll be sharing a bed." Somehow he manages to make that sound both innocent and heavily laced with innuendo at the same time.

"You're ridiculous." I shake my head and look away momentarily. "But you clean up well."

"Thanks. The shower in our room is great."

"It looked nice when I poked my head in. You did a great job picking this place. I thought Clara's eyes were going to pop out of her head on the drive in."

"Wait until you see what I've got planned."

"How about you just tell me?"

He grins mischievously from behind his cup. "No, I think I'll hold you in suspense as well." He glances down at his watch, a gift I gave him for his thirtieth birthday. "Speaking of our plans, you should go get ready for dinner. The car leaves at seven."

I drain the last of my coffee and stand up. “I better get going then.”

“I’ll walk over with you and then go find Ash and Clara to let them know.”

He holds the door open and ushers me through with a hand on my lower back. The heat seeps from his palm through the wool of my sweater. I wish I wasn’t always so aware of him. Knowing he probably doesn’t give these small touches a thought while I feel like I’ve been counting them for years frustrates me.

Why can’t I just let it go? He dates so many women. Dates is probably a generous term for it.

“What are you thinking about over there?” he asks as he walks along beside me.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. I can hear the gears turning, even over this wind.”

“What’s with this wind anyway?” I jump on the chance to deflect from his invasive question.

“From what I gathered as I was planning the trip, it’s common for this time of year.”

We get to the path leading to our cabin and say goodbye to each other as he continues down toward Ash’s and Clara’s cabin. His scent hits me full throttle as I step inside. A combination of the fresh scent of his body wash and the woody scent of his cologne. It should be criminal to smell that good.

I grab a clean set of bra and panties and take them into the bathroom with me. I already hung my rollup bag with all my skin care and makeup products on the back of the door. After grabbing the bottles I need, I put my hair up and cover it with a wrap so it doesn’t get wet.

I take my time under the jets of hot water. I almost wish I had time to wash my hair because that’d be another layer of

relaxation. Just to drag it out a bit longer I use a body exfoliating treatment after going through my usual routine.

Once I'm out and dried off, I realize there aren't robes hanging anywhere. I didn't hear the door open, but I call out Nico's name while I do my makeup anyway, just in case. When he doesn't reply, I pull my panties on and clasp my bra. It's my favorite set, I have it in every color available, but tonight I'm wearing the deep midnight blue lace. I give myself an admiring glance, even though no one is going to see me in it, at least I have the confidence of knowing how good I look under my clothes.

I stroll out of the bathroom heading straight for the closet when a throat clears behind me. I turn, startled, and instantly freeze. Time stands still as my gaze falls on Nico, but his eyes are drinking in the sight of me. A strangled noise comes from me as I cover my chest as best I can.

"I didn't think you were in here. I called your name."

He doesn't answer right away, his lips parted in shock. Finally he snaps out of it and pulls his AirPods out. "Sorry. What?"

"Turn around?"

"Sorry." He turns so fast, probably just as mortified as me.

"I didn't realize there weren't robes in the bathroom, and I called out your name, but you didn't answer." I grab the dress I'm planning on wearing off a hook in the closet and toss it over my head. Unfortunately for me the zipper catches in the back and I struggle to get it up.

"Let me help." Nico's voice is softer and deeper than usual as his warm hands close over mine, gently pushing them out of the way.

My face flushes as the soft sound of the zipper moving up fills the room. "Thank you."

He clears his throat and steps back. "No problem. Just roomie things."

We stand there with my back to him for a few seconds as I battle to gain my composure. I turn and paste on a tight smile. “Bet you’re used to doing that in reverse, huh?”

He flinches like I slapped him, but just as fast the quick grin he’s always been known for crosses his face. “You know it,” he jokes. “We should probably get going.”

CHAPTER FOUR

NICO

Torture.

I'd pick waterboarding over having to see Stella in nothing but sexy lingerie and pretend not to be affected. My dick will never be the same. I've seen her in countless bikinis over the years, but lace is a whole different level than the nylon blacks and neutrals she's leans toward in swimwear.

Fuck.

I have to stop thinking about it. Thank god for the woolen peacoat I brought to go with dressier outfits. It does a good job of camouflaging my still hard cock as I follow her out into the cold evening.

Ash and Clara are holding hands and smiling at each other as we meet them on the path to the front of the resort. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred I'm over the moon happy when I find the two of them like this, but today jealousy rears its nasty head. The amount of times I've fantasized about having that with Stella is depressing.

Nevertheless, I put my hand on the small of her back and guide her down the path. I'll take any touch I can get. I catch the look that Ash sends my way, his brows raised slightly, but I keep a blank expression firmly fixed to my face.

The girls talk in the third row of the SUV and chat quietly while Ash and I take the second row. We make small talk with the driver who points out a few places of interest as he drives. As soon as that conversation dies down, Ash turns to me.

“Getting all settled in your cabin?”

“Yeah, we were talking earlier about how wild it was that Stella and I have never slept together.”

Ash’s eyes flare slightly at that statement.

“I mean, never in the same room on a trip or drunken, late night.” My words tumble from my lips in a rush.

“Right, right.” He nods, but one corner of his mouth tips up in a smirk. “There’s a first for everything.”

“Yep.” I glance out at the barren landscape around us before looking back toward him. “Are you two happy with your cabin?”

“The bed is comfortable.” A slow smile crosses his face. “And the shower walls are sturdy.”

I laugh as Clara swats his shoulder and admonishes him.

“Asher!” Her voice is about three octaves higher than usual.

“Sorry.” He laughs as he grabs her hand and pulls it to his mouth, not sounding one bit remorseful.

My eyes meet Stella’s as she smiles warmly at them. I give her a little wink, happy that the weirdness between us seems to have eased for the time being. I just want a fun, relaxed evening to kick off our celebration.

Stella slides her hand in mine as I help her from the car, and I fight the urge to link our fingers instead of releasing her. Her perfume, a subtle yet distinct mix of warm and floral notes, surrounds me as she walks past. My mind flashes with the image of her in navy lace, her nipples teasingly visible as her eyes darken with desire. I clear my head with a shake that has Clara looking at me with concern.

“How are you liking everything so far?” I ask as I swing my arm around her shoulder.

“It’s amazing. Thank you so much.” She reaches up and covers my hand with hers. “I know you understand when I say that it is almost overwhelming. Sometimes I just look at my life now compared to how it was even a year ago and I just,” she pauses to clear her throat. “I just feel so grateful and at the same time unworthy.”

I pull her into a hug because I know exactly what she means. It’s how I’ve felt for the better part of twenty years. “You’re probably more worthy of the life you’re living now than any of us assholes.”

I mean that. Her life before she accepted the temp job at TechJet last year was vastly different. She went from a studio apartment a few blocks from Midway to a penthouse on Wacker. That doesn’t even count the way she went from living a lone wolf lifestyle to having an instant tight group of friends that came as a package deal with Ash.

She pulls back to look me in the eyes. “Says the guy who spends almost every weekend volunteering on the down low and siphoning most of his paycheck into his family’s pockets.”

“Are you guys coming?” Stella asks from just inside the restaurant. “It’s cold out there.”

I’d put thoughts about actually sleeping beside Stella out of my mind until now as I close the cabin door behind myself and flip the lock. She’s standing by the wall of windows, but looking back and forth between the bed and me. Silence fills the air between us as we each search for a way to navigate this foreign situation.

“I’ll change and get ready for bed first, if you don’t mind?” She moves toward the dresser where she put away her things earlier with a glance at me for a response.

“That’s fine with me.” I point at a bar in the corner. “Want a nightcap?”

“Not tonight.” A smile ghosts her lips as she brushes past me.

I pull two bottled waters out of the mini-fridge and set one on either bedside table for us before walking to the closet and pulling my sweater over my head. I can’t tell if she turned the heat up or if it’s my body knowing we’ll be in close proximity in only minutes. I can hear water running in the bathroom, so I quickly change out of my clothes and pull on a pair of pajama pants.

By the time she’s finished in the bathroom, I’m sitting against the padded headboard with my legs stretched out in front of me, looking out onto the cloud-covered horizon. I’m trying to focus on everything but her. The silky shorts and lace trimmed top she comes out in make that task incredibly difficult. Her movements are jerky and unnatural, too.

It shouldn’t be this weird after decades of friendship. I have to get my head on straight and remember this is my best friend. The woman who has literally walked beside me through prep school, college, law school, and adulthood. Then I glance over to see her bent at the waist rifling through her suitcase, the pale blue material of her shorts is lifted by the movement. The gentle swell of her ass is just visible as all the blood rushes from my brain to my dick.

My fingers ache to explore the soft skin of her body that she rarely exposes. I grab my phone and start scrolling through a law journal aimlessly. My eyes move over words that don’t register in my brain.

Head empty.

Cock throbbing.

Heart racing.

“What are you reading?” she asks as she crawls into bed beside me.

“An article on tort law.”

“Sounds like a good way to put yourself to sleep.”

More like a good way to put my dick to sleep. “Something like that.”

After a minute of adjusting her pillows and burrowing under the covers, she opens the Kindle app on her phone and starts reading. I keep trying to sneak a peek to see what she’s reading, but the angle makes it impossible.

I decided to put my phone down and mess with her. I scoot under the covers sideways and prop my head on my hand. “What are you reading?”

“A book.” She eyes me sideways but doesn’t turn her head.

“About?”

“People living their lives?”

“Orcs fucking?”

Her skin flushes pink. “That was *one* time.”

“One more than me.”

She sets her phone down and levels me with her get fucked gaze. “At least orcs find the clit every time. Much better than humans.”

Good thing I’m covered by the blankets because hearing *clit* while she’s talking about fucking is too much for me. I should steer this conversation back toward safer ground.

“I don’t know about the losers you usually date, but I know I’ve never had trouble finding every single spot to send my partners into orgasmic oblivion.” What can I say, I’m a risk taker.

“Orgasmic oblivion? The fact that those words even slipped out of your lips tells me everything I need to know.”

“That I’m the best you’ve never had?”

Shut up, Nico.

She rolls her eyes and turns to plug her phone in. Then she flips over toward me again and starts stuffing pillows between

us, creating a wall. “Guess we’ll never know, will we?” she asks as she settles back down into the bedding.

“You never know.” I say quietly as she slips on her sleep mask that doubles as noise canceling headphones.

She rolls around a few times, struggling to get comfortable, but I stay right where I am, watching her every move. I love that she feels safe enough to fall asleep with two of her senses deprived, even if she did erect this stupid pillow barrier.

I wait a few minutes after she’s fallen into a deep sleep and get up to wash my face and brush my teeth. Everyone always gives me shit for my extensive personal hygiene, but I’ll be damned if anyone can call me a crusty ass man. I’m not ashamed to take care of my body in the same way I’d take care of someone I love. If anything it helps ensure I’ll be present and healthy for a long time to come so I can keep taking care of my family.

What I’m not prepared to see when I fold the hand towel and hang it back on the rack, are Stella’s panties and bra dropped carelessly on the bathroom floor. She’s notoriously messy, it’s the one trait that proves she’s actually human. Seeing that tiny pile of navy lace against the cream-colored marble feels real somehow. Almost like we’re playing house.

Instead of my mind going somewhere dirty, it goes to the thought of living with her. My things and hers, side by side. How her scent would fill our room and mine, our closet. How I would happily follow her throughout the house, picking up items she’s discarded.

It’s sobering to realize how peaceful that thought is. These thoughts are dangerous. I can’t let them take root because she’s not remotely interested in me. If she were she would have said something long ago. So as I walk past the reminder of her, I try to expunge the notions from my mind.

But I fail.

CHAPTER FIVE

STELLA

The soft sounds of Nico breathing greet me as I wake up and pull my sleeping mask off. It doesn't matter where I am, I'm always awake after six hours of sleep. Streaks of sunlight filter through the windows, illuminating dust motes in their path.

I look over to see his broad back exposed to his waist. His head is angled in my direction with his thick, dark lashes casting a shadow over his cheek. My fingers twitch with the desire to run along his stubbled jaw. He never shaves on vacation.

He tosses the pillows from between us aside, startling me. Before I can react he's pulling me down and into his arms. I giggle and try to get out from his firm grip, but I feel him shake his head no against my back.

"What are you doing?" I try to sound exasperated, but the laughter gives me away.

"It's cuddle time."

"We're friends."

"Your Honor, permission to request cuddle time amongst friends as common practice," he mumbles behind me. Goosebumps race down my spine at the gentle way his breath ruffles my hair.

Despite the pillows squished between our lower halves, I relax into the comforting warmth of his arms for just a moment. Just a while to soak up the feeling of his bare chest against my own skin. I'm not sure if he realizes it, but his thumb is brushing soft strokes over the sliver of exposed skin between the waistband of my shorts and where my camisole has ridden up. The caress is enough to send heat straight to my core.

How pathetic is it that just the touch of his thumb absentmindedly has my thighs clenching? I brought that vibrator for a reason. I'm obviously touch starved to the point of delusion. I start to push myself up, but his grip tightens.

"Ten minutes," he says drowsily.

"I'm just supposed to stay here for ten minutes?"

"Yes, just give in. Relax. I know you're a high productivity machine, but you're also a person. Human beings need physical contact."

Just give in.

Those three words echo in my mind.

So I do. I let myself melt against him and rest my head on his bicep. The smile that spreads across my lips is unstoppable when he sighs against me happily and snuggles closer, burying his face in my hair. After a few minutes I'm lulled back to sleep.

A dream about my doctor forces my eyes to fly open, even though Nico is still wrapped around me, lightly snoring in my ear. My heart races from the bad news she gave me and I slide out from under Nico's arm slowly, trying not to wake him. I need a minute to gather myself before facing anyone.

My face is still drawn and pale, even the butterfly rash across my cheeks and the bridge of my nose from my condition is lighter. I splash some cold water on my face and stare down into the sink as I will my heart rate to settle. I don't remember the specifics from the dream, just a hospital bracelet and my doctor's drawn face.

Once my pulse settles I poke my head back into the room to make sure Nico's still sleeping. After confirming that he is, I pad out into the room and grab my clothes for the day. I definitely don't need another incident of him seeing me nearly naked. I don't know if I would survive a second time.

We have a tour of an ice cave and a beach where ice washes ashore in small chunks from a glacier making it look like diamonds litter the sand. I've seen photos of it all over social media, and I'm excited to see it in person. With all that in mind, I grab a pair of fleece-lined leggings, wool socks, and a thermal shirt to bring into the bathroom with me.

The shower heats up quickly, and I sigh with relief as the scalding water washes over me. I haven't had a morning where my body doesn't hurt in months. Today is sadly no exception. But I did have time to get the pain medication my doctor prescribed before I left, so at least I won't have to rely on over the counter pain relief.

The sound of a morning news program and the scent of coffee filters lightly through the door, letting me know that Nico is awake. I'm just finishing my makeup when he knocks lightly on the door.

"Come in." I'm focused on the process of putting Dutch braids in my hair when he walks in with two steaming cups of coffee in his hands. "One of those better be for me."

"Of course." He sets one down in front of me as he looks at me in the mirror, watching me tame my blonde hair into submission. "Those are cute."

"Thanks. I figure it'll be best to have my hair out of the way today."

"Makes sense. You look younger like this, like you did when we were kids."

There's a soft look in his eye as he searches my reflection. There's an intimacy in this moment, him watching me get ready for the day while he stands beside me in nothing but a low slung pair of pajama pants. The muscles of his abs move

as he laughs at something I say, distracting me as I darken my eyebrows.

A lump forms in my throat as I'm hit with a sense of longing for this type of familiarity every day. His company has felt like slipping on an old sweater and curling up in my favorite chair. So easy and comfortable that I feel the bridge of my nose sting with emotion that makes me want to flee.

“Well, I'm done here. It's all yours now.” I put the cap back on my eyebrow pencil and set it on the counter. “Thanks again for the coffee.”

“There's some pastries on the table, too.” He says as I shut the door behind myself.

The past few days have been like a fever dream of amazing sights, alien landscapes, and the absolute best time with the three people I love most in the world. The one thing we haven't seen yet are the northern lights. We have one last night to see them, and Nico has been very cryptic about what he has planned.

He got ready early while I was at the spa with Clara. I'm not sure when he did it, but he added several treatments to what I was already planning. So while we were working through some of the wedding planning together, our hair and makeup was being done.

As soon as I walk into our cabin, I see a glass of champagne with a folded piece of stationary beside it on the table in the corner.

*Stella, please enjoy the champagne
while you finish getting ready.*

*I hope you don't mind that I
took the liberty of choosing your dress
for the night.*

-Nico

I don't mind at all, actually. He probably has the best sense of style and fashion of all of us. Although Ash would never admit it. That thought actually makes me chuckle, thinking back on how Ash met Clara for the first time. A cab splashed through a slushy puddle right beside him, and he had to borrow the extra suit Nico had in his office. As he was changing, Clara walked in to introduce herself. I could tell that day there was something different about the way he looked at her, even when he did his damndest to deny it.

I lift the flute to my lips and let the bubbles dance on my tongue for a moment. A fleeting question about whether I'll be able to enjoy a random glass of wine moving forward passes through my mind. Will my medications not be able to be mixed with alcohol? I decide that is a question for the Stella of tomorrow. I'm going to let go and fully enjoy this last night before we go back to the reality awaiting us in Chicago.

The dress laid out on the bed is brand new, meaning Nico had this planned all along. I am struck at how gorgeous it is. I lift it and walk to the mirror, holding it against me. The scarlet color looks magnificent with my fair skin and blonde hair.

I strip down and put the dress on, examining the fit in the mirror. It hits just below my knees and fits like it was designed for me. I decide last minute to put my hair in a low ponytail to highlight the way the straps tie around my neck in a big bow.

With one final look in the mirror, I slip my coat on and down the last of my champagne. I'm already feeling the buzz as I walk down the lighted path toward the private dining room that Nico reserved at the resort. Nerves flutter in my stomach, the kind that don't have an obvious cause but happen anyway.

I'm not great at surprises, so I just chalk it up to that trait and keep walking.

CHAPTER SIX

NICO

You know the moment in every early 2000s rom com where the girl walks in and the douchey love interest finally sees her. The moment where everything is stripped away from between them and the connection just snaps into place. That's how I feel when Stella hands her jacket to the host and our eyes meet.

The unspoken, unacknowledged string tying us together goes taut. Her skin is glowing, the dress I picked for her is utter perfection. As soon as I saw it, I knew I needed to get it for her. She's stunning, so goddamn beautiful it makes my stomach do backflips inside me.

I hold my hand out as she steps into my arms and returns my embrace. "You look gorgeous."

"Thank you." She steps back and does a little spin for me. The bow at the back of her neck taunts me. "You did a damn good job picking this out."

"It's easy to pick something that will look good when the person wearing it is effortlessly beautiful."

Her cheeks flush as her eyes flit away. I watch as they widen, she's finally taking in the scene around us. "Oh my god, Nico."

Her hand closes around mine as she looks at the hundreds of candles placed around the room. Their light catches on the crystal snowflakes hung from the ceiling sending tiny refracted rainbows scattering across the floor. If there aren't groups of candles, there are evergreen trees decorated with silver, white, and champagne decorations. I wanted to incorporate the theme of Ash and Clara's late December wedding. I even added a few kitschy elements of the holidays, like a few sprigs of mistletoe hanging in the doorways because I know Clara goes wild for that.

"Clara is going to love this." Her eyes are glassy when she looks at me. "You did so good."

"Nico."

A surprised gasp has me turning to the door where Clara looks just as starstruck by the room as Stella. Tears almost immediately start rolling down her cheeks as her fingers cover her mouth. She drops Ash's hand and crosses the distance to me, wrapping me in a tight hug.

I return the hug just as eagerly. She might have only been in my life for a year, but she's balanced us, and I've found a kindred spirit in her. Being able to bring her joy makes me so happy.

"I assume you like it?" I ask with a chuckle as Ash glowers at me like he always does when I touch her too long. Jealous asshole.

"I love it. It's everything I want our wedding to be." She releases me and shrugs out of her coat. "Maybe I should just hand over the planning to you."

"The resort really pulled through with this. I can't take all the credit."

"Humility doesn't suit you," Ash says as he claps me on the shoulder. I catch his eye and see the gratitude within their frosty depths.

A server comes out with a tray of cocktails and serves the ladies first. When I set this dinner up, I gave the resort complete creative control of the menu, including cocktails.

They have a Michelin star chef and top tier mixologist on staff. None of us are picky eaters, so I figured letting the experts be experts was the best bet.

Ash taps his glass to mine, and we take a sip of the slightly sweet but very strong drink.

“What is this?” I ask the server.

“It’s called Mistletoe Mayhem.”

She rattles off a list of what it’s made from, but my eyes travel across the room to Stella. She throws her head back with laughter as Clara whispers something to her while looking at Ash. I love seeing her so carefree. The past few months she’s really pulled back and withdrawn from us, staying home a lot more than going out. For a while I thought maybe she had found a boyfriend she was keeping from us.

That would have hurt, but if she was happy that’s all that would have mattered. Clara told us that she wasn’t dating anyone, just spending more time at home. I know both Ash and I have tried to get any information out of her about the seemingly sudden change, but she just deflects. Neither of us want to be intrusive so we don’t push.

“Do you think they’re talking about us?” Ash asks as we watch their giggle fest continue for another couple minutes.

“Without a doubt.”

“But it’s good to see them both so happy and light.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“How has Stella been? You’ve gotten more time with her than either of us has in years this week.”

“She seems fine. A little neurotic about sharing the bed, but otherwise I can’t tell the difference between her and the Stella we’ve always known.”

“That’s good.”

We migrate to the table and pull chairs out for Stella and Clara. Before long the chef joins us as servers bring out the

first seven courses. Every single thing is delicious and the cocktails keep coming.

Maybe I should have listened to the list of ingredients because these keep tasting better and better.

We're nearly finished with the seventh course when the first faint green lights up the night sky. Clara gasps and quickly stands, crossing the room to the windows. The rest of us follow just as quickly, although it's a phenomena that Asher has seen before on a ski trip in Norway. He wraps his arm around her back, pulling her flush to him.

"You're under the mistletoe." Stella points at the greenery above them.

"As if they need a plant telling them to kiss," I say in jest.

"It's tradition, though." She smiles warmly at them. "Get to it."

Stella and I snuck out about five minutes after encouraging them to kiss under the mistletoe when they had yet to come up for air. We love that for them but not enough to watch. Stella has her arm tucked through mine as we walk down the path toward our cabin.

Green and violet flare above us as we walk transfixed by the beauty.

"You planned an amazing trip for us." She stumbles with her head tilted back, but I catch her. Her beautiful laugh fills the still night air. "All those cocktails went to my head."

"They had no business being that good."

"It just added to the magic." Her eyes meet mine and then move down to my lips.

Did she just...

Should I...

I've obviously had one too many drinks to think she was giving me any sort of invitation to kiss her. Never before has she opened the door to that possibility. I shake the notion of her being interested from my mind.

"You want to know the biggest secret of the night?" I ask.

"Yes."

"I had the resort staff decorate Ash and Clara's room while we were eating. It's going to be a replica of what the dining room was like."

"She's going to love that." Stella bounces on the balls of her feet while holding onto my shoulders. Then she wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me. Her coat is open, so I feel every delectable curve of her body against mine. She shivers against me, so I step back, out of her arms and tug the lapels of her coat closed.

"Let's get you inside. You're cold."

I hustle her up the path to our cabin and inside but stop short when I see the room. Candlelight flickers along the walls with a warm glow and a large white floral arrangement sits on the table I left a glass of champagne on for Stella earlier. In its place is an ice bucket with a bottle of Dom Perignon and note on the resort stationary.

*Mr. Mattia, we wanted to bestow
the same ambiance to you and your
guest as you requested for Mr.
Bennett and his fiancé. Please enjoy
your final night with us.*

Heat crawls up my neck as I look back at her. She's standing by the door taking everything in with wide eyes and flushed cheeks. I hope she doesn't think I asked for this or something.

“The resort did this.” I hold up the card between two of my fingers.

“It’s beautiful.” She slips out of her coat, and I cross the room to take it from her.

“I had no idea.”

“You know how much I love candles. I have them all over my place.” She looks up into my eyes, and I realize how close we are to each other.

When we’re this close it’s impossible for me not to notice everything I love about her. The way she smells. The faint freckles on the bridge of her nose. The way her eyes change like the blues of the ocean depending on her mood. Right now they’re a deep navy, the type that I imagine would lure sailors with a siren’s call. They dip back down to my lips for the second time tonight, and if she does it one more time, I might have trouble holding back.

I break eye contact and roll my neck, and that’s when I see what we’re standing under. A strained laugh mixed with a groan comes from my throat.

“What?” she asks, confused.

I cup her cheek, the first time I’ve ever touched her like this and tilt her head back. Her eyes widen with surprise and crinkle with mirth when she sees the mistletoe above us.

“I guess we have to kiss each other,” she says playfully.

“Is that what you want?” I swallow down my nerves and hope she doesn’t hear the hitch in my breath.

“It’s tradition, right? Who are we to break it?” Her eyes move back and forth between mine.

Fuck me, I’ve never been so goddamn nervous to kiss a woman in my life. I’m going to fuck this all up. I move toward her a few inches, and she moves to meet me. After searching her eyes one last time, I close the distance completely.

I feel this kiss from my head to my toes as soon as our lips meet. The rapidly increasing thrum of my heart echoes in my

ears. My fingers slide back into her silky hair, and I feel her melt against me.

I'm barely able to contain my moan when her lips part and I feel her tongue seeking entry past my lips. Her hands splay along my ribs, fingertips digging into the muscle there as I step fully into her space. She fits against me perfectly, in a way no woman has before. My free hand moves around her body to the small of her waist where I can feel her smooth skin against my calloused palm.

She moans as she angles her head back, giving me deeper access to her mouth. Any rational thought I might have had is erased as our tongues glide past one another. I don't ever want this to end, this dream I never thought would come to fruition.

"I don't want to stop," she says against my lips.

"What do you mean? Kissing?"

"I mean that I don't want to stop at kissing," she says as she kisses the stubble on my jaw.

I put my hands gently on her shoulders and push her back to arms length. "How sober are you right now?" I would never forgive myself if she was too drunk to consent and I just went for it.

"Sober enough to consent," she says clearly. "Drunk enough to do this." She reaches behind her neck and pulls the ribbon holding her dress up.

The bodice of her dress falls to her waist, and all rational thoughts exit my body. Her breasts are a lovely pear shape with hardened, rose-colored nipples. It takes every ounce of willpower left inside me not to reach out cup them in my palms, and take them in my mouth. But I finally have her where I've always wanted her, and if she thinks it's just going to be one night, I'm going to make it the most mind-blowing night of her life.

Because one night will never be enough for me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STELLA

Nico's eyes rake down my body, the heat of his desire setting my skin aflame. He wets his lips as the tension between us builds. Enough time goes by that I'm starting to second guess myself.

"Take off your dress."

The demand is soft but firm, and part of me wants to bristle, but a bigger part of me whispers to do as he says. To let go just for tonight. Let myself feel beautiful and desired because even though he has yet to touch me again, I see how badly he wants to.

Maybe it's a way to cede responsibility for whatever ramifications we face after we cross this boundary. Giving up control is not something I'm good at. He might be the only person I would do this for.

I slide my thumbs under the material and push it down to the floor. All that I'm left in are my high heels and an ivory, lace thong. He runs the back of his knuckles up from my wrist to my shoulder, sweeping past my collar bone and then down my sternum. Goosebumps race across my skin from the gentle sweeps of his touch on my body.

"You're sure about this?" His eyes meet mine with a carefully blank expression. "Because once I start, I'm not

stopping.”

“I don’t want you to stop.”

His lips crash over mine before I can even take a breath. He kisses me as intensely as a drowning man draws breath. I can feel his hands everywhere as he walks me backward, our lips never parting. He holds me steady as the back of my legs hit the bed.

My eyes open when he drops to his knees before me. I try to step to the side, unsure what he’s doing down there. But then I see him undoing the buckle on my shoe.

“Up.” He pats my right foot, holding it steady as he slides the discarded shoe to the side. He repeats the process with the left foot, but this time he presses a kiss to the inside of my ankle.

His lips trail up my leg, heating the skin with each kiss while he looks up at me from under his dark fringe of lashes. He runs his fingertips over the outside of my thighs and hooks them in the waist of my panties. They slide past my hips and drop to the floor.

“What are you doing?” I ask when he picks them up and puts them in his pocket.

“These are mine now.”

A retort is just about to cross my lips when he pushes me down onto the bed, spreading my thighs wide apart and kissing the juncture where my thigh meets my sex. His lips and tongue tease every part of me but where I want him. My clit throbs with desire, but he studiously ignores it.

I lift my hips off the bed searching for the touch to ease the growing pressure within me. I’m about to sass and ask him if he can find the clit when I finally feel the gentlest caress as he circles my pleasure center with his fingertip.

“So wet for me, aren’t you?” He slides a long finger inside me, slowly pumping it in and out. “You want to come so hard, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I barely recognize my voice, it’s so soft and needy.

He stands and moves me fully onto the bed, with my head resting on a pillow. That's when I realize he's still fully clothed while I'm laid out completely bare for him. He pulls his shirt off and removes his belt but leaves his pants on. My brow furrows as I watch him walk over to my suitcase and start rifling around.

Is he having second thoughts?

Then he turns around, mischief in his eyes and my vibrator in his hand. "I'm going to give you so many orgasms you'll be begging for me to stop."

He lays down alongside me, giving me a languid and thorough kiss as he drags the toy through my folds. It glistens in the candlelight, wet from my desire. He turns it onto a low setting and circles my nipple. I watch his face as he looks down at my body, enraptured by the sight of what he's doing to me.

He runs it over the swell of my breast and through the valley between them to the other peak. As he continues to tease me with the toy, he covers the abandoned nipple with his mouth. The dichotomy of the intense vibration with the light circles and flicks of his tongue makes my head spin.

He drags the toy down my ribs, along the curve of my pelvis down to my slit. All this while his lips blaze a path from my breasts up my neck and finally back to my mouth. I let him glide his tongue along mine, exploring the recesses of my mouth as I slide my fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck.

I draw a sharp intake of breath as he presses the toy between my folds right over my clit. I'm so close to the edge already that when he increases the vibration I cry out and attempt to close my legs. White hot heat builds in the center of my core as he locks a leg over my thigh, ensuring he has enough space to maneuver his hand.

"I'm gonna come." He swallows my moaned confession with his mouth.

“Good girl. Let me see you lose control.” He pulls back and looks down at me, his eyes nearly black with want.

I’ve never been called a good girl before. It should feel infantilizing, but I swear my pussy clenched when I heard it. My body trembles right on the edge of one of the strongest orgasms I’ve ever had. The fingers in his hair scrape along his scalp while my other hand fists the sheets.

I come with a cry as my back arches off the mattress. As I drag deep, greedy breaths in he keeps the silicone toy nestled in my sex. Each aftershock of my orgasm rocks my clit against it giving me no relief.

“Fuck. You’re exquisite.” He kisses me. “Another.”

“I can’t.” I shake my head back and forth in denial even as I feel a second orgasm building.

He pulls the toy away, giving me a chance to relax my muscles. “Stop is all you have to say if you don’t want to keep going. Do you want to stop?”

I search his eyes, once again a neutral expression has taken over his face. “Keep going.”

“That’s my girl.”

He changes the setting to a pulse and wave pattern. It’s my favorite to use, but there’s no way he could know that. The little bullet toy is only meant for clitoral stimulation, so when he adds his fingers to my cunt his name flies from me in a whimper. My toes curl so hard they begin to cramp.

“Nico. Fuck.”

“Let go, love.” He hooks his fingers inside me, and I don’t stand a chance.

Blood pounds in my ears as I see stars behind my closed eyes. He withdraws the toy, but my walls continue to spasm around his fingers. I feel his weight shift down my body, and suddenly I feel the heat of his mouth over my clit.

His fingers continue to work me at a steady pace as the tremors from the previous orgasm subside. He looks up at me,

his eyes crinkled in a cocky smirk as he continues to drive me slowly to the edge of another orgasm.

“I can’t give you another one.” I tilt my head up and gasp at the colors rippling across the sky. “Look,” I say as I pull his hair.

He pauses and does a double take. “Holy shit.”

Green and purple ripple across the inky black sky dotted with more stars than I’ve ever seen. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him push his pants off and the sight of his long, thick cock draws my attention. It jerks when he notices my gaze on him. It’s a beautiful dick though, a slight upward curve, a strong vein running along the side of his length.

He pulls me into his lap as he kneels in the center of the bed. “I’m going to fuck you now, while these lights put on a show for us. I don’t have a condom, but the last round of tests was all negative. I can show you the results on my phone.”

I trust him, and he knows I have an implant. He went with me as moral support. Instead of saying anything, I position myself on his lap, the heat of my pussy right against his crown. I’ve never wanted a man inside me the way I do now.

Our eyes lock as he pulls me down his length. His lips part as I dig my fingers into his shoulders, a whimper falling from my lips. I feel so full, so sexy and powerful as he pulses inside me. He takes a shuddering breath as his forehead braces against mine.

“Is that okay?” he asks.

“Yes.” I shift my hips, rocking against him as he draws a sharp intake of breath.

“Better than anything I’ve ever imagined,” he whispers so quietly I almost don’t hear him.

I begin grinding against him as his lips cover mine. Our pace increases, all of our movements are so in sync with each other that it almost feels like we were always meant to be together like this. It’s effortless as pleasure mounts between us. But I need more. He’s made me lose control, now I need for him to follow me into the abyss of pleasure.

I lift myself off him and lay back on the bed, spreading my thighs in invitation for him. He doesn't hesitate, gliding back into me. I wrap my leg around his waist as he increases the pace of his thrusts. I want to feel him explode inside me, to claim me with his release. I need to see him fall apart inside me, so I clench my walls around him.

He cries out and stills, his cock jerking inside me as he fills me with his release. He reaches between us and pinches my clit, sending my third orgasm rocketing from my core. Echoes of pleasure ricochet through my body.

He pushes up but stays seated inside me. His eyes hone in on the place we're joined, the way I've stretched around him. I whimper when he pulls out, looking up at his face as a slow smirk crosses his lips.

I feel him gather the cum leaking from me and push it back inside. "You just made every fantasy I've ever had come true."

Nico is lightly snoring when I finish cleaning up. I gingerly slide under the covers not wanting to disturb him, but he reaches over and pulls me into his arms. It should calm my racing thoughts, but I think the buzz of tonight has worn off and in its place has settled the weight of my anxiety.

Did we just ruin years of friendship for one night?

I've never judged Nico for the amount of women he's slept with, but now I can't help but wonder if I'll just be another notch on his bedpost. Someone on the list of those off limits to be crossed off some sort of list.

He's one of my best friends, but we don't talk about feelings and emotions. I know I'm emotionally guarded and having two men as my best friends has lent me an out on being open. I have no idea what he'll be like come morning.

His arm settles over me, pulling me down like an anchor in the maelstrom of my anxious thoughts and doubts.

What am I even doing right now? I have a long road ahead of me to figure out what treatment plans are going to be best for me. Everything I've read says it can take several years to settle on the right medications and dosages to even consider remission possible.

Even if I was ready to talk about it, he doesn't deserve the weight of this when I can handle it on my own. I wait until his breathing is deep and even before rolling out of bed from under him. Luckily he's sleeping heavily tonight.

I make quick work of booking a commercial flight back to Chicago that leaves first thing and call the front desk for a car to the airport. Luckily I hadn't blown out all the candles and the remaining few shed enough light to pack up my suitcases. By the time I'm dressed and ready, the car is waiting outside the lobby.

I send a message in the group text letting them know I had an emergency to get back for and not to worry. With only a slight hesitant look back, I quietly exit the cabin and take the first steps back to home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NICO

For the first time in a long time, I wake up happy and refreshed. Memories of last night filter back in, and I stretch my arm out, expecting to be met with the beautiful, warm body of my favorite person. Instead I find ice cold sheets and a cabin completely silent.

“Stella?” I call out her name as I sit up.

There’s no response, and a pit begins to form in my stomach. I look around to see if she left a note saying she went out for coffee or something but don’t see anything. As I look around I realize I don’t see *anything* of hers. Dread weighs my limbs down as I get out of bed and pull on a pair of sweats.

My worst fear is confirmed when I go into the bathroom and see all her mess gone from the counter. A chasm opens up in my chest, grief and hurt and remorse swirl painfully against my ribcage as I breathe.

Maybe she just packed up already.

The fleeting thought gives me just enough hope that I open the closet looking for her suitcases, but all that’s left are mine. I pull at my hair as I look around in despair. My phone lights up with a text message notification.

There are a few new messages in the group chat.

STELLA

Hey! I had to leave early for a family emergency. Nothing huge but I didn't want to rush you guys.

ASHER

No problem. What's your flight number? I can have a car pick you up.

CLARA

I hope everything is okay. Let us know if you need anything!

STELLA

Don't worry about it. Ian is picking me up.

I hope everything is okay. Call when you land.

That should make me feel better, but it does little to ease my mind. Everything feels off.

She kissed me with a hunger and fervor I've never experienced before. Last night was undeniably the best of my entire life. That kind of chemistry isn't just a product of a couple cocktails too many. That was years of pent up want and need. On both sides.

So why would she just take off in the middle of the damn night without even waking me up? Before I can think better of it, I whip my phone back out and pull up our chat.

You okay?

I wait to see if it'll be delivered, but there's nothing. She must be in the air already.

I type out several messages but erase them all before sending. I don't want to pressure her or make her uncomfortable. I'm probably overreacting anyway. That has to be a normal thing in a situation like this. We'll just have to work on our communication skills.

There's no world in which we can go back to just being best friends and business partners now. I've waited too damn long for this shot, and I won't lose my chance at happiness with her. A few more hours in limbo shouldn't be too challenging to push through.

When she calls I'll offer to make us dinner tonight so we can talk about everything. Figure out where we go from here. Knowing Stella she'll want to take things slow.

The more I think about it, her leaving in the night without saying anything is classically her. She's always in control of every aspect of her life. Truly an incredible woman who isn't used to checking in with anyone else.

The thought of her ceding control to me last night filters into my brain. Instantly my dick perks up. Having her a writhing, begging mess beneath me was an absolute thing of beauty. I want more, *need* more.

I'll just shower and pack up so we can get a head start on going home. The shower is the shortest I've probably ever taken as I rush through my routine. I'm also uncharacteristically sloppy while I repack my bags, tossing clothes in my suitcase instead of folding everything properly.

By the time we're all checked out of the resort and on the way to the airport, I have to ask Ash and Clara what they think about Stella randomly leaving early. Thoughts just keep banging around in my mind like a pinball machine. Maybe one of them knows more than I do.

"Has anyone heard from Stella yet?" I work hard to keep my voice level.

“No.” Ash doesn’t even glance up from his work.

I brace my elbows on my knees and wipe my face in my hands. Part of me wants to push for more answers, to keep asking questions, but the other part of me knows not to. If I keep going on about it I’ll look suspicious.

Stella didn’t tell me not to say anything to them about last night, but I know her well enough to know she wouldn’t want me running my mouth about it either.

“Why are you agitated?” Clara asks, her voice coated in concern.

That question makes Ash’s eyes fly up from his screen. His eyes scan me with easy familiarity. I tame my body language and facial expression. Luckily for me I’ve had years of training myself to look relaxed, it helps as an attorney to be able to put people at ease before you take them down. At the very least it makes my job more enjoyable to do that.

“It’s just weird for her to take off in the middle of the night. I’m worried.”

“She told me that her mother has been hounding her about something yesterday when we were at the spa together. She kept getting texts from her to the point that she turned her phone off.” Clara smiles softly at me. “I’m sure it has something to do with that.”

“See.” Ash squeezes her knees. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Unless something happened between you two?” Clara asks.

“No, we’re good, I think.”

I hope.

My phone has become my enemy. I can’t help but check it every twenty seconds thinking maybe I’ve missed something. A text. A phone call. No I’m staring out the window across the

river in her apartment's direction like maybe I'll see a fucking smoke signal.

My phone isn't the problem.

I am.

But fuck me, she didn't let anyone know where she was or when she landed. My message doesn't even say delivered yet. The only thing stopping me from just swinging by her place is the seed of doubt Clara planted by mentioning Stella's mom.

Their relationship is strained at best. I don't want to go over there and interrupt whatever could be going on. Plus she said her brother was picking her up from the airport. Maybe they went straight to their parent's house in the suburbs.

A notification chimes on my phone from the other side of the room, and I damn near hurtle over the couch to get to it only to see my sister's name on the screen.

MIA

Are you home yet?

Yeah, just got back

Want to go grab dinner?

Come over here

I'll order delivery

Thirty minutes later my littlest sister is standing in my apartment, holding a glass of wine and judging the art on the walls. She's majoring in art history and full of opinions. But it's just the distraction I needed. I also have to talk to someone about Stella.

"Can I ask you something?" I interrupt her critique.

She blinks a few times at my abrupt outburst. “Yeah.”

“If you slept with a friend and then woke up the next day to find them gone, like not just out of bed but left the country entirely, would you automatically assume it was because of you?”

Her eyes widen. “Did you and Ash finally do it?” She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively. “Taking your bromance to the next level?”

“Shut up.” I give her an unimpressed look. “I’m serious.”

“Who did you fuck?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. It absolutely matters because everyone is different.”

“Stella.”

Her jaw drops. “You love her. Why would you risk it for sex? How did this even happen?”

“I did it because I love her. I’ve loved her forever. We were drunk.” I hold a hand up when she starts to move toward me threateningly, all five feet and two inches of her. “Not too drunk to talk beforehand and for me to make sure she consented. There was mistletoe hanging in our cabin so we just kissed.”

“Your cabin? As in you stayed in one together?”

“Yeah, the resort messed up the reservations. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Why was there mistletoe? It’s October.”

“I had the dinner theme inspired by Ash and Clara’s wedding.”

She nods, having met Clara and heard me talk about her over the past year. “Okay. But if you talked before things happened, why would you think she left because of you?”

“I just woke up to her things gone and a message in the group chat saying there was an emergency. She said she’d call us, but she never did. It’s just not like her, you know?”

“Yeah, she’s the most responsible of the three of you by a mile.” She takes a sip of wine and looks out the window. “She could be freaking out. I’d freak out in her shoes. Sleeping with your lifelong best friend. The one who is also your business partner? Feels so messy, you know?”

“So what should I do?”

“Give her space. You don’t want to be too clingy or pushy. When will you see her next?”

“I don’t know. I think she’ll be in California for the next couple weeks.”

“Let her know you’d like to see her when she gets back. Maybe for dinner or drinks at a place she loves. Something that feels normal for you two.”

Waiting that long sounds like torture, but if that’s what I have to do, I will. I want nothing more than to figure this out.

CHAPTER NINE

STELLA

Both my parents sit across from me, pinched faces and tight lipped as I explain my current health issues to them. I knew ignoring Mom while I was on my trip was a bad idea, so when Ian picked me up at the airport, I begged him to join me for this conversation. It's easier to tell the three of them all at once anyway.

“So it's treatable?” Dad finally speaks.

“Yes. My doctor did warn that it can take quite some time to find the best treatment plan, though.”

“It's that ridiculous job of yours that did this.” My mother waves her hand dismissively my way and looks out the window to where Lake Michigan beats against the shore of their backyard. “I assume you'll be resigning.”

“Absolutely not.” I share a look with my brother, who thankfully nods in solidarity. He might have wanted me to join him in the family business, but I think he respects my skills as a CFO enough to realize I would never just resign.

“How can we help you while you go through all this? I don't know anything about lupus or Hashimoto's Disease.” My dad leans forward and squeezes my hand. “Do you have the best doctor or should we find a new one?”

“Maybe you should get a second opinion.” Mom crosses her legs at the ankle and taps her finger on the arm of her chair. “I could ask around for recommendations.”

“No. I’m seeing the best rheumatologist in Chicago. Now that we’ve pinpointed the problem, the last thing I want to do is switch.”

“Perhaps you should move in with us.” Mom gestures around the two-story great room of their Winnetka mansion. “We have all this house for just the two of us.”

They’ve lived in this house since Ian was shipped off to prep school four years before I was, so I’m not sure why it being empty now is a problem. The large oak and maple trees they’ve planted in the yard are yellow and red against the overcast, gray sky. Even so, the room feels bright and airy.

Ian’s lip tilts up in a smirk that he hides by taking a sip of scotch. If our mother isn’t pestering me to resign from TechJet, she’s bugging both of us about getting married and having children. I can already predict the next sentence out of her mouth.

“It’s not like either of you are going to give us children any time soon.” Her eyes snap to mine. “Will this make you barren?”

“Mom,” Ian admonishes her. “This isn’t the eighteen hundreds.”

“It’s a reasonable question. Why have all this if it just ends with the two of you?” She pushes to her feet and walks to the sideboard where they keep their liquor, topping off her martini with a splash more gin.

“We’ll get it sorted.” Dad pushes to his feet and pats my shoulder before ambling off to his office.

“Mrs. James?” Russel, their butler, pokes his head in to interrupt.

“Yes.”

“Mrs. Steinburg is on the phone regarding the Ladies of Winnetka luncheon this week.”

“I’ll be right there, thank you, Russel.” Mom stands and looks down at me. “We’ll discuss this more when you get back from California.”

Ian leans back on the other side of the sofa from me and holds out his scotch. “It could have gone worse.”

I tap my wine glass to his because it definitely could have. “Should we make our escape before either of them come back?”

“Yes.”

He sets his glass down on the coffee table and holds out his hand to help me up when I do the same. As much as I hate to admit it, having someone help me up feels good. I woke up this morning in so much pain. The fatigue is killing me, too.

Ian and I always drive up here together from the city. He doesn’t live in the same building as me, but we’re only a fifteen-minute walk from each other. Another perk for me is that as much as I am a control freak, he is doubly so and always insists on driving.

“When are you leaving for California?” he asks as he pulls out of the driveway.

“Tomorrow.”

It’s cowardly. I’m well aware. Nico has texted me twice since I packed up and left in the middle of the night. I just don’t want to face the possible consequences of what we did.

“That’s really soon. Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ve been living with the symptoms of this for at least a year. Having a concrete diagnosis doesn’t change anything.”

“Maybe.” His wide jaw ticks as he changes lanes. “But traveling so much back to back can’t be good for you.”

“I’ll be out there for two to three weeks and the hotel is right across the street. I’ll be okay.”

“Is Ash or Nico joining you for this trip?”

“No.”

His head turns and he regards me closely. Too closely. “That seemed very declarative.”

“I mean, no is a complete sentence.”

“It was the way you said it. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is fine.”

He looks at me as pull up to a stoplight. His dark blue eyes narrow as he scans my face. “Liar.”

“It’s nothing important.”

“Do I need to buy the company out from under Asher?” It’s a ridiculous question, but he’s one hundred percent serious. He would and could do it. “Break it up and dissolve it for parts? Demoralize him into a broken and penniless man?”

“That’s a little intense.”

“No one fucks with my little sister.”

“Calm down.” I laugh at the over the top sentiment. “You know that neither Ash nor Nico would ever hurt me.”

That last sentiment hits a little harder now because I can’t utter the words with absolute certainty anymore. Would Nico hurt me on purpose? No. I know he wouldn’t. But he definitely could unintentionally.

What if what we did was just a fun but meaningless night to him? Worse, what if it wasn’t but then he finds out about my diagnosis and runs for the hills? I wouldn’t blame him.

It’s hard for me to wrap my mind around my life-altering circumstances, imagine starting a relationship with someone at the beginning of this journey. I know he’ll be there for me when I tell him. I just don’t want to put all this on him beyond friendship.

Who knows? Maybe he hasn’t even thought twice about it. It’s not like he’s a stranger to one night stands. He could easily have checked that box when he woke up and I wasn’t there.

He’s only texted twice which has to mean something, that he’s fine. This is one of those times where having a girlfriend outside my friend group would be amazing. I’ve almost dialed

Clara four times since I got home, but I know she'll tell Ash. He'll talk to Nico. I don't want my sex life to be a game of telephone.

After Ian drops me off, I go change into an oversize Bears hoodie and leggings to be comfortable. I turn on the Sunday night football game as background noise while I start packing. Ash, Nico, and I used to always watch Sunday night football together if the Bears had an away game, but between the expansion of the company and his upcoming nuptials, we just haven't had time.

I'm deep in my closet when I hear my phone's text alert. With a handful of trousers draped over my arm I walk out into the bedroom and pick it up.

ASHER

I saw you were going out to the west coast office this week

Do you need anything from me?

No, I'm just heading out to oversee some things

Everything else okay?

Of course

A relieved breath whooshes out of me as I set my phone down. I can lie through text messages, but if he had decided to FaceTime me, I'd be getting interrogated. I'm so grateful that he's so deeply in love with Clara that it's easier to hide things from him.

At some point I'm going to tell them about my diagnosis, but I'd prefer to have everything controlled before then. A good handle on medications and dosages. That way I can just

deliver the news, answer any questions, and everything can be as normal and easy as possible.

If I could have done the same with my family I would have, but with how pushy Mom was getting, it would have started a cold war between us. We've had enough of those over the years that I don't want to revisit. At the end of the day having my parents aware of everything will actually help. Less drama on the back end.

If I had been raised by parents who were actively present in my life, I probably would have told them sooner. But being shipped off to boarding school before I'd even gotten my first period kind of kills any type of reliance I could have on them. That's why I'm like this, so closed off and hyper-independent. I've just always had to be.

Or I'm just running from my problems.

CHAPTER TEN

NICO

I walk into work earlier than I ever have. None of our assistants have even arrived. Ash's office is still dark. My hope is that Stella will get in before he does so we talk for a few minutes privately. I need to know what is happening inside her head right now.

Anxiety has never been an issue for me but fuck if my mind hasn't been a swirling mess the past forty-eight hours. I need clarity. Something.

I hear the elevator a second before it opens, and I watch, disappointed when Ash and Stella's assistants step off together. I wave to both of them as they do a double take, clearly surprised to see me here this early.

Ten minutes go by.

Twenty.

I pull up some work and begin looking through a contract that needs to be finalized to try to distract myself. It works for a second until I hear the elevator again and look up to see my assistant, Sammy, do a double take at me.

"I'm so sorry, did I forget a morning meeting or something?" she asks hurriedly after dropping her bags at her desk.

“No, I just came in early today to start these contracts.” I gesture at the computer screen to my left.

“Do you need me to get you anything? Breakfast or coffee?”

“Yeah, I’ll take an Americano and one of those breakfast sandwiches that I like from the place down the street. But you can wait until you get settled.”

“Right on it.” She taps my desk and walks back out to hers.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and set it on the desk, hoping to see a notification but disappointed when I don’t. What is that saying, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome? If so, that’s me. I have to stop obsessing, so I take the phone and drop it in the drawer of my desk.

Out of sight, out of mind.

“Did hell freeze over?” Ash leans against the door jamb with an annoying fucking grin on his face. “You made it into the office before me on a Monday. This has never happened.”

“And it’ll never happen again if you don’t drop the smug ass grin,” I say with scowl.

He chuckles. Fucker. It just makes me scowl even more.

“Where’s Stella?” I ask, turning my back on him.

“San Francisco.”

“What?” I spin right the fuck around. “Why?”

“Just dealing with opening the office out there. Calm down.” He straightens and closes the door behind him. “What’s going on with you? You’ve been weird since Iceland.”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“Asher.”

“Dominico.”

“Don’t full name me.”

“Don’t be evasive.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one out there dealing with the new office opening? Now that I’m COO, isn’t that technically my job?”

“It will be, but she was the lead on the expansion. Is this what you’re upset about? Do you feel pushed out or something?”

“No.”

“Good because it isn’t personal. I know you could handle it, as does Stella. She just started everything, and we decided it made more sense to keep her on it rather than throw you straight into everything.”

“I could handle it.” My hackles rise. Those two have always lived to work which is fine, I respect the hustle, but I know there’s more to life than building an empire that will just crumble once I’m gone. Most of the time I feel like they fully respect our differing philosophies but times like this it feels a little judgmental.

“I know that. So does Stella. She just wants to make sure everything is perfect.”

“We slept together.” I could have confessed that more delicately, but fuck it, he’s pissing me off.

His jaw drops, and he blinks rapidly. I think he might be rebooting. “Pardon? Who slept together?”

“Stella and I had sex the last night together in Iceland.”

I notice the assistants sending furtive glances this way, so I turn the glass walls opaque. I know they can’t hear us, but it wouldn’t surprise me if Sara, Ash’s assistant, could read lips.

“I, wow.” He slumps back against the chair and runs his fingers along his jaw. “It’s about time.”

Now it’s my turn to be shocked speechless. “What?”

Over the years I’ve always been fairly certain that my interest in Stella was obvious. I might have drunkenly

confessed my interest to him as a teenager, but it seemed so far-fetched that we never discussed it again.

“You two have been circling each other for years. Before I met Clara I had so many moments where I felt like the third wheel. The tension between you has always been palpable.”

“And you never thought to bring this up to me?”

He shrugs. “It wasn’t my business.”

“Have you ever said anything to Stella?”

“Nope.”

“Would you have ever said anything?”

“Only if one of you came to me first. Clara knows my suspicions though.”

“And what does she think?”

“We’re in agreement.”

We sit and stare each other down for a moment. I have no idea where his thoughts are going, but I know where mine are.

“Have you talked to Stella?”

“Yeah, I texted her last night.”

“Did she seem alright?”

“Hard to tell through text messages but yes. Not quite as lively as usual, but maybe she’s overthinking everything like you.”

“Or she’s regretting it.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“She won’t answer me. Mia thinks I need to give her a little bit of time.”

“Do you want me to ask Clara for her opinion?”

“There’s no way you’re not going to tell her anyway so let me know what she says. They’re close anyway, maybe she’ll have insight we don’t.”

I turn in my chair and look out the window after he leaves my office. The sun is out today, contrasting brilliantly against the glass and steel skyscrapers jutting up into the air. The urge to check my phone comes again, but it's easier to ignore now that I've talked to Ash. If she doesn't return my calls or text messages by the end of week I decide I'm going to go confront her.

It's been six days with zero contact from Stella. Ash and Clara invited me over for dinner tonight. I think partly because she wants to talk to me and partly because Ash is going to pump me full of beer and hopefully pizza.

"Hey," I say when he opens his door cradling Steve, Clara's cat.

I have a catnip-laced cat toy in my pocket. For the past year I've been trying to get this damn fur ball's approval, but every single time he finds me lacking. I can see it in his evil green eyes. He doesn't know who he's up against though, and I can be doggedly persistent.

"Clara's in the kitchen. I need to change the litter box and then I'll be out." He turns and moves down the hall.

It's a testament to the love he has for his future wife that he is shoveling cat shit while still wearing his Armani suit from work. He was always so uptight, I mean, he still is, but she brought joy and warmth into his life. Nothing makes me happier for them.

"Hi Nico," Clara comes around the kitchen island and wraps me in a hug. She's in one of her holiday-themed outfits, leggings with candy corn and a fuzzy sweater with ghosts all over it. Even her slippers are Halloween-themed. "How are you doing?"

"The answer is going to depend on how much you know."

"Everything."

“Then I’m doing pretty shitty, to be honest.” My eyes meet hers. “Have you heard from her at all? I’ve never gone this long without talking to her.”

“No. I’m sorry. It’s weird for us to not hear from her for this long either.”

“She emailed me some figures from last quarter earlier today. Nothing seemed off in the email, but usually she would have just called me.” Ash walks into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator.

“Should I go out tomorrow to check on her?” I ask as he hands me a beer.

“Give it one more day.” Clara turns to the oven as the timer goes off. She pulls a sheet pan out of the oven and sets it on the granite between us.

“Is that chicken nuggets and french fries?” I look between them in confusion.

“Yes. It’s my comfort meal.” She slides the oven mitts off and sets them aside. “I’ll tell you the story if you want, but it’s kind of depressing. I just know you need all the comfort you can get tonight.”

“It’s been a long time since I had anything remotely close to this.” I watch as Ash sets out a bowl of freshly cut fruit. “So let’s do it. You can tell me all the details as we eat. Maybe your sad story will distract me from my own.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STELLA

There are a lot of shitty things about lupus, but, for me, the worst are the low grade fevers right at the beginning of what I've come to know are flares. I'm working from the hotel bed today, cocooned by the plush comforter and extra blankets I had housekeeping deliver. I emailed my assistant, Amanda, back in Chicago to let her know I was sick and texted Ash. I'm glad to know I can count on them to handle anything urgent while I rest.

I manage to work for an hour before I can't keep my eyes open anymore. It's only ten in the morning and the fatigue is already setting in. My temples pound as I lay back in bed, grimacing at the pain in what feels like every joint of my body. I don't know how I went from a woman running marathons and doing pilates four times a week to feeling like even getting out of bed is a chore.

Tears roll down my cheeks as the gravity of my situation sinks in. For the first time I'm completely alone, in another city, in a hotel room with nothing to distract me from my thoughts. I'm so mad and confused about why this is happening. I could call Ian, but he would probably overreact and either call our parents or fly out here to take care of me. I don't want that.

This is my problem to deal with. I can't hand it off to anyone else to shoulder for me. Maybe I just need to cry it out and then sleep it off. Hopefully this flare will be short lived now that I have all my medication.

When I wake up I'll handle this shit like I handle everything else, alone and with focus.

Somewhere down the hall someone is banging their fist on a door. I feel even worse than I did earlier as I pry my eyes open. After a few sleepy blinks, I hear my name and more pounding.

Is someone at my door?

It's dark outside when I glance out the window. I must have been asleep for most of the day. The knocking continues as I hobble toward the door. The joints in my ankles scream with discomfort with every step.

Thankfully I fell asleep in a pair of leggings and a crew neck, so I don't have to worry about getting dressed. I barely remember to check the peephole before opening the door and gasp at who I see.

Standing on the opposite side of the door is a very irritated Nico. You don't have to have known him your entire life to tell he's pissed by the way his arms are crossed over his chest. Even through the distortion of the peephole, I don't miss his clenched jaw.

I unlock both locks and open the door rather aggressively for how shitty I feel right now.

"What are you doing here?" I ask with an attitude.

"You missed a meeting this morning and none of Amanda's calls were going through. I even convinced the front desk to call your room and no one answered." He brushes past me as he walks into my room. He doesn't even have a bag with him.

What meeting?

“So you flew here? Like a fucking psychopath?”

“I don’t know, Stella, you must have missed the day at our fancy private school where we learned how to politely return phone calls. Maybe, then, I wouldn’t have felt it necessary to go to the extreme of jumping on the company jet to make sure our CFO wasn’t dead in an alley somewhere.” He finally stops to take a breath and looks me up and down. “Are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

I hold my hand up to stop him from coming closer as concern deepens the lines around his eyes. “I texted both Ash and Amanda to tell them I wasn’t feeling well.”

“No, you didn’t.”

I cross the room to where my phone was plugged in. Sure enough I have almost seventy notifications. Countless from Amanda, two from Ash, and I don’t even want to look at Nico’s because the thought of opening our text thread puts a lump in my throat. Guilt and shame heat my blood when I realize that the texts I thought I sent to Ash and Amanda were sitting unsend as drafts.

“Fuck.” I set the phone down and rub my temples. “I really thought I told them I wasn’t feeling well. I’m so sorry. But flying out here is a little extreme regardless.”

When I turn back to Nico, he’s standing in front of the table where all my medications are laid out. He picks one up and frowns as he looks at the prescription. “Methotrexate?” He looks at me confused and picks up another bottle. “Celebrex?”

“The other is an antidepressant.” I close the distance between us, gently taking the bottles from his hands and putting them back.

“What’s wrong?” He lifts his palm to my cheek, cupping my face so gently like he’s afraid to break me. I see none of the annoyance and anger he came into the room with left in his eyes, now all that’s there is a deep well of concern.

“I have lupus and Hashimoto’s disease.”

He flinches as if I hit him. “Since when?”

“I was officially diagnosed the week before we left for Iceland.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us?” His words are sharpened by the edge of hurt in his voice.

“I didn’t want to overshadow the trip with the news.”

“Where was all this?” His hand arcs over the table. “Because I sure as fuck didn’t see any medications in the room we were sharing for four days.”

“I didn’t have them with me. I hadn’t picked up the prescriptions yet.”

He drops down on the edge of the bed and grabs my hand tugging me in front of him. “Is this why you disappeared after we,” his voice trails off as if he’s unsure about saying the words out loud.

“Partly.”

“You could have told me, you know? So you wouldn’t have felt so alone.” He rests his hands on my hips lightly as he looks up into my eyes. “Is the medication making you feel sick now?”

“No, I have these flare ups of symptoms.” I can’t handle standing anymore so I pull the covers back and climb under them. “Usually fatigue, joint pain, low grade fevers. I’m hoping it won’t last as long as it usually does now that I’ve started medication for it.”

“How long have you been dealing with this?” He tucks the duvet around me and turns the lamp off.

“A year or so,” I say around a yawn.

“Alone.” The edge is back in his voice.

I can’t even work up the energy to be pissed at him right now though. For starters, he’s here because he’s worried about me after I flaked at work. Not to mention he has every right to be pissed at me for leaving in the middle of the night. But none of that gives him any right to be upset that I kept my

medical issues from him. It was a private matter for me, and I won't apologize for how I've handled it thus far.

"Where's your key?" He whispers as I start to drift off. "I need to go pick up some things."

"In the center pocket of my tote."

I start to drift off as he moves around the room quietly. Water runs in the bathroom, and I hear a glass being set on the nightstand beside me. Then he leans down and presses a kiss to my temple. His spicy scent comforts me into a deep sleep as I hear the door close behind him.

At some point later on, I wake up to the soft glow of a phone screen illuminating the hard planes of his face. Stubble already shadows his jaw as his eyes scan whatever he's reading. He's so focused he doesn't notice me watching him and eventually I fall back asleep.

I shouldn't let myself feel so comforted by his proximity, but I find myself moving closer to where he's stretched out beside me. I do feel lighter now that he knows my secret. At least one of them. I just can't let him figure out the other.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NICO

I stayed up until the early hours of the morning reading every single thing I could find about lupus and Hashimoto's disease. I've never known anyone with either of them and she seems so sick. How could I have missed the signs? She said she's been dealing with all this for at least a year.

As deeply concerned as I am, I'm also pissed. Removing the romantic feelings I have for her, as her friend I am angry that she didn't tell me. I don't think Ash knows, but if he does, if she told him and not me, I'm not sure how I'll get over it.

After accidentally rereading an article, I decided it was time to lay down. The cheap boxers and undershirts I picked up at the corner market aren't comfortable, but I left straight from work after she missed her meeting and didn't return calls for an hour.

All that's peeking out of the covers is her messy bun and forehead, so I gently push them down to her chin that way I don't have to worry about her suffocating in her sleep. It also allows me to watch her while she sleeps. Now that I've read about all the symptoms, I can easily recognize the rash on her face. I noticed it in Iceland but thought it was from the cold and wind. She rarely goes anywhere without at least a little makeup, so it never struck me as out of the ordinary either.

She whimpers in her sleep quietly, a crease forming between her brows. Before I can think the better of it I lean forward and press my lips over it. Nothing feels as right as my lips on her skin.

Minutes crawl by slowly as I lay beside her with nothing but my thoughts to keep me company. There's even more doubt now. Did she take off on me because of this? Or was it that she got cold feet when I fell asleep and didn't have space to think? Worst of all, does she regret what we did?

I came charging into her room prepared to read her the riot act for disappearing. Not only on work, but on me. Especially me. In all the time I've known her, I think she's only been sick three times. Of all the things I was expecting to find, it wasn't this.

My eyes finally start to drift closed when she rolls closer to me. I slide my arm under her pillow and make myself available if she wants to cuddle. My breath escapes me in a whoosh as she migrates closer to me, eventually resting her head in the hollow between my shoulder and neck.

I give the clock one last look and pray to any god that will listen that she didn't set her alarm because it should be going off in less than two hours. After the day I've had, I'm going to need more than that.

Sunlight streams through the crack in the curtains and across the pillow my head was resting on. I got at least four hours of sleep based on the intensity of the beam.

“Hi.” Stella peers up at me from where she remains cocooned in the bedding.

“Good morning.” I reach over and push them away from her face so I can see her clearly. “How do you feel?”

“Better today.”

“Good,” I say with a sigh of relief. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not too long. I thought about getting up but,” she says as she rolls over and looks out the window, not finishing the thought.

“But?”

“It was nice to wake up beside you.” She doesn’t look at me. “And I knew you were up late last night, so I wanted you to be able to sleep in.”

“Stella.” I lift the covers and slide toward her.

“I texted Ash to let him know what happened and apologized for yesterday.” Her voice quivers as I lay flush against her back.

“Is this okay?” I ask as I wrap my arm around her waist, my palm resting over her stomach. “Does it hurt?”

“No, it’s fine.” She lays her hand over mine, sliding her slender fingers between my own.

“Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?”

“Can we just lay here instead? Pretend I didn’t just drop a bomb on you last night and then pass out?”

“Why didn’t you ever mention any of this to us?”

She deflates in my arms. “I wasn’t ready for it to be real. I only just told my parents and Ian this week.”

“How’d that go?”

She snorts derisively. “Ian was great. Dad was neutral. Mom suggested I quit working and move home. Not so she could take care of me, obviously, just so that I’m no longer working for a living. It’s absolutely wild how she’d rather I be a kept woman under their roof than a successful executive.”

“Well, you know we wouldn’t be the same without you. Ash wouldn’t accept your resignation anyway. You could cut back to an hour of work a week, and you’d remain our CFO.”

“That’s not something we have to worry about. My doctor said that there’s no reason to think I won’t be able to find a treatment that works and get back to being one hundred percent there at work.”

“What about outside of work?”

“What about it?”

“You’re too smart to be obtuse.”

“And you’re too smart to be indirect, so if you have a question, just ask it.” Her tone is just as biting as mine was.

“Why did you leave me back in Iceland?”

Her body tenses against mine, and for a moment I think she’s going to shut down and close herself off from me.

“I was scared.” Her voice is barely a whisper. “I’m still scared. What if you woke up and looked at me and instantly regretted it? I just found out that I have an incurable, though treatable, chronic illness that is going to change the way I live my life for the foreseeable future. How can I ask anyone to jump into that mess with me?” Her body shudders under mine as she fights back a sob. “And you’re my best friend.”

She rolls over, her glassy eyes searching mine in the dim light. I look back at her just as intently, listening to what she’s saying and, more importantly, what she’s not saying. Self-preservation demands that I be sure of the context outside of her words.

“I’ll always be here regardless of what we decide,” I tell her honestly.

“What do you want?”

I take a deep breath before answering. “I want you to be healthy. And happy. I want you to let me in, all the way in. I want you to let me prove that I can be who you need, even though you think you don’t need anyone.”

What I really want to tell her is that I want to be her partner. I want to spend every waking moment together. To hold her while she’s sick and encourage her when she feels defeated. Those thoughts stayed locked up though, because I’m not sure she won’t take off running if I tell her I’m all in. I’ve been all in.

I quit dating as much because I could tell it was causing tension between us. At the time I thought it was because she

thought I wasn't taking work seriously. For several years we'd argue about the same thing and she'd make snide remarks about my personal life.

All the women I would take out and entertain always knew that I wasn't looking to settle down with them. It was always a mutual, casual interaction, and I just figured that was what bothered her. I never stopped to think that maybe she had similar feelings for me that I did her.

Now as I look back it does seem like some of it may have stemmed from jealousy. It might take some work for her to see me as serious, so I'm going to hold back the words that want to tumble freely from my lips.

As much as I want to rush forward into this without thinking, I know I need to set the foundation. I've already started being more responsible at work, becoming COO is evidence of that. Now I have to lay the groundwork for her and I. Be there to make her life easier. Join her at appointments, make her dinner, slowly insert myself into every facet of her life until there's no reason for her to be scared anymore.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STELLA

Having Nico out in California turned out being the best thing for the company in the end. We've been able to fast track so many little things to get the new office ready, and he's met the staff that he'll be overseeing. As shocking as it was to open the door and see his face, I'm so glad he came to be part of this.

I had assumed he'd get his own hotel room because after our initial conversation about everything he hasn't pushed for anything more but he also never moved to another room. We had no deeper conversations. He didn't try anything sexual which, if I'm honest, hurts a bit. It's confusing though, to think that I don't want that but still be a bit hurt.

I know it was probably the least sexy thing ever to see me sick. And after I left him after we slept together, I can't expect him to keep pursuing me when I ran away. But the fact of the matter is that I even have trouble seeing myself as more than my illnesses most of the time. Adjusting to this is harder than I ever could have imagined, and from all my research, I actually have only experienced mild symptoms.

The one thing Nico has been adamant about is telling Asher and Clara as soon as we get home. In a perfect world no one would have had to know about this, I could keep this outside of my professional life. That's just not feasible when

you co-founded a company with your best friends. They deserve to know why I haven't been at my best lately.

Nico said he'd order dinner and we could meet at his house, but I told him I'd feel better in my own space. It's a vulnerable thing to be open about this. At least it's the last sit down explanation I'll have to give anyone about it though. I'm sure it'll feel good to have it all out in the open and off my chest.

"I'll have the driver drop you off first," Nico says as we exit the plane and walk toward the awaiting SUV. "Then I'll run home for a few things and be back to your apartment before Ash and Clara get there."

"That works." I take his hand as he helps me into the back seat.

The drive back into the city is quiet, so I spend most of it looking out the windows. Steel gray clouds cast gloomy light over the city but this time of year has always been my favorite. I love watching as winter encroaches on the city and ice starts to form along the lakeshore. I'm completely fine going days without seeing the sun. Which, come to think of it, is actually a good thing since lupus makes me sensitive to UV exposure.

No more beach vacations where I do nothing but lay on a beach for days. That's actually depressing. At least I'll always have spray tans. Although I should probably check into that and make sure it's safe, too.

There's so many things to learn. What I can't do anymore. How my medications will interact with one another. I already think one of them is causing me to have trouble sleeping. On top of that concern, I keep forgetting when to take what, so I'm pretty sure I'm occasionally missing doses.

The driver stops in front of my building, and Nico jumps out to get my bags. The doorman, Wayne, offers to help, but I shake my head with a polite smile. "Thank you," I tell him.

Nico pulls me into his arms for a hug, and I let him, going so far as to tuck my head under his chin and wrap my arms around his waist. He gives me a kiss on the forehead, and

while I'm sure he didn't mean for it to be sexy in any way, it still sent a wave of heat through my body. I cling to him a little longer than necessary, but I'm having trouble letting go.

"I'll be back soon." He says the words quietly, almost like he's trying to convince himself, too.

My apartment feels extra cold and empty now. I have a unit that takes up half the floor with eastern and southern facing views. There are technically three bedrooms, but I turned one into a closet and the third into an office. All three bedrooms are on the side of the apartment facing Lake Michigan. Maybe it's because I grew up in a house right on the shore, but being able to look out onto the lake from bed has always been comforting to me.

The rest of the apartment is pretty standard. Chef's kitchen, which I rarely use because I can't cook to save my soul. A large living room that's separated from the kitchen by a dining room. It's all one space with floor to ceiling windows.

My only neighbors are an eighty-year-old couple, who still hold hands and steal kisses in the elevator. June and Jerry have been married for almost sixty years and love to have me over for dinner. I never really thought much about marriage, just assuming it would happen for me eventually. Maybe sometime when I wasn't so focused on my career, and now I wonder if I should even entertain it.

I wheel my suitcases down the hall into my closet and separate the dirty laundry into each respective basket. This room is the only place I keep neat and tidy. My own personal temple to fashion. I look up at the shelves where I keep my suitcases, but the thought of lifting even an empty suitcase above my head seems to be too much right now. I'll do it later.

I grab my makeup and toiletry bag to take into my bathroom. The bed is unmade and a bottle of water still sits on my bedside table. Towels litter the floor of the bathroom, too. I'll have to clean up after everyone leaves tonight.

I should light some candles or run to the store for flowers, but the thought of going out overwhelms me. So I take off my pants and crawl in bed, setting an alarm for an hour before

everyone is set to arrive. Most of the pain I had been dealing with is gone, but the fatigue is still lingering.

“Stella.”

The bed dips beside me, jostling me gently from the deep sleep I was in.

“Stella.” It’s Nico’s voice. Then I feel the warmth of his palm on my hip even through the covers. “Wake up, love.”

I blink a few times, clearing my vision along with my mind. The sunlight is reflecting golden off the building across the street, so it must be getting near time for my alarm to go off. I look up at him and smile.

“Let yourself in, did you?”

“I knocked first.” He winks down at me. “When you didn’t answer right away, I just used my emergency key in case you were sleeping.”

“Good thinking.” I reach for my phone to check the time. “I better get up. I need to take a quick shower before they get here.”

“I’ll get everything ready out in the kitchen. Do you need anything before I go?” He stands and waits at the foot of the bed.

“No. I’m good.” I swing the covers off, completely forgetting that I took my pants off.

My skin heats under his gaze as he rakes his eyes down the length of my legs. At least I don’t have to worry about my libido being affected by everything. He could probably breathe on me and I’d come at this point. I consider waiting to get up until he leaves the room but decide to taunt him.

I’m still so confused by him not asking for a clarification of how things are between us that I want to do things to push him. I need a definitive answer. So I stand up and walk into the

bathroom, even with most of my ass on display for him, without looking back once.

After a quick shower I pull on a pair of leggings and a soft, oversize cashmere sweater. I find myself wishing I had slippers or a pair of warm socks handy because my feet are freezing. My toes are even a different color than the rest of my feet, but I ignore it and walk out into the living room.

Ash and Clara are already there sitting at the island while Nico sets everything out. For a moment everything feels so right. All the discomfort I feel in my body evaporates as I hang back. I want this all the time, to just feel normal again.

Ash is the first to see me and stands holding his arm out for a side hug. He gives me a questioning look which I return with a smile. Soon it will all make sense for him. Then Clara swoops in with the tightest, warmest hug known to man.

“Are you feeling better?” she asks.

“Yes. That’s actually why I wanted to have you over tonight. I need to fill you guys in on some recent things I’ve found out.”

We serve ourselves and go sit around the table as I tell them. I explain both of my diagnoses and how they may affect me both professionally and personally. I owe it to all of them to be completely transparent about this, not because I think they’ll be upset or use the information punitively, but because I know they care.

They prove that sentiment by reacting completely different from my parents. There’s no disengaging like my dad did. No one suggests I take time off work, although I know it wouldn’t be an issue if I did. Instead, they ask how they can support me.

The love and compassion they shower me with leads to me breaking down in tears. I don’t like to cry in front of people, it makes me incredibly uncomfortable to put those emotions on them like that. But it doesn’t change the fact that I don’t know how to process the care they show.

After we finish off a bottle of wine and Ash and Clara leave, I realize that I don’t want to be alone tonight. The

atmosphere already feels off without them, and thinking about being in my place alone just makes me sad. Having Nico barefoot in my kitchen helping put away food and dishes just feels right.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me as he finishes wiping down the counters.

“Nothing.” Why am I like this? Why can’t I just be open and tell him the truth without him putting in so much effort to get me to open up?

“Try again.” He levels his gaze at me and braces his palms on the edge of the island. “I can see the thoughts racing through that beautiful mind of yours.”

“I don’t want to be alone tonight.” The words come tumbling out of my mouth before my pride can stop them.

“Oh.” He shrugs a careless shoulder. “That’s good because I packed a few bags that are sitting in your office as we speak.”

I blink several times, working through the string of emotions. First, the audacity of this man. Second, that’s oddly sweet. Finally, my body just seems to sag in relief, as if it instinctively knows I’ll be looked after.

Not that I expect to be some sort of pampered pet. It just feels good to not be alone. A big part of me rebels at his declaration, though. I’m torn.

“I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for years.”

He walks around the perimeter of the kitchen island and cups both my cheeks, tilting my face back until our eyes meet. His thumbs caress my cheekbones as I search the depths of his deep brown orbs.

“Just let me do this. Let me take care of you.” His gaze dips to my lips. “Please.”

“I don’t have a guest bedroom.”

“I’m fine on the couch.”

“Your back will hurt.” He hurt himself playing basketball at the community center one weekend with Clara.

“Then I’ll line the pockets of my chiropractor.” His fingers still caress my skin, even as I wrap my hands around his wrists. “Stella, I’m going to overcome every objection you could possibly make, and I’ll win. You’re a force to be reckoned with, but I will out stubborn you every time.”

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. I expect some sort of cocky response from him, but he just gives me a soft smile and leans down toward me. My eyes flutter closed because I think he’s going to kiss me. My lips part in anticipation, but he surprises me by kissing the corner of my mouth instead.

Disappointment and confusion war within me.

“I’m going to go change into my pajamas. Want to pick a movie to watch?”

“Sure,” I answer, still puzzled by his actions as I watch him disappear into the office.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NICO

Watching Stella's facial expression as she thought I was going to kiss her told me everything I need to know. Whether she's ready to admit it or not, she still wants me. Thank fuck, because I know I want her. I want her forever so slow and steady it is.

I grab a pair of flannel pants and a henley from my bag and quickly change. It's important that I not give her a lot of time to start overthinking this. I bet she's already gone back and forth in her mind twelve times in the five minutes I was in the other room.

"Want anything to drink?" I ask as I rejoin her. "I'm going to grab a water."

"I'll take one, too." She's snuggled in the corner of her sofa with a blanket over her lap. "What are you in the mood to watch?"

"Anything without subtitles." I smile at her answering grumble. She loves watching foreign films, but if I'm reading I want it to be a book. "How about that sad Sarah Jessica Parker and Sharon Stone movie you love?"

"Oh, yes," she exclaims as she scrolls to it on the screen.

"It takes place at Thanksgiving, right?"

“Christmas but the vibes are right. I could use a good cry that’s not about me anyway,” she says as she takes the bottle from my hand. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Instead of sitting at the other end of the couch, I make myself comfortable in the middle and pull her feet onto my lap.

She tenses as I start massaging one of them, but as soon as I hit the inside of her arch, I feel her melt back into the cushions. I can’t help but notice how cold her feet are and remember reading something about a syndrome that can occur with autoimmune disorders when I went on my research spiral. Unfortunately the lights are off while we watch so I can’t see if her toes are a different color. Honestly, I can’t even remember if it is a serious enough thing that she should call her doctor about.

The movie is halfway through when I hear her breaths deepen and look over to find her asleep. I set her feet to the side and walk back to her bedroom. I want to get everything ready to just transfer her from the couch to the bed.

Her bathroom is a bit messy, as usual, so I pick up the towels from the floor and pull the used ones off the rack to throw in the hamper. A glance at the counter covered by makeup and skincare products makes me a little twitchy. I really consider grabbing a container of disinfectant wipes to clean up, but she needs to be put in bed. Plus, slow and steady has to be my mantra.

I find her in the same position I left her and turn the television off. She doesn’t wake as I set the blanket aside and scoop her up in my arms. Her head falls against my shoulder, and my stomach swoops in response. I have it so bad for her, the last few weeks have really turned up the dial for me though.

She makes a cute growly noise when I lay her down in her bed. I’m tucking her in when her eyes flutter open and she grabs my hand.

“Sleep in here with me,” she mumbles.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” To emphasize the command she reaches to the side and pulls the covers back.

“Alright, I’ll finish turning everything off for the night. Do you want water or anything?”

“Just you,” she says sleepily as she rolls away from the beam of light shining through the crack in the bathroom door.

It feels like she just reached inside my chest and squeezed my heart with that final sentiment. She probably won’t remember in the morning, but I will. I walk out into the living room and make sure the front door is locked before grabbing both waters from the coffee table and walking into the bedroom. After fumbling for a few minutes, I figure out how to close the blinds. The last thing either of us want is to wake up with sun blasting into the room as it rises over the lake.

I reach over my head and grab the collar of my shirt. Taking a page from Stella’s book, I let it drop on the floor beside the bed and carefully get in beside her. I can’t tell if she’s asleep or not, so I try to move as little as possible. I’m just about to drift off to sleep when she rolls toward me.

“What are we doing, Nico?” she asks quietly.

“We’re being there for each other.”

“How am I being there for you?”

“By letting me be here for you.” By letting me love you, I want to say. It’s right on the tip of my tongue. I’ve told her those three words so many times over the years, but now they have a different weight to them.

She crosses the invisible divide between our bodies and drapes herself over me. She must have taken her pants off while I turned everything off for the night because all I feel under my palm is the expanse of the soft skin of her thigh. My cock pulses at her proximity, but she quickly falls asleep, and this isn’t about sex. I follow her into a deep sleep soon thereafter.

“So how do you think Stella’s actually doing with everything going on?” Clara asks me as I fasten an apron around myself and get ready to help her serve dinner at the shelter.

“She’s internalizing everything and rarely talks about it. She hasn’t shown any outward signs of pain or a flare lately.”

“Yeah, but she also never showed any of it before either.”

“Exactly, which is why I’ve moved in.”

She drops the spoon full of mashed potatoes she was about to serve onto the metal buffet table. I probably could have found a more subtle way to drop that bit of news but too late. Her eyes are twice as big as they normally are.

“Are you together, together then?” She recovers and smiles at the man she was serving, apologizing and calling him by name.

“No.” I exchange a few friendly words with the man as he moves down the line. “We’re keeping it platonic-ish.”

“Platonic-ish?”

Cold wind blows through the room as a string of men come through the door hungry and ready to eat. We stop chatting and focus on the people we’re serving for the next hour. As winter approaches more and more people show up for meals and hoping to find a bed for the night.

She helped expand the center last year, but it seems like the more space there is, the higher the demand. I know it eats at her, trying to keep the people who rely on the shelter and community center fed, clothed, and sheltered and at times having to turn folks away. Clara’s heart is bigger and warmer than anyone else I’ve ever met. She’s managed to warm up and humanize my asshole best friend, so she might as well be a saint in my mind.

As the guests shuffle out, either into the cold November night or to one of the dorms, she walks back over to me.

“I’m going to need you to explain what you mean by platonic-ish and where you’re staying because we both know she doesn’t have a guest room.”

“We’re not sleeping together, so it’s platonic.” I dip my washrag into the hot soapy water and start cleaning off a tray.

“Okay, but you want to, right?”

“Want to what?”

“Don’t play dumb,” she says as she backhands my chest. “I’m going to have to report back to Ash tonight, so I need all the details. Otherwise he’ll ask a million questions I can’t answer.”

“You’re the one who agreed to marry him.” I laugh at the side-eyed glare she gives me. “That seems like a you problem.”

“I know a thousand ways to make you bleed.”

“Damn. Didn’t realize you had such a vicious side.”

“I keep it hidden away so I surprise my victims. Now tell me and quit being cryptic.”

“Okay, fine. We aren’t having sex, but we are sleeping in the same bed. I don’t think what I want is more important than what she needs right now, which is support and comfort. Her physical needs have always been taken care of, but her parents never met her emotional needs. I’ve known this since the very beginning of our friendship. She and Ash have that experience in common.”

She nods, knowing better than anyone how awful his parents can be. They won’t be at their wedding, and I don’t think Ash has even been in communication with them since Christmas of last year.

“You’re a good guy, Nico.”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

“I’m glad she has you.”

The conversation fades after that, and we work side by side helping clean everything before going our separate ways for

the night. I wait until she gets in the town car Asher insists she take to and from work. I'd be the same way in his shoes. At least Stella employs her own driving service, so it's one thing I don't have to worry about.

I tell my driver to stop at a pharmacy on the way home. I've noticed that Stella sometimes forgets which medication she's taken. Then in order to avoid double dosing, she ends up skipping. So I'm going to find her one of those pill dispensers where you preload your medication for the week.

I find the section with a much wider selection than I thought I would find. After looking at two different versions, I settle on one with fourteen compartments, one for every morning and evening for seven days. I see an end cap display with animal slippers and stop dead in my tracks. As if they had been waiting there for me are two matching pairs of raccoon slippers in the perfect sizes for both of us.

At the register I grab her a dark chocolate bar, too. I found her a couple nights ago eating frozen chocolate chips from a bag in the middle of the night. Having sisters growing up that wasn't a new experience, but we can do better than semi-sweet morsels for my girl.

The cashier convinces me to put everything in a gift bag which turns out to be a great idea based on the look in Stella's eyes when I walk in the door. She's always loved thoughtful gifts, not over the top shit. I watch her eyes widen and then crinkle at the corner when she pulls out the slippers.

“What are these?”

“I noticed that your feet are always getting cold.” I pull my matching pair out of the bag. “And I couldn't resist when I saw that we could have matching trash panda feet.”

Her musical laughter fills the air and then she dives back into the bag. Her eyes light up when she pulls the chocolate out. “I'm not sharing.”

“I know you don't share chocolate.”

“As much as I hate that I need one of these, I really do.” She holds up the pill organizer. “Thank you.” She sets

everything down and closes the distance between us. “You’re the best, Nico.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STELLA

“Are you sure you want to come with me?” I ask Nico for what feels like the thousandth time. His parents are visiting his oldest sister out of state for Thanksgiving, so I jokingly invited him to my family Thanksgiving celebration. I never in a million years thought he’d say yes to it, and on top of that, we’re also bringing his youngest sister who stayed behind to study for exams.

“Yes, we both do.” Nico smiles at me while he helps his sister into her coat. “We’re not afraid of your family.”

“Well, I am.” I’m not at all concerned about them, it’s whether my mother will behave or not. The woman is the queen of backhanded compliments and veiled barbs. I glance at my phone and see a text from Ian stating that he’s downstairs waiting. “Our ride is here.”

Nico comes around and helps me into the Burberry trench I chose to wear. It coordinates with the maroon, wool turtleneck sweater I’m wearing perfectly. With my heels I’m able to nearly look him eye to eye.

And God, does he look good. Holiday meals at our house are always formal, so he’s wearing a classic Tom Ford suit. Watching him get ready today left me reeling and so needy. I never realized how sexy it could be to watch a man shave or

put his watch on. The temptation to maneuver my body between his and whatever flat surface I could find was nearly impossible to ignore.

Over the past few weeks he's kissed my cheek, my forehead, and the corner of my mouth. He rubs my feet and ankles every single night. Then we get in bed together and snuggle, but he hasn't once tried anything more. It's driving me crazy.

I'm finally back to feeling as close to normal as possible. The fatigue is mostly gone, my joint pain is minimal. I have another six weeks until my next round of blood work. My desire for sex has returned what feels like tenfold.

The drive to my family home feels like it's going faster than it ever has. I haven't spoken to my parents since sharing the news with them weeks ago. I haven't had much to say, and they clearly either don't care or don't know what to say. My bet is on the former.

Russel greets us at the door and takes our coats as I exchange a nervous look with my brother. Dad calls us into the library where he and Mom are sitting in large wingback chairs on either side of the fireplace. I'm glad they're receiving us here; it's always been one of my favorite spots in the house. The decor is less fussy, with deep walnut built-ins and forest green paint on the walls. Plus the smell of leather-bound books just adds to the cozy ambiance.

"Mother, Father," I kiss each of their cheeks. "You remember Nico. This is his sister, Mia," I gesture at them.

"I'm Henry," Dad stands to shake her hand.

"Delia," Mother waves with a polite smile but doesn't get up. She gives Mia the full up and down look and then dismisses her. Unfortunately her attention then turns back to me. "How are you feeling? Have you given any more thought to what we discussed?"

"I've been doing much better. The medication seems to be helping." I choose to ignore the second question she asked.

“It could get worse again. In fact, I was speaking with Theresa Hammond, her husband John, is a surgeon at Northwestern, about it. She said you could go into organ failure if you don’t take it seriously enough.”

“I’m aware, Mother. That’s why I’m seeing a physician who specializes in treating it.”

“That’s not enough. You have to make lifestyle changes. You need to resign.”

“I’m not resigning.” I signal to Russel for a glass of wine.

“How are the Hammonds?” Ian interjects on my behalf. “I played a few rounds of golf with John over the summer.”

I turn my back to Mom and mouth thank you to him. “Why don’t you come with me and I’ll give you two the tour?” I tuck my arm through Mia’s and lead her out of the room and down toward the living room. I feel Nico’s presence at my back, warm, steady, and supportive.

“She’s intense,” Mia says softly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m used to it as the black sheep in the family.”

“In what world could you be a black sheep?”

“She’s independent and driven,” Nico says. “Her family always thought that her brother would take over the family business.”

“Which he has.”

“And that she would fall in line with all the other James women. Go to college, meet a man, get married, and become a kept woman who volunteers in her spare time.”

“What can I say, I live to disappoint,” I roll my eyes and turn to the windows. “But this view can’t be beat.”

“It is gorgeous,” Mia says with wonder. “The house feels like it belongs in some Chicago issue of *Architectural Digest*. Did you grow up here?”

“On school breaks, yes. But my dorm and Nico and Ash’s room always felt more like home than this place ever did.”

Knowing that she's an art history student, I take her to my mother's sitting room which has several collector's pieces of impressionist art from the nineteenth century. She's even had museum quality protections added to the room. I'm surprised there isn't a velvet rope across the entrance.

Ian finds us, and she draws him into a conversation about something art related. I have to swallow a laugh because he couldn't care less about art. He looks so out of his element but listens anyway.

We're called to the dining room for dinner which goes as well as I expected. Mom continues to pressure me to resign, to find another doctor, essentially to do everything differently than how I am doing it. Fortunately I have plenty of experience tuning her out, but I watch as Nico becomes visibly more agitated with each passing comment.

Ian and Dad turn the conversation away from me and onto business which distracts her for a little while. Ultimately, though, her attention turns back to me as I talk to Mia about her classes.

"Mia, what are you planning on doing with your degree?"

"I'd like to work in a gallery and then eventually open my own."

"It's a hard industry to get a foot in the door. Do you have any contacts?"

"A few, mostly through my advisor. I'm hoping to find something entry level soon."

"Are you working?"

"Yes but not in the field."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a house cleaner."

Mom's fork pauses in midair. "A maid?"

"No, I'm an independent contractor for a cleaning agency."

"A maid is a maid, dear."

“Mother,” I say as sternly as possible, tossing my napkin onto the table. “I’m not feeling well, suddenly.” I look at Ian and he nods. It’s a lie, and he knows it, but neither of us want to see this situation devolve any further.

“Let’s get you home, then.” He stands and walks around, helping me up. “We’ll drop you and Nico off your place first and then I’ll get Mia home.”

“Nonsense.” Mother tries to shoo him away. “This is home. You can stay here. I’ve already had the linens changed in your room.”

“She’ll be more comfortable in her own bed.” Nico’s hand lands on my back as he puts himself between her and me.

“What if she needs something in the night? It doesn’t make sense for her to be alone.”

I can’t stop my eyes from rolling at that. As if she wouldn’t just force Russel to stay awake and tend to me. It certainly wouldn’t be her.

“I’ve moved in with her.”

That has absolutely no business being so sexy.

The room goes silent. I can practically feel the barely restrained rage from my mother at that proclamation. She’s never approved of my friendship with Nico, strictly based on his background as a scholarship student. She drops back into her chair, the freeze out beginning already. It’s better this way.

Nico told me he wanted me to let him in, all the way in. To trust him with every thought, every emotion, every need. It’s a lot to ask, but seeing him ready to stand up for me while still respecting my boundaries hit differently.

He’s been patient.

He’s been caring.

What am I waiting for?

He smiles at me as the elevator lifts us up to our floor and holds out his hand. I wonder if he knows what I'm thinking. It wouldn't surprise me at this point. He's gone out of his way to anticipate and fulfill all my needs since the moment he found out.

Buying me a pair of ridiculous slippers because he noticed my feet are always cold and getting me a weekly pill box were some of the most romantic gifts I've ever been given. Anyone can buy flowers or chocolates, it's the attention to detail that goes the extra mile. Maybe our night together wasn't a mistletoe mistake, maybe it was a mistletoe miracle.

I shake the cheesy thought from my mind as I open the door to the apartment and hang my coat in the closet. Nico reaches over my shoulder to grab a hanger, and my eyes close as I drag in a greedy breath of his woodsy scent. I stand paralyzed by his proximity, the growing tension inside holds me hostage.

He hangs his coat up and then wraps his arm around my waist, pulling my back against his chest. "Are you okay?" His warm breath caresses the shell of my ear as he asks softly. "Are you actually not feeling well?"

"I'm good." My hand covers his where it rests on my abdomen. "I'm sorry my mother was so horrible."

"Yeah, I see where you get it from now."

I elbow him in the stomach with a laugh. "Jackass."

"Vicious. I like it."

"Nico?" I go still in his arms as I try to find the right words for what I want to say. Or to ask. Offer.

"Stella." His voice has lost its playful edge, and his grip tightens.

"I'm ready."

I swear he stops breathing at my back. Then his hands grip my hips, and he slowly turns me around, stepping forward until my back rests against the wall. His eyes dip from mine down to my lips and back up.

“Ready for what?”

“For you and me to turn into we.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NICO

Stella's eyes are like a vast and mysterious ocean that I've been ready to dive into for so long. To lose myself in her, to uncover the possibility of us is all I've ever wanted. It feels like both of us are holding our breath, scared to jump, even though we're holding hands on the edge.

"Are you all the way in? Because I can't risk it if you're not."

It's harder and harder to hold myself back, to keep the slightest distance from her because all I want to do is sweep her into my arms and carry her to bed. I want to show her with every caress, with every whispered word, with every kiss, how much she means to me. I've never been more serious about something in my life.

Her smooth palm moves to my cheek, and she strokes her thumb along my stubble. "Yes."

I lose the internal battle with my willpower and close the distance between us. Instead of the hungry clash our kisses were in Iceland, this one is slow and deep. I plan to take my time worshipping every single inch of her body tonight.

Her fingers glide through the hair at the back of my neck. I reach behind her head and pull her hair loose from the knot she had it tied back in. The silky strands fall down her

shoulders, surrounding us in the subtle rosemary mint scent of her shampoo.

My hands move down her body as our lips stay fused. She moves her lips against mine like she savors a fine wine, like this is the most decadent kiss she's ever had. I swallow her gasp as my fingers find their way under the hem of her skirt and trace the line where dainty lace meets the smooth skin of her thigh.

Her head falls back against the wall as I move my lips from hers down to her neck. My fingers have found their way to the apex of her thighs, teasing her through the lace covering her pussy. She whimpers when I run my thumb along her slit, applying just enough pressure to tease but not enough to ease the ache I know she's feeling.

I hook my fingers inside her panties, nearly groaning when I feel how wet her cunt is against my knuckles. My cock throbs as I gather her slick desire on my fingers and circle her clit. Her pulse races against my lips as I suck and nibble along her jaw and neck. I could come just from fucking her with my fingers, hearing the obscene sound of her pussy while I work her. How embarrassing would that be, cumming in my pants like a horny teen?

She releases a breathy moan of my name as her pussy trembles beneath my touch. Fuck it, I need to taste her right here, right now. I drop down to my knees before her, pushing her skirt up to her waist with one hand. She's wearing a painfully sexy garter belt, and for a moment I just look up at her in wonder. How many times has she been wearing something like that at work? It drives me mad with lust and frustration just thinking about it.

"Hold your dress," I instruct, my voice raspy with need.

Just like the good girl she is, but desperately wants to believe she's not, she follows orders. I could eat her pussy with her panties on, in fact, I could give her the best orgasm of her life over them, but I want to feast on her. I want to consume her. I want her pleasure all over me with no barrier.

So I take my time flicking open the clips holding her stockings up and kissing each newly exposed inch of her skin. When I finish I look up at her, my fingers hooking inside the waist of her garter belt and panties, pulling them off in one smooth motion while never losing eye contact. As she stands there, holding her dress up, that beautiful pussy on display for me I realize something.

“You know what you look like?”

She shakes her head, blue eyes dark with desire.

“Mine.”

I swear to god I hear her moan. It’s muffled by the way she’s got her lip trapped between her teeth, but I will hear it again. I lift her knee, setting it over my shoulder to stabilize her while also opening her up for me.

The first taste of her explodes on my tongue. Her fingers immediately grip me by the hair, pulling me closer as I circle her clit with my tongue. I need more of her, more of everything, so I slide my fingers inside her. She is so fucking wet I groan against her, which in turn makes her moan.

I don’t know if I can draw this one out any further. She’s so close already, I can feel her walls beginning to quake around my fingers. I pull her clit between my lips, sucking gently as I stroke the spot on her front wall that makes her gasp with pleasure. Her hips arch away from the wall toward my mouth as I feel her crest the first peak of her orgasm. Her body trembles against me as I softly continue to use both my mouth and fingers to caress her through the waves of pleasure.

She drops her leg from my shoulder and melts back against the wall. Her eyes find me, the sated pleasure evident in the way they gleam at me. She grabs my tie as I stand back in front of her and pulls my mouth to hers.

“You know what you taste like?” she asks against my lips.
“Mine.”

She grabs me by the hand and leads me down the hall to the bedroom. The light from the city filters through the windows as she runs her hands up my chest and under my

jacket, pushing it from my shoulders. I watch as she works each button open, pressing a kiss to the skin she uncovers each time. I sit back passively as she untucks my shirt and pushes it off my shoulders, only helping remove it by shrugging out of it.

“It’s criminal how good you look in a suit, you know that?” She arches a brow at me as she unbuckles my belt.

“I do know, actually.” I chuckle when she rolls her eyes. “But I’m glad you finally caught on.”

She pulls my belt through the loops with a swish. “I’ve always noticed.”

I didn’t think I needed that affirmation from her, but it feels damn good. Almost as good as it’ll feel to get her naked and beneath me. I reach for the zipper on her dress, but she steps out of reach.

“Nope. Not yet. You had your fun, now it’s my turn.” She runs her nail along the bulge in my pants, making my already hard cock throb for her. “Sit down.”

I do as I’m told and watch as she kneels and begins unlacing my shoes. It’s intimate and sexy to watch her do this for me. She sets them aside and pulls my socks off next. I watch as she stands in front of me and slowly turns, exposing her back to me.

“Can you get the zipper?” she asks with a coy look over her shoulder.

My fingers were already moving toward it before she finished the question. I pull slowly, taking my time because I never want this night to end. I want this to last forever.

Before I can push the dress off her shoulders, she spins and steps back. She pulls the dress off, letting it drop to the floor at her feet. She reaches behind her back and unhooks her bra, letting it fall on top of her discarded dress until she’s standing before me in nothing but black, lace-trimmed stockings.

She walks toward me, stopping between my spread thighs, and I just want to lay back and pull her atop my face until I drown in her. I lean forward and grab her hips, taking one of

her nipples in my mouth. She lets me shower her breasts with attention for a little bit before she steps out of my reach again.

“Stand up.”

I do as she asks, rewarded with the heat of her gaze as it lands on the erection tenting my pants. Her hands run the length of me again before moving to unbutton and unzip my trousers. She pushes my pants down before once again kneeling in front of me. She pulls them away as I step out of them.

A hiss escapes my throat as her hand wraps firmly around my cock. She licks my crown as her hand pumps me slowly. Every single fantasy I've had in my life is fulfilled by the woman in front of me as she takes my length in her warm, soft mouth. I slide my fingers in her hair as my head falls back.

I release all control to her and lose myself to the wicked sensation of her sucking my cock. She takes me so fucking deep I hit the back of her throat. She gags around me but keeps going. Her mouth glides almost to my tip, sucking as she goes. As her throat relaxes around me, she moves her hand from my base to my balls and tugs. The unexpected sensation makes my cock jump inside her mouth. She moans around me, taking me deeper as she hums. The heat of my impending release builds inside me, pleasure tightening every muscle in my body. I'm just about to explode when I pull her off me.

I need to be inside her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

STELLA

“What are you doing?” I ask as he pulls me to my feet.

“I was seconds from cumming down your throat.” He covers my mouth with a deep, consuming kiss.

“That’s the point,” I say against his lips. My voice is whinier than I expected it to be.

“You’re cute when you pout, love.” He lifts and tosses me onto the bed.

He settles between my legs as he pulls my stockings down my legs. It’s just light enough to make out every expression that crosses his gorgeous face. His eyes drink in the sight of me laid out completely bare beneath him. All I see in their brown depths is devotion and desire and love. His gaze paints me with strokes of possession, as if every part of me it moves over is indelibly marked as his.

Goosebumps erupt over my skin as he trails his fingers along the lines of my body. I memorize the way the pads of his fingers feel over the swells and hollows of my body. His pelvis settles between my legs, his cock pulsing against my aching entrance.

“There’s no going back for us now, you understand that, right?”

I nod, my hips lifting against him searching for connection.

“We will never just be friends again. You’re mine, and I’m yours. I will bleed myself dry for you.” He drags his length teasingly against me. “You can’t shut me out again.”

“I won’t,” I say as he pushes inside me. “I promise I won’t.”

He thrusts inside me, deeper than I thought possible. My name falls from his lips like a prayer before he slants his mouth over mine. The kiss matches the pace he sets, steady and deep as he works us both to the edge.

I dig my heels into his thighs, opening wider and taking him deeper. He breaks the kiss and leans back, lifting my hips off the bed so he can fuck me harder. At this angle, every glide of his length drags along my g-spot ratcheting up my pleasure tenfold. I cry out as his thumb moves to my clit.

The orgasm tears violently through me. Heat floods every inch of my body as I clench my walls around him. He calls out my name as he cums, the heat of his release mixing with mine. It feels like it goes on forever, his cock twitching inside me while my pussy trembles from the aftershocks of our sex.

Sweat glistens at his temples and in the valley between my breasts. He collapses on top of me, while his cock remains buried between my thighs. Our hearts race in time with each other as we lie still, catching our breath together.

“How are you feeling?” he asks after he slides out of me.

“Floaty.” I’ve been high exactly once in my life and it felt just like this. Happy, relaxed, unbothered.

He chuckles and rolls us, so he’s on his back with me sprawled over him. “So no pain?”

I consider making a joke about his inflated ego and penis size, but I know he’s being genuine. He truly wants to make sure I’m not having any joint pain.

“No.” I kiss his chest. “I’m okay.”

“Good.” His body relaxes beneath me. “I need you to always tell me if something we’re doing hurts. I like bossing

you around in bed and controlling your orgasms, but I'm not into giving pain."

"So, just for clarity's sake, when you said I was yours and you were mine, does that mean we're together, together? Should I tell people you're my boyfriend?" It doesn't feel heavy enough for what we are, to be honest.

"I don't care what you call me as long as it's yours."

He slides out from under me and pulls the covers back. I try to pull them back over me, but he drags me to the edge of the bed and picks me up.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he carries me into the bathroom.

"We're going to take a shower, and you're going to let me take care of you."

"I need to know everything." Clara comes out of the dressing room in the most beautiful bridal gown. Beaded lace covers the entire bodice and sleeves, but her back is entirely bare to below her waist. The skirt is fitted and flows over her curves perfectly. Ash is going to lose his mind when he sees her.

"Earth to Stella. Come in Stella." She waves her hand in my face to get my attention.

"Sorry." I look up at her. "You just look so fucking beautiful it's all I could think about."

She turns to the mirror and smiles nervously. "Do you think Ash is going to like it?"

"He won't just like it, he'll love it. Actually, he'll probably drag you off to another bathroom and have his way with you before the ceremony even starts."

"Hopefully I get an upgrade from a public restroom to a closet or something this time around," she jokes.

When he finally got his head out of his ass last year, he convinced her he was all in by fucking her, loudly, in the bathroom at our company holiday party. Nico had to start singing a horrible rendition of Jingle Bells so no one could hear them.

“Okay, I need details now.” Clara’s eyes meet mine in the mirror while the seamstress finalizes a few touches on the dress.

“There’s not much to say. You know what happened in Iceland between us. I guess over the past couple months he’s just been so focused on helping me settle into my treatment plan that it makes sense we ended up together.”

“I’m calling bullshit. Ash could have done all the same things.”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine him buying matching raccoon slippers after noticing my feet were always cold because he rubs them every night. Or staying up late for weeks reading every medical journal and health organization article about my conditions.”

“Actually, I caught him late one night on FaceTime with Nico while they read an article together.” She smiles at me. “We’re lucky to have them.”

“No ridiculous matching slippers though,” I say as I point at her.

“True. That seems more like something I would do.” She answers a few questions the seamstress asks and then steps down from the stool she was perched on for alterations. “I’m going to change back into normal clothes, do you want to get dinner?”

“Sounds good.”

Asher and Nico are having a guys’ night after their tux fittings. I know that most of Nico’s attention has been on me lately, so it’s good for them to spend time together. Although it does feel a bit weird to not be included when I’ve been one of the guys for so long.

Clara and I decide to go get sushi at one of our favorite restaurants. After we sit down and place our orders, she looks at me with a serious expression.

“How is everything with your health? I feel like a terrible friend, everything at work and with the wedding planning has eaten up all my free time.” She reaches across the table and squeezes my hand.

It has been so much longer than usual since the last time we saw each other, nearly three weeks. It’s a normal part of life though, and I know she’s been asking for updates from Ash on top of texting me.

“It’s completely fine.” I squeeze her hand back. “I’ve never planned a wedding, but from what I hear, they’re a lot of work.”

“So much.” She rolls her eyes and leans back in her chair. “I’m never doing this again.”

“I’m sure that puts Ash’s mind at ease.” I laugh as the server sets our cocktails down. “Do you know where you’re going on your honeymoon yet?”

“No.” She pouts. “He won’t even give me hints so I can pack. Are you helping him?”

“No, he hasn’t told me anything. I think he’s doing all the packing on his own.”

“Which means I’ll end up with nothing but skimpy bathing suits and lingerie.”

“I’m sure he’ll throw a couple sexy dresses in there too, and probably some new jewelry.”

He lives to spoil her, and she deserves it. She’s by far the most selfless person I know, although Nico is right up there, too. My eyes dart to my phone, wondering if he’s sent me a text or anything, as if I don’t spend nearly all day, every day with him either at work or at home.

“Things with Nico are going well?” she asks with a sly smile. “I can’t believe he just moved himself in.”

“That was before we decided to give things a shot.”

“That makes it even more romantic. He wasn’t trying to get in your pants, he just wanted to take care of you.”

I don’t know who I am anymore because a sentiment like that would have made me give her the side eye but now my stomach flutters. Even with how well things are going though, I still have these nagging doubts from time to time. Wondering if I’m doing Nico a disservice by allowing myself to be with him. My condition isn’t the worst by far, but it’s not always going to be this good.

“Can I tell you something?” The question is out before I can stop myself.

“Yes, of course.”

“Sometimes I worry that I’m dragging him into something he shouldn’t have to deal with. I know he’s had feelings for me for a while, just as I have him, but could he just be acting out feeling responsible for me based on our history? What if I have a long, drawn out flare and he not only has to help take care of me, but also not have his needs met?”

“You have trust that he’s already thought of that. You mean so much to him, I can’t ever see him growing to resent you. He’s a big boy, and he knows what he’s signing up for.”

She’s right, but it only eases my mind momentarily. The doubts just seem to stick to the fringes of my psyche. Regardless, I’m going to force myself to stop thinking about it and live in the moment. At least at this moment.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NICO

After the debacle that was Thanksgiving with Stella's parents, we've decided to spend a low key Christmas Eve with Asher and Clara. Clara insisted that we come to their house because it would be more festive than our place. One step inside and I realize that she was definitely not wrong.

Asher's penthouse has a double height ceiling in the living room, so a sixteen-foot Christmas tree stands proudly in the corner. Other small trees and topiaries stand lit and decorated in every other unoccupied space in every room. It's a lot, but it exudes warmth and cheer. It definitely has Clara written all over it.

"Merry Christmas," Clara says as she wraps me and then Stella in a hug. "I'm so glad you decided to join us."

"Thanks for inviting us. It'll be nice to have a relaxing night before the chaos of my parents' house and the nieces and nephews tomorrow morning."

My older sister and her family always stay with my parents to do Midnight Mass and Christmas Day. Luckily that takes the heat off of me, as long as I show up Christmas morning, I'm good as gold in their opinion. At least for the day, that is.

"I hope you guys don't mind, but I planned some activities before we eat."

Clara gives us a sheepish smile while Ash rolls his eyes good naturedly behind her. Whatever, he loves it.

“I’m in,” Stella says.

She and Clara disappear into the kitchen arm in arm.

“What is she going to make us do?” I ask Ash as he pours us a glass of wine.

“Make gingerbread houses.” He chuckles at the look on my face. “It could be worse. At least you didn’t have to decorate eight Christmas trees.”

“Only eight?” I say looking around the room. “Seems like it could be worse. You could easily fit another four.”

“Say that again, and they’ll never find your body.”

“You couldn’t take me on your best day. Besides, you love this.” I gesture at the giant tree. “The Grinch has been tamed.”

“I have.” He smiles up at the tree. “You should have seen the way her face lit up with wonder when we turned the lights on for the first time. I’d do anything she asked.”

I know that feeling all too well. The frustrating thing for me is that Stella doesn’t ask. Which means I just have to figure it all out on my own. I think I’m doing alright so far, but there are these moments where I catch her mind wandering. When it happens she gets this little wrinkle in between her brows, and I just know that she’s thinking negatively.

I don’t know if it’s about me. Maybe she’s spiraling about the future and what it means for her. Sometimes, the worst times, I worry that she’s in pain or something feels off, but she refuses to tell me because she thinks she can power through on her own.

It’s the blessing and curse of loving someone who is so incredibly strong and independent. She’ll never come to me first because she’s convinced she can handle it. That’s not to say she can’t handle it on her own, just that she doesn’t have to. I see the distinction, but I’m not sure she does.

Clara calls us into the kitchen, pulling me from the troubling thoughts. The table is set with four pre-made

gingerbread houses. Bowls of bright candy and piping bags of royal icing in white, green, and red are spread around the table ready for us to begin decorating. It's a testament to how much the three of us love Clara that we're actually participating in this. You wouldn't have caught any of us dead doing it before she came along.

“Okay, we have an hour to decorate, and then we're doing a blind vote to pick a winner. You can't vote for your own gingerbread house. Winner gets to pick the movie we watch tonight after dinner.” Clara points at the table. “All the houses are identical, and there's more candy on the counter if you need it.”

“One of us better win because I'm not going to be happy if I have to watch *Die Hard* on Christmas Eve,” Stella says to Clara. “No matter how much those two try to convince us that it's a holiday movie.”

I was pretty sure an hour of doing this was going to drag because how hard can it be to put on icing on a house and drop a few candies on top? The answer to that is *very fucking hard* when you don't know the appropriate pressure to use on a piping bag. Without the right amount of icing, the candy either falls off the house or looks messy as fuck.

One look at Ash's house, and I feel instantly better. He's scowling at the absolute mess he's made of the roof, his fingers stained green and red. I catch his eye and smirk, which only pisses him off even more.

The timer goes off, and our attention moves over to the side of the table where the girls are working. Both of us deflate as soon as we see their gingerbread houses. Stella's is better than both of ours. It has perfect lines of icing and coordinated candies placed with precision. Clara's though, blows us all out of the water. Hers has swoops of icing along the roof tiles, and she dripped it off the corners to form icicles.

“Did you go to culinary school and not tell the rest of us?” I ask incredulously.

“No. It's just something I've done the past few years at the shelter as part of the festivities I plan when there's enough in

the budget to warrant it.”

“How’s the budget this year?” Stella asks.

I’m genuinely curious, too. They built a large addition, mostly thanks to Asher and his drive to fuck over his dad at any opportunity. He had to go to the city zoning committee and get them to change the zoning for that block before his dad could buy it for some strip mall development.

She glances at Asher and blushes. “It’s good.”

It’s so grotesquely cute how they still look at each other. Stella looks back and forth between them, likely having the same thought as me. That’s confirmed when she makes a gagging motion at me while the love birds continue to make lovestruck faces at each other.

“Fuck off with that,” Ash says with a smirk. “You should see how you two look at each other.”

It ends up being a perfect night, with the best people I could have asked to have in my life. We had dinner delivered from the steakhouse that takes up the second level of Asher’s building. Then the girls picked *The Holiday* as the movie we watched because obviously Clara won. We didn’t even need to do a blind vote.

This is just the first of many holidays together as couples instead of just friends. I can’t help but run my fingers over the box I have been walking around with in my pocket for the past week. Inside is the ring I plan on proposing to Stella with. It feels sudden and like a long time coming all at once. I just want to find the perfect time and place to spontaneously ask.

“You look absolutely stunning,” I tell Stella as she steps out of her closet ready for Ash and Clara’s wedding.

“Thank you.” She rises onto her toes and presses her lips to mine. “So do you. You’ve always looked incredible in a tuxedo.”

“You could have told me that once or twice.”

“And risk inflating your ego even more? No, thank you.” She gives me a saucy wink before turning her attention to the sapphire and diamond tennis bracelet she’s trying to clasp.

“Let me help you.” I pull her delicate wrist toward me and snap the closure together. Her eyes soften as they meet mine when I lift her wrist to my lips and leave a kiss just above the bracelet.

“Nico.” She looks at me like there’s more on her mind but then presses her lips together and slides her hand in mine. “We should go, don’t want to be late.”

They wanted the wedding to be small and intimate, so it’s being held at a private event space over a restaurant with a lakeshore view. The total guest list is under thirty people, two of Ash’s brothers and their families, a couple of the other executives from work, and then a handful of Clara’s colleagues. Her mentor, Daniel, is marrying them.

As they exchange vows they’ve written themselves, I squeeze Stella’s hand. She sniffs and wipes a tear away when Ash gets choked up saying his vows. I don’t think any of us thought this is where we’d be two years ago. We were all so hyper focused on work, and I on avoiding my feelings, that we never opened ourselves up to the possibility of being more than we were.

By the time they’re declared husband and wife, I’m even a bit teary eyed myself. There’s a cocktail hour down in the bar while Ash and Clara have pictures taken and the room is reorganized from the ceremony to dinner set up. Stella and I work through the room separately making small talk and catching up with people we don’t regularly see.

While I’m always present in my conversations, I can’t stop my gaze from constantly seeking her out. She must feel the same way because almost every time I look her way, she’s looking mine. My chest squeezes every time we share a secret smile.

I didn't bring the ring with me because in no way would I ever consider asking her to marry me at someone else's wedding. This is a night to celebrate their love. Although if Stella keeps running her hand along my thigh during dinner that could change.

When other couples are invited to join Ash and Clara on the dance floor following their first dance, I hold my hand out to her. She fits perfectly inside the circle of my arms, not that I had any idea she wouldn't. We've danced together countless times, but it's different now. I get to go home with her, hold her. She's my person, and I'm hers.

"Do you want to do this someday?" I ask.

"Get married?" She pulls back and raises an eyebrow.

"Yeah."

"I've never thought much about it, to be honest. There was always so much pressure from my mother that not thinking about it felt like the best way to rebel."

"We could elope, that'd be rebellious, too."

Abort. Abort. Abort.

"Are you—"

"Can I steal her away?" Ash says, joining us.

"Yes," Stella agrees quickly. Too quickly.

Asher looks at me with a question in his eye, and I nod, stepping back.

As the night goes on, it feels like she's avoiding me. Talking and laughing with anyone who will listen. Meanwhile, I keep replaying the look on her face when I suggested we should elope. She was stricken, horrified, terrified. Me and my big, stupid mouth and even bigger feelings. I numb myself with a couple glasses of whiskey until the idea of just slipping away sounds better and better.

With a final look over my shoulder, I watch as Stella and Clara sit quietly in the corner smiling over pieces of cake. Then I walk out the door and hail a cab.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

STELLA

“Nico?” I call out into my apartment as soon as I open the door.

I don’t need to wait for a response to know he’s not home. The life that he’s brought to my space is painfully void right now. His absence is like a vise around my heart, slowly squeezing it until it stops beating.

I call him, but it goes straight to voicemail. Anger mixes with sadness and indignation as I walk back to the bedroom. His glasses sit out on the bedside table on his side of the bed. He needs those for reading.

Why didn’t he come home?

Maybe he did go home, just not mine.

Why would he just leave me like that?

I can’t believe it, and I’m not going to stand for it.

I stride over to the closet and start rifling through his things and clothes pockets looking for his keys. His door has a passcode entry, so he could have gone home without them. As I push my hand into the pocket of the jacket he wore yesterday to work, I find something, just not what I was looking for.

I pull the box out and gasp when it hits me. The ring-sized Tiffany box taunts me from my palm. I'm so tempted to open it, just to be sure it is what I think it is. But if it is an engagement ring, I don't want to see it before he asks me to marry him.

I don't want to steal that moment from him. From us. Now it's even more urgent that I find him. First to chew his ass for leaving me like that. Second, to tell him yes. Of course I'll marry him. I'd marry him tomorrow if he wanted.

When he asked that I thought he was joking, maybe at most feeling me out for an answer. I didn't realize he'd already bought me a ring. Then everyone wanted my attention.

I have to find him. I pull open the drawer he uses in my closet for his undershirts and feel around until my fingers land on a single keychain. When I pull it out, the name of his building is attached as well as two keys, one looks like a mailbox key and the other a door key.

I change out of my dress and into a pair of jeans, a sweater, and a pair of warm boots. It started snowing right as I got home and from the look out the window it's coming down fast and hard. Hopefully I can find a car tonight, but if not, I can walk. It's only six blocks from here.

I grab the ring box and stuff it in my coat pocket along with my phone. The keys go in my other pocket and I grab my hat, a scarf, and some mittens. I will find him tonight, no matter what.



I couldn't find a cab at this time of night and all the rideshare apps had huge wait times so walking is what I settled on. What I didn't anticipate was the brutal wind that's snapping between the buildings off the lake. Snow blows horizontal against my face as I cross the river. At least once I get north and turn west for the final three blocks, the wind will be at my back.

My teeth are chattering as soon as I get inside his building. The doorman gives me a worried look as I stalk past him and

hit the call button on the elevator. I don't blame him, I feel like a raging icicle, and the only thing keeping me moving is anger.

I hit the button for the nineteenth floor and stew in anger as my cheeks sting. That twenty-minute walk gave me plenty of time to dig deep for anger. I don't even want to let myself worry about what I'll do if he's not in his apartment. That's not something I'm mentally prepared to deal with, so anger it is.

I don't even give him the courtesy of knocking. The key slides into the lock, and I swing the door open wide. All the lights are off except the one coming from his bedroom so that's where I head. The warm light from a lamp illuminates the room, but he's nowhere to be found.

Then the bathroom door swings open, and he flinches, startled by the sight of me. First surprise, then concern fills his expression as he looks me up and down. Steam billows out into the room from around him as he rapidly moves across the room to me.

"My god, love. You're freezing." He starts taking off my hat and scarf while I pull my mittens off. He winces at the sight of my fingers, bone white from the cold, and cups his warm hands around mine.

"I walked."

"Are you fucking crazy?" His eyebrows form angry slashes over his eyes. "It's damn near a blizzard out there."

"You left me. Alone." I yank my hands back. "And you shut off your phone. What the hell was I supposed to do?"

"I didn't think it would matter. I sure as fuck thought you would be smarter than traipsing through Chicago in the dead of the night in December."

"You asked me to elope and then ran off." I fling my arms away from him again as he tries to warm my hands.

He runs a hand over his face before responding. "I lightheartedly suggested we elope, and you got this face of horror and shock. As if marrying me was the worst idea you'd ever heard."

“It wasn’t horror and shock; we were dancing at our best friends’ wedding, and we’ve only officially been together for a few weeks.”

“We might have only been together for a few weeks, but I’ve been in love with you for years.”

In love. Not just loved. Anyone can love someone. But being *in love* is something entirely different.

“I know,” I say, my voice softening. “Because I found this while I was looking for your keys.”

I hold out the box to him. Panic flickers in his eyes as he looks from me to the box and back.

“Did you open it?”

“No.” I’m second guessing that now. What if it’s something like cufflinks?

“May I have it back?” He holds out his hand, palm up, and my heart drops to my feet and shatters like glass.

He wants it back. Somehow he’s changed his mind. The negative voice in the back of my mind reminds me that of course he did, I’m sick. Who would want to knowingly commit to that life? I slump as I hand it back to him.

I turn to leave before the tears can start falling. I would never be able to look at myself in the mirror again if I fell apart in front of him. I’ll have to resign and go crawling to my brother for a job. God, how could I be so stupid?

“Stella,” he calls my name firmly before I even reach the threshold of the door. “Stop.”

“Why?” I stop but don’t turn around.

“Because you’re going to feel like a real asshole if you make me do this twice. We both know there’s only enough room in this relationship for one of us to be an ass.”

I swipe the first errant tear from my cheek and take a deep breath before turning around.

Down on one knee, with the Tiffany’s box open, is Nico. Tears gather in his eyes as he looks up at me hopefully. “Will

you marry me?”

A sob tears through me as I nod. I'm not capable of words yet, so I launch myself down at him, knocking him over and landing on top of him. My lips seek him out as he rolls me onto my back.

We kiss happily, frantically until he sits up over me, his thighs holding me in place on either side of my hips. “Give me your hand and say yes. I need the word.”

“Yes.” I lift my left hand for him, and he slides the ring on my finger.

“Did I do good?”

“I haven't looked yet.” I laugh as I realize and move my hand into my field of view. It's big and sparkly on a platinum band. “It's perfect. I wouldn't have wanted anything more.”

He pushes to his feet and hauls me up off the floor, leading me into the bathroom.

“What are we doing?”

“You're freezing cold, so we're going to take a bath and get you warmed up.”

He walks over to the tub and turns the water on, holding a hand under the stream to test the temperature. I toe off my boots and pull my sweater over my head. My hair and makeup are still surprisingly intact from earlier, even with the cold and my hat.

Nico stands and helps me out of the rest of my clothes, only sneaking a few light caresses over my chilled skin. After he helps me in and gets me settled, he leaves with a promise to be right back. I lean back, the lavender-scented bubbles around me helping me relax into the heated water.

He walks back in with two champagne glasses and sets them on the edge of the tub. I reach over and take a sip while I watch him pull candles out from under the sink along with a book of matches. He lights a few and sets them around the room before turning the lights off.

He looks so damn good as he pulls his t-shirt over his head and then pushes his sweatpants down. His cock bobs free, so hard and perfect. I've instantly forgotten all about everything that happened hours ago. The only thing that matters is the ring on my finger and the man lowering himself into the bathtub across from me.

He spreads his arms out on either side of him and smiles at me. "So when are we going to elope?"

"The day after Clara and Ash get home from their honeymoon?"

"In ten days?"

I nod with a smile. "I'd do it tomorrow, but I can't imagine those two not being with us."

"Same. What about your family?"

"They'll get over it. Yours?"

"They love you, as long as we're happy, they'll be happy."

"We can always have a reception later in the year for everyone."

I set my champagne aside and crawl onto his lap, wrapping my arms around his shoulders. "I love you, Nico. I don't know how I lived in denial so long."

"I've never been in denial." His hand sneaks between us, guiding his tip along my slit. "I've always wanted you." He slides his crown inside my entrance. "I've always loved you."

I slide down his length, sighing at the way he stretches me so perfectly. Rocking against him, I slant my lips over his. Water sloshes around the tub as we move together, puddling on the floor around us, but nothing can distract us from each other.

EPILOGUE

STELLA

Eight Months Later

“Tonight was amazing,” Nico says as he pulls off his bowtie and opens the door to our balcony. The sounds of the Mediterranean lapping at the coast filter through on the breeze. “Waiting to have the reception was the best call.”

We married as soon as Ash and Clara returned from their honeymoon. It was just a small courthouse wedding with them and Ian and Mia as witnesses. Then we all went out and had a celebratory dinner. It was perfect, and we kept our little bubble of happiness as long as we could, telling only Nico’s family.

After the California office was up and running, we planned this reception in Capri. We didn’t send out marriage announcements and invitations until everything was set. My mother was horrified, as I knew she would be. She was the main reason we did everything the way we did.

We chose to have our reception here because of all his extended family still living in Italy. With my family’s wealth and ability to travel, it just made sense to do it here. Plus, it’s beautiful, and tomorrow morning we’ll board the private yacht Ash and Clara chartered for us as a gift for our honeymoon.

I have no regrets.

“I agree.” I cross the distance between us and wrap my arms around his waist.

Over the past year his arms have become the place I feel most at home. He's held me through lupus flares. Attended every doctor's appointment while we tried to figure out the right medications and dosages. Whenever I get overwhelmed with trying to keep my normal schedule while feeling awful, he's there to hold and support me.

If he wasn't in my life as my partner, I know I'd be alright, but his presence gives me something to hold onto when I need to take a break. I'll be forever grateful for that night with the mistletoe martinis. It wasn't a mistake; it was fate giving me a hard shove in the right direction.

His fingers run down the length of my back and dip under the material of my custom Valentino dress. "I love when you wear backless dresses."

"Is that why they keep showing up in my closet?" I ask with feigned surprise.

"I have nothing to do with that." His lips coast over my jaw and down my neck as he slides the straps of my dress off my shoulders.

The dress falls to my feet with the gentle whisper of fabric. I love the dark look of desire in his eyes, their color nearly as black as the midnight sky. I work the buttons of his shirt open as he pulls the pins from my hair out, flipping them carelessly across the room. I push his shirt off and press my lips to his chest, right over his heart.

He cups my cheek and tilts my head back, running his thumb beneath my lips. "That's yours, you know. Always has been."

"I know now." I lift onto my tiptoes and press my lips to his.

He tastes like champagne as our tongues meet. I walk backwards toward the bed as my fingers run through his hair and hold him close. As soon as the back of my legs touches the mattress, I turn us and push him back onto the bed. It's not often that I feel as good as I do today, so I'm going to take full advantage of it.

He watches me with love and lust in his gaze as I pull his belt off, followed quickly by his pants. His boxer briefs go next, his thick cock bobbing free and begging for me. I crawl on top of him and grip his length, slowly dragging it along my slit, back and forth gathering all the evidence of my desire for my husband.

After several more teasing strokes, I slowly lower myself down until he is seated fully inside me. Using his chest as leverage, I rock my hips at the torturously slow pace I know drives him mad. I love when I can push him to the limit and flip the switch within him from gentleman to animal. I tighten my walls around him and glide nearly off his cock.

I gasp as he grips my hips and thrusts inside of me from below. "You feel so good." Another thrust. "So perfect." He flips us without ever pulling out of me and lifts my thigh around his hip. "So. Fucking. Mine."

My back arches off the bed as he fucks me relentlessly. I cry out with his name on my lips as he reaches between us, circling the bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs. The orgasm races through me, my walls shuddering around him as he continues to glide in and out of me.

I wrap my other leg around him and tilt myself, so he gets a deeper angle. I want to feel him fill me. I feel his cock spasm inside me, the heat from his release filling me as he drags in deep, greedy breaths.

He collapses beside me and pulls me close until my head rests on his chest. The sound of his heartbeat slowing back to a normal rate lulls me nearly into sleep.

"Did you see Mia and Ian tonight?" he asks quietly.

"What do you mean?" I obviously saw them; we made the rounds completely to speak with our guests.

"They were chatting a lot, is all."

"They have met before, maybe they were just catching up."

He makes a noise deep in his throat as he considers my words. "Or maybe they're gonna fall in love."

I laugh and press a kiss to his chest. “Ian isn’t going to fall in love. He’s a lifelong, confirmed bachelor. Way too uptight to fall for someone as cool as your sister.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you goes out to Sarah, my cover designer, for working through all the challenges on this. You are the best!

Veronica, my editor and friend, as always I so deeply appreciate you. Your work is superb and your willingness to always be flexible with me will forever be appreciated.

Jennifer, thank you for your immaculate proofreading.

Ashley, I appreciate your enthusiasm and the fact that you are forever hyping me and my books up. Not to mention always coming in clutch with the blurb help.

To my wonderful readers, I simply would not be here writing books without you. I am so deeply, eternally grateful for each and every one of you.

The biggest thank you goes out to my family. I love you all so much.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nichole is a dreamer who on a random day in May 2019 decided she was going to write a book. One book turned into two and now years later, multiple books have been written. When she's not writing, she can be found with her four children and husband, reading, or sipping tea and taking care of her plants.

Find more about Nichole and her books here:

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