

ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



Rewardded

BY
THE

BOSS

LENA COVE

REWARDED BY THE BOSS

ALL THE JINGLE LADIES



LENA COVE





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REWARDED BY THE BOSS INFO

Wilder

As the oldest St. James sibling, I'm used to everyone relying on me.

When planning the company Christmas party gets added to my already overfilled agenda, it's too much.

I yell at my mom and stomp around my office.

Everyone thinks I'm a boss behaving badly.

Until I see her.

She changes everything overnight and now the company Christmas party planner is number one on my to-do list.

Ivy

I spent every summer in Star Mountain and now I've moved here permanently.

Everything is falling into place - except I can't find a job.

Luckily, my best friend got me a holiday party planning job with her family's company.

It will also get my foot in the door for a design job at their firm.

The only problem is my boss.

He should be off-limits, but I can't get him out of my head.

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CHAPTER 1



WILDER

“JINGLE BELLS, JINGLE BELLS...”

With a deep sigh, I grab my phone and answer, knowing that whoever is on the other end will ask me to do something I don't want to do, and I will say yes because that's what I do. “Hello?”

“Wilder, is that any way to answer the phone when your mother calls?”

“Sorry, Mom, Clara changed your ring tone to ‘Jingle Bells’ and I didn't look to see who was calling, I just grabbed the phone.” This was the reason I assigned unique ringtones to the people in my family. One, it makes it easier to screen calls from my brothers and two, I know when it's my parents calling. “What's up?”

“I don't need a reason to call and check on my firstborn, Wilder St. James.” Her annoyance comes through in every word. I'm not phased though. I know there is a reason she called. She doesn't call during work hours just to check on me. I wait her out and less than a minute later I hear her sigh. “It's about the Christmas party. I'm not going to be able to do the party planning this year. I just have too much going on.”

“What do you have going on, Mom?” I can't hide my irritation and that's not how to get on Mom's good side, but I don't have time for this. “Dad's semi-retired, we're all grown, and this is the one thing you do every year.” Instantly I know I've put my foot in my mouth, but before I can apologize, she's already letting me know how badly I've messed up.

“What do I have going on? Not that I need to justify myself to you, Wilder, but we have people coming in from all over the country this year since we are hosting the entire St. James family for the holidays. And, for your information, you kids might be grown but that doesn’t mean I am any less your mother, and if you think that this is the only thing that I do all year... Well, I just don’t know what to say to that. Just plan the party.”

What had started as a strong rebuttal ended with barely a whimper and Mom hanging up without letting me get a word in. Putting the phone back down on my desk, I hit my forehead against the hardwood with a loud bang that echoes through the room. I’m going to get so many phone calls about upsetting Mom— and rightfully so. I just don’t have the time for it today, tomorrow, or any other day. “Shit.”

Before I can even raise my head back up and figure out how I’m going to get back in my mom’s good graces, the door to my office flies open and the youngest St. James comes running in with, frankly, a scary look on her face. My little sister, Clara, is twelve years younger than me, but as the only girl in a family of boys, she is just as in charge as our mother. “What did you say to Mom?” she demands to know while giving me a look that makes me feel like I’m the one who’s twelve years younger than her. “Well?”

I look over to make sure the door is shut all the way. I don’t want my brothers to hear about any of this. I’m hoping I can fix everything before they hear about it and I get this same treatment from the three of them. If any of them treated Mom like I just did, I would kick their ass. “I screwed up, Clara Bear.”

Clara rolls her eyes. Ok, calling her by her childhood nickname isn’t going to soften her up, but I had to try. “I was already frustrated about something when I answered the phone and it the phone call didn’t go well. I didn’t realize it was her calling because *someone*,” I emphasize the word, so she knows that although none of this is her fault, she did play a small part in my mood this morning, “changed my ringtones around and it wasn’t the usual one for Mom. Then she asked me to

organize the company Christmas party and I already have so much to do that I was rude and said things that weren't very nice. I would never assume that Mom has to plan the party, but she always has and I wasn't expecting that to change. I also know how much she does for us day in and day out. We would all be lost without her."

Clara listens to my whole explanation without saying anything. I hold my breath waiting for her response as she just sits opposite my desk looking at me. Finally, she starts to say something, "Wilder, you need to tell Mom all of that."

"That's it?" I was ready for her to read me the riot act and tell me how terrible I'd been. "I already knew that."

"Yup," Clara gets up and starts to skip out of my office. I don't think I've seen my sister slowly walk out of any room. She stops right before the door. "Oh, I might know someone who can help you with the party."

"Really? Someone from school?"

"No, not someone from school. Do you remember Ivy Kennedy? She used to come every summer to visit her grandparents, Lillian and George Kennedy."

I shake my head, so Clara keeps going. "She's moved back to Star Mountain to help Lillian now that George is gone and she's done with school. We used to hang out every summer and kept in touch. She got her degree in design. I already told her I would talk to you guys about any jobs that come up. In the meantime, maybe she could plan the party. She needs something to do for work and you need someone to delegate this to. And it would show you how good she would fit with St. James Construction and Design."

Clara is hard selling her friend, automatically making me suspicious, but I really have no other options. I can't take the time out to plan a Christmas party. Especially one that starts out being for the company, gets out of control and ends up being for our whole small town. "Ok, that sounds fine. If anything goes wrong, it's your fault, Clara Bear."

“Nothing will go wrong, Wilder. You’ll see, this will be your favorite Christmas party ever.”



Ivy

I’m back on Star Mountain.

I never really thought I would call this place home. All through my childhood and most of my teen years, I visited this magical place for several weeks during the summer. My parents are wonderful, loving parents who also wanted some time to just be a couple in love. Every year they let me spend the time with my dad’s parents, whom I loved more than anyone else. It was my favorite part of the year.

Being here now is bittersweet. Grandpa George suddenly passed away two years ago, and Grandma Lil is alone. I’m not worried about her in the regular sense you would be after someone lost their spouse of almost fifty years. No, Grandma Lil isn’t wasting away, dying of a broken heart. She’s out causing trouble. I think that when I told my parents I wanted to relocate closer to her after college, they were relieved. It meant that I could watch over her for a while and they could take a break. She’s fun and I love her so much.

The other thing I love about being in Star Mountain again is getting to reconnect with friends I made in childhood and have maintained throughout the years. My best friend growing up was Clara St. James. When I was visiting my grandparents as a kid, Clara and I were inseparable. She is the youngest in a huge family of brothers and I am an only child. I’m a city mouse and she’s a country mouse. It was a case of total opposites becoming the best of friends. She was the first person, after family, that I told I was moving to Star Mountain and she immediately made plans for us.

Waiting for her at a small table outside the town coffee shop, I take a deep breath. We may be in the South, but it still gets cold in the winter. Thanksgiving is a week away and the temperature outside is hovering around forty-five degrees.

Cold enough that I need a jacket over my sweater, but not too cold to stay inside when there are heaters outside on the sidewalks to add additional heat. I order a hot chocolate for Clara and a cinnamon mocha for me as soon as I see her running down the street toward the shop. Thank goodness for the ease of mobile ordering. I won't have to get up until our drinks are ready.

"Ivy! I can't believe you're here!" Clara exclaims as she jumps to a stop in front of me.

Laughing, I hug my friend and feel transported back to childhood for a moment. "I'm here and this time I don't have to leave in a few weeks. We get to hang out whenever we want."

The barista brings our drinks to our table—I'd forgotten how much slower and personal everything is in this town, and we start our catch-up session. Telling each other about school, dating, and plans for the future. "I'm looking for a job, as you know, in design. I will probably have to find something with a commute or start freelancing. I know you said you could put in a good word at your family's company, but that feels odd. I don't want to trade on our friendship like that."

"It's not trading on friendship, Ivy. It's part of the business that Dad, Knox, and Wilder are talking about expanding more all the time. I think you would be a great addition—I looked up some of your work online. I take St. James very seriously and wouldn't suggest you if I didn't think you would be an asset to the company." Clara frowns at me across the table.

Great, now I've insulted her, which was not my intention at all. "I know you take it seriously. I didn't mean it that way."

"I know you didn't, that was just me being overly sensitive. Being Knox's personal assistant isn't my end goal and I sometimes think my brothers don't take me seriously because I'm the youngest." Clara shakes her head, but then a sneaky smile crosses her face. "But I did get Wilder to listen to me about something today."

"Of course, you did, Clara. I bet they listen a lot more than you think they do." My friend is brilliant and I'm sure her

brothers appreciate her more than she realizes.

With a laugh, Clara continues, “Wilder got in a bit of a sticky situation with our mom and he’s very frustrated about the company Christmas party. My mom has always been in charge and it’s a huge deal to the company and the town. This year, she is hosting our whole family for the holidays and doesn’t have time to do both, at least that’s her excuse. I think she just doesn’t want to do the whole thing anymore. She’s been trying to get Dad to retire all the way and is slowly trying to turn over everything to Wilder and Knox.”

“I think it’s great that your mom wants your dad to retire so they can spend time together. It’s sweet. My parents both retired early and have been traveling for the last couple of years.” Sometimes their relationship means I feel very alone. If I didn’t have Grandma Lil, I would be all alone most of the time. That’s not a problem the St. James family would have though, there are a lot of them.

“It is and I think my brothers agree, but Wilder has been swamped at work and everyone goes to him for everything since he’s the oldest. I think it was just one thing too many today.” Clara loves her brothers and it’s obvious when she talks about them. “I came up with the perfect plan to help him and he was completely on board.”

“What’s the plan?” I’m interested in what she’s come up with and I also want to help if there is something I can do. I’m not doing anything else, and the St. James family has always been nice to me. I don’t remember ever meeting Clara’s older two brothers, Wilder and Knox, but I can’t see them being any different from the rest of the family.

“I thought that you could plan the Christmas party.” She pauses, and I’m not sure if I’m supposed to say something, but before I can, she continues, “It would be perfect, Ivy. You can plan a perfect Christmas party, technically becoming a St. James employee, and make it the most gorgeous, delightful, and original party we’ve ever had. Your designing skills will be undeniable, and then St. James Construction and Design will hire you to be the chief designer for the company.”

“Wow, you have a whole scenario from A to Z.” I laugh, but it does sound amazing. “You said your brother was on board?”

“Yes, he said he trusted me in my pick for party planner — that’s you— and the rest will just fall into place. You’ll see.” There’s a look in her eye that makes me think she’s up to something more than what she’s saying.

I agree to plan the party for her family’s company and lots of ideas start forming in my head. Clara sends her brother a text to tell him that I agreed to organize the party and through Clara he asks me to meet him at his office in two days to sign employment contracts, talk party budget, and show him any ideas I have. I agree and now I have two days to come up with something spectacular to impress Wilder St. James.

CHAPTER 2



IVY

WALKING INTO THE HEADQUARTERS OF ST. JAMES C&D IS nowhere as intimidating as I thought it would be. I've driven by the building many, many times and from the outside the intimidation is real. While researching the company and previous Christmas parties, I learned that Wilder is an architect and designs the buildings and houses that the company builds, including the company headquarters. It was the first building he designed for the company, and he did it while still in college. I also found several pictures of Wilder St. James and he is one sexy man. I have thought more about meeting him than about presenting my ideas for the Christmas party.

The lobby is partially decorated for the holiday season. A large Christmas tree is set up in the atrium, but isn't yet decorated. Maybe that's something they wait until after Thanksgiving to do. There are smaller trees with ribbons and lights, but no ornaments on those trees either. The aesthetic is very minimalistic, which is the opposite of my idea for the company's Christmas party. I hope this isn't a bad sign.

In the elevator ride up to the top floor, I check my lipstick again and make sure my black pencil skirt and dark green blouse are perfect. My heels are higher than I would normally wear, but they make my butt look amazing and I want to look my best at this meeting. Not because I had a filthy dream about my best friend's older brother last night that I can't get out of my head, but because I am a serious businesswoman who is here to do a job.

The elevator opens, I take a deep breath... and walk straight into a very tall man. Looking up, I smile. Standing in front of me is another of the St. James brothers, Miles. “Ivy Kennedy?”

“Hi, Miles.” He wraps his arms around me in a big hug and I hug him back. Miles, Clara, and the youngest brother, Hunter, were the St. James kids I knew. Wilder and Knox were never around. But Miles used to always be nice even though he was five years older than Clara and me. I might have had a crush on him when I was a tween but got over it quickly without even a bruised heart. “What are you doing here, Ivy? Clara said you moved back, but you look like you’re here for a meeting, not to see Clara.”

“She’s here to see me, Miles. Stop accosting the party planner.” A deep voice comes from the door across the room. Miles lets go and I instinctively step toward the voice. Drawn toward the man across the room in a way I’ve never experienced before.

“Jeeze, Wilder, it’s Ivy.” Miles looks at his brother like he has lost his mind and I feel like I’ve definitely lost mine. I feel guilty that Wilder saw me in another man’s arms and that’s simply crazy. I still haven’t officially met the man and already I feel like I’m his. The pull I feel toward Wilder St. James is both immediate and overwhelming. “Clara’s friend and the Kennedys’ granddaughter?”

When Wilder does nothing but continue to stare at me, Miles looks from his brother to me and back again. “Huh.” And with that, he walks away.

Wilder St. James in person is even better than I imagined. He’s tall— maybe half a foot taller than me, and I’m not a short woman. That would make him around six foot three or four. Wilder has dark hair that is long on top and shaved on the sides and a full beard that I want to feel against my thighs.

No, Ivy, this is a business meeting.

Technically, he’s my new boss and there is no way I’m going to mess that up by acting on this crush I’ve developed. Even if he is the hottest guy I’ve ever seen. There’s also the

fact that he's Clara's brother, older than me, and just to drive the point home, my boss.

I walk to him and hold out my hand, but he doesn't take it right away. His eyes travel up and down my body and I swear I feel it like he's running his hands along my body. Finally, he holds out his hand and we touch. "Hi, I'm Ivy." My voice is soft and breathy, nothing like the businesslike image I wanted to project.

"Hi, Ivy." He smiles at me, and my knees go weak. He is too much. Wilder still hasn't let go of my hand and I haven't tried to pull away. This isn't a handshake between colleagues and I have no idea what to do. I don't want to let go of his hand, but this job is important and don't want to mess it up by flirting with the boss, so I pull back and create distance between us. Instantly the warmth I was feeling when he was touching me is gone and I feel like I've lost something important. I want to grab his hand and put it back on my body.

I have to walk past Wilder to enter his office, but he doesn't move. I brush against him a little and the warmth comes rushing back. Once I've crossed the threshold into his office, I feel his hand on the small of my back as he leads me over to the chair across from his desk. I sit and he makes his way to his chair on the other side. Taking a deep breath, I try to center myself so that I can present my ideas and get this job. I have no idea how I'm going to be able to plan the party if I have to be around Wilder St. James. Maybe I can work from home.



WILDER

What the hell just happened?

I have a hard-on at the office. This has never happened to me before. Ivy Kennedy is a knock-out— tall with long, strawberry blonde hair and gorgeous brown eyes. I heard her voice when she got off the elevator and I was instantly drawn in. When I saw Miles with his arms around her, a bolt of

jealousy went through me and I wanted to punch my little brother. All I could think was that she was mine. I've never had this kind of instant possessive reaction to any woman before and of course it happens with someone that I shouldn't be lusting over at all. The possessiveness hasn't gone away, but I do feel calmer now that we are in my office with the door shut and it's just Ivy and me.

We stare at each other and neither of us moves to start our meeting. Ivy squares her shoulders and takes a deep breath. I can see her physically moving into business mode. It's sexy as hell. She gives me a presentation folder. Diagrams, lists, and vendor quotes make up an entire plan for the company Christmas party. "This is just an idea. I didn't know what the budget is for the party or if there is a particular theme that you have in mind. I had some ideas, and I drew them up. The quotes are for basic things and once I have more details, I can get more specific quotes."

Everything she says is one hundred percent party related, but my focus is completely on her lips. I wonder what they will feel like against mine or how they will feel wrapped around my cock. Now, Ivy is looking at me, waiting for my response and I have no idea what the right thing is to say. I can't tell her what I'm thinking, so I just wing it. "That sounds great. We can show you things we've done in the past and you can just do whatever you want." Her smile is dazzling, and I give myself a mental high-five myself. That was the right answer. I'm telling the truth too. She can do whatever she wants with the party if I can see her again and again. "I'll have Clara put together a folder of pictures and the things my mom has left from past parties."

"That would be great. I'm sure having pictures and notes from the past parties will help." She starts to stand up and panic spreads through my chest. I don't want her to leave without making plans to see her again. I can't let her go without knowing I will see her again.

"What about dinner tomorrow?" I ask before she can leave. I'm not sure if I mean the dinner to be for business or

pleasure. I don't care which it is, I just want to spend more time with her.

“To go over the plans for the party?” Her face is a bit flush. Maybe she wants to see me again as much as I want to see her.

“Sure. We can get to know each other better too. I know that you hung out with Clara a lot and you obviously know Miles, but I would like to get to know you too, Ivy.” Getting to know her is the least of what I want. I want to feel her body against mine, I want to know what's underneath those sexy as fuck clothes she's wearing and what it feels like to be her everything. I've never wanted to be with a woman this bad and I don't know how I'll take this slow, but I don't want to come on too strong and scare her away.

She nods her head, and we make plans to meet at my house for dinner the next night. I make the excuse that I have to be home because of my dog— which is true, I do have a dog that I have to let out after work. The real reason I want to have dinner at my house is so I can have her to myself and have no interruptions from family or friends. Just Ivy and me getting to know each other.

CHAPTER 3



WILDER

EVERYTHING IS READY FOR DINNER WITH IVY. I RUN DOWN THE checklist in my head. I have the table set with my good dishes and the steaks are ready to put on the grill. The salad is waiting in the fridge and a bottle of red wine is breathing on the counter. Mom's chocolate cake is under the glass cake display thing I didn't know that I owned until this afternoon when she showed me where it was.

Inspecting the living room for anything out of place, I'm proud of how it looks. The Christmas lights are giving off a romantic vibe that isn't usually here. I've dimmed most of the regular lamps so that the glow from the tree is more prominent. If Ivy thinks it's odd, I can blame it on getting in the right frame of mind to discuss the party.

I check the clock for the fifth time in the last hour. I'm acting like a teenager with his first crush. I've had girlfriends before, but I've never felt this kind of instant attraction. This woman has me tied up in knots and we've only spent maybe thirty minutes together so far. I know it's ridiculous, but I know in my gut that she is the woman for me. Ivy Kennedy is mine.

This dinner has changed, in my eyes, from a maybe business dinner into one hundred percent a date. Guilty feelings try to creep in as I think about the fact that I she probably thinks we are meeting to talk about the Christmas party but are quickly gone when I remember how gorgeous she looked sitting across from me in my office. I still want her to plan the party, and we can talk about the party all she wants,

but I also want to learn about her and at least make it known that I want more than just her party planning. If she wants to wait until after the party, when she's no longer an employee, to start being a couple, it will be hard, but I will do whatever she wants.

Another look at the clock and it's still ten more minutes until Ivy is supposed to arrive. I start the grill, so it's ready to go whenever we are ready to eat. The wine is uncorked and there is nothing else for me to do. I sit on the living room sofa when there is a knock on the door. Trying not to run, I quickly walk to the door and open it with a giant, goofy grin on my face that quickly turns into a grimace.

"Hey, big brother." Knox pushes through the front door with Hunter right behind him. Usually, I love my brothers visiting, but if they don't get out of my house in the next thirty seconds, I am going to punch them both.

Hunter looks at the table set with my good plates, flowers, and candles —yes, I went overboard— and raises his eyebrows. "Having company over?"

"Yes, you need to leave." I'm not in the mood to explain myself to either of these assholes, who know exactly what I'm doing tonight. My family doesn't know the meaning of the word "secret." As soon as my mom knew about the dinner, she told my dad, and he passed it down the line or Clara told Knox and it went on from there. They are just here to mess with me.

Knox sits down on the sofa and smiles. He is only fourteen months younger than me, and we are constantly screwing with each other. The look he's giving me assures me that he's not going to leave without giving me a little shit. A glance at the clock gives me three minutes to get them out and that will never happen. "I thought you were having a business meeting with Clara's friend about the Christmas party."

"Ivy?" Hunter asks. Maybe he's just along for the ride. Neither brother seems to know the whole story of what's happening and my feelings toward Ivy. "I remember her from when we were teenagers."

“Keep your hands to yourself.” Warning Hunter, so we don’t have a repeat of yesterday with Miles just seems smart, but it also gives away the game to my brothers. They exchange glances with each other and start to laugh.

“So, that’s how it is. I wondered why you were having her over here instead of just coming back to your office. Mom said you were having the party planner over for dinner and that she was a friend of Clara’s but didn’t say that you were hot for her. You know she’s like at least ten years younger than you?”

“She’s closer to my age or Miles. She was pretty when we were teenagers.” Hunter is laughing so hard he can barely get through his taunting. “I remember she liked animals, too. Being a veterinarian and not her boss might work in my favor.”

I can feel my blood pressure rising. Hunter is messing with me, it’s what he does, but he’s kind of right. I am her boss and a lot older. Both things are reasons that I shouldn’t go after Ivy, but they aren’t going to stop me.

Another knock at the door and this time it has to be Ivy. I turn to my brothers. “The two of you need to leave, now. Say hello, nice to see you, and then walk away.”

I open the door and there she is, dressed like the best Christmas present. She’s in jeans, a tight red sweater, and red heels. I wish I had the right to take her in my arms and kiss her. Someday I will, but not today. “Hi, Ivy. You look beautiful, please come in.” I stand back and place my hand on the small of her back as she walks into my home. I’m physically unable to resist touching her in some way.

“Thank you, Wilder,” she says with a gorgeous smile. She looks around the foyer and tells me, “Your house is lovely.”

I start to say something, but Knox interrupts me, coming up to introduce himself to Ivy and irritate me further. “Hi, Ivy, I’m Knox, the best St. James brother.”

She laughs and holds out her hand. I squint my eyes at him, trying to communicate that he shouldn’t touch her, but he ignores me completely and envelopes her hand in his. “Hi,

Knox, I think you're the last St. James for me to meet," Ivy says with a laugh. I know I have no reason to be jealous of my brother, but I want him to stop touching her and I'm not above removing his hand from hers. I gently grab and hold her hand in mine. A sweet smile crosses her face. I would do anything to have her smile at me like that all the time.

"My brothers were just leaving, right, guys?" I say with a bit of rancor. I wanted everything to be perfect tonight and them being here when she arrived is already starting things off on the wrong foot.

Turning toward the living room, Ivy sees Miles and smiles a different smile than the one she's given me and my stomach sinks. It's a smile that shines with old memories and friendship. I don't have that with her, and it makes me so damn jealous that my brother does,

"Miles!" She quickly walks over to my little brother and hugs him tightly.

"Hey, Ivy. How are you?" Miles smirks at me over her shoulder and I wonder how my parents would feel about only having three sons.

"I'm great. Clara told me that you're finally a vet and have taken over for Dr. Peters. I have a kitten that adopted me before I moved here and I've only done an initial vet appointment, so she needs to be seen again. It would be great to have you look her over."

So, my girl is an animal lover like Miles said. Hopefully, her kitten and my dog, Duke, will get along.

"You always had a soft spot for animals when we were kids. Just call my office and we'll set something up. She'll be safe in my hands." Again, Miles gives me a look, fucking with me, and I'm done.

"Miles and Knox, if you don't get out of my house right now, I'm going to call Mom and tell her what you're doing." I know it's a childish way out of the situation, but I can't handle not being alone with Ivy anymore. I need to be alone with her,

even if it's just to talk to her and learn all about everything she's ever done. I don't want to share.

Both of my brothers laugh but say their goodbyes and leave. Ivy blushes. The last thing I want to do is embarrass her, but I just can't share her attention anymore and I won't apologize for that. Sitting next to her on the couch, I turn until our thighs are touching. I'm hard and aching against my pants. Thank God I'm wearing a sweatshirt that's long enough to cover where I press against my zipper. I want nothing more at this moment than to lean over and kiss her. To start something that will only end with me inside her for the rest of the night. Touching her like this, even through the layers of our clothes, has my body throbbing for more.

"Ivy, I'm sorry they were here. It's the problem with having so many damn siblings, they are always in my business. I promise there won't be anyone else but us for the rest of the night. Well, and Duke, but he's playing outside and doesn't usually come inside till it's dark."

She places her small hand on my knee igniting a fire through my whole body, "Wilder, first, I love that your family is in your business all the time. I've always been jealous of Clara with all of her big brothers. I know it drives her nuts at times, but you're all lucky to have that built-in support system. I'm an only child and even though I have my parents and my Grandma Lili, I've always wished I had siblings." She takes a deep breath. For several moments Ivy just stares into my eyes while biting at her lower lip. I wonder if there is something she is nervous to tell me or if she is worried about what's happening between us. I would do anything to make her feel comfortable here with me. "Second, I came tonight to show you my plans for the party."

Fuck, I've misread everything. I quickly move away from her. "I'm so sorry, Ivy. I thought there was something..."

Ivy grabs my sweatshirt as I turn away. She pulls me hard enough that we both fall onto the couch, our bodies press against each other, and there is no way she can't feel just how much I've misread this situation. I'm going to get sued for sexual harassment.

“Wilder, you were right.” She smiles up at me, revealing the most adorable dimple in her right cheek.

I’m trying so hard to not kiss her, it takes a second for her words to sink in. “I was right?”

With a laugh, Ivy nods. “I was going to say that I came to show you my plans for the party, but I hoped you felt something more than just business stuff happen yesterday in your office. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you.”

There are no words for how I feel at this moment, knowing that she felt that bolt of lightning yesterday just like I did. I gaze into her eyes, running one hand up to the side of her face to pull her close to me as our lips finally meet for the first time.



Ivy

Damn.

Wilder’s right hand is holding my face and his left is making an exploration of the area between my hip and the underside of my breasts. His lips against mine feel like heaven. I don’t have a lot of experience with men —none would be more accurate— but I would rank this as the best kiss to ever happen in the history of the world. He presses his tongue against the seam of my lips, asking for entry, and I grant it gladly. His weight on my body is something I didn’t expect to experience tonight, but this moment will forever be embedded in my memory. I was so worried about admitting to wanting more than just a business meeting tonight and then almost messed it up. I’m not usually a forward person and shocked myself by having the guts to do something about my feelings, but I wasn’t going to let this moment with Wilder pass me by. Even with limited experience, deep down I know I could never feel this way for anyone other than Wilder.

Wilder slowly moves his kisses across my jaw, down my neck and then back up to whisper in my ear, “I’m so fucking glad you’re here.”

I laugh. It's not funny, it's romantic as hell, but I laugh. What's wrong with me? Wilder sits back and I clutch his shoulders. "I'm sorry, I'm not laughing at you." I try to stop laughing and be serious, but I can't stop. "Maybe it is a stress reaction?"

I look into his eyes, but he doesn't look upset by my laughter. He's smiling back, his eyes sparkling with humor, "I know, sweetheart. It's all a bit fast and crazy, isn't it?" He lightly kisses my lips and my forehead. My stomach flips with the tenderness of his kisses. "Why don't we have dinner and talk. We can just spend time together. Then we can see what happens?"

He stands up and holds his hand to help me stand. I grab his hand to stand up and end up firm against his body. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I stand with my head on his chest and just breathe. Standing with him holding me feels peaceful and right. He's right that everything is moving so fast, but I have never experienced this kind of feeling before and I only know that I want to feel the way I feel in his arms forever.

We work well together in his kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner and sharing an amazing red wine. Wilder is finishing the steaks on the grill, while I put the salad ingredients together.

"So, you came to Star Mountain a lot when you growing up?" Wilder asks, pulling out my chair and pushing it back in after I take my seat.

"Yes, for at least a few weeks, but usually a month or so every summer. We would go on a family vacation and then I'd come to Star Mountain for the rest of my break. My parents are crazy in love and wanted to do couple stuff every summer. I never begrudged them that time. I love that they nurtured their relationship even while raising a child. I've always found it sweet, even if sometimes I was the odd man out." I shake my head. Not going to get into that part of my childhood on a first date. "Plus, I got to spend summers with Clara, Miles, and Hunter. Those were pretty fun times. My grandparents weren't

strict. I got away with a lot back then. Grandma Lili has always been a free spirit and encouraged me to be the same.”

“I can’t believe that we never met during the summers when you were a teenager,” he says, coming in with the steaks.

I pour the rest of the wine into our glasses. “I think you were just older and too cool for us kids. By the time we were teenagers, it was just Clara and I hanging out the most and we always met at my grandparents’ house. Clara would mention her older brothers, but you guys were these college-aged men that really didn’t interest us at all. We mostly spent our time obsessing over a few local boys and One Direction.” The expression on his face is so funny, a mixture of disgust and disbelief. The difference in our age doesn’t bother me at all, but when I was hanging out with Clara as a teen, Wilder was already jumping headfirst into adulthood.

He reaches out for my hand and laces our fingers together. “I’m glad we’ve met now instead of then.” Winking at me, he finishes his glass of wine.

“Me too.” I take a bite of the steak and can’t help the moan that escapes from my body. “This is so good.”

Wilder doesn’t answer, but stares at my mouth. “Keep talking, baby.”

What am I supposed to say with him staring at me like that? I have no idea so I say the only thing that pops into my head. “Um, pineapple on pizza... yes or no?”

Wilder keeps staring at me, but it’s no longer just at my mouth and there’s laughter reflecting in his eyes instead of heat. “No pineapple for me, but if you like it I wouldn’t have a problem ordering it.”

That seems to put us back to where we were before, asking questions and trading answers, but I’m still very careful not to make any noises as I finish the rest of my delicious steak.

I finish my glass of wine and begin to gather up the dishes. “We can leave those, I’ll get them later,” he says, standing and offering me his hand.

Wilder is very gentlemanly, always helping me up, putting a hand at the small of my back as we walk from room to room, and making sure I'm okay when we sit and are close to each other. His checking in on my level of comfort is sexy as hell and makes me feel safe and protected.

“Should we talk about the party?” I ask, wanting to get that out of the way. I know we both said that's what the actual purpose of this dinner was, but I like the date vibes we've had and would rather keep those.

“I don't care about the party, Ivy.” Wilder moves closer to me and places a hand on the side of my face. “I trust that you have a fantastic vision and that you plan to do an amazing job. Clara wouldn't have suggested you if she didn't have complete faith in your abilities.” His fingers move from caressing my cheek to tangling in my hair, his other hand pulls me closer and begins drawing circles in the patch of skin he's revealed right above the waist of my jeans. “What I want to do is kiss you over and over. Feel you against me for the rest of the night. Is that what you want, sweetheart? Whatever happens tonight has no bearing at all on the party planning or anything to do with working at St. James. Whatever happens between you and me, is just that, you and me— us.”

I can barely breathe at the intensity of his words and the clear determination in his gaze. I know that it's a mistake to mix business and pleasure, but I also know that if I don't kiss this man again, I will never forgive myself.

CHAPTER 4



IVY

“KISS ME, WILDER.” THOSE THREE WORDS ARE ALL HE NEEDS to devour me. He grabs my hips and pulls me across his lap. My legs move around his body, tightening on either side of his thighs as I begin to push against his body. I’ve never felt so powerful. Wilder lets me set the pace of our kiss, while still exploring my body with his hands. It’s intoxicating to know this gorgeous man wants me as much as I want him.

His hands move under my sweater, the heat burning me as his palms trail up to my lace bra. Thank goodness for earlier Ivy who planned ahead and wore sexy underwear, even though I was still pretending this was a business meeting. “Can I take this off?” Wilder asks as he kisses his way down my neck. Pulling back, I raise my arms in answer. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t let this man do to me, but his asking for my permission me is hot. He pulls the sweater over my head and growls as my skin is revealed. Quickly, he undoes the hook of my bra and frees my breasts to his view. “Damn, Ivy, you are so fucking gorgeous. I could worship these for hours.”

He takes one nipple into the warmth of his mouth while kneading the flesh of my other breast in his hand. I feel the connection down to my clit and it’s unlike anything I’ve ever felt before. Rubbing myself against his hard cock relieves some of the pressure, but I need something more. Dry humping through two layers of denim just isn’t going to cut it. I’ve never felt this need or felt this frustrated. I don’t know how to vocalize what I’m feeling to Wilder. Everything he’s doing is amazing, but I need more.

As if he can read my mind, Wilder stands, holding onto my ass and kissing me wildly as he walks from the living room to his bedroom. He plops me down onto a bed with a roguish grin. A quick look around the room confirms that it's his bedroom. The walls are a soft cream, and the large wood furniture is stained dark. There are only a few family pictures on his dresser. His bedding is lush as I run my hands across it, a lovely midnight blue, with a quilt at the bottom that looks old and well-loved. Everything about this man calls to me. My internal inventory of his bedroom stops instantly when he takes off his sweatshirt and I get my first look at his body.

Wilder might be an architect at St. James C&D, but that doesn't mean he spends all his time at a desk. The man is ripped. He either works out a lot or spends a lot of time at the building sites. A sleeve of tattoos begins on the edge of his neck and ends at the wrist of his left arm. The only thing that could distract me from staring at the god-like upper body of Wilder St. James is the reveal of the lower half of the man. I don't have experience up close and personal with any men, but that doesn't mean I don't have a general idea of what they look like. Nothing I've seen online could have prepared me for Wilder. I've never seen anything like him.

My hand reaches out to touch him, but I pull back before I make contact. Grabbing my hand, he places it on his cock. It's warm and hard and smooth, unlike anything I've ever felt before. Looking up at him, his eyes are closed, my touch bringing him pleasure. His reaction makes me feel brave and I want to try something else to make him feel good. I move up on my knees and then rise to stand off the side of the bed. Wilder opens his eyes but stays silent. Slowly, I slide to the floor and kneel at his feet. Damn, looking up at him—all that strong muscle and powerful man—is turning me on in a way I didn't think was possible. Leaning forward, I test the feel of his cock against my tongue. I never thought this was something I would want to do and now I can't imagine our time together starting any other way. I wrap my lips around the head of his cock and the growl that comes from the strong man above me almost makes me come. I want to make him feel this good for the rest of our lives.



WILDER

This woman is going to wreck me forever. Looking down at Ivy at my feet, her lips wrapped around my dick, is the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my entire life, but I can't wait to take care of her. I don't want the first time I come in her to be in her mouth. I want to be inside her pussy and for us to come together.

I gently separate her from my dick and lift her back onto the bed. I'm completely naked, but somehow, she still has her jeans on, and I don't know how that happened. Clearly an oversight that needs to be remedied right away.

"Ivy, why aren't you naked?" I ask her as I start undoing her pants and working them down past her hips, thighs, and finally off her body. Now, the only thing keeping me from where I want to be more than anything else is a very thin scrap of bright red lace.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just better at this than you," she answers with a cheeky grin and a lift of her hips.

"Maybe," I answer back as I kiss down her body. Her breasts are perfect handfuls tipped with rose-colored nipples and I make sure to kiss all the freckles that make up constellations across her body. I plan on spending hours mapping my own universe on her skin. My lips continue their adventure down to her thighs. I graze down the inside to her left knee and then shift to the right. I can smell her arousal as I move my shoulders between her legs and my mouth moves closer and closer to her pussy. Her body tenses and her thighs tighten around my head. Running my hands slowly up and down her legs, I check in with Ivy, "Are you okay, sweetheart? If I'm doing anything you don't want to do, you just have to say no and I'm done. This is all about you."

Her legs relax a little bit and her fingers run through my hair. "I absolutely don't want you to stop, you feel amazing." Ivy takes a deep breath and I wait for her to continue. I have

all night, hell, I have forever for her. “I’ve just never done this before.”

“You’ve never had someone eat your pussy?”

She shakes her head and I see a blush spreading down her chest. “I’ve never done any of this. I’m a virgin.” She closes her eyes like she doesn’t want to see my response. Is she embarrassed by this amazing gift she’s giving me?

“Open your eyes, baby.” She looks at me and worries cloud her beautiful, deep coffee brown eyes. “I feel so honored that you trust me with this. I love that I’m going to be your first and if you want to wait until we’ve known each other for longer, that’s okay. I would wait for you forever, you know.”

An enchanting smile crosses her face, and she shakes her head again. “I don’t want to wait. I want you so much and I want you to be my first. I wanted you before I met you.”

I feel the same way about her. It’s like all along she was meant to be mine and the amount of time we’ve actually known each other is irrelevant. I’m going to make my girl feel more satisfied than she thinks possible. I run my nose along the seam of her panties. They need to come off, but it’s sexy as fuck that they are hiding her from me. So close to where I want to be, but not quite there. They are drenched with the evidence of her arousal. I almost come myself thinking about sliding into her hot, tight pussy. Pulling aside her panties, I get my first look at her most intimate place and I turn into an animal. I move in and eat her with single-mindedness. I want to make her feel things she’s never imagined and want to come back for more.

She moves her hips against my face seeking more from me. I pull her panties so tight that the flimsy lace breaks and falls off her body. I move up to suck on her clit and put first one finger and then another into tight, virgin sex. How am I going to get my cock in there and not come the instant I feel her wrap around me? I might die from pleasure, but it would be well worth it. I feel her body tightening and begin sucking her clit harder and pumping my fingers in and out of her faster. Ivy’s hands are in my hair, both pushing me tighter against her

body and pulling me away. She pulls so hard that I might have a bald spot when we are done, and I couldn't give a fuck. With a deafening scream, Ivy comes, and I feel like the master of the universe.

CHAPTER 5



WILDER

THE DREAMY LOOK IN IVY'S EYES AS SHE RECOVERS FROM HER orgasm is one I want to see every day. I'm not anywhere near done with her yet, either. Slowly I kiss my way back up her body, taking a different path than before, finding another set of freckles to add to my map of Ivy Kennedy. Taking her lips with mine, I let her taste herself and it must turn her on even more. With a slight push on my shoulders she rolls me over onto my back. The sight of her above me, legs spread on either side of my body, her juicy pussy lips wrapping around my hard cock, will be burned into my memory eternally. When I'm old and gray, I will remember this moment, the seconds before I make Ivy mine, and replay it over and over.

"You feel so good against me, baby." Running my hard staff slowly up and down through her heat, making sure it's nice and wet, I'm ready to find a way inside her tight walls without hurting her any more than necessary. The very last thing I want to do is hurt her in some way.

"You feel good, too, Wilder." Ivy smiles down at me, then bites her bottom lip. "Um, I've loved everything we've done so far..." Again with biting her lip, as if she isn't sure she can tell me what's on her mind.

"What is it, baby? You can tell me anything." I run my hands up and down her back, trying to reassure her that no matter what she has to say, I'm here for her.

"I want you to fuck me." A beautiful red flush spreads across her body as I flip us back around to her laying beneath me.

“You want me to fuck you?”

She nods.

“Right now?”

She nods again.

“I need words, baby. I need to know exactly what you want from me. I don’t want any miscommunication between us.” I want to hear her say she wants me to fuck her again. I think my brain broke when she said it and I need to hear it again. In a night full of memorable moments, that will be the hottest fucking thing that has ever happened.

Taking a deep breath, she runs her hands down my back and grabs my ass, pulling my body tightly into hers. She whispers into my ear, “I want you to take that big cock and put it in my pussy. I want you to fuck me with it until we both scream in pleasure.”

Damn. I asked and she delivered. There’s nothing to say to those instructions other than: “Yes, ma’am.”

Placing the head of my cock at her opening, I start to slowly push in. Ivy’s so fucking tight and I’m not sure if I will be able to get all the way inside. Ivy doesn’t wait, she surges up and pulls me fully into her body.

“Ivy, God, you feel so good. Are you okay?” Trying not to move so she can get used to the sensation of having me inside her, I look into her eyes. There is a sheen of unshed tears, but the smile on her face betrays the turmoil I saw for a moment staring back at me. That smile is blinding and all I needed to see to know that Ivy is ready for what’s next.



Ivy

I’ve never felt like this before. It hurt a bit in the beginning, probably because I wasn’t patient enough to let Wilder take his time and let my body adjust to his size. I may have never touched a real penis before, but I know that the

man is blessed. Now, that uncomfortable moment has passed and I'm feeling impatient again. I need Wilder to move, to touch me, to just do something.

I slowly move my hips a bit to give him a hint. I can't believe how blunt I was earlier and even though we couldn't be more intimate than we are right now, there is no way I'm going to ask him to fuck me again. I've hit my limit on being forward for the day. Luckily he picks up on my hint and grabs my hips.

"Want me to move, baby?" he asks me as he starts to gently pull out of my body.

"Yes, please."

"Well, since you asked so nicely." Wilder pulls almost all the way out and then slams back inside of me. I've never felt anything so amazing. In and out, Wilder takes me higher and higher. I don't expect to have another orgasm, but I find one building as his motions increase in tempo and power.

I wrap my arms around his neck. He leans back until I'm practically sitting in his lap, we're still joined, still moving in a rhythm that can only be ours. This feels like so much more than just a physical act. Looking into Wilder's eyes as we move together, I feel him move into my heart and soul. This is life changing. I feather kisses all over his face, and his beard, which felt so good on my body, tickles my neck. When my mouth finds his it's like I've come home. Surely it isn't normally like this when people get together. No one would ever get anything done.

Wilder pulls his face back and I look deep into his sapphire eyes. "Are you gonna come with me, baby?" he asks.

I nod and give him the words I know he wants. "Yes, Wilder, whatever you want me to do." I'm so gone, my body is his to do whatever with and if he wants me to come with him, then that's what I'll do.

A deep growl comes from his body. "I can't wait anymore, Ivy. I'm so close to exploding in this tight, hot, pussy." He puts his finger against my clit and rubs it in a tight circle.

“I’m coming!” I scream against him. I wasn’t prepared for how the combination of his finger on that sensitive button and his big cock pounding in and out of me would send me into orbit.

After a few more pumps, I hear Wilder groan into my ear, feel his body tighten, and then feel the evidence of his body reaching orgasm inside. Luckily, I’m on birth control since we didn’t use a condom. Not sure either of us cared about that. Wilder places a sweet kiss on my forehead as he lays me down on his bed.

“Be right back, baby.” He walks toward his bathroom and then returns with a washcloth. He quickly cleans me up before climbing into bed. He pulls the covers over us and wraps his arms tightly around my body. “You’re staying the night, right?” He sounds unsure and nervous about how I will answer. There’s a vulnerability in this big, strong man that surprises me.

“Yes, I’m staying the night.” I cuddle deep into his body and he kisses the back of my neck.

His body relaxes against me. “Good.” After several minutes of lying together, his breathing evens out and he falls asleep.

It’s still dark when I wake up with Wilder’s arms wrapped tightly around me. I don’t think I’ve been asleep long and don’t know what woke me up. For a moment everything is perfect. Laying here in Wilder’s arms is one of the most amazing feelings I’ve ever experienced, but now my mind won’t stop spinning. *What have I just done?* I slept with a man twenty-four hours after meeting him, giving him my virginity. I’m falling for Wilder, but was it wise to jump right into bed? Plus, he’s my boss. I know I’m just planning the Christmas party right now, but I really wanted to get a job at St. James and now that can’t happen. I can’t work at a place where people will say I got my job as a reward from the boss. And he’s my best friend’s older brother. I might have ruined one of my oldest friendships. How will Clara feel about Wilder and I being together? Why didn’t I think this through?

Oh, Ivy. You've really messed up, haven't you?

CHAPTER 6



WILDER

I WAKE UP WITH A SMILE ON MY FACE. I'M A GONER FOR IVY and don't care. Rolling over, I reach for her, only to find an empty bed. Not only is the bed empty, but it's also cold. She hasn't been next to me for a while and I didn't wake up when she left.

“Ivy?”

Maybe she got up to make breakfast. I hope she didn't clean up all the dishes from last night. I left a mess in there and I would hate for her to have felt like she needed to clean it up. I pull on some pajama pants and walk to the front of the house. As I walk through, I notice that Ivy's clothes are missing, but maybe she was cold and didn't want to walk around my house naked.

I'm trying to justify things to myself, but there's a ball in the pit of my stomach that's telling me she's gone. I can feel it in the air, she's not here.

In the kitchen, everything is the same as when we left it, except in the middle of the table there's a piece of paper. I don't want to read it. Everything was so perfect last night, I thought that Ivy and I were on the same page. I thought that she felt the same way I did. Why would she leave without talking to me? Why would she run?

I pick up the paper and read it:

WILDER,

I'm sorry. Last night was perfect. But I can't do it again. I don't want to mess everything up. I'm sorry.

Ivy

WHAT THE FUCK? WHAT DOES SHE THINK SHE'S GOING TO mess up? I grab my phone and call her number. It goes straight to voice mail. I text her, but I know she's not going to respond. She's staying with her grandmother, but I think showing up there and demanding to know why she left in the middle of the night is probably not the right move. What do I do? I need to talk to her, but she obviously doesn't want to talk to me. Sitting down on my couch, the couch where I first kissed Ivy last night and believed that we were beginning something special, I do something I never thought I would. I call my brothers and Clara for help with a woman.

Less than an hour later, Clara, Knox, Hunter, and Miles are all gathered in my living room with pizza and beer even though it's only ten in the morning. Clara brought cookies. They are all staring at me and no one says a word. I'm normally the one in charge, the one with the answers, and now I'm coming to them. I have to find out what's happening with Ivy and what I can do to get her back in my arms. My behavior is completely abnormal, but when they fall in love they will understand how much it flips everything upside down. I won't feel right or whole until Ivy is with me again and I know that she's okay.

"So, how did you mess everything up so fast?" Knox asks, smirking at me.

With a shrug, I simply answer, "I don't know." Before anyone else can say anything else, I continue "If I knew what I did to scare her away, I would have already fixed it. When we fell asleep, or at least when I fell asleep, I thought everything was perfect."

Clara shudders, "I don't want to know any details, not a single one, but are you sure that everything that happened between the two of you was what she wanted to happen?"

I hate that my baby sister is asking me that question, but I can't say I didn't have the same thoughts already this morning. I replay in my mind every moment of our night and I can say for certain that she was one hundred percent on board. I checked in with her many times and she always had an opportunity to say no. I tell my family just that without getting into any details.

Hunter then says, "Do you think she thought this would affect her ability to work for the company? You are technically her boss and I remember Ivy being fiercely independent as a kid. There is no way she would want people thinking she got a job because the boss was sleeping with her."

"One has nothing to do with the other. She was already hired to plan the party before I met her, it was just a formality when she came to my office. As far as a job in the future, her previous internships and portfolio speak for themselves. We would be stupid not to hire her, but I had already thought of a way to not be her boss or in any way part of her job. Anyway, we are a family company and she'll be part of the family. No one would think anything of her working with us." I had thought all of this through, but not said anything to anyone because I know how crazy it all sounds. To think about marriage and forever with someone I've only known for a day. But, hell, I knew that she was it the moment I stepped out of my office and saw her standing with Hunter. She is mine and always will be.

"Family?" Clara asks eyebrows raised to her hairline. "You've only known her a day, Wilder. You can't be serious."

"She's your best friend, Clara. What problem do you have with us being together? Do you think she's too good for me?" My hands run through my hair as I pace back and forth in front of the fireplace in my living room. My hair is probably permanently stuck up from the amount of time my fingers have spent in it today as I've stressed about Ivy. "You're right, she is too good for me, but I don't care. I have to find a way to get her back here. Can you please call her, Clara Bear, and see if she'll talk to you?"

Clara walks over and wraps her arms around me. “Wilder, she’s not too good for you. You are the best man I know.” My brothers all voice various forms of protest and Clara laughs. “Okay, one of the best men I know. I think you and Clara make a perfect couple, but I’ve never seen you act like this. I don’t understand why you are acting so out of control.”

Holding my little sister close makes me feel more grounded than I have the rest of the morning. I have been out of control, but what am I supposed to do? The woman I love and had a life-changing night with left me in the middle of the night with only a note. If ever there was a time to be out of control and crazy, this would be that time. “When you fall in love, Clara Bear, you will understand.”

Clara rolls her eyes, “You guys would never let a man close enough to me for that to happen.”

“You’re just a kid, Clara,” Knox says.

“I’m the same age as Ivy,” Clara says with a cheeky grin in my direction. She’s got me there. Ivy is twelve years younger than me, but that doesn’t matter at all. Would I have a fit if Clara started dating a man my age? Probably. There’s nothing I can do about that now. “Even though you scare all the men away and treat me like a baby, Wilder, I’m going to help you with Ivy. I just want you to be happy and for Ivy to be happy. I think that means for the two of you to be together.”

“Can you call her?” I want to make sure she’s okay more than anything and then I want to see her. I’m willing to use my little sister to achieve these things.

“I’m gonna go to the guest room and try to talk to her. Don’t interrupt.” She starts toward the guest room but turns around. “I’m on your side, Wilder, but Clara’s been my friend for a long time. I’m going to listen to her too. I’m not going to go against her wishes. Please, don’t put me in the middle and expect me to violate my friend’s confidence or privacy.”

Smiling at my sister, pride and gratitude run through me. I’m proud of the woman she is and the friend she is. She’s right that she’s not a kid anymore and we need to start treating her like an adult and equal. “Clara, I wouldn’t want you to

betray Ivy in any way. I love that you feel protective of her and I'm happy that she has you as a friend. Just tell her that I want to know she's all right and I want to talk to her."



Ivy

Waking up from crying yourself to sleep is the worst. My eyes are puffy and red, my throat is sore, and everything around me feels slightly damp. After leaving Wilder's house, I drove around for a while. I didn't want to go back to my Grandma Lili's house and climb into my bed by myself. I was also afraid that if I saw my grandma, I would tell her everything that happened between Wilder and me and she would either tell me I was crazy for leaving or crazy for sleeping with him. I'm leaning more toward the former, but my mind is so mixed up that I don't know what to do. Now I've made everything worse by leaving him in the middle of the night.

I need to get out of bed. It's ten thirty in the morning and I never sleep this late. I have a Zoom meeting with a vendor for the Christmas party at two and even though I'm not sure I still have the job, I'm not going to just flake on the party planning until I'm told to stop. It's important to Wilder, so it's important to me. Maybe that's how I can make it up to him that I left. I can plan the best party that St. James C&D has ever had.

A quick shower doesn't improve my mood, but at least I look human. Venturing into the kitchen for coffee and something to settle my upset stomach, I stop in my tracks when I find my Grandma Lili sitting at the table with coffee, a muffin, and her "let's talk things out" face on. I love her more than just about anything, but I'm not sure I can explain this one to her without spontaneously combusting.

"I'm not going to disappear just because you wish hard enough, young lady. Come in here and drink your coffee before it gets cold." Grandma Lili laughs and her smile is so warm. Suddenly I can't get to her fast enough. The tears

tumble down my face as I sit in the chair she pulls right next to hers and lean my head against her shoulder. “Darling girl, it can’t be that bad. And if it is, we’ll fix it. Your grandfather always said that I could fix anything with my sheer determination.”

“And your smart mouth.” I finish the saying.

“Yes, that part too.” She takes a napkin off the table and wipes my face. “Now, tell me what happened, whose body I need to hide, and what we need to do to make you smile like you were yesterday. When you left for your *business meeting* yesterday,” her emphasis on business meeting lets me know I wasn’t fooling her at all, “you were practically floating on those killer heels you wear.”

“It was a business meeting.” I try to lamely defend myself, but neither of us is buying it. Grandma just shakes her head, so I tell her a PG-13 version of what happened. “Now I feel stupid and don’t know what to do about it.” The tears are back to running down my face. She just takes a napkin from the table and tells me to dry my eyes.

“You have to decide what’s more important to you. Do you want to find a job and be a career woman here in Star Mountain or do you want to find love?”

Ugh, like that’s an easy choice to make. I’ve always envisioned myself as an independent woman with a career I could be proud of but also someone with a partner to share things. My parents —and grandparents— have been amazing role models of good relationships and I don’t want to settle for less. If I follow my heart and let myself fall completely for Wilder, will I have to compromise on my career? Would that eventually cause resentment on my part? Or if I push to still be a designer somewhere other than St. James C&D is that going to cause friction with Wilder and his family? It’s all just too much and it’s easier to hide here and not think about any of it.

“I don’t know, Grandma. I want everything, but I just don’t see how that’s possible.” I stand up and pour my half-drunk coffee down the drain. “I need to get ready for a couple of Zoom meetings I have with vendors this afternoon.”

“You’re still going to plan the party?” She tries to hide her look of shock, but I see it quickly cross her face. Did she think I would bail on everything because of what happened between Wilder and me? I would never do that to Clara and her family.

“Yes, I just have to find a way to do it where I don’t have to set foot into the company headquarters or talk to Wilder St. James. There is no way I can face him after the way I’ve acted.”

I return to my bedroom and think about just crawling back under the covers and resuming my pity party. I’m fully aware that I put myself in this position, but that doesn’t mean I can’t wallow in my broken heart for a while.

Before I can make up my mind about getting under the covers or acting like an adult with work to do, my cell phone rings. I had it on silent earlier but turned the ringer back on when I went for coffee. I didn’t want to forget and miss anything important from a vendor. Plus, Wilder had left a voicemail and a text earlier and I want to know if he calls or texts again. I pick up my cell phone, my heart practically beating out of my chest at the idea it could be Wilder, but it isn’t. The display tells me it’s a St. James, but not the one I want to hear from and dread hearing from at the same time.

“Clara, hi,” I answer, unsure whether she’s going to be upset with me for running out on her big brother or for sleeping with her brother, or if she even knows what happened last night.

“Are you okay, Ivy? Where are you?”

So, she knows. “I’m okay. I’m home with Grandma Lili.”

“I don’t want to be in the middle of whatever is going on with you and Wilder. I will tell you the same thing I told him.” She takes a deep breath and I hate that she’s in this position. “I won’t tell him anything you tell me and the same thing goes the other way. I won’t break confidences or pick sides. Think of me as Switzerland.”

I giggle at the idea of her trying to ignore Wilder as he bugs her for information. Of course, that would mean he

would want to know information and I have no idea what he's thinking or feeling after I ran away. "I'm still going to plan the party, Clara. I wouldn't leave your family in a lurch like that. I know that none of you have any reason to believe me, but I'm not a bad person." The tears start to flow again. "I'm so sorry. Please tell Wilder that I'm sorry."

"Honey, stop crying. Wilder isn't mad at you— no one is mad at you. We are all concerned about you and wondering what happened, but no one thinks you are a bad person, especially me. You are one of my longest and best friends. Do I want to think about whatever happened between you and Wilder last night? No, thank you. But the two of you as a couple is something that I can totally see. I did see it and that may be why I suggested you for the job."

"You were trying to matchmake?" I wouldn't put it past Clara, but Wilder and I?

"A little. Wilder has been getting so frustrated with everyone and everything lately, but it's because he was looking for something he couldn't find. I thought maybe you were that thing."

"Thanks, I think."

"It's a compliment, I promise. You know how protective of my brothers I am. I wouldn't let them fall in love with just anyone."

Love. I don't know what to say to that. I know that I am falling for him— or, if I'm honest with myself, already fell in love with him. I haven't let myself believe that his feelings could be that strong or real for me. I've done more than run out on him, I've also ignored his feelings completely. Another way I am completely wrong for such a good man.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know what to do, how to fix anything." I feel another crying breakdown coming and I have to get off the phone with Clara before I start sobbing. "I promise I will plan the party as I promised, and it will be perfect. I'll stay away from your brother and then I'll leave town."

I start to hang up the phone when I hear a scuffle and Wilder's growly, wonderful voice barrels through the phone. "The fuck you will stay away from me. I'm coming for you, Ivy Kennedy, so be ready." Then silence.

CHAPTER 7



IVY

“I’M COMING FOR YOU, IVY KENNEDY, SO BE READY.”

Be ready for what? Ready to listen to how much he hates me, loves me, or doesn’t have feelings one way or the other? The last option would be the worst. I could deal with him hating me. I’d have to leave town and die a spinster, but I could learn to cope. If I found out he feels ambivalent toward me and doesn’t care if I stay or go, I’m not sure I could survive.

As I pace my room, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Holy hell, I look beastly. I took a shower earlier but did nothing with my hair. It’s dried in a mass of frizz and half curls. My face is pale and splotchy from all the crying— my eyes are puffy from the same. The girl who showed up at Wilder’s door last night has been replaced by a hag monster lady from a horror movie. My clothes are equally atrocious. I’m in a sweatshirt I’ve had since I was a teenager that has more holes than any respectable garment should and leggings that sag in my butt from being washed and worn so much.

It only takes ten minutes at most to get from Wilder’s house to my grandparents’ place and I’ve spent at least five freaking out about his feelings and my unfortunate appearance. If I’m going to make myself presentable, it’s going to take a miracle. Where is Cinderella’s fairy godmother and sewing mice when I need them?

First, I’m going to change out of these clothes. I pull on a different pair of yoga pants that are tight and still fit to the shape of my body. The sweatshirt is tossed into a pile of dirty

clothes and a crop top is its replacement. The final piece of the outfit is an oversized cardigan. The effect is sexy, yet comfortable. I have no idea if this is the way I should be dressing for an encounter with the man I'm head over heels for, but it's all I've got.

I hear him knock on the door. It's banging more than knocking and Grandma Lili responds in kind, yelling for him to try it again the way his mother and father told him to knock on a door when visiting a neighbor. I'm sure she's trying to buy me more time and I love that woman even more in that minute. As fast as I can, I run a brush through my hair and put it up in a top knot. There is no helping the puffy eyes or pale face. Putting makeup on is just going to make the situation worse. If Wilder has been even half as upset as I have, then he will understand why I'm bare-faced and puffy.

I head downstairs and can hear Wilder talking to my grandmother. She's making small talk, asking him about his family and the business. Wilder is answering politely, but there is so much tension in his voice. He's a barely caged animal and my grandma is just standing there purposefully poking him with a stick. She sees me and gives me a little wink.

Wilder spins to where I'm standing and stares at me. Damn, he's so handsome, but there are little indicators that he's had just as rough of a time as I have. His shirt is not buttoned up all the way and is very wrinkly, like he pulled it off a pile of clothes. His pants are the ones he was wearing last night, and it doesn't look like he's wearing socks with his tennis shoes. His hair is sticking up every which way and he looks tired.

We focus on each other, but no one speaks. I don't know what to say. I ran out on this amazing man. I let my insecurities, which seem unimportant now that he's standing in front of me, get the better of me and hurt him. That's not what someone does to somebody they love. I do love him though. I know it's too fast and there is a lot we don't know about each other yet, but I know one thing. I love Wilder St. James.

He walks toward me with his hands held out for me to take.



WILDER

I hold my hands out and hope that she gives me her hands to hold. After what feels like forever, but is probably less than ten seconds, she places her hands in mine, and I breathe for the first time since I woke up and found her gone. Pulling her body toward me, I wrap my arms around her and place a kiss on her head. There is a lot we need to talk about, but having her back in my arms is the best feeling and I'm not ready to start all the heavy stuff yet. I want to just revel in the feeling of touching her. We were apart for less than twelve hours and I never want to be without her for that long again. I'm obsessed with this woman, and I don't care if it's too fast or crazy. She's mine and I'm going to keep her.

"I missed you," I whisper into her hair. She pulls back and I look into her red-rimmed eyes. I can see evidence of her crying and I hate it.

"I'm so sorry, Wilder," she says with tears in her eyes.

Without letting go of her, I lead her over to the living room couch and pull her into my lap. I saw Ivy's grandmother go out through the garage with her car keys. She probably left to give us whatever privacy we need to get to the bottom of what happened last night after we made love. "Ivy, I don't understand why you keep apologizing. You have nothing to be sorry for at all."

"I left you." She rubs her face against my chest.

"You did, and I would like to understand why you left, but I'm not mad at you and I don't want you to apologize for your feelings. Something made you feel like you needed to leave and that's on me. I just wish you had woken me up and talked to me, instead of writing that damn note." I will be able to recall the words of that note for the rest of my life.

Ivy pulls herself off of my lap and sits beside me. I don't like it, but if it's something she needs to do so we can have this conversation, then that's what we'll do. I still grab her hand

and hold it. She smiles down at where our fingers are intertwined. “We fell asleep and then I woke up. You were holding me and it felt so perfect. Then I started spiraling. We’ve only known each other for such a brief time and we moved into the bedroom so fast. I sort of work for you. Would people say I only got my job because I was sleeping with the boss? Would I never get a serious job because people think I’m a floozy? What if by my actions I messed up my relationship with Clara or your relationship with Clara? I could deal if Clara was upset with me— it would break my heart, but I would survive. I would be devastated if she was mad at you because of me. I would never do anything to hurt your family.”

Her eyes grow unfocused during her rambling, like she is remembering how her thoughts tumbled through her mind. I lift her hand and kiss each of her fingers. “Ivy, I know that we moved fast and we can slow down and go at whatever speed you want to go. Please tell me that you didn’t feel pressured into what we did. I will never forgive myself.” This has been my biggest fear, despite the reassurance I gave my siblings earlier.

Ivy grabs my face between her small hands and looks directly into my eyes, “No, I wanted to experience everything we did last night. It was magical. I will remember every moment for the rest of my life.”

I kiss her— I can’t wait any longer. Our lips touch and that same lightning bolt that struck the first time yesterday hits me again. This woman will be mine forever. Once we talk about the rest of her fears, I’m going to do whatever it takes to keep her with me. Pulling away from the perfection of her mouth is almost impossible, but I manage, telling myself that the faster we talk, the faster we can go back home and fully be together.

“As for working for me... Yes, I’m technically your boss, I guess. But that has nothing to do with you and me. I know we both called last night a business meeting, but it was never a meeting for me. I always meant for it to be a date, and I should have made that more clear.”

“I knew what it was.” Ivy laughs. “I didn’t even bring the party planning stuff inside your house. It was all in my car.”

We both laugh. I didn't realize she didn't bring any work with her. "If it makes you more comfortable, we can make Knox your boss and I can be hands-off on anything to do with you." At the raise of her eyebrow, I realize how that sounds and restate. "I mean, hands off with anything to do with your work. St. James C&D is a family company. You'll be a St. James, so it shouldn't matter that you have a job with us. That's just the way we do things."

Ivy freezes. "What do you mean, I'll be a St. James?"

I never thought I would be doing this so quickly, but I don't know how I thought I could wait. I always thought I would have some big dramatic plan, but I pull the ring out of my pocket that I got before our date. That's how far gone I was after meeting her at my office. I knew deep down that she was the one. I didn't think I would be proposing a few days later, though. I get down on one knee in front of the Kennedy family couch and hold my soulmate's left hand in mine. "Ivy, I love you more than I thought possible. I know this is moving unbelievably fast and that people will think we are crazy. I am crazy about you. From the second I saw you standing outside my office, I knew you were it. Would you please do me the greatest honor of becoming my wife?"

Tears stream down Ivy's face as she scoots closer to the edge of the couch and into my space. "Wilder, I will love you until I take my last breath and then probably even after that. I'm sorry for all the heartache I caused this morning." She holds up her hand to stop me from talking. "That's the last time I'll say it, I promise. I would love to be your wife and have you as my husband."

I put the ring on her finger and draw her into my arms. I swing her around while kissing the fuck out of her. This morning, I woke and experienced the worst emotions I have ever gone through and now I'm so happy that my heart is beating out of my chest. I can't wait to see what the rest of my life will be like with my Ivy.

CHAPTER 8



WILDER

ONE YEAR LATER

“WHERE IS MY WIFE?” I ASK MY MOTHER AS SHE HELPS THE caterer do the final check for the Christmas party. Even though she put her foot down that she wasn’t planning the party last year, she couldn’t help assisting my Ivy this year. After waiting a year to get married, we finally eloped on the one-year anniversary of our first date. We spent the last year getting to know everything about each other, letting Ivy settle into working at St. James C & D, and just enjoying being a couple. We are going on our honeymoon right after Christmas and my mother is looking at this party as our wedding reception, but without presents for the bride and groom. There is even a “Christmas Cake” that would be very bridal if it weren’t red and green.

“Um, she’s around somewhere. Last minute checks of everything.” Mom looks around but doesn’t make eye contact. Something is going on, and I have a feeling it involves the women in my family. “You know how it is.”

“Uh-huh. Well, if you see her, tell her I’m looking for her. The Santa called in sick and I’m filling in.” I don’t want to play dress up, but my brothers all said no and that it was my wife’s party, so I had to fill in for the absent Santa. I’m not sure their logic is one hundred percent sound, but there wasn’t any time to argue.

I change into the costume in my office bathroom. The suit is itchy and too big. Feeling foolish, I walk into my office and the scene in front of me is a fantasy come to life. A fantasy I never had until this moment, and that seems like a failing on the part of my imagination.

Standing in front of me is a very sexy version of Mrs. Claus. No plump dress or grey hair for this version. This Mrs. Claus is wearing a form-fitting red velvet dress with white fur lining the collar, cuffs, and hem. Green tights, black high heels, and an adorable Santa hat round out the rest of the outfit.

“Well, ho, ho, ho.” I make my way over to her and pull her into my arms. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Claus.”

“You’re looking very jolly.” Laughter rings out as she tries to get closer to me and is hindered by the big fake belly that is part of my costume. “Can I sit on your lap, Santa?”

I growl as I haul my wife up into my arms. Her amazing ass in my hands as I make my way over to the couch in my office. She’s driving me crazy with small kisses along my neck and below my ear, knowing it makes me unbelievably hard. I need her. Now.

I tumble her onto the couch and come down on top of her sweet body. Again, the belly gets in my way. Frustrated, I sit up and pull the thing from under my costume. “That’s better.” I put my body on top of hers, the heat of our bodies combining and shocking me just like it always does. There’s a part of me that is waiting for this pull between us, the charge that happens when I’m in the room with her to go away. I don’t want it to ever stop, but surely this overwhelming need to always be with Ivy, to always be touching her, loving her, part of her, will calm down the longer we are together.

“I said I wanted to sit on your lap, Wilder.” There is a sparkle in her eyes and I realize that there is something to her request that I’m not picking up on. Something that Ivy needs to tell me.

Turning, I pull Ivy across me to straddle my waist and wait.

“This is not how people sit on Santa’s lap, honey.”

“No, you get special privileges as Santa’s wife.” Unable to stop, my hands move along the sides of her body from her hips up to her breasts. Thanks to the amazing costume she’s wearing, I can see just how turned on she is. Her body is giving me cues too— she’s moving against my hard-on, a small moan escaping from her lips. “Ivy, baby, you have to tell me whatever it is you have to say. I’m not going to be able to hold back much longer. I need you and you’re driving me crazy.”

A blush spreads across her cheeks. After everything we’ve done together, Ivy shouldn’t be shy about anything. “I wanted to give you a special gift for Christmas.”

“Okay,” I answer, “but Santa gives the gifts, Ivy. You’re supposed to tell me what you want for Christmas when you sit on my lap, sweet girl.”

“It’s something that will be for both of us.” She takes a deep breath and a breathtaking smile spreads across her face. “We’re going to have a baby.”

A picture of Ivy round with our baby —a life with a little girl that looks like Ivy or a little boy that laughs like my brothers— floats through my mind, and my heart beats a little faster. A baby. The best Christmas present ever.

“When? How?” I can’t really form a thought and Ivy laughs a little.

“I’m just a few weeks late, too early to tell anyone else.” She raises an eyebrow and brings her body closer to mine. “And I think you know how a baby is made, honey.”

She’s right, I do know and my wife is giving me all the signals that she wants me to show her exactly how it happens.



Ivy

“I love you,” my husband whispers, almost reverently, as he begins pulling up the tight skirt on my costume. I can feel his hard cock through the thick velvet of his Santa pants. There should be something very taboo about the way he’s dressed, but I don’t think there is anything my husband could wear that would turn me off.

“We’ll have to hurry. I’m surprised no one’s come looking for us yet.” I lift my hips and help Wilder pull down the green tights and tiny red thong I’ve soaked through while I’ve been on his lap.

“Somebody hasn’t been a very good girl,” he says in a deep, low voice.

“Santa,” I pull the rest of the costume over my head and stand before him naked. “I think I’ve been a very good girl this year.”

Before the dress hits the floor, his hands are on me. I slide the suspenders off his strong shoulders and the pants of his costume fall to the floor. His tight boxer briefs, red and green-striped, of course, can’t hide how much he wants me. I always feel so powerful in my husband’s love. I know there is nothing he wouldn’t do for me and nothing he wouldn’t do to have me. It’s a heady feeling to be loved so much by one person.

Without words, he places the head of his cock at my wet opening and enters me. There is no time for foreplay with the whole party waiting for us, but it isn’t necessary. Just touching or kissing Wilder makes me wet and ready to ride my husband. Quickly and quietly, we find our rhythm, sharing kisses and touching each other while we find ecstasy in each other’s arms.

Wilder rests his forehead against mine, slowing the rhythm of our lovemaking, and looks into my eyes. The corners of his eyes crinkle with laugh lines and a small smile spreads across his lips. “I want us to finish together.”

I nod and Wilder pounds into my body. His finger finds my clit and rubs in a tiny circular motion, and I can’t control myself anymore. “I’m coming, Wilder,” I yell, probably alerting the entire party to what we are doing in this office.

Wilder slams his mouth down on mine. I'm not sure if it is to quiet me or himself and it doesn't matter, because at that moment I feel the hot liquid of his release shoot inside me.

Quickly we put our costumes back together. Before I can leave the office, Wilder pulls me back down onto the couch saying that I need to rest for the baby's sake.

"Are you going to go all obsessive caveman now that I'm pregnant?"

"Going to? I think I've been obsessive already." His hand strokes down my back over and over, lulling me to the edge of sleep. If we didn't have the whole family and a company party outside, I would love to just lay here and take a nap.

He might be a touch obsessive, but one of the things I love most about Wilder St. James is how much he takes care of me and everyone in his family. This baby will be so lucky to have Wilder as their father and to have the whole St. James family in their corner.

EPILOGUE



WILDER

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

LOOKING DOWN INTO THE EYES OF MY NEWBORN DAUGHTER IS one of the best moments in my life and one of the scariest. Jovie St. James came screaming into the world eight months after the Christmas party. She's a tiny little thing, weighing barely six pounds, and so beautiful— like her mother.

Ivy is sleeping in the bed next to us, but I'll have to wake her up soon. Jovie is doing that rooting thing I read about in one of the hundred parenting books I read in preparation for her arrival. Ivy's prediction that I would be an obsessive caveman was true, but nothing topped how crazy I became when we found out that we were having a girl. My entire family had to set me down and explain that I was going to chase my wife away if I didn't cool it. None of them understand how it feels to have people that mean so much to you just out in the world where anything can happen. Jovie is so helpless, and it's up to me, Ivy, and all the St. Jameses to protect her and keep her from all harm.

There's a knock on the door and it opens slightly. Clara and Knox slide in and quietly make their way over to where I'm sitting. I check that Ivy is still sleeping —she deserves as much rest as she can get— and tilt my head to the other side of the room where there is a sitting area.

“She's beautiful.” My little sister has a sheen of tears in her eyes as she looks at my daughter. “I can't believe she's

here and she's so small." Clara and Ivy have been planning and scheming for Jovie's arrival since the moment the stick had two lines.

"Do you want to hold her, Aunt Clara?" I ask, knowing that she's dying to do just that and a little surprised that she hadn't already taken her from my arms.

She nods, now with actual tears on her face. I place the sleeping baby in her arms. Jovie startles for a moment, but goes right back to sleep. Clara brings her close, giving her a sweet kiss on the forehead, and smiles. "I love her so much already. I'm going to be her favorite."

Knox clears his throat. "You can be her favorite aunt and I'll be her favorite uncle."

"Clara won't have any competition unless one of you gets married, but you will have to fight it out with Miles and Hunter." All three of my brothers are going to spoil this little girl rotten. They've already bought her some toys that she can't use until she's a toddler.

"Not planning on getting married, and Miles and Hunter are no competition for me," Knox rebuts with his usual cocky attitude. Eventually, some woman is going to knock him on his ass, and I can't wait to see it happen. He won't know what hit him.

"Clara, you've had the baby long enough. It's my turn." Knox gently takes Jovie from Clara, who crosses the room to check on Ivy. My wife looks like she's still asleep, but my little sister grabs her hand and whispers something to her that I can't hear. Ivy smiles but doesn't open her eyes.

Knox has walked with Jovie over to the window and is looking out into the parking lot. "I'm your Uncle Knox, sweetheart. I'm the one you come to if you ever need anything, no questions asked. If anyone ever makes you sad, you tell me and I'll make them pay." I step back and let Knox have his moment with my baby girl. I know I don't need to be too worried about how I will protect her and keep her safe, my family will always have my back.

“Where’s my baby?” Ivy asks from the bed. She sits up and smiles toward Knox, who is still staring out the window, transfixed on something. He doesn’t respond to Ivy.

“Hey, Knox, you okay?”

He startles, scaring Jovie, and she starts to cry. Knox looks down at the baby and over at Ivy. He quickly makes his way to her. “Ivy, I’m so sorry I made her cry. I didn’t mean to startle her. She’s gorgeous. You did amazing.” He kisses Jovie’s head and then Ivy’s before looking at Clara. “I have to go. Can you get a ride home?”

“I guess.” But Knox doesn’t wait for Clara’s answer. He is halfway out the door before she answers, leaving us looking at each other in confusion.



Ivy

Five Days Later

“Have you heard from Knox?” I ask, while my mother-in-law, whom we are all to now call Gran, folds a load of towels in my living room. We’ve been home with Jovie for four days and I haven’t had to lift a finger. Wilder’s family has been wonderful, but it’s time to start doing things on my own again. Wilder said I just need to tell his mom that I’m ready. I don’t want to sound ungrateful though, because I don’t think we would have made it through the last few days without her help.

“No one has. Miles said that he tried to call him about something work-related and got an email in return, Clara said he hasn’t been to the office, Hunter is taking care of his dogs, and he missed golf with his dad. It’s like he dropped off the face of the planet after visiting you when Jovie was born.”

“I don’t understand. He was looking out the window, jumped like he’d seen a ghost, and then took off.”

Jovie starts to fuss. I start to get up and head toward her bassinet, but Gran tells me to rest. This is it. This is when I

have to tell her I'm okay. "Actually," is all I say before she starts laughing.

"I'm overstaying my welcome, aren't I? Wilder's dad told me last night that I was in the way and I said that you needed me, but this morning I've noticed that you are humoring me more than needing me."

"No, I needed your help. Wilder, Jovie, and I would have been lost without you when we came home from the hospital." I pick up Jovie and sit next to Gran. "You know how much all three of us love you."

"I love you too, sweetie. You aren't hurting my feelings by telling me to hit the road, I promise. I've let stuff slide at home and need to catch up there."

"You can still come by anytime to chat, have a cup of coffee, snuggle a baby." We laugh because there is no way we could keep her away from Jovie.

"I'm so happy that you and Wilder found your way to each other. I remember you as a young girl. You were always so happy and carefree, and my Wilder has always been the protective, take-on-the-world type. I think you balance each other out beautifully."

"Thank you, so much. For those beautiful words and for Wilder. He's more than I ever could have dreamed of, and now we have Jovie."

At that moment, Wilder walks in the door along with Miles and Hunter, booming laughter ringing through the house. Jovie startles but calms down the second her eyes meet Wilder's and he scoops her up. She's already a daddy's girl.

"We know where Knox is," Miles blurts out before anyone even says hello, causing both of his brothers to knock him in the head.

"Where?" I ask, eager to get the gossip. I haven't been an actual member of the family for very long, but I know the St. James family well enough to know that they never disappear on each other. A five-day disappearance is unheard of and cause for worry and gossip.

“Do you remember Scarlett?” The question is directed at their mother, and from the look on her face, she remembers her... and the memories aren't fond.

“Yes, I do remember that girl. Please, tell me this has nothing to do with her. She left for New York years ago.”

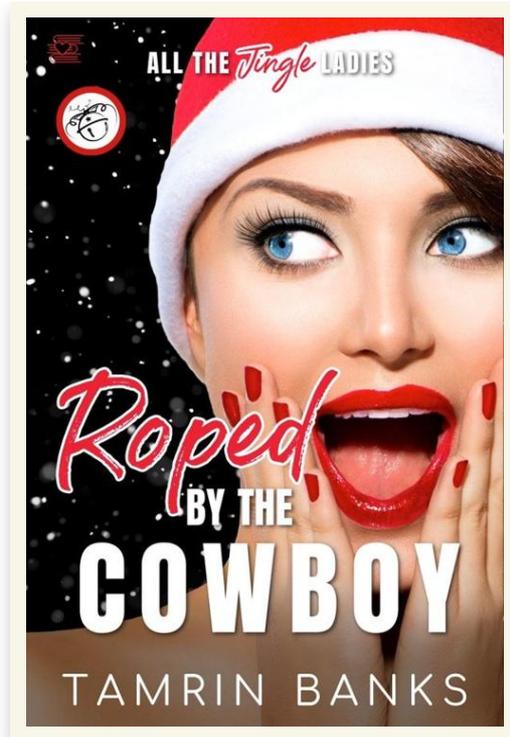
“She's back.” Knox walks in the door and we all turn to face him. He hasn't shaved in days and looks like a change of clothes hasn't been a top priority either. “I saw her in the parking lot of the hospital, but then couldn't find her. I've spent the last five days looking everywhere, but I know where she is now. I'm going to go get her, bring her home, and keep her. This time forever.”

Want to know what happens for our holiday couple? Check out the Bonus Epilogue and catch up today! <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/e3e84lspu7>

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Mistletoe

My parents' loss gave me no real choice where my future lies.

Luckily for me I was born to run this ranch.

Unfortunately for me, I'm now being blackmailed by the grannies to spend time with my nemesis.

My best friend from school, Sebastian gave me both the best and worst memories of my life.

Sebastian is the cowboy that has me running to keep away from him and just live my life.

Our grannies are insistent that I need to corral that cowboy before he gets away.

Is there any way I can forget or forgive the way he embarrassed me and left me broken hearted at sixteen?

Sebastian

My life as a rancher is my dream, but there's one dream that's eluded me - the love of my life.

One stupid mistake at sixteen and Mistletoe has spent the last ten years torturing us and ignoring me until I ache for her.

I've got a secret weapon though - two grannies almost as desperate as I am to get us together.

They've managed to get us to have to work together, but Misty is fighting tooth and nail.

When it comes to the grannies, Misty's outmatched in stubborn and persistence.

Misty gives in. And now's my chance.

We continue our bickering over the miles keeping us occupied even as the grannies work to make it permanent.

Most people want to kiss their soulmate, but I want to absolutely wallow in my Mistletoe.

How do I convince her that unlike the boy who kissed her at sixteen, the man in front of her wants a never-ending future with her for the rest of our lives?

If you enjoy safe reads with instalove perfection, strong men, spicy scenes, and a solid happily ever after with no cheating or cliffhangers, then this series fits your wish list.

Grab a mug of hot chocolate and settle into your favorite reading place to fall in love with *All the Jingle Ladies*.