



Santa Baby

Holiday Series: Book Fifteen

JISA DEAN

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By:
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Talia

I know what I want for Christmas. It's small, beautiful, and wrapped in blue...or rather pink. It's the baby I've been left with when my friend -her mother- died. Noelle. I will do anything for this little baby...including something I never thought I would, like marrying a man I don't know who may or may not have a thing for dating sites used to find Sugar Babies. But what choice do I have? I can't let them take Noelle away from me. I can't stand by and watch the baby I've grown so attached to being sent into a system that is so broken and that I know so well. I just have to suck it up, meet the Sugar Daddy that will become my husband, and stay focused on that little baby with the big bright eyes. But what I get when I meet Nic isn't what I was expecting. And this man isn't just someone willing to go along with my plans to keep my baby. No, Nic wants to give me an extra special Christmas gift...a sister or brother for little Noelle.

Nicholas

I've spent my life building up the toy company my father left my brother and me. One of the clauses in his will was that we both had to get married or pay to keep it. I've given up on ever finding a wife and instead set out to buy my way back into the company. My brother...he's always taking the easy way out. But when I get wind of the little thing wanting him to be her Sugar Daddy, I have to take a look especially when I hear her voice. What I find is a woman willing to do anything to keep the infant her friend left behind. Talia isn't the kind of woman who looks like she would be alright with someone

calling her a Sugar Baby but she's desperate. And I find I'm very willing to help her. One look at Talia and how much she loves baby Noelle and I'm willing to be more than her Sugar Daddy...I want to make her my Santa Baby and teach her all the fun she can have when she lets me drive the sleigh. I'm not playing when it comes to Talia. This Christmas, I plan to keep Talia all wrapped up under my tree...even if I have to tie her to my bed to do it.

Buckle up, you hot elves because I have a little slice of Christmas cheer to offer for when you just can't wrap another gift or move that elf one more dang time. This isn't a story for the tiny reindeer. It's the fifteenth in my Holiday Series and can be read as a standalone. So don't let all the stress of the season bring you down, curl up by the lights of the tree, and read about this sexy Santa who will go to any extremes to make his Mrs. Claus happy. Just like the song, he's going to hurry down the chimney and Christmas is going to be a whole lot warmer this year. So, give yourself a Happy Holiday, no wrapping required!

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Chapter One

Talia

My mind keeps tripping back to the past three months. Things have changed so much from how they were back in the summer, or even before that. And then...everything changed. My world, the world I worked so hard for, is crashing down around me. I'm going to be all alone again. My eyes burn as I start to cry...AGAIN. That's all I've been doing since I got home and opened the letter from the Department of Children's Services.

A freakin' letter. Not a phone call or a visit. They didn't have a problem visiting me when they were looking at where I lived for the court case. No, someone was out here the next day poking and prodding and telling me all the ways I've come up short because I'm only nineteen and can't take care of even myself.

I'm so mad! And sad, and scared, and...mad. I fling the paper as hard as I can, but it does about as much good as me trying to save my way of life because it just catches air and floats lazily to the floor close by. I grab the sofa cushion and bury my face in it so I can scream and not wake the baby.

The baby! The reason I wake up in the morning and keep going. The reason for the letter and the court date that's looming over my head like the sharp, shiny blade of a guillotine. And I feel it weighing me down like I'm the one carrying the damned platform for my execution on my back. Everything is so heavy.

A knock on the door has me jumping like I'm guilty of something. I try to dash away the tears as I stand and smooth my hair down so no one can tell I've been sitting here pulling at it trying to find a way out of all of this. I hurriedly open the door before the next knock too afraid the sound will wake up little Noelle.

When I open the door, my sexy next-door neighbor is on the other side. She's so pretty and always totally put together. She's got all these beautiful clothes, and her hair is always perfect. And seeing her now just brings home how far from perfect I really am. Maybe everyone is right when they say I shouldn't be allowed to raise Noelle. Maybe everything I thought really is wrong and love isn't enough.

My nose stings and my eyes start to well up with more tears and I am certain I'm about to embarrass myself in front of this beautiful woman who probably just stopped by to tell me she has some of my mail or ask for a cup of fucking sugar.

“Hi...oh my God! Are you alright, sweetie?”

I nod but then lose it and start sobbing. To my surprise, this woman is as kind as she is pretty. She doesn't even back away from me or go running back to her own apartment. Instead, she puts her arm around me, and we go back to my couch.

“What happened, honey? You look like someone kicked your dog?”

The woman's accent is thick, so the word dog comes out sounding like dawg. Even her accent is pretty.

“I...I'm so sorry. I shouldn't...leak on you.” She giggles and offers me another one-armed hug.

“Babe, I think that's called crying. And don't you worry, my momma always said what's the use in being a woman if you can't be soft enough to cry about the sad stuff and tough enough to let another woman lean on you when she needs to be soft to cry about the sad stuff?”

When I figure out what she meant, I've not only stopped crying but also mostly pulled myself together. She gives me a kind smile and pats my leg.

“Now, tell me what's got you so down, hon?”

I start telling her...everything. About how I met Noelle's mother when she

came to be my roommate, how she got knocked up and I offered to help her because we both had nobody but ourselves. I tell her about the awful news I got one night telling me Lissanne will never be coming back to kiss her baby or to hold her or watch her grow up because a drunk driver crossed the line and took her away from little Noelle. That Lissanne wanted me to take care of the baby - we had already discussed what would happen if something terrible happened to her - and about how I've been close to the baby from the very beginning. I was there for her birth and have been loving her right from the start.

“Oh wow. I actually thought the baby was yours when I first moved in. I mean I've only ever seen you with her.”

“Her mom worked at night, and I work from home so...it was easier for me to take care of her than Lissanne. But now.... now I'm going to lose her!”

“Oh no!”

I hand her the letter with shaky hands. “They said I was too young to take care of a baby. That I'm not stable enough to keep her and keep her healthy and happy. That I don't have a husband so I can't support her the way a family could. They're going to take her after Christmas right before the court date.”

I flop over and hide my face in the pillow again as I bawl my eyes out and the neighbor girl pats me and rubs my shoulder. “You love that baby girl so much. Anyone can see it if they just look.” I cry silently for I don't know how long, as she sits and tries to offer me some comfort.

“Oh darlin', it just kills me to think the two of you are going to lose one another.” I look over at her and open my mouth to thank her for at least caring but she keeps going. “Wait! All you have to do is get married, right? They don't care to whom?”

I scrunch my face up and try to follow along. “But I don't...have a boyfriend. I don't know anyone. I moved here right out of college and only knew Lissanne. Once Noelle came, I...just never had the time or the energy to actually try to meet anyone.”

“But you could have one. You’re pretty enough to turn any man’s head, especially the ones that love the whole innocent act.”

“Act?”

Chapter Two

Talia

I try to keep up with her but just can't figure out where she is going with this. What act? And what's all this about me being pretty enough to turn men's heads? Is she being mean now? I stare into her big wide blue eyes and realize she's not being mean. Maybe she's just telling me that to boost my morale.

“So, the whole innocent thing...not an act, huh?” She rubs her chin in a classic thinking pose. “That might actually be a good thing.”

She says it softly, almost to herself instead of me.

“I'm thinking...what if you find someone who you could marry?”

“What? I...I don't know anyone. I told you...I don't...”

“But you could go online. To a dating service. And find someone.” She says it so happily I almost go along with it to keep her from getting all bummed out with me again.

“I...I don't have...there isn't time to date. I have just a matter of weeks. You can't meet someone, fall in love, and marry in a matter of weeks.”

“Maybe not fall in love but sometimes love comes later.”

“I don't understand.”

“Well, there are dating sites...” she starts out slowly like I might not be okay with what she's about to say, “and then there's Littles For Us.”

“Littles for us? What is that?”

“Well...it’s a dating site for people who like taking care of women, who like being...you know...a Daddy.”

Her eyes widen and I can feel my cheeks flush bright red. I typeset books for authors and small indie publishers. Romance authors are one of my biggest clients. I know what a Daddy is. But she just keeps going without seeing my flaming cheeks.

“These older men will take care of you and treat you like a...a...princess.”

Not the word I would have used. “I know what it is...what they are. I just don’t understand how that is going to help my situation. I don’t need a boyfriend. I need a...someone who...oh, it’s hopeless.”

“Just hear me out.” She reaches out to keep me from hiding my face again. “I have a friend who used to date this one guy and he was very interested in finding a wife. She wasn’t all about that, so they ended their contract.”

I try to think things through. There is so much to unpack I’m not sure where to begin. “Why does he need a wife so bad?”

She shrugs her shoulders but starts texting madly. “I don’t know why but if you want I can ask for his number and you can ask him yourself. Besides, what difference does it make? He needs a wife, and you need to be one. It’s perfect.”

“I don’t...” I start shaking my head no, “I don’t really think that’s going to be safe. I don’t really...”

“Got it!” She holds her phone up like it’s an ancient golden icon she’s unearthed when it dings.

“What?”

“I texted my girlfriend and she texted back his number.”

“I don’t...” think this is going to work but I also don’t get to say anything before she calls. She immediately hits the speaker button.

“Hello.”

The voice that answers is deep and rumbly. It makes me want to reach for the phone and hit cancel. “Hi. Is this Chris?”

There is a long pause that has me tucking my lip between my teeth and holding my breath. “No. He’s not here right now. May I take a message?”

“Do you have any idea when he’s going to be back...and if he’s married to anyone?”

I close my eyes and exhale. She means well but...I would already have hung up if I got this kind of call.

“Who the hell is this? And what do you want with Chris?”

Yeah, this is not a good idea at all. I don’t need the man with that voice to be mad at me when I already have an agency after me as it is.

Chapter Three

Nic

The voice on the phone irritates me. It's too...irritating. I can't put my finger on why it sets me off. It just does and I'm a man who doesn't really take the time to figure stupid shit out like why a voice irritates me.

"Just hang up."

I spin in my chair and away from my computer at the sound of the new voice on the phone. That voice does not irritate. The annoying one shushes it causing me to narrow my eyes like they can both see me even though I realize they can't.

"I have a friend who used to date Chris. She told me he had to get married - I don't know the reason and frankly, it's none of my business. I just wanted to know if he still needs a wife. You see, I have this other friend who needs to get married to keep her baby."

I interrupt. "To keep her baby?"

Is it the little voice I heard in the background I wonder? Does she have a baby?

"Long story short - she wants to adopt this baby, but they won't let her unless she's married. So, if Chris still needs a wife...can you tell him to meet us at the Drip on Main if he does? Thank you."

She gives a time and date before the line goes dead, and I'm left with nothing more than an empty office and a silent phone. That voice was...sweet and soft. If I'm being honest with myself, I would admit that it made my cock twitch in a way it doesn't normally react. Hell, it doesn't react at all most of

the time.

Between work and sleep, I've been...stagnant. It's literally been all work and no play. And up until now, I haven't given one fuck if it's made me a dull boy or not. But now...things could be different. If I can just find the owner of that voice and talk her into coming home with me.

The fact she might be looking for my brother just makes me want to wrap my hands around his neck and throttle him. I'm twelve years older than the little shit and have been keeping him out of trouble for the past twenty years. I knew exactly what they were talking about when they mentioned Chris's need for a wife.

My father passed away about eighteen years ago and instead of leaving the company to my mom - which would have been the smarter thing to do - he left it to a business partner of his with an amendment that we take over after we both turn twenty-one... if we are both married by then. I already knew that wasn't going to happen for me, so I set out to find the loophole. Even at fifteen, I understood enough about the legal process to realize everything has a loophole.

Since the company went to the business partner if we didn't marry there would be nothing saying he couldn't sell it back to me and I made sure to be ready when the time came, when the company needed help because of bad business decisions and a shaky economy and like a hungry hawk in the sky... I swooped in and bought shares of the company bit by bit until I bought back my fifty percent.

Patrick Carter, my father's old business partner, had no idea it was me buying all the shares at first but eventually, I was brought back into the company and given full reign over all the decision-making. Now, Patrick's only hope to retain his fifty percent of the company is if my brother allows his twenty-first year to go by without a wedding. If he shows up married... Patrick is out.

I can't say I would be broken-hearted if he was out. He's not necessarily a bad guy...he's just fucking annoying, and I tire of listening to the drama he allows into his life. He has a habit of thinking with his dick first and his head

second, which gets him in all sorts of trouble. Very much like my brother now that I think about it.

I didn't have to buy back the company. I could have chosen to do hundreds of other things but this...this company...it has become a part of me, and I have grown to love it. It's not because it belonged to my father. He was sort of an asshole who had the moral values of a 1950s CEO - he didn't think women could do anything other than be a secretary or wife, cheated on my mom with every one of his secretaries, and drank way too damned much. The best thing he ever did for his family was to die early so we didn't have to endure him longer than we had to.

Even though my office is empty of everyone except me, I still find myself stiffening and looking around. If my mother heard my thoughts about my father, she would have taken me by the ear and given me the spiel about how we don't speak ill of the dead, and how he was after all my father...like the fact I owe him my life because of his sperm has any sway over me. However, I would never upset my mother and wouldn't want to bring up something that would cause her any worries or stress. She's had enough of that putting up with my brother.

Which is why I plan to go to the café and figure out what my brother has gotten himself into. Why are women calling him and asking him about marriage? And what's up about this baby? And the woman wanting to adopt it? Has my brother been a naughty boy? Is it his and the girl just doesn't want to say anything until she talks to my brother?

On the day the woman told Chris to meet her at the café I was there early taking a seat in the corner so I could see all the people coming and going. I was surprised that I started looking forward to coming and maybe meeting the woman with the soft voice that's been haunting my dreams since I heard it. What does she look like? What else would I find surprising about her once I met her? And then...the door opens and in steps a redhead with bedroom eyes and Cupid's pout. She has trouble written all over her and I start to turn away when she captures my attention again by opening the door and pulling another girl in behind her.

And it's this girl that keeps my attention firmly anchored. It's this girl that

has me noticing everything about her. The dark curls, the soft green eyes that remind me of bright mint, or the stripes that wrap around wintergreen candy, all draw the eye so she is all anyone can look at if she's in a room. And young. So very young that I started to worry my brother might have been a very, very bad man and done something awful. If that's true, mother won't have to ever worry about him again. I'll kill him.

“I can't do this, Naomi.” She struggles against the first woman's hold even as she takes a seat at one of the booths, one woman on each side. “I can't.”

“Think about that sweet little baby, Talia. You have to if you want a chance of keeping her.”

The girl gnaws at her lower lip, “I love that baby.”

“I know you do. Which is why you are here and you're going to stay here until this guy shows up. Because you are doing it for her!”

It's with those words that I stand up and come over to their table. “Ladies.” I give them a small nod, loving the fact her eyes are on me now, “I do believe you are here for Mr. Bell.”

Chapter Four

Talia

The man standing in front of me has twin emotions spiking through me. I want to run but I also want to stay and listen to him talk, to watch him, to figure out what he's thinking and what would make him smile and laugh. His voice is the same as the one on the phone and I was ready to hang up after just a hello.

Naomi apparently doesn't feel it because she gives him a look up and down before saying anything, "You are Chris Bell?"

"No. I'm Nic Bell." He answers her but he's looking at me. His gaze is intense and makes me want to squirm under the icy blue gaze.

"But you're not Cris, which is who we are here to meet." Naomi's words start to sink in and I feel my heart start to sink.

"I'm his brother."

"That's all well and good but it's Chris we want to meet. Do you know where he is?"

"He's in Europe for the next few weeks...probably hooking up with whatever blonde eighteen-year-old he can find to warm his bed. If I'm guessing." His words drive the nail in not just my coffin but the last shred of hope I had left.

"Damn!" Naomi's sweet lilt mimics my thoughts exactly. "That's too late."

I drop my head on the table and try not to break out sobbing. Even when I try to cheat the system, I end up getting fucked. I just can't win and because

I'm such a loser the only one getting hurt the most is little Noelle.

"Maybe you should tell me exactly what is going on." He moves to sit next to me...in the same booth. He looks over to me, but Naomi starts telling him the story. She goes over the crash and the last wishes Lissanne had. About how I've been with little Noelle since before she was born really since I helped Lissanne through her pregnancy.

"So, you see, Talia has to find a man willing to marry her before the end of the year so she can keep Noelle."

"And you think my brother can help you?"

"Well, we were hoping...yeah. But now...we'll have to start all over again and actually put you on that Sugar Babies dating site, Littles For Us."

My stomach lurches at the thought as my heart sinks into it.

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen. I'll be twenty in May but May will be too late. They aren't going to wait. If twenty is even old enough for me to keep her."

"That's kind of young to have the responsibility of a baby when you're little more than a baby yourself."

His words might not be meant as a barb but to me, someone who has heard this over and over again from the agency, they might as well be a dagger aimed straight at my heart. Instead of waiting to hear how I should just focus on having my own baby and let this one go, which is how most of the conversations with the child services have gone, I push on him so he stands up giving me plenty of room to leave.

I might have to do something I find distasteful to get it done, but I am determined to keep my baby. I go to walk away when his big hand wraps around my wrist. I hate the little sparks that run up my arm like electricity at his touch. "Wait."

Instead of letting him finish his thoughts on my ability to be a mother I

twist my hand from his grasp and rush for the door. I don't get very far from the café until those same fingers wrap back around my arm this time causing me to gasp out and shoot a startled look up. And up and up because this man is tall as fuck.

“Wait, don't leave.”

“Look, I don't need you to repeat everything everyone else says, okay! I'm perfectly capable of going out and getting knocked up so I can have a baby, and no one would bat an eyelash or say a word to me. I don't need you to tell me what I've already heard. Why can't I raise her as my own baby? Why can't I keep Lissanne's baby, so she doesn't have to go through the system and be shuffled from house to house until she's too old to ever be adopted and she gets lost in all that mess? I love that little girl and she loves me! Why can't that be enough?”

“Let's discuss this in my car.” He tries to turn me around and starts pulling me back the way we came but we pass the café.

“Absolutely not! Do you think I'm stupid? I don't know you!”

He stops and turns to me talking quietly so only I can hear him. “The last thing you want is to be caught fighting in the street with someone who turns out to be your husband weeks from now. It doesn't look good and won't help us sell the story you need them to believe.”

I let him guide me to his car with no fight. Does this mean...he can help me contact his brother? No! He said I was arguing with...someone who would be my husband in a few weeks.”

He leads me to a pretty, shiny car that looks like it goes way too fast and costs way too much. He helps me into the passenger seat and comes around to the driver's side not saying a word until his door is shut.

“I'm not trying to stop you. I'm just telling you what we have to be ready for.”

“We?” He nods. “So, we shouldn't be ready for them to question the fact

some new guy shows up out of nowhere in my life and marries me when I've never even had a boyfriend? That might be the thing we should be thinking about since no one is going to believe this nonsense."

"We can fake most of that."

I can't help but give him an unconvinced snort. "Maybe you can but I can't."

I wouldn't even know where to start. Truth is...I couldn't make a baby of my own because I don't have a clue about the first place to start. He reaches out for my hand causing me to jump and my heart to pound.

"Why don't you come have lunch with me and bring Noelle with you." I'm listening. And not saying no. "We'll meet in the park so it's public and you won't have to worry so much about being alone with a stranger. Say noon."

I try not to overthink all of this. I try to remember why I have to do this, what it's all for. Who it's all for.

"Um...okay. I guess." Why do I feel like I just made a deal with the devil?

Chapter Five

Nic

I can feel the hot sun on my back. There's just a hint of a breeze rattling the last remaining leaves on the trees as so many people come out to enjoy the last of the warm days before winter sets in and everything becomes cold and gray. I've not even let myself question why I'm doing this. There really isn't a question there. It just is what it is.

Talia doesn't realize how much she gives away. In everything she does, her actions, her words, her presence, she tells people around her who she is and what she stands for. How much she loves is evident in the fact she has taken this little baby into her life and her heart and would do anything for it. Even marry someone she doesn't know, trusting that they will help her reach her ultimate goal of being this baby's mother. I can tell how attracted I am to her because of how she's got me doing things I normally wouldn't even think about doing.

Like how I reacted to her when she mentioned going out and getting knocked up. My knee-jerk reaction was to take her to the ground and get started. To make it even worse she went and told me she's never had a boyfriend before. I can almost bet what that means given a girl like her doesn't just fuck around with everyone she meets. She's innocent and sweet...and mine!

I never understood my brother's love for younger women especially since he's only twenty-fucking-one or why he likes women that call him Daddy, but with Talia...things start to make sense. All I want to do is take care of her and keep her safe, make her life easier, and give her whatever the hell she could ever want. Hearing her call me Daddy wouldn't hurt my feelings if she said it with those plump lips tilted up in a smile and those wintergreen eyes

up towards me.

I grunt and squirm around on the blanket I've laid out, hoping no one can see my dick tent the front of my dress pants. I check my watch again and stand to start pacing again. I'm sure I look like some sort of madman pacing back and forth in front of a blanket and picnic basket constantly looking at the time, sitting then standing and pacing more. She's five minutes late. I don't think she's coming. She's talked herself out of doing this and I'm going to have to find another way to get close to her.

And then she's here, like magic. Carrying two bags and a car seat and the baby in her arms. She comes over to me juggling all of this and still looking like the cutest little fairy I've ever seen. I just want to put her in my pocket and take her home with me. Instead, I take the two bags from her shoulders.

"I'm so sorry. The baby spit up on me just as we were leaving, and I had to change shirts...and wipe the spit-up out of my hair."

"No worries." I help her sit and take my first look at the baby. "You seem to have a lot of stuff to haul around."

"Yeah. It takes a lot to leave the house with a baby."

"This is Noelle, I take."

She widens her eyes and gives me another apology, "Oh, yeah. Sorry. Noelle, this is Mr.,"

"Nic." I gently correct her. If we're going to act like we've been dating for a while she's going to have to get used to calling me Nic.

"Oh...um, yeah. Nic. This is Nic. Nic this is Noelle." She turns the baby around so I can get my first good look at the chubby little cherub in her arms.

"Wow, she's a tiny little thing." Much younger than I had thought. "How old is she?"

"Five months." She gives the little gurgling bundle a smile and hugs before going on, "She's just learned to sit up so now she's trying to walk. In another

month she'll want to drive.”

“That fast, huh?”

“It feels like it.” I watch as she lets the baby tug on her hair and gnaw on her finger.

“Can I...?” I hold my hands out.

“You want to...oh, okay.” She hands the bundle over to me and we sit looking at one another for a long time as I take in the utter smallness of this little thing.

She's so tiny but her stare is so intense it feels like I'm being judged as she stares into my soul. I look up to find Talia smiling at the both of us.

“I've never held a baby.”

“Aww, Noelle's your first baby.” The baby finally reaches out and starts to play with my tie. It immediately goes into her mouth. “Noelle, no! You can't put that in your mouth. Mr...Nic has to go back to work and doesn't want baby drool as a decoration.”

“She's alright. I don't mind. I have to get used to it anyway...right?”

She gives me a long uncertain nod, “Right.”

I let the baby explore the buttons on my shirt and the tie and one of my fingers before finally turning my attention back to Talia. Instead of looking at us with a smile on her face now she's wearing a frown and gnawing on her bottom lip. I raise my brows in question, wanting to understand what has put that look on her face.

“You seem like you might...really be alright with doing this...” I raise my eyebrows again, “the...act and I just want to make sure you aren't being misled about what all of this is. If we do this...we, um...I...no sex.”

This time when my brows go up, they reach a higher level and show my surprise at her blurted-out words. “Excuse me?”

“We can’t have sex. I mean...we could but um...I don’t want to. Not that it’s you! Because it isn’t. You’re very hot and incredibly sexy but, um...”

I can’t fight the smile that stretches across my face. Talia always lets everything show through. She’s going to be horrible at playing poker but the trust in her telling me how it is, is off the charts.

“What about proving that we are a couple? We have to be a ‘loving’ couple or this won’t work.” Unfortunately, I am great at poker and don’t have any problem using what I have to in order to get what I want. And I want her. “They’re not going to let you keep Noelle if we can’t show them, we are close and really a couple.”

She starts gnawing at her lips again. “This all sounded better in my head.”

“How about we have rules? Say...no penetrative sex?”

Her cheeks pinken almost confirming my suspicions about whether or not she’s a virgin. So does the confused look she gives me.

“I feel like you might be trying to trick me.” Her voice comes out unsure and quiet.

“We’ll have to kiss each other, hold hands, that sort of thing. But we should also work on cuddling and necking and maybe even fooling around. All the things you don’t want a husband doing with another woman but no vaginal intercourse.”

She frowns and goes back over my words in her head even as she blushes so hard even the upper part of her chest turns a cute shade of pink, not that very much of her chest is showing. It leaves me to wonder if said blush would travel all the way down her body leaving her soft and pink in certain spots that have my cock hardening just thinking about.

“So, um, just kissing.”

“And a little bit more so we can fool everyone into thinking this is real.”

“Okay.” She reaches her hand out to me so we can shake on it, and I secretly smile even though my lips don’t move an inch. I take her hand in mine and instead of shaking it, I keep it rubbing my thumb over the back of hers.

I can’t believe she agreed like she did. Now I know she really is as innocent as I first thought. No one with any experience would agree to as much as I’ve suggested without striking out several options. This means my little Christmas treat has left herself open for oral, heavy petting, dry-humping, not-so-dry-humping, and so many things. If I wanted to, I could cover her in my cum and still not have broken the rule -not that it will last mind you. I plan to break that rule or find my loophole before the month is out. By the time I walk Talia down the aisle, she won’t just be the mother to Noelle if I have my way. She might wear white, but she’ll be stuffed full of my kid and minus one ripe little cherry. We’ll be a family of four before she knows it.

Chapter Six

Talia

“Okay.” He shakes but he doesn’t let my hand go. Instead, he keeps rubbing his thumb over the skin on the back of my hand, mine becoming lost in his. I can’t help but wonder if this is some kind of foreshadowing of how things will be once this whole thing starts.

I needed to be upfront about everything with him. I wanted to let him know what he’s agreed to. I’m not sure about things but from what I’ve read and heard from friends’ sex is a very important part of a man’s life. He would be giving that up if he agreed to go through with this lie. But Nic didn’t even hesitate when I told him. He just kept thinking about what we need to do to make it look real and showing me he’s really committed to this.

I finally tug at my hand and he lets it go without me having to ask, “Are you...um, going to ask me why I don’t want to do...,” I force myself to rush through this part, “the sex stuff?”

If he wants to help me then he’s going to have to understand where my education on all this stands. We might be able to pull off a kiss or hold hands but I’m not sure how much more I’m going to be able to do and not have everyone be able to tell I have no clue what I’m doing.

He shakes his head no and goes back to playing with Noelle, “I already know.”

Does he mean...? “What?! H...How?”

“Look, angel, you don’t have to be a Daddy to know someone is as innocent as freshly fallen snow...you can practically smell it.”

I can't hold back a gasp and subconsciously look around us to find out if anyone is close enough to overhear our conversation, but he chose well, and we are set fairly apart from others in the park. He just..., "What...um, what does it...?" I stop myself not wanting to ask but wanting to know just the same. "Does it really...?"

"Cherries." He gives me my answer without me having to ask. "Sweet ripe cherries."

His eyes leave Noelle and pin me to where I am sitting. I have to take several deep breaths before I can stop squirming and pull my eyes away from his. He's lying. It doesn't really...does it?

"Really?"

He laughs out loud, "Oh yeah."

His tongue comes out and licks his lower lip and he looks hungry. But it can't be because of what we are talking about. Not where I'm concerned. Because he agreed to the rule. So maybe he's just really hungry and it doesn't have anything to do with our conversation at all. He did let my hand go without me having to do too much more than just tug it from his.

"Nic! Nic, is that you?!" The voice is soft and feminine and the look on his face tells me he has some kind of history with the woman calling out his name.

"Oh shit!" His face goes from smiling at Noelle to frowning in a matter of seconds. He hands Noelle back to me. "Miffy."

"Muffin." The woman doesn't so much as lose her smile as she comes over to stand over us with a baby of her own in a stroller. The little one looks to be close to a year old and sound asleep. "Funny meeting you here, Nic. You usually spend all your time in the office. What are you doing here?"

"Forgive me for being rude." Nic takes my hand in his and once again it disappears. "This is Muffin, my business partner's wife. Muffin this is Talia...my fiancée."

“Fiancé!” The woman looks shocked and the baby in the stroller starts to stir at his mom’s raised voice. I try to pull my hand from his like before but this time he doesn’t let go. “I didn’t even know you were dating anyone.”

“I typically don’t bring my private life up very often. Especially not at work. While I’m working.”

The woman finally pulls her eyes from Nic and takes me and the baby in. Then she lets out a big gasp and turns shocked eyes to Nic once again. “Oh my God! Is this your baby?”

I understand why the woman would think Noelle is Nic’s baby since they kind of look like one another and both have big blue eyes. Instead of answering the woman, Nic gives her a fake smile.

“It was nice speaking with you, Muffin. I’ll be sure to tell Patrick we ran into one another.”

Even I hear the dismissal in his voice. At first, the woman doesn’t lose her smile or act like she’s upset at all but then she turns those reptile-like eyes towards me and Noelle again and I can’t help but think of something better suited to slithering in the grass than an actual woman. Her eyes are just cold.

“Do you breastfeed? You really should.” I start to shake my head no, but the woman just plows right on without actually waiting for me to answer. “It’s the best for the baby, you know.”

“I...I...,” I don’t know how to answer. It isn’t a question that’s new to me. Some moms, most really, like to talk about their babies and give out advice while also getting some in return. I’ve taken Noelle to enough parks and stores to understand this isn’t weird or not normal. It isn’t necessarily the question, as the way the woman keeps looking at my chest.

“Of course, a woman your size might have worries about smothering the baby.” And that’s what I was waiting for. The snake struck, burying her fangs in deep to leave the deepest scar before slithering away.

“Muffin.” The name is snapped out and Nic doesn’t make it a secret that he is highly irritated. “If you will excuse us, we only have so long before I have to go back to the office, and we haven’t even started eating yet.”

We watch her go and I sit and worry. Since all of this started with Child Services, I question everything I thought I knew. Maybe I am too big to try to breastfeed. Not that I could right now. And because of the lie, I won’t actually have a chance anymore. Sadness settles in my chest -my overly large chest- and causes a lump to form in my throat. This isn’t forever. We just need to be together until I can be sure they won’t take Noelle away from me.

The mood changed after Muffin left which I guess is what she wanted. I glance down at my chest one more time. “Are my...?”

“No!” I gasp and raise my eyes to his. I wasn’t really asking him. I thought I was talking mostly to myself. It was so low I didn’t think he could hear...at least I thought it was so low. “Not at all! I have a request of my own. This relationship, no matter how unconventional it might be, has to be a monogamous one. No being with other people, no flirting, no sex, no other men ever!”

“Um, okay. But it goes both ways, right? No other women, ever?”

“Of course!” He starts taking things out of the basket. “Any hint of an affair will not look good in a court case. But more importantly, I’m not a cheater.”

“She’s cheating on your partner, isn’t she?”

“You better believe...wait...how did you know that?”

“The rule you just made and the fact that you kind of snarl your nose up when she talks like you smell something a puppy would leave on a carpet. And she looks at you like I would a cheesecake behind a glass case. Willing to do anything for just a taste.”

“He’ll figure it out but he’s already so far in.”

“So far in?”

“The baby. The only reason she had that baby was to honeytrap Patrick into never leaving her.”

Silence hangs heavy over us until I can't take it any longer and have to ask, “Why are you doing this? Helping me? Your brother needed to marry. Is that why you're doing this?”

“No.” I wait but don't really expect him to tell me. But he does. “My brother is taking the easy way out of our father's will. He left a clause saying both of us have to marry before we can own any part of the company my father started. Otherwise, the whole company goes to his partner...Patrick.”

I feel my eyes widen and my mouth starts to drop open before I can compose myself and realize for the first time...I have no idea who this man really is. Has he been married before and that's why this whole scheme is no big deal to him? Who is Nic Bell?

Chapter Seven

Nic

“You...work with the man who could take your company from you?” I watch as she tries to understand. Not a lot of people would understand. You would have to be a douche for it all to make any kind of sense, but I have enough of a grasp on it to explain to her. Or at least try to.

“I do. He controls Chris’s part of the business now and until Chris gets married.”

She dances her eyes away and shifts as I help her feed the baby. “You’ve been married before?”

“No. I chose...another way.” She looks at me with a creased brow and waits for me to go on, “I became a lawyer and waited for the company to...run into trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“I understood what kind of men Patrick and my father were. I knew Patrick would run the business in the hole and need to find a way to dig himself out. He took my share of the business and started selling it off. I just happened to be the owner of the company that bought it. And now I have my half back.”

“Oh wow.”

“Never been married. Haven’t really dated for years and don’t like women like Muffin who use other people -babies no less- as insurance policies. As for why I am doing what I am doing...let’s just say I have my reasons. I’m sure one day there will be time to tell them to you, but I have to start heading back.”

“Oh, of course. Um, here, let me help you.”

“You have the baby. Don’t worry about any of this. I have it.” I make quick work of packing everything back up and helping Talia carry most of the baby’s stuff so all she has to worry about is Noelle as they walk me back to my office.

I’m about to tell her to take the car so she doesn’t have to lug all of this shit around with her when Patrick calls out to me.

“Nic! How you doing man?”

I school my features and turn with Talia under my arm. He knows how I’m doing because we just saw one another not more than an hour ago. My guess is his nosey wife called him because she wants more information, or he saw me walking with Talia and wanted to know what I was up to. His eyes take in the diaper bag hanging off my arm and my other arm wrapped around Talia who is holding the baby.

“Who do we have here?”

“Patrick, this is my fiancée, Talia, and our baby, Noelle.” Beside me, Talia stiffens at my choice of words but she’s going to need to get used to the possessive pronouns I chose to use.

“Baby?” Patrick’s eyes widen and he looks from me to the baby and back again. “I...you...?”

I turn from where he stands floundering and focus on Talia and the baby. “I’ll call you when I get home from work tonight.” She nods and I step in close to her and drop a kiss on her mouth, turning her so Patrick can’t see the surprised look that crosses her face when I do it. “Have my driver take you wherever you need to go so you don’t have to lug all this shi...stuff around.”

Right by my side, my driver steps forward and takes the bags from me.

“I don’t need...”

“Do it so I don’t worry.” I stare into her eyes, and she finally gives me a nod, letting me help her into the car.

Patrick barely waits until the car pulls away before he’s asking me questions. I only give him a little before I head back into my office, but I don’t get back to work. Instead, I start working on my plan. When I want something, I have a tendency to become single-minded and obsessive. And I have my sights set on Talia.

By the time I call her once I’m home, not only do I have a plan but I’ve already implemented some of it. When I hear her voice I realize another reason for going so hard at getting everything in place...it means I don’t have as much time to think about just how good she smelled anytime I came close to her, how good she looked sitting with a baby in her arms with the pale winter sunshine glinting off her curls and her sweater highlighting the soft swell of her breasts, or fuck me dead, how soft those lips were under my own when I stole a kiss shocking and surprising her.

“Hello.” She seems out of breath and hurried.

“You okay, angel?”

The nickname flusters her, “Oh, um, yeah. I...baby just needed changing, and my phone was all the way across the house.”

Best to get this out right from the start, “I think you need to move in with me.” Silence is my only answer for a long time. So long I start to wonder if she dropped the phone or hung up on me. “Talia?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? You’re going to have to come live with me when we marry.”

“Bu...but I can’t leave my apartment.”

“Talia, sweetheart, what did you think would happen after we married?” I say it softly not wanting her to think I’m being condescending or rude to her. “We have to live together or nobody’s going to believe any of this.”

“I...I didn’t really think that far ahead. I was so caught up with the wedding and...”

“Keeping Noelle.” I finish for her. “I think that’s one of the reasons we should do this quickly. Noelle has to be comfortable around me and we have so much to do while both of us work. I think we would have more time to plan and work on all of this if you and Noelle moved in with me and we had the evenings to work things out.”

“I guess...it would be easier. I could...um, start packing.”

“No worries, sweetheart. Let me handle everything. You have enough to do taking care of Noelle. Can we meet tomorrow afternoon, say five-forty.”

“Um...”

“We can talk, come up with a game plan, and really sink our teeth into all we have to do.”

“Ok. Five-forty.” I feel my lips curl in a Grinch-like grin as we hang up after I gain her promise to meet with me. She thinks I’m coming to pick her up so we can talk. It’s probably better for her to think that than to know what will happen tomorrow. She has to take baby steps and that’s fine, I’ll be the one to take the leaps that take us down the aisle.

Chapter Eight

Talia

A knock comes on the door at five-forty sharp and I feel my heart kick up at the sound. I have Noelle in my arms but we're not really ready to leave just yet. Hopefully, Nic won't be mad about that and will be able to wait on me while I finish. But Nic is not on the other side of the door. When I open up, it's to find a big, burly man on the other side. He looks me up and down chewing gum before giving me a big smile.

“Whoa, you are...one hot momma.”

“Hey! I don't pay you to hit on my wife.”

My mouth drops open in shock. Wife? It's Nic's voice but...I'm not his wife yet. He comes through the door and drops a kiss on my open mouth causing me to gasp out, or at least try to since his mouth is on top of mine.

“Sorry, Sir!”

“And don't touch her clothes!”

“Nic?”

He takes me by the arm that I'm not holding Noelle in and leads me to the back of my apartment towards my bedroom. “Where are your things, angel?”

He opens the door to Lissanne's room, but I move in front of him and shut the door again. Nic's already moved on and opened the door to the room that is mine. I moved the crib in here after...there's not a lot of room anymore.

“Why don't you sit on the bed with Noelle. I'll be right back, and you can

tell me about your day.”

Before I can say anything, he steps out of the room and comes back in with boxes in his arms. “Nic, um, what is going on?”

“Is this your stuff?”

“My...stuff?” He pulls open a drawer full of underwear and I squeak and try to stand up but there just isn’t enough room.

“Underwear, lingerie, anything else you wouldn’t want a stranger to touch?”

He dumps the lace and satin into one of the smaller boxes and then starts going down the line opening and dumping all of them into a box.

“Nic...what is going on? I only just agreed to this last night. I don’t think...my computer. I don’t want my laptop messed with.” The sound of the movers in the living room has me panicking.

“Where is it?”

“Kitchen counter.”

He brings it back to me and lays it beside me and Noelle in no time. He finds the gift Lissanne gave me last Christmas and holds it up. “Oh my God! Nic! Put that down. I can...”

My cheeks burn as he holds the lace and strings up to stare at it in front of me. I lay Noelle in her crib and go for the sexy outfit that is mostly see-through and...well, string. I try to take it out of his hands, but he holds it up out of my reach. My breasts brush against his arm and cause my breath to rush from me. He drops the strings and wraps his arms around me.

“Are you wearing a bra, Talia?”

All I can do is stare open-mouthed at him, “That...is none of your business, Nic.”

He gives me a sexy half smile, “Angel, everything is my business when it comes to you and Noelle.” He traces his finger over the swell of my cheek. “You been sleeping alright?”

I don’t need him to tell me I look like death warmed over. Noelle had a bad night and I’ve not slept well since Naomi came up with this crazy idea. I am very aware that I have bags under my eyes and look like I might fall asleep at the drop of a hat.

“Boss,” the sound of the mover’s voice has me trying to pull back from Nic but he’s not having any of it. “You want us to pack the other room too.”

I stop trying to move away and turn my head away so the man asking can’t see the look of pain that crosses my face.

“Yes. Nothing stays.” The man at the door might not be able to see but I’m certain Nic does. Noelle starts to fuss like she can tell something has me upset. “Why don’t you get her and sit on the bed so you can talk to me while I pack, angel?”

With the movers and Nic it doesn’t take very long until the whole house has been packed up and I’m standing in an empty apartment. This place has been my home for two years. I moved here when I was newly eighteen years old and fresh from the orphanage I grew up in. And now...I’m leaving it. Now...everything is uncertain and I’m on shaky ground again. Nothing is in my control, and everything is happening too fast.

And then a warm hand lands on my shoulder. “Why don’t you let me hold on to her so you can take a minute and make sure we got everything?”

He takes Noelle out of my arms and leaves me standing in the emptiness. I understand why this makes sense in my head but in my heart, everything feels wrong. Everything, except Noelle. She is why I am doing all this. She deserves better than being put in the system and bounced around to people she doesn’t know or trust. She makes sense and always will. So, I suck it up and walk through all the rooms to make sure I haven’t left anything behind. For her.

Outside in the hall, Naomi is standing playing with the baby while Nic holds her. Nic looks like he belongs with Noelle. If anything, I'm the odd one out since I have a more olive coloring than Nic and Noelle.

"So, you're taking care of Talia?"

"I plan to, yes."

"Because the girl needs someone to take care of her." My back goes ramrod straight. I need someone to take care of me? "She takes care of everyone around her but never herself. She needs someone strong she can lean on."

Before I can catch what Nic says in reply, Naomi sees me and gives me a warm smile. I immediately lose the stiffness in my posture. Naomi didn't mean I can't do anything for myself. I understand that now. What she was saying...was really quiet kind, sweet even. Nic turns to find me behind him. "Ready to go?"

I give him a quick nod and step around him to offer a hug to Naomi.

"You take care of yourself, girl. And call me if you need anything. A babysitter for date night maybe, or anything?"

I give her a look because she understands how much of a lie this all is, but she has a romantic heart and finds love in places it isn't. I don't say as much and instead, let the look I give her say it all.

"I'll take care of both of them, Naomi. You come visit when things settle down a bit. I'm sure Talia will love to have you come see her and Noelle."

With promises to come visit made all around, Nic ushers me outside and right into a waiting car. It's already so dark you can't tell it's not the middle of the night. By the time we arrive at Nic's building, I'm struggling to hold my eyes open and dread having to unpack everything. I hold on tight to Noelle not just because I love her but as a reminder to be brave and strong... for her.

“We’ll unpack everything tomorrow. I told the guys to wait until then to bring everything here. All I want you guys to worry about tonight is just settling in.”

He helps us out of the elevator and big silver doors swoosh open letting us into his home. A sense of unrealistic uncertainty hits me when I step inside. The place is so big, and everything is so...fancy. Much fancier than I have ever known. I turn around to walk back out again but find myself in Nic’s arms.

When I raise my head to look into his eyes, I see a smile cross his face like he might have realized I was about to make a run for it. “Welcome home, Talia.”

Chapter Nine

Nic

Now that I have her here, I can focus on keeping her here. I've already overcome one of the biggest hurdles I foresaw as a problem by getting her to move in with me.

"This place is...beautiful."

"Yeah?" I look around and try to see the place through her eyes. To me it's home.

"I...am way too messy to be anywhere near all of this." I laugh and usher her deeper into the living room.

"Nonsense. Trust me, everything here can be replaced, and I want you to feel at home. Change anything you want, however you want to."

"I don't..."

"I want you to make this place your home. Because it is now."

She's got a death grip on the baby and she's paler than I've seen her before.

"I realize some of this furniture isn't baby proof so...that's probably one of the first things that need to be changed."

"Actually...everything looks...round, so it's already kind of baby-proofed."

"Oh...good." I give her a lop-sided smile, but she isn't looking at me.

She's staring at the windows behind the couch.

"This is a great view."

Outside the lights of the city are shiny and twinkling like a diamond necklace wrapped around a lady's throat. I hate to admit it, but I've grown kind of used to the view...until Talia came and opened my eyes to it again.

"You have to be hungry. Let's get you girls fed and figure out our next move."

We have dinner and Noelle, worn out from the excitement of the day, goes right to sleep leaving me and Talia alone together.

"Thank you. For everything."

I give her another smile and hold her gaze. "We should practice kissing."

"Excuse me?"

"Practice. So, we seem more natural when we do it."

"Now?"

"Well yeah, you have to notify them that we've moved in together and if they send someone out, we have to show them it's not because we've just met and are lying about everything." She gnaws at her bottom lip making me want to give her something else to do with her mouth. "You have to be comfortable with me and all of this. You can't jump every time I go in for a kiss."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. We don't know each other very well and you're being asked to do something that doesn't come naturally to you. But we have to make it look natural if we're going to sell this. We should practice every chance we have. Don't you think?"

She allows me to pull her down next to me and I cup the back of her head

to bring her close so I can kiss her. She sits as stiff as she can without actually breaking and gives me nothing in return. I pull away from her so I can reassess what is going on or a way to make her more comfortable with me.

“Let’s...hmm? Let’s do it this way.” I sit back and pull her over my legs, so she is straddling me. “Let’s work on just getting comfortable to begin with. Then we’ll move on from there.”

“Getting comfortable?”

“Yeah. Just...relax.” I start rubbing her back as I pull her in close to me and hold her in my arms.

“Yeah right, like that is going to happen.”

Even as she says it, she starts shifting around in my lap playing hell with my self-control. But after a few minutes of just holding her, she does start to relax.

“See this is nice. No rush, no fast moves, just relaxing with one another.” She doesn’t answer me, but she doesn’t stiffen up again either. I shift so I can see her face and realize her eyes are closed and her head is leaning against my shoulder. I smile to myself as I settle back down and get comfortable while holding her.

We didn’t fail. Talia did get comfortable with me...so much so that she went to sleep on me. I rearrange us so her head is lying better against me and rub up and down her back. Even this will help her get used to my touch and help her relax around me. She must have been exhausted to fall asleep so fast while she was straddling my lap.

I let my hands roam over her to memorize her form before reaching for the remote and turning something on. Finally, after a couple of hours living with the world’s worst case of blue balls, I stand and carry her up to my bed where Noelle is resting in her crib. I click the baby monitor off now that we are in the same room and lay Talia on the bed.

I'm not sure if she was aware this was my room when we moved the baby's crib up here but it's too late to raise concerns now since she's asleep and so is the baby. I work her leggings off and then gently remove the sweater she was bundled up in. I worry she's going to wake when I have to take it over her head, but she only rolls and snuggles into the soft sheets surrounding her.

Looking at her in my big bed, she looks tiny and small even though she's curvy as hell and there is plenty to keep a man's hands full. I take in everything about her now that I can look without having to pretend I'm not as interested in her as I am or as drawn to her as I find myself. Her dark hair spread over the silk sheets making my hands itch to touch, to trace, the same way I did her back and the swell of her bottom when she fell asleep on me.

I run my palm down the front of her tank. Not in a creepy way so I can feel her softness underneath but in more of a worshipful way. I can't believe this woman is in my bed, in my home. Soon she'll have my last name, she already owns my world. Finally, I allow myself to shuck my shirt and go look for pajama bottoms so I can crawl in beside her and hold her all night long.

It might be early in the game but so far, I would say I am right where I want to be.

Chapter Ten

Talia

I wake up to an empty bed and look around disoriented about where I'm at and where Noelle is. When I finally remember agreeing to move in with Nic, I flop back on the nest of pillows behind me. Then I start searching for my phone.

I don't know how late it is, but it feels late. When I finally find it, I freak out a little bit.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!”

I quickly dress and run down the stairs to find Noelle... on the floor...with Nic. Both of them turn to me when I stumble off the last step and stare at both of them. Nic gives me a big smile as he scoops Noelle up in his arms. “We were getting to know one another a little better.”

Seeing him in the floor, playing with the baby does something funny to my heart...and my stomach. I sit down with them and give Noelle my hand so she can put it in her mouth.

“Don't let her fool you, she's already had breakfast.”

I giggle as she noms on each finger and then starts exploring the space around us. “I, um, am sorry about last night.”

I need to apologize before I do anything else. The last thing I want is for him to feel awkward around me or to think that I might be bored by him...or worse.

“Last night?” He gives me a questioning look forcing me to explain.

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you. It has nothing to do with you. I was just...”

“Tired. I understand. You’ve gone through a lot to be everything for Noelle. Don’t be sorry because you had to crash for a minute.”

“Or eight hours.”

“Really. There is nothing for you to feel bad about. I want to help you and Noelle. And if that means I give you some time to do a basic human function then...I’m happy to help.” I give him a smile and feel myself relax for the first time since we got here when he starts to speak again. “I figure we’ll spend Thanksgiving here and for Christmas, we’ll go home - to the big house.”

“The big house?”

“It’s what we call the ancestral home. Mom stays there more than she does in the city.”

I feel the smile melt off my face at the mention of his mom. “You’re... mom? Oh my God, won’t she realize immediately something is off? You can’t fool a mom. She’ll see right through us.”

He gives me an even bigger grin than he gave to Noelle. “She already knows.”

My mouth falls open. “Oh great! She probably thinks I’m some opportunist or...worse.”

“She’s excited to meet you and Noelle.”

“She is?”

He nods before continuing, “I’m going to work for a couple of hours to handle some things, so I can take a little time off.”

“Oh...but we’ll be alright. You don’t have to take time away from your

work for us.”

“Won’t people think it’s weird if I don’t take time for my honeymoon?”

“Oh. Um...honeymoon?” He continually throws me off balance.

“We’ll have to take a honeymoon after our wedding. Otherwise, it just won’t look right.”

“But...um, can’t we just...get married and...I don’t know...wait for the court date? I don’t feel right about leaving Noelle while all of this is so...”

“We’ll take her with us.”

“Oh...um, okay. I guess if people expect it.” It would seem Nic has all of this already figured out and I’m just going along with it all. He lets me know breakfast is in the microwave before dropping a kiss on Noelle’s head and tipping my head back so he can drop a kiss on my upturned mouth.

And then he’s gone, leaving me and Noelle in his big penthouse. Alone. It really is a lovely apartment...er, penthouse, whatever it’s called it’s pretty. The couch is huge and stretches all the way across the room. It’s a soft dove gray that begs me to curl up on it and take naps. Today the built-in blinds are down to keep the morning sun from being too intense in the room and making it too hot.

I step into the kitchen and start to put Noelle in her little highchair when a knock has me turning to the door and wondering if maybe Nic forgot something or maybe it's the movers with our stuff. I bring Noelle with me as I pull the door open...and come face to face with the one person I was hoping I wouldn’t have to deal with right now.

Nic’s mom.

Chapter Eleven

Nic

I let myself in the door and immediately hear voices coming from my living room. I step around the corner and am greeted with an image that has my heart doing double time. Talia is standing in the kitchen with my mom who is holding baby Noelle in one arm and prepping food with the other.

I didn't think I could want Talia more but seeing her laugh and interact with my mom has the feeling I have when I think about her, growing and getting even bigger. Today has already been a little odd since all I could think about was Talia and Noelle. I have never been at work and wanted to go home so badly as I did today. It was a new feeling and one I finally had to give in to and make my way home.

“Let's do it right at Christmas. It will be so magical with all the lights and Christmas atmosphere. Oh, but let's do it on the twenty-fourth so you can wake up Christmas morning a brand-new woman with a new name and a new hubby.”

“That...can we be ready that quickly?” I hold my breath and wait for Talia to say more. “I do think a Christmas Eve wedding would be...romantic.”

“Oh, we'll make it work, have no worries about that. It will be good too because Chris will be back then, so he won't miss his brother's wedding.” I slide my foot, so it makes a sound causing both Talia and my mom to look up. My mom's face breaks into a big happy grin, “Son, we didn't expect you back for at least another forty-five minutes or more.”

She comes around the island and gives me a big hug. She leans in and kisses me on the cheek while at the same time whispering to me, “I love her.”

I take Noelle out of her arms and drop a kiss on her cheek too. I know she's not talking about Noelle. Not that my mom doesn't love the baby. I can tell that easily since she takes her back away from me. I walk around the island and wrap my arms around Talia from behind causing her to jump and turn bright red.

“So, you want a Christmas Eve wedding, little angel?” The blush turns brighter, and her eyes slide over to my mom.

“Um...if you want a Christmas Eve wedding...”

“What do you want, angel? I want this to be everything you could ever ask for.”

She frowns at me, her little eyebrows drawing together. I know what she's thinking, what has that look on her face. She understands my mom knows about our little charade and she's wondering why I would say the things I just did if I wasn't putting on an act for someone.

“We need to make it seem natural, angel. And I really do want you to have what you want. If you want to wait for New Year's we will, but I think the quicker the better. Don't you, sweetheart?” I whisper in her ear. “And you seemed excited about the Christmas Eve idea mom suggested.”

“You...heard us?”

I nod and drop another kiss on her upturned face. “So that settles it, we'll marry on Christmas Eve and start Christmas morning as a married couple...a family of three.” I look over at Mom who is smiling her ass off and little Noelle who is exploring more of her world by putting it in her mouth.

All during dinner Mom and Talia talk about the wedding, asking me off and on what I think about something or what I want to happen. And then Mom leaves for the penthouse below mine since it's too late for her to go back to the Big House and she plans to be here tomorrow again anyway. She wants to play with Noelle again and plan more things about the wedding. I have no doubt that with Mom's help, Talia will have the wedding of her dreams, and everything will be ready to go way before Christmas Eve.

It was really nice to see my mom open up like she did with Talia. It reminds me that for a long time, all mom has had was me and Chris. Talia and Noelle are good for her in a way I didn't foresee. After Noelle goes to sleep, Talia comes back down to sit with me on the couch. We watch TV for a little while before I turn to her.

“So...”

“I'm sorry -again- about falling asleep on you. I know you said not to worry about it, but I've been thinking about it all day and I just want you to know it wasn't because you aren't, um, well, it isn't because I'm not attracted to you.”

“You've been thinking about kissing me all day long?”

Her cheeks turn a cute shade of pink and I can't help but wonder if her nipples are the same color as her blush. Her mouth opens and closes a few times before she figures out what she wants to say.

“I just wanted you to understand it wasn't because you aren't hot or...I'm not...”

“Attracted to me.” I use her words back but don't leave her hanging for too long. “Please don't worry. I think of it as an honor. You felt safe enough to rest with me.” I give her what I hope is a warm smile before I reach for her hand and wrap our fingers together.

“Oh. That's...really kind of sweet when you look at it like that.”

“You want to practice some more?”

“Now?” Her eyes fly around the room looking for something to stall the inevitable. “Um,”

“Come on.” I pull her into my lap right away, not waiting this time to try to kiss her when she isn't sitting in my lap. “Let's start practicing before you get too tired, and I have to put you to bed.”

I sink my hands in her hair and tilt her head so I can settle my lips over hers. At first, she remains stiff and unresponsive but slowly -oh so slowly- she relaxes into me and starts kissing me back. Her hands land on my shoulders as I wrap my arms around her and hold her close. By the time I mumble against her lips, both of us are breathing just a little deeper. “Open your mouth for me, little angel.”

She doesn't pull away, but her eyes blink open as she tries to figure out where I'm going with this. “What? Why?”

I smile against her mouth, “So I can come in, sweetheart.”

This time she does pull away from me as she tries to understand, her brows dropping into a frown. “Come in?”

“Just open up for me, darlin’.”

She starts to say something, but I don't give her the chance as I take the opportunity to enter her warm, wet mouth myself. I can't hold back the moan that comes out at the first touch of our tongues against one another, at the first taste. She gasps around my tongue giving me even better access to the inner cavern of her sweet mouth. I tease her with my tongue and explore every part of the new area she's opened for me.

I am pleasantly surprised when she starts kissing me back. After several moments of me exploring and touching, she starts doing some of her own. She's very passionate. It shows in her love for Noelle and how she is willing to do anything for her but this...this is a whole other level of passion that I don't even think she is aware she has.

Her arms go from my shoulders to wrap fully around me, and she pulls me close as our tongues duel and parry together. By the time we both pull apart, we are breathing heavily, and my hands have found their way to her ass where I hold a cheek in each hand. Apparently, I was lifting her so she would be even closer to me so I could take her mouth with my own.

Talia still has her eyes closed and her mouth slightly open...and she is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I can't help but take her mouth again.

This time she doesn't pull away from me but meets my tongue with her own. This time she takes my breath away as her body moves closer and she shows me how naturally sensual she is. This time when we break away from one another I come away with the knowledge Talia is a very dangerous woman. And my heart is the thing in the most trouble. This tiny woman could break me...and she doesn't even realize it.

Chapter Twelve

Talia

His mom comes back around lunch, and I have to admit...it's kind of nice having help with Noelle. After the...explosive meal she just had I feel like I'm wearing more of the oatmeal I've started her on than she actually ate. I ask Anita if she can watch her while I go change my clothes and she suggests something a little different.

She wants to take Noelle shopping with her while I have time to take a long soak in the big tub in the master bedroom upstairs.

“I don't...”

“Please. I'll have her back in a couple of hours and you have time to relax and soak. I know things have been rocketing around so fast - believe me, I know my son. He can be...a bit much.”

And convincing. So very convincing. I think back to him talking me into sharing his bed with him last night. Not that I'm going to share that memory with his mother. But it still makes me blush and I can definitely understand where he gets his charm and persuasive powers as Anita holds Noelle and gives me an excited look that is too hard to say no to.

“Alright. But I'm just going to take a quick shower so if you need me just text.”

“No, you have to soak. No one ever uses that big tub - Nic prefers showers over baths. And if you don't use it, it will just be wasted sitting there... abandoned by everyone.”

Damn, she's good.

“Alright, but I’m still keeping my phone close so if you need me...”

“Absolutely. We’ll have a good time, won’t we? Yes, we will.” She starts talking to Noelle as she buckles her into her little car seat. “We’ll go have fun and let momma have some time to herself, won’t we.”

My eyes sting and I have to turn my back in order not to make a fool of myself. Anita is the first person during all of this to ever call me Noelle’s momma. I shouldn’t get all teary-eyed over it but it’s a big deal to me. One more step to actually being able to keep her with me. I pull myself together and turn back around so I can kiss Noelle and give Anita a hug before they are gone, and I am left alone. For the first time in months.

I make my way up the stairs and into the master bedroom where so many of my things have been set up that it is starting to look like we’ve been here longer than we actually have. Stepping into the bathroom, which is bigger than my living room and kitchen in my old place, my point is driven home as my toiletries are everywhere in the room.

I make my way over to the bathtub and look at it with a healthy side-eye. I’ve been wanting to use it since we came here and I first saw it, but now that I have the chance to use it I’m a little intimidated by it. It has its own fireplace for fuck’s sake. I shake off the fear I might fuck something up and start filling the round porcelain full.

I add bath salts to make it smell good and step in. And sink down until everything but the top of my shoulders and head are below the water. Damn, this thing is deep. Noelle can swim in this like it’s her own personal pool until she’s at least twelve. The fireplace along with the sweet scent of flowers I added to my water has my imagination running wild. I can easily see how this would be so romantic. I lean back and think of a date night with candles and roses and the crackling of fire in the background. The mood would definitely be set for making love...if this were all real.

If I was really here because Nic was my fiancé, and all of this wasn’t a huge lie this would be one of the most romantic rooms in the whole penthouse. I sink further down and lean back so I can rest against the cold

porcelain hoping it shocks me back to reality and out of my romantic musings. It wouldn't be so bad to daydream a little while I have the chance. Would it?

I start thinking about what it would be like. What being with Nic would be like? Kissing him was... really nice. Feelings I've never had before hit me when our tongues touched and he explored my mouth. Thinking about it now makes my breasts grow heavy and I have to squeeze my thighs together to stop the sensations coursing through me at just the memory.

And then my phone rings, jerking me out of my dreams and reminding me of my promise to Anita to keep my phone with me in case she needed me. Like a dummy, I left it in the bedroom. I sit up and slosh around the tub until I reach the side where the stairs to step up to the tub are so I can rush out.

"Shit! Shit, shit shit! I'm coming." I'm aware they can't hear me, but I say it anyway. I don't even bother to grab the towel I laid out since I will more than likely be hopping right back in. I dart out of the bathroom...and run smack into a thick wall of bare chest and warm man.

Instead of going for my phone like I thought I would, I found Nic. And he found me. Completely naked, slick with water, and held captive in his very large arms that are wrapped around me tightly.

All I can do is look into his bright blue eyes and say the first words that go through my head, "Oh! My! God!"

Chapter Thirteen

Nic

I step into the house and call out for my girls. “Girls!”

No one answered me back. I check all downstairs before I take my phone out to call Talia. I realize she might have left with my mom to do...whatever the hell it is girls need to do before a wedding or just to hang out together. I can't believe how much I missed them today or how I instantly thought of them as 'my girls'. Just like yesterday, I couldn't wait to be home.

I hit call as I take the stairs and work my tie loose so I can take this damned shirt off and get into something more relaxing that Noelle will find softer and safer for her to put in her mouth because there aren't so many buttons. I jerk the shirt off as I hear the phone I'm calling, ring on the bed and hear water slosh around in the bathtub.

“Shit! I'm coming.” I cock my eyebrow at the sound of the soft voice I have grown to love listening to say words I really want to hear coming from her mouth for very different reasons. I head toward the bathroom with the express idea of furthering Talia's education when a warm, soft, wet body hits mine and a sweet 'oh' escapes from a sexy little mouth.

I have a whole hand full of very naked, very wet, Talia as our eyes meet, and reality sets in for both of us. The feel of her in my arms, her bare skin up against my own, goes straight to my cock making it stand to attention and has my balls aching something fierce.

“I...you...can you put me down?”

Can I? I don't think I can.

I get to watch as her blush travels from her cheeks down over her neck and out across the tops of her breasts to the very tips of the soft raspberry-colored nipples. My fucking mouth starts to water, and I have to fight the urge to just pick her up and bring her closer to me so I can wrap my mouth around one. To find out if she tastes as good as she looks, of course. Her words finally sink in and I realize maybe I didn't do such a good job controlling those urges as I first thought I had since she is dangling in my arms and those soft, round mounds are closer to where I want them to end up.

"I'm...I'm so sorry."

"Angel," I can hear how rough my voice is even to my own ears, "I'm the one who has you...I'm pretty sure I should be the one apologizing to you."

"Your mom said it would be alright to use the tub." She says it like she might be in trouble for being found naked and wet and she might not be too far off. She might be in trouble. Just not the kind I'm sure she's thinking about. "She took Noelle so I could clean up."

"Did she?" Well, fuck! It would seem Noelle isn't here to save Talia from me either.

"Um...what are you doing?"

I've started to walk us back to the bathroom and Talia's eyes have grown impossibly wide at the movement. "Taking you back to your bath."

"Oh, um, I...I can get back myself, Nic."

"I wouldn't want your feet to get cold."

I take her back to the tub where the water is waiting on her. I gently put her down in the water and take a step back. She immediately sinks all the way up to her neck and crosses her arms over her chest.

"You want me to light a fire for you?"

"Oh, um...I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble." She pulls her knees up to her chest to try to better hide her soft body from me.

“It’s no trouble. No trouble at all.” I go over to light the fire. “You know, you should refresh your water. Want some bubbles? I think mom has some bubbles around here somewhere.”

“Oh, I...,” before she can say anything else I step out of the room to look for bubbles in the bathroom mom uses when she stays with me.

She’s not done it in a while since she recently purchased the penthouse under me, but she used to do it all the time. I come back in to find the tub half full, and Talia curled up in a little ball in the middle. I pour the bubbles in and check the water to make sure it’s warm enough since she can’t really check herself, not and stay covered like she wants to.

I stand back up and put my hand on my back. I’m going to have to hit the gym again if bending over a tub has me feeling this damned old. Or maybe it’s the mass of my hard-on weighing me down. Talia’s eyes follow my hands and she gives me a shy grin.

“Maybe you should take a turn in here.”

A smile stretches across my face that if anyone saw they would instantly realize I am about to be up to no good. “Really?”

“Well, yeah. It is yours after all.”

“Okay.” My hands drop to my waistband and I start shucking my pants.

“Oh my God! What...what are you doing?” She quickly diverts her eyes so she doesn’t see my cock thud out right in front of her.

“Taking a turn too.”

I use the steps and lower myself into the hot water and bubbles. I make sure we are on opposite sides of the huge tub before turning the water off. She has her back turned to me facing away even though there’s no longer anything to look at. It’s all underneath the bubbles.

“I...that’s not...I meant...”

“It was very kind of you to offer to share, Angel.”

“I, um...uh, you know what? You would probably be more comfortable if nobody was here with you. I’ll step out and let you have the...”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We have to be close, have to be friends, right?”

“Um, I guess.”

“Friends share.”

Her face finally turns my way, her eyes narrowed in a scowl, “You share baths with all your friends?”

Do I hear a hint of jealousy in her voice?

“No. But I don’t marry them either.” She chances another glance behind her, finding that the bubbles cover almost everything. “I guess you are a little more than just a friend, huh?”

She slowly turns and when she realizes neither of us can see anything she settles back.

“Tell me about your day. What have you and Noelle been up to?”

She tells me all about lunch and by the end of her story, both of us are laughing so hard it’s hard to not want to come closer to her, to lean back with her by my side instead of on the other side of the tub.

“I’ve not had a chance to share things like that with someone else in... months. Thank you for listening to me ramble on.”

“I don’t think it’s rambling at all, angel. I like hearing about what I missed.”

She looks away and blushes again, calling me back to the last blush I saw spread over her body.

“Come here, angel.”

Her eyes widen and she plasters herself to the side of the tub. “I don’t think it’s the right time to be practicing kissing, Nic. Not when both of us are naked.”

I laugh and move closer to her since she won’t come to me. “I wasn’t really thinking about kissing, sweetheart but if you want a kiss all you have to do is ask for one.”

She blushes again and turns so her chest is pushed against the porcelain of the tub. She’s about to run, I can tell.

“Let me wash your hair.”

The question is one she isn’t expecting and causes her to turn to me even as I creep closer and closer. “What?”

“I want to wash your hair. Can I?” My fingers itch to sink into the soft tresses as I ask permission. But will she give it to me? Will she give me this...and so much more?

Chapter Fourteen

Talia

He wants to...wash my hair?

“We have to be close, the more comfortable you are around me, the better it will look, right? Getting you comfortable, as comfortable as we need to be with one another, would normally take time. Time we don’t have, little one.”

I frown at the information. I already know what we have and what we don’t. I don’t need to be reminded that all of this is going super fast.

“Because we don’t have the time it would take to grow that connection, I have to come up with alternative ways, find new ways to become close. To get you used to my touch, make it look like we have a relationship with one another that has grown over time. One of those ways I can do that and portray that sense of...closeness, is to do things couples would do...”

He wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me to him so that our skin brushes against one another again. I didn’t realize he was this close.

“After they’ve already had sex, little one.”

“Like...moving in with one another?”

He nods but builds on that, “Like taking a bath with one another and letting me wash your hair for you.”

“Washing my hair? Couples do that for one another?”

He pulls me in front of him with my back turned to him and digs his fingers into my hair. I have to fight back a moan as his big digits work

through the strands to massage my scalp. “Hmm, washing your hair. You have such lovely hair.”

I can't fight the moan when he starts working the shampoo throughout my hair and taking such interest in everything about me. I end up closing my eyes and tilting my head back for him so he can work his magic all over my head. My eyes fly back open when I realize his mouth is on my bare shoulders as he drops kisses on the tops of them.

He cleans the soap from my hair and refills the water. I bring my arms up to cover my boobs and bring my legs up so he can't see much. But he doesn't even try. Instead, he just focuses on getting my hair rinsed clean. When it is fully clean, he refills the tub one more time and leans both of us back.

All this time we haven't really touched, so the fact that I am now leaning up against his naked body with my back to his chest is...shocking. I try to sit up, but he holds me to him, and moving only seems to bring me closer to him.

“Just...relax. See this isn't so bad, is it?”

If I don't think about being naked while in the same bath as a man I just met days ago, and the fact I'm sitting on his leg so that my bare bottom is touching him, then sure I guess it's not bad at all. The things this man has talked me into over the past couple of days are astonishing. I slept with him last night. I realize it might not seem like a lot but for me, it didn't matter that we were both fully clothed and I don't think either of us touched the entire night.

But we're touching now.

He starts rubbing my shoulders to help me relax. At first, it doesn't work, but over time, with the warmth of the water and the fire, and his kneading fingers working over the tired muscles, I melt. Long moments pass as every kink and knot I have started to slowly release. I'm not really aware of when his touch starts to go lower but over time it's left my shoulders and sunk lower down my body. His fingers massage the top swell of my breasts. And I tell myself he's not really touching anything. Not really.

“You should let me give you a massage soon.”

“A massage?” Isn’t that what he’s doing now?

“Hmm, a naked one.”

I try to sit up but he holds me to him so I can’t pull away. “I don’t think... I’m ready for that.”

He chuckles but doesn’t move his hands from where they came to rest before he started talking about massaging me naked. “Alright, maybe not soon then. Can I ask for something though?”

“Um...” What could he possibly want? “Maybe.”

He doesn’t laugh this time, but a big smile still stretches across his face, “Can I have a kiss?”

I try to think of a way he could be trying to trick me but can’t. His face doesn’t hold any mischief or show that he’s up to something. Maybe...he just really wants a kiss. “Yes.”

He quickly changes the way we are positioned with me being more to his side. I don’t move towards him but wait for him to come to me. Both of us sit looking at one another until he finally gives me a soft smile. “I want a kiss from you. I want you to kiss me this time.”

“Oh.” My brows lift as understanding dawns on me. He wants me to be in control this time. “Okay. Um...”

I try to think of how best to go about this without flashing him my boobs or having our bodies touch too much. I have to focus and can’t do that knowing we’re skin to skin. I come up on my knees and lean forward catching myself with a hand while the other one is wrapped around my breasts. Not that it seems to be doing the job since there is a lot more of them than I have hand to cover them with.

I press my lips together and lick my lips nervously before leaning in and

touching my mouth to his. He doesn't move or react but instead lets me become used to what it feels like being the one giving him a kiss instead of the one being kissed. I go back in for another buzz of lips when he sinks his fingers in my hair and cups the back of my head. I gasp out but he doesn't pull me to him or move another way.

“You're doing great, angel.”

His praise has me licking my lips and trying again. This time when I settle my lips against his I linger a little longer, playing with the full lower swell. I gently let my tongue come out and explore the softness under my lips and he readily opens for me, letting me in without me having to ask. Instead of surging in like he did when I opened mine I cautiously prod the hidden spaces until I become more sure of my welcome.

By the time we are really working each other's mouths, Nic has moved one of his arms around the tops of my shoulders but doesn't try to pull me closer to him or use it to cop a feel. And then the sound of his mother's voice echoes up the stairs and has both of us pulling apart.

“Oh my God!”

My eyes widen, the blood rushing out of my face as the reality of what we are doing truly sets in. My eyes flash over to where the towel is and prepare to run for it. But Nic has other plans.

“You'll never make it in time.”

He slides over until he is facing the door and pulls me into his arms holding me like we were when he was rubbing my shoulders but now his hands are not on my shoulders. One of his big arms band across my breasts as he covers one with his palm. He doesn't try to make space between us this time and our bodies clash against one another and slide together so I can feel every inch of him pressed against me. At the feel of his huge...my eyes widen at the heat and solidness of him nestled against my ass and lower back.

“Oh my God!”

It doesn't come out above a whisper so both of us can hear his mom talking to Noelle. "Let's go let your momma know we're back so she won't worry so much about you, little bug. Yes, let's go say hi."

She knocks and slowly slides the door open just enough to speak to me.

"Talía, dear. We're back."

I open my mouth to respond but nothing comes out because I can't think of what to say.

"Talía? Honey, you aren't asleep in there are you?" She slips the door open just a little bit further before catching a glimpse of us in the mirror on the opposite side of the wall to the tub. We can also see her face and the look of surprise that has her mouth forming a perfect 'o'.

"Oh! Not just your momma, in there. Continue on, guys. We'll just be downstairs waiting until the two of you are...done and dressed."

"It's not what you think." The worst thing to say if you are trying not to sound like you are up to something. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to look as innocent as I can given I'm in a bathtub naked with her son who happens to have his hands all over me...and his dick in my back.

She gives us a little laugh before a smile breaks out on her face, "I'm just glad you aren't asleep. Don't rush on our account. We'll entertain ourselves."

She quietly snips the door shut and I am left alone with her son...and his massive package.

He releases his hold on me, and I realize what I need to do. I need to have him close his eyes while I make a mad dash for the towel and leave him to his bath. What I need isn't always what I do though and instead, I open my mouth and wade right into all sorts of trouble.

"Is that your dick?"

I can see his expression in the mirror. At first, it's surprised shock, his brows rising high on his forehead at my question. Then a smile glides over

his face and a wicked light flares in his dark blue eyes.

“Want to turn around and find out for yourself?” I gasp out at the offer, self-preservation kicks in and I dash from the tub over to the towel. I keep my eyes averted as I quickly wrap the terry cloth around me. I look up even though I know I shouldn’t, “I’ll even let you touch it if you want to.”

I dart out of the room, wanting to put this bath out of my mind as fast as mist evaporating in an open room.

Chapter Fifteen

Talia

I throw myself into preparing for Thanksgiving, so I don't have to think about what happened yesterday. I'm lucky because there is a lot to help out with to make sure dinner is done on time and everyone is ready to eat at the designated time. I invited Naomi to dinner and when she shows up it is like a little piece of my past has come to visit. We catch up and gossip about all the people on our floor before she takes Noelle and starts playing with her in the floor.

Last night I fell asleep before Nic came to bed, so I didn't have to worry about talking to him about The Bath Incident last night. He wanted to make sure everything was ready for us to travel to the Big House tomorrow so he and his mom stayed up kind of late making sure things would go smoothly. I can't even be real sure if he actually slept with me last night.

And today he isn't acting like anything happened between the two of us. He seems a bit distracted as I stay close to his mom so I can help her with the cooking. Everyone gathers around the table and that's when he stands up and takes my hand in his.

"I know everyone here is aware of what is happening in our lives but I'm still a stickler for tradition, so...Talia," He sinks down in front of me and pulls out a ring box to hold up in front of me. I take a quick look around the table at all the eyes on us before coming back to his. I can't believe he's doing this. On bent knee. "Will you marry me? Will you let me be a part of not just your life but Noelle's as well?"

I look at the ring nestled in the plush velvet nest resting in his hands. This is way too much like the real thing. I can't let it be too real. Then I stand a chance of losing my focus and forgetting why I have to do all of this. I run

the risk of forgetting that none of this is real. It's all a lie.

“Angel.” His voice snaps me back to the moment and when I look past the ring in his hand to meet his eyes, I finally find my voice. His gaze oddly offers me a stable place to focus and concentrate. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

His mom starts clapping with unshed tears in her eyes and Naomi starts too. Both women rush over to offer hugs. Somehow, I make it through the rest of dinner without being completely worthless and dropping everything I try to pick up. And just because dinner is over, it doesn't mean that my shock is over. Anita decides to stay overnight with us so we can all leave early tomorrow so I have no other option but to sleep with Nic.

Both of us lie in the near dark as we try to find sleep. The last thing I want is for us to start talking about The Bathtub Incident or what happened when he was trying to propose to me. Sleep would make that hard to do...if I can find it in time. We are on our own side and the space between us seems vast and a whole lot wider than it actually is.

He finally whispers in the dark softly, so softly I can barely hear him. “Fuck it!”

He rolls past the divide and turns me suddenly as well. Now we are lying back to chest and his arm is thrown over my waist. “What...?” He buries his face in my hair and acts like he is about to settle in for a while. “Why did you say...?”

Do I really want to know?

“Why did I say fuck it? Because I'm tired and I'm not waiting for you to fall asleep tonight so I can cuddle you.”

“What?” His words not only shock me but leave me grappling for sturdy ground, “You...wait until I fall asleep? Before you... 'cuddle' me?”

“Most of the time. But, darlin', I figure we've seen each other naked,

there's no reason for us to not cuddle. Right?"

I open my mouth a couple of times to try to form a reply but end up not saying anything.

"Try to sleep, angel. Tomorrow will be here fast enough."

Somehow, I finally fall asleep. The next thing I'm aware of is an alarm going off. It sounds like mine but when I search my mind, I can't remember setting one. More things creep into my sleep-fogged mind the longer the damned buzzing keeps going on. A hand on my body, legs all tangled up together and my leg thrown over something smooth and hard. Things start to snap into focus when the hand on my butt gives it a little squeeze and a male voice mumbles something over my head. I don't catch what he is saying but I am very aware of who he is.

"Nic?"

Am I dreaming? Is this a dirty dream?

"Mmm, I'll kill it, baby. Don't move." He drops a kiss on my forehead and pulls his hand out of the elastic band of my panties. He reaches behind him to hit the button to kill the alarm causing his pelvis to push against the vee of my spread legs.

My eyes fly open as his dick comes to rest up against the front of my thin panties and sleep rushes from me almost as fast as I took off running from the bathroom a couple of days ago. I drop my hands to his broad forearms and try to scoot away from the protrusion. He turns back to me and once again his hand travels down the plains of my back to find the stretchy band of my panties before he shoves his hand down them so he can cup my ass cheek in the palm of his hand. Again. He pulls me close, and I am shockingly aware of the fact my nightgown has traveled up not just to my waist but further up so that my breasts are smooshed against his bare chest.

"Nic?! Oh God, please wake up."

"I'm awake, angel."

“Then why are you still holding my ass and pressing your dick in my... Nic!”

He keeps snuggling into me, burying his face in my neck and his cock in the warmth between my thighs.

“God damn, you feel good, sweetheart!”

“Is...is it always...it’s so big, Nic.”

“Hmm, just what a man wants to hear when he’s got his dick buried in his girl.”

His girl? His girl? Is he still asleep? He doesn’t really have his dick ‘buried’ in me so he might be sleeping. He might even be dreaming. Of someone other than me. I start to frown but he rolls us so that I am on my back, and he is over me. From this position, I can tell his eyes are open and he is taking in everything from my bare breasts to where my legs are spread around his hips.

“Nic?”

“You’re awfully wet, angel.”

My cheeks burn with the force of the blush that hits my cheeks. Did he really just say...?

His hand drops to run over the gusset of my panties causing me to gasp out and my hips to lurch forward. “Oh...my...Nic, what are you doing?”

Instead of answering me, he asks a question of his own, “Is this for me?”

His eyes capture mine and for some reason, I can’t seem to look away. I should lie. I should tell him no. I should...but I just can’t.

“Answer me, baby.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, baby,” His voice seems to grow even lower making him sound like he is nearly growling, “You can’t tell me things like that and not expect me to do something about it.”

Something about it?

He positions our bodies, so his cock is snuggled even tighter against my body, and starts rocking his hips back and forth. My breath leaves my lungs as I try to make sense of what is happening. My legs come up around his hips even higher and I transfer my grasp back onto his forearms, trying to hang on to something solid.

“Nic?”

“We aren’t breaking any rule, Talia, baby. You said no penetrative sex, and this isn’t about penetration at all. It’s just a little dry humping.” He folds me in his arms bringing me to his body so the tips of my nipples brush against his bare skin. “Or maybe not so dry, sweetheart.”

I close my eyes at the embarrassment of having him realize I’m so wet that he easily slides against me when he thrusts again. His mouth crashes down on mine as I try to hang on. His tongue rushes in my mouth and our tongues meet so that there are three points of pleasure being worked over with every breath, every thrust.

I have to pull my mouth from his as he works his cock in between the valley of my wet pussy and travels over the bundle of nerves at the top that seem so sensitized it’s making me ache. “Nic! Nic, some...oh, it...I am... God Nic!”

“Shh, baby. You can’t get too loud. We’ll wake Mom and Noelle.”

“No...Noelle. We...she’s still in the room.”

“Sound asleep, baby. She won’t know anything is going on. Here...,” he stops long enough to reach for the sheets so he can pull them over us, “now she won’t see a thing even if she does wake up before we are done. Not that

we are doing anything, just hugging and kissing and touching and being close.”

He wraps his arms back around me and pulls me in close. It feels like a lot more than hugging or kissing. It feels like my body is going to explode and I ache all over. When I speak to him it’s between clenched teeth with a strangled whisper, “Nic...I think I’m going to die.”

“If I don’t keep moving? Alright, alright baby. No need to beg, baby.”

“Nic...I...”

“Fuck, baby, you can’t be feeling this good and think I’m not going to be all over you. All the fucking time.”

Chapter Sixteen

Nic

If I had known she was like this, soft, sweet, sexy as hell, when I was in that café staring at her for the first time, I would have just thrown her over my fucking shoulder and made off with her. I definitely wouldn't have waited this long to have her spread wide for me. I latch my mouth onto the column of her neck and kiss and suck the sweet-smelling skin there. I'm so close to popping, my balls hurt but when I do go off, I want the taste of her in my mouth.

Her nails sink into my back making it even harder to hang on to my load as my hips start moving faster and faster. I slam my mouth over hers as she tenses, and I can tell she's about to cry out her release. When her body does start falling over the edge of pleasure my mouth captures the cry and my body holds the wet, warmth of her release close to our bodies.

I wait until she shudders through the biggest part of it when I move. I run my arm in between her legs and under her body as I lift her so my mouth can land on her soaked panties. The taste of her release has been trapped within the cotton fabric and she's made them stick to her with all the gathered liquid she's given me when she came.

I have to cover her mouth with the palm of my hand as I drive her to another climax finding my own. I finally pull my mouth away from her with one last grunt as another wave of cum leaves my still-hard cock. This little spurt lands on the top of her mound and up her lower belly causing her to jump as it hits her bare skin.

A sound from the crib has her going stiff under me as Noelle picks that moment to wake up. I drop a kiss on her still-opened mouth before sliding from her warmth. "I got her, baby. You take all the time you need. Me and

this little princess will be downstairs helping Mom with breakfast.”

I make quick work of dressing before I make my exit, so she doesn't have time to overthink what just happened. By the time she comes down and we knock breakfast out of the way, there is no time to talk about what happened in our bed this morning as we leave for the Big House. Talia and Noelle spend most of the ride there napping before we arrive and Mom and I take care of bringing suitcases in and getting them to the right room as Talia feeds Noelle a late lunch.

In the evening, mom has brought out her Christmas decorations and wrangled both of us to help her put them up. We take turns helping her and playing with Noelle.

“I really like the black trees, Anita. They're so classy but also different from everyone else.”

Mom beams. “Thank you, dear.” She steps back to take in the two nine-foot-tall black trees. “I love my little black trees. And my white one we use as the main tree in the living room. They're my way of giving Yule the finger.”

“Mom?!” My mouth is open, and I am completely shocked speechless for the first time in a long time when my mom mentions my father. Shocked but not unhappy about it.

She waves my surprise away and continues to explain to Talia. “Yule, Nic and Chris's father, was always such a stickler for perfection. Everything had to be just the way he liked it and that way was whatever way looked the best to other people outside the family. We had to have the perfect tree every year. The biggest, the greenest, the perfect image of Christmas. A big green monster that was hell to keep alive, which was left up to me, of course. The perfect ornaments. They had to be bright red so they would pop off the tree and everyone could see them. Not blue, or white, or handmade by the children - I kept those in a box in my room so they wouldn't be thrown away... 'by accident'.” She makes quote signs with her fingers before going back to placing hangers through the brightly colored ornaments that don't match at all. “The perfect tree, the perfect home, the perfect hostess.”

She stands back to take another look at the tree and Talia touches her hand in a show of comfort and compassion.

“I like to think of him doing a little roll every time I put them up.”

Talia covers her mouth to hide the big smile but then she and Mom catch each other’s eye, and both start laughing as they finish up with the decorations. Hearing Mom open up about the awful years she had to spend with my father is...refreshing and makes me love Talia more.

I never thought about Mom not having anybody to share things like this with. Yeah, she had me and Chris but there are just some things I am sure she doesn’t want to share with her sons. Especially when it comes to telling us everything our father did wrong. I can’t help but think that maybe me and Chris are the way we are - protective, possessive, and paternal - because we rebelled against the things my father wasn’t for my mother. And how do I feel about Chris now if I look at it that way? Not as pissed off or annoyed by him actually.

“Ma’am, there’s a Ms. Stenson here to see Ms. Talia and Noelle.”

I stand immediately noting the pallor that comes across Talia’s face at the mention of the name, the worry and fear that glaze her eyes. Mom can tell too because she reaches out to her to comfort her. “That’s the caseworker over Noelle’s adoption.”

My mother tells our head of security, Justin, to escort her to the back parlor and we’ll meet her there giving Talia time to gather herself. I fix the little dress Noelle is wearing and take Talia by the hand so we can walk into the room as a clear and decisive threesome.

The amount of anxiety rolling off Talia is...astonishing. Her hand clutches mine, cold and sweaty, looking for some sign of comfort or relief. When we enter the room, a woman in a pink jacket and skirt turns to look us up and down. I can already see her taking stock before she opens her mouth to say a word.

“Won’t you sit?” It’s not a request or a pleasantry and she realizes as

much, landing her butt in one of the overstuffed leather chairs. I take Talia's hand and guide us to the couch so we can sit side by side.

"I had hoped you had reconsidered our request to give the baby up before we all have to go through the court case." She talks to Talia trying to shut me out completely. She doesn't want anything to do with me and the force I bring to this little party she's throwing. "A woman your age and status just can't give little Noelle the life she deserves."

"My fiancée and I think differently."

"Fiancee?"

I hold our clutched hands up and turn Talia's so the engagement ring can clearly be seen. The woman starts to act flustered for the first time since we entered the room.

"And who are you?"

"You come to someone's house, and you don't find out who it belongs to?"

"I am perfectly aware of whose house I am currently in, sir. I just don't know who you are and what Ms. Barlowe is playing at?"

My brow raises at the stupidity of this woman. "Why do you think Talia's here?"

"I assumed she acquired employment in the Bell household and gave up her ridiculous job that couldn't possibly make enough to support a child, let alone a full-grown adult."

"You thought my fiancée came to MY house to find a job. You really don't do your homework. What agency did you say you worked for again?"

"I am with Child Services. Just who are you, Sir?"

"I'm the owner of the house you are sitting in. The fiancé of the woman you just insulted, and apparently you don't comprehend how to read - unlike

my fiancée - or you would have seen the engagement notice in the papers. But have no fear," Talia squeezes my hand hard but I make sure to keep my focus - and my ire - on the woman in front of me, "I will be doing a thorough background search on you to find out if you really are from Child Services as you claim. I would never let just anyone come in and try to take Noelle for no good reason before a judge has a chance to hear the case. That would be illegal, wouldn't it, Ms. Stenson."

"I can assure you I am who I say I am, Sir. What I am not sure of is the game the two of you are trying to play at when there is a lovely couple waiting to adopt this baby and Talia is only dragging out the inevitable. Giving the baby over is what is best for Noelle."

"And the couple that want a baby for Christmas. That may be so, but until we hear from a judge the baby isn't leaving our sight. If we're all finished here, we've had a very busy day trying to ready the house and Talia has a lot of preparations to make before the wedding, if you'll excuse us. Justin can see you out."

Justin shows up right on time and the woman in front of us has no other option but to leave. This isn't one of the normal well-fare checks they do on adoptive parents. This bitch came here because it's personal. And she just pissed the wrong person off if she wants to make it personal. But looking at Talia and the fear in her eyes something tells me I am alone in my assurance that this isn't right or normal. Something tells me I am going to have to work that much harder to make her forget all about this unpleasantness. A job I am more than happy to undertake...as soon as I make a few phone calls first.

I have a man who owes me a favor from a while back who happens to be a judge. I wonder what he can do - and what strings he can pull for me - to take that worry out of my angel's wintergreen eyes. I walk her and Noelle back to where Mom is waiting and make my excuses for stepping away.

I don't want to tell Talia and give her one more thing to worry about or stress over if my friend can't do anything to help. But I think he can. And I think Ms. Stenson is going to find that things can get very personal if she keeps coming after my angel and our baby. Very personal indeed.

Chapter Seventeen

Talia

Nic leaves me and his mom with Noelle to make some phone calls. And I try to put the meeting with the caseworker out of my mind. She saw right through the act we were trying to put on. I knew she would, but she didn't buy that me and Nic could be together at all. She thought I was working for him for fuck's sake.

“Try not to worry about it, darlin’. I’m sure Nic will take care of that woman, and everything will work out just perfectly.” I wish I had the same faith Anita has but I just want it so badly. And typically, people like me don't get what they want. People like me are used to having things taken from them, not given to them.

We go back to decorating but with Noelle it's a little more unorganized and chaotic. I end up spending more time in the floor with her than I do helping Anita with the ornaments. A noise in the front hall has both of us tensing up and looking over at one another. I hold my breath waiting for someone to come in and tell me the woman has come back because she's not done raking me and my life choices over the coals just yet.

But this time when the door opens it's not the big man in the tight black shirt that told us the caseworker was here. Instead, it's a...smaller copy of Nic. Instead of bright blue eyes that change with his emotions, this version has a mix of greenish-blue eyes that seem...veiled, keeping secrets from everyone he meets. I much prefer Nic's blue eyes to this man's shifting ones. He's also not as tall as my Nic...not that Nic is really mine. I just...I know him, I don't know this new man, but I can guess who he is.

Anita goes running for him and wraps him in her arms, “Chris!”

She gives him a kiss on the cheek and pulls back to look at him. “Mother.”

The smile he gives her doesn't reach his eyes which happen to be turned on me.

“You haven't been eating enough, you're getting skinny.”

“I've been skinny mother. Nic's the stockier of the two of us, remember.”

I would hardly call the man 'skinny' by any stretch of the definition. He doesn't have as much muscle as Nic, true, but at the same time, he's not thin or in fear of being swept away. Instead, he has a leaner body and appears a bit wilder than Nic but that might be because this man is dressed in all black and when I met Nic he was in a suit.

“Who do we have here?”

He moves around Anita and comes over to where me and Noelle have been playing. Even Noelle is waiting to find out what this new guy will do.

Anita starts the introduction but doesn't get far, “Chris, this is...”

“My fiancée and someone you will not flirt with.” My eyes go to the now-blocked door where Nic is standing. I try to curb my smile at seeing him again but I'm just so happy he's back that I don't think I do a very good job.

He comes past his brother to help me off the floor and picks Noelle up in his arms. His brother looks...surprised. His brows are high and for the first time since he came into the room, he loses some of that aloofness that shrouded him. Nic doesn't pay him any attention and instead focuses on me and Noelle. His thumb runs over the swell of my cheek, and he looks into my eyes trying to find something there.

“You okay, angel?”

I nod and try to give him a smile.

“Angel?” Chris has both of us turning to look his way.

“Chris, this is Talia, your brother’s fiancée and this is Noelle.” Anita comes to the rescue and makes introductions that Nic didn’t seem in a hurry to give.

“Noelle?” I can see the questions running through his head as he takes in the image of Noelle with Nic. She looks like his. “My, my, brother. You have been busy since I left town, haven’t you?”

Nic narrows his eyes, but I speak up before things get too...strained. Well, more strained than they already seem to be. “She’s not his.”

“The hell she isn’t.” His vehemence takes me back and captures my whole attention.

“Chris, Talia is trying to adopt Noelle who was a friend’s baby, but the friend passed away. She and Nic are hoping to be married before the case goes to court, dear.”

“So...you are taking care of a baby that isn’t even yours?” He turns to me and addresses me directly even though I can feel Nic bristle at him even looking over at me. “And you, what? Honey trapped Nic into helping you?”

“You son of a...”

Nic tries to go for his brother, but I step in front of him with Noelle in my arms. His hands fall to my shoulders, and I half expect him to set me out of the way so he can keep going after his brother.

“Nic is helping me with Noelle.” It’s close to the truth. Unfortunately, his is a little closer explanation except Nic isn’t really getting the honey out of the situation.

“Talia and Noelle belong to me.” Nic wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me closer to him.

Instead of being cowed, Chris takes the three of us in and narrows his eyes, “Interesting.”

Chris dismisses the threat emanating from Nic and flops back on the

couch.

“This proves to be a very interesting couple of weeks. And here I thought I was going to die of boredom, but I think I’ll be just fine spending the next couple of weeks yanking your chain and coming up with ways to torture you, big brother.”

“I’m not here for your entertainment, Chris. If you want something to do, why don’t you try to work for a change.”

“I would, dear brother, but it turns out you aren’t the only one prepping for a wedding.”

“Christopher Cornelius Bell! You did not just drop news that you are engaged while in an argument with your brother?! I know you wouldn’t be stupid enough to tell me important news like that while you are trying to rile your brother up.”

Everyone -even Noelle- turns to look at Anita. Her cheeks are flushed, and she looks like she’s about to murder Chris who no longer looks smug, distant, or mysterious. Now all he looks is apologetic.

“I...was going to tell you, mom. I really was. I just...didn’t know how and then Nic gave me such an easy distraction. You know I can’t stay focused when Nic sets himself up so neatly, just waiting for me to knock his smug as...backside down a peg or two.”

“Well, where is she? Who is she? Am I going to get to meet her before you say I do or are you going to do that without me too?”

Chapter Eighteen

Nic

“Mother,” I interrupt my mom who is in full rant mode at the moment, “even though I am loving the ass-chewing Chris is getting, Talia needs some rest and I want to make sure she actually has some peace during her rest so if you can...will you watch Noelle for us for a couple of hours?”

My mom’s whole demeanor changes, her eyes start shining, she starts smiling and I can’t help but think Noelle just saved Chris’s life, “Of course, I will. Give me that yummy little Christmas cookie. You’re this Nana’s Christmas cookie, aren’t you? Aren’t you, little angel?”

“Wh...what now? I don’t...,” She starts but I interrupt her.

“Yes, you do.” I bend and scoop her up over my shoulder so I can more easily make it through the rooms and the doors I have to go through before I make it to our room.

“Nic! What are you doing?”

“Angel, you still have the look in your eyes, and I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.” I spot her confused look and go back over my words. I see how they could be about my brother’s impromptu return, “I don’t like the woman who put it there, and I don’t like the situation that put it there, and I am a man who is very good at fixing big problems. So, I’m fixing that look.”

I dump her on the bed and disappear into the bathroom looking for what I need. It doesn’t take me long to find it. I was the one that packed and unpacked it and Talia didn’t even know about it.

When we came in I made sure to lock the door and when I come out it’s to

find her looking at it with a crinkled frown on her cute-as-fuck face.

“Why did you...? What is that?”

“One question at a time, baby. One question at a time.” I drop a quick kiss on her head and work my way around to the other side of the bed.

“I did that,” I point to the door, “because I don’t want us to be disturbed by stupid shit that might try to disturb us.”

I take her ankle in my hand and give it a pull causing her to lose her balance and fall backwards at the same time I slide her across the bed closer to the side I am on.

“This,” I hold the bottle of massage oil up so she can see it better, “is what I am going to use to make that look leave your face.”

Instead of giving me a smile or being excited about getting a massage, she is frowning again. But the look of worry and anxiety is gone. I take the ankle I still have in my hand and flip her until she’s on her belly before I surprise her by yanking her leggings down her legs.

“Nic!”

I roll her sweater up before I crawl on the bed and across her legs. “I didn’t want to get the oil on your leggings.”

“Really?” I can tell by the sound of her voice that she doesn’t believe my excuse for taking her pants off. “But you don’t mind getting it on my sweater?”

“Oh, good catch. Let’s take this off too.” Before she can protest, I have the neck hole over her head and pull it from her arms leaving her in only her tank top and panties.

“Nic!”

“Oh, come on. I’ve seen you in your bra and panties before. No big deal.”

“No big deal? No big deal! Are you kidding?”

I turn her squirming figure back around and place my hand on her back, so she stays on her belly while I raise her tank and unhook her bra. I pour the oil on her back and watch as it spreads across the soft skin.

“Oh, Nic. I don’t...I don’t want it on my bra. Wait. Can you just wait? I can take my bra off and leave my...Nic!”

The entire time she’s trying to tell me she can work her bra off while leaving her tank on I yank both over her head and arms leaving her completely bare from the waist up.

“There. Now there’s no fear we’ll ruin your lacey things.”

I place my hands on her back and rub upward, spreading the shiny substance over her shoulders and back down to the tops of her hips. She gives me a loud moan before continuing to tell me how much she likes it. “Oh God, Nic. Mmm, that...that feels good.”

“Does it?”

“Oh yes.” She keeps moaning like she is, and this is going to be the world’s quickest massage because I’m going to turn her over and cum on her, giving myself a happy ending. I work the muscles in her lower back before moving up to her shoulders again.

“See, everything is going to be alright, angel. Just lay here and let me rub you.”

I work the muscles in her back for long moments as she lays and lets me listen to her pleasure at my hands. Then I drop lower, running my hands over the soft globes of her ass and down her bare legs. I work her legs over before returning higher so I can focus on that fine ass she’s got. She’s been in a state of complete relaxation until I start working my fingers under the edges of her panties.

“Nic?”

“It’s alright, sweetheart. Just relax right there.” I go slow and knead the muscles until I feel her relax again. I move one side of the panties over so I can see more of her bare skin and use my hands to make her feel good. Then I go to the other side, but I don’t put the side I just left back over so that most of her panties wind up in the valley of her ass. And then I run my hands along the outer edges of her lips causing her to gasp and try to move away from me.

I use one hand to hold her down while I keep working the sensitive skin. I don’t go any further, but I also don’t retreat. Over time she settles and lets me work both sides of her body wedging the gusset of her panties even further right up her middle. I reach for the scrap of lace and silk and tug on the back. She stiffens immediately and I hear her breath rush from her as the material rubs against the heart of her. I do it again and again until she realizes I’m doing it on purpose.

“Nic...” her voice comes out breathless and a little shaky, “Nic, you...have to stop...you...Nic...you’re going...Nic!”

Her voice gets higher as I work the bit of lace against the front of her pussy, so it hits the sensitive bud every time I move it. Her hips start to come off the bed and I have to use the other hand to hold her down as she gives me a mewl before burying her face in the mattress and cumming for me.

It’s a small one. The one she gave me this morning was much bigger than this one. She lays limply for a few moments and I let her catch her breath before I flip her again.

Chapter Nineteen

Talia

I have nowhere to hide when he flips me over. My breasts are bare, and my arms feel like lead, making them useless in any effort to hide them. And what's even worse, my panties have ridden up so that more than half my pussy is out in the open too. I try to swat at the hand that lands on my stomach and work my panties to cover myself, but the more Nic works my tired, sore muscles the more I relax into a state of just not caring.

Even as he works his way up so that he can cup my breasts in both of his big hands his eyes remain on mine, watching, waiting. His touch against the tips of my breasts has me arching my back and to my surprise, it's into his touch.

“Oh my God! I...”

He lowers his head and gives me a pop kiss before his hands, which never leave my breasts, start moving over the curves again. My nipples instantly harden and tighten until my breasts feel swollen and heavy. He focuses his touch on first one, and then the other. I know he can see what he's doing to me, he can tell how my body is reacting to him, but I can't seem to stop him. Instead, I close my eyes and try to stay as still as I can. Maybe if he thinks I've fallen asleep he'll leave me to rest.

“Oh my God!” My eyes fly back open as I feel his lips wrap around the hard buds. His head is bent over my breasts and he's...his cheeks...he's sucking my breasts like an infant would. “Nic! I...”

I can't hold still or pretend any longer. My hands come up to hold his head. My brain says this is wrong, but my body isn't listening to my head. His other hand plays with the hard nub, plucking and squeezing up around the

tight skin, mimicking what his mouth is doing to the other one with his tongue and teeth. And then I feel his other hand wrap around the lace of my panties so he can tug them over my clit at the same time his mouth is playing with my boobs.

“Oh God, Nic. Don’t. Please...Nic, I can’t...”

He isn’t listening to me as he starts working the lace over my clit. I slap both hands over my mouth and try to stay focused, try to stay still. The touch of bare fingertips brushing over the overly sensitive skin of my pussy causes me to yelp out, my hips bouncing off the bed and right into his touch. Our eyes meet as he rolls my nipple over his tongue and sucks. His hand finding my clit, he starts to stimulate me with just his fingers.

I should be ashamed of letting him do this to me. I should have some reservations about why he is doing this but the way he touches me takes all the shame, all the thought, all the things that would normally block me from experiencing this and turns them completely off. My thighs shake and I feel the sweet tightening in my body that signifies I’m about to cum when he moves. He moves so fast I can’t even try to figure out what he is about to do.

Until his mouth lands on my bare pussy and his tongue finds my clit. The same clit that was under his fingertips just seconds ago. I cry out, not being able to stop myself from screaming out his name as my body pitches over the edge and right into a massive orgasm. My thighs shake, my hips surge off the bed and into his mouth, and the rush of release leaves me as his mouth seems to lap it all up.

“NIC!” My hands fly out to grab the bedding as I cum again and again. “Please, Nic! Please!”

He mumbles something but I can’t tell what because he never takes his mouth off me. And then I feel his tongue slide lower. He pushes the thick muscle into the entrance of my pussy and causes me to go ridged under him. Our eyes flash to one another’s as he slowly pries me open with his tongue, licking in the deepest, tightest part of me. This time when I cum I fold in on myself, almost sitting completely up as my legs pull in tight and my thighs shake with the immense power of my climax. Everything goes liquid as I flop

back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling not seeing anything and feeling everything.

He rises over me, dropping kisses on my mound, my lower belly, just above my navel, the bottoms of both breasts and over both nipples. He finally makes his way to my mouth and takes mine with his. When he probes his tongue inside, I can taste myself on him, the sweet, tart flavor being shared between the two of us.

When he pulls away from me the touch of our skin finally draws my attention to something other than my own body.

“Nic, are you...you aren’t...?”

“Stay still, baby. Just stay real still.”

His dick slowly slides between the lips of my pussy causing him to close his eyes and sigh. “God damn, you are the softest thing I have ever had my dick around.”

My hands come up to his shoulders so I have something solid and strong to hold to keep myself still like he asked me to.

“You are so fucking wet and tight too. Fucking perfect. This pussy is perfect, these tits are perfect, the taste of that pussy, mmm, fuck is it perfect too.”

His words have heat flooding my face and making my cheeks burn. The head of his cock slides over the sensitive bundle of nerves that have already been worked to aching release.

“Oh my God, Nic.” I breathe out, knowing he can feel it on his own lips since we are so close together. “I...I don’t know if I’m going to be able to stay still. I don’t know...I...”

My nails sink in as he works his hips over me causing the thick length of his cock to repeatedly bump my clit causing my body to tingle and tighten all over again.

“Nic, I can’t...it...”

He captures my mouth and runs his dick over me one more time before my hips jerk and the broad head of his cock catches in the entrance of my pussy. He pushes in slightly and my body chooses that moment to spasm around what little of him I have in me.

“Fuck, shit, god damn. Holy fucking God, baby! Holy fucking God!”

Warmth floods me, heat like I’ve never felt before spreads through me and leaks out the edge of my opening and around his twitching cock.

“Did we...did we just...?”

“No. You’re still a virgin.” His weight lies on me heavily before he’s rolling so I am spread over him. There’s nothing at my entrance anymore and even though he wasn’t inside far enough to make a difference, I feel strangely empty. I try to make sense of what just happened, but nothing makes sense anymore. Nothing is in my control. Not where I live, what happens to my body, or who I am. I’m lost and even knowing that I’m doing this for Noelle isn’t giving me what it once did - the sense of certainty.

I don’t know how I can be so lost and still be so sure of the outcome of all this...I’m going to get hurt when this is all over. And losing Nic is going to hurt so much worse than losing anybody ever before.

Chapter Twenty

Nic

I focus wholly on Talia. She's been so quiet since we both came together yesterday that I worry I might have pushed her too far, too fast. It's not that she's distant really. She's just too quiet. Why doesn't she want to talk about what happened last night? Why doesn't she tell me I moved too fast? Or that I'm an asshole for not having more control over my own goddamned body?

"It's snowing." When I look up it's to find Talia looking out the window, a soft, sweet look on her upturned face.

"So, it is." I smile at her. "You want to go watch it while we eat?"

She gives me a questioning look.

"Come on."

I move us so she can sit curled up on the window seat, her feet in my lap and our plates in our hands as we watch the white flakes fall magically out of the sky.

"It's beautiful."

"Yes, it is." She's talking about the snow. I'm talking about her being next to me while my mom plays with our baby close by. I'm talking about waking up to her in my arms and us coming downstairs together so we can all be with our family. I'm talking about watching the wonder on her face at something as simple as snow and wanting to put that look on her face as often as possible in the future, knowing that is what I am meant to do with my life.

Our eyes meet and I try to tell her what is inside without saying the words.

She deserves the words but I'm not sure if I can say them and get them right. Not yet. A commotion at the door has us both looking over to find my brother and a short redhead standing beside him and covered in snow.

"It's really coming down out there."

She has a sweet, soft voice and can't be much older than my Talia. She rolls her lips around her teeth and her eyes take everything in. Mom comes bustling through the door leading to the pantry holding Noelle.

"Mom," Chris starts as we both go to try to take Noelle from her, "this is Kit, my fiancée."

"Oh, hello. Please come in. We were just finishing up with breakfast but there's plenty left if you've not eaten."

"Oh that's...I ate before."

"How much before, little one?"

Everyone's eyes turn to Kit and Chris as a side of Chris comes out I've not ever seen before.

Kit looks everywhere but at Chris and mumbles something.

"What was that, little one?"

"Not since last night. But I'm so nervous about meeting everyone I was afraid I was going to puke which would have been awful and just made me more nervous."

I watch as Talia comes forward and a different side of her comes out as well. "You can sit by us. We were just kind of slumping around, looking at the snow. I'm Talia by the way." She leans in close to Kit. "I'm new too."

"Can I play with the baby? Is she yours?"

"Noelle, yes she's ours." My heart swells and I try to fight back the joy that washes over me at the fact she said Noelle was ours. My mom must

realize too because she gives my hand a squeeze before moving closer to Kit.

“Not until after you eat, Kit. You can’t keep going without eating.”

“You do that too?” Talia seems excited that she’s found someone else who does what she apparently does, as I store that bit of information away so I can make sure she’s eating in the future.

The two girls go over to the island and Talia helps Kit make a plate as the two chat and get to know each other. My brother walks up beside me with an equally stunned expression.

“Huh, would you look at that? They made friends.”

I give him a cocked eyebrow before giving him my agreement, “Guess this means me and you are going to have to start acting like we get along. You know, to make them happy.”

“Shit, you’re right. As freakin’ usual.”

The rest of the morning is spent finishing up the decorating and planning out dinners. The two girls help Mom who seems to be having a blast and has Noelle permanently glued to her hip. I might have gotten to hold her maybe fifteen minutes all day long and that was when Mom had to go to the bathroom.

After lunch, we all pile outside so we can play in the snow. Watching Noelle experience snow for the first time is...probably one of the most fun experiences I’ve had in my life. It literally brought back all the magic of playing in the snow from my childhood that I hadn’t thought about in...a really long time.

My favorite part of the whole day was when I got to chase Talia around and finally caught her, both of us falling in the snow. Her dark hair fanning out on the snow in stark contrast as her wintergreen eyes smiled laughingly up at me from the wet, cold white will be an image I tuck away in my heart forever.

Now Mom is watching Noelle while we take a few hours to ourselves before our late dinner. I immediately stuck Talia in a warm bath and have been making plans the entire time she's spent soaking. I plan to woo her so that when we marry on Christmas Eve it will be for real, and not the act she thinks this all is. She will really love me, and I can admit to her that I want her to be mine. Forever.

But first I have to make her fall in love with me. To help set the mood I start a fire in the hearth and leave the curtains open so we can look at the snow falling while I show Talia love and attention. When she comes out, she's wrapped in one of my early Christmas gifts to her, a red silk robe that drapes across her body lovingly. The way it follows the curves of her body leaves very little to the imagination and my eyes hone in on the peaks of her pebbled nipples as they become more and more pronounced the longer I look.

“You look...stunning.”

She holds out her silk-clad arms, “Yeah? It's beautiful, thank you for getting it for me. I've never felt anything as soft and silky.”

I move closer to her and reach for her, not the robe, “I have.” I run my thumb over her bottom lip before bending my head so I can take her mouth with my own as I engulf her in my arms. Hers come up around my waist holding on to me too. Our tongues explore one another for a while before we pull apart.

“Is it still snowing?”

“Off and on. I thought you might want to watch it come down for a few minutes before we go back downstairs.”

She looks at me with suspicion before speaking, “I thought I would check on Noelle.”

I take her by the hand and walk her over to a chaise so we can sit down together. Steering her away from the bed will hopefully make her more comfortable. I lean against the back of the lounge and pull her down on top of me. Her hands come down on my shoulders to try to hold herself apart from

me.

“Nic, I’m not wearing anything under the robe.”

“So?” I rearrange her so she’s straddling my lap, her legs tucked on either side of my hips. “Listen, there’s something I want to talk to you about?”

I distract her -or at least I hope I distract her- and bring up a topic I was going to bring up anyway.

“And you have to do it with me sprawled naked across your lap? It must be bad.”

I laugh as I settle her more firmly in my lap and wrap my arms around her waist. I can feel the warmth coming off the junction of her legs.

“Okay, you can say no if you want but hear me out first.” Her face scrunches up in the cutest frown ever as she waits for me to tell her what I want to talk to her about. I can’t help but drop a kiss on her lips and bury my face in the crook of her neck before going on. “Will you redecorate the penthouse?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Talia

I sit quietly for some time since he's kind of thrown me off balance. In more ways than one. He said he wanted to talk about something important. I thought he was going to tell me he couldn't do this anymore; he couldn't keep up the lie, he couldn't handle the stress that this whole court case is bringing into his life. Something about not wanting to marry me and looking for another way to offer help. Not redecorating his home. That was the last thing I thought he was going to talk about.

"I realize it's a big ask, I do. What with the wedding planning and I don't want you to worry about it right away, but I thought after the wedding you could maybe start helping me redecorate and refurbish the place."

"Why would you want to redecorate your home? It's perfect."

"Because it's not been changed in forever and it doesn't really...feel like a home. I only really used it to sleep so I didn't necessarily care about its everyday functionality so much as just having someplace to go. But I want something different now."

His hands drop to my hips, and he makes little circles with his thumbs that have my skin jumping under the silk of the robe. I try to act like it isn't affecting me, that this is normal and not something that drives me crazy and makes me wet.

"Different?" Is this code for something? Does he want to do something different with more than just his home? "What do you want now?"

"I want comfort and peace. I want you and Noelle to be comfortable being there and when I come home to you two, I want the time to be...more relaxed

and family-oriented than just functional and business-like.”

“You...want me to make your apartment...a home? For us?”

He gives me a wide smile and nods like what I said is exactly what he was thinking but couldn't put words to. “Yes! Exactly! I want you to help me make it more homey, more comfortable, and more of a place to rest and relax in than just sleep. A place to live.”

His touch drops lower until his hands are on my lower back and running down over the swell of my ass. Each rub, each dip, brings me closer to him. To the warmth coming from him. “Why are you touching my ass?”

“It's a nice ass.” He gives it a little squeeze before rubbing it again but this time my robe has shifted so that his fingers touch bare skin. He pulls the ends of my robe up and out of his way so he can press his hands flush against me. “You know what else is nice?”

I shake my head no because I don't trust myself enough to speak. I'm afraid I'll say something inappropriate like asking him to run those magical fingers even lower and play with me like he did yesterday. Or to say to hell with the rules we made about no sex. Or tell him I want another orgasm that only he can give me. I tried to mimic the feelings in the shower this morning but just couldn't do it the way he did it so I gave up even trying.

“How soft you are under my fingertips, how sweet you taste, how you respond to me like it's something you just can't help.”

His hands are massaging my ass which in turn causes me to rise and fall on top of him, his jeans rubbing against me in the most delicious way that has my cheeks burning with the knowledge I'm getting off on this.

He nuzzles into my neck more as he yanks me even closer and a gasp is pulled from me, my head falling back so he has better access. His mouth takes full advantage of the space I've given him and runs up and down the column of my throat and down to tease the sensitive skin over my collarbone. And down even further.

I wasn't aware the panels of my robe came loose until his mouth lands on one of my bare breasts and quickly runs down to my peaked nipple. His lips play over it until he engulfs it and presses it up against the roof of his mouth giving it a gentle squeeze orally. My hands jerk up to hold him, cupping the back of his head and sinking my fingers in his short hair.

"Nic...", the sound comes out low and breathy as he starts to suck at my breasts. His hands haven't moved off my ass, still using it to bring me closer to him. Up and down. It's almost like I'm riding him.

"Fuck, baby, you feel good. So good. Like a little Christmas angel."

"Nic...I'm...oh, God! I'm..."

"Are you cumming for me, baby? Are you close? Do you need me to help you? Need me to hurry so you aren't in pain, so you don't ache?"

"Yes. God, Nic! Yes!"

I'm on my back so fast that by the time I catch my breath, he's spread my legs apart and his mouth is already on me. He's licking and lapping between my lips until he finally settles on my nub at the top causing me to cry out and stiffen under him.

"Too fast?"

"No, God no!" Too fast is not why I am grabbing for anything I can reach to stabilize myself. Too fast is not what has me crying out over and over again. My hand finally lands on his head again and this time I'm the one pulling him closer. "Keep...Keep going! Don't stop!"

"Never!" He says it without taking his mouth very far away so he can go back to licking and sucking. His tongue is both rough and soft and is driving me crazy. The liquid heat of his mouth is unbelievable and has me rising off the lounge to follow his mouth, my hips all but riding the warm, wetness as my orgasm builds higher and hotter with every swipe.

"Nic! Nic! Nic!" I rush towards the pinnacle, my body tightening and

everything feeling hot and swollen, heavy and ready to break. It's like my body is...ripening. Like the things he is doing are making it that way so... what? What is the reason I feel like this with him? Why does my body react the way I do?

Thoughts fly from my head as his tongue dips down and he presses it inside of me. In seconds my body goes from preparing to full-on climax as the muscles surrounding my entrance tighten around his invading tongue. My thighs squeeze together even though I try not to. I don't want to hurt him but at the same time, I have very little control over my body.

"Oh my God, Nic!" The waves and pulses that wash over my body leave me limp and drained even as Nic moves us so that I am once again sitting, straddling his lap.

"Now it's my turn, right?"

I give him a semi-sleepy look as I try to decode his words. Does he want me to give him a blowjob? It seems fair really.

But Nic has something else in mind. He reaches down between us, the knuckles on his hand brushing against my bare skin causing me to let out a small yelp. But he's not playing with me like I first thought. He's undoing his pants. His cock bounces out towards me, red and huge, like it's mad it was kept pinned the entire time he was eating me. My mind goes again to blow jobs and my mouth around the girth of his cock. I subconsciously lick my lips at the idea, wanting to wrap my lips around him.

"Can I take my turn, Talia?"

Is he asking me something other than what I think we are talking about? Something deeper than either of us wants to put words to right now?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nic

She nods for me, but I need more. “Tell me sweet thing. Tell me I can take my turn.”

Her brows lower in a cute vee, “Yes. You can take your turn. I want you to, um, feel the way I do when you make me feel good.”

She doesn’t understand what I’m asking, or what I need, but is still willing to give it to me. I take my cock in hand and run it back and forth through the passage of her wet, warm pussy causing her to gasp out loud. Her hands come to my shoulders again and I bring her body close to me so I can rub her against my cock, using her to masturbate with.

“Oh my God! You..you’re going to cause me to cum again, aren’t you?”

I smile before leaning forward and taking her lips with my own. “Move with me, baby. Rub that sweet pussy against me and help me stop the ache too.”

She follows along with my rhythm, rising and falling alongside me so the two of us are never away from one another, our bodies push in tight together. Son of a bitch, I’ve not felt anything as amazing as I have Talia. I’m close but don’t finish yet. Instead, I take her chin in between my fingers and make sure she’s aware enough that she can give me an honest yes or no.

“Talia...I want to cum inside of you.”

Her eyes go from being glazed over to clear and inquisitive.

“You...want to...will it hurt?”

“I’m not going all the way in, baby. Just like last time, I won’t go in very far and that’s why I have you like I do so you can help me control how far I go in. If it hurts, we stop. I take it out and put it somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?”

“On your body, baby. On your stomach, across your tits...” Just talking about this is stretching the endurance of my self-control.

“Oh.” She thinks about what I’m telling her. “You just want the tip of it inside.”

“Yes, baby. God, yes.” It would mean breaking her rule. Will she break it, for me?

“Does it hurt you?”

I look in her wintergreen eyes and give her the truth, “A little. Until I cum.”

“Then let’s do that. Let’s make you not hurt too.”

Once I have her permission, I work her clit with one hand as I very gently bring my dick to her tight entrance. The head starts to slip in and causes my balls to tighten even more painfully than before. I make sure to keep my thumb on her clit, wanting her to cum for me one more time too.

I should have kept my hand wrapped around my cock, but I want to touch her, to hold her even as she works her body up and down on me. Her breath catches at the feel of my broad tip pressing in on her. I can almost feel it spreading her apart for the first time, hugging up around just the little she’s been given.

A grunt falls from my lips as I teach her how to move her hips and try to stay focused at the same time. She sinks down a little more until almost the entire head is inside.

“Don’t...go any further, baby.”

“But I like feeling you stretch me.”

Oh God! I close my eyes to regain some strength but that just makes everything worse since all I can do is feel. Her breasts are right in front of my face when I lift my lids again and I can't stop myself from leaning forward and taking one in my mouth.

“Nic.” She breathes out my name as her hips jerk and the whole head goes inside of her warmth.

It feels like I've cum and keep cumming. Like I've been cumming for the past two minutes for fuck's sake. “Baby, you got to stop or...”

Her balance shifts and she comes down further until the tip of my dick is shoved right up against her barrier. My muscles tremble with the force of holding back. I need to pull back, to leave her warmth, but can't move for fear I'll just push myself inside of her. Sweat has broken out on my forehead, and I am struggling so hard to be a good man, to do what is right for her.

She lets out a low, soft moan before pushing herself even further down on me. “Talia.”

She cries out as I break through and continue to slip inside. Her muscles grip up around my cock causing more cum to spurt out of me and into her. I work on her clit with my thumb as I take her mouth with mine. She can't be this tight. It will hurt her.

“Put your feet...the tops of your feet on top of my thighs, baby.”

She does exactly as I tell her, shifting her weight more to her knees.

“I'm going to push you all the way down and then you're going to use your legs to rise off me again. Alright, baby? Do you understand, angel?”

She nods her head and I focus all my attention on working her clit until she is tense and rocking her hips unconsciously on my cock. I have her take a deep breath and thrust up. All of me sliding inside of her wetness until she's stretched all the way over me, her outer lips coming to rest on my pelvis. I

must be right up against the depth of her pussy, her cervix. The thought has more cum leaking from me. This time my mind focuses on how close my cock is to the opening of her womb. What would happen if...?"

Her body surprises me by seizing up and pulsing around me. I can tell by the look on her face that she's cumming for me again. The wild abandonment written across her face is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Her hands come to her lower belly where I am sure she can feel me.

"Oh shit! Shit, baby!"

"Nic!" She whines my name as her body just keeps spasming and convulsing around my thickness. "I...oh, can feel...you cum inside...Nic!" Her words end with a high scream as I rock back and forth inside of her before lifting her and sitting her back down on my cock again.

Her arms wrap around my shoulders holding on tight. I too wrap my arms around her but I use them to push her back down when she comes up so that both of us are moving, both helping each other find pleasure, paradise. I rest my hands on the back of her neck and marvel at how small Talia actually is. I can almost wrap one hand around her entire throat. We start really moving as both of us feel that coil of tension tighten down, growing ever tenser and tenser.

Until finally she drops her head back and cries out my name as her body shudders and pulses around my hard leaking cock. I follow behind her allowing myself to let go and truly fall - all in. With her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Talia

We've grown so close over the past couple of weeks, and I've been so happy that I almost forgot what was coming in January with all the drama and court. I spend my nights curled around Nic and my days playing with Noelle, planning the wedding, and talking with Anita and Kit. I never realized how distant I was from other people until I met these two women and have grown so close to them.

But life can't be blissful all the time and one day before my wedding day, my world collapses. The caseworker comes back and this time she doesn't ask to speak with me or Nic but just hands me papers. When I look down all I can see is the words 'take immediate custody of the child'.

I gasp and watch as she picks Noelle up and walks out the door, tears streaming down my face as I listen to the heart-wrenching sobs Noelle lets out. "No. N...nic."

Even though I say it out loud it comes out as nothing but a whisper. I don't have the air to say it any louder.

"Oh God! Nic! Nic!"

He comes and takes me in his arms, pulling the papers from my hands. I cling to him, grasping his shirt in my hand, squeezing it like my heart has been squeezed. "Nic? They...they just came and took her from me."

"Fuck this!" He turns me to his mother who takes me in her arms.

"They made her cry, Nic," I tell him even though it helps nothing.

“Watch her, mom. Don’t leave her side! I’ll be back.”

He takes my face in between his hands and looks right into my eyes, “I will bring her back, Talia! I will get our baby back. I promise.”

And then he’s gone, walking from the room with his phone already in his hand. “Judge...I’m gonna need that favor...”

“I can’t...”

“He’ll bring her back, Talia. He’ll bring her back to us.”

The noise and shouting has Chris walking in wondering what is up.

“Mother, Talia, what’s wrong?”

“They took her.” I know it’s something I’ve already said but it’s all I can think about, all that is going through my head.

“They came and took Noelle, Chris. They just took her.”

“Where’s Nic?” His eyes cloud over, and he looks like he’s about to run from the room to try to find his brother.

His mother answers, “He left to get her back.”

“He’ll need help. And I have a good idea who he’s going to see. Tell Kit I’ve gone to help Nic. Hopefully I can catch him before he leaves.”

“Leaves?” Nic is leaving?

Nic. Noelle. I have nothing once again. Everything I worked so hard for... gone. Kit comes in and Anita catches her up on what happened and the two women try to comfort me but can’t. Tears streak down my cheeks and my body feels hollow and empty. I didn’t have Noelle but she is like a part of me, like my heart walking around outside my body...and someone just came and took her from me. They took my heart with them.

I’m not sure how long it is or how long I sit sobbing my heart out before

the two women let me cry myself to sleep. My last thought is of Noelle and all I've lost. Commotion has me waking and sitting up to find out what more can happen today. Darkness has fallen outside and it's started to snow again.

And then in walks Nic...with Noelle. I think I might be dreaming at first. I want it so badly. I stand on wobbly legs before I take off running for the two of them. It wasn't just Noelle I was mourning but Nic as well. Would I lose him if I didn't have Noelle and no reason to get married? My heart just couldn't take both losses at once.

I run to him and he wraps his arm around me, bringing me and Noelle in close to him. I run my hand over her sweet little face and bury my nose in her soft belly as I hold on tight to my baby.

"You brought her back! You brought her back, Nic. Thank you! Thank you! I love you so much!"

I start kissing him and thanking him over and over again. Until I drop the 'L' word. Then he pulls back from me and stares into my eyes. "Do you mean that or are you saying it because I brought Noelle back?"

I look into his bright blue eyes, "I mean it. I love you. Because you brought her back...to us. Because you love her too. Because you are her daddy and I am her mom. Because you take care of both of us. I love you because...I've fallen in love with who you are."

His mouth quirks up in a grin that lights his whole face. "And because I love you."

I gasp out as he kisses me deep and sweet. His mom comes up and takes Noelle so she and Kit can hug her too. His arms hold me close as we pour all our love for one another into the kiss we share.

"I love you too, Talia, which is why we have to be married tonight."

"What?" I don't understand.

"The judge is here to marry us so we have a mom and a dad to present to

the officials when we go back after we adopt our baby. Which will happen when he comes back out on Christmas Day.”

“What?” I look past Nic for the first time and spot his brother standing behind him with a man I’ve never met before. Beside him is a tiny woman who smiles with her whole face. She gives me a little wave and wraps her hand around the Judge’s.

“We have to be married before we can adopt Noelle. I’ve pulled some strings so the process is being fast-tracked but we have to marry tonight, baby.”

“I...”

“I realize you want a Christmas Eve wedding,” I shake my head to show him I don’t need a specific day to marry him but he keeps going, “and we’ll renew the vows tomorrow afternoon if you want but we need to do it tonight just in case she comes back tomorrow during the day.”

“I’ll marry you. I don’t care when it is. Or when it has to be. I’ll marry you right now if you want to.”

He checks his watch, “Technically it will be Christmas Eve in three hours.” He looks over at Anita. “Mom, can we have everything ready by midnight?”

“Sweetheart, I’d sew her a damned dress by midnight if it meant keeping them from taking Noelle, but you’re in luck. We will definitely be ready to go right after midnight.”

And I am whisked away so Kit and Anita can help me get ready for my wedding day...night. Almost fourteen hours before we had planned it. I walk down the aisle with Kit being my bride’s maid and Anita walking me down the aisle to her son. Little Noelle holds the rings on a gold braided rope around her waist, just far enough so she can’t put them in her mouth.

And instead of my fairy tale being over, instead of my story being finished...it has just begun. My life with the man I love and the baby that drew us together and holds all our hearts in her tiny hands is just getting

started. My forever starts with two words spoken in the earliest hour of Christmas Eve..."I do."

Epilogue I

Christmas Day

Bic

Everyone sits around the tree in the living room with smiles on their faces and cheer in their hearts. The judge came back early this morning and signed the adoption papers making us the official mom and dad of little Noelle. Nobody is fighting us on it either, since Child Services is now minus one caseworker who should not have made things personal.

Turns out Ms. Stenson was taking huge kickbacks from adoptive parents to make sure they got the children they were looking for, no questions asked. Not only is her job gone, but so is her freedom if the accountant I sicced on her has anything to say about it.

And everyone over the agency just wants the scandal to go away which works out well for me and Talia. I look over and see my wife sitting in a pile of ripped wrapping paper playing with Noelle and my mom.

“You did pretty good for yourself, brother.”

Chris slaps me on the back and comes to sit beside me. I was absolutely shocked when he got in the car with me and told me he was going to help me no matter what I said. His support in that really awful time has brought us together in a way I don't think would have happened without it.

“You didn't do bad either, little brother. Kit fits in very nicely with the family. And she's great with Noelle.”

“Good. I wanted her to have some practice before...”

I turn and stare at my baby brother. Is he...are they...? He nods with a secret little grin on his face that has me grinning in answer. If everything works out right, Kit won't be the only one growing rounder this coming year. Which reminds me of the box in my pocket.

I go over to Talia and pull her out of the paper and away from the women so I can step to the window with her and have a little bit of privacy. She's wearing the bracelet I gave her as a wedding present right before she walked down the aisle to me. The diamonds and light emeralds are the very image of wintergreen and match her eyes perfectly. She has a matching necklace and earrings too, but she left those in the room because of Noelle's penchant for pulling on shiny things.

"What's going on?" She turns happy eyes that sparkle like the gems in her bracelet up to me.

"I have another gift for you." She gives me a look of amused incredulousness since I've been giving her gifts since Thanksgiving night. I can't help it. I love to spoil my little angel.

"You've already given me so much and all I need is you and Noelle. Those are the two best gifts I could ever receive."

"I know but I saw this and wanted it for you." The words have a double meaning for sure.

She takes the box from my hand and opens it. Lying inside on the velvet is a heart-shaped necklace that has a little stone hanging from it. A little stone that is the same color as Noelle's birthstone. Hanging beside it are more bales - the little metal circles that hold the stones on the chain.

"It's a mother's necklace with places to put all the children's birthstones on it."

Her hands shake as she takes it from the box and touches the empty circles hanging from it.

"There's room for more."

She gasps and looks up at me, “How did you...how did you know I want more?”

There is so much love in her eyes that I can only tell her the truth.
“Because I want that too.”

She throws her arms around me and our lips connect in a kiss that holds so much promise I can tell, for us, every day will hold the magic of Christmas no matter what time of year it is. As long as I have my little Christmas angel by my side and my Noelle close by.

She gives me a wicked little grin before leaning in close, "Why don't you take me upstairs and tell me more about the necklace and all the spaces it seems to have hanging from it, Santa?"

How can I tell my angel no when she's asked Santa so sweetly?

Epilogue II

Two Months Later - Valentine's Day

Talia

I bustle around and try to keep the nausea at bay. This is not my moment, and I won't take the attention away from Kit for one second. I fluff the white tulle on her dress and give her a big smile.

“You're gonna vomit, aren't you?”

I look up into her eyes with surprise, “How can you tell?”

“I'm three and a half months pregnant, Talia. I know vomiting.” I stand and give her a big hug.

“I'm fine, sweetheart. I just caught a bug or something.”

She gives me a sly grin, “Are you sure you didn't catch what I have?” She pats her still-flat stomach.

“I...,” I'm not sure. I can't tell her one way or another because I'm not certain.

I think back over when my last period came and can't think past Thanksgiving. The color leeches out of my face as her smile grows bigger and bigger.

“Oh my God! You are, aren't you?!” She hops up and down and throws her arms around me.

“I don't know for sure, Kit.”

“What don’t you know for sure, Talia?” Anita comes up behind us causing us to spring apart and look guilty as hell.

“I...”

I look over to Kit but she’s staying tight-lipped letting me know this is my secret to share or not to share, whichever I decide.

“I think...I don’t feel good.”

“Oh no! What do you think is wrong?” She lays the back of her hand on my forehead to check for fever. “Listen, don’t let this wait. We need to get you to a doctor so you and the baby can be all good.”

“What?” I reach for her hand before she can take it completely away as the word comes out shrill and thin.

“Darlin’ I’ve had two babies, I’ve watched tons of other women have babies and I love those pregnancy reveal TikToks. I know when a woman is pregnant. And you have all the signs.”

“I do?” I sit down heavily in a nearby chair and look to my mother-in-law. Over the last few months, she has become so much more of a mother to me but even better, a friend. A dear friend.

She nods, “You do. Getting sick morning, noon, and night. Not wanting to even look at certain foods. Not to mention you can’t look at Noelle without bursting into tears and telling me how the time is flying.”

“And you were telling me how you thought your boobs have gotten bigger since we had the first fitting of your bride’s maids’ gown.”

I look from Anita to Kit. “You...you really think we’re...?”

A knock on the door stops me from asking the full question.

“I’ll get it.” Anita goes to the door as Kit nods her head up and down to answer my half-asked question.

"Yes, we do."

"Talia, Nic wants to see you." She gives me a quick hug. "I didn't tell him a thing. This is for you and him, not you, him, and me."

I give her a big hug back and step outside where Nic is waiting on me. In his hand is a plate of my favorite kind of chocolate drizzled in caramel alongside various fruits and in his other hand is a bunch of flowers -my favorites. "What is all this?"

"I wanted to make sure you ate today, angel."

I can't help but laugh. "So you decided to bring me dessert? It's perfect. Just let me tell the girls I'm taking a quick break."

He waits for me and when I come out, he leads me to a small window seat like the one we sat in that December to watch the snow fall.

"You really are too sweet."

"I have to make sure my girl is taken care of."

The smile on my face melts a little as I think about what I was talking about before he came. "Nic...um, I..."

Should I wait? Should I make sure first? Should I just get it over with? This is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

"Kit thinks we might be...pregnant?"

I whisper the last word like it's a big secret. I want him to be a part of every second of this. And that means sharing with him now - even if we aren't.

A hurt look comes across his face, "Did you take a test?"

"No! Not yet! Not without you."

His smile is everything. He takes my hand and holds it in his. “I think... she might be right.”

“What?” Was I the last one to find out?

He leans forward and whispers like I did to him, “I think she’s right.”

“How? Why?”

He chuckles and pulls me up so he can walk me to a small library near the window seat. We go in and he locks the door behind us causing my brows to go up.

“You taste different, lover.”

“I...” At first, I don’t understand what he is saying but then it dawns on me and my cheeks flare red. “Oh God! Do I really? Bad different?”

“Absolutely not bad. But definitely different. But...I think just to be sure... I should take another taste. Just to be sure.”

I like Nic’s way of testing for babies a lot better than peeing on the stick - even if the stick did tell us for sure that we were expecting once I took it after the wedding. Nic’s way is just more fun. Even if it did make me a few minutes late to the bride’s maid line up and my hair was a little more tousled than before.

The End!

* * *



Thank you so much for reading! If you enjoyed the story and want more, stay tuned for *Countdown*. In the meantime, if you still need a Christmas fix, go check out [Saving Christmas!](#) today! Also, for those who might want to know more about Mandy from *Bringing Ember Home*, make sure you are signed up for my email. Subscribers will be getting her story exclusively.

Christmas Hoffman has the unfortunate luck of having a birthday just days before Christmas, a mother who thinks the perfect present is a hot man to spend the night with, and the man she has been crushing on for years having to come stay with her because not only was she involved in a shooting but now she's on some drug dealer's hit list. And all she can do is hope that next year is going to go better for her than this one...if she even makes it to next year. One thing is for sure, she won't ever be the same after this Christmas.

Heath Phoenix has one Christmas wish this year, and that's to get under his sister's best friend's tree. He's been waiting for Christmas longer than anyone and now that she's old enough to finally be his he's not about to let some criminal keep him from claiming her. He'll just have to perform a miracle and not only save Christmas but make her fall in love with him too.

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Saving Christmas

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