



# TAMING MISTLETOE

JANUARY RAYNE

A romantic scene of a man and a woman kissing. The man is wearing a dark beanie and a blue jacket, leaning towards the woman. The woman is wearing a white knit hat and a brown jacket, with her arms wrapped around the man. They are in a snowy, winter setting with falling snow and a soft, purple-toned background. The scene is framed by a dark purple border with white snowflake patterns.

# TAMING MISTLETOE

JANUARY RAYNE



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**This book is in the Mistletoe Creek Anthology world, not Shallow Cove.**

**This story is a contemporary retelling of The Lion King.**

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## Chapter

ALSO BY  
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# Dedication



To Santa, now that I'm older, I understand why I love sitting on laps so much. I blame you, but Merry Christmas, anyway.

Are you the beginning of my trauma? I'm curious.



# Prologue



ONCE UPON A TIME, long ago, in a land far away... Well, actually it wasn't that far away, although Mistletoe Creek, Tennessee, often seems more off the beaten path where it lies nestled against the Smoky Mountain foothills. And it really wasn't so long ago.

A few short months ago, the following conversation was overheard between Fern Myers, Fawn Carter, and Merry Andrews during their monthly meeting. When later asked, all three women would deny the conversation ever occurred.

"It's your deal, Fern," Merry says as she glances at the window when a colorful leaf drifts off the oak tree just outside.

Fern scoffs and stretches her fingers before picking the well-worn deck up off the shiny table.

"I *always* deal, Merry."

"More like always cheat," Fawn mumbles.

“Excuse me?” Fern adjusts her bifocals on the edge of her nose.

“I find it highly suspect that every time you deal, you also seem to win.”

“If you want to deal...

“I don’t. But I do want you to play fair.”

“Play fair? Just because I’m lucky doesn’t mean I don’t—”

“Ladies!” Merry jumps in before their argument can escalate.

It wouldn’t be the first time a confrontation between the two of them had been stopped before it went beyond just words.

“I really don’t feel like getting kicked out of here again by Mayor Anderson. We just got invited back. And personally, I didn’t care for power walking all summer in the heat.”

While the mansion of the original founder of Mistletoe Creek had been turned into a combination of public gathering spaces and city offices, the last time they’d flipped the table during a card game, Mayor Anderson had been left with no other option— he had banned all three septuagenarians for the entire summer.

“I did offer for us to play dice instead,” Fawn says.

“We could always actually learn bridge instead of just telling everyone that’s what we play,” Merry adds.

“We’ve been playing Texas Hold ’Em for thirty years. Dice is for when I babysit my grandkids. And if we told everyone

we were playing poker instead of bridge, we'd have the entire town trying to join in our games." Fern levels a look at both of the other women until they nod.

The room is silent except for the crackle of cards as they swoosh across the table along with sighs and murmurs as each woman considers her cards.

"It's too quiet." Merry drops her cards face down.

"What do you mean?" Fern asks.

"It's been ages since we've had a wedding. Or any good gossip."

"We just went to Dawn and Jack Phillips's wedding two weekends ago. Raise ten." Fawn tosses a blue chip onto the small pile and the other two follow suit.

"It was a beautiful wedding," Merry sighs, a dreamy smile playing on her lips. "Even if Fawn fell asleep during the ceremony."

"You take that back, Merry Andrews! Or I'll tell Dawn that you didn't like the light pink of her wedding dress," Fawn fires back.

Merry's eyes narrow across the table. "You wouldn't."

Fawn crosses her arms. "Try me."

"Fine. You win. I take it back." Merry's voice is nothing more than a mumble.

Fern sighs and glances between the two of them.

“I can’t believe Dawn is all grown-up and married now,” Fern says, trying to redirect the conversation. “I still remember when I used to babysit her.”

“Such a good girl.”

“I’m just glad that she and Jack finally found each other.” Merry checks her bet and turns to Fawn.

“They wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for us,” Fawn reminds the other two.

Both other women nod in agreement.

“I thought that was never going to happen no matter how many times we kept signing Dawn up to volunteer with Jack at Parks and Wildlife.” Merry rolls her eyes.

Fawn shrugs. “They finally stopped fighting it.”

“It was a beautiful wedding,” Fern says.

“I already said that.” Merry stares at Fawn.

“Who cares? It’s still true.”

“We need more weddings.” Fawn checks her bet and Fern deals the last card.

“No one is close to dating, let alone marriage.” Fern studies her cards in her hands before lifting her shrewd gaze to the five cards on the table.

“Neither were Dawn and Jack last year and look at them now. On their honeymoon.” Merry clasps her hands together and the cards in her hand crinkle.

It wouldn't be the first deck to be lost to their lack of attention. And it definitely wouldn't be the last.

“So what are we going to do about it?” Fawn asks.

“Same thing we always do,” Fern responds. “Let's see, there's Pierce and Hudson. Either of whom would be a catch.”

“Don't forget Robyn or Elle. But not for either of those boys.” Fawn taps her lip as she adds to the list.

“No, all four of them are ready for something special. Something spectacular. It's...” Fern's voice fades as her attention shifts back to her cards.

“It's matchmaking time,” Merry says and gasps when Fawn pushes in all her chips.

“All in, ladies. Who's next?”

# Chapter One



**NINA**

The funny thing about a memory is every time you remember it, something about it changes. It can be a small detail, something you wouldn't even notice. Eventually, what you remember wouldn't be what actually happened at all. Better yet, the memory will leave you wondering if that moment even happened at all.

It's how I feel right now, holding an old, wrinkled picture in my hand proving a certain moment did happen, but the man in the photo? I don't know him anymore. I don't want to know him.

*Don't lie, Nina.*

A voice in the back of my head whispers, damning me with the truth. The longer I stare at the photo of us as kids, the more my eyes burn. Simon St. Claire was my childhood best friend,

the boy who had my heart from day one, and the person I counted on for everything.

Until one day, he proved that I shouldn't.

“Hey, Nina!” Chris shouts as he jumps out of the truck carrying the town's Christmas tree.

Christmas is a huge celebration in Mistletoe Creek. The town turns magical. Big red ribbons alternate between wreaths with ornaments on every other lamp post. The Christmas festival will be happening soon, then the gingerbread house decorating contest, and the one thing I dread most—the masquerade ball.

I dread it because Fern, Fawn, and Merry are always trying to set me up with someone. Every year, I try to get out of it.

And every year they guilt me saying, “This could be our last Christmas, you know. We could die.” They are cunning ladies with tricks up their sleeves and will probably outlive me.

“Hey, Chris. How are you?” I tuck the photo in my jacket pocket.

His breaths are frozen as he walks over to me, his boots crunching against the snow accumulating on the ground.

It's my favorite part about Christmas. I love the snow. It's beautiful as it falls, serene, and brings peace. It's also quiet, but if you listen closely enough, you can hear the soft static of it falling to the ground.

“Ready to get this tree up. I swear, it gets bigger every year.”

I look at the long trailer he is pulling, my eyes roaming the giant evergreen. The branches are hugged tight by rope, but I can tell they are full and will spread out beautifully.

“I think you might be right.”

“Are you sticking around like everyone else to see us put it up?”

I roll my eyes and smile. “I do every year, Chris.”

“I wasn’t sure. I know the Pride Sanctuary takes a lot of your time.”

My smile falters, reality crashing down on my shoulders along with the familiar anger and hatred I have felt towards Simon for years.

“The lions are in good hands. They will be fine without me.” The sanctuary is the only safe haven for lions in Tennessee, but I’m not sure how much longer we can stay open if Simon doesn’t return.

Pride Sanctuary was opened by Simon’s dad. He had the biggest love for large cats and wanted a safe place for all the abused lions from zoos or circuses. We also have a rehabilitation and breeding program to increase the numbers of not only lions but tigers too.

The St. Claire family is one of the wealthiest families in Tennessee. The old kind of money that goes back generations. Simon’s dad, Donner, never acted better than anyone, regardless of his status. He treated everyone the same and gave everyone kindness but loved animals way more than people.



I can relate to that.

When he built the sanctuary, he kept in mind how cold it would get, and made temperature-regulated buildings for the cats. Keeping the safe haven open is expensive though. Electricity for those buildings is not cheap. Food for the animals isn't cheap and we don't get donations like we should. We used to keep the sanctuary running with St. Claire's money, but with the wealth frozen in the bank due to Donner's death, we are barely keeping afloat.

And Simon left right after the funeral. He said nothing to no one. He was just gone the next day. I expected a note to explain leaving me, us, and the sanctuary behind, but I never got one.

No one in this town received any kind of explanation.

Then, I told myself he'd call, he'd write, he'd do something. He wouldn't just forget about me, yet he did.

Ten years later, the only thing I have from Simon is a broken heart and unanswered questions.

With Simon gone, money low, and his Uncle Dash banging on our door to buy the property, I'm starting to think I don't have another choice but to let Dash have it.

No one in town knows about the issues with the sanctuary. Me and the few other workers have decided to keep it between us. So far, the plan has worked, but it's only a matter of time before Dash runs his mouth. He's a grimy man who stops at nothing to get what he wants.

“Everything okay?” Chris asks, slipping on his gloves to begin unloading the tree.

I blink a few times to bring myself back to reality, tucking my hands in my jacket pockets only to feel the edge of the picture. “I’m fine. Sorry.” I shake my head, smiling. “Gosh, it’s getting cold.” I change the subject. The last thing I want to do is be honest. “Look, seems everyone else is coming too.”

“Well, this starts the season. Am I right?” He grins, flashing an award-winning smile that would have any girl falling at his feet.

And yet, the only man I can ever think about is Simon.

I’m pathetic.

“Definitely. Be careful. Don’t get... splinters,” I say lamely, wishing I could slink away to the nearest corner.

He tosses his head back and laughs, the frozen air leaving his mouth in white clouds. “I won’t. Thank you for the worry.”

I give a small smile just as he unties the rope binding the tree. I tilt my head back, rocking on my feet. The snow falls, placing cold kisses on my cheeks. Taking a deep breath, I try to relax, to let go of the past, but as the edge of the photo rubs against my thumb, I’m reminded that I can’t.

Christmas carolers begin to sing as they put up the tree in the middle of the square. Taking out the picture, I blink away tears, a new wave of mourning washing over me. I can’t help the small smile playing on my lips as I brush my index finger across a young Simon’s face. We were standing in the spot I’m

in right now and like every year growing up, we held a mistletoe over our heads, made a wish, and sealed it with a kiss on the cheek.

In the worn-out photograph that Donner took, Simon's dirty blonde hair curls under his beanie, and his golden-brown eyes are closed as he gives me a kiss. I'm grinning and blushing. I always blamed it on the cold weather bothering my skin, but that was never the case.

It was Simon.

It will always be Simon.

A tear drops onto the picture, and I wipe it away, wondering where he is. We need a Christmas miracle to save the sanctuary. We need him. We need the heir to the St. Claire fortune to come home to save the lions.

*To save us.*

For the hell of it, I pull a mistletoe out from my pocket and hang it over my head, wishing I'd find him, and he'd come home.

There's no kiss on the cheek to seal the wish. There's only snow.

Even with all the love I have for him, I hate Simon St. Claire just the same.

# Chapter Two



## **SIMON**

*Mistletoe Creek Tree Arrives, Jumpstarting Holiday Cheer.*

I don't know why I continue to torture myself after all these years, but here I am, still receiving the town paper because I need to know that my home is okay. I didn't leave because I hated it. I left out of fear, guilt, and shame. It's my fault my father died. If I had been at the sanctuary like I had promised instead of being in town with my Uncle Dash, then my father would still be alive.

But I got into a fight with Dash which ended up turning into a pub brawl. When the fighting was over and I was in handcuffs, Dash was gone, and the one phone call I made was to my father to come bail me out of jail. He never complained. He never lectured me.

The last thing I heard from him was, "I love you, son. We all make mistakes. It's okay. I'll be there soon."

Only he never arrived at the police station. He got into a car accident. That winter was a brutal one. The snow was falling hard. The ice was slicking the roads. The conditions were hazardous. If I had been less selfish, if I had been a better son, I wouldn't have called him to come get me.

His brakes gave out and his car slid downhill causing him to get into a head-on collision with a semi-truck. My dad died on impact. He didn't experience any pain which I'm thankful for. I didn't deserve to stay in Mistletoe Creek and take over Pride Sanctuary. The lions were my dad's pride and joy. They were better off without me and so was the entire town.

So was Nina.

My feet land on the floor from my desk, my boots hitting with a solid loud thud so I can lean over the newspaper to get a better look at the woman in the corner of the picture.

Nina.

She's fucking beautiful. All these years have gone by and there hasn't been a day where she hasn't crossed my mind. I fucked up leaving her like I did. I didn't say a word. I didn't write a note. I haven't even called. She deserved so much better, especially since she's the only woman I've ever loved. Even when we were kids, playing tag, riding bikes, catching snowflakes, I knew then I'd spend my life with her.

Yet here I am, hiding away in another small town, working as a mechanic because I'm too much of a fucking coward to go home.

I think about going home all the time.

Not to Mistletoe Creek. Not to the Pride Sanctuary.

But to Nina.

She is my home. She was the only person that made that small town worthwhile. I hated Christmas Cheer. I hated that everywhere I turned, there was something else to get everyone in the damn holiday spirit. It happened all year, but then Nina would hang the mistletoe over my head, taming the grouch inside me, then kiss me on the cheek.

The constant Christmas spirit wasn't so bad with Nina around.

My heart tugs, trying to persuade me to go home, to grovel at Nina's feet, to beg for her forgiveness, to accept my family fortune, and to breathe life back into my soul.

"Hey, the blue truck ready? Customer is here," Tim, another employee, and my best friend, at the garage asks.

I toss him the keys, never looking away from the newspaper to memorize all the changes in Nina's face. She's so fucking beautiful, prettier than any Christmas Mistletoe Creek could ever celebrate.

"Oh." He knocks on the wall before heading out. "There's a guy here wanting to talk to you. Says he's your uncle."

My entire body clenches, my teeth tightening together as I try to calm my rage.

How the fuck did he find me? I'm in the middle of nowhere. It's too early for this shit.

I fold the newspaper in half and stand, tucking it in my back pocket. There's no way in hell I'm going to let him see how much I miss home. He's another reason I don't want to go back. Growing up I wanted to be just like Uncle Dash. He has this charming quality about him that everyone falls for. When I was a kid, I didn't see it.

After my dad died, I saw him for the snake he was.

My boots slam against the floor with every fast step I take to get out the door.

"Woah, hey, what's going on?" Tim asks as I shove him to the side.

I barely hear him. I push the door open so hard, it hits the wall, and the glass cracks across the front panel.

There he is. Uncle Dash, leaning against his brand new shiny, black truck that has St. Claire's Construction written across the side. He straightens up when he sees me coming.

I don't stop. I charge at him, kicking up dust under my steel-toe boots. "I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing here, and I don't know how you found me." I shove him in his chest, and he grunts. "But you can get the fuck out of here and never look back. I don't want to see you again." Uncle Dash didn't come to Dad's funeral, his own damn brother, but you better believe he got an attorney to try and get Dad's money that he left to me.

I haven't touched it though, so according to the will, the account is frozen until I claim it.

Getting into that fight at the bar was my doing, but if Uncle Dash hadn't started in, if he hadn't provoked me, where would I be? Sometimes, I think he planned the entire thing. It's a paranoid theory, but he left me there. He was gone when I got arrested. I had no triggers, but one.

Nina.

And when he started bad-mouthing her, calling her names, I fucking lost my temper on him. I have never wanted someone's bones as Christmas decorations so badly before. He made me lose all control.

Just like he is now.

With that in mind, I take a deep breath and step back. I won't let him win again.

“Good to see you, Simon.” He brushes off the non-existent dirt on his shirt. “I see you're still battling that little temper of yours, aren't you?” He smirks causing the scar down his eye to stretch and move as if it's alive.

“I'm not giving you the time of day. Get in your truck—“ I gesture to the road. ”—And follow the pavement until you roll off it for all I care.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, Simon,” he chastises me, pushing off the truck again.

His shadow no longer swallows me since I'm an adult, but his attempt to make me feel small is obvious. He straightens,



widens his chest, and gets so close that our chests nearly touch. I don't back down. I keep eye contact, doing my best not to focus on his scar.

“You've only seen the beginning of me. I'm here to offer you the deal of a lifetime, son.”

My jaw flexes at the fake endearment. “I am *not* your son.”

He chuckles, staring off to the right, and nods his chin to the audience we have acquired. Lowering his voice he states, “Your time as the St. Claire heir is over.” He pushes a piece of paper into my chest. “I think someone forgot to read their father's will. You have one week, Simon. I know you'll make the right choice.” He sighs, then shakes his head. “Read the will, then read my offer.”

“I don't want anything you're offering.”

“You will when you read your dad's will.” A violent, greedy gleam takes over his brown eyes. “What would happen to Nina if you don't do as I say?”

“You won't touch her,” I roar, a deep rough growl from within my chest. Launching myself at my uncle, arms wrap around me before I can reach him.

“Don't,” Tim warns. “He isn't worth it, Simon.”

“I'm worth more than you two and this entire damn dump put together.” He walks around his truck and opens the door. “One week, Simon.”

The truck grumbles to life, spewing black smoke from the exhaust as the tires spin out of the parking lot.

“Who the hell was that asshole?” Tim asks.

“My uncle.”

He lets out a long whistle of pity or disbelief. I’m not sure. “Damn, I’m sorry, man. That’s an unlucky break. What did he want?”

Timothy and his brother Peter are the two people I have in my life in this town. We all work at the garage and while they know about my past, they don’t know all of it. I owe them my life. When I came to this town, I was broken. Tim and Peter saved my ass from going down a very dark road.

I lift the paper in the air. “Dad’s will. He’s been trying to get what my old man left me for years now.”

“Ah.” He nods, placing his hands on his hips. “Hey, Pete!”

“Yeah?” The big guy shouts from the garage.

“Come here. Simon needs us.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t need you. I’m fine.” I playfully bump Tim’s shoulder as I head to the office to get out of the cool evening.

“Bullshit. You know you need us.” Pete wanders in from the garage, his voice echoing in the tight space. “You worry too much without us.” He leans his plump body against the counter, his meaty yet strong arms cross over his chest. “What’s the scoop?”

“His uncle was just here.”

“The guy with the... you know...” Peter points to his face. “The scar,” he mouths in a low whisper.

Tim nods quickly. “Yep, that one. The one he talks about all the time but doesn’t want to talk about all the time.”

“Oh, I don’t like that guy. He’s not very nice.”

I rub my temples as they continue to bicker. “I can hear you.”

“Sorry,” Pete grumbles.

“We know,” Tim says with an uncaring flair, waving his hand around. “So, what are we going to do?”

“We? No, We. I. Me. Just me. I don’t want you guys getting mixed up in my family drama and there is a lot of it.”

“We’re family,” Tim states.

“Yeah. We’re family.” Peter puffs his chest, agreeing with his brother.

“I have a lot of baggage, guys. If I face this, it could get messy.”

“Messy is my favorite.”

“This isn’t food, Peter. This is real life.” Tim smacks his brother lightly on the chest.

“Messy life means there are solutions. Solutions to problems. Resolutions to issues but I hope food will be part of this equation. Messy food, though.”

I chuckle, unfolding the letters my Uncle Dash gave me.

“You aren’t alone, Simon. Stop thinking you are,” Tim says, placing his arms on the table. “So, catch us up. Tell us everything.”

“Well, you know how I said I ran away from— well— everything because my dad died?”

Both of them nod.

“You blame yourself for that,” Tim replies from a conversation we had years ago.

Slowly, I give a slight nod. “That isn’t everything.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m the heir to billions of dollars and to my dad’s legacy, the Pride Sanctuary. A safe haven for lions. He left it all to me, but my Uncle Dash wants it all for himself. He’s threatening Nina.”

“Who is Nina?” Peter asks.

“The girl I grew up with. The only woman I’ve ever loved.”

“What girl? There’s a girl? You love her? Woah, woah, woah. Let’s think about this for a second.” Tim rubs his temples and begins to pace.

I watch him go back and forth, sighing at his theatrics. Peter’s head visibly turns left and right watching his brother think himself to death.

Tired of waiting for him to get his thoughts together, I open the letter from my Uncle Dash, rolling my eyes when I see him offering me two million to give up the rights to the sanctuary and the account my inheritance is on.

I'd rather that money stay frozen forever than give him anything. Over my dead body will he get anything from me.

But he brought Nina into the mix and even though I haven't talked to her in years, I think about her every day. I miss her. There hasn't been another woman in my life. There never will be, but if I have to go home to protect her from my uncle, I will.

"Nina is the girl you love. Why haven't we heard about her?" Tim asks, finally pulling himself free from his thoughts.

I open the will Dash gave me and look up to meet Tim's eyes. "You didn't ask. Besides, she is no one's business but mine."

Peter puckers his lips and raises his brows. "Sounds serious."

"It isn't serious. If it were serious, he'd be with her. He obviously loves us more, right?" Tim leans his elbow on the counter and gives his best side smirk as if he knows the answers to everything.

"I love you guys, but I won't love anybody or anything more than Nina."

"Ouch." Tim hits his chest with his hand. "The pain. The anguish."

"The hurt," Peter adds to his brother's theatrics.

I roll my eyes. "You two are family, but she's... she's more."

Tim sighs.

I know that sound. He isn't happy and it isn't because of Nina but because for the first time in years, I'm considering going home. I haven't said it, but I don't need to. He knows me better by now.

I open the will, reading the typical things I already know.

The sanctuary is mine, the wealth is mine once I sign the documents, Dad's house, car, everything is mine. My eyes roam over and over the document, wondering what the hell Dash is going on about. I've read this will a hundred times and there's no— wait.

My eyes stumble over the fine print at the bottom of the page, something I've never noticed before, and I can't help but wonder if this is the original or if Dash tampered with it. That kind of behavior wouldn't surprise me.

My heart thumps heavily in my chest and sweat begins to build on my forehead when I reread the sentence.

“Account and Pride Sanctuary must be claimed within ten years of death or inheritance will fall to the next of kin...”

“No, no, no.” I reread it over and over again, making sure this isn't a dream. I couldn't have missed this. That isn't like me. I don't miss details.

“What?” Tim questions, becoming serious.

Pete is behind him, peering over his shoulder. Both men are gravitating closer to the counter until they are leaning so far, their shadows cast on the paper I'm reading.

I jump from the chair and slam my hand so hard on the desk, that the part connecting to the wall breaks off.

“Hey, woah. Simon, calm down. Talk to me.”

I run my fingers through my hair, pure panic imprisoning my soul. “I fucked up. I fucked everything up.”

Tim comes around the desk and grabs me by the arms. “What did you fuck up and how can we fix it?”

“We can’t.” I stare up at the ceiling, breathing in and out, fighting the urge to kill my uncle. “It’s too late. I’ve ruined everything. That town won’t forgive me.” I slump in the seat, rubbing a hand over my face. “Not that they would now.”

Tim snatches the will from the counter and reads it. Mumbling here and there, “To you— and if— money— next of kin— billions—“ His eyes round, like I didn’t tell him that 20 minutes ago. “Billions? Billions? You’re a billionaire and you’re working with us at this dump of a garage? You have got to be kidding me.”

“It isn’t my money. It’s my father’s. I don’t deserve it.”

“Yes, you do. And this means nothing. So you have ten years to claim your fortune, what’s the problem?” He hands me the paper back and for some reason, the thin sheet feels heavier than anything I’ve ever carried.

“My father’s ten-year anniversary is next week. It’s already been ten years.”

“Which means...”

“...Which means if I don’t go home and sign the documents needed, my uncle will get everything. The sanctuary will be his and knowing him, he’ll find a way to make those lions trophies to put in his home. Who knows what he’d do to the town? He’d probably ruin it.”

“You didn’t like it anyway, right?” Peter chimes in.

“I might not like the Christmas cheer shit all day long, but those people mean everything to me. Do not mistake that, Peter,” I shout at him.

“Then why are we here? Why can’t we go to Mistletoe Creek? What’s the hold-up?” Tim asks, protecting his brother from my wrath.

I rub my temples just as the bell rings, signaling someone is waiting for service. “It isn’t that simple.”

He grabs my arm as I begin to walk away. “Owning the throne never is, Simon.”

I yank my arm free, furious at no one but myself. I have made this horrible circumstance. I’ve done this to myself. The anger can’t be blamed on anyone but me.

Opening the door, the cool air whips around me, the branches in the sky swaying like long skeletal arms.

“Sorry for the wait!” I shout, picking up the pace as the wind blows. The issue about my dad is fresh on my mind, but I push it away. I’m still here and I have a job to do. “Do you only need gas?” I ask the person who I can’t see.



The trunk is open, and they are rummaging around back there.

“No, no, I don’t know what happened, but I think my car is dead. It rolled into the parking lot. Can you take a look—“ she shuts the trunk of the car, and our eyes meet. ”—At it for me...” she trails off, running out of breath because she’s just as shocked as I am.

I’d recognize her anywhere.

“Your hair has gotten long.” The words are all I can manage to say with a rough, breathless disbelief.

But it’s the truth.

Her hair is beautiful. Always has been. It’s blonde, blonder than it used to be. The rest of the light brown color must have faded out. Either way, the color pairs perfectly with her light green eyes. She’s gorgeous.

Those same eyes I’ve always gotten lost in fill with tears. “I’m... I’m sorry, but I think you have the wrong person,” she says. “I’ll just be going.” She turns around and walks away, leaving her bags beside her broken-down car.

Her icy blonde hair shines in the sun, creating a facade of warmth in this cold weather.

Nina begins to walk faster, not even looking back at me. If she did, she’d see my eyes never leaving her.

Even if she is pretending she doesn’t know me.

# Chapter Three



**NINA**

I'm so damn angry at that handsome, no good, lying, bastard. Oh, the audacity! The audacity of him to tell me that my hair looks good. That's it? After all this time, is that all he has to say to me? He thinks that will be enough to get me to talk to him? After leaving me with so many questions? After abandoning... everything?

*Abandoning me.*

No, he doesn't deserve anything from me. He is going to have to work harder than that. All these years of wondering where he is, and he has only been two states away. What are the chances of me finding him when I didn't mean to? I knew I wanted to find him, but not right now. It was more of a fleeting thought because I didn't know how to look for Simon.

I'm only here because I had an interview at a zoo, to take care of the lions there, and of course, my car broke down an

hour on the way back home.

Of course, the man coming to check on me is none other than the man I've been missing for ten years. How is the universe so damn cruel?

"Nina! Nina! Stop. Just... just wait a minute."

I ignore him, walking faster, not wanting to give him a second of my time. I've thought about this moment since the day he left. What would I say? What would I do?

I never thought I'd do this. I never thought I'd act like I didn't know him, but I'm so angry. All the emotions I've held since he disappeared are welling up inside me, possessing my bones.

"Nina! Nina, goddamn it, will you stop!" He snags my arm, tugging me to him, and my back hits his chest. "Stop," he whispers against my ear, the tickle of his warm breath ghosting over my cold cheek as tears fall freely down my face. "Please, stop running from me."

I yank out of his hold. "I don't know you. You have me confused with someone else." I keep walking, my vision blurring from my tears. I don't know why I'm keeping up this act. I'm not ready. I wasn't prepared for this, for him. I wish I never took that job interview.

"That's ridiculous. It's me. It's Simon and you know that."

I run, wanting nothing to do with him, wanting to turn back time so I didn't have to see him. It's hard to catch my breath as sobs break free. My lungs burn as I pump my arms and move

my legs as fast as I can. The motel is just up ahead. I only need to make it there.

But I should have known I couldn't outrun him. His memory. His body.

*Him.*

He wraps his arms around me, picking me up so I can't move.

"Nina, please, stop. Please." His voice cracks as if he cares. "Stop running from me," Simon repeats.

The words light a new fire inside me. I kick, thrash, and slam my elbow against his ribs. He grunts, releasing me, and I hit the ground. I stumble and nearly fall, but I right myself in time.

I don't hide my rage or hurt. I shove his chest with all I have. "Run away from you?" I shove him again, loving how he takes a step back, whether it's from me or not. "Fuck you, Simon. Fuck. You." I yell at him as loud as I can, until my throat hurts, until... everything hurts. I shove him again, only this time it's weak. "Fuck. You," I whisper, emotion breaking the words. Pointing a finger at his chest, I lift my eyes, hating how much I want to forgive him for everything when his gaze meets mine. "If I want to run from you, I can. I've earned that right to run when you've been sprinting for ten years. Stay away from me."

I take a deep breath in and set one foot back, then another, hating that I'm hesitant because his eyes are watering,

threatening to convince me he gives a damn.

“Nina—”

I hold up my hand to stop him as he takes a step forward and interrupt him. “No. No, you don’t get to do this! You don’t get to demand to talk to me after ten years, Simon!” I cry, shouting as loud as I can, forcing the agony from my soul with every breath and word spoken. “You don’t get to ask that of me. You don’t get to ask for my time when you left me without a word, right after...” Another wave of warm tears drip down my face. “Right after we gave in to one another. You left me as if I meant nothing. You didn’t call. You didn’t write. You didn’t do anything. You left me and everyone you knew behind, but I thought I meant more than them. I thought I meant something to you.” I hit my fist on my chest. “You are nothing but a memory to me, Simon St. Claire.”

I spin on my heel, preparing to stomp away and leave him in the dust just like he left me all those years ago.

Naked.

Alone in bed.

Still sore between my legs from him.

I ached from that night together.

He left me without question, and I have every right to do that to him.

Simon grips me by the back of the neck, spins me around, pressing me against his body as he bends down until our noses touch.

“We both know we aren’t done making memories.” He crashes his mouth into mine, his lips just as warm and soft as the first time I felt them all those years ago.

He wraps his other arm around my waist, keeping me jailed against his body. His grip tightens on my nape, tilting his head as he controls the kiss. The salty drips of my tears flow between our lips, spreading across my tongue until it’s all I can taste. His tongue teases mine, his body igniting something I long buried.

With every sigh, with every inhale and exhale, I become surrounded by him. I grab at his grease-ridden shirt, our mouths fusing with forgotten need. His hand grabs my hip, his entire body flexes tight as he tries to control himself.

Simon groans into my mouth, a sound I have been playing over and over again since that night, but the memory of him making that exact noise as he claimed my virginity plays in the forefront of my mind, and I pull away, ending the kiss.

I shake my head, untangling myself from his hold, and touch my lips. They are swollen and tingling from his kiss. My heart hammers against its cage, banging so profoundly, that I can’t even hear myself breathe.

“I can’t do this with you.” I continue to shake my head, trying to deny my feelings. “Not again. Simon, please. Please, let me go. You did it for ten years, don’t stop being selfish now.” I cross my arms, wanting to put a barrier between us and begin to step back.

Walking away from him is all I can do.

“Not again. I won’t let you do this to me again. You don’t understand how much you hurt me when you left. I will not let you put me through that hell again when I’m just now clawing my way out of that hole. Do me a selfless service, just once, Simon, and leave me alone.”

“Nina—”

“—Please,” I break, holding my hand up, palm forward to stop him from coming any closer.

It doesn’t work.

In a long stride, his chest bumps against my hand, and I’m left feeling the hard muscles of his pecs along with the raging beat of his heart.

He doesn’t say anything, but his breathing quickens, the air from his lungs mixing with the breeze. He lifts his hand and places it over mine, holding it to his chest.

“I’ve been waiting to feel you for ten years,” he finally says after a long period of silence.

This time it’s my turn to fall quiet. My mind is racing with so many things I want to say, and my heart is exploding with emotions that have become unburied.

A car drives by, the hum of the tires breaking the silence, and it forces me out of the trance Simon always seems to put me under. Tugging my hand away, I wrap my arms around myself, shaking my head.

“You could have had more than my touch over the last ten years. You could have called, sent a letter, or come home. You

did none of those things. Keep your guilt, Simon. Keep your wishes. I don't want them." I wipe my cheek, turn on my heels, and walk away to put the past behind me.

This time, I don't hear him following me, and I'm relieved. Seeing him felt so good, better than I wanted it to. Fighting the urge not to look at him is difficult because damn it, why did he have to grow into such a handsome man? He is taller than the last time I saw him with long blondish hair that has red hues. It reminds me of one of the lions we have at the sanctuary. Simon's eyes didn't change though. They have the same golden-brown hue and he looks at you as if you're the most important person in the world to him at that moment.

The scruff on his face highlights the high ridges of his cheekbones too. He grew into the man I dreamed about. Seeing him made my heart sing and that kiss made every worry in the world fade away. The panic of finding a new job, the stress of keeping the sanctuary going, and the debate of moving away from Mistletoe Creek, vanished.

That's what Simon has always done to me—he makes every worry in the world, no matter how big or small, disappear.

I almost look over my shoulder to get one last mental picture of him, but I force myself not to give him the satisfaction. I want to forgive him, I do, and I thought forgiveness would come easier when I saw him.

Oh, it didn't. Not at all. When I saw his stupid, handsome, beautiful, defined-jaw face, all I felt was rage.

It's all I still feel.



I stop in front of the small motel on the side of the road. It's rundown, old, and the sign is black with white flashing letters: Shadow Inn, Vacancy.

Great. Anything is better than staying one more second on this road where Simon can see me.

I step through the overgrown grass, the tips brushing against my knee. My shoes hit the gravel of the parking lot, the rocks bumpy and sharp, pressing against the soles with every step I take.

With a hammering heart, I open the main door, immediately hearing loud laughter. The sound reminds me of a hyena celebrating a fresh kill. The front desk is off-white, reminding me of old bones. The man behind the desk has greasy black hair, dark eyes, and a predator nature about his stare.

He grins, showing large teeth with unusually pointed canines. "Welcome to Shadow Inn, young lady. How can I help you today?" His eyes roam over my body, and he licks his bottom lip as he leans on the counter.

"I need a room for the night, please."

He nods, clicking his tongue. "I got a room for you, sweetheart."

My stomach flips, unsettled and panicked.

"How about you stay with me? I'll show you what happens in the shadows here." He stands from behind the desk, the light catching on his face. He reminds me of a hyena, his large

ears pointing outward, shadowing the wall. “I’ll make sure you’re real comfortable.”

The door behind me slams open with a loud bang causing me to jump. Heavy footsteps thud against the floor and a giant shadow drapes over me, blocking the sunlight pouring in. The creep behind the desk lifts his creepy gaze from me to the new guest.

He snarls when he notices who it is. “Simon.”

An irritated growl has me turning my head to see a murderous expression across Simon’s face. “She won’t be staying here, Earl. Keep your disgusting thoughts to yourself.”

Earl runs his fingers through his dirty hair, dandruff snowing onto his shoulders. “I think that’s up to the lady to decide, Simon.”

“When it comes to you, I’m not giving her a choice.”

Simon grabs my arm and drags me out of the door, but not before I catch a wicked gleam in Earl’s eyes.

Simon slams the door behind us, then backs me up until my back is flush against cool metal. I turn to see what it is, and it must be his truck.

“What do you think you’re doing coming here? Earl is the sketchiest guy in town. I can’t believe you’d put yourself at risk like that.”

It’s hard to listen to him rant when his lips are still swollen from our kiss.

“Are you listening to me, Nina? Next time you want to be pissed off at me, at least stay near me so you don’t end up in a graveyard.”

“Next time? I’m still pissed off at you *this* time. I doubt that will ever end.”

He opens the truck door, still red in the face with rage. “I can live with your anger, but I can’t live knowing something bad happened to you. Get in the truck, Nina.” He takes a breath, his wide shoulders rising and then falling as the tension melts away. “Please.”

Without causing a fuss, I climb into the oversized truck. When I’m safely in the seat, he slams the door shut harder than necessary. Watching him walk around the truck is out of my control. He’s wearing a baseball cap riddled with oil streaks and it’s on backwards, causing his long dirty blonde hair to curl under it. Paired with the tight shirt stretched across his chest hugging his muscular biceps, the anger drops from a boil to a low simmer.

He opens the driver’s side, slides into the seat, and starts the truck. The engine grumbles to life, reminding me of the growl he made in the motel. The chiseled line of his jaw becomes more defined as he clenches his teeth together, then side-eyes me with those amber irises.

Simon leans over the middle console, raising his arm.

“Wh—What are you doing?” I ask, pulling away until my head hits the window.

He smirks, grabs the seatbelt, and then tugs it across me until it clicks. “Precious cargo. Got to keep you safe.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t need you keeping me safe. I’ve been fine for ten years without you. I don’t need you swooping in now.”

He doesn’t say anything because what could he possibly say to that? Instead, he wraps his hands around the steering wheel, flexing them with irritation before putting the truck in drive. The tires spin on the gravel, throwing rocks against the motel’s door.

The ride is silent and filled with tension. Not even the radio playing a song I don’t know through the speakers is enough to make this any less awkward.

We pass the garage where he works. My car is inside, lifted, and one of the workers is tinkering under it.

“Wow, he’s already working on it,” I mumble, hoping by some miracle my car will be ready by tomorrow.

“I have your bags in the back. Your car won’t be ready for a while if he can fix it at all.”

I turn to him, my hair falling down my shoulder. “I need to get home, Simon. The sanctuary—“ I close my mouth. “Never mind. Why would I tell the one person who doesn’t care about the lions?”

“I care, Nina. We have a lot to talk about. I’m not saying what I did was right, but please, let me explain my side to you before you completely write me off.”

I want to sass a reply. I want to cry. I want to wrap myself around him and never let him go.

I want to make a wish under the mistletoe with him.

I want to tame the runaway in his heart.

Yet I also know I need to protect myself from him. If I'm not careful, I'll be opening a Pandora's box of emotions that I'll never be able to close.

“If anything, I'll take you home. You don't have to worry.”

I snort in disbelief. “You haven't been home in ten years. You'd take me home, and then what? Drop me off, roll down the window, and wave goodbye? I'd rather get a taxi, Simon.”

“God, you are just as maddening and stubborn as you were ten years ago,” he grumbles under his breath.

“I have plenty more where that came from.”

He shakes his head as the truck slows, the blinker clicking just as he takes a left onto a dirt road. It's flanked by naked trees that I'm sure are beautiful in the spring. The road is bumpy causing me to bounce so hard, I have to grip the door for support.

A house appears at the end of the drive, simple, nothing special, but I fall in love with it because it's Simon's. It has a wide porch with a swing to the left. Large windows on either side of the front door that I bet let in a ton of light. The roof is black tin and I imagine the rain dinging on it during a storm lulling me to sleep.

“It isn’t much. It’s small. Two bedrooms with one bathroom, but it’s home.”

“It’s adorable. Girlfriend pick it out?” I regret the words as soon as they are out of my mouth. I don’t know why I asked.

He opens the door and turns his chin to his shoulder. “I wouldn’t have kissed you if I had a girlfriend, Nina. But since you’re asking, I’m single.”

“I wasn’t asking,” I mutter, swinging my own door open and sliding out of my seat.

“Sure. Sure.”

“I wasn’t,” I argue weakly.

He grins at me, pulling the tailgate down. “Yeah, I just bet.” He snags my bags, still smiling, and his dumb dimples show on his cheeks.

I was always a sucker for those.

How is this happening after ten years?

Out of all the places he had to be, what were the chances of me seeing him? Here. In the middle of nowhere.

My eyes drop to his ass as he climbs the steps, my hands aching to reach out and grab it. I’ve always been a sucker for his backside. From his shoulders, all the way down the curve of his spine, to the dimples above his butt, then the round plump cheeks— God— I’m working myself up. I need to get away from him as soon as possible. The sooner I’m home, the better.

“Stop looking at my ass.”

I pull my eyes away just to tell him I wasn't, but I'm caught red-handed.

He is looking right at me, another smug grin on his face.

I glance down, cheeks flaming red with embarrassment.

His finger slides under my chin, lifting my head so I'm forced to look at him. “I've missed your eyes on me. You don't know how much.”

I gently tug my chin out from his mild grasp. My eyes well with tears and I can't stop them from falling because I can't be strong around him. No matter how many times I've imagined this moment with him, I was always strong and resilient.

That's the tricky part about imagination. Sometimes, it lies to you.

“Then why?” I ask softly, doing my best not to lose the last thread of self-control I have. “Why did you leave me?”

The door swings open and he takes my hand, tugging me gently inside. “Come on.”

I step inside, my shoes hitting the hardwood floor of the house, and the lock slides into place behind me.

Simon is directly behind me, his body so close, I can feel the heat radiating from him.

I'm alone with the man I've hated for ten years yet I've loved him my entire life. I'm finding that talking may be a

little difficult for me when my heart is beating faster, and his fingers are a light touch down my arm.

He is my home and I've forgotten what that's felt like.



# Chapter Four



## **SIMON**

Having her in my space is too much. I'm consumed. I want to undress her and take her on every surface of this house. I want her in my bed, my territory, my plain. I want to claim her all over again and make her mine. I want to relive the night when we were teenagers, completely trusting one another, exploring, learning, only this time... I won't leave.

She steps away from me, then turns around, the tears on her cheeks adding to the wounds on my bleeding heart.

"You can't keep being so close to me, Simon. I can't think when you're so close."

I take a step forward only for her to step back. "I can do this dance with you all night, Nina. I've been away from you too long, not being near you is not possible."

"It has to be!" she yells at me, her voice echoing in the house. "You need to tell me the truth and then I can find my

way home. Then, we can be out of each other's lives forever. I can get a new job—”

“—A new job? The sanctuary needs you, Nina. You can't leave the lions.” If she left them, it would be a nail in the coffin for us because she'd be saying she was leaving me.

“With what money? Don't you see, Simon? There is no more sanctuary. We can't afford to feed the lion or tigers. We can barely pay the staff. I've already had to let three people go. The sanctuary won't last another month. I just had a job interview. You think I'd just leave the lions? The same ones I have been with since they were cubs? I'm not like you,” she spits with all the venom that's built up inside her over the years. “I don't leave the ones who need me.”

Her words make me snap. I charge until I'm standing right in front of her. “Do you think leaving was easy for me? Do you think I woke up one day and decided to leave everything I loved behind?” I raise my voice, needing her to hear how tortured I've been, needing her to see on my face how burdened I've become.

She lifts her chin, her bottom lip wobbling just as more tears wet the tops of her cheeks. Her mascara is starting to run, light black streaks reflect the hallway light catching the wet path down her face.

“Yes, I do. There's no other explanation. You did decide to leave. You left me.” She pokes my chest. “In bed. Naked. With nothing but the memory of you being my first. You left

everyone. Me, your friends, your mom. Have you even talked to her? Or checked on her? Don't you want to know?"

It's a punch in the gut when she brings up all the ways I've failed as a man, friend, and son. My eyes burn with regret. "Of course I want to know," I croak, guilt eating away at my soul at how I've treated my mother. "I think about her every day, but she's better off without me and so are you. So is the sanctuary."

She scoffs, rearing back as if I've slapped her. "Is that what you've told yourself so you can sleep better at night? So you can ignore your responsibilities as the heir to the St. Claire throne? Is it too much for you to handle? All that power, all that money, all that attention, with so many people counting on you," she sneers, her disappointment evident in her cutting gaze.

I lift my eyes from the floor, my own tears breaking free as the last ten years slam inside me. I back her against the wall, my hand flattening at the base of her neck to keep her pinned so she can't move. My shadow engulfs her as I tower over her small, delicate, and fragile frame.

I feel like one of those lions we took care of our entire lives, cornering my prey. "Is that how low you think of me? Do you truly think I'm as shallow as running away from being in charge? You think I left you in bed, probably still aching from me claiming your virginity, still wet with my come, my marks all over your body because I couldn't handle the pressure?" As I speak, I lean in closer, noticing the pace of her breath

quickenings in what I hope is lust. “Leaving you killed me. A part of me died. I was darkened that day. How we...” I shake my head. “The way we had one another for the first time, the moment wasn’t right. You deserved better than me. I was broken by my father’s death, and you always made me feel better. You changed my life that night, Nina. I loved you more than I ever had as you trusted me to take care of you. I left because I’m the reason for my father’s death and I couldn’t bear killing you too.”

“You killed me anyway,” she whispers, glancing away from me. “You said when you left me, it killed you, but I died every day you weren’t there, Simon. Little pieces of me stopped existing, my heart’s beat changed to a new rhythm because I had to learn to live again without you, but every day, those little pieces would be missed.” Her eyes lift and meet mine, the heartache I’ve caused drips down her face. I cup her cheek, wiping the pain away. “I’ll never get them back because you own them. I’ll never be the same because I’ve died inside too many times for you. You think you saved me by leaving, but all you did was the one thing you didn’t want to do— you killed me anyway. I’d rather you bury me now because I can’t keep doing this, wishing for the hope of you. Put me out of my misery, Simon. Let me go home.”

My hand slides up her neck, gently wrapping around her throat as I press my forehead against hers. “I can’t do that. I can’t let you go when I finally have you again.” I can’t be without the feeling of home again, but I won’t say that because

I'm not sure if I can go back yet. Mistletoe Creek isn't my home anyway.

Nina is.

And I've forgotten how good home feels. She's the sigh after walking through the door after a long day's work, the warmth of a blanket drifting over me on the couch, the safety I feel within the walls of the house, the peace of looking out the window to the view of the forest.

"Please," she begs me, pleading with me to let her go.

"No."

I simply can't.

And won't.

# Chapter Five



**NINA**

“No? What do you mean no?”

The rough glide of his calloused hand from all that hard mechanic work slides around to the back of my neck, clutching it tightly in his hold.

He growls. “Just what it fucking means, Nina. No.”

And for the second time today, his mouth crashes against mine, and like a damn fool, I kiss him back because Simon has always been the wish.

The kiss isn't slow. It isn't elegant. Simon is commanding, owning my lips, forcing his tongue over mine. He's demanding that I kiss him back. He's leaving me no choice—not that I needed one. Kissing him will be the one thing I never deny.

His fingers dig into my hair, curling at the root, then tugs until my head tilts back and my throat is exposed. A feral

sheen morphs his eyes, a hunger that can't be denied.

“And the answer will always be no. Do you understand that?”

I narrow my eyes at him, wanting to challenge his dominance. “No, because as far as I'm concerned, your silence over the years has spoken louder than anything you could say right now.”

His top lip curls in a silent growl, clearly not liking the distaste of my answer. He presses himself to me, his long thick cock hard against me. My eyes flutter shut at the memory of how good he felt inside me, how he stretched and filled every inch he could.

“Maybe it would help to know—” his hands glide under my shirt, the warmth of his fingers against my stomach have me inhale a sharp breath. “—That there has been no one else since you,” he whispers against my ear while his hands slowly travel up my body. “For ten years, there's been no one else. For ten years, I've come to the thought of us together that night, your body against mine, how tight—” he gasps just as I moan when he drags my bra down and pinches my nipples. “—You were. So fucking tight. So fucking perfect for me. I knew no other would compare. I knew my cock was only meant for you.”

I find that hard to believe that he hasn't been with anyone else. A man like him, there's no way.

“Don't say things like that. Don't lie to me,” I whisper just as he tugs the shirt over my head, leaving me in my bra.

He shucks off his shirt, showing thick muscle. Everything about him is larger, more filled out. His pecs have clear definition, his abs become more noticeable with every breath, and his arms bulge as he places them above my head, caging me in with his size.

“I am many things, Nina.” He unbuttons my pants, followed by lowering the zipper, then slides his hand under my panties until his fingers are at my clit. “But I am not a liar.” He circles my clit ever so slowly, forcing a groan from me. “I was— and am— content never having another when I have already experienced the best. I would— and will— die happily knowing I had what deserved to be mine, if only briefly.”

I wrap my hand around his wrist, my mouth parting in pleasure while his fingertips rub expertly with just the right amount of pressure on my clit. “Simon—” I gasp his name, wanting to tug his hand away while holding myself back from riding his hand.

He hums, slipping his hand further until he can feel the wet entrance. Another growl tears from him. “You’re so fucking wet for me. I bet I could slide inside you with so much ease, just like that first night. Couldn’t I?” He drags his lips across my jaw until he reaches my mouth. “Tell me.” His lips are a feather against my own as he speaks.

“Yes,” I groan, my head hitting the wall with a slight thud.

I don’t want to tell him that there hasn’t been anyone else. Not yet. I want to make him wonder just like he’s made me wonder the last ten years.



“I really do *love* that for me.” He emphasizes the word love just as his finger circles my entrance. He kisses down my neck, lightly scraping his teeth under the spot right at the base of my neck next to my collarbone.

It’s a hot spot for me and it seems Simon hasn’t forgotten.

“I’ve missed the feel of your skin, Sweet Girl. So soft,” He moans against my shoulder, his arms circling around me to lift me off my feet. Swinging me into his arms, he carries me down the hall.

The living room is simple and to my surprise, I see a picture of us when we were kids sitting on his mantle as we pass it.

The same one I always carry with me.

I turn my head, burying my face against his neck, inhaling his scent. It hasn’t changed in all the years I’ve known him. Same soap. Same cologne.

“You smell the same,” I say, kissing the side of his throat.

He kicks the door open to his bedroom to reveal a large king-sized bed. The comforter is black with matching pillows, nothing fancy, but enough to be warm at night. Grey curtains hang on the windows and to the left is a large picture of Mistletoe Creek in the middle of winter. The town is lit up with Christmas lights, the tree in the middle of town shining like a beacon.

“For someone who doesn’t love Christmas, you have a funny way of showing it.” I point to the photo.

“It isn’t the town I miss,” he admits, lying me gently on the bed. Simon turns his head, staring at something next to us and I follow his gaze, noticing one of the last pictures we took together.

My breath catches when I see us. We were a couple. The relationship status was never talked about, but we fell into it because we both knew we would always be together.

This picture was taken at the sanctuary. We were sitting on a rock and one of the lions— Leena— was rubbing her face against my body. She was— is— so heavy that she almost knocked me from the rock, but Simon caught me. We laughed so hard and that’s when Simon’s dad took the photo of us.

He turns my head, his eyes dancing over my face, and his palm cups my cheek. “You’ve been the only one, Nina. There has never been another. Do you believe me now?”

I wrap my arms around his neck, nodding as I squeeze my eyes shut. “You’ve been the only one for me too,” I admit, finding the courage to look at his cinnamon-colored eyes again. “I’ve never met anyone who comes close to you.” I reach my hand up, taking off his hat, then run my fingers through his long soft hair. When the light catches it, different shades of blonde, brown, and hints of red peek through.

It has always reminded me of a lion’s mane.

His expression changes, heat hooding his eyes, and that large hand wraps around my throat again.

*Fuck.*

I love it when he does that.

“Say it again,” his voice is deep and rough. “Say I’ve been the only man inside you. Say I’ll always be the only man who gets to feel the depths of you.” He tugs my jeans down, tugging them from my legs, and tosses them off the bed onto the floor.

I forget what he has said when he sits up, showing all of that muscle he has built over the years. The Adonis belt dives under the edge of his jeans and becomes more pronounced as he flicks the button free and then lowers the zipper.

“Tell me, Sweet Girl,” he orders, lowering his jeans down his hips.

He isn’t wearing underwear.

I can see the base of his cock, the hard shaft lying to the left and down his thigh. His hair is trimmed short above the girth while his happy trail blends in seamlessly with it. I’ve always loved all his hair. It’s scattered along his chest and stomach, coarse hair a shade darker than the dirty blonde locks hanging to his shoulders.

“How can you expect me to remember anything when you’re above me like this?” I lick my lips, trailing my hands up his body, and my fingers brush through the hair I’m so fascinated with. “I’ve missed this body,” I say so low, so quiet, I don’t expect him to hear me.

He tugs his jeans off, his cock slapping against his stomach when it’s finally free. I swallow when I see it, my pussy

becoming wetter, my body becoming needier for him. I trail my fingers down the vein filling his cock with scolding desire. Wrapping my hand around him, I stroke his shaft, the skin velvet under my palm.

He groans, watching as his cock fucks my fist. With a primal rumble in his chest, he snatches my wrist in his hand, stopping mid-stroke.

“I’m going to come if you don’t stop. You aren’t the only one who has missed this.”

I smirk. “You’re going to come already?”

He snarls, pinning my wrists above my head, both fitting in the expanse of his hand. His nose touches mine, his warm breath tickles my cheekbones, and his fingers slip the strap of my bra from my shoulder. “Fuck yes I’m going to come fast. It’s been ten years of missing you.” He unhooks the back of my bra in a quick flick, his tongue flicking across his bottom lip as my breasts fall free. “The moment I’m inside you, I’m going to come. I’m going to fill you with every drop, Sweet Girl.” He kneads my breast, rubbing his thumb over the sensitive nipple. “And then I’m going to fuck you through my orgasm until you bring me to another.” He bends down, sucking a nipple into his mouth and I whine. “You still haven’t told me what I wanted to hear.”

I gasp as he cups my pussy.

My tongue is twisted. I can’t remember how to speak. My body is on fire, my thoughts are scrambled. All I can think about is him.

A tug on my waist followed by a rip of material sounds.

“I said tell me,” he seethes through tight teeth, holding the shreds of my panties in his hand.

“There has never been another,” I finally manage to say through needy groans.

He spreads my legs, his finger slipping down the middle of my pussy until he is at my entrance. “And there will never be another.”

# Chapter Six



## **SIMON**

What the fuck have I been thinking over the last decade? I've been missing out on her, on this, on us, for what? I convinced myself she was better off without me, that everyone was, and maybe they were. Maybe she was.

But I'm not.

Selfishly, now that I have her in my life again, I can't let her go.

She moans, cupping her tits as I pump my fingers in and out of her to get her ready for my cock. I glance down, watching my fingers disappear inside her. Every time I pull out, I see the sheen on my hand from her juices. She's so goddamn wet.

My cock throbs with need. Precome beads at the flushed pink tip. My orgasm already looms. There's a deep ache in the entire length from my cock being so hard. My sack is pulled

tight and if she even brushes her finger against me, I'll be a goner.

“Simon,” she gasps my name, and that nearly has me spent.

I have to wrap my hand around my cock and squeeze it so tight, it hurts. Only then am I able to take a breath.

Her cheeks are tinted red, her body warm and inviting me to share the heat, but I can't just yet. I slip in another finger, stretching her with a third, and she arches her back, moaning loudly into these four walls.

“Such a good girl. You remember I don't like it when you're quiet. I love hearing you.” I move the pace of my arm faster, pumping my fingers in and out at a fast, hard rhythm.

“Simon. Oh, God, Simon. Yes! More. Please, don't stop. Please.” She pinches her nipples, sucking her bottom lip. She shuts her eyes and something about seeing her so lost in pleasure has the love I have for her swelling inside my chest. I feel like the emotions I have for her are going to explode from the cage that holds my heart.

Possessiveness.

Obsession.

Love.

Addiction.

Infatuation.

It's all so dangerous when combined, an explosion of unhealthy need that even her presence, her touch can barely

satisfy.

I want more than her touch. I want more than to be able to feel her wet cunt around my fingers. I want more than to feel her orgasm.

I want her bound to me.

In marriage.

Pregnant with my child.

Mine in every way and I won't waste another minute. Our lives start now.

“Are you going to come for me, Sweet Girl?”

Her eyes are still closed as she nods.

“Look at me when I talk to you, Nina,” I growl, pressing the heel of my hand against her clit.

Those gorgeous eyes snap open and she bends her back, a long scream that morphs into a moan falling from her lips.

“Yes, yes, yes! Don't... more... I'm going to... I'm... I'm...” she tries to finish her sentence, warning me of her orgasm. Her legs shake and she turns her head into the pillow, coming so hard, she squirts.

“Oh, fuck yes,” I growl, moving my hand faster, ignoring the ache in my wrist. Her come soaks my hand. The wet sounds of my palm slapping her cunt cause her sweet nectar to splash against my cock.

“Fuck. Oh my God,” she slurs, running her hands down her body as she tilts her chin to her chest.



Nina notices the mess she made and covers her face with her hands. “I have never... I mean... I have with toys, but I never expected... I’m so sorry.”

I keep my fingers lodged inside her and snatch her hands away. “Don’t hide from me. Don’t ever hide from me. That was so fucking sexy. You have no idea how close I was to coming knowing I made you come like that. I want it to happen again and again.” I slip my fingers free, then lick up my palm until I suck my fingers into my mouth. “You taste so good, Sweet Girl. Are you going to be good and squirt for me again?”

Her eyes glaze as she nods. “I’ll... I’ll try to,” she whispers.

“You will.” I enunciate the words, settling between her legs, then cage her head in with my arms. “Say it. Be a good girl for me, Nina. You know I love it when you’re good,” I murmur against her lips before taking them in a kiss. My tongue claims hers, flicking and sliding around it.

“I’ll do anything you want me to.” Her fingers dig into my shoulders, then scrape down my back, her hands cupping each of my ass cheeks.

I smirk, lowering myself further, and kissing her lips once more. “You have always loved my ass.”

She nips my chin. “It’s such a good ass.” Nina squeezes it and I let out a soft moan because the move jostles me forward.

My tip is at her entrance.

I look down her body, sliding one hand up her leg, clutch her thick thigh, and hook it around my hip. Her body is my view, my gaze traveling up to her breasts, and I can't deny myself, I bend down to suck her nipple into my mouth.

She hisses, then sighs when I blow cool air on it, kissing my way across to the other. I can't leave the other without affection. That would be neglectful.

“Simon.”

The way she gasps my name has me lightheaded, the blood rushing south making my cock harder than steel.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Because everything will change. You'll be mine.”

“I've always been yours,” she replies just as her eyes widen and her palms flatten against my chest. “Condom? I'm not on birth control like I was before.”

I narrow my eyes, digging my blunt nails into her thigh, then slam inside her without warning.

“Simon!” she moans, her tight pussy fluttering around my cock.

I growl, sliding out, then punch forward. “Fucking take everything I'm about to give you. Look at me. Watch as I fill you, Sweet Girl.” My eyes roll back as my orgasm hits me quickly, the same one I've been holding in ever since I laid her in my bed. “Fucking hell, you feel so goddamn good. So hot, so tight, so wet. This cunt has missed my cock, hasn't it?” I

drive in with every jet that leaves me, wanting my come as far and deep as possible.

“Simon— what— oh God— you feel so good— why—” she stammers.

I grip her chin, force her to look down, and slide out until all that’s left is the tip. My shaft is drenched in my come, white streaks sticking— proving what I’ve done. “Why? Because there’s no fucking way I’ll ever take you with a barrier between us. You are mine. This cunt is mine. And I hope by the time I’m done with you tonight, you’re pregnant.” I slam forward again, moaning as I fill her again. “There will never be a day where my come isn’t dripping from you, Sweet Girl.” I curl my hips, slamming into her so hard, her tits bounce with every hard thrust.

My come makes a mess, smearing on me, her thighs, the bed, but I don’t care.

I want to make a mess of her.

“Look at what you did. Look at all that come. It’s all yours.”

“Ah, Simon,” my name is a long drawn-out groan, broken from our bodies moving.

“Such a good fucking girl taking my cock like you are.” I curl over her, pressing our foreheads together which changes the angle.

She cries out, her nails scratching down my arms as I give her everything I’ve been desiring for ten years. I bite her lip,

sucking it into my mouth while wrapping my hand around her throat.

I squeeze gently, not too hard, but enough to see that beautiful submissive glaze in her eyes. She loves being controlled in the bedroom.

And I love being the one to control her.

“Tell me how good you feel, Sweet Girl. I’ll let you come again if you do.” I dip my fingers into her mouth, and she sucks, moaning in pleasure as if she’s sucking my cock.

So filthy.

“You wish you had my cock in your mouth? You miss sucking what belongs to you?”

She nods eagerly.

“I’ll let you, but you have to tell me what I want to hear.” I slip my fingers free, then suck them into my mouth, wanting to taste her. “I know you want to come. I feel this cunt being greedy for my cock, wanting more. I’ll give it to you. Just tell me,” I whisper into her ear, licking the shell of it.

Her hands roam down to my ass again, holding onto it as I fuck her.

“Your cock feels so good, Simon. I’ve dreamt of your cock fucking me instead of the toys I have. You’re so thick. You know my body better than I know it. I ache for you. I ache to come, please, let me,” she practically sobs. “I want more of you. Give me more.” She presses me harder against her, my cock driving in deeper, while her hands claw at my shoulders

and her teeth sink into the left side of my chest. “I’ve missed you. I’ve missed this. Nothing feels better than you inside me. I want your come, Simon. Give me more,” she repeats, meeting my thrusts with her own from the bottom. “Make me yours.”

Her words have me growling, pulling free from her pussy to give one of the two things I’ve promised her. I lift her by her throat, shove her against the headboard, and without a warning, drive my come-ridden cock draped in her nectar between her pouty lips.

One of her hands stays on my right ass cheek, the other fondling my sack while she bobs her head. I gather her hair, and a low drawn-out grunt escapes me as she traces the crown of my cock.

“Such a good girl,” I praise her. “You’re doing such a good job. That mouth of yours is heaven. Take me deeper,” I encouraged her. Her big green eyes lift to meet my stare, telling me silently that she can’t. I press in deeper, causing her to gag.

Fuck, I love it when she gags.

“You can do it. I know you can.” I gather more pieces of her hair cascading over her face.

And she does, taking me to the back of her throat until she coughs, spit trickling from her mouth.

“You look beautiful with my cock in your mouth. One of the many places it belongs when it comes to you.” She’s the only

woman who has tasted me, the only one who will fuck me, the only one who will bear my children.

She's... the only one.

I've never been the kind of man to move on or fuck around. Why would I do that to the love of my life? The kind of love that only happens once in a lifetime if people are lucky.

Another orgasm brews, my toes curling in warning, and I yank out of her mouth. I keep her in place by the grip I have on her hair just so I can memorize the look on her face right now. Her mouth is parted, lips swollen and red, spit flowing down the middle of her chin, tears fall from her eyes, but she's never looked more peaceful or sated.

"You're perfect, Sweet Girl."

"Did I do a good job?" she rasps.

I bend down, tilting her head back, and flatten my tongue on her chin, then across her lips. I taste my come in her saliva, then plunge my tongue inside her mouth.

"You did a perfect job. Good girls get rewarded." In a move she doesn't expect, I push her onto her stomach, pressing her face against the mattress while driving into her drenched pussy. "Fuck, you must have loved sucking my cock because you are soaking wet for me." I keep her head pressed against the mattress, gripping her ass with my free hand, using it as leverage as I relentlessly drive into her. "You can come whenever you want because I'm about to fill you again. That's

what you do to me, Sweet Girl. Years of not having you and this is what you have to deal with.”

I release her head, clutching her other cheek. I spank her ass once, twice, three times before she’s crying out, and I’m sinking my fingers into the meaty flesh again. I use it as support, helping me pound her cunt with my cock. I watch myself quickly vanish inside her with every bounce of her ass.

“Fuck. That’s it. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I somehow move her against me quicker and she cries into the mattress, her muscles squeezing me tight as she comes again just as I flood her with my orgasm.

I’m not done.

“Jesus Christ, that’s it. Oh fuck,” I groan, trying to slide every inch inside her. I forget to breathe because of how intense the orgasm is. My entire body shakes.

I flip her around, sit on my legs, and have her straddle me. Our bodies are slick with sweat. The ends of her hair stick to her skin, her body glistening.

“Simon, yes, God, yes. You’re so deep like this.” She rides me, rolling her hips. A whine slips free every time she rocks, her clit rubbing against me.

I can’t think. I can’t form words. I can’t believe I’m here with her, feeling her body move against mine.

Every year I’ve wished on mistletoe, hoping for a second chance.

And now I have it.

I bury one hand in the back of her hair while my arm wraps around her waist. I kiss her collarbone before pressing my forehead in the nook where her neck and shoulder meet. My fingers slip against her body as I try to hold on tight while she uses me.

Squeezing my eyes shut, a loud groan fills the room with every other roll of her hips. I realize it's me making those erotic sounds.

I can feel the combination of our orgasms against my thighs. We're making a mess, but I don't care, if you aren't messy, are you fucking your partner right?

She's going to make me come again. Three times. I bet I could keep going too. Nina pushes against my chest, wanting me on my back, so I listen. I lie in the middle of the bed, my hands on her hips, and watch her gorgeous body sway back, then forward.

Her body is fuller than the last time I saw it and I'm obsessed with every curve.

"Simon. Simon! You're going to make me come again. Can I? Please," she begs me, riding me harder to chase her orgasm.

"Not yet." I want us to come together, not for any romantic purposes, but so when her muscles contract, they bring my release closer to her womb.

I want her bred and bound to me by the time we fall asleep.

"I can't... I can't... please!"



I flip us over until I have her flat on her back, grab the post of the bed for support, and fuck her as hard and fast as I can. The bed moves across the floor from the force, the mattress shifts and Nina moves closer to the edge with every thrust I give her.

“Come, Sweet Girl. Take the last of me.” I collapse, gripping her shoulders, and press myself as far as I can as a small orgasm drains the last of the come I have left.

And that’s when I feel the gush of liquid between us as another orgasm rips through her. I smirk, gasping as I try to catch my breath.

“What a good girl squirting for me, just like you promised.” I lean down and kiss her lazily, tasting the salt of our sweat, but I don’t care.

“I always want to be good for you.”

“You always are.” I cup her cheek, diving in for another kiss.

I don’t know how long we kiss, but I stay inside her until we fall asleep.

Naked. Messy.

And at peace.

# Chapter Seven



**NINA**

It's been days with Simon and while it's been amazing getting lost in the sheets with him, I need to get home. I've already missed the Christmas festival and the tree-lighting ceremony. I've had Fern, Fawn, and Merry text me wanting to know where I've been— nosy little old women.

Plus, Zach, the other worker at Pride Sanctuary can't take care of all the lions by himself.

Being with Simon has been a dream come true. I love being able to get to know the man he is today. He still holds so many characteristics as he did as a teenager.

I swing my legs over the edge of the bed to get up.

“Where are you going?” he grumbles, rubbing his hand down my back.

“The real world awaits,” I say, standing and taking a step away from him. I need to distance myself. I've been

heartbroken by him before; I'll be able to live through it again. It will be hard, but I'll survive. "I need to get home and back to the sanctuary."

"Stay here," he adds as he sits up. The blanket falls to his waist, showing all that damn muscle again. Even with the ache in my body from all the amazing sex we have had, I still want more. "Be with me here."

I turn my head over my shoulder and give him a smile. "I can't do that, Simon. As wonderful as that would be, I love Mistletoe Creek. I love the lions. Why don't you come home? Come back with me."

His eyes drift from mine and I know the answer before he even has time to open his mouth.

I shake my head. "I don't know why you're afraid to come home."

"Because I've been a ghost. They don't need me there. I don't deserve to be there after what I did to my dad."

"Simon." I turn to face him, taking his hand. "That was an accident. You can't blame yourself forever. It wasn't your fault at all. It was a terrible thing. We could say if you were home, he wouldn't have gotten in that accident, or maybe he would have anyway. You have to stop beating yourself up about it. People need you. I need you, your mom, the sanctuary. You are so missed, and I know your dad would want more for you than living a life alone."

He lets out a sigh, rubbing the back of his neck. “I know, but the town is fine without me—“

My frustration with him explodes. I wrap the sheet around my body and stand. “We aren’t fine without you. Stop convincing yourself of that! The sanctuary is hanging on by a thread, Simon. Don’t you care at all? We are running out of basic life necessities we need for the cats. The surrounding land has been bought by your maddening uncle! He is slowly creeping in so he can make an apartment complex called Sunlight Apartments. He is closing in and at this point, it’s only a matter of time before—“

”—What the hell do you mean he has the land surrounding the sanctuary?“ He rolls out of bed, not bothering to cover himself.

“He’s been wanting to buy the land and he’s been trying to push us out. It’s working. With money running low—“

”—Fuck him. I hate him. There’s no way I’ll let my father’s legacy go. He came to see me the other day—“

”—He was here? What did he want?“

“He wanted to show me my father’s will. He offered a few million for the sanctuary and I wasn’t going to give it to him, but there is a stipulation in the will I’ve never seen before. It says I have until the ten year anniversary of my father’s death to accept the inheritance or everything defaults to my uncle.”

I rear back, looking at Simon as if I don’t even know him. “You knew. You knew he wanted the sanctuary and yet you

were going to do nothing? You were going to let it default, weren't you? For what? For guilt? Ruin so many lives just so you can feel better about yourself?"

He doesn't button his jeans before running around the bed, holding my arms to keep me in place. "I won't lie to you, I thought about it. I thought about finally letting it all go, hoping that maybe I'd feel better about myself, but then he brought you into it, and I wasn't going to allow it. I was going to go home, claim the inheritance, then give it all to you and my mom."

"Me? But I don't want any of it without you," I admit, more tears gathering in my eyes. "I stayed at the sanctuary for as long as I did hoping you'd come back. I waited for you to walk through the sanctuary doors every day."

He wraps his arms around me, kissing the top of my head. "I'm going to because I can't be away from you again." He leans back, brushing the hair from my face, and I can't help but smile at him.

"Really? You'll come back? For how long?"

"With you? Forever, Sweet Girl."

I wrap my arms around his neck, squealing with excitement. "Oh, everyone will be so happy to see you! Fawn, Fern, and Merry for sure. Oh, there is the gingerbread house contest and the masquerade ball we can go to. The lions will be so happy to see you." I speak fast, too excited for my own good.

He grins in return but rocks his hips against me, his hard cock digging into my stomach. How he can still get hard is impressive. That fucking hand wraps around my throat just as he tilts his head. “Do you think I’m going to let you out of bed long enough to do any of those things?”

“What if I want to do those things?”

Another growl vibrates his chest. “I guess I could manage but when those events are done, you’re mine, Sweet Girl.”

Heat floods my cheeks. “I like the sound of that.”

“Good. Let’s shower and then I need to go to the garage to let Tim and Pete know what’s going on, okay?”

I drop the sheet from my body and step away, getting closer to the bathroom. “I think that’s a good plan.” Backing away, happier than I’ve been in so long, I squeal as he launches himself at me.

We get lost in a deep kiss, stealing gropes and touches from each other’s bodies. I slip my hands under his jeans, grabbing his ass again.

He moans, spins me around, bends me over, tugs his jeans down just enough to free his cock, then slams into me. I slide along the vanity, catching myself by placing my hand against the mirror. His hands hook onto my shoulders, ramming into me.

“Still dripping with my come. I like you like this. Always ready for my cock, always ready for me to claim this pretty pussy.” He leans over, his mouth close to my ear, and his eyes

meet mine in the reflection. “I need to get a plug for you, so your cunt is always full of me, always ready for me to fuck you at any time of day, anywhere.” He glides one hand down my body, pressing against my hip. “I’ll never get enough of you.” Simon kisses down my shoulder. “Tell me you’re mine. Look at me.” He spans me when I glance away.

He fucks me harder, and I have to grip the edge of the vanity. I’m so sore, full of a delicious ache.

“I said to look at me.”

I do as he says, my orgasm brewing, warming my body.

“Good girl. You do such a good job listening to me.” Simon’s hand slips down my hip, across my lower abdomen, through my trimmed hair until his fingers find my swollen needy clit. “Good girls get to come.”

My breasts sway with every hard stroke he fills me with me. His cock rubs against every sensitive nerve, hitting a spot inside me that belongs to him.

His hair hangs in his face, dirty from sweat from all the different ways he has taken me. His muscles gleam in the bathroom light, flexing and tightening.

“Simon.” I hang my head, unsure if I can’t orgasm again. “I can’t. I can’t come again. Oh, God, it hurts.”

“You can come, and you will.” He pinches my clit, rubbing quick hard circles on it causing my knees to weaken. “Tell me you’re mine.”

I meet his gaze, biting my lip to hold in all the moans he is drawing out of me. “I’m yours. I always will be, but are you mine?”

He stops mid-stroke, clutches my throat, and begins a slower yet deeper pace. “From the day I met you, I’ve belonged to you. In your dreams, in your every breath, in your everyday thoughts, there hasn’t been one second where you did not have a claim on me. I am and will forever be yours, even if there is a day where you do not want my love, I’ll still be yours.” He presses his cheek against my shoulder, continuing his long deep strokes.

His words, his affirmation, it’s the balm to my burned heart, and his claim pushes me over the edge. I come, the soreness and aches vanishing as pleasure takes over those tired places. I arch my back, pressing against him to take more of his cock.

He groans with me, punching his hips forward with every jet of come that seeps into my womb. We both tremble, tiredly finding one another’s lips and kiss, slow and exhausted.

“Let’s clean you up, Sweet Girl. Even if it will kill me to wash my come away.”

We hiss as he pulls free and already I miss being full by him.

“You’re a caveman.”

He spans my ass and I yelp, startled by the sting.

“When it comes to you, fuck yeah I am.” He turns on the shower and slides open the stall door. “Come on. Let me bathe you just so I can have my hands on you again.”



Who am I to say no to that offer?

I'm not an idiot.

# Chapter Eight



## **SIMON**

It took too long to get back to the garage. I can't seem to keep my hands off Nina. I have ten years to make up for and not enough time in the day with her.

“So what are we telling people when we get back?” she asks as I park next to the side of the shop. “Are we...” she shakes her head then shrugs her shoulders. “Friends?”

“No, we are not friends.” I unbuckle her seatbelt, grab her leg, and slide her across the seat.

I see the light in her eyes dim, but I hope what I'm about to say makes them shine again. “We aren't dating, we aren't boyfriend girlfriend. That's juvenile to me because of our history. You're my fiancé, my wife, mine. It's as simple as that.”

There it is, the light ignites in her eyes again. “I don't remember you asking me to marry you,” she quips.

“You don’t? I believe you said yes while we were playing in the mud when we were nine. I asked you to marry me with a twig dipped in dirt, that’s what I used as a ring. You said yes, put my ring on, and we played in the mud right after that.”

She scoffs. “That doesn’t count. We were nine.”

“It counts. We sealed the deal stomping in the mud. Sorry, I don’t make the rules,” I sigh, feeling a bit cocky.

I open the truck door, sliding out first, and she follows right behind me.

“Well, until there is a ring on this finger, I’m a free—”

I press her against the truck, snag her hand, dig in my pocket, and slip the ring I got for her when I was eighteen onto her finger. It’s a large diamond, three carats, surrounded by yellow accent diamonds. I wanted it to look like the sun because Nina’s light always overcame the shadowy places in my soul.

“You aren’t single. You aren’t free. You’re mine, Nina. Understand?”

She gawks at the ring, then nods, dazed and a bit confused. “I— I— I do —yes.” Her watery eyes lift to mine.

I smile, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around.

What the fuck has been wrong with me all these years? I’ve been missing out on way too much.

“What are we celebrating? I know it isn’t your car because that thing is toast, Nina. Sorry.” Tim’s voice ruins the moment

and I set Nina down, turning to my friend.

“We’re engaged.”

His eyes round in surprise, the oil-stained rag dropping from his hands. “Pete! Pete!” Tim barks for his brother.

A loud metal clank followed by a curse word. Nina giggles, burying her smile in my chest.

“What? You made me hit my head on a tire,” Pete complains, rubbing his head as he stumbles out of the garage.

“You did that. I didn’t. Don’t blame me.” Tim points to me. “Simon is engaged.”

“No way! That’s amazing. I love weddings. They are so beautiful,” Pete smiles. “Congrat— Ow.” He rubs his head again after Tim slaps it. “What was that for?”

“It means he is leaving. He is going home. He won’t be needing us anymore.”

“Hey, that is not true.” I step forward, keeping a tight hold on Nina’s hand.

“Isn’t it?” Tim questions, sadness instead of anger riddled in the words.

“No. You’re my best friends. I wanted to ask you to come with me.”

“Come with?” Pete perks up.

“Hell yeah. Give us an hour. We’ll pack our bags and follow you home.”

“Just like that?” Nina asks.

“Just like that,” Tim answers. “Let’s go see what the Christmas town is all about, then let’s deal with your uncle.” He steps away, then steps back. “Maybe not in that order.” He snaps his fingers as if he just had a bright idea, leaving Nina and me alone in the parking lot.

“They are willing to do anything for you,” she says.

I nod. “I met them when I was down on my luck.”

“Well, I’d say you got very lucky.”

I did, but I can’t help but wonder how lucky I’d be if Nina had been in my life for the last ten years.

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After a few days of traveling, we finally pass the welcome sign that says, “Mistletoe Creek.”

“Sweet Girl.” I drag my knuckles down her cheek to wake her. She’s a horrible co-pilot, but that’s okay, I’ll take her head on my shoulder while she sleeps any day of the damn week. “We’re home,” I state, and damn, I didn’t think it would feel so fucking good to say.

I’ve missed it here.

The snow is sticking to the ground, the beautiful white blanket goes on for miles over the mountains while weighing down the tree branches.

She mumbles, burying her face in my arm.

“We’re here, Nina. We’re home. Wake up.” I nudge her a bit, tapping the tip of her nose.

She startles awake, wiping the small trail of drool from her lip. When she sees the snow, she perks up as if she hasn’t been sleeping for the entire drive. “We’re here! You’re here.”

“We are. I am,” I chuckle, lacing my fingers with hers to hold her hand. “I’m sorry I was gone for so long,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I was being stubborn and for not seeing what was right in front of me.”

“It’s okay,” she says, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. “I understand. We can’t change the past, Simon. Let’s just focus on the future. You’re here now.”

“And I’m not going anywhere,” I say, bringing her hand to my lips to give her a kiss.

I watch the road, the truck peaking at the top of the hill to show the entire town. The most noticeable part is the castle situated behind the town at the base of a mountain. It’s daytime so no one can see, but I have no doubt Christmas lights are decorating the entirety of that giant castle.

“Well, there’s Gold’s Gas and Garage. I see that hasn’t changed a bit,” I say, liking that it hasn’t changed. The white and red building is classic. I would hate to see it be any different.

“Everything is how you left it,” Nina states. “Nothing new to add. Everyone is going to be so excited to see you. Your mom... I can’t imagine what she’ll do.”

“Before we do anything, I want to go to the lawyer, okay? I need everything settled before my uncle beats me to it.”

“I agree. He’s so... I don’t know. There’s always been something about him that’s so unsettling.”

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel and glance in the rearview mirror to make sure Tim and Pete are still behind me. They are and they must be singing something because I can see their mouths moving in a way that says they are jamming out.

“Can I tell you something?”

“Always.” She squeezes my hand with reassurance.

“You know how my dad got into that accident and they said his brakes failed?”

She nods.

“I don’t think they failed. I think my uncle had something to do with it. That entire night, the more I think about it, the more it felt like it was a setup. Maybe I’m paranoid, but I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“I wouldn’t either. He’s made a few threats to the sanctuary, saying he’d kill the lions one by one until there were no cats for us to care for.”

“He did what?” I snarl, pressing my foot on the gas to get to the lawyer’s office quicker. “Please tell me H.C. Anderson’s law office is still there?”

“He’s still the town lawyer,” Nina confirms.

We pass The Glass Slipper, Mistletoe Creek's Bed and Breakfast, and then just a half a mile up the road is the law office. I pull into the parking lot, slamming on my brakes until the tires slide against the pavement.

I don't bother turning the truck off as I get out, Nina following right behind me.

"What's going on?"

"Got to see a man about a fortune, Tim! Hang tight. It should only be a few minutes."

"Sure. No problem!"

I help Nina up the slick steps of the law office, then bang on the door. It's early, but I know Hank is awake. He lives and breathes law.

"Come on, Hank." I continue banging on the door until the curtain moves, Hank's aged eyes peer out the window to see who it is.

He unlocks the door and swings it open. "Simon St. Claire? Boy, is that you?"

"In the flesh, Hank. Tell me what I need to sign to keep the family fortune and the sanctuary away from my uncle's greedy hands. We can catch up another time. Do you have a copy of my father's will?"

It takes a few seconds for him to find his words. "Yes, yes, of course. Come in. Let's get this done. I'm so happy you're back." His eyes cut to Nina. "I can't imagine you had anything to do with this, young lady?"



She shakes her head, suddenly shy.

“She has everything to do with it, Hank. We’re getting married. I’m never leaving home again.”

“Good.” He smiles, his cheeks rosy with happiness. “Oh, that’s wonderful. It has to be a Christmas wedding. Oh, the town will be so happy.” He claps his hands. “Fern, Fawn, and Merry are going to have a field day.”

Nina snickers, but I forgot that Hank gets a bit sidetracked sometimes.

“Hank, I’d love to marry her on Christmas day, but I need the paperwork about my dad first.”

“Right.” He snaps his fingers. “Right. I have the file. It’s been waiting for you.” He takes a picture off the wall revealing a vault. “I never trusted that uncle of yours. He’s come into my office a few times looking for the paperwork your father left. I only ever gave him a copy of the will— per your father’s request.” He opens the safe and slides a file out. “Here we are.” He opens it on his desk. “I only need you to sign here,” he points to one arrow. “Then here.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it, then everything is yours and your uncle can’t do anything about it.”

I read over the simple document, granting me ownership of the sanctuary and the three billion dollars that’s been waiting for me. I flip the page, reading the will, and there in fine print is the stipulation my uncle warned me about.

How did I not see that before?

I only have until midnight tonight before everything is my uncle's.

I pick up the pen, scribble my name on the legal documents, and I feel lighter.

“Your father would be very proud of you,” Hank says, making copies of what I just signed.

I grunt, not believing that for a bit. He'd be furious at me for disappearing on the people who loved me, and I wouldn't blame him.

“We all handle grief differently, my boy.” He tucks the paperwork in an envelope and hands it to me. “Congratulations. Oh— I nearly forgot.” He digs in the safe again, pulling out an old, crinkled envelope that has seen better days. “From your father. To you.”

My breath hitches in my throat as I gently take it from him.

“I wasn't allowed to give it to you until you signed the paperwork. I was getting nervous,” he chuckles.

“Thank you, Hank.”

“Welcome home, Simon.”

I give him a forced smile before we leave. When the cold air hits me, I exhale, my breath showing in a frozen cloud.

“Are you going to read it?”

“Not yet,” I say to Nina, tucking the letter in my back pocket. “Let's go home first.”

“Your house or mine?”

“Ours,” I state simply, knowing she has no idea what I’m talking about.

Behind the sanctuary, nestled in the mountains to give us the perfect view of the sanctuary so we can watch over the lions, is a large chalet home I had built for us.

We’re so close to having the life we have always wanted, and I won’t let my uncle take that from us.

# Chapter Nine



**NINA**

I sip my morning coffee, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook Pride Sanctuary. It is breathtaking. The deck is covered in snow, the trees are white, and the sanctuary looks empty, but it isn't. The lions are inside and warm. I had forgotten just how big the sanctuary is. Seeing it from this angle really puts it in perspective.

“Hey, Sweet Girl.” He wraps his arms around me. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Simon. So much. I can't believe you had this built. How did I not notice? How did the town not know? How did you keep this a secret?”

“NDA's,” he chuckles. “I had it built years ago, but I always hired people to come in and clean to keep everything fresh. I just knew that this is the life I wanted with you. I wanted to be ready.”

“And there is enough room for Tim and Pete,” I add.

“They have the basement.” His hands cup my stomach. “And plenty of room for a few kids. Maybe three or four?”

“Four?” I shake my head, taking another sip of my coffee. “Let’s start with one and go from there.”

“You know I’m always going to want to keep you pregnant,” he whispers in my ear, in that fucking tone that has my body awakening for him.

“Simon, don’t start. We have to leave soon. Your mom is meeting us at the sanctuary.”

He groans, stealing a quick squeeze of my breasts. “Fuck, I know. I can’t wait to see her, but I want you. Later, I’m going to press you against these windows and fuck you from behind.”

“Promise?”

“Oh, that’s a fucking vow, Sweet Girl.”

“You two love birds ready?”

We turn to see Tim and Pete in camouflage with black paint under their eyes.

“What... what are you doing?” Simon asks.

“We see your uncle today, right? We’re ready for war.”

“I don’t know guys. I haven’t talked to him, and I don’t want to. Glad to see you have our backs though.”

“Man,” Tim pouts. “I really wanted to show that guy a thing or two.” He lifts his fist and shakes it in the air.

“Me too.” Pete munches on a muffin, wiping the crumbs from his stomach.

Those two will keep things interesting, that’s for sure.

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## **Simon**

“Let’s go. Mom will be there any minute. I told her to meet us here, but she has stuff for the lions too,” I inform everyone, nerves eating away at me. I hope she doesn’t hate me.

We pile in the truck and drive down to the sanctuary, their typical plains covered in snow. We keep the cats inside most of the time, but they love to play in the snow too. I hope to be able to see that today.

The ride is only five minutes and we park in the lot, staring at the front doors. I’ll be able to truly take care of this place now, bring more lions in, and make it what it used to be to make my father proud.

Me, Nina, Pete, and Tim get out of the truck, then head inside to stay warm. The lights flick on and to the right, there’s the desk for information on private tours and tickets, a few offices, and concessions... Then there’s the thick glass separating me and a few lions.

“Leena,” I whisper, staring at her lounging form as she naps on a rock. “She’s alive.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s healthy. Maybe we can say hi to her later.”

The doors opening bring in the cold. Mom is standing there in a black peacoat, her brown hair has streaks of grey, but when she sees me, she smiles, a sob breaking free.

“Simon!” she yells, and I run to her as if I’m a little boy.

I smack against her a little too hard, wrap my arms around her, and hold on tight. “I’m so sorry, mom. I’m sorry. I’m... I’m so sorry,” I repeat.

“I’m so glad you’re home. You’re safe. Look at you.” She leans back, looking me up and down. “You look so much like your father.” Her eyes water, then shift to Nina. “Nina. You brought my son home.”

Nina and my mom share a hug.

“And what’s this I hear about a Christmas wedding?” My mom breaks the tension.

“Really? The word is out already?” I mumble.

“I always knew you two were meant to be. I saw it when you were kids. I’m just glad Simon’s grief has been healed.” Mom pats my chest. “I know you left for your own good reasons, Simon. I don’t blame you.”

“I’m not leaving again—”

“—You might want to rethink that, nephew.”

My uncle’s deep voice reverberates off the walls, gaining the attention of the lions. Leena yawns, showing her large teeth.

“What are you doing here, Dash?” my mom asks.

He holds a gun in his hand, and a few of his friends flank his sides. “I’m here to claim what is mine.” He points the gun at Nina. “You signed just in time. I didn’t think you would, but it’s okay. I have a piece of paper you can sign to fix that.”

“Dash, you have lost it. This is not yours. Don made sure of that,” my mom says, facing Dash head-on.

“I deserve this!” he roars, causing the lions behind him to echo the call. “This is mine. His life was supposed to be mine. I am tired of being in his shadow. He was always the favorite, always the golden boy, and I don’t care what I have to do, I will tear down everything he has worked for. I’m close to having my own kingdom and the only thing in my way is this fucking sanctuary.”

“It’s Christmas,” my mom whispers. “Don’t do this.”

“It’s always Christmas in this town.” He cocks the gun, the click loud enough to make a slither of fear straighten my spine. “And I really don’t fucking care. Give me the sanctuary and the money. Then, we can go back to being a happy family.”

“I do love a good luau,” Tim grumbles, pressing a button that allows the lions out of their space. “But I really don’t want you there.”

Leena prowls forward, along with two other female lions, growling at Dash and his men. Leena roars, and Dash swings his gun at her. Dash’s friends scream, running away for their lives as the other lionesses chase them.



“No!” I tackle him, and the gun slides across the floor. “You won’t fucking dare be a threat to me or my family anymore. I know it was you.” I lift my fist and punch him in the face. “I know you killed him.”

“And I’d do it again,” he admits, wrapping his hands around my throat. “Like father like son. Say hi to my brother for me, will you?” He doesn’t choke me long before he cries out in pain, his body being dragged across the floor.

I roll off him, noticing Leena dragging him by the leg, snarling.

“Simon! Simon! Surely, you won’t kill me, your only uncle.” He fights Leena, trying to free himself from her hold. His ankle is shattered from the strength of her jaws.

“I won’t,” I shake my head, watching Leena pull him into her den.

I press the button, shutting the gate to lock him in. “But they will.”

Lions can’t be tamed. They are wild animals and will always succumb to what they are best at.

Hunting and killing.

# Epilogue



**NINA**

*Christmas Day*

“It’s amazing we were able to put a wedding together so fast,” Fern says to Fawn.

“I had no doubts,” Merry huffs. “I’m so happy for you and Simon. It’s been a long time coming. Now, ladies,” she turns to her two best friends. “Who is next you think? We need more weddings in this town. Let’s go see who is single.”

“Oh, yes. Sounds fun!” Fawn claps her hands.

Simon wraps his arm around me, tugging me close. “Those three women are up to no good.”

“And they always will be.” I turn in his arms. “Hi, Mr. St. Claire.”

“Hey, Mrs. St. Claire,” he grins, then spins me around, my dress flowing around my feet. “You have to be the most

beautiful bride the world has ever seen.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself, husband.” Who am I kidding? He is so handsome in his tux. I can’t wait to take it off him later.

Music from our left grabs our attention. Pete and Tim are doing the hula, double-fisting beers. Those two never fail to bring a smile to our faces.

We got married at the sanctuary, missing the town’s fun Christmas events due to the circumstances of what happened with his uncle. We don’t talk about it, but Dash will never be seen again.

Simon walks to Leena’s section, pressing the button, and we step inside her den. “She protected me. I didn’t think she’d remember who I was.”

Leena jumps down from her rock, runs to us, and drags her body along our legs.

“How could she forget you? You are the heart of this place, Simon. You’re her king.”

“That would make you my queen,” he says.

“Cheers to that!” his mom shouts, lifting her champagne, and everyone claps and shouts in agreement.

The lions chime in, giving their blessing as glasses are raised, roaring their happiness at Simon’s return.

My husband spins me around, dips me over his leg, and kisses me. My eyes close as our love is bound in the roars of

the wild.

When the kiss comes to an end, I look at Simon to see him holding a mistletoe over our heads.

“What are you doing?”

“Like I’d ever forget. Make a wish.”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “I have my wish. This has always been what I wished for.”

“Me too, Sweet Girl. You’re my wish. Always have been, always will be.”

**The end.**

# Dad's Letter



SIMON,

I hope I'm writing this letter long before I'm actually gone. Something in my soul told me to write to you, to get my thoughts down, so talk to you one last time even in my death. If you're reading this, I'm sorry to say that I left you much earlier than I ever wanted.

And because I'm writing this, thinking I'm dead, which is odd, I don't recommend doing it. There's a finality in it, almost as if I'm sealing my fate.

Now, I know you. You're going to blame yourself because you've always beaten yourself up over things that weren't your fault. Listen to me son, my death isn't your fault. Be kind to yourself. Don't miss out on time with the ones who love you. And Simon, you are so loved. Don't vanish from their lives. Don't disappear on your mother, Nina, or the sanctuary.

Again, I know you, so you probably will, and you'll battle you'll grief, but I hope you don't let it consume you. I want

you to know that I love you. I'm proud of you. I'm always watching over you. Don't let the shadows cloud your mind and remember the light Nina brings you. I see you two and how effortless your love is.

Love like that doesn't always happen. Don't ruin it because of me. Don't ruin your life because of sadness. Be better than that. Be happy. Live for me, but most importantly, live for you. Have a life with Nina, have children of your own, and forget the pain of losing me and remember the amazing times we had. I'll always be your father.

Death doesn't change that.

Remember who you are, Simon. Remember all the things in your life that are still with you. Remember that life is fleeting and temporary. Remember not to tarnish it over things that aren't your fault.

Just remember.

I love you. Take care of your mother.

*-Dad*

p.s. - Don't you dare let my brother have anything I've left you. I'll haunt you if you do.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

January Rayne is a paranormal fantasy romance author who lives in Buffalo, NY with her husband, son, two dogs, and two leopard geckos. Buffalo is freezing, but January loves when it snows as it gives her the perfect atmosphere to write a book for you to get lost in.

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