



THAT CHRISTMAS

kind of FEELING

HANNAH BIRD

# That Christmas Kind of Feeling

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*For Andrew,  
The coworker who became the love of my life.*

## Chapter One

---

**I**t's an inevitable death, but I'm annoyed all the same.

The red bulb has been flickering on and off for the better half of the morning, waning right along with my energy. From its position halfway up my miniature Christmas tree, it carries a lot of weight on its shoulders. When it finally winks out, the top half of the tree goes dark with it. Not to mention the minuscule shreds of my holiday spirit.

Dread has been slowly seeping into my bones with every tick of the wall clock toward five. While everyone around me crackles with energy, partially funded by a sugar high courtesy of Lacey in Accounting, I stare at that minute hand and beg it to slow down. To stop.

Apparently I'm willing to mess with the space-time continuum if it means avoiding another holiday with my family.

"Brought you a cookie," Paige says, depositing the powdered-sugar-doused confection on my desk. "Well, really Lacey brought them. But I took it on the trek from the break room to your desk, so I deserve some of the credit."

"Thanks." I pluck a Kleenex from my tissue box and use it to collect the cookie. No need for powdered sugar to get on my fingers, thus coating my keyboard. One bite and my mouth is flooded with buttery goodness that has my stomach growling in applause. "This is the first thing I've eaten all day, and it's really going to put the ham sandwich in my lunch box to shame."

Her eyebrow quirks. "It's two in the afternoon. Why haven't you eaten?"

I swallow the rest of the dessert and use the tissue to clear any debris off my desk. "I've just been super busy."

"With what, watching your tree lights go out?"

My gaze flashes to hers, to which she tuts, “Girl, my cubicle is right there.” A neon-pink nail lights the way to the desk directly adjacent to mine. “I’ve been watching *you watch it* for so long that I got invested.” She reaches over my lap and grabs the base of the tree, dragging it across my desk until it rests in front of her. With amazing precision, she locates the faulty bulb and gives it a jiggle before blowing a frustrated breath through pursed lips. “You don’t have a spare, do you?”

“Let me just check my Christmas decor backup drawer,” I deadpan, yanking open the top drawer of my filing cabinet to reveal a plethora of sticky notepads, paper clips, and Crystal Light packets. “Mm, sorry. Must’ve used my last Christmas light already.”

Paige rolls her deep brown eyes at me. As my best friend of almost five years, she can read me in a way that makes me squirm. Still, when her gaze softens and she releases the bulb to rest a hand on my shoulder, I feel the tension in my spine dissipate immediately. Sometimes no matter how hard you’re hiding, it feels really good to be seen. Maybe especially then.

“I wish I had a way to make the holidays better for you.” She pinches the curve of my neck. “If I didn’t have a flight to catch, I’d brave Chicago traffic just to pull up in those suburbs and give your mom and stepdad a piece of my damn mind.”

“Or, hear me out...” I peer up at her with what I hope is a gaze that’s just pathetic enough to be convincing. “You could take me with you.”

She snickers, turning away to retrieve her desk chair. Her ass hits the seat, and then she crab-walks over to me. “If it were my family, I one hundred percent would. You know that.”

I nod, my roughly chopped bangs falling across my eyes. “I do. Tom and Sarah are the best.”

“The feeling is mutual.” She uses both hands to brush the hair out of my line of sight. “My parents love you. But this trip is with Brandon and his whole extended family. I don’t know what their deal is with cruises, but I swear it’s the only type of vacation they’ll take.”

My gaze falls to the snowdrifts blowing past the window. “I mean, I can kinda see the allure.”

Her chair groans as she sits back, expression suddenly contemplative. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t either. Wisconsin winters are brutal.” She picks at a stray cuticle on her left hand. “It’s just weird because it’s, like, his whole family going. His dads, his grandparents on both sides. Even his sister is



coming back from London for this cruise.”

Eventually she must feel my gaze boring into her because she finally glances up. “What?”

“Paige.” I lean forward and cover her hands with my own. “Do you think he’s going to propose?”

Her lips flatten, causing the dimple in her right cheek to appear. A haze glosses over her eyes as she nods, slowly at first and then so fast I’m afraid she’ll get whiplash.

“That’s amazing!” I squeal, and she squeals in return, and soon we’re just two squealing, hugging girls in the middle of our office where instrumental Christmas music plays over the crackly speakers and people pretend to work on the last day before break.

“Do you two mind?” Glenn grumbles, leaning back in his chair to peer around the partition between our cubicles. “Some people are actually working, you know.”

*He’s playing solitaire*, Paige mouths. With her back to him, he’s none the wiser, but I have to suppress my chuckle with a fake cough.

“Right. Sorry, Glenn,” I manage to force out. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

He grunts his disapproval but sits back up, thus disappearing from sight.

Paige gathers her long, dark waves to one side, exposing the column of her throat. She’s flushed with excitement, and it colors her olive-toned skin all the way down until it disappears beneath the collar of her maroon sweater. I grab my nearest notebook and use it to fan her, which she accepts with a tossed-back head and quiet laughter so as not to upset Glenn.

When she’s cooled down enough, she plucks the notebook from my hands and turns it over to examine the page. “*Destinations to Explore Solo*,” she reads. “Hey! Why don’t I get to hike the Narrows with you?”

“One, because you hate hiking.” I pinch the metal rings of the notebook and remove it from her grasp. “And two, you’ll be off galivanting with your fiancé.”

I work hard to keep any trace of bitterness out of my voice. After all, I *am* ecstatic for Paige. She and Brandon deserve nothing but happiness. Sometimes it’s just hard knowing everyone has someone they belong to. Whether it’s my mom and her new family with no space for me in it, or Paige with her soon-to-be fiancé’s literal boatload of supporters, they’re all part of something bigger than just themselves.

And then there’s me. The exception to the rule.

Paige studies me for a moment, head tilted. Then, soft as a whisper, she strokes my cheek with the backs of her knuckles. “I’m sorry, Amelia. I really am.”

Somehow, without intending to, I’ve found myself on the verge of tears. Blinking them back, I sit up and shake my head. “Anyway, I should probably finish up—”

“You know who would have a spare light?”

“Hm?” I turn back to her, brow furrowed.

She reaches out and flicks the defunct Christmas tree. “A replacement.” She stands, gathering the tree in her arms, and takes two long strides down the corridor. “I’ll bet you Levi has some.”

“Levi?” I scramble from my chair and follow her. With my short legs, it takes three of my steps to match one of hers, so I’m already lagging behind by the time we make our way into the North Hall where the newer offices are housed. As fast as Lakehouse Creative Media has been growing, we ran out of space with the latest round of hiring. That landed our newly appointed market analyst in a cubicle far, far away from me—which has proven to be good for my career.

Because Levi Abner is a walking distraction, all six feet five inches of him. Not just tall, either; years spent playing football for the University of Wisconsin left his naturally broad body thick with muscle. The first time I saw him in a cubicle, I almost laughed out loud. It looked like someone had herded a bear into our office and asked him to crunch some numbers.

An attractive, charming bear.

Every conversation we’ve had has ended with me flustered and sweaty, which Paige never ceases to make jokes about. Luckily the distance between our desks and lack of overlap in daily tasks means we rarely run into each other.

Except for today, apparently.

Paige marches right up to his desk, which to my surprise is decked out to the nines in holiday decor. Garland strung along the top of his cubicle shimmers in the fluorescent light. Glittery snowflakes and ornaments hang from ribbon pinned directly into the fabric walls. Strings of lights encircle the trash can, the filing cabinet, hell, even the monitor. And Paige chooses a cluster of beautifully appointed miniature Christmas trees to deposit my derelict excuse for holiday cheer in between.

Levi glances up at the intrusion, though the way his face relaxes into a

wide smile suggests it's anything but. That's the thing about Levi. Not only is he gorgeous; he's also unwaveringly friendly.

It's a deadly combination for my heart.

"Hi, Paige." His gaze drifts from her to me as I bring up the rear, a fine sheen of sweat already breaking out across my forehead. Deep blue eyes lock on to mine, and that smile grows even wider. "Amelia. Nice to see you in my neck of the woods for once."

That's the other thing about Levi. He came to Wisconsin to play football, but he grew up somewhere in the South. It's there in the lilt and lull of his accent, so subtle I wanna lean closer to hear it clearly.

Paige clears her throat, pulling me back from the rabbit hole I nearly fell into. It'd be her fault anyway for dragging me over here, knowing I lose all brain function in this man's presence.

"Um, hi." She cuts her gaze intentionally from me to Levi, drawing his attention back to her. "We have a dilemma we were hoping you could help with."

He leans forward onto his elbows, lacing his fingers together at the apex. "I love a good pickle. Whatcha got?"

He may be the only man in the universe who can make that sentence sound sexy.

"Amelia's tree had a lightbulb go out." She flicks the bulb, which can't be good for it. But what do I know? "And we were wondering if you had a spare."

The corner of his mouth turns up, and my stomach flips over in a way that only a bottle of wine and a soak in the tub later will come close to fixing.

Short of him joining me in said tub...if he would even fit.

"Hello, earth to Amelia." The bright pink of Paige's fingernails flashes in front of my vision as she snaps to bring me back from the first positive thought I've had all day. *Damn it.*

"Sorry, must've zoned out there for a sec." Paige's dimple appears due to a barely suppressed grin on her part. I scowl while Levi inspects the tree. "What'd I miss?"

"I said I have a few emails that need urgent attention"—her stare is purposeful as it levels with mine—"but that you'd stay while Levi fixes the tree. Sound good?"

Before I can open my mouth to say otherwise, she nods.

"Perfect." With a wave tossed over her shoulder at Levi, she skirts me on

her path back to our side of the office. “Have fun, you two!”

When I glance back down at Levi, he’s watching me with an unreadable expression, one eyebrow arched, and that pillowy bottom lip caught on his pearly teeth.

I shift my weight and swallow, though my throat is so dry I nearly choke. “What?”

He shakes his head like he too had drifted off and narrows his gaze on the bulb between his fingers. “Nothing. I actually do have a backup that’ll work. It should be right here.” He leans over and opens a few of the drawers attached to his desk before finding one that looks like Christmas threw up in it. With a surprisingly delicate touch, he selects the appropriate bulb—a tiny thing no bigger than a thimble—and nudges the drawer shut with his elbow.

I feel so incredibly awkward just standing here watching him. My hands fold together at my waist just to have something to hold onto. “Thanks for doing this.”

“It’s no problem.” He carefully removes the blown-out bulb and tosses it in the trash can by his foot. “Can’t have your tree half-lit this close to Christmas. That’ll put a damper on anyone’s spirit.”

A slightly harsh snort escapes me, startling both of us.

This time it’s his turn to say, “What?”

I shake my head. Trauma dumping on my attractive coworker isn’t exactly high on my list of favored activities. I’m about to attempt a joke to downplay the awkwardness, though everything I know of humor has left my brain all of a sudden, when a phone starts ringing and draws his attention away from me.

He removes his cell from his pocket, narrowing his gaze at the screen. “Sorry, just a second.”

“No problem. Take your time.” I hold up both hands with my palms out, hoping he won’t notice the sweat coating them.

“Hello?” But he says it in that distinctly Southern way that almost sounds like *hyello*.

I wrestle with the smile that wants to form in response.

“Hey, Tanya... Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. It’s been going around for sure.” He raises a hand to his brow and pinches the bridge of his nose. “No, I completely understand. Just take care of yourself and focus on getting better.”

Distant chattering continues on the other end as he drops his hand, but his eyes remain closed.

“It’s all right. Don’t beat yourself up about it. No one gets the flu for the fun of it.”

More chattering. I begin to wonder if I should just collect my tree and run.

“I appreciate you letting me know. Have a good day.” He starts to hang up but jerks the phone back to his ear. “Oh, and Tanya? Try to have a merry Christmas.”

See? So. *Nice*.

A heavy sigh escapes his lips as he sets the phone down on his desk.

“Everything okay?”

“Just my pet sitter.” He grabs the replacement bulb and fills the empty setting. “She has the flu, so she can’t come watch my dog this weekend.”

I fidget absent-mindedly with the hem of my cardigan while watching him work. “Going somewhere for the holiday?”

He studies the power strip beneath his desk for a moment before deciding on a cord to unplug. The string of lights around the trash can goes dark. He plugs mine in, in their place. To my surprise, the whole tree lights up.

His expression brightens ever so slightly. “Yeah, I was. But Finley can’t travel in the car—he gets super motion sick and won’t eat for days after, no matter what medication I give him before, during, or after.” He unplugs the tree and passes it back to me. “But change of plans, I guess.”

I don’t know what comes over me—if it’s his fingertips brushing mine as we exchange the tree or the forlorn look on his normally effervescent face or the absolute dread I feel at going home for Christmas—but I find the words, “I’ll do it,” bubbling out of me before I can second-guess them.

Hope lights up his eyes, but he counters it with a questioning tilt of his head. “You will?”

“Yeah, I’d be happy to.” I rock forward on my toes, then back onto my heels. “I mean, I’m technically not supposed to have dogs in my apartment building, but I could probably sneak him in—”

“Or you could stay at my place.” He winces like the implication has hit him square in the face. “I mean, it’s what Tanya does. I have a guest bedroom, and it’s already set up for her. If that’s not something you’re comfortable with, though, I completely understand.”

A hot flash streaks down my spine at the idea of being in his house, the intimacy of it settling heavy in my stomach. Somehow I manage to squeak out, “I don’t mind,” despite the fever pitch of my hormones.

He folds his hands together and leans forward on his knees. “Are you sure? You don’t have any plans? Family...or...”

I don’t pretend to think he’s asking if I’m single. Not even for a second.

“Nope.” Okay, I may not *think* it. But I do *hope* it. “Nothing.”

His sigh of relief would be easy to read into if it weren’t for the fact that I’m literally saving his vacation right now.

“Wow, I don’t know how to thank you for this. I mean, obviously I’ll be paying you. But you have no idea how much this means to me.”

Warmth spreads through my chest. The list of people I want to make happy in my life has grown increasingly shorter over the years as I’ve learned about the miracle that is a boundary, but suddenly Levi Abner just made it to the top of that list.

And besides, a little extra money to fund those solo adventures couldn’t hurt.

“Can I get your number?”

I’m not sure what the responding look on my face is, because I go completely numb with excitement, but it must be a good one because Levi immediately adds, “So I can text you my address and the details? I’m supposed to leave tomorrow, so if you’re able to get there around three, that’d be great.”

I nod because I don’t trust myself to speak.

“Perfect.” He grins, a wide, miraculous thing offset by a day’s worth of stubble and a jawline that could cut diamonds. “Thank you so much again, Amelia. I owe you big.”

I lift my tree an inch. “I’d call us even.”

“Hardly,” he chuffs. “See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow.”

I force myself to turn around and walk away, though it feels like I’m walking through molasses. Disbelief rattles me like shock waves. Then there’s the relief, quiet and unassuming, on its coattails.

I may not get a Christmas with the stereotypical big happy family, but I’ll get a peaceful one, and that in and of itself is a miracle. The fact that I’m indebting my workplace crush to me is just the cherry on top.

When I round the corner leading to my cubicle, Paige is decidedly not catching up on important emails but is instead sitting in my chair with her chin propped in her palm. The world’s cheekiest grin lights her face up brighter than the whole of Levi’s decorations.

“So...?” She captures her bottom lip in a giddy bite that does very little to quiet her squeal of excitement. Glenn leans back to glare. Her expression becomes one of mock remorse. “Sorry, Glenn.”

He scoffs but returns to his game without another word.

I jam the plug into the power strip beneath my desk and hold up my illuminated tree for her to examine. “Voila!”

The bangles on her wrist jingle as she claps her hands together. “Yay! I told you he could fix it.”

I return the decor to its rightful place on my desk. A small part of me preens like a teenage girl at the fact that Levi was the one to take care of my little tree. A feeling that only intensifies when I remember I have news to share.

“Um, so... I also may have definitely found a solution for my holiday problem.”

She leans back in my chair and folds her hands over her lap, a little wrinkle forming between her carefully manicured brows. “I didn’t know we were calling the fact that you haven’t been laid in six months a *holiday* problem, but you’re welcome for forcing you to spend alone time with McDreamy. When’s the date?”

“What? No, that’s not—first of all, how dare you.” I do my best to glare at her, but the balloon in my chest won’t let me deflate for long. “Six months is not even that long; you just have a skewed scale due to being in a committed relationship, thank you very much.”

She glances at the floor and shrugs. “I mean, there are cobwebs in my apartment that have appeared in a shorter time...”

I kick her shin. Lightly. Kind of. “Not the point!”

She snickers, leaning forward to rub the afflicted limb.

“Anyway.” I kiss my palm and press it against her shin. “The problem is not my sex life—”

“Or lack thereof.”

I glare at her. “It’s my family.” *Or lack thereof.* Ugh. “Levi’s pet sitter backed out last minute and he was going to have to cancel his holiday plans, so I offered to cover for her.” The grin that takes over my face is equal parts relief and horny thrill. “I’ll be staying at his place while he’s gone, so I can officially no longer go home for Christmas.”

Her eyes go wide. “Shut up.”

I shake my head, laughing as quietly as possible so as not to disturb

Glenn. "I'm serious."

"So let me get this straight." She holds up a hand and starts counting off fingers. "You'll be staying in his house, sleeping in his bed—"

"Guest bedroom," I interject.

"And making his dog fall in love with you?" Her eyebrows do the wave, an impressive talent my facial muscles could never recreate. "Millie, this is incredible. You two are so gonna bone."

"He won't even be there," I scoff. "And who says 'bone' these days?"

"Boink?"

A guttural noise erupts from my throat. "That's worse."

"Come on." She grabs my hand and squeezes, leaning close so her words stay trapped between us. "You've been drooling over him forever. This is the perfect first step toward pound town!"

"I hate you," I whisper, but there's no heat to it. "And besides, have you seen the man?" I sweep a hand over my body. "He'd crush me."

Another eyebrow wave. "Yeah, he would."

"I'm just saying, logistically it wouldn't work." I bite the inside of my cheek, peeking at her out of the corner of my eye. "But it makes for a great fantasy."

"Yeah, it does," she grits out through her unwavering smile. "You're gonna have the best Christmas out of all of us." She stands, frames my shoulders in her delicate arms, and gives me a little shake. "Look at that. You deserve a little happiness."

"Thanks, Paige." I cup her elbows. "I owe you."

She winks, then releases me, finally returning to her desk and giving me back my seat. "I accept extremely detailed recaps of your sexcapades as payment."

"Don't hold your breath," I quip, settling back into my chair. This time when I glance at the clock, it can't go fast enough. A weekend spent cuddling a cute dog, filled with reading time and junk food, is a lot more exciting than playing second fiddle to my half-siblings when I'm not being ignored entirely.

As I watch the snow pick up outside the window, a sense of peace fills me. This is shaping up to be a good Christmas after all.



## Chapter Two

---

I'm white-knuckling the steering wheel while navigating an ice-covered country road. My vision is nearly completely cut off by snow flurries when a deer darts out in front of me, sending my heart flying into my throat.

Pumping the brakes does nothing to aid in slowing down. I skid across the ice uncontrollably. Certain this is how it all ends, I flip a mental bird at the universe. What a shitty way to go, on the way to my first good Christmas since my dad left and our family fell apart at the seams.

The deer remains frozen in place, watching the whole ordeal with a little too much disinterest for my taste. The least he could do is be as scared shitless as I am.

I brace myself for impact even as my foot maintains a steady pulse against the brake pedal, doing everything in its power to slow this disaster down. At the last minute the deer finally remembers his survival instincts and makes a mad dash for the snowbank. Simultaneously my tires find their grip on a patch of fresh snow, and my imminent death dissolves into a close call of epic proportions.

"Holy shit." Puffs of erratic air escape my lips, making the defroster work extra hard on my windshield. I'm shaking from head to toe. Suddenly the decision to skip breakfast is very much working in my favor, because otherwise it'd be coating my steering wheel right about now.

A glance at the GPS tells me Levi's house is up ahead, tucked away in the frosted wood line just out of sight. And thank God because I don't think my nerves could make it another mile. My foot lowers hesitantly onto the gas pedal. I inch slowly forward until Levi's driveway comes into view. It's at a

decline, so I slide more than drive down its length. A final curve deposits me in front of a quaint cabin with smoke billowing out of its chimney into the gathered clouds above. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, perfectly suited for a man that's more bear than human.

A nervous chuckle skitters over my lips. When I climb out of the car, I'm as shaky on my legs as that deer. And equally as frozen.

I thought I'd escaped the nerves, but standing here in front of Levi's house, suddenly I'm littered with them. What if I do a bad job? What if his dog hates me?

What if I accidentally leave a pair of panties behind and he returns them to me at work?

I'd have to find a new job. A new city, actually. So long, Elkhorn. Hello, WITSEC.

I'm mulling over where I'd move—perhaps Australia, a la the Mary Kate and Ashley movies of my childhood, just to be somewhere warm—when the front door opens. Levi steps into view. He's so large he blocks my entire line of sight into his home. He must've shaved this morning, but a shadow is starting to appear. A beanie and a dark, long-sleeve T-shirt are the extent of his winter wear. Meanwhile I'm wearing a knee-length puffer. Jeans strain against the bulk of his muscular thighs. My gaze continues traveling downward, taking in the full length of him—I *wish*—when a little white fluffball shoots the gap between his boot-clad feet and becomes the second animal to dart out in front of me today.

In one smooth motion Levi scoops the dog up by his midsection and nestles him in the crook of his arm. Giving the space between his ears a scratch, he flashes a smile my way. "You found us!"

"I did!" I wave a hand in the general direction from which I came. "No thanks to the deer that almost killed me on my way."

He grimaces, and the dog yips. "Yeah, they'll do that. Are you okay?"

Genuine concern laces his voice, and it melts some part of me that's not used to people actually caring what happens to me. Hell, when I told my mom I had to get my gallbladder out last fall, she barely acknowledged I'd spoken, let alone expressed an ounce of worry. Levi scans my body from head to toe, then peers over at my car. Checking for damage? I don't know. But the relief when his gaze returns to mine is apparent. And heartwarming.

"All good." I start my trek across the snowy path. "Just a little shaken."

"But not stirred?" He grins, proud of himself. He tousles one of Finley's

ears, resulting in a matching smile from the small dog.

“You don’t moonlight as a stand-up comedian, I take it?”

“It’s a specific brand of humor, that’s all.”

“Are you saying my tastes just aren’t highbrow enough?”

His responding belly laugh distracts me, and I miss the patch of ice on the porch until it’s too late to course correct. Despite wearing boots, I find myself slipping when I step onto it. I’ve already accepted that I’m going to end up on my ass when Levi’s free arm comes around my waist and lifts.

My hands flatten against his chest. Our gasps mingle, the scent of peppermint flowing over my face as I glance up at him, eyes wide in surprise. He’s so close that for a second I imagine rising up on my tiptoes and pressing my lips to his. The vision is so clear, so real that I lick my lips in search of his taste.

His gaze, the deep blue of midnight, tracks the movement.

Beneath my palm, his pulse picks up. From the adrenaline, I’m sure. But a part of me hopes. Wonders.

A raspy tongue against my cheek shatters those fantasies.

“This must be Finley.” A breathless laugh shakes through me.

Levi blinks, then releases me, stepping backward. “Yeah. Yes.” He clears his throat. “This is Finley. Finley, meet our savior this weekend, Amelia Lawrence.”

Hearing my name in his delicious baritone sends a thrill all the way to my frozen toes. I train my gaze on the dog, trying to focus on anything other than this man and the effect he has on me. I scratch the soft space between his ears the way Levi did, earning another doggy smile. “I have to admit, I thought he’d be…”

“Bigger?” The corner of Levi’s mouth quirks, amusement sparking in the depths of his eyes. “What he lacks in size, he makes up for in personality, I promise.”

“Is *your* size making up for a lack in personality?”

I regret the words as soon as they’re out, but Levi lets out a guffaw so loud a few icicles dislodge from his roofline.

When his laughter finally steadies into a subtle thunder, he muses, “You’re a little spitfire, Amelia.”

I’ve never wanted to be called a spitfire before, but I have the distinct feeling I’ll be chasing the high of that compliment for the rest of my life.

Mostly to give my hands something to do so they don’t reach for his

collar and tug him down to my level to thank him properly, I give Finley's chin a scratch. He looks like a Westie, with a cute mustache framing his dark nose and happy pink mouth. "He's precious."

Levi's chest, which I didn't think could get any bigger, puffs out. "I think so, too." He glances over my shoulder. I follow his gaze, noting the snow is coming down harder now. So much so that we're losing sight of my car just twenty feet away. "I better get going before this weather gets any worse." He deposits Finley on the warm side of his threshold and gestures for me to follow. "If you wanna head in and get warm, I'll grab your bags. Are they in the trunk?"

I nod. "I can get them though—"

"Nonsense. You're doing me a huge favor here." He touches my shoulder gently. "It's the least I can do."

Before I can protest further, he takes off down the steps, disappearing into the flurry of snowflakes. I kick my shoes against the front door mat and follow Finley inside, shutting the door behind me so he doesn't escape. The last thing I need is him darting outside. With his white coat, I'd never find him in the snow.

I'm standing in a space that serves three purposes: the kitchen, dining, and living rooms. It's simply decorated, depending on a large picture window on the other side of a dark leather couch to entertain the eye. The dense forest beyond the glass looks more like a painting than real life, anyway. There's a roaring fire in the hearth. Wood cracking and splintering couples with the muted sound of snow falling on the tin roof. A Christmas tree dominates the far corner, decorated in various baubles of silver and gold.

There are also lights everywhere. They're strung from the wooden beams supporting the vaulted ceiling and along any surface Levi could reach, which at his height is pretty much everything. Two doors to my left remain shut, while the one on my right opens into a bathroom. I plant myself on the couch. Finley joins me, content to wait together for as long as I continue doling out chin scratches.

"Phew," Levi exclaims, a shiver running the course of his tall frame. He steps inside and quickly shuts the door. "It's really coming down out there." My black duffel gets deposited on the nearby dining table. In his other hand, he holds up the wine bag I forgot about. "I see you brought rations."

A blush creeps up my cheeks. "You can never be too prepared."

"I agree." He saunters over to the fridge and opens it, revealing a door

with three bottles of chardonnay inside. With a wink he adds, “Great minds think alike, I guess.”

The heat that filled my face now moves lower, pooling between my thighs. “That they do.”

He adds my bottles to his stash and shuts the fridge. “I stocked it with more than just wine. There are a few dishes that just need heating up. Stuffing, corn casserole, and the like. Typical holiday stuff.”

I must look surprised because he continues.

“What? I couldn’t leave you here without a proper Christmas dinner.”

“No, that’s great. I just...” The words tangle on my tongue. How do I tell him I’m about as used to basic kindness as a stray dog? I don’t, that’s how. “You didn’t have to do that, is all. I packed peanut butter and bread.”

He wrinkles his nose in a decidedly adorable move. I’d say a thousand more baffling things just to see it again.

“Not happening. Not on my watch, anyway. Speaking of which”—he glances at the smartwatch on his wrist—“I’ve got to go. Okay. Finley’s food is in a bag under the sink.” He points to the correlating cabinet. “He gets a cup in the morning and in the evening, just whenever you have breakfast and dinner. He likes to eat with you. The guest bedroom is there.” I follow his nod to the nearest pine door, right beside the fireplace. “Remote is on the coffee table, but I wouldn’t leave it there if you go out because Finley will eat it.

“He likes to sleep with you if you’ll let him. There’s a leash hanging in the closet in the bathroom for when you want to take him out; in a storm like this, he’ll resist but should get desperate and relent once he stuffs his face.” Levi crosses the room, leaning over me to scratch Finley’s head. His expression softens, and after a moment of hesitation, he bends down and kisses the dog’s nose.

It fills my lungs with his spiced cologne. A scent I’ll be dreaming about when I take that aforementioned bath, no doubt.

“If I’ve forgotten anything, or you have any questions, feel free to call me.” He smiles, this time at me. “I really can’t thank you enough for doing this.”

*You’re doing me just as big a favor,* I want to say, but instead I bite my tongue and nod.

“Okay, I’m gonna go.” He glances between me and Finley. “Don’t let this one boss you around too much.”

Finley yips, offended.

“Noted,” I say, chuckling. “Safe travels.”

“Thanks.” He heads for the door, scooping up a roller bag I hadn’t noticed waiting to the right of the recliner opposite me. “I’ll try not to kill Bambi.”

“Hey, Bambi tried to kill me!”

“That’s probably what the hunter in the movie said, too.”

I grab the nearest throw pillow and put it to good use, but he catches it before it can collide with his face.

“Listen, just because I was on the offensive line doesn’t mean I can’t catch.” He tosses it back in an underhanded throw, grinning like our interaction has made his whole day. “Don’t have too much fun—”

“We won’t.”

“Without me,” he finishes, and before I can read too much into it, he disappears into the snowy afternoon.

I stare at the door for an embarrassing amount of time, mulling over his words, Until my phone starts vibrating. With a quick swipe, a new message from Paige fills the screen.

Paige: About to board the ship. I’m exhausted but excited.

Me: Have so much fun!

Paige: You too!! Are you there yet?

Paige: What does McDreamy’s house smell like?

Me: You are so damn weird.

Me: But since you asked, cologne and peppermint.

Paige: Ugh, of course it does. What kind of dog does he have?  
A German shepherd? A pit bull?

I SNAP A QUICK PICTURE OF FINLEY, WHO’S FLIPPED OVER ON HIS BACK TO give me better access for belly scratches.

Paige: Okay, not what I imagined. But also, ADORABLE.

Me: Right?

Paige: If you don't steal him, I will.

Paige: How did your mom take the news?

A STONE DROPS IN MY GUT. I TYPE, DELETE, THEN RETYPE A THOUSAND excuses for why I haven't made that particularly unpleasant phone call yet. Paige finally grows impatient.

Paige: omg MILLIE. CALL HER RIGHT NOW.

I SIGH, KNOWING SHE'S RIGHT, BUT HATING THAT FACT ALL THE SAME.

Me: Calling now.

Paige: Report back. I'm buying the Wi-Fi package just for this update. And more cute dog pics.

MOM PICKS UP ON THE TAIL END OF THE THIRD RING. I'M HIT WITH THE SOUND of a vacuum cutting off, followed by unintelligible shouting aimed at my brother, Aidan. "Sorry, the housekeeper was just finishing up. It's me. I'm the housekeeper." Her hand covers the receiver briefly while she yells another tangent his way. "Are you on your way yet, Amelia? The Lewises just invited Peter and me over for appetizers and a game of pinochle tonight, and we were thinking you could watch the twins."

“Um, about that.” Finley glances up at me, his head tilting at the shift in my tone. “I actually won’t be coming for Christmas this year. I’m doing a favor for a coworker and can’t leave town.”

“What? No, honey,” she hesitates, and in that brief pause I feel hope leap into my throat. Hope that’s quickly deflated when she goes on. “Amelia, we’re counting on you to watch Aiden and Audrey. We have Peter’s Christmas Eve party tomorrow night at work and now pinochle with the Lewises. We can’t back out last minute.”

*Not my problem*, I want to say. But what good would it do? Ever since having the twins six years ago, all she sees me as is the built-in babysitter. They were her fresh start. A boy and a girl on the first go, creating the perfect family she never got with my dad. And when she found that I didn’t fit into this new vision, I became the part-time daughter. I’m only convenient when she and my stepdad need a night to themselves without my little siblings in tow.

I blink back tears, embarrassed to even have this response after all this time. I knew this was the reaction I’d get, even if some small, childish part of me hoped that she’d at least lie and say she’d miss me. That the family wouldn’t be complete without me there.

But that’s the problem, isn’t it? It’s always been complete with just the four of them. I’m a spare wheel. A phantom limb she acknowledges out of memory rather than need.

“Sorry, Mom, I can’t. I already promised my coworker.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. A stray tear spills over my cheek, which I quickly swipe away. “I’m sure you guys will still have a great Christmas without me.”

“Amelia, what’s going on? You always come to Aurora for Christmas.”

She doesn’t call it home, which is telling. We moved there when she married Peter, forcing me to finish out senior year of high school with a bunch of strangers.

Suddenly exhaustion fills every pore, every space around my heart. I get desperate for her to hear me, to see me. Even if only this once.

“Mom, we both know the only reason you want me there is so you can dump the kids on me and go have fun with Peter and your friends.” She sucks in a breath, gearing up to respond, but I push on. “I’m just tired and I want to enjoy Christmas for once. Alone seems to be the only way that’s going to happen.”



Suddenly the door swings open, startling me right out of my misery. My mom rambles a response, but I hear none of it.

Levi stands at the threshold, looking like a yeti with the way snow has coated him from head to toe. His cheeks are bright red, hands a matching shade. He steps inside and shuts the cold out before dropping his suitcase onto the table beside mine.

“Sorry, Mom. I’ve got to go,” I say, not worrying that I’ve interrupted her midsentence. She wasn’t saying anything I needed to hear anyway. “Merry Christmas.” I end the call and drop my phone into my lap. “Levi, what’s—”

“Change of plans,” he says, dusting little flurries of snow from his broad shoulders. “The roads are impassable in the storm.”

“What?”

“The driveway is so bad that I don’t know how you got down it without crashing, honestly. We’re not gonna be able to leave until the plows make it out here.” He removes the beanie, smoothing the dark hair it leaves in disarray. I must look shocked or confused or downright idiotic, because he feels the need to add, “We’re snowed in, Amelia.”

“Oh,” is all I can manage. That and an audible gulp.

## Chapter Three

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**M**y phone vibrates, giving me an excuse to look away from Levi.

Paige: Got the Wi-Fi. How'd it go with your mom?

MY HEART IS HAMMERING IN MY CHEST, A THOUSAND THOUGHTS THAT I HOPE aren't painted on my face passing through my brain. Like being stuck here in this cabin with a guy I've spent months avoiding at all costs because I can't trust myself to behave in his presence.

Our eyes meet across the room. He smiles and shrugs. "I'm sure it'll clear soon."

"Mhm." I glance back down at my phone and type out a quick message that might as well be an SOS.

Me: Change of plans. We're snowed in.

Paige: You and the dog?

Me: Levi and I. Together.

Me: And the dog.

INSTEAD OF WORDS, I GET A TON OF EGGPLANT EMOJIS IN RETURN.

“I’m gonna go grab a few more logs just to make sure we keep the fire going.” He retrieves a pair of gloves from a hook by the door. “With a blizzard this bad, it wouldn’t be a shock to lose power, but that thing will keep us nice and toasty.”

Cue another gulp. Snowed in. No power. With *Levi*.

I need something to do, stat. Before my mind wanders any further. “How can I help?”

“You wanna toss one of those casseroles in the oven?” He rubs his belly and shrugs. “Or two?”

At his size, he could probably eat everything in that fridge, but I don’t say as much. “Got it; two casseroles coming up.” I rise from the couch, Finley hot on my heels.

“And a partridge in a pear tree?”

I waggle a finger at him. “I’m telling you, don’t quit your day job.”

“Is that because you’d miss me too much?”

When I glance over, there’s a wry grin turning his face a certain shade of irresistible. I don’t know what makes me say it. What makes me think I could be so bold. But the next words out of my mouth shock us both.

“Levi Abner, are you flirting with me?”

He recovers quickly, schooling his face into cool neutrality. “That depends.” The front door opens, a gust of wind and snow flooding in through the opening. “Do you want me to be?”

Before I can respond, or even regain brain function for that matter, he steps out into the blizzard and leaves me to contemplate my answer.



BY THE TIME HE RETURNS, ARMS FULL OF SPLIT LOGS FOR THE FIRE, I’VE GOT stuffing and something that looks like green bean casserole warming in the oven. I’ve also decided that avoidance is my best course of action, so I’ve turned off my phone.

And I’m taking Levi’s joke to my grave.

The alternative is too fucking scary. Because what if he doesn’t like me?

What if he's a grade-A flirt who gets off on making women think he's into them, when in reality he's way out of their league?

I'm self-aware enough to know I'm attractive, at least sufficiently so. I'm petite at five-foot-four with a little extra weight on my hips and thighs, but no man has ever complained. My dirty blonde hair is long with fringe bangs constantly falling into my eyes, and I have hazel eyes that can be mistaken for green on a good day. I'm functionally pretty. My looks get the job done. But Levi...

Levi is miraculous.

If his size alone weren't enough to command a room, he's also rocking the dark-hair-and-dark-blue-eyes thing that makes women everywhere swoon. Smiles are easy to come by with him, and if I've learned anything today, it's that he's funny. In a goofy, charming way. That mixed with his looks, as well as his knowledge when it comes to all things analytical at work, leaves me feeling incredibly inadequate.

Hell, the man played college football all four years while also managing to graduate Summa Cum Laude. I know because they put it all on a bullet-point list beneath his name in the welcome newsletter at work. My list included the fact that I'd visited a few countries, hiked a few notable trails, and enjoyed reading a good book after a long day building digital marketing campaigns. Stacked up against his accomplishments, I hardly seem like a person worthy of his flirtation.

*He's just being nice*, I remind myself. Because that's what people like him do. They charm your socks off. Convincing myself of anything else is just asking to be disappointed.

The oven timer dings, summoning me from the spare bedroom where I've deposited my bag. Levi finishes stacking the logs by the hearth and gives Finley, who's keeping a watchful eye on his progress, a noogie.

"Smells amazing." He stands, stretching his back. A cacophony of pops and crackles coming from his spine signals his relief. "My compliments to the chef."

I huff a laugh as I pull out one hot dish and then the other. "You made them. I just heated them up."

"Eh, semantics." He washes his hands in the kitchen sink, then dries them off with the nearby towel. "Actually"—he turns the sink on a slow drip—"better leave that running so the pipes don't freeze." He disappears into the bathroom, where I hear another slow drizzle turn on.

“Good idea,” I comment when he returns. “I’ll bet you start stinking after too much time without a shower.”

“As a matter of fact, I don’t.” He puffs out his chest. “My shit always smells like roses.”

“Using Poo-Pourri doesn’t count,” I say, leveling him with the serving spoon I grabbed from the jar by his oven.

He uses an imaginary pen to scribble on his open palm. “Note to self: is not afraid of potty humor.”

“Did that just go in the pros or cons column?” I ask with an arched eyebrow.

His fist closes around the invisible ink. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I roll my eyes, which gets an earnest laugh that I work hard not to take to heart.

Sidling up to me, he opens the cabinet to my right and removes two plates. I take the one he offers and fill it with a scoop from each steaming dish. His presence is so physical it creates a vacuum around him. Even if I couldn’t see him, I’d sense him. Heat radiates off his body, and I have to fight the very real urge to lean into his chest and be warmed by it.

Instead I sidestep him, open the fridge, and remove a bottle of wine from our stash.

Anticipating my needs, he rifles through a drawer by the sink and grabs a wine opener, which he passes to me.

“Do you want a glass?”

“That depends,” he says, echoing his earlier comment in a way that causes my nerves to spasm body-wide. “I only drink the cheap, sweet stuff. If you spent more than twelve dollars on that bottle, I don’t want it.”

“You contain multitudes, Levi Abner.” I turn the bottle around. “What we have here is a vintage Sutter Home Sauvignon Blanc. It may not be fancy, but it will get you drunk in a jiffy.”

He tosses his head back and splays a hand over his heart. “Amelia, I think I just fell in love with you.”

Removing the cork, I take a swig straight from the bottle. It’s the only way not to let comments like that one weasel their way into my fragile, needy heart and fester like an infected wound. This man is not good for my health.

Once I’ve poured a glass for each of us, we take that and our plates over to the dining table. This late in the year, nighttime comes early, and our view out the window behind the couch is one of pitch-black, broken up only by

brief glints of moonlight on snow when the cloud coverage shifts.

I set my plate at the seat opposite his and then return to the sink, opening the cabinet, and retrieve a scoop of food for Finley. His bowl sits on a bone-shaped mat right beside the table. Before the first piece of kibble has hit the bowl, he's darting from his resting place on the kitchen mat to beat me there.

Levi turns, noting his dog's happy dance with a smile. "You didn't have to do that. I was about to get his dinner!"

I wave a hand and take my seat. "Hey, you hired me to pet sit, so pet sit I shall."

We each take a bite of our food. I attempt to mask the shock at how good it is while he watches me with a thoughtful expression. It seems unfair that a man as handsome as him could be this good at cooking, too. But my taste buds testify to the truth.

"Why *are* you available, if you don't mind me asking?"

I nearly spit out my sip of wine. By the time I manage to swallow it, an amused grin tugs at his lips.

"To dog sit," he clarifies. "Though feel free to elaborate on being single, if that's where your mind went."

My gaze finds his and holds. A silent war wages in my thoughts. *What's worse, I wonder. Explaining the minefield that is my family or admitting that I thought he was asking about my dating status?*

"Assuming you are, in fact, single?"

Is that hope in his voice? I eye my half-gone glass of wine and decide that no, I'm just reading into things too much.

"The reason I am available to *pet sit* is because my family lives south of Chicago."

I note the slight twitch of his lips before he covers it with a sip from his glass.

"That's only a two-hour drive. Hell, I was going farther than that," he says.

To wherever that accent hails from? Or somewhere else? I realize how little I know about him, and vice versa. Despite a million alarm bells going off in my head, I realize that I want to know more. And to know more, I have to give more.

I swallow the bite I was chewing and let out a heavy breath. "My family situation isn't exactly ideal." Finley finishes his dinner and trots over to the base of my chair, smiling up at me expectantly. I smile back. "A weekend

with a cute dog sounded a lot better than what was waiting for me there.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. But if you want to”—he tilts his head, voice dripping with sincerity—“I’m all ears.”

I try to tap into my resolve from a little while ago, but all the reasons I gave myself for keeping my distance slip away under the spotlight of his gaze.

“It’s tragically stereotypical, actually.” I comb the bangs back from my face, studying my plate of food rather than him. “My dad left us for his secretary when I was, what, fifteen, I think? Mom was devastated and stayed that way until my stepdad came along a year later and swept her off her feet. They got married my senior year, and three years later had a set of twins. Aiden and Audrey.”

“Got a thing for A names, huh?”

I nod. “My mom is Andrea.”

“Of course she is.” He smirks, then gives me a conspiratorial wink. “They’re all great, but I like Amelia the best.”

A genuine smile spreads across my face, lightening the load of this conversation on my heart. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“So your brother and sister are how old now?”

“Six.”

“And are you close?” He punctuates his question with a bite of food.

“As much as we can be with twenty years between us.” I separate a green bean out and twirl it with my fork. “The problem is that my mom kind of started over with her picture-perfect family, and I just faded to the background. Anytime I come home, I’m immediately assigned babysitting duty so my mom and Peter can go off with their friends.”

He rests his elbows on the table and folds his hands, creating a cradle for his chin. “Even at Christmas?”

“*Especially* at Christmas.” The next sip of wine goes straight to my veins, making me confident. Or vulnerable. Probably both. “Do you know what hurts the most? The minute the babies came along, I stopped getting Christmas gifts. Don’t get me wrong, they still wrapped stuff and put my name on it, but it’d be onesies for the babies that said ‘Love My Big Sis’ or bracelets with their names engraved on them. Everything revolves around the twins’ existence. It’s like they came into the world, and Mom just forgot I ever existed.”

A tear escapes the corner of my eye. Faster than should be possible for his

size, Levi gets up from his chair, crosses over to me, and squats so that we're at face level. With a calloused thumb, he swipes that tear away, taking the shame that had been bubbling up along with it.

"Sorry." I glance down at my hands where they rest in my lap, studying the freckle on my knuckle. "I know that probably sounds so ridiculous when there are vastly more important problems in the world."

"Amelia?"

"Hm?"

"Look at me."

When our eyes meet, my fractured, bleeding heart squeezes tight in my chest.

His hand encapsulates both of mine. That same thumb, still damp from my tear, traces soothing circles over my knuckles. "There can be a million other problems in the world, and not a single one of them makes yours less important." He squeezes my hands. "The people who were meant to love you most made you feel like an afterthought. That's not small potatoes."

Despite myself, I smile. Only he could make a phrase like that so skin-tinglingly charming.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Anytime, Spitfire." He rises to his full height, blotting out the overhead light in the process. "God, I'm too old to be squatting for long periods of time."

"You're what, thirty?"

"Twenty-nine, excuse you very much." He returns to his seat like the whole emotional exchange was just a normal conversation, easy as breathing, and I think a part of me loves him for it. "Football aged me twenty years. The body was not designed to take hits like that. Let alone repeatedly."

I grunt my understanding, though my grasp of college football doesn't extend much beyond the tailgating I did during my time at the University of Illinois.

"But you enjoyed it?"

His smile reminds me of a chipmunk, cheeks stuffed to the brim with the aptly named casserole. He swallows, but I've already tucked the moment away in my back pocket for the next time I need a laugh.

"I loved it. Every second."

"Do you miss it?"

He shakes his head. "To everything there is a season. I'm happy with my



life now, just like I was happy with my life then. The best parts of it are still with me.”

“Like what?”

“My best friends. The guys I played alongside.” He clears the last bite off his plate and rises, nodding toward my now-empty glass. “Would you like some more wine?”

“Yes, please.”

He deposits his plate in the sink and returns with the bottle, topping off my glass and then his. This time when he sits, it’s at the seat beside mine.

“So, Amelia, when’s the last time you really enjoyed Christmas?”

The question takes me by surprise. I have to dig deep to find the memory, and when I do, it’s like a precious artifact buried in the sands of Egypt. I dust it off gingerly, scared that I’ll lose the fine details if I don’t handle it with care.

“I guess the last one before my dad left.”

“And what made it so special?” He winces at some internal commentary. “Aside from the obvious.”

“It’s okay. I knew what you meant.” I pat his hand. To my surprise, he turns it over so we’re palm to palm, opening himself up to me. I trace the lines of his palm gingerly, noting the dips and swells. The scars and memories. “I guess it was the little things. Baking cookies with my mom. Sledding in the backyard with my dad.”

His hand captures mine in its roaming. Squeezes tight.

“We always did this thing called elf pajamas, where the ‘elves’ would bring us pj’s on Christmas Eve to wear before Santa came. So we’d get up on Christmas morning all dressed in our finest plaid courtesy of the elves and Old Navy, and it just made it extra magical.”

His expression lifts like he can feel the magic, too. As if I’ve gifted it to him alongside the memory.

“Amelia, that’s—”

But before he can finish his sentence, there’s a distant *pop*, and then the room goes dark save for the fire crackling in the hearth.

## Chapter Four

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“Okay, so, remember that thing I said about the power going out?”

In the firelight I can just barely make out his silhouette. He kicks his boots off on the doormat and hangs his gloves back on their hook to dry.

“I’m guessing it wasn’t a popped breaker then?”

Even from my place snuggled with Finley on the couch, I can see his teeth flash in what looks like a grimace.

“No dice. Not only are our cars both buried under at least three feet of snow, but I visited a few neighbors, and it looks like power on the whole street is out.” He pads over to the kitchen. Cabinets clang and clap, followed by the sound of glass clinking against glass. “I’ve never seen a storm get so bad so quickly.” When he stands up, he’s double fistfing Bath and Body Works candles.

“Leaves or Champagne Toast?”

He squints to study them in the dim light. “Mahogany Teakwood.”

“Both of them?”

“Both of them.” He rustles through a few more drawers. When he finally joins Finley and me by the fire, he’s got the candles cradled in one arm and a lighter in the other. “Now instead of peeing in the dark, you can pee in mood lighting with the scent of a sexy man nearby.”

“Weird kink, but okay.”

“Never been much into golden showers, actually.” He lights one and walks it over to the bathroom, then returns. “But who am I to yuck your yums?”

“Golden showers are most definitely not my yums.”

He lights the other candle but leaves it on the coffee table, then takes a seat on the opposite end of the couch. When the scent reaches me, I realize why the place smells as good as it does. Like firewood and spiced cologne.

“Then what are?”

My gaze drifts back over to him. I’d gotten lost watching the flames. “Hm?”

“Your yums.” He stretches his legs out. They’re so long his feet are nearly in my lap. Only Finley’s tiny cinnamon roll of a body acts as a barrier between us. “What gets Amelia going?”

If I didn’t already have two glasses of wine in me, that question might actually knock me over. Instead, emboldened by the darkness, I scoop Finley up and stretch my legs out alongside Levi’s, then settle the pup in my lap.

He’s still in jeans and I’m wearing leggings, but where our legs touch, I swear there’s fire.

“What exactly are you asking for?”

“Well, before I ask for anything, I need a little clarification.”

I tilt my head in question. The darkness has turned his eyes into the reflecting surface of the ocean at midnight. Flames crackle there, a mirror image of the fireplace behind me.

“Are you single?”

The smile that takes over my face is a little loopy from the wine and entirely involuntary. “Yes, I am.”

“And more importantly, are you interested?” His hand splays over his chest. “In me, specifically.”

My breathing becomes light and rapid. My pulse follows suit. For the first time since high school, butterflies explode in my stomach. An entire swarm of them. He’s watching me intently, but his tone holds no expectation. I get the sense that I could turn him down right now, and he’d drop the subject, never to pick it up again.

But of course I don’t.

“Yeah, I’m interested.” I nudge his thigh with my foot. “In you, specifically.”

At that, he lets his hand fall to my shin, where he traces phantom drawings with a delicate touch. His fingertips, even through the fabric of my leggings, send a delicious tingle all the way up my leg, where it settles at the apex of my thighs.

“In that case, start at the beginning. I want to know everything.”

“Everything?” I choke on a laugh. With the way he’s watching me, it’s hard to do things like breathe. Or talk. “Um, okay. The beginning. I think the first yum I ever realized I had was hands.”

“Hands?” He releases my leg and does jazz hands in front of his face. “Lucky for you, I’ve got two of them.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I deadpan, kneeling him in the calf. “I’m serious. I remember being thirteen, staring at Cody Green’s hands as he pointed out each mistake I’d made on our group art project, and thinking, ‘I’ll make a thousand more mistakes if it means I can keep watching those hands.’”

Instead of laughing at me like Paige did when I told her this story, Levi sports an amused grin and goes back to tracing images into my skin.

“I get it. For me it was watching girls put their hair into ponytails.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Really?”

He nods. “Kelsey Banks did it in homeroom my sixth-grade year, and I got a boner in class because of it.”

My teeth find purchase in my bottom lip, but it does little to tamp down my laughter.

“Hey, that was an incredibly traumatic story I just shared with you. I had no clue what to do with that thing!”

“So what did you do?”

“Hid it behind my textbooks until I could get to a bathroom stall and take care of it.”

“Oh my God, at school?” Peals of laughter spill out of me, annoying Finley so much he jumps off me and saunters over to his dog bed by the hearth. I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, still shaking and hiccupping. “How many boys were jerking off in the bathrooms between class?”

“So many, Amelia.” He pinches his lips to trap his own laughter, shaking his head in mock dismay. “It was the Wild West of jerking off back then.”

I fold in on myself, giggling uncontrollably. Levi takes advantage of me drawing up my legs and escapes to the kitchen to retrieve a fresh bottle of wine and our glasses. When he returns, I’ve only just calmed down, but I can’t look him in the eye without dissolving into another fit, so I focus on the full glass he hands me instead.

“Thank you.” It cools my throat but warms my belly. “I needed a drink after that revelation.”

He settles back into his spot, this time tugging my feet into his lap. One

hand contains his wineglass; the other works magic on my sore heels. Suddenly I wish I had a camera to capture this moment. The perfection of it. A dream some last-week version of me never would've believed could come true.

"So hands." He takes a sip. "What else?"

"I don't know." I pinch his wrist with my toes. "Massage porn has always done something for me."

"Filing that one away for future reference." His lips form a tantalizing curve. The five-o'clock shadow is intensifying on his rough-hewn face. My fingers itch to touch it, to trace the fault lines of his jaw, his cheekbones, his nose.

I don't recognize this version of myself. Sure, I've wanted him since the first day I saw him, but I've expressed more sincere wants and desires today than in the past six years combined. Both to him and my mother. Pride swells in my chest.

No, I may not recognize her, but I like this girl. The one who's honest with herself and others. And I'd like to hang on to her, even after the snow clears.

"Where'd you go just then?" His voice is gentle, but his words...they strike a chord somewhere deep in my heart.

"I'm not used to being read so easily." I shake my head. "It's a bit disconcerting."

"What can I say? I love a good book."

The wind whistles outside the window, reminding me of the storm still raging overhead. It's easy to forget in this little snow globe we've found ourselves in that there's a whole world out there. Somewhere my mom is tucking the twins into bed. Paige is out at sea, perhaps with a new ring already perched on her finger.

And I'm here, despite never planning to be. Crazy how life works.

"I was just thinking about today. I spoke up for myself with my mom earlier. Before you came back. I'm not usually so bold." The loose thread I've been picking at comes free from my sweater. I release it, lifting my gaze to meet his.

He holds it like it's sacred. Like being looked at by me is a privilege. "You've always seemed bold to me." The muscle in his jaw tenses. "But tonight, italics."

"Pardon?"

“Everything about you is emphasized.”

My tongue darts out to wet my lips. His gaze never falters, but his hand pulses against the sensitive arch of my foot.

“I think you bring it out in me. Somehow. You make me want to be honest, not just with you but with myself, too.”

He clears his throat. “That might be the greatest compliment I’ve ever received.”

I place my wineglass against my heart. “Happy to be of service.”

“I’ll have to find some way to repay you.” His smile tells me he means it.

Sleep weighs heavy on my eyes, but I don’t want the moment to end. I’m afraid if I give in, then I’ll wake up tomorrow morning and this little bit of magic we’ve found will have disappeared. The roads will be cleared, and he’ll continue on with his original plans.

Where will that leave me? Alone for Christmas. Just like I wanted. Only, sitting here with Levi, I don’t think I want that anymore.

His brow furrows, ever so watchful. “You look tired. Should we call it a night?”

I’m sinking into the couch, my blinks coming in slow pulses. “I’m warm here. If I get up and go to the guest room, it’ll be cold.”

He smiles softly. Releasing my feet, he climbs over me, leaving me alone on the couch. I whimper like a petulant child, but I’m too tired and tipsy to be ashamed.

“Don’t worry. I’m not leaving you.” There’s a folded quilt on the back of the recliner, which he retrieves after adding a fresh log to the fire. When he returns to the couch, he drops the blanket on the ground. “Scoot in.”

I glance up at him with a question in my eyes. Rather than explain, he simply scoops me into his arms and lays us both down on the couch, his head on the armrest and mine on his bicep. We’re chest to chest. Or, with his height, my chest to his rib cage. He unfolds the blanket and spreads it over both of us.

“Warm enough?” His breath disturbs the hairs on the crown of my head. This close his voice is thunder, surrounding me like a late summer storm. I inhale his scent. The spiced cologne and peppermint are faded but still present.

“Snug as a bug in a rug,” I mumble.

“Sweet dreams, Spitfire.” I don’t have to see it to know he’s smiling. I can hear it in his voice.

I fall asleep to the sound of the fire and Finley's soft snores, blanketed in warmth. Even my dreams smell a little bit like Levi.

## Chapter Five

---

**B**linking against the harsh light of morning, I find that I'm no longer snuggled up with the bear of a man from my dreams. Instead Finley feels me stir and bounces to his feet, eager to smother me in licks before I've had an ounce of coffee.

The smell of which fills my nose. I crane my neck, expecting to see that the power has turned back on and a coffeepot is running, but instead I find Levi freshly showered in a plaid flannel and jeans, kneeling in front of the fire. He's placed some kind of grate over the top of the logs, and on it rests a camping coffee percolator I recognize from my hiking groups on Facebook.

Propping myself up on an elbow, I wipe the remnants of sleep from my eye. "I'm so happy to see that coffeepot, I could kiss you right now."

He glances over his shoulder at me and smiles. "Don't threaten me with a good time."

I shake my head at him, but my stomach does a somersault.

"Power is still out, but I boiled enough water that you could take a quick bath if you like. I was just about to wake you so it didn't get cold." He combs his fingers through damp hair the color of coal. "As someone who took a frigid shower this morning, I assure you I wouldn't recommend it."

"Thank you." My heart melts a little more each time this man opens his mouth, I swear. "Can I help with anything before I do?"

"Nope. Coffee should be ready when you finish. You'll need your energy; I've got a full day of fun planned for us."

"What are you talking about? It's a blizzard outside." I sit up and point toward the window, a great wall of white, just for emphasis.

"Never stopped me before."



“Except for yesterday.”

“Okay, fact checker.” He silences me with a flat look. “Remember last night, I said I’d find a way to repay you?”

A nervous laugh escapes me. “I thought you were joking. You don’t have to repay me for a simple compliment, Levi.”

“I don’t have to, but I want to.” There’s a glint in his eyes. A giddiness to his voice. “I’m gonna give you back your best Christmas memories.”

“My what?”

“You know, the memories you have from your favorite Christmas.” He shifts closer to me and rises to his knees so we’re eye to eye. Warmth floods me as his hands land on the tops of my thighs and grab hold. “The cookies, the sledding, all of it.”

I shake my head, wondering if I’m still a little delirious from sleep. “I don’t understand.”

“Amelia, it breaks my heart that your family has made this holiday something you dread instead of something to look forward to. And I’m not prideful enough to think I can fix that or somehow make it all better, but as luck would have it, I get to spend this Christmas with you. So I’m going to make it a good one. Okay?”

I don’t want to cry in front of him again, but I can feel the tears pressing at the backs of my eyes. It doesn’t help that he’s so close I can see every speckle of light in his navy-blue eyes, each of the hairs at his temples that are taking on an early tinge of silver. From afar, Levi is heartbreakingly handsome.

Up close, everything about him shines.

“Why?” I swallow back the lump in my throat and try again. “Why are you doing this for me?”

“Because everyone deserves that magical Christmas kind of feeling.” He leans forward and presses a kiss to my forehead, a sensation I’ll hold on to forever. “But especially you, Spitfire.” In a quick juxtaposition, he smacks the outsides of my thighs, a gesture that’s meant to be playful but leaves me throbbing. “Now go before I lay you out on this couch and show you just how beautiful I find your bedhead.”

Tempting, if I weren’t acutely aware of my morning breath.

He returns to the hearth, that jaw working beneath a fine layer of stubble. The floor is cool against my feet as I make my way to the guest room and retrieve a change of clothes from my bag. Thank God for my fear of leaving

underwear behind—I packed only my finest pairs.

Levi doesn't look up when I pass him on my way to the bathroom. It's not till my hand grips the brass doorknob that he calls, "Oh, and Amelia?"

I glance over my shoulder. "Yeah?"

His gaze drifts from my toes to my hips to my breasts. When the journey finally ends with his eyes locking on mine, there's a heaviness to their depths that steals my breath. "If you need more hot water, just say the word."



IT'S NOT THE BUBBLE BATH OF MY FANTASY, BUT I DO FIND MYSELF TEMPTED to delve a hand between my legs. My thoughts remain focused on the man just outside that door. He filled the tub enough to submerge the majority of my body, but the cold coupled with the memory of his weighted gaze has my nipples peaked and my exposed knees pebbled with goose bumps. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip to distract from the tantalizing sensations, or to prevent myself from taking him up on his offer.

Because it *was* an offer, right?

I swallow thickly, eyeing the door just as I have been for the entirety of what was supposed to be a quick bath. If I don't get out of here soon, I *will* need that extra bucket of water—or him—to warm me up.

The responding pulse of my clit makes the decision for me.

"Um, Levi?" *Pathetic*. If I'm going to violate the cardinal rule of fraternizing with a coworker by taking this leap, I better do it confidently. "Levi, can you come in here!"

Footsteps reach my ears first, then the sound of his hand on the doorknob. My heart leaps into my throat.

But nothing happens for so long I wonder if I imagined it.

"Levi?"

A thud. The sound of a body meeting wood. I imagine his forehead resting against the other side of the pine door.

"Amelia, I hope you know that if I come in there and you aren't clothed, it'll be like sixth grade all over again." He sighs heavily. "Probably worse."

I giggle. "I'm counting on it."

Before the words have left my mouth, that knob is turning and the door swings open, revealing a very flushed, very turned-on Levi. If the bulge in his

jeans is to be believed.

“Jesus Christ.” He braces a hand on the counter, another on the doorframe. “You’re fucking remarkable.”

I lift a dripping finger to my chest. “It’s Amelia actually.”

“Such a smart mouth.” Two steps and he’s over me, then his arms are plunging into the water and scooping under my knees and back. “You’ll pay for that one.”

“You’re getting wet!” I squeal, slapping his chest as I’m lifted, water pouring from my skin to the floor beneath us. But it’s no use fighting. He’s in complete control, and from the way he’s moving, he knows it.

Cold granite meets my ass and I yelp, a sound quickly swallowed by his mouth covering mine.

I’m seated on the countertop between the sinks of the double vanity, and as his lips seal to mine, he grips my knees and rips them apart, making space for himself to come flush with my body. Damp flannel scrapes against my hardened nipples. The sensitive skin aches for more, and I oblige, arching into him to get the relief I need. His calloused palms travel the length of my thighs, the curve of my hips. Finally they settle on my ass, which he squeezes so tightly I already know there will be marks.

Perfect. I want every memento I can get of this wet dream come to life.

His tongue parts the slit of my lips, delving into my mouth in lazy circles. There is so much heat, so much intensity to the way he is handling me that this softness comes as a surprise. And it, above all else, is my undoing.

I let my hands fall from his shoulders to his chest, where I blindly search for a button to undo. I want his skin against mine, the coarse scrape of his chest hair over my breasts. I want everything he can give me and more.

But he abandons his ministrations on my ass to capture my wrists and clamp them down against the granite. Using his teeth to drag out my bottom lip, he backs away just enough to look me in the eye. His pupils are blown with desire, the blue completely swallowed by darkness.

“Tell me another of your yums.”

I blink hazily up at him. “*You.*”

A guttural moan is all the response I get.

He releases my wrists. One hand roams the swells of my breasts, the column of my throat, before gathering the length of my hair in a closed fist and tugging. It exposes me to him, something he takes full advantage of by licking me from collarbone to ear. His breath is hot on the most sensitive spot

of my neck when he growls, “I can’t tell you how long I’ve wanted this,” into the shell of my ear.

His other hand moves to cup my jaw, his index finger plucking at my swollen bottom lip.

“You said you liked hands, right?”

I nod. Wetness pools between my legs. The need is so strong, so desperate that I’m fairly certain I could come from his touch alone.

“Perfect.” He pushes his finger into my mouth. “Suck on that, Spitfire.”

I do as he says, working over his finger the way I wish I could his cock. I take it deep, watching those dark eyes the entire time. Soon a second finger joins it, and I moan, a sound that drives his hips forward as if by instinct alone. The rough seam of his fly collides with my exposed pussy, and I whimper at the shock of pleasure that rolls through me.

“You’re such a good girl.” He removes his fingers from my mouth and uses them to spread my labia before plunging in. “So wet for me.”

Our mouths collide. As he works the sensitive spot just inside my entrance, his thumb moves in tight circles over my throbbing clit. An orgasm starts building inside me, a coiling of electricity that’s desperate to explode. I roll my hips toward him, craving release.

And he gives it to me, right there on the bathroom counter.

I shatter against him. My entire body is a shivering, needy thing. His hand slips away, only to cross his other behind my back and pull me to him, as close as two bodies can be with the barrier of a flannel between them.

“This has got to go,” I murmur against his lips, reaching once more for the top button.

Only he steps away, leaving me gasping and confused.

“Later. I promise.” He winks. “For now, we have cookies to bake.”



“THEY’RE NOT YOUR TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS COOKIE, BUT I THINK IT’S A great attempt considering our circumstances.”

I finish chewing the mouthful of sugar and butter, wiping a glob of chocolate that has dripped down my chin. “Honestly I think I like them better than normal cookies.”

He removes another cookie tray from the grate over the fire, revealing a

sheet of cookies that are crispy on the outside, but nothing more than hot cookie dough on the inside.

“Lacey from Accounting would have your head.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m serious! What’s everyone’s favorite part of baking cookies?”

One of his eyebrows lifts.

“Eating the cookie dough. Here you have the best of both worlds.” I pick one up off the cooling rack on the kitchen counter, ignoring Finley’s adorable attempt at coercion at my feet. “Cookie on the outside, dough on the inside.” I take a bite. “Delicious.”

He brings the tray over to the counter and transfers the last of our masterpieces onto the rack. At this point all we’ve had for sustenance is coffee, cookies, and some cold corn casserole we snuck out of the fridge while gathering ingredients for cookies. I’m a little bit queasy and a lot anxious over what to make of our bathroom tryst. But hey, what’s Christmas without a sprinkle of anxiety?

I get that he wants to give me back all these special holiday moments, but part of me would be content just to hole up in his bedroom and explore a long list of each other’s yums. Before it was only a fantasy. Now that I’ve gotten a taste of the real thing, I’m itching for more.

“Okay. Next up, sledding.” He captures my chin between his thumb and his forefinger. When he bends down to place a kiss on my lips, it takes everything in me not to climb him like a tree. “You’re going to want to bundle up. It’s a blizzard out there.”

“Again with the humor.” I click my tongue disapprovingly, but when our eyes meet, I can’t help but smile like a madwoman. *What on earth is this man doing to me?*

Dressed in our thickest coats, both of us sporting a pair of Levi’s gloves that look more like Mickey Mouse hands on me, we make our way gingerly through the fresh powder to the incline of Levi’s driveway.

Finley runs ahead, though I’m only able to spot him because of the lime-green leash he’s attached to. He blends in perfectly with the snow.

“Do you think they’ll clear the roads soon, now that it’s stopped snowing?” My breath comes out in a choppy staccato. Walking in snow is hard enough. Walking uphill in snow is my own fitness nightmare.

Levi shrugs. “Not sure. Since we’re a low traffic road, we tend to be last on the list for the plows. But it sure would be nice.”

For reasons I don't want to admit to myself, his words cause a tightness in my chest that has nothing to do with exercise.

"How far were you going to visit your family?" I clear my throat, but the lump there won't budge. "If they plow before dark, you could probably still make it in time for Christmas."

I'm laser focused on the path ahead when Levi's elbow nudges my shoulder, urging me to look at him. I do, but I pray for once that my emotions aren't written plainly on my face for the world to see.

Because I understood having a crush on my sexy coworker, but this? This ache at the thought of him leaving? That's a feeling too dangerous to name.

"I meant it'd be nice because then the utility trucks could come turn the electricity back on. Though admittedly the fire does add a certain ambiance to this whole experience." He brushes the bangs out of my eyes like he's done it a thousand times before. "Even if they turned on the power right this second, I wouldn't leave you."

I can't—*won't*—address that conundrum. Not sober in broad daylight at least. Instead I ask, "Was your family really bummed that you couldn't make it?"

His lips flatten as he nods but doesn't elaborate. Probably in an attempt not to make me feel bad for my mom's less than emotional response to my own cancellation.

We reach the top of the hill and drop our sleds in the snow. They're old-fashioned wooden ones, classier than the plastic disks of my youth. The path to the bottom is lined on either side with snow-dusted trees. I can only hope I don't run straight into one and make an utter fool of myself.

"Have you sledded at all since that Christmas?" He scoops Finley up and takes a seat with him in his lap. His ass nearly hangs off the back, and his knees are all the way to his chin, with the poor dog sandwiched in the fold between. But he smiles like this is the best day of his life.

I lower myself onto my sled, eyeing the steep slope ahead. "I have not. To be honest, I think I have a lot more fear of getting injured now than I did as a kid, and it makes things like this slightly more daunting." I sigh, closing my eyes against the frigid air and my own nonsense ramblings. "All that to say, I've been avoiding it."

Suddenly a warm hand comes around mine, or as best it can with the oversize gloves. When I open my eyes, Levi's hold no judgment. Only a gentle kind of enthusiasm.

“Remember how I said this weekend you’re in italics?”

I chuckle and nod, nervous shivers vibrating my spine.

He scoots an inch forward and tugs my hand to bring me along. “Right now I need you to be in all caps.”

“I’m not sure that metaphor means what you think it does.” He gives me a flat look, and I relent. “But okay. I can do that.”

“Good.” He puts his feet in the snow and starts crab walking us forward. “Because here. We. GO.”

Levi jerks his feet back onto the sled as we tip over the summit. Icy wind whips my hair out of my face and blurs my vision. Instinct has me leaning to steer, a memory my body held on to even when my brain let it slide. My stomach drops and my lungs constrict. I’m flying down the hill without a care in the world.

And it feels good. So good.

Levi’s weight carries him farther faster, so of course he’s the first to hit the bank at the base of the driveway, just to the right of where his car is buried beneath a pile of snow.

He crash-lands but manages to hold Finley up in the air. This spares the dog from the face full of cold I receive when I plunge into it a moment later.

“That was incredible,” I breathe.

Levi turns to me, a wide smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. His cheeks are bright red, and flakes of snow are caught in his stubble. He looks like all the good things I used to associate with Christmas, back before my family morphed it into something to dread.

I turn to face the bright blue winter sky, letting the cold bring me to life instead of numbing me. I’m sprawled out on my back like a starfish, and when Levi stands with Finley in hand and reaches back to help me up, I shake my head. “Just one more thing.”

I drag my jittery limbs through the fresh powder, up and then down. Legs apart and then together. It only takes a moment for Levi to realize what I’m doing. Then he sets Finley down and lays flat out beside me. I can’t see his movements, but I hear the drag of his arms and legs through the snow. He’s making an angel, just like me.

When we’re satisfied with our handiwork, we do our best to rise from the snowbank without disturbing the masterpieces. Levi reaches for me again, and this time I take his hand. He tugs me into him and wraps his arm around my shoulders, placing a kiss on the crown of my head.

Our angels are comically disproportionate. Mine looks like a child's compared to his. But oddly enough, looking at them reminds me of doing the same thing with my dad all those years ago. Back when I was young enough to believe in the magic of Christmas. Like the kind that sends a snowstorm when you need it most.

"They're perfect," I whisper. It's the only way I can hide that my voice is breaking. I swipe a hand at my cheeks and hope that from Levi's vantage point, it just looks like I'm sweeping away bits of snow. "Okay, what's next?"

Using his grip on my shoulders, he spins me around so I'm facing the house. He steps behind me and leans over so his lips are just brushing the top of my ear.

"Next is elf pajamas."



## Chapter Six

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The evening comes on quickly. By the time we're warmed up and all the snow clumps have been cleared from Finley's underbelly, that pale blue sky has turned to the melodramatic lavender of twilight. It emphasizes the surrealism of the scene beyond the window. A perfect metaphor for this entire experience.

"I still don't understand how you have elf pajamas for me." I cross my arms over my chest, narrowing my eyes at Levi. He's sitting crisscross in front of the Christmas tree with a sloppily wrapped present in his outstretched hands. I take it but make no move to open the package. "I don't have anything to give you in return."

"Let me give you a massage later, and we'll call it even," he says, winking.

I cross my legs and squeeze. "That's not the kind of massage porn I was talking about."

"Oh?" He leans back, hands braced on the hardwood floor. "Do tell."

We lock eyes and I give him my most seductive grin. "I'll be the one giving the massage."

His Adam's apple bobs. When he speaks, his voice is strained. "Deal."

Satisfied, I slip a finger under the seam of the wrapping paper and rip. Buffalo plaid greets me. I remove the fabric from the remains of the green and red wrapping paper and hold it up, finally working out that it's a men's button-down. Levi's, based on the size and the fact that it smells like spice and peppermint, a scent I inhale deeply.

"Old Navy was out of the question, so I had to get creative." He tilts his head, gaze flickering over my face. "And obviously you don't have to wear

it, but I figured at your height it'd be more of a nightgown anyway.”

I hug the shirt to my chest, overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. Joy and nostalgia and some sadness, too. As well as the warmth pooling in my stomach—and lower—at the idea of wearing his clothes.

“Thank you, Levi. This is amazing.” I blink against the burn of tears. In the increasingly dim light, he looks like a dream. Probably because he is one. I wished for him, for this feeling, in the quietest parts of my heart for as long as I can remember. Someone to listen and really care about what I say. To show me I'm wanted and adored.

*Adored.* That's how I feel. From the warmth filling his gaze and the affection as he leans forward and captures my hand, tugging me down to the floor with him. He sits me on his lap. The thick ridge of him pressing against my core is a clear indicator of his desire. I roll my hips just slightly, to let him know I feel it in return.

I press my palm against his cheek, reveling in the rough scrape of his stubble and the hard cut of his jaw beneath it.

“Why are you doing this for me?” I breathe.

“I told you, I—”

My finger moves to his lips, silencing him. “I know what you said. That you want to give me back that Christmas magic. But you're so passionate about it. So dedicated. Where does that come from?” I let my hand fall to his shoulder, but I miss the feeling of his soft lips immediately. “Someone as incredible as you doesn't just happen.”

His responding smile is wry, though his eyes are wide and thoughtful. “I can't just be a naturally passionate person?”

I pinch the swell of his deliciously pronounced traps.

“Ouch, okay.” He fake-winces. “I guess I just know what it's like for Christmas not to look the way it should, and I wanted to give to you what the people I care most about have given to me.”

Echoing his words from yesterday—has it really only been twenty-four hours?—I reply, “You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. But if you want to...”

“You're all ears?” He leans forward and nips one of mine, sending a thrill down my spine.

“Exactly.”

Suddenly a loud hum fills the room; then one by one the cabin comes roaring back to life. The tree illuminates, followed by the twinkle lights

overhead. The microwave beeps and the oven clicks. Levi tightens his grip on my hips as we both tilt our heads back, blinking against the onslaught of light after so long spent in the orange glow of the flames.

“Well, would you look at that?” Levi whistles. “A Christmas miracle.”

Our laughter mingles and muddles, forming a harmony unique to us.

With a pinch of my sides, he spurs me to action. “Okay, up. Time for a Christmas tradition of our own.”

We both stand, and I retrieve the shirt from the couch and gather it in my hands. “What do you mean?”

He points to the shirt. “Get changed and I’ll show you.”

“Are you putting on something more festive, too?” I grip the hem of his gray Henley and tug.

“Only one way to find out.” He smirks. “See you in a minute.”

When I return to the living area, I’m wearing his button-down and nothing else. Not even the delicate lace panties I contemplated before discarding them in my bag. If we’re being bold this weekend, we’re gonna be fucking *bold*. No more hiding when he so clearly wants me. When I so desperately want him.

The twinkle lights fill the space with a cozy magic that just *oozes* holiday spirit. Levi is hunched over what looks like a Bluetooth speaker, wearing a matching buffalo plaid shirt. Finley snoozes quietly on his dog bed by the fire. Two glasses of milk sit beside a plate of our cookie creations on the coffee table. It all gives me the distinct feeling of waking up on Christmas morning as a child to find that Santa had come.

This Christmas Eve, when Levi glances up at me as carols begin pouring from the speaker in his hand, I know with certainty I’ve been a good girl this year. Why else would I be getting such a gift?

He collects the glasses from the coffee table and passes one to me. “Hope you like eggnog.”

“Eggnog?” I take a sip, and sure enough... “When did you have time to make this?”

His cheeks hollow as he sips from his glass. “You were in there for a lot longer than you realize.”

A blush creeps up my neck. “Sorry, I had important decisions to make.”

“Like?”

“Whether or not I wanted to wear underwear.”

A pained expression passes over his face. “Fuck, Amelia.”

I get high on the feeling of power it gives me, seeing how deeply he's affected by this news. My spine straightens once I set my glass down, and I take a step closer to him. "The answer was no. In case you were wondering."

The responding growl is more bear than man.

Abandoning his eggnog on the mantel, his hands sweep under my arms and lock in the middle of my back. On instinct alone, I reach up to clasp my hands together against the nape of his neck, though they just barely touch once there. He's gazing down at me like I'm something to be devoured, and as we start swaying to the rhythm of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," all I can think about is being eaten.

"I'd hoped to spend some time dancing with you to a few of my favorite carols, but knowing *that*"—his gaze dips south to the bare expanse of my thighs—"I doubt I'll last this whole song."

"Lucky for you, we started in the middle of it."

"Amelia Lawrence, the things you do to me." The muscle in his jaw ticks. "A man could get addicted."

"Just any man or you, specifically?"

A wicked grin. "Me, specifically."

"Perfect." I rise to my tiptoes and pull at his neck simultaneously. He takes the hint and meets me halfway, our lips colliding in a flurry of heat and need that sends a responding strike of desire straight to my core.

He sighs against my lips. "Amelia, is this the part where I get a massage?"

I smile and he licks my teeth. "I thought you'd never ask."

Next thing I know, he's bending at the knee and locking his arms around my thighs. He lifts me, and by the time I stop moving, I'm bent over his shoulder with my ass in the air.

He storms through his bedroom door and deposits me onto his bed, a massive thing seemingly carved from the same wood as the rest of the cabin. I land in a sea of blankets, and he crawls over me, bracing himself on either side of my head. "Where do you want me?"

"On your belly." I reach for the collar of his matching flannel. "And take this off."

"Yes, ma'am."

That *drawl*.

He sits up and strips the shirt from his body. Just as I pictured, he's broad and thick, with a dusting of dark chest hair and a matching happy trail that

bridges the gap between his navel and his waistband. My mouth goes dry, but my pussy is dripping wet.

As though he knows what reaction I'm having to the sight of him, he smirks. Ever so watchful.

He undoes the button of his jeans and stands to remove those as well. While up, he retrieves a bottle of lotion from his bedside table and tosses it to me. Moving to my right in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs, he sprawls out on his stomach and lays his head on folded arms. "Have your way with me, Spitfire."

I bite my lip so hard it punctures, but I barely notice. I'm too fucking excited.

I mount his backside, reveling in the feel of his firm ass against my sensitive core. His eyes drift closed as I pour a generous helping of lotion on my hands and begin rubbing his shoulders, a soft groan slipping through his parted lips. I press the heels of my palms against the rippling muscles of his back, focusing on the areas he responds to most passionately—with more moans or sharp gasps, whatever I can get. All the while, I roll my hips subtly, enjoying myself just as much, if not more.

"Okay," I move my hands to his sensitive sides and squeeze. "Time to roll over."

His eyes fly open. I perch up on my knees to give him space, and he follows instructions, the bulge of his cock apparent through the thin fabric of his boxers. This time when I lower myself, we both let out a guttural moan.

"I have a better idea," he says. His hands find my hips and pull. "I want you to sit on my face."

Every muscle inside me clenches. I'm not sure I'm even breathing.

"Now, Amelia." He digs his fingers into my ass.

My heartbeat rages, flooding my ears with nothing but the sound of rushing blood. I do as he says, crawling forward over his chest and settling with my knees on either side of his face. I hover only for a second, but even that is too much hesitation for this man. He grabs my thighs and forces me down. My pussy meets his mouth, the sensation unleashing a ripple of pleasure throughout my entire body.

As he laps at my core, I tug the flannel over my head, leaving me naked and bucking against his mouth. His gaze remains locked with mine. Those hands will no doubt leave bruises on my thighs. It's so fucking hot, watching him squeeze me as close as possible, devouring me just as he did in my

wildest dreams.

“Fuck, Levi.” His tongue finds my clit and flicks. “Yes, just like that.”

He repeats the action tenfold while one hand abandons my thigh to cup the swell of my breast. He pinches my dark nipple and rolls. The twin sensations of his tongue and his fingers send me careening over an edge I didn't even see coming. I grind against his mouth uncontrollably, blindly, as he swallows every drop of moisture his mouth draws out of my pussy.

I collapse against the bed frame. “Holy shit.”

He holds up my hips, and when he tilts his head back to gaze up at me, his stubble glistens with evidence of my pleasure. “We're not done yet.” He slaps my ass. “On your back.”

My legs tremble and my arms are weak, but I manage to position myself as he instructs with my head resting on a pillow that smells of him.

He stands at the foot of the bed and strips his boxers off, revealing a thick, rigid cock that makes my mouth water instantly. There's a chest of drawers behind him, and he yanks open the top drawer. A gold foil packet comes up in his hand. He tears it open and rolls the condom over his dick, never once breaking eye contact with me.

I'm trying to figure out the logistics of him fitting inside me when he kneels on the bed and reaches to the right of my head, retrieving another pillow. His arm scoops under my ass and lifts, and he uses the other to situate the pillow just under my hips. When he sets me back down, our pelvises align perfectly.

“I don't even have to ask if you're ready for me,” he growls. “I tasted just how badly you want this.”

“Please, Levi.” I squirm beneath him, aching to be filled. “I need your cock.”

“Yes, you do. And you're gonna take it like a good girl, aren't you?”

I nod, biting my bottom lip.

He grips his dick and guides it to my entrance. That first moment of him entering me is everything I could've imagined and more. Tighter. More breathtaking. He thrusts hard and fast, burying himself to the hilt. I throw my head back and cry out, unable to contain the pleasure rippling through me. It has to have somewhere to go, and it comes out as his name on my lips.

One hand braces above my shoulder; the other holds my hips in place as he fucks me. And fuck me he does. It's everything I craved each time I caught his eye in the break room or sat beside him in a meeting, trying to

focus on reports and corporate jargon while imagining him buried inside me.

He releases my hip long enough to grab my hand and bring it to his lips. His thumb presses into my forefinger, forcing it up. I'm just about to ask when he spits on it and then guides my hand down to my pussy. "Touch yourself. I wanna feel you come on my cock, baby."

I swallow and nod. My fingers circle my clit, still throbbing from his meal, and it brings me right back to the edge. Just when I think it can't get any hotter, that hand of his finds my breast and he pinches my nipple the way I loved before. Every part of my body is lit up with his attention, his touch. On his next thrust, I erupt. My heels dig into his ass, and I hold him inside me, grinding out my orgasm until it's spent.

His hair is falling over his forehead, and sweat beads at his temples. He sits up, removes my legs from their place around his waist, and gathers them together on his right shoulder. His lips part, and he breathes my name out like a mantra as he thrusts into me at a pace that's just for him. I'm still reeling from my own orgasm when his overtakes him. I watch him, completely rapt, as his face tightens and then releases and he crumples over me, utterly spent.

"Merry Christmas to me," I mutter against his skin.

He lifts just enough to press his lips to mine and whisper, "Merry Christmas, Amelia," before collapsing back onto me with a sigh.

After long minutes we get up and take care of ourselves, gather Finley, and return to the bed. We tangle together under the blankets, and I doze off while wrapped tightly in Levi's embrace.

## Chapter Seven

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I wake on Christmas morning to the sound of an engine rumbling outside the window. Levi's arm is deadweight over my midsection, keeping me firmly planted in the bed. I pinch his hand. He stirs but doesn't wake, so I jab my heel into his shin. That does the trick.

"Are you always this feisty first thing in the morning?" he grumbles. His breath stirs the hairs at the base of my neck, making me shiver.

"There's someone outside."

His head lifts. "Huh?"

"Listen."

We both quiet, letting the sound of the engine rise to the surface of our conversation.

He jolts upright and dismounts the bed, crossing the room to peer between his blackout curtain panels. His eyes narrow, neck craning. "I can't fucking believe it."

"What?"

Instead of responding, he lets out an excited whoop and races to tug his jeans over his bare ass. I'm still struggling to poke my head through the hole of his button-down when he rips open the bedroom door and disappears. A few moments later the distant sound of the front door opening and slamming shut follows.

Finley and I make eye contact, equally sleep-laden and confused.

"Wanna go investigate?"

He yips, which I take as an affirmative. I straighten Levi's flannel over my body, making sure nothing is showing, then scoop Finley up and head for the door.



Outside, against a blinding backdrop of white, I find Levi standing shirtless among a group of men. The source of the rumbling sound, a pickup truck fitted with a snowplow attachment, is parked beside the mound of snow that is my car. The men take turns embracing Levi with a firm slap against his bare back, leaving a chorus of handprints over his shoulder blades. One of them—a man nearly as tall as Levi but twice as wide, which I didn’t know was possible—catches sight of me out of the corner of his eye and turns, narrowing his gaze like I’m a figment of his imagination.

“Man, we came all this way to rescue you from a snowstorm only to find you’re not even snowed in, you just got yourself some better company!” the man hollers.

All at once, the other five men turn to face me. Four of them with various expressions of surprise, while Levi just wears an ecstatic grin.

Levi says something to the guys that is drowned out by Finley’s excited barking. He’s wiggling for freedom, desperate to meet the newcomers. I’m about to grab his leash—and a pair of pants—when the men start moving toward me one by one with Levi at the lead. The big guy who noticed me first stops to cut the truck’s engine before following.

Levi breaks into a jog to get ahead of them. His skin is mottled from exposure, but his eyes are bright when he arrives at my side and plants a kiss on my cheek.

“You may wanna put on some panties.” He winks. “My family just arrived.”



“THE CITY CLEARED THE STREET,” JOSEPH, THE BIG GUY, EXPLAINS. “WE JUST figured we’d take it the rest of the way.”

“Straight to your house,” Kaden—the leanest of the five newcomers, with dreadlocks dusting his shoulders and an easy smile—adds.

TJ reaches for a roll at the center of the table. Apparently they didn’t just come to rescue Levi. They also brought along a spread that would put Paula Deen to shame. “We couldn’t let you miss out on Christmas.”

“And ruin ten years of tradition.” Monty scrapes the remnants of his mashed potatoes into a pile and scoops them into his waiting mouth.

Joseph, TJ, Monty, and Kaden go on discussing their grand plan, while

Landon—the quietest of them all—looks on with an amused smile. His shock of red hair and bright green eyes are such a contrast to Levi’s dark fade and midnight irises that seeing the two of them next to each other is a bit disconcerting. But they mimic each other’s movements without realizing—a testament not just to the length of their friendship but the depth. As with all the guys at the table, they’ve known each other since their days as Wisconsin Badgers. Or so I’ve been told.

“So you guys do this every Christmas?” I ask.

“Yep,” Joseph replies. “It’s at a different person’s house each year, but always together.”

“This time was supposed to be at Monty’s since he and his wife just got married, but this guy”—he jabs a finger at Levi—“decided he wanted to go twice in a row apparently.”

“Listen, I don’t control the weather!” Levi says, raising his hands in mock defense. When he lowers them, he places one on my knee beneath the table and squeezes. “I’ve just got extremely good luck.”

My heartbeat stutters. How could it not, with him saying things like that? And with his fingers tracing slow circles over my knee, and the way he glances at me out of the corner of his eye and smiles, it’s hard not to get ideas. Not to want it all to mean something more.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, interrupting that thought. I powered it on while getting dressed to see if there were any updates from Paige, only to find a plethora of missed calls from my mom and a handful of texts with various suggestive combinations of emojis from my friend, including a snowflake and a peach duet that I’m still trying to work out.

My mom’s face lights up the screen. I’m about to lock it and put the phone away when Levi’s hand moves from my knee to my wrist, drawing my gaze to his.

“Maybe answer it.” He shrugs. “You never know.”

*I do know*, I want to say. It’s always the same with my mom. But something about this weekend has me feeling optimistic. Or stupid. The jury’s still out. Either way, his steadying touch makes me act against all instinct and accept the call while excusing myself from the table. I disappear into the safety of Levi’s room, prepared to be disappointed.

“Hello?”

“Amelia! Where have you been? I’ve been calling for two days and going straight to voice mail.”

I sit on the edge of the bed, which is still rumpled from our night together. Despite the anxiety in my stomach, I smile.

“I’m sorry, the power went out where I’m staying. There was no service.”

It’s not entirely a lie, though I’m certainly leaving out the fact that I turned my phone off in the first place to block her out. I just needed some space from it all. Not that she’d ever understand.

“Oh, honey, I was worried sick about you.”

That doesn’t sound right. “You were?”

“Yes!” Her voice carries an intensity I’m not used to from her. Typically the best I get is half-assed listening while she chauffeurs the twins to their next playdate or soccer game. “I just...I wanted to talk to you about what you said on Saturday.”

My heart drops like a lead balloon.

“Mom, I don’t really want to get into it.” My mind drifts to the group in the kitchen, including the man whose touch I miss even for these few minutes we’ve been apart. “I’m actually having a good Christmas for once and—”

“That’s just it, Amelia,” she says. “You should be having a good Christmas. You should’ve always been having a good Christmas. I was shocked on Saturday, but not because what you said wasn’t true. Because it *was*.”

I close my eyes, willing the sudden rush of tears to stay in, but they don’t listen. They spill over my cheeks in torrents, wetting my lips and soaking my neck on their journey down.

“When the twins were born, I started completely over. And it was hard. Incredibly so. After all, you were always such an independent child, and they...well, now I’m realizing maybe you were independent because you had to be, not because you wanted to be. And then they came along, and even though it wasn’t your fault I made that decision, I certainly made it your problem. I was losing myself in raising them, and whenever you came home, I threw them at you and ran. Which wasn’t fair to you or your siblings.” She hiccups, and I realize she’s crying too.

I picture her in the perfectly appointed bedroom she and Peter share, in a town she never knew until she moved there for him, with two small children downstairs that depend on her for everything while Peter works all day to provide for them all. Each a decision she made, yes, but for once I see it through her eyes. I feel her panic. Sense her overwhelm.

I imagine losing my marriage to my high school sweetheart in the worst

possible way, then finally finding someone who makes me believe in love again. Then a pregnancy, with twins to boot, just as my grown child is finally starting her adult life. I can't excuse the way she treated me, but I can see her as a human who made a flawed decision. A lot of them, actually.

"I'm so sorry, Amelia. I'll never be able to make up to you all these years I made you feel forgotten...but you aren't. I promise you aren't. And if you'll let me, I'd like to do everything I can to prove that to you."

"Mom, I—" I clamp my mouth shut. There are no words that can do the feelings inside me justice. Relief at having her acknowledge I am not, in fact, crazy. That she really did mess up. That I've been wronged, and I'm justified in all my hurt and anguish.

There's also hope and hesitation, too. The desire to believe things really could change. Fear that they won't and this'll all be for nothing.

*No.* Never nothing. I spoke up for myself, and I can do it again. If this time with Levi has taught me anything, it's that I'm stronger than I realized. Bolder. And I can do hard things.

"I don't expect an answer right away." Her sniffles and sharp, sputtering breaths fill my ear. "But I booked a condo in Elkhorn for New Year's. Just the two of us. No kiddos. No Peter. I want to spend time together without any distractions."

The bedroom door opens, and Levi's head pokes through, eyebrow raised in question. I nod, and he slips inside, closing the door behind him.

Levi slides in behind me, wraps his arms around my stomach, and lays me against him. Every muscle in my body relaxes at his nearness, warms at his touch. It gives me the strength I need to respond.

"Mom, I'd love to spend New Year's with you." She gasps, but before she can speak, I add, "But it's going to take time. I need you to know that. The damage wasn't done overnight, and it won't be fixed that way either."

"I know, honey. I got the name of Linda's therapist, and I'm going to call her after the holidays. And we hired a babysitter. Her name is Josephine and she's lovely." She pauses to suck in a shaky breath, and I do the same. "I don't want you to resent your siblings, and I'm afraid I've set the three of you up for failure with the way I've acted. But they adore you, and one day I hope you can have the kind of relationship I had with my big sister."

I smile at the thought of Aunt Marcy, who passed twelve years ago in a car accident that rocked our family's world. She and my mom were thick as thieves. The three of us would have sleepovers and spa days, dance parties

and movie nights. Some of my best memories are from those times.

“I want that, too, Mom.” And I do. I want Aiden and Audrey to always know they have a big sister who loves them. And now that I don’t have to be their babysitter, perhaps I can start becoming their friend.

“I love you, Amelia. I’m sorry I’ve done a terrible job of showing it.”

My heart, which for the past few years I’ve thought of as a fractured thing so incapable of this kind of emotion, swells with the weight of those words. “I love you, too, Mom. And thank you.”

“I’ll let you get back to your holiday. But Merry Christmas, honey. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Merry Christmas.”

The call disconnects, and I let the phone fall to my lap. Levi’s head dips into the curve of my neck. His lips brush the exposed skin there, and I shiver against him.

“My mom apologized.”

“She did?” He presses a kiss into the hollow behind my ear.

“And she wants to spend New Year’s together. Just the two of us.”

His head lifts, leaving my neck exposed to the cold. I turn to look at him over my shoulder. His expression is thoughtful. Serious. “Amelia, that’s not small potatoes.”

Laughter bubbles up and spills over, shaking me to my core. He joins in, the two of us sputtering and coughing between giggles. It’s such a light moment after something so heavy that I go lightheaded from the joy of it.

There’s a knock at the door. Levi glances at me for permission before calling out, “Come in.”

TJ peeks his head in. A mischievous grin spreads across his face when he clocks us practically spooning in the bed.

“The guys wanted to play a game of snowball if you two are in.”

“Snowball?” I ask. “Like a snowball fight?”

“Not quite,” Levi says.

TJ’s grin grows even wider. “Why don’t you come see for yourself?”

And that’s how I end up watching a group of grown men play football in the snow with a large snowball tucked in their arms instead of a pigskin.

## Chapter Eight

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**S**nowball makes very little logistical sense, considering the ball explodes the second anyone grabs it too tightly, but there are six men in front of me wrestling over a clump of frozen water like it's a pot of gold. To say I'm entertained is the understatement of the century.

And besides, who am I to yuck their yums?

By the time they finish, my toes are frozen and the only reason the rest of me isn't is because Finley is nestled in my arms, acting as a compact space heater. The minute Joseph announces it's time to refill the tank while patting his belly the way Levi does, I take my cue and dip inside in pursuit of warmth.

The group moves into the little cabin with a level of grace just shy of that of a herd of bulls. They descend upon the leftovers from our early lunch like they're literally starved. I imagine their poor wives and families dealing with this every Christmas—hopefully in a space much bigger than this one—and chuckle to myself.

“Okay, as the one who hasn't had hot water for two days, I've got dibs on the first shower.” Levi's gaze cuts to mine. “You coming with, Spitfire?”

I press my lips together and nod, which earns a round of catcalls and a stray condom thrown at Levi by silent Landon of all people.

On the other side of the bathroom door, it all becomes a dull roar. The memory of his fingers buried in me yesterday, my skin hot and slick against the cool granite, has me shivering. Levi, as always, notices.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

“I'm sure you can imagine.” I step into his waiting arms, which envelop me like we've been doing this much longer than a day. “After all, you were

there for it.”

“Amelia,” he groans. “You’re a heart attack waiting to happen.”

“Maybe, but at least I’m fun.” I rise up on my tiptoes and nip his shoulder.

“That you are.” He releases me and turns to the tub. He pulls back the shower curtain and turns the water on high. When it flows out of the showerhead, steam billows off it. “Wanna have fun in the warm shower?”

I remove my sweater as an answer.

When we’re both stripped down, he steps into the spray first, and I follow, tugging the curtain closed behind me as I do.

“Turn around.”

I do as he says. Standing there with my back to him, I wonder which of my body parts he’s going for first. Fondling my breasts? Or, since he asked me to turn away from him, maybe he’ll bend me over and spread my ass cheeks without any foreplay. After all, I’m wet enough for it. Anticipation quickens my stomach, while my pulse moves steadily south till it settles between my legs.

To my surprise, a squirt sounds over my head and then a glob of shampoo lands on my crown. I glance back at him just as he’s returning my bottle of TRESEmme to the shelf that runs along the lip of the tub. He straightens and finds me staring, to which he responds, “What?”

I shake my head, feeling the shampoo slide a little. “Nothing, just wasn’t what I was expecting.”

He uses a hand on each side of my head to face me forward and then delves into my damp waves, lathering the shampoo against my scalp with massaging fingers. “What were you expecting?”

“Something debauchurous.”

His chuckle is low and throaty. “Don’t worry, there’s still time.”

I crane my head into his hands, enjoying the spa treatment more than I expect. “If we stay in here too long, your teammates will never let us live it down.”

He tilts my head all the way back. With the advantage of his height, he can bend down and kiss me even at this angle. And he does. “It’d be worth it.”

I hum my approval. When he’s satisfied that I’m thoroughly shampooed, he removes the showerhead wand from its hook and rinses my hair, careful to avoid my eyes. Once the wand is returned to its station, I turn in his arms, my

breasts brushing against his stomach, and look up. “I’m glad you got to have your Christmas with them after all.”

One corner of his mouth pulls upward. “I am too.”

“All this time, I thought you were going to see your family.”

He blinks slowly, expression somber. “They are my family.”

“Oh?” My voice lilts upward, but I keep it light. I don’t want him to feel like he has to explain, but I want him to know that he can.

A heavy sigh passes over his lips. Its peppermint scent fills my lungs. It’s a smell I already know I’ll miss when this weekend is over.

“My parents weren’t exactly the best. In and out of jail, never sober for long. I was mostly raised by my grandparents, and they passed when I was in college.” His eyes close like he’s remembering. “Until I met those guys, Christmas was just another day I felt inadequate about the family I had. But my teammates...they became my family. And now I have five different families, at each of their houses, that I get to spend every Christmas with. What used to be a sad day is now the most special day of the whole year.”

“And that’s why it was so important to you to make this Christmas special to me.” I say it instead of asking. I already know the answer. I’m devastated for this man, whom I’ve grown to care about so deeply in the matter of a couple days. I feel so silly for whining about my miniscule problems when, compared to him, I have no reason to complain.

He taps my nose with his finger. “That look right there is why I didn’t tell you.”

My brow furrows. “What do you mean?”

His arms come around me and lock, effectively creating blinders on either side of my vision. I can’t look anywhere but at him.

“You discredit your own pain too much, Amelia.” He leans forward to press a kiss against my forehead. “Just like someone else having it better than you doesn’t take away from your joy, someone having it quote-unquote worse than you does nothing to negate what you went through.”

My heart swells into my throat, making it difficult to breathe. What did I do to deserve this moment? With this man? Because I’ll keep doing it forever, I swear. Anything to keep this. Him.

A scary want, but it’s there all the same. And I can’t ignore it any longer.

“Levi, where do we go from here?”

His gaze locks with mine. “That depends.”

“On?”



“Well, I’m going to need at least the next seventy Christmases to do everything I want to do to you. But by those last few, I might not be moving the way I am now.”

I’m fighting back a smile when I say, “So what’s the alternative?”

“The alternative”—his hands slip below the curve of my ass and lift till we’re eye level and my legs snake around his waist—“is that I get all the days in between as well. So I can space it out a little. Give you some rest.”

He slowly lowers me until I feel his cock pressing against my entrance. I gasp and then moan, “What if we compromise?”

“I’m listening.” As he says it, he lets go of me with one hand to reach outside the shower curtain. It comes back holding that condom Landon tossed, and he rips it open with his teeth.

“What if we go with all the days in between *and* no rest.”

He somehow unrolls the condom blindly and then guides himself into me like an answer to prayer. Or my question. I’m hoping for the latter.

“I think I can handle that.” He punctuates his sentence with a thrust.

I’m quickly losing my ability to form coherent sentences, but I do manage to whimper out a, “Thank *God*.”

He pauses, removes one hand from my ass yet again, and this time he points to his chest. “It’s Levi actually.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Maybe.” He presses a kiss against my pursed lips. “But I’m yours.” And then he proves it, over and over until the hot water runs cold.

## Epilogue

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**M**y leg is bouncing uncontrollably. I'm sure Levi wants to tell me to cool it, that this is all not really a big deal, but he doesn't. And I love him a little bit for it. A feeling I can't yet speak aloud but can sense at the back of my mind, growing with every moment spent in his presence. Every bad attempt at a joke, or kind gesture that he does just because he wants to.

Like driving clear across town on New Year's Eve to drop me off at the condo where my mom is waiting because I was too anxiety-riddled to do it myself.

Not that I had to tell him so. One look at me and he just knew.

His hand crosses the midline of the center console and comes to rest on my jittery knee. I close my eyes and revel in his warmth, letting all the negative thoughts eke out of me. This is going to be good. And if it's not, I'll figure out how to handle it.

I open my eyes and turn to face him. He must catch the movement out of the corner of his eye, because for a brief moment he glances at me and smiles.

"Just remember if you need anything, I'm a phone call away." He flips on the blinker. "Or a text. Sometimes carrier pigeon, though the service is shoddy these days."

I snort. The tension in my spine releases. Because that's the thing, isn't it? Even if I didn't know how to handle things with my mom, I have him now to help me figure it out. I still marvel at that fact late at night as he snores softly beside me in my bed or his, though usually his because mine is just too small.

“When this is over—good, bad, or indifferent—can we have a wine-and-cookies night at your place? To toast my success at having adult conversations?”

He narrows his gaze. “Normal cookies or campfire cookies?”

“Campfire cookies all the way.”

We pull into what the GPS says is the driveway. It’s confirmed a second later when my mother steps onto the front porch of the bottom unit. She looks different than usual. She’s abandoned her pressed chinos and linen blouses for a casual sweater and jeans. It reminds me of something she’d wear when I was young, which makes me smile.

Maybe we’re all growing. And in a lot of ways, both of us owe it to Levi. My phone vibrates and I cut my gaze away from Mom to check it.

Paige: On the very last day of the cruise. OF COURSE.

ATTACHED TO THE TEXT IS A PHOTO OF MY BEST FRIEND SMILING NEXT TO THE love of her life, sporting a brand-new engagement ring on her finger.

“Paige is engaged!” I lean over to show Levi.

“That’s amazing!” He takes my phone from my hand and selects the camera icon. We both lean into the screen and make our best surprised faces, which he snaps and then sends to Paige along with a congratulations.

Her service has been in and out, so I haven’t been able to give her many updates. When he hands me back the phone, the messages are already pouring in. Mostly bear emojis, along with a few of her signature eggplants.

Mom spots us just as I look up. She’s using her hand as a visor and squinting at the car. Levi, ever the friendly one, waves at her enthusiastically. She returns it, but her expression is one of confusion.

“Add that to the list of things to talk about.” I laugh and reach for the handle.

“Hey,” Levi says, grabbing onto my knee once more. I turn, finding a gaze that’s equal parts encouragement and confidence. He knows I can do this. And because he does, so do I. “It’s gonna be good, okay? This is a great thing.”

I nod. "It is pretty big potatoes, isn't it?"

"All right, out."

"That was at least ten times funnier than most of the things you say."

"Listen, Amelia, I am not the standard you want to live by." He says it with a hand flattened over his heart, brows furrowed in earnest.

I lean forward and press a kiss to his lips. "See you next year?"

He groans and rolls his eyes, but he returns the kiss in the end. "Next year then, Spitfire."

I get out of the car, retrieve my bag from the trunk, and head for the condo. My head is held high, and I meet my mom's gaze head-on. I'm stepping into a new phase of our relationship, and my life, with confidence.

I'm bold, and I'm done believing anything less.

The End

## Also by Hannah Bird

### *Loveless Series*

[The End and Then](#) (Book 1)

[What's Left of Me](#) (Book 2)

### *Standalones*

[Promise Me This](#)

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## About Hannah Bird

Hannah's accolades include a second-grade teacher who said her story about bats had "very good potential" and enough accelerated medals to sink a body at sea. Her goals in life are to write novels that will make you cry, and to check everything off the bucket list she wrote at seventeen.

Hannah resides among the rolling hills of Tennessee with her other half and their clingy golden retrievers. When she is not writing, she is trying to outrun her sweet tooth in the gym.

You can travel along with Hannah on her writing journey at her website, [hannahbirdauthor.com](http://hannahbirdauthor.com), and at all the bookish destinations below:

