



THE CHRISTMAS NEMESIS



LIST



DANI HALL

The Christmas **Nemesis** List

DANI HALL

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DEDICATION

For the ones who are working to conquer their internal battles

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PEPPERMINT

Every holiday season, I dusted off my special assortment of archenemies. Topping the list was: peppermint and holiday parties. I had a normal year-round collection of enemies that I kept a running tally of, but this time of year required a different list that was overrun with some of the typical holiday fodder that I couldn't stand. My standard list consisted of things like elevators and ex-boyfriends. My special edition holiday list included Christmas music (because it constantly played in elevators), mistletoe (because ex-boyfriends were caught *kissing* ex-friends under it), and Christmas parties (because aforementioned kissing happened at the annual staff celebration last year).

This year, I didn't have to worry about the latter, because Helena—my boss—was allowing me to skip the annual office Christmas party. That still left a running tally of enemies to battle, including enemy number one—which happened to take the form of a long black coffee hit with four pumps of peppermint syrup.

Four. Freaking. Pumps.

During the non-holiday portion of the year, I always ordered two long black coffees—which was just an explicit amount of hot water and espresso, essentially. I ordered two. One for me, and one for Helena, just in case something tragic happened on the way to the office. This particular coffee order wasn't ranked extremely high on my typical enemy list. It was strong and bitter, but drinkable. Once I had safely passed Helena her hot water and bean juice, I would sneak away to the staff lounge and mix an obscene amount of creamer into my coffee to make it palatable. A long black coffee was not my thing, but I didn't want to chance getting a coffee I'd actually enjoy, and then spill Helena's drink without having a substitute handy.

But as soon as the winter holiday drinks were back in session, Helena demanded to have her coffee laced with that infuriating peppermint flavoring. Peppermint! I couldn't stand peppermint as it was, but adding it to coffee was essentially giving the whole drink a proper funeral. There was no combatting

the potency of that peppermint. No amount of vanilla or caramel could cloak that minty freaking taste.

Even though I couldn't stand peppermint, I would still order two of the exact same coffees. Because the day that I ordered myself some nice holiday specialty drink would be the day I lost my balance and tripped and spilled coffee all over Helena without a backup. And then I would get fired and subsequently lose my apartment, and have to move back in with my out-of-love and out-of-touch parents that were states away.

I was bouncing on the balls of my feet in line at the coffee house two blocks from the office where I worked. The inside of the shop was dimly lit, lined with all manner of silver and red tinsel. The walls were packed with dark, wooden shelves and crammed with different holiday themed coffee mugs and bags of chocolate espresso beans. The scent of brewing coffee and cinnamon filled my nostrils, and it almost felt like I could absorb caffeine through the steam spurting up from espresso machines as baristas mastered their coffee creations. There were different holiday objects pinned to their green aprons: a cracked gingerbread man here, a frayed candy cane there.

I was eyeing the menu, mourning the fact that I wouldn't get to taste the signature praline latte or a chocolate chip cookie macchiato. But Helena was paying for the coffee, so I didn't have the right to complain. I couldn't regularly afford coffee like this if it was on my dime. So, instead of resorting to the ancient percolator perched on my kitchen counter, I would drink Satan's spit and get on with my life, since it was free. But I still made mental complaints every step of the way, allowing myself to agonize over the loss of experiencing an eggnog Americano.

Not really. Eggnog easily made the top ten on my holiday hate list.

I couldn't seem to stand still as I waited for my order. I was crammed up against empty tables along with other impatient people, all waiting for their names to be called. There were tired-looking individuals rolling their eyes and staring at their phones as they anticipated their completed orders. I wondered fleetingly how many of them were already late for their own jobs. For me, if I wasn't early to work, I was automatically running late. And my earliness was slowly timing out.

"Spencer!" A harried barista shouted my name before slapping my paper cups with cardboard sleeves down on the counter.

I leapt forward to grab the coffees, eyeing the labels to make sure they were correct. The barista watched me suspiciously as I nodded my head in

thanks and raced for the door.

The streets of Philly were teeming with people, all in a hurry. Sometimes, it didn't feel like Philly was so big. There were plenty of quiet spaces in the very populace city, all manner of trees and parks and museums. The month of November was quickly coming to a close, and I would be disappointing my parents—again—by not making the flight home to Michigan to see them for Thanksgiving. They didn't understand the pressure I was under as a PA for one of the most successful CEOs in the state, let alone country.

Helena ran a communication and entertainment business. It was a broadcasting company responsible for delivering television programs relative to news, entertainment, and the like. After I got a very fancy four-year degree in entrepreneurship, I didn't have the money or the credit to start up the cookie business I'd always dreamed of. So, to make ends meet, I somehow managed to become a personal assistant to *the* Helena Vonaparte. I promised myself that I'd save and scrape together until my business could take off, and that this whole assistant gig was a temporary thing, just until I could get my feet off the ground.

And then the rent was due, and the various bills started piling up, and almost every dime I made was spent here or there. That particular business dream of mine, Spencer's Sweets, got put on hold three years ago. Here I was, almost twenty-five, and I was certain that this would be what the rest of my life would look like. I couldn't afford to quit. I didn't have time to legitimately start my cookie business, and that was that. I would be answering all of Helena's phone calls, directing the office traffic either towards her or away from her, scheduling her appointments, and fetching her coffee for the foreseeable future. I added a few pennies here and there to the savings account I kept for the moments when I imagined that maybe one day the crumbling cookie dream would actually take off. The dream and the savings were both laughable, at best.

My days were crazy busy because I was constantly on the move, always in perpetual fear that I was going to send my boss into a tizzy. The company she ran was worth over a billion dollars, so I could excuse her erratic behavior in favor of an annual raise and a nice Christmas bonus. If I was being honest, I'd already blown through my bonus for this year, and I hadn't even received it yet. Every once in a while, I was able to squeeze out a few orders for my would-be business, but I could barely muster the energy to do that. My dream was slowly fading into oblivion, waiting for eventual implosion.

The glass and steel building I worked in had forty stories. The lobby was huge, open, and people were zipping about everywhere, crowding around the elevators with their bags and cups of non-peppermint infused coffees. I envied them their gingerbread cold brews. The small security personnel were stationed sporadically around the first floor, enough of a team to look intimidating, but not logistically capable of stopping any foul play, if any were to ever occur.

Helena insisted that her office should be located on the very top floor, so the elevator ride up was always tedious with the constant stops and starts. That was why elevators were always near the top of my normal list of adversaries. If my boss was on the fifth floor, I could easily take the stairs. Forty floors up? Not a possibility. And this time of year meant that an infuriatingly awful rendition of “Jingle Bells” was on a constant loop. The outdated and cheesy track was forever burned into my brain; I heard those stupid jingle bells in my sleep through the month of April.

Once I was out of elevator limbo, I raced down the hall and towards Helena’s massive office. I flew by my desk, located sensibly right outside of her door. Out in the open. I was a buffer between her and the rest of the employees or persons who were vying for her attention.

I cautiously held the cups of coffee as I approached her door, maneuvering one coffee cup into the crook of my arm. I rapped on the door with a careful knuckle in two quick successions with my unoccupied hand. Helena always anticipated my arrival in the morning, so this was the only time of day I was permitted in after my two-knock routine. Any other time, I would have to wait for her permission to enter, or for the door to open.

I reached for the knob, my foot automatically moving to catch the door once I had it open. But my ritual for the day was abruptly upended as the door came flying open before I could grasp the handle.

The door knocked into me, and both coffee cups buckled and exploded with hot peppermint bean water. The coffee was all over me, and all over the man who had just conveniently made the number one spot on my holiday enemy list.

The guy, covered in spilt coffee, blinked slowly as he registered what had just happened. He had black hair pulled back in a low ponytail, and dark, brooding eyes that narrowed at me. I took in his wet crimson shirt, his brown boots. His skin, while glistening and sticky, was naturally bronzed. He was probably in his late twenties.

“What the hell was that?” Helena snapped from inside her office.

I shut my eyes tightly, my wild auburn hair already scrunching and stiffening with the sticky beverage. I took a moment to mourn the sabotaged cups: one was crumpled in my hand, the other was lying lifeless on the ground. The lids had popped off, and had fallen to the floor in various arrays of desolation. I swallowed, and shouldered my way around the guy, who hadn’t bothered to utter a single apology for pretty much taking me out with the door.

“I’m so sorry, Helena,” I said as I smoothed my sticky hair with as much dignity as I could muster. The coffee had stained my favorite blue scarf, along with the puffy gray jacket that I’d been wearing the past three winters. “I was just coming in to deliver your coffee. I didn’t realize you had someone in your office already.”

“Someone opens the door for you, and that somehow results in you spilling perfectly good coffee?” Helena managed to make every word out of her mouth slice like a sharp cookie cutter through dough.

My fingers curled into fists, one of them crushing a sodden cup further, but I kept my tone carefully apologetic. “I wasn’t anticipating someone opening the door, I was in the process of opening it myself—”

“So, what I’m hearing is…” Helena stood from her massive glass desk and leaned over in a threatening manner. Her red tipped fingernails tapped as her palms pressed into the table. Her voice and mannerisms had always reminded me of a scavenging crow. “I’m about five minutes away from a caffeine headache because my PA can’t manage to hold on to a cup of coffee?”

“Would you like me to fetch another one for you? I could drop off some aspirin while you wait, if you’d like.”

The man responsible for this tragic ordeal had been standing wordlessly behind me this whole time. I stifled the urge to turn around and glare at him.

“Go. Get. The coffee. Ary will be outside the door when you get back, so you’ll manage to avoid any mishaps like this again, I would hope.”

Ary. Public enemy number one had a name. I mentally penned it in above peppermint flavoring on my list. His name was metaphorically slathered in red ink.

I didn’t ask who Ary was, or what he was doing there. I simply nodded and spun on my heel. I didn’t bother looking at him as I pushed by him once more. I was literally jogging for the elevator, and mentally preparing for a day that was already off to the worst start possible.

ARY

As promised, Ary was standing outside of Helena's office when I returned. He was leaning back against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, to the right of her door. Since I'd squandered the initial coffees, this one had come out of my pocket. And I just bought the one, because I wasn't going to drop ten bucks on a coffee I personally hated. I was praying that nothing happened to this singular cup of coffee, because if it did, I might as well kiss my PA job goodbye. I'd made it all the way to the fortieth floor without something disastrous happening to the beverage, so I was hoping I could complete the miracle by carefully easing it past the last barrier and right onto Helena's desk.

The new guy, Ary, didn't even flinch when I brushed by him and knocked on the door to her private office. While I was waiting for Helena to permit my entry, he didn't acknowledge me in the slightest. I had a gut feeling Ary was going to make the normal enemy list, and not just the special holiday edition, if he stuck around. If he was going to be part of the routine security detail, this dude was undoubtedly going to become an everyday nuisance.

"That'd better be my coffee," Helena groused from behind the door. That utterance was permission enough to enter. I went inside, making sure to give Ary a proper glower. He just stared back with an unconcerned expression in place. I had yet to hear this man utter a single word.

I hurried over and deposited Helena's coffee on her desk, a string of apologies flying from my lips. Her office had enormous windows that backlit her in a scary, evil emperor kind of way. Helena's short brown hair was cut just below her jawline, and her dark eyes never sparkled with any sort of humor, her nose slightly aquiline. I placed her somewhere around fifty, and imagined she would be somewhat attractive if she could do something about the perpetual scowl that graced her features. If she deigned to spend time away from the office and out in the sun, I was certain she'd have a natural tan. But she didn't spend time in the sun. Half the time, I wasn't sure she ever left the office at all.

“You’ve met my new personal security watch.” Helena nodded to the door. “Ary, get in here.”

Ary pivoted into the doorway. He uncrossed his arms, and slid them behind his back. He rocked back on his heels before readjusting his standing position.

“Security?” I asked, turning to Helena. “Is it that bad?”

There were plenty of people who gave Helena death threats on a daily basis for various reasons, but I hadn’t realized it had gotten that serious. She waved a hand dismissively, but I could see a flicker of fear in her normally dead eyes.

“Ary, this is Spencer. She’s my eyes and ears. I swear that she’s normally not so inept. She’ll help you adjust to the normal crowds who are allowed in and out.”

“Wait.” I looked back at Ary. He cocked an eyebrow, and I realized he still hadn’t said anything. Wasn’t this normally the part where we stepped forward and shook hands? Officially exchanged names? I couldn’t compute that, because I was too busy reeling over what Helena had just let on. “He’s just going to...be standing...outside of your office all day?”

Right by my desk? All day? Just brooding? *All day?*

Helena nodded sharply, already growing bored with me.

“For the holidays or—?”

“It’s a permanent position. He’s to be stationed by my doorway in case of an emergency for the foreseeable future.”

Everyday enemy list it was, then.

“You really think the first-floor security isn’t capable of—?”

“Thank you, Spencer,” Helena said in dismissal.

I gave a jerky nod and moved right past Ary for the, what, third time? Fourth? He followed after me, without being dismissed. I waited with anticipation for Helena to snap at him, but she didn’t.

Seconds ticked by. I felt myself deflate when Helena didn’t address his unexcused departure at all. Great. Was this a new level of sexism for her? Did she have a tender place in her frozen heart for this guy, or was she just really that scared? Helena wasn’t one for charity, but perhaps she’d had an epiphany and hired a mute—to make herself feel better about the rancorous number of sins she’d surely committed in her lifetime.

I walked over to my desk, whipping off my stained scarf and dangling it over my chair. The fabric was stiff against my fingertips with dried coffee. I

really, really wanted to shower and change my clothes. I was going to reek of properly spoiled peppermint all day long. I took in a deep breath, resigning myself to the situation, and unzipped my coat. At least the majority of the coffee rain ended up on my coat and scarf, my clothes underneath had escaped the majority of the onslaught. My hair and face were an entirely different story. My hair might have been spared if I'd remembered to put on my hat this morning. I wiped at my cheek absently, feeling my fingers stick slightly to the tacky surface.

Ary had taken up his new position: standing outside of Helena's door. He didn't look sticky. His long-sleeved, button-up black shirt wouldn't necessarily show the dried coffee, but I could tell it wasn't stained with it. Was he wearing a black shirt before? His sleeves were rolled up, his hair still pulled back. But he looked clean. The permeating peppermint smell was only emitting from me.

"Did you change shirts?" I asked as I shifted my weight, my hand going to my hip as I assessed him. Ary was definitely not in the least bit sticky.

His lips pursed slightly, his eyes narrowing at me, but he didn't respond. Had Helena ordered his complete silence? I couldn't imagine she'd be quite that dark. But that was fine. I'd much prefer it if he stayed quiet. I couldn't imagine if he was the type to never shut up, that would make this job even more unbearable. Especially when he would be stationed twenty feet away from my desk. All day long.

All year long.

I thumped down into my office chair, turning on my computer while trying to smooth back the stiffness of my red curls. I briefly saw the dim reflection of my steel gray eyes, my heart-shaped face in the black screen of my computer before it buzzed to life. I stole a glance at Ary, and felt myself bristle when I found him staring back at me. I whipped my attention back to my computer, clumsily typing in my password.

"Where's the other coffee?"

I stiffened at his voice. I hadn't expected the low timber of it, rich and deep. This was the first time I'd heard him speak, and I couldn't compute what he'd just asked.

"Huh?" I sounded muddled and unsophisticated in comparison.

There was such a pregnant pause that I thought I had just been hearing things. Perhaps he hadn't spoken at all. I must have imagined a sexy voice emanating from this guy.

Eventually, after a stare off, he gestured with his head to Helena's office door. "You had two coffees earlier. You returned with one."

I blinked, trying to process his actual words as the sultriness of them wisped through me. I silently scolded my heart as its rhythm picked up without my consent.

I broke his stare to look back at my computer. I opened up my daily twenty tabs, my eyes flicking back and forth between the keyboard and the screen as I began typing up memos for the day. I decided not to answer Ary's question, because it wasn't like he deserved my attention. He still hadn't apologized. Or answered my question from earlier regarding his lack of stickiness.

I was suddenly self-conscious of all the frilly Christmas doodads and trinkets littered across my desk. I had draped a velvety tablecloth across it, white with red trim. Not to mention the ribbons and ornaments I hung from the ceiling last week, in spite of the clear fire code set in place that prohibited such holiday nonsense. I had even bought Christmas tree scented wax for the warmer in the staff lounge. Sure, there were plenty of things I couldn't stand about the holidays, but apart from that list, I was all about the Christmas season. Did Ary think all of this frivolousness was stupid? Did I care?

No. Of course I didn't. I sat up a little straighter in my chair, trying to restore my confidence. We sat in an awkward silence for an extended period of time, up until there was a stampede of people without appointments itching to see Helena that came strutting off the elevator. I had to bat them all off and schedule them proper appointments, if I concluded they were worthy of Helena's time. And most of them were not. The majority I had to give sympathetic smiles and ask for them to wait on a call from her. They'd never receive one. Some would be persistent and be back at my desk within the week. And they would be met with the same exact responses from today. A fake smile. A false promise. Round and around we would go.

Ary watched it all silently, taking mental notes of my process. He seemed to catalog everything as it happened, tallying the very few people who were allowed in to see Helena without being met with my firing squad questionnaire. Once the traffic cleared out a bit, and it was just me and Ary again, I let out a soft sigh and returned to my computer tasks, which were already piling up.

"What happened to the second coffee." This time, he didn't poise it as a question. His voice was flatter than before, like he was annoyed that I hadn't answered him the first time.

My temper kindled. I absently reached out and straightened a wooden snowman figure that was poised on my desk. “Why in the world are you so interested in spilled coffee?” I asked testily. “You should be mustering up an apology.”

“Was the peppermint in your coffee, or was it in hers?”

“You know what, why aren’t you covered in coffee?” I threw out my hand, motioning to him. “I will smell like nasty freaking peppermint for a week. Why aren’t you sticky? Why aren’t you peppermint-y?”

He shrugged instead of answering. When I didn’t give him a direct response, I thought the subject, and therefore the entire conversation, was dropped. Emails flooded in, and I stayed glued to my computer screen as people continued to traipse in front of me, all desperate to talk with Helena. I sent them off, one by one, by giving them false hope regarding phone calls I knew they’d never receive.

“I changed shirts.”

I glanced up, flustered after a decent crowd had been filtered through. Ary was staring at me. Again. My mind had already moved on from the previous conversation and had tumbled through dozens of different tasks, and I had no idea what he was referring to.

“What?” I snapped.

“I keep a spare set of clothes in my bag. I washed up in the bathroom, and then changed.”

“Do you regularly anticipate coffee showers?” I moved my mouse across the screen and rescheduled another one of Helena’s appointments. I briefly took note of the messenger bag that was sitting on the floor next to Ary. I tried not to think about what else may be in that bag, and whether there were any security related items hidden there.

Before I could detect whether or not he was going to reply to my coffee shower comment, the elevator dinged, and none other than Naomi Blakely came sauntering in. The ex-friend who kissed the ex-boyfriend at the work party last Christmas, who just happened to work a few floors down. I clicked my mouse a little too vigorously as she approached.

“Spencer!” Her bleached silvery blonde hair was tied back in a high ponytail, the dark roots starting to show along her hairline. Her eyes had black liner swept under them, and her lipstick was a plum color. I stiffened as I recalled the sticky matting of my hair, which was normally unkempt as is, but today it had its own peppermint orbit. I chanced a glance at Ary,

wondering what he thought of my ex-friend-still-colleague. But he wasn't looking at her. He wasn't studying either of us.

"I need to see Helena, it's pretty urgent," Naomi said as sweetly as her forked tongue could manage.

"What is this concerning?" Business. This was business. I was a professional.

She rolled her eyes, suddenly impatient. "The office party. The band that was set to play bailed on us."

I quickly opened up my messenger tab, and shot off a note to Helena regarding Naomi's issue. Seconds later, she pinged back.

Have her document the details regarding new potentials. CC me. You and Clayton follow up.

I cleared my throat and straightened up. The shit-eating grin on Naomi's face told me that she could smell the peppermint hell I was currently swimming in.

"Send her an email with all the details, including new potential bands to perform. Clayton and I will be following up," I said as politely as I could.

Naomi was in charge of public relations, and she also helped organize special faculty events. The staff Christmas party was the biggest staff event of the year. She had worked her way up pretty quickly at Timeplace Broadcasting, and it stung even more that I was the one who helped her get a job here. Naomi was the first real friend I'd made when I moved to this city three years ago.

And then she helped herself to my boyfriend. I hadn't bothered to try and make some other friendship connection since because it seemed like a waste of time. Look what happened when I tried to be nice to people. They kissed my boyfriend in front of everyone at the office party, and used mistletoe as some lame freaking excuse for their behavior. But mistletoe certainly didn't explain the deleted text messages and late nights he'd been working leading up to Mistletoegate.

Naomi didn't budge. I studied my computer screen too intently, fiddling with a scheduling conflict that I couldn't concentrate on with her staring at me.

"I hear you're not going." Her initial smugness had dissipated, and she seemed almost apologetic. But her well of sincerity was about as deep as a kiddie pool. "To the work party, I mean."

"Nope." I kept my gaze on the computer, afraid to look at her. I didn't

want to see her pitying look. I didn't want her pity. I wanted nothing to do with her.

"I was hoping we could move past all this by now," she whispered, her eyes skimming over my coffee-stained jacket and scarf hanging on the back of my chair. "I know Dean told you he was planning on ending things between the two of you anyway. We just happened to connect before—"

"I really don't care," I interrupted, firm but quiet.

Liar, liar. I did care. I cared too much. Almost a year later and I was still unable to conquer the mountain of insecurities the cheating fiasco had left me with.

I caught a muscle in Ary's jaw tick, but his eyes remained firmly planted elsewhere. When silence had elapsed for far too long, I plunged forward.

"I'm going to miss Thanksgiving with my family so that I can actually go home and see them in a few weeks, therefore missing the party. It has nothing to do with either of you." Okay, not a complete lie. But not a complete truth either. Of course I didn't want to go to the stupid holiday party and see Dean and Naomi all over each other. But I wasn't about to give her that kind of satisfaction by admitting to it.

Naomi cleared her throat, and finally took a step back. Her attention finally switched to Ary, and she offered up a cheeky smile as she took him in. Ary was not even an acquaintance of mine, so I shouldn't have felt the venomous suspicion that suddenly surged through my veins. I told myself it was because she already had a boyfriend, and therefore shouldn't be looking at men the way she was looking at Ary. But, she was the sort of person who engaged with men who were supposed to be off-limits, so I guess that meant she herself didn't necessarily have the decency to be loyal.

"I'm Naomi. You must be Helena's new muscle." She tossed me a sympathetic look. "I can promise that Spencer doesn't normally smell like stale coffee and mint. I think you just caught her on a bad day."

I stiffened. Ary, to his credit, flicked his eyes to look Naomi up and down once. His lip curled, just slightly, as if she disgusted him, before he pointedly turned his attention back to the wall. Naomi puckered her lips, unsure of his response. That was not the general reaction she received from any of the male population. A delicate toss of her blonde hair normally beckoned any man within a two-block radius. I was mentally tap-dancing, because it was eating Naomi up that Ary wasn't already flirting with her.

"Are you liking it here?" Naomi tried again.

No. Response. My tap-dance routine was center stage, and I added in a cane and top hat.

“Does he speak?” she whispered to me.

“He does,” Ary answered, his eyes lazily sliding back to her. “To people worth his time.”

Naomi was caught off guard. She straightened her shoulders and took a methodical amount of time taking down her ponytail. She gave her hair a quick shake, pulling on a few strands of it teasingly. “What makes you think I’m not worth your time?”

Ary’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly, his mouth dipping into a frown of utter repulsion.

And. He. Did. Not. Answer. Her.

My inner tap-dance came to its finale: a thunderous amount of tapping before throwing wide my cane and top hat as I knelt down on a knee. The mental crowd went wild.

Naomi huffed with displeasure, looking to me one last time before she turned on her heel and made her way back to the elevator. She swished her hips unnecessarily the entire way back, her arms crossed defiantly as she waited. When she finally was closed up behind the elevator doors, I turned to Ary, a question forming on my lips.

Helena’s door banged open. “Spencer, take a lunch. Ary, take yours when Spencer gets back. I need to have a word with you.”

I swiped my coat and scarf off my chair without a second thought, and raced out of the office. I was suddenly worried that Helena was finally going to admonish Ary for his earlier antics. An hour ago, that would have been delightful. After the wonderful interaction that had just taken place between Ary and Naomi though, my animosity towards him had dimmed slightly. I didn’t necessarily want him to get chewed out by Helena. I knew personally that it wasn’t a pleasant experience.

Ultimately, it wasn’t my business. If he was going to be hanging around, he might as well be clued in now about the expectations he’d be under while employed by Helena Vonaparte.

I decided to sacrifice eating for cleanliness. During the milder months, I parked my rearend on a bench outside the building, and devoured whatever lunch I'd remembered to pack in my haste to get out of my apartment. When winter rolled in, I tried to find an empty staff lounge somewhere in the building to hide. I never used the lounge on my floor, because Helena would inevitably find me there and start barking orders before my lunch had run its course.

Instead of eating, I raced the few blocks to my apartment, took a hurried shower, and got dressed in clothes that were not suffused with peppermint coffee. I made it back to the office by the skin of my teeth, hair still wet, jacket haphazardly hanging on my frame as I pretty much threw myself back down into my rolling chair when the final seconds of my lunch ticked down.

I'd be hangry, but at least I wouldn't reek of peppermint. I could sneak some subtle emergency snacks that I kept in the left drawer of my desk. I had to replenish my secret stash pretty often because of occurrences like these. My lunch, which consisted of a premade salad I'd picked up from the grocery store, would be much too obvious to try and sneak. I definitely didn't want a disgruntled employee snapping at me in the midst of a huge bite. Or Ary to sit and stare at me as I stuffed my face.

Ary wasn't stationed by the door, which meant he was still getting chewed out by Helena. Or perhaps he'd been spared a typical half hour ranting session and was already on lunch. I took a series of rapid breaths in an attempt to calm my racing heart, the lack of caffeine and food wasn't pairing well with my rush to get home and back. I decided to go ahead and chance a bite of food so that the next employees or customers wouldn't be exposed to Spencer sans snack. Helena's brutality was enough for people to endure; I tried to be as polite as possible to act as a buffer for them. But I could only do so much if my stomach was clawing the rest of my insides to pieces in desperation for some sort of filling morsel.

When I had my teeth properly sunk into a granola bar, Ary emerged from

Helena's office, looking more cross than earlier. Ah, so half hour ranting session it was, then. He took a second to scan me, and then my desk. He didn't say a word as he walked to the elevator. I cursed myself inwardly for taking a ginormous bite right when he left Helena's office, leaving me looking like a winter chipmunk, eating snacks after my presumed lunch. How embarrassing.

I anticipated that someone would come to take his place by Helena's door, but no one covered his position while he was on lunch. That meant that during my work day I could expect thirty minutes Ary-free, which provided at least a little bit of a breather from his penetrative observations.

The people seeking Helena out—that had been turned away by the little sign that I poised on my desk during lunch—were back with a vengeance upon my return. This was the crowd that was always overly rude, because they'd already been turned away once by a piece of paper, and were probably missing their own lunch in an attempt to get in touch with Helena.

In addition to the normal parade of people I had to fend off, there were a number of female workers who came sauntering up, appearing lost. One woman stepped off the elevator, glanced around, and then offered a sheepish wave before running right back to it and disappearing. Weird. The second one came in and stepped towards my desk, her eyes scanning the office, before she turned without a word and also left.

After the third employee strolled in and didn't come to me directly, I realized what was going on. They were all here to get a good look at the hot new security guard. Which, I wasn't going to kid myself, he was attractive. And that voice? Oof.

Naomi's word of mouth must have traveled fast. Knowing Naomi, she had probably spread the word that Ary was not only attractive, but also rude and unobtainable, given the salty interaction they had exchanged. That was the kind of challenge some females would inevitably be drawn to. Including Naomi. I knew we'd probably be seeing her back up on this floor before the week was over.

I took a quick bathroom break in the lounge, making sure to splash cold water on my face. I could definitely feel the lack of morning coffee in my sluggish movements. I remembered to switch on the wax warmer, excited to have a new holiday scent wafting through the office space—as long as the new scent wasn't peppermint, but that smell seemed to be burned permanently into my nose.

When I got back to my desk, Ary had taken up his spot again beside Helena's door. And there was a cup of coffee on my desk.

I immediately picked it up to study it. There was a label on the cup, printed and pasted ten minutes ago. It was a mocha, large-sized, with toasted marshmallow syrup and sweet cream foam on top.

Ary's name was printed on the label.

I turned to look at him. "You bought me coffee?" I asked suspiciously.

He had no cup in his own hand. I sniffed at mine tentatively, petrified he had pegged me as a peppermint drinker. But there was no peppermint on the sticker, and not even the slightest whiff of peppermint emanating from the coffee itself. I tried to stealthily sneak more inhales of the beverage in an attempt to rid my nose of the peppermint inferno it was still burning in.

"I'm sorry. For opening the door. When you knocked." Ary's lip curled up in what I recognized to be a smile. It was barely perceptible, but it was definitely a smile.

I stiffened, suddenly embarrassed, feeling like a child for chiding him earlier. I toyed with the coffee cup, unable to shake off the need to address his...thoughtfulness.

"You're off my enemy list," I muttered eventually after fumbling for something to say. I took a sip from the cup, and was rewarded with a flooding sensation of coffee that was not tainted with enemy number one. I was not quick enough to prevent the widening of my eyes as the toasty marshmallow taste set my happy sensors on fire.

Ary's eyes sparkled, and he took in a breath as if he was going to say something. But he didn't. He let the breath go, and went back into his natural broody position. Neither of us said another word to each other for the rest of the day. Perhaps he considered us even now, for whatever reason. Maybe he had decided I wasn't worth talking to after all.

After working over my contracted time by almost an hour, I left the office to head home, mentally tallying everything I had to do for the evening. I had to somehow muster up the energy for the two dozen cookies I was going to bake tonight for a coworker. At this point, I didn't even know why I bothered filling the occasional cookie order, because that dream had long been differed.

Ary was still at the office when I left. I knew that Helena worked late nights, and I wondered what his contracted hours were. Was he required to be in the building with her, or was he permitted to leave at the end of the typical

work day? I mean, he left for a lunch break. Surely he wasn't tied to her night and day if he was an employee of Timeplace Broadcasting. Or was he? Even if he was—dang—he'd need to trade out with someone else so that he could sleep. Eat.

Why in the world was I wondering about Ary to begin with? I mentally admonished myself. He was gorgeous and broody and he made me spill coffee and sit in peppermint hell for four hours. I should not be thinking about him.

But, he bought me a new coffee and apologized for something he probably shouldn't have had to apologize for to begin with. And it wasn't peppermint coffee he bought me. It hadn't been a plain coffee either. It was a specially made order. With toasted marshmallow. And sweet cream foam—

Get a grip, Spencer.

Of course, there was absolutely nothing wrong with thinking about a guy, right? My romantic life hadn't exactly been thriving. There were the brief relationships in college that never lasted, because the guys always had a stronger attachment to partying than to commitment.

Then there was Dean, a semi-serious relationship turned disaster. When that shit hit the fan, I made the decision to ward off all men until I could fulfill something worthy of my time, like my cookie business. I declared that there would be no relationships until I could get my dream off the ground. If I was going to put effort into something other than my PA job, Spencer's Sweets deserved attention above all else.

It'd been nearly a year since Dean and Naomi got together. When Dean and I were a couple, I devoted as much time to him as I possibly could to account for my long hours put in with Helena. I was also trying to keep in touch with my parents who lived states away, and was drowning in a lack of energy and general zest for life. Not that Dean cared very much, as long as he was able to crawl into my bed when the mood struck, he was satisfied. I guess he didn't mind dating someone who fell asleep on the couch by seven, or worked long into the night trying to fill a random cookie order placed on my sad little website.

Then there was my blonde bombshell friend who had more time and physicality to offer, so Dean thought he could have it all by keeping me as his serious commitment, and Naomi as his plaything. She wasn't crusted over with dried cookie dough or snoring on the couch even after she made promise after promise to stay awake during some movie she couldn't care less about.

She didn't put off sex for the fifth night in a row on account of a fake headache she had to make up because intimacy was the last thing on her mind. It made sense that Dean decided he needed more. I understood it, but it didn't make it hurt any less.

The fact remained that I wasn't ever enough for him. It could've taken him thirty seconds before walking into that party together to tell me *something*. That he was unhappy. That we were over. But letting me know that he was dissatisfied in the way things were moving between us hadn't even occurred to him. I'd never been worthy of his respect to begin with.

Maybe if he had been upfront with me about Naomi to begin with, I would have taken him back. Maybe not. It certainly hadn't helped my trust issues. I could have retained the one friend that I had in this city if they'd made different decisions. But no. My existence now revolved around a life I never strived for and a job I never wanted. Sad, pathetic Spencer wasn't interesting enough to keep a subpar boyfriend faithful. What was the use?

And then there was Ary. He was a coworker, who would be in close proximity to me on a daily basis going forward. Getting attached to him would be nothing but bad news. If I couldn't keep Dean's affections, I certainly wouldn't be able to hold down a man who looked like he'd been sculpted by the gods themselves. No. I couldn't waste time thinking he'd want to pay me any scrap of romantic attention. Business first.

But, that didn't help that fact that I was completely stuck in a world where a freaking toasted marshmallow coffee gifted by a practically mute stranger was the highlight of my freaking month.

THANKSGIVING

The following morning, Ary was already standing outside of Helena's door when I got there. Thanksgiving was coming in hot tomorrow, but it didn't matter, because I was not going home to be with my family, or going to Dean's for dry turkey. I would probably pick up a bottle of wine and a burger from whatever fast-food joint was open on the way home as a treat to myself. Happy Thanksgiving to me.

I was more weighted down today than normal when I arrived at the office. Maybe it was the fleeting high I'd gotten last night when I was baking cookies—delighting temporarily in the bliss I found concocting recipes and measuring ingredients—that made the morning after so much harder. I'd taken a bite out of my dream, only to wake up and find the nightmare that was my actual life waiting for me. Or, it could be entirely the fact that I had lost precious sleep by staying up so late filling the order. I had second-guessed one of the cookie flavors, and baked an entire new batch, before going with my gut and sticking with the original.

Or it could be the sullen man I'd be sharing my workspace with going forward, there was that. With the influx of people, I was never completely alone, but having sporadic crowds of people was a lot different than having a man perched twenty feet from my desk every second of the day.

I had precariously balanced a drink tray with the cups of coffee on top of the boxes of cookies I was holding. I normally didn't bother with a tray, but thought it a necessity today since I had the cookies to worry about as well. After depositing the boxes on my desk, I slid one coffee out of the tray and walked over to Helena's door. I did my normal knock, clutching her cup of coffee close to me as if it was some precious treasure. When I reached for the doorknob, Ary shifted without a word and opened the door for me. I hesitated, giving him a quick nod, before going into Helena's office. She was already on the phone, and she studiously ignored me as I set her long black peppermint coffee on her desk.

I shuffled back out of her office stealthily, and returned to my desk. I eyed

my coffee as I began unwrapping my scarf from around my neck, and unzipped myself out of my jacket, both of which were washed clean after yesterday's catastrophe. I'd remembered my hat today, and plucked that off as well, my hair frizzing up as soon as I pulled it off my head.

Once I had shrugged out of all of my winter gear, I swiped my coffee from my desk and went down the hall to the staff lounge. I threw the cardboard tray in the trash and then puttered around the fridge. Withdrawing a few liquid creamers, I began the painful process of trying to dump random flavors into my coffee in an attempt to make it palatable. I gave a cinnamon cereal creamer a whirl, and added in some caramel for special effect. I sipped on it while making my way back to my desk, grimacing at all of the conflicting flavors at odds now with the stupid, stupid, stupid peppermint.

"If you don't like peppermint, then why do you order it?" Ary asked, the deepness in his voice casual. Had he been watching my face as I came out of the lounge?

"Good morning to you, too," I said with false cheerfulness as I sat down in my rolling chair. Apparently, I was worth speaking to after all. I set my coffee down on my desk gently, as if scared it might detonate if it hit the surface to forcibly.

Ary was in a long-sleeved, button-up indigo shirt today, his hair pulled back again. He wore slacks that were khaki, and dark brown leather boots. Rolled sleeves revealed bronzed arms that were crossed casually over his chest, coarse black hair visible. I was convinced that broody must be his eye color.

When Ary didn't respond, I felt the need to fill the quiet.

"It's Helena's coffee preference," I explained, reaching to turn on my computer. I leaned back into my chair and eyed the offending coffee.

"Why are you drinking Helena's coffee preference?"

I let out a breath and punched in my password. "I get two coffees every morning. Just in case I accidentally spill one. Therefore, they both have to be her flavor."

"That didn't help yesterday," he pointed out unhelpfully.

"That is the first time that a catastrophe of that measure has ever struck. I have accidentally spilled a coffee just under a dozen times in the three years that I've been here. By having an additional coffee, I was able to avoid Helena's wrath. That alone was worth it, because there are always plenty of other things for her to be pissed at me about. Coffee I can control. Most

days.”

He snorted. I whipped my head around to look at him.

“What?” I demanded.

“You’ve avoided your head being chopped off six times, and that’s worth suffering through peppermint purgatory every day?”

“Yes,” I snapped haughtily. “I want to stay on Helena’s good side, and I will do absolutely anything to do that. If that means I drink peppermint every morning and give up my Thanksgiving to avoid the holiday party, I will do it. I can cross turkey and staff parties off my enemy list this year, and settle for making peppermint my worst enemy. That is something I can live with.”

I glared at Ary. I’d given him entirely too much information, and infuriatingly, he was not going to respond. I was about to give him a piece of my mind, but the elevator doors dinged open.

My coworker Jan stepped out, smiling widely. She was probably the only colleague I could tolerate for long periods of time at the office these days. And, unfortunately, she was several floors down, so I rarely got to see her.

Jan was in her fifties, loved her grandchildren to death, and was my only regular customer in the business I never really started. When I first began working for Helena, I had promoted my would-be business to everyone I came into contact with. I passed out business cards with a fevered glint in my eye to anyone who came by my desk that first week. Then I got busy, and people, for the most part, forgot I baked cookies. Except for Jan.

I still managed to sell a few boxes here and there, but I rarely had the energy to bake these days, let alone promote it. Jan was one of the ones who politely ordered a box from me when I first started here, back when I was bright-eyed and determined to stay at this job a maximum of six months while I got everything set up. She’d continued to order cookies even after I got a very serious reality check. I’m sure her initial purchase was made in sympathy, but surely the boxes she’d ordered since were because the cookies were actually good, right?

Jan’s smile never wavered as she approached. Her skin was a bit blotchy from too much sun exposure in her youth, and her gray hair was pulled back with combs at the sides of her head. She was genuinely one of the nicest people I knew.

I stood to greet her, reaching forward to lift the boxes of cookies. I returned her smile, awkwardly holding the pink boxes as she walked forward.

“Spencer!” she said, appearing sincerely happy to see me.

I extended the boxes out to her when she was within reach. She went in for a hug, which I returned a bit awkwardly between the desk and the cookie boxes. “Thanks so much for ordering! I swear, you’re the only one who appreciates my baking.” I pulled back, the boxes managing to make it into her grasp when we had drawn apart.

“Your cookies are my absolute favorite in the entire universe.” She immediately popped open the top box and plucked out her favorite flavor, which was a pumpkin pie cookie. It was typically a seasonal special, part of my Thanksgiving collection, but I made them year-round for Jan. She always requested a box of seasonal surprise cookies, and a box of her regular favorites. Which meant I could depend on roughly four orders of cookies a year from Jan, at the very least.

“I promise my grandkids every time they come down that I’ll have these waiting for them,” Jan said admirably as she patted the boxes, the side of her mouth packed with pumpkin pie cookie.

Ary had been observing this entire exchange. Jan noticed him, and offered a small wave, but her arms were mainly taken up with cookie boxes. She swallowed the bite in her mouth. “I’m Jan. I work with finances.” Jan was being modest; she was the head of the finance department. “Got a few grandkids that are always begging for more of Spencer’s cookies.”

Ary offered no response, but Jan appeared completely unbothered by his lack of verbal reaction. She continued on as if he was taking part in the one-sided conversation.

“Have you tried them? You haven’t lived until you’ve had one of these.”

Ary cocked an eyebrow, and continued to stay silent. Jan opened up a box again and plucked out a pecan pie cookie. Each box had a dozen cookies, six flavors a piece. I was particularly proud of the Thanksgiving assortment I managed to put together for her this year. Her favorite pumpkin pie cookie was accounted for, a new pecan pie flavor that I was second-guessing, a caramel apple, a maple cheesecake, a chocolate chip pumpkin, and a pecan cinnamon roll. Aside from my seasonal flavors, I always had certain cookies on a recurring menu: chocolate chip, sugar, snickerdoodle, white chocolate macadamia nut, rocky road, and lemon drop.

Traditional types of cookies were not in hot demand by the general population at the moment. Sugar cookies layered thick with decorative icing were getting bought up by the dozens. They were enviously creative, because the bakers could appeal to any sort of special occasion. Cookies in the shapes

of graduation capes or wedding dresses, birthday party characters or baby rattles. All types of colors! All types of variations! But for me, the thick icing on these cookies wasn't my favorite. I thought my flavor-packed cookies would be a nice competition, surely people would prefer flavor over presentation. But, well, you get the idea.

Jan walked over to Ary, completely at ease, and extended the pecan pie cookie to him. I fleetingly wished she'd given him one of the cookies I was confident with, instead of the brand-new cookie I wasn't even sure I liked yet. It wasn't like he was going to take it anyway. If he wasn't even going to speak to her, he surely wouldn't accept—

Ary took it. Part of his mouth quirked up in his small smile as he nodded his head once in appreciation.

"She has her own little business site! You can preorder your boxes, customize them, buy gift certificates! It's incredible."

Jan closed the lid to the box, and continued to sing praises, smiling warmly at me and thanking me again and again as she made her way back to the elevator. She bid Ary a simple goodbye, before returning her attention to me again and promising to put in another order soon. I wished my one faithful customer a happy Thanksgiving.

I turned from Jan in time to see Ary swallow his first bite of cookie, and immediately shifted my gaze away from him, not wanting to see his eyes crinkle in distaste if he didn't like it. It had made me feel all prickly to watch the bobbing of his throat. I'd sampled one of the pecan pie cookies myself last night, and thought it was decent, but I'd also had several glasses of rosé by that time as well. My taste buds from last night's taste testing were not in the least bit reliable.

He finished the cookie, but didn't make any comment about it. I wasn't sure whether that was good or bad, and the last thing I wanted was to sit there and stew about what he thought. I was itching to ask his opinion, but also knew that it'd be yet another blow to my self-esteem if he didn't bother to answer me. Or, worse yet, if he opened his mouth to tell me they were the most disgusting cookies he'd ever eaten in his life, I would never recover. Ary struck me as a no-nonsense kind of guy. If I asked him his opinion—if I was worth talking to—he'd give it to me straight. That was both reassuring and alarming at the same time.

I was just getting back into the groove of sending off some of Helena's requests, when Ary's voice broke through my concentration.

“What’re you doing for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m working.”

“After.”

I shrugged in what I hoped was nonchalance. I didn’t want to let on to my wine and cheeseburger plan. Ary’s brow dipped when I didn’t answer straightaway, as if he was concerned.

“I don’t like turkey,” I answered eventually. Which wasn’t really an answer at all, but it was all I could come up with.

The silence kicked up again. This time, I was having trouble refocusing on my tasks. I shouldn’t care about this random guy’s opinion of me, but I couldn’t help but feel like an absolute loser for my lack of Thanksgiving plans, on top of the fact that he’d made no comment about my cookie.

“I don’t even really like Thanksgiving,” I tried to fudge, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. “I’m thinking about adding it to my enemy list. Last year’s dinner with my ex-boyfriend was an absolute tragedy.”

“You can do Thanksgiving with me.”

I snorted in reaction to his joke, but realized his expression was completely serious. “I don’t cook. Hence the whole—you know—list...thing...”

“I’ll make dinner.”

I absently smoothed back some of my wild red hair, fumbling for something to say. “I can’t just crash your family’s Thanksgiving.”

“Just me.”

I stowed away this little piece of information, wondering why Ary was also alone this holiday season. “Like I said, I don’t cook,” I answered. “It wouldn’t be a fair trade.”

“I’ll settle for a box of cookies. And your list.”

I felt a thrum of pleasure at the fact he considered my cookies fair trade for a Thanksgiving meal. Holy shit, so that’s what a hot spike of adrenaline felt like. But, then again, his idea of a Thanksgiving meal may just consist of a dollar store charcuterie board.

My mind fastened on the latter part of his deal. “What list?”

“Your Christmas nemesis list.”

“That’s not—” I blinked, feeling the repercussions of my oversharing earlier bite me in the butt. “You are inviting me to a Thanksgiving meal with you in exchange for the items on my holiday hate list?”

He shrugged in a non-answer.

“My list is never-ending.”

“I’ll take your top ten.”

“You want me to give you the top ten things I hate the most about the holidays? And that, along with a box of cookies, is worthy of a Thanksgiving dinner?”

He nodded, and before I’d even agreed, he stepped over to my desk. He easily plucked up my cell phone and fiddled with it for a second. An alert sounded on his phone. He handed my phone back to me directly, and I glanced down to see that he had texted himself using my number. I looked at the message:

Ary on my phone: *Spencer’s Nemesis List:*

I sighed, and begrudgingly texted out my top ten.

Me:

1. *Peppermint*
2. *Holiday parties*
3. *Mistletoe*
4. *Christmas music*
5. *Eggnog*
6. *Turkey*
7. *Secret Santa*
8. *Stockings*
9. *Black Friday*
10. *Christmas movies*

I spent an obscene amount of time trying to find a little emoji image for every item I typed while Ary stood beside Helena’s door. When I sent off the message, he pulled his phone out and glanced down at my text. His expression didn’t change as his eyes scanned over the items. Once he’d finished reading, he punched in a response. He sent it, and his address along with a time populated on our texting thread.

Ary and I had a texting thread.

“If you’re not careful, Thanksgiving won’t just make the list, but it’ll take the number one spot,” I muttered more to myself than to him.

His mouth quirked up for a fraction of a second. He reread through my text once more before slipping his phone back into his pocket.

And that was that. We went the rest of the day without speaking to one another.

PEPPERMINT

I guess Ary was given Thanksgiving off, because he didn't show up to the office the next day. Granted, there was a finite number of security present, along with a few scattered individuals here and there working. For the most part, it was just me and Helena working in this huge building on Thanksgiving.

There was no flow of people traffic, so I was able to get caught up on the massive amounts paperwork Helena expected me to complete on her behalf. She must have had a rare streak of generosity briefly gust through her, because she gifted me an extra ten minutes on my lunch. I ended up squandering it, because I was too busy worrying about the evening ahead. It turned out, her generosity was a complete sham, because the stack of paperwork she'd left had somehow quadrupled when I returned to my desk after lunch.

It occurred to me that I had made Thanksgiving plans with a man that I knew absolutely nothing about. He could be a serial killer for all I knew. And he hardly spoke. I was going to endure a whole Thanksgiving thing with a guy that barely talked. Mistakes, oh mistakes had definitely been made.

The day crept along, and as I fired off emails, confirmed different appointments, and worked tediously through the stack of paperwork, it felt as if I'd managed an entire workweek within the space of eight hours.

Naomi had sent a list of new potential bands to me yesterday, which I presented to Helena. Helena seemed a touch interested in one band in particular, which, subtle interest for Helena could be translated into jumping and shouting with excitement for normal people. I made plans with my coworker Clayton to scope out the band she was interested in. They were performing several blocks over at a bar tomorrow night. When I confirmed a time with him, I only belatedly remembered that I was crashing his family Thanksgiving fodder with work. I second-guessed whether to bother him again by apologizing, but thought better of it, and just left him alone.

The end of the day arrived, and I found myself punching Ary's address

into my navigational app as I stood on the sidewalk outside of Timeplace. I was wrapped up in multiple layers, and I hadn't had the forethought to make sure his place was within walking distance when I had agreed to these plans yesterday. There was no way I was wasting money on a cab to an evening filled with painful silence and mediocre food.

I was already drafting up an apology text in my head when the route kicked in, and his place was about five blocks from the office, so a cab was unnecessary. And that also made cancelling plans unnecessary. I could always make something up, but instead, I took in a deep breath, and tightened my grip on the box of cookies I'd brought with me. I'd finished baking them at one in the morning, because I had fallen asleep on the couch, and woke up in a panic around midnight, remembering that Ary had requested cookies.

I gave myself a pep talk the entire walk to his apartment, a gentle snow gracefully sticking itself to me as the gears in my head grinded together. I was trying not to worry about what I looked like or what this evening was going to entail. His apartment building was one of several bricked buildings lined up along the street. I kept my head up and took deep breaths all the way into the correct building and up to Ary's apartment, trying not to anxiously crush the box of cookies I was holding in the process.

I was two minutes late by the time I knocked. Ary made no comment, verbal or otherwise, on my slight tardiness as he opened his door. He was wearing a black sweater with dark jeans, and he had socks on his feet. And somehow that was what I focused on. He was not wearing his normal boots. Just socks. White socks.

His hair was tied back out of his face. I'd never seen it down, and I wondered why he always had it pulled back. I had a brief and totally inappropriate fantasy about untying Ary's hair myself, and then running my hands through it, pulling it backward, his chin snapping up.

Jesus Christ, where had that thought come from?

"Spencer." My name sounded warm coming from his mouth, a kindling fire on a cold day. The deep melody of his voice made me want to take a swim in his vocal cords. Distantly, I was relieved he didn't talk more at the office. If I was listening to the constant murmur of his voice, I'd never be able to focus on getting anything done.

Ary didn't say anything more, my name was the only invitation extended to step inside. I offered an awkward smile and held out the box of cookies I brought. He took them, and I started to shake the snow from my hat and shed

my coat as I stood in his doorway. I attempted to disengage the stubborn snowflakes that had clung to my curls as Ary reached for my discarded clothing items, unbothered that I was littering his entryway with a fine coating of slush.

His apartment was dimly, but elegantly, lit. There were white walls and dark walnut wooden floors. Simple enough décor. What floored me was that it smelled divine. There was some hearty, meaty smell drifting down the hall. Ary swiftly hung up my sodden jacket, hat, mittens, and scarf with one hand as I worked to remove my boots. I set them under the avalanche of clothing I'd just created in his apartment. And somehow that felt intimate. My clothing was piled carefully on the entry hooks, my possessions now a part of his personal life. I had made a mark—if only temporarily—on Ary's apartment.

He led the way down the hall and to the left, where a simple kitchen was nestled. I briefly took in the living room on our right, noting the dark green couch with a rug in front of it that matched. A TV was mounted above a fireplace, and a lamp along with a stack of books was neatly positioned on a credenza.

There were several pots lined up on the stove in the kitchen. The oven's light was on, but I tried not to stare at whatever was inside of it. That felt rude for some reason. Ary swept aside some food dishes to make space on the counter for the box of cookies he still had in his hand. His counters weren't packed with any sort of opened food packages or dishware, everything about his apartment suggested tidiness was a gift of his.

"Uh," I gestured to the box. "I decided to bring my Thanksgiving assortment," I said shyly.

Ary's attention honed in on the box. He lightly lifted the pink lid, and then froze as he studied the cookies, the lid held captive by his long fingers.

"I should've brought other things," I said quickly, embarrassment fizzling inside of me as I considered the vast array of food items organized about his kitchen in preparation for this meal. "But in all fairness, you said to bring cookies, and I didn't realize you—"

"You made these." It wasn't a question.

I shifted my weight, suddenly self-conscious. "Yes?"

He turned his attention back to me. "You don't like to cook."

"I don't. But I do bake. And I thought this wasn't going to be a big production! I thought you'd have like—I don't know—a cheese plate and a

box of crackers or something.”

Amusement spread across his face, and he gently tucked the lid back on the box of cookies. He stared at the closed box for an extra moment, as if studying it. I took a quick inventory of the dishes on his countertops: chunky and well-seasoned mashed potatoes with butter melting on the top, macaroni and cheese that appeared extra gooey and cheesy. There was a green bean casserole, cornbread, biscuits, and different homemade gravies divided out in separate serving bowls. There was dishware in various states of cleanliness in his sink, as if he had been in the process of washing up when I knocked. He had spent his Thanksgiving cooking, preparing this massive meal...for me? Just me. And him.

Ary’s eyes drifted to the oven timer just as the last few seconds ticked down. He whipped on a pristine oven mitt, opened the oven door to remove the—

“That’s not a turkey,” I blurted out.

There were two. Yes. Two birds. Small birds. On a baking tray, suspended above a pan. They were golden brown and smelled absolutely delicious—a blend of rosemary, thyme, and sage detectable. I was a bit perplexed, because these definitely weren’t turkeys, and they were too small to be chickens.

“Cornish hens,” Ary explained as he stuck a thermometer in the meatier parts of the birds. Satisfied, he reached over and shut off the oven.

“But it’s Thanksgiving!” I blustered. “It’s the day of turkey. Or whatever.”

“You don’t like turkey.” He pulled out tin foil and made a little tent over the birds before crossing his arms over his chest and turning his full attention back to me.

“Well, no, but—”

“Turkey is number five on your Christmas nemesis list.” He leaned casually against the counter as he studied me.

This man not only cared that I had a vendetta against certain holiday items, but he remembered it down to the *number*?

I was stunned into silence. Ary didn’t seem the least bit unsettled in the quiet. When it was clear I hadn’t come up with anything else to say, he turned and opened his fridge, swiftly removing a coffee pitcher. I knew it wasn’t some regular pitcher for lemonade, because I had that exact one sitting in my wish list online. It was meant to steep coffee for iced drinks. Cold brew at its finest.

He rimmed a glass with a chocolate syrup, and then rolled it in a finely

chopped chocolate that had already been prepared and shaken out onto a plate. Once the rim of the glass was to his satisfaction, he turned to his freezer. He removed a tray of caramel colored ice cubes, and carefully shook them out into the prepared glass.

“Were you a barista in a past life? I would love to be a barista,” I commented.

He poured out the chilled coffee from the pitcher into the glass, before returning it to the fridge. I noted that he’d only poured the one cup. Then he brought the assembled coffee to me directly.

“It’s a little late for caffeine,” I tried to object.

“It’s decaf.”

“I hate to break it to you, but your ice machine might be broken. These ice cubes look like they might have taken a dip in the Delaware River.”

“It’s coffee with a bit of cream, frozen.”

Then Ary smiled. That tiny, half smile of his that was barely a smile at all. He had literally thought of everything. And I was trying to talk my heart off the ledge. Ary wasn’t some guy that asked questions in order to make polite conversation. His questions were intentional, he remembered the answers. Then utilized those answers, weaponized them.

Military background, I’d heard someone say in the way of gossip in the elevator yesterday morning. In my brief encounters with the rest of the working world in my building, Ary was a hot topic. The rumors were running rampant, but I barely paid attention to the majority of them, because the rumor mill hardly ever produced truthful intel. But that piece of gossip felt accurate. Ary’s precision, his dislike for meaningless conversation, his tidiness, pinned him as someone who had some sort of military experience.

I took the glass from him, trying to figure out how to take control of the situation again. “Are you going to tell me why you’re not with your family on Thanksgiving?”

“Are you going to tell me why you’re not with yours?” he countered.

“I already said I was working through the week to prepare for my vacation time.”

I took a sip of my iced decaf coffee that Ary had no right to be that thoughtful about. And it was good. I hated how good it was. It was rich with a deep chocolate taste and something else I couldn’t put my finger on. I licked a section of the syrup and dark chocolate shavings, and Ary averted his gaze to the assortment of food on the counter. I felt the need to fill the quiet.

“I agreed to work this week so that I could skip out on the annual Christmas party and see my parents over the holidays. Helena said if I stuck around this week, I could take my vacation the week before Christmas, since the actual holiday is that weekend. I’m going to fly out to my parents and see them. I try to make it back to Michigan for Thanksgiving or Christmas every year. Your turn. Why are you alone?”

Ary gave a slow, thoughtful nod, taking in my answer before he proceeded. “My parents are on a cruise in Alaska. I declined their invitation to join them, as I outgrew third-wheeling with them when I was in high school. My older brother is at his in-laws. My younger sister’s family has come down with the flu.” It didn’t escape me that this was the most he’d ever spoken to me at one time, at any time, for that matter, that I’d been around to track.

Ary reached up into a cabinet and pulled down two large plates. He removed the tinfoil from the birds, and then placed a bird on each plate.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” I set down my sinfully delicious iced coffee on the counter and threw my hands up. “I’m sorry. You cannot just load a whole ass *bird* on my plate.”

Ary chuckled, and ignored me. I wondered if he’d grown his hair out after he’d left the military. Were men allowed to have long hair these days? I had no clue.

“Seriously! If you think I’m capable of eating an entire bird then you are single-handedly tanking my self-esteem.”

“It’s yours. Whatever you don’t eat, take home.”

“I don’t even know how to properly dissect that thing. Trust me, science was not my strong suit in school.”

“If you’re caught up in the finer points of etiquette, I can show you how to do it properly. Or, you can just enjoy it.” He began to load up all of the different food items he’d prepared on both dishes.

“I’m perfectly capable of making my own plate,” I muttered, stepping over to him. “What if you give me something I don’t like? Then I have to actually eat it and pretend like I do. That’s basically torture. I didn’t come here to be tortured.”

“You’ll like everything here,” he said confidently.

“And how do you know that?” I asked testily.

He finished loading up both plates with a disgraceful amount of food. He turned to me slowly, his eyebrow cocked up, a confident swagger in place. “Do you like the coffee?” he asked quietly, curiosity and mischievousness

entwined in the words.

My mouth parted as I tried to gauge the meaning behind his question, but he didn't wait for my answer, and instead glided into his quaint breakfast nook that was connected to his kitchen. The nook had bay windows that looked out over Philly. Some sort of learning center was just across the street from him. I snatched my stupidly delicious coffee from the counter and stomped after him, trying my hardest not to be impressed. I was trying really, really hard. Because what I had imagined to be an awkward snack hour with a mute coworker was turning into wildly successful seduction scene. Wait, was that what this actually was?

A bottle of white wine was on the table next to empty wine glasses. There were glasses of ice water filled to the brim already set on coasters, and Ary neatly placed the loaded plates on centered placemats. I wanted to scream when he pulled my chair out for me, because he was being entirely too perfect.

"Is there a reason you're not drinking coffee?" I probed lightly.

"I don't drink coffee," he answered easily, moving to pour out the wine when I didn't advance forward.

"You don't drink coffee, but you have an expensive coffee pitcher sitting in your fridge steeping cold brew."

Ary did not answer, but simply finished with the wine glasses. He straightened, still positioned by the chair he had pulled out for me, and watched me expectantly.

I tapped my foot impatiently. "What's the end goal here?"

One of his eyebrows dipped while the other shot up. I put my unoccupied hand on my hip, the other still holding the coffee. "Are you putting on all this razzmatazz hoping to score tonight?"

There was a beat of uncertainty. Then, understanding dawned in his eyes, and he slowly shook his head. "I'm not someone who partakes in casual cohabitation."

My cheeks burned. I finally crossed the room and took a seat in the chair he had pulled out. He stepped to his own chair lazily, his eyes still fixed on me. They were dark smoldering spots of amber magma and volcanic rock.

"You're just a nice guy, then? Taking in a stray coworker because you feel sorry that she's alone on Thanksgiving."

"You still sound skeptical." Ary considered for a moment, draping a napkin carefully across his lap. "Sleeping together wasn't your goal for this

evening, was it?" he asked playfully.

"No," I said too quickly, my cheeks suddenly on fire. I eyed the massive hen sitting on my plate. "To clarify, you have no interest in getting in my pants?"

Ary began dissecting the fowl that was on his plate. I noted the places he carved, and tried to commit it to memory. I hoped I wouldn't look stupid trying to slice up the stupid tiny chicken. "Don't misunderstand things. I would very much like to get into your pants. But I'm not looking for a temporary chase." He speared at his plate as if he hadn't just set my soul on fire. "As I said, I'm not into casual."

How was I supposed to eat a whole bird after that? I ignored the wine, not just because I didn't prefer white, but because I needed to be clear-headed for this. I took another sip of coffee.

"You're interested in me. For more than just a one-night thing," I tried to clarify.

He motioned towards my plate, beckoning me to eat. He ignored my trembling fingers as I reached for a fork and knife. I tried to make a cut like I'd seen him do. I sent up a silent prayer that he wouldn't feel even more sorry for me and offer to cut up the hen on my plate as a result.

"I'm not looking for a relationship right now—" I tried to say, halfway concocting some speech in my head as the other part of my brain honed in on the meal.

"You mentioned an ex," Ary interjected, his words cautious. "Are you seeing anyone right now?"

"No, but—"

"I want to make a bet with you," Ary interrupted again.

"A bet?" I asked, my eyes flitting between his face and the mountain of food on my plate. "What kind of bet?"

"Your Christmas nemesis list."

"I really wish you wouldn't call it that." I pressed the heel of my hand into my forehead, attempting to thwart a headache that was beginning to pulse in my temple.

"I want a chance to change your mind about the things you hate about the holidays."

I frowned. "Why?"

"There is something memorable for me in all of your most hated Christmas things. And it is a shame that no one has taken the chance to make them into

a good experience for you.”

“They’re memorable, all right. Just not in a good way. Given why they’re on my list to begin with, you will never succeed at changing my mind about them,” I scoffed. “I have been cultivating that list since I was six years old. It is my life’s masterpiece.”

“Oh, I know I will succeed, if given the chance. I guarantee that I will remove your list entirely by New Year’s.” He popped another bite into his mouth, his expression serious and steady.

“What are you getting out of this?” I pressed.

“We’re going to be spending a lot of time together; we may as well make it interesting.”

I took a tentative bite of mashed potatoes, and as creamy and buttery as they were, my stomach was melting for an entirely different reason. “You think you can change my mind about a list I’ve been working on since childhood over the course of a couple weeks?”

“Yes. But only if you’re honest with yourself. And me.”

“If you lose, you leave the dating thing alone,” I blurted. Then my face reddened, but I powered through. “No more seduction scenes, no more chasing. Dating coworkers is an absolute dumpster fire idea as is. And I’m committed to getting my cookie business up and running before I take part in any dating nonsense. My time is precious enough without wasting it on—”

“Fine. If I win, I want the recipe to the pecan pie cookies.”

“That’s it? You’re not going to pressure me into going on a date with you if you win?”

He made a face. “I’d never force your hand. I’m not interested in something you’re being coerced into.”

“So...a recipe?”

“Your pecan pie cookie recipe, specifically.”

“If you’re coming up with some elaborate scheme to make me fall for you, using stupid and cheesy traditional Christmas crap, you’re going to be severely disappointed.”

“Scared?” he asked, his seriousness dissipating into a challenging smolder. I took the bait. Hook, line, and sinker. “I knock off the items on your list before New Year’s, deal?”

“Deal.”

“Done.”

He put another bite of food into his mouth, his eyes crinkling with pleasure

at our confirmed game.

“You’re wasting an awful lot of time for a cookie recipe,” I noted.

“They’re that good.”

“They are a generational secret. My grandmother had that recipe tucked into her bosom when she was crossing international waters to get to America.”

Ary gave me a doubtful look.

“Fine. Maybe not. But she will still haunt me from her grave in Michigan if I give it to you.”

“Then don’t lose.”

I bristled, and popped a piece of buttery biscuit goodness into my mouth. I reached for the coffee and took another sip. “I won’t.”

I will. *Shit*. I might. I won’t! I won’t.

“Do you like the coffee?” Ary asked again, pointing to the glass with his fork.

It was the second time he’d asked me that. The richness of it was still lingering on my tongue. The fact that the coffee was getting better as the ice cubes melted didn’t help matters. I opened my mouth, and I was on the verge of admitting it was one of the best coffees I’d ever had. But there was something in his expression that gave me pause. I frowned.

And that’s when it hit me, meandering in the chocolatey aftertaste and my thoughts.

There was peppermint in the coffee.

He saw it on my face the moment I realized it. He saw the exact moment when recognition twisted my expression.

“You mother—”

“Number one,” he said, and he swiped his index finger through the air to mime a checkmark. And then the asshole winked. He winked, and my insides got all twisted up with a combination of disbelief and desire.

“That hardly counts! You tricked me.”

“How did I trick you?”

“You didn’t tell me there was peppermint! And you gave it to me before the bet even started! It doesn’t count.”

“Would you have given it a fair shot if I told you beforehand?”

No. But he hadn’t known that. Or had he? Judging by the absolute delight that was dancing in his eyes, he knew very well I would’ve declined that coffee had I known what was in it. Had he already been brewing over a

potential bet with me before I'd even gotten here?

"The other nine will be a breeze considering I've already conquered the top of your list."

"Peppermint," I grumbled, absently clanking my fork against the plate. "Frankly, it's embarrassing. My worst enemy toppled with the taste of chocolate."

"Dark chocolate," he corrected mildly. "The bitterness helps offset the peppermint. It stands to reason that you don't hate peppermint. You've just never had it outside of its traditional scope. It'll be the same for everything else on your list." He set his fork down and prattled off my list on his fingers. "Holiday parties—"

"Which, I'm not going to the office party. You already lose. Plus! I'm gone for a whole week before Christmas! But we already made the bet, so you can't change the rules."

"My parents are throwing a Christmas party upon their return, so in all fairness, you have to accompany me. Unless there is another party that you'd rather attend in its place. You already told me about the vacation. If you hadn't, I would've ended the bet earlier."

"I never agreed to a party."

"You agreed to be fair. And attending a party is fair to the bet."

"Fine."

"Mistletoe—"

"Itching for a kiss, Ary?" It was the first time I had said his name out loud. He blinked, as if he realized it too. I cleared my throat, scrambling for a way to change the subject. "Is there anything else you're tricking me into liking tonight? Is there mistletoe in the freaking potatoes? Are the birds actual purebred miniature turkeys?"

His lip turned up in that signature smile of his that I couldn't watch without my insides doing somersaults. Then my eyes went wide as saucers as I realized what tomorrow was. "Wait, that means..."

Ary gave a knowing nod. "You and I are going Black Friday shopping."

"But I have to work!"

"Black Friday shopping starts well before working hours." He smirked, then pulled out his phone and checked the time. "In fact, if you want to get technical, we're already behind. We better get going."

~~BLACK FRIDAY SHOPPING~~

“This is much too people-y.” I glared at the hundreds of people gathered in front of the massive department store. I’d assumed Ary was going to whisk me away to the mall or a tech store or something silly. Certainly he would try to convince me how amazing Black Friday was by buying something obscene to impress me. But, instead, he had parked his silver SUV in the parking lot of the same store where I did my grocery shopping on Sundays, which was not what I had anticipated at all. It was a chain store, not expensive or flashy by any expanse of the imagination. It was the store everyone hated but begrudgingly put up with, because no other store could match their prices on a regular basis, let alone Black Friday deals.

“Do you think they’ll have a sale on my favorite tampons?” I asked, in an attempt to embarrass him.

Ary pressed his lips together and tilted his head, as if he was considering the possibility. When my shaming didn’t work, I tried to switch tactics.

“You can’t enjoy this,” I insisted as he skipped the line of people entirely. “You don’t strike me as being very people-y either. You know, with your whole silent, moody façade that you’ve got going on.”

“Did you know Black Friday originated in Philly?”

“Did you...? Did you just give me a piece of trivia in hopes of changing my mind about Black Friday? Was that the plan all along?”

He took my hand lightly in his, not in a show of affection, but in an effort to maneuver our way through the stagnant crowds without getting detached. But, my heart wasn’t aware that this was platonic, because it was attempting to freefall into infatuation.

We heaved through hordes of people as they shifted impatiently in long lines for different supplies. I brushed up against way too many bodies, despite Ary’s attempts to keep us as removed from the crowds as possible. If he thought Black Friday shopping was coming off my list based on this experience, he was sorely mistaken.

We made our way past people standing in long lines for TVs and gaming

systems. The toy aisles were a frenzy. But Ary kept his hand clasped around mine, and skirted right past all of the different happenings. If he noticed the abnormal amount of perspiration coating our pressed palms, he didn't comment on it. Each time I thought I had figured out what his end goal was, he kept us moving past what I had assumed he had been aiming for.

He led me all the way to the back of the store, and away from the bustling melee. After wordlessly directing me to sit down on a bench that was right outside of the customer service alcove, he crossed over to the woman standing behind the counter. I tried to act indifferent about what he was doing, but was disappointed when he leaned across the counter and spoke so lowly to the customer service agent that I didn't catch what he said. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed when the woman nodded in surprise.

I frowned at him as he came back over. He easily slid beside me on the bench.

"I'm not sure what poor soul tried to explain Black Friday shopping to you, but I think you've got the wrong idea."

He crossed his ankle over his knee, and scanned the store with innocent curiosity.

"Watching the event is not the same as participating," I continued to prod, trying to get to the bottom of whatever this was.

"We are participating."

"We have to buy something—"

"We will."

"But...it has to be a deal."

"It will be."

When he spoke, there was no fluff. He was to-the-point in all of his verbal communication, nothing less than matter-of-fact.

"Listen, you're all dark and broody and patient. And I am decidedly not. If we're going to be here, we might as well launch into the scuffle."

"Is there something here you wanted?" he asked, mild bemusement in place. "Tampons, perhaps?"

Oh, Ary had guts. Fine. Game on. "I may be willing to sell my soul for an upgraded standing mixer," I confided with mock desperation.

He cocked an eyebrow, but didn't reply. I could almost see his would-be response poised but unspoken: *Do you know how much of a smartass you are?*

I turned my attention to the commotion we could observe from our spot,

unwilling to answer his undeclared question.

Likely customers were, in general, frustrated and impatient. They were milling about, keeping tabs on whether or not there were enough items in stock dependent on their places in line. Their faces were flushed, and they were entirely displeased with the proceedings. It was exhausting to watch, let alone partake in. It had been over a decade since I'd had anything to do with Black Friday, and watching the scuffle was a strong reminder of why I'd given it up.

Eventually, after we had been watching the hum for a time in silence, a woman pushing a shopping cart approached the customer service counter. She appeared quite frazzled as she stopped in front of the customer service agent, her attention honed in on two large toys placed in her cart. I recognized a large, remote-controlled blue truck that had been heavily advertised in the past few weeks leading up to Christmas. The other toy was a life-sized doll that had been on a few flyers that I'd seen strewn over the store's waxed concrete floors.

Ary's posture changed. While he was pretending to study the crowds in front of us, his shoulders straightened and his head cocked to the side slightly. His full attention was on whatever was about to take place behind us. I, however, had no shame, and turned sideways on the bench to see exactly what was going on. The mother appeared embarrassed as she leaned hesitantly toward the customer service agent.

"Excuse me," she said quietly. "I was wondering if I could put these on hold? Or set up a payment plan?"

"Unfortunately," the cashier said with a forced smile, "we don't offer layaway options for Black Friday deals."

The mother's face crumpled, but she nodded politely, and turned to leave. Ary cleared his throat.

"But!" The cashier sputtered, as if suddenly remembering something important. She threw a quick glance at Ary, seated on the bench next to me. Ary was staring at two men arguing intently over a rather large TV. "We had someone, in the spirit of the season, offer to cover the next purchase we received. I can ring these up for you, no charge."

"Oh." The woman's exhale was palpable. Relief broke across her face. My heart cracked a fraction. "Oh my gosh. Really?" Her eyes brimmed with tears.

The cashier nodded enthusiastically, and motioned for the customer to

hand over the toys so that they could be scanned. Once the cashier had finished the transaction, she passed over the receipt, and the mother completely broke down.

“My kids weren’t going to get a Christmas this year. Presents or bills, you know?”

The mother thanked the cashier profusely, her hand pressed to her mouth as she tried to contain her relieved sobs. The cashier’s smile was forced, but polite. When the mother walked by, Ary was very carefully studying his phone, seemingly uninterested in the whole interaction. I knew better.

I swiveled forward and shoved at his arm as the mother passed by. She brushed away her tears absently and sniffled, looking fondly down at the toys in her cart. I continued to glare at Ary. When the mother was out of our sightline, Ary slipped back over to the customer service desk. I stood and followed after him, arms crossed over my chest.

“Thank you,” he was saying quietly as I approached. The agent slid Ary’s credit card back across the counter to him.

“No. Thank you!” She offered a half-smile. “We tend to turn away a lot of disappointed parents during the holidays. I hate that they discontinued layaway purchases on Black Friday. It was incredible of you to help someone out like that.”

Ary brushed this off. Because of course he did. He turned back to me, and then nodded forward, suggesting we go. And that was that. He was about to act as if he hadn’t done one of the most thoughtful things I had ever seen. No credit given.

“You!” I pointed my index finger at him. “You do this every year? Or just when you want to impress women?”

He didn’t answer. But he didn’t have to. I knew this wasn’t a pickup method, or a way of showing off. Ary would’ve done this whether or not we’d made this bet, he would’ve done it whether or not I’d tagged along this evening. And it was the fact that he hadn’t done it at one of the registers up front that really got me. He’d made sure to do it for someone who really couldn’t afford the gifts to begin with.

“This is what, year three, Villanova?” Ary and I both glanced back to the counter as a manager emerged from the back. Ary instantly gave a controlled but sincere smile and extended a hand to the man who had just made his appearance. “And for what it’s worth sweetheart, you’re the first woman he’s ever brought out to a Black Friday.”

“Larson,” Ary said gruffly as he shook the man’s hand firmly.

“How you been, man? It’s been a minute.”

Ary nodded in response, and then waved me forward. “Spencer.”

I caught that the inflection he used on my name was different this time. An introduction that only consisted of my two syllables. Ary was finding ways to spin my name in all sorts of ways.

The man tipped a nod to me. He was one of the largest men I had ever seen, with a buzzed haircut and hazel eyes. “Kelvin Larson. I was in the Air Force with Villanova.”

I stepped forward and offered my hand. “Spencer Anniston,” I said politely, and tucked those bits of information away carefully to examine later. Mr. Ary My Lips Are Sealed Villanova wasn’t very forthcoming about anything, was he? But this man on the other hand...I might be able to weasel some serious information out of him.

When the thought crossed my mind, Ary caught it, as if registering exactly what I was thinking as it lit up my face.

“Three years, huh? Does that mean you guys have been out for three years?”

“We got back right before Christmas a little over two years ago. I got a job here not long after, and the layaway thing came up in conversation with Villanova. Didn’t quite sit right with him,” Larson said, shooting Ary a glance that was both amused and warm.

Ary rolled his eyes in response, crossing his arms over his chest.

“How’s the security position at the museum looking for you?” Larson asked, turning his attention back to Ary.

“At Placetime Broadcasting now,” he answered simply.

“Oh? You liking it?”

Ary looked at me for a brief moment, offering a smile with a shrug. “More money, weekends off.”

“Ah, you work there too, Anniston?”

“I do.”

Larson ran a hand over his buzzed scalp. “Hell yeah, man. Worst thing I could’ve done was get into management, let me tell you. Keep an eye out for me. If they’ve got a good gig, hit me up. I’d owe you.”

Ary’s eyes squinted in a way that suggested Larson already owed him. Larson laughed.

“Shoot me a text, let’s meet for drinks next week.”

Ary nodded in agreement. Larson turned his attention to me again. “And since Villanova won’t tell me shit when he buys me a drink next week, clue me in on the two of you, Anniston.”

“He does have that silent thing going on, doesn’t he?” I commented with a playful smile thrown in Ary’s direction. Ary did not look entertained.

Larson chuckled, waiting a moment for me to answer his question. But I didn’t. I wasn’t sure how to answer it. Saying that I was Ary’s friend didn’t sound right, but neither did acquaintance.

“Fine. I can get down to the brass tacks of things with one question. Can I grab her number?”

Ary took in a sharp breath, very carefully maintaining an indifferent expression that threatened to crack. Into what, though? Anger? Fear?

Whatever emotion he was hiding, Larson caught it, and laughed. “I thought so.”

I wanted to point out that Larson should’ve asked me directly if he wanted my number. But there was some kind of silent exchange going on between them, some bro code I wasn’t clued in to. Larson respected a boundary that Ary was throwing down, and I really didn’t want to beat around the bush with Larson anyway. By telling him he should’ve asked me, it would be inviting him to proceed with asking for it. Larson was an attractive guy, but I wasn’t interested. Proving a point wasn’t worth the hassle.

“Anyway, Villanova, it’s been nice seeing you. I better get back to the grind that is Black Friday. Anniston, it was nice to meet you.”

Larson reminded Ary once more about getting a drink next week, then offered a wave to me before disappearing into the back. Ary let out a breath, as if that minimal contact zapped his energy for the evening. He nodded towards the Black Friday frenzy again, holding my gaze as he waited for me to either pester him with more questions or comply with his invitation to leave.

I blinked up at him. “What if it had been like...three hot tubs and a sports car?”

Ary squinted, tracking my line of thought. “I give a limit. She fell right in my suggested margin. If she’d been way over, the cashier would’ve waited, or offered to pay for part of the purchase.”

I didn’t wait for him to finish before I spun on my heel and marched back over to the counter. I yanked my purse open and fished around until I got hold of my credit card, and then slapped it down on the counter.

“Can you do the same thing for me that he just did?” I asked. The cashier’s eyes went wide and she nodded quickly.

Ary had already seated himself on the bench, a subtle smirk on his face as I came back over to him.

“Oh, shut up,” I muttered even though he hadn’t said anything. I slumped down next to him on the bench, crossing my arms in defiance, deciding that I didn’t need that much money in savings. Who needs a new standing mixer when there are kids without toys during the holidays? I knew how important it was to wake up and find toys Christmas morning. Nothing sinks a kid’s self-esteem faster than having a toyless Christmas and believing you must’ve been an awful kid all year long to not get a single stocking-stuffer from Santa.

Ary looked over at me, and then drew a checkmark through the air. I scowled.

He’d done it. He’d taken Black Friday clean off my list.

In one night, he’d conquered two out of ten.

EXES AND NOS

The ex of all exes swaggered into my office with purpose Friday morning. The Black Friday shopping—which had actually been on a Thursday evening—had thrown off my normal weeknight schedule. It had been late by the time I got home, but instead of wallowing in self-pity, I had been strangely elated. I expected to be drawn and tired at the office Friday morning, especially when I’d given up on the long black peppermint coffee altogether and tossed it after two sips. But I wasn’t drained. I was still riding the happy blossoms Ary had managed to plant. If someone looked too closely, they’d probably be able to detect stars in my eyes. Ridiculous.

I was momentarily thrown off by Dean’s sudden presence. When we were together, he would drop off a lunch for me every once in a while. Or pop in just to say hello. I assumed he visited Naomi frequently here, but I was never made aware of it, because Naomi and I worked in entirely separate departments. Dean was an element that no longer belonged in this building, or at least this specific space. It was one thing for him to visit his girlfriend a few floors down. There was no reason, at all, for him to be here.

Dean was briefly thrown off balance when he spotted Ary standing essentially a few feet from my desk. Once he’d regained his focus, he paused in front of me, and dropped a takeout container on my desk. The plastic container was halfway packed with what looked like crusted-over mashed potatoes and dried-out turkey. It gave me flashbacks to last year when I’d shared my Thanksgiving with him. I eyed the container suspiciously.

“Uh?”

“I brought Naomi lunch today. I heard you didn’t have any Thanksgiving plans, and I felt bad, so I brought some leftovers for you.”

Wow.

“I don’t need your leftovers, Dean.” I gritted my teeth, trying to stay somewhat calm and not lose my shit completely. “My fridge is packed, as it turns out, so I don’t have room for your cold microwavable potatoes.”

Dean pressed his lips together in a sign of sympathy. Oh hell no. “You

don't have to feel embarrassed, Spencer."

"I brought some for lunch today," I insisted.

I had nothing to prove to him. I knew I didn't. But I reached down and tugged on the zipper of my lunchbox, quickly pulling out my lunch container and setting it down with a *thunk* of my desk. Ary had stored the bulk of my meal in a large carryout tray that was currently sitting in my fridge. Then, he'd carefully packed a selection of things into a sectioned out takeout container specifically for my lunch today. He'd done both without even asking. Each pocket of my lunch held some delicious segment from his cooking last night. Dean eyed it, as if he didn't believe me, even though he was staring right at my proof.

"Naomi said that—"

"Naomi assumed that since I wasn't going home, I must have been all alone on Thanksgiving. Which was the original plan, and there was nothing wrong with being by myself. But I ended up having plans."

"You're coming off really hostile right now. I came here to check in on you, you know? I still feel really bad about how everything went down."

"You haven't felt the need to check on me in nearly a year, Dean. What's bringing this on now?"

Dean was unable to stifle the swift glance he gave to Ary. But I noticed. Oh, I noticed. "Look," he continued, "Naomi is working late tonight. Big party coming up, and everything. I still care about you, Spencer. A lot. You and I can go grab a drink after you get off, talk things out?"

"I've got plans, thanks."

"Plans by yourself or?—"

"Plans with a person."

"One drink."

"No, Dean."

Dean lowered his voice, leaning closer to me. "You don't have to be embarrassed. I don't care that you were alone on Thanksgiving."

"She wasn't," came Ary's deep voice. It sounded almost like a growl. "Alone, that is," he amended with a slight curling of his lip. This was not his smiling curl. This was his disgusted curl.

"She was...?" Dean blinked, and shifted his attention from him to me. "You were with him last night?"

"Yes," Ary answered.

Normally guys answering for me was not my thing. But this? This I could

get used to.

Dean was clearly taken aback. He had seen me muddling through life entirely alone in the time since we'd officially broken it off, and had probably relished that knowledge. I was the one alone and moping, unfulfilled. He had the relationship that he could flaunt at will. An ex he could torment on a whim, if he wished.

I wasn't sure how offended I was that he found my Thanksgiving plans with Ary so shocking. Dean was looking between the two of us, his eyes wide as he tried to understand the situation. "Are you? Are you two...?"

"I got to taste her cookies, if that's what you're asking."

Dean flushed a deep red, and I'm pretty sure I was doing the same. Dean tried to stay composed as he placed a hand to the back of his head and continued to assess the situation. Naomi probably told him about Ary working on my floor, and maybe he'd seen a potential for the ex he tormented to actually move on. Maybe he wanted to yank my chain, attempt to make sure I was still tied to him. There wasn't a chain to yank, and there hadn't been one since the moment he locked lips with Naomi. But there hadn't been a clear threat to his delusion...until now.

He directed his attention to Ary, dropping his hand in the process. "Look, I know Spencer, and she wouldn't just—"

Dean stopped talking as Ary took in a deep breath and rolled his shoulders out. He then casually reached down to his messenger bag. Ary met Dean's eyes squarely as he removed a brown paper wrapping from inside of it. Ary opened the paper slowly, inside of which was one of the cookies I had brought him last night. Ary never broke eye contact as he took a decent, suggestive bite out of the caramel apple cookie. Dean spluttered. Ary cocked an eyebrow, holding onto a very cool composure as he chewed and swallowed. Dean looked back at me like I had three heads.

"If you're trying to get back at me, this is a little low for you."

"What is low, exactly?" I offered him a tight smile. "It's just cookies, Dean. No need to get your feathers ruffled."

Ary actually snorted in what I realized was a laugh. Dean was so flustered that he offered no further commentary. He simply took back his sad little box of leftovers and hightailed it out of the office. I offered an amused giggle as I turned my attention back to Ary. That small laugh quickly dissolved when I caught Ary's smile, fuller than I'd ever seen before. But the set of his eyes... it had me spinning indecent images in my head.

No. Snap out of it.

“If that’s what Thanksgiving normally consists of for you...” He trailed off, shaking his head thoughtfully. “No wonder turkey was on your list.”

“Still is,” I amended, sliding back to my computer, riding an entirely new high for the day.

Ary slipped the partially eaten cookie back into his bag, looking up at me from beneath his lashes. “Not for long.”

Oh, this wasn’t good. The way my guts were somersaulting in response to the way Ary was looking at me. We were just talking about a bet. Cookies. But why did it feel like we were discussing something entirely different?

I was not exactly shocked when Naomi made an appearance not long after Dean had booked it off of this floor. Ary was on lunch, and I was sorry that I wouldn’t get to gauge his reaction at whatever was about to transpire. I could hold my own, but it was nice having him in my corner.

Naomi pumped forward in neon purple high heels; a hot pink lipstick smudged over her full lips. Her blonde hair was down today, slicked back away from her forehead. She prowled towards me with purpose.

“Was Dean here?” she demanded.

I finished typing out an email, unable to help the slight widening of my eyes as I sent it off. Yikes. How villainous was I planning to be for this particular conversation? I could cut straight to diabolical, if I wanted to.

“Dean,” I repeated, tapping my fingertips together and staring at the ceiling, as if trying to recall who he even was.

“Yes, Dean,” Naomi snapped. “He was here, wasn’t he?”

The elevator dinged, and Ary stepped out, a cup of coffee in his hand. Naomi didn’t so much as blink, her attention firmly planted on me.

“He may have tried to drop off some of his sad little leftovers for me,” I conceded, leaning back in my chair as I absently brushed at my desk.

Naomi narrowed her eyes at me. “You said something to him, didn’t you? He’s all twisted up about whatever happened. If you’re trying to get back at me by trying to steal him back—”

Ary strode right past Naomi, but didn’t take up his position by the door to Helena’s office. There was something conniving in his eyes, some plan that he was trying to telepathically communicate to me that I wasn’t catching.

He came around my desk, right to my chair. Ary set the coffee down on my desk, and turned his back on Naomi. He offered me a subtle wink before bending towards me and planting a lingering kiss on my cheek.

Don't panic. Don't freakout. Act like this is normal. Act like bronzed gods traipsing about as attractive mortal men with broody eyes and long black hair kiss you on the cheek all the time.

Ary casually traipsed back to his section of the wall, dropping his messenger bag and holding his hands behind his back. When I couldn't tear my eyes away from him, he winked at me again, but this time it was suggestive, a show for Naomi.

"You were saying?" I asked Naomi, my face on fire, but my tone manageably neutral.

Naomi's mouth, which had been previously hanging open, slammed shut. "Dean should not be coming up here to visit you."

"I agree."

"Then you need to make sure he understands—"

"Spencer," Ary interrupted quietly. "Last I checked, you aren't responsible for what other people's boyfriends do."

Naomi leveled a glare at Ary. "She sure as hell is responsible for provoking him."

"Provoking him?!" I snapped.

Ary paused, as if weighing the situation. He still wasn't directing his attention to Naomi as he spoke. "Don't worry. Dean doesn't strike me as the cheating type."

Naomi. Turned. Purple.

I studied her, realization dawning as I plopped my chin in my hand. "You found the ring, didn't you?"

The ring Dean had bought me, intending to settle for our less-than-average life together. In a way, it was a blessing in disguise that I found out about them before he'd ever proposed.

I wasn't sure Naomi was breathing, which confirmed she *had* found the engagement ring. And Dean's inability to lie well probably provoked a whole new host of insecurities for Naomi. I almost felt bad for her. Almost.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she finally grated out, the purple finally receding from her face.

She continued sputtering out nonsense relating to Dean, and Ary subtly garnered my attention, nodding to my desk. I could see his subtle suggestion: that I stop giving Naomi the time of day. So, I followed his prompting, and fumbled for the coffee cup he'd set down for me. I studied the label, stifling my urge to squeal with delight.

“Gingerbread espresso,” I said, literally cutting Naomi off mid-rant. I sipped on it, my mouth blooming into a smile as she blinked rapidly, her mouth hanging open.

I avoided looking at her, and instead focused on reading the unspoken question in Ary’s eyes, which held no concern about Naomi’s presence: *Do you like it?*

Before Naomi could start yelling again, I asked Ary, “Do you want to try it?” I asked with a grin, extending the cup towards him.

Ary stepped over, not giving Naomi a single care or scrap of attention as he took the cup I offered. Naomi finally unglued herself from the spot she had been occupying. She offered no further commentary as she stalked to the elevator. He leaned in closer to me than necessary to take a sip, his face dangerously near as he handed the cup back. The elevator doors closed, signifying Naomi’s departure. But Ary kept the closeness between us for a beat longer before finally leaning away.

“You hate it?” I guessed, the tension in my shoulders relaxing as he returned to his spot. I nodded toward the coffee.

He rolled his eyes and nodded his head. I feigned a gasp.

“What?! Not a fan of gingerbread?” I was smiling widely, unable to contain my teeth. Was my life suddenly a dream? What was happening? “Don’t tell me you’re culminating your own Christmas nemesis list.”

“I don’t drink coffee,” he reminded me, his nose wrinkling up.

“Says the guy who has a fancy cold brew pitcher in his fridge.”

He cocked his head in answer.

“Wow, has anyone ever told you that you talk way too much?”

“Don’t commit to peppermint purgatory in the mornings anymore. Just get Helena’s.”

“And why would I deprive myself of caffeine?”

Ary looked to the trashcan by my desk. I could see his response on his face: *You threw your coffee away after two sips this morning.*

I sighed. “The strawberry creamer was a bad idea, in hindsight. But that doesn’t mean I’m just going to stop buying coffee. I’m not a caffeine deprived monk like you.”

“I’ll pick up your coffee.”

I tried to swallow the lump that was forming rapidly in my throat. When that didn’t work, I chased it down with a sip of gingerbread coffee. “Why is that?” I tried to ask nonchalantly as I busied myself with my computer. He

didn't answer, and I found myself responding again as if he had. "The whole point of the two coffees is to have a backup, just in case," I reminded him tensely.

"Then get the backup," he answered simply, his eyes never leaving me as much as I tried to shrug them off. "But don't drink it. Wait for whatever sugary abomination I bring you."

"Peppermint is off the list already," I prompted. "There's literally no reason for you to pick up an alternate coffee for me."

I could feel a verbal response brewing in him this time. He waited until I looked at him, my fingers suspended over my keyboard, before he voiced it. "I want to be the reason you smile like that every day."

My heart was in a freefall. Soaring, diving, straight through nothing but air, wind whipping past, waiting for the impact of the earth. Because the ground was coming, right? It had to be. There was a splat at the end of this skydiving session, surely.

"You could save money and just use that fabulous cold brew pitcher of yours," I pointed out.

"We'll keep that for whenever you come back over to knock something else off of your list."

A coffee pitcher in Ary's fridge. Just for me. For whenever I was at his place. But those evenings would eventually dwindle down, the bet would come to an end ultimately. And then what? What would our workdays look like when we were no longer bound by the rules of our game?

As circulation in the office quieted down, I was counting the literal seconds until quitting time. I wasn't necessarily looking forward to the evening, given the work plans I had with Clayton, but I had to get out of Ary's presence before I literally combusted. Instead of midnight, my Cinderella time was five p.m., and as soon as it struck, I swiped my phone off my desk and deposited it in my purse before I could turn into a pumpkin. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I glanced up and Ary was right by my desk.

"You have plans for the evening." It wasn't poised as a question, but a statement. That's what I had told Dean, and he was trying to gauge whether or not that had been factual. Ary hovered by me, waiting for me to confirm or deny.

I made an effort to focus on work after the Dean incident, the Naomi incident, and the coffee. Oh, the coffee. I couldn't let my mind wander where

it shouldn't. Now, I was forced into close proximity with Ary again, and it had me pressing my thighs tighter together.

"Why, were you hoping to knock another item off my list?" I clipped, trying to seem uninterested. "Stockings, perhaps?"

He didn't respond.

"I have a life, you know," I said, as if he had said something snippy.

No reply.

I sighed in defeat, as if he'd made an argument I couldn't rebuff. "I have to go out with Clayton tonight. We're scoping out a band that Helena wants us to snag for the staff Christmas party."

Ary's mouth twitched. "You're going to a concert. With Clayton."

"It's not exactly a concert. The band's performing at a bar down the street, a group called The Fourth Floor."

Ever so subtly, Ary's jaw flexed.

Oh. I liked that.

"Hey, you know, it could work in your favor," I said, batting my eyelashes. It probably wasn't fair that I wanted to get more of a rise out of him, but I liked the sudden streak of adrenaline that was barreling through me. And he had started this nonsense by baiting Dean and Naomi. "Maybe Clayton can buy me some boozy eggnog and take it off the list for you."

"Spencer." I refused to look at him as the sound of my name on his lips sent hot spikes of attraction straight from my head all the way down to my toes. When I didn't look at him, he reached forward.

Both of us looked down in surprise as his fingers touched the back of my hand. Ary abruptly broke the contact, and shoved his hands into his pockets, as if restraining himself. "Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow what?"

"Christmas movies."

I groaned. "You can't be serious. Thanksgiving just ended. It's not time for Christmas movies already. Let the turkey have its moment, man."

Ary didn't say anything. And I'll be damned if him not saying anything meant a whole lot more than if he'd barfed out the dictionary.

"You're just assuming I have no plans for my Saturday?"

Ary's head tipped forward in question. *Do you?*

I had the urge to lie. To not let on that my existence over the weekend tended to be a pathetic attempt to recuperate from the workweek. My Saturdays consisted of me sprawled out on my couch and binging on trashy

reality TV in an attempt to bleach my mind of the previous week. I wanted to appear interesting to Ary, even though I had no reason to. His attention, however fleeting, had me reveling in sensations I'd never felt so headily.

"I'll text you," I said flippantly. "If Clayton manages to knock eggnog off for you, we could probably call it a weekend."

I hoisted my purse over my shoulder, absolutely delighted by the sudden clench of Ary's fingers as he curled them into a fist at his side.

EGGNOT

“Can I get you a drink?” Clayton shouted as we both took a seat at a table in the middle of a place called Clive’s Bar. I’d been there a time or two with Dean, and probably a handful of times with Naomi when we were friends. I tended to avoid this place like the plague now, convinced that this was the lovebirds’ normal hangout spot.

There were people everywhere. We were in the midst of a sea of similar-looking tables, with bodies crammed in along all of the walls, and the bar itself. Large Christmas bulbs were haphazardly strung around the ceiling of the bar like an afterthought, carelessly blinking off and on. There was a staleness to the air, the floor somewhat tacky beneath my shoes. The Goth Apothecaries were on stage presently, but they weren’t the band Helena had her eyes set on. The band she wanted, an up-and-coming pop group called The Fourth Floor, were up next.

“Just a water,” I responded, reaching to fish my credit card out of my purse. “And something sweet, if they have anything.” I remembered from the few times I had been here that they had a cheesecake that upon devouring I would wish for a quick, sweet death.

“Something sweet?” Clayton echoed back. He was on the latter end of middle-aged with rust-colored hair that was thinning, and a slight gut that protruded from his tight yellow polo shirt. The shirt gave his skin a sickly pallor, the wedding ring on his left hand scratched from years of wear. When I nodded, he shrugged and started elbowing his way to the bar. I tracked the chaotic Christmas bulbs for a second, momentarily picturing them crashing onto the people occupying stools around the bar itself because of their precarious positioning.

I sighed, leaning back in my black-cushioned seat as the singers on stage wailed and screamed into their microphones. I resisted the urge to put my hands over my ears. This was a version of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” that I never wanted to hear again. Just another reason why Christmas music was so solidly secured on my list.

I wondered briefly what Ary was up to on a Friday night, but quickly shook my head free of those thoughts. He claimed that he wasn't into sleeping around, and I highly doubted he'd be courting someone seriously if he was in the midst of this exceedingly addictive bet with me. Or, maybe he didn't see things the way that I did. Maybe Ary wasn't as passionately affected by this game as I was.

Clayton came back a few minutes later. He set his own glass of amber-colored beer down first before sliding over my glass of water and informing me they didn't have anything sweet on the menu. I knew for a fact they did, but I thanked him anyway, and took a sip from my water, my fingers impatiently tapping on the table.

Out of nowhere, a new cookie recipe floated through my head. I whipped my phone out of my purse and navigated to my notes application, ready to jot things down as they flitted through my head. I could replicate an ice cream flavor in a cookie. I could use vanilla bean, and create a cooling element somehow, then—

"Plans for the holidays?" Clayton asked good-naturedly as he swallowed a mouthful of his beer. He was looking everywhere around us except the stage. I imagined the Goth Apothecaries weren't really his musical preference either. Thankfully, they were in the process of singing the final notes of their set.

I spotted The Fourth Floor waiting offstage as I begrudgingly slipped my phone back into my purse. I was pretty sure the lead singer's name was Cindy, and she definitely caught me staring at her. Stupidly, I just waved. She offered an uneasy smile, but she did wave back.

"Flying home to the parents," I finally answered Clayton's question. "What about you? Taking the kids anywhere special?"

"Vanessa wants to take the kids to Florida." I could smell the yeasty alcohol on his breath, wafting towards me as he spoke. "I told her that if she wanted to go to the theme parks in December, then she must have a death wish."

I nodded sympathetically, even though I couldn't really relate. Kids weren't really my thing. I was an only child growing up, with no brood of cousins within three hundred miles.

A notification sounded on my phone, and I took it back out of my purse again. There was an alert for my cookie business page. Which was highly unusual. Normally Jan was the only one who utilized my website, and she

wouldn't be placing another order so soon.

When I signed in, I nearly jumped out of my seat when I saw that a fifty-dollar gift certificate had been purchased off my page. I quickly scanned the details, but didn't recognize the address the certificate was supposed to be sent to. The gift had been purchased Thursday morning, and the credit card had just been processed. The information asking for name or personable information had been left blank. The notes section asked for the certificate to simply be sent to the address indicated.

"Holy shit!" I said aloud.

Clayton looked at me questioningly.

"Sorry," I said. "I just had a purchase for my cookie business!"

"You have a cookie business?" he asked while squinting his eyes.

The Fourth Floor took the stage. Cindy grinned nervously at the crowd. "I'm Cindy, and this is The Fourth Floor. No need to get into the story of why we named ourselves The Fourth Floor, because Fitz changes the story every time we tell it."

Cindy glanced back at the drummer, who was apparently the guy named Fitz. He raised up a stick and offered an approving, profane shout.

"Anyway," Cindy said, shaking her head and looking back to the audience. Her eye caught on something at the back, and then caught on me for a moment. "'Tis the season and all that, so here's our take on a Christmas classic."

They tuned up, and began their upbeat rendition of "Silent Night." I hated Christmas music, and hoped that this would be somewhat palatable. Cindy had a sweet soprano voice that I'd heard from time to time on the local radio stations. Her singing was even more beautiful accompanied by the live acoustic music. I felt like the pop ballads on the radio overpowered the simple velvetiness of her voice. Even if it was currently belting out a cheesy Christmas classic, it was nice.

"Seems like a good fit for the party," Clayton commented, leaning closer so that I could hear him, his breath more potent in the space we shared. He touched my shoulder. "Classic but not dull. I'd book it." He took another swallow of his drink, and looked around to monitor the audience's reactions to Cindy's voice, his hand still on my shoulder. "If anything, they're too good for us. I think they'll be expensive. And even if we can afford it, I can't imagine they'll have any openings this close to the party. The party's the twenty-third, right?"

“Right. Don’t worry,” I said, lightly shedding his hand. “Helena spares no expense for the party, so I’m sure she’d be willing to pull some strings to make sure they play for us.”

Clayton polished off his beer, and then stood up. He took note of my half-empty water before maneuvering his way back to the bar. The Fourth Floor was nearing the end of their rendition of “Silent Night” when Clayton returned, two new glasses in his hands. But, this time, they were filled to the brim with a frothy cream liquid.

“Eggnog,” he clarified as he set down one of the glasses in front of me. I couldn’t contain my snort as I shook my head. When Clayton gave me a confused look, I waved it off.

“Sorry, I have this weird thing about eggnog.”

Clayton shrugged, unbothered as he began sucking his down. I hoped that he would slow down on the alcohol, because he was supposed to be my ride home for the evening. I didn’t necessarily want to tramp through the cold November night if I could avoid it.

As the band began tuning up for their next song, Cindy leaned into the microphone. “Ho, ho, hold up a second.” Cindy’s head cocked to the side as she studied something at the back of the bar. “Normally I wouldn’t call him out like this in front of a crowd. But my tall, dark, and handsome friend cannot keep his eyes off a beautiful young lady in the audience.”

The crowd tightened up, some whistling as they all glanced around in an attempt to find whoever Cindy was speaking to. I turned in my seat, scanning the room as well. It took a second before I spotted Ary standing in the back corner. I actually did a double-take. He offered a shake of his head, both amused and annoyed at Cindy, his arms crossed casually over his chest as he met her gaze evenly.

“It’s been like five minutes of staring at her, dude,” Cindy continued to tease. “Make a move or I will.” She shook her head with amusement before turning her attention back to the general hum of the audience. “Here’s an original song for you guys.”

Cindy started singing a pop song dealing with unrequited love, saluting Ary as he finally shoved off the wall. He rolled his eyes at her before giving her a sharp wave in acknowledgement. Clayton was getting out of his seat, his belly straining against the fabric of his shirt as he tried to look assertive. On my behalf? Was Clayton worried about me?

When Ary navigated towards our table, I quickly leaned over to reassure

Clayton. "He's from work," I said quietly. "He's working in Helena's office with me. I told him I'd be here tonight."

Clayton didn't take his seat as Ary finally made it to our table. Clayton looked comically outmatched, as Ary stood about a foot taller than he did. Ary was tall without being lanky. There was a naturalness to his size and muscle tone. He wasn't someone who spent hours pumping weights, but he was definitely someone who knew his way around a gym. While Clayton protruded forward, Ary was broad. Ary took in the glasses of eggnog on the table, before directing his attention to me.

"You're disgraceful," I said with a smile.

"You're drinking eggnog."

"As is my right to do." I shrugged one shoulder while simultaneously tilting my chin to the side to match the gesture, unable to contain the upturned corner of my mouth.

Clayton looked between Ary and myself, like he was watching a tennis match. Then, as if finally convinced Ary was harmless, he began shrugging into his jacket, appearing a bit miffed.

"Spencer, I'm good with The Fourth Floor if you are." Clayton zipped up his coat, and took one last swig from his glass of eggnog before setting it back down forcefully. "I'd really like to get going. If this is all settled, I can go ahead and drive you home."

Before I could respond, Ary shifted to position himself directly between Clayton and me, all while slowly shaking his head. I waited for him to make some verbal excuse or argument, but one never came. Ary and Clayton just stood staring at one another for a few beats. There was a brief flash of fear in Clayton's eyes, before he finally cleared his throat.

"Well, then. Have a good evening, Spencer," Clayton managed to mumble, shoving past Ary to make his exit from the bar.

"Did you just telepathically threaten him?" I asked in a low voice.

Ary finally seemed to loosen up, the seriousness of his face softening into amusement.

As The Fourth Floor's original number faded out, Cindy's voice cut through the sudden silence. "This one goes out to all of the dark and broody men who watch quietly from the corners," Cindy quipped. Ary huffed, but didn't acknowledge Cindy's jab. His focus was on me. Cindy giggled to herself and started singing a newer and more popular Christmas song into the mic.

Just to get a rise out of Ary, I leaned over and grabbed my glass of eggnog. I took a sip, and my lips immediately puckered in displeasure. “Nope. Still disgusting.”

Ary plucked the glass from my hands, and took his own swallow. He looked immediately repulsed. “This doesn’t count.”

“Why ever not?”

“That’s not the eggnog I would’ve gone with.”

“That’s how all eggnog tastes.” I reached for my purse as Ary firmly set the glass back down. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to figure out a way home since you dismissed my ride.”

“You were riding with him?”

“Not any more. I refuse to pay for a cab, so I guess I’ll walk. Thanks for that.”

“I’ll pay for a cab,” he offered quietly.

I shook my head with a roll of my eyes. “Nope. I’m not your Black Friday charity case.”

His jaw clenched. “Allow me to accompany you home, then. At the very least.”

“I’m perfectly capable—”

“I don’t want any dark, broody men who linger in corners to follow you home.”

“Then why do I get the feeling that is exactly what is about to happen?”

Ary waited for me to officially object, but I didn’t. I deployed his own tactic by not exactly agreeing, but not exactly disagreeing either. The both of us could play the sullenly silent game.

He acted as a buffer as we maneuvered our way out of the bar. He shouldered where necessary, making sure I didn’t so much as touch any other bodies in our vicinity as we scuffled towards the exit, getting closer to me than he had yesterday. He was defensive of me without being overbearing, and it made me feel...appreciated.

“You’ve got some nerve showing up here. It kind of makes you look a touch desperate. Or stalkerish.” We pushed through the doors of Clive’s Bar.

“A cookie recipe is on the line.”

“You don’t show up to a bar and hide in a corner for a cookie recipe,” I countered, fumbling with my gray coat. “Do you have a problem with Clayton or something?”

“I wanted to make sure he was behaving.” Ary’s eyes brushed the exact

spot on my shoulder Clayton had touched earlier.

Shocked, I paused as we reached the sidewalk outside, my face contorting with unease as Ary's statement sunk in. "He's married, Ary."

I was struggling with my coat, and Ary absently reached out to help me shift into it. He looked pensive as he finished zipping me up. His fingers lingered on the pull tab, rubbing it absently between his thumb and forefinger as if lost in thought. When he found his way back to the moment, he reached forward and adjusted my knitted grayish pink cap over my head, pulling it down so that it covered my ears from the cold.

He had never taken off his heavy burgundy coat and dark teal beanie. He reached into the pockets of his coat to remove dark leather gloves, and started yanking them over his fingers. I stuffed my hands in my pockets to hide the fact that I'd forgotten my mittens at home. My fingertips hit the scarf I'd stuffed in my coat pocket earlier, and I pulled it out.

"What're you not telling me?" I finally asked, winding my blue scarf around my throat.

Ary clocked the movement, and took note of my bare fingers. He reached forward again to help, as if compelled to do so. He tucked the scarf in around me, making sure my throat and chin were covered. "A committed man is not the same thing as a faithful one."

"That's quite the accusation."

Ary didn't respond as he let go of the scarf, possibly waiting for me to go for my pair of mittens. I cleared my throat and stuffed my hands back in my pockets. He sighed, as if exasperated, and yanked his gloves off his hands.

"I don't need your—"

"I didn't say you did." He pulled one hand free of my pocket, and easily slid his gloves over my cold fingers. The leather was somehow smooth and scratchy at the same time, and it completely swallowed my hand. He repeated the process with my other hand.

"Are you suggesting he'd cheat on his wife?"

"I'm suggesting he already has."

My eyes widened. Ary, satisfied with the gloves, shifted to stand beside me, asking with a raise of his eyebrows which direction to go. I nodded forward, and onward we began to trudge.

"Clayton wouldn't."

"Oh, Clayton would."

"I'm sorry, but if you're going to have an affair with a guy, wouldn't you

pick someone a little more...?" I trailed off, unable to nicely finish my question.

"Like Dean?" Ary answered flatly. His lip curled again, subtle repulsion blanketing his features.

"I don't remember telling you about Dean."

"I assumed infidelity was not on your agenda. Apologies if I crashed your evening."

"How—" I was about to ask exactly how Ary knew any of this information, but then my mind registered that Ary was walking me to my apartment. And that should have been a little heavy, because traditionally the expectation behind that gesture could have been frightening. But he'd mentioned before that he had no ill intentions, and I believed him. I was pretty certain his goals hadn't changed.

I abruptly halted on the sidewalk. Ary stopped with me, his face both confused and amused as he glanced down at me. No, Ary wasn't going to just change his mind on an impulse. That was never really a worry. The fear that was growing rapidly inside me had nothing to do with wondering if Ary's intentions were impure. All I could think about was the bra haphazardly thrown across my couch, the dirty towels on the floor of my bathroom, the leftover flour and sugar dusted across my countertops that I still hadn't managed to clean up. I didn't want him to see that side of me. Yet. It was much too early in our acquaintanceship-friendship-flirtation-whatever to let him in on the chaos that was my life, especially considering the tidiness that was his.

"I really can walk by myself," I tried to insist.

He lazily rolled his eyes, a flicker of interest dancing in them. "Are you stalling because your apartment's a wreck?"

I spluttered, and tried to make it sound like a laugh. I'm pretty sure it didn't work. "Maybe I'm concerned that you have ungentlemanly aims."

His pursed smile slipped in place. "I wasn't planning on hijacking your evening. I wasn't even going to let on that I was there."

"If that's true, then what were your plans for when I climbed into the car with Clayton?"

All manner of jest left his face. His eyes darkened, and he made a pained noise deep in his throat. "Since Cindy blew my cover, I guess we'll never know."

"Yeah. Your big, popstar friend. I even told you we were going to watch

The Fourth Floor. Why didn't you say anything?"

He shrugged in a way that said, *You didn't ask.*

"Helena is dying for her to sing at the Christmas party, by the way. You think you could convince your friend to do us the favor?"

Ary's mouth quirked down. "Is there a reason you're emphasizing *friend*?"

"Because no one can just be friends with a woman as gorgeous as that," I said with a bothered laugh.

"You're questioning my morals again. Haven't we already discussed my dislike for hookups?"

"I didn't say a hookup. She could be an ex. She could be hopelessly in love with you. Or, maybe, once upon a time, you were cool with casual. And she happened to be on the receiving end of the times when hookups were your thing."

Ary's eyebrows furrowed, as if he was truly stunned by these accusations.

"I hardly believe you can be completely moral when it comes to someone as beautiful as that," I pressed.

"Cindy and I have been friends since we were teenagers. I was one of the first people she came out to." He gave me a pointed look. I swallowed any response waiting in my arsenal. "I have not yet encountered a wild streak, if that's what you're hinting at. And I'm not going to ruin my chances at a pecan pie cookie recipe by acting impulsively, or ungentlemanly." He leaned toward me. "Unless, of course, there comes a time when you want me to act ungentlemanly."

A picture of Ary lowering himself between my thighs flashed through my head.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The downright vile things I'd let this man do to me.

"Is that what women in general hope you would agree to? Ungentlemanly things?"

"Spencer." He stopped our progression forward, pulling me to a standstill with him. He refused to speak until I looked at him.

"What?" I snapped.

"My entire focus is devoted to pecan pie cookies, at the moment."

"So, to clarify, you are platonically friends with an up-and-coming popstar, you are unwilling to compromise your question of gentlemanliness for the promise of a cookie recipe, and this current show of chivalry extends to just walking me home—and nothing else?"

He leaned away, reaffirming everything I'd said with a nod and his small smile. I was having a hard time reminding myself that I could not get tangled up with this guy romantically. If I let him take hold of me in an *ungentlemanly* way, I would never have the focus to bake another cookie again. This man was dangerous. I could get so caught up in him that I'd forget I'd had any other dream to begin with.

"You kissed me on the cheek in front of Naomi today," I surprised myself by saying as we progressed forward again. "And made some suggestive cookie comments in front of Dean. That was decidedly *ungentlemanly*."

I cut my eyes to him, trying to gauge his expression at the same time Ary chanced a glance at me. My stare challenged his. He turned back to the snow-lined sidewalk. The evening was somewhat muted by the snow, the only sound echoing through the streets was our boots hitting slicked pavement. It was unseasonably snowy for the month of November.

"What's the story there?"

"What? The Naomi-Dean cheating saga?"

Ary flinched, but then nodded.

"I asked about your cheek kissing first."

There were a few beats of silence. Ary's gaze tracked the ground, his eyes darting back and forth as he thought about his answer. "He was looking for trouble. She wanted to pin her cheating boyfriend's conduct on you. I didn't appreciate either instance. So, I may have...acted accordingly to combat their behavior." He tugged at my arm to make sure he had my full attention. "And to be honest with you, I didn't like the sound of your name coming out of his mouth."

Compared to the melodic, rich note that it was coming off Ary's lips? I would hastily agree.

Ary took in a deep breath. "Story," he insisted. I shrugged, and started telling him about Dean.

I explained my crazy schedule, my cookie dream, and my relationship with Dean the rest of the way to my apartment. Ary didn't say a word as I rambled on, but there wasn't necessarily a need for his vocal response. I knew he was hanging on to my every breath, knew he was cataloguing every word I said. I explained the work party and the mistletoe, the single text message from Naomi in his phone that said: *She can't suspect anything if we do it under the mistletoe*. The lack of any former text conversation, suggesting he had deleted whatever text messages they'd been exchanging. The late nights he'd

been ‘working’ the week previously. His inability to come up with an answer when pressed on any of it.

I left out the part where he begged me to stay. I left out that Naomi only assumed Dean was going to break things off with me, but he never had any intention of doing that. He’d bought a ring—which he showed me—to try to get me to change my mind about leaving. He’d insisted she was nothing, not the kind of woman a guy married. But an ice shield had already solidified around my cold, dead heart—permanently locking him out.

I’m not sure why I excluded that piece of the story. Maybe I didn’t want to sound scorned, or petty. I finished up the tale as we hit the landing of my floor. True to his word, Ary walked me to my door, and immediately stepped back as I turned the key in the lock. I was ready to call my own bluff and ask him in, heat radiating in the pit of my stomach. Just one drink. Just one night. A drug I could smoke once, just to get it out of my system. Just to see how high I could get, how good it could feel, before coming back down to reality.

Even as I thought it, though, I knew Ary wasn’t the kind of drug you could only smoke once. He probably wasn’t even the smokable kind. He was the shit that you injected in your veins until you forgot who you were. That wasn’t the kind of drug you could try once and swear off of.

As I bit my lip, toying with the idea of asking him in, I noted the politely reserved expression on his face. I doubted he would accept any offer I extended in the first place. Ary was...different. He’d said he wasn’t a one-night-stand kind of guy. And, for whatever reason, I believed him.

Unfortunately, a relationship was not something I could offer at the moment. I had a duty to myself, to my dream, before getting my head stuck up in the clouds of some fantasy romance that would most assuredly leave me with the pieces of a broken heart and no business dreams to my name.

“Goodnight, Spencer,” Ary said quietly, interrupting my inner turmoil. No one on this planet could possibly evoke such a response from me by simply uttering my name.

He waited patiently while I fumbled into my apartment and gently closed the door behind me, making pathetic farewells to his contented silence. As the door clicked shut, he waited until he heard the lock slam home, and then his footsteps retreated down the hall of my apartment complex.

I ripped my phone out of my purse and sent him a text.

Me: *Thx*

Me: *4 walking me home*

Me: And 4 making sure Clayton wasn't a creep

Me: Or whtevr

His response came back immediately.

Ary: Any time.

Ary: And, if I wasn't a gentleman, I'd probably tell you just how much I love black lace.

My eyes darted over to the black lace bra strewn over the back of my couch. I groaned.

Me: Definitely ungentlemanly

Ary: I'd never say that though.

Ary: Because. You know. I'm a gentleman.

I decide to save me from myself.

Me: Im not in a place where I can commit 2 someone right now. 2 date. Im going 2 win the bet so u can leave whtevr this is alone.

Ary: Who said anything about dating? I'm serious about those cookies. Don't think for a second I'd jeopardize obtaining that recipe.

Me: U dont show up 2 a bar to stalk ur coworker 4 a cookie recipe.

Ary: You underestimate my addiction to your sweetness.

I blushed. Alone. In my apartment. With my phone in my hand. Grinning like an idiot.

Ary: I would do just about anything for a taste. Including being a gentleman and waiting patiently for your...recipe. Whenever you're ready to give it to me.

Me: So I could end this whole thing right here and now by sending u the recipe?

Ary: Now, what would be the fun in that?

Me: Do u always perfectly punctuate your txt messages?

Ary: My place or your place for Christmas movie marathon?

Me: U hosted Thanksgiving. Ill host the Christmas movie cringe-a-thon

Me: Should I text all properly like you do?

Ary: What time should I arrive with my list of Christmas movies?

Me: List? Ary, the first step to fixing a problem is admitting you have one.

Ary: I'm not the only one with ridiculous lists, if I remember correctly. Time?

Me: 6 is fine.

Ary: I'll bring dinner.

Me: U did dinner last time.

Me: You**

Ary: Text speak doesn't bother me.

Ary: And I'll happily do dinner again if you promise more cookies.

Me: Fine

Ary: Pecan pie cookies?

Me: Yes Ary

Ary: :)

Ary sent me a smiley face. And it made my whole damn year.

~~TURKEY~~ ~~CHRISTMAS MOVIES~~

I made up the gift certificate for my cookies, finally convinced that Jan had been super sweet and bought it. I made a quick trip to the post office to send it off, and then got back to my apartment where I rocketed around my kitchen, and ended up making three different batches of cookies for Ary. There were pecan pie cookies, traditional chocolate chip, and I decided to let him be a taste tester for the popping candy cookie that I wanted to try out in my New Year's cookie assortment. I already had a few ideas in mind for New Year's, but was still struggling with an official Christmas collection. It wasn't like anyone was going to buy any of them anyway, except for Jan.

There was a quiet knock on the door that announced Ary's presence, one minute before his expected six o'clock arrival. Ary struck me as the kind of guy who was early to everything. I wondered if he had been early, and had just hung around in the hallway, or downstairs, waiting for the official time.

He had a heavy tote in hand when I opened the door, his small smile in place as I ushered him in. He took off his beanie, revealing that half of his hair was down, falling like black silk past his shoulders. The other half was pulled up in a messy bun on top of his head. I liked seeing his black locks down, if only partially.

I helped him with his coat and winter things, and then guided him to the kitchen so he could lay out the food he had brought. I caught his eyes skimming the back of my couch, where my bra had been slung the previous day.

"Something in particular you're looking for?" I taunted pointedly.

There was a teasing glimmer in his face before he politely cleared his throat, and set about unpacking his bag.

Ary was neat and methodical in his process. Carefully packaged food containers were labeled, and the tote he'd used to carry it all was thermal, so it had kept all of the food warm. He laid out bread cut in thick slices. Brown

gravy. Fried chicken cutlets. Sautéed potato slices sprinkled with coarse salt. The fixings for a salad. My mouth involuntarily watered.

“Did you actually bake the bread?” I asked incredulously. “Were you a chef or something in the Air Force?”

He arranged everything on my counter. All of the items he’d brought looked so organized compared to the possessions I had littered across the kitchen. I had haphazardly cleaned up what I could, but it wasn’t enough to mask the normal disorderliness of my apartment.

There were two different glass jars by my sink that I used for cookies. Cookies that were either leftover from orders, or baked on random whims. One was in the shape of a blue cartoon cat, its paws wrapped around a sign that read: *Feline Sweet!* The other was meant to replicate an actual jar of cookies, fake cookies making up the lid of the jar. I honestly couldn’t tell you the last time I’d cleaned them. I typically just dumped in cookies where necessary, and then would sometimes exclusively eat cookies for dinner if I was being extremely lazy.

There were opened boxes of crackers and pancake mix crammed against the backsplash. My internet routing device was jammed in the corner, green and yellow lights blinking at us, a fine coat of dust covering the surface of it. Ary didn’t seem the least bit bothered by my clutter. As he was setting the last container of food out, he spotted my newest box of cookies on the counter. I’d put all of the cookies together in a large white box instead of pulling out my cute little pink ones.

“I’m good with skipping dinner entirely,” he commented while nodding to the box.

“Over my dead body.”

He chuckled, and gave a questioning nod in the direction of my kitchen cabinets. I nodded jerkily, feeling like an awful hostess as he began rummaging through my cabinets for plates. Once I had gathered my wits, I tried to bump him out of the way to do the plating myself, but he waved me off.

He would smile randomly when he pulled on different doors to glance inside. The majority of my cupboards were filled with ingredients and instruments pertinent to my would-be business. Flat pink boxes stacked upwards, business cards, rolls of printed labels, pink stationery and envelopes trimmed with white lace for gift certificates. I wondered if my organizing methods were amusing to him, or if it was the fact that I wasn’t doing

anything productive or worth note with all of this equipment. My entire apartment felt small and slovenly compared to the immaculateness I'd been exposed to at his place on Thanksgiving. My place was definitely outdated, including a stove you probably couldn't even find on the shadiest of junk selling sites. The carpet was fraying up in some of the corners, and there were marks on walls that even the most expensive cleaners couldn't remove without taking out the wall itself.

Ary began assembling together hefty sandwiches with some of the ingredients he had unpacked. The fresh bread was slathered with butter, and then a mountain of toppings was constructed on top of the fried chicken breast slices. There was lettuce, brown gravy, Swiss cheese, tomato, and some sort of spiced mayonnaise, all artfully crafted to make up the sandwich. Ary even speared the completed sandwiches with toothpicks before slicing them diagonally.

"The diagonal cut is far superior to the rectangle cut," I commented approvingly.

Ary let out a breath that sounded a lot like a chuckle, and went about piling the potatoes on the sides of the plates, and constructing salads in the mismatched bowls I had on hand.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, halfway gesturing to the bowls.

"What are you sorry about?" Ary asked.

"My dishware is pitiful. But we can't all have fancy shmancy plates like you do."

Ary pursed his lips, as if he was trying to hold back a smile. "I wouldn't necessarily have *fancy shmancy* plates if they hadn't been gifted to me to begin with."

"Ah, that makes sense," I said with understanding. "Ex-girlfriend forced you into an apartment makeover so it wouldn't look like such a bachelor pad?"

Ary drizzled some sort of homemade dressing he had brought across the salads, the careful concentration on his face was beautiful. "My mother."

"Is she to credit for the super responsible warming tote as well?"

Ary nodded, a look of amusement briefly fleeting across his features.

"Does the chaos of my life bother you?" I cleared my throat. "Text language, messy apartment, the constant smell of cookie dough..."

"Not in the slightest." Ary straightened up, setting the glass bottle of salad dressing back onto my counter. If he looked that good in a sweater, muscles

perceptible under a layer of wool, I could only imagine what he looked like underneath it. “In fact, the taste and smell of cookie dough is beginning to fuel my wildest fantasies.”

Whoa. Wait. What did that mean?

I coughed in surprise. “I’m a little concerned about that admission, Ary. I wouldn’t consider cookie dough to be sexy accompaniment.” It was my attempt at baiting him, at trying to get to the bottom of these fantasies. And for a moment, I thought he was going to bite. His mouth even parted, as if he was going to clear up the picture. But then he caught sight of my face, and realized that I was trying to goad him into talking.

Ary snorted as he carried two loaded plates over to my small dining table that was essentially located in my kitchen. The table was old—a thrift find from a local donation center. It was circular and had four chairs that didn’t match. I panicked when I thought of the one chair that was a little wobbly. Knowing my luck, it was imperative that I go ahead and accept that Ary would probably choose that chair to sit in.

Ary set the plates down side by side, rather than across from one another. I scurried back to the kitchen and poured out glasses of water for the both of us.

“Can I get you anything else to drink?” My brain frantically scrambled through the very limited liquid selections I had on hand. I had a half-full bottle of wine in the fridge, didn’t I? Maybe a few knock-off brand sodas? “I—umm—there’s—”

“Water is perfect.” This man had a knack for easing my anxieties, for feeling things out before I’d even managed a full-on panic. Ary returned to the kitchen and pulled a bottle of wine from his tote. The tension in my shoulders relaxed tenfold. “I figured we’d wait and pair it with your cookies.”

I nodded hastily, digging deep for the false confidence I wielded, which normally lingered right below surface level. Ary retrieved the bowls of salad, and after he had deposited those by our respective plates, he pulled a chair out for me. I swiped at my flyaway red hair as I put down the glasses of water, and then sat down.

I felt my cheeks pinking up as Ary took his seat. In the stupid rickety chair. It bobbed twice when he sat, and I firmly pressed my lips together, trying to even out my breathing.

“Um. That chair—you can sit in a different one,” I mumbled.

There was a quick calculation that was here and gone in Ary’s face, and he

leaned back, planting the chair firmly on its back legs so that it wouldn't wobble forward. Not because it bothered him, oh no, but because he immediately saw that it bothered me.

I willed myself to calm down, and turned my focus to the sandwich on my plate. Any composure I managed to gather in that two seconds flitted away when I realized there was no delicate way to go about eating it. It was a monster, the mayonnaise and gravy already oozing over my fingers as I tried to hold it somewhat delicately. This was a meal that couldn't necessarily be plucked at daintily with a fork without doing the sandwich itself a disservice.

I was spared my mannerly dilemma when Ary promptly picked up his sandwich and dove right in. I felt less self-conscious about tearing into mine as gravy slopped down to Ary's plate. When a swath of mayonnaise smeared the corner of his mouth, Ary swiped it away with his thumb, aware of my eyes on him. Wordlessly, he was making sure I was comfortable. He was setting the pace, his actions meant to expel the tension I was harboring. How one man could both drive my anxiety to its highest points with his attractiveness and perplexity, and simultaneously level it with his protectiveness and amiability, was unfathomable. Anyone could see he was good-looking, but not everyone had been granted a place at his table. This bet, as far as I knew, had been extended to me alone, for whatever reason.

If he could be that comfortable tearing into his meal, then so could I. And it was a good thing that my nervousness was abandoned, because I inhaled that sandwich at an ungodly speed. It was one of the best meals I'd ever had—like a Thanksgiving afterthought squished between bread slices. I devoured it all, along with the potatoes and salad, in less than ten minutes.

"Don't look at me. I have morphed into a disgusting goblin who sees red when presented with delicious food," I said, leaning back and attempting to suck in my gut as I threw my shoulders back. It was like I had gone into a food trance and forgotten everything else in the universe as I had been demolishing the meal.

"You are absolutely mouthwatering. If I weren't so invested in your cookies, I would say that I was ready for dessert." Ary wasn't looking at me as he said this with absolute casualness. He took the last bite of his salad, and I almost missed the implications of his statement based on the sheer nonchalance inflecting the words.

"But the cookies are dessert—"

Ary's eyebrow popped up as he set his napkin down neatly on the table, his

tongue sliding over his teeth behind his closed mouth.

I swatted the air in response, feeling a warmth flushing through me. “You are not as smooth as you think you are.”

Ary stood slowly, stretching as he did. He picked up our cleaned plates, and shuffled them back to the kitchen. “I’m going to pack up the leftovers and leave them for you. Go ahead and pick a Christmas movie.”

I sighed, my face still warm. “But we were having such a nice time.”

“And we will continue to do so.”

Once Ary had packed away a disgustingly superb lunch for me out of the leftovers, we started wrestling for dirty dish duty. I finally convinced him to log into his streaming account while I loaded the dishwasher. He snagged the box of cookies off the counter and set it down in the living room, as if he wanted to keep a careful eye on it while he signed in. Maybe it was just about the cookies. Maybe I was way too in my own head.

Once I had wrangled everything into the dishwasher, and Ary had loaded up a variety of Christmas movies he’d added to a favorites list, I started sifting through them.

“Are all of these your preferences?” I asked incredulously as I flipped through the list.

Ary pursed his lips in thought. “This is a list I made for you. Some are a true testament to the Christmas season—timeless and classic. Some are so ridiculous it’s painful. I pulled in every movie that I thought I could win you over with.”

My cheeks warmed as I realized this wasn’t simply a folder of Ary’s favorite Christmas movies. This was a list of movies he culminated specifically for me. I pictured him sitting in his apartment, browsing the endless cycle of movies, pondering over whether or not to add one. I was sure he hadn’t undertaken the task flippantly. He’d assuredly put some serious thought into every pick.

As I browsed, Ary went back to his tote and pulled out bits of paper and a tape dispenser. I teased him ceaselessly as he began taping a black paper mustache to my TV, secretly enjoying watching his shoulder and back muscles shift beneath his sweater. He placed the mustache just below the center line on the left side of the screen. He then placed a top hat on the opposite side of the screen, in the upper righthand corner. When he stood back, I squinted at the little paper pieces, confused. When he was satisfied with his antics, he retreated back to the kitchen.

Ary poured us each a glass of wine from the bottle he'd brought with him as I continued to flip through titles. He didn't mention that I had no actual wine glasses to speak of. He snagged a tall, square glass I'd gotten for free when I attended freshman orientation. The other glass he snagged was short and circular; I had nicked it from my parents' house when I moved out.

He sat down beside me on the couch, leaving room enough to be polite, but close enough to charge the space between us with heat and uncertainty. I found myself both relieved and frustrated at the distance. We ultimately weren't touching one another. But there was a desire lurking in the pit of my stomach that desperately wanted him closer. I wanted to test those back muscles with my fingertips, wanted to see his shoulders flex without a sweater obscuring my view.

Ary handed me the round glass of wine, and set his rectangular one down on the coffee table, right beside the box of cookies, banishing the naughty thoughts from my head in the process. I studied the glass in my hand.

"Rosé this time?"

"You didn't drink white."

"I..."

I fumbled for some excuse, but found no reason to lie to Ary. No, I hadn't drunk the white wine. What was more shocking was that he had noticed. And changed up the bottle he'd brought this evening in response.

"What if I like red?"

He honed in on the tote he brought.

"You brought red, too?" I asked incredulously. Ary made as if to stand, but I put my hand on his knee to stop him. "You guessed right. Don't bother with the red," I murmured, pulling my hand away so that it would stop feeling as if it was being scorched, and took a tentative sip of the wine.

I finally selected a movie as Ary lifted the lid on the box of cookies and took one out. He waved towards the TV screen as he settled back against the couch. "Take a drink each time the mustache or hat line up with a character."

"Oh, I see. You're trying to get me drunk."

"I am trying to get you to loosen up so that you can enjoy a stupid Christmas movie."

"So, you admit they're stupid?"

Ary leaned forward in an attempt to offer me a cookie from the box, which I declined. Once he had relaxed back into the couch again, wine glass in one hand, cookie in the other, I started up the movie. I hadn't given much thought

to the choice, and had picked one at random, my thoughts too wound up because of the close proximity to the gorgeous mortal on my couch.

The movie, which was somewhat dated, had been one I'd seen advertised plenty of times over the years, but had never actually watched. It followed some dumb schmuck who gets himself stuck behind the reins of Santa's sleigh. It was gimmicky in nature, and not necessarily my type of comedy. I immediately began trashing the opening scene. Ary never disagreed with any of my commentary, but would cautiously counter with a fact about the movie, and effectively draw me back in.

"Oh, come on. This guy obviously can't play Santa Claus. Look at him! He's a clown!" I scoffed, absently swirling wine around in my glass.

Ary shifted, crossing an ankle over his knee. "He was actually hesitant about playing Santa Claus. Because he admittedly doesn't like kids."

"Sounds like my kind of guy."

I would hold my breath when one of the actors got close to the mustache or top hat, my grip tightening on the glass of wine in my hand. Eventually, as Ary listened patiently to my ramblings, and met them with either a joke or a fact, I forgot that this was some corny Christmas crap. I was actually paying attention to the story as it played out, anxious for the next bit of trivia Ary offered me, or for a character on screen to line up with one of the pieces.

Ary and I continued to banter back and forth. I would hoot and holler when a character got close to the mustache or top hat, going so far as to stand and tighten up with anticipation the longer the actor lingered. Ary smiled subtly and snorted in response to my reactions, obviously entertained more by me than the movie. Inevitably, an elf would be a short distance away from the mustache, and we would both be on edge as the actor hovered right near it. The mustache would appear on a forehead or a shoulder, and I would cackle, kicking my feet with delight.

Eventually, Santa would hit the top hat, and we'd drink, or a reindeer would line up with the mustache, and we'd drink again. I would let out a chorus of boos when the scene changed without a character meeting up with either accessory correctly. And I would glance over to see if Ary was letdown that it hadn't matched up just right, but he was never watching the scene. He was always looking at me. Every time—he was looking at me. Towards the end of the movie, it was getting harder and harder to pay attention with the sensual feel of his stare lingering on my reactions.

Ary moved closer to refill my glass a few times, and then didn't restore the

distance between us. He relaxed back, his arm resting comfortably along the couch behind me. When the first movie stopped, I didn't object when he turned on the sequel. Whatever had been shifting between us throughout the first film was kicking into overdrive as the opening credits queued up. The side-splitting laughter was transitioning into a slow-burning anticipation.

"I don't think I've ever seen a reindeer with a mustache before," I managed to say under the burn of his gaze, staring unseeingly at the TV.

"Santa looked good in the top hat though, right?"

I let out a giggle, and then made the mistake of looking up into his face for the thousandth time. We hung onto a moment of silence, neither of us looking at the TV, but at one another. He held my eyes, a contented smile turning up both corners of his mouth, his cheeks slightly flushed with joy and drink. The moment felt natural, easy.

I considered his lips, which were wet with wine and slightly parted, the lower lip fuller. I tilted my head back, and Ary responded by sliding his hand under my chin, his thumb just below my mouth. He was so close that I could smell the sweetness of the wine on his breath, the evergreen in his cologne. A spell had been cast over the two of us, some stupid magical Christmas merriment coupled with a tipsiness from the drink and a giddiness from the game. And I wasn't pulling myself out of it this time. I couldn't conjure up any of my normal reasons for putting distance between us romantically.

Before our lips touched, Ary jerked back, dropping his hand from my face as if I'd shocked him. I thought I heard him swear, but couldn't be sure. I'd never actually heard Ary cuss.

He lunged off the couch, his cheeks even rosier. "I should get going. Can we knock Christmas movies off your list? Or do I have to try again?"

"Wait." I set down my glass. "Did I...just completely misread that moment?"

"Spencer."

Did he understand the effect he had on me? The visceral reaction that pulled deep in my soul when he said my name? Surely not. Surely he wouldn't keep *saying* my *name* like *that* if he knew what it stirred in me.

"Is this really just about a cookie recipe?" I asked instead, standing up as well.

"I think we both know it isn't just about a cookie recipe," he mumbled distractedly.

"Then help me understand why we had a moment, and now you're

leaving.”

“The first time I kiss you, Spencer—” He paused to consider his response as he retrieved his winter clothes. He shrugged into his burgundy jacket while retracing his steps to get closer to me. “It will not be sloppy or drunken or dazed with some cheap Christmas movie playing in the background. I want you fully alert and clear when I kiss you. That way, there’s no question when you feel things for me in the pit of your stomach. I want you to know, deep in your gut, that it wasn’t because you were tipsy or lost in a moment. I want you to be absolutely certain that it was because of me. Just me. Nothing else to cloud you, or make you second-guess what this is.”

Being stunned into silence was a rare occurrence for me. Ary somehow made a sport of it.

His face softened. “Can you confirm for me that we’ve knocked another two items off the list.”

I closed my eyes in an attempt to shut out the fire he’d set in my veins. Once I had some semblance of control again, I opened them. “I’ll give you movies. But I hate to break it to you, that was just one.”

“The way you inhaled that turkey sandwich...” Ary widened his eyes suggestively as he adjusted the collar of his coat. My mouth swung open in surprise. “I assumed it was safe to take turkey off as well.”

“That wasn’t...!” I blinked, thinking back to the sandwich. I’d thought it was chicken. It had been way too juicy to be chicken. “That was...?”

Ary grabbed his empty tote from my kitchen floor, easily sliding the strap over his shoulder. I approached him, still trying to make sense of the situation at hand. When I reached him, his full attention dialed into me. He leaned down slowly, seductively, and my heart rocketed into my throat. Maybe he’d changed his mind about kissing.

He kept his eyes opened for every inch that he dropped closer to my face. But, instead of bridging that final distance, he diverted course, and pressed a kiss to my cheek. The kiss lingered for a breath, and when he pulled back, it was as if he was mustering every bit of his strength to detach himself from me.

Ary cleared his throat, and if this man had asked me right then and there to accompany him to the bedroom, I would have obliged without a second thought. Because if a kiss to the cheek could have me reeling this much...

I think he realized it too. Judging by the change in his breathing, the half-lidded eyes that lingered on my parted lips a moment longer than necessary.

“My parents’ Christmas party is in two weeks,” he managed to say. “They live in Pittsburgh, so it’s a drive. Unless you’ve determined a fair alternative?”

“Are we staying overnight?”

“I was planning on booking a room.”

“One room?”

He gave me a flat look. “For you. I’m staying with my parents.” He tugged on his leather gloves, and I accompanied him to the door. Was he truly still planning on playing the gentleman role two weeks from now?

“Text me the details,” I managed to get out as I opened the door. I didn’t dare suggest we share a room at this point, even though that was what my body and my heart were screaming at me to challenge him on. My brain quieted the other two, reaching back into the far corners of my mind to remind me that I had a duty to myself above anything else.

“Goodnight, Spencer.”

He adjusted the strap of the tote over his shoulder once more before ducking his head and striding down the hallway towards the staircase.

My heartrate took a long time to come back down, even after he’d been gone from my apartment for a time. It was like the memory of our evening still lingered, his evergreen scent still present among the other normal fragrances of my apartment. I couldn’t shed him from my mind. I tossed and turned that night, with just the promise of an eventual kiss from him sending me into a spiral.

I was considering giving up on sleep entirely when the early morning hours snuck in. Just when I was halfway convinced that I’d go bake some cookies with this rare spurt of energy, a text came through. I yanked at my phone so brusquely that the charging cable disconnected from the wall. On the screen was a text from Ary.

Ary: *Details Spencer requested:*

Ary: *I’ll pick you up at eight on the tenth, which is a Saturday. We’ll get you checked into the hotel first before we head to my parents’. There will be some shenanigans to get into Sunday morning before we head back.*

I tapped out a reply that was tainted with my unrealistic fantasies and sleep deprivation. Two o’clock in the morning? Business ventures be damned.

Me: *What if I want you to stay with me?*

I waited several minutes with baited breath, but Ary never responded.

Across whatever distance that stretched between us, we had been thinking about each other into the early morning hours. Gentleman or not, it was me on his mind at two a.m.

HAZELNUT & WAX MELTS

On Monday, there was a cup of coffee waiting on my desk. A coffee that was no doubt free of any peppermint nonsense. And there was also no doubt that it came from the dark and broody colleague that was quickly becoming more than just a colleague. He wasn't outside of Helena's door when I arrived, and I was both relieved and annoyed by that.

I dropped off Helena's coffee as per usual, and found Ary standing outside the door when I re-emerged. There was a new Christmassy smell that was beginning to drift down the hall. I frowned, and when I investigated the lounge, I found that a new sugar cookie wax cube had been left to begin melting in the warmer.

Ary.

I ignored the coffee he had set on my desk as I returned to my station. After sending my risqué text, I had never heard back from him, and had subsequently stewed all day Sunday. I wasn't going to be the one to text again. And if he couldn't bother to respond to the initial message from me, I was not about to give him the satisfaction of drinking the coffee he'd bought me. I caught a slight hint of hazelnut wafting from the warm cup, and my body instantly relaxed, believing it would be spared from its own personal peppermint hell for today.

But I held firm, and didn't drink it. I strutted back to the lounge and tried to drown the peppermint with a new dark chocolate creamer I had purchased, hoping it would have a similar result to the coffee Ary had made. When I tasted it, I had to hide the utter repulsion that hit my tongue full force. I refused to give Ary the satisfaction that the peppermint coffee tasted like death this morning.

In the early morning rush, I avoided looking at him at all costs. As I sent people away with fake promises and faker smiles, Ary stood still, observing the normal ruckus while also keeping an eye on me. Once we reached our first quiet stent of the morning, it was Ary that spoke first.

"Got something against hazelnut?"

“No.”

“Apparently you do. You’d rather sip on peppermint purgatory.”

“I have a thing against guys who don’t respond to a vulnerable text, and then have the gall to bring me coffee. And expect me to drink it. And! Bring new holiday-themed wax melts to work just because you know I’m a sucker for Christmas specialties. How dare you try to buy my forgiveness with hazelnut and sugar cookie.”

Silence. And I knew damn well just how long that silence could extend, so I broke first.

“Why didn’t you text me back?” I asked, not bothering to cloak the hot annoyance that was burning a hole through my esophagus.

Ary considered, his gaze lingering on the untouched coffee sitting on my desk. “I didn’t text you back because I could not come up with a single gentlemanly thing to say.”

“I didn’t want you to be—!” I stopped abruptly, remembering that I was a closed door away from my boss. And this was my job, not a preplanned stage for a seductive melodrama. “Maybe I wasn’t looking for gentlemanly,” I muttered lowly.

“I also reminded myself that you aren’t looking for something serious.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I am.”

I snorted in indignation, but didn’t respond. His hair was pulled back into a low ponytail again today, and I found myself wishing for the half-bun he had been sporting on Saturday.

Ary meandered over to my desk, and easily leaned his hip against it. His arms were still crossed, and he knew darn well his closer proximity was essentially my own personal truth serum. “Tell me this: you don’t want anything serious, or you don’t want anything serious with me?”

Oh boy, do you have it wrong.

“Not—I don’t want—I am not looking for anything serious, period.” I finally managed to get out.

“Because of meathead?”

I blinked. “Who?”

Ary crinkled his nose and slumped his shoulders.

“Dean?” I asked disbelievingly. “You think I’m holding off on a serious relationship because of Dean?”

Ary was saved a response by the elevator opening. He moved back to his position by the door as a haggard woman begged to see Helena about a

producer that wasn't working out. I took down her information and directed her to HR. The elevator had barely closed behind her when Ary burst out what he'd been holding onto the entire time she'd been at my desk.

"I'm going to start by saying you deserve a lot more than an unfaithful meathead who thinks crusted turkey in a takeout container is worthy of you. But if that's what's holding you back from something serious, if you still care for him—"

"Um, no. That's not a thing."

"I'm trying to say," he swallowed, as if the words pained him, "the thing with the blonde isn't going to last. A man doesn't just go out of his way to bring his ex leftovers."

"Ary, I am not holding out for Dean," I said flatly. "That ship has long sailed. I ended things the moment I realized what was going on, despite the fact that he practically begged for forgiveness and asked me to stay by pulling out a bubblegum machine ring he'd bought."

"...The blonde."

"Naomi."

"When she was here talking to you"—his brows furrowed—"she made it seem as if he chose her. When I asked you about them, you didn't explain about the ring."

I snorted. "He chose her when I dumped his ass. Who cares? She can have him. Let her think she won. She didn't win anything at all."

"And you never told her any of that. That he begged your forgiveness, had bought a ring?"

"What difference does it make?" I overvigorously closed a tab on my browser. "It's not like it matters."

Ary startled me by approaching my desk again. This time, he leaned forward, his palms planted on the desk as he studied me. He waited until he had my full attention before speaking again.

"You had the opportunity to absolutely destroy her. Their relationship. And you didn't." He was clearly confused by my choice.

It was true, I had let Naomi think I was nothing more than a discarded Christmas tree left out for trash collection. As far as she was concerned, she was the shiny new artificial tree that would last a lifetime.

Ary's next question was quiet and curious. "Why?"

"Because her pain would not give me any sort of relief. Sure, it would feel good at first, but then I'd be no better than her."

Ary contemplated my answer for a long time before he eventually backed up to the door to take his official post back up.

“My turn to host.” Ary stretched, his eyes flicking to Helena’s door for a moment before they settled on me again. “I’ve got to cross another item off your list.”

“Tonight?” I hummed with false indecision. “It is a worknight. Tell me, does it involve booze?”

Ary gave me a flat look.

I batted my eyelashes innocently. “I can’t get wasted and then show up to work with a hangover. And I distinctly recall booze ruining my night the last time I drank.”

“There will not be booze,” he finally conceded.

Helena’s office door snapped open. “Spencer!”

I shot up from my desk, because it wasn’t lunchtime yet, and it was very unlike her to try to speak to me in person. She’d normally send anything that I needed to get done over the computer messenger.

“Yes, Helena?”

“Send out a memo to my personal department. Set up a meeting for ten-thirty.”

SECRET SANTA

Helena calling an unplanned staff meeting was essentially unheard of. If we ever had staff meetings, they were always dated well in advance. I mean, Helena scripted out an item-by-item itinerary a month before the scheduled assembly. For one to be called without any warning was worrying.

The elevator dinged again and again as Helena's closest staff began crowding around the office space. People were getting awfully close to my desk, some even leaned on it as we waited. These colleagues mainly consisted of the heads of each department, who would then pass along any pertinent information that the departments needed to be made aware of. Naomi would come because she was over public relations. Jan would be there since she was the head of finance.

Whispers of a layoff ran rampant around the office. Why else would a meeting like this be called? We all wondered who would survive the apparent firing squad that was coming, and I hoped that I wasn't on the list. I hated this job, but I needed it to survive. One cannot live on cookie dreams alone.

Ary abandoned his normal place, which was swarming with men running their mouths and women batting their eyelashes at him. He took up residence behind my desk, coming to stand right next to me. He crossed his arms and glared at the few people who were leaning against my desk, and they wordlessly detached themselves as they cleared their throats and adjusted their collars. When he caught sight of Naomi glaring at me, he casually looped his arm around my shoulders, just to spite her. He was the only one who looked completely at ease.

I frowned at him. "You know what's going on, don't you?" I asked accusingly.

Ary looked my way briefly, his lips pressed together as he held back a smile. I pulled out of his grasp and smacked him on the arm.

"You're not even worried!" I feigned a gasp, my eyes narrowing at him. If it was bad news, there was no way he would look so calm. "It's not a layoff, is it?" I guessed.

He shook his head. *Much worse*, he mouthed, finally letting a small smile crack his face. Whatever I'd done to deserve those smiles—my karma must have been on point in my past lives.

Helena threw open her office door, looking positively murderous. She gazed with disgust at the people who were in her immediate bubble, and they backed up to comical effect. She did a mental calculation of the bodies crowded in her office space, and I knew full well she didn't know half the people in the room. I was the one who did all of the coordinating with them on her behalf, for the most part.

"It has come to my attention," she snapped, not even bothering to properly address the room to achieve quiet. She didn't have to address us or clear her throat, because the moment her door had banged open, there was an automatic silence that extended. "That some of you, in light of the...holiday season," she swallowed as if the words disgusted her to say, "would like to participate in a Secret Santa exchange."

I'm pretty sure every mouth in the room—apart from Ary's—dropped wide open. There was a nervous tension that broke out amongst the staff, but no one uttered a word for fear of Helena biting a head off.

"Spencer will arrange for the exchange and will coordinate the details relating to any guidelines that I couldn't be bothered with. I will not be participating. If you would like to establish individual exchanges with your own respective teams, that's entirely up to you to organize."

Her employees continued to stare at her, waiting for some other hammer to drop. If she was suggesting an office holiday game, surely she would be announcing something devastating in response to this random act of good will. But that was it. She let out a sharp breath, and subsequently shut herself back inside her office.

Everyone slowly turned to look at me. I'm pretty sure I squeaked something unintelligible out before clearing my throat.

"If you're interested, come back at two o'clock, I'll have the names together and the parameters set by that time. If you aren't interested in the exchange, then please drop me an email no later than one. I will send out the rules to those participating before we begin the drawing."

There was a general grumble as people piled by the elevator, some braving the stairs instead of waiting in the long line. Ary was holding back an absolute feral grin, and for the sake of his dignity, I was waiting until everyone cleared out before ripping him a new one. I knew exactly who had

planted that idea in Helena's head. How the hell had this man convinced Helena Vonaparte to allow a Secret Santa game to commence in her office? He kept glancing at me curiously as he took up his position by Helena's door, knowing darn well what was brewing.

As soon as the floor was pretty much cleared out, he popped into Helena's office without knocking. He left the door open, and murmured something about an early lunch, before hopping onto the elevator with the last bunch of employees who were making their way back to their respective offices. The Spencer Anniston tongue-lashing of a lifetime would have to be postponed for half an hour.

I only had two people that emailed me to withdraw themselves from the exchange—I was surprised that Jan was one of them. I could have complained about the time I was wasting on the task, but it was easy enough to compile the names of the participating employees and print them out. Cutting the stupid little pieces was going to take a bit more time, though.

When the paper began spitting out of the printer, Ary stepped off the elevator, and I noted that he hadn't quite taken his full half-hour. He quickly strode forward and aimed for the sputtering printer. He took up the task of swiping up the papers as they slid out, slicing through the names with a pair of scissors he picked up from my desk. I thumped a random bin that I'd swiped from the staff lounge in front of him to deposit the finished pieces in.

I huffed as I took a seat at my computer, opening up a new document to set the parameters for the exchange. Ary's eyes kept flitting between me and the paper pieces he was depositing in the bin. "So..."

"You coward," I snorted, my back straight and my eyes firmly planted on the computer. Ary let out a hardy chuckle, but didn't deny my accusation. "You broke for an early lunch to avoid my wrath."

"Now that," he said with a firm snip of scissors across paper, "is untrue."

"Regardless. Since this was clearly your idea, let's talk logistics." I poised my fingers over my keyboard, staring at the blank document I'd procured. "You can't keep your own name, obviously. You must reveal yourself as someone's Secret Santa before the end of the staff party. What should the price cap be?"

"There shouldn't be a cap," Ary stated, dropping two bits of paper into the bin. My eyes swept over the strong forearms peeking out of his dress shirt.

"That's not going to work, Ary."

"Why not?"

I fully whirled around to him. “Because then some people are going to drop a hundred bucks on the person they draw, while another person may just be able to scrape twenty bucks together just to participate.”

“It’s not about the money.”

“Yes, it is! Because the person who gifts with their whole heart will end up with a stick of gum and a Happy Hanukah card.”

Ary considered me for a moment, his progress on the paper slicing stalled. “If I were a betting person, I would bet you were the person who gifted with her heart, and then got shafted with the stick of gum. Would that be correct?”

“Spoiler alert: I don’t celebrate Hanukah.”

“What if we did a minimum instead of a maximum?” he suggested. “You have to spend at least twenty dollars. That way, you can spend twenty, or you can spend a hundred.”

I turned back to my computer angrily. “We’ll put the cap at fifty dollars. That’s more than reasonable.”

Ary frowned, but didn’t argue.

“You must give your person at least one gift by the Christmas party at the bare minimum.”

“It’s better if there are several gifts leading up to the party.”

“Listen, what’s better: receiving several puny gifts that’ll get thrown in the garbage, or one big gift actually worth receiving? Everyone will just end up getting one another gift cards anyway. ‘Here’s a twenty-dollar gift card to a place you hate.’ ‘Thanks! Here’s your twenty-dollar gift card to that restaurant you left two stars.’ ‘Gee! I never would’ve guessed!’”

“You really are not a fan of this, huh?”

“Why do you think it’s on my list, Ary?”

“Spencer.” The sound of my name coming from those luscious vocal cords made the tension in my shoulders ease, at the same time my stomach tightened. But I refused to look at him as he spoke. “The idea is not to stress about this. It’s about having fun. Some years you get shafted, some years you don’t.”

“Every year I get shafted. Every! Single! Year!”

“This year you won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

I spun around again. “There’s no way you can guarantee that. It is a random draw, and I promise that you won’t get my name. And there’s no

possible way you can track down every employee and demand to know who they got for Secret Santa in order to threaten them into buying me nice things.”

He shrugged in a way that suggested he could do exactly that, and continued cutting names up and depositing them into the bin. “Start a spreadsheet that you can send around. They can fill out their favorite things. Candies, places to eat, interests. Make it a document available to everyone, so no one has to worry about not knowing what to get someone. Whatever name you receive, you check the spreadsheet, and then you have a complete idea of what that person likes, regardless of whether or not you like them.”

It wasn’t an entirely bad idea. But I wasn’t going to tell him that. One of the worries associated with this whole game was stressing over what to get the person to begin with. That would alleviate that pressure.

Begrudgingly, I spent the next several minutes drafting up a spreadsheet that everyone could fill out. I typed out several categories—including favorite places to eat, favorite candies, scents. Once I was satisfied with the spreadsheet, I sent it out to the participants. I drummed my fingers idly against my keyboard for a second before taking the time to fill in my own answers. Ary finished cutting up the paper pieces and resumed his place by Helena’s door. Curiosity got the better of me, so I cleared my throat.

“I can fill in your answers for you. On the spreadsheet. Since you’re so busy standing over there looking all bothered and broody.”

Ary lifted an amused eyebrow at my blundering.

“Favorite candy?” I asked, my voice too high.

He didn’t answer.

I huffed in frustration. “Ary. I have it pulled up. I was trying to be nice.”

Ary smiled in a way that hinted he knew I wasn’t just being nice. I was being nosy, and we both knew it. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. It took me a second to realize he was accessing the document on his phone.

“Isn’t it against Timeplace policy to access work-related documents on personal devices?” I huffed.

He scanned the spreadsheet quickly, before finding what was most assuredly my name. I simultaneously scanned the document to see if anyone else had the chance to fill it out yet, and found it depressingly empty. I mean, I had just sent it out. But, since my answers were the only ones currently drafted, Ary was most assuredly studying my responses to all of the items. After carefully reading it, he clicked a button on his phone to take a

screenshot, then stuffed his phone back in his pocket.

I pulled up my work email, trying to stay politely uninterested. “What was that?”

He studied his fingernails.

“You have to fill in your answers.” So much for polite disinterest.

“No, I don’t.”

“But...but you’re the one who suggested this stupid list in the first place!”

“That didn’t mean I was going to fill it out.”

“Ary! How will your Secret Santa know what to get you? You literally don’t speak to anyone.”

“I speak to you.”

“You have to fill it out!”

“You didn’t make it a requirement in the rules.”

I groaned in frustration, switching tabs to delete out all of my answers from the spreadsheet. Then stopped, because it didn’t matter. That’s why he’d taken a picture of the document—so that if I retaliated by deleting out all of my answers, it didn’t matter. He had them for whatever reason. He was obviously not going to get my name, so why the hell did he need them?

“If you think you can use my answers to win the bet, you’re wrong.”

“Possibly.”

“You are not going to get my name!” I shouted unnecessarily. “There is no reason for you to have my answers for Secret Santa.”

“Call it morbid curiosity.” Ary’s smile was genuine, and bright. It was a rare, full Ary smile. But it was by far my favorite of his. Like getting a gift on Christmas you thought for sure no one would think to get you. “I want to know what other potential Secret Santas are thinking of gifting you.”

Those that were participating in the game began filing in roughly around two, a few stragglers making their appearance at ten after. I let it go because elevator limbo was no joke. I sent off the official parameters via email, not bothering to make the spreadsheet mandatory. If someone didn’t bother to fill it out, that was their loss. They couldn’t gripe when they received presents they didn’t like.

I made up my mind to draw last, just in case something went wrong and there weren’t enough names. But once everyone had drawn, there was a single scrap of paper at the bottom of the bin. I sighed, resigning myself to the situation, and let go of the hope that maybe I had miscounted.

There were people grumbling with their slips of paper as they piled back

onto the elevator again. Some looked a touch excited, and confided lowly some of the items they planned on putting on their favorites list. Ary approached me as I unfolded my tiny scrap of paper. I groaned at the name neatly typed across the crinkled piece.

Naomi Blakely

A torrent of swear words raced across my mind. Stupid Secret Santa. Stupid Ary for putting this idea in Helena's head. And stupid, stupid, stupid Naomi Boyfriend-Stealing Blakely.

"Who did you get?" Ary asked when he paused by my side. He studied my face for a moment, and I finally held up the name for him to see. He whistled lowly before offering a relieved smirk. "Trade." He held up his little scrap of paper between his index finger and thumb.

"If you want to trade, you must have someone far worse. And! That's not fair to the game. No cheating. This will be a fair testament to whether or not you scratch this off my list."

"It is fair to the game."

"No," I answered stubbornly.

He squinted, and then leaned down. I felt a shiver run down my spine when the soft, lushness of his voice caressed my ear in a whisper. "You agreed to be fair, and we both know that this isn't a fair testament to the game." When I remained outwardly unmoved—internally quaking jelly—he leaned in even closer, his voice dropping an octave. "I've never begged for anything in my life. But I'm willing to start if it means you'll trade with me."

I blinked rapidly as he pulled back. He held up his scrap of paper, folded, for me to take. I finally nodded numbly, and he offered up his small, half-smile as he snatched the scrap of paper from my hand. He pressed his piece into my palm. I unraveled it, and glanced down.

Ary Villanova

"You got yourself?!" I hissed. "You were supposed to redraw if you got yourself!"

"Rules didn't say redraw. Rules said I couldn't keep my own name." He smirked. "This is going to be fun."

"Oh, sure, fun. You get my ex's super-hot girlfriend to buy presents for. Not to mention that this isn't how Secret Santa works. If you know it's me giving you presents, there is no secret!"

"If I recall the rules correctly—"

"Ugh! You and your rules!"

“The identity has to be revealed by the party. You failed to specify how soon it could be revealed. Fair game.”

My mouth parted to offer up some argument, something to counteract the mastermind behind the man. But he was right. I hadn’t specified.

“I’ll just trade with someone else,” I finally muttered.

“You could,” he said flippantly. The latter half of his statement hung in the air unsaid: *But you won’t.*

He was right. But I wasn’t going to give him that kind of satisfaction.

MISTLEDON'T

"If this is a kidnapping attempt, there are three different people who have access to my location at any given time."

"Let me guess." Ary's eyes narrowed, his focus on the road in front of us as he weighed his options. "Your mom. Your dad. And..." He gave me a quick glance before looking back out the front windshield. "Helena?" he asked with his mouth slanted down in disbelief.

"No fair. You were only able to guess right because I don't have a life."

"Helena has your location?" he asked skeptically.

"The first time I was two minutes late with a coffee order, she insisted she needed to be able to track my location. So she could be sure about whether or not I was incompetent, or dead in a ditch."

Ary's mouth was in a full-on frown mode, clear aggravation pasted on his face. I didn't press him on it, and he didn't pester me any further either. He reworked his features as he pulled into a gravel lot, a big wooden arch with a sign proclaiming itself as "Philly Evergreen." A Christmas tree farm.

"Ah," I said, as if I had any earthly idea why we were here. "A Christmas tree farm. This works perfectly against the raging army of Christmas trees I have on my list. Oh, wait."

Ary stepped out of the vehicle, and then walked around to open my door. Once my feet were firmly planted amid the snow and gravel, I pulled my knitted cap down over my head. I studied the acres behind the small store, seeing line after line of Christmas trees waiting to be chopped down. I squinted, studying the rows. "Are they known for their specialty Christmas tree eggnog? Or, wait, there's a grandma here that knits stockings for every tree purchased, isn't there?"

Ary tilted his head back for a second, and then opened up the rear passenger door of his SUV to retrieve a sheathed handsaw, presumably for cutting down a tree. I tapped my foot impatiently.

"I hope this isn't a tree for me. Artificial is more my thing. No needles. No worrying about whether it's going to catch fire and burn my apartment to the

ground.”

“The tree is for me.”

“Thank. God.”

“What kind of fir do you like?”

“Oh, is it that kind of party?” I flipped my hair back behind my shoulders, and then stuffed my mittened hands into my coat pockets. “I think my hair gives me a fox aesthetic. But you’re definitely giving wolf vibes. Maybe bear. No, definitely bear.”

Ary stifled a smile. “Fir meaning type of tree, Spencer.”

I smiled sweetly. “As far as trees go, my knowledge doesn’t extend past ‘Christmas’ and ‘not Christmas’ tree, so you’re going to have to break things down for me.”

He motioned towards the building where we would presumably pay for whatever monstrosity he picked out. We started walking towards the front door. “There are different types of trees...” he began.

“I don’t need an elementary lesson.”

“...There are different types of Christmas trees—”

“That’s better.”

Ary chuckled, reaching forward to open the front door. “This place has different types. There are spruces, and firs. Fraser Firs have been popular recently.”

“Jesus. There are multiple firs?” I hung back from the counter, several workers glancing up to take us in before going about their tasks. There were different ornaments hanging from displays, along with some other festive gimmicks for sale to accompany the sales of trees. “Ary, why are we here? Are you trying to make sure I have a new hate list procured by the time our bet ends?”

Ary bumped me, a polite request to give him a chance, and approached the counter. He didn’t have to say a word to the cashier, who started into a bored spiel relative to tree care. We would pick a tree, cut it down, and they would take it from there as far as bringing it up to be netted and drilled to make sure it fit the tree stand that they sold as part of the tree package. They would even tie it down to the SUV for us. We’d pay after the tree was selected, considering there were different sized trees—and types, as Ary had already pointed out.

We went out through the back, Ary’s saw aloft over his shoulder, and we started picking our way through rows upon rows upon rows of Christmas

trees. Firs. Spruces? Same thing. It felt like I was on a checkerboard of green and white, larger trails of dirt dusted with snow dividing different tree sections.

“This is definitely not what I pictured chopping a Christmas tree down to look like.”

“What did you picture?” Ary asked, his eyes skimming through the trees we were passing with polite interest.

“This is way too organized. It’s like a grid. Clear paths, clear sections. I always thought chopping down a Christmas tree was a lot more rugged; you know? Like, having to pick your way through brush and bramble, getting caught up in some briar patches, combatting a bear. That sort of thing.”

“A forest,” he clarified. “You’re picturing illegally chopping down a tree in a protected wooded area.”

“Hey. Don’t bash my dreams. I’ll add you to my list.”

“I would be honored to a part of your nemesis list.” He shot a sideways glance my way. “Was there a specific event in time that made you start documenting this precious catalog?”

Yes. But I wasn’t going to be weird and tell him that. “I actually love Christmas trees,” I said instead. “I always loved the artificial ones that looked like the real thing. That had fake snow crusted over the branches and little pinecones and stuff. But we had this ancient white tree that had these cyan-colored bulbs on it. It looked shabbier and shabbier year after year.”

Ary nodded thoughtfully. “We had an artificial tree for the first stent of my childhood. Then, my younger sister got it in her head we needed a real one. It’s become a tradition ever since.”

“Aw. You’re missing Christmas tree chopping with your family?”

He chuckled. “They have that tradition with their own families now, my sister and brother.”

“How old was your sister when she demanded a real tree?”

“Eleven. She’s always been very persuasive.”

I realized that Ary was navigating with purpose, and we weren’t just aimlessly walking through the rows, as I’d initially thought. His eyes kept catching on something beyond our area. I started skimming as well, trying to spot what he was casually drawing us toward. After several more paces, pops of color appeared in my field of vision. Understanding dawned as we approached rows and rows of trees that were a variety of colors, other than dark or vivid green. These trees were purple or pink, teal or blue, and they

were positively stunning.

“Are these real?!” I shouted as we reached the first row, which showcased purple trees. Ary nodded, and I squealed. “Oh my gosh! How do they even make trees like this?!” I gushed, reaching out tentatively to touch a plum branch. “Do they grow like this, or are they painted, or what?”

Ary shrugged, not elaborating. But I had the feeling he probably knew. He had probably researched this farm—these trees—in depth before taking me out here. Ary liked to be well-informed, and I enjoyed the bits of trivia he’d offer relative to whatever adventure we were partaking in.

He gestured towards the different rows, suggesting I pick one for him.

“Ooh, are you giving me full say? What if I go with bubblegum pink?”

Ary shrugged, his half-smile in place, as if he could care less what color tree I chose.

“Hm.” I stalked forward, considering the different trees. “I’m still trying to figure out what we’re knocking off the list here. There’s no Christmas music. This isn’t helping with Secret Santa.” I actually did consider making him chop down a hot pink tree for a fraction of a second, but then a new row of trees caught my eye. There were ebony trees, so black they looked like the shadows of the fuchsia trees in front of them.

“Ary! You have to get a black Christmas tree. It fits your whole dark and moody thing, and it would look awesome in your apartment!”

He followed me as I went to investigate the few ebony trees that were still standing. Apparently, this was a popular tree choice, because there were few remaining. I scoped out the line, looking at the branches and sizes, and finally pointed to a tree that was about eight feet tall. It would look absolutely stunning in his living room. The branches were pretty even as far as I could see, the tree itself was full, and I could picture it decked out in gold and silver tinsel and ornaments. It would be an absolute vision.

“This one,” I decided, nodding towards it.

Ary moved to stand by the tree, a mere foot in front of me, and dropped the saw from his shoulder. It hit the ground, and he held it against his leg lazily. He didn’t make a move to start sawing it down. He simply leaned the saw against his leg, and stared at me. He had the biggest grin I’d ever seen on his face, and he was failing to hide it. I put a hand to my hip, and waved towards the tree.

“This one. This is it. Do you not like it?”

“I love it. It’s the exact tree I would’ve picked out.”

“Then what’s the problem.” I waved again, as if uncloaking the tree for him to see. “Do your thing.” He shook his head, sheathed blade still leaning against his leg, his hands on the handle. There was no denying his gorgeousness, even bundled up in his burgundy jacket, his leather gloves in place. Dark snow boots adorned his feet, and his hair was loose under his teal beanie. I stifled the urge to yank it off in order to get the full picture of him with his hair completely down. “Why not?”

“I’m waiting.”

“For what?”

For you to notice, I could almost hear him say. I frowned, hand on my hip, as I tried to assess the situation. I turned back to the tree, looking down at the base of it first. Was that the issue? How was he going to see that thing down when I couldn’t even see the trunk? That couldn’t be the problem, though. My eyes slowly went from the base upward, tracking the branches as my gaze climbed, and finally paused at the very top of the tree.

Attached to the top of the tree, right where a star or angel would go, was a sprig of mistletoe. Tied with a red ribbon. I scanned the surrounding trees, wondering how I’d missed the mistletoe toppers...but realized this was the only one in the whole lot that had mistletoe attached.

It’s the exact tree I would’ve picked out.

I turned slowly to face Ary, a fleet of emotions warring for territory over my face: shock, disbelief, awe, excitement. I had picked the exact tree he had his eye on. When had he come here? Did he attach the mistletoe? How had no one else come along and sawed the tree down? Was this some special they ran for men attempting to pick up women? How did he continue pulling off these incredible feats of romance without breaking a sweat?

“If I had picked a different tree, were you going to chop two down?”

“I would’ve found a way to drag you past this one.” Ary’s smile faded just a touch, but it wasn’t morphing into cockiness or triumph. It was turning into an expression of contentedness that made my heart yearn for him. When he took a slow step forward, that same heart picked up its pace. This was it. I was going to kiss Ary. A whole freaking Christmas tree farm, and I somehow ended up at the exact tree he intended us to be in front of.

Ary bent forward, closing his eyes, and I did the same, tilting my chin up eagerly.

“Spencer!”

Every thread of desire that had been spun tightly through my body

suddenly unraveled. I opened my eyes, without my lips ever having touched Ary's. Ary's face darkened with annoyance before smoothing over, tagging the voice without seeing its owner. I looked past his shoulder towards the sound that was still echoing faintly through the farm.

Dean was stepping away from a bright pink tree a few rows over, leaving Naomi sulking beside it. She had her arms crossed, and refused to budge as Dean strode over to us. He was a mess. There was a blanket of sweat beading across his forehead under his hat. He had an odd saw in his hand, one that was completely different than the one Ary had brought.

"Looking for a tree, too?" Dean asked as he finally was within easy speaking distance. He looked up to the black tree Ary and I were planted in front of, and nodded to himself, as if the tree made sense to him.

I shifted on my feet uncomfortably. "Very pink," I said simply, nodding to the tree Naomi was still standing beside. "Hope it goes well for you," I tried to assert in dismissal.

Dean didn't budge, but looked back briefly to the tree Naomi was perched beside, taking in a deep, frustrated breath. "Kind of a bitch to cut down, though."

Ary wordlessly held up his own saw, and tipped his chin towards the pink tree in question.

Dean blinked. "Oh, I mean, we brought our own saw. But—"

"It's not for sawing Christmas trees," Ary said to me, and then started walking forward.

"I really appreciate that man." Ary gave me an apologetic look over his shoulder, as if Dean's interruption was somehow his fault, and moved to step past Dean and toward the pink abomination that I knew wouldn't fit in Naomi's apartment. Which meant it must be going in Dean's. I snickered inwardly, thinking about how it would clash terribly with all of his blue and orange retro décor.

Ary paused a few steps in front of Dean, turning to Dean with a flat expression. Dean quickly followed after him, towards the pink tree. I kept my position by our tree, feeling annoyed, frustrated, and a little sad that Ary's mistletoe mission got ruined by none other than Dean and Naomi. Dean, mostly. The part that really got me was that everything would've been fine if Dean had just kept his big fat mouth shut. He'd obviously seen what was going on, right? Had he waited until Ary had almost kissed me to call my name, or did he just so happen to call out at that exact moment?

For whatever reason, I had it in my head that trees of every caliber had to be chopped down. But that thought had been eradicated when Ary had pulled a hand saw out of his SUV. Even then, I hadn't anticipated the concentration and agility that went into it. There wasn't a piece of stump available to just bend down and cut. I watched as Ary had to get down onto the ground, get up under the tree, place the saw, and begin working. Christmas trees didn't just have a section of trunk down at the bottom, that would look weird. The branches went all the way down to accommodate for ornaments. It made sense logistically, I'd just never put all that together.

When Ary was close to getting the tree sawed through, Dean made excuses to leave, claiming he was going to find a worker to help drag it back to the store to get it drilled and netted. I did a sweep of the surrounding area, finding several workers within shouting distance of all of us. But it became painstakingly clear that Dean's intention wasn't to find a worker. He was making a beeline straight for me.

I backed up, practically hanging in the branches of the ebony tree as Dean approached at full speed. He was entirely too nervous, too excited, for me to feel the least bit comfortable. Ary finished with the sawing, and the pink tree fell to the ground with a muted thump. His attention immediately snapped in our direction. Funnily enough, it didn't bother me in the slightest that Naomi and Ary were together alone. I knew Ary. I knew Naomi wasn't worth a word or glance in his book, and I found that villainously satisfying.

"Ary is something, huh?" Dean asked as he came to stand directly in front of me, his movements jerky as he jammed a thumb over his shoulder.

"Right. Something," I responded quietly. I wasn't sure if Dean even heard me.

"Spencer, I wanted to tell you—"

"Weren't you going to get a worker?"

"Right," he answered, distracted. "Listen, I haven't really gotten over what happened between us. I just wanted to make things clear before things got serious between the two of you. Especially when Ary..."

Time seemed to slow as Dean glanced up. And when he halted, I knew exactly what his eyes had landed on. I was unable to see the bundle of mistletoe from this angle, but I knew for a fact that's what his attention had fastened on. I couldn't backpedal, my back was already against the tree branches. I couldn't move forward without being in closer proximity to Dean.

It happened in a handful of seconds: Dean spotting the mistletoe, me

recognizing that I was trapped like a rat in a cage, and then Dean swooping in before I could make my mouth form disapproving words. And, thankfully, a handful of seconds was all Ary needed. As I was taking in a breath to vehemently reject Dean—my hand flying up in front of my face, tree needles scratching at my jacket—the sound of steady footsteps crunching over snow snapped Dean out of it. Ary effectively slid right between Dean and me, staring Dean down as he stood firmly in front of him.

Dean threw his hands up, eyes wide as he took a step back. “Hey, look man, it was just mistletoe, you know? I didn’t mean anything by it—”

“Just mistletoe,” Ary muttered, shaking his head. Dean retreated another step, but Ary kept on him. “If it’s *just mistletoe*, then go ahead.”

It took me a delicious moment to understand what Ary meant. But then it hit me why Ary had sandwiched between us like he had.

“If it’s just mistletoe,” Ary clarified, leaning in dangerously close to Dean. “Then it looks like I happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

Dean backpedaled just as Naomi was stamping towards us, looking homicidal. “Dean! Are you freaking serious!” she screeched.

Dean turned to Naomi, his eyes widening further. “It was just mistletoe, Naomi,” he tried to say calmly.

“You think I didn’t see what happened?” Naomi thundered as she got right in his face. “Don’t you think that it’s entirely possible you could’ve restrained yourself?”

“Funny, I was thinking that exact thing around this time last year,” I said coldly. Ary’s lips quirked up, delight dancing in his eyes. He stepped back and slid his arm around my waist, his stare hardening when he returned his attention to the pair in front of us. Under his glower, they turned and began retreating back to their tree. Naomi was blistering Dean with her comments, her voice somehow a low shriek as they walked away.

“If the urge strikes to kiss me, Dean,” Ary said to their backs. “You don’t have to use mistletoe as an excuse. You can just ask.”

I doubled over laughing, Ary’s touch leaving my waist as I bent forward. Dean turned tomato red, and Naomi glared daggers at us. When I couldn’t contain my giggles, I collapsed completely to the snow-covered ground. It crunched loudly in my ears as I lay flat on my back, my eyes closed, riding out the comical delirium. I heard more crunching, and felt a warm body move next to mine. I cracked my eyelids to see that Ary had sprawled out beside me.

We both looked up at the tree I had chosen—and that he had chosen too, apparently. My knit cap didn't agree with me moving my head around, and refused to adjust with my movements. I slipped it off, stuffing it under my head as a barrier between me and the snow. I wasn't sure if I'd ever looked at a tree from this angle, and the ebony branches towered over us in an imposing way, the needles looking exceptionally prickly.

"If Dean had kissed me, would you have decked him?"

"Maybe." Ary turned his head to look at me, I was not shielded from the closeness of his ambered magma eyes. "If Naomi didn't beat me to it."

My mouth twitched as I gazed at him. "Aren't *you* going to kiss me?"

Ary snorted, and then lightly got back to his feet. Once he was upright, he held out a hand to help me up. I took it, my feet a bit clumsier as I tried to gain traction on the snow. The stirrings of disappointment radiated through me, because it was becoming clear that Ary was not going to try and kiss me after that debacle.

"It was a bold attempt," I praised, dusting off snow from the back of my pants. "A valiant effort indeed. But you still haven't kissed me. And I still hate mistletoe. Probably more now than ever before."

Ary pressed his palm to his forehead, and rubbed absently, trying to mute his frustration.

"You know, it's like a felony in Christmasland not to kiss someone under mistletoe. I should have you arrested."

"I would arrest me if I attempted to kiss you after that." He got down onto the ground to begin the process of sawing down the ebony tree. Silent moments ticked by as the buzzing sound of the saw working the trunk filled the air between us.

"Ary."

"Spencer."

I cocked my head to study him. "I'm not accustomed to you losing. I could get used to it."

Ary paused in his sawing to lick his lips. Then he pressed them into a thin line as he continued.

"Does this mean I get to do the checkmark thing?" I teased.

"No. It's not the end of the bet."

My brow dipped. "So, you have to try again?" I instantly felt bad, because this was a top-notch attempt. He had put a lot of effort into this. I still had no idea how he'd pulled it off. Or, at least attempted to. "I think the attempt

alone is worth taking it off the list—”

“I am not”—Ary abruptly stopped sawing—“accepting a pity knock-off.” He propped up for a moment, and motioned to one of the nearby workers, before dropping back down to finish the final few cuts.

“Ary...”

The tree fell, and Ary snapped up, moving toward me as if scared the tree would suddenly fall the wrong way and he’d have to—I don’t know—catch it before it hit me? Who knew. The tree crashed to the ground, and I cringed, wondering how in the world it didn’t lose half its branches in the tumble downward.

I turned to Ary. All manner of frustration was gone from his face. “I had a really good time. I hope you didn’t feel like it was a waste of your time since we didn’t get to knock something off the list.”

“Oh, no!” I said too quickly. “I had a good time, too. Well, you know, except for the part where Dean almost kissed me. That was not so fun.” I hit his shoulder with a soft punch. “Now, if Dean had kissed you, we could have most definitely knocked mistletoe off the list.”

Ary gave me an eyeroll as one of the workers grabbed the tree by its base and began dragging it back towards the store. I was excited to see how they drilled the tree for the stand, and how they’d go about netting it. Our tree was absolutely gorgeous.

His tree. Not ours.

Whatever.

SMALL PACKAGES

Tuesday morning, I brought in pecan pie cookies for Ary because of the whole stupid Secret Santa thing. I didn't bother trying to be sneaky. I literally dropped them into his arms as I shoved past him to drop Helena's coffee off. When I came back out, he had already taken one out and was munching on it.

"You're going to be so sick of pecan pie cookies by the end of this bet," I muttered as I took up residence at my desk. There was a coffee from Ary by my keyboard, but I was startled to find a neat little giftbag perched beside my monitor. I shot a look at Ary.

"Did you see who dropped off my Secret Santa gift?"

He nodded matter-of-factly, his attention still diverted by the cookie in his hand.

"Who is it?" I asked eagerly, stuffing my hand into the bag. I withdrew a package of chocolate-covered almonds, which were my absolute favorite candy. Which, of course, my Secret Santa would know that. Whoever drew my name had obviously looked at my favorites list in the spreadsheet.

Ary was polishing off his cookie as I tucked the emptied giftbag under my desk. "Who is it!" I demanded, dropping the candy into my snack drawer.

Ary followed the movement, and then shook his head in answer.

"That's not fair! You know who yours is!"

"Doesn't mean I'm telling you."

"Are you threatening them with death if they don't deliver?" I asked with a grin. Ary snorted, and I took that to mean that he hadn't so much as spoken to whoever had dropped the gift on my desk.

All week long, different little giftbags were left on my desk. A gift card to my favorite coffee shop. A gingerbread scented candle. On Friday, it was a bouquet of lilies, offset by red poinsettia flowers. Every day, Ary would inevitably ask me about whatever favorite item had made its way on my desk. *Why is that your favorite coffee shop? When did you start liking lilies?*

When it came to buying gifts for Ary, I was left completely stumped. Other than my cookies, I wasn't sure what else he enjoyed. He never drank coffee. I

took a stab at buying an expensive dark chocolate bar for him, which he genuinely thanked me for before stuffing into his messenger bag. He didn't tear into it like he did the cookies I brought. When I tried to hand him an online shopping gift card, he outright frowned at me.

"Spencer." He shoved the card back to me. "I don't need this."

"You don't like it?" I asked with a pout, and attempted to thrust it back towards him.

"What has this entire relationship been about?" he asked patiently, taking the card and sliding it into the front pocket of my blouse. When I didn't answer, he snorted. "Cookies."

"You are going to get sick—"

"Let me be very clear," he interrupted. "I will never get sick of your sweetness." He raised his eyebrows, asking without asking if I understood. I rolled my eyes, and went to check the bag that had been left on my own desk. A brick had lodged itself in my stomach, because it was very, very clear that sweetness was not just a comment relative to the cookies.

As much as I pestered Ary, he never so much as physically responded when I asked who my Secret Santa was. I would coyly ask him what he was leaving for Naomi, to which he would outright scoff. I was embarrassed to admit that I'd checked the staff list to see what some of her favorite things were, and wondered what Ary was leaving for her. He was thoughtful, and I doubted he would shaft her during the exchange, even though he didn't care for her at all. Whenever I got to thinking about him buying her things, a jealousy snake would slither around in my chest, momentarily stealing the breath from lungs, and putting me in an unexplainably bad mood.

It was also increasingly obvious that something strange was going on with Helena. Or, at least, when it came to Ary. Whenever I got back from lunch, I would spot Ary coming out of her office. There was a certain magic he could work with her that no one else was capable of. Like, the Secret Santa exchange. She would have destroyed me on the spot if I ever asked her something like that. But, when Ary asked her? She actually agreed. There would be times when he would walk into her office without even knocking first. He never waited to be dismissed. And I had never, not once, heard her actually reprimand him. Whatever conversations went down behind that closed door were always too low for me to ever decipher. And when Helena was scolding you, everyone on the floor knew it. Suffice it to say, their exchanges had nothing to do with Helena reprimanding him for his actions.

As far as I knew, there was only one thing Ary couldn't get Helena to break on. And that was the subject of lunch. Helena trapped Ary in her office during my lunchbreaks. I hinted that I'd like to take a lunch together with him some time, and Ary had actually cringed. When I turned away, unable to conceal my hurt, he was quick to explain that he'd already tried to make that happen, and Helena asked we keep our lunchbreaks separate, so that there was always at least one person in the office with her.

I was moody about that decision, wondering why Helena would try to keep us apart. But then, Friday afternoon rolled around, and I abruptly understood her initial reasoning.

Right before I was about to break for lunch, Ary had been pestering me about the lily bouquet my Secret Santa had left. He wanted every detail regarding my love for lilies—and I was opening my mouth to avoid this question by excusing myself to lunch—when our conversation got cut off by the ding of an arriving elevator. I smoothed my hair back reflexively, and watched a man in a brown uniform step out. He had a plastic bag in his hands, and he strutted toward my desk with purpose. It looked like some sort of lunch order was packed in the bag—a white container outlined in the bottom of the plastic.

I went ahead and tuned up my best customer service smile.

"Food delivery for Ms. Vonaparte," the man said, a cap pulled low on his brow. I realized that he had gloves pulled over his hands, medical gloves. Odd. But given that he was delivering food, I just brushed it off.

"Aw, I'm sorry," I said with as much false cheer as I could muster. "Deliveries are normally handled on the first floor. If you get in touch with the front desk, they'll make sure it gets to where it needs to go."

"This is addressed specifically to Ms. Vonaparte," the man said icily.

I—oblivious to any ill intent—wasn't catching what was going down. I didn't even notice Ary had abandoned the wall to step towards the deliveryman—a predatorial cat on the prowl.

"I understand that," I crooned. "We get a lot of things addressed to Ms. Vonaparte that are not actually intended for her directly. She never orders takeout," I said with a fake laugh. "They will certainly straighten it out downstairs for you."

"This. Is. For. Her." The man was almost shaking with irritation, the plastic bag in his hand crinkling. I opened my mouth to try to calm the situation, but it was Ary who intervened first.

“You need to go back down to the first floor,” he commanded in a steely voice. “And believe me when I say I’m not the kind of guy who will ask twice.”

There was finally a flash of hesitation in the deliveryman’s eyes. But then, a renewed sense of determination took root. He clutched the bag in his hands tighter, the plastic shaking in his grasp. As I studied his gloved hands, it hit me.

It’s a rouse. He’s trying to get to Helena. This is exactly what she was afraid would happen. Is he really trying to hurt her?

“Let me escort you down,” I said quickly. “We can get it sorted at the front desk.”

The man seemed to chew over my offer, but Ary made a noise low in his throat. Ary took another step toward the guy, his eyes glued to every action the deliveryman made. Ary’s hand grazed a point on his hip. The place he kept a gun, I realized with a degree of shock. I’d never so much as seen it, had never asked about it. But then, why would I? It had never been a topic of conversation, there had never been a need to ask about the specifications regarding his job here.

“Let’s—” I tried to intervene again.

“You are not going anywhere with him,” Ary muttered so lowly to me that I thought I might have imagined it.

The man’s eyes darted twice between Ary and Helena’s door. When he made his decision, he abruptly threw the food container at Ary to stall him. There was a pop as the container of food opened and tumbled out of the bag, raining bits of chicken and fried rice all over the office. The man launched himself at Helena’s office, but Ary was much faster. He had the man’s arms locked above his head in a moment, and slammed him against the wall by Helena’s door.

“Call the police,” he yelled to me. I had been frozen with fear, but finally fumbled for my phone and dialed.

Helena came out of her office. I knew she intended to snap about what the hell all of the racket was about. But before a noise could be emitted from her throat, she saw Ary, and she saw the man pinned against the wall. She saw me, phone in hand, relaying pertinent information to a dispatcher. And then the woman slammed her door and locked it behind her.

Ary held the guy for the agonizing twenty minutes it took for the cops to show up. The man went from screaming obscenities in that time, to quietly

sobbing for forgiveness. When the police arrived, the man was apprehended, the bag and emptied container taken into evidence. All of the employees who had come in contact with the fake deliveryman were escorted to a different floor for rounds and rounds of questioning as the mess of food was carefully cleaned up by the Timeplace custodial team on the fortieth floor. It was well after the police had left before the floor was deemed safe for us to return to.

Turns out, a security guard on the first floor had gone to lunch. The other guard that was supposed to be posted by the front door had just returned from lunch, his stomach unsettled. He disappeared for five minutes to the bathroom without finding a proper replacement. The secretary—that the second guard had asked to keep an eye out—thought nothing of a food deliveryman going to the elevator. She was fairly new, and didn't realize that only the first-floor handled deliveries of every capacity.

The food the man had tried to deliver to Helena had been sprinkled with poison. What might have presented itself at first as food poisoning could have slowly worked through her system. It might have just caused her discomfort, but depending on the levels, it could have killed her if not caught in time. It was unclear how much had been used, since the evidence had been scattered on the floor.

The man's social media had been overrun with his unhappiness over Placetime Broadcasting's recent decision to air a commercial that conflicted with his personal viewpoints. I could not fathom how a commercial could drive a person so far as to harm—and potentially kill—someone just because their views didn't align.

If Ary hadn't been there...

I doubt the food would have made it to Helena. If Ary hadn't been there, I would have tried to escort him down. But then what? There wasn't a guarantee that the man wouldn't have resorted to violence on whoever happened to be in his vicinity when things didn't go his way. I would've been the one and only line of defense to Helena if Ary hadn't been standing there to intervene. But that was no way to think. Everything had worked out, so it was important for me to move on, not to dwell on the *what ifs* of the situation.

It wasn't the head of security who confirmed the fortieth floor was safe, or double-checked procedures set in place. It was Ary. He got caught up clearing up protocols, to make sure something like that didn't happen again. When Helena was tucked safely back into her office, the first thing she did

was fire the security guard who had taken a bathroom break.

Then she gathered up the entire security department, including Ary, and yelled until her face turned blue. It was the deep-rooted fear inside of her, I knew, that was behind the terrifying tantrum. Ultimately, I understood now why she was so afraid. But that wasn't a solid enough reason to swear at her security team, blasting them for their supposed incompetence.

She screamed behind the closed door of her office for a solid twenty minutes. Anyone who came up and walked out of the elevator took a total of two steps in my direction before uneasily sliding right back and pressing buttons to get out of there quickly. When the security team was released, Ary was held back. I had never, not once in my time since Ary had been there, been able to overhear a conversation between him and Helena. Mostly because they spoke so low that I couldn't make anything out behind the closed door. But this time, the door was cracked slightly, left open by the last guard to leave the office. I checked to make sure the security staff had been cleared, and the elevator wasn't anywhere near the top floor before I stood from my desk, angling my head to try and catch the conversation through the partially parted door.

"—can't have you in harm's way. I'll find something else for you here, but I can't jeopardize—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Ary replied angrily. It was the first time I'd ever heard him speak directly to Helena. And he was irritated. Ary was always impatient with people he didn't want to talk to, but this was a different level. Helena was our boss. Helena didn't take any form of insubordination. I couldn't imagine she would tolerate even a minimally annoyed tone. But Ary? He was downright heated. He had to know Helena personally in some capacity.

"I'm not an idiot," she snapped right back, still managing to keep her tone low. "I know why you don't want to be moved. And I want to reiterate that *no one* needs to know about this."

Ary scoffed. "I'm not interested in what you're trying to pull."

"Let me talk to the board," Helena said in the calmest voice I'd ever heard from her.

"I'll work on the security measures. But that's it. Understood?"

"I want you to consider—"

"Are we done here? I have a job to do." Firm footsteps sounded. Shitshitshitshit.

I had just flounced back down into my chair when the door opened all the way, and Ary slid outside. I smoothed my hair down nervously, and Ary's features went from annoyed to rigid. I hadn't fooled him for a second, he knew I'd been eavesdropping.

"Um," I stammered out, remembering I should probably look busy. "I was just remembering neither of us has had a lunch break yet. If you—"

"Go ahead."

"No, I'm okay. I..." I giggled with a little shame, pulling at my snack drawer. "I'm well stocked. You aren't."

Ary's jaw clenched.

"No lunch?" I blanched, pushing back from my desk. "Did Helena say that?"

Ary shook his head.

I blinked. "Ary, just call down and have someone come up—"

"No, Spencer."

"One of the security team could relieve you—"

"No." He took in a breath, and let it out slowly. "If I hadn't been here—"

"I know." My voice softened. "But you were. So, let's bring someone up temporarily. That way you can get at least a little bit of a break."

Ary shook his head, firm in his decision. I sighed, ready to argue further, but he spoke first. "I do not trust anyone else to do this job. To protect—" He abruptly halted, and my insides turned to goo.

"Helena," I put in hastily.

Ary was still, as if unsure about the words that were about to escape his mouth. "Helena," he finally breathed out. "Right."

We both knew it wasn't true.

We both pretended otherwise.

CAVEMEN

Ary was strangely radio silent through the weekend. I thought for sure he'd be itching to scratch another item or five off of my list, but after the incident on Friday, he was acting strangely. There were still six items he had to tick off before New Year's: holiday parties, mistletoe, Christmas music, eggnog, Secret Santa, and stockings. Secret Santa was already technically in the works, and I was begrudgingly enjoying it. But he didn't need to know that. I texted him Sunday morning, trying to get a read on what was going on with him.

Me: *dying for some mistletoe mashed potatoes about now*

Ary: *I'm sorry. I'm not ignoring you, or the bet. I got caught up with some security work this weekend for Helena. Her head of security is worthless.*

Me: *ur doing work for Helena?*

Ary: *What kind of coffee would you like me to bring you Monday?*

Me: *I like it when u surprise me*

He never responded.

The following Monday, my heart kicked up a few beats when I walked into the office, fulling anticipating that Ary and I would fall into our typical, flirty bantering. Upon entering the building, I knew instantly that things were different. The security personnel weren't simply slumping against some secretary's desk. They were stationed promptly around the space. A few at the door, a few by the elevator, a few making circles around the lobby. I swallowed as one of the guards asked for my work ID before permitting me entry onto the elevator, trying to banish the memory behind why security was being beefed up in the first place. I couldn't let the event burning in the back of my mind control me. I did take time to consider how much of this new security work was Ary's doing. It was apparent that he *had* been busy all weekend.

When I got to the office, there was another giftbag on my desk, but no coffee, meaning Ary hadn't been in yet. When he wasn't immediately in my

sightline, I deflated, the gift on my desk wasn't enough to pull at my happy triggers. I attempted to deliver Helena her coffee, but found her office door locked.

I set down Helena's coffee and the gift I'd brought for Ary—which consisted of a whole bunch of gold and silver ornaments to decorate his ebony tree with. Sitting down at my desk, I dug into the giftbag halfheartedly, finding a gift card for my favorite takeout place. For whatever reason, it made me angry. I stuffed it back into the giftbag and jammed it under my desk just as Ary was walking out of Helena's office.

He tracked my movement, the frustration in my posture, but he didn't say anything. He looked irritated, but muted his expression as he handed me a coffee directly. Helena must have dragged him into her office before he'd even had the chance to set my coffee down.

"Good morning." I used my foot to push the gift farther away. "Well, actually, it's not a good morning. So, morning."

Ary crossed his arms over his chest as I went to deliver the dragon lady her coffee. Which was odd. When I got into my usual antics with him, there was always a spark in his eyes, as if he was looking forward to hearing my daily diatribe. But that spark clearly wasn't evident today. I snapped my mouth shut as I reemerged from her office, and went back to my desk without a word to start up my computer.

Ary brooded silently in the corner the whole day, assigned a new tablet that he presumably worked on security measures with. Whenever someone walked out of the elevator, he stepped forward. Every. Single. Time. There was a lot less traffic than normal, because anyone without a work badge, a permission slip, or an escort was not permitted past the first floor. Before Friday, Ary's observations were more silent, nonchalant. But today? Today he had abandoned all sense of stealth. Anyone that walked into the room was made uncomfortably aware of Ary's presence. I shrugged it off, knowing Friday must have gotten to him. He needed time to adjust, to let his guard down a bit. I could do that. I could give him some space to cool down.

But then Tuesday came and went, and nothing budged in Ary's mannerisms. He was preoccupied, the tablet in his hand that he scanned and fiddled with. I thought I caught sight of plans of some kind for the building, blue prints and paperwork.

Ary persisted in his quietness, but it was not his normal Ary disposition. His silence was not casual, it was threatening. I clacked furiously at my

keyboard all day, not even bothering to glimpse into the giftbag that had been left on my desk, frustrated by that as well. By the end of the day Tuesday, there were new security devices installed on every floor.

By the time Wednesday rolled around, I was volcanic, waiting for the right moment to erupt. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long.

Jan stepped off the elevator right before lunch time. And Ary, busy with the tablet, and not even registering who it was, stepped forward as he lowered the device to his side.

"Can you back off?" I snapped at him. Ary blinked, and seemed to look at me for the first time in days. He cleared his throat, and stepped back to his position by Helena's door. He gauged me for a moment, and then cautiously tucked the tablet into his messenger bag.

Jan, unruffled by our behavior, offered a timid smile to Ary as she approached me. She brightened when she saw the giftbag on my desk. "Oh! Is that from your Secret Santa?"

"Yep," I answered. Then I cringed at my own short response. I was angry at Ary, and Secret Santa. I wasn't angry with Jan, and she shouldn't be on the receiving end of my temper. "I got a good one this year. Whoever it is certainly didn't follow the parameters I set as far as budget goes. And Ary here apparently won't pass on that message even though he sees him or her basically every day."

"Ah, that's why I normally forgo these kinds of things. It always seems more one-sided."

I offered her a tight smile. "I know what you mean."

"Well," Jan threw her hands out and then slapped them back down to her sides. "Listen kids, I just wanted to check in on the both of you. I know Friday must have been a scary ordeal."

"Psh." I rolled my eyes and swatted a hand through the air. "It's no big deal. I was—"

"No big deal." The low rupture of wrath was palpable from the deep, sultry voice twenty feet away.

Jan and I both glanced to Ary. Jan was clearly taken aback. Ary's jaw was clenched tightly as he glared at me.

"Right," I said slowly. "No. Big. Deal. No one was hurt—"

"No big deal?" he repeated with cool incredulousness.

Jan, sensing the tension in the air, wiped her palms absently against her dress pants. "Well, I just wanted to stop in and say hello." She reached out

and patted my arm absently, smiling her sweet Jan smile. "I'm here if either of you need anything. And I'll be needing another cookie order soon. I'm dying for a good old Spencer's Sweets Christmas Special."

"Of course," I said, my eyes darting back and forth between her and Ary. I'd never seen this level of annoyance from him directed at me. "You can text me. Or put in a customized order online. Just let me know!"

"Thank you," she said sincerely. She offered a nod to Ary before turning away. It was a minute of uncomfortable silence as she waited for the elevator. As soon as the doors closed behind her, I turned on Ary.

"What is your problem?"

"My problem?" He folded his arms over his chest. "My problem, Spencer, is that you think a man intent on intentionally harming a woman in this office last Friday is *no big deal*."

"Jesus. Nothing happened. You—"

"If I hadn't been here—!"

"If you hadn't been here then I would've eventually taken the food from him and waited for him to leave before throwing it in the trash."

"Or eaten it," he muttered to himself. I bit my lip, not wanting to admit that he may have been correct in that assumption. Obviously I wouldn't go forward, and hopefully if he hadn't been there, I would've had enough sense on my own to see that something wasn't right.

"Is it possible you're overreacting just a skosh?"

He shook his head. "You offered to walk him down. You were the only thing standing between him and Helena. He would've hurt you."

"You're not here to protect me," I reminded him sharply. "You're Helena's muscle. Not mine. So, get your head on straight and remember what job you're here to do."

Ary blinked, the wrath slowly seeping away from his face. "If it's not my job to protect you, whose job is it, Spencer?"

"My own damn job," I managed to mutter as I skimmed through some contract for Helena.

Helena's door opened with a jolt. "Spencer, take a lunch. Ary, get in here." Then her door promptly slammed shut once more.

"Gladly." I went to stand from my desk, but then I thought better of it. I relaxed into my chair, my shoulders slumping as I plopped my feet up on my desk. I watched Ary's gaze darken as he observed me cross one ankle over the other, my suede boots thudding heavily. I cracked open my snack drawer.

Ary watched my movements for a handful of seconds, not moving to join Helena.

“You better get on that,” I sniped, nodding to the door.

“What are you doing.”

“Lunch.” I responded just as bluntly. I tore out a prepackaged bag of trail mix and ripped it open with my teeth.

“Then go to lunch,” Ary commanded quietly.

“I am on lunch.”

He blinked in surprise. I offered a smartass smile.

“If you don’t go to lunch,” I said while pouring a handful of trail mix into my hand, “then I don’t go to lunch.”

“That’s not how this works,” Ary growled. “This is literally my job. You deserve to enjoy your lunch.”

I popped a peanut into my mouth, leaning further back in my chair, my head tilted back. When I swallowed, I looked back to him and batted my eyelashes. “Oh, I am enjoying my lunch.”

Ary literally locked up, a disbelieving and furious expression creeping in. I heard thunderous steps, and Helena poked out of her office once more.

“Ary, I said—”

“Give me a minute,” he said with annoyance, shooting her a glare.

All the air was sucked out of my lungs, and I truly—truly—thought Helena would fire him on the spot. When Helena let out a groan of frustration and shut herself back up in her office, I had to keep myself from completely gaping.

“Go to lunch, Spencer.”

I remembered myself, and summoned up the act I had been putting on earlier, an attempt to goad Ary, to get him to break, to bait him into expanding on his anger. Because his rumbling anger was at least better than his empty silence.

I tipped my chair back into a precarious position, and Ary’s fists clenched as his eyes narrowed. Then, one hand uncurled, and lifted, and he reached for Helena’s doorknob.

“Don’t you dare.” I brought my chair back down with a thud. “Don’t you dare go tattling to Helena that I’m not leaving on lunch. I’m not getting paid right now, it doesn’t matter where I take my break, as long as I actually take it.” I smiled a victor’s smile. “Whenever you’re over this whole ridiculous ‘not taking a lunch and being pissy’ thing, then I’ll happily resume my

normal lunch routine.”

Ary still looked like he was considering going into Helena’s office. But then the elevator opened, and a whole mass of people started towards my desk.

My face fell. I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t explain to these people that I was on lunch, which was why I always left the office entirely. I would leave a little note on my desk with a time I would be back.

“Good afternoon,” I started, definitely deflated as the first person stopped in front of me. “How can I—”

“She’s on lunch,” Ary asserted from his corner.

Everyone’s attention immediately snapped to him, before looking back to me in confusion. The person at the front of the line looked like he was about to press forward anyway, but was ultimately interrupted.

“She’s. On. Lunch,” Ary reiterated lowly.

“If you could, come back at one,” I said hastily to try and assuage the fear building in their faces. “I’ll be happy to help then.”

Annoyed and dejected, they went back and piled back onto the elevator. I stood from my desk, my face flushing with all of the pent-up anger I’d been feeling the past few days.

“You and I,” I breathed out, refusing to look at the man that I was hopelessly and desperately attracted to. I needed to keep a hold on my anger. I couldn’t look at him, and then melt into a puddle of desire when those volcanic eyes met mine. “We are about to have words.” I took in a breath to continue, but Ary cut in.

“Right. Words. Because that’s definitely my strong suit.”

I couldn’t help the puff of air that burst out of me, my failed attempt at containing a laugh. I put my hand to my forehead in frustration, both at him and me.

“You have got to back off,” I finally managed to say. “I know your precious little male brain went into caveman mode when the guy came in last Friday, but you’ve got to take it down a few notches.”

I chanced a glance at him, and saw that his face had softened several degrees.

“Caveman mode?” he asked with quiet bemusement.

“Me man. Me see threat. Me take down threat for weak female,” I mocked in a deep voice.

Ary lost it. He laughed, a soft laugh that was breathy. I’d never heard him

laugh like that before. It made me let out a nervous giggle of my own. He composed himself quickly, licking his lips as he studied me.

“My caveman brain did not go on the defense in honor of a weak female,” he eventually said. The spark was back in his eyes, if only for a moment. “My caveman brain went on defense for what it perceives as *my* female.”

I bristled at that; my blood running cold at the quiet admission. No, we weren’t together. But his caveman brain didn’t know the difference, did it? Just like my stupid brain didn’t register that he wasn’t mine whenever he got too close to me, when my body responded to his of its own free will. His instincts had claimed me, whether or not we had verbally agreed to be anything other than...what, exactly? Friends? God forbid Ary was only ever my friend. That was something I definitely could never live with.

“If your sweet, little brain believed I was yours,” I said tightly as I took my seat again at my desk. “Then it should’ve been a little politer the past few days.”

Ary’s brow dipped. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t so much as let me know you were alive last weekend. I had to text you to make sure you were breathing,” I reminded him frostily. “You haven’t mentioned the bet at all. You’ve hardly looked at me all week.”

“Spencer.”

“Don’t do that,” I snapped. I took in a deep breath, my body tensing as if it was preparing for battle. Because it was, in a sense. It was battling all of the urges it wanted to partake in at the sound of my name emitting from this man’s vocal cords.

Ary’s eyes were back to being molten, making it feel like we weren’t in an office space at all. When he looked at me like that, we were somewhere far away, behind some closed bedroom door. A place that he was undressing me with his hands instead of his eyes.

“I apologize that you felt...” He paused to consider his words. “Slighted. That wasn’t my intention. You’re right. I’ve been on the defense. I’ve been in my head, worried about what could’ve happened to you if I hadn’t been standing here.”

“But you were!” I sputtered. “There’s no sense in worrying about any of this, Ary.”

“You’re right,” he said again. Sheesh, this man was basically admitting blame twice within the same breath. Most men couldn’t apologize once in their whole lifetime, and here I was, basking in the presence of a man who

apparently didn't mind being humbled. "I didn't contact you this weekend about the bet because you're going to have your fill of me, and my family, this upcoming weekend. It was my attempt at giving you a little peace before you are fully submersed into a whole new world." His eyes crinkled as he gave a knowing smile. I read exactly what he wasn't saying: *You missed me.*

My eyes narrowed with curiosity and suspicion. "You were giving me space?"

He nodded. "You always tend to act a little exasperated when I suggest we knock something off your list. Since I intend on knocking off several items this weekend, I wanted to give you a bit of a reprieve."

My heart puddled in my chest. I could almost feel it leaking down towards my toes. I hadn't considered that I was coming off a little aggravated. "I'm sorry if it seemed like I wasn't enjoying the bet," I offered quietly. "I'm just naturally grumpy when it comes to my list. Our bet has been...really fun."

Liar.

It had been the highlight of my year.

Maybe even my life.

Being the center of this man's universe was the single most exciting thing that had ever happened to me.

Then my brain reminded me that this wasn't what I was supposed to be admitting, even to myself. This exact feeling was what I was trying to prevent. I had my own dreams to fulfill before my head got all caught up in the lovesick clouds. I was losing sight of myself in this, of what I deserved. This bet was fully taking away precious time that I could be working on marketing, or perfecting recipes.

Part of my brain nagged at me for the wasted time.

Part of my brain begged for more of Ary.

STOCKINGS MISTLETOE

Ary and I slipped back into our respective rhythms Thursday and Friday. He contained himself when people came and went, stiffening when someone entered, but remaining by Helena's door. He also started going to lunch again, finding someone to cover his post from the second he walked away to the second he returned.

There was still a giftbag on my desk every day when I arrived to work, and I felt a hum of anxiety as I continued to calculate the money this person was spending on me, which was climbing higher and higher above the fifty dollar limit I'd assigned.

When I had griped about it to Ary again, he had shrugged with nonchalance. He lit up like a Christmas tree whenever I brought in a new box of cookies for him to try. They were often gone before lunchtime. Sometimes my coffee was already waiting by my keyboard when I arrived, and some days Ary handed it to me directly. But the gift from my Secret Santa was always poised on my desk by my monitor before I got there, every single day.

Friday after work, the night before we were set to leave for his parents', Ary asked if I had any plans for the evening. I was hardly able to restrain my giddiness as he escorted me to his SUV. When he let on that we'd be going to the mall, I protested on behalf of the amount of peopling I would have to do there, but he insisted. Apparently, there was some sort of party game we would be playing with his family that we would need to prepare for.

I poked as much fun at him as I possibly could on the drive over. Ary was still stoically silent to a certain degree, but he was talking more and more each passing day, and I was also tuning in better to the tremendous amount of words he left unspoken, but communicated through his expressions. He would even answer a personal question here and there if I was able to weasel it in to our normal flow of conversation. Any pointblank questions were always met with an eyebrow raise. But, with some conversation detours, I

was able to extract more information relative to his family.

Both of his siblings were happily married with five and a half children between the two sets of parents. His family was a tight circle of people, and he spoke fondly about every one of them. I typically griped when I had to spend time with kids, because I wasn't necessarily a kid-friendly person. But as Ary talked about the nieces and nephews in his life, I wasn't annoyed or hesitant about them, I was anxious and excited to meet them.

Ary navigated through traffic and pulled into the mall parking lot. He unbuckled his seatbelt and then leaned into the backseat to unearth a Santa hat from somewhere. He pulled it over my head, making sure to playfully yank it down over my eyes. The hat smelled like him; it smelled like the subtle evergreen cologne he wore. He was wearing his dark teal beanie and burgundy jacket, some scruff lining his jaw from where he'd forgotten to shave that morning.

"Why do I have to be Santa?" I complained, adjusting the hat over my red curls. "Shouldn't I be an elf? And why do you get to wear a cool guy hat?" I poked him in the ribs and then adjusted my hat again, cocking it in an attempt to look somewhat cute.

"We live in a world where you can be anything you want to be."

"Maybe I want to be Rudolph."

"Then I will buy you the first pair of antlers I see. And a blinking red nose to accompany it."

Ary gave me a pointed look, telling me to stay put until he could cross around the front of the vehicle. Once he had opened the door for me, I smirked at the hand he extended.

"What's the plan, exactly?" I asked, taking his hand, and allowing him to help pull me out of the passenger seat. I was disappointed when our points of contact broke. "What are we kicking off the list tonight?"

Ary took a second to adjust my jacket, along with the scarf I was attempting to wind around my throat, as if he was worried the brief walk to the front doors would give me frostbite. "No promises. But you do have to take part in our yearly tradition." He took note of the mittens I tugged onto my hands, and nodded, as if satisfied.

"Which would be?" We began traipsing towards the mall, large glass doors beckoning shoppers towards their entrance.

"Stocking exchange."

I gauged his face, trying to find some lingering line of jest. There was

none. “You’re kidding me.”

He pressed his lips together and shook his head with amusement.

“When you say stocking exchange...”

“It’s Dirty Santa. But the gifts have to fit in a stocking.”

“Remind me what Dirty Santa is again?”

“Everyone brings a gift. Then, we all draw numbers. You pick a gift in the order you draw, and when it’s your number, you choose a fresh gift, or you steal from someone that’s already grabbed one. It can get pretty heated.”

“You’d want to draw the last number, right? So you get your pick of anything?”

“Actually, the first person gets the last pick. Since they get shafted with first draw, they get the final say.”

The mall was bustling with liveliness. There were plastic tinsel streamers lining the stores, with silver snowflakes strung from the ceiling. The kiosks in the middle of the walkways were packed with retailers peddling their wares: bizarre-looking hairdryers, incense guaranteed to cure whatever ailment you were currently suffering from, Christmas-themed tins of cookies, holiday-scented vape juices or perfumes that kept wafting this way and that—an inescapable fog of peppermint and pine that attacked my senses. I found myself turning towards Ary to breathe in his subtle, clean evergreen scent to escape the assault on my nose.

Ary stopped at the first kiosk that had stockings and bought the plainest one he could find: red, with a rough velvety texture to it. I surveyed the stockings, but shook my head, convinced I could find something better, since this was Ary’s family and I kind of wanted to impress them. For whatever reason. It wasn’t like I was falling for the guy or anything. Because...yeah. Cookies. Right.

There were people weighted down with shopping bags and snacks. There were phones pressed against faces, kids lying down on the floors of stores and wailing for some Christmas-themed treat. Different scents puffed their own little clouds around our heads as we continued to shop. The buttery, saltiness of a pretzel shop swarmed us, and only a few paces away we were immersed into a confectionary sugared smell emitting from a cinnamon roll bakery. Heels and boots thundered across the glossy floor, and there was a constant revolving stint of conversation easing in and out of my range of hearing.

Ary pointed out a set of antlers a few stalls in, and raised an eyebrow in

question. I shook my head with a laugh, flicking back the little white ball of fluff on the end of my Santa hat in jest. I had no doubt that he would buy the reindeer antlers for me, even when he'd known I had just been teasing him.

"I'll stay Santa, since I'm technically making a list."

Ary hummed in agreement. "And I'm checking it twice," he said with a wink.

When we waded farther into the mall, a beige stocking in a shop window drew my attention. It had a Christmas tree embroidered on it, and it was bedazzled. There were even little Christmas lights on the tree that turned off and on with a little switch that was tucked into the cuff of it. A yellow star was at the top of the tree, and it flashed along with the rest of the ornaments.

Ary trailed me inside as I yanked it down and toyed with it, switching the lights off and on, my eyes wide with merriment and excitement. I turned to show Ary, and as he studied it, I realized how happy I was. Over a stocking. My cheerfulness quickly soured into a glower as Ary handed the stocking back to me. When his eyes found mine, he offered me his small, knowing half-smile. I could tell that he was fighting a full grin, and also fighting the need to swipe a checkmark through the air.

Stupid Christmas sock. Stupid Christmas list.

In a candle shop that had wall-to-wall shelves of glass candles and wax scents, I found an evergreen candle that I decided to add to my stocking for the exchange. The scent definitely reminded me of Ary, and I secretly wondered if I could pick my own gift for the Dirty Santa game. I wouldn't object to my whole apartment smelling like a knockoff version of Ary.

While I was waiting in line to checkout, Ary tapped me on the shoulder to show me a peppermint candle. I threatened to put peppermint back on the list if he didn't put it back. As I approached the register, he came back again with a wax melt, which was mistletoe-scented. I begrudgingly sniffed it, then waved him away a second time. I heard him chuckling as he disappeared to put the wax squares back.

When I made it to the front, the cashier gave me a tired look. "Did you find everything all right?" he asked with a harried smile that suggested he had been in the customer service field a while. He had that polite coating with a distressed and overworked undercurrent.

Instantly, I felt a brush against my side. Ary had materialized out of thin air. He eyed the cashier with a hint of suspicion. I patted his arm absently, my eyes widening at his sudden alpha demonstration.

“Absolutely, thanks,” I managed to say with a tight smile. Ary then glared down at me, as if talking to the cashier was the equivalent of kicking an abandoned kitten. “Jesus, caveman. Take it down a notch,” I muttered to his shoulder. Because he was too tall for me to successfully whisper in his ear.

He just shook his head slowly, looking directly at the cashier.

The cashier, not having heard my comment directed to Ary, looked at Ary in confusion. “You didn’t find everything all right?” he asked with a degree of shock, as if he’d never heard that response before. As the cashier scrambled to improve the situation, I intervened.

“Please forgive him, his brain isn’t quite in the twenty-first century at the present,” I offered in a cryptic apology.

The cashier held out my bag with my purchase, not quite computing my response. Before I could say anything more, Ary leaned across the counter and plucked the bag from the cashier’s grasp. He put a hand against my back and steered me directly out of the store, not quite successfully concealing the last glance he stole of the cashier.

“Lighten up, would you?” I said with a nervous laugh, shaking Ary off when we breached the doors. “I hardly think that situation called for caveman mentality.”

“I knew what he was thinking.”

“He was thinking it’s the holidays and his job sucks and he wants to go home so he can get drunk and think about how awful his life is.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do know that. Because that’s exactly what’s on my mind at the end of every workday.”

Ary sighed, conceding to my point. He shook his shoulders out, as if he was physically shrugging off the encounter. I felt a prick of amusement at Ary’s overprotectiveness, and the fact that his caveman brain had chosen me as its focal point.

An upscale bathing essentials store was up next. As Ary trailed me, he observed the little spheres of soap I picked up and put back.

“What’s your issue with stockings?” he asked nonchalantly as I put a lemongrass bath bomb back on the shelf. “Why is it on your list to begin with?”

“The stocking is self-explanatory,” I answered while picking up a vial of fireside blend essential oil. I decided to add it to my stocking. I wrapped the small bottle in my palm, the smooth glass cool to the touch. My eyes

continued to scan the shelves as my fingers skimmed labels absently, reading the different varieties.

Ary made a noise in his throat, vocalizing his disbelief.

"It is a sock that you put on a wall!" I exclaimed in way of defense. "A fat man in a beard fills it with candy. I mean, when setting down Christmas traditions, how the heck was that on the list? 'You know the socks the children wear? Yes, put them on the chimney. If they don't catch fire, put a penny and an orange inside it.' Honestly, it's absurd."

I felt Ary's stare. When I turned to him, the glint I loved so much was in his eyes. "An orange and a penny?"

I huffed. "Yes! You know! Back in the olden days, when an orange and a penny was worth something to a kid."

Ary nodded thoughtfully. "Is that what you plan on putting in your kids' stockings one day?"

My pulse ticked up. Kids. If men weren't on the menu anytime soon, kids were definitely off the table for me. And kids aggravated me, right? Except I loved it when Ary talked about his nieces and nephews, his affection for them made my heart balloon up.

I wouldn't mind his kids.

Stop! That is not the thought we're delving into right now.

As my mind wrestled with the intrusive thoughts, I shrugged in a non-answer. Ary nodded, as if I'd made my point. He had no patience for bullshit answers, and I wasn't capable of giving him something straight with my mind misbehaving.

We almost passed right by a lingerie store, but with some quick thinking, I came to a halt and beckoned to Ary. He appeared momentarily confused as he turned back to me. When he registered what store I had paused in front of, he shook his head in amusement. "Underwear is old news for the exchange. My sister put together a stocking filled with thongs two years ago."

"Oh, this isn't for the stocking exchange," I murmured sweetly. Ary's eyes darkened deliciously. His eyes flitted back to the store and he bit his lip.

Bit. His. Lip.

"I won't take long, just need to pick something up for Secret Santa."

I waltzed in merrily, half expecting Ary would wait outside. I was somewhat surprised when he followed after me, a bored expression carefully crafted on his face.

There was black and pink garland strung across the walls, shimmery hearts

hanging in random assortments from fluorescent lights. As I observed some delicate, silky red underwear that was advertised as a Christmas promotion, Ary appeared unmoved. But the giveaway was not in his face, it was in his hands. His fists were clamped tightly around the purchases we'd made. I pulled at a red thong, humming to myself as I pretended to consider it.

"Hmm. What do you think?" I spun to face Ary, the underwear spread between my two thumbs. "I don't remember seeing this on his list of favorite things. Maybe that's because he didn't fill it out to begin with."

Ary refused to be shamed. His mouth cocked up with amusement. Then, he reached past me and pulled a pair of black boy shorts edged with lace from the rack behind me. "I think he would appreciate these."

"Right. Black lace. I forgot that was his thing." I pulled the underwear from his hands and pursed my lips. "Well, then. We wouldn't want to disappoint him now, would we?"

Ary shook his head, trying to stifle a smirk. Which wasn't working well for him. "I don't think these come in his size."

"I was thinking more along the lines of him...unwrapping them."

I missed his facial expression at my taunt, because a pair of women behind him started giggling. I glanced past him and watched as they ogled Ary, saying something behind their hands as they intimately caressed him with their eyeballs. I narrowed my eyes at them. And, for whatever reason, that interaction made me remember that Ary was leaving things for Naomi for the Secret Santa exchange. Between the women and Naomi, an irrational hot streak of jealousy claimed me that I wasn't quite able to shake off.

"Will you be purchasing a frilly pair for your Secret Santa as well?" I asked with sugar-coated venom. Ary's face, previously alight with mischief, dropped. I was not at all satisfied with my jab as I turned from him to trundle the underwear up to the front. Ary was hot on my heels.

"Spencer."

"I'm sure her boyfriend would appreciate the thought. Or maybe you could let my Secret Santa know what kind of lingerie I prefer, since you know who's dropping my gifts off. I'm sure whoever it is would appreciate the tip."

He groaned in irritation, his eyes now heated with annoyance instead of desire. When I made it to the purchase desk, I set the lacy underwear up on the counter, knowing he wouldn't say anything to defend himself in front of the cashier. Ary did not like talking in front of strangers, or people he felt were not worth his time. Even if he was dying to argue, he would keep quiet

during this purchase.

The cashier was observing Ary before we'd even made it to the counter. She picked up the boy shorts a little over-enthusiastically while quickly glancing to Ary's left hand...in search of a wedding band. Her nametag had a heart on it, not an actual heart, but the kind created with a bracket and a three.

"Oh! I love these!" The cashier squealed. I cracked an insincere smile, my lips pressed into a thin line. Ary wasn't looking at her as she tried to gauge his expression at the compliment. He was glaring out at the store traffic with an exasperated look on his face. I wasn't confident he'd even heard her speak. I felt a flash of possessiveness flare up in my stomach for no good reason. Because Ary and I weren't together. Even though his caveman brain said otherwise, and my heart said...stupid things.

When the cashier finally looked at me again, her smile cheapened. "Is this your boyfriend?" she asked while taking the protection tag off the lingerie.

I stiffened. "No," I said through gritted teeth. "They're for my Secret Santa, actually. Apparently, he has a thing for black lace."

"You buy lingerie for your Secret Santa? Geez. I'm in the wrong Christmas game circles." She offered another flirty smile to Ary. He made ignoring people into such an artform. "Are you playing Secret Santa, too?" she pressed, trying to angle her head to get his attention.

His glare turned into a look of longing, as if he wished to be anywhere else in the world rather than in this woman's presence.

"I can help you pick something out?" The woman pressed as if Ary simply hadn't heard her.

Ary's face contorted into a grimace. She tried all sorts of movements to garner his attention as she bagged my single item and ran my credit card. When Ary grew too irritated with her attention, he scanned the perimeter, and then literally stalked away and out of the store, still never bothering to give this woman a single look. The cashier visibly deflated when he left, giving up on her smile altogether as she slung the plastic bag containing my underwear across the counter to me.

As I joined Ary outside of the store, he reached to take my purchase, and added it to the massive amount of shopping we'd procured.

"If you want me to tell your Secret Santa your undergarment preference, consider it done," he murmured lowly, his head back in the game as we turned towards the mall exit.

"You wouldn't," I said confidently. "I know you, Ary Villanova. And I

know that you, a practically mute stranger, are not going to accost some unwitting employee about my taste in lingerie.”

His silence should’ve been assurance that he wouldn’t. For some reason, my gut twisted at the thought that he might actually be considering it.

In the end, my stocking contained the following items: an evergreen candle, an expensive hot chocolate set, a mug shaped like a snowman, fireside essential oil, a pair of cashmere mittens with a matching scarf and hat, and a Christmas movie that Ary insisted would be considered a classic one day. To me, the cartoon movie looked a little dorky, but his assurance made me want to watch it with him. I wanted to watch a stupid cartoonish Christmas movie with Ary. Who was I?

Ary had subtly picked up items of his own, but had been careful to avoid my prying gaze. He would randomly disappear, only to reappear a short while later with another shopping bag in hand. He refused to let me see what he bought, and thwarted my attempts to snatch bags from him at random, all while holding his small, half-smile in place.

Back out in the parking lot, Ary popped the trunk of his SUV and loaded it up very carefully, cognizant of some of the breakable things that had been purchased. Once he was satisfied, he stepped back beside me. But he didn’t reach up to close the trunk, which was suspended over us.

“Two things off the list,” he said confidently.

“Two?!” I crossed my arms and gaped at him. “Stockings I’ll begrudgingly give you, because it was kind of fun. What else have you managed to sneak in tonight?”

“Mistletoe.”

I scanned back over the bags in the trunk, recalculating the items I’d bought. I thought back to the mistletoe wax melt that Ary had held out for me to smell in the candle store. “Oh no. You’re going to have to do better than a candle for mistletoe.”

I looked over to him. He slowly tilted his head back, his eyes firmly planting on something overhead. And, no shit, when I looked up, there was mistletoe tied to the inside handle of his trunk, red ribbon and everything. It was hanging right above our heads.

I let my arms fall back to my sides. “You smooth mother fucker.”

He slid his hand across my jaw and tilted my chin up, the darkness in his eyes smoldering with delight and anticipation. His hand gently slid across the side of my face, cupping my jaw. I couldn’t believe this was finally

happening. Ary Villanova was about to kiss me. No Dean or Naomi within ten miles of us to ruin it.

When Ary leaned down, he brushed the softest kiss across my lips. It was like he was proving that he would be harmless to me, to be the gentleman that he had promised he would be. I think he meant for it to end there, our lips like the tender flutter of butterfly wings, there and gone. And it was like that. Soft and sweet. For a few seconds.

When he intended to pull back, my hand traced up the side of his neck, feeling the slight stubble across his jaw. One of his hands slid down my side, and the lightness in his touch changed. He clutched onto my jacket, firmly pulling me closer to him. I gasped at the change of contact, and the kiss didn't just continue, it immediately transformed.

His lips parted, and his tongue darted out to taste my bottom lip. His fingers dug into my waist, and I began to slide my tongue into his mouth. He wrapped his arms around me as I flung mine around his neck. His teeth lightly grazed my lower lip—

HONK!

A car horn blasted us apart as if a bolt of lightning had struck between us. Ary glanced back to the offending vehicle, which happened to be a minivan crammed with children and angry-looking parents. A black car with bold red lettering across the side that proclaimed itself as security began zipping our way. Ary offered an impish grin and a wave as the van passed us, his other hand went to absently touch his lips in wonder.

We both stepped back as Ary closed the trunk, hastily trying to avoid the security car rolling towards us. We didn't say anything as we both scampered around the vehicle and got situated into the front of his SUV. I wasn't sure my face had ever been this red in my life. Meanwhile, he was shaking with silent laughs, his mouth split into a toothy grin.

"I can't believe you just kissed me like that in a mall parking lot," I finally admonished.

"I can't believe I almost got us kicked out of a mall parking lot by kissing you like that," he responded. He started up the SUV, and then held up two fingers. He made his signature checkmark swipes through the air, and I pretended to groan in irritation, shaking my head as if I had entirely run out of patience.

But, in all honesty, I couldn't hide the smile radiating across my face. I hoped that Ary wouldn't hesitate to kiss me like that again, mistletoe or not.

HOLIDAY PARTIES

The drive to Ary's parents' house on Saturday went smoothly. We checked into my hotel and dropped my belongings off in the room before trekking over to the house. Ary kept his bag in the SUV, which made me purse my lips. He still wasn't making any assumptions, and I didn't have the nerve to ask him to stay with me. We'd shared one kiss. One hot, sexy-as-hell kiss that had me desperate for much more. I needed more of his mouth, his lips, his tongue, his hands.

When the large two-story house appeared in front of us, Ary seemed to relax a bit. The bottom of the house was brick, the top part of it slated with tan siding. While the house itself looked cozy enough, I couldn't stop my jaw from dropping at the sheer number of lights and decorations that bedecked it. A rainbow of Christmas bulbs traced every edge of it: the porch, the railing, the roof, the chimney, the windows. There were five different inflatable characters blown up in the small front yard, along with LED figures such as reindeer, a snowman, and a Santa Claus lit up in white. There was a spectacularly large wreath with dark green branches and red poinsettias hooked on the front door.

"Wow. So, your people are like...really Christmassy."

"It's a long story," Ary said affectionately, gazing at the spectacle of lights flashing with reds and greens and yellows and blues.

This house was a sense of home for him. And inside would be his rather large family, consisting of his parents, his older brother and younger sister, along with their spouses and all of their offspring. I had been trying to commit all of the names of the nieces and nephews to memory, but it proved a difficult task since I wasn't able to attach a name to an actual face yet.

Ary pulled into the driveway behind a parade of other vehicles. He came around to open my door, and once I was solidly planted on the ground, he went to gather up the supplies we had brought. I had baked two dozen cookies for his family, six different flavor varieties, and had packed them neatly into two pink boxes.

A young woman opened the door before we'd fully made it onto the porch. She had dark brown, almond-shaped eyes that could've passed for black. Her hair was cut just above her shoulders, and the raven strands at the crown of her head gradually swept into a dyed caramel color, creating a beautiful ombré. Her appearance startled me, and I couldn't place her as anyone I pictured.

She pulled me into a tight hug as my brain tried urgently to put the pieces together. When her torso pressed against mine, I felt a firm bump between us. I realized she was pregnant. Which couldn't be right, because Ary's sister was the one who was pregnant. Her baggy sweater with a gingerbread man on it hadn't been snug enough for me to see the slightly protruding stomach before she'd essentially mauled me with affection.

"Spencer! Ah! It's so nice to meet you!" she squealed. Were pregnant women supposed to hug people this tightly?

Ary let out a soft chuckle. "Alright, Talia. Let her breathe."

Talia.

So, this was Ary's sister. They were siblings but...genetically there was no way. Was she adopted? Was Ary adopted?

"Is she here? Is that her!" I heard a feminine voice call from inside the house.

The owner of the voice appeared. She was a pale woman with russet brown hair that was streaked naturally with gray. She wore a sweeping turquoise blouse with black slacks, and had so many silver bracelets on her wrists that they jangled like bells with each subtle movement. And her movements, at the present, were not subtle. She did the same thing Talia had done and pulled me into a tight embrace. This woman was soft and warm, and quite the force to be reckoned with, even if she was a few inches shorter than I was. These hugs made me feel as if I was coming home, as if I was a beloved treasure returned to its trove. It was weird to feel that from an embrace with a stranger.

"Talia, Mom, this is Spencer," Ary introduced me politely as he attempted to gently pry his mother away. I had guessed that Ary was biracial, with a parent that may have been white, and another parent that may have been Middle Eastern or South Asian. This woman would fit into one half of that, except that Ary looked absolutely nothing like her. There was not a single feature I could pinpoint that was hers. But the same was true for Talia, Talia didn't favor her either.

Ary's mom, who was named Deborah, pulled back to look at me, and I tried to arrange my face so that I didn't look confused or frightened. If I hadn't succeeded, she didn't let on. She and Talia continued their cheerful and boisterous greetings and compliments as they led us right into the living room, where a bulk of the action was happening.

A large, dark-skinned man stepped forward first. He did not embrace me as the two women had, but held out a hand and issued a firm handshake. He had on a red Hawaiian shirt, the only one in the room wearing short sleeves. "You must be Spencer. I'm Ezra, Ary's older brother."

Ezra was the first person that seemed to understand that I had no idea what was happening. I gave him a nervous smile, and clocked that Ezra didn't look like anyone else here either. Ezra, Ary, and Talia all had different ethnic backgrounds, and it hit me that all three of them must have been adopted. Ary had never mentioned that he was adopted. But, then again, I'm not sure how that kind of topic surfaces in normal conversation anyway.

How's your mom?

Oh, she's good. You know. Since she adopted me almost thirty years ago.

When I glanced back to the room, there was a horde of children tearing after one another through the house, and I was unable to catch hold of any particular features as they raced past. The incantation I had recited in my head of all their names had vanished in the wind.

Talia crossed to a fair man with carrot hair, cut short around his head. He smiled unsteadily as she approached, his eyes nervously keeping track of the children as they raced away. He looked slightly uneasy amongst the commotion taking place, an itchy looking sweater with a reindeer on it draped across his small frame. He lifted a hand to give me a distracted wave as his head jerked sideways to keep up with a screaming child.

Ezra took his seat by a dark-skinned woman with a halo of black hair. She was watching me as I approached, her dark eyes alight with curiosity. She wore a royal blue sweater dress that hugged her toned body, one of her legs was crossed over the other, black tights creating a shimmery effect on her sculpted calves.

"Hi, Spencer," she said with a slight dip of her chin.

Deborah didn't move to stand next to Ary's father, who must've been the fair man with blond and white hair that was taking up residence in a corner of the room, almost hidden behind a Christmas tree. He hadn't smiled or wished me welcome, but simply swirled wine around the glass he held in his hand as

the kerfuffle of the evening continued to play out.

Their living room was cozy. The floor was laminate, and had an ornamental rug running the length of it. There was warm lamp light dimly flushed throughout, illuminating an orange, green, and cream theme. A large tree that was crammed into the corner displayed a wide array of ornaments, most of which looked like relics from Ary's childhood. There were newer pieces that appeared to be crafted by current grandchildren.

"Fraser Fir," Ary whispered, nodding towards the tree I was studying.

Once the wide array of giggling nieces and shouting nephews realized Ary was present, the atmosphere changed. I thought for certain that they would avoid their silent and broody uncle. But there was a slow realization that clicked into place as they registered their uncle's presence. The first child spotted Ary, and let loose a loud howl before barreling towards him. Then, all of the other children's attention snapped to Ary, seemingly in slow motion, and in a chain reaction they raced towards him, one by one. Ary, overwhelmed suddenly by the sheer number of children, from preteen all the way down to toddler, collapsed to the floor.

The collection of adults all snickered and laughed, some covered their mouths with their hands in an attempt to stifle their chuckles as they observed the scuffle. One of the kids popped his head up from the pile and zeroed in on me, a little submarine periscope breaking surface.

"Who are you?" he asked, eyes wide. He was clearly Talia's offspring with his almond eyes and dark auburn hair.

"That's Spencer," Ary responded, attempting to disentangle himself from the mountain of children.

"Is she your girlfriend?" A little girl, probably around seven, asked. She stood up, her dark hair braided back on her scalp, dark piercing eyes observing my every move. She was definitely Ezra's. The child immediately reminded me of her mother, whose name I couldn't place or remember.

One set at a time, all of the little eyeballs landed on me. Ary remained tight-lipped, leaving it for me to answer his niece's question. But I had no quick-witted response in my arsenal to give these doe-eyed children. Luckily, Talia intervened before I could stutter something inarticulate.

"Go wash up, kids! Dinner's almost ready!"

There was a fierce scramble as the tangle of children all scurried up the steps and towards a bathroom on the second floor. And, for some damn reason, I imagined what our children would look like, scampering up with

them, if Ary and I had kids. As soon as that thought established, I banished it. I wasn't even able to answer whether we were a couple, the last thing I needed to be imagining was our fake children.

Dinner went on without a hitch. I stayed quiet mostly, enraptured by the conversation taking place. There was so much laughter and liveliness at the table. The children had their own table, other than the youngest, who sat in a highchair by Ezra's wife. The kids pelted each other with food crumbs, and scampered back and forth from the table, unable to contain their delight. Sitting down for more than a period of two minutes at a time seemingly impossible.

The adults talked about the children, watching their movements fondly. I put together which children were named what, and who belonged to what parents. Ezra and his wife had three children, two girls and a boy. Talia and her husband had two boys and were expecting a girl. The family got caught up on everything that hadn't been expressed in the phone calls they exchanged on a weekly basis. I got a good gauge on their personalities as the conversation circled, and a reading on the grandchildren's different temperaments as well.

Talia was just like their mother. Both she and Deborah were extroverted and bubbly. They were quick with invasive questions, and had a knack for detecting who didn't want to speak on a certain subject. They were the natural helpers of the group, sensing when someone needed a refill or seconds.

Ezra and his wife, who was named Harmony, were both more reserved, Harmony being a touch more extroverted than her husband. Harmony laughed along with the rest of us, and was unafraid to poke some fun here and there. She would ring in with a witty joke that would send the table into hysterics. Ezra normally only chimed in as the voice of reason when a subject veered too far off course.

Talia's husband, Ron, was a bit socially awkward. He had trouble holding people's gazes, and would stutter out answers to the questions asked of him. Talia would fill in some of the gaps for him, and let him battle out some of the other answers on his own.

Evan, Ary's father, remained the most reserved. By the end of the meal, I wasn't sure he'd uttered a single word. He appeared stern as he sat at the end of the table, observing everything as it progressed. It was clear Ezra had taken after him, and Ary as well. Ary had pieces of his mother when in the

comfort of his family—and me, I guess—but definitely was like his father when outside of his circle.

“So, Spencer,” Deborah chimed in after a pretty intense laughing spell. Dessert had been served, and I tried not to feel deflated that my cookies weren’t out amongst the pies and cakes that were available. Maybe they weren’t good enough? “You and Ary have some kind of bet going on?”

I shot a glare at Ary. He studiously ignored my stare, wiping his mouth with a napkin and clearing his throat. He was hiding a smile.

“Yes,” I answered hotly. “He’s convinced that he can change my mind about a bunch of things I hate about the holidays.”

“Her Christmas nemesis list,” Ary interjected. “I’ve managed to knock off...” He trailed off, as if he had to count the number of items. I knew darn well he didn’t have to stop to count. He knew exactly what items he had left. “Five? Six?”

“Six out of ten,” I answered with an eyeroll.

There was a round of polite chuckles around the table.

“And do you have an idea for how you’ll knock off the last four?” Talia asked with a smirk.

“Two of the four are already in the works,” Ary said with a playful look my way.

“Spencer, give us the details,” Harmony prodded good-naturedly.

“Ah, well.” I nervously smoothed a hand over my hair. Ary noted the gesture, and put his hand on my knee to help steady me. Lucky for me, it had the opposite effect. I had to quickly hide the fact that his touch had stolen the breath from my lungs. “Ary...started a Secret Santa thing at work in hopes that I wouldn’t hate the game as much anymore.”

“Is it working?” Deborah asked, leaning forward as if totally invested in our bet.

“I’m a little ticked at whoever is getting me gifts because they’ve gone well over the spending limit,” I grumbled.

Harmony laughed. “Let me get this straight, you’re complaining about being showered with gifts?”

“I don’t need someone spending a bunch of money on me!” I protested.

“Why not?” Ary stealthily looked me up and down, a glint of desire unmasked in his eyes, for me alone to see. “It sounds like you were owed some compensation from the former Secret Santa games you’ve played.”

We locked eyes, and the silence in the room was suddenly charged because

of our held stare.

“What is the other piece Ary is currently working on?” Ezra asked politely after clearing his throat, to divert the energy Ary and I had been channeling through the air.

I grimaced, flattening my hair again.

“Holiday parties,” Ary said easily, removing his hand from my knee. I felt a whoosh as air was able to infiltrate my lungs again.

There was an easy commotion that broke out across the group, grimacing faces and chuckles and bits of conversation I was able to pick up.

“Ooooo!”

“Ary, how dare you put that kind of pressure on us.”

“Just wait for the stocking exchange.”

“Well, that’s not getting scratched off her list tonight.”

“Enough, enough,” Ezra shouted reasonably. “It’s all in good fun.”

“Right,” Ary murmured to me as the adults began methodically clearing the dinner table. He stood as well. “All in good fun.”

“Spencer,” Talia intervened as she laced her fingers together. There was that natural instinct of hers, the ability to divert the conversation when things got out of hand. “Did Ary tell you that I’m the most expensive baby here?”

Ary and Ezra both groaned together, their heads tossed back as they disappeared briefly into the kitchen with emptied plates in hand.

“It’s true,” she said simply. “Ezra and Ary were both local adoptions. I was —”

“International,” Ary and Ezra both finished for her from the kitchen.

“Do we have to argue over which adoption cost the most?” Deborah rang out with a groan. “We have never once told you the numbers—”

“You didn’t have to. I’ve looked it up.” Talia shrugged with nonchalance. “Ron and I have been considering an adoption as well. I’m not sure if we’ll do local or international—”

“Can we have this baby first, please, before we start on that again?” Ron squeaked, dabbing his sweaty brow with a napkin.

HOLIDAY PARTIES

After dinner, all of the children were banished upstairs, apart from the oldest grandchild, who belonged to Ezra and Harmony. The preteen was a shy, tall, and lanky young lady. She kept stealing glances at me as she took a seat by her mother in the living room.

“Sasha is old enough for the stocking exchange this year!” Harmony announced politely, setting a proud maternal hand on her daughter’s knee.

There was a general murmur of excited assent as everyone took up new places in the living room. Ary led me over to a two-seater settee that was a pistachio green color. Ezra seated himself by his wife and daughter on the suede orange couch. Talia took a cream-colored leather recliner, relaxing into it, her belly barely perceptible beneath her sweater as she settled. If I hadn’t hugged her earlier, and if Ary hadn’t mentioned to me that his sister was expecting and due fairly soon, I never would’ve known she was pregnant.

Ron dragged a straight-backed chair from the dining room over beside Talia. He couldn’t seem to find a comfortable position in the chair, as he kept shifting on it. He would lean back, then lean forward, then cross a leg only to uncross it moments later. Deborah dragged a chair of her own into the space, placing it between the couch and settee, but didn’t sit down. Evan moved to stand in the corner by the tree, his wine glass no longer in hand. He put his hands behind his back, and scanned the room slowly. I couldn’t believe I still hadn’t heard the man speak. But, considering how Ary behaved around people, I supposed that shouldn’t have been a surprise. Was I the sole cause of his silence? Or was he always quiet, even in the midst of his family? No one was giving him funny glances or seemed put-off by the absence of his verbal communication, so this must have been normal behavior for him.

Deborah did not seat herself immediately, but instead grabbed an old Pittsburgh ballcap off a crammed bookshelf. “Time to draw!” she exclaimed. She shook the hat up a bit, presumably to scatter numbers that it contained.

Ary relaxed beside me, his arm lazily draped over my shoulders. There was a wine glass in his other hand dangling idly. He was wearing an emerald

green sweater that tailored to his upper body well. His jeans were dark and faded, his favorite brown leather boots adorned.

I'd declined the second glass of wine he'd offered me, terrified I would get too giggly. I straightened the white blouse I was wearing. It had a few brown buttons at the top near the collar, and had billowing sleeves that gathered at my wrist. I had on my form-fitting khaki dress pants, and dark brown suede boots that were a touch too tight around my toes, but the only other pair of shoes I owned that matched this outfit were open-toed, and I wasn't going to wear those in this kind of weather.

Deborah bustled around the room, extending the hat out to everyone one at a time so that they could draw a number. Sasha smiled in an embarrassed fashion when Deborah got to her, and dipped her hand into the hat. She withdrew it quickly, and accidentally pulled out a few numbers at once. There were reassurances given, and Sasha's cheeks darkened as she quickly slipped the spare bits of paper back into the hat.

I felt a fondness bloom in my chest for the girl. I had already known that I would like her from the little bits and pieces I'd squeezed out of Ary, but being with her—with all of them—in person gave me a whole new sense of maternal protectiveness that I hadn't even known I possessed. It was an important moment for her to be included in the festivities for the first time, and she was trying so hard to make sure it was going well. I wanted to tell her there was no need to worry. We were all rooting for her.

Deborah winked when she got to me, holding out that frayed ballcap for me. I pulled out my scrap of paper, and Ary followed. The family lowly discussed their numbers with one another. I looked down at mine.

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Ary gazed down at me in question. I held my number up. He withdrew his arm smoothly from around my shoulders and grasped my hand. Outwardly, it probably appeared to be a casual show of affection. But I felt him seize hold of my paper, and then he pressed his own into my palm. I yanked my hand from his grasp and glanced down.

1

I shot him a glare. But he was suddenly busy sipping from his glass of wine, slipping his arm back around my shoulders. I didn't get a chance to tell him that I didn't want to be the first person to pick a gift. It was going to be bad enough to have everyone's attention on me when I picked up a stocking, but to be the first one? I wanted to get a good grasp on how other people

played and reacted before I was dropped into the middle of it.

Evan and Deborah were the last two to draw. When Evan reached forward to draw his number, he smiled at his wife, their eyes locking for a full second before Deborah turned from him and pulled the last number. The ghost of Evan's smile still lingered as he looked down at his number, and I felt my opinion of the man softening a bit.

"The rules! Of the game! Are simple!" Deborah called to quiet everyone and draw their attention. We all turned to her. Harmony was absently petting her daughter, and Talia appeared absolutely giddy. "We go in order! Whoever drew the first number gets to pick the first stocking. That person opens it up and shows the party what they received. Then, the person who drew number two gets to decide whether they steal the first person's gift, or pick a different stocking. If they steal, number one has to pick again. So on and so forth."

"A gift can only be stolen twice, passing between a total of three sets of hands," Ezra put in.

"And number one gets a chance to steal anything that isn't already dead at the end of the game," Ary said with a meaningful look thrown in my direction. He'd given me the first number on purpose, so I'd have the final choice.

"Who's number one?" Talia called excitedly.

Ary raised my arm for me. I snatched my hand away quickly, but the room was already tightening up with anticipation. Ary assisted me to a standing position without leaving his seat. I smoothed over my blouse and crossed over to the pile of stockings by the Christmas tree. I tried not to feel shy under all of the prying stares, particularly Evan's.

I stood before the selection, considering the different sizes and colors in front of me. I was nervous, because I had to give a performance, essentially. I had to 'ooh!' and 'aah!' over whatever I received, and gauge how enthusiastic to be in the present company.

"The plain one!" Talia stage whispered. "Grab the plain red one!"

"That's Ary's!" I whispered back.

"Ary always has the best gift," Harmony said, not whispering. "And he always has the plainest stocking of the group."

I hesitated. I was curious about what he'd gotten for the exchange, as he had been secretive at the mall. After another second of indecision, I snatched Ary's stocking from the pile and proceeded back to my seat. The room

exploded into conversation and excitement. Talia was literally bouncing in her seat. Ron was grimacing outwardly, but then seemed to remember himself and fixed his face. Sasha looked like she wanted to squeal, but was containing her eagerness by bouncing her knee. A random thud resounded from upstairs where the children were playing.

I sat down with a smug smile on my face and stuffed my hand into the stocking to begin unpacking the gift. Everyone unconsciously leaned forward as I pulled out the first item.

I unearthed a pack of Christmas-themed cookie cutters, very nice ones too, I might add. They were an array of pastel colors, the shapes ranging from gingerbread man to Santa hat. Next up were delicate little ingredient bags filled with chocolate chips and candy pieces. A quick glance around the room told me that everyone was hanging on to my every movement. My gut tingled as I considered the items, putting together that Ary had me in mind when choosing a theme for his stocking.

There was a turquoise spatula, whisk, and spoon. The final item at the bottom of the stocking, stuffed neatly into the toe, was an envelope. As I tugged it out, I made out a familiar pink stationary in the warm light, and my stomach somersaulted. The pink envelope was edged in papered white lace. Inside, I knew there was a gift certificate.

I didn't budge, didn't move to open the envelope. Ary, sensing my hesitation, pulled the envelope from my hands. He opened it neatly, and showed off the fifty-dollar certificate that was inside. A fifty-dollar certificate for my business. The one I had mailed out, the one I thought Jan had been sweet enough to purchase. This certificate had been purchased before I went to Ary's for Thanksgiving. He'd bought this before we'd even started our bet.

I swallowed as puzzled looks flashed across the living space.

"What is it?" Talia asked.

"A gift certificate," I managed to mumble. "For my...business." This was not what they wanted. Ary had made a huge mistake. They hadn't even put my cookies out when we ate dessert.

"You have a business?" Ezra asked politely as my face began to heat.

"Well, no, not really," I stammered out. "It's just—"

"She's being modest," Ary cut in. He took command of the room while casually slipping the certificate back into the envelope. He tasked himself with repacking the stocking. "Spencer's Sweets is her cookie business. She's responsible for the cookies you all snuck from the kitchen and devoured

before dinner even started.”

The room exploded with giddiness. Relief and gratitude flushed through me in response to Ary’s comment. My cookies were gone before we’d even eaten? It wasn’t that they hadn’t been put out because they weren’t good enough, they hadn’t been put out because there had been none left to begin with.

There were different pieces of conversation I was able to make out, everyone speaking over one another.

“Those were your cookies!”

“You made those?”

“Ary! You’ve been holding out on us!”

Deborah stepped forward immediately, holding her piece of paper out like a sword. She waved it about animatedly. “I have number two! I want to steal! I steal!”

“I have three,” Harmony said measuredly, flipping up her piece of paper nonchalantly. “I steal from you.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Ezra said reasonably. “We have to do this in order—”

“Let Mom have her moment to hold on to the cookies so poor Spencer can pick a replacement gift,” Talia giggled.

Once the bubble of joy had quieted, I wrestled a new stocking over, which was movie-themed. It had theatre gift cards and prepackaged popcorn. While I presented the new items in the stocking, Deborah and Harmony were waging a quiet battle over whether Harmony was going to steal the cookie stocking from Deborah. Harmony didn’t utter a sound, just wordlessly smirked at Deborah, the intensity of the smirk increasing with each passing second. Deborah was speaking lowly in defense of her gift.

“You. Will. Not. You’re not getting this. It’s mine,” Deborah kept repeating quietly, clutching the stocking closer. Deborah’s focus was entirely on combatting Harmony, and she ignored the gift I was unwrapping completely as she waged a silent war, her eyes locked with Harmony’s. My attention kept diverting to them, my interest piqued as I watched them battle. I wondered what it would be like to have that kind of relationship with Ary’s mom. You’d think Deborah was arguing with her own child, the way she and Harmony went at each other. Ary had to keep nudging me to remind me of the stocking I was supposed to be showing off.

When Harmony’s turn officially started, she swayed right over to Deborah and plucked the stocking from her hands. She sauntered back over and sat

down next to her daughter once more, a triumphant smile on her face. "Cookie stocking is dead."

The game continued. Deborah's new stocking, filled with gift cards, got swiped pretty quickly, along with my movie stocking, which Sasha timidly stole from me. There was a silent agreement around the room that no one would steal it back from Sasha. Talia snagged the stocking I had brought, oohing over the different items inside.

I thought I'd be able to hold onto the next stocking I chose, which contained a bottle of wine and some nice chocolates. But then Ary's number was called. He swiped the stocking from my hands without so much as a blink. He promptly began unwrapping some of the chocolates in the bag, to the chorus of protest that resounded around the room.

"The game isn't over!" Deborah protested.

"You can't just start unwrapping!" Talia chimed in.

"Your father hasn't had his turn yet!"

"I'm well aware. He doesn't like red wine, and Spencer won't steal from anyone," Ary answered confidently, holding up the aforementioned bottle in salute.

I was tempted to prove him wrong and snatch a stocking away from someone else. Before I could make a decision, Ary leaned over, and spoke so that no one else could hear him.

"Pick the green one."

"Why should I?" I hissed back.

"My father's the last one left. And the green one is his. Don't make him pick his own stocking."

"Then why didn't you get it?" I snapped back, still low enough for no one else to hear.

Ary's eyes twinkled. "Because I know that you'll like what's inside of it."

"How do you even know that's his stocking?"

"Because that's my stocking from last year. He ended up with it in the game, and must have reused it this year."

I tried to picture Evan fighting over a stocking, since Ary's was clearly the most popular, and failed. I stifled the sigh that I wanted to emit, and hauled myself back over to the two remaining stockings. I plucked up the silky green one and started unpacking it before I'd even sat back down. I paused before I sat, surprised to find a beautiful pair of copper Moscow mule mugs inside. They were elegant, rounded, but with squared handles, and there was a

pattern of circular impressions stamped around the outside of them. These mugs far surpassed any kitchen item I possessed.

“Where did you get these?” I mused aloud, admiring the mugs from every angle. When I looked up, remembering they were from Ary’s father, there was a slight pinkness tinging Evan’s cheeks. He was looking down, and didn’t answer the question.

“That’s what you’ve been working on in the shop, right?” Ezra asked politely. “They turned out magnificently.”

“You made these?” I realized, admiration coloring my question. “These are fantastic. I don’t think I’ve ever owned a matching set of anything before.”

There was a twinkle in Ary’s eye as I sat down once more by his side. Evan had the last number, and he quickly picked up the remaining stocking. The stocking contained a substantial amount of candy of every kind. I guessed that Evan would secretly distribute the candy to his grandchildren before they were packed up and sent home for the evening.

After Evan quietly showcased the items in his stocking, he looked to Sasha, and then winked. Sasha giggled in response. Evan had put together that his stocking was from Sasha, and made a show of holding the stocking close against him. Sasha beamed with pleasure. Even without words, their exchange was one of the sweetest I’d ever seen.

Everyone’s attention turned to me once more. It took me a moment to realize that I had the opportunity to steal back any gift that wasn’t declared dead. I smiled politely, and clutched the silky green stocking tighter to my chest, feeling the hard press of the mugs underneath.

“I’m holding on to these,” I said with a firm nod.

With that, the game was concluded. There was a general bubble of conversation that began circling around.

“Sasha, let’s have an aunt-nieces date and use that gift certificate next weekend,” Talia suggested easily, adjusting in the recliner.

Sasha nodded eagerly.

“Ezra can take the boys,” Harmony offered.

“Of course,” Ezra agreed good-naturedly, not at all put off by his wife offering him up. “But if it’s an aunt-niece date, I think Spencer ought to be invited along as well. Uncle Ary and Uncle Ron can join in the uncle duties.”

Sasha’s knees bounced with anticipation. “Will you come, Spencer?” she asked excitedly.

Expectant eyes turned to me. There was a flicker in Ary’s gaze, and he

avoided looking at me, waiting for me to answer for myself.

“Um. If you guys are cool with me crashing, I’d be happy to—”

“Of course. Someone’s got to be there to drive if my water breaks.”

“Way to kill the mood, Talia,” Ary murmured with mock disbelief.

Plans were further solidified for the following weekend. I’d be driving down with Ary again on Saturday. Saturday afternoon us girls would catch the movie. The guys would figure out something to do with the boys, leaving Harmony and Deborah’s plans up in the air. Ary and I needed to discuss whether we’d make the long drive back that evening or stay the night again.

“He hand-crafted those,” Ary said lowly beside me, drawing me into him as Harmony asked Deborah how much holiday shopping she had left to do.

“I gathered that,” I answered, watching without really seeing the merriment continuing around us.

“Spencer,” Harmony garnered my attention. “I would like to drop the full fifty on as many lemon drop cookies as you can muster. Would it be possible to get those made by next weekend?”

“Of course! I’ll drop them off when we come up Saturday.”

Ezra looked affronted. “Not a single white chocolate macadamia nut?”

“Nope,” Harmony answered with a smile. “My coworker is having a lemon-themed baby shower that Sunday. I can’t wait to deliver those bad boys and watch everyone melt into a pile of heavenly lemon goodness.”

Sasha, looking a little tired from all the energy she’d exerted in her first stocking exchange, stood from the couch to rejoin the children. Ary lifted his wineglass to his lips at the precise time Sasha got tripped up by Ezra’s stocking that was settled neatly on the floor against the couch. Sasha fell forward, knocking right into Ary. Consequently, Ary’s wineglass tipped directly over my blouse, splotching my white shirt with burgundy-colored liquid.

Immediately, different people came forward, all attempting to help with the mess. Sasha looked on the verge of tears.

“I’m so sorry, Spencer,” she squeaked, her voice wobbly.

“Oh my gosh, Sasha, please don’t stress about it.” I laughed nervously and waved it off. “It’s not a party until someone spills a drink. Are you okay?”

She nodded, not at all comforted by my blowoff of the encounter. Well-meaning hands reached for me, attempting to staunch or blot the red blotch spreading out across my chest. Ary put his arm out in front of me to halt them, and gave Talia a stern but pleading look.

“Here, let’s get you cleaned up,” Talia put in quickly, slowly unsticking herself from the recliner. “I’ve got something you can put on. And we can get that soaking so it doesn’t stain. Dad is the best at stain removal.”

As Talia wiggled out of her chair, I continued making reassurances to Sasha. I attempted to reroute the conversation by asking about what movies were playing next weekend. She stumbled through some titles that I was somewhat familiar with, detailing one movie featuring blue alien people, and another about cats that were vigilantes.

Once Sasha had managed to calm down a bit, Talia led the way upstairs, where children were flinging themselves at random down the hallway, slamming doors here and there. Talia pushed her way into one of the bedrooms, and started shuffling around in an opened suitcase that was on the bed. Two kids darted in the room and immediately started jumping on the mattress. Once she had decided on a shirt, she met me back in the hall, and walked to another closed door. She rapped on it.

“Occupied!” a young voiced called.

“Kayson, you had better be using the bathroom in there!” Talia told the closed door in exasperation.

She crossed again and knocked on a different door. When no answer came, she offered a tight smile and pushed her way in. When the room revealed no scampering children inside, she motioned me forward, and handed me the pomegranate-colored shirt.

“This one is too tight for me at the present,” she said, patting her tiny bump. I silently doubted that, but didn’t say so. “It should fit you okay. Don’t worry about getting it back to me, I’ve got that shirt in three other colors at home.”

“Thank you. I’ll get it back to you next weekend for movie night. If I remember, that is,” I added with a chuckle. “If I don’t, I’ll still get it back to Ary so he can return it to you the next time he sees you.”

Talia raised a curious eyebrow. It reminded me of her brother. “Are you saying you won’t be joining him at the next family gathering? I can understand not coming down for Christmas, I’m sure you have plans with your family. But we do throw a wicked New Year’s Eve party. Do you like sparklers?”

I hesitated, my mouth parting as it waited for my brain to create a response. The bet between us would probably be over by then, and I had no idea what the extent of our relationship would look like at that point.

When several seconds ticked by, in answer to my floundering, Talia offered a sad smile. "I hope we haven't scared you off after tonight."

"Quite the opposite, actually," I answered, glancing down at the shirt she had handed me. "This was the best Christmas party I've ever been to."

I thought of the cold quietness of my parents' house during the holidays, the lone echo of my footsteps padding down the hallway to greet Christmas morning alone. When I was six, I was greeted by my first entirely empty Christmas. After an intense fight the night before, my parents had gone to their separate rooms, and then promptly forgot to lay out the gifts from Santa, assuming the other was going to do it.

My parents were a couple who had fallen out of love decades ago, but were both too stubborn and comfortable in the patterns of their miserable life together to admit it to one another. I had been a late addition to their misery, an attempt to salvage something they had already lost long ago.

Ary's family was goofy, but well-meaning. Comfortable dynamics were constantly at play, along with an endless array of banter and laughter. Ary had not only checked another item off my list, but he had unwittingly made me want to become another piece in his beautiful family.

The room Talia had found for me to change in appeared to be the remnants of a teenager's bedroom. There was a twin bed in a corner with a dark camo-themed bed cover. There were vintage military action figures still in boxes displayed on a shelf, long abandoned.

"This is Ary's old room," Talia noted, watching me take in the surroundings.

"Do you guys have any contact with your biological parents?" I found myself asking, still studying the action figures in their boxes. I figured if I was going to get a straight answer from anyone, it would be Talia.

"Well, Ezra found his parents a few years back. They're not together, and they both have their own families now. He doesn't really have contact with them, he just wanted to find out who they were, their histories. When he and Harmony wanted kids, he wanted a clear medical record for them." She smiled and rolled her eyes at Ezra's practical behavior. "For me, I haven't tried to track anyone down. I doubt very seriously I'd be able to find anything anyway. And Ary..." She shrugged, her face clouding over suddenly. "Well, you know."

But I didn't. I didn't know. I opened my mouth to say just that, but she was already turning away. "Bring me that shirt when you're all finished and I'll

get it to Dad to get it washed up for you.”

“Thank you, Talia. I appreciate it.”

“Of course. What are families for?”

Family.

I offered a smile in thanks, and Talia’s eyes were back to their overzealous selves. She swiftly exited the room, closing the door shut behind her.

I stripped off the stained shirt I was wearing and went to an adjoining bathroom, wondering what in the world was the story with Ary’s biological parents. I wet some tissues and dabbed water on my skin to make sure it wasn’t sticky, my mind racing. I had no earthly idea what Talia meant, and wondered fleetingly if I would ever know. There was no way I could ask Ary pointblank about his parentage, and I couldn’t fathom a way to sneak that kind of question into a normal conversation between the two of us. Even if I managed, if it was a taboo topic, I couldn’t see Ary being very forthcoming with an answer. Had he sought them out at a younger age, and they had dismissed him? Were they alive? Based on that reaction, there was clear animosity regarding whatever situation they were in.

I slipped the new shirt on, casually swiping at some of the gathered pleats before briefly studying my reflection in the mirror. I was flushed, my eyes alight and happy-looking. My hair, as always, was untamed. Wild and curly, frizzing up in all the wrong places. I looked animated, maybe even a little lovestruck, I realized. That last thought struck a panicky nerve, and I picked up my stained shirt and walked out before those thoughts took deeper root.

I crossed the bedroom and opened the door, still trying to stifle lovesick thoughts from my brain. Totally throwing off my inner scolding, Ary, of course, was on the other side of the door as I opened it. And it immediately struck me that it should be illegal to look that good in a sweater.

His silky hair was undone and had the slightest wave to it, falling past the tops of his shoulders. Tonight was the first time I had seen it completely down. The other times his hair had been unbound, he’d had his hat on, so I was deprived of the full effect. He had stubble across his face, his subtle smile in full tilt. No one on this planet should have the right to look that damn gorgeous.

It did things to me, him standing in the doorway of his childhood bedroom, seeing him so vibrant with his family. It struck a chord low in my stomach. There was something undeniably attractive about seeing him here in his parents’ home, at ease. I loved the dark and broody persona he presented in

public. It was intoxicating. But this...this was just as sexy. Seeing him undone to a certain degree, relaxed, being a cool uncle, devoted son, and loyal brother. He was able to joke with a room full of people he loved, and had included me in this personal piece of his universe...it was a whole new level of undeniable attraction.

“Have you always wanted to be in the military?” I asked him, gesturing towards the boxed action figures.

Ary took time to quietly close the door behind him, looking pensive as he considered my question. “I was never confident in what I wanted to be,” he finally answered. This surprised me, because Ary was the most confident person I knew. There weren’t many people that could shame people with sheer silence. I wondered if his parentage had anything to do with that answer. I imagined the idea of identity could be puzzling for some adopted children.

He took a slow but purposeful step into the room, and every other question lingering on my tongue instantly dried up. I forgot about Talia’s comment. I forgot about whatever lineage lingered in Ary’s past. As he crossed over to me, anticipation built with every step he took, and my brain stopped functioning altogether. All I could think about, all that I could focus on, was him. Every nerve ending inside me was poised, taut, anxious with heightening anticipation. I felt his name in every exhale of breath from my lungs. Ary.

It must have been a million years before he finally reached me. In reality, it was barely a few seconds. When he was close enough to touch me, his fingertips grazed my hips. I couldn’t help the small gasp that escaped as he took hold of them. Ary pulled me closer, and then he let one hand wander back up to my face. He stroked my cheek softly, the fingers over my hip flexing before digging in deeper into the material of my shirt, as if he was hungry to touch me beneath it, to feel me.

He had to tilt my head back in order to meet my lips. His mouth was timid at first, barely tasting me, as if he was testing our limits. When I met him with my own fervent mouth, his tongue dipped out in search of mine. My hands grappled with the front of his sweater as his tongue flicked lazily across mine. He wasn’t in a hurry, but I was desperately clinging to every second of this.

I clutched the front of his sweater tighter as his hands began to roam. I feared that if I let go of my hold on his sweater that I might just fall out of

earth's orbit. As his fingers skimmed my waist, I let out a small murmur of pleasure. When his touch skated over my ribs, I gasped, jumping at the contact. Ary let out a sharp release of breath as I reached under his sweater to feel the taut skin of his stomach, in search of more contact.

"Spencer," he breathed out. The soft rumble of his voice sent tingles tiptoeing down my spine. It was by far my favorite entry into the collection of moments in which Ary spoke my name. I loved the raw desire he managed to inflect into it, my name a breath, the sound tying us together.

Ary stepped forward, guiding me back as his mouth claimed mine again and again. When my calves hit his childhood bed, halting our progress, his hands stilled. He released his hold on my mouth, and the stupid earth started spinning again as he pulled back.

He disconnected from me completely, taking a firm step back, as if he needed the space to help control himself. I wanted to keep this high that was entirely him. I wanted him. I wanted to be consumed by him.

"Ary," I pleaded, stepping forward in an attempt to retain my hold on his sweater.

He made a pained noise low in his throat, but he ultimately resisted. He caught at my hands to halt my reach, attempting to get a handle on his breathing. When I pouted, my heated flesh cooling down, he leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead.

"What if I add sex to the top of my nemesis list?" I asked quietly, my stare darting between his eyes and his mouth.

Ary let out a strained chuckle. "The first time I make love to you isn't going to be in my childhood bedroom, Spencer." He pulled away slowly, letting the lingering heat slowly dissolve.

"You weren't of that opinion a few moments ago," I argued, leaving the distance between us so that I could think through my talking points.

"I plan on doing some pretty ungentlemanly things to you, when you're ready. And I want to hear every beautiful noise that comes out of your mouth." He reached out to flick my nose playfully. "And while my family is pretty open, I don't necessarily want them to hear you screaming my name a floor away. I'm not willing to do things halfway for the sake of silence."

I knew I was blushing from my hairline to my toes. He wasn't wrong, because if I ever happened to make it into his bed, I had a feeling I would be anything but quiet.

"Are you agreeing to casual?" I asked with a raise of my chin.

“There’s nothing casual about this. But if you’re still under that very wrong impression, then maybe we need to pump the brakes on this.”

When my face fell at his assertion, his face softened.

“It’s getting late,” Ary put in. “You were amazing tonight. Everyone’s in love with you. Sasha can’t stop talking about you.”

“I loved it,” I responded sincerely. “I’ve never been to a holiday party like this.”

“Which means?” he asked with a tease.

“Yes, Ary. You’ve knocked it off my list.”

“Which leaves...?” he continued to toy, his smile growing.

“Eggnog. Secret Santa. Christmas music.”

“Too easy.” He ducked down to brush his thumb lightly over my cheekbone. “I know you’re exhausted. Let me drive you to the hotel.”

“Only if you stay with me.”

“Spencer.”

“I’m asking you to stay the night.”

“It’s one bed.”

“If you can’t trust yourself to behave, I can banish you to the couch.”

For the love of all that is holy, please, misbehave.

“Business before romance, remember?” Ary reminded me. “I respect you. I respect your mind, your body. Is it really so bad that I don’t want to take advantage of you?”

“It’s not taking advantage of me if I’m a willing participant.”

“I want us to be serious about one another.”

“Are you not serious about me?” I asked quietly. Halfway teasing, halfway desperate for a real answer. “And don’t you dare say you’re serious about my cookies, Ary Villanova.”

He took in a ragged breath, suddenly unsure what to do with his hands. “I think,” he dragged a hand through his hair before making his way back to the bedroom door, “that we’re walking a dangerously fine line here.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Sounds like one of us is going to have to break.”

VAGUE IMPLICATIONS

When Ary left the bedroom, he was immediately tackled by a horde of children. I tiptoed around the pile of them, giggling, and went down to the kitchen in search of Talia. Instead, standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes, I found Ary's father. Evan had his back to me, his shoulders slumped over the sink and his hands working a steady rhythm under a hot steaming stream of water. I screeched to a halt, my brain trying to compute what to do, because Talia had mentioned Evan was the stain-remover guru.

Before I had come to a decision on whether to bolt, or try to initiate conversation, Evan turned, and wordlessly extended his hand out for the shirt.

"Thank you." I tried not to cringe as I stepped forward and deposited the blouse in his grasp. He examined the stain, testing the feel of the fabric between his fingers, before turning to the kitchen counter. He rummaged around under the sink for a moment, and reappeared with dish soap and hydrogen peroxide. Then he grabbed an opened bottle of white wine off the counter.

Evan splayed the shirt out on the counter. He doused the stain in white wine first, then grabbed a glass bowl from somewhere in a cabinet.

"Matching wine with wine?" I asked with disbelief and curiosity.

Evan subtly nodded his head once in response. As the white wine soaked into the red, he created a mixture with the dish soap and peroxide. He took time to monitor the consistency, and then tugged my blouse over to the sink, where he rinsed the stain methodically, the combined wines dissolving away. I was surprised at how much of the blotch disappeared right then and there.

Once he had the blouse spread back out on the counter, he smeared his concoction out evenly over the stain. Satisfied, he reached into a different cabinet and retrieved some coarse salt. He sprinkled some lightly over the stain, his concentration unmatched.

"You work with Ary."

I jumped, not expecting the quiet rasp that came out of Evan's mouth. I nodded too quickly. "Yes, we work in the same office."

“Same boss.”

I nodded again, stepping closer as Evan finally pulled his concentration away from the shirt, leaving it to soak in the solution. My heart was banging around in my chest because *holy shit Ary’s dad was speaking to me*.

Evan crossed his arms. The gesture reminded me of Ary. So much of his family had made an appearance in Ary, biological or not.

“I don’t like Helena, I don’t like the relationship they’ve built,” Evan said plainly. “And Deborah would never admit it, but she doesn’t like him working under her.”

Brakes screeched to a halt in my head. I’m sorry, relationship? What the hell did that even mean?

“Um.” My vocal cords tried to work something out in response, to not leave Evan hanging alone in the air. His first extension of conversation, and I was back at the Christmas tree farm, looking for a Fraser Fir in a sea of green trees that I couldn’t identify.

Evan shook his head, as if I’d made some valid argument. He heaved a sigh and uncrossed his arms, making as if to leave the kitchen.

“I wouldn’t worry about Ary,” I said hastily, trying to salvage this conversation somehow. “He’s very careful about who he allows into his life.” I bit my lip. “He doesn’t waste breath on people that aren’t worth his time.”

A new anxiety iced in my chest, feeling the truth for what it was. Ary spoke with Helena. Often. Behind closed doors. But why? Why was Helena, out of everyone else on earth, worth his time? I guessed it would be pretty awkward if you didn’t speak to your boss, but she was certainly pulling every word out of him that she could, as often as she could. Then again, he wasn’t exactly polite to her in the interactions I’d caught.

Evan’s face was tight with concentration, and it was really difficult to be on the receiving end of that scrutiny, even if it wasn’t exactly directed at me. I was scared half to death he was going to walk away without acknowledging what I said, or shout at me. Which, I had no idea why he would shout at me when he barely spoke as is, it was just my flight reflexes trying to measure a threat.

I could hear Ezra’s steady voice floating in from the living room, Talia’s ringing out in response. I heard Deborah’s laugh, and a stampede of small feet thundering upstairs. Evan moved forward, and I thought he was going to pass right by me without any further acknowledgement. But, he paused, and laid a careful hand on my shoulder. He patted it twice, before continuing on

into the living room. I stood there, shellshocked, somehow knowing that I'd earned some sort of acceptance from the quietest man I'd ever met. It would seem that it was easy for him to let the world believe him to be calloused, stern. But, on the inside, he was a sweet man with nothing but love for the family he had built.

Ultimately, Evan had left me incredibly confused. Out of all the conversation topics in the world, he chose to speak with me about Helena. And Ary. Why?

PULL-OUT COUCHES

There was a lot of hugging and screeching as we exchanged farewells. All of the women hastily programmed my number into their phones, all at different paces as I painstakingly repeated it at least four times. Deborah's jangling jewelry was in full music mode as she hugged her son extra tight, a steady stream of well wishes and unabashed love coming from her mouth. I would've assumed it would be a year before she saw her son again based on the goodbye she was issuing, but in all actuality, she would be seeing him in the morning for whatever shenanigans their family had planned that Ary had had the grace to forewarn me about.

"You better not screw this up," Talia muttered to Ary as she delivered a quick hug of her own. Ary rolled his eyes and playfully shoved his sister away.

Ary drove us over to the hotel. His hands were steady on the wheel, his eyes overly focused on the stretch of road in front of us. The tension between us on the ride to the hotel was palpable—a living thing that pulsed between us like a heartbeat. I had to clasp my hands together in order not to reach over to him, to touch him.

"So..." I said, repositioning my feet on the floorboard. "About this hotel room—"

"I will be sleeping on the couch," Ary interrupted.

I puffed up my cheeks, then blew out all my air. "You know—"

"Spencer Anniston."

"Ooo. He pulled out the full name. He must be in serious mode. Or caveman mode. Do you know my middle name?"

His fingers flexed over the steering wheel. "Whenever you're ready to admit you're serious, you just let me know."

When we made it in to the hotel room, Ary immediately strolled casually to the couch. He dropped his overnight bag to the floor beside it and threw his wallet on a low table. He sat down, taking a long breath as he pulled out his phone. "Did you have enough to eat at my family's? I can place a delivery

order if you're still hungry."

Hungry was definitely the word. But not for food.

I admired his commitment to the gentleman routine. For all of three seconds. And then I felt the urge to snap his careful resolve like a twig.

"I'm perfect. Going to hit the shower," I said sweetly. I shrugged out of my shirt—Talia's shirt—while walking past him.

Ary dropped his phone, averting his eyes as he tried to recover it. "Behave," he said through gritted teeth.

"I never promised such a thing." I pulled some things from my overnight bag before stepping out of my pants. "You're welcome to join me in the shower."

Ary threw his head back, looking as if he was praying for patience. Or restraint.

"Come on, it'll be fun," I purred, cocking my hip.

Ary, the master of not looking at people, remained physically unmoved. Mentally? His resolve was trembling. "You go ahead," he finally grated out, appearing truly conflicted.

I shrugged, and shut myself in the bathroom to shower. My mind spun with the possibilities of the evening, my adrenaline spiking as I considered ways to crack Ary's tenacity.

There was nothing wrong with the two of us keeping things casual while I worked on myself. And starting something now didn't mean it would burn out by the time I had conquered my own metaphorical mountains. We could take things more seriously when that time came. If that time came. If I was actively ready to participate in a relationship that was more physical, if it was on my terms, how could Ary argue that he wasn't respecting me?

But, then, if Ary was pursuing something strictly serious, was that exactly fair to him? If I couldn't give him what he wanted in this relationship, was it fair to ask him to bend his boundaries for my sake? I was torn. I wanted things between us to grow, eventually we could become something more. Why couldn't that start now? We could keep things easy, light, unburdened so that I wouldn't feel so guilty when it came to my goals. Or maybe it wouldn't hurt as badly if he got bored with me.

Ary had managed to pull the couch out into a bed by the time I was finished showering. He was sitting up, the darkened hotel room was now cast in the glow of the bathroom light, and the subtle light illuminating from Ary's phone.

When Ary glanced up from his screen, his grip immediately tightened around the phone in his hand. He had time to register that I was only draped in a towel before he snapped his attention away from me. But it was enough time for him to see my dripping hair, my sodden skin.

“Christ,” he muttered, avoiding looking at me altogether.

“I don’t think he was a redhead,” I murmured sweetly. “Can I ask you a question?”

He tossed his phone down beside him and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Spencer,” he groaned.

“Something the matter?” I crooned innocently. “Anyway, I was thinking about this whole casual versus serious matter at hand.”

He started to pull his hands away, his mouth parting with a readied response, but then he froze entirely as I dropped my towel. He heard the thud as cloth hit the floor. He outright hissed, abruptly flipping onto his stomach and burying his head into his pillow.

“You are pushing your limits,” he growled. “I can only be so much of a gentleman when you’re waltzing around naked.”

“Oh, come on. We can put some Christmas music on if it makes you feel better. Just knocking something off my list,” I teased, my heart battering in my chest as I tried to keep things as light as possible.

Ary laughed at the absurdity of my statement, the sound of it muffled against the pillow.

“Surely you aren’t already going to sleep,” I continued to prod. I wouldn’t push any further than what I had done. I wouldn’t cross over to him. I wouldn’t touch him. I wouldn’t narrate all of the images rotating through my head of the two of us together.

“I wasn’t planning on going to sleep. Until a devil in the form of the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on decided to parade around as my own personal apple.”

“The apple’s worth a taste, right?”

“Put some clothes on and I’ll consider it.”

“When you say clothes—”

“Shirt. Underwear.”

“Hm. I might be able to accommodate that request.”

I flung the black lacy underwear he’d picked out at the lingerie store over to him. Registering something softly thud to his side, he fumbled around in the sheets until he had a grip on them. He turned his face away from me to

look at the object in his hand. When he realized what it was, he crumpled them in his hand, and stifled another groan.

“Think you could help me out?” I asked sweetly.

He tossed them back in my general direction and refused to move an inch. “Get dressed and we can have a serious conversation.”

“Always serious.” I begrudgingly threw on my pajama shirt and the black underwear before crawling into the hotel bed. “I’m decent,” I muttered, sinking down into the covers. “Come kiss your clothed apple, caveman.”

Like a child, he peeked up from his pillow, his gaze flipping quickly to my clothed shoulders, before he relaxed substantially. The sheets shifted as he slid from the pull-out couch, and he padded over to where I was nestled. He’d changed into a long-sleeved T-shirt and blue plaid pajama bottoms while I’d been in the bathroom. Even clothed, he was tempting. I could make out the hard lines of his biceps underneath the soft cotton material, the curve of his pecs.

He leaned down to plant a swift kiss on my mouth. I immediately leaned up, attempting to evoke more of a response from his lips as I slid my hands over his shoulders. Ary chuckled against my mouth, and as I tried to link my fingers behind his neck, he caught them, and gently pulled them away.

“Is being unattached seriously such a bad thing?” I asked, sinking back into the bed. Ary sat down beside me, his legs hanging off the side. “I mean, with most men, the unattached thing is essentially a dream deal.”

“Is being attached such a bad thing?” he countered, maneuvering to fold one leg underneath him. “With most women, isn’t the attached thing a dream deal?”

“Point taken,” I grumbled. “I am committing myself to my business first. As soon as this bet is over—”

“Is it so bad if someone’s there to cheer you on along the way?” He shifted, and then reached over to gently brush his thumb across my cheekbone. “Is it such a bad thing to have two dreams at once?”

“It’s something I have to do for myself,” I insisted. “Otherwise...”

“I’ll hold you back?” He tilted his head. “You think that little of me?”

No. I think that little of me. We aren’t even together and you’ve commandeered my attention completely. What would happen if we took that next step, and you broke my heart? What would happen if you became my new dream, and then that dream shattered, and I had nothing but coffee runs and memos to greet me when I came back down from the clouds?

“It’s entirely possible that you really are only in this for the cookies.”

Ary didn’t bother correcting me, because it was clear to the both of us that wasn’t true. He nodded to himself, but didn’t push for the truth that he could see bubbling beneath my surface.

“Don’t sleep on the couch,” I finally grumbled. “I’ll *behave*.”

He deliberated for several seconds before he shuffled back into the bed, and shifted under the covers with me. I immediately clung to him as if he was a lifeline, my arms wrapping around him, my legs hooking around his hips. He tensed, waiting to see how my attack on his gentlemanliness progressed, but when I relaxed against him, true to my word, I felt him breathe out in relief. He started smoothing back my hair—familiar with my own nervous habit. Except he was turning my nervous habit into something sweet, reassuring. He pressed a lingering kiss to my lips, and then placed another against my forehead before relaxing back into the pillows, his arms incasing me softly.

As I drifted to sleep, I considered his suggestion of having two dreams at once. The potential difference between the two was that I was completely in control of one, and only had myself to blame if it didn’t pan out. I could only hurt myself. I could make new plans, I could move forward, in spite of the pain. I could hold it at a distance if I wanted to, study it, and mold it according to my plan and my plan alone.

But the other dream—the Ary one—would leave me devastated if we broke it. My heart in his hands. His heart in mine. And with that kind of hold, I would be giving him permission to slowly smother it, or to crush it all at once. No warning, just pieces of devastation raining down around me. It was a dream entirely out of my control; a dream capable of destroying me completely with no hope of recovery. No escape, no way out, just coldness.

PRIDE

I woke up to the feel of the bed shifting beside me. I quickly turned to snuggle into the new occupant, unable to recall when he had woken up. He was freshly showered, in a clean long-sleeved mustard yellow shirt and cargo pants, his hair still damp. He let out an abrupt breath when I practically barreled into him, righting the coffee cup he held in his hands, making sure it didn't spill with my sudden movement.

"How dare you be nice and bring me coffee," I huffed into his warm chest. The smell of evergreen and soap swallowed me up, threatening to drown me in an Ary infused dream.

Ary snorted, reaching his hand out hesitantly to run his fingers through my hair, his other hand still holding my coffee. I'm sure my hair looked akin to a bird's nest after being tossed around in a category five hurricane.

"That's my job at the present, remember? Gentleman."

"Where's caveman? I'd like to speak to him, please. I'm sure his brain is all about world-saving reproduction or something."

His hands paused in my hair. "I'm starting to think that I'm going to lose you after this bet is over."

"Lose me?"

"Lose this relationship. I won't have an excuse to impress you."

I dislodged myself immediately from his chest to look at him incredulously, and swiped the coffee from his hands. "Are you for real right now?"

He didn't flinch, didn't waver. How could this beautiful, broody, sexy as hell man think that he needed an excuse to spend time with me?

I threw the covers off and stood from the bed. I began pacing randomly, throwing an arm into the air as I wrestled with thoughts I was muddling through, trying to find the right thing to say. I stopped to sip the coffee in my hand, hoping it would give me some surge of energy to help my tongue come up with the right things to vocalize.

"Ary, you—" I stopped. And then started again. "You and I would never

work.” Yikes. That probably wasn’t the way to start this. “I love the time we spend together. But I can’t commit to you! I can’t! Because once I do, there wouldn’t be anything else. I would fall down the lovesick puppy rabbit hole and I would never recover.”

He arched a dark eyebrow. “Are you saying you can’t commit to me because I would be too much for you?”

“Yes!” I sputtered. “I would be so wrapped up in you that I wouldn’t ever do a single thing for myself again! I have already spent too much of my time trying to be the perfect girlfriend in the past relationships I’ve had. And now I spend too much time trying to be the perfect assistant. I haven’t had the time to refine the passion I love. And even this, now, I’m being stupid by being here when it doesn’t benefit my goals.”

Ary’s face darkened, and he pushed himself off the bed, crossing his arms as he considered me. “Business first,” he clarified.

“I’m putting *me* first.”

“Because you think I’m incapable of doing that.”

What man was capable of putting a woman first? My history had detailed clearly how this kind of relationship shook out. I was a focal point, sure, up until things got boring. Normal. We had the bet to focus on. There was Christmas spirit bullshit in the air that made this feel bigger than what it was.

In the end, when the bet ended, and one of us ended up winning, we may commit to one another and traipse right into the mundanity of a relationship...where he would eventually get bored. I wouldn’t be this sparkly, new, list-wielding, cookie-baking temptress. I would just be Spencer. Burnt out on cookie dough and coffee orders.

And what Evan had said to me at the family gathering the night before. The one thing he spoke to me about was Helena. Their...relationship? I had no idea what was going down there, that was something else that I needed to figure out before that turned around to bite me in the rear.

“Business first,” I finally muttered. I grabbed fresh clothes from my bag and closed myself up in the bathroom to get dressed. I begged my heart to come back down from whatever building it was metaphorically scaling. This was the right thing to do. I couldn’t expect Ary to commit to me when *I* wasn’t committed to me. I wasn’t my best self. Isn’t that what he deserved from someone, nothing less than their best?

When I emerged, Ary’s arms were still crossed, his eyes on the bag I needed to pack.

“To clarify this—all we are...is a bet that ends before New Year’s.”

“That’s it,” I managed to squeak out. “Can I make things any clearer?”

He shook his head, and then uncrossed his arms. “Well, since that’s the extent of this relationship, I’m going to spare you from the morning festivities with my family.”

My heart cracked a fraction. “Your family...?”

“We’re going downtown to look at the Christmas displays.”

“Ary.”

“But, that doesn’t involve anything on your list. No sense falling on false pretenses. Right?” His stare was direct, challenging. I wanted to cry. What had I done?

I swallowed heavily. “Right,” I said instead of admitting to the turmoil that was tearing me up from the inside. “I’ll hang here until you get back. Pack up, and everything.”

He nodded. “You need anything while I’m out?” he asked with civil disinterest as he turned to the door.

“Not a thing,” I managed to say in return, my throat burning the entire time.

Ary didn’t say anything else. He quietly left me alone in the hotel room, bombarded by the intense feeling that I’d just made the biggest mistake of my life. But it couldn’t be. This was me, continuing to save me from myself. This was me sparing Ary and myself an eventual heartbreak, because pursuing something with him wouldn’t be right when we couldn’t give each other what we wanted right now. Right?

But, if that was the case, why did it feel like I was drowning?

DRAGON LADIES

The drive back to Philly was hell. Literal hell. Like, Satan himself was escorting us in Ary's SUV through whatever level of the underworld dealt directly with deceivers and unrequited love. Ary said nothing in response to my lame attempts at conversation, only offering head nods or grunts. This wasn't a comfortable Ary quiet. I knew all of his quiet. This was a new one for me. This silence was uncomfortable, strained. This was me being unworthy of his words. And I hated every moment of it.

He didn't say anything as he dropped me off at my apartment complex Sunday evening, not even when he quietly escorted me to my door. Even with everything I had put him through, he was still a gentleman, and waited for the lock in my door to click before striding back down the hallway and out of earshot. The trip to Pittsburgh next weekend would be painful. I hadn't had the heart to call off the movie date with Talia and the girls, and I had to drop off cookies for Harmony anyway. I promised myself that this week I would make things right, somehow. That we could get back to what we were before this weekend. We could be amicable. We could be...friends. We didn't need a bet to be friends.

I wanted to text him. I wanted to call him. I wanted to fill in the cracks I'd opened by putting Ary at a distance. I'd done that. I'd divided us with a stupid, stupid comment. And Ary wasn't going to cross a defined line I had set between us.

On Monday morning, Ary was already stationed by Helena's door. I felt a catch in my throat at the coffee sitting on my desk. I couldn't care less about the giftbag that was also positioned there.

Politely, as he always did, Ary opened her door for me. But the air was different. It was no longer a gesture of adoration; it was a polite obligation. I'm sure the coffee was the same extended politeness, as he had already committed to buying me coffee before I blew things up.

I deposited Helena's morning coffee on her desk, ready to hightail it right

out of there and right things with Ary. I needed him to talk to me again. I needed the trip up to Pittsburgh this weekend not to be an extended stay in my own personal underworld. We needed to be friends before I left on vacation that Monday.

As I turned to leave—in a rare move for Helena—she narrowed her attention on me.

“Spencer.”

I immediately halted my normally swift retreat from her office, longingly looking to the opened door and my desk for a split second before offering the sincerest smile I could summon. “Yes, Helena?”

This wasn’t going to be good if she was already getting on my case this early. I couldn’t recall anything I’d done wrong in the twenty seconds I’d been in her office. I wasn’t sure how much more stress I could add to my mental plate.

Helena picked up her coffee, sipping from it delicately, before addressing me. “The staff party is next Friday. I need you to double check the catering with Naomi. Make sure the Fourth Floor is set and we have everything we need to make their performance successful. And use my personal card to buy yourself a new dress for the party.”

Mayday. Mayday. Red alert. Alert.

“Uh...” I swallowed as sweat began to manifest on my palms. “Helena, I’m actually—”

“I’m going to need you to verify the number of attendants as well. We had an unusual number of plus ones this year.”

“We...um...discussed...” I was already losing the battle; I could feel it. My confidence was slipping through my fingers like water. My face heated as I struggled with my sense of professionalism, my words warbled and wobbly as I spoke. “If I worked through Thanksgiving, I could take the week before Christmas off. For my family, you know. You agreed—”

“Things have changed. I need you here.” There was no give in her tone, no note of debate or sympathy.

“I’ve already bought tickets, Helena,” I said in a whisper. My composure was threatening to crack. “I won’t be able to refund my ticket. I can’t get tickets this late for Christmas weekend.”

“There’ll be tickets, I’m sure.”

“Not that I can afford,” I blustered. “Especially when I can’t get the money back for the tickets I already bought.”

“Transfer them.”

How did I explain to this woman that people like me bought tickets on a prayer, without any emergency or late transfer insurance purchased? She wouldn’t get it; she had no idea that people couldn’t afford what she could.

There was a slight shift in her normal villainous presentation when she caught the look on my face. “I’ll reimburse you for the tickets,” she said, softer than her normal cackle. “We’ll move your vacation to the second week in January, after all the holiday fuss has died down. You should be able to find tickets then. Cheaper, even.”

“My parents won’t be able to get any time off then. Helena—”

“For God’s sake, Spencer, I’ll double your normal Christmas bonus. Alright?” She slapped her coffee cup down on her desk and let out an irritated sigh. “I don’t have time to play at being hostess to people that will infinitely waste my time. I will make an appearance. But I need you there. Show face for the first hour to make sure everything is running smoothly. The food, the band, the guests. Then you can go home.”

I could already hear my mother’s disappointment dripping from the phone call I would have to make that evening. I was, in her perspective, choosing work again over my family. I was going to miss not only Thanksgiving, but also Christmas this year. I had always made it to one holiday or the other. It was never about the actual holiday with my parents, it was always the principal of the matter, the test of loyalty. Heck, I wouldn’t have minded staying home for the holidays, but I also had a nagging sense of responsibility to the people that raised me.

But none of that was admissible here. Helena had no family, no obligations—apart from this job. There was no explanation I could give, no tear that I could shed that would make her change her mind. Not seeing another way around it, I gave her a nod, barely keeping control of my poise as I turned from her.

“I’m sorry, really I am.” There was not a single drop of sympathy in her apology. “I need you there.”

She picked her coffee back up and sipped on it, immediately diving back into a new pile of paperwork that was stacked on her desk.

I stiffly navigated out of her office, in a slight daze. Ary was standing stock-still when I emerged. He reached over to close the door behind me, but paused. I was wondering how I was going to be able to play off the rest of the day without tipping him off to the newest wreckage of my life. Sure, we

weren't on speaking terms necessarily, but Ary wouldn't let something like this slide, would he? Or maybe he didn't care anymore. Maybe he no longer considered my misery his problem.

But he grasped my arm as I passed him, imploring for my attention without a word. His eyes were apologetic, but simmering at the same time. He must have heard the exchange.

"I'm going to talk to her," he said in an even tone. It appeared that I wasn't the only one trying to hold my composure. Mine devastated, his seething.

I shook my head, gently pulling my arm from his grasp. "No," I rasped out. "It's fine. If you're worried about the holiday party—"

His eyes burned. "I'm not worried about the bet, Spencer." He turned and widened Helena's door, pushing forward without knocking.

"No!" I snapped, more forcefully than I'd intended to. But he didn't listen. He barreled into Helena Vonaparte's office and closed the door firmly behind him. "Ary! Helena!" I tried the door, but found it locked.

The steady murmur of Ary's voice was too low to catch, and Helena's reply was uncharacteristically quiet for her. I still was unsure of why she put up with Ary's dismissal of her normal rules and routines. If he had been anyone else, he would have been fired on the spot for storming into her office and demanding explanations for something that wasn't even his business to begin with. Heck, he would've been fired day one. But Ary, for whatever reason, was not exposed to her normal intolerance.

I don't like the relationship they've built.

What sort of relationship had Evan meant? A relationship that Ary's mom was hurt by? What gave Ary permission to act differently than every single one of Helena's employees? Were they, or had they been...involved?

Shuttering at that thought, I immediately dismissed the accusation from my brain. I trudged back to my desk and dealt with a few antsy employees that came scurrying up in a panic. Painful minutes passed. When Ary finally emerged sometime later, he looked even angrier than before. He was outright furious, breathing hard as he took up his position outside Helena's office, slamming the door behind him. His eyes were downcast, darting back and forth as his brain tried to create a fix. If Ary couldn't convince Helena, no one could.

A positive from the morning was that Ary's quiet was no longer due to our current strain. It was made up entirely of his frustration in regards to whatever conversation he and Helena had. I went the rest of the morning

assuming nothing at all had come of their dialogue, up until the lunch hour.

“Spencer,” Helena snapped at noon as she threw open her door. “Take a lunch.”

I nodded, not looking at her as I stood from my desk.

“And...” Helena hesitated, and gave the briefest of looks to Ary before addressing me directly. “For the staff party, we are going to need ten dozen of your cookies. Holiday themed. Or whatever. Just put it on my card.”

I outright stared at her. My mouth parted, and I waited for someone to make sense of her words. But there was no clarification, no confirmation. After a few painful seconds, I gave her a curt nod, and then grabbed my purse and fled as her door slammed back shut.

When I returned from lunch, I noted that Ary was not tucked away in Helena’s office. Lover’s quarrel?

Stop it, Spencer.

I grabbed Ary, tugging him away from Helena’s door by his shirt sleeve. I made an error, though. I stopped short of my desk, and when I wheeled on him, I realized I was essentially pinned against it, Ary directly in front of me. Exactly where I’d dragged him.

I arched back, tilting my head back to meet his eye. “You put her up to this.” I jabbed my index finger at him for emphasis. He appeared unfazed, cocking his head to the side as he studied the finger pointing at his face. When I pictured him leaning forward and sucking my finger into his mouth, I jerked my hand back. He stifled a smirk, as if he saw the fantasy written all over my face.

“I am not prepared. You know that I’m not prepared to make ten dozen cookies at one time. It’s going to take me hours.” Ary absently trailed his finger down my side as I spoke. I cleared my throat, and he dropped his hand, pulled from whatever daydream that had captivated him for a moment. “You got me into this. You’re getting me out of it.”

“You want her to cancel to order?”

“I...no! But—”

“I’ll help you make them. I’ll help brainstorm ideas, bake, anything you need.”

“It’s going to take hours!”

“Fine.

“Baking is not all rainbows and butterflies in Cookieland.”

“Spending time with you, watching you work miracles in your element, is

supposed to be a punishment?” Ary grinned. There was a catch of relief in my throat at his smile. Some internal knot loosened.

“I’m serious. You are going to be elbow-deep in cookie dough.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” he answered easily, taking a step back.

RED SILK

Tuesday morning, I dropped a new box of cookies for Ary off on my desk before delivering Helena's coffee. By the time I came flying back to my desk, Ary had appeared, coffee in hand. He gave it to me, and I nodded my thanks.

I felt Ary's eyes on me as I went around to sit at my desk. I swiped up the new giftbag that had been left by my computer monitor. I flicked a quick glance at Ary, then motioned to the box of cookies on my desk. Ary immediately stepped forward and picked them up. As he lifted the lid to study the contents of the box, my own stomach plummeted as I gazed into the little giftbag that had been left for me. I retrieved a satiny red pair of underwear from the bag, the exact pair I'd picked up at the lingerie store. My gasp was audible.

I yanked the red silk from the bag, and wielded it like I was about to expel a demon from the room. "You!" I exclaimed. "You didn't...!"

He considered me, a cookie poised halfway to his mouth. His gaze locked on the underwear I had in my hand. "It may have come up in conversation." Ary took a chunk out of the cookie in hand, completely unbothered.

"You don't just have conversations, Ary." My face burned as I stuffed the underwear back in the bag, tossing it under my desk as if the bag itself had burned me.

Ary snorted in agreement, meaning this lingerie was diabolically intentional. Jesus, how had that conversation gone between Ary and my Secret Santa?

"Still on for Saturday?" he asked, his eyes flitting up to meet mine squarely. He finished the cookie, and then carefully put the lid back on the box of cookies.

"Of course," I said. I sipped from the coffee Ary had brought me, white mocha flavored, and then launched into my morning emails.

"Tell me more about the work party." Ary shifted his weight from one foot to the other, stowing the box of cookies by his messenger bag.

I couldn't remember the last time I had baked so many cookies. There was

a time I hadn't had the energy to muster up the wherewithal to bake a batch. Now, I was baking cookies left and right. For Ary, for his family, and there had been another mystery order that had just been placed. The customer had asked for me to hold the box at my desk for pickup on Monday, so I presumably knew the mystery person. Probably Ary. Or Jan. Why either of them would hold their identities back, though, didn't make sense if they were just going to pick it up from me directly. Whoever it was had ordered a dozen chocolate chip cookies. Which weren't really Ary's or Jan's favorite.

"What do you want to know?" I dodged, firing off another email.

"It's not a party for the whole company."

"God, no." I huffed out a breath. "That would be six thousand employees in one place. I would lose my mind. Each of the department heads are responsible for their own little holiday shindigs. This party is just like Secret Santa, all of the important people are invited. But they also get a plus one."

Ary hummed with interest, his eyes darting back and forth as he thought about something.

"What?" I asked.

"It's just that ten dozen cookies won't be enough."

"Oh, please." I swatted the air in dismissal before my fingers found their way back to the keyboard.

"I'm serious. They'll be gone in ten minutes."

I couldn't help the smile that broke across my face. Sure, I was thrilled by the compliment. But I was even more thrilled that we were talking again. I hadn't had a chance to talk to him about what we had said over the weekend, about what I had said. Now I was afraid to broach it, afraid to add weight on a tentative truce.

But there was one sticking point I couldn't quite shake.

"What's the deal with Helena?" I asked lowly, cognizant of how close her door was.

Ary's eyes tightened. "What do you mean?"

I tried to shrug with an air of nonchalance. I shouldn't have led with that. I should have eased it in somehow. But, screw it, I was in it now. "To start, she doesn't hate you."

Ary gave me a look that suggested I was very incorrect about that assumption.

"Some of your family had interesting things to say about her."

I was certain Ary stopped breathing. When he did get his breath back, his

rubbed at his chest, as if it pained him. He didn't speak.

"You want to make a wager on what they said?" I asked cryptically, sending off a document to Helena's email.

Ary dropped his hand, some tenseness in his shoulders easing. "No."

I pressed my lips tightly together, avoiding his prying eyes. I wasn't willing to risk what we had just built back, so I switched topics. "I was scared to ask your dad, but are those mugs dishwasher safe?" I asked, letting him off the hook.

Ary let out a breath through his nose, and shook his head. I had to accept that if he wanted me to know what was going on with Helena, he would've told me.

I could do this. I could do friendship.

NINJA CATS

The rest of the workweek flew by. And in that time, Ary and I gained back whatever we had lost the previous weekend. The relationship no longer felt as fragile, as fleeting. But it still felt like a bubble ready to be popped with the end of the bet looming closer and closer. Ary hadn't so much as mentioned the bet all week, and I had the feeling he was having the same thoughts that I was. The bet gave us an excuse to talk, to laugh, to poke fun at one another without pressure. I wasn't sure what was going to happen when our game finally came to a close.

I was relieved when the ride to Ary's parents' house on Saturday wasn't silent. The family was all congregating together in order to split up into our respective groups. Talia and I were taking the girls to the movies. Ary and Ezra ended up agreeing to keep the boys, some sort of plans forming about an indoor snowball fight. Ron and Evan were going to do some sort of tinkering in Evan's workshop—which I would've paid money to see. Deborah and Harmony decided to get some last-minute Christmas shopping done. Talia, as it turned out, was done with her shopping for the year. I was surprised that Deborah wasn't finished. My best guess was that she secretly was, but used the excuse so that she could join Harmony.

As Ary helped me down from his SUV, he kept hold of my hand, carefully searching my eyes. "You sure you're good with this?" he asked lowly.

"If I said no, what would happen next?" I teased.

"I would buckle you back in and retreat down the highway," Ary joked. He waited for me to confirm that I was okay. I pushed at his shoulder playfully, looking past him to the house I was happy to see again. Maybe not the house itself per say, but the people in it.

Harmony and Ezra's girls burst through the front door first, spluttering half-hearted goodbyes over their shoulders and giggling as they tripped down the steps to get to us. A sincere smile touched my lips, and I turned back to Ary.

"Who doesn't want to watch a ninja cat movie during the holidays? At

least it's not some corny Christmas crap." I elbowed him in the ribs as the girls made it to us. "Or, God forbid, blue aliens."

To my surprise, the two girls threw their arms around me first before turning their attention to Ary. He was able to tackle one girl in each arm, and lifted them into the air in a tickled greeting. They both screeched and batted at him, and my heart swelled looking at the full grin lighting up Ary's face.

Talia came out of the house, all bundled up and hardly looking pregnant. She carefully treaded down the steps to join the girls. The rest of the adults appeared from the house, standing on the porch in various stages of dress. Ron hadn't bothered with a coat, but had apparently bolted outside to make sure his wife made it to the car safely. Deborah looked like she was ready to leave, her jacket and hat firmly situated, her jangling bracelets somewhat muted because of the outerwear. Harmony was tugging her coat on as she joined Deborah on the porch, no hat on her halo of raven hair. Ezra was in a Hawaiian shirt, assuredly wishing for a cold death. Evan had on a sweater, and was reaching forward to Deborah. I realized he had her gloves in hand, and I was touched as I watched him slip them over her hands. She looked up at him warmly, planting a quick kiss on his mouth before she and Harmony moved down the steps.

Deborah came over to give me a hug, fussing over my face, flushed from the cold. I slipped Harmony her boxes of lemon drop cookies. She threw her head back with joy and thanked me graciously, elongating her syllables.

Talia and I ushered the girls over to her car. "Sasha, Trinity, you girls behave for your aunties," Harmony admonished. She was at the passenger side of Deborah's vehicle, making sure to shoot a serious expression at her daughters.

"We will!" they sang out in unison. I made sure Sasha buckled in while Talia moved to help Trinity.

Ary stood on the front walk, his hand absently brushing against his beanie as he observed us. "Do you want me tag along?" he asked as he dropped his hand back to his side. His gloved fingers flexed. I didn't miss the surprised glance Ezra gave him.

I shut Sasha's door, and gave him a wave. "Stop worrying, caveman," I reprimanded with a smile as I opened Talia's front passenger door.

"Girl, he's got it bad," Talia giggled as she slid into the front seat at the same time I did. We buckled ourselves in, the girls already singing and clapping in the back. As Talia began reversing out of the driveway, I heard

the gruff muffle of Evan's voice as he looked to Ary.

"Caveman?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

I had already known that Sasha was a little more on the timid side, but I was thoroughly impressed when she took it upon herself to purchase the tickets for everyone. I watched her fidget anxiously at the ticket kiosk, gift card in hand, her fingers hesitant to select any of the buttons.

I wondered if Ezra had been less confident as a child. Or maybe even Harmony. But I could never imagine Harmony as anything less than cool and assured. And their younger daughter, Trinity, obviously shared that trait from birth. She watched as Sasha second-guessed the tickets to purchase, Trinity's little hand poised on a cocked hip. After Trinity sighed a third time, she stepped forward. She bumped Sasha aside and completed the transaction, her little eyes rolling back into her head at her older sister's supposed incompetence.

The tickets alone depleted Sasha's gift card, but Talia brushed it off, ushering the girls over to the concession stand with me trailing behind. "You can't watch butt-kicking cats without popcorn," she insisted with a tease. I was quick to agree.

We waited in line at the concession stand, the girls dancing around the ropes that kept the long lines in order. There was a salty, oily scent that lingered in the air, with a lively machine spitting out a waterfall of popcorn behind the concession workers. The air itself felt sticky. Talia fell into easy conversation with me as we both watched the girls having the time of their lives before the movie had even started.

"Why can't we watch the blue people movie!" Trinity trilled as she swung from a post, interrupting Talia mid-conversation.

"Because that movie is PG-13," Talia answered easily.

Sasha chimed in shyly. "That means we could watch it with parent guidance."

"Exactly. Do I look like your mother?"

The girls both dissolved into another giggling fit as Talia moved closer to my side.

"How did you and Ron meet?" I asked as we lumbered forward in line. I heard my phone ping, and started digging through my purse to grab it so that I could silence it.

"Through a dating app. Ron was too shy to try and pick up a woman in

public. We talked over text for two weeks before he finally agreed to meet me. I thought for sure there was something wrong with him. Turns out, he just had some anxiety issues.”

I silenced my phone, and glimpsed a text on the display.

Ary: Make it there okay?

I let a smile slip, and texted back.

Me: yes caveman

“I bet he was speechless, meeting someone as beautiful as you in person.” I went to slide my phone back in my jacket pocket, but thought better of it, and went ahead and shed my jacket completely. It was going to be too warm to keep it on the whole time.

Talia noted my gesture, and then followed my lead, shedding her own coat. She smiled as she recalled the memory to mind, folding her coat over her arm. “He was so nervous. He would hardly look at me, wouldn’t speak. He just listened to my blabbering the entire time, looking like he was completely enraptured.”

“Sounds like all of the other men in your life. None of them are very chatty, are they?”

Talia snorted. “Maybe now. It wasn’t like that when we were growing up. When we were younger, my brothers couldn’t care less about listening to me or being mature.” She seemed to remember herself, and attempted to explain it away. “Things have obviously changed since then. But with Ron it felt....it felt like he was willing to battle his innermost demons just for the chance to listen to me rant about nonsense. He made me feel special.”

I nodded, considering her perspective. Some men attempted to pick up women without a second thought. Others...it was their own version of battling fire-breathing dragons just to approach one, even with the best of intentions at heart.

“I knew he was the one when I invited him to a three-hour, jam-packed concert. He took five full seconds, and then he squeaked that he would be happy to come with me.” Talia laughed, her almond-shaped eyes dancing. “That man,” she said fondly.

“What about Ezra and Harmony? How did they meet?”

“In college. He was crazy smart in math, and got all sorts of scholarships.

But, for some credit requirement, he was obligated to attend some arts performances. Harmony was in the choir, and he swears he could pick her voice out of the crowd the first time he saw her. It's Dad's big spiel that all the Villanova men fall in love at first sight." She cut her eyes to me. "You and Ary met at work, obviously."

"Yep. He's literally stationed right beside my desk. It was kind of hard not to talk to him."

Talia harrumphed. "I know Ary. If he didn't like you, it wouldn't matter if you were standing eyeball to eyeball. He wouldn't speak to you."

I silently agreed. I'd seen it firsthand with the number of employees who came through every single day, offering greetings to Ary, none of which he ever returned. Aside from Jan, who he was quietly cordial with.

"Now I've got to know your parents' story," I pressed, my curiosity unable to be quenched when it came to their family.

"Ah, the Christmas story of the century," Talia said with a dramatic sigh. "Dad was granted leave from his job in the military for about two weeks around Christmas when he was twenty. When he got back to Pittsburgh, he wasn't ready to head home yet, so he found himself wandering along, looking at some Christmas lights in a neighborhood nearby."

"What branch of service was he in?"

"Air Force."

Ah, that explained Ary's pathway. Pursuing the same job his father had. Maybe part of his identity crisis.

"Anyway, Dad was strolling along, looking at the lights, when he spotted Mom a block in front of him, doing the same thing. He swears he didn't even see the guy Mom was with until he had already approached her, but Mom says they were literally locked arm in arm when Dad walked up, both of them staring up at this one house that was really decked out."

I smiled, painting the picture in my head as Talia continued.

"Mom and this guy were arguing about the Christmas lights. She was saying how much she wanted a house just like that one day, that she couldn't wait to go all out at Christmastime with lights and such. The guy she was with kind of blew her off, trying to sound smart or something by talking about electric costs and bulb replacements or some crap."

"Ugh," I scoffed, wrinkling my nose.

"I know, right? So, Dad walks right up to Mom, pulls her away from the guy, and tells her, dead straight: I don't even know your name, but I can tell

you right now that if it would make you happy, I would buy this house for you someday, and buy every Christmas light you ever wanted.”

“There is no way Evan said that!”

“Oh, he did. The guy Mom was with got all huffy. It was a first date between them, and Mom said it really wasn’t going well. But Dad didn’t know that. Apparently, Mom crosses her arms and goes: What about electric costs? Bulb replacements?”

I laughed, loving Deborah for her sass.

“Dad says: I don’t really give a shit about electric costs or bulb replacements if it means I get to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“And that was it?” I pushed excitedly. “She just agreed?”

Talia shrugged. “Dad served out the rest of his contract, came back to Pittsburgh, and bought her that house.”

Their house. Decked out in all sorts of lights and inflatables and figures. I derailed that beautiful story from my mind, because there were tears building in the back of my eyes at the thought—thinking of that lovely house that Evan promised to buy Deborah the first time he ever saw her. And he freaking did it. And then proceeded to bedeck it in so much Christmas finery...the love he had for her was just too overwhelming to think about.

Talia and I split the cost for the refreshments. We had a time getting the girls down the aisles and to their seats in the correct auditorium. By the time we got them settled, they were hardly visible behind their buckets of popcorn, sodas, and candy.

Their eyes went wide as the theater darkened, and Talia and I chuckled to one another over their heads, both of us positioned on either side of the girls. We were entirely entertained by their awe, and Talia gave me a knowing look that made me pause. I took my phone out and texted Ary.

Me: *do u believe in love at 1st sight*

It took a full minute before his reply came through.

Ary: *Do you believe this is just casual?*

I put my phone away without responding as the previews began to play, the girls shoveled handfuls of popcorn into their mouths and slurped loudly from their drinks, already enraptured. I watched their reactions more than I watched the butt-kicking cats on screen. I found myself wishing I could be a

part of these moments all the time.

SLOW MOTION

Talia and I could see the curtains parting in the windows of the house as she parked in the driveway. I'm not sure who was more excited to see us, the boys or the dads.

The boys threw themselves out of the door and barreled towards the car as Talia helped Trinity unbuckle. Sasha managed on her own, and quickly petted the boys on their heads in turn after she'd gotten out of the car. Two of the three boys had chocolate smeared over their mouths.

Ron stepped quickly down to Talia, that current of worry never dimmed as he took her in. The kids, complaining about the cold, quickly disappeared back into the house, Evan monitoring everyone to make sure they got in safely from the porch. Ezra looked down the road, apparently Harmony and Deborah were not back from their holiday shopping yet, before turning back inside.

As Ron fussed over Talia and helped her into the house, Ary appeared on the porch, completely decked out in his winter gear. I looked at him questioningly as he bid everyone a quick goodbye. Evan was the last one in the house, giving us a nod before departing.

"Am I disbanded from the house?" I asked as Ary approached.

His lips twitched and he shook his head. "If you're up for it, since today hasn't exactly been about your list, I thought I'd take you out for a new Christmas experience."

I bit my lip, and looked down at the pavement. "Ary, I'm sorry about last weekend—"

"If you don't want to go, you can tell me."

"No! I do! That's what I'm trying to say. I..." I knew what the words might cost, but I forced myself to look back up into his face. "I hate that I missed the Christmas displays with your family last weekend."

He waited, sensing I wasn't finished.

"I was being stupid. And I'm sorry. I want...every experience you're willing to offer me, Ary."

Both Ary and I glanced up as we heard a whistling rip through the air. Talia had wandered onto the porch, a hand pressed to her belly. She was out of her coat, and looked as if she'd just stepped out to bid a quick goodbye to the two of us.

"I'd be taking her to a hotel and not a Christmas lightshow," Talia called, a shit-eating grin on her face.

"We're going to a Christmas lightshow?" I asked Ary.

Ary turned his face skyward. "Thanks for that, Talia."

"Oops." Talia shrugged, not looking sorry at all. "My bad. Spencer, today was a treat. You're on niece-aunt movie duty going forward."

"It was so much fun." I tilted my head, feeling such a fondness for Talia. For all of them.

Talia wiggled her fingers in farewell, opening the door back up and retreating inside.

I wasn't able to keep the excitement off my face as I turned back to Ary. "Where is this Christmas lightshow?"

Ary's mouth quirked up, and he simply nodded towards his SUV. I squealed and raced around to the passenger door. He beat me to it, and opened it up so I could climb inside.

There was a long line of cars waiting to get in to the racecar stadium—the Christmas lightshow constructed inside the speedway. I'd never been to anything like it before, and I was bouncing in the passenger seat as Ary eased us forward. I took in all of the advertisements, lights projecting on the signs in an otherwise dark area. Ary pulled his phone out of his pocket as he rolled down his window and proffered up a pre-purchased ticket when we reached a booth. Once his phone was scanned, we continued winding along the pavement, the stadium looming up in front of us like a large, gray giant.

"What is that for?" I asked, pointing to a sign with two different radio stations listed.

"The lightshow is programmed to music. But there's also a Christmas movie playing. You have to decide what you want to listen to as we drive."

"Wait. Are you trying to knock Christmas music off the list?" I asked skeptically.

Ary shook his head. "Tonight is about having a good time. Let's not worry about the list."

Appreciation flooded through me. But also hesitation. Was he trying to

prolong this by easing off the bet for the evening? I had been cruel the former weekend, avoiding a non-bet related outing. Tonight, I had reset those boundaries. But that didn't guarantee which way this could potentially progress this evening. I tried not to think about it. I needed to just let the evening unwind however it wished, I would follow whatever Christmas magic tugged on my heart, and not second-guess a moment of it.

I looked to Ary, hoping his face would bring some clarity to my muddled thoughts.

"Let's start off with the music," he said easily. "After the lightshow, we can always park and watch the movie. There's also a little village halfway through the lightshow."

"A village?"

"They constructed a little village within the show. There are booths with treats and things you can buy."

"Ary, I'm so sad for you."

"Why?"

"Because this is going to be such an incredible experience that will knock absolutely nothing off my list."

He pressed his lips together in a way that said he wasn't in the least bit sorry. "This was my backup in case I was behind on any of the items," he said absently, braking as a car in front of him slowed down. We were about to enter the stadium.

"This was a backup?" I teased.

He nodded, his focus on easing the SUV into the speedway. "Just in case."

My heart leapt as I considered this thoughtful man. Geez, how had no one swept him up before now? How was this gorgeous, kind, sexy mortal not already married with a brood of beautiful children?

Ary cleared his throat, aware of my intense staring. He nodded forward, and I turned my attention back to the stadium.

We passed through the entrance, and immediately became entranced by the hundreds of displays—different scenes outlined by Christmas lights. Ary turned up the radio, queueing up the accompanying music. The bulbs throbbed and pulsed along with the beats and melodies. We passed a snowman on a sled, bounding down a hill. It flashed with cyans, whites, and yellows, a carrot nose evident on his face with a few blinking bits of orange. There was a Santa and Mrs. Claus laid out on a beach, complete with ocean waves vibing in the background.

I was awestruck by these pictures that moved and thrived based on very precise placements of lights. There were holiday scenes and characters lining the entire track, and dispersed throughout the center of it. Each separate display had a little sign at the bottom attributing whatever company had sponsored it. It was seriously impressive the way all of the lights came together to make up big, flashing sequences relative to all things Christmas.

Cars slowly rolled around the track, their headlights cut off, observing the displays. Children undid their seatbelts and pressed their noses to the windows. Adults pointed to various displays they especially liked. On one side of the speedway, a huge jumbotron displayed a Christmas movie. I scanned the arena, and spotted a parking deck that was in perfect view of the screen. Several lines of cars were parked, watching the movie contentedly. I couldn't gather much about the movie, since Ary had chosen the music route to begin with. I could only make guesses based off the animated scenes. There were kids in pajamas, a train, and very fancy-looking hot chocolate service. I cocked an eyebrow as I observed a conductor character who for some reason looked a lot like Tom Hanks.

After we had been cruising around for twenty minutes, we passed by a lit-up display of Rudolph failing to take off in flight, a fork in the road appearing ahead of it. Ary nodded to it.

"You up for a pitstop at the village?"

"Yes!" I shouted, already unbuckling my seatbelt.

Ary veered right, and was directed through a crowded makeshift parking lot by people wearing neon vests. Attendants directed him to a spot that had just been cleared near the front. I didn't wait for Ary to open my door; I was way too excited by the trucks and stalls I could make out through the entrance ahead. I could see warm light trickling through the opening. The entire village was incased in white canvas, shielding its lights from the show, that way it wouldn't distract from the displays. Ary closed the passenger door for me, a playful expression on his face as he caught up to me.

I was ready to head in, glimpsing a peek of a carousel through the break in the canvas. I probably hadn't ridden a carousel since I was a kid. I tried to picture Ary astride some white beast with blue hair and rubies tapered along its bridle. The image made me smile.

"Spencer," Ary said firmly. He stopped my progression forward, spinning me around to zip up my jacket. I had been so eager about the little village that I hadn't bothered to make sure my winter gear was assembled properly. But,

ever since I'd known him, Ary had made sure I was appropriately bundled from the cold.

"Ary!" I said, trying to turn from him to see what else I could spot through the entrance. "I think they have hot chocolate!" Ary snorted, thoroughly entertained by my enthusiasm as he double-checked my mittened hands.

As we passed through the entrance, it was natural to pull his hand into mine. The enchantment of the lightshow, the charm of the little village—the magic of it all was made complete by having him close. He followed my lead as I raced forward.

There were several tables and chairs assembled in the center of the village, where people were stopping to enjoy their purchased food and beverages. The jumbotron movie was visible, and sleepy children with cones of melting ice cream stared at it slack-jawed. Space heaters created a perimeter around the table section of the village. Even with that, accompanied by subtle heat given off by generators at the food trucks, it still wasn't quite enough to combat the chill of the evening. My nose went pink pretty quickly, the breaths puffed between Ary and me clouding the air between us as we observed all of the different stands.

There was a fresh caramel-coated popcorn booth, a stand with hot apple cider, an ice cream truck, and a home-spun cotton candy table. There was one food truck in particular that proclaimed to have the best hot chocolate in the world, indicating they used some sort of double chocolate formula. I didn't even have to point it out to Ary. He kept his gloved hand clasped around my mittened one, and navigated us to the truck. When we got to the cashier, he held up two fingers, and pointed to the hot chocolate sign.

After Ary paid for the drinks, we moved back into the crowd to await our order. I took in the strung lights that blinked along the top of the canvased little village. There was a tented market, where different goods were being auctioned or sold. I caught sight of hand-made quilts and vintage boxes of toys. A man poised as Santa was positioned in a huge black sleigh, and children were lined up to get their picture taken with him.

There were multiple photo ops positioned under the tent. Two teenaged girls were taking up their whole time in the village at one of the stations, utilizing prop glasses and tiaras as they took way too many photos for their supposed influencer social media accounts.

We finally got our drinks, and when Ary handed me the cup, my hands instantly thawed under the heat of it. My mittens retained the warmth, giving

me a new elation as I continued to glance around. I squealed and started tugging Ary over to a video capture station.

Families or couples got up on a little rounded pedestal. There was a video camera attached to a pulley system on the platform. The individuals that were poised up on top of it were given some instructions, and then the camera fully circled them in three seconds flat. Up on a monitor, we saw that three second recording was then transformed into slow motion video. The camera started center, and then did a full rotation clockwise around the couple, the camera revolving around the base of the circular pedestal. It ended center once more.

When it was our turn, Ary stepped up on the platform first, and then reached to help me up. He kept an arm around me, to help balance me next to him and keep us centered. The attendant was shouting something to us in regards to the camera, but my ears were buzzing with the closeness of Ary. I got a whiff of his evergreen cologne, which I hadn't been able to detect lately because of the lack of physical closeness this past week.

One of Ary's hands was occupied with his hot chocolate, but the other arm wound around me tightly, angling me towards him. With my unoccupied arm, I braced my hand against the center of his back. Ary's hot chocolate was clutched in his left hand, nestled close to his chest. With the drink in my right hand, I mimicked his pose, bringing both of the hot chocolates to the center of the frame.

Somewhere in the distance, I heard the attendant give the go for the camera to circle us. There was not a single thought in my head other than Ary. His arm around me, his face bent towards mine, the scent of evergreen lingering on his burgundy jacket, the dark teal beanie pulled down over his black hair, the sweet hot chocolate scent on his breath.

Ary didn't second-guess the moment between us. As soon as the camera began its quick circle, Ary kissed me. It was a honeyed peck on my lips, a simple kiss, that took perhaps a second of the three second rotation. But it was enough to dazzle me, to steal my breath. I couldn't hold on to the moment tight enough, already feeling the stars and sparks dancing in my vision fading as Ary helped me down from the platform.

Another couple quickly occupied the pedestal, and we were escorted over to a stand, where a code was available to download a free copy of the video that was created. As Ary worked on scanning the code, I glanced back to the small screen displaying the videos captured in real time. Ary and I appeared, the logo of the company sponsoring the videos largely pasted across the

bottom of the final edit. As our clip began playing, I felt my heart falter.

The camera started in front, a view of the two of us as if a picture was being taken. I was grinning up at Ary, my arm tucked around him, his arm pulling me close. I watched as Ary ducked his head down when the camera came around my shoulder, but I didn't miss his eyes closing, his mouth bending down to meet mine.

When the camera was directly behind us, our profiles were clear as the kiss commenced. Our eyes were both closed, the brush of his lips over mine. The camera circled behind Ary, our faces blocked momentarily before coming forward again. I watched our lips unlock, our eyes flutter back open. By the time it had centered again, it was clear the stars and sparkles I had been feeling were very evident for everyone else to see. I was looking at Ary like I was making a wish on a falling star. Like I was captivated by him. And he was looking at me like...

I averted my eyes, glancing to see if Ary had managed to get the video on his phone. But his attention had diverted as well to the video on the screen. As the video looped once more, his eyes intently focused on what had been clearly captured between us in slow motion.

"Got the video?" I asked, my face burning.

Ary blinked, and then nodded as he put his phone back into his pocket. He didn't take my hand this time as we ducked out of the little station, the loop of our kiss no longer playing on the display, but that didn't matter. It was repeating over and over in my head, burning the spellbound kiss into my brain.

IMPROMPTU MEETINGS

“There’s a parking lot up ahead,” Ary said, nodding out the windshield to the rows of cars I’d seen earlier. “Did you want to stop and watch the movie, or are you ready to get to the hotel?”

“Movie,” I said, looking back to the screen on the other side off the stadium. I wasn’t quite ready to let the magic of the evening end just yet.

Ary nodded, and maneuvered off into a different lane again, this time to lead us to the viewing lot. He eased into an empty spot, and I observed the cars around us, couples and families and friends all piled together to watch the movie, or just enjoy one another’s company. As Ary changed the radio station, I dropped my empty hot chocolate cup—which had been the best hot chocolate I had ever tasted—into the cupholder in Ary’s center console.

As the movie’s sound played out of the vehicle’s speakers, slightly out of sync with the scene, I attempted to swallow the lump that was building in my throat. Ary fiddled with his phone for a second, and then mine buzzed. I whipped it out, and found that he’d sent me the slow-motion video. Because I was a glutton for punishment, I played the video.

I watched the camera circle us again, monitoring the first glint of happiness, all the way to the end when I was entirely wonderstruck by him.

“It’s a nice video,” Ary said, nodding to my screen. “You’re absolutely beautiful.”

“You’re—” I tried to find the right words, and failed. My voice quavered. “You look...”

Ary nodded. “Like I’m in love with you,” he said knowingly.

My heart stopped in my chest as I my eyes shot to his. There was no jest in his face, no suggestion that his words had been a joke. He wasn’t smiling, simply asserting the truth into the air between us.

“Like you’re in love with me,” I repeated in a whisper. That was exactly what I had thought when I saw the video—saw the replay of his face—back at the village.

He nodded, confirming it. “Ask me again if I believe in love at first sight.”

All of the breath from my lungs whooshed out of me. I dropped my phone, forgetting to grasp it as my heart started sprinting. The phone bounced to the floorboard loudly. Ary tracked it with his eyes, and that was when I launched myself across the center console, catching Ary by surprise when my lips crashed into his.

I threw every bit of desperation and desire I felt into the kiss. And his lips, in return, were hungry. He wasn't shy about what we were. He was sure of me, in love with me. From the moment he'd laid eyes on me, covered in coffee and glaring at him, he'd known what I would be to him.

His arms came around me, and I felt every bit of assurance from him that I needed, that I wanted.

Him. I wanted him. Everything else would work itself out.

When my lips left his to trail down his neck, he cleared his throat. "Spencer." My name wasn't a throaty breath, but a warning. I bit down gently on what I could get to of his shoulder, my fingers trailing up the zipper of his jacket, trying to find the pull tab in an attempt to get it off of him. "Spencer," he said again, bracing his hands against my arms to dislodge me.

I pulled back, my mouth turned down into a frown. "Ary—" I was about to tell him off. For what, I hadn't exactly worked out yet, but he dipped his head down so that we were eye level.

"I just don't want us to actually get kicked out of a parking lot," he said quietly, one hand coming around to gently trace my bottom lip with his thumb. His eyes flitted between the cars that we were sandwiched between.

I yanked away from him, and then sank back down into the passenger seat, my face burning. I fumbled around for my cell phone, clearing my throat. "I'm ready to go," I announced, grabbing for my seatbelt and clicking it in place.

Ary smiled, reaching for his own belt, but the action was interrupted by his phone going off. The sound confused him, as if he wasn't used to his phone ringing. He pulled it out of his jacket pocket and looked at the screen. He frowned, releasing the seatbelt from his grasp.

"I'll be right back," he said quietly, opening the car door. He stepped out into the cold, leaving the car running as he closed the door behind him. I immediately unclicked my seatbelt, leaned across the seat, and turned down the movie playing through the car speakers in an attempt to catch the low murmur of Ary's voice.

He answered the call, bringing the phone up to his ear. "Helena."

My stomach tightened. Helena! Helena? *Helena*. Why was she calling him on a Saturday night?

Ary's back was to me as he listened to whatever Helena had to say. "I'm not doing that," he said evenly. As a silence ensued, I desperately wished I was able to hear her side of the conversation. I imagined I wasn't going to gauge much from Ary's side.

"I'm not in town," he said as he shifted his weight between his feet, his shoulders tight. At one point, he looked back at me and caught my eye. I continued watching him steadily, not backing down from his stare. "I don't owe you anything," he snapped coldly, turning his back to me once more.

The silence this time was never-ending. Ary listened, and listened some more. I strained my ears for some scrap of conversation on Helena's end, but came up empty. Suddenly, the tightness in Ary's shoulders loosened. Whatever Helena was asking of him, he was going to give in.

"Fine," he muttered. "Temporary, Helena. I want that clear. My involvement in all of this is temporary." He ended the call without issuing a proper goodbye. He jammed his phone in his pocket and climbed back into the vehicle.

"Why is Helena calling you on a Saturday night?" I asked tightly, moving to buckle my seatbelt again.

Ary drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, replaying whatever conversation they had in his head. "I guess she has no one else to call," he said eventually.

"What exactly is temporary?"

Ary looked down, absently buckling himself in. He put the SUV into reverse, and began backing out of the car lot. "She's insisting on an emergency security meeting with me tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning? As in...Sunday morning?"

Ary said nothing, but straightened up the SUV and began working his way into the traffic flowing out of the stadium.

"We're driving back tonight?" I asked incredulously. "Ary. We won't get back until like two in the morning."

"I'm so sorry," he apologized genuinely. "I never would've dragged you to this had I known."

"No, it's not that. I'm glad we came. I just..."

We began circling our way out, driving through the open-aired halls outside of the stadium, usually reserved for people traffic. The magic that had

worked its way into our evening slowly crept its way out.

“What is her deal?” I finally asked, irritated with the silence.

“She just fired the head of security.”

“And she offered it to you?”

“I do not want the job, but no one else is qualified to conduct a safe environment.”

“So, on a random Saturday night, she had the urge to fire her head of security, call you up, pressure you into taking it, and set an emergency meeting with you specifically for the following morning?”

“If I don’t do it, it’ll go to someone who can’t manage it.”

“Who cares? Let her figure it out.”

“I can’t guarantee your safety if I don’t head this up, Spencer.”

“My safety? Are we pretending like this thing between you and Helena is just about my safety?”

Ary’s eyes flashed to mine briefly. We were finally out of the stadium, and working our way onto the highway.

“You don’t talk to anyone,” I pressed. “I can’t recall a time you’ve ever answered a phone call.”

“I can’t recall a time you’ve called me,” he pushed back. There was no suggestion of anger or agitation in his voice, he was simply stating facts. “If you called me, I would answer. Same for my family.”

“And Helena.” I shook my head in disbelief. “I recall times when you haven’t even returned a text message to me.”

Ary snorted with amusement. My eyes widened, unable to believe how unbothered he was by all of this. I turned towards the window, literally shifting my body away from his. I was getting heated. We had experienced this beautiful evening together, he’d basically told me he loved me, and now this? I was being deprived of a hotel room with Ary because of something Helena was insisting on? Was he that oblivious when it came to Helena? Maybe he wasn’t oblivious at all. It was becoming painstakingly more obvious that Helena had some sort of inappropriate infatuation regarding Ary, and maybe he knew it.

“I know I don’t have any right to tell you what to do, I get that. If you want to answer a call from your boss, by all means, do it. But I just really feel like Helena is crossing some boundaries. And I want to see where your head is in regards to all that.”

“Spencer.” I didn’t turn when Ary said my name. He sighed. “Don’t you

see that she is petrified?”

I closed my eyes tightly, making the decision to look at Ary. Which was a mistake. Because his face was all soft and concerned, even with his focus on the highway ahead of us. It instantly put a melt on my freezeout.

“She has isolated herself,” he continued. “She has no family. And I...feel bad for her.”

“You feel sorry for Helena Vonaparte?” I asked suspiciously.

Ary considered his answer carefully for the space of three beats. “I do.”

“It’s not your job to feel sorry for her.” I turned back to the front, watching the lines on the road blur together in one long continuous stream.

“Consider for a second,” Ary continued. “She is at home alone right now. And the only person in the world she could think to call when she got scared was her...security guard.” I chewed over his thought process for a moment, feeling myself deflating. “Helena Vonaparte doesn’t call me to tell me she’s scared, Spencer. She calls me to cuss me out about some security measure or another. She makes up excuses for this or that because she is incapable of admitting she’s scared, that she has no one.”

Helena had no family that I knew of. Her life consisted of running her business, and nothing else. I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard a conversation out of her mouth that dealt with anything other than Timeplace Broadcasting.

“I...guess I get your point,” I said finally, releasing a long breath.

Ary reached over and grasped my hand in his. He squeezed it reassuringly, and didn’t let go the rest of the drive home. Even when I drifted off, my head leaning back against the headrest, his hand remained firmly wrapped around mine.

ANONYMOUS COOKIE PURCHASES

When we arrived back to Philly in the early Sunday morning hours, Ary came around and lifted me out of the SUV to carry me up to my apartment. I was exhausted, my head snapping back now and again as I would drift in and out of sleep. He set me down outside my apartment door, and I swayed back and forth on my feet as he dug through my pockets for my keys. I could hardly keep my eyes open, but whenever I managed to look at him, he was wearing an entertained smile.

“Whatimeizt?” I slurred as he swung open my apartment door.

“Late. Or early, rather.” He lifted me right back up and carried me inside. “Bed or shower?” he whispered in my ear as he softly kicked the door closed behind us.

“Are you offering?” I mumbled, cracking my eyes open slightly to study him. He stopped in the doorway of my bedroom, waiting for me to answer. “I’m too tired to shower myself,” I finally said.

“Bed it is, then.”

I flopped down onto the bed as Ary patiently removed my boots and socks, and then took off my jacket, mittens, scarf, and hat. He removed it all slowly, his actions tender. Once I was freed of the outerwear, I mummified myself in my blankets. Ary placed a kiss to my forehead, and whispered goodnight into my ear. I was asleep before he’d even crossed back out of my bedroom.

Everything from the previous evening came in blurry flashes when I finally woke up at noon Sunday. I rifled through all of it, reaching over to pluck my phone from its charger. Had I plugged it in? No. I definitely hadn’t. There were two texts from Ary, sent about an hour apart from one another.

Ary: Feeling okay? Let me know when you’re awake.

Ary: You can call me when you wake up, if you’d like.

I groaned, turning over into my pillow for a moment.

Me: not rly a call kinda girl TBH. txt is gd

Ary: Relieved to hear from you, in any capacity. I do have bad news, though. I will deliver it however you prefer.

I shot up in bed, my phone clutched in my hands. I dialed his number without thinking, and pressed the phone to my ear, unsteady breaths wheezing out of me.

“Spencer.”

“Ary, what’s wrong?” I managed to spit out.

“Everything’s okay,” he said cautiously, but didn’t immediately continue. The call was a bad idea. I couldn’t handle his pauses over the phone. In person I could gauge his expressions, his reactions. Over text he was a lot clearer in his communication. This was unbearable.

“Ary! What’s the bad news?” I asked impatiently.

I heard something muffled, and realized Ary had laughed.

“You jerk. I’m going to hang up on you.”

“Don’t do that.”

I threw my covers off, anticipation building once again at Ary’s thoughtful pauses. I was about to shriek at him again when he finally spoke over the line.

“I’m not going to be stationed outside of Helena’s door this week.”

I deflated, falling back into my bed. He wasn’t hurt, he was okay. But this...this wasn’t great news either.

“Because you’re head of security?” I guessed.

“...Temporarily.”

I blew out a breath. “I’m not going to see you at all this week.”

A few beats passed. “Still anticipate your morning coffee on your desk. I’ll be sure to find an excuse to see you, Spencer.”

“But it won’t be like normal,” I whined. “Wait. Does that mean someone else will be stationed there?” I groaned; the hand that wasn’t gripping my phone clenched.

“Larson was just hired. He’ll be with you upstairs.”

“Larson...?” I sifted through my memories until one caught. The manager from the store, Ary’s former friend from the military. “You hired him, didn’t you? Are you the one hiring and firing people now?”

I knew he must be in charge of all that now, but Ary didn’t admit to it. “All of this is only temporary,” he reminded me patiently.

I remembered him saying something similar to Helena the previous evening. I was no longer sure if he was referring to the job, or the two of us.

To account for Christmas being over the weekend, our work hours had been adjusted, and we were given Thursday and Friday off the following week, which meant we would only have to work Monday through Wednesday.

On Monday, Larson was standing outside of Helena's door when I stepped off the elevator. He offered me a genuine grin as I glided past him to knock on Helena's door.

"Anniston, how's it going?" He opened up the door for me. Ary must've informed him about the daily ritual. I wondered what else he told Larson about when it came to the office. Or Helena. Or me.

"How are you, Larson?" I asked as I squeezed past him to drop Helena's coffee off. When I traipsed to my desk, I noticed a present from Secret Santa, along with a coffee emitting a lazy circle of steam. I set down the box of chocolate chip cookies for the mystery customer I'd brought by my keyboard. I guessed this was the new expectation for coffee... dropped on my desk before my arrival. I wondered whether my Secret Santa or Ary got here first in the mornings. Before Ary got moved, sometimes a coffee would already be waiting on my desk, if he expected to be caught up somewhere else when I arrived. Most days, he handed me my coffee directly when I got there.

"I know you're missing Villanova," Larson teased when the first light traffic of the morning had dulled.

I smiled good-naturedly at Larson. "Definitely. But you're the next best thing by far. You've been well-informed."

"I can text him to come pick up his cookies if you haven't already." Larson nodded to the pink box.

"Oh," I looked down at the box. "I didn't know for sure he ordered these."

Larson tilted his head. "Villanova didn't order those?"

"I don't know who did, actually." I sank down into my chair. "There wasn't a name on the purchase. Which, Ary did that once. He ordered a gift certificate from my website without specifying his name. I just figured he'd done it again."

Larson's eyebrows dipped, and he pulled out his phone, presumably to text Ary.

More employees came and went, some getting antsy about the upcoming work party in particular. Women wanted to verify the dress code with me, and nervously flashed pictures on their phones of dresses they'd picked out. I gritted my teeth, ultimately wishing I wasn't the official fashion police on

behalf of Helena's ridiculous dress code. When I glanced over to see how Larson was handling all of these women and their style emergencies, he was looking down at his phone, frowning. He had done a pretty decent job at blocking the flirting attempts made by the females, but of course, wasn't quite as skilled compared to Ary's ice outs.

Another employee flitted away, swiping through her photos after I had failed to help her make a decision, and she flashed an impish smile in Larson's direction. Larson wasn't studying her.

"Anniston," he said to get my attention, not realizing I was already looking at him. He glanced up from his phone. "Villanova's on his way up."

"All right." I tried to act nonchalant. I mean, I was used to spending hours upon hours in this office with Ary. Why was I nervous about a visit? I couldn't manage to calm the butterflies swarming my stomach.

"Something's not right," Larson muttered more to himself.

"What do you mean?"

"Villanova didn't order those cookies."

"Oh." I brushed it off. "It was probably Jan, then."

The elevator opened up, and my heart stumbled when Ary stepped off. He was still dressed in his normal work outfit: button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled back, dress slacks, boots, his hair tied back in a low ponytail to keep it out of his face.

Ary swiftly approached my desk, his jaw tight. He attempted to cover up his anxiety by leaning casually against my desk. "Good morning, Spencer." He eyed the box of cookies perched on my desk as my heart jolted.

"Hi, Ary."

"You don't know who ordered these?" he asked quietly, the full intensity of his gaze honing in on me.

I froze, suddenly realizing why he and Larson were acting so cautious. They were worried it was another threat.

"...No?" I finally answered. I touched the box of cookies absently. "I just thought that you or Jan ordered them."

"I checked with Jan. It wasn't her."

"Oh."

"I don't want to tell you how to run your business, Anniston—" Larson interjected.

"I have a feeling you're about to, Larson."

Ary frowned. "We're concerned—"

“Going forward, I will make sure customers have to include their information for purchases, okay? Does that satisfy your caveman brain?”

Ary’s mouth twitched. “No,” he finally answered honestly.

I crossed my arms and tipped back in my chair. Before I could open my mouth to continue the argument, the elevator dinged. And Dean stepped off.

Ary immediately straightened, his eyes flashing with impatience and annoyance. Larson’s mouth turned down into a frown as well, and both men eyed Dean suspiciously. I remembered that Larson didn’t know who Dean was.

Dean sensed the tension as soon as he stepped off the elevator. I could literally see the warning bells going off in his head as he approached my desk. He cleared his throat, nodding to Larson and Ary. Ary refused to budge from his position directly in front of my desk, his legs were leaned against it, his back to me. Blocking me from Dean.

Dean peered around him eventually, coming to the side of my desk when it was clear Ary wasn’t moving. Ary simply adjusted his position to follow Dean when he walked around. Dean’s eyes flitted between all of us before landing on the cookie box on my desk.

“I, um...”

“You ordered the cookies?” I asked flatly.

“You were always a really good baker,” Dean admitted sheepishly.

“How did you get to this floor?” Larson asked from his position by Helena’s door.

Dean couldn’t decide who to look at between Larson and Ary. He swallowed. “I was visiting with Naomi—”

“Naomi who?” Larson asked, unfamiliar with the staff list as yet.

“Blakely,” Dean answered, unsure of himself. “She walked me in, and then —”

“You got on the elevator unaccompanied,” Larson put together. He and Ary exchanged a look. “We’ve got to tighten security around employees and their guests.”

“Whoa, wait.” Dean held up his hands, alarm dancing in his eyes. “I’m not a threat, or anything. I wanted—”

“Your girlfriend got you into the building. And then you decided to play games.” Ary said lowly. He turned to my desk and plucked up the box of chocolate chip cookies. He held them out to Dean. “Go play somewhere else.”

Dean swallowed, looking down to the cookie box, but not moving forward to take them. “I just wanted a chance to talk to Spencer. To explain—”

“Explain what?” Larson asked coolly. “What’s so important that you had to anonymously order a box of cookies for?”

“I was trying to catch her alone!” Dean spluttered, looking to me with wild eyes. “We may not be together, but I still care about you. I tried to text you —”

“I blocked your number,” I interjected coolly.

“Exactly! So, how else was I supposed to warn you that your boyfriend is a little too close to the CEO—”

Ary closed the distance between them in one stride, and forcefully shoved the box of cookies into Dean’s arms. Larson advanced forward as well.

“Then consider her warned. Get out,” Ary growled.

“We’ll make sure to tell your girlfriend that she committed a serious security breach today,” Larson rumbled out as well.

Dean, with the pink box of cookies in his hand, paled. Seeing no other choice, he gave me a wary look before walking towards the elevator. Ary made a move to accompany him, but Larson held up his hands, and followed after Dean himself, leaving Ary and me alone in the office.

Ary let out a long sigh as the elevator doors finally closed. I returned to my leaned-back, crossed-arm position in my chair.

“Satisfied, caveman? You saved me from a rumor-spreading ex-boyfriend encounter.”

“It could have been a lot more serious than that,” Ary argued, still keeping his cool.

“But it wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t,” Ary agreed. His posture loosened up, and he planted his hands on my desk. “Can we go over some of the finer points on your cookie business soon?”

“Only for you, Ary,” I responded dramatically, batting my eyelashes, making my exasperation clear.

My bit worked, and Ary relaxed completely. “I have good news.”

I felt my irritation deflate slightly, a pinprick in my anger balloon, slowly letting that sentiment leak out. “What?”

“Text me whenever Helena lets you go to lunch. I’ll take mine at the same time.”

I lit up like a Christmas tree. “Really?”

He nodded, his half-smile in place.

“I get thirty minutes of uninterrupted Ary time every single day?”

“Until this gig is up,” he reminded me patiently. “As soon as I have a proper replacement, I’ll be right back up here.”

Ary leaned across the desk to kiss me on the cheek, his form of goodbye. And I wanted to believe, truly, that his insistence on being on this floor just had to do with me. With our relationship. I would never give credence to anything Dean had to say. But he wasn’t the only evidence at the present suggesting things were weird with Helena.

That little voice at the back of my head kept pecking at me. Reminding me that being on this floor meant he was back with Helena as well. And while what Dean had begun to suggest was absolutely absurd...it was a reminder that there was something going on between them that I still didn’t have a clear picture of.

CLOTHING

Only working three days the week before Christmas weekend was a relief. Larson was easy company to keep, but I missed Ary fiercely. I coveted our lunch breaks together, the minutes spinning out entirely too quickly.

On Monday, Ary had eyed the crackers and cheese I'd remembered to pack in my haste to get out of the apartment that morning. Starting Tuesday, he not only made sure there was a coffee on my desk, but he also packed a lunch for me. He didn't openly proclaim this, because that wasn't Ary's style. But when I cracked open my lunch bag on Tuesday to take out the granola bars I'd swiped from my desk, he wordlessly passed me a chicken salad sandwich. Before I'd finished eating it, he passed me a bag of kettle cooked chips. I knew what he was doing. His way of taking care of me had always extended way past security measures.

He'd offer me nothing more than a peck on the cheek at the end of the half hour, staying professional. He stayed away during the weeknights, working with Larson on solidifying plans at Timeplace, and attempting to fish for some sort of replacement for the position he was begrudgingly holding down.

I kept insanely busy to fill the void his absence left in the many working hours I put in. Having him out of my sightline did wonders for my productivity, as much as I hated to admit it. When I wasn't silently bemoaning his absence, I was flying through emails and appointment scheduling. The days both crawled and soared by at the same time. I didn't even have time to daydream about the cookies I was going to be baking for the upcoming party. I was going to need all day Thursday to prepare for the party Friday.

When Thursday arrived, after a panicked grocery trip that filled me with a new sense of dread at just how unprepared I was, anxious adrenaline started coursing through me as I trundled my groceries back to my apartment.

Ary was waiting outside the door to my apartment when I arrived, his thermal tote by his feet on the floor. He swiftly yanked the strap up over his shoulder, and then gathered all of the grocery bags from me. As I worked to

open up my door, I had a flashback to Ary unlocking it a few nights ago, bending to pick me up and then carrying me inside my apartment. I was grateful that my cheeks were already flushed from the strain of carrying groceries a few blocks in the cold.

“She asked for a holiday collection, Ary,” I said by way of greeting him. “I haven’t even decided on something solid for a Christmas special! Ten dozen cookies—!”

“Spencer.” Ary’s stern but soft voice brought me back down to earth as he set my grocery bags of cookie-making items down on my kitchen counter. He moved to his cooler tote, stealthily retrieving whatever he’d brought in my fridge without me detecting what he’d snuck in. He then offered a reassuring smile as he joined me in unpacking the grocery bags I’d brought up.

I had asked him to meet me at my apartment at four. Then, when my shopping was getting a little out of hand, I texted him to let him know I’d be late, hoping he hadn’t left his own apartment yet. I was pretty certain that he had already made it to my apartment by the time I texted him, and had probably stood waiting for me an additional half-hour. We would be baking well into the night at this rate.

I tried to keep my head on straight, rifling through the bags he hadn’t unloaded yet. “Let’s brainstorm. What are some Christmas themes that would pair well with cookies?”

Ary’s mouth cocked up.

“If you say peppermint, I’m going to throw something,” I warned.

His eyebrow went up slightly.

“Ugh. Fine. I can do a dark chocolate peppermint cookie. I’ll even name it after you. What else?”

“Name it after me?” he repeated, casually leaning back on my kitchen counter.

He was still dressed up from work. His hair was pulled back, and I had the urge to free it from its low pony. But, if he was helping with the cookie making, the smart thing would be to keep it out of the way. I hastily snatched a hair tie from my dining room table and jerked my own hair up on top of my head.

“What were you thinking? Ary’s Delights?”

“I was thinking more of The Caveman Special,” I managed to retort as I started ripping open cabinet doors, looking for inspiration from the few ingredients I already had on hand. Wisps of my hair were already escaping

my messy bun, fluttering as I whipped back and forth. “Gingerbread cookies. What else?”

“Traditional chocolate chip,” he said measuredly. Like I was a rabid animal in need of immediate sedation.

“And sugar cookie! Yes! And maybe a chess pie inspired cookie?”

“Eggnog.”

“Yes! That’s—” I stopped my craze long enough to give Ary a mean look. “That doesn’t mean it’s off the list.”

Ary didn’t seem the least perplexed. “It will be,” he said without worry.

We were navigating a more romantic Ary-Spencer relationship. We were talking normally, my dialogue making up a solid sixty-five percent of our conversations. He was buying me specialty coffee drinks, bringing me lunch, and just making me feel all melty in general. I should have squashed all of those pesky feelings before my heart got so invested in him. But I knew it was too late now. It didn’t matter how this ended; I was going to be hurt regardless of how much more this relationship grew. The bet was going to end, but I wasn’t clinging to it, I was no longer holding out for some reprieve.

To quiet my rather loud and unconfident thoughts, I loaded up a music app on my phone. I popped one earbud into my ear, selecting the first playlist that came up in an attempt to drown everything out. The cookie bonanza. The Ary feelings. All of it.

“Harmony mentioned your cookies were a hit at the shower last week,” Ary said casually. He had written out some suggested ingredients for the eggnog cookies, and was now jumping in to help with the first batches of dough. We decided to get started on the more traditional cookie batches first, and work our way into the more complicated recipes after.

“Right. She texted me to tell me that. I may have a few cookie orders from her friends pending as we speak, actually.”

Ary nodded, as if he expected nothing less. “Business is picking up, then.”

“It is. It really—” I shot him a look, still keeping a careful handle of the measuring spoon in my hand. “It is.”

Ary smiled to himself, sliding over a pack of flour he’d just opened.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I muttered, pulling the bag closer.

“Do tell,” he purred while moving to open up a bag of chocolate chips. He started measuring out the pieces for me.

“All of this isn’t success,” I said quietly.

Ary abruptly abandoned his chocolate chip task to look at me. “Then what

would you call it?" he asked with surprise and exasperation.

"This has all been you," I pointed out. "The gift certificate, the party... this is all your doing."

Ary stepped back, bumping into the adjoining counter as he did so. He looked back, as if surprised the counter was there. "Spencer."

"It isn't success when you've been the one to twist everyone's arms into ordering cookies."

"I didn't tell Helena to order cookies."

I froze, my gaze snapping to his face. There was a somberness there, and I knew, without a doubt, he was telling the truth.

"Then why would she order cookies from me? It had to be to appease you."

"I wish you weren't so surprised that other people find you competent."

I let out an annoyed laugh and turned back to my own measuring. "Right. A failed business venturer who is barely capable of retrieving a cup of coffee for her boss without messing that up."

A beat after my statement rang shrilly through the air, Ary's hand glided under my chin, and he turned my face to look at him directly.

"Let me clue you in on something. You, with your clever smoky gray eyes and your gorgeous red hair, are not someone to be underestimated. You are capable of laughing along with the crowd, but witty enough to supply jokes of your own. You are creative enough to concoct these amazing cookies, but you're petrified to actually believe in them. And you stubbornly hold onto this ridiculous notion that you're unworthy. You think that you're not worth a successful business, a real relationship. You hide behind lists instead of just being upfront about things that have hurt you in the past."

He leaned his head down, the space between us slowly closing as he continued. "Right here in front of me is a woman that I'm so far gone for. I would build a house made out of cookie dough if it would convince her that what we have is as real as it gets. I'm desperate for you to believe in us, in what we have. But I wish, more than anything, you would start believing in yourself."

I couldn't come up with anything to say in response to that. There were plenty of quiet moments from Ary. But the difference between my quiet and Ary's was that Ary always had something to say, even when he stayed quiet. I could often detect what thoughts were running through his mind in the way he tilted his head, or the flash in his eyes. My quiet was always a result of

him rendering me speechless, every time.

I reached up to lightly run my fingers along his defined cheekbone, taking in the Romanesque nose on his face. He caught my hand in his, and pressed my fingertips to his mouth. "Please don't be scared to open your heart up to me."

I cleared my throat. "Is that the gentleman or the caveman speaking?" I asked, reaching for the earbud I hadn't popped in.

Ary locked his gaze on me, his lips puckered as he tinkered out an answer. "I guess you bring out the best and worst of both." He extended his hand out for the other earbud, and I placed it in his palm. He gave me his half-smile as he curled his fingers around it, and I rolled my eyes, trying to act as if he hadn't just electrified my entire universe.

After the second song had elapsed from my playlist, Ary took over the music. I threatened him to not even think about putting Christmas music on, and he laughed, agreeing with a nod. He was very selective, and clearly clever in his choices.

As I bent to pop in the first batch of chocolate chip cookies into the oven, a seductive song was ringing in my ear. Ary took his opportunity to place his palm, coated with flour, right onto my rearend as I straightened up. He kept his hand in place as he feigned an excuse to help me shut the oven door. The touch left behind a perfect imprint of his hand, all the while some man's voice was crooning pillow talk in my ear. And we lost all semblance of control from there, everything tumbling downhill like a rolling snowball gaining speed.

We prepared more batches of dough as the chocolate chip baked. The oven made the small kitchen space hot. Ary got more daring, splitting my lips with his thumb, and letting me taste the raw cookie dough he'd caked there. As I measured out scoops of cookie dough onto a baking sheet, Ary dusted some sugar across my neck.

"Oh no," he murmured as he stepped right up behind me. "You've got a little something right here."

"Oh, do I?" I was barely able to concentrate on spooning out the remaining dough with this god of a man fully pressing himself against my backside.

Ary steadied himself by putting his hands on my arms, and then leaned in. As I dispatched the last ball of dough onto the sheet with an audible plop, my eyes closed as his tongue met the sensitive flesh at the base of my neck. He licked languidly at the spot of sugar, and continued to lightly graze his teeth

down my neck long after the sugar had been consumed.

When the oven timer started blaring, he placed a soft kiss to the same spot he'd just claimed with his tongue, and a full body shiver ran through me. I'd officially crossed into perdition, because we had way too many batches of cookies to get through, and my concentration was already shot.

Since I was still somewhat dazed from the physical contact, Ary bent to retrieve the finished cookies from the oven. I startled, coming back to reality, and started setting the freshly baked cookies on a rack to cool as Ary pushed in a new sheet to be baked.

"I would reiterate that your cookie business is taking off," Ary murmured, taking up residence against me once more, his hand sliding my shirt down slightly so that he could press his lips to my shoulder.

"Thanks to a certain meddling someone," I added, my eyes squeezed tightly shut as I catalogued every sensation tearing through my body.

"Wasn't that the reason you wanted to hold off on a relationship?" he mused, brushing his nose against the top of my shoulder. His hands slid down under my arms and wrapped around my ribcage. His fingers firmly pressed into the fabric of my shirt.

I was struggling to keep my head on straight. "Ary Villanova," I admonished, attempting to pull his hands off of me. I yanked the earbud out of my ear and slapped it down on the counter in order to gain some of my control back. I turned to face him fully, and was met with his lips crashing into mine greedily. His hands roamed to my lower back, and then they drifted further down to cup my backside in his palms. A vocal plea rang from my throat at the contact.

When he slowly pulled his hands back to my hips, I swear it was the devil dancing in his eyes. "I'm sorry. You were saying?"

"Let's get through the cookie dough," I managed to say through gritted teeth. "And then you have the floor to do whatever you want."

His eyes darkened as he studied my mouth a moment longer than necessary. "This floor specifically?" he inquired with a quiet rasp.

Oh.

As the time for the current batch of cookies in the oven counted down, and all the dough was prepared and refrigerated, awaiting its turn to be baked, we both turned to stare at the timer as it ticked. I glanced up at Ary curiously, wondering if he'd pounce now that we were simply waiting on a timer, and weren't elbow deep in cookie dough. But he shook his head slightly, knowing

exactly where my thoughts had gone. He didn't want a timer on this. He didn't want to be interrupted in the middle of whatever unholy tangle we would find ourselves in by the time this particular batch was done baking.

We tried to go about boxing up the cookies that had already cooled. But I couldn't seem to get my hands to be productive in anything other than touching Ary.

When the timer finally chimed off, I startled, air freezing in my lungs. Ary's arm was wrapped around my waist, his mouth in the middle of brushing lightly against the hollow of my ear. It was Ary who finally moved to take out the cookies, and then neatly set them out to cool. Once he was satisfied, he crossed to my kitchen sink and washed his hands. He turned off the tap and whipped my kitchen towel from the oven handle, drying his hands slowly, meticulously, before tossing the towel back onto the counter and making his way toward me. He prowled forward like some seductive predator that I didn't have a prayer of outrunning.

"You're alright with putting the other batches on hold?" he clarified, his eyes running over me as he paused his advance. I swallowed, and then tried to nod confidently.

He stepped right to me, and I tilted my face back to meet his stare. He eased his face down slowly, not quite kissing me, but close enough for me to feel the soft rush of his breath over my face, close enough that I could smell the sweetness lingering from stolen bites of cookie dough he'd taken.

"I haven't agreed to serious," I said breathlessly, in a last attempt at self-sabotage. The frenzy that had been building between us for a month was finally coming to a head, that snowball gathering speed downhill to a point of no return.

"Honestly, Spencer," he rumbled out, his hand reaching to catch my waist in his firm grasp. "I'm going to take whatever experience you're willing to offer me—without complaint." I didn't miss the twist on the very words I'd just recently spoken to him.

Both of his hands glided downward. He gripped me under my thighs, and then lifted me up, locking his arms underneath my behind to support me. I couldn't help the squeal of surprise and scandalous delight that escaped my lips as I wrapped my legs tightly around his hips. I draped my arms around his shoulders as he made his way to my bedroom. He playfully nipped at me as we crossed the threshold, but all manner of play ceased when he slowly lowered me onto the bed.

There were a few heartbeats where we just stared at each other. We both soaked up the heat—the desire—snapping inside of us like heavy-laden branches in the wintertime. We were an entire forest of frozen trees, awaiting a sudden and satisfying release from the ice frosting our limbs, finally contending with the firm weight that had continuously kept the two of us tightly wound. I'd already been riding high off the few kisses we'd exchanged, the select touches we'd shared. Compared to those moments, this was going to be an obsession I'd never be free of.

He pulled the elastic from my hair first, watching as a curly wave of red fell across my pillows. He brushed the stray curls away from my face timidly, before tentatively leaning down and meeting my lips with his. He was keeping a leash on his eagerness, keeping the kiss sweet and light, as if he was hesitant to push too far too fast.

But even the cautious kisses he brushed against my lips were tantalizingly addictive. As the kisses grew more breathy, more insistent, it became clear that we wouldn't be able to derail from how fast we were proceeding. Ary realized it, too. I saw it in his face the second his fingertips skimmed the bare skin under my shirt. We were both losing control, unable to pump the brakes on this. My skin was getting hotter as his hands skated over me, exploring me before he'd even removed a scrap of clothing. When he brushed over the waistband of my pants, I bit his lower lip in a silent command to keep going.

Ary released a breath, and then reached down to free the button of my jeans. He took his time with the zipper, pulling it down in a teasingly slow progression. He looked between our bodies and tracked the movement as the pull slid down, his breathing already turning ragged as he caught sight of the silky red panty line poking out from beneath the denim.

"I should've worn the black ones," I whispered. I watched as he slowly removed my jeans. His eyes drank in the red silk, my bare legs.

He finally registered the joke, and skimmed his hands up my shins. "I think red just became my new favorite color." He ducked down to plant kisses along the trail his hands had just made. Then he brushed his lips along the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. I stifled my gasps, ashamed at how quickly I was coming undone.

Ary paused. He eased forward, and helped me lift up so that he could remove my shirt. He slowly tugged it off, his fingers finding their way back to my skin before the fabric hit the floor. He traced the bare curve of my shoulder, the swell of my breast spilling out of the cup of my black bra.

Ary shook his head, as if trying to clear his thoughts. "I'm not going to be able to take this as slow as I want," he ground out, his fingers delicately sliding up the strap of the bra.

I reached for the button of his pants, pulling at the fabric with my fingers. "Then I guess we'll just have to take it slow the second time."

His eyes flared, and my subtle taunt was the release he needed; some tether finally severed on his composure. I hadn't even managed to undo the button of his pants before he pulled free of my grasp, and dipped his head down to my stomach. I reached down, desperation sending my hands threading through his hair, my fingers pulling the silky black locks as his lips grazed my skin. His tongue blazed a trail down the center of my stomach, stopping just before the line of red silk. When his fingers pulled at the fabric, my body tensed, a harsh breath escaping my lungs.

His fingers stilled briefly, as if he was gauging my reaction.

"Don't stop," I panted, pressing my thighs together in an attempt to calm the electricity that was bolting in the area between them.

Ary tracked the movement, sensing the need that was urgently intensifying. He left the lingerie on, and rose to smash his lips against mine. We both nipped at one another, and Ary's fingers moved again, working themselves downward. He slipped his fingers inside the red silk, and eased them down until he found the throbbing place between my thighs. I gasped, breaking the kiss between us, and his mouth roamed to find the sensitive spot below my ear. As his fingers moved, he teased my earlobe with his teeth, and would whisper stunning, electrifying things. He listened to my breaths, my moans, and then worked his fingers into a slow, steady rhythm to accommodate that need.

When my back began arching, release eminent, his fingers let up. I moaned my displeasure, sitting up to beg for the climax he was robbing me of. He smiled faintly, and shook his head. His hands slid around me to find the clasp of my bra. Impatient with his progress, I broke from him long enough to fling the stupid thing off, before returning to his lips like the addict I was becoming, desperately chasing the high he was creating. His hands moved to cup my breasts, offering a firm squeeze as his tongue skated over my top lip. His thumbs swept over my nipples, already stiff with anticipation.

He broke the kiss to gaze down at me, his molten eyes dancing, his pupils dilated. He wet his lips, and then leaned down over my breasts. Ary gave a slow and steady kiss to the hard peaks, and my body bucked in response to

the touch. My fingers dug into the backs of his shoulders as he lightly grazed his teeth over a pebbled point. His tongue flicked over one nipple, and his fingers worked the other in a tantalizing circular motion, sending my senses into a frenzy. He switched sides, continuing to tease and taunt, tongue and fingertip.

His tongue drifted center to my breastbone, and he kissed down my sternum, all the way to my belly button. He dipped his tongue into it, as if anxious to taste every part of me. When his attention returned to the underwear he'd not yet removed, he dipped his fingers under the waistband and slid them off of me in one smooth stroke. I was completely naked, and under normal circumstances, would have felt entirely exposed. But Ary didn't make me feel exposed. There was a big difference between feeling exposed and feeling seen.

Ary made me feel wanted. Desired.

I pulled myself up, realizing he was still fully clothed. I went to right that incredible wrong, but Ary put a gentle hand to my shoulder, and guided me back down onto the bed. His eyes held mine feverishly as he lowered himself between my legs. Not even my wildest fantasies had painted this moment in enough color. His dark eyes fixed on me, his silky hair loose—brushing over the bare skin of my thighs as his mouth moved to find me.

Ary began by trailing his tongue down my bikini line, his fingers gently sliding up and down my opening, feeling me, assessing my reactions to even the slightest touches from him. Then, his hands wrapped around the backs of my thighs, gently parting me for him. He pressed his mouth to my most sensitive flesh—cautiously, sensually.

He felt my thighs tremble with the need of release, his tongue sliding and flicking, tasting the slickness he had created. He was learning me, listening to my moans, noting my sudden arches. And once he found a rhythm with his tongue against that bundle of nerves, I moaned his name, forgetting my attempt to try and contain the level of passion I was feeling. When I was closing in on that high, he slid two fingers inside of me, and pumped in steady rhythm as his lips and tongue continued to suck and tease.

I fractured, crying out as my body broke into a thousand little pieces for him. He eased his movements as I came back down to earth, his tongue slowing, his fingers easing their momentum.

As I was trying to catch my breath, I realized that he still had every single piece of his clothing still on. Ary seemed to realize it in the same moment.

Before I could open my mouth to protest, he pulled back, finally pulling his sweater over his head. It was the first time I'd seen the broad plains of his chest, the hard lines of his stomach. I'd only felt them in the heated touches we'd exchanged, seeing them was a whole different beast.

This golden god of a man smelled like evergreen, with a slight saltiness detectable from his sweat, and an underlying sweet smell of cookie dough. Even after climaxing for him, I was still acutely aware of how much I wanted to kiss his body, lick every inch of his bronzed flesh. I wanted to scrape my teeth down his chest and sink my nails into his back.

Ary slid his belt off in one smooth motion, unbuttoning his pants as his eyes still roamed my body hungrily.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his voice rough.

I nodded. Somewhere in the distant part of my brain, I knew it was my turn to repay the favor he'd just wrecked my body with.

His jeans and underwear fell to a pile on the floor, which he stepped out of, and I was unable to look away from the sizable erection that had just been freed. He reached down and removed something from a pocket in his pants, and then climbed back up onto the bed. The mattress shifted as he maneuvered over me, his dark eyes cracking with amber-streaked magma as he claimed me in another kiss. He paused, looking down between us, and a crinkling rip sounded. I tracked the sound in time to find him sliding a condom onto his considerable length.

My fingers trailed down from his shoulders to his chest, testing the firm flesh of his pecs. My hands ventured farther down, but before I could grasp him, Ary emitted a groan, and shifted.

"Later," he said gruffly.

"It's your turn—"

"No one is keeping score, Spencer."

I temporarily froze at the casualness of his comment as his teeth found purchase on my earlobe again. With every sexual encounter I had experienced in the past, the guy I was with had expected to be pleased. Often times, they felt entitled to my hand or my mouth after ringing the simplest of sensations out of me. Sometimes, it was still the expectation, even if I hadn't been attended to at all.

Ary paused. He sensed it, the moment I started getting too wrapped up inside my own head. He put a hand to the bed to lift himself over me, needing to read my expression. "We can stop," he suggested evenly.

I shook my head, tightening my hold on him. I relaxed underneath him, any weight of expectation from this dissipating. It was just me and him. There was no need for calculation or planning, it was just satiating the need between us in whatever way felt the most natural in the moment.

He shifted my thighs apart, positioning himself over me, and then hesitated.

“Is this okay?” he asked hoarsely, unsteady breath eking out of him. “I need to hear that you want this.”

“I want you,” I answered.

I closed my eyes as I felt the press of him against my entrance. We both let out a moan at the first contact. I wrapped my legs tighter around his hips, pulling him in closer as he eased in. I wriggled beneath him, impatient for more—for all of him.

His first few strokes were tentative as he tested my limits, experimenting with his length before he was comfortable enough to sheath himself entirely inside me. We found a rhythm together, increasing our paces, or slowing them down in response to the pleasure wreaking havoc over our bodies. The momentum built, and I was closing in on another release. Ary felt it too, his lips finding mine in the dark, his body coaxing mine to find itself again. My fingers absently clutched the sheets, a sorry attempt at keeping me grounded.

In the times I’d fantasized about him, I wondered just how quiet he would be in the bedroom, theorizing that he was probably shy, wanting to control any wild noise that might escape his lips. But Ary wasn’t quiet. He abandoned any attempt to rein in his noises, and I responded to every low and guttural sound that emitted from his throat. He said my name. Breathed it like he was worshipping me. And as I approached the second climax, he leaned down to murmur in my ear. Begging me to release for him. Describing what it felt like being inside of me.

I broke first, my soul seeming to suspend over my body as the intensity wrecked me. Ary, feeling my release, increased his rhythm for a few seconds before finding his own.

We lay against one another, his form partially collapsed over top of me, his sweaty forehead pressed to mine for several seconds. He took in a sharp, relieved breath when we finally both found our way back down. When his eyes met mine, a contented, lazy half-smile tugged his mouth upward.

“You are so beautiful.”

“I know why you’re not into casual,” I breathed out, my own smile finding

its way onto my face. He arched an eyebrow in question. “Because no woman could experience that with you and be okay with something as flippant as *casual*.”

Ary let out a low chuckle and eased out of me. He padded naked to the bathroom, and I listened to the sound of water running. My eyes began drifting shut, my grasp on the bedsheets I’d been strangling finally loosening. When the bed shifted again, Ary left lazy kisses across my shoulder, my collarbone.

“We have cookies to finish baking,” he reminded me gently.

“No,” I grumbled, wanting nothing more than to just fall asleep with my head on his hot chest, allow some time for our flesh to cool down.

“Spencer,” he whispered against my throat. Even after what we’d just done, my body still responded to him instinctively. “Let’s order some food, get these cookies finished up, and then you can rest.”

I let out a loud and long groan, but let him pull me up. He dragged his sweater over my head, and I disappeared briefly to the bathroom while he pulled his pants on. I slipped a new pair of underwear on, forgoing pants entirely. We padded back into the kitchen—him shirtless, me in his sweater.

EGGNOG

Ary ordered a pizza, and we devoured it before moving on to finish up the cookie tasks. All of the urgency that had been pressing against us during the initial cookie baking had dissolved into a contented pace as Ary and I began methodically baking and boxing up the remaining cookies. We would kiss and talk when we ran out of tasks to do, whenever we were simply waiting for cookies to cool off or finish baking. Any time he was within reach, his hands found me. A brush against my side, a trailed fingertip over my stomach.

When he reached over to help set out the last batch of cookies to cool, his hands went around my waist and he lifted me up onto the kitchen counter. He slid between my legs, hoisting them over his hips as he pressed against me. I tightened my legs around his waist and reached forward to run my hand through his dark hair. How long had I dreamed about those black locks? He closed his eyes at the contact, leaning in to my touch.

“I love it when your hair is down.”

“I don’t wear it down often.”

“I noticed.” I tugged gently at one of the silky strands. “It’s always up at work.”

I was beginning to think he was warming up for another round, his body had been tightening up. And I thought I detected him hardening beneath me. But then he pulled back from me, and turned to rummage through the refrigerator in search of whatever he had brought with him.

“What’re you doing?” I whined, feeling his physical absence against my skin like a sudden winter blizzard.

“Trying not to get distracted.” He closed the door, a chilled container of a creamy liquid in his hands. “And remembering what’s important here.”

Ary dug through my cabinets and retrieved the Moscow mule mugs his dad had made. He retrieved some spice bottle from his tote, setting it down on the counter next to the mugs. Each cup got filled with the creamy beverage, and a thick texture poured to the rim. Using the spice jar he’d retrieved, Ary dusted

what looked like cinnamon across the surface of the drinks.

Sidling back over to me, he slid between my legs once more and handed me one of the mugs. He clinked his cup against mine before taking a tentative sip of whatever concoction the drink contained. He nodded, satisfied, and looked at me expectantly.

“The most important thing about the relationship is the bet,” I jested, staring at the mug he had deposited in my hand. “So, you’ve either given me the world’s first liquified cup of Christmas music, or this is eggnog.”

He hummed with anticipation, tipping his mug back again to drink more of the infernal beverage. “Can you tell me why it’s on your list?” he asked, putting his mug down on the counter so that he could touch the sides of my thighs with both of his hands.

I stared at him. “It’s disgusting.”

“You don’t put something on your list just because it’s disgusting.” He waited, rubbing his palms up and down my thighs absently. I think he sensed this entire time that I hadn’t always been exactly forthcoming when it came to my general hatred for the items on my list. And maybe it was because of what we’d just done, but I felt some vulnerability ready to ooze out of me.

“When I was six, my parents made up their own batch of kid-friendly eggnog. I was excited, because I figured Santa got tired of all the milk he drank. I left some out for him that year instead of milk.” I blew out a wary breath. “That same night my parents had an argument, went to their separate rooms, assumed the other was handling Christmas, and no one ended up putting toys out.”

Ary froze. I looked down at the mug in my hand to avoid his stare. “I raced down to the living room Christmas morning—I was always the first one up on Christmas, my parents typically slept in. But there wasn’t anything there when I got to the tree. The eggnog wasn’t touched. The cookies hadn’t been nibbled. And there were no toys. Not a single one. I saw my stocking, and thought that surely he’d at least left something in there.”

Ary sucked in a breath. “It was empty,” he guessed quietly. I nodded.

“So, my six-year-old brain decided that Santa hated eggnog. Because me, the kid who left Santa eggnog on Christmas Eve, received nada on Christmas morning. I obsessed over it for an entire hour before my parents came down, realized what had happened, and informed me they were just lousy parents.”

“And so, a hatred for both eggnog and stockings was born,” Ary surmised, leaning back from me slightly to fully study my face.

I swallowed the lump that was forming in my throat and dropped my gaze to the floor. What a stupid thing, to be tearing up about a Christmas morning that happened nearly two decades ago. One of Ary's hands left my thigh, and he tipped my chin up so that I could meet his stare. He didn't look like he felt sorry for me as he met my glassy eyes, unshed tears threatening to spill over. He didn't appear uneasy or uninterested. He was the picture of reassurance, an unspoken promise to be harmless.

Ary was capable of calming the most tumultuous feelings in me without ever speaking. I wasn't sure how one mastered that type of ability, but it felt good to be vulnerable with him. The comfort of his presence, of his silence, wrapped around me like a warm blanket.

"Anyway," I said, trying to dispel the awkwardness I'd brought on. "Thus begins my long and complicated history with the holiday season. Don't even get me started on my true hatred behind Santa Claus."

"If I ever meet the fat guy in person, I'll make sure to give him a piece of my mind," he promised, his eyes unwavering.

I sputtered, a laugh ringing from me. The jolt caused tears to spill from my eyes. Ary automatically brushed them away with his thumb, and the sob I'd been holding onto quietly broke from me. I put my head to his shoulder, my body hiccupping as I tried to regain as much poise as I could muster. His arms firmly wrapped around me, comforting me. After a few minutes passed, I pulled back, hastily swiping at my eyes.

"Anyway," I drawled out.

He cleared his throat, and as a way to move past the Christmas memories that haunted me, he gestured to the mug still gripped in my hands.

"I don't know if this eggnog will convince St. Nick to leave us tons of presents, but it's a start."

I pursed my lips, trying to make my wobbly smile more self-assured. I studied the frothy, creamy liquid for a heartbeat, the dusting of cinnamon over the top, before slowly bringing the mug up to my lips. I was terrified that this would be the item I couldn't in good conscious tick off. And I knew damn well I'd be willing to lie at this point, because I didn't want to win the bet. I didn't want Ary to be anything less than what he was right now. I was more than willing to put my pride on the line at this point, to admit that I'd been wrong about the two of us. Ary wasn't going to prohibit my dreams, his love would never stifle me. If anything, everything we were, and could be, would bring me closer to my dreams taking off. The little success I had

garnered was because of his presence in my life.

The froth tickled my lips before making its way down my throat, a new milky sweetness I'd never tasted before coating my tongue.

"This isn't regular eggnog," I said, hastily depositing the mug on the counter.

There was a crease of worry that furrowed his brow as Ary tracked my abrupt release of the drink.

"It isn't," he confirmed cautiously. "It's horchata eggnog." His fingers returned to my thighs, and he rubbed them up and down restlessly, awaiting a verdict.

I nodded, acting indifferent. I leaned over to the cooling eggnog cookies that were laid out and plucked one up. I took a bite and shrugged.

"I don't see why you went to all that trouble. I would've knocked it off the list with just the cookie alone."

When my gaze returned to his, I grinned and begrudgingly traced a checkmark through the air.

Ary released a relieved laugh, and promptly lifted me up off the counter. As he carried me away from the kitchen and slung me over his shoulder, I squeaked and tried to pull from his grasp, unable to contain my bewildered giggles.

"My eggnog!" I squealed, cookie still in hand, as he strode with confidence back to the bedroom. When he laid me back down on the bed, he leaned forward and chomped his own bite out of the cookie in my hand. I threw my head back against the bed and laughed again, but that laugh quickly lost momentum when Ary lifted his sweater over my head.

His lips brushed against my cheek. "I will make you all the eggnog you can drink," he promised, his mouth turning to fixate on my collarbone between words. "But first, I think I owe you a slow second time."

I knew better than to argue.

~~SECRET SANTA~~
~~CHRISTMAS MUSIC~~
MISTLETOE
HOLIDAY PARTIES

As we approached the office building Friday evening, Ary's hand in mine, I was in a bit of shock that I wasn't dreading this staff party. Perhaps it was because of Ary's presence beside me, or the fact that I had ceased to care about anyone other than the two of us. I was in a good place. I still hated my job, and had business ventures to work on, but those things weren't suddenly the focal points of my entire existence. It was something to work toward, with someone I really loved cheering me on every step of the way.

Maybe cheer wasn't the right word. Mentally applauding? Outwardly broody? Yeah, that was more on point.

Ary sensed my confidence as we approached our workplace. He didn't pause to ask if I was okay, or if I was ready. He knew I was. Instead, he squeezed my hand in his, and then held up two fingers with his unoccupied hand. "Two left," he murmured playfully as the doors swung open for us.

In actuality, Ary only had one item left to conquer on my list, but I hadn't officially told him that Secret Santa had been scratched off. Whoever my gift-giver was had been exceedingly generous, and finding enough gratitude to thank that person was the only thing I found myself anxious about relative to this party.

There were lower-level employees being paid to help with the festivities, including taking our coats when we entered. Ary begrudgingly let go of my hand so that our coats could be removed. Just as soon as he was free of his jacket, he had his hand wrapped around mine again.

"Don't be so cocky. This could add holiday parties back to my list, depending on how this shakes out."

"Doubtful."

“How can you be so sure?”

He smiled. And it wasn't a half-smile. Both corners of his lips tipped up in a grin.

I completed my obligations to Helena by checking in with all of the different sectors I needed to, verifying the catering, the band, and all of the other little intricacies that kept a party going. After everything was accounted for, I let out a deep breath, the feel of Ary's hand incredibly comforting.

I patted my purse, which I had kept on me because it contained Ary's last Secret Santa gift. Per my rules—or suggestion, I guess—I'd be 'revealing' myself at this party. And presumably whoever my Secret Santa was would also be revealing his or herself as well.

I waved to Cindy, who was already performing up on a makeshift platform stage that Helena had a crew temporarily construct in the expansive lobby. Cindy offered a quick wave back, impressively never breaking stride in her guitar strumming. There were clusters of employees and their families or friends stationed sporadically around the lobby. Some had plastic drinking cups in hand, laughing uproariously about some work venture gone wrong. There were also smaller pockets of people who didn't seem so enthused by the proceedings of the party. They had their arms crossed, heads slumped, annoyed expressions hardly masked on their faces.

I almost didn't spot Dean and Naomi, who were slinked in chairs pulled up to a round table. They were trying really hard to appear as if they were not arguing.

“Do you feel relaxed knowing holiday parties are off my list?” I asked Ary.

“As far as I'm concerned, it will be an ongoing battle,” Ary mused. “I will try to make every party fun for you. Not because of the bet, but because it's what you deserve. You deserve for your boyfriend to make things easy for you. To make the continual effort.”

Boyfriend. Continual effort.

Labels. Seriousness. But I didn't correct him, because putting a label on the two of us didn't frighten me anymore. He would never stop trying for me. He'd never stop chasing away the shadows that lingered from my past experiences. How would he broach my hatred for elevators, or my disdain for cheesecake? I didn't care, really. Just the prospect of this...this willingness on his part to make me happy in every way possible was almost too much happiness to contain.

“Let’s guess the conversations,” Ary said quietly, pulling me out of my lovestruck stupor.

“Meaning?”

He took a quick survey of the room, before nodding towards Jan. “She is talking about her ten grandchildren.”

“She only has five grandkids,” I giggled. But observing Jan, I knew Ary was right. She was gesturing wildly, her eyes wide and expressive. “Jan must be protected at all costs.”

“Agreed.” Ary’s attention shifted, now nodding subtly to Naomi and Dean. “They’re arguing about you.”

I followed his gaze and saw that Naomi was glaring at me. Dean was taking quick glances at the two of us, while trying to sputter something out to Naomi. “Maybe. Or, hear me out, they may be arguing about you. I’d keep clear of any mistletoe.”

Ary shook his head with an eyeroll, and then linked his arm through mine so that we could meander around. We walked slowly, leaning together conspiratorially, our theories growing wilder the longer we played the game.

I caught sight of Helena. “Helena is...” I was planning on making up something extravagant in relation to some sort of castle and treasure trove she was meant to be breathing fire around, but I trailed off. Because her eyes were firmly planted on Ary. She was staring at him...intently.

Ary cleared his throat. “Helena is unimportant,” he said, shifting to block her from my view. There was a flicker of discomfort—subtle, but perceptible—in his quick attempt to divert my attention. But I went along with it when he pointed to Clayton, theorizing that he was meeting his ogre mistress in a broom closet in five minutes. I scandalously upped the ante by predicting his wife would join to spectate the disgrace as it unfolded.

Raised voices drew our attention to a horde of people gathered around the long line of snack tables. There appeared to be an argument waging between several people, all clustered around one focal point.

Ary slipped into security mode, and he moved his hand to my lower back as we weaved our way over. There were other security personnel responsible for keeping the party contained that were staggered about, but I guessed that Ary would never be fully satisfied until he could check things out firsthand. I stole glimpses of different food items as we walked along the tables: sloshing meatballs, crusty pigs-in-a-blanket, crumbling cheese squares. When we drew close enough to hear the argument taking place, my jaw dropped.

“There aren’t any more of the chocolate chip, those were gone within two minutes!”

“Then I very well deserve a peppermint cookie, at the very least. You’ve had three!”

“I have not—”

“He ate five—”

“I haven’t even had one—”

They were arguing over my cookies. The cookies had dwindled down quickly, and my coworkers were battling over who was entitled to the final few. The huge order that Helena had placed had been depleted within the first twenty minutes of the party.

My business cards were neatly tucked beside the empty pink boxes, and people were swiping them off the table greedily. I hadn’t even thought to snatch up a stack of them from my kitchen cabinets. Ary’s expression told me that he was the one that had had enough forethought to set the cards out.

“You do have a limit on how many cookie orders you can receive at one time on your website, right?” Ary asked with a tease, pouring each of us a cup of punch. I gulped, and then whipped my phone out to launch my business site app. A few swipes later, and I had a cap in place for how many unfulfilled orders I could receive at once. Not that I would need it, but just in case.

Once the cookies were depleted, and people were settling into their different levels of comfort—sitting at tables, leaning against walls, making their marks on the dance floor—Cindy leaned into the microphone.

“It’s an honor for the Fourth Floor to be performing tonight for Timeplace Broadcasting. And a big thank you to Ms. Vonaparte for her willingness to create a commercial slot to promote our band this New Year’s!”

There was polite applause as the drummer, Fitz, banged some rhythm out on the symbol in excitement.

“I had someone make a special request this evening,” Cindy continued. There was a mischievousness in her eyes. The audience quieted slowly, and their attention returned to her. “I don’t normally do collab work on the lyrics I write. Lyrics can get pretty personal. But when I pitched the idea of wanting to write an original Christmas song to a friend, he had a few ideas already up his sleeve for the lyrics. So, I caved to his persistence, and I’m glad I did, because it’s the best Christmas song I could have ever written. It’s called: Forever Under Mistletoe.”

I attempted to hide my snort, my general hatred for Christmas music blossoming in my chest. Ary raised an eyebrow at my response, but remained silent. Some of the band members stepped back, and it was just Cindy taking the stage with her guitar. One other band member gently swayed some silver balls to accompany her.

As the melody caught, Cindy closed her eyes and took in a deep breath.

*“She hates peppermint,
And Christmas parties.
Feigns her confidence,
She’s tenderhearted.”*

Wait.

My eyes snapped to Ary. He took a casual sip of his drink.

*“She’s got me taste testing her
Gingerbread expresso.
I want to spend forever,
Catching her under mistletoe.”*

The music changed a tad as Cindy reached the chorus.

*“Forever under mistletoe.
There’s no one else I’ll ever want to kiss,
The taste of cookie dough.”*

My ears were buzzing, and I was hardly registering the words as they floated out across the audience. “Ary,” I breathed.

*“Forever under mistletoe.
I’ll give my heart to her for Christmas,
Tied up in a bow.”*

“I don’t sing,” he said with a shrug. “It probably would’ve been more impactful coming from me, but...this was the best I could do, given the circumstances.”

“You had Cindy sing a song about me?”

“A Christmas song,” he corrected simply.

“You wrote a—”

“I did not write it. I asked a friend for a favor. I told her the things I love about you. About us. And she worked her lyrical magic.”

And just like that, he’d wiped every single item off my Christmas list in the space of a month. I had known pretty early on that he’d win this thing. And I would lose more than just a cookie recipe if I didn’t swallow my pride and make sure things were solidified between us. I still hadn’t exactly committed to him with words, but my heart had made that leap long ago.

When the song came to a tender end, I barely heard the ending lyrics. It felt like I was underwater as my colleagues and their families burst into applause, a few whistles emitting in response to the new song. Cindy offered a dazzling smile and waved, and then sent a conspiratorial wink in Ary’s direction. Ary dipped his head into a nod before turning to catch my gaze, the question clearly written in his eyes: *Is Christmas music off your list?*

I was trying to hold back the emotion that was threatening to overtake my composure. A ghost of a nod was finally managed on my part, and an unsteady smile of reassurance. Ary didn’t gloat. Didn’t crack a smile. He simply stepped forward, one arm wrapping around my body to steady me, understanding that I was about to break under the sheer beauty of the gift he’d given me. As he searched my eyes, there was a relief that cracked within me. I could breathe freely. It didn’t matter about the bet. Ary was going to be mine whether or not he won, he wasn’t going to bend or break at whatever I had to throw at him.

Ary seemed to clock all of that emotion as it rippled through me. With one hand, he reached up and traced a checkmark under my left collarbone. Above my heart.

I was ready to tell him in that moment. I wanted to let him know that he’d won. And not just the bet. My heart. My soul. He’d won the right to win over any listed enemies I laid claim to.

As I took in a breath to say exactly that, Ary’s eyes slid to something on my right. He blinked, immediately looking annoyed at whatever he saw. I took a quick survey of the room but couldn’t pinpoint what had soured his mood.

He leaned forward, his hand moving to my shoulder. “I’ll be right back. Grab another drink, if you want. Or a seat. I’ll find you.” He pulled back, offering a tight smile, before striding purposefully away. Maybe it was a security issue he wanted to check in with. Or, he might have been ready to

reveal himself to Naomi as her Secret Sidekick without making me feel uncomfortable.

In a daze, I walked over to the snack table, working hard to not look for him in the lobby. I stared blankly at the empty cookie boxes that had been left behind. Every one of the business cards was gone, and I wondered just how many cards Ary had swiped from my apartment. I would need to revamp my site a little bit if people were actually interested in placing cookie orders on a regular basis. Did I need to print more business cards? Crap. I needed to order more pink boxes as well.

As I started scheming about potential cookie plans, my head pounding with new dreams, another Christmas song echoing in the space, someone came to stand beside me. Relieved, I looked up, expecting to find Ary. My stomach curdled violently when Dean leaned over and plucked a cube of cheese from a platter and popped it into his mouth. It would make sense for him to come find me if Ary had found Naomi.

Dean had a drink in hand, his face thoughtful as he chewed, watching something across the room. I could no longer help my curiosity, and I tracked his stare, following it across the party-goers, expecting to find Naomi and Ary. The latter part was accurate, it was easy enough for me to spot Ary. But it wasn't Naomi at his side. Helena was standing with him, and they were deep in conversation. I had never actually seen them talk in public; their conversations had always taken place behind Helena's closed office doors.

They're close. She is way too close to him.

Dean shook his head sadly as he turned his attention to me, and took a sip of his drink.

"What?" I snapped.

"I, personally, would be more cautious about openly lusting after the guy your boss is sleeping with."

My blood seemed to freeze in my veins for a millisecond, my flight instinct flaring brightly. When I was able to kick that impulse to the curb and catch hold of my composure, I scoffed. "Wow. I don't think anything more embarrassing has ever come out of your mouth. And I would know."

Dean popped another piece of cheese into his mouth, speaking around the morsel. "I mean, if your goal is trying to get Helena to hate you, you're doing a fantastic job."

"Find something else to mope about."

"I've been trying to warn you this whole time. You haven't wondered

about them?”

“He isn’t—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Clayton, with a cup clutched tightly in his hand, his other arm wrapped loosely around a secretary from the thirty-first floor, pointed with drunken poise to a bundle of mistletoe hanging right above Ary and Helena.

Time seemed to slow down as I had a flash of déjà vu: Naomi already standing under a few sprigs, shifting anxiously in her high heels, grinning like an idiot when Dean just happened to sidestep into her path. There were no blushes, no flustering apologies or anxious looks my way. They simply leaned in and kissed, like they’d done it a thousand times. Neither one of them had even looked up to verify the mistletoe was there, never fumbled or questioned anything. It had been a ploy.

In real time, Ary took a firm step back, putting his hands up. Helena advanced forward, putting a hand up to Ary’s face before planting a quick peck on his cheek. Dragon lady. The woman who couldn’t speak without spitting had kissed Ary.

The very carefully closed Ary-Helena compartment inside of me snapped open. I had flashes of all of their interactions I’d been privy to over the course of the month: hushed conversations behind closed doors, Ary closed up in her office during lunch, the phone call Saturday night, the meetup Sunday, Helena’s willingness to accommodate his insubordination and requests. And those were all things that I was already aware of. What else had been going on that I wasn’t even aware of? And Ary’s dad...the one piece of conversation he felt necessary to communicate to me...

Ary stiffened at Helena’s touch, but allowed the brief contact. There was a...lingering familiarity between them. Not like what I’d seen with Naomi and Dean by a long shot. I could see that. But I could also sense that I wasn’t entirely clued in to whatever was going on between them, either. Helena Vonaparte was not someone who showed affection in any sense of the word. She was not someone who was familiar with any definition of kindness. So... what was this? Helena would never, ever do something like this with any regular employee. She could hardly stand staring at people for longer than a handful of seconds.

I don’t like the relationship they’ve built, Evan’s voice rang out in my mind.

Dean, doing an awful job at hiding a triumphant smirk, moved to comfort

me. I was shellshocked, but had sense enough to sidestep him.

“Stop, Dean,” I said too quietly, my breath not quite returned from my reeling thoughts. My hand moved automatically to halt the unwanted contact. He was moving in again, cooing some reassurance I couldn’t hear, but I wasn’t even looking at him. I was still staring unseeingly at the man moments ago I’d internally bled my heart out for.

“Ary.” Cindy’s sharp voice cut through the music, interrupting whatever song they had been singing. I dazedly caught Cindy’s eyes dancing with fear as she looked at Dean, then to me. Ary’s eyes suddenly locked with mine, and he read in my face every emotion I was feeling: shock, confusion, anger, hurt. He pulled back from Helena as his glare found Dean. A cutting look across the room was enough for Dean, who immediately stepped back, making excuses as he hightailed it back to Naomi. Ary was shaking his head as he said something to Helena, his full attention turning to me as I began backpedaling.

Cindy’s music picked up its normal pace, but catching Ary’s attention had brought the two of us front and center to the party-goers.

“Spencer,” Ary said firmly from across the room, trying to pin me in place as he began elbowing his way through the crowd.

There had been something in their body language, something I should’ve seen before. I mean...he wasn’t attracted to her, right? But...there was something...

“Spencer,” he said again. It wasn’t loud, but there was a desperation behind it. My name uttered from his mouth used to be my favorite sound in the world. But now, that deep, gorgeous voice of his was searing me on the inside. It was reburning a hot brand on my soul, healed flesh was chafing back open.

Right when I was ready to love him, to open my heart to him, to make him a permanent part of my dreams...it all had to come crashing down. With Dean—of all people—there to deliver the final blow. This, whatever this was, was not good.

I pushed my way through the crowd of people around me, but Ary was hot on my heels. I tried to break through the mass, but unsuccessfully made it to the alcove by the closest hallway exit before his hand was on my elbow. I tried to shed his grip, but he held on.

We pushed through the doors together, the two of us spilling into the empty hallway. My high-heeled boots clicked loudly on the glazed white

floors, which had specks and swirls of black running through them. The thrum of Christmas music was still pulsing from behind the closed door, the hallway only lit by a few sporadic lights that some custodian had remembered to turn on. The aroma of appetizers and vanilla did not follow us out into the hallway, instead, it smelled a lot like an over-perfumed cleaner someone had drowned the hallway in to mask whatever normal smell lingered in its corners.

“Spencer.” Forever persevering. Ary was so patient, and that’s what I felt in his tone this time when he said my name. My name was coated with a longing to understand my current torrent of emotion. But I was past rational behavior.

“Tell me I was seeing things!” I yelled, whirling on him. I couldn’t contain my hurt, couldn’t keep the accusation from my voice, couldn’t bend the words into something articulate. “Tell me you’re not screwing our boss.”

Ary, to his credit, appeared absolutely disgusted by my comment. He took a step back as if I had slapped him, his lip curled back with revulsion. And that made me feel a little better.

But seconds ticked by, and he didn’t deny it. Was he only disgusted because he’d been found out?

“Are you sleeping with her?” I demanded.

“Spencer.”

“Stop saying my name and answer the damn question, Ary!”

Ary literally bent over, his hands on his knees, his head down. “I might throw up.” He took a few beats to compose himself, eventually straightening back up.

We had a silent stare off, where I waged an internal argument about whether or not I should trust what was going on. While he was offended, he still hadn’t denied it outright. I tried to read his quiet, tried to get a handle on what he was saying without words. When I couldn’t decipher any of it, I turned away from him.

“I’m going home. Don’t follow me,” I finally yelled, done playing silent games.

I pushed on the emergency exit door, attempting to stalk away in the high-heeled boots. I turned back to glare at him. “And you know what? You can add holiday parties and mistletoe right back on the list.” The door swung shut, and I turned my back on it. I hadn’t even remembered that my coat was still somewhere in the lobby. The only thing I had was the purse still slung

over my shoulder, holding Ary Villanova's stupid Secret Santa gift.

I made it a block before my teeth started chattering. I may freeze to death, but I was determined to turn into an icicle before I went back to that party. I refused to give him another silent inch, refused to march back there and swipe my coat up and have to face an entire group of my coworkers who would all be whispering about what was going on between us.

I didn't hear him approach, but I did feel the sudden press of material to my bare shoulders. I glanced to my right to see my coat sliding over my shoulders. The material of it was warm, as if he'd kept it pressed against him so that it would retain its warmth from the building.

Ary tucked my coat around me. He pulled my hat down over my head, and I continued to stamp away from him, slipping my arms more comfortably into my sleeves but not zipping it up. The snow was falling hard around us, not simply a gentle fall of fluff, but a heavy blanket of white. Neither of us spoke, and Ary continued to walk beside me towards my apartment, resisting the urge to stop me and zip up my jacket.

I didn't argue when he followed me up the stairs of the apartment building. But I did try to slip in to my apartment in order to slam the door in his face. He easily caught it, and kept the door from closing. He didn't step inside, and his eyes were both cautious and curious as he studied me, his foot wedged between the door and the frame.

"I said not to follow me," I snapped.

"You did. I should have let you keep your pride so that you could freeze to death a block from your apartment."

I groaned in annoyance and gave up my hold on the door. He opened it fully, but didn't proceed forward. He was waiting for me to invite him in. I wouldn't give him the verbal go-ahead, but flung my arm out in annoyance, permitting him entrance.

He stepped inside, closing the door behind him, his attention on me the entire time. My phone started going off, and I released my death glare on Ary long enough to dig around in my purse for it. I stared at the screen, literally growling when Helena's name buzzed adamantly at the top.

"Don't worry about her," he said.

"Oh, I hadn't planned on it," I said icily before tossing my phone onto my couch. "Or maybe it was just that I was trying not to." I pulled off my jacket and roughly tossed it to the floor.

Ary ripped the dark teal beanie from his head, snaking a hand through his

hair, his fingers pulling at the silky locks in frustration. “Let us, for the sake of argument, entertain the idea that Helena and I slept together. Fine. I have been exclusive to you since I’ve known you, even when we had nothing between us but a bet. That would mean that any extent of a relationship would’ve happened before us. True?”

I considered before nodding curtly.

“If this were the case, it would be a past relationship. Would you hold something in my past against me?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ve never held your relationship with Dean against you.”

I looked disbelievingly at him. “What the hell does Dean have to do with this?”

“There is a man you used to care for, slept with, who is in and out of the building we work at on a regular basis. Sneaking ways to see you. Bringing you leftovers. Ordering cookies from you. Trying to put his lips and his hands —”

“I would never entertain that kind of—”

“I know you wouldn’t. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that he still thinks you belong to him.”

“Is that a fact, caveman? And what about your behavior in regards to any man who so much as looks in my direction?” I spat, crossing my arms over my chest.

Ary froze, finally releasing his hold on his hair as he turned over my questions in his head. He sighed with resignation, and reached forward and pulled my hat off my head. Some of my hair tried to follow the pull of it, frizzing up on top of my head. My arms dropped, and I clenched my fists at my sides, refusing to smooth it back. Ary, tracking my tension, pressed his lips tightly together, and then smoothed the hair away from my face.

My gaze shifted to the ground before snapping back up to Ary. “Dean is in no way the same thing as Helena. He doesn’t work with us. He’s not our *boss*. I can’t handle the fact that you’ve done things to her that you’ve done to me. That you’ve put your mouth—”

“If you think I’ve put my mouth on any other woman in the same way I’ve put my mouth on you, you’re sorely mistaken.”

My cheeks heated, but I held his gaze. Held it. Held it. Refusing to be shamed or embarrassed.

He was the one to break first, letting out a long breath. “I hope you can

give me a break on the party for two reasons.”

“I’m sorry, are you talking about the freaking *bet* right now?”

“My family’s party went splendidly. It was unfortunate happenstance that Helena wanted to speak with me tonight, under mistletoe no less.” He paused to shake his head, as if he couldn’t possibly believe the bad luck. “And I’m supposed to knock Secret Santa off your list tonight to win the bet, not add things back on.”

“Secret Santa!” I slapped a palm to my forehead. “I forgot about the reveal.”

“Don’t worry about that. But just keep in mind the reveal was supposed to happen at the party. So, I should get credit towards the party for that.”

I stalked to the couch and grabbed my purse. I unzipped it, and plunged my hand inside, pulling a tiny box from its depths. I wrinkled my nose as I shoved the package towards him. “I’m you’re Secret Santa. Surprise, surprise. Here’s your stupid present.”

Ary’s mouth quirked up slightly, in a subtle version of his half smile. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

He removed the top from the small box, and his forehead wrinkled as he shifted some crinkling green paper, and studied the contents. His brow cleared when he realized what it was. He pulled out the tiny ornament that had been delicately packed inside. The decoration was a ceramic scroll rolled out into a list. The recipe for the pecan pie cookies was elegantly typed out on it. Tiny, but legible.

“You won,” I muttered. “I loved all of it. Every single thing. I had a great Secret Santa this year. And I’m shafting whoever it is by not being there tonight for the reveal. I didn’t do nearly as much for you as my Secret Santa did for me.”

Ary shrugged out of his burgundy jacket, and then retrieved an envelope from a pocket in it before discarding it to the floor. He held up the envelope so that I could see it. The paper was heavy, and stenciled in gold, with my name elegantly scrawled along the face of it. On the back, there was a red wax seal that had been stamped over the closure. The seal had impressed the shape of a Christmas bow. I frowned, the lyrics from Cindy’s Christmas song floating through my brain.

*I’ll give my heart to her for Christmas,
Tied up in a bow.*

“What...?”

“I would’ve revealed at the party if I’d had the chance.”

“You!” My mouth dropped open. “But I gave you Naomi! There’s no way you had my name.”

“Jan secretly played, even though she told you she wasn’t.”

“You sneaky son of a—”

“I slipped her name into the pile when I was cutting up paper.”

“That doesn’t explain how you got my name!”

“I kept our names out of the drawing. When I traded you my name, I gave Naomi’s name to Jan. Jan was more than happy to play along once I’d explained what I was doing. That left your name, which I kept for myself.”

“That’s why you disappeared right after we started the game. You went to ask Jan to help you out with your little scheme.” I let out a snort tinged with amusement and disbelief. “You cheated.”

“I played to win.”

“All of those gifts...” I reflected back on all of the tidy giftbags left at my desk every single day. Ary hadn’t always been at his post when I arrived, sometimes he even brought in a coffee with him as he entered the office. I never would’ve dreamed it was him all along. He’d played it so well.

He pressed the envelope into my palm, his eyes sparkling with delight. I undid the seal slowly, and peeled out a Hanukah card. There was a single stick of gum taped to the outside of it. It took me a second to register the joke, but when it occurred to me that Ary had gifted what I had literally complained to him about when we first talked about Secret Santa, I immediately reached out and slapped him on the arm.

“Keep going,” he said with a knowing glance.

I rolled my eyes, but opened the Hanukah card up. Tucked inside was a plane ticket printout. A round trip to Michigan. The flight was at the ass crack of dawn Christmas Eve, with a return date New Year’s Eve.

“A week with your parents,” he said lowly. “Not the week you wanted, but a week, nonetheless.”

I took in a sharp breath. “New Years was your deadline. You didn’t know you’d win the bet, and you still bought the ticket? If you hadn’t won, you would’ve lost an entire week towards the bet.”

“I was pretty certain I’d won.”

“I have news for you. Helena—”

“That’s what I was able to convince her to do. I didn’t ask her to order

cookies from you. I asked her for this.”

A sudden pulse of jealousy claimed me again. Because why—*why*—would Helena agree to this for Ary? Surely it was because she had feelings for him in some capacity. Perhaps she was still hoping to win him over by placating all of his requests. Jesus, how old was she anyway? Surely a decade or two older than us. Forty-five? Fifty? I involuntarily shivered and stopped trying to calculate the potential age gap.

“Helena did this,” I clarified lowly.

There was a quick flash of annoyance on Ary’s face.

“I can’t accept it,” I said stiffly. I stuffed the ticket back inside the card, and then thrust it, along with the envelope, at Ary.

“I bought them for you.” Ary grabbed it absently, the mess of papers gathered against his chest in disarray. “Your parents are expecting you. I thought about going with—”

“No. Get a refund for the ticket. I’ll call my parents and straighten things out. Again. You shouldn’t have meddled in this in the first place.”

Ary’s jaw tightened. “Spencer.”

“No,” I said, dismissing the conversation with a wave of my hand. “I appreciate the ticket, Ary. I do. But the bet’s over.” I stared at the ornament, still perched in his hand. “You have your recipe. It’s time to honor that and move on.”

“Is this about Helena? Spencer, Helena is—”

“I don’t care who or what she is to you. Got it? I don’t care. The bet is over. Please leave.”

Ary’s silence wasn’t filled with unspoken words. It wasn’t tense, or uncomfortable. This was the first Ary silence that was sad. This was the first time he was quiet because he literally couldn’t think of what to say.

So, he said nothing. He slowly tucked the card back into the envelope, and then picked up his jacket off the ground. His tongue absently pressed the inside of his cheek as he scrambled for something to say. Stalling for more time. Searching for me to break, to say I hadn’t meant it.

But maybe I had.

PARENTAL CONTROL

Making yet another phone call to my parents that evening was absolutely nauseating. I was in a funk starting from the moment Ary left the apartment. I was still clinging to the memory of Ary meeting my eyes one last time before nodding in defeat, taking his silent leave. I didn't need a verbal goodbye from Ary. I never had. But this goodbye from Ary had been different, the air choked with disappointment and finality as he shut my door softly behind him.

I had become familiar with unnatural silences, and I was in one currently, quiet extending over the line after I'd greeted my parents.

I mustered up my best fake enthusiasm when they picked up.

"Hello?" Mom answered.

"Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!"

My parents were doing their best to act as if they weren't ready to murder one another whenever I made time to call them. I could picture them bent over the cell phone intently, standing a few feet apart as they listened to the call on speakerphone. My father would have one hand shoved deep in his pocket, trying to conceal a scowl. My mother would have the phone propped in her hand, and she would be frowning miserably.

I pictured the house they were living in, the house I grew up in for the most part. I pictured little child Spencer who lingered in the hallway leading from the living room to my childhood bedroom. I hadn't known it then, but I was quite accustomed to the silences that persisted in that house as well. The quiet after a fight. The quiet leading in to a fight. The quiet when separate doors were closed. The quiet when days had passed with no amicable resolution to be had.

The line crackled with some unspoken tension, and I couldn't determine whether it was some fight they were having that excluded me, or something that my call had kindled that they were trying to tamp down the blaze on for my sake. It wasn't the stillness on the phone that plagued me, though. It was the new stillness in my apartment that left me feeling empty. There wasn't an

unspoken word or feeling hanging on, waiting for me to decipher. It wasn't comfortable or warm. It was a silence filled with Ary's absence.

We never had Christmas traditions in our household. There were attempts every few years to bring in something new, like leaving carrots for reindeer one year, and the holiday-shattering eggnog another. But they were picked up and then quickly forgotten about. There was no magic that clung to any one tradition that was haphazardly thrown together for me at the last moment.

I pictured myself stepping into the house, surrounded by walls and halls and neutral-colored everything, a single white plastic tree set on the dining room table, placed there like an afterthought. Any Christmas merriment in that house was done with me in mind, but after that Santa-less Christmas, they'd stopped trying to make anything magical.

I tried to picture my kids running through those hallways of my childhood, just like I'd imagined when I had been at Ary's parents' house in Pittsburgh. I had daydreamed about our kids joining the fray there, tearing up the stairs after their cousins. But in my parents' house, the house from my childhood? I couldn't conjure the image. Not that I should be thinking about any such thing anymore.

"I'm really sorry, guys. There was a miscommunication about me taking time off. I'm not going to make it home this time around. Helena mentioned something about January, though."

"But we thought you were—"

"It was a misunderstanding," I quickly interrupted my dad.

"A misunderstanding with Arty?" Dad pressed.

"Your boyfriend, I gather," Mom put in.

"It's Ary. And no, he's not my boyfriend."

"He seems nice."

Diving right in, then. "Ary is not my boyfriend," I repeated.

"Just a fling, then," Mom clarified.

"Fling's don't arrange expensive transport on Christmas Eve," Dad answered unhelpfully.

"Well, they might if they want to get rid of the fling for the holidays. So they can focus on their real relationships without worrying about having to placate somebody."

"Mom. Ary is not a fling. He is a...good friend," I tried not to choke on the words.

"A male friend," Dad chimed in again.

Mom snorted. “Who apparently spoke to your boss on your behalf. And bought you a plane ticket. And contacted your parents to coordinate the surprise.”

“I don’t have any friends that are that...nice,” Dad said.

I repressed the sigh that was building.

“Sad that it took a friend to make you see that a visit to your parents was long overdue.”

“I am going to come. My boss—”

“Had no trouble telling your friend that you could go home. You just couldn’t be bothered to take off, I’m sure.” She kept emphasizing the word ‘friend.’

“She had no problem assuaging him because he is her fling,” I spat.

There was a pregnant pause. I pictured Dad’s eyes going wide, and Mom covering her mouth with a hand.

“Happy now? Maybe if she wanted to screw me instead of him, I could’ve made it back for Thanksgiving.”

“Spencer Eloise Anniston,” my mother admonished, pulling out the full name.

I just laughed in disbelief, deciding that I shouldn’t take the bait any more. They could just roast me endlessly. It wouldn’t matter what I said in way of defense, I was a disappointment to them. It would never matter how big of a disappointment they were to me.

“Why is it so difficult to get time off from a job where you’re someone’s lackey.” Dad took a step closer to the phone. “That fancy degree you have, and you’re fetching coffee for some big shot.”

“How’s the business going?” Mom interrupted. “Or have you given up on that entirely?”

“You know what.” I took in a deep breath to try and calm my nerves. “I think this would go a lot better if I asked how things have been going with you guys.”

Mom and Dad stopped talking, they took turns clearing their throats and shuffling around, as if searching for some answer.

“Are you ever going to agree to a divorce?” I pried.

“NO!” They said in unison.

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Mom repeated. “Are you serious? We have been together for thirty-seven years—”

“Thirty-seven miserable years,” I amended.

“We are not throwing away our entire lives—”

“Your entire miserable lives,” I amended again. “You know, you both could find some happiness. Sixty is the new forty. Maybe spend some time getting acquainted with not hating each other while you’ve still got the chance.”

“Spencer. Drop this. Your father and I were simply in the midst of discussing whether or not to move.”

“Move?” I asked, my brows furrowing. “Where on earth would you move?”

“To Philly, of course,” Dad answered. “To be closer to you.”

Oh no. *Oh nooooooooo.*

“Well,” I squeaked, brushing at my pants in order to give myself something to do. “That’s a thought.”

“You don’t want us to come.” I could hear the accusation in Mom’s tone. “See, I told you. She doesn’t want us near her.”

“She hasn’t said that.” There was some clinking, and I imagined Dad taking a sip from a glass containing some alcoholic beverage.

“I am sure you have the best of intentions,” I tried to diffuse the situation. “But I don’t see why you have to uproot your lives in order to be closer to me. We could start slow. Like, with a visit.”

“You aren’t exactly visiting us at home regularly, Spencer. If this job is what you’re focusing on, if you want to stay there—”

“But that’s the thing, I don’t know for certain if I’m staying here.”

“It would seem as if you are. You’ve got the boyfriend fling thing going on. You are constantly putting us off, always too busy to even pick up the phone. If we lived closer—”

“Because I’m tired of playing referee to your endless arguments! Nothing would change!” I spluttered. They both paused in surprise. “I will still be busy. I will still not pick up the phone. The only difference is that you will be in the same city but still faced with the same problem.” I leaned in closer to the phone. “I am not the glue in your marriage. Moving across the country to be closer to me will not fix things for you.”

There were several beats where I just listened to my own breathing. When it was clear they weren’t going to comment, I sighed, deflated.

“Look, being together for as long as you guys have is amazing. But what’s the point if you’re both miserable? Either...figure things out, dig deep or

whatever, or come up with a plan on how to move forward. Okay? When I figure out a firm vacation date with my boss, I'll give you a ring."

I ended the call, unable to understand how two people could just simply stay together because that's what society deemed acceptable. Was there ever any love between my parents? I imagined that there had to have been at some point, even if their marriage now was nothing short of keeping things comfortable for the sake of it. They were living in the same house, in separate rooms, parading around in lives that never overlapped.

Their relationship was the textbook definition of what I didn't want for myself. If I was ever serious about someone, I wanted it to outlast any newfound flutters. And I certainly didn't want to tie any children to a relationship in hopes of preserving it. It was up to the parents to find their own contentedness; it should never be a child's responsibility to keep parents together in a marriage.

I had to get through the weekend—the first Christmas I would actually be spending by myself. A month ago, I may have been excited by the idea, if I could've properly shed my parents' disappointment. But now...I lived in a world that had been painted more vividly by a man I was in love with. Facing a Christmas by myself suddenly didn't feel like a win. It felt depressing, lonely. When you're starved of Christmas magic and love and a sense of family almost your entire life, and then you're given an overdose of everything over the course of a few weeks, it isn't exactly easy to go back to starving.

And then there was Monday. Oh...Monday was going to be the worst day yet.

WINNING BETS

I was tempted to not even get out of bed Christmas Eve. I couldn't remember a time that a Christmas Eve had fallen on a Saturday, and it felt like that sort of alignment should have been fantastic. But it wasn't.

I checked my phone, finding an obscure text from my mom explaining that whenever my next vacation was, they would be happy to have me down, reinforcing several times that the date didn't matter. I had several notifications from my business site, and found that there were quite a few panicked messages asking if they could place last minute orders for cookies. They needed them tonight...for various gatherings and parties. I replied to every one of them, assuring that I could have deliveries put together for this evening. It wasn't like I was going to be doing anything else anyway. The orders felt like a godsend, a way to keep my mind occupied for the otherwise empty day ahead.

I dragged myself to the grocery store, only to remember that it was Christmas Eve as I pulled into the empty parking lot. My head thumped down onto the steering wheel in dismay, and I gritted my teeth as I wheeled back out onto the highway, planning on checking the smaller establishments around town, hoping one of them would be open.

By the time I had gathered up ingredients, made it back to my apartment, baked through all of the emergency orders, and then successfully delivered them, my Christmas Eve was almost at an end. With some extra spending money in my pocket, I decided to splurge, and found that my favorite coffee place down the block from my apartment was open. It looked like that would be the biggest stint of Christmas magic I would receive going forward. The gift cards Ary had left me for Secret Santa had been spent the same days they had been gifted. Maybe it was time to admit I had some sort of caffeine-coffee-addiction-problem...thing.

I smiled sadly at the workers behind the counter, mentally promising to double my normal tip since they had to work these hours. When I apologized to the cashier about her having to work on Christmas Eve, she waved it off,

explaining she was agnostic. I just nodded, and ordered a brown sugar shaken espresso. I stuffed some money in their tip jar a little overzealously, and the barista gave me a funny look before moving to the next customer.

As I turned to wait next to a table, I realized the face in line behind me was familiar.

“Spencer!” Cindy squealed.

“Hey!” I said, a little too eagerly. Because, oh crap, she was catching me alone at a coffee shop on Christmas Eve. How pathetic was that?

But wait. She was also at a coffee shop alone on Christmas Eve.

“Hold on,” she said with a smile, turning to give her order to the barista. A quick scan of the coffee shop had me deflating a bit. Turns out, Cindy wasn’t alone on Christmas Eve after all. Her band was all poised together at a corner table. The majority already had coffee cups in their hand, except for Fitz, who had a hot chai tea.

A barista called out my order, and I thanked him profusely, wondering if I should try to sneak out before Cindy’s order was up to avoid any awkwardness. But then Cindy’s name was called, and she flitted right up next to me, smiling brightly as she grabbed her cup.

“Thank you so much for all your info and connections and stuff with the performance at Timeplace. You were awesome.”

“Of course,” I said, waving it off. “Literally just doing my job.”

“Oh, please. You were such a dream to work with. Coordinators and PAs can be a literal nightmare to work with sometimes.”

“It’s no biggie.” I offered a tight smile.

Cindy scanned the shop, and I knew she was looking for Ary. When she determined he was not there, she turned her attention back to me. “Well, hey, you’re welcome to join us,” she said with a flick of her blonde hair back to the corner. Fitz was jumping up on a low table, chugging his tea to the chants of his bandmates.

“Uh...”

Cindy’s nose wrinkled as she considered her bandmates. “Actually, let’s grab a table over there.” She pointed out a different side table, removed from the band happenings.

“Oh, come on, Cin!” One of the bandmates yelled after her. Cindy paid them no mind, flipping them off as we turned our backs on them.

“I don’t want to take you away from your friends.” I sat at the table Cindy had indicated, unsure whether or not to shed my coat.

Cindy had already taken hers off, and was draping it over the back of her chair. She relaxed back into her seat, and sipped on her strawberry drink. "I've had nothing but communication with them for, like, ever. I think I'm overdue for a guy-free conversation." She traced the lip of her drink, smiling sympathetically as she looked at me. "Obviously you're feeling the same?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Villanova isn't lingering in any corners glaring at any men who try to speak to you."

I offered a strained laugh, and busied myself with taking a sip of coffee.

"Ah," Cindy murmured. "Trouble in paradise?"

"I'm so, so grateful for the song," I blurted out, setting my cup down a little too vigorously on the table. "The song was amazing. I—"

"Whoa, chill, chill." She offered an understanding smile, depositing her own drink on the table as she held her hands up. "I was happy to do it, Spencer. It turned out to be a great song. My agent says it's going to blow up on local radio, and then who knows?"

"That's great!" I squeaked, suddenly wishing for this conversation to be over. Cindy was sweet, and I really liked her. But the whole Ary debacle was just a touch too uncomfortable to talk about at the present. Especially with someone who had been friends with him for well over a decade.

"So, why isn't my tall, dark, and handsome friend brooding within your vicinity at the present?"

I hesitated.

"I assumed family stuff, but I'm picking up different vibes from you."

I nodded guiltily. "We...there's just some weird stuff going on."

"Do tell," Cindy said, leaning forward in her seat. She propped her chin in her hand, ready to listen.

"There's this thing with our boss. I don't...I'm not sure exactly what's going on between them, but there's something up and..."

"The boss? Vonaparte?" Cindy frowned. "Ary hasn't even mentioned her to me."

"They talk all the time. And Ary never—you know—talks."

Cindy nodded in understanding; her brow furrowed in confusion. "If he's talking to her, it must be for something important."

"Right, I get that. But it's just..."

"Ick vibes?"

"Ick vibes," I confirmed on a breath out.

“I’m not trying to, like, I don’t know...sway you one way or another. But I do know what went down when I got together with Ary to write the lyrics for this song.”

“He said you wrote it, that he just gave you ideas.”

Cindy gave me a flat look. “Does he ever take credit for anything?”

“No.”

Cindy pressed her lips together. She took a quick sip from her drink before honing in on me. “Look, like you said, Ary isn’t the best at being generous with words. His generosity extends to his actions, his thoughtfulness. It’s been that way since I’ve known him.”

“You guys met in high school?”

“Yes, freshman year.”

I nodded, urging her to continue.

“Ary has never asked me for a favor, ever. I can’t say the same. There were plenty of weekends when we weren’t even communicating on a monthly basis and I would reach out to him and ask him for a ride or twenty bucks. He never hesitated, even when I changed schools. I took it seriously when he hit me up for this. I knew how important it must have been to him.” She took in a breath, looking sad. “He talked more during the song writing than he’d ever talked before. And I know for a fact it was because he wanted to get the song right for you. That is an unmatched level of devotion, coming from him.”

My shoulders slumped when Cindy finished. “That still doesn’t explain the boss thing.”

“Knowing Ary? Sheesh. He may be up her ass because he’s protecting you in some capacity.”

“But that doesn’t explain why she is so accepting of his behavior. He’s rude to her, he doesn’t listen. And he’s literally the only one who gets away with it.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about any of that. But I do know Ary isn’t responsible for anybody else’s behavior, you know? If your boss has some creepy thing for him, I can’t imagine Ary being the kind of guy to encourage that kind of behavior.”

I looked down at my coffee and pursed my lips, realizing that Cindy was entirely correct. It was time to face the music and accept that I had...overreacted.

“Whatever it is, I know Ary would totally be transparent with you if he felt the need.”

“Our bet’s over. I pretty much told him to leave me alone.”

“So? Tell him to not leave you alone.” She shrugged with nonchalance. “Start another bet. Do something.”

I took out my phone, glancing down at the display screen. I had several new notifications from my business site...but nothing from Ary. “Thanks, Cindy,” I said genuinely.

“Call him, sweetie,” she said with finality. She swiped up her drink, gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, and then sauntered off to her band. “Tell him if he doesn’t fix things, I’ll be making a play for his girl,” she called over her shoulder.

I laughed, and finally cracked the ice around my heart, letting it thaw out so that it could consider Ary in a gentler capacity.

Ary wasn’t a simple infatuation that would run its course over time, we were far past that. He seemed like the kind of guy who declared love and meant it. Ary was no-nonsense, he had no patience for anything that was a waste of his time. He didn’t play games. But, the whole time we’d been together we were working on this bet, which was a game. Or...maybe not a game for him, necessarily. It was a means to get to know me, a way to breakdown my walls. A way to build something that would ultimately be more permanent.

He was a great brother, son. An amazing uncle. When he had kids? Man, forget about it. He would make the best dad. He would probably play some kind of games and make bets with his own children. Would our kids have their own little holiday hate lists that Ary would ceaselessly try to conquer? I could imagine the terms of agreement would grow more complex as the years went on, our kids learning the ins and outs, how to tailor a bet to stump him.

I’d already learned how he weaved his way in and out of rules in his favor. The terms of our own agreement, for example. The time limit, the flexing of activities in their own right, the ten-item list...

I bolted up from my seat. I grabbed for my drink, and stalked quickly outside, my phone shaking in my hand. Before I could second-guess it, I called Ary. I put the phone up to my ear, counting my breaths, hoping he would answer, and hoping he wouldn’t.

It didn’t even reach its second ring before Ary picked up.

“Spencer.” There was a degree of fear in his pronunciation of my name, and the sound of his voice stole the air from my lungs. Before I could respond, his voice rang out again. “Spencer. What’s wrong?”

A car roared by on the street. I cleared my throat, trying to regather my thoughts.

"Spencer," Ary said firmly, the fear in his voice growing.

"The bet," I managed to say.

"...The bet?"

"My Christmas list. You said you'd have everything crossed off by New Year's." He waited for me to continue. I listened to the silence on the line, held onto it like a lifeline. "You asked for my top ten, but you didn't say you'd just get rid of my top ten. You said you'd clear out my entire list."

There was a sharp intake of breath on his end. "Meaning...I didn't win," he puzzled out.

"Meaning the bet is still on!" I quickly corrected. "New Year's, remember?"

He let out a pained breath. "I took this week off to accompany you to Michigan. When that...was no longer on the table, I made plans with my family. I'm almost to Pittsburgh."

I inhaled sharply. I wasn't going to see him until the bet was over. Which meant...

I'd won.

And if I won, then by my own terms, he wasn't allowed to bring up dating any more. In trying to fix the problem between us, I'd created an even bigger monster.

What had I done?

Before I could think of a way to salvage the situation, his voice broke in first. "Goodnight, Spencer."

The line clicked before I could protest, before I could explain what I'd meant. But it didn't matter, did it? It's not like I would see him this week. It's not like he'd even want me after everything I'd said, everything I'd done. I had messed up by not trusting him. And he recognized that. He didn't have time for childish behavior, and my reactions had been immature and hurtful.

I won the bet. And by winning, it felt a lot like losing everything. If only I had another chance, to prove that I trusted Ary, to prove that I loved him regardless of whatever situation he was in with Helena. I'd been unlucky in my long line of Christmas wishes. But this wish...this one felt completely out of reach.

ASSUMPTIONS

When I woke up the next morning, it felt like any other day. As a child, even the holidays when my parents were on bitter terms, there was still some semblance of Christmas spirit in the house. There had been presents from my parents, and cookies in a household that didn't believe in sugar. And then, I got older and the magic just...dissolved. Santa died in my heart, and then my soul just shriveled up along with it. This Christmas was the least magical of my life by far. Even more miserable than finding untouched eggnog and an empty stocking.

This was even worse than the year I had a clarinet solo in the band's Christmas production when I was thirteen, and Connie Young had deliberately spilled her lemonade all over my white dress five minutes before we walked on stage, and then proceeded to tell everyone I'd pissed myself. I didn't have a change of clothes, and the band teacher wouldn't let me back out of the solo. So, I'd stood up in front of an auditorium and played "White Christmas" to an audience of adults who couldn't contain their giggles at the yellow stain splotched across my voile dress.

This was worse than the year my parents had been too lazy to put together a Thanksgiving meal and had ordered one from a local food chain. We'd all spent the next day violently ill with food poisoning, my parents occupying both the bathrooms, while I was meant to fend for myself in trying to locate a place to properly relieve the waste coming out of multiple places. I swore I'd never touch a turkey again in my life.

Or the year I was finding my passion when it came to baking, and I had begged my mom for some equipment to help. That Black Friday, my mom promised I could get my first standing mixer, and we'd waited in line for hours, only for the store to run out when we were two places away in line.

The holiday season had never exactly been good to me, and it would appear this weekend was no different. I heaved myself out of bed, and decided to brew a cup of coffee using the ancient coffeemaker my college roommate had gifted me when she moved out. It was what I had resorted to

before plunging into peppermint purgatory with Helena. I had no sooner reached for a mug in the cupboard when I heard a soft rapping on the door to my apartment. I paused, listening, trying to decide whether I'd actually heard anything at all.

A knock sounded again.

I put the mug down on the counter, leaving it to sit depressingly empty.

I heaved open the door and found Ary standing on the other side. He was bundled up from the cold, his dark teal beanie on his head, a scarf wound around his throat, peaking out above his burgundy jacket. He was dusted with melting snowflakes, flecks of white still apparent in some places, translucent trails of water cascading into the pockets and folds of others. He had a large coffee in his gloved hand.

I stood in the doorway, stunned. I was barely aware of my skin prickling with goosebumps because of the chilliness lingering in the hallway. I was standing there in a thin pajama set I'd picked out of a bargain bin two years ago.

"Merry Christmas." Ary cleared his throat, inclining his head toward the door. "Can I come in?"

"What're you doing here?"

"Apparently trying my hand at becoming a snowman. The melting part, that is."

I finally remembered myself, and ushered him into my apartment. "You could've text me."

I closed the door behind us, staring unabashedly at the man I somehow manifested with my Christmas wishes. He was standing awkwardly in the tiny entryway. I hadn't moved to take his coat, hadn't helped him with the coffee.

I took the cup from him and walked it over to my kitchen counter to set it down. Then I helped him out of his winter gear. Once he was down to his sweater and jeans, he motioned to the coffee sitting on the counter.

"I assume Santa didn't come last night," Ary jested lightly. It was as if he was prodding the air, trying to sense what he could and couldn't say. I didn't want him to feel like that. At all.

"Apparently he likes herbal tea even less than he likes eggnog," I tried to tease back, but I could hear the joke falling flat.

I crossed over to my couch, and motioned for him to come sit. I sighed as I ran my hand over my hair in an attempt to smooth it down. I took a sip of the

coffee he'd brought before depositing it on my table. It was a salted caramel coffee that caressed my tongue. Ary remained standing, refusing a seat on the couch.

"You could've texted," I pointed out again.

"You said that already."

"What about your family? I thought you were on your way to Pittsburgh!"

"I turned around."

"Did you even sleep? It's Christmas, Ary—"

"What are we missing from the list? What do I need to scratch off." He crossed closer to me, but didn't sit down, keeping a comfortable distance between us. "Or, was that phone call about the bet at all?"

"It was—clearly—about the bet," I hedged, absently brushing at the couch cushion beside me.

Ary studied me for a moment, before deciding for himself that I was a big fat liar. "Helena and I have never been romantically linked, in any form or fashion. And. Never. Will. Be. Is that what you needed to hear?"

"So, we're diving right in, then?" I rubbed my hands along my thighs, remembering the shotty pajama set I was wearing. "Helena has feelings for you."

"Helena does not have a single romantic bone in her body." He grimaced, dropping his head down, "I might be sick just from saying that out loud. Can I make my point any clearer for you?"

"That doesn't explain why she bends over backwards for you. There has to be some sort of sick crush—"

"You've got things completely wrong."

"What about the lunches? And being her personal security? I've never seen that woman so much as touch another human being, and she kissed—"

"Helena is my biological mother."

I could've sworn I heard a record scratch somewhere.

Zrrrrrrrrrrrrp.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"My parents adopted me at birth. But you knew that. I was the result of some whirlwind fling Helena had during an overseas vacation when she was eighteen. She returned to the States without releasing she was carrying a plus one. Don't tell Talia, please. She'll never let Ezra live it down that he's the only adopted child who has no international ties. She'd have a field day if she found out."

I reworked my brain, seeing the conversations with his family a lot differently in my head. Evan was upset about Helena because of the relationship—maternal relationship?—she was trying to form with Ary. That was also why Talia had scoffed when talking about Ary’s biological parents.

“Did you know that she was your mother when you got the job?”

“Not when she initially reached out. As soon as I saw her in person for the interview, I put two and two together. I’ve got her nose.” He pointed to his nose for emphasis.

“I think that’s the extent of the similarities between you,” I grumbled.

“She didn’t realize I had put things together by the time the interview was over. Eventually, I called her out, and things have been weird ever since. She wants to get to know me. She wants a relationship. But not—” He made a face again.

“Well, everyone at work believes you two are screwing, just so you know,” I said hotly.

“She doesn’t want people to know. I’m assuming she thinks it’ll make her look softer if it gets out that she has a son.”

“She didn’t want you to tell anyone? Wouldn’t the truth be better than everyone thinking—”

“Since when do you care about what anyone at work has to say?”

“I don’t! Or, I thought I didn’t.” I looked down at my hands. “I guess it just seemed too good to be true, you and me.”

“You and I are the only perfect part of any of this.” He ran his hand through his hair, which was down. It felt like a punishment having to restrain myself from running my own hands through the raven strands. “I don’t know if it’s because she feels like she owes me, or if she is just terrified about not leaving behind a legacy at her age. Whatever she’s feeling, I haven’t been too proud to use it to my advantage on multiple occasions. But I’m not interested. In taking over Timeplace, or security. And I’m definitely not interested in a parental relationship with her. I have a mother, and a good one. I have no need for a second.”

He moved closer to my place on the couch, and I felt a gust of warm relief blow through me, melting all of the frigidness I had been holding on to.

“You could’ve just told me that,” I pointed out. Then again, he wouldn’t answer a direct question about his own family.

“I tried to at your apartment. And then realized that I probably needed to let you go if you thought that little of me—”

“I don’t! It was just...” I reached for the coffee on the table, in need of something to do with my hands. I studied the label, but didn’t sip from it. “There were the comments made by your family, and the weird things at work that were really messing with me. At the party, Dean walked up—”

“Dean?” Ary interrupted with a flat tone. “Are you saying this all started going downhill because Dean—”

“He said the two of you were a thing. And then she kissed you on the cheek. It was hard for me to put any other pieces together. It made absolutely no sense that the two of you had something going on, but then, I couldn’t figure out why she would be so lenient with you. The only solution I could puzzle out was that...”

“We were sleeping together.” Ary shook his head, finally coming to sit beside me on the couch. “Well. The last I checked, this is not some Greek tragedy, or belated oedipal complex.”

I put my face in my hands. “I’m so sorry. No wonder you were so disgusted.”

“Spencer.” He pulled my hands away, drawing my attention back to his face. He weighed his words for a second, before his mouth tipped up into a half-smile.

There was so much that happened in that moment between us. A sense of relief welled up for the both of us. The realization that everything between us was okay. The misunderstandings had been corrected, the love between us no longer unrequited, a future suddenly opening up for the both of us to grab hold of. But, neither one of us addressed all of these new and beautiful things vocally. We quietly acknowledged it, held onto it. As with everything else, Ary made it clear without words what I was to him. So, instead of voicing any of the feelings that had silently passed between us, he said, “What items are we adding to the bet?”

We.

“Santa Claus,” I tried to say with a straight face.

Ary let out a laugh. A real, heartwarming laugh. Then he rolled his eyes, and took my coffee from my hands. He sipped it, and then made a puckering face before handing it back. “Okay, Spencer. What else are we adding?”

“Making a snowman. And sleigh rides. Caroling. Definitely caroling.”

“Is that it?”

“Oh no, there’s a lot more.”

Ary narrowed his eyes at me, and then gave me a slow, confident nod:

Game on.

EPILOGUE

I shifted my purse higher over my shoulder as I walked onto the elevator, Ary trailing behind me. I pressed the button for the top floor as he came to stand at my side, a heavy empty box in his hands. The doors closed.

I was officially packing up my desk at Timeplace after handing in my resignation to Helena two weeks ago. I decided to pack up on a Saturday, so there wouldn't be anyone in the building to stare at me, or gossip. Helena was supposedly devastated that I was leaving. She didn't tell me that directly, of course, but confided it to Ary a few days later when I had left on a lunchbreak.

There had been no more quiet conversations between the two of them behind doors. Instead, Helena just waited until I left the office on lunch to talk to Ary out in the open about whatever was on her mind. Mostly, she begged him to reconsider a higher position at Timeplace, which he always refused. Larson was the one who took over the head of security position, and Ary was back to manning his post in front of Helena's office, at least for now. He was making plans to leave the security position completely when the time was right, teasing that he no longer had to stay at Timeplace since I was moving on. He was taking some online classes relative to security work, intending to help map security systems for big businesses.

The way he dedicated his spare time to Spencer's Sweets...I should be paying him full-time for all the hours he was putting in. When I pressed him on his dreams one night as we were baking a few batches of cookies for new customers, asking what he wanted in life, he simply smiled, and smeared cookie dough over my lips. That conversation at his parents' house had come flitting back to me, when he'd been transparent about his past: *I was never confident in what I wanted to be*. Maybe I could help him with that, figuring out his dreams, just like he was helping me with mine. I figured the security classes were a good start.

I had secured a part-time position as a barista at my favorite coffee shop. The majority of my time for the next few weeks would be figuring out how to actually run a successful cookie business. Every time I fulfilled orders, more

would come tumbling in. I was maxing out orders every single day, and was facing the fact that I was either going to have to rent a space that could hold a few industrial ovens, or move to a new place entirely that could accommodate all the cookie nonsense.

On one particularly busy Saturday following New Year's, Ary offered up his kitchen for my baking. Now, there were plenty of weekends where I gave up and dragged all of my materials over to Ary's place, and stayed through the weekend, since his kitchen was bigger than mine. It was shameful how many hours he was putting in with me, just content to be by my side as we spent our evenings elbow deep in dough. He never got agitated, never threw up his hands in need of a break. He relentlessly worked to help me pursue this fantasy, Spencer's Sweets becoming a part of his dream as well since it was so important to me.

"Maybe I should lower the amount of cookie orders," I sighed one night, throwing myself on his couch just before eleven.

He dropped beside me, his hair on top of his head, his sweater dusted with flour. "No," he said easily, reaching up to tug his hair free. "I think you should accept a few more orders on the weekends."

I looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Has all of the cookie dough gone to your head?"

"It's easier for us to knock them out on the weekend as opposed to the weekdays."

I teared up, his belief in me and the exhaustion settling into my bones overwhelming my senses. He'd given me a tired and contented smile, slapping his hand down on my thigh.

"You need to quit Timeplace," he had said seriously. "It's time." And when I smiled at him with both excitement and disbelief, he'd rolled over to me, and, like most other nights, we made love right there on the couch, incapable of making it to the bedroom before desire took over.

Monday morning, I'd walked into Helena's office with her coffee and my notice in hand.

I was quickly building a regular clientele. I wasn't counting my chickens before they hatched, though. I felt the need to have something steady in case my cookie business came crumbling down, no pun intended. That's why I had decided to put in a few shifts at the coffee shop a week, just in case things went south and I needed a backup.

"Elevators are on your normal list, right?" Ary asked, bringing me back to

the present as we began ascending upwards towards what was now my old desk.

I blinked, trying to gauge his question. Ary abruptly dropped the empty box he was holding, the one I was planning on using to pack up my desk with. He leaned forward and swiped his hands up and down the elevator grid. Every. Single. Button. Lit up.

“That was funnier when it happened during that elf movie. In real life? Not so much.”

The elevator stopped on the third floor, and Ary darted out. My mouth parted in surprise as the doors began to close, Ary nowhere in sight.

“Ary!” I shouted, but it was no use, the elevator was moving upward again.

When it dinged on the fourth floor, Ary came sprinting around a corner. Just before the elevator doors had begun to close, he flung himself inside. He put his hands on his knees, doubled over, as he tried to catch his breath.

“What was that?!”

“Beat the elevator,” he said simply, halfway motioning to the door, still bent over.

The elevator came to a stop on the fifth floor. Ary straightened and immediately shoved me out into the hall. “Your turn,” he said with a wicked smirk, and quickly pressed the button to close the elevator doors behind me.

I squeaked, immediately panicked. That panic soon dissolved into out-of-breath laughter as I raced towards the stairs. I clambered up as quickly as I could, and was relieved when I saw the opened elevator doors on the sixth floor. Ary was definitely holding the doors to keep them opened for me so that I wouldn’t miss it. I panted as I slid back inside, the doors closing as we started moving again.

Ary was taking my never-ending hate lists in stride, chipping away at items slowly, an ongoing bet constantly in play. He’d listen patiently when I offered up the deep roots that had spurred on some of the items, and the others that I wasn’t ready to voice yet he never pressed me on.

There were times when my stubbornness persisted in regards to my everyday annoyances, but the majority of the time he won. Even in a single moment, when I declared something new to add to my list, he would immediately tackle it, attempting to brush it off as soon as it had been stated: long wait lines at restaurants, random cars barreling through crosswalks, holiday upcharges, my parents’ unexpected visit, his sister’s unhealthy sparkler obsession.

He was getting accustomed to my daily items and my special edition enemies as the winter season was ending—Valentine’s was rough for him as far as my list was concerned— and the spring season beginning. This continuous game was a comfort, knowing that he was going to pursue this, pursue us, long after he’d won that initial bet.

Which, he did win, even after he’d taken down Santa Claus and caroling, and I’d tacked on several items in the last few hours just to try and spite him. We’d spent the week following Christmas in my hometown, much to Helena’s chagrin, and made it back New Year’s Eve to spend time with Ary’s family. The following week was when my parents decided to visit me as a big surprise.

On the seventh floor, I expected Ary to dart out again. But he didn’t. He made as if he was about to run out, but then abruptly swung around, pinning me against the elevator wall. His hand trailed down the side of my face before he leaned in and kissed me. The doors opened and shut, opened and shut. Dings rang out to announce different floors as we continued upward, oblivious to his mouth on mine, his hand on my hip, pressing me against the wall.

“Spencer,” he whispered against the column of my throat. My name was his own subtle pronouncement of love. I could hear it in the catch, in the depth of it. His proclamations of love were said with the same inflection, the same huskiness.

I love you.

Spencer.

On floor twenty, Ary wrenched back from me. He offered a wink before essentially diving off the elevator, sprinting for the staircase as the doors closed and the elevator made its way up to the twenty-first floor. As my heart raced, and my lips tingled from the lingering touch of Ary’s lips, I realized that I didn’t really hate elevators that much anymore.

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Mom, I hope you enjoyed this one. I never pegged myself as an adult romance author, but when I decided to publish one, I wanted to write one that you'd like. I hope Spencer gives you a new love on multiple fronts.

For my readers, you made it this far? I'm impressed. Thank you for giving this book a chance. I write these books because they're on my heart, with characters who plead to have their stories told. And the fact that you read them and (hopefully) enjoy them is just breathtaking. I appreciate your time!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dani Hall resides in North Carolina with her husband and sons. She is currently a high school English teacher, and spends her spare time reading and writing. She has received multiple awards for her writing. She has become a passionate advocate for the CHD community after losing her daughter to the disease in 2017.

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