

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, about to kiss. The woman, on the left, has long blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored, textured knit sweater. The man, on the right, has a beard and is wearing a dark, textured sweater. They are standing in front of a Christmas tree decorated with white snow and red ornaments. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the tree and the festive decorations. A large red ribbon is tied around the bottom left corner of the image, and a red tag is attached to it, containing the text.

The Naughty List
A CHRISTMAS ROMANCE COLLECTION

ALEXIS WINTER

THE NAUGHTY LIST

A CHRISTMAS ROMANCE COLLECTION

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THANK YOU!

A wonderful thank you to my amazing readers for continuing to support my dream of bringing sexy, naughty, delicious little morsels of fun in the form of romance novels.

A special thank you to my amazing editor Michele Davine who I would be COMPLETELY lost without!

Thank you to my fantastic cover designer Sarah Kil who always brings my visions to life in the most outstanding ways.

And lastly, to my ARC team and beta readers, you are wonderful and I couldn't do this without you.

XoXo,

Alexis

CONTENTS

A Very Bossy Christmas

“Sweetheart, I know exactly how to handle you.”

Prologue

1. Damon
2. Kate
3. Damon
4. Kate
5. Damon
6. Kate
7. Damon
8. Kate
9. Damon
10. Kate
11. Damon
12. Kate
13. Damon
14. Kate
15. Damon
16. Kate

Epilogue

Dashing Mr. Snow

“Maybe we can be a little naughty. You want to be naughty for me, right?”

Prologue

1. Sadie
2. Alex
3. Sadie
4. Alex
5. Sadie
6. Alex
7. Sadie
8. Alex

9. [Sadie](#)

10. [Alex](#)

11. [Sadie](#)

12. [Alex](#)

13. [Sadie](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Naughty or Nice](#)

[Dear Santa,](#)

1. [Felicity](#)

2. [Carson](#)

3. [Felicity](#)

4. [Carson](#)

5. [Felicity](#)

6. [Carson](#)

7. [Felicity](#)

8. [Carson](#)

9. [Felicity](#)

10. [Carson](#)

11. [Felicity](#)

12. [Carson](#)

13. [Felicity](#)

14. [Carson](#)

15. [Felicity](#)

16. [Carson](#)

17. [Felicity](#)

[Epilogue](#)

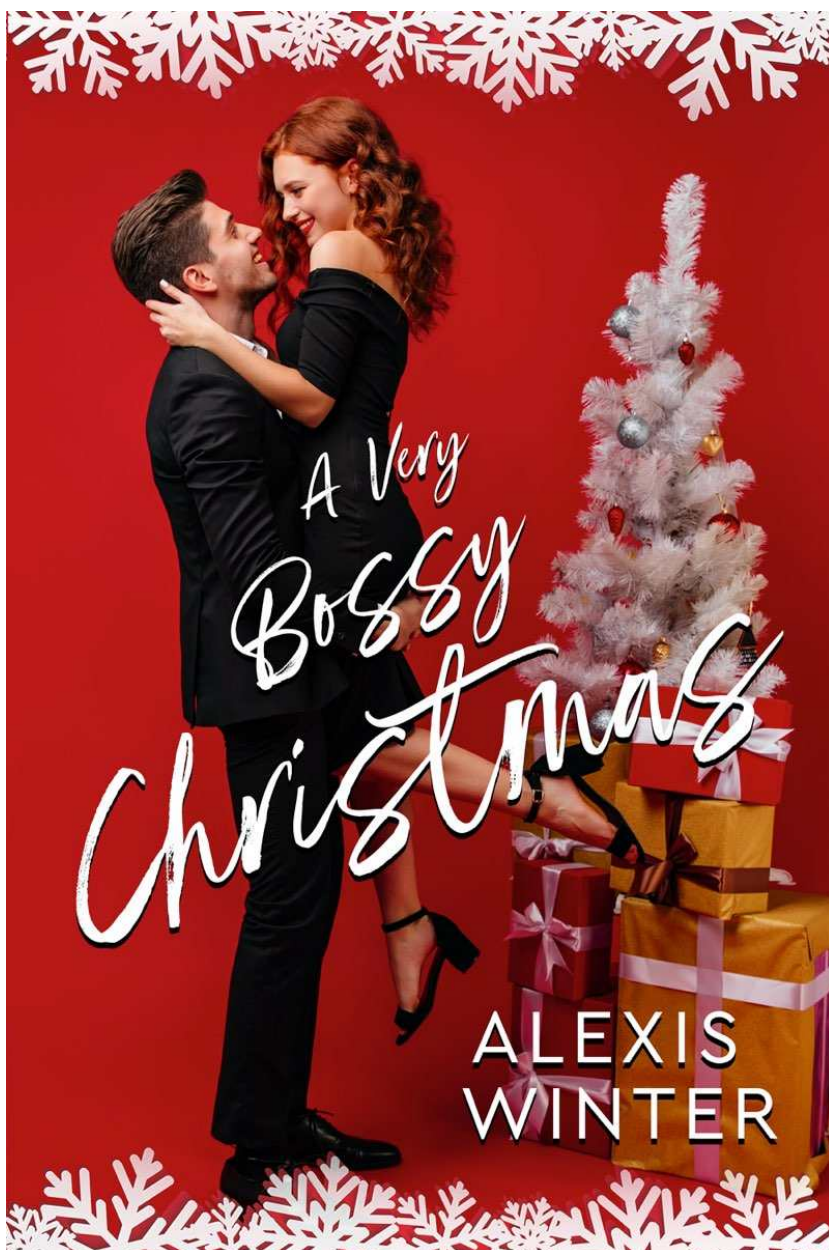
[He said he wants to do bad things to me...very bad things.](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1-Daphne](#)

[Also by Alexis Winter](#)

[About the Author](#)



A Very
Bossy
Christmas

ALEXIS
WINTER

“SWEETHEART, I KNOW EXACTLY HOW
TO HANDLE YOU.”

Those eight little words whispered in my ear by my boss were
my undoing.

And what we did after he said them, most definitely landed me
on Santa’s naughty list.

Let me back up...

If there’s one man who can suck all the joy out of Christmas—
it’s my boss, Damon Wells.

I should have known when fifteen minutes into our first
interview, he told me that nothing about me stood out from the
fifty other applicants.

Yet somehow, I’m sitting shotgun in his fancy sports car on the
way to my family’s house for the week.

You’d think he’d show a little mercy this holiday season after
my day from hell.

Car towed? Check.

Spilled coffee on my white blouse? Check.

Soaked in Chicago slush by a cab? Triple Check.

Instead, he threatens to fire me.

So now I’m stuck spending the holidays with my *boss* by my
side...Until two minutes into meeting my family, Damon

introduces himself as my boyfriend and my minor panic turns into a full fledged five-alarm holiday meltdown.

He wasn't supposed to pretend to be *anything*.

He absolutely wasn't supposed to stick his tongue down my throat when he promoted himself to fiancé in front of my entire family.

And I sure as hell wasn't supposed to enjoy it.

Suddenly, our fake little fairytale is starting to feel too real when Damon slides my grandmother's diamond ring on my finger.

The same ring I thought my ex was going to give me last year when he dumped me.

The same ex who shows up to my family's holiday party.

All I want for Christmas this year?

To forget just how good my boss is in the bedroom before my heart starts to get other ideas.

PROLOGUE

KATE

“Come on. Come on. Come on.”

I hold back tears as I turn the key for the fourth time, praying the engine turns over this time. The car whines loudly over and over again as panic builds in my chest.

“Of all fucking days.” I can’t hold back the tears that prick my eyes any longer as I pound the steering wheel. I stare at the blurry clock as big tears tumble down my cheeks. I wipe at them desperately as I realize that not only am I going to be crazy late for work and face a sharp tongue-lashing from my asshole boss, but now I have to figure out how I’m going to get my car fixed in time to drive home for Christmas.

I look over at my passenger seat to the large pastry platter and two coffee cartons that should have already been on the conference table ten minutes ago. I feel bile build up in my throat as I picture the giant vein on my boss’s forehead about to burst.

My thoughts are interrupted by the shrill ringing of my phone and I glance down to see his name plastered on the screen—Damon Wells. “Speak of the fucking devil,” I mumble as I swipe the screen to answer.

“Mr. We—” I start with my most chipper voice but I’m quickly interrupted by his enraged bark through the phone.

“Where the hell are you, Miss Flowers?” he hisses. “The partners are all here, sitting around the table waiting for you with the goddamn breakfast food and reports. Surely you can’t be so incompetent that you can’t handle picking up some pastries. Hmm?”

He’s whisper shouting at me and I can picture him pacing, running his hands through his hair in exasperation as he pinches his nose dramatically. It’s his classic temper tantrum demeanor, something I’m very used to at this point in our professional relationship.

“Mr. Wells, I can explain. I have the coffee and pastries and I’m on the way. I ju—”

“Get here in ten minutes or you can pack your shit!”

“I—hello? Mr. Wells?” I pull the phone away from my face and see that the prick hung up on me.

“Ahhhh!” I scream in my car, wanting nothing more than to punch Damon Wells in his perfect white teeth. I’m sure it’s deranged but the thought of seeing his bloody mouth and watching him flip backward over his desk gives me more glee than I care to admit. I should probably get back into therapy. I would if I could fucking afford it working for Mr. Tight Wad.

I look at my phone; there’s no way in hell I can make it in ten minutes but I have to try. I grab the tray of pastries and two cartons of coffee while trying to hold my purse and hail a cab. I trudge through the dirty slush of melted snow that has now filled my high heels as I step to the curb and raise my hand. I manage to get a cab quickly and pile into the back seat as I rattle off the address to the office.

“If you could hurry, please, that would be great.” I offer the most genuine smile I can muster but the driver just ignores

me. I reach into my wallet and look at the cash I have; I'll be lucky if I have enough to cover the fare and maybe give him a few dollars for a tip. I don't even have enough to bribe him with an extra five dollars to step on it.

I stare at my phone the entire way. We're less than half a mile away when I get a taunting text from my boss along with a picture. I open it, confused at first to see the image.

“What the—?”

Damon: *Two minutes, Miss Flowers. Look, I was even nice enough to grab a box for you.*

The image shows a large box on my desk. “What a fucking sicko!” I say loudly, causing the driver to look up at me in the rearview mirror. “Oh, sorry, sir. Not you. Just my... never mind.” I pull the wad of cash out of my wallet this time and stare at the meter. Looks like I have just enough to cover it. He slows the cab down in front of my building and before he's even stopped, I throw open the door.

“Whoa, lady. Hold your damn horses!” he shouts.

“I don't have time!” I yell as I scramble out of the cab with my bag slung over one shoulder, the pastries in the other, a coffee jug in one hand and one under my arm. I go to hand him the cash that I've tucked under my chin when I drop one of the coffee jugs.

“Shit!”

“Crazy woman,” he mutters as he takes the cash and speeds away.

I pick up the jug and inspect it briefly; it's one of those cardboard containers so it appears undamaged. I tuck it back under my arm, holding it tightly against me as I scramble to the front doors.

“Hold it!” I yell as I sprint through the lobby toward the open elevator doors. I’m breathing heavy, doubled over, and laughing that I made it. I glance at the watch on the guy next to me and see I have thirty seconds to spare.

“Hey, you’re, uh—leaking something?” The man says as he takes a step away from me. I glance down to see what he’s looking at and see that coffee is running down my leg and pooling onto the elevator floor. In my rush, I didn’t even feel the warm liquid soaking through my blouse.

“No, no, no!”

“Good luck.” The doors open and the man steps out without even offering to help me.

“What the fuuuuuck?” I yell as the doors close and reopen a moment later on my floor.

I scramble through, running down the hall and flinging open the conference room door. All twelve shareholders turn their heads to stare at me. I can feel Damon’s eyes attempting to burn a hole through me, but I don’t give him the satisfaction of making eye contact. I feel like I’m in a fucking Drew Barrymore movie. I’m sweating; my hair has half fallen out of the clip that’s holding it up, and I’m now soaked in coffee and still dripping it down my leg. I don’t even care; I’m at my actual wit’s end.

Without a word I toss the pastries on the table along with the still full coffee jug before spinning on my heel and marching back to my desk.

“Miss Flowers!” I can hear the stomping of his Salvatore Ferragamo shoes as he marches toward me.

“What in the actual fu—”

“Not a fucking word.” I spin around and shove my finger in his face. I can feel my body shaking as I ball my other hand into a tight fist. I’m praying he goes off so I have an excuse to finally pull back and sucker punch him.

Instead, he puts his hands up and takes a step back, noticing that my white blouse and pale-pink skirt are now stuck to my body with coffee.

“Whoa, what happened to you?”

“Seriously?” I snap.

“My car died this morning outside of the bakery while I was picking up your precious fucking pastries. Then you called and bitched me out and didn’t even give me a chance to explain what happened and that I needed help. Instead, you threatened me and so I used the last of my cash on hand to hail a cab with my already full arms and then dropped one of the coffee containers because I sprinted to get up here so that I didn’t lose my job.” I can feel my eyes bulging out of my skull as I work to keep my voice steady. “So now I’m soaked in coffee and I have no way to go home and change.”

He takes another step back before straightening his tie. “That sounds like a helluva morning, Miss Flowers, but you’ll just have to clean up as best you can and then bring those reports into this meeting that is now”—he looks at his watch disapprovingly, like it somehow has offended him too—“thirteen minutes behind schedule. I can stall for another five minutes, but that’s all you get.”

I’m about to lunge over my desk now and rip him apart like a defenseless gazelle on the Serengeti in the clutches of a merciless lion when he turns and starts to walk back toward the conference room but then stops abruptly.

“One more thing. If you could maybe ask one of the other ladies in the office if they have a spare set of clothes, that would be great. Can’t have my secretary looking like she got hit by a bus and dragged for a few blocks, now can I?” He laughs.

Yup, I’m going away for homicide.

I manage to get myself cleaned up as much as I can before walking back into the conference room with the stack of reports. The rest of the morning speeds by in a blur and I’m counting down the minutes till I can go check on my car and retrieve my coat that I realize I left in there this morning.

“Hey, Marge, I have to run an errand so I might be a few minutes late getting back from lunch.”

“Mr. Wells okay that?” she mutters, not bothering to pull her face away from her computer screen.

“I’ll hurry,” I say which is neither a yes nor a no, but Marge is a snitch and I don’t have time to ask dickweed for permission. I rush outside, clutching my purse tightly against me as the cold Chicago wind whips around me and goes straight to my bones. I have to take the train to the station closest to the bakery I was at since I don’t have the cash for another cab ride. I get off on my stop and briskly walk the three blocks to Crumbs and Caffeine.

“Where’s my car?” I glance around the street, double-checking I didn’t just walk past my own car, but no, my car is nowhere to be found. I feel my throat tighten but I choke back the immediate response to burst into tears. “There has to be an explanation,” I say as I glance around frantically. I’m about to step into the bakery to see if they know anything when I glance up at the signs on the pole in front of me.

Something people might not know if they aren't from Chicago is that street parking is like a sick game the city likes to play on us residents. Not only are there multiple signs on the pole outlining when you can and can't park, but there's also exemptions like if it's a holiday, a weekend, your mom's thirty-third birthday if it lands on a Tuesday and there's more than a ten percent chance of rain.

"Oh my God, this literally cannot get any worse." I pull at my hair, laughing hysterically to keep from sobbing. I draw a few stares from weirded-out onlookers who probably assume I'm in the midst of a complete mental breakdown—they're not wrong. I take a few deep breaths and read the signs again, noting the name and number of the towing company. I punch the number in my phone and wait for an answer.

"H&R Towing, this is Jake," a guy's voice booms through my speaker, his over-the-top Chicago accent making him sound like a character from a movie.

"Yes, I parked outside of Crumbs and Caffeine by Halstead and West Jackson and I think you guys towed my car."

"Yeah, ma'am. You can't park there. It's fifteen-minute parking." I bite my fist, reminding myself not to snap at him; he didn't do anything wrong.

"Mm-hmm, yup, found that out. So do you have a 2009 Kia Optima at your lot? Silver, plates are KITN 78." I hold my breath as he clicks around on his computer.

"Yup, looks like she's here. It's a fee of one seventy if you pick it up today. We're open till five."

I rub my forehead. "One hundred and seventy dollars? But you guys just took it a few hours ago." I can hear myself

getting to that whiny place and I take a few deep calming breaths.

“Sorry, ma’am. Policy. It’s one fifty the moment we hook it to our rig and then twenty a day lot fee for the first five days. Goes up to thirty-five a day thereafter.”

“I, uh—” I scramble trying to figure out how I’m going to make this work today when I can’t leave work till five thirty at the earliest. I took tomorrow and Friday off to drive home and be with my family since Christmas is next week. “Did the car start, do you know?”

“We don’t have the keys, ma’am.” I look down at my purse and realize I’m an idiot for asking that question.

“Okay,” I say, my voice shaking. “Thanks, I’ll figure it out and try to get there today.” I slide my phone back into my bag before raising both hands toward the sky. “Why me?” I yell just as a cab comes screeching into the open spot in front me, spraying me with slush from head to toe.

I don’t move. I’m literally frozen from my lack of coat, the now-melted snow all over me, and the utter shock of what this dumpster fire of a day has turned into.

“Hey, lady, you getting in or not?” the driver yells at me. I just stare at him, or stare at my own reflection in the rear passenger window of his car. You can see through my blouse that is now a lovely shade of brown from the coffee and dirty snow; my mascara is running down my cheeks, and my hair looks like roadkill on my head.

The driver flips me the bird before driving off, leaving me to drag my ass back to the train station.

DAMON

W *hat in the actual fuck is she wearing?*

I can't help but gawk at Kate's getup and not in a good way. The brown wool skirt she has on looks like it's at least four sizes too big and cinched at her waist by a rubber band wound around the excess material gathered at her back. If the skirt wasn't enough, she's paired it with a turtleneck that's a different shade of brown. She bends forward, leaning over the desk to show Marge something. The skirt might be fugly as hell, but it still looks delicious draped over her perky ass.

Even though four out of five days a week I want to wring Miss Flowers' delicate neck, I'm still a man, and that woman has a body that is nothing short of a fantasy. It's probably good her personality instantly kills my raging hard-on whenever she walks into my office; otherwise, I'd probably have had to fire her. Can't have my assistant falling in love with me, thinking our hookup meant a marriage proposal.

"You're going to end up in HR." Teller, our sales director, nudges my elbow and laughs.

"Nah, she prefers to take her wrath out on me in more fucked-up ways than that." I don't take my eyes off her. Something Marge said has made her laugh and I watch as a genuine smile spreads across her lips. A small pang of

jealousy hits me in the gut when I think about the fact that I've never made her smile. Not even once.

"You're lingering," he says, looking between her and me.

"Yeah, and?"

"Someone's got a crush." I flick my eyes back to Teller as he wags his eyebrows.

"A crush? What is this, junior high?" I scoff.

"Just saying, you don't just lust or leer when you look at her... You linger."

"What's with you, man? Charlotte have you watching those Hallmark movies again?"

"Laugh all you want, buddy, but they get her all emotional, and then I get to comfort her and she's so appreciative of my sensitive side that she ends up getting all hot and bothered, and then we make our own Hallmark movie, if you know what I mean. Sex, we end up having sex."

"Yeah, got it, Tell." I turn my gaze back toward Kate just as she's standing back up and walking over to her desk. She doesn't notice me at first but then our eyes meet. For a brief moment, it feels like the air has been sucked out of the room as the tip of her tongue runs across her bottom lip. I feel a twitch in my pants. For a second I think she might walk over to me but the soft gaze quickly turns into a hardened expression as she places her phone on her desk and then flips me off.

"She wants me." I grin as I slap Teller on the shoulder and walk back to my office.

I'd be lying if I didn't say that I got joy out of coming up with ways to torture Kate. But hey, in my defense, I'm tortured

by her presence. Those mile-high heels she wears make her tits bounce with every step and I swear to God she purposely presses them against me when she's close to me. She may act like she wants to rip my head off, but I'd bet my millions it would be after she fucked the life out of me.

I'm halfway through a contract when I hear her signature sharp knock on my door at the same time she turns the handle and waltzes in.

"Still haven't mastered the art of knocking, waiting for a response, then entering the room or walking away after three or two years, huh?" She ignores my comment and my smile as she places two files on my desk. Only, she doesn't turn and walk out like usual; she stands stoically in front of my desk, hands clasped in front of her.

"Mr. Wells, I need a minute of your time, please." She's way too subdued; something's up.

"What can I do for you, Miss Flowers?" I see her flinch when I phrase it that way, which I do because she always gives me a reaction.

"I need to leave early today, around fourish, so I can go pick up my car."

"*Fourish?*" I repeat. "What time is that exactly?" I can see her tighten her fingers together; she's trying not to bite my head off.

"Four. I need to leave at four. The towing yard closes at five and it's outside the city."

"And why can't you do it tomorrow or Friday? You are off work on those days, right?" I lean back in my chair, my fingers steepled in front of me as she squirms.

"Well, yes, I am, but I had plans—"

“Yes, and it looks like *your* plans were interrupted because *your* car broke down. Those aren’t my problems or the company’s problems so take care of them on *your* time.”

Her eye’s twitching and I’m biting the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. It’s not that I’m an actual maniacal asshole; it’s just that this is a game we always play. She purposely makes mistakes or shows up late just to piss me off and make me look incompetent and I make her life difficult in return. We both get a free pass for telling each other off and don’t go running to HR to solve our disagreements. I contemplate giving her a lecture on being a responsible adult but feel I’ve pushed her buttons enough for the day.

“Will there be anything else, Miss Flowers?” I say in my sweetest voice.

“No, sir.” She says the words through gritted teeth before marching out and slamming my office door.

“WELL, look who it is, Miss Fifty Shades of Brown.” I’m surprised to find Kate sitting at the bar at my local watering hole by the office. After her mere meltdown at work today, I figured she’d be tending to her car. She slowly turns her gaze toward me. “Whoa, don’t go spitting green vomit all over me,” I say, raising my hands in the air.

“Shouldn’t you be sneaking into people’s houses right now, stealing presents and destroying the happiness of innocent young children?” She leers at me.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I wave to flag down the bartender. “I’ll take a vodka soda. Belvedere, please.”

“Please tell me you get that it was a reference to *The Grinch*? It’s the holidays; you’d think that you’d be a little nicer this time of year like the rest of humanity but my guess is your heart hasn’t grown three sizes yet.” She motions to the bartender for another round for herself.

“It’s the holidays? Hadn’t noticed.” I shrug. It’s a lie, I noticed, but I don’t like to celebrate them. They’re not as fun and jolly when you’re alone.

“Yeah, what gave it away? The lights, trees, holiday music, and general merriment?”

“Man, you’re extra snarky today. You get a fresh batch of bitch hormones or something? Must be something about you redheads.” I shake my head and thank the bartender as he hands me my drink. I go to take a sip but I’m startled when Kate slams her hands down on the bar, making me jump and spill my drink a little.

“My God, can’t you just let some things slide? Why do you always have to be a massive prick all the damn time?”

“You don’t make it easy, sweetheart.” I wink at her and I know she fucking hates when I flirt with her. I’m sure as far as she’s concerned it’s just me trying to piss her off but the reality is, it’s genuine. There’s something about her copper hair and bright-blue eyes with those overly full pouty lips. I catch myself lingering a little too long on her lips as she glares at my remark. “Okay, fine. I’m sorry. I’ll be nicer. But only if you tell me why on God’s green earth you’re wearing that outfit.” I can’t hold back my laughter any longer.

“You told me to see if anyone had an extra outfit because I wasn’t allowed to go home, and the only person who had extra clothes was Marge.” She downs her second cocktail and motions for another.

“Marge!” I laugh even harder. “Well, for what it’s worth, you wear Marge’s clothes much better than she does.” She doesn’t respond, just smiles as the bartender hands her another cocktail.

“Hey, could we each get a double shot of tequila?” she asks him and he nods.

“Whoa, what’s up?” I ask as she dives into the drink.

“Like I said, the holidays.”

“Shitty for you too, huh?” She shrugs but I’m curious so I pry. “Tell me about what’s going on.”

“Seriously? Are you just going to make fun of me the entire time?”

“Nope,” I say, raising my right hand. “Hand to God.” She stares back at her glass for a moment before letting out an audible exhale. The bartender is back and places the double shot down in front of us.

“I’m gonna need this first,” she says, grabbing the shot. She doesn’t wait for me, just takes the shot and sucks on the lime it came with. “Shit!” she says, slapping her hand down on the bar before coughing.

“You’re a natural.”

“Anyway, I took tomorrow and Friday off to drive home to my family’s house. They live a few hours away, in central Illinois, but now, since my car broke down and it got towed, I have no way to get home. So thank you!” she says, reaching over and grabbing the second shot right from my hand and downing it.

“What the hell? What do you mean thanks to me?”

“My car wouldn’t start at the bakery so I had to leave it and of course it was a fifteen-minute parking spot so I went back at lunch, it had already been towed and you wouldn’t let me leave work early to pick it up. I called a few mechanics and because it’s the holidays, nobody had a spot open for me, except one place but they had to have my car by tonight. Soooo, I’m shit outta luck. But the funny thing is, I don’t even have the money to get it fixed anyway.” The liquor is starting to hit her. I can see her eyes are a little blurry and her movements are a little delayed and exaggerated as she speaks.

“Shit,” I murmur and I really do feel like dick. “Kate, I’m so—”

“Kate?” she says loudly. “Kate? I thought I was Miss Flowers.” She barks out her own name, clearly trying to do an impression of me. I can’t help but laugh which in turn makes her laugh.

We spend the next hour laughing and drinking, something I never thought I’d be doing with her. It feels nice, great actually.

“So are you close to your family?”

“Meh.” She shrugs. “I mean yes I am but there was an *incident* that kind of changed things.” She leans forward and whispers the last part, resting her hand on my thigh. I instantly flex against her warm touch. I’d give anything to have her keep going. She glances down, though, almost as soon as it happens and looks at her hand and then back up at me, her eyes dropping down to my lips. The moment feels charged, sexy even, but then she jerks her hand back.

“Tell me,” I say.

“My ex, Chad. He’s going to be there.”

“Well, first off, that’s the problem right there... Chad? That’s a frat boy douchebag name. Chad, Derek, Kyle—they’ll break your heart and leave you with an STD.” She snorts. “Wait, your ex will be at your family Christmas?” I wrinkle my nose at the thought.

“Yeah, we dated for three years and my family loved him. They had every right to; he’s great, really he is. He just ended things kind of abruptly last year right before Christmas and yeah, my family still loves him.”

“That’s fucked up, Kate. You know that, right? Do they know it bothers you?”

She waves her hand sloppily at me. “It’s fine. I’m not gonna make a big deal out of it. Should be fun to meet his new girlfriend.”

“He’s bringing his new girlfriend?” I know I sound like a gossipy middle schooler but who the hell does that to their daughter?

“Yeah. I think he might have cheated on me with her ’cause they were always *just friends*.” She uses dramatic air quotes while rolling her eyes. “Whatever, it’s fine.” She waves me off again but I’m seething. I know I have no right; she’s not mine and our relationship is a dumpster fire most of the time, but there’s still a protective feeling I have toward her.

“Okay, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to drive you home.”

“What?” She tumbles forward off her stool and I catch her.

“I’m taking you home to your family’s Christmas. Like you said, it’s my fault you don’t have a way to get there now so I’m going to fix this.”

“No, I can’t let you—” I hold my finger up to hush her lips; they’re soft and pillowy and I regret it as soon as our skin touches.

But instead of pulling away, I run my finger along her lip before pushing her hair behind her ear. Her big eyes are fixated on mine. I grip the tip of her chin with my thumb and pointer finger and pull her just a tad closer.

“I’m taking you home and that’s final, Miss Flowers.”

I wake to the sound of loud pounding.

“What the hell happened?” I can’t figure out if the pounding is in my head or coming from the front door. I lift my head off my pillow and my stomach rolls. I look down my body and see that I’m still in Marge’s outfit and there’s an awful taste in my mouth. I groan and drop my head back on my pillow just as the banging sounds again.

“Kate! Open the door, Kate!” The voice is muffled but I can still distinctly make out who it is.

Confused, I climb out of bed and stumble through my bedroom and toward the front door. I pull it open, greeted by an overly chipper Damon Wells.

“What are you doing here? How—how do you even know where I live?” He looks me up and down and laughs before pushing past me inside.

“I’m guessing you don’t remember anything about last night?”

“Oh God, what happened last night?” My hands shoot up to cover my face and my stomach rolls again.

“You okay?” he asks as he steps around me, toward my kitchen. He grabs a glass off the counter and fills it with water

before handing it to me.

I take it from him, eyeing him suspiciously as I drink it. The coolness instantly helps to calm my stomach. I need something for this pounding headache.

“Sit, I’ll make you some toast so you can take Advil. Got any juice?” he asks as he shrugs out of his coat and places it on the back of one of my barstools.

“Again, while I appreciate all this,” I say, making a circling hand gesture, “what are you doing here?”

“You *really* don’t remember anything about last night?” he asks again through a laugh as he pours me some orange juice and hands it to me. “I found you at Franklin Tap after work; you were already a few cocktails deep and after some pleasantries exchanged between us, you started ordering double shots of tequila. But not before you explained everything about your car to me and that because of me you had no way home to spend Christmas with your family so I said I was taking you home and you agreed.”

I spit the orange juice out of my mouth which simultaneously comes out my nose in the process. I grab a paper towel and bury my face in it, trying to minimize my embarrassment.

“You’re what? No, no. Absolutely not!” I say as I take the toast from him and take a bite. I continue to shake my head as I swallow it down.

Damon leans back against the counter across from me, crossing his arms over his chest as I continue eating. I stare at him, his silence and direct eye contact making me uncomfortable. *Dammit, why does he look so sexy standing there like that?*

“Are you going to say anything?” I finally ask, overwhelmed by my discomfort.

He doesn't say a word, just hands me three Advil. I take them and finish the rest of my toast as he reaches forward and takes the plate from me. He places it in the sink and then slowly walks over to me. He spins the barstool around so that I'm facing him and then reaches down, grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet. He wordlessly leads me down the hallway and into the bathroom.

“This is weird; what are you doing?” I ask as he reaches his arm into my shower and turns the water on.

“Your parents' house is just over three hours away. We have about twenty minutes to get on the road before we're behind schedule. So get in the shower while I pack you a bag.”

I point a finger in his face. “You are not packing my bag! Creep, you'll probably touch all my underwear or something.” I narrow my eyes on him as he takes a step toward me and I take a step back. My back hits the countertop and I reach my hands out behind me to brace myself.

“Am I going to have to help you undress too?” He cocks his head to one side as his eyes lazily roam up my body.

What the fuck? I instinctively throw my arms over my chest to cover myself as if this giant turtleneck isn't already doing that for me.

“Get out!” I bark at him as I point toward the door. Once he exits, I let out the breath I didn't even know I was holding and lean against the door. A smile involuntarily spreads across my face and my lower belly tightens when I think about the look that was on his face as he looked me up and down. The

way my body responded was a surprise too, the tingling between my thighs.

“Oh God. Ew! Nope,” I say to myself before clamping my hand over my mouth and shaking my head back and forth. I will not be another woman to fall prey to Damon Wells and his manwhore ways. *Gross!*

I pull my shirt over my head and slide Marge’s skirt down my thighs. I finish getting undressed before stepping into the shower and scrubbing myself from head to toe. It’s only now I realize that I never showered after being covered in coffee, Chicago street slush, and train germs.

After I shower and feel somewhat human again, I crack open the bathroom door and look around to make sure Damon isn’t creeping on me before darting across the hall into my bedroom. I pull a pair of oversized jeans on and one of my favorite holiday sweaters, a cat wearing a Santa hat that says ‘Meowy Christmas.’

“Did you borrow that from Marge too?” Damon asks, eyeing me over the lip of his coffee cup.

“Did you make coffee?” I ignore his comment and walk over to the fresh pot of coffee on the counter.

“Here, poured you a cup already. Has milk, a splash of creamer, and a Splenda in it already.”

I eye him suspiciously as I bring the cup to my lips, hesitating before I take a sip. “You poison this? How do you know how I take my coffee?”

“We’ve worked together for over three years now, Kate; I know how you take your coffee.” He lets out a little snort and just shakes his head like I’m being ridiculous.

“And in those three years you’ve never once made me a cup of coffee.”

“No, that’s *your* job,” he says, pointing a finger at my chest. There it is, the elitist attitude I’ve come to know and hate from him.

“So anyway, about driving me home. While I truly appreciate the offer, it’s just unrealistic. Are you going to drive me there, then come all the way back here, then come pick me up again? That’s like twelve hours of driving over a few days and that’s without holiday traffic and Illinois snow. Plus, I cannot take you away from your family and holiday plans. And most importantly, I don’t want to spend the holidays with you. I’m afraid that you’ll suck all the joy out and get us permanently blacklisted from Santa’s *nice* list.” I tack on the last part just to remind him that spending time with him is about as much fun as getting a pelvic exam.

“Come on, let’s go,” he says, completely ignoring everything I just said and taking my only half-drunk cup of coffee right from my lips.

“Hey, I’m drinking that!” I say as I lunge for it but he blocks me with his forearm.

“We’ll get more on the way.” He rinses both our cups out and then marches over to the front door, pulling it open. “Kate,” he barks loudly and gestures for me to walk out the door.

“Are you hearing me right now? What the hell is your problem, Damon? I told you I’m not going and I don’t even have a bag or anything ready.” I place my hands on my hips and dig my heels into the ground.

“I told you I would pack your bag and I did; it’s already in the car with your purse and I have your keys. So I’m not going to tell you again.” He dangles the keys in front of me, his voice lowering with his last statement. I don’t respond; I just stand there with my biggest *fuck you* expression on my face.

Before I can register what’s happening, Damon takes two large strides toward me and picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder before spinning around and marching through the door.

“Put me down, you psychopath!” I scream as I beat against his back. It doesn’t faze him; he slams the door and locks it before heading down the stairs. He tightens his grips around my waist and I feel his bicep flex against me. I’ve never seen Damon out of clothes, but damn does he feel built. His imposing six-foot-three frame lends to his dominant demeanor but knowing he’s rock-solid as well... My thoughts come to a screeching halt when I remember what’s actually happening right now.

“This is kidnapping! Help! I’m being kidnapped!” I wail as he kicks open the door to my building and marches us out onto the sidewalk.

“Nobody cares, sweetheart,” he says, smacking my ass and causing me to yelp in response.

He slides my body down the front of his, placing me unsteadily on the ground. He reaches around me, opening the passenger door to his Tesla X. I widen my stance, ready to refuse getting in when he forcefully hooks his hand behind my neck and pulls me to within mere inches of his face.

“Of course you drive a Tesla,” I mutter.

“Don’t create more of a scene, Miss Flowers. Just get in the fucking car or I’ll make a scene of my own and trust me, it will put yours to shame.” A shudder runs down my spine at his almost whispered words.

“I’m not easily bullied, Mr. Wells,” I retort confidently. “In fact, I think you’re all talk.” I mirror his whispered tone back to him as I defiantly push a finger into his chest with a cocky smirk. I barely make contact with it, though, before he grabs my hand and pulls it over my head while backing me up against the car. He pins my arm above me as he tightens his grip on the back of my neck, pulling my face to his until his lips are on mine.

I’m confused as to what is happening as the distance between our bodies disappears and I can feel him pressed firmly against me. He tips my head slightly as his lips begin to move against mine. It’s only soft for a second before he delves his tongue into my mouth. He swirls it around mine once, twice, then pulls mine into his mouth and sucks on it. The sensation shoots straight to my core and I immediately want more. But before I can reciprocate, he’s broken the kiss.

“Jesus, why the fuck do you insist on making everything so damn difficult?” He pants. He releases my hand and neck and spins me around to put me in the passenger seat. This time I don’t fight him. I’m dizzy and confused and extremely turned on. He pulls the seat belt over me and then leans in a little further to threaten me once again.

“Next time you insist on defying me and making a scene, I promise you, the punishment won’t be so nice.” He slams the door and walks around to his side and climbs in.

I don’t know what the hell just happened but I know for damn sure that any momentary laps in judgment I’ve had over

the years where I've wondered, if even for a brief second, what Damon Wells would be like in bed, I just got my answer and I can guarantee I won't be forgetting it anytime soon.

DAMON

W*hy the hell did I have to kiss her?*

I know why I did it. I've wanted to kiss her smart, sexy mouth since about fifteen minutes into our first interview. You'd think a woman that calls me an arrogant prick wouldn't get the job but that's when I knew I had to hire her. I didn't want a kiss-ass or a pushover; I wanted someone who would be my right hand and call me on my shit. That's exactly what Kate is. I trust her more than anyone and I know she has zero reason to ever lie to me to keep her job.

I'm sure I'm a clinical head case, and I probably have all sorts of shit I need to work through in therapy. But the only way I've been able to put a dividing line between us is to be as unappealing to her as possible. I'm not an idiot; I see the way she looks at me when she thinks I'm not looking. It's the way most women look at me. The problem isn't that I don't still drool over her as well; it's that I don't want to be the guy that breaks her heart. So I maintain my arrogant, heartless prick ways around her so that even if she finds me attractive, she'd rather deal with disposing of my dead body than waking up next to me.

“There's a Pilot about thirty minutes outside the city that I always stop at. Obviously you don't need gas but they have

the best road trip snacks and there's a Starbucks across the street." She doesn't look at me when she talks, instead staring out the passenger window. I'm actually surprised she didn't fly into me and rip my head off once I got in the car. Maybe she's still in shock.

"Sounds good to me."

We drive the rest of the way to the Pilot station in silence. I follow her around the giant gas station as she grabs a few snacks. I step away and grab some water for us before meeting her at the counter and handing my credit card to the cashier.

"I can pay for my own stuff."

"I'm aware, but I can pay for it as well." I want to offer her a smile when I respond but there's zero amusement on her face as she grabs her things and rolls her eyes. We pretty much repeat the same process in the Starbucks drive-through. Only this time she lunges across my seat with her app open, trying to get the cashier to scan hers instead of mine. I win.

"What was with the *of course you drive a Tesla* comment earlier? What's wrong with a Tesla?" I ask as she takes a drink of her coffee.

"Nothing, it's a fine car." Her answer is clipped.

"So basically anything that I do is going to piss you off?"

"How would you feel right now if your boss showed up to your apartment and carried you kicking and screaming out of your place after going through your shit and then kidnapped you?" I can't hold back, and I burst out laughing at how dramatic she's being.

"I didn't kidnap you, Kate. You agreed that I would take you home for the holidays. The only reason you put up such a fight is because you can't stand me for some reason and you

insist on always making everything difficult instead of putting aside your disdain for me so that you can at least enjoy the holidays with your family.”

She doesn't respond right away, just sulks in silence while she continues drinking her coffee.

“It's not that I can't stand you,” she finally says quietly. “You're just always so mean. It's like you can't ever let a single dig get by you.”

“Might I remind you that you're the one who first started all this in our interview. You called me an arrogant prick, Kate. Not exactly starting off on the right foot.”

“You laughed when I said it and you deserved it; you told me that I was indistinguishable from the fifty other candidates you had so why should you spend another second interviewing me.”

“Yeah, and yet you still took the job.” I give her my best smile and it actually makes her laugh a little.

“Thanks.”

“For?” I raise an eyebrow and she lets out a dramatic sigh before answering.

“For taking me home. I know I didn't make it easy, but I would have been really sad missing out on it.”

“You're welcome.” I don't know why but I reach over and grab her hand for a moment, giving it a small squeeze.

“What are you going to do though? Will you make it back in time to celebrate with your family?”

I don't want to answer her question because I don't want to explain that I don't have a family to celebrate with.

“Uh, I’m staying with you and your family. I’m not doing four trips, Kate.”

“No, that is not happening. I’m sure there’s a hotel in the area.”

“Are you going to make this as difficult as you did this morning or can we just get that all out of the way now?” I ask her sternly.

“What are you going to do, Damon? Throw me out of the car this time?”

“Remember when you were a kid and your mom would say, *‘Don’t make me pull this car over or you’ll regret it!’*” I give her a wink and she rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest with a huff.

“Don’t you see how weird this is going to be? Spending Christmas with my boss at my own family home? What am I supposed to tell them?”

“Well, what did you tell your mom in the text you sent her last night?”

“What?” She bolts upright, her eyes about to bug out of her skull.

“You said you texted your mom when we were sitting there at the bar and she was super excited you were bringing someone.” I can see the panic building on her face.

“I texted her?” she squeals as she frantically looks for her phone. She pulls it out of her purse and opens her messaging app. “Oh, gaaaaawd,” she says, smacking her hand against her forehead.

“What did you say about me?” I ask as I try leaning over to look at her phone.

“Keep your eyes on the road!” she says, pointing ahead as she scrolls through the messages. “Well, it’s not as bad as I thought. I just told her that my car broke down so a *friend* was bringing me home and that he’d be celebrating with us.”

“Why did you just do air quotes when you said friend?” I ask.

“Because that’s how I sent it to my mom; I put friend in quotation marks because you’re my boss, not my friend. Please don’t tell me this comes as a shock and your feelings are hurt?”

“No, I’m just trying to read it as your mom probably did and when you said a friend in quotes and then ‘he’ along with it, she thinks you’re bringing home a lover.” I wriggle my eyebrows up and down at her.

“A lover? Gross. Why’d you have to say it like that?” She wrinkles her nose at me.

“Fine, a boyfriend.”

“No. She wouldn’t just read into my texts and make something up like that. Besides she’d have asked me that in the text.” She shakes her head matter-of-factly.

“What was her response to your text then?”

She stares at her phone for a minute before closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Shit,” she mutters.

“She said, and I quote, ‘*Ohhhhh, a friend? Tell him we’re excited to have him celebrate with us. Let me know if I should make up one of the guest rooms?*’”

“And did you respond to that message?”

“Nope. I probably blacked out.” She pulls her foot up into the seat and rests her arm on it as she stares out the window.

“What’s our story going to be?” I finally ask after several minutes of silence.

“I guess just what I told her, that you’re a friend and my car broke down and I needed a ride.”

“You don’t think they’ll find it strange that this random friend that they’ve never heard of spends the holidays with you?” I’m not sure what I’m getting at here but I’d rather use the boyfriend angle with this whole thing.

“Not as weird as my boss bringing me home. Look, I don’t tell my parents about every friend I have or guy I meet so it won’t be weird. Just—” She trails off and I can hear the irritation in her voice. I don’t want to upset her but I can see by her bouncing leg that either the caffeine has kicked in or the closer we get, the more anxious she gets.

“Want to talk about it?” I finally ask. She looks over at me suspiciously. “Chad. Yeah, you mentioned him too last night.” She doesn’t say anything right away. “We don’t have to. I’m just offering a listening ear if you do want to vent.”

“I love being with my family at Christmas but, yeah, having him there when he might have cheated on me and my family still loves him... It’s not the best feeling.”

“Can I ask why you didn’t tell them?” I’m genuinely curious about this dynamic.

“I didn’t have proof; it was just a gut feeling because she was always with him and he was cagey about their texts and when I would bring it up, it turned into a fight and she was always *just a friend*. Then, two months later, he was dating her and they were exclusive. Now they live together, eleven

months after he dumped me.” She shakes her head and lets out a pathetic laugh. “It wasn’t worth it to cause a huge dramatic thing between him and me and my family. I know if he did cheat and I had proof and told my family, they’d believe me and back me up but—”

“Your family shouldn’t need proof. If you feel hurt by their actions and betrayed, they should respect you.”

“I know but it’s more complicated than that. Like I said, I don’t want to burn bridges or cause drama. I can put my feelings aside for the holidays,” she says with a weak smile and it pulls at me. I want to punch this Chad guy in the face and his balls and tell her family to respect their fucking daughter. I grip the wheel a little tighter.

“You still love him?” I probably shouldn’t ask it but what the hell; she seems to have let her guard down a little.

“No. That’s part of why I don’t make it into something with my family. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of even thinking that I’m still in love with him. I got over him as soon as he started dating Tess.”

“Ugh, Tess. I know a Tess. There’s something about that name,” I say and it makes her laugh.

We spend the rest of the trip in silence. Kate nodded off about an hour before we arrived. I caught myself a few times glancing over at her. She looks so peaceful when she sleeps. Gone is the constant scowl and the claws are fully retracted.

“Kate.” I reach over and shake her, the GPS indicating we are about fifteen minutes from her parents’ house.

“Oh shit. I didn’t realize I fell asleep. Did you pack my mak—?” I reach behind her seat and grab the bag of makeup and hair products that I packed for her.

“Thanks,” she says as she unzips it and frantically pulls out random objects. Not even ten minutes later she’s running her hands through her fluffed up hair and slicking a gloss on her lips that smells like peppermint. My dick twitches when I think about tasting that gloss right from her mouth.

Nope, keep those thoughts at bay, I remind myself, but then thoughts of taking her in her childhood bedroom has my blood pressure soaring. We’re pulling into her parents’ driveway and a little plan formulates in my head. This one might actually end up getting me murdered, or at least my dick ripped off, but fuck it.

“Damn.” I whistle as we pull up the large driveway to the three-story brick mansion. “How did I not know your parents were rich?” I ask as we climb out of the SUV and I grab our bags.

“Because we’re not friends and that’s a weird thing to share with people. Okay, please, please, please be on your best behavior and don’t flirt with my mom or push my buttons.” Kate glances over her shoulder when she hears someone calling from the front porch.

“Sweetie, hiiii!”

“That’s my mom,” she says hurriedly. “Promise me, Damon!” she says, pointing a finger at me as I wave and smile at her parents that have now both gathered in the doorway.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” I say without moving my lips. “I’ll behave.” I carry our bags as we walk up to the front door and are immediately greeted by not only her parents but several other people.

“Hi, I’m Laurie Flowers, Kate’s mom and this is her father, Dennis.” They both shake my hand as Laurie points to another

man and woman. “And this is our oldest, Oliver, and his wife Erin. They’re expecting our first grandbaby.” She claps as she says this and Erin shrugs and rubs her belly.

“Don’t forget about me!” someone says in the back as they come walking out of the kitchen, a huge grin on the man’s face.

“And this is Chad and Tess,” Laurie says as Chad juts his hand out toward me. I shake his hand and have to stop myself from snapping it off. I plaster on my fakest smile.

“Chad, good to meet you. Heard *so* much about you,” I say.

“Chad and Tess just stopped by briefly to give us some lovely holiday wine that his mother made. They got into town from Chicago yesterday. I told him he could have just brought it to the party but he insisted once he heard you were heading home tonight.” Her mom is so oblivious it makes my head hurt.

I reach down and squeeze Kate’s hand, but she quickly pulls it away.

“Mom, Dad, this is Damon, my—”

“Boyfriend,” I say, reaching out and pulling Laurie in for a tight hug.

“God, I’ve been dying to meet you guys.” I grab Dennis’s hand and give it a hearty shake.

“We’re so happy to meet you too,” Laurie coos as she gives Kate a big smile. If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s charm the ladies and Laurie is no exception.

I feel a hard pinch on my backside and look over at Kate who is bright red.

“I’m sorry we haven’t come down sooner. We’ve just been so caught up in our tight love bubble; it’s like the entire world ceased to exist,” I say, wrapping my arm around Kate’s shoulders and planting a big kiss on her cheek.

She laughs, her face softening into a big smile as she rests her hand on my chest and leans into me. She reciprocates my kiss by reaching up onto her tiptoes and kissing my cheek, wrapping her arm around my neck, and then she whispers in my ear.

“You better pray for a Christmas miracle, sweetheart; otherwise, this is your last one.”

Yup, she’s going to kill me.

KATE

I can feel my face burning red but what I can't tell is if it's embarrassment, desire, or anger. Part of me loves to feel his big, strong arm wrapped around me while his hand grips my waist. It's possessive and sexy—something I've never felt in my past relationships.

To Jason, my first boyfriend, I was more like a best friend who made out with him and occasionally gave him hand jobs in my parents' basement. Around his football buddies he'd act like I was just one of the guys.

To Brody, my college boyfriend, I was basically a wallet and a sex toy. We barely spent any time together outside his friend group and the only time he sweet-talked me was when he needed money or wanted to get laid.

But that's why I fell so hard for Chad; he was different. He was charming and sincere; he knew all the right things to say to make a girl swoon and send butterflies soaring through my stomach. He'd compliment my outfit or when I tried a new hairstyle. He never had a passcode on his phone and gave me the password to his computer and email to prove that I could trust him. That's why I felt so blindsided when things changed. It wasn't a gradual change either. We didn't grow apart or have some huge disagreement about where we see our lives going.

One day, he just had a passcode on his phone and he changed his computer password. When I questioned him about it, he just blew me off and said he'd had a passcode on his phone for almost a year now. When I pressed further, he said it was because his company demanded he do it since he could access private client information from his phone. I knew at the time it was a lie but I excused it. I ignored the little butterflies that no longer were flutters of excitement but little nagging reminders that something wasn't right.

Month after month things began to change even more. He started working late, going to more work events and dinners that previously I'd accompanied him to but now he told me I'd be bored. He even started traveling for work suddenly, something that his job had never required of him previously. I saw a new name, Tessa, popping up on his phone rather frequently and when I'd question him, he'd say she was just a friend, a coworker, that she was going through a divorce, etc. Again, I knew it was all lies but he had such a way of pulling me into his arms, kissing me, telling me how much I meant to him and how much he loved me that I'd ignore the feelings and tell myself that I was paranoid. It also didn't help that he texted my family more than I did and had become almost inseparable with my own brother.

"Mom, we'd love to freshen up if the rooms are ready? Yesterday was a bit of a hectic day, and we had a rough start today. Right, babe?" I turn to look at Damon and give him a sickly sweet smile.

"Yeah, this sweet little lady's car broke down yesterday, ended up getting towed, and just set the entire day up for failure, but you know how she is." Damon pulls me in tighter to his side and it takes everything I have not to pinch him

again. “She kept that radiant smile and positive outlook going like you wouldn’t even know her world was falling apart.”

“Oh, honey,” my dad finally says, “why didn’t you tell us you were having car trouble? I would have gladly called Niles and told him to run you over a new one.” My dad’s business partner, Niles, lives full-time in Chicago and he’s constantly trying to get me to call Niles about living in one of his many vacant condos.

“It’s fine, honestly. I called a garage and they’re taking it in next week when I get back. Mom, the rooms?”

“Well,” she says with a pause. “Your room has been made up and is all ready to go. I made sure to have fresh towels placed in your bathroom as well.”

“So, just the one room?” I ask, trying to somehow wordlessly convey to my mom that I really need two different rooms for us.

“Yes, dear,” she says with a coy smile. I let my shoulders drop, realizing that she thinks I’m making sure that we are sleeping in the same room.

“Great, thanks so much, Mom.” I lean forward and give her a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll show us to *our* room then,” I say as I turn to face Damon.

“Hey, Damon, great to meet you, man,” Chad says as he slaps Damon on the shoulder before turning to me. “And Kate, sweet Kate, so great to see you too.” He pulls me in for a tight hug that lingers way too long. “Tess and I are heading out, but we’ll see you at the annual Flowers Christmas bash!” He gives my dad finger guns and it makes me want to puke.

“Let’s go,” I mutter under my breath to Damon as we walk down the main foyer toward my bedroom.

The moment we walk into my bedroom I slam the door behind us, causing Damon to jump and spin around. “What the fuck, Damon? My boyfriend!” I yell.

“Wow, okay. You’re welcome first of all, and second”—he makes a lowering motion with his hands—“keep your voice down; they’ll hear you.”

“You’re welcome? What happened to the plan we agreed to stick to, Damon? That you’re just my friend? What the hell were you thinking?”

“First of all, what good-looking single people are just friends to the point that they go to family holidays together? Hmm? That’s suspicious. Second, it just kind of popped out of my mouth when I saw that dickweed *Chad* standing there with his toothy grin and ridiculous handshake.” He mockingly thrust his hand out and distorts his voice. “Hi, I’m Chad, a cheating manwhore that’s bamboozled all of you.”

“Typical,” I say as I grab my bag off the floor and toss it onto my bed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you are so arrogant and entitled that you don’t listen to anyone else. You think you know better than everyone else even in their own lives. You managed to weasel your way into my family Christmas and then instead of doing what we agreed on, you go off the rails because you act on impulse and think you know better than me. I’m just so tired of it.” I sit down on the bed and cradle my head in my hands. I want to cry I’m so frustrated and still tired from being hungover. Not only do I have to face Chad and Tessa all weekend, but I now have to put on a show and act like I’m dating my boss. I feel the bed move a little as Damon sits down beside me and puts his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Kate. I really am. I just—truthfully, I felt sorry for you when I saw that Chad was there with the woman he cheated on you with and everyone was acting like it was okay. I just wanted to—I don’t know, fix it for you?”

I know he probably thinks he means well but his apology just pisses me off even more. I shrug his hand off my shoulder and stand up.

“You feel sorry for me? God, Damon, I didn’t ask for any of this from you. I don’t need or want your pity. I can take care of myself and my feelings and handle my ex being here, okay? Let’s just get one thing straight between us; you’re my boss and not my boyfriend. We aren’t friends; we don’t even like each other. Let’s just pretend, get this weekend over with, and go back to our normal dysfunctional working relationship.” I rifle through my bag, pulling out my clothes and putting them into the dresser drawers. Damon doesn’t move off the bed for several seconds. I can see something in his eyes, but I don’t linger long enough to decipher what it is. I feel a twinge of regret for snapping at him so harshly again but instead of apologizing, I just remind myself of the dozens of times he’s made me cry at work.

“Uh, can my stuff go in these drawers?” he asks, pointing to the second dresser. I nod and we both continue to organize our stuff in silence.

“Can I just ask... Why not let your parents help you? You mentioned not having the money to fix your car at the bar last night so...?” His words trail off but I don’t answer so he keeps talking. “I mean, clearly they’re not hurting; this house has gotta be at least ten thousand square feet.”

“I don’t really feel like talking about it,” I say as I gather my toiletries and head into the en suite. I close the door behind

me, placing my things on the counter. I put my hands on the counter and stare at myself in the mirror. As much as I tried to make myself look alive with some makeup in the car, I can see the prominent bags under my eyes. My eyes look dull and sad; my hair is limp and lifeless. I turn on the shower and allow the room to fill with steam for a few moments as I strip out of my clothes.

When I step into the shower, I can't hold back the tears that have been threatening for the last forty-eight hours. It's cathartic but it doesn't do much to help relieve the constant stress I've been under for the last several months. My parents always told me that I could come home when I moved to Chicago after dropping out of college. It wasn't just out of the goodness of their hearts that they offered me a place to stay; it was because they never believed I could make it on my own, and as the days and weeks go by and my stress and anxiety builds, I'm starting to realize that maybe they were right.

DAMON

I feel guilty for upsetting Kate, but I feel like she's overreacting. I just wish she'd explain why she won't just tell her parents what Chad did. I understand not wanting to ruin Christmas, but what kind of family wouldn't support their child? Not to mention, at some point you have to stand up for yourself.

I finish putting away my clothes and pull out my phone to check a few emails. Since Kate is still in the bathroom, I take the opportunity to look around her room. From the looks of it, I'd say it hasn't been touched since she moved out. I walk over to the bulletin board on the wall. It's covered in pictures, a few playbills and concert tickets, and a deflated mylar birthday balloon that's tacked to the wall.

There are pictures of her with friends, her volleyball portraits, her at prom, and several that look like she's in a play or production of some sort. I lean in a little closer; the emotions on her face are so perfectly captured. Her eyes are almost half closed because she's smiling so big, her cheeks pink and full, and she's embracing another girl so tightly. Once again, I'm reminded that this is a side of Kate I've never seen, not once in three years of working together.

I know she's right about me—I'm a prick, entitled, and arrogant. I hate the way I am half the time, but each time I think I'm going to take the high road with her or respond in a way that might get a better response out of her, I end up going below the belt. Somewhere along the way I convinced myself that if she hates me, I won't fall in love with her, but I know that's not possible. I fell for her a long time ago and now I just do it to try and remind myself that I don't deserve her. I've always been terrified to let her in, to see the real me because if she doesn't hate me and I'm not making her life miserable, then there's no excuse if she doesn't want to be with me. It's fucked up, childish, and misogynist. I want to change—I have to. She deserves it.

The bathroom door opens and she walks out slowly, her wet hair stuck to her neck. She glances at me briefly before scurrying over to her closet and tossing her clothes in the hamper. She's wrapped in a fuzzy robe that goes to her ankles; her lack of makeup emphasizes the smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

“You were in theater in school?” I ask, pointing to the photos.

“Yeah.” She grabs her makeup and walks back in the bathroom.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?” I ask, shoving my hands into my jeans. She hesitates but turns back and walks over to the bed to take a seat. “You're right. I had no right to make decisions for you and certainly don't have a right to fix anything for you. This is your life and I did weasel my way into it and I'm sorry.” She doesn't say anything so I keep going. “This is your home and your bedroom and I'm clearly making you uncomfortable. I don't want to do that, Kate,

especially during Christmas, so I'll tell your parents that I have an emergency back home that I need to take care of and let you guys celebrate in peace. I'll even send someone else to pick you up or leave my car here and take the train back to Chicago."

"No, no," she says, shaking her head. "That's too much, Damon. Weasel was probably too harsh of a word. I was angry and honestly the fact that you offered to bring me here and miss your own family Christmas is... extremely selfless and I haven't been as grateful and appreciative as I should be."

"Well, I can at least move to another guest room; this place has to have a few others or at least a couch I can crash on so you get your own space." I watch as she seems to contemplate the offer for a minute before shaking her head.

"No, this is fine. I feel like if you move to another room, it will just bring on more questions and draw more attention to our little sham of a situation." I nod in agreement. "But don't think for one minute you aren't sleeping on the floor," she says, grabbing her makeup again and heading for the bathroom.

"It's a king-sized bed. Come on."

"Not a chance in hell, buddy." She shuts the bathroom door in my face and then quickly re-opens it. "I'll be out of here in fifteen minutes. My parents eat dinner at six p.m. on the dot so there's plenty of time if you want to shower but don't go wandering around out there without me. I can't trust you to not say something else to make things even worse."

"Can I shower while you do your hair and makeup?" I ask, trying to look past her into the bathroom.

“Ew, no.” She scrunches up her face like I just offered her a cockroach as a snack.

“Ew? Seriously?” I say, placing my hand above her on the doorframe and leaning in a little bit. “You didn’t say ew when my tongue was down your throat.” I smirk.

She gives me that snarky-ass look that makes my cock hard before slamming the door in my face. I laugh. Even if she doesn’t want to admit it, she’s attracted to me just as much as I am to her.

The door flies open again. “And don’t be going through my room.” She tries to shut the door again, but I put my hand up to block her. “What are you doing?”

“You’re taking too damn long and it’s already five forty. I’m taking a shower while you do whatever it is you’re doing.” I march past her and take in the large bathroom. There’s a jacuzzi tub in the corner and large walk-in shower. “Want to put that to good use?” I point to the tub and she just rolls her eyes.

“Seriously, get out.”

“Avert your eyes,” I say as I pull my hoodie and t-shirt over my head. “Or don’t. Up to you.” I kick off my shoes and pull my socks off as she looks at me in horror. I reach for my belt and undo the buckle, her eyes slowly falling from mine down my chest to my waist. I see her swallow hard and I realize that she’s turned on. I stop my movements and take two steps forward till I’m standing in front of her. I reach my hand up slowly and place my fingers beneath her chin.

“What do you want to happen next, Kate?” I whisper the words and I see her eyes searching mine. She wants to know what I want, but I won’t give her the satisfaction. I want to

hear the words from her lips; I want her to say that she wants me, that she needs me as badly as I need her. I step forward again. This time she's against the counter and my body is almost flush against hers. I reach my other hand up and I place one on either side of her face. "It's just us in here, Damon and Kate. Whatever happens can just be left here, in these moments." I lean in, my mouth a centimeter from feeling her sweet, pillowy lips again. "Do you want me, Kate?" I start to close the distance when there's a loud knock on the bedroom door and it's immediately opened.

"Kate, sweetie, dinner is al—oh! Oh goodness. I'm so sorry." Laurie blushes and pretends to cover her eyes as I take a step back.

"We'll be right down, Mom," she says as she waves her off.

"I see where you get the knocking as you open the door thing; it's a Flowers family trait," I say as she pushes me away and turns back to face the mirror. I want to resume what we were doing; it's killing me not knowing what she would have said or if she would have let me kiss her again. I don't dwell on it though. I unbutton my jeans and pull them down my legs along with my boxers, kicking them to the side before stepping toward the shower and flicking on the water.

"Jesus, Damon, what the hell?" Kate asks as she throws a hand up against her eyes.

"It's just an ass, Kate. Relax. Plus, the glass is frosted." I step into the shower. "You've seen a man's ass before, right?"

"Yeah, I look at your face every day, don't I?" she quips and I can tell she thinks it's a zinger. I burst out laughing at her corny joke. She always comes up with these little one-liners

that she thinks are so clever and they always work because I always end up laughing.

Ten minutes later we're both dressed and walking down the stairs for dinner. I grab her hand right before we enter the dining room and at first she stiffens, but then I feel her fingers entwine with my own.

"So," Laurie, Kate's mom, begins, "how did you two meet?" I'm surprised it's taken them this long to ask, if I'm honest, considering two seconds ago they've never even heard about me. I glance over at Kate who has a nervous look on her face as she takes a sip of her wine.

"Through work actually. One of those classic both working for a big company and met in the elevator situations." I smile genuinely while I reach beneath the table and squeeze her hand. I'm not sure why but I don't want to lie to her family any more than I have. "I know for me it was love at first sight," I say, giving her a wink. She rolls her eyes at me and smacks my hand away.

"Speaking of work, Kate, whatever happened to that asshole boss you worked for?" Laurie asks as we begin to eat. Kate chokes on her wine and I reach over to pat her on the back as she grabs her napkin. I take the opportunity to ask another question because I can't wait to hear what her family has to say about me.

"Which guy is this?" I furrow my brow, trying to look convincing.

"*D* something?" her mom says as she's trying to remember his name. "His first name started with a *D*."

"Derek!" I say enthusiastically and they all agree.

“Yes, Derek,” her brother chimes in. “He’s a total prick apparently. Has one of those uppity frat guy attitudes and treats her like shit. I told her she should have sued him for harassment and then walked out with both fingers in the air.”

I glance over at Kate and I see the blush creeping up her neck; she’s mortified. She waves her hand dismissively as she takes a sip of water and clears her throat. “He’s not that bad; you guys are blowing it out of proportion. Besides, it’s Christmas. We don’t want to talk about work.”

“Not that bad? Sweetie, didn’t he make you cry like every single day for the first several weeks? That’s awful and honestly I wish you’d let your father speak to him.”

Shit. Is that true? I made her cry? I knew I was harsh but she gave it back just as good so I thought... Fuck, I feel like an idiot.

“Apparently he’s got a small you know what,” her mother whispers as she points to her lap.

“Is that right?” I ask as I reach my hand under the table and rest it on Kate’s thigh. She tries to push me away but I don’t budge. “And how would you know that, baby?” I say in my most syrupy voice.

“I don’t *know* that; it’s just an assumption since it seems like his personality is so dickish, I can’t imagine there’s a lot in his pants.” She reciprocates my cheesy smile. “Enough about my boss’s penis, okay?”

“Damon, what is it that you do again?” her father, Dennis, asks me.

“Investment banking, sir. Not very exciting I’m afraid.”

“That’s an excellent career, son. One can never go wrong with finance. Got me where I am,” he says, lifting his glass

and gesturing around the massive dining room.

“Cheers to your success, sir; you’re an inspiration, truly,” I say as I raise my glass and everyone follows suit.

“And cheers to hoping that Derek’s tiny penis gets chewed off by a rabid raccoon and he finally gets what he deserves,” Laurie chimes in and I can’t help but burst out laughing.

“Mom!” Kate says in utter shock.

I can’t wait to tease her about this later.

“**Y**our father and Oliver are going to play chess in the lounge, and

Erin and I are going to pretend to watch them but just gossip and talk about our holiday party tomorrow night. Care to join us?” My mom loops her arm through Erin’s elbow.

“In a bit, Mom, but I promised Damon I’d give him a tour of the house. Show off all the amazing Christmas decorations.” I give her a smile and a kiss on the cheek as she follows my dad and Oliver down the hall toward the lounge.

Dinner was a shit show. The food was outstanding and the wine flowed a little too freely, but I owe Damon an apology or at least an explanation for what my family said about him.

We walk into the great room where my mom’s signature fourteen-foot-tall spruce is immaculately decorated in shades of gold and silver with the perfect touches of red and green.

“This looks professionally done,” Damon says as he walks around the tree.

“That’s because it is.” There’s a garland decorated with a red velvet ribbon and twinkle lights throughout it wrapped around both of the banisters and the balcony of the landing.

There are also two massive wreaths on either side of the tree, each above a mirror.

“Hey, I owe you an apology about dinner,” I start as I walk over to where Damon stands admiring the tree.

“Nah, honestly they could have said a lot worse and they wouldn’t have been wrong,” he says, slipping his hands into his dark-gray dress pants. The motion causes them to tighten against his taut ass and images of his naked backside pop into my head. I shake my head as if it will make the thought disappear.

“I, uh—” I laugh and nervously cross and uncross my arms. “I know we haven’t always been friendly or even nice to each other but, ugh, I don’t even know what I’m saying.” I’m flustered and he can see it; he gives me a warm smile before reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear again. Something about that movement is so simple yet intimate.

“Just say whatever you feel, Kate. I’ll listen.”

“I obviously complained about you a lot to my family, well, not a lot, but I told them a few stories. I know it hasn’t been all you. I can be moody and difficult and instead of telling you when something is hurtful or rude, I snap back and clearly it never resolves anything.” I stare back at him, wanting him to say something but also worried he’ll ruin my attempt at an apology with a snarky-ass remark.

“I understand and I’m sorry I made you cry. I’m sorry for so much more too.” He looks at me like he’s sincere and I feel like I can see regret in his eyes.

“So what is this, like a clean slate or something?” I poke him in the side and he laughs, a deep rumble that fades into a smirk. There it is again, that tension between us. I don’t want

to ruin the moment so I turn to face one of the large mirrors and stare at my reflection.

“It’s a shame it’s all fake; we do make a damn good-looking couple.” He sidles up behind me, placing one hand on my waist as the other pulls my hair off my shoulder. I watch in the mirror as his eyes follow his hand movements, settling on my neck for a moment before meeting my gaze in the mirror.

“Cut it out, lovebirds. Dad wants you to play him in a game of chess, Kate.” Our moment is interrupted by Oliver walking around the tree. “Damon, I’ve got some single malt scotch with our name on it.” He gestures with his hand for Damon to follow him. I give him a nervous shrug as I walk toward the lounge to find my dad.

“MY PARENTS always made me feel like I was going to fail when I dropped out of college and moved to Chicago,” I say into the darkness of my bedroom.

“Why?” Damon asks from the floor.

After losing in chess to my dad, I decided to head up to bed a little early. Damon was still sipping scotch with Oliver while they played pool. I stopped by the game room to say good night but changed my mind at the last minute, instead just sending a text to Damon to let him know I’d retired for the evening.

I’ve been lying in bed for the past two hours, trying to fall asleep, but I can’t. My mind won’t let me. I’ve been trying to rationalize my feelings for Damon, not just the attraction but the genuine interest I’ve started to develop for him. It made me do a postmortem on my relationship with Chad and try to

resolve if I should let it go or tell my parents how he hurt me. And now, the question that Damon asked me earlier about why I didn't ask my parents for help has been rolling around in my head.

“They wanted me to come back to my small town and work at my dad's company and find some guy to marry who would also work for my dad. I just didn't have that academic bug like Oliver did; he flew through school like it was nothing, getting his undergrad and two masters in the time it takes most of us to just figure out what we want to study.” I stare up at the ceiling, Damon not saying anything else. I don't know what comes over me but I can't seem to stop talking.

“Every time I talked to them on the phone they'd tell me that my bedroom hadn't changed and I could always come home. I know it sounds like something normal parents should offer, but it wasn't because I said I was struggling or needed help; in fact, I was excited about my new life in the city. They weren't interested in hearing what I wanted to do, what was going on in my life—they just wanted me to move back home and take the safe route. So when I met Chad, who was a little older and established and rich, they were elated. They loved him and always said we were perfect together. They were just happy some guy was there to pick up the pieces of my messy life and pay for it. I think to them, Chad was my redemption so when I ended it with him, they took it personally as well. I think to them, I was once again throwing my life away because I was choosing happiness over security and that's just something my family cannot understand.” A tear forms at the corner of my eye and I don't resist it; I let it fall. “I hate feeling sorry for myself.” I sniff. “I know I come from wealth and privilege and I sound like I'm complaining that my gold shoes are too tight, but that's why I didn't ask them to help me

with my car. I want to do it on my own. I want to pursue my dreams and be happy for me, even if that means I have to struggle.”

The room is so silent, just the sound of my sniffles here and there. Damon doesn't say anything; instead, he just reaches his hand up on my bed until he finds mine. He holds it like he knows that I just need someone to listen and while it feels amazing to be heard, it causes my heart to ache because I know it's all an illusion and will disappear like a vapor once we return to work.

The next morning we sleep in, taking our time to get coffee and eat breakfast with my family. It's nearing four and my mom has officially moved into panic mode as guests for her annual Flowers family holiday party are about to start arriving. Damon and I managed to escape back up to my room to get ready and avoid most of the hysteria.

“You ready for this?” I ask as I brush some bronzer onto my cheeks.

“Yeah, I think so. How bad can it be?” Damon asks as he adds the finishing touches to his already perfectly styled hair. It was weird but Damon's hair was the first thing I noticed about him; it's thick, black, and so shiny. When he lets it grow a little longer, like it is now, his curls come through, sometimes casually falling over one eye. He looks over at me and I absentmindedly reach up and run my hand through the front to get the curl effect I like. He smiles at me and I smile back, the moment feeling so natural between us.

“So what did you and Oliver talk about last night? You guys were gone for like three hours.” I try to sound casual but it's been eating at me since last night.

“Just typical guy stuff. Talked business, the markets, how he’s getting ready for fatherhood.” He steps out of the bathroom, returning a few moments later. “How does this look for a party?”

I almost choke as I give him a once-over. *Hot damn, he looks good!* He’s wearing a black velvet suit coat with satin lapels over a crisp white shirt and a gold and black bow tie. His dress pants have a velvet tuxedo stripe down the side to match the coat.

“You just happened to pack the perfect black tie look for a holiday party?” I scoff. Like how does he seriously always look like he’s ready to be served on a silver platter?

“Of course. I’m a man of style, baby; I always come prepared.” He gives me a wink as he casually leans against the doorframe and adjusts one of his cuff links.

“Good thing I brought two dresses and one of them happens to be gold.” I step around Damon and into my walk-in closet, closing the door behind me. I pull out the floor-length gold sequin dress. The sweetheart neckline accentuates my cleavage and shoulders while the thigh-high slit shows off the perfect sliver of leg. I adjust the dress, pulling on a pair of matching strappy heels. I do a soft glam makeup look, a touch of a brown smoky eye and a nude lip while my hair is in soft waves and pinned back on one side. I open the closet door, stepping out to see Damon waiting on my bed.

“You ready to go make Chad jealous?” I joke as I walk over to him.

“Gladly,” he says as he stands up and circles around me. “I’ll do whatever you tell me in that dress. Chad will be crying in the corner by the time I’m done.”

“Easy, buddy; I was kidding,” I say as I press my palm against his chest and playfully push him away as I make my way to the door.

The party was in full swing. I say hello to the many friends of my parents I haven’t seen since last Christmas all while introducing Damon as my boyfriend.

“What is going on with you?” I whisper to Damon as his hands grip my waist.

“What? Nothing. We’re supposed to be in love, remember?” he whispers back as Chad and Tessa smile and wave at us. I plaster on my fakest smile and wave back.

“Eat shit,” I say through my smile at Chad even though I know he can’t hear me.

“You seem extra irritated, what happened?” I turn to face him. I can see the tension in his clenched jaw. “You were fine an hour ago.”

“Him,” he says, pointing toward Chad with his chin.

“What about him?” I ask, confused. Damon looks around before grabbing my hand and pulling me off to the side.

“Last night when I was talking to Oliver, he told me—” He rubs his eyebrows and I can tell he’s clearly pissed off.

“Told you what?” My heart is thudding in my chest.

“He told me that Chad has spun this huge sob story behind your back about how he thinks you cheated on him. He apparently still loves you and said Tess is just a rebound. I don’t know if he’s told everyone in the family, but that’s what he told Oliver, and I think your brother believes him.”

It sounds like water is rushing through my ears, then it turns to ringing. “He—no, what?” I’m so confused and angry. I ball

my hands into fists as I replay what Damon just told me. I spin around and take a step toward where Chad is standing before Damon grabs me by my shoulders and spins me back around.

“No, don’t. I have a plan. You might not like it, but just trust me,” he says before walking away.

I stand there, inhaling and exhaling deep breaths. I can hear the band finishing up their song, and then I hear a familiar voice through the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. I know you don’t know me. I’ve had the pleasure of meeting several of you, but for those I haven’t, I’m Damon Wells, Kate’s boyfriend. Kate? Can you come here, please?”

Confused, I walk into the great room where Damon is standing on the small stage. My legs are wobbly as I try to rationalize what the hell is going on and what Damon just told me about Chad. Everyone is staring at me and I try to muster a small smile.

“Baby, I feel like my life didn’t begin until I met you. You are a force to be reckoned with—fiery, determined, and so amazing. You are the inspiration behind everything that I do and I cannot imagine a life without you. Katherine Renee Flowers,” he says, stepping down and walking over to me. “Will you marry me?” He drops the microphone down to his side and tips my chin up toward his.

“Say yes,” he whispers and I don’t know what comes over me but I do.

“Yes,” I say and it feels like all the sound has been sucked out of the room. Then I hear chanting.

“Kiss her! Kiss her!” And before I know it our lips are touching; his hand is in my hair and my arms wrap around his

neck and we're kissing. It's sensual and intimate at the same time. I don't overthink it; instead, I just let myself fall. I feel his hand slide up the slit of my dress and grip my thigh as I moan into his mouth, and then I hear them chanting again, only this time it's filled with cheers and laughter.

“Get a roooooom!” someone yells.

I pull back and look at him; he's not smirking like I expected him to be. His eyes are hooded and lustful, hungry like he's about to devour me. Within a few moments the band is playing again and everyone's dancing. My family rushes over to congratulate us before my mom realizes that we need a moment to ourselves. I don't even register what anyone is saying to me; I'm just nodding and pretending to smile.

“Would you excuse me,” I say just above a whisper before escaping to the hall. I take my shoes off and walk up the stairs to my bedroom, barely closing the door behind me when Damon walks in.

“Did I fuck up again?” he asks and I just bury my hands in my face and start to cry. He pulls me to him, wrapping his arms around me as I cry. We stay like that for several minutes before I sit on my bed.

“No, this whole thing is just fucked up.”

“I was just pissed about what Chad said to Oliver. It made me see red when I saw him tonight and I just wanted to make him hurt like he hurt you.” He takes a seat next to me and I turn to face him.

“You need to understand, Damon, this isn't a situation that you can fix. In fact, pretending to be my boyfriend and now my fiancé—” I laugh when I say the word because it's so ridiculous at this point. “It's only making things worse because

at the end of the day, I now have to explain to my family why a second relationship has failed in my life. They're going to wonder what happened when I'm single next Christmas. I'm not mad at you; I went along with it at this point just as much as you have."

"I know I just wanted to make things be—"

"No, Damon. No." I reach over and grab his hand and squeeze it as he lifts his eyes to look at me. "I'm not yours to save." I stand up and walk to the bathroom to change and take a shower. Before I walk in, I turn back to him. He looks wounded and I know he doesn't want to hear it, but I have to say it anyway. "I don't need rescuing. I can take care of myself, Damon."

DAMON

I stare into the darkness of Kate's bedroom, her words bouncing around my head from earlier tonight.

"I'm not yours to save."

I want to save her, to protect her from all the harm in the world and the fuckboy assholes like Chad. I roll onto my side and pick up my phone. It is 1:14 a.m.

"Oh my God, if you light up your phone one more time," Kate groans and slams a pillow over her face. Seems like I'm not the only one who can't sleep.

"Maybe if I wasn't subjected to sleeping on this floor," I groan as I try to adjust myself.

"Your fault. You could have your own bed right now if you didn't say we were together and now stuck in the same room."

"Come on, let me in," I say as I stand up and nudge her leg. She pulls the pillow from her face and glares at me.

"No way!"

"That entire side of the bed is completely untouched; you don't even go near it." I gesture toward the opposite side of the bed where the covers and pillows are still undisturbed. She doesn't respond, just rolls over and ignores me.

“Fine,” I say and lie back down on the floor. I wait patiently until I hear her breathing deepen, and then I sneak into her bed and close my eyes, falling asleep almost instantly.

I wake to sunlight streaming through the blinds. I stretch my arms overhead and glance to my right to see Kate’s side of the bed is empty. I’m surprised I didn’t wake up to a punch in the face or even worse, my dick. I swing my legs out from under the covers and sit up, looking at the clock to see it’s almost ten thirty already.

“Kate?” I ask and see that the bathroom door is shut but I don’t hear any sounds. She must have woken earlier and went downstairs already for breakfast. I stretch again and walk over to the bathroom, grabbing the door handle and opening it without hesitation.

What I don’t expect to see is a butt-ass naked Kate fresh out of the shower. Her body is still dripping wet as her arms are stretched above her head, pulling her hair back from her face. I stand there in silence; it feels like time stands still as our eyes meet.

Holy fucking shit, she’s hot. I suddenly forget how to swallow as I take in the long, lean lines that run down her body. *Are her boobs fake? They look too perfect.* I narrow my gaze, not seeing any scars.

“What the fuck, Damon!” Her screech pulls me back to reality as she lunges for the towel on the hook and covers her body.

“Sorry!” I lie as I slam the door shut. “I didn’t hear you, I swear. I thought you went downstairs.”

Fuuuuuuck. Now I have to try and keep my fucking brain in control every time I look at her. I cover my face with my

hands. “I need a Christmas miracle,” I mutter just as she whips the door open.

“Seriously? I wake up next to you and now you’re walking in on me naked? Fucking creep,” she mutters before walking into her closet and slamming the door.

“It’s not like I was looking through a keyhole or something,” I say back at her before walking into the bathroom to take a shower.

Kate has to finish up some Christmas shopping with her mom and sister-in-law, so I take the afternoon to head into town and get some work done. I find a local cafe and knock out a few hours of work before taking some time to walk through the small downtown.

I see a jewelry store and decide to pop in. I’m greeted by a sweet older lady with gray hair. “Hello, what brings you in today?”

“Just looking,” I say. I smile back and walk over to a small Christmas tree that holds several crystal ornaments. I’m about to walk away when one catches my eye. It’s a crystal rendition of Thalia and Melpomene with a beautiful red ribbon through the top. Without a second thought, I take it to the counter. They gift wrap it beautifully in a small gold box. I don’t know if Kate is still as into theater as she was when she was in high school but the images of her on the stage and with her theater friends looked like such a wonderful and happy time in her life. If I can give her something that even reminds her for a second of that time in her life, it’s worth it.

I walk back to my car just as three men in Santa suits and one in an elf costume come around the corner, laughing.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” They laugh as they stumble down the sidewalk.

“Pub crawl!” another one shouts, handing me a flyer as they keep walking. I look at the sheet, noting a holiday-themed pub crawl tonight. I pull out my phone and call Kate.

“Hello?” she answers.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I ask.

“Just finished up shopping with my mom and heading back home. Why, what’s up?”

“We have plans tonight?”

“Nooo,” she says cautiously.

“We do now. I’m coming back to pick you up. We’re grabbing dinner and then hitting a pub crawl.”

“YOU’VE NEVER DONE a pub crawl? Ever?” I ask her again.

“Like I said before, no. My college experience was brief.” She shrugs as she takes a sip of her beer. I watch her lick the foam from her lip and images of her from this morning come rushing back.

“What?” she says with that attitude and I have to bite my cheek from saying something inappropriate.

“Nothing. It just seems crazy because you live here. Pub crawls are staple small-town events. Every holiday has one.”

“And how would you know?”

“Believe it or not, I lived in a small town once. Wasn’t actually born and raised in Chicago.” I regret bringing up my childhood immediately when I see the look on her face. She wants to know more.

“Where’d you grow up?” she asks and I wave the bartender over.

“Two candy cane shots,” I say over the loud music and she gives me a nod. I turn back to Kate who’s still waiting on me to answer. “Iowa,” I say before downing the rest of my beer and grabbing her hand before she can ask more questions.

“What are we doing?” she asks as I pull her off the stool and over to a group of people gathered around a table.

“I signed us up for beer pong. We’re next.” I lean near her ear so she can hear me and I smell her perfume. It’s spicy and exotic with a touch of cinnamon. It makes my mouth water and I let my lips linger near her skin. I step a bit closer, my nose in her hair and my lips against her ear. “Hope you brought your A game,” I say as I smack her on the ass before walking over to the bar to grab our shots.

“Here, a little pre-game courage,” I tell her as she takes the shot from me and we down them.

“Oh God.” She shudders as she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Yeah, not good,” I agree.

“I don’t know how to play beer pong,” she says in my ear.

“Don’t worry, we’re on a team. Just try to shoot the ping-pong ball into one of their cups. If you do, they drink it. If they get one in your cup, you drink it.” She nods and we step up to play. It’s a fucking riot. I’ve never seen her so relaxed and carefree. She’s laughing, high-fiving strangers, and even

throwing her arms around me and hugging me at one point. She's in her fucking element and I just sit back and watch.

"Stop it," she says, looking over at me. I'm sitting on the edge of a stool, watching her kick the other team's ass. After my third shot, I let her take over. She's better at the game than I am. Plus, it allows me to just watch her.

"Stop what?" I say with a coy smirk as I take a sip of my beer.

"Stop looking at me like that." She focuses her attention on her shot and takes it, kicking her foot back in the process and sinking it. She cheers again and points to the other team as the guy chugs his beer.

"Like what?" I say when she looks back at me.

"You know what." She plants her hand on her hip and juts it out. I just shrug and act like I have no idea what she's talking about. She takes a few steps toward me, abandoning the game as her eyes lock on mine and I can see the alcohol has given her a false sense of bravado.

"Now that you've seen me naked, you look at me like you don't know how to handle me." I reach out, grabbing her wrist and pulling her until she's standing between my thighs while I sit on the stool. I reach up, slipping my hand behind her neck and grasping her firmly. I pull her forward so that her lips are centimeters from mine.

"Sweetheart, I know *exactly* how to handle you."

Her breath hitches in her throat and we both ignore the yelling behind us to come back to the table. Instead, I stand up slowly, not releasing my grip on her neck. I grab her waist and spin her around, walking her backward a little till she's flush against a pillar in the middle of the room. I lean down, my lips

hovering over hers, teasing her. I press my rigid cock into her belly so she can feel what she does to me. I'm teasing her; I want her insatiable with desire for me. I want her so frenzied she'll rip my clothes off by the time I get her back to her house. She steps onto her tippy-toes and our lips just touch when someone trips and falls into us, spilling beer all over her.

“Oh shit, my bad,” the guys says, laughing as he stumbles and falls over.

“You okay, man?” I ask as I reach down and help him up.

I turn my attention back to Kate. “You okay?” I ask as she gives me a nod. I look her up and down; there's a wet stain all over her jeans and white sweater.

“Come on, I'll call an Uber. Let's get you home and cleaned up.”

“Sit,” Damon says as he grabs my waist and hoists me onto the counter in my bathroom. He grabs a towel and begins to dab it against my sweater, trying to soak the beer out of it.

He’s standing between my thighs as he presses the towel against my side with one hand while holding my waist with the other. The warmth of his fingers through my sweater is doing things to me. He’s focused on the task at hand so I take a moment to look at him, really look at him. His usually clean-shaven face has two days of stubbly growth and I want to reach out and run my hand against it.

“You confuse me.” I say the words before I can stop myself and I know it’s because of the alcohol but I don’t want to take them back.

“How so?” he asks, looking up at me through his long, dark lashes.

“Most of the time you look at me like you hate me. Like I infuriate you so bad you either want to fire me or punch me, I can’t decide. And then sometimes...” I swallow down the words. Should I open this can of worms? We were so close to kissing again tonight and I could blame it on the alcohol but I know that’s not the truth. I want it to happen again.

“And then sometimes?” He repeats my words back to me.

“Sometimes you look at me like you want to bend me over your desk.” I feel myself redden as I say each word. He stops what he’s doing for just a second before letting out a small chuckle.

“You’re not wrong.” He smirks as he stands up and tosses the towel into the hamper.

“So, which one was it tonight? At the bar. I saw the way you kept looking at me.” He stands between my legs, resting a hand on either thigh as he looks at me.

“You answer my question and I’ll answer yours,” he says.

“What question?”

“What are you going to do about this whole thing with your family and Chad?”

I push his hands off my thighs and jump down from the counter. Of course he’d ruin the moment. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I say as I step out of the bathroom and into my closet, Damon following close behind me.

“Why not? Is it because you’re not going to do anything again? Even though this shithead is telling your family blatant lies about you, you’re just going to pretend like everything is okay?”

“Can you get out so I can undress? I need to shower.” I say the words calmly without looking at him.

“No. Why do you keep running from this, Kate? Please, just tell me why you refuse to grow a backbone and stand up for yourself? You have no problem at work standing up to me, telling me when I’ve been an asshole.”

I turn around to face him. I’m angry and frustrated but he’s not wrong. I don’t know why I can’t just tell my family that

their actions with Chad hurt me. “I don’t know, Damon, okay? I don’t know.” I fling my arms. “There. Are you happy? I’m a pushover!”

“No, no, I’m not happy. I care about you, Kate.” He steps toward me and grabs my hand, but I pull it away.

“You care about me? That’s rich,” I mock.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” he snaps back.

“You didn’t give a fuck about my car breaking down and me needing to leave work early. You didn’t care that I was covered in coffee and slush when I showed up late to work. You didn’t care I had to wear someone else’s clothes that didn’t even fit me. No. Instead, you made fun of me and mocked my situation.” I point my finger at him as I step toward him.

“It’s not like that, Kate; it’s not because I don’t care or didn’t care.” He’s exasperated and turns and walks out of the closet.

“Then why, Damon? So now that the tables are turned and I’m putting you in the hot seat to answer questions, you walk away.” I follow him as he marches back into the bathroom.

“All of the above,” he says with his back to me.

“What does that mean?”

“It means”—he turns around and walks over to me—“tonight, I want to do all of the above to you. I want to fire you, to punish you, to bend you over this counter and fuck some sense into you.” He grips the back of my neck again. “Tell me,” he pleads. “Tell me why you won’t tell your family about Chad.”

I stare at him, his chest rising and falling with his rapid breaths, and it hits me. He thinks it's because I'm still in love with him. "I wasn't lying; I'm not in love with him," I say and my eyes search his for relief.

"Do you still want him?" he says, his eyes falling to my lips.

"No." And before I can get the words out, his lips are on mine and his fingers are tangled in my hair. His kiss is hungry and needy, his lips covering mine as his tongue explores mine. Thrusting, massaging against mine as I feel him grow hard against me.

"Stop," I say as I step away from him.

"You don't have to do this; there's nobody around to convince that we're a couple or in love. I'm not in love with Chad. I'm totally over him but it feels childish to throw a tantrum with my family and ask them to choose me over him. It makes me feel pathetic, like the fact that I have to even ask my family for this just makes me feel less than. Why can't they see that it hurts me? Why can't they understand that it's just fucking weird to still have your ex-boyfriend hanging around all the damn time." I wipe away at the tear that falls from my eye and tumbles down my cheek. "I know it's even more pathetic that I complain about it but yet do nothing about it. I guess I felt that in time, they'd naturally grow apart. Then when he showed up with her, it just snowballed and now they all get along and I feel like the asshole that comes in and breaks it all up because my feelings are hurt. I just want to get over it and not fucking care. I'm so tired of feeling like the outsider in my own damn family."

We stand in silence for several seconds before Damon walks to me again. This time he doesn't hesitate. He pulls me

in to continue the kiss, lifting me onto the counter again.

“I’m not trying to convince anyone that we’re a couple right now.” He grabs my hand, bringing it down to his crotch to feel his cock ready to tear through the zipper of his jeans. “I’m doing this because I fucking want you.”

DAMON

I rest my forehead against Kate's as I feel her squeeze my cock in her palm. I can see her heart beating in the small, fleshy dip at the base of her throat.

“I haven't stopped thinking about the way your lips taste, wanting to feel them against mine again.” I lean in and kiss her softly. “Every time you run your smart mouth, I want to teach you a lesson you won't forget.” I kiss her again. “Every time you look angry, frustrated, or stressed, I want to ravish your body so all you can focus on is the pleasure running through you.” This time I don't stop kissing her.

I place a hand on either side of her face, angling her mouth so I can deepen the kiss. She moans against my lips as her hands unbutton my jeans and slowly lower my zipper. My heart feels like it's about to beat out of my chest in anticipation of feeling her fingers wrapped around me. She doesn't hesitate; she slips her hand beneath the waistband of my jeans and boxers, gripping my cock. She pumps it once, twice, and I break the kiss to let out a groan.

“Fuuuuuck.” My head lulls back as she continues to pump her hand up and down my rigid length. How can something so simple feel better than any fuck I've experienced? I steady my

eyes on hers as I lean forward, placing my hand on the mirror behind her as I tip her chin upward.

“You’ve had me so fucking worked up for days,” I whisper against her lips before kissing her. I reach my hands down and grip the edge of her sweater. I don’t want her to stop what she’s doing but I need her naked now. “Put your arms up,” I say and she complies. I lift the sweater over her head and look down at her nude lace bra, her perfect tits spilling over the top of it. I’m about to lean down and pull one of the cups down when I look at her. “You’re not talking, Kate. What do you want?” She stares at me for a moment.

“Take your shirt off,” she says, reaching forward and undoing the buttons of my shirt. She gets three undone before I impatiently pull it over my head. I watch her eyes as they scan my naked chest. A small smile spreads across her lips, and then she bites her bottom lip as she reaches her hands out and places them on my pecs. She doesn’t say a word as she slowly explores every ridge and muscle of my torso. I watch her intently; she looks like she’s studying me and it’s the sexiest thing. I tell myself she’s memorizing this moment between us. My cock jumps and it’s painful in my jeans. I reach into my pants and adjust myself, wincing a little in the process.

“Take them off,” she whispers, and I look at her to make sure. She nods and I slip the jeans and boxers down my legs, kicking them off along with my socks. I’m standing in front of her, fully nude, my cock bouncing with my movements. I reach for the button of her jeans, undoing it along with the zipper before hooking my thumbs in the belt loops.

“Lift,” I say and she plants her hands on the countertop and lifts her ass so I can pull her jeans off. I toss them on the

floor and she's left sitting there in nothing but her bra and panties. "Don't look at me like that," I say as I step between her thighs again and lean forward, planting a row of soft kisses on her neck.

"Like what?" Her words are breathy.

"What'd you say earlier? Like now that I'm naked you don't know what to do with me?" I move her hair away from her neck, dragging my tongue up it before nipping at her earlobe. I feel her knees press against either side of my hips. "Trying to get some relief?" I murmur.

"Yes, please." She pants as she grips my biceps, her nails digging into my flesh. I reach a hand between her thighs, running my thumb over her still-clothed pussy. "Ohhh." Her mouth falls open as I repeat the process, circling around her clit a few times. I take a step back and her eyes pop open. I reach down and grab the edge of her panties, pulling them to the side.

"Oh, sweetie, you are already soaked. Look at those pink lips glistening for me. I think I need a taste, baby." I look up at her and she's intoxicated with lust. "But first, I want to watch you get even more wet." She looks at me with confusion. "I want to watch you play with yourself. Can you do that for me?" I grip her chin softly again. "Can you make yourself come for me while I watch?" A blush quickly creeps up her neck. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, Kate. I want to sit on the edge of the tub and stroke my cock while I watch you get yourself off."

"O-okay," she says, still a little unsure.

"What's wrong? You never had a man tell you exactly what he wants?" She shakes her head no and I lean forward

and kiss her again. “Just pretend I’m not here; let loose and fuck yourself like you want me to fuck you, okay?”

I step back and sit on the tub, fisting my cock as she slowly pulls her panties to the side and begins touching herself. “Mmmm. Fuck, baby, that is divine.” I try to keep a slow pace but it’s hard the moment she lets her inhibitions go. I can see the moment it happens—her eyes close, her head falls back against the mirror, and she pulls her feet up to plant them on the counter. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. Her creamy thighs splayed open, she works two fingers in and out of her wet pussy. I can hear the sounds it makes through her moans; she’s pulled the cup down on one of her breasts as she fondles her pert nipple.

“Ahh, I’m close,” she whimpers as she thrusts her fingers in faster and deeper. Her toes curl and she squeezes her nipple hard as waves of pleasure roll through her. I don’t let myself come; I don’t want to till I’m inside her. Instead, I stand and walk over to her, her fingers still inside her as she opens her eyes and looks at me.

“Did that feel good?” I ask as I reach down and pull her fingers from her folds. She watches me intently as I bring them to my lips, slipping them into my mouth and licking every ounce of her juices off them. I feel my dick aching. “Fuck me, you taste like heaven,” I mumble as I drop to my knees and rip her panties off.

“Oh God, Damon!” I don’t give her a warning; I dive face-first into her pussy, lapping at her. I use my tongue and fingers to pleasure her, drawing another orgasm out as she comes against my tongue.

“You want to get fucked, Kate?” I ask as I pull her off the counter and she wraps her legs around me. “If you don’t want

me to fuck you until you can't walk, you better tell me now." I grip her firm ass in my hands; I know I'm going to leave a bruise but that only makes me grip her harder. "Tell me, baby," I murmur against her lips.

"Fuck me, Damon."

She doesn't even finish the sentence before I'm sliding myself inside her, inch by inch; she's so tight. She grips my shoulders, biting me before sliding her hand into my hair and pulling so hard it burns my scalp.

"I can't hold back; this is going to be hard," I say as I thrust once more, eliciting an animalistic groan from her lips. I slam her back against the wall, pumping into her deeply with long, slow strokes. I reach behind her, undoing her bra. "Take it off," I groan as I watch her full tits finally bounce free. I lock my lips around one nipple, sucking it in and biting down softly.

"Oh my God." She pants over and over. She pulls my hair back so that we're looking at each other and for a moment I feel like she wants to say something, like she feels that this is so much more than a hard fuck in her bathroom.

I spin her around, planting her ass back on the counter as I look down and watch my cock slide in and out of her. "You've got me so hard," I grunt, my cock slick with her desire. "I don't want to come yet." She's leaning back a little on the counter, her head banging against the mirror with every thrust. I feel frenzied, like I can't control what I want to look at or touch while I'm on the edge. "Grab your tits, baby; play with your tits for me," I say as I grip her hips and start to pound into her harder and faster. She moans every time I slam into her.

“Touch my clit,” she says and I obey. I lick my thumb, rubbing her softly as I feel her tighten around me. “Yes, yes, yes!” she shouts as she comes.

The moans, watching her lose herself in her orgasm, watching her delicious body beneath me, all of it sends me over the edge and I pull out just as I spill myself onto her belly and tits. I’ve been turned out with no release for days and it shows in the load I just dumped onto her.

We’re both panting as we come down from our high. I reach down and pull her upright again, kissing her. “I wanted to kiss you when I was coming,” I say and it shocks me. It’s such an intimate desire to want or express, especially with someone who pretty much hates you and works for you.

I pull back for a moment to stare at her. “Are you okay?” I ask and she nods. She pulls me back to her mouth, her tongue flicking against mine like she’s fucking my mouth with her tongue—it’s hot as hell. “You kiss me like that again and you’ll be on your hands and knees getting railed to kingdom come,” I say, making us both laugh. “See what you did?” I say, looking down at my dick that’s already ready for round two.

“I, uh, I think I need a shower,” she says, lowering herself off the counter while looking at the mess I left on her. I grab some toilet paper, wiping her off the best I can before reaching in and turning on the shower.

She looks a little uncomfortable, standing there naked in front of me after the excitement of the moment has worn off. I turn her to face the mirror, the top of her head beneath my chin. I wrap my arms around her. Her green eyes look brighter, like they’re sparkling, and her pale skin is reddened from my beard and tongue. “I like seeing you marked from me,” I murmur in her ear as I cup her breasts. She puts her hands over

mine, offering me a small smile before slipping out of my arms and pulling me into the shower.

Contrary to what I expected, Damon doesn't attempt to seduce me again in the shower. Instead, he sees to me.

"Turn around," he says as he squirts a healthy dollop of shampoo into his hand and begins to lather it. I do as he says and close my eyes as his strong fingers begin to massage my scalp. I inhale the minty scent of the shampoo, letting my shoulders relax as Damon strategically presses his thumbs into the base of my neck and runs them slowly up the back of my skull.

"Mmm, that feels good," I say softly as he pulls my back against his front. I feel his manhood press against my ass, but he doesn't attempt to pursue anything further.

"Good," he murmurs against my ear as he kisses my shoulder. "You deserve it." He walks me beneath the shower stream, rinsing my hair of the shampoo before reaching for the conditioner. He looks at me questioningly and I nod.

"Just the bottom half," I say as he squirts it into his palm and runs it through my hair. "I let it sit while I wash my body," I say, reaching for my loofah.

"May I?" He takes the loofah from my hands and squirts the body wash onto it. He lathers it before pressing it gently to

my body as he begins to wash me slowly, his eyes trained on my body like he's studying me.

For a brief second I'm tempted to cover myself, although I have no idea why after I just masturbated in front of him. My cheeks redden at the memory but he doesn't notice. I watch him; he looks completely lost in the task at hand like he's worshipping me and it makes my stomach flop. Suddenly I feel nervous, giddy about what's happening between us, but then I remind myself to not overthink it. It's simply a product of us pretending to be together and getting carried away with it, mixed with an overabundance of alcohol at the bar.

After the shower I dry off and apply my skin care routine as Damon does the same. Neither of speak as we brush our teeth, towels wrapped around our still-naked bodies. When I'm done I turn to walk into my closet and glance back at him.

"Get in your pajamas and go to bed," he says with a smile. "I'm going to finish up in here and check a few emails." I give him a nod and head to the closet.

As I slip beneath the covers, the coolness of the sheets is a welcome sensation on my warm skin. I see the glow of the bathroom light still on beneath the crack of the door and I wonder if Damon will join me soon. I'm still wondering when my eyelids grow heavy and within a few minutes, I'm fast asleep.

The next morning I yawn and stretch my arms overhead before glancing to the left of me. The bed is empty but even stranger, the bedspread is unbothered. I turn my head back to the corner of the room where Damon has been sleeping, and there he is, still fast asleep with his naked back to me.

I lie there for a moment, taken aback at the fact that he didn't sleep with me after our escapades last night. *Should I be*

offended? Was I just a one-night stand? I'm tempted to crawl over to where he's lying and wrap myself around him, see if he's ready for round two. But then I stop myself. What if that's all this was? Just a one-time thing and this is his way of telling me? Before I can overthink it anymore or act on my impulse to wake him up and ask him, he stirs awake and I roll over to avoid an awkward conversation.

I hear some rustling and then the bedroom door open and shut softly. I peer over the blankets, but Damon isn't in the room. I let out a sigh, trying to tell myself not to worry about last night. It was just a momentary lapse in judgment; he'll go back to being your dick-hole boss in no time and you'll both hate each other again.

"Don't fall for it," I say to myself in a hushed whisper just as the handle to the door twists and I roll back over. I hear the soft padding of feet on the hardwood floor, then the pressure of the blankets moving as Damon sits on the bed beside me.

"Good morning," he says softly as the smell of coffee hits my nose. I roll over and holy shit, I can't help but smile when I see what greets me. Damon, shirtless, mussed hair, and stubble lining his angular jaw, his sparkling blue eyes staring down at me. *Goddammit, there goes that little belly flip again.*

"Morning. Thank you," I say, sitting up and taking the cup of coffee from him. I bring it to my lips and inhale the sweet, creamy goodness before taking a long sip.

"I just spoke to your mom briefly and she said something about the annual Flowers family ice-skating event tonight?" He smiles and it feels like fifteen butterflies awaken inside my belly.

"Yeah, that's the tradition, I'm afraid. How are you on the ice?"

“I don’t want to brag but let’s just say my teacher told me I was a natural and gold medal contender.” He gives me that signature cocking wink.

“*You* took ice-skating lessons? For how long?” I want to laugh when I picture him in tight stretchy pants and a blouse covered in a shiny sequins and bright feathers.

“From six to ten. Shhh, don’t tell anyone or you’re fired.” He holds his finger to his mouth as if he’s hushing himself.

“Scout’s honor,” I say as I lift my hand in the Girl Scout symbol. “Well, we usually have lunch as a family, go skating, and then hit up the Christkindle market in the town square for hot cocoa and pretzels. What time is it now?” I ask, reaching over and checking the time on my phone.

“Looks like we’ve got some time to kill,” he says when we see it’s only going on nine. “I have an idea.” He reaches out and grabs my hand. “How about you show me around town? I want to see where Kate Flowers grew up and raised hell.”

“YOU DID NOT!” Damon says as he throws his head back and lets out a loud belly-aching laugh.

“I swear to God!” I say, his laugh making me laugh in return.

“So how long before they found it was you who put it on the marquee?”

We stand outside The Times, our local theater that has since shut down. The new cinema is located in the mall and this relic has been turned into a historical landmark. I’m telling him about the time I caught my best friend Grace’s high school

boyfriend Mark making out with Cherish, the head cheerleader, so I took revenge on him. He happened to work at the movie theater so I borrowed my dad's ladder. Grace borrowed her dad's truck and we snuck out and changed the marquee to read: *Coming soon, Mark Teeter's teeny peen starring in Cheaters are Douchebags.*

"Not long. Mark obviously knew Grace was involved since he worked at the theater and she had access to the letters when she'd come visit and he'd sneak her into the back to make out and fool around. She didn't tell him she knew about Cherish so the last time she visited him she stole the box of letters and the rest is history."

"You guys get in trouble?"

"Not too much. We both had to apologize to Mark and his parents but after we told Mark that we'd tell his parents and everyone at school that he was a cheater, he told us it was water under the bridge."

We stand face-to-face on the sidewalk. Our laughter has died down and Damon is staring at me. Normally it would piss me off or make me uneasy that he's staring at me, his body so close to mine, but this time it makes me warm and fuzzy. It feels like he can read my thoughts with only his eyes. I'm about to do something stupid like grab him and kiss him when the buzzing in my pocket snaps me back to reality.

"My mom just texted. Ready for lunch?"

"Very," he says, reaching down and lacing his fingers through mine as we walk toward Murdoch's Bistro after spending the morning walking around my hometown. Damon was insistent I show him my high school, the theater where my plays took place, and all my favorite hot spots. Of course, I have to remind myself for the four hundredth time that this all

means nothing, and it's just an act. He's making the best of being my fake boyfriend—fiancé I guess—now, but once we're back in the office, the mask will fall away and we'll be right back to being oil and water.

Lunch goes well. It's easy and casual, and several times I catch myself smiling and telling stories and sharing laughter with Damon and my family like this is reality. I slip to the restroom after lunch. I'm washing my hands when I stare at my reflection. I look—*happy*. Panic grips me when I realize that I'm letting myself fall. Fall for the lies that we're both telling, fall for the fake romance that's brewing between us. I shake the thoughts from my head and step out, running smack into Damon's chest.

“Sorry—” I say, stepping backward without looking up to see who it is. In an instant he's grabbing my hand, pulling me toward him and kissing me like his life depends on it. I'm so shocked, I almost push him away, but I don't. Instead, I lose myself in the kiss, his hands cupping my cheeks, then one gripping the back of my neck as the other travels down my body, gripping my ass through my jeans and hiking my leg up around his hip. *Holy shit, this is hot.*

“Never be sorry,” he says breathlessly as he pulls away for a second, peppering my lips with nips and kisses as I feel his hardened cock pressing into my center. I want to pull him into the restroom and rip his clothes off, acting out a repeat of last night. He kisses me one more time, deep and heated, his tongue swirling around my mouth as he releases his grip from my ass and places his hand on the wall beside my head. I'm about to ask what the hell that was about when I glance past his hand and see Chad staring right at us.

“Look who joined us,” he says without looking over at him and my heart sinks. That’s what this was about, marking his pretend territory. I want to push him away, to slap him and tell him to leave and stop playing with my emotions, but I don’t. It’s not his fault I agreed to go along with this sham.

“Lovely,” I say with a faint smile as I release my hands from his chest. “Can’t avoid him forever.” I push past him and walk back toward my family.

DAMON

I see the look on her face and I know she thinks I'm only doing this for show, but I'm not. I mean, yeah, I want that douche Chad to be jealous; I want him to see what he lost when he fucked up with Kate, but I also want her to see what's been right here in front of her this entire time.

I watch as she walks back to her family, a smile plastered on her face as she hugs Chad, and it makes my stomach sick. I know it's not my job to fix her life or make her happy. Hell, I guess it's insanity for me to even think that she'd look at me and see anything other than a grade-A asshole who's done nothing short of terrorize her for the last three years. Can I change that? Would it even do any good to tell her that what I'm feeling for her is very real, that all the past behavior was my way of simply projecting? I realize how fucked up it all is when I think it through. What kind of woman would want a man that was so insecure and scared he made her feel like shit just so he could feel better about not having her. I slam my hand against the wall, shake off the frustration, and make my way back to the table. I'll just have to do everything I can to prove to Kate that I'm more than just her asshole boss and apologize to her for what I've put her through. She has to see that I'm worth a second chance.

“Hold my hand,” I say as we step onto the ice and Kate’s baby deer legs slip beneath her.

“I swear I do this every year.” She laughs as she grabs my coat with both fists and clings to me for dear life.

“I’ll just tell myself you’re pretending you need my help to boost my ego.” I maneuver us so that her arm is looped through mine and her hand is in mine.

“Pretty sure your ego doesn’t need any more boosting.” She grips my arm but her attention is pulled away when she notices Chad laughing hysterically. I look over, following her gaze to see him and Oliver doubled over. My stomach instantly sours but I shake my head of the thoughts and try to draw Kate’s attention back to us.

“What’s your favorite Christmas tradition?” I ask. She looks at me and then gazes off into the distance like she’s thinking about the question.

“Probably just being home with my family. I don’t see them enough.”

“You ever consider moving back here?” I ask and I’m praying her answer is no.

“No, not a chance. I am still very much in the need to spread my wings and fly and find out who I am phase.” She giggles a little.

“That sounds corny but I just mean I still haven’t figured out my career and I know that if I come back here, as much as I love my family, they’ll guilt me into working at my dad’s company because it’s safe and predictable.”

I unhook her arm from mine. “What are you doing?” she asks as I pull her till she’s facing me.

“You trust me?” I smile.

“Absolutely not.”

I grab her hands and begin to skate backward and she follows, a smile spreading across her face.

“Oh God, this is what my dad used to do with me when I was a kid and couldn’t skate.” She laughs and I spin her around slowly. She lets go of my hands and takes off. I chase after her and catch up to her just as she loses her balance and tumbles to the ground, taking me along with her. We lay in a pile on the ground, laughing.

“Are you okay?” I ask as I reach forward and brush her hair out of her face. She licks her lips, her eyes settling on mine as she nods her head. She’s stopped laughing and so have I. Every time I look into her eyes my pulse races, my heart feels like it’s about to beat out of my chest, and my stomach clenches with excitement.

“Kate,” I say just above a whisper as I lean forward and catch her lips with mine. It’s barely a kiss, a hint of a kiss as our lips brush.

“I think I’m ready to call it a night,” she says, getting to her feet. “If it’s okay, you mind passing on the Christkindle market?”

“Of course.” I take her hand and lead us back off the ice where we turn in our skates and make the walk back to my SUV. I want to ask her what’s wrong but I already know the answer. The moment the air thickened between us and our lips touched, reality came crashing back to her and she looked at me like I was just Damon Wells, her boss.

The car ride is quick but silent. So is the walk back to her room.

“You want to drink cocoa by the outdoor fire pit? It’s only just after nine.” I agree and we make our way down to the kitchen. I step onto the deck and turn on the fire while Kate makes us each a mug of cocoa before joining me outside.

“So Miss Flowers.”

“Oh, back to Miss Flowers, huh?” She gives me a coy smile.

“Kate. What would be your dream job?” She lets her head fall back against the high back of the Adirondack chair, the steam from the hot chocolate in her mug rising and then disappearing.

“I still don’t know but—” She hesitates briefly. “Don’t laugh but I’d love to do something with theater or acting still. I just love everything about it.”

“I think that’s great; I’d never laugh at that.” I furrow my brows a little at the thought that she thinks I’d make fun of her dreams.

“Well, it’s not exactly corporate America, kicking ass and taking names like you, my dad, and my brother. Besides, you’ve never really been the type to encourage me to follow my dreams, more like ‘get my damn coffee and so help me God if you spill it on my laptop again, I will ruin you.’” She says the last part in a mocking tone, like she’s impersonating me.

“Man, your boss sounds like a prick,” I joke, then take a sip of my cocoa.

“So was finance always your dream? What does your dad do?”

I feel my chest tighten the minute she starts asking about my family. “Yeah, I was always good with numbers and I

knew I didn't want to do general accounting or just mathematics. I enjoy business as well so it worked out well for me. My dad is in construction. He didn't go to college which is why he insisted I go. Still made a good life for himself though, supported us," I say, hoping my answer suffices.

"Is it just you or you have any siblings?" she asks with genuine curiosity.

"This could seriously use some whipped cream," I say with a smile. "Have any?"

"I'm sure we do. Let me check." She gets up and walks inside, returning momentarily with a can of Reddi-wip.

"Hey, not to change the subject, but..." No, please do, I think to myself and feel a bit of relief at her comment. "I always hang out with three friends from high school when I'm home. It's our chance to catch up since they still live here. You're more than welcome to come but I also don't want it to be boring or awkward for you to hang out with more strangers."

I'm about to ask her if she wants me to come but I don't want hear *no* if she doesn't want me there. "I'd love to come; it's not a problem at all for your fiancé." I grin but she doesn't seem enthused.

"Well, I'm done." She tilts her mug to show me it's empty. "I think I'm going to head up to bed." I want to tell her to stay but I also want to follow her upstairs. Instead, I sit frozen, completely unsure how to handle this or what to do.

"Kate?" I say and she turns to look at me.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." It's vague at best and I fully expect her to ask *what for*, but her face tells me she knows. "For—everything."

“Good night,” she says and then stops in her tracks. I think she’s going to ask me to join her but instead she turns and says, “And, Damon, it’s okay, you don’t have to pretend to be fiancé with my friends. They won’t tell my family anything.”

I give her a tight-lipped nod and it feels like someone just stuck a knife in my heart. “Good night, Kate.” I smile as she walks away.

I brush the curls out of my hair; it falls in loose waves, tumbling over my shoulders and down my back. I slept alone again last night, Damon on the floor. I tossed and turned, debating on asking him to join me, but somewhere between my decision to talk myself out of it or say fuck it and jump him, I fell asleep.

Something is changing between us. The way he looks at me, the small, intimate touches between the overt, over-the-top kisses, send me spiraling down rabbit holes of what-ifs and maybes. But I always talk myself out of letting it be anything other than a fantasy. It's like when you go away to summer camp and you swear the guy you met is the love of your life and you're going to be best friends with the girls in your cabin forever, but then you go home and back to your real world and real life and it all fades away to just a memory.

"You look beautiful." Damon's voice interrupts my thoughts as I slick a plum-colored gloss over my lips. I turn to see him leaning against the door of the bathroom.

"Thanks." I smile. "You don't look too bad yourself." I let my gaze fall down the length of his body—he looks like a Christmas fantasy. Dark jeans hug his muscular thighs; the sleeves of his flannel shirt in shades of red and green are rolled

to his elbows, exposing his forearms. This man knows exactly how to dress to emphasize his long legs, lean waist, and broad shoulders. *Chris Evans who?*

“So anything I should know before being thrown to the wolves tonight? Or maybe something I shouldn’t mention?” He runs his hand along his jaw seductively as his eyes roam over my body. I see him pause on my ass in the reflection of the mirror.

“Just be on your best behavior.” I give myself one last look in the mirror as I walk toward the door, my hips swishing a little more provocatively than normal. I decided to wear the skintight black jeans Damon packed me, complete with a dark-purple off-the-shoulder sweater that not only shows off my neck and collarbones, but my cleavage as well. I didn’t have the best shoes for the outfit but thankfully, my mom still had a pair of sexy thigh-high boots stashed in the back of her closet—I made a mental note to never ask myself what she wore them to.

“Always,” he says before adding, “especially when people don’t know me. First impressions and all that.” I pause as I walk by him and rest my hand on his chest, flashing him the same seductive, coy smirk he loves to give me.

“Oh, they already know about you, Damon Wells. Trust me... They’ve heard alllll about you.” And that look of *oh shit* on his face is exactly what I was going for.

WE CLIMB into the back of our Uber for the short ride to the bar. It’s quiet, the soft sound of Christmas jazz playing on the

driver's radio. The pungent smell of a cinnamon air freshener fills the car.

It's a compact car, and our shoulders touch. But it isn't because there is not enough room but because Damon chose to sit in the middle of the back seat. He leans closer to me, his mouth close to my neck.

“So how worried should I be meeting your friends? They going to surround me in the alley and jump me?” he teases.

I can smell his cologne, notes of amber and pepper, and it instantly transports me back to the night in my bathroom. I feel warmth spread through my body at the memory that I've had sex with my boss. I know it sounds ridiculous to forget something so momentous from just two days ago but it's like I've compartmentalized it, convinced myself it didn't happen.

“Don't worry. After they took care of my first boss, they promised they wouldn't do anything like that again. People were asking too many questions, Feds got involved,” I tease him back, waving my hand dismissively before flashing him a grin. “If Chad's still alive, then you've got nothing to worry about.”

We thank the driver and exit the car in front of The Rowdy Farmer, the same bar my friends and I have been coming to for years. Someone exits and I can hear Mariah Carey crooning “All I want for Christmas” over the speakers.

“The Rowdy Farmer?” Damon asks, pointing to the large gold letters set against painted black brick.

“Hey, it's small-town Illinois; what do you expect? The *corny* names are part of the charm. Corny,” I repeat, wiggling my eyebrows up and down to which Damon laughs and just

shakes his head. We step inside and I glance around, spotting my friends in a corner high top table.

“Over there,” I say, pointing toward Todd who is waving us over. As we approach the table, my friends jump up, greeting me with hugs and air kisses. I start to remove my coat when I feel Damon’s hands helping me.

“Allow me,” he says, sliding the coat down my arms and placing it on my chair. All three of my friends have the same expression on their faces, one I’m not looking forward to dealing with.

“Damn, girl!” Todd says, whistling and pointing to my outfit. “You clearly came here to break hearts and necks dressed like that.”

I flick my hair over my shoulder dramatically and jut my hip out like I’m posing. “That’s the only thing I know how to do.” I laugh. I turn to Damon who has that look in his eyes again, the one that either says I want to punish you or I want to drag you to the back of this bar and have my way with you. I ignore it, turning back to my friends.

“Damon, this is Todd, Charity, and Bridgette,” I say, pointing to each friend. They all smile and say hi, Todd giving him a handshake that lingers a little too long.

“This is Damon, my boss.” Something flashes across his face, a look I know all too well—annoyance. I want to remind him that he could have stayed home if he didn’t want to come tonight. I just hope it doesn’t develop into one of his sour moods that ruins the night.

I reach to pull out my chair but Damon has it first, placing his hand at the small of my back as I take a seat. He pulls his

chair right next to mine, taking a seat. Our arms are touching and I catch my friends noticing.

“So, Damon,” Charity asks, “what brings you down to our little corner of the world from the big city?” It’s a legitimate question and I know my friends were surprised to hear that my boss was traveling home with me. I didn’t give them any more detail than that and I only told them because he said he wanted to come out with us tonight.

I glance over at Damon, trying not to show the nervousness I feel in my belly. Once again, he reaches under the table for my hand.

“Long story short, Kate was having car trouble and I was a selfish dick that didn’t let her leave work in time to get it fixed so I brought her home.” He looks at me, a crooked smile forming at one corner of his mouth as he slowly strokes his finger across the back of my hand. It sends a shiver down my back.

“Oh my God, that is so sweet of you.” Bridgette rests her hand over her chest as she speaks.

“Wait, so are you spending the holidays at the Flowers? What about your family?” Todd’s confusion mirrors everyone else’s and this time I’m the one that squeezes Damon’s hand. I’ve picked up on the fact that there’s something about his family that he either doesn’t want to talk about or isn’t ready to talk about.

“Yup, staying with us. His family is completely understanding,” I say, brushing off the question. “How is it that we’ve been in this bar for five minutes and nobody has ordered a round of nog shots?” My question successfully changes the subject.

“Nog shots?” Damon raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah, it’s one part eggnog and one part whatever liquor you want. Todd likes Goldschläger because it’s cinnamon; Bridge, you drink peppermint schnapps, right? And Charity and I drink it with Crown because we’re not crazy and trying to black out.”

“That sounds interesting.” Damon laughs. “I’ll do one with Crown.”

“I’ll get the first round.” I stand to head to the bar when Damon pushes back his chair and joins me. He places his hand at the small of my back again as we walk toward the bar.

I say hi to Deb, the bartender who’s been here since I turned twenty-one, and place the order for the shots along with two rum and cokes for Damon and me. I feel his hands on my waist as he stands behind me so I turn to face him. He doesn’t let go; instead, he pulls me closer before reaching up and smoothing my hair away from my face.

I’m confused. I want to ask him what’s going on, but I also don’t want to ruin the moment. I give him a small smile.

“Why are you nervous?” His normally bright eyes seem darker, hooded.

“Nervous? I’m not nervous.” I feel my shoulders shrug dramatically like I’m trying too hard to play it cool. Without thinking I glance over my shoulder and realize that all three of my friends are staring right at us, mouths hanging open. *Shit*. I step back a little from his embrace.

Damon follows my gaze. “Ah,” he says, releasing me and placing his hands on the bar. “Right, sorry about that.” He hands his credit card to Deb and grabs the tray with our drinks.

“Keep the tab open,” he says as we make our way back to the table.

I feel... bad, like I'm hiding him. But we aren't together; we aren't actually a couple. We're lying to my family about us. Hell, we're lying to ourselves as well.

We spend the next two hours laughing till my stomach hurts, reminiscing about our childhood and catching up on what's been going on in our lives. Maybe it's the alcohol or maybe I'm caught up in the fantasy, but at times it feels like Damon and I are a real couple. I feel his hand rest on my thigh under the table. He casually drapes his arm around my chair at one point. He even wipes a drop of liquor from my lips with his thumb and then licks it off his finger.

“I need to use the restroom,” he says, sliding off his chair and walking away from the table.

“Okay, what the actual fuck was thaaaaat?” Todd gasps as he slaps the table with both hands, causing me to jump. He grabs the small bar menu off the table and begins to dramatically fan himself.

“Yeah, Kate. I just about melted over here with that thumb-licking situation,” Bridge joins in.

I wave off their comments. “It's just the alcohol, I'm sure.” I take a long sip of my ice water because they weren't wrong, that thumb-licking thing was hotter than hell and if we were alone, I probably would be in the bathroom with him right now.

“Seriously, Kate, he's into you,” Charity adds. I scrunch up my nose and shake my head.

“Okay, I want to believe you're just being coy and you're not that oblivious to the fact that he's super into you.” Todd

grabs my hands. “Sweetie, it’s clear you both like each other. What gives?”

For some reason, again probably the alcohol, tears prick my eyes and my chin quivers.

“Ohh, honey, we didn’t mean to upset you,” Bridge says.

“No, you didn’t. It’s not that.” I grab a napkin and dab at the corners of my eyes, making sure Damon isn’t walking back yet. “You guys know he and I have a very rocky relationship at work. Well, things have been... different lately between us.”

“Different how?”

“We have had some actual nice conversations and we—” I trail off, not sure if I should divulge this information. But Todd catches on.

“Oh my God, you guys hooked up?” He covers his mouth with his hands and I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head.

“Tell us everything! How was it?” Charity and Bridgette both talk over each other.

“It was—amazing! Like, best I’ve ever had. He—” I hesitate again and then lower my voice. “He made me get off in front of him so he could watch while he jerked off, and then we had sex all over my bathroom!”

Todd pretends to fall out of his chair like he’s fainting.

“He *made* you?” Charity asks, her eyes wide.

I nod. “He’s not just bossy at work apparently. But I’m not delusional; I know that as soon as we’re back in Chicago and at work, things will go back to how they were.” I glance up to see Damon walking toward me, and the water I’m chugging makes me cough.

“So, yeah, Chad is still hanging around so that’s been a treat,” I say, changing the subject.

“Ugh, what a tool.” Charity shakes her head, and Todd and Bridgette agree.

“What do you think about that whole Chad situation?” Todd asks Damon as he sits back down. I had really hoped we wouldn’t talk about Chad tonight but in my panic I mentioned him.

“I think he’s a waste of space,” Damon says, finishing off his drink. “If given the chance, I’d be more than happy to teach him a few lessons.” His eyes darken.

“But I also think we should respect Kate’s wishes about it. Maybe letting him see her move on with someone else and be happy and fulfilled for once will be the best revenge.” His eyes don’t move from mine and my breath catches in my throat. I glance over at my friends and they’re all staring at me with an *I told you so* look on their faces.

Damon turns his head, looking over at the dance floor where two other couples have begun to dance. A slow country song I’m unfamiliar with comes on the jukebox and Damon holds his hand out to me.

“Dance with me,” he says.

I place my water on the table and slowly extend my hand to his, and he leads me onto the dance floor. He pulls me in close, his hard body pressed firmly against mine as he grips my waist. My heart feels like it’s about to fall into my ass and my back is as stiff as a board.

“Relax,” he whispers in my ear as our bodies begin to sway with the music.

I let out an audible breath, willing myself to relax in his arms as we move around the floor. I want to ask him what he's thinking, what he's feeling, what we're doing. He must see it all over my face.

“Kate, look at me.” He tips my chin up and our eyes meet. “Stop overthinking everything; just feel the moment.” He leans in, planting a soft kiss to my lips before continuing the dance. The song ends, but another quickly comes on. Damon doesn't let go of me or stop dancing.

I let my hand rest against his chest; the feeling of his body against my fingers is doing things to me. I look up at him again. This time I initiate the kiss.

“Can I take you home?” Damon murmurs against my mouth, and I nod my head yes.

“Do you understand what I'm asking you, Kate?”

He pulls back, his eyes staring into mine as his lips are so close, I feel his warm breath as he speaks. I bite my bottom lip, not wanting to assume, but I don't have to for long.

“I'm asking if I can take you back to your room”—he slips his hand behind my neck—“and strip off your clothes so that you're completely naked and at my mercy.” He nips my bottom lip and a jolt of electricity shoots right to the junction between my thighs, wetness pooling.

“I want to explore every delicious inch of your body with my tongue,” he whispers in my ear as his tongue snakes out and curls around my earlobe. My eyes roll back in my head and I've completely forgotten I'm in the middle of a dance floor with my friends staring at me.

“And then,” he continues, dragging his lips up my neck, planting small kisses along the way, “I want to fuck you so

thoroughly, so deep that no other man will ever come close to making you come like I will over and over again.”

DAMON

I don't remember us walking off the dance floor or saying goodbye to Kate's friends. Hell, I don't even remember the ten-minute ride back to her house. But the moment we step inside her room, my brain is only focused on one thing—her.

I'm worried her guard will be back up, that she'll have talked herself out of it, but when I close the door and turn around, she's already on me. Pulling my coat down my arms, she thrusts her tongue in my mouth. I free my arms, reaching between us to undo the buttons of her coat as I remove it, letting it fall to the floor. I grab her hands, spinning her around and pinning her to the door. I break the kiss, both of our chests heaving.

"I'm in control tonight, Kate. Understand me?" She nods slowly and I kiss her again.

"There's so many things I want to do to you. So many things I've fantasized about over the years." I know I'm exposing myself to her, telling her that this isn't something that's new to me. No, this is a fantasy I've revisited dozens of times over the years.

I release her hands, pulling her toward the bed. I take my time removing her clothes, slowly removing her boots first before stripping her out of her jeans and top. She's standing

there in her lace bra and G-string; her full tits look positively edible. My mouth waters as I take her in. “So fucking sexy. I don’t know where to start,” I murmur as I run my hand over my mouth like I’m actually drooling.

I sit on the edge of the bed as I continue to stare at her, kicking off my boots and socks and removing my shirt. I slide off the bed onto my knees. “Think I’ll start here,” I say as I run my nose up the center of her panties. “Been dreaming about eating your pussy all night.”

She threads her fingers through my hair as my hands grip her hips. I plant a soft kiss through her panties before hooking my thumbs in them and pulling them down her thighs. I see a small wet spot inside her panties and smile. “Were you wanting me to taste you too?” I ask, looking up at her, and she nods.

I lean forward again, slipping my tongue between her folds, causing her to jerk and pull my hair. She hisses and I do it again. “Not like this,” I say. Her eyes pop open and she looks down in confusion. I stand up, removing my jeans so my cock springs free.

“Get on the bed on all fours.” She looks at me, then slowly moves to the bed, bending over and looking over her shoulder at me. “Fuuuuck me, that’s a pretty sight.” I look at her exposed to me, her glistening pussy and plump cheeks staring back at me, begging to be taken. I step forward and grab her hips, pulling her back till her feet are hanging over the edge of the bed, then I drop to my knees. I don’t waste time. I dive in, lapping at her as I grip her hips, burying my face in her wet folds. Eating her from the back has been running through my mind since the second day I met her. She squirms against me, fisting the sheets and moaning as her release builds. I don’t

stop. I lick long, slow laps from her slit, all the way up her ass crack, swirling my tongue around the tight bud of her ass. I feel her jerk in surprise.

“You want more, baby?”

“Yes,” she says, and I dive back in. I fuck her with my tongue, then I slide two fingers deep inside her as I continue licking her ass. It only takes a second before she’s exploding around me, my name tumbling from her lips as she collapses on the bed. The sound of my name being groaned by her while she orgasms is about the best thing I’ve ever heard. I grip myself, stroking a few times, but I stop, afraid I’ll come too early just by looking at her.

She looks at me, my cock in my hand. Her eyes drop to a small bead of pre-cum leaking from my tip and she pulls herself up, crawling over and licking it. My cock jumps at the warmth of her tongue.

“Fuck, baby,” I say as she does it again and again, just the tip of her tongue swirling around the head of my shaft. She opens her mouth wider and I guide myself into her, sliding in and out of her lips a few times. It’s a vision I’ll never be able to unsee, Kate on her hands and knees, my cock fucking her mouth. I pull back before I can finish, a look of disappointment settling on her face. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, we’re just getting started.”

I didn’t bother bringing condoms on this trip—I wasn’t exactly expecting this to happen—but Kate assures me she’s on birth control and we’re both clean.

I stand her up, reaching behind her to remove her bra. I cup her breasts, rubbing my thumbs over her nipples.

“That feels so good; I’m so sensitive,” she says as her head lulls back. I lower my head, taking my time with each breast, biting and sucking on her nipples as I caress them. Her moans are driving me wild and I know I can’t take much more.

I lift my head. “I need to fuck you so bad,” I say as I kiss her. I walk us back to the bed and climb up her body, kissing her everywhere. I’m tempted to stop at her pussy again, her scent almost pulling me in. I lick her twice, savoring the sweetness before grabbing two pillows and placing them beneath her ass. She’s at an angle now, her back and shoulders on the bed, her hips and ass elevated. I position myself at her entrance, teasing her a few times by running the tip up and down her slit.

“More,” she pants, and I oblige. I thrust in an inch, pulling back out and thrusting in two. She’s so tight around me. My eyes roll back in my head as she grips me like a vise. It only takes a few minutes before I’ve built up a rhythm, driving all the way into her and pulling all the way back out. We’re both on edge, groaning, grunting, trying not come and just ride this out for as long as possible.

I lift myself up so that I grip the top of her headboard; her arms are outstretched over her head, palms flat against the headboard as I drive into her.

“I can’t stop,” I pant as I drive into her harder and harder. “I need to come, baby,” I grunt as my pace begins to grow sloppy and jagged. I can’t stop. I groan, slamming into her fully one last time until I spill myself inside her just as her release breaks free. She digs her nails into my back as she lifts her hips higher and grinds them against me. We’re both breathless, falling into a pile of sweaty limbs.

“Nobody’s ever done that before,” Kate says, breaking the silence.

“Done what?” I asked, confused.

“Umm—licked my ass,” she says softly, and I turn my head to look at her.

“Seriously?” I’m surprised in all honesty.

“Yeah, that’s pretty wild for me.”

“Hey.” She looks up at me. “No need to be embarrassed by it. We’re both consenting adults and as long as you enjoyed it, that’s all that matters.”

“I did enjoy it.” She tries to bite at her lip to keep from smiling.

“Oh, yeah? Interested in any other new things?” I prop myself up on my elbow to look at her.

“Like?” She looks scared.

“Well, I’m not asking to fuck your ass; if you’ve never done anything like that, I don’t think it’s best to jump into that.” She covers her face and giggles.

“Oh my God.” I pull her hands down and even in the darkness of the room I can see she’s blushing. “Not with that dick. I’ll be ripped in half.” I can’t help but laugh; her eyes are huge and she’s completely serious, but I’ve never heard it put quite like that.

“You ever had anything inside you? A finger? Toy?” I ask and I feel my dick start to stir at the thought of it.

She shakes her head no.

“Interested? If you’re not, I won’t push it.”

She thinks about it for a second. “Maybe?”

She doesn't have to tell me twice. I reach down between us, my fingers finding her pussy and I begin to slowly circle her clit.

"We'll go slow," I whisper against her lips.

"Oh, right now?" Her legs slowly fall open for me as I feel her wetness building.

"Just enjoy," I say as I slip my finger inside her slit, dragging the wetness to her ass and circling it. I repeat this process several times before she's breathing heavy, panting, grabbing at my chest as I fuck her pussy with my fingers. I place my thumb at her clit, circling it as my two fingers pump into her. She's so close, I can feel her release building as she grips my fingers. I pull them out, and this time when I drag her wetness back, I press against her asshole. I hear her breathing quicken more and I press harder. I go slow, inching my finger in and out in the smallest increments.

I dip my head down, swirling my tongue around her clit as I push my finger farther into her. She's grabbing my head with one hand, gripping the sheets with the other as I lick her and fuck her asshole with my finger. It doesn't take long before she's coming undone on my lips, her legs shaking and quivering as an orgasm rocks her.

I want to let her rest but looking down her body, seeing her legs splayed open with my finger still inside her ass and her wetness on my tongue, I can't hold back.

"I know you're probably sore, Kate, but I need to fuck you again." I roll over, pulling her on top of me. She doesn't hesitate; she positions herself over me before sliding down my cock.

“Yeah, this”—I struggle to talk as her tits bounce in my face—“this is how I want to die.”

THE ROOM IS QUIET. The steady rhythm of Kate’s breathing tells me she’s either asleep or almost asleep. We’ve been wrapped in each other’s arms for a few hours. I sit up slowly, not wanting to wake her, and reach for my phone in my jeans pocket. It’s almost three a.m. I feel movement behind me as the sheets rustle.

“Stay in bed,” Kate says, reaching for me. I grab her hand, bringing it to my lips and kissing her fingertips.

“I’m just grabbing water.” I walk to the restroom, grabbing a glass of water before walking back to bed and climbing in behind Kate. I pull her back against my chest, burying my nose in the crook of her neck and praying, hoping this isn’t the only time I get to fall asleep with her in my arms.

“Good morning and happy Christmas Eve,” I roll over, waking to the smell of bacon and coffee.

“Are you serious?” I smile as Damon walks over to the bed with a tray of food. He slowly lowers it to the bed, climbing up to sit next to me.

“Breakfast in bed? You’re really trying to butter me up, huh?” I ask, reaching for the cup of coffee.

“Well, your mom made it; I just assembled it.” He kisses me on the forehead, something so simple yet so endearing. Is this how life with Damon would be? I wonder, or is this just all still part of the fantasy we’ve created?

“A girl could get used to this.” I wince a little at my confession, but Damon doesn’t seem fazed by it.

“So what is the Flowers family tradition for Christmas Eve?” He takes a bite of his toast and washes it down with orange juice.

“Sledding,” I say with a mouth full of eggs and bacon.

“Oh yeah?” He looks excited and it makes me smile.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a big deal. There’s a golf course about three miles away that has this big hill and they open it up to

the public. They have hot cocoa and hot dogs and it's a whole big thing. Very Midwest Christmas vibes."

I know to most people it would be lame. Sledding in Illinois isn't exactly thrilling when our biggest hill only has a two percent grade, but we've been doing it since I can remember and it's one of my favorite family traditions.

I see his face fall a little. "Chad coming?" He spits his name out like it's bitter.

"Nope, this is Flowers only so consider yourself extremely lucky I'm letting you tag along." I playfully bump his shoulder. We both finish our breakfast, and I make the bed as Damon returns the tray to the kitchen.

I step into the bathroom, flipping on the water as I brush my teeth. A moment later, Damon walks into the bathroom. He pulls his t-shirt off, his taut muscles rippling with the movement, and I catch myself staring. *God, this man is mouthwatering.*

He doesn't stop with the shirt. He slides his pajama pants down his legs before walking up behind me and kissing my neck.

"Care to join me?" he murmurs like it's normal for us to just be waking up together and going through our routine as a couple. He wraps his arm around my waist, placing his hand on my belly as he plants several more kisses along my neck. My head lulls to the side and I forget I have a toothbrush hanging out of my mouth.

I snap back to reality when I start to choke on the minty toothpaste running down my throat, causing Damon to laugh. I spit it out, rinse, and turn around to smack his bare ass just as he jumps into the shower.

A moment later I'm naked and joining him and a few minutes after that, I'm crying out his name in orgasm.

"OH MY GAAAAAWD!" I squeal as Damon and I careen down the sledding hill. I'm sitting in the front of the toboggan while Damon's long legs jut out around me. He grips my waist, shouting at me to turn. I yank the rope, causing us to both fly off the sled to one side, landing in a tangled heap in the snow.

Tears stream down our faces as we laugh hysterically. This is the third time I've made us crash.

"That's it, I'm driving from now on," he says, standing and pulling me to my feet. I stand there in his arms. Our laughter dies down as we stare into each other's eyes. He tilts his head and I mimic his movement, both leaning in as our lips touch.

"Get a room, you lovebirds!" Oliver shouts just as a snowball lands square on our faces.

"Oh, it's on now!" Damon shouts as I step back and try to shake the snow from my hood. He picks up a handful of snow, compacting it into a ball before sending it hurtling at Oliver who dodges it and laughs.

After that, everyone gets in on the snowball fight. Kids and families we've never met have teamed up, creating walls and forts and talking strategy and formation. I haven't laughed this hard in years. I sit back, watching as my family embraces Damon like he belongs, and for a brief moment, I believe it too.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS!” my dad says, raising a glass.

“Merry Christmas!” we all repeat back with glasses raised.

Damon turns to me, clinking his glass of champagne against mine and whispering in my ear, “Merry Christmas, beautiful,” before leaning in, his soft lips landing on mine.

“So when do we get to start talking grandbabies, you two?” My mom interrupts our moment, bringing a very much-needed reality check to the moment.

“Mom!” I cough, instantly turning red. I glance over at Damon who looks... calm?

“I guess that depends on your daughter. I’ll leave it up to her.” He gives me a smile and a wink, reaching over to grab my hand.

What the fuck? This lie is getting a bit too out of hand.

“Well, with the eagerness”—my dad looks over his glasses at both of us—“of their activities, I’m surprised there isn’t one on the way already.”

Oh. My. God. I cover my face with my hands and sink down into my chair. My face is so red that I’m positive I’ll burst into flames at any moment. At least I won’t be around anymore to deal with this.

“And on that note, let’s open gifts,” my mother says, giving my dad a look that says *I told you not to say anything*. “Kate, you’re the elf this year.”

We bring our wine into the family room where my mother’s second Christmas tree sits. This is the one that’s

decorated with ornaments from our childhood, Chicago Cubs and Bears ornaments and the one we get every year as a family.

When we were kids the presents were piled high and wide, spilling from beneath the tree. But as we've gotten older, the presents have become fewer but more meaningful. I pick them up one at a time, handing a few to Oliver and Erin first. I'm down to one small one left. I bend down and pick it up, opening the tag to see my name.

"Oh, who's this from?" I ask as I spin around right into Damon's arms.

"From me," he says, kissing the top of my head. He grabs my hand and walks me over to the couch to sit beside him.

"Oh, Dennis, sweetheart." My mom fans fake tears as she stares at the ruby bracelet my dad gave her. They play the same game every year—she sends my dad a list of things she wants; he picks a few, and she pretends to be surprised on Christmas Day. I've asked her before if she resents him for it because it's not a surprise or thoughtful but she said it was her idea. After forty Christmases together, it starts to get repetitive and not as much fun to try and surprise each other.

"Open yours, sweetie," my mom says as I clutch the small box in my lap.

I pull the red ribbon off the box and slowly pull off the thick gold wrapping paper. It feels like a shame to destroy such beautiful packaging. I glance at Damon, offering him a shy smile as I lift the lid and see the beautiful Thalia and Melpomene masks in crystal.

"Oh my God, it's beautiful," I say as I pull it out of the box. The ornament has a red ribbon through a small hole on

the top. “Thank you,” I say to Damon who’s smiling at me.

“When I saw it, I immediately thought of you.”

I run my fingers over the smooth edges of the crystal and a lump forms in my throat. *He’s thoughtful.* This whole time I thought it was just an act but maybe— “I’m so sorry I didn’t get you anything.” I suddenly feel awful.

“No, don’t apologize. I, uh, I already have the most amazing gift I could ask for.” He reaches over and squeezes my knee and I think he’s done but he slides off the couch and produces another small box from his pocket. I look around nervously but he reaches out and grabs my hand. “I’m so grateful you agreed to be my wife and now, I get to do it right with this.”

He opens the box slowly and my hand instinctively shoots to my mouth. There staring back at me is my grandmother’s antique wedding ring. I don’t think twice; I jump up, tears stinging my eyes as I run up the stairs to my bedroom.

I throw myself on my bed, tears running down my cheeks. How did I get myself into this mess? My parents were right about me; clearly, I can’t manage life on my own.

“Kate?” Damon’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Go away,” I say, sniffing as I wipe away the tears.

“Kate, what happened? What’s going on?” he asks as he ignores my comment and sits on the bed beside me. He reaches out and touches my leg. I jerk it away, sitting up rapidly.

“Are you fucking serious?” My words sting; he looks like I just slapped him. “This whole thing is a nightmare! It’s gone too far.” I’m sure my mascara is running down my face but right now, I couldn’t give a shit.

“Last Christmas, I thought—I thought that I’d be getting a proposal, a real one from Chad with *that* ring. So it was like salt in the fucking wound when I opened it and saw it staring back at me and it’s all just a big fucking lie.”

I see his face drop as he hangs his head. “Kate, I had no idea, I’m so sorry. When your mom came to me with the idea, I thought tha—”

“What? When?”

“Two days ago.” He looks confused again.

“Are you serious? You’ve known about this for two days and you didn’t say anything to me? You really thought *yeah, this is a good idea!*”

“I don’t know. It all happened so fast I got confused and I panicked. I didn’t know what to do or what you would want me to do. So I just...”

“Really? Mister always has the perfect answer for everything, mister I can do no wrong, I can fix everything didn’t know what to do?” My words are coming out rapid-fire, anger dripping from each one, and I do nothing to stop myself. “You knew!” I say, pointing to him through my tears. “You kept it from me. Just go.” He starts to object but I roll back over. “Leave me alone. Please.” This time he listens, leaving without another word.

I’ve nearly cried myself to sleep when I hear the click of the door opening again.

“I said leave me alone.” I sniff. When nobody replies, I glance over my shoulder to see my mom walking over to my bed. She sits down next to me and the waterworks start all over again.

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to tell me what’s wrong, but you do owe that poor man an explanation. He really loves you, honey, but if you’ve had a change of he—”

“It’s not real.” I sniff.

“What?”

“It’s not real, Mom. We’re not engaged; we aren’t dating; we’re not even friends.” Her face is marred with confusion. “He’s my boss, Mom.”

“Derek?” She gasps, clutching her nonexistent pearls.

“Damon. Derek isn’t real. That’s the name—it doesn’t matter. Damon is just my boss, my asshole, dickbag boss that offered to bring me home for Christmas but being my pretend boyfriend or fiancé was never part of the deal.”

“Sweetie, I’m sorry but I am so confused.” I let out a sigh and close my eyes briefly before I spend the next several minutes telling her how the plan came about. A few minutes into the story my dad knocks and comes into the room so I have to start over.

“But why, Kate?” my dad asks.

“I’m sure I sound crazy but…” I hesitate.

“It was partly because of Chad and the fact that you guys always seem like you have no faith in me. You acted like once I dropped out of college I was hopeless, and then you were all happy again when I met Chad because he could save me or whatever.”

They both stare at me. My dad starts to interrupt me, but I hold up my hand.

“Let me just get this out. Chad isn’t the amazing guy you guys think he is. I’m ninety-nine percent positive he cheated

on me with Tessa and when we broke up you guys took his side; you acted like my feelings didn't matter." I begin to cry again, and my mom wraps her arms around me.

"I just wanted to feel like I was more important. I just felt like you guys chose him and the fact that I even have to say all this makes me feel like shit." Sobs rack my body and my parents both envelop me in their arms.

They both take turns asking questions. I tell them about how things ended with Chad, that I didn't want to ask them for financial help because I want to pave my own path. I also apologize to them for lying about Damon and not speaking up sooner. My dad half-jokingly threatens to drive over to Chad's house and "handle" him, whatever that means.

"Kate," my mom says, pausing at my door. "I know that it was fake and I know you two have a very rocky history, but that man down there loves you; whether you want to hear it or admit it, he loves you."

DAMON

The drive home is mostly silent, only quiet nods when I ask if she wants to stop at Starbucks or needs to use the restroom. She spends the time either staring out the window, sleeping, or pretending to sleep. There are so many things I want to say to her but I know now isn't the time. What I really want to know is if any of it was real for her.

She glances at her phone. We left pretty early from her parents' house and with it only being a three-hour drive, we still have most of the afternoon and evening left.

"Can you drop me at the tow yard?" she asks.

"Oh." What I had hoped would end up being a grand romantic gesture had things not turned sour this week now seems like it's going to go over like a lead balloon. "I, uh— I called and had your car towed last week actually." Out of the corner of my eye I see her head snap in my direction.

"Towed to where?"

"My buddy, Teller, his brother-in-law owns a garage. He said he could get it in and fixed for you, and then he dropped it off at your apartment. The keys are with your office." I grip the steering wheel, fully expecting for this to be the final straw and her to rip my head off. After her confession to me and her parents about wanting to do things on her own, I can see how

this would seem like a patronizing and undermining move on my part, but that wasn't my intention at all. I'm fully prepared to whip that speech out in my defense.

“Oh, thank you.” She glances down, fiddling with the seat belt across her lap. “I appreciate it. I'll pay you back. Just send me the bill.”

I just nod in the affirmative. Now is not the time for me to stand my ground and insist that she doesn't need to pay me back.

“It was my fault you ended up in the mess you did with it all so it was the least I could do. Again, I'm sorry about that whole thing and how I handled it.” This time she nods and then leans back in her seat to stare out the window for the last thirty minutes of the trip.

When I pull up to Kate's building, I unlatch my seat belt and go to reach for the door handle.

“It's okay, I got it,” she says, reaching behind to grab her bag. It's silent between us as she hesitates, her hand on the handle. It feels like the air has been sucked from my lungs. I want so badly to reach out and grab her, to pull her to me and tell her these last several days have been the best of my life and that I never want to let her go. I want to tell her that she's beautiful and amazing and dynamic and I know without a doubt that I'm in love with her.

“Thanks for the ride home and the car. I'll see you at work.” She gives me a tight-lipped smile before hopping out of the car and hurrying into her building, not turning back.

EVERY MINUTE of every day of the last three days have been torture. The air is tense between Kate and me. I've gone out of my way to give her space, hoping that each new morning pissy, snippy Kate will show up to work, ready to rip my head off. I'd give anything to have that version of Kate right now instead of the quiet, sullen version. The sadness in her eyes is killing me. Even her walk is sad.

"So, got any fun weekend plans?" I ask her, trying to break the ice as she places a stack of files on my desk.

"No, no plans." She clasps her hands together in front of her, her face void of any emotion.

"What about New Year's?" I ask and she shakes her head no with a slight shoulder shrug. I glance past her; the hallway behind her is empty. It's after five so most people have gone home for the evening. I can't take this anymore; I have to do something. "Kate, can you close the door for a moment?"

She stares at me for a brief second, blinking before walking over and shutting the door. I gesture to the chairs in front of my desk and she takes a seat. I stand and begin to pace nervously.

"I know this is unprofessional to do at work, but I feel like I have no choice. I can't stand this"—I gesture with my hands as I try to find the right word—"heaviness between us. I fucked up royally and I know that, Kate. It kills me to know how bad I hurt you and disappointed you and your family."

I walk over to her, crouching down in front of her as I grab her hands in mine.

"If I could take it all back I would, in an instant. I shouldn't have pretended to be something I'm not to you. I shouldn't have lied to your family, and I sure as hell shouldn't

have given you your grandmother's ring like that. You have every right to hate me and be mad at me and I don't blame you. I just want you to know how sorry I am. I never meant to hurt you." I shake my head; I'm so ashamed.

I feel Kate's hands stir beneath mine as she wraps hers around mine. I look up to meet her gaze and I see a sympathetic glint in her eyes.

"I'm not mad at you, Damon," she says in a hushed tone. "I mean, I was. I was really pissed, but I understand that you were trying to help, even if it was in a really fucked-up way." She laughs a little and it makes my heart flutter.

"I'm mad at myself more than anything but truthfully I'm just feeling sad for myself. I'm sad that I gave so much time to Chad, even after the breakup. I hate that I didn't stand up for myself; you were right about that. My parents felt awful and apologized. I even spoke to Oliver and explained things to him. They were all so understanding and I wasted so much time being too scared to speak up. So thank you for pushing me to grow a backbone."

I squeeze her hands in mine as I stand up. I'm about to tell her more, that I want more, that I want her, but she stands up and walks to the door. "And don't worry, I'm sure we'll go back to hating each other and hurling insults in no time." I watch as she walks out the door and down the hallway.

I sit back at my desk, contemplating my feelings. I want to tell her how I feel but I also want to tell her about my family. I grab a piece of paper from the printer and a pen and start writing.

When I glance at the clock again, it's going on eight. I pull my phone out, swiping up to open it and going straight to the

messages. I click the conversation with Kate and type out a message.

Me: *Hey, thanks again for our talk tonight. Any chance you're up for company?*

I stare at the message then delete it, typing out a new one.

Me: *You've got cups? I'm bringing the wine.*

No, too cheesy. I delete the message, toss my phone on my desk, and run my hands over my face. I lean back in my chair.

"Fuck it," I say, grabbing the letter, my jacket and keys, and walking to the elevator. I hit the button for the parking garage. I'm just going to show up at her place and hope for the best.

I knock impatiently on her door, my heart thudding in my chest. I hear the lock click as the handle turns and the door slowly opens. A confused Kate stares back at me.

"I'm sorry I didn't text first, but I have something I need to get off my chest," I blurt out.

"Oookay, come in I guess." She opens the door and I step inside.

"I wasn't faking it," I say the words and then stare at her as if she knows what I'm saying but her face shows no signs of recognition. "Every time I held your hand or kissed you or made love to you, I meant it, Kate. I wanted those things. I wanted to know what it was like to feel your warm hand in mine." I take a few steps toward her. "I wanted to know what your soft lips felt like against mine." I step even closer, reaching up and running my thumb along her bottom lip. "I desperately wanted to know what your body felt like beneath mine." She swallows, her eyes studying mine. "Every time

you look at me, I feel my chest tighten. Every time you smile it feels like electricity shoots through me.”

“Damon,” she says, her eyes filling with tears.

“It was real for me, Kate; every second of it was real. You deserve happiness and love, Kate. You deserve so much more than you give yourself credit for.” I place a hand on either side of her face. “I’m in love with you,” I whisper. The tears that have been gathering in her eyes tumble down her cheeks as she shakes her head. I lean in and kiss her, the tears moistening her lips. I press my forehead against hers and close my eyes. “Tell me you felt it too, Kate. Tell me you meant it. Tell me I mean something to you.” I’m begging, pleading, but I don’t care.

She reaches her hands up, grasping mine and pulling them away from her face as she steps back. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, “I can’t do this.”

My arms fall and it feels like my heart is in my stomach. I hang my head. I don’t say another word. I just reach into my coat pocket, pull out the letter and place it on the counter, then I turn and walk out of her apartment.

H*e's in love with me?* I repeat the words to myself over and over again in my head. I can't even process what just happened. I was so overwhelmed yet scared. I didn't want to just fall into his arms and get swept up in my own emotions. I need to process things, to understand what my own feelings are.

Instead of falling on the floor and sobbing like I did when I let Chad walk out of my life, a small smile spreads across my lips and I reach up and touch them. They're still warm from his kiss. Butterflies dance in my stomach as I close my eyes and hear his words in my head. Then I remember the letter he placed on the counter. My eyes pop open and I reach for it.

I take the letter to the couch, completely unsure of the contents. *Oh God*, I think to myself, what if this letter has some dark secret that will ruin any chance of us being together. I push the fears aside and pull the letter from the envelope.

Dear Kate,

By now you hopefully not only know how truly sorry I am for hurting you and causing you pain, not only this last week but since we've known each other. I've been a selfish, entitled asshole without any regard for your feelings and I cannot

express to you how truly sorry I am. I don't deserve your forgiveness; I know that implicitly.

I hope you also know that I love you, truly and deeply. I know that probably seems unlikely given how I've treated you but the truth is, I was insecure and immature and projecting. I knew from the moment my eyes landed on you that I wanted you and I knew within fifteen minutes of speaking with you that you were too good for me. So instead of being a man and being respectful and kind to you, I tortured you because I wanted you so badly and had convinced myself that a woman like you would never fall for me. I hope I'm wrong. I hope that you saw through it all. I hope that you will give me a chance to prove to you that I can be the man you deserve. But even if you don't, I won't stop loving you, but I will respect you and your wishes.

The other thing I wanted to tell you about, the main reason for this letter, is to tell you why I don't celebrate the holidays with my family. I don't have a family anymore. I lost them eight years ago.

When I was twenty-four, I was living here in Chicago. I had this amazing job where I was making five times what any other twenty-four-year-old was making. Life was good but I was bitter and angry at my family. I felt like they never took the time to come visit me in Chicago; they were too comfortable in their life back in Iowa. They hated the city and I felt like they always expected me to be the one to travel to see them. So, one Christmas I just decided I wasn't going home. I didn't tell them why; I didn't even bother telling them at all actually. So they decided to pile in the car and drive here to surprise me. The weather turned on the drive and my parents and younger sister all died in a car crash that night. I'd give anything to go back and tell them why I was hurting, to

explain to them that I wanted to feel like I mattered to them still. Instead, I just became angry at them and pulled away. I do blame myself for what happened. I know you're a much better person than me and you'd never let things get that far with your family, but please understand that's why I pushed so hard for you to be open and honest with them about your feelings. Life is so short and unpredictable. Whatever it is you're feeling, say it; whatever you want, go for it.

Thank you for being an amazing friend to me, even when I didn't deserve it. You are the most wonderful person, Kate, and I hope you NEVER doubt that.

All my love,

Damon

I drop the letter onto my lap. My heart breaks into a million pieces for him. I want to run after him and pull him into my arms and tell him it wasn't his fault. I want to tell him that I'm in love with him too, but I know that I need to take the weekend to process things.

I reread the part about why he's been so cruel to me over the last few years. It stings. I thought he hated me. I think back to the bullshit theory our teachers and parents taught us as children—*if boys like you, they tease you and throw rocks at you*. Ugh, what a nonsensical and misogynist crock of shit. I know that if Damon and I do end up together, that's something we'll need to work through. I also sit back and think about my own actions, how I fed into his entitlement and cockiness by constantly belittling him and teasing him right back.

“Oh boy.” I sigh as I lie back on the couch. “We need some serious therapy,” I mutter, laughing to myself at the insane turn of events that has unfolded this last week.

IT'S Monday morning and I feel giddy to get back to the office. After Damon came over on Friday night, I spent the night thinking about my feelings and what I want in life and a partner. I called my mom and spoke to her for almost three hours, not holding back. I spilled all our dirty laundry and told her my fears and concerns. It felt good to let it all out.

I step off the elevator and walk to my desk, placing my things in my drawer and logging in.

“Morning, Marge, have a nice Christmas?” I ask.

“Well, I ate too much and I’m broke again after shopping for my grandkids. What about you?”

I smile and nod. “Yeah, it was actually a great Christmas. Oh, and thanks again for letting me borrow your skirt and turtleneck,” I say, grabbing the freshly dry-cleaned outfit and handing it back to her.

I grab my iPad as I make my way to the kitchen, pouring myself and Damon each a cup of coffee. I knock softly on his office door, waiting for his prompt to enter this time.

“Good morning, sir,” I say, placing his coffee on the desk and taking a seat. I pull out my iPad to go over our schedule for the day.

“Good morning.” He takes the coffee, eyeing me for a moment. He’s nervous. I give him a small smile to ease his worry and I see his shoulders drop a few inches in relief.

The day passes quickly and without event. I can see him stealing glances here and there, probably trying to figure out my mood. I have to admit, it’s kind of fun having him on pins

and needles all day. I wait until Marge and the rest of the admins leave for the day before walking slowly down the hall to Damon's office. His door is open and I casually lean against the doorframe.

"Hey." My greeting startles him. He looks up from the paper he's holding and drops it onto his desk.

"Hey, yourself." He smiles.

"I wanted to thank you for the letter, for explaining things and being so open with me. I really appreciate it. Truly." He nods.

"Oh, one other thing," I say and his eyes dart back up to mine.

"Yes?" he asks excitedly.

"Would you maybe want to grab dinner or a drink sometime?" I look at my nails, trying to play it supercool.

"Like a date?"

"Yeah, like a date," I say, and a huge smile spreads across his face.

"Absolutely. When?"

"Friday night. We'll talk specifics tomorrow." I smile and walk back to my desk to grab my things and head home.

I've been home barely five minutes when I hear a knock at my door. Instead of looking through the peephole, I swing the door open and see Damon staring back at me.

"I couldn't wait till Friday." His words are rushed as he takes two large steps, closing the distance between us. He kicks the door closed as he grabs my arm and pulls me toward him, our lips crashing against each other.

The kiss is frenzied, his hands pulling at my coat that I've yet to remove. I mirror his actions, pulling his coat down his arms as he walks me farther into my apartment. He removes my coat, then reaching down, he grips the hem of my sweater and pulls it swiftly over my head, peppering kisses from my lips and chin down my neck to my breasts.

"I love you," he says over and over again between kisses. I pull his face back, looking at him.

"I'm in love with you too." He picks me up, our lips finding each other again as our tongues dance together. He carries me to the bedroom, slowly sliding me down his body as his hands roam, pulling at my clothes.

We finally manage to strip each other of every bit of clothing, our naked bodies in a tangled heap on the bed. I'm lying on my back, Damon above me. He sits back, staring down at me as he studies me.

"What?" I ask.

"Are you mine?" I nod my head yes. "Say it," he says, dipping his head down and planting a soft kiss on each nipple. "Say you'll be mine."

"I'm yours," I gasp as his lips wrap around a nipple and suck.

He spends the next hours teasing me, kissing, touching, and licking every inch of my body before making love to me over and over again.

EPILOGUE
DAMON-ONE YEAR LATER...

“Kate, we’re going to be late!”

“I said five more minutes, Damon!” she snaps back. I shake my head; this woman is going to drive me crazy or kill me, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

After that night together in her apartment, we haven’t looked back. We jumped in with both feet and a seriously amazing therapist. We’ve not only worked through a lot of our personal issues—me harboring guilt about my family, her worried I’ll just be Chad 2.0—but we’ve grown closer through it all. Kate has finally found her calling, teaching voice and acting classes at a local theater as well as being the production and casting manager. She’s got her hands full but she’s in her element. I was sad to no longer see her at work every day, but I knew it was for the best in order for her to be truly happy. Plus, it wasn’t healthy for us to spend that much time together.

She ended up moving in with me after her lease was up, but then we put my condo on the market and it sold in less than twenty-four hours. We just closed on our own condo in the city.

“Oh!” I hear her yelp followed by a crash. I bound up the stairs to see her kicking over a box.

“Just stubbed my toe for like the millionth time on these fucking boxes!” She shoves a stack of boxes out of the way, throwing me a glare as I laugh.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I promise as soon as we are back from your parents’ house we will spend the weekend unpacking. We’ll have this place all organized.” I wrap my arm around her as we walk down the stairs toward the front door. “It will be the perfect way to start the new year.”

By the time we’re pulling into Kate’s parents’ house, their driveway is full of cars for the annual Flowers family holiday party. Noticeably absent this year is fuckboy Chad and his cheating partner in crime, Tessa.

We barely get inside before we’re swept in warm hugs and holiday wishes. I’m on Laurie’s arm, being paraded around to different friends and family for an introduction; some I met last year but most are new faces. I glance around the room and see Kate, holding her new niece in her arms while she coos over her next to Erin and Oliver.

“Everything ready?” I ask Laurie, leaning in to whisper in her ear.

“Absolutely,” she says, giving my arm a squeeze before turning to face me. “You be good to her,” she says, her eyes full of tears as she stands on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek.

“I’d go to the ends of the earth for her,” I say reassuringly.

After the cocktail hour and dinner, some folks have left but most are standing around talking, still sipping on wine or coffee while Christmas music pumps through the in-house speakers.

I see Kate across the great room and make eye contact with her. She smiles, a smile I haven’t gotten used to seeing yet. It’s

genuine and warm, the kind of smile I always wanted from her. I give her a wink and motion with my head for her to follow me.

“Have I seen you here before?” She sidles up beside me, looping her arm through mine as I stand next to the massive decorated spruce in the entryway. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her in for a kiss.

“Dance with me.” I grasp her hand, twirling her around and back into my arms. She giggles as we slow dance to Frank Sinatra’s voice crooning “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”

When the song ends, I pull her back to the Christmas tree. I stand behind her, wrapping my arms around her as I lean in near her ear. “You get to choose one item from the tree for your Christmas gift this year.” I see her glance up at me, confused.

“The ornaments?”

“Just glance around the tree and see if you see something you like.”

“Okaaay,” she says, stepping out of my arms and studying the tree. She picks up a beautiful silver Tiffany ornament in the shape of a heart, then looks closer at the inscription and sees our names on it. “Oh my God, this is beautiful. Did you?” she asks and I nod.

“You sure that’s the one?” She looks at me suspiciously and puts it back, moving on to look at the others. She moves around the tree, finding another ornament that is a collar with a tiny bell on it and a tag.

“What’s this one?” I laugh and reach for it.

“This one is for a kitten. The tag is blank because once you pick one out, we’ll have its name engraved on here.”

“A kitten?” She squeals and throws her arms around me. “Where?”

“I didn’t pick one yet; we’ll go to the shelter together and pick one.” She jumps up and down and turns back to the tree. One by one she finds the little gifts I’ve left for her—a personalized luggage tag with two tickets to Italy, her dream vacation destination, a keychain with a picture of us from this past summer—but she hasn’t found the last one yet.

“Wait,” she says, spinning around to face me. “I only get to choose one?” Her eyes look big and sad.

“Of course not, sweetheart, but there’s one left.” I spin her back around and move her closer to where it’s at.

“I don’t see anything—” She freezes as she stares at the twinkle lights glinting off the diamond. “Oh my God.” She slowly reaches her hand out and pulls the red ribbon from the tree branch, her grandmother’s diamond wedding ring dangling on the end.

I take the ring from her, reaching for her hand and dropping to one knee. This time I’m doing it right.

“Kate Flowers, you’re it, baby. Will you marry me?” She nods her head enthusiastically as she jumps into my arms, knocking me over. We laugh on the floor as she peppers my face with kisses and I slide the ring onto her finger.

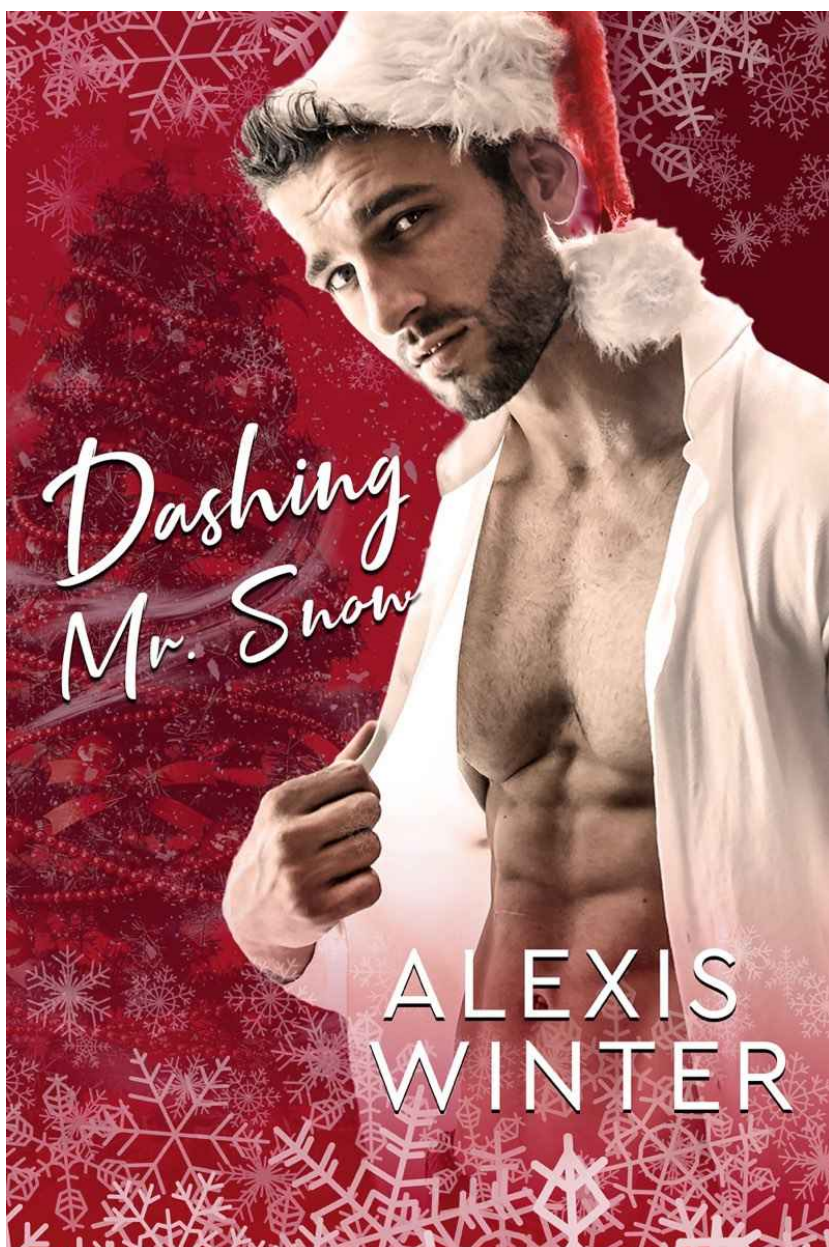
“It’s so beautiful,” she whispers as she admires the new setting I had it placed in.

“You are my one and only, Kate. Thank you,” I whisper, choking back tears.

“For what?”

“For believing in us and giving me a second chance. Thank you for letting me love you.”

This is exactly how I wanted to do it, just the two of us. I stand and pull her to her feet as we continue dancing, the soft glow of the Christmas lights surrounding us and the promise of forever filling us with joy and happiness.



*Dashing
Mr. Snow*

ALEXIS
WINTER

“MAYBE WE CAN BE A LITTLE
NAUGHTY. YOU WANT TO BE NAUGHTY
FOR ME, RIGHT?”

**The last thing I expected to get for Christmas was being
dumped by my boyfriend—after all, I’m always on Santa’s
good list.**

**But walking in on my naked boss and seeing his *candy
cane* was an even BIGGER holiday surprise—one that has
me headed straight for a lump of coal this year.**

Alex Snow, the billionaire CEO of Snow Communications and
the only living heir to his family’s fortune, has a reputation for
being intimidating.

Not in the “*I’m an arrogant bosshole*” kind of way, but more
of a “I value my privacy above all else” kind of way.

So imagine his delight when I stumble into what I think is his
home office with a contract in hand just as he emerges from
the shower.

Only... it isn’t his office. It’s his bedroom, and the low-slung
towel hanging off his hips slides down his muscular thighs,
landing in a perfect pile at his ankles.

There’s nothing like falling to your hands and knees in raging
embarrassment after making *direct* eye contact to gather up the

papers you dropped.

What I thought would certainly end my career at his company
has suddenly catapulted us into an unlikely friendship.

One that has me spilling all my secrets one drunken night
when we end up stuck in an elevator.

But the moment he pulls me into his arms at a mistletoe
kissing contest, he awakens something in me I didn't know
was there, something I want to explore more.

He pushes my limits, making demands of my body that have
me begging to stay on the naughty list.

But when he comes home with me for the holidays as *just a
friend*, lines start to blur, confusion takes over, and my ex
shows back up in my life, telling me all the things I've wanted
to hear him say for so long.

Suddenly, my heart and my head are in an all-out war.

**One that has me questioning if my broken heart still pines
for my ex, if this is just a game of forbidden lust, or if I'm
already in love with my boss, the *Dashing Mr. Snow*.**

PROLOGUE

ALEX-TWO YEARS EARLIER...

I adjust my tie in the reflection from the elevator doors as I ride it down to the conference room for the new-hire orientation.

I've been the CEO and owner of Snow Communications, a billion-dollar empire my grandfather started decades ago, for just over five years now. I hadn't planned to take ownership of the company at the age of twenty-eight, let alone become the youngest billionaire CEO in the country; but after my father passed unexpectedly, I stepped up.

I love my job, and to complain about my privileged life would be pointless and terrible, considering there are people who struggle to put food on the table. But being rich, powerful, and young has left me more isolated and lonelier than I ever thought possible. When I was in my early twenties, all I cared about were the summers yachting through the Mediterranean with models and friends who were only there for the money and parties. I thought I'd have the time to settle down eventually, find a wife and start a family together; but when my dad—who was my only living relative—passed away, it forced me to grow up and put the rest of my life on hold while I took over the family business.

Now, gone are all the friends who were ready to go on extravagant vacations at the drop of a hat. Once the parties stopped and I started focusing on my job and wanting to settle down, they disappeared.

“Morning, Cheryl.” I tip my head toward my HR manager who is standing outside the conference room with a huge smile on her round face. Her bright red lipstick matches her shoes, which also coordinates with her polka dot dress.

“Good morning, Mr. Snow. Are you excited? I love new-hire day!” she says with genuine enthusiasm. Cheryl, like many others here, have worked for this company since I was just a teenager. My dad might have been a cold and oftentimes cruel man toward me and my mother who passed many years ago; but to his employees, he was kind, gracious, and always generous.

Building this company and cultivating his legacy were my father’s dreams, a family was merely an obligation. A box he had to check in order to maintain appearances, but something he never really wanted—a fact he made little effort to hide. Something I promised I’d never do with my own family, should I be lucky to have one of my own someday.

“I am very excited.” I smile as I follow her into the large conference room where several rows of new employees are sitting, looking eager, fresh-faced and clearly ready to climb the corporate ladder.

Most of these young people are sales associates, with perhaps a few marketing people and a new finance member or two sprinkled among them. I scan the room quickly, giving a few nods and tight-lipped smiles to the group as I take a seat in the corner, allowing Cheryl to kick off the meeting.

New-hire orientation is a tradition my dad started, one I've chosen to continue. While I don't have the extroverted personality my father often displayed here at Snow, I do like my employees to feel welcome and well taken care of. I tend to prefer a life behind the scenes, one where I'm not the center of attention. I learned the hard way early on that being rich, good-looking, driving a fast car, and dating models would only result in having your life plastered across the headlines, whether the tabloids are printing the truth or not.

"And now, a few words and a warm welcome from our fearless leader and CEO, Alex Snow." Cheryl claps for me, giving me a huge smile as I step up to the front of the room.

"Thank you, Cheryl," I say, smiling at her. "She's a wonderful resource for all of us here at Snow, so don't be afraid to reach out to her. She is always willing to help, and she goes above and beyond for all of us."

I'm turning to give her a round of applause when I spot *her*.

I don't know who she is, but sitting in the far righthand corner of the room in the very first row is a stunning, petite woman with strawberry blond hair and big round eyes. Her green cardigan is buttoned over a white blouse, which is tucked into a matching black-and-green checked skirt. She looks timeless, like she stepped out of a 1940s film noir.

"I uh ..." I clear my throat, suddenly aware my train of thought has completely left the station without me. I snap my attention back to the room at large. "I want to thank each of you for accepting a position here at Snow Communications. I know there are a lot of amazing companies in Chicago who would be incredibly lucky to have you, but you chose us, and we don't take that lightly. We do see ourselves as a family

here, and I promise you that your opinions and voice matter and will be heard. I'll never ask you to sacrifice your work-life balance, or your weekends or evenings for this company."

I try to remain focused on the room but find my gaze wandering back to the mysterious woman who is studiously taking notes and nodding along as I speak. She looks young. If I had to guess, I'd say early twenties—a solid decade younger than me. The man next to her looks over at her, leaning in to whisper something that makes her smile slightly as a pink warmth spreads across her pale cheeks.

I wonder what he said. Do they know each other?

I wrap up my speech, thanking the new recruits again before stepping aside for Cheryl to make a few announcements about the office tour she will be conducting shortly.

"We have about fifteen minutes before the office tour. Mr. Snow has graciously agreed to stay behind for any questions and to meet with you."

Several of the new employees immediately gather around me, asking me questions and introducing themselves.

"Great to meet you." I smile graciously, subtly scanning the room for the young woman who'd captured my attention. I spot her close to the back of the room where she is standing all alone while picking at a donut from the breakfast spread Cheryl had ordered.

"Excuse me," I say to the group around me, who are now talking among themselves. I stride toward the back of the room to where she's standing with her back to me. My 6'2" stature towers over her smaller frame.

"Those ones are my favorite."

“Huh?” She spins around so quickly she almost tumbles over, and I dart my hand out to grab her elbow and steady her. She stares up at me. “Oh, sorry did you want it? I think it’s the last one.” The pink tip of her tongue glides across her bottom lip, catching a small piece of glaze left by the donut.

“No.” I smile. “Thank you, though. Alex,” I say, holding out my hand. “Afraid I didn’t get your name?”

She smiles back. “Sadie. Sadie Emmert.” Her face turns red as she wipes the glaze from her fingers, then gently places her delicate hand in mine.

“Pleasure,” I say, holding onto her hand a little longer than professionally necessary. Something about this woman pulls at me, awakening more than just desire inside me. She is stunning but shy. “Thank you for coming aboard here at Snow. Sales?”

“Yes,” she answers matter-of-factly, her eyes still unblinking. “Thank you for hiring me, sir. I promise I won’t let you down.”

I look down at her petite frame and my mind strays into dangerous territory. I wonder what she’d look like if I reached around and pulled the clip from her hair, allowing her curls to tumble down her back. My jaw clenches as I try to push the thoughts from my head. I have no business having this kind of reaction to a woman ten years my junior. Particularly one who also happens to be my employee.

She’s young and innocent; far too innocent for a man like me. The things I want to do to her would have her running for the hills.

“I’m sure you won’t, Miss Emmert.”

I nod and turn away to allow her to eat her donut in peace. My thoughts remain on the beguiling young woman as I leave the conference through the door in the back.

SADIE

PRESENT DAY...

“A break—as in *break up*?”

I blink rapidly as I try to make sense of what my boyfriend, Tim, is telling me.

“Don’t think of it like that, babe. It’s more like a little sabbatical. You know, when a professor takes a paid leave. They’re still employed by the university and still technically work there, but they go off to learn or research somewhere else.”

I wipe away a few tears that have begun to fall and roll my eyes.

“I know what a sabbatical is, Tim. So you mean you want to stay committed to me, still be in a relationship with me, but you just need space?”

He stops pulling his clothes from the closet and crouches down in front of where I’m sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Kind of. But you know with a sabbatical, the professor is off learning new things so that could mean that he engages in other extracurr—”

“Can you just outright say it? Stop trying to explain it with this sabbatical metaphor. Are you going to be seeing other people?”

He doesn't answer. Instead, he reaches out and takes my hands in his. His eyes dart down to them before coming back to rest on my face. I tug my hands away and stand up, stepping away from his grasp. He doesn't need to answer the question, it's written all over his face.

“Is this about Tiffany?”

He sighs. “Sadie. This again, seriously? I told you, she's a first-year at my law firm. It's completely normal for them to blow up us third years, asking for advice or whatever.”

“At ten at night?” I cross my arms over my chest in an attempt to protect myself. I hate feeling vulnerable, but mostly, I loathe feeling jealous.

A good man—one who truly loves you— won't do things that make you jealous, Sadie. They won't put your trust on the line for a flirty text or a cheap thrill from someone at work. That's bullshit, and you shouldn't stand for it.

I hear my best friend, Karlie's, voice in my ear, reminding me I deserve better.

My friends have been encouraging me for the better part of two years to dump Tim, but I haven't been able to bring myself to do it. The first two years we were together, my friends tried to like him, they really did, but these last two ... it's been like getting blood from a turnip. Can't say I don't blame them. Tim never made an effort to get to know them, and even went so far as to insinuate that they were a bad influence on me. Although I still don't understand why.

Whether they like it or not, I'm in love with him ... or I was. Am I still? I'm not really sure, but I'm not ready to give up on trying to get back there and make it work. Maybe I'm

just comfortable in this relationship. Or maybe it's the idea of being all alone at twenty-five and having to start over.

"I'm not doing with this with you. Tiffany didn't do anything wrong, and neither did I." His tone is cold and clipped. I've noticed something has changed with him recently. He's easily annoyed and agitated with me, and uninterested in all the things we used to love doing together.

"Tim, wait," I plead, reaching out to touch his arm. "It's Christmas, though. What am I supposed to tell my family? Are you not going to come this year?"

"I think it's best we spend the holidays apart. You can tell them that we're taking some space to figure things out and focus on what we want in life."

"Is that what you're doing? Trying to figure out if you want a life with me?" I search his eyes for some sort of sympathy but find none. It's like I don't even recognize him anymore. "I just don't understand what happened. What changed? Up until even a few months ago we always talked about having a family together, and then all the sudden you decided you don't want kids?"

"It's not that I don't *want* kids, but I don't want them anytime soon. Maybe in ten years, but maybe only one. I need to focus on my law career and running for office, Sadie. You know that's always been important to me."

He grabs another handful of his clothes from the closet and stuffs them into his suitcase.

"I know that, and I've always been supportive of that dream. I've said a dozen or more times that I would be happy to stay home and raise our kids. We can travel with you on the campaign trail."

“It’s more than that, Sadie. I’ll be by in a few days to get the rest of my stuff.” His tone is exasperated, and he doesn’t even look up at me.

“Where are you even staying?”

“My brother’s place,” he answers, looping the handle of the duffle bag over his shoulder. I follow him to the door, and he turns, placing his hands on both my shoulders.

My lower lip starts to tremble, so I bite the inside of my cheek, willing myself not to cry. I want to be strong. I want him to think I’ll be perfectly fine without him, but it’s no use.

“Please don’t go,” I choke out.

“Shh, it’s going to be okay.” He pulls me in for a hug and kisses me on the cheek. “I’ll text you before I come over so you’re not here when I get the rest of my stuff.”

And with that—no goodbye, no *I’ll miss you*, not even a *happy holidays*—he shuts the door behind him and leaves.

IT’S BEEN ALMOST three weeks since Tim officially moved out of our apartment and declared that we were *on a break*.

I still don’t know the technical definition of what we are to each other, but he made his intentions to date other people perfectly clear. A pit forms in my stomach as an image of him and Tiffany embracing in his office flashes through my head. I’ve never actually met her or seen a picture of her, but the way he reacted when I saw her name flash across his screen one night told me everything I needed to know.

“You’re being ridiculous, Sadie. Honestly, she’s a friend—not even. She’s a coworker. She’s a lame first-year at that.

Honestly, I have no idea how she managed to get into Harvard because she takes ditzy blond to a whole new level. Honestly, she's annoying and all the guys at work think she's kind of a slut."

Something my mom always taught me growing up was that if a man feels the need to put another woman down to make *you* feel good, he's either being dishonest about his true feelings and attraction to her, or he's cheating on you with her. I push the thought from my head as my desk phone rings.

"Snow Communications, this is Sadie, how may I help you?"

"Oh, thank god!" I instantly recognize the shrieking voice on the other end of the line. It's Beth, personal assistant to the CEO, Mr. Snow.

I actually went to high school with her. She was the top of the cheerleading pyramid, the leader of the popular girls, and could be a major bully at times. I was never in her line of fire; oddly, she seemed to like me. She would stick her neck out if any of the jocks got too rowdy teasing me about my oversized marching band hat that never wanted to stay above my eyeline, or the way I'd stumble down the hallway with my giant tuba. But she didn't like me enough to invite me to any of the cool parties she had at her parent's massive estate in Hinsdale, one of Chicago's most affluent suburbs.

"Hey Beth, what's going on?"

"I feel like such an idiot. Everyone I've called so far is already out for the holidays, so I need a *huge* favor from you."

"Sure, what do you need?"

"I already left with my family for our annual ski vacation in Vail, and I forgot to have Mr. Snow sign this extremely

important and time sensitive contract. It's in the top drawer of my desk. Could you pleeeeeease take it to him and have him sign it? There's a courier coming today at three p.m. to pick it up."

I feel panic grip my chest at the thought of engaging with Alexander Snow. Not only is the man hot as hell with his panty-melting smile, but he's also extremely standoffish and really doesn't like to be bothered outside of his extremely rigid schedule.

Everything he wears is perfectly tailored for his chiseled body. Expensive custom suits and shoes. His signature Rolex was given to his father by some foreign dignitary, something I read once in a business article. And his hair ... god, his perfectly styled yet messy blond hair makes me want to tug at the strands while staring into his sparkling green eyes. To say he's intimidating would be like saying the Titanic hit an ice cube.

I met him once. When I was hired two years ago. Our interaction was brief. He attended the new-hire orientation to introduce himself and give a little speech about the company and his expectations, and then he left. I see him from afar now and then. One time I even shared the elevator with him for maybe fifteen seconds. He was buried in his phone, so he didn't notice me; but damn, I can remember how jittery I was walking back to my desk that day.

"I dunno, Beth. Sorry, I just have a pretty busy day, and I was actually planning on leaving here before three."

"Oh, pleeeeeeaaaaase," she whines in that *I use this to get my way and it always works* voice. "I promise, I'll make it up to you. We'll have a girls' day, go get our nails done and facials and massages. My treat!"

I can picture her pouting collagen-filled lips and her long, bleached Barbie hair cascading over her slim, year-round tan shoulders.

I sigh, giving in. “Okay. Is he in his office? Will he be expecting me? Because I really don’t need to get yelled at today.”

“Oh, Sadie, you’re so dramatic.” She pops her gum. “He’s such a softie, he’s just shy.”

“Shy? A billionaire CEO who made a fifty-year-old man cry during a television interview last year?”

“That was *totally* out of character for him but justified. The journalist only wanted to talk about his rumored romance with Poppy Tallman, even after he’d made it clear he was there to discuss the company’s partnership with the NFL. That reporter was out of line.”

I remember it all too well. Everyone at Snow likely does. After the incident, socialite and social media queen Poppy Tallman only fueled the fires of their rumored romance when she came to his defense with her posts and live videos. Despite Mr. Snow refusing to comment on the rumors, it took the media by storm for an entire month, completely ruining what was supposed to have been a major partnership announcement with the NFL.

“So the contract is in your top drawer. Is he expecting me at a certain time?” I glance at my watch. “I can run up there now.”

“Actually, he’s at home today; but yes, he will be expecting you. I’ll call him now, and you can just grab that contract from my drawer and take it over to his penthouse.”

“His penthouse?” Okay, now I’m even more panicked. I don’t want to invade his personal space.

“You promised you’d do it, Sadie, you can’t take it back.” Her tone is petulant, and I can practically see her stomping her foot.

I groan. She’s right. I mean, I didn’t promise, but I still can’t refuse her. Not with the memory of Beth’s kindness in high school all those years ago fresh on my mind.

“Fine, I’ll do it. But make sure you call him so he knows. I’ll let you know once the courier picks them up at three. Can you have them meet me in sales instead of on the executive floor?”

“Yay! Of course, I’ll call Mr. Snow now, and then the courier. Thank you so so so so much, Sades!” she exclaims, using the weird little pet name she’s always called me. “You are saving my life. I owe you so much. Gotta go, bye!”

The call ends and I grab my purse, heading upstairs to grab the contracts before going outside to take the train over to Park Tower in the Gold Coast. Everyone knows where Mr. Snow lives, of course. It’s the most elite and expensive residential building in Chicago.

“Uh, hi, yes. My name is Sadie Emmert,” I say to the doorman after I walk through the large door he’s holding open for me.

“Hello, Sadie, I spoke with Beth. Follow me. I’ll take you to Mr. Snow’s private elevator.”

“Private elevator?” I follow closely on the doorman’s heels. Reaching the elevator, he scans a card on the control panel and selects the penthouse.

“Only accessible with a keycard,” he says, holding it up as the doors close between us.

I grab a compact from my purse and furiously attempt to fluff my hair, also checking to be sure I don't have any leftover poppyseeds from my salad in my teeth. Suddenly, I feel overheated and out of breath. I plaster on a big smile as the doors open, but nobody is standing there.

“Hello?” I step into the massive entryway and the sound of my heels clicking against the marble tiles echoes around me.

“Mr. Snow?”

I take a few more steps inside and peer around a corner, but there's no answer and no sign anyone else is here.

I pull my phone out of my purse to see if I missed a text or call from Beth, anything to indicate a last-minute change to Mr. Snow's location, but my screen is blank.

I contemplate calling her to double-check but decide against it. Walking into the main living area, I slide the phone back inside my purse. My eyes are immediately drawn to the massive floor-to-ceiling bay window. It has a nearly unobstructed view of the partially frozen Lake Michigan. It's breathtaking. So much so, I find myself mesmerized by the blue expanse of water, which is dotted with ice.

I jolt, remembering I'm not just in some random building, but that I am standing in my boss's private living space. Clutching the contract tighter, I turn and walk through a sitting room that looks professionally decorated. It's excessively tidy, to the point that I'm not sure the room has ever even been used.

“Mr. Snow?” I say it louder this time, hoping he will hear me so I don't have to continue wandering aimlessly around his

house.

I snake my way down a hallway, unsure whether I should try knocking on the doors I'm passing, until I hear his muffled voice.

"Hello? Mr. Snow?" I follow the sound to a cracked open door. His voice grows clearer the closer I get, and I figure he must be on a call in his office.

"Thanks, yeah, that works just fine. All right, Tanner, Merry Christmas to you too. Talk to you next week."

He finishes his call just as I reach the door.

"Mr. Snow?" I knock once, then gently push the door open and step inside the room. "Sorry to bother you at home but—oh my god!" I shriek, covering my mouth with my hands and scattering the papers I was holding across his office floor.

Only ... it isn't his office. It's his bedroom. And the low-slung towel hanging off Mr. Snow's hips slides down his muscular thighs, landing in a perfect pile at his ankles.

My eyes drop, locking onto his very well-endowed manhood that hangs low between said thighs.

Why am I staring?

I squeeze my eyes shut, flinging my hands out as I spin around.

"I'm so sorry!"

"What the fuck?" His booming voice echoes off the walls of the room as I blindly scramble to exit, tripping in the process and landing in a heap on the hard floor. A sharp pain shoots through my knee. Suddenly, his warm hands are on my arms, helping me back to my feet.

Oh god, please have the towel back on. Please, please, please.

Slowly, I turn to look at him, my face flaming with embarrassment.

“Why are you in my bedroom, Miss Emmert?”

I’m too shocked to answer him, so instead of explaining, my eyes bulge.

“You know my name?” He crooks a brow at me, and I shake my head. “Sorry, Beth asked me to come here, and have you sign uh—” I look around and see the papers still on the floor. Dropping to my hands and knees, I crawl around to pick them up. “This contract.”

“Is that right?”

I sit back on my heels, papers in hand, and look up at Alexander Snow. He’s looking down at me, wearing nothing but a towel.

My eyes drop to the dirty blond hair peppering his chest and winding its way down his defined abs, calling attention to the chiseled V at the base of his stomach.

This man is a walking, talking thirst trap. Every fantasy about a sexy, dominating playboy has come to life before my very eyes, and here I am, kneeling at his feet while he’s practically naked.

“And here I thought Santa was just rewarding me for being extra good this year,” he says with a wry grin.

I stare down at timid Miss Emmert on her knees before me, a fantasy I've had no less than a hundred times since I first laid eyes on her two years ago.

What I wouldn't give to see her eyes drop down to my lap as she begs me to let her taste it.

"Stand up," I say; and she scrambles to her feet, her cheeks still glowing. I appreciate her obedience, and I'd love to test the boundaries of just how far it goes. But I know with nothing but a towel covering my cock, I'm about ten seconds from having a serious situation on my hands.

"I don't really like doing business without clothes on. Why don't you go wait in the living room so I can get dressed?" I wink at her, and she spins around on her heels so fast that she's practically already out of the room and down the hall before I can finish the question.

I take my time getting dressed, sliding on a crisp white button-down and a pair of navy dress pants. I walk down the hallway toward the living room to find her standing in front of the bay window, staring out over the lake.

"Now, where were we?" I ask, dipping my hands into my pockets as I come to stand beside her.

“This view ...” She trails off, lost in thought, her big blue eyes scanning the horizon.

I take a moment to look at her—really look at her. Her full pouty lips are bare, a natural pink, with a perfect little cupid’s bow that runs up to her button nose. Her lashes are long and dark, accentuating her doll-like eyes. She’s absolutely gorgeous. She has the kind of beauty women pay to emulate with plastic surgery but can never fully achieve. And judging by her timid nature and the way she keeps her head down around the office, I’d bet money she has no idea the effect she has on men.

“Stunning,” I agree, not talking about the view. She turns her head to look at me.

“The contract.” She extends her arm, handing it over.

“Yes, the contract.” Taking it from her, I scan it with my eyes, making sure everything the client and I discussed with our lawyers is addressed before signing and handing it back.

“Thank you, I should head back,” she says, but it’s not very convincing. Her eyes drift back to the view. She steps a little closer to the window, her breath hitching as she anxiously peers over the ledge before stepping back again.

“Are you scared of heights?”

“A little.” She gives me a tremulous smile.

“Here.” I hold out my hand toward her and she looks at it then back up at me. “I’ll hold your hand and stand right next to you.”

“That’s okay.” She blushes but I reach for her hand anyway, gently grabbing it with mine. Her delicate fingers are slightly cold to the touch. She looks down to where we’re

joined, and I half expect her to pull away, but she doesn't. I take a step closer.

"It is a pretty long drop." I playfully tug her hand and she gasps.

"Don't do that." With a giggle, she regains her composure and takes a timid step closer to the window.

We stand together in silence, both peering down over the edge. I'm not usually bothered by heights, but at this angle it does make me a little dizzy.

"I always forget I'm up this high."

"You forget? With this view?" She sounds unconvinced.

I shrug, realizing I probably sound like a pompous ass. "Mostly because I'm usually in my office staring at my computer, or in the gym. But I should probably take the time to enjoy the place a little more, huh?"

She smiles, nodding her head before taking another step closer to the window. I join her, our arms touching with the proximity.

"You want a tour of the place? It's pretty spectacular, and since it mostly goes unappreciated by me, someone should enjoy it."

I don't know why I made the offer. Maybe because I like the company, or maybe I just don't want to be alone. I spend most of my life alone. Usually, it doesn't bother me; I can put it out of my head. But this time of year—around the holidays—it gets harder and harder to ignore the loneliness. The older I get, the more I realize life is passing me by while my dream of having a family becomes an even more distant fantasy. I'm not old, not quite thirty-six, but I don't want to be that fifty-year-

old dad at the park, struggling to keep up with his five-year-old.

“I should probably get back to work.”

I chuckle, bumping her shoulder “I happen to know the boss, and I don’t think he’ll mind if you’re a little late getting back.”

She stares at me, an impish grin taking over her lips as she shrugs her shoulders. “Okay then, yeah.”

That’s when we both look down. She probably just realized we’re still holding hands. I don’t let go, continuing to hold onto her as I pull her away from the window.

“Let’s start in the kitchen, it’s my favorite part,” I say, leading the way.

“Oh my god!” she gasps, her hand shooting to her chest as she takes in the panoramic windows that dominate the space. “Is that the—”

“John Hancock? Yeah. Dinner with a view.”

“This is unreal,” she says, her voice just above a whisper. She pulls her hand from mine to drag her fingertips along the edge of the black marble countertops. I stand back, watching her eyes bounce around as she takes it all in. “You cook?”

“Love to cook. Not saying I’m good at it, but I like to experiment in the kitchen.” I’m this close to adding *and in the bedroom*, but I bite my tongue, reminding myself that not only is Sadie Emmert my employee, but I also have no idea if she’s single. I highly doubt it.

“Me too. My boyfr—ex-boyfriend,” she corrects, and my ears perk up. “He uh, didn’t appreciate my experiments, although he never had an issue with my baking.” She giggles

nervously, her eyes darting away from me, returning to the view.

“That’s a shame. Maybe we can experiment together sometime.”

Her head whips around to look at me and I motion for her to move to the next room before she freaks out and runs screaming from my apartment.

“This is my office, where I spend most of my time,” I say, opening the door.

“Does every room have this view?”

“Yeah, three hundred sixty-degree views, which is why it came with the price tag it did.”

We walk through a few more rooms before moving down the hallway toward the great room.

“Wait, so there’s a living room, a sitting room, and now a great room?”

“Technically, the first area was a family room, then a sitting room, and now this is the living or great room.”

“With a grand piano?” She laughs, shaking her head. “I just—my mom would freak if she saw this.”

“Does she play?”

“Yeah.” She nods as she steps closer to it. “And it’s a Steinway!” she squeals, pulling out her phone then stopping herself.

I laugh. “You can take a pic. You can even play it if you know how.”

“Oh goodness, no. I’m too scared to touch it.” She takes a few pictures, then we continue the tour, finally winding our

way down the last hallway.

“These are mostly bedrooms I don’t use.”

“How big is this place?”

“I think just under 10,000 square feet. Way too big.” I shake my head in embarrassment. I bought this place when I was twenty-eight. I had just become CEO after my father’s untimely death and felt I needed to emulate ostentatious lifestyle he once had. Something I now realize I don’t want or need. I’ve called my realtor to put it on the market twice, but both times he insisted I keep it a while longer because the market wasn’t ideal. He insisted I could make a killing if I rode out the dip.

“And this”—I open my bedroom door—“is my room, which you saw earlier.”

Her face goes red, her hands coming up to cup her cheeks.

“I—I’m so—”

“Don’t apologize. Trust me, no man will ever be angry about having a beautiful woman barge into his bedroom and end up on her knees in front of him.”

I probably shouldn’t have said it, but I’m almost certain I see a flash of lust in her eyes, making me glad I did. Call me crazy, but her pupils are dilated, her nostrils flaring a bit, and her throat constricts as she swallows.

She’s intrigued ... maybe even turned on. Is timid little Miss Emmert secretly a naughty girl, desperate to escape her buttoned-up shell?

I step aside, giving her space to enter the room. She heads to the same stretch of windows that wrap around the entire

building but suddenly stops in her tracks and turns back to face me.

“I’m sorry, this is so weird. I’m realizing how I literally barged into your home, my boss’s ... er—my boss’s boss’s boss? Whatever. You’re the owner of a massive company, we’ve never even had a conversation, and now I’m walking around your twenty-million-dollar penthouse? This is all so strange. I’m sorry.”

“You’re overthinking it, Sadie. Just think of me as Alex, a guy from your office.” I take a few steps toward her.

“Just a guy from my office,” she repeats slowly. “How do you know my name?”

“Well, like you said, I own the company you’ve worked for the past two years.” I flash her a smile.

“Yes, but I didn’t think you noticed or knew who I was.” She pretends to smack her forehead. “Oh, Beth told you I was coming, duh!” I don’t say anything, just casually cross my arms over my chest. “I guess you won’t ever be forgetting the first time we met now.” She bursts into nervous laughter.

“Today isn’t the first time we met; and no, Beth didn’t give me your name.”

Her laughter falters. “You remember meeting me before?”

I step closer to her now.

“Of course I do. When you were hired two years ago, you were in a new employee orientation, and I came in to introduce myself and give a welcome speech.”

“Yes.”

I take a final step to close the remaining distance between us, sliding my hands back into my pockets for fear I won’t be

able to stop myself from reaching out and pulling her body against mine.

“You told me you were honored to work for my company and that you wouldn’t let me down.”

Her mouth falls open. “I said that? It’s so ... dorky. Like I’m heading out on a mission.” Her laughter fills the room, her shoulders bouncing with mirth.

“For what it’s worth, you didn’t let me down. In fact, you’ve consistently been a top performer since you were hired.”

She shrugs. “I do enjoy sales, which is odd considering I’m a pretty big introvert.”

“Well, whatever you’re doing, keep it up.” I smile and her eyes shift from mine down to her knotted fingers. “One question I’ve had for the better part of a year now ... why didn’t you go on the trip to Rio last year? I saw your name listed as one of the President’s Club winners for sales. That was an all-inclusive trip, not a lot of people would pass that up.”

“Yeah.” Her countenance falters, and I’m hoping she isn’t going to tell me something horribly tragic happened, which would make me feel like an ass for bringing it up. “My boyfriend was slammed at work and couldn’t go, so I had to decline. But Marsha went in my place and had an amazing time, so it all worked out.”

“This the now *ex*-boyfriend?” She nods. “Makes sense.”

I glance at my watch. “I should let you go. I have a meeting across town that I need to finish getting ready for. Thanks again for stopping by with the contracts.”

“Thanks for the tour.” She smiles and I put my hand on her lower back to escort her to the elevator. She jolts at the unexpected contact.

“Sadie?”

“Hmm?” She turns around in the elevator.

“Don’t be afraid to say hi in the office.”

Her eyes soften as her smile reaches them, and her reply is almost cut off by the doors closing between us. “But I never see you around.”

SADIE

I groan loudly from embarrassment, clutching the contract to my chest as I squeeze my eyes shut.

I wish the floor of this elevator car would open up and the shaft would swallow me whole. My friends are going to die laughing when I tell them about this. I already know what they're going to say ... if it were going to happen to anyone, it would be me.

I feel my face growing warm as I remember the way he looked down at me when I was on the floor of his bedroom. The way the towel barely clung to his hips, the deep V that led my eyes straight to his crotch.

“Oh god,” I groan, wondering how I'll ever manage to face him in the office again after seeing his *very, very large*—ahem...

Then again, it's not like I ever see him in the office. He's several floors above me and has always been a bit of a recluse at work.

Relief washes over me when the doors finally open, and I sprint through the lobby and out the doors, then make my way down the street to catch the train back to the office. When I get back, I bury myself in work. After the courier comes to pick

up the contract, I send Beth a text to let her know the task is complete.

I wrap up the rest of my day, and I'm gathering my things when my phone chirps with a text from my best friend, Karlie.

Karlie: Hey, you down to hang out tonight? Caleb said he's in dire need of cocktails.

I spin around in my chair, debating whether I should go. Truthfully, I just want to stay in tonight. Between the bomb Tim dropped on me a few weeks ago and walking in on Mr. Snow earlier, I think tonight calls for a bubble bath and a glass of Prosecco.

Me: Wish I could, ugh, need to finish up some stuff tonight. Work has been crazy lately. I promise we will soon though. Have fun without me!

I feel a tinge of guilt about somewhat lying about being too busy. The reality is I haven't told my friends about me and Tim yet. I know what they're going to say, and I don't know if I'm ready to hear it. I know if they start telling me all the reasons—valid or not—that I should just end things for good, it will make me feel the need to defend him. I hate being pulled in opposite directions, my friends on one side, boyfriend on the other. I hate that they can't just get along for my sake.

My phone dings again, pulling me from my thoughts.

Karlie: You better not bail on the annual holiday pub crawl this weekend.

Shit, completely forgot about that. Every year, we go to a local pub where they have all sorts of silly holiday games and giveaways.

Me: Of course not! I'll be there.

I put my phone away, then grab my things and head out to take the train back to my apartment, where I fill the tub to the brim with lavender bubbles and pop the cork on a single serving bottle of Prosecco.

THE NEXT MORNING, I smile at our head of security, Todd, as I make my way through the lobby toward the elevators.

There's hardly anybody working since Christmas is right around the corner. I'd originally planned to take the whole week off so Tim and I would be able to spend time with both our families, but that plan went out the window when he put our relationship on pause. I canceled my time off though, figuring staying busy would keep my mind off things. I'm secretly relieved I don't have to spend time with his pompous family this year.

I tried to like them, and I will absolutely continue trying if things work out between us, but damn do they make it hard! The worst part is that I thought his mom and sister loved me for the longest time. We laughed, joked, and got along great; but then his sister, Alice, accidentally sent me a screenshot of something I'd sent her along with a nasty message about how happy she'd be when Tim dumped the *little peasant girl*.

I get it. I'm not wealthy by any means. In fact, my family is barely even middle-class. We've always had to work hard for everything, and even then, we still lived paycheck to paycheck on occasion. Tim made sure I was aware of my lower status in life. It was often a source of contention between us during the holidays. He hated being around my *loud and crass* family. He never admitted to being embarrassed to be seen with my family, but I know he felt it.

“I just don’t understand why we have to ride with your mother to the Christmas parade. Her car smells weird, and why won’t she get the exhaust fixed already?”

I remember faking a smile and fighting back tears as I told my mom we would ride separately, struggling to come up with a believable excuse, but she knew the truth.

She laughs, giving me a big hug. “No worries, sweetheart. I’ll just crank the holiday tunes that much louder in the car.”

Stepping onto the elevator, I glance to my right and see an older portly man with his nose buried in a newspaper. I didn’t realize people still read physical newspapers anymore.

“Hold the door!” someone shouts as the doors begin to close. I dart my hand out just in time and they bounce back open.

“Thanks, Sadie.” Alex winks as he comes to stand next to me.

“Good m—morning sir,” I stutter, shock probably all over my face.

“I know, I remembered pants this time.” He laughs and my head whips to my right at the man behind the newspaper. “Don’t worry about him. That’s Paul, our CFO.”

I look back at the man who is still unbothered, completely engrossed in his newspaper.

“You could tell him your head fell off last night and you sewed it on this morning with dental floss, and he wouldn’t flinch.”

I hear a small harrumph and Paul peeks around the edge of the paper to roll his eyes at us. With a shake of his head, he returns his attention to the news.

“Paul’s been here since my dad started the company.” He pats Paul on the shoulder.

“Paul, nice to meet you,” I say when the elevator reaches my floor.

He responds with a grunt, not bothering to look up. “Nice to see you again, sir ... pants and all. This is me,” I hurriedly add before attempting to dash away from the awkward moment.

“I know, I’m coming with you.”

I stop in my tracks. “Wait, what? Why? Was something wrong with the contracts? Shit, did I screw up?”

“No,” he says with a laugh. “But something you said made me realize that I should make more of an effort to be seen around the office, to engage with people.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, sad, isn’t it? Took me this long to realize that I need to be more involved with my employees, make sure they know I’m here for them.”

I nod my head, eyeing him.

“What?”

“Well, it’s just that you walking around might actually make people more on edge.”

“Really? Why?” He seems genuinely surprised.

“Like you said, you’re not usually around a lot, so they’ll probably assume that you’re here to fire them or because something bad is going on that they aren’t aware of.”

“Hmm.” He rubs his hand over his jaw. “What if I make a quick announcement down here on the sales floor and just say

hey, I'm not here to fire you, just being nosey and wanting to say hi?"

"Don't do that!" I glance around, hoping our hushed tones aren't carrying to the nearby cubicles. He laughs, and I realize he's joking. "Very funny, sir." I roll my eyes and start down the hallway toward my desk.

He falls into step beside me, earning stares from my coworkers. "You do realize you can call me Alex, right?"

We make it to my desk, and I turn to look at him, hands on my hips. "Everyone thinks I'm getting fired."

"Seriously? Just because I'm talking to you?"

I give him an are-you-serious look and place my purse in my bottom desk drawer. "You have no idea the effect you have on people, do you?"

He opens his mouth then snaps it shut again, chuckling to himself like his thoughts are incongruous with the expression of surprise on his face.

"What?" I ask suspiciously.

He plants his hands on my desk and leans closer, lowering his head and his voice. "You know, the same thing could be said about you."

My cheeks burn when he gives me a playful wink and taps my desk twice before walking away. He moves between the cubicles, making small talk with employees he passes on his way back to the elevator.

His words bounce around my head all day and through the remainder of the week. At night, I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling and kicking myself for not asking him to elaborate. But then I realize if I had asked, he could have said something

completely inane and not flirtatious at all. I kind of liked being able to imagine the mysterious possibility that there was an innuendo there.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS!” Marsha places a large bottle of spiced rum on my desk.

Surprised, I look up at her. “What’s this for?”

“Remember how last year I bought you that bottle of eggnog I thought was a pre-made cocktail but turned out to just be non-alcoholic eggnog? Well, this year I thought, *I’ll buy her the rum.*”

“You shouldn’t have gotten me anything, now I feel bad. I thought we all agreed no Secret Santa this year.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s cheap rum, don’t worry about it.” She laughs, waving off my concern. “Besides, I can never thank you enough for allowing me and Rich to take your spot in Rio last year. You made that man’s year, and between us”—she leans forward, holding her hand up to the side of her mouth—“it made our sex life ten times better since going on vacation.”

I giggle. “Glad I could be of service.”

“You heading home soon?” She plants her hands on her full hips. “It’s Friday night and almost Christmas. I thought you were going to be off for the holidays by now anyway.”

I sigh. “I was supposed to be.”

“What happened? You’re still going home to your family, right? Out in Yorkville?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “I’ll be spending the holidays with them as planned. You and Rich excited the kids are coming to town?”

She ignores my question for a moment, her eyes narrowing at me. “No Tim this year?”

“Uh, no. At least not right now.”

“What’s that mean?”

“We uh—he decided that we should take some time and space to thi—”

“That bastard dumped you at Christmas?” Her eye twitches. That’s Marsha, always ready to throw down with someone. This isn’t the first time she’s gone in on Tim, though.

“Not *dumped*. It’s just a break.”

She gives me the same look I know I’ll get from everyone once I finally tell them. The you-can’t-possibly-be-serious-you-know-a-break-means-he’s-out-hooking-up-with-someone-else look.

“Glad I gave you the rum then, sister. You’re going to need it.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’m going to head out. I’ll be gone till after New Year’s. Rich and I are very excited the kids are coming in, feels like it always takes forever for this time of year to get here, and then our time with them flies by.” She taps my desk and I look up at her from where my eyes had briefly drifted back to my computer. “If you need anything, you call me, okay?”

“Thanks, Marsh. Have a Merry Christmas. And tell Rich I said the same.”

“You too, baby girl.” She waves as she walks away from my desk, her giant purse swinging back and forth on her shoulder.

I groan and lean back in my chair, glancing over at the clock. It’s just after 4:30 and the sales floor is pretty much empty. I stare at the bottle of rum, tempted to open it and toss back a shot or two to get me through the last hour of work.

I don’t need to stay to catch up on anything, but I don’t have any plans, and I really loathe the idea of sitting alone on my couch while eating takeout or a frozen dinner while my mind plays a fun game of *what did Mr. Snow mean by his comment the other day?*

I put my AirPods in and start knocking out some end of year reports and other tasks that will make coming back from the holidays easier. By the time I’ve finished, it’s pushing six p.m. I decide to call it a day and grab my purse and the rum before trudging toward the elevator bank.

I press the button and glance around. It seems like I really am the last person here tonight. The elevator dings and the doors open. I step inside and hit the button for the lobby, but notice the elevator starts going up rather than down.

“What the?” I groan when I see the arrow pointing up. I guess I wasn’t paying attention when I stepped inside. I’d assumed it was the elevator I called to go down, but someone on a higher floor must have pushed it at the same time. I lean against the wall with a sigh. The lights flicker briefly as the elevator climbs higher.

Panic grips my chest when I realize I'm almost to the top floor. I know Beth isn't working this week. I can't imagine Mr. Snow would be staying this late, but then again, his entire life seems to revolve solely around work. Oh, maybe it's Paul. I bet it's Paul. He seems like the kind of guy who works round the clock, holiday or not, and will most likely never retire.

The doors open. Nope, not Paul.

"Sadie, what a lovely surprise." Mr. Snow's contagious grin spreads across his face, his eyes lighting up as he steps into the car. "Why are you here so late?"

"Just trying to make sure I got everything finished before the holidays. I hate trying to relax knowing there's a mountain of reports waiting for me when I return from time off."

He smirks. "So studious. Are you always such a good girl, Miss Emmert?"

The way my name—Miss Emmert—slides off his tongue like silk sheets off a bed makes my temperature skyrocket. The question takes me by surprise, not because of the subject matter but because of the look in his eyes when he asks it. His voice reminds me of the richest, most decadent chocolate, all tempting and sultry. It's full of temptation and it does things to me. A bead of sweat drips down my back as he continues to look at me, my thighs squeezing together as I try to compose myself and answer in a way that seems professional instead of what's really going through my head—*Yes, but you make me want to be a naughty little slu—*

I shake my head, redirecting my thoughts, and clear my throat before attempting to answer. "Uh—" My voice goes up about three octaves when the lights flicker again, only this time they go out completely and the elevator car comes to a jolting stop.

“What the hell was that?” I ask, panicking. My throat tightens as the emergency lights come on.

“It’s okay, I’m sure it’s just stuck.”

“Stuck!?”

“I’m sure it will be back up and running any second.” He pokes around on the panel, but nothing happens.

I glance at my watch. We’ve only been in here a few moments, but it already feels like an eternity.

“Let me call down to Todd.” Alex holds his phone to his ear then pulls it away to look at the screen. “Shit, no reception. What about you?”

I grab my phone and check. “No bars.” I hold it up for him to see.

He steps around me to press the phone button on the elevator control panel, and it begins to ring. A moment later, a woman answers.

“Hello, 911. What’s your emergency?”

“Hey, this is Alex Snow over at Snow Communications on Van Buren. We’re stuck in an elevator. Emergency lights are on and neither of us has cell reception.”

“Okay, sir, is anyone injured?”

“No, we’re fine.”

“How many people are in the elevator?”

“Just myself and one of my employees.”

“Are either of you over the age of sixty-five or have any medical conditions?”

“No.”

“Just one second please ... okay. I have your address from the elevator response call. We can get fire and rescue over to you—just one second, sir.”

The line goes quiet, and we look at each other.

“Sorry, sir, but we are actually getting word that the entire city block is without power. We have several more elevator calls coming in right now. I’m being told that fire and rescue will be dispatched shortly and start prioritizing rescues.”

“Prioritizing them based on what?”

“On age, health, any injuries.”

“So any idea how long we’ll be in here?”

“Sorry, sir. No idea. We will maintain contact through the emergency phone line. As soon as fire and rescue are on their way to you, we’ll let you know.”

“I’m sweating, are you sweating? It feels stifling in here.”

Sadie plucks at her sweater, pulling it away from her neck as her panicked eyes dart around the elevator.

She’s the epitome of a Christmas Hallmark movie heroine, like the ones I’ve seen in commercials. A crisp white collar pokes above the edge of her red sweater, her black tights and black skirt hugging her slim figure. She reminds me of the girls I went to prep school with; sophisticated and elegant, but with a touch of something mysterious simmering just beneath the surface.

“It is hot in here, yes,” I reply, tugging at my tie. “You know, you could take your sweater off.” I don’t mean for my voice to drop an octave, but it does, sounding much flirtier than I’d intended. Not that I mind. Besides, I want to keep her mind engaged and prevent her from spiraling into a full-blown meltdown over our current situation.

“I have a shirt underneath,” she says quickly, her eyes snapping to mine. Her hand is still clenched around the bottle of rum, her purse clutched to her side.

“I know, Sadie, that’s why I suggested it. I can see your collar.” She looks down, then back to me, and her expression softens. “What’s with the rum?”

“Oh.” She holds it up. “Last year, Marsha—you know the lady who took my place in Rio?”

“Yeah, I know Marsha.”

“Well, she bought me a mixer of eggnog last year and didn’t realize it didn’t come mixed with alcohol, and she felt silly. So this year, she gave me the alcohol.”

“Please don’t tell me you still have the eggnog from last year?”

She giggles and shakes her head. “No, but this will certainly come in handy once we get out of here.”

“Did you have plans tonight? Hopefully no friends or a”—I grit out the next word—“date waiting on you?” I begin removing my suit jacket, the heat starting to get to me.

“I—uh ...” I look up when she stumbles over her words. She’s watching me intently as I slide the jacket down my arms, then remove my tie completely and undo another button. Folding my jacket in half, I gently place it on the floor before rolling my sleeves up to my elbows.

“You were saying, Miss Emmert?” Her eyes are trained on my hands as she swallows.

“Oh, yeah sorry. No, no plans. I guess I kind of forgot it’s Friday night. Talk about a lame way to start the weekend.”

“You mean spending it with your boss isn’t fun?” I tease, and her cheeks redden again.

“Sorry, no, that’s not what I meant.” She shakes her head in exasperation. “I think I should take my sweater off.” When she thrusts the rum toward me, her purse slides down her arm to the floor. Spinning around so her back is toward me, she struggles to get the sweater over her head and keep her blouse

tucked in. She fails, and it pulls up a little, flashing me a sliver of her lower back for one brief second. I feel like a pathetic creep, getting excited over the tiniest glimpse of her bare skin.

“I think we should crack this open,” I say, holding up the bottle.

“Really?”

I look at my watch. “We’ve already been in here for almost twenty minutes, and there’s still no sign of getting any help. Might as well make the best of it. It is the weekend, after all.”

“Just straight? I don’t have anything to mix it with.”

“Come on.” I waggle my eyebrows at her. “Live a little.”

“Okay,” she agrees, flashing me a mischievous little grin. “Oh, I do have one small water bottle, so at least we can stay somewhat hydrated.”

“Always the good girl.” She tugs on her bottom lip with her teeth as I unscrew the cap and hold the rum out to her.

“You first,” she says, pushing it back toward me.

I bring the bottle to my lips, taking two healthy swallows.

“Fuck me, that’s good.”

Her eyes widen. “You like it?” I nod and hand her the bottle. She brings it to her lips, staring at me, then she squeezes her eyes shut and takes a swig. It makes her cough and sputter as her face twists into a horrified grimace, and she sticks her tongue out, making an exaggerated gagging face.

“Oh god, that’s terrible!”

I can’t hold back my laughter. “Sorry. I knew if I told you how bad it was you wouldn’t do it. The first shot is always the worst. Don’t worry, the rest will go down smoother.”

“The rest? I’m not drinking more of that,” she says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and reaching for the mini water bottle in her purse.

“Oh come on, I thought we were having a Friday night party.”

“Are you trying to peer pressure me, Mr. Snow? That doesn’t seem very professional.”

I let her question simmer for a moment before I answer. How is it she can seem so innocent yet so fucking alluring at the same time? Like she knows just what to say to make my mind spiral with all the naughty things I want to do to her.

“Depends, Miss Emmert.” I take a step closer to her, the space between us already limited. “Is it working?” I reach down, not breaking eye contact as I grab the rum and take another long pull before holding the bottle out to her.

She stares at me, unblinking. Her small hand wraps around the neck of the bottle and our fingers brush, sending a sizzling tingle up my arm. She brings the bottle to her lips and takes a sip. She doesn’t react as strongly this time, but her eye twitches and a small cough erupts from her chest.

“So, what do you normally do on Friday nights?” Her question breaks the budding tension.

“Let’s see ...” I run my hand over my unshaven jaw, my stubble audibly scraping against my palm. “When I’m not here working late, I’m usually working late in my home office.”

“Seriously?”

“Afraid so. Not a terribly exciting life I lead.”

“I thought being the billionaire owner of a company meant you could do whatever you want. Jet off to Monte Carlo, or

wherever rich people go.” She gestures a little wildly with her hands and I realize the rum is hitting her.

“That sounds like an amazing idea but”—I hang my head—“not as exciting as you’d think it would be when you’re doing those things alone.”

“Oh, I guess I assumed ...” I grab the bottle back from her and take another long sip, the rum burning a path down my throat and into my chest.

“What about you? What’s your typical Friday night?”

“I don’t really know anymore.” She shrugs and her expression looks a little sad.

“Meaning?”

“Since Tim wanted a ‘break’ ...” She does air quotes, following her statement with an exaggerated eyeroll. Darting out a hand, she grabs the bottle from me, this time tipping her head back much longer than she had for her previous sips.

I pull the bottle away from her mouth. “Whoa, whoa. Maybe we should pace ourselves.” I place the bottle on the ground and grab her hand. “Here, why don’t we sit.” She doesn’t resist as I guide us both down to the floor.

“These damn shoes are pinching my feet.” She leans forward to unzip the black ankle boots she’s wearing, removing them and kicking them to the side.

“So, tell me about this Tim guy. I already don’t like him.” I don’t offer an explanation. The truth is, the rum is hitting me too, but I don’t care. I don’t understand how a man could have this woman in his life and just toss her aside.

She snorts. “He’s a lawyer, been together for three years now, and he just decided a few weeks ago that he suddenly

doesn't want kids anymore and needs space to figure out if I'm who he even wants to be with."

"Wait a minute. There were no warning signs, no previous talks, he just decided he needs space and that was that?"

"Yup. Well ..." She holds up a finger, her eyes squinting like she's thinking. "I guess there might have been a few warning signs. At his firm, the new first-year lawyers were recently brought in, which is when he started acting shady. I saw this woman's name, Tiffany, on his phone, and he acted like it was just because she's new and needs help or whatever ... but when I asked to see the messages, he said it was private because they're lawyers and it breaks some code or bylaw or something because it's technically his work property."

"He certainly sounds like a lawyer." I grit my teeth. Just hearing about this piece of shit is pissing me off. "So, clearly there's something going on between those two and he wants to explore it, which is why he said he wanted space."

She slaps my arm. "That's what I said! Of course, he said I was being dramatic and jealous. He's—there's other stuff." She twists her fingers together in her lap. "My friends don't like him, and I'm pretty sure he hates my family."

"Hey." I reach out and touch her chin to get her look at me. "He hates your family? Sadie, that's not a good thing, you know?"

She nods and looks back down. "I know there are red flags, especially since my friends can't stand him, but I guess I've just been too scared to admit it and let go. I hear all these dating horror stories from social media and from my friends, and they made me feel like I was lucky to have Tim because it meant I didn't have to be out there navigating all that. Pathetic,

I know.” She leans over to grab the bottle and takes a drink before handing it to me.

“Not pathetic. We’ve all been there, I think. But I can confidently say that guy is an asshole and I hope you see that now.”

“He can be so nice though. I think sometimes people don’t put enough effort into working through issues in a relationship.”

“Or some people give too much.” I can see her mood souring so I change the subject. “Anyway, what about your friends? You have plans with them this weekend?”

Her eyes light up again. “I do! We always go to this annual holiday pub crawl in Wrigleyville. We’ve been going since college. It’s dive bars, cheap beer, and lots of silly holiday games and costumes.” She laughs and the sound tugs at my heart. “We don’t do the full bar to bar thing anymore. We tend to settle at the final bar, Finnegan’s, and watch all the crazy drunk people pile in at the end.”

“That sounds like a fun time. What about for Christmas?”

“I spend it with my family. They live about forty miles outside the city in Yorkville. We have a very traditional Christmas, the big meal, presents, sledding. What about you?”

“You’re not going to like my answer.” I give her a sheepish smile. “I stay home and work.”

“What?” Her back shoots off the wall of the elevator. “You can’t work through the holidays! What about your family?”

“Well, I don’t really have any family left. I’m an only child, my mom passed away when I was ten, and my dad died about seven years ago.”

She gasps and places her hand over mine. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t tell you to garner sympathy. Honestly, it allows me to catch up on work so January is a little less stressful.”

She looks at me with pity in her eyes. “You can’t stay home. I’m serious. You should come with me this year. My family is super nice and outgoing, they’re always happy if more people show up.”

I laugh. “Are they used to you bringing home strays for the holidays?”

“You’re not a stray; and no. Tim is usually there but obviously not this year, so they would love it. Honestly!”

“I’ll think about it, Sadie. I appreciate the offer.” I cover the hand she placed on top of mine with my other hand and we both look down at where we’re joined. I swear I hear her inhale sharply at the sight.

I consider using my hold on her hand to pull her into my lap, briefly fantasizing about what it would be like to explore her delicious lips. But at the last second, she slides her hand away to check the time on her watch.

“Holy shit, we’ve been in here for two hours already.”

I stand up, a little unsteady from the rum, and push the phone button on the elevator to chat with the dispatcher. She assures me both the power company and fire and rescue are working as quickly as they can, but there’s no update on when power will be restored or when someone will be able to come get us out.

“Fuck.” I grab the bottle and take another drink. “Time to get drunk, I guess.”

“Think I already am,” she says, grabbing the bottle from me.

We sit in silence for a bit, passing the bottle back and forth a few more times before she speaks again.

“Can I ask you something super personal?”

When I look over, her expression is serious.

“Sure, I’m an open book.”

“Can guys fake it?”

“Fake—?” I lift one eyebrow, and her eyes dart away from mine, a pink glow inching its way up her neck. “Oh, fake it? As in an orgasm? Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“I think Tim was faking it the last few months we were together.”

“What made you think that?”

“He—uh ...” She looks at me.

“Sweetheart, you’ve seen my penis, so as far as I’m concerned, there are no secrets between us.”

“Oh my god.” She clamps her hand over her mouth, her face now beet red. “Oh god, I have.” She buries her face in her hands.

I laugh. “Damn, I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“No, it wasn’t. You have an amazing pen—it’s huge, it’s—that wasn’t what I meant to say.” We both burst out laughing. She leans against me, her head falling half in my lap like we’re lovers sharing an inside joke.

“Sorry,” she says, sitting back up. “Anyway, what I meant was he never seemed to finish. He’d just like roll off and get up and take a shower.”

My stomach churns at the thought of Tim touching her—of any man touching her. Especially a selfish asshole who clearly didn't prioritize her physical needs ahead of his own.

“Can I ask *you* a personal question?” She nods. “Did he make sure that you finished first?”

“No.”

“Ever?”

She tilts her head, chewing her bottom lip again.

“The fact you have to think about it says everything. Did you ever fake it?”

Her mouth opens then snaps shut again. “Yes.”

“Can I ask why? I mean, we both know how it works, if you communicate to your partner what excites you, what turns you on ...” Her eyes grow heavy as I talk, her throat constricting as she swallows. “What makes you come ... well, it might be uncomfortable at first, but it could save the relationship.”

She shrugs. “You're right, and it wasn't always this way. I think I just got tired of explaining it every time, you know?”

“I don't think I do. Every time, meaning?”

“The best way I can explain it is this ... imagine something you love doing or something that makes you feel amazing ... like a massage. But every single time you go to your masseuse, you have to tell them step-by-step, over and over again what to do to make you feel good. It not only negates the relaxation aspect, but it's exhausting, especially when the next time they completely disregard everything you already told them and do what makes *them* feel good instead.”

Is she seriously saying this idiot could never get her off?

“Did he ever make you come?” I know I’m drifting into seriously dangerous territory here, but between the rum and how intoxicated I am by her, I can’t seem to stop myself. The air suddenly feels thick and charged between us. I reach over, brushing a tendril of her strawberry blond hair from her face.

“Um, yes, but only a few times and not from—not sex.”

“You mean he couldn’t make you come with his cock?” She looks away, but I reach out and tug her chin to make her look at me. “Did he use his tongue or his fingers?”

Her breathing picks up. “His fingers.”

“Inside?”

She shakes her head.

“Hmm, so he never got you off with his tongue or his cock? What about the other men you’ve been with?”

She doesn’t answer right away. After a few seconds, she shakes her head.

“No?”

“There haven’t been any other men. He’s the only one I’ve been with.”

I can’t hide my shock. Now I see why she’s struggling to get over this asshole. She has a special bond with him.

“That’s the problem, sweetheart. You’ve been with a boy; you need to be with a man. A man who knows how to treat a woman, how to listen and watch your body respond to his touch so he can please you.”

She’s about two seconds from climbing into my lap, it’s written all over her face. Lust, desire, but also a touch of uncertainty. From what she’s been saying, she isn’t used to

taking what she wants from a man. I want to show her she's capable.

"It's so hot in here," she says, attempting to stand up, but her legs wobble. I reach out to grab her arm and pull her toward me, and she tumbles forward, about to land on her knees in my lap, but I grab her waist, slowly lowering her until she's straddling me.

"Oh." The word comes out on a sigh as her ass hits my lap.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you stumble, I was just um ..." I don't finish my statement.

"What were you going to do?" she asks. My hands are still resting on her waist and her hands are on my shoulders where she caught herself.

I can feel myself growing firm against her ass, the warmth of her body sending my hormones into overdrive. I don't want to release her.

"Something I shouldn't," I answer, my eyes falling to her pink lips.

Her knee slowly slides further away from my body, aided by her tights. She attempts to adjust herself until her body is hovering over me slightly, but her other knee slips and she falls down a little harder. She repeats the process again, and this time I tighten my grip on her waist.

"Sadie, sweetheart, you need to sit still or we're about to have a situation."

"What?" She tries to get up one more time, almost grinding down on me as she situates herself, and I can't bite back a groan.

“Fuuuuck.” My head falls backward, thumping against the wall, and I squeeze my eyes shut. This woman literally has no idea how close I am to coming right now.

“Oh, OH!” she says, finally realizing why I told her to sit still. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.” She scrambles to get off my lap just as the lights flicker and the elevator car jolts, bouncing twice and sending her full weight back down onto my lap. The elevator begins its descent to the lobby.

“We’re moving!” she squeals.

“Just please—”

I attempt to stop her before she can climb off my lap, but I’m too late. She gets almost completely off my lap, but her bare feet slip on the floor, causing her to catch herself with her hand, which lands directly on top of my rock-hard cock.

I squeeze my eyes shut. “This has to be a bad dream.”

She stares down at the very clear outline of my manhood straining against the fabric of my pants. “Holy shit, it gets bigger!”

“Yeah, that tends to happen when I get hard. But for fuck’s sake, Sadie, please stop touching me unless you plan on finishing what you started.”

She jerks her hand back, recoiling like she just touched a snake, then falls back on her ass, giggling.

“You think blue balls are funny?” I take a deep breath, attempting to regain my composure as the elevator doors finally open to the lobby.

“Oh no!” she says, an overdramatically serious expression on her face. “I’m too drunk to drive home.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll call my driver.” I slowly stand, pulling my phone from my pocket to shoot him a text while attempting to cover my erection with my coat. “Let’s wait out here. I think I’m done with elevators for a while.”

She follows me outside. A few minutes later, my driver pulls up and we slide into the backseat of my Maybach.

“Thanks.” She smiles at me. “For listening to my drama and making the best of a shitty shituation—er, situation. I think I drank too much.”

“I think we both did.” I am not relishing the nasty headache I can already feel building in my skull.

A few minutes later, we pull up outside Sadie’s building and I get out to walk her to her door.

“You want a nightcap?” She giggles as she holds up the mostly empty bottle, and I just shake my head. I step a little closer, teasing us both, my height making it so I tower over her smaller, slim frame. Her big blue eyes gaze up at me.

“Thanks for the offer, Miss Emmert, but I should get home.” I turn and take two steps down the stairs, stopping when she says my name.

“Thanks for the ride home. Enjoy your work at your home office,” she says, teasing me.

I turn and take the two steps back to her in a single stride, backing her against the brick wall of the building as I slide my hand behind her neck, gripping tightly so she has to look up at me. Her big eyes are wider than usual.

“Don’t tease me, Sadie. We both know what will happen if I walk in this building with you. You’ve had far too much to drink, and I’m far too turned on to be a gentleman.”

And with that, I walk back to my car, telling myself it was the right decision. No matter how badly I wanted to take her upstairs and finally have my cock inside her tight little body.

SADIE

“You look like hell.”

“Gee thanks, come in.” I step aside to let my best friend, Karlie, into my apartment. She holds up a garment bag and I shake my head. “I’m not wearing that this year.”

“Excuse me? Like hell you aren’t! The ho-ho-ho girls is our tradition. We’ve been doing this for five years and it’s not stopping now.” She shoves the garment bag in my hand. I know it contains an identical little Santa outfit to the one she’s wearing. It’s basically a bright red bra top trimmed with white fur and embellished with black and gold buckles, a matching miniskirt, tall striped socks, and a pair of black high-heeled pumps.

“Ugh,” I groan, taking the bag from her and shutting the door. My head is still pounding from the night before. I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea to get drunk on cheap rum with basically no water or food in my system. Even the gallon of water and three Advil I took earlier haven’t touched it.

She eyes me suspiciously. “What happened to you last night?”

“Nothing.” I shrug, attempting to remain nonchalant, but based on the suspicious way she studies me, I’m unsuccessful.

“You didn’t return my texts for hou—oh my god! Did you finally dump that loser and find a hottie with a body to show you a good time?” She wiggles her eyebrows up and down, and it reminds me of Alex doing the same thing last night.

“Hottie with a body? What are we, seventeen?” I laugh. Tossing the garment bag on the couch, I reach for the burger and fries she brought me. I take a huge bite, stalling. I still haven’t told my friends about me and Tim. At first, it was because I thought for sure we would be back together by now. I figured there was no sense rousing the troops if he just needed a short-lived weeklong break. But it’s been almost a month, and I’m starting to think maybe he’s actually done with me.

“Caleb and Ariel are meeting us in thirty minutes, so you better get a move on. You need to take a shower. I think there might be something growing in your hair.” She grimaces, lifting a limp, matted lock of my hair. It always looks like crap when I go to sleep with it wet like I did the night before.

Karlie, Caleb, Ariel, and I have been best friends since our freshman year of college. I can’t even remember who met who first. It just feels like we’ve all been inseparable for the last six years.

“The thought of drinking tonight makes my stomach feel soupy.” I dip a fry into a pile of ketchup and shove it in my mouth.

“You went out drinking last night?” She arches her brow. “What’s going on?”

I shake my head. “Long story. I promise I’ll fill you guys in on everything at the bar. I just don’t want to have to go through it all multiple times.”

“Ohhhh, so something is going on? I hope it’s piping hot.”

I finish the burger in two more bites and stand up to toss my trash away before heading for the shower.

“Trust me,” I say, pausing in the doorway to look back at her. “It’s boiling.”

“OKAY, okay! Before we get too deep into the holiday spirit, Sadie said she has some boiling hot tea to share, and I’m tired of waiting. So spill!” Karlie claps her hands and leans on the bar table we’re all sitting around.

Caleb throws his hands up. “Hold up. You ladies know the rule. As excited as I am for this hot goss, we start this party every year with a nog shot and rum chaser.”

“Ugh, not rum.” I drop my head into my hands and Ariel reaches over to rub my back.

“What am I missing?” she asks, looking around the table.

“Nothing. I just drank about a third of a bottle of cheap rum last night.”

“Ohhh, that explains things,” she says, studying my clearly exhausted-looking face.

A moment later, a waitress places eight shots on the table. I make the mistake of sniffing the rum, which causes my stomach to twist as saliva pools in my mouth.

“Okay bitches, here’s to another fantastic holiday season and another year of the ho-ho-ho girls shutting down the bar!” Caleb smiles as we all lift our shots and yell “cheers!”

To my surprise, I actually manage to take both shots and keep them down, but not without chugging half my Diet Coke after.

Ariel turns toward me. “So what’s the story with you and the rum?”

“Please tell me Tim didn’t hurt you again, or so help me god, I will march my ass over to your place right now and beat him into next week,” Caleb says, Karlie and Ariel nodding their agreement. “Unless of course you dumped him, in which ca—”

“He dumped me.”

All three of their faces fall.

“Excuse me? You let that pathetic man-child dump *you*?”

“Well technically, he didn’t dump me, we’re just ... on a break.” As I suspected, their expressions tell me what they’re going to say.

“A break?” Caleb leans across the table. “Sweetie, we’re heading into our late twenties, we’re not eighteen anymore. We don’t go on breaks at this age unless a man sees a piece of ass he wants to tap but can’t do it in good conscience.”

I grimace and Caleb gasps, his hands covering his mouth. “Oh no, that’s it, isn’t it? That Tiffany girl.”

“I don’t know for sure. He said over and over that nothing was going on, and I literally have zero proof. I know he wouldn’t let me see the texts, but in all our years together, he never gave me a reason to doubt him or suspect infidelity. He’s never given me a reason to not trust him.”

“Till now,” Ariel pipes up. “Sadie, you mentioned months ago that he was acting differently. It wasn’t just her name

popping up on his phone, it was him hiding his texts, the fact he didn't want to be intimate anymore, changing his mind about kids, and now he wants space?"

"I know, I know. Trust me, I feel like an idiot. I want to be over him. I hate that I'm hung up on him, that I'm worried I'll never find anyone else. I just hear all these awful stories about women finding out a guy has an entire secret family, or he's married, or he's secretly a serial cheater, or just ghosts you after you catch feelings. That shit is terrifying."

Karlie grabs my hands. "So is burying your head in the sand, babe. You're better than this. You're not that girl who ignores shit out of fear. There couldn't be more red flags and neon signs pointing to the fact that even if he didn't cheat, he wanted to, and he clearly doesn't value what you built together because he's willing to throw you away for a break."

I hang my head in shame because that's all I feel. "I know. It's hard because he wasn't always this way. Remember back in the day when you guys liked him? And my family did too? Then when he got hired on at his firm, things slowly started to change."

"Yeah, he turned into an arrogant asshole," Caleb says.

"I think more than anything I just want closure. I want him to be honest; I think we both deserve that. I just wish he and I could sit down and just talk about everything."

"Has he reached out?" Ariel questions.

I shake my head. "I haven't either. He said he wanted space, and honestly, I'd feel pathetic. Plus, I'd feel worse if he just left me on read."

"What's the plan then? If a month from now he calls you up and says he's done having space but doesn't tell you if he

slept with someone else, would you take him back?” Caleb asks.

“No. A lot would have to change for that to happen.”

“Wrong answer. Listen to me.” Caleb slides off his stool and puts his hands on my shoulders. “Unless that man can turn back time and erase the shit he’s said and done, you don’t take him back. We are telling you this stuff *because* we are your best friends. We care about you, and as people who love you, we’d be shit friends if we weren’t honest with you.”

I smile at him. “I know, and I do appreciate it.”

“So was that the piping hot tea?” Karlie asks.

“Uh ...” I laugh. “Part of it. But I also accidentally saw my boss’s ... um, candy cane.”

The frequency of my friends’ screams would make dogs howl.

“Lead with that next time!” Ariel jokes with a laugh.

“Spill everything,” Caleb adds as all three of them gather around me like we’re back in middle school.

I explain in painstaking detail why I’d gone to my boss’s residence, what went down when I got there, and how Mr. Snow gave me a private tour of his zillion dollar penthouse.

“Are we talking hot dog?”

I shake my head.

“Bratwurst?”

I shrug.

“Oh god, kielbasa?”

“That’s more accurate.”

Caleb and Karlie pretend to faint, and Ariel fans her face and reaches for her drink.

“So then, we ended up stuck in an elevator together last night for like four hours, drinking rum.”

They stare at me with confused expressions on their faces, so I backtrack a bit and explain how we ended up in the situation to begin with.

“But right before the power came back on, I ended up in his lap, and he got hard, and ... holy shit! I accidentally touched it.”

“How do you accidentally touch a man’s rock-hard kielbasa?”

“It’s a little fuzzy because I was very drunk, but from what I can remember, my tights made my legs slippery, I was barefoot, so my feet were slippery too, and, well, it was just a whole ordeal.” I start laughing as memories from last night come back to me.

“But nothing happened? He didn’t kiss you?”

“No,” I reply to Karlie. “But he hinted that he wanted to. Basically said something about how he shouldn’t want what he’s wanting and something about coming upstairs to my place. Oh god! I forgot I invited him upstairs.” I cover my face with my hands.

“The real question here is, are *you* going to do something?”

“With my boss? Hell no! I wouldn’t know what to do with all ... that.”

Ariel laughs. “I can think of a few things.”

“I think you’re crazy for not at least trying, but this is still good news!” Karlie says, grabbing my shoulders like Caleb did a minute ago.

“It is?”

“Yes! You’re clearly able to flirt with another man and not pine away for pencil-dick Tim. I think tonight would be the perfect time to get back out there.”

“No, I’m not ready to date yet.”

“I didn’t say *date*, sweetie. I mean go dance with a hottie, make out, find a fuckbuddy or something.”

“Yes, I like this plan,” Ariel says, nodding.

“In fact, let’s find someone right now.” Caleb slides off his stool and starts looking around the bar. “Oh, what about him? He’s got that sexy older man muscle thing going on.”

I look at where he’s pointing, “I think you have a better chance of picking him up than me.”

“True,” he agrees, waving at the guy and giving a flirty wink before returning his attention to the rest of the bar. I wave off one suggestion after the next while finishing a glass of sangria, against my better judgment.

“Him!” Caleb suddenly shouts, sounding confident.

“Who?” I ask, my vision blocked by a group of people on the dance floor.

“Oh, he’s fine!” Ariel says. “Look at the way he’s staring at her, like he’s the big bad wolf. Yum!”

“You guys are crazy, you know that? I need another drink.” I slide off my stool just as the crowd parts and I see who they’re pointing at.

Sitting alone in the back corner is Mr. Snow.

“That’s him!” I whisper-shout, spinning back around to face my friends. “That’s my fucking boss! Why the hell is he here?”

“*That’s* Mr. Candy Cane? Hot damn, I would have devoured that man,” Karlie says as she casually leans against the table and undresses him with her eyes.

“No, that’s not what we’re calling him. Stop it! Everyone! Turn back around! We have to pay the check and get out of here.”

I start scrambling to gather my purse while attempting to pull down my barely there top and pull up my barely there skirt, trying to hide all the bare skin I’m showing, but the clothes are refusing to cooperate.

“Oh shit,” Ariel says, and I snap my head up.

“No oh shit. What’s oh shit?”

“He’s coming over here.”

W*hat the fuck is she wearing?*

It's revealing, sexy, and not at all something I'd ever imagine her choosing to wear. I take a long sip of my beer, watching her while she still has no idea I'm here. She's talking in a very animated fashion to her friends, who seem completely engrossed in whatever she's saying. Then she says something that makes all their jaws drop.

She covers her face with her hands and shakes her head.

They clutch at their chests, and the only guy in the group screams and covers his mouth.

My chest tightens with jealousy at how much they're enjoying her company. I want to be laughing and having a good time with her. I also want to slide my hand up her milky thighs and bury my face between them.

I adjust myself in my jeans. Now is not the time to start fantasizing about little Miss Emmert.

Finally, she turns around, her eyes scanning the room. She doesn't recognize me at first. Her eyes pass right over me but then immediately bounce back, growing wide just before she spins back around and attempts to hide behind her friends. I

can't hold back my laughter. She is clearly caught off guard by seeing me here.

I slide off my barstool and maneuver through the crowded room until I reach her.

“Good evening, Miss Emmert.”

She looks over her shoulder before turning her body toward me, her rosy cheeks lifting as she smiles.

“Good evening, Mr. Snow.”

“Caleb,” the man to her left says, holding his hand out for me to shake and almost knocking the woman next to him off her chair.

“Alex, pleasure.” I smile and shake his hand before turning to introduce myself to the others.

“Sorry, this is my boss, Alex Snow. And these are my friends.” She gestures around the table, and her friends take turns waving and telling me their names.

“So what brings you to our side of town tonight, Alex?” Caleb asks as her friends stare at me, barely suppressing their giggles. If I had to guess, she told them about the penis incident.

Sadie grabs my arm and tugs me away from the table before I can respond.

“What are you doing here?”

I shrug. “Guess our conversations in the elevator about this place made me get into the holiday spirit for once. Sounded like a fun night.” I don't bother to hide the way my eyes rake over every inch of her body as I reach out to touch the soft white fur on the edge of her skirt. “This is cute.”

“Um, yeah. I didn’t want to wear it this year, but Karlie insisted. It’s part of our tradition, we’re the—” she stops abruptly and wraps her arms around her waist, attempting to conceal her very toned bare midriff.

Fuck me, I’d like to drag my tongue over her exposed skin. Maybe leave a few bite marks to mark where I’ve been.

“The what?”

She stares at me for a few seconds before giving in.

“The ho-ho-ho girls. Have you ever seen Mean Girls? You know that scene where they dress up like this and sing ‘Jingle Bell Rock?’ That was our inspiration.”

I let my head fall back with laughter. “That’s cute.” She crooks her eyebrow at me, a sassy little expression on her face I haven’t seen before. “Is that what you were going for with that outfit and name? Cute?” I bring the beer to my lips as she slowly shakes her head no.

“Not exactly, but when my two best friends are both a solid six inches taller and look like models, I’m used to getting *cute*.”

I peruse her body again, taking my time and making sure she can see the desire in my eyes. “That’s not what I think when I look at you.”

“No?” Her voice is breathy.

“You want to know what I think when I look at you?”

She nods, but I want to hear her say it. I take a step closer, and she tilts her head back so she can look up at me as I stare down at her.

“Tell me you want me to tell you what words come to mind when I see your tempting body on display like this.”

Her eyes dart back and forth as she scans my face, her lips slowly parting. “What wo—”

“Hello?” Caleb interrupts, bounding over to us. “We’re doing another round of nog shots and you’re both doing them with us, so get over here.”

The moment is gone. She blinks a few times before smiling at Caleb then back at me. “Sorry, looks like they roped you in. Get ready to relive a nightmare with a rum shot.”

We walk back over to the table where there’s a shot of eggnog and a shot of rum in front of each chair.

“This looks like a bad decision,” I say, eyeing the white milky liquid.

“It is, that’s why we’re doing it.” Karlie laughs as she grabs a shot in each hand and raises them both. “To another successful Santa pub crawl, the ho-ho-ho girls, and of course, to candy canes.”

I see Sadie’s eyes almost bug out of her head as she shoots a look at Karlie, who is laughing hysterically, and Caleb and Ariel join her.

“Did I miss something?”

“No!” Sadie shouts.

“Oh, no. Sadie just really *really* loves candy canes,” Ariel says, smirking. “Not like the normal ones you hang on your tree but the big ones. You know the ones you get at the hardware store? It’s really thick and long and—”

“Okay, we get it,” Sadie interrupts.

“And to men who don’t tell us we need boob jobs,” Karlie adds, giving Sadie a pointed look.

“What?” I can’t hide my shock and annoyance, because even without an explanation, I know it must be something Tim said. It’s written all over Sadie’s face as she gives her friend a look that screams *what the hell?*

“He asked if I’d ever considered getting a boob job; and for the record, I told him it was an insensitive question and he apologized. But yeah, fuck him.” She downs both her shots, one right after the other.

I do the same, then glance over at the dance floor where several couples have gathered. I want to take her mind off what she just revealed, and any excuse to get close to her is fine by me.

“Dance with me,” I say, nudging Sadie. She looks at me then glances at the dance floor.

“That’s okay.” She shakes her head and points down at her shoes. “Two left feet.”

“So, Mr. Snow,” Caleb says, stopping me from convincing Sadie to a dance. “Tell us about yourself. Sadie mentioned you live in Park Tower over on Michigan Ave. What’s life like in the penthouse—is it really private? Good views?”

I can’t hide my smile because now I know for sure she told them about the other day. “It’s okay; it’s high up and overpriced and ostentatious. I’m happy to give you guys a tour of the place sometime.”

“Will you be with or without a towel?” Caleb can barely finish the question before he’s doubled over with laughter, Karlie and Ariel right with him.

Sadie’s mouth falls open. She grabs my arm and starts pulling me toward the dance floor. “On second thought, let’s dance.”

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. Watching her get embarrassed is hilarious. The poor girl wears her emotions all over her face.

“So you told them?” I laugh, and she just shakes her head. “Don’t be embarrassed. If anyone should be, it’s me. I’m the one who ended up naked.”

“I still feel so bad about that. Beth really did tell me that you’d be expecting me, and your doorman said he had spoken with her.”

“It’s okay, seriously. I mean, I hadn’t planned on flashing an employee I barely knew; but hey, it could have been worse.”

She studies me suspiciously. “Really? How could it have possibly been worse?”

“Could have been Paul,” I answer, and she finally laughs. A real laugh that has her head falling back, her eyes squinting with how high her full cheeks raise. She is so fucking adorable.

I take her hand in mine and tug her toward me, wrapping my arm around her back. Pressing my hand against her warm skin, I bring our bodies together as we start to sway with the music.

Something about this woman drives me absolutely crazy. I want to protect her and worship her, treat her delicately; but at the same time ... I want to completely defile her. I want my hands to make her tremble with desire. I want her begging for release on my tongue. I want her to experience complete and utter bliss while I impale her with my cock.

“You know what I was thinking about? Your offer in the elevator.”

“My offer?”

“To celebrate the holidays with your family. I know it’s probably a little unconventional to spend Christmas with your boss but ... you made it sound so fun.”

I can’t read her expression. It almost seems like panic at first, but then it softens into something else. “It is fun; my family’s a blast. They’re very warm and welcoming.”

I begin second-guessing taking her up on her offer.

Did she forget? Was it the rum? Was it just one of those niceties you offer to someone knowing they’d never be presumptuous enough to take you up on it?

“I guess it would be really intrusive, huh?” I chuckle. “I’m just teasing about coming along, I wouldn’t make you explain that situation to your family.”

“No, no. You should come.” She stops swaying and looks up at me.

“I appreciate it more than you know, Sadie, but honestly”—I reach up and brush her hair away from her face—“I know we were drinking, and I realize it was probably just a nice gesture that I took too literally.”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it, seriously. Just be prepared for a little bit more of a low-key type of celebration. No penthouses or private chefs, just me and my mom in the kitchen while my two brothers drink PBR with my dad while watching *A Christmas Story* and laughing like they haven’t seen it eight hundred times already.” Her smile as she talks about her family is contagious.

“Okay, then. You’ve convinced me.”

“Besides, you shouldn’t spend Christmas alone, and you certainly shouldn’t spend it working, Mr. Snow.”

I flex my arm, pressing her body harder against mine. “For fuck’s sake, Sadie, call me Alex. I feel like your boss when you call me that.”

“You are my boss.”

I move my hips with hers, pressing myself against her as I put my mouth to her ear. “Not right now, I’m not. You’ve not only seen me naked, you’ve touched my hard cock and straddled me. Sweetheart, I think we’re well past being just boss and employee.” Her body tenses in my arms. “Tell me, Sadie, is that the only way you see me—as your boss?”

She inhales sharply. “What do you want me to see you as?”

Fuck me. This woman has no idea how much she already has me wrapped around her little finger.

“Hmmm, do you like to play these games, Sadie? Drive a man absolutely crazy, get him thinking about nothing but you, and then play coy?”

She stumbles, stepping on my foot.

“No, no that’s not what I—you thought about me?”

She really has no idea.

I stop dancing and tilt her chin with my finger, making her look at me. “Yes. Constantly. For the past two years.”

Before she can reply, someone rings a loud bell and the music cuts out.

The DJ’s voice crackles through the speakers. “All right, friends, it’s your favorite time of the night!”

“Oh shit!” She looks around the room then over to her friends who are pointing and laughing. “No, no, no,” she says, shaking her head and tugging on my hand to pull me back toward the table.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“That’s right folks, it’s Finnegan’s annual mistletoe kissing contest! For all you lovely couples on the dance floor, make your way to the stage, and when the mistletoe is hung over you, you know what to do. Get those tongues ready!”

“Come on,” she says, tugging harder, but I tug her back until she stumbles against my body.

“What’s wrong? Scared of a little competition?”

“You’re not serious? No. We can’t.”

“I’ll go easy on you, I promise.” I don’t give her time to resist again. Instead, I pull her across the dance floor and up on the stage to join the four other couples.

“I’m never going to live this down.” She cringes when her friends start shouting and cheering along with everyone else.

“Okay folks, you know the drill. When Mrs. Claus dangles the mistletoe over you, you have ten seconds to show us what you got. We run on an applause meter here, so the couple who gets the loudest cheers will win two limited edition Finnegan beer steins, a \$100 Visa gift card for a super sexy date night, and last—but certainly not least—these two *I caught mommy kissing Santa Claus* t-shirts.”

The DJ holds up a shirt with a cartoon image of a voluptuous woman kissing Santa, his hand on her ass.

“Classy.” I nudge Sadie, who responds with a nervous giggle.

We wait patiently as the contest begins. The first two couples both go for a chaste kiss, no tongue, just holding their lips together as the crowd cheers. The third couple gets a little more into it; he dips her, but it's still pretty tame. The fourth couple though ... they will be our competition. Their kiss is intense. The crowd erupts into a raucous roar as the man slides one hand up the woman's back to her neck. But still, it's nothing like what I've imagined doing to Sadie for the past two years.

Finally, it's our turn. She looks up at me as the plant dangles over our head. I reach out and grab her waist, pulling her against me with one hand, the other tangling in her hair so I can tilt her head back as my lips descend on hers.

I don't waste time. We only have seconds, and if this is the only chance I'll ever get to taste her sweet lips, I'm going to make it one to remember. The second her lips part, I take the chance to slip my tongue inside her mouth, my hand sliding down to grab a healthy handful of her ass. The crowd's excitement escalates.

"Three ... two ..." the DJ counts down.

He shouts "One!" and I step back, breaking the kiss, but I haven't had my fill. My chest heaves, and I try to catch my breath as the lust burning in Sadie's eyes sears me down to the bone. I don't think either of us is fully aware we're still standing on stage in a room full of people. All we can focus on is each other.

We simultaneously move back toward one another, our lips and tongues locking together once more as I walk her backward until her back hits the pillar at the edge of the stage. I barely register the crowd screaming as I tilt my head, deepening the kiss. My hands find hers and I tangle our fingers

together before sliding them up her body and over her head to pin them to the pillar.

This isn't a performance. It isn't to win a stupid t-shirt and gift card. This is pure, unbridled lust I've kept pent up for so long, and now that I've tasted her ... now that I've felt her body against mine—begging to be taken—there's no going back.

“I think we have a winner, ladies and gentlemen!”

The DJ sounds an airhorn, bringing me back to the present. I release her hands and cup her face while we both try to catch our breath. Her cheeks are red, lips swollen, eyes heavy.

“Are you okay?” I ask, and she nods. “Good, because I'm not sorry I got a little carried away.” I drag my thumb over her bottom lip.

“That was going easy on me?” she finally asks, shooting me a sexy little smirk.

I wrap my arm around her, and she rests her hand against my stomach as the DJ announces us the winners.

“Trust me.” I smile to her friends who are watching us and swooning. “That was absolutely taking it easy on you.”

SADIE

Alex's hand burns against the exposed flesh of my back as we stand on the stage.

My lips are still tingling from his kiss.

The taste of the beer he was drinking continues to linger from when he took ownership of my mouth and made my mind spin out on all the other things he could do with that tongue.

I feel drunk on lust and my cheeks hurt from smiling. He grabs my hand and hoists it above our heads in a triumphant pose as the DJ approaches us with our reward.

"That was hoooooot!" Caleb fans himself as we approach our table. "You sure you two haven't done that before?"

"Uh, no. I've been in a committed relationship, remember?" I reach for a glass of water and chug it. Glancing at Alex out of the corner of my eye, I see his smile falter as his eyes dart to me then back to Caleb.

"I feel a little bad, actually. I got caught up in the moment. I didn't mean to take over your night with your friends."

"You didn't, it's okay. It was kind of fun to win something for once."

He casually bumps his shoulder against mine like we're old friends who share hidden stories and inside jokes.

"Well thanks again, and thanks for the holiday plans. I probably should get going though. Did you have a plan for getting to your parents, or ...?"

My friends look at each other then back to me, confused.

"Um, kind of," I say, pulling him off to the side where we can speak in private. "I always drive out there pretty early on Christmas Day so I can spend the full day with them."

"Okay, let's plan on me picking you up Christmas morning at seven?"

Butterflies dance through my stomach. I'm still unsure about spending Christmas with him, but I give him a smile anyway. "Sounds like a plan."

"Good, it's a plan."

He continues to stand there staring at me like there's something else he wants to say, but he remains silent. He rubs the back of his head then runs his hand through his already rumpled hair, leaving it a sexy mess and making me want to tangle my own fingers in it. I want to pull him toward me and finish what we started a few minutes ago.

"Sorry, it's hitting me that I just kissed the fuck out of you in front of a bunch of strangers and your friends, and now I'm not sure how to non-awkwardly say goodnight." He laughs. I think this is the first time I've ever seen him nervous.

"Yeah, I'm never going to live this down." I joke.

"Sorry."

"Thought you weren't?" I feel bold and sexy from the way he handled my body so effortlessly, the way the crowd cheered

for us. I cock my head to one side, placing my hand on my hip with newfound confidence.

His eyes narrow as he looks at me, like he's trying to read my reaction.

“You're right, I'm not. In fact—” He wraps his arm around my waist again, pulling me against his hard chest as his other hand slides up my neck. His lips instantly find mine and he kisses me again, more softly and with less tongue than before, but with the same heat and passion.

“Now I can say goodnight.” He steps back and gives me a wink. His hand lingers on my waist for a moment before he turns to toss a few bills on the table and walks out.

I look over at my friends. Their arms are crossed over their chests, and they share a communal look that clearly communicates their thoughts. *You have a lot of explaining to do.*

“So he's going to Christmas? With your family?” Ariel scrunches up her face.

“Yup.”

“Are you guys a couple, or what the fuck is going on?” Karlie cuts to the chase.

“No, we are not a couple. When we were in the elevator last night, after a few drinks, we started talking about our holiday plans, and when I asked him what his were, he said he was working.”

“Oh, that's so sad.”

“Right?” I agree with Ariel. “He doesn't have any family. He was an only child, and everyone is gone now. He said he always stays home and gets caught up on work. So under the

influence of some very cheap spiced rum, I told him that he should come to mine.” I try to put on a brave face, but my friends see right through it.

“But now you’re second-guessing it?” Caleb asks, and I nod.

“Big time, but I can’t take back the offer. That would be so messed up.”

“What has you worried? I mean, apart from the fact that he’s your boss and you’re going to have to explain to your family who this hot as hell hunk is that you brought home, and then say *well we aren’t dating, but I’ve seen his penis and we’ve made out like we were a couple of horndogs on a sinking ship.*”

“Thank you, Karlie, for that beautiful and anxiety-inducing image.” I laugh and shake my head at the situation I’ve gotten myself in to. “I’m worried because—ugh I hate even saying this. But he’s so rich and his entire family was rich and high-class and all that, and he’s about to be thrown into a real Emmert Christmas celebration, complete with drunken karaoke and Jell-O molds they call ‘salad,’ and let us not forget the redneck Christmas caroling.”

Karlie waves away my concerns. “Yeah, but that’s your family, and you love the way they celebrate. That’s Tim in your head, not you.”

“Ugh, Tim. If I have to hear that jerk’s name one more time ...” Caleb dramatically rolls his eyes.

“True,” I concede, taking a sip from my cocktail. Tim always made my family celebrations seem so embarrassing. At first, it was just little comments and refusing to participate but every year it seemed like it became more and more of an issue,

until he just flat-out refused to go. I had to beg and plead to get him to come last year.

“I just want to say one thing about Tim. I am not some spineless woman who just goes running back to a guy who so easily tossed me aside to screw someone he barely knows. I’m not holding on. I know I don’t want to take him back, but I do feel like I deserve to have a sit-down with him. I deserve the chance to speak my mind and just explain to him how hurt I’ve been and what I wanted from him. I need that closure before I start attempting to move on, with or without someone new.”

Ariel eyes me suspiciously. “Just be careful, that’s how they suck you back into the dicksand. You sit down to talk about your feelings and do a postmortem on your relationship, and then you get pulled right back in because they make you think that *this* time it will be different, *this* time they’ll change.” She reaches over and grabs my hand. “But they never do, sis.”

TO SAY my sleep was fitful is an understatement.

I kept replaying the kiss in my head over and over. One particular part. The look in his eyes when he lunged at me, grabbing my hands and sliding them up my body to pin them above my head.

While Tim is the only guy I’ve been with fully, I kissed guys in high school and college. Nobody ever kissed me like that. Nobody has ever looked at me the way Alexander Snow looks at me.

I slide my hand beneath the covers, straight into my panties. My eyes squeeze shut as I stroke myself, wetness pooling instantly as I imagine Alex's fingers dancing across my clit instead of my own.

I imagine what it would have been like if he had done this to me in the elevator the night before. Would I have stopped him? Would I have let him explore my body with his tongue the way he did my mouth? His kiss was demanding; it didn't ask, it wasn't timid. It felt like he was claiming me, and I wanted it.

With Tim, there was never any sort of territorial claiming or all-consuming desire. It was always the Tim show. For years, I managed to convince myself that I just wasn't into sex like everyone else was. When my friends would tell stories about hot encounters or wild nights they had, I convinced myself I didn't want that. I wanted a man to make love to me gently, to hold me after. And I didn't care if I came or not, what mattered was if we connected.

But now? Now I want a man—No—I want *Alex* to claim me. To mark me. Make me his, however he wants, even if it means breaking me in half. I want him to take control of my body and pull out my wanton and wild side.

Heat builds in my body. I kick the covers off as my back arches off my sweaty sheets. I'm close. I bite down on my lip, a small moan tumbling from my mouth as I quicken my movements. I relax, letting the orgasm roll through my body from my toes all the way up until it explodes into white fireworks behind my eyes.

I toss my arm over my face, giggling to myself. Normally, I'd feel ashamed for picturing a man I wasn't in a relationship with, but for some reason I have the urge to pick up my phone

and text Alex, telling him what I just did in detail. He's the kind of man who would find it sexy, who would call me and tell me to do it again while he listened, or maybe even jump in his car and drive across town to watch me do it in person.

The few times I tried to be spontaneous with Tim, sending him an alluring picture or a naughty text in the middle of the workday, he called me, convinced I meant to send it to someone else and leaving me in tears.

"What the hell, Sadie?" I say aloud as I sit up, frustrated at how much I put up with from him.

I didn't go crazy with the drinking last night, but I still feel the twinge of a headache coming on, as well as the telltale twisting of my guts, telling me my stomach isn't too happy with me either. As someone who has about two drinks a month, drinking a lot two nights in a row means my body is certainly feeling it.

I stretch my arms overhead, yawning, then dip into a forward fold. Once my body feels more limber, I walk to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee before heading to the shower. I don't have any plans today except to relax and maybe catch a Christmas movie or two on Hallmark.

After my shower, I make myself a cup of coffee with an extra serving or two of my favorite peppermint mocha creamer and scroll through the bestie group chat that's littered with a few unanswered texts from my friends after we left the bar last night. I laugh as I read them, remembering how hard they tried to push me to surprise him at his penthouse again.

Caleb: Did you end up at Mr. Candy Cane's last night?

Ariel: Yeah how's his yule log doing?

Karlie: I don't have a funny holiday pun but if you went over there after and didn't tell us, that's criminal. Love you!

I tug the fridge open, bending down to assess the contents.

“Oh gross,” I groan, sniffing a leftover container from god knows when. I toss it in the garbage and continue checking the fridge. Literally, all I have are frozen vegetables, condiments, and a few pieces of fruit.

I'm usually on top of my game when it comes to having a stocked kitchen and home-cooked meals, but ever since Tim moved out, my motivation has waned. I suddenly feel a burst of motivation though, a desire to start putting myself first and focusing on the things that bring me joy. I love cooking, baking especially, but in the last year it felt like my efforts were wasted.

When I would take the time to create a really spectacular and often time-consuming dish, Tim would get home too late to enjoy it, then refuse to eat leftovers the next day; or he would flat out tell me it wasn't what he was in the mood for and order something for delivery.

I used to make baked goods for him to take to work, something he loved. He told me he bragged about me at work and the other guys were jealous their girlfriends didn't make them cinnamon buns or muffins in the morning. But lately, that all changed ... so did the friendships I'd made with his work colleagues.

I used to go to happy hours with Tim and a few work buddies now and then. I even partied with them at their annual holiday party. But I haven't seen them or been invited to go out with them in months. I think about one of his coworkers,

Jeff, a partner at the firm who was always so nice to me. I wonder how things are going with him and his wife, Melody.

I sigh and reach for the fridge handle once more to make sure there wasn't some delicious item I'd somehow missed when I hear a knock at my apartment door. I rush over, lifting onto my tiptoes to look through the peephole. Panic washes over me when I see Alex standing outside my door.

"Shit, shit, shit!" I glance around and see my reflection in the mirror on the far wall. My wet hair is clinging to my neck, and my ratty pajamas and mismatched socks are a far cry from the sexy ho-ho-ho getup from last night.

"Uh, uh just a minute!" I shout as I light a candle and fluff a few pillows, as if that's going to distract from the fact that I look like I slept in a dumpster with a family of raccoons.

"Just let me in, Sadie," he says with a muffled laugh.

Finally, I take a few deep breaths, attempt to fluff my wet hair, and casually open the door. My mouth goes dry the second I see him. He's wearing a casual black coat, with his hair in its usual mussed up fashion.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"I took a chance you might be home and thought that after the last two nights, you could probably use some of this." He holds up a large nondescript bag with one hand and two coffees with the other.

"What's in the bag?" I ask, nodding toward it.

"You going to let me in?"

"Depends." I smirk, leaning my shoulder against the doorframe. "What's in the bag?"

We both speak at the same time, doing our best crying Brad Pitt impression from *Seven*. “What’s in the bag?”

We laugh as I open the door, and Alex steps inside, the savory and sweet aroma of yeast and bacon following him. I take the items from him and place them on the counter as he shrugs his coat down his arms. He’s wearing a gray knit sweater underneath, paired with black jeans. When he reaches down to remove his wingtip boots, my stomach audibly grumbles and he looks up at me.

“I was right about the food. Merry Christmas Eve, by the way. Figured you shouldn’t spend it alone.” He reaches for the bag again, pulling out a box of half a dozen donuts, a few bagels, and several different breakfast sandwiches.

“Thank you. I guess it would be pretty lonely, huh?” I watch as he pulls out even more food. “Did you buy the entire bakery?”

“Wasn’t sure what you liked, so a little of everything. All carbs and fat, all bad for you, all the good stuff.” He gives me that sexy little wink of his, this time with a devilish grin, and I’m half tempted to make a comment about how all the delicious things we want are always bad for us, but I don’t.

I reach for a bacon, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwich, bringing it to my nose and inhaling the delicious decent.

“Smells like heaven,” I moan, before taking a big bite. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he mumbles around a bite of donut.

We stand at my kitchen island, devouring our breakfast in silence and shooting flirty looks at each other.

“This feels like a Hallmark movie,” I observe.

“What do you mean?”

“You know how they have these cute moments where a guy does something sweet for the girl, and that’s when she realizes she’d never truly looked at him and seen who he really was before?”

He shrugs. “Never seen a Hallmark movie. Seen the previews a hundred times though.”

“What? That should be a crime. They’re cheesy, romantic, always on theme with whatever holiday is going on, predictable, dorky, sometimes very cringe.”

“But entertaining?” He laughs, reaching for a breakfast sandwich.

“Very. I was actually going to spend my afternoon watching one ... or five.” I giggle as I grab a donut.

“Put it on, let’s watch it.” He gathers up the rest of the food and places it on my coffee table.

“Are you serious?” I stay at the island, the donut I’m eating frozen halfway to my mouth as he walks back to the kitchen and points toward the cabinets.

“Of course I’m serious. Plates?”

“Third from the left.”

I smile as I watch him put a couple plates on the coffee table before popping the lids off the coffees and placing them next to the plates. Next, he takes a seat on the couch and pulls out a stack of napkins, setting them down in the center of the table.

When he looks over at me, he hops back up. “Sorry, I shouldn’t sit down before you in your own home; that was rude. Join me?”

I feel tears in my eyes, but I smile through them as I walk over to join him. In all my years with Tim, not once did he ever offer to watch a Hallmark movie with me. In fact, he never watched one with me. He always threw too much of a fit for me to even ask, and if he walked in while I was watching one, he'd grab the remote and flip it to something else without even asking. I realize in this moment that if Tim had wanted to do things like this, he would have. I know hindsight is twenty-twenty, but sometimes it takes a simple gesture from someone new to make you realize what you thought was a *normal* or *healthy* relationship, wasn't at all.

“What are you thinking about?”

I study the smile on Alex's face, noticing a dusting of icing on his lower lip leftover from his donut. Without thinking, I lean over and swipe it away like we're a couple settling in for a routine Saturday brunch on the couch.

“Nothing, just happy you're here. Nice to have some company.”

“You promise you're not just saying that since I barged in here unannounced and now you're too afraid to kick me out?”

“Not at all. Although, I am mildly—no—*very* embarrassed about last night.” I can feel my cheeks growing red.

“Embarrassed? Why? Did I embarrass you?” He puts his food back on his plate and looks at me. His dirty blond hair falls down over his forehead, making it difficult to focus on our conversation.

“No, not at all. I just mean me, dressed like that. And of course my friends and their comments.”

“First of all, that outfit wasn't embarrassing, it was—” He does that thing guys do sometimes, slowly dragging his hand

over his mouth while looking me up and down. “Well, let’s just say every man in that bar wished they were me last night. Trust me.”

I avert my gaze, taking a bite of my donut so I won’t ask him to elaborate, even though I’m dying to. I still want to know what he was going to say before the buzzer on the dance floor interrupted us.

We stare at each other, both our chests rising and falling in time with our breathing. It’s like we both want to say something ... or maybe that’s just wishful thinking on my part.

“I told them I saw your penis,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. I clamp my hand over my mouth, muttering, “I’m sorry,” then grimace at my muffled apology.

He laughs a hearty, almost bellowing laugh. “I thought we already came to that conclusion at the bar last night.”

“Well, I didn’t actually confess. I know I shouldn’t have told them, and honestly, I only did it because I thought my friends would never meet you and I was so confused by everything after.”

He reaches his hand out and slides it over mine, our fingers lacing together like it’s a normal gesture for us.

“I liked meeting your friends. They were very nice and funny. I’m not embarrassed or upset you told them. I would have too. It’s a pretty funny story, Sadie. Is that why they kept talking about candy canes?”

“Yeah.” I giggle. “I told them I saw your candy cane, and they ran with it.”

“Well, I certainly hope they don’t think it’s because it has a hook in it.”

I burst into laughter and shake my head. “No, I told them —” I stop abruptly and point to the TV in hopes we can change the subject before I beg him to kiss me again. “We should watch the movie.”

“Sadie,” he says, lowering his voice as he tugs my hand. “What did you tell them?”

“That it was huge. I think I used the term kielbasa sausage.” I feel warmth climbing up my neck again.

He fights a grin and softly strokes his thumb over the inside of my palm. “And do you like sausage, Miss Emmert?”

I swallow hard and nod tentatively. It feels like he’s fighting with himself the way the tone of his voice changes, or maybe that’s just because I am battling my own desires ... I can either beg him to drag me back to my bedroom right now and bury himself inside me, or I can let him be a gentleman and a friend.

I grit my teeth and briefly close my eyes, letting out a calming breath. When I open my eyes again, he has a look on his face, one that tells me he wouldn’t say no to anything right now. He must read the anxiety on my face because he looks away, reaching for the remote.

“Maybe we should start the movie. Otherwise, I might do something I’m not sure you’re ready for.”

I want to tell him I am ready for whatever *it* is, but truthfully, I’m not sure I am. Do I want this to merely be a fun rebound, or am I looking to him to replace a guy who’s broken my heart more times than I can count?

He hands me the remote and we spend a few minutes reading through the descriptions of the different movies on

demand, finally settling on one about a small-town single dad who hires a nanny, and she ends up being the love of his life.

I settle against the couch cushions, sipping my coffee with my feet propped up on the coffee table. When we first sat down, there was about a foot of space between us. Somehow, without me even realizing it, our thighs are practically touching now. I can feel the warmth of his body next to mine, and when he brings his hand up to take the last bite of his donut, his arm brushes against mine. I feel my body growing tenser the more I focus on our proximity, and I wonder if he feels it too.

“You can relax,” he finally says in a low, gravelly tone that does nothing to help the situation between my thighs. He bumps my shoulder with his as he looks over at me, and I smile, letting my shoulders fall from where they’d been hovering near my ears. “I promise I won’t bite. Yet.” His voice is so quiet, I’m not sure I was meant to hear that part.

Halfway through the movie, I feel myself start to nod off. The story is cute and engaging, but between the sugar and carbs and the shitty sleep last night, I can’t fight it any longer. My head bobs and I jerk it back upright, situating myself so I’m sitting straighter, but it’s no use.

I blink, my eyes focusing on an arm that isn’t mine. The TV is still on. Growing aware of the warmth of someone underneath me, I slowly lift my head and realize I must have fallen asleep on Alex’s chest.

“Oh, sorry!” I sit up, wiping my mouth and praying I didn’t just drool on my boss’s shirt. “This is so embarrassing.” I adjust myself on the cushion, fidgeting nervously, but he just smiles at me as he brushes aside my hair that has fallen from my ponytail and gotten stuck to my cheek.

“Don’t apologize, you needed it.”

“You didn’t have to stay. I wouldn’t have been offended if you left.”

He looks confused. “Why would I leave? Feels a little rude to just walk out when you’re asleep and leave you to wake up alone.”

He’s doing that thing again where he’s studying my face, his eyes conveying a message he’s never put voice to.

They drop to my lips, causing me to lick them self-consciously.

“I have to tell you, I’m pretty excited to experience an Emmert Christmas. Is this going to be at your childhood home?”

“Yes,” I answer, all my nerves about him coming to my family holiday rushing back, just like the night before.

“What should I bring? What kind of wine does everyone like?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing, trust me. That’s very kind of you though.” I touch his arm and his eyes drop to my fingers. “I um, I’m actually glad you brought it up because”—I swallow down a lump of nerves—“I’m not so sure it’s a good idea actually.”

“Not a good idea?”

“That you come to my family Christmas.”

“Oh.” He looks surprised, and I instantly regret saying anything.

“Not because I don’t want you there or anything like that, it’s just—” I don’t finish the sentence because I don’t really

know what my problem is. I'm beginning to think it has nothing to do with embarrassment over how loud or chaotic my family is. I think it goes a lot deeper than that. Maybe it's the fact that I'm not sure what's happening between us, and I am well aware that a billionaire who looks like him could get any woman he wants. Men like him don't fall in love with their low-level employees and live happily ever after. That only happens in Hallmark movies, and my life is more like a low-budget calamity of errors.

"Why are you worried about me coming to your family holiday, Sadie?"

I shrug and turn my face away, but he just turns his body to see me better.

"Is it because I'm your boss?"

"Partly." I let out a nervous laugh as I drag my finger up and down the seam on the edge of my pajama bottoms.

"Or is it because"—he hooks a finger under my chin, turning me to face him—"you're attracted to me too, but are afraid of what's happening between us?"

"Too?"

He gives me that devilish grin. "Yes, *too*. You have to know how attracted I am to you, Sadie. How I haven't stopped thinking about these lips since I tasted them." Using his thumb, he pulls down on my lower lip. "How badly I want to taste them again."

He leans closer until his lips are hovering over mine, teasing me.

"Tell me you want it too. Tell me you've imagined my hands on your body."

“I have.” I shock myself with my response, but he doesn’t give me time to elaborate before he claims my mouth with a kiss.

His lips cover mine, his tongue snaking inside my mouth to gently stroke my own. The kiss is slow but somehow so much hotter than the one at the bar, which I wouldn’t have thought possible. He’s kissing me like I really am the only thing he’s been craving for the last twenty-four hours, like it’s the last time he’ll ever kiss me and he wants to savor every last second.

Never in my life have I wanted a kiss to last forever.

She moans against my mouth, her hands tangling in my hair as I attempt to control myself. I drop my hands to her hips, pulling her body on top of mine until she's straddling my lap. Neither of us breaks contact as I begin to stroke her body, the thin material of her shirt gathering beneath my hands. I reach her breasts, and I can't resist. I gently cup them, swiping my thumbs over her nipples through her shirt. They harden beneath my touch, and I want to suck them into my mouth. But just as quickly as I started touching her, she pulls back to end the kiss, her body trembling.

Her hair is a mess, her lips parted and swollen as her eyes bore into mine. "We—we shouldn't," she says, sounding unconvinced.

"We shouldn't, or you don't want to?"

"You're my boss."

"Mmm." I lean forward, running my nose up her neck as I inhale her scent. A low growl rumbles from my chest as my cock, already thick and hard, jumps to attention beneath her. I grip her waist with my left hand, the right still settled over her breast. "Tell me why that makes me want to do it all the more?"

She gasps, arching into my touch as her hands grip my sweater. The way she responds to my touch is unreal.

“You’re always such a good girl, Miss Emmert.” I slide my tongue up her neck and a groan falls from her lips. “Makes me want to show you how fun it can be to be naughty, to break the rules and take what you want.” I open my mouth, biting down on the base of her neck where it meets her shoulder.

“Tell me,” she moans.

“Tell you what, sweetheart?”

“What you want.”

I lean back just far enough to look at her. Her eyes are closed, her hands curled into fists, her thighs squeezing mine tightly. I release her breast, bringing my hand down to slide beneath her shirt this time. I go slowly, my fingers brushing against her warm skin until I reach her full breast.

“Look at me,” I command, pausing until her eyes open. Running my thumb over her pert nipple, I cup her once more. I maintain eye contact as I lift her shirt with my other hand, fully exposing both her breasts to my hungry gaze. Leaning in, I drag my tongue up her taut belly until I reach the underside of her breast and slowly slide it up, circling her nipple once before sucking it into my mouth.

“Ohhh,” she moans, her hand tangling in my hair as she grinds her hips down on me.

I switch to the other breast, biting down on her nipple before sucking it into my mouth. I go back and forth between them, kneading one while I kiss and suck the other.

“Fuck me, your tits are perfect.” I grab them both, one in each hand, and press them together. “They’d look so good with my cock between them. Would you like that, Miss

Emmert? Would you like to see me fuck your luscious tits and leave my mark on them?” She nods, and I lean in to bite the top of one breast. She hisses from the pain, but I don’t stop. Instead, I bite down harder, sucking her flesh into my mouth and marking her with a perfect outline of my teeth.

“Now you’re mine.” I plant a kiss where I left my mark, certain she’ll be bruised tomorrow. “Sadie, look at me.” Her eyes are hazy with lust when they lock on mine. “I’m not going to fuck you right now, but there is one thing I need to know.”

“Why not?”

I pull her shirt back down over her breasts, leaning in to plant a quick kiss on her lips. “Why am I not going to fuck you?”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t because I don’t want to. In fact, I’d love to spend the next twenty-four hours buried in your pussy; but I didn’t come here today to get into your bed. I came to be a friend and to check on you.”

I place my hand on her knee, gliding it up her exposed thigh until I reach the bottom of her shorts.

“Friends don’t fuck?” Her voice is timid, and the question makes me chuckle.

“Look at you being naughty. Just hearing you say the word *fuck* like that has me questioning my decision.” I smile, my hand slipping beneath her shorts as I run my thumb over her panties. Her breath stutters, her eyelids fluttering when I find her clit and rub it through the material.

“Friends certainly fuck, but I’m not interested in that, and frankly, the things I’m interested in doing might intimidate

you. So I'm going to coax out your filthy side." I push her panties to the side and my thumb is instantly soaked in her juices as I repeat my previous motion on her bare pussy.

"Oh, that feels good," she groans.

"Good, I want to make you feel good. Look at me sweetheart, keep your eyes on me." She opens her eyes again. "Good girl. Now, as I was saying, I have a million fantasies about you, and I think there's a dirty little girl hiding behind that good girl facade. I think you just haven't been with the right man, one who made you feel comfortable enough to explore that side."

I replace my thumb with two fingers, sliding them up and down her slick folds twice more before coaxing her open and dipping inside her heat.

"So while I'm not going to fuck you with my cock today"—I grip her chin with my free hand—"I am going to fuck you with my fingers because I need to watch you come. Then I'm going to lick them clean so I know just how fucking good your pussy tastes. Okay?"

"Ooookay." The word escapes her lips on a moan as I bury my fingers inside her. Lazily pumping my hand in and out of her body while my thumb dances across her clit, I look down to where my fingers are slick with her juices, and my mouth waters in anticipation.

"Has a man ever done that to you baby? Fucked you with his fingers just so he can watch you come, then lick you clean?"

"N—no." Her eyes roll back in her head, her fingers digging deeper into my sweater.

“I want to look at you across the room at your family Christmas and know I’ve tasted you. I want you to look at me and know that all I’ll be thinking about is when I get to taste you again.”

I slide my hand down her chin to her throat, gripping it tightly as I quicken my pace.

“That’s right sweetheart, don’t hold back.”

Her thighs begin to shake and quiver.

“Is it too rough? Or can I push you a little more, show you how good I can make you feel?”

I don’t wait for an answer. Pressing hard on her clit, I crook my fingers inside her, going deeper and harder.

“Oh, oh, oh!” She’s panting, her eyes still on mine, and I can tell she has no idea what’s about to happen next.

“You’ve never felt this before, have you, baby?” I smile as her body convulses from my touch.

“N-n-noo.” I can barely hear her; she’s utterly lost in the moment. In the pleasure.

“Just let it happen, squirt on my hand.”

Her eyes widen in shock when she looks down her body, like she can’t understand what’s happening, what I’m doing to her. She lets out a garbled scream as a warm wet fluid releases from her, soaking her panties, shorts, and my hand.

“That’s exactly what I wanted.” I slowly remove my hand from her while her body continues to twitch. She watches as I bring my hand to my mouth and wrap my lips around the two fingers I’d used to fuck her and lick them clean. I groan, my eyes rolling back in my head as my cock threatens to tear through the fly of my jeans.

“I—I ...” She looks down at her wetness, clearly embarrassed and confused.

“Don’t,” I say, wanting to stop her train of thought before she grows self-conscious. “Nobody’s ever made you squirt before, have they?”

She gasps. “I didn’t know I could do that.”

“I told you, sweetheart, I want to explore all kinds of new things with you. Trust me, it was hot as fuck, and your pussy tastes like a dream.”

I dip my fingers back inside her. “Oh god,” she moans, her walls squeezing my fingers.

“Someone’s ready to come again already, huh?” Once more I bring my fingers to my lips and lick them clean. “On second thought ...” I lift her body and place her down on the couch, facing me. “Lean back.” Planting my hand in the middle of her chest, I push, and her body sprawls before me. I reach for the waistband of her shorts and swiftly yank them down her legs, along with her panties, leaving her bare to my roving gaze.

“Goddamn,” I groan, parting her thighs to study her. “Look how beautiful that pink pussy is.”

“What are you—” She attempts to close her thighs, but I push them even further apart.

“Keep them open,” I command in a harsh tone. “I need more.” I don’t explain further as I lean forward, burying my face between her thighs. I take my time, dipping my tongue inside her as I grip her thighs. I try telling myself to release my grip on her skin, knowing I might bruise her, but I don’t care. I want her to look down tomorrow and see where I’ve been. I

want her reminded of how I made her body tremble and fall apart beneath me.

“Yessss,” she hisses as she fists her hands in my hair.

I groan, my eyes rolling back in my head as her flavor explodes on my tongue. I’m a man possessed; I can’t get enough. I continue to devour her, and she starts to lose herself to the pleasure. Her thighs are shaking, and I don’t stop lapping up her juices until I bring her to another explosive orgasm on my tongue. Her back arches off the couch, her hands tugging at my hair.

“That was ... wow,” she pants.

“It really was.” I smirk, wiping her juices from my chin.

I pull her into a sitting position, and she averts her eyes.

“Hey.” I reach for her chin. “You don’t have to be shy with me. I want to learn all about you, Sadie.” She gives me a shy smile and I decide not to push the issue. “Guessing you don’t want to put these back on?” I hold up her wet bottoms and she reaches for them, shaking her head.

“No. Um ... I feel weird sitting here naked from the waist down while you’re fully clothed.” She laughs awkwardly.

“I can take my pants off too if it would make you feel better.”

“If you take yours off, I don’t think your promise about not—you know—will hold up.” She looks down at my lap where an obvious outline of my hard cock is pressed along my thigh.

“Yeah.” I laugh, letting out a long breath. “You’re probably right.” I can see she’s starting to feel uncomfortable, so I pull her back onto my lap. “I promise I’ll leave you alone in a minute, but I just want one more thing.”

“One more thing?” She gives me a sexy little look.

I reach for the hem of her shirt and lift it slowly, stripping it off her so she’s fully naked in my lap. Tossing it to the side, I sit back and look at her.

“I’m sorry if this is too much to hear, but I’ve pictured you naked a thousand times and none of them came close to how sexy you are in reality.” I reach out and touch her breast where my bite mark is still visible. “You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted you.” Tracing the outline of her nipples, my fingertips graze her silky-smooth skin. I know I’m saying too much, giving too much away, but fuck it. This isn’t just a hit it and quit it situation for me. I want her to be mine.

“You have?”

“From the moment I saw you sitting in that conference room two years ago, I’ve been fighting the urge to seek you out and get to know you. I convinced myself it would never work. That you were probably with someone. That you wouldn’t be interested in me. That you’d think I was only after one thing.”

“What *are* you after, Mr. Snow?”

I look up at her, stilling my hands. I debate whether to just say it, tell her I’m already falling for her, but I don’t want to freak her out. I want her to have space to make her own decisions about me, and about her ex. So, like a coward, I change the subject.

“Are you normally alone on Christmas Eve? I’m surprised you didn’t go to your parents.”

“Well, usually we spend Christmas Eve with Tim’s family, but obviously that won’t be happening this year.”

“Have you heard from him at all?”

“No.” Her expression is unreadable. Part of me wants to know if she’s happy or sad about the way she’s spending her holidays—with me—but I’m too afraid to ask. Too afraid of her answer. Maybe I don’t want to know.

She leans forward until her lips meet mine. The kiss feels like it’s happening in slow motion; like a scene from the romantic movie we watched earlier. I let my hands explore her body, caressing her skin to memorize every last inch of her. She pulls me closer by gripping a handful of my sweater, and her other hand drops down to the button on my jeans and begins working it free.

“I need more,” she says into my mouth, maneuvering herself over me and teasing my cock as she presses her wetness against my jeans.

“Sadie.” I grab her hand, stopping her from unzipping my fly. “No.” I shake my head, and she pokes out her bottom lip.

“Are you pouting?”

She shrugs, biting her lip seductively as she pulls her hand away and dips it into the waistband of my jeans. “Please, Mr. Snow.”

I grab her hand more firmly. “Don’t make me tell you no again, Sadie, or I’ll have you begging for forgiveness on your knees.”

She lets out a throaty chuckle. “That doesn’t sound like a bad time at all.” That naughty side is coming alive in her, exactly how I wanted.

“No? Let me clarify.” I grab both of her wrists, pinning her hands behind her back and holding them in place with one of my own.

“You’ll be on your hands and knees, begging for release while I fuck your ass. But I won’t let you come, sweetheart. I’ll use this tight little body however I see fit. Maybe I’ll fuck these tits, leave a trail of my cum from your chin ...” I point to her chin. “All the way down to here.” I drag my finger down between her breasts until I reach her clit. “And then, when you think I can’t possibly fuck you any longer, that I can’t possibly fuck you any harder ...” I pull her closer until our lips are almost touching and lower my voice to a whisper. “I’ll break you in half. You understand me, kitten?”

“Yes,” she says with a gasp, and when I tighten my grip on her wrists to show her how serious I am, she nods earnestly, showing her understanding.

“Good.” I help her off my lap and stand up, placing her on her feet. She starts to cross her arms over her body in an effort to cover herself, but I stop her by grabbing her hand and leading her down the hallway until I find her bathroom. I reach inside, flicking on the light before turning on the shower.

“Now.” I place my hands on her arms. “Be a good girl and go take a nice long shower and have a relaxing night, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.” I place a chaste kiss on her forehead and leave her, making my way out of her apartment before I lose my resolve and make good on my threat.

SADIE

The moment my head hits the pillow, guilt begins to creep in.

Guilt for starting to move on from Tim so quickly. Guilt over not talking with him and letting him know I've decided to move on. Guilt for wanting Alex.

What could this thing between us even turn into? I'm not sure I'm ready to jump into another relationship, or if I even should, for that matter. Hell, I don't even know if that's what he wants with me, or if this is all just some boss fantasy he's had playing in his head for the past two years.

"Don't overthink it," I mutter to myself as I flip my pillow to the cold side and attempt to shut out the noise from my brain, but the peace doesn't last long.

Alex's question about whether I'd heard from Tim haunts me. I reach for my phone and scroll to our last text thread. Reading through our most recent messages, it hits me how normal they seem, like we were a typical couple. Questions about what we would have for dinner, or when one of us would be home. Even a few brief conversations about the upcoming holidays. Anybody else reading these would never know we were on the precipice of a "break." But looking back, I sensed it. I could feel it in my gut every single day. I can't

believe I was so surprised by his demand for a break. I'd seen it coming for months, but I didn't want to admit it.

My chest tightens, and I scroll back down to the bottom and type out a simple message to him. Although we aren't together anymore, I still want to wish him a Merry Christmas.

Me: Hey, hope you're doing well. Just wanted to wish you and your family a very Merry Christmas. I hope you have an amazing holiday.

I hit send and place my phone back on my nightstand, then roll onto my back to stare at the ceiling, a single tear dripping from the corner of my eye and rolling down my cheek to my pillow. For as much as I know that I deserve better—that I want better— it's still hard for me to process that a man I once loved and thought I would spend the rest of my life with would soon merely be a stranger. A man I'd known once but didn't anymore.

My phone lights up on my nightstand and I quickly reach over to grab it, thinking it's a response from Tim. It isn't.

Karlie: Hey girl, thinking about you. I know we teased you a lot about Alex the other night but if you like him, go for it. Don't be worried about what it looks like moving on from Tim or how your family will react. Do what makes you happy, you deserve to be happy babe. We all love you so much and have fun tomorrow with your family. Don't overthink it. Alex will have a great time, that man is SERIOUSLY INTO YOU! Okay, Merry Christmas, hugs and kisses to you and the fam.

I smile at the message, choking back a sob because of how much I needed to hear that. It's almost like she's in my head with me, but the reality is she just knows me that well. Lately, I've felt a lot of guilt for not listening to my friends more

when it came to Tim, but also for not listening to my own intuition.

I type out a quick response and hit send.

Me: Thank you. It's like you always know just what I need to hear at just the right time. Never apologize for being honest with me about things you see that I'm too blind to notice...or that I willingly avoid. You're more than just a friend, you're my sister and I love you too. Merry Christmas.

After putting my phone face down on my nightstand, I roll over to catch some sleep.

I'M NOT sure I'm at all ready for today. Spinning around in front of my full-length mirror, I double-check my outfit of jeans and a simple ivory sweater. I pull my hair back then let it fall back down, completely overthinking how I look.

I check the time.

“Shit!” It's already almost seven, which is when Alex said he was going to pick me up. I opt to leave my hair down and put on some simple gold hoops and a matching chain before grabbing a pair of brown ankle boots. I'm hopping on one foot, attempting to zip up the second boot when I hear a knock at my front door.

I swing it open, and there he is. Alex is wearing a pair of black slacks, a chunky red sweater, and a black peacoat, and looking every inch the part of a handsome lead in a Hallmark movie, complete with snowflakes dotting his shoulders.

“Hi.” He smiles, and my stomach instantly coils into a knot of nerves and excitement.

I smile back, opening the door a little wider. “Hi. Is it snowing?”

“Yup, seems like it snowed through the night, there’s a few inches on the ground but the plows are out. Merry Christmas,” he adds, holding out a small gold box wrapped with a red ribbon.

I smile wider as I take the box from him, and he steps inside. “You didn’t have to get me anything, I feel bad now.”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing huge. Just made me think of you when I saw it.”

“Should I open it now?”

“Of course.” He slides his hands in his pockets and watches me. There’s a look in his eyes I don’t think I’ve seen before, or at least, haven’t noticed. A look I can’t quite put my finger on, but it’s like he’s seeing me in a completely different way.

I slide the ribbon off the box and lift the lid. Inside is an ornament of Lindsay Lohan, Amanda Seyfried, Rachel McAdams, and Lacey Chabert dressed in their sexy Santa Claus outfits they wore in *Mean Girls* for their rendition of “Jingle Bell Rock.”

I laugh as I stare down at the ornament. “Oh my god.”

“Sorry, couldn’t resist. Plus”—he reaches out and brushes my hair back from my face—“you’ve almost got the red hair.” He winks.

“Thank you, and Merry Christmas.” I stand there awkwardly, unsure if I’m supposed to kiss him. Before I can

decide, he wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me to him.

“Come here.” His lips find mine and he kisses me softly for several seconds before his tongue slides inside my mouth. Every single time he kisses me, my body comes alive. I want the sensation to linger, want it to build into more, but he pulls back. “Are you ready to head out?”

“Yes, just let me grab my coat and purse.”

I rummage through my purse and pull out my keys to lock the door behind us before leading the way downstairs. “My car is just across the street,” I say as we exit the building, pointing to where I’m parked. The fresh snow crunches beneath our boots, and the clean, frosty winter air is refreshing.

“I’m driving,” he says, lifting his keys to unlock his black Range Rover. “You were kind enough to invite me, so it’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you.” I reach for the handle, but he beats me to it. His chest brushes against my back as he leans around me to open the door. I laugh nervously.

He holds my hand as I climb inside. “Tim not open doors for you?”

I think back, trying to remember. “No, I don’t think so.”

Alex doesn’t respond before closing my door. He walks around the SUV and slides into the driver’s seat. I give him my parents’ address and he types it into his GPS.

He reaches out for my hand and our fingers intertwine, staying that way as we leave the city, and we ride in comfortable silence for about fifteen minutes.

“So how did you spend Christmas growing up?” I ask, curious to learn more about him.

“My mom was very loving and nurturing, but she was also raised in a very traditional, wealthy family who didn’t do a lot for celebrations. Christmas was more of an adult’s thing in my house. My parents would throw really lavish parties; it almost felt like it was to show off their wealth rather than celebrate friends and family. I spent pretty much every Christmas with our kitchen staff.”

“Oh, that’s so sad.”

He shrugs. “I actually didn’t mind. I loved the chef. His wife and daughter treated me like I was one of their own, and since he had to work on Christmas Day, we’d all celebrate in the back. They’d even let me drink wine.” He’s smiling as he tells the story, but I can see a tinge of pain in his eyes.

“Are you still close with them?”

“Not really. They moved back to Seattle after a few years, and since I was young, we lost touch. After my mom died, Christmas was almost nonexistent. Dad would drink alone in his study, and I’d usually find a high school or college friend I could celebrate with. So see, I’ve been mooching my way into other peoples’ holidays for years.” He laughs.

My heart aches for him, even as my anxiety about my family continues to lurk in the back of my head. Will it be too much for him? I worry my brothers will embarrass him—or worse—give him the third degree about *us*. We haven’t discussed what we will tell my family yet. I swallow down the knot in my throat.

“Well, my family can be a little ... loud at times. Like I mentioned before, they’re super welcoming, but if they get a little too comfortable with jokes or get too pushy about making you do an eggnog luge, just give me a look and I’ll rescue you.”

He glances over at me. “Eggnog luge?”

“Umm, yeah. It’s a frozen sculpture of a ski slope that you put a shot of eggnog on and have to get on your knees to do. You pour it down the ice so it chills the shot, then wrap your lips around the spout so it fills your mouth.” My face reddens just describing it. “And then there’s my family’s version of the polar plunge.” The polar plunge is a tradition in the area. Every year, locals and tourists alike strip down and jump into Lake Michigan. There’s a small pond in the backyard of my childhood home, and my dad and brothers came up with a twist on the tradition, and they do it every year on Christmas.

“Don’t worry about all that, Sadie. Really. It sounds like they know how to have a good time, and I’m sure I will too.”

He makes the final turn onto my parent’s street, and their single-story ranch house comes into view. After pulling into the driveway, he puts the car in park.

“Welcome to an Emmert Christmas.” He shuts off the engine, and I look down at our hands, which are still tangled together. “I have a confession. They don’t know about Tim yet, so this is going to be confusing for them.”

“Hey,” he says, tugging gently on my hand. “Don’t worry, everything will be fine. I’m just your friend, okay?”

“Okay.”

I wait for him to walk around the car and open my door, thinking about how wonderful it is to be with a man who treats me so well. It wasn’t something I ever really thought about when Tim and I were together, but Alex’s gentlemanly behavior has really shined a light on Tim’s shortcomings.

He takes my hand to help me out of the car and we make our way to the front door. “I have a confession too,” he admits,

holding up a bag I didn't see him grab from the car. I must have been really lost in thought.

Before I can admonish him for bringing a gift after I told him not to, the door is flung open to reveal my mom, who squeals and opens her arms for a hug. I oblige her, smiling at my dad who is standing behind her.

“Mom, Dad, this is my friend, Alex.”

“Great to meet you. I've heard so many wonderful things. Apologies if I'm intruding,” he says as he shakes both of their hands.

“Not at all. I'm Gene,” my dad says, then gestures toward my mom. “And this is Sadie's mom, my wife, Dawn. Happy to have you. The more the merrier, son.”

“Sadie told me not to bring anything, but I figured wine is never a bad idea.” He holds out the bag to my mom, who smiles and reaches inside.

“Oh, gracious! This looks so fancy, Alex. A Pinot Noir? That's my favorite!” I love how genuinely excited my mom gets over the smallest gestures. She really is the most kindhearted woman. But if I had to guess, that wine she's holding probably cost more than a week's worth of groceries. I'm glad she doesn't know enough about wine to realize that, or she'd probably faint.

“Come in, come in.” My dad pushes us through the entryway and is taking our coats when my two younger brothers come flying around the corner.

“Jason, Skyler, settle down boys, we have company.” Mom gives them a stern look. “Introduce yourselves, boys.”

“Hi, I'm Jason.”

“I’m Skyler.”

They both smile and look at Alex, then back at me.

“What happened to Tim?”

Jason laughs at Skyler’s question.

“Boys!” My mom snaps.

“It’s okay.” I smile. “I knew it would come up, so let’s just get it out in the open. Tim wanted space, or a break rather, so we are no longer together.”

“Good, that guy was an asshat,” my older brother, Troy, says as he walks around the corner. “Sorry sis, but you know he was.” He pulls me in for a hug. I smile and roll my eyes at his fiancée, Grace, who is standing beside him. She grins at me.

“Total asshat,” Jason agrees.

“Language!” Mom snaps.

“Troy said it first,” Jason argues, pointing toward his laughing older brother.

“Troy is a grown man. He’s twenty-eight. You’re seventeen and still living under my roof.”

This is so embarrassing, and exactly what I was afraid of. Alex must sense my tension because he leans closer and gently bumps his shoulder against mine, getting my attention.

“Relax,” he whispers.

“Okay, okay, we’ve embarrassed the girl enough. Let’s get settled and allow these two to relax after their drive. The boys and I were just about to set up the eggnog luge anyway. You like eggnog, son?”

“Dad, no. Alex is—”

“I do like eggnog,” Alex answers, smiling at me. “I’m happy to help if you need it, sir.”

“An extra pair of hands is always welcome.” Dad grabs Alex’s shoulder and leads him behind my brothers through the house to the garage.

I groan once he disappears from sight. “Oh god.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. Let’s have some coffee. Grace, come on.”

We follow my mom into the kitchen, where she pours each of us a cup of coffee and sets us up to peel potatoes. The turkey and ham are already in the oven.

“You want to talk about what happened with Tim?”

I shrug. “Not really. The relationship wasn’t right for me, and it ran its course. We ended things weeks ago.”

“And Alex?” Mom asks, not looking up from the potato in her hand.

“What about him? He’s just a friend.”

She stops peeling and gives me the mom look. “That’s not how a friend looks at someone, Sadie. Am I right, Grace?” Grace just laughs and shrugs, shaking her head to indicate she doesn’t want to get in the middle of *this* conversation.

“What are you talking about? We just got here, and you literally just met him.”

“I know that look, there’s something there.”

I shake my head, not wanting to indulge in that kind of wishful thinking at the moment. Suddenly, several yelling voices erupt from the garage, making me drop the potato I was peeling. I walk to the door that leads from the kitchen to the

garage, flinging it open just in time to see Alex standing up, his arms raised overhead, with eggnog running down his chin.

“It’s not even nine a.m., Dad,” I scold, but he waves away my concern.

“It’s the virgin nog right now. We’re just doing a test run for later.”

My brothers start to chant Alex’s name and he winks at me. I laugh and close the door, heading back to finish helping my mom with the potatoes. We chat for the next hour, talking about my job and her recent promotion at the hospital where she’s been a nurse for almost twenty years. She fills me in on my dad’s health, telling me he had a fall a while back, which was a minor scare, but he’s back at work now.

“How’s Skyler doing at college? I try to keep in touch with him but he’s always so busy.”

“Busy with girls.” Mom shakes her head, laughing. “He’s loving it, though. Jason is going to visit him next semester, I’m sure he’ll end up there with him next fall.” It’s hard to believe my parents will officially be empty nesters in less than a year.

Grace tells us how she and Troy booked their venue and can’t wait to get married so they can start a family right away. A flash of envy runs through me. Not because I don’t want that for her and my brother, but because I thought I’d have a family of my own by now.

We spend the afternoon as a family, talking, snacking, and playing games. Alex joins the conversations and jokes, the competition, and even the charades, which he knocks out of the park.

Dinner is delicious, the wine is tasty, and I’m pleasantly surprised at how easily Alex blends in with my family. My

brothers make sure to take every opportunity to crack a joke about our *friendship*, but Alex rolls with the punches and I just roll my eyes.

“Alex, we have an Emmert family tradition here. I don’t know if you noticed the pond in the backyard.”

“Dad, no!” I shout. Alex gives me a confused look.

“It’s our version of the polar plunge. You wear a Santa hat, a Santa Speedo, and nothing else.” Alex laughs. “The rules say you have to spend five seconds in the water. I think I have an extra Speedo or two.”

“You don’t have to do this,” I tell Alex, shaking my head.

He ignores me, clapping his hands and rubbing them together in excitement. “Let’s do it!” he says, getting up and following my dad down the hallway.

A few minutes later, Grace, Mom, and I are roaring with laughter as the men parade in front of us, wearing their tiny Speedos.

My eyes almost bug out of my head when I see the massive bulge in Alex’s Speedo. He catches me looking and gives me a cocky wink that makes me blush.

“Let’s go!” Dad yells, marching the guys out the back door as we follow behind them. “Okay boys, on the count of three, okay?”

Mom flicks on the porch light, illuminating the backyard and the pond. My dad counts down, and all five men run through the snow as fast as they can and dive into the water. Their yelps and screams echo through the night.

I squeal when Alex emerges from the water and stalks toward me, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Don’t do it!” I

scream, trying to run away. He catches me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me down into the snow with him.

I can't stop laughing. I'm lost in the moment, not even noticing the cold snow or the fact that my family is witnessing such an intimate moment. He stops tickling me and hovers over me. For a second, I think he's going to kiss me. I want him to kiss me. But he doesn't. He climbs to his feet, holding out his hand to help me up.

We head back inside where my mom tosses my now damp clothes in the dryer. Alex goes to take a shower in my old bathroom, and when he emerges, he's dressed in the clothes he was wearing earlier and I'm waiting for him in my bedroom.

"So this is your old room?" he asks, looking around at the room my parents recently started redecorating.

"Yeah, my parents kept my old posters on my door, but they're redoing it so they have a nursery when Grace and Troy have a baby."

He slides down to the floor where I'm sitting with my back against the bed, and I hand him a cup of hot cocoa.

"Thanks again for bringing me today. I really had a blast." He chuckles as he brings the cup to his lips and takes a sip.

"Really? I was nervous they might be a bit ... too much?"

"Not at all." His brows knit together. "Why are you so concerned about that? I promise I can say no if I don't want to do something."

"I know. It's just that ..." I hesitate, not wanting to mention Tim, but there's no other way to explain. "Tim seemed annoyed or frustrated by my family half the time. He never indulged in their silly games or the polar plunge. I think he tried the first year. He laughed and cheered them on, and it

seemed like he enjoyed himself. Or maybe it was just an act, because after that first year, it was like he thought he was too good for all of it. I have a lot of regret about that actually. How I allowed him to behave that way toward my family.”

I feel tears prick my eyes as I stare down into my mug of hot cocoa.

“Hey,” Alex reaches over and turns my face to look at him. “I’m not Tim, sweetheart, and I never will be. You don’t need to protect me or shield me from anything. I’m a man, and if I have a problem, I’ll never push that onto you or behave in some passive aggressive, immature way. You understand me?”

I look back down and nod.

“Look at me.” I lift my eyes and look into his. “Never be ashamed or embarrassed of your life or your family. They’re wonderful people, and so are you.” He glances over my shoulder then leans in, grazing my lips with a gentle kiss before covering them completely. His tongue plunges into my mouth, tangling with mine.

I place my mug on the floor and lean in to deepen the kiss just as he does the same. He grips my hair in his hands, and I grab a fistful of his sweater as I go to climb into his lap. Pulling his lips from mine, he breaks the kiss and places his hands on my shoulders to keep me still.

“If you crawl into my lap, I’m not promising I’ll stay in your family’s good graces. Although,” he says, leaning forward to trail kisses up my neck. “Being that this is your old bedroom—” He doesn’t finish the sentence. I close my eyes as his hand slides up my sweater to massage my breast. “Maybe we can be a little naughty. You want to be naughty for me, right, Sadie?”

“Yes.” The word is a hiss as he flicks my nipple with his fingers, his tongue gliding up my neck.

I hear my mother’s voice getting closer, and we both jump back, reaching for our mugs like we’re a couple of teenagers about to get busted. The room is still dark, and even though the door is open, my mother doesn’t see us when she walks by.

I laugh. “We should probably get going.” We stand and make our way down the hall to say our goodbyes.

We’re about twenty minutes from the city when he says, “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why were you with Tim? I mean, I get it in the beginning, since you said he was different then. But why stay for as long as you did, and why fight to stay?”

I’m a little taken aback. I hadn’t expected him to ask that, but I answer truthfully. “I guess familiarity ... fear. I loved him, and he wasn’t always the way he was the last year, and things didn’t get really bad until the last few months.”

“But it didn’t concern you that none of your friends or family liked the guy?”

His tone sounds a little judgmental and instantly puts me on the defensive. “I mean yes, but I don’t know. I was young, and maybe I just felt safe because he was the first guy I slept with and the only guy I’d been in love with. We both wanted the same things, a family and marriage. I don’t expect you or anyone to understand, and frankly I’m done talking about it.” I say the last part more sternly than I intended, but I am just so over talking about Tim.

“Maybe they all have a point, you know? That he’s a shitty person who just saw you as someone he could manipulate or

take advantage of.”

“Who said that? Did my dad say that?” I turn to look at him. Tim must have come up when they were in the garage while I was helping Mom in the kitchen. “That’s nice,” I mutter, turning to look out the window. “I’m so sick and tired of everyone telling me what’s best for me. And now you? You don’t even know me,” I snap.

“Don’t belittle what we’ve shared the last few days. In the short amount of time we’ve spent together, I bet I know you better than he did, after how many years?” He pulls the vehicle into a parking spot down the street from my building and turns to look at me. “I know you well enough to know that Tim isn’t the right man for you; he never was. You deserve better than that, Sadie. The fact that he asked you to get your tits done? Seriously? With me, there would never be a single doubt in your head how much I appreciate your body, how fucking sexy you are.”

I look out the window and fight back tears. Because I know he’s right.

He reaches over and takes my hand. “Has he reached out today? Has he even asked how you’re doing or wished you or your family a Merry Christmas?”

I shake my head no, wiping away a few tears.

“Look at me,” Alex pleads, and I do. He reaches over to wipe the remaining tears from my cheeks.

“I’m not in love with him anymore,” I say, but I’m not sure why. He didn’t ask. Maybe it’s because I want him to know. Maybe I needed to say the words aloud for myself, to finally admit it and accept it. “And I know I deserve better. I just want ...” I let my words trail off. I want to feel loved, desired,

wanted. I want to build a life with someone; have a family. I just hate that I have to start over, and that's why I hung on for so long with Tim. But I'm too ashamed to say that.

“What do you want, sweetheart?”

His eyes search my face for answers. I'm tired of feeling weak. I want to take what I want. And what I want is Alex Snow.

Reaching forward, I grab his sweater, pulling his lips to mine and kissing him hungrily.

I pull back less than an inch. “I want you. I want you to make me feel good, to help me let go of my inhibitions and explore my wild side. For once, I just don't want to be sad. I don't want to try to explain my past or my feelings. I just want to feel and live in the moment.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want to give myself to you fully. Take me to your place.”

I don't have to tell him twice. He pushes me back in my seat and fires up the SUV. When we reach his building, he whips into the parking garage, pulls into a spot, and shuts off the engine. He unclips his seatbelt before jumping out and rushing around to my side. Yanking my door open, he reaches in to unbuckle me before helping me down, my body slowly sliding down his. He places his hands flat against the window behind me and leans in until his mouth is almost touching mine.

“I hope you're prepared to get what you asked for, Sadie, because I'm not going to hold back with you any longer. I've waited two long years to have my way with you, and tonight, I'm going to take every last ounce of pent-up frustration and

desire out on you, you understand me? There will be no question of how I feel about you or what I want from you.”

“Yes.” My knees tremble in anticipation, my body buzzing with excitement.

“Good.” He grabs my hand and ushers me into the elevator. When the doors close, he spins me around and pins me to the wall with his body, pressing his large erection against my belly. “Are you mine tonight, Miss Emmert? Ready to submit to whatever I say?”

“Yes, sir.” I square my shoulders, looking him dead in the eyes, but the words come out more timidly than I wanted.

He smiles, his hand sliding up my body until he reaches the base of my throat. He rests it there as he lowers his mouth to nip at my earlobe.

“I’m going to own you, kitten. I’m going to fuck you so good, so thoroughly, there won’t be any doubt in your mind who you belong to when I’m through with you tonight.”

As soon as the elevator doors open to my penthouse, I begin walking her backward, my lips traveling from her mouth to her neck, my hands roaming her body as she presses it against me like she needs more, like she can't get enough, and we've only had a taste.

I want to go slow, to savor having her at my mercy, because come tomorrow, she may say this was all a mistake, a rebound; nothing but a distraction from the heartbreak she's been wallowing in. She said as much; that she just wants to feel tonight, to not think about anything else.

"Wait, wait," I pant, putting some distance between us. She looks at me with confusion, like she's worried I'm second-guessing things, but that's not what this is. I hold my hand out. "Come here."

She puts her hand in mine and I lead us down the hallway to my bedroom. I spin her around and command her to sit. She drops down on the edge of the bed and looks up at me with wide eyes.

"Tonight isn't about me, Sadie, it's about you. About what you want. It's about making you feel good. So what makes you feel good?"

She looks at me for a second, then quickly looks away. “I ... I’m not sure. I haven’t experienced much. I just want to feel free, to feel uninhibited with my sexuality.” She licks her lips and waves her hands in a nervous gesture. “Like what you did to me with your fingers at my apartment.”

“Making you squirt?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else you’ve been curious about?”

She shrugs. “I’m not sure. I liked feeling out of control. I liked feeling like my body and pleasure were in your hands.”

I can’t fight the wolfish grin that spreads across my lips. “I like that too, sweetheart, very much. Do you trust me?” She nods tentatively. “Good. I promise I won’t do anything to scare you, nothing too out of your comfort zone. We need a safe word, so I will know to stop if something makes you feel uncomfortable. What’s your word going to be?”

She chews her lip briefly, then suddenly giggles. “Candy cane.”

“Candy cane it is. But you understand what you’re saying, right? You’re giving me full control to do as I see fit with your little body?” While I wait for her answer, I pull my sweater off and begin unbuttoning my shirt. She stares at my hands and licks her lips.

Her voice is husky when she finally responds. “Yes.”

“And you’re willing to obey me? No questions asked?”

“Do you think—” She stops talking abruptly.

I wait a moment for her to continue but she doesn’t. “Do I think what?”

“That it’ll ... fit?” Her eyes drop to the obvious bulge in my pants. I finish removing my shirt and toss it to the floor with my sweater.

“My cock? It’ll fit, sweetheart.” I kneel between her legs and reach for her foot to remove her shoes. “It might take some time, but don’t worry, I’ll warm you up with my tongue first.” I drop her foot and gently cup her chin. “You didn’t answer me. Are you ready to obey?”

“Yes, Mr. Snow.”

“So eager.” I pull her up to stand. After removing her shirt, I reach for the waistband of her jeans. “In fact, my mouth has been watering nonstop every time I thought about how good you taste and imagined tasting your pussy again.” Once her jeans and panties are discarded, I push her back on the bed and crawl over her, straddling her waist. I pull down the cups of her bra to reveal her bare breasts.

“My mark is still there.” I run my thumb over it, leaning in to trace it with my tongue. “Did you like when I did that—when I bit you?”

“Yes,” she breathes, her hands sliding into my hair. I spend a few moments kissing and sucking her nipples, my cock already begging me for release. Moving lower, I kiss my way down her stomach until I reach her pubic bone. Her hands fall from my hair as she pushes herself up on her elbows to watch.

I look up at her as I slide my tongue between her folds. “Mmm, already soaked baby.” I get down on my knees on the floor, grabbing her legs and pulling her closer to the edge so I can spread her thighs and bury my face in her. Her pleasure builds, but I stop before she can come. I stand up and look down at her.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m going to let you come, but I want to eat you from behind this time.”

She looks intimidated. “Behind?”

I help her stand and make quick work of removing her bra before turning her to face the bed. Placing my hand between her shoulder blades, I push, forcing her upper body down.

“On your hands and knees,” I instruct, but she doesn’t move. I pull my hand back and smack her ass, the sound ringing out as her mouth falls open, and her body jolts forward a few inches from the force.

“Bend over, Miss Emmert,” I demand more firmly, and she obeys.

“Good girl.” I don’t give her time to think about what’s coming next. I drop back down to my knees and spread her ass apart, slowly dragging my tongue from her pussy up between her cheeks. A gasp tumbles from her lips. My tongue swirls around her asshole as I slide a finger inside her pussy. She pushes against me, wanting more, so I oblige her. I tease her with my tongue and push my finger deeper. Removing my finger from her pussy, I spread her arousal over her asshole before inching my way inside. I repeat the process until she’s pushing her ass back against my finger, fucking herself.

Leaving my finger deep inside of her, I instruct her to roll onto her back. She obeys instantly, and I go back to devouring her as I pump my finger in and out of her tight ass. She’s strung tight as a bow, her legs shaking.

“There’s that naughty girl,” I say between licks, watching her body convulse. “You like getting your tight little asshole fucked while I eat you, don’t you? Come on my tongue, baby.”

I lean forward and suck hard on her clit until she explodes. With a groan, I lap up her release.

She moans when I pull my finger from her. “I didn’t think it could get better.”

“Oh sweetheart, I’m just getting started with you.” Standing up, I walk to my closet to grab two neckties and toss them onto the bed next to her.

“What are those for?”

“I’m going to tie you to the bed and fuck you till you scream.” I reach into my nightstand and pull out a few condoms. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” I pull my belt off and step closer to her.

“Yes, it is.”

“Stand up.” My lips find hers, and I kiss her long and hard. I want her to know that even though I am being demanding and rough with her, I still cherish her.

“I’m going to do something to you that I need you to completely trust me on, okay?” She nods, and I walk her over to the chair in the corner of my room, still holding my belt. “Hold your hair up.” She complies and I wrap the belt around her throat.

She’s visibly nervous but the way she’s looking at me tells me she’s intrigued also.

“Do you need your safe word?” I ask, looping the belt through the buckle and tightening it, but leaving enough room to fit my fingers between her neck and the belt.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Down on your knees.” Gripping her upper arms, I help her get in position then sit in the chair that’s in front of her. I

admire the way she looks on her knees with my belt around her throat, the rest of it dangling between her breasts. “You were born to wear a collar.” The words are quiet, meant more for me than for her. I unbutton and unzip my pants, reaching inside to pull out my rigid cock.

“You like what you see?” She watches me with heavy-lidded eyes as I begin stroking myself. “Do you want a taste?”

“Yes, please.”

“So proper,” I growl, leaning forward to grab the end of the belt and tugging it gently. “On your hands and knees.”

When she gets in position, she’s still a few feet away from my chair. I tug the belt again, harder this time.

“Crawl to me,” I command. Her eyes lock with mine and she crawls closer until she reaches me. “I’ve fantasized about seeing you crawl to me since that day in my penthouse. Now”—I place the tip of my dick at her lips—“suck my cock, baby.”

She places her hands on my knees and positions her mouth at the head of my cock. I feed just the tip of it past her lips, savoring the sensation of teasing myself for a few seconds. Her shyness evaporates and she grips it by the base, attempting to take me deeper, but she gags.

I grab the tail of the belt and begin tugging it to match the rhythm of her head bobbing up and down my length. I can feel my balls tightening, ready for release.

“I’m going to come down your throat and you’re going to swallow.” I grunt, my orgasm ripping through me. I keep her head in place by gripping the belt, forcing her mouth to stay in place as I release stream after stream of hot cum inside her mouth.

When I finish, I let go. Looking at her red face and watery eyes, I worry I may have pushed her too far. Before I can ask if she's okay, she wipes the remnants of my release from her lips and climbs into my lap.

"Please fuck me," she begs, lining herself up with my cock and attempting to sit on it.

"Need a condom, baby," I grit out as I grab her hips, forcing myself to stop her, even though it nearly kills me. Keeping her in my arms as I stand, I toss her onto the bed and grab the ties. After tying her wrists to the bed, I get on top of her and begin biting her breasts while sliding two fingers inside her.

"Don't come yet." I pull my fingers from her and move to her clit, teasing her by barely brushing the swollen bundle of nerves before pushing them back into her.

"Please, please," she begs as her whole body trembles, and it drives me wild. I can't hold back any longer. I grab a condom and tear it open, sheathing myself before positioning it at her entrance.

"Look at me, Sadie." Her eyes open lazily, her lips parted as she pants, her body screaming for release. "I'm not going to be gentle once I'm inside you, but I will give you time to get used to my size." I move my hips the slightest bit, pushing inside one inch at a time. An animalistic groan falls from her lips. "That's right baby, open up for daddy, let me in."

I'm on my knees, holding her legs apart as I watch myself slide into her. I pull out, slowly pushing forward again until I'm all the way inside.

"Don't fight it, let it happen." Sweat beads at my temples as I quicken my pace, her cries of ecstasy echoing through the

room. She grips the ties that are binding her wrists to the bed. Her mouth is open, her tits bouncing as I thrust in and out of her. The belt still around her neck.

“Yessss,” she hisses, her back arching and her thighs opening even further.

“That’s right baby, take my cock.” I grunt, looking down at where I’m stretching her to her limit. “The next time we’re in the office, just know this is what I’m thinking about when I see you. You, stretched open for me, begging to be filled with my cock.”

I fall forward, massaging her clit with one hand and gripping the headboard with the other.

“Look at me,” I command. Her eyes meet mine. She’s so close. There’s something more than passion, greater than ecstasy in her eyes. It’s raw, unbridled delirium. “Come for me, Sadie.”

Seconds later, she’s coming on my cock, her release coating me and pushing me over the edge. At the last second, I pull out, ripping the condom off as I pump my shaft once before spilling myself all over her tits.

My vision is blurry as I gaze down at her, and I shake my head to clear it. My knuckles are white from gripping the headboard, and there’s a pool of my cum between her tits.

I try to catch my breath as I release her wrists, bringing each one to my lips to kiss. Her hands drop heavily to the bed when I let go. “Are you okay?”

“More than okay.” She blinks lazily, running a hand down my sweaty chest.

“Fuck me, that was intense.” I sit back, a grin on my face as I look at the mess I left on her. I undo the belt, sliding it

away from her neck. “Wasn’t too much?” I ask.

She blushes. “No ... it was exciting.”

“Don’t be ashamed that you enjoyed it. Trust me, seeing you on your knees sucking my cock with my belt around your throat is a vision I’ll never get out of my head.” I climb off the bed and walk to the bathroom to get a warm cloth. When I return, I help her clean up.

“You need anything? I’ll go grab some water for us.”

“What time is it?” She swings her legs to the edge of the bed and reaches for her clothes.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, I thought—home?”

“Get your ass back in bed, you’re not going anywhere.” I push her back on the bed again.

“I’m not?” She gives me the same innocent little grin she gave me the first time we met. I pull my boxer briefs on and climb up the bed to her.

“Why would I let you leave?” I tug her hair, exposing her neck to my tongue. “I have so many more naughty things to do to you, Miss Emmert.”

“You do?”

“Oh yes.” I slide my hand up her thigh to toy with her pussy. “I want to spend hours devouring you. I want your taste burned onto my tongue.” I dip a finger inside her and she mewls. “I want to take my time kissing and licking every square inch of your body so you can never ever say again that a man hasn’t made you come in a certain way. Call me selfish, but I want to be that man. I’m going to spend hours tonight

making you feel things you didn't know you could. I want you completely and utterly addicted to my cock and my tongue.”

SADIE

Falling asleep in Alex's arms feels so right. Scary, but right.

I blush in the early morning sunlight when I remember all the ways he had me last night. The way his filthy words excited me. The way his hands tugging on that belt around my throat had me quivering with anticipation.

“Good morning.” Alex nuzzles my ear, his arm sliding across my body to pull me against him. “You sleep okay?”

“Good morning, I did. Did you?”

“I was practically in a coma. You fucked the life out of me.” His morning voice is low and scratchy.

“Me?” I giggle when he tickles my side.

“Yes, you. You naughty little minx.” He runs a hand over my naked body. “Are you sore?”

“A little.” I lean my head back so his lips find my mouth. “I need to brush my teeth.”

“Shut up,” he moans into my mouth as his fingers tease me between my thighs. “You promised to obey me, remember?”

I'm sore—very sore—but I don't want him to stop. He rolls me to my back, pinning my hands overhead while he settles between my thighs. We're both ready, wanting—no,

needing more. He reaches for a condom and rolls it on, entering me immediately.

This morning it's slow and intimate. His eyes stay focused on mine as he lazily pumps in and out of me. It feels like so much more than sex. This is making love, and it's terrifying because I can't tell if I'm in lust, if this is just a rebound, or if I'm truly falling for Alex Snow.

IT'S BEEN four days since Christmas, and Alex and I have spent at least a few hours each day together, hanging out at our apartments and watching movies, getting dinner together, or going to see a movie. Tomorrow will be our first day back at the office.

“Are you nervous?” Caleb asks as our friend group enjoys lunch together.

“Very.” I dip my fry into ketchup and pop it into my mouth.

“Do you want to talk to him about what you guys are or just let it play out?” Karlie chimes in.

Ariel looks over at me. “Or maybe just see where things go and not try to complicate it yet?”

I lean back in my chair, chewing the fry as I mull over their questions. The truth is, I have no idea what I want. After facing the firing squad this morning with their fifty thousand questions about the sex and how my family reacted when I showed up with Alex at their house on Christmas morning, my brain is fried.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I feel like I’m too scared to trust my gut since I completely got things wrong with Tim. It’s like ...” I pause, thinking over my words. “I know what I want. I want a life with someone like Alex. Someone who sees me for who I am, who likes my friends and enjoys just *being*. It’s effortless. I know every couple has issues and fights; I don’t mean that. I mean that I’m not always on eggshells with him. You should have seen him with my family. I felt so silly being worried about how he’d handle their craziness.” I laugh, remembering the way he so proudly strutted out in that Santa Speedo like he’d known my family his entire life.

“Are you worried that maybe it’s the honeymoon phase? That once you get back to being life after the holidays, it will be different?” Caleb’s usual joking demeanor has turned serious. I know he isn’t trying to plant doubt in my mind; he’s merely concerned as someone who cares deeply for me.

I nod. “Yes. But more than that, I’m worried that I haven’t healed from Tim. I’m worried that instead of facing all those feelings and dealing with them, I’m just ignoring them because I have Alex to distract me.”

“Maybe you guys should take some time apart. You can call Tim and get some closure. I assume that dickbag never texted you back?” Karlie raises her brow at me, referring to the text I sent him on Christmas Eve. I shake my head in response.

She has a point, and it’s probably the best plan. I’m heading into the office tomorrow, then we’re all off for New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. Alex insisted there was no point in me coming in for the day, since most of the office is still out, but there are a few end of year tasks I want to knock out.

“Are we still planning on chilling at your place for New Year’s, Karlie?” Ariel asks.

“Yes. I have all the snacks, but you guys need to bring the champagne.” She looks over at me. “You can invite Alex too if you want.”

“Thanks, but I think what you suggested is smart. Some time apart so I can sort my own shit out. You know what’s weird? Hanging out with him feels a lot like hanging out with you guys. It’s like hanging with my best friend, but we also have sex and insane chemistry and attraction.”

All three of them stare at me, quizzical expressions on their faces. Caleb finally speaks up. “Sweetie, that’s how relationships *should* be. You should date someone that you want to be friends with; someone who makes you laugh and gets you and supports you but also knows how to fuck your socks off. This is what we’ve been trying to tell you for years about Tim. It wasn’t that we were assholes, it’s that we saw he wasn’t even a friend to you, he was merely someone who took up space in your life and used you.”

Caleb’s words hit me like a ton of bricks. I don’t know why it took me so long to get it, but I finally do. I know beyond any doubt that I don’t want Tim back. While I know Alex has been there to distract me from lonely nights, the truth is the first three weeks after Tim left, he wasn’t there. It was just me alone in my apartment with my thoughts. And while I’d cried, mourning the life I had built with him, not once did I really and truly miss him.

I think about Caleb’s comment all night and into the following morning while I get ready for work. It feels like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, like I’m finally giving myself permission to forgive myself and move on from

that relationship. I grab my coffee thermos and sling my bag over my shoulder as I walk out of my apartment toward the train station.

When I arrive at work, the building is almost empty. Alex was right, nearly everyone is still out for the holidays. I exit the elevator and turn down the hallway toward my cubicle. As I approach, I see a small white bag on my desk. I place my things down and open the bag, peering inside to see a single maple donut.

“Thought you could use a little treat since you’re stuck here today.”

I spin around to see Alex sitting in the empty cubicle across from my desk.

“How’d I miss you?” I laugh, pulling the donut out of the bag and sinking my teeth into the still-warm pastry. “Thank you,” I mumble around a mouthful as he walks over to my desk and sits on the edge.

“You’re welcome.”

“Mmm,” I moan, flopping back into my chair. “So good.”

“That sound brings back memories.” His voice is husky as he reaches up to swipe his thumb across my lip, collecting some wayward icing crumbs. He brings his thumb to his lips and licks the crumbs off, keeping his eyes locked on mine.

I pause mid-swallow, staring at his movements. Heat rushes through my body.

“Not as tasty as you.” He winks and I feel my face redden as I glance over my shoulder. “Relax, I think there are two other people on this entire floor.”

I swallow down the bite before standing up to glance around again. He's right, there isn't anyone in the vicinity.

"Your mom called me this morning."

"What?" My head snaps back so fast, I tweak a muscle in my neck. I rub it absentmindedly. "Why?"

"She wanted to thank me for the wine, and to tell me that she was very pleased to see me at Christmas."

"How—how'd she know your last name or who you were? How'd she get your number?" I purposely didn't mention Alex's last name at Christmas, knowing my parents would easily put two and two together, considering I work at Snow Communications. And while my parents aren't judgmental, if my mom knew I was bringing my billionaire boss to her house, she would have completely freaked out.

He chuckles. "She called the lobby receptionist and asked to speak to me. She told her she was *my girlfriend's mother*."

"Oh god." I cover my face, sinking down into my chair and praying for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

"It's okay. I don't think you give your mom enough credit. She said she knew who I was the second you introduced me. She knows the name of the man who owns the company you work for, Sadie. She's your mom, she's done her due diligence."

"I'm so sorry." I shake my head. "I *never* told her, or anyone else for that matter, that you were my boyfriend. I swear. She asked me about you, and I quickly shut things down."

"Why's that?"

I stare at him for a second, blinking, trying to assess his tone. “Why’s what?”

“Why did you shut things down when she asked about me?”

“Oh, well I didn’t want to make it any more awkward for you than it already was. I mean, I showed up with a completely different guy than I have in the past. Plus, it would have made her think she had to go out and buy oysters and caviar, or whatever rich people eat, if she knew a billionaire was sitting at her Christmas table.”

“Is that how you see me? A fancy billionaire? We ate hotdogs on your living room floor two nights ago, tacos at my place the night before that.”

“No, that’s not the only way I see you, but it’s a fact. You’re you, and that intimidates people.”

“I’m not fancy though. I’m a very down-to-earth, everyday person. It’s just money.”

I know he’s being sincere, but he doesn’t see himself the way everyone else does. He just doesn’t get it. “It’s not just money, Alex, it’s status and power. Being who you are gets you in the door, it gets you respect. It’s not a bad thing, it’s just hard for the rest of us to relate, and that can often make people feel intimidated.”

“Are you intimidated?”

“A little, yes.”

“Still?”

“Still.” I smile and my stomach knots up, knowing that what I’m about to say might completely ruin things between us. “I um ... I’ve been thinking actually.”

“Oh boy, it’s never good when a sentence starts out like that.”

“I know we haven’t talked at all about”—I motion between us—“this. I don’t even know what this is but—”

“What do you want it to be?”

“I’m not sure. We both know I just got out of a long-term relationship, one that I’m not sure I’ve healed from. I haven’t even experienced closure with Tim yet, and honestly, I’m not sure I ever will. That’s okay though, I’ve accepted that, but I think I need some time, you know? Even if all this ever was going to be was just fun, I really value your friendship. I don’t want to lose that, and I think that if I’m in your bed every night, I’m not going to be able to figure things out for myself.”

He sits in silence for several seconds. I reach my hand out to touch his.

“Say something.”

“I think you’re wise beyond your years, Sadie. For what it’s worth, I value your friendship too. A lot. I don’t see you as just a fun distraction. I’ve told you before, you deserve more than that. And I really do hope that you get the closure you deserve from Tim. I’ll always be your friend.” He squeezes my hand and stands up. “Thanks again for allowing me the pleasure of spending Christmas with you and your family; they’re wonderful people.”

I don’t know why I feel like I’m going through a breakup all over again. My chest tightens, and tears begin to pool in my eyes.

“Don’t do that,” he says, reaching out to wipe one that broke free. “This isn’t goodbye, kitten. Reach out if you need anything.”

And with that, he turns and walks to the elevators.

“THREE ... TWO ... ONE ... HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

I raise my glass to toast with my friends as we watch the ball drop in Times Square. I smile and yell cheers, but my mind is elsewhere. I wish I'd invited Alex. I wonder what he's doing, if he's having a good time. I pull out my phone to send him a text, but when I click on our text thread, I already see the three little bubbles dancing, indicating he's typing a message.

Alex: Happy New Year Sadie. I hope you're having an amazing and fun night with your friends. Just wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you and sending you love and happiness going into the new year. PS...if I were with you, I'd be kissing you right now.

“Look at her smiling, you know that dick is goooood,” Caleb says, making Ariel and Karlie laugh.

I roll my eyes and turn around to tap out my reply to Alex.

Me: I was just about to text you! Happy New Year to you too. I've been thinking about you too. I miss you. I wish you were here to kiss me.

Before I can overthink it, I hit send.

“Just go over to his place already,” Caleb yells.

“What? No, we agreed to take space. I thought you guys agreed it was a good idea?”

“I'm just saying go get some, I'm not saying go propose to the man.”

I look over at Ariel and Karlie. “Should I?” Before they can answer, I’ve already talked myself out of it. “No.” I shake my head and slide my phone back into my pocket. “I said I’d take time and I’m going to take time.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I leave Karlie’s house early, stopping for a cup of coffee on the way home. When I exit the shower, I see a text from Alex, and my heart skips a beat.

Alex: I promise I’m respecting your boundaries, just wanted to make sure you made it home safely?

Me: I did, thank you. What did you end up doing?

Alex: I don’t want to tell you, you’ll be mad.

My stomach drops at his response.

Alex: I stayed home and worked.

Relief washes over me. The thought of him going out with another woman entered my mind for a brief second, which he is free to do. We never made any commitments to each other, and I’m the one who told him I needed space.

Me: What are you doing today? Want to grab coffee?

Alex: I’d love to...as your friend.

He sends a smiley emoji, and it makes me laugh.

Me: Yes...friends. Meet here. See you soon.

I place my phone down and go back to my morning routine, applying a touch of makeup and running the blow-dryer through my hair. I’ve just barely started drying it when I think I hear a knock at my door. I check my phone. No text

from Alex, and it seems too soon after our text. I turn off the blow-dryer and listen. Sure enough, someone is knocking.

As I walk toward the front door, I look down at my robe and touch my still-wet hair.

“Dammit, why is my hair always wet when he comes over!” I shove my nerves away and put on a huge smile, flinging my door open and finding not Alex, but Tim standing on the other side.

“Oh my god, what are you doing here?”

“Hi beautiful.” He smiles, his hands outstretched toward me. I step forward and he puts his arms around me. I don’t hug him back, keeping one hand on the door, the other down at my side.

“What are you doing here, Tim?”

“I want to come home.”

“Home? As in here?” I’m so confused.

“Can I come inside?”

“No,” I respond instinctively.

“Okay, I understand. I want to end the break, Sadie. I miss you; I miss us.” He grabs my hand. “I realized I made a huge mistake.”

“When?” He looks perplexed. “When did you realize you made a mistake? Because I sent you a text on Christmas Eve and you couldn’t even be bothered to respond.”

“I know. I was busy and emotional, and I’m so sorry baby. You have to believe me. I’ve been so torn up, depressed, drinking too much because I’ve missed you so much.”

“So what?” I pull my hand back. “You thought you’d just show up here and tell me you’re ready to come home, and I’d welcome you with open arms?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” I feel my mouth fall open at his audacity. “Baby, baby, listen. I thought that even though you didn’t want the break, we agreed that this was what we needed to fig—”

“No,” I say emphatically. “*You* decided that this was what *you* needed to figure out if I was what *you* wanted. There was no *we* in all of this. My feelings and what I wanted weren’t even considered. I cried and begged you to stay, and you left me right before Christmas.” My voice begins to shake and a tear tumbles down my cheek.

“I know, I was wrong and I’m so sorry. I want to spend my life with you. I want to have five babies and raise our family in a giant house in the suburbs with a tire swing in the front yard, and a dog and two cats.”

The tears really start to fall now. My chest burns as I choke back a sob. He steps closer, cupping my cheek.

“Remember when we used to drive around the suburbs and point out which houses we loved? We’d talk about how we could see our kids in the front yard. We’d find a local bakery and you’d say this is where you’d get coffee and pastries on the weekend. And then we’d walk through the town and—”

“Stop! Stop it!” I yell, pushing his hand away from my face. “How could you do this to me? You leave me after three years, then you show up here after I haven’t heard from you in weeks, and you finally tell me all the things I’ve wanted to hear for so long?” Tears blur my vision.

“I know, but I’m here now. Please Sadie, please just give us another chance.”

“What changed? What’s going to change? Are you going to be interested in spending time with my family? Will you actually watch a movie with me that I want to watch? Will you make an effort to get to know my friends instead of just talking shit about them?”

He stares at me, his mouth hanging open as he attempts to come up with an answer. “It’s not—it’s about us, not everyone else.”

I shake my head. “Just go.”

“Sadie, I’m begging you.”

“It’s too late, Tim, just go!”

He doesn’t say anything else. With a shake of his head, he punches the wall next to my door, making me jump, and storms away.

I’m still standing there in shock when I see movement out of the corner of my eye. I look up just as Alex rounds the corner with flowers in his hands. His face tells me he already knows that was Tim. I don’t know how much he heard, but he can see I’m upset, and my red, tear-stained face confirms it.

“If you’re going to say *I told you so* or lecture me, don’t bother.”

“Hey, hey.” He steps forward, pulling me into his arms and rubbing my back. “I’m here to be your friend, Sadie.”

I don’t hold back, releasing all the pent-up hurt and anger as I sob in Alex’s arms, finally feeling safe enough to let it all go.

He steps us inside the apartment, closing the door behind me as he continues to comfort me. “It’s okay sweetheart, I’m here. I’m here.”

We sit on the couch for an hour. I go through fits of crying while Alex comforts me, getting me more tissues and water. He doesn’t offer his opinion, doesn’t try to tell me I’m strong and I’ll be fine, he just lets me feel.

My head hurts, my eyes are red and swollen. I lean against his chest, listening to his heartbeat as he gently rubs my head. I know I’m falling in love with this man, and it scares me.

My mind wanders, and I consider what would have happened if I didn’t have Alex and Tim had shown up. Would I have taken him back? I feel confident I wouldn’t have, but then a hint of guilt creeps in. What if this break was exactly what Tim needed to change? What if I gave up on the relationship too soon? My parents always taught me that marriage requires work from both parties, that love is a choice. There were plenty of times in their relationship when one or both wanted to give up and walk away, but they didn’t.

“Stop overthinking everything, I can hear your brain turning.” Alex’s hand stills on my head. “Just listen to your gut, Sadie. Follow your heart.”

I pick myself up off Alex’s chest and look at him, my body still hovering over his. “Are you happy?”

“Right now? Absolutely.” He brushes my hair behind my ear. “Are you?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure. I want to be. I feel like I haven’t been truly happy in so long.”

“What makes you happy, Sadie?”

“Little things. Spending time with people I love and care about. Feeling like I matter to someone. My job.” He chuckles. “I’m serious, I really love my job, and I’m good at it.”

“You are incredibly good at it.”

“What makes you happy?”

His eyes shift away from me, then back. “I enjoy my job as well. But I think I tend to lose myself in it too often because I don’t have a family to invest in. Making you smile.” His eyes soften and then his expression turns a touch more serious. “I want to make you happy.”

We stare at each other and inch closer. The tension builds between us, the rhythm of his breath growing faster. Finally, we close the distance. His lips cover mine and his hand comes to rest against the back of my head.

This kiss is different from any other kiss we’ve shared. It’s not hungry or a prelude to sex. It’s passionate, but deeper. It’s like we’re telling each other how we feel without words. I pull back and look at him, his eyes telling me he feels the exact same way I do. That right now, in this moment, our relationship has changed.

IT’S BEEN a week since I saw Tim.

I’ve been keeping myself busy with work now that the new year has passed. Alex and I have maintained our vow to focus on our friendship, that one kiss being the only time we’ve been intimate since we agreed to just be friends.

Each day, my confidence in my decision to not try and work things out with Tim grows. He doesn’t deserve a second

chance. I still have moments of weakness where I struggle with it, not because I'm still in love with him but because I just have a hard time letting go of someone I thought I'd spend my life with. I've even started therapy, and she's been helping me work through those feelings, and has helped me realize it's a pretty normal thing to experience.

My stomach grumbles and I check the time. It's just after noon. I grab my purse and walk down to Marsha's desk.

"Hey Marsh, I'm heading to lunch, want to join?"

"I would love to, but unfortunately, I have a client meeting at 12:30. Enjoy something delicious for me. I'm back on my new year diet." She rolls her eyes and lifts up a container of salad.

"I can bring you back a cookie?" I laugh. She briefly considers it but shakes her head.

"No, I'm going to be good so I can enjoy a glass of wine tonight."

"Okay, back in a bit." I head toward the elevators and pull out my phone, thinking of inviting Alex, but decide against it. I've been trying to spend more time with myself and focus on my own happiness.

I step outside and shield my eyes from the midday sun. Shocking, it's actually a sunny January day in Chicago. It's that weird time of year where we get all four seasons in a single week. It's shockingly balmy out, so instead of hailing a cab or heading to the train, I decide to walk the few blocks to my favorite sandwich shop.

"Sadie? It is you! How are you?"

I spin around at the crosswalk, glancing past a few people to see Jeff Miller, one of Tim's coworkers I was friendly with

when I tagged along to his happy hours and holiday parties.

“Jeff, so good to see you.” We hug briefly and the walk signal lights up for us to cross.

“Hey, you got a few minutes?”

“Yeah,” I say, motioning over my shoulder for us to step out of the path of foot traffic. “How are you doing? How’s Andrea doing?”

“She’s great, we’re both great. Tired. We just had our first baby.”

“Oh, congrats! What’d you have?”

“A girl.” He pulls out his phone and holds up a photo of his baby in his wife’s arms. “Her name is Violet. She was just over seven pounds and looks exactly like her mama.” He beams, a true proud father.

“Oh, she’s adorable, Jeff. Seriously stunning, just like Andrea.”

He slides his phone back into his pocket. “We miss seeing you around, I uh ...” he fumbles, and I know what’s coming next. “I was so sorry to hear about the breakup.”

“Ah.” I shrug, attempting to play it off. “It happens, unfortunately.”

“For what it’s worth, I liked you way better than Tiffany. We all did.”

“Tiffany?” I can’t hide the shock in my voice as my stomach suddenly turns sour. “I didn’t realize that she and Tim dated.”

“You didn’t?” He looks just as shocked as I feel. “Yeah, I thought it seemed super quick; so did Andrea. They started

dating back in July, I think it was.”

“Oh, okay.” I try to remain calm, but my pulse quickens. My suspicions were correct about him having feelings for her, but I guess I hadn’t really believed he would outright cheat on me. I plaster on my best smile. “Well, I hope they’re happy, truly.”

“They’re done already. We knew it wouldn’t last long, she’s young and just wants to have fun. Rumor has it she dumped him like a week or so ago.” He rolls his eyes. “Anyway, don’t be a stranger. I know you have Andrea’s number, so give her a call. We’d love to see you and introduce you to Violet.”

“Thanks, Jeff, will do. Hope you guys had a wonderful holiday.”

“You too, Sadie.”

We share another brief hug, and I walk back toward the office, no longer hungry. That’s why things started falling apart several months back; he was cheating on me with her and felt guilty ... or maybe just stressed from balancing two relationships. I wonder if she knew? I shake the thought from my head, and the image of him begging to come back home comes rushing back. He didn’t want to come back because he missed me, he got dumped and realized how good he had it with me and thought he could crawl back like nothing had changed.

I pull my phone from my pocket and give my mom a call, praying it’s her day off.

“Hey sweetie, this is a lovely surprise in the middle of the day.”

“Hey Mom, just wanted to hear your voice. Always puts a smile on my face.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s fine.” The line goes silent, and I know she detected the sadness in my voice. Mom knows me better than anyone. She doesn’t even have to see me to know I’m lying.

“Please tell me Alex didn’t break your heart?”

I laugh. “No, Mom. He’s great, actually. He told me you called him. Guess you figured out he’s my boss?”

“Oh sweetie, of course I did. I told you, that man has feelings for you. He’s a good man, a lot better than that last one.”

“Tell me about it. So you like him? You don’t think I’m jumping into something too quickly after Tim?”

“You’ve always had your head on straight, Sadie. If you see in Alex what you’ve always wanted, then no, it’s not too soon. I think you both know that you’re meant to be, you just need to figure out a way to accept it.”

“You make it sound so easy, Mom.”

“That’s because sometimes it is. Sometimes love is just flat-out, plain easy to see. I’m not saying there won’t be hard times, but I knew about six weeks after meeting your father he was it for me. When you find the right person, the one who makes you feel safe and cared for, who has the same values and desires as you, don’t worry about the outside noise of what others will say or think. They’re not in your relationship, baby girl, only you two are.”

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose because I know I’m about to cry. “Thanks Mom, you’re always so wise.”

“After raising your three brothers and being married to your father, I’ve learned a thing or two about men. Tell Alex how you feel, you’ve got nothing to lose.”

We chat a little longer, and I’m feeling a lot better after we hang up. It stings to know Tim was cheating on me, but oddly, I don’t care enough to confront him about it or to wallow in it.

I’m ready to move on and be happy. I just have to find the courage to follow my heart and tell Alex how I feel.

“Hey, got a minute?”

I look up from the document I was reading to find Sadie standing in my doorway. I toss my pen on the desk, a smile taking over my face the instant I see her.

“Of course, come in.”

She softly shuts the door behind her. “Sorry I didn’t make an appointment. I thought Beth would be out there but she’s not.”

“She had a doctor’s appointment. You never need an appointment to see me.” I stand up, intending to move toward her.

“Just stay there.”

“Ookay.” I eye her suspiciously, sitting back down in my chair. That’s when I notice the worried expression marring her face. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, kind of.” She wrings her hands as she starts to pace. “I talked to my mom, and she’s right, I need to just say what I feel and go after what I want, you know? Not be scared. I’m always so worried about everyone else’s feelings but my own and how everyone else is going to perceive me.”

“Sadie.” I say her name calmly, but she continues pacing as if she didn’t hear me.

“I think I am scared to face what I feel though. It’s scary to realize that you’re almost out of control with what your heart wa—”

“Sadie.” My tone is stern this time, and she stops in place, her head snapping up as her eyes shift to look at me. “You’re not making a lot of sense right now, sweetheart. What’s going on?”

Her face is expressionless as she walks straight toward me, rounding my desk and grabbing my tie to pull my mouth to hers. Her tongue demands entrance as she tugs on my tie, the kiss growing deeper by the second as she settles herself in my lap.

“I need more,” she groans as she paws at me.

“More what, honey?”

“More of your tongue. More of your mouth. More ... you. More everything.”

I lean back, resting my hands on her forearms. “Sadie, wait. What are you saying? You want sex right now? Here? On my desk?”

Her shoulders fall. “No. I mean yes, but I know we said we would—or that I’d figure stuff out on my own. I just don’t know how to do that.”

I let my hands settle on her waist, “I wish I could do it for you, but I think you just need to figure out what you’re feeling and what you want.”

She slowly climbs out of my lap as she nods her head. “Yeah, I think I’ve done that.”

“And you know what you want?”

“Are you friends with anyone else—like how we’re friends?” She motions between us, her brows raised. I know what she’s asking, even though she’s not asking it.

I smile and shake my head. “No, Sadie, you are the only woman I’ve touched in ...” I look up at the ceiling, trying to remember how long it’s been. “Well, let’s just say a really long time. Has that been bothering you? I’m sorry, I should have made that very clear.”

“I mean, it does make me feel better, but we also never talked about what this was or if we were exclusive or not.”

“Do you want to talk about what this is or what you want it to be?” She nods. “Okay.” I grab her hand, bringing it to my lips for a gentle kiss. “Let’s talk tonight, okay? I’ll come get you before I leave for the day.”

“Thank you.” She smiles, her shoulders dropping with relief.

I hate that she’s been worried or stressed about my intentions—about *us*. If I’d thought she was ready or wanted to hear it, I would have told her the other day when I came over that I was in love with her. It was the whole reason I went to see her. I couldn’t bear the thought of another night without her being mine, but when I saw the distraught look on her face and heard Tim’s bullshit, I wasn’t about to pile on to her stress.

“Thank you for coming up to see me. I love seeing you throughout the day. Always puts a smile on my face.” I lean forward and kiss her forehead. “I’ll see you in a few hours, beautiful.”

I CALL my head of security to make sure my plan for tonight will work. “Hey Todd, got a favor to ask.” I tell him what I’m thinking.

“Yeah, I can handle that,” he says with a laugh. “I’ll give you the master key for the elevator.”

“Great, thanks. I’ll be down in a few to grab it from you. Need to run out to grab something anyway.”

Thirty minutes later, I’m back in my office with the master key for the elevator and a bottle of spiced rum. I glance at the clock. It’s just after 5:30, which means most everyone will be gone.

“Goodnight, Mr. Snow.” Beth waves to me from the doorway of my office, ready to head out for the night.

“Goodnight, Beth.”

I pull out my phone and type a quick text to Sadie.

Me: Hey, you about done with the day? I’ll be down in a few.

Sadie: Yes, just finishing up a few reports. I’ll be ready to leave in about twenty.

I pass the time pacing my office and checking my watch every three minutes, counting down the seconds until I can finally express my feelings to Sadie. My stomach is in knots. I’m worried that maybe her coming up to my office earlier was her attempt to tell me that while I’m what she wants, maybe it’s all too much, or maybe she only wants to be friends with benefits.

I grab the master key for the elevator and the bottle of rum I purchased earlier and head down to Sadie's cubicle. When I get off on her floor, it's mostly empty. Only two other employees remain, but both are gathering their things to leave.

"Evening," I say, tipping my head toward them as they get into the elevator after I exit. Sadie is leaning down to grab her things when I approach. She still doesn't hear me. I take a seat on the edge of her desk as quietly as I can.

"Oh my!" she yelps when she turns back around and sees me. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry, looked like you were in your own little world there." I laugh as she turns off her computer and stands up.

She motions toward the bottle in my hands. "What's that for?"

"Follow me." I walk back toward the elevators and gesture for her to enter. "After you." "How are you feeling?"

She sighs dramatically, her shoulders rising and falling with her exhale. "I'm okay, just kind of all over the place mentally, I guess." She smiles but it seems a little strained.

"Well, I hope I can help with that." I push the button for the top floor.

"Oh, I thought we were leaving."

"We will. But first, I have a little *exercise* for us try."

Her brow lifts. "Exercise?"

"Mmhmm." The elevator climbs higher. "Do you still trust me?" Her blue eyes are wide as she nods. "Good."

We reach the top floor and doors open. I hold out my hand to stop her from exiting. "Here's where I need you to trust

me.” Opening the control panel, I retrieve the master key from my pocket to slide it into the keyhole and press the stop and door close buttons at the same time.

I can tell by her expression that she’s uncertain. “What’s going on?”

“It’s okay. We aren’t stuck. If you want to leave at any point, just hit the door open button. This master key just takes the elevator out of use. We’re not stuck between floors or anything. We’re staying right here.”

Her face softens as she looks around. “What are we doing back in here?”

I take her purse from her hands and place it on the floor, next removing her coat and folding it neatly.

“Last time we were in here, you didn’t overthink things. I know the rum helped with that, which is why I brought some with me. Last time, you just let yourself feel. You expressed yourself to me more clearly than you ever have.” I reach out and run my thumb over her jawline. “You’ve got a lot going on that head of yours right now, and I know you’ve tried to express what you’re feeling to me, but you seem to keep getting in your own way. I thought we could just sit in here, drink some rum, and talk.”

Slowly, the fear melts away from her face, a big, genuine smile replacing it. “I like that idea.”

“Shall we?” I hold out my hand and she takes it, and we lower ourselves down to the floor, sitting across from each other.

“I’ll go first.” I wink and unscrew the cap from the rum, taking a long sip. The burn creeps down my throat, spreading through my chest. “Fuck.” I cough, and it makes her giggle.

“Haven’t drank liquor from a bottle since college, and here I am doing it twice in a month.”

“Bottoms up.” She takes the bottle from me and takes a sip, her face twisting as she sputters.

We make small talk about our day, about work, and discuss our plans for the weekend, laughing a lot. Between jokes and catching up, we continue to take swigs of the rum.

“You’re the best sex I’ve ever had,” she blurts, the rum clearly doing its job. She gasps, clamping her hand over her mouth and making me laugh.

“Is that right?” She nods, her hand falling away from her mouth. “Am I still the only man to make you come from my tongue and cock or—” I grab the bottle and take another gulp —“did you fake it?”

“No! I don’t think I could have faked that, and if I could I deserve a damn Oscar because that would have been one helluva performance.” I can’t hide my smile at how animated she’s being. “And yes, you’re still the only man. I haven’t been with anyone but you and Tim.”

I nod at the reassurance. “Good. So, what has you wound up?”

“Everything,” she huffs, running her hands through her hair. God, her hair. It drives me wild. I imagine tangling my hands in the strands while exploring her mouth. “Tim was cheating on me. I got confirmation.”

“Shit, what? How’d you find out?” That was not what I was expecting.

“I ran into his coworker, Jeff, earlier. I got close to him and his wife, Andrea, back when I’d attend work functions with Tim. We caught up and he told me that he was sad to hear

about our breakup and said that Tim had been dating that first-year, Tiffany, since July.” She grips the bottle of rum by the neck. “I didn’t tell Jeff that we had only just broken up in December, so my guess is he thought it happened earlier in the year. Explains why Tim had been acting differently the last several months.” She shrugs, looking unbothered as she brings the bottle to her lips.

“I’m sorry Sadie, that’s—” I search for the right words —“seriously fucked up.”

“You know what’s crazy?” She leans forward. “In the moment, when he told me, I was shocked; but at the same time, I felt relieved. Like it validated my intuition; proved I wasn’t wrong all those months. It also validated me not wanting to give him another chance and made me feel better about already moving on. But the craziest part is ... I really don’t care, and that’s not the rum talking. I’m just glad to be done with it all. I’m glad I will no longer be left wondering, beating myself up, thinking I’m going crazy because he’d gaslight me any time I brought up something inconsistent or suspicious.”

She looks off in the distance, then shrugs. “What were you going to tell me that night at the bar? You asked if I wanted to know what you were thinking when you looked at me in my outfit, but we were interrupted.”

“Ah.” I remember that night vividly, that outfit, her bare stomach, that fucking kiss. “No judgment?” I ask.

“No judgment,” she confirms.

“Well, the first thought that came to mind was that you looked like you were made to be fucked roughly by me—and only me—in that little outfit. The way the tiny skirt hugged your ass, I kept imagining what kind of panties you had on.

Then I wanted to drag you out of that bar so none of those other men could look at you.”

“Thong,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Fuck.” I reach down and adjust my hardening cock. “You were killing me in that little outfit, pure torture.”

“Guess I’m glad I decided to wear it after all.” She smirks and hands the bottle to me. “Your turn.”

“My turn?”

“Yeah, you have to drink and confess something, that’s what I did.” She giggles.

“I thought this was an exercise to help *you* feel and express yourself?”

She gives me a cute little smirk. “You’re not getting out of this.”

“Hmm, what can I confess?” I tip my head back, taking another drink.

“Tell me how you feel about me.”

I don’t hesitate. “I’m in love with you.”

Her smile fades, her face growing serious. “What?”

I repeat the words. “I am in love with you, Sadie. I’m not expecting you to say it back or even feel the same way but that’s how I feel about you, and I don’t want to keep it to myself.” I lift the bottle and take another drink. “I was actually planning to tell you that day we were supposed to meet for coffee, but when I showed up, Tim was there.”

Her eyes grow wide. “You were? Why’d you change your mind?”

“You were hurting. You needed a friend. I wasn’t about to use your pain and hurt to try and manipulate my way into your heart. It felt like it would have been wrong not to allow you to express the pain you were feeling in the moment. I also didn’t want you to worry I was only saying it to make you feel better. That would be as bad as saying it after mind-blowing sex.”

Her cheeks bloom pink at the mention of sex, something I still find adorable, considering all the things I’ve said to her.

“So you love me?” she asks again.

“Yes, I love you.”

She can’t hide her smile. “So what does that mean for us?”

“It means whatever you want it to mean. I’m not saying it to convince you to jump into something with me. What I feel for you is so much more than a rebound, so I don’t want to pressure you. I want this to be real and genuine for you. Because it is for me. I’d be no better than Tim if I used your pain from him to convince you to be with me if you’re not ready.” I pause and she just stares at me. “You’re it for me, Sadie. You’re everything I want and need. I’ll wait for you as long as it takes.”

That’s when I see it, a single tear sliding down her cheek. She gets to her hands and knees and crawls into my lap. I place my hands on her hips as she lowers herself, her hands coming to rest against either side of my face as her forehead rests against mine.

“I’m in love with you too.”

SADIE

“I love you,” I whisper the words again before kissing him.

Everything finally feels so right. I know I’m tipsy, but it doesn’t change what I’ve known for the last few weeks. It’s surreal; like a dream. But I’m awake, and he’s staring back at me.

“I want you to be mine,” he says between kisses, his hands sliding up my back.

“I am yours. I’ve been yours since the first time you touched me.”

Our lips meet once more, the intensity increasing as my fingers comb through his hair and his hands roam my body. It feels like the first time with him again; every time feels like the first time. Hands and lips grasp and seek frenetically, like we’re racing to consume each other.

I pull back suddenly and look up at the ceiling. “Oh shit, are there cameras in here?”

Alex chuckles. “There are, but I had Todd turn them off.”

I lick my lips seductively and run my hands down his chest. “Hmm. Almost like you had a plan for something naughty to happen?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He pushes my hair away from my neck, leaning in to bite down on the exposed flesh. His teeth send a shock of desire straight to my core, my toes curling in my shoes. “What’s on your mind, sweetheart?” His lips are still at my neck, dancing their way up toward my ear.

“You tell me. What do you want, Mr. Snow?”

He leans back, looking up at me with lust-filled eyes as he grabs the railing above my head. He doesn’t attempt to hide the way he’s checking out my body. He is so effortlessly sexy in this moment. A lock of his hair falls down over his forehead when he runs his other hand over the scruff on his jaw.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly,” I repeat.

“I want to fuck you.”

Electricity shoots through my core at his brashness. I love his dirty talk; it drives me wild, something I’ve never experienced before.

“But I want to know what you want, sweetheart. How can I please you?”

“I ...” I bite my bottom lip, struggling to find the confidence to answer.

“Don’t be shy. This is why we’re in here. So you can just be free and express what you want.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Okay, how about this. I’ll ask you some questions, and we can figure it out together?”

“Okay.”

“Did you like when I played with your breasts?” He slides his hand up my blouse, gently cupping my breast as his thumb swipes across my nipple, his eyes never leaving mine.

My eyelids flutter at the sensation. “Yes.”

“What about when I bit you? Do you like it rough?”

I nod and he pinches my nipple, eliciting a gasp from me. He removes his hand from beneath my shirt, bringing it to rest against my throat.

“And what about when I squeeze here?” His fingers tighten just enough for me to feel the pressure.

My fingers curl into his shirt. “It’s exciting.”

“Mmm.” He leans in, keeping his hand in place as his lips touch my earlobe. “I knew there was a naughty girl in there somewhere.”

“More,” I moan. “Say more things.”

“You like when I talk dirty to you?”

“Yes.”

His other hand slides beneath my skirt, his fingers finding my wet panties.

“Oh, you do like it, don’t you?”

I grip his shirt, praying he doesn’t stop.

“What about when I slide my fingers inside you, does that excite you?”

“Oh! Please don’t stop.” I lift my hips a little, giving his fingers access and allowing him room to slide one inside of me.

He lazily slides it in and out a few times before dragging my wetness back between my cheeks.

“And here? Did you like when I entered you here?”

“Ah.” I tense at the intrusion, but quickly relax as he presses against me, slipping just the tip of his finger inside. “Yessss.” He removes his finger and brings it back to my clit, toying with me.

“Tell me what’s going through your mind?”

I stare down at him. His tie is loosened, his top button undone. My lips claim his in a searing kiss while he continues to prime me with his fingers. I’ve never wanted a man the way I want Alex Snow. Loosening his tie, I slide it away from his collar.

“I want to be in control,” I say, gaining confidence.

“Do you now?” He smiles as I wrap the tie around the bar above his head.

“Give me your hand.” I hold out my hand. He obliges, and I wrap one end of the tie around his wrist. “Other hand.”

He stares at me, and I’m unsure whether he’s actually going to do it, but he slowly removes his hand from beneath my skirt.

I tie his other hand the same way I did the first, then sit back and admire him. His mussed hair, his undone shirt, his hands tied over his head. I know full well he could easily release himself, but he doesn’t try. The way he submits himself to my control makes me feel powerful.

He looks up at his hands then back at me, a devilish grin on his lips. “Looks like I’m at your mercy, Miss Emmert. What are you going to do with me?”

“Use you,” I answer, a little timidly.

“That’s right, baby. Yes you are. Show daddy how you like to be fucked.” He lifts his hips an inch, and the pressure of his hardness against my core makes me gasp.

Reaching down, I continue unbuttoning his shirt, revealing the dark blond curls peppering his chiseled torso. I lean forward and press my lips to his chest.

He moans, his hands clenching into fists as I drag my tongue up between his pecs to his neck. I grind against him as I sink my teeth into his skin, wanting to mark him the way he marked me.

“There.” I smile, pulling back to see the imprint I left. “Now you’re mine.”

“I’ve been yours,” he says, his eyes dark with lust. I glance up to see his fingers tightening around the bar, as though he’s fighting the urge to rip his hands free and consume me.

It’s like a fire has been ignited inside me. I reach down, undoing his belt and pants as I reach inside and fist his cock. His head falls back against the wall with an audible thump, his eyes closing as his lips part on a groan. Gripping him tightly, I stroke his length. Putting my lips up to his ear, I say the words I’ve been trying to muster the courage to utter since I tied him up.

“You like that, daddy?” I’m shocked I managed to say it. The second the last word leaves my mouth, his eyes fly open. He’s needy and hungry, like a wolf ready to pounce.

“Fuck yes,” he growls, the fabric of his tie straining against his wrists as he struggles to maintain his composure.

I pull his cock from his pants, lifting my own skirt in the process and pulling my panties to the side before lining him up

at my entrance. Teasing both of us, I spread my wetness on his tip while he watches.

“I—we don’t have a condom.”

“Are you on birth control?”

I nod and begin sliding down his girth. It stings a bit, causing me to wince.

“Spit, baby.”

“Huh?” I look away from where our bodies are joined and meet his eyes. His resolve is beginning to crumble.

“Spit on my cock so you can sit on it.”

I scoot back a little so I can spit on him like he instructed.

“Now climb back on and ride me before I come in your hand.”

I obey, quickly realigning his tip at my entrance and lowering myself onto him.

“Ohhh,” I groan, half from pain, half from pleasure as I inch further down his shaft. He lifts his hips a little, helping me.

I lift up, then slide back down, my body relaxing a little more with each thrust, allowing me to take more and more of him. Soon, I’m gripping the railing where his hands are tied, using it as leverage to ride him faster.

“Come on, baby. Use me. Make yourself come.”

Alex’s words tip me over the edge. My body convulses as I fall forward. I kiss him deeply, my tongue massaging his. He groans, his hips thrusting upward as he finds his own release. I collapse against his chest. We’re both panting, completely

spent. He wriggles one hand free and places it in the middle of my back.

“Thank you, baby.” He kisses my forehead.

I sit up, wincing a little as I lift my hips and he slips out of me.

“Take your panties off.”

I don't question him; I just do as he says and hand them over. He lifts my skirt and wipes away the remnants of his release before cleaning himself and putting them into his pocket with a flirty wink.

“You ready to finally get out of here?”

“I think so.” I giggle as we stand to adjust our clothing. He turns the key on the control panel and presses the button for the elevator to take us to the lobby. When we reach the ground floor, he tells me his driver is waiting.

“Do you think people will know what we did in there?” I ask as we walk through the lobby where only the night attendants and Todd are on duty. Alex tips his head at them and gives Todd a knowing smile.

He has his arm looped around my shoulders and is carrying the half empty bottle of rum with his other hand. Our clothing is wrinkled and askew, his hair is a mess, and his tie is undone, haphazardly wrapped around his neck.

“Sweetheart, anyone who looks at us knows exactly what we just did in there.” He laughs, pulling me into his arms so I'm facing him when we enter the vestibule of the lobby. “And I want them to know what we did. I want everyone to know you're mine ... forever.” He leans in, kissing me softly. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” My smile is so big it causes my eyes to squint. I pause just as we step outside. “Oh.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I wince. “Just need to get home so I can clean up. You’re kind of um, leaking out of me.”

He groans. “That is so sexy.”

We climb into the backseat and his driver pulls out into traffic as Alex leans over to whisper in my ear. “But no need to clean up when we get home. I’m just going to get you filthy all over again.”

EPILOGUE
ALEX-NEXT CHRISTMAS...

“Merry Christmas and cheers to another Emmert family holiday.”

We raise our glasses to Sadie’s father, Gene’s, toast.

“And to Alex,” her mother joins in, “for making our little girl happy and being such a wonderful new addition to our traditions.”

Sadie smiles and nudges my shoulder with hers.

“Now when do we get to the nog luge?” I ask, as we all dig in to dinner.

“A man after my own heart,” Gene remarks with a laugh. “Hurry up and eat guys before the ice luge me—”

“Don’t you dare. Sadie, Grace, and I labored a lot of hours to prepare this meal, you boys aren’t going to go run off after barely eating it,” Dawn scolds.

“Yes, dear.” Gene gives me a look. “The key to a happy marriage, son. Learn that phrase and use it often. Right, Troy?”

Both men laugh, and Grace and Dawn just roll their eyes.

I slide my hand into my pocket, fidgeting with the ring that’s been burning a hole in it all afternoon. A few weeks ago,

I called Gene and Dawn and asked for their blessing to marry Sadie. They were both ecstatic. Dawn burst into tears before they both agreed.

“So, did Sadie ever tell you guys the story about how we met?”

Her eyes bulge out of her head and her face burns red, making me chuckle into my napkin.

“No, but I think we need to hear it,” Jason says after seeing the look on his sister’s face.

“So, I wa—”

“Don’t you dare!” Sadie yells, her eyes pleading with me not to embarrass her. She thinks I’m going to tell the towel story, but that wasn’t when we met.

“It was her new-hire orientation. I was giving a welcome speech to the group.” Her shoulders drop with relief. “She caught my eye immediately. She was absolutely breathtaking in that front row. Scribbling down notes so diligently.” I look over at her and squeeze her leg under the table.

“And was it love at first sight for you, Alex?” Dawn asks, swooning.

“I think so. After that day I first saw her three years ago, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I never lost hope that someday we’d get the chance to get to know each other, become friends at the least.”

Sadie’s eyes fill with tears. “Love you,” she mouths, before leaning in for a kiss.

“Gross,” Skyler mutters.

“It’s beautiful,” his mother corrects him, playfully smacking his arm. “What changed? I mean, what started you

guys off getting to know each other after so long?”

I take a sip of my wine. “She came over to have me sign a contract and saw me naked.”

The table goes completely silent for a long beat, and then the boys burst out laughing.

“Are you serious?” Gene asks, not even attempting to hide his laughter.

“Yup.” Sadie has her face buried in her hands and is shaking her head. “Isn’t that right, sweetie?”

“Well, you have to tell the story now,” Dawn says, eyeing her daughter.

“Should I?” I ask, looking over at Sadie.

“No!” She gulps down the rest of her wine and grins. “Allow me.”

She launches into the story, cracking everyone up with her theatrical gestures and dramatic storytelling. She even goes on to tell them about how she told her friends the story, who *still* refer to me as Mr. Candy Cane; and how we shared our first kiss on stage in front of a room full of strangers and won the kissing contest.

“Oh, you kids,” Dawn says, fanning her face as her tears of laughter morph into tears of joy. “I’m just so happy for you,” she barely squeaks out.

We finish dinner and everyone helps clean up before heading out to the garage for the luge. I convinced Sadie to join this year.

After the luge, we head back into the house.

I grab my bag to change into my Speedo. “So, you ready to do the polar plunge?” I ask through the open bathroom door, peeking my head out to wink at her as she sits on the edge of her bed.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Absolutely not.”

“Suit yourself,” I shrug before pulling on the Speedo and grabbing my towel.

I walk out of the en suite bathroom with a towel slung around my waist. Her eyes follow my hands as I grab the edge of the towel to remove it. “Fine, guess you don’t want to see Mr. Candy Cane.” I drop the towel, posing in the brand-new Speedo I got for the occasion. It has a perfectly placed candy cane on the crotch.

“Oh my god.” She laughs as I reach out, pulling her toward me.

“You want to taste the candy cane? Give it a couple long, delicious licks?”

“Mmm, yes please.” She slides her hand between our bodies, but I grab it just before she reaches my cock.

“First, you have to indulge me.” I step around her and open my suitcase, lifting out her skimpy little ho-ho-ho girl outfit I found shoved in the back of her closet.

“I am *not* wearing that in front of my family.” She snatches it away from me and tosses it back into my suitcase. “Where’d you get that, anyway?”

“Not in front of your family, sweetheart. Trust me, that’s the last thought I had when I found it in your closet.” I step closer, lifting her chin before giving her a sweet kiss. “I do want to fuck you in it later, though. When we’re back at the penthouse.”

“Deal. As long as I don’t have to jump in the pond with you.”

“Deal.” I plant a kiss on the tip of her nose. “Just make sure you have some of that hot chocolate ready for us after.”

We meet up with everyone in the living room and we all head outside. The ladies cheer me and the guys on as we run and jump into the pond. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’m loved and welcome. Like I have a family of my own. My life has changed so drastically this past year, it’s almost unrecognizable. I feel like I’m finally living. I don’t spend late nights, weekends, or holidays in the office or at my desk at home. I’m actually enjoying my life and savoring every little moment with Sadie by my side.

After the polar plunge, I take a shower and then we settle down on her childhood bedroom floor, sipping our hot chocolate. Just like we did a year ago, only this time we’re wearing the matching t-shirts we won from the kissing contest.

“Thank you.” I squeeze her knee. “For bringing me into your family. I can’t tell you what it means to me that they accept and love me like they do.”

“Well, you’re very easy to love, but they also love seeing us happy.”

“You’re happy?” I ask.

She beams. “Incandescently. Are you happy?”

“More than I thought possible.” I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. “There is something I want to show you.” I pull up a real estate listing and hand it to her.

“What am I looking at—” She looks up and her eyes narrow on my face. “You listed the penthouse?”

“I listed the penthouse. I’m finally selling it.” She knows I’m not happy there, that it was a remnant of a life I thought I’d wanted almost ten years ago, but now I want a home. A place for us to grow old together. Somewhere we can raise our children.

“I thought we could start looking at houses for us,” I say, reaching my hand into my pocket again.

“For us?”

“Yeah, I figure we’ll buy a house, then plan the wedding so it’s not as stressful, and you know ...” I take a casual sip of my cocoa. “Fill it with kids.”

“I—wait.”

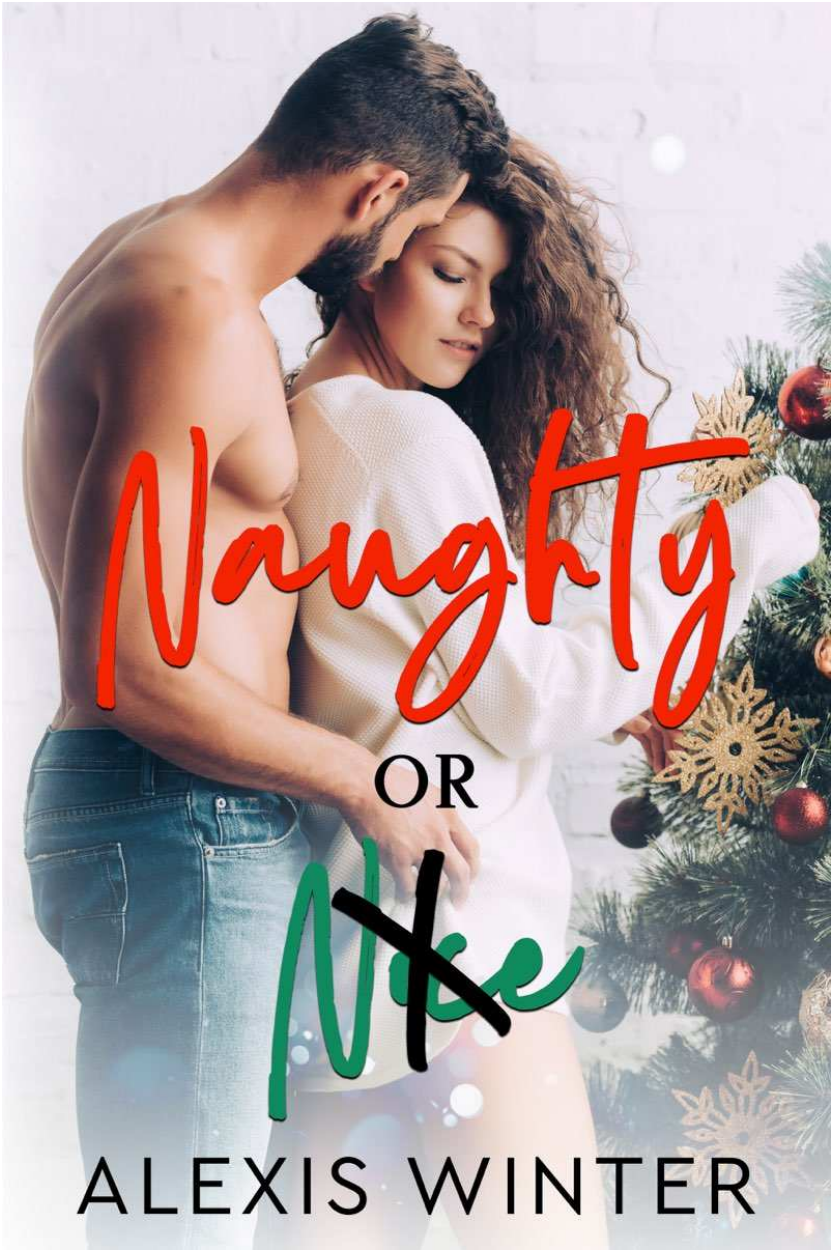
I slowly pull the ring out of my pocket, turning to face her.

“I’ve thought of a million different ways I’d ask you to be my wife, but none of them captured how I feel about you, how much you mean to me, and I’m done waiting. I’m done trying to find the perfect proposal, because Sadie Emmert, you are my world, and I don’t want to go another day without you being my wife. Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” Her bottom lip begins to quiver as I slide the elegant solitaire diamond onto her finger. “I’m speechless, I’m actually speechless.” She lunges forward, wrapping her arms around my neck. “We’re gonna have babies?”

“Ten, at least,” I answer with a grin, resting my forehead against hers. “You have made me the happiest man alive. I just knew, from the moment I saw you, that no matter what it took, no matter how long it took, I was going to wait for you because you were going to be my wife. You have completely changed my world, Sadie.”

I feel the same way I did when I locked eyes on her in my conference room three years ago. It almost feels like it was just yesterday, but at the same time it feels like we've already lived a lifetime together. I wrap my arms around her, clutching her to my chest. For the first time in forever, I have a family. A home. I've found my everything with her.



Naughty

OR

~~Nice~~

ALEXIS WINTER

DEAR SANTA,

*I know I'm supposed to be nice, but this year, I need to be
really naughty.*

*Oh, and I need a BIG favor—Carson Wells, in nothing but a
big pretty bow under my Christmas tree.*

Xoxo, Felicity

Look, I'm desperate okay.

I've been the kid sister, sidekick, and friend zone queen since I
was seven years old, but this year, that all changes.

Growing up next door to my best friend was pure,
wonderful...torture.

From the moment my seven-year-old eyes landed on Carson, I
was head over heels in love. I tried to wish him to fall in love
with me but Santa seems to have missed that memo.

Forget feelings and romance this year, I'm going in for the kill
—pure seduction.

After all, Christmas is the time of year to let it all out, right?

I know Santa won't approve but, I'm done being nice.

**It's time for Carson Wells to see my naughty side once and
for all.**

FELICITY

I'm sitting on my bed in my dorm room, cleaning out my desk to start the packing process. Tomorrow, I will be graduating and done with college. The thought excites me to no end. I mean, no more tests, no more term papers, no more early mornings and races to the coffee cart on my way to class. Tomorrow, I will be a college graduate!

As I look around my room that's decorated with pictures of me and my friends from my time at college, I feel a little sad to be putting this chapter of my life behind me. It was a lot of work, but I did have some fun times. At least these last few years I knew what day-to-day life would look like. After tomorrow, I have no idea. It's like a big blank chalkboard. I have no idea what I'm doing other than going back home with my mom after graduation. From there, I get to settle back into my old room while I apply for jobs and figure out my future.

Figure out my future.

Man, I can't even explain how badly those words scare me. I'm terrified that I will get hired on some place only to find out that I don't have what it takes. Then these last few years will have been nothing but a waste. Not only that, but the money that my mom spent on my college is wasted too. Good money that she worked hard for. Money that she

could've used to re-roof the house instead of taking out a loan. Guilt eats at me, but it also pushes me forward. I can't fail. I won't fail.

I take a drawer out of my desk and shake it over the empty box on my bed, too lazy to actually go through it and throw shit away. My phone rings and when I see Carson's name flashing on the screen, I drop the drawer onto my bed and answer it as quickly as I can.

"Hey, you," I say, full of energy and excitement.

"Hi, sweetheart. What are you up to?" he asks in his thick, deep, raspy voice. His voice has always sent shivers down my spine. Goosebumps prickle my skin every time I hear it.

"Oh, you know. Cleaning out my desk and packing my whole life into a box. You?"

He ignores my question and instead focuses on me. "That's right. Tomorrow is the big day. Are you nervous?"

I shrug out of habit to getting this question. "I'm not nervous about the concept of graduating, but I am nervous about what comes after it."

"What do you mean? Going back home?"

"Yeah, that and having to figure out the rest of my life. I'm just scared that I'll fail and let everyone down, you know?"

"Not possible."

I snort and that makes him laugh.

"I wouldn't expect *you* to listen to *me*, but you have to know that you've never been able to let any of us down. Not me. Not your mom."

“Well, now I know that isn’t true,” I tease as I feel my face warm from his compliment.

He laughs. “When have you ever let us down?”

“How about that time that we got hammered and you had to throw me over your shoulder and carry me into the house even though I was puking down your back?”

He laughs at the memory. “That wasn’t your proudest moment, but neither of us were let down then either.”

“I don’t know. I seem to remember a very long, boring conversation with my mother the next day as she forced me to eat the world’s greasiest bacon and eggs.”

He laughs again and it makes my stomach muscles tighten as need for him floods my entire body. “Actually, I’m pretty proud of you for that. You beat the town drunk at a shots contest. You’re my hero. Have I told you that lately?” he teases as his laughter fills my ears.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, not feeling like a hero to anyone. “I didn’t accomplish anything that night but getting wasted, dancing on a table, losing my bra somehow, and then puking down your back as you carried me to the house. You shouldn’t have picked me up over your shoulder like that. All that pressure on my stomach forced all the alcohol up.”

He chuckles. “You lost your bra because you weren’t just dancing on that table. You were stripping, or at least attempting to. And I had to pick you up like that. You refused to come in the house.”

I gasp. “You never told me that!”

“What? That you refused to come in the house?”

“No, that I was stripping!”

He laughs. “How else would you have lost your bra? You actually tried to recreate that scene in *Flashdance*,” he says, the words tumbling out of his mouth in a fit of laughter.

“I don’t know. I thought I was about to get lucky with some cute guy or something,” I say, but actually, in my messed-up, drunk-out-of-my-mind head, I thought that maybe Carson and I let things get out of hand. That he was the one who took my bra off and I thought that maybe he kept it as a little souvenir.

He laughs harder. “If you think I would’ve let you go off with some guy when you were that wasted, you have another thing coming.”

My face heats up with embarrassment when I think about how everyone was at that party my senior year and how they’ve all now seen me topless. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I tried. I did. It was just a little too late. I walked outside by the pool. There was music going and a big crowd gathered around the table. So I walked closer and that’s when I saw what everyone was looking at and cheering for. You! You were up there dancing and your shirt was coming off. Then as I was squeezing my way through the crowd to get to you, you saw me, smirked, and started to take your bra off under your shirt, shouting, ‘I’m Jennifer Beals!’ It’s like you were trying to make me lose my mind. You got it off and swung it around your head, then threw it into the crowd. I grabbed you and your bra that you flung on the table shortly after and pulled you out of there.”

I shake my head at myself with my eyes closed. Now that he mentions it, the memory resurfaces.

I’m on the table, dancing to the music as a crowd grows around me. I’m drunk out of my mind. My vision is blurring

and everything seems to be blending together, but I feel like a superstar up on this table with everyone crowding around me. They're all hooting and hollering and cheering me on.

"Take it off!" someone in the crowd yells and I think, why not?

My hands find the bottom of my shirt and start to pull it off then decide to take my bra off instead. The cheers grow louder as I let the material drop from between my fingers. It falls to my feet on top of the table. I sway my hips from side to side and wiggle my shoulders to make my breasts jiggle. Even more cheers.

Well, I wanted to get Carson's attention. I guess this is one way to do it.

As I dance, I think about how this is something I would never do before. And I mean NEVER!! But ever since Carson left for college a few years ago, a space has been growing between us that was never there before. He's moved on without me. Forgot me. He's got some snobby girlfriend now and I'm jealous in every way possible. Luckily for me, he came home to visit his family and she was too busy to come. I have to make him see that I'm the girl he's supposed to be with. Not her.

"Strip, honey!" someone yells.

Carson comes into view and I see his blue eyes flash angrily to the side at whoever told me to strip. But hey, maybe if I show some skin, he will get a little jealous and realize his true feelings. This is my chance to show him I'm not that nice girl he's always known. I'm a woman now, with needs. I reach behind me and unclasp my bra. The straps fall from my shoulders and Carson's eyes land on mine. I can read the message he's sending me.

Don't you fucking dare.

But I don't listen and he knows that about me. The bra falls and I catch it in one hand by the strap. I spin it around with my hand and let go. It goes flying into the crowd. In the same instant, I feel like I'm falling. But then I look up and see that I haven't fallen. I'm in his arms. My chest pressed to his as he carries me through the crowd and out the back of the privacy fence. He presses my back against the wood and our eyes lock. His are so heated it looks like fire burning within them.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asks, low, quiet.

I wet my lips. "Having fun," I reply.

"You think it's fun to show your body to every drunk guy that begs to see it?"

Wait? He doesn't like it? Usually, from what I can remember right now, he would have been one of those drunk guys out there cheering a girl on. Then he would have pulled her down and taken her up to a room so he could enjoy her himself. I've seen it happen! Why isn't he doing it now? What's so different with me?

"No, I just..."

"Just what, Felicity?" he asks, and it's only now I can see the anger on his face.

"I just wanted to have fun. I wanted you to have fun."

"Watching you degrade yourself isn't what I consider fun, Felicity. You're drunk. I'm taking you home," he says, forcing my shirt back over my head. I have no choice but to put my arms through. When I do, he latches on to one of them, then drags me around the house and to his car.

My eyes open and lock on a picture I still haven't packed. It's sitting on the corner of my desk. His smiling face stares back at me.

"I forgot all about that," I say, embarrassed all over again.

"Ah, it was a long time ago. I'm sure nobody remembers."

"You do," I point out. "That's bad enough."

He laughs. "Just another fun memory I have of you." I can hear his smile.

"Fun memory? Ha! If I remember correctly, you weren't having fun. You were pissed!"

"Hell yeah, I was. All my friends were drooling all over you. You've been mine since you were seven years old. I wasn't going to let them see you like that."

I smile at his overprotectiveness. I'm his? And I have been since we met when I was seven? My heart starts racing with that thought. I'm his. His.

"Anyway," he says, stealing my thoughts. "I thought I'd just give you a call and wish you luck tomorrow."

"You're coming home too, right?"

He doesn't answer.

"Carson Lee Wells, you promised!" I remind him.

He laughs. "I know, I know. And yes, I'm coming home too."

I can finally breathe. I can't imagine going back home and not having him there. "Good, and don't forget, you owe me for missing my graduation."

He chuckles lightly. It's a deep sound that I can feel in my bones. "I promise, I'll show you a good time to make up for

it.”

Tingles flood my body when I hear about him promising me a good time. I wonder what that could mean. “Okay, I’ll see you soon, then.”

“See you soon, sweetheart.”

“Bye,” I say, and I hear the click of his phone hanging up.

I let out a sigh as I get up and move over to my bed. I throw myself back, dreaming of his face. His blue eyes and the way they seem to cut right through me, making my heart skip a beat. The sharpness of his jaw and his defined cheekbones. That little dimple in his chin and the two that appear on his cheeks when he really smiles. They only come out if the smile is genuine. If it’s forced, they don’t make an appearance. I close my eyes and picture him standing before me. His tall, muscular body is twice the size of mine. I can see myself running my hands through his short dark hair, over his neck and collarbones, over his pecs and down to his narrow waist where I can unfasten his jeans.

Stop! No good can come from this. If Carson wanted you, he had plenty of chances as we were growing up. We met when I was seven and he was ten. We became friends, then teenagers together. We went through the awkward phase together. I stood back and watched him date girl after girl; every time he introduced me as *Felicity, she’s like my kid sister*. Every time, it broke my heart because even at seven years old, I was completely in love with him.

I’ve been waiting for my chance with him. I thought starting college would make him see me as the woman I am and not some little girl who tags along everywhere he goes. I thought that if I showed him how much I had grown that night my senior year, he would finally see. But he didn’t. He didn’t

see anything but a child misbehaving. He rescued me. I only wish I could have done the same for him.

Sleep finds me quickly even though I don't mean to nod off, but the stress of finals has worn me down. Being warm, comfy, and thinking about Carson though, it pulls me into a warm happy place. Our childhood.

"Hi, I'm Felicity," I say, coming to a stop in front of the new boy who just moved in next door.

He looks at me with his brows pulled together. "I'm Carson. Hey, are there any boys in this neighborhood to play with?" he asks as he spins around to pick up his bike that's lying in the grass at my feet.

I shake my head, feeling my pigtails slapping the sides of my head. "Nope, no kids. Just me." I smile proudly, happy that I finally have a friend to play with.

He scoffs. "That figures."

I frown and cross my arms over my chest. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He looks up at me. "How old are you?"

"Seven and a half," I say matter-of-factly. "I'm the oldest and tallest kid in my first grade class."

He laughs and shakes his head. "That's my point. I'm ten. I'm in fourth grade. A fourth grader and a first grader can't play together. I'm too old." With that, he pushes off on his bike and rides away, down the sidewalk.

I sigh, sad to see my new friend leave. Well, I guess he's not exactly my friend yet, but I hope he will be. There's nobody else here to play with. He'll get bored eventually and I'll be there.

With that thought, I smile to myself as I picture his dark hair, blue eyes, and goofy smile with his crooked teeth. As I walk back across the yard to play by myself, I think of him. I wonder if he'll let me count the freckles on his nose. I have thirteen. I bet he has more. I wonder if I can make shapes out of them like I do with the clouds. My freckles aren't close enough together to make anything out of, but he seems to have a lot. If I can look at them long enough, I bet I can see a square or star or maybe even a heart.

CARSON

I hang up the phone and let it fall to my side on the couch. I lean my head back and stare up at the TV screen as I bring my scotch glass to my lips and take a sip. The alcohol goes down smoothly and I expect it to wash away all thoughts of her, but it doesn't. Instead, I think of that time she came to visit me in college. She was a senior in high school, and I was a junior in college.

I open the door to my small apartment and there she is, bright-eyed like always and smiling from ear to ear. I don't hesitate, I just wrap my arms around her and pull her against me for a rib-crushing hug.

"It's about time you got here. I was about to start calling every hospital along the way to make sure you didn't drive yourself off a bridge or something."

She giggles. "You worry too much. You know that?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's what you always say," I reply, setting her on her feet and pulling her into my apartment. "So, what did your mom have to say about this?" I take her bag and toss it onto the couch as I turn to inspect her face.

She smiles. "She thinks it's great that we get to see each other again. She knows you'll keep your eye on me. Plus, I think she's hoping this place grows on me so I'll stay close to

home instead of going across the country for college next fall.” She flops down onto the couch and I go to take a seat next to her.

“Have you put any thought into where you want to go?”

She shrugs. “I’m still debating. It all just depends.”

I’m about to ask her what it depends on, but someone else knocks on my door and I have to get up to answer it. It’s my buddy, Tray. He doesn’t wait for me to invite him in. He just walks right past me and turns in a circle to face me.

“Dude, get ready. There’s a crazy party going on.”

I shake my head. “Not tonight, man. I got company.” I motion toward Felicity who’s still sitting on the couch.

He turns and looks at her. “Ohhhh, well, you don’t need a party. You already caught you one for the night.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “This is Felicity. My friend from back home. I’m showing her around the campus this weekend. She’s going to college in the fall.”

“Oh, you’re that Felicity,” he says, turning to shake her hand.

“The one and only,” she says, shaking his outstretched hand. “Or the only one that matters anyway,” she adds on, making him laugh.

He looks back at me. “I like her.”

“Everyone does,” I say, joking.

“So, if you two aren’t...you know, come to the party. Bring her. The parties are half the college experience.”

“No,” I start, but she cuts me off.

“Yes! Party! Let’s do it. I haven’t been to a good party yet this year.”

“No, no way. Your mom would kill me, and since when have you ever partied, little Miss Goody Two-Shoes?” I point out. I can see her brow furrow; she always hates when I call her that but it’s the truth. Lately it seems like she’s on some kick trying to get rid of the moniker.

“So we just won’t tell her,” she argues. “Come on, Carson. I’ve been driving all day. I need to let loose. Please,” she says, getting herself up onto her knees on the couch. She looks up at me with pleading eyes. Fuck. Why do I want her so badly? Seeing her like this, begging me for something on her knees, all I can see is making mascara run down her cheeks as she takes me deeper and deeper into that mouth of hers. But. That. Can’t. Happen.

No, this is Felicity after all. The little girl who followed me everywhere. The girl who chased off more shitty girlfriends than I can count. This is the girl I have to protect at all costs.

I shake the dirty thoughts from my head and say, “Alright, we’ll go for a little bit. And no drinking!” I tell her as I point my finger in her direction.

“Fine,” she agrees, showing me her palms.

A little while later, we walk into the party and it seems like every guy here has his sights set on her. “Hey, Carson. Who’s your friend?” Dan asks, motioning toward Felicity.

I wrap my arm around her and pull her to my side. “This is my friend from back home. Her name is Felicity.”

“Nice to meet you. Can I get you a drink?” he asks her.

“No,” I jump in and answer for her.

Her eyes cut toward me, but I narrow mine on her and she backs down.

This seems to be the pattern for the evening. Guys come up to her and I chase them off. She seems annoyed at first, then just learns to accept it. I have a few drinks and start hanging out and talking with the guys. That's when she decides to go off in search of a bathroom. I let her go, thinking she can't get into much trouble in there, but about forty-five minutes later, I remember that I'm supposed to be watching her and she still isn't back.

I break away from the guys and go in search of her. After checking out most of the rooms, I find her in the kitchen with another guy. I don't know him but they're standing awfully close to one another and they both have a shot glass in their hands. She's laughing at something he's saying and he's eating it up.

I grab ahold of her arm and pull her toward me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"What? I was just talking with Chris," she says, lifting her shot glass up and swallowing back the liquid.

"You're not supposed to be drinking. You're under age," I point out.

She rolls her green eyes. "Oh, like you didn't drink before you turned twenty-one?"

I shake my head. "This isn't about me. I'm responsible for you this weekend. If your mom finds out, she'll have my balls. And what the hell has gotten into you?"

She giggles. "Look, the damage is done. Can't we just relax and have some fun?"

I shoot her a glare, but she bats those fucking lashes at me again and I can't say no.

"Please? Just a little longer and you can drag me out of here if you want."

"Only if you promise me one thing," I say.

"Anything. Name it!"

"No guys. You can drink and hang out, but no guys. No making out. No going upstairs. Got it?" I ask, giving her my death glare. "If you end up knocked up, it's not going to get traced back to this weekend."

She flinches at the harsh words, but I didn't know how else to put it. Clearly her hooking up with someone would anger me, but it's not for the reasons she thinks. She thinks I'm just looking out for her. But really, I can't stand to think of another man touching her. She's mine and always has been.

"Deal," she agrees, and I release her arm.

That seems like so long ago. I feel like I'm a completely different person now. In a way, I guess I am. I'm no longer a college student who is desperately working to get a degree to get a job to support myself. Back then, I knew that there would be no help for me, so I made sure I put forth the effort I needed to do what I needed to do. Now, I'm set. I did the work, I got the degree, I landed the job, I got the life I wanted. But something is missing. It's her. She's always been by my side before. These last few years of living separately haven't been easy. I find myself constantly thinking of her, trying to replace her in some way. All the women I date somehow seem to remind me of her—I know, it's fucked up and my therapist would agree. Things could have been so much different if I

wasn't so damn stupid. But I pushed her away that night, the night of the party.

I never should have made that deal with her. Now she's wasted and even though she's holding up her end of the bargain, that doesn't mean that the guys haven't stopped coming up to her. Jealously is eating me alive as I watch her talk with guy after guy.

Her long cinnamon-brown hair is in bouncy curls and her green eyes that can light up a room are bloodshot. She's happy and smiling, laughing at all the stupid shit these guys are saying, and here I am, drunk, alone, and jealous.

Tired of throwing my own pity party, I get up and walk up to her. "Are you ready to go? It's getting late and I think we're both pretty hammered."

Her green eyes, that remind me so much of glowing emeralds, land on mine. Her thick, glistening lips turn up in a smile. "Well, I am having a lot of fun with your friends here, but I think I could have just as much fun with you alone at your place."

I get the double meaning there and it makes my dick twitch with excitement, even though I would never allow it. "Alright, sweetheart. Let's get out of here then." I hold out my arm and she laces hers through it. I lead us out of the party and out of the house. Luckily, the party isn't a far walk from my place so we pass by my car and instead opt to walk for a safer option.

The night is warm for being early fall and the leaves on the trees are falling and bunch up on the sides of the sidewalk. Every few steps, I hear the crunch under our feet, and it reminds me of raking the leaves together as kids, only to jump in them.

“Thanks for showing me a good time,” she says, stealing me from my thoughts.

I smile. “Well, you didn’t give me much of a choice, now did you?” I smirk in her direction.

She laughs and shrugs one shoulder. “You could’ve said no.”

“I did say no; you just argued until you got your way.”

Her smile widens but her feet stop moving. “Hey, I didn’t say I’d give up. You just give up too easy.”

I laugh. “Well, it’s kind of hard when you beg and bat your lashes at me like that.”

She wets her lips and the action draws my eyes to them. I quickly look back up and meet her intense gaze. The green only seems to be lighting up the darkness. “You know, I’m not a child anymore. I can take care of myself, right?”

I shake my head slightly. “No, you’re not a little girl anymore, but that doesn’t mean that I’ll ever stop protecting you.”

“Why do you feel the need to protect me? I know what I want and I’m prepared for the consequences.”

“You know what you want?” I ask, all amusement gone. She’s never been one to make up her mind. She’s always back and forth.

She nods. “I do know what I want, Carson, and I always have.” After that sentence leaves her lips, she presses them against mine.

At first, I’m shocked and I don’t know what to do. I mean, this is Felicity after all. The girl I’ve sworn to protect, even from myself. All I’ll do is take her down with me. But then

again, this is Felicity, the girl who has been running around my mind more and more these last few years. The girl who's somehow grown into a woman, a sexy-as-fuck woman who's teased me without even knowing it. I have to stop this, but there's no rule that says when I have to stop it. I can enjoy it a little while, savor it. I mean, if nothing else, I'll blame it on the drinking.

Her tongue pushes past my lips and I open for her. Her tongue touches mine and it's like being struck by lightning. Suddenly, every nerve ending is on fire, every muscle hard and prepared to take her away, someplace close by so I can finally have my way with her.

My hands move up to cup her cheeks as I deepen the kiss. Her hands fist into my shirt, pulling me closer as our kiss grows deeper and more urgent. All I can think about is that party I went to back home, the one where I found her stripping on the table. I thought for sure I was going to prison or the morgue that night. Either because I was going to kill myself trying to get to her or because I was going to take every fucking guy on that looked at her.

There's a lamp post nearby and I walk her backward a few steps and press her back to it. My hand falls down to her hip and I pick up one of her legs and hitch it up over my hip. I press my hips into her, and she lets out a soft moan into my mouth. My body is alive and feels as though it's been set on fire. It's like I'm burning up from the inside out. I reach between us and unzip my coat, suddenly too hot but not hot enough to pull me out of this moment or make me stop. No, the street is mostly dead. It's dark. I could fuck her right here on the sidewalk right now and I bet nobody would notice or be around to see it. So, what's stopping me? She's perfect. I've wanted her for years. She seems to want me too. Or maybe

she's just drunk. That's enough right there. This thing between me and her, it's too much. It's too much to think about when we're sober. So that means neither of us can wrap our heads around it right now. Plus, she's only eighteen. Has she even had sex yet? I can't be the one to take it, can I? If I stop and ask these questions, I know it will kill the moment between us.

And that's what we need. We need an out. A way to undo these last few minutes and keep moving on the way we should. I pull back and break the kiss. I allow her leg to slide back down until her foot is on the ground.

"We can't do this, Felicity."

Her eyes lock on mine.

"We've been drinking. This never should have happened. I'm sorry," I say, pulling away completely.

Felicity is different from the rest. Of all the women I've been with, none of them have been like her. None of them knew the perfect words to say when I needed them. None of them could stop me from doing something stupid with one look. None of them could get under my skin, like her. She's been the only one in my life who's had any power over me. Before I didn't know how to stop things from changing between us. Now, I don't want to stop them. All I know is that I've been hoping and praying that nothing has changed.

FELICITY

“I’m so proud of you honey,” Mom says on our drive home from the airport. The ceremony was at noon today. It was just a small one since I graduated in the off semester. My school is one of the only colleges that does two ceremonies a year. From there, we packed up my stuff and took it to a shipping company to have it shipped back to the house. Then we hopped a flight from South Carolina to St. Louis, Missouri. From St Louis, we have to drive. But it’s only about an hour-and-a-half drive home.

“I know, Mom,” I reply, glancing over at her before looking down at the phone in my hands, wishing that Carson would call or text or something. But I guess since he’s coming home too, he’s probably busy with driving from Chicago to Benton, Illinois, our hometown.

“I know I’ve said it a dozen times since this morning, but I just want to make sure you understand how proud of you I am. I mean, you’re my only child, to get to see you graduate, it is...” She lets out a sigh. “It’s the proudest moment of my life. I can only hope that I’ll be around to see you get married and have children.”

I laugh. “God, Mom. You make it sound like you’re dying.”

She laughs. “Oh, you know what I mean.”

“Well, I’m in no hurry to settle down anytime soon. I have to stay focused and keep momentum. I have to get a job and figure out my life.”

“Oh, you have all of the time in the world. There’s no rush for any of that.”

“I can’t be the adult daughter who lives with her mother forever.”

“What’s your plans for tonight? You got plans to meet up with any of your old friends?”

I shrug. “Just Carson. We’re supposed to hang out, but I have no idea what we’re going to do yet.”

She smiles. “I was just talking to his parents yesterday.”

“His mom and his stepdad, Mom. Not parents,” I point out on his behalf.

She waves a hand through the air. “You know what I mean. They didn’t mention him coming home this weekend. He doesn’t come home often, you know?”

“I do know, and I’m sure they didn’t mention it because it’s none of your business,” I joke. She’s always been such a busybody.

She gasps. “What? It’s not like I was prodding them for information.”

I laugh. “I’m just joking, Mom. But maybe he hadn’t told them yet or maybe he’s planning on staying at a hotel and not seeing them. You know how rocky their relationship is.”

She nods. “I know, but at some point, they’re going to have to let all of that go. Connie is a wonderful lady and Jack,

he's a good man."

"Sure, what you know of them." That's not fair; his mom is a wonderful lady and I haven't had to deal with Jack much, but what I've learned, he seems okay enough. "It's just that his parents' divorce took a toll on him. And then even after, they kept using him as a pawn in their game. He doesn't have the best relationship with either of them."

"Well, he turned out okay, so there's that."

"He turned out okay because he's strong and smart. He put in the work he needed to do to get to where he is. It has very little to do with either of his parents or his stepfather." I don't know why I'm getting so annoyed with this conversation. It has nothing to do with me, but I remember his parents' divorce was one of the key things that built our relationship as kids. He was always outside, trying to escape their yelling and fighting. That drove him right to me, the girl next door.

"Why are you sitting out here all alone for?" I ask as I sit at his side on the curb.

He shrugs, and we're so close, when his shoulder lifts up and falls, it rubs against mine.

"Parents fighting again?" I ask, and he nods. "At least you have parents to fight. I only got my mom."

"I'd rather have one happy parent than two miserable ones," he says, seeming wise beyond his years.

I guess he does have a point there. I don't reply as I divert my eyes to the street in front of us, watching as our neighbor's cat lounges in the warm road due to no traffic in our small town.

"Well, you want to sit here pouting or you want to do something fun?"

He looks at me from the corner of his eyes. “What do you want to do?” he breathes out.

I stand up excitedly but try to hold it off in fear of scaring him away. “Let’s go explore the woods behind the house. Maybe we can find a dead body or something.”

He snorts but stands up too. “I’d rather do that than have a tea party or whatever you little girls like to do.” We both start walking toward the tree line behind our houses.

Every day after that, we spend our time in the woods, hiking, talking, laughing, playing hide and seek, and climbing trees. The forest, it’s our happy place. Nobody can touch us out here.

“Wake up, sleepyhead. We’re home,” Mom says, shaking my shoulder.

I open my eyes and see that we’re parked in front of our single-story brick home. There’s a slight glow shining out the living room window and the porch light is on, ready to greet us.

“Who shoveled the driveway?” I ask.

“I pay Mrs. Taylor’s grandson thirty dollars to do it; he always does the sidewalk too.”

“Damn, inflation is crazy.” I shake my head, remembering when Carson and I would walk around asking neighbors if we could shovel their driveway for ten dollars. And we had to split that!

I yawn and undo my seat belt before opening the door and climbing out into the crunch of fresh snow. Mom pops the trunk and gets out the bag of clothing I packed and leads the way to the door. I look up at the Christmas lights that run along the railing of the house and smile; she still uses the big

colored ones that are currently set to chase one another in a specific pattern. I used to always want them on the setting that looked like a strobe light, but my mom told me it was obnoxious for the neighbors and people driving by. I'm still partially asleep and trudging toward the door when Carson's mom comes walking off her porch.

"Felicity, is that you?"

"It's me, Mrs. Hamilton," I reply, my feet coming to a stop on their journey.

"Look at you!" she says, stepping into the brightness from the outside porch light. "I haven't seen you in years. You look so grown up," she says, pulling me in for a tight hug.

"You look amazing, yourself, Mrs. Hamilton. How's Jack doing?"

She releases me and waves a hand through the air as if to say, *you know men*. "Does Carson know you're coming home? I just got off the phone with him a few minutes ago. He should be arriving any minute."

I nod. "He knows."

She smiles, nudging my shoulder. "That must be the reason for his visit."

I want to say *duh*, but I don't. I just shrug and offer up a smile.

"Well, you better go get freshened up." She practically shoos me off.

Mom smiles and hands me the keys to the house and my bag of clothes. I let myself in while they stand around and talk. I drop her keys on the table by the door, then walk through the living room; everything still looks exactly the same. I set my

bag down and walk over to the Christmas tree, bending down to plug it in. I can smell the pine needles and I smile; Mom still refuses to ever get a fake tree. I stand there for a moment, basking in the glow of the warm lights as I finger one of the ornaments. It's shaped to look like a snowman with a frame in the center of it. The picture is me at two years old in a giant puffy snowsuit out on the front lawn. I take a moment to look at few of the other ornaments. I wish Mom had waited to decorate the tree until I got home; it was always one of my favorite traditions with her. We'd order pizza, put on *Christmas Vacation*, and decorate the tree. I sigh, picking up my bag again and heading down the hallway toward my old bedroom.

The door opens easily and when I step inside, I flip on the light. The room smells like fresh laundry so I guess Mom must have washed the bedding. The cream-colored carpet looks soft and clean, but I guess that's what happens when a room is no longer used on a daily basis anymore. The pink walls are still covered in my posters and pictures I hung years ago. Above my bed is a poster of Mario Lopez. He's shirtless and flexing while looking directly at the camera. I remember Carson hating that poster when he came to visit from college; the memory makes me laugh.

Carson just stopped by and it's the first time he's been here since leaving for college five months ago. I lead him to my room so we can just sit and hang out. I open my bedroom door and he follows me in, but he stops dead in his tracks when his eyes land on the poster above my bed.

"What the fuck is that?" he asks, staring at it, completely frozen.

I look at the poster with a smile. “Uh, Mario Lopez, duh. Don’t mind him. He’s just working out,” I joke.

He rolls his eyes he moves to sit at my desk while I sit on the bed. “Why is he there? Seems weird.”

I laugh. “Shut up. It’s just a poster. He’s there because I like to know he’s watching me,” I tease.

He makes a fake gagging sound. “Seriously, it’s creepy. I think you should take it down.”

I roll my eyes. “Seriously with the jealousy? We all know you don’t want a real guy around me, so you’re just going to have to settle with a poster.”

This time he rolls his eyes. “No, seriously. I feel like he’s watching me. It’s like the Mona Lisa. No matter where I go, his eyes are following me.”

I smile. “I know. I kind of like it.”

He shakes his head. “You really are a freak, aren’t you?”

“You can’t be the only guy in my fantasies, Carson.”

He laughs but he thinks I’m joking. Really, Mario Lopez doesn’t stand a chance against Carson. I’d rather have him any day of the week. “Anyway, what have you been up to lately?”

I lie back on the bed and notice the way his eyes watch me. This is way better than the poster. “Nothing much. Greg and I have been—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Greg? Greg Warren?” he questions.

I nod. “That’s the one. Why?”

“You’re dating Greg? My friend Greg?”

I nod. "Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't call it dating as much as hanging out and stuff, but—"

He goes flying out of his seat and starts pacing. "You're sleeping with Greg?"

"What? No, we're not sleeping together. At least, not yet. We're just...you know, going out, making out, exploring our options and each other's bodies. With our hands!" I emphasize, highly exaggerating what it is I've actually done with Greg. In reality, I've never done much of anything besides hold hands and a kiss here and there. "Nothing else. No sex. Why is this bothering you? Seriously, you still act like I'm a little girl sometimes, Carson. I'm almost eighteen."

He shakes his head. "I know how old you are; I just don't think you should be screwing around with Greg or doing anything with him for that matter. What's he even doing here? Didn't he go off to college?"

I shake my head. "He didn't get in anywhere. He's going to the community college."

He snorts. "Oh, well, that's great. Way to go, Felicity. Set your sights real high there, didn't you?"

"Hey, what's your problem, Carson?"

I shake the thoughts from my head. That was the last day that the two of us talked about my dating life or "sex" life at all. Every plan I have at making him see me as a woman and not some little girl always backfires. I was just thinking that maybe if he knew that I had some experience under my belt, he'd be more inclined to see me as the woman I am, or in that case, was. But my plans never work on him. I guess in his eyes, I'm forever stuck as still being little Felicity from next door. They always talk about that fantasy of the *girl next door*

but what they don't tell you is, that's the friend zone and the only thing harder than getting out of the friend zone is getting out of paying taxes. That really dampers my mood and excitement I had for tonight.

I change out of my sweats and hoodie and pull on a pair of ripped up skinny jeans, not practical in an Illinois winter but hey, they make my ass look like a damn peach. I slide my feet back into my white Converse and grab a gray off-the-shoulder sweater from my bag. I pull my hair out of its bun and it falls around me in soft dark curls. I grab my dry shampoo and spray the hell out of it, giving it that sexy, *I don't care* look. I examine my face in the mirror. My makeup is still done from graduation today, so I just touch up my under-eye area and add some fresh mascara and lip gloss. I grab my favorite perfume and dab it on a few pressure points: my neck, wrists, and down between my cleavage. Then I turn around to gather up my phone and purse.

A knock comes at the door and I spin around, expecting to see my mom, but it's Carson walking through my door. I look him up and down quickly and my mouth instantly waters. He's still just as tall as I remember him and maybe even more muscular than before. His biceps look like they're about to rip through the navy crew neck sweater he's wearing. His dark hair is short on the back and sides, the top a little longer and styled neatly. His blue eyes land on mine and they light up. I run across the room, throwing myself in his arms. I wrap my own tightly around his neck and my legs around his hips. He squeezes me against him, and I feel how hard and strong his chest is against my own.

"Damn, I missed you, sweetheart," he says into my hair.

“I missed you too,” I reply, squeezing him as hard as I can. I smell a faint touch of cologne and it makes me tingle. He no longer wears the cheap aerosol body sprays he used to hose himself down with in high school; this scent smells expensive.

After a long moment of hugging, things begin to feel too good, at least to me. I begin to let loose and he places me on my feet. “You look good,” he says with a smile, looking me up and down.

I cock my head to the side. “I look good? That’s it?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes. “Always with the dramatics, Felicity. You look great. Hot. Grown up. Is that better?”

I smile wide and nod. “Much better. Grown up, but not old, right?” I point at him.

He laughs. “You most definitely don’t look old.”

He falls back into the chair at my desk and his eyes land on that poster again. “Damn, your mom hasn’t ripped that thing down yet?”

I smile and shrug, more than ready to play with him. “Maybe she likes to have him watching too,” I joke.

And just like I knew he would, he makes a sick gagging sound.

I laugh and shake my head. “So, what’s the game plan for tonight?”

He sits forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he rubs his hands together. “I was thinking we would start slow by going to Sandy’s for some food and drinks. Then we can hit up a few bars in town, meet up with the guys, you know. See what we can find.”

Sandy's was our favorite hangout back in the day. It's nothing special, just a local diner that serves greasy spoon food and some pretty kick-ass pies this time of year.

I nod and smile. "Sounds good. Let's do it."

I lead the way back to the driveway where our mothers are still talking.

"You two better behave yourselves tonight. I don't want any midnight calls from the police. You hear me?" my mom says as we walk past.

"You have my word, Mrs. Brighton," Carson says.

"Carson, you haven't seen your mother in months. Aren't you going to at least give me a hug?" his mother says.

I turn around to see him stop in his tracks. He gives me an annoyed look and turns to give her a hug. I wave and smile at my mom. "See you later. Love you and thanks for picking me up," I say, opening the door to his fully restored Trans Am.

Mom smiles and waves and Carson jumps in the car next to me. He turns and gives me a smile as he twists the key and the car fires to life. He backs out of the drive, shifts into drive, hits the gas, and we take off, zooming through the night like the good old days.

"Woohooooo!" He hollers and I burst into laughter. I glance through the back window and see our moms just shaking their heads as we speed away.

I laugh and shake my head. "I can't believe you still have this car."

He smirks in the darkness. "Of course I still have it. I'm never getting rid of this baby," he says, running his hand along the dash. "I mean, of course this isn't my everyday drive

anymore. I just pull her out for special occasions...like tonight. Tonight it will take us back to our teen years.”

I smile. “It really does,” I agree, reaching into my purse and pulling out the bottle of gin I have tucked away there.

He looks at me and laughs.

“Just like old times.”

“Hold up,” he says, reaching for something under his seat. He pulls out a CD in a clear case and tells me to open it and put it in the CD player. I do as instructed and hit play. A few seconds later, Third Eye Blinds ‘Jumper’ starts blaring through the speakers.

“Now it’s just like old times.” We both burst out into song, singing along like we were kids again.

We get to the diner and step inside, greeted by a hostess that’s dressed like an elf. The same tacky decorations hang on every surface of the place, just like they have every single holiday season. The restaurant isn’t too crowded. It’s mostly a hangout for an older crowd, but it’s the only place in town that serves food twenty-four hours and serves alcohol. We pick a table in the corner and are immediately brought over menus. We both order a beer and Carson insists we also order a shot of tequila for old time’s sake, then we both gaze down at the menu to figure out what we want to eat.

“So, is anyone joining us for dinner?” I ask.

“Nope, this portion of the evening is just for me and you.”

I smile. Alone time with Carson? I like the idea of that.

CARSON

“So, what’s been going on in your life?” I ask her after we toss back our shot. “Any new boyfriends or big life changes I need to know about? Did you run off and get married or do you have a secret child nobody knows about?”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “No, no children. No husband. No boyfriend.”

That makes me smile. All of it. She’s completely single and so am I for the first time in I don’t know how many years.

“What about you? You and *big boobs* still together?”

I laugh. “Big boobs?”

“Yeah, you know the one. Long dark hair, big boobs, green eyes. You know, they all look the same. Your exes could all be on *The Bachelor*.”

That makes my back straighten. “I guess I have a type.” I laugh. What she doesn’t know is that she’s my type, but I fill my life with women who remind me of her because I can’t have the one I want. Fucked up? Yeah, tell my therapist that.

“You do have a type. Hey, have you ever noticed that all your little playthings look like me?” She leans forward, putting her elbow on the table and using her fist to hold up her head as she watches me.

“What?” I ask, playing confused.

“I have dark hair. I have green eyes. And you’ve seen my boobs. They may not be as big as *big boobs*, but I think they’re pretty nice.” She smiles and her face flushes.

I lean in, not even knowing what I’m going to say. I open my mouth, close it. Then I say, “Me and Jessica are not together anymore.”

She nods. “So my theory?”

I roll my eyes. “What exactly is your theory?”

“That maybe, deep down, you really want me.” I can’t tell if she’s joking or serious; the look on her face gives nothing away.

I wet my lips as I think about how to approach this. She’s my best friend. I shouldn’t want her. I can’t want her. All it would do is ruin us. And I’ve had her in my life too long to throw it all away for a one-night stand. “I guess I never really thought about it. I’ve dated blondes too. And they don’t all have green eyes.”

“All the ones I’ve met have,” she argues.

“Order up,” the waitress says, sliding our plates beneath us.

“Thank you,” I say, leaning back and getting ready to eat. “So, tell me. What do you plan on doing now?” I ask, hoping to change the subject.

She pops a fry into her mouth. “You mean like tonight or like with my life?”

“I meant with your life but either will work.”

“Well, I’ve been applying to several jobs, some in Chicago, St. Louis, even a few back out on the East Coast. I don’t know where I’ll end up. And what I plan on doing tonight is getting hammered, forgetting about the last four years I spent in study hell, and hopefully, get laid because let me tell you, it’s been too long!”

My back straightens again. Does that mean she wants to hook up with me or that I have to stand back and watch some other man touch her? I don’t know that I can do either.

“I mean, I haven’t been laid in...” She mentally counts the number of months in her head. “Like four months, and a girl has needs, you know?”

I take a bite of my burger and focus on chewing so I don’t choke. “You’ve changed a lot,” I point out.

Her brows draw together. “How so?”

“You never used to talk about getting laid before.”

She laughs. “Well, we haven’t seen one another since before I started college. I wasn’t getting laid then. You wouldn’t let me. You were always in my way,” she points out.

I wish I never would’ve gotten out of your way.

“Then me and Greg were working up to it—I told you about that. But after your last visit my senior year, he suddenly stopped calling me and started avoiding me around town. So I had to go off to college a sad little virgin.” She makes a little pouty face, jutting her bottom lip out. “But no worries, with the number of horn-dog frat boys, it didn’t take long to give it away,” she jokes—at least I hope she’s joking.

“I didn’t realize you were so hell-bent on losing it before college. You should’ve told me. I would’ve been more than

happy to help you out.” I smirk at her, hoping she’s blowing this all off as fun banter.

She scoffs. “Yeah, right. You were hell-bent on keeping me innocent. But...” She shrugs. “Look at me now, no more little nice girl. All your work is in vain.” She smiles.

I pick up my beer and take a drink.

“So, is Greg coming later? I have some unfinished business with him.”

“I have to use the bathroom,” I say, standing up and practically running off. In the bathroom, I lock the door behind me and lean against the sink, hanging my head. What the fuck is she trying to do to me? She’s always been a flirt, that’s nothing new. But she’s never openly teased me or flirted with me like this. Or is she goading me? Is she trying to piss me off? It’s always been in the name of fun, never serious. Or maybe it was. Was it serious flirting on her part? Was she dropping me hints? And even if she was, that doesn’t change the fact that we’re best friends and our relationship is worth more than a random hookup. I can’t lose her. I’ve gone months without talking to her before and every time, it felt like I’d lost a part of myself.

I splash some cold water on my face and leave the bathroom, deciding to just change the subject and steer away from the sex topic altogether. I take my seat and she’s still in hers, eating and enjoying her beer.

“Feel better?” she asks with a lift of her brow.

I nod and take a sip of my beer.

“So, your mom really seems to miss you. You don’t come home often.”

I nod once and take a bite of my burger. “I know, I’m working on it.”

Her brow lifts.

“I’m working on putting the past behind me when it comes to her and that house. It’s not easy forgetting how I grew up.”

“I know you had a hard time at that house with your mom and dad always fighting and then the divorce, but your whole childhood wasn’t that bad. You had me.” She smiles. “And you still do.” She reaches out and grabs my hand briefly.

I return her smile. Maybe she’s right. Maybe I’ve had her all along for a reason. Maybe she was meant for me after all. I mean, there has to be a reason she was brought into my life and has stood by my side longer than anyone else ever has, right? But what if I fuck it up like I have every other adult relationship I’ve been in? What if she ends up hating me and I lose her too? The *what-if* is what gets me; it’s too dangerous to bet everything on a what-if.

The night goes by in a flash. We leave the diner and go to meet up with some of the guys at the bowling alley. We drink draft beer and throw a couple of games. Everyone seems to fall back into their old rhythm. It’s like having us all together again takes us back to our teenage years. But this time, Felicity isn’t so young. Now she’s a grown woman with a killer ass, dirty mouth, and sexy smile. The guys are eating her up and she’s loving it. I, however, am hating it. I’m jealous and pissed, but I’m trying to make it appear like it’s not bothering me and that I’m in a good mood.

I’m sitting on the bench waiting for my turn while Greg and Felicity are sitting at the scoreboard behind me. I can’t help but to listen in to their conversation.

“I’m serious, I really wanted to. Just...couldn’t,” Greg tells her.

“Well, if I wasn’t worth it then, you’re not worth it now. Sorry, buddy,” she replies, and I know exactly what they’re talking about. The relationship I ruined there. I told myself it was for her benefit. But it wasn’t. It was all for mine. I didn’t want to think of my friend’s hands on her. Even if she didn’t know it, even if nobody knew it, she was mine and only mine. Still is. I just have to figure out how to go about this.

“Come on, Felicity. Give me a shot. I swear, I’m a changed man. I’ll take you back to my place right now and will make sure you enjoy your night. You know he won’t do that.”

He? Who’s he? Me? I’m going to fucking kill Greg. He knows how I feel about her. Maybe he thinks it no longer applies since we’re all adults now. It still applies.

“Nah,” she says. “I’m holding out for something better.” She gets up and grabs a ball, stepping up to the line.

Greg stands and I do too. I look at him with my eyes set. “The rules still apply here, you know? Nothing has changed.”

His shoulders fall. “Come on, man. You’ve had your turn for years now. You ain’t done nothing about it. Move over and let some of us have a turn.”

I shake my head. “Touch her, you’re dead.” I walk away, heading outside for some fresh air to cool off.

I lean against the hood of my car and cross my arms over my chest. My breath comes out in little clouds in the freezing night air. I left my coat inside but right now, I don’t even notice the bitter cold. I hang my head, staring at the gravel beneath my feet. I try telling myself all the usual shit, but it’s not having the same effect it usually does. It’s not making me

back down. Instead, I'm just telling myself how stupid I am for holding out this long.

I don't look up until I hear the crunch of gravel. I look up and find Felicity walking toward me. "What are you doing out here?" she asks, coming to a stop in front of me.

I shrug. "Just needed some fresh air. It was a little crowded in there."

She nods once, then moves to lean against the hood with her arms crossed just like I am. "It is a little crowded in there. And it stinks. I forgot how badly a hundred feet smell mixed with the scent of stale beer and grilled onions." She laughs and I smile.

Silence falls between us for a moment. I look over and notice she's also not wearing a coat but has both of ours in her arms.

"You need a coat."

"You seem off tonight. What's up?" She ignores my comment.

I shrug before looking over at her. "It's just being back here with you and all of them. It makes me miss that time of my life, you know? I wish...I wish we could have known back then that we were in the good ol' days. Makes me wish I would've done things a little differently. Does that make sense?"

She nods. "It does. I think about that all of the time though. I don't have to be here for me to think of it."

"What do you wish you could do differently?"

"Well, I wish I never would've wasted any time with that jackass Greg in there," she giggles out, but her tone quickly

turns serious. “I wish we could’ve gotten closer.”

“How so? We were already pretty close,” I remind her.

“Back then, the only thing I wanted was to be pinned to the hood of this car by you.”

I look over at her and it’s like the world stops. Everything stops, everything but us as we stare into one another’s eyes. Her chest is rising and falling quickly. As is mine. But it’s out there. She’s said the words. Does that change anything? No. Is it enough to stop me this time? No. I’m too weak to keep this game up any longer.

Before she can process what’s happening, I’m spinning around, positioning myself between her legs, and laying her back on the hood of my car as my lips find hers. Our coats fall to the ground but I don’t care. This isn’t the first time we’ve kissed, but it is different. This time, I’m not worried about ruining her future. She’s a grown woman now and she knows what she’s doing. She isn’t some eighteen-year-old kid who doesn’t know what she wants. She’s telling me she wants me and I want her too. We’re both adults here, so what’s the problem? Other than the obvious of us being best friends who are about to fuck up everything we’ve ever known. I wonder if she’s thought this through like I have.

Either way, I give myself a few moments to enjoy this, just like I did back then. My hands tour her soft body. I let my hands feel her full hips, reaching around to grab her ass and pull her closer against me. Fuck, she feels amazing in my hands. I’ve never allowed myself to touch her this way. Her breasts feel heavy in my hands, more than a handful but nothing is wasted. Our mouths never stop moving; I cover her lips with my own, snaking my tongue in and out of her mouth. Her hands are around the back of my neck, pulling me closer

—her fingers raking through my hair. It feels like we can't get close enough to one another.

“Fuck, Felicity,” I whisper against her lips. “You have no idea how badly I've wanted you. How long I've waited to hear the words.”

Her arm moves between us, her hand reaching down and finding my aching dick that's still in my pants, threatening to bust through the seams. “Oh, I think I have an idea,” she whispers, squeezing me.

“Damn, I didn't think you'd actually do it,” Greg says, walking out of the bowling alley, causing us to both pull back and look at the smug grin on his face. He starts slow clapping. “Good for you, man.” That's the last he says before climbing behind the wheel and taking off.

“Asshole,” Felicity says from beside me.

“Come on. Let's get out of here.” I move around to the passenger side and open the door for her. She slides into her seat as I pick up our coats and climb behind the wheel. I start the car and drive away from the alley. With the cool air blowing through the cab of the car, it's easier to think more clearly, to see the mistake we could be making.

“Felicity, you know what you mean to me, right?”

She looks over at me, brows drawn together.

“In my life, I lost my dad to the divorce. After that, my mom changed too. You've been the only constant in my life, even if we went months without talking, I knew you'd be there for me in an instant.”

“Why are you telling me this, Carson?”

“I want you, Felicity. I do. I’ve always wanted you. That time you came to look at my college, it nearly killed me to pull away. That time when I came to visit and I found you stripping on that table, it took everything I had in me to put your shirt back on and take you home instead of pulling you into some dark bedroom and having my way with you. And when I heard that Greg was trying to take you from me, I lost my fucking mind. He didn’t call you back because he’s an asshole. He didn’t call you back because I threatened to beat his ass. I couldn’t bear the thought of someone else touching you.”

She shakes her head. “What does this have to do with anything, Carson?”

“I want you, Felicity, but I can’t have you.”

Her face goes slack.

“You’re too important to me to gamble with. I want you, but I refuse to fuck this up. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you. That’s why I think that sleeping together would be a mistake. If I hurt you, if I lost you, I don’t know what I would do.”

“So, you’re taking me home?” she asks, looking at the road and seeing we’re back on our street.

I nod once. “I need to drop you off. I need to get as far away from you as I can before I fuck up and take you, ruining everything we’ve built since we were kids.”

“You do realize that I’m right next door, right? My window looks into yours. That isn’t taking away much temptation, is it?” She doesn’t seem to understand how serious I am.

“Felicity,” I warn, pulling in front of my mom’s house.

She looks over at me. “Seriously?”

I nod, chancing a look at her. She doesn't seem sad like I thought she would. She seems let down, mad even. "So tonight, the kissing on the hood..."

"That was me giving into my urges one last time, but I can't do that with you. I can't be selfish. If I do, I'll only take something great from the both of us. I will hurt myself to protect you, Felicity."

She lets out a long breath and shakes her head, but climbs out, slamming the door behind her without another word. Feeling as if I've let her down, I wait and watch in the mirror until I see her enter the house and the porch lights go off. After that, I climb out and walk inside the house I've grown to hate.

My mom and Jack must already be in bed because the house is dark and quiet. I waste no time in going straight to my room like I've always done. I flip on the light and see that room has been changed to a guest room now. My mother has taken the liberty of turning down the bed for me, and she's brought my bags in and placed them on the foot of the bed. I pick up the bag that holds my clothes for the weekend and start putting them away. Then I grab my laptop and place it on the desk, having a seat in the chair. I turn it on and go through my email. I return a few and then lean back to stretch. I notice that my mother has all the curtains open in the room and I get a glimpse at Felicity's window. There is a red curtain hanging over it. I wonder why? They always used to be white before, but maybe she's re-done the room. That's when I see the curtain move, like something brushed up against it. That makes me curious and I wait to see what happens. Will she turn off the light and go to sleep or will she open the curtains?

When we were kids and we'd get into fights, she'd keep the curtain closed until she forgave me. When the curtain

opened, I knew it was okay to go over and talk to her. The curtain moves again and I see light. I turn my chair so I'm facing the window directly; that's when I see the curtain fall. I know this is fucked up. I'm torturing myself.

I was right. The room does have white curtains. I can see them on either side of the open window now. And Felicity is standing directly in front of it with a wide smile.

FELICITY

Sure, I'm angry that he changed his mind. I'm upset and let down, but that doesn't stop me. No, I'm not stopping. Not this time. This time, I'm getting what I want. Him.

Every other time I've decided to try for him, it always backfired, and this time it might too, but each time we do this little dance, I feel his resolve crumble just a little more. Tonight, we were closer than we have ever been before. That has to mean something. We're closer than that night at his college when we kissed on the street. That was just a kiss. Tonight, it was more than a kiss. There were words said that he can't take back. There was touching. I felt him in my hand. He had his hands all over me. He wants me just as badly as I want him. The only difference is that I'm not giving up.

So when I come up with this drunken plan, I know it won't work but it's another step in the bigger plan I have in my head. I have one weekend to make him see before he's back to the city and away from me. Tonight is only step one. I hang a red tablecloth over the window and move the curtains to the side while I get ready. I crack open that bottle of gin I stashed in my purse earlier and turn on some music. I have to give myself a little pep talk but I finally have the balls—aka the bottom of the bottle.

I jerk the curtain down and to my surprise, he's already there at his window with his eyes on mine. I smile and he gives me a confused look, then I start to sway my hips to the beat of the music as I back up so he can see all of me. I spin around in a circle and my hair flies around me. When my eyes find his again, he's wearing a smile. Then I reach for the hem of my shirt and his smile falls. I pull it up, revealing my black lace bra. His eyes stretch wide open as his brows raise. I drop the shirt and dance around a little more, slowly unfastening my jeans and lowering the zipper. When I look up at him, he's scooting his chair closer to the window.

I smile. My plan is working.

I turn my back to him and start moving my hips from side to side as I work my jeans over my ass. I look over my shoulder at him just as the jeans get past my ass and he sees my black lace thong. He's sitting back, his elbows resting on the chair's arms. His eyes are dark, smoldering as he watches me dance for him. I spin around a couple of times before reaching behind me and unclasping my bra. His eyes narrow the moment the bra falls and my breasts bounce free. Slowly, I lower the straps on the bra and let my arms escape. Still holding the bra to my chest, I pull it away, holding it out to the side where I let it drop. The moment I do, his mouth drops open like a cartoon that's drooling.

I smile as I walk closer to the window. He leans up in his chair. I watch as he slides the window open. I do the same, then bend down so his face and mine are at the same level.

“What are you doing, Felicity?”

I smile and shrug.

“Are you trying to kill me?”

“Just want you to know what you’re missing,” I say.

“Trust me, I know what I’m missing.”

“Good night, Carson.” I lower the window, then close the curtains.

I smile to myself as I pull on my pajamas and slip into bed. I put my phone on the charger by the bed and turn off the light. I think of him all alone over there in that bedroom and wonder what he’s doing now. Is he thinking about me? Was he turned on by me?

My phone dings and lights up. I grab it and look at the screen, finding his name.

Carson: *No fair.*

I laugh.

Felicity: *Who says I play fair?*

Carson: *I know you don’t, but I didn’t expect that. I’m going to have blue balls now.*

Felicity: *I can fix that.* Devil face emoji.

Carson: *You have no idea how badly I want to climb through that window and make you scream my name. And you would, you know?*

That makes my belly clench and I squeeze my thighs together.

Felicity: *IDK, I’m not much of a screamer in bed,* I tease.

Carson: *That’s because you haven’t been properly fucked. I won’t stop until I have you screaming my name and begging me to stop.*

Holy shit! My body flashes with heat and need and my muscles tighten.

Carson: *By the end, I would have had you in every dirty position your mind can think of and even some you never thought possible.*

I have to fan my face as I read that. What is he doing?

Carson: *I'm going to watch your tits bounce in my face while you ride every last inch of my cock. And when you come and are too weak to continue, I'm going to bend you over and fuck you until, until...*

Damn you. Until what? I wait for the rest. I wait. And wait. And wait. Finally, I text back.

Felicity: *Until what?*

Carson: *You really wanna know?*

Felicity: *YES!*

Carson: *Are you turned on right now?*

Felicity: *Ugh, YES!*

Carson: *Laughing face emoji. Now you know how it feels. Good night, sweetheart.*

Ugh. Fuck you, Carson. I toss my phone back onto the table and stare up at the white ceiling. I should have fucking known.

IN THE MORNING, I wake up and take a quick shower before heading to the kitchen. Mom is already up and the coffee has been made. She's working over the stove, making pancakes, scrambled eggs, and bacon.

"Oh, Mom. You didn't have to do all of this," I say, pouring a cup of coffee.

“Hush, it’s been a long time since I had a reason to cook. And I enjoy cooking, you know?”

I smile over at her. “I know.”

I take my cup of coffee over to the table and she places a plate in front of me.

“So, how was your night?”

Ugh, how do I even explain it? “It was...interesting.” To say the least.

“Interesting? What’s that mean?” She comes to sit down beside me with a plate of her own.

“We met up with a bunch of his friends from high school. They were cool, but I kept noticing how jealous Carson would get when I’d spend too much time with another guy.”

Mom smiles. “Well, that’s to be expected, isn’t it?”

I tilt my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s obvious he has a thing for you. He always has. I remember watching you two play as kids. I could see it then. He loved you. He would’ve done anything to protect you and he still would.”

“That’s another thing, Mom. I want him. Always have.” I feel embarrassed talking about this with my mom, but she doesn’t seem fazed at all.

“Does he know?”

After last night? “I’m sure he does.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“He’s afraid to screw up our friendship. He said that I’ve always been a constant in his life and he doesn’t know what

he'd do if he screwed up our relationship and lost me as a friend."

"So, he's scared?"

Scared? Is Carson scared? He isn't scared of anything.

"Honey, is he worth fighting for?"

"Yes," I answer without question.

"Is your happiness worth fighting for?"

"Yes," I tell her.

"Then don't give up. He's just afraid, honey. Just be patient with him. Guys are a little slow when it comes to this kind of thing."

I smile. "Thanks, Mom." I take a bite of my pancakes and savor it. Our conversation drops while we eat and it gives me time to think about all of this. I think back over our years of friendship. I was convinced at the age of seven that he was put on this earth for me. That he was mine and I just knew that one day, we'd grow up, fall in love, get married, have children, and live happily ever after. I held out hope that one day, he'd see what I had to offer him. I was in love with him growing up, and then when he left me here to go off to college, I thought I'd die without him. We talked often on the phone, but it wasn't the same. I wanted to see his face, see his eyes and that panty-dropping smile. I prayed for the day that he'd see me as a woman and not the child he grew up with. And when we kissed at his school, I thought it was a turning point.

It wasn't. Things went backward actually. He wasn't as free with me as he used to be. After that kiss something was holding him back. I remember telling him that "it depends" on which college I attended. Well, what it depended on was him. If he could see me as a woman, someone he wanted to be with,

I would've gone to college in the city with him. But he didn't. Instead, he pushed me away. I went home heartbroken from that trip. I cried nearly the whole way home. His rejection killed me.

Then I convinced myself that I didn't love him. I mean, I loved him as a friend but that was it. I wasn't in love with him. I told myself it was nothing more than a silly childhood crush, and that's when I decided to go to school in South Carolina. I needed to be away from him and away from my feelings toward him. I told myself distance would do us some good, that I'd be able to meet new guys and move on. It took almost a whole year before I hooked up with someone else. To me, that was giving up. I was giving up hope that Carson and I would ever be together. I convinced myself that coming home would be no different. I wanted him, but it was more of a way of working him out of my system. He was an award that I wanted so bad I could taste. I just needed to sleep with him.

But seeing him again, it's bringing back all those old feelings. I'm so confused. I don't know if I'm in love with him or if being back here is just making me feel that way. But I know one thing, I want him. At least for one night, and I won't stop until I get it because now I know he wants it too.

I help Mom clean up breakfast and I head back to my room to get ready for the day. When I get to my room, I grab my phone and move to the vanity to fix my hair and makeup. I'm searching through YouTube for something to watch or listen to while I get ready and a text comes in.

Carson: *Good morning, sweetheart.*

Ugh. Sweetheart? Really? After last night?

Felicity: *Who you calling sweetheart?*

I put the phone down and grab my moisturizer to slather on my face. This cold air is sucking all the moisture out of my skin already. I'm waiting for a text, but it rings instead. I answer it and put it on speakerphone so my hands stay free.

"Hello?"

"Are you mad at me?" Carson asks.

"Hmmm, why would I be mad at you? It couldn't be because you promised me a good time and ended up bringing me home at ten thirty, could it? It couldn't be because you got my hopes up and then brought me home, right? Or it couldn't be those texts you sent last night?" I lean down to the phone and whisper, "That isn't cool, Carson. I can't take care of business with my mother sleeping across the hall."

He busts out laughing. "What do you mean, take care of business?"

"Let's just say that there is a wet spot on my sheet that I'm hoping dries soon or this will be a weird topic on laundry day."

That makes him laugh harder and that sound causes goosebumps to prickle my skin.

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to tease you."

"Yes, you did," I point out.

"Okay, I did, but it was only fair. I could say I have sticky sheets right now, but I won't get into it."

I giggle. Good, at least I wasn't the only one who was fired up last night.

"What are you doing today? I need out of this house." he says, sounding annoyed by being there already.

I shrug. "No plans. What do you want to do?"

“Well, the ice rink is up in the town square if you want to go. We can skate, get some hot chocolate...”

“Oh, carriage ride!”

I can hear his smile when he says, “Meet me outside in twenty.”

Getting ready gets kicked into overdrive and I’m walking outside twenty minutes later, bundled up in a coat, scarf, hat, and gloves. The snow crunches as I walk across the yard to his waiting car with him leaning against the passenger side door like he’s in a John Hugh film. The car is already running, thick white exhaust coming out the back.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” he says, standing upright and pulling me in for a hug. After last night, it feels too personal, but I enjoy his heat nonetheless.

“Damn, you smell good,” he says into my hair.

I’m still in his arms but I look up at his blue eyes shining in the sun. “You do too.”

Our eyes meet and he smiles. Something is being exchanged. It feels like he’s about to kiss me. His tongue comes out and wets his lips as his head dips forward, but at the last minute, he changes his mind and pulls away.

“We should get going,” he says, opening the door for me.

It feels like I’ve just been drenched in ice cold water, but I tuck my tail between my legs and climb into the car. He closes the door and rushes around to get behind the wheel. He takes his seat, pulls on his seat belt, and shifts into gear. We slowly start moving forward.

“Why do you do that?” I ask, looking out the passenger window instead of at him. I’m afraid he will see the hurt on

my face.

“Do what?”

“Stop yourself like that,” I say, finally turning to look at him.

“You noticed that, did you?” he says, turning to look away from me this time.

I don't respond.

He wets his lips and takes a deep breath. “Have you ever wanted something so bad, something you can't have?”

I roll my eyes but play along. “I remember once, my mom made this whole batch of cookies for a bake sale and she wouldn't let me have any.”

“Do you remember how bad the torture was? Having to look at the cookies? Having to smell them? Having to pick them up and place them into a container to be taken to someone else?”

“Yes.”

“Now you know how I feel.”

“That's different. I wasn't allowed to have the cookies. There is nobody here stopping you but you.”

“But it's still the same. You couldn't have the cookies because they weren't meant for you. I can't have you because you're all I have. It's like having a brand-new toy that you've been dying to play with. But it's a collector's item. You know if you take it out of the box and play with it, it will never be the same, it won't be worth as much. If I take you out of the box and play with you, I'm risking damaging you, breaking you, ruining you. So I have to push the temptation away. Sometimes the temptation gets to be too much, like last night

or the night at my place in college. I just have to keep reminding myself of my place.”

“Well, the damage has already been done, right?”

He laughs. “You’re not getting me with that one again.”

“Okay, Carson. What if I said that you’re taking advantage of me. You’re kissing me in a moment of weakness and it’s hurting me; it’s wreaking havoc on my emotions. Then what?”

His jaw flexes and I see his Adam’s apple bob in this throat. “I don’t want to hurt you, Felicity.”

“What would you do then?”

“I guess I’d have no choice but to pack up and go home and put some distance between us so you can heal without me breaking you even more.”

“And what? We’d just never be allowed in the same room at the same time again?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know that what I’m doing is right, but I know preserving our friendship can’t be wrong.”

I’m clearly not getting through to him. An idea hits me. He always says that he can’t deny me when I ask him for something when I smile and bat my lashes. “What if I asked you to fuck me?”

He looks over at me so fast I’m surprised his head didn’t fly off his neck. I look at him from beneath my lashes.

“It doesn’t have to be anything serious. It can just be a fling, some fun between two friends for one night. Would you then?”

“Don’t push me, Felicity.”

I let out a heavy breath.

“You think I’m some kind of saint. That I can withstand every want and need I have. I can’t. I will break eventually, and I’d hate to hurt you in the process.”

I shake my head and look back out the window. Clearly, we’re not getting anywhere like this.

We make it to town square and the place is bustling with townspeople. Everyone is here, ice skating, enjoying the carriage rides, hot chocolate, and gift buying in the Christmas Market they set up every year. We find a parking spot and we both climb out. We meet behind the car and I reach over and take his hand. He looks at me, but lets it go. This isn’t anything we haven’t done before. In big crowds or when one of us was upset, we’d always hold hands so we didn’t get separated or just to ground the other person.

We walk hand in hand to the center of the town square and he pays for us both to ice skate. We take our skates to a bench and sit down to put them on.

“You never told me why,” he says, stealing my attention away from me untangling my skate lace.

“Why what?”

“Why me? Why do you want this so much? I mean, I’m nothing special. In fact, I’m the opposite of special.”

I shake my head as our eyes meet. “Carson, I’ve known since I was seven years old that you were the boy I was meant to love. You don’t see what I see when I look at you. You see a kid who got into too much trouble growing up. You see a boy who was basically left behind by his parents, forgotten about because their troubles seemed more important than yours. I see a friend who has been by my side through thick and thin.” I start putting on my skates.

“I see someone who has put my happiness above your own. Someone who has always taken care of me, protected me, even when I didn’t make it easy for you. And you know what?” I look at him and he looks at me. “I’m perfect for you too. I’ve been the one by your side. I’ve kept you out of trouble. I’ve kept you grounded. And I’ve been patient. I’ve waited for you. I waited while you explored your options with every other girl. I waited while you went off and did what you needed to do to get you to where you wanted to be. But if you’re not ready, I’ll keep waiting until you are. How many other people can you say that about?”

This time, it looks like I’ve gotten through to him. His eyes are unmoving as he watches me. His jaw is flexed and he’s breathing heavy. But I don’t give him time to respond or argue. I want him to think, really think, so I stand up and make my way to the ice.

CARSON

Fuck. She's right, but that doesn't change the fact that all I'll do is screw things up between us. I can't lose her. I won't lose her. But I can't deny her either. She said that this could just be fun between two friends. Is that true? Could we keep it casual? I look up at her skating on the ice and she looks beautiful, elegant, free. Her long dark hair is blowing in the breeze and she's wearing a big smile. Her eyes are lit up, just like they always did when we were kids. Being with Felicity would be like heaven, but I also feel like she's a perfect ivory angel and to touch her would be to smudge her up like a work of art that hasn't dried yet.

But how long can I go on resisting her? It's only a matter of time before she catches me in a moment of weakness. She knows that if she asks me for something directly, I always give her what she wants. I always have. I've never been able to deny her. I think she found the loophole and she knows it.

As I make my way out onto the ice, I can't help but think about what being with her would feel like. I imagine holding her naked body in my arms, against my chest. I think about how soft and sweet her lips are. I think about sliding into her heat, hearing her moan a sigh of relief the moment we become one. My blood begins to boil beneath my skin and I have to push the thoughts away before my body gets away from me.

She's coming around just as I'm stepping onto the ice. She spins around and skates backward as she watches me on wobbling knees.

"What happened? You used to know how to skate."

I laugh. "That was a long time ago."

She gives me that breathtaking smile. "I seem to remember a little boy who wanted to be a hockey star. Remember that?"

I laugh. "Yeah, for one whole winter," I remind her. The snow melted and the rink was taken down and I was onto the next thing.

"Come on," she says, holding out her hands. "I'll help you."

I reach forward and slip my hands into hers. She works herself backward and I slowly work myself forward. She's wearing a wide smile and her green eyes are lit up against the sun.

She nods me on. "See, I knew you could do it. It's all muscle memory. Just let your body take over. Clear your head."

Is that what I should do? With her, I mean. Clear my mind and let my body take over and do what comes naturally? Fuck, she's making too many good points today. She brought her A game. She's playing chess while I've been playing checkers.

We go around the rink a few times before I feel comfortable enough to let go of her hands and try it out myself. She stays at my side, cheering me on the whole way. This only reminds me of the time we came here as teenagers. I was seventeen and she was fourteen.

“I’ll be back in three hours,” her mom says as we climb out of the car.

“Bye, Mom.” She closes the passenger side door as she climbs out.

“Thanks, Mrs. B,” I say, closing the back door.

Our friends are already here waiting, set to meet up at the hot chocolate stand. We both head over, her a few steps in front of me. I can’t help but look her up and down and I know how bad that sounds. I’ll be eighteen soon and she’s only turning fifteen. Jailbait for sure! But she’s dressed like she’s about to walk down the winter wonderland runway. She’s wearing black boots that come up to her knees. Her jeans are tight, hugging her round ass and hips. She’s wearing a gray Henley shirt that’s just as tight, but it has a few buttons undone, showing a little cleavage that I didn’t even know she had. She’s wearing a white coat that only hits at her hips and it’s unzipped, showing off that growing chest of hers. Her long dark hair is curled and hanging down her back and she’s wearing a white sock hat. Her green eyes are shining bright today and when she sees our friends, she smiles bright.

We close in on them and a few guys greet me before my girlfriend, Christina, comes up to me and pulls me in for a hug. I look down and see her waiting for a kiss, so I do it quickly, not feeling comfortable doing it in front of Felicity for some reason. When I pull away from our quick kiss, I turn to see her in the arms of Chad. She’s smiling and he has his hands on her hips, whispering something to her. I glance away just as she glances at me. Then when I look back, they’re kissing. Full-on kissing in front of everyone. Now I know why she looked at me. She was seeing if I was watching.

Apparently she doesn't feel right kissing someone in front of me either.

Christina pulls me toward the ice rink and our whole group follows. We skate for a while, talk with our friends, but then everyone kind of disperses and goes their own way. I notice Chad getting off the ice and Felicity is still skating around. I look around for Christina and find her behind me with a couple of her friends, so I quickly skate up to Felicity.

"So, Chad, huh?" I ask, annoyed that I can't hide the disgust in my voice.

She looks up at me with raised brows. "So, Christina, huh?"

I wave her off. "Christina and I have been together for months. You know that."

"I knew when you got together. I didn't know you were still together. I never see you with her anymore."

I shrug. "We're busy."

"When are you busy? You're almost always with me."

"Exactly. I'm always with you, so how is it that the subject of Chad never came up?"

She shrugs. "I didn't think you liked him and I didn't want to fight."

"I wouldn't fight with you. Him maybe," I joke, but I'm also completely serious. Already I'm trying to figure out how to pick a fight with him.

"Why are you so upset by this?" she asks, coming to a stop on the ice.

I do the same. "Who says I'm upset. I just can't figure out why you'd try hiding it."

"I wasn't hiding it. God, you sound like my mother."

"Look, I'm just concerned, okay? Chad is a douchebag. He dates girls and gets what he wants from them and then dumps them. He's older than you too. You know he's going to have expectations."

She laughs. "Expectations? Like what?"

I shrug.

"Sex? You mean he's going to want to have sex with me?"

"Felicity," I warn.

"Well...good. Maybe I want to have sex with him."

I grind my teeth together. "Don't talk like that. You're not even fifteen yet."

"So, how old were you when you had sex for the first time?"

"That's none of your business."

"So, you won't tell me one thing, but I'm expected to tell you everything? Kind of a double standard, isn't it?"

I roll my neck, looking up at the sky as I let out a long breath. "Just be careful. And let me know if he gets out of line. I'd love a reason to kick his ass." I push past her and get off the ice. It's not long before Christina finds me and I have to pretend to be in a decent mood again.

"You remember that fight we got into here?"

Her eyes grow wide. "Of course. We didn't talk for like two weeks after that."

I laugh. “Yeah, I was pretty pissed off.”

“You were jealous,” she points out.

“Of course I was. I couldn’t have you; I didn’t want anyone else to either.”

“What’s your excuse now?”

“It’s pretty much the same, but it’s easier to ignore when there is a country between us.”

She shakes her head slightly. “That works for you? It doesn’t me. I thought going to South Carolina for college would stop it, but it didn’t. I ended up just driving myself crazy wondering what you were doing all the time.”

“It did at first. But then I found myself wondering what you were doing. Who you were with. Who was touching you. That’s why I started calling more. I had to know that you were safe.”

She stops moving and I glide to a stop next to her. “You know, there’s one surefire way to know the answers to all those questions, right?”

“I know.”

“If you want me to stop, just tell me, Carson. We’re adults. If you want me to stop, I will.” Her sparkling green eyes meet mine as I think it over.

“Don’t stop, Felicity. Just give me some time.”

The corners of her mouth turn up into a smile as we stand there looking at one another, lost in our own world. I want to lean in and kiss her, to drive the point home. I don’t want her to stop. I never want her to stop. But then some kid skates into my back and knocks my feet out from under me. I fall, pulling

her down with me. We hit the ice hard. It knocks the air out of my lungs, but she can't do anything but laugh.

“Fuck, this hurts a lot more than it used to,” I say, just lying down on the ice, not attempting to get up yet. That only makes her giggle more.

She climbs to her feet and holds out her hands. “Come on, old man. Let's go get some hot chocolate and warm up.”

I take her hands and she helps me to my feet. Slowly, we skate to the exit and have a seat on the bench to remove our ice skates. We put our shoes back on and turn our skates in before heading to the hot chocolate stand.

“You know that day we got into that fight here,” I say, leaning in.

“Mm-hmm,” she says, nodding.

“Well, I couldn't keep my eyes off you that day. Just...the way you were dressed, your hair and makeup made you look so much older. You were happy and smiling; your eyes were practically glowing. In fact, my girlfriend at the time caught me checking you out several times that day.”

She giggles. “Is that why you broke up?”

“Yep, pretty much. I tried to convince her that I wasn't checking you out. I was just keeping an eye on you, but she didn't buy it. She said I was always skipping out on her to do nothing with you.”

“Well, she was a bitch anyway.”

I laugh and nod. “Yeah, but she was right. I think that's why all of my relationships fail. None of them even compare to you.”

She opens her mouth to say something but gets cut off by the guy who runs the hot chocolate stand. “Next!” he yells and I pull my eyes from hers. I step up to the window and order two spiked cups. She hangs out around one of the fire barrels that are set up to get warm by.

I get the cups and pay the man before taking a cup over to her. She takes it and says, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She takes a sip and looks at me. “Is there alcohol in this?”

I laugh. “Yep.”

“I didn’t know they did that here.”

“So, what do you say to a carriage ride?”

She smiles. “I’d love one.”

I lead her over to the payment booth and pay the twenty-four dollars for the ride. We’re taken over to the carriage and she climbs up ahead of me. I climb up next to her and pull the thick fuzzy blanket up over both our laps. The horses start moving and a slight wind blows. I see her raise her cup to her lips as she holds it in both hands for the warmth. She shivers and I put my arm across the back of the seat.

“Come here,” I say. “Get warm.”

She smiles but scoots up to my side and I hold her close. Already, it’s warmer.

“We never did this before,” she says, looking up at me.

“Yeah, it always seemed like a couple thing back then.”

“I remember the day that we were here, I wanted to ask you to go on a ride with me so bad. I was looking around for

you, and that's when I saw you climbing into a carriage with Christina."

"I didn't know you saw that."

She nods. "I did, and I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. I cried and called my mom to pick me up early."

"That's why she came early?" I ask, looking down at her.

She nods.

"I didn't know that." She doesn't reply, so I pull her closer. "I would have much rather rode with you that day," I tell her and her eyes move up to mine.

"You would?"

I nod, then lean in, pressing my mouth to hers. This kiss is different from all our other kisses. Before, we always came together in desperation and need for one another or just drunken stupidity. Now, we're coming together in love. I love Felicity more than anything else in the world. She's always been top priority to me, even before I knew it myself. Our friendship turned into a crush, and that crush turned into love. All this time, I thought the love I had for her was based on our friendship, but that isn't the case and I see that now. I am in love with my best friend. Only question is, what am I going to do about it?

When our ride ends, we get off and head over to the hot tent where food is sold. She opts for some loaded nachos and I stick with a BBQ sandwich and onion rings. We also grab a couple of beers to wash down our food.

We're sitting alone at our pop-up picnic table when Greg walks over. "Hey, fancy seeing you two here...together."

She smiles up at him. "Hi, Greg."

He smiles down at her. “Hi, sugar.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes.

“You guys mind if I sit with you?”

I shrug and he sits anyway. “So, what’s been going on with you two since I last saw you. Did you two finally seal the deal?”

“Greg,” I warn.

Felicity holds up her middle finger.

“So, that’s a no,” he says. “You know, Felicity, I’ll take you back to my place and show you how a real man handles a woman. I know you’ve been thirsty for it since high school.”

She snorts. “There’s only one person I’ve been thirsty for since high school and it isn’t you, Greg.”

He laughs, not bothered at all by her words. “Oh, come on. You know you wanted it back then. I remember you begging me to take that virginity of yours.”

I look at her and her face flushes. She’s embarrassed and I can tell she doesn’t know how to reply to that. “If she asked you to take her virginity, it’s only because I wasn’t around. You realize that, right?” I ask him.

He looks at me, then back at her. “So, who was the lucky guy anyway? Someone who didn’t know this guy for sure, right?” he says, nudging me.

Felicity rolls her eyes. “I met him in college. He is a nice guy who I still enjoy talking to today, the furthest from you I could get.”

“Ohhh,” he says. “You didn’t seem to have a problem talking to me at the bowling alley.”

“That was before I was reminded of how much of an ass you are.”

“Alright, Greg. I think it’s time for you to leave. We’re clearly not enjoying your company,” I say, turning to face him. I give him my death glare and he stands up.

“Alright, alright. I can take the hint, but just know, Felicity, that I’m here any time you wanna get freaky and this one won’t give it away.” He turns and walks off quickly.

I shake my head. “I can’t believe you asked him to take your virginity. What did you do, ask everyone but me?”

She rolls her eyes. “You weren’t around. You wouldn’t have anyway and you know it.”

She’s probably right. But damn, it’s nice to think about. “So, when you came to visit me at college, you were a virgin then?”

She nods. “Yep, you didn’t know?”

I shake my head. “No, I guessed you were, but I didn’t know for sure. That was one of the things I was worried about when we started kissing. I was ready to fuck you against that lamppost. But the thought of taking your virginity like that seemed wrong.”

“You were really considering it?”

“For a moment, yeah. I was dead set. I figured you were eighteen. You knew what you wanted and you kissed me.”

“Why’d you stop? I mean, why not take me back to your place to continue?”

I shrug. “Because you deserve better than me, and I didn’t want to take anything from you.”

“I wish I would’ve lost it to you. I’m sure you would’ve treated me better afterward.”

“What do you mean? You just said he was a nice guy?”

She snorts and rolls her eyes. “I lied to shut Greg up. He was a total asshole. He came over, got straight to business, no foreplay, nothing. And then when it was over, he said thanks and got up and left. I haven’t talked to him since.”

I can feel the anger swelling in my chest and as usual, I blame myself. If I had just given her what she wanted then, she would have a better memory of her first time than that. I feel like I’ve done everything wrong with her. And all this time, I’ve been trying to do everything right. That’s when I know, she’s right. Always. And I’ve always been wrong.

We end up leaving the winter festival and I drive us home in silence. I pull the car next to the curb in front of my mom’s house and kill the engine. That’s when I look over at her.

“I think you’re right,” I finally confess.

“About what?”

“About us. I think our relationship can handle a night of fun between two friends,” I tell her, knowing damn well one night will never be enough. But for now, I’ll stick with one night to see how things go and progress between us.

Her eyes are wide with surprise and her mouth is hanging open. I expect her to say something, but instead, she just gets out and closes the door. I climb out quickly, wondering what in the hell she’s doing, but then I see her walk into her mother’s house and close the door behind her.

Well, fuck.

FELICITY

My heart is racing a mile a minute. Carson just agreed. He wants to be with me. And what did I do? I panicked and ran off. But I'm not running. No, I'm preparing. I go to my room and lie on my bed, trying to wrap my mind around this. What does this mean? That he's willing to sleep with me? Does it mean that he actually wants to be with me? That he's finally letting his guard down? Or is he just giving in to my wishes since I don't seem to be letting up? I thought I'd be happy when he gave in, but now, it doesn't feel right. I feel like a child who threw a fit to get their way. All I know is that tonight, I'm going over there and I'm going to collect on years of fantasies.

Hours pass and I finally have myself talked into taking what I want. I take a shower and shave nearly every inch of my body. I scrub every nook and cranny of my body, then climb out and slather myself in lotion that I know he loves. Then I add a little makeup and curl my hair the way he likes it. I search through my clothes and find a red and white bra and panty set. The underwear and cups of the bra are red satin but the top waistband of the panties have a white band around them just like the cups of the bra. It's my Mrs. Clause set which is perfect for this moment cuz Santa is coming early this

year and I hope he's ready because I'm about to be really naughty.

I pair the bra and panty set with some white stockings and a garter belt, then slide my feet into some bright-red high heels. I grab my longest coat that goes well past my knees and sneak out of my house. I'd hate for my mother to stop me right now, knowing that I'm about to go have mind-blowing sex with Carson freaking Wells. I walk across the yard and knock on the door. His mother answers and she doesn't think anything considering it's about twenty degrees out and I'm wearing a giant ass coat that covers me from my neck practically to my ankles.

"Can I speak to Carson, please?" I ask.

"Of course, dear. He's in his room. Go ahead and go back." She opens the door wider and allows me to walk through. I knock on his door and a moment later, he's pulling the door open. He sees it's me and his smile returns.

"Hey, what are you doing here? What happened earlier; why'd you take off?"

I walk past him and he closes the door, spinning around to face me.

"Santa has come early this year and so will you," I say, unfastening my coat and letting it fall around my feet.

His eyes stretch wide and he smiles. "What's this?"

I walk up to him and place my hands on his shoulders. "You agreed, didn't you?"

"I did," he says, nodding his head.

"Well," I say, motioning toward my body, "Get ready to open your present early this year."

“You walked past my mother like this?”

“Well, no. I had my coat on,” I remind him.

“You know,” he says as I start to push him back toward the bed. “I was hoping to do this right, you know? A date, nice dinner, wine and dine you.”

I shake my head. “Carson, we’ve had like fifteen years of foreplay. I don’t need wine and dine.” I close the distance between us and move my mouth to his. It doesn’t take him long to warm up to me. His hands find my hips and he picks me up and holds me against him. My legs wrap around his hips as he carries me over to the bed. As he crawls up onto the bed, he lays me down gently until all of his weight is pressing against me. And oh my God, he feels amazing. His bed is soft and smells like him. His hands are strong and touring my body. His mouth is soft but forceful and he kisses me, taking what he wants while giving me what I need.

His mouth falls from mine and makes its way down my jaw and neck. His hands find my breasts and he massages them, winding me up tighter. I can’t take going slow. I feel like I’m going to explode. So I grab ahold of his shirt and pull it up. He breaks away long enough to pull it off and send it flying across the room. He’s back on me in a second, stripping away my bra.

“Fuck, Felicity,” he says, lowering his mouth to my hard nipples. He sucks one into his mouth and I let out a loud moan. His tongue flicks against it again and again, and it feels like I’m only a moment from my release already. He continues to kiss down my body, peppering my skin with soft kisses and teasing nips. I dig my fingernails into the skin on his back and that makes his back arch, causing his hardness to press against me.

My hands move around to unfasten his jeans, but he pushes them away and works to remove my panties and garter belt with haste. He loses his patience and ends up ripping it all off me. I'm about to yell at him for ruining my clothing, but then he sucks my clit into his mouth and I see stars. My back arches up off the bed and my hands turn into fists that are tangled into the sheets. My eyes flutter closed as my lips part. His mouth is magical, knowing all the right places to touch and to tease. He licks, flicks, and sucks until I'm coming undone around him. My thighs tighten around his head as I ride out every last wave of my release. I feel like I'm being drowned. I can't breathe. I can't suck in the oxygen I need. All I can do is stay still and enjoy every last powerful wave of pleasure that he provides.

When my body goes weak, he pulls himself away. He's on his knees between my legs, looking down at me as he unfastens his jeans. "What's the matter, sweetheart. Too much for you?"

"Not even close," I reply, watching as he pushes his jeans past his thick, long cock. It springs free and I lick my lips, wanting to touch him, to taste him. I reach for him, desperately wanting to wrap my hand around him, but he catches my hand and pins it above my head as he lowers his chest to mine. With a hand between us, he guides himself to my entrance.

"Are you sure about this," he asks, moving his tip between my folds. "There's no going back from here," he warns.

"I don't want to go back," I tell him.

His eyes fall closed and he almost looks pained as he leans down to kiss me. "Tell me to stop, Felicity. Please, don't let me do this," he begs, still moving himself against me but not entering me.

“Please, don’t stop, Carson. Fuck me,” I whisper.

His mouth crashes against mine. In the same instant, he thrusts forward, sliding into me hard and deep. We both let out a moan of pleasure.

“Oh fuck,” he breathes out, holding on to my hips fiercely. “Fuck, you’re so tight. So fucking perfect, just like I knew you would be,” he says, pulling out and pushing back in. I hold on to him tight, like if I don’t, I might just fall right off the edge of the world.

I can’t explain the emotions that are bubbling up inside of me right now. Being with Carson is better than I ever could have imagined possible. It’s like wanting something your whole life and finally getting it, only to discover it’s better than you could have imagined. I’m overwhelmed with happiness, love, excitement, pleasure. So much pleasure.

His hips keep moving, pushing me closer and closer to my breaking point, but he gives me so much more. While he moves inside of me, he never stops kissing me, touching me, loving me. Years of need, yearning, passion, desire, love, it all combines and boils over. It’s strong, overwhelming, intoxicating.

It’s not long before I’m coming around him again and when I fall back down to earth, he rolls us both over, putting me on top. “Show me how badly you’ve wanted me, sweetheart,” he whispers as his hands cup my cheeks.

That’s all it takes to get me going again. I begin lifting myself up before falling back down. When I’m against him, I rock forward, grinding my clit against him. He’s so large, larger than anyone I’ve ever been with, but it doesn’t hurt. Before I thought I was getting what I was supposed to, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. It’s like Carson and I were

made for one another. He's the perfect size for me and I fit him like a glove.

His eyes move from mine down to my bouncing breasts and back. He smirks, bites his lower lip, and then his lips part with his heavy breathing. His eyes flutter closed but pop back open like he doesn't want to miss a moment of this. His hands come up to massage my breasts and he leans forward, capturing one in his mouth. He sucks on my nipple and flicks his tongue against it, only working me closer to that edge he likes to keep me on.

“Come for me, Felicity. Let me watch you while you come on my dick.”

I've never been much for dirty talk during sex, but when he does it, it doesn't turn me off. In fact, it gives me even more pleasure to hear him, to listen to him demanding such dirty things of me. It's been a fantasy for far too long. I grind against him one last time and that's when he gets his wish. I throw my head back and let out a moan, enjoying the tingles that swim through my body, lighting every nerve ending on fire while my bones are overtaken with snow.

His hands fall back to my hips, lifting me and pulling me down against him, harder and harder each time, only prolonging my release. My toes begin to curl and go numb as I lose all control of my body. I can't do anything but ride this wave and pray that it never ends. When it does, as they always do, he lifts me up and flips me over onto my knees. He enters me from behind and he doesn't take it easy. With each thrust, I fall forward. After a few times of this, he wraps my hair around his fist and keeps me in place. My legs are shaking beneath me, threatening to collapse, but he keeps a strong hold on me and he never lets me fall. He slides a finger into my

mouth and it surprises me but I suck on it. He pulls it out and smacks me on the ass, making me call out. Moments later, he slides his finger into my ass and I lose all control.

I've never been taken this way before and it's perfect, something that only he can do. I come harder than I've ever come before and he joins me, filling me with every last drop. Moments later, he releases me and I collapse onto the mattress.

We both lie on the bed, neither of us moving or talking. We're both just focusing on catching our breath and controlling our racing hearts. He leans down and grabs the blanket we've somehow managed to kick to the foot of the bed and he pulls it over both of us before reaching over and shutting off the light. He pulls me to his chest and presses a kiss to the back of my shoulder.

"That was fucking mind-blowing," he says, kissing up my neck to my ear.

"Earth-shattering," I agree.

"Mind-altering."

"Mind-altering? How about world-altering?"

He chuckles in the distance. "Fuck, why did we wait so long to do that?"

I laugh. "Cuz someone wanted to keep me pure," I tease.

"Fuck pure. I'll take dirty any day." His hands are already sliding up my body again, caressing my sides and hips, squeezing my breasts, and gently working their way between my folds.

His mouth lands on my neck and he kisses up my neck and nibbles on my ear. "Once is never enough," he says, causing

me to roll over. He slides back on top of me. “I’ll never get enough of you,” he says, bringing his lips back to mine.

I PUT my bra back on and pick up my torn panties, garter, and hose. I hold them up in the air, showing them to him. “What am I supposed to wear home now?”

He chuckles. “Here,” he says, reaching into his bag and tossing me a pair of boxer shorts.

I catch them and pull them on with a giggle.

“What?” he asks.

“I was just thinking about how I was always so jealous of the girls you were with, and how now that I’ve been with you, I know exactly how jealous I need to be.”

He smiles as he walks over. “If it makes you feel any better, every single one of them, I imagined they were you.”

I smile. “You did not.”

He nods. “Ask Beth. I fucked up and called her Felicity in bed one night. She kicked me out and we haven’t talked since.”

I laugh as I reach up and wrap my arms around him. “Our one night together is almost over,” I say, looking into his eyes.

I see them dash from mine, to the clock, and back. “Well, we better make the most of it then.” He picks me up against him and carries me back to the bed where we spend the rest of the night.

CARSON

I wake in the morning with a smile on my face. I don't open my eyes though, in fear of it all disappearing. I roll to my side and reach for her, but the bed is cold and empty. My eyes pop open and anger washes over me. I can't believe she snuck out of here while I was asleep. I get up, pull on my basketball shorts, throw a coat on, and slip my feet into some flip-flops. I rush out of the house faster than anyone can stop me.

I walk across the snow and ice covers my feet, but I don't even feel it as I walk up to her front door and open it. I let myself into her room and find her dead asleep in bed. I slam the door shut and she sits up.

"Carson, what the hell?" she asks, rubbing her eyes.

"You snuck out," I say, simmering down now that I see her sleepy eyes.

"You fell asleep. We agreed on one night so I wanted to keep my word. What's wrong with you?" She throws the blankets back and stands up. She's still wearing my boxers, but the bra is gone. Now replaced with a white tank top that I can clearly see through.

My anger falls away and quickly changes to something else. Need. "Maybe I want more than one night. Maybe I want two."

She smiles. “Okay,” she agrees.

“You’re not even going to fight with me?”

She seems taken aback. She always fights with me. Don’t give up now.

“Do you want me to fight with you?”

I nod. “That’s our thing. Me and you, I tell you one thing and you don’t like it and we fight.”

She nods. “Okay, we agreed on one night, Carson. Not two. Don’t get greedy.”

“Greedy? I’m greedy, little Ms. I’ve wanted you since I was seven. Now you got a piece and you’re done?”

She laughs and shakes her head at me. “Shut up, you idiot.” She presses her lips to mine and everything else is gone. I lay her back on the bed and pull the blankets up over both of us. Under the blanket, I push my shorts down her legs and push my basketball shorts over my hips. I’m hard and ready to go, just like every other argument with her. Sliding into her is easy, warm, and welcoming. Finally, connecting as one, I can think straight. I hold her tight against me as I let myself calm down, unmoving in any way. “What are you doing to me?” I whisper, finally pulling out to thrust back in.

I’ve always known right from wrong. I knew what I wanted, what I needed, and what I should avoid. All the answers to those questions are her. She’s right and oh so wrong for me. I wanted her. I needed her. And I should be avoiding her right now, but that’s not going to happen. I’ve had a taste of her and her sweetness is left on my tongue. There’s no way I’m forgetting last night. There’s no way I’m not fighting for more. Where she ends, I begin, and together, we’re one. There’s no going back now and that thought scares

the shit out of me because I don't know how we'll end up. I'm no longer certain on my future.

I don't know how, but we manage to pull away from one another. I put my flip-flops and coat back on and leave her house. Neither of us are ready for the day. We both need to get cleaned up and I need to come up with some kind of plan to escape this house for the day. As I'm passing through the living room, her mother lets out a yelp.

"Oh, Carson. I didn't know you were here," she says, her hand covering her heart.

I smile. "Sorry, Mrs. B. I didn't mean to scare you. I just popped by to wake Felicity up. She wasn't answering my calls and I wanted to make sure she was okay."

"Aww, you're such a sweet boy," she says.

I force a smile and wave as I exit the house. A sweet boy? A sweet boy who just fucked your daughter like four times in the last twenty-four hours. *Yeah, not so sweet*, I think as I make the journey back to my mom's house.

When I get home, I waste no time in taking a shower and getting dressed. When I walk back into my bedroom, my mom is in there stripping the bed.

I freeze when I see what she's doing. I clearly would have washed my dirty sex sheets myself.

"I was just going to make the bed until I came in and seen what a wrinkled mess it was. You must be a rough sleeper."

"Mom, I was just getting ready to do that."

She waves me off. "It's no problem, dear. I'm happy to have you home." She tosses the blankets and pillowcases into a pile on the floor while she strips off the fitted sheet. Then

she bends over to pick it all up and comes up with something red. She's holding it by two fingers.

My face heats up when I realize it's Felicity's panties.

"What in the world?" she asks, looking from the scrap of material, to me, and back.

"Oh, uhhh...that's mine," I say, reaching out and taking the torn-up material.

"Who's is that? Carson, are you having people stay over?"

I swallow, unsure of what to say.

"Who's been here? I've only seen Felicity and the two of you have never..." Knowledge washes over her. "Oh, Carson," she chastises. "Not you and the neighbor girl."

"What?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "You better watch what you're doing and think long and hard about this. They are family! They will be here Christmas day for dinner, you know?"

"I know, Mom. They spend Christmas here every year."

"Then you know how valuable our friendship is with them."

I nod. "I know, Mom."

She seems really disappointed. "I've got to call her mother. I've got to put a stop to this."

"Mom, I'm a grown-ass man. Don't you think I can handle this myself?"

She picks up the sheets and looks at me. "A grown-ass man doesn't sneak women into his mother's house to..." She starts to stutter, not knowing how to say it. "To sex her up."

Really? That's the term you chose to use?

She rushes out and I fall back on the bed, groaning.

It's only been five minutes before Felicity is calling.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Well, I just had the most awkward conversation with my mother."

"I'm sorry," I say, sitting up. "I just came in the room and she was stripping the bed. Then she found your ripped-up panties and knew you were the only one who had been over. She put it together herself. Are you in trouble?"

She laughs. "No, my mom thinks it's great."

"What?"

"Yeah, she said she's known for years how the two of us felt about one another and she's glad we're finally doing something about it."

I shiver. "I feel a little dirty now that we like...have her permission."

She laughs. "She also mentioned running into you in the living room this morning."

"Yeah, she said I was a sweet boy after I roughly fucked her daughter under her own roof."

"Well, it wasn't that rough," she says.

"What?"

"It was sort of gentle. I enjoyed it."

I feel like my manhood is on the line. "Oh, you want it rougher?" I ask. "I can get rougher," I promise.

“You were pretty rough last night and I enjoyed that too. I like seeing all the different sides of you I didn’t know before.”

I laugh. “You don’t think I’m some sort of sick, twisted weirdo? Cuz my mom does now after picking up your ripped-up panties.”

She giggles. “If you’re a weirdo, I’m a weirdo. In fact, I think we need to get to living out that car fantasy I’ve had for far too long.”

I smile “Oh, that we can do.” My body starts to come alive, just from talking about it. I stand up and look into her window. “Where are you?” I ask.

She quickly steps in front of the window. I see that she’s changed out of my boxers. She’s now wearing a pair of black yoga pants and a light-pink sweater. “Mmmm, you look sexy.”

She frowns. “Sexy? How?”

“I love watching you walk around in yoga pants.”

She smiles as she turns around to give me view of her ass.

“Now bend over,” I direct and she does.

“Oh, good Lord,” my mother says, walking in and seeing what’s going on.

“Mom, for God’s sake, knock!” I turn around and yell at her.

She picks up the pillowcase that she dropped on the floor by the bed. “It’s like I’m raising a teenager again,” she grumbles, making her way back out of my room.

Felicity, hearing everything that’s going on, giggles in my ear.

I hold up my finger and motion for her to come over.

“Where we going to do it with your bed stripped and your mom walking in?”

I look at my closet and back.

She tilts her head. “You want to have sex in the closet?” she asks.

I smirk and nod my head.

She rolls her eyes and lets out a long breath, but then says, “I’ll be right over.”

I hang up the phone and slide up the window. She pushes hers up and then climbs out. I help her into mine, then pull her to the closet. My mouth is on hers before I even have the door shut.

EVERY TIME she tries to leave, I pull her back in, but end up having to release her when she tells me she has a day planned to do some Christmas shopping with her mom. I let her go, giving her an extra long kiss before helping her back out the window. I stand there and make sure she gets back in hers. She does and she closes the window and locks it behind her. She offers up a smile before turning away and leaving the room.

With her occupied for the day, I’m at a loss for how to spend mine. All I know is that I don’t want to spend it here, with my mother and stepfather. I decide to just head out and see where I end up. As I’m gathering my phone, keys, and wallet, someone knocks on the door and I almost get excited, thinking that maybe Felicity canceled on her mom. I walk out of my room in time to see my mom open the door. Gillian is

on the other side. Her long dark hair is in her signature curls and she's wearing a big bright smile as she hugs my mom.

Mom turns around to call for me but stops when she sees me already here. "Oh, Carson. Look who's here."

"I see," I reply. I look at Gillian. "What are you doing here?"

She puts her smile in place. "I came to see you, silly. Can we talk?"

"Sure," I agree, leading her back to my room.

"Wow, back in your childhood bedroom. How's that feel?" she asks, walking around the room and looking at everything.

"I'd rather not talk about it," I say, plopping down in the desk chair.

She nods. "Noted. So, how have you been?" she asks, sitting across from me on the stripped bed, the bed I just fucked my best friend on. Looking at that bed, I don't see Gillian sitting on it. I see all the naughty things that I did to Felicity, all the naughty things she liked, all the naughty things that I can't wait to do again.

"Fine. You?" I ask, shaking my head to clear it.

She nods and keeps that fake smile in place. "I'm good. Fine. Are you enjoying being back home for Christmas?"

"What's this about, Gillian?" I'm tired of the small talk already.

She takes a deep breath. "I should've known that you wouldn't be much for small talk. You never were."

"That's right. So spit it out."

She nods. “Okay, here goes.” She takes a deep breath. “I miss you.”

I freeze when I hear those words. She misses me? She’s the one who broke up with me.

“I realize now that I never should have called things off with you. And I’m sorry that it took me so long to see it. It’s just that, the holidays make you think, you know? Make you think about what you’re thankful for and really puts things into perspective. It’s just that when you said you didn’t want the whole marriage and kids thing, it threw me for a loop. I mean, you’re a great guy with a good job. Marriage and kids are usually part of the package. But I see now that I acted a little hastily. If it’s time you need, I’ll give that to you. I can wait for those things. I just need to know that at some point, you do see us getting there.”

I sit back, thinking over her words. Gillian and I had spent nearly five years of our lives together. She’s the closet thing I’ve had to a lasting adult relationship. But that was back when I thought that Felicity was out of the question. Still, I had feelings for her. Strong feelings. Maybe even love but I don’t know how true that is. I felt more for her than I had anyone up to that point. So I thought that was what love was. But now, now that Felicity and I are in such a good place, I don’t know.

“Is that Felicity?” Gillian asks, looking out the window.

I lean forward in my chair, finding Felicity standing in her window, shock evident on her face.

I quickly pull my phone from my pocket and send her a text.

Me: I’ll explain later.

I tuck the phone away and look back out the window, watching her read it. She looks up at me and nods once before turning away.

“So you’re both home at the same time, huh? That has to be exciting, just like the good ol’ days.”

I take a deep breath. “I don’t know what you’re wanting me to say here, Gillian. I mean, you broke up with me three months ago. I haven’t heard from you since. And then you show up here, completely unexpected and say what? That you want to get back together but only if I can promise you a ring and a kid?”

Her eyes flutter closed. “I know this must all be a shock to you. I’ve been thinking about it for months. Don’t worry, though. I’m not asking you to make up your mind today. You can think about it. But please, think about it. Don’t just push this aside. We have five years behind us. It’s too much to just give up don’t you think?”

I don’t know what to say, so I just stand up. She stands up with me and she steps up to my chest, wrapping her arms around my waist. I place my arms around her and hug her lightly, noticing how this doesn’t feel anything like it does when it’s Felicity in my arms.

“Come on. I’ll show you out.”

I show her to the door and I step out with her. I see Felicity and her mom in the car, but they haven’t backed out of the drive yet. I can feel Felicity’s eyes watching me. To my surprise, Gillian steps up to me and the next thing I know, she’s pressing her mouth to mine. I pull back quickly, looking at Felicity in the car again. Hurt and pain is reflecting in her eyes.

“Sorry, I guess it’s too soon, huh?” Gillian says when I reject her kiss.

“Yeah, too soon,” I agree, but I highly doubt we’re talking about the same thing. It’s too soon for me to be hurting Felicity this way, and that’s exactly what I’ve done.

FELICITY

What the fuck is Big Boobs doing over there with him? He told me that they broke up. Did he lie? No, Carson doesn't lie to me, especially about things like that. So what's she doing there? Is she trying to get him back? Over my dead body. He's mine. He always says that I'm his and have been since we were kids. Well, he's mine and has been since he was ten years old. I don't know what she's doing, but I'm not going down without a fight. I finally have something to fight for.

I walk away from the window and Mom's finally ready. I grab my things and head out to the car. She's only a few steps behind me and she climbs behind the wheel. She sets her purse in her lap and starts digging through it, looking for the keys. That's when I notice Carson's front door open and he comes walking out with her. She says something to him and he looks at me. I can see something on his face. Sorrow, anger, something. He glances back at her and she sneaks a kiss on him. He pulls back like he's been slapped, but the damage has been done. My lips are no longer the last to touch his. That thought alone makes me want to curl up and cry.

Carson was always a bit of a player, but I never thought he'd play me. I tell myself not to overreact. He clearly didn't want the kiss, not like he wants my kisses anyway. Since hooking up yesterday, he hasn't been able to keep his hands

off of me. In fact, it seems he would be completely content just staying in bed with me all day, but Gillian, Big Boobs as I call her, she's trying to throw a wrench in our plan.

Mom finally finds her keys and she starts the car up and backs out of the drive. I tear my eyes away from them on their front porch and focus on spending the day with my mom. We drive to the center of town and get out to walk around the square. It's just as full as yesterday with everyone out to enjoy the ice rink.

"You remember when I would bring you and Carson here every year?"

I smile and nod. "Of course."

"I remember that time you called me, crying and asking me to pick you up early. You never did tell me what happened."

I laugh. "It's stupid, Mom."

"Either way, I'd like to know."

"I had a huge crush on Carson, but he was too old for me. He was pushing eighteen and I was only turning fifteen. He was there to meet his girlfriend and I went to meet my boyfriend at the time."

"I didn't know you even had a boyfriend then."

I laugh. "I know. I didn't tell anyone. He was sixteen and Carson hated him. Anyway, I thought that I could make Carson jealous and I don't know, get his attention or something. But we ended up fighting about it and he left with his girlfriend. Anyway, I bought us both a hot chocolate and I planned on giving it to him and telling him I was sorry and asking if he'd go on a carriage ride with me. When I went to find him, I saw him getting on the carriage with his girlfriend

and it broke my heart. I threw the hot chocolate away and called you to pick me up.”

She gives me a sympathetic look. “Oh, honey. You and Carson have been running headlong into each other for years for a reason.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t know about that now,” I say, thinking back to Gillian kissing him on the porch.

“Why? Because of that girl?” she asks.

“You saw that?”

“Of course. Why do you think I took so long to find my keys? I wanted to see what was going to happen.”

I laugh. “Oh my God, Mom.”

“What?” she asks, shrugging her shoulders. “He’s a good boy. He will do the right thing. Just don’t give up on him yet.”

“You think so? Even after seeing their kiss?”

“Oh, honey. It was clear he didn’t want that kiss. Don’t hold that against him. He’s just too nice to pimp slap that ho across the face for trying something like that.”

I bust out laughing. “Oh my God, Mom. You seriously need to stop watching Comedy Central.”

She giggles. “Why, I like it and it makes me cool with the kids.”

“What kids?” I question.

“The ones that come into the store. I have a group that come in to see me every day, just to talk and listen to the wackadoodle things I’ll say.”

I shake my head. “God, shoot me now.”

“Now, forget all your troubles and let’s go get some shopping done, huh?”

Shopping is a nice distraction, but it’s not enough. Every time I let my guard down, I find myself thinking of Carson and Big Boobs. It’s killing me that she’s there and I hate that I can’t let it go. Carson isn’t mine. Sure, we’ve been hooking up, but that doesn’t mean he’s mine. In fact, I think we both agreed on one night, well, two now.

I thought being with Carson would be magical, amazing, life-changing, but I couldn’t wrap my head around how much it would change me. I thought it was only going to be one time. I thought that things couldn’t get complicated if it only happened once. But it was so good that I needed more than once. And he hasn’t been able to keep his hands to himself since. So, what made it so good?

Was it because we both wanted it so badly? Was it because we’d been waiting so long, always denying ourselves? Or is it something else? I try to think back on every other sexual experience I’ve had and none of them can even compare. Even the experiences that I thought were good at the time can’t hold a thing on Carson. What is different about Carson and every other man I’ve been with? I’ve known him longer. There is a friendship there. And I guess I love him. I’ve always loved him. He’s my best friend. But do I *love* love him?

Mom and I spend the day going in and out of the little shops on the square, and then she takes me out to dinner at the little Chinese restaurant on the corner. We both load our plates with General Tso’s chicken and fried rice. Then Mom insists on washing it all down by sharing a pitcher of beer.

“When did you become such a drinker?” I ask, just giving her shit as I pop a piece of chicken into my mouth.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re making me sound like I have an addiction.”

I shrug. “It was just a question.”

“It’s not all for us. I invited someone else too.”

My brows pull together. “Who’d you invite?”

“Mind if I sit down?” he asks, standing next to the table. I look and find Carson.

“Of course, dear,” Mom says.

Carson sits next to me and we look at one another. I can see in his eyes how badly he wants to explain, but not in front of my mom.

“Go on and fix you a plate,” she urges.

He lets out a little chuckle, but he stands up and shrugs out of his coat before walking over to the buffet.

“Mom, why’d you invite him?” I whisper so he won’t be able to hear me.

“Whatever happened today needs to be talked about. Don’t worry, I don’t expect you to talk in front of me, but I knew that if I didn’t invite him, you’d avoid him and think the worst.” She smiles. “Now you can’t avoid him.”

I roll my eyes. “Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?”

She leans forward just as he’s walking over. “I am on your side, dear. Give him a chance to explain.”

“Thanks for the invite, Mrs. B,” Carson says.

Mom smiles and begins pouring him a glass of beer.

“So, how was the shopping trip?” he asks, looking between me and Mom.

“Very effective. I was able to knock out everyone on my list. How about you?” she asks, looking at me.

I nod. “Yep, I’m all done too.”

I don’t know how Carson being here has suddenly shifted my mood. I was planning on talking to him when we got home. I wasn’t expecting him to show up here. I’m not ready for the talk right now, and honestly, I’m not excited about sitting here awkwardly in front of my mother.

Mom asks Carson some questions about living in the city, his job at the investment firm, and everything else she can think of. The whole dinner is filled with their conversation and I only nod or hmm or naaa my way through it. When dinner is done, Mom insists on paying the bill and we all head toward the door together.

Outside the door, she turns and hugs me. “Carson will take you home. I’ll put your bags in your room. Have fun and be safe,” she says, rushing off before I can argue.

Carson and I stand on the sidewalk, watching her back out and drive away.

“Want to take a walk?” he asks, motioning toward the square and the winter wonderland event.

I shrug. “I guess so.”

It’s the first time I’ve seen the square at night in years and it still takes my breath away. There are multicolored Christmas lights in every treetop. There are white lights strung from tree to tree, highlighting the walking path around the event. There is snow piled up and decorations everywhere of little angels, the nativity, and then a kid’s section where there is Santa and the elves as they prepare for Christmas in the workshop.

We don't talk as we cross the street and enter the event. He leads me down the sidewalk and to the hot chocolate stand. He orders two and then takes me over to the benches by the skate rink. He sets both cups down and then pulls out a bottle from his inside coat pocket, pouring a little in each.

"That should keep you warm," he says, handing over my cup.

"Thank you," I reply, taking it and bringing it to my lips.

"I need to explain," he starts but for some reason, I cut him off.

"No, no, you don't. What we've been doing isn't anything serious, right? We're just messing around. You owe me nothing, Carson."

His brows furrow together. "We may be messing around, but you're still my best friend and I would like to talk about this with you."

Fuck, I forgot about the whole being best friends thing. I guess I have to hear all the gory details now. I nod him on.

"Gillian popped up today, totally unexpected."

I snort. "Sounds just like her."

He laughs. "Yeah, I never could get a handle on what she would do next. I thought she'd zig and she'd zag. We were never on the same page." He takes a sip of his spiked hot chocolate. "Anyway, she says that she left me prematurely. That she thought that there was no point in being with me if I didn't want marriage and kids with her."

"So, now she's changed her mind?"

"No, she still wants those things, but now she says she's willing to wait as long as I can promise that we will get there

eventually.”

“And...what did you say to that?”

“I didn’t say much of anything, actually. She said that she still loved me and would wait as long as I needed. Then she kissed me but you saw that.”

I nod as I press my lips together. “And what do you think? Do you still love her? Do you see yourself having kids with her one day?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says quietly, shaking his head. “If you would have asked me this question yesterday, I would have said hell no. But now...”

“What’s changed now?”

“She came back,” he answers. “I thought I’d never see her again so I didn’t waste any time thinking about it. I spent nearly five years of my life with her, so it seems unfair to just throw all that away.”

I swear, I feel my heart crack and I can’t figure out why. I wanted Carson and I’ve now had him. That’s all I wanted, isn’t it? I should be happy that the woman he’s spent so much time with is asking for him back. I should be happy that my friend is being offered his happily ever after, but I’m not. Why?

I look up and his icy-blue eyes meet mine. I see years of friendship, troubles, good times, and love. But not the way I loved him when we were kids. This is a different type of love. How did that happen? Am I in love with Carson?

“Anyway, I told her that now isn’t the time to try making important decisions. The holidays are crazy enough without adding important life events into the mix. So I told her I’d talk to her when I got back home after New Year’s.”

“So...right now, you’re still single?” I ask, looking up at him from beneath my lashes.

He cracks a smile and nods. “Yeah, I’m still single.”

My smile breaks free. Even if I can’t have him forever, I can have him for now. That’s better than nothing...I think. When I smile, he smiles, and then the next thing I know, he’s pulling me in for a kiss. He sets his cup down and his hands move up to cup my cheeks, holding me to him. His tongue presses against my lips and I open for him. He enters and our tongues dance together in a perfect rhythm. I reach up, fisting his shirt in my hand, pulling him closer and never wanting him to leave.

He pulls back and whispers against my lips, “Want to get out of here and make that car fantasy a dream come true?”

I giggle and nod. “Yes, yes, I do.”

He stands up and pulls me to his side. I wrap my arm around his, and he leads me back to the car. Inside, he pulls out into traffic quickly. I have no idea where he’s going, but he turns down a secluded backroad that’s pitch-black in the middle of the country. He turns onto a dirt road that seems more like a farming road than anything else, and he puts the car in park but doesn’t kill the engine.

“We’re going to need some heat out there,” he says, swinging open his door.

I climb out and meet him around the front in the darkness. I look up at him and he looks down at me. In the same instant, we grab one another and start kissing. This kiss isn’t like the one we just shared by the ice rink though. This kiss is like all our other kisses, brought together out of need and desperation. He pulls me against him and his hands find my ass. He picks

me up and my legs wrap around his hips. He sets me on the hood of the car and the warmth from the engine rises up, warming me.

As he leans over the hood, kissing me, his hands are traveling my body, pushing and pulling clothes away. He unfastens my jeans and pulls me up against him to push them over my hips. Then suddenly, he's spinning me around and bending me over, entering me from behind. He slams into me hard and makes me call out. His hands on my hips tighten as he pulls me back into his thrusts. I can hear his heavy breathing mixed with animalistic growls every time he shoves into me, and that sound alone could make me come.

My release starts to build and my muscles are tightening around him. He rocks against me, rubbing that perfect spot every time he pounds into me. My release rises and breaks free, leaving me in gasps, moans, and whimpers. My sounds only make him work harder, which pushes him over the edge with me. Within moments, we're both completely spent, our bodies numb and weak as he rests his head against my back to catch his breath and settle his heart. When we've both come down from our high, he pulls out of me and pulls me back up. He pulls my panties and jeans up my hips and fastens them before fixing his own. Our eyes meet in the darkness and something is exchanged. Trust, friendship, love? I don't know, but the way he's looking at me now is a look I never saw from him before. It cuts deep into my heart, making it come alive and race with the unknown.

He cracks a smile. "Well, was it all you hoped it would be?"

I smile. "It was better," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Because it was real." I press my lips to his and he

kisses me, hot, long, and hard.

CARSON

I thought that if I explained Gillian's visit, Felicity would freak out. I thought she'd fight for me. I never thought she'd just accept it and move on. The fact that she didn't argue, that makes me wonder. This thing we're doing, is it just fun to her? I know what we agreed upon, but I also thought it stemmed from a love she has for me deep inside. I love her and have loved her for many years. I've wanted her. I was just too afraid of ruining our friendship over it. I thought she wanted me in the same way, but her response about Gillian wasn't what I expected. Maybe she really did only want a night of fun with me. A night that has turned into two, and I plan on making it turn into three, then four, then five if she allows it.

But her lack of response doesn't help me out any. I was expecting an ultimatum. I expected her to say, *it's her or me*. I would have chosen her immediately and wouldn't have thought twice about it. But the fact that she didn't say that makes me wonder if she wants to be with me at all. Is there anything worth fighting for here?

Once we get back into the car and make our way into town, I'm so turned around by these thoughts that I feel the need to take the edge off. "Want to stop and grab a drink?" I ask, glancing at her in the darkness.

“Sure,” she agrees, a smile playing on her lips.

I pull in at a local bar and we both climb out, heading inside. I head up to the bar and order two beers and two shots of tequila. The bartender rushes off to get the order and I turn around to take in the bar while I wait. The place is pretty crowded which surprises me since it’s so close to Christmas, but maybe everyone here is trying to escape their family as much as I am. I see some familiar faces that I haven’t seen in several years and some I don’t recognize. Then I find Felicity sitting at a table in the darkened corner. There’s some guy standing next to her with a beer in his hand, a smile on his face.

“Here you go,” the bartender says, handing over our drinks. I manage to take all four things over to the table and when Felicity sees me approaching, she smiles and her eyes light up. That’s what I like to see.

“Carson, this is Chad. You remember him, don’t you?” she asks.

I look at the man standing next to our table and examine his face. Suddenly, it’s not his face I’m seeing. It’s the face that I remember from years ago, but much older now. He’s the guy she brought to the skate rink that night.

I nod. “Of course, how you doing, man?”

He smiles and nods. “Pretty good. I didn’t know the two of you were back in town. You here to stay or just visiting?” he asks, looking at me.

“Oh, I live in Chicago. Just down for the holidays.”

He nods and swings his stare over to Felicity. “And you?”

“Oh, well, I just graduated early. So I’m working on finding a job, and then I’ll go wherever.”

“So, you’ll be hanging around a while then?”

She nods. “Yeah, probably.”

This makes him smile but he covers it with his beer as he takes a drink.

I pass Felicity over her shot and beer and I pick up mine, holding it in the air. “To a magical Christmas,” I say.

She smiles and clanks her shot glass off mine before we throw them back. She quickly chases hers down with a drink of beer and I look up at Chad, wondering why he’s still hovering.

“There something you need, buddy?”

He seems surprised, but then he shakes his head and walks away without another word.

“Carson,” Felicity chastises.

“What? Dude was being a weirdo, just hovering there like that.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “You never did like him.”

“Still don’t,” I remind her, picking up my beer and taking a drink.

“Why? What problem could you possibly have with the guy now? You haven’t seen him in years.”

“He likes you,” I point out.

“He does not.” She rolls her eyes, thinking I’m just being overprotective again.

I lean forward, resting my arms on the table. “He does. Why else did he ask if you were sticking around town?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. To make conversation?”

This time, I'm the one to roll my eyes. "No, dude wants another turn with you."

She shakes her head. "Well, he's not getting it."

"Is that so?" I ask as she leans in.

She nods.

I'm about to ask her why that is, see if it has anything to do with me, but I get cut off when Greg plops down at our table.

"Look at you two getting all nice and cozy," he says, placing a hand on each of our shoulders and giving us a little shake. "Chad said you chased him off, Carson. You never did like that punk." He laughs.

I move my eyes in his direction. "He wasn't the only one I didn't like," I say, hoping he gets the hint.

"Oh, no! You didn't like anyone who tried sniffing around Felicity, here. Hey, you remember that time. Oh...when was it. It must have been your freshmen year away. You were so worried that all the guys would start asking Felicity out, you made the football team follow her around everywhere she went?" He starts laughing and Felicity's eyes cut to me.

"That's why they were following me around?" Her voice is loud and squeaky. "I couldn't figure it out. It was creepy as hell! They legit tried hiding behind trees and stuff so I wouldn't see them. But do you know how hard it is to hide a six-four linebacker behind a tree?"

Her description makes me laugh. "I'm sorry." I laugh. "I wasn't trying to freak you out. I just wanted to make sure you had someone watching over you while I was gone."

She shakes her head, her eyes rolling in response. "You were always very overprotective."

Greg nods his head in agreement. “Oh, you have no idea. Once, a bunch of guys tried sneaking into a slumber party you were at, fuckface here decided to call the parents and let them know. They came out and busted us.”

Her eyes widen. “That was you?” She points at me from across the table.

Greg nods. “Yep, nobody got laid that night.”

We’re all laughing and giggling like old times, but I wish he wouldn’t tell all of my secrets.

“And then once,” he starts.

“Alright, Greg. I think that’s enough,” I say, cutting him off.

“Okay,” he agrees.

“Wait! No, I want to know the lengths you’ve gone to just to keep me pure,” she teases.

I shake my head. “Trust me, you don’t want to know,” I tell her.

The conversation shifts to something else, more high school memories of parties, dances, and football games. Eventually, Greg gets up to go for a beer, leaving us alone. A soft song starts playing through the speakers and I hold out my hand. “I think I owe you a dance, right?”

She looks up at me confused, then acknowledgment washes through her green eyes.

“You promise you’ll dance with me?” Felicity asks as she corners me at my senior prom. My date is off in the bathroom again, primping and fixing her makeup.

“I already told you I would, Felicity,” I tell her as I lean against the wall, rolling my eyes. Most senior guys wouldn’t be caught dead with a freshmen girl, not unless he’s trying to bang her and steal her innocence, but everyone knows that I’m not and believe me, I get plenty of shit over it too.

“I know you did, but you’re drinking a lot and I’ve heard talk of all the seniors leaving early to go to a party. I just didn’t want you to forget about me.”

I look in her green eyes and every time I do, it’s like I get trapped there. “I could never forget about you.”

That makes her smile and pink paints her cheeks. “Okay.” She finally lets it go as she turns and walks back to her friends.

As the night drags on, me and the guys drink more from our flasks we snuck in and the girls get pretty rowdy. Everyone is ready to leave this chaperoned party and find one that’s adult free. I look around, needing to find Felicity so I can deliver on my promise, but Jessica grabs my arm and starts tugging me toward the door.

“Come on, baby. Let’s get out of here and get into something a little more fun.” She starts kissing my neck, making my blurred eyes even more hard to see through.

“Okay, I just have to find Felicity first.”

She rolls her brown eyes. “Ugh, she’ll be fine. She’s in high school now and with her own date. Come on. She’ll understand. Plus, she’ll probably be glad to get rid of her babysitter for a couple hours.” Her lips land on mine and her hand glides across the seat of my pants, brushing across my dick that hasn’t had attention in too long.

Since Felicity started high school, she's been attending all the same parties as me. That makes it really hard to keep an eye on her and get laid. So my dick has been pushed to the back of my mind for too long now. Every party, I used to get laid. Now, I'm leaving early and taking Felicity home before she gets into any trouble.

"Alright," I agree, letting her pull me toward the exit.

"Prom," she says as she slides her hand into mine.

I nod. "I know I've said I'm sorry at least thirty times since then, but I really am sorry," I tell her, spinning her around and pulling her to my chest on the dance floor.

She rolls her eyes. "You were just excited to go to a party without me."

I shrug. "It wasn't so much the party as it was about getting laid without having to worry that some drunk asshole was trying to take advantage of you."

"Well, jokes on you because some drunk asshole tried taking advantage of me anyway."

That causes a whole new memory to form behind my eyes.

It's going on two a.m. before the limo pulls up outside of my house. As I climb out, I loosen my tie and slip out of my stiff jacket the moment I exit the car. Who can wear this shit all the time? The door closes on the limo but I can still hear the party going on inside. I wave as the limo pulls off, and I turn for the door.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a black Cadillac parked on the side of the road in front of Felicity's house. There are no lights on. The car isn't running. There isn't anyone in the front seat. I look at the driveway and see that Felicity's mom must be working another night shift at the store. She won't be home

until early morning. I look at my watch. That's still several more hours.

With a deep breath, I walk over to the car and peek into the windows. The back seat is empty too. Damn it! Felicity and her date are in the house...alone. I rush up the sidewalk and onto the porch, tossing my jacket down on the porch swing as I open the door. The living room light is on, but nobody is in the room. I head down the hallway and hear music behind Felicity's door. I put my ear up to it and hear soft moans and whispers.

"Come on, baby. Nobody will have to know," he says.

My jaw clenches.

"No, Mark. I can't. We hardly know one another," Felicity says softly.

"Then why the fuck did you go to prom with me? Everyone knows what goes on at prom."

"I just, I just wanted to go to prom. I'm fifteen. I'm not ready to have sex yet."

"Fine, no sex," I hear him agree and I take a breath to cool off. "But how about a blowjob?"

I can't stop myself. I throw open the door and flip the light on. They both jump from being interrupted.

"What the fuck, man?" the guy says, standing up from the bed that Felicity is on and rushing to button his pants back up.

I don't even say anything. I just grab ahold of his shirt and drag him to the door. I open it and throw him out it. Felicity is right behind me and I turn around, pointing my finger in her face. "Stay here." I slam the door closed behind me and notice that for once, she listens and isn't following me out.

Her date is working to get himself up. I guess he fell when I threw him. I grab him up and pull him behind me to his car. I walk him out into the street, then slam him against the driver's side door. Getting close to his face, I say, "Leave. Don't ever come back and don't ever let me catch you around Felicity again. Got it?"

He's out of breath and holding up his hands in front of him, but he nods.

"Next time, you won't get the chance to walk away." I step back and he rushes into the car. Seconds later, he's squealing his tires as he hits the gas, leaving in a rush.

I hang my head and take a few deep breaths, trying to cool the anger that's burning inside of me. After a few moments, I walk back into her house and find her sitting on the couch. Her dress is unzipped in the back and it's falling off her shoulders; her hair is a mess, and her makeup is smeared. I look at her with the sternest look I can muster, and she breaks down into tears.

"I'm sorry, Carson. I didn't mean to..." She sniffles. "I mean, I didn't know that he would want to..." More sniffles.

My anger melts away and I go to her, pulling her against my chest where she cries into my shirt.

I look into her green eyes and they sparkle and shine, lighting up the dimly lit bar. "Just so you know, there's no lengths I won't go to, no lines I won't cross to keep you safe."

The corners of her mouth turn up slightly, then her hands that are wrapped around my neck pull my head down and her lips press against mine.

FELICITY

He says that there are no lengths he won't go to to keep me safe. I hope he realizes that I feel the same way about him. After his parents' divorce, things were a bit rocky for him. His mom was depressed and having to learn how to do everything on her own, take care of the house, dinner, keeping an eye on her son, and bringing in a paycheck. It's a lot for any adult, but especially for her, a woman who went straight from her parents to her husband at the age of eighteen. After the depression wore off and things started to get back to normal, she did what any young woman would do. She started dating, but not all those boyfriends were good. One was downright horrible, especially toward Carson.

I'm outside, playing in the yard alone when I hear a loud crashing sound come from Carson's house.

"You little shit," Jared, Connie's boyfriend, yells. And I know he's talking about Carson.

The screen door squeaks open and slams shut. I look up just in time to see Carson come running out the door. He's headed for the backyard where I am.

I stand up. "What's going on?" I ask.

"He's coming! Run!" Carson says, running as fast as he can over to me. He grabs my arm. "Come on. We have to

escape to the woods where he can't find us."

But it's too late, Jared is now outside, walking up to us with a belt in his hand. He points at Carson. "Your mom won't beat your ass like you deserve, but I will. Come over here," he demands.

I look over at Carson and can see him shaking. I don't know what he did, but I don't care. I don't want to see him hurt. So I do the only thing I can think of. I move to stand in front of him. I cross my arms and try my best to look bigger than I am. Carson's older so of course his head sticks up above mine.

Jared comes to a stop a few yards away. "Move, Felicity," he demands.

"No!" I say. "You're not hurting my friend."

"Well, if your friend would behave himself, I wouldn't have to."

"I think Mrs. Wells would like to hear about this when she gets home." I'm only nine, but already I know that she wouldn't be okay with her boyfriend punishing her son like this. Ground him, sure. Take away his bike, yep. But hitting him with a belt? No way.

His eyes squint at me as he tries to make up his mind on what he wants to do. "You going to tattle on me, kid?"

"You're not hurting my friend," I say again, getting more and more scared the longer he looks at me that way.

My mom must see us from the window because she comes outside. Standing at the door, she yells, "Everything okay out here?"

I look at Jared and he looks at me.

“Yeah,” he yells back to her. “I was just looking for Carson but I found him.” He points his finger at him. “Don’t run off,” he says, loud enough that my mom can hear. He turns and walks away, but to Carson’s house.

Remembering that almost makes tears form in my eyes, but I will them away. That’s the sort of thing that Carson and I don’t talk about anymore. He hated growing up the way he did, and I hate it for him. He’s such a good, caring guy. Sure, he got into some trouble as a kid, but what boy doesn’t?

When the song ends, we pull apart. “I’m going to use the restroom,” I tell him and he releases my hand as he walks in the opposite direction to the table. I quickly use the ladies’ restroom and wash my hands. When I walk out, I bump right into Chad’s back.

“Oh, hey,” he says, steadying me.

I smile. “Hi, sorry. I should watch where I’m going.”

He waves his hand through the air. “You can bump into me anytime.” He offers up a flirty smile and finally, I see what Carson was talking about.

“Well, I should get back.” I point in the direction of Carson.

He nods his head in the same direction. “He doesn’t like me much, huh?”

I laugh. “Don’t take it personally. Carson’s never liked any guy that gave me attention.”

“Ahhh, I seem to remember that.”

“What do you mean?”

He laughs. “I got my first black eye from him.”

I gasp. “What? When?”

“The day after we all went to the Winter Wonderland Festival here in town.”

“That’s the day you broke up with me,” I remember out loud.

He nods. “Yup, he’s why.”

“What happened?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I know that you guys left pretty early, and I stayed and hung out with some friends. We were skating and playing hockey once the crowd thinned out. The next thing I knew, he was back and he was pulling me over the wall that separated the ice from the sidewalk. He yanked my ass up over it, threw me on the ground, and demanded that I stay away from you. I was caught off guard. I knew of him, but I didn’t actually know him. I had only heard stories and him threatening every guy to stay away from you. I didn’t think he’d actually do anything, so I told him to fuck off, that I liked you and that you didn’t belong to him.”

“Ohhh,” I say, listening to his story.

“Then he punched me. I got a few hits in on him too though. All in good fun, huh?” He laughs like it’s a fond memory.

I nod and fake a laugh. “Right, right,” I agree. Guys are so weird. Pretty sure if some girl attacked me, I wouldn’t be laughing about it, even all these years later. I’d still be holding a grudge.

“Anyway, I don’t know if you two are still just friends or what, but here’s my number. Call me if you want. We have a lot to catch up on.” He passes me a business card and walks away.

As I walk back to the table, I look at the card. It says, *Chad Johnson, Veterinarian* along with his business and personal cell phone number.

I tuck the card into my back pocket as I approach the table and I sit down. “So, I just heard the funniest story.”

“Oh, yeah?” he asks, his eyes moving up to lock on mine.

“Yep. I finally found out why Chad broke up with me all those years ago.”

He sinks down into his chair and picks up his beer bottle, taking a long drink.

I place my arms on the table and lean forward. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

His face is red and he’s trying his best not to smile, but he shakes his head no.

I tilt my head to the side. “Seriously, you beat him up?”

He jumps to tell his side of the story, leaning over the table the same way I am. “He left me no choice. I was just going to scare the little asshole, but he called me out.”

“He said I didn’t belong to you,” I remind him.

His face pinches. “Yeah, that’s why I beat him up. You’ve always belonged to me.”

I smile. “You know, I’m not sure if this relationship we have is sweet or scary.”

He laughs. “A little of both, probably.”

“Probably,” I agree.

We leave the bar and arrive home a little while later and I climb out without thinking. He rushes out of the car and jogs

up to me. “Whoa, where are you going?” He grabs ahold of my wrist and pulls me back.

“I’m going home. My mom is probably waiting up to hear how our night ended.”

His hands find my hips and he starts walking me backward, against the side of the house. My back hits the brick but he moves in until I’m pressing against him. “You don’t want to come over?” he asks, moving his lips to mine. His kiss is soft and gentle, but I know there’s so much more behind it. “Come on, for old time’s sake?”

I giggle against his lips. “Oh, are we going to make blanket forts and have a pillow fight?”

He chuckles. “If you want to.” He moves his lips back to mine and his hands move up to unzip my coat. With it open, his hands slide in, landing on my chest and giving a firm squeeze.

“I don’t know, Carson,” I breathe out. “I mean, don’t you have some thinking to do about Gillian?”

“Gillian has not even crossed my mind, Felicity,” he whispers, moving his lips to my neck now. God, this man’s mouth can work magic. My eyes flutter closed as I enjoy the sensation of his lips on my neck, his hands on my body.

“Come home with me, please,” he begs against my soft skin. “Just one more night. I need you for just one more night.”

“Ugh, alright,” I agree, and he picks me up against him and carries me across the yard and into the dark house. He bumps off a few walls in the dark and trips a few times, every time, making me laugh and giggle.

“Shhh,” he tells me as we finally find his room and fall through the door. He kicks the door behind us and it slams shut.

“Shhh,” I tell him this time.

“I know, I know,” he whispers, quickly moving his mouth back to mine. I push his jacket down his shoulders and he does the same with mine. We leave them both lying on the floor as he lays me back on the bed. His weight presses down on me and it feels perfect. His hands run up my thighs, squeeze my hips, and tease my breasts. With a quick flick of his fingers, my bra is unlatched and he pulls it away with my shirt, revealing myself to him. A small smirk forms on his lips before he moves his mouth to them. My head falls back as I let the tingles he creates inside of me take over.

CARSON

“Carson, I—” my mom’s voice rings throughout the room.

“What in the world?” she asks, taking in the massive blanket fort that we built in my room. Felicity and I both poke our heads out and her eyes land on us. “Oh, good Lord! What is wrong with you two?” she asks, shaking her head as she quickly leaves the room.

Felicity giggles before pulling her head back into the fort and lying down.

I take my place at her side and look up at the blanket hanging above us as I hold her close to my chest. She turns her head up and our eyes lock. I move my mouth to hers and we kiss softly for several long moments. When I break the kiss and find her green eyes again, I can’t hold it back any longer. “Felicity, I love you.” The words come pouring out.

I expect her to laugh or playfully smack me across the chest, tell me she loves me too, but that’s not what happens. She doesn’t do anything. She freezes like the words I just said have done nothing but scared her.

Fuck. Undo. Go back. Cancel. Nothing is working!

“I’m sorry to tell you like this,” I start, but she shakes her head and pulls away from me. She crawls out of the tent and

starts digging around for her clothes.

“What are you doing?” I ask, pulling some shorts on.

“You love me?” she asks, pulling her pants up. I can’t help but watch as her breasts jiggle with the action. “You love me?” she yells louder when she catches me not paying attention.

“Yes! What? Why are you yelling? I thought you’d be happy!”

“Happy? Happy?” she repeats again.

“Yes, why do you keep repeating everything?”

She shakes her head as she pulls her shirt on, no bra. “You thought that telling me that you love me would make me happy?”

I roll my eyes and flop down on my bed in a sitting position, giving up.

“Why now, Carson?”

“What?” That takes me off guard.

“Why now?”

“I always have loved you, Felicity. Always. Why do you think I’ve done all of this?”

She pulls her coat on and picks up her shoes, not bothering to put them on. She shakes her head. “There’s a difference in loving me then and loving me now. Then you loved me as your best friend, your little sister. So why do you love me now? Is it because we’re sleeping together?”

I’m speechless.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. The only reason you *love* me now is because you fell in love with someone I’m not. You didn’t *love* me until I started throwing myself at you. You

didn't *love* me until I started acting completely out of character by giving you a peep show in front of the window or parading around in sexy underwear in front of your mom. You're not in love with me, Carson. You're in love with this character I created."

Without another word, she turns and rushes out, slamming the door behind her. I'm left sitting on my bed alone in a mess of clothing and blanket forts. I rest my elbows on my knees and hang my head. What am I supposed to do now? Give her time to cool off, obviously. But what then? How long is too long? How long is just enough? I don't want to wait too long and have her write me off completely, but I don't want to go bugging her too soon either.

"Carson, you have a visitor," my mom calls from the other room.

Oh, thank God, I think as I get up and rush out of the bedroom, expecting to find Felicity. I stop dead in my tracks when I'm face-to-face with Gillian.

"Gillian?"

She smiles. "Hi, Carson. I hope I didn't come at a bad time."

I look around and shrug. There's no good time. "What's up?"

"Well," she starts but then looks around at my mom and stepdad. "Can we talk in private?"

"Ugh, sure," I agree, leading her back to my bedroom.

She walks in. "Oh, what's all this?"

"Oh, it's a...uhh. It's a blanket fort. You know? Did you ever make those as a kid?"

She smiles. “Of course, but I haven’t made one since.”

“Yeah, that’s the difference between me and you,” I mumble, pulling at the blankets and tearing it down. I throw the wad of blankets onto the bed and find Felicity’s bra lying on the floor next to the pillows.

I look up at Gillian and she sees it too. “I see you’ve found some way to spend your time.”

“Yeah, about that...” I start, about to tell her the whole story with me and Felicity, but she holds up her hand, cutting me off.

“You don’t have to explain, Carson. We’re both single right now, and I can’t say that I’ve been a saint through our breakup either.” She bends down and picks up the pillows and bra. She tosses the pillows onto the bed and the bra, she folds in half and places it on the nightstand.

“Okay, then what can I do for you?” I ask, sitting on the edge of the bed. It’s only now that I notice that Felicity has shut her bedroom curtains. I guess we’ll follow the same rules as when we were kids. When she opens them, I’ll go over.

“Well, as you probably remember, tonight is my family’s big Christmas party, and I’m completely dateless. So, I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind filling in. I completely understand if you already have plans and trust me, this is not me pushing you for an answer you’re not ready to give yet. I just thought that maybe, if you didn’t have any plans, you wouldn’t mind going. I remember how well you and my father got along.” She offers up her best smile.

I take a deep breath, not knowing what to say. I’d love to get out of the house for the night, but I was hoping that Felicity would occupy my time, not Gillian. And if I do this

little favor for Gillian, Felicity might take it as something it's not. But if Felicity wants nothing to do with me, I might not want to burn this bridge with Gillian either. What do I do?

"Gillian," I start, but then stop, thinking again. Even if Felicity wants nothing to do with me, there's no way I can go back to just living a normal life with Gillian anyway. Not after Felicity. She's going to take some time to get over. "I know you're not wanting an answer right now, but I have one for you."

She nods me on, brows high and smile in place.

"I don't want to get back together with you. You see, the girl I've been seeing, the owner of the bra you found, it's Felicity."

"Felicity?" she asks, frowning. "Your childhood best friend that I had nothing to worry about because she was more of a little sister to you than a friend? That Felicity?"

I nod. "That's the one."

"How? How did this happen?"

I shrug. "I think my whole life has been leading to this," I say truthfully. "Felicity and I are best friends. But once we grew up a little, we started seeing one another differently. She was no longer just some little girl who followed me around. She was a beautiful girl who was getting attention from all of my friends. I found her undeniably sexy back then, but I wouldn't let it go anywhere because of our three-year age difference. Then when I went to college and she turned eighteen, things got more complicated when we kissed. Again, I stopped it because we were friends and I didn't want to ruin our friendship, and she accepted that. Then we went our separate ways. I went to college; she finished high school. By

the time I was out of college, she was starting. This is the first time in our lives since we were kids that we're around one another again. I came here, hoping that our feelings had changed, but time doesn't stop anything. I want her and she wanted me, so we agreed to hook up. Then things got more complicated. I told her I loved her."

Her face falls slack now, taking in my words. "And what did she have to say to that?"

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter what she said. It's just the fact that I said it to another woman. That changes everything with us." I motion between the two of us. "You honestly don't want to be with me if I'm in love with another woman, do you?"

She shrugs. "I mean, is it over?"

I just look at her, not able to believe her.

"I'm just saying that feelings linger and sometimes fade away."

I shake my head. "This isn't fading, Gillian. Not any time soon. Probably never. I mean, it's lasted me this long, right?"

She nods once and takes a deep breath before standing. "Okay, then. Carson, I wish you the best of luck."

I smile. "Thank you. And I hope you find what you're looking for out there."

She pulls me in for a hug and then turns to leave without another word.

I move back over to my window and look across the small section of yard at hers. The curtains are still closed. A long breath leaves my lips. I wonder how long she can hold out. Girl can hold a grudge.

FELICITY

I'm sitting on the couch, staring at my phone when my mom sits down in the recliner next to me. "What's your plans for the night?" she asks, picking up the remote and turning the TV on.

I shrug. "I've been going so much here lately. I think I'm just going to stay in tonight. Have dinner, take a long hot bath, wrap some Christmas presents, and fill out some applications. I need to find a job and the sooner the better. I've been fucking off too much these last few days."

"Oh, hun. Don't be so hard on yourself. You've worked your whole life to get to where you are now. Sit back and enjoy it for a bit. Take some time off and relax."

"I just don't want to lose the momentum, you know?"

She laughs and shakes her head. "What's Carson up to tonight?"

I don't look at her. I just shrug.

"Oh, Felicity. Don't tell me the two of you didn't make up last night."

"No, we did," I tell her. "But we got into another fight again this morning and I'm not sure how to handle it yet."

"Want to talk about it?"

I shake my head. “Not yet. I just want to let it simmer for a while. Think through things, look at every angle, you know. Be responsible.”

She giggles as she picks up her yarn and knitting needles. “Oh, hun, matters of the heart rarely have anything to do with responsibility.”

That’s what I was afraid of.

The night winds on and Mom and I decide on pizza for dinner and head to our rooms early. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve and that’s when we start our holiday baking. We always head over to Carson’s on Christmas Day and have a huge dinner and exchange presents. Usually it’s something I look forward to, but this year my excitement is held under something else. Anyway, the dinner is more of a potluck and we always bring a side plus the desserts. That means many long hours in the kitchen, preparing everything for the dinner.

I take my shower, spending way more time than necessary, but I enjoy the alone time and the quiet. It gives me time to think. It makes me start to question everything I thought I knew about Carson and me. I mean, before all this started, I would have loved to hear him say the words he did today, so why it is that now that he’s said it, I’m so freaked out? I love Carson, I know I do, so why am I so scared?

I guess I’m starting to feel the way he did before this started. We’re best friends and we’ve been in each other’s lives for a long time. Any time I had a hard day, a bad breakup, or just needed someone to talk to, he was there. But now that we’re in this stupid fight, who am I supposed to talk to?

Why couldn’t he tell me he loved me back then? Why wait until we started sleeping together? Did it take sleeping

together to make him figure out his feelings? He's always had some sort of claim to me and I thought that was more of a big brother thing. Like, he watched me grow up, and he watched out for me and protected me. On some level I knew he loved me, he had to stick around that long. But I didn't know what kind of love it was. Now I do.

Ugh, this whole thing is so confusing. I mean, why didn't he tell me before I stripped in front of my window? Why didn't he tell me before I was throwing myself at him, trying to win him like some prize? Why did I do those things to begin with? I should have just been myself and if he liked it, great. If not, fine, nothing changes. But I was hell-bent and determined. And this is what I get.

A buttload of confusion and heartbreak.

I get out of the shower and pull on a pair of pajamas. I brush through my hair and slather on my face cream. Then I walk back into my room and see my closed curtains. I want to open them. See if he's there, but I'm too scared to. What if he is there, waiting? Then what? He'll want to talk and I don't know if I can do that right now. I need to figure out what I want and what I want to say.

What if it's true? What if he does love me? Then what? He'll go back to the city because that's where he lives and works and I'll what? Stay here. Live with my mom while I try to find a job and then hope and pray that I land one in the city to be close to him?

I sit at my desk and open my computer, applying for every graphic design job I can find all around the country. I want to keep my options open. That only takes about an hour since I only have to fill out the info once and the computer imputes it into every app for me. When that's done, I sit on my bedroom

floor and start to wrap presents. I look around my room and notice that I'm not exactly feeling the Christmas spirit. This is one of my favorite times of the year. I shouldn't let this thing with Carson bring me down. I get up, light some Christmas-scented candles, put on some Christmas music, and change into my red, white, and green pajamas I wear every year to wrap presents in. I pull the hood over my head, hoping to hide away, mostly from myself and my feelings. I wrap the gifts I bought for my mom, Carson's mom and stepdad, and of course, Carson. Then I sneak out to the living room and put them all beneath the tree.

Walking back into my room, I feel alone and sad. Pity party at its finest. I walk over to the window and try willing myself to peek. Just a little peek. I move the curtain slightly to the side and peek out the window. His curtains are open and the bedroom light is on. He's sitting at his desk, looking at the blue light of the computer screen. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looks handsome sitting there, focusing. His dark hair is styled neatly and his jaw is covered in thick, dark stubble. I see him look down and pick up his phone. He looks at it, puts it down, and then looks over at my window. I quickly move to the side so he can't see my eye peeking out at him.

Slowly, I release the curtain and back away, sitting on my bed. My phone dings and I pick it up to read the message.

Carson: *I'm here when you want to talk. I'm not giving up on this.*

His message makes me feel guilty. I should just go over there and talk to him, but I can't. I don't know what to say. I don't know what I want. I want him. I want him to want me for me, not for some character I've been playing or some mask

I've been wearing. I guess this is all my fault. I should have just been honest with him from the start. I wasn't and now I'm paying the price.

I drop the phone and sit up, daring another peek. I pull the curtain back slowly and see that he's moved his chair from the desk to directly in front of the window as he gazes at my window, just like he did the night I danced for him. I move away from the crack in the curtain and go back to my bed. I lie down and look up at the ceiling. I take a deep breath and try to think of a happier time when things weren't so complicated.

"Come on, Felicity. You're so slow with those short legs."

"Piss off," I tell him, trying my best to catch up as we run across the backyard and to the forest behind our houses.

"You shouldn't talk like that, you know?" he says, giving me a dirty look.

I laugh and roll my eyes. "I'm thirteen, dummy. It's not like you don't cuss."

"I didn't say I didn't cuss. I just said you shouldn't. I'm older and a guy."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Women are supposed to be polite, sweet, innocent," he reminds me.

I snort. "Yeah, fuck a bunch of that shit. You know me and I ain't any of those things."

"You're never going to get a boyfriend with a mouth like that," he says, leading me through the woods to the creek so we can swim.

"Who's looking for a boyfriend? I'm not. Have you seen the guys I go to school with? Ugh, all skinny and smelly."

“Smelly?”

I laugh. “Yeah, they’re favorite thing to do is tell fart jokes. It’s gross. Please tell me at some point, you boys grow out of that.”

He laughs. “Some of us,” he says, stopping at the creek. He kicks his shoes off and throws down his towel. Then he removes his shirt and my, oh my... Carson is nothing like the boys in my school. The boys I go to school with are skinny and don’t have any meat on their bones. But Carson, Carson has been working out and he has muscles! Real muscles. His pecs are toned, probably bigger than my practically nonexistent boobs. His stomach is covered in abs, two, four, six of them! His biceps are probably the size of my thigh! I’ve never been shy or embarrassed in front of him before, but now, I don’t want to take my clothes off even though there is a bathing suit underneath.

He jumps into the water, not even noticing my sudden panic to strip down. When his head breaks the surface, he looks around for me, still finding me on the creek bank. “What are you doing? Get in here.” He waves me on.

I wave him off. “Nah, I think I’m good.”

His eyes level on me. “Felicity, get in the water,” he orders.

“No, I’m okay. I’ll just watch.” Watch? What a weird thing to say and such a bad choice of words considering the way I’m staring at him and checking him out.

“Why did we walk all the way down here if you didn’t want to swim?”

I don’t have an answer.

“Felicity, get in this water right now or I’ll carry you in.”

God, no. *“Okay, okay. Turn around,” I say.*

He laughs. “What?”

“Turn around, okay?”

“Why? We’ve swam in this creek for years. Why do I have to turn around now?”

“Because I don’t want you to see me in my bathing suit.”

He scoffs and rolls his eyes but turns his back to me. I move behind a tree and pull my t-shirt over my head, dropping it onto the ground. Then I slide out of my shorts. I look down at my skinny body. I have no ass, no hips, and no boobs. In fact, the only part I’m proud of is my stomach. It’s nice and flat. But no curves at all? Come on! The pink bikini fits me well. Mom just purchased it this summer. I tried it on and everything and loved it until now.

I step out from behind the tree and start making my way toward the water. That’s when Carson turns around, catching me. I swear I see his lips turn up into a pleasant smile, but then he wipes the look away and runs for me. Before I know it, I’m in his arms as he carries me into the water. Once we’re deep enough, he throws me and I fly through the air, landing in the water. I pop up, probably looking like a drowned cat.

“You asshole!” I say, wiping water out of my face.

That only makes him laugh. “What? You were being weird and I fixed it.”

“I wasn’t being weird,” I argue.

“We’ve swam together a million times, Felicity. Why are you suddenly so worried about me seeing you in your bathing suit?”

I get quiet which is the wrong thing to do around Carson. He lunges for me. He pulls me against his chest so my back is pressing against it. He starts tickling me and I start fighting and wiggling, trying to get away.

“Tell me,” he demands, refusing to let me go.

“It’s because you have a nice body and I look like a little girl,” I say all at once, hoping he didn’t understand a word of it.

That’s when he stops with his torture. He spins me around in his arms but refuses to let go of me. There’s only a small space between us as our eyes meet. “That’s why? You think you don’t look good in a bikini?”

I nod. “I mean, I look fine if I was swimming with a bunch of little girls, but I don’t look like the girls you date. They have boobs, and hips, and—”

He cuts me off, shaking his head. “You’re only thirteen, Felicity. You’re not supposed to have that stuff yet. When I was thirteen, you remember how I looked?”

I smile and nod. He was tall and skinny and lanky. Plus, he had that weird thing going on with his voice.

“You’ll grow and change. And you’re already beautiful, so when you do, you’ll knock their socks off.”

I smile even though my face heats up. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

I smile up at him and I feel tension settling between us. His hands are still on my hips, holding me close and his blue eyes are shimmering like the ocean on a sunny day. I wet my lips, not knowing why. Only knowing that I need...something.

That's when he splashes me in the face and the moment is gone.

“Hey!” I yell, splashing him back. The war is on and everything is back to normal with us, even though those lingering feelings will never leave.

CARSON

I t's going on midnight before I finally give up on watching that curtain. I pull my chair back to my desk, shut off the computer, and turn off the light. I flop into bed and cover my eyes with my forearm. Sleep finds me easily, but even in my sleep, she's there, teasing me.

"Hey, man, what are you doing back here? Didn't you escape this small town for the big city?" my old buddy Mike asks.

I give him a high five that turns into a handshake. "Yep, officially done with my third year of college. Only one more to go," I tell him, proudly.

"Awesome, man. So what are you doing back here? Miss the high school parties?"

I laugh. "No, not exactly. My friend was in your class. She graduated so I figured I'd come and celebrate with her. You seen Felicity anywhere?"

"Oh, yeah. She's inside. She was in the make-out room."

My anger flares. "Make-out room?"

"Yeah, it's the room off the living room. The one with the blacklight and all the couches." He smiles and nods his head once.

I walk into the house that the graduation party is being held at and go straight to the room he described. I look over every face in the room, but Felicity is nowhere to be found. I immediately start praying that she didn't move from the make-out room to a bedroom upstairs. I turn and walk back through the living room and into the kitchen where I find her in a circle of a bunch of guys. They're all dying for a minute of her time. Too bad they ain't getting it tonight. Not now that I'm around.

"Hey, shorty," I say, grabbing her arm and pulling her out of the circle.

At first, anger flashes in her eyes, then she sees that it's me and it's replaced with a smile. "Carson?" she breathes out, pulling me in for a huge hug. The way her breasts press against my chest causes a fire to light low in my stomach.

"What are you doing here?" she asks when she pulls away and I get the full view of her. She's wearing a tiny little skirt, a low-cut tank top, and a pair of heels that make her legs look toned and sexy as fuck. After the last party like this that I rescued her from, I'm not leaving her alone the rest of the night. This outfit would be far too easy to lose.

I shrug at her question. "Just wanted to come and celebrate with you. Congrats!"

She smiles and her green eyes light up. "Thank you. I didn't think you'd show up. I haven't seen you since that weekend last fall when you gave me the college tour."

I take her hand and wrap it around my elbow, leading her out back where it's a little more quiet. "I know, but I couldn't miss this. Hey, what college did you end up choosing anyway?"

She frowns. "USC."

“What? Why didn’t you choose Chicago?”

She shrugs. “I said that it depended.”

Oh yeah, I remember her saying that but I never did find out what it depended on. “What was it depending on?”

Her face flushes. “You.”

“Me?” I ask, shocked. “Why did it depend on me?”

She rolls her eyes. “You know, for a smart guy, you’re really dumb.”

I freeze. What am I missing?

“I came to your place, we kissed. I thought I made my feelings clear, but you pushed me away. So I decided instead of being constantly reminded of it, that I would move on, start fresh, far away from you and my confusing feelings for you.”

Oh...I get it. “Felicity,” I breathe out, but she just shakes her head.

“It’s fine, Carson, really. I get it. I mean, you’re older, more experienced. And I’m me. The girl who followed you around everywhere, made you watch over her. I shouldn’t expect you to feel the same about me as I feel about you.”

“Felicity,” I breathe out again. “I didn’t know you felt that way. I mean, I know we kissed, and I enjoyed it. I really did. But I thought it was just a drunk make-out thing. I figured you would’ve kissed any guy in that moment.”

“Seriously, that’s what you think of me?”

I shrug. “I mean, last summer I had to pull you off a table because you were stripping in front of a bunch of guys.”

Her eyes tear up. “Screw you, Carson.” She turns and walks back into the house.

Fuck. Why did I say that?

I go after her, but she's found comfort in the arms of some guy. Which is fine. She's taken care of and I'm still here to keep my eye on him. As long as she's okay, I'm fine. I stop in the kitchen, leaning against the counter so I can watch her without being too close. I get offered a drink and I accept it. If I'm going to be stuck at this party, I might as well enjoy myself a little at least.

Hours pass and I find myself getting more and more drunk while she gets more and more comfortable in the arms of that guy. They're on the dance floor now, slow dancing. He's holding her close, his hand dangerously close to an area I will break his fingers if he touches. Her head is on his shoulder and every time they spin, her eyes lock on mine. Jealousy is eating me up from the inside out. I finish off my drink and something inside of me takes over. I don't even know what I'm doing.

I walk up to them and get her attention. "Can I cut in?"

The guy pulls back and says something, but I don't hear a word of it. Instead, she comes to me willingly. The guy walks off, pissed off and grumbling but I couldn't care less. I have her in my arms now. My hand is on the small of her back and her arms are around my neck with her head on my chest.

"What are you trying to do? Make me get in a fight?"

She giggles. "Still the same old Carson, I see."

"That'll never change, Felicity. I'll always chase away any guy that comes near you. I'll always protect you, even when you don't want me to."

She lifts her head off my chest and her eyes meet mine.

"Why?"

“Why what?”

“Why does it mean so much to you? I mean, clearly you don’t want me.”

“What I want and what you need are two completely different things, Felicity.”

I know she’s taking that to mean, it doesn’t matter if I want her because she needs protected, but what I really mean, is that I want her, but she doesn’t need that.

Her eyes are still locked on mine and the urge to kiss her is stronger than ever. “Come on, let’s go get a drink,” I say, needing to stop this before it starts. She kissed me before and I loved it, but she doesn’t know that. If I kiss her, she won’t know where she stands with me and I don’t want to confuse her more.

I take her outside and we get another drink along the way. We’re hanging out by the pool, talking, laughing, and just having fun for hours. The drinks go down too smoothly and I forget to keep an eye on how much she’s consuming. Actually, I forget to limit myself as well. She sits up on the poolside chair, putting her knees facing me. I sit up the same way and her eyes light up.

“Hey, let’s go swimming. For old time’s sake. You know like we did in the creek behind the house.”

I look down at myself. I’m wearing shorts and a t-shirt. “I don’t have a suit.”

She shrugs as she stands up. “Me either.” She pulls off her top and pushes her skirt down her legs. She’s wearing a black bra and black boy short panties. Without warning, she dives into the pool. The pool and the night around us are dark. This part of the house has clearly been closed off to the party. With

nobody around, I strip down to my boxers and dive in after her. When I break the surface, she's giggling and swimming over to me.

"Not so shy this time, are you?" I say, thinking back to that time she was too shy to be in front of me in her bikini. Now she's running around in her underwear.

She wraps her arms around my neck. "Well, a lot of stuff has changed since that day," she says, her eyes flashing down to my lips.

"Like what?"

"Like, I finally have the boobs and curves I wanted back then." She lets out a giggle.

I shake my head. "I didn't notice," I joke.

"Shut up," she teases. "I know you've noticed."

"How?" I ask.

"Cuz you can't keep your eyes off them," she says around a smile, and when she says that, I lose all control and look down at them again. They are nice. Big, but not too big. I'm sure they're firm and would feel perfect in my hands...or mouth.

"What do you want, Carson?" she asks softly in the darkness.

My mouth opens but no words come out. What do I want? I want her.

"Just take it," she says.

"I can't take anything from you, Felicity."

"Then I'll give it. Again and again and again until you have this whole thing figured out." She leans forward and

captures my mouth with hers. Her lips are soft and strong as they move against mine. They're sweet and teasing, pushing me to want so much more. I feel like I'm getting a second chance. I blew it last time by overthinking. This time, she's in control. I'll stop when she tells me to stop and that's about it.

I place my hands on her hips and pick her up against me. Her legs wrap around my waist as I move us to the corner of the pool. I press her up against the two sides as I deepen our kiss. My hands are still on her hips and they begin kneading and massaging their way around her thighs and ass. When I get two large handfuls of her ass, I squeeze tightly and she moans into my mouth.

Fuck. I'm a goner.

"What do you want from me, Felicity?" I ask against her lips.

"Everything," she replies, pulling my mouth back to hers.

I let out an animalistic growl as I break our kiss, peppering her jaw and neck with kisses and nips from my teeth. Her fingers lace into my hair, pulling and tugging, egging me on. She seems to know what she's doing, but does she?

"Are you still a virgin?" I ask, licking up her neck, tasting the pool water.

She nods, and that's when I know I can't go through with this. I can't take that from her. My hands slow on her body and her eyes open, locking with mine.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't do this," I say, shaking my head and trying to convince myself of what I'm saying.

“What? Why?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” she says, her voice sure and steady. “You make me feel good. It feels like every nerve ending is on fire right now. Nobody else has made me feel that way, Carson. Just you.”

I rest my forehead against hers and breathe heavy. “It’ll never work out. I’m in Chicago. You’re going to South Carolina. It’s too far. We’ll never make it.”

She places her hand on my jaw and tilts my head back. “I’m not asking for forever. I’m just asking for tonight.”

I shake my head. “I can’t do that. I can’t use you.”

“Then let me use you,” she tries.

“Not when you’re the one that will be hurt in the long run.”

Her eyes fall from mine now, hiding behind her spiky black wet lashes. She bites down on her lower lip and I see the pain I’ve already caused just by denying her. Does she think it will feel any different when I roll off of her and walk away, not to see her again for God knows how long? I can’t do that to her. I won’t.

“I’m sorry. I’m doing this for you. You’ll see that one day.” I try to release her, but she tightens her hold on me. I stop and turn back to face her.

“You won’t have sex with me. I get it. But there’s something else I want.”

“Name it,” I breathe out, relieved.

“It’s just that... I haven’t had one yet and all my friends keep talking about it. I want my first one to be from you,” she says, her cheeks turning pink.

First what? I wonder. Then I see the look she’s giving me, and it all makes sense. First orgasm?

“You...you want me to...”

She nods.

“You. Want me. To...make you...come?” I practically whisper the last word.

She nods, not looking at me.

I take her chin in my hand and force her eyes to mine. “You mean, you haven’t...done it yourself yet?”

Her cheeks burn hotter, but she shakes her head. “I didn’t know what I was doing and I’ve kind of always had it in my head that you’d be the one, you know. I saved it for you, if you will.” Her eyes meet mine now and they’re bloodshot from drinking and from the pool water but they’re as clear as day. She’s sure. And this isn’t much, right? This I can do. This, I was born to do.

I move my mouth back to hers. Our kiss starts slow but builds quickly. My hand is on her thigh that’s still wrapped around my hips and I glide it slowly upward under the water. When I get to the junction between her legs, I dip my fingers down the front of her panties and she gasps into my mouth. That pushes me forward. This, I want to give her this. I will give her anything she wants, but never take. I move my fingers back and forth over her clit before slipping inside. She lets out a soft moan and I can feel how tight she is around me. It kills me to know that I’m the first man to touch her like this.

Technically, I'm still the first man to be inside her and that seems fitting given we've spent our entire lives together.

As I push her closer and closer to the edge, her nails dig into my back and her fist pulls at my hair. Our kiss is sloppy now, our teeth bumping together the closer she gets. Finally, I feel her tighten around me and I pull back, desperately needing to watch her as she comes for me. Her lips part and her eyes close as she leans her head back against the edge of the pool. Her brows knit together and she bites on her lower lip as more whimpers and cries fall from her mouth. When she loosens around me, I remove my hand and place her on her feet again. She looks into my eyes and she blushes crimson and I chuckle.

"Is that what you needed from me, sweetheart?"

She smiles and her eyes close. "Thank you? I feel like that's a bad term, but thank you."

I laugh and wrap my arm around her, dragging her back to the middle of the pool where we splash around like a bunch of kids.

Fuck, just remembering that makes me hard for her. Even then I loved her and couldn't deny her as long as I wasn't taking anything. I've got to get her to hear me out. I know what she thinks and I was stupid for telling her the way I did. But the truth is that I've loved her since she was seven years old, even when I hated her. I've wanted her my whole life, and I refuse to lose her now that we're so close.

I will make her talk to me. If not tomorrow, then Christmas Day. She'll have to talk to me. She's coming over here for Christmas and has every year she was home. This isn't over. This is just beginning.

FELICITY

Christmas Eve goes by in a flash of baking, wine drinking, and Christmas movies with Mom. Me and my mom have always been close, but now that I'm an adult, we're a whole different level of close. She talks to me like I'm her adult friend instead of her daughter. We talk about anything and everything, such as the guys I dated in college and the guys she's been seeing. She asks about Carson but I blow that off, not ready to address it yet. I know I'll have to face him tomorrow, but that's tomorrow's problem, not today's. Today, I just want to relax and enjoy the holiday with my mom.

We're in and out of the kitchen all day making cookies, cakes, and pies. She teaches me her famous potato salad before packing it up in the fridge for tomorrow and we spend way too many hours peeling eggs to make deviled eggs. Everything gets sealed tight and put away for tomorrow. The rest of the night, we spend cleaning up the kitchen, eating leftover pizza for dinner, and drinking wine and laughing in front of the TV, watching all our favorites.

We call it a night around ten and I walk to my bedroom alone. I enter my room and see that my curtains are open. Mom must have opened them when she was vacuuming earlier. I look out the window and into his. It's dark and empty and I take this as a good sign as I walk across the room to pull

them closed. Just as I reach for them, his light comes on and he enters the room. His eyes automatically find mine. We share a long moment together and just as he takes a step closer, I pull them shut. Tears sting my eyes as I go to lie down on my bed.

What am I doing? I love that man. I know I do. Why can't he just love me for who I really am and not some easy girl I played to be with him. Looking back, I guess I was always easy for him. I've always wanted him and was never afraid of letting him know it, not when I got older anyway. But I never went to the lengths to get anyone as I went to for him. He's always attracted the easy girls, the girls looking for a good time. The ones who would show up to a party barely dressed with their boobs hanging out. He'd find the easiest one and take her to some bedroom where he'd spend several hours buried deep inside her. Does he think I'm like the rest of them? Or that I'm this way with every guy? Why would he tell me *that way*? Why didn't he love me years ago?

With my crying, sleep finds me easily. I drift in and out all night, each time only going back to dream of him some more.

"Why doesn't he notice me?" I ask my friend, Lauren, as I lean against the wall at a party. I'm only a freshman so he takes me to every party, but he always leaves me with a friend while he goes off and has a good time with whatever girl he finds. Why can't I be the girl he finds?

"He does notice you, Felicity. It's just that he doesn't see you that way. To him, you're his little sister and you just need to move on. Like with him," she says, pointing at some random guy.

I turn and look at who she's pointing at. Hey, that's not a bad idea. He's over there with a blonde on his lap. He's

making me jealous. Maybe I can do the same.

I walk over and talk to the guy she pointed out for me. I find out his name is Steven and he just got chosen to be on the football team. Even better. Carson is on the football team, which would make him really jealous. We talk and hang out. He drinks but I don't. I know if Carson caught me drinking, he'd drag me out of here and give me a longer lecture than even my mom would. The more I get to know, the more I get to like. Maybe Lauren was right. Maybe I just needed a distraction and Steven seems like the perfect distraction.

He's holding my hand and running his finger along my cheek when I blush. He's getting closer and closer and the next thing I know, I'm sitting on his lap and he's kissing me. Like, really kissing me. He's holding my face and keeping me in place. I feel my body start to come alive but that must be like a beacon that calls to Carson because he comes over and grabs me up by my arm.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asks, seemingly repulsed by my actions.

I frown. "What? It's no different than what you're doing over there." I point to the girl who's now sitting on the couch instead of his lap, pouting.

His eyes flash from me, to her, and back. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Ha! Finally.

"Let's go," he demands, pulling me toward the door.

"Wait? What?"

"You're right. I shouldn't be over there doing that in front of you. I'm sorry. Now I'm going to take you home." The girl walks up to him and he tells her he'll be back.

Now I'm mad. It was one thing when he was going home with me, but now he's taking me home and coming back to finish what he started where I can't see? No way. This is not happening.

He drags me out of the house party and to his car. He puts me in the passenger side seat and climbs behind the wheel. No worries about him drinking. He never does when I'm with him. He's too afraid to set a bad example.

"What's your problem, Carson?"

He looks at me. "I don't have a problem, Felicity," he spits out my name.

"You clearly do, Carson," I spit out his name in the same disgust.

He lets out a long breath and shakes his head. "You really expect me to be okay with watching you sit on some loser's lap and make out with him?"

I roll my eyes. "You really expect me to be okay watching you make out with some skank sitting on your lap?"

"I said I was sorry."

"Yeah, and now I'm in trouble and you're not. I'm going home and you're going back to the party."

I see him grind his teeth. "Would it make you feel better if I didn't go back?"

"Yes. Yes, it would," I tell him.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Okay, then. What do you want to do?"

"Huh? Really?"

He nods me on. "What do you want to do?"

I smile to myself. “Ummm, I want to sneak a bottle away from your mom’s boyfriend and go swimming in the creek.”

“Fine,” he agrees, and I’m happy once again.

I wake up Christmas morning and I’m in no hurry to get this day started. I miss him like crazy. It’s like he’s embedded himself into my bones and when I’m away from him for too long, my whole body feels his absence.

“Rise and shine, cupcake,” Mom says, popping her head into my room. “Breakfast is ready.”

I fling the blankets off me and sit up. Her famous Christmas pancakes are done. Every year she makes pancakes in the shape of little Santa heads. Hat and all. She even colors it with strawberry syrup for the red hat, whipped cream for his beard and the fuzzy ball on the end, and blueberries for eyes. It’s really not all that tasty, but I don’t dare tell her that. She’s been doing it since I was a little girl. It’s a Christmas tradition and I’m more for keeping the traditions than having a tasty breakfast.

We eat and clean up the mess, then take our coffee into the living room to exchange our own personal gifts. I give Mom her gifts first. She unwraps the first one and smiles at the mother and daughter wineglasses I found at one of the shops in town.

“I love this,” she says, setting it aside and picking up her second gift. She opens it to find the scrapbook I made. It’s filled with pictures of us from the time I was born up to just a few days ago. Each page I decorated with stickers, glitter, and bows. There are cute sayings that I wrote by the pictures. It’s a gift that’s completely handmade and from the heart. As she flips through the pages, she wipes tears from her eyes.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever received.” She leans over and pulls me in for a hug.

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, kid,” she says, pulling away and drying her eyes with her shirt sleeve. “Now, open mine.”

She hands me three. The first one is wrapped in red paper with a big green bow. I open it and find a personalized coffee cup. It’s the backs of two women. One is older with gray in her hair and the other is younger, dark hair with curls and highlights. Their arms are around one another and it says a cute little saying about how daughters turn into their mother’s best friend. My eyes tear but I will them away. “Aww, this is cute. Thank you.”

She nods me on, and I open the one wrapped in green paper with a big red bow. I find a *first time on your own* kit. It has tons of gift cards for restaurants and grocery stores. It has a little pocket that says *gas money*. Another that reads *mad money* and another that says *because I know you’ll forget something*. There are many more pockets in the kit, but I get the gist and laugh. “Thanks, I have a feeling this will come in handy very soon.”

“The last one is my favorite,” she says with a smile.

I open the last gift and find a picture frame. The frame holds four pictures and she’s already put pictures in them. The first one is a picture of Carson and I when we were kids. He’s frowning at the camera and I have my arms crossed over my chest, refusing to look at him. The picture makes me giggle. The picture next to it must have been taken the same day because we’re wearing the same clothes, but in this one, we’re hugging with big smiles on our faces.

Below those are two more. The first is a picture from the other night at dinner when we were fighting. His brows are pulled together and his jaw is flexed, like he's angry or in deep thought. In this picture, I'm looking at him with a dirty look, my nose curled up and brows knitted together. I didn't even know she had snapped this picture. I remember her looking at her phone, but I had no idea it was directed at us.

In the one next to that is a picture of us after dinner when I thought she had left. We're sitting by the ice rink with the Christmas lights in the background. He's looking at me with a smile and I'm smiling back.

I look up at her with tears in my eyes.

“The point is, honey, that you two will fight and argue a million times through this life, but you love one another and forgiveness always comes. You just have to be patient with one another, forgive one another, and love one another just like you've always done. Whatever you're going through right now, you'll overcome it, just like you did when you were kids.”

I smile at her. “Thanks, Mom.” I lean in and she hugs me, smoothing down my hair.

After we clean up the paper, we both go to get ready for our dinner at Carson's. I take my gifts to my room and place the picture frame on the bedside table. I sit on my bed and look at it. She might be right, but the only problem is that our problems today are nothing like the problems we had as kids. It can't be fixed with an I'm sorry and a sucker.

I know that I will have to forgive him at some point. He's my best friend and I can't imagine living without him in my life. The question is: when? When will I be able to forgive him and look past this? And when I do, what will happen then?

Will we go back to being just friends who have too much passion or will we pick up where we left off a couple days ago? Or will it be too late for that? What if he moves on and finds someone else? Someone like Gillian. Or what if he already did?

I push the thoughts from my mind and go to get ready. I can't put it off any longer and the longer I wait, the less time I'll have to look presentable and I want to make him drool. I pull on the tightest pair of skinny jeans I have. They're light in color and have rips and tears in all the right places. I pair the jeans with a red sweater and a pair of high-heeled boots. I curl my hair and leave it hanging down my back, then I fix my makeup, making my lips shine as much as possible. I know how much that gets his attention. I remember him once saying that he couldn't stop staring at my lips because they were so shiny. It made him want to kiss me, but that was long before we had actually kissed.

"Ready, hun?" Mom asks, poking her head in my room.

"Yep, ready as I'll ever be," I say, pulling on my coat and grabbing the gifts as I give myself one last look in the mirror.

CARSON

Someone knocks on the door and I get up from the couch and answer it. I pull the door open and Mrs. B is on the other side with Felicity right behind her. I pull her in for a hug. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” she replies, hugging me quickly before moving deeper into the room to greet my mom.

Felicity steps up to me and forces a smile. “Merry Christmas, Carson.”

I look her up and down; my body begs to touch hers, but I don’t. “Merry Christmas, Felicity.” I look around her. “Wow, it’s really coming down out there, huh?”

Her brows raise and she nods. “Yep, snow for Christmas. How original.” She passes me by and goes to greet my mom with a genuine smile.

Well, guess she’s still mad at me. I close the door and follow the women into the kitchen. “Mrs. B, did you make those cookies I like?” I ask, looking through the canisters she’s pulling out of her bag.

“I sure did.” She looks at Felicity. “Why don’t the two of you go put the gifts under the tree?”

Felicity turns her nose up at her mom for suggesting such a thing, but she hands one bag over to me and we walk into the living room together. We both kneel down at the tree and start unloading the gifts.

“Felicity,” I start, but she stops me.

“Carson, don’t.” She shakes her head.

“You know, sooner or later, you’re going to have to hear me out, right?”

“Nope,” she says, refusing to look at me.

“We’re best friends. Our parents live right next door to one another. You can’t avoid me forever.”

“Fine, let’s go to your room,” she says, tossing the empty bag aside and standing up.

I stand up and follow her back now that the adults are busy in the kitchen.

I close the door and walk toward her. “Look...”

“No, you look. What you said to me wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that you said it the way you said it or when you did. But I’m putting it behind me. What we had there for a few days was fun, but look at what it’s done to us, Carson. We’re not even the same people we were a week ago.”

“What are you saying?” I ask, taken aback.

She takes a deep breath and runs her hand through her hair. “I’m saying that...maybe you were right. Maybe I shouldn’t have pushed you. Maybe you shouldn’t have given in. Maybe we shouldn’t have done the things we did. It’s done nothing but confuse us and tear us apart. So, in the spirit of Christmas, I’m going to forgive you. I’m going to forget what you said and go back to how we were before.”

“Oh,” is all I can say.

“No more fighting. No more avoiding. Just two friends. Deal?”

I nod my head even though I don't know why. Again, just me trying to give her anything she asks for.

“Good,” she breathes out. Then she pulls me in for a hug. Her heat consumes me. Her scent draws me in. My heart starts racing in my chest, begging me to lean in just a bit more and press my lips to hers. I'm craving her taste, her soft lips moving with mine. I need her more now than I've ever needed her before. There's too much between us now to go back to how we were. There was too much before, but now? No way can I move on and pretend all this didn't happen. Now that I've had her in my arms, in my bed, I can't go back to just being her friend.

Not even if that's what she wants?

Someone knocks on the door and it opens inwardly. Mom pokes her head in and looks relieved. “Thank baby Jesus. No blanket forts. Come eat dinner, you two.”

Felicity pulls away and follows my mom out of the room, leaving me alone once again. I collapse onto the bed, wondering how I can make her see that this is a bad idea. We can't go back. We can only move forward. How can I get her to move forward with me?

“Come on, we ain't waiting all day,” Mom says from down the hall.

I get my ass up and leave the room, heading for the dinner table. The five of us sit around the table just as we have in the years past. My mom and stepdad sit together; Mrs. B sits across from us, and me and Felicity are across from one

another. I used to reach under the table and tickle her legs or pinch her, kick her if need be. But today, there's none of that. I feel like she's just ripped my heart out of my chest and stomped on it. Mom says grace and we all bow our heads, then she picks up a dish, takes a serving, and passes it along. Before long, we're all eating. Everyone's talking about the Christmas' from the past and the memories we share. All but me that is. I have nothing to offer this conversation. I sit and eat quietly and nobody but Felicity seems to notice. When I look up from my plate, her eyes are on me, but the moment I try to meet her gaze, her eyes dash away.

After the table is cleared, we all move to the living room for gifts. We all have a glass of wine as we sit around the room. I drink mine a little too quickly and get up for another while my stepfather passes out gifts. When I come back into the room, I look at Felicity and see her big smile as she holds up a sweater my mom gave her for Christmas.

“Thank you,” she says. “I love it.”

“Psh,” accidentally slips out and everyone looks at me. I shake my head so they disregard the comment but take my seat and think, *oh, you can love a sweater but you can't love me?* Okay, maybe I should stay away from the wine.

Felicity cuts her eyes toward me and give me a look that asks, *are you okay?*

Then she picks up a small box and hands it over. “Open mine,” she requests. I wonder why she's always the one asking me for things. I've never once asked her for anything, and yet, I still can't tell her I love her? I tear into the paper a little too aggressively and open the box. In my hands is a picture frame. In the frame, there are four pictures. Two of them are of us as kids, and two of them are from the past week.

I frown as I look down at her sitting on the floor at my feet.

“This is what my mom gave me, and I thought it was too good not to give you. You see, in the first picture, we’re angry with one another. But in the second, we’ve made up and are happy. The third picture taken fifteen years later, it’s the same. And the fourth. We’ve had a lifetime together, Carson. We’ve had our ups and downs. But we always overcome it and stay friends. I’ll never forget you. That, I can promise,” she says. It’s a sweet gesture, but the only word I can focus on is *friends*.

I set the picture frame aside and get up. Everyone is looking at me now as I grab my coat and leave the house, slamming the door closed behind me. I get in the car and start the engine. I see her running out the moment I hit the gas and leave the house behind.

I end up driving around aimlessly for a while. Then I find myself at the liquor store buying a bottle of tequila. Then I’m at the old farm road that I took Felicity to. I park on the side of the road and get out to sit on the hood. It hasn’t been that long since I was last here, but a lot has changed. I open the bottle and chuck the lid into the snow, knowing that I won’t need it. I’m not moving until this whole bottle is gone. The more I drink, the more comes into focus for me. I know I shouldn’t have left the way I did, but I didn’t have much of a choice. What I wanted to do was pull her against me and kiss her until I made her see clearly. I don’t know why she’s being such a pain in the ass about this. She loves me. I know she does. And I’ve known it somewhere deep in my soul before my brain even knew it. She’s loved me since we were kids. And it’s more than just in a friendly kind of way. If it wasn’t, we

wouldn't have fought against it our whole lives. I just have to make her see. How do I do that?

Being winter, it gets dark early and it's not long before I'm sitting out in the dark alone and cold. My cell phone has been ringing constantly in my pocket, but I keep ignoring it, not ready to talk to anyone yet. It's crossed my mind a few times that I'm too drunk to drive home, but I push that thought away quickly. If nothing else, I'll sleep in my car tonight. It's not like there's an Uber in this small town. God, I miss the city. Get shit-faced drunk anywhere there, and you're safe as long as you can still work your phone. I've done that a few times too, usually because of her as well. The first time was when she told me some guy she had been dating proposed.

"Hello?" I answer my phone as I sit at my desk at work. I look at the clock and see that it's well past quitting time. It's going on eight o'clock.

"Carson?" It's Felicity and she sounds excited.

"Hey, sweetheart. What's going on?" I ask, immediately smiling when I hear her voice.

"Oh my God. You're never going to guess."

"Guess what?"

"I haven't told anyone yet, but Ben proposed! Can you believe that? He asked me to marry him."

My blood runs cold. I can't think. I can't talk. All I can do is sit here with this information and let it take everything from me, my past, my present, my future.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," I stutter out.

"Can you believe it?"

“I’m sorry, I’m just...who’s Ben again?”

“Ugh, Ben. The guy I’ve been dating for the last two years. Remember? I’ve sent you pictures of us.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, remembering the pictures because I cropped him out. “That’s...that’s some news,” I say, not knowing what to say.

“Yeah, so what do you think? Should I say yes?”

“You mean, you haven’t answered him yet?”

“No, I told him I needed to think about it. I mean, we’re still so young, you know? What if we graduate and want different things?”

“Yes! Exactly! You are too young. People...grow and change and, and, and want different things.”

“I know. I’m just so taken off guard. I mean, we’re not even living together or anything yet.”

“Right. God, what if you get married and find a million things you can’t stand. Like he doesn’t put down the toilet seat, or he leaves his face hair all over the sink? Or” And I only say this because I know how much she hates it when I do it. “Or what if he spits all the time.”

“Ugh, I haven’t even thought of that yet. I mean, we really haven’t spent that much time alone together, you know. I mean, we’ve dated for a long time, but the most we’ve ever been together is what, a weekend?”

“Exactly. I think this is something you need to think about long and hard. There’s no going back from something like this.”

“I know,” she says, sounding like a child.

“So, you’re going to think about this, right? You’re not just going to get off the phone and tell him yes?”

“No, I’m going to think about it.”

“Good girl,” I say, finally able to breathe. “Keep me updated.”

“I will and thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

There’s a long pause.

“Bye, Carson.”

“Bye, sweetheart.”

I hear the phone click and the call ends. That’s when my panic begins.

FELICITY

I'm in shock when he gets up and storms out. What did I do wrong? I thought passing the gift along would be a good idea. I thought it would calm his fears of me never forgiving him. I thought it was an olive branch, especially after having the conversation we had in his room. I took it back. I took it all back. There's nothing to fight over. Why is he acting this way?

I get up and chase after him. He sees me, but it doesn't stop him, and it feels like he just drove right over me. He's never run from me before. He's always run to me, whether to save me, hug me, or be friends with me. He's never run the other way. Not until now, that is. I should have listened to him. We never should have slept together. Why didn't I listen? For years, he wanted me as much as I wanted him, but he wouldn't allow it in fear of ruining what we already had. But I wouldn't listen. I took what I wanted and it's ruined everything. I hate him about as much as I hate myself right now.

I watch until his car is no longer visible from my place in the road, then I run back home instead of back to his house. I can't show my face in there now. Not after all of this. I go home and fling myself onto my bed, tears rushing from my eyes. It doesn't take my mom long to come and find me. She sits on the edge of the bed and rubs my back.

“Are you ready to talk now?”

I nod as I sob. “Carson and I slept together,” I admit.

She nods. “I know. I’ve heard all about it. Everything from the Santa themed bra to the blanket fort.”

My face blushes. “For years, I wanted him and he wanted me. But he would never go for it. He was afraid of ruining our friendship. But I kept pushing. I thought that if we slept together, I could get over him or that maybe it would make him see how great we could be.” I wipe my tears and she nods.

“And then we did it and it was great. And then we kept doing it because it was so great, so much better than anyone else I’ve ever been with. It felt right, you know?”

She nods, trying to keep up without getting disgusted from hearing all of this from her daughter.

“Well, then he said he loved me.”

She gasps. “Well, that’s what you wanted, right?”

I nod. “I did, but not like that. Why couldn’t he tell me before? Why couldn’t he love me when it was just him and me. Why say it after I bend over backwards to sleep with him?”

“Oh, honey,” she says, rubbing her hand up and down my back to soothe me. “Men are stupid. They say the worst things at the worst times, but I’ve come to learn, if they say it, it’s true. Don’t let the timing ruin this. He said it, that’s what matters.”

“You really think so?”

She nods. “Do you love him?”

“I’ve always loved him, Mom. For as long as I can remember. It’s always been him. I knew it when I was seven years old and I still know it today.”

“Then go to him. Forgive him. Be honest with your feelings before it’s too late. Trust me, bitterness, anger, and resentment can destroy you. That’s why your father left, you know? He broke my heart and I never could forgive him. He left before you were even born. It killed us, and I don’t want to see the same thing happen to you. Who cares if he didn’t say the words when you wanted to hear them. The point is that he said them.”

I look up at her and know she’s right. I nod my head and dry my tears.

“That’s my girl.”

She leaves my room and that’s when I grab my phone and call him. The phone rings and rings and rings, but it always goes to voicemail. I wonder where he’s at, if he’s gotten himself into some kind of trouble, and I pray that he didn’t run to Big Boobs for comfort. There was once a day when he’d run to me, but that was before I chased him off.

I wait and I pray, and I pray and I wait. I pace the floor back and forth in front of my window, waiting to see his car pull in the drive or waiting for his bedroom light to flicker on, but it never does and I end up falling asleep around four in the morning.

The first thing I do when I wake up is rush to my window. His car still isn’t home and I’m getting more worried. But I tell myself that Carson has always been responsible. That he probably just had too much to drink and he stayed somewhere else so he didn’t have to drive home. I go for breakfast, coffee, and a shower. When I get out, I check again. Still no car.

I feel like I can't move on, not until I see him, talk to him, explain and tell him how sorry I am. I don't leave my room. I sit and find things to keep my mind busy. I read old books, go through my old things, finding notes between me and Carson, and look through old yearbooks. I clean out some of the trash and finally start unpacking my boxes that got shipped from school. Every couple of hours, I look out my window, hoping and praying, but there is still no sign of him. I finally lose my patience and call his mom's home phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Felicity. Have you heard from Carson?"

"I have, dear. He's gone back to the city. Something came up at work and he needed to address it, but he's still coming to the New Year's party."

I let out a sigh of relief, knowing that he's safe. "Are you sure? You don't think he'll blow it off, do you?"

"I made him promise."

"Okay, thank you."

I hang up the phone and try calling him again, but there's no answer.

Almost immediately my phone dings.

Carson: *I'm sorry I've been avoiding your calls, but I'm just not ready yet. We'll get over this, I know we will. I just need more time.*

Felicity: *Please come to the party. I need to see you.*

Carson: *I already told my mom that I will be there.*

Felicity: *I know, but I know how you are.*

Carson: *Felicity, I'm trying here. Please, just give me a break. I'm trying to give you what you asked for.*

Felicity: *What I asked for? What did I ask for?*

Carson: *Friendship. Just give me a few days, please. We'll get there again.*

I let the phone fall from my hands, not knowing what to do. I don't want to tell him over a text, but I can't stand the thought of him going days without knowing that I love him too.

The days pass slowly, too slowly, and I haven't talked to Carson since. I want to give him what he asked for: time. Over the course of our friendship, I've asked him for a lot, and he always honored my wishes. So I'm trying to do the same. But damn, it's hard. The days pass and finally New Year's Eve approaches. The party is tonight and I have the perfect dress. I know exactly how I want to do my hair and makeup. Everything seems perfect except for the fact that I'm as nervous as can be. A lot can happen in a few days. He could've gotten back together with Big Boobs. He could have changed his mind about me completely, thinking that I'm not worth the effort anymore. I pray that none of that is true as I get ready for the party.

The party is in the town square, at the big fancy banquet hall there. It started at seven, but it's going on ten and I'm just now getting ready. I know, I suck, but fear was paralyzing me. I didn't want to get up there and pour my heart out, just to have him turn me away. But then I knew that nothing would ever happen if I didn't take the chance and put my heart on the line. So, I got up and started getting ready.

I walk into the living room in my black dress. It's long as it flows all the way to the floor. It's fitted through the hips with a

slit in the side all the way up to my hip. The dress has long sleeves and it's a deep V neck, sexy but tasteful. It's a dress I found years ago and begged my mom to buy for me. I've been saving it for the perfect moment ever since.

When I walk into the living room, she gasps. "Oh, Felicity. It's perfect," she says, standing up to walk circles around me.

"You think so?"

She nods, speechless.

"What about my hair?" I curled it into loose curls that are smooth and sleek and shiny. It hangs to my lower back.

"Gorgeous."

"And my makeup? My eyes aren't too dark or my lips too red?"

She shakes her head. "No. It's all perfect. You're breathtaking, sweetie."

She hugs me lightly, careful not to smudge anything or wrinkle my dress. "Go, go get him." She practically pushes me out the door.

I borrow her car and drive to the town square. The place is already packed and crowded. It seems everyone in town is here. I have to park blocks away after circling around several times. Hiking in these shoes is not practical, but I do it. For him.

I finally make it to the center of the square and notice a few kids still ice skating. The rink comes down the day after tomorrow and that always makes me sad. Just having it here makes the town feel magical. I have so many memories on that ice. I push past the ice rink and come to a stop at the window of the banquet hall. I look in and see the party I'm late for.

There are chandeliers hanging high on the ceiling and gold and white everywhere. This is the only formal event our town has, and they spare no expense to make it as fancy as they can. The tablecloths are white and crisp, and there are big centerpieces. Everyone is dressed in formal dresses and tuxes and they all look so important as they stand around, drinking, talking, and laughing, while some couples dance.

As I stare into the building, Carson comes into view. He looks handsome in his black tux and crisp white shirt. His hair looks perfect as usual and he's shaved his jaw clean. He's talking with a group of guys, holding a glass of scotch in his hand as he laughs at something they say. Watching him like this, I feel like a teenage girl again, dreaming of something I'll never get. But tonight is different. I'm not a teenage girl. I'm a woman. A woman who he loves. And I'm not leaving here without him.

I look at the clock as I enter. It reads 11:57 p.m. I know I have to hurry. I don't want to start this next year without being able to call him mine. I rush through the throng of people and push my way through to him. When he sees me, it's like everything freezes around us. He turns to face me and his eyes say it all. He's in awe.

"Bout time you got here, sweetheart. Where ya been?" he asks, his eyes moving up and down my dress.

I smile. "Running late, as usual," I tell him and he smiles.

"You look beautiful." He picks up my hand and kisses it, causing me to blush. He chuckles. "You always blush so easy. Care to dance?"

I shake my head. "Not yet. There's something I have to tell you first."

He waits and I work up the courage. “I didn’t mean it.”

He frowns. “Mean what?”

“That I wanted to take it all back. I don’t want to take it back. Those couple of days I spent with you, it was the happiest I’ve ever been.”

Everyone starts to count down to midnight.

“I love you, Carson. I’ve loved you since I met you and I will love you until the day I die. I don’t want to take it all back. All I want is you.”

“Three,” everyone yells as I wait for his answer.

“Two!”

“One!”

He pulls me against him and our lips meet. He kisses me hard but slow, a lasting kiss that may just have to last me a lifetime if he’s changed his mind. My hands move up to wrap around his neck to hold him to me, not ready to let him go yet. His hand finds my hip and he pulls me against his chest until there’s not even a millimeter between us.

Everyone cheers as the bell rings, indicating midnight. He pulls back with a smile. “I love you too, sweetheart.”

I smile. “You do? You forgive me?”

“There was nothing to forgive. I’ve been in love with you since my eyes landed on you and I never stopped. I’ve waited for you, Felicity. I’ve hoped and prayed for you. I’ll never give up on you.”

I’m so excited I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. Instead, I just pull him back against me for another long, slow kiss.

I GIGGLE as he trips on my dress and causes us to fall into his bedroom door at his mom's house. "Shhhh," I say around a giggle that he silences with his lips on mine. He manages to get the doorknob turned, but he's still standing on my dress when he tries to take a step. The weight of him on the fabric causes me to fall downward, which in turn, causes him to fall forward. We both laugh, landing in a pile on the floor.

"What in the world?" his mother says, rushing out of her bedroom in her night coat. The hall light flicks on as she looks down at us on the floor, laughing our asses off. "Oh, it's just you two numbskulls."

That only makes us laugh harder.

"I can't wait until tomorrow when you go back home. I've had about as much excitement as I can handle this holiday." She waves us off and goes back to her bedroom after shutting off the hallway light.

We're left in the darkness once again.

The moment we're alone, in the dark, his hand is on my jaw, directing his lips to mine. He rolls on top of me, keeping the kiss in the doorway. "I love this dress, but I can't wait to rip it off."

"Don't you dare. I've been saving this dress for years." I push him away. "In fact, get off of me and let me take it off respectfully."

He laughs but gets off me. He stands up and holds out his hand, which I take, and he helps me to my feet. He closes the door and flips the light on, and we both work at removing

these stuffy dress clothes. Beneath my dress—I planned ahead—is a pair of black thong panties. No bra. No garter belt. No hose.

He looks over at me and I can see his pants start to tent in the crotch area. He lets out a whistle as he moves toward me. His hands reach me first and he pulls me against him, our lips perfectly in sync. His hands move down to my ass where he picks me up against him. I wrap my legs around his hips and he carries me to bed. His body covers mine and I work to unbutton his shirt since he forgot to get undressed once he saw me.

He pulls the shirt away and presses his bare chest to mine. His hot skin burns mine, but it's a burn I love and crave and now, never have to do without. I reach between us and unfasten his pants. When they're undone, I push them down his hips.

"You're so fucking perfect," he says, kissing down my neck. "Fuck, I love you," he breathes out.

My fingers lace through his hair, pulling his lips away so I can look at his eyes in the darkness. "I love you, forever," I tell him, my lips turning up into a smile.

He lets out a growl before his mouth devours mine once again. "Mine," he says, kissing me, kissing my body. "Forever."

His clothes come off quickly after that and it's only minutes before he's slamming into me, making me call out his name. Somehow, he seems to know when to be gentle and when to be rough, and I love both versions of him. He thrusts into me until my head is hitting the headboard. Then he flips us over and watches as I ride him until I shatter around him.

His patience is short after that, thrusting up into me until he spills every last drop.

I collapse on top of him and he wraps his arms around me, holding me close as we both work to catch our breath. “I don’t know what took us so long, but now that I have you, I’m never letting you go.”

I smile at his words. “I’m never letting you go. I’ve never worked so hard for a guy in my life,” I joke and he laughs.

“You know what I was thinking about the other day?”

“What?” I ask, moving to his side.

“The pool.”

My face flushes red. “Ugh, you would mention that.”

He laughs. “What? That’s a good memory. And you know, technically, I was the first to be inside you.”

I laugh and nod. “You were.”

“Did you think back then that this is where we’d end up?”

I shake my head. “Absolutely not, but this isn’t where we’re ending up. This is just where we are now.”

“How do you think we’ll end up then?”

I think about it in the darkness of his room with his strong arms around me. “I don’t know, but wherever it is, we’ll be together and happy. That’s all that matters.”

EPILOGUE
CARSON-6 MONTHS LATER

“Do you have everything this time? I don’t want to have to drive back down here next week,” I say as she hugs her mom.

She nods as she makes her way to the car. “Yes, I’m absolutely sure.”

We both climb into the car and I notice the tote bag she’s holding. “What’s in there?”

She smiles as she looks at me. She opens the bag and pulls out the picture frame with our four pictures in it. “I thought it would make a good addition to the new bedroom. Don’t you think? Remind us where we came from and how much we’ve overcome?”

I smile. “I have you to remind me of that, but yes, I’d like it in the bedroom.”

She leans in and presses a kiss to my lips. I start the car and start driving us to our new home in Chicago. We don’t have much time to unpack considering she starts her new job on Monday, and then, we have a wedding to plan. I look down and see the ring on her finger and smile.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, picking up her hand and pressing a kiss to the top. Looking back, it’s easy to see that this is where we

were heading. But at the time, it felt like it would never get here. I thank God every day for bringing that little girl into my life when I was ten years old. She's made my life so happy, filled with so much love, and now, she really is mine until the end of time.

Want more sexy, filthy talking billionaires?

Check out my best-selling Chicago Billionaires Series by reading a sample of *Very Bad Things*.

A BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

**VERY
BAD
THINGS**

ALEXIS WINTER

HE SAID HE WANTS TO DO BAD THINGS TO ME...VERY BAD THINGS.

The first time I met single dad Weston Vaughn, I thought it was my meet cute.

But it turns out, my knight in shining armor was just a grumpy billionaire in a custom suit.

After a nightmare year of losing not only my fiancé and my mother, I'm ready to start over.

And what better way than to land a teaching job at the prestigious Crestwood Academy in Chicago.

Imagine my surprise though when the handsome stranger I accidentally poured hot coffee on in front of the Eiffel Tower, turns out to be the father of one of my students.

The same stranger that made me miss my flight back home from Paris.

He might be devilishly handsome, but no amount of good looks can make up for his arrogant and bossy attitude.

It takes everything I have to plaster on a smile and deal with his antics but the school is in desperate need of his participation in our annual silent auction and I'm tasked with getting him on board.

But when he shows up on my doorstep, desperate for a babysitter, I agree...if only that was the last favor he demands

of me.

Next thing I know, I'm flying to the Bahamas on a private jet with him and his daughter and sailing off into the sunset on his private yacht as the hired help.

Soon our back and forth banter goes from scorching jabs to fiery passion.

And while falling in love again is the furthest thing from my mind, a summer fling might just what I need.

Instead, I'm flung right into some dangerous drama that sees me getting fired from my dream job.

So when I decide I need space and a fresh start, he gives me one week before he shows up at my apartment and demands we stay together.

One thing I've learned about Weston Vaughn, he doesn't negotiation.

He gets what he wants, no matter the cost.

Even if what he wants is me pregnant.

PROLOGUE

DAPHNE

“I’m moving to Paris.”

“Right, and I just bought a house in London. We should summer together in Spain.” My best friend Xana laughs before biting into her eggs Benedict. I don’t laugh. “Wait,” she says around a half-chewed mouthful of eggs and English muffin once she realizes I’m not joking. “Are you serious?”

“Yup.”

She chews furiously, swallowing the bite. “Paris as in France? The country?”

“One and the same.”

“Why? How?”

“I don’t have it all figured out yet, but I will.” I shrug. “And you know why. The last two years for me have been a nightmare, for lack of a better word. I need a change of scenery, change of pace.” I glance out the window of our favorite brunch café in downtown Chicago. I love this city, always have, but ever since I lost my mom and my fiancé less than six months apart, it feels like this place is a haunted tomb to me. A constant reminder of what my life could have been, what it *should* have been.

“You can’t just up and move to another country, Daph. People like us don’t move to Paris. It’s one of the most expensive cities in the world and last time I checked, you’re not a secret millionaire.”

“I know but people do it every day.” Her lack of enthusiasm is a little frustrating, but I know it’s only because she’s worried about me. How would I feel if she just up and told me she was moving halfway around the globe tomorrow?

“What people?”

“I don’t know, people! I watch *House Hunters International* all the time and people are constantly relocating to other countries.”

“Yes, those people usually have a job that is already there or transferring them or they have family there to help them.”

“Yeah, well, I can easily find work. I can be an au pair, teach English, work in a pastry shop, or any number of jobs.”

Her face softens a touch when she sees my frustration. “Daph, listen, I’m not trying to be a Debbie downer who rains all over your parade, but running away to Paris isn’t the answer to your issues with Chicago and what you’ve gone through. What about that job at Crestwood Academy you applied for? You were so excited about that opportunity.”

“I haven’t heard from them and it’s been months. They made it sound so promising after that second interview, but then poof”—I make a motion with my hand for emphasis—“nothing.”

“Did you reach out to them?”

“Twice. No response.”

“Well, it is the end of the school year so maybe they’re just swamped. You know how it is being that we’re both teachers and going through it ourselves at the moment. Speaking of, I’ll be spending my Saturday night and all day Sunday grading my freshman biology students’ finals. Fun, fun,” she says sarcastically.

Xana and I met in third grade and have been inseparable ever since. As the always outgoing extrovert, she immediately befriended me. We bonded over the fact that we both thought *Scooby-Doo* was a far superior cartoon to any of the Nickelodeon ones. We went to the same college here in Chicago and both studied education.

“I can’t imagine teaching middle schoolers or high schoolers, they’re so intimidating.” I shudder at the thought of feeling constantly judged by teenagers every day.

“Nah.” She laughs. “You just have to know how to handle them. Most of the time they laugh and think I’m being super corny when I try to be cool. Sometimes, though, they can be little shits. I won’t lie. So are you doing tutoring this summer again or summer school?”

Every summer we usually pick one or the other, either tutor privately or teach summer school in our district. It’s not exactly like you make enough teaching at a public school to get by. Most of us have summer jobs to make ends meet.

“Um, about that.” I pick nervously at the wadded-up napkin on the table in front of me. “I may or may not have told the school that I wasn’t coming back after this year.”

“You quit?” Her eyes practically bug out of her head.

“Yeah, I guess that’s the correct way of putting it.”

“Jesus, Daph.” She drops her fork and rubs her forehead. “Why? Did you actually put in your notice and tell the district?”

“Yes, and because I—well, first I thought I was getting that job at Crestwood. They dangled that carrot pretty close so I thought I had it, but then after not hearing anything, I realized that moving to Paris was a better idea anyway.” I smile, really trying to sell the idea to Xana as a thought out plan and not an impulsive decision that I’m very close to regretting.

“Okay, well, I’m sure that your administrator will be more than willing to take you back. You’ve worked at Davis Elementary for three years. They love you there.”

“I already booked my trip to Paris,” I blurt out, knowing I’m only going to add fuel to Xana’s panicked fire.

“You what?”

“It’s just a fact-finding mission. I’m going for a week to explore and see the city.” It’s more than that; it’s the closing of a door. The end of a story that I never even had the chance to start.

“Alone? When?”

“Yes, alone. I leave next Monday.”

“You’re not going to sign some lease when you’re there, are you?” She eyes me suspiciously.

“No, it’s just a trip. You know I’ve always wanted to go there and that was where Carson and I planned to honeymoon. I figured it would be the final chapter in that part of my journey, a farewell of sorts.”

“Yeah.” She smiles. “I like that idea. I do worry about you traveling alone, but I think it will be the closure you need.”

Plus, you've talked about Paris for as long as I can remember."

Paris has been my dream since I was in fifth grade and watched *Funny Face* for the first time. I begged my parents to take me, but when you grow up below the poverty line, that's not really a realistic dream. My mom tried letting me down easy; she didn't want to destroy my dream of going there someday even though there was no way we'd ever afford it. Instead, she bought us both berets, croissants, and cheese and we would pretend we were sitting at a Parisian café on our back porch. My gaze drifts away as I smile, remembering the one time she indulged us and bought real macarons from a local bakery.

"I bet your mom would be so happy right now." I don't have to tell Xana where my mind went just now. She already knows. Not only did I lose my fiancé Carson in a tragic car accident two years ago, but I was still mourning the loss of my mom to cancer just five short months before he passed.

"She would be... Carson too."

"Did you tell your dad?" I can see the apprehension on her face as she asks.

I nod, finishing my tea. "Yeah. He was happy for me and I promised I'd send him a postcard from Paris."

"How are things going with you two? Have you seen him lately?"

"Not since he moved, no, but we've been working on our relationship over the phone."

When my mom was diagnosed with cancer, I didn't think he was going to be able to go on, especially not after the doctor told us there was no hope. But then, three months after she passed, he told me he was in love with one of the hospice

nurses and he wanted to marry her and move to Florida to start a new life. I stopped talking to him and only after Carson died three months later did we talk again. I couldn't go through that loss and the loss of my mother alone, but I in no way had forgiven my dad for moving on so fast. I pushed him away again, then would reach out and attempt to understand, only to push him away again.

After several deep conversations and my dad assuring me thoroughly that nothing was going on while my mom was still alive, I have come to realize that I don't understand it. I think because that's not how I dealt with losing Carson, but at the same time, I wasn't married to him for thirty years like my mom and dad were. I decided that he's still my father and I do love him and want to work on mending our relationship.

“I think it's finally time. I'm ready to move on and close this chapter of grief in my life.”

“Are you sure?” She gives me a hopeful look.

“Yeah.” I nod my head, reassuring myself as my fingers wrap delicately around my cup of tea. “It's been almost two years now. I've allowed myself time to fully grieve and I've worked through a lot of my emotions and feelings in therapy. You and my therapist are both right; it's time I get back to living my life.”

I'll admit that after so much loss, I felt like I was slowly slipping away too. I couldn't comprehend it for the longest time. When they talk about the stages of grief and one of them being denial, they aren't wrong. I tried to just act normal for as long as I could, and I think even Xana was worried that when it all came crashing down on me it was going to be catastrophic... and it was. I always managed to keep my job, but I became a recluse, losing friends and motivation. I lost

weight, became depressed, and was practically a shell of the person I used to be.

“That makes me really happy for you.” She reaches across the table and clasps my hand with hers after I place my cup down. “I never meant to rush you before you were ready, but I did worry I was losing you along your grief journey. You’re only twenty-seven and I do think you deserve to be happy and even find love again—when you’re ready.” Tears threaten to fall from the brim of her dark eyes.

“I know. I never felt that you did, but truthfully, love is kind of the last thing from my mind at the moment.”

She glances at her watch. “I have to meet Ryan in fifteen to look at a new apartment. Please, please, please, if I don’t see you before you leave, text me every day, send me photos from Paris, and whatever you do, don’t make any rash, off the cuff decisions. Seriously consider calling your administrator and seeing if you can get your job back. Okay?”

“I’ll consider it,” I say, reassuring her. “But for the record, it wasn’t a rash decision to quit. I thought I had that other job and I rebounded with the Paris idea. It was a calculated decision. I’m just apparently really bad at calculations.”

We say our goodbyes and I put my earbuds in, Édith Piaf’s voice flooding my ears with “La Vie en Rose.” “Paris is always a good idea,” I quote Audrey’s famous line from *Funny Face* to myself as I imagine dancing down cobblestone streets with Fred Astaire.

CHAPTER 1-DAPHNE

I let out a sigh, my shoulders falling as I stare up at the Eiffel Tower.

I can't believe I'm actually standing here right now. I'd give anything to experience this with my mom or Carson. I know that Carson wanted to go to some place tropical for our honeymoon and honestly, I loved that idea too. But after my mom passed, he surprised me one night by showing me the two tickets he had bought for us to Paris for our honeymoon. He didn't say a word and I burst into tears, throwing my arms around his neck and sobbing as he held me.

I close my eyes, soaking in the moment as I clutch my latte in one hand, my buttery croissant in the other. I don't care if I look like a cliché, an obvious tourist. I want to soak in every possible second I have in this magical city. I imagine what it would be like to have this be my view every single day as I walked to work or looked out my apartment window.

My phone rings loudly in my pocket, jolting me out of my fantasy and back to reality. Before I fully open my eyes again, I rapidly attempt moving my latte and croissant into one hand and reach into my pocket to grab my phone. I feel the phone tumbling from my hand and I step back, attempting to catch it,

but I'm unsuccessful. The phone falls and my body twists unexpectedly.

"Oh shit!" I stumble, jutting out my hand to catch myself when I smash my cup right into the very broad, very firm chest of a complete stranger.

"What the—ow!" he yelps as my hot coffee soaks his pristine white shirt. I stand frozen for a second, completely shocked at what just happened.

"Oh my God, I am so sorry." I feel my face already burning with embarrassment as I struggle to right myself. "Here, let me—" I look through the pocket of my cardigan for a tissue before seeing my now deflated croissant on the ground with the napkin nearby, a large footprint marking both. "Oh no," I mutter as I bend down to grab the napkin. "Here." I attempt to dab at the large brown spot now taking over his shirt.

"Sidewalks are for walking, not pictures," he snaps.

"Oh, a fellow American." I snap my head up when his accent registers. "Or Canadian?" I correct when he doesn't respond. "I swear I am not one of those clumsy people who does stuff like this." I shake my head, laughing to ease the tension when I look back down at my hands. "Sorry," I gasp, realizing I'm clutching his arm, my other hand flat against his chest with the soggy napkin as his arms jut outwardly with no attempt to help me.

"It's fine," he mutters, reaching into his pocket to pull out a handkerchief, brushing my hands away. "Are you okay?" He dabs at the large brown stain on his shirt but it's no use.

"Uh, yeah, yeah, I'm just a little discombobulated." I laugh as I straighten out my skirt that has twisted a little, my eyes

traveling up the stranger's long suit-clad legs. His head is turned down as he focuses on his shirt, his dark hair falling over his forehead obscuring my view. His hands are large, his fingers long. I don't know much about fashion, but I can tell that his suit is not an off-the-rack Calvin Klein from Macy's and his watch probably cost more than my childhood house. "Are you okay?"

He dabs at his shirt once more, giving up before slowly lifting his eyes to meet mine. He stuffs the handkerchief back into his pocket, the sun catching his blue eyes that look piercing surrounded by his long, dark lashes. My breath actually catches in my throat as I take in the beauty of this man. His clean-shaven face has a jaw that looks carved by the gods, just a hint of gray at his temples. I feel like I physically choke on my own tongue looking at him.

"Christian Grey?" I whisper, completely taken aback by this man's appearance.

This is it. This is that moment in the romance novels where we meet and fall in love. Paris really is a fantasy. Even the men are a cut above.

"Excuse me?" He looks confused, probably frightened actually by the Cheshire cat grin that's plastered on my face.

"Uh, are you okay?" I repeat a little louder, hoping he buys it.

"Fine," he grumbles.

"Again, I'm so sorry. I was trying to take it all in." I gesture with my arms toward the tower. "First time in Paris and all." I laugh nervously, practically tripping over my words as I blabber on. "I was supposed to come here on my honeymoon or well, I guess I should say with my mom first

and then my honeymoon, but unfortunately life gives you lemons sometimes and man, did it give me le—”

“Lady, I don’t mean to be rude, but I really don’t care. I’m running late and now”—he motions toward his shirt that has become slightly see through thanks to the coffee I spilled on him—“I need to go change before my meeting.”

“Oh, right, of course.” I shake my head, sticking my tongue out like I’ve actually lost my mind. My eyes dart down to where the shirt is suctioned to his chest, the outline of his defined pecs causing my mouth to go suddenly dry. He moves to step around me right as I attempt to step out of his way in the same direction. “Oops.” I giggle, my face growing even redder as I do it again, this time with a little dance.

He stops, pinching the bridge of his nose for a second before offering up an annoyed smile. “I’m going right,” he says slowly. “You go left.”

“Wait.” I hold up both hands. “Could you possibly take a picture of me really quick? My best friend wants me to send her pictures and I would love a pic—” I reach into my pocket when I realize I never picked up my phone. My eyes dart around frantically when I see it between his feet. I reach down to pick it up. “Here it is!” I lift it up, checking to make sure the screen is still intact. “Phew!” I laugh. “I was so worried the screen wou—”

“Make it quick,” he says, cutting me off as he holds out his hand. I open my camera app and hand him the phone as I take a few steps closer to the tower. I pause for a brief second before posing, turning to look up toward the top, the wind catching a few strands of hair and whipping them around my face.

“What’s a good pose? I don’t want to look too touristy.”

“You have three seconds,” he says sternly and I turn around.

“Cheeeese!” I place one hand on my hip, raising the other above my head with a huge smile as I pop my foot up like Anne Hathaway in *The Princess Diaries*. He snaps the photo, stepping forward to hand me the phone before turning and walking away.

“Thank you!” I shout after him but he either doesn’t hear me or doesn’t acknowledge me. I open the photo, sending it to Xana, but then I notice he took more than one. I slide my thumb across the screen. The second photo of me is a close-up of my shoulders and face, my hair blowing away from me when I was half-turned away from him, looking up toward the top. I look up from my phone toward the direction he walked but he’s already lost in the crowd.

In the heat of the panic and chaos that just unfolded, I completely forget that someone was calling me. I pick up my croissant and my now empty cup and toss them in the trash. I slide my phone back into my pocket and walk to the metro station to take the train to Père Lachaise Cemetery.

It’s calm here, quiet. Some might think it’s weird or even eerie to find solace in a cemetery but that’s where the two people I love the most are. Carson and my mom aren’t buried here obviously, but I feel like I’m closer to them here. At home, when I’m feeling overwhelmed or too sad to function, I go to the cemetery where my mom is buried. One of the hardest parts of accepting the fact that Carson was also gone was the fact that he wasn’t buried in Chicago, not even in Illinois. His family wanted him back home with them in Tennessee. I don’t blame them, but realizing I won’t be able to visit his grave when I want or need to is something I still

struggle with. I sit down on a bench, the buzz of the city almost nonexistent in here. Tears threaten to fall, and my throat grows thick with emotion.

“Please,” I pray, “just give me a sign. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore.”

It’s hard to admit but I’ve been so lost since losing them both, like life no longer has direction for me. My phone chirps and I reach into my pocket. I look at the screen, realizing I have a voicemail.

“Hello, Miss Flowers, this is Rick Fein, administrator over at Crestwood Academy,” he says in his almost singsong voice. “I am so sorry that I’ve taken so long to get back in touch with you. The end of the school year is always a bit hectic as you can imagine. Anyway, I’ll cut straight to the point. If you are still interested in the first grade teaching position here at Crestwood, we would be honored to have you on board. Give me a call back to discuss the next steps. Thank you.”

Now the tears cascade, unstoppable, down my cheeks. I rest my head in my hands, crying, laughing, excited, and anxious all at once.

“Yes!” I shout, throwing my hands up in the air in celebration.

My week in Paris flies by but I make the most of every single second I’m here. I spend my mornings sipping coffee and eating pastries on the small balcony of my hotel room. My afternoons are filled with street art, strolls along the Seine, and sightseeing. Each evening, I savor a small glass of wine while listening to “Les Champs-Élysées” by Joe Dassin—another cliché but it brings me joy.

On my last night here, I triple-check that I'm checked in for my nine a.m. flight, then turn on a peaceful YouTube video to fall asleep to. The soft sounds of rain lull me to sleep in a matter of minutes, a smile on my face when I think about sharing my exciting news with Xana.

"Ugh," I groan, stretching my arms overhead as I realize it's my final few hours in Paris. I'm sad to leave but I'm also excited to start my new job back home. I sit up, a little surprised I'm awake before my alarm. I reach for my phone, tapping the screen to check the time, but the screen stays black.

"That's weird." I tap it again, reaching to grab it when I realize that while the cord is plugged into my phone, it's not plugged into the wall. "Oh my God!" I gasp, realizing it died sometime in the night and I, in fact, did not sleep through my alarm because it never went off. I plug it in, the little red lightning bolt on the screen confirming that the phone is completely dead.

"Shit, shit, shit." I scramble across the bed, reaching for the clock on the other bedside table. "8:14!" I practically scream as I launch myself out of bed, tearing off my pajamas while hopping from one leg to the other to pull on my jeans. I dart to the bathroom, brushing my teeth while simultaneously brushing my hair and attempting to pull on my shirt.

My flight leaves at nine and I'm staying twenty minutes from the airport which means that I need to have left my hotel a solid thirty minutes ago to make sure I made it through security on time. I dash around my room, grateful I packed everything but my outfit for the day and minimal makeup which I now have no time to apply. Realizing I need to

conserve my phone battery, I call down to the front desk for a taxi.

“Bonjour, yes, could I get a taxi to the airport as soon as possible, please? Yes, thank you so much.” I hang up, shoving my pajamas and toiletries into my bag before grabbing my phone and running toward the elevator. By the time I make it downstairs, the taxi has arrived.

“Hi, good morning. I’m in a crazy hurry. I’m so sorry. So if we could take the fastest way, that would be great.”

He looks up at me in the rearview mirror, muttering something beneath his breath in French before pulling out into traffic.

“Merci!” I hand him a few extra bills as I tumble out of the taxi, tugging my luggage up over the curb and into the airport. I’m sweating by the time I make it to security, glancing at my watch every few seconds. I stand on my tiptoes, looking over the crowd. There are only a few people in front of me. I look at my watch again. My flight leaves in eighteen minutes. I kick off my shoes once I show my passport and boarding pass, walk through security, and grab my bags again. I don’t even bother putting my shoes back on before I’m running through the terminal, darting around people right and left.

“Wait!” I shout, waving my arm overhead as I approach my gate, my chest heaving as I bend over to catch my breath, a stitch piercing through my side. “I’m here, I’m here,” I pant, showing my boarding pass on my phone to the gate attendant.

“Unfortunately, you’re two minutes too late, the door has shut and boarding has ended.”

“What?” I gasp. “But it’s only 8:47 and my flight doesn’t depart till nine.”

“Exactly. Boarding ends at 8:45 promptly.” She stares at me, her face stoic.

“Please, I’m begging you. Just let me on. I didn’t realize my phone wasn’t charging and it died while I was sleeping so I missed my alarm.” I plead my case with her but it’s clear it’s not doing a thing.

“Ma’am, please step over to the customer service desk. They’ll book you on the next available flight.”

I groan and walk over to the desk, explaining what happened when I see the door open again and the pilot exit the flight, waving toward someone.

“Ma’am,” the man behind the counter explains, “the next flight we can get you on doesn’t depart until tonight at midnight.”

“What? Seriously, there’s nothing else?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Sir, I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to have you on our flight.” I look over toward the pilot who juts his hand out toward a man who has me doing a double take.

“Hey,” I say, stepping away from the desk. “I know him.” I point to the man who is the stranger I ran into in front of the Eiffel Tower.

“I highly doubt you know him, ma’am. That is the owner and CEO of this airline.”

“What? Seriously? Why is he taking a commercial flight?”

“Probably a quality check but you’d have to ask him that.”

“Hey,” I shout toward the man.

“I didn’t mean seriously ask him,” the man behind the counter scolds me. “Do you want to be booked on the red-eye flight or not?”

“Now wait a minute.” I walk toward the gate agent again as she ushers the stranger and the pilot through the door onto the gangway. “If the door is open, can’t I go in? I know him. He knows me,” I say, pointing toward his back.

“You know him?” she says condescendingly.

“Yes—hey, Mr. Eiffel Tower!” I shout after him, having no idea how to address him.

He stops in his tracks, slowly turning around to look at me. He squints at me, then recognition falls across his face and I smile.

“Can you vouch for me? They won’t let me on the flight because I kind of overslept and barely made it, but I told them you know me so can you just tell them so I can get on the flight because the only other flight they say they ha—”

“Sir, do you know this woman?” the gate agent asks, interrupting me.

He looks me slowly up and down, running his hand over his whiskered jaw that is now dark with a heavy shadow. “Never seen her before,” he replies before turning back around and walking away. The gate agent smirks, slamming the door shut as my mouth falls open in shock.

“Rude!”

“THANK YOU, MISS FLOWERS,” my first graders say in unison before I dismiss them from their first day of school.

The summer flew by which is usually a universally agreed upon bad thing but not this time. I've been itching to start my new job at Crestwood. I spent the summer learning everything I could about the school, crafting the perfect introductory email that not only introduced me to the parents but also detailed my educational background and my passion for learning and children. I was tempted to include a photo but felt it was a little odd so I opted instead to request that they meet me after our first official full day so that we can get to know one another. Every single parent replied but one... a Mr. Weston Vaughn.

“Thank you, students.” I smile, greeting each parent as they line the back wall of the room. “And thank you all so much for coming today. I promise I won't keep you. I know how busy all of you are, but I wanted to let you know that the paper I handed to each of you not only has my school email but also my personal cell phone number should you have any questions or need clarification on any assignments. I am so excited to teach your children and get to know each and every one of them as well as you. We do have quarterly parent-teacher conferences but if you ever want to schedule a one-on-one with me, that is perfectly okay with me. And lastly, you'll see that there is a list of opportunities for you to get involved this year. There will be emails going out for volunteers before each event so please keep an eye out for those and don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.”

I take the time to go through the line and meet each parent, documenting each food allergy, preference, and concern that they have as well as taking note of their nannies and au pairs along with a photo of them so I know who will be picking up each child.

“You must be Mrs. Vaughn.” I smile at the older woman standing next to Daisy, the last student in line. She looks much too old to be Daisy’s mother, but I don’t want to assume and embarrass myself.

“Well, yes, I am but I’m the grandmother, not the wife. Regina.” She smiles, holding out her slim hand. “Unfortunately, my son is running very late today so he instructed me to pick up Daisy.”

“Oh, is he still coming to the meeting?”

“Daddy is always late,” Daisy says, looking up at me with her big blue eyes. She rolls her eyes dramatically, making her grandmother and me laugh.

“Yes, he will be. Usually it’s me who picks her up from school and sometimes the nanny, Roxy. I’ve included both of our contact information here. If Roxy is picking her up, you’ll hear from me first. Otherwise, she has no allergies and honestly is a very easy little girl.”

“I can already count to two hundred in English, Spanish, and French,” she says emphatically.

“Wow, that’s even more than me.” I smile down at her. “Maybe you can teach me.”

“He’ll be here shortly but we have to get going to her ballet class. Pleasure meeting you.”

Whoever Weston Vaughn is, his mother is a very stunning, elegant woman who screams old money. She smiles politely, waving her manicured hand toward us as she and Daisy walk out of my classroom.

I finish cleaning up from the day, glancing at the clock. It’s now ten to five and I’ve been waiting for over an hour to meet Mr. Vaughn. I hear the soft click of steps down the long

marble hallway, a frustrated voice muttering as the steps grow closer.

“Yes, listen, I need to go. I have to meet with my daughter’s teacher. Apparently, first graders require a parent-teacher meeting in the middle of the fucking day like we aren’t busy enough.”

I flinch at the harsh comment but straighten my back as the door swings open and in steps Mr. Weston Vaughn.

“You,” I say in disbelief as the stranger I dumped my coffee on in Paris steps over the threshold of my classroom. The same stranger who pretended not to know me so I couldn’t board my flight home.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he says, shaking his head.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Winter is a contemporary romance author who loves to share her steamy stories with the world. She specializes in billionaires, alpha males and the women they love.

If you love to curl up with a good romance book you will certainly enjoy her work. Whether it's a story about an innocent young woman learning about the world or a sassy and fierce heroine who knows what she wants you, 're sure to enjoy the happily ever afters she provides.

When Alexis isn't writing away furiously, you can find her exploring the Rocky Mountains, traveling, enjoying a glass of wine or petting a cat.

You can find her books on Amazon or at <https://www.alexiswinterauthor.com/>

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