

a merry & bright novella



the
nice list

**VICTORIA ELLIS
DEE LAGASSE**

a merry & bright novella

The nice list

**VICTORIA ELLIS
DEE LAGASSE**

*For all the good girls that just want a hot, bearded man for
Christmas. This one's for you.*

CONTENT WARNING

If you don't like a good Christmas pun (or five), we strongly suggest putting this book down and finding another Christmas book with less holiday cheer (and less laughs).

**In all seriousness, no heavy themes are discussed in this book. It was our goal to write something full of holiday cheer for our readers! There are a couple spicy scenes, though, so buckle up and get ready to fall in fa-la-la-love with Bennett and Clara!*

CONTENTS

1. [Clara](#)
2. [Bennett](#)
3. [Clara](#)
4. [Clara](#)
5. [Bennett](#)
6. [Clara](#)
7. [Bennett](#)
8. [Clara](#)
9. [Bennett](#)
10. [Bennett](#)
11. [Clara](#)
12. [Bennett](#)
13. [Clara](#)

[If You Enjoyed The Nice List...](#)

[Social Media](#)

[About D + V](#)

ONE

CLARA

THE FRONT DOOR chimes as it's opened, immediately pulling me from the chalkboard I've been doodling snowmen and gingerbread houses on for the last twenty or so minutes.

Before I've had the chance to turn all the way around, I'm greeted with a loud groan. The grumble of annoyance brings me just as much joy as my beautiful chalkboard.

"It's too soon, Clara Ivy."

Dressed in a brown Carhartt vest with a navy flannel underneath, his tan-colored everyday canvas work pants, a backwards baseball hat, and a frown, my best friend is mid-eye roll as I reach the end of the counter he's standing at.

This long standing argument has been going on since we were eleven. Fifteen years of the same back and forth. I look forward to it every single year. As the self-proclaimed queen of all things holly and jolly, I love Christmas. The only thing I love more is the satisfaction of getting under Bennett's skin. The pinched brows, the scowl... it's a whole thing.

Granted, I sort of manage to do that in all the other months of the year too, but there's something extra hilarious about a human Grinch grumbling about "the damn Christmas candy being out before we've had Thanksgiving dinner."

"Good morning to you, too, Bennett. What's too soon?" I fake confusion as he shakes his head.

It's been less than twelve hours since the last costumed Trick or Treater took a piece of candy from a big bowl of Halloween candy that sat on our counter. Just yesterday, the

cafe was filled with multiple decorative cobwebs, a six-foot skeleton we affectionately named Larry, and a mini patch of pumpkins. Our pastry case had single serving “Terror-Misus” and Boston *Scream* Pies, Jack-O-Lantern cupcakes, and sugar cookies in the shape of ghosts.

The drink special of the day was Witches’ Brew—a vanilla bean and pumpkin latte. The desserts were sold out before lunch yesterday, which made the decision to transition both our menu and decor right into the next season an easy one.

As the girls and I pulled out boxes of garland last night, we knew it was going to be a controversial month. We accepted that before the first ornament was hung. I look around at the new decorations, and right on cue, Bennett raises and waves his arm around in a circling motion.

“This! All of this!” He sighs and I can’t help but think if this were a cartoon, puffs of smoke would come out of his nose and ears like some sort of fire breathing dragon. “Come on. It’s not even Thanksgiving yet, Clara!”

There it is!

In my defense, this wasn’t just my doing. I’m only one-third of Ivy House. We stayed open late last night, serving cookies to Trick or Treaters and coffee and tea to their parents. Once eight o’clock came, we promptly closed our doors as the mayor requested. At approximately 8:01, I pulled the bottles of white wine and sparkling white grape juice I brought from home out of the cooler and dragged the boxes marked *Christmas Decorations* out of the storage area. Thankfully, Sara and Rachel, my sisters-in-law and business partners, don’t share my best friend’s complete and utter disdain for the holiday season.

By the time we went home, any and all traces of Halloween were gone and replaced with twinkly white lights and big, red decorative ornaments hanging from the ceiling. In the next couple of weeks, we’ll get a small Christmas tree to put in the corner, too. Starting next week, I’ll begin baking gingerbread people and making giant batches of white chocolate peppermint fudge. Sara already placed an order with

a local vendor for holiday blend teas to stock, and Rachel can't wait to offer frosted sugar cookie lattes and salted caramel hot cocoa as drink specials.

This is honestly the most wonderful time of the year.

And I'm so glad my grumpy best friend has to witness me in all my glory.

Maybe I'll bring out my big, dangly, gaudy earrings a little early, too. I smile at the thought and Bennett narrows his eyes at me.

"You do know some of your customers are going to give you shit for decorating for Christmas before it's even Thanksgiving. Me included," he says, looking around the shop again. If I didn't know better, I'd think he was admiring all of our hard work.

Most of our customers will either be excited or simply ignore our holly jolly vibes, but there are always a few that aren't afraid to let us know their disapproval. Bennett is always in the latter bunch. How someone who grew up in the most magical place in the entire state of Vermont could be so Grinchy is something I have never been able to wrap my head around.

"That isn't very *merry and bright* of you, Bennett," I tease, extending my hand and motioning for him to hand me the same travel mug I refill for him seven days a week.

"If I wasn't co-dependent on your coffee, I would have some choice words for you right now, just so you know." He counters with a grin.

My stomach flutters like it does every time he smiles at me. Just like each smile before this one, I combat the feeling with a sassy comeback.

"There's always—"

He cuts me off before I can say the name of the chain coffee shop five minutes away from Merry & Bright Farm—the Christmas tree and caribou farm he'll take over from his parents one day. Bennett lives in a cabin right on the main

property. Driving to Main Street every morning for coffee isn't exactly a matter of convenience.

He leans down, resting his elbows on the counter, and I stare at him for a moment too long but thankfully, he doesn't seem to notice.

"There's no coffee like Ivy House coffee, and you know it."

I do know, but it's still nice to hear him say it.

"You sure you don't want to change up your regular for a gingerbread muffin or a peppermint mocha latte?" I bait as I open the pastry case.

It doesn't matter that we don't actually have any gingerbread muffins available yet. Bennett's been getting a hot, black breakfast roast coffee and two "Protein Power" peanut butter granola bars since the day Sara, Rachel, and I officially took over as Ivy House's owners.

He's a creature of habit. For as long as I've known him, he's thrived on schedule, routine, and being organized. It makes no sense that the universe would give him me, a hot mess on my very best days, as a best friend.

"Very funny," he says, deadpan, as he takes the small brown paper bag that contains his granola bars from me. "How much do I owe ya?"

I answer the same way I do every morning.

"Your friendship is all the payment I need, Benny."

There isn't another human on planet Earth that could get away with calling him "Benny"—a nickname he acquired around the same time we started sneaking vodka into our hot cocoa at his parents' annual Christmas festival. Sober Clara clearly enunciated every letter as they should be said. Three mugs of cocoa deep Clara uses it like a battle cry.

"Pick you up at seven?" he asks with a shake of his head, undoubtedly dropping far more than I deserve in the tip cup sitting on the counter.

He used to argue with me when I wouldn't let him pay. After hearing me tell him "no" so many times, he gave up. Or so I thought, 'til I caught a glimpse of the twenty dollar bill he put in the tip cup one morning.

Sara, Rachel, and I always pool the tips and split them at the end of the day. Since I'm the first one in every morning, I'm normally the first one out the door at night. Whoever closes leaves me my third of the tips in the office for the next day. I never would have known if I didn't see it with my own eyes. He's never said anything about it.

Knowing Bennett, if I tried to stop him now, he'd just go and put more money in the tip jar.

I nod. "We close at five, so that should be perfect."

"See ya tonight, Bunny."

It's my turn to roll my eyes.

That silly nickname was never going to leave me. Bennet would make sure of it. It wasn't even *his* nickname for me originally. His dad was the one that made the comment about wishing that he had half of my energy one night after I spent hours jumping and doing backflips on the trampoline they bought for Bennet for his birthday. We were nine, maybe ten, at the time.

"Clara just keeps going and going..."

"Bunny" is a reference to the Energizer Bunny—the marketing mascot of Energizer batteries. In the commercials there's a little pink bunny that bangs a drum and moves around nonstop.

No one calls me that anymore. No one except Bennett.

And as much as I act like I'm annoyed by it, secretly, I love it. Bennett doesn't keep women in his life for any significant duration of time. Sure, we're just friends, but our friendship is the longest standing relationship either one of us has had. Growing up, neither one of us had the same mentality of our classmates. Getting wasted in the woods was fun the first couple of times, but it got real old, real fast. The small town drama that stemmed from those Friday and Saturday

nights was nothing I wanted to be a part of, and Bennett was too busy helping his parents run the farm to even consider the risk of a hangover.

Not much has changed since then. Bennett spends every waking moment at Merry & Bright Farm, and most Friday and Saturday nights, for me, end in me covered in flour and sugar. The cafe's pastries aren't going to bake themselves.

Not tonight, though. Tonight, Bennett and I are going to my college roommate Noelle's twenty-seventh birthday party. Tomorrow will be my first day off in over six months. Noelle told me she was inviting Bennett, but I was sure that he would decline as soon as he saw the party theme. I still don't know how she did it, but somehow Noelle convinced Bennett to not only go to the party, but to stay overnight as well.

Tonight should be interesting to say the least. The last time Bennett and I partied together was during spring break of my last semester at Johnson and Wales. I'll never forget that luau for as long as I live. Partially because those pina coladas rocked my world, but mostly because that was the night Bennett kissed me...

Only to never speak of it ever again.

TWO

BENNETT

THE THINGS *I do for this girl...*

I sigh, as I punch in the security code to get into Clara's apartment building. It's ten minutes to seven, but I'd already sat in the parking lot for fifteen minutes. The other tenants should know me by now, but that doesn't stop them from eyeing me with suspicion every time I pull into the parking lot. I can only imagine the looks I'd get if someone saw me in this ridiculous outfit.

Santa pants? Check.

Suspenders? Check.

Shirtless? *Check. Check. Check.*

As I walk to her place, I look back over the text that Clara sent me explaining what to wear, and more specifically, what *not* to wear. The only thing I couldn't get behind were the clunky black boots she suggested. I wear work boots all day long. She's going to have to accept me in my black Converse or not at all.

I wouldn't be doing this for anyone else.

I don't do themed parties.

Hell, I don't dress up. Haven't since I was an elementary school kid and decided I was too cool for Halloween. But for Clara? Yeah. I'd do just about anything to see that woman smile. Even if it means giving in to the whole Christmas before Thanksgiving issue.

As I use the spare keys Clara gave me to let myself into her first-floor apartment, I find myself wishing she would take me up on my offer to stay in the empty spare bedroom of the cabin. Despite her promises that she can “handle herself,” I worry about Clara living here all alone. It was the first apartment she looked at when she moved back home after college. The kitchen is too small for her baking and, while our small town doesn’t have any bad areas, this is *not* where I’d choose for her to live if it were up to me. Since it’s not up to me, I make sure she always has double locks on her door and pepper spray on her keychain.

“Honey, I’m home,” I jokingly call out as I push the door open.

Swirls of creamy French vanilla and dark espresso greet me as soon as I step over the threshold. I can’t remember a time Clara didn’t smell like a sweet, sugary confection. Her grandparents started up the only gourmet bakery in our town and the three surrounding us. Everything Clara knows about baking, she learned from her Gramma Ivy.

This time of the year especially, I think about Clara’s grandparents often. Missing them as much as I do, I can only imagine how much Clara and her brothers miss them. That’s part of the reason I don’t give Clara too much crap when it comes to her overzealous love of this time of the year. Mrs. Ivy was the same way.

When I close my eyes I can still picture the sweet old woman and how she dressed in nothing but red and green all November and December long—and how she was always shoving Christmas cookies at me...something I’d never complain about.

Before Clara, Rachel, and Sara took over Ivy House, it was strictly a bakery. They made everything from croissants and cannolis to multi-tiered wedding cakes. Her talent was indisputable, but for me, it always came down to the chocolate chip cookies. Mrs. Ivy made the best chocolate chip cookies I’ve ever tasted in my life and I made sure to tell her so every time I saw her. It’s probably why every year on my birthday, there were a dozen hand-delivered to the farm by Margaret Ivy

herself. She was the kindest, most thoughtful person I've ever known. The apple certainly didn't fall too far from the tree when it comes to her granddaughter, though.

That girl is the kindest soul. And years later, I still don't know why she picked me to be her best friend. All I know is she straight up told me I was going to be her best friend and there was nothing I could do about it.

The memory still makes me chuckle.

"I'll be right out!" Clara yells back.

In typical Clara fashion, I'm assuming she's going to also be wearing her worn Chucks and probably a gingerbread apron over one of her self-proclaimed (and incredibly accurate) ugly Christmas sweaters she loves so much. She flips on her festive switch so damn early every year, and as much shit as I give her for it, I'm only messing with my best friend of over a decade. Her holiday spirit is cute. I wish I could love something as much as she loves Christmas in our small town.

"Okay!" she calls out as I lean against her kitchen counter and look at the calendar she has hanging on the fridge. A small smile settles on my lips when I see that she has my mom's birthday noted in a few weeks. I know my mom loves me and my brother, Elliott, and she's never so much as hinted that she ever wished for a daughter, but the way she dotes on Clara speaks for itself. It's nice to see that adoration is reciprocated. "Don't judge me, okay?"

Judge her? I mean, if I haven't judged her yet I'm certainly not going to start—

Holy jingle fucking blue balls.

Clara, my sweet, ugly Christmas sweater wearing, gingerbread cookie baking best friend who has never shown even so much as a *hint* of cleavage in all the time I've known her is dressed like she's about to shoot a porno with the *big guy* himself.

"Absolutely not," I tell her, the words coming out before any other conscious thoughts can form in my brain. "Absolutely not, Clara Margaret Ivy. I swear to god..." I trail

off before I start stuttering. I feel it. I'm about to lose all ability to even form words in about two goddamn seconds. Clara's eyes widen, and I do my best to keep my own on her pretty blue stare but it's ungodly hard when her tits are practically pushed up to her damn neckline.

I can't help it. I can't keep my eyes on hers. Not when she's dressed like every single straight man's wet dream. I break eye contact with her as she stands before me, drinking her in like the goddess she is. She's wearing damn near nothing. I don't even think I could call this lingerie. This is like...what's a step down from lingerie but not quite naked?

That's *exactly* what this is.

"What do you mean absolutely not?" she questions and I shake my head, at a complete and total loss for words. "You don't like it?"

The barely there red satin fabric of the bodysuit she's wearing covers only her most intimate parts, and it's not doing too good of a job at that, either. I know when this woman turns around her ass is going to be on full display, and I'm not having it.

"Absolutely not because I'm going to get in so many damn fights tonight, Clara. Do you want me to end up in jail for manslaughter?" I ask as I finally force myself to look at those blue orbs of hers again. The intense pull for my eyes to wander down her body is taunting me, and I have to resort to thinking about anything else before I get fucking hard in front of her.

The Patriots...

The time I heard my parents in bed...

Grandma...

"Is it my hair?" She laughs and flips her long blonde hair over her shoulder. I'm such a fucking man. I didn't even notice she's wearing her hair down until right now. Who could blame me when she's standing in front of me practically butt ass naked though?

The hair thrown over her shoulder has exposed her delicate collar bone, and I can't help but wish I could trace it with my

finger. She's all beautiful sighs and feminine curves, and it makes being her best friend a challenge at times.

I roll my eyes as she throws me her car keys. She never wears her hair down. It's always up and out of the way because of the coffee shop and her baking. She looks like a damn angel. Like a halo should be glowing above her head. The blonde hair that's typically frizzy and haphazardly thrown up into a messy bun cascades down her shoulders in soft, loose curls.

"You're driving tonight!" she says as I catch the keys. She twirls around to snag her coat from the back of the couch where she's thrown it, and I get a glimpse of the bottom half of her ass cheeks.

The Patriots...My parents...Grandma...

God damn.

THREE

CLARA

“ARE you ready for this ho-ho-ho down?” I laugh at myself as we slowly walk up the steps leading to the swanky brownstone apartment Noelle lives in with her boyfriend Michael.

Thankfully, the party is being held on the first floor because I might have underestimated my ability to walk in stiletto heels. As soon as I showed Sara and Rachel my outfit for tonight, Rachel insisted I borrowed her knee-high Christian Louboutin boots. A three-inch heel might not be a big deal for some women, but the extent of my boot wearing is my well-worn, very broken in Uggs.

My balance is way off-kilter. It has to be the boots. It can't possibly be because Bennett looked at me like I was a fresh baked Christmas cookie he wanted to devour when I made my big reveal at my apartment. After asking me three times if I had a longer jacket, he made me promise to let him know if anyone tries anything tonight. Suffice to say, he did not find it the least bit funny when I said that I was hoping to get myself put on the naughty list tonight. In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him clench his jaw that hard.

“Are you okay?” Bennett asks, reaching forward to ring the doorbell. “You took each step like you were expecting a bomb to detonate below us.”

“Yeah, I just feel like a baby deer,” I admit. Bennett's brows quirk, so I continue to explain. “The boots. I'm just not used to walking in heels.”

“Ah.” He nods in understanding before turning to face me. “I’m sorry if I made things weird back at your place. I don’t want—”

Before he can finish his thought, Michael opens the front door. His eyes light up at the sight of us. As much as he’ll pretend he’s excited to see me, I know it’s mostly Bennett’s presence he’s thankful for.

Noelle comes from money. A *lot* of money. Aside from me and a few of the girls we went to college with, she hangs out with mostly rich, mostly snotty people that tend to look down on us regular nine-to-fivers. Noelle isn’t like that at all. It’s why she defied her parents’ wishes, went to a local university, and then dismissed every guy they tried to set her up with and downloaded a dating app instead. She matched with Michael, a used car salesman, and they’ve been together ever since.

“Bennett, my man! And, Clara, of course, hi.” Michael grins as he pushes open the screen door. “Come in, come in.”

If Bennett was worried about looking ridiculous tonight, any fear he felt surely dissipated the moment he saw Michael wearing no shirt, silk red shorts, and pointy elf shoes with bells on them.

“Where do you want me to put our bags?” Bennett asks after a round of hellos.

We’re here an hour before the party starts. Noelle hired decorators and had it catered, but there’s always something that pops up last minute. Plus, I haven’t socialized outside of the walls of Ivy House in a while. I figure it couldn’t hurt to get a couple candy cane martinis in before I have to start people-ing. Especially dressed like this...I’m confident in my body but this is totally not my typical attire.

“You guys are going to be in the guest room,” Michael tells him. “Top of the stairs and to the right.”

I freeze in place. I was just about to take my jacket off to bring it to whatever room Michael said I was staying in. Noelle conveniently forgot to tell me Bennett and I would be sharing a room.

Typical.

“Together?” I squeak out as my heart practically stops beating.

My stomach knots at the thought of sleeping in a bed with Bennett. I did not plan for this. Fully prepared for a hot holiday party hookup, I packed the only sexy pajamas I own. They’ve never been worn, except for when I tried them on in the Victoria’s Secret dressing room. Last week. When I was mentally getting myself ready for the aforementioned hot holiday party hookup.

It’s been six months, a whole half a year since I deleted all of the dating apps on my phone. And it’s been just as long since I’ve had sex. Longer, actually. As much as I want to be the girl that can do one-night stands and no strings attached, it’s just not who I am. I tried. A few times.

The problem doesn’t necessarily lie with me either. Blue Spruce Hills is a small Vermont town where everyone knows each other. If you leave the bar with someone on a Saturday night, you’re going to be the gossip talked about in the grocery store checkout the next day. Noelle lives an hour away in New Hampshire. If I play my cards right, I could get laid and never see the guy ever again.

Or so I thought.

“Yeah. We gave the office daybed to Chris,” he confirms, referring to his best friend.

The very same office daybed Noelle said Bennett would have for the night when we talked about it. Two days ago. This has Noelle Washington written all over it. She means well. She’s convinced Bennett is my soulmate and cannot help herself when it comes to trying to shove us together any way she’s able to. But to blindside me? Not cool. Not freaking cool.

From the far end of the apartment, Noelle calls out for Michael.

“That’s my cue.” As he walks away, he calls back to us. “The bartender will be here in fifteen minutes, but until then,

help yourself to anything you want to drink. Everything is set up in the dining room. There are pre-party snacks set out for us in the kitchen.”

Glancing over to Bennett, I expect to find his trademark scowl settled on his lips. However, in its place, is a half-smirk. *What is that about?*

He leans in, his scent intoxicating. Woodsy balsam that men pay cologne companies hundreds of dollars for has settled into his skin after spending years tending to Christmas trees at the farm. I’ve been in close proximity to him a million times by now, but it’s never quite affected me like this.

“Just so you know, I sleep naked,” he says lowly before he makes his way up the staircase in front of us.

Son of a nutcracker.

I wish I wasn’t freaking the fuck out so I could appreciate the lengths Noelle went to decorate the room for tonight. From the red and white quilt with a Nordic design of snowflakes, ornaments, and reindeer on the bed to the small Christmas tree lit with white lights in the corner, the spare bedroom looks like it belongs in a damn Hallmark movie. I barely notice the chalkboard sign that says, “Welcome Bennett and Clara!” before I make a mental note to take a breath.

In through your nose, out through your mouth, Clara. Relax. You’re just sharing a bed with the man you call a best friend who has made an occurrence in several of your naughtiest fantasies. No big deal. No big deal at all.

The corset of the bodysuit is tight, but not tight enough to be cutting off any air circulation. The lightheadedness has nothing to do with the room or my attire, but everything to do with the man standing in front of me, watching my every movement. My heart slams clamors around in my chest as I unbutton my jacket. For a split second, I wonder if I should change before the party. My thoughts are all over the place with Bennett’s latest revelation.

That is until remember how his jaw all but dropped to the floor when he first saw me tonight. If I have to spend this

party imagining him naked in bed, it's only fair that visions of *my* sugarplums dance in his head for the rest of the night. My arrogance lasts approximately three seconds before he strips out of his own jacket, placing it on the bed on top of mine.

Hot freaking toddy, the man is a smoke show.

Bennett hadn't exactly jumped for joy when I told him the theme for tonight was not a joke. There were even a few choice curse words dropped when I went as far as suggesting Santa pants with suspenders only. No shirt. I half expected him to show up in his work clothes. The Santa pants were a win in themselves, but when I see his bare chest and abs on full display, my mouth goes dry.

"What's the matter, Clara?" he asks as he pulls a Santa hat from out of his overnight bag. "I thought this is what you wanted me to wear?" He puts the Santa hat on his head and adjusts it, somehow looking even hotter than a few seconds ago. Who the hell looks hot in a Santa hat?! I force myself to look down at the floor for a beat while I get my shit together.

"It is." Warmth flushes over my cheeks as I bring my eyes back up to his. "Nothing. I'm fine. It's fine. Everything is fine."

I'm fully aware I'm jumbling my words, but how the fuck am I supposed to speak when his beautifully defined V-line is less than five feet away, taunting me.

"So, I was thinking," he starts. "You know, there's nothing wrong with being on the nice list."

"What?"

"The nice list," he repeats. "Earlier you said you were trying to get on the naughty list, but you're not a bad girl, Clara. You're a *good* girl. And lucky for you, good girls get everything they ask Santa for."

FOUR

CLARA

MY BREATH HITCHES from his comment.

Good girls get everything they ask Santa for.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask as he narrows his eyes. This time he doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he’s blatantly checking me out. His eyes rake over my body in such a way that makes me want to lock the door right fucking now. Party be damned. I’m about to jump on his candy cane and ride into tinsel town.

Too far?

“You know what I’m getting at, Bunny,” he says, and I swear he deepens his already low voice. “Don’t ever try to be someone you’re not. You’re a good girl, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Bad girls aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, and I happen to like you exactly how you are.” He looks me up and down again, his eyes locking on my cleavage a beat longer than the rest of me, and I can’t say I’m upset about it. It feels good to have his attention in this way. I’ve seen his attention on other women, and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t gnaw at me from time to time.

I swallow past the growing lump in my throat as he says the words I’ve been dying to hear him speak for longer than I can even remember. Is this even real life? Or am I *fa-la-la*-losing my mind?

Bennett steps closer to me, closing the sliver of distance that separated us, and I have to crane my neck to look up at him—our height differences on full display. “Well, there’s a

reason guys like bad girls, isn't there?" I ask, unable to reference the type of women my best friend typically spends his time with. My mind flashes to his latest conquests I've seen him with. All are etched deeply into my mind. "Besides, you and I are proof nice girls don't always get what they want," I murmur.

I turn to head downstairs after saying a bit too much. Damn my mouth and my inability to stop the word vomit I always seem to have.

I can't let my mind and my heart get sucked back into all things Bennett Winters. I've had to use every ounce of willpower I possess to get over him too many times—and we've never even been together. I'm just the *nice* best friend he has that he kissed one time.

Clearly, it didn't mean as much to him as it did to me because we never spoke of it after that night. It wasn't entirely his fault. There were countless times I could have brought it up since then, but the fear of being unwanted halted me in place every time I tried to bring it up.

I can't do this again. I won't do this again.

Moments after those thoughts appear, I almost laugh at myself. As if I've had any control over the way I feel about Bennett. As if I could stop these thoughts, these feelings from coming to the surface. As hard as I tried to push them down, they are always there. I don't have willpower when it comes to him. I never have.

Just as I grip the doorknob of the room we've been designated to share, Bennett grabs ahold of my bicep and turns me back toward him. Heat, or something very similar, flashes in his eyes, and I can't help but hope he got a nice eyeful of my ass—one of my favorite assets that I've fully planned on making him drool over all night. Friends or not, Bennett is still a man, after all.

"Sometimes nice girls just need to ask for what they want, Clara."

I look into my best friend's eyes, and although I'm scolding myself, begging myself to not go there, I feel my resolve cracking and crumbling into an unknown abyss, never to return again.

Damn it.

His golden-brown stare locks me in, and I'm a damn goner.

This thing between us, this *a bit more than friendship but not anything enough to put a label on* is dissipating and blurring and morphing into something I don't think either of us is ready for. How is it that I've kept a tight hold on this for so many years and all it takes is him dressed in red pants and suspenders (without a shirt) to send me spiraling?

"Can I tell you something?" he asks, and I find myself nodding along like I'm in a trance.

And I am.

The Bennett Winters trance.

One I've run from for years.

"You look incredible tonight, Ms. Ivy." Bennett smiles and I can't help but smile back as I roll my eyes. "Seriously. If I didn't tell you, I'd be kicking myself for the rest of my life. You look amazing and you should be told so."

Heat blooms on my cheeks, his words hitting me hard in the feels I try so hard to keep a grip on. "Well thanks, *friend*," I emphasize the word, for myself only, but I don't miss how his brows furrow. "You look good, too." A half-smile forms on my face. "It took me, like, a thousand years to get ready and do all of this. Makes me realize why I don't do it every day. But thanks for noticing."

He scoffs and I cock my head, unsure.

"I always notice you. Doesn't matter what you're wearing or not wearing." He motions to my barely there ensemble. "I probably don't say it as much as I should, but I'm gonna work on that."

I smile and turn away from him again, Bennett's words replaying over and over again in my mind as my smile grows so wide my cheeks sting. Thank god he's behind me because I'm grinning like a damn idiot.

As I open the door, it hits me that we're about to be surrounded by a lot of beautiful men and women. I know I look good, and Bennett has clearly taken notice. It gives me a new sense of confidence that I don't quite know what to do with—but I do know one thing...

"Hey!" I say, spinning on my heel, literally. I forget I'm in these stupid deathtrap shoes, lose my balance, and almost fall over. Thank god he's practically on top of me because before I can fall, Bennett catches me in his arms and rights me.

"Damn heels," I mutter, cursing the stupid things.

Bennett chuckles and I swat him. "You were going to say?" he asks, his hands still on my arms.

I shake my head to clear the annoying embarrassment and take a deep, cleansing breath.

"Maybe this nice girl *will* go after what she wants tonight," I say, looking up at him. "I guess time will tell."

As much as I wish we could stay in this perfect snow globe moment together, we're snapped back to reality when "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" starts blasting from the main floor.

"I think that's our cue," I say with a slight shake of my head.

Maybe putting a little distance between Bennett and I isn't such a bad idea. Clearly, I can't think straight while he's so damn close, looking and smelling so damn good. If I don't start thinking about something else soon we're not even going to make it down to the party tonight.

Frosted sugar cookies.

Gingerbread men.

Candy cane martinis.

“Before we head down,” Bennett starts, as a mischievous grin spreading across his face. “Wanna make a wager?”

My brows raise at his suggestion. I never knew Bennett to be a betting man. You learn something new every day.

“What kind of wager?”

“For every guy that hits on you tonight, you have to strip one item of clothing when we get back to the room later.”

He has to be joking, so I let out a laugh. “Ha, ha. Real funny.”

There’s no way he said that and meant it. But, there isn’t a single trace of amusement on Bennett’s face. The corner of his lips have fallen flat as he waits for me to realize it wasn’t a joke.

Holy shit. He’s dead serious right now.

“And what if no one hits on me tonight?” I challenge.

I’m feeling pretty damn good tonight, but I’ve seen some of Noelle’s friends. I’m content over here looking like Girl-Next-Door Barbie with my self-painted, chipped manicure and my natural hair color, but the women Noelle grew up with look like real Barbies come to life with their spray tans, perfect contours, and perky, fake boobs. Even on my best day, I can’t compete with that.

Bennett belts out a laugh. “I’m sorry. That was just hilarious to me.”

“You’re going to get hit on,” he continues. “I have no doubt about that. Hence, the wager.”

“Okay,” I agree. “But how will *you* know? What if I don’t tell you each time?”

“If you think I’m going to let you out of my sight looking like that”—his eyes glance down to my bodysuit again—“you’re sadly mistaken, Bunny.”

He steps forward, once again, closing the space between us. Before I allow myself to be pulled under by his charm again, I twist the doorknob and push it open slowly.

“Okay,” I repeat. “You’re on, Winters.”

FIVE

BENNETT

IT'S INCREDIBLY HARD to take Noelle and Michael seriously right now. The only thing covering Noelle's nipples is a red ribbon that is somehow wrapped around her body, leading to bows that cover her lower lady parts and her ass crack, and Michael looks like he belongs to a North Pole exotic dancer ensemble.

Not that I have any room to talk right now.

Approximately three seconds after Clara and I found them in the kitchen, the girls started screeching over the massive diamond ring on Noelle's left hand. On the outside, Clara is visibly excited for her closest girl friend, but there was something in her eyes that didn't sit right with me. It wasn't jealousy. Clara doesn't have a jealous bone in her body. She's always been the kindest, most supportive person in my life as well as to everyone else around her. As empathetic as they come, when the people she loves are happy, so is Clara.

But as she glances over at me, there's a hint of sadness in her eyes. It makes me want to scoop her up in my arms and do whatever I can to take it away. Tonight has been a real eye-opener for me as far as seeing how much of a fucking bombshell my best friend is under all those leggings and big oversized sweaters, but the overprotectiveness is nothing new. Looking back, I couldn't count how many guys I threatened growing up for making comments about her. Clearly, they all saw what I hadn't been seeing this whole damn time.

I shouldn't say I *haven't* seen it.

Because I have.

I've just done my damn best to ignore it.

But the pull toward Clara, the want and desperate need for more?

It's always been there. I just haven't had the guts to go after what I want.

"So, you and Clara, huh?" Michael asks, nudging me with his elbow before handing me a copper mug.

While Clara and Noelle are going over every little detail of how Michael popped the question, Michael and I have taken it upon ourselves to order Moscow Mules and, of course, candy cane martinis for the ladies from the bartender.

"You guys really went all out this year, huh?" I look around, sidestepping Michael's question.

We didn't spend much time down here before Clara and I went to bring our bags upstairs, but now that I've gotten a good look around, I realize Noelle has truly outdone herself this time. Every year, her parents give her a ton of money to throw herself an early birthday party. At first I thought it was just a rich kid thing, but after getting to know Noelle, these parties just make me feel sorry for her.

It has very little to do with celebrating Noelle's birthday—which isn't until Christmas Eve—and more about just dumping an obscene amount of money her way to distract from the fact they can't be bothered to do anything for her themselves. It's gotten to the point where my mom asks if Noelle is coming with Clara to holiday gatherings.

In her own form of rebellion, Noelle makes sure to spend every penny of her party allowance. This year is no different. Six-foot Nutcrackers, painted in different colors, are scattered throughout the main floor. Entire rooms are individually decorated with their own Christmas theme. The dining room, which is serving as a drink area, has giant silver bells hanging from the ceiling. One of the six Christmas trees Michael picked up from the farm earlier this week is decorated in silver tinsel and smaller bells. It's insane to me how much these girls

love Christmas time. To me, it's just the busiest time of the year at the farm. By December first, I can't wait for the twenty-sixth just so I can sleep past four o'clock in the morning. If my damn brother would get his shit together and start holding his own, I'd at least be able to depend on someone else a little bit. But he's "too busy" to stay in town during the week and can only be here on the weekends. I'll give it to him, because at least he comes back home at all and weekends *are* our busiest time, but still. Weekdays get really long at this time of the year.

"You're not gonna get out of this one so easily." Michael laughs as I continue to ignore him and look at the decorations around the room.

"Well, well, well, look at these ho, ho, hoes!"

Saved by the douchebag.

Michael's best friend, Chris, comes strolling in the room, and I immediately straighten. It's damn near impossible to look intimidating right now, in this fucking outfit, but that doesn't stop me from puffing my chest anyway—I swear it's instinctual. I do not understand how someone as down to earth and genuine as Michael stands to be around a prick like Chris. Every single time I'm around this dude, I want to punch him in his mouth.

I'm generally not a *resort to violence* kind of guy, but, without fail, every time we're all together, he finds some woman to degrade or belittle. I've kept my cool until now out of respect for Michael, but I don't think I'll be able to bite my tongue if he moves in on Clara. Especially not with that fucking mouth of his.

I've seen Clara grab the attention of various guys plenty of times before. I wasn't just saying it earlier when I told her that guys want nice girls. Good girls. She's quirky and adorable. The kind of girl you bring home and spend forever with... not just one night. We've played that hand on many, many nights out. I've sat back and been her wing-man before, but there will be none of that tonight. We made a bet, and I fully intend on letting guys come up and talk to her. I want her to understand

how fucking desirable she is, but Chris is where I draw the line.

Luckily, Michael handles it this time.

“Hey!” Michael’s brows pinch as he slugs Chris in the arm. “That’s my fiancée you’re talking about!”

While Chris throws an adult-sized version of a temper tantrum over the fact he’s losing his partner in crime, I take the opportunity to step away from the conversation and join Noelle and Clara. As I approach her, I place my hand on the small of Clara’s back. All things considered, it’s a small gesture, but there’s a predatorial side of me that hopes it’s big enough that Chris will see and take the hint. A small wave of guilt washes over me when Clara stops mid-conversation to look up at me with those big blue eyes. The sweetest smile settles on her lips, and it makes me want to kiss it right off of her.

Damn, she’s perfect.

“So, Clara and I were just talking about brunch tomorrow,” Noelle says, tucking a strand of long black hair behind her ear. If she’s surprised by the intimate proximity between me and Clara, she isn’t letting on in the slightest. “Since Jackson and Liam aren’t allowed to come tonight, I thought we could all do a big hangover brunch around eleven with just our crew. I just popped it in the group text, and Elliott said he’s in, too.”

In all this craziness, I hadn’t given Jackson and Liam, Clara’s older brothers, a single thought... Maybe I should have when I was rattling off things to keep my dick soft earlier, because thinking about their baby sister in the way I have been is enough to be get my dick cut off by one of them. Clara’s the youngest of the three of them. When their dad left, Jackson and Liam became more like bodyguards than big brothers. They’ve calmed down a lot—something I would absolutely attribute to their wives, Sara and Rachel—but I know that if anything happens with Clara and I, they’re going to be on me like Santa on a plate of Christmas cookies, making sure I don’t have any ill-willed intentions with their baby sister.

Christ. Clara's festive puns are worming their way into my brain.

I assumed Sara and Rachel would both be here tonight, which would mean Clara's brothers would be here too. Those four girls do everything together. It appears Clara's brothers were excluded from the invite, though.

"What do you mean Jackson and Liam aren't allowed to come?" I tease. I have a good inclination why, but it's still fun to press Clara's buttons. "Do you not think they would have fun?"

"I think Clara would end up wearing a burlap sack and feel uncomfortable seeing her brothers dressed like..." Noelle pauses and waves her arm up and down as if to showcase my body. "Well, you, sexy St. Nick. I will say... I told her I wouldn't believe it till I saw it with my own two eyes, but if anyone could get you to agree to this ensemble it would be our Clara. Who knew there were so many muscles under all that plaid? You look good, Bennett. Doesn't he look good, Clara?" Noelle nudges Clara and widens her blue eyes at her.

Clara lets out a sigh at Noelle's badgering. Since the very first party I came to when Noelle and Clara were college roommates, Noelle has been absolutely fixated on the idea of Clara and I being together. At this point, I don't think it matters whether it's for one night or forever. Noelle is just very much *Team Clarett* as she likes to say. Every fiber of my being fights against admitting it, but the idea of *Clarett*, not the name itself, is beginning to grow on me too.

"Forget about me," I say, taking the heat off Clara having to answer Noelle. "Can we talk about how much of a smoke show Clara is?"

"Oh, I've known." Noelle grins, waving to someone I don't recognize that just walked in the room. She pats my arm as she walks by. "But it's good to see you've finally opened your eyes, Benny boy."

SIX

CLARA

THE PARTY IS in full swing when Noelle stops the music and declares it's time for the "Dirty Santa" swap.

I'm grateful for the interruption as the fifth random guy of the night approaches me. As of right now, I'll be losing both boots and both garter belts later tonight thanks to the wager with Bennett. In hindsight, I should have made a bet of my own. A pair of socks and the bodysuit are all that stand between me being completely naked in front of my best friend later.

The thought hadn't crossed my mind until just now. I've been too busy dying inside as women walk up to him and find an excuse to touch his muscles. At first, I thought I was all hot and bothered due to the four candy cane martinis I've had, but as the night goes on, I realize I'm just not a fan of other women being all over Bennett.

It doesn't matter what they look like, what they do for a job—because I've been eavesdropping—or how much they laugh at his jokes. He's not *that* funny. One can only assume the only reason they're laughing so much is because they're trying to charm their way into his bed. Jokes on you, ladies. He's sharing a bed with me tonight. I guess I should actually thank Noelle for that, even though she totally blindsided me.

I've helped Bennett score girls in bars before, but it was difficult then and it's difficult now.

"Okay!" Noelle claps as everyone makes their way into the living room. "First, I want to say thank you to everyone for

coming and for going with the theme in the most spectacular way. I have the hottest friends in the world. Tonight sure proves that.”

There’s a slew of whistles and cheering that stop as soon as she starts speaking again. I figure I have a few minutes before the shenanigans begin, so I sneak out to the dining room. The bartender recognizes me and reaches for the peppermint vodka.

“Actually,” I say. “Could I get some H2O on the rocks?”

While I am enjoying the warm fuzzies I’m currently experiencing throughout my body, I am still fully aware of my surroundings and coherent enough to know I do not want a hangover tomorrow. Buzzed is great. Drunk? No thank you.

With a copper mug filled with ice water, I saunter back in the living room. Scanning the space, I find Sara and Rachel sitting on the couch and there’s an empty cushion with my name on it. With each step, I focus on not falling on my face. These boots are gorgeous, but wager or not, Bennett will not get any argument from me when it comes to taking them off.

Chris motions for me to sit next to him, and although I’d rather die than sit by the insufferable, loudmouth idiot, I start to take a seat next to him. Just as I go to sit, Bennett slides down onto the couch, taking my spot. I open my mouth to tell him I was just about to sit there, and he pats his thigh.

“Got a seat for you right here, Bunny.” He smirks like he’s managed to get one up on me. I’ll let him think that if he wants, but I’m not exactly disappointed to be offered the spot on his lap. Just call me Petty Betty, because as soon as my ass makes contact with his leg, I take the opportunity to look around the room, finding each of the women that threw themselves at him tonight. I also can’t help but notice Chris’s look of disapproval and the way Bennett side-eyes him in return.

“God, you guys are so fucking cute,” Sara says from the other side of the couch. “If you don’t come to brunch tomorrow with a full report of what happens after we leave, I’m going to be very disappointed.”

“You know I’m right here.” Bennett laughs as he wraps his arm around my waist. Lowering his voice, he puts his lips right outside of my ear. He’s so close I can feel his breath on my skin. “Get comfy.” The urge to make myself at home on his lap, to move my ass against him in a way I know would make any man hard, is strong—but I resist. I don’t need these people seeing his *package* before I get to.

God, now instead of making Bennett horny, I’m working myself up.

“For those of you that are new to Dirty Santa...” Noelle says. “There’s usually a whole game that goes with it, but I know everyone doesn’t want to sit around and wait for a gift. So, basically, my helper elf is going to randomly hand out bags, and you get what you get. No trades allowed.” She points a long, red manicured finger at each of us.

In true Noelle fashion, she requested that every gift was something naughty. Last weekend, Sara, Rachel, and I drove an hour away from the nosy Nellies of our small town and went to a “modern adult store” in Burlington. Given who their partners are, I didn’t dare ask Sara or Rachel if they were as clueless about it as I was while walking into there.

There were sex toys for his and her pleasure, accessories, a whole wall full of lubes, books, BDSM items... but I think I did okay. I’m excited to see who gets mine. I don’t think anyone will expect mine to be as risqué as it is.

“Okay,” Noelle says once all the gifts are handed out. “Now, on the count of three, everyone tear in.” She beams. It’s funny how such little things get us excited, especially this time of year. “I’m so excited!” she exclaims and then counts us down.

I hope I don’t get something too crazy. Visions of whips and chains are dancing in my head as Noelle finishes her countdown. Sounds of crinkling paper and excited squeals and laughter fill the space. I peel back the evergreen tree paper, and I’m met with my thoughtful gift: a stress ball in the shape of a penis.

I mean, I honestly thought whatever I ended up getting would get thrown away but this could actually come in *handy*.

No pun intended.

“Clara! You got mine!” Chris laughs. “Now you can squeeze my penis anytime you get stressed.” He waggles his eyebrows, and I swear I feel Bennett tense behind me as I roll my eyes.

I scoff. “You got that just so you could say that didn’t you, Chris?” I say, rolling my eyes as I turn back toward Bennett to see what useful gift he got.

“Oh my god.” I laugh as my mood lifts. “You got mine!”

I hadn’t realized it before because the girls wrapped the present for me a few nights ago when I was working late, but Bennett is holding the gift I purchased in his hands, examining it.

Bennett turns the package over in his hands and reads out loud, “Eat me edible panties,” he chuckles out. “Intense strawberry.” He raises his eyebrows as he looks from the edible undies to me. “Nice choice, Bunny. You know someone who loves strawberry-flavored anything, don’t you?” He lowers his voice and narrows his eyes at me as everyone around us continues to laugh and chat about their presents. “Did you get these and imagine wearing them for me?”

Is he joking?

Surely he’s joking.

Doesn’t matter. The heat creeps up my chest and onto my cheeks anyways.

Because maybe I did.

My best friend does love strawberry, and there were ten different flavors to choose from...

“Bunny?” he pokes at me, and I just want to scream, *yes!* Obviously!

“That’s okay,” he says, grabbing my hips and tugging me against him, stealing my breath. “It can be our little secret for

now.” He smiles and I swear my insides spin.

SEVEN

BENNETT

OF COURSE I got edible panties.

Now I can't stop imagining my best friend wearing them tonight.

The Patriots...

The time I heard my parents in bed...

Grandma...

"I think I know someone who would look really good in those..." Noelle says as she walks by, gesturing to the panties. "And you guys just so happen to be sharing a bedroom tonight. Weird, huh?!" She winks and then runs over to Michael, waving the massage mitts and lotion she got in the air as she does.

"She couldn't be any more obvious, could she?" Clara looks at Noelle with a scowl on her face as she shakes her head.

I reach out and massage her shoulders, something I've done countless times before, but it feels a bit more intimate when there's no clothing separating my hands from her bare skin.

"Aw. Come on, Bunny," I say. "Your best friend is just trying to get you *la-la-la-la-laid*."

I smirk at her as she turns around.

"See what I did there? I'm being festive for you."

Finally, my girl smiles, and I fucking swear it makes me grin ear-to-ear.

My girl?

I mean, she is my girl. She's always been mine. Even if we don't acknowledge it.

"Hey, Clara."

An unfamiliar voice interrupts our moment, and I instinctively remove my hands from her shoulders as she straightens. I look over and see a guy I've never met before. He's practically got hearts in his eyes as he looks Clara up and down and she stands. I stand too, because fuck if I'll be sitting as they both stand here and he eye fucks her in front of me.

"Hi, Guy," she says sweetly, her voice raising an octave.

Guy? Seriously? I laugh before I can catch myself and they both turn toward me.

"Guy, this is Bennett," Clara says, motioning between us. "Bennett, Guy."

I reach out my hand, and when his palm collides with mine I grip it tightly. He matches my death grip as he narrows his eyes.

"Guy. Nice to meet you. How do you two know each other?" I ask, genuinely curious. She's never mentioned him before.

"I met Clara awhile back at a pet adoption clinic her coffee shop sponsored. I volunteer for the shelter." He doesn't even look at me but instead eyes Clara from head to toe and back up again, his eyes staying on her tits for a bit longer than I'd like.

Hell, who am I kidding? I want to throw a damn trench coat around her and carry her out of here. It was all fun and games at first, but I'm over this. I don't want any of these guys to look at her tits—or anything else on her for that matter—all.

And, of course he met her at a pet adoption clinic. It sounds like one of those damn Hallmark movies that are on my parents' television all season long.

I stand closer to her and drape my arm around her, unable to resist myself. I thought I'd be better at the whole *allowing people to hit on her* thing. But it turns out I'm just an idiot.

I want my best friend.

I want Clara Ivy.

And the more I watch other people shoot their shots, the more I realize how stupid I've been all these years.

"Good to know," I say, pulling her into my side as Guy's eyes finally land on me. "You wanna go get a drink, babe?" I ask her and she looks at me with a puzzled look on her face. "See you later, *Guy*," I say, pulling her after me.

"Uhh, Bennett..." Clara starts once we're out of earshot of the dog whisperer. "Babe?" she asks as we approach the bartender.

"Yeah, I didn't like him. I got weird Ted Bundy vibes," I tell her. "You know, like he acts like a good guy until he gets you into his apartment and then *bam!* Your body is thrown in the river, and your head is sitting in his living room for him to admire."

"Uhh..." Clara glances back toward where we left Guy. "That got really dark, really fast," she says as she rolls her eyes.

I rub her back and nod. "Just looking out for my *friend*," I tell her, emphasizing the word the same way she did earlier.

When we reach the bartender, I look down and see Clara's drinking water. *Pretty and smart*. We're both still buzzed, and neither of us likes to take things too far. Hangovers are the devil.

Water it is.

"Sure," she says, sipping from her mug as soon as the bartender hands it back to her. She rolls those pretty eyes of hers again. I love the confidence she has tonight. I want to see more of it.

"Sure?" I ask.

She stands a bit taller, and her damn tits push out. My knees actually grow weak at the sight. This woman knows exactly what she's doing.

“You just love to scare away my potential suitors. Makes me wonder...” She trails off, and I step closer to her. She looks up and into my eyes, and I realize even though this is a whole new side of Clara, she's still the same beautiful woman I've always known. She's just more confident with less clothes.

“Makes you wonder what, Bunny?” I ask and she smirks.

“Makes me wonder why you don't just claim me for yourself.”

And that's it.

That is fucking it.

With one short, sweet, suggestive sentence, she's disintegrated any lasting part of my resolve.

In one, swift movement, I pick her up, toss her over my shoulder, and head up the stairs.

Merry fucking Christmas to me.

EIGHT

CLARA

“BENNY!” I squeal as I try to keep my butt-cheeks at least partially hidden. “Bennett Winters, you put me down right now!”

He grunts and lets out a scoff. I can practically see him rolling his eyes at me—although I’m still draped over his shoulder as if I weigh nothing more than a damn ragdoll.

“We’re almost there. Relax.”

He kicks open our partially closed bedroom door and crosses over the threshold. Once in front of the bed, he finally releases me, throwing me down onto the comfy bed. My head still swirls a bit, the buzz creating a high that’s the perfect balance of all things merry and bright.

“Damn,” he says. “I could get used to this view.”

Bennett smiles as he looks down at me, and I can’t help but think about all the intimate, dirty, very *holly and jolly* things I’d love for this fine specimen of a man to do to me.

“Can I ask why we came up here when the party is downstairs?” I ask, even though I don’t mind at all. Especially when he’s got those perfect abs on display and I’m the only one who gets to look at them.

Bennett crawls onto the bed and lies down next to me, and I turn onto my side to face him.

“You finally spoke up,” he says. “Finally asked for what you want, and lucky for me, tonight it’s me.” His face inches closer to mine, and his scent fills me with both nervousness

and ease. “What were your words? Why don’t I just claim you for myself?”

I swallow, remembering my candy cane martinis and the confidence boost they’ve given me.

I literally told my best friend to claim me.

Is my brain okay?

“Clara,” he coaxes, our foreheads now touching. “Don’t tempt a man with something he can’t have.”

He brings his hand to my jaw, cupping it, and his eyes are glued on my lips in a way that tells me he’s starving for this as much as I am.

“Who says you can’t have me?” I ask, needing his mouth on mine more than I’ve ever needed anything else in my life. The air between us shifts, the desire palpable as our eyes finally connect.

He takes a deep breath, nuzzling his nose against mine.

“If we do this, there is no going back. Not this time,” he says, his breath hot and minty against my skin as he references our kiss from so long ago. The one we both ignored. “I don’t think I could do it again, Bunny. There’s not a fucking chance I’ll be able to keep my hands off of you once I’ve had a taste.”

I nod fervently, my heart racing from his words. From his desire. From my own.

Before I can say anything else, his lips are on mine and my mouth is opening at his command, his tongue entering and tangling with my own as he groans against me. He pulls away for only seconds, just enough time to say, “God damn, Clara.”

His growing length presses into my thigh as his cock hardens, and I move my hand to stroke him, the fabric of his pants the only thing separating my touch from him. He rolls me on top of him, continuing to devour my mouth as his hands roughly pull down the small amount of fabric that had kept my breasts hidden from view.

“Fucking hell.” He pulls away from me, his eyes on my breasts as he drinks me in. He’s literally looking at me like I’m

otherworldly. Instead of feeling embarrassed or like I need to cover up, the look in his eyes gives me a brand-new boldness that ignites in my veins, and I sit back, straightening my spine as he watches me. “You’re a fucking goddess.”

He sits up and pulls me to him, licking and sucking my nipple as he palms my other breast greedily, making my core tighten with an ungodly need.

A need purely for him.

“Bennett,” I manage to get out. “Please...”

“Please, what?” he asks, pausing for mere seconds before taking my other nipple between his teeth and lightly grazing it in the most satisfying way. “Use your words, baby.”

I grind against his hard length as he groans against my breasts, continuing his perfect assault on my sensitive buds. He feels so good against me. He’s so long and thick and even just the friction between us is enough to make me come, I feel it building, the pressure driving me forward as I buck against him.

“Eager little thing, aren’t you, Bunny?” he asks as he lies back on the bed. “Who would’ve thought?”

“Someone told me I should go after what I want,” I say as I move down his body, remove his pants, and take his heavy cock into my hands.

His head falls back onto the pillows as he lets out a long, no longer stifled moan.

“Yeah? Sounds like some pretty fucking good advice,” he manages to get out.

His words are clipped as I work him with my hand, and his muscles contract. Moving my head down to the tip of his cock, I tease him, licking him and looking up at him to see the ecstasy play out on his face.

“You wanna tell me what you’d like now?” I ask him, not even recognizing my own voice. I dart my tongue out and lick him from base to tip and then take him all the way down my throat, surprising him.

“Fuuuuuck,” he lets out, his hand finding its way to the back of my head and providing light pressure. “That,” he says. “That right there is exactly what I want.”

I do as he wishes, licking and sucking and moaning against him as I take every inch of him down my throat and feeling my own desperate need build as I bring him closer and closer to the edge. I break for only a second, giving my jaw a rest as I stroke him from base to tip, perfecting my motion in time to his ragged breaths as the valleys and ridges of his defined stomach pulsate.

Bringing my head back down, I take him down my throat again and feel him somehow grow even harder as he hits the back of my throat, and I gag against him.

“Shit,” he says, pulling out of my mouth and using his two strong, capable hands to lift me up and onto his face. He continues lying exactly as he was, flat on the bed, but instead of where I was positioned down at his core, I now have my thighs wrapped around his head as he immediately starts devouring my pussy.

“Oh my god,” I cry out as he expertly licks and sucks and takes my sensitive clit between his teeth gently yet forcefully at the same time, causing me to fuck his face as he sends me spiraling out of control. “Jesus!”

He pauses only long enough to say, “No, baby. Bennett.” Then, he grabs onto my ass as he continues to feast on me and suddenly, before I can hold off or beg him to fuck me, I come completely undone, my body unable to take even a second more of his ministrations before letting go. I come with a force I’ve never felt before, bucking uncontrollably against my best friend’s face as he moans against me, lapping up every single drop of what he’s done to me.

“Fucking yes, baby,” he urges me on and then flips us over so he’s on top of me. He coaxes two fingers inside of me and my eyes roll back into my head as he works into me in a lust-inducing haze I know I’ll never recover from. “Such a good girl, coming all over my face. You think you can come again for me?” he asks, and I nod wordlessly, unable to form a

coherent thought let alone speak anything out loud. “What do you want now, baby?” he asks as he fucks me with his fingers, my need already building again from his touch. Damn this man and what he does to me. It’s unlike anything I have ever felt in all my life.

So damn good.

Where do I want him? Is that what he asked?

“Inside of me,” I say honestly. “I want you inside me.”

He takes his cock into his hand and strokes, and now it’s my turn to watch something so beautiful I can’t even put it into words. Lying here as he rocks back on his heels and palms himself for me is like I’m watching a painting come to life in front of my eyes.

“I don’t have a condom,” he says, and I shake my head.

“I’m on the pill, and I trust you. Give me what I want, Bennett. Nice girls get what they ask for, what they want, right?”

He wastes no time, flipping me on my back. In one smooth, perfect motion, he’s inside of me, filling me to the hilt.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he grunts out, moving in and out of my wet, needy pussy with slow, captivating precision, filling me and leaving me wanting when he pulls out.

“No. It’s Clara,” I tell him with a wink.

NINE

BENNETT

I CAN'T HELP but smirk at her comment as I drive inside of her pussy. She clenches around me, damn near ending me as I fuck into her, giving her exactly what she asked for.

What we *both* need.

“Such a good fucking girl, finally asking for what you want,” I tell her, playing off of our earlier conversation. She feels so fucking good, unreal almost. Ethereal. I nearly came when she was taking me down her throat like she’s done it all her damn life, and now? Now it’s like I’m high above the earth, in another dimension entirely.

Her hands find my back as I move inside of her and she grips me, her nails clenching into my skin and giving me the perfect amount of pain to mix with the pure fucking bliss she provides.

She nods as she moans, my name on her lips a fucking heaven I’ve never known—that I’m afraid I’ll never feel again.

“Come for me, Clara,” I urge her, and just as I slip, unable to control my need for her for a second more, I feel her come all over my cock as she screams my name again, writhing underneath me. I don’t pull out of her, she’s on the pill and I trust that. Instead, I pump into her one last time and hold her down against me by her hips, filling her as I lose control.

Once we’ve both finished, I collapse onto the bed and she runs her fingertips up and down my chest as I stare at her. She’s so god damn beautiful. Words don’t compare. Not to her.

My buzz is completely gone now, also incomparable to the high I just felt while the two of us were connected. Damn. Clara does something to me. Something I've tried ignoring for so long.

"You're incredible," I tell her, reaching out to smooth the hair away from her face. She licks her lips and I lean forward to kiss her again. It's quick, simple, but I couldn't resist.

"*You're* incredible," she counters with a smile. "*That* was incredible."

"Call me a grinch all you want," I say, pressing my lips to the side of her temple. I can't seem to keep my lips off of her. To think, all those years wasted when I could have been kissing her this whole time. "But the thought of going back down to the party and having to share your attention with all the guys that wish they were up here with you is the last thing I want to do right now."

Clara lets out a giggle. "Aw, Benny. You're jealous. That's so freaking cute."

I sit up, ready to argue with her, deny it, but, fuck it. She's right. I *was* jealous. I will never be sorry for making the wager because it got us to where we are right now, but if I could scrub the memory of Clara in that bodysuit from every dude that looked at her tonight's mind, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Maybe it's possessive of me, but at this point I don't care. She's mine. In every sense of the word. I don't want to scare her by going all caveman possessive of her right off the bat, but it's a conversation we're going to have sooner rather than later.

When I don't say anything, she sits up too.

"It's okay," she says with a shrug. "I was too. Of every girl that held your attention tonight."

"I might have talked to other women when they approached me, but the only person that held my attention tonight was you."

Clara

In all of my wildest dreams, I never imagined that it would feel like this with Bennett. I'm no prude. I've had sex before, but it's never felt like that. Sex, for me, was always purely physical, but with Bennett, it was so much more than that. It was physical. It was emotional. If anyone overheard us, they might even say it was something spiritual.

If I hadn't been so hyper focused on the way Bennett was making me feel, I would have burst out laughing when he corrected me after calling out for Jesus. Maybe I was wrong earlier when I said he wasn't that funny. He's hilarious.

"What's going on in that pretty little mind of yours?" Bennett asks as he traces figure eights on my stomach.

He hasn't taken his hands off me since we walked in this room. I could definitely get used to this. I *want* to get used to this. I know Bennett said that there was no going back, but did he mean just for tonight? Forever? What does this mean for our friendship? Because, holy fucking shit, I just had sex with my best friend. My best *fucking* friend.

For more than half my life, Bennett has been by my side. Even when I moved to Rhode Island for college, he made sure to check in daily. We never went more than two weeks without seeing each other. He's the one that picked me up in the middle of the night when Gramma Ivy went into hospice. Bennett is the one that held me as I sobbed in the back of the funeral home, refusing to say goodbye to her. He's seen the very best and the absolute worst of me.

No matter where this lands us, everything is going to change between us now. The thought of losing him hits me like a sucker punch to the gut.

"Nothing really," I lie, as if I hadn't just spent the last few seconds spiraling into complete panic.

The last thing I want to do is freak him out. Experience has taught me that guys tend not to think beyond the moment. As hard as the instinct of fight or flight is starting to kick in, I'm not ready for this to be over. Not when I waited so long for it to happen in the first place.

“Clara.”

I've heard the tone he just used so many times before. Bennett is calling my bluff. Of course he knows when I'm not being truthful. The man knows me better than anyone on this earth. Instead of answering him right away, I scooch my body as close to him as I can get without climbing on top of him, nestling my head on his chest.

Focusing on the sound of his heart beating in a slow, steady rhythm quiets the noise in my head.

“Not tonight,” I plead. “I know we have to have this conversation, but can we please just savor tonight?”

At that, Bennett presses a kiss into my wild, messy hair and begins to run his fingers up and down my back. “Of course, baby.”

I fight sleep for as long as I can, knowing that no dream could ever compare to this.

TEN

BENNETT

I'M NOT QUITE sure when I fell asleep. All I know is I've tried melatonin, prescribed sleeping meds, nature sounds... but none of them have left me as well rested as a night of sleeping with Clara in my arms. At some point, she rolled over onto her side. Apparently I followed suit, because we woke up spooning.

Clara hasn't said anything yet, but I know that little shit's awake because she keeps pushing her ass against my ever-hardening cock.

"Careful, Bunny," I warn. "Don't start something you don't want to finish."

She answers by pressing hard against me. The thought of pulling her ass up and fucking her from behind is tempting as hell, but I gave her a warning. She's going to finish this.

Reaching under her torso, I pull her over so she's straddling me. With a smirk, she lifts her hips, positioning my cock just at her entrance.

"God damn," I curse under my breath as I between her glistening folds. "So fucking wet already."

"This coming from the guy who woke up with a raging hard on," she teases.

All traces of amusement leave her face when she pushes down, taking every fucking inch of me.

"Holy shit," she whimpers, swallowing as her eyes find mine again. "Bennett," she starts, letting out a breath, "I've

never done this before. I've never been on top. I don't want it to be bad for you."

An undeserving sense of pride blooms in my chest at her admission. I always knew Clara had less experience than me in the bedroom. We may have gone out together a lot, picking up people and having a good time, but the amount of times she actually left with the guys she flirted with? I could probably count them on one hand. The one guy she dated pretty seriously in college believed in waiting until marriage to "consummate" the relationship. I teased her so much about it then, but now I'm finding myself thankful Tommy Flanagan decided to keep his dick in his pants.

"It won't," I assure her as I push my back up against the headboard.

I want to watch every single second of this. Placing my hands on her hips, I guide her up and down until she begins to find her own rhythm. She sure as fuck doesn't need my help anymore, so I take one of my hands and put it on her chest, pushing her back slightly until the angle she's at is almost unbearable—in a really fucking incredible way—for both of us.

Her eyes widen, but before any of that unspoken fear begins to manifest itself, I lean forward and brush her lips with mine.

"Lean back, baby," I tell her. "I promise this is for you."

Without hesitation, she does as she's told. Taking the hand that had been holding her hip still, I swipe a finger across her clit once, and then back again, groaning as she bucks against my touch.

"Bennett," she whispers. "You keep doing that, I'm gonna come."

As if I needed more incentive to keep going. Her pussy tightens and she comes completely undone on top of me, tipping me right over the edge too.

Falling to the pillows on the other side of me, Clara lets out a giggle.

“Good morning to you too,” she says, lifting one of her legs up in the air. She wiggles her toes and lets out another laugh. “My toes are tingly.”

Amazing sex aside, it has become increasingly clear to me I would do just about anything to be the guy who puts that silly little smile on her face. Not just for a party hookup. For today, tomorrow, and all the days she’ll have me.

“You’re fucking perfect,” I say.

Words don’t usually come easy to me, but with Clara they leave me effortlessly.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she counters with a happy sigh. “I’m gonna go shower before brunch.”

Brunch.

Fuck. I forgot all about brunch. Nothing about Bloody Marys, pancakes, and quality time with our brothers—both Clara’s and mine—sounds appealing to me.

“What if we just stayed in bed?” I ask. “I know for a fact there’s something sweet to eat right here.”

As I waggle my brows, she sends a playful shove to my bicep.

“Bennett Winters!”

“Clara Ivy!” I say, mimicking her tone.

With a shake of her head, Clara leaves me alone in the bed. Her naked ass sashays back and forth as she heads to the adjoining bathroom. For a minute, I contemplate joining her, but if I do, there’s no way in hell we’re going to get out of here in time.

The water turns on, and the most beautiful woman I’ve been lucky enough to lay my eyes on begins singing a terrible, off-key rendition of “Santa Baby.”

It’s equally the most horrible and cutest thing I’ve ever heard in all my life.

ELEVEN

CLARA

IT'S BEEN twenty minutes since we've sat down, and not a single person has said a peep about me and Bennett. Michael chose to stay home instead of joining us, but out of the six other people sitting with us, three of them, for sure, watched Bennett carry me up to the bedroom and not come back down last night. It doesn't take a detective to put the rest of those pieces together.

Under normal circumstances, I would never expect Sara or Rachel to throw me under the bus to my brothers, but I thought, for sure, the candy cane martinis would've had at least one of them slipping up when they talked to them last night. The only other person at the table that might know something is Bennett's younger brother Elliott—who conveniently is on his way up to Merry & Bright Farm and decided to join us for brunch. He works in Boston so we don't see him too often these days. Aside from me, Elliott is the closest thing Bennett has to a best friend.

Irish twins, Bennett and Elliott are just a year apart. In looks alone, there's no denying the Winters lineage they share. Both of them have their dad's dark hair, the same green and brown flecks in their hazel eyes, and stand tall at six feet. In personality, though, they're as different as night and day. While Bennett keeps an impenetrable force field surrounding himself at all times, I don't think Elliott has ever met a stranger in his entire life.

Weirdly enough, before she passed, my grandmother was convinced I would end up with Elliott. She used to say he and

I were kindred spirits. I never looked at Elliott the way I looked, and still look, at Bennett. Elliott is wonderful, but Bennett has held my heart in his hands since I moved to Blue Spruce Hills...

...A hand that is currently placed on my thigh under the table. I would love to think it was because he can't keep it to himself now, however, chances are, he's just making sure my bouncing leg doesn't jolt the table. Anxiety isn't something I experience too often, but this brunch feels what I imagine it would be like stepping into the den of sleeping grizzly bears and poking them with a stick. Any second now, the bears, or in this case, my brothers, are going to wake up and they're not going to be happy.

After two rounds of mimosas, coffee, and tea, I start to think we might be in the clear to get through this meal without a big scene. But then, Noelle drops the spoon she used to stir sugar and cream into her coffee onto her plate. The clanking sound of the metal against the porcelain plates captures everyone at the table's attention.

"Okay, I'm dying over here," she starts, looking across the table directly at me. My stomach drops, and I try my hardest to be discreet about shaking my head. *Not now. Please do not ask this right now.* "Are you two together now?"

That girl and her big ass mouth.

I don't get a chance to answer her before my brothers start asking questions.

"Who?" Jackson questions, eyes darting between Bennett and me. "Is *who* together?"

"Something you wanna tell us, Winters?" Liam glares at Bennett.

"I swear," Elliott says, holding his hands up although he is well aware my brothers don't mean him. "I know nothing!"

A flush of embarrassment settles in my cheeks. This is exactly what I was worried about. It was never going to be a picture perfect moment when my brothers found out, but I swear, the two of them still look at me like I'm a virginal

twelve-year-old incapable of making decisions for herself. Most of the time, I cut them slack because I genuinely understand it comes from a place of love and concern. Not this time, though. Especially when I don't have an answer for them.

I send pleading glances to my sisters-in-law, and Sara and Rachel both attempt to sway their husbands' attention from the current conversation. Just as I turn to apologize to Bennett, he clears his throat.

"To be honest, we hadn't gotten a chance to have a conversation privately yet, and I will not have it at a table with our siblings," Bennett says. "I would hope that, by now, it goes without saying I would fucking die before I hurt Clara. For now, I just need you guys to trust that."

There isn't an empty spot in the restaurant. Patrons and servers alike zoom throughout the endless rows of tables. Nevertheless, the chatter of the multiple conversations around us are muted as a long silence settles over our table.

I am the girl that isn't afraid to sing karaoke in a room full of people. I wear ugly, awful Christmas sweaters simply because they make me happy. I'll dance anywhere and anywhere. It takes a lot to make me want to hide myself away. However, this conversation, or the current lack thereof, makes me want to crawl underneath the table so no one can see me.

Until my oldest brother Liam gives his nod of approval.

"You're right," he agrees with a nod. "You and Clara are adults and we need to trust the two of you to figure out what is or isn't going on yourselves."

Are pigs flying? Is hell freezing over? Have aliens taken over my brother's body?

I must be wearing my disbelief on my face because the corners of Liam's lips turn up as he shakes his head slightly. With a scrunch of his nose, he mouths, "Love you sis," before asking Elliott if he's excited to be headed back home for the season.

“Your mom must be thrilled,” Sara adds. “Both Winters boys under one roof again.

“God bless, Mama Winters,” Rachel chuckles.

“Not under one roof,” Elliott and Bennett both said at the same time causing the rest of us to chuckle.

It’s not uncommon for them to speak simultaneously.

“But yes,” Elliott continues. “Mom is excited. I gotta say, I am too. This time of the year is my favorite. The Grinch over here”—Elliott looks over to where his brother is sitting—“hates it. But I’m hoping someone’s Christmas cheer rubs off on him a little.”

“The Grinch doesn’t hate Christmas,” Bennett says. “The Grinch just isn’t a fan of working his ass off all year and having Tiny Tim come in and try and run the show.”

“Bro.” Elliott laughs. “You don’t even have your Christmas stories straight. Tiny Tim is from *The Christmas Carol*.”

The two of them will go back and forth all night if someone doesn’t put a stop to this now. Thankfully, our server steps to the table and I’m not forced to start singing Christmas songs at the top of my lungs as a distraction.

TWELVE

BENNETT

I'M NOT ready for my time with Clara to end—not that it ever truly does. I see her every single day when I stop at the coffee shop, but still. I want more of her. Crave more of her. And I'd be lying if I said I didn't want a repeat of last night...and this morning.

But mostly? Mostly I just want to be in the presence of my best friend turned...lover? I have so many questions, and I'm sure she does, too. But I know what I want. I'm sure of it. After last night, after finally breaking down those fucking barriers that have been up for far too long, I can't go back.

I cannot be *just friends* with Clara Ivy.

Not anymore.

“This damn radio,” Clara says, her voice breaking through my thoughts. She reaches out and hits the top of the dashboard with her fist a couple times, and it finally starts playing again. This truck is a year older than her. It was her grandpa's, and I've helped her keep it in pristine condition. The wires on this old radio, though? They've seen better days.

We've rode in mostly silence since leaving brunch. The radio unwilling to cooperate with either of our assaults for the first part of our drive. Finally, with another fist to the dash, it crackles to a start. My usual rock station comes through from the speakers, an old Disturbed song blaring as I turn down the familiar gravel back road that leads to Merry & Bright Farm. We're only a couple minutes out now.

“Well, that’s a definite no,” Clara mutters as she spins the dial to our small town station. One that, much to my chagrin, plays only Christmas music from the day after Halloween through December 25th.

I swear, Clara must have them in her back pocket. I wouldn’t put it past her to offer free cookies and coffee in exchange for her precious Christmas carols.

“It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas” now blasts through the old sound system, and I roll my eyes.

“Oh, stop it,” Clara says with a laugh, catching me. “Stop pretending like this time of year isn’t magical.”

I briefly glance over at her before fixing my eyes back on the road. She’s so damn beautiful it hurts. No matter what she’s wearing, makeup or no makeup, hair down or up in a messy bun. After last night it’s like a switch has flipped. I’ve always known my best friend is gorgeous, but for some reason I was able to keep myself in check. I can’t anymore. Those walls I carefully constructed over the years have crumbled, and honestly, I don’t want them to ever be built back up again.

“It’s the beginning of November, Bunny,” I say, shaking my head. “We’re weeks out from Thanksgiving, it doesn’t look anything like Christmas. Some of these old farmers are still harvesting their damn crops,” I add for good measure, although I’m just fucking with her now.

“Bennett Winters,” she says with a scoff. “One of these days I will have you willingly listening to Christmas songs with me the day after Halloween. Maybe I’ll even have you back in that sexy Santa outfit of yours.” She pretends to think for a minute, humming to herself. “You know, that would probably really drum up business for Ivy House. I can see you now, standing outside of the shop with that outfit on and drawing in all the old ladies.”

She laughs and I can’t help but chuckle along with her. This woman is the only one who can wear me down so effortlessly.

“You wanna make a bet? A wager, perhaps?” I ask, a grin spreading on my face.

We pull onto the property, and I drive down the long, winding road as Clara talks about how she could have me standing out in front of Ivy House with a snap of her fingers.

She’s not wrong, but I won’t admit that—yet.

“So,” I say, effectively changing the subject. “You wanna stop in and see Mom and Dad? Mom sent a text earlier asking both Elliott and I to stop by the house when we can. She wants to talk about hiring some event coordinator for the Winter Festival.”

Every year, we put on a big to-do. The entire town, those surrounding us, and even people from various parts of the state that have heard of us come out for a night of fun. We get the reindeer out for the kids to feed, a hot cocoa bar, vendors...it’s a whole thing. Admission is just a toy for our annual toy drive. Apparently Mom thinks we need more help after last year. There ended up being multiple issues because of how much the event has grown.

“I’ll never say no to seeing Mama & Old Man Winters,” Clara says with a smile. “You know I love them.” And I do. Clara and my parents have really gotten close over the years, but for some reason when she says it this time, it feels different. Strikes something deeper inside of me.

Now this woman has even me comparing myself to the damn Grinch. Heart growing three sizes, and all that.

THIRTEEN

CLARA

“WELL, CLARA IVY!” Meri pulls me in for a hug like she didn’t just see me a week ago when she came into Ivy House. “I haven’t seen you in forever. Where have you been hiding our sweet girl, Bennett?”

I look over at Bennett as she hugs me, and Bennett rolls his eyes.

“Ma, I’m not Clara’s keeper. You know the week of Halloween is busy at Ivy House.” He shrugs as Meri finally lets me up for air. “It’s all that spicy pumpkin boo fest bullshit, and they wanna get festive drinks for their social media.”

Meri swats at him playfully while telling him she’s going to wash his mouth out with soap. This earns a chuckle from me. She’s maybe five-foot-one, if I’m being generous, and despite her threat, she’d never inflict any kind of discomfort on her kids.

“Anyways,” she turns back to glare at Bennett, narrowing her eyes before her stare focuses back on me. “What a pleasure to see you today, sweetie. What’s got you here at the farm?” she asks, and my own eyes immediately find Bennett’s. Surely we aren’t discussing anything about the two of us when we still have yet to broach the subject. And honestly, it isn’t unlike me to be here. I’m here often.

“I’m going to help Bennett with a few things around the farm, but he said something about a group text...? I trail off, hoping he’ll take over—thankfully, he does.

I glance around the Winters' home, which always smells of fresh baked cookies and laundry. The kitchen is the main gathering spot here in this old farmhouse, and the laundry area shoots right off from this room, causing the mixture of fresh laundry and Meri's baking to be a focal smell. It seems weird, thinking about the two mixing, but the smell is actually quite perfect. Comforting. Familiar.

"Yeah, Ma," he says, sliding out a chair to sit down at the small, round, four-chair table. "You hired an event coordinator for the festival this year?" he questions, and I follow suit, pulling out a chair as Meri starts preparing hot cocoa. "I mean, I'm all for it if it's going to ease the burden from our shoulders. I have to say, though, Elliott is quite..." He pauses. "Well, you know how he can be."

Elliott Winters is a stubborn, stubborn man.

While he's the typical boy-next-door, happy-go-lucky type of guy so many women fawn over, he's still a man. A man who refuses to ask for help and thinks he can do everything on his own. While Bennett is a grump when it comes to being festive and likes to tease me for being over-the-top when it comes to...well, most everything...he at least realizes that his parents are getting older, and the festival is getting larger and larger each year.

Eventually, it'll be impossible for the family to run the biggest winter event in Blue Spruce Hills. Judging by last year's crazy attendance and the host of issues that popped up, it doesn't surprise me that Meri and Brighton are calling in for reinforcements.

The hot cocoa finishes, and she brings two to-go cups over and places them in front of Bennett and me.

"I'll deal with your brother. You know he can't say no to his momma. He might just have to pout for a little bit, but he always comes around," she says. "Plus, I've already got a video chat set up with a darling girl that Mrs. McKinley's great-granddaughter's sister's classmate's ex-boyfriend knows."

Bennett lets out a snort, ever the pessimist, my best friend.

My best friend, or...my...I'm dying to have this talk.

“Well, Ma. You know I'll back you. Let me know if you want me to be on the call, and I'll be there.”

Meri walks over to Bennett and ruffles his hair. I watch as he softens. I've always loved the love he has for his mom, but it hits different now.

Now that I've had his face between my legs, and the man has made me come harder than any man before him.

God, I can't keep my head out of the gutter.

The old screen door slams and Meri smiles.

“Must be that cranky old husband of mine who won't sleep past five a.m. even though he doesn't even need to do any harvesting for the rest of the year...” She talks loudly enough for Brighton to hear her despite being across the house.

“Ma?” a familiar voice calls out, and the three of us look at each other, Meri's eyes widening.

“Well, shit!” she whisper-shouts, scrunching her face, clearly not ready to talk to Elliott about her plan to hire the coordinator for the event.

“Mom!” Bennett gasps, feigning shock. “Don't make me grab the soap,” he teases, grabbing my hand.

The two of us run out the back door just like we did when we were younger. Back then, it was to avoid getting caught after we'd snuck a cookie or two. The boys, especially Elliott, were always involved in something in school. I swear the Blue Spruce Hills PTO found an excuse for a bake sale once a week. Meri was always baking sweet treats for fundraisers.

We weave through rows of Christmas trees of various heights and sizes. The Blue Spruce, the tree our town is named after, can mostly be found in the Rocky Mountains. In a region filled with high standing pines, the trees that fill our little town are a mystery even to this day. People have their theories, but there's been nothing proven.

The Winters celebrate our small town's heritage by growing primarily blue spruces, but they also grow balsam and

pine trees. The festival is just the highlight of a nonstop season for Merry & Bright Farm. Every year, families come from all over the state to cut their own trees, have photos taken at the farm, and to visit the caribou. There's a full staff that live on the grounds year round in the bunkhouse, but there are always extra hands that come on during the season.

"You must be getting ready to bring on some new hires," I say, awkwardly once we reach the caribou lot.

This was my favorite part of the farm when I was a teenager. I love the Winters, and their home and the rest of the farm is, and always has felt, like a second home to me. There is just something magical about being in a field with reindeer—especially during this time of the year.

"Is that really what you want to talk about, Clara?" Bennett asks. His eyes crinkle with amusement as his lip curls up in a half-smirk when I shrug. "But, yes. My dad is running a job fair this week."

My stomach flutters when his eyes lock with mine. Inhaling sharply, I start to second guess coming here with him. This was a mistake. This whole thing was a big fucking mistake. What the hell were we thinking? What the hell was *I* thinking?

"It's, uh, really nice out for November, huh?" I say, biting the inside of my cheek.

The weather, Clara? Really?

Bennett answers me with a deep, weighted sigh. Taking a step forward, he places a finger under my chin, tipping my face toward his own.

"Stop," he says in a soft, but assertive tone that I've never heard him use before. "Stop it right now."

My breath bottles in my chest at his words. My bottom lip begins to quiver, and my vision becomes blurry as water pools in my eyes. I don't want to lose him.

"Whatever that voice in your head is telling you," he continues, using his other hand to wipe the tears as they fall down my cheeks. "It's wrong."

“How... how do you know?” I manage to stammer out.

“Clara, there are two things in life I am absolutely certain of,” he begins. “Merry & Bright is my home. For a long time I thought it was my purpose, too. I thought all I would ever need is this farm, but I’ve come to realize, and I’m so damn sorry it took me so long, but I need you, too. Maybe more than anything in this life, I need you, Clara. Not just as a friend. You’ve been the best friend a guy could ever ask for, but you and I both know that’s not how our story ends. We may have taken the long road, and we may have had a few unnecessary detours along the way, but it was always you and me.”

“You and me...?” I repeat as hope flutters in my stomach like a million little butterflies are taking flight inside of me. With every passing second, the weight of my panic dissipates, leaving me feeling like I could float right off this ground.

Bennett thumbs away tears from my cheeks before gently placing his lips on mine. It’s nothing like the heated kisses of last night and this morning. This is tender, soft, and gentle.

“You and me,” he confirms.

“Okay,” I agree.

There’s no need for a big speech of my own. Bennett said everything that needed to be said anyway. At the end of the day, it’s me and him.

It always has been.

With that, he slides his hand in mine, and we walk in silence until we get to the barn. I was totally just bullshitting about helping him when we were in the kitchen with his mom, but I guess we’re going to put in some work.

“I don’t mind helping out if you have stuff to do,” I start. “But I have a confession to make before we do.”

“Oh?” Bennett’s brows pique. “What’s that, Bunny?”

“So, before we left the restaurant, I went to the ladies’ room, right?” My cheeks flush and my body starts to shake with silent laughter. I can’t believe I’m about to say what I’m

about to say. “I didn’t actually have to use the bathroom. I just changed.”

“I’m not following you, babe,” Bennett says, tilting his head in confusion.

“I think we should head to your cabin before we work,” I tell him. There’s no one around us, but that doesn’t stop me from standing on my tiptoes to whisper, “The edible underwear from last night? I’m wearing them right now.”

In one fell swoop, I am once again being lifted over Bennett’s shoulders. This time, I don’t insist he put me down. Instead, I giggle and wave at the farm hands as we pass them on the way to Bennett’s cabin.

It turns out, Bennett was right. Nice girls do get what they want.

All they have to do is ask.

IF YOU ENJOYED THE NICE LIST...

You don't have to wait much longer for the next story from Dee and Victoria!

Bennett's brother, Elliott, is getting his very own novella: The Naughty List! Think enemies to lovers, golden retriever MMC, and of course...Hallmark with spice.

You can check it out [here!](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA

You can find all social media (and probably other random things) for Dee Lagasse [here](#), and for Victoria Ellis [here](#).

ABOUT D + V

Dee Lagasse is a mom of three from New England. When she's not writing, Dee can be found hiking in the woods with her family, reading comics, or harassing her husband to reach something on the top shelf.

Victoria Ellis is a multi-genre author that publishes Psychological Thrillers, Suspense, and Romance (both contemporary and dark) novels. She is also the author of three poetry collections. Basically, she just writes whatever she feels like and (doesn't) apologize later. She is the co-founder of Cruel Ink Editing + Design, and she resides near Chicago, Illinois with her husband, daughter, and an abundance of animals.

Dee + Victoria have never met in real life but feel like long lost soul sisters down to their very cores. This is their second co-write together (the first being an anthology piece), and they don't plan on stopping anytime soon.