

The book cover features a decorative border of gingerbread cookies and pine branches. The cookies are shaped like a rocking horse, snowflakes, and a candy cane, and are decorated with white icing. The pine branches are green and have small white snowflakes on them. The background is a light green color with a repeating pattern of small, stylized snowflakes.

The Secret Clause

Violet Paine

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Foreword

Violet Paine is a British author, and British English spellings and phrases are used throughout this story.

Playlist

Mary's Boy Child/Oh My Lord – Boney M.
It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas – Michael Bublé
Christmas Time (Don't Let the Bells End) – The Darkness
Last Christmas – Wham!
Christmas Cookies – Lainey Wilson
God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen – Pentatonix
Santa, Can't You Hear Me – Kelly Clarkson, Ariana Grande
Step Into Christmas – Elton John
Mistletoe – Justin Bieber
This Christmas – Christina Aguilera
Silent Night – Tori Kelly
My Kind of Present – Meghan Trainor
All I Want for Christmas Is You – Mariah Carey
Who Would Have Thought – Boyz II Men
Christmas Eve – Kelly Clarkson
I'll Be Home for Christmas – Michael Bublé
Christmas (Baby Please Come Home) – Mariah Carey
Underneath the Tree – Kelly Clarkson

All I Want for Christmas Is You – Gabrielle Aplin, Hannah

Grace

Merry Xmas Everybody – Slade

Listen along here!



If you want drama at Christmas, this story isn't the one. Go home for the holidays.

Prologue

Chase

Two years ago...

THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE said about waking up to a beautiful girl on Christmas Day.

The T-shirt she stole from me before crawling under the covers last night swamps her petite frame, falling to her mid-thigh. Her chocolate-brown hair falls into messy tangles that end at her collarbone, and I smile, remembering how the silky strands wrapped around my fist as the clock chimed midnight, welcoming Christmas Day.

Now, she wears a pair of fluffy socks that muffle her steps as she flounders around the room. I lean against the headboard, humming a merry tune as she gathers up her discarded clothing.

“Oh, go on, Ryan. It’s Christmas Eve. Let’s finish this bottle,” she rambles, perfectly mimicking my sister’s tone. “Wine only leads to trouble. When will I ever learn...?” She grimaces as she finds my gaze.

My grin widens. “Don’t stop on my account, Ry. I’m really enjoying this. Keep going.”

“I don’t know why you’re so smug. Bailey is going to kill me if she finds out.”

“Bails won’t care—”

“Not to mention your parents...” She freezes, her eyes going wide. “Bloody hell. Your parents! They’ve treated me like a daughter for the last ten years, and how do I thank them? By fucking their son at Christmas. Jesus Christ.”

“It is his birthday, yes.” I chuckle, then dodge as she tosses a slipper at my head.

“This never happened.” She heads towards the door, then peels it open a sliver to glance up and down the hallway. “Yes, perfect. We pretend it never happened, go back to being friends, and nothing has to change. It’s going to be fine. Nobody has to know.”

She stares at me, and I smile indulgently.

I have no intention of pretending this never happened, but she doesn’t need to know that.

This is something I’ve been wanting to happen for a long time, and despite the steady thumping in my head—thanks to

the sheer volume of booze we inhaled yesterday—I feel fucking fantastic this morning.

“Chase?” she asks, a wry grin on her face.

I cock my head, my heart racing as her eyes drag over my naked torso. As she stares, her lips fall open into a small O, and her eyes hood.

Ryan might not be ready to admit it yet, but she’s as in this as I am. I’ll let her have her freak-out. After all, I’ve been in love with the girl for the last eight years. I can wait a little longer for her to catch up.

“Anything for you, Ry.”

Ryan

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK a Lot Like Christmas blares through the speakers, and while it certainly smells like Christmas inside my Mini Cooper, with the blended scent of cinnamon, cranberry, and orange rippling through the air, it's obvious Mr. Bubl  has never been stuck bumper to bumper on the M1 the first week of December.

I hum along to my Christmas playlist, tapping my fingers gently against the steering wheel as I strain my eyes to see where the line of traffic ends. I'd forgotten how horrible it can be to travel in the festive season.

If I'd left my house on time this morning, rather than faffing and repacking an already packed-to-the-brim case, I'd already be in Scotland, sipping cheap wine and getting cosy by the fire in my teddy-fleece pyjamas. As it is, I'm trapped in a nonmoving hunk of metal, watching rain smash against my window and cursing the Range Rover that keeps riding my arse.

Merry Christmas, indeed.

My phone blares from its holder, and I sigh when I see the name flashing over the screen. I debate letting it go to voicemail, but traffic will be the least of my worries if that happens.

I shift into first, and the car rolls a couple of inches as the call connects.

“There’s a bottle of wine with your name on it,” my best friend, Bailey, says, her voice crackling through the speaker. “Where the fuck are you?”

I laugh at the lack of greeting. “I’m good, thanks, Bails. How are you?”

“Don’t be sweet with me, Ryan Parker. You were supposed to be here two hours ago, and you’re nowhere to be seen. I swear to fuck, if you’re bailing on me for the second year in a row, I’m going to revoke bestie privileges.”

“First of all, you cannot revoke privileges. You’re stuck with me for life.”

“We’ll see about that—”

“And second,” I continue, ignoring her grumbling, “I’m stuck in traffic. God knows why everyone and their nan decided today was a good day to take a drive down the M1, but I’ve been more or less at a standstill for the last two hours.”

“You only have yourself to blame, you know.”

I hum, wondering where she’s going with this, considering she has no idea I didn’t leave on time this morning. “I’ll bite.

How do you figure that?”

“Well, if you hadn’t moved away from home...”

Rolling my eyes, I chuckle softly as she picks up on her crusade of trying to get me to move back home—something she’s been trying to do for the last three years, since I packed up and moved to London.

Bailey and I met at sixteen, in college, and we became inseparable within days. She’s the sister I always wanted, and I’m the second sister she never needed.

We went to university together—studying songwriting and production at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts—and lived together from ages eighteen to twenty-six. It’s only in the last two years we’ve been apart, thanks to me taking a producing job.

I could have worked from home, making the three-hour commute when needed, but getting away and living somewhere new felt exciting, so I jumped at the chance, much to the chagrin of my best friend.

With how she goes off, you wouldn’t believe we saw each other nearly every other weekend, but I get it. I miss her when I don’t see her for long periods, and I miss home ... though that’s not something I’ll admit to for fear of getting a chorus of *I told you so*’s from everyone I know.

“So, really, if you hadn’t moved away, you’d be sipping this cheap Barefoot with me and making a fool of yourself singing Mariah on karaoke already.”

Unbridled laughter falls from my throat. “When have I ever been near a karaoke machine long enough to make a fool of myself?”

“Christmas Eve 2021 ... need I say more?”

“Please don’t.” I shiver at the reminder, though not because I sang a piss-poor rendition of “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” That year, karaoke was my least foolish moment; what happened after took the cake. Bailey still doesn’t know about my error in judgement, and if I have it my way, she never will.

“Traffic seems to be moving now,” I say, diverting the topic before we can take a trip down memory lane. “I’m going to love you and leave you.”

“I’ll allow it, I guess.” She chuckles. “Call me when you’re ten minutes away, and I’ll make sure there’s a perfectly chilled glass waiting for you, and some Celebrations ... if I can pry them out of Eli’s hands before he scoffs them all.”

“Kay. Love you, Bails.”

“Love you too. Drive Safe.”



The Highland Hideaway is my favourite place to visit in the whole world. It’s got sprawling mountain scenery, forests of green that fill every inch of the periphery, and the quaintest

cottage that—despite housing up to twenty guests—feels like home the moment you step inside.

My veins hum with excitement as I drive through the forest and onto the lengthy drive that leads straight to the cottage. I blow out a calming breath and smile widely as twinkling fairy lights guide my way through the trees.

Bailey waits on the porch, her caramel-blonde hair tied into two braids that frame the strong lines of her flushed cheeks. She wears tartan pyjamas, the green and black stark against her pale skin, and way-too-oversized fluffy Grinch slippers that seem to make her five-foot-six frame taller. She leans against the wooden fence, unaware of my arrival as she taps away feverishly at her phone.

I press down on the horn and laugh as she jolts at the intrusion, her phone slipping from her hand. It would have fallen to the ground if not for the embellished strap wrapped around her fingers. As promised, there's a glass of rosé in her other hand—one she takes great pleasure in downing the moment she finds my gaze through the window as I pull up in front of the ratty wooden steps.

“You're such a twat,” she shouts, hopping off the porch and making her way to my car. Resting her hand against my open window, she narrows her eyes, searching my face for something. “You look different.”

“I washed my hair.”

She laughs loudly. “Well, that'll do it. There is normally a touch of hobo-chic about you.”

She jolts back as I step out of the car, then bump her shoulder with mine before throwing my arm around her and steering us towards the steps. “And you call *me* a twat. Also, I’m sure I was promised wine, and you just drank it... Let’s hydrate, please and thank you, before I die of thirst.”

“Remind me why you never went into performing arts. You’re certainly dramatic enough for it.”

“My terrible singing voice. Apparently, off-key and squeaky isn’t what the West End looks for when casting female leads. It’s really hard to talk about, actually,” I croak, faking a sob.

“A true tragedy,” she deadpans, pushing the door open.

My chest warms comfortably at the familiar sight, my heart settling in its cage as my eyes drag over the wide hallway, coated in a golden glow from the chandelier.

The coat hooks to my right are overloaded with big coats, jackets, and macs—enough to cover every resident of the cottage over the next three weeks—and the shoe rack is piled high with a collection of different styles, from boots to trainers and all manner of fluffy slippers. A conifer sits at the end, tucked between the doors that lead to the kitchen and lounge, decorated to perfection in green, red, and gold.

The other doors on this level, spaced on the walls to either side of us, house up to ten residents, while the staircase to the left leads to the second floor, where the remaining rooms and bathrooms are tucked away.

“I missed this place,” I tell Bailey, as she nudges me into a bar stool at the kitchen island. “I forgot how homey it feels.”

“No, I know. I’m devastated this might be the last year.”

“What? What do you mean?” I ask, my smile dimming at the frown marring her face.

“Didn’t I tell you? I thought I mentioned it when I came down the other week...” I shake my head at her question, my frown deepening. “Oh, bugger. Well, Mr. Dorsett was talking to Dad and said he’s selling up. Says he’s too old to keep up with this place, and since his wife passed and they never had kids, he’s got no one to leave it to.”

“So this is our last year?”

Bailey shrugs and turns to the fridge to grab a bottle of wine. “Seems that way. There’s a company interested, but they want to turn the land into a ski resort, apparently. ‘Revolutionise the Highlands’ or some bullshit like that.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Isn’t it? He offered it to Dad, but with Nana Joyce’s health and care costs these days, he and Mum can’t swing it. Fingers crossed some nice little independent buyer wants a slice of heaven in their pocket and buys it.”

“Fingers crossed.” With a sigh, I take the filled glass from her outstretched hand and clink the rim to hers before downing half in one.

While I’ve only been coming here for the last ten years, Bailey’s family have been doing seasons here for much longer

than that. Every year without fail since she was a baby, they've spent almost all of December hiding from reality in this cottage. I'm grateful they took pity on me and welcomed me into their little Christmas bubble.

As soon as I turned eighteen, my mum decided she was done doing her bit of parenting and fucked off to Spain with her boyfriend at the time—ex-boyfriend now, though that hardly matters since she's onto Spanish boyfriend number seven—and my dad has been nonexistent in my life since birth basically, so if it weren't for the Brooks, I'd have been completely alone. And, after spending last Christmas in my cramped flat, tucked into my couch eating kebab, I can't say I ever want to do it again.

“Where is everyone, anyway?” I ask, changing the topic before the threatening melancholy can settle around us. “It's way too quiet here. That worries me.”

Bailey chuckles, her eyes sparkling with humour as she lifts her gaze to mine. “Eli and Daisy went to the supermarket to get supplies for Saturday, before the rain picks up.” I smile at the mention of her siblings. “And Mum and Dad aren't coming until next week. Nana Joyce just moved into that new home, so they want to be around to make sure she settles. Though I also think they just don't want to be around for the cleanup after this weekend.”

She laughs, her eyes alight at mention of her thirtieth celebrations this weekend. While we're keeping it simple with only a few friends coming, bad things tend to happen in this

cottage when alcohol is involved. Speaking of... “And Chase?” I ask, keeping my tone light despite the swirling anticipation I feel at the mention of his name.

“No idea. But you know what he’s like. He’ll show up when he wants.” She shrugs, and I try to ignore the flutters in my stomach. Chase and I are just friends. Good friends. Friends who—“Hopefully in a much better mood than last year.” Bailey shakes her head, snapping me back to the conversation, and I raise a brow in question. “God, he was an asshole the whole time. So fucking grumpy, but nobody could figure out why, and he wasn’t telling us shit.”

Bailey steers the conversation along, and I let her, trying to stay in the present despite my mind threatening to drift a thousand miles away ... or back in time two years, to be precise. Chase being grumpy last year had nothing to do with me or what happened the year before, surely?

The sound of a door slamming pulls me from my reverie, and I down the remnants of my wine, push away from the island, and follow the swell of voices coming from the porch.

“Ryan Parker, as I live and breathe,” Eli says, leaning against the bonnet of his Ford Focus. His ashy blond hair is slicked back with a light gel, keeping the strands from falling under his black-rimmed glasses. He wears a grey chunky cable-knit jumper and dark denim jeans paired with grey Timberlands. “After you skipped out on last year, I figured you might have had enough of doing Christmas with us.”

“Never.” Rushing down the steps, I throw myself into his waiting arms. He folds me against his chest, squeezing tight as he places a kiss on the crown of my head.

“Missed you, kiddo.”

“I missed you too,” I say, patting his stomach. As the oldest Brooks sibling, Eli adopted me as a little sister when I came into their life. I smile at Daisy as she pops her head from the boot, where she’s scrabbling with bags. “Where’s your better half and her little mini-me?”

“Sar’s stuck at work until next week, so she wanted Grace to stay with her mum and dad before Christmas. I was going to stick around, but you know my wife—she sent me away and made me promise to have some fun.”

“You know she just wanted to starfish the bed, right?” I nudge his shoulder, chuckling softly, before helping him grab some bags from the boot. “Also, the moment I get my hands on Gracey, you aren’t getting her back.”

“I don’t blame you. She’s the best part of me. But you know, you’re getting on now. Maybe it’s yours and Bailey’s time to settle down and have some mini-mes.”

“Ha. You’ll be waiting a long time for that to happen.”

He hums, a smug smirk tipping his lips. “I guess we’ll see...”

Chase

A ROUND OF CHEERS erupts through the studio, dulling the familiar buzzing as our apprentice, Holly, finishes up with her first client. Her excitement is palpable, passing through the air until even the most stoic amongst our crowd share in her joy.

I remember that same thrill of completing my first ink. Hours of doodling idly, waiting for the moment your mentor says you're ready, then months of holding a gun steady in your hand and dragging it over textured fruit skins before finally being allowed to get a friend or family member in that chair, willing to be your guinea pig.

There's nothing quite like it...

Well, that's a fucking lie.

One thing topped that feeling, but it's not something I'm going to let myself dwell on while I'm stuck at work, unable to do fuck-all about it if my brain decides to revisit that particular memory.

The client in my chair grunts as I drag my gun over his elbow pit, covering the skin in black ink. Blackout tattoos, while sick to look at, aren't light work on the skin, and despite taking it like a pro for the last four hours, the poor sod looks as if he'll pass out if I don't call it a day soon.

He sags in relief as I roll my chair back and place my gun on the table next to an array of black ink. After snapping my gloves off, I toss them in the bin at my feet and stretch the kinks out of my back as I stand.

“Looking sick, dude,” I say, eyeing my work. Kyle has been coming to me for as long as I've been tattooing, following me from the little studio I started apprenticing at twelve years ago to the studio I now own with my best mate, Kai. Kyle's body is littered with my art, and despite the forever-changing styles, he's stuck it out with me. “You want to book in for January so we can get this finished up?”

“Yeah, sounds good. You guys shutting up for Christmas?”

“Yeah.” I move over to the counter opposite the door and pull up the calendar to search for some free spots in the new year. I'm fully booked up for new clients, but I always keep some space clear for the regulars, as without them, I wouldn't be here. “Yep. Closing up shop today, then we won't be open again until the second.”

“What are your plans?”

“Visiting with the fam, and since Kai's stuck on his own this year, I'm dragging him along so he can't cause trouble without me.”

“I fucking heard that,” Kai shouts from his station.

I chuckle. “You were meant to.” I slide Kyle an appointment card and take his cash to stuff in the drawer. “See you on the fifth?”

“Yup, see you then.” He calls his goodbyes to the others, but flicks his gaze to mine again. “Tell me all about your sister’s fit best friend when you get back, yeah?”

“The fuck—” The door chimes as he peels it open, his booming laughter swallowed up by the busy sounds coming from the high street. I steel my shoulders, narrowing my eyes as I turn to find Kai. “Really?” He shrugs, whistling under his breath. “You told him about Ry?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“You’re a cunt.”

“But you love me.” He laughs and turns back to his client.

“You’d be so fucking lucky.”

“You’re right,” he says flippantly, then switches his gun off and stands. He snaps his gloves off and rakes a hand through his black hair. “Your love is reserved for the beautiful Ryan Parker—” Holly whacks his head with the back of her hand, and he winces. With one hand on her hip, she stares him down as if she were twice his senior, not ten years younger. “Shit. The fuck was that for, Hol?”

“Leave him alone,” she demands, turning to me. Her lips quirk into a mischievous grin, and she raises a brow. “He’s not ready to admit his undying love yet, and considering Ryan has

kept him safely in the friend zone for the last two years, I think it's safe to say he blew his shot with that one.”

“He blew something, alright.” Kai booms with laughter, and my hands tighten at my sides.

“You're both fired.”

“You can't fire me; I own half the business,” Kai quips, far too fucking happy with himself despite the fact I'm about to murder his ass.

“And Uncle Eli would disown you if you fired me, so I think you're up shit creek without a paddle, *Uncle Chase*,” she teases, knowing the moniker isn't something she has to use considering she's only Eli's niece by marriage.

“I knew trusting Sarah when it came to you was a mistake.”

“I make your days brighter. You'd be bereft without me.”

Mumbling under my breath, I make my way into the office and slam the door behind me as their laughter fills the studio. Working with friends and family? Zero out of ten—I don't recommend.

For the rest of the afternoon, I keep myself locked away, working through the books.

Before Kai and I went into this, I was overconfident, convinced it would be a piece of piss. We'd get to tattoo all day every day, have a laugh with our mates, and spend our evenings drinking beer in the pub before starting all over again the next day.

How naive I was.

I can safely say I'm lucky. Not many people get to take a whole month off work without worrying about their income, but fuck me, if there isn't a lot behind the scenes that goes into running a business.

By the time I get home and pack up the last of my shit for the next month, I'm bone-tired, and my muscles ache from sitting hunched over a desk for hours.

I reel off a text to Kai, telling him I'll be with him in about an hour, and make my way into the bathroom. I kick my black jeans off and peel the studio hoodie and my plain back T-shirt over my head before flipping the shower on.

Steam billows in the large walk-in shower, and I step under the stream, sighing happily as the scalding water begins to work at the tightness in my shoulders.

I grab the loofah and load it up with shower gel, then work circles over my skin to remove the excess ink, grime, and dirt.

When I reach my hips, I hiss out a breath as the material scratches over my semihard dick. It twitches the moment it receives a tiny bit of friction.

Fucking Ry.

From the moment Kai mentioned her name, filling my head with images of the last Christmas she came to the cottage, I've been unable to keep myself cool.

The loofah drops from my hand, splashing against the tiles as I fist my length and give it a harsh tug as flashes of

chocolate-brown hair wrapped into a bun at the top of her head—secured with one of the pencils I use to draw up new designs—flood me. Ry on her knees as she swallows my dick, taking me down her throat like a fucking pro...

As if it isn't bad enough that for two years, I've been unable to rid myself of the reminder—not that I've tried all that hard—but knowing she's placed me firmly back into her “only friends” category makes the whole thing fucking harder. Then again, what guy can turn down the challenge when it means winding up with the girl of their dreams?



The Darkness blares through the car as I gear down, then leave the engine to idle as I reach the end of the familiar drive.

Kai whistles as he hops out of the car and gazes over the land. “I thought you said you guys rented a cottage. This place is a miniature mansion, at least.”

“Yeah, that word is used lightly. Mr. Dorsett likes to surprise new guests, I think.”

“And he's selling up?”

“Seems to be.” I shrug, then pull the keys from the ignition and push my door open. Rain falls heavily, sinking into the grassy land, and I tug my hood up, covering my short, dark

hair before I get soaked. “Too much for him to handle at his age.”

“Damn. I’ll bet he makes a killing from that sale.”

“He’s shifting it for pretty cheap, from what my dad said. Couple hundred grand.”

“Really?” Kai asks, his eyes widening as he focuses his attention on the cottage. “A place like this could easily get a mill.”

“At least.”

“I don’t think I’d ever give this up if I owned it.”

“You’re telling me,” I utter. “We’ve been coming here since I was a baby; I can’t imagine not being here next year. We’ve got thirty years of memories in that building. It’ll be weird to say goodbye to it.”

“Are you not tempted?”

“What, to buy this place?” Kai nods, his gaze curious as he searches my features. “Nah. What would I do with a place like this?” I laugh as I grab my holdall and sling it over my shoulder.

Truthfully, I’ve more than considered it, but I’m not remotely ready for anyone to know I’ve been talking to Mr. Dorsett. There are a few other things I need to get sorted before I commit to buying this place, one of which is just on the other side of that old wooden door.

“About time you two got here,” Eli says, the moment we step into the cottage.

I drop my bag on the floor and clap his shoulder with my palm as he hands me an uncapped Budweiser. “Did you miss me, big brother?”

“Absolutely not,” he jests, moving from my hold and starting towards the lounge. “Bailey, however, was about to blow a coronary thinking you’d miss her birthday party.”

“Isn’t the party Saturday? It’s only Monday, why is she stressing?”

“You know what she’s like.” He shrugs. “Worried you’d forget all about her birthday. How is it you’re the favourite brother despite being an ass ninety percent of the time?”

I smirk. “What can I say? Everyone loves me.”

“Not everyone,” he sings, throwing himself on the couch and propping his feet on the coffee table. “In fact, I’m pretty sure one current resident of this household ran away to hide the moment she heard your car pull up on the drive.”

Rolling my eyes, I toss a pillow at him, then slump into the armchair facing the television. There’s some Christmas chick flick gracing the screens, no doubt chosen by Ry and Bails before I got here as they sipped what looks to be two bottles of wine between them.

“When you gonna admit it, bro?” Eli asks. His gaze burns into my profile, but I ignore him, watching as some dude falls to his knee in a snow-filled garden and pulls a black velvet

box from his pocket. “Seriously, Chase. You can’t still be living in the land of denial when it comes to her. You’ve been jonesing after Ryan for *ten years*. Surely, it’s time to man up and do something about it.”

“Mind your business, Eli, and stay out of mine.”

“Okay, touchy. I’ll keep my lips sealed.” He laughs, miming a zipping motion at his mouth when I flick my gaze to him. “For now, anyway.”

With a huff, I peel myself from the chair and head to the wide glass windows that lead out to the patio. “I really need to stop hanging out with all you dickheads.”

Ryan

THE WOOD CREAKS UNDER my feet as I approach the swinging lounge chair on the far side of the porch, overlooking the firepit. I place my laptop gently on one of the soft green cushions and take a seat. After setting it to gently swing, I tuck my feet beneath me and take a generous sip from the overfilled wine glass Bailey thrust into my hand, then load up my emails.

Sifting through them, I flag the most important, promising myself I'll start working on them tomorrow, before finding the one I'm most eager to open.

I pull my buds from the pocket of my Oodie, stuff them into my ears, and turn the volume up to full before clicking on the link.

With a wide grin, I sink down into the swing, losing myself in the music. If someone had told me three years ago I'd be listening to a song I produced, I'd have never believed it. The industry is full of immense talent, and I'm a tiny tadpole in a sea of sharks. But here I am.

It's a little insane.

My stomach flutters in excitement, a bubble of laughter exploding from my throat as the joy overcomes me. I'm not sure I've ever felt quite like this.

Well, if you don't count—

Nope. Not going there, Ryan.

Though not going there feels mighty impossible when a heavy weight settles onto the swing beside me, an even heavier-feeling arm resting on the back behind my head.

If I don't give him any attention, maybe we can avoid the confrontation I'm sure he's eager for, at least until tomorrow ... or the day after never, if I have any say in it. What happened happened, and we're perfectly good friends still. No need in letting this cottage dredge up old memories.

I press play on the song again, hoping like hell he'll take the hint and bugger off. But if there's one thing I know about Chase Brooks, it's that he does what he wants, when he wants, fuck the consequences.

Instead of leaving, he seems to make himself more at home. He leans closer into me, his fingers splaying near my nape. While he may not be touching me, I can feel every inch of him as if he were. Heat radiates off his large frame, wrapping around me like a blanket, and my breaths shallow as it penetrates through me, sinking to places it shouldn't.

With his free hand, he pulls a bud from my ear, his fingertips sending a shiver through me as they graze the lobe before

tucking a loose strand of hair behind it. I close my eyes, holding a breath as he leans in further, his minty breath fanning my face and flooding my senses when he presses his lips to my cheek.

Not quite a kiss, but not nothing either.

“Ry,” he says, his voice deep and gruff like he’s just woken up from a deep sleep—not that I let myself remember what that sounds like, *obviously*. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“I’m pretty sure you came out here to find me, so I’m not sure what’s so fancy about it,” I croak, steeling my shoulders and flicking my gaze to his.

Biting my tongue, I force down the groan that threatens to escape the moment my eyes lock on the deep brown depths in his gaze.

Where Eli and Bailey are light and fair, Daisy is in the middle—with medium-dark brown hair and pale skin, somewhat reminiscent of Snow White—and Chase ... Chase is the complete opposite.

His dark hair is short, but not so short you can’t run your fingers through the silky tresses, and his eyes are the deepest brown, a shade you can’t help but fall into.

And don’t even get me started on his face and body. His chest is cut with hard lines and rippled with muscles, and almost every inch of his skin is covered in black and grey ink that runs from his neck to his hands.

Paired with a strong jaw and high cheekbones, he looks like a god—an untouchable kind of god—but when he smiles...

Fuck me.

He gets these perfect little dimples in his cheeks, and any hardness falls away, leaving nothing but a boyish charm that you can't help but want to lean into.

“You're feisty today.” He hums, snapping me from my reverie with that stupid fucking dimple showing as I zero in on his face. “You gonna say hello? Or do you want to keep eye fucking me? I'm good with either, but if it's the latter, maybe we could take this somewhere a bit more private.”

I scoff, turning away from him as my cheeks flush crimson. “Hello, Chase. It's nice to see you again.” He bellows a laugh, and I send him a scowl. “What?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” he says sweetly, pushing away from the swing and smirking at me. “Anyway, food's ready, so best wrap this up and come eat before Eli and Bailey scoff it all and you're left with scraps.”

I nod in thanks. “I'll only be a minute.”

“Kay.” He stalks away, and I blow out a long breath.

I fan my face with my hands, hoping to calm my racing nerves and rid some of this bloody heat that's taken over me, then down the remaining wine in my glass in one gulp. Of course, Chase chooses that exact moment to halt his steps, his gaze locking on mine.

He drags his gaze down the length of my throat, watching the movement as I swallow. His eyes darken, and he runs his thumb over his lip, his tongue sliding out to flick at the tip before he smirks smugly, half turning away. “I missed you, Ry.”

“We spoke on the phone yesterday. How on earth can you miss me already?”

He presses a hand to his chest, pouting like a child. “You didn’t miss me? I’m wounded.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mumble, resisting the wide grin that threatens to overtake my face. “I guess I missed you too.”

“Knew it.” He winks, a dimple flashing at me, before he turns and leaves me on the porch, with only the butterflies dancing inside my belly for company.

I avert my eyes back to my laptop, trying to force him from my mind to no avail as I save the files and close the lid.

See, Chase is ... well, Chase.

It doesn’t matter how much distance I try to craft between us or how many walls I put up—he finds a way to break them down every time. Even when I’ve been determined to keep him at arm’s length over the last two years, refusing to spend one-on-one time with him because that means danger, there hasn’t been a day that’s passed when he hasn’t made sure I’m thinking of him.

Whether it’s the hours-long phone calls late into the night, or the memes sent sporadically during the day; even the daily

good-morning text with a single kiss at the end.

Chase consumes me, and that's terrifying.

And now that he's in my vicinity again, determined to steal my time and attention, I think it's safe to say I'm well and truly fucked.



Dinner goes swimmingly.

If swimmingly means drinking one too many glasses of wine until you're seeing double to try and forget about the six-foot-five irritant sitting beside you, of course.

Daisy sits on my left, trying to keep me engaged in conversation as she tells me about something or other. Her efforts are wasted, though, as on my other side, Chase talks in his deep rumble, laughing boisterously and drowning out everything else.

See ... irritant.

"Ryan."

"What?"

Daisy laughs as I snap my head up, locking my gaze on her. Or one of her, anyway. I didn't realise she was a triplet, but

there seems to be two more of her dancing in my periphery.
Weird.

“I asked if you wanted to go with me?”

I frown, squinting until only one Daisy is in focus. “Go where?”

“Have you listened to a single thing I’ve said?”

I shake my head, grimacing as the movement sends me dizzy. “In my defence, I’m pretty sure there’s a few of you, and I’m not entirely sure which one I should be listening to. Blame Bails. She keeps plying me with wine.”

“Hey,” Bailey interjects, scowling at me. “Don’t pin the blame on me. You’re the one guzzling the cheap Pinot like its water. As your best friend, it would be rude if I didn’t top up an empty glass.”

“What’s rude is—”

“Anyway...” Daisy chuckles, steering the conversation back to her. “As I was saying, they’re having an outdoor showing of *It’s a Wonderful Life* at the park tomorrow, so we should go.”

“Sure,” I answer eagerly, ignoring the low chuckle from my left. “Love that film so much.”

Truthfully, I hate that film.

I hate it with a passion.

It’s far too sad for a festive favourite.

But a few years ago, I may have told a teeny-tiny lie to Bailey after she made us watch it—in my defence, she was

crying her eyes out and asking me how much I enjoyed it, and I didn't have the heart to lie—and now, too much time has passed for the truth. So, for all intents and purposes, I *love* that film.

“Okay, perfect. We can grab some blankets and load up on snacks from the supermarket; make an evening of it.”

“Can't wait.”

I tip the remnants from my glass down my throat, turning away with a grimace only to lock eyes on the smug-looking irritant to my left.

“*What a waste of my bloody life that was.* Isn't that what you said about that film, Ry?” Chase asks, his voice low, meant only for me.

His eyes shine with unspent humour, and he opens his mouth to say something more, but I cut him off. “I told you that in confidence,” I hiss, narrowing my eyes. “So hush it.”

“I don't understand why you don't just admit it. Every year, you get dragged into watching it, and every year, I'm the one you rant to afterwards.”

“Well, I'm sorry my moaning is inconvenient to you.”

“Nothing you do is an inconvenience,” he says, his expression suddenly serious. My heart races as he leans in, his hand brushing a stray hair from my cheek. I sway on my chair, leaning out of his reach before I can do something like let my drunk brain convince me to try and climb him like a tree.

Stupid wine trying to ruin my friendship. “But you hate that film.”

“I do. I *really* do.” I chuckle. “But it makes Bails happy, so I’m not gonna burst that bubble for her.”

“And when are you going to start making *you* happy?” he asks, searching my gaze knowingly.

I fold my arms over my chest and glance at my friend as she smiles, laughing at something Kai whispers in her ear. “She’s done so much for me. The least I can do for her is this. It’s not a big deal.”

“Sure, Ry. Forget about yourself. Only think of others, as always.”

Chase pushes away from the table, grabs his plate, and stalks towards the sink. There’s a solemn look on his face as he leaves the room. My gaze tracks his every step, and when he rounds the corner without a second glance, I’m left with an ache in my chest.

That’s just because of all the wine I’ve drunk this evening ... right?

Chase

IF I DIDN'T KNOW better, I'd worry Mariah Carey was being murdered in the kitchen.

I follow the sound, biting back a laugh when I reach the open doorway and lean against the frame. Ryan is bent over the counter, singing along to the radio as she fiddles with a mixing bowl.

Pushing my hands into the pocket of my jeans, I run my eyes over her, grinning widely when I see the much too large black and white snowflake jumper she's wearing.

"You know..." Ryan startles at my voice, and the bowl in her hand falls to the counter with a clunk. She curses under her breath, turning slowly until she faces me with a scowl. Her mouth falls open, her eyes narrowing, but I continue. "I've been wondering where that jumper got to. Mum was pissed last year that I didn't match everyone else in the Christmas photo."

"I... uh, you, erm..."

“Don’t worry, Ry. It looks better on you than it ever did me,” I say, pushing off the door and stepping towards her. A deep flush crawls up her neck, painting her cheeks a delicious pink as she glances furiously around the room, avoiding my gaze. “What are you making?”

She sighs, her shoulders sagging at the reprieve, before turning back to the counter. “Gingerbread. I woke up stupidly early, and despite the raging hangover, I had a hankering for it. My head still pounds, though. Are you up for helping?”

“Sure. Where do you want me?”

I roll up the sleeves on my black hoodie and move over to the sink to wash my hands. I don’t miss the way Ryan traces the ink on my forearms with her eyes, her tongue darting out to wet her plump bottom lip before she locks in on my gaze.

“You can start rolling out the dough,” she says, busying herself by searching through the drawers. She coughs, mumbling as she fiddles with the utensils, and I laugh loudly.

“What?” she shrieks, clenching her eyes shut, and her nose wrinkles with her grimace.

“*Those bloody tattoos,*” I echo, cocking a brow. “See something you like, Ry?”

“It’s rude to listen to someone’s inner ramblings, you know,” she snaps, glaring daggers at me.

“Hardly inner if you say them loud enough for the whole of Scotland to hear.”

She scoffs as she moves to pass me the dough. As I grab the bowl, though, she “accidentally” bumps into me, pressing her flour-stained hands against my stomach with an innocent “Oops.”

It might be more believable if it wasn’t for the happy little tune she whistles under her breath as she starts on the next batch.

For the next hour, we work in tandem, humming to the radio while blanketed in the comforting scent and warmth of gingerbread as batches move in and out of the oven.

“So, excited to have some time off work for a bit?” she asks, hopping up onto the counter and swinging her legs back and forth as I place the final tray onto the cooling rack.

“Fuck yes. I’m more than ready for it. While I hate to admit it, I should have listened to you when you told me how much work would go into running your own business.”

She laughs, the sound heating my chest. “Is now where I say *I told you so?*”

“Probably should.”

“Well, then, Chase Brooks...” I turn to face her, folding my arms over my chest as I lean against the counter. “I told you so.”

“That you did.”

She smirks smugly, sending me a wink. “You should hear the way Bailey brags about you every time she comes down. If

you weren't already so good at bragging, I'd say you should consider taking her on as your manager."

"Ha. I'm pretty sure Bails just likes the perks."

"Free tattoos whenever she wants? Who wouldn't?"

"That offer still stands for you, you know." She cocks her head, her brows furrowing. "If I remember correctly, you wanted some ink not so long ago."

"Oh. I forgot about that conversation."

"Well, I didn't. So, whenever you're ready, just let me know."

She sighs and shakes her head. "Maybe one day."

"Not ready to stop avoiding me yet?" I tease, moving off the counter and stalking towards her.

"I haven't been avoiding you..."

I step between her spread legs and cup her jaw, tipping her head back until her eyes lock on mine. "Try saying that with a little more conviction, and maybe I'll believe you. Texts and phone calls don't really count if whenever I try to see you, you run the other way." My thumb trails along her golden skin, brushing her bottom lip, and she hisses out a breath, her eyes shuttering closed.

"Maybe you're just not that exciting to hang out with," she says, raising a brow playfully. Her hands move to rest on my hips, the heat from her fingers penetrating the cotton of my jumper and searing my skin as she tightens them.

“We both know that’s not true. I seem to recall you finding me very exciting the last time we hung out alone.”

“Chase—”

A door slams in the distance, bursting the bubble that seems to have surrounded us. Her hold on me loosens, and she heaves in a deep breath, smiling sheepishly as she pushes me away.

“Saved by the Bailey,” she says, hopping down from the counter.

“What are you two up to?” Bailey asks, sidling up beside me and stealing a glance at the counter. She hums in approval and snaps an arm off one of the chilling cookies before turning to Ryan.

Her eyes narrow, darting between the two of us. “Isn’t that your jumper, Chase? I thought you lost that?” Ryan flushes, spinning quickly as she chokes, and I chuckle under my breath.

“Yeah, I thought so too. Guess it must have been here the whole time.” I shrug. “Chucked it in the wash last night, and Ry got a bit clumsy with the eggs this morning, so she stole it.”

Bailey snorts. “Not surprising. You two end up in a right state when you bake. I mean, look at your jumper,” she says, gesturing at the floury mess left behind. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, big brother, I want tea and biscuits with my bestie.”

I nod, taking the hint, and grab my now cold mug of coffee before heading to the lounge. I can't help but wonder what on earth it will take for Ryan to consider that maybe us being an option isn't somehow betraying my sister. Just a hint that Bailey might learn the truth, and she freezes up.

I've thought about going to Bailey myself and laying all my cards on the table, but Ryan would never forgive me.

I may be all in, but she isn't. *Yet.*

Though I'm hoping I can change that.

I have four weeks to convince Ryan that throwing caution to the wind and risking it all for me will be worth it.



When Bailey asked for more lights to be fitted around the cottage in time for her birthday, I happily volunteered. After all, what are big brothers for? What I didn't realise was that I'd be expected to climb up Mr. Dorsett's rickety old ladder and hold on for dear life, trailing electrical leads as rain sprinkles around me.

To make matters worse, my business partner and best mate—who was supposed to be on hand to secure said shitty ladder—is too busy flirting to be of any help. Worse still, he's flirting with the one person he knows to stay away from.

Ryan's tinkling laugh reaches me, and my fingers tighten around the fairy lights. I glance around and spot her leaning against the hood of her baby-blue Mini Cooper. Wearing a fluffy black coat paired with black leggings and a knitted red and white bobble hat, she looks like she's stepped right out of a Christmas flick.

Strands of chocolate brown peek out from beneath the wool, falling into two braids that end at her collarbone, and her face is bare of makeup, showing off the bright flush to her cheeks as she tips her head back.

Kai places his hand on her shoulder, and I run through all the ways I can remove it from his body. But the problem is, I'm stuck up this fucking ladder.

"Oi, dickhead," I yell. Kai startles, looking around before he finds me staring at him, a scowl on my face. "Fancy helping me down? Or do you just want to keep flirting over there?"

He saunters over, tugging Ryan with him with an arm wrapped around her shoulder. "I'm quite enjoying the flirting, actually. What about you, RyRy?"

"Stop antagonising him," she says, tapping his shoulder with the back of her hand before pushing away. "I need him to be in a good mood."

I eye her suspiciously, searching her gaze. "You never admit to needing anything, least of all me. What are you up to, Ryan Parker?"

"Always so suspicious, Chase Brooks."

“With valid reason,” I tease, before turning back to Kai. “Now, come hold this pissing ladder so I can get down before I decide I don’t want to play nice today.”

“Do you ever play nice?” Kai asks, moving to hold the ladder so I can step down.

“Only with Ry.” Ryan coughs, stealing my attention, and I smirk, sending her a wink. “What do you need?”

“My car won’t start, and I’m on supermarket duty for tonight.”

“Want me to look at it?” I ask, furrowing my brow. I’m not much of a car dude, truth be told. I doubt I know more than Ryan herself.

“Nah. I’ve already called, and someone is coming out later. I think I left the lights on when I got here yesterday, so I probably killed the battery.” She grimaces, and I chuckle. It wouldn’t be the first time. “Eli’s already gone off ahead to pick up the order from the party place for Saturday, so I’m stuck without a ride, and since you’re the only other one with a car here, I was hoping you’d let me borrow it.”

“Absolutely not.”

Ryan frowns. “What? Why?”

“There’s no chance I’m letting you borrow the Range. You’d crash it within minutes.”

“Oh please. I’m a great driver.”

Kai scoffs, and she turns to him with a glare, but he's not deterred. "Remember your Mazda? You legit drove straight into a ditch, and this one"—he hikes his thumb in my direction—"had to come save you. And that wasn't the first time, I believe?"

"Nope. She had the Ford, then the SEAT before that..."

Ryan growls, and it might just be the cutest fucking thing I've ever heard. "Alright, I get it—cars and I aren't the best of friends. But I promise I'll drive at like two miles an hour, and I won't even play the radio, so I don't get distracted. And you know I've always wanted to drive the Range Rover. How can you possibly say no?"

"Easy," I deadpan. "No."

"*Please.*" She flicks her gaze to mine, giving me her best puppy-dog impression, and fuck me, I'm about to cave.

My best friend knows it too. "Don't do it, mate. Stay strong."

"Ignore him," Ryan demands, keeping her eyes on mine. "What do you say? Say yes. We're friends, remember?"

I shake my head, huffing a laugh. "Fucking hell. Fine. But I'm coming with you, and if I tell you to stop, you stop, and I take over. Got it?"

"You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Brooks, but I'll take it." She throws her arms around my neck, her breath heady on my throat, and I wrap my arms around her tighter, relishing in her warmth as she whispers, "Thank you."

I drop a kiss on her crown, breathing her in. “Anything for you, Ry.”



It’s official. I have a death wish.

If I could go back in time and tell my younger self anything, it would be to not trust a word from Ryan Parker’s mouth. Also, don’t let her sweet-talk me into shit.

My fingers curl around the oh-shit handle, and my free hand shoots out to steady the steering wheel. Despite her promises, I’ve told her to stop the car no less than five times, and with each one, she’s sent me a bright grin and pretended not to hear the command.

“Whoever passed you on your driving test needs to be sacked,” I hiss, sucking in a deep breath as she careens around the corner. “Seriously, Ry. This isn’t safe. Can you at least slow down?”

“I’m going fifty in a seventy. Stop being a baby.”

“If you knew how to drive, your speed wouldn’t be a problem.”

“I clearly know how to drive, Chase. You’re being dramatic —” She kerbs it, the car jolting heavily, and she straightens back out, looking sheepish. “That was intentional.”

“Of course it was. Why wouldn’t you intentionally take a trip on the kerb?”

“Someone’s grumpy today.”

“Someone doesn’t want to die today,” I deadpan, grabbing the wheel again when she takes a harsh corner. “It’s a shame the same can’t be said for you.”

“If I let you drive home, will you stop whingeing?”

“*Let?* There’s no let about it. I *am* driving home, and you will sit pretty in the passenger seat without a complaint.”

“You think I’m pretty?” she teases, flicking her eyes at me.

“Eyes on the road, you bloody maniac.”

She laughs, and the sound goes straight to my already semihard dick.

This experience has been wholly confusing to me. On the one hand, I’ve hated every second of it. Ryan truly is not the greatest driver in the world, and I’m starting to wonder if I can make her car’s not-starting problem a permanent thing, considering I value her life and the lives of others on the road far more than she does, it seems.

But also, watching her behind the wheel of my car, her five-foot-three frame swamped by leather ... well, that’s a fantasy I didn’t realise I had before today.

“Oh, would you look at that? We made it,” she sings as she swings into the car park. “And all in one piece, might I add.”

“Thank fuck for that.”

Ryan

WINTER IN THE UK leaves a lot to be desired, but there's something to be said about strolling down a darkened, rain-soaked high street in December. Twinkling lights dance around in the periphery, and the distant sound of carollers wraps around us like a comforting hug.

Chase walks beside me, his hand pressing against my lower back as he steers us away from a horde of gathering teens. Despite my large coat, heat seems to radiate from his palm, imprinting me with his touch.

I steal a glance at him, brushing my eyes over his length. He catches my eyes with a broad smile as he sends me a wink, and my breath hitches. To some, he might be imposing—with his height, all-black outfit, and the tattoos that peek from beneath the collar of his hood, covering most of his visible skin—but there's something warm about him too.

The supermarket looms ahead, promising a quick end to this little outing, but I drag my feet, not really wanting to be done with our little trip before it even starts.

“You wanna go get a drink before we do the shopping?” Chase asks, and I chuckle. “What?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head, smiling brightly.

He narrows his eyes, sliding his hand away from my back. I shiver from the loss, and he smiles knowingly, finding my hand and interlocking our fingers. “Nope, not nothing. Tell me what’s got you laughing, and I’ll buy you that orange hot chocolate you love so much.”

“With all the trimmings?”

“*All* the trimmings. Cream, marshmallows, and a chocolate Flake. Maybe even two...” He wags his brows, then tugs me away from the main street and down one of the smaller alleys.

I groan dramatically, tipping my head back. “You don’t play fair—using my chocolate addiction against me to get what you want.”

“All’s fair in love and war, baby.” He squeezes my fingers, and I bite my tongue, trying to ignore how my heart tries to leap out of its cage at his term of endearment. It doesn’t mean anything. It can’t mean anything, not when he’s my best friend’s big brother.

I shake my head, forcing my gaze forwards. “It’s honestly nothing. It’s just crazy how well you read my mind sometimes.” He flicks his gaze to mine, his brow raised in confusion, so I elaborate. “I was thinking I wasn’t quite ready to end our errands run just yet, and then you come in with your Jedi mind skills and give me the perfect opportunity to prolong it.”

He laughs. “I thought you didn’t find my company all that exciting?”

“I don’t,” I jest, bumping his bicep with my shoulder. “It’s obviously the weather I’m enjoying.”

“Obviously,” he deadpans.

“And the decorations.”

“Of course.”

“The carollers aren’t too bad either...”

“Uh-huh.” He halts suddenly, giving my hand a hard tug. I stumble over my feet, but he spins, his free hand resting on my hip as I collide with his solid chest. I tip my head back, and my eyes lock on heated brown irises. “Anything else enjoyable about this outing, or just those three things?”

“Just those three things,” I whisper, lowering my gaze to his full lips.

My heart races as he leans down, pressing our foreheads together. The mint from his chewing gum fans my nose as he closes the distance between us, and I breathe him in as the sounds from the high street dim until all I can hear is the thump of my blood rushing through me.

I press my hand to his chest, feeling the racing strum of his heartbeat beneath my fingers, and I’m powerless to stop whatever comes next, even if I wanted to.

Being with him is as easy as breathing, and despite my best intentions, it’s impossible not to fall into him when he looks at me like he is. Pushing up onto my tiptoes, I curl my hand into

the thick cotton of his hoodie, and he tightens his hold on my hip, his fingers searing through my coat.

Later, I'll re-erect my barriers and remind myself why we can't do this again, but for now—

A shrill ringtone cuts through the air, instantly snapping the tension between us. Peeling my eyes open, I avert my gaze from Chase and pull in a deep breath. I relinquish my hold on his hoodie and take a step back.

With a sigh, he lets me go and grabs his phone from his pocket, swiping his thumb across the screen before lifting it to his ear.

I should be grateful for the interruption, and I'm sure I will be when my senses come back to me. But for now, all I feel is annoyed.

“Bailey,” Chase says into the receiver, giving me a wry smile before turning his attention to the call.

I press my hands to my cheeks to calm the racing heat that rushes my skin. That phone call is the perfect reminder why giving into whatever lingers between Chase and me for a second time would be a terrible idea.

Without Bailey, I'd have nothing. She welcomed me into her home, gave me a family I could call my own, and how do I repay her? By trying to snog her brother's face off after two years of keeping him at arm's length in the hopes of not reliving another moment of weakness.

I don't know what she'd think if she knew about these moments that transpire between us, but I really don't want to

find out. Because the risk of her *not* being okay with it ... well, that's not a risk I'm ready to take.

Chase ends the call and rakes a hand through his hair before he turns back to me. He drags his eyes over my face, searching my expression. I don't know what he's looking for, but his shoulders drop, and he blows out a short breath before plastering a smirk on his lips.

It's fake. Having known him over the years, I'd instantly recognise it, but I don't push him on the fact, and instead offer a sheepish grin in return.

"Hot chocolate?" he asks, offering me his hand, and I sag in relief, my smile widening.

"Yes, please." I thread my fingers through his, squeezing gently. "With *all* the trimmings."

He chuckles, and any remaining tension between us dissolves. "Anything for you, Ry."



I have regrets.

Too many to count, if I'm being honest.

But my biggest one might be getting so drunk that my brain couldn't form a coherent reason to get out of watching this film. It's freezing, my snacks have long dwindled, and the teddy-

fleece blanket I was looking forward to wrapping around me is scratchy and weirdly bumpy.

I should have listened to Chase in the supermarket's home section when he told me to go for the wool blanket, but I'd been so busy trying not to look at his face that I wandered away before he could persuade me to swap them.

Stupid bloody dimples.

The only positive from this outing is that the rain finally stopped just before the film was due to start, so at least I'm not soaking wet too. Wonders never cease, I guess.

I grab my phone from beneath my thigh and press the warm metal to my cheek for a moment to try and get some feeling back in the tight skin, then I flick over the screen and pull up my texts with Chase.

Ryan: This film is worse than I remember. Save me,
please.

"Who are you texting?" Daisy asks, her gaze curious as she peeks over my shoulder.

I shake my head, rolling my eyes as I flip the screen down. She chuckles, but it turns into a grimace when Bailey hisses, "Be quiet!" in our direction. "Sorry," Daisy mouths, smirking in my direction as my phone buzzes a response. "Fine. Have your

secrets, Ryan. I'll get it out of you this weekend after a few drinks."

"I have no secrets," I whisper, my stomach fluttering as I open the text from the person who holds my biggest secret in the palm of his hand.

Chase: Well, if it isn't the consequences of your actions. Unfortunately for you, Ry, I'm swamped right now.

Ryan: What are you doing?? How are you busy? We're in the middle of Scotland with literally nothing to do.

Chase: That's not true. We found plenty to do last time you were here...

Ryan: STOP. We aren't talking about that night, thank you. We had a deal.

Chase: You had a deal. If I remember correctly, you didn't let me get a word in edgeways.

Ryan: Ugh, whatever. Come save me. PLEASE.

Chase: Hmm ... I think not. Enjoy the film! x

With a huff, I find Eli's contact next and reel off a quick text feigning illness, asking if he's free to pick me up instead. One of the Brooks brothers might sympathise with my plight, even if it is fictional.

Waiting for his response, I hunker down into my seat, tug my blanket up to my neck, and scroll mindlessly, trying to find anything that might hold my attention long enough to get through the next hour and a half, since Eli seems to be ignoring my cry for help.

Bailey begins to sniffle, a few stray tears leaking from her eyes as I glance in her direction. I tuck my face beneath the weighty blanket, muffling my chuckle. It isn't that I find Bailey crying amusing ... well, maybe a little ... but the film has barely started, and she's already a weepy mess.

God help us all when Clarence gets his wings.

"It's not nice to give spoilers, Ryan Parker..."

My eyes widen at the husky rumble behind me. His voice is low, meant only for my ears, and I bite back a groan when his lips brush over my lobe, sending sparks firing through my veins.

“I’m pretty sure the statute of limitations ran out on spoilers about twenty years ago. You only have yourself to blame if you feel the film is ruined for you,” I whisper, tipping my head until I find his gaze. “I thought you were *super* busy and unable to attend to my sos?”

“What can I say? I’m a sucker for a damsel in distress.”

“Please tell me you’re going to get me out of here.”

“Nope,” he says loudly, stepping back as he draws the attention of Bailey and Daisy, who turn to us with confused expressions. “I come bearing gifts.” He offers up a cardboard tray holding four to-go mugs, and my lips twist into a frown.

Fucking hell. I’d been so busy staring at his stupid face I hadn’t noticed his full hands.

“You’re the best brother ever,” Bailey screeches, grabbing one of the cups and stealing one of the canvas bags he’s holding. She rifles through it, groaning aloud as she pulls out a sharing bag of chocolate and tucks it into her chest. We ran out of snacks halfway through the adverts, so it’s a welcome gift.

“Can you say that again so I can record it to send to Eli?” Chase teases, handing off the tray to Daisy before he offers me the other bag in his hand. “For the damsel.”

I narrow my eyes but gingerly pulling it from his grasp. A chuckle bursts out of me at the soft knitted blanket stored in the depths, and I shake my head, my chest warming at the gesture.

He gives me a knowing smile and moves away. Disappointment floods me, though it’s quickly dispelled when

he grabs one of the empty chairs from the row behind us and moves it next to mine.

“You’re staying?” I ask, and he gives me a wide grin that sends my heart soaring.

“Of course I’m staying.” He fiddles with the blankets, removing the scratchy one and wrapping the soft woollen one over both our legs before he hands me a peppermint tea, his dimples winking at me as he sends me a smile. He leans in, his hand on my thigh and his voice in my ear, and the whole evening becomes bearable. “Where else would I be?”

Chase

THE REST OF THE week passes by in a flurry of activity.

Bailey keeps us busy with party preparations, so the few times I do get to see Ryan, it's always in a group setting, over dinner or movies at the end of the night.

It's not that I begrudge Bailey being excited about her thirtieth birthday party—it is a milestone birthday, after all—but if she could not be trying to plan the event of the season while I try to make her best friend realise she's in love with me, that would be brilliant.

I thought I'd got past some of her walls on Tuesday, watching that god-awful film with her, but the moment it was over, she nudged me away, and she hasn't been alone in a room with me since.

If I didn't understand her loyalty, I'd find it frustrating. But if anything, it only endears me more to her. I'm not afraid of putting in the work, because the result will be so fucking worth it.

“There’s not enough,” Bailey screeches from the kitchen as I round the corner. I find Eli first, scrubbing a hand over his face in frustration. As the eldest brother, he’s been stuck on Bailey duty while she spirals over the minute details, and I was more than happy to hand that over to him. “Oh, Chase, thank God you’re here.” I smirk in Eli’s direction, and he rolls his eyes at her sudden personality transplant. “Can you do me a huge favour?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“I asked Grandad over here to go get the alcohol for tonight,” she grumbles, gesturing at the small selection decorating the island, “and this is what he comes back with. There’s not enough for the six of us, let alone everyone else coming.”

“There are at least ten litres of spirits there, Bails,” Eli argues.

“It’s not enough,” she snaps, turning to me with an incredulous look. “The man gets married, has a kid, and forgets what it takes to throw a party.”

“I know how to throw a party.”

“For a child, maybe,” she deadpans.

I hold my hands up, stepping between my soon-to-be-warring siblings if I don’t intervene. “Okay, children, that’s enough.” I laugh, throw my arm over Bailey’s shoulder, and pull her into the lounge. “I’ll get the alcohol, and you will sit here and breathe, okay? Stick on one of your Hellmark

movies, have a cup of tea, and we'll get everything sorted for tonight."

"It's Hallmark," she mumbles, narrowing her eyes.

"Sure, that's what I said." I wink, then nudge her onto the couch and toss the remote on her lap. "Chill, Bails. We've got this."

She playfully mimics me, flipping me the bird, but thankfully takes my advice and starts flicking through the channels before I can even say my goodbyes.

I find Kai in the dining room, wave my keys in his direction, and he nods.

"What are you doing?" I ask him, eyeing the sketchpad he has spread out on the oak table.

"Hiding." He tosses his pencil on the skull-and-crossbones drawing and pushing his chair back. "Bailey scares me."

"Bailey scares everyone. It's part of her charm."

He snorts, then rolls his neck. "I don't think there's anything charming about the noises that come from that girl's mouth when she's not getting her way," he says. "But it does make you wonder what *other* noises might come from that pretty little—"

My palm collides with the back of his head, and he stumbles. "Don't even think about it, dickhead."

"Fine. If we can't talk about your sister and what she can do with her mouth..." I clench my fist and aim it at his gut, but he

dodges, barking out a laugh. “Then we should talk about that gorgeous best friend of hers.”

“If you wanted to die today, you just had to say so.”

“You’d miss me too much if you killed me,” he says, following me from the dining room and out to the car.

“Debatable,” I deadpan.

“How’s all that going, anyway?” he asks as I pull away from the cottage.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I quip, fiddling with the radio until I find something that isn’t Christmas music. I love Christmas as much as the next person, but every now and then, everyone needs a reprieve from Michael Bublé.

“Dude, I’ve known you for over twenty years; let’s not pretend I didn’t figure out your game plan within minutes of stepping inside the cottage.”

“And what is said game plan?”

“Irritate the shit out of Ryan until she gives in and admits she’s as madly in love with you as you are with her.”

“And here I was, thinking I was being subtle,” I jest.

“There’s nothing fucking subtle about leaving me hanging in the pub so you can answer to her every need.”

“She’s better company than you.”

“I’m sure she is. After all, I’m not the one you want to stick your dick in,” he says, wagging his brows when I flash my

eyes his way. “Though, I’d be open to it after a few tequilas if I ever took your fancy...”

“Great. I’ll make sure we stock up, then.”

“If you could, and don’t forget the lube. Dry dogging isn’t the one.”

“You speak from experience, do you?”

“You know me,” he says, tapping his fingers against the window. “I’ll try anything once.”

“Dry dogging, though. Really? There’s no way that didn’t fucking sting.”

“Mate, my eyes watered, it was that painful. She forgot the lube, *apparently*.”

“Fuck me.”

“Only if you ask nicely.”



The cottage is decked out to the max by the time we get back.

Fairy lights adorn the ceilings, casting a warm glow over the otherwise dim rooms, and there are more banners and bunting lining the walls than I think I’ve ever seen.

I meander into the kitchen, place the alcohol-filled bags on the island, and shrug off my jacket before turning to find Ryan

leaning over the counter. Her hair is tossed in a messy bun on top of her head, and she's wearing an oversized T-shirt with leggings and only a pair of fluffy Santa socks on her feet.

She's lost in her own world, her nose wrinkled adorably and a pitiful frown marring her face. Mumbled expletives fall from her lips, and she smacks her hand against the counter and sighs heavily.

Before she spots me, I move around the island, coming up to her back. "What did that counter ever do to you?"

She startles, stumbling backwards. My chest collides with her back, and her heat seeps through my cotton shirt. "Shitting hell," she hisses, trying to turn. I step back, giving her the space she needs, but as soon as she's looking up at me, I crowd into her, pressing her back against the counter as I lean down, her breath coasting over my neck as she whispers, "Hi."

"Hi." I smile and tuck a strand of loose hair behind her ear. Her cheeks flush, a beautiful rose tainting her skin as she smiles softly. "What's got you in a tizzy?"

She groans, letting her head fall to my chest. "I was left in charge of cake duty and thought it would be a brilliant idea to make one myself. But it turns out my baking skills begin and end with gingerbread men."

"What recipe did you use?" I glance at the counter, biting back my snort at the sight of the severely charred Victoria sponges in front of me.

“I googled and found something on a forum. They said it would be the best thing you’ve ever put in your mouth, but I got distracted, and then *that* happened. And the party starts in...” She grabs my wrist, flipping it upwards to glance at my watch. “Fuck, is that the time? I have two hours, no cake, and I’ve not even showered yet.”

“I reckon that’s salvageable.”

“Really?” She scoffs.

“Yes. Really.” I reach around her, snap a piece from the smaller cake, and shove it in my mouth. She looks at me, her eyes wide with hope as I chew, and I don’t have the heart to tell her it’s quite possibly the *worst* thing I’ve ever put in my mouth. I grin, humming to try and mask the sound of me choking as I swallow it down. “That tastes great.”

“Really?” she asks, incredulous.

“Yep, perfect. The burnt edges add extra flavour.” Her brow furrows, and she tries to spin around, her hand reaching to try for herself. I grab her hips, pulling her with me until I reach the kitchen door, then spin her, nudging her out of the room. “Go shower and get ready. I’ll finish up here and decorate the cake for you.”

“You sure? I don’t mind.”

“I’m sure.” I pat her ass, sending her on her way, and she turns to beam at me for a moment before starting up the stairs to her room.

I turn back to survey the mess, groaning as I pull out my phone and call for backup.

“The fuck you calling me for? We’re in the same cottage.”

“You need to come to the kitchen. Be fucking discreet about it. We have an emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?” Eli asks.

“The kind where Ry attempted to bake something and got distracted.”

“Well, shit.” He barks out a laugh before ending the call, but it’s only seconds until I hear him jogging down the stairs.

“What do you need?”

I turn to him, gesturing at the mess. “We need to make sure Bailey has her cake and Ryan never finds out we tossed hers out.”

“So we’re baking?” he says with a sigh, shaking his head.

“We’re baking,” I tell him, grabbing what we need and laying it all out on the counter as he tosses Ryan’s pitiful attempt into an old box and stuffs it to the bottom of the bin.

“Grab an apron, big brother.”

“If it were anyone else, I’d leave you to deal with this on your own, you know.”

“Sure you would.” I chuckle and make a start.

Within an hour, we have two cakes cooling in the fridge, and buttercream and fondant laid on the side, ready for us.

Eli finishes wiping down the counter and tosses the cloth in the sink before he turns to lean against it, his arms folded over his chest as he surveys the now spotless kitchen before his gaze finds mine.

“I don’t know many guys that would do what you’ve just done for a *friend*,” he says, with a smug grin.

“Whatever you say, bro.”

Quiet descends around us, the mindless bustle from the rest of the cottage muffled as we finish up in the kitchen. By the time we’re done, the girls are ready, sipping happily at the drinks Eli delivered into the lounge for them.

Ryan finds my gaze as I pass the open door, and I stop in my tracks, unable to take my eyes off her. The green sequined dress she’s wearing glistens against her golden skin, and her hair is curled loosely around her shoulders, the rich brown making the hazel in her eyes pop.

She looks like a dream, and when her red-stained lips split open into a beautiful smile meant only for me, my heart races.

“You know you’re totally fucked, right?” Eli whispers, sidling beside me as Ryan talks to Bailey.

“Yup,” I answer, bobbing my head, though my gaze remains on her. “Nothing I can do about it now, though. She’s it, Eli.”

“He finally fucking admits it.” Eli laughs, moving to cup my shoulder.

“No point denying it. Not like everyone hasn’t figured it out already.”

“Everyone *but* Ryan, it seems,” he says, cocking his head.
“And Bailey, but I don’t think you’ll have anything to worry about when it comes to her.”

I scoff. “Try telling Ry that.”

Ryan

SWEAT BEADS ON MY neck as I weave through the gathering bodies.

The cottage is abuzz with excitement as Bailey pounds back shot after shot on her mission to drink one for each year she's been alive. My stomach recoils as she downs number six, and I'm hoping Daisy will be on sick duty later—Bailey may be my best friend, but vomit is not something I'm equipped to handle.

The party is in full swing as I make my way into the lounge. Glancing around the room, I try to find a familiar face, but they're few and far between. God knows where Bailey has found them all; I don't think I've met even half of the thirty people she's invited.

I sip my drink and tuck myself into the corner to people watch.

It isn't long before I'm drawn to a super familiar face. One I shouldn't be looking for, but can't peel my eyes from. If I

thought Chase looked good in casual wear, it's nothing compared to how he looks when he's made an effort.

He's dressed in all black, as usual, but instead of a hoodie and jeans, he's wearing tailored pants that cling to his thick thighs and a tight black shirt rolled up to the elbows, showing off the ink adorning his forearms. His hair is styled loosely, pushed back from his forehead, and I start to smile, but that quickly changes when I see where his attention is focused.

A petite redhead stands at his side, gesturing wildly with her hands as he chuckles at whatever she's saying. She's dressed in blue jeans and a white blouse, and her hair falls straight down her back.

She's super pretty. I guess.

And she looks sweet and kind.

I hate her.

“That's not nice, RyRy.”

I snap my gaze to Kai, scowling as he throws his arm over my shoulder. “What's not nice?”

“You hating someone you've never even met.”

A flush creeps over my neck, and I avert my eyes, staring at the floor. I really need to stop blurting out my inner ramblings without realising. That shit is going to get me in trouble one day. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“So you weren't glaring daggers at that poor girl and telling yourself you hate her?” he jests, tugging me towards an empty

spot on the couch. There's barely room for two on the cushion, but he pulls us down either way. Our thighs are squashed together, and he has to toss his arm over the back just for some breathing space.

"Nope. I said I *ate here*. And I wasn't glaring daggers at her. There was a spider crawling over her head."

He barks a laugh, pulling the attention of those nearby, including the couple we won't speak about. "Don't tell Bailey. She'll have a coronary, after she spent all morning dusting."

I chuckle, grateful he's playing along with my lie. "She's too drunk to care."

"And why are you not?"

I shrug. "Not in the party mood, I guess."

"Well, let's change that, shall we?" He stands and rushes out of the room. I stare wide-eyed at his exit, unsure if I'm supposed to follow or not, but the question is quickly answered when he comes back in, holding a bottle of vodka in one hand and a bottle of sambuca in the other. "Pick your poison, RyRy." I grimace, flicking my gaze between the two. "Come on. It's Bailey's birthday, and she'll never forgive me if I don't make sure you have a good time."

"It's amusing how afraid you are of that girl."

"She's really scary," he whispers dramatically, pulling a choked laugh from me. "Now pick."

I sigh, rolling my eyes playfully as I reach for the sambuca. Kai's grin is broad when he plops back down on the couch,

uncaps the vodka, and tips a generous shot down his throat before gesturing for me to do the same.

Well, you know what they say. If you can't beat them...

"Bottoms up," I say, pulling the bottle to my lips.

I wince as the bitter aniseed flavour explodes on my tongue before burning a trail down my throat. My chest heats, and I force back a gag as it settles in my stomach.

"Attagirl," Kai says proudly, tapping the rim of his bottle to mine. "Now, do you really want to have some fun?"

I raise a brow, searching the mischievous glint in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Unlike you, one person in this room is *not* doing a good job of denying their feelings." He tilts his head inconspicuously, and I follow the direction, my heart racing at the sight of Chase.

The girl at his side is still going, chattering away aimlessly, but he's only looking at me. His expression is blank, devoid of any emotion, but the moment my eyes lock on his, a shiver runs through me.

His pupils are blown with heat, and there's something else lingering beneath the surface ... something I can't read, but it sends a horde of emotions surging through me either way.

I force my gaze away, refusing to acknowledge the stare I still feel burning holes in me. "I'm far too old to be playing those kinds of games," I say, quickly figuring out Kai's meaning. He raises a bushy brow. "Nope. We're not doing it."

“Boo. You’re boring, RyRy.”

“Find your own entertainment; don’t drag me down with you,” I tell him, smiling as his eyes dart over the room. Having known Kai for as long as the Brooks family, I can read his tells quite well—even if we aren’t as close as I am with the others—and he’s up for causing some mischief tonight.

“Fine. I shall.” He stands and jumps up onto the coffee table in the middle of the room. “Oi. Everyone,” he hollers, flicking his gaze around. “Where’s the birthday girl?”

“Here,” Bailey shouts, dragging Daisy behind her. Bailey spots me instantly, sending me a bright smile as she saunters towards me in too-high heels. Dropping onto the arm of the couch, she leans to throw her arms around my shoulders. “Where’ve you been, *Ry-ann*?”

I shake my head at her slurring, tug the glass of wine from her hand, and take a generous swallow to wash away the lingering taste of sambuca. “I didn’t feel like watching to see if you chucked chunks, and the kitchen was rammed, so I snuck away while you were on shot six, I think. How many did you get through?”

“Eight,” she tells me proudly, snatching the wine back. “And then I had a tactical chunder, so I’m feeling right as rain. Basically sober again.”

I chuckle. “Amazing.” It might have been believable if she wasn’t swaying on the arm, humming along to a different song than what’s playing.

“Basically sober,” Daisy mouths, her eyes alight with amusement as she stands in front of me. I bob my head, watching Bailey from the corner of my eye.

She hops up excitedly, clapping her hands at whatever Kai just said. “Yes, let’s do that.”

“Do what?” I ask, glancing between the pair.

“We’re playing Never Have I Ever. And since it’s my birthday party, I get to go first,” Bailey says, sitting back down and pursing her lips in thought. The rest of the room follows her lead, plonking their asses on available surfaces or the floor.

I definitely don’t watch Chase as the girl *still* talking to him gestures at the nearby armchair, then props her pert little ass on the arm as he drops into the cushion. I scowl, averting my gaze and tipping more sambuca down my throat.

“Never have I ever visited Scotland,” Bailey says, grinning to herself as the room groans collectively, everyone lifting their drinks to their mouth.

“You can’t really fault her for that one,” Daisy comments, stealing my attention. “Clever way to get people drinking. It seems our Bails is determined to get everyone on the same level she is.”

“When is she not?”

“Facts.” Daisy snorts, and my eyes zero in on the water in her hand as the game continues around us.

“You’re not drinking?”

“Nah. I’m on some new medication, so it’s not recommended.”

I don’t press, knowing Daisy has struggled with her mental health over the years and has only recently become comfortable with even discussing it, but I squeeze her hand to let her know I’m here if she needs to talk to someone not quite as involved. As the youngest, she’s constantly surrounded by noise, and while her siblings mean well, they’re an overbearing bunch at times.

She sends me a soft smile. “Anyway, what about you? You’ve been quiet the past few days.”

“I’ve been swamped with work and trying to keep up with Bailey’s demands for this week,” I tell her, flicking my gaze to my best friend as she finishes the wine in her glass and turns to Chase to demand another. He indulges her, winking as he leaves the room.

I won’t be telling Daisy that another part of me—a huge part—has been avoiding being stuck in a room with him, especially since I can still feel the imprint of his hand on my thigh.

“I hope you make her work just as hard for your thirtieth.”

Flicking my gaze back to Daisy, I bob my head. “Absolutely, I will. If Bails doesn’t give me the princess treatment, I’ll be revoking bestie rights.”

“You can’t,” Bailey screeches, sliding onto her knees in front of me. “And I already have epic plans for your birthday, so

don't you worry about a thing."

"Well, now I'm intrigued," I tease.

She shakes her head from side to side, pursing her lips and mimicking a zipping motion. "You'll get nothing from me," she says, turning back to the centre of the room. "Ooh, drink, Ryan!"

"What, why?"

"Josh just said 'never have I ever had sex in a car,'" she says, far too fucking loudly.

My cheeks blister as half the room turns to stare curiously at me. "I'm never telling you anything," I hiss through gritted teeth, "*ever* again."

She has the good sense to look sheepish. "Shit. Sorry, Ry."

I take a sip of sambuca, closing my eyes as it goes down. Daisy moves the game along quickly, and I pat her thigh in thanks.

I'm not sure how long we play for, but by the time I've drunk sip number seven, I start faking my drinks. I'm not a complete lightweight, but I also don't want to have to look at pictures on social media tomorrow to try and piece the night together.

When it's Chase's turn again, I flick my gaze to his, my breath shallowing at the mischief in his eyes. "Never have I ever..." He pauses dramatically, twisting around until our eyes collide, and my pulse begins to gallop as his smile broadens. Kai chuckles at my side, but I can't peel my eyes away from

Chase long enough to wonder why. “Fucked somebody who is currently in this room.”

My fingers tighten around my bottle, and blood rushes to my ears as he watches me closely, his own drink hovering near his mouth as he waits. Time slows, and the room around me disappears until it’s only him and me.

If I drink, it means we can’t pretend anymore.

We can’t go back to being friends. Though have we ever really been *just* friends?

My heart thunders in my chest, and goosebumps erect over my skin in anticipation. If we do this, I don’t know what happens next, but I also don’t know I can fight whatever is between us anymore.

He’s giving me an out—letting me make the next move—and I want to take it. There are so many things that could go wrong if I drink. But what if things go right?

I flick my gaze over the room, anxious butterflies stirring in the pit of my stomach. Bailey is distracted, talking animatedly to Kai, while Daisy sits on the couch, nursing her water as she stares out of the window.

Eli, though—he’s looking straight at me with a curious gaze. I catch his eyes, and he smiles, lifting his brow for just a beat before turning away and walking from the room. Pulling in a deep breath, I flick back to Chase, sparks of electricity shooting through my veins as he runs the rim of his glass with his thumb.

The girl at his side laughs at something, her face light with humour, and the part of me that keeps trying to push him away—keep him at a distance—snaps.

My eyes never leave his as I lift the bottle, rolling the rim over my bottom lip before pulling in a deep breath. His chest heaves, and he closes the distance between his mouth and the glass in his hand.

Fuck it.

I tip the bottle.

Chase

“THIS WAS THE BEST night *ever* !”

I chuckle at my sister, keeping my arm tight around her waist as I lead her up the stairs towards her bedroom.

She hiccups when I push open her bedroom door, then laughs to herself as I drop her on the edge of her bed before rifling through her drawers and pulling out a pair of pyjamas. Tossing them into her lap, I move into the bathroom and grab her reusable water bottle. I fill it to the brim and rifle through the cabinet until I find some paracetamol and ibuprofen.

Bailey is snoring softly, fully dressed in her party outfit and half off the bed, when I make my way back in. I place the water and pills on her bedside table before gingerly moving her until she’s tucked under the duvet, her hair splayed out on the stark white pillows.

I press a kiss against her forehead, then flip her bedside lamp off before tiptoeing from the room. The door closes with a soft snick, and I make my way back downstairs. The party has long

dwindled, and any stragglers still in the cottage are snoozing in the lounge.

I find Ryan in the kitchen, picking away at the mess left behind.

She's finally alone—after I've spent all evening trying to talk to her and having to watch Bailey drag her away constantly—and I take a long moment to watch her, grinning at the baggy jumper she's replaced the green dress with. She might have looked like a vision in the sparkly number, but there's nothing quite as satisfying as seeing a girl wearing your clothes.

“The cleaners will get that tomorrow, you know,” I say, chuckling as she bumps into the counter.

She presses a hand to her chest, pulling in a deep breath. “You really need to stop creeping up on me. You're going to give me a heart attack one of these days,” she snaps, narrowing her eyes. “And yes, I know we have cleaners coming. But I'm here, I'm awake, and I have hands. Might as well make a start.” She offers me the black bag, cocking a brow expectantly. I take it from her with a sigh, then move around to start on the island.

We make quick work of the kitchen and even the hallway before I snatch the bags up, moving them out of her reach.

“I think we've done enough for the night, Ry.” I glance at the clock ticking away on the wall, see the early hour. “Come on, it's 2 a.m. Time to get you into bed, Cinderella.”

“Okay,” she says, rolling her shoulders before she starts to move around me and heads into the kitchen.

I follow her and close the door behind us with a soft snick. The bin bags fall to the floor as I reach out for her, wrapping my arm around her waist and tugging her into my body. “Look up.”

Her eyes narrow, but she tips her head back, choking back a laugh as she sees what I’m getting at. “Mistletoe.”

I nod, closing the distance between us as her gaze zeroes in on my face. “You drank, Ry.”

“I know,” she breathes, her tongue darting out to wet her plump bottom lip.

“Why?” I push, needing to hear the words from her before I take this further. The ball has always been in her court, whether she knows it or not. “I thought you wanted to pretend it never happened.”

She shakes her head, a wistful smile gracing her lips. “Is that possible? God knows I’ve tried, but you’re always just there. You terrify me, but there could be something here, and I guess ... I want to give it a chance. See what it means.”

“Yeah?” I grin, leaning down until my lips hover over hers.

“Yeah,” she says, her breath coasting over my cheeks as she leans in and presses her lips gently to mine. “But I do have one condition.”

I chuckle, moving my lips against her cheek until I reach her ear. “I would expect nothing less from you, Ry.”

“Nobody can know.”

I pull back, cocking my head. I wasn't lying when I said I expected her to have conditions, but the thought of this one didn't even cross my mind. “Am I your dirty little secret?”

“No.” She laughs, reaching up to drop her arms around my neck. Using the arm holding her waist, I hoist her up, and she wraps her legs around me without hesitation. “I'm not ashamed of this, or whatever this *might* be. But if we're wrong and this isn't anything, everything would get weird and awkward, and I love your family. Bailey is my best friend. I think we see what this could be before we let everyone else in on it.”

“Okay, I will concede on your condition. But this *is* something. You know that, right?” She nods, though I can see the worry lingering in her hazel eyes. “Talk to me, Ry. What's going on in that head of yours?”

“I saw that little redhead chatting your ear off all night,” she mumbles, her fingers grazing my neck.

“That little redhead is Bailey's coworker and also happily married.” My grin widens as she grimaces. “Were you jealous?” I tease. She shakes her head but says nothing in response, and I frown. “Let me make one thing very clear. There hasn't been anyone since you, Ry.”

Her mouth gapes, and she searches my expression. “You're serious.”

“As a heart attack.” I tighten my hold on her and spin until her back is pressed to the wall and my lips are over hers once more. “*You*, Ry. Only you, in two years...”

She crosses the distance to silence me with a harsh kiss. My eyes close, and I take control, sliding my free hand into her messy curls and tipping her head slightly as I run my tongue over the seam of her lips.

She gasps, and I steal the opportunity, sliding my tongue inside her mouth. A hum falls from her throat, vibrating against me, and I groan, pressing her tighter to the wall.

She nips at my bottom lip, tugging the skin before swiping her tongue over the sting. I pull away, and she whimpers, but it quickly becomes a moan as I press open-mouthed kisses against her jaw before trailing down her neck and finding her pulse point.

My teeth graze the skin, and she digs her heels into my back.

“So fucking responsive,” I murmur, and she shivers as she drags her fingers down my back. Even with the material separating us, I can feel the pinch of her nails.

I pull away, letting her drop her legs before I crowd into her again, my hands moving beneath the thick cotton sweater until I find her breasts.

She’s forgone a bra, and precum leaks from my tip at the feel of her peaked nipples. I tug at them with my fingers, revelling in the way her mouth opens on a gasp.

She bucks her hips, moaning when she feels me against her waist. Her hands trail from my back, sliding over my hips until she finds my belt.

Unbuckling it quickly, she tugs it away, pops my button open, and slides her hand down the waistband, stroking me over my boxers.

“Fuck, Ry,” I moan, leaning down and biting into her neck.

She continues to work at my length, driving me insane with her hand. Even with the layers between us, I can feel her heat wrapping around me, and I’m desperate for more. I drag a hand from her nipples, my fingers trailing over her skin as I move downwards.

I find her centre, brushing my fingers over the cotton covering her. She gasps as I cup her, my thumb circling her clit over the material, and she squeezes me in her palm, her breaths growing shallow.

Moving her underwear to the side, I slide my fingers through her heat, my thumb finding her clit and circling it slowly until she whimpers. “Chase. Please.”

“What do you want, Ry?” I ask, trailing her jaw with my lips as I tease her entrance, dipping just the tip of a finger inside before pulling back out and focusing on the lazy way my thumb plays with her.

Her eyes flutter open and zero in on mine. “You. I want you.”

I press a kiss to her lip, increasing my pace for just a moment until she's panting beneath me. "You have me. I'm all yours." I slide a finger inside her slowly, feeling her snugness contracting around me, and I almost spill into my boxers there and then.

"Holy shit," she hisses, biting down on my bottom lip as I curl my digit, seeking her G-spot. I know the moment I've found it because she shudders against me, her own hand moving faster against my length.

"Now, be a good girl and use your words." Her breath heaves, and her eyes roll to the back of her head as I pull my hand away from her and reach for the waistband of her knickers. "Tell me exactly what you want *from* me, Ryan."

"I need to feel you," she says, as I push the elastic down. She mirrors me, relieving me of my trousers and boxers before curling her palm around my dick again, stroking it slowly. "Inside me. All of you." She gasps as I wrap my arm around her thighs and hoist her up until our hips are aligned. She guides me to her entrance, a low whimper falling from her lips as I push inside, moaning as her tightness envelopes me. "God, do you know how many times I've thought about that night, Chase?"

"Tell me, Ry," I whisper in her ear, rocking my hips slowly. Her feet dig into my arse, her fingers moving beneath my shirt until her nails drag against my skin. "Tell me about all the times you've touched yourself while thinking about me fucking you."

“Fuck,” she hisses when I pull out, leaving only the tip inside her, before slamming back to the hilt. “There’s too many to count,” she breathes, bucking her hips to meet my thrusts.

She gasps loudly when I hit her G-spot, and I curl my hand around her throat. “Show me. Show me how you touch yourself when you’re thinking about me.” I smirk as I tighten my fingers, and she shivers. She swallows a moan, tugging her bottom lip as I roll my hips before driving even deeper. She snakes a hand between our bodies, her shoulders growing taut as she finds her clit.

“That’s it,” I whisper, my own breaths growing shallow as my climax threatens to overtake me. “Show me how you get off when it’s my name on your lips.” She shudders, and her eyes flutter closed as her mouth opens on a gasp, the sound muffled by my hand tightening around her throat. “Such a good girl, Ry. Are you gonna come for me?”

She nods, fluttering around me as she chases her orgasm. I slow my thrusts, moving at a snail’s pace as I glance down to watch as her fingers roll around her glistening clit. “So fucking pretty, Ry. Such a pretty pussy.” Her legs tremble, her body growing taut as her back arches, and she comes on a choked moan, bucking her hips faster as I drive back in, groaning into her ear as I spill inside her.

My dick begins to soften, but I don’t pull away. I’m not sure I can, even if I wanted to.

“Jesus, fuck, Ry,” I breathe, murmuring against her cheeks as I move to claim her mouth. She kisses me softly, her fingers threading through my hair as she tries to catch her breath. “So much better than I remembered.”

“Yeah.” She chuckles, her fingers playing with my hair before she whispers, “Take me to bed?”

I nod, pull out of her, and slide her gently to the ground. She pulls up her knickers, and I follow suit, tugging my trousers up before holding my hand out for hers. The moment she laces her fingers through mine, sparks zip through my veins, and I know she feels it too because her thumb strokes over the back of my hand.

“Yeah,” she mumbles. “This might be something.”

Ryan

ROAMING HANDS WAKE ME, calloused fingers tracing over the soft skin of my stomach. I keep my eyes closed, marvelling at the feel of him behind me as he explores my body.

“I know you’re awake, Ry,” he whispers in my ear, his teeth grazing the lobe. A shiver passes over me as his fingers slip past the waistband of the pyjamas I dragged on before falling into bed last night, my breaths becoming ragged when he finds my bare pussy.

He slides a finger through my slick heat, gathering my leaking juices before circling my clit once, then twice. Tipping my head back, I let out a moan when he increases his speed. With his other hand, he gathers my hair, draping it over the pillow so he can drop open-mouthed kisses on my neck.

Goosebumps follow the line of his lips, and a shiver runs through me. The combination of his mouth and his fingers has me squirming, my arse rocking against his growing erection.

“Chase,” I breathe, another moan slipping past my lips when he moves his fingers down, pressing them inside of me. He never stops kissing my skin as he fucks me slowly with his hand, my body trembling the moment he touches my clit again, circling his fingers.

“It’s too early, Ry,” he tells me, increasing his speed until a gasp falls past my lips. I flick my eyes to the clock on his nightstand, noting the 7 a.m. flashing on the screen. “Everyone is still sleeping. Didn’t you want this to stay between us?”

“Y-yeah.” The word stumbles out of me, turning into a whimper when he pulls his hand free. I almost cry, but it’s only a second before he grabs my hips, rolls me onto my back, and crawls over me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m hungry,” he says, his eyes dipping to where my nipples pebble. The white strappy tee I’m wearing does little to hide my body’s reaction to him, though after last night, it seems futile to even try.

He straddles my thighs with his while his hand tugs at the shirt, pulling it down until my breasts are bare. The cool air makes them harder, and he licks his lips, lowering his head to take one peaked nipple into his mouth and tug it between his teeth.

“You know there’s food in the kitchen, right?” I tease, hissing when he bites down hard.

“Food is boring when you’re on the menu.” His hands find my bottoms while he moves his attention to my other breast. He alternates between licking, sucking, and biting, all the

while pushing my pants down until they're at my knees. His hand cups my pussy, the heel grinding against my clit as I writhe underneath him. "And Ryan..."

He tapers off, his eyes locking with mine. His pupils are blown with lust, but there's a deeper emotion swirling in the depths. It's intense, something I've noticed before when looking at him but refused to acknowledge.

"Yeah?" I ask breathlessly.

"I really want to eat you."

"Fuck," I groan, when he moves downwards. He pulls my pyjamas off and tosses them to the floor, then places his hands against my thighs and nudges them open until he's staring directly at my heat.

He runs his nose through my folds, breathing me in for a moment, before his mouth latches around my clit. He licks slowly at the hard nub, teasing me with tentative strokes.

Dizziness takes over me as he drags this out, taking his time to devour me with his mouth. He dips lower, his tongue prodding at my entrance for a moment. He mumbles into me, a hum that sends tremors pulsing to my clit, then he plunges his tongue inside of me, and my mouth opens on a scream before he clamps a hand around my throat, cutting my airway off so the sound is a jumble of breathlessness.

His tongue presses against my clit again, moving quicker this time as, without warning, he thrusts two fingers inside me.

The lack of oxygen makes me dizzier, my orgasm coiling inside of me as he scissors his fingers, finding my G-spot.

He doesn't let up his assault, thrusting quicker each time as his tongue circles my clit. Seconds turn into minutes, my eyes fluttering closed as my body starts to pulse. My pussy suffocates his fingers, my clit throbbing under his tongue as my climax takes hold of me.

He still doesn't release me, dragging my orgasm out until tears spill over my cheeks, and my lungs burn for oxygen as one spirals into two. He holds me under him, pressing soft kisses to my pussy while I start to come back down.

Peeling my eyes open, I glance down at him just as his eyes flick up to meet mine. His chin is coated in me, his lips shining with my juices, but he swipes his tongue over them as he loosens his hold around my neck and pulls his hand away.

I want to whimper at the loss of him, but he crawls over me, his hands on either side of my head as he leans down, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips and stealing any complaint from me. "Fucking delicious."

Reaching up, I cup his jaw, revelling in the feel of his five o'clock shadow as it tickles my palm. "Good morning."

"Morning, Ry," he says, and my chest flutters.

It's the exact thing he said when I woke up in this same bed two years ago, but I'd rushed out of bed then, panicking that we were going to fuck everything up because we'd slept together.

It feels different now, though.

The panic is still there, and I'm terrified of what it means to really let go with him. I've seen it one too many times—the shell a woman becomes when she falls and the other person doesn't catch her. But this is Chase.

If there's any person I can trust to catch me, it's him.

It *has* to be him.

I don't think there's anyone else out there for me.

“What's got you thinking so hard?” he asks, rolling off me and tugging me onto my side so we're face to face.

I tip my shoulder up. “I was just thinking about what happened the last time I woke up in your bed.”

“You mean when you ran away?” He chuckles and reaches up to cup my jaw. His thumb grazes over my cheeks, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. He steals a kiss, and I thread my fingers through his hair, holding him against me for a moment longer than necessary. “You're not gonna do that again, are you? I'm happy to keep chasing you, but I need at least an hour or two to wake up. Maybe let me fuck you once more before you make me put my running shoes on.”

“I think once can be arranged.” I smile, sighing happily. “Maybe twice, if you're lucky.”

“Oh, I'm definitely lucky...”

I squeal as he manoeuvres his arms beneath me, tugging me into a roll until I'm sprawled on top of him. My fingers dance

over his hard chest, circling his nipples before I drag my nails over his stomach, only ending at the waistband of his black boxers. “How do you feel about reverse cowgirl?” I ask him, tugging my bottom lip between my teeth as he moans loudly, thrusting a hand into my hair and pulling me down to slam his mouth to mine.

I'll take that as a yes.



The notes on my screen blur, and I scrub my hands over my eyes, blow out a slow breath, then grab my mug and drink the now cold peppermint tea with a grimace.

I'm bone-tired. My muscles scream at me every time I move, and my head thumps steadily, promising a wild headache if I don't force myself to shut this laptop and crawl into bed to catch up on some shuteye soon.

Turns out, losing sleep at nearly thirty is hell on your body.

But so fucking worth it.

“What's got you all happy this morning?” Bailey grumbles as she shuffles into the kitchen. Her hair is a mess of tangles thrown up in a butterfly clip, and last night's makeup still sits heavily on her skin, giving her a bad case of panda eyes. Wearing a ratty old dressing gown over her fluffy pyjamas, she grimaces as the coffee maker comes to life.

“Nothing, just work,” I say, the lie bitter on my tongue. I’ve never lied to Bailey before. Unless you count *It’s a Wonderful Life*, which, honestly, that lie is for her own good.

And Chase, of course.

But I wasn’t lying when I said I want to know what this is before I bring the rest of the world into whatever we’re creating between us. It feels fragile. *Special*. And I’m not ready to share that. However, it doesn’t make keeping it a secret from my best friend any easier.

“I can’t believe you’re working over Christmas,” she says, waving an empty mug in front of my face.

I nod, answering her silent offer of a cup of coffee before dipping my gaze back to the laptop. “Yeah, well, some of us can’t afford a whole month off work. We’re not all that lucky.” I type out a few notes for the singer I’m currently working with to look over, then close my laptop and slide it to the centre of the island. “How’s your head this morning?”

“It feels like someone is taking a hammer to my temples. I could actually cry. I’m not sure a hangover has ever felt this bad before.”

“They do say when you cross over into your thirties, everything feels worse.”

She groans as she grabs the two mugs of steaming coffee and moves to the stool beside me before handing me one. I blow on the rim, inhaling the bitter aroma as it seeps into the air.

“Don’t remind me. Thirty is scary as fuck; I’m not sure I’m ready for it.”

“I don’t think you have much of a choice,” I remind her. “You’re already there, babe.”

“Maybe I can just stay twenty-nine forever.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s how it works. Unless you have a time machine ready for Tuesday?” I tease, though my lips twist into a frown at the forlorn expression on her face as she shakes her head. “Hey, what’s going on?”

She sighs, pulls her mug to her mouth, and swallows generously before she finds my gaze. “I don’t know. I guess it’s just hitting me that I don’t have my life all figured out yet. Mum and Dad were married at my age, settled into their careers, and already had two kids. Eli was engaged and in the process of starting his own company. Chase bought the shop at twenty-eight. And then there’s me, floating around, without a clue where I’m going.”

“Oh, Bails. I don’t think we’re meant to have it all figured out.” I scoot off my stool, wrap my arms around her, and hug her tight to my chest. “We’re still young, you know? Just because some people knew what they wanted at our age doesn’t mean we have to. Can I let you in on a secret?”

She nods, and I pull back, holding my hands to her shoulders as I lock my eyes on hers. “I hate living in London.” Her eyes widen, and her mouth pops open for a beat before she barks a laugh at my revelation. “Like, *really* hate it.”

“I fucking knew it,” she says, shaking her head before her eyes dip. “But why did you never tell me that? You know you could have come back to the flat. I kept your room empty.”

“I know.” I nod, sighing as I lean back against my stool. “But I was afraid to admit I didn’t know what I was doing. I made such a fuss about moving away, spreading my wings, learning to fly on my own and all that bullshit.”

“I would have never—”

“No, I know you would have never judged me or used anything I said against me, but as you said, we’re meant to have it figured out, right? I’m so scared of being like my mum and never settling in life.” My shoulders sag as I finally let the truth out, and I breathe slowly, feeling the weight falling off my shoulders. “God, it feels good to finally say that aloud.”

“You could never be like your mum,” Bailey says seriously. She grabs my hand, squeezing as I wrap my palm around hers. “You’re too good, Ryan.”

“Thanks, Bails. I know that now ... maybe. But the point I’m getting at is neither of us knows what we’re really doing, we’re just trying to follow—or *not* follow—the path others have taken before us. Maybe it’s time we craft our own path. Who cares if we don’t know it all yet? Isn’t part of the fun figuring it out as we go?”

“What did I do to get so lucky to deserve a friend like you, Ryan Parker?” she asks, her eyes watering as she throws her arms around me.

My gaze darts around the kitchen, finding Chase as he wanders past the open door to the lounge. He spots me, his dimples popping up as he smiles and sends me a wink, and my breath stutters. “You have given me more than I could ever ask for, Bailey. I’m the lucky one.”

Chase

RYAN SMILES AGAINST MY lips, sighing softly as I stuff my hands in the back pockets of her jeans and close the remaining distance between us.

I'm not going to say I love the fact we're having to hide this from my family, but I can't say there isn't something magical about stealing moments when nobody's looking. There's something to be said about figuring things out without everyone else's opinions.

Plus, sneaking around is a hell of a lot of fun.

She runs her tongue along the seam of my lips, pleading for entrance, and I tighten my grip. She moans, sliding her tongue inside. I hum in approval as she runs her fingers through my hair, tugging at the short strands while dragging her nails over my scalp.

“Fucking hell—”

“Auntie RyRy!”

Ryan reels back at the tiny voice, her eyes wide in panic as they dart around the empty kitchen. She places her hands against my chest, shoving me away lightly as my niece comes barreling into the room and launches herself at Ryan's legs.

"Missed you, Gracey girl," Ryan says, hoisting the tiny four-year-old into her chest.

I can't say I've ever been jealous of a child before, but as Ryan peppers kisses all over Grace's face, making the tiny blonde giggle uncontrollably, I can't help but feel a bit put out that her attention isn't on me.

Fucking hell. I need to get a grip.

I busy myself by grabbing a couple of mugs from the cupboard and flipping the kettle on as Eli and his wife, Sarah, walk into the room. "You two want a drink?"

"Ooh, yes please. This one," Sarah says, nodding in the direction of my brother, "refused to stop at the last services, so I'm gasping for a cuppa."

"We stopped twice, Sarah." Eli chuckles as he wraps his arms around her waist and hauls her into his chest.

"And then you made us drive for two hours straight. I think I'm going into caffeine withdrawal." She sighs dramatically, and I laugh, grabbing the tea and sugar containers.

"Ry?" I call but get no answer.

I turn to stare at my girl as she talks in hushed whispers to Grace. There's a bright smile on her face, and her eyes are

alight with humour as my niece gestures wildly, never taking her eyes off Ryan.

“You know, I didn’t even get a hello,” I say to Sarah and Eli. “I’m her only uncle.”

“You don’t send her Amazon parcels every week.” Eli laughs, his eyes landing on the two. “Children are fickle. Easily bought.”

“Hmm, I’ll try to remember that.”

“Thinking about having some kiddos soon?” Eli asks, a too-telling note in his voice.

I flick my gaze at him and shrug. “Can’t say the thought hasn’t crossed my mind, especially recently.”

“Is there a special lady we should know about?” Sarah asks, her eyes darting between Eli and me. Eli snorts, cocking his head in the direction of the melodic giggles coming from the island. “Oh.” Sarah’s mouth falls open, and a soft chuckle falls from her lips. “About time, I say.”

I roll my eyes and make quick work of the drinks before we settle in the lounge.

“Where’s Mum and Dad?” I ask Eli. “I thought you were picking them up when you grabbed Sar and Grace?”

“I dropped them off in town,” he says, blowing on his mug. “Think Mum wanted to grab a few more presents, not that she needs them—I couldn’t see shit from my back window because of all the bags she shoved in the boot. You and Ry should go pick them up.”

I narrow my eyes, cocking my head at him. “Why?”

“Just a suggestion. Might be nice to get out.” He shrugs. “And oops, did I forget to mention Mum and Dad were meeting up with some friends for dinner this afternoon and planned to get a taxi back later? My bad,” he says, with a mischievous smirk.

I laugh, shaking my head. “You are an evil genius, Eli Brooks.” Pushing off the couch, I send him a silent thanks and head off to find Ryan.



“Where are we going?” Ryan asks for the fifth time as I roll into a parking space of the small restaurant and turn the engine off.

“Can’t a guy steal his girl away for a nice dinner without an interrogation?”

“*His* girl?” she sasses.

“You have a problem with that?” I ask, leaning over the central console and cupping her cheek with my hand. My thumb runs along her bottom lip, and she flushes, but her face brightens with a smile as I press a soft kiss to her lips. “Cause the way I see it, you’ve been my girl for the last two years, Ry. I’ve just been waiting for you to catch on.”

“I guess I’m a little slow on the uptake, huh?”

“Just a little, but I’ll let you off.” I shrug, then lean over to unclip her belt before I slip free of mine and push open my door. I round the car, grabbing her door before she can push it open, and offer her my hand to help her out. “I’d say you’re more than making up for making me wait so long. That thing you did with your tongue last night—”

I laugh as she whacks my bicep with her fist. Grabbing it, I bring her hand to my lips and press a kiss on her knuckles before twining her fingers with mine and tugging her towards the doors of the restaurant.

We’re seated quickly, and I order a bottle of Ryan’s favourite red wine to the table, smirking at the bewildered expression she wears. “You think I wouldn’t know all your favourite things by now? We’ve known each other a long time, Ry.”

“No, I know. But *all* my favourite things? Really?” she quips, leaning forwards.

“Try me.”

“Okay...” She purses her lips, her playful gaze locking on mine. “Favourite colour?”

Snorting, I grab her hand across the table, tapping at the old friendship bracelets that still adorn her wrists despite her and Bailey making them over ten years ago. “Too easy. Green.”

“Hmm, I basically gave you that one. What about my favourite band?”

“You don’t have one. It’s too hard to pick. But the band of the moment is Sleep Token.”

She narrows her eyes, and the waiter interrupts, taking our food orders before she can press me with more questions.

We go back and forth over the next hour, and with each right answer, Ryan’s laughter grows louder and her cheeks flush deeper—though that could be partly due to the two bottles of wine we’ve consumed.

“Right, last one.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” I tell her, placing my knife and fork on my empty plate before propping my elbows onto the table and running my hand over my jaw. “Best make it a good one; I feel the need to show off here.”

“Should I be worried about that big ego you’re growing?” she jests, cocking a brow before she wrinkles her nose and moves her gaze over the restaurant before coming back to me. “Where’s my favourite place in the whole world?”

“That’s the easiest one, you know.” She cocks her head to the side, searching my expression, but says nothing. “It’s the cottage.”

“Why? What makes you say that?”

“It’s the first place you ever felt at home.”

She breathes slowly, a choked laugh slipping from her lips. “How the hell do you know that? I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone.”

“That’s not true.”

“What are you on about?”

“Remember the second year you came?” She nods, her brow furrowing and a frown marring her beautiful face. “You got super wine-drunk with Bailey on Christmas Eve, and she went to bed, but you couldn’t sleep.”

“I barely remember that night,” she says.

“Are you surprised? I think you polished off a good five bottles between you.”

“Yeah, that I remember. It was the hangover from hell.” She laughs. “I’m honestly surprised we didn’t have to have our stomachs pumped.”

“Anyway, I found you out on the porch, sitting on the swing, and there was this bright, beautiful smile on your face. And then you turned to me and said ‘I think I’ve found it.’”

“Home...” she breathes, her eyes lighting up. “I told you I’d found home.” I nod and reach my hand out to find her fingers. She links our hands, squeezing tightly. “I can’t believe I forgot about that, but you remembered.”

“I remember everything about you, Ryan Parker.”

“I’m starting to see that.” She chuckles softly. “I guess we need to order some dessert.”

“Do we?” I raise a brow, wondering where she’s going with this.

“Yup. ’Cause now I get to show off all the things I know about you.”

“This will be interesting. Okay ... what’s my favourite colour?”

“Most people would say black, but it’s purple.” She snorts, and over the next hour and a half, we keep the game going. It turns out, Ryan knows as much about me as I do her. She may have been pretending for the last few years, but after tonight, I’ve no doubts that Ryan Parker is mine, and it won’t be long before I get to show that off to the world.

“Such a gentleman,” she teases later, when I pull the car door open for her.

“I’ve been waiting for years to flex my gentleman card, so you’re going to let me without complaint.”

“I guess I can do that.” She smiles and presses up onto her tiptoes to claim my lips in a sweet kiss before she leans against the open frame. “Surely you’ve flexed with other women before, though? Dates and whatnot?”

I snort, shaking my head at her naivety. It’s adorable. “When have you ever known me to date, Ry?”

“Well, there was...” She turns to me sharply, a frown on her lips. “You don’t date.”

I smile. “Nope.”

“Like, you *never* date,” she rambles, her hands finding my waist as she leans into me. “I can’t even remember the last time you’ve spoken to a girl. And I know you said you haven’t

been with anyone for the last two years, but even before that. I don't think I've ever known you to have a girlfriend.”

“Maybe because I never have, Ry. Unless you count Mary back in secondary school, but that lasted approximately three days, until she decided she preferred Kai over me and chose him to be her next boyfriend. Nearly ruined our lifelong friendship, but we survived. I won't lie and say I haven't been with women over the years when I was young and stupid, but nothing that ever mattered.”

“Only me?” she breathes, echoing the sentiments I whispered to her on Saturday night, and a bright, melodic laugh slips past her lips.

“Only you, Ry,” I say, pressing my forehead to hers. “It was *always* you.”

Chase

RYAN SLIPS FROM MY hold, pressing a lingering kiss to my lips before sliding from the bed.

I pull in a deep breath and force my eyes open as she gathers her discarded clothing from the floor and tugs her dress over her head. She grins, then steps softly to the door before peeling it open an inch and peeking her head around the wood.

“You’re not going to stick around and say good morning?” I ask her, my voice husky with sleep. “It could even be a *very* good morning if you shut that door and get your arse back into bed.”

She groans and glances back at me with a forlorn expression. “Why do you have to look and sound like that first thing in the morning? It makes leaving very difficult.”

“Then don’t...” I peel the covers back slowly, teasing her with the sight of my naked body, but she slams her eyes shut, spinning before I can tempt her further.

“Nope. I have willpower.”

“You sure about that?”

“No,” she whines, before pulling in a shuddering breath. “But it’s Bailey’s birthday, and I’m already the worst best friend in the world, meaning I can’t slack today lest she sack and replace me.”

With a snort, I roll off the bed and stroll towards the chest of drawers tucked into the corner of the room. “We could just tell her,” I say casually, pulling out a pair of black boxers and tugging them over my legs.

“Sure,” she says, scoffing. “*Hey, Bails. Happy Birthday, bestie! Sorry I’m late, I was too busy letting your brother fuck me against a wall. That’ll go down a treat.*”

“We already did the wall, baby. What about the kitchen island? That might be a good time.”

“You’re not funny.”

“I’m hilarious, and you know it.”

“Whatever you say,” she quips, though her eyes brighten with amusement.

“You know you’re making all this a much bigger deal than it needs to be, right?”

“Maybe,” she says, sighing as she quietly closes the door and saunters back across the space. She pushes onto her tiptoes and kisses my cheek before finding my lips. The kiss only lasts a second, but my body hums happily anyway. “But I don’t want to mess this up before it starts.”

“What are you so scared of, Ry?”

“Everything.” Her mouth ghosts over mine, then she pulls away and heads back to the door. She pulls it open, turning to give me a final glance. “You need to be downstairs in ten minutes to help me.” She claps her hands, a beaming smile on her face.

“Give me fifteen. I need to hop in the shower.”

“Well, have fun with that. While you shower, I’ll be busy *blowing* downstairs.” She laughs as she steps into the empty hallway.

I groan, scrubbing my hands over my face as she closes the door behind her, leaving me alone with only my rock-hard dick for company. I move into the shower, flipping the stream onto cold before stepping inside.

I swear, that girl will be the death of me before this season is over.

It takes me closer to thirty minutes to compose myself, and by the time I make my way into the dining room, Ryan has transformed the large space into a birthday haven.

The table has been pushed against the wall, weighed down by pastries, fruit, prosecco, and fresh orange juice, surrounded by a large arch covered in rose-gold balloons. A light-up sign reading “Thirty, not so flirty & barely surviving,” is pinned to the wall, brightening up the otherwise darkened space thanks to the torrential downpour outside.

A pile of numbered presents adorns a smaller table, with “thirty for thirty” scrawled messily in chalk on a blackboard plaque. My gaze flickers over the room, and I shake my head.

“I think I need to get a new best mate,” Kai says, sidling up beside me. “If I remember correctly, for my thirtieth, you handed me an electricity bill for the studio and said ‘Deal with this.’ ”

“And *you* gave me a warm beer and tattooed a penis on my thigh.”

“I guess we can call it even, then.” He smirks, clapping me on the shoulder before he walks the length of the room, whistling at the over-the-top decor.

Footsteps sound from the hall, and Ryan hollers as she rounds the corner. “Good, you’re both here. I need favours.”

“What do you need, RyRy?” Kai asks.

“Can you grab me the speakers from the loft? Mr. Dorsett said they should be up there, behind the old generator or something.” Kai nods at her request, sending her a salute before he stalks from the room, and Ryan turns to me, a wry smile on her face.

“What’s that face for? Do I need to murder someone? If so, you really should have prewarned me. I’m not dressed for the occasion.” I gesture at the buffalo-check shirt I dragged on before coming downstairs. “Blood spatters and white don’t really go together, Ry.”

“Wow. That’s disappointing. There goes my plans for the day,” she deadpans.

“You ruined my fun morning plans, so it only seems fair.”

“Ha ha,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I’m sure you had a great time in the shower.”

“It could have been better…” She grumbles at my words, turning on her heel and starting towards the door, but I grab her wrist, tugging her into my chest as she stumbles over her feet. “Hi, Ry.”

“Hi,” she breathes, folding her arms around my waist for a second.

“What do you need me to do?” I ask, running my fingers up and down her spine. She shivers under my touch, and I smile as I press a kiss to her forehead.

She sighs happily, breathing me in before she tips her head back. “My car is still in the garage, and I totally blanked when they took it the other day and forgot I’d left a present for Bails in the glove box. Could you go get it, please?”

“Why did you look so worried about asking me that?”

She shrugs, frowning. “It’s an hour and a half round trip. That feels like a pretty big ask.”

“Nothing is too big an ask, Ry. Not when it’s you asking,” I say, cupping her jaw and guiding her head until our eyes collide. “I know I joked about killing someone, but if you need me to, hand me the shovel, baby. I’ll do the dirty work for you.”

“Such a sweet-talker.” She smiles and presses her lips to the corner of my mouth.

I inch closer, my fingers curling around her neck as my lips hover over hers, but Ryan reels back in an instant, stepping away from me and turning to face the windows as Daisy peeks her head around the open doorway.

“Sheesh, Ry.” Daisy’s eyes widen as she strolls around the space, her mouth popping open in bewilderment. “Can you do all my birthdays in future too, please? I might have to steal you away and claim the best-friend title instead of Bails.”

Ryan laughs, a proud glint in her eyes as she looks over her work. “I did good, huh?”

“Better than good. Bailey is going to die when she sees this. Where is she, anyway? I haven’t seen her this morning.”

“Eli, Sarah, and Gracey took her to that little café she loves with a promise to keep her busy until I send the text to say we’re ready here.”

“You’re a good friend, Ry.”

“I certainly try,” Ryan croaks, her eyes darting to mine before she quickly drops them to the floor. Her cheeks redden, guilt etching over her features as she busies herself with rearranging the already perfectly laid table. “Chase, can you pick up that present for me, please? It’s just a small black envelope in the glove box.”

“Got it.” I nod, taking my cue. I kiss Daisy’s cheek and say my goodbyes as she peppers Ryan with questions about the

thirty presents.



Laughter wraps around me as I push through the front door and shuck off my jacket.

Following the sounds, I find my family tucked away in the dining room. The radio plays quietly in the background as Bailey tears through wrapping paper, her eyes bright with love and appreciation.

“Did you get it?”

I turn to the hissed voice, my lip curling at the side. “Oh, hello, Ryan. I’m good. The drive was fine, thanks so much for asking. How are you?”

Ryan keeps her expression blank, but her eyes spark with fire as they lock on mine. “Did. You. Get. It?” she repeats, propping a hand on her hip.

I hum, dragging my gaze over her slowly. Her boots tap against the floor, a frantic rhythm as she tries to keep the scowl off her face. Tapping my hand against hers, I meet her eyes again, pursing my lips. “What was I supposed to get again?”

“I swear to God, Chase—” She huffs, her eyes narrowing to near slits, and I can barely keep my laughter down. “You’re

kidding, right?”

“Am I?” I quip. She sags in relief, closing her eyes for a second. I avert my gaze, biting back my smile as I glance around the room until Ryan socks me on the shoulder, dragging my attention back to hers. “That’s not very nice, baby,” I say, keeping my voice a low rumble just for her ears as I curl my fingers around her fist and tug her to my side.

“Chase...” She shivers as I trace her black cotton T-shirt, my fingertips dancing a slow rhythm up and down her spine. I see Daisy in my periphery, watching with a curious glance, but I can’t bring myself to relinquish my hold.

I’m playing with fire; I know that. But there’s something so delicious about pushing Ryan’s boundaries—the way her eyes flicker with hunger and her voice grows husky as she tries to keep herself composed.

“Yes, Ryan?” I dip down until my mouth grazes the tip of her ear.

Her breath shudders, and her eyes flutter, and I’m pretty sure if I push one more inch, she’ll explode. While that’s something I’m excited to see—the moment Ryan finally accepts this between us and stops hiding behind my family as an excuse—I’m a selfish bastard and want to keep her all to myself a little longer.

“Uhm...” She coughs, hiding the stutter in her voice as she presses against my ribs, pushing me away. I let her go, a low chuckle slipping past my lips as she brushes trembling hands

over her denim-clad thighs and refuses to look in my direction.
“The, uhm, the present?”

“Oh, right. That,” I say, digging into the pocket of my hoodie. The black envelope is snatched from my grip the second I pull it free, and Ryan laughs in relief, finally flicking her eyes to mine.

“Thank you.” She beams.

“Don’t even worry about it. What is it anyway?”

Ryan’s eyes sparkle with pride, but she shakes her head, and Bailey’s gaze snaps up, her eyes glistening with unshed tears as she thanks Ryan profusely for the gifts. “I can’t believe you did all this, Ry,” she says, her voice trembling.

“Yeah, well, you only turn thirty once, right?” Ryan shrugs, a ghost of a smile on her face as she strolls across the room and slaps the envelope into Bailey’s hand. “Happy birthday, Bails.”

“Ryan, you got me more than enough already.” Bailey gestures to the presents surrounding her, a confused look on her face as she flips the envelope over and peels it open. She gasps when she tugs out a sheet of paper, and her eyes widen with shock. Ryan’s smile is blindingly beautiful as she watches my sister, and I can’t force my eyes away.

Not when Bailey flings her arms around her shoulders, squeezing for dear life, or when Dad booms laughter from behind me somewhere. Not even when my mum comes to my side to natter away in my ear.

I’m frozen; suspended in time with only Ryan as my anchor.

If I didn't realise it before today, I certainly know it now.

I'm going to spend the rest of my life with that woman.

Ryan

STEAM RIPPLES THROUGH THE air, the scent of rich chocolate and vibrant orange flooding my senses. Bailey steers us towards a small booth tucked in the corner of the little café before dropping the bags from her hands and falling into one of the couch cushions with a heavy exhale.

“I’m pooped,” she says, reaching for a hot chocolate as I take a seat opposite her. I pass one of the loaded mugs into her waiting hands and blow the steam on my own before inhaling deeply. I hum happily as I hunker down on the couch. “But I think we’ve ticked everything off the list.”

“Not quite,” I tell her, laughing at the petulant pout on her face when she looks at me. “We need to head to the jewellers and pick up the watch for your dad. Then I want to go get that Unicorn Operation we saw for Gracey.”

“Okay. Two more and done, yes?” She looks hopeful as she sips on her hot chocolate, and I grin sheepishly. “What else?”

“Chase,” I mutter.

“Oh fuck,” she grumbles, scrubbing her hand over her face. “He’s the hardest to buy for. Why did we leave him for last?”

“*Because* he’s the hardest to buy for,” I deadpan.

“Every year, we do this to ourselves. What if we just stick some cash in a card? Chuck him a twenty and say Merry Christmas?”

I laugh. “And face the wrath of Mumma B for not putting thought into a gift?”

Bailey shudders at the reminder of what happened six years ago, when we were both poor, unmotivated, and not in the Christmas spirit. We gave everyone a card with cash inside it, thinking it would be appreciated more than whatever cheap tat we could throw together last minute. Turns out, we were wrong. Very wrong.

“The way she went off, you’d have thought someone died. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mum so disappointed in me. At least you got off somewhat easy, as the adopted daughter she never signed up for. She’s never let me live it down. I’m surprised she didn’t edit me out of the family picture that year. Ironically, when Eli did the cash thing the year Grace was born, he was basically the patron saint.”

Sipping my hot chocolate, I shake my head in amusement. “That’s because he gave her a grandchild. And unless you’re about to pop one of them out...”

She grimaces, her face paling. “Absolutely not. No babies here, thank you.”

“That’s what I thought,” I quip, smiling at my friend. “So, we need to get our thinking caps on and get Chase something, lest we do get kicked out of the family photos this year.”

“What do you buy the guy who wants for nothing?”

I shrug, gazing out of the window at the grey, dreary sky in thought. The thing is, I’m pretty sure I know what Chase wants for Christmas this year, but it’s not a gift I can go into a shop or purchase, or something I can throw on a gift card and walk away.

It’s me.

Since Bailey’s birthday last week, he’s made that very clear—in the hushed conversations in the middle of the night when we’re hidden away in his room, the small touches whenever I’m in his vicinity, and the stolen kisses when nobody is looking—and I don’t know how much longer I can fight to keep this between us.

The more time we spend alone together, the more I see what really exists between us. It’s not just heat and lust that will die out when we’ve had our fill. It’s comfort and warmth—the kind you only ever feel at home. And that’s nothing short of terrifying.

“Earth to Ry.”

I snap my gaze to Bailey, exhaling sharply. “Sorry, zoned out.”

“You’ve been doing a lot of that lately,” she says, her eyes searching mine. “Anything you want to talk about?” Her

expression is open, but there's something in her gaze, a knowing curiosity I don't understand.

“Nah, I'm just tired. Didn't sleep well last night.”

She hums, a soft smile on her face. “Well, let's get these last few bits, and then we can head home and snuggle on the couch with Netflix until we have to go out later.”

“Bailey Brooks,” I tease, wagging my brows. “Are you asking me to Netflix and chill with you?”

She blows me a kiss and winks. “Only if I get to top.”

“Perfect. That means I get to lay there like a sack of spuds and still get off. Every girl's dream.”

“I didn't take you for a lazy shag, Ry.” Bailey laughs, and any lingering tension in my muscles expels as I sink into the cushion, sipping my hot chocolate.

“You're a tit.”

“But I'm your tit, and you love me.”

“Facts.”

“Drink up, then, and we'll get this shit done.”



The rest of the day flies by in a blur of shopping and movies,

and before I know it, we're packed around a large table in one of the local pubs, empty glasses and plates littering the oak.

Chase sits beside me, his hand curled around my thigh as his thumb glides under the hem of my dress, heat searing through me at the innocent touch.

The silver rings on his fingers glint under the dim light as I glance down, and I choke back a groan. There's something so attractive about rings on a man's fingers, especially paired with the veins that ripple beneath his muscles with each movement.

If it wasn't for his family chattering happily around us, I'm pretty sure I'd have jumped his bones before the first course was delivered to our table.

"You alright over there?" I snap my head up, flushing at the smirk on Kai's lips as I turn to him. "You've been looking at your lap awfully hard..."

Chase chuckles at my side, his fingers tightening around my skin, and a deep flush crawls over my cheeks. I try to knock him away, but he doesn't falter, keeping his gaze forwards as his thumb travels the length of my thigh, searing heat following the touch.

"Oh, I, erm—" *For fuck's sake, Ry, think.* "There's a loose thread on my dress, and it's annoying me." *Nailed it, Ry. A loose bloody thread? Likely story.*

"Hmm."

“What?” I snap, narrowing my eyes as Kai continues to hum under his breath.

“Nothing, RyRy,” he says, his tone sickly sweet. “Nothing at all.” I grab my glass of water and tip the contents down my throat, though it does little to douse the fire Chase stokes in my veins—how can it when his thumb continues to strum my skin? “Did you catch the end of today’s game?” Kai asks, turning to Martin, and I exhale slowly, grateful for the reprieve from his knowing gaze.

It’s not that I think he *knows* what’s happening between Chase and me, but as Chase’s oldest friend, there’s certainly the chance he’s catching on to something. Though I am starting to wonder if that would be such a bad thing.

As I glance around the table, taking in the laughter, chatter, and joy coming from Chase’s family—my family—I can’t help but *want* to let them in on this. The fact is, for the last two years I’ve convinced myself I couldn’t—that they wouldn’t want me to—but after the last few weeks, I’m starting to see it’s just an excuse. A crutch.

I don’t think the Brooks would care.

So why, then, am I so afraid?

“Hey,” Chase whispers, tilting his head as I turn back to him. His eyes are warm as he searches my expression. There’s a soft smile on his face, one meant only for me, and I can’t stop my own lips from breaking into a grin as I look at him.

“Hey.”

“Where did you run off to in your head?”

“I was just thinking,” I tell him.

“About...”

“Nothing important.” I shrug.

“Why do I not believe you, Ryan Parker?”

I chuckle and wink at him before turning back to the table, dipping into conversation with Bailey as she tells her dad about the concert tickets I got her for her birthday. The rest of dinner passes easily, the mood light and airy, and when we leave, I hop into Chase’s car without hesitation, my hand curling around his on the gear stick as he pulls away from the restaurant.

The others follow behind us, but in here, it’s just me and him. There isn’t any other place in the world I’d rather be.

Chase

RYAN'S HAND BRUSHES AGAINST the straining zipper of my jeans when she lifts from the couch and stalks out of the lounge.

There isn't a doubt in my mind that she knows exactly what she's doing as she saunters through the hallway, swinging her hips seductively with each step she takes. She turns to face me for a moment, a smirk on her face. I shake my head, fighting my smile as she winks before disappearing through the open doorway.

Ryan thought it would be a great idea to stroke me over my jeans on the drive back, and I've been rock hard since we came back from town a couple hours ago. I tried to persuade her to sneak up into my bedroom, but she thought it would be a great idea to have a game night with the whole family.

If I didn't think she'd murder me in my sleep, I'd have thrown her over my shoulder before she could utter a single complaint, let everyone into the little secret we've been harbouring. I rather like my life, though. Especially now that

Ryan seems to be coming around to the idea of becoming a permanent feature in it.

But when she's behaving how she is tonight, taunting and teasing me with her body, it's almost impossible to keep my mouth shut and not blurt out to her—and the whole family—that I'm madly in love with her and can she please just put me out my misery.

Mum slides onto the cushion beside me, offering me a fresh beer. I uncap it, hoping the cool liquid can douse the fire raging inside me, but I think it's futile at this point. Only one thing is going to cool me down tonight, and she's determined to keep riling me up before we get to that point.

"You and Ryan seem to be getting along well," Mum comments, glancing at me eagerly.

"We've always gotten on well, Mum."

"Oh, I know," she says, with a wistful sigh. "It just feels different this year, is all."

"What do you mean?" I ask, keeping my voice blank.

"You both seem happier, I guess." I avert my eyes, knowing my mum can read every emotion on my face if she wants to. "It's nice. It reminds me of Eli when he was courting Sarah."

"Mum, no one says courting anymore." I laugh, and she whacks me with the back of her hand.

"Would you rather I called it fucking? Isn't that what all you young'uns are doing these days?"

I grimace, a shudder rocking through me. “Oh God. Please don’t. Absolutely not. That word should never come out of your mouth.”

“What word?” Daisy chirps, popping up from her game of Battleship with Bailey.

They both look over at us, and I send them a glare, refusing to answer the question. Not that Mum seems to have any such reservation. “Fucking.” Daisy gags, and Bailey shields her face behind her dressing gown, flushing a bright red as Mum keeps talking. “Oh, don’t act so scandalised. It’s not as if your dad and I didn’t do enough of that back in our day. Isn’t that right, Martin?”

“Too right, love. Hell, we still do plenty of it now.” Dad grins. “Remember last week when we—”

“Oh, God, I think I’m going to be sick.” Daisy runs from the room, plugging her ears, and I glance at Bailey, tipping my head in the direction she went. She nods and pushes up to stand, her eyes wide as Dad keeps talking.

“Bye, Mum and Dad,” she calls, and we rush from the room before our parents can traumatise us forever. We find Daisy and Ryan in the kitchen, loaded hot chocolates in their hands.

“Look, it’s not that I don’t realise our parents must be...” Daisy winces, gritting her teeth. “*Doing the deed*. I mean, they have four children, but why on earth they’d ever think we’d want to hear about it, I don’t know. I think I might need therapy after that.”

“You already have therapy,” Bailey says, with a chuckle.

“Okay, fine. *More* therapy then.” Daisy laughs and turns to me. “How did that topic even come up? What on earth were you two talking about?”

“Oh, erm,” I stutter, not really wanting to get into this topic with my sisters, especially with Ryan standing here. “Courting.”

“Courting?” Bailey echoes, wrinkling her nose. “Who says courting anymore?”

“That’s what I said, so then Mum goes on about how we young’uns don’t date and just fuck ... and, well, you were there for the rest.”

“Ugh, that’s gross,” Daisy says.

“And are you...?” Ryan asks, her eyes glittering as my two sisters stare at me with open curiosity. I cock a brow, wanting her to elaborate before I answer. “*Courting* anyone?”

“I don’t know. Courting means an intention to marry, right? I’m not sure she’s on board with that yet. I’m definitely *fucking* someone. Though I don’t think you three want those details, do you?”

“Nah, I think we’re good,” Bailey agrees. “On that note, because thinking of my mum, dad, or brother getting down and dirty...” She shudders. “Ugh, nope, never mind. I’m going to bed.”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna join you.” Daisy laughs, and they bid their goodbyes, leaving Ryan and me alone in the quiet

kitchen.

As their footsteps echo up the stairs, I stalk towards the door, peeking out and into the lounge where Mum and Dad are distracted with a game of cards. I close it quietly, spinning and leaning my back against the wood.

Ryan saunters towards me, a smug smirk on her lips. She presses her hands to my chest, running her nails over the cotton T-shirt as she lifts up on her tiptoes.

Leaning down, I close the distance, cupping her cheeks and pressing my lips to hers. Ryan chuckles against my mouth, and I fist my hand into her hair, tugging her head back until her lips fall open and I slide my tongue inside, losing myself in her mouth.

My lips move over hers, and her fingers dance over my shirt before moving to the waistband of my jeans. She fiddles with the button, managing to slip her hand inside, and she gasps when I wrap a hand around her throat, dragging my lips from hers and spinning us until her back is flush with the door.

I remove her hand from my trousers and pin it beside her head. Her eyes darken, her pupils dilating with hunger as her chest heaves.

“You’ve been a naughty girl tonight, baby,” I tell her, and she whimpers, digging the nails of her free hand into my shirt. “You didn’t think I’d let you off without a little punishment, did you?”

I stroke my fingers along her throat and down the deep V of her grey sweater dress before slipping my hand beneath the wool and cupping her breast over her bra. She arches her back, pushing against my hand, but I pull away, refusing to give in to her silent demand.

I kiss her again, my hands running all over her body until she's writhing beneath me. "Chase," she breathes, and I laugh against her mouth, dragging her plush bottom lip between my teeth and tugging. She hisses, gritting her teeth.

"It's not nice to tease, is it, baby?"

She shakes her head, her eyes snapping open to meet mine. I press my forehead to hers, breathing in the chocolate on her breath as her lips ghost over mine. I give her a final demanding kiss, swiping my tongue once against hers before pulling away.

I nudge her from the door, peel it open quietly, and turn to her with a wink. "Night, Ry."

I leave the kitchen, whistling as I go, and she hisses expletives behind my back. Peeking my head around the lounge, I say night to my mum and dad before taking the stairs two at a time, pretending I don't hear the pad of Ryan's angry stomp following my every step.

When I reach my room, I tug the door open, grinning broadly as I spin to face the little firecracker glaring daggers at me from the top of the stairs.

“Can I help you?” I ask, my tone sickly sweet. She doesn’t answer, darting her eyes over the hallway before she rushes past me, grabbing my hand and tugging me into the room before slamming the door shut. “You’re being very loud, Ryan. You might just get in trouble.”

“I’m not sure I care,” she breathes, peeling the dress over her head and dropping it to the floor so she’s left standing in front of me in only red lacy lingerie.

She moves her hand to her back, fiddling with the clasp of her bra, and I snap to attention, launching myself at her and hauling her up in my arms.

I toss her on the bed, and she lands with a thud, her tits bouncing gloriously with the movement. “You’re every dream I’ve ever had come to life, Ryan Parker.”

“Do you dream about me often, Chase Brooks?” she quips, her eyes hooding as I reach for the hem of my shirt before tugging it over my head.

“Only every fucking night, baby.”

“Then show me.” I snap my eyes to hers at the command, so similar to the one I uttered to her that night in the hall. “Show me what you dream about, Chase.”

How the fuck am I supposed to say no to that?

I crawl over her, my hands framing her head as I lean down. She winds her fingers into my hair, dragging my face the rest of the way to meet her in a demanding kiss.

Rolling my hips, I rub against her knickers, sliding my tongue into her mouth as she gasps and arches her back to chase my erection.

I drag a hand over her body, peeling the cups away from her breasts before kissing my way down her jaw, her neck, and finally, her chest, pulling a peaked bud into my mouth.

My teeth close around her nipple, tugging it taut, and she hisses, moving to pop the button on my jeans and shove them down over my hips.

She bucks up, pressing her lace-clad pussy to my covered length, and I moan, biting down hard on her nipple before lapping the sting away with my tongue.

She pushes my boxers down, her fingers stroking over my tip before she cups me and guides me towards her. “You’re feeling impatient tonight, baby,” I comment, moving my hand to her centre to push her knickers to one side. “I thought I was meant to be showing you my dreams.”

“You can.” She moans, and I drag my fingers through her pussy lips, gathering her leaking juices before circling her clit. “*Fuck*. You can, but I really need you inside me first.” She guides me to her soaking entrance, teasing us both as she slides my tip up and down before pushing it inside her.

I palm her breast, kneading at the skin as I rock my hip forwards, inching into her so fucking slowly I think I might die. But I can’t bring myself to go faster, either.

I want to explore her body, feel every pulse as her pussy wraps around me, welcoming me inside her. Her eyes flutter closed, and my heart races as her lips fall apart, her chest heaving despite the lack of urgency between us.

It's different. This isn't a raging fire threatening to consume us, like the times we've been together before. It's calmer, like waves lapping gently at the sea while a storm brews offshore.

I rock for a final time, filling her completely, and I realise Ryan is both my calm and the storm. She stokes the fire, bringing me to the edge every time, yet only she can douse the flames.

Her body. Her mouth. Her everything.

Just her.

If there was any doubt in my mind before, this right here has shed it. Ryan is my one. The only person I'll ever want in this world, and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it.

"Ry," I murmur, pressing my forehead to hers as I roll my hips and hear her gasp the moment I hit her G-spot. "Ryan, I..."

Her eyes snap open, swimming with emotion as she curls her hand around my neck, bucking her hips to meet my lazy thrusts. "I know, Chase," she breathes, filling the otherwise quiet space. "I know."

She clenches around me, and I find her clit with my thumb, circling the nub slowly until she's panting, pleading with me. "Chase, I'm going to—" She cries a whimper as I press

against her clit, my teeth closing around the pulse point on her neck. “Fuck, Chase. I need to...”

“Come for me, baby.” I thrust harder, though I keep my movements slow, and she groans, her mouth falling open into an O as her back arches off the bed, her head falls back, and she pulses around me.

Slamming my lips to hers, I silence her scream. All the words neither of us is willing to say in the dark of my bedroom pour into the kiss, and when she bites down on my lip, her eyes fluttering open to land on mine, my own climax takes hold of me, stealing my breath.

I fall onto her, completely spent, and she chuckles into my neck, her arms running up and down my back. Neither of us moves for a long while, and when we do, it’s only to crawl under the covers.

I pull them over us, tucking her into my chest as her fingers dance over the ink tattooed there.

“Chase,” she mutters sleepily a little while later, her eyes shuttering closed as she yawns deeply.

“Yeah, baby?”

She gives me a dopy smile and presses a kiss to my chest before she blows out a soft breath. “Me too.”

Ryan

“TELL ME AGAIN WHY we aren’t just using the sofa beds?”

I prop my hands on my hips and turn to Eli with pursed lips. “Because your daughter asked for a sleepover tonight, so she’s getting a proper sleepover, which means turning the floor into the most comfortable bed she’s ever laid on.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever slept on the floor at a sleepover before.”

“Then you haven’t lived,” I retort, rolling my eyes. I refuse to admit Eli may have a point as I glance at the mess of duvets and pillows piled onto the floor in the lounge.

It’s been a long time since I’ve had a sleepover like this, but I remember when Bailey and I used to in college. We’d always make the living room into one large bed, watch films all night long, eat chocolate and sweets until we felt sick, and then pass out in the early hours. Granted, we were sixteen at the time, but the point still stands.

“I want Gracey to have the best sleepover she’s ever had,” I tell him.

He laughs, hops over the piles of bedding, and throws his arm over my shoulder. “She’s four, Ry. Stick on Moana, give her a bag of popcorn, and let her fall asleep in your lap.”

“I refuse. We’re doing this properly.”

“Why is this so important to you?”

“It’s Christmas.” I shrug. “I missed so much last year because I stayed at home. I don’t want to miss anything this year.”

“Are you ready to talk about it?” he asks, a soft smile on his face.

“Talk about what?”

“Why you didn’t come last year? Bailey said you were busy with work and didn’t want to be far from the office, but I don’t think that’s true.”

“You’re too wise for your own good.” I snort and give him a squeeze before pulling away. “But for this conversation, there would need to be wine, chocolate, and probably a bunch of tissues.”

“Well, I’d offer to sneak away to the pub with you, but I’m pretty sure I’m not the Brooks’ sibling you fancy sneaking around with.” My eyes widen at the insinuation, and I snap my gaze to his face. There’s a smirk sitting on his lips and a too-knowing glint in his eyes. “Your secret is safe with me, Ry.

But if you want it to *stay* a secret, maybe consider buying some earplugs for the rest of us.”

I choke, trying to swallow the growing lump in my throat as my face heats. My mouth opens, but I have no words. This is mortifying. *Let the ground open and swallow me up* mortifying.

“I ... uh—”

“Hey, what’s going on in here?” Bailey asks, rounding the open doorway and popping her head into the lounge.

“Nothing,” Eli says brightly, his voice laced with humour as he stares at me with a smug smile. “Grace asked for a sleepover tonight, so we’re trying to get everything set up. I suggested we just pull out the sofa beds—”

Bailey snorts. “You can’t do that.”

“Exactly what I said,” I croak, forcing a smile onto my face as I stare at my best friend. “We’ve got the duvets out, but Eli is bloody useless.”

“That’s because Eli is basically a grandad these days.”

“Eli is standing right here, you know?” he interjects, but we both ignore him.

“Facts. He got married, had a kid, and forgot what fun is.”

Bailey shudders. “Do you think that’ll be us in five years’ time?”

“God, I hope not,” I tease, grateful the heat is off me. I wink at Eli, who pouts. “We’re too cool to ever become boring.”

“I don’t know, Ry. I don’t think anyone under the age of forty uses the word ‘cool’ anymore,” Eli says, smirking again.

“Okay, that’s enough from you.” Bailey steps into the room, crowding her brother and nudging him out. “Off you go. Chase and Kai are in the yard doing bro things or some shit like that, so go man out with them and leave this to Ry and me.”

“I can see where I’m not wanted,” he says, dropping a kiss on Bailey’s forehead before moving to me. “We’re going to finish that conversation later.” He meets my gaze pointedly, and I sigh but lean up to press a kiss to his cheek.

“I can’t wait,” I deadpan.

“What conversation?” Bailey asks as her brother leaves the room.

I drop to my haunches, grabbing a handful of the bedding before passing some over to Bailey. “We were just talking about work,” I tell her, not really lying because we definitely did talk about my work at some point in that conversation.

“Anything exciting?”

I turn to her, seeing the hopeful glint in her eyes, and I smile. “Nope,” I say, with a playful smile, popping the *p*. Her lips turn down slightly, and she averts her eyes, but I continue. “I did want to talk to you about something, though.”

“Oh?”

“After our conversation last week, I’ve been thinking...”

She finds my gaze, keeping her expression blank, but I see the flicker at the corner of her mouth. “Yes?”

“Well, you did say you still had my room in the flat...”

“Did I?” She shrugs, suppressing her smile. “Must have been a slip of the tongue.”

“Oh, okay.” I sigh and turn to lay out the duvet in my hand. “I guess I need to tell my boss we don’t need to have a chat when I get back in the new year.”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Bailey squeals. “For real, though ... you’re coming back home?”

“I think so,” I tell her. “I obviously have to work out some logistics, like work and speaking to my landlord about breaking my rental agreement, but yeah. I miss home, and I guess I’ve done the spreading my wings thing. I think I’m ready to give that whole settling down thing a go.”

“This is the best birthday slash Christmas gift you could ever give me.”

“So I can return the presents I bought, then?” I chuckle, and she scowls, sending me a playful glare. “I guess not.”



I smile proudly at our handiwork as Grace runs into the room

with a loud squeal. She dives onto the makeshift bed on the floor, giggling as she cuddles the large Santa Squishmallow I made Chase head into town and get, then snuggles under the blankets.

“Looks like her morning trip into town tired her out. It seems grandad duties aren’t needed anymore today,” Martin says with a laugh, leaning against the door frame with his arms folded over his chest.

Out of the Brooks siblings, Chase is the one who most resembles their dad. It kind of makes me excited to see him in a few years with grey streaks peppering his hairline, ’cause there’s no point denying Martin is attractive, with his dark hair and dark eyes. But where Chase is all hard lines, his dad is soft and squishy in the best way.

“I think it might be time for them kids of mine to give me more grandchildren, don’t you think?”

Water spills from my mouth as I choke, and I snap my gaze to his. “What?”

“You okay, Ryan?” Martin laughs, shaking his head.

“Yeah, just went down the wrong pipe,” I croak.

“I see.” He hums, turning back to Grace, who is now napping on the floor. “Susan and I are getting older now, and as retirement comes up, we’re going to need something to fill our time.”

I snort. “Yeah, well, you may be waiting a while. Just mention babies to Bailey and she comes out in hives.”

“And Chase? You talk to him almost as much as you do Bailey. What are his thoughts on children?” Martin asks, and my heart thunders. *What is it with this family today?*

“I don’t know. He’s never mentioned it,” I tell him, trying to derail my mind as it drifts to images of Chase holding a dark-haired baby, rocking them side to side as he whispers in their ear, his tattooed hands cradling them as if they were the most precious thing in the world. I’ve never really thought much about having children, considering my own example of a mother is hardly one to aspire to, but now it’s all I can think about—having a baby with Chase.

I give my head a wobble, nodding along to Martin as he keeps talking, despite the fact I can’t hear a thing he’s saying over the blood rushing my ears.

It’s been just over two weeks since we broached the topic of figuring us out, and now I’m thinking of babies. Christ on a fucking cracker. I need to get a grip. We’ve been on one date. One wonderful date, but still, we’re not even remotely ready to think about the future.

“Lunch is ready,” Susan shouts through the bustle of the cottage.

“I guess that’s our cue,” Martin says, linking my arm through his and tugging me out of the room. I glance back at Grace, snoring softly against the pillows with the Squishmallow hugged tight to her chest, and smile.

The dining room smells incredible when we walk through the door, and I practically salivate at the roast dinner laid out

on the table. Susan hugs me as I pass, whispering a hello before I take my seat.

It's not long before the table fills up. Chase sits at my side, his hand wrapped around my thigh, hidden from view.

"What were you and Dad talking about in the living room?" he asks quietly, rubbing his thumb over my leggings. "Looked rather serious."

"Nothing much. He was just saying how he wants more grandbabies, and that maybe *you* could be the one to give them to him."

"Oh, is that right?" Chase mumbles, his eyes searching my face as I tip my head up.

"Uh-huh."

"What do you think about that?"

"Huh?" I ask, keeping my expression blank despite my burning curiosity.

"Babies, Ry. With me?" He raises a brow, but there's a wistful sheen in his eyes.

"I think you'd be a brilliant dad, Chase," I tell him earnestly. "And I can see it. You running around, chasing after two little terrors."

"You think our kids would be terrors? And we're having two, are we? Interesting."

"I don't think I ever said about them being *my* little terrors, now, did I?" I taunt, wagging my brows before turning back to

the table. Bailey steers the conversation, asking Sarah what movies Grace is currently into for our sleepover tonight.

I feel Chase's breath on my ear as he leans in, and mine stutters, but I refuse to look at him, knowing I'll see those stupid bloody dimples as he speaks. "There isn't another person in the world I'd consider to carry my babies, Ry. So, yes. They'll be yours. Yours and mine—two tiny terrors."

"Rather presumptuous of you. What if I don't want kids?" I ask, keeping my voice low despite the fluttering in my stomach.

I feel his shrug and finally flick my eyes back to his. "Then I keep you all to myself."

"And if I want a whole football team of tiny terrors?"

I narrow my eyes, and he chuckles, drawing the attention of everyone at the table, who all wear varying looks of curiosity on their faces.

I expect Chase to move the conversation along and come up with some excuse as to why he's laughing, but he pays them no mind, his eyes never leaving mine. "You want a football team; I'll give you that. Anything for you, Ry."

Chase

I EXPECT RYAN TO freak at my declaration, but she surprises me, smiling as she turns to pick up her glass of wine.

Eli chuckles at my side, sending me a proud smile as I twist to look at him. “Nailed it, bro,” he tells me, and I shake my head, turning to face the rest of my too-nosy family, who quickly busy themselves with their plates, pretending they weren’t straining to listen to every word of that conversation.

“There’s a new Hallmark film streaming tonight,” Bailey says, speaking to Daisy and Ryan. Ryan tries to keep the suspicious glint from her eyes but fails miserably, not that I can blame her. I half expected Bailey to go off on a huge spiel, but instead, she surprises me, letting whatever thoughts she has running rampant in her head stay right there for now. “We should watch it tonight after Grace falls asleep.”

“You’ll be lucky if that kid falls asleep before dawn,” Eli says, staring pointedly between Ryan and Bailey. “I’ve seen the snacks you two carted back from the store. The amount of sugar you’re about to ply my daughter with is worrying.”

“Just be grateful we don’t have to deal with it,” Sarah says with a laugh, sending a wink at the girls. “And thank them for letting us have a date night for the first time in months.”

He grumbles, pressing a kiss to his wife’s head. “Yes. Thank you three very much. What would a guy ever do without sisters like you?”

“Have fewer grey hairs,” Ryan teases, plopping her straw in her mouth and pulling a face of pure innocence. “In fact, I think you’ve grown some new ones since we’ve been here.”

“You’re such a little shit. I get it now.” He turns to me, narrowing his eyes as I muffle my laughter with my hand.

“You’ll get a hernia if you don’t stop biting at everything these guys bait you with,” Sarah says, running her fingers through his hair. “And I only see a couple of grey hairs, baby, don’t you worry.”

The table falls into a fit of laughter, and the conversation moves along, though everyone glances at Ryan and me periodically, watching and waiting. What they expect to happen, I don’t know. It’s not as if I’m about to throw her down on the old oak and have my wicked way with her. Obviously, I’ll save that until everyone is in bed. I do have some willpower.

“Right, everyone,” Dad says, clearing away his plate and kicking back from the table. “Ladies, disperse. Since Mum cooked and the girls helped, it’s up to us men to get this place straightened out. Off you pop.”

“Thanks, love.” Mum stands, pressing a kiss to Dad’s cheek as she stalks over to the wine cabinet in the corner of the room and pulls the door open. “Red, white, or rosé? What’s your poison, girls?”

“Rosé,” three voices chirp, and the girls stand. They start to leave, Daisy and Bailey linking arms as they trail through the doorway, but Ryan pauses, a pout on her lips as her eyes dart over the room before landing on me.

Her back straightens, and if I didn’t see the way her chest pulled in a shaky breath, I’d wonder if she stopped breathing for a moment. It’s as if she’s warring with herself, her lips moving quickly as she mumbles something under her breath. The room around me blurs as her eyes find mine, and she blows out a slow breath, closing her eyes for a beat.

“Ryan, you okay?” I ask, pushing away from the table to stand. I start a slow walk towards her, stopping when she snaps her eyes open, uttering a *fuck* before closing the distance between us.

“Look up,” she whispers.

I tip my head back, glancing at the green and red hanging from the ceiling as I bark out a laugh. “Mistletoe.”

“Mistletoe,” she echoes quietly, pressing her hands to my shoulder. “This *is* something, Chase.”

“About time you caught on, I’ve been trying to tell—”

“Stop talking.” She presses her lips to mine as her arms wrap around my neck.

Laughter and murmurs sound around us, but I ignore them all, banding my arm around her back as I cup her cheek with my free hand and tip her head back as she plays with the hair on the nape of my neck.

“You owe me fifty quid, Bailey,” Daisy shouts, cutting through the haze that’s fallen around us, and I pull away slowly, dropping a kiss to Ryan’s nose before stepping back. She doesn’t let me go far, curling her arm around my waist and tucking her head against my chest.

“That’s not fair. You can’t make me pay just because Ryan is a bad friend.”

“Wait...” Ryan blurts, guilt washing over her face as she stares at Bailey. “What the hell do you mean I’m a bad friend?”

“I bet Daisy you’d come and talk to me *before* going public with Chase, but no, little miss can’t-keep-her-lips-to-herself just had to snog him after Christmas Eve dinner. I thought we’d be waiting until at least New Year’s Eve before you caved and came to tell me you’re in love with my big brother.”

Ryan sputters, reeling back as her eyes widen. “Wh-I-uh ... you knew?”

“Oh please. I saw you sneaking out of his room two weeks ago, and you were wearing his old Christmas jumper that day you were baking gingerbread. You’re hardly subtle, Ry.”

Daisy laughs. “Not to mention you two stomp around like a herd of elephants.”

“Didn’t you realise when I asked you about grandchildren, Ryan?” Dad interjects, smiling broadly when Ryan snaps her head in his direction. I bite back my laugh, running my thumb up and down her spine.

“I ... wait,” Ryan says, her eyes darting slowly over each member of my family. “So what I’m getting is that apparently every single person in this room figured it out?”

“Will it make you feel better if we say we didn’t?” Kai asks, sidling up beside me to cup a hand over my shoulder. Ryan bobs her head, pouting slightly. “Okay, we didn’t figure it out. You’ve been the paragon of secrecy. What a surprise that you two are doing the whole couple thing. Wow, never would have guessed.”

“Laying it on a bit thick there, dude,” I deadpan, and his grin broadens.

“We figured you’d tell us when you were ready, Ry,” Bailey says finally, a soft smile on her lips as she stares at her best friend. “Though I’m pissed I’m down fifty quid because of it. Reckon you can convince your boyfriend to fork it over instead?”

Ryan snorts, her eyes glazing over as she looks at everyone in the room. “I’ll see what I can do, Bails.”

“Perfect. And don’t think we aren’t going to talk about this. I want details.”

“Really?” I ask, my brow furrowing. “I’m your brother.”

“Ew. Not *those* kinds of details, you perv.”

“Okay,” Mum says, winking at Ryan as she tugs her away from me. “Time for girl talk. Tidy up, and it best be sparkling when I come back in here later.”

“You’ve got it, love,” Dad says, shooing the girls from the room before he turns to me. “Right. Grandchildren, Chase. I want more.”

I laugh, clapping my hand against his shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do, old man.”

“See that you do, son.” He turns to Eli and Kai, holding his hand out to the pair, who grumble under their breaths as they each hand him a twenty. I baulk, snapping my gaze between the three of them, though they only offer me broad grins and shrugs.

“Seriously, Dad? You bet on my relationship? I’m not surprised at these degenerates, but my own father?”

“Oh, your mother and I have been betting on you and Ryan for a long time.” He chuckles, turning away and starting to clear the table without elaborating.

I turn to Eli, raising my brow question but he just shrugs. “You aren’t fucking subtle, bro. but I will say, if you want to marry her in March 2025, I won’t be mad about it.”

Kai barks a laugh, socking Eli’s shoulder. “Don’t fucking tell him. The stubborn bastard would marry her tomorrow if it meant we didn’t see any cash.”

“You realise I don’t get to just drag her to the altar and force her to marry me, right? She actually has to say yes,” I tell them

incredulously. “And that’s assuming I even ask.”

“She’ll say yes,” Dad says without an ounce of hesitation.

“What makes you so sure?” Kai asks.

“Because he gives her something she’s always needed.” Dad smiles when I look at him questioningly. “Home, Chase. You give her a home.”

Ryan

I SIT GINGERLY ON the couch, clenching the stem of my wine glass between my fingers.

It was one thing to finally stop hiding, but another to sit here with Chase's mum and sisters—one of whom happens to be my best friend—each of them eyeing me eagerly as they wait for me to talk.

“I don't really know what you want me to say. It's not that I wanted to lie to you or keep it a secret. I just didn't want you to hate me if it didn't work out...” I frown, darting my gaze to Bailey.

“You needed to know it was real before you risked ruining everything?” she surmises, a sad smile on her face. “Ry, I don't care that you didn't tell me. Though we should talk about why you thought I could ever hate you. What happens between you and Chase is just that—between you and Chase. I could never hate you. You're my best friend. The sister I never wanted, remember?”

“Should I be offended by that comment?” Daisy asks wryly, narrowing her eyes.

“Absolutely you should,” Bailey says. I laugh, and some of the tension holding my muscles taut seeps out of me as I lift my glass to my mouth. I take a generous sip as Bailey turns back to me. “You’re not her, Ryan.”

“Bailey—”

“Nope. Let me say this.” She pulls in a deep breath, moving to the sofa beside me. “We’ve been friends for over thirteen years, and I’ve seen you at your best—*and* your worst.” She laughs, cocking her head knowingly. “But you’ve never been the kind of person to jump into things without thoroughly thinking them through. You don’t make decisions on a whim just because you can. You wouldn’t have even considered anything with Chase unless you were sure there was something important between you.”

I shrug, averting my gaze, but Bailey grabs my hand, squeezing tight. “You’re not your mum, Ry. You’re the best person I’ve ever known, and my brother is damn lucky you’re even giving him the time of day.”

“Bailey...” My vision swims, and I bite my lip, trying to keep the emotions at bay.

“She’s right, you know,” Susan says, pulling our attention. “You’re a remarkable person, Ryan. Even if things don’t work out between you and Chase—and that’s a big if, since we’ve all seen the way he looks at you and has done for the last

decade—you will always be a part of this family. Once you're in, you're in for life.”

“What if I hurt him?”

“Do you love my son, Ryan?” she asks, not malice or excitement in her tone, just a question, and one I don't even need to think about as I bob my head. I won't say the words—it's not fair to him if they hear it first—but the fact remains. “Then I don't think you have anything to worry about.”

“I have a question,” Daisy says, and I nod, waiting for her to continue. “So we all know you slept together two years ago, right?” Bailey and Susan nod, and my eyes grow wide. *Seriously?* “Don't look so shocked, Ryan. Again, you two aren't very subtle, and you might want to take Eli up on his suggestion to buy us all earplugs. You're rather loud.”

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I groan, hiding the deep crimson that flashes over my cheeks.

Is nothing a secret in this family?

“Nope,” Daisy chirps, and I tip my head up, faking a sob. “But, back to my question. Is he why you missed last year? Did something happen between you? Do we need to kick his ass? 'Cause we will, right, Mum?” Susan nods seriously, promising to do damage to her second-born if he hurt me in any way.

I sigh, knowing this conversation was going to come up at some point. “No, Chase didn't do anything. He was—and is—a perfect gentleman.”

“Okay then, that’s good.”

“My mum was meant to come to visit. She promised she’d be in London on the twenty-third and stay right through until New Year, but she bailed last minute ... something about a new boyfriend she couldn’t bear to leave.” With a shrug, I tip the remaining wine down my throat and thrust my now empty glass to Susan, who holds up a bottle, ready to pour. “I didn’t tell you guys, because I was embarrassed. I should have known, really, that she’d let me down, but I guess I wanted to believe. The magic of Christmas and all that.”

“You know what, Ryan,” Susan says, swapping my glass for the bottle instead. “Fuck that bitch.”

“Mum!” Daisy and Bailey shout, eyeing her with wide eyes.

“Oh, please. As if you two weren’t thinking worse.”

“Facts,” Bailey says, clinking her glass to the rim of the bottle in my hand. “So Ryan’s mum is a twat, she’s shagging our brother, and they’re going to get married and have babies. Have we missed anything important?”

“Yeah, the part where marriage and babies were decided,” I deadpan.

“That was decided the minute my husband declared he wanted more grandbabies,” Susan says. “He’s very persuasive when he wants to be, and if I have to guess, it’s not going to take a lot of convincing to get Chase on board.”



My fingers dance over Grace’s hair, massaging gently at the strands as she sleeps against my legs. Bailey hands me another cocktail, one of her own concoctions. and I wince as the bitter taste of liquor hits my tonsils.

The cottage is quiet, save for the soft snores coming from Daisy and Grace and the low hum of adverts playing on the television. Eli and Sarah are still out for dinner, something they do every Christmas Eve, and Chase, Martin and Susan are tucked away in their rooms upstairs.

“Can you believe Christmas is almost over?” Bailey asks, and I snort.

“It’s only Christmas Eve, we still have tomorrow, Bails.”

“I know.” She exhales, her eyes glowing wistfully. “But it just feels like everything is about to change, you know? With you and Chase doing whatever you’re doing, and then Mr Dorsett selling the cottage.”

“Nothing is going to change between *us*, you know that, right?”

“No, I know,” she says, smiling. “But it just feels like the end of an era, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I glance around the lounge, sighing at the memories of this place. “I’m gonna miss this place.”

“Me too.”

“Don’t you dare cry, Bailey Brooks,” I demand, averting my eyes from my best friend’s glistening ones. “I’ve had too much wine to be able to stop myself if you start.”

“I’m not.” She sniffles, and I know it’s a lost cause.

I throw my arms around her, squeezing gently. “I love you, Bails.”

“I love you, too,” she whispers before inhaling a shaky breath.

The door to the lounge creaks opens, and I pull away, holding my breath for a beat to keep the well of emotions stirring inside me from exploding.

“What are you two doing in here?” Sarah asks, tugging her husband into the room behind her.

“Nothing, we were just having a moment,” Bailey says, pushing off the couch before turning to her big brother and his wife. “Did you have a good night?”

“Oh, it was lovely,” Sarah answers, snuggling into Eli’s chest. “But now, we have to do the fun stuff like get that little missus into bed so Santa can smuggle his goodies inside.”

“Do you need any help?” I ask, lifting Grace into my chest so I can stand and carry her over to her dad. He takes her, kissing her head as he tucks her against him.

“Nah, we got it. Plus, I know you two have a Christmas tradition to uphold anyway.” He winks.

Bailey laughs, already moving into the kitchen. “That we do, big brother. Come on, Ry. It’s Christmas Eve, after all, and all this wine won’t drink itself.”

“I guess that’s my cue,” I say, patting Eli on the shoulder as I pass.

“Hey, Ry.”

I press my hand to the doorframe, turning to the wide grin on his face. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” I ask.

“For being you,” he says, his smile never faltering. “There isn’t anyone else that’s better for my brother.”

I hum as my heart races in my chest, beating erratically. “Thanks, Eli.”

Chase

“AREN’T YOU MEANT TO be having a sleepover?” I ask Ryan when she stomps into my bedroom, slamming the door closed behind her.

She slaps at the wall and winces as the room floods with white light. I toss my phone onto the bedside table and sit up as she moves to my drawers, peeling them open one by one before she chirps happily, pulling out one of my black sweaters. “I am. Obviously. With you.”

“Oh, *obviously*.” I hum, fighting my grin as she strips off her jeans and T-shirt and kicks them to the corner of the room. “What happened to girls’ night?”

“We did girls’ night,” she chirps, a bright grin overtaking her face. “It was super fun. But Grace fell asleep, and then Eli got home and decided she *had* to sleep in a real bed, because apparently Santa can’t deliver presents if he can’t get to the Christmas tree...”

“Can’t fault his logic.” I laugh at the scowl she sends me, her nose wrinkling in the most adorable way as her lips purse. “And then what did you do?”

“Drank wine, ate *all* the chocolate, and then Bailey got out the tequila.” She shudders, hugging my jumper to her chest.

“Are you going to put that on?” I ask, gesturing at her lingerie-clad body. She frowns, glancing at the material as if it’s personally offended her. I slide out of bed, closing the short distance between us, and take the jumper from her hands. “Arms up, baby.”

She sighs happily, doing as requested, and lets me slip her arms through the holes before tugging it over her head and down her body, where it stops mid-thigh. She tucks her face into the neck as I slide my hands under the back, reaching for the clip of her bra. “Why do your clothes always smell so much better than mine?”

“I use better detergent.” I press a kiss to her forehead and nudge her in the direction of the en suite. She ambles around, and I leave her to it for a minute, the trickle of the tap filling the otherwise empty room as she brushes her teeth.

“What did you do tonight?” she asks, sauntering back into the room. She fiddles with her hair, grumbling as she tries to wrangle the mess of waves into a bun at the top of her head. I shuck my joggers off, tug my top over my head, and climb back into bed, leaning against the headboard as Ryan comes back into the room.

“I was on Santa duty, wrapping the rest of Eli’s presents while he and Sarah were out so she wouldn’t see them.”

She hums happily. “That’s nice. You’re a good egg, Chase.” I snort, folding my arms over my chest as she slaps her hands through the air, whooping to herself when she finds the light switch.

The light dims, leaving only the soft glow from my bedside lamp.

“Did you know we’re having marriage and getting babies?”

I bite back my laugh, folding my arms over my chest. “How does one have marriage?”

“I dunno.” Ryan spins, stumbling over her feet and bumping into the frame at the foot of my bed. “Fuck’s sake, why would you put that there?” I laugh and peel back the covers so she can crawl into bed. “Your dimples are stupid.”

“And you’re very drunk,” I tell her as she climbs over me, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“I am. But I’m happy.”

“Yeah?” I ask, cupping her cheek before claiming her lips in a soft kiss.

“Yeah.” She hiccups, then kisses me deeply for a beat before flinging herself face down on the mattress. “Your mum is a cool mum. Did you know that? She wasn’t mad at me about keeping you a secret. She even threatened to dismember you if you ever hurt me, so don’t do that, ’kay?”

“I have no plans to hurt you, baby.”

“You promise?” she asks quietly, flipping onto her side.

“I promise. I think I’m going to keep you around for a very long time, Ryan Parker.”

“That sounds nice,” she murmurs, her eyes drooping closed.
“Can you keep me around forever? I think I’d like that.”

Yeah. Forever sounds pretty good. “Anything for you, Ry.”



Heat encases me, my body buzzing to life as a soft mouth closes around me.

Ryan hums, and my eyes snap open as she traces my length, teasing me with her soft tongue. She flicks her eyes to mine, hunger in the depths as she hollows her cheeks, sucking me to the back of her throat.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I groan when she gags around me, my hand moving to grip her head. I find the elastic holding her hair together and tug at it until the strands fall loose. My fingers thread through them, tugging gently as she pulls back, lapping at the precum trickling from my tip before swallowing me back down.

What a fucking way to wake up.

“That’s it, baby,” I say, my eyes shuttering as she continues her ministrations, her moans vibrating along my length and sending shockwaves spearing through my veins. “Such a good girl. Look at how well you take me, Ry. You feel so fucking good.”

She whimpers at the praise, her fist closing around me as she focuses her tongue on my head, lapping, swirling, and nipping until my hips buck, a low groan falling from my mouth. “So fucking close, baby,” I tell her, snapping my gaze up to find her eyes locked on mine.

The sheen of emotions staring back at me is overwhelming, and before I can stop myself, I tug at her shoulders, dragging her over my body until her thighs straddle mine.

I grip the hem of her jumper and peel it lazily over her body, my mouth closing around a nipple as I toss the jumper to the floor. She moans, writhing against me as I swirl my tongue then tug her nipple between my teeth.

Her hand snakes between our bodies, cupping me as she guides me to her entrance. She lowers down slowly, hissing at the stretch as her tight pussy clenches around me. I pepper kisses along her chest and nip at the skin of her neck before finding her lip.

She meets my kiss with urgency, her tongue running along the seam of my lips as she rocks her hips, lowering the final inches. I buck up, driving deeper than should be possible, and she moans into my mouth, hers falling open with a gasp when

I grip her hips, pulling her almost completely free before slamming her back down.

Fisting her hair, I tug her head back, pressing hot kisses to her neck as my free hand slides between us, finding her swollen clit, hot and needy. Circling it with the tip of my finger, I close my teeth around her pulse point, suckling hard enough I'm satisfied it's going to leave a mark.

She rolls her hips, chasing her orgasm as her eyes flutter closed, her mouth falling open on a groan when I hit her G-spot, and she does it over and over again until she's panting, her nails dragging over my back, leaving her own marks behind.

Time seems to slow as we lose ourselves in one another. Breathless moans flood the room with each slap of our hips. When she presses her lips to mine, demanding a kiss that promises to last forever, her pussy pulses, her body shaking with pleasure as her climax overtakes her, and I follow her right over the edge, knowing I'll follow her for the rest of my life if she lets me.

Ryan traces her hands over my chest a little later, following the lines of ink that colour the skin. "Do we have to go downstairs?" she asks.

"I think we do, baby." I cup her jaw, kissing her softly. "Mum would have a coronary if we missed Christmas. Though I could be persuaded. That thing you did with your tongue earlier was particularly thrilling..." She laughs deeply, her head tipping back, and I relish the sound.

“I’m such an idiot,” she murmurs against my mouth.

“Why makes you say that?”

“I wasted so much time.” She exhales slowly, her eyes finding mine. “I shouldn’t have left two years ago.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I quip, patting her arse with my hand. “But you’re here now, and that’s all that matters.”

She smiles, snuggling deeper into me. “Merry Christmas, Chase.”

“Merry Christmas, Ry.”

Epilogue

Ryan

One year later...

“CAN I TAKE THIS thing off?”

Chase chuckles, but he grabs my hand and links our fingers together as he tugs me from the car. I wave my free hand through the air, sighing when I find his solid chest.

“You know,” I breathe, leaning up on my tiptoes until I feel his lips hovering over mine. “If you want to have your wicked way with me blindfolded, all you have to do is ask.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” He steals a kiss, smiling against my lips, and I wish I could see it. “And you can take it off in thirty seconds, so stop whingeing.”

“You’d be whingeing too if you had this thing on for God knows how many hours.”

“You slept for five of those hours, Ry,” he deadpans.

“Well, if you hadn’t kept me up all night, then I might have been better company today.”

“Are you complaining?” he teases, his hand dancing over my hip. I dig my nails into his chest as his fingertips dip beneath the waistband of my leggings, teasing me with a light graze, as he leans into my ear, his breath coasting over the lobe. “Because I’m pretty sure *Don’t stop, Chase. Please. Yes, right there, Chase* meant you rather enjoyed staying up late into the night with me.”

My breath hitches at his husky words, and I whimper as he slips his hand free.

“Now, turn around,” he tells me, grabbing both my hips and spinning me until my back is flush to his chest. “And on the count of three, you can take the blindfold off, okay?”

I nod, anxious butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

“One,” I start.

“Two,” he whispers, his hold on my hips tightening as we both say, “Three.”

Peeling the black material away from my eyes, my mouth gapes at the cottage in front of me. “What did you do?” I ask, my eyes welling up at the sight of the Sold sign anchored into the grass. I spin on my heel, locking my gaze on him. “Did you buy this?”

“We bought it.” He smiles, and my brow furrows.

“What? I don’t—” I gasp when he drops to one knee, taking my hand in his. “Chase...”

“Ryan, I’ve been in love with you for eleven years. Did you know that?” I shake my head, my lip quivering as he smiles that bright smile, showing off those stupid bloody dimples that I’ve grown to love more than life itself. “Yeah, well, it took you a hot minute to catch up, but I fell in love with you when you were eighteen years old. I was stupid and waited for you to get with the picture, when what I should have done was throw you over my shoulder and never let you go.” A tear rolls over my cheeks, and my chest heaves on a sob. “But when you were eighteen, you told me something. That first day we spoke in the kitchen of your uni dorm. Remember?”

“I want to fly,” I whisper, my heart warming at the fact he remembers.

“You deserved to fly, Ry. How could I ever hold you back from that? So I let you go, and I guess the adage is true. If you love something, you set it free. And you flew. You did everything you wanted, all on your own. But then you came back, and I knew I would never let you go again. So, are you ready for this?” he teases, cocking a brow, and I chuckle through my tears.

“Yes. More than ready.”

“Okay then.” He breathes deeply and pulls a black velvet box from his pocket. He flips it open, revealing an oval-cut solitaire nestled on a white-gold band of diamonds. “Fly with me. Let me follow you as you spread your wings and soar. Marry me, Ryan Parker, and I promise we can fly forever.”

I open my mouth, another sob clutching me before I can find the words.

“I swear to God,” a voice calls from behind me, and my mouth gapes at the familiar sound. Chase sighs, grumbling *couldn't just wait a fucking minute* under his breath, and I chuckle, spinning to find Bailey waiting on the top step that leads into the cottage. “If you say no, I’m revoking bestie privileges.”

“I already told you, Bails. You can’t. You’re stuck with me for life.”

“Facts. So do me a favour?” she asks, and I nod, smiling brightly. “Say yes and put that sad sack out of his misery. Then you get to be my sister for real.”

“If that’s what I get out of this, how could I ever say no?” I tease.

“Are you two done?” Chase grumbles, more than tired of our shit. “I’d prefer an answer today...”

“I guess the husband isn’t a bad prize either,” Bailey says, winking at me before she spins around and heads back inside.

“Husband?” I test the word on my tongue, humming happily. “I rather like the sound of that,” I say, turning on my heel until I find Chase. He pushes himself to stand, banding his arms around my back and tugging me against his chest.

“Say yes, Ry.”

“I don’t think you actually asked. It seemed more like a demand,” I tell him, pursing my lips. “Do I have much of a

choice?”

He shakes his head, claiming my lips in a devouring kiss. “Nah. I think I’m going to keep you.” He kisses me deeply, stealing my breath, and I melt against him.

“Does this mean they’re finally going to give me them grandbabies I keep asking for?” Martin asks from somewhere behind us, and despite Chase pulling away with a chuckle, nothing has ever felt righter than this moment right here.



Chase

Two years later...

The fire crackles, echoing through our bedroom as Ryan hops around on one foot, rambling to herself.

My T-shirt swamps her frame, and the new fluffy socks Bailey bought her soften the sounds of her movements. Her hair falls messily over her shoulders, and I can't help but chuckle at the similarity between this moment and Christmas morning four years ago.

"I don't know why you're laughing over there," she grumbles, narrowing her eyes at me as she props her hands on her lush hips. The diamond on her finger glistens under the winter sun peeking through the open curtains, nestled against a thin white-gold band. "We were supposed to be up two hours ago. The turkey should already be in the oven, and I didn't even finish wrapping the presents. *Christ.*"

"It is—"

"If you say it's his bloody birthday," Ryan snaps, and I bite back my answering laugh, "I may actually smother you."

“You’d be lost and miserable without me, baby.”

“I’m not so sure right now,” she utters.

I slide out of bed, closing the distance between us. Cupping her cheeks, I tip her head back, stealing a kiss before pressing my forehead to hers. “Why are you stressing?”

“I just want today to go smoothly.”

“It will.” I thread my fingers through her head, massaging gently at the roots. “Also, if you don’t think Mum was up three hours ago shoving that turkey in the oven, then that brain fog of yours is worse than I give you credit for.”

She wrinkles her nose, pouting. “I know, but I should have set an alarm. And I’m annoyed at myself for forgetting. What kind of person forgets to set an alarm for Christmas Day?”

“The kind whose husband is so attentive to her needs that she forgets all about what day it even is.”

“Stupid bloody husband,” she mumbles, though her lips twitch at the corners, betraying her amusement. She kisses me, exhaling heavily before peeling away from my hold and moving to the door.

“Baby?” I call when she pulls against the handle, already peering out into the hallway.

“Yeah?”

I gesture down to her bare legs, a smirk on my face. “I think you’re forgetting something.”

She grumbles expletives and stomps back across the room to grab the leggings from my outstretched hand. She tugs them on with a huff and shoves her hair back from her face, a scowl on her lips.

“How much longer until I get my brain back properly?” she asks, whimpering softly as her eyes shimmer with emotion.

“You’d have to ask my dad. He’s the one who’s been reading all the baby books.”

“If it wasn’t for that man filling my head constantly with talk of babies, we wouldn’t even be in this position,” she whines, glancing down at her growing belly.

“I’d like to think I had some part in this, you know,” I say, coming up behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist. One of the babies kicks, pressing against my palm, and my hands drift over her waist, chasing the movements of my child.

“Yes, yes,” she huffs, growling under her breath. “You and your super sperm managed to get two stuck up there. But you aren’t the one who has to carry the little terrors while they try to break my ribs.”

“You’re the one who said you wanted a football team.”

“I was joking. You didn’t have to take it seriously.”

“What have I always said, Ry?” I ask.

“Anything for me,” she says, relaxing against me.

“Anything for you.”

She peers up at me, batting her lashes sweetly. “So you’re going to push them out for me when the time comes, yes?”

I snort and kiss her cheek as I breathe her in. “Anything but that.”

The End



Thank you for reading *The Secret Clause*. I hope you loved this festive novella. Keep your eyes peeled in 2024 if you want to see more from the Brooks family...

May your Christmas be merry and your new year bright!

Acknowledgements

To the reader:

Without you, none of this would be possible.

Thank you.

And to me:

Writer's block sucks, but you wrote something, finally.

Yay.

Also By

Braylee University Series

Five Things

Four Rules

Standalones

The Secret Clause

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About the Author

Violet Paine is a contemporary romance author who lives in Derbyshire, England, with her husband, their daughter and fur baby. When she isn't busy trying to make some sense of the millions of characters who take up residence in her mind, you can find her reading fanfiction on her couch, wrapped in her favourite Oodie, with a cup of tea in one hand, and more than likely a very large glass of wine in the other.