



*The*  
**SECRET**  
*of Stars*

**OLIVIA SINCLAIR**

# Contents

[Author's Note](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About](#)

## ***Author's Note***

If you're new to the world of Alpha Corps, ACI is large government contractor. They have one — and only one — client, the Pentagon. While there is an increasingly civilian staff, the bulk of their employees are former active military, many of whom still go out on missions and maintain their branch loyalties and related smack talk. Sala Bay to the south of Seattle was one of the original offices. Demand for ACI's services is high enough they've opened a second office in Washington to the north, closer to the Canadian border.

Get a complete additional Alpha Corps story and an update on Heath and Betsy when you join [my newsletter!](#)

# 1

## *Betsy*

How do you tell your husband in name only that you'd really rather like to remove that qualifier? That you are old enough to know your own mind and no, despite the fourteen-year age gap, he's definitely not too old?

Nevermind, it's probably too late for suggestions anyway because my rideshare is about ten minutes away from 'our house'. I changed my flight at the last minute so I could surprise Heath and spare him a trip to the airport in the middle of his workday. Which he will probably pout about, regardless. It's Christmas break, but I managed to graduate a full semester early so I won't be going back. It remains to be seen how long I'm staying here, though.

I pay the driver and carefully tuck the ends of my long red winter coat so the hem won't drag in the mud by the curb. This is it. Although if I timed this right, Heath will be off at his book club for several hours. I'm not silly enough to think he won't notice I'm here the instant he steps in the door, probably long before. Still, I should have a few hours to get things organized and overthink my plan at least one more time.

I press the keycode into the front door lock and breathe a sigh of relief when it unlocks. Heath *probably* would remember to tell me if he changed the code but... out of sight, out of mind. I give myself a quick minute to appreciate the wreath I made up last year, entirely of weatherproof ornaments in green and pink. I love red but sometimes it's nice to get a slight variation on the theme.

Inside, my room is made up and waiting. There's a silly smile on my face

as I take in the military-precise fold of the sheet over the top edge of the duvet. Heath always goes out of his way to make sure I feel like I have a home to come back to. I'd only like it better if I was dropping my suitcase in the room at the end of the hall. I slip my coat off, laying it on the bed to air dry and head to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

A haphazardly decorated tree in the corner of the living room widens my smile into a grin. I guess the military doesn't train on Christmas tree precision. Either that or Heath ran out of time and said to hell with it, tossing ornaments at it until they stuck. I know perfectly well that the tree is for me. If I told him I had other plans and wasn't coming for the holiday, that area of the living room would hold a stack of romance novels. The same books that are now hurriedly stuffed into the cupboard over the refrigerator because Heath thinks I'm too young to read them.

Honestly, that just makes it more fun to grab the stepstool and pick out my bedtime reading material from his stash. I can't believe he doesn't know I do that. But maybe he's just going for plausible deniability?

I take my tea with me back to my bedroom. I want to get my big reveal set up before he gets back. I unzip my suitcase and take out all the components. There are a lot of things I need to explain to Heath, but they're all sort of circular, chicken and egg things. So I decided to let fate figure that part out. Each confession is carefully contained in a little box I got from the dollar store and all of them are going in the Christmas stocking I embroidered while sitting quietly in my dorm room on Friday nights.

I'm hoping curiosity gets the better of him and he's willing to dive in before Christmas morning. To encourage that, I place a miniature Santa holding the message *Open Now!* right on top. I carefully hang the stocking on the mantel where he can't possibly miss it and then retreat to my bedroom. I want lights out long before he gets back to the house.

Just in case, though, I change into cute pajamas rather than my usual shorts and t-shirt. These aren't overly sexy, but they fit well and have an adorable holly pattern. It's a small but important part in Operation Get Heath to See Me as a Grownup.

I hit the lights and crawl between the tightly tucked sheets. I'm not too surprised to find my ears straining for sounds by the front door instead of drifting off. Eventually, though, my mind shifts to other things and my tired body takes over.

## *Heath*

“Ainsley, how come you’ve never had your story?” North asks out of the blue as we wrap up a rather heated discussion on the latest mafia romance. Half the group thinks it too unrealistic to be of interest and the other half says that’s *why* it’s a good read. So it takes me a minute to switch mental gears. I shrug and send him a small smirk. “Don’t need one?”

He snorts in disbelief. “You’re here. All the married guys are out doing last minute Christmas shopping.”

“Are you seriously saying you’d rather be doing that?” I ask archly. Nobody would. And I’d prefer not to tell the whole world that I am actually married. To my best friend’s little sister, who I promised I would look after if anything happened to him. Unfortunately, it did and since she had just turned eighteen when he was killed, I married her. That way, she has insurance and a college education and a place to call home. But I don’t want that to be a blight on her life, so we tell everyone we’re family and leave it at that.

I’ve already told Betsy that she’s free in all other ways to be a typical college student and young adult. When she finds the guy she wants to marry for real, we’ll sit down and figure out the paperwork. I have to say she didn’t exactly seem thrilled about that. But I put it down to her brother’s death and being suddenly married to a stranger at eighteen. Still, I’ve done my best to make sure she feels like she’s got a home with me. A place to feel safe and not be a perennial guest. Someplace she can always bolt to if life gets hard.

“I’m good, North. Why are you asking? No luck with your love life?”

He blusters and snarls as we put his house back to rights. It was a small group tonight so there aren’t that many chairs to be returned to their original locations. When North finishes stomping around, he finally says quietly, “What if she’s not out there? Anywhere?”

I try to remember the details of his story, but it *has* been a while. “Then you keep looking. There are how many billions of people on this planet, Sam? And I guarantee you haven’t even crossed paths with one percent of them.”

That perks him up. “You’re right. The holidays always bring me down a little.”

“Hey, why don’t you come by my place then on Christmas? It’s just me and Betsy, so I’m sure she’d rather have another ugly face to look at.”

He tilts his head to one side, thinking that over, and then gives a slow

nod. "Betsy is your niece?"

"She's family," I say firmly, not about to be drawn further. North's eyes narrow in suspicion, but of what I have no idea.

"She single?" he asks pointedly.

"Not to you," I retort back just as quickly. He grins and gives me a brief salute as I walk out the door.

## *Heath*

I can feel something different about the house as soon as I pull into the garage. It's not ominous, more anticipatory, still I take extra precautions before entering. Including circling the perimeter after exiting from the garage. Everything is quiet. The curtain in Betsy's room is slightly askew, which clues me in. She must have come back early and not bothered to tell me.

Frowning, I unlock the front door, reminding myself to circle back to the kitchen to close up the garage, although the odds of anyone wanting to steal my trimmer at midnight in December are slim. The air smells different. Slightly floral, but more like wildflowers than roses. Definitely Betsy. I head straight to her room to make sure she's okay and not sobbing over some boy or other. Not that she's ever done that, but I've been braced for it. She doesn't have any remaining relatives so I'm her only bolthole. Which I'm happy to be, she's a sweet girl but I'm ill equipped to offer romantic advice.

I gently press my ear to the door. No sounds of crying. I nudge it open and double check. Her breathing is deep and even causing my shoulders to sag with relief. Whatever it is, I can hear about it over breakfast. Heading to bed, I almost miss the stocking she'd placed on the mantle. We always do presents on Christmas morning so she has days to put anything out. What was on her mind that made her do that first?

Peering at it, I notice the message at the top. So with a frown I assess the contents through the felt, feeling a little silly and reminding me of doing that with far more concentration when I was nine or ten. Whatever is in the stocking appears to be a bunch of the same thing. Or at least the same size



and hardness. Still, I'm unclear if 'now' means now or some now in the future, so I leave it where it is. Another thing we can discuss over breakfast.

Stripping off in the bathroom for a quick shower before bed, I notice my scars in a new way. Not sure why. Maybe it was North's questions about why I'm still single — well, as far as he knows, anyway. I certainly wasn't sacrificing anything by shielding Betsy with my last name. I'm lucky to have all my parts, so you won't catch me whining. But nobody would pick my lower half for any of those steamy book covers.

Puckered red skin and thin white scars spread from my waist to my knees. I don't even remember why the other sections of me were spared. Must have been something I was holding or the guy in front of me. The blast is a blank but I read enough of the incident report to know I was the lucky one. But my girlfriend at the time didn't see it that way — good riddance, really. And I find it's easier to get off with my hand in the shower than face that look of disgust on another woman's face. I ignore the flash of Betsy's dimples in my mind's eye. She's never going to see any of this.

Betsy is still asleep when I get up to make coffee in the morning. I remember she's here just in time and slip on long pants instead of my usual boxers before sleepwalking to the kitchen. It's Saturday so technically I could sleep in, but I'm beyond curious as to why she arrived early and I've got grocery shopping to do now that North is coming to dinner too.

I'm staring at the coffee maker contemplating actually making a list when two slim arms wrap around my middle and squeeze.

"Morning, Bets," I say softly.

"How'd you know it was me?" She gives me a playful pout after walking in front of me and helping herself to the first cup of coffee.

"Who else would it be?" I respond dryly.

"I dunno. Your sexy hookup you found in the romance aisle at the indie bookstore?" she offers cheekily.

"Bets," I warn her before she gets started.

She frowns and flicks her long, black hair over her shoulders. My fingers itch to subdue her riotous curls. "You'd tell me if you were involved with anyone, right, Heath?"

I nod cautiously. "Not happening, sweetness. Now, you ready to confess what brought you home two days early? Something wrong at school?"

She shakes her head, her curls flying, partially obscuring her smirk. "Nope. And you'd have more of a clue if you'd opened your stocking last

night.”

Shrugging, I eye her from head to toe. Her fuzzy sleepwear shows off more of her figure than it ought to be able to.

“Why don’t you just tell me now?”

“Nope. Let’s go out for pancakes, and then you can open it when we get back. I’ll answer any questions then,” she amends quietly, suddenly looking nervous.

“You don’t want to take it with us?”

“Hell, no!” Her eyes widen in panic.

“Well, go get dressed then. I’m old and impatient,” I remind her, not surprised when she rolls her eyes dramatically.

## *Betsy*

I’m freaking about to lose my nerve. Except I can’t because I *need* to know. I just wish I could foresee Heath’s reaction without Heath actually having to know anything about it. I barely taste my pancakes, even though I’ve been looking forward to these very ones for months. Heath keeps eyeing me speculatively between bites and it’s making my stomach flip over. I know he doesn’t think of me as anything but his best friend’s baby sister. Now. What if I can’t change his mind?

The drive home is quiet. My left knee bounces with nerves, but I keep my eyes trained on the neighborhood Christmas decorations. It all looks pretty much the same as last year, which has a certain charm. Heath purses his lips as we step inside the house. He reaches a long arm over my shoulder and snags the stocking. “Here or in the kitchen?” he asks abruptly.

I ponder that. The kitchen feels more like neutral territory, but the living room is cozier, more intimate. “Kitchen,” I finally sigh. “We might need the table for the diagram.”

His lips twitch. “There’s a diagram?”

“Only if you’re going to be obstinate about things,” I warn, leading the way into the kitchen.

Heath is still grinning when he sits down and lays the stocking on the immaculate surface. He pulls the first brightly colored box out and eyes me quizzically. “Am I supposed to just start opening? No preamble or instructions?”

I sigh and rest my chin on my folded hands. “Just get on with it, Ainsley.”

He does. Quietly and without reaction so I don’t even know which message he opened first because he sets it aside face down and reaches for another box. This time, his eyebrows go up and he stares at me briefly. Was that the one where I informed him I was still a virgin, or the one where I told him I was clueless about relationships and seduction?

“Betsy...” he sighs with exasperation on the third.

“Just keep going before you say anything. Please.” I hate the anxiety bleeding into my voice.

When he’s opened them all and the six messages are spread out on the table, he flips them all over, surveying the collection with a furrowed brow. “Well, I can see why you might need a diagram,” he says cautiously.

I wait, my fingers clenched together.

“Betsy, sweetheart...”

My heart sinks. He doesn’t want me.

“Baby, you don’t know what you’re asking here,” he finally says with regret.

“What do you mean?”

He hesitates. “Ten years ago I was injured in a roadside blast. Every inch of my front from the waist to the top of my boots was hit by flying glass, Bets. *Every* inch.”

He waits for me to catch on. But I’m still confused. “Are you trying to tell me you’re missing something you think is vital?” I finally ask, my brow furrowed. Because Heath is Heath and I want him just as he is.

“No... nothing’s missing but...”

“But?” Eventually I have to prompt him if I want an answer.

“Never thought I’d be attempting to explain this to a virgin,” he mutters under his breath. That makes me grin in a sort of dark humor kind of way.

“The scars aren’t exactly pretty. And where my skin... healed without them, there’s still nerve damage, Bets. Things... take longer than they did when I was twenty.”

“Okay, so?”

He rolls his eyes. “You should find someone closer to your own age, Bets. Someone that can... I don’t know how to say this gently. Comes with all the factory presets, I guess.”

That makes me giggle. “Heath, I can buy that on the internet. All the settings a girl could ever want. What I want to know is, can I convince you to

give us a chance? And if that's a yes or a maybe, how do I go about it? I already know your largest sexual organ is completely undamaged, so I'm really not worried about the rest of it."

That stumps him. He stares at me in shock or disbelief.

Finally, I give a teasing sigh of disappointment. "Your brain, Heath. Where there's a will, there's a way and other similar shit."

His jaw tenses while he studies me. "This is a lot for so early on a Saturday morning," he finally says slowly.

I nod. "I couldn't come up with a way to ease into it," I finally confess.

Heath's lips twitch. "No, I can see how that would be difficult. Any more surprises?"

I shake my head mutely, still not clear about how he's feeling about my confessions.

## *Heath*

“Let’s put this away for a few days and talk about it after Christmas,” I suggest gently to Betsy, knowing it’s not the immediate happy ending she was hoping for. Her mouth opens to protest, but then she shuts it abruptly and gives me a jerky, reluctant nod. I stand up ready to get going with the chores of the day, but she looks lost and lonely sitting there with her chin up. I can’t resist pulling her into my arms for a quick hug.

The last thing I ever want to do is hurt Betsy. So I can’t bring myself to outright reject her, even if I know that’s probably what I should be doing instead of stringing this along. But I doubt very much that the reality of me resembles what she’s come up with in her imagination. Maybe if I give her a tiny taste, she’ll come to the same conclusion on her own.

Betsy softens against me, letting out this cute kitten sigh when I rest my chin on the top of her head. Her arms tighten around my waist, making me conscious of her sweet curves pressing into my chest. Something I’ve really no business noticing, even if we are technically married. I pull back slightly. “Come on, baby. The grocery store awaits. I’ll let you push the cart.”

No surprise, she grimaces with a small smile. “Gee, thanks.”

I take a minute to collect her project from the table and take all the pieces back to my room. It’s not like I’m going to forget her words anytime soon, but I might need to refer to something later. Betsy’s eyes widen slightly as I slide everything into the stocking, but she doesn’t say anything. Instead, stepping into the entry to put on her coat.

“I forgot to tell you North is coming for Christmas dinner,” I tell her

abruptly later as I hand her the Brussels sprouts or at least attempt to. She hates the things which may be why she's suddenly holding her hands behind her back.

"Oh? Okay. Does he know...?" Her lips turn down slightly at the corners.

I shake my head. "No, just that we're family. I did tell him you were off limits," I confess.

Betsy brightens at that until I remind her, "He's my age, baby."

She rolls her eyes and leans in to whisper in my ear. "You see, the guy over there stacking eggplants like they're bricks?"

I spot the glowering kid in a store apron she's referring to and nod slightly.

"He's my age and if he handles produce like that, he has no clue about women." She turns away and delicately inspects the persimmons, her finger tracing the curves of the fruit. I frown, knowing she's teasing me, but I take her point. No way in hell would I let an idiot like him take her out. Which sounds weird even in my own head. I'm not her father. Just her... protector? Stand-in, older brother?

I'm muttering to myself as we leave the produce aisle for the dairy section. Betsy scurries to keep up with me. "Where's the fire, Heath?"

I sigh and focus on the task at hand. So we can finish and join the mile long queue for the checkout. I thought being out in public would get everything back to normal. But instead I'm eyeballing my fellow shoppers to see who's got their eye on Betsy's rosy cheeks, or worse, the curve of her ass in jeans that look practically painted on. So far, the only offender is... me.

## *Betsy*

I'm pretty sure Heath isn't completely immune to me. He's growly because he's clearly not happy about it. And I don't want to demean whatever hangups he's got about his body. But honestly, I don't care. I'd take him forever without having sex. Or at least not the standard kind. I have faith that the man can get creative if he wants to. It's the desire that's in question, not the follow-through.

But I'm not sure of how to encourage that thought process without derailing everything completely. I don't think I'm the type that could carry off the bare-under-the-trench-coat variety of seduction. I mean, my name is

Betsy. Which I love, by the way. But people tend to remark that either their great-grandmother or worse, their great-grandma's cow shared the same name. It's weird how many people know the names of their relatives' cows.

Besides, I don't think that kind of thing would work on Heath, anyway. He's an easy-going guy, but he keeps the heavy stuff locked away deep. And I know he has that side of him because I caught a glimpse when my brother was killed and Heath came for me. I could and did say a polite no thanks to his offer of help. But it was like he didn't hear it. He was going to make sure I was protected and had everything I needed. The determination shone out of his dark green eyes and before I knew it, we were married and he was helping me fill out college forms. He even did all the paperwork to change my name because my brother's death was newsworthy and Heath didn't want any reporters tracking me down. Even then, I kind of hoped that was a sign we could eventually move into a deeper phase of our relationship.

I also recognized that not only was Heath grieving, but that he would hate himself for taking that out between the thighs of an eighteen-year-old. So I held back and finished school as fast as I could. I'm twenty-one now and we've both come to terms with the loss of my brother, at least as much as anyone ever can. Dillon would want a guy like Heath for me. Oh, he'd grumble about it, much the way Heath is doing right now. But deep down my older brother knew Heath was a great guy, that's why he asked him to look after me.

Biting my lip as we unpack the groceries, I consider my next move. I tease Heath a little by pretending I'm going to put the box of crackers in the cupboard over the refrigerator. He frowns and takes them from me, sliding them into a bottom drawer. "I can use the stepstool, you know?" I do love poking at Heath.

"Why bother?" he asks rather absentmindedly, having already moved on to rearranging the contents of the fridge to hold the turkey. Even with three people, we don't need a thirty-pound turkey. It must be a guy thing. Always going for size.

"Well, if you feel like that, let's take your books down so I don't have to make such an effort to borrow one," I suggest with a smirk.

Heath gapes at me. God, did he really not know? "Betsy, you really shouldn't be reading..."

I cut him off. "I'm twenty-one! But I've yet to see anything that scary up there."

“They’ll give you the wrong idea...”

I press my fingers to his lips, not able to contain my eye roll. “Like what, Heath? Do you think I’ll suddenly believe that you’re bound and determined to bend me over the counter right here so you can breed me? Fill me up so full of cum that I can’t help but get pregnant from the very first time?” I’m borrowing heavily from the book I read last time I was here. Heath swallows reflexively, his fists clenching around the bag of lemons.

Then abruptly he drops them on the counter and yanks me up tight against him. His big hands hold my upper arms firmly while he glares at me. “Maybe I need to pick out your next read then, if you’re so grown up. There’s one up there about a bratty girl that gets spanked every time she disobeys. I’m starting to see the merits of that story now.”

His lips are on mine before I can sass him back with a, “Yes, please!” Instead, I respond with a little squeak of excitement. I don’t care that he’s a tiny bit angry, he’s feeling something and kissing me. It’s progress. Plus, hearing dirty words from his mouth in his rich, light drawl has me going boneless with delight.

And then again, because while I can’t reach my arms up to bring him closer, I feel his growing erection against my stomach. I thought he said...

He pulls away abruptly, swiping his hand over his face. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Betsy.”

“I’m not,” I inform him cheekily. “Can I have another?”

“No.” He drops a patronizing kiss on my forehead, anyway.

“Then may I have that book?” I ask him archly. Heath stares at me like I’ve grown two heads. “You know, the one with the spanking? Maybe it will give me *ideas*.” I waggle my eyebrows at him suggestively.

Heath’s eyes widen, then finally he sighs. He rifles through the upper cabinet for a minute and then hands me a slim volume with a simple cover. “Go. Before I do something, we’ll both regret.” He pushes me out of the kitchen. I pretend to hang my head in shame, but really, I’m thrilled.

Of course, now I’ll have to discover his new hiding place because I’m positive he’s about to move his book stash somewhere he thinks I won’t find it. Probably in his room. I’ve never snooped in there, but surely, if he’s watching me do it, it’s not an invasion of privacy? I’ll put that on the agenda for tomorrow...



## *Heath*

“You’re fooling nobody but yourself,” I mutter to my scarred reflection in the mirror. More than a little surprised to be back here so soon, assessing my body like an image-obsessed teenager. My hand strokes my cock to the memory of Betsy asking if I wanted to breed her. I hadn’t until she said it. Now it’s all I can think about.

As my cock lengthens, the scars on my thighs feel like mountain ranges against the back of my hand. My brain knows they aren’t that severe. I didn’t even spend a week in the hospital. They stitched me up and then had me come in twice a week as an outpatient. Surface damage, you might say, except for those nerve endings. I wasn’t lying about that. And it shocked me probably more than Betsy to have such a fast and hard response to her teasing. Still not going there.

My cum sprays into the sink in long ropes as I relive the sweet taste of Betsy’s lips. Her soft squeak of submission right before I came to my senses. I rinse the basin. I’m simply off track because I wasn’t expecting Betsy to throw so much at me this morning. Once I’ve processed that and found a way to let her down gently, things will get back to normal.

I brush my teeth and, because Betsy is now a completely unpredictable quantity, slip on long pants before sliding into bed. Reluctantly, I pick up the book for the next IPDIESAC meeting, but I can’t concentrate. I’m too busy thinking about my girl reading the smutty book I gave her with the intent of shocking her into good behavior.

I spend the night restlessly — periodically waking and wondering if I

should be handling Betsy in a completely different fashion. Go in and take that book back, for instance.

In the morning, I'm convinced I was worried about nothing. Betsy is back to her usual cheerful self and doesn't say a word about books or feelings when I set a bowl of oatmeal down in front of her.

"Oh, going fancy I see," she teases me with a warm smile since I went out of my way to add dried apple chunks and cinnamon.

"It *is* Christmas," I point out.

She nods cheerfully, her mouth already closing around the spoon. Time stills while I focus on those soft lips as she slowly slides the utensil away. When I finally break my gaze, her eyes are laughing at me. They're a little too knowing for a woman as young and innocent as she is. She says nothing, but her smirk is more than enough. My very own untouched wife is attempting to seduce me. I'm torn between being scared as fuck and flattered beyond belief.

"So what's on the agenda for the day, boss?" she asks cheerfully as she carries her empty bowl to the sink.

I blink, having completely lost my sense of time and place while panicking about relationships. "I thought we'd get some of the cooking out of the way this morning and then drive around for the lights like always," I say slowly, wondering if she's going to attempt a break with tradition. It might only be a few years old, but both things I introduced our first Christmas together as a way to make things more normal for her. It would have been easier to go to a restaurant or buy a pre-packaged meal, but that would have had Betsy hiding in her room, afraid to make a mess in her new home where she barely ever stayed. Watching me fail through recipes kept her laughing and in the kitchen. We cook, that's it.

"What are you attempting this year?" Her eyes widen in anticipation.

"Orange rolls for breakfast, and I thought we'd branch out to a French fruit tart for dessert."

Betsy bites her lip, her eyes twinkling. "You're a brave man, Heath," she says solemnly, like I'm about to head out on a suicide mission to capture enemy territory.

"Brat." I swat her flannel-covered rear gently like I have a hundred times before. But this time she stills.

"Heath? Do you really only think of me as a kid?" Her voice is strong, but her eyes are anxious. She's not asking it with defensiveness, like she's

ready to argue for her place at the adult table. She's genuinely worried that I only see her as the baby sister of my best friend and that won't ever change.

But something has shifted. I groan as I pull her to me and seal my mouth over hers. Giving into the temptation that's been tugging at me since last night.

When her mouth finally opens to the insistent press of my tongue against her lips, I lose all conscious thought. I dive in. She tastes of cinnamon and sweetness. I crave more, so I take it. It's only when her fingers clutching at my shoulders spasm that I pull back to let her breathe. Her mouth stays open, her small tongue running laps over her lips, her eyes dazed with awareness and confusion.

"No," I answer her simply and slide her gently to the side so I can open the refrigerator.

## *Betsy*

*He's new to this*, I remind myself as I take a shaky seat on one of the bar stools by the kitchen island. *But he's not running away*. That describes my relationship with Heath to a T. Ever since he showed up at my parents' house six months after my folks were killed in a car accident and a week after I lost my brother on some distant battlefield. My world was shattered and Heath certainly hadn't expected to have a teenager to look after. Even if I was legally an adult. We all know I wasn't ready to take the world on all by myself. He didn't know what he was doing, but he didn't run away and he didn't pretend to have all the answers, either.

Anyone would have fallen in love with him. I'm just the lucky girl that got to see him step up to my mess first hand. I knew I wanted to be with him since our first Christmas together. I also knew it was too soon. For both of us. But I had no idea he could kiss like that.

Heath shoots me a few concerned glances as he lays out ingredients on the counter. Sliding the open cook book in front of me before slinging a Santa-themed apron over his head. It's my job to read the recipe. In the beginning, it was all I could handle and I'm pretty sure I messed it up more than I got it right, but now it just feels right. Heath pours me another cup of coffee and we're off.

"Grate the rind of three oranges into a small bowl," I read off and snicker

while Heath frowns at his industrial-sized grater for cheese. “I think they mean the tiny gauge one, Heath. Look in the back of the drawer.”

He does and pulls out the smaller grater with a triumphant wave before casting a questioning glance my way. “How did you know it was in there?”

“Same way I knew about your kitchen book stash. I looked.” I shrug with a small smirk before daring it all. “And later today, when we’re done here, I’d like to see what’s in your other drawers. With you there, of course.” I wait breathlessly for his reaction.

Heath stills at the sink, his back to me. He turns and scans my face, his expression tight. “Are you sure you want to rock this boat, Bets? You’re going to end up disappointed. And I’m worried you’ll get hurt because of it.”

I shake my head at his stubbornness. “I’m sure that I won’t. And yes I do. Even more now that I know you can kiss.” I grin at him, practically daring him to do it again. But he’s on to me and simply pats his oranges dry with a paper towel and a frown.

Might as well let him get on with cooking. I’ve planted the seed. I think I have his permission to rifle through his sock drawer this evening. I’ll know when we get there because I definitely want him watching me do it. I might have questions, you know?

“So I’ve been thinking that after the holidays I should see if ACI has any openings. What do you think?”

Heath’s mouth turns down even further, which I wasn’t expecting. “I like the idea of being able to check in on you...” he says slowly while I roll my eyes. “But I don’t want that horde of love-sick loons thinking you’re free and available.”

The tangy scent of citrus fills the air as Heath grates slowly. I hold my breath while I turn over his words. He doesn’t want them to think I’m available because I’m not? Or...

“Okay, what’s next?” Heath interrupts my reverie and I hurriedly glance down at the cookbook.

“Um, then juice two of them.”

“Why not all three? What about this one?” He holds up a bald orange.

I shrug. “Juice it separately and give it to me? I’ll drink it.”

He nods and proceeds to do just that. I’m back to wondering if I dare ever ask him to put a ring on it. I’ll let him bake in peace for now...

## *Heath*

Why the hell did I ever agree to this? Bets is humming with delight as she goes through my room like a forensic specialist finally allowed on scene. There's Christmas music playing softly in the living room and she keeps bending over. Her fuckingly perfect ass going high in the air and *twitching*.

I bite back another groan because cluing her in to my reaction will only encourage her. She bounces upright with glee, holding out a pair of boxers I'd forgotten I even had. They're bright red and decorated with cacti wearing Santa hats.

Betsy turns to me with both eyebrows up, her entire face smiling. I shake my head. "Gag gift from the study group Christmas party a few years ago."

"And you don't wear them?"

"Hell, no."

"Then can I have them?"

Reluctantly, I nod. She's not wanting to parade around here in them, is she? Or worse, the co-ed dorms? Wait, she's not going back there. She's done. I breathe out a sigh of relief.

Betsy folds them neatly and places the garish underwear on the top of my dresser before returning to her investigations.

"What on earth are you even looking for, Bets?" I finally ask cautiously.

She shrugs without turning around. "You," she says simply, leaving me in the dark.

"When was the last time you wore this?" she asks ten minutes later, holding out the sleeve of my dress uniform hanging in the depths of the

closet.

“Um, not since I got out, I don’t think. That was five years ago.”

“I’ll bet you look sexy in that.” She’s turned back into the closet visually searching the upper shelves while my jaw drops. I don’t know what to do with this new Betsy. I’m even less sure what I want to do with her. Except fuck that ass.

I get up from the bed where I’ve been lounging, trying to stay out of her way. Picking her up by the waist, I inform her. “You’ve got five more minutes, then I won’t be responsible for the consequences.”

“What do you mean?” she asks absently while pushing boxes to one side to see what’s behind.

“I mean, you’re too young to be flashing that ass in a man’s face like that,” I growl.

She stills in my arms. “You can put me down now, Heath,” she finally says quietly.

I set her on her feet and turn her towards me even as she attempts to step away. She keeps her gaze fixed on the doorway, her cheeks pink. I’ve burst her happy bubble and now I’m kicking myself. I tug her closer.

“Bets...”

She jerks her chin away, and I swear I see tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. I sigh again. Before I can analyze the consequences, I pick her up again and carry her into my bathroom. Setting her on the counter, I look her in the eyes. “Sit. Stay.”

That gets me an eye roll and a small twitch of the lips, but she’s still leaning away from me. Knowing I’ll regret this, I pull my gray sweats down with unnecessary force. Betsy’s eyes widen. I wait for the look of horror to sweep her face, but instead she licks her lips.

“Can you pull those down too, please?” she asks in a whisper, her voice slightly husky. I glance down and realize she means the dark boxers barely containing my throbbing erection.

“Bets...”

She shakes her head. “Now, Heath. You’ve never been one to run from an honest conversation and this is bothering you, so show me.”

Reluctantly, I slide my fingers under the elastic and tug them down below my knees. Baring myself to her curious gaze, I feel like an old fool.

Without a sound, Betsy disobeys orders and slides off the vanity counter and onto her knees. She reaches out a hand.

The delicate touch of her small fingers dancing over my thighs and cradling my cock like it's fine china and might break has me breathing through my nose so as not to lose control.

## *Betsy*

It sort of goes without saying that I've never been this close to a real, live naked man before. I would really like to embrace the opportunity by indulging my curiosity. But every muscle in Heath's strong thighs is tense. I'm not sure if that's to keep from grabbing me or running away.

I have a brief window here to convince him. So as I gently cup his balls, I mention casually. "You know, my mom always said that if you leave your car in the garage and never take it out on the road, it won't get a single scratch on it. But isn't it better to go out and see the world?"

I kiss his left thigh on a particularly bumpy patch of skin. Heath goes suddenly still. I glance up. His gaze has filled with sadness and concern. Rising to my feet, I lean up to kiss his cheek. "It's okay, Heath. They were killed by a drunk driver, not from living their lives. I miss them, of course I do. But I'm past thinking they should have stayed home instead of going to the grocery store."

His eyes search my face before he breathes out stiffly. He pushes me back gently, then bends over and pulls up his pants. This is my sad face.

"But you, um..." I bite my lip, not sure how specific to be in my observation.

Heath nods stiffly. "And I will take care of that when you go back to your room to seriously think things over. You're a sweet girl, Betsy, but do you really want to live out your life with that?" He gestures toward his groin, making me frown. Didn't I just say as much? I scan his face, looking for any hint of my feeling for him being mirrored back at me. But all I see is concern and frustration.

I nod silently and turn away. I have some thinking to do, but it's not about his scars. Or at least not the physical ones...

The kitchen is mostly cleaned up, but I do the final scrubbing down of counters and check all the locks. I know perfectly well Heath will eventually emerge from his room and do all this over again, but this way he won't have anything to frown over.

Then I retreat to my bathroom and scrub my face and brush my teeth. I can feel the unwelcome truth poking me in the ribs, but I'm holding it off until I'm under the covers in the dark.

Once there, with my pillows punched and folded under my head, I take each thing I learned out and examine it. I could probably get Heath to take my virginity. And he would hate himself in the morning. Even if we are married.

And what I realize that hurts the most is if I move out — get my own apartment — Heath would not ask me out on a date. Oh, he'd swing by to make sure the locks were good and I was eating properly. The man has an inspection sheet for his vegetable drawer. But he wouldn't be coming over in hopes of kissing me or staying the night. The simple truth? Heath loves me, but he's not *in* love with me. And while I could attempt to force it, I would always know his heart wasn't really in it.

The tears start leaking at the sadness of it all. Because I know Heath isn't open to anyone else either. A part of me is glad I won't have to see him with another woman, but most of me is sad. Because what kind of life is that?

I'm snuffling into my pillow to muffle the sound when there's a heavy sigh in my ear and the mattress dips. The next thing I'm aware of is Heath pulling me into his arms and murmuring into my hair, "Why are we crying, baby?"



## 6

### *Heath*

Betsy stiffens in my arms and sucks in a ragged breath.

“You know,” I say thoughtfully into the dark, “I always half expected this, to find you in here one day crying over some boy and to not know what to do to fix things for you.”

She stays silent, but invisible question marks are practically flying off of her.

“Except that never really happened, did it, Bets? And if I had to hazard a guess and risk my ego in the attempt, you were crying over me. Isn’t that right, baby?” I rub my hand slowly down her arm. Her breathing is shallow and hesitant, but she’s no longer crying. “And I do know how to fix it, in the short term. But what if I break both of us in the process?”

Bets exhales with a shuddering sigh. “It’s okay, Heath. I was crying as part of coming to terms with the fact that you aren’t in love with me. And won’t be. I don’t need you to try to force it. I’ll find a little place of my own after the holidays and then we can get back to normal. Friends. Okay?”

Her words are a bit strained at the end, but I realize the simple truth in them. She’d rather let me go than not have me fully invested. It’s incredibly mature and generous of her and makes me want to punch walls.

“No.”

She sits up and turns on the light, frowning down at me as I rest my weight back on my elbows. “No?” Her brow furrows in confusion.

I shake my head. “No, Bets. You’ve already said the words so you can’t take them back.”

Betsy frowns, her naturally plump pink lips parting with a slight huff. “What does that even mean?”

I sit up so I can take one of her hands in mine. “It means, baby, that you have until bedtime on Christmas Day to come to terms with being claimed by an old, scarred curmudgeon. Because that’s exactly what’s going to happen.”

She blinks at me slowly, then a tiny smirk pulls at the corner of her mouth. “Just to clarify, we are talking about you?”

I growl and reach one hand for her most ticklish spot just above the waist. My other arm reaches around to both brace her from falling and prevent her escape. Bets falls against my chest, laughing.

When her breathing returns to normal she says hesitantly, “Heath? I really need a few more words here. What’s going through your mind?”

I reach over her to turn off the light again, then snuggle her against me. “The thing is, Bets, in an odd way, I meant every word of those vows we spoke in front of a judge. It’s true I didn’t see you as a grownup, but you were barely one then. And then you had to go and mention breeding you bent over the kitchen counter.” I hesitate to take things further.

Betsy doesn’t. After a shocked moment of silence, her voice comes out with a subtle purr. “Did that turn you on, Heath? Do you want to put a baby in me so everyone knows I’ve been pumped full of your cum?”

“Brat,” I grumble, giving her flannel-covered rear a gentle swat. “Yes. But not tonight. Now go to sleep before I change my mind.”

She gives a soft, watery giggle before snuggling tighter into my embrace. I drop a quick kiss on her curls and pull her even tighter. I no longer have it in me to push her away, even for her own good.

## ***Betsy***

If it weren’t for Heath’s green eyes watching me with gentle tenderness I’d have dismissed last night as a bittersweet dream. Instead, I’m staring back at him, hoping against hope that he doesn’t take his words back in the cold light of day.

Finally he sighs. “Betsy, baby...”

“You didn’t mean it, did you?” I inquire sadly. But to my surprise Heath growls and rolls me under him.

“I did mean it, and we need to do something about your lack of trust.”

I squeak in protest, but he probably interprets that as objecting to his fingers tugging at my pajamas.

“How do you even get into these things?” he mutters in bewilderment.

“There’s a zipper, right here.” I guide his bigger hand to the metal ring currently positioned under my chin. Then gulp as he slowly slides it down to my navel. The cool air of the room followed by the heat of his palm as it glides over my belly makes me whimper.

“Mine now, Bets. And you need to know that I always take care of what’s mine. Trust me?”

I nod hesitantly. He always has taken care of me. Ever since he appeared in my life amidst the tragedy.

Heath shakes his head. “Not good enough, baby. Let’s see if we can improve on that answer.”

He doesn’t wait for my response. Instead, his thick fingers delve deep under the flannel of my pajamas. Seeking and finding my already slick folds, he nudges one knuckle against my entrance. Not nearly close enough. I squirm under him, trying to bridge the gap. Heath growls and pulls his hand back. Except it’s trapped in the crotch of my pajamas. I smirk up at him.

“Stay still, Bets. Show me that you trust me to take care of you.” His words click into place. I nod and widen the gap between my thighs. In theory, giving him better access but also literally forcing his hand as the soft fabric goes taunt.

It’s all I can do not to reach down and grab his wrist so I can grind against his criminally slow fingers. But I promised. So I grit my teeth and catalog each new sensation as Heath slides one thick finger into me. And I watch his eyes.

They’re solemn, those eyes of his as they watch me in turn. I smile suddenly and arch up to kiss his nose. He blinks. “What are you plotting, Betsy?” he asks gruffly.

“No plot. I love you, Heath. Just as you are. Even if you are slower than a turtle on a cold day.”

He snorts a surprised laugh and adds a second finger. I gasp a little as he hits a sweet spot. One that has my thighs clenching to hold his hand in place. He gives me a knowing look. “Trust, remember, baby?”

I nod, finding it hard to keep my eyelids open as he glides back and forth over that most delicious set of nerve endings. When it all builds to a climax, he pulls his hand away and hauls me against him. Kissing me deeply as my

body shudders in release, he lets go of my lips only when I whimper with renewed need. When the spasms finally stop, I kiss the part of him I can reach right over his heart. “Oh, Heath,” I sigh.

“And?” he finally inquires, his fingers clenched over the curve of my hip. I shift so I can raise an eyebrow in his direction.

“Was there more to that sentence?” he asks dryly.

I shake my head. “No, not really. That felt really good. More so because it was you.” I smile sweetly at him, waiting for the confusion to cloud his expression. But instead, he looks thoughtful.

“Hmm. Let’s get breakfast and maybe get out of the house for a while?”

I nod again and wait for him to release me. I have to hold back the smirk when his arm lingers. “Can’t go anywhere until you do, Heath,” I point out gently knowing there’s no chance in hell I’ll get a repeat performance this soon.

## *Heath*

I'm positive Bets will realize she can do far better than me before Christmas. And that's even more likely to happen if we're out in public mixing with other people. So I take her out for breakfast again. This time to a quaint little cafe near the college that should be practically empty now that it's winter break.

It is. Empty, that is. Betsy keeps her red coat on because there's a freezing draft coming in from the door that refuses to swing completely closed. The contrast with her dark curls is stunning, as is the delicate blush on her cheeks. You would think after all she's been through recently she'd be broken and lying in a heap on the floor. "You've had shit luck the last few years, haven't you, Bets?" It's almost a rhetorical question, but Betsy just frowns at me.

"No. I had shit luck three years ago and then you came. I've had nothing but good luck ever since." Her voice is mischievous, her eyes twinkling. Daring me to argue.

"Need to get your eyes checked after breakfast," I mutter.

She grins outright and curls her hand around the fingers of my left hand. "I like what I see just fine. And more importantly, I like you when the lights are off, too." She goes back to eating her omelet, but her fingers stay where they are, claiming me. And I can't say that I hate the sensation.

I clear my throat. "I thought we'd stop by the office for a few minutes after this. I need to take care of some paperwork and maybe you want to look around? See if there's anything interesting on the internal notice board?"

Betsy nods enthusiastically.

I think better of my suggestion when we enter the lobby and all eyes turn to Betsy. My arm is low on her back, but that doesn't stop the eight guys who move closer. Betsy blinks and looks up at me with curiosity. I'm too busy glaring at them to answer her. And it's too late to retreat.

I send another round of glares and guide her to the elevator in the far corner. Betsy starts giggling as soon as the doors close. I wait for her laughter to slow before even asking, "What's so funny, Bets?"

"You!" she chuckles. "You're so sweet and then boom! Ready to annihilate anyone approaching within fifty feet." She goes up on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "Thank you, though. That convinced me that you weren't just taking pity on me last night. It's kind of a relief."

She exits the elevator without waiting for me and heads with confidence down the hall towards my office. I brought her here once a few years ago. How the hell did she remember where to go?

Betsy plops herself down in the chair by the window and takes out her phone while I turn on my computer so I can approve shit that I promised to get done before going on vacation. I wasn't expecting Betsy home until this afternoon originally. This way we can relax and enjoy the holidays, assuming Betsy continues to confound me by imagining a happily ever after in my arms.

"Five more minutes, baby. Then we'll go look at the job board," I promise as I send the last of the forms off and quickly check email for anything urgent. I could do that from my phone at home, but I promised myself not to while Betsy was here.

There's a flurry of movement at the doorway, and then my head is being hugged. It's not Betsy because she's staring at me with wide eyes that begin to narrow with suspicion.

Finally, the arms pull back far enough for me to find out who it is, but the laughing voice gives her away. "Heath! I thought I heard your voice. It's so good to see you! Who are you? I'm Evie."

Evie's gaze is now focused with interest on Betsy, but her arms are still around my neck. Something that seems to annoy both Bets and the large man growling from the doorway. Evie taunts the devil by dropping a swift kiss on the top of my head. "Oh, don't mind Duke. You know he's a sweetheart deep down."

Duke doesn't seem to agree. "Evie, baby. Stop harassing the man just to

tease me. Santa still has time to change his mind, and Christmas is on a Tuesday this year.”

That makes Evie roll her eyes. I sigh and say, “Evie, Duke, this is Betsy. She’s my...” I hesitate to fill in the blank, but Betsy doesn’t. “Wife?” she offers helpfully, her eyes slitted. I give her a small smirk of capitulation, but it’s lost in Evie’s flurry of excitement.

“You got married! And you didn’t tell anyone? Heath, this is huge!” I’m braced for another hug but instead she scurries over to Betsy, pulls her out of her chair and hugs her instead. Then she bundles her out of the room, calling out over her shoulder, “We’re going to the restroom — be right back.”

Duke stares after them and then turns to me with a shrug.

## *Betsy*

One minute I’m sitting quietly waiting for Heath to finish and the next I’m being kidnapped for interrogation in an empty bathroom down the hall. Evie is maybe a few years older than me, but quite a bit shorter, and her curiosity could look right at home on the face of an eight-year-old.

“Oh, my God. When did the two of you get married? How long have you known each other? This is so exciting!” She finally pauses for breath but doesn’t let go of my arms that she’s clutching with enthusiasm.

“Three years ago and three years ago,” I finally answer dryly. Evie frowns.

“Oh dear. And here a complete stranger accosts you and wants you to spill all the personal details. I’m sorry, Betsy.” She lets go of me but it turns out it’s only to pull me into another hug. “Is Heath being difficult?” She finally asks with a fierceness I find charming.

“A little,” I admit.

Evie grins. “Well, payback is always fun. Even though I am grateful that he did help bring Duke to me, so...”

I stare down at her, wondering what the hell she’s talking about. She finally releases me completely and leans back against a sink, folding her arms like a general preparing for battle. “You know about the book club, right? And the special books?”

I shake my head. “Book club, yes, but what books? There’s the pile Heath doesn’t want me to read but...”

Evie giggles. “You’ll have to give me your recommendations from that pile. I’m always looking for new authors. No, I meant the ones Damien writes for the wounded veterans, to get them motivated and inspired.”

I shake my head again slowly. “No, I know nothing about those.”

Evie sighs like she doesn’t have time to explain. “Well, it started with Duke. He only admitted he had feelings after reading a book where a character like me married a lawyer. He still gets hot under the collar when anyone says that word.” She shrugs in disbelief. “Anyway, there have been heaps more books since. But that doesn’t really matter to you. But if you didn’t know about them, then you can’t know that Heath has a book too.”

I blink. “He does? What does it say?”

Evie shakes her head, smiling. “I think you need to read it. It might help explain... things,” she ends limply and my eyes narrow. She knows. She knows about his injuries and I’m wondering exactly how, seeing as they’re not publicly visible.

“How do you...?” I start with suspicion, feeling the warmth of jealousy start to spread in my belly even though Evie seems really nice and sweet and clearly in love with Duke.

She pats my arm with a smile. “Oh, you’re perfect for him. Did I mention I met Heath and Duke when I worked at the VA hospital?” She turns and pulls open the restroom door. That’s all I’m going to get out of her but my ruffled feathers subside. She isn’t willing to spill private information that isn’t hers to share. I can respect that. Hell, I don’t even care how she knows as long as they weren’t in a relationship.

“The book you’re looking for is called *Hiding in Plain Sight*,” she whispers as we approach Heath’s office.

“Thanks,” I whisper back, positive I won’t have any trouble remembering that title. But now I’m desperate for a few hours alone to find out why Evie thinks I need to read it so badly.

Both men look up with concern that quickly relaxes when they catch sight of us.

“Baby,...” Duke starts but his wife interrupts him with a hand on his arm.

“Nevermind that, lovebug. We have shopping to do.” She turns to Heath and me with a smile, ignoring Heath’s widened eyes at her term of endearment for the gruff guy gazing down at her with grumpy love. “You just can’t get clothing big enough for a guy his size in Asia, you know? Not without paying a fortune.” She grabs Duke’s hand to pull him out of the



office and then stops abruptly. “And you,” she says with a fiercely pointed finger aimed at Heath, “should head to the jewelry store before it closes and put a ring on it. I don’t know what you were thinking, but it was wrong.” Evie doesn’t wait for a response, exiting with a cheery wave while Duke simply shrugs his shoulders and follows her out.

I glance around Heath’s office, almost expecting to see a mess from the whirlwind moment, but it’s exactly how it was when we entered.

“She used to be shy,” Heath remarks dryly, making my lips quirk up in a smile.

## *Heath*

What Evie doesn't know and Bets may have forgotten is that we do have wedding rings. I got simple ones for that ceremony years ago, but I didn't want Betsy weighed down by it at only eighteen. I thought she should have as near a normal college experience as possible. As close as a girl who lost her entire family could have, anyway.

But according to her confessions, Betsy didn't bother with that. She wants me to be her first lover. Her only lover. That fills me with both dread and satisfaction. And the instinctive need to push her away because I can't quite trust that I get a happy ending.

We stroll by the notice board on the third floor, and while Betsy studies the various openings, I consider her. And how to make sure she understand the real-world implications of us while not hurting her.

Betsy jots a few job IDs down in her phone, without consulting me, I might add. "Don't you want to know anything about the managers?" I ask.

"Not from you, darling." She turns to me with a smirk. "You are not in a frame of mind to be objective."

True. So I'm not going to bother arguing. "We should talk about children," I observe mildly as we walk down the hall to the elevator.

Betsy raises an eyebrow. "What about them?"

"Do you want any? How many?"

She sighs happily, reaching for my hand. "At least six or seven."

I choke at that, although the thought of putting in the time to get her pregnant that many times has my cock twitching.

“I want them to have each other to rely on, and more than one other. You know?” Betsy adds quietly and immediately, I understand. She had a brother to lean on. Until she didn’t. And with her parents being only children, it left her alone in the world.

I lean down to kiss her forehead in capitulation. Who was I kidding, ever thinking I could push her away? This isn’t about me. If I get a happy ending, it’s a byproduct of seeing that Betsy gets hers. Lord knows *she* deserves it. And if Betsy wants me — then me she shall have.

“Come on, Evie reminded me that I still have some shopping to do, too. You okay if I leave you at home for a bit?”

She nods, her expression full of repressed curiosity but no reluctance. “I need to wrap your presents, anyway. Did you leave any wrapping paper?”

I stop abruptly. “I thought you gave me your presents already. Do you have more confessions?”

Betsy laughs. “No, Heath. Those were secrets, not presents, although I guess it’s nice if you think of them as a gift. I have real presents for you. Nothing fancy.” She reaches up to kiss my cheek just as the elevator doors open. My eyes meet Sam North’s blink of realization. He purses his lips thoughtfully. “Still want me to come over tomorrow?”

I nod. “Sam, this is Betsy. Betsy, Sam is our dinner guest for Christmas. Betsy and I got married a few years ago.”

Betsy beams and pats my arm with pride. “See? That gets easier with practice. Sam, it’s so nice to meet you!”

Sam wisely holds back his questions and probably a few accusations. He says all the polite things and then steps into the elevator, his face dissolving into one of glee right before the doors shut. The guys of IPDIESAC will know everything he does before dinner time.

I sigh and usher Betsy out of the building. It’s not such a bad thing. Having everyone know Bets is taken.

## ***Betsy***

I really do need to wrap Heath’s presents. I didn’t do it in advance in case airport security needed to inspect something. But I have even more important things to do first. Find that book and figure out what Evie thought I should know. I try not to push Heath out the door, but he still ends up giving me a

funny look as he leaves. I wait impatiently for him to actually pull out of the driveway. Then I rush for my phone and search frantically for the title. It takes me a little while to find it. There are several with the same name, but there's only one that sounds like Heath. I buy it and then make myself a cup of hot chocolate before opening the ebook.

The first tears fall when his idiot of a girlfriend walks away without a second glance (although I might be slightly glad about that, really.) But they keep coming when I see how he's locked himself away from his own happiness. Focusing on others instead. Whoever wrote this knew and understood Heath well. That makes me a tiny bit jealous, but not really. I've got decades with him hopefully and this definitely helps explain him. Except for the part where the heroine in the story is nothing like me. Truthfully, she's a bit vague. What we do share in common is the damsel in distress vibe. Although I hope I'm over the bulk of that by now. I'm chewing on that thought with still wet eyes when the front door opens.

Heath rushes over. "Betsy? What's wrong? What happened?"

I giggle wetly as his hands pat me down, an awkward procedure given how I'm curled on the couch. "I'm fine, Heath. I was reading your book."

He looks blank. "What book? I haven't written any books."

I flip the image on my phone over to the front cover. "This book. Your book. Evie told me about it."

Heath grimaces. "Baby, I don't know anything about that book, so I can't see how Evie could say it's about me. What exactly has you crying so hard, even if it was? My life is not that tragic."

I shake my head in denial. "So your girlfriend didn't walk out on you while you were in the hospital? And you went on to have other relationships before I met you?" I ask almost hopefully, but my stomach drops when Heath's face goes flat. I kind of knew it was all true. His blank expression only confirms it.

"Heath?" I inquire softly, suddenly worried that I've tripped a wire I wasn't aware of.

He sort of shakes himself and turns to close the front door. "Betsy..." he finally starts quietly. "I honestly know nothing about that book, but clearly I should. So let's go over it together so if you have questions, I'll explain where I can. Do you want anything to eat first?"

I shake my head anxiously. Who could eat at a time like this? Heath apparently. He goes into the kitchen and fixes himself a sandwich while I

trail after him mutely. He holds up a beer with an inquiring glance and I shake my head again. He heads down the hall to his bedroom. Setting the plate and bottle on the top of his dresser, he pushes the pillows against the headboard, tugging me back when I start to sit down. I bite my lip while he settles himself after moving his snack to the nightstand. Then he's motioning me to sit between his legs with my back against his chest.

"Don't you dare get crumbs in my hair," I mutter, making him grin.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Bets." He takes a healthy bite of his sandwich and then flips my phone back to the book in question. Almost immediately, my hand stops his finger before he can slide the page over.

"Tell me about her," I command quietly. He pauses and then sighs against my hair.

"Not much to tell, baby. I thought I loved her, but really, she was more of a habit. She never annoyed me in the slightest."

I turn my head to glare at him. "Hey!"

He bends down to softly kiss my lips. "Betsy. You make it impossible to take you for granted." His voice still holds a hint of chagrin.

I smirk at his annoyance. "And she just left? Without a word?"

Heath shakes his head. "Oh, there were words. How sorry she was. How she was leaving for my own good, et cetera."

I gape at him until my neck complains about the angle and I turn back to his hands holding my phone. "She was an idiot," I announce.

Heath snorts and turns the page.

A few minutes later, I stop him again. "So you've not... um, been with a woman since what's her name? Seriously?"

"Jennifer. Her name was Jennifer and no. Not because I was hung up on her, but it seemed easier to simply take the edge off by myself rather than explain and deal with the pity or outright disgust. And well..." I can feel him shrug behind me. I reach a hand out to cup his knee. I don't know why. I just need to be touching him.

"So when you said things aren't like they used to be, you don't really know, do you?" I ask slowly.

## *Heath*

I sigh into Betsy's dark curls and mentally curse out Black, who I always thought was a friend. Why the hell didn't he bother mentioning this to me? Although I suppose in some way, the book is aiding this conversation sort of like one of those too obvious for words kids' books about some trauma or other. So maybe it was meant to be found at a moment like this? Hard to know until I get a chance to ask him. And clearly Dominic Jamieson was in on it because nobody but a spook would know half of this.

"What I know is that there's a large area of skin where... it's like touching someone else, almost. Or like being touched through thick clothing, you can feel a hint of something, but it's not like feeling it on regular skin."

Betsy leans back against me thoughtfully, her finger tracing a design over my kneecap through my jeans. "Do you understand how much I love you, Heath? That it wouldn't matter to me if you couldn't make love in a traditional way at all? As long as you want to be close to me, to make me happy, to get your own satisfaction from seeing me cum. But I'm having trouble untangling the two. I can't tell how much of your reluctance is general guy stuff and how much is Heath and Betsy stuff."

She turns her face up to me with an earnestness I haven't seen since I first met her. I meet her gaze directly when I respond without hesitation. "It's all guy stuff, Bets. And a healthy dose of guilt because I'm so much older than you."

Betsy rolls her eyes. "It's hard to tell when you're being such an idiot."  
"What if I told you I was done being stupid about it? What if we set that

book aside and I prove it to you — now?”

Her eyes widen, and she licks her lips. “Well, don’t tease a girl, Heath. But only if you mean it.”

I give her a short sharp nod, my cock already pressing painfully against the zipper of my jeans at the thought of finally being allowed to approach her untouched pussy. I groan, forgetting that she’s never done anything. Diving right in is not going to make this good for her. I set her phone down on the nightstand and regard her thoughtfully.

I slide down in the bed so my head is level with hers and trail a series of tiny kisses down her jaw. Her slight shiver reminds me just how inexperienced she is. My cock throbs at the thought of claiming her. “It’s fun to talk about breeding you on the first try, Bets. But is that really what you want? Right off the bat?”

A slow, sexy smile spreads across her face and she nods. “Uh, huh. I want you to fill me right up, Heath. I told you I want a big family so nobody, even you, ever feels alone. And I don’t want to wait.”

She reaches for my zipper with an arch look of inquiry waiting for my agreement. I give her a slight nod and watch my virgin bride start undressing me. She’s savoring every moment, that’s for sure.

## *Betsy*

I bite back my quivers of anxiety. This is my big test and I’m not going to ruin it by showing how nervous I am. Simply because I have no idea what I’m doing. Heath will take over when he’s confident this is what I want — that he’s what I want. I just have to make it to that point without giving him some excuse to think it’s his scars or age or whatever that’s bothering me.

I peel back his jeans enough to give his cock some breathing room and then tug his sweater up over his head first. I’d like some exploration time, but I have a feeling the window will shut abruptly, so priorities and all. Top of that is reassuring Heath through touch and kisses that his scars don’t bother me. With narrowed eyes, he lifts his hips enough for me to scoot his pants down.

His boxers are trickier because I’m hardly skilled enough at undressing a man to do both in one go. I work them slowly down anyway, kissing as I go. I rub my cheek against the scars on his thigh and feel him go still. I blurt out

my words, anyway. “This may not be a nice thing to say, but I kind of like your scars.”

There’s genuine bafflement in his voice when he finally responds. “I can’t wait to hear this one, Bets.”

I smile up at him before returning to trace a finger under the base of his cock. He jerks and I grin inside with satisfaction. It’s only the very front of him that has nerve damage — everything underneath has a more immediate response, so that’s where I need to focus my explorations.

“I’m not sure if you can understand,” I say softly as I bend over to kiss the back of his shaft, delighting when his cock visibly stiffens. “Not being a woman, you might not appreciate the allure of five o’clock shadow grazing over the tender skin of your thighs.”

“Can’t say as I’ve ever had that image before, Bets,” he growls. “And I’d appreciate not having it if it’s all the same to you, unless it’s my jaw rubbing your thighs.”

“Oh, it is!” I tell him cheerfully, finally daring to slide back the hood of his tip to blow gently on the exposed skin.

“Fuck!” he grinds out above me.

I grin up at him. “Can’t try that on your own, huh?” I do it again just to prove my point. My bravery is about to run dry. “Anyway, your scars are sort of like that. A little rough but not sharp, and I want to feel them pressing into me. Reminding me that my battle-hardened warrior is alive and in charge.”

Two large hands slide under my arms and pull me up. “My turn to play, baby. Or this is not going to be nearly as much fun as you imagine,” he growls as he strips me thoroughly and efficiently. Instinctively, my hands move to cover myself from his heated inspection, but he holds them away with a small smile.

“You’re beautiful, Bets. Inside and out.” He pulls me close against him, his cock pressing between my thighs as he kisses me. I was right — the rough skin pressing against me feels delicious and somewhat dangerous. Like no matter what I mess up, Heath is intent on claiming me. Finally.



*Betsy*

Before I'm even over the shock of being naked with my husband, Heath is gently bending me down onto the bed. I'm half-expecting him to chicken out at the last minute. But I should have remembered this is Heath. Steadfast is probably his middle name. Out of nowhere, that thought bubbles up as he laves one of my nipples into a stiff peak.

"Heath? What's your middle name?"

"That's what you're thinking about right now?" His chuckle is incredulous.

"It popped up. And now I want to know," I tell him simply, sliding one leg over his hip before he gets any ideas about leaving.

Heath nips the soft skin of my inner shoulder with a growl. "Everett." He goes back to my other breast, leaving the first pouting.

I mull that over in my mind. Heath Everett Ainsley. It has a nice ring to it. And his initials would be... that's when I start giggling uncontrollably.

Heath lifts his head with a sigh. "Now what?"

"Your initials are HEA! Heath!" I chortle with delight while he stares at me. Then eventually he shakes his head in bewilderment.

"Betsy. I'm getting the sense that you aren't entirely ready for this."

That sobers me up right quick. "I am. I am! I'm just a little anxious that you're going to regret it — possibly before we get there."

His hand moves between my thighs, rubbing lightly against my folds. "Baby, the only thing I'm going to regret is if I hurt you. And right now, you aren't nearly wet enough for me."

“Oh, that’s easy to fix. You haven’t been talking much. Just start reciting the alphabet and I’ll be soaking in no time.”

Heath pushes up on his elbows, the better to scan my face for any signs of evasion. “Seriously? You get off on my voice?”

I shrug. “What do you want me to say? I like it. I love the hint of an accent — sort of warm and liquidy. Makes my spine tingle.”

“Well, that’s easy enough to test, I guess.” Heath doesn’t sound convinced, but he stretches out again next to me, one hand loosely splayed over my pussy. And then to tease me literally starts in on the ABCs. I think it’s around G when my thighs clench around his hand. By the long-drawn out M I’m a quivering mass of jelly. Heath’s thumb glides over my well-lubricated clit.

“Heath!”

“Slow down, Bets. I haven’t gotten to the good stuff yet. How do you feel about dirty talk, hmmm? Are you secretly a bad girl? Do you like knowing that you get me harder than I’ve ever been? Even before the accident. That when you bend over, your ass twitches like it’s literally inviting me to force you to be still by spearing you with my cock?”

I moan. Long and low, the sound is filled with need. Heath talking like that? The feel of his hand stroking my folds, one finger probing my channel while he talks about impaling me? It’s off the charts. I turn into his chest as I shatter. He pulls me close with his free hand, the other still circling and probing while my orgasm pulses against his fingers. He kisses my hair.

I stretch my thighs wide, inviting him in. Heath rolls me onto my back, his cock probing my stomach as he maneuvers. “I’m not sure I can maintain talking the whole time, Bets.”

“S’okay. I just want you,” I murmur, trying to tug him closer, but he’s so much bigger and resistant.

“You have me, baby.” And he surges forward.

## *Heath*

Betsy may be the one with a literal barrier to be breached, but it’s my walls that come crumbling down as my cock presses into her tight channel. Because instead of pushing me away for causing her pain, my darling girl tries to pull me closer. The last of my resistance to believing in a future

together goes flying out the window. She has every bit of me now.

I muster what little ability I have to speak to ease her out of the adjustment. “Can you feel me, Bets? Feel my cock claiming you, about to breed you and fill you with cum. I’m going to plant that seed deep, baby.”

Her eyes fly open with a sparkle of delight. A small smirk of happiness dances across her mouth. And my cock eases in another inch. “And even when you’re so full of my baby that you want to scream, I’ll put you on all fours and slide into you from behind. I’m going to make you take all of me, Bets. Over and over again. Because when you smile at me like that, I have to keep reminding myself that you belong to me.”

Her pussy coats my cock with a fresh dose of nectar, and I bottom out with a groan. Betsy loops her arms around my neck. “Heath? You’re the best dirty talker in the world.”

I snort with laughter at that. Knowing she has zero points of comparison but liking the title, anyway. I kiss her lips fiercely and then slide partially out. Her pussy is so tight the pressure is intense against my cock. Even the parts that can’t feel completely are responding to the pressure. It’s heaven and hell, but most of all, relief. I can make this good for her.

I slide back in, murmuring whatever nonsense pops into my head. The way her head is thrashing on the pillow, I doubt she’s even listening to the actual words. By the time my balls draw up, I can tell she’s on the edge. When I reach between us to finger her hard little clit, she cums with a cry almost instantly. The clench of her pussy on my cock finishes me. We’re both pulsing with energy, Betsy as she milks my cock and me as the pressure valve of the last ten years is released with a vengeance, cum driving into her crevices. It’s not that I haven’t taken the edge off, but it was always with the knowledge that this was out of my reach.

I shudder at the loss of tension. Betsy senses something bigger is happening and holds me close, running her hands gently down my back.

When I can breathe again, I pull out of her as gently as possible and roll us over. “You okay, there, Bets?” I ask softly.

She snuggles into me, as if worried I’m going to pull her away. “Love you, Heath. Of course I’m okay. Better than okay. Are you okay?” She lifts her head to scan my face with concern.

“I’m okay,” I assure her solemnly. Knowing that I haven’t given her the words she has a right to hear but isn’t demanding. I slide out of the bed and reach for my jeans. I fish the ring box out of the pocket and then stand to

fetch another from the top drawer of my dresser. Not sure how she missed that in her inspection, but she never brought it up.

“Now Mrs. Ainsley. Seeing as how everything is permanent and official, I have a promise to make to you.”

Betsy sits up in bed, still too new to this level of intimacy not to pull the sheet up around her shoulders. She waits with expectant eyes, her lips caught halfway between anxiety and a smile.

## *Betsy*

First off, Heath has an ass so tight I'm dying to beg him to keep his back turned for a few more minutes. But that would make him think I don't want to see his front, so I bite my tongue. But it's a really nice ass.

He turns back with a suspicious arch to his eyebrow. I widen my eyes innocently, but the blush probably gives me away. I know it when he smirks and shakes his head in disbelief.

"You're a beautiful girl with strange taste in men, Bets. But I love you anyway." He lets the words hang there in the air, waiting for me to pluck them down. Then he tugs my left hand away from the sheet.

"What are you hiding for, baby? I need your hand for a second."

"Only a second?" I ask dryly while he fiddles with ring boxes. He isn't proposing, is he? That's definitely the cart in front of the horse after the barn has burned or something.

"Now, we did this part already, but I think it's time to share that publicly with the world." He slides the slim gold band on my ring finger that I vaguely remember. That day in the courthouse, I was numb to just about everything but the steadiness in Heath's eyes. He'd slipped the rings back in his pocket before we left the building.

"And I know historically, an engagement ring was a promise to stick around for the wedding, so that seems out of order."

I nod in agreement, plus I don't want him wasting money on any kind of status symbol.

"But there is a promise I want to make to you, to commit to sticking

around for, which I'd be doing anyway, as you aren't allowed to get over me."

I shake my head furiously with a smile. "I won't ever be done with you, Heath."

"Good," he says softly, popping the new ring box. "Because I got you this. One diamond for every baby I'm going to put in your belly and a ruby for my love and trust in you to hold my heart."

I'm giggling and leaking tears as he slides the gorgeous ring on my finger. I stare at it through a sheen of tears and count up six tiny diamonds. Every time I look at it, I'm going to hear Heath's light drawl promising to plant a baby in me. It's sweet and sexy and so perfect.

"Did I get it right, Bets?" he asks softly, lifting my chin slightly with his index finger.

"So, so right. You really love me? All the way?"

"All the way, baby." He leans down to kiss my lips softly. "I think I did from the moment I saw you with your arms wrapped across your front, hugging yourself because there was nobody else to do it. But I wouldn't let myself believe you needed me for more than that."

I nod my head frantically. "I do, I really do."

He chuckles and tugs the sheet away from me completely. "Let's get you cleaned up and see about dinner."

"You don't want to..." I hesitate, wondering if I'm the only one wanting to pull him back inside my body.

"I do, but you're going to feel this in the morning, Bets. Your sweet pussy was unbelievably tight, baby. Like new shoes, we need to break it in gently."

I snort laugh at that. "New shoes! Heath!"

He shrugs with a grin. "Well, in reverse, I guess. I won't hurt you, baby. I tell you what, if you like hearing my voice so much..." he shakes his head like he still can't see why, "I'll read to you at bedtime. You pick the book." He rolls his eyes as if he can't believe he's making the offer, knowing I'm not going to pick something tame.

"Really?" I love this idea. Maybe later he'll let me record him? Then I could play his voice, telling me sexy things whenever he isn't available.

Heath simply nods, then scoops me up and carries me into the shower.

***Heath***

Betsy in a white fluffy bathrobe is both sexy and adorable. And when she gives me a cheeky grin while stealing the fattest mushroom off my slice of pizza, I have to force the frown of disapproval so she won't be disappointed.

She pops the morsel in her mouth, licks her fingers and asks, "So, now that I've somehow managed to convince you to fuck me occasionally, I have a question."

I raise an inquiring eyebrow, wondering if I should correct her assumption regarding timing now or later.

"Do I get to move into your room or..."

I pull her to me with a growl, rubbing my unshaved jaw lightly over her skin in punishment. "It's *our* house, Bets. Not mine. I've always meant that and whatever bedroom you want to call ours is as well. Wherever you are, you'll be naked and I'll be right there with you, enjoying the view. And I won't be fucking you *occasionally*. I'll be fucking you every damn day." I'm practically thumping my chest to make my point, so Betsy's radiant smile takes the wind right out of my sails.

"Oh, goody!" She smiles sweetly and steals another mushroom. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"We'll move your clothes in the morning and when you're ready, we can take a trip to retrieve your parents' things from storage," I remind her gently.

She sobers at that, biting her lip in the corner. "Maybe in the summer? I'm honestly not sure I'm ready for that. Having those things tucked away — it's like my parents are still at home and I'm living on my own. If their stuff is here..." her voice trails off.

I drop a quick kiss on Betsy's palm. "Then they can stay in storage for the next twenty years. Or longer. I thought you might want some of your past here, but only when you're ready, baby."

She nods and then smiles at me from under her lashes. "You know what I'm ready for? Storytime."

I sigh and roll my eyes. "Then go pick out your book, Bets."

She stands and stacks our empty plates. "Any book?"

I grimace at what she might pick, but she looks so damn excited I can't say no. "Whatever you want."

She drops the plates by the sink and scurries off with a wicked giggle.

I slide the dishes into the dishwasher and lock up the house. I've no idea what she's going to pick out, but when I walk into the bedroom, I'm still shocked.

Betsy is back in her curvaceous holly pajamas, sitting up against plumped pillows holding — the dictionary. It's an old Webster's. I think my grandparents got it for me when I started high school and I never had the heart to get rid of it.

“Seriously? You want me to read you the dictionary?”

Betsy nods enthusiastically. “It's not what you say, Heath, it's the way you say it. That, and I'm not a masochist. So if you read something deliciously naughty and then didn't follow-through I might get really grumpy.”

“Even if I promise to make you cum? You still want the dictionary?” I shake my head in wonderment.

“Well, yes. Honestly, it could be the phone book. But then I wouldn't get to hear you say aardvark.”

I slide into the bed next to her and arrange her between my legs so her back is resting against my chest.

“There's going to have to be some rules for storytime, baby. No touching yourself, understand? If your pussy starts to ache, you let me know and I'll take care of it for you.” How in hell she could get there from the dictionary is beyond me, but I'm sure we'll be moving on to spicier things soon.

Betsy dutifully wraps her hands over my forearm with a small nod.

“Okay. Can I touch you?”

I consider that carefully. I want her comfortable with me, with my body and not holding back. “You can, but only what you're able to reach without moving.”

She sighs happily and settles back against my chest expectantly. I dutifully start in on the words, stumbling a bit on the unfamiliar ones with too many syllables, but Bets doesn't seem to care. I'm only halfway down the first column, somewhere around *aberration*, when Betsy pinches my arm.

“Heath? That ache you mentioned? I think I'm there.”

I blink down at the top of her head. She hasn't moved, she's got to be teasing me.

“If I slide my hand inside those wickedly adorable pj's of yours, will I find you dripping?” I growl into her ear.

She nods, her curls teasing my chin. “If you're not, then I'm going to make you read something of my choice until you are,” I warn her. “Still sure?”

“Heath!”



Slowly I pull the zipper down, reaching inside the stretchy flannel, my hand gliding over her silky skin down to her pussy. Which is indeed slick with need. My fingers move easily over her swollen folds. She moans softly, throwing her head back against my shoulder.

“Please, Heath.”

I pinch her hard little nub in warning, but that only makes her wiggle faster against my hand. She quiets when I slide two fingers inside of her, curling them slightly. I don't want to be too rough, even with such minor penetration, after the way I claimed her earlier.

Bets clinches down hard on my fingers with a little cry of satisfaction. In seconds she's spasming on my hand, her knees coming up, forcing more contact. I let her take what she needs, murmuring nonsense into the ear closest to me. When her knees relax down, I slowly retract my hand and slide up her zipper.

Then I turn her slightly so she can watch me with wide eyes as I lick my fingers.

And in usual Betsy fashion, she quickly turns the tables on me. She runs her tongue over her lips.

*Betsy*

This has got to be the best Christmas morning ever, waking up in Heath's arms. He wouldn't let me ditch the pajamas last night, saying only, "I like to open my presents in the morning." Then he wrapped one heavy arm around my waist, draped his shin over my lower legs, effectively trapping me in place, and went to sleep. Heaven.

Now my eyes have popped open, and I slowly turn my head to see if he's awake. He is, watching me with solemn eyes. I smile tentatively, making Heath smirk.

"Do I get my presents now?" he grumbles in a sleep-raspy voice.

"Sure?" I move to free myself enough to get out of bed, but Heath's grip tightens.

"It's you I want to unwrap, Bets. You sore at all?"

I shake my head mutely, wondering if I'm supposed to know to do something at this stage. The most comfortable part of being with Heath is that he knows me, better than anyone really.

"Relax, baby. I like to take my presents out, play with them a little and then read the manual."

My brow furrows at that last part. There's a manual? Is he talking about doing more reading?

Heath chuckles long and low in my ear as he once again slides the zipper down my front. "Stop thinking so hard, Bets." He rolls the flannel down over my arms, trapping my hands in the sleeves. But rather than freeing me, he lowers his head to tongue one of my nipples into a turgid peak. I wriggle,

trying to get my hands out, but Heath frowns. “Don’t rush me, baby. Unless you want to wait until after dinner tonight to feel my cock?”

I shake my head slowly and Heath’s gaze heats. “There’s my good girl.”

The slightly exaggerated drawl in his husky voice has my insides quivering all over again. I force myself to hold still while he gives equal treatment to my other breast, the first now wet and pebbling with the chill of the room.

Heath frowns when he realized he can’t take the lower half of my pajamas off without the top half too. He strips it off and then, with a perfectly straight face, feeds the sleeves back over my hands. “What on earth are you doing?” I finally ask.

“Making sure I know what all the buttons do before I turn my present on.” He says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, his lips grazing over the curve of my hip. When I feel the heat of his breath hovering over my clit, I don’t know if I should hold still or... squeal in surprise when his tongue pushes into my channel.

“Hmm, I think I like my present a lot, Bets.” He’s practically humming with satisfaction when he finally lifts his head, having ensured I orgasmed against his face. I’m shocked and excited and wondering what could possibly come next. Heath releases my hands finally but takes one of them in his and guides it to his cock. “I want you to learn how to do this, Bets. I don’t ever want to give you more than you’re comfortable taking, so lift your hips slightly and guide me home.” He’s patient with me as he shows me how to line his cock up with my entrance, pulling my hand back slightly when I try to take too much at once.

“Good job, baby. You ready to cum on my cock?”

I nod, unable to form words as my hips rotate instinctively, trying to bring him in even closer. Instead, he pulls out, making me pout. His chuckle rasps above me as he slowly sinks back. This time I wrap my legs around him, but he manages to move, anyway. A minute later, I don’t even care as he reaches down and rubs my clit too damn slowly. I jerk against him and cum, hard. I’m not sure if that took Heath by surprise, but suddenly he’s pumping into me frantically, jetting cum into my depths with a force that sets me off again with a minor aftershock.

“Merry Christmas, Betsy,” Heath murmurs into my curls as he pulls me close. He’s still deep inside of me, my pussy stretched to bursting with both his cock and what must be a gallon of cum.

“I like my present too,” I inform him shyly, tracing a simple pattern down his bare chest. He raises an inquiring eyebrow, but I lower my gaze, not ready to share all the feelings bubbling up. All the happy and hopeful and relief from worrying about how he was going to react to telling him I wanted him just like this.

“We do have to get up soon, Bets. We’ve got company coming in a few hours,” he finally announces regretfully.

I wince, wondering if his poor friend will feel like a third wheel. I’ve been there, and it’s awkward as fuck.

## *Heath*

Betsy blushes, and Sam gives me a knowing look when he walks into the kitchen. “I knew you were holding out on us, Ainsley. Betsy, you should have insisted on meeting all the guys before marrying *him*.”

She just shakes her head, her dark curls bouncing. “Nope. I’m the one that claimed him, not the other way around, and I’m very satisfied with my choice.”

I smirk back at North’s exaggerated face of disbelief. “What can I say, Sam? She likes the way I read the dictionary.”

I chuckle at the myriad of expressions wafting across his face. He’s dying to ask and most definitely afraid to. Bets slaps my hand lightly. “Stop being mean, Heath. Sam, why don’t you have a girlfriend? It sounds like you’re a lot more open than *some* people.”

“Just haven’t found the right one yet, I guess. My book kinda got me hooked on the idea that there’s someone out there that would want to actually talk to me, not just uh...” he flushes slightly and Bets takes pity on him. “Sleep with you?”

He nods sheepishly.

“Have you thought about maybe taking some university classes? That way you’d have something in common to talk about first, even without going further.”

“I’m too old for that.” Sam sounds uncertain but smiles slightly when Betsy gives him a look after rolling her eyes in my direction. Wisely, she redirects the conversation to working at ACI, and it’s my turn to be a little

miffed because she's sharing more with Sam about the positions she's interested in than she has with me. Never mind that I'm in the room.

Sam makes a graceful exit right after the fruit tart. Although he did leave with a smirk and a wink behind Betsy's back. The dessert came out better than expected and a far cry from anything professional. I've got Betsy cuddled up on my lap in front of a small fire with presents stacked all around because we didn't have time when we finally got out of bed. Neither of us is making a move to open them, though. My fingers are too busy twisting Betsy's curls and she's fully occupied looking through my ebook collection on my phone, trying to pick a story for bedtime. My girl has her priorities in order.

# Epilogue

## *Heath*

*Seven years later*

I eye the five Christmas stockings hanging from the fireplace. The one with my name embroidered on the brim is the only that's not flat as a pancake. "Should I be worried?" I ask over my shoulder at Betsy, who's busy putting the Christmas decorations back on the tree. Isobel, the two-year-old, has decided she hates red and has taken to removing it from everywhere she can reach.

She shrugs, her eyes twinkling. "Why don't you open it and find out?"

"But it's not Christmas."

"And that's not from Santa, so I think you get an exemption."

I study her face with pursed lips. Bets is ever so slightly anxious and trying not to show it.

The five-year-old twins, Alex and Riley, come in to find us, ready for bed and stories. Isobel is already asleep and even the twins know not to make too much noise. Their whispers aren't exactly quiet, but their baby sister is usually a sound sleeper. "Can we get two stories tonight?"

"What's the rule?" I remind them firmly.

"One," Riley sighs, practicing her pout.

"What if it were two shorter ones?" Her brother tries again.

I raise an eyebrow.

"Fine," he grumbles, turning around in his yellow hi-vis pajamas. One of the guys found them online and couldn't resist. Naturally, Alex loves them

since they make my eyes hurt. Since Riley shares a room with Isobel, we read their bedtime story in Alex's room. I lean down to kiss Betsy softly. "Why don't you take whatever that is," I nod toward the stocking, "and get ready for bed. I'll open it before I read you a story, too."

"Not Construction Dan builds a skyscraper?" she inquires with a smirk.

"No. I'll make a final decision after I see whatever it is that you're afraid to tell me," I warn her.

She bites her lip and swallows. I frown as I turn to leave the room. If it were anything bad, she wouldn't wrap it up in a stocking, so I'm baffled.

Construction Dan is vetoed in favor of Princess Penelope. Then I carry Riley into her room and tuck her in.

It's lights out and doors locked and as far as I'm concerned, the day has been a success, with only minimal disasters and just one Isobel meltdown.

Betsy is waiting, looking even more alluring than she did when she first told me what she wanted in our relationship. She was beautiful then, but with each passing year she's more confident about her place in the world.

I crawl in beside her and empty the stocking over the bedspread. "Start anywhere?" I ask her.

"Yep, just like the first time." Except now she leans into my shoulder. I steal a quick kiss just because I can. Then start opening tiny packages. The messages are as follows.

*I don't want you to get a vasectomy. I'd rather get my tubes tied.*

*I'd like to amend the six kids down to four.*

*Will you get me pregnant tonight?*

*Can we get a dog?*

"You can see why it doesn't fit neatly into a conversation opener," Bets says softly.

I nod. "Let's start with this one." I hold up the number of kids. "This is a given," I point out, setting the one about breeding her on the nightstand. "Or at least making an attempt. Now, are you sure about this?"

She nods. "The idea of six was nice, but honestly, three feels a lot like six most days. I'd like one more, but even if that didn't happen, I'd be okay."

I regard her thoughtfully. "It's whatever you want, baby, but I'm not so sure about surgery."

"Me neither — for you. I know it's a simple procedure for guys, but I don't want to mess with your cock, Heath. It's seen enough damage. Particularly since the underside is where you still have the most sensation. I

talked with my doctor and I'm almost certainly going to need a c-section. So they'll just do it while they're in there." She gives me a soft smile and kisses my cheek. "Okay?"

"Can I talk with your doctor first before I commit?" I ask slowly. Betsy nods with a satisfied smile, so I'm guessing she's already scheduled the appointment. Probably in about three weeks, when she'll want her first maternity visit. Bets seems to have an unerring ability to decide when I'm getting her pregnant and have it happen.

"And the dog?" she asks archly.

I consider that one. I'd been thinking it would be good for the kids, but I don't want either of us getting up with a puppy in addition. "If we get an already grown, well behaved one from the shelter," I give in.

"Oh, perfect." She reaches over to turn off the light, but I stay her hand.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Bets? I think I know exactly what story to read you, that one you've been requesting for absolutely months."

Her eyes widen. "Really? You're ready for that?"

I shrug, holding back my smile at her delight. "Well, if this is going to be the last baby, I'd better make sure you're really wet for me so I can plant it deep, right?"

She nods enthusiastically and I reach for my phone to bring up the story of the battle-hardened alien invader with lizard skin who steals his mate away from Earth to breed her properly. Bets has been begging me to read it because she says it describes exactly how sexy my scars feel to her. I'm skeptical, but based on the way she's already twitching her ass against my cock, this should be a very productive and enjoyable evening.

**Get a sneak peek at Heath and Betsy's future together as their family grows!** Bonus content available only to [newsletter subscribers](#)! And don't forget to read [The Allure of You](#) when the spooky Dominic Jamieson tracks the intriguing woman he heard speaking French back to his own office!



# About

## **It's true! Tough Guys Read Romance**

[The Origin of You](#)

[The Scandal of You](#)

[The Command of You](#)

[The Promise of You](#)

[The Secret of You](#)

[The Allure of You](#)

[The Mask of You](#)

## **Great things can happen when Truly Devious Matchmakers step in!**

[The Virgin and the Laid-back Billionaire](#)

[The Virgin and the K-9 Cop](#)

[The Virgin and the Head of Security](#)

[The Virgin and the Navy SEAL](#)

[The Virgin and the Patient Professor](#)

[The Virgin and the Other Brother](#)

And if you haven't been introduced to the [Men of A Corps](#) yet, well... there is always something special about your first (series)!

There's also the Navy SEALs of [Team Delta Tango](#), ready when you are!

**Thanks for Reading!**

If you loved this story and can take a minute to leave a review, you will help others find it.

## **About Olivia Sinclair**

I write steamy romance that's safe, funny, and totally over the top. My heroes are always alpha males because the stronger they are, the harder they fall. Luckily the smart, sassy heroines know how to catch them and make everything better!

I never get tired of believing that love can show up unexpectedly and with determination. That it can find you anywhere, even curled up on the couch, in your jammies, while eating ice cream and binging romance novels. Then a knock on the door reveals your gorgeous new neighbor that you didn't even know had moved in... or maybe it's that hot friend of your dad's you only know through photos...

Possibly the HEAs come easier because my home and office are in a romantic clearing of giant evergreens in the Pacific Northwest. Think Snow White without the Dwarves. But I do have a bounty of wild animals that come to visit. There's even a resident nuthatch that talks to itself (constantly)! And there are currently seven chickens in the henhouse...

You can find me and my books along with lots of fun extras on my website: <https://oliviasinclairbooks.com> or email me directly at [oliviasinclairbooks@gmail.com](mailto:oliviasinclairbooks@gmail.com). I love to know who my readers are and what you love to see in a good story!

## **Author's Note**

© Copyright 2023 Olivia Sinclair

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons or animals, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. This book is covered by copyright and it or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever

without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.