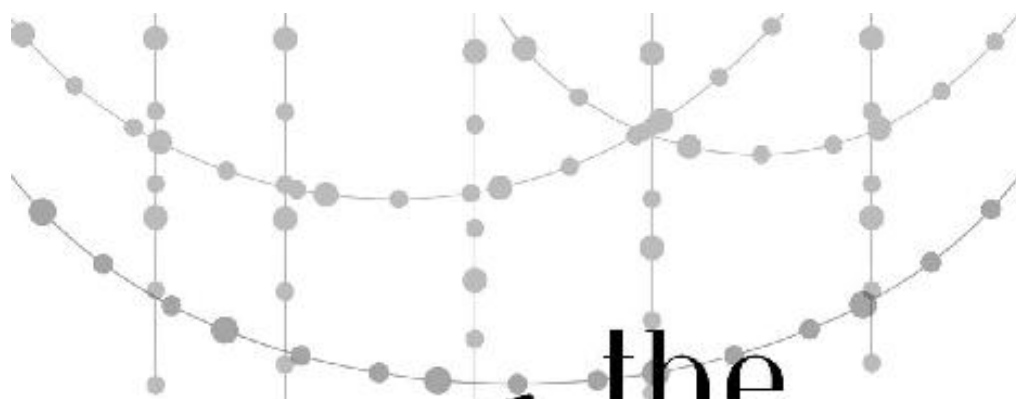


LOREN SORENSEN

Tis the season for Christmas trees...  
to become matchmakers

THE *Trouple*  
WITH  
*Christmas*



the  
*Trouble*  
with  
*Christmas*

loren sorensen



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*To all those who believe in the magic of the Christmas season*

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author's note

**T**he Trouble with Christmas is a novella that builds the foundation of a romantic relationship between two secondary characters from *Love in Plane Sight*. Caleb is Isla's younger brother, and Rayanne is Isla's best friend. Their love story begins here, but it doesn't end happily...yet. Rayanne and Caleb have a hell of a story to be told, and it all starts here.

Please note that Caleb is a pastry chef and that the image heading is an Italian pastry called sfoglitella. It plays an important role in the novella.

Readers, please also be warned that this novella features a lot of profane language, brief mentions of toxic parent/child relationships, including a father leaving his family, and explicit sexual content. Rayanne's ex briefly mentioned is also considered a very toxic presence with lasting effects. Please consider all these trigger warnings while reading *The Trouble with Christmas*, and take care of yourself.

*Loren Jorgensen*



# the Trouble with Christmas playlist

THERE'S NO WAY (FEAT. JULIA MICHAELS) | LAUV  
SEPTEMBER | JAMES ARTHUR  
ISSUES | JULIA MICHAELS  
HEART OUT | THE 1975  
LAVENDAR HAZE | TAYLOR SWIFT  
3 LIBRAS | A PERFECT CIRCLE  
IF YOU NEED ME | JULIA MICHAELS  
SUCKER | THE JONAS BROTHERS  
FALLING FOR YOU | THE 1975  
CHECK YES, JULIET | WE THE KINGS  
EVERLONG—ACOUSTIC VERSION | THE FOO FIGHTERS  
WORST OF ME | JULIA MICHAELS  
AS IT WAS | HARRY STYLES  
I WANNA BE YOURS | ARCTIC MONKEYS  
ROBBERS | THE 1975  
STOLEN | DASHBOARD CONFESSIONAL  
LITTLE DID I KNOW | JULIA MICHAELS  
IT WAS ALWAYS YOU | MAROON 5  
HANDS DOWN—DASHBOARD CONFESSIONAL  
I THOUGHT SHE KNEW—\*NSYNC



# Rayanne's christmas playlist

IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS | MICHAEL BUBLÉ

CAROL OF THE BELLS | JOHN WILLIAMS

MERRY CHRISTMAS BABY | HANSON

MERRY CHRISTMAS. HAPPY HOLIDAYS | \*NSYNC

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS YOU | MARIAH CAREY

WHAT CHRISTMAS MEANS TO ME | HANSON

MAKING CHRISTMAS (FROM 'THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS') | PENATONIX

SANTA BABY | EARTHA KITT

HOLLY JOLLY CHRISTMAS | MICHAEL BUBLÉ

LET IT SNOW! LET IT SNOW! LET IT SNOW! | FRANK SINATRA

JINGLE BELL ROCK | BOBBY HELMS

LAST CHRISTMAS | WHAM!

CHRISTMAS (PLEASE COME HOME) | HANSON

SANTA TELL ME | ARIANA GRANDE

WHITE CHRISTMAS | OTIS REDDING

O HOLY NIGHT - A CAPELLA | \*NSYNC

HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS | CHRISTINA AGUILERA

WINTER WONDERLAND | EURYTHMICS

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR? | WHITNEY HOUSTON

THE CHRISTMAS SONG (CHESTNUTS ROASTING ON AN OPEN FIRE) | \*NSYNC

CHRISTMAS TIME IS HERE | VINCE GUARALDI TRIO





# chapter one: rayanne



‘T is the season, and I don’t have my Christmas tree. *Still.*

With ten days to go until Christmas, I’ve been unsuccessful in my attempts to check off that one box on my to-do list. Is it because I’m brotherless and parentless for the season? My family members are already off to their holidays and Isla, my best friend, is set to leave for an extended holiday in England with that smoking hot boyfriend of hers. Unfortunately, she’s too busy working out of town until she leaves. Had Isla been here, we would have found our way managing the tree together, dragging it up the three flights of stairs of my apartment building, laughing our way up each turn guiding us to my apartment, then creating some pulley system for getting the tree standing upright.

I chuckle at the thought. I’m definitely in a bind with all I’m trying to accomplish. Between trying to set up arrangements to purchase my Christmas tree and then stabilize

it in the stand in my apartment, I know I have a lot to do to create the perfect Christmas setting. While I'd love nothing more than to have my bestie here with me, I can't begrudge Isla her happiness. She deserves it and that sweet Englishman of hers. Too bad he has only sisters.

Moving into my new apartment this year has been an unexpected highlight. The first thing I saw when I opened the door with my real estate agent were ten-foot ceilings and a vast window overlooking Austin's skyline. My vision tunneled and all I saw was my future flashing before my eyes: me, in this apartment with a gorgeous Christmas tree centered in front of the city's stunning skyline. I said yes to the real estate agent instantly.

Standing for the first time in a while, I arch my body into a back-bending stretch, then walk over to my linen closet to make sure I know where my Christmas tree stand remains hidden. I giggle with excitement when I find it shoved in with my towels and other important linens. Last year, I couldn't afford the tree of my dreams, and used a standard tree stand that supports a six-footer. This can't be a big deal, right? A Christmas tree stand is six of one, half a dozen to the other.

I walk back to my living room and place my tree stand where I want it, then run back to inspect the overall effect. I cackle with delight, jumping up and down, as it officially looks like Christmas vomited all over my apartment. Fairy lights trace the window frame, and window decals that mimic snow melting are smooth with no bubbles on my huge bay window. I spent ages making it look perfect. I placed Christmas garlands on the mantles and surround my front entrance. All that's missing is the Christmas tree.

Our family's favorite variation of Christmas tree were Frasers growing up. Christmas has always been our favorite family affair—with my mother's Scandinavian background, and my father's southern roots, it was inevitable that my apartment would look like a Christmas advertisement in a magazine. All that's left is that perfect Fraser fir decorated top to bottom with twinkling lights at night.

Frasers are in high demand in Austin unfortunately, it seems like everyone here shares my dream. I've already called around and there are still a few places that miraculously have nine footers I can investigate. I just need to figure out how to get the tree to my apartment, up three stories of stairs, then make it stand correctly to become the magnificent centerpiece it was always meant to be.

There's an answer to my dilemma, but I'm not ready to call in the favor just yet. Caleb is a strong, sturdy young man of twenty-five who could easily help me lift my tree up three flights of stairs and position it into the tree holder. The only problem is that Caleb is Isla's younger brother who's been making doe eyes at me since he was sixteen. The crush Caleb has on me hasn't really been addressed between us, which I prefer. It was awkward ten years ago, but we don't see each other enough to make me feel self-conscious about it anymore.

Isla seems to disagree, even after all these years. She teases me anytime Caleb's name comes up, and I have to pretend I don't know what she's talking about. Her wide, mischievous grin settles in my mind. Sometimes it feels a bit crowded in my head with Isla's encouragement coupled with Caleb's looks of longing.

I walk back into the kitchen to pour water in my electric kettle for a cup of tea. Isla's love for tea has bled into my own life and I start my ritual: cup lined with sugar; tea bag ready for water. I muse on this issue of getting my Christmas tree up to my apartment. My brows furrow with concern trying to figure out the logistics without involving Caleb, but he's the only person I know to ask right now for help. I just... I just don't want to be put in a position where I could lead him on when I don't mean to. I don't want to put us in a situation where I would have to hurt him, knowing how he's felt about me as long as he has.

It's been a while since I've had to deal with Caleb's puppy eyes on a regular basis. Caleb went to culinary school and got his master's degree as a pastry chef, then was quickly recruited for the Head Pastry Chef position at *Les Portes du Plaisir*. Caleb and I have been living separate lives for a majority of

our adulthood, and I've lost contact with him as an adult—for the most part. We don't really spend time with each other as we used to when we were kids. The usual exception to the rule is when Isla is in town, and we're all back together at her place.

I sigh, acknowledging that had Caleb not been Isla's brother, I might reconsider those puppy dog eyes begging me for attention. They're a soulful rich brown that matches his chestnut hair. And granted, his hair almost achieves sex-hair status, with the perfect amount of curve falling into his eyes. And his body is sculpted with precision from mixing ingredients all day and who knows what else. Caleb is the perfect height for jumping into arms that are ready for catching—but he is Isla's kid brother. We've just known each other too long, and to ever consider Caleb as anything more is simply too weird.

The water begins to boil for my tea, so I pour it into my teacup and let it brew. As I pour the dash of milk into my cup, I lean against my island. The warmth of the mug settles comfortably as I hold it close to my chest. I inhale the fragrant scent of the tea as I take my first sip.

The memories catch me by the dozens as I drink my tea slowly. I remember when Caleb was about six or seven, sneaking around the corner of the kitchen trying to catch Isla and me in our late night rendezvous with our beloved cookie dough. How many bargains did we make with him, just so he would leave us alone? And then... somewhere between our junior and senior year in high school, he started making his own cookie dough. How many times did we negotiate with Caleb for our own portions? I always suspected he made too much because he knew of our proclivities towards raw cookie dough. I smile fondly at the memories.

I take a moment, considering the fact that I do sometimes find him attractive and onto the possibility of shifting my relationship with Caleb, but it's honestly too inconceivable. He is three years younger than me, and I can envision the child, the awkward teenager, and the budding hottie all in one reel of moving pictures. It's so hard to look at him and not see the kid

he was first. We grew up together and were the last two standing when Isla lost her baby and their father left their family. Caleb came to me for comfort and guidance, and the barrier that was Caleb's crush was forgotten. That was a hard time for all of us. He's important to me, and we've impacted each other all our lives. And... it's for this precise reason that considering Caleb anything other than Isla's brother is unacceptable.

*But does that really mean he can't help me find a Christmas tree?*

God, this practical reason is frustrating.

*Fine, he's perfect for the job.*

And fine: these days, when I see Caleb around Isla's apartment, there might be a fan girl swooning at those arms and cheeky grin, daring me.

And fine: I'm scared shitless of being alone with him because we have shared our past histories.

But I can hang out with Caleb on my own. No Isla necessary. If it means that I can get my perfect tree in the apartment, then I'll just have to work hard to ensure that there are no distractions. I've gone twelve years maintaining a solid distance without breaking Caleb's heart, I can go another week without anything else happening.

Right?

chapter two: calab



It's ten o'clock in the evening, and I'm biding my time as I wait for Celeste—or Chelsea, whatever her name is—to fall asleep. I'll slip out of her bed discretely and send her a text. Something meaningful to our time together, but nothing too personal. We'll text for a couple of days, and perhaps I'll decide later on whether or not to sleep with her again. I find girls these days aren't looking for post it notes on the refrigerator or on the kitchen island like movies would lead you to believe. A text works, so that's what they get.

I don't often seek a second date. I've become a master at letting women tell me they don't feel that spark anymore—because it's usually what I want.

Am I a coward or a bastard for taking this route? My friends have endless opinions, but the truth is that it's easy. I don't lie to these girls, but I don't make a point of overly communicating my feelings either. One girl told me I had the “mysterious attractive best friend” vibes, and I honestly have



no idea what it means. But she was dumping me at a convenient time, so I didn't take it personally. Honestly? I forgot to care after she said it.

My phone from under the pillow buzzes. I wrap my fingers around it and look at it quizzically. My friends know the routine, expecting by now that I'm trying to make a smooth exit out the door. Someone usually texts me to see if I get home around midnight. Then they all have a laugh at me in the morning when I tell them about my walks of shame back to my apartment. But I'm not ashamed, and I feel good. After all, that's the point of surrounding myself with beautiful women, isn't it?

I pull my phone out from my pillow discretely and focus on the notification. My eyes must not have seen clearly, because it's Rayanne Miller texting me.

Jesus.

Rayanne Miller.

My sister's best friend, and the only girl I'd never walk away from, if I ever had the experience of spending more than a few moments alone with her. Her heart-shaped face is framed in insatiable curls that make her hair the embodiment of temptation. I've been dying to dig my fingers into that hair since I knew what a hard on was. Rayanne was the first girl of my wet dreams, and the only girl I'd ever offer my heart to—if she asked.

Too bad that's never going to happen. Four years ago, I began making a valiant effort to kick her out of my mind and heart and so far, it's passing as acceptable. We don't cross each other's paths regularly, unless Isla is in town and we're in forced social circumstances.

Rayanne's beauty punches me in the gut every time I see her—but it's her candid skepticism and humor, and the way she makes my sister laugh like she's never felt pain that captivates my imagination. It's the way that when I say something entertaining that Rayanne doesn't expect, or that she tries to hide a small smile on her face when she remembers how long we've known one another. It's the way we keep

finding each other throughout our lives to offer comfort to each other when trauma hits us in the face, and we're left to our own devices.

The work of four years of resistance evaporates at the notification of a text, and I'm already spiraling out of control. The minute I hear from Rayanne, I'm ready to do her bidding—should she ever bid me to do anything. And I haven't even read the damn text message yet.

I hit my head on the pillow—then look immediately to my left to make sure I didn't bother Celeste.

Celeste?

I shake my head, redoubling my efforts to focus my concentration.

God, this always happens. I thought I had a better handle on my emotions this time around, which of course I don't. When it comes to Rayanne Miller, I'm not sure I'll ever have control of my emotions. I've been in too deep in these feelings for too long now, whether or not I like it.

I have my moments of being a real asshole at times, but even I understand it's best not to read Rayanne's text in Chelsea's bed. I sit up carefully, as to not disturb her. I glide out carefully of the bed and glance back at her.

Yeah, she's totally a Chelsea. I don't know why I ever thought her name was Celeste.

Dressing quickly, I step into the hallway with my possessions in my pockets or hands. I text Chelsea something self-deprecating about my work schedule, knowing it'll pull on the corners of her mouth until she's smiling instead of frowning at my disappearance.

Being mindful of Chelsea, I walk back to my truck and tap my phone once more to see that Rayanne is texting again. I swipe right to find out what her deal is.

Hey Caleb—'Tis the season and I'm late in picking a Christmas tree. Again. Any chance you can help me out with this?

This is about a Christmas tree!? Of course, it is. The Millers are a cut above the rest in their Christmas game as they vomit it upon the whole house and throw their whole spirit into the holiday season. I imagine her final touches around her apartment. I open my phone up to read the rest of her text message.

I don't want to inconvenience you, it's just that everyone else is out of town, and I need your help.

Send help? Thx, Ray

I snort at the idea of Rayanne inconveniencing me at all. Of course, I'm a last resort. That damn crush of mine has always held Rayanne at arm's length from me. If I had kept myself together before, perhaps I wouldn't be the last person she'd contact. I type out a response, just to get it over with, then step into my truck and turn the engine on.

Yeah, I'll be there. Just tell me when and where.

I groan as my head meets the steering wheel the minute I see the message is delivered. Of course, I'm going to help Rayanne. It's just that every time we come across each other, I get caught perpetually between teenager Caleb and the guy I am today. One minute I'm making her laugh, and the next she's looking up at me through her lashes and I'm that awkward thirteen-year-old discovering just exactly how girls transform into goddesses.

Of course I'll help her, but someone do me a solid and just help me get my ass together, so I don't act like a fucking idiot the whole time we are getting her tree into her apartment.

chapter three: calab



I tap on Rayanne's door in greeting and she opens it wide with a generous smile. Rayanne's long blonde curls bounce with greeting, her baby blue eyes shine with eagerness. I know Rayanne's enthusiasm is only because I'm picking her up to get her Christmas tree, but it's been a hot minute since I've seen her. My breath catches in my throat, captivated by how beautiful she is. In the month since I last saw her at Isla's, I've managed to forget how much she affects me. *Every. Time.* Anything I was going to say is lost as I look at Rayanne for the first time in weeks.

Christmas garlands and twinkling lights greet me from the living room. Rayanne has done everything she possibly can to decorate her apartment, and I'll admit, she's done a great job. I look down at her and smile.

"Hi!" Rayanne greets me. "Like what you see?"

*I like everything I see about you.*

“Hey,” I reply. Thank god I sound normal because I feel my heart racing like I’m a teenager again. My smile widens as I see what she’s wearing. Her outfit is completely ridiculous, beginning with an oversized Christmas tree sweater, skinny jeans, and combat boots. Of course, she’s wearing a Christmas sweater on a sixty degree December morning. Her jeans hug her in all the right places, but the sweater hides all those gorgeous curves. And those combat boots...

*Fuck.* They get me every time. Only Rayanne would assemble an outfit like this and not give two shits about how an oversized Christmas sweater looks with combat boots.

“Nice outfit,” I chuckle, tugging on the tails of her sweater.

“Thanks,” Rayanne beams at me, bouncing on the toes of her boots. She’s completely unaware of me checking her out. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” I can’t help it. I ruffle her curls, and she swats at me, laughing.

“Come on! We need to get to Cedar Park.”

“Of course, we have to go to Cedar Park,” I complain, rolling my eyes at her. “Of course, you’re making me drive half an hour away to get your Christmas tree.” We’re going to have to drive on a national highway, full of traffic jams, or possible accidents with a Christmas tree. This is going to be a *disaster*.

“Well, *duh*,” Rayanne pokes my side. “Get going, Gardiner. We got a Christmas tree waiting for me.”

“You do know that this is heavy work, right?” I ask, tugging on her sweater again. “You might reconsider?”

“Pfft,” Rayanne dismisses the notion. “This sweater’s going to be good luck. Come on, Caleb.”

“You’re going to be pulling it off in two hours,” I warn. “It’s nice outside, but it’s not cold enough for this thing.”

“I’ll be fine,” Rayanne insists.

“Don’t get mad if I tell you I told you so later,” I smirk.

Rayanne rolls her eyes and tugs on my shirt again. “Come on,” she nudges me out of her doorway. “My Christmas tree is waiting.”

“Right,” I reply, exhaling. “You keep talking about your Christmas tree like it’s a puppy dog waiting to get adopted.”

Rayanne snorts as commentary, “Try to keep up, Caleb.” She steps around me to start climbing down the stairs.

I sigh, knowing this is going to be a long ass day. Getting involved with Rayanne Miller and her Christmas tree is trouble. Knowing her expectations and how her parents have always made Christmas come alive during the season, and I know Rayanne’s chasing the memories of her childhood. Those are high expectations she’s trying to fulfill.

I saw her apartment decorations; they’re gorgeous. And while a Christmas tree is going to make it perfect, I know she’s expecting something beautiful and majestic. But we don’t need something like a nine-footer to experience the magic she’s trying to create. At that thought I cringe internally... God, we’re going to have to get whatever she picks up these stairs into her apartment.

“You have to live on the third story, don’t you?” I complain once more, keeping pace beside her. “These stairs are going to be a pain in our asses, getting whatever tree you pick up to your apartment.”

“Yeah, Caleb,” Rayanne offers me a gorgeous smile, pulling on all my heart strings. “That’s why I have you.”

*You have no idea, Rayanne Lee Miller.*

I exhale slowly, taking an indulgent moment to imagine what it would look like if she would let me sweep her off her feet. The thought of caging Rayanne in, pressed against a wall, and running my fingers through her hair as I kiss her senseless leaves me breathless. I imagine ripping that ridiculous sweater off Rayanne’s body, just so I could show her just how much I appreciate all those beautiful curves. I sigh, realizing that I’ve actually stopped walking. Today is not starting off well.

Rayanne actually *skips* over to my truck, waiting for me to beep it open. I grin, clicking the button on my keys for her and watch her pull the passenger door open. She takes a deep breath, and hops into my truck. Rayanne actually *hops* into it. I chuckle, listening to her *oomph* as she lands in the passenger seat. The truck adjusts to her weight, and I start the ignition for the truck knowing she's safely seated inside. I open the back seat door behind the driver's side, rummaging for a fresh undershirt. Rayanne's mission for finding a Christmas tree is going to be physically demanding, so I change into a new one, anticipating the hard, sweaty work climbing up that apartment stairwell.

"Ready?" I ask, climbing into the driver's side.

"Caleb, I've been ready since—" Rayanne moves her legs up and down like a little kid who has ants in her pants.

"Stupid question," I grin, looking down at her. "Let's go."

The drive to the tree farm doesn't take too long, but I do observe how much traffic clusters and stops in jams going south. There are a few cars heading back to their homes with trees stuck on the top of their cars. I'm grateful that I have a truck because the tree will be safe in the bed. It's still going to stick out from the end of my truck, and people are assholes when they drive on I-35. If the tree gets damaged, Rayanne's going to cut somebody's head off. For the sake of everyone's safety, it's best we get this tree to her apartment in one piece.

When we get to the tree farm in nowheresville Cedar Park, Rayanne jumps out of the truck and headed to the back of the lot. She's heading to the tallest trees. "Rayanne," I yell after her. "Don't you dare pick a nine footer!"

"Of course, I'm picking a nine-footer," she turns around, flashing me a grin as she walks backwards. She looks positively radiant, like a little kid in a candy store. "I finally have an apartment that lets me have a big tree."

"Fuck," I mutter. This is going to be a problem. Yeah, her apartment ceilings are tall, but she won't be able to move around a Christmas tree that big. "Don't you dare!" I yell at her, but it's to Rayanne's back, and she's positively ignoring



me. I blink once, and she's disappeared into the maze of Christmas trees. I sigh, shrugging my shoulders down, and hook my thumb into the jeans. Blonde curls flash in front of me, and I start moving towards the back, where the flash of Rayanne's hair gave her away.

"OH. My. God!" Rayanne's voice shouts out a few minutes later. It's loud and filled with excitement and anticipation. "Ohmigod, CALEB! I found it!"

"Aw, fuck," I mutter. *Here we go.* Let's test out how far back she went. "Where are you?"

"Back here!" she replies. It's far enough that I have to quicken my pace. The longer that I am separated from her, the more set she's going to be on whatever tree she's chosen, and it's going to be a fucking nightmare for me to pick up the pieces.

"MARCO!" I shout. We've played this game with Isla since we knew we could play outside by ourselves. It's now just a joke between the three of us. For a while in school, Isla included me in everything they did—because she's the best fucking sister there is in the world, and she wouldn't leave me hanging. There were some lonely days as a kid where the only people I could rely on were Isla and Rayanne.

"POLO!" Rayanne shouts, then giggles delightfully. I grin helplessly when I find her. She's a fucking beacon of light. With laughter dancing in her eyes, she makes a big *TADA* gesture at the tree with her whole body, arms extended out with jazz hands dancing, and legs spread to support her new position.

*Aw, fuck me.* I'm going to have to talk her down from this, just like I knew I would. The tree, as she predictably told me, is a nine-and-a-half-foot Fraser. The whole point of a Christmas tree, Isla has informed me of Rayanne's family insistence, is to have a shining star on the top. And if that's the case, this tree is going to barely stand without scraping the top of the ceiling. The needles fan out beautifully, but the width of the bottom of the tree is too wide. It's going to take up all the free walking space in her living room. Then there's also the

fact that this tree looks sturdy enough to knock me down on my ass and send me tumbling down three flights of stairs if I mess a step or stumble. *Not worth it.*

“No,” I say, crossing my arms.

“No?” Rayanne replies, raising an eyebrow. “Why ever not?” The final T in “not” is enunciated crisply to pronounce her disfavor. *Sorry, your Highness, we’re fighting this out.*

“Where do I begin?” I scoff with laughter.

“From the beginning.” Rayanne crosses her own arms, and the battle of reason and logic versus nostalgia and vision has commenced.

“The tree’s too fucking tall, Rayanne,” I begin at the top of my list. “You won’t be able to light up a star at the top.”

“I’ll use a bow,” she rallies.

“Ray,” I roll my eyes. “When the fuck have you ever decorated with a bow?”

“I can trim the top!” Her deflection is a point to me because Rayanne Miller has never used a fucking bow for decorating in her life.

“Then it’s going to look disproportionate, and the top will look too full and short.” I argue, knowing too well how much it matters to Rayanne. “And you won’t be satisfied with inadequate proportions.”

“Who cares?” Rayanne fires back, her arms flying up in frustration.

“You will!”

“The tree is freaking gorgeous,” Rayanne counters, stomping her foot. “It’ll look perfect in my apartment.”

“And how do you propose getting this thing up there?” I raise my own eyebrow. “Unless you’re willing to pay the farm for a pulley and prepare for a fight with the apartment complex because of all the noise you’ll make trying to get this damn thing up there. *We are not enough.*”

“I have a drolley,” she rejoins. “And you brought your straps.”

“Fine,” I retort, my arms flying up with frustration. “Where will your furniture go? This damn tree will be too big in your living room. You won’t even be able to walk through it, let alone sit and relax to enjoy it without the tree suffocating you.”

“Damn it, Caleb!” Rayanne’s eyes widen with emotion, and she’s about to go full temper tantrum on me. Honestly, I don’t know how Isla puts up with this shit because Rayanne is so fucking stubborn.

“It’s perfect,” she whispers. “It’s everything I’ve envisioned this whole year. Just... let me have this.”

Something in her tone makes me relent. It wasn’t that long ago I remember she wasn’t always allowed to make all her own choices for herself. That ex of hers was a nasty piece of work. For the sake of that woman a few years ago, I let it go.

I huff, walk towards the tree, and look at the price, which is fucking outrageous. “Seriously?”

“I can afford it,” she states, eyes turning to blue steel. Fucking hell, this woman doesn’t know when to back down, even when it’s not good for her.

“It’s a fucking scam.” I reply, snorting with disgust.

“God, you and Isla can be such assholes, you know that?” Rayanne huffs. I smirk internally because if either of us turned into a mirror, we’d be a perfect reflection of each other’s expressions. Arms crossed at our chests, an individual eyebrow raised and a look of pure stubborn contempt for the other’s logic.

“Yeah, guess it runs in the family,” I mutter, the words tasting bitter in my mouth. I didn’t mean to bring up the ghost of my father up or his actions, but the lingering consequences of those words lead back to my father and his choices. Rayanne’s eyes widen once more, and I know that she’s interpreted it that way.

“Oh, Caleb—” she softens, and that tender look in her eyes is a kick in my balls.

“It’s whatever.” I scuff my boots against the ground, conceding. “Get the fucking tree, Rayanne. It makes you happy.” I walk back to the truck so I can make sure it’s ready to go for loading the Christmas tree.

This is a reminder that Rayanne knows all my skeletons and secrets in my closet. She was there for every fucking catastrophe in my childhood, and she’s seen me walk out tall. There was a time I wasn’t sure I’d have the strength mentally to overcome the gaslighting my dad threw in our faces, trying to guilt us into believing his own unhappiness was our fault. But Isla got me through it, and Rayanne was right beside her. I reached for Rayanne’s hand for the first time when my father left us, unsure if she’d be willing to offer me comfort. But she took it without question, and that started my need for her embrace.

As we got older and got kicked around by more trauma, those touches turned to fortifying hugs that became my beacon of strength. My need for her touch is a bottomless well. Every time Isla wasn’t there for me, Rayanne was. I’m a better, stronger man for it. I learned to turn that strength into focus and precision. Without Rayanne, I wouldn’t be the man I am today.

Arms wrap around me from behind and hug my waist. Rayanne mumbles into the dip between my shoulder blades. “I didn’t mean to be a dick.”

“Yeah, I know.” I sigh and turn around to hug her properly. Her honey almond scent is intoxicating. My fingers brush her hair out of her face. The feeling of our skin flush against each other is the gentlest of grazes, but it’s a match set to flames. Touching Rayanne fuels my demand for her, and I didn’t know how much I’ve needed it until now. I resist holding her tighter to me because I know this is an embrace of friendship and nothing more. This is Rayanne, my sister’s best friend, not my consolation prize to be rewarded with strength.

I sigh, resigned.

“Sorry for being a dick too, but I stand by what I said,” I murmur against her temple. “That tree is going to be a fucking nightmare.”

“Right,” she replies, and I feel her smile grow on my chest. She lets go and I feel like Hercules when Zeus turned him into a god. “I’ll eat my words, I’m sure.”

“You will,” I reply, my own smile turning at the corners of my mouth. “And I’ll be the first one to make sure you know it.” I feel confident that when I am proven right, Rayanne will tell me so. And when she does, and I rub it in her face and she’ll take it with grace and laugh with me. It’s always been like this between us.

“Fine,” she huffs. “I need to go pay and show them where the truck is.”

“I’ll take care of the tree.” I reply. “Just take care of paying and we’ll get out of here.”

I head back to the tree and find it’s already been taken out of its stand. The workers have it laid down horizontally and are trimming the trunk for its own nourishment for when it arrives at Rayanne’s apartment. They finish a clean line across the bottom, and I begin to investigate the tree as a whole on Rayanne’s behalf. I’m trying to discover if there’s any way to make this easier before they bag it up for travel. The top could get trimmed down a few inches which might give us enough space for her to put up a star.

“Hey man, any chance we can trim this a few inches down?” I say to the guy with the hand saw. “Rayanne’s going to want to put a star on this tree that’s barely going to fit in her apartment as it is.”

He grins at me, “Sure, no problem.”

As he trims it down, I turn my head to assess how full it’ll be at the top. I find a few other places that might help shape the tree a little more to accommodate her apartment and point them out. “And is it okay if we get these trimmed down a bit too?”

“Did your girlfriend ask you to do this?” he asks, like he hears these sorts of requests all the time.

“Nah, man.” I shake my head. “She didn’t ask, and she’s just a family friend.”

He pauses from his work and turns to look at me. “She’s not your girlfriend?”

“Nope,” I reiterate. “We’ve just known each other forever.”

He shakes his head in disbelief, and I raise a brow at his interest. He takes to his work, trimming down the places that I’ve asked for. When he’s done, he purses his lips as if there’s something else he wants to say.

“What?” I ask, unable to resist the bait.

“Well, it’s just that she *should* be your girlfriend,” he says, a knowing grin spreading. “Sorry to say as much but look—we all saw your shouting match about logistics are the fighting words of a couple. And I know it’s none of my business, but I’m rather a loud-mouth with my opinions, and I had to say it.” He looks slightly sheepish at the admission, but not enough to look apologetic.

I laugh a little helplessly, because I see the point. “Regardless of what should happen,” I sigh, frustrated by the fact that this stranger sees our chemistry and Rayanne is completely clueless. “I don’t think Rayanne’s changing her mind anytime soon.”

“Do you mind helping out with this?” the tree guy asks, seemingly changing the subject. “All the other guys are busy helping customers. I’m Chris, by the way.”

“Caleb,” I reply and shake his proffered hand. “And sure, no problem.” We count together and heave the tree onto our shoulders. We find a steady pace to the truck with me leading the way.

“Do you want her to be your girlfriend?” he asks, pointedly. Fuck me, this guy is like a dog with a bone, unable to drop the topic.

“It doesn’t matter what *I* want.” I retort.

“That’s a yes then,” Chris counters.

“Fine, it’s a yes.” I sigh, because he’s coaxed my deepest wish out of me. I don’t talk about this, but since I’ve known what it means to have a girlfriend, Rayanne’s been it for me. But I’ve never whispered the thought to my best friend, not to mention that I haven’t uttered a word to Isla. She only knows of the crush—not this soul deep connection and lure that pulls me to Rayanne every time I see her. That’s another skeleton stacked in the closet that I hope is never discovered.

We arrive at the truck and lower it steadily on the bed so that the heavy end of the tree is supported in the bed with the last few feet sticking out. It looks secure, but who knows what stupid things could happen on our drive back into Austin. Making quick work of an easy job, Chris and I are left to our own devices, and I ask the question that’s been prickling at the back of my mind since he brought up Rayanne.

“What gives, man?” I ask. “Why the interest in my love life?”

“I’m a nosy bastard—I told you as much before. I’m free with my opinions when something needs to be said aloud.” He laughs, and shrugs like it’s no big deal. “But it also turns out that I finally won over my lady, and I look at you two and see us from the same position we were in a year ago.”

“Congrats, man.” I pat Chris on the back. “You want some water?”

“If you have one to spare, that’d be great.” I open the truck door and grab two water bottles and hand one to him.

“Thanks for this,” Chris says, twisting the top off and taking a swig. After a moment he asks, “Have you tried talking to her?”

“No,” I shrug helplessly. I don’t think she’s interested in me that way.”

“Oh, she’s into you,” he snorts. “She just doesn’t know it yet.”

“How do you know?” I reply, leaning back against the truck bed and turning my gaze to him.

“Something about the familiarity between you two,” Chris says. “And the way you fought. Y’all got chemistry, that’s for sure.”

“We’ve been fighting since we were kids,” I scoff dismissively. “Ray’s my sister’s best friend and we basically grew up together.” At that, Chris grins his appreciation.

“And look, I appreciate the vote of confidence about her interest.” I continue on a sigh, “But she’s never given me an ounce of encouragement to pursue anything with her.” I dig the toe of my boot in the ground.

“How much do y’all know each other now?” he asks. At my puzzled look, he continues, “Like, when was the last time y’all hung out? Was it ever just the two of you?”

“No,” I concede. “We basically only see each other when my sister’s in town.”

“Caleb, man, she doesn’t know who you are now,” Chris comments. “You need to help her out. Spend some time together so you can nudge her in the right direction. It can’t hurt, right?”

“And how do you suggest I do that?” I ask, coming to terms with the fact that it wouldn’t hurt taking advice from a man who seems to want to help me become successful. Honestly, it’s nice having someone to talk to about these feelings with. Chris is separated enough from the situation that if he perhaps sees hope for us, then maybe I can too.

“Well, y’all are hauling this tree into her apartment, right?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply, groaning, not looking forward to it.

“There’s plenty of opportunity there,” he says, tapping knowingly on his temple.

“Yeah, I’m not sure there is,” I reply, laughing.

“Open your eyes, man,” he counters. “You’ll figure it out. Lots of opportunities for falling on your asses and brushing



needles out of each other's hair. You don't know what the possibilities are, especially if you don't try." He winks at me, and before I can comment, Rayanne comes within hearing distance, putting an abrupt end to the conversation.

"Thanks for all your help today!" Rayanne offers her hand to Chris.

"No problem, miss," he says. "Enjoy your tree, and Merry Christmas."

Chris offers me his hand to shake with a knowing look that says I'm allowed hope if I want to reach out for it. He's suggesting a promise of change by simply lining up the dominoes. I don't really know what the likelihood is of this working, but he's right. It can't hurt to try. If Rayanne tells me no, then I know my answer for good, and I will have known that I made the effort. After all, I've lived in these deep feelings most of my life. Avoiding them at all costs never worked, so perhaps it's the right time to take my chances.

"It was good talking," I finally reply, offering him a small smile as we shake hands. "Merry Christmas, and thanks for the help."

"Anytime," he says. "Merry Christmas."

chapter four: rayanne



I want to be furious with Caleb, I really do. He pissed me off by telling me all the ways that my gorgeous tree is wrong for my living room. But then the *asshole* comment happened, and I couldn't help but feel like I was the dick in this situation. I don't think he meant to bring up his dad, and I certainly didn't mean to, but Arnold really did a number on Caleb growing up. I'm never going to stop being sorry anytime his dad is brought in conversation. I can't help it if I feel protective of Caleb. I've seen what it looks like when he's hurt, and I just want to make it better—if I can.

Don't get me wrong; Caleb is still the prize winner for biggest dick at the tree farm award, but after the shit he and his family have gone through, they could never really be the sorts of assholes who ruin people's lives. For all intents and purposes, Caleb is a good man, even if he has a bad temper and runs on the borderline of being a Class A Jerk. And then there is his competitive streak and unabashed opinions that

leave me and Isla yelling at him for days whenever he comes around nosing into our business. Caleb Gardiner is definitely a pain in my ass, but he's *our* pain in the ass.

Caleb's quiet in the truck on the drive back to my apartment. I'm not sure what to do with myself, because I can't really tell if he's just pissy with me for picking the perfect tree, or if something else is on his mind. I don't know if I want to start small talk or if I want to ask him about himself. Outside of our shared history and the information Isla volunteers, I honestly don't know much about him. Isla has always been a buffer between the two of us. And current silence between us in the truck is the weird and awkward kind.

Traffic is at a standstill. I kill the time by scrolling through my music. Just to find something—any inspiration. We need to get back in a good groove. Caleb and I have been to a couple of concerts together, but always in the company of a large group of friends. Still, I know that we share some common music interests—Isla's said so, but I don't know exactly where to start.

“Here,” Caleb says, breaking the silence. He tosses me his phone open for perusal. I smile at him gratefully because his Bluetooth is connected to his truck and we can immediately start our jam session.

“Where do you prefer to listen to music these days?” I ask, wondering if I should look for an app, Apple Music or something else.

Caleb shrugs. “Spotify, but pick your poison. We still have —” he checks his watch then glances out into traffic, “—forty minutes to go before we hit your exit.”

“Stupid Austin traffic.” I grumble, and Caleb chuckles at me. I open up Spotify and navigate to his liked songs.

Caleb has a wide and eclectic taste, which I bet he has Isla to thank for. I see a bit of ska, lots of punk, some metal. A lot of the music has a nostalgic touch to it. I grin helplessly as I see a lot of Panic! At the Disco, Dashboard Confessional, Fall Out Boy, and The 1975.

“Good stuff, Caleb.” I grin at him. “I’m impressed.”

“Those are my go-to these days,” he comments. “Though I’ve just discovered A Perfect Circle after going through a Tool phase a couple months ago. They’re currently on repeat.”

“Maynard Keenan is a freaking genius,” I reply, searching for *3 Libras*. When I find it, I tap to begin the song. The violins begin, soothing my soul and my heart soars with the movement of the orchestra. As Maynard moves through the verses of the song, I find myself dying with happiness just a little bit.

“Aww man.” Caleb grins back at me. “I freaking love this song.”

“Absolutely,” I agree. “The progression at the end is amazing. I feel like crying every time I hear it.” I sing the ending to make my point, and god, the release of the music feels revitalizing to my soul.

“How does that go again?” Caleb teases, laughing at me.

“Shut up,” I laugh, and thwack him on the arm.

“Heeeey! No hitting the driver while in motion!” Caleb tsks me.

“Sorry! Sorry!” I surrender, arms up.

The second verse starts, and we both follow Maynard’s words. Caleb has the voice of an angel. He follows all of Maynard’s cadences and passion. This song is heartbreaking, dynamic, and gorgeous. As we lead into the chorus, we’re both singing at the top of our lungs, Caleb plays air violin and at the buildup to the end, we’re both playing air drums and singing so loud that the bass vibrates the car. The song ends abruptly, and I quirk my lips down, disappointed. I instantly put it on repeat, and Caleb grins at me.

“We make a good team,” he says, a smile quirking on the corner of his lips. “Good call on the repeat.”

“It’s generally the appropriate reaction to hearing the end of that song. At least it’s mine.” I grin back at him, then turn back to the dimly lit screen of his phone to resume scrolling

his music. While I search for a new song we sing together—less dynamically because traffic is finally moving. I let 3 *Libras* end properly the playlist shuffles automatically to *Sucker* by the Jonas Brothers.

“Really?”

I raise an eyebrow at him, trying to hide my smile. While the Jonas Brothers are not what I call my normal jam, Isla turned me on to them. Their newer stuff is so fucking catchy, it’s hard not to move to the beat. When they came to Austin a few years ago, Isla bought tickets and made me go with her and some friends. Surprisingly, most of the audience were Isla’s and my age. To my complete shock, the concert was a fucking blast, and we had an amazing time.

“Their riffs are catchy!” Caleb laughs. “You do remember I went to the concert with y’all, right?”

“That’s right!” I yell in excitement, smacking his arm. “God, that was a good concert.”

“Yeah, it was.” Caleb replies, then to my astonishment, hits Nick’s falsetto perfectly as he leads into the chorus. The guy is a regular Sinatra, and I’m completely impressed. I sing the backup, and Caleb starts whistling.

“Oh my God, stop!” I start laughing. “When did you become such a rock star?”

“Rayanne Miller, are you giving me a compliment?”

“Fuck off,” I reply, rolling my eyes at him, and Caleb laughs at me. “That note’s not an easy one to hit. And, really, the Jonas Brothers? I’m surprised you added them to Spotify for all the world to see.”

“It’s Isla,” Caleb shrugs. “She blasts it on the radio every time we’re in the car together.”

“Or basically anytime we’re near a speaker system,” I groan, conceding the point while simultaneously rolling my eyes at Isla. “Look, I like these guys, and this song is fucking catchy. But if I keep listening to them for much longer, my soul might turn bright pink or turn into a fucking rainbow that drains my soul.”

“Yeah, rainbow souls are the fucking devil,” Caleb snorts at me. I look at him mockingly devastated, catching his eye. We both laugh, and then he starts singing again, and I—damn my eyes—start clapping along.

“Fuck this shit,” I curse the Jonas Brothers. “I need to blacken my soul some more.”

I find The Clash on Caleb’s liked songs and the car ride becomes companionable again. Caleb and I find our comfort zone, singing, poking fun at each other, and before I know it, we’re at my apartment. Caleb jumps out of his truck, and I join him.

“Here, let me.” he begins, and works on undoing the straps securing the tree. “I’m going to drag it out of the bed, and we’ll test out how much weight you can support, okay?”

“Sounds good,” I reply, eager and ready to prove that the tree’s weight isn’t bad as Caleb thinks it is. It’s big, I know. But it’s going to be gorgeous in my living room. Caleb drags it out of the bed, and I grab my keys and phone, securing them in my back pocket.

“Do you have a good spot to hold on to?” Caleb asks. “This should be good.” He’s grips the top of the tree, about a foot down from the top.

“Yeah, I got it,” I say, mimicking his hand position in the tree. His shoulders brush against mine and heat rises in my cheeks, unbidden at the touch. As we make eye contact, the lock of hair falls down his face, obstructing his vision. It’s begging me to brush it out of the way. Caleb’s lips curl into a half smile, and before I can react, he’s shifted his stance behind me. Caleb lifts the trunk of the tree, and the weight isn’t as bad as I expected. “This is good. Let’s go.”

“Hold on,” Caleb says, dropping his end of the tree on the ground.

“It’s fine, Caleb,” I groan. “Let’s just get the tree in the apartment.”

“I’m grabbing these just in case,” he replies, snatching the straps. “I don’t think we’ll need them, but I want them handy.”

“Okay Caleb,” I whine. “Let’s go!”

We take our positions and make our way to the staircase. As we ascend the first flight, it goes smoothly, but my apartment complex has narrow stairwells. The turns are sharp and awkward as we wind our way up. The bending of my arms and repositioning as Caleb navigates the corners begins to wear down my willpower. By the time we get to the middle of the second stairwell, sweat is dampening my bra, and my tank under my sweater is clinging to the small of my back.

Caleb doesn’t look much better. His face is a mask of concentration, bearing the weight of the heaviest part of the tree.

“Why are you stopping?” Caleb grunts, “This fucker’s heavy.”

“Sorry, sorry,” I apologize, fanning myself with my sweater. “It’s just my sweater. It’s getting too hot.”

“I told you,” Caleb huffs. “Why didn’t you change before?”

“I have a fucking tank on, alright!?” I snap. I haven’t forgotten that smirk he gave me at the suggestion I take off my sweater earlier this morning. He may have been right, but I’ll be damned before I admit it to him just now.

I grab the top of the tree and we drag it to the top of the second story. Caleb releases the trunk, and it lands with a heavy thunk on the ground. My hands are sticky with sap and fuzz from my sweater, which sticks to my palms.

*Great*, I groan internally. It’s gotta be done though, so I lift my sweater off. The suppressed weight of heat is lifted, and I’m instantly relieved. I attempt to brush my hands on my jeans and tuck my sweater into my elbow to secure it.

I’m about to tell Caleb I’m ready to conquer the last flight of stairs but am caught off guard by the way he’s openly staring at me. His breath is heavy from catching it, and there’s an unrestrained look of wanting in his eyes. With the way his hair falls in his face, his mouth stern with concentration, Caleb



looks like a different man. The way he's studies my exposed skin sends shivers up my spine.

I'm used to the teenager Caleb looking at me with puppy dog eyes. I'm used to the dopey kid trying to catch Isla and me unaware of his presence, surprising us in her bedroom. I'm used to the kid reaching out for my hand, seeking help.

I am not used to this full-grown man eyeing me like I'm a prized treasure. I'm not used to feeling my cheeks blush under his attention—which they most *definitely* are not. And I'm definitely not used to liking the way he studies me when my clothes come off.

What the fuck is happening?

*This is Caleb. I admonish myself. Remember? Isla's kid brother. You made a commitment to Isla first. No going back now.*

"Come on," I break the spell, and toss my sweater on the ground. "I'll come back for it."

"Yeah, okay." Caleb replies, his voice filled with sensuality. Did he just say it like that on purpose? The two words send shivers up my spine. I gather the tree in my grip and chance one more glance at him. Caleb's steady look of concentration is still laced with desire. A thought slides into place and I groan internally.

Oh.

*Oh my god.*

Has he been checking me out this whole time? Should we change positions so I'm not getting checked out by my best friend's little brother? I curse silently, wondering what it is that I've gotten myself into exactly. If I'd caught him staring at me before hauling this nine-and-a-half-foot monstrosity up the stairwell, I could have insisted upon swapping places. But it's too late now, because I'm fucking exhausted.

"Come on, Miller." Caleb groans, lifting the trunk of the tree. "Let's get this done with."

I lift up the end of my tree and carry on, but I'm so distracted that I stumble at least three times up the stairwell. I can't get over the idea that Caleb might be watching my ass every step we take to my apartment. I'm shaken by this man and the way he's been staring at me.

*This will be fine, he's Isla's kid brother. No big.*

It turns out I'm wrong, because if I see that chiseled jaw of his flex with concentration one more time, I'm seriously going to have to examine what the fuck is going on in my mind.

*Ray, get your fucking head in the game!* I admonish myself. *Now is not the time!*

"Ray," Caleb's voice is steady with concern. "Focus. We're almost there!"

"Sorry," I reply, and I steady my left hand on the railing the last few steps. When we get the tree up the stairwell, we both drop it with relief. I grab the keys from my back pocket and open the door. "I'll just grab some water, okay?"

Caleb's jaw flexes in acknowledgement as he nods, letting me know that he's heard me. I clench my fist, resisting the urge to react to that small movement. Is it just me, or is there still desire lingering in that look he's giving me?

When did I start paying attention to every small movement Caleb makes? I don't remain still, eager to retreat back to my kitchen with the excuse of doing something. I gather myself back together while I fill two cups of water.

Does Caleb like ice?

Should I even care?

*Whatever.*

I open the freezer door and throw ice in one of glasses. As I make my way back to Caleb, I find him studying the tree and the doorway.

"Here," I say, startling him. "Pick one."

Caleb takes the one without ice, which works because I like extra cold water. We down our glasses, and the tightness

of my muscles relaxes.

“Do you want more?” I ask, my voice unsure and unsteady. Nothing like my usual self. *What the fuck, Rayanne?*

“No, this is great, thanks.” Caleb says. I watch him take my cup and walk into my kitchen, placing them in the sink. Are his shoulders broader than when he arrived to pick me up this morning? And why are his jeans hanging lower than I remember?

*When did Caleb Gardiner become so sexy?*

There are so many problems making themselves apparent; my fingers are still tingling from his touch, and I love the way he just walked right into my kitchen to put the dishes in the sink. Caleb could have just handed them to me to deal with later, but he’s taken action for himself and done something nice for me in the process.

*Fuck.* That’s sexy too.

“Hey Ray,” Caleb greets me from the kitchen. “I’m going to go grab the ladder from the back of my truck. Want me to grab your sweater?”

“That’d be great.” I offer him a small smile. “Thanks.”

Caleb nods his head in acceptance, and I watch him walk out the door. Do I shamelessly check out his ass as he goes down the stairs, picks up my sweater, and heads back to the truck?

*Yes. Yes, I do.*

I’m not so blasé that I get caught by Caleb as he heads back to the apartment though. I retreat to the kitchen, grab one of the cups in the sink and fill it with water and steadily drink my way through it. I breathe in deeply and exhale, taking a moment for myself. Slowly, I feel myself come back together through the breaths and fresh water. I try to reign in the madness that is my mind and how it keeps coming back to Caleb. This time, when I tell myself Caleb isn’t sexy—that I don’t have the brain space to think of him as anything except a friend and Isla’s brother, I almost believe it.

*Almost.*

Today has been... well, it's been trouble. Spending all this time with Caleb alone is trouble. Just exactly how long has it been since I saw him? Was it last month for Thanksgiving?

That was a great day: Graham and his sister joined us for the holiday since they live in the States for work. I remember sitting across from Caleb, enjoying the meal with the combined forces of all the Gardiners and my family members in town. It was loud with ten conversations at once. In all the madness, I found small moments with Caleb that I was grateful for, whether it was shared glances as we laughed at others, or delighting in a good meal. When I dove into the chocolate pecan pie Caleb made, I remember watching him study my reaction like my opinion of the dessert was the only one that mattered.

That look is so similar to what I just experienced when I took my sweater off. I hadn't caught on then, but I understand it much better now. Caleb's feelings—this crush—it hasn't changed. He's not over it, he's just gotten better at masking his feelings.

And now I'm finding out that I actually *like* that look he gives me.

*Fuck!* I am in so much trouble.

"We have a problem, Rayanne." Caleb calls out from outside the apartment. I jump in surprise, not prepared for what will happen next. I glance up, feeling like a deer in headlights. Caleb stands taller, his shoulders broader. I take the last sip of water from my cup, then place it in the sink.

We sure do have a problem.

*God, he looks good.*

"Oh, yeah?" I reply, shaking my head again. I need to get out of my headspace now.

Caleb navigates walking around the tree with the ladder, lifting it up slightly and placing it against one of the walls in the hallway. The position of his shirt and the slight slouch of his pants reveal an angle that leads down to the v of his crotch.

My toes involuntarily curl inside my boots and I clench my thighs together. Just that little exposure of skin and I feel my body forming into putty.

*God, what would Isla think of me?* I turn away, so I don't shamelessly stare, but the image is burned into my eyes now.

"Yeah, we got a problem." Caleb replies, stepping in close and into my space. He turns so we're making eye contact and tosses my sweater at me. I hug it like it can become my support blanket. He grins at me and my heart flutters at the sweep of his hair and that troublesome smirk. Caleb's musk is distracting, and I have to restrain myself from lifting my head up to the crook of his neck so I can determine what exactly lies under his scent.

"What's that?" I ask, my voice heady with the lingering thoughts taunting me.

"I'm not sure the tree is going to fit through your doorway."

chapter five: rayanne



“**W**hat do you mean, the tree won’t fit!?” I exclaim. Gone is the thrill of that sexy musk. Gone is the insecurity. This is impossible. I couldn’t exactly measure at the tree farm, but I reviewed the size of my doorway over and over to make sure this wouldn’t happen.

“I mean,” Caleb begins, rather impatiently, “that the bottom of your tree is too fucking full to fit through the door.”

“That’s impossible,” I reply, my anger feeding off Caleb’s impatience. “It has to fit. I bought one that would.”

“Yeah, sweetheart, this isn’t a single-family home,” Caleb retorts. “It’s a fucking apartment complex, and the door to this apartment is not as wide as a five bedroom in Westlake. Your tree is just too fucking big to get inside.”

The *sweetheart* is not a term of affection, and I’m not stupid enough to assume it is. All the same, I have to hold my composure as a tiny thrill tightens in my gut. I have to resist

the urge to get in his face, because I don't know what would happen if I did. Neither of us backs down, and the tension between us escalates. I can't tell if shoving or—dare I say it—kissing him might happen first, but I'm not about to find out. *Not that I want to kiss Caleb or anything...*

Definitely not.

“You're wrong,” I declare. “You have to be. Isn't there some ordinance about door size regulation in Austin? There has to be.” I shove him out of the way and examine the problem myself. I have an eye for creating vision and selling the hell out of it. This is what I do for a living, and I can make this damn tree fit in my apartment.

Admittedly, I can understand why Caleb thinks it won't fit. Even contained in the net, the tree is much bigger at the bottom than it looks. I retrieve one of the measuring tapes Isla left lying around my apartment on the kitchen island and pace back to the entryway. Caleb smirks at me, confirming my suspicions. I may not have had a tape at the farm, but this beauty was here with me before I left this morning, and I know my measurements. This is just for ceremony for Caleb fucking Gardiner, current pain in my ass. I take Caleb's hand and hold it in place as I pointedly take the door's measurements.

“Stay.” I command, directing Caleb. I pull tight on the measuring tape and crouch down to be precise. “Thirty-two inches. Let's look at the tree.”

Caleb is now openly entertained by my need for precision. We measure the width of the tree with the tape, and even though it looks like a tight fit, I know it'll work. “It's going to be fine Caleb.” I smile up at him. “It's within an inch difference, but it'll go through. We may have to shove really hard though.”

He laughs and offers me a hand up. I take it, and Caleb lets go once I'm steady on my feet, but I feel the impression of his hand around mine. I brush my hand against my jeans to remove the feel of his hand, but the sensation sticks.

*Don't think about this too hard, Rayanne. Don't think about how those smooth callouses felt warm and comforting.*



*Don't—*

*Stop it!*

I look up at Caleb watching me, smirking. Is he just messing with me? I'm beginning to suspect that his impatience is all just a show. Still, Caleb wants me, even when he argues and gets in my face. My new awareness of him isn't doing me any favors, because now that I know, a knife could cut the sexual tension in the air between us.

I stand taller, resisting acknowledgment. I'm not here for this internal dilemma: Caleb has one job, and that's to help me get my tree into my apartment and secured in the tree stand. I don't need these extra feelings creeping up on me, attempting to slowly take over my mind.

*Not now.*

“Come on,” he grins. “Let's shove this tree through the doorway.” We reposition the tree so that we can push it through, me in the front guiding the way.

“Hold on a second,” I say, dropping the tree and looking at my living room. I shift around my side and coffee tables and Caleb, catching on, joins me in time to help lift the coffee table and move it to the side.

“Do you think we need to move the couch?” I muse, keeping my focus, my gaze, and thoughts on the task at hand.

“There's no way that the tree and both of us are fitting in this apartment without moving it.” Caleb replies. I huff in protest as we move it towards my kitchen. Caleb surveys the living now very open living room. “Where's your tree stand?”

“It's in the closet.” I reply. “I'll go get it.” I leave to get the tree stand from my bedroom closet, and when I return Caleb quirks his lips with amusement, then breaks into laughter.

“Rayanne, what the fuck is that?” he's asks.

“It's my tree stand,” I reply, refusing the bait.

“Yeah, for a six-footer,” he answers, “not this monstrosity.”

“It is not a monstrosity!” I reply, stomping my foot.

“Come on, let’s get the beast in here,” Caleb says, snorting once more.

“Fuck off, Gardiner.” I mutter, and Caleb laughs. I position the tree stand in front of the bay windows, which look out to a gorgeous view of the ever-growing Austin city skyline. It wasn’t this tall ten years ago, but with the way Austin’s city population keeps growing, it won’t change anytime soon. Still, it’s a beautiful sight, and I’ve daydreamed about this scenery with my perfect Christmas tree in the foreground for months.

“Today, Ray.” Caleb singsongs at me while snapping his fingers impatiently at me. “Let’s get this fucker in here, eh?”

I head back to Caleb, annoyed at his finger snapping. When I get back to him, I shove his shoulder. “Don’t snap your fingers at me, asshole.” I grumble. I snap my fingers back at him, and he laughs.

“Do you like that, Caleb Gardiner?” I demand, hoping he hates it as much as I do.

“I had to get your attention somehow.” Caleb stills my hand with his, but the warmth that spreads through my body is as unwelcome as it is pleasant. I scoff at his argument and the swirling emotions shifting inside me, but Caleb keeps moving to the base of the tree. “Right, on my count, we’ll pull and push the tree through your door at the same time.”

“I’m pulling.” I confirm, also moving into position. Caleb offers me such a lazy, knowing grin that my cheeks flush pink. I ignore my embarrassment as I bend my knees down and position one hand in front of the other at the top of the tree. *One... two...*

“Three!” Caleb shouts, and he shoves as I pull the tree into the front of my foyer. The force with which Caleb pushes the tree into the apartment also pushes me down on my ass and I’m lost under the tree. “Fuck! Rayanne!”

I burst into laughter and instantly regret it. Needles are in my face, my hair, and my mouth. My shirt is shoved up and the sharpness of the tree needles prickle my skin. Caleb’s

footsteps approach and he tosses the tree aside and offers me a hand. He steadies me with a strong grasp on my forearms, then he looks me over once I'm steady. I tug my shirt down and spit pine needles from my mouth.

"Jesus, Rayanne." Caleb runs his fingers through my hair, dislodging green needles. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I reply, unable to control my giggling. "God, I must look like the Christmas Tree Mistress from Hell."

"Nah," Caleb beams down at me with a wide, generous smile dancing with open amusement. There's nothing cynical or biting in his glance, and my breath catches. His hands are gently woven into my hair and the sides of his eyes are crinkled with laughter. Caleb's hair falls in his eyes, and that base instinct I have to brush his hair out of his eyes tests my every reserve.

There's a loud, busy energy about Caleb that doesn't always match the man I see. It comes from the need to keep everything light, I suspect. He edged close to destruction a few years ago, making both Isla and me worried. That loud, questioning, cynical side Caleb showcases could be some form of deflection for any feelings he wants to keep close to his sleeve. There isn't much still about Caleb for the most part, but when he finds those moments, I know they are precious to him. Just as the precision needed for baking helps him find that stillness for his mind. I haven't seen it for myself, but Isla's told me several times.

The air settles between us as our eyes lock on each other. His hands remain curled in the tips of my hair and his gaze steady on me. This moment has calmed between us, and we're quiet together. He's slowed down and settled to one task. Caleb is simply breathtaking in his stillness.

*I'm the task. I consider internally. He's tending to my well-being. Is this what it would always be like between us?*

The thought is unbidden, but it's made its mark. Like so many moments throughout the day, I'm beginning to consider the fact I don't actually know Caleb Gardiner very well. I'm beginning to suspect that I have no inkling of how deep those

feelings Caleb has for me really are, and I'm not sure how much I want to accept the depth of those feelings pointed in my direction.

When Caleb breaks away from me, the space between us is tangible. In haste, I look around for something to do and my eyes settle on the base of a tree in my front room.

*Oh God...*

It looms large in my living room, even still contained in the netting. I run back to the tree stand and where I've positioned it, then move it about four inches forward. Is that enough? I scoot it up another two inches, then step back, trying to predict the space needed for this overwhelming tree.

"Rayanne," Caleb begins, and I turn to him. "Is the tree stand in position?" In the time that I've been recalculating the tree size and positioning it in front of the window, Caleb has centered himself over the tree and is slowly inching it back towards me.

"Put that down!" I yell at him. "Don't be a fucking idiot. We can drag it to the base then lift it up into the stand." Caleb scoffs as he singlehandedly shoves and drags the tree through the rest of the apartment, despite my protestations. He rotates it with ease, leaving me with my mouth gaping open. That was a seriously impressive show of sheer physical strength.

"Are you going to be able to support the weight of it while I lock the tree into the stand?" Caleb asks, brow raised in question.

"Yeah," I reply, "It shouldn't be that hard."

"You're going to have to keep it still, alright?" Caleb says, a cheeky smile flirting on his lips.

"Yeah, I got it." I say, snorting with impatience. We both push the tree up and he maneuvers the tree to stand. He rises immediately to reposition the tree and stands back.

"Here." he begins, and his body envelops mine from my back as he positions my hands for securing the tree. Caleb's body is warm, with those large and smoothed calloused hands surround mine. The heat of his touch spreads through my

body, and I have to steady my breaths to fight clenching my legs together.

“You have to stay absolutely still,” Caleb murmurs, leaning down. His mouth is far too close for comfort. He positions my hands for the right placement to keep the tree straight. Caleb’s own hands are huge and envelop mine. I move my hands further into the netting and hold tighter for a steadier placement and reposition my legs to support my new position. I clear my voice, trying to dislodge Caleb.

“Yeah, Caleb—I got it.” I snap, louder than I intend.

“Good. Stay there,” he replies, tone still dubious about my grip. He leans down to turn the first screw into the trunk. The full heat of his body rests on my side, and I hug the tree to fight the sensation of his touch. My cheeks burn red as I realize that if we readjusted our positions, his face would rest right at my crotch. I tighten my grip on the tree as I try not to examine why exactly my legs clench together.

Caleb is focused on his task, but his insistent touch seduces me with unexpected warmth and is doing incredible things to my imagination. He raises his eyes to me with a look of steady concentration. He rests his chin on my thigh, and instead of dismissing his puppy dog eyes like I might have before, they become endearing to me. Ridiculous urges tell me to call off help for the tree so I can discover how many other ways he can touch my thighs. What would those broad hands feel like, resting high on my legs? I gasp quietly, trying to control my spiraling thoughts.

Spoiler alert: it’s not working.

“Ray, you gotta keep the tree still.” Caleb lectures, a knowing smile teasing me.

“I am.” I snap back.

“No, you’re not,” he says. “It keeps swaying side to side.”

“Sorry!” I reply, hugging the tree tighter, praying that it will stay in place. I lean my head in to keep it steady, and Caleb works as quickly as he can around the tree to secure it. When the torture is finished, we both stand back.

“Ray,” Caleb says, tone amused and sardonic. “You’re going to have a tree falling out of that stand any minute.”

“The hell I am,” I retort, definitely sharper than I intended. Whatever magic Caleb has woven into the moment has disappeared as he begins insulting my tree and its stand.

“If it lasts longer than two hours in that stand without falling, I’ll be shocked.” Caleb pronounces, nothing short of sarcastic.

“Well, it’s positioned straight, right?” I demand. “It’s not going to fall?”

“Of course, it’s not going to fall,” Caleb scoffs. “I’ve been putting up Christmas trees for ten years.” The tree is straight, and for all his questioning, it looks fine. Caleb begins to laugh.

“What?” I ask. “The tree’s sturdy.”

Caleb shakes his head and begins moving my furniture back into place. I lend a hand with the coffee table and couch. Furniture in place, Caleb gestures at the tree. It overshadows the rest of the living room, and I haven’t even cut the netting off yet. He raises an eyebrow at me in question, but I refuse to acknowledge it.

Instead, I head back into the kitchen, grab my scissors, and begin releasing the tree from its netting. I start at the base and work my way up until I’m about a third of the way from the top. More than a head taller than me, Caleb smirks, grabs the scissors and finishes the job. He refuses to move out of my space; his arms reach higher as he cuts the netting away. With each snip of the scissors, his body brushes against mine, and the raw connection between us begins to weave a sort of magic between us once more.

Caleb looks down at me when he finishes. Indulgence dances in his eyes and his smile is so inviting. He leans down, and I swear to God, he’s going to kiss me. It’s etched there, right on Caleb’s stupid face. Clearly entertained, he isn’t holding back his desire for me, but I’m not ready to accept his feelings, let alone act on them. Between the buildup of my unwanted feelings and Caleb Gardiner just being *here*, my

stamina with resisting his charm may not last much longer. I escape to the kitchen and fill up a pitcher with water, and Caleb—damn his eyes—follows me and steadies the pitcher in my hands as I attempt to fill it with water.

“Ray,” he breathes my name out, and god, it’s delicious. Full of wanting and desire, the syllable resonates through my body, and I want to look up. When I don’t respond, he brushes hair out of my eyes and picks out a few remaining needles. “You’re a mess.” It’s an excuse to keep touching, and I’m itching to give into the game he’s playing.

*You can't. I reprimand. This is Isla's little brother.*

“Caleb,” I say, closing my eyes. I have to shut this down fast. His touch is so inviting and he’s so close, but if I look up at him, he’s going to fucking kiss me. I’m not prepared to open that door. I still the movement of his hands in my hair with my own.

“We can’t do this.” I finally breathe out.

“Do what?” he asks, a smile in his tone. “We aren’t doing anything.”

*What a fucking liar.*

“Caleb,” I try again, more insistent this time. I drag his fingers from my hair and release them gently. “Thank you for the help. I really couldn’t have gotten my tree up without you.”

*But you have to go.*

The look Caleb gives me is nothing short of affection: attentive, kind, and patient. His attention is focused and singular. The open affection is so... weird. I’m not used to being the center of attention—not like this. I shut my eyes, willing the man in front of me to turn back into that awkward preteen I knew how to handle, but it’s no good.

Caleb isn’t a kid anymore.

“Fine,” he says playfully, and steps out of my space. Relief washes over me. “I’ll see you when the tree falls over.”

“The tree isn’t falling over!” I stomp my foot with anger, feeling too frustrated to care about that indecent, perilous moment where I might have begun to fall under Caleb’s spell.

*My tree is fine. It’ll be just fine.*

“Keep the ladder for decorations.” he says and messes up my hair like a stupid kid brother. Needles fall down my shirt, and I swat at him in retaliation. “Call me when shit falls apart.” He winks at me and opens the door.

“Fuck off, Gardiner, the tree is fine!” I yell back at him. Caleb laughs as he closes the door and I’m tempted to throw something at him to make my point. Instead, I curse out loudly and walk back to my kitchen to fill the tree with water. When I’m finished with the task, I stand back in my living room to take in the tree and immediately start cursing in fluent sailor again. The tree is just *too* fucking big, even without decorations.

Motherfucking Caleb, I’m going to bloody kill him.

*Wait.*

*Maybe I can fix it.*

Perhaps if I rearrange the furniture, I can create more space. I try a few arrangements, moving the big furniture around so frequently that I’m a hot sweaty mess. Since it’s just me, I blast the AC and strip down to my underwear. A puddle of tree needles falls at my feet, and I groan at all the different messes that need to be cleaned up.

*Whatever,* I groan internally. *I’ll fix it later.* I have bigger fish to fry at the moment.

No matter the layout of my furniture, it’s all a fucking catastrophe. The tree takes up all of my walking space, even if I shift it to the side. The best variation features my couch facing the window and one of my chairs next to the tree, with the other kitty corner to the left, but my living room is simply all too confining.

The tree will be beautiful when it’s decorated, but right now I’m too exhausted to consider the task of even stringing the lights. I curse Caleb again, because he’s right and I’m



wrong. But I'll be damned if I'm saying a word to him about that.

chapter six: rayanne



A resounding whoosh disrupts in the air, followed by a loud echo of clunks clanging against hard surfaces, and then a strange sweeping motion. Melodic bells chime as the last note of the peculiar song, and I sit up in bed, blinking stupidly. I turn my head to the side, listening as closely as I can; the tinkling bells transform into sounds of glass plopping, then breaking. I stand up immediately, panic building at the odd symphony reverberating through my apartment.

*Tinkling bells crashing?* In my sleep hazed-state, I'm not even sure I know what that means. I fumble into my closet, grab my combat boots and stumble into them. When I walk past the table beside my bed, I curl my fingers reflexively around my phone and AirPods. As I turn the corner into my living room, the tinkling glass makes a lot more sense.

Time has slowed as I gaze at my magnificent, half-dressed Christmas tree completely turned horizontal, landing it's

resting place on my coffee table and my living room couch. The decorations I so meticulously placed in an exact location last night are all bouncing precariously from the Christmas tree. The sweet ring of bells reveals themselves to be the ornaments that have lost their place from the force of falling off the tree. I wince as I watch the Christmas candles topple out of their holders. The sound of trickling water catches my attention, and I watch with horror as the water creeps closer to me. The Christmas lights I obsessively placed are now half immersed in water.

I realize, very quickly, that the dreams this tree once promised is now quickly becoming a thing of nightmares. As time speeds back into real time, reality taps me smartly on the ass, and I'm hurled from the Twilight Zone.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" I curse, running into action towards the wall, then pulling the plug on the fairy lights. "Fuck!" I stamp towards my linen closet, grabbing every towel I have to soak up the water. God, if this flood ruins the carpet, I'm entirely fucked. Even with panic rising in my body, I take the time to exhale slowly and calculate the best locations for towels. Ornaments crunch under my boots as I place each towel, and I wince involuntarily.

*Fuck. What do I do next?*

I really thought it would be okay. I thought I had this tree under control, with it standing in place for three days. I expected that the next time I saw Caleb, I'd tell him I told you so and that he was wrong and could laugh in his face. But as I take in my too large Christmas tree, the sight of just how small the tree stand is becomes blatantly obvious. Laughter bubbles up, coming out bitter.

Fucking Caleb Gardiner. I'll be damned if I call him for help. I can't handle his knowing smirk at the moment. I don't need the knowing glares or cynical remarks waiting for me if I actually call him now. I do the next best thing: I call Isla. As I tell Siri to dial her number, I check my phone for the time. It's three o'clock in the afternoon in London. It'll be fine. Girl code dictates all emergency calls be answered at any time of the day.

“Ray?” Isla asks, brows furrowed, instantly noting my distress. “Are you okay?”

“I am not *fucking okay*.” I moan, dragging my fingers through my hair. “Look at this fucking mess I’m in!” I change the camera point of view to show the god damned catastrophe, and I hear her gasp.

“Ray!” Isla’s shocked intonations make me show everything to her. “Ray, turn the phone around.” I whine involuntarily, stomping my foot with distress like a child in a tantrum. “First off—are you okay?” Isla demands.

“I’m fine.” I admit tersely. “But my apartment is not. Jesus Isla, what the fuck do I do about these carpets!?”

“Did you get towels yet?”

“Yeah,” I reply, flipping the camera view to show the apartment. “I’ve done what I can to prevent the worst of it, but the towels are already soaking up the water, and there are crushed ornaments everywhere.”

“Rayanne?” It’s Graham chiming in. Of course, he’s with her. What did I expect? She’s in London meeting his family and friends, so of course he’s here for this disaster.

“Hey Graham.” I deadpan.

“Hey,” I hear the catch of amusement in his tone. I know how devastatingly handsome that grin is, so I pull my phone back into face range so I can see it. Graham towers over Isla, both sharing mirrored expressions of concern.

“Are you safe?” Graham asks. “Are you wearing shoes?”

“I have my combat boots on.” I reply, then point my camera at my feet with my mismatched combat boots and pajama pants.

“Good.” Graham sounds relieved. “How big is the tree? I ask, because you’ll need to get it off the furniture and floor as soon as possible.”

“It’s uh...” I stall, exhaling a deep breath slowly. I might be getting a lecture from Isla at any moment by now. Why I thought it was a good idea to call her, I’ll never know.

“What did you do?” Isla’s tone is slightly accusatory as she narrows her eyes at me, knowing full well that I can get obsessive with my Christmas decorations. It’s a family trait, alright? I can’t help it.

“What do you mean, *what did I do?*” I narrow my eyes in return. “I don’t think I like that tone, Isla Gardiner.”

“You know exactly what the fuck I’m talking about,” Isla replies, raising a brow at me. “Your tree is now part of the furniture. I know how your mind works, missy. Did you balance out the decorations when putting them on the tree?”

“No.”

“Did you overwater the Christmas tree?”

“...Maybe.”

I didn’t think too hard about the extra water I added to my tree stand last night, but perhaps that was the literal tipping point? I fucking sigh.

“How big is that tree, Ray?” Isla asks, and the sound of her voice makes me look at the camera. Isla and Graham look at me with solemn grimaces in anticipation to my answers.

“It’s, uhh—” I begin. “Stupidly big.”

“Fuck, Rayanne.” Isla sounds exasperated. “How big? What exactly did you do?”

“I got a fucking Christmas tree—that’s what!” I exclaim with defense.

“Let me see it again.” Isla sounds resigned.

“Look it’s fine, I’ll figure it out.” I deflect, not wanting to admit to another Gardiner that I fucked up. Even after three days, I’m still adjusting to how large this Christmas tree looms in my apartment. I had to shove the furniture around and pull the tree farther from the window so I could place the lights on correctly. It took me two days and that godforsaken ladder Caleb left me. I’m grateful that it was easily accessible, but also deeply annoyed that he seemed to know that I’d need it for decorating. I huff in exasperation.

“Show me the goddamned Christmas tree,” Isla demands. “Please tell me you did not buy a nine footer. Your ceilings are tall, but they aren’t that tall. It’s barely going to fit—”

“It’s actually nine and a half feet,” I grumble, then huff.

“Rayanne Lee Miller!” Isla yells, and I think I actually hear her foot stomp on the ground in London. “Stop delaying and show me the damn tree.”

I cave in with a devastated sigh and turn the FaceTime footage to show the tree in my living room again.

“God damnit, Ray.” Isla sounds furious. “Why the fuck would you buy such a big Christmas tree?”

“Because it’s beautiful?” I offer.

“Rayanne,” Graham observes with such delicate precision so he doesn’t sound amused, “You do understand that tree is taking up half your living room, right?”

“Fuck off,” I grumble, and Graham chuckles. “Just tell me how to get this asshole tree up off the furniture, please. I’ll also accept advice for making sure my landlord doesn’t evict my ass because of this catastrophe.”

“How exactly did you get this tree in your apartment?” Isla grins with amusement.

“Caleb helped,” I reluctantly admit.

“Caleb?” Isla’s all too familiar amused tone makes me grimace. Her brows rise above her eyebrows as she looks at Graham, and they share a knowing look I do not like at all.

“Look—Niels and Thomas are out of town with their families, and mom and dad headed back to Copenhagen for Christmas a week and a half ago,” I sigh. “I literally had no one else, since you were in Arizona working...”

“So, you called Caleb?” Isla’s amusement is clear. Girl code clearly dictates brothers are off limits, but I’ve always had the sense that Isla wouldn’t mind if I broke this rule. “Caleb, my little brother?”

“He’s the only choice I have available to assist me at this time,” I grumble.

“Ray—you do know the man would literally do anything for you, right?” Graham asks. Isla’s smile is wide, and I’m ready to tap the red button, ending the call.

*Yes, I know.* I know with the new seeing eyes that understand *just* how much Caleb cares for me. And this time, I am aware that my position on the matter is shifting, and I’m not entirely comfortable with the new feelings growing inside of me. I’m aware, that this is my best friend’s little brother, someone I’ve watched grow up. I’m aware of how much we’ve encountered each other in the past and the feelings that are catching up with me.

*I’m aware.*

“Look,” I sigh. The delay in my reply has Isla looking at Graham with surprise, and he nods, acknowledging it too. Whatever they’ve discovered in my silence, I don’t want to know. I move on quickly before they can say another word. “If you two lovebirds can’t help me figure this shit out, I’ll do it on my own. I just need to get this tree off my furniture. I don’t need Caleb—”

“The physical body weight of that tree suggests otherwise,” Graham notes, rather unironically. I’d punch him on the shoulder for those implications unspoken if he were here.

I’m really about to push that end call button when Isla and Graham have an unspoken conversation, and he smiles. “I’ll let you two sort this out. Ray, I wish you luck.”

“Bye,” I reply, the bitterness of my tone not quite hidden.

“Babes,” Isla begins, voice tentative. “You know that even if you could get the tree up yourself, it’s going to take all day to get this shit cleaned up, right?”

“Yes,” I sigh.

“And your towels are likely absorbed to maximum capacity—if not now, then they will be, certainly very soon?”



Isla uses her soothing voice that always seems to work magic on me.

“Probably,” I sigh.

“And you’ll be spending all day alone doing shit work when you know you have to replenish what’s lost, right?” Isla’s brow raises with the leading question, and I fucking take the bait.

“Yeah.” I sigh, resigned.

“Then call Caleb.” Isla urges.

“Do I have to!?” I whine. “God, he’s going to be such an asshole about this. You should have seen him Isla—”

“Caleb knows exactly what your family is like with Christmas—”

“—And what does that mean?!” I demand.

“Rayanne,” Isla rolls her eyes at me. “Don’t be daft. Your whole family is renown in Austin for their household decorations when it comes to Christmas. *We* all know what you grew up with. And *you*, Rayanne Lee Miller, are a romantic. We only have a week to go before Christmas, and the fact that you don’t have your Christmas decorations up now is most likely eating you alive.”

“I really hate that you know me this well.” I grumble.

“Look lovey,” Isla says. “I wish I could be there to help, but—”

“You’re with Graham,” I cut her off. “You’re living your best life with that gorgeous Englishman of yours.”

“I am.” Isla beams in the way I only associate with Graham these days. God, she’s so much happier with him. I impulsively wish for my own Graham to comfort me in this time of need.

“How’s it going?” I ask, dying to know.

“Nice try,” Isla looks at me accusingly. “While I’m thrilled to be here, and while I love meeting all of Graham’s friends and family, that is not why you called.”

*Damn.* I thought I could get away with that diversion.

“Ray,” Isla begins, tentatively. “Talk to me. Did something happen with Caleb?”

“Not really?” I sigh, and the question in my tone gives me away.

“What happened?” Isla asks, eyes dancing with entertainment.

“*Nothing!*” I exclaim. “—At least not really. But it’s been a while since I’ve seen Caleb and...”

“*And!?*” Isla’s unconcealed excitement digs in my side.

“*Why* are you so excited?” I grumble. “He’s your brother, and you know what girl code dictates.”

“Rayanne,” Isla says, with a cool, steadying tone. “That was always your rule—not mine. Has something shifted?”

I sigh, caught between my need to sort this shit out and hide from the feelings that are beginning to curl their claws into me. Tuesday was an intense revelation, if only because I finally understood what I saw when I caught Caleb looking at me. And my physical reaction to the man gazing at me with a man’s desire is unsettling. Caleb has grown up well, and I noticed all the changes.

“*It did!*” Isla is triumphant.

“Isla,” I hesitate. “I don’t know about this. We’ve known each other for so long, and he’s—”

“Honestly, I don’t care,” Isla interrupts. “Look, I never missed how y’all found ways to support each other when I couldn’t be there. You two have always worked well together. I like you and Caleb together.”

“I don’t know,” I falter. “I don’t like spending time alone with him. I don’t know what will happen if we continue to spend more time together.” Isla’s grin is triumphant at that revelation. “Isla!” I moan.

“Look babes, I got your back either way.” Isla soothes. “I love you both. And whether you like it or not, you need Caleb

right now. Your *apartment* needs help maintaining this disaster. And if you want the Christmas vision in your dreams, you're going to need clean, then replace anything that's been damaged."

I sigh, resigned. "Fine."

"Do me a favor, Ray," Isla asks. "Ask yourself what you want. Whatever's changing, don't hide from it—that's not the Rayanne I know. Forget about me, forget about Caleb, and just focus on you. If you find yourself in a position where you don't want to fight the chemistry between y'all, then don't. You don't need my blessing, but you have it."

"Isla—"

"I mean it." Isla promises, cutting off my interruptions. "You deserve happiness, and if you think you can find it with Caleb, I'm okay with it, alright?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "Thanks for the love advice—but I don't need it."

*I really needed it.*

"Good." Isla replies, cutting me a look that tells me she knows exactly what I need. "Call Caleb. If he's an asshole about it, I'll kick his ass later."

I smirk, "I can take his shit. Thanks, Isla. I love you."

"Love you too babes," Isla blows me a kiss. "Take care of you, and that absurdly huge Christmas tree of yours."

"Yeah, you know—" I call out, belatedly with panic. "I don't freaking need Caleb freaking Gardiner!" God, I hope that it's true. The last thing I hear is my best friend's laughter and I visibly grimace. She clearly thinks I'm bullshitting.

*I can do this shit on my own, right?*

Right.

I work for an hour in vain, attempting to stabilize the Christmas tree in a standing position. The only words that come out of my mouth are explicit and indelicate. At first, the tree's weight seems manageable, that it isn't too heavy, but the

height of it damns me to failure. There is just simply too much tree and too little of me. I carefully sweep what ornament pieces I can off the floor and trash my pjs in the process. The attempts I make to move the tree only get more needles in my hair. I know I'm a fucking mess. I sigh, finally giving up, and sit my ass on the side of the couch not occupied by the tree. I take deep calming breaths, attempting to focus my brain on relaxing. And there, at the forethought of my mind, is Caleb freaking Gardiner.

Isla and Graham always offer their words and advice with the best of intentions. It's their nature to be generous, but the conversation about Caleb makes me visibly tense and undo all the work in relaxing that I've attempted. I close my eyes, thinking childishly that if I do so, it means I don't have to face him—or the budding tension and change of feelings growing inside.

Right?

Isla has all but gone and told me to be indulgent, to claim Caleb if I want to. And for fuck's sake, I love that woman like my sister from another mister, but I'm barely coming to terms with the fact that I *do* find Caleb attractive—or that I might have interest. The version of Caleb that has settled into my mind is that of the man he's always meant to be, and that's who he's become. God forgive me because that man is fucking eye candy and I know I can rely on him. It's all comforting and disarming at once. I sigh, discontentedly, unsure of where my thoughts carry me.

In indecision, I open my eyes, only to behold the chaos in front of me. I've barely made a dent in the cleaning. Graham and Isla are right: I can't do this on my own. Can I swallow my damn pride though, and accept Caleb's help? I know in his heart that he is a good man, but I'm not sure I can handle the mockery and justification that'll come from him, should I get his help. He was waiting for the tree to fall down, and prove the point that I was wrong, and he was right. I don't think my ego can handle that shit.

I tap my phone open, find Caleb's contact info, and note his personal cell phone number. I smile, half amused, because

that number hasn't changed in eleven years. The essence of his character has remained the same since I first met Isla in elementary school. He may have struggled to make good choices a few years ago, but he has endured those challenges and come out stronger on the other side. I tap on his number, sighing with utter exhaustion. I may not have to make any decisions about where my heart is involved now, but I do have to get this mess cleaned up.

My heart sputters as the phone rings.

And rings.

And rings.

chapter seven: caleb



It's mid-morning on Friday, and I'm deeply immersed in the process of creating desserts for New Year's Eve. After I've worked through the weekend, I'm going to present the options our top investor and Luc, our head chef and owner on Monday.

The current dessert I'm working on is sfogliatella. It's an Italian pastry layered like a croissant but built like a log and filled with ricotta cream. The shape finishes as a lobster's claw and is ridiculously labor intensive. I anticipate Luc's praise, knowing the labor I've put into this dessert. This sort of pastry I excel at that got me hired right out of school. Evan's working on the ricotta filling while James is playing with the pulled sugar designs that will finish the plate. It'll be completed with a mint gelato that I'll start later tonight.

I spiral the pastry on a rolling pin secured in a bowl so I can pull it out as needed. While I roll the dough into a log, I spread out the thin pastry so I can cover it in butter, which will

give it those perfected flaky layers of sfogliatella needs. The process takes an endless patience which is what I need to calm my mind. AirPods in my ears, I'm jamming out to some Bad Religion as I slowly roll the pastry. Evan comes over with a spoonful of the cream. I open my mouth to taste test it, which is nearly perfect.

"Just add a little more lemon," I advise, pulling out my AirPod, then hand him the spoon back. "It should balance out the raspberry. We don't want too sweet."

"You got it boss," Evan salutes me with the spoon and returns to his station.

My phone rings, but I'm covered in butter up to my elbows, and I'm so far in the zone that I wouldn't answer it, anyway. I leave my phone out though, just in case. I haven't heard from Rayanne in three days, and I'll admit I'm impressed that the tree has lasted this long in that absurdly small base of hers.

I snort as I recall how utterly ridiculous Rayanne looked. Her hair was an absolute mess, needles stuck throughout her thick blonde curls; her tank riding up and her skin sticky from the sap. She was fucking radiant.

I want nothing more than to test out Chris' theory. The difference between the way Rayanne looked at me at the beginning of the day compared to when she was yelling at me at the end as I walked out the door nearly gave me the confidence to push it another step forward. I was so tempted to step back into her apartment and coax a kiss out her. I'm sure afterwards there might have been a punch or a shove against me had I done so, but I didn't want to risk the possibility of her shutting me out.

My phone starts ringing again, and I grin in victory. I continue my steady pace with the sfogliatella. If my phone's ringing at 11:30 on a Friday morning, it's most definitely Rayanne in a tree related catastrophe.

I'm about halfway through the roll when my phone rings for a third time in twenty minutes. The tree has definitely



fallen over. I call out Siri's name from my AirPods telling her to text Rayanne.

"Hey Rayanne," I dictate. "Currently elbow deep in butter for work. I'll call back soon."

Evan and James study me with raised brows of surprise. They know the deal, so I catch them up on what's going on with Rayanne's Christmas tree. I check in on their progress once more, and James offers to make the gelato in case Rayanne needs me.

When the log is finished, and I'm as scrubbed clean as I'll ever be, I step outside into the cool breezy air of a December afternoon. It's actually chilly enough to need a warm jacket this year, which is a Christmas miracle in itself. It might even be cold enough to get a light dusting of snow if we ever get the clouds of perspiration for it. My mind drifts to kissing Rayanne in the snow, but I pull back the daydream.

As much as I enjoy envisioning Rayanne's lips on mine, the truth is that when I started testing out Chris' theory on Tuesday, the results were as effective on me as they were on Rayanne. When I positioned my body in her space, or touched her hair as an excuse to feel those thick curls in my fingertips, I felt Rayanne's walls breaking down. I saw—with my own eyes—the moment she started looking at me different. I don't know how she felt about it, but there was an immediate difference. The air between us became taut with tension. If she had been ready for a kiss, she would have gone after it.

No, I don't need to daydream anymore. I just need to see Chris' theory through.

I tap on her name to see what's going on. "Rayanne?" I ask in greeting.

"Caleb? Thank fuck—" she sounds near hysterical. I receive an invitation for FaceTime and accept it. Rayanne's a fucking mess, one side of her body is utterly soaked; her pajamas plastered to her body. There's a horizontal tree in the background, and towels are strewn about everywhere, clearly soaked through.

“What happened?” I ask, a smirk escaping unintentionally. I know what’s happened, but I need to hear it from her.

“It was fine,” she swears. Rayanne sounds cool and appears calm, but it’s clear she’s struggling with composure. “But I might have filled the tree with too much water last night and I didn’t quite finish all my decorations and they might have been forward facing, and there must have been enough weight on the it from the candles and ornaments and garlands—and fuck!” She says all of this so fast she has to interrupt herself to take a deep breath. “The crash happened this morning and woke me up. The tree, the lights, and candles, they’re all covered in water.”

“Fuck,” I hiss. “Show me.” Any inclination I have to boast that I was right and she was wrong goes out the window when I hear the Christmas lights are covered in water.

Rayanne flips the phone over, and it’s as she’s described: the tree’s weight sags against the floor and the coffee table. The top of the tree is leaning against her couch. She’s done some rearranging of the furniture, I see. But there are ornaments smashed into fine shards that are embedded in the carpet, and candles are tossed carelessly everywhere. What floor space isn’t covered in towels have heavy streaks of damp carpet, which could cause serious water damage.

“Fuck,” I shout again. “Ray, are you wearing shoes?”

“Of course, I’m wearing shoes, asshole!” she shouts back, panic seeping through her tense anger. “I got my combat boots on.” She changes the view camera once more to show me. “See?” She flashes her ruined pajama bottoms with her sturdy combat boots, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Of course, you do.” I reply, chuckling. Thank fuck for combat boots. “I’ll be there soon, okay? I need to wrap up at the restaurant.”

“Okay.” she smiles. There’s so much relief in that smile I want to kiss the stress out of her. “Oh—Caleb?”

“Yeah?”

“We need towels—lots of them.” Rayanne grimaces. “Mine are soaked through and I didn’t have many to begin with.”

“I’ll bring some more over.” I grin at her. “See you soon.”



When I arrive at Rayanne’s apartment with my arms full of towels, the door springs wide open with Rayanne’s curse of thanks. The towels I brought from my place and the ones I borrowed from my mom’s house block my sight of her. As Rayanne removes them two by two, the catastrophe of the tree falling comes into view; its disastrous consequences revealed. I silently curse. It’s been at least an hour and a half since she called, and who knows how long the tree actually has been on its side.

Rayanne comes back to me bedraggled. She’s strategically placed the towels for maximum absorption all over her apartment floor. She’s had a fuck-all morning and I’m ready to offer her a shot when Rayanne hugs me tight around my waist, marking my shirt with dampness.

“Thank you.” She shudders involuntarily then laughs with relief. I wrap my arms around her neck, welcoming the embrace. Her head fits perfectly against my chest, and I breathe in her scent. There are still hints of honey almond, but it’s overpowered by wet pine tree.

“Sorry I’m so late,” I mutter into her hair. “I’ve been working on some ideas for New Year’s, and they’re labor intensive.”

“You’re here.” she replies, relief etched all through her tone. If I’m not mistaken, she sounds surprised to hear it. I smile, breathing in her damp tree scent, tempted say fuck off to all catastrophes and just hold her tighter for a little longer. This is an apartment she’s renting though, so I resist that temptation and focus on that task at hand.

“Come on,” I say, dragging myself away. “Let’s get the tree back up and rest it against the windows. Then you can take a shower, alright?”

“You’re my fucking hero right now, you know that?” Rayanne replies, and I do a double take when she grins up at me through her eyelashes. There’s something more than just relief in her expression, and I’m unsure if even she knows it. It’s in her body language and the way that she’s been touching me. The shift is so slight, I’m not even sure it’s real, but my gut instincts are telling me something about me has changed for her.

Chris’ words come back to me, and while they’ve floated in my mind since Tuesday, today they’re hitting me with a full punch in the gut.

*This is it.*

Today’s the day that magic could happen with Rayanne.

I was planning to take tomorrow off, but I’ll swap my days to see this shit through. Luc will understand if I call out the rest of the day. I got to the restaurant early this morning anyway. And if he knows this has something to do with Rayanne—hell, the whole restaurant already gets it. I’ll find the time to text the people necessary to tell them what’s happening so I can have this day with Rayanne.

“You bet your ass I know.” I grin down at her. Her blue eyes, wide open with happiness at seeing me, are temptation itself. I temper down my impatience; this isn’t the right time or place. I won’t be holding anything back today though, and if she doesn’t shy away or flinch at my proximity, then it’s game on.

“Come on,” I nudge Rayanne to face the catastrophe behind her. “Let’s get this fucker standing and get you cleaned up.”

“Thank you.” Rayanne repeats, breathing in a deep sigh with relief.

“Did you turn into a turntable?” I ask, teasing.

“Oh fuck off,” Rayanne laughs, attempting to shove me away. We carefully work our way back to the tree. On my count, we haul the tree upright, stand still attached at its base.

“Do you want to take the tree out of the base now?” I ask, looking at several possibilities for what we do. The decorations, for all intents and purposes, are a lost cause. Half her ornaments smashed from falling off the tree, and with the lights being immersed in water for an extended period of time, just about everything is going to need to be replaced. If we take the tree out now, it won’t be the end of the world, but I can begin cleaning up underneath the tree while it rests. Keeping it in the stand might make it fall over again.

“I don’t know,” Rayanne replies, biting her lip.

“Let’s take the tree out now,” I propose. “I’ll clean up, and then we can begin again.”

“Won’t it need water?” Rayanne asks, unusually tentative.

“It’ll be fine,” I reply, trying to assure her. “It’ll take longer than us being gone for a few hours for it to die.”

She takes her time in thought, considering her options. Finally, it looks like she’s come to the same conclusions I have. “If that’s the case, then yeah, let’s get it out.”

“Good.” I grin at her. “Can you keep the tree steady for me again?” Whispers of Tuesday night circle the air as we both remember me testing her limits of my physical proximity to her. I purposefully put my chin on her thigh. I followed her when she got panicked to see the moment though. Rayanne never backed away—never told me to stop, and that fact coupled with the shifts I saw in her towards me is enough for me to keep going on this path.

If Rayanne had been more indulgent, perhaps today would have started differently. My touch lingered on her body more times than I have in my life before. It’s as if the dreams I’ve had of finally touching her this way settled in my mind from the encouragement Chris offered. I’ve wanted to touch her like this for at least half my life, and the memories from Tuesday have my fingertips itching to find their place in her curls. I busy my hands by rubbing them against my jeans to resist my impulses.

“I got it.” She replies, her face surprisingly blank. I take my time moving down to the tree stand, keeping my eyes on Rayanne until I can’t anymore. Let her think what she will, but the magic is swirling around us already. Something is going to happen between us today.

We work though quickly because I want her to get warm and dry. Rayanne is plastered in her wet pajamas and has been for hours. I know she’s miserable.

“Go get cleaned up,” I urge her on. “I’m sure you want to get out of those wet pajamas.”

Rayanne studies me for a minute, squinting her eyes at me, unsure of my intentions. I roll my eyes at her, because sometimes she is ridiculously suspicious. “I’m not following you in the bathroom.” I wink, just because I love fucking with her. “I have a catastrophe to clean up.”

Rayanne starts to address me with her hands on her hips, as if deliberating her options. Then she huffs and exits the living room, leaving me alone and grinning like a dumbass. Whatever was going through her mind must have been a comedy show, because she did little except blow air at me.

I message Luc, James, and Evan to let them know I’m taking the rest of the day off to assist Rayanne. I really don’t mind working through the rest of the weekend; when I get Luc’s thumbs up with luck, the corners of my lips turn up. He’s a good man and a better chef. He saw my talent when I was in school and offered me the head pastry chef position when no one would have otherwise. I owe him my career as much as I owe him my thanks in friendship.

That task completed; I study her living room to decide what to focus on first. The candles and shattered ornaments on the floor gather my attention. I make myself at home searching for the location of her brooms and find them in her utility closet, currently empty because of all her towels on the ground. I find a Dutch broom, which is immensely helpful, because it will collect all the broken shards of ornaments in the carpet and make clean piles. I work my way through the living room, lifting tables, shifting couches, and catching the last of

the fuckers who think they can escape me. The damage was worse than I thought. Her towels are completely ruined, soaked through with shards of ornaments that will never come out. I find some trash bags and triple bag them to support the weight of the water and protect against the shards. Looks like we're buying more towels today too.

I repurpose the towels I brought for the spaces that need them the most. When I've finished with the floor, I go back to the tree and assess the lights. Rayanne has sensibly unplugged them. I place the tree back up into a standing position against her windows to identify the lights that are working. Unfortunately, Rayanne doesn't have many of her strands working consistently. They aren't completely dead, but she needs better ones. And knowing Rayanne's habit of keeping the lights on twenty-four-seven, these guys aren't going to last her expectations.

By the time I'm done with these two tasks, Rayanne's striding out of her room in an off shoulder green sweater, skinny black jeans, and her combat boots.

Fuck this shit. She's so fucking radiant, I'm about to haul her over my shoulders and show her what happens when she exposes her skin like that. My imagination teases me with the steps I'd take, trailing kisses up her neck to that sweet spot behind her ear.

I once heard her tell Isla that was her favorite spot to be kissed. I stowed it away alongside thousands of images, random bits of fact, and preferences stored away just because it's Rayanne. If she ever finds out how much I know about her predilections, I'm entirely fucked.

"Hey," I grin, and I don't hide my pleasure at seeing how gorgeous she looks. "Feel better?"

"Positively human." she smiles back. "Thanks for this. You made progress while I was out."

"I did, but you have some casualties, Ray." I reply, furrowing my brows in mock concern.

“What do you mean?!” she asks, instantly worried. The crease between her eyebrows is so fucking cute I want to sweep it clean with kisses.

“Your towels gotta go.” I cut to the chase. “Your lights, while they survived for the most part, are old, and I’m pretty sure they aren’t going to last the season.”

“What do you mean!?” she asks, slightly outraged. “They’ve lasted me for years.”

“Yeah, sweetheart, they’re on their last legs.” I pronounce dryly. “That’s why it’s better to get new ones and pitch these guys.”

“Fuck,” she breathes out. “I knew the towels were shot, but now lights? What about the candles? Are any of them broken?”

“Yeah, Ray—what the hell?” I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me. “Why are the fucking candles on your tree? Isn’t that an easy way to burn your apartment down?”

Rayanne laughs, “It can be, which is why you only let the candles burn a couple of hours, and tend to your tree afterwards.”

“But...why?”

“There’s lots of reasons why,” she emphasizes. “But it’s a tradition my parents kept while I was growing up, and it’s so beautiful that I do it every year.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes!” she laughs at me. “Are any of the candles broken?”

“No,” I reply with a grunt. “They’re fine.”

“Good, because this is becoming a really fucking expensive Christmas.”

“Sorry,” I reply, not really feeling sorry at all. We now have to shop for lights, ornaments, a tree stand, and towels. I may have hated hauling this tree up to her apartment, but the excuse it’s giving me to spend time with Rayanne is invaluable. I have all day to work my way into her heart.



Rayanne has always been in mine, so I'm hoping for a bit of an equalizer this afternoon.

"Come on," she says on a sigh. "Let's get this over with."

"I'll drive," I reply. "Anywhere you want to hit up first?" I flash my keys in my palm, ready to go. Rayanne smiles, happy to let me do the honors.

"Breed and Company." she replies, her smile unfurling wider. "They have the best Christmas shit around."

"Which one?" I ask for clarification, as there are at least three locations I know of.

"The one on twenty-ninth, *duh*." she replies, rolling her eyes. "Literally the best and only one in town to go to."

"Well, they have a large garden center, maybe we can *actually* find the right tree base there," I tease, lips curling into a smile. "We may need to hit a Home Depot for your tree stand though."

"Honestly, some of their decorations are a little ostentatious." she replies, "but I like it."

"It does kind of remind me of your parents," I say, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips. "Bows... fucking everywhere." I imitate an explosion with my hands and Rayanne giggles. The one time I saw Christmas at Rayanne's parents' house was an event. Big bows, oversized ornaments, fake garlands exploding on every flat surface. It was a fucking Christmas disco in their house—no wonder Rayanne has unrealistic expectations about decorations for her small apartment.

"I don't have bows." she concedes stiffly, fighting a smile.

I laugh openly at her, "No you don't, thank god."

"I have nightmares with that shit haunting my dreams," she replies, shuddering.

"And that's why you were going to use one as backup to a star?" I raise an eyebrow. She tries to punch me in the arm as a response, but I dodge her attempts. God, it's so fucking easy to egg her on. She bristles up in defense at my teasing.

“You are such a jerk,” Rayanne rolls her eyes at me, finally conceding the point I’m making. “I should have never said that. I fucking hate bows.”

“So, I was right?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “You would rather leave your tree bare than put a bow on it? Was it a living nightmare growing up in a house covered in bows for the whole season?”

“Fuck,” she hisses. “I keep forgetting that you’ve seen my parents’ house at Christmas.”

“Are you even allowed to sleep during Christmas?” I tease, “Or are your blackout curtains sacrificed to the Christmas Elves because they aren’t red, green, or white?”

“Fuck off, Caleb,” Rayanne says, leans in, attempting to punch me again. I stop my movement as she skates past me, bursting with laughter. Her loud, carefree laughter is an amazing gift. It wasn’t always so loud in the past. There were years of her brilliance becoming forcibly dimmed down. Every time I think about it, I’m ready to do the man bodily harm that made Rayanne darken her effervescence. She stands tall now, proud in her body and uninhibited in her joy and feelings. I’m want to kiss her in thanks for such a beautiful sound. Rayanne finally grasps my arm and offers a short punch as she continues to laugh, then holds herself steady though her giggles. For once, I let myself hold on to her tightly, just so I can cherish this moment a little longer.

chapter eight: calab



I step in my truck as Rayanne hops in, landing with a loud *thwump* on the cushion. The motor comes to life, and we're heading down Mopac to Breed and Company. Rayanne's on research mode to tap down mileage for the most efficient itinerary. She's so adorable, casually resting with her boots propped up on my dashboard. Her apparent ease and comfort are such a relief to me that I'm tempted to lean in and brush a soft kiss on her forehead. I keep my hands on the wheel though and focus on navigating the random pockets of traffic stoppage.

When we arrive at Breed and Company, Rayanne and I part at the front of the store, where Christmas trees are set and decorated to greet customers. Hundreds of ornaments for sale cover the three Christmas trees. Rayanne, with a beaming smile, laughs at the vision before her and begins her search for the new treasures that will come home with her.

I move on to the gardening section searching for lights and tree stands. I wind around until I find the automatic doors and am greeted by a sales associate. When I'm informed that they're out of lights and have the wrong size tree stand, my suspicions become a proven fact and I find my way to the towels. I'm not sure what the quality of her towels prior to getting ruined, but I pick ones similar to what I think they were before. I stack five or six in my arms and make my way back to her.

When I return to the front of the building where I left Rayanne, she's cackling with pleasure; ornaments are overflowing from her basket. She looks like a little kid, boundless with energy and brimming to discover every ornament. I internally cringe because these guys are twenty dollars a pop and she easily has four hundred dollars' worth to sort through. I have to bite my cheek to contain my entertainment at her wonder in something as trivial as Christmas tree ornaments. I toss the towels on the nearest counter and cross my arms, leaning against a column. Rayanne pauses from her dance of delight to observe the towels by my side, tree stands and lights not in tow.

"No luck?" she asks, a furrow in her brow creases. I resist smoothing it out for her.

"No." I admit. "We're going to need to hit Home Depot for the tree stand."

"Sounds good." Rayanne smiles at me. "Hey, because I know you love this shit so much, come help me pick out a few of these." She points to her overflowing basket of ornaments.

"I pick this one." I gesture to an over-the-top glittery black and white polka dotted bow right in front of me. It's ginormous and would take its place at the centerpiece of the tree. "This looks perfect. In fact, I believe this is the bow you wanted on top of your tree."

"You are such an asshole." Rayanne laughs, tugging on my shirt sleeves. "Come look at these." She attempts to grab my hand to pull me closer, but I'm already looking for the next worst ornament I can find.

“—Or what about this?” I hand her an absurdly hideous green, black, red, and white plaid ornament that’s thrown up in glitter. “That goes perfect with your décor.”

It doesn’t. There is nothing about this ornament that goes with her apartment or the aesthetic she’s trying to achieve for Christmas. But it’s fucking entertaining to watch her face turn from one of hope to disgust as she looks at my second choice—like she didn’t know I was going to fuck around with her about this. It doesn’t stop Rayanne from trying to hit me, or me bursting with laughter as I dodge her attempts.

“Stop it!” Rayanne hollers when she finally lands a punch on my shoulder. “You are such a jerk!”

“Are you really spending four hundred dollars on ornaments?” I ask, an eyebrow raised. I peruse through the choices given, and they are a little better than the ones I jokingly gave her. She’s picked all the ones I would have wanted on my tree if I had to start over again.

“No,” she grins, “Just a hundred dollars. These are the best ones I could find. I’m just making myself pick five.”

“Then map out a route to the nearest Michaels and we’ll get some cheaper ones too.” I remind her. “These guys can’t be the only ones to decorate that monstrosity.”

Rayanne glares at me, and I smirk. “Fine.” She concedes, then turns her attention to the ornaments in front of her.

Of the twenty assorted ornaments Rayanne has chosen, we have a hell of a time choosing the right ones for the tree. There are ten that she can’t decide between, and at the end of the tireless debate, she picks the five random ones from the mix. Rayanne’s equally pleased and annoyed because she’s limited herself to five, when she really wants ten. She packs up the towels I picked out for her, places the ornaments in her basket, and a few random knickknacks she’s found in the home center, then looks at me expectantly.

“Go on,” I nudge her. “I’ll be there in a minute. I need to check on something right quick.” Rayanne gives me a dubious brow then walks away when I keep nudging her out the door. I

grab the other ornaments on the top that made the top ten, throw in the ostentatious black and white bow for good measure, and seek out the associate who helped me before.

“Are you sure she’s just your friend?” the saleswoman asks, suspiciously. “When you asked about the stands, you told me—”

“I’m working on it,” I wink at her. “I’m hoping this will help.” I put the ornaments down on the register and she grins at me.

“Um, yeah, that might do it,” she replies. “Oooh! These are such good choices—and *expensive*. I saw her go crazy shopping for them, so I think they might help your case.” She rambles happily as she rings up my ornaments, then wraps them up individually.

“They were her favorites,” I shrug. “Besides, she has a nine-and-a-half-foot tree and it’s just too big for five ornaments. This should balance it out.”

The associate grins back at me. “There’s no way she’ll be able to resist.”

“I hope so,” I reply, running a hand through my hair. I tap my phone for payment, as directed. All the ornaments are gathered in a Breed & Co bag, and she offers me the bag.

“It’s a sweet gesture,” she smiles at me and hands over the bag of ornaments. “I think it will go far. Good luck!”

“Thanks, have a good holiday.” I wave goodbye and head out to find Rayanne.

Rayanne points to the truck, then throws her arms up in a *what gives* gesture. I shrug, beep the truck open for her, and step into it. “Seriously though!?” she asks while hopping into the truck. “What took so long?”

I show her the bag of ornaments. “You are not allowed to open this until we get to your apartment.”

“Color me intrigued.” Rayanne tilts her head in a questioning gesture, then attempts to peek through the top. I playfully swat her away from the bag.

“Good,” I grin mischievously at her. I plop them down and start the truck. “Stay intrigued, and don’t try that again.”

The rest of the afternoon passes amicably. We’re successful in our missions to find lights and some cheaper ornaments at Michaels. We complete our errand at Home Depot for the right size tree stand. Each moment with her gives me an opportunity to learn more of her quirks, what kind of preferences she has, and discover all the right ways to make her laugh like she hasn’t in years. I soak up my time with her like it’s the last chance I’ll have alone time with her. Because as far as I’m concerned, it is.

If I thought I liked Rayanne in my head, or the girl I grew up idolizing, they are nothing compared to the woman she’s become. She’s incredibly funny, smart, and quick on her feet. She doesn’t take my shit and hands it back to me when I’m being an asshole—which I do on a regular basis. I also see it in Rayanne’s eyes, and the way she casually touches me. I see it in the way she props her feet on my dashboard while we drive around town. I see it in her indulgence for all the shit I put her through. They’re only tests for myself, because the more time I spend with her, the more I want her alone.

We unanimously decide to grab some fries and shakes for appetizers from P.Terry’s before heading over to Central Market to pick out food for dinner. Rayanne checks my theory on opening the bag several times, then laughs at me and the way I smack her hands out of the way each time. The potential in friendship and love that I’ve always believed in between us is evident. Is it the magic between us, or just a series of circumstances that’s allowing me this small gift?



As I move on to the dinner prep, Rayanne pours herself a glass of wine and props herself across the island. We’re taking a well-earned break from Christmas cleaning and managed to control the worst of the water damage and picked out all the shards of ornaments on the floor. Rayanne wanted a stir fry for dinner and insisted on both tofu and chicken for protein. While they marinate, I deal with the veggies.



“Would you stop!” I ask, flicking water from my glass at Rayanne. She squeals with laughter, dodging my assault of water droplets. This is the third or fourth time Rayanne has attempted to help around the kitchen, but she’s distracting me. “Sit your ass down and relax, alright? I got this.”

“But—” Rayanne pouts, and it’s the cutest frown I’ve ever seen.

“Seriously,” I emphasize, pausing my veggie prep. I grin at her, motioning her to put her sweet ass down in the chair in front of me. Has she never had anyone cook for her before? I lean down to focus on my work. “Drink that glass of wine while I cook. You’ve had a long day and you’ve earned a break.”

“Fine.” Rayanne replies, huffing her resignation. She seats herself in front of the hummus and veggies I organized as appetizers and takes a long sip of her wine. Her shoulders sag in relaxation, and she smiles happily at me. “You want a glass?”

“Not now,” I reply, shifting the carrots over to the side and begin on cleaning the snap peas. “I’ll take one during dinner though.”

“Okay,” Rayanne says, swiping a carrot from the veggie pile for the stir fry. I’d smack her hand away, but am secretly pleased to see her move across the island and steal food for the meal. It’s the sort of small gesture of intimacy that lends itself to comfort. It means a lot to see how much she’s opened up with me today. Rayanne dips the carrot into the hummus and munches on it. A small smile tugs at her lips while she watches me cook, and it almost feels like she approves of the effortless ease between us while I prep.

“How’s head-pastry-chefing at *Les Portes du Plaisir* coming along?” she asks, being ridiculous and exaggerating the French name.

I snort at her description of my job. “It’s fine.” I reply. “Getting ready for the New Year’s Eve special.”

“What does that entail?” she asks, tracing the edge of her wine glass with her fingertips. I don’t think she’s flirting with me on purpose, but the look she gives me through her lashes is testing all of my patience. Rayanne Miller has no idea what kind of impact she has on me. A deep sweep of her eyelashes, a small curve turns up on her lips, then Rayanne looks down at her glass of wine...almost shyly.

*Does she know?!*

If that’s the fucking case, and I find out for sure, she’ll be begging me to stop giving her all the attention she deserves.

“Well,” I begin, finishing the snap peas to focus on my composure. It’s not much time because prepping them takes me all of fifteen seconds. I start on the bell peppers and check the rice. “We’re working on finding the right pastry to serve as an exclusive for the New Year.”

“Have you found it yet?” She asks, taking a sip of wine.

“I think so,” I reply. “It’s labor intensive, so the love and time it takes to make it would make it meaningful as a special feature for this time of year. If I had to do it every week, I’d never have a day off.”

“What is it?” she asks.

“Sfogliatella,” I answer, finishing off the veggies.

“I haven’t heard of it.” Rayanne answers. “What kind of pastry is it?”

“It’s an Italian pastry layered like a croissant,” I begin, giving the simplified explanation. “But it’s first rolled out like a log and then shaped to create a lobster’s claw and has a ricotta cream filling.”

“It sounds delicious!” she beams at me. “I know croissants take a lot folding—is it like that?”

“Yeah,” I grin, pointing at her. “But I’m not sure you want to know about how much work it takes.”

“Probably not,” she laughs. “Then tell me how it’s going to be changed up then. Because knowing you, there’s some sort of modification.”

“It’ll have a lemon-raspberry crème filling with a mint gelato,” I reveal, and her eyes open wide. “And the sfogliatella itself is bite size, with a raspberry-mint compote drizzled on the top.” The only people that know the full extent of details for the dessert are Evan and James. Luc trusts me enough to make what I want. Even though I’m preparing other options for Monday’s tasting, I know this one will be the choice he makes.

“That sounds amazing,” Rayanne whispers.

“It should be.” I answer, winking. “But I haven’t finished the sfogliatella shell yet. It needs to rest today and then I’ll prepare it with the filling and bake the whole thing on Sunday.” An excuse begins to form in my mind so I can see Rayanne again on Sunday.

“Grab the chicken and tofu, will you?” I change the subject. Any awkwardness between us is long gone, and all that remains is the raw chemistry that makes us work so well together. It’s so effortless to be with Rayanne. Today has been a testimony to what I always knew is between us. I want to make a move, but Rayanne hasn’t given me any indications that it’s what she wants.

So, I wait.

Rayanne eagerly jumps off the chair to be helpful and I find myself watching her move. I get lost in the distraction of how closely those jeans hug her ass. I study her body for imperfections that I know I won’t find, just to check out the sway of her hips.

“Should I drain the meat out of the marinade?” she asks.

“Nope,” I reply. “Just leave it here, but get a small saucepan, will you? I’m going to thicken up some of this marinade as a sauce.” I turn off the rice to let it rest and prepare a pan to sear the protein. I start breading the tofu and plating it for cooking. I take the chicken thighs out of the marinade and plate them as well. Rayanne watches me dance around her kitchen. I catch her eye, and that small smile she offers me is further evidence that whatever is happening

between us is allowing me to test the boundaries. If I get to kiss her tonight, it'll be a fucking marvel when I do.

“Did you always like cooking?” Rayanne asks, as I keep moving through her kitchen. I grab the third pan that barely fits her stovetop for the veggies. I begin sautéing the broccoli, baby corn, water chestnuts, and carrots. I place the tofu and chicken on the pan side by side and let the tofu fry in the oil as I shift the chicken around. I pour the marinade into the saucepan and put it on high for boiling.

“Yeah, I love it.” I reply, a big grin unfurling. “Mom taught me well. Isla and I had some good times with her in the kitchen.”

“Isla has told me about some of the cooking nightmares, too.” Rayanne smirks, like she’s getting away with a dig at me.

“Just in the beginning!” I reply, flicking some water once more. Rayanne squeals when she dodges the wrong way and the water droplets fall down her face. “I got good setting up for meals quickly, and then when I out prepped Mom and Isla, Mom began showing me more complicated tasks in the kitchen.”

“I noticed.” Rayanne grins, wiping her face. “A girl could get used to this, you know—having dinner prepared for her every night.”

“All you have to do is ask.” I give her a teasing grin, and she blushes. Rayanne knows it’s true, and there’s a moment of candor between us as we gaze at each other. I’d do anything for her—and now that we are learning more about each other better as adults, the honest devotion I have always felt has only intensified. Rayanne blushes again, shifting her body to be closer, even if she’s across the island. I don’t miss the change of posture, and had I not been in the middle of cooking us a dinner with so many layers to maintain, I might have taken steps to be closer to her too.

As the marinade boils, I shake up the protein and check the bottoms of the tofu. Passing inspection, I flip them over and shake the pan again. I shift to the veggies, season them, and

begin layering in the peppers and mushrooms then open the rice pan and fluff it out.

“Better get the bowls ready and bring it over here.” I notify her. “Dinner’s going to be ready in a few minutes.”

While Rayanne sets the table, I finish up sautéing the protein and rotating the tofu on the side so that it gets crispy. I test out the marinade, place some thickener in it and continue to cook it down.

“Do you cook at home a lot?” Rayanne asks.

“Yeah.” I reply. “I might as well. There isn’t anyone that’s going to do a better job than I am—except Luc.”

“He is the head chef.” Rayanne counters, a small smile revealing her entertainment. “You’d think he’d have some talent in the kitchen.”

“A bit.” I wink at her. When I’ve determined the marinade is satisfactory as a glaze, I plate everything in the bowl. Rayanne pours me a glass of wine. The dining table isn’t big, so we sit side by side. The wine is excellent, my woman is beautiful, and the food is passable.

“Shut the fuck up, Caleb!” Rayanne shouts, mouth full of food. She finishes her first bite then braces herself against the table. “Jesus, this is so fucking good!”

I laugh, “Glad you like it.”

“Are you kidding?” she rolls her eyes in delight. “Why aren’t you sous chef?”

“Because I love baking.” I reply simply. “The method soothes me—”

“—And it’s needed,” Rayanne finishes.

“What did Isla tell you?” I ask, cautiously. It’s true, that I find a steady peace while I work. I just didn’t know that Isla noticed or shared that particular detail with anyone.

“Just enough that I know you need the work to find peace,” she replies. Rayanne takes a moment to study me, then offers a comforting smile.

“Yeah,” I reply, digging through my food. “It does the job pretty well.” *But I don’t need it when I’m with you.* The words are begging to be let out, so I take a sip of wine instead. The clean citrus from the marinade pairs nicely with the fruity front of the Sancerre. When I look back at Rayanne, it’s like she knows my mind. She places her small, delicate fingers on mine. Unable to resist, I kiss the underside of her wrist lightly. The scent of her honey almond fragrance is there. I tuck her hand in at her side before I do more, but Rayanne gives me a gentle squeeze before I let her go. She’s been adjusting to the attention I’ve given her today, but with all my feelings getting stirred up, I’m doing what I can to make this easy for her.

“Thanks,” I say, softly. “Today’s been great.”

“Yeah, it has.” Rayanne replies, slightly breathless. Her gaze lingers on me, and I debate the outcomes of what would happen if I kissed her right now. The odds aren’t good: we’ve just sat down for dinner; she’s *finally* relaxing as she should. I don’t want to be the asshole who changes the mood. So, I’ll continue bide my time for the right moment.

Dinner is companionable as Rayanne tells me about the marketing consultation, she’s trying to establish for herself. She’s in her element discussing the vision she has for all that she can offer startup businesses and the goals for her career. She’s so fucking brilliant that it’s scary—but I would one hundred percent hire her for the restaurant if it was needed. I’m keeping my ear to the ground for her. Maybe *Les Portes du Plaisir* can help launch her consultation business when the time is right.

When we’re finished with dinner, Rayanne stands to take our empty bowls back to the sink. I stop her before she can move too far away and wrap my arms around her waist. She puts the bowls down on the table and hugs me back. The knowing of her mind and spending the day with her has only increased my need for her touch. I’ve resisted Rayanne long enough today, and now I just simply want to hold her. I graze my lips over her stomach so lightly, I don’t even know if she notices because my arms are wrapped around her so tightly. She hugs me back just as fiercely. I know she’s felt the shift

between us, and to feel her embrace me just as passionately is a balm to my senses.

“Caleb.” Rayanne breathes out my name on a sigh. “Talk to me. What is this for?”

“You give me strength,” I murmur. “I just need some more.”

“Oh Caleb,” she sighs, then runs her fingers through my hair. I hum in pleasure and this time kiss her under her bra line. Rayanne protests weakly, and I back off. I have to fucking kiss her properly first before I begin that sort of exploration. I reluctantly let go, grab our dishes, and take them to the sink.

“Go look in the bag now.” I change the subject, worrying I overdid it.

Rayanne remains frozen in place, clearly reacting to the my selfish moment of indulgence, kissing her intimately. Clearly she didn’t miss a beat. Is she okay? Perhaps I overstepped the fragile boundary between us.

“Ray?” I ask, trying to grab her attention once more. “Are you okay?”

She blinks slowly at me, then suddenly stands taller, like her mind has been made with decision, which is encouraging. But now I’m worried she’s about to kick me out for my indiscretion.

“Ray?” I ask, one more time, and this time she looks up. “Go look in the bag.” I repeat, smiling.

“I can look!?” Rayanne asks blinking, and I notice she’s back to normal. Excitement flashes in her eyes as she grins at me. Whatever that moment was, it’s over now. I exhale, relieved that I didn’t push my luck.

“Yeah, go grab it,” I urge her on. She smiles when she walks past me searching for the bag of ornaments. She locates it on the couch in the living room and Rayanne skips to it like a kid, all eagerness in anticipation.

I stop doing the dishes to watch her open the bag. Rayanne laughs with delight, then unpacks one of the ornaments that she debated on so heavily. She looks back up at me, slack-jawed with wonder.

“Are you fucking serious right now?”

I shrug. “You have a big ass tree and five weren’t going to cut it.”

Rayanne charges back to me, bag in tow, and gives me another bear hug. As tiny as she is, and as much as I tower over her, she’s the one making me feel breathless. “Thank you.” she says, voice muffled in my chest. “They’re perfect.”

“Did you find my extra one?”

“What?” She looks up, completely confused.

“Search again.”

Because clearly, she didn’t find the bow ornament. I brace myself for the punch coming. This time, she opens up all of the ornaments and throws paper at me when she finds it. I laugh at her, and she throws more at me.

“It should be perfect, front and center.” I grin helplessly. “About, ye high?” I position my hand two feet taller than myself, clearly positioning for the bow ornament to hold the place of honor.

“You jerk.” She punches my stomach and I chuckle. It doesn’t hurt.

“You fucking love it.” I laugh at her once more. “—And no take backsies on a gift.” I interrupt, laughing and wrapping my arms around her so she can’t escape. I lower my chin to the crook of her neck. I breath in her fresh scent and sigh happily.

“—That one’s a gift.” I speak against her heated skin, “The rest are just necessary to finishing the look of the tree.”

“Fine,” she huffs out a laugh, and steps away from me. Rayanne knows that I’ve invoked one of her rules of girl code against her. “Take a break from the dishes and help me with this tree.” She moves through the living room, swiping and tapping at her phone. I’m unsure why she hasn’t looked up to



watch where she's going, but when Christmas music starts from her phone, a smile quirks at the corner of my mouth. Rayanne instructs Alexa to play her Christmas Spotify list, then inspects the tree that's leaning against her window.

I feel my impatience grow bold, always searching for the right moment to take the next step that feels like a natural progression to me. As we rearrange furniture, put the tree back in the stand, and arrange the ornaments in groups, I'm waiting for the magic in the air to let me know it's the right time to kiss my sister's best friend. I shamelessly touch her as much as I think I can get away. When I look at Rayanne to read her level of comfort with my brazen touching, she doesn't hide or shy away. She accepts my touch and doesn't back away from our physical closeness. Rayanne seems to want me as much as I want her, and it's the only encouragement I need to keep up my flagrant attention.

We fall effortlessly into a routine, singing along with her Spotify list while we string the new lights on her tree. I take the lead in placing the lights strategically on bottom and work my way up to the top. Rayanne follows me and adjusts to her own vision of what she wants the lights to look like.

The music is the last piece of the puzzle needed to complete the magic. We rediscover how well we sing together while laughing with and at each other. We sing over-dramatically while placing the ornaments around the tree. The light in her eyes is captivating. I've never spent so much time with her while she's happy.

While I'm up on the ladder, I place the bow ornament front and center as the first one on the tree. Rayanne hands me the ornaments she wants higher than normal, and I place them strategically at her request. When she squeals in delight with her vision coming to life, it is the final moment to embolden me. Rayanne looks at me with such deep affection that I know in my gut, the magic in the room isn't just one-sided. Rayanne is affected as much as I am.

I climb down slowly, facing Rayanne, unable to break eye contact from her. Rayanne's smile is slow and sensual, but I stop at the ladder's edge when I reach it. My body tenses with

the need it has to close the gap that would lead to kissing her, but I want her consent. I pause, waiting for Rayanne's decision. She takes a couple of steps forward, pauses, then looks down at her feet, clearly considering. Her eyes are wide, clear, and vulnerable as they look into mine. Rayanne wants me, at least enough for me to close the space between us. When she bites her lip and looks up at me, it's the encouragement I need to take those final steps. I move towards her, and the light in her eyes shines.

"Rayanne?" I ask, brushing a curly lock from her face. She leans into the touch and my heart soars. *This is happening*. It's really, honest to god, happening.

"Yeah?" Rayanne leans in, removing any of the space between us.

I can't ask the question I'm dying to say aloud. My heart is so full of anticipation, I feel like I might throw up. We both know where I stand—where I've always stood, and that's at her side. I'd do anything for her, but I need her to make the next move and tell me that this is what she wants.

"Is it okay if I try something?" Rayanne whispers. I feel her body brush against mine as she moves to stand on her tippy toes.

"You can try anything you like," I offer graciously, a small smile unfurling.

"Good," Rayanne purrs, as she brushes my hair from my face. She runs her fingers through my hair, and I reflexively curl my arms around her waist. We both know this embrace is new and different with intention. I'm so worried she's going to back away, but she presses her body into mine once more as she leans up to hold my face in her hands.

"When did you become so handsome, Caleb Gardiner?" Rayanne whispers. "When did this..." She interrupts herself, her fingers tracing down my temple and to my cheekbones. Her touch scorches my skin, and I'm ready to burst from the steady pace of her exploration.

“Ray,” I warn. I can’t help it, if she doesn’t make up her mind soon, I’m doing it for the both of us.

“Sweetheart,” she whispers, testing the word out. It’s a balm to my ears. The word soothes my soul, and I know it’s the permission I’ve been dying to have to make my move. I lean down and lightly touch my lips to hers. It’s soft, inviting, and gentle. I’m not about to scare the woman of my dreams off—not when she finally seems so present and willing to try something new. The kiss she offers in return is also light, but she presses firmly. Rayanne tightens her grip in my hair, then tugs as she opens her mouth invitingly. I skim my tongue across her lower lip. At her gasp, I slip it into her mouth and feel the movement of her tongue catch mine. They dance and Rayanne bites my lip. I growl with pleasure as she tugs on my hair again. I pull her closer into my embrace, kissing Rayanne with the passion that’s built up for the last thirteen years.

I was right. Kissing Rayanne Miller is a paragon of perfection. Her lips and tongue are made for mine. Her body pressed against me feels like it’s shaped to mold itself against me. For a moment, it’s just us, Rayanne and Caleb: a man and a woman kissing as if their lives depended on it. Rayanne softens as I deepen the kiss. When she wraps her arms around my neck, I hike her legs up around my waist and let her feel just how much she affects me.

Rayanne pulls back, slightly breathless from our embrace. Her delicate fingertips lightly touch my cheekbones as I adjust my grip to hold her tighter. The questions in her eyes pull her away, and I feel the loss of the moment as she slides down my body to the floor and I let her go. I can see it plainly on her face: the consequences of what kissing me could mean are taking over whatever impulsive desire made her feel free in the moment. The look of joy in her eyes turns to all concern. She might have given me permission to kiss her, but the minute I turned it into something more was the moment I lost her. Rayanne clearly isn’t ready, and all the hope that swelled within me is turning into heavy lead in my stomach.

“Ray?” I ask, hoping that the question doesn’t sound pleading. *This is good. This is good, Ray—don’t pull back.*

“Oh Caleb,” she sighs, unable to look at me. She steps back, so that there’s at least two or three feet separating us. “I think you should go.”

I want to argue with her, to tell her that this is the natural progression of our relationship. What swirls between us is the same magic I’ve always felt around her. It’s the same magnetic pull that always brings us back together. We have always been this good—I just needed her to recognize it. I want her to embrace what’s there, right in front of her.

*Take it, Ray. Pick me.*

“This was always right, sweetheart,” I sigh. Rayanne’s eyes have widened at the term. It cuts like a double-edged sword between us. “What we share—this magic—it isn’t just a moment. We’re *real* together. You and I—”

“—Caleb,” Rayanne cuts me off, lifting her hand in a stopping motion to seize my words. She stands tall and rigid like an oak tree, clearly troubled and uncomfortable. “Not now, I just... I need time. I don’t know what to think right now.”

“Is it Isla?” I ask, unwilling to give this up. “Because—”

“—No, Caleb.” She shuts her eyes with frustration. “For once, it’s actually not Isla. I don’t know where to go from this —”

“Forward is generally the right motion,” I joke, unable to help myself. “We can’t take that back, and even if we could, I wouldn’t.”

“No, I don’t suppose you would,” Rayanne snaps, and I know I’ve pushed her limits too far now. My heartstrings pull, and even though I know I’m the cause of her frustration, I want to fix it and make everything better. The only move right now is to let Rayanne be. I gather my things, keeping my eyes on her when I can. I feel the heat of Rayanne’s gaze on mine. When I look back at her, I feel the trouble and conflict she has building within her.

*Can I fix this?* I ask, pleading with my eyes. Rayanne shakes her head no.

*Go*, she tells me.

“Alright,” I begin, leaning down to kiss her on the forehead quickly. I can’t help it. Even as I look down at her, Rayanne’s eyes are shut, but she leans into the embrace. Whatever she’s fighting inside, she still feels the attraction between us. I sweep her hair back from her face just to get a clear look at her. If I see her eyes, maybe I’ll understand better. If I can sense her hesitations, then I can fix it. But as I search, the immediate solution I need isn’t there. Rayanne needs me to give her some time alone. “I’m going. Keep the ladder, and I’ll come back Sunday to pick it up.”

Rayanne nods, her eyes slightly widened with vulnerability, but her body’s tensed with discomfort. At the thought of my touch making her uncomfortable, I let her go. I don’t quite understand what’s happening in Rayanne’s mind, but I get that at least recognizing the shift in our relationship is a lot to acknowledge and process. The intensity of our chemistry, I think, is hard for Rayanne to adjust to. I never expected anything to come from my feelings for her, but now that they have, and I’m only convinced that *this* was always meant to happen.

*We* were always meant to happen.

I pick up the trash beside her door because it will take me one stop versus her three. Keys in hand, I head out of her apartment. The idea that began formulating during dinner tonight has settled in my mind, and while I’m technically coming back for my ladder, I’m also bringing her something as well.

A dessert, I think, in the shape of a lobster’s claw.

chapter nine: rayanne



The wonder of a Texas sunset fills the sky with dusky blues, pinks, red, and orange contrasting against the purple lined clouds. Its beauty helps ease my mind. I close my eyes and breathe in the cool evening air. The sounds of traffic slowly disappear as I inhale and exhale. I breathe into the stillness and release any concerns in my mind.

I'm out on my balcony meditating, because it's the next best thing to finding Caleb Gardiner in Austin, Texas and throttling him—or kissing him—senseless. I'm not sure what I want to do. I inhale slowly, trying to focus on what I've learned about meditation and the practices needed for achieving inner tranquility. I focus on the details of the wind blowing, the muted traffic, and the beats of my heart. I exhale the pressure point of Caleb out of my body, and breathe in slowly, focusing on the stillness of my mind.

In my mind, Caleb steps off the ladder, gazing at me with such affection, I know I'm the continuing exhale to his inhale. He wants me so badly, but he holds back his desire. It's his restraint coupled with his patience and sex hair that makes me cave. A slight upturn on his lips, like he knows a secret, and I give in, dying to share the knowledge that could be his lips against mine. I brush his hair out of his face and divine just how soft and thick it is. I get lost in the closed space between us and touch his beautiful, chiseled cheek bones and let go of the mask. I tell him *yes*. I give myself the permission to take what I want.

I expected a deep passionate kiss, but Caleb drops such a featherlight touch on my lips, that I want to explore further. I press my lips firmly against his and the passion that's been stirring inside me bursts as his tongue traces my bottom lip. It's an invitation to carry things further—and god, I've never craved such an entreaty before. The press of his firm lines fits my soft curves perfectly. I melt into his arms and our tongues dance. It's such a perfect combination of exploration and passion that I lift my arms around his neck and Caleb hikes my legs around his waist pulling me in tight and close. All I can inhale is his scent, and all I exhale is the warmth of his body around mine.

I've found the peace I've sought today.

*Fuck.*

I open my eyes and my surroundings come back. Traffic blares my ears, the sunset has dimmed, and Caleb Gardiner is still the center of my tranquility. It's been two days, and everything in my apartment has his touch on it. The floor is immaculate, the hallway is trash free because he took it out for me, and the refrigerator is full of his stir fry because he left me enough food for a week. A part of me has gotten used to the minor changes of cleanliness in my apartment and seeing his presence everywhere I look. But it's still very overwhelming, and I don't know how to process the potent presence of Caleb in my space.

Excising Caleb from my mind and apartment is a lost cause. His presence is unrelenting, and I'm finding ways to



assist myself in handling it all, like meditating. I sigh, pick up the yoga mat from my balcony, and head back inside to my apartment. The ladder says hello from the wall, only to remind me of that beautiful, magical day.

I knew I always liked Caleb. Growing up with him with Isla on either side of us, his humor and sarcasm are always entertaining. The way we gave each other shit then make each other laugh has been part of our relationship. It's easy to be around him, partly because he's always been there. These are the effortless parts of being around Caleb Gardiner. Spending time with Caleb is just another extension of myself, and I was reminded of that on Friday. If Isla has always known my mind, Caleb has always known my heart.

I know what draws me to him; I know some of the reasons why I feel so attracted to Caleb. He surprised me so many ways on Friday and I'm relearning how to frame my understanding of who Caleb is to me. I felt the magic stir between us throughout the day: when he insisted that I take a shower and allow time to myself so I could get over the devastation of the tree falling down. Then his insistence that I sit and relax while dinner was getting prepared. Small details of the day flash before my eyes: Caleb dancing around me in Breed and Company, taunting me about ornaments. Caleb and his smiles for me in his truck on repeat. How he always opened the door for me and how smacked my hands away from revealing the extra ornaments that he bought just for me.

I didn't expect the shift of my attraction to change so fast. I couldn't foresee the magnetic pull to Caleb would weave into my heart and soul as he took care of me all day. I didn't expect that by the end of the day, it would determine my lips brushing against his. The transition from family friend to something more is so effortless and easy. I keep reeling from my reactions to him and how effortless it feels to be myself with Caleb all day. I think my heart grew three sizes bigger when I kept waiting for him to throw this disaster back into my face, and all he did was just make sure I was cared for and that the messes were cleaned up.

When Caleb hugged me like his life depended on it, then kissed me beneath my breastbone, I forgave him because I felt the desperation of need for touch and physical connection between us. But somehow, my logic is twisted because the minute he lifted me in his arms and wrapped my legs around his waist, my mind shut down. *I* shut down, not trusting the desire that has escalated so quickly.

I want him.

*Badly.*

I couldn't have anticipated how perfect it would feel to have our tongues dance and discover that the press of our bodies would feel like arriving home after a long day of work.

I should have seen it coming. I should have prepared myself for his persuasive lips to coax mine open. I should have been ready to turn down his irresistible mouth, and his magical tongue working expertly against mine. I should have been able to restrain my arms as they wrapped around his neck to pull him closer.

I should have resisted the seductive pull between us, but with Isla demanding that I put my happiness first, I stopped fighting it. And Caleb—I stopped resisting him and all the fulfillment I experienced when I'm with him. When I accepted the touch of Caleb's lips against mine, I chose selfishness. And now I don't know how much I want to take what I want, because what I see at the end of the day is pure joy. And I don't know if my heart is ready for such unaffected happiness.

I just don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can live with the urgent need propelling me forward. Caleb has always been Isla's little brother in my mind. *Always*. And now that's changing: the shift of seeing the man he's become, Isla's demand that I care for myself first, and that I drop girl code is all happening much too fast.

Caleb's attention to detail, the way he always put me first, the way his eyes watch me while I move—it's intoxicating. I'm just... I'm struggling to accept all of his attention on me. The full court press is wild, and even though I know it's just a

shadow of how he would care for me, I know the focus and attention he offers me is mine alone.

It's been three years since I've been in any sort of real committed relationship, and that ended with my heart and soul being pulled out of my body. It's only been the last year or so that I've felt the strength to be myself. I have a lot of healing to do before I can really consider what Caleb offers. My body hurts from the maze of emotions hitting me at once. I turn around one corner and its blazing happiness, and the next, it's my breakup with ex gazing at me steadily with all the possession his soul expects of me.

I need to talk to Isla again. I need her to help me process all the feelings and emotions swirling in me. And I need to understand *why* exactly she's okay with the idea of Caleb and me being together. Because as tempting as Caleb is, the problem is that if we fall apart—if we break up at the end of the day, shit hits the fan and I've lost two very important people in my life. Isla is the extension of my mind and knows how I process all my worries and fears. I have complete faith that she can guide me through my worries and fears. Her latest confession that she would like to see Caleb and me together is seriously messing with my doubt. Despite what she would want for us, I know Isla would listen with an open mind and walk me through this hazy maze of emotions.

I take a moment to consider: Caleb and I still have some things to discuss, and I need to woman up and face the storm of feelings stirring inside. I glance back at the ladder that's been prone on my wall since we finished decorating. I reluctantly pull out my phone and deliberate on calling Caleb. My phone buzzes, and I stare blankly at it, not computing that it's Caleb calling me. *Weird...*

“Caleb.” I intone, trying to imbue my voice with confidence. The shock of my need for him forced me to kick him out Friday night. I still feel bad about demanding his departure, but at the time, I found myself unable to comprehend my need for Caleb.

“Hey.” Caleb says, and he sounds like himself. Why isn't he mad at me for making him leave on Friday night? The ease

of his baritone makes me squeeze my thighs together. I'm frustrated at his casual tone and furious at myself for reacting to his voice.

"Hi." I squeak. *Get your shit together, Miller.*

"So, I need to pick up my ladder." Caleb says. "Is it okay if I swing by?"

I breathe a sigh of relief, "Yeah, that's perfect." Perhaps we can talk this out when he gets here, and I'll have a better idea of what it is that I want.

"I'm on my way then." he replies. "I'm coming from the restaurant."

"How far out are you?"

"Fifteen minutes," he says. "Is that okay? You want coffee or anything?"

"Sure, that'd be great." *I just need more time to consider and formulate what it is that I want.*

"Toffee nut latte from Starbucks?" Caleb asks.

I reflexively pull my phone from my ear and glare at him like he can see my surprise. How the fuck does he know that? That's been my go-to drink for years. The fact that he knows my favorite coffee order sends me reeling. Who pays attention to such small things like coffee orders?

"Um, yeah, that's perfect." I pause, sounding ridiculous. "Thanks. How did—"

"I wasn't blind every time we shopped with Isla." Caleb interrupts. "—It's not difficult to pay attention to something like a coffee order, Rayanne."

"But—" I pause again. I pull my phone away from my ear and stare at it like I can see his reaction through it. When was the last time Caleb and I went shopping with Isla? "Fuck, Caleb, that was like, last year during Christmas."

"It's coffee, Rayanne," he replies, and I hear the shrug in his voice. "See you in half an hour."

“See you then,” I reply, breathing a sigh of relief. I have half an hour before Caleb gets here. I look around trying to find messes I need to clean up, but the apartment is perfect. I spot a few dishes that need tending to, then run into the bathroom.

I stare at myself in the mirror. It’s only six o’clock in the evening, but I’m still in my workout pants and wearing one of the baggy shirts that I sleep in. Men don’t see me dressed like this. I start perusing my closet for the right outfit, trying not to panic. I know I’m doing what I always do when I like someone. I’m caring obsessively about what I look like, and the part of me that’s panicking is freaking out over the fact that I’m falling into old habits for Caleb. I pause, take a steadying breath, and breathe through it.

*I can do this. I can find an outfit that works.*

I finally pull out my favored skinny black jeans. As apart of my standard uniform, I know my ass looks good in them, but I wouldn’t wear them for a date. I run my fingers over the tops of my shirts and wait until I feel the right material. It’s a cool, light cotton rayon combo. The jungle green top makes me smile; the square neckline is open and sexy, and the shirt hugs my curves. I don’t feel like I’m dressing up for Caleb with this outfit; I feel like myself.

As I undress, the sight of my neon pink Victoria Secret bra makes me scoff, then I snort with humor. It’s completely wasted, fully stretched out and should have been tossed in the trash two years ago. It’s comfortable though, and I only wear it in my apartment. Isla would kill me if she knew I still wore it. And knowing Caleb as I do, if he saw me in this bra, he’d say something to Isla. For the sake of my stretched out Victoria Secret bra, I change into a new one, something that Isla might approve of. I distinctly *do not* take note that this is for Isla’s younger brother.

I pull out a new white unlined lace balconette that Isla gave me recently. I test it with the shirt on and am pleased with the results. I don’t look like I’m trying with a push up, and there’s enough to suggest cleavage, but not offered on a

platter. I take one last glance at my reflection in the bathroom mirror to determine if I look acceptable.

As I walk out of my closet, I catch a glimpse of my hair, then groan at how limp it looks. I pull out my hair dryer to blow it out to my satisfaction. When I finish, it looks normal. I sigh, looking at the unattractive dark circles under my eyes. I need concealer.

A knock comes from the entry, which makes me jump. Caleb is here, and I've run out of time.

I run over to the door and he's there: coffee in one hand, a small cooler in the other. Caleb is still wearing his chef's jacket, buttoned up. His hair expertly falls in his face, elevating his looks to sex god status. I feel myself gaping at him, completely forgetting my manners. The killer combo of sex hair, the chef's jacket, and my favorite coffee order has me eyefucking him, and I'm not sure how I feel about it.

*God damnit. Did he plan this?* I'm practically panting and he's only at the door, waiting for me to let him in.

"Here." I begin, belatedly. "Come in." I'm reeling from the power of my reaction to him. Apparently two days is too long without seeing him. And as reluctant as I am to admit it, I missed the fuck out of Caleb. He's made a hard week so easy, and he understands me so well. The fight against him has been difficult, and now that he's here in front of me, all I want to do is to drink him in.

He grins, "Thanks. This is for you." He offers my coffee and I take it. I exhale a breath, offer him a small smile, then take a sip of my coffee. It's the perfect temperature. The milky toffee nut is a welcome comfort in a time when I know change is coming. I just don't know to what end yet. And besides, Caleb is just coming to get his ladder, right? I eye the small cooler dubiously, which suggests more than just a quick errand.

"What about you?" I ask, belatedly. I eye his empty hand, using coffee as an excuse to look at those slender, strong fingers. "Did you get yourself anything?"

“Nah,” Caleb shrugs, “I didn’t need anything.” His nonchalance is sexy, and I groan internally as I gesture Caleb in. He heads to the kitchen.

*Wait.*

Why is he going into the kitchen?

I follow him, completely confused. “What the fuck?” I ask, momentarily forgetting the barrage of feelings whirling inside of me. I really shouldn’t be surprised, but I am.

“Remember the sfogliatella I told you about?” Caleb asks, as he places the cooler on my island. He settles in further by beginning to unbutton his jacket. Each button undone reveals his white under shirt. I take a sip of coffee to hide my full reaction of his undressing in front of me. I bite my lip, and Caleb grins at me.

“Yeah.” I reply, eager to move on. “Did you finish it?”

“Open the cooler,” he replies. His jacket is completely open, leaving nothing to the imagination. I reluctantly shift my gaze to the cooler. Caleb works out right? Because there’s no way those abs are the product of baking all day. I scoff internally as I gently place my coffee down and follow Caleb’s directions. A to-go box is revealed inside. As I lift it out of the cooler, Caleb moves it aside so I can place the box gently on the countertop.

The sight in front of me is a fucking marvel. It’s living *art*, and I’m dying to take a picture and share it with the world. His miniature sfogliatella is plated with a sugar pulled cup marbled with gold foil and red colored sugar. The perfect sized scoop of mint gelato is portioned out in the sugar bowl. To finish the vision, a compote is drizzled over the sfogliatella. Raspberries and pulled sugar disks fill in the white space of the container, and I’m transfixed.

“Caleb,” I breathe in. “This is gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” he replies, grinning.

“Is this all for me?” I ask, inhaling the art before me.

“Yes,” Caleb replies, giving me a secret smile. “It’s all for you, Rayanne.”

“I can have all of it?” I whisper, speechless. I am not prepared for what the dessert offers: time, thoughtfulness, and care. Like everything Caleb does, the intent behind it is to steal your breath away, and I can’t even compute. It hurts, the affection he offers me by preparing such a beautiful dessert. I take a moment to breathe in deeply. *In and out.*

*If you want it, take it.*

Okay, Isla.

I want this. I want to accept this gift Caleb offers me. I want the thoughtfulness, the time, and care Caleb offers for the taking. I hesitate though, because to what extent am I willing to accept all he offers? To what extent do I share that I want Caleb and all he can provide?

“Yes, sweetheart.” Caleb replies, the nickname tugging at my heart. It pulls me away from this gorgeous dessert in front of me. “Can I offer you a bite?”

“Should I start with the gelato?” I reply, eyes falling back down to the plate. I study the dessert longer than it warrants. “It’s not going to last long, right?”

“Here.” he replies, scooping up a sfogliatella and placing a taste of the gelato for me on top. “You have to combine the flavors together.”

“Caleb,” I hesitate, awkwardly taking the proffered gift in front of me. I pause, thinking of what this dessert is made for. It’s exclusive and for a menu proposed for New Year’s Eve. “Is this even allowed? I thought you were presenting this for the final menu tomorrow.”

“Consider it research.” he replies, trouble dancing in his eyes. “Any feedback you give me I can apply to the future.”

A laugh escapes my lips as I roll my eyes at him and that trouble he’s promising. Leave it to him to take this opportunity to feed me.



“You’re such a dork,” I laugh at him. I take a bite and all my laughter fades, getting lost in all the combinations of textures and flavors in my mouth. I close my eyes to savor the depth and detail that entails all of the sfogliatella offers me. The crisp flakey layers of the sfogliatella are coupled with an explosion of raspberry and lemon cream filling. The mint gelato finishes the flavors perfectly. It’s simply extraordinary.

There’s a reason that Caleb is head pastry chef at a top new restaurant in town. His vision and execution of all he imagines is utter perfection. I involuntarily moan in pleasure and snap my eyes open in recognition of my gaff. I shouldn’t make sex sounds in front of Caleb. I finish chewing, then swallow and steady my hand on the island.

Caleb drinks me in greedily. The look of possession in his eyes is unexpected, and I reach out for my coffee, clenching my legs against my response. Here before me, is this *beautiful* man, drinking me in like I’m the sunshine and breath of life that he needs. The magic swirls between us, and I know this is a *moment*. Do I accept the pull between us? Because honestly, I’ve never had a man stare at me like I’m the center of his orbit without feeling overwhelmed. I am completely, one hundred percent cherished by Caleb... and I wonder if accepting all he has to offer is worth the risk of everything falling apart.

“What’d you think?” he asks, and the tone in his voice goes straight to my groin. It’s deep, husky, and filled with sex. The deadly aim hits me in my center, and I feel a thread of composure unravel at my wanting.

“It’s amazing.” I make myself maintain eye contact with Caleb. I make myself look at the options in front of me.

*You can have it. If you want it.*

“I’ve never tasted anything like it.” I finish, and there’s sensual warmth to my tone that responds to his own husk and desire.

“Would you say there’s an imbalance of flavor?” he asks huskily, stepping into my space and caging me in.

“It was perfect.” I whisper, affected by the closeness of his body.

“You might need to try the compote drizzle again.” he says, swiping a finger through it and offering it to me.

“It’s good—it tastes like raspberries.” I reply lamely, blinking up at him through my lashes.

“But did you taste the mint?” he whispers devilishly. He leans in, separating our foreheads by millimeters.

“Mint?” I ask, rather stupidly. Of all the things to comment on... but then again, my mind hasn’t exactly been on the mint balancing raspberry. “I’ll try it with this.” I reach for another sfogliatella, swipe it through extra compote and pop it in my mouth before he can offer me his finger again.

The second bite is just as good as the first. The crunch of the sfogliatella is refreshing against the creamy filling. For good measure, I lick the extra compote off my fingers, just to make sure I can say I searched for the mint flavor. It’s subtle and finishes the fruity flavor with a clean finish.

When I open my eyes, Caleb is in my space again, licking the compote off his finger. The hint of mischief in his eyes, the smile tugging at the corner of his lips melt my panties. *Just* a little.

“Did you find the mint?” he whispers, closing the gap between us, touching his forehead to mine.

“Yeah,” I murmur on a breath. “At the end.”

“I think you missed some,” he replies, touching the corner of my mouth lightly. And before I can respond, he licks it off. I try to turn to brush him away, but as I turn, his mouth catches mine.

I can’t say I’m surprised that Caleb tastes like the raspberries he’s just tasted. I open my mouth to accept the kiss he offers and find the mint he insisted upon. He traces his tongue on the edge of my lips, asking for permission to kiss me properly. I nibble his lower lip in acceptance, and he sweeps my hair out of my face as he deepens the kiss, sucking on my lip in return. His kisses with an edge with desperation,

like all he's wanted was to be back here, embracing me. I kiss him back, just as readily: because let's face it, I have needed him since I made him walk out the door on Friday. I moan softly.

The tenderness Caleb offers me in his kisses take my breath away. His attention is just for me. When Caleb Gardiner kisses a woman, he does it with purpose. He takes what he wants—he always has. But to feel the effects of his full court press is truly all encompassing. I gasp, taking a step away.

“Caleb,” I'm breathless. “Just... a moment, yeah? I need one of those.” I inhale deeply to counter the passion inside me, so ready and eager to match Caleb step by step.

“What is it, sweetheart?” Caleb looks concerned.

“I don't—” I sputter lamely. Unsure of how to process the question and my feelings, I grab my takeout box and walk back to the fridge. Just as I open the door, I find myself scooping up the rest of the gelato in my mouth and it dissolves in my mouth. It is the best combination of cream, sugar, and mint known to mankind. I moan quietly as I shut the door to the fridge. I haven't figured anything out in the thirty seconds I've taken, but at least the space has allowed me a spare moment. A vista of opportunity is before me, and all I have to do is take the chance and leap... if I want.

When I turn around, Caleb is in front of me on the edge of my personal space. He lifts one of his arms above me and presses his weight against the refrigerator door. He leans down into my space, refusing to run away from the chemistry raging between us. He examines my curves thoroughly, and I can't stop watching him. His need to drink me in is intoxicating, and I focus every iota on Caleb, aware of the movement of his breath and how his mouth parts so he can lick his lips. I feel an arch in my back pull me towards him. When Caleb lowers his head down to whisper in my ear, his hair falls in his face, and I have to bite back my need to brush it from his eyes.

“Rayanne,” he murmurs in my hair, finally taking the step into my space and cupping my cheek.

“Caleb—” I start, but my voice wavers. I honestly don’t know what to say.

Caleb closes the space between us as he wraps my arms around his neck and hugs me tight. I expect him to try kissing me again, but his caress is gentle. Caleb kisses the top of my head, as if he just needs to touch me for comfort. The tips of his fingers graze so lightly against my temple, tears well and prick my eyes, begging to fall. I fight against the tears because they’ll take me away from Caleb.

“Caleb—” I whisper again. “I’m not sure—”

“See, here’s the thing, Rayanne.” he interrupts me, leaning down to murmur in my ear. His voice is quiet, seductive, and enchanting. “You haven’t told me that you want me to go, and I think we need to sort out what’s between the two of us.”

I’m breathless. Caleb is acting faster than I can process my feelings, but he gently releases me from our embrace and tilts my chin up to look up at him.

“Tell me you don’t want this, Rayanne,” he says, leaning in and caging me against the fridge, an arm over me, his body pressing close. “Tell me, and I’ll go.” Caleb swipes my hair out of my face and leans down to kiss me. It’s soft and inviting.

“Caleb—” I whisper. “I shouldn’t—”

“But you do.” he whispers, leaning down to kissing me chastely once more. “—And we’re here.”

chapter ten: rayanne



*T*his is your chance, Rayanne. You can tell him to go—if you want.

Indecision swirls around me, and I'm dying to process my emotions faster. When I look up at Caleb again, the final fortifications surrounding my heart crumble. He is all patience and desire, longing and compassion. He is the extension of my heart and I just have to woman up and take what I want. I just have to hold out my hand, and he'll hold it and keep me safe.

Caleb pauses, waiting for my consent. When I finally give in with a nod, he leans down to kiss me once more. His lips press gently against mine, then traces his tongue on my lower lip, seeking entrance. I grant it as I wrap my arms around his neck. Caleb presses his body closer to mine and the ache I feel in my body slowly knit my broken parts back as we hold on to each other.

Caleb skims his teeth against my lips, eliciting a moan from me. I wrap my leg tight around him, feeling the motions of my desire rock involuntarily against him, my body expressing the thoughts I don't know how to share. Now that I've granted myself permission, I'm taking what I need of him and demanding high stakes in return. Caleb responds by raising my other leg in a sweeping motion and lifting me so that I'm hooked around his hips and pressed hard against the fridge. His dick rubs against my center, and though we're fully clothed, I feel every inch of his desire. He tilts his hips against me and sucks on the soft spot behind my ear.

"Is this what you want?" Caleb asks, stilling me into silence once more. "Use your words and tell me what you want, Ray."

I try formulating words and gape like a fish at him. Then I shut up, so I stop looking like an idiot.

"You didn't answer me, Rayanne." Caleb taunts the lobe of my ear with his tongue, and I gasp. "Tell me."

It takes a moment for me to recognize that the motion of our bodies has ceased, and Caleb is just holding onto me tightly, keeping my legs tight circling his waist. The onslaught of his affection has stopped, and I'm left with is the press of his hard on against me. I hiss with displeasure.

"Tell me, Rayanne." Caleb urges. "Is this the only kissing we're doing tonight?"

Meaning, *are we done?*

No, we're not fucking done. I scoff with disbelief, then laugh with amusement as he waits silently.

"No!" I finally gasp out. "No, we're not fucking done. Are you fucking kidding me?"

"*Thank fuck.*" Caleb groans, and he kisses me greedily.

I bat his shoulder. "You are a fucking asshole." I hiss, feeling Caleb's lips suck on the nape of my neck. "You know that?"

“Tell me,” He murmurs, a hint of amusement in his voice. Caleb kisses that sweet spot heartily, and I sigh with happiness. He repositions me around him and walks us over to the couch. “Are we going to sit on the couch?”

“Yes.” I concede, happily.

“Good, because you’re fucking heavy.” he grins, mischief dancing in his eyes.

“Asshole.” I mutter and punch him on the arm. Caleb laughs as plops down on the couch, and I laugh at him until I feel the full length underneath me. And... it’s considerable. So much so, that I stop my giggles and have to focus on not automatically moving against him.

“You don’t hate it though, do you?” Caleb smirks as he shifts under me, his body hitting all the right points against mine.

“Shut up, Caleb.” I smirk. *Cheeky bastard.* He laughs as he wraps his hands around mine to keep them held around his neck.

“I’d rather fuck you.” he replies, his voice a deep and sensual rasp, as he lifts his hips against my sex. The mood has changed into something deep and heady. I act reflexively, rocking against him. I look deep into Caleb’s eyes, acknowledging the change and the wanting. He removes his hands from mine and presses his hands on my hips. The pressure builds in my center, and I’m dying to move against him.

“Yeah, sweetheart,” I grin, despite change. “That’s not happening.” Caleb laughs at the term of endearment. I’m distracted by the thought of him inside of me and automatically shift my hips. With a wide grin, Caleb reacts, shifting his own to grind against my center. A breathless moan escapes from me.

“I figured as much, but I plan on making this as fun as possible for us while I can.” Caleb’s smile is so carefree and joyful I laugh, unable to help myself.



Caleb leans down to kiss my neck, but I catch his chin with my fingertips, so I can kiss him properly. He nips at my lips as I open my mouth and our tongues dance. We kiss for an endless amount of time. It could be hours or days and it feels like years of embrace as we cling to one another and make each other laugh in wonder at the new changes between us. Our deep connection feels cherished as we make up for lost time. Caleb changes the pace when I least expect it; slowing down and teasing me with long lingering embraces with our tongue and teeth when I'm ready to kiss him hard, then changes his pace and presses his lips against mine and kisses with such desperation that I attempt to fill his ache with my own.

The movement of our hips are slow and steady. When Caleb wraps his arms around my shoulders to hug me closer to him, my petite frame fits against his chest perfectly. I hug him back, and he slowly lifts his hips against mine so I can feel how much I affect him once more. Any sort of composure I clung to is officially lost. I kiss him hard, and he tugs my hair gently as he kisses me back with equal fervor.

“I need more.” I gasp, tugging at his chef's jacket. “Take this off.”

Caleb obliges, taking both his outer layer and shirt off. He tugs at the hem of my shirt, and I lift my arms up for him to take it off. He studies me for a moment, completely captivated. I feel intense relief that I'm wearing something sexier than my worn down Victoria Secret bra. The lace on my white balconette is delicate, soft, and of a French inspired floral design. The wide double straps on the front add an extra layer of sex appeal. As modest as the lift is, the open neck offers more skin to kiss.

“This is gorgeous,” Caleb brushes a finger along the strap of my bra, and I shiver with anticipation.

“Thank you,” I smile shyly at him. I appreciate that he's taking a moment to compliment me. As openly as Isla discusses lingerie with everyone, I'm relieved he's not squeamish about complimenting lingerie. *I may have to thank Isla for that one day...*

I hum my pleasure as Caleb leans down and brushes his lips along my open chest. The movement of his tongue against my exposed skin opens me up to him.

“Caleb!” I moan, feeling the intense movement of his mouth on my skin. I sit up taller, offer more of my neck, and his tongue finds a magical rhythm of licking, sucking, and biting as he moves up my neck. I spread my legs further on his lap and we start another steady movement against another as he bites down on the crook of my neck. I gasp as he sucks on the same spot and then moves further down my chest. I lift my arms up to offer the exposure of my breasts. Caleb teases the seam of my bra line with his tongue. I’m aching for him to taunt my nipples, but the pleasure doesn’t come.

I look down at him, searching for the reason. Caleb smiles gently at me, then brushes my hair away from my face. He waits patiently for my approval and consent. It’s utter torture, the stopping of motion. I’m not used to men taking what they want while asking permission. It feels low level sadistic, but I’ve also never been as turned on as I am now.

“Fucking, yes!” I groan in anticipation.

It doesn’t take more than my agreement, and his tongue find my nipple through the lace and sucks hard. Caleb sucks and licks through the lace until my nipple is taut. The brush of lips is gentle, but the pull and pressure of his sucking is the perfect combination to build me up to that single point of demand that leads to an explosion of pleasure. I press my free nipple between two fingers and Caleb swats my hand away.

“Mine.” Caleb growls, as he leaves my taut nipple for the other.

I laugh huskily at his playfulness, which immediately turn into carefree groans full of wanting. As he sucks, Caleb murmurs small vocalizations against me and completely ruin my panties. The steady pace of our gyrating hips becomes harder and faster. He leans back, pulling me closer as he presses his back against the couch, I lean over him as he moves. It allows for more access in our hip movement, and we fuck each other with our clothes on.

The synchronicity between our bodies demands the question: why have we never done this before? Why haven't I given myself permission to see Caleb as more? Because this feeling... Its sensational. It feels too good and so right, that the natural ease takes my breath away.

I freeze at the thought. The effortless movement between our bodies is intoxicating, it's intrinsic, and I'm suddenly very aware of what this all means. There's no stepping back from this—no pretending what we've done hasn't happened.

“Rayanne?” Caleb senses my panic and gently turns my face to his. “Sweetheart, where did you go?”

“I—don't, I'm—” I stammer, unsure where to begin.

“Are you okay?” Caleb asks gently. “Do we need to stop?”

“And if we do?” That question catches my attention because I know how much he wants this.

“Then we had fun,” Caleb replies, hugging me close to him. “And we'll do it again if that's what you want.”

“Caleb,” I sigh, knowing that he understands me so well. That's exactly what I needed to hear. “What am I going to do with you?” I touch my forehead to his, and he nuzzles his nose against mine.

“You could kiss me again,” he smiles devilishly. “If you like.”

I laugh openly at the hope springing from him. All of my soft curves pressed into his hard lines line up, making me aware, once more, that this is right.

*If you want it, take it.*

I take a moment to breathe in and out and absorb what's before me. Caleb's hair is mussed up by my touch, and it's sexy as hell. His mouth is parted, waiting in anticipation for my response. I brush a fingertip down his nose as light as a butterfly, then skate my hand down his cheek. I search for a trace of reluctance, and all I find is eagerness to feel those lips on my skin once more. I take the whole sight of a shirtless Caleb on my couch, and it is a beautiful, rare vision. His

muscles, long and lean are strong and sculpted. A memory flashes before my eyes: that of Caleb changing t-shirts in the back of his truck on Tuesday.

It was an accident really, he hadn't told me he was switching tees, or that he had one in the back of his truck. When I saw his broad shoulders bare with understated sculpted biceps, I had to physically make myself tear my eyes away from the sight. If I had known that he looked that good with a shirt off before, I would have resisted a glance through the rear view mirror. Unaware of his actions, I felt my lips part silently at how beautiful and sculpted his bare skin was.

Remembering that moment fondly, I press a hand against his chest, thrilled to see the sight before me. I brush my fingertips lightly against his skin, turning the movement into light circles. My hands shift down as I give a slight tug on his nipple, and Caleb groans softly.

“Ray,” Caleb warns.

“Yes?” I smirk devilishly at him. *This is fun.*

“Kiss me, or I'm going to take my chance and kiss you senseless into tomorrow,” He replies, and the threat is very appealing.

“You drive a hard bargain, Gardiner.” I reply, a smile curling on my lips.

“Ray,” Caleb demands. “Kiss me now, or I swear to god \_\_\_”

I laugh, then run my fingers through his hair. I trace the frustrated line of his lips until it turns into a smile and kiss him softly.

“You are beautiful,” I whisper. “Did you know that?”

“Not as beautiful as you are,” Caleb replies. “You take my breath away, every day.” His lips brush the side of my jaw, and he kisses his way down the shell of my ear. A delicate combination of tongue and teeth against my tender skin elicit a moan from me.

“Are we doing this, Rayanne?” Caleb murmurs against my skin. His lips move away from my neck and Caleb looks at me. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll give you everything you ask and more.”

“Yes,” I reply, cradling his face in my hands. “We’re doing this.”

“Good answer.” Caleb brushes his lips against my mine, and I open eagerly for him. As our tongues collide, Caleb presses his hips up against me. His dick rubs against my center, and I moan, pressing down into him. We find our rhythm slowly, as he begins to explore my body once more. I run my fingers through his hair, pressing him closer to me. Caleb skates his fingers up my torso and his thumbs brush my nipples into hard buds. He pinches one, making me moan and his lips finds its way to the other and sucks. *Hard.*

“Oh Caleb,” I moan. “More—give me more.”

Caleb softens my body with desire as he works between both breasts, reverently praising each until the brink of ecstasy begins to churn in my center. I run my fingers through Caleb’s thick hair and tug his mouth to mine, demanding his lips. As our tongues dance, I drink in the feeling of one of Caleb’s hands skating from my bottom to the center of my sex, pressing a thumb against it. An electric storm is rising in my body; my center white hot and demanding. The much-anticipated relief I’m expect never comes, and I’m forced to focus, making eye contact with Caleb.

“Fuck, Caleb,” I groan, grinding against his hand. “Yes. Touch me there. Make me cum.”

“That’s my good girl,” Caleb growls against my skin. He bites down gently on the nape of my neck as his tongue swipes soothing strokes against the rough touch. His thumb presses into my center, then offers long, languid strokes of pleasure. I pull him closer, relishing every touch of his and mine as Caleb’s tongue expertly drives wild pleasure into an emerging point of focus. Caleb expertly kisses his way down to my nipples, returning his attention to making them taut once more.

As we move against each other, the pressure of his fingers rubbing against my clit, the onslaught of sucking and nibbling on my nipples hardens the center of my core. Caleb moves longer strokes between my legs as we move. He keeps the pace, pushing against my jeans and on my sex. As the electricity rises from my navel, the hair on my arms rises with waves of pleasure building into a white, blinding light. The consistent movement of his thumb on my center, his lips on my nipple, and his teeth biting down are enough to send me over the edge. My moans turn into a scream as my pleasure as my body bursts like a supernova. Caleb rides out my orgasm in supplying pleasure until I've seen it through.

“Oh, my god.” I gasp.

I look down on Caleb; his grin is as enigmatic as the Cheshire Cat who looks like he's won the cream. *Smug bastard.*

Caleb playfully nips my neck. “Mine.”

It takes a moment, coming down from the high, but the word hits me like a freight train. It sets me on edge, and I sit up rather abruptly. “Excuse me!?”

Any sense of the endorphin high has evaporated, and I'm instantly on alert. That possessive word takes me back to a dark place I'm not fond of. I've worked hard, picking myself back up. I don't need any reminders of where I've been in the past.

“Mine.”

Even as Caleb looks at me so fondly, and even as my heart beats loudly in my chest for him, a cold wave of emotion rolls over me. I don't like the sound of being someone's—not even Caleb's. All of my insecurities, all of my reservations immediately come to the surface.

Tonight was a mistake. That kiss on Friday was a mistake. I should never have listened to Isla. I shouldn't have given in to my selfish wanting for Caleb, because now he actually thinks he has a chance with me. My mind clears away the haze of indecision and doubt. Any lingering questions I have in my

mind about Caleb, and what to do with these feelings stirring within me vanish.

*Stupid, Rayanne—this was very dumb of you.*

“No, Caleb.” I remove myself from his lap and step away from him. “I don’t think so. You don’t get to claim me like that.”

*No one does.*

I let someone claim me once. I let someone possess my heart and my mind and my body, only to be left behind, shattered in the dust. The only person that has a right to all of those things is me. I’ve worked hard to ensure that no one will ever possess me like that again.

“Why?” Caleb asks, rather stupidly. The playful tone between us has entirely diminished, and he looks utterly lost. I don’t blame him, as I’ve just turned a complete one-eighty on him, but it’s my responsibility to let him know that this—whatever’s between us isn’t going any further than tonight.

“This was fun,” I reply, ignoring the question. I find my shirt and tug it back on. I look around for his and toss it his way. “You need to go, Caleb. Thanks for the orgasm.”

*Be a fucking bitch, Rayanne. Rip the band-aid off fast so he doesn’t have a chance to turn it around.*

“The fuck, Ray?” Caleb replies, utterly astonished. “That wasn’t just fucking around. Not for me.”

*No, it wasn’t.* That’s the problem, isn’t it? I comb through my apartment for all the shit Caleb brought in and gather it at the door. The faster he gets out, the easier my breathing will become. The faster he leaves, the sooner I can begin the process of recovery from whatever tonight has become.

“Rayanne,” Caleb corners me in the hallway. “Talk to me, what the hell’s going on?”

“I *am not* yours,” I spit out angrily. “I will never be *yours*—this, this fucking—” I wave my hands around, gesturing between us. “It’s not happening.”

“Why?” asks Caleb, rather patiently. He crosses his arms across his chest. “You said that, and I don’t get it. Explain it to me.”

*Oh Caleb. You just had to ask, didn’t you?*

I laugh bitterly, feeling the endless swells of emotion rage inside me. Does Caleb think that after a week of spending time together marks as a unit? Or does he think that because he gave me an orgasm that marks us as official? We *are not* official. This orgasm was just a moment of indulgence—a stupid, selfish, overindulgence on my part. I shouldn’t have given into my feelings for him. And now I’m stuck here, frozen in the raw intensity of emotions that if I process all that I feel right now, I might break down. I’m not breaking down for another man ever again. If anything, the only outcome that has happened, is that I’m more resolute in stamping out these feelings that have swelled inside of me this last week.

Isla was wrong. I don’t get to take what I want because there are too many risks involved with Caleb Gardiner and my heart. I was wrong to take advantage of him and use him for my own needs. I was wrong to think that I could look away from all the barriers between us.

“Ray?” Caleb tries again. “Is it Isla? You know she doesn’t care if—”

“I *know* she doesn’t care,” I reply, spitting out the words like an angry cat. “She actually wants to see us happy together —”

“She said that?” Caleb asks, a playful grin tugging at his lips. That beautiful smile tugs at my heart and I attempt to shut down the flutters that wash through my body, knowing that it’s just for me. “When?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I reply, waving it off. “We aren’t a thing that’s happening.”

“Why? Because Isla’s my sister?” Caleb asks. “If she’s told you she’s okay with us, it shouldn’t matter, right?”

“You know you can be rather short-sighted, Caleb?” I snap. He clearly doesn’t see what I see, and the fact that he’s



always felt so strongly about me blinds him to what's in front of us. It blinds him from the trouble that comes from falling for a long-time acquaintance.

"I can be short-sighted?" Caleb parrots my words with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah," I reply, crossing my arms over my chest.

"*I* can be short-sighted?" Caleb laughs. "Jesus Rayanne, that's rich coming from you."

"This will never work!" I shout angrily, pointing between us. The words burst from my mouth against my will, and now I know I can never take them back. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Caleb, but we aren't falling in love and having a happily ever after."

"Why?" Caleb demands. "Because you're wondering if we fall in love and things fall apart, who's going to pick up the pieces afterwards?"

Exactly.

"Because if we *do* fall in love, and I break your heart," Caleb scoffs angrily, running his fingers through his hair. "Isla will have to pick between us? Jesus, Ray—"

His words hit the fucking bull's eye.

"I'm not making Isla choose between us, Caleb." I reply, resting my hands on my hips. "I love her too much."

"Give me some credit, Rayanne," Caleb rolls his eyes. "I'm not some immature asshole who doesn't know the treasure you're worth. You don't think I've run through all the possible outcomes in my head? Do you not think I understand the risks involved with your heart? I know what you've endured."

I step back, feeling the force of his words. Even in his frustration, Caleb's first thoughts are for me. This isn't good—it can't be. He needs to find a way to shut those inclinations off. And if he just attempted to connect what's between us and my ex, that's utterly ridiculous. This is about us and how our boundaries should never have been crossed.

“This isn’t about Isla,” Caleb replies, running a broad hand over his face. “She’s not the real problem here, Rayanne.”

“No?” I raise my brows with disbelief.

“No.”

We stare at each other at an impasse. Caleb looks expectantly at me, waiting for me to take the bait, but I’m not following through. I scan the apartment for his chef’s jacket and pick it up.

“It’s time for you to go,” I tell him, shoving his jacket in his arms. Caleb hasn’t moved to put it on. He’s only looking at me pleadingly, begging me to take the bait. I’m not a fucking idiot, and I refuse to engage further in the conversation. I turn away from him to open my apartment door for his departure.

“You know I would never leave you, right?” Caleb interrupts the silence between us, sweeping his jacket on. He steps into my space, turning me around. Caleb caresses the hair in my face away from my eyes so gently, I feel my body tremble. “I will never abandon you. Not like he did.”

*Oh no, he did not.*

“You know Caleb,” I reply, pointing a finger at him in accusation. “You can fuck off straight to hell.”

“You don’t think I saw the aftermath?” Caleb finally explodes. He’s been so careful, checking himself this whole time. Caleb has been so patient and considerate of me, but now all that careful thoughtfulness has shattered as he demands my attention. “You don’t think I watched your family and Isla put you back together, piece by piece? Do you not understand how devastated I was for you?” Caleb cuts himself off, breathless with anger. A tinge of sadness shadows his eyes, his brows furrowed. He’s kept this in for a long time.

I had no idea he’s felt any of this for so long.

I wasn’t even aware he saw everything.

“Fuck Ray—” He sighs and sweeps a thumb across my cheek. “I was broken too. And I had no place to say anything

at the time—but I can now.”

“A week of spending time alone together does not allow you to comment on my life or what I’ve experienced.” I reply, bracing myself against the warmth his words spread through me. I step back, curling my arms instinctively across my middle. “I don’t need to listen to you forcing your thoughts on me, telling me you’ve felt sorry for me for the past three years.” I point a finger at him accusingly. “You haven’t earned access to *any* of that. I’m *fine*, alright? I was the one who put myself back together.”

“Yes, Rayanne, you were.” Caleb beseeches me, demanding my understanding. “Do you not see that I get it?”

I hear him—but these aren’t the words I want to hear. He doesn’t need to coddle me with his sympathies and understanding. “Caleb, you aren’t listening—”

“No, Ray—” Caleb shoots back. “You’re the one *not* listening. We—”

“There isn’t a *we*, Caleb!” I shout, throwing my hands explosively in the air.

“So that’s it, huh?” Caleb snaps back. “I’m not here to tell you that I feel sorry for you—I’m not showing you pity. Fuck pity, Rayanne. I fucking hate that word. I’m telling you that I broke alongside you when you couldn’t put yourself back together.”

I scoff with indignation, “Right—”

“—My fucking crush cut me off from every saying anything before because I didn’t think you’d take me seriously,” Caleb interrupts. “Did you not see at any point—or know how much I was dying to help?”

“But this—what’s between us—this is more than just a one-sided crush.” Caleb affirms, a pleading look in his eyes for me to acknowledge what he understands to be true. “You and I are real. This magic and chemistry and all the feelings we share—they’re real. And we’re good for each other. How many times have we picked each other time and time again?”

*Too many.*

The well of emotion bursting through me is at breaking point, and I resolve to turn the softness I feel for Caleb into a fortification made of diamonds. There is just, simply, too much at stake. “I’m not talking about this,” I reply, curling my arms instinctively across my middle. “There isn’t an *us*.” I hiss.

“Fuck Ray!” Caleb yells, finally. “Of course, there is!”

“No, there really isn’t.”

“I’m not going to sit here and pretend that I can’t connect the dots, Rayanne.” Caleb replies so gently, the words caress my skin. His softness is a balm to the rigid ball forming in my stomach. I pause my fury enough to listen to him—just for a moment. “I get it, okay? I really do. Damon was a sickness that infested your soul and tried to take away any beautiful light that makes you shine.”

“Caleb—” I whisper, unwanted emotions of dread stirring within me. “You need to go.” I’ve resolved to not think of that name, but there: he’s gone and done it. He’s brought up the shadows I’ve tried to forget. I will never forgive him for uttering *that* name.

*Never.*

“No sweetheart,” he carefully envelops me in his arms. “I really don’t. I’m right where I belong.” At first, I’m stiff in his arms, reluctant to accept the comfort he offers. But Caleb gentles his touch, and it’s so soft, I feel myself open up. He holds onto me so long that my arms begin to wrap around his waist, and he brushes his lips against my hair. Caleb hugs me so long that the pieces falling apart inside of me get put back together. Tears escape, and I hastily try to wipe them away. The warmth emanating from him reminds me to breathe. Caleb runs his fingers through my hair, kisses my forehead chastely, and squeezes me tightly.

“Are you okay?” Caleb finally asks, brushing a finger down my cheekbone.

“Not really,” I laugh, shakily.

“You’re such a fucking treasure,” Caleb pronounces as he looks at me. He pulls me back into a hug with such ferocity that my breath is knocked away. He lowers himself to his knees, wraps his arms around my waist and looks up at me. “You know that, right?”

Am I?

The question in my eyes gives me away as Caleb laughs bitterly. “Fuck Ray, do you not see yourself clearly?” His hand moves up my torso in a gentle caress, sending shivers down my spine. “You are all strength, courage, and kindness. You have endured hell and walked out of it standing tall. I’m so fucking proud of you. I will always be on your side—you know that right?”

I nod my head, breathless and completely unaware of all he’s said. The power of his words break through my fortifications, regardless. How is he doing this again? How does Caleb Gardiner know all the right words to soothe my soul and warm my heart? I shudder a breath, looking up to the heavens. I can’t—I can’t do this. I don’t know if anything he’s said about my ex is right. Right now I can’t tell facts from feelings, or what’s right or wrong.

Caleb stands up and hugs me briefly. “I’m sorry that this has turned you upside down, but I’m here, Rayanne.”

“I know you are.” I sigh. He always has been, and that’s the hell of it, isn’t it?

“Can you do something for me?” Caleb smiles and my heartstrings tug once more.

“What’s that?”

“Shine bright, Rayanne Lee Miller.” he breathes, swiping a thumb against my cheek. “I know this is a lot. But whatever’s between us is just beginning.”

Caleb picks up the ladder and small cooler as he opens the door to leave. He’s finally leaving me, as I asked him to ages ago, but now I’m reluctant to watch him walk away. I should want him to leave and never see him again. He’s gone and crossed a line that’s hard for me to uncross—but he’s done it

with such gentleness and love that it doesn't feel like he's betrayed me.

My heart pounds hard against my chest and against my wishes. My soul demands his return. I want his arms wrapped around me—I want to feel his warmth comfort me and cradle any insecurities I feel. I want his arms to be the blanket that wraps around me and never lets me go.

I watch Caleb walk down the stairs of my apartment complex. The ensconces guiding him down the stairs reflect the light on his face in the shadows. He looks back at me with such fondness that I can't help but believe him. I want to believe that he'll never leave me—that he's not going to hurt me. I learned that hard lesson once though, and the risk of losing Caleb in every capacity is enough to harden my heart again. I have to. For better or for worse, Caleb is in my life because he's Isla's kid brother, and I will not risk what good is already between us.

I step back through my apartment and close my door. I lean against it heavily, letting it carry my weight as I fall to the floor. A heavy sigh escapes my lips, and sadness overwhelms me. Whether I like it or not, the one thing I know to be true is that Caleb is wrong.

We will never work. What's passed between us is done. And as much as my heart aches for Caleb Gardiner, I'll never allow my desire for him to show again.

επιλογε: calab



I glance back at the Christmas tree in Rayanne’s living room before I leave her apartment. It’s large, sparkling, and beautiful. Rayanne’s Christmas tree, despite how large it is; despite how much it fills up her living room space, is simply breathtaking. It could only be so, as it was what Rayanne envisioned in the first place. On Friday, I checked the base to ensure that the tree was placed in evenly, and that it would not fall down again. Had it not been for this tree, I’m not sure I would have the hope to see my dreams come true today.

Had it not been for this tree, Rayanne and I wouldn’t have ever kissed, or made out like our lives depended on each other’s pleasure.

Had it not been for this tree, I wouldn’t have seen Rayanne search through her emotions, opening doors and discovering how deeply she feels for me. We wouldn’t have fought about the future—or her past. The mask she wears is so discreet, I’m



not even sure she knows she's wearing one. But I see right through it. I know that despite the mask of wellness and vitality, there is still a part of Rayanne that suffers every day from the repercussions of her ex. It was too risky bringing up the elephant in the room that was clearly staring at me—but I did it anyway, because she needs to know that I see her. *All of her*. And I want Rayanne just the same. I always will.

Her ex: a man of great charisma and sensuality captivated Rayanne for so long she lost herself in him, and when he left her three years ago with no word, Rayanne was shattered into tiny pieces. It was devastating watching her fall apart. She had become the perfect visage of what he wanted her to be, and his disappearance shattered her confidence. It eviscerated her well-being, and she was only shadows for a long time. I hate him. I hate what he did to Rayanne—if only because she's still recovering. It's only within the last year that she's become the sparkling ray of light I know her to be.

Rayanne's fear of us, of what we could be is understandable. I detected traces of her reluctance earlier this week, saw the shadows of her ex hover over her that I'm sure she doesn't understand. When I demanded that she take a look in the mirror and address the clear truths in front of her, Rayanne shut down. I wish she hadn't, but honestly, Rayanne still has more healing to go through. And regardless of what she thinks, because I *know* she thinks we're done, I'm going to be right beside her every step of the way. We are a unit—Rayanne and me. We are the perfect complement to each other, and if there's anything I've learned this week, it's that my deep intuitive understanding that only seems to work around Rayanne is right. There isn't much I'm good for in this world, but if there's one thing I know how to do right, it's how to love Rayanne Lee Miller.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's been several hours since I've left Rayanne. I'm restless in bed, unable to settle into sleep. I wish I could give her the words of comfort I know she needs, but I've known her for so long that I know only Rayanne can sort through her stubbornness and accept the truth. I swipe right on my phone, seeing that it's her texting me.

The sfogliatella is a fucking marvel, Caleb. You make living art, and I'm so proud you.

Thanks Ray.

You're welcome.

I take a moment to consider if I should address what happened tonight. I'm so tempted, but I don't want to push her away. I know she's felt the magic between us. It's always existed, but now she's aware. Now she knows I'll take the time she needs for her acceptance. I'm about to start typing as much when another message flashes before me.

You should forget me, Caleb. Forget us. It's not an option.

Never, sweetheart. I'll never walk away from you. Don't you know that by now?

I can hear Rayanne sigh across Austin. The thought makes me smile sadly. The response from her is faster than I anticipate. It's all I need to know that she's just as absorbed in our conversation as I am.

I know.

Still...

I pause, waiting to hear more, but that's all that comes from her. I know she's gripping her phone tightly, holding onto whatever it is that's piecing her together. I wish I could comfort her right now. As the silence deepens, I carefully compose what I know to be true, and praying that she'll understand why I'm not walking away.

I know that you think this is a mistake, Rayanne. But it's not.

Whatever your fears are, I will protect you from them.

Whatever your desires are, I will help you fulfill them.

You are light and goodness, and I believe in you.

The three dots start moving, but before she can finish her response, I complete mine.

We aren't done, Ray.

This is just the beginning.

I'm not going to give up until she is one hundred percent mine. If you'd asked me a week ago if I ever thought I'd make out with Rayanne Miller on her couch, I would never have believed you. And if you had asked me if it was because of a Christmas tree that was too fucking big, I would have laughed in your face. But thank god for that Christmas tree, because otherwise none of this would have happened.

I am the bottom line that cannot be washed away, despite Rayanne's protests and fears. It doesn't matter if it takes a month, a year, or the rest of my life—I have the patience needed to earn Rayanne Miller, her trust, devotion, and love.

I will earn it.

where to listen  
to the playlists

the trouble  
with christmas



Apple Music

LINK:

[HTTPS://MUSIC.APPLE.COM/US/PLAYLIST/THE-TROUBLE-WITH-CHRISTMAS-PLAYLIST/PL.U-NpXmYVikzKxI](https://music.apple.com/us/playlist/the-trouble-with-christmas-playlist/pl.u-NpXmYVikzKxI)



Spotify

LINK:

[HTTPS://OPEN.SPOTIFY.COM/PLAYLIST/58vBv5WWATyvLfjldNtV8I?si=Dbf3c9f8e23d40a3](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/58vBv5WWATyvLfjldNtV8I?si=Dbf3c9f8e23d40a3)



where to listen  
to the playlists

rayanne's  
christmas playlist



Apple Music

LINK:

[HTTPS://MUSIC.APPLE.COM/US/PLAYLIST/RAYANNES-CHRISTMAS-PLAYLIST/PL.U-KVXBYNIEFX7XE1](https://music.apple.com/us/playlist/rayannes-christmas-playlist/pl.u-kvxbyniefx7xe1)



Spotify

LINK:

[HTTPS://OPEN.SPOTIFY.COM/PLAYLIST/58vBv5WWATyvLfjDNTN8I?SI=5EFD19BD58B84618](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/58vBv5WWATyvLfjDNTN8I?si=5efd19bd58b84618)



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*also by loren sorensen*

LOVE IN PLANE SIGHT, AVAILABLE ON KINDLE VELLA.

LIGHT ME UP, AVAILABLE ON KINDLE VELLA AND CO-AUTHORED WITH J.C.  
MURPHEY

## *about the author*

Loren Sorensen lives with her husband and son, two dogs, and kitty in Austin, Texas. An avid collector of both tea and books, Loren possibly has more than she knows what to do with for either. Her love of writing began as a reader of the Classics, Historical Fiction, and Young Adult romance, connecting deeply to well-written characters. Writing began as a hobby in middle school and has been a creative outlet for over twenty years.

Loren became inspired to pursue her writing career with more purpose when the idea of her first novel, *Love in Plane Sight*, came to her in a dream. Between working and living in Lingerie retail and reading romance novels, *Love in Plane Sight*'s story has demanded to be told. There is a whole world mapped out for the main characters and side characters from *Love in Plane Sight*, including Rayanne and Caleb. Stay tuned for the wild ride!

Check out more from Loren on her website, [www.lorensorensenwrites.com](http://www.lorensorensenwrites.com). She's also most active on Instagram, and you can find more from her on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.

