



Yours
TO

Ho Ho Hold

A Romantic
Comedy

JERÉ ANTHONY

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To all the other weirdos who are here for the Santa-smut.

You are my people.

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Chapter One

Drew

I SCRATCH at the thin velvet material of my Santa suit as I make my way to the very back of the plane. Eyes widen and heads turn as I pass, but I've gotten so used to the reactions I almost don't notice.

It's not like I blame them. It's not every day you see a young, muscular Santa covered in tattoos out in the wild. It doesn't help that my suit is essentially a robe with a deep V in the front that falls open every time I raise my arms.

But that's what the client wanted, so who am I to refuse?

I'd say I wish I had more time to change before running to catch my flight—the last one available to have me home in time for Christmas—but honestly, I don't mind the attention.

Not in a cocky way. I work hard to maintain this physique. I spend hours upon hours in the gym, so I don't mind a little attention here and there. But more than that, it's fun to shock people, to break up their mundane day-to-day routines and make them giggle or pick up their phones and discreetly snap a photo for their friends ... People aren't nearly as sneaky as they think they are.

But as I said, I don't mind. In fact, I like to give them a little flex or flash them my bedroom eyes—really give them what they're looking for.

In some ways, it feels like I'm making the world a better place, lightening the moods of my fellow humans and lifting their spirits little by little. Of course, I don't actually say those things out loud. Well, maybe sometimes when I'm drinking with my younger brother Jamie, but he's really the only person who sees that side of me.

I've always been fine being the butt of the joke. I come from a tightly-knit family with a healthy dash of disfunction, and teasing is our primary shared love language. It used to bother me when I was younger. I thought they were making fun of me, but then I realized they teased Jamie just as much, and he seemed to thrive off their attention, teasing or otherwise.

So, one day I decided I had two choices. I could feel sorry for myself and hide from their teasing ... or I could embrace it.

So, that's exactly what I did.

"Excuse me," I say as I squeeze through the narrow aisle where a man sits with his legs stretched out and doesn't bother moving. If I had to guess, he's feeling pretty insecure, judging by how his jaw's set like he's clenching his teeth and the way he's folding his arms over his chest like he's a peacock fluffing out its feathers.

Don't worry, bro. You're pretty, too, even if your muscles aren't as big as mine. Though, your scraggly facial hair is another story entirely ...

I wish I could say this is a rare occurrence, but it happens more than you'd think. Ever since I really started hitting it hard in the gym and taking my weight training seriously, I always seem to trigger douchebags like this guy.

Men, I've noticed, can be extremely insecure... *and they say women are the more emotional sex ...*

I give the guy a friendly nod before stepping over his leg and finding my seat a few rows back. When I lift the overhead compartment to put my carryon in, someone behind me beats me to the last open space. He flashes me an apologetic smile,

but I get it. It's every man for himself. With it being only two days before Christmas, I was lucky to get a seat at all.

"Would you like me to take your bag? It looks like we've just run out of space," a flight attendant asks from behind me.

"Sure. I guess so." I pass her the bag. "Thanks."

She gives me a wink, making a show of scanning her eyes down my body. "It's my *pleasure*, Santa. Please let me know if there's anything else I can do for you this evening ..." I watch in appreciation as she sways her shapely, plump ass until a female voice steals my attention.

"Why are guys such pigs? I'd rather not have to watch you and *Stew* become initiated into the mile high club ..."

I turn my gaze to find a cute, petite blonde with bright red lips scowling at me over the top of her book. She's sitting in what appears to be my seat—according to my ticket, anyway.

I pause in front of the seat, bracing my arms against the overhead compartment and lean toward her. "I'm not sure if you know this, but I think you're in my seat."

The beautiful woman rolls her eyes and shoves a piece of paper inside her book before closing it in her lap. "I don't do window seats. Considering most people fight over them, I figured I'd save you the trouble, and we can call it an even trade. Besides, now you have a better view to ogle the flight attendants." She picks up her book and continues reading like the conversation is over.

She's a feisty one, this girl, and her whole snarky attitude has my balls tingling with excitement.

Fuck, I love a challenge ... These days, women practically throw themselves at me, making my selection process nonexistent. Don't get me wrong, it was fun at first, but it gets old dating the same flat women all the time. There's no substance to any of it, and mutual attraction only goes so far. I miss the chase.

"I don't think it's fair to assume everyone loves the window seat." I flex my bicep as she looks up at me. "Some of us have a hard time squeezing into these tiny seats, and the

aisle offers a little more room.” I scan my eyes over her body sizing her up. “My guess is you’re five-four, maybe even five-three? Don’t you think if one of us needs the extra space, it’s safe to say it isn’t you?”

She sits up a little taller, like she’s preparing for a fight, and fuck, if it’s not the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. There’s no fear in her deep brown eyes. If anything, she’s hungry for the confrontation. And I’m happy to give it to her.

“Five-two actually,” she retorts like she didn’t just prove my argument right. “But I was still here first, so—”

“That’s not how it works. I have a ticket—”

“Dude, the plane is packed. There’s no such thing as space. Just sit down. I’ll have to deal with my elbows getting smacked by the drink cart. Have you ever hit your funny bone? Let me tell you, there’s nothing funny about it,” she deadpans.

I shake my head, feeling confused, like we’re somehow arguing in two different languages.

“Excuse me, sir. I’m going to need you to take your seat now,” a different flight attendant says, this one older and far less enthused with me.

“Fine. But I don’t want to hear any complaining out of you after I chug this bottle of water and have to pee every thirty minutes.” I shimmy over her because, of course, she doesn’t stand up to move out of the way, probably too afraid I’ll take her vacant seat the second she got up ... Here’s the thing, that *was* my original plan, but it looks like I’ll have to bow out of the fight this time.

I make a point to shove my ass in her face as I slide into my seat, but she just holds her book in front of her face and keeps reading.

“Whatcha reading there, Cujo?” I ask after a few moments of awkward silence.

I can practically feel the lasers shooting from her eyes as she lowers her book and glares at me. “Did you just call me Cujo?” She laughs, but it’s not a happy laugh filled with

humor. It's more of a scary laugh, the kind crazy people make right before they snap. "Because you're one to talk. What are you? Some kind of porn star Santa Claus?" She pinches the material of my suit between her fingers like it's something hazardous. "How'd you get past security in that, anyway?"

I flash her a charming smile and smooth down the fabric against my chest. "Easy. All they had to do was a quick once over and they could clearly see I didn't have any contraband on me, so they let me through." I lean back in my seat propping my hands behind my neck. "You may even say I made their jobs a little easier." My eyes flick down at her book. "You didn't answer my question."

She lowers it, so I can't see the cover, but it's too late. I'm well aware of the smutty romance book she's reading, even though the cover doesn't portray what's really inside. I know because I recognize the author's name, the very author responsible for the Santa suit she seems to be so offended by right now. Go figure.

My little sassy seatmate just got a little more interesting ...

"It's kind of like a thriller ... about this stalker who disguises himself as Santa during Christmas time." She shakes her head and rolls her lips. "Why am I telling you this? It's none of your business."

"Just making friendly conversation." I lean in and whisper, "But just so you know, I know you're lying, and I'm going to have to put you on the naughty list for that." I shrug. "I don't make the rules, Sunshine. Well, maybe I do, but rules are rules ..."

Her mouth drops open like she's at a loss for words, and her cheeks tint pink. Fuck, she's pretty. If she keeps giving me reactions like that I'm going to have a hard time *not* pressing her buttons this entire flight.

She scoffs. "Sunshine. Cujo. Do you always give the woman you're talking to a special nickname, or am I just lucky?"

I scroll through the movie selection on the small screen in front of me, not looking at her as I answer, “Well, since you haven’t told me your name—just starting slinging insults at me from the get-go—I don’t know what you’d like me to call you ...” I raise an eyebrow as I glance at her.

She crosses her arms and rolls her eyes, falling silent once again.

All right, I see how it’s gonna be. Good thing I’m up for the challenge. I don’t have anything to do for the next few hours so if it’s games she wants to play then I’m all in.

I continue my perusal until I finally land on my favorite Christmas movie, *Elf*, and hit play.

“Of course, you’d pick that one,” she says as she picks her book back up, pretending to read.

“What do you mean? It’s Christmas. This is a classic.” I motion toward the window at the snowy scene below us, and she shivers, then immediately goes back to her book like she’s too scared to look away.

Interesting. Maybe there’s a bigger reason for her not wanting the window seat? I’m normally not one to pry, but she’s making it too damn fun.

I lift the visor all the way and prop my hands behind my head to give her a better view. Maybe she’ll think twice next time before stealing someone’s seat. When I cross an ankle over my knee, so my knee’s touching her leg I don’t miss the way her body goes rigid.

Yeah, I’m about to have so much fun fucking with her. How’s that for revenge?

She tries to scoot away, but she’s unsuccessful. There’s nowhere for her to go in this cramped space, and for the first time ever in public transportation history, I’m actually thankful for that.

“Can you not manspread? I don’t want to catch an STI from your skanky Santa suit.” She tries to shove my knee away, but I don’t budge. I can’t say I hate the way her hands feel groping my leg either.

I sit up a little like I'm confused. "I'll have you know I had this dry-cleaned just yesterday. You seem really tense over there." I nod toward her book. "Is that book making you sexually frustrated, and now, you're mad because you can't do anything about it?"

She narrows her eyes but doesn't say anything, so I keep going.

"Are you at the part where she walks in on him, and he makes her sit in his lap without her pant—"

Her soft hand flies over my mouth to silence me. "Will you shut up?" she hisses.

It's cute as fuck that she's embarrassed, with her bright pink cheeks and those red lips pressed together. She's like a little chihuahua or something, vicious and wrapped up in a tiny, cute package.

I hold up my hands in surrender, and she finally lowers her hand—not like she was really stopping me, but I indulge her anyway.

"Can you just watch your stupid movie and leave me alone —"

Her words break off as the plane jolts with turbulence. The next thing I know, she's lunging toward me, burying her face in the plush, velvety fabric of my Santa suit.

See what I mean? Women just throw themselves at me ...

Chapter Two

Holly

MY STOMACH TWISTS in knots and I let out a panicked scream for what feels like hours as the plane violently rocks like it's just been hit by a missile. For all I know it has because I've never experienced either of these things.

I've always been terrified of flying, but I decided my desperation to get as far away from Christmas as possible outweighed the risk.

Jokes on me, I guess.

Though the irony of being held by a slutty Santa isn't lost on me. It just makes it even more poetic—especially considering the book I was just reading. Rereading, actually. It's a long-time favorite and just about the only thing I still love about Christmas.

I bury my face in his voluptuous pecs, dragging my cheek along the soft fabric in an attempt to self-soothe. His Santa suit is softer than I imagined, and even though his body is absolutely jacked with corded muscle, he feels surprisingly cozy.

He lays a heavy arm over me, wrapping me tightly against him. "Hey, it's just a little turbulence. You're okay," he says, tracing his fingers over my back as if we weren't hurling insults at each other only moments ago.

I'm not normally so combative with complete strangers, but it's been a shitty day, and I guess the Santa suit kind of triggered me. That and the fact he looks as hot as he does, which means there's an almost-one hundred percent chance he's a fuck boy. And if there's one thing I don't mess with, it's fuck boys.

"See, it's almost over now," he whispers, his breath tickling my neck and making my pulse pound in my ears. What the hell kind of voodoo magic is this guy using that has me actually relaxing just because he said everything was going to be alright? It's not like he's the real Santa or even a pilot. I don't think he's a pilot. He doesn't look like one, not that I know what pilots are supposed to look like.

What is wrong with me? Even when my life's in danger, I can't keep my brain from rambling. It's like I've never seen a hot guy before.

I sit up in a rush, tearing myself away from him to put as much space between us as possible—which is admittedly not very much.

The flight attendant's raspy voice comes over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, we seem to be experiencing a little turbulence, but our pilot says the worst is behind us. We may have a few bumps here and there, but it should be a smoother ride from here on out. We'll keep the fasten seatbelt light on for the duration of our flight."

I smooth down my cozy wool sweater and rub my sweaty palms against my jeans. "Sorry about that. I guess my nerves are a little jumpy. It's my first time flying."

His face breaks into a cocky grin, making my insides twist with equal parts annoyance and attraction.

I am not the girl who swoons over anyone. In fact, I pride myself on being immune to charming guys with killer smiles and witty one-liners. I learned my lesson a long time ago that there's a direct correlation between a man's charm and his potential to break your heart. So why am I getting so flustered just from sitting next to him?

“You couldn’t help yourself.” He tucks his hands under his arms and shrugs. “It happens all the time.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re so full of yourself. You could’ve been dressed as a snaggle-toothed tooth fairy, and I would’ve had the same reaction ...”

“Is that what does it for you? Because I don’t mind role-playing.” He pinches his suit away from him. “I can be whoever you want me to be, baby doll. Whatever tickles your fancy.”

My lips curl, and I scrunch my nose. “You’re disgusting.” I try my best to scoot away, but I don’t get very far, and it’s more uncomfortable to sit like this, but I’ll never let him know. He can’t win. Not today.

“Oh, come on. You don’t think that. I felt you copping a feel of my man-titty. You don’t have to pretend you didn’t like it. I could practically feel your muscles melting underneath my touch.” He holds up his hand like he’s admiring it. “I’ve been told on several occasions I have a magical touch ...”

“Man-titty? Seriously?”

He shrugs, then bounces his pecs like A.C. Slater, and I have to force myself to look away. His body really is immaculate ... like straight out of a romance novel hot ...

“That’s quite enough.” I cross my arms over my chest with a humph and give him a side eye. “Why don’t you go back to your terrible Christmas movie and leave me to my book.” I reach for my book, but it’s not where I left it. I’m bending to dig around at my feet when he holds it up, dangling it between two fingers in front of me.

“Give me my book—” I reach for it, but he jerks it away, and starts reading from the page I bookmarked.

Seriously? How old are we? I feel like I’m back in grade school dealing with a bully who I’d later be told acted that way because he had a crush on me. I just want to read my book in peace. Is it really so much to ask?

I try to grab it again, but he keeps blocking me with his ninja reflexes.

“Is there a problem over here?”

I look up to find the flight attendant from before standing over us, and force a smile around my teeth. “No. Everything is just peachy.”

He bites his lip in a poor attempt to hide his smirk and says, “Actually, I’m getting a little parched. Do you think you could grab me a Coke? Extra ice, please.” He winks, and she’s putty in his hands, disappearing to the back of the cabin. I try to grab the book one more time, but it’s too late. He’s already reading it.

And then I remember the part where I left off ... Fucking fantastic. This day keeps getting better and better.

His eyes go wide, and he shoots me a knowing smile. “I fucking knew it.” He laughs as he licks a finger and turns the page. “I know the look of sexual frustration when I see it.

“So, tell me, Cujo, were you picturing me when you read this scene? Because I have to say, he may be a dreamboat of a man written by a woman ... but I’m pretty *well-read* myself.”

“Stop. Calling. Me. Cujo,” I say as I grab for the book. Yet again, unsuccessful as he moves it out of the way.

“Then why don’t you tell me what you *do* want me to call you?” He pauses for a moment, laying the book delicately across his lap, then holds out his hand. “Look, why don’t we start over? I’m Drew, but if you can’t remember, you can just call me Santa. I answer to both.”

I roll my eyes and blow a strand of hair out of my face, crossing my arms rather than shaking his hand. “Trust me, I won’t be calling you Santa, but I’m sure steward-tits back there would love to indulge all your little freak show fantasies.”

“Says the woman reading Santa-smut,” he whispers, sending a chill up my spine and straight back down to my poor, neglected vagina. I hate to admit it, but his theory isn’t too far off ... I’ve got sexual tension pent-up on top of regular tension from losing my job today. It’s a whirlwind of mixed emotions, and I’m sticking with anger because it’s what feels

the most natural. But give me another couple of hours and who knows what I'm capable of. I am nothing if not a hot mess at the moment and the longer I sit here fighting with him, the more I'm starting to wonder if there's a hidden camera somewhere. Surely this is all a joke?

I crane my neck to look around just as the flight attendant appears. She hands him his soda with extra ice and even sneaks him a few bags of cookies with a wink.

"Hey, why does he get a snack? Some of us haven't eaten since breakfast," the guy in front of us protests.

"We'll be back with refreshments shortly," the flight attendant says in a fake sweet voice.

"He's not really Santa Claus, you know. I've been traveling all day and haven't had time to—"

"I got you, dude. Merry Christmas." Drew passes him a bag of cookies over the seat, and the man immediately tears into it and starts eating.

He opens the second bag and holds it out to me. "Cookie?"

I shake my head. "You've got to be kidding me. Maybe I should start wearing a slutty Santa suit in public, so I can get special treatment?"

He scratches his chin as his eyes scan me. "I think you'd make a bigger impact if you went as a slutty elf or Mrs. Claus. But don't let me stop you from letting your freak flag fly."

This guy is insufferable and impossibly frustrating.

"Your nose does this really cute thing when you're angry." He flairs his own nose to mimic it.

"You don't even know me, much less the faces I make when I'm angry. Hell, I've been angry since you met me. So, technically, every face I make is an angry face."

"If that's what you want me to believe, sure." He picks my book up again and pretends to read.

"You've made your point, Ron Jeremy. Can I have my book back now?"

This earns me an impressed laugh, and when he smiles at me like that, it almost touches a wound I didn't realize existed, but I shut it down before it gets that far.

“I have an idea. Why don't we play a little game of trivia. Three questions each. If you win, I'll give you the book.”

“And what do you get if you win?”

He smiles. “You have to go on a date with me when we land.”

“This flight has a connection. You don't even know where I'm flying to.”

He holds up my boarding pass, which I was using as a bookmark. “Looks like we're both headed to sunny Florida for Christmas. How convenient is that?”

“What's the topic?” I ask in challenge. I've always been pretty good at reading people. It's why I was able to climb the ladder at my company so quickly, despite being the only manager without a college degree. Though I suppose losing my job today pokes several holes in my logic ...

“Each other.” He places the book face down on his thigh and meets my gaze. “We have to make three correct assumptions about the other, and we only get three tries a piece. We'll alternate turns.”

“Fine.” I nod. “Who goes first?”

He gestures toward me. “Ladies should always go first ... and definitely more than once.”

His words are laced with innuendo, and I'm embarrassed to admit my panties are a little wet because of it. Damn this dry spell. I'll sleep with the first decent looking guy I come across as soon as I land if that's what it takes to knock this stupid, sex-crazed fog out of my head. It's clouding my judgement, making me not think clearly, hence my current situation. For all I know, Drew here is just a figment of my imagination, a horny conjuring straight from my dusty, shriveled up vagina in an attempt to trick me into fucking whoever is closest in proximity ...

“Fine.” I bite my lip as I study him and his bulging muscles, which are covered in tattoos from his exposed chest all the way up to his neck. I’d be willing to bet he’s got plenty more hidden beneath that Santa suit. Great, now I’m thinking about the other parts of him.

“Any day now,” he teases.

“Hey, don’t rush me. I’m thinking.” I tap my lip as I scan him. He’s very put together, not a hair out of place, and his skin is perfectly flawless ... too flawless. I narrow my gaze in on his jawline when I see the faintest hint of a makeup line.

“You’re either an actor or a model ... judging by your perfect physique, freshly trimmed hair, and the leftover makeup on your face.”

His smile stretches to his eyes, and he nods as he tucks his hands underneath his arms. “You’re good. Beautiful and smart. Dangerous combo.”

I try to hold back my smile at his compliment, but I probably look more like I’m constipated than unaffected by his praise.

“My turn.” He sits up and drinks me in, his gaze lingering longer than socially appropriate around my thighs and chest, and I almost forget what we’re doing here. “You haven’t eaten anything since breakfast, and that was only something small you could grab on the go like a muffin or a scone ... chocolate chip’s my guess.”

I narrow my eyes. “How could you possibly know that by looking at me?”

“Am I right?”

“Yes.” I blow out a sigh of defeat.

He reaches toward me and wipes something off my shirt right above my breast, causing me to suck in a breath. “You’ve got a little chocolate on your shirt, and your leg hasn’t stopped shaking since I sat down.” He puts a hand on my knee, and I immediately go still. I didn’t even realize I was doing it.

I guess my low blood sugar isn't exactly helping my nervous first-time-flying jitters, either.

"Your turn."

I purse my lips as I think. I need to go with something more generic this time but I can't help myself. "You have a long-term girlfriend back home who doesn't know you flirt with everyone you come across." The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop them, maybe because I'm curious, or it could just be my overall distrust of men in general.

He smiles again, but this time, it's what I'm learning is his cocky smile as he shakes his head. "Wrong. Lucky for you, I'm single as a Pringle." He narrows his eyes. "Do you really think I'd play a game to win a date with you if I had a girlfriend?"

I look down and shrug. "All I know is you're a hot guy wearing a Santa suit sitting next to me on an airplane."

"So, you *do* find me attractive?" he says with a grin.

"It's your turn," I remind him.

"All right. All right. Let's see. Judging by your tense shoulders and irritability ... and the book you're reading ... I'd say you're also single?" His words come out like a question. "And have been for quite some time." He taps a finger to his lip, drawing my attention there, and I don't know if I've ever seen such incredible lips on a man. They're full and perfectly smooth, framed by his impeccably groomed mustache that's surprisingly working for me.

"My guess is six months minimum ... maybe longer ..." His eyes search mine in question, and I roll my eyes. He pumps his fist in a silent triumph.

"How long?" he presses, and I shake my head.

"That's none of your business. You got the question right. That's all you need to know. My turn." I try to think of every immediate judgment I made about him because, most of the time, I'm right. "You have a very strict diet when you're weight training, but when you do have a cheat meal you love

...” I scrunch my nose as I think back to how he smelled when he held me. “Mint chocolate chip cookies ...”

His mouth falls open, and he glances behind him like he’s looking for someone to share in his surprise. “How’d you know? Mint chocolate chip cookies are my absolute weakness.”

“You seem like you’re one of those Christmas people.”

“What do you mean ‘Christmas people’? It’s the day before Christmas Eve. Everyone loves Christmas this time of year.”

I shake my head and laugh. Actually laugh because he couldn’t be more wrong if he tried.

He goes still. “Wait, you’re saying you don’t like Christmas? Like at all? But you’re reading Santa-smut.”

“I hate Christmas. Loathe it, even. Why do you think I’m flying to the beach on possibly the second busiest travel day of the year?” I snap my lips shut, realizing I’m giving him more information to work with. He’s still got one more assumption to make.

“Why? Why do you hate the happiest holiday of the entire year?”

I shake my head. “None of your business. It’s your turn, by the way.”

“I can’t believe I’m sitting next to a joyless monster,” he teases, pretending to scoot away from me. “Okay, here’s the deciding assumption.” He taps his fingers on his armrest as he thinks. “You like everyone to think you’re tough, and you don’t like Christmas ... but deep down, you’re just a big softie, and Christmas is really your favorite holiday—”

I open my mouth to tell him he’s wrong, but a loud noise coming from the wing of the plane steals my attention. The lights in the cabin flicker off and then back on. I close my eyes and clench my teeth, bracing myself for whatever happens next.

“Sorry, folks, but we’ve just had a run in with a flock of birds. We’re going to need to emergency land to have a mechanic take a look. I know you’re all trying to get somewhere for Christmas, and I’m truly sorry about the inconvenience. We’ll try to have this sorted out as fast as we can, but it may not be repaired until the morning.”

The passengers all grumble in annoyance, and my wide eyes look to Drew’s. For reassurance? I’m not exactly sure. But when he places a hand over mine, which is gripping the armrest so hard my knuckles are white, I don’t swat him away.

“It’s okay, Holly. I’m right here. You’re safe. They’re just being cautious,” he reassures me, which should be odd, considering he’s a complete stranger. But instead, my brain fixates on another minor detail ...

“How do you know my name?”

Chapter Three

Drew

“I’M SANTA CLAUS, REMEMBER?” I gesture to my suit that’s now fully opened at the chest. “I know everything.”

Her eyes widen, and the faintest hint of a smile pulls at her lips. I have a sneaking suspicion she enjoys this little charade more than she’s letting on.

I lean in and whisper, “I also read it on your boarding pass. For someone who says they hate Christmas, your name sure is ironic, isn’t it?”

“My parents’ favorite holiday is Christmas,” she admits, and I squeeze her trembling hand, trying to keep her distracted.

Truth be told, that’s what I’ve been doing this entire flight. It’s why I stole her book, teased her, and mostly why I suggested we play the game. I was also desperate for a chance to take her out, and I didn’t think she’d agree without a little incentive.

“Is that why you hate the greatest holiday of the year? Because your parents love it?” I press a little more.

She swallows a gulp. “Yes. No. I don’t know. Maybe?”

“Seems complicated. There’s got to be a story there.” I stroke my thumb over her hand in soothing circles, surprised she hasn’t brushed me away yet.

I can't explain it, but I feel oddly protective of her, even though we literally just met. I feel like our souls know each other. Like when I first saw her there was immediate attraction, followed by an odd sense of recognition deep inside me.

I hate that she's so scared right now, and I wish I could take her fear from her and wear it as my own.

She opens her mouth and closes it, then finally says, "It's too long of a story to get into right now, but all you need to know is I disappointed them a long time ago, and that's something I have to live with every single day. Christmas is a painful reminder—" She scrunches her face up as the plane hits another patch of turbulence.

I glance out the window to see the plane descending to a small airport in what appears to be the middle of nowhere. It's dark outside, and there aren't many city lights—or cars for that matter—and sheets of snow blanket the ground beneath.

I bring our connected hands to my mouth and plant a gentle kiss on the back of her hand. "One of my favorite things about Christmas is the magic of it all. Anything is possible if you believe in it. You can always start fresh."

Her deep brown eyes meet mine, and though I can't read her mind, she looks like she's considering my words. Her lips part to speak just as the wheels of the plane touch down with a hard thud.

And just like that, our moment is broken as passengers leap from their seats and begin shuffling around to retrieve their bags. She yanks her hand away and wipes it against the leg of her jeans, looking everywhere but at me.

I move in front of her, trying to catch her eye, but she's a stubborn thing and ignores me completely as she reaches under the seat for her bag.

"Did you just wipe my cooties off your hand?"

She ignores me.

"Oh, come on. You weren't too good to hold my hand when you thought your life was in danger, but now that we're

safely on land, you can't even look at me?"

She looks over the rows of heads as if judging if she can squeeze between the people in the growing crowd standing in the aisle. Considering our seats are in the very back, I know there isn't much use in being impatient, so I may as well settle in.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've arrived at our emergency landing location of Chestnut Crossing, Minnesota, home of the world's largest candy cane sculpture."

My eyes go wide, and my brain does that little tingle thing when I get an idea.

"The current temperature is a balmy fifteen degrees, and the local time is 10:29 p.m. Please see the airline worker at the desk outside the gate for further instructions. Trust me, we'll do everything we can to get you to your destination in time for Christmas. In the meantime, enjoy the sights of this infamous Christmas town."

I glance back to Holly, who's got a backpack hiked over one shoulder and is standing up, trying to squeeze between the two guys who were sitting in front of us. They don't even budge.

"Ow. Shit. Can you let me through?" she grunts as she tries to shove her backpack between them as leverage.

"No way. We were here first. You're not cutting. I'm hungry and tired, and she never came back with my snack. Besides, I think the turbulence rattled a turd loose, so unless you want to bear witness to me shitting my pants, I'd back off." He bends to meet her glare as he delivers the last part, and she slowly backs away, falling back into her seat with a humph.

I can't help my laugh because it's obvious the guy's telling the truth, based on how he's clenching his butt cheeks and the sweat on his brow. He looks scared, and that's enough for me to take his word for it. It's a fair excuse, and now, I'm rooting for him, too.

“You think this is funny?” she hisses, sitting awkwardly with her backpack against the back of her seat.

“Yeah, it’s pretty funny. I can’t say I expected him to have a solid reason for being a dick, but ...” I shake my head. “Dude’s got the poopoo sweats to prove it. Poor guy.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not my problem. I need to get off this plane. I need to find another connection or something because there’s no way in hell I’m just going to frolic the streets of Chestnut Crossing and enjoy myself. I need to be on the beach, away from the cold, away from the snow, and away from Christmas entirely!”

I just laugh and cross my arms over my chest. “You know, it would probably do you some good to roll with the punches a little more. Things have a way of working out, but you just have to trust they will.” I lean back in my seat and gesture at the long line around us. “See, these people are all in a hurry, but what they don’t know is that we’re all going to the same place anyway. Just relax, trust me.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Trust *you*?”

“Yeah.” I nod.

“*Trust* isn’t really my thing.” She folds her arms over her chest and lets out a heavy sigh.

“Yeah, I’m learning that.”

The line begins to move, and people have to fight against the people behind them to retrieve their bags, making the processes slower than if they’d just go in order of their seats.

It’s a painfully slow process waiting for our turn at the counter, but I let her ahead of me so I can at least have something fun to look at while waiting.

When it’s finally our turn, Holly steps up to the counter and passes her ticket information.

“Merry Christmas, Miss Shepherd,” the woman reads as she types in her information. “Let’s see here. We’re offering room and board for your inconvenience at the ... oh no ...”

“Oh no, what? What’s wrong?” Holly asks, standing on her tiptoes as she tries to read what’s on the computer.

The woman’s smile falls as she types something and shakes her head. “I’m so sorry. This has never happened before.”

“What? What’s never happened?” Holly leans forward but still can’t see the screen, so she hikes a knee up attempting to climb on top of the counter.

I have to cover my laugh with my hand.

“Calm down. There’s no need to climb—”

“Then just tell me what you’re looking at and stop being so vague!” Holly blurts, and the sweet older woman goes still.

“I’m sorry.” Holly lowers her leg and smooths her sweater. “I’m just really tired and stressed, and I had to stand behind this guy who farted for like twenty minutes to get off the plane, and I haven’t eaten anything since my chocolate chip muffin at breakfast.” She sucks in a breath. “And I got fired this morning, and I hate Christmas, and this airport smells like candy canes, and I just want to go somewhere else.”

I place a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry about my girlfriend’s meltdown. We appreciate you working on this for us...” I glance at her name tag. “Martha. I love that name by the way,” I say with a wink.

Martha smiles and gives me a once over. “Thank you. I like your suit.”

I flash her a mischievous smile but keep my dirty retorts to myself. She’s probably in her seventies, and though she may be flirting, I don’t want to give the old bird a heart attack.

She returns to the keyboard and types something else. “Okay, this could work.” She looks up with a smile. “The hotel in town is completely booked, but I was able to find you a room at the local bed and breakfast. It’s conveniently located downtown, which is only about a thirty-minute carriage ride from here.”

Holly looks to me, then back to Martha and shakes her head. “But ... there’s two of us ... We need two rooms, not one.”

Martha gives her a knowing look. “Now, honey, you don’t strike me as someone who saves it for the marriage bed, especially when you pulled someone who looks like that,” She licks her lips as she stares at my chest.

Holly glares at me over her shoulder. “I’ll take it. You can put me down—”

I reach over and hand my ticket information to Martha. “Both of us. You can put both of us down. Thank you so much for going the extra mile to ensure we have somewhere to sleep tonight.”

Holly tries to push past me, but I block her out, stepping in front of her until Martha’s taken all my information.

“Wonderful. I’ll have Jasper bring the carriage around to the front.”

“Carriage? Is that the name of a taxi or Uber service or something ...”

Martha just smiles. “Welcome to Chestnut Crossing, the North Pole of the Midwest. I think you’ll love it here.”



“YOU’RE SHITTING ME. It’s freezing outside, and we’re actually riding in a carriage? What year is it again?”

I wrap my arm around her and pull her close to me as the driver places a heavy fur throw over our legs. “This should keep the chill away.”

“I can’t believe this is happening right now. Did that plane take us to a different dimension?” She looks around and behind us. “Am I in the Bad Place? Is this some kind of test?”

“Oh, come on, lighten up a little. You have to admit, this is pretty awesome. It’s not every day your plane emergency lands in a tiny Christmas town that looks straight out of a movie.”

The carriage bobbles and bounces over the cobblestone path as I take in the quaint little town. Lights are strung overhead, and the streets are completely empty, giving it a picturesque feeling. Crystal white snow glistens around us as we pass by the cutest little shops with Christmas displays in their windows.

“Why couldn’t we drive?” Holly asks with irritation in her tone.

“I think they said they don’t allow any vehicles on the streets to preserve the authentic Christmas village feel,” I answer, squeezing her tighter against me.

The movement must remind her we’re touching because she grabs my hand and pries me off. “Let’s state some ground rules about this shared room situation, shall we?”

I fold my hands together and look at her. “I’m all ears. What did you have in mind?”

“No funny business. We are here to sleep, and first thing in the morning, we’ll part ways and never speak again.”

I tense my jaw but don’t argue. “Anything else?”

She shivers and wraps her hands around her arms to warm herself. Stubborn girl would rather freeze to death than accept a little help. “Yes. You stay in your bed, and I’ll stay in mine.”

I hold up my hands. “Not a problem for me.”

“Good.”



“UM ... WHERE’S THE OTHER BED?” She drops her backpack with a thud and runs into the small room like she’s going to find a hidden hallway or door hiding another bed.

I drop my own bag by the wall and take a seat on the bed in question as I take in the cozy cottage-style room. The bed’s adorned with a Christmas flannel comforter, complete with reindeer-shaped throw pillows set across from a cozy fireplace. Two big windows frame the room on either side of

the fireplace, providing an amazing view of the snow-covered mountains and little shops in the distance.

I bounce on the bed, making it creak a little, and the sound gives me a semi. I stopped wondering why seemingly normal smells and noises gave me boners a long time ago. Now, I just roll with it, learning new things about myself every day.

“What are you doing?” She glares at me.

“Uh ... sitting here waiting for you to finish your freakout so I can go to sleep,” I answer honestly.

She glances down at my crotch, and her mouth falls open before she looks back to me with disgust. “I can’t believe you —” She moves to grab her backpack, and I jump to my feet to stop her.

“Holly, no, wait ... It’s not anything like that.” I grab her backpack strap and pull her back into the room. “I wasn’t thinking about you ... er ... not really.” I scratch the back of my head trying to explain myself, but I’m doing a shit job of it. She gives me a confused look.

“I just ... I mean ...” My eyes fall to the floor. “Sometimes noises and smells give me boners at inconvenient times.” I meet her eyes. “I promise, I wasn’t thinking of anything. It just happens, and it’s not like this material is doing me any favors disguising it. Honestly, I’m shocked I made it through security because, sometimes, it also happens when I’m nervous. Basically, all the worst times possible.”

She doesn’t say anything, but at least she’s not running away from me. So that’s something.

“I’ll sleep on the floor tonight if that makes you more comfortable.” I grab a pillow off the bed and drop it on the hardwood floor.

“Fine,” she huffs, grabbing her bag and heading to the bathroom. I hear the distinct clinking of the lock.

It’s comical how much she wants me to know she’s not interested. It almost makes me wonder which one of us she’s trying to convince. While I would love to ask her about that, I value my life too much to push on that nerve.

I take the opportunity to change my clothes, grabbing a white undershirt and some boxer briefs to sleep in, then take my rightful place on the hard floor. I'm so tired I don't even mind at this point.

When she steps out of the bathroom, she's wearing a long t-shirt, and her hair hangs wet around her shoulders. The smell of sugar and vanilla fills the room, and I feel like a teenage boy sleeping next door to his childhood crush. It takes every bit of restraint I have to keep myself from taking a peek.

I force myself to think about the farting guy from the plane to calm my traitorous mind. I may not make a move on her, but I can't stop my imagination from keeping me more than occupied with detailed fantasies.

The bed creaks as she climbs in and tosses and turns several times like she's unable to get comfortable.

"It's easier to fall asleep if you lay still," I say after listening to her struggle for several minutes.

"Yeah, well, I can't get comfortable. I'm not used to sleeping in strange beds, and you took all the pillows."

"I took two because I'm sleeping on the floor. You have two. That's even," I argue.

"I prefer to have at least three. I can't sleep if my knees are touching," she snaps back.

"Are you the princess and the pea? You're in a bed for Christ's sake. I'm happy to trade places."

"Just shut up already. You're making me lose all my tired."

"What does that even mean? How do you lose your tired? You're either tired or you're not."

"I took a melatonin, and if I don't fall asleep as it kicks in, then I'll push through the window of tired and lay awake all night," she answers like it's an obvious explanation.

I turn on my side and prop my head on my hand. "That's not a thing!"

“Yes. It. Is!” She jerks herself up and leans over the bed to glare at me.

“Okay, well then here’s a solution. You let me come up there, and I’ll give you one of my pillows. Then we both get to sleep comfortably.”

She goes quiet, and I know she’s considering it.

“What do you say, Hols? How important is that third pillow to you?”

“Fine,” she grunts, “but no touching. Stay on your side, and if you even think of getting another boner, I’ll break it off like an icicle and stab you in the ear with it!”

“Jesus! You don’t have to be so mean.” I climb onto the bed and slide under the covers before tossing her the precious bargaining chip. I have no idea what’s she’s talking about. This bed is soft and plush and absolutely divine, light years better than that hardwood floor.

I pull the cover up to my chin and turn on my side. I’m going to sleep like a baby tonight.

Chapter Four

Holly

“GOOD MORNING, Sunshine. I hope you aren’t too good for regular brewed coffee. I grabbed you some cream and sugar, and this candy cane to stir it with if that’s something you’re into.”

I blink open my sleepy eyes to see a handsome dark-haired man with a mustache staring down at me and let out a scream of terror ... which he returns with the same intensity.

He jumps back, clutching the coffee against his chest.

“What’s wrong with you? Who wakes someone up by staring at them? How long have you been there?” I fire off the questions as I pull the covers up to my chin and hurl myself against the headboard.

He places a hand over his chest and takes a deep breath as if to calm himself. Then he places the cup of coffee on the side table. “Just thought you’d like a cup of coffee to start the day. I didn’t mean to scare you. Though, in my defense, you were sleeping with one eye open, so I figured there was a fifty/fifty chance you were awake.”

I grab the coffee from the nightstand using the candy cane to stir it. “I do not sleep with one eye open.”

“The fuck you don’t.” He laughs. “I wish I could say that was the creepiest thing you do in your sleep, but after last

night's charades ...” His voice trails off and he shakes his head.

“What are you even talking about?” I sip the delicious beverage that just may be the best coffee I’ve ever had, the candy cane giving it the perfect amount of sweetness—though I’ll never admit it.

Drew throws his head back and laughs, moving to the wicker rocking chair beside the bed. “You really don’t remember?”

I don’t respond, which makes him laugh even more.

He counts off on his fingers. “Let’s see, you got lost in the corner of the room at one point, and I had to come rescue you —”

“What do you mean I got lost?”

He smiles a wicked grin like he’s thoroughly enjoying holding this over my head. “You were spinning around in circles with your arms out saying, ‘Where are you? Where are you?’ At first, I thought you were talking to yourself and trying to find your suitcase, but after the fifth or sixth time, I realized you were just sleepwalking. I had to get up and lead you back to bed.”

“That did not happen.”

“*Then* when you settled back down, and I was finally drifting back to sleep, you turned around and faced me, eyes wide open, and said in the creepiest voice I’ve ever fucking heard, ‘Someone’s in the house’.” He holds his hand against his chest and shivers. “I nearly shit my pants. I jumped up and grabbed the lamp and was ready to fight someone until I heard you snore.” He shoots me an irritated glare, and I shake my head.

“That doesn’t sound like me at all.”

“*Then* after I finally got my heart rate back to a normal rhythm, you flipped over and heart punched me.”

“I *heart punched* you? What does that even mean?”

He looks at me like I'm an idiot for not understanding. "You rolled over and punched me right here." He holds his hand over his heart, rubbing it like it still aches. "I don't know what I did to deserve such disrespect, but I think I was better off sleeping on the floor."

I roll my eyes and sip my coffee. "Has anyone ever told you you're dramatic? I think you're the one with sleep problems."

He leans forward, bracing his hands on his knees. "No, you don't. You're not pinning this on me. I was the one babysitting your ass all night while you slept like the fucking dead. I think you need to see a sleep specialist or an exorcist, at the very least."

I crane my neck side to side until it cracks loudly, and Drew's eyes widen, which makes me smile. Maybe I should be embarrassed about my nightly activities, but instead, I find it mildly entertaining. That's one way to make sure a guy doesn't try to make a move. Maybe my subconscious is on to something?

The truth is, I've been known to sleepwalk, mostly when I was little and really tired. My parents actually had to set an alarm system on all the doors to alert them. They even installed baby gates by the stairs after I broke my arm falling down them in my sleep when I was seven.

I knew I was exhausted. I've been exhausted from working like I have been for a very long time. But I didn't expect to actually pass out and sleep so deeply. I haven't slept that well in months? Years? I literally don't remember when. I guess I needed it.

All of a sudden, I remember the reason we're here, and I jump up to find my phone. "Shit. What time is it?" I swipe open my messages and email and scroll until I see the missed call and voicemail from the airline.

"They're still working on the plane," Drew answers as I listen to the message basically telling me the same thing. "They don't think they'll have it repaired until tomorrow morning, and they'll contact us if there's an update."

“Shit.” I drop the phone in my lap as I fall flat on my back in defeat.

Drew walks over standing over me again and finally says, “I was thinking about the bet ...”

I move my arm from my eyes and look at him.

“I think I’ll cash in that date. Today,” he adds.

I sit up in a rush. “What are you talking about? You didn’t win. We tied, so the bet’s off—”

He holds up a hand to silence me. “I think the verdict is still out about that, and I plan on proving it to you.”

I narrow my eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we’re stuck here for the next twenty-four hours, whether we like it or not.” He gestures to the window revealing a quaint scene of shops, horse-drawn carriages, and twinkling Christmas lights. It looks like a picture you’d find on a puzzle or a Christmas card.

“And?”

“And why waste it? We can either sit here and maul each other in our sleep ...” He shoots me a glare. “Or we can have a little fun and make the most of it.” He tosses my book, and it lands beside me. “How about this? If you still feel like you hate Christmas after today, I’ll leave you alone. I won’t ask you for your number. I won’t even stalk you on social media.”

“I don’t have social med—”

He holds up a hand again. “But if you do have a change of heart, then you give me your number and a fair chance to woo you.”

“I don’t date.”

“Yet,” he corrects with a pointed stare. “So, what do you say? Is it a bet or what?”

I bite my lip and roll my eyes. “I hope you enjoy losing. I don’t plan on making it easy on you.”

As he laughs, his mouth pulls into a cocky smirk. “Trust me, Ebenezer. I wouldn’t dream of it, but I think I’m up for the challenge.”

Chapter Five

Drew

“THIS IS what you call fun? I could have googled the picture and saved us the trouble of waiting in line.”

We stare up at the giant candy cane sculpture as snow begins to fall around us.

I reach for Holly’s mitten-covered hand, but she pulls it away and shoves it in the pocket of her bright red wool coat. The very same red she wears on her lips and my new favorite color.

“You said if I got you that chocolate chip muffin, you wouldn’t complain.” I nudge her with my elbow, and she takes a step away so I can’t reach her, but I only move closer. She’s not getting away from me that easily.

“I’m not complaining, just stating facts. Are we done here?” She turns to face me. She looks so fucking cute all wrapped up in her fuzzy hat and scarf that are so large there’s barely room for her face. Her nose is pink from the cold air, and I want to reach out and touch it. I want to pull her into me and hold her, breathe in her sweet scent of vanilla and sugar ... see if she tastes as good as she smells ...

But I have a feeling she wouldn’t like that very much, considering she makes a point to tell me every chance she gets.

It's not that she doesn't find me attractive, trust me, I know when a woman is into me, and Holly Shepherd is definitely into me. Maybe not as much as I'm into her, but I don't think that's actually possible, considering I'm crushing on her harder than I ever thought possible. She's my actual dream girl, right down to her snarky, sarcastic attitude, her quick witty retorts, and the secret soft spot she's yet to reveal, but I know is in there somewhere. She's walking around with my balls in a death grip, and she doesn't even know it.

"Name three things about the sculpture you love." I shove my ungloved hands into my pockets and rock back on my heels.

"No," she returns, narrowing her eyes in challenge.

"Come on, three things you *like* then? I'm a believer we'll find whatever we're looking for, so maybe you just need to look for the good? Works for me anyway. My life's pretty great." I shrug.

She blows out a breath and turns to face the sculpture. "Fine. But only because I don't think you'll let me leave until I do it."

"That's a girl." I wink, and maybe it's the cold air, but I swear her cheeks get a little pinker. I clear my throat. "I'll go first. I think it's pretty cool this is the world's largest candy cane sculpture, and we're getting to see it in person. I don't think many people can say that."

"It's interesting that the stripes are so ... unique. They don't match and don't have straight edges ... which gives it a ... abstract feel?" She looks to me for approval, and I just laugh at her backhanded compliment. I'll take what I can get.

"Agreed." I nod. "I also love that it's made of real sugar and peppermint extract."

"It's cool it hasn't been eaten by ants already," she adds.

"I love that it's a unique, quirky thing that brings people so much joy." I look to her in challenge and wink.

She blows out another exasperated sigh, fighting the smile that twitches at the corner of her lips, and says, "I like that

you're so impressed by it."

My face breaks out into a giant grin. "See, that wasn't so hard was it?"

"It really shows me how low your standards are," she deadpans with a wicked smile.

"You couldn't just leave it alone, could you?" I ask with a laugh, looping my arm through hers and pulling her along with me.

"You asked, and I answered."

She tries to squirm away but eventually gives up when I don't release her, her steps falling into pace with mine. I have to intentionally make myself walk slow because of our height difference, but I don't mind.

"What's next on our date, Santa?" She winks, sending a jolt of electricity straight to my cock, and I've never been more thankful for layers.

"Well ..." I glance up at the large hill in the distance, my eyes landing on a group of children dragging sleds behind them as they take turns pushing each other down. "Come on, you'll see."

I lead her along the cobblestone path, our arms still linked together, and to my surprise, she doesn't argue or pry any further.

"So, what's the story?" I finally ask, breaking the silence.

"What story?"

"When I asked you why you hated Christmas so much, you said it was a long story." I look around. "We've got the time."

She bites her bottom lip, something I've noticed she does when she's thinking, and it makes me want to see what those red lips taste like.

When she doesn't answer, I ask, "Have you always hated Christmas?"

She shakes her head. "No. Not always. I told you it's my parent's favorite holiday." She holds her hand under her chin.

“It’s why they named me Holly.”

“I knew it.”

“I guess I really didn’t start hating it until I was in my early twenties.”

We pass by a park bench, and I lead her over and take a seat, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as I nod for her to keep going.

“My parents were older when they had me. They didn’t think they were able to have children, and my mom found out she was pregnant with me on Christmas morning.”

“Ah, the name’s making a little more sense now.”

“Anyway, they both came from really poor backgrounds. My dad worked two jobs for as long as I can remember just so my mom would be able to stay home with me.” Her eyes fall. “They sacrificed so much to give me a great childhood, an education, let me do all the sports and activities I wanted.”

I lift her chin. “That’s what parents are supposed to do for their kids.”

Her brown eyes glisten like she’s holding back tears, and I don’t dare look away. I recognize a rare moment when I see it, and I’m praying she doesn’t close herself off right now.

She swallows. “I know, but it took me hitting rock bottom to see it. I wish I would’ve known how lucky I was earlier. Maybe then I wouldn’t have made so many terrible mistakes.”

“Some people have to learn lessons the hard way. The important thing is you learn, and once you know better, you do better,” I say, trying to cheer her up. I hate seeing her so torn up about this. “What’s all that got to do with Christmas?”

Her lip begins to tremble ever so slightly. “I’ve had this dream ever since I was a little girl. It’s all I ever talked about. Every time someone asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I never had to think. I just knew. And I was too stubborn to listen to anyone’s advice. Especially my parents.”

“There’s nothing wrong with knowing what you want out of life. What was the dream?”

Her words come out in an almost-whisper. “To own my own bookstore. Only I went about it all wrong.”

I place a hand on her knee, encouraging her to keep going.

“I was twenty-one. I thought I knew everything. I met this guy, fell head over heels for him, and no one could convince me things were moving too fast. I was young, dumb, and in love.” She shakes her head. “He fed into all my crazy ideas, gassed me up, and I felt like I could do anything as long as he was by my side.”

She scrubs a mittened hand over her face like she’s trying to wipe away the memory. “I don’t know how or what I was thinking, but somehow, he convinced me to drop out of college, and to go for it. He said school was a waste of time and money, and I could be using both of those resources pursuing my dream rather than waiting for a piece of paper to give me permission.”

I rub my hand along her knee watching as her face twists with regret.

“He said all the right things. So even though my parents were against it, we ran off and got married, and then I dropped out of school the next week.”

She looks up at the sky, watching the snowflakes dance in the wind around us. “I was convinced I was ready. I went to my parents and begged them to give me the nest egg they’d saved for me to finish school so I could get started on my own. I invested all of it into a bookstore. I really thought I’d made it.”

“I don’t understand, Hols? That’s incredible—”

“A brick and mortar bookstore in the most expensive part of the city.” She looks to me and rolls her eyes.

I suck in a breath, and she nods. “I know. I was so stupid.”

“So, what happened?” I think back to our conversation on the plane yesterday about how she’s been single for a long time.

“As I said, I thought I knew everything, thought I could trust him. Things were going pretty great at first. He helped me set up the store, even worked with me sometimes in the evenings at first while it was new and still fun. I wanted to keep things cost effective, but Justin was a dreamer. He insisted we have the most expensive espresso machines, talked about how coffee sales were so important to keep bookstores afloat. Every time I turned around he was ordering some new thing that would set us apart from all the competition.”

Her voice trails off, and she looks back to me. “By the time we had our first quarter under our belt, I’d accrued nearly three quarters of a million dollars in debt. I could barely afford rent. Sales were hardly existent. I was working from sun up to sun down because I couldn’t afford to hire anyone else and Justin wouldn’t help.

“He complained I chose the business over him, that he never saw me, which wasn’t entirely untrue, but he could’ve helped me. It was his idea, too. But unlike me, he was busy finishing his degree because he *didn’t have the luxury of having a dream to chase.*”

A single tear falls down her cheek, and I have to fight the urge to wipe it away. I don’t want to spook her, not while I have her like this, baring her calloused heart so openly.

“Then, one day, I walked into our apartment and found him fucking some girl.” Her glassy eyes meet mine, and my heart falls to my stomach. “It was Christmas Eve. I’d taken off early to surprise him, and he wasn’t expecting me. Apparently, the affair had been going on for almost as long as our marriage, not that eight months is that long.”

“Fuck, Holly. I’m so sorry.” I pull her into my side and rub a hand along her arm. “That’s why you hate Christmas. Because he cheated on you.”

She shakes her head as she wipes her tears. “No. It gets worse. Naturally, I was upset, so I drove straight to my parents’ house, ending their annual Christmas Eve party early. They’d just put in an offer for their dream vacation home, a two-story cabin on the lake where they’d host family

gatherings, throw parties, and spoil their future grandkids. It was a big deal for my middle-class working parents, and they'd been saving for it ever since they first got married."

"I told them everything. His cheating. The store debt. I was in over my head, and I didn't know what to do." Her lip falls into the tiniest little pout when she says, "And you know what they did? They backed out of the offer and took all that money they'd set aside and used it to bail me out."

She sucks in a breath wiping her face with her mittens. "I had to file for bankruptcy," she scoffs a laugh. "I had to pay Justin alimony for five years because of the hit to his credit score. I lost everything. Had to move back home and start working a minimum wage retail job because I never finished my degree and wasn't qualified to do anything else."

"Sounds like you really did hit rock bottom," I finally say, wishing I could take the painful memories from her but so fucking grateful for her honesty all the same. When I look at her, I see the wounded, scared woman who pushes everyone away because she's afraid of getting hurt. It makes sense, but I still hate it.

"Anyway, I eventually worked my way up in my department, all the way to a middle management role. Things were actually looking up. I'd saved enough money to move out, got my own studio apartment, and even saved up a good little nest egg to surprise them with. Then, yesterday, I was called into the HR department and told my position was being terminated. They told me and thirteen other employees that we were losing our jobs, our pensions, and hard-earned holiday bonuses on Christmas. Fucking. Eve."

"So, you never tried again? Is the bookstore still your dream?"

She shakes her head and blows out a breath. "I'm no longer delusional enough to believe in dreams. Dreams are for little children who believe a bearded man in a red suit brings them presents if they're good. And if it isn't blaringly obvious by now, I've managed to earn myself a permanent spot on the naughty list. So, no, it's not still my dream."

I scan my eyes over her plump red lips and swollen, tear-stained cheeks. This woman is so beautiful it steals my breath every time I look at her, and I know it's more than skin deep. Her heart is big, and she genuinely cares about the people she loves. Otherwise, she wouldn't have worked so hard to make things right for them. "There's no way you're on the naughty list. No way in hell. Not for any of that anyway."

Something flashes behind her eyes as I stare into them, and I wonder if she feels this spark between us too. This longing, a pull between two magnets fighting to keep themselves apart when it would be so much easier to just let go and see what happens next.

Magic. That's what I think it'd be like. Pure magic.

I stand and offer her my hand, breaking the tension. "On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your sledding skills?"

She smiles, and I know it's a real one because her nose crinkles at the top and her eyes light up with mischief. "Oh, I'd say I'm pretty decent."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Chapter Six

Holly

“HANG ON JUST A MINUTE. How is that not cheating?” Drew yells as he climbs off his sled and drags it behind him.

I use my hand to shield the glare from my eyes as I watch him struggle with the small, flimsy sled. It’s midday, and the sun’s shining brightly, making the freezing temperature a little more tolerable. Between that and the physical activity of walking up this hill for the last hour, I’m almost warm enough to shed my thick, wool coat ... but not quite.

“You said to count to three, but you went on three, and everyone knows it’s one, two, *three*, go, not one, two, *go*.”

I pull off my mitten and slide my thumb and pointer finger together mockingly.

He slaps my hand away. “Don’t play your tiny violin for me. I was robbed, and I want justice.” He lunges toward me and lifts me over his shoulder as I kick my legs and pound my fists against his ass ... and what a firm ass it is. I almost forget I’m supposed to be protesting this.

Our laughter blends in with the children’s giggles as they squeal in excitement riding their sleds down the steep hill.

I don’t know what I expected, but Drew paying two kids one hundred bucks apiece for their cheap aluminum sleds was not it. I’ve beat him every single time, and he’s had some excuse or another. The truth is, he’s far too heavy for his child-

sized sled. It's creating too much friction and is slowing him down. But I'm having too much fun watching him try to beat me to spoil the fun.

I let out a squeal of laughter when his hands grip my waist to tickle me, and I kick my legs as hard as I can until he finally sets me down in a loose pile of snow.

"I don't know how you're doing it, but I know you're cheating. I outweigh you by at least a hundred pounds. It doesn't make sense."

I shrug and bat my lashes, feigning ignorance. "Someone once told me you'd find whatever you were looking for. Maybe you need to change your mindset?" I lean forward and whisper behind my hand, "Do you actually believe you're a winner? Because I know I am."

"Oh, so you're using my wise advice against me now?" He brushes the snow from his jacket, pretending to be offended, but we both know he loves my smart mouth. It's the only reason he's still standing here looking at me with those piercing sea glass eyes after my confession this morning. I'm not exactly a catch in the responsible adult department.

He moves to sit beside me. "You know what? I don't even care. I'd lose unfairly a million times over if it means I get to see you smile like this." He touches an ice-cold finger to the tip of my nose, and I snap my teeth, making him pull his hand back. "Hey, no biting. Are you trying to tell me you're hungry?"

I laugh as my stomach growls. "Actually, yes."

He stands and offers me a hand. "Then let's not waste time. I'd like to keep my fingers. I've been told they can be pretty useful."

I slap his chest with a mitten covered hand. "Now, don't get too cocky. Just because you're hot and built like a Greek god doesn't mean anything. I think I remember all the shit-talking you did before you challenged me to that sledding race."

He grabs my hand and holds it as his feet come to a stop. His eyes darken as he leans forward, and I reflexively take a step back. “Believe me, that was different. I may be delusionally confident about a lot of things, but my bedroom skills are definitely not one of them.”

I swallow a gulp and wet my lips as my eyes roam his beautiful, hard jawline, the intricate lines of the tattoos covering his neck and disappearing beneath his clothes. So many tattoos I’d love to trace with my tongue. There’s got to be a story there.

“Why do you have so many tattoos?”

At first, he looks taken aback by my sudden change of subject, but then he wraps his large hand over my mitten and keeps walking. “Mostly because I like them.”

“Mostly?”

He tilts his head side to side as he considers my question. “Yes, mostly. That’s how it started. I like the way they look, and I always felt the need to express myself. My younger brother, Jamie, and I grew up doing everything together. He was always more outgoing than me, and I sort of got lumped in with him. When people thought of me, they automatically thought of Jamie, too. I’m not complaining. I love my brother; he’s my best friend, but I wanted to be known for my own thing.”

“So, you covered yourself in tattoos? You couldn’t just dress differently or pick a different favorite band?”

He scratches his head and laughs. “Well, yeah, that, too. But I love the look of tattoos. I love the black lines and bright colors. I love that each one holds a memory in some way or another, like a map of my life I’ll always have with me.”

“So, why did you say *mostly*?”

He smiles and leans in. “If I tell you, do you promise to keep it a secret?”

“Of course.”

“My family thinks I’m living solely off the brand deals I get from weightlifting, and that’s partly true, but I’m also a tattoo model.”

“Wait, that’s a thing? Like, that’s a job people actually get paid for? Just existing with tattoos?”

He laughs. “Not exactly, but kind of. I’m more like a walking art portfolio.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, you are.”

“And I recently started some gigs for a few big-time romance authors. That’s what I was doing yesterday.”

“That’s why you were in the Santa suit,” I say in understanding, and he nods. “You said they were big time romance authors. Is it anyone I would know?”

He flashes me that cocky grin of his. “I’d say so. That was one of their books I stole from you on the plane.”

My mouth falls open, and I slap his arm with the back of my hand. “Are you shitting me right now? You’re modeling for Kandy Kane? That’s how you know what my book was really about? She’s been my favorite author since I picked up my first smutty Christmas novella on accident when I was fourteen.”

His grin widens, and he nods. “Fourteen, huh? That’s a little young to be reading dirty books, don’t you think?”

I roll my eyes. “It was an accident, but I’ve been hooked ever since. She’s the reason I had the courage to go after the store. I was always so inspired by her kickass heroines. Which just further proves books and real life are not the same thing.”

“I’m not sure I believe that. I think life can be just as magical if you’re doing it right.” He gives me a little smirk, and it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know what he’s insinuating.

Drew may look like a book boyfriend, and even act like one, but I’ve been burned enough to know if something seems too good to be true, then it usually is.

“What? I had to do my research. I had to see what I was tying my image to before accepting the job. I can’t say I didn’t enjoy the homework. All anyone can want is for a love like you read in a romance novel, so why settle for anything less than that? I know I won’t.”

“Well, I feel like an idiot now. Seriously, what are the chances of you not only having read her books but actually being the freaking cover model?” I say, pretending like his last words didn’t just make my heart skip a beat.

He bumps me with his thick arm. “Almost like we were destined to meet.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far. More like the universe really loves to make an ass of me.”

“I guess that’s another way of looking at it.” He winks, sending a swarm of butterflies straight to my belly.

I must be hungrier than I realized if I’m feeling butterflies over this man’s wink.

“But why keep it a secret from your family? You haven’t told me much about them, but do you really think they’d be upset if they found out?”

He sighs, twisting his lips as he considers my question. “No, they wouldn’t be upset, but they like to tease me a lot. I don’t really mind, most of the time, but it gets kind of old sometimes. I don’t mind being the butt of the joke. Hell, I thrive off the attention, but sometimes, I’d like to be taken seriously.”

“Have you ever told them their teasing bothers you?”

“No. It’s really not a big deal. I don’t want to change the playful dynamic we’ve got going for something so little.”

“But it’s not little. Not if you feel like you need to hide your career from them.”

We come to a stop at the entrance of a small café with a chalkboard sign that says, “Hot Soup Inside.”

He looks to me and nods toward the sign. “How does soup sound for lunch?”

“Actually, soup is my favorite meal.”

“Then what are we waiting for? If baby wants soup, then baby gets soup.” He pulls me inside, and I almost correct him but decide it’s not worth it.

Besides, at least Baby is a step up from Cujo.

Chapter Seven

Drew

I FEEL like I'm in the best fucking dream of my life, and I'm afraid to wake up.

We sat in that cozy diner on the corner of Main Street overlooking this little Christmas town as snow fell all around us like we were sitting in the middle of a snow globe.

I've always loved Christmas, but growing up in Florida, I never saw real snow, so I guess I sort of became obsessed with the traditional white Christmas I saw in movies. Sure, I've traveled around enough and experienced true winters on work trips, but I've never had a white Christmas, never even spent a Christmas away from home. But if I had to miss spending my favorite holiday with the people I love most in the world, I'm glad I'm here, and I'm glad it's with Holly.

I pull out my phone to send a quick update to my family to tell them I plan to be home by tomorrow morning ... hopefully.

Holly looks over her little compact mirror as she reapplies her red lips—the one's I've been fantasizing about all fucking day—and lifts an eyebrow when she notices me watching her. “What? Did I get lipstick on my teeth?” She flashes her straight white teeth, checking them in the mirror.

“No, you're perfect.”

She sits up a little straighter, and I'm afraid I may have spooked her. She opens her mouth to speak, but I beat her to it, not wanting this date to end just yet. "There's an ice skating rink not too far from here. What do you say?"

"How many dates are you going to take me on? I'm pretty sure you've exceeded your limit by at least two."

"What's the matter? Are you afraid you'll embarrass yourself in front of me?" I tease, and she shakes her head, her lips twisting to the side like she's holding something back.

I crane my neck to look around the empty diner. "Or do you have other plans with someone I don't know about?"

"I hope you're getting all of this out of your system," she says as she throws her bag over her shoulder.

I stand and offer her my hand, which she takes without pause. It's almost like we're on a real date. I'm grateful for our unfortunate travel circumstances because, otherwise, I don't think Holly Shepherd would give me the time of day. She's so closed off. She's been through so much, and I'm just thankful she's letting me in, even if it's only for twenty-four hours.

"I don't think I'll ever get it out of my system," I say under my breath. I don't know if she really doesn't hear me, but she doesn't say anything else.

We fall in a comfortable silence as snowflakes fall all around us. The world appears to be in slow motion, as if in this moment time is frozen.

"So, why aren't you spending your Christmas with your family? What's in Florida anyway?" I ask, breaking the silence.

She studies me out of the corner of her eye. "Normally, I would, but this year, they're traveling. They won this all expenses paid Alaskan cruise off this traveler's podcast they listen to. A Christmas cruise has always been on the top of their dream vacations, and the opportunity was too good to pass up." She shifts on her feet. "They tried to back out of it because they didn't want me to be alone, but I couldn't let them. They're already having the best time. They keep sending

me all these pictures and updates.” She pulls out her phone and swipes open her text thread showing me several pictures. There’s one of her mom smiling ear to ear as she sits on Santa’s lap and another of both her parents overlooking the ocean at sunset.

Her mom’s petite with short blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She’s gorgeous, and I can totally see where Holly gets her good looks from. I feel like I’m looking at her forty years in the future.

She has her dad’s eyes, though. They’re a rich chocolate brown that feel so warm and inviting. You can tell a lot about someone by their eyes. Holly’s are deep and full of secrets, with a sparkle of fight that steals my breath and makes me want to fall to my knees. She’s all sarcasm and sass on the outside, but deep down, I know she’s hurting. She cares so deeply about the people she loves that she’d spend her entire life just trying to make it up to them. But that’s no way to live.

“They look like they really love each other,” I say, passing her phone back.

“They do. I don’t think I’d believe love like that existed in real life if I didn’t see it with my own two eyes. They do everything together. They’re each other’s best friends and the kindest people I know.”

She puts her phone back in her purse and looks up at me. She must see the smile I’m trying to hide because she narrows her eyes. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I squeeze her hand. “You’re lucky to have them. I know you think you fucked up, but I bet you’re being harder on yourself than you need to.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, yeah? And when did you become a psychologist?”

“Hey, I told you, I can be anything you want me to be, baby.” I wink and pull her into the ice skating rink.

“Jingle Bells” plays loudly over the speakers as we crouch to lace up our ice skates. A group of teenagers stand awkwardly in one corner, whispering and giggling as they

point to another young couple holding hands. Young children use plastic trainers that look like miniature walkers to help them keep their balance while people young and old slide around the oval rink.

It's dark outside now, and the bright lights and falling snow add to the Christmas magic. It won't be long before little children climb into bed as they wait for the jingle of Santa's sleigh bells.

"Shouldn't these kids be in bed?" Holly bluntly asks, and I can't help but laugh. I love her sharp tongue and how she always says what she's thinking. It's how I know she's at least tolerating my company. Dare I say, even likes me ... maybe? She'd definitely tell me if she didn't, so I at least know I've got somewhat of a chance. I'm holding out hope anyway.

We step onto the ice, starting slow and gradually building speed as we make our way around the loop. My ankles wobble a little when I slow down around the curves, and I nearly lose my balance several times as teenagers and children alike zoom by us. Thankfully, I don't think Holly notices.

I catch her smiling, turning her face up as big fat snowflakes land on her cheeks. She closes her eyes every now and then as if she's savoring this moment, as if she, too, is enjoying herself.

I wet my lips as I watch her body move, gliding along the ice in a rhythm all her own. She's so fucking beautiful, and I feel like I'm seeing a side of her she's kept locked up for too long. I don't have to know about her painful past to see she doesn't exactly let herself loose very often. It's apparent in how tired she looked yesterday, with those dark circles under her eyes and the way she belly laughed after she beat me sledding. It was like her laugh needed to warm up a little because she hadn't used it in a long time, but once she let herself play, there was no holding it in. Fuck, I want to make her laugh like that again.

She starts moving faster until she builds up enough momentum, and then she breaks into a full spin, her back leg extending gracefully as she stops spinning. She looks over to

me with a giant grin, her chocolate brown eyes swirling with mischief and challenge.

I cup my hands over my mouth and let out little hoot of encouragement before taking off to catch up to her. Only, I'm not as skilled as Holly, and on my next step, the toe of my skate gets hung causing me to stumble, inertia propelling me forward.

I try to brace my fall so I don't hurt myself, but then, out of nowhere, a little kid pushes his plastic walker contraption in front of me.

I dig the blades of the skates into the slick ice in an attempt to emergency brake, but they seem to have minds of their own. I feel like one of those cartoon characters kicking their feet falling in slow motion for what seems like an eternity.

Crashing into this small child is inevitable, and the only thing I can do is try to absorb the brunt of it so he doesn't get hurt. It all happens so fast.

The moment our bodies connect, I scoop the kid and tuck him and the plastic walker against my chest and twist to the side cradling him protectively like a football. My ribs hit first, knocking all the air from my lungs, and I quickly spin to my back so the kid and the walker lie on my chest unscathed.

"Oh my God, Drew. Are you okay?" I hear Holly's muffled voice through my ringing ears.

I lie there in a helpless heap as I try to catch my breath. "Are you okay, kid?" I croak out. The kid just grunts, sits up, and climbs off me. He sets his walker back up, then turns to face me, his lip jutting out so far I'm afraid he'll trip on it.

"Are you okay?" I ask again, but rather than answering me, he just holds up a chubby fist revealing the tiniest middle finger I've ever been given before skating away without saying a word.

Doesn't this kid know who he's dealing with? I literally just saved his life, definitely bruised a rib or two, and all I get as a thanks is his tiny fuck you finger? And on Christmas.

“Drew,” Holly calls coming up behind me. “Are you okay? That looked like it hurt.” She bends down, ducking beneath my arm, and I groan as she helps me to my feet. “Come on. Let’s get out of the way.”

She leads me over to a bench set away from the rink and helps me remove my skates. “What happened back there?” she asks, looking up at me from her knees, her eyes soft with concern. All my impure thoughts rush to mind, and I have to shake them away. I bite my cheek. Now is not the time for a boner.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. I think I tripped, and then this kid just skated in front of me out of nowhere. I really thought I was going to hurt him, but I couldn’t stop, so I just grabbed him and tried to absorb most of the blow.” I rub the tender spot on my ribcage and wince.

“Little shit,” she hisses under her breath. “Do you think you need to go to the hospital or something?”

I roll my lip to hide my smile, seeing her really concerned about me. I have to say, I could get used to Holly looking at me like that. I’m halfway tempted to milk my injury, so she’ll keep doting on me, but I don’t want to waste the few hours we have left.

“No. I’ll be fine,” I groan as I lace up my boots.

“Come on, I’ll help you get back to the room, so you can rest.”

I grab her arm to stop her. “Wait. No. I’ll be fine. I’m not ready to go back just yet.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “You sure? Because your grunting tells me something different.”

I pat my aching ribs to show her I’m fine. “Trust me, I’ve had a lot worse. You don’t grow up with three brothers without being able to take a hit.”

“Well, then, may I suggest a less hazardous activity?”

“What do you have in mind?”

She points to a small red food truck shaped like Santa's sleigh parked on the corner of the street. "Buy me a cup of cocoa?"

"I'll buy you all the hot cocoa you want." I hold out my hand, and she takes it as we make our way to the novel hot cocoa truck. A plump man with a long white beard wearing a very authentic-looking Santa suit smiles and greets us, and Holly and I share a glance. I've never met the real Santa, but this guy could definitely give him a run for his money.

"Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas, what can I get for you?" He gestures to the menu posted on the side of the window.

"I'll have a small dark chocolate with whipped cream and peppermint," Holly says, and I nod.

"The same for me."

"Dark chocolate with peppermint is Mrs. Claus's favorite, too. You have good taste, young lady. I'll have that right out for you." He disappears behind the window, and we both fall into a laughter as soon as he's gone.

My eyes go wide. "Did we just order hot chocolate from the real Santa?"

Holly laughs and pushes me. "Wait a minute. I thought you were the real Santa?"

I catch her hand and pull her closer. "Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. Maybe I can be whoever you want me to be.

She sucks in a breath her eyes flicking to my lips and back up to my eyes, and there's that spark again zapping through the air between us like an electrical current.

"Two small dark peppermints with whipped cream and a little extra Christmas magic," Cocoa Santa says.

I hold my cocoa in front of me. "Cheers."

"Cheers to what?"

"Cheers to winning the bet," I say with a cheeky grin.

She sips her cocoa and eyes me over the rim of the cup. When she pulls away, there's a dab of whipped cream on her

nose.

“You’ve got a little ...” I swipe my finger and suck the sweet cream off, never taking my eyes off her. Her brown eyes brighten, and she bites her lip. I know she feels it, too. This connection. But will she let herself go there? Will she let herself have something she wants just because she wants it?

“Walk with me.” It’s less of a question and more of a demand. Her eyes flare with curiosity, and she holds the crook of my arm falling into step beside me as we stroll along the cobblestone path as the sound of Christmas music fades in the distance.

“I’ve enjoyed our date today.”

“You mean, dates?” she corrects.

“The lines are pretty loose considering the timeline.”

“Yeah? Why do I have a feeling you’re used to bending the rules to get what you want?”

We make our way to the Christmas tree garden area outside the inn. I take a sip of my cocoa, then look her right in the eyes. “You’re right. I am used to getting what I want, but it’s not because I cheat.” I move closer, and this time, she doesn’t back up as she meets my eyes in a challenge.

“Then why is it? You’re just lucky, then?”

I bend down, bringing our mouths closer, and whisper, “I get what I want because I’m not afraid to ask for it.” I glance up at the mistletoe hanging over our heads, and her eyes drop to my lips before wetting hers. “And right now, I can’t think of anything I’ve ever wanted more than to kiss you.”

Chapter Eight

Holly

I SUCK IN A BREATH, but my feet lock in place, and I don't dare move. I lift my chin ever so slightly as if my body's giving him the okay all on its own.

Drew's eyes lock with mine, and once again, I get the strangest feeling of déjà vu, like our souls have done this time and time again. Everything about this just feels right, even though my mind can't seem to understand why. Maybe I don't need to know why. Maybe I've spent my whole life searching for the answer to that never ending question, and it's only led me to the point of exhaustion, frustration, and a lackluster existence. Maybe what I really need to start asking is why not?

I glance up at the mistletoe and wet my lips. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Drew's lips crash into mine, and I feel a tiny explosion ignite in my chest. All our sexual tension comes flooding out, and it feels so good. His lips are commanding and possessive as he slides his tongue gently inside my mouth like he's savoring every taste. I press up to my tiptoes needing to be closer to him, needing to deepen this kiss that lights me up brighter than a Christmas tree in places I didn't know existed.

"Fuck, baby." He takes my chin between both hands, separating us, and I let out the tiniest whimper of protest, which only makes him smirk. "Fuck, even just kissing you is

too indecent to do in public.” He stares into my eyes and smiles. “What do you say we take this back to our room?”

“Yes.” My voice is the faintest whisper, but that’s all it takes before he’s grabbing my hand and pulling me along behind him through a side door.

We barely make it up the stairwell before he’s pressing me against the wall and stealing another kiss because he’s too desperate to make it ten more feet.

I’ve never been kissed like this, never felt so desired and needed the way Drew needs my lips on his. His massive body brackets me in, and I feel so small underneath him like he could break me in half using only his hands. I have no idea why I find that so sexy, but I’m done asking questions for the night. I’m done thinking with my head. Tonight, I’m giving into my body.

He stifles a growl under his breath like it pains him to stop kissing me as he walks us backward to our room. My skin is on fire burning from the inside out. I need his mouth on mine, his hands on my skin. I need friction and relief from this pressure building inside of me.

He kicks the door open and shrugs off his coat before helping me out of mine and tossing them in a pile on the armchair. And then he’s on me again, pressing my body against the wall and pinning my arms above my head. His body is all hard lines and sculpted muscle, and when he takes control like this, I feel as though I could melt into a puddle at his feet.

“I hoped it was peppermint,” he says between kisses. He moves from my lips to my neck like he wants to taste all of me at the same time.

“What are you talking about?” I ask in a breathy gasp, loving how he takes control, still pinning my hands with one hand as his other slides underneath the hem of my sweater.

“Your lip gloss. It’s been driving me nuts all day.” He kisses along my neck, tracing his tongue along my collar bone,

and it's almost too much. I have to force myself to remember to breathe because I've never been this turned on in my life.

"I couldn't decide if it tasted like berries or peppermint." He bites my bottom lip, sucking it into his mouth, then releases it with a gentle swipe of his tongue that turns into another mind-numbing, breath-stealing kiss.

His hand sneaks up my waist a little higher, tracing along my rib cage as he presses his hard length against me. "You are so fucking perfect. I want to take these layers off one by one like I'm opening a Christmas present." He pauses his movement and looks to me, and I realize he's waiting for permission.

I don't know if it's the hormones or the rush of adrenaline from doing this with an almost stranger, but a wave of boldness washes over me as I look him in the eyes. "I trust you, Drew. I don't know why or how, but I do. Tonight, I'm all yours. I don't want to think, can you just ... I don't know ... tell me what to do?" A warm blush creeps up my neck, and I can't believe I just said that out loud, but I don't look away from him. I need him to hear me and know I'm serious, that I want this just as badly as he does. In fact, I don't know if I've ever needed anything more.

He lifts an eyebrow, and there's that cocky smirk again. "Oh, Holly. You have no idea what box you've just opened." He releases my hands and cups my jaw as he plants a soft, gentle kiss on my lips. It's a wildly different energy from before, but I melt into him all the same.

I don't know what's gotten into me, but I hardly recognize myself right now. I'm not the woman who hooks up with hot strangers she meets on an airplane. I'm by no means a sex vixen confident in the art of seduction. Hell, I've only had a handful of sexual partners as it is. I guess getting cheated on has that affect sometimes. But when I'm with Drew, I feel like I could be.

I feel like I could be anyone I want to be when I'm with him, like I'm not stupid for failing or making mistakes. When he looks at me with those sea glass eyes and that cocky smirk,

I feel powerful and confident. And the craziest part is the longer I'm around him the more I'm starting to believe it. Drew makes me feel special and even if it's just a charade to get me in bed with him, I know without a doubt in my mind that he'll at least make it worth it.

He walks me backward until my knees bump on the edge of the bed, and I fall back on the mattress.

“Wait right here. Don't move.”

He goes to his suitcase, but I can't see what he's doing because the room's too dark, the only light coming from the open window that overlooks the picturesque, snowy night sky.

“Are you ready to sit on Santa's lap and tell me what you want for Christmas?” I look up to see Drew wearing his Santa suit, only impossibly more disheveled and erotic than last time, complete with a hat, boots, and a large sack he's thrown over his shoulder.

I almost burst out laughing, but then his jacket parts, giving me a front row seat to his sculpted chest and a better look at all those glorious tattoos. I've never seen art quite as exquisite as Drew's ink covered body, all those rippling muscles flexing and twisting as he moves toward me. It doesn't feel fair for someone to be so insanely hot. But I realize that what really sets him over the edge is his sweet personality. He's always looking on the bright side. The guy's a golden retriever in human form and would do anything to cheer someone up. He just may be the sweetest, kindest, and most thoughtful person I've ever met.

He saunters toward me and drops his sack at his feet, never breaking character as he says, “I *asked* you if you wanted to sit on my lap, but I guess you were waiting for me to tell you.” He spins the wooden desk chair around where it's directly in front of the fireplace, then clicks the remote, igniting warm flames.

Holy shit. Am I hallucinating, or is this the exact scene from the book I was reading?

When I look at him, he gives me a wink like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Then he taps his lap and crooks his finger in my direction. "I said, get over here and sit on my fucking lap unless you'd prefer me to tie you down and force it out of you. I've been waiting all year to have that pretty pussy sitting on my cock and I can tell by the way you're pressing your thighs together that you're just as eager. You don't have to pretend to be a good girl tonight, Holly. In fact, I hope you'll show me just how naughty you can be. It'll be our little secret."

That line is all I need to hear to confirm he is indeed reenacting one of my favorite sex scenes of all time. I can't tell you how many times I've read that book over the years, always rereading it at Christmas time, fantasizing about this exact scenario.

So, I do what any warm-blooded romance book enthusiast would do.

I kick off my shoes—exactly how she did in the book—and walk over to him, straddling my legs on either side of him, and sit on Santa's lap.

"Good girl." He tucks my hair behind my ears, then lifts my chin as he stares into my eyes. "You are so fucking beautiful and I'm going to enjoy every second of this. I've been watching you for a long time hoping you'd be ready for my visit. But you already knew that didn't you? All those nights you left your curtains cracked in your bedroom, taking off your clothes and putting on a little show for me right in front your window. You knew I'd be watching, knew I was always watching. It's why you waited until you were all alone before touching yourself, those little whimpers of pleasure you made right before you'd come. Don't think I wasn't watching you, memorizing you, listening to the way you cried out my name as you fell over the edge."

He traces a thumb over my jaw tilting my eyes up to meet his. "Say it. Say my name you dirty little slut."

I bite my lip, my body trembling with need and suck in a hiss. "Santa Claus." My words come out no more than a

whisper and then his lips are on mine, hungry and needy as he nips by bottom lip between his teeth and pulls away with a satisfied grin.

“Such a good little slut. You’ve had your fun teasing me and now it’s my turn to play with you.”

I try to focus on his words, but his hard length creates the most distracting pleasure as I rock my hips in gentle circles. His hands move to my hips as he flicks open the button of my jeans and folds the waistband down to expose my lower belly.

“Tell me, Holly, what is it you want for Christmas this year? Why’d you beg me to come visit you again? Did you not get your fill of me last Christmas?” He rubs his thumb along the line of my exposed flesh just above my panties, sending a jolt of arousal in its wake, and I feel myself getting wetter by the second. I’ll be a blubbering mess by the time this man’s done unwrapping me. The thought has me charged up and antsy for what comes next. I don’t care where he touches me. I just need his hands on me like I need my next breath.

I trail a finger down his chest and bite my lip as I muster up the courage to say the next line, whether I’ll give him what he wants and play along. I move my hand down his chest, along his never-ending abs until I reach his belt. He sucks in a breath.

“I want Santa’s cock inside me, filling me up with his Christmas magic. I want you to break me apart and put me back together. I want you to be your good girl and your dirty slut, and I want you to use me just like you did last time. Please, Santa.”

A hint of a smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth, and his eyes twinkle with satisfaction. “Now, that’s a hefty request. Are you sure you can handle all of that?”

I wiggle against his hard erection and begin to wonder if it will take the same magic he uses to get down the chimney to fit inside my poor, neglected vagina. But then he’s kissing me again, making all my thoughts and worries fly right out the window.

He lifts the hem of my sweater, pulling it over my head in between kisses as his hands move up my bare stomach and slide between my breasts. He pauses, savoring my body with each layer he removes.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, breaking character.

His eyes search my face, and then he finally says, “Are you fucking kidding me right now? I’m wondering if I’ve died and gone to heaven because I don’t think anything could ever top this moment. I don’t know how the fuck I convinced you to do this with me but fuck, Holly, I don’t think I’ll ever get this image out of my head. I’m the luckiest bastard in the whole goddamn world. I want to be gentle but it’s taking all my willpower to keep from taking you right here.” I don’t miss the way his hands tremble as he touches me like he’s liable to explode at any moment and somehow that knowledge gives me the last bit of confidence I need.

I shake my head, moving his hand over my racing heart. “I don’t want you to be gentle. I trust you, Drew. You know exactly what I want you to do to me so don’t even think about holding yourself back. I want all of you and I want you to show me everything I’ve been missing. So, what are you waiting for, Santa?”

“Jesus, Holly.” His mouth crashes into mine as he flicks the hook of my bra. It falls open in my lap. “Fuck,” he mutters as he takes me in, his hands trailing along the soft flesh of my breast before running his thumb across my sensitive nipple. “Fuck, your tits are perfect.” He groans as he squeezes them and then he stands up and drags my jeans and panties off in one motion.

He sits back down on the chair my now completely naked body atop his fully clothed one as his hands cup my ass pressing our bodies closer. It’s so erotic and I feel like I’m in the story, only my version is better because my Santa is Drew and he doesn’t exist solely between the pages of a book.

The warm fire feels heavenly against my chilled skin as I grind against him, feeling pleasure in every cell of my body, all the way down to my toes.

Drew sucks my nipple in his mouth as I begin to unfasten his belt.

He brings a hand on top of mine to stop me. “Not so fast, my little Ho Ho Ho.” He smirks at his pun, then pulls his Santa hat off and places it on my head. “There, you look so hot wearing nothing but my hat. You want to tease me all fucking year with your little games then maybe I’ll have a little fun too.” He tugs the hat down so it’s covering my eyes, and I let out a little yelp when he picks me up and tosses me on the bed.

“If you take off the hat then I stop. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Santa.” I nod as I impatiently wait for his next move. My whole body is on fire, every cell quaking in anticipation.

“That’s my filthy little slut.” His voice comes out in a growl, and then I feel him on top of me. My nipples harden, and I just want him to put me out of my misery. I need him to touch me, to fuck me, to fill me up and relieve this growing pressure building inside of me.

He parts my legs, and I feel so exposed in all the best ways. I can’t see the look on his face, but I can feel his gaze on my skin, his adoration and complete and utter awe as he worships my body with every glance and touch.

“You look so pretty with your legs spread wide and that perfect pussy glistening for me. I have half the mind to take a picture but I can’t have evidence like that out there. And I’d kill anyone who saw it because this beautiful pussy belongs to me. It’s mine and I think we both know I do not share what’s mine.”

He strokes a thumb over my aching clit and I jump at the surprise touch. Having my eyes covered like this seems to heighten all my other senses and all I can do is hold on to the sheets and pray I survive his blissful torment. My mind is reeling listening to him re-enact the scene. It’s almost like he’s talking to me using all the lines I know and love but saying something else entirely. I can’t help but wonder if there are seeds of truth laced in his words.

My back arches off the bed when his soft tongue brushes against my aching pussy, and my legs fall open wider as my hands grip his thick locks of hair. I don't dare take off the Santa hat, the smell of his shampoo lingers on the fabric, adding to the overwhelming sensations as Drew licks me in a soft, slow rhythm that has my toes curling.

"Such a sweet little cunt." He wraps one leg behind his head to give him a different angle and deepen the pressure.

I let out a little squeak as I try to hold in a moan.

He slides a single finger inside me, and I nearly buck off the bed, pulling the Santa hat tight over my eyes as pleasure shoots through my body.

"Fuck, your pussy is tight, Holly. So tight and wet. Your wet little pussy made a mess all over Santa's lap. But you can't help it can you? My little whore can't help herself. You're such a needy slut aren't you?"

He adds another finger, curling them inside of me pressing a spot no one's ever touched before. So, this is what it's supposed to feel like. All this time I thought I knew what sex was. I always wondered why everyone acted like it was such a big deal. But now I get it.

"Holy shit," I croak when his tongue strokes me again as he works his fingers inside me. I swear my body hovers off the bed like an out of body experience, but I can't be sure because my eyes are still covered. I lock my hands on the Santa hat in a death grip and hold on for dear life.

"Fuck, you taste good, Baby. You like it when I touch your pussy? Are you getting enough attention from me? Is my little cock tease ready to come now?"

"Yes. Yes. Please," I moan, squirming beneath him like I'm not in control of my limbs.

"Such a greedy little thing aren't you? Be a good girl and come all over Santa's face. I want to be able to taste you with my milk and cookies later tonight." He moves his fingers back to the spot as his tongue works my clit, and then he hums.

Pure, electric heat shoots out of me in every direction as I cry out my release, gripping his hair with one hand and digging my nails into his shoulder with the other. I can't think. There are no words, only pleasure so intense I can't believe this is what I've been missing out on all this time.

When I finally come back down from the wave, I peer from underneath my Santa hat to find Drew looking at me, eyes wide and darker than I've ever seen them.

Without a word, he strips off his shirt and moves back to the chair, his eyes flaring with lust. "Now, bring your sexy ass over here and sit on my lap."

I swallow the gulp in my throat, but then I'm up and moving, shaking legs and all. I was hoping we'd do this part.

"Yes, Santa."

Chapter Nine

Drew

MY COCK TWITCHES in anticipation as Holly saunters toward me wearing nothing but my fucking Santa hat. She's a walking wet dream with her killer body, and I love how she isn't trying to hide herself. Not like I didn't already have the best view when my face was between her legs, but she's got an air of confidence about her that's sexy as fuck.

She swings a leg over me and gently straddles my lap before placing both hands over my shoulders and gripping the back of the chair so her tits are right underneath my chin.

I let out a frustrated groan as I squeeze her ass, then slide my hands up to palm her tits.

I've had a lot of sex in my life but no one has ever come close to making me feel as alive as I do tonight with Holly. No one has ever jumped into a role-playing scene with me, even when I've offered. But not only did this amazing woman take the bait but I think she's enjoying our little scene as much as I am.

I watch the way her chest lifts as her breaths come out in long heavy pants and the way she bites her plump bottom lip to keep from moaning too loudly when I touch her. Fuck, I love touching her. I love the way her face twists and her nose scrunches up just before she comes. I love the little squeaks she makes when I surprise her by doing something that feels good. I've always taken pride on taking care of the women I'm

fucking, making sure their needs are met and then some. But Holly takes that to a whole new level.

I'd fall on my knees at her feet and worship her, be anything she needed me to be, do anything she needed me to do. I'd start a war or even crawl on my belly over hot coals if it meant she'd look in my direction and smile.

I'm a goner, a mad man, and an utter fool. But I don't care. This goddess of a woman's got me wound around her little finger and she doesn't even know it.

She throws her head back as she slides her hands over my chest, digging her nails in when I pinch her nipple.

Fuck, I hope she marks me good. I'll need the evidence tomorrow, so I don't think this is a dream because Holly is making all my dreams come true tonight.

"Is your greedy little pussy ready for me? Are you ready to take Santa's cock?" I say as I bury my face between her tits as she grinds herself in my lap like she's already on the verge of another orgasm.

She shuffles back and slides a hand inside my pants, gripping my cock in her small fist and stroking me. My head falls back against the chair, and I suck in a hiss trying to calm myself. I'm so turned on right now I could blow just from how she's looking at me.

"Fuck, baby, that feels so good. You have no idea what you're doing to me. You have no idea how fucking sexy you are in that hat."

She moves to pull my pants down and drops to her knees, and I suck in a breath. It's almost painful how aroused I am just from tasting her. Fuck. I can still smell her on my mustache, and now, she's looking up at me with those big brown doe eyes and her bee stung lips. "Shit, baby, I don't know how long I'll last if you—"

She doesn't wait for me to finish before parting her lips and swirling her tongue around the head of my cock in delicious slow circles.

My head falls back again as I suck in a slow, controlled breath and try to calm myself. I've never been a two-pump chump, not even when I was a teenager, but it's taking every ounce of concentration to keep from blowing, and I haven't even fucked her yet.

I need to fuck her.

Not that this isn't incredible. I choke on my own saliva when she cups my balls and shoves my cock down her throat. It takes me a minute to catch my breath. But Holly doesn't stop. She's a woman on a mission, and my gasping and choking for air doesn't seem to distract her in the least.

Fuck, I don't want to know where she learned that little move, but she deserves an award. I want to carve her name on a plaque, name a building in her honor, create a national scholarship in her name ... something ...

When she looks up at me with those deep brown eyes, I nearly lose it right there.

"All right, fuck, baby. That's enough." I grab her by the arms and pull her back up to me, and the little vixen has the nerve to pout about it. Jesus, what am I going to do with her? "As much as I'd love to come all over those pretty lips of yours, I need your pussy like I need my next breath."

I grab the condom lying on the brick fireplace beside me and slide it on. Then I lift her by the ass so she's hovering over me. She lets out a little gasp of surprise as I hold her.

I slowly lower her down as my head breaks through her entrance, and her warm, wet heat envelopes me inch by inch. A twinge of pain flashes behind her eyes, and I slide my hand over her racing heart to calm her. "Your pussy is so tight, Holly, but you're doing such a good job taking my cock. Fuck, you're wet for me aren't you, baby?"

Her eyes glaze over, and she relaxes a little more until I'm finally completely inside her. I grab her hips and rock her, showing her she's in control and can take me as deep or as hard as she wants.

She's so tight; it doesn't take much movement before my cock's ready to blow. Fuck, I never knew sex could feel this good. It's never been this good, and I don't know how I'll ever move on because no one will ever be as perfect as Holly.

I slide my palm up her back and grip her soft hair in a fist, forcing her eyes up to meet mine as she rides me. Goddammit, she's beautiful, so fucking gorgeous I want to burn this image into my memory, her mouth parted, hair wild, her perfect perky tits bouncing as she makes the sexiest fucking whimpers that tell me she's getting close.

"You look so good riding Santa's cock, Holly," I growl as I kiss her, keeping my fist in her hair as she bounces harder in my lap, alternating between bouncing and grinding. Her pants and moans grow faster, and when I feel her fingernails digging into my neck, I know she's on the edge.

I pinch her nipple and bite her shoulder as she moans and screams, losing all control as she grinds herself in my lap. "That's it, baby. That's my good girl. Make yourself come on Santa's cock."

She lets out a scream as her pussy squeezes me so hard I nearly pass out and then collapses against me, resting her head on my shoulder.

"How was that?" I trail my fingers down her back, she shivers.

"Holy shit. I ... I ... I've never ..." She shakes her head and looks at me with tears in her eyes. "I didn't know it could be that ... strong."

I laugh, and my cock jumps inside her. She shakes her head with a smile. "Where did you come from?"

I kiss her gently on the lips and tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. "I could ask you the same thing," I whisper as I slap her on the ass. "I'm far from done with you, sweetheart. Now, stand up and turn around." I pick her up again and help her flip around so her ass is facing me as I lower her back down over my cock.

Normally, I don't make my girl do all the work on top, but since this is a Santa role play, I'm leaning into it.

"Oh my God," she whimpers as I hit her g-spot again and press my palm against her stomach to increase the pressure. Her head falls back against my chest as I hold her like that, loving the way her soft ass feels against me as she grinds herself into another release.

I wait until her body goes limp before I stand up and lead her to the bed, pushing her face down into the mattress as I drive my cock deep inside her. "Fuck, baby. Your sweet little cunt is driving me crazy. You're so fucking tight and I'm trying not to hurt you but I don't know how much more I can take," I say in a hiss as she brings her round little ass higher, bowing her back to take me deeper.

I slide my palm over her firm, round ass cheek, my thumb caressing her tight hole as I thrust into her taking her deeper. She lets out a little moan and I take it as encouragement driving my cock inside her as the sound of our skin slapping fills the silence of the room.

"Does that feel good, baby? Does my little sex doll like it rough? Such a dirty girl letting Santa fuck her from behind while she begs for more. How much more do you need?" I press my palm on her lower back holding her in place as I wrap one leg around my waist to give me the deepest angle possible. I've got an incredible view of her ass as I drive my cock into her and pray to anyone listening, telling them how grateful I am.

"Fuck, baby, I'm close," I hiss as I pump inside her, her walls convulsing with another orgasm as she squeals incoherently into the mattress. "Fuck, Holly. Can I finish the scene?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Oh my God, don't stop!" she pants, writhing through her orgasm, and that's all the encouragement I need.

I grit my teeth as I deliver my last line, "Okay my dirty little slut, let me remind you who you belong to."

I thrust inside her impossibly tight cunt two more times, and then I pull out, tossing my condom to the side, and spray my hot, slick release over her gorgeous back and ass.

And when she gives me that satisfied little smirk over her shoulder, I nearly collapse. Because I've never felt this strong of a connection with anyone, and I don't think I ever will again.

I move to the bathroom and return with a warm wet washcloth, taking my time as I wipe her clean.

"You are breathtaking," I say as I kiss her forehead.

She just smiles a sleepy smile. "You're not too bad yourself, Santa."

Chapter Ten

Holly

I GRIP the handle of my suitcase and try to push the images of last night to the back of my mind. What was I thinking? We weren't even drinking, so it's not like I can blame alcohol for my momentary lapse in judgment. No, I was high on something much stronger than alcohol. Gourmet hot chocolate, Christmas nostalgia I didn't realize I'd forgotten, and being the object of a man's intense obsession are much more powerful aphrodisiacs than booze.

All morning, I've had this pang of guilt stabbing me in the chest, but when I look at Drew and those icy green eyes that seem to cut through all my shields, I feel like there's no use in pretending. Last night I wanted something, so I let myself have it. Now, it's done and over. I can lick my wounds while staring at the ocean and come up with a new plan.

"Boarding pass, please?" The woman's warm smile brightens when she recognizes us. I hand her my paper boarding pass to scan while Drew flashes his phone screen.

"Merry Christmas. You two look fresh and relaxed. I take it you enjoyed your stay at the inn?"

Drew wraps an arm around me and tugs me against him. "You know what? We really did." My face burns with embarrassment, but luckily, I don't think Martha's very focused on me right now, not when Drew's wearing that Henley that fits his muscular body like a glove. His sleeves are

rolled up, revealing corded forearms, and thanks to last night, I know exactly how every ridge of his muscle feels beneath my fingertips. That memory alone is enough to make my panties wet.

Jesus, it's 7 a.m. Calm down, girl.

“Thanks again for your help, Martha, and Merry Christmas,” Drew says before we board the small plane.

There are considerably fewer people packed onto this plane today, probably because it's Christmas morning. Last night, we were given an option to take a shuttle to a larger airport a few hours away, but we didn't see the message. My guess is most people opted for flying out late on Christmas Eve, so they'd be home on Christmas Day.

“Our flight's only half full this morning, so please feel free to spread out and sit where you'd like,” a flight attendant says in greeting. Immediately, my heart starts to race.

I don't know why I feel so awkward around Drew. I mean, so what, we had sex. He probably hooks up with women every time he travels for work. Hell, he's a fucking romance cover model, I'd expect nothing less.

It's just I'm not the kind of person who has meaningless sex, not to mention one night stands with romance cover models, so I don't exactly know the protocol on how to act afterward.

Do we sit together? Does he want to sit with me? Do I want him to want to sit with me? Should I sit next to someone else so he doesn't have to feel guilty for not wanting to sit by me?

A brush of my arm knocks me from my anxiety spiral, and I look back at Drew, who's looking at me with a confused expression. “Are you freaking out about the flight, Hols? Because what happened last time was a fluke thing, and—”

I nod my head a little too enthusiastically, thankful for the reasonable explanation. “Yeah, sorry. Just having flashbacks, I guess.”

He places a hand on my shoulder and bends down to whisper in my ear, “I think I heard something about the safest place to sit being near the wings.”

I press my lips into a line and make my way to the aisle seat near the wing. Drew follows closely behind me, and when he takes my bag to stuff it in the overhead compartment next to his, I finally breathe a sigh of relief that he made the decision for me.

I begin fidgeting with the seatbelt, tightening and loosening it as if to get the fit just right, when Drew’s warm hand covers mine. I freeze.

“What’s going on with you today? You’ve been acting distant all morning. Are you sure you’re only worried about the flight? Are you having regrets? Because I thought we had fun?”

“No,” I blurt out before he can finish that thought. “No, I just ... it’s a lot ... and I never do this. Like *never*.” I emphasize the last word and look at him.

His eyes squint with a smile, but he keeps his lips pressed tight, so he doesn’t show it. “You’re pretty cute when you’re all flustered, you know that?”

I pull at my seatbelt again, but the strap sticks, so I have to yank it. “What? I am not flustered. And I’m *not* cute. I just ... I don’t want you to feel like you need to be nice to me if this was just a normal thing for you.”

“Holly, just stop. I promise you I wouldn’t be sitting next to you right now, following you like a fucking lost puppy dog, if I didn’t like you.” He brushes my hands away from the seat belt and loosens it, then carefully adjusts it over my lap. Heat pools in my belly from the brush of his fingers, and there she goes again with the waterworks. He hardly even touched me, and my vagina’s ready to tap back in for another round.

Who knew she was such a whore? Not me, not until Drew Jordan waltzed onto that plane in a trashy Santa suit and flashed me those *I see right through you* eyes.

“Which is why ...” He clears his throat and continues, “I’m asking you to spend Christmas Day with me ... and my family.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he holds a finger over my mouth. “Just hear me out before you say no.”

I close my mouth, biting my cheek to keep myself quiet.

“Good girl,” Drew whispers just loud enough for me to hear as he flashes a devilish grin.

And ... I think my panties just spontaneously combusted.

“Now, I know you’ve got big plans to avoid this holiday at all costs, and taking me up on my offer could sort of feel like losing the point you’re trying to prove to yourself, so I’ll make it easy on you.” He lifts my hand between his and kisses it. “Come home with me. Spend Christmas with my favorite people in the world, and if you still feel the same way tomorrow, I promise I won’t fight you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat as I consider his request. I guess things are already messy and weird, and it’s not like I have any concrete plans anyway. Maybe vacation Holly can stick around a little while longer.

“Sure. Yeah. That’d be nice. As long as I’m not imposing ...”

His face breaks out into a giant grin. “Seriously? Wow. I was prepared to spend the next four hours convincing you. I even prepared a list of pros and cons and made a graph.” He squeezes my hand and sits back in his seat, still grinning like he can’t believe it.

“You made a graph? Now, this I have to see.”

“I almost forgot.” He bends and starts digging around in his backpack. “Close your eyes.”

“What are you—? Why do I need to close my eyes?” I start to argue, but my eyes flutter closed anyway like he’s got a direct line of control over my body.

“Now, hold out your hand.”

My lips tug into a slow smile as I oblige.

“I couldn’t let Christmas go by without getting you a little something to remember me by.” He places something heavy in my palm, and when I open my eyes, I’m holding a snow globe that swirls with beads of white snow like he just shook it. When all the snow pieces finally settle, I see Santa Claus standing in the middle of his sleigh with his leg propped on the side as he kisses a blonde-haired woman in a familiar possessive embrace. The inscription on the bottom reads “Yours to Ho Ho Hold.”

My cheeks heat, and I can’t hide my smile as I take in all the intricate details that are so eerily accurate. My eyes meet his, which are beaming with pride and a spark of mischief. “How did you find this?”

“The same way I found you. Dumb luck, I guess. Or maybe it was a Christmas miracle. Depends on how you look at it.” He winks. “I take it you like it?”

I hold it to my chest, trying to hold back my tears as trapped emotion lodges like a lump in my throat. “It’s perfect,” I finally manage.

He links his hand in mine, smiling that smug, satisfied smile I love so much. “Good. That’s what I hoped you’d say.”

Chapter Eleven

Holly

“ARE you sure I’m not imposing? I don’t want to make things awkward for you. I mean, what did you even tell them? That you’re bringing home someone you just met and hooked up with?” I squirm in my seat, chewing my lip as Drew drives us to his parents’ house.

The flight went by surprisingly fast, especially considering we had so much space to ourselves. Drew may have gotten a little handsy in the name of calming my nerves, but now that we’re here, I’m starting to think my decision was made in a sex-hazed stupor. It’s not my fault the guy touches me like he wrote the user manual, hitting places I never knew existed. I can’t exactly expect my brain would work correctly after so many orgasms in such a short amount of time.

I think I’ve given my poor vagina whiplash with all these intense orgasms. I don’t know how I’ll ever be satisfied with the basic cable version I’ve always known after experiencing Drew’s holy shit package. I may as well hang my sex life up and become a nun because he’s ruined me for anyone else.

“You’re not imposing, Hols. My family loves a good last-minute surprise. My stepmom Charlotte thrives off feeding new people. So as long as you eat her amazing cooking, you’re good.”

He reaches over and squeezes my hand, then slides his thumb over my bottom lip. “You’ve got to stop doing that.

You'll hurt your pretty lips, and then I won't be able to kiss them."

I slap his hand away playfully and smile, thinking about all the kissing things I want Drew to do to me—and not just my mouth. Truly, I think the man's short-circuited my brain because I haven't been able to think about anything other than sex after he rocked my world last night.

We live over two thousand miles apart for Christ's sake. It's not like this could ever really work. Besides, I can't forget I'm unemployed and need to be figuring out my next move. I'm not exactly in a position to make major life changes when I'm unemployed with virtually zero job prospects. I'm not exactly the catch of the century, no matter how much Drew likes to make me feel like I am.

"Here we are." Drew pulls up to a light blue, three-story house on a private beach, and my mouth falls open. Not because of the breathtaking view, but because I've never seen so many Christmas decorations on one home in my life. And I thought my parents were obsessed with the holiday.

Rows and rows of different scenes light up and animate as lights flash and Santa's wave. They've got a whole beach Santa theme going, with a surfboard sleigh and a Hawaiian shirt wearing Santa with white chest hair and the buttons undone.

"Is that ... the Beach Boys?" I shoot a glance over my shoulder, and Drew gives me a slight nod.

"I know. It's a lot." His face breaks into a huge grin like he's proud rather than embarrassed, and it only makes me like him more. I love how he owns his little quirks and isn't embarrassed to embrace the things he loves. It says so much about his character that he's not afraid to be himself, and I'm so envious of that. What must it feel like to be accepted completely and fully for who you are, to feel so comfortable in your own skin? Though, I guess he isn't completely comfortable, considering the secret he's keeping from his family. And I don't know why, but the thought of Drew feeling like he needs to hide a piece of himself breaks my heart.

He lifts a brow. “Are you ready? My family can be a lot, but they mean well, so just warning you.”

I nod. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

“That’s a girl.” He winks and comes around to open my door. As he leads me up the steps, my stomach does a backflip. I feel like a thirteen-year-old girl with a movie star crush. Only, in my scenario, the movie star is a cover model, and he’s actually real. And for reasons I still can’t comprehend, he seems to like me back.

“Merry Christmas,” a man says as he swings the door open just as we get to the top of the stairs.

“Merry Christmas,” Drew says as his dad pulls him into a hug. “Dad, this is Holly, the girl I told you about.”

“Holly. What a beautiful name. It’s so nice to meet you. I’m James.” James is tall, with broad shoulders and a neatly trimmed white beard. I can’t help but notice how his muscles fill out his flannel shirt, though he’s got a few extra layers covering his muscles. It’s clear Drew’s built just like him, and for some reason, that little bit of knowledge excites me. Is this what I’d have to look forward to? I shake the thought away as soon as it comes. Don’t be ridiculous, Holly. This is why you don’t have one-night stands. You’re not built for casual; you’re too loyal.

But I still can’t help but notice James bears a striking similarity to—

Drew’s eyes send daggers my way, and his lip curls up in a knowing grin as he loops a finger around my belt loop and tugs me closer.

My cheeks heat from getting caught checking out Drew’s dad, but I do my best to play it off. Better to not look guilty, so hopefully, no one else picks up on it. This Christmas is plenty awkward enough as it is.

“And this is my beautiful wife, Charlotte.” He wraps an arm around her and steps to the side to let us in.

I shake both of their hands. “Nice to meet you both. Thank you so much for having me. I hope I’m not imposing.”

Charlotte waves the tea towel in her hand. “Oh, please don’t apologize. We’re just happy to have you. And happy Drew was able to make it home today.” She kisses Drew on the cheek and whispers something in his ear. When she pulls away, he looks between his parents and nods.

I don’t know what they’re talking about, but whatever he told them seems to have made them happy because they both break out into giant grins, and Charlotte flies into the kitchen in a frenzy.

“Why don’t you introduce Holly to the family? I think I need to go check on your stepmother before she puts the remote in the freezer again.”

I eye Drew, and he shakes his head. “Char sometimes loses things when she’s excited. One Easter, we couldn’t find the TV remote. Dad was so mad he had to replace it, and then Char found it a week later in the door of the freezer. Now, we always check the freezer anytime something goes missing.”

“That’s cute.”

“I not want to take a baff!” A little blonde girl wearing pink footy pajamas screams as she bursts into the room, a giant black dog fumbling behind her. She collides into Drew’s legs and wraps her arms around his knees. “Help, Uncle Doodoo. Tell Daddy no!”

The dog slides to a stop when he sees me and rolls onto his back at my feet, presenting his belly. I happily oblige as I bend down to scratch him. “Uncle Doodoo?” I lift a questioning brow, and Drew shrugs.

“I’ve come to embrace it. She can call me whatever she wants. Besides, Doodoo was her fourth word after Mama, Dada, and cheese.”

“Cheese?”

“Oh, yes. Nothing comes between my girl and her cheese. We all have our vices, though. Don’t we? Indie loves cheese, and some of us love pu—”

“Doodoo! Hold me. Hold me. Hold me!” She reaches her little arms up, squealing like her life’s in danger.

He gives me a wink before scooping her up ... and now my vagina has a heartbeat. Seriously, I've never really been a kid-person, but seeing Drew looking so natural with this adorable little girl in his arms has my ovaries screaming.

He holds her to his chest in a protective hug as he kisses her chubby little cheeks. "Merry Christmas, Indie. Did you miss me?"

She ignores his question, holding up one finger as she screams. "Not! Tell him not!"

A tall, slightly trimmer man with tattoos and short dark hair comes around the corner, pausing when he sees Drew. "Hey there, Doodoo. I didn't realize you were home already." He wipes his hand on his pants and holds it out to me. "I'm Simon, and I see you've already met Indie." He looks down at the silly dog soaking up all the belly rubs. "And that's Denver. Sorry to bombard you like this. I wish I could say they're just excited, but the truth is it's always this chaotic around here."

I stand to shake his hand. "Oh, I don't mind. It's a nice change from what I'm used to. It's nice to meet you." I shake his hand, and he gives Drew a curious look, to which Drew mouths something behind the baby.

Simon smiles as a beautiful woman with lavender and hot pink hair comes up behind him.

"Holly, this is Wren. She's my brother's better half. She and Charlotte have their hands full keeping all us boys in line."

Wren rolls her eyes. "You have no idea." She flashes me a smile. "I can't wait to hear all about how you two met." She gives Drew a teasing wink and reaches for the baby.

Drew kisses Indie on the head before passing her to her mom. "Sorry, Indie, but you stink, and you're covered in syrup. Go take a bath, and when you're all clean, I'll let you open your present."

She sucks in a loud gasp. "A pwesent! Doodoo bwoght Indie a pwesent?"

He ruffles her blonde curls. “I sure did, but if you don’t get cleaned up, I’m afraid we’re going to have to change *your* name to Doodoo.”

Indie furrows her little brow in confusion. “I not Doodoo. I Indie.”

“Uncle Doodoo is just being silly,” Wren says as she carries her to the bathroom, from where I assume she just escaped.

“Sorry about that. I think Jamie snuck her some chocolate when we weren’t looking, and she’s all hyped up on sugar and overstimulated with all the new toys. I don’t think she knows what to play with first, and she keeps cycling through her piles and making a mess.” He whistles and pats his leg, and Denver moves to sit beside him.

“Where’s Sam and Maggie?” Drew asks, and they share another silent exchange. “Right, well, I guess Holly can meet them later.”

The smoke alarm in the kitchen beeps just as the smell of smoke fills the air.

“Oh, shoot. James, can you crack a window?” I hear Charlotte say, and my eyes widen at Drew, but he doesn’t seem concerned in the least bit.

Simon shakes his head and laughs. “Welcome home, little brother.” Then he leaves us to go help with whatever’s burning in the kitchen.

When we’re finally alone, I turn to Drew and quirk a brow.

“I told you they were a lot.”

It’s a stark difference from my quiet family gatherings; that’s for sure. I always wondered what it would be like to have a house full of people on the holidays. Being an only child, it was always just my parents and me. We made the most of it, but it was pretty quiet, nothing like this, and we haven’t even been here for thirty minutes.

I rock back on my heels and look around the cozy space. It’s got an air of elegance about it, yet it doesn’t feel like you

can't touch anything. There's an assortment of family photos displayed on a small secretary desk, and I pick one up to examine it.

I immediately identify Drew. He's got the darkest hair and the lightest eyes of everyone. He's making a silly face with his younger brother, the one he's told me about the most. They're standing on the beach, and everyone's wearing their swimsuits looking genuinely happy. Charlotte's head is thrown back as she laughs at the two younger boys as James, Simon, and another brother—Sam, I think—stand in a line with their arms thrown around each other's shoulders.

“You look so different from your brothers, but I can see the resemblance to your dad. You're all built just like him.”

He blows out a breath, and his eyes fall. “Yeah, I look more like my mom. She had the same light eyes and dark hair.” He gestures to a picture of all four boys as little kids clinging to a beautiful, smiling young woman. She doesn't look much older than me.

“That's your mom? She's gorgeous.”

Drew told me she passed away when he was young, and I can't imagine how hard that must've been for him growing up. It looks like his dad is happy with Charlotte. They all seem to love her. It's nice they keep pictures of her, too.

I pick up the family photo I was looking at before, the one in which Drew looks to be fifteen or sixteen. He's much skinnier than he is now and obviously isn't covered in ink.

“That was our last big family vacation. We all went to Turks and Caicos. I think I was sixteen and Jamie was fourteen there. We'd just finished zip lining and found this swimming hole. My dad did a backflip off a cliff and gashed his leg open on a sharp rock. Charlotte nearly had a heart attack, and we all couldn't stop laughing at how stupid he was for trying it.” He scoffs a laugh. “I swear, he still thinks he's twenty-five, and the worst part is he executed it perfectly. He only cut his leg when he was climbing out of the water. Charlotte was furious, but we thought he was the coolest guy in the whole world.” He smiles to himself as he remembers. “The only problem is now

he's in his sixties and isn't as agile as he once was. Doesn't stop him from doing dumb shit, though. I hope I'm just like him when I get older."

"Wow. Sounds like fun." I set the picture down and look at him with fresh eyes. Meeting Drew's family helps me understand where he got his easy-going nature. "So, you guys are still close, huh? Even all grown up?"

"Oh, yeah. My parents house will always be home. We try to all get together for at least one holiday every year. Obviously, Christmas is our favorite, but now that two of my brothers are married, we sometimes have to compromise."

I smile to myself. I can't imagine having so many schedules to consider, but it really shows how close they all are if they're still showing up for holidays.

I look around. "So, you said I'd meet Sam later, but what about Jamie?"

Drew nods. "Oh, I'm sure he's around here somewhere. He still lives downstairs."

"Now, Doodoo, you make it sound like I'm a mooch."

I turn to see another handsome Jordan brother propped against the doorway.

Drew moves toward him and pulls him into a tight hug. Jamie's light brown hair is cut into a mullet that trails down the back of his neck.

"What's up Arkansas Waterfall?" Drew says clapping him on the back.

Jamie smooths his hair proudly, then licks his finger and twists the corner of Drew's mustache, making it stick up in a curl. "Dude, why aren't you styling it like I showed you? What's the point of having a mustache if you're going to be basic?"

Drew slaps his hand away and shoves him. "Fuck, now I'm going to be smelling your spit all day."

Jamie's eyes land on me like he's only just realizing I'm there. He pushes away from the door frame and offers me his

hand. “Sorry, I didn’t see you there. I’m Jamie. I’m not exactly sure what you see in my brother, but—”

Drew shoves him away. “Keep your hands off my girl, Davy Crocket.”

Jamie holds up his hands. “Sorry, jeez, I was just trying to introduce myself. No need to go all caveman on me.” He whispers to me behind his hand, “I taught him everything he knows.”

Drew grabs his shirt collar and shoves him through the doorway as they whisper fight all the way to the living room. I follow behind them catching little bits and pieces of: “I told you she was hot.” “Did you fully satisfy her?” “Of course, I know the Jordan law—”

My ears perk up at that last part. *Jordan law?* Now, this family really has me intrigued.

“Okay, who keeps rearranging my Noel letters to spell Leon?” Charlotte says as she moves the decorative letters on the bookshelf.

Jamie and James both share a look, and Drew just shakes his head.

“You two think you’re so funny, but I’ll not have our pictures ruined again. Do you know how many questions I got when I posted our family photos last year? Everyone thought we were sneakily announcing another baby in the family, and the whole gardening club took the idea and ran with it. I had to personally un-tell everyone, and it was so exhausting. So, unless someone wants to give me a little Leon, stop with the pranks.” She huffs something under her breath, but it’s easy to see she isn’t really mad, just full of sass, which makes James’ smile grow wider.

Jamie holds up his hands. “I’m saving my bologna pony for the woman of my dreams, and I don’t see me landing her anytime soon, so looks like Drew and Holly are your best bet, Char.”

He flashes Drew a grin, to which Drew just squeezes my shoulder. “Let’s not scare Holly off before we’ve even had

lunch.”

I suck in a deep breath as the smell of cinnamon and cranberries fill the air and think of anything to change the subject. “Something smells amazing.”

“That’s my homemade cider. Why don’t we all sit down, and I’ll bring everyone a glass?” Charlotte offers, and James jumps up to help her.

The living room is spacious but cozy, and there’s a huge nine-foot Christmas tree trimmed to perfection set in front of the massive wall of windows overlooking the beach.

I take a seat on one sofa, and Drew plops down beside me as the others slowly file in and fill the space.

I can’t help but think this is what my parents always dreamed about. They wanted a family so badly, and all they ever got was me. They had to put all their eggs in one basket, and of course, I went and ruined it for them.

A fresh pang of guilt hits me in the chest, and when I look down, Drew squeezes my hand. His eyebrows cinch in a look of concern. “You okay?” He whispers so only I can hear him, and I give him a curt nod. But he still doesn’t let go of my hand, tracing little circles along my skin with his thumb.

How can this man I just met already be so perceptive? I feel like he already knows me so well, but that can’t be true. It’s impossible.

“There they are. You two lovebirds finally decided to join us,” James says, and I look up to see Drew’s oldest brother, Sam, and the beautiful red-haired woman on his arm. Her freckled cheeks are tinted pink, but she’s smiling and doesn’t seem to look embarrassed.

“Holly, this is my brother, Sam, and that’s his wife, Maggie. They’re newlyweds and can’t keep their hands off each other.”

After I shake each of their hands, they take seats on the sofa across from us. Sam doesn’t correct anyone as he tucks his bride under his arm and kisses her on top of her head. Maybe there’s something with these Jordan men? They’re all

fiercely protective of their women; that much is obvious. But do they really have a code they follow?

A few moments later, Simon, Wren, baby Indie, and a hyper Denver come bursting into the room. I sit back and watch as they all pass the baby around and play with her while Denver makes his way around, competing for his own attention.

The couches are full, and Jamie hops up to give Wren his seat. He pulls a dining chair into the space and sits on it backwards. A flash of Drew fucking me in a very similar chair sends a fresh chill down my spine, and I swallow a gulp, trying to push the memory away.

I cannot let myself think about that right now. With my luck, if Drew's family is anywhere near as intuitive as he is, they'll all see right through me.

I bite my lip and stare down at my feet as I try to clear my dirty thoughts.

"So, what brand were you working with on your trip?" Jamie picks up his phone like he's searching for something.

Drew clears his throat and coughs, choking on his cider and says, "Oh, um, it was just a small gym. They wanted me to do some promo for a local ad."

I sit up a little taller. It's the first time I've seen Drew look flustered, and I don't have to know him to see he's lying. He's fidgeting in his seat, and he can't look anyone in the eyes. He looks ... nervous?

Suddenly, I remember his confession about why he doesn't tell his family what his real job is, and my heart breaks for him.

Jamie's mouth pulls into a smirk. "I thought that's what you told me, but when I checked your location, you weren't anywhere near a gym." He swipes at something on his phone and pulls up a picture that I can't quite make out.

Drew's face drains of its color, and he blinks several times but doesn't say anything.

“Then I saw this ad for this romance novel. It popped up on my feed, and even though I can’t see the guy’s face, I’d recognize that tattoo anywhere.” He passes the phone to Simon, who laughs and passes the phone to Sam. Sam smirks but doesn’t say anything.

“Now, I don’t know what the big deal is.” James grabs the phone, and his eyes go wide.

Charlotte sneaks a glance and nearly spits out her cider. Indie’s sitting in her lap, and when she sees the picture, she squeals. “I see Uncle Doodoo’s Go-Go!”

Drew snatches the phone. “What are you talking about? That is not my Go-Go.”

“What’s a Go-Go—” My words fall off when the view of Drew’s round, muscular ass fills the screen, complete with the thigh tattoo of a topless mermaid. In the photo, he’s shirtless and pulling up his jeans, looking freshly fucked with his dick barely covered and giving the camera a prime view of the side of his ass, crack and all.

There’s no mistaking it’s him, even though his face is only visible from the side. Between the dark, silky hair, the thick, neatly groomed mustache on his lip, his golden skin, and the tattoo that has to be one of a kind peeking out over the top of his jeans ... It’s undeniably him.

The room falls quiet as all eyes land on Drew, and I want to throw myself on top of him to shield him from this awkward moment, but it’s too late. They’ve already seen it.

Drew purses his lips and finally speaks. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you ... about my job ...”

Chapter Twelve

Drew

“I GUESS THE SECRETS OUT, THEN.” I scratch my head as I look into a room full of confused eyes, all waiting for an explanation.

I think there’s always been a part of me that knew they’d find out—hoped even—but the timing isn’t exactly ideal. I guess it never really is when it comes to having these kinds of conversations.

Well, may as well get it over with. Rip it off like a band aid. The quicker I come clean, the quicker they can all get back to teasing me, and I can stop keeping all the secrets. It’s fucking hard living a lie, unable to ask my dad for contract advice or brainstorm with Sam about starting my own agency.

Sure, they’ll never let me live this down, but at least I don’t have to pretend anymore. That’s a relief in itself.

I scrub my hand over my face and blow out a breath as Holly’s hand rubs across my back, letting me know she’s right here. For some reason, that tiny gesture gives me courage I didn’t know I needed.

“I’m not just a social media influencer.” I open my clasped hands and shrug. “I mean, that’s what started it all. What caught the eyes of my agent.”

Holly wraps her hand in mine, and her brown eyes flicker with pride as she looks at me giving me strength.

“I guess I’ll just start from the beginning.” I cross my foot over my knee and lean back on the sofa, feeling the weight of everyone’s attention like a boulder heavy on my shoulders. “I posted that thirst trap—the one in the pool wearing the speedo you all made me wear when I lost in fantasy football last year.”

Everyone nods in understanding as Jamie and Simon both try to hide snickers behind their hands. I continue, “Well, I don’t know if you know this, but it went viral. Apparently, the picture reminded people of this hot character from a popular romance book series. I gained thousands of followers overnight—all women and all of them telling me I resembled this character. Then, it didn’t matter what I posted. They wouldn’t stop.”

I shake my head and smile, remembering the craziness of it all.

“I didn’t say anything because I thought it would pass, that they’d eventually lose interest over time, but apparently, the author started a new series and wanted to bring me in on it. One day, I got an email from someone who wanted to represent me, and things took off from there. Not only was the original author interested, but there was an entire list of romance authors willing to pay top dollar for my photos.

“When I saw the offers rolling in, I couldn’t believe it. I was already posting pictures for different brand deals, but these offers were for ten times the amount, and they were all really professional and respectful. It was an easy yes, and I’ve met so many cool people because of it. I’ve learned a ton, made connections with different studios and photographers and, of course, the authors. I’ve been a special guest at book signings and giant conferences. It’s been incredible.”

My dad lets out a long sigh and finally speaks. “Why didn’t you tell us, son? That sounds amazing and pretty damn stressful, if you ask me. We could’ve supported you, helped you with managing it all.”

I press my lips together, and he looks away. “I don’t know. It feels stupid to admit it, but I knew you guys wouldn’t...”

“Wouldn’t what?” Simon asks, drawing my attention to him.

I meet his eyes, and to my surprise, there’s no hint of a smirk on his face. I finally say, “You wouldn’t let it go. You wouldn’t drop the joke or let me live it down. I knew I’d hear the relentless teasing for the rest of my life.” I shrug. “And I just didn’t want to feel the weight of embarrassment when I was so excited about where this could lead.”

Simon’s eyebrows knit in confusion, and he shares a glance with Jamie. “Drew, you know we’re just teasing, don’t you?”

I lean forward and clasp my hands together, propping my elbows on my knees as I hold his gaze. “Yeah, I know. As I said, it’s dumb ... I just ... I don’t know, I guess sometimes I just want you guys to take me seriously.”

“I take you seriously,” Sam says, his words cutting through the thick air like a knife. “It’s easy to see this is something you’re passionate about, and I don’t give two fucks what it is. Don’t you dare feel ashamed or embarrassed about doing something you love. Not when you’re clearly so good at it. If it makes you happy, that’s all I need to know.” He pulls out his phone and starts typing. “I have a list of contacts I can reach out to right now. Just say the word and tell me what you’re looking for, and I’ll do everything in my power to help you.”

“He’s right,” my dad says, standing up and walking toward me. He pulls me up and wraps me in a tight hug. “Son, I know I tease you and your brothers, but I never want you to keep something from me because you’re afraid of what I’ll think. I’m so damn proud of you. I’m proud of all of you, and there’s nothing you can do to change that. You boys have already exceeded every expectation I had for you. Anything extra you do is just icing on top. Please don’t keep parts of yourself from me. I just want to be part of your life, to cheer you on and help you make your dreams come true in whatever way I can.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you, too.”

“Your mother would be so proud of you. You remind me so much of her, with your tender heart. You’ve always been

our special, gentle soul, and I am so sorry we hurt you by teasing you.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me,” I say as I take my seat next to Holly again, and from the corner of my eye, it almost looks like Holly’s crying. I reach out and squeeze her knee, this time comforting her.

“I’m sorry, bro.” Jamie’s voice comes out in almost a whisper, and the room falls silent. It’s a rare thing for my younger brother to admit fault or for him to contribute to a serious conversation.

His eyes meet mine, and there’s a watery sheen to them like he’s holding back tears. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you and call you out in front of everyone. Well, I mean, I did mean to. I just didn’t realize you felt so strongly about it. I know I like to laugh and joke, and I like being the center of attention, so I figure you did, too. But that’s not fair to you, dude. I was a dick for calling you out, and you know I’m going to be in your corner cheering you on. I’ll hold the phone for you while you dance if that’s what you want.”

I have to hold in a laugh, so I don’t interrupt this rare, sentimental moment.

“I’ll help you style your mustache. I know I tease you about it, but it’s only because I’m jealous. You know I wanted a mustache first, but my hair’s not as dark as yours, so I had to go for the mullet instead.” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, dude. I won’t tease you anymore or start up anything else.”

I hold up my hand. “Hey, now, I don’t want us to lose our familial sense of humor, so don’t get it twisted. I still expect the embarrassing punishments for losing a bet and all the other shit we say to each other. I just want to know you respect me, too. That’s all.”

My brothers look around and nod, and just like that, everything’s right in my world again.

“Well, now that we’ve got that dealt with, who’s up for a game of charades?” my dad asks, clapping his hands.

Holly tugs at my shirt, and I turn to face her. Her eyes are brimming with tears, and I can see she's trying hard to hold them back.

"Hey, what's the matter?" I run my finger along her cheek, and she catches my hand.

She shakes her head. "I am so proud of you for standing up for yourself. That was so incredible to watch how you all resolved something so maturely. Your family is so amazing. I can see why you love them so much."

A fat tear falls down her cheek, and I swipe it away before pulling her up and leading her into another room. "I'm going to show Holly where the bathroom is. You can get started without us," I call, but everyone's too busy arguing about teams to notice.

I pull her into the bathroom and close the door. "Okay, now that we're alone, tell me what's really bothering you."

She goes to the sink and splashes water on her face, then dabs it dry with a towel as I stare at her reflection in the mirror. I cross my arms as I wait.

"I don't know. I guess I'm just missing my parents extra today." She looks down at the sink, and I spin her to face me.

"That seems extremely understandable. What else?"

"I just feel so guilty. They'll never have this huge family or a beautiful home of their dreams because of my mistakes, because I fucked things up for them. They had to win their dream vacation from a podcast rather than buying it themselves."

I lift her chin to meet my eyes. "Hey, that's not on you. Your parents made a choice, and if they're anything like you say, then there's no way they resent you for that. They love you, Holly. All they want is for you to be happy."

"That's just it. I'm not happy either. So, they wasted their life savings on me for nothing." Another tear flows down her cheek, and she sucks in a shaky breath.

I pull her to my chest, wrapping her tightly against me, wishing I could take all her pain away and fix it for her. “Shh, baby. You’re okay,” I whisper in her hair as I hold her.

She shakes her head, pressing herself away to look at me. “It’s not okay, Drew. I’m a mess, and I don’t know where to go from here. I’ve already lost everything chasing my dreams. Now, I’ve got to find another job, and I have no idea where to even begin or what I’m even qualified to do for that matter.”

I push her hair back from her face as I look into her sad, brown eyes. I hate seeing her like this. “You’re twenty-seven, Hols. Your life is supposed to be a mess. Where on earth did you get the idea you’re supposed to have it all figured out by now?” I brush my thumb along her furrowed brow and smooth it.

“I don’t know. My parents were married and already owned a house by the time they were my age. They both had established careers.”

“Baby, that was over thirty years ago. Things were different. The world was different. You can’t compare your life today to theirs.” I brush another tear from her cheek. “What else has got you so upset? Tell me so I can help you.”

She bites her quivering lip. “I guess ... I just feel like a failure and like I’ll never get ahead. I feel like I’ll always be playing catch up.” She shakes her head. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m so happy for you. I really am. It’s just listening to you talk about how much you love your job, it just brings up a lot of heartache I’ve been suppressing for a very long time.” Her eyes meet mine. “I think I wasted my only shot at doing what I love, and now, I’ve got to pay the penance for my stupidity. It just sucks. That’s all.”

I spin us around and pin her against the wall, holding her hands above her head, and she lets out a little gasp of surprise. “Don’t you ever call yourself stupid. You’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, and I’m not just saying that, Hols.”

I hold her hands tightly with one hand as I let my other slide down her body. She sucks in a breathy gasp, her eyes

darting around like she's searching for what I'll do next.

"You're smart and funny. And you've got this sense of confidence about you that captivates me. Seeing you light up when you told me about your bookstore ... Fuck, baby, I just want to be near you so I can soak up some of your passion." I nibble at her earlobe sucking it between my teeth, and she lets out a little squeak that makes my cock jump.

Obsessed doesn't even come close to how I feel about her, my feelings are growing stronger the more time we spend together, and the thought should terrify me, but it doesn't. Rather, I find it oddly comforting to have found my match so quickly. I can only hope she recognizes it before she gets too spooked and convinces herself she doesn't deserve this.

I dip my hand beneath the waist of her jeans, and her belly sucks in at my slight touch. "Tell me the truth, and I'll give you what you want." My fingers trace the elastic of her panties, and her eyes flutter closed. My girl's so needy, and I fucking love it.

"What's your real dream, Holly? What do you want to do with your life, more than anything else?" She squirms against me and parts her legs more as I sneak my fingers lower. My mouth waters as I remember how sweet her pussy tasted last night. I see by the way her glassy eyes dilate that she wants this almost as much as I do. Almost because there's no way she can be more obsessed with having my mouth on her than I am.

She lets out a little whimper, and I stroke her clit encouraging her. "I ... I just ... I just want to be able to pay my parents back. I don't want to feel guilty anymore ..." Her words trail off in breathy gasps as I swirl my fingers in slow teasing circles, giving her only a caress of pressure before pulling my hand away.

"Nope. Try again, sweetheart."

Her eyes fly open as she stares into mine, her eyebrows pulling together in confusion. She shakes her head. "What are you talking about? That's what I want." She parts her legs a little more, and I take my time sliding her pants and panties

down her ass, only releasing her hands to help her step out of them.

I drop to my knees, bringing my face to her perfect pussy now soaking wet for me. I flash my eyes up to hers as I blow along her clit. Her eyes roll back in her head as she presses herself firmly against the wall to keep from falling over.

“I believe you want those things, but I asked you about your *dreams*. What do you want for yourself? Don’t think about anyone else.” I slide a finger along her slit, and her body goes rigid as I tease her, kissing along her inner thigh and hooking one knee behind my head.

Her hands find my hair her fingers, locking around it in fists. I love seeing her so desperate for relief. I love that I can take her from crying to panting in a matter of seconds.

I pause my perusal and look up at her, waiting.

Her hazy eyes blink down at me, and she bites her lip but doesn’t speak.

Stubborn thing. I know she knows the answer to my question, but I guess it’s going to take a little more coercing.

I slide my hand back to her, massaging her clit for a moment before pulling away and giving her pussy a quick slap.

She buckles forward with a groan of pleasure, eyes wide in surprise as she stares down at me.

“Talk to me, Holly. Or I’ll have you screaming and begging so loud my whole family will hear you and know exactly what we’re doing back here.” I raise an eyebrow. “Don’t make me prove it to you.”

I move my fingers back, this time rubbing my thumb in slow circles and creating just the right amount of pressure. Her knees begin to tremble, and I pull my hand away again, slapping her pussy harder this time.

“Oh my ... Fuck,” she cries out through gritted teeth.

“Tell me, Holly. That’s all I’m asking. Be brave and tell me what you really want.”

I bring my mouth up to her pussy and wait.

“Fine,” she grunts, tightening her fists in my hair. “I guess ... I ... it feels so stupid ...”

“Be brave, baby,” I encourage her by pressing my lips against her clit and sliding my tongue out to taste her.

“I want to do the bookstore again ... but this time, do it my way.”

I reward her with my tongue as I lick her slowly, encouraging her to keep going.

She sucks in a breath. “I’d focus on only selling romance and create a space for women to gather and build community. I’d host book clubs and have a space the book clubs could rent out ... I’d partner with authors for signings ...”

I deepen my pressure, wrapping her leg behind my head as I palm her ass with one hand and slide my other under the fabric of her bra. “Fuck, baby, you taste so good,” I growl between kisses.

Her head falls back, and she begins to pant as her breathing hitches. I know she’s close.

“What else, baby. Tell me the rest,” I growl before sucking her swollen clit between my lips.

“Fuck, Drew, I can’t think when you do that.”

I pull away with a smirk, but she grabs my hair pulling my face back.

“Fine ... I ... I’d create an online presence to build communities of like-minded readers and travel to host meetups and retreats for them. I want to create a space for women to make friends and feel not only seen but celebrated for the things they love.”

I slide a finger inside her, then add a second as her tight walls clench around me, already on the brink of orgasm. “See, now, was that so hard to admit?” I curl my fingers inside her as I lick her in a slow, even rhythm.

“Yes,” she pants. If I didn’t have my mouth on her pussy, I’d probably laugh at the sass, but I’m too invested in my craft.

“Admitting it to yourself is the hard part, and now, we both know what you really want.” I curl my fingers against her g-spot, and her knees wobble, threatening to buckle once more. “Now, if you think for one fucking second I’m going to let you get away with settling for anything less than what you told me, then you’re fucking the wrong Santa.”

Her eyes fly open at my last admission and I wink. “Now, let me finish my snack, and then we’ll come up with a plan.” I move my fingers inside her a little faster as I deepen my tongue strokes. It doesn’t take long before her tight little pussy is squeezing my fingers and she’s biting her fist to muffle her scream, the sweet juices of her release coating my tongue.

I’ll admit, I can be a cocky motherfucker, but there’s not a thing in this world that boosts my ego more than making my girl fall apart and lose all inhibitions. It hits even harder knowing Holly’s held so much of herself back for so long. Like I’m doing more than just giving her pleasure. It’s like I’m helping her find her way back to herself.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and help her back into her clothes before pressing a kiss to her lips. She melts against me, grabbing my shirt to keep her upright as I kiss her deeply. I have to brace myself against the wall to keep from pulling her down and fucking her on the bathroom floor.

Knock. Knock. Knock. We both startle at the interruption.

“Hey, dude. We’ve waited like thirty minutes. It’s your turn. You know how Dad gets with the teams.” Jamie calls from behind the door.

Holly’s eyes widen, and she covers her mouth in embarrassment.

I just smile as I smooth down her sex hair and straighten her clothes. “Come on. This is a Jordan family tradition you don’t want to miss.”

Chapter Thirteen

Holly

“HEART ATTACK!” Charlotte calls. “Dying. Paralyzed. Accident,” she fires off as James lies on his back, holding his elbow against his lower abdomen with his hand clenched in a fist.

“He looks like he’s in pain,” Wren says. “Injury!”

James shakes his head, his face turning red as he grimaces.

“He’s not ...” Drew and Jamie’s eyes meet, and I look around as the guys all try to hide their grins.

“Boner!” Jamie yells like he’s figured it out, and James nods excitedly gesturing for him to keep going.

Jamie looks around, then shrugs. “Dad boner! Old boner.” James shakes his head like he’s getting frustrated.

“Erectile disfunction!” Simon offers, which seems to annoy James more as his face grows redder. He emphasizes his straining arm and clenches his fist.

“Raging boner?” Wren guesses looking to Charlotte in confusion.

Charlotte holds up her hands like she’s just as confused as all of us. “It’s not usually that aggressive. Maybe there’s something wrong with it. Is it a broken boner, dear? Broke dick?” She guesses again, and we all burst into laughter.

James just tightens his fist and gestures to his arm, his face growing redder in frustration.

“Dad, I think you need to give us something else,” Sam suggests, squatting down next to his dad.

When Drew said the Jordan family charades were something I wouldn't want to miss, he wasn't kidding. I don't think I've laughed this hard in my entire life, and to say they all take it seriously is putting it mildly. I don't think I've ever met a more competitive family, which makes this whole thing that much funnier.

I cover my smile with my hand as I watch James flail around on the ground, holding his arm like he's in pain.

“What's the category again?” I ask Drew under my breath.

“TV pop culture, I think,” Charlotte offers without looking back.

“Did someone already guess bricked up?” Maggie asks innocently from behind Sam, who wraps an arm around her.

“That's the time,” Jamie says just as the buzzer goes off.

James grunts in annoyance as he pushes himself up off the floor, ignoring Simon's outstretched hand as he grabs his bottle of water.

“Okay, so that brings it to a score of six to five. Drew, Holly, Sam, and Maggie are the winners.” Jamie announces, and I look at Drew who wears a proud grin.

“What was the answer?” Charlotte finally asks after James catches his breath.

He rolls his eyes like it's obvious. “*Bones*.”

Jamie blinks several times before pinching the bridge of his nose. “Just *Bones*?” he finally asks.

James nods.

“Just *Bones*? The TV show?” he says again, his voice growing louder. “Why the fuck did you think boner would be the way to get us to guess that? Why not point to any bone in your arm or leg?”

James slams his water bottle down. “I’m sorry, son. I don’t have an exposed bone to show you all. Do you want me to peel back my flesh for you to make it easier? I thought you’d be able to guess from the obvious.”

“How is boner obvious for bone!?” Jamie screams as James and he go nose to nose.

“My dad and Jamie both take charades very seriously if you haven’t noticed. They’re exactly alike. I wish I could say some version of this doesn’t happen every year, but ...”

“Now, that’s enough out of you two,” Charlotte steps between the two fuming men, her body small in comparison as she pushes them apart with the flick of her wrists. “You’re going to wake the baby if you keep all that hollering up. Since you both have so much energy to argue, why don’t you come help me in the kitchen.” She moves into the kitchen as they follow suit, grumbling underneath their breaths like two scolded kids.

“James, you can carve the prime rib, and, Jamie, why don’t you set the table. Make sure there’s a glass of ice water by every setting. And don’t skimp on the ice.” The three of them disappear into the kitchen as everyone else shakes their heads.

“Sorry you had to witness our dad miming a boner. He’s usually not so *intense*.” Simon laughs.

“After last year’s ass kicking, I think he wanted the W,” Sam says. “We should play a round of Mexican train after dinner. You know that always cheers him up.”

Everyone’s eyes fall on Maggie, and she smiles. “What? You want me to throw it? All you have to do is ask.”

“Nah, I don’t think he minds losing to any of the women. He prefers it, actually.” Sam kisses her on the cheek, and I tear my eyes away to give them some privacy.

“We’re going to go get cleaned up for dinner,” Sam finally says before pulling Maggie away.

Simon waggles his eyebrows at his wife. “Yeah, we need to go check on the baby.” He wraps an arm around her, and they disappear in the opposite direction.

“I see the family resemblance,” I tease. Drew just shrugs as he grabs my hand.

“Come on, I want to show you my favorite view.”

I follow him out onto the balcony as a gush of warm, salty air blows my hair away from my face. It’s nearly dusk, and the bright orange sun lights up the sky, which is seemingly cut in half as it disappears behind the water.

“It’s beautiful out here,” I shiver as cold air blows around me, the two mixing like they’re coming from different directions.

Drew moves to a chair and pulls me into his lap, wrapping me in his warm arms. I lean back against his chest as I take in the beautiful view, feeling so lucky to have shared this special day with this amazing family.

“So, I was thinking. I think you should stay here for a little while. Let me help you come up with a business plan. We could ask Sam if he has any contacts—”

I jerk my head to face him. “No. Drew. What are you talking about right now?”

He grabs my arms holding me in place. “I’m talking about the bookstore, Holly. You said you’ve got a good amount of savings, and since you’re not working ...”

My stomach sinks. This time, not because of butterflies as a fresh wave of panic rises in my chest. I shouldn’t be surprised he’d bring this up again, but I’m so caught off guard. Like I’ve just been jolted back to my real life—the actual nightmare I’ve been escaping the last couple of days.

“Drew, can we just drop this? I don’t want to get into it right now.”

“But you said it’s what you wanted. All I’m saying is maybe you should make a plan, see if it’s doable, before you jump back into another job you hate.”

Memories of my parents disappointed faces flash through my mind, and I try to shake them away. The way my mother

cried when I told her. She was so worried and hurt that I waited to come to them.

I press off Drew's lap and back up until my legs are against the railing. "That's not ... Drew, I can't just throw all my money away again for a daydream."

He jumps up, moving closer and looking so innocently confused. "Why not? You said it yourself, Hols. It's what you've always wanted. Maybe the universe has given you this opportunity to really go for it, to do it your way this time."

"I don't live in the same perfect world you do, Drew. It's great your family is so supportive of you, but that's because you haven't given them a reason to not be. I'm all my parents have, and I have a responsibility to take care of them, to pay them back. Now, can we just drop it?"

"Hols, what if you can have both? Your parents are fine. They're off on their dream vacation. They're having a great time, judging by the pictures you showed me."

Something in me snaps, and I feel like a wounded animal lashing out trying to protect my aching heart. I yank my wrist away, my throat tightening like there's an invisible rope around it. "Don't call me that. And don't talk about them like you know them because you don't know anything about me or my situation."

He tries to grab my arm, but I jerk away, feeling a new wave of panic as all the emotions of the last few days rush to the surface and come to a head. What am I doing here? Here I am, once again acting impulsively, letting my heart get too invested over someone I've only just met, only to leave us both hurt and broken. I can't keep doing this to myself. I don't feel like I can trust my intuition because she lies to me; she tells me the things that feel good and right are safe, but the trail of mistakes littering my past tells me differently.

I can't believe I came here. That I agreed to spend Christmas with his *family*. There's no doubt in my mind I'm falling for him, and I can see in his eyes he feels the same. I have to stop this before it goes any further. My heart may be long gone, but maybe I can still save Drew from himself.

“We’re not the same, Drew. Just because everything works out for you doesn’t mean it does for me.” I take a step backward, moving toward the steps and putting distance between us.

“Holly, stop. What are you talking about? Have you even asked them about the money? Have you told them how you feel? What you want to do? Do you even know they need it?”

I shake my head as tears fill my eyes. “It was a mistake coming here. I shouldn’t have let you talk me into it. I can’t do this with you, Drew. I thought I could just let myself forget about my responsibilities for one more day, but I can’t. I need to go.” I make my way down the steps as Drew follows behind. Luckily, I left my bag in his car, so I don’t have to embarrass myself by going back in there.

“I’m sorry, Holly. I didn’t mean to push you. I just want you to have it all. I don’t think it’s as black and white as you’re making it out to be.” He sighs, “I just want you to be happy.”

“Then give me a ride to a hotel,” I offer curtly, keeping my eyes trained on my feet.

Drew just sighs. “Fine. Let me grab my keys and tell them I’m leaving. I’ll be right back.”

I pull open the car door and slide inside, thankful he left it unlocked as I wait for him. It doesn’t take long before he’s jogging back to me, a sad look on his face that makes him almost unrecognizable. Another pang of guilt stabs in my chest. This time, for leading him on, for giving him hope when there was never a chance this would be anything more than a Christmas fling.

The sound of gravel underneath tires echoes through the car as we sit in silence. There’s nothing left to say.

It was fun while it lasted, but now, it’s over, and it’s back to reality for the one of us who still sees the world through rose colored glasses. I’m afraid my glasses are crystal clear with magnifying lenses that show me every imperfect detail.

But I can't be mad at Drew. I was the one who messed things up for myself, and now, I get to pay the penance.

Chapter Fourteen

Drew

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? I asked you to bring me to the Holiday Inn.”

I pull under the awning and put the car in Park. “Let’s just call this an apology gift. It’s not a big deal, but I figured since I’m the one who messed up your Christmas plans to have a quiet holiday on the beach alone, you may as well have the best view in the city.”

“No, Drew, this is too much. I can’t accept this.”

I place a hand on hers and quickly pull it away. “It’s done, Holly. I had my brother call as soon as we left. He booked the room through New Years. You’ll have plenty of time to relax and unwind, figure out a game plan for your next move. I want you to know I never meant to hurt you. I just thought I could help. For what it’s worth, I think you’re the most incredible person I’ve ever met, and I hope someday you see that for yourself.”

She bites her quivering lip, but when she looks up at me, I see the tears she’s trying to hold back, and my hand itches to wipe them away, to comfort her. But she’s not mine to comfort; she never really was. Maybe all this was just a dream, and it’s all coming to a halting stop as I’m finally waking up.

“I’m so sorry, Drew. I’m sorry I couldn’t be the person you thought I was. But I guess it’s better you realize it now ...”

Her voice trails off.

“The reservation is under your name,” I say, “I’ll get your bags for you.” I start to get up, but she stops me.

“No. I’ve got it.” She walks around to the back, grabs her bags, and just like that, she’s gone.

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I pound my fist against the steering wheel, feeling everything shattering around me. The high I’ve been riding for the last three days comes crashing down, and I can’t make sense of it.

What was the point of any of it?

It was never just about the sex for me; though the sex was off-the-charts amazing. When I looked into Holly’s eyes, I felt like I was seeing the other piece of my soul. Like I didn’t realize I was missing a piece of myself until I found it in her.

And now she’s gone, and I’m left with the giant gaping hole. Only now I know it’s there, and the pain is so excruciating I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to move on.

I catch sight of her purse lying on the floorboard. When I bend down to pick it up, a tube of shiny bright red lip gloss falls into my lap.

The name on the lip gloss reads: Holly Berry Mint.

Somehow, the idea of this Christmas-hating woman buying Christmas-themed lip gloss with her name on it makes me fall for her that much harder.

She’s so full of shit. I could see it all over her face that she loved Christmas, but she wouldn’t let herself enjoy it because, for whatever fucking reason, she thinks she needs to be a martyr, and she doesn’t deserve it.

So fucking stubborn.

I grip the small tube in my fist as my phone buzzes. I swipe open my family group message to find a string of messages.

CHARLOTTE

Just checking in. I made you a plate and put it in the microwave. Let us know when you get Holly settled into the hotel.

DAD

Did you tell her you were sorry? Did you actually say the words I'M SORRY?

SIMON

Dad's right. Did you?

JAMIE

Do you think Dad's boner is what pushed her away? Checks out if you ask me ...

CHARLOTTE

James! What if you scared the poor girl away???

SAM

Why don't we all chill with the family group texts and give Drew some space?

DAD

Just trying to help. I'm sorry I acted out boner in front of your girlfriend, Andrew. I accept full responsibility for my actions.

CHARLOTTE

I love to see the accountability, James. Thank you for taking ownership of your actions

JAMIE

Jesus, you two need to lay off the personal development books. You sound like robots

JAMES

It's called emotional maturity. You know what, I've got a book that could help you with that

I roll my eyes and type out a response.

Thanks, everyone, but this isn't on anyone. I appreciate you all trying to help.

JAMES

Of course, son. We just want you to be happy. I want you to know we're always here for you. You'll always have your family rooting for you, and we're here to help any way we can.

And if you need me to call and apologize for my crude behavior, then I'm happy to do it.

I smile down at my dad's kind words, feeling so fucking lucky to have such an amazing family in my corner. I believe every one of them when they say they'd do anything they can to help me.

Suddenly, I get an idea.

Char, you can put that plate in the fridge? I don't think I'll be home until later.

CHARLOTTE

Okay, honey. Is everything okay?

Everything's great. I've actually just got an idea.

I'm going to need some help, though.

JAMES

Well, let's hear it. What do you need us to do?

I grab the purse, make my way inside the fancy hotel, and find a seat at the bar. The bartender appears, an older man with salt and pepper hair wearing a bowtie and a Santa hat.

“What'll be?”

“I'll have a White Russian, please, and could you add a little peppermint schnapps?”

He smiles and nods as he starts making my drink.

I pull out my phone and begin to type.

Sam, how do you feel about adding a romance bookstore to your investment portfolio?

SAM

That's pretty specific, little brother. You have my attention. I'd be willing to hear a pitch.

Great. I'll let you know when I have more details.

Simon, do you think you could have Wren call me? Does she have any friends in the romance book world? I know soaps aren't exactly the same as books.

SIMON

I'll have her call you as soon as she's done putting the baby to sleep.

CHARLOTTE

I just love when this family comes together like this. It makes my heart so full and proud.

JAMES

Me, too, Char. Me, too.

The bartender places my drink in front of me and quirks a brow. “That’s quite a festive drink you’ve got yourself. I don’t usually get those kinds of requests from someone sitting alone at a bar on Christmas. Usually, it’s whiskey straight.”

I sip my drink, the mix of chocolate and peppermint mingling on my tongue, reminding me of the hot cocoa Holly and I had just last night. It feels like a lifetime ago.

“I can see that, but the difference is I’m not drinking my sorrows away. I’m plotting a comeback, just biding my time while I make my plan.”

He tosses his towel over his shoulder and laughs. “You know what, there’s a first for everything. Merry Christmas, brother. Let me know if you need anything else.”

I smile to myself as I pull out my phone. I’ve got one more favor to ask.

Chapter Fifteen

Holly

THE HEAVY METAL door slams behind me, and I drop my suitcase before collapsing in the plush king-sized bed, layered with all the pillows a girl could want. Now, this is my kind of bed.

I fluff a pillow and shove it between my knees as I turn on my side. The tears I've been holding back finally release.

I'm pathetic and a coward, and I don't know why I have to keep tormenting myself like this. Why can't I just be one of those people who accepts help? Why do I feel like I need to crawl on my knees over broken glass and hot coals to feel like I've earned something? Who am I really trying to prove myself to?

I throw my arm over my eyes as images of Drew's larger-than-life smile flash through my mind, and I know without a shadow of a doubt I've just pushed away the only human—other than my parents—who truly supported me and wanted me to be happy.

Maybe I am a glutton for punishment. Maybe misery is all I'm comfortable with, and I'm not cut out to actually enjoy my life. It was fun pretending, though.

I'll ride the high I've been on for the last three days for the rest of my life, living off the fumes of broken memories, of

what could have been if only I was dealt a different hand, if I could go back in time and undo all my mistakes ...

God, Holly, melodramatic much?

I wipe my eyes dry and mosey over to the mini bar, where I pour myself a drink. There's not much of a selection, but a vodka cranberry seems fitting. I use a cinnamon stick to stir the liquid together as I make my way to the large balcony overlooking the shore.

The beach is empty; not a single footprint as far as the eye can see, with the only sound the waves crashing along the beach. It's so beautiful and peaceful. You'd think it'd be the perfect escape from Christmas, but after spending the day with Drew and his family, it reminds me of the holiday that much more.

I cross my feet along the railing as I lean back in my seat and try to think of my next step. But just like every time I try to make myself figure out a new plan, I come up empty.

My phone buzzes to life on the metal table beside me, and I gnaw on my bottom lip as I gaze at the incoming call.

I suppose I can't ignore them forever. I already missed their call during the flight this morning, and I can't let Christmas go by without talking to them.

Sucking in a breath to mask my tears, I answer the call.

"Hey, Mom, sorry I missed your call earlier. My flight got rescheduled, and then I got caught up. How's everything going on the cruise? Are you guys still having a good time?"

"Holly, baby, it's so good to hear your voice," my mother says. "Your father and I miss you so much. I hate we can't be there with you on Christmas—"

"Mom, stop apologizing. I couldn't let you miss a once in a lifetime vacation. Don't worry about me, I'm great." A knot forms in my throat, and I force out the lie, only I'm not so sure I sound convincing.

"Honey? What's wrong? You don't sound like yourself. Are you sure everything's okay?" I hear my dad ask her

something, and the phone muffles like she's covering the receiver. "I think she's been crying. No. Shh, hang on just a sec."

Great. Here comes the interrogation.

I let out a long sigh, preparing myself for the slew of questions. My parents can never leave anything alone. They always feel the need to jump in and fix my problems for me. Hence, bailing me out of bankruptcy with their retirement savings. This time, though, there isn't anything they can do to help. This is all on me.

"Holly, are you sure you aren't feeling down? Are you sitting in your apartment all alone tonight? Please tell me you didn't sit at home all day? Did you at least watch your favorite Christmas movies? Or bake those chocolate peppermint cookies you love so much?"

"Ask her if she's been taking the vitamin D I brought her. Maybe her levels are getting low again. You know she doesn't get outside enough working all those long hours," my dad says in the background.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Yeah, dad, I've been taking the vitamins."

"I knew we shouldn't have left you alone. Let me see if I can cancel our whale sighting excursion tomorrow. I'll see if there's a flight first thing in the morning."

"No. Mom. Don't cancel anything. You and dad deserve this vacation. You've been dreaming of it ever since you got married," I blurt, cutting her off. "Besides, I'm... I'm not just sitting in my apartment alone. I'm actually at the beach. I ... uh ... I met up with a friend and spent the day with his family. It was nice."

My mom sucks in a gasp of surprise. "Really? That's wonderful. When did you make a friend? This is the first time you've mentioned him. Is he a new friend?"

"Holly has a friend?" my dad yells in the background.

"That's what she just said," my mother answers.

Okay, so I may have gone a little far mentioning Drew and his family. That's going to be fun to undo. They'll be asking about my friend for the next ten years if I don't shut this down right now.

"He's more of an acquaintance than a friend, I don't think it's going to be a thing, but I had a nice Christmas. I don't want you to worry about me, just enjoy your trip. You guys deserve that much."

I let out a sigh, relieved to have that part over with, but I should know my parents are too nosey, or rather perceptive, when it comes to my life.

"So, how did you end up at the beach? Today of all days? It doesn't seem like a very festive place to spend your favorite holiday."

I sigh. I could give her another bullshit excuse about flights being cheap. But that would just prompt her to ask me if I was struggling with money, then they'd offer to cover my rent or help with my electric bill, which would only add another layer of guilt to the heaping pile I already carry around on my back daily.

Should I just come clean, take a page out of Drew's book, and say it? The thought makes my stomach burn with nervousness, but maybe there's something to it? I still can't believe how he just told them what was upsetting him, and they... listened. Then they apologized, and Drew instantly felt better. He didn't have to carry around the burden of keeping his work a secret.

Be brave, Holly. I can hear his words play back in my mind.

I shake the thought away. I'm not like you, Drew. Our lives are too different.

Do you know why I get the things I want? Because I'm not afraid of asking for them, and right now, what I want more than anything is to kiss you.

Drew's words play back in my mind, and I feel my spine lengthen as I sit up a little straighter. What if he's right?

What's the worst that could happen? They could tell me I've disappointed them, and then I'd know for sure, but it wouldn't change the way I already feel about myself, about what I deserve.

I'm so tired of being miserable, tired of working myself to the bone to hit a target I'll always move because I hold myself to impossible standards. Suddenly, I'm flooded with a momentary burst of borrowed courage, and I know if I don't speak my piece now, I never will.

"Holly? Honey are you still there?" My mom's concerned voice pulls me back into the present moment, and I swallow the knot in my throat.

Be brave, Holly.

"Yeah, sorry, I was just ..." My voice trails off as I consider my words. "Mom, could you put me on speaker phone?"

"Um, yes. Hold on one second, let me just see how I—"

A moment passes as I hear them shuffling with the phone, and then my dad's voice comes out louder and crisper. "We're here, honey. What's going on?"

I tighten my grip on the phone and squeeze my eyes shut. "I haven't been honest with you. I didn't want you to worry while you were on your trip, but ... the reason I'm spending Christmas at the beach is because I got fired from my job last Wednesday."

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry to hear that!" My mom says at the same time as my dad adds, "Those bastards! What kind of monster fires someone two days before Christmas?!"

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you—"

"That's it. We're coming home. I can't stand the thought of you being alone right now."

"No. Mom. Hang on a second, I'm not finished." I wait for a moment for my mother to settle down before I continue. "I know we don't really talk about it, never talk about it actually, but I'm so grateful for everything you two have done for me."

I bite my trembling lip, trying to hold back my tears. “And the truth is, I feel so guilty about it, and I feel like such a failure because all I want to do is pay you back. I want to erase the stain of my mistake, but no matter what I do, I feel like I can’t get ahead.” I suck in a sob, the tears freely flowing now.

“Oh, honey, please don’t do that to yourself. Your father and I never want you to feel like you owe us. We helped you because we wanted to see you thrive, and we had the means to do it. We’d never offer you anything if there were strings attached. That’s what makes it a gift, sweetheart.”

“Holly, you have a bright future ahead of you, and your mother and I saw helping you as a worthwhile investment, not a gamble.” My dad huffs a laugh. “Honey, we are so proud of you, and you don’t owe us anything. All we want is to see you happy, to follow your heart, and hell, we just want front seat tickets to watch you make all your dreams come true.”

I wipe my puffy eyes with the sleeve of my sweater, feeling a mix of confusion and relief swirling in my stomach. “I know you say that because you’re both so kind, but I stole your entire retirement savings. You had to win a vacation from a podcast, and now you can’t afford the cabin you always dreamed of retiring in.”

“I’ll have you know I manifested this vacation, and if I want a cabin on the lake, I’ll manifest that, too. My dreams don’t exist within the limits of cynical thinking, sweet girl, and I’m sorry you ever felt burdened by that. Your father and I are living our dream life. We’re happy, and we have everything we could ever need. The only thing missing is for us to see you reach for the things that will make you happy, too.”

She sighs and grows quiet for a moment before adding, “Listen, Holly, we didn’t want to tell you this over the phone, but your father and I have had a lot of time to reflect, and we think it’s time we have a little intervention.”

“Intervention?” I clutch the phone tighter feeling my stomach drop.

“Since we’re being honest with each other, the reason we opted to go on the cruise over Christmas is ...”

“You’re kind of a fun-sucker, and it’s pretty hard to watch,” my dad interrupts.

I suck in a shocked breath, my leaking eyes suddenly drying. I blink back my confusion as I try to process what my father said.

“And we didn’t want to spend another Christmas watching you wallow and work yourself to the bones being underpaid and underappreciated. So, we thought we’d get away and actually enjoy ourselves.”

“We hoped the time alone would do you some good. Maybe you’d realize you hate your job and wake up,” My dad adds.

I blink several times, my mouth dry as I try to follow their confession. “You ... you ... wanted to get away from me?”

“We just needed a little break. We love you so much, you have to know that, but it’s hard watching you work so hard at a job you hate. Every day, your father and I hoped you’d come home and tell us you quit, that you wanted to try another shot at the bookstore you always dreamed of.”

I open my mouth to speak, but the words don’t come out.

“Do you know how heartbreaking it is to see your only child’s spirit break? We hoped it was only temporary. That’s why we offered you the money, hoping it’d help you get back on your feet faster, so you could try again without that shitstain bleeding you dry with unnecessary debt.”

“You ... wanted me to try again?”

“Of course, we did, sweetheart. It was your dream. You’ve only been talking about it since you were ten when I brought you to your first privately-owned bookstore. You’ve been obsessed with the idea, and your father and I have always known you had what it takes to make it work. I’ve never met anyone as hardworking or determined as you, Holly girl. I just hate that one little bump had you believing you couldn’t do it.”

One little bump ... The gigantic, life-altering, monumental fuck up that haunts me every single day ... and my mom just referred to it as a little bump ...

The wheels in my brain start to spin as I desperately try to catch up, realizing we've been looking at the same problem in two completely different ways for years.

"Mom, I had no idea—"

"Listen, Holly, you know your father and I love you, and we'll support you no matter what, but we just want to see you thriving again, so if the bookstore isn't your dream anymore, that's okay. But you've got to find something that lights you up inside. What's the point of living through all the pain and heartache that comes along with this human existence otherwise?"

Holy shit. All this time, I've been torturing myself trying to make up for my mistake only to realize my parents never saw my failed business as a mistake at all. The real mistake was giving up and never trying again.

"I still want to do the bookstore," I blurt out all at once. "I still want to do it, and I have all these big ideas I've been dreaming about ever since I closed those doors. I have the money to get started, but I was saving it because I wanted to pay you back."

"Oh, Holly, honey, I don't think you could give your father and I a better Christmas gift than hearing that excitement in your voice. We don't want your money. We just want to see you chasing your dream and really living your life again. That's all a parent really wants."

"I love you both so much, and I can't wait to see you when you get back. I can't wait to hear all about your trip, but I need to go."

"Please tell me this has something to do with the new friend you mentioned," my mom croons.

"His name is Drew, and he's so much more than a friend. At least he was until about two hours ago." I glance at the time on my phone. "I hope I didn't ruin my chances with him by being too stupid to see it."

"Now, Holly, have you learned anything from me at all? Miracles happen all the time at Christmas so long as you're

looking for them. Now, go! And send me a picture.”

“Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad. I love you both!” I say before hanging up the phone.

I rush to the bathroom and survey the wreckage, smoothing down my wild hair and dabbing a little concealer under my eyes. But when I go to grab my lip gloss, I realize my purse is missing.

I was in such a hurry to get away from him, I must've forgot it in his car. I don't know how I'm going to pay for a ride without a wallet, but I have to try. I owe us both that much.

Chapter Sixteen

Drew

“EXCUSE ME. Did someone leave a purse back there for me? It’s a black shoulder bag about this big.”

I freeze at the sound of her sweet voice.

“Are you sure? Do you have a lost and found or something you could check?”

I sneak a glance at a frazzled Holly standing at the host stand looking panicked and worried.

“Someone you know?” my bartender, Larry as I’ve come to know, asks with a nod in Holly’s direction.

A smile pulls at the corner of my lips, and I down the rest of my drink. It’s no Santa hot cocoa, but it’s the next best thing.

Looks like I’ll get to execute my plan earlier than I expected.

I hold the purse up in front of me and call out, “Looking for this?”

Holly turns toward me, her eyes widening in surprise. I guess she didn’t expect a hand delivery.

“Drew, what are you still doing here? You dropped me off over an hour ago. I thought you’d want to get back to your family and finish celebrating.”

“What, and just give up on you that easily?” A smile tugs at my lips, but I bite my cheek to hold it back.

Holly’s eyes fall to the marble floor, her hands twisting with the sleeve of her sweater. “Yeah, I mean, I was pretty awful to you tonight. I wouldn’t blame you for taking the opportunity.”

I grab her worrying hands and tug her toward my seat at the bar. I hold up two fingers to Larry, who nods in understanding.

Holly takes a seat on the red leather stool beside me, and I yank the leg of the chair, bringing her closer. “You really think you’re that easy to forget?”

A smile pulls at her lips. “You tell me?”

There she is, there’s the girl I remember. When I look at her again, I notice a sparkle behind her eyes, her cheeks are puffy, and her nose is pink and swollen like she’s been crying. I brush a thumb along her jawline, letting my hand cradle her thin neck. “I could live a thousand lifetimes with you, and my heart would still ache for more. You, Holly Shepherd, are a lot of things, but you’re certainly not forgettable.” I brush my thumb over her plump bottom lip, noticing for the first time the absence of her signature shiny red gloss.

I move to grab my phone from my pocket just as she blurts out, “I’m sorry I yelled at you. I’m sorry I pushed you away and acted like you were crazy for admitting your feelings for me. It’s only been a couple of days, but I’m already falling for you, and I can’t imagine a life without you, however that looks.” She grabs my hand and holds it in her lap as she stares into my eyes.

Larry sets down two fresh drinks in front of us, and she looks at them in confusion.

“What’s this?”

“Trust me, you’ll like it.” I slide a glass toward her watching her eyes widen in surprise as the minty chocolate liqueur touches her lips, those fucking lips I can’t wait to kiss...

“Thank you for pushing me before.” Her cheeks burn bright red, and I know she’s remembering the way I *helped* her admit what she really wants, and my chest swells with pride that it worked. Not that I had any doubts.

“You were right about everything. The guilt I was carrying around was all in my head, completely one sided. I ... uh ... I actually talked to my parents about it. I came clean and told them everything, and do you know what they told me?”

My smile breaks across my face as I stare at a beaming Holly, feeling so fucking lucky I can hardly breathe. “What’d they tell you?”

She shakes her head and huffs a laugh. “They told me they took their cruise over Christmas on purpose to get away from me. They said they were tired of me ruining their favorite holiday by moping around and being miserable.” She wipes at the corner of her eye, but this time, they’re filled with tears of relief. I can see she already looks lighter, happier even, which makes my heart swell even bigger.

“I thought I was paying my penance by punishing myself, but really, all I was doing was making myself and everyone around me suffer.” She sits on her hands and leans toward me like she’s bursting with excitement. “I told them about losing my job, the money, everything, and I think I’m ready to really give this another shot. I’m ready to open my bookstore, and none of this would be happening if you hadn’t helped me to see it was possible, Drew. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you for giving me my confidence back. For believing in me when I didn’t think I deserved it.”

I grab her hand and look into those soft, brown eyes. “You just needed a little jump start.”

Her smile lights up her face, and she looks so beautiful it almost hurts. “I don’t know what the future holds, or where I’ll end up along the way ... All I know is I want to try this thing with you for real. I don’t care if that means we’re long distance, or if I have to save every penny I make to meet you halfway, but I think we owe it to ourselves to try.”

“It’s like you took the words right out of my mouth.” I kiss her hand and give her a wink. “Tomorrow, we can go over the game plan I’ve already mapped out. You can talk to Sam. He’s interested in investing in the store, and I’ll help you dream as big as you want.”

Holly’s eyes light up in excitement as she covers her mouth to hold in a squeal.

“But tonight, it’s still Christmas, and I think I’d like to spend the next”—I glance at the time on my phone—“three hours doing very dirty things to you in the privacy of your very expensive suite.”

Her smile is quickly replaced with my favorite sexy grin as she takes another sip of her cocktail. “Only if we can finish the rest of the scene. What do you say, Santa?”

My heart skips a beat in my chest as I try to keep from throwing her over my shoulder right here in this hotel bar.

I pull some cash out of my wallet, adding an extra hundred on top. “Larry, my man, how much will it cost me for that Santa hat?”

Epilogue

Holly

CHRISTMAS EVE – 3 Years Later...

I HAD BIG, audacious dreams when I was a little girl and I was privileged to grow up in a home that nurtured my creative spirit. So much that at the ripe age of twenty I felt ready to take my first leap into the real world only to have it all come plummeting down on my face.

I thought I'd fallen too far, messed this up too badly to repair, that I'd ruined my only shot by wasting it before I was ready... but I couldn't have been more wrong.

I thought that failing meant just that, that I'd failed and wasted my only opportunity away, like there were only so many shots available to me and I used up all my chances.

But that's not how life works and what I've come to learn is that success isn't possible without its loyal companion, failure.

They go hand in hand because success doesn't happen in a straight line. It's the ebb and flow and constant iteration of ideas, making little tweaks and changes along the way. Success is recognizing failure while it's still early and pivoting into something better.

I used to look at my past mistakes as a stain or a scar that marked me as a constant reminder of the shame I felt but now I see my past mistakes more like speed bumps warning me to slow down so I don't wipe out around the next big curve.

"Are you ready for this?" Drew whispers in that gruff, sexy voice as he wraps an arm around me.

It's Christmas Eve and all of our family is here as well as a store full of fellow enthusiastic romance-readers, as we celebrate the grand opening of our fifth brick and mortar bookstore in, none other than, Chestnut Crossing.

Readers from all over the country have flown in to celebrate with us in this magical Christmas town where it all started.

"I'm so fucking proud of you, baby. You created all of this from a seed of an idea in that brilliant head of yours."

I grab his hand and twist underneath his arm bringing us chest to chest. "I couldn't have done it without the help of my well connected, insanely hot, super model boyfriend." I sneak up on my toes and plant a kiss on his lips, my sticky lip gloss leaving a thin sheen that he quickly licks away.

It's hard to believe so much has happened. In only 3 years, with the help of Sam's investment and Drew and Wren's industry contacts, I was able to create a booming online book club subscription box focusing solely on romance books. The subscription box quickly turned into live events, where I'd travel to different cities and host fun book-themed parties, meeting amazing authors and readers along the way.

When the merch line took off we needed a place to hold all the inventory, and it just made sense to try another swing at a brick and mortar store. I opened the first Ho's Books in my hometown, across the street from my very first location. Then a year later I opened the next one back in Florida to be closer to Drew and his family.

Shortly after I had two more stores popping up coast to coast, but I saved the grand opening of my favorite location just in time for my favorite holiday.

We booked out the local inn a year in advance in preparation for tonight. It was a risk, I didn't know if people would show up and travel to be here on Christmas Eve, but what better place to spend Christmas than the Northpole of the Midwest?

I look around at the tightly packed space as my heart burst with gratitude. Readers file around the author tables, taking pictures with friends they've only known online and meeting their favorite authors. It's incredible and so much better than I even imagined.

I glance up at the bulky stud beside me, decked out in his infamous Santa suit and killer handlebar mustache, tattoos covering nearly every inch of his skin apart from his handsome face. And to think, none of this would be possible without his little jump start, as he calls it.

I've come to realize that the Jordan Law goes so much deeper than being a generous lover. Drew still won't tell me all the details, but I've come to gather that the Jordan men have an affinity for helping their women appreciate themselves. And that's a good enough explanation for me. I still don't know how I ended up so lucky, because I think Drew Jordan has made it his mission to make sure I love myself almost as much as he loves me. A girl can't complain about that.

"I can't wait to sit on your face tonight, Santa, and take that mustache for a ride." I kiss his cheek catching him off guard with my words.

"Jesus, Hols, are you trying to give me another boner in front of your mom?" He tightens his grip on my arm, sending me a warning look.

"She still has that picture of us on the fridge." I shake my head and laugh. "No matter how many times I've asked her to take it down. She says that she doesn't mind, she just wants to remember the way you looked at me the first time you met them."

"Okay, it's kind of sweet but you can totally see the outline of my cock in those gray sweatpants. You have to admit it's a

little creepy that I was shaking your dad's hand with a giant boner."

"No creepier than your dad acting one out in a family game of charades," I tease.

"Touché," he says as he kisses me on the head.

"You ready to get up there and do your thing?"

I bite my lip and nod. I used to get nervous being the emcee all night at these events but I've gotten used to it, and I actually really enjoy thinking on my feet.

Drew pulls his phone from his pocket and his face breaks out into a mischievous smile.

"What?" I try to see his screen. "What are you looking at?"

He moves the phone away holding it above my head. "You'll see. It's just a little surprise." He holds his hand out for the mic and I cautiously pass it over. It's not the first time he's helped me kick off the party.

"Good evening, ladies, and welcome to the grand opening of Ho's Books. How's everyone enjoying their night so far?"

The women in the crowd scream and clap so loud I have to cover my ears.

"That's what I hoped you'd say," Drew croons all sexy and playful. "Now listen, as you all know this is a very special grand opening, and because of that we have a special guest joining us tonight." The crowd goes silent as they wait for Drew to announce the secret special guest. I furrow my brows looking at him with confusion. We've already announced the special guests, so I don't know who he's talking about.

"Before I tell you who it is, I'd like to tell you a little story." He grabs my hand and pulls me to stand next to him. "Most of you may know by now that this lovely lady, the woman responsible for creating everything you see here, loves Christmas. And three years ago—yesterday technically, but go with me here—she walked onto a plane and sat beside me reading a certain Santa-smut book that I think we all know and love."

The women go wild, fanning themselves and cheer.

“And would you believe that she had the audacity to lie about it when I asked her about her little book?” He pulls the mic away looking shocked, as he cuts his eyes at me. I roll mine teasingly and smile.

“But what our little Holly here didn’t know, was that I was the cover model for the ten-year special edition covers.” The women lose their shit, screaming wildly and cheering.

“I know, I know, it’s impressive.” Drew shrugs. “But I’m just the pretty face. What you should really be excited about is that...” He turns to face me. “Kandy Kane just so happens to be a dear friend of mine. So I reached out to her and asked her if she’d make my girl’s whole year by popping in for a little signing, and you know what? She said yes!”

My mouth falls open and my whole body goes rigid as I stare up at Drew. The women around me scream and jump, some actually start crying. I blink several times and shake my head. “How?”

“I was just brave enough to ask.” He whispers sending a chill down my spine.

“Now please help me in welcoming everyone’s favorite smutty Santa enthusiast, Kandy Kane!”

The doors open and I nearly fall out of my seat when my favorite author waltzes through the doors of my very own bookstore, waving and smiling as she poses for pictures with excited fans.

“Oh my God, Drew. How did you manage to pull this off without me knowing?”

He shrugs. “If I told you then it wouldn’t be magic.”

I roll my eyes at his cheesy line, but my mouth goes dry when he pulls something out of his pocket and moves to one knee.

“I’ve wanted to ask you this from the moment I met you... and no, that’s not an exaggeration. I knew I’d met my soulmate the moment you rolled those big, brown eyes at me.”

I cover my mouth realizing the crowd's gone quiet as everyone stands completely still watching us.

"I've been carrying this ring around with me for the last six months, waiting on the perfect moment to ask you.

I can't really think of a better moment than right now, at the grand opening of your fifth bookstore in the little Christmas town where it all started, surrounded by our family and all these incredible women—not to mention your favorite author."

The women all scream again, chanting, "Say yes! Say yes! Say yes!"

Drew's eyes flicker and I realize he's holding back tears. "You are the love of my life, Holly Shepherd, and I want to spend the rest of my Christmases—and every other day—by your side, chasing dreams with you, and having a blast while doing it."

"Will you marry me and make me the luckiest man in the whole fucking world?"

"Yes!" I nod with tears rolling down my cheeks. I'm jumping into Drew's arms before he's even all the way to his feet.

"I really hoped that's what you'd say..." He spins me around then sets me down before sliding a large round diamond wrapped in a simple band of white gold onto my finger.

"It's perfect."

"A classic ring for a classic girl." He kisses me on the forehead, holding me like he can't believe any of this is happening and I can't either.

I look around the bookstore, packed full of people who all came here to celebrate this thing I've built, and it's all so much more than anything I could've dreamed.

A white-haired woman with hazy blue eyes and bold red lips moves to stand beside Drew. I have to pinch myself because it all feels surreal. How is this my life right now?

“Holly, I’d like you to meet my friend, Kandy Kane.”

She smiles and shakes my hand.

“It’s so good to finally meet you.” I lean in so only she can hear me and whisper, “I have some ideas for a scene in your next Santa book, if you’re interested.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “I’m always looking for new material.”

And just like that, I’m rubbing elbows with my hero as my ultra-sexy fiancé sits beside me watching with actual hearts in his eyes.

I guess dreams really do come true. We just have to be brave enough to ask for them...

Be a Book Babe

Do you want to be my friend?

Join my reader group: [Jeré Anthony's Bantering Book Babes](#) Where it feels like an grown-up slumber party every day.

We discuss books/reading, I tell my embarrassing moments—that happen all too often, and those hilarious inappropriate stories that only women will understand. Plus Giveaways!

It's a place for positive vibes + laughter + community and all the book talk!

So if you love my books and that sounds like you jam, come join us!

Author's Note

What a whirlwind this sexy little novella has been! To be completely transparent, this little passion project pulled me out a a deep imposter syndrome spiral and I am so damn proud of myself for finishing it.

Writing has got to be one of the most torturous, yet satisfying careers filled with so many ups and downs that it's hard to know what's normal and what isn't. And if the last year's taught me anything, it's that it's all normal and I may as well cozy up with feeling like I don't know what's going on because this industry changes too quickly to get comfortable!

In this career the only the you can expect is that the ride will be bumpy, you will question your worth—and even your sanity every now and again. But it sure makes for an exciting life and that's a high I'll never stop chasing.

I didn't realize how much I needed to revisit my familiar characters as I struggled to start a new world in a new series, but writing the Jordan family at Christmas time felt like coming home.

My intention with this story was to give you a little slice of the type of family dynamic I wish I'd come from. Healthy communication, clear boundaries, and hilarious disfunction are my favorite qualities within a family and things Stephen and I are actively creating within our own family. So I hope that in some way by telling these stories, I'm creating my ideal future too.

So you can definitely expect more of that from me...

And, of course, writing the smut is always a blast! I had so much fun exploring the role-playing aspect in the story and wanted to represent another side of the kink community. (Also, am I considering writing the dark, stalker Santa smut now???)

I am so grateful to call this my job and that wouldn't be possible without your support, so thank you for reading. I look forward to bringing you more kinky, swoony, and hilarious romcoms very soon!

If you want to stay up to date and be the first to know about new releases, sales, giveaways, and hilarious embarrassing moments from my life, join my newsletter!

XOXO

Jeré

About the Author



Jeré Anthony (pronounced like hooray with a J) writes steamy, swoony, and hilarious romantic comedies with depth.

She is a mental health advocate, a lifelong anxiety warrior, and is ADHD AF. Her quirks bleed out into her stories making for an exciting group of characters. Because of her undiagnosed ADHD, growing up she always felt different from everyone around her. Now she strives to create stories that give readers an escape from reality while also helping them feel seen.

She loves a strong cup of coffee and thinks beer + buffalo wings are a delicacy that is unmatched.

Jeré currently lives in NW Arkansas with her husband, three children, dog, and two cats. When she's not writing, you can find her reading, driving her kids all over for travel soccer games, watching cat videos on her phone, or trying to convince her husband to go on another family adventure somewhere new.

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