

A man in a blue suit and tie is holding a small white gift box with a red ribbon. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

12 days  
of  
boss  
mas

OLIVIA HAYLE



COPYRIGHT © 2022 OLIVIA HAYLE

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be distributed or transmitted without the prior consent of the publisher, except in case of brief quotations embodied in articles or reviews.

All characters and events depicted in this book are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

The following story contains mature themes, strong language and explicit scenes, and is intended for mature readers.

[www.oliviahayle.com](http://www.oliviahayle.com)

12 days *of*  
boss  
mas

OLIVIA HAYLE

# CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Tristan](#)

[Freddie](#)

[Anthony](#)

[Summer](#)

[Cecilia](#)

[Victor](#)

[Carter](#)

[Audrey](#)

[Isaac](#)

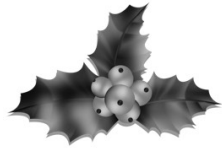
[Sophia](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus: Secret Santa](#)

[Other books by Olivia](#)

[About Olivia](#)

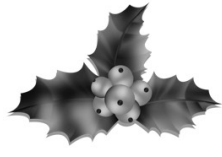


# FOREWORD

*12 Days of Bossmas* is a companion novella to the New York Billionaires series, and is set two years after the end of *Suite on the Boss*. It's fun, it's fluffy, and it's filled with holiday cheer.

I've done my very best to keep track of each couple's timelines, but dear reader, baby math is very hard for authors. If something doesn't add up, please consider it a Christmas miracle and keep on reading.

Flip the page to join the couples celebrating Christmas!



TRISTAN



## 12 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

The New York chill has no mercy for wool coats or thick sweaters. It seeps through the fabric and freezes you to the bone, until the only thing capable of heating you up is a steaming cup of coffee. Or in Joshua's case, hot chocolate with a ridiculous amount of whipped cream on top.

And I couldn't love it more.

I love the weather, I love New York this time of the year, and I love the tradition of going Christmas shopping with my son. Lord knows I need a good reason to spend quality time with him these days. His interests have shifted from family to video games and his friends.

Joshua shot up like a reed over the summer and now, walking beside me, he feels less like thirteen and more like a gangly fifteen-year-old. He hasn't fully adjusted to his new height, and refuses to throw away his favorite print T-shirts, leaving an inch-long gap of skin visible whenever he stretches.

Now he walks beside me, his hands buried in the deep pockets of his parka. "So," I say. "What should we get Julie?"

He shrugs, the picture of teenage irreverence.

But I soldier bravely on. "She likes that TV show, the one with the dogs that act like humans... I can't remember the name. But they must have baby books about them."

He nods and kicks at a rock on the sidewalk. "She likes pancakes."

“Yeah, she’s pretty obsessed,” I agree. My one-and-a-half-year-old daughter has started demanding pancakes at every meal. She doesn’t succeed very often, but she’s nothing if not persistent.

“Maybe they make, like, plushie pancakes.”

“A stuffed pancake,” I say slowly.

Joshua shrugs. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“That’s a brilliant idea. If we don’t find it today, I bet we could order it online.”

“Mmm.”

“Grandma is coming to spend Christmas with us this year, too,” I say. “I’m getting her a new car, but she doesn’t know it yet. The deathtrap she drove when we visited her this spring has to go.”

That makes Joshua chuckle. “I think I saw black smoke coming out of the engine.”

“Absolutely terrifying,” I say.

“I bought Grandma a book last weekend, when Fred and I were shopping.”

“Oh, well, then you’re all set,” I say. Joshua is the only one who calls my wife Fred. They’d had a discussion about it few years ago, when we’d gotten married, when Joshua had been younger. He’d told Freddie he wanted something to call her that was theirs and theirs alone. The discussion had bubbled up from his own thoughts about whether or not the marriage made Freddie his mother.

He’d suggested Fred and it had stuck.

“I’m not really sure what to get her, though.”

“We’ll figure something out before the day is over,” I say. “We could go to that chocolate shop, the one next to the toy store? She loves chocolate.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Maybe.”

Frustration bites at the inside of my chest. He's been unusually quiet the past week, preferring his room to the busy living room, only stopping to play with Julie. I'd asked him if he was all right twice so far. Neither question had been particularly well-received.

Something's brewing inside him. I just can't tell *what*.

For so many years it had been just him and me. Our lives are immeasurably richer now that he has a sibling and another loving adult in the household, but it's also different, and the one-on-one time we used to share so effortlessly has become a rarer thing.

The day hadn't started that great, either. Freddie had been snappish and in a bickering mood, something she rarely was. I suspected she was stressed about the upcoming holidays, but when I asked if I could help with the planning, she'd said no. It was probably one of those problems I need to listen to, instead of trying to solve.

I sigh. Joshua hears it and looks up at me, and I immediately feel guilty. He should know how much I treasure days like this. Just him and me.

"I'm just thinking," I say. "Feels like you've been doing a lot of that lately, too."

Joshua is quiet for a long few moments before he answers in another monosyllable. "Yeah."

But then, world? Then he speaks.

"I've been thinking a lot about what we spoke about. You know, a month ago."

A month ago... My eyebrows shoot up. "The adoption?"

"Yeah."

We're in the middle of a crowded street in Midtown, surrounded by Christmas shoppers and decorations and the sound of holiday music blasting from the speakers of a nearby department store. Of course *now* is the time he chooses to have a heart-to-heart, and not when I'd asked him two days earlier, sitting by the side of his bed.

“I see,” I say, and realize I should’ve sooner. But he’d been so happy when we’d first spoken about it. “It’s a lot to digest.”

He nods, and then sighs. “Yeah. I had planned on saying one thing. But now I’m wondering if that’s the wrong thing, and I should say the *other* thing.”

“Mhm. Well, what are the things involved?”

We pass by a loud group of carolers and get separated briefly in the crowd before he reappears at my side, closer than he was before. And suddenly I get why he wanted to have the conversation here. Less pressure and more chaos... and an easy retreat, if it gets too much, by popping into a store and pausing the conversation.

A month ago, Freddie and I asked Joshua if he would like Freddie to formally adopt him. He had stopped twirling spaghetti with his fork, looking at us across the dinner table with eyes that widened by the second.

“Really?” he’d asked, a smile spreading across his face. The joy there had made my chest tight.

“Yes,” Freddie had said. “I’d love that, honey. But I want you to think it through first. I know it’s a big thing, and there’s no time limit on this.”

His smile dimmed just a bit, a concentrated furrow appearing on his brow. “Yeah,” he’d said, nodding. “I’ll think about it. Definitely.”

Since then, he’d had a few questions, but nothing more, and we hadn’t wanted to press the issue until he was ready.

Joshua has fallen quiet again. The sleeve of his jacket brushes against the shopping bag I’m carrying, with gifts we’ve already found. “It’s just the whole... adoption thing. All of it.”

I run a gloved hand along my jaw. “Uh-huh. If you have any questions about it, you can ask me. Any at all. Or Fred, if you’d rather talk to her.”

“I’ve been researching a bit,” he says. “It would legally make her my mother.”

“Yes,” I say. “It would mean that you’ll legally be her child, just as you are mine.”

“For the rest of our lives.”

“Yes,” I say. It’s a big thing to consider. Frederica and I had discussed it thoroughly with one another for a long time, until we knew we were on the same page, and then we’d decided to wait until Joshua was a bit older. We wanted him to be a part of the decision-making. It was entirely about him, after all.

But while I haven’t said it to Joshua, not wanting any pressure put on him, I admit that I’d love it if Freddie adopted him. Joshua would then have two legal guardians, two parents, two people who are committed to him. It would help take a load off the worry I’ve carried for so long. That if something happened to me... what would happen to Joshua?

I look down at the messy hair that he won’t let us cut, the sharp shoulders beneath his navy parka, and the thin glasses resting on his straight nose. A swell of tenderness rolls through me. My unexpected little son.

Only not so little anymore.

“I like Fred,” Joshua says. “And I’d like her to adopt me.”

I smile. “You would?”

“Yes. But I’ve been thinking about... what would my mom and dad say?”

My smile disappears, replaced with a sudden understanding, and then a burst of guilt. I should have realized his thoughts would head in this direction. I should have preempted it, spoken about my sister and her husband first, instead of leaving him alone with his thoughts.

“Buddy...” I say. “Have you been thinking about them more because of all this?”

He nods. “Yeah. A bit.”

While he’d only been a toddler when they passed in a tragic accident, he’s asked about them over the years, often with a child’s curiosity. After all, how do you miss people you

never knew? He once said he felt guilty for *not* missing them, and I told him he never needed to worry about that.

“Your mom and dad loved you,” I say. “You know that.”

He nods, a child used to hearing the same words. “I know. It’s just... is this erasing them even more? They won’t even be my parents officially anymore. I want... I want Fred to adopt me. But I don’t want *them* to be disappointed, or to disappear.”

My heart clenches tight in my chest. It takes me a few moments to speak. *Jenny*, I think, *help me find the right words here*.

“They could never be disappointed in you. Never. You’re the cleverest, most hard-working, brightest thirteen-year-old I’ve ever met.”

“Dad,” Joshua says, and I can practically hear his eyes roll. “Be serious.”

“I am! It’s the truth,” I say. “They would have wanted you to be happy. That was all they wanted, and I know they would have given anything to still be here with you, to see that through. And buddy, they’ll still be listed as your parents.”

He looks up at me with a frown. “Will they?”

“Yes. They’re on your birth certificate. I’m listed as your dad on later documents, that’s true, and Freddie will be there too if you want. But Jenny and Michael aren’t going anywhere.”

He takes a deep breath. “And Mom wouldn’t think I’m replacing her?”

“Absolutely not. I know that as clearly as I know my own name, or yours, buddy. She would want you to do what *you* want. Your mother always did. She chose her own path, and it was one of the bravest things about her. What more could she want from you, than the very same?”

He’s quiet for a long few moments. We’ve walked further down the street than I’d planned, but this conversation is too important, and the Christmas music doesn’t blast quite as

loudly here. “Okay,” he says finally, and there’s a thread of joy in his voice. “I really want Fred to adopt me. Officially.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I like that she’d be my parent, not just my dad’s wife, you know?”

I laugh at his choice of words. “I understand that.”

“We’d have a relationship too.”

“You would. You already do, of course, but I understand how it might feel different.”

“Besides, she’s my sister’s mom,” he says. “It would be weird if... yeah. I want it. I’ve just been thinking what...”

“Your parents would say. I understand. That’s completely normal and understandable, buddy. You can always ask me, too, if you’re wondering about them. I think about them all the time.”

“You do?”

“Of course. Your mom was my big sister, you know. She was one of my closest friends.”

Joshua nods. “That’s true.”

“It can be hard to have two sets of parents, like you do,” I say. “But I’ll always listen if you need to talk about it.”

“I know. I just didn’t know what I wanted to say yet.”

“That’s fine, too. Sometimes we all need some time to just... think through our thoughts.” I put a hand on his shoulder and pull him closer to my side. He lets me, and I wish he’d stay this small just a little while longer, before the true teenage years begin. “I love you, kid.”

“I know,” he says, and then mumbles something beneath his breath that sounds a bit like *I-love-you-too*.

We’re in public, after all.

“Did Mom like Christmas?” he asks.

“She loved it. The food, especially. When we were kids, she’d beg Grandma to start baking Christmas cookies in

November.”

Joshua chuckles. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. Have I told you about the time she got a hamster for Christmas?”

“No. She did?”

I can’t stop my laugh at the memory. “Yeah. Come on, let’s go inside this department store and warm up a bit, and I’ll tell you the story. Are you hungry?”

“A bit, yeah.”

“Let’s eat too. So... your mom had been wanting a hamster all year. So your grandfather decided it would be a great idea to get one, and just for Christmas morning, he would pop it in a small cardboard box and wrap it with Christmas paper. He popped a few air holes in, of course. It wouldn’t be out of its cage for more than half-an-hour—just for the big surprise.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, you know hamsters have excellent teeth, right? They can gnaw through almost anything that’s not metal.”

“No,” Joshua says, his eyes wide. There’s a smile on his face. “Did it...?”

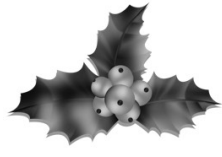
“Sure did. It disappeared in the living room. Your mom spent all of Christmas Day searching the house for it, and she made me look, too.”

“Where did you find it?”

“It had crawled into your grandmother’s slipper. Bit her big toe and scared her half to death. Your mom had the nerve to call the hamster, who lived to a very admirable three years old, by the way, Nipper.”

Joshua bursts into laughter, and it warms my heart more than the Christmas music playing from the speakers ever could. *This is why we do this, just him and me*, I think. Our family might have grown, but I’ll never stop treasuring that sound.





FREDDIE

## 12 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Julie is sitting in her high chair by the kitchen island. Her hands are covered in flour, and she kneads the little clump of gingerbread dough I gave her with reckless abandon.

I start rolling out the main portion of the dough, and she looks up to watch me work. “We have to make it very thin,” I say, “to cut out the shapes.”

Julie points to the metal shape-cutters lying to the side. “That one.”

“Yes, exactly. We’ll use those. We can make gingerbread men and women, and I have one in the shape of a Christmas tree, too.”

“Tree,” she says, and smiles down at her own dough. She smacks it with the flat of her little palm in an effort to flatten it out like me. The floor beneath her is littered with crumbs and flour, and while I’m only halfway through baking, the whole thing has already taken twice as long as it would’ve if I was alone.

But I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Julie’s dark, wavy hair reaches halfway down to the nape of her neck, and it grows thicker by each passing month. Her dimpled smile is my favorite thing in the entire world. And even when she’s angry, furious in the way only a soon-to-be-toddler can be, she’s adorable.

I lean over the island and kiss her hair. It smells like baby shampoo and her.

She looks up at me with a question in her wide eyes, the same color as her father's.

"You're doing great, honey," I say.

Julie makes a concentrated little sound and returns to her work, kneading it in her hands like it's playdough. She's too young to bake, of course, but I wanted her with me here. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that babies want to be where you are, always.

From the speaker in the corner comes Frank Sinatra's soft, crooning voice. Our apartment is fully decorated for the holidays. I look over the space and work through my mental checklist. Tree, check. Christmas lights on the terrace, check. The guest bedrooms are all made up and prepped, check. Gifts all bought, not check.

I'm behind on a few things.

The door clicks from the hallway, the sound of a key inserted in the lock.

Julie drops her dough onto the plastic table of her high chair. "Daddy!" she says, bouncing. "Hello, hello, hello."

I hear the sound of snowy shoes being taken off and coats hung up. "Is that Julie I hear?" Tristan calls.

Our daughter makes a high-pitched squeal in response. Joshua and Tristan walk into the living room, shopping bags at their sides. Their cheeks are flushed from the cold.

"Hi, you two!" I say. "Looks like it was a successful trip?"

Tristan nods. "Very. We're going to go hide all this stuff. Yes," he says, looking at his daughter, who has her hands out to him, "I'll be right back, honey."

Joshua follows his dad, but he looks at me over his shoulder. "There were break-dancers by Madison Square Garden."

"Really?"

He nods. "I filmed it. I can show you later."

"I'd like that," I say. "Were they any good?"

“They were *awesome*,” he says, and disappears around the corner to his room. Connecting with Joshua had been harder in the past month than usual, and while he’s gotten less inclined to spend time with us as he’s gotten older, this had seemed different somehow. More deliberate.

But us chatting about his fascination with break-dancers? That’s a return to normal.

The guys return, sans Christmas shopping. Joshua heads straight for the fridge and Tristan comes up beside me, an arm around my waist. He kisses my cheek. “Hello, master baker.”

“Hi.” I lean against him, a silent apology in my body language. I’d snapped at him this morning, for absolutely no fault of his. “I’m glad you’re home.”

He kisses me again and the hand on my hip pats me twice before he heads toward the insistent shrieks of his offspring.

“Hello, you. Are you baking? Making cookies?”

She reaches up and he relents, as he so often does, scooping her up in his arms. “She’s floury,” I warn him.

“That’s okay,” he says, and bounces her on his hip. “These clothes can go in the laundry anyway.”

Julie reaches for his face, his hair, and he watches her with warm eyes. He’s been a father for as long as I’d known him, and I’d always known he would be great with another kid. And yet... seeing him with Julie, from the very first time he held her in the hospital, so tiny in his arms, has only made me fall deeper in love with him.

Guilt flashes through me at my snappish words that morning.

Joshua grabs a yogurt pot and, to my surprise, comes to sit opposite me at the kitchen island. He peels back the lid and looks at the shapes I’ve lined out on the baking tray.

“I’m baking gingerbread,” I say. “If you want to join.”

He gives a half-shrug that could mean either yes or no. “It smells good.”

“The first batch is already in the oven.”

Joshua takes a spoonful of yogurt, and swallows audibly. Then he sighs. “Fred?”

“Yes?”

“Dad and I spoke about the adoption earlier. When we were out shopping.”

My heart gives a lurch. “You did?”

He rests his chin in his hand, the overlong hair hanging over his forehead. “Yeah. It means you and I will have our own thing, right? Without Dad?”

“Yes,” I say. I wipe my hands slowly on the apron and wish we didn’t have a Christmas soundtrack on for this discussion. A singer croons in the background about *Santa Baby* and Julie is babbling happily and loudly and it’s absolute chaos. But it’s us, and it’s home, and I love it. “It also means you and I will be family for life. We already are, honey. But this will make it legal.”

He nods, his face serious. “I’ve thought about it a lot.”

“It’s a big thing to consider.”

“At first I really wanted it,” he says. “But then I wondered if it would mean I was abandoning my birth mom, and my birth dad too, kinda.”

“Oh, honey, you’re not. You never could.”

“Dad said the same thing.” He cocks his head, and the smile I’d been so charmed by years ago, when I’d first met him, flashes across his face. It makes my chest warm. “I can continue calling you Fred, right?”

“Of course!” I say. “Anything you want to call me is okay.”

He nods, and the smile widens. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I want it.”

My tears well up faster than I'd anticipated. There's no time to blink them away, and I hate how they make Joshua's eyes widen.

"Happy tears!" I say, and round the kitchen island to reach him. "Sorry!"

"It's okay," he mumbles into my shoulder. It's an awkward hug, him sitting, me standing, and someone calling Santa "baby" in the background. It's also absolutely perfect.

"You know I love you, right?" I say. "We might not have known each other since you were a baby, but that doesn't change how much I care about you."

He nods. "Yeah, I know."

Tristan is close by. I can feel him near, and even Julie has fallen uncharacteristically quiet, probably watching all of this with wide eyes.

"Love you too, Fred," Joshua whispers, like it's a secret. My heart squeezes tight in my chest. There's no handbook for being a stepmother, or for being the dad's wife. We'd navigated it together from the start, and if I was ever unsure of the right thing to say, Tristan never had been. And Joshua? He'd welcomed me with open arms from the very first week I'd known him. *My family*, I think, and feel a humbling sense of gratitude.

*Mine.*

The evening moves on, as it so often does. Something profound followed by something mundane. Gingerbread cookies are baked and Joshua shows me a video clip of some break-dancers and we eat dinner, all of us, before Tristan puts Julie to bed by reading her a book. It's hours later when everything's finally calm and settled and I'm alone in our bedroom with Tristan. I lean against the door to our walk-in-closet, and watch as he shrugs out of his T-shirt.

"Joshua said yes," I say.

Tristan turns, his hands on the waistband of his slacks. "Yeah, he did."

“What did you two talk about today?”

“His thoughts about the whole thing,” Tristan says, the smile on his face rueful. “I should have anticipated what direction his mind would go in. He’s been wondering whether my sister and John would’ve liked it.”

“Oh, the sweetheart.”

Tristan nods. “I think he had a lot of big feelings and they were hard to articulate. You know he was happy about us asking him. His smile was... well. He was happy.”

“Yes,” I say. “It had seemed so clear cut, the first day we spoke to him about it.”

“Yes. He told me today that he was feeling guilty for wanting to say yes... or maybe more guilty about *not* feeling guilty.”

I tug at the waist tie of my bathrobe. The only way to get rid of all the flour and gingerbread from beneath my fingernails had been a shower. “I get that. It’s a big thing, for a kid.”

“Yeah. I still think we did the right thing, though.” Tristan stops by his dresser and takes off his watch, putting it in the personalized watch case I’d gotten him for his birthday last year. “Waiting until he turned thirteen. I want this to be something he chose, too.”

I cross the floor to our king-sized bed and turn on my bedside light, and fold back the covers. “Me too. It feels right, having him be a part of the decision-making process.”

Tristan *hms* in agreement and puts his pants, carefully folded, on the divan in the corner. I let my eyes linger on him in nothing but his boxer-briefs, his shape familiar and so dear. The long legs, the lean torso, the thick hair that’s recently hinted at gray by the temples. *Too early*, he’d said when he first saw it, but I thought it made him even more handsome.

“I’m sorry about this morning,” I say.

His voice is warm. “It’s okay.”



“No, you were suggesting something nice, and I just went off. It was unnecessary.”

I'd been stressed. Tristan had asked me about what time my family arrived in New York, and I hadn't known it by heart, and the anxiety increased. So I'd complained about it and then he'd said, in a calm voice that can be so incredibly infuriating when I'm not the least bit calm, that maybe he and I should go away for a night. Get some time alone, with no stress at all.

*And when would we possibly have the time for that?* I'd snapped. *I have a million things to do...*

“You're stressed. Or were, at least, this morning.” Tristan throws back the covers and gets into bed, sitting up against the headboard. “Want to tell me why, exactly? It feels like it's more than just the approaching holidays.”

I climb into bed after him. “Maybe I'm a bit freaked out about my entire family spending Christmas at our place this year.”

“I've sensed that,” Tristan says, and I can see him fighting a smile. “How come? We've hired help. Do you think we need more?”

“No, no, the caterers do a great job, and Sylvia will be here to help with Julie, but... My family is a lot.”

“I know,” he says.

“They're so... *Italian*, sometimes. There's going to be so much noise and commotion here for three days straight. I love them, but I also feel bad for you, and for Joshua. It's going to be a lot.”

Tristan chuckles and puts an arm around me, tugging me against his bare chest. “Joshua and I lived in almost complete silence before I met you, you know. He had no cousins and no siblings. And now? We'll celebrate Christmas with board games and charades and cousins running around and almost too much talk around the dinner table. It's a good thing, baby. All of it's a good thing.”

The words make me feel better. They ring true. And yet... I walk my hand across the fluffy comforter and direct the next words to the foot of the bed. "I know my brother-in-law will ask you about the stock market and finance stuff and make not so subtle remarks about how much money he thinks you make."

"Yeah," Tristan says. "But I know how to handle that. So it'll be a lot, but it'll be fun, and it's only two and a half days."

"That's true. You truly don't mind?"

"Of course I don't. I wouldn't have suggested us hosting them if I did. Besides, on Christmas Eve we'll have dinner with our friends, and for New Year's we'll be travelling. That'll be nice, won't it?"

"Yes," I say. Then my eyes widen. "Oh! I haven't bought my Secret Santa gift yet!"

"I have," he says, and there's smugness in his voice. The Winters are having a Christmas Eve dinner party, a small, intimate thing, only the ten of us who are connected through a complicated web of business and family relations. Over the past couple of years, we've spent more and more time together, outside of public events and business meetings.

As far as I know, it'll be Isaac and Sophia's first party in their new apartment together, and judging by what I know of Sophia and her excellent project-management skills, it's going to be one hell of a dinner. Sure doesn't hurt that her husband is in hospitality, either.

The Secret Santa game they've organized is meant to be funny. *Buy something ridiculous*, Sophia's text had said. *If you've gone to Tiffany's for the gift, you've gone too far.*

"Who'd you get?" I ask Tristan. The blind draw had given me Cecilia, and I'm still stumped on what to get her.

He shakes his head above me. "It's called *Secret Santa*."

"Yeah, but we're married."

"Yes, and I take that very seriously. Just as seriously as I do the unbreakable vows of Secret Santa."

I laugh. “Well, I won’t tell you mine either, then. Or what hilariously fun gift I’ve gotten them.”

His hand strokes up my bare back. “You’ve already bought it?”

“No,” I admit. “But I will this weekend.”

He chuckles. “Good. Me neither. But I have my eye set on something... even if I probably got the hardest person to shop for.”

“Anthony,” I guess. “No! Victor!”

Tristan groans. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Victor? Is that it?”

“I didn’t say it,” Tristan says. “So I technically haven’t broken any rules.”

I settle deeper beneath the blankets, nestling against his side. “I won’t tell a soul.”

“Good,” he says, and presses his lips to my forehead. “I can’t wait until New Year’s. It’ll be just the four of us. No musts, no planning. Just clear blue water and snorkeling.”

I breathe in the scent of him and try to picture it. Tristan and Joshua’s adventurous trips had continued, even after our marriage, only now Julie and I were involved. Sure, they’d been modified a bit, and Tristan and Joshua still did a few activities of their own while we were away.

“I can’t wait,” I say. “You were right, too, this morning. We need some time just for us.”

“Mmm.”

“I had been planning... well. Christmas will be a lot with my family. But when they leave, we have some in-between days. I can’t wait to forget time exists. I’m going to live in my pajamas.”

“Oh, I plan on eating my body weight in leftovers.”

I slip out of his arms. He makes a sound of protest, and I feel his curious eyes on me as I pad over to my dresser. “I did

buy you something for Christmas...”

“I don’t need presents,” he says. It’s something he’s said often, but I’ve never listened. “I already have everything I want. You, for one, and Julie and Joshua.”

I dig through my underwear drawer for the little silk pouch. “How tired are you?”

“A bit,” he says, “but getting less so by the second. What have you bought?”

I turn around with a flourish. “Tristan Conway,” I say, “you have been cordially invited to the Gilded Room.”

His eyes turn sharp with interest. “Freddie?”

“Lie back,” I say, and climb onto the bed. “I got us a little something...”

His body is warm beneath mine, and relaxed, letting me straddle him. He puts his hands behind his head and watches me place the contents on his chest. Black silk, metal handcuffs, and a bullet vibrator. “Let’s start with this,” I say, and hold up the black silk. It’s a sleep mask, not a carnival one, but it still harkens back to the way we’d met.

We haven’t visited a Gilded Room once since we got together. It hasn’t been needed... but that doesn’t mean we haven’t had all kinds of fun alone, at home. It’s just been a little less frequent since Julie arrived.

Tristan lets out a groan of appreciation. “The things I want to do with you blindfolded,” he says.

I stop his hand. “Oh, no. I want *you* to be blindfolded.”

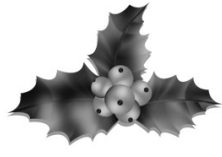
“Do you?”

“Yes. Why don’t you lie back,” I say, bending over to kiss him, “and let me take the reins for a bit?”

His hand weaves into my hair. “If this is how you want to work through your holiday stress, I’m all for it.”

I chuckle. “Merry Christmas, baby.”

He tugs me closer, his lips warm against mine. “Merry fucking Christmas indeed.”



ANTHONY

“Daddy!” The wail echoes down the stairs. Beside me, Abel launches to her paws, her ears alert. I put down the sandwich I’d been making. “*Daddy!!*”

“You okay?” I call, heading toward the stairs. Abel slips in front of me and rushes upstairs. Without her harness she’s not in work mode, and besides, I don’t need help around the house.

“Come here!” Theo yells.

I sigh, taking the steps in two. “What’s the matter?”

“Bird,” he says. He’s standing in the middle of his bedroom, feet sunk deep in the plush carpet, and points toward his window. There are two pigeons sitting on his windowsill. Theo’s voice is full of excited awe. “Birds!”

“They’ve come to say hello,” I say, and take a few steps into the room. They see the movement and fly off, just like I hoped they would. Sky rats. “Gosh, you scared me, kiddo, yelling like that.”

He pushes past me. “Sandwich?” he asks. The word comes out half-mumbled, the syllables all jumbled together.

“All done,” I say. “But you have to eat it downstairs.”

Theo looks over at the reading nook in the corner of his bedroom. Ace is lying there, looking at us with dark eyes. The book Theo had been reading to the gray-muzzled dog is thrown to the side. He’d promised he would stay right there



while I went down to make him a snack. *Ace wants to know how the story ends*, he'd said.

Not that Theo was anywhere close to reading yet, and the book was only full of pictures... but Theo did his best to explain them.

Most days, we have the help of a nanny. Summer had resisted the idea in the beginning, and I'd understood. She wasn't raised with frills or extravagances. But I'd known we'd need help from the start, because the day will come when I can't pull my weight in the same way. My eyesight hasn't deteriorated further in almost two years. It's a godsend and I hope it'll stay like that for a decade, or for two, but it might not.

"Ace will probably come with us," I say. "Bring your book, too."

"Kay." Theo scoops it up and rushes past me. I walk behind him as he methodically climbs his way down the stairs. It'd be faster if I scooped him up, but he's in a DIY phase intense enough to rival a home fixer-upper.

We walk past the lit Christmas tree in the living room. Summer had decorated it, with me giving very useful pointers. Theo had been a huge help. He'd spent five minutes hanging a single ornament on the lowest branch, face furrowed in intense concentration, before running over to ask me if we could play.

Summer's filled the house with holiday spirit, from the decorations to the Christmas-scented candles she insists we light every night. I pretend to grumble about it. But at this point the effort is almost nominal. She knows, and I know, that what she's done is wonderful. This townhouse is a home, and it's because of her.

"Where's Mommy?" Theo asks. He climbs onto one of the chairs and reaches for the jelly sandwich I'd made for him. There are a few slices of apple beside it that he pointedly ignores.

"She's out with Sophia to do some Christmas shopping."

Theo munches on his sandwich, his legs kicking beneath the chair. “Ohmmmkay,” he says.

“She’ll be home soon,” I say. “I think she mentioned a little something about icing, too.”

Theo looks up. He has jelly on his cheek. “Ice?”

“Icing. What you put on a cake.”

“Cake?!”

“Well, we’re not making a cake. Sorry, kiddo. But Mom wanted to make a gingerbread house. And when mom gets an idea in her head, it’s really darn hard to talk her out of it,” I say. *Especially* right now. She’s six months pregnant and seems to think she’s invincible.

I know she’s strong. I’d known it from the first, and seeing her give birth to Theo had only strengthened that. The woman was a golden warrior and nothing could convince me otherwise.

But that doesn’t make me worry any less... not when she’d been a lot more nauseous this pregnancy than the last.

Theo and I end up on the couch. Ace lies down at our feet with a sigh and Abel, knowing she’s only allowed on the couch when we pull her throw on it, waits patiently for me to prepare her side. Theo buries his hand in her fur and keeps his eyes on the dancing dogs on the screen.

I run a hand over my face. I’ve been working for what feels like nonstop the last few weeks. Acture is in the process of buying a new company, and I’ve been double-checking all the numbers our accountants sent us. Summer has been putting in long hours at her home office too. The dating company had unexpectedly gone viral on New York social media, and as a consequence, she and Vivian had drowned in a tidal wave of new applicants to sort through and match.

“Santa,” Theo says, and points at the TV.

Huh. The episode I’d put on must have been Christmas themed, because there it is, an animated dog wearing a Santa hat and a beard.

“Look at that,” I say. We watch as he opens the letters all the puppy-kids in all the lands have sent him.

“Write letter,” Theo says beside me, and bounces up and down. Once. Twice. He puts an insistent hand on my leg. “Write letter to Santa!”

So that’s what we’re doing when Summer comes through the door. The two of us, sitting on the rug in the living room. I’m Theo’s scribe. I write down item after item he comes up with, all for Santa to give him. Not that he’s being idle. No, he’s using his crayons to make a drawing for Santa. When I ask what it’s supposed to be, he says *Christmas*. And, well, the giant blob is mostly red, so points to him.

I’ve just finished writing *giant balloon* as item number thirteen on his list when the front door opens. Summer is home. Her face shines when she sees us. It never stops taking my breath away, that smile. Like we’re her favorite people in the world.

“Look at you two!” she says. “What are you making?”

“Letter! Santa!”

“Oh, are you writing one to the North Pole? And is Daddy helping you?” She leans over and kisses Theo on the head, ruffling his hair, before turning to me. “Hey.”

“Hi, honey.” I get to my feet and give her a proper kiss hello.

She chuckles against my lips. “Missed me?”

“Always.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling, and shrugs out of her coat. Her stomach is slightly bigger this time than it was last at six months, her body familiar with the process.

It’s hard to put the feelings into words. Seeing my wife pregnant the first time had been exhilarating. Scary. Arousing. Nerve-racking. But most of all I’d felt proud, insanely so, and protective. Those emotions are just as strong now, the second time around.

“Did you find what you were after?” I ask.

“Well, I got some great things, including for you, but I won’t tell you what they are. And I finally found the *perfect* gift for Secret Santa! But I had to ask Sophia to wait outside the store or she would have figured out who I got immediately.”

“I don’t need a lot for Christmas.”

“I know,” she says, “but I really like getting you things.”

“Was everything all right with Sophia?”

Summer nods. “Oh yes. She’s looking forward to some time off, and they’re going to Barbados again, after New Year’s. Maybe that’s when Isaac will propose?”

I frown. “Did you ask Sophia that?”

“No, no, of course not. But I couldn’t help thinking it. Your brother is *head-over-heels*.” She sinks down on the couch beside me and lets out a low groan. “God, my back is starting to hurt again.”

I gesture for her to scoot forward on the couch and slid my hand under the fabric of her sweater. The skin of her lower back is warm, and I rub slow circles into the sore muscles.

“That feels amazing,” she says dreamily. “Can you do that forever?”

“Might make it tough to take care of our son, but if it’s what you want, I’ll do it.”

She chuckles and reaches for a pillow to rest her head on. “She was kicking all day today.”

My hand slows. “Really?”

“Yes. I’m afraid we’ll get an energizer bunny baby, and not one like Theo over there.”

I look over at our small son. He’s sitting, quiet and with his brow furrowed, engrossed in his drawing. “I think we lucked out with that one,” I say. “He’s always wanted peace and quiet.”

“We definitely did. Oh, that feels so good.”

“Did you feel sick later in the day, too?”

“No, it stopped after lunch.”

“Good,” I say. Her skin is heating up quickly beneath my hand and I can feel the outline of her spine, curved over as she is. The pregnancy had been hard on her, especially the first couple of months. I hated watching her feel so nauseous. Hate that it still swings by, from time to time, the world’s most unwelcome houseguest.

Most of all I hate that it’s not something I can set right. It’s not a problem, not an issue that needs fixing, not an illness. It’s natural and necessary and awful.

“Next Christmas we’ll be a family of four,” she mumbles into the pillow.

I stroke her hair back. “Yeah.”

“Still excited?”

“Of course,” I say. Theo’s ears had been so small, when he first arrived. I remember tracing the outline with my index finger and feeling how the world shifted around me. It hadn’t been the same since.

“Do you remember how small they are?” I ask.

“Just barely,” she says. “I can’t wait to have a baby in the house again.”

Theo looks up from his masterpiece to Santa. “Baby?” he asks, and drops his crayon. “I wanna feel!”

“Oh, she’s not moving right now,” Summer says. But she sits up and opens her arms to Theo, who crawls between us on the couch. “But she’s been moving so much today. Like a little fish, you know, swimming around in her bowl.”

“That’s a terrible analogy,” I say.

“I blame pregnancy brain,” she says.

Theo puts both hands on Summer’s tummy. “Fish?”

That makes me chuckle. “Yes, in a bowl.”

Summer shakes her head. “No, baby. Ignore the fish part. She’s lying more to this side now, I think... here.” She moves his hand and I lean back on the couch, watching them. “Can you feel her?”

Theo gives three quick nods and looks up at her. “Icing?”

“Icing? Are you thinking about cake right now?”

“I think,” I say, reaching over to ruffle his hair, “that he means the gingerbread house-making kits you said you’d buy.”

“Oh! That’s right! Want to make a gingerbread house, honey?” She tucks her hands beneath Theo’s shoulders and lifts him up as she stands.

She immediately groans. “God, you’re getting heavy.”

“You shouldn’t lift things,” I say, and take her from him.

“I’m not at nine months yet.”

“No, just six, but that’s plenty.” A thought strikes me and I frown at her. “You and Sophia didn’t walk home, right? With all those bags?”

“No, I took a cab. Don’t worry.”

“I can’t help it.” I set Theo down on the kitchen island and keep a hand on either side of him, making sure he can’t fall. He looks on curiously as Summer unpacks one of the bags, pulling out a gingerbread making set and a giant bag of M&Ms.

“We have enough time before dinner to give it a try. What do you think, kiddo? Want to help Mommy?”

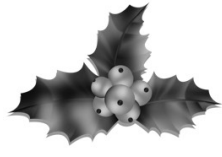
Theo stretches his hands out. “Yes! Icing!”

“That part is your favorite, huh? Not much of a surprise there.” Her warm, blue eyes meet mine. “Daddy will help. Right?”

I think of what a long and twisted road my life had taken, to end up here, in this renovated townhouse, in a giant kitchen decorated for Christmas, with a wife and a son.

And I think how grateful I am that I got here.

“Yes,” I say. “Always.”





SUMMER

I wipe my hands on a towel and look at the monstrosity on the kitchen island. Half of the roof is covered in evenly spaced M&Ms, and the other side is a jumbled mess of icing that someone poured over it with a giant spoon. One was made by an adult, the other by a two-year-old.

I wonder if people will be able to tell the difference.

The house is calm and quiet. I stir my too-hot cup of tea and look out over the living room. The fire in the large fireplace crackles softly. It's my favorite feature of the entire house. The dogs are curled up in front of it, back to back. The Christmas tree sends soft, golden light out into the room, making their golden fur glow. While Ace doesn't have quite as much energy as he once did, there's nothing wrong with his mood, and his tail is still the waggiest of them all.

Theo is asleep upstairs. I'd read from his favorite book, and he'd tried to follow along until his eyelids got too heavy. I'd stayed still for a long time beside him and watched his small face, the skin perfect and the mouth open in sleep. My beautiful son.

The tea is still too hot to drink, and I lean forward on the island, taking the weight off my aching back.

I'm caught immediately.

Anthony walks into the kitchen. He pauses, eyes on me and my posture. "Your back is hurting again."

"Just a bit," I say. His overprotectiveness kicks into high gear when I'm pregnant. It's lovely and annoying all at once.

“Want me to heat up your heating pad?”

“Not yet,” I say, “but maybe when we go to bed. Did you call your parents? How were they?”

“Good. Mom is looking forward to Christmas.”

“Oh, I bet she is,” I say. “Did you ask your dad?”

Anthony taps his hands against the kitchen counter a few times, his face set into stern lines. I know well by now that he’s not actually stern. But his thinking face, one of my favorite expressions on him, definitely is.

“No. I think it might be better in person.”

“Maybe,” I say. “Don’t you think he’ll like the idea?”

“I do,” he says, and runs a hand through his hair. “But the one person I should talk to most is Isaac. Dad and Isaac get along fine, but they’re very different people.”

“That’s for sure.” I motion for him to come closer and he obliges, wrapping an arm around my waist. I lean against his chest and breathe in the scent of him, familiar and comforting. “I know Isaac will like the idea, once he’s had time to process it.”

“Thanks,” Anthony murmurs. “Maybe I’ve just rebelled against it for too long. Now, I’m starting to feel... if I’m putting in all this work, at least some of it could be for the good of the company, you know?”

“I do. But it doesn’t have to be one or the other, either. You know that, right?”

“Yes. You’ve reminded me often enough.”

I chuckle. I’m definitely guilty of that. But when I’d met Anthony, he’d painted himself into a corner, both by life and by his wan outlook on things. Everything was dark.

Pitch black.

But he *had* options. He had opportunities, and things to look forward to, and a life that could be full and happy and glorious. Acture Capital does better than any company has the right to do, and if he wants to go down to working only fifty

percent? Perfectly fair. I don't think a single one of his business partners, of his *friends*, would fault him for that. And if he wanted to start working for the Winter Corporation fifty percent of the time?

Well, only one person could object there, and I don't think he will. "It would be cool to see you working together," I say. "I know Isaac would like that."

Anthony snorts. "Right, well, I wouldn't be so sure. I've been... vocal for twenty years about my disdain for it."

"If there's one thing he's passionate about, it's family."

"That's arguably true."

"Also, you have expertise, and skills you've honed. Your data-crunching talents are why Acture is where it is right now! It's not like he'd be doing you a favor. Quite the opposite, actually," I say. "Besides, it's not like you want to become the new CEO."

"Hell no," he says. "I don't want any job that'll take me away from you and the kids for too long."

I smile. "Kids. Plural."

"Yeah." Anthony's face softens. "Do you feel ready to be a mother of two?"

"No. Yes. Maybe... and definitely not." I take a deep breath against his cable-knit sweater, the one I'd gotten him last Christmas.

He rubs slow circles on my lower back. "I feel the same way," he murmurs. "So? What are you going to force me to do tonight? If I have to watch another oversized man live in an elf-village, I'll break out the brandy."

"The eggnog," I correct him gently.

He chuckles. "You're such a Christmas-a-holic."

"Have been since you met me." I tilt my head and reach up, tracing his jawline with my finger. "You know what I look forward to the most?"

"Mmm, what's that?"

“Feeling like myself again. I love being pregnant, don’t get me wrong... But my body doesn’t feel quite like my own, and my moods are all over the place.”

“It’s tough on you,” he says quietly. “I see it, every day. And I’m in awe of you. I was the last time, and this is no different. You’re the strongest person I know.”

“I’m only doing what most women have done throughout history, going back hundreds of thousands of years.”

“Just creating life, yes. No biggie. You’re just carrying our child inside our body, keeping her safe until she’s ready to join us.”

That makes me laugh. “Okay, I get your point. It’s huge and small at the same time. It makes me feel better, you know, knowing that so many women have done it before me. Less alone in the experience. Even if...”

“Yeah?”

“I really look forward to having my body be mine again,” I say. “And being able to share it with you.”

Anthony shakes his head. “You already do.”

“Yes, but more. I want to feel like *myself* again.”

He laughs darkly, the sound reverberating into me. “That time will come.”

I sigh. Sex with my husband was my favorite thing before kids. It still was, during my first pregnancy. But the constant nausea of the first trimester had made it almost nonexistent this time around, and that had carried over into the second trimester. It’s only now that I’m getting my mojo back, *finally*, but my body feels unfamiliar.

It had changed after Theo. I’d been self-conscious about that, but Anthony had never done anything but put me at ease. He’d kissed my stretch marks and said he loved my wider hips and bigger chest and as I’d grown into motherhood, I’d found I agreed with him. My body had sustained life. How could I do anything but love it?

I still believe him... but right now, I'm having a little trouble believing myself.

"Summer?" he murmurs. Damn the man for always knowing what I'm thinking, even when I barely know it myself.

"Yeah?"

"There's nothing wrong with not being in the mood."

"Yeah, it's just annoying. And... it's not that. I'm back in the mood now."

His eyebrow rises. "Oh?"

"Yes. It hit me this past week," I say. It's the truth, and it feels liberating to say. "Honestly, on Tuesday, I felt ready to combust."

He's quiet for a long moment. "That's interesting."

"I don't know if it's the hormones, but... it just hit me."

"Well," he murmurs. The hand on my back shifts to my hips, still rubbing slow circles through my shirt. "I can oblige, you know. That's what I'm here for. Anything the pregnant woman wants, the pregnant woman gets."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Why do you think I watched that elf movie in the first place?"

I laugh. "Thank you for that, by the way."

"Of course. But I feel like there's still something you're not saying."

"You know me too well. It's almost disturbing, actually."

"But only almost," he says calmly. "Now tell me what it is."

I sigh. "Okay. So... the last time we had sex was a while ago."

"A month and a half," Anthony says.

"But you're not counting?"

“No, I’m not. But I’m aware, of course. I was present.”

“Yeah. Me too. And since then I’ve like... exploded.”

The hand at my hip shifts, moves to my rounded belly. “You’re growing a baby.”

“Yeah. And I’m horny, and hormonal, and my back hurts, and I don’t know how great I’ll be. We’ll probably need to start rotating through the few positions I could do last time.”

“That’s fine by me,” Anthony says. Then his voice softens, and he finds the heart of the issue, like he always does. “You’re beautiful, Summer. You always are, and never more so than when you’re pregnant. I’m attracted to you morning, day, and night.”

I close my eyes. “Thanks. I’m sorry that I need you to reassure me.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re going through a lot, emotionally and physically.” He leans back, and there’s a smirk in his dark eyes. “We can always try. And if it doesn’t work, or doesn’t feel good, we’ll just watch another Christmas movie.”

That makes me chuckle. “Really?”

“Really,” he agrees. “Elves and all.”

I grip his hand. “All right. Come on then, big man.”

We make it to our master bedroom. My body feels hot, like my skin is stretched too tight all over, and I can’t wait to be touched. *I’ve missed feeling like this*, I think. *I’ve missed Anthony*.

It’s the last coherent thought I have in a very long time.

By the end, I’m left lying on my side, staring up at the lamp on my nightstand, struggling to catch my breath. Anthony is curled up behind me, warm and big and breathing heavily from his orgasm. My own has left me feeling soft and pliable and infinitely relaxed.

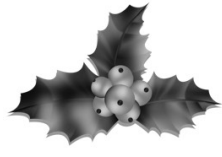
“I don’t think we need to watch that spin-off elf movie today.”

Anthony chuckles darkly behind me, and a warm arm settles over my waist. “Thank God,” he says. “Sequels are never as good, anyway.”

I turn over and meet his dark eyes. “Are you sure about that?” I ask, and reach between our bodies.

His mouth tips up in a crooked smile. “Let’s test the theory.”





CECILIA

## 8 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Philippa is asleep. She's curled up on her side, face relaxed and her round mouth open. She's sturdy for a nine-month-old and has short, light blonde hair. It's a sharp contrast from my brown, and lighter even than Victor's. I'd asked him if he'd had the same sunshine hair as a baby. He'd said he didn't know, but he'd let me look in the old photo albums his mother had made to check... and sure thing, Philippa's hair is the same shade as his was at that age.

I tiptoe out of the nursery and slip the baby monitor into the back pocket of my jeans. An hour, give or take. That's what I have.

So I get right down to business.

I wipe the kitchen island clean from crumbs and line up the gifts I have left to wrap. There's a Himalayan salt lamp for my mother, a whole bunch of toys for Philippa, and a few things for Nadine. Beside it are the cuff links with the date of our wedding, and a gift card for a weekend away—just the two of us.

I put in one of my AirPods and hit play on a Christmas playlist. This will be our second holiday season in the house. It had once been Victor's grandfather's, but it's become our home, now. The place has more character than anywhere I've ever lived.

I love it.

It's a love affair Victor finds amusing, and he'd joked more than once that I seem more in love with the house than him,

but I know he secretly likes it.

Sure, it had been hard for him in the beginning, to live somewhere so filled with memories. Many of them good, but many of them lonely. It had been a house he'd once longed to escape.

Now it's a home he does his best to never leave.

I'd once scheduled his meetings, fielded his phone calls, and run his life. If there was one thing I'd always known about Victor St. Clair, from my first day as his assistant, it was his ruthless devotion to his work.

Nothing came above it in his list of priorities.

That had changed after our marriage went from one of convenience to one of love. But the biggest change of all? That came after Philippa was born.

Now he's ruthless about his time at home. He guards it preciously, saying no to meetings that he deems unessential, and turning one of the guest bedrooms into an at-home office. He's become the king of online meetings. It turns out that Victor takes his family as seriously as he once took his job.

I'd worried about that, when I was pregnant. Worried about how Victor would react when the baby was born. Being a parent is different than expecting to one day *become* a parent. He had ghosts, and you never knew when they'd come by. But he had risen to the challenge, and watching him learn how to be a father is one of the greatest joys of my life.

I call my best friend Nadine and, listening to it ring, reach for a stuffed tiger to wrap.

She answers on the fourth ring. "You're like clockwork."

I chuckle. "I have to be, or Philippa gets cranky. Naptime is sacred in this household."

"Good. It should be in mine too, really."

"Did you pull another all-nighter?"

"Yes," she says with a groan. "I have paint everywhere. Under my nails, between my toes, probably behind my ears."

“I know you’re the artist and all,” I say, “but if you’re getting it between your toes, I think you’re doing something wrong.”

She chuckles. “That’s what Jake thinks. He says I’m playing, not working. I keep on reminding him that play *is* work when you’re a painter.”

“That’s right,” I say. Jake is her boyfriend, who she’d met through her first show in New York. Her star has only risen in the years since and she’s had gallery showings in cities across the country. Jake has stuck around, and so has their relationship, even if they have a less than conventional one.

I *think* they define it as “open.” They’re not poly, or so Nadine says, but they’re allowed to “color outside the lines, as long as it’s all discussed beforehand.”

Victor had chuckled when I told him about their relationship. *That’s a disaster waiting to happen*, he’d commented, and I’d silently agreed. *Sharing you? Or wanting someone else? I couldn’t imagine it*, Victor had said. *I like coloring within your lines, thank you very much.*

But Nadine and Jake *had* made it work, and they seemed stronger than ever. Different strokes for different folks, it seemed.

Perhaps quite literally.

“Is Jake still in Seattle?” I ask.

Nadine sighs. “Yeah. He’s working on an exhibition there, and it’s taking weeks longer than it should.”

“But he’ll be back in New York for Christmas?” I say. “You know he’s welcome for dinner at ours.”

“Thanks, I know, and maybe he’ll make it. I’ll be there though. You know I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Good,” I say. “Mom will love getting the chance to see you.”

“Marguerite!” Nadine says. “My favorite mother-in-law.”

I laugh. “Are you and I married now?”

“Practically,” she says. “If only that husband of yours wasn’t so stingy about sharing you.”

That makes me smile. I reach for the tape and turn the package I’m wrapping over, securing the paper in place. “I’m not interested in sharing him either, you know. Or in being shared.”

“I know, I know,” she says. “You two are so boringly, conventionally, in love.”

“Mhm. Not a bad thing to be,” I say. My mother is coming up for Christmas, just as Nadine is. Mom will stay for a whole week and I can’t wait to get some time just for us, not to mention Philippa-Grandma time.

“So how is he, your brooding husband?” Nadine asks. “Is he still being an absolute Scrooge about Christmas?”

“I did get him to watch a Christmas movie the other night. Granted, he fell asleep about halfway through, but it’s progress.”

She chuckles. “The decorations? He hasn’t complained, has he?”

“No,” I say. It had been a struggle to get them in place. I’d wanted to do it myself, but having a fussy baby who’d just started teething wasn’t, funnily enough, conducive to tinkering with garlands. I’d complained about the lack of curb appeal our house had compared to the rest of the street. It had been a mindless comment... but the next day Victor had hired a professional Christmas decorator.

They did big business, apparently, with families who had too little time and too much disposable income.

“He hasn’t complained at all. I asked him if it made him uncomfortable, but that’s not it, either. Honestly... I just think he’s not used to it.”

“To celebrating Christmas?”

“Yeah,” I say. I’d found out our first year together that Victor doesn’t really know *how* to. He knows the steps, of course, and can go through the motions. He has great

memories from his early childhood of Christmas with his family. But all that stopped after the car accident. His grandfather never made an effort around the holidays, and the gaping hole left by their loss was always the most palpable on days when everyone else spoke of family.

“Well, this is your third, right?” Nadine asks. “He must be getting used to it by now.”

“Yeah, he is,” I say with a sigh. Not that it had stopped us from having an argument earlier. Not about Christmas, per se, but it had factored into it. *If we had more time and help, I’d said, we would have had a Christmas tree up weeks ago!*

Victor had just shaken his head. *We don’t just need any help. We need the right helper.*

It was an argument we’d had many a time over the past month. We’d found the perfect nanny a few weeks before Philippa was born. The pregnancy had been a marvel for me. I’d been able to plan and organize, my two absolute favorite hobbies, and prepare the nursery and the months of recovery. Sharon had been a fantastic help. She was experienced, she was funny, and she was just getting into a relationship with a man who lived on the West Coast.

He won, in the end, and Sharon traded coasts for love. I couldn’t blame her, except I did just a little bit, because we’d come to rely on her guidance and help.

“You’re quiet,” Nadine says on the other end. “Tell me what’s going on.”

I sigh. “We haven’t found a new nanny yet.”

“You guys have interviewed several, right?”

“Yes. I’m setting up interviews, Victor’s setting up interviews, but after every single one, Victor vetoes them.”

Nadine chuckles. “High expectations, huh?”

“The worst! He wasn’t like this when we hired Sharon. Not at all.”

“Are you going through an agency?”

“We’re working with two. The third dropped us after we, or rather *he*, refused three of the finest candidates they sent us.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. He just keeps saying they’re not good enough.” And earlier today, I’d snapped.

I love being at home with Philippa. Victor works from home and takes days off and loves to have her in his office, sleeping or playing, while he answers calls. But sometimes he’s away full days in the city. Sometimes I have calls with my aunt and clients and a gurgling baby in my lap doesn’t help me focus. And sometimes, *sometimes*, my husband and I need to grab dinner just the two of us or, heaven forbid, go away for the weekend.

The nice gift card I’m giving him for Christmas will go unused if we don’t.

“The man has high standards,” Nadine says. “It’s why he was single for a decade before he met you.”

I roll my eyes. “You mean before he offered to marry me for a business deal?”

“Okay, so it wasn’t love at first sight, but you converted him. Maybe he just needs to come around to the nanny too?”

“Maybe,” I say. “But if he would at least tell me why, you know?” Our argument about it had been pretty fierce. He hates it when we disagree. I’ve learned, over the years, that it wasn’t a big part of his childhood. His grandfather wasn’t someone you disagreed with openly. Not like my mother, who I’d argued with once a week growing up. We’d fight. We’d make up. All was fine in the world.

Not so for Victor. For a man who’s made conflict his calling card professionally, who never backs down from a fight or loses a wink of sleep over harsh words spoken over the negotiation table, he hates us arguing. He shuts down. Like celebrating Christmas, I’m wondering if that’s something he never got used to—having healthy disagreements with loved ones.



“Maybe I’m making too big a deal out of it,” I say. “And you know how much I love Philippa, and staying home with her this first year.”

“You’re working from home too, you know,” Nadine says. “Stop saying you’re taking time off. You’re doing two jobs now instead of one!”

“My assistant does most of the work now.”

“Don’t minimize what you do,” she says.

“Okay, okay, so I still work a few hours a day. Honestly, I wish I could devote some more time to it. Or at least time where my brain isn’t split in half, between what thing my daughter is currently gnawing on and the growth report on my screen. Some consistent help would be amazing. I know Victor’s feeling the strain too, but...”

“He just can’t find a nanny perfect enough for his perfect little baby,” Nadine says.

“Yeah, that’s probably what it is. Besides, I shouldn’t complain. I have the sweetest baby, the best house, and a crazy best friend who I love despite her lack of hygiene. She doesn’t wash behind her ears or... between her toes, was it?”

“It’s paint! Not dirt! And in my defense, it’s really hard to get off.”

“The guy you’re seeing, Baptiste, was it? He doesn’t mind?”

“He’s a French *artiste*,” Nadine says. “He has more paint left over on his body than I do!”

“Ugh. I don’t want to hear it,” I say. “But also, tell me more.”

She chuckles. “Of course you do, because you need to live vicariously through me.”

I roll my eyes, but I’m smiling. “Yes. Take me away from my humdrum life. I’m so tired of not having any drama, and just living in perfect bliss.”

“I knew it. You’re closer to an open relationship every day.”

“You wish,” I say. There’s the familiar sound of an engine outside, pulling up onto the driveway. I have thirty seconds before he walks through the front door.

“I should go,” I say.

“Naptime is up?”

“Almost, and Victor just got home.”

“Oh. Time to make up with Scrooge?”

“Hopefully,” I say, and push away a gift-wrapped box. “All right, talk to you later.”

“Sounds good. Go get yourself a nanny.”

“Tell my husband that,” I say. “Love you.”

“You, too.”

I hang up and pull my headphones out just in time for the front door to open. He’d been in the city for a meeting he hadn’t been able to do digitally. Acture is considering buying a new company, and it’s resulted in more late nights than usual.

“Cecilia?”

“In the kitchen!” I call. “How did it go?”

Victor walks into the room, shrugging out of his suit jacket. “It went all right. We’ll enter negotiations with the current board after Christmas.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“So the numbers look good, then.”

“Yes. Anthony’s run them, and so has our team, over and over. It’s all solid.” He puts an arm around my waist and pulls me in for a brief kiss on the cheek. “The baby?”

“She’s napping. Although... what time is it?” I take his left hand in mine and twist to look at the heavy watch on his wrist.

“Oh. I should wake her soon, or she won’t be tired by bedtime.”

“I’ll do it,” he says. He heads toward the stairs, but pauses, a hand on the doorframe. “When did your mother’s flight get in again?”

“The day after tomorrow, at noon.”

“Good. Have you booked a car to pick her up?”

“Yeah.”

His crooked smile is entirely genuine. “Good. It’ll be nice to have her here.”

I watch his retreating form up the stairs. The long legs, the well-tailored suit, and I can’t help but smile. My mother and Victor have true affection for one another, despite being as different as two people can be.

But they have one key thing in common. Both of them have zero tolerance for bullshit. My mom sees through it a mile away, having preached nothing but radical honesty my whole life, and Victor thinks it’s beneath him. They saw that in each other from the start.

Sure, Mom has said more than once that Victor is a person out of balance, and that he should cultivate parts of his personality he’s kept dormant. She’s said it to his face, too. And yeah, Victor thinks my mother’s fascination with the spiritual and the homeopathic is ridiculous. He has never been offensive in expressing that, but neither has he been shy. He’s not a man who buys a Himalayan salt lamp.

But they like each other all the same.

Maybe it has to do with how small our family is, too. I’m an only child, and my mother doesn’t have a husband. Her adventures take her far and wide and she has more friends than I do, but as far a family goes, it’s always been her and me and my late grandparents. Victor... well, he lost his grandfather a few years ago, and with him, the last remnants of his own family.

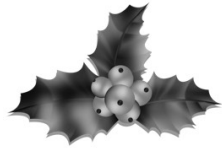
So we're making our own, and Victor and my mother both know that, even if they haven't expressed it in those terms. Not yet, anyway.

He comes down the stairs with Philippa in his arms. She's resting against his shoulder, her wide eyes foggy with sleep and blinking at the lights. He leans against the kitchen island and watches me move the wrapped gifts next to the fireplace.

"You've been busy," he says.

"Gotta make use of those naptimes." My words are soft, but they raise the tension between us. *Because we don't have a nanny.*

"Yes, I suppose so," he says quietly, and bounces Philippa gently in his arms. "Do you have time to go somewhere this afternoon?"



VICTOR

## 8 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Cecilia is quiet in the backseat. She's sitting next to a happily babbling Philippa, preoccupied with her plushie. The car handles the snow-packed streets of our neighborhood with ease. We'd bought the four-wheel SUV while Cecilia was pregnant. *A family car*, she'd said, and it had felt like a puzzle piece falling into place.

I haven't seen her as irritated as she was this morning in a very long time. She's usually put-together. Polished, even in the face of adversity, handling every problem with an eye on long-term solutions.

She loves to smile. Loves to make situations fun and light. So seeing her lose her cool entirely?

I've fucked up. I know that.

We drive past house after house, all with Christmas decorations artfully placed and string lights draped along porches. Our neighborhood hasn't spared a single expense. Curb appeal in this area feels like a pissing competition. It's one of a few things about the neighborhood I now call home again that I dislike.

But it's quiet, and safe, and beautiful. Cecilia loves it. Her enthusiastic comments from the very start had won me over. It had let me look at things with new eyes, or at the very least with *her* eyes.

I hadn't realized until I left it how tiresome I found New York's constant noise. With the hectic, hopeless, distracting buzz of the city and the pace of my career, I hadn't heard

myself think in over a decade. But out here, the calm is a palpable thing. It's addicting.

I turn onto the neighborhood square. The small park is filled with Christmas trees for sale. This neighborhood loves stylizing itself as a small town, instead of an affluent bedroom community to New York. There are hayrides during the fall and art festivals in summer and spring cleaning initiatives.

I park next to the entrance to the Christmas tree sale. From the backseat, Cecilia's silence is palpable.

*Please let this be enough*, I think.

"We're getting a Christmas tree?" she finally asks.

I look back, meeting her solemn eyes. "Yeah. About time, right?"

"How will we fit it in the car?"

"We won't. I called ahead, and they can deliver it to us later tonight. All we have to do is pick one out."

"Oh," she says. "Well, let's get to picking, then."

We keep Philippa snuggled tight in her winter clothing. I pull out the foldable stroller and settle her in it, making sure to tuck a blanket tight around her small form. Her eyes are bright. *Adventure?* they ask, and I want to tell her yes, and that her mother is about to make yet another Christmas miracle come true.

But Philippa's mother is a thoughtful, quiet woman beside me, and not her usual upbeat self. So the Christmas tree surprise wasn't enough. My stomach sinks.

Fuck.

We walk through rows and rows of trees. The place isn't fully stocked, not like it'd been at the beginning of the month. Us late suckers get the crooked ones, it seems.

I follow Cecilia. She has a camel coat tied tight around her body, her brown hair tucked beneath a hat. I push Philippa in front of me, talking to her quietly about the trees we pass. It's nonsense talk, but hopefully it calms her. Or me.



Cecilia stops in front of a tree. It looks no different to me than most of the others. A bit straighter, perhaps, and the boughs look full.

“This one.”

“Good choice,” I say.

She reaches out and runs a few pine needles between her fingers. “For the living room,” she says. “Next to the fireplace?”

“It’ll look great.”

“We’ll finally have someplace to put our gifts.” She looks over at me, and there’s a hint of a smile around her mouth. “You know, I don’t need make-up gifts every time we argue.”

“Yeah. I know you don’t need it.”

“But maybe you need to give them?”

I run a gloved hand over my neck. “Maybe,” I admit.

She rests her hand next to mine on Philippa’s stroller. “I appreciate it. Truly. But what I was irritated about wasn’t the Christmas tree, you know. Or the lack of it.”

“I know. We need a new nanny.”

“Yeah,” she says. “Can you tell me why you keep vetoing them? I promise to listen and not get annoyed. But can you tell me an actual reason? It would help me understand.”

My body tightens. This is the last thing I want to talk about *again*. But I meet her gaze, this woman who’s become my life. Who has given me my own life meaning. “We haven’t met someone who’s good enough.”

Her eyes cloud with frustration. “Victor.”

“They’re just not.”

“You didn’t have a problem signing off on Sharon, before Philippa arrived.”

“Yeah,” I say, “but that’s just it. It was *before* Philippa arrived.”

“So?”

“So, I didn’t *know* back then.”

Her eyebrows rise. “Know what?”

“How perfect she is. How important it is to find someone worthy of taking care of her. This is our daughter. We can’t just hand her over to a stranger.” I shake my head, feeling my frustration rise. “Why would I trust someone I don’t know with the most precious thing I’ve ever had?”

Cecilia’s eyes widen. “Well,” she says. “At least that makes sense.”

“Before, our child was a possibility. Sharon was a good choice. But now, well... She’s real. She’s here.”

“And you can’t be objective anymore,” Cecilia murmurs. Then she smiles, a wide one. It feels like the sun’s come out for the first time today. “You couldn’t have told me that from the first?”

“I didn’t know it myself back then.”

She steps closer, and I wrap an arm around her waist. “Don’t you think I feel that way too? I hated leaving her with Sharon in the beginning. Do you remember how tiny she was?”

“Yeah,” I mutter. It had been impossible, looking down at my daughter, and imagining that she’d one day be a child, running and playing. A teenager rolling her eyes at me. An adult woman I might one day walk down the aisle.

“But we worked through it. We called Sharon’s references, we were there the first times, and it was *wonderful* to have help. I wouldn’t have gotten any sleep those first few months without her help. You and I,” Cecilia says, her hand curving around the lapel of my coat, “wouldn’t have been able to go on a single date. The only reason we haven’t been living as platonic brother and sister for the past year is thanks to Sharon.”

I raise an eyebrow. “The *only* reason?”

She chuckles. “Okay, so maybe we would have found ways to stay romantic without her. But it would have been

quickies with the baby monitor in tow, and not a one-nighter at the hotel down the street.”

“You’re right,” I say. “I know you are.”

“But it doesn’t make it easier. I get that. The way I see it... parenthood is going to be one long negotiation with risk. Right? We can’t shield her from everything. We can try, but we’ll fail sometimes. She’ll scrub her knee and fail a math test and get her heart broken. I’m more worried about that, then a nanny who’s been triple-vetted and checked and signed with the best agency in town.”

“You’re making a lot of sense.”

“Yeah. And you hate it,” she says, smiling.

“Maybe. Only because... honey, trying to keep her and you from harm is the most important job I have. Nothing in life is guaranteed. *Nothing*. For a long time that made me focus only on the present. The future wasn’t promised. What good was it to plan for it? To open yourself up to being hurt?”

“I know,” she murmurs.

The understanding in her voice washes over me. I shake my head, my words turning angry. “But now I want to do the opposite. I want to make sure nothing bad ever does happen, and I know I can’t, because nobody can, and I hate it. I really fucking hate it.”

She wraps her arms around my neck. The hug is unexpected, and I tighten my arms around her waist. She smells lovely, like her, familiar and warm and floral.

“It’s the worst,” I mutter into her ear.

“Yeah. I agree. Part of life, though.”

I make a grumbling noise. Things I don’t like, I change. I’ve always been that way. But I can’t change this unchangeable fact. Since Cecilia, and since the arrival of Philippa, I’m living with my heart walking around outside of my body. It makes me feel out of control.

“It’s an uncomfortable truth,” she says, and leans back in my arms. “But you’ve faced a lot of them before. We both

have. We'll have to face this one too, together.”

“You're right.”

“About tomorrow not being guaranteed... Shouldn't that make us want to treasure the present even more?”

My arms tighten around her. “You don't think I do that?”

“I know you do,” she says. “Don't think I haven't noticed. Let's focus on that, then, instead of seeing imaginary dangers around every corner.”

“So what you're saying is that I need to get on board with a nanny?”

She chuckles. “Yes! Please! I want to go away with you and have an entire night when it's just you and me, and I can enjoy myself, and then *sleep* after. An actual full night of sleep.”

I smooth a thumb over her cheek, cold from the nip in the air. I should have seen this earlier. Should have seen the real source of her frustration. “I'm sorry,” I say. “It's been selfish of me, vetoing them all like that.”

“It's okay. Thanks for telling me why you've really been doing.”

“Thanks for pushing me,” I say, my voice quiet. It had taken me a long time to figure out that I needed it. She had, even before I'd snapped out of my blindness and realized what a catch she was. As my assistant, she'd done it cleverly, slyly, and as my wife she's kept up with the practice.

And I need it. I'm a better man today, right here, because of her pushing.

I kiss her. She tastes good, and the kiss is sweet, filled with the release of pent-up emotions and irritation. It's the return to a normalcy I've come to crave.

From the stroller comes the sound of little feet kicking.

“Uh-oh,” Cecilia says. “We've been standing still for too long.”

I push the stroller back and forth, and the kicking dies down. Our little momentum baby. “Did you want this tree?”

“Yes. It’s perfect, don’t you think?”

“It is,” I say. Because she is, and if she thinks it, then it’s the best damn tree in the whole country.

Later that evening, I sit on the couch and watch as Cecilia hangs ornaments on the tree. The gifts she’d wrapped earlier are already beneath it. It looks good. Even I can admit that.

Philippa is lying on her stomach on a baby play mat between us, surrounded by toys.

“You could have been the Christmas decorator,” I say.

Cecilia chuckles. She’s on her tiptoes, and I get up to help her hang a bauble near the top of the tree. “It’s more of a hobby for me,” she says.

“One you’re good at.”

“Thanks.” She tilts her head to the side and looks at me. “You know, I really meant what I said earlier. You don’t have to buy me things just because we argue. And just because we argue from time to time, or have disagreements, doesn’t mean that *we* aren’t still great.”

“I know,” I say. But the words are good to hear regardless.

“Good. Because I know that you didn’t really have healthy conflicts with loved ones growing up, but it’s a part of life, to disagree. And I won’t love you any less because of it.”

I tug her against my side. Everything is easier when I’m holding her, and for conversations like this, it’s grounding.

“But you don’t mind them, either, do you?” I ask. “The making up gifts?”

She glances over at the tree, standing proud in our living room. The faint scent of pine hangs in the air. “No,” she says, “and the tree is lovely. But you know, there are other ways of making up.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” she murmurs, and pulls my head down to hers. I kiss her and pull her body tight against mine. Her softness molds against me, and I slide my hand down to her hips. Desire rises in me as quickly as the tree had started dropping needles.

Her mouth opens and I let my tongue trace her lower lip, loving the sound of her soft moan. Images flash through my head of the last time we’d gone to a hotel for a weekend. Her thighs around my head, my lips on her sensitive flesh, and the sound of her breaking apart with pleasure.

“Victor,” she murmurs and slides her hand in my hair. Her fingers tighten just the way I like. My desire turns molten.

A high-pitched wailing cuts through the air. We both turn to see a frustrated Philippa lying on her back. She’s managed to roll over from her tummy, but can’t yet find her way back onto it.

“Oh, are you stuck?” Cecilia says. She walks over to our beautiful, sweet screamer of a baby, and helps Philippa back onto her stomach. She stops wailing immediately and reaches for a chew toy.

“You know what,” I say. “I think a nanny is a great idea.”

Her eyes warm. “You think?”

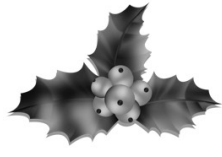
“Yes. Let’s start a new round of interviews right away. Tomorrow.”

She laughs. “I should have known the promise of uninterrupted sex would be the way to break you.”

“If you’d explained that logic to me weeks ago, you could have spared yourself a lot of trouble.”

“Maybe,” she says, and returns to my arms. Her eyes sparkle. “But then I wouldn’t have gotten a Christmas tree out of the deal.”

“Ah, I see how it is. I’m dealing with a master negotiator.” I tip her head back and kiss her again, melting into the warmth of her lips. “I yield.”



CARTER



6 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

“Kid!” I yell. “Did you steal my shirt?”

“No,” she calls back.

I frown, looking around the bedroom. I could’ve sworn it ended up on the divan at the end of our bed last night. I pull on a pair of sweats and head out of the bedroom to investigate.

The shirt-thief is in the kitchen. She’s standing by the kitchen island, arm-deep in a giant mixing bowl, wearing nothing but my blue button-down and a frustrated expression.

“You liar,” I say.

She looks up. “Whoops.”

“You know, I don’t feel comfortable starting a marriage based on lies.”

Audrey rolls her eyes. “Me neither, actually. And you know what I saw when I opened the fridge earlier?”

“Ah, damn.”

“Someone ate the last leftover cupcake when they said they wouldn’t.”

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll drop my case if you drop yours.”

She grins. “Truce?”

“Truce.” Walking around the counter, I stand beside her and peer into the bowl. It’s filled with a dark brown, sticky batter with plenty of nuts in it. “What’s that?”

“I’m trying to make biscotti. Smells good, right?”

“It does, yeah. Cinnamon?”

“Yes. The dough’s just so damn sticky. I mean, the recipe says it’s supposed to be, but it’s annoying.”

“This wouldn’t be for the Winters’ Christmas party, would it?”

“Maybe.”

That makes me chuckle. Her hair’s in a messy bun, and I reach up to tease one of the locks free. “You know they’ll have catering. They’ll pull out all the stops.”

“Yes, but I want to bring something homemade as a gift.”

“You’re cute.” I reach for a spoon and dip into the dough, grabbing a chunk.

She watches on. “I don’t think this is the kind of dough that tastes good raw.”

I try it anyway. It’s not bad, but she’s right. It’s not fantastic either. “It’s all right,” I say. “A lot of Christmas spices.”

“Well, ’tis the season,” she says, and turns to me. “How are you feeling?”

I groan. “Audrey.”

“I have to ask,” she says. “It’s part of my job, you know.”

“Mhm.” I push the bowl away and grab her, lifting her up on the kitchen island. She chuckles but doesn’t protest.

“Does this mean you’ll answer my question now?” she asks.

I rest my arms around her waist. “I’m great. It’s the first day of a full week without work, and I get to spend all of it with you, and some of it right here. Alone in our apartment. What’s not to like?”

Audrey’s smile softens, and she wraps her arms around my neck. “That’s right. And you know, this week will be what we make of it. It’s all up to us.”

“Of course.”

“And me baking cookies doesn’t mean I’m trying too hard.”

“Never said you were.”

“I know,” she says. “But... I know what you said a few weeks ago. About your mom.”

I close my eyes. Yeah. I’d finally come clean to Audrey about why I didn’t like holidays, as much as I’d tried to hide it from her. There’s nothing wrong with them objectively. The food’s good, and the days off work are even better. But it had been a coin toss, every single time, whether my dad would make it home or not in time to celebrate Christmas, or Thanksgiving, or the Fourth of July.

He rarely did.

Now, of course, I know who he was celebrating with instead. His other family, his *real* family, who lived in a large house with a white picket fence and a family dog.

“I just don’t want anyone feeling like they *have* to make Christmas special,” I say. “I never want you, or my mom for that matter, to feel like it’s a must. A requirement. Where’s the holiday magic in that?”

She smiles. “I just wanted to try this recipe.”

“Good,” I say. The memories of my mother trying to make up for Dad’s absence run deep. Trying to explain to me why he couldn’t be there for Christmas morning when she barely knew herself. And working, always working *so* hard, to make the holidays special for me regardless. I love her for it, just like I hate my dad for putting her in that position. But I never want anyone to bend over backwards like that for me again.

“Christmas will be quiet this year,” Audrey says. “Just like last year.”

I raise an eyebrow. “*Quiet* is hardly the word I’d use.”

“Well, maybe it depends on what you’re used to.”

“Probably, Miss I-have-fourteen-cousins.”

She chuckles. “And two of them were obsessed with play-wrestling. I’m glad they’re not joining Christmas this year.”

“Are they still play-wrestling as adults?” I ask. “Because if so, I think they’re cousins you should disinherit.”

“I think they’ve stopped, but you can never be too safe,” she says. This year we’re spending Christmas with her parents and my mother. We’re planning on doing all the city things. Rockefeller Center, the Rockettes, shopping... just good food and even better company.

It almost sounds nice.

“This week will be good,” I say.

“Are you trying to convince yourself?”

“Maybe,” I say. “I’m a master negotiator, you know that. I don’t stand a chance against my own arguments.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“The worst,” I agree, and tighten my arms around her. Being silly around Audrey has become second nature. All walls are down. They have been for years now, our partnership the most valuable thing in my life. There’s no one I’d rather talk to than her. No one else I’d rather plan on spending my life with.

“It’ll be nice seeing William and the girls a few days after, too. When did you decide on dinner?”

“The twenty-eighth,” I say.

Her smile widens. “Perfect. If these biscotti turn out good, maybe I’ll make some for them too.”

“Mhm,” I say.

“What? You don’t have faith in my baking skills?”

“You’re talented at so many things,” I say. “You’re a brilliant journalist, a fantastic conversationalist, you know the lyrics to every single song that comes on the radio, you’re compassionate, kind, funny, beautiful, the absolute best partner in—”

“So that’s a no.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll take it,” she says, “but skills can be improved. Is William bringing his wife? Sarah and her husband?”

“I think so,” I say. “Hopefully, at any rate.”

My brother and I have met up a handful of times. He understands my anger, and shares it, to some extent. He’s never once questioned my decision not to talk to Dad or see him. William’s also my polar opposite. It had made things awkward, in the beginning, to find things to talk about. But now we’ve settled into the relationship. He’s quiet, but his humor is dry and black and I love it.

My half-sisters have taken longer for me to warm to. Sarah is still very hurt by Dad’s actions, and she’s more open to me. But Jenny is the one who still has the closest relationship with him and doesn’t like to acknowledge his “little” misstep. The misstep, of course, being me.

“That’s good. It’s always easier with the spouses,” Audrey says. “But what’s most important, I think, is that you’re all trying. That’s all you four can do. This isn’t a situation you train for, you know?”

“Definitely not.”

“You’re doing your best navigating it all. Every time you meet, it’s like you’re reaffirming that the future is what matters and not the past. You guys can still have a good relationship, unsullied by what your dad did.”

It takes me a moment to find the words. “You should be a writer.”

She smiles. “Do you know a newspaper I could work for?”

“Maybe. Have you heard of the *Globe*? But you’re right. Every time we meet up is a step in... some direction, at least.”

“Yes. *He* might have dictated your lives in the past, but you’re all adults now, and the decisions are yours and yours alone.”

I nod. Her words are ones I've heard before, but that doesn't make them any less nice to hear. "You know what I liked last Christmas?"

"What?"

"The marathon we had, just you and me, watching movies in bed."

Her smile widens. "We can do that again."

"I want to take you out to a restaurant too, for a proper date."

"I'm open to that," she says. "We should probably plan our honeymoon a bit, too. Give some options to the agency. Right?"

"Yeah. We can do that in between all the movies, in bed. We can do other things in bed too. I like all kinds of marathons."

She chuckles. "I was thinking more like, at the kitchen table, with a computer open and a notepad."

"Traditional, but that might work," I say. "How are you feeling? Ready to become Mrs. Kingsley?"

She scoots to the edge of the kitchen counter and braces her thighs on either side of me. "Maybe I should be Mrs. Queensley."

"I can't believe you just said that."

"What, you're the only one allowed to make bad jokes?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you insulting my humor?"

"You can't gatekeep it," she says, face innocent. "That's all I'm saying. And yes, I can't wait. Only two more months now, you know."

"I know," I say, and pull her closer. Her lips are warm and taste of spices from the dough. She must have snuck a bit of it, too.

Marrying her feels like the easiest decision I've ever made. There's something about it that makes me excited in a way no

company takeover, no work prospect, ever has before. Being a husband was never a role I thought about. Never a role I wanted.

But now I can't wait to get a shot at it.

Audrey leans back in my arms, her eyes sparkling. "Just remember, if you hate some aspect of this week, or of the Christmas decorations I've put up, you just tell me. We talk through things. Right?"

"Of course we do," I say. "I appreciate it, but you know I'm not a fragile baby bird?"

She ignores me. "Like I said from the start, there are no musts, no have-tos. We don't even have to give each other gifts if you don't want to."

"I'm going to have to stop you right there. This is the second time a year, the first being your birthday, where I can give you all the opulence in the world and you can't protest."

She rolls her eyes. "I don't need opulence."

"Then you shouldn't have married a rich guy, kid."

"Jesus," she says. "Sometimes I wonder if you speak like this to people who aren't me and I get worried. You'll get yourself in trouble one day."

"Yes, but then I'll talk myself right out of it," I say. "Besides, if we didn't give each other gifts, what would I do with my stockpile of jewelry?" I've bought her a pair of diamond earrings she'll protest but love, a first edition of one of her favorite books, and a trip to Bali for us both next fall.

"Okay, all right," she says, and pulls me in for a kiss. "Forget I said anything, you baby bird."

I lift my lips. "Eagle."

"Raven, at the most."

"Let me at least be a bird of prey."

She cocks her head, like she's considering it. "A vulture would be too on the nose, you venture capitalist. How about... a very tiny falcon."

“You’re insulting me, and doing so wearing my own shirt, no less. I’d at least be an owl.”

“Maybe in a few years,” she says, eyes dancing. “You have to gain some wisdom first.”

“What is this conversation, even?”

“I don’t know,” she says, and pushes me firmly back to slide down from the counter. “But I’m convinced you’re doing it just to keep me from finishing my Great New York Bake Off.”

I snap my fingers. “That’s it. That’s what we should marathon this Christmas.”

She shakes her head, but she’s smiling, that wide expression of happiness that I love the most. Every time she smiles at me, or because of me, it fills me with warmth. “Go put on a shirt,” she says. “You can’t have mine.”

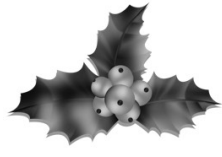
I give a sage nod. “I guess I’ll have to get used to it. What’s mine is yours, and all that.”

“That’s right,” she says. “If you want me to stop, you’ll have to stop buying such nice shirts.”

“Blackmail. Impressive.”

“Go,” she says, grinning. I do, walking past rows of little nutcrackers she’d put up in the hallway, and not minding them one bit.





AUDREY

## 6 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

I look at the spread of shopping on the kitchen island. After baking the best biscotti I've ever made—and the first—we'd hit the town, and the Christmas stores had delivered.

Few things are as beautiful as the holiday season in New York City. The sparkle, the decorations, the smell of candied nuts. Even the crowds don't bother me. There's a magic to that too, all of us preparing to celebrate the holidays in sync, families and couples and tourists alike, beneath the winter sky.

I reach for the costume I'd bought. "Do you think," I say, loud enough for Carter to hear me in the other room, "that he might get offended by this?"

"Isaac?"

"Yes."

Carter returns to the kitchen and pulls out a chair, looking at the costume I've laid out on the island. "Hypothetically, *if* I knew who you had for Secret Santa—"

"Hypothetically?"

"Yes. *If* I knew, I'd say that this person would get a great laugh from it. It was his idea, wasn't it, that the Secret Santa gifts had to be ironic?"

"I think the word was 'fun,'" I say. "You're the one who loves irony."

Carter's mouth turns into a half-smile. "Guilty."

I run a hand over the bellboy costume. It had taken us a while to find, but once I'd come up with the idea, I knew I had to run with it. Isn't it perfect for the hotel mogul?

"If nothing else," Carter says, "I look forward to watching Sophia force him to wear that little hat."

That makes me chuckle. "Me too. Okay, I'm not worried about my Secret Santa gift anymore."

"Good," Carter says, and grabs the gift he'd bought. He peels away layer after layer of tissue paper. "I know Summer won't be offended by mine."

I give a dramatic gasp. "*Summer* is your Secret Santa?"

"Hypothetically, yes."

"I'm shocked."

He chuckles and sets the unwrapped statue back on the kitchen island. It's tall, and made in a marble reproduction. It had been more expensive than mine, that's for sure, but I think it's something Summer might actually use.

"It's really pretty," I say.

Carter touches the tip of the arrow peeking out from behind Cupid's back. "I'm glad it came with a certificate of authenticity, but it actually just says it's fake. It's a certified *copy* of an authentic piece."

I grin. "Just in case someone thought you'd bought a Roman antique on the black market."

"Exactly. It'll work, though, for a love addict like Summer."

"Of course it will. Watch her give it a place of pride in her home office." I frown down at my bellboy outfit. "You've out Secret Santa'd me."

"Nonsense," he says. "Your costume is the best thing to give to a man who can buy himself whatever he wants, except a sense of humor."

"Carter," I say, but I'm smiling.

“I like the guy, don’t get me wrong, but he could use a laugh or two.” He reaches for one of my biscotti, resting on a cooling rack on the kitchen island. “These turned out great, by the way.”

“See? Doubting me is never a wise decision.”

“I know that, kid.” He takes a bite of the Christmas cookie. “I really wonder what someone’s bought you as an ironic gift.”

“Oh, I can’t even imagine. Or you, for that matter.” But then I smile, an idea forming. “Scratch that. I can actually think of a few for you.”

“That look on your face,” he says. “It’s diabolical.”

I chuckle. “No, it’s not. I’m just imagining someone getting you an improv comedy course.”

His eyes widen. “They wouldn’t dare.”

“Ironic though. Right?”

“Ironic *and* offensive,” he agrees. “So, dinner. Do you still feel like take-out?”

I feel warm, filled up with happiness and twosomeness and the prospect of an entire week with him, and with family, and with friends. No work and no early mornings. “Yes. I want us to eat Chinese on the couch and watch stupid movies.”

He salutes me, a soldier taking orders. “Yes, ma’am. Do you want soda or red wine? Sparkling water? Iced tea?”

The question sparks a tendril of nerves through me. “Iced tea, please.”

“Got it.” He leans in and gives me a quick kiss. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here waiting.”

He grabs his wallet and heads toward the front door. “Keep an eye on that Cupid statue!” he says over his shoulder. “If you see him aiming an arrow at you, duck. You’re mine!”

“I’ll be on my guard!”

His chuckle is the last thing I hear, and then he disappears out the front door of our apartment and toward the elevators. The uneasy nervousness in my stomach doesn't relent. His comment about wine or iced tea had launched it full scale.

I hit play on our surround sound system and scroll through my phone for a Christmas playlist. Crooning music starts to play softly in our apartment. *Ours*, that we've decorated together, that we've made a home together. I lean forward on the kitchen island and put my head in my hands. I'd planned on waiting until Christmas Day. It was going to be a Christmas gift, of sorts.

But now...

Every day that passes makes it harder to keep the secret. He's my best friend. My fiancé, soon-to-be-husband, and my greatest cheerleader. He knows me and understands me and has my back like no one else. And I'm going insane not knowing how he'll react.

The sun has begun to set outside the windows, earlier than usual, thanks to the season. It's also started to snow. Thin, white flakes twirl outside the windows, dancing on unseen gusts of wind. It makes my breath catch. I've always loved this snowy season.

"Okay," I murmur. "All right. This is as good a time as any."

I dig out the gift box from its hiding spot in my sock drawer. Inside rests the positive pregnancy test, wrapped beneath a layer of tissue paper, like a present to be unwrapped.

I just hope he'll take it as one.

I'd first noticed something off a week and a half ago. My period was late, my breasts were tender, and my body just felt... different. Uneasy somehow. The test had been a shot in the dark.

We'd spoken about maybe trying next year, or the year after that. But we hadn't decided on *now*.

I grip the little box tight and sit down on the couch, waiting. I'm happy. Stupidly happy, perhaps, in my life and

my relationship and my work. A baby feels like the most wonderful addition.

I'm just praying he'll feel the same way.

Torturous minutes later, I hear the sound of a key turning in the door. "I'm back!" he calls. "It started snowing, did you see?"

"I saw!"

"Thought of you." He shrugs out of his jacket and shoes, and steps into the living room. A wonderful scent spreads from the bag in his hand. "Got your favorite. They didn't have peach iced tea, so I got lemonade."

"That's great," I say. My stomach is flipping over with anticipation, and as delicious as the food smells, I know I can't eat until I get this done.

Carter pauses by the kitchen island. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

He narrows his eyes and leaves the bag of food behind, coming toward me. "You sure? Why are you sitting on the couch like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you're expecting royalty."

"I'm just sitting," I say, and pat the spot next to me. "Will you join me?"

His movements turn cautious. "Sure. Are you going to tell me that Cupid managed to get a good shot, and you're now in love with an inanimate object? Am I going to have to fight the fridge or something?"

"No, no, I kept my shield up. No... I have an early Christmas gift for you."

He sits down beside me, face concerned. "I don't need anything special."

"I know, but I like... never mind. I was going to wait until Christmas, but I don't think I can." I hand him the silver box.

He accepts it carefully, holding it in his open palm like it's a bomb.

“Okay,” he murmurs, and starts to tug at the ribbon. “This is intriguing.”

“Mhm.”

Every passing second feels like torture. I watch as he wiggles off the lid, lifts it up. As he stares at the pregnancy test in the tissue-papered box. The double lines are still clearly visible.

“Audrey,” he murmurs.

“It's early, still,” I whisper. “I think I'm in the third week, if I've counted it correctly.”

The hand holding the box cramps, the knuckles turning white. “You're pregnant?”

“Either that, or the seven tests I took are all wrong. The odds of that aren't great.” My voice sounds shrill with nerves and excitement. “I know this is earlier than we'd planned, and our life is great as it is, and we weren't going to start trying—”

He wraps his arms around me, tugging me so tight against him that my breath whooshes out of me. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God,” he says. “Oh my fucking God. Sorry. I mean... holy shit.” He pulls me into standing with his hands on my arms. There's a warm glow on his face. “You were going to keep this from me for another week?”

My eyes overflow. “I wanted to make Christmas special!”

He smooths a thumb over my cheek, wiping away a happy tear. “You're really pregnant,” he says, and then again, quieter. “We're going to be parents?”

I nod. “Are you happy?”

“Of course I am, kid. Of course I am.”

“Yeah?”



“Yeah,” he says, and pulls me closer. He hugs me tight and I feel his heartbeat against mine, fast and strong. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happier.”

I close my eyes. Tears track down and settle in the fabric of his sweater. “Me neither.”

He kisses me. It’s a wet kiss, marred by my tears, but it’s warm and true and laced with love. “Iced tea,” he murmurs. “That’s why you haven’t wanted any wine for the last week or two.”

“Thought you’d pick up on that.”

He shakes his head, eyes warm. “You fooled me. And... oh my God...” He reaches down and puts a hand on my stomach. “Next year, then.”

“Yes, probably sometime in August.”

“What a great month to be born.”

“It’s probably the best.”

A smile spreads across his face. “I can’t believe you said this was going to be a Christmas gift!”

I laugh. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes! But it’s too much! My stupid earrings will never outweigh this.”

“You got me earrings?”

“Yeah,” he says, smile widening. “I love you so much.”

“That’s why we’re doing this, you know.”

We sink back onto the couch. He runs a hand through his hair, and I notice that it shakes, just a little. “Our baby is going to have the best mom,” he says. “You’re going to be such a good parent.”

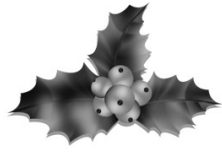
I lean my head against his shoulder. “So will you.”

He’s quiet for a moment, his hand moving in slow circles over my back. “Yeah,” he murmurs, and his voice is filled with sincerity. “I’ll try, that’s for sure. I’ll do my absolute best.”

And I know he means that. He never gives anything less than a hundred percent when he's made up his mind, and if there's one thing he's said, over and over, is that he never wants to be like his father. He'll forge his own path instead.

Do it right, do it better.

I slip my hand into his and look out at the falling snow, whirling outside our windows. "I can't wait to do my best together with you."



ISAAC

## 2 DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

“Okay,” Sophia says from her office. She’s using her professional voice; polite, soothing, but clipped at the edges. “That’s not a problem. As long as it’s here by noon on the day, and no later.”

I smile down at my computer screen. Sophia is a project organizer through and through. She had been when we met, and she still is, just in a different Exciteur department. It carries over to her personal life beautifully. No one project manages a party like she does.

“Will you be sending the... yes, exactly. That’s a big part of the meal... excellent. Thank you very much.”

Her conversation is more interesting than the numbers on my screen. I’d just received an end of the year report from The Winter Caribbean, and the numbers bleed together on the spreadsheet. Concentrating is rarely an issue for me, but it seems like the Christmas atmosphere has finally gotten to me.

“Okay... all right. Thank you very much. I’ll call to confirm in the morning. Take care... yes, you too.”

I wait a few seconds to make sure she’s off the phone. “Did you give them a dressing down?”

“A very polite one!”

“Oh, I heard. You were fearsome.”

She chuckles. I hear the sound of a chair being pulled out, and then she’s in the doorway to my office. The gray

loungewear set she's wearing hugs her body close, and her hair is in a low ponytail. I love it when she's dressed for home.

"All I did," she says, "is make sure we'll have food for our guests."

"I'm sure they'll be very happy."

"They'd better be," she says, but she's smiling. "Did you get confirmation from the waitstaff on your end?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you asking if I fulfilled my very menial task?"

"Yes," she says, her smile widening. "You're famously lazy, you know. I have to double-check. Keep you on track."

"True," I say, and reach out to shut my laptop. "Unreliable, too."

She walks into my home office, her bare feet silent on the thick rug. "Not to mention great at dodging questions."

"I got a confirmation from the waitstaff."

"Excellent! Then we're all set to go."

"Sure are." I push back from my desk and motion for her to join me. The numbers report can wait for a few more days.

She sinks down on my lap and loops an arm around my shoulders. "Is everything right in the kingdom, oh mighty Emperor?"

"I'm not sure," I say.

Her eyebrows rise. "No?"

"I've decided I have better things to do these coming days," I say. "I have a dinner to host, Christmas to prepare for, and a girlfriend to take care of."

A crooked smile spreads across her lips. "You're going to *take care* of me?"

"Yes. Spend more time together... Maybe get another game in before we head to Montauk on Christmas morning."

"I'm still sore from our game yesterday."

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh, are you?”

“*Isaac.*”

“Couldn’t help myself,” I say. “How are you feeling?”

“Good. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, it’s the first Christmas you’re not celebrating with your family,” I say.

It’s our third Christmas as a couple. The first, we’d spent on our own with our separate families. For Christmas last year, I’d gone with her to Marhill. It hadn’t been my first time visiting her family, but it had been the longest trip to date. They’re loud and loving and when they say they want the best for Sophia, they genuinely mean it, without any expectations attached to it. I’d been grateful to them for that.

“Yes, but I’ll see them at New Year’s,” she says. Her eyes are warm on mine and relaxed, like we’ve both put a pin in our workaholic tendencies.

God, I love her.

“My parents,” I say. “You won’t feel...”

“No, not at all. I only felt like that in the beginning, you know.”

“It’s okay if you feel it still,” I say. “We’ll work through it.”

Her face turns thoughtful, and I wait for her words, my arms tight around her. My parents can be a lot. It’s an alotness so different from her parents, with their loud voices and jokes and freely expressed opinions. While Sophia’s parents are great at putting others at ease, my parents are experts at doing the opposite.

Sophia had been forced to deal with terrible parents-in-law during her marriage. I’d hate for her to feel even a glimpse of that again.

“Your parents are lovely,” she says. “It just took me a little while to see that. I was... afraid in the beginning, I suppose, and kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. But they haven’t

hinted that I'm a gold-digger or a silver thief yet, and by now, I'm pretty convinced they won't."

I smooth a stray lock of her hair back behind her ear. "They're not the best at expressing it, but they're pretty damn ecstatic that I found you, you know."

"Ecstatic?"

"Yes. They'd given up hope I'd ever marry."

Her eyes widen. *Marry*. But we're not engaged, nor have we spoken about it. The silence stretches for a second longer than usual.

"Well, I'm glad I put their minds at ease," she says finally. "They thought you'd be a bachelor all your life?"

"Pretty much."

"That's hard to imagine," she says. "It just feels so natural, you know. You being a partner to someone."

"To *someone*?"

"To me," she says, her mouth curving into a smile. "Only to me."

I pull her in for a kiss, and it deepens in a way we don't let ourselves indulge in during normal workdays. Her hand slides into my hair, fingers tightening around the strands. It sends a shiver racing down my spine. I want to marry her. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything... and I haven't told her that.

I don't know if she's ready to hear it.

"Who'd you get?" she murmurs.

I press my lips to the smooth skin of her neck. "Hmm?"

"For Secret Santa?" she whispers. "Who'd you get?"

I slide my hand into her hair, tightening just a bit, to pull her head up. "Are you seducing me just to find out?"

"Maybe."

I kiss her again. "I take the rules of the game very seriously," I say against her lips.



She'd been the one to decide them, too. We're hosting a Christmas Eve dinner party with my brother and his business partners who, admittedly, have become friends over the years. Sophia has grown close with Audrey, and she regularly meets up with Summer.

"But you're mine," she murmurs back. "The rules don't count with *me*."

"Maybe I got you in the draw. Ever thought of that?"

She leans back, her lips rosy with kisses. "Did you?"

"You know I wouldn't tell you."

"Tease," she says, and shifts in my lap. The pressure makes me groan. She rolls her hips again, right over my hardness. "How about I keep doing this, until you cave?"

"Extortion," I mutter.

"Yes. Very effective." She reaches down and slides her hand over the bulge in my slacks. She finds the outline easily and squeezes. More of my blood rushes south.

I close my eyes. "I don't negotiate with terrorists."

"Oh?" Her hand tightens around me. "I thought you were a master negotiator."

"Why do you want to know so bad?"

She undoes my zipper. "Because I want to tell you mine."

"You could've just told me from the start."

"I know. But this," she says, and closes her hand around my erection, "is more fun."

"Jesus," I mutter. "Yeah, maybe it is."

"Besides, you love negotiations."

"I do," I admit. My eyes drift down and watch as she strokes me with steady, tantalizing movements. It's been a while since we did this in my office. A while since we did it anywhere, actually, that's not our king-sized bed.

Sophia's smile is one of my favorites. It's filled with desire, amplified by her sparkling blue eyes. "So?" she asks,

her fingers tightening. “Are you close to caving?”

“Mmm. As delicious as your hand is, I’ve got more stamina than that, sweetheart.”

Her smile widens. “That’s usually something I like.”

“I know you do.” Reaching for the hem of her sweater, I take my time folding it up, inch by inch. Revealing her smooth skin and the bralette she’s wearing beneath.

*Marry me*, I think.

She tosses her sweater to the side, and I take the chance to kiss her. The hand crushed between our chests slows its stroking to an almost painful pace. She tastes good, like her and warmth and as much as I have stamina, I’m not in the mood for slow and torturous today. The need for her pounds like a second heartbeat beneath my skin.

“I’ll tell you someone I didn’t get for Secret Santa,” I say. “You tell me someone you didn’t get.”

Her eyes glitter. “I didn’t get you.”

“What a disappointment,” I say. “Well, I didn’t get you either.”

“Good thing I’ve bought you Christmas gifts anyway.”

I kiss her deeply, faltering only when she starts to stroke faster again. I’m hard as a rock now and every teasing touch sends pleasure-pain radiating through my legs.

“Now, if we’re negotiating…” I reach for her bralette and she lets me tug it off her. *Beautiful*, I think, soaking in her near-nakedness and closeness. It’s been over two years and I haven’t tired yet, and I doubt I ever will. Being close to her is like a drug.

“Isaac,” she murmurs. “I can’t stay in character if you look at me like that.”

“Do you need to?” I cup one of her breasts and roll the nipple between my fingers, feeling it harden. “Let’s have sex first, and then you can tell me all about your concerns. It’s

about whether or not you've bought the right thing for one of the guys. Am I right?"

Sophia frowns. "I have your dick in my hand, and you can still read me like a book?"

"It's my favorite pastime, sweetheart."

"I thought *this* was."

"Well, it's a close second. Come on." I wrap my arms around her thighs. "This chair is ergonomic for everything *but* this."

"I was going to torture you!"

"You can torture me in bed." I lift her up. She's tall, and it's no easy feat, but I wouldn't let go of her for anything. Our bedroom is one door over. It had been the first room we renovated in the old apartment after we bought it, just a few months ago. Everywhere else still needs sprucing up... a project Sophia is handling with expertise.

I didn't set out to marry a project manager, but damn if that isn't a lovely bonus.

I walk us to our bedroom and set her down on the bed. She crawls backwards and I join her, settling above. I kiss my way down the smooth skin of neck... her chest... finding a nipple. She moans softly with pleasure, her body softening beneath mine. "Carter," she murmurs.

I pause. "Isaac. I'm Isaac."

She chuckles, her fingers sliding into my hair and gripping tight. "And thank God for that! No, I have Carter for Secret Santa."

"Oh," I say. "You folded quickly."

"You made a good point."

"Mhm." I slide my hands beneath the waistband of her gray cashmere pants and thong, and pull them both off her long legs. She's naked and smiling on our bed, clad in winter sunlight streaming in from the windows, and I'm so glad we're doing this in daylight again. The last weeks of work had made

sex a nighttime activity, and she's far too beautiful to only be enjoyed in darkness.

"How much time do we have?"

She arches her back. "Until the cleaners arrive. So... an hour."

"Good," I mutter, and pull her to the edge of the bed.

"Isaac!"

"You teased me," I say, and sink to my knees on the soft carpet. "This is payback."

Her body goes soft and limp, her knees falling open. "If you insist," she says. The trust in the movement, in the words, never fails to turn me on. *Honored*, I think, and lower my mouth to her. I'm honored that I'm the one she trusts to be this close.

I don't stop until she comes. I grip her hips tight to keep her still and watch her through it, her skin flushing and chest heaving and the love I feel for her threatens to overwhelm me, right then and there, watching how beautiful she is when she lets herself come undone.

*Marry me.*

She tugs at my shoulders. "Come here."

"What was that?"

"Isaac," she groans. "Come on, I need you inside me."

I put my arms under her knees and fold them up, spreading her wide for me. She's gorgeous beneath me. Flushed from her orgasm and her body open and ready and I push in, watching as inch after inch disappears.

Funny how this never gets old. The look on her face, the soft parting of her lips, the moan that escapes her when I slide in to the hilt. It's perfection.

"Yes," she murmurs. "Yes, yes, *yes*."

I roll my hips, thrusting deep into her. "Much better than expense reports."

Her hand slaps mine where it's holding her knee wide.  
“*Much better?*”

“Infinitely better,” I say, and speed up. “Not in the same realm. An Excel spreadsheet’s got nothing on fucking you.”

“That’s right.”

“Think you can come again?”

“Yes,” she says, “feels like it.”

I grin down at her. Correction: there’s nothing better than that. Feeling her tighten around me and watching her break apart for a second time. It’s always stronger than the first, and I love how sensitive she is afterwards.

“Do you want me to get a vibrator, or hands?”

“Hands,” she says. “The vibrator would be too much.”

I let go of one of her legs, freeing my hand. It’s instantly put to good use. Sometimes she does this herself, depending on the position, but I love when I’m able to. I’ve always been a quick student, and studying how she likes to be touched is my favorite subject.

“Okay,” she murmurs, reaching up to lock a hand around my neck. “Keep doing that.”

I grin and speed up my hips. She moans every time I bottom out, her chest rising and falling with the rapid breaths. There’s a pressure building in my thighs and a tingling at the base of my spine and I close my eyes, trying to delay the tidal wave.

She feels too good.

I keep my fingers steady, circling, listening to the rapid rise of her moans. It doesn’t take long before she explodes. I open my eyes to see that. I *have* to see that.

Her back arches and her eyes close. “Oh my God,” she half-whispers, half-moans. Her legs turn into a vice around my hips and she flutters around me, intimate muscles squeezing, and I let the tidal wave wash over me. For a long minute we both drown in it.

It takes me a good five minutes before I can speak again. Sophia curls up along my side, a leg over mine and her right arm over my chest. I tug her close and feel the words hover on my tongue.

I'd slipped up earlier today and she'd reacted fine. Maybe she'll react fine to it again. Maybe she'll even welcome it, be open to it, say she wants what I want.

"Isaac?" she says.

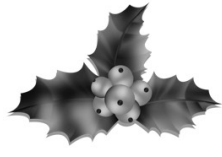
I swallow the words. "Yes?"

"I bought Carter a book of jokes. Do you think he'll hate me for it?"

"No," I say with a chuckle. "I think he'll get a kick out of it, and the others will love it. Besides, he could do to work on some new material."

"Good," she says, and nestles closer. "I hoped so, but I wanted to double-check."

I press my lips to her forehead. *Marry me.*



SOPHIA



## 1 DAY BEFORE CHRISTMAS

I wake up early on Christmas Eve, jostled by a set of paws kneading into my side. Milo has jumped onto our bed and is walking in a tight circle by my side, padding the cover to perfection, before he sinks down into a snug ball.

I run my fingers over his fur and glance behind me. Isaac's still asleep. I sneak quietly out of the bedroom and close the door behind me, careful not to make too much noise. He rarely sleeps in. It's reserved for special occasions, like holidays and vacations and the occasional lazy Sundays.

I pull on my fluffy robe and stick my feet into my slippers. Happiness feels like a warm blanket around me. I love Christmas, and I love it *here*, in the apartment we're making a home. I love the Christmas tree in the living room with the silver baubles and the large mantel with the pine garland draped over it.

Our new apartment is over a century old. We'd managed to snap it up before it hit the market, and it needs a lot of work, but it has the most stellar set of bones. Isaac and I had both contributed to the down payment. My name is on the contract, right next to Isaac's.

It's mine, and it's his, and it's *ours*.

I turn on some music and make coffee. While it brews, I start setting the table for tonight. It's something I've always enjoyed. The methodicalness of it, the design process. White tablecloth, charger plates, silverware, a garland draped along

the middle. I set out candleholders and hum along to an old Christmas song.

The past two years have been the best of my life.

I hadn't known it could be like this, to have a true partner, someone who trusts you and who you trust fully in return. How easy it can be—how easy it *should* be. Life is hard enough as it is. There's no need to complicate things further, and Isaac and I strive for simplicity in all things. We communicate open and easily. We fight, and then we make up, talking through the actual issues. We actually *solve* our problems. He supports my career and I support his and he has never, not once, pressured me about our relationship. Not in any direction.

I had needed that. But now...

I find the champagne flutes and arrange them on the kitchen island. It's good to have something to do with my hands while my mind works. *I'm ready*, I think. Maybe I have been for a few months, but the sensation has been creeping up on me slowly, little by little, until I'm finally submerged in it.

Sure, I'd been fully *in* with Isaac from the start, after we decided to invest in us. I'd meant that and I'd stuck with it. But on a subconscious level, I'd probably been afraid of another shoe dropping. It had been fun with Percy too... until it wasn't anymore. Why would this be any different?

But it was. It is. I know it is, but it had taken me some time to really trust it.

I pour two cups of coffee and stick today's edition of the *Globe* beneath my arm. But when I walk into our bedroom, the bed is empty.

He steps out of the bathroom with a toothbrush in hand. "Good morning."

He's so handsome, I think. And he's mine, all mussed dark hair and bare chest and soft smile. "Good morning," I say, "and merry almost Christmas."

"Is that what today is?"

“Yes. I brought you coffee and the *Globe* in bed.”

“I’d better get back into bed, then.”

He does. I lie down beside him and watch as he settles in. The familiar strength of him, the warmth, the steadiness. I know he’d help me solve any problem I might have.

“Isaac,” I say.

He unfolds the paper. “Yes?”

“I think I’m ready to have kids.”

“Sorry?”

That makes me chuckle. “I know I just sprung that on you, but... I think I’m ready. I want it in a way I never did before. It used to be theoretical... something I wanted for future me. But now it’s something I’m excited about for present me.”

“Right,” he says, and sits up straighter in bed. “When did you start feeling this way?”

“It’s been strong for a few weeks now, but I’ve had the thoughts for months,” I say. We’d spent a full week this summer in Marhill, and being so close to my niece, and seeing Isaac play with her... and playing with Summer and Anthony’s little son...

I want the same thing, and I want it with Isaac.

“All right,” he says. His face is serious, but there’s warmth there, too.

“All right? You know, I can’t really have kids by myself.”

“I generally think you can do anything you put your mind to, but yeah, that might be a hard one.”

I grab his hand, lying on the cover between us. “The only person I want to have kids with is you. It’s not something I want to do if you’re not on board.”

The want had never hit me with Percy. Kids had always remained a theoretical in that marriage. Maybe it’s age, maybe it’s where I’m at in life... but maybe, just maybe, it’s my

relationship. Maybe it's Isaac. I needed a man I loved and knew I could trust.

"Sweetheart," Isaac murmurs, his hand tightening around mine. "You know I want children with you, too. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want us to talk about it. I want us to plan for it. I want us to try."

His mouth curves into a half-smile. "Then we'll do that."

"Okay," I say, my own smile widening. "Next year is going to be incredible, I can tell."

"It will," he says. Then he clears his throat, and the hand around mine tightens. "I have something I want to talk to you about, too."

"Oh?"

"We've never really spoken about marriage," he says. "Is it something you see in your future?"

I look down at our intertwined fingers. None of them carry a ring. He'd said it yesterday, in his office. *His parents never thought he'd marry.* And now they do.

I smooth my thumb over his. "It's what you want, right?"

"Yes," he says. "I'd love to be married to you. But only if and when you want it. I'll never make you do anything, you know that. And I'll never spring a proposal on you in a fully packed stadium or something."

That makes me smile. "Not really your style."

"Definitely not. So... How do you feel about it?"

I take a deep breath. His eyes are dark and serious, and I know he'll accept whatever I say next. There's comfort in that. "We'll have a different marriage," I say. "Our own marriage. I think it might be a little like this, like how we live right now... won't it?"

His eyes soften. "Yes, I imagine so. I don't want anything to change."

“Me neither. And maybe we can have a long engagement?”

“As long as you want, sweetheart.”

“I don’t want a huge wedding. Not saying it has to be small, but... all of New York can’t come.”

“Definitely not,” he says, his smile widening. “They wouldn’t fit, at any rate.”

I shift closer to him on the bed. “Did we just decide two very major things in the span of five minutes?”

“I think we might’ve.”

“I’m impressed by how efficient we are.”

“We always have been.” He pulls me closer, and I wrap my arms around his neck. “You know I still want to propose to you properly,” he says.

“Oh, I do want that.”

“Good. We’ll talk rings, too. I want you to wear something you’ll love for decades to come.”

“They say communication is key.”

“They do, don’t they?” He kisses me, warm and soft. “Next year really might be a big one for us, then.”

“Yes. We should plan it out.”

“Nothing turns me on like fiscal quarters.”

I laugh. “That’s the kind of dirty talk you want me to do?”

“Yes please,” he says, but he’s smiling widely. There’s happiness in his eyes, so much of it that it makes my chest ache. “So we’re on the same page, then.”

“Same page, same word,” I say, and kiss him again. “Have you been thinking about this for a long time?”

We both stretch out in bed, our cups of coffee forgotten and likely cold by now on the nightstands. “Yes,” he admits.

“We could’ve talked about marriage earlier.”

“You weren’t ready,” he says, and when I make to protest, he kisses me again. It’s a long minute before I can speak.

“Okay,” I finally say. “Maybe I wasn’t.”

“I’ll propose when you least expect it,” he murmurs.

“I’ll be on my guard now, you know.”

“Oh, I know. I’ll have to throw you off the scent.”

I settle against his chest and he slides his hands inside my robe, finding the bare skin of my shoulders beneath. I feel free, and light, and bathed in potential and possibility. Planning a future with him doesn’t feel like being in a gilded cage. It feels like building something new together with the best partner a person could have.

“I love you,” he says. “Married or not married, kids or no kids, whatever comes our way...”

I trace the outline of his jaw. “I love you too. And you know what?”

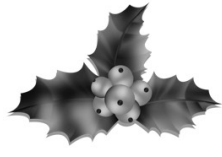
“What?”

“I don’t think I’ll mind living a traditional life again, as long as I’m part of making the traditions.”

His smile blooms beneath my fingers. “Well, our Christmas Eve traditions are off to a great start so far.”

“Breakfast in bed?”

“Exactly,” he says, and pulls me in for a kiss. “The party can wait...”



# EPILOGUE



## 12 YEARS LATER

Theo doesn't like all the noise, and there's so much of it. From the speaker playing music in the corner, to the slam of cutlery against porcelain plates, to the soft murmuring of the serving staff in the kitchen.

What he does like, however, are the decorations and the smell of Christmas that hang in the air, and the feel of Julie's thigh resting against his own.

"Come on," she says. "Focus on the game."

Right. He looks down at the board, the Christmas-themed Monopoly, the one they're all too old for but still play every Christmas Eve party. It's become a tradition. *A tradition within a tradition*, Theo thinks, and reaches for the dice. He avoids jail and ends up right on a plot that Emilia owns. His little sister gives him a victorious grin. "Pay up!"

"Yeah, yeah," he mutters and hands her the notes. He zones out during Elijah's and Philippa's turns. From the other room he hears his parents. They're drinking and laughing and talking to the others. Dinner's not ready yet and so the kids are exiled here, to the den in his aunt and uncle's apartment, with boardgames and the TV showing Christmas-themed cartoons. Nova and Jacob, the young twins, are watching it.

Joshua walks in, leans against the doorway. "You winning?" he asks Julie. He's holding a glass of what looks like whiskey in his right hand and Theo hates how he's allowed at the grown-ups' table, how he's always been allowed at the grown-ups' table.

At fourteen, shouldn't Theo be too?

Joshua's girlfriend is somewhere out there, too. Julie calls her *mean-spirited* and Theo hates her too, on principle.

"I will be in a few rounds," she answers her brother.

Joshua grins. He's grown a beard over the summer and Theo is envious of that, too. "Good. The food's almost ready. I asked Dad if you could sit at the grown-up table."

"And?"

"It's a maybe. They're considering rearranging things."

"I can talk to my uncle," Theo says. After all, it's *his* aunt and uncle's party. They've had it for as long as he can remember, this dinner for their closest friends. He has vague memories of it being smaller, but over the years it's grown to encompass more and more kids, and more and more friends. It's small compared to his grandparents' party, and that's a blessing, at least. The noise in their house threatens to overwhelm him.

His cousin shoots him a look across the table. "It's not worth trying," she says. "I've asked Mom and Dad all week."

*But she's only eleven*, Theo thinks, but he doesn't say it. Odette has a fierce temper.

"Anyway," Joshua says, and turns from the door. "The food will be just as good, regardless of the table."

At least there's that. The food is always good at the Christmas Eve party, and so are the games. He knows they'll be rolled out after food is done, and it'll be charades and Secret Santa and sometimes music trivia. Sophia is an expert at planning parties. His mom calls her the *Type A Queen*, and even if it's always said with love, he knows he's not allowed to repeat it.

"It's your turn again," Julie whispers at his side. Her brown hair tickles his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

He blinks down at the board. He already knows the outcome. He has the most important streets. Odette doesn't, but isn't willing to face it yet. Neither Elijah nor Philippa have

enough resources to stay in the game, and Julie is just playing to have fun, not to win. Theo already knows he will.

“Yeah,” he mutters, and reaches for the dice. In his backpack is the Secret Santa gift he’s supposed to give her during the game later. He doesn’t know if the thing he picked out was too much. He doesn’t want the other kids to see, but of course they will, and he doesn’t know how they’ll react. Or how Julie will.

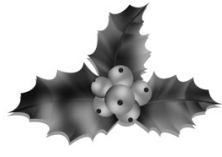
He wins the game, and he doesn’t get to sit at the grown-ups’ table. But it turns out all right anyway, with all of them in the Winters’ giant dining room, the cheerful voices rising and falling like music. Across the table from him, Julie is cutting through her turkey and talking quietly with Philippa, trading secrets he knows aren’t for his ears.

Beside him sits his youngest cousin. Jasper has just been allowed to watch the *Star Wars* movies and wants to talk about them, and Theo indulges him. He also thinks they’re awesome, of course, but he doesn’t want anyone else to see that he does.

After the main course he looks around at the table, and over to where his parents sit, surrounded by their friends. He doesn’t know what’ll happen next year.

He doesn’t know if he’ll make the junior varsity team next semester or if he should continue with his higher-level math elective and whether or not he’ll finally be rid of his braces. He doesn’t even know if the crush he thinks he has is *actually* a crush, or just the result of being too close to a girl for too long.

What he does know, though, is that a year from now they’ll all be sitting here again, as reliable as the holidays themselves, warm on a blustery Christmas Eve.



## BONUS: SECRET SANTA

Wondering who gave who what for Secret Santa, at that very first Christmas Eve party? They're all listed below.

*Anthony got Audrey a feather quill.*

*Freddie bought Cecilia a CEO plaque for her home office.*

*Carter got Summer a not-so-antique statue of Cupid.*

*Cecilia got Anthony a gift basket full of fancy tea... as he runs his own coffee company.*

*Isaac got Tristan a 'World's Best Dad' T-shirt and baseball cap.*

*Summer got Freddie a pasta-maker. Her family is Italian.*

*Tristan got Victor a T-shirt that said "I'm the world's grumpiest grump. Smile to cheer me up!"*

*Audrey got Isaac a classic bellboy outfit (complete with the little hat).*

*Victor got Sophia a lavish but store-bought gift basket. He forgot about Secret Santa and picked it up the day before.*

*Sophia got Carter a book of jokes, called to "Humor for Dummies."*

## OTHER BOOKS BY OLIVIA

LISTED IN READING ORDER

**The New York Billionaire Series**

[Think Outside the Boss](#)

*Tristan and Freddie*

[Saved by the Boss](#)

*Anthony and Summer*

[Say Yes to the Boss](#)

*Victor and Cecilia*

[A Ticking Time Boss](#)

*Carter and Audrey*

[Suite on the Boss](#)

*Isaac and Sophia*

12 Days of Bossmas

*Christmas anthology*

**The Seattle Billionaire Series**

[Billion Dollar Enemy](#)

*Cole and Skye*

[Billion Dollar Beast](#)

*Nick and Blair*

[Billion Dollar Catch](#)

*Ethan and Bella*

Billion Dollar Fiancé

*Liam and Maddie*

**Brothers of Paradise Series**

Dark Eyed Devil

*Lily and Hayden*

Ice Cold Boss

*Faye and Henry*

Red Hot Rebel

*Ivy and Rhys*

Small Town Hero

*Jamie and Parker*

**Standalones**

Arrogant Boss

*Julian and Emily*

Look But Don't Touch

*Grant and Ada*

The Billionaire Scrooge Next Door

*Adam and Holly*



## ABOUT OLIVIA

Olivia loves billionaire heroes despite never having met one in person. Taking matters into her own hands, she creates them on the page instead. Stern, charming, cold or brooding, so far she's never met a (fictional) billionaire she didn't like.

Smart and sexy romance—those are her lead themes!

Join her [newsletter](#) for updates and bonus content.

[www.oliviahayle.com](http://www.oliviahayle.com).

Connect with Olivia

