



*A Wolfe
in Winter*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Best Christmas present ever?

Famous actress and secret submissive Sheridan Stratford can't wait to collect her Christmas gift from Mistress Nora—a two-hour session with the Big Brad Wolfe, one of New York's top male dominants. But when she's snowed in with Mr. Wolfe for the night, Sheridan is forced to reckon with the sacrifices she's had to make for her career. She expected to get eaten by a wolf, not fall in love with one...



AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a standalone novella featuring characters from the Original Sinners series. For readers already following the series, it begins the December before Mistress Nora and crew moves to New Orleans.

*To the lone wolves still looking for their pack.
And to all the girls who have forgotten how much fun it is to
dance.*

Thou knowest, winter tames man, woman, and beast.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

PART 1

A WOLFE IN WINTER

ONE

OUTSIDE THE CAR WINDOW, the snow was falling and falling and falling.

Inside the warm interior, “Merry Christmas, Darling” by The Carpenters played through the car speakers behind Sheridan’s seat. When Karen Carpenter hit those glorious low notes, Sheridan felt them like a soft massage in her back.

“Can you turn it up, please?” she asked her driver, O’Neal. Without a word, the music grew louder in the back. She’d always loved this song. As a child, she would sing it into her hairbrush, pretending to feel the sort of sexy, grown-up longing that Karen Carpenter sang about so beautifully. She could only ever pretend, because she hadn’t experienced loneliness or hunger at that age. Now, she missed those days of wanting for nothing.

Just as Karen was making her Christmas wishes in the final chorus, O’Neal pulled the car to the curb and stopped. “We’re here, Miss Stratford,” her driver said.

Here? She peered out the window squinting through the veil of softly falling snow. Really? This place? The house wasn’t what she’d expected at all. A picturesque stone cottage, it looked more like the home of an overpaid academic or a retired corporate attorney than that of a wolf.

Then again, she’d never seen a wolf den before. Maybe wolves liked living in tiny hamlets in Westchester County.

“Thank you,” Sheridan said to her driver. She tried not to sound breathless with nervous excitement. “Pick me up at

midnight?”

“You know it.”

“Do you think the snow will get worse?” The neighborhood was covered in a blanket of white from a previous snowfall, with two more inches predicted tonight.

“This tank can handle anything, Miss. I hope you have a nice time at the bridal shower. Let me get the door for you.”

“Stay, please,” she told him before he could exit the car. “No reason for both of us to get our shoes wet.”

They always did this song and dance. Bad enough she was so pampered and helpless she had a personal driver, but she could open her own damn door.

She left the car and pulled the hood up on her Burberry coat. The soles of her boots made a hollow echoing sound on the stones as she walked the shoveled pathway to the front door. The snowflakes were lighter than air and danced away before touching the ground.

She’d been told not to knock or ring the bell but to come inside the moment she arrived. The house had an arch-top front door, like something out of a fairy tale.

There were always wolves in fairy tales.

She double-checked the house number on the door. 55 Ivy Drive. She waved to O’Neal, still waiting in the car. He flashed his lights and then drove off to wait somewhere less conspicuous.

Sheridan glanced around at the neighbors’ houses. Was anyone watching from their windows? Would anyone recognize her from TV? This was a wealthy hamlet, but she doubted the sight of a Bentley dropping off a hooded woman late at night was an everyday occurrence.

Her breaths rose like smoke with every exhalation. Sheridan turned the knob and went into the house.

She found herself alone in a lovely entryway—dark wood paneling, very masculine. The only sound was the crackle of a fire in another room. Where was her host?

She caught a glimpse of herself in the antique mirror hung by the door. She'd put her long pale blond hair into a loose braided crown. It seemed fitting for the "bridal shower" she was supposedly attending. Her make-up was subtle and natural, with coral lipstick and the slightest tint to her cheeks. She hoped her host would approve of her, wherever he was.

Next to the mirror stood an iron coat rack. Sheridan took off her coat and hung it up. Under her coat, she was wearing a winter white sweater dress with a black belt to match her black boots. If the dress seemed suspiciously short for a bridal shower, it was only because there was no bridal shower. She was actually here for two hours of kink with one of New York's preeminent male dominants. The "Big Brad Wolfe." A Christmas gift from her Mistress Nora, of course.

After waiting a few minutes in the entryway, Sheridan realized no one was coming to greet her. Was this part of the scene? Leave her alone? Let the anticipation build? Turn her into a bundle of nerves before even showing his face? Probably. And it was working.

Sheridan wrapped her arms around her stomach and stepped into the living room just to the left of the main hall. The walls were painted antique ivory with dark brown trim. Probably the original colors of the house. Very old-fashioned, but she liked it. The sofas and armchairs were all dark buttery leather. A gas fire burned low in the stone fireplace. It was a beautiful cottage, if too quiet and empty at the moment.

There was something very manly and stark about the house. She didn't feel a woman's touch anywhere. All leather, no lace. But she did like it. And she found herself liking the man who lived here, who had chosen not to tear this old house apart and rebuild it. She would have cried if she'd walked in and found he'd turned it into one of those god-awful glass and steel minimalist boxes that had taken over New York.

But maybe she was being hasty. Perhaps Brad didn't even live here. He could have rented this house for the evening. No photographs anywhere. No personal items. Not even a Christmas tree, even though Christmas had come and gone just

three days ago. She saw only sturdy, stately furniture and a warm fire.

Was she supposed to go upstairs? Was this a test? Maybe the night wouldn't begin until she did? Was she ready?

She turned around to warm her back at the fire and gasped.

A man stood in the arched entryway. He was watching her, not saying anything, one arm on the doorframe, one hand casually in his pocket like he'd been standing there for an hour. Where had he come from? She hadn't heard a single footstep.

He was tall, very tall, and broad-shouldered, too. His hair was mostly gray with a touch of brown, and so was his perfectly groomed stubble. He wore a dark blue three-piece suit, and his unbuttoned jacket revealed a trim waist.

Sheridan's heart raced at the sight of him. Mistress Nora hadn't been exaggerating when she said he was big, handsome, and did she mention big?

He took a step toward her, and she noticed his feet. No shoes. No socks.

"Bare feet," she said without meaning to speak out loud.

"All the better to sneak up on you," he said as he walked into the room.

She didn't know what to do or say. She just stood there in front of the fireplace as he came up to her.

Up close, he was even larger than he'd appeared looming in the doorway. He was over a foot taller than her and had to be twice her weight. He was built like a football player but had the penetrating blue eyes of a poet.

He brought his hand to her face, and she stiffened, surprised by the touch of his warm fingers on her cheek. She didn't move away but stood there as he stroked her jaw with his fingertips. His rough, strong hand felt so good she closed her eyes and pressed her cheek into his touch. When she opened her eyes, he studied her so intently that she blushed.

Sheridan remembered who he was and what he was. She looked down at the floor as she'd been trained to do.

He snapped his finger in her face, startling her. His fingertips tilted her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes, to look at him and let him look at her.

Sheridan was twenty-seven. Since the age of twenty-two, she'd been going to Mistress Nora for kink. She'd endured all sorts of sadism from her beloved mistress over the years. She'd been stripped and whipped, flogged and fisted, forced to orgasm over and over and over...

Oh, but nothing had ever made her feel quite so uncomfortable as this long, intense eye contact from this man she'd never met before tonight. He was undeniably a dominant. In a room of a thousand men all pretending to be doms, she would have known he was the real one. Looking him in the eyes like this went against all her training.

He bent his head as if to kiss her on the mouth, but instead put his mouth to her ear. "Did Nora tell you I'm your Christmas present?"

"Yes."

"Funny."

"What?" Her voice was shaking.

"She told me the same thing about you," he said, his warm breath tickling her skin, his voice deep and commanding.

She smiled. Couldn't help herself.

"Something funny?" he asked. He didn't sound angry, only curious.

"Mistress Nora warned me about you."

"Did she? What did she say?"

"She said you'd probably scare me at first, but you're like one of those Rottweilers or Pit Bulls who look terrifying but are actually crazy about tiny kittens."

"Oh, I do love to play with kittens, kitten," he said as he stroked her cheek again. "Do you want to know what your

Mistress Nora told me about you?”

“That I’m on TV?”

She felt his laugh more than she heard it, and it felt like the warmest, softest brush of air over her ear. “She said you needed fucked,” he said. “Is that true?”

“If I say yes, will you fuck me?”

“If you’re good.” His voice was a low rumble. She could have listened to him reading an old phone book in her ear.

“I’ll be good,” she said.

He brought his lips to her ear again. “Good.”

She took a deep breath and inhaled the most delicious scent of his cologne mingling with his warm tan skin. She wanted to press her cheek to his, rub her smooth skin against his stubble. It had been a long time since she’d been so powerfully attracted to a man.

He stood up straight again and, with one last look in her eyes, turned and walked away from her.

She felt a pull toward him, as if he’d tied a rope around her waist, and where he went, she must follow. But she remained frozen in place, awaiting his command.

When he reached the stairs, he looked back at her over his shoulder. He held out an arm and beckoned her. Although they’d only just met, she was ready to be with him. Sometimes in fairy tales, the girl runs away from the wolf.

Sometimes the girl lets him eat her.

TWO

LIKE A LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER, Brad Wolfe thought as he marched Sheridan Stratford up the stairs. The girl was pale, scared of her own shadow, and dressed all in white. However, he'd been warned ahead of time that she was no lamb.

She's darling, Nora had said a week ago on the phone when she'd set up this little "Christmas present." *She'll fit in the palm of your hand. But trust me, she needs beaten and fucked like a man about to jump out of a plane needs a parachute.*

He'd told Nora he wasn't one to fuck on a first date. She'd laughed so hard and so loudly he'd had to hold the phone away from his ear.

Well, she would know.

Brad, listen to me, Nora said, suddenly serious. When the one-and-only Mistress Nora told you to listen, you listened. *When I say Sheridan Stratford needs beaten and fucked like a man about to jump out of a plane needs a parachute—you know what I am saying, yes?*

Yes, he knew. Sheridan would die without it.

When he'd first laid eyes upon her next to the fireplace, he'd found it impossible to believe she needed anything besides comforting. Sheridan was just as vulnerable as the characters she played on screen, if not more. He observed her looking around the living room for some clue about the master of the house and, finding none, grow nervous and worried.

She'd wrapped her arms around herself, protecting herself as if she was in a wolf's den—because, as Brad knew, a predator always went for the soft underbelly of its prey.

But then he'd shown himself and watched her expression change from fear to curiosity to desire in the time it had taken him to walk the twenty steps from the entryway to the fireplace. Nora had told him Sheridan had a bit of a fetish for nice suits—especially three-piece suits. And at first, it was his suit she seemed to notice as he strode toward her. But when he stood close to her, so close he could hear her breathing, close enough he could smell the lavender in her hair, he saw her lift her face closer to his neck and breathe him in.

Smelling him. Taking in his scent. Like an animal in heat.

Brad had raised his hand to her face, waiting for her to flinch, but she didn't. When he touched her impossibly soft skin, she moved closer. Her eyes closed briefly, eyelashes fluttering in pleasure as Brad caressed her cheek. At that moment when she wasn't looking, he smiled. It had been months since he'd smiled like that.

“Sir?” she said, snapping him out of his thoughts. She was waiting patiently at the second-floor landing.

He climbed the final stair and joined her. “Your driver comes back at midnight?” he asked, taking his phone from his jacket pocket.

“Yes.”

“You'll be naked by then, covered in come and sweat, so we should probably stop at fifteen 'til, yes? Or do you need more time to clean up?”

Her eyes went wide again as she watched him set a phone alarm. And how could he resist this lovely little submissive who, as Nora had said, could fit in the palm of his hand? He pictured his hand cupping her cunt, her heat against his palm, her wetness slick against his fingers...

“Ten.”

“What was that?”

“I only need minutes to clean up.”

Brad didn't smile. He wanted to. If they hadn't been playing already, he would have. A spoiled brat, this little girl, already negotiating for five more minutes.

He cupped her chin with his hand, forcing her to meet his eyes again. He knew this was terrible training, that he should be instructing her to look at the floor, not him, but what a waste of two pretty eyes... She wore her desire in her eyes, and she wore it well.

“I am going to fuck you and beat you—maybe not in that order,” he said, to see her expression. Her eyes widened even more, and then she nodded slowly in acceptance. “I'll use protection, of course, but I can't protect you from bruises and welts. You'll be covered with them tomorrow. Will that be a problem?”

She shook her head no. Her breathing quickened. He was already hard but knew how to keep himself under control.

“Do I call you ‘sir’?” she asked, her voice small and respectful.

“Sir or Mr. Wolfe.”

She nodded again. “Yes, sir.”

“Nora's told me your limits. She's told me what you like, what you need. Is there anything she hasn't told me that I should know about you or your body?”

He always asked that question before topping a woman. In his professional capacity, he never had sex with clients, but this was more of a blind date, D/s-style, but there were still things he needed to know. Was she on her period? Did she have any injuries? Was there anything she'd never tried before that she wanted to try? That's what he meant. He assumed those were the sort of things she'd tell him. But she surprised him.

“If I start crying, sir,” she said, “you can ignore it.”

He was shocked by the sudden tightness in his chest at her words. The things women said to him when he asked that

question usually turned him on or made him laugh. They didn't usually break his heart.

“Why would I ignore it if you started crying?”

“It's just...it doesn't mean you're hurting me, sir.”

“Then what does it mean?”

She looked at the floor. “I've... Mistress Nora's moving, you know. I'm feeling a little lonely.”

Ah. Brad knew how that felt. He'd only agreed to this “very private session” to alleviate the loneliness for a couple of hours.

“Go inside. Wait for me,” Brad said. “Neither of us will be lonely tonight.”

THREE

SHERIDAN SHUT her in the dungeon by herself, leaving her alone with her thoughts and fears. The dungeon looked like an old smoking lounge. Dark wainscoting and navy blue walls. A small fireplace with a carved wood mantelpiece and tiled around the grate. Two large tufted brown leather club chairs. Even a humidor with cigars in it. No coffee table. Just a big old steamer trunk. Vintage. A real antique. She clicked the latch and opened the lid.

Inside the trunk were floggers, whips, spreader bars, plugs, dildos, vibrators, a few tubes of lube, handcuffs, paddles, and stocks. On the ceiling? Hooks. On the fireplace, candles. Unscented. The kind you use for wax play. The rug in front of the fireplace was thick faux fur, the type of rug you put down when you were planning on fucking someone for a few hours or days on the floor.

Two sturdy D-rings were screwed into the underside of the fireplace mantel.

Genius. If she hadn't known to look, she wouldn't have noticed. She could have brought her parents or grandparents into this room, and they wouldn't have thought for one second they were standing inside a dungeon. And if anyone asked about the D-rings, Brad could say that's where you hang the Christmas stockings.

She put her finger through one of the hooks and tugged. It had been a long time since she'd let a man dominate her. She was straight, more or less, but she didn't feel safe being with men, not unless Mistress Nora was with her, protecting her.

Even then, the more famous she got and the more she had to lose, the harder it was to trust someone new with a secret that personal, that potentially career-ending.

And that was fine. Sheridan could manage her own needs well enough. Except Mistress Nora and her whole crew were moving down to New Orleans, leaving Sheridan all alone in New York. Alone and lonely, which was why Mistress Nora had given her a very special gift of two hours with Brad Wolfe. If Mistress Nora trusted him with her, Sheridan would trust him, too.

No matter how good he was, he couldn't take the loneliness away for longer than two hours. But two hours was better than nothing.

The door opened and closed behind her. She stood frozen in place by the fireplace, waiting for orders.

“Warm enough?” Brad asked as he made a circuit of the room, shutting the curtains. When they were closed, it felt like this was the only room in the world, and they were the only two people left on earth.

“Yes, sir.”

He strode over to her and stood in front of her. Without any fanfare or asking for permission, he reached for her belt and unbuckled it. He tossed it on the club chair. Then he sat on the trunk in front of the fireplace and tapped his thigh. She knew what to do. She brought her foot up and rested it on his leg while he unzipped her boot, which he tossed aside, as well. Then the other boot. He stood up quickly and just as quickly pulled her dress up and over her head. It ended up on the floor with her shoes.

She stood in front of him wearing only her panties, her stockings and garters, and her lace-trimmed bra. If the lingerie did anything for him, he didn't show it. With a single twirl of his finger, he told her to turn her back to him. When she did, he unhooked her bra and slid it off. After that, her garters were gone, her stockings slid down her legs, and finally, her panties.

“Better,” he said. She smiled though he couldn’t see it. He laid his hands on her shoulders and then slid them down her arms and up her back. She sighed, her body remembering how good this felt, with two large, strong male hands on her skin. She shivered in pleasure as he stroked her back and hips, then ran his hands over her lower stomach and up to her breasts. Her small breasts almost disappeared under his enormous hands. The heat of his palms stoked the fire in her belly. She closed her eyes as his thumbs found her nipples and lightly rubbed them until they were hard as diamonds on her chest. His thumbs first, then his index and middle fingers made tiny circles around her areolas.

She began to relax a little, to let the heat of the fire seep into her skin. Incredible how Brad’s hands could be so delicate with her, so precise and skillful. It felt so good she leaned back against him, and he was like a wall behind her, unyielding.

“Good girl,” he said. His right hand slid from her breast to her stomach, then lower. He cupped her between the legs. Firmly. So firmly that when he pulled her closer, she came up on her toes. He held her there by her cunt, before letting her down gently. His finger stroked the slit of her vulva, slowly opening the folds, caressing the inner lips until it found the opening of her vagina. His fingertip made little circles on the hole, again and again, until Sheridan could barely stand. She had to put her hands on the fireplace mantel to steady herself.

He was making her wet, and there was no way to pretend he wasn’t—she knew he could feel every drop. Did he understand why she was so wet? It wasn’t the touch itself that did it—she’d been fingered by vanilla boys before without feeling anything but boredom—but because he did it like he had every right to her cunt.

It was starting to overwhelm her, his finger at the entrance but not inside. She arched her back. She wanted him to push in, go deep. Instead, he wrapped his other arm around her stomach to steady her. Then he pulled his hand away from her pussy and brought it down hard onto her ass.

She cried out, shocked by the sudden slap, the breathtaking pain. She’d been hit with a wooden paddle before, and it

hadn't hurt as much as the powerful slap of his hand against her skin. It stung, burned, and before she'd absorbed the shock of it, he did it again. Another slap to her ass so hard she cried out. He was holding her so tightly in place she couldn't move away. Again and again, his hand came down, fast and hard, brutally hard. Whimpers escaped her lips, growing louder and more hopeless every time he struck her. She wanted it to be over. She wanted it never to end.

But it ended.

Without warning, he stopped. Sheridan sagged against his chest, and he held her close to keep her from falling to her feet in exhaustion. Sheridan panted and shook.

He laughed. A soft laugh, more a warm chuckle than an outright laugh. The rigid, unyielding wall of his chest moved with the sound.

"All that, and we've only just gotten started," he said. "Poor little girl."

"It hurt," she said, beating her fist uselessly against his iron stomach.

"That's not how we behave, is it?"

She punched him again, which was about as effective as a butterfly slapping an oak tree. "It hurt, sir. Mistress Nora warns me first."

He found her chin with his hand and forced her to look at him. He studied her face with barely concealed amusement.

"Do I...look like Mistress Nora to you?"

Before she could answer, he sat down on the top of the trunk and pulled her across his lap.

The second round of spanking hurt worse than the first. His thighs were hard against her stomach, and she couldn't get comfortable. The harder she struggled, the more each strike of his bare hand hurt. She struggled to take a deep breath. Each slap echoed in the quiet room, quiet but for her grunts of pain and cries of agony.

Then he was done. Again. But was he? She lay like a corpse across his legs, head hanging down. Then he cupped her cunt again, one finger stroking the slit of her vulva. With each stroke, his finger went deeper through the folds until it found the entrance of her vagina again.

She was so wet he could have fisted her. He must have had the same thought because he suddenly thrust three fingers into her, fast and deep, pushing into her body without resistance. Three fingers were deep in her, and it still wasn't enough—not for her or him. He drove in a fourth finger, then turned his hand and pressed his thumb inside her. She felt the knuckle of it graze the hollow under her pubic bone, her g-spot, and she raised her head, crying out with a sudden spasm of her cunt around her hand.

“Good girl,” he said as he fucked her with his hand. Not his whole hand, not his fist, but enough of him that she felt herself spreading apart, opening up. He was merciless, working her with his hand. He was forcing her to orgasm as if she had no control of her body. And she didn't. She couldn't even move, he was holding her down so hard, and her feet couldn't touch the ground. Dizzy, blood rushing to her head as she hung over his legs, and inside her body, his long thick fingers made circles inside of her, exploring and probing her. Every time she gasped at either pain or pleasure, he repeated the action that brought it on as if she were a game he was playing. And what was the prize? Her orgasm? Her tears? Both?

He wouldn't stop until he'd won, whatever the game. He worked her harder on his hand until she was spread so wide open she had to arch her back again to take everything he gave her. And she loved it. She hated that she loved it, but she loved it. She wasn't like the women who needed pleasure to feel pleasure. She needed to be possessed to feel pleasure, needed to be used to feel pleasure, needed to be forced to feel pleasure. And since he was forcing her to come, she would come. Not to please herself but to please him.

She didn't have to make her body obey her. Her body obeyed him. He moved his fingers faster inside her, pushed in

and up, spreading her out until her vagina felt splayed open like a butterfly's wings pinned to velvet. She squirmed on his hand, on his lap as the pressure built to a breaking point. Speared and spread out, she raised her head and cried out. Her orgasm tore through her stomach, her hips, her cunt. Her vagina fluttered and spasmed around his fingers, nearly forcing them out of her. But he wouldn't be forced. He pushed back in, fucking her even as she came, each thrust of his fingers sending a wave of sharp sensation through her, another spasm, forcing another cry from her throat.

Her climax faded, but still she lay across his lap, limp as a ragdoll. He was still inside her, but now his touch was gentle, massaging her sleek inner walls, soothing the soreness.

“Does Mistress Nora do that to you?” he asked. He was mocking her.

“Yes, sir,” Sheridan replied. “But your hand's a lot bigger.”

He laughed, big and loud. “I'd worry if Mistress Nora had hands as big as mine.”

Then carefully, as if he knew how tender she was inside, he removed his fingers from her. Then he eased her up, turning her to face him, and sat her on his lap like a child. The soft silky wool fabric of his trousers felt rough against her sore cunt, and she winced as he sat her down on his thigh. He saw the expression but offered only a smile in response.

Her hair had come loose around her face, and he pushed it off her forehead.

She saw him looking at her body, her breasts, her belly. Did he think they were too pale? Did they need his welts, his bruises?

“That was a nice start, wasn't it?” he asked.

Sheridan blinked at him.

“Wait. Start?”

FOUR

BRAD DIDN'T LAUGH, but it was a close call. Did Sheridan have any idea how adorably shocked she looked? Probably not. But the image of her sitting naked on his lap, face flushed from her time upside down on his lap, hair loose, eyes wide... He would remember that look for a long time. Her face, her eyes, how she felt wrapped tight around his hand as he made her come so hard she screamed...

His cock was already remembering it. He was stiff, and her leg resting lightly against his penis wasn't helping.

She groaned in despair and rested her forehead on his shoulder, seeking comfort from the same source as her suffering.

"You are a very spoiled rotten submissive," he said into her ear. "Whining? Punching me? Mistress Nora didn't teach you any manners, did she?"

"She likes spoiling me, sir, and I like being spoiled. And I don't think she knows any manners, so I'm not sure how she could teach me any."

"Ah, fair point." He laughed again and kissed her forehead. "It's all right. I like that you're spoiled and badly behaved."

"You do, sir?"

"Bad habits demand correction. Bad behavior demands punishment."

"More punishment?"

“I haven’t begun to punish you yet.”

“What was the spanking for then?” she demanded.

“For pleasure. Mine.”

He plucked her off his lap and set her on her feet. Then he stood up in front of her. Once again, he was struck by how small she was, petite, delicate. She had no idea how careful he’d been with her, not hitting nearly as hard as he could have. And even so, her small soft buttocks were already blood red and turning purple with bruises. He ran his hands over them, feeling the heat radiating off her. She made soft groans as he stroked her sore skin, but she didn’t try to move away from his touch. She stood still against him, leaning into him, accepting everything he did to her. He looked down and saw her eyes were closed, and her small hands clung tightly to the fabric of his suit vest. He felt a wave of sudden unexpected emotion. No, emotions—possessiveness, tenderness, desire, need, hunger, lust, affection. Lurking behind them all was relief. He’d been afraid he would never be able to enjoy kink like this again, not after how badly things had ended last time, and knowing he could, thanks to Sheridan, was a weight off his shoulders.

He would have to send Nora a thank you note for his Christmas gift.

“Kneel,” he ordered.

Sheridan hesitated, probably thinking he would make her suck him off. She knelt on the rug in front of the fireplace and waited.

All his gear—floggers, whips, spreader bars, and more—were neatly packed inside the steamer trunk. But what he wanted wasn’t there. It was in the hall closet.

He looked back as he left the room and saw her eyes dart his way, a look of surprise that he was leaving. She wasn’t the only one. He really shouldn’t be doing what he was doing, but he told himself it was out of spite and nothing else.

He opened the closet and found what he was looking for—a square white box with a white lid tied with a red ribbon. He

carried back into the dungeon and shut the door behind him. Sheridan was still waiting on her knees. He could have stood in the doorway looking at her beautiful naked body for an hour, but he didn't want to waste another moment. Midnight would be here before they knew it, and he was already regretting the minutes he'd made her wait for him in the living room.

She glanced up at him, confused, when she set the box on the rug in front of her.

“Merry Christmas,” he said, though Christmas had come and gone already. “Open it.”

As ordered, she untied the red ribbon and lifted the white lid off the white box. A thin sheet of white tissue paper came next, and under the tissue paper...

“Oh,” Sheridan said, blue eyes bright. “These are beautiful, sir.”

He watched with pleasure as she lifted the fur-lined leather wrist cuffs, palest pink, from the box. Matching ankle cuffs next. Then, finally, the collar. A thin collar for a woman's slender neck, hand-made, hand-tooled. Stamped into the leather were the words, Property of Brad Wolfe.

She looked at him and smiled. “For me?”

“Tonight.”

He held out his hand, and she gave him a wrist cuff. He wrapped it around her right wrist, then her left. He made her lay on her back and offer him her legs. A glorious vision, Sheridan naked and on her back, legs up in the air, feet on his stomach while he cuffed her ankles.

And then he ordered her to kneel again. Her hair was like silk on his fingers as he brushed it back and buckled the collar around her neck. As soon as the collar was on, she rested her full, if slight, weight against him. The collar could do that to some submissives, transforming their willing, if nervous, submission into total surrender.

He took a moment—only one—to enjoy the sight of them in the mirror together. He was still fully dressed in his three-

piece suit. She was naked but for her collar and cuffs. He stood. She knelt. He commanded. She obeyed. For the first time in months, he felt like himself again, like a man. A man and a wolf.

“Ready?” he asked softly.

She nodded, eyes closed, the slightest smile on her lovely lips.

“Ready, sir.”

FIVE

A COLLAR. Sheridan was wearing a collar. She'd never worn a collar before except when Mistress Nora had put her on a leash.

This was different. A collar with a leash was a tool. A collar without a leash was a symbol. But of what? She didn't belong to Brad Wolfe. Only for these two private, secret hours. Still...it felt so right on her neck, soft as satin, comfortable as a second skin. It cast a spell on her. For the next two hours, she would do anything he wanted. It had taken away any desire to say no.

Actually, that wasn't it. It had taken away nothing from her. It had given her something—the desire to please him any way she could and to do for him anything he asked.

Anything.

He cupped her under her chin and lifted her face to meet his eyes. She could have looked at him from that angle all night. He was handsome, breathtakingly so. This was a man born to stand while others knelt. Or was that the collar working its spell on her brain again? She didn't know. When he ran his thumb over her lips, she didn't care either.

He pushed his thumb past her lips, past her teeth, then pressed down on her tongue, forcing her to open her mouth. She knew what came next and wanted it to come. With her mouth adequately wide, he unbuttoned his trousers and unzipped them. No underwear. Not a surprise. He took his penis out and held it in one hand, his thumb caressing the tip.

His cock was everything she wanted it to be, especially the thick head, wet with the first drops of semen.

“Arms up,” he said, and she held her arms over his head. His left hand held her wrists up and against his chest. With his right hand, he cupped her head and guided her mouth around his cock.

She took the head into her mouth and sucked lightly on it, tasting the salt of his come, relishing the subtle aching of her jaw as she opened her mouth even wider to take more of him. It was bliss...being used by a powerful man for his own pleasure. Why couldn't she have this every day? Every night? Because of her work, of course. Because no one could know this was the real her. So she'd commit this moment to memory though no memory or fantasy was as potent as the thick hard cock down her throat.

Brad's penis nudged the back of her throat. The tiniest cry escaped her lips, and immediately he pulled it out. With one powerful, graceful tug of his hand, he drew her to her feet. She dropped her chin to her chest and coughed.

He held her against him, lightly rubbing her back. “Choking or crying?” he asked softly in her ear.

“Both...sir.”

He didn't say anything, only held her. She could feel his cock—still hard—against her stomach. She liked that. She liked that choking or crying didn't turn him off. Real masters saw tears all the time, made subs choke and gag and thrash and scream. The good ones accepted it. The best ones enjoyed it.

He was clearly enjoying it.

As he held her close, he rubbed his erection into her stomach. She pressed her body closer to his, then wrapped her hand around the shaft and held it firmly, stroking it. She watched herself touching him, her palm sliding down the length to the soft thatch of dark hair at the base and then pulling up and up to the head again, where semen was beading.

“Beautiful little girl,” he said. His voice was low and heavy with hunger. “I’m half-afraid to flog you. I could probably use a shoestring on you and still break you in half.”

“If it pleases you to break me, sir,” she said, “I’m pleased to be broken.”

SIX

HER HAND on his cock was killing him. He had to stop her before he came. As much as he relished the sensation of her soft palm and slender fingers around him...as much as he needed to spill all over her stomach and naked breasts...he didn't want to, not yet. He was the master. He had to be in complete control so she could feel safe enough to lose control. And that's what he wanted more than anything—to watch her lose control as she came and came and came.

Soon. But not yet.

He took her wrist in his hand and pulled it from his cock. Quickly, before he changed his mind and put her on her back on the rug and fucked her raw, he zipped up his trousers and fastened them, tucking in his shirt to protect the tender skin of his cock from the cold metal of the zipper. He hadn't been this painfully brutally hard in months, so hard the tip was already tender. When he came tonight, finally, it would feel like a dam breaking.

But first, he was going to hurt her. And he was going to like it.

He turned her to the fireplace and had her stand in front of it, facing it. From his trunk, he took out a spreader bar and four hooks.

When Brad designed his private dungeon, he made sure that no one, not even someone kinky, would realize it was a dungeon unless they knew exactly where to look. No massive looming St. Andrew's Cross here. Instead, he'd screwed D-

rings under the wooden fireplace mantel. And it was to these rings he hooked Sheridan's arms wide, a pale naked, trembling letter T.

Then, kneeling on the rug, he pushed her legs apart wide enough to fit the spreader bar between her ankles. Two hooks secured it. He waited for her to test it, to try to push her legs closed. All subs tested their bonds. It was a temptation they couldn't resist.

Except for Sheridan, it appeared.

Just his luck. The perfect submissive he'd always wanted, and he couldn't keep her past midnight.

While on his knees, he couldn't resist touching her again. He brought his hand up to her cunt and stroked the bare folds of her vulva, wetting his fingertips. Then he found her clitoris. It was swollen, throbbing against his touch when he pressed it. She gasped and pumped her hips. He let her. He rubbed it while she pumped her hips into his hand, shameless. She'd already come once, and he wasn't about to let her do it again. It was his turn...but pain before pleasure.

He moved his hand away, leaving her sagging and panting, still pumping her hips like a cat in heat. He found the flogger he wanted—suede tails. Soft as velvet when wielded gently. Wielded roughly, it would set her on fire.

Flogger in hand, he walked to the side of the mantel so she could turn her head and see him. He set the flogger onto the mantel.

"You look beautiful in that collar," he said. He slipped out of his suit jacket.

"Thank you, sir." Her words came out in pants. Her face was red and loose strands of hair fell over her forehead. She looked half-wild already. "Who were they for?"

He stopped halfway through unbuttoning his right cuff. Then he carried on, rolling up his right sleeve, then his left.

"They were wrapped up for Christmas," she said. "I just assumed—"

“No one you know,” he said, realizing how inadequate that answer was as he said it. “Someone I’m not with anymore. Her choice.”

Sheridan nodded as if those few words told her the entire story. Was it the words or the look in his eyes?

“Wrong choice,” Sheridan said. “Sir.”

God, could she be any sexier? When her driver came, they would have to pry Sheridan out of his hands. He pushed that thought away and focused.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he said. “Not because I’ll stop. Just because I want to make sure it hurts.”

“Yes, sir,” she said in a small voice. “It hurts.”

“I haven’t even started yet.”

“That’s why it hurts.”

“You keep this up, kitten, I’ll never let you leave.”

She lowered her head, ready for her beating. It sounded like she said something under her breath. Maybe it was *Good*.

Or maybe he only hoped that’s what she said.

He picked up the flogger.

SEVEN

AT FIRST, it didn't hurt. The tips of the suede tails brushed over Sheridan's body like the softest breeze. But then the breeze turned into a wind, and the wind became a firestorm as he struck her again and again. It hurt. It hurt like fire. For minutes, hours, days, Brad flogged her from neck to knees. With her arms locked to the mantel and her legs wide open, she couldn't move away from the assault, only endure it.

Endure it. Enjoy it. Adore it.

Between strikes, she would glance left at the mirror on the back of the door. Brad in his bare feet, his suit, jacket off, sleeves rolled up, tie tied just so perfectly, and his suit vest begging to be unbuttoned with her teeth. She could even see his erection through the tight wool of his trousers.

Silver hair peppered with brown. Wolf eyes watching, ready to strike.

She'd never wanted a man this much. It was a fire that nothing could put out but his cock in her. Images of him fucking her flooded her mind. On her back on the rug, legs splayed, cunt spread wide, his cock pounding into her core. On her hands and knees, his fist inside her to his forearm. Bent over the chair. Cock in her ass. Dildo in her cunt fucking two holes at once. Tied spread-eagle to the bed naked while he straddled her head, fucking her mouth. Him on the leather club chair, fully dressed but for his cock out and dripping, her on top, grinding her hips, riding him while he pinched and pulled her nipples until she came so hard she screamed...

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more pain, he changed tactics.

With a sudden swing of the flogger, he brought the soft suede tails between her legs, striking her cunt. The pain of the flogging hadn't killed her arousal, only masked it. And when the leather slapped her clitoris, she cried out. Another strike was one too many. With a loud cry, her vagina spasmed, her orgasm erupting from her without warning.

She sagged in her bonds, unable to stand as the waves ripped through her. Brad caught her with one arm around her waist. Her head fell back against his chest, and she gazed up at him through eyes half-closed, barely seeing.

His mouth came down on hers in a demanding kiss...but then it was over. It was all over. He unhooked her legs from the spreader bar and her hands from the mantel. Then he took her to the rug and laid her out in front of him. She spread her legs. Her climax was waning, but already she wanted another.

From inside the trunk, he took out a condom. He opened his pants again. The condom was on in seconds. Kneeling between her wide-open thighs, his hands found her breasts and rubbed them roughly, possessively. She arched her back into his hands, offering herself to him, all of her.

He lowered her head and wrapped his hot mouth around her nipple. She cried out as he suckled it deeply, then cried out again when his cock speared her. She lifted her hips to take it. Inside, she was so wet and slick, he went into her core with one powerful thrust. After that, it was all animal fucking, rutting. She went wild under him, pumping her hips so hard into his thrusts that she imagined she was almost lifting him by the sheer force of her need.

And his need seemed as great as hers. His mouth ravished her breasts, sucking the pink tips until they ached. Then he rose over her and covered her breasts with his hands again. Pressing her down onto the rug, he pounded her, pounded his own orgasm into her until her head fell back, her mouth opened, and she came like the end of the world.

Then it was over.

She flinched as Brad pulled out of her. She turned onto her side and brought her legs to her chest. Emotion overwhelmed her. When he'd been inside her, she'd been safe and warm. Now, suddenly, she was freezing, shaking, shivering like the world truly had ended. She'd never experienced this before, this overwhelming sense of loss. A loss so profound it almost felt like grief.

But why?

Brad didn't seem surprised by it. He appeared ready for it, in fact. He left her side but only long enough to bring her a bottle of water. Then he lifted her head and helped her drink it before laying her down again. Calmly he draped his suit jacket over her and sat behind her, massaging her back.

"It's all right," he said. His voice was steady, tender, and calm. "It's just the drop."

"No, I don't get the drop," she said, shaking her head. She knew all about X-drop, sub drop, top drop—that weird emotional collapse some people got after topping or being topped. She'd been told it felt like you were flying one second, and then suddenly, someone cut the strings. "I just get euphoric and silly and, um..." She shook her head.

"Sheridan? Talk to me. That's an order."

"I don't want to go home." It came out at once, and she hated herself for saying it, especially how she'd said it. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I'm being a child," she said. "I sound like one. 'I don't want to go home.'" She mocked herself, putting on the voice of a whining child. "I was always like that as a kid. I'd be at a friend's house, and we would be playing the most wonderful game of pretend princesses, and then Dad would show up. And I would beg for five more minutes. Anything to stay in the magic world a little longer."

"You can stay. I won't make you go home." His strong hand stroked her hair. Every kindness only made it worse. "I don't want you to go home either."

“I can’t. I want to, but I can’t. I can’t be like this all the time. Just every now and then when no one’s looking. If I get caught, they’ll fire me, and then my agent loses her best client and my manager and my cast and—”

He hushed her gently. She curled her knees closer to her chest.

“I’m just being emotional,” she said. “I’m sorry to ruin it.”

“You aren’t ruining anything, Sheridan. You just gave me the first good night I’ve had in three months and one of the best nights I’ve had in my life.”

Maybe it was calculated, dropping the detail about “three months.” Something to distract her, but if so, Sheridan didn’t care. She rolled onto her back.

“What happened three months ago?”

“My fiancée left me.”

Sheridan was shocked, though she couldn’t say why. What was so shocking about a well-off, incredibly handsome man getting engaged? Only that she had trouble imagining being kinky and married. Maybe that was the problem?

“She wasn’t kinky?”

“No, she was. But she—”

And that’s when she heard it...the last sound she wanted to hear.

His phone alarm started going off.

Time to go.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said.

“No, it’s not your fault.” She started to roll up, but he held up his hand to stop her.

“Wait. That wasn’t my alarm.”

“What was it?” She sat up, holding his jacket over her. She was still shaky, but she felt more like herself now.

He stood up and held out his hand to her. She took it and let him pull her to her feet. Suddenly aware of her nakedness,

embarrassed by it, she pulled on his jacket and wrapped it around her like a robe. She could swim inside of it, it was so big on her. He went to the window, and she followed him.

“That was a severe weather alert.” He drew back the curtain. In the hour and a half they’d been in his dungeon, the world had turned white. Snow was coming down in sheets. She couldn’t even see the house next door. “And all the roads are closed.”

“I don’t have to go home tonight?”

“No, kitten,” he said, and she saw the quickest flash of a smile in the window glass. “You’re with me tonight.”

EIGHT

IN THE KITCHEN, Brad could overhear Sheridan in the living room talking to her driver.

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I’m safe here. When the roads are clear, then you can pick me up. Please don’t try driving anywhere tonight, okay? Sleep well.”

First, she was kind to her driver, friendly. Brad had known a few celebrities in his day, and he couldn’t say the same for most of them.

Second, she’d said, “I’m safe here.” He liked hearing that so much Brad caught himself smiling mid-pancake flip.

Sheridan walked into the kitchen through the dining room. He’d given her one of his Oxford shirts to wear. Although it was three times too big for her, she looked incredibly sexy in it. Especially with her blond hair down and a little mussed from the sex. She was still wearing her cuffs and collar.

She smiled shyly at him as she lingered in the doorway. “You changed,” she said, nodding toward his clothes—red and black flannel pants and a gray T-shirt.

When it was clear Sheridan would be staying the night, he’d decided to make the sleepover as comfortable as possible for her.

“I don’t usually cook midnight breakfast in a three-piece suit,” he said.

“I wouldn’t either. That was a nice suit.”

“All the better to seduce you with.” He gave her a wink as he went to the fridge. “You can take the cuffs off if you want. You’re a free woman if you want to be.”

“Is it okay if I keep them on? I like them.” She held up her wrist. “Real fur?”

“Faux. Faux fur. Vegan leather. Not that I’m a vegan, but the intended recipient was. And they were hand-made, so it’s nice they aren’t going to waste.” He was about to tell her how beautiful she looked in them when the kettle screamed its whistle. “So...tea? Coffee? Both are decaf.”

“Tea, thank you.”

He tossed a bag of peppermint rooibos into a mug and poured hot water over it. “All good staying overnight?”

“All good. I convinced my driver I could survive twelve to twenty-four hours in the ’burbs without dying of boredom. He thinks I’m at a bridal shower for an old castmate who quit the business to get married.”

“That’s a pretty elaborate lie.”

“I like to give the characters in my lies backstories,” she said. “This one’s a TV actress like me. Got sick of the grind. Very depressed. Then went to a party one night and met a famous Broadway composer twice her age. Fell in love, obviously. Moved to the ’burbs. Getting married at the Gansevoort. I got her a spa day at Oasis as a gift.”

“The Gansevoort? No offense, I’d pick The Sherry-Netherland.”

“I never said my fake retired actress in my elaborate lie had good taste, just good luck.”

“‘Broadway composer’ is also a very specific detail. Anyone I’ve heard of?”

She fluttered her eyes coquettishly. “Well, to be honest, I had a massive crush on a composer I worked with in my Broadway days. Nothing ever happened between us, but he did write a song for me. He put it in his next show and ended up winning a Tony for Best Original Score. He gave the award to

me and said I could give it back to him the day I won my own Tony. Which I, uh...swore I would do. Then I got a job in television, and that was the end of Broadway and me.”

“You miss it?”

“Every day.”

“Can you go back?”

“To Broadway? I could, but it doesn’t pay nearly as well as TV does. I make as much per episode as I would for a full year on Broadway, even in a top production. And I have a lot of mouths to feed.”

“Kids?”

“Agent, manager, castmates...”

“That’s a lot of pressure on one little kitten.”

She shrugged again. “With what they pay me, I can’t complain.”

He picked up the mug of tea and carried it over to her. She took it from him with both hands.

“You can complain.” He kissed her cheek. “Pancakes?”

“That sounds amazing. Haven’t eaten in hours.”

“Have a seat. Two minutes.”

She went back to the dining room. He warmed the syrup, found napkins and forks, and brought them out.

Sheridan sat with her back to the picture window, her knees pulled up to her chest.

“A dom who sets his own table,” she said. “There’s a name for that, right?”

“If there is, I don’t know it. Unless it’s ‘adult.’”

She unfolded her napkin and laid it across her legs. “You know what I mean,” she said, spinning her fork in the air as if trying to turn the gears in her brain. “There are the dominants who do everything, and the submissive just sits there and waits to be used—”

“Daddies,” he said. “Or mommies.”

“Right. And then there are the doms who, you know, order the sub around and beat them over any infraction. I know there’s a name for it. Mistress Nora would know.”

“That’s DD,” he said. “Domestic discipline. Basically, turning your submissive—male or female—into a 1950s housewife.”

“That’s it. I’m not into that. I’m into this.” She spread her arms out to indicate the table he’d set, the food he’d cooked. “Less discipline, more spoiling. Not that I’d mind washing the dishes. You wouldn’t even have to order me to do it.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He winked at her as he returned to the kitchen to fetch the pancakes and syrup. He brought them out, and as soon as he set the plate in front of her, Sheridan tucked in with a good appetite.

“DD isn’t my preference either,” he continued. “It can work, but I know too many doms who take their real frustrations out on their partner. If you’re angry—actually angry, not just doing a scene—when you hit someone, I don’t care what name you call it, it’s abuse with a bow tied around it.”

She was staring at him, a bite of pancake hanging off the end of her fork.

“You’re going to drop that, kitten,” he said.

“Oops.” She quickly ate the bite, moaning softly in pleasure. “I just... Sorry.” She covered her mouth with her hand and swallowed. He had to try very hard not to laugh at her. “Okay, sorry. Had to swallow.”

“You don’t have to swallow. It’s just appreciated.”

She swatted him with her napkin. “I thought you were nicer than Mistress Nora at first. Now I’m questioning that.”

“You should.”

With a theatrical gesture of fingers to lips, she cleared her throat. “As I was saying, Mr. Wolfe, you are not what I expected.”

He sat back in his chair, eyebrow raised. “What have you heard about me?”

She took a long drink of her tea, then set her mug down. “No comment.”

“Let me guess,” he began. “Edge hates me for flirting with Juliette.”

“Flirting with her while she was pregnant,” she said. “That’s the key point there. Also, for stealing his employees. Oh, and for tricking him into thinking some lady ran your club who didn’t even exist.”

“It’s fun to mind-fuck a mind-fucker. And I only flirted with Juliette to remind her she has other—arguably better—options.”

“That’s the only reason?”

“I do love pissing Edge off. The French are so cute when they’re angry.” He gave her a wicked grin.

“Griffin Fiske hates you, too. Said you tried to break him and Michael up.”

Brad set his fork down. “I assume he’s referring to the brief conversation I had with Griffin about some warning signs I was seeing in his relationship. Closeness is one thing. Smothering is another.”

“Yeah, Griffin can be a little much where Michael’s concerned.”

He looked at her over his coffee mug. “A little?”

She shrugged. “Okay, a lot. But I can’t blame him. Michael’s a prize.”

“Prizes are things, objects. Young doms like Griffin have to learn the hard way that people are not objects.” Her eyes were wide with worry. “Sorry. My hackles go up when I see a dom treating their sub not the way I would treat mine. If I had one.”

“You’re a wolf,” she said. “Of course your hackles go up. I think I saw them go up the second I said ‘prize.’”

“Maybe I can brush them back down?” Jokingly he ran his hand through his hair over the back of his neck. “Better?”

Sheridan shook her head at him, smiling, almost laughing. She looked so pretty, so happy. Hard to believe she was the same girl who’d been shaking and crying in the fetal position on his dungeon rug half an hour ago.

“Do you just hate all other dominants?” she asked.

“‘Hate’ is a strong word. Distrust? Mistrust? And I’ve always had a soft spot for submissives. Typical service top,” Brad said and waited to see how she’d react to that. Some submissives weren’t big fans of service tops. They wanted it to be 100 percent real 100 percent of the time. The idea that the top might be in it to make the sub happy didn’t count as “real” to a large percentage of the community.

But Sheridan didn’t even blink.

“Why do you like us so much?” she asked.

“For more reasons than I can count. The courage it takes to submit, the generosity with your bodies, the willingness to serve, the strength to be humbled—”

“And let me guess—you like us because we know our place?”

“No, not that.” He took her hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. “Because you help me find mine.”

NINE

SINCE BRAD COOKED, Sheridan insisted on clearing the dishes and putting them in the dishwasher. He stood near her, back to the counter, offering assistance, but letting her do it, which she appreciated. Nothing drove her crazier than people treating her like she was helpless.

A Bluetooth radio on the windowsill was playing soft-seventies Christmas classics. As Jim Croce crooned “It Doesn’t Have To Be That Way,” Sheridan slotted the plates neatly in the dishwasher as Brad leaned over, pretending to inspect her work.

“Well done,” he said. “I approve of your technique.”

“Thank you,” she said as she picked up a mug already in the dishwasher, rearranging to make more room. She paused to examine the child’s drawing of a flower on it. *Daddys Mug*, it read.

“My daughter made that for me,” he said.

Daughter? Brad had children? In an instant, her entire perception of him changed. He was older than her, yes, obviously, but this wasn’t about his age but maturity. There were men his age who were overgrown children. But he was a father? That meant he was a real adult.

“You have children?” she asked. He hesitated for a split second. “You don’t have to tell me. I know people in the scene don’t like to talk about their personal lives.”

Mistress Nora hadn’t mentioned any kids. Maybe she didn’t know, or maybe she did and knew Brad didn’t like

talking about his daughter?

“You’re in my house. The house I bought for my family. We can talk about my personal life if you want.” He handed her the mixing bowl, but not before swiping the bottom with his finger and licking up some leftover batter. She gave him a side-eye. No matter how old they got, men were still boys.

“So...a daughter?” She hand-washed his wooden pancake turner. A nice one, possibly a family heirloom, not dishwasher safe.

“Lola. Product of a one-night stand four years ago, but hey, no regrets here. Her mother got married two years ago, and moved to Austin, but I get Lola every summer. She can count to a hundred. She’s already reading picture books. Obviously she’s the smartest kid on the planet.”

“Obviously,” Sheridan said, nodding in agreement.

He walked over to the fridge, plucked a photo off the front, and held it out for her. The girl was adorable, dark brown skin, brown eyes, a halo of curly hair.

“What a doll,” Sheridan said. “She’s got your eyes.”

“And my heart.” He smiled as he put the photo back onto the fridge.

“Um...personal question, but are you going to tell your daughter what you do for a living?”

“When she’s old enough to ask, I’ll tell her I own a private club in New York. When she’s old enough to get curious, I’ll send her to Japan.”

“Mr. Wolfe.”

He laughed. “No, I’ll tell her I run a club and it’s adults-only. Hopefully she’ll accept that, but if not, I’m not ashamed to be kinky. If I were gay, I would tell her if I ran a gay nightclub. What’s the difference?”

“I guess there isn’t, except...feels like there is.”

“I know,” he said. “But acceptance starts with us. If I can’t accept myself and what I am, I can’t really expect anyone else

to.”

“Mistress Nora says the same thing to me.” Sheridan sighed. “I still can’t believe they’re moving.” She closed the dishwasher and started wiping down the butcher block countertops. “They’re the only people who know what I am. Them and you. Gets lonely pretending all the time.”

Brad picked up a clean dish towel, dried off the pancake turner, and put it in the drawer with the other utensils. She shouldn’t be enjoying this, should she? Playing house with Brad Wolfe? But she was. Way too much.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve been lonely, too. I bought this house six months ago expecting to spend my first Christmas here with my new wife, her two kids, and my daughter. You don’t buy a five-bedroom house for one person. I walk in the front door and my footsteps...they echo.”

“I was wondering why it was so...empty? No Christmas tree or anything. No personal stuff.”

“I was waiting for my family to move in. Didn’t quite work out that way.”

“You said your fiancée ended things. That must have been hard.” Sheridan noticed a few herbs in pots on the windowsill that needed watering. She ran them gently under the tap.

“To be honest, that’s not exactly what happened.”

Sheridan heard the note of tension in his voice. She placed the plants back on the windowsill.

“What happened?” she said as casually as she could. “Was she vanilla?”

“No, she was very kinky. Natural submissive,” he said. A simple statement, but she felt a sudden stab of jealousy. “But she’s divorced, two kids—five and seven. Which I loved, you know. A brother and sister for Lola. We were three months from the wedding when her son found a pair of handcuffs under her bed and took them to school.”

“Oh, no.” Sheridan gasped.

“His teacher thought it was hilarious. She said she’s seen much worse, but Rachel panicked. She called off the wedding. She wanted to keep seeing me, but just for sex. I was planning a family here in this house—wife, kids, couple of dogs, couple of cats...”

He shrugged as if it were nothing, but his jaw clenched.

“I get it. Custody battles are no joke,” he said. “And ‘Mom’s a kinky freak’ is fair game in court. No hard feelings, but I told her I wasn’t in it for sex. Not at my age. I wanted it all, and if she couldn’t give me that? Goodbye.”

Sheridan tilted her head back to show off the collar and smiled, hoping to make him smile. “So that’s how I got her Christmas gift?”

Brad reached out and turned the radio off halfway through The Band’s “Christmas Must Be Tonight.” He was stalling and it made her nervous. After a moment he looked at her.

“The collar wasn’t a Christmas gift,” he said. “That was a wedding present.”

TEN

SOFTLY, SHE SAID, “BRAD.”

Just that. Just his name. But it hit him like a silver bullet.

She went to him and put her arms around his neck. He lifted her easily and set her on the countertops that she had just cleaned.

His hands roamed up and down her back, molding her body to his. Sheridan wrapped her legs around his back and rubbed her cheek against his chin stubble like a cat.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I’m only happy this isn’t going to waste.”

Brad bit her collar and tugged on it with his teeth. When he’d gotten them back from the leatherworker who made custom gear, it was the first thing he imagined—this collar around his wife’s neck on their wedding night, his teeth biting the leather, leaving the impression there forever.

Sheridan gave a small moan of pleasure and pressed her neck into his mouth as if asking for more teeth, more biting. Well, if that’s what she wanted...

Brad lifted her off the counter. Was he showing off? Maybe. He could have put her down, but he didn’t want to. There were men half his age who couldn’t have carried a girl up a flight of stairs. He wanted her to know that even if he was old enough to be her father, he was strong enough to take care of her. At least tonight, if tonight was all they had.

She weighed nothing in his arms. He carried her upstairs and down the hall, past the dungeon, and kept walking.

“You missed your turn,” she said into his ear. Her shapely legs felt like heaven wrapped around his waist, her arms around his shoulders.

“I’m not taking you to the dungeon.”

He lightly kicked the door to his bedroom open. The lights were off, but he could find the bed in the dark. He carried her there, laid her down, then switched on the bedside lamp.

His bed was large and low. The thick mattress rested on an oak platform he’d built himself. Black comforter. White sheets. Sheridan lay on her back across the bed, quiet and waiting. He knelt at the side of the mattress, which was low enough that the top of the bed reached his hips. He took Sheridan’s ankles in his hands and pulled her toward him. Her soft laugh was music to his ears. Nothing made him happier than a happy sub in his bed.

He parted her legs and laid them on either side of his body.

She wasn’t wearing panties. Brad wanted to taste her inside and out, but first, he wanted to look at her. She lay on her back, his white shirt pushed up to her stomach. Her soft stomach quivered as she waited for him to make another move. Her eyes were half-closed, watching and waiting. He took her thighs in his hands and pushed them wide open. Then with his fingertips, he opened her folds, exposing the wet pink interior, the inner flesh so slick and tender. Carefully he pulled back the hood of her clitoris. Beautiful little thing. Mouth-watering. He pushed two fingers into her vagina and ran them along the front wall. Sheridan let out soft moans as he searched out all her most sensitive places. He found a tight knot of muscle inside her, touched it, and watched her flinch with pleasure. He went at it again, massaging it until it throbbed like a beating heart.

“You have an incredible cunt,” he said. “The most beautiful cunt I’ve ever seen in my life. So pink and tight and wet. It’s a fucking work of art, Sheridan. I could play with this —” and he punctuated that statement by pushing three fingers

up and into her “—all night...opening it, spreading it out, finding every nerve and soft spot inside you... Fuck, kitten, I could look at it all night long and know I didn't waste a second of my life.”

She pumped her hips against his fingers. And her hands gripped the comforter, pulling on it as her head fell back and her breaths quickened.

Cock. Tongue. Hand. He wanted all of them inside her now. But tongue first. He didn't want to eat her. He wanted to devour her. He tugged her closer to him and brought his mouth down on her vulva. There would be plenty of time for finesse later. Now he just wanted to fuck her with his tongue. He forced her legs wider and spread the folds out with his fingers. He found the hole and probed it with his tongue, licked it, burrowing his mouth into her body until her pussy was sealed to his face. Her hips bucked under his mouth, but he didn't let her escape him. Her cries were loud and desperate. He could make her come in two seconds just by licking her clit, but he wanted more time with his tongue inside her and her pussy wrapped around his face.

She was begging—*please, please, please*—but he ignored it. She would thank him for it later.

Her wetness was better than wine or water. If she were his, Brad would never get enough of her taste. She'd want to leave the house, and he wouldn't let her until he'd lifted her skirt and gotten a last taste of her, maybe slipping a finger in and licking it off before she walked out after a kiss, tasting herself on him. The fantasy of keeping her, ravaging her like this every night was so potent he shoved his hand into his pants to rub his cock.

With one hand still on her, he carefully pulled back the hood of her clitoris and gave it all his attention.

She was almost screaming. Low hungry animal sounds came from her throat. The tight knot pulsed against his tongue as he lapped at the little organ. He spared the quickest glance up to see her and was rewarded with the sight of her up on her elbows, red-faced, watching him. She was panting, strands of

hair loose around her face. If she wanted a show, he would give her one. Or maybe two.

He rolled his tongue around her clitoris. Her mouth fell open in a long moan. He kept at her, not relenting. He wanted her to come until she cried. When her head fell back, he pushed his fingers into her body. She came against his mouth, around his hand, the contractions so powerful they almost pushed him out of her body.

But he wasn't done.

He lifted his head and stood up. He pulled off his t-shirt, took off his pants, then straddled her hips. He tore open her shirt and took his cock in his hand. She lay limp under him, spent, sweaty, and beautiful beyond words. He rubbed the head against her nipple. His hand was a piston on his shaft, working himself to release.

It came fast, faster than he expected. The tension built until every muscle in his body was at the breaking point. Then it broke.

He came, ejaculating onto her perfect small breasts, coating her in his semen, marking her. Each spurt sent pleasure rocketing through him, draining him. When it was over, he fell onto his hands and knees over her.

Sheridan blinked heavy eyelids, reached her arms up and put them around his neck. He rested his forehead against hers and breathed each other's breaths.

He kissed her mouth once, softly, then pulled up again.

"I'll get something to clean you off," he said.

"Don't. Please. Leave it on. Just..." She closed her eyes and went limp under him. The slightest smile danced at the corner of her mouth. "Leave it on forever."

ELEVEN

SHERIDAN COULD HAVE STAYED HERE FOREVER. Brad lay at her side, naked and glorious, while he massaged his semen into her skin. His hands felt enormous on her small breasts. Tall men usually intimidated her, but not Brad. He made her feel safe, not insignificant.

“You’re so big,” she said with a happy sigh.

“Thank you, kitten. I assume that was a compliment?”

“Is a woman telling a man he’s big ever an insult?”

“Not often.”

“I just... We fit well together. Don’t we? Even though you’re so much bigger than I am.”

His hand slid between her legs and cupped her vulva. “I like a girl who fits in the palm of my hand. And a girl who wants to fall asleep covered in my come. And a girl who won’t take off her collar even when given permission.”

“Sounds like you like me,” she said.

“I like you very much, Sheridan.” His hand roamed her thighs, coming to rest on her stomach. They were under his covers now in his bed. His big low bed in his surprisingly cozy bedroom. The walls were a stern dark blue, but the floors were honey-colored hardwood. A large bay window looked out onto his backyard. A tree branch, heavy with snow, swayed in the wind, and a light from somewhere—maybe the street—made the snow glow like it was illuminated from within.

“I like you, too, Mr. Wolfe. Too much, probably.”

“How much is too much?”

She moved closer to him, hungry for his body. “You know,” she said. “Enough it’s going to hurt when I leave.”

“I won’t make you leave.”

She gave him a look. “I have to leave,” she said. “Right?”

He only shrugged in that infuriating way men sometimes did when they wanted to seem cool and non-committal. “Do you?”

“I have a job.”

“Go to work. Then come back here.”

“For what? Kink and sex...or something more?”

“All of the above. Why not?”

She stared at him, not believing what she was hearing. “Why not? You’re asking me why not?”

“Yes, why not? What are your reasons why not?”

Sheridan sat up, pulling the covers up to her chest. This conversation wasn’t one she should be having naked in bed with a man who was also naked. “Where’s your bathroom?”

He pointed at a door. Sheridan grabbed his discarded T-shirt off the floor and took it into the bathroom with her. If she wasn’t so flustered, she might have appreciated the nice white bath with the enormous tub. After using the bathroom, she pulled his t-shirt on and washed her face. When she was ready to face him, she opened the door and went back into the bedroom.

Brad was sitting in bed, pillows stacked behind him, looking casual and comfortable, like a man who had all night to talk this out with her.

“I can’t,” she said, just to get it over with.

The covers were only pulled up to his hips which meant she could see his muscular, broad chest. Did he think she was that easy to impress? Maybe. She wasn’t, though, which he was about to learn.

“You just gave me the best night of my life,” she said. “And I’ve had some good ones.”

“Then let’s do it again tomorrow.”

“You also just told me, not half an hour ago, how much it hurt you that your fiancée wanted to keep you a secret.”

“From her kids, yes.”

“Okay, did you miss the part about me being on TV? Nobody can know I am what I am.”

“They can know. You don’t want them to know. There is a difference.”

“If they know—I hope you’re listening to this part—if they know, I could lose my job.”

”And that’s important to you? Being on TV? I am asking that as a serious question, not being a smartass. Is it important to you?”

“It’s important to a lot of people. My manager. My agent. My castmates. A lot of people depend on me financially.”

“That isn’t what I asked. I asked, Is it important to you? Is being a TV actress important to you? You told me you’re lonely and have to lie all the time, which you don’t enjoy. And when you made up your ‘elaborate backstory’ for the bride whose bridal shower you’re supposedly attending, she’s a depressed TV actress sick of the grind who quit the business the minute she found someone. Tell me that’s not a fair question, kitten.”

It was a fair question, but she wouldn’t admit that.

“You’re just lonely, too. You were going to get married this month, and your fiancée chickened out, so now you’re looking for someone to take her place. Obviously.” She unbuckled her collar. “This isn’t mine. It’s hers.”

He shook his head. “It was never hers because I never gave it to her. I gave it to you, and I don’t want it back unless you come with it.” His tone was calm and understanding which made her even angrier. Did he not understand what he was asking of her?

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know enough about you to want to know you more. That’s how all relationships begin, Sheridan.”

She ignored how good that made her feel. She wasn’t going to be seduced by sweet words that meant nothing.

“And I know enough about you to know you don’t want to be with someone like me. I can’t tell people about you. I can’t get caught with you. I can’t be seen with you. It’ll be the same situation like with your ex all over again.”

“Unless we get serious and you feel safe enough to be honest about who you are.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t hold your breath. I get paid a lot for lying.”

“Everybody in our community has to lie sometimes, but there’s no amount of money in the world you should accept for being so fucking lonely you cry during sex.”

“I’m successful. I have fifteen million dollars to my name. I get recognized wherever I go.”

“But are you happy? Because if you aren’t, maybe try something that pays less but gives you more.”

“You make it sound so easy. I can’t change who I am because of one amazing night with you.”

“How about two nights, then? What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Flying to LA for a New Year’s party at a famous producer’s house.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It won’t be. I’d rather eat glass, but my agent wants me to go.”

“Pretend you’re sick and stay with me.”

“My agent took me on when no other agent believed in me. She gave me my career.”

“Your agent should kiss your feet for the money you’ve made her. She owes you, not the other way around.”

Sheridan opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off before she could say a word.

“When you went into the bathroom, did you wash my come off?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, but no answer was her answer.

“Thought so,” he said. “Now put the collar back on and come to bed.”

He leaned forward and held out his hand, beckoning her to come to him.

She didn’t. She remained right where she was, standing on the rug in front of the bed, a good ten feet from him. He smiled.

“Don’t laugh at me, you big jerk,” she said and stamped her foot. “We’re fighting.”

“You’re fighting. I’m talking. Pit bulls don’t fight kittens. We know who wins that fight and who ends up with puncture wounds. Now come here and let me take care of you for five fucking minutes, please. All right?”

She couldn’t resist that offer. She spent every waking hour taking care of herself and her career. She couldn’t say no to five minutes of someone else taking care of her.

She walked over and let him pull her down to him. He took the collar out of her hand and buckled it around her neck again. Then he held her against his chest where she could have stayed for the rest of her life.

”Better?” he asked.

“Worse.” She rested her chin against his collarbone. “I never want to leave, but I have to leave. I wish I never met you so I wouldn’t know what I was missing.”

He kissed the top of her head. She sighed in pleasure. If only she didn’t have to think about the tabloids and social media every time she liked someone...

“Ready to sleep?” he asked.

“Very, very ready.”

Brad reached for his phone on the bedside table. “Do you want any lights on? Music?”

“Dark is good,” she said. “But I like sleeping with music. Christmas music, maybe?”

“I can handle that.” He tapped phones. The lights went off in the bedroom. Then music came on, loud and raucous.

“That is not Christmas music,” she said, giggling against his chest as “Sweet Child o’ Mine” by Guns N’ Roses erupted from hidden speakers around the room.

“No? Guns N’ Roses isn’t Christmasy?”

“They are many things, but they are not Christmasy.” She had to raise her voice to be heard over Axl Rose’s famous wail. And maybe it was because she was so sleepy that it made her punch-drunk, but before he turned off the music, just when it hit the chorus, she started to sing along...

Whoa...oh-oh... Sweet child o’ mine...

Brad leaned back and looked at her. “You got some pipes, kitten. I can’t even believe you know this song.”

“Know it. Love it. I can do Axl’s snake hips dance, too.”

“Don’t tell me that unless you can prove it.”

“Tomorrow. If I can move after everything you did to me tonight.” She yawned and wrapped her arm around his shoulder.

“All right, since you insist GNR isn’t Christmas music—news to me—how about...”

He tapped his phone again. N’Sync’s “Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays” started.

“Don’t insult me,” she said. “I’m young but not that young.”

He laughed softly. “How about this?” he asked, then started playing The Pretenders’ “Have Yourself a Merry Little

Christmas.”

“Closer, but it makes me want to sing, not sleep.”

“Suggestions?”

“The Carpenters,” Sheridan said at once.

“Good choice,” he said, nodding. “Excellent choice. The soundtrack of my childhood Christmases.”

“Mine, too.”

He looked at her, eyebrow raised.

“My mom’s favorite record,” she said by way of explanation. “But also mine.”

For the second time that night, Karen Carpenter’s glorious contralto crooned from the speakers, and Sheridan felt that intense longing again that her voice brought out of her.

In the dark, Brad undressed her, tossing the T-shirt onto the floor. Then he lay down on his side and drew her against him. She wished she could stay there in his arms forever. But the world wouldn’t let her.

“She has the prettiest voice,” Sheridan said.

“Had,” he said pointedly.

Had. Yes—had. Because Karen Carpenter died when she was only thirty-two from complications of anorexia. Sheridan knew the whole story. Being in the public eye preyed on Karen’s insecurities. And her reputation was spotless, so squeaky clean, that it made it impossible to ask for the help she needed. Nobody wanted sweet, lovely, wholesome Karen Carpenter to be anything but sweet, lovely, and wholesome.

“I’m fine,” Sheridan said.

“I don’t want you to be fine. I want you to be happy.”

She looked up at him, his brown eyes bright in the dark.

She pressed her breasts into his chest, her mouth to his mouth. He was so warm, almost hot against her skin. She would never be cold with this man. He was a living fire. His

fingers found the wet cleft between her thighs and went deep inside her.

“I’m happy tonight,” she whispered as he filled her.

“But what about tomorrow?”

TWELVE

MORNING CAME TOO EARLY. Brad woke up to find Sheridan sitting on the edge of his bed, sunlight streaming in the windows. She was dressed. Fully dressed in the clothes she'd arrived in last night. She'd managed to tame her hair, a feat considering the rough hungry sex they'd had before falling asleep wrapped up in each other's arms.

"You're up early." He checked his phone. 7:52.

"My driver called. He's on his way. I couldn't..." She sighed and rubbed her forehead. "I couldn't think of an excuse to tell him not to come."

"You don't need an excuse."

"Brad."

She looked at him, and the expression in her pretty blue eyes broke his heart. She didn't want this any more than he did, but she felt she had no choice. She did. Of course she did. A tough choice but it was still her choice. But until she figured that out for herself, there was nothing to say. He couldn't keep her here by force.

"All right," he said. "I'll make coffee."

He got out of bed and pulled on his pajama pants. As he dressed, he saw the pink collar and cuffs lying neatly on top of his dresser.

"You can keep those," he said. "I want you to have them."

"No, I can't." She wasn't looking at him, just staring at the bay window, at the rising winter sun.

He gave up. She'd left him no other choice.

Downstairs in the kitchen, he made coffee. Sheridan stood at the counter, her coat over the back of a chair and her handbag. She would leave the minute her driver arrived, and there was a good chance he'd never see her again. Unless he caught her TV series.

He poured a mug of coffee for her. She took it with a tired smile.

"You want to know something interesting about wolves?" he asked.

That coaxed a slight smile from her. "Sure."

"Years ago, a biologist studying wolves saw that male wolves fought for dominance over females. He coined the term 'alpha wolf' to describe the wolf who won the role of leader."

"Yeah, I've heard of alpha wolves."

"Turns out...he was wrong. The wolf population he studied were captive wolves out of their natural habitat—they were stressed, scared, and angry. Only scared wolves fight each other for dominance. In the wild, where wolves belong, a wolf pack is just a family. The pack leaders are the mother and father. There's no fighting for dominance. They work together to raise their pups. If you want to be a real alpha wolf, you don't fight other wolves. Find a partner, build a pack together, and take care of them."

Sheridan didn't know what to say. She could only stare at him, this strong, handsome man, this lone wolf aching for the pack he lost or maybe never had...

A car horn beeped discreetly outside.

Sheridan took a deep breath and set her half-empty mug on the counter. "That's my cue."

He walked her to the door and helped her with her coat. She turned to face him.

"You'll forget about me in two days," she said.

Brad took the belt of her coat in his hands and tied it for her, knotting it around her waist. “Will you forget about me in two days?”

Very softly she said, “No.”

The car horn beeped again. Sheridan blinked back tears.

“Sheridan,” he said, one last try. “Kitten, please—”

“I know something about wolves, too,” she said.

“What do you know about wolves?”

“A wolf in winter is a hungry wolf. A starving wolf. He’ll eat just about anything he can find,” she said.

She was right. Brad would be the first to admit he’d been struggling with being single after his engagement ended.

“So maybe come back and see me in summer or fall when you know I’m not starving.”

“October, then?”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

She gave him a shaky smile and started to open the door. But he didn’t let her go, not without one more kiss. One more long, hot, hungry, starving, ravenous-as-a-wolf-in-winter kiss.

Then he let her go.

Then she was gone.

PART 2

A KITTEN IN FALL

THIRTEEN

SHERIDAN EXHALED with relief when the wheels of her plane touched down at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport. She wasn't afraid of flying. The opposite. Before every trip down to New Orleans, she panicked for a day or two, worried something would come up and force her to cancel. She needed this trip, and now that she was here, wheels on the ground, she felt safe again.

Perks of first-row first-class, Sheridan was the first to leave the plane. It was easy for her to hide in plain sight when she wanted to. On her TV show, she always wore frilly feminine dresses, blond hair down, and lots of make-up. As she strode through the airport, she wore a Mets cap Mistress Nora had given her, ratty jeans, a T-shirt, and an oversized cardigan. In the bathroom mirror, she looked like any college student coming home for the holidays. Except it was October 30th, and college kids didn't usually go home for Halloween.

At the arrivals area, she looked around, expecting Mistress Nora to be waiting for her like always. No black hair and oversized sunglasses in sight. Delayed? Sheridan got out her phone but didn't have any messages.

“Bad news, beautiful. She sent me instead.”

Sheridan recognized that voice at once. She turned around and launched herself into the gorgeous tattooed arms of Master Griffin Fiske.

“Griffin!” She laughed as he spun her once before setting her on her feet again. “Are you here for the party too?”

“Sort of,” he said. “Been crashing at Nora’s. How long can you stay?”

“Just a couple of days. Busy, busy, busy.”

“If you’re too busy to party with Nora and the crew, you are too busy.”

“True. Very true.” She grinned at him, then gave him another hug. “Oh, you are a sight for sore eyes.”

She’d always adored Griffin. Yeah, he was a trust fund baby, spoiled and pampered all his life. But he’d also overcome a drug problem and turned his life around, which wasn’t easy. Didn’t hurt that he was pretty, too. But very taken.

“I’m a sore sight for all eyes, to be honest,” he said with a half-hearted grin. He picked up her overstuffed weekender bag like it weighed nothing and, with a hand on her back, steered her toward the exit.

“What’s wrong?” Sheridan asked. Then it hit her. He was alone. Griffin was never alone. He always had Michael by his side. And if he was crashing at Mistress Nora’s, as he said... “Wait, where’s Michael?”

He told her the whole story on the drive to the Garden District. Sheridan listened in shocked silence as he related the end to one of the few D/s couples she was sure would last forever. But no, Michael had broken up with him. He couldn’t handle Griffin’s smothering anymore. He wanted a chance to be an ordinary college student, not a “trophy boyfriend.”

“I keep trying to blame the age difference,” Griffin said as he took a right onto Magazine Street. “I mean, he’d just graduated high school when we met, and I was twenty-freaking-nine. But let’s be real, he is definitely the mature one in the relationship. I mean, he *was*.”

Sheridan didn’t know what to say. She reached out and squeezed Griffin’s shoulder. It felt like solid steel, he was so tense and stressed.

“So really,” he went on, “I kind of just have to accept I fucked everything up. The best thing that ever happened to me, and I destroyed it. Like...I’m like some stupid kid who

catches this gorgeous butterfly and pets its perfect fucking wings off. Right?”

“You’re not a dumbass kid,” she said. “But then again...”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

He waved his hand, trying to get her to keep talking. “Say it, Sher. Trust me, there’s nothing shitty you can say to me that I haven’t said to myself.”

“I was just going to say you’re not stupid, but Michael’s not a thing or a pet either. He’s a person.”

“I know he’s a person.”

“Yes, I know that you know. But sometimes, when you talk like that, submissives feel a little...objectified? I mean, I know you don’t mean it like that. And a lot of subs like feeling objectified. Just not all the time. That’s all. I didn’t mean—”

“No, you’re right. You’re right. Mick said the same thing. That he felt like I forgot he was a person who would like, want to get a job someday, and not just my personal sexual property.”

Griffin parked the car behind Mistress Nora’s house in the alleyway. He turned off the car but didn’t get out.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Fucking Brad Wolfe.”

Sheridan sat up. “What? He’s here?”

Griffin smiled. “Not here. Thank God. I’d probably punch him in the fangs. It’s just... He said something to me a year ago, and it’s still pissing me off.”

“What did he say that made you want to punch him?” Sheridan asked. Griffin wasn’t usually violent. Sure, he’d flog you and spank you and all that good stuff, but randomly punching men for saying something he didn’t like wasn’t his style.

“It wasn’t so much what he said but how he said it.”

“Which was?”

“Out loud.”

“Griffin.”

“Okay, fine. So about a year ago, we ran into Wolfe—God, I hate that stupid name—”

Good thing Sheridan was an actress and had been trained to play dumb.

“When was this?” she asked. Brad had told her he’d talked to Griffin about his relationship with Michael, but he never said where.

“Student art show at Mick’s school. Brad Wolfe’s girlfriend is an art professor at Mick’s school, I guess.”

Girlfriend? Must have been the ex-fiancée.

“So Wolfe was there,” he continued, “and I made the mistake of letting Mick talk to him.”

Sheridan gave Griffin her best side-eye. “You *let* Michael talk to him?”

He exhaled loudly. Very loudly. “Right. I’m doing it again. Sorry. Anyway, he took me aside after talking to Mick and said...well, a lot.”

“What did he say?”

“I’d talked Mick out of doing a study abroad semester in Italy. I didn’t want him to be gone for four months, you know? Sue me, right? I promised him I would take him to Italy over the summer, just the two of us. Wolfe was like, ‘Griffin, I know it’s none of my business, but Michael mentioned you talked him out of doing a study abroad semester. As a father, that concerns me. If it were my child and their partner tried to stop them...yadda yadda.’ You get it.”

Sheridan could hear Brad’s voice in her ear, like he was standing next to her. Minus the *yadda yadda*.

“Then he goes on and says that when I lost him—and yeah, he said ‘when’ not ‘if’ like some kind of evil oracle—that I better let him go because if I tried to make him stay, I’d

never see him again. I'd never see him, and I wouldn't deserve to see him again. And you know what really pisses me off?"

"What?" Sheridan asked. She was shaking inside. Just talking about Brad made her feel half-sick with longing.

Griffin didn't answer. He got out of the car, walked to her side, and opened the door. He held out his hand. She took it, and he pulled her to her feet.

"He was fucking right," Griffin said.

They went into the house. Her beautiful Mistress Nora was sitting at her kitchen table. Of course Mistress Nora wasn't in the kitchen for any normal reason like cooking or making tea. No, she was blacking her boots on the table over a pile of newspapers.

"There's my Little Miss. I'd hug you but you don't want shoe polish on your cardigan. Come kiss me instead."

"Yes, Mistress."

Sheridan went over to her Mistress and carefully leaned in, lips puckered. Mistress Nora gave her a quick kiss on her lips and then on the tip of her nose.

"Miss me?" she asked.

Sheridan smiled. "Every single day."

"Liar. Now sit and talk to me. Griffin, shoo. We need girl talk."

Griffin had a bottle of water half-way to his mouth when Nora told him to leave. His eyes went wide. He slowly lowered the water bottle. "Nora, you've never participated in 'girl talk' in your entire fucking life."

"First time for everything," Nora said. "Go on. We need to decide on our Halloween costume, and it's going to be a surprise."

Griffin started for the door, but he squeezed Sheridan's shoulder gently as he passed her, kissed Nora on her cheek as he left.

Alone now, Mistress Nora gave her a long look. “On a scale of one to ten?”

Sheridan glared at her. For a split second. She wasn't good at glaring at Mistress Nora. “I thought we were going to talk about our Halloween costume, Mistress.”

“Fuck that. We'll go as nudists. Now answer my question. On a scale of one to ten, how bad is it this month?”

Sheridan sat back in her chair and sighed. “Eleven? Twelve?”

Mistress Nora smiled as she dipped her polishing cloth into the tub of black polish.

“It was nine two months ago,” Nora said as she made small circular motions on her boots, turning them from a dull gray to a glossy deep black. “So it's getting worse. I almost regret introducing you to Mr. Wolfe. Except not because it is really fun watching you lose your mind over him.”

“Glad you're having fun.” Sheridan said, shaking her head. “Meanwhile I've had a wolf living rent-free in my brain since January.”

“You can't expect a wolf to pay rent.”

Sheridan took her phone from her bag and showed Brad's latest text message to her.

Mistress Nora looked at it, grinned. “A picture really is worth a thousand words.”

Once a month, every month, Brad would send Sheridan a photograph. And the photograph was the same picture every single month. It was the pale pink collar and the matching wrist and ankle cuffs sitting on top of his dresser where she left them. She didn't have to be psychic to know what Brad was saying to her every time he sent that picture.

When you're ready to be with me, kitten, I'm ready to be with you.

After the photo, he would send another text that said, *Tell me to stop and I'll stop.*

Although she never replied to his texts, she always put a heart on them. And she never told him to stop.

“I knew you’d like him,” Mistress Nora said.

“Did you know I’d go crazy for him? Because I wish you’d warned me, Mistress.”

Her mistress gave an evil chuckle as if she’d planned it all along. “No. I didn’t know you’d *both* completely go nuts for each other. He’s...what? Eighteen years older than you?”

“Seventeen. But so? I love older men. Always have.”

“That I know, but he’s never been into younger women. His last girlfriend was his age. And the one before that, too. For him to be into you this bad... Wow. You must give even better head than I do.”

“Mistress? Rude. True, but rude.”

Mistress Nora looked up from her boot blacking and met her eyes. “Sheridan, you know he’s dead serious about you, right? Sending you that pic every single month? That’s not the Brad I know. He doesn’t sit around waiting for the phone to ring. He’s one of about ten single men in New York to start with. Throw in kinky, money, a great body, and a cock that still works like it’s attached to a twenty-four year-old, not a forty-four-year old? The man is the most eligible bachelor in the state.”

“Better not let Griffin hear you say that,” Sheridan said.

“Griffin’s left the state of New York for the state of denial. And no deflecting.” Mistress Nora wagged her finger at her. “It’s time to do something about Brad. This can’t go on much longer. He’s like one of those miserable dogs that sits on the grave of their dead owner for ten years. You put a dom on his knees, Sheridan. Congrats. But for God’s sake, either throw the man a bone or tell him to stop texting you his *Still Life with Kink and Sadness* pics and move on.”

“But I don’t want him to move on...” She pretended to cry so she wouldn’t actually cry.

“Pitiful.” Mistress Nora shook her head and clucked her tongue.

“I know, I know. Ten months...I should be over him after ten months, right? We spent one night together.” She rubbed her aching temples. Just thinking about Brad hurt.

Mistress Nora spun her boot around, then went to work polishing the toes.

“Oh, please. Nobody these days has any respect for love at first sight.”

“Because it’s stupid,” Sheridan reminded her. “You can’t fall in love with someone after one night with them.”

“Says who?”

“Well...everyone.”

“Everyone is wrong. I am right. Listen.” Mistress Nora set the boot down and wiped off her hands with a clean towel. “If you’d gone to Brad’s house that night, and he’d tried to kill you, and you’d run screaming to the police, nobody in their right mind would expect you to be over it by now. They’d consider almost being killed a life-altering traumatic event. Yes? Obviously.”

“Of course.”

“One definition of trauma is ‘the emotional response to a terrible event.’ And trauma can last for months and years, yes?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Falling in love is a... It’s like a *reverse* trauma. Why do we accept it’s normal to be traumatized for months or years after one bad event, but we can’t let people be, I don’t know, *revitalized* for months or years after one good one? Revitalized? Renewed? Invigorated? Whatever you want to call it, Little Miss, you met the man you want to spend the rest of your life with. There has to be a word for ‘an emotional response to a life *affirming* event.’”

“There is. *Trauma*. Because I can’t be with him. For all the reasons I have told you many, many, many times. Reasons I

can't remember right now, but when I'm on set, I remember them, and they're really important."

With a groan, Sheridan dropped her head back and sunk into her chair. "God, I want him so bad," she said. "I want him. I want him. I want him."

Mistress Nora sighed heavily, dramatically. "I have a sad-sack sub and a depressed dom under one roof. This Halloween party's gonna be a blast. I better buy more alcohol."

FOURTEEN

AFTER DINNER, they decamped to Mistress Nora's bedroom with a bottle of wine.

Sheridan stood in the walk-in closet, digging through all the clothes. It seemed her Mistress had three types of outfits—kinky, pretending-to-be-grown-up-and-vanilla, and vintage concert T-shirts.

“Maybe we can dress as boring vanilla people,” Sheridan said. “Like we can dress as real estate agents or something.”

“You dress like a boring vanilla person every day,” Mistress Nora reminded her. She was lying on a pile of pillows with her phone, putting together a party playlist. “Aren't you tired of that?”

“Good point.” She was tired of it. More than she could say. So she didn't say it, only sighed softly. “Got any flapper outfits? We can be Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly.”

“Is that a thing women usually keep in their closets?”

“I keep them in mine,” Sheridan said. “But I've been dying to play Roxie Hart since I was twelve years old.”

“Go do it then. Isn't *Chicago* touring right now? Bunch of newbies and no names? They'd probably kill to have *the* Sheridan Stratford in the cast.”

Sheridan turned around and faced her Mistress. “I can't just quit my show to join the touring cast of a musical.”

“Why not? Contract got you?”

“Well, no. I mean, we’re currently renegotiating, so—”

“Negotiate time off. Or quit. If you’re free, go have fun. Not like you need the money.”

“My agent does. My manager does. My—”

“Yeah, and Kingsley always said he needed the money when I worked for him, and he was taking fifteen percent of everything I earned, too. Guess what? He didn’t need my money. He just wanted it.”

“You sound just like Brad. He tried to tell me I should quit my show, too.”

“He told me I should quit working for Kingsley and go out on my own. And he was right about that, and he’s probably right about you, too.”

“Why? Why is he right? He doesn’t even know—”

“He’s a service top, Little Miss. You know what that means, right?”

“It means he does kink to make subs happy.”

“No, it means he only does kink that is in the best interest of the sub. If he told you to quit your TV show and go follow your Broadway dreams, he said it because he thinks it’s in your best interest.”

“I’m not here to talk about my stupid career, Mistress. No offense.”

“Then stop talking about it, Little Miss.”

Sometimes Sheridan forgot she was a submissive. This was one of those times.

“I want to slap you with a slapper, Mistress,” Sheridan said.

“They’re called paddles, not slappers, but go for it. I’m all for cathartic violence in small doses.”

Sheridan ignored that as she pulled a black leather catsuit out of the closet. “I guess we could go as a cat and a kitten. You can be the cat, Mistress, and I’ll be the kitten.” She didn’t

tell her Mistress that Brad had called her “kitten.” That was between them.

“I don’t know if I can fit into that catsuit anymore,” Mistress Nora said from the bed. “You live in New Orleans five minutes, and you put on fifteen pounds. Even Søren gained weight. I didn’t think that was possible. Of course, he lost it in a week by going on two extra runs. God, I hate men and their metabolisms. Any song requests for the party?”

Sheridan always had to pay attention when in conversation with her Mistress. She always liked to tack on questions entirely unrelated to the topic right at the end of her speeches. This was a test, of course, to ensure she was paying attention.

Sheridan flipped through the rack of Nora’s old concert tees. Pearl Jam. The Runaways. Queen. The Go-Gos. Guns N’ Roses.

“Guns N’ Roses,” Sheridan said. “Sweet Child o’ Mine.”

“Adding,” Nora said. “Any particular reason?”

“Brad likes that song, and I’m a pathetic fool in love?”

“Good reason.”

Sheridan smiled as Slash’s guitar began blaring through speakers on Mistress Nora’s bedside tables. Those opening bars took Sheridan right back to December, lying in Brad’s bed, against his chest, laughing and singing along.

When the song hit the chorus, Sheridan started swaying her hips like Axl Rose. He’d been so impressed by her singing. If only he’d gotten to see her dance. She wished he was here, hanging out with them, helping them decide on their Halloween costumes. He’d probably offer to help Mistress Nora shimmy into her catsuit. And Sheridan could easily picture him painting whiskers onto her face. This was her life now. Her whole life, every waking moment—imagining Brad pouring their coffee in the morning, imagining him telling her about his night at the club, imagining him in a black suit, her in a little black dress as they went out for dinner and to see *Wicked* on Broadway. Or maybe *An American in Paris*? Imagining coming back to his house in Westchester and before

he took off his suit—God, she loved men in suits—he'd take her into the dungeon and use her for an hour or two. Flogging and spanking. Some delicious forced cock-sucking. And then he'd drag her to his bedroom, cuff her to the bed, and make love to her until she came so hard she left claw marks in his back worthy of a wolf.

“Shh... It's all right,” Mistress Nora said as she pulled Sheridan into her arms. She'd started crying. It just happened sometimes when she let her guard down. Mistress Nora held her tightly, rubbing her back. “I know you miss him. I've been in your shoes, baby girl. I know how bad it is.”

“They'd kill me in the tabloids,” Sheridan said. “And they'll do it to him, too. You know that. You know famous people don't get to have private lives. I mean, what if you found out that, I don't know, Jennifer Aniston sold drugs? Or Tom Hanks did gay porn?”

“If Tom Hanks did gay porn, I would watch it with Kingsley.”

“Mistress...”

“*Forrest Hump? You've Got Nailed? Sex Toy Story?* I mean, *Big* is the obvious one. Wouldn't have to change the title—oh, maybe *Very Big? Too Big?*”

Sheridan put her hands on Mistress Nora's shoulders and looked her in the eye.

“Brad has a daughter.”

“He's a grown man, Sheridan,” Mistress Nora said. “And he's been in the business for a long time. At any point, some dissatisfied client could have figured out where he lived, shown up at his house, and threatened his kid. That's the risk I take every day, that King takes every day, that Brad takes every day. And don't even get me started on the risk Søren takes every single day.” Her voice was tender but chiding. “He puts us to shame, right? If anyone has more to lose than you, it's him. Right?”

Sheridan nodded. “Right.”

“If Brad is willing to take that risk to be with you, that’s his choice. The only thing for you to figure out is...do you want to take that risk?”

“Do I want people to know all about me being kinky? No.”

“Do you want that more than you want him?”

Sheridan groaned, then dropped her head onto Mistress Nora’s shoulder. She didn’t answer. She didn’t answer because the answer was obvious. Of course, she wanted Brad more than she wanted...well, everything. Only she couldn’t bring herself to call her agent and manager and say, *Guess what? I’m kinky. I’m in love with a man old enough to be my father who is not just kinky but famously kinky, and I’m going to throw myself at his feet as soon as I hang up. Also, I want to quit Hollywood and go back to Broadway. Oh, and Happy Halloween.*

“I didn’t do the dance for him,” Sheridan said as she pulled back and took a deep breath.

Mistress Nora grabbed a tissue from the bedside table and wiped her face for her. “What dance, baby?”

“I told him I could do Axl Rose’s snake hips dance? He said he wanted to see it, but I was too sleepy, and I said I’d do it tomorrow. But tomorrow came, and I was leaving him, and I forgot to show him.”

Mistress Nora only shook her head and smiled. “You got it bad, kid. Big Bad Love for the Big Brad Wolfe. Well, I can’t tell you how to live your life, but I can tell you this—when you were engaged to that vanilla guy five years ago, you were miserable. When I talked you into breaking up with him, you were happy. When you stopped pretending to be someone you weren’t, your life got better. Maybe try that again. Just a thought. Okay?”

Sheridan nodded. “Okay. I’ll think about it.”

An easy promise to make. She did nothing but think about it all the time, all day and all night.

“Now, forget my drama. What are we going to do about the costume?” Sheridan pulled a concert T-shirt out of the

closet. “Go as a couple of band groupies?”

Mistress Nora clapped her hands. “Wait, wait, wait,” she said. “I got it.”

“Got what?”

Sheridan looked at her. She tossed her phone onto the bed and went to the closet. She pushed Sheridan aside as she dug through a few boxes on the top shelf.

“Found it.” Mistress Nora opened the box and removed a large black top hat. She ran her fingers through her long black curly hair, making it as big as she could. Then she plopped the hat on her head, bringing the brim so low it almost covered her eyes.

“Who do I look like?” Mistress Nora asked.

“Um...the Mad Hatter at a funeral?”

She took the hat off and swatted Sheridan on the ass with it. Then Mistress Nora grabbed her phone and pulled up a photo.

“Oh,” Sheridan said, looking at the photograph. “Great idea. I’ll need some leather pants.”

“You can borrow mine.”

FIFTEEN

SHERIDAN WAS PLEASED with her costume. Dressing like Axl Rose and Slash circa 1987 was a stroke of genius on Mistress Nora's part. Sheridan had on black leather pants slung low across her hips and a cropped t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, her long blond hair was down and straight. She wore a red bandana around her head.

Mistress Nora wore ripped jeans, a black pirate shirt, and a black leather jacket with fringe. Plus the top hat, of course, and dark sunglasses. Sheridan had her own pair of aviators, which, along with the costume, should obscure her identity.

Griffin was dressed like a white swan. Not just like a white swan. Like Bjork in her infamous white swan Oscars dress.

"You do not disappoint, Mr. Fiske," Mistress Nora said, giving him a golf clap.

"Thank you. You two look obscene," Griffin said as Mistress Nora spun in a circle. "I never thought I'd be having threesome fantasies about Axl Rose and Slash, but, like you said, Nor—first time for everything."

"You're looking good," Mistress Nora said and gave him a sharp swat on his swan tail. "Ridiculous but good."

"I was going to dress as a Met, but since I'm already a loser..." Griffin sighed deeply.

Sheridan squeezed his arm, but Mistress Nora rolled her eyes. "God help me, if you and Michael don't get back together soon, I'm moving to France."

Both Sheridan and Griffin looked at her. “Why France?” Griffin asked.

Mistress Nora paused one suspicious second before answering. “Why not France? Come on. Let’s go get weird.”

The party was at Mr. King’s big Garden District mansion, conveniently located one street from Mistress Nora’s much more modest double gallery house. As they approached the back gate, Sheridan heard music blaring.

“Good thing this is New Orleans,” Mistress Nora said as they entered the yard. “They’re used to parties down here.”

Griffin held the backdoor open for them and said in a surprisingly good accent, “*Laissez Les Bon temps rouler...*”

Sheridan grabbed Mistress Nora’s hand as soon as they entered the packed house. Everywhere she looked, she saw people she didn’t know. Even if Sheridan had known any of them, she wouldn’t have recognized them. She saw Mr. Spock, an evil clown, an assortment of angels and demons, and since it was a kink party...lots and lots of slutty vampires. And slutty pirates. And slutty nurses. And slutty nuns. Basically, everyone was dressed slutty except for her and Mistress Nora.

They wove through the slutty crowd to the living room, where two bartenders served cocktails. There were even security guards at the front door.

Sheridan nodded at the guards. “Keeping people in or keeping people out?” she asked her Mistress. She had to whisper-shout over the din.

“Keeping people from puking on King’s lawn,” Mistress Nora shouted back. “He’s never had a lawn before. It’s very exciting to him.”

“Wow,” Griffin said. “I’ve never seen so many slutty costumes in my life. And I’ve been to Provincetown during Pride Week. I gotta put this on YouTube.”

He took out his phone and started filming, wisely keeping Sheridan out of the picture.

“Drinks?” Mistress Nora asked.

“I’ll get them,” Griffin said as he stuffed his phone in his pocket. Mistress Nora raised her eyebrow at him. That required her to lift her top hat off so Griffin could see her eyebrow raised. “No booze for me, I swear.”

Griffin was many years sober now, but Sheridan could imagine how losing Michael had tested his sobriety. If she’d let herself, she might have fallen into a bottle of wine over Brad and not crawled out of it for a long time either.

“I’ll take you home if I catch you drinking,” she said. “But I’ll have a beer, and Sheridan will have a...”

“White wine.”

They stood together watching a man, built like a boxer but dressed like an elfin Icelandic pop star, weave his way to the bar.

“Poor Griffin,” Sheridan said. “He and Michael were like...the cutest couple ever.”

“They’ll be fine. I think. I hope.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Once, Sheridan had a threesome with Griffin and Michael. Only once. They were fun together, all three of them, and the sex had been good. Griffin did the heavy lifting while she and Michael relaxed and enjoyed themselves. But afterward, watching them kiss and cuddle and talk and joke around with each other...watching Griffin rubbing arnica gel into the bruises on Michael’s back...watching Michael’s face go quietly blissful when Griffin kissed his neck...Sheridan was so wracked with jealousy, envy, and loneliness that she couldn’t do it again. It hurt too much seeing what they had and knowing she’d never have it.

Unless.

Unless she threw her career into the fire and watched it burn.

Griffin returned with Mistress Nora’s beer—a Pumking Ale for Halloween—and a glass of white wine for her. They

huddled on the sofa together, people-watching. She sipped it carefully, not wanting to spill anything on her leather pants.

A slutty Chewbacca (apparently that was a thing?) strolled past with a slutty Han Solo (definitely a thing).

Mistress Nora gently elbowed her side. “Having fun?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s horrible being at a party without the one person you want with you. Been there, too. Try to have some fun, but if you don’t, don’t beat yourself up. That’s my job.” Mistress Nora winked at her.

Griffin leaned over, swan head tickling Sheridan’s bare shoulder. “It’s not my job to beat you up, but I’m happy to do it for free.”

“Oh my God...” Mistress Nora breathed. “They did not...”

“What?” Sheridan asked, but then she saw it. And what she saw couldn’t be unseen, not that she’d ever want to unsee it.

Mr. S, aka Søren, aka Father Stearns, Jesuit priest and Mistress Nora’s master, had just entered the party. And at his side was Kingsley Edge, aka Mr. Edge, aka the King of Kink, at least in their world.

A priest and a king.

Except now the priest was dressed like a king, and King was dressed like a priest.

Mr. S wore a Regency-era suit of black knee-high boots, a black cutaway tailcoat, a white waistcoat, black knee breeches, boots, and a white cravat. His silver-blond hair was brushed forward, giving him the look of a dark and moody poet.

Meanwhile, Mr. King was in a cassock, a word Sheridan only knew because of Mistress Nora. From neck to toes, he wore a long all-black tailored cassock, black buttons from top to hem, and a black sash around his waist. The only color was a square of white as his throat.

Every eye in the room was on both men. Sheridan was probably the one person at the whole party who didn't want to fuck either of them.

"I have to go kiss my priest," Mistress Nora said. "Back soon."

Mistress Nora-slash-Slash patted her thigh and got up. She had to throw a few elbows to get to Mr. S, but she made it. She reached for him to kiss him, but he pulled back, pretending not to know who she was. Then she took off her top hat and bowed. He returned the bow gracefully, as if the blood of grand dukes ran in his veins, before taking her in his arms and kissing her on the mouth.

Sheridan exhaled.

"Yeah, I know," Griffin said. "I hate happy couples too right now."

"I don't hate them. I just...yeah, I hate them," Sheridan said. Griffin held out his arm, and she leaned against his side, coming nose to nose with the swan.

"You got anybody in mind, or is it just general misery?"

"It's specific misery on top of general misery. I was generally miserable before Mistress Nora, and everyone said they were moving down here. Then I met someone so perfect for me I...I let it get specific."

"What happened? He cheat on you or something?"

"No, no. We met. We hit it off. He wanted to see me again. But he also...he won't do secret relationships, which is the only kind of kinky relationship I can have without causing some big scandal. So now I'm in love with someone I spent one night with. Like an idiot."

Griffin took his arm from around here. "Forget it. You're not in love."

"What?"

He laughed, but then seeing she wasn't laughing too, he met her eyes. "You're not in love, Sheridan. Trust me. If you

were in love, and he wanted you, too, you wouldn't want to keep it a secret. You'd be shouting it from the roof."

"Mistress Nora and Mr. S keep their relationship a secret."

"Right. Big secret. Huge. Nobody knows." He pointed across the room where Mistress Nora was wrapped up in Mr. S's elegant arms. He held her close to whisper something in her ear. Whatever it was must have been good because she smiled and kissed him again. "He can't tell the whole wide world they're together, but it's not like they're trying that hard to hide it. And you know and I know and they know...if it meant breaking up or telling the whole wide world—"

"They'd tell the whole wide world. Yeah, I know. I know."

"Which means you don't love him. Just a crush. So don't worry. It'll be over soon."

"It's been ten months."

Griffin's brown eyes went wide. "Ten months? You've been miserable for ten months? Over one dude? No offense, Sher, but if you'd told the world about you two ten months ago, the scandal would have already blown over nine-and-a-half months ago."

Griffin got up quickly, which wasn't easy for a large man in a swan dress. But still, he managed it.

"Look, if it's just the Twitter-tabloid bullshitters keeping you and this guy from being together..." He shook his head. "I gotta tell you, if a little public humiliation is all it took to get Mick back, I'd let Justin Bieber peg me on the *Today* show."

He walked away to join Kingsley in the smoke-filled billiards room.

Alone, Sheridan walked around the party, checking out all the wild costumes behind the safety of her costume and sunglasses. Crazy costumes. Wild party. The music blared and half-naked revelers sang and danced along. Juliette sat on King's knee, viciously cropping anyone who got too close. As gorgeous as she was, there was no end to the line of victims volunteering to get on the business end of her crop.

When the heat got too much for Sheridan, she found the one empty bedroom not claimed by party-goers who wanted to fuck behind closed doors (as opposed to a few party-goers who were fucking quite openly in the house). The guest room had a balcony. She stepped out on it and breathed in the thick autumn air of New Orleans.

Her phone was tucked safely in her back pocket. She'd forgotten she'd brought it with her until it vibrated. She took it out and found a text from Brad.

It was the same thing he always texted—the photograph of the pink collar and cuffs on top of his dresser. Except this time, he'd added a small orange pumpkin.

The text read, *Happy Halloween, kitten.*

Maybe the wine she'd drunk had gone to her head. Or maybe she was just lonelier tonight than usual, but instead of simply replying with a single heart, she wrote him back.

I don't know what to do.

Brad replied quickly. *Do you want to talk?*

No. I just wish you'd tell me what to do.

The answer took a long time coming, long enough for her heart to race so fast and so hard it almost ran out of her chest.

Do what makes you happy.

You make me happy, she replied.

Brad replied—predictably, *Exactly.*

Sheridan had walked right into that one.

She wrote back, *Big jerk.*

That's big jerk, SIR, to you, he replied. She thought that would be it, the end, but then a few seconds later, her phone buzzed again in her hand.

It's fall, and I'm still hungry for you.

When she read those words, hot tears filled her eyes. Ten months later and Brad still wanted her. His wedding had been called off for over a year. He wasn't newly single. He wasn't

nursing a freshly broken heart. All the excuses she's told herself for why she shouldn't trust Brad's feelings for her were gone. Expired. Back in winter, she could have believed he wanted her because he was on the rebound.

But not in October.

Ten months.

Ten long, lonely months.

If you'd told the world about you two ten months ago, the scandal would have already blown over nine-and-a-half months ago...

Griffin was right. She knew that. No celebrity sex scandal between two consenting adults lasted longer than a week or two as long as no kids, violence, or pets were involved. And even then...

Charlie Chaplin married a sixteen-year-old girl, and their divorce trial was the scandal of the century. Did anyone even remember that?

Or that Gary Cooper was bisexual?

That Rock Hudson was gay?

That Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich and Tallulah Bankhead all had multiple affairs with women?

Or that Lana Turner's daughter literally murdered her famous mother's mobster boyfriend?

If the public record could forget all that...

And Sheridan wasn't even that famous. Yes, she was on *Nolita*, a highly rated network TV show, but she was more Julianna Margulies or Krysten Ritter than Marilyn Monroe or Audrey Hepburn. Not that she wanted to be movie-star famous. All she wanted was to...what did she want? What would make her happy?

Well, being with Brad. That would make her happy.

And doing Broadway again. Musicals. Singing and dancing.

Why not? Why the hell not, right? Why not throw her career into the fire? Maybe something better would rise from the ashes.

And even if it didn't, if it was ruined for good...well, she did have a few cool million in her bank account. Maybe she and Brad could move to France. Because, as Mistress Nora said, why not France?

Sheridan got out her phone and sent another text.

Want to see my Halloween costume?

SIXTEEN

SHERIDAN'S BREATHS came in short dry bursts as she pushed through the crowd. "SexyBack" by Justin Timberlake pounded through the speakers spread throughout the main floor of the house. She knew Mistress Nora had contributed a few songs to the party playlist. Now she just had to find the DJ and then Griffin.

The party DJ had his table set up in the music room off the main living room. Sheridan went to him just as Justin Timberlake faded out, and Joan Jett's "I Love Rock n' Roll" started.

"You take requests?" she asked the DJ. She already knew the answer was yes. DJs typically didn't say no to pretty girls offering them one-hundred-dollar bills.

Deal done, she found Griffin in the living room in a corner, staring out the window as if waiting for someone to show up who was never going to show up.

Sheridan couldn't help Griffin, but she would show up for Brad. "Griff?"

He looked at her and blinked as if returning to reality. "Hey, sorry," he said. "Spaced out. I, uh...I just saw something crazy."

"Can you tell me later? I need a favor."

"Sure. What's up?"

"How many Twitter followers do you have?"

"Um...twenty-five thousand. Why?"

“Can you film something and post it online for me?” she asked. “And tag me?”

“What am I filming?”

Right on time, they started playing her song. That opening guitar lick was calling her name.

“Me,” she said. “Dancing.”

And then Sheridan Stratford—beloved and adored star of America’s favorite primetime soap opera *Nolita*—got onto a table, took off her sunglasses, and began to dance to “Sweet Child o’ Mine” by Guns N’ Roses. And when it hit that aching heartbreaking chorus, she broke into a snake hips dance so sinewy, she could have wiggled her way through prison bars and into freedom.

The whole party was watching, cheering. Mistress Nora-slash-Slash even got on the table to dance with her. Then just to put the final nail in the coffin of her currently pristine reputation, she threw her arms around Mistress Nora, and “Axl” kissed “Slash” right on the mouth.

Tongue included.

And then she swiveled in a circle and kept dancing as the party-goers cheered her on and sang along.

It was the first time she’d been happy in ten months.

Griffin, filming still, yelled at her, “You know this will go insanely viral, right? Just warning you before I post it.”

She twisted her hips in a slow sensual circle right into the camera.

“Exactly.”

SEVENTEEN

Somebody give my girl Sheridan Stratford the role of Axl in the Guns N Roses biopic already. Take my money!

— @lord_griffin

GRIFFIN'S TWEET included a thirty-second video clip of Sheridan dancing and kissing another woman at a Halloween party in New Orleans hosted by a man who once ran the most infamous BDSM club in New York City.

By eight A.M. the day after the party, the clip had been shared two million times.

It was five million after Axl Rose's official Twitter account shared it.

The press got on the story immediately. *The New York Post*, that bastion of truth, rationality, and fairness, reported that the Halloween party took place at the home of "infamous sleazeball" Kingsley Edge. There was a smattering of grumbling from mothers who swore they'd never let their daughters watch anything Sheridan was in ever again.

Many, many, many, many, many men, however, said they were going to start watching *Nolita* now as long as Sheridan got to dance on it.

And BuzzFeed, of course, collected the best replies to the original tweet, including someone reminding the world that "Axl Rose" was an anagram of "Oral Sex."

Much was made of the fact that Sheridan herself hit LIKE on only one reply, three little words, from the mysteriously

named account @mrbwolfe.

That's my kitten.

PART 3

A WOLFE AND A KITTEN IN WINTER

Fourteen months later...

EIGHTEEN

SHERIDAN FAMOUSLY REPLIED to Griffin's original suggestion that she play Axl in a biopic, *Good idea, but I'd rather do Broadway than film.*

So much was made of her response that, six months later, she won the part of Maria in the new Broadway revival of *The Sound of Music*. "Stunt-casting," they called it in the trades.

Opening night, after she blew the audience away with her performance, the trades called her something else: a "Triumph!" Her mezzo-soprano rendition of "My Favorite Things" quickly became a hit on New York's Christmas radio stations...though why that song was considered a Christmas song, the world and Sheridan would never know.

Was it sweet getting rave reviews in a Broadway musical?

Yes.

Was it delicious getting a groveling apology email from her agent, the one who'd dropped her a week after the video went viral?

Definitely.

Was it electrifying getting Tony buzz so loud she could barely hear herself think?

A thousand times yes.

But what was better than them all put together was seeing Brad in a three-piece suit waiting for her in the wings after her debut, two dozen pale pink roses in his hands. His arms tight

around her, holding her close, whispering in her ear, “You were perfect, kitten. I’m so proud of you.”

When Sheridan ran back to her dressing room for her coat, she ran into Elena Marquez, the nineteen-year-old ingénue who played Liesl Von Trapp.

“Is that your dad?” Elena whispered, glancing at Brad. “He’s...wow.”

Sheridan replied with a smile. “That’s not my dad. That’s my Daddy.”

Luckily the show gave her Christmas Day off. She spent it alone with Brad in his house in Westchester, naked, under a fur blanket in front of his stone fireplace. The Carpenters’ Christmas album played softly in the background. They both had a strict personal rule against doing kink on Christmas, but they still made love all morning after opening presents. Sheridan gave Brad a trip to northern Quebec to go wolf-tracking. Brad gave her an opal and diamond cat pendant on a gold necklace and an envelope she wasn’t supposed to open until later.

“Is it later yet, sir?” she asked as she stretched out across his chest. His fingertips lightly scored her naked back. After getting her cat necklace, she’d kissed him, which led to more kissing, which then led to making love on the rug by the tree. But now that that was over, she wanted her other gift.

“I suppose it’s later. But is it later enough?” Brad asked.

“If not, I’ll scream.”

“You’re not allowed to scream,” he reminded her. “You have two shows tomorrow for the Christmas crowd.”

“Right, right.”

“You’re not even supposed to be talking.”

True. To preserve her voice, Sheridan and the rest of the cast had been advised to speak as little as possible on their days off. Not a problem for her and Brad. They found a thousand ways every day to tell each other, “Good morning,”

“I love you,” and “Take off your clothes.” The important things didn’t need words.

Sheridan leaned up and reached across his body for the envelope. He slapped her hard on the ass. She yelped—silently, of course. He grabbed the envelope from under the tree for her.

“Good things come to those who wait,” he said.

With a quiet sigh, she laid her head back on his chest and gazed at the tree. An eight-foot balsam fir, Brad had cut it down himself from a Christmas tree farm outside of town. She’d gone with him and picked it out two Mondays ago. Broadway performers always got Mondays off. He looked so sexy and rugged in his fur-collar coat with his ax that the first thing they did when they brought the tree home was to make love underneath it.

Afterward, she laughed softly.

“What?” Brad said.

She lifted her head and said, *sotto voce*, “You didn’t even have a tree the first time I came here. No lights. No tree. Nothing. And now...”

Now his big stone cottage was practically a winter wonderland. A thousand lights were hung on the tree. A hundred glass balls in red and gold. Lights on the house. Candles on the mantel.

“The first time you came here was December twenty-eighth. That was supposed to be my wedding day,” he said.

She didn’t say anything, and not only because she wasn’t supposed to talk.

“I only agreed to meet you for a session,” he said, “because I needed a distraction. Good distraction. I hope you distract me for the rest of my life, kitten.”

Sheridan kissed him on the mouth. No words were necessary.

He grinned at her, a deliciously delectable hungry wolfish grin. “Okay, now you can open it.”

Her hands shook as she opened the envelope. There was nothing inside of it but another envelope. Cream-colored with red printing that read, THE SHERRY-NETHERLAND.

The Sherry-Netherland? The famous five-star apartment hotel with the gargoyles right across the street from Central Park? Sheridan loved the place. Who didn't? She'd been there for lunches, meetings, and even a wedding.

Wait...

Sheridan looked at Brad, who only waved his hand, telling her to get on with it.

She opened the envelope. Inside was a note with nothing written on it except a date: *January 17th*.

"Are we staying there in January?" she asked, forgetting she wasn't supposed to speak.

"Meeting with the hotel's wedding coordinator. Unless you'd prefer a church wedding. The Sherry has gargoyles, but there's a nice old chapel in town—"

Sheridan held up her hand. She needed a moment just to feel this feeling. She'd almost forgotten what it felt like, this feeling that even when it was cold outside and the snow was falling, she would be inside—safe and warm.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "What about Lola?"

"She knows I was going to ask you. She likes you, and eventually, she'll love you if you give her enough time. Especially if you get her tickets to *The Lion King* next time she visits."

He brushed a lock of hair off her forehead and tucked it behind her ear.

"When I come home," he said, "even when you're not here, my footsteps don't echo. The emptiness is gone." Then he grinned. "Come on. We'll make an amazing wolf pack. First wolf pack led by a wolf and a kitten."

Sheridan laughed. "First time for everything."

"So yes?"

“Yes, sir, Mr. Wolfe. Yes.”

They celebrated their engagement as couples madly in love have celebrated from the dawn of love, lust, and time. Meanwhile, Karen Carpenter reminded them that every day was a holiday when they were together.

And outside, the snow began to fall and fall and fall.

THE END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tiffany Reisz is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Romance Writers of America RITA®-winning Original Sinners series.

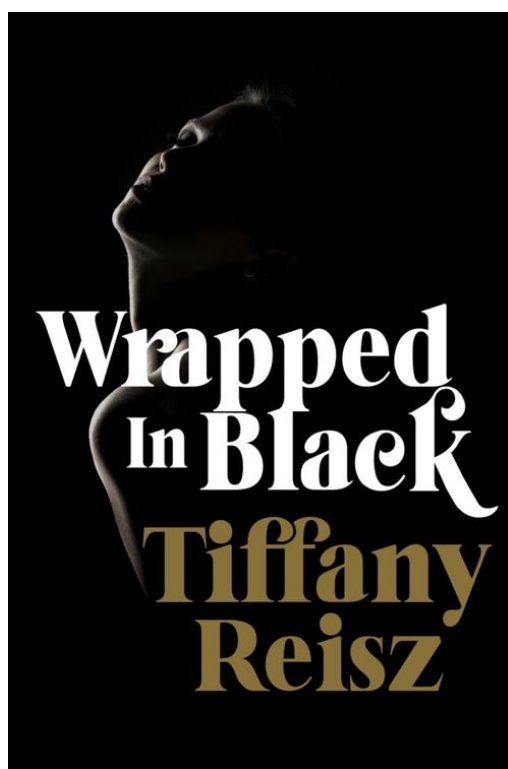
Her erotic fantasy *The Red*—the first entry in the Godwicks series, self-published under the banner 8th Circle Press—was named an NPR Best Book of the Year and a Goodreads Best Romance of the Month.

Tiffany lives in Kentucky with her husband, author Andrew Shaffer, and their two cats. The cats are not writers.

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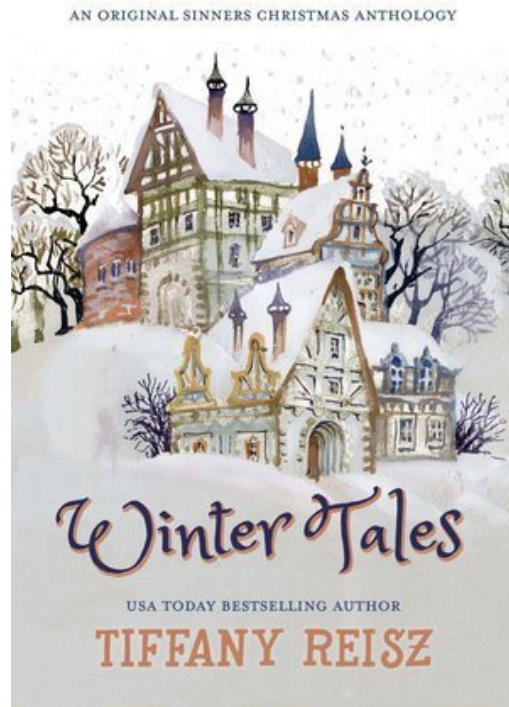


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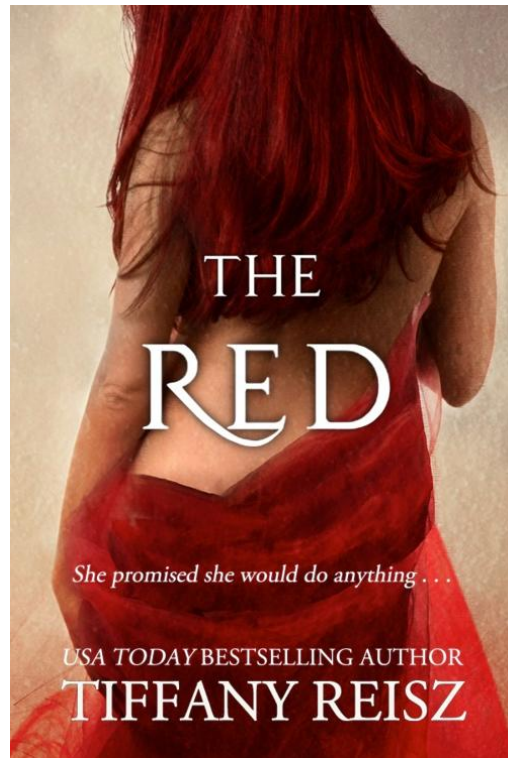


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