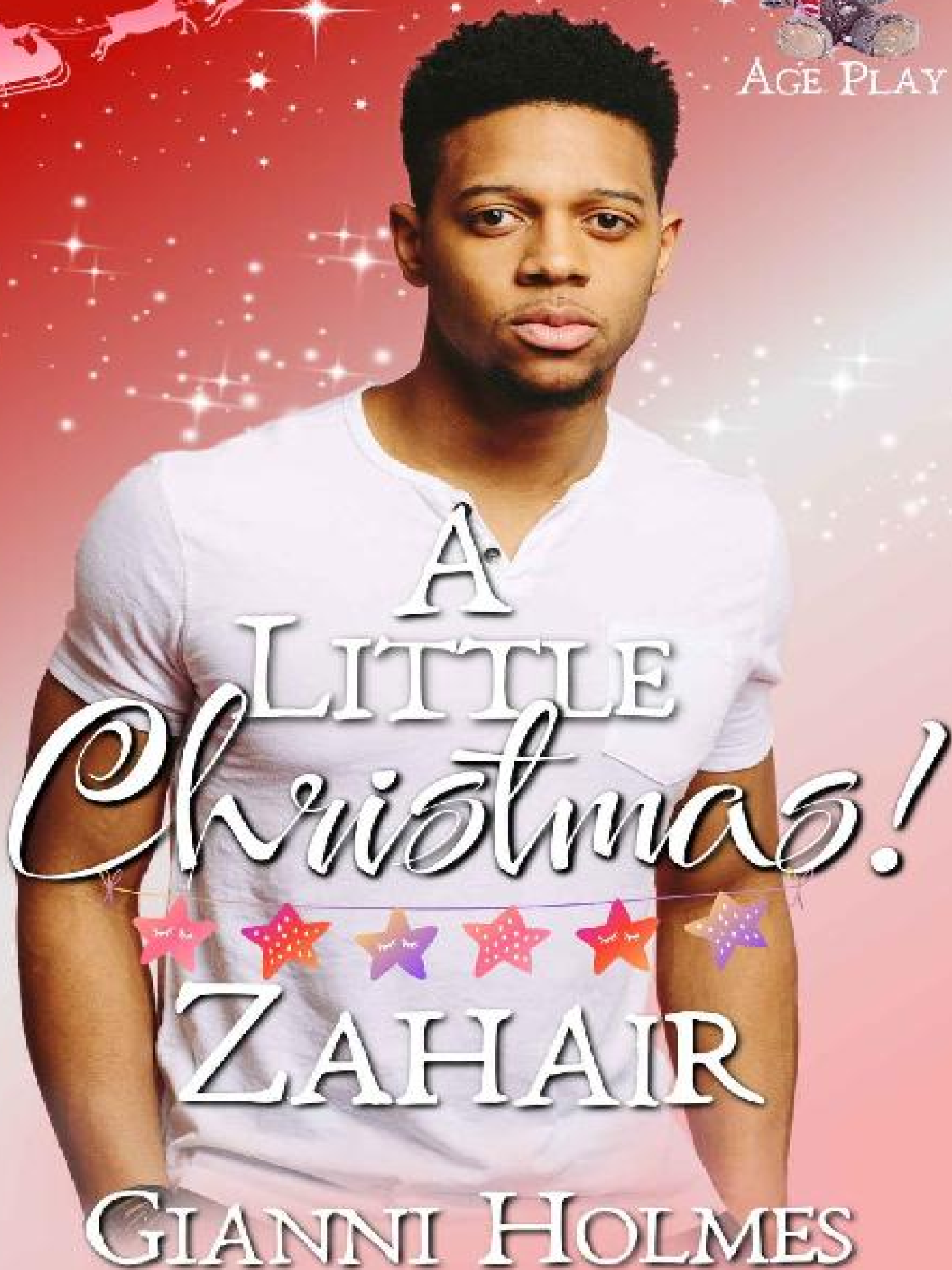




AGE PLAY



A
LITTLE
Christmas!



ZAHAIR

GIANNI HOLMES

A Little Christmas: Zahair

Gianni Holmes

Editor: Tanja Ongkiehong

Proofreader: Abrianna Marchesotti

Final Proofreaders: Lori Martini, Tammy Jones, Marissa Miller, Ashlynn Mills

Cover Designer: Wendy Rathbone

A Little Christmas: Zahair © 2022 Gianni Holmes

All Rights Reserved

This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic, in whole or in part, without expressed written permission. This is excluding brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Find Me](#)

[Also By.](#)

[About Gianni](#)

This is a daddy kink MM romance story with light age play. It contains a very brief mention of the suicide of a parent, homelessness, orphanhood, and the poor treatment of orphaned children by those in authority without depiction on page.



Prologue

ZAHAIR

SCAN A PICTURE OF your ass, my friend Elliott said. It's the only way to prove to me you work in an actual office.

Did I know it was a terrible idea when he sent me the message? Yes, yes, I did. Did I do it anyway?

Well, from the cool, unperturbed blue of my boss's gaze, one would never have guessed he'd just walked into the copy room, where I was sitting on the sturdy industrial photocopier.

If there was a time I wished I wasn't so easily influenced by others, it was that moment. I prayed that the machine would split open in two and swallow me whole to save me from the intense waves of embarrassment that washed over me—over and over...and over again.

“This isn't happening,” I whispered and clamped my eyes shut. “This isn't happening.”

Footsteps approached, and I opened one eye. Fuck. It *was* happening.

Mr. Gilchrist slowly walked toward me, looking every bit as intense and gorgeous as all the other times I'd glimpsed him.

Even after nine hours of work, he appeared immaculate. His suit didn't have a wrinkle in it. Or maybe I'd missed them because I was too busy staring at his too-handsome face, strong jawline, thick dark brown hair, and full beard and mustache.

I'd never thought I was into facial hair until him.

"I see you've made yourself at home," Mr. Gilchrist said, his deep baritone only making my stomach queasy. "Zahair, is it?"

"Mr. Gilchrist, sir." I hopped off the photocopy machine, and my pants slid down to my knees. I hastily grabbed them and yanked them up along with my underwear. My hands shook so hard it became a Herculean effort, but eventually, I got everything in the right hole, and my belt buckled. I didn't dare look at him, so I kept my gaze on his expensive black leather dress shoes.

"Well?"

I glanced up and couldn't look away when his eyes snagged mine. "Umm." I swallowed hard. "Please don't fire me."

"And one good reason I shouldn't?"

"I, umm, it's after hours, and I didn't expect anyone to visit the copy room?"

Omar, the other office assistant who worked down here with me, had left half an hour ago, and since there was a cutoff time for documents to be sent down to us, I never expected anyone to walk in.

Stupid. Stupid. I should have locked the door.

Mr. Gilchrist lifted one of his brows, impressing the hell out of me with how he did it so perfectly. “Oh. I suppose everyone can do what they please in my office building once it’s after hours?”

“Absolutely not, sir.” I inhaled deeply. “It was a dare.”

“How old are you, Zahair?”

“Twenty-two, sir.”

“And you’re smart enough to know this sort of behavior will get you fired, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if a friend told you to jump into a fire, would you?”

“No, sir.”

Disappointment and worry filled my chest. I couldn’t afford to lose this job. If I did, I would be forced to find somewhere else to live. After working at an ice cream shop, as a hotdog mascot outside a fast-food restaurant, and as a singing telegram, this was the best job I’d ever had. It paid well, the staff was nice to me, and most of the time, I was left alone.

Why had I taken that stupid dare? I could have just sent a picture of me working.

“It won’t happen again,” I said softly.

“You assume you still have a job to not let this happen again?”

I hung my head. “I understand, sir.”

A folder came into my line of vision. Mr. Gilchrist extended a file to me. “I need this copied and on my desk by eight tomorrow morning.”

I gasped. “Does this mean I’m not—”

“By eight a.m., Zahair. Not a second later.”

Mr. Gilchrist strode from the room, leaving me thirsting after his broad back. He’d look so damn good out of his clothes. I smacked the file against my forehead. Now was hardly the time to think inappropriate thoughts about my boss. I was already skating on thin ice.

But why hadn’t he fired me?

Omar had shared all the office gossip with me about everyone who worked in the building. From day one, he’d warned me to stay away from Mr. Gilchrist. I would never forget the first day I’d seen him. We’d been walking back to the office from our lunch break when he entered the elevator. Before we could get on too, Omar had clutched my arm and steered me into the next one.

“That’s Mr. Gilchrist, CEO of Sterling Capital,” Omar had whispered. “It’s best to stay as far away from him as possible.”

“Why?” I’d asked.

“Because he’s a shark. He has a bad temper that only his PA knows how to handle. The entire floor will go quiet once he’s there.”

“He can’t be that bad.”

“He doesn’t give second chances.”

“But the turnover rate for employees is low.”

“That’s because he pays well, but he also expects you to be pretty much on the go all the time.”

If all that was true, why had he given me a second chance? If it’d been me in his shoes, I would have fired me. It was no less than I deserved for slapping my bare ass on the man’s property.

I sucked in a deep breath and shook my head to dispel the image that’d formed.

Nope, I’m not going there.

Maybe something had put him in a good mood, and that was the reason he hadn’t fired me. After this, I’d better be on my best behavior so he didn’t have another opportunity to fire me.

I wiped off the area where my ass had been—it was the polite thing to do, since I wasn’t the only one who used the machine—and copied the files he’d requested according to the instructions on the sticky note he’d pasted to the cover. I’d never have imagined a man of his standing would visit the copy room. Wasn’t that a job for his secretary?

When I was finished, I scooped up the pages, paper-clipped them, and put them to one side. Only to pick them back up. Why not deliver them to him now? That would put the eight-o’clock threat hanging over my head to rest. Maybe he would see how efficient a worker I was, and not regret giving me a second chance.

But how to face him again after the infantile thing I'd done? His reprimanding words echoed in my head, and a shiver ran down my spine. I straightened my shoulders. I'd apologize better this time and thank him for not firing me.

Mind made up, I left the copy room and marched toward the elevator. I rode it up to the fifth floor, where his office was. Which I knew because on my first day, an HR employee had walked me through the building and told me who worked on what floor. Not all people had a secretary to pick up their copies, and I had to go up with the files.

My heartbeat sped up when I walked out of the elevator. Other than his office, there was another with the lights on. A custodian was cleaning the floor. His secretary's post was vacant, so my cowardly self couldn't drop the copies off and run after all.

Damn.

You can do this, Zee. You're no longer dressed as a hotdog twirling a sign.

I wouldn't have minded the hotdog suit right now to cover up my embarrassment.

I walked to the door with "Brody Gilchrist, CEO," engraved on the stainless steel plate. Before I could change my mind, I rapped my knuckles on the door.

"Enter."

Just from that one word, my stomach churned. I turned the doorknob and shuffled into his office. Mr. Gilchrist sat at his

computer and didn't even look up to see who had disturbed him.

I cleared my throat. "I got the copies you asked for, Mr. Gilchrist."

He waved at his desk. "Put them there."

I gently placed the copies on his desk and stepped back, but he kept tapping away at his computer. It was almost as if he didn't even realize someone was in the room.

Maybe I should go.

But the apology. I owed him one.

"I n—"

"Is there something else?" The clickety-clack of the keyboard stopped.

"N-no. So—"

"Then close the door on your way out."

I bowed. I took a fucking bow like I was a butler from the nineteenth century. Mortified, I ran out of the office and closed the door behind me.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid." I smacked my palm against my forehead over and over. The custodian was staring at me open-mouthed.

I gave her an uneasy smile and hurried to the elevator. Back in the copy room, I dropped into my chair and buried my face in my hands. Maybe I should quit instead of waiting for him to fire me.

My phone rang, and I picked it up from the desk. I glared at Elliot's name.

"You!" I snapped. "This is all your fault."

"What's my fault?"

"That my boss walked in on me buck naked on the photocopier."

"No way! You're making shit up."

"I'm not." I jumped to my feet and marched over to the photocopy machine. "Do you know how embarrassed I am?"

"Shit, man. Are you fired?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't think so, but I wouldn't be surprised if when I come in tomorrow, I'm called into the HR office." I checked the receiving tray and stiffened. Shit, only blank papers. "Oh god, no."

"What's wrong now?"

"The page with my scanned butt." I groaned. "I think I mistakenly put it among my boss's files."

"Holy shit, dude. What are you going to do?"

Maybe I could go back to his office and...nope. I wasn't going to do it. I rubbed a hand across my forehead. "I'm not going to do a damn thing but wait for him to fire me."

Fingers crossed, he didn't. Maybe he would like the butt pic?



1

BRODY

Five months later

“MR. GILCHRIST, ANYTHING YOU’D like me to take down to the copy room for you?”

I glanced up from my computer at my secretary, Laura, and promptly forgot about the memorandum I’d been typing up. If I were a dog, my ears would have straightened at the mention of the copy room, and my tail would have wagged.

I scowled, but while everyone else in the office would have looked uneasy, Laura just waited for my response. The forty-two-year-old woman had been with me for almost ten years, and gone were the days when a glance from me would have sent her scurrying behind her desk. From the second day on the job, she’d made it clear she knew my bark was worse than my bite.

Luckily, the other employees hadn’t figured it out yet. After my old man nearly wrecked the company with his too-casual flirtations with the office staff, I’d built a solid reputation as a wolf that kept people at a distance. The one woman who’d dared to cross the line and flirt with me during a cocktail party had been reassigned to a different location.

“Now that you mentioned it, I have some documents I need for the next board meeting. I should take them down myself.”

Nothing good could come from mixing business with pleasure. Then what the fuck was I doing?

Laura lifted her eyebrows. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Never been better.” I rose to my feet and picked up a random file from my desk.

“Normally, I’d insist you see a doctor,” she said, then shrugged. “But if it saves me a trip to the copy room, who am I to argue? You’re the boss.”

It still didn’t stop her from giving me a curious look as she handed me the red paper file jacket with the instructions written on a sticky note of how many copies she needed. When she walked out, I almost called her back, but if I did, I would only prove to her this wasn’t as casual as I’d made it seem. I had to follow through to save face.

Usually, I wouldn’t care what other employees thought, but Laura was more than just a secretary/PA. She knew me better than most people did. At first, I’d tried keeping our relationship strictly professional, but with everything she did for me, that plan had blown out the window over the years.

Still, there was a line we’d never crossed. She didn’t invite me over for Thanksgiving dinner with her husband and their girlfriend and two kids, and I didn’t tell her about my fetish and kinky side.

She definitely couldn’t know how that boy who worked in the copy room affected me. How a glimpse of him set my heart racing.

As I walked past her desk, she made a *dun-dun-dun* sound. I glared at her over my shoulder, but Laura only grinned. Did she suspect my true intent? How many times had I been to the copy room since before he started working here? Zero. And

this was my third time in a month. He'd been employed here for five months. My brain quickly did the math, and I stifled my groan.

I'm just stretching my legs, that's all.

Disgusted with myself, I stalked over to the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor. It stopped on the third floor, and two women stepped in, their laughter dying when they caught sight of me. Both mumbled a formal greeting, and I nodded my acknowledgment. They kept glancing at me, but I ignored them.

They got off on the first floor, and I continued to the ground floor alone. When the elevator doors whooshed open, I stepped out. This part of the building was colder than the other floors and bland with bare walls. I walked the short distance to the heavy double doors that led to the copy room.

I inhaled deeply and pushed the right side open. It swung back to a close silently. I swept my gaze across the room. Where was he? The photocopier made my lips twitch. Of all the things I'd fired workers for, his act would have topped the cake.

So why hadn't I fired him? Each time we came face-to-face, I was forced to relive that moment and how much it'd taken out of me not to react to seeing him with his pants down to his knees. Before he'd pulled his pants up, I'd glimpsed firm bronze thighs that kept me awake at night.

He was sitting at the long desk to the right with his head resting on his arms. He didn't seem to have heard me, and I

slowly approached. His back rose and fell evenly. He snored softly, and drool dripped onto the stack of papers he'd fallen asleep on.

Why's he sleeping at work?

I glanced at my watch. It was a few minutes after ten, in the middle of the work week. Was he one of those irresponsible party boys who stayed up way too late and allowed it to affect his job?

The urge to scold and punish him was overwhelming. My heart skipped a beat. I wanted to lay him across my lap and spank his ass until he cried. The tears always got to me because then I could bring comfort.

I shook my head and clenched my teeth. The HR director should at least send him a memo for shirking his duties. That was the punishment he should receive, and that was light, considering I would have fired anyone else.

I reached out to shake him awake, but when my hand connected with his shoulder, I pulled back. Touching him was another bad idea. I tapped him on his shoulder with the file.

Zahair brushed aside the folder, knocking it from my grip. The folder landed on the floor, fell open, and the papers scattered around his chair.

“What the—” He jerked upright and swiped at the drool from the corner of his mouth. His eyes widened. He opened trembling lips, and a choking sound escaped him. “I’m awake!”

“No, don’t...”

He pushed back his chair, running the wheels over the papers and the folder. I winced at the dirty track marks the wheels made.

“Oh, no.” He sprang up from the chair and shoved it away. “Why are there papers on the ground?”

“You knocked the file from my hand when I woke you up.”

He dropped to a crouch and snatched the papers up. “I always make a mess when you’re around,” he mumbled under his breath, so low I had to fill in what I *thought* he’d said.

Zahair rose to his feet and stared at the dirty pages in dismay. “I’m so sorry. Are you going to fire me now?”

“Give me one reason I shouldn’t.”

“Because, umm.” He licked his lips. “The other incident was worse, and you didn’t?”

I arched an eyebrow. “Because now’s the right time to remind me about that.”

He tapped his mouth. “Let’s just pretend I didn’t say that.” He grimaced. “Is there any chance you still have the original version of these?”

“I’ll have to ask my secretary.”

And while at it, pray she doesn’t ask why I don’t fire the incompetent boy.

“I can try to get out the dirty marks.” He scratched at his hair.

“No need.” I took the file from him. “I’ll ask Laura to print out another copy.”

“When it’s ready, call me, and I’ll collect it. It’s the least I can do.”

“Actually, the least you can do is to *not* sleep on the job.”

“I’m sorry. I had a long night taking care of the sick kids and...” He swallowed and hung his head. “It won’t happen again.”

“Kids?”

“Forget I said anything. You’re right. I shouldn’t be sleeping on the job, and that’s all that matters.”

But was it? He had bags under his eyes, and he’d mentioned something about looking after kids. Was he a father? From the way his gaze lingered on me, I’d always thought he wasn’t straight, but maybe I was wrong. He was only twenty-two, but that was old enough to have kids.

“Don’t let it happen again.” I frowned. What the hell was he wearing? A Christmas tie with a snowman? “And get rid of that tie. It’s not appropriate for work.”

He stroked his tie. “But it’s a few weeks before Christmas. I’m getting in the mood.”

“Lose the tie. We don’t celebrate Christmas here. I’ll have my secretary bring back these papers.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, Zahair?”

“Sir?”

“You’re already on too many strikes.”

He bit his plump bottom lip. I walked out of the room and, as soon as the door closed behind me, let out a groan. There was no reason at all that I should care or be this lenient with him.

Shaking my head, I rode the elevator back up to the office. Laura’s gaze flickered to the file clutched in my hand.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Can you reprint these?”

She took the file from me and opened it. “How did these get so dirty? Did you drop them?”

“No, I—” I swallowed down the words. Going this route would only invite more questions. “I was clumsy and dropped the folder. You still have the original copies, right?”

“Yes, you know I save everything.”

“Good.”

“Do you also want me to take them to the copy room, or are you still being generous with your time?”

“You take them. I’ll be in my office and don’t want to be disturbed.”

“You got it, boss.”

Once inside my office, I closed the door and walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window that gave me a clear view of downtown Heartease with its bustling snow-covered streets.

Two weeks ago, the city had put on the annual illuminations to welcome the festive season. Lamps, benches, shops—everywhere had colorful decorations to get people in the mood for the holidays.

I turned my back to the window. Of all the holidays, I hated Christmas the most. People were foolish, spent what they couldn't afford to, and got overly happy when they had nothing to rejoice about. Electric bills skyrocketed, credit card debts were racked up, and unnecessary gifts were bought that would soon be forgotten.

Zahair's snowman-covered tie flashed through my mind. Of course, he was one of the silly ones who made too damn much fuss about Christmas. Didn't he realize our office didn't have any holiday cheer? No Christmas carols filled the lobby; no Christmas tree was erected. It was business as usual. The workplace was to be professional, not to express views about what the season meant—whether religious or secular.

I opened the bottom desk drawer, shoved some ledgers aside, and pulled out a piece of paper with dark and white smudges: Zahair's ass. The wastepaper basket sat a couple of feet away from my desk. I had a paper shredder in my office too. I had no excuse to keep the offensive paper that had ended up in one of the folders I'd passed around to the members of the board in one of our regular meetings five months ago.

“What is this supposed to be?” Juliette Butterfield, the vice president, had asked, brandishing the paper for all to see. As unclear as it was, one glance and I knew exactly what it was.

“That actually belongs to me, Juliette.” I’d reclaimed the page and diverted everyone’s attention from trying to figure out what the obscure image was. I’d had every intention of throwing it away at the first opportunity. Instead, I’d placed it at the bottom of my drawer.

I bet the real thing looks better. He filled out a pair of pants so well.

A knock sounded on the door, and I quickly flipped over the page to hide the image.

“Come in.”

Laura entered, the heels of her cherry-red stilettos clicking on the floor. “I know you said you don’t want to be disturbed, but I figured you’d like to have these back.”

She placed the papers I’d grabbed to make my trip to the copy room seem logical on my desk. They were personal utility bills I had taken with me to the office to pay them. No reason for me to copy those, especially when I’d told her the copies I needed were for the upcoming board meeting.

“Thanks,” I grunted, ignoring the heat filling my cheeks. “Anything else?”

“You sure there’s nothing I can help you with?”

She smiled way too widely.

“Whatever you think you know, you don’t.”

“Oh, I think I have some idea. Now all those trips to the copy room make sense.”

“Laura, get out.”

“Let’s see. Omar’s been here for almost three years, and you’ve never been to the copy room in all that time, so that leaves—”

“You’re fired.”

Her smile turned into a full-scale grin. “But whatever will you do? Everyone in the office knows you’re so strictly against workplace relationships. Too bad. He’s very cute.”

“You’re getting too personal, Laura. Aren’t you worried about your job?”

“Oh, if you fire me, it’ll still be worth it. I’ve never seen you this interested in anyone before.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Mmm. Are you sure there’s nothing I can help you with?”

I eyed her suspiciously. “Like what?”

“Oh, take a peek at his file and slip you his number. Send him a bouquet of roses and chocolate from his secret admirer.”

I scowled. “Don’t you dare, Laura. I mean it.”

She sighed. “Fine, but I think you shouldn’t let it go. I’ve never seen you do such silly things because of someone before.”

“Like you know anything about my social life.”

“I know enough.” She shrugged. “If you don’t want me to act, then I won’t, but if you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

I kept it together until the door closed behind her. Sagging back into the chair, I ran my fingers through my hair. I'd been careless, and now my secretary knew too much. It served me right for giving in to my whim to see him whenever the urge hit me.

Had Zahair also figured out why I went to the copy room myself instead of sending my secretary?

Laura had a point, though. My stance against office romances was well known at Sterling, so even if I'd intended to act on the attraction I felt to Zahair, I couldn't do anything about it.



2

ZEE

I CHECKED MY WATCH as Claire from the front desk waved me over. Good. I had twenty minutes to spare for a chat before I had to get to work. Since Mr. Gilchrist was counting my strikes, I'd made every effort to drag my ass out of bed half an hour earlier than usual to avoid arriving late.

For whatever reason—which I was still trying to figure out—he'd overlooked the ways I'd messed up so far, but I would rather not push him. He'd gone crickets about my butt pic. Had he found it? He hadn't scolded me, so maybe not. But still, one of these days, my luck might run out, so I had every intention of being on my best behavior.

“Hey, Claire.” I rested my miniature Christmas tree on the top of her desk. “How's your morning going?”

“Not as well as yours.” She nodded at my outfit. “You're looking all snazzy for the season.”

I grinned and smoothed my hands down my green-and-white diamond-patterned sweater vest with snowflake prints. “It looks great, doesn't it? I got it on sale at Bloomingdale's. The ladies' department, but don't tell.”

She chuckled. "Looks great on you. I've got to say you're rather brave." She picked up the Christmas tree and inspected it. "In all my time working here, no one's ever come through those doors with anything remotely resembling the holidays."

I wrinkled my nose. "That can't be true."

"I promise you I'm not exaggerating. Mr. Gilchrist is all business and made it clear our personal views about the holidays should not be expressed at the office."

"Well, that's no fun."

"I think that's the point. The office is about work, not fun."

I bit my bottom lip. That was why he warned me about not wearing my holiday tie to the office again. I pouted. He couldn't be serious, could he? What was the harm in dressing for the occasion? I was getting into the mood for the holiday season, not forcing my beliefs on anyone.

Hmm. The other workers always acted like Mr. Gilchrist was an ogre. Sure, he was stern, but he'd let me off the hook twice now. Not to mention how I became nervous whenever he brought papers to the copy room. He couldn't be all *that* bad if he put up with my foolish babbling to my wealthy boss, who I was attracted to.

Thank god he didn't know that last part.

"I'll press my luck." I snatched the Christmas tree from Claire and blew her a kiss. "Have a great day."

She made a disgusted sound that made me laugh. I hummed "Dashing Through the Snow" while I took the stairs down to

the copy room. Omar wasn't there yet, but that wasn't surprising, given he usually breezed in a minute before work began. I'd tried it once, and it had completely ruined my day. When I arrived here in the mornings, I needed a few minutes to breathe before I got started.

I set my Christmas tree down on the long desk I shared with Omar. What if Claire had actually seen everything I'd brought from home?

By the time Omar walked into the room, I'd hung green and gold tinsels off the corners of the desk, as well as two Christmas stockings I'd made with our names on them. On my side of the desk, I had put a snow globe, an advent calendar with chocolate treats, and my favorite rabbit dressed up in a fluffy white winter coat. I'd debated hard on bringing that one but figured no one would understand what the rabbit meant to me.

"Dude, what the hell!" Omar slipped his bag from his body and placed it on his chair. "You're going to get us into trouble."

"Relax. It's just a few things."

"A few holiday things. I'm telling you, this is a bad idea."

I wagged my eyebrows. "You might change your mind if you look inside your stocking."

"What's in it?" He peered inside and took out a candy cane and his favorite chocolate bar.

“Now I know I told you that you eat way too much chocolate and shouldn’t be indulging you, but I’m in the holiday spirit. Can’t you feel the change with the season?” I sighed with a happy smile and wrapped my arms around my body.

Omar laughed. “Dude, you’re scaring me. I’m not used to coming into the office and finding this.”

“We’re the ones who spend most of the time here. Why should anyone care that we’ve spruced the place up a bit? Tomorrow I may sneak some more stuff in.”

“I’m not sure this is a good idea, Zahair.”

“There’ll be something in your stocking every day.”

“Damn, you make a solid argument.” He ripped the wrapper from one end of the chocolate bar and sank his teeth into it. A moan followed. “Fine, but I’m not taking credit for any of this.”

“I’ll own up to it if anything goes wrong. Don’t worry about it.”



As I stapled the papers I’d printed out, I swayed to the Christmas song coming from the speaker. The mundane task needed little concentration, which was just as well. I was too

busy grooving to my playlist of Mariah Carey's Christmas songs.

Despite his earlier apprehension of me hanging my seasonal ornaments, Omar had come around and tapped his feet to the jaunty beat of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." At first, I hadn't been certain about playing the Christmas songs, but then everyone who'd visited the copy room had smiled when they saw the decorations. Only two secretaries had commented that Mr. Gilchrist didn't do Christmas, but even they had seemed happy.

The music was low, so it wouldn't disturb any conversations. Plus, everyone left with a smile and a bounce in their steps. Mr. Gilchrist was hardly the Grinch. How could he have a problem with any of this?

The door opened, and the object of my thoughts entered the copy room. He scanned the desk. Then his gaze landed on me. My heart skipped a beat, and my stomach swooped like I'd rocketed from a four-hundred-foot drop, going ninety miles per hour.

"Mr.— Fuck!" I dropped the stapler gun. Shit, I had shot a staple into my finger instead of the papers. Red dots appeared around the staple still fastened in my flesh.

"Zahair, you okay?" Omar sprang to his feet, but with a few long strides, Mr. Gilchrist reached me first. He wrapped a broad hand around my wrist and held my hand out.

"You're injured," he said, his voice low and calm.

Omar stood a few feet from Mr. Gilchrist, looking ambivalent about what to do.

“It’s just a small wound.” I tugged at my hand, but he held tightly to it.

“Let me.” He smoothed out my fingers straight. “I’m going to remove the staple. Take a deep breath.”

I inhaled deeply, staring at his face, my mind in shambles. His entire focus was on the staple in my finger like he was performing some kind of life-threatening surgery. I could have easily yanked the staple out, but he took his time, caught the staple, and slowly pulled it out of my flesh. Blood bubbled up my skin.

“I can get paper towels from the restroom,” I croaked.

“No need.” He tugged the pocket square from his jacket and wrapped it around the wound. “Hold on to this tightly to stop the bleeding.”

“Thank you.”

He glanced up, and our eyes met. The way he looked at me...

Mr. Gilchrist dropped my hand and schooled his features back into the impassive, unreadable, gorgeous slate I’d come to know over the past months.

“I’ll take the copies my secretary dropped off this morning.”

“They’re right here, Mr. Gilchrist, sir.” Omar hurried to the table where we had the finished work ready. He took the file

from Omar and strode from the room as quickly as he'd come in.

After he'd left, only Mariah Carey's voice disturbed the silence. Omar's gaze collided with mine. At least one of us wasn't shaking.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

"What the hell was what?"

"He didn't say anything about the decorations and the music. I was prepared to shove you under the wheels of the bus."

"Well, I think y'all are exaggerating. He's not so bad."

"Trust me, he is, and I should know. I've worked here for a few years. But seriously, did you see the way he rushed to your help?" He stared at me so hard I shuffled my feet. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Maybe he likes you."

I laughed and waved him off. "Be serious, will you? The man's quite a catch. Why on earth would he be interested in me?" I removed the pocket square from my finger and tried to tame my smile. Could there be any truth to what Omar had said? I bit my bottom lip. Mr. Gilchrist hadn't fired me for catching me with my pants down. If Omar knew about that, he would be even more convinced that our boss was into me.

But he was freaking Brody Gilchrist, and I was an orphan without any special skills to make it big in life. Next to Mr. Gilchrist, how could I not feel pathetic? I didn't even dare hope.

Except my heart was already there, adding up all the times Mr. Gilchrist had come to the copy room, the fact that he hadn't fired me, and the way he'd wrapped his pocket square around my finger. Could the sum be that Omar had a point? Did Mr. Gilchrist like me?

"You're thinking about it, aren't you?" Omar rubbed his hands together. "Imagine that. You and Mr. Gilchrist."

"Stop it. There's nothing to imagine." But why was I grinning at the idea? It was all Omar's fault. Now I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Deny it all you want." He returned to his seat. "In a month or two from now, you could be sleeping with the boss."

"Now you really need to stop." I couldn't have thoughts of having sex with Mr. Gilchrist in the office. My cock was already liking the idea way too much.

The phone rang, and Omar pushed his chair across the room to snag it up. "Copy room. This is Omar."

I tested the area I'd punctured with the staple gun and blocked out Omar. The skin felt tender, but the bleeding had stopped.

"Hold for me, please. Zahair."

"Yes?"

“It’s Mr. Gilchrist’s secretary.” He waggled his eyebrows and handed me the phone.

I shushed him and took the receiver from him. “This is Zahair.”

“Zahair, it’s Laura. Mr. Gilchrist would like to see you in his office pronto.”

“See me? But why?”

“Mr. Gilchrist will explain.” A couple of seconds passed. “Don’t worry about it. Just don’t make him wait.”

“Okay. I’ll be right there.”

I ended the call and, in a daze, stared at Omar.

“Well?”

“He wants to see me in his office.”

“Oooh, does the boss want to have a torrid affair with you?”

I balled up a blank sheet of paper and threw it at his head. “It’s nothing of the sort. He probably has some important documents that need special care.”

“Yeah, right. I’m telling you, the man’s sweet on you. If you play your cards right, you might be the future Mrs. Gilchrist. You’ll have succeeded where everyone else has failed.”

I threw him the bird and slipped out of the room. When I walked out of the elevator on the fifth floor, my stomach was in knots, and my knees wobbled.

Laura greeted me with a big smile. Some of the tension eased from my shoulders, and the knot in my stomach

loosened. It couldn't be so bad if she looked this happy... excited even.

“Zahair, he's waiting for you,” she said. “Go right in.”

“Thank you.”

I swallowed and tried not to look as panicky as I entered Mr. Gilchrist's office. Yeah, I had a crush on the man, but if Omar was right and he wanted *that* sort of relationship with me, could I do it? I wasn't sophisticated like him. I had a one-bedroom in the basement of an old relic of a house with no luxury and the very basics.

Mr. Gilchrist raised his head, and my confidence wavered. No warmth was in his eyes. I could never read him because his face was always so expressionless. How could I tell what he was thinking and prepare myself?

“Close the door behind you,” he barked.

I jumped and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

I fumbled the lock and turned it. If I were a skeleton, my bones would have been knocking together as I took a few steps forward.

“The Christmas decorations in the copy room and the Christmas songs—that was you, wasn't it?”

My mouth went dry, and my tongue felt swollen. “Yes,” I rasped, then blurted out the rest of the words as it became clear where this was going. “It was all my idea. Omar had nothing to do with it. In fact, he warned me that the company was against the expression of the holiday.”

“So you knew but went ahead all the same?”

“I didn’t think anyone would really mind.” I licked my dry lips. Losing this job wasn’t an option. The pay wasn’t going to buy me a penthouse suite, but it did put a roof over my head and food on the table. And not many places provided healthcare. If I wanted to go to college part time, his company would allow me to do that and even help with the tuition. How could a man so practical and considerate be offended by a few Christmas decorations on their desk?

“You broke the rules, Zahair.”

“I’ll take them down. I promise.”

“It’s too late.” He picked up an envelope from my desk and handed it to me. “We’ve had to terminate your employment with us. Thanks for giving us your time, and we hope you were comfortable during your time here.”

My hands shook as I opened the envelope and peered inside. I unfolded the single sheet of paper with his signature at the bottom. I scanned the page, and the breath left my lungs. The words became one big blur, but one line stuck in my head like a reel.

We regret to inform you that effective immediately, you are no longer employed by Sterling Capital Group.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered.

“Because the termination is effective immediately, you will receive a severance package. Human resources will be in

touch with you in the next forty-eight hours. That will be all, Zahair.”

“Nonono.” I gripped the letter tightly in my hand. “You can’t fire me for the Christmas decorations and music. That’s —” Would it be offensive to call my boss insane? Because that was the only word I could think of.

“The reasons are outlined in the letter.”

“It says incompetence, failure to follow instructions and abide by company protocols.” I gasped. “Is this really about what happened all those months ago? But I don’t get it. Why not fire me then? Why do it now?”

“Like I said to you, Zahair, we’ll be in touch with you within the next forty-eight hours. Can you trust the process to do right by you?”

“Do right by me?” My voice rose from the panic bubbling up inside me. “You fired me!”

“And now I’m asking you to take your belongings and leave the premises willingly. It’s better this way than the entire building knowing.”

My insides crumpled, folding from an avalanche of emotions. I’d gotten it wrong. Omar and I both had. Mr. Gilchrist had no feelings for me. He’d fired me. With no remorse.

I blinked back the tears that burned my eyes, squared my shoulders, and set my chin. “Very well, then. Thank you for the opportunity to work with this company.”

Because the tears were on the brink of falling, I rushed out of his office and slammed the door behind me.

“Zahair!” Laura called, but I didn’t stop.

I didn’t wait for the elevator for fear of running into someone. I took the stairs, and as soon as I reached the first landing, I let the tears fall. He had no idea what he’d done. I’d lost my job and, with it, so much more. All those kids who depended on me...

How dare he fire me for something this trivial after everything else that he could have legitimately fired me for? Had I somehow slept through the months, and it was April first? Nothing about this felt real.

I scrubbed my eyes and marched the rest of the way down the stairs. By the time I entered the copy room, I was out of breath. Omar swung around in his chair, and the big smile he wore fell.

“What happened?”

Unable to find the words, I handed him the letter and stalked over to the corner of the room where we stacked empty boxes. I grabbed one, returned to my desk, and shoved the decorations inside.

“Oh my god, he fired you?”

“I take back every nice thing I ever said about that man.” I flung the tabletop tree into the box, the snow globe, the tinsels.
“He’s not nice at all!”

“He isn’t coming after me next, is he? Did you tell him I had nothing to do with this?”

“I did, so don’t worry about it.” I yanked down the Christmas stockings. “You should be perfectly safe from the Grinch. No, scrap that. He’s worse than the fucking Grinch. At least *that* Grinch was redeemed. This one...ugh, he’s just plain horrible. Mayor Maywho, that’s who he is!”

“Zahair—”

“He’s ten times worse than Ebenezer Scrooge.” I threw the advent calendar into the box. “No, I got it. He’s Mr. Potter incarnated!”

“Zahair, you should stop—”

“No, why hold it all in now? He can’t fire me again. In fact, I wish I’d told him when I was in his office. He’s so ugly on the inside but struts around the office building, looking like someone’s wet dream when in reality he’s a nightmare!”

“Zahair, you really should stop!”

“You were right, okay. I really liked him. I’d have slept with him even just once but...” The words choked out of me as I turned and came face-to-face with Mr. Gilchrist standing inside the door.

Fuck, where’s a lightning strike when a guy needs it?

“Oh god.”

“I thought I’d bring this down to you.” Mr. Gilchrist approached me calmly and placed an envelope in the box. “It’s

your final paycheck, but like I said, Zahair, we'll get in touch with you shortly and help you transition."

But I didn't want to transition. I wanted to work under his obnoxiously gorgeous nose. I wanted to wake up from sleeping at my desk to find him hovering over me. I wanted to step out of the elevator and run into him, to glimpse him and his colleagues as they walked along the halls in their power suits, making everyone hush.

"Please don't fire me," I begged shamelessly. I couldn't even pretend this was only about the job. He'd already heard enough from my tirade, anyway. If he fired me, the little hope I'd had that Omar's hunch was right would be dashed to pieces.

"I'm sorry, Zahair. Sterling is not a right fit for you, but I have no doubt that you will bounce back. Be patient."

Be patient? He was firing my ass a few weeks away from Christmas!

I grabbed my box and clutched it to my chest. "You, sir, are pure evil. Good day!"

"Zahair!"

I marched out of the copy room and stomped up the short flight of stairs to the first floor. Claire, tending to someone at the front desk, shot me a questioning look, but I didn't stop. I had to get away. In such a short time, this place had begun to feel like home. It was the most decent place I'd ever worked, and now I'd lost it.



3

BRODY

WHERE THE HELL ARE you, Zahair?

I paced in my office, my chest tight and a dull ache pulsing at my temples. Another automated voice came on the line. I waited impatiently for the recording to end.

“Zahair, this is Mr. Gilchrist from Sterling.” Maybe that sounded too formal when my call had nothing to do with professionalism. “I mean, this is Brody—Brody Gilchrist, your former boss.” And owner of your photocopied butt pic. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for the past five days but have been unable to. Please give me a call as soon as you get this. Or drop by the office at any time. Please.”

Before I started begging, I approved the message, then hung up. “You dumb son of a bitch.” I threw my cell phone onto my desk and braced my hands on the back of the chair. How stupid could I have been to fire him? Then I’d waited too long to get in touch with him. I should have called him that same day instead of giving it a couple of days to convince myself I was doing the right thing.

The right thing. I snorted. The right thing wasn't firing a guy so I could ask him out. But I'd been so fucking sure I had a foolproof plan. I hadn't counted on him not answering his phone.

A sharp rap echoed on the door, and Laura entered. I'd been loath to have her interfere in my private life before, but she was the only one who could ever know about Zahair and what I'd done. I could just see my company, my efforts, crumbling if it got out I'd fired a worker so I could sleep with him.

When my dad was head of the company, we'd already suffered way too much from scandals. Our family had gone from a wealthy household name we could be proud of to being scorned as lawsuit after lawsuit rendered our family destitute.

I'd tried to handle this situation with as much discretion as possible to avoid that from happening again. If Zahair held a grudge for me firing him and wouldn't answer his phone because of that, my only hope was that he had no idea how I truly felt about him. If he had, he would probably have talked to the press already. But I didn't see him as the kind of person to run to the media. Still, I'd been cautious in dealing with the issue—probably too cautious. It turned out he might not have understood my nuanced “we'll get in touch.”

“Anything?” I asked.

Laura shook her head. “I'm sorry. He came to collect his severance pay and left the building quickly. The security guard who you'd instructed to delay him when Zahair got here

already went home and forgot to relay the information to the colleague who relieved him.”

“Dammit.” I rubbed my temples. “I have no choice but to go to his home. Did you get the address from HR?”

“I did.” But she made no attempt to give it to me. “Mr. Gilchrist, are you sure you want to do this?”

“What do you mean?” She was the one who’d told me that if I was drawn to this boy in a way I hadn’t been drawn to anyone before, I shouldn’t let it go.

“It’s just that I know how hard you’ve worked to build up the reputation of this company. Is it worth it to risk all that for someone who might not feel the same way about you? When he finds out the true reason you fired him, he might decide to go public with it.”

“But he’s not like that.” And I’d heard everything he’d said that day as he furiously packed his stuff into a box. He felt exactly the same way I did. He’d also been so angry. As I’d listened to his tirade, a mixture of emotions had overwhelmed me. I’d wanted to tell him the truth. I’d felt guilty for the redness of his eyes. And I’d also been amused by the way he’d trashed me and complimented me all in one to his friend.

“You should probably think twice about all this.”

She had a point, but I was beyond thinking twice. I needed to find Zahair and explain.

“I didn’t put this plan into motion lightly, Laura.” I winced. “As bad as it has turned out, I put a lot of thought into this.

Now I need his address so I can find him and explain. He'll come around."

"You fired him to sleep with him."

"Not just to sleep with him." I would have never fired him if that was all I wanted. I enjoyed sex as much as the next man, but I wasn't led by the instinct to fuck anyone I was attracted to. I had more self-restraint than that. "It's more."

"Okay, but be careful."

Laura wrote down the address for me, and I thanked her and grabbed my jacket and car keys.

"If I have any meetings this afternoon, reschedule them," I said on my way to the elevator. "I'll likely not be back in the office for the rest of the day."

I marched to my car, which was parked in the CEO-designated spot at the front of the building. I started the engine and plugged the address into the GPS. He only lived twenty minutes away. Hopeful Home. A private nonprofit home for orphaned children.

Unease settled in my gut as I drove to the place. The snow came down in flurries, and despite it being the middle of the day, the sky was overcast, leaving a shadow hanging over the city. What had Zahair said about kids when I'd found him sleeping in the copy room? For the life of me, I couldn't recall.

Why would he have given the address for a children's home as his? Did he actually live there, or had he used a false address? How the hell was I supposed to find him if he'd done

the latter? I tightened my hands on the steering wheel. I wouldn't stop searching until I found him. I had to make up for my mistakes.

A part of me had hoped my GPS was wrong and the children's home had been replaced by an apartment building. I should have known better. I drove onto the property. Brown patches choked with weeds emerged from the snow-filled lawn.

The main building was a two-floor structure with a shingle roof. Some of the shutters were broken, and a fresh coat of paint would go a long way in getting the place to look presentable. Detached from the house were two other buildings farther to the back.

A blue minivan stood in the yard. I parked next to it and climbed out of the car. The front door opened, and a thin woman wearing Wellington boots walked out onto the porch. Her brown hair was coiled around her head.

"Hello there," she called. "Are you with the city?"

"The city?" I walked up to her.

"Never mind." She waved me closer. "What can I do for you?"

"My name's Brody Gilchrist," I said with a hand outstretched. "Is this a children's home?"

"It is." She gave my hand a hearty handshake. "I'm Madeline Roper, the caretaker of this place. We have fourteen children living here."

Shit, was this turning out to be another dead end?

“I was looking for someone, and this is the address I have for them. Does Zahair Gooden live here by any chance?”

Movement to the left caught my attention. A young man peered around the side of the building. He jerked back when he saw me.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t have any Zahair living with us.”

“You’ve never heard of him?”

“No. He must have given you the wrong address.” She took a step back. “Is there anything else?”

“No, that’s it.”

“Then excuse me, Mr. Gilchrist. I was in the middle of cleaning the bedrooms when I heard your car drive up.”

I nodded and tried but couldn’t muster up a smile. “Thank you.”

I trudged back to the car feeling crushed. Dammit. This was my last lead on where to find Zahair. Maybe Laura had written down the address wrong. I sent her a quick message, asking her to double-check the address.

A tap on the glass startled me. The same face that had appeared around the side of the house was right at my window. The boy could be anywhere from twelve to fourteen with dirty blond hair and blue eyes.

I lowered the window. “Is there—”

“She’s lying,” he whispered, his tone urgent. “She kicked Zahair out when he lost his job. Said he couldn’t stay here anymore. I miss Zahair. Everyone does. Will you bring him back?”

That witch. I frowned. What else was she hiding if she’d lied about this? “When did Zahair leave?”

“Two days ago.” He sprang back from the car. “I have to go before she realizes I’m gone.” He dashed to the side of the house and disappeared around the back. The urge to go back and demand the truth from the woman was strong, but what would it help?

Zahair was already gone.

Please, please let me find him. I’ll put a Christmas tree up every year if I locate him and know he’s okay.



4

ZEE

TWO WEEKS AGO, I'D lost my job, but not a day went by that I wasn't stunned it had happened. My feelings were all over the place, swinging from self-pity to hatred for Mr. Gilchrist. Then I thought of the times he'd cut me some slack and got confused all over again.

The front door of the two-bedroom apartment where I was staying temporarily opened, and I pushed my misfortune from my mind. I'd been lucky Elliot had agreed to me staying with him until I found another job. So far, the severance package I'd received from Sterling was keeping me afloat. The money I earned as one of Santa's elves at the mall was enough to contribute to the rent and help with the food, but it didn't leave me with much else.

As a way of saying thanks, I'd used my first paycheck to buy what I needed to make dinner for us. The task made me feel a little better and distracted me from wallowing. I'd never known before how much wallowing I was capable of until I'd gotten fired.

“Hey, something smells good in here.”

My face fell, and I turned away from the stove. Instead of Elliot, Leo, his boyfriend, entered the kitchen. The guy gave me the willies. When Elliot introduced us, I'd been so happy for them. He doted on my friend like the perfect boyfriend, but as soon as Elliot turned his back, Leo would hit on me. I avoided him whenever I could, but he spent so much time here it was impossible. At least Elliot was usually home when he stopped by, which put a buffer between us.

"Elliot's not here yet." I turned off the heat under the bubbling saucepan on the stove. I was practically done with everything, and if he was here, I would rather stay in my bedroom. "He should be here any minute, though. I made dinner if you want to help yourself before he gets here."

Leo licked his lips. "I do want to help myself, but you won't let me."

"The food's finished. I'll be in my room."

I tried to pass him, but he stepped into my way and clutched my thigh. "You know damn well I'm not talking about the food." He slipped his hand behind me and grabbed my ass. "I want to take a stab at that ass. Been thinking of bending you over and making you scream since you moved in here with us."

"You're my friend's boyfriend." Nothing new about telling him that. He only dug his fingers harder into the flesh through the green velour pants I had on. "You need to stop, Leo, before he catches you hitting on me."

“Come on, let me hit that one time. You got a perfect ass. I bet it’d bounce real nice up and down my dick.”

“I said no.” I shoved him away, breathing hard. The skin on my ass ached, and my stomach churned. He was bigger than me, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to defend myself if he forced me.

“It’s the least you can do for me letting you stay here.”

I balled my hands into fists at my side. “You put a hand on me again, and I’ll tell Elliott you’re a scumbag.”

He furrowed his brow. “You threatening me?”

Instead of answering, I dashed toward my bedroom and slammed the door shut behind me. I bolted it and threw myself onto my bed, clutching the pillow to my chest. I would stay in my room until he was gone. I missed the kids.

The hole in my heart grew larger each day I was away from them. How were they doing with Ms. Roper? The woman was a tyrant who ran the boys’ group home like a drill sergeant. Her punishments never left physical marks, but she had ways of making us suffer when we misbehaved.

Having aged out of the home, I should have left as soon as I’d hit eighteen, but I hadn’t been able to walk away from the other kids. When I was there, I could help them and shield them a little. With the money I hadn’t handed over to Ms. Roper for “rent,” I’d helped get the kids supplies they’d needed. Otherwise, she’d argue about everything the children

needed and complain about how little funding the home was getting from the initial founders.

At least she'd allowed me to visit with the children. Seeing them three days ago had helped to set my mind at ease somewhat, but it was quite the adjustment to not see them every day and ensure they were being well taken care of. Not that Ms. Roper would abuse them. She was too smart for that, but she was stingy and could make things harder for them than necessary.

Although I was hungry, I remained in the bedroom to avoid running into Leo. Hard raps on the door roused me from sleep.

“Zee, open the door.”

Elliott.

I vaulted off the bed. I took a deep breath, then spun the lock and opened the door. He frowned and peered over my shoulder. “Why’s the door bolted if you don’t have company?”

“I-uh-” *Tell him the truth.* “I must have locked it by mistake.”

“Can we talk?” Before I could reply, he shouldered his way inside. He was even shorter than me and a lot skinnier with both cheeks pierced and his long blond hair shaved on one side.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to leave. Tonight.”

“What?” This couldn’t be happening. Not again. Ms. Roper hadn’t given me any notice either when she told me to get the hell out.

“Yeah, I don’t think this is working,” he said. “It’s not enough space for all three of us.”

All three of us? Realization dawned on me. “What did Leo tell you because I swear I didn’t hit on him. He was the one who hit on me.”

“He said you came on to him several times when I wasn’t around.”

My face became numb. “He’s lying. You can’t believe him over me, Elliott. We’ve been friends for a long time.” We’d been in the group home at the same time, but he’d been happy to walk away when he became legally an adult. “You must know I’d never hurt you like that.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” He waved a hand at me. “Look at what you’re wearing in the apartment when my boyfriend is around. Of course he’s going to look at you, Zee.”

What was wrong with my velour pants and top? Elliott always complained he was cold, so he cranked the thermostat up, which left me hot. Me wearing a cropped top had nothing to do with seducing his boyfriend.

I stared hard at my friend, but he wouldn’t look me in the eye. “You know,” I said softly. “You know he was the one who hit on me. I can tell by that look on your face. But what I don’t understand is why I have to go instead of him.”

“Because he’s my boyfriend, Zee, and I love him. Plus, he helps me with the bills and everything.”

“You know if he’s hitting on me, he’s doing it with other guys, don’t you?”

“Just get out. I don’t want to hear it. Pack your shit and go. This is what I get for being nice.”

“Elliott—”

He had tears in his eyes as he rushed from the bedroom. He didn’t mean it. I knew he didn’t, so I didn’t hate him for what he was doing. Elliott had low self-esteem and picked the guys he thought he deserved instead of ones who deserved him. Hopefully, one day he would come to his senses and feel better about himself.

Numb, I packed my bags. Everything I owned fit in a suitcase and a duffel. When I’d started at Sterling, I’d bought fancy clothes for work, and they had been the first to go after I was fired. I’d sold them to a secondhand shop for way too little, but I’d needed the money, so arguing would have been futile.

When I had everything packed, I hauled the suitcase behind me. Elliott stood in the hall, chewing on his nails and looking more wrecked than I felt for being without a roof over my head again. Tears filled his eyes, and his lips trembled.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said. “Don’t cry.”

“It’s not.” He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. “Where will you go?”

“I’ll figure something out. Don’t I always?”

He inhaled sharply. “I don’t know how you can always be so optimistic. I envy you, you know.”

“Envy me for what? You have an apartment, a good job, and…” I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t say a boyfriend who loved him.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.” He sniffled. “Will you still call me? Let me know you’re okay?”

“I will. We’ll meet up for drinks soon, okay?”

Because he still looked so guilty and devastated, I pulled him in for a hug. He clung to me and shuddered. “I wish I were as strong as you. He’s all I got, Zee.”

I released him. “That’s not true. You’ve got me. I’ll always be your friend, and it’s because I’m your friend that I can’t leave without telling you that you’re an amazing guy with so much to offer. You deserve way more than him. I wish you wouldn’t settle. Somewhere out there is a guy who will love you and be faithful to you. Take care.”

My confidence lasted until I got to my car. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I cried because I had no place to go, and I cried because Elliott wasn’t getting the love he deserved, but I got it. All our lives, we’d been without anyone to love and care for us, so he’d accepted the first person who treated him a little better.

And I cried because Brody Gilchrist was a disappointment and I’d started to believe he liked me a little.

When I was all out of tears, I started the car and drove around aimlessly before I realized what I was doing. I needed a plan. I needed a clear head to think. Coffee sounded good, so I parked my car and crossed the street to the coffee shop decked out in garlands, Christmas lights, and boughs. Usually, hearing the Christmas songs, seeing the happiness of the people around and all the decorations were enough to cheer me up, but my heart plummeted.

How could I remain hopeful when I had nothing?

A car horn blasted. Shit, I'd stopped in the middle of the road. The car swerved to avoid hitting me, but metal slammed into my side, and a flare of pain ran up my hip. My leg was swept out from under me, and I flew a few inches, then hit the ground hard. My head smacked onto the asphalt, and stars danced before my eyes. Nausea rose into my mouth, but I swallowed the bile down.

“Zahair!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Fuck. Even when I was about to die, I was hearing *his* voice.

“Zahair, Oh my god. You just stopped right in the middle of the road. Are you all right?”

I cracked my eyes open and stared into the face of my very own sexy Scrooge.



5

BRODY

AS I SWERVED THE car to avoid the guy who'd stopped abruptly in the middle of the street, I knew it was too late. The guy turned around, his face partially hidden by the hood of his sweater, but his profile was enough for me to recognize Zahair just before the bumper clipped him, knocking him off his feet.

The car jerked to a stop. I'd found Zahair, but I might have also seriously injured him. Fuck. Was this fate's way of showing I should leave him alone? How many times could I hurt one person?

I turned off the ignition and hopped out of the car. Pedestrians who'd witnessed the incident crowded closer. I ran over to Zahair, who lay sprawled on the ground. My heart was in my throat. If he was seriously injured, I would never forgive myself. I was responsible for this whole situation.

"Zahair." I dropped to my knees next to him, ignoring the cold of the snow seeping into the material of my pants. "Zahair, open your eyes."

He groaned, and his brown gaze met mine. I released a long sigh. I'd found him.

He narrowed his eyes to icy flints. “Isn’t it enough that you fired me and got me kicked out of my home? You have to try to kill me too?”

Despite the cold, heat surged into my cheeks. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see you. I’ll call an ambulance. Stay right there.”

“Don’t bother. I’m okay. It’ll take more than that to knock me down, Brody Gilchrist!” He struggled to sit up and scowled at me. “Well, you know exactly what I mean.”

“You shouldn’t sit up until you’re checked out.”

“I’m fine.”

“Isn’t he even going to help the young man up?” someone whispered.

The words had me flying into motion and grabbing Zahair’s arm to help him to his feet. A cry of pain flew from his lips, and alarmed, I released him. “Where does it hurt?”

“My right shoulder. I think I dislocated it, and my hip feels bruised, but I can manage.”

“I’ll take you to the hospital to get checked out.”

He straightened and lifted his chin, but his expression was pained. “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you. My car’s nearby. I’ll drive myself.”

More people had gathered around now, and their presence wasn’t making the situation any easier. “I’m driving you to the hospital,” I said. “You don’t have to walk. I’m going to carry you.”

“No, you don’t—”

I swept him off his feet and marched him toward my car and away from the crowd. It was bad enough that tomorrow my face would appear in the newspaper. They didn’t need to hear everything I wanted to say to Zahair.

“What are you doing?” he growled.

“I already told you. I’m taking you to the hospital to get checked out.”

“But my car—”

“We’ll get it after.” I set him on his feet and opened the door. “Please get in and let me make up for my mistakes.”

Whether it was the softness of my tone or what I tried to convey to him when our eyes met, I had no idea, but he let out a sigh and gingerly got in. Despite his bravery, he was hurting. That was obvious from the way he cradled his right arm and the sweat on his temples. I hated how much pain I’d caused him.

“I promise I’ll fix everything,” I said.

He didn’t respond. He curled up onto the back seat on his side, favoring his arm. I hopped into the car. The people parted, giving me way, and I drove as quickly as was safe to the hospital. I kept glancing in the rearview mirror to ensure he was okay. I thought he had fallen asleep, but when I pulled into a parking spot close to the emergency department, he opened his eyes.

“I’ll get someone to bring you a wheelchair,” I said. I’d do anything to make him comfortable.

“There’s no need. I can walk.”

He opened the back door and hauled himself out before I could reach around to his side. I wrapped my arm around his waist and held him firmly, but he didn’t move.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Helping you inside.”

“Well, you don’t need to. You brought me here. Now you can go. I’m sure someone like you has a million and one things to do.” He huffed out a breath. “Like more people to flirt with, then fire.”

“I never flirted with you.” I’d wanted to, but I’d never crossed the line. I’d come close, though, so I’d fired him before I made the same mistakes as my father. Instead, I’d made it even worse.

“Whatever. You didn’t fire me that first time you caught me mooning your photocopier. How could you fire me for some stupid Christmas decorations?”

“That’s not why I fired you. I’ll explain everything later when we get home. First let’s get you checked out.”

He clenched his jaw but allowed me to lead him into the hospital. The emergency waiting room was crowded, and we had to sit and wait. The nurse had no idea how soon we would see a doctor but gave us some papers to fill out.

“Do you want me to fill this out for you?” I asked.

“No need. I’m left-handed.”

He took the clipboard from me, hunched over the paper, and scribbled the details. His handwriting was atrocious and barely legible, but I made out his middle name and that he had no health insurance and no emergency contact. The next-of-kin field was also empty.

“Can I get you anything?” I asked.

“I’d like my job back.”

I winced. “I’m sorry, but you can’t work for me, Zahair.”

“Then there’s nothing you can help me with.”

We sat in complete silence for almost two hours. At some point, he tilted sideways and rested his head on my shoulder while he napped. When the nurse called his name, he jerked awake and scrambled to his feet. I didn’t want to force myself into the examination room with him, so I stayed in the waiting room.

I opened my phone and sent a text message to the private investigator I’d hired to locate Zahair.

“Call off the search. I found him.”

I sent a similar message to Laura and put my phone away. Twenty minutes later, Zahair returned to the waiting room, his arm in a sling. He walked with a slight limp, favoring his left leg, but otherwise, he looked good. His eyebrows were no longer knitted in pain, and his jaw was relaxed.

He avoided my gaze and made straight for the reception desk. He didn't seem to want anything to do with me. How could I blame him after everything I'd put him through? I had to fix things.

I surged to my feet and stepped up next to him.

"...some kind of payment plan?" he asked.

"I'll take care of it." I took out my wallet and flipped it open.

"You don't have to do that."

"It's partly my fault, so I do."

He was back to grinding his teeth. I quickly settled his bill and pocketed his receipt, then took his uninjured arm and led him to the exit.

"Just drop me off where the accident happened," he said when we were outside. "My car's still parked across from Citibank."

"I'm not dropping you off anywhere, Zahair. Did you get a prescription?"

"It's for painkillers. I'll take the cheap over-the-counter ones."

"Give it to me."

"But I—"

"Zahair, I told you I wanted to handle everything. Now be a good boy. Less arguing and do what I say."

He inhaled sharply, but I kept moving and helped him into my car. Without a word, he handed me the prescription.

“Do you need to take any of them now?” I asked.

“No, the doctor already gave me some painkillers. They’re making me feel really happy right now, or else I wouldn’t be sitting in your car.”

I chuckled. “You’ve always been cheeky. I like that about you. When everyone else was afraid of me, you weren’t.”

He grunted. “Liked me so much you fired me, eh?”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow when you’re not drugged up. Let’s go home.”

“I don’t have a home.”

He sounded so forlorn. A quick glance in the rearview mirror showed how sad he looked. He’d stretched out in the back seat and stuck a thumb into his mouth.

So adorable.

Would he find comfort suckling on other things too, or was he into just his thumb? My nipples tingled, and I shifted my gaze away.

The traffic was horrendous. Everyone and their mother seemed to be out for the festive season. We got stuck behind a slow-moving truck, and Zahair fell asleep. I adjusted the heater to warm him up. The pullover he wore was too thin for the Colorado cold at this time of the year.

When I finally drove into my garage, I breathed a sigh of relief. I cut the engine and watched Zahair sleep for a couple of minutes, then got out of the car. He wasn't heavy at all, so I lifted him from the back seat, being careful with his arm. His eyes flew open, but they closed again so quickly I doubted he registered what was happening.

"So tired," he mumbled. "Can't sleep in peace when they're always so loud having sex, but at least I had a roof over my head. Now I'm homeless again, and it's your fault."

"You're not homeless." Emotion thickened my throat. I walked through the door into the mudroom. "This is my home, and it's also yours for as long as you want."

"Hmm. You're just feeling guilty for my near demise, but I have no shame in milking this for all it's worth. You really hurt me when you fired me."

"I'm sorry, Zahair."

His chest rose and fell. Whatever the doctor had given him was powerful stuff. No wonder he didn't seem to be in any pain.

I carried him up the stairs. Should I put him in my bedroom? I started for a guest bedroom but backtracked. The last time I hadn't made it clear what I wanted from him. I wouldn't make the same mistake twice by treating him like an accident victim I felt sorry for.

I felt something for the boy, and it wasn't just compassion for all he'd been through. It was also fondness. I loved the way

he smiled and was being a playful brat. And lust. I wanted to strip his clothes from his body and fuck him until we were both exhausted.

In my bedroom, I placed him on the bed and removed his shoes. I grabbed a blanket and covered him with it, but I didn't leave. I sat next to him and lightly traced his features with my fingers. He was finally here in my bed. I'd almost given up hope of ever finding him.

"You don't have to worry about a thing anymore," I said softly, rubbing my thumb against his full bottom lip. "You just rest and let Daddy take care of you, baby. I swear I'll spend the rest of my life making everything up to you if you let me." I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his forehead and nose.

He was finally right where he belonged.



6

ZEE

“YOU JUST REST AND let Daddy take care of you, baby. I swear I’ll spend the rest of my life making everything up to you if you let me.”

The words swirled in my head as I stretched and yawned, coming fully awake. I couldn’t remember the dream I’d had last night, but given those sentences uttered in Mr. Gilchrist’s voice, I must have been dreaming about him again. My cock twitched, and I groaned. Yup, despite him hitting me with his car yesterday, my body knew no bounds and still wanted him.

Well, my mind at least knew better.

My aching hip made it a struggle to sit up in the bed—a big-ass comfortable bed with a dark, sleek headboard. How did I get here? Had I been so tired I didn’t remember walking into the room?

The room was so spacey, but instead of giving me the feeling that something was missing, it felt relaxing not to have to be careful or slam into furniture. To the right of the bed was a walk-in closet with transparent doors, which exposed the clothing inside. I blinked several times. Clothes in a closet.

Was this not a guest bedroom?

Heat flared inside my chest, and I clutched the soft sheet in my hands. I glanced over to the empty spot beside me. The pillow didn't have any indentations. Was I relieved or disappointed? After fantasizing about it for so long, I'd made it into the bed of my boss—former boss—and he hadn't even slept in it.

“Zee, you're being stupid again.” I smacked my forehead with my good hand. “Stop thinking about him. He's an asshole.”

“You're awake.”

Mr. Gilchrist had entered the bedroom. How could such a big man move so quietly?

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said a little too loudly. I cleared my throat and threw back the soft bed sheets I'd been snuggled up in. More than likely, I'd never sleep under sheets with this quality again. “I'll use the bathroom, then be on my way.”

“You won't be going anywhere, Zahair. We have a lot of talking to do.”

“Why should I talk to you?” I shuffled to the edge of the bed and stood. I'd fallen asleep in my jeans, and the material felt stiff and chafed my skin.

“So I can apologize properly.”

“I get it. You’re sorry for hitting me with your car.” I pursed my bottom lip. “I should sue you.”

“Would that make you feel better?”

No, it wouldn’t because he hadn’t just hit me with his car and fired me. He’d also ruined my silly dreams of us.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

He pointed to a door to the left. “Right through there. I’ll get you something to wear after. You fell asleep before you could tell me where you live so I could get your stuff.”

“Wherever my car’s parked. That’s where you’ll find my stuff.”

“You were serious about that?”

I nodded. “Gonna use the bathroom.”

I closed the door behind me, leaned against it, and let out a heavy sigh. How dared he looked as if he regretted everything he’d done? He was probably only worried about my threat to sue him. He didn’t care. Never had.

I pushed off the door. Wow, this bathroom was too big for two people, let alone one. Did he have a significant other? I’d asked Omar, but he hadn’t known. Mr. Gilchrist kept his private life tightly sealed.

After peeing, I opened the cabinets and found unopened toothbrushes. I took out one and brushed, then carefully stepped into the glass-enclosed shower. I spent a couple of minutes figuring out how the faucets worked, and was

rewarded with a gush of water hitting me from both sides. At the group home, water had barely trickled out of the showerhead.

Showering took a while, and it wasn't just me being careful of my arm and hip. I didn't want to get out. The hot water didn't seem to run out. Not that I was deliberately trying to see how long it would last. It usually took a long time for the water to heat back at the group home, and in the mornings, I was in too much of a hurry to wait for it to get hot enough.

After scrubbing all the places I could think of to wash, I reluctantly turned off the full-body spray. I grabbed a towel from the rack, tracking water on the floor.

“Oh god, what heaven is this?” The rack was one of those fancy heating ones. I patted myself dry and ran the comb I found in the cabinet through my hair to loosen the kinky knots.

Just as he'd said, Mr. Gilchrist had laid out a T-shirt for me, but no underwear. Should I put on my own I'd worn all day? I shivered. That would be a no.

I slipped the shirt over my head. Hmm, since the material came down to midthigh and hung on my body, it wasn't obvious I didn't have any underwear on. I fitted my arm back into the sling.

Where was Mr. Gilchrist? I peeked into the room next door, and my mouth fell open. It was a little boy's room, painted in blue and red and with toys stacked in a corner. Mr. Gilchrist didn't have any kids. I was almost certain of it. Despite the

childish look of the room, the furniture inside was adult sized. Could it mean that he was a Daddy?

My heart beating fast, I shut the door and slowly climbed down the stairs. One would never know it was Christmas from the lack of decorations. Not even a single sprig of mistletoe to take advantage of.

Not that I want to kiss him or anything.

Sounds from my left pulled me in that direction. I walked into an enormous kitchen, where Mr. Gilchrist was unloading food onto the island. He glanced up.

“Hey, you’re finished with your shower.” He pulled out one of the ridiculous, uncomfortable-looking bucket stools from around the island. “Here, have a seat.”

“Don’t expect me to apologize for the long shower.” I hopped up onto the stool, and contrary to what I’d thought, the padded seat was comfy under my ass.

“Why would you apologize?”

That’s right. I could spend all day in his shower, and it would probably never bother him.

“Nothing.”

“I wasn’t sure what you’d like to eat, so I bought a lot.” He fished the rest of the food out of the bags—English muffins, donuts, croissants, waffles, pancakes, hash browns, eggs, bacon—a feast for a small army.

“As hungry as I am, I doubt I can eat all this.”

“Then eat what you can. If you want something else, let me know, and I’ll get it.”

I popped the lid on the box of donuts and snagged one. “Boy, you’re really worried I’m going to sue you, aren’t you?”

“What?”

I swallowed the piece of donut. “Everybody fears you. I’ve never heard you apologize or be this accommodating before. Relax, I’m not an asshole. I know it was an accident, and I’ll be out of your hair as soon as I eat breakfast.”

“Technically lunch, and I filled your prescription while you were sleeping.” He moved to the cupboard and returned with a white paper bag, which he put in front of me. “You’ll need to take the pain medication after eating. You’re not hurting too badly, are you?”

I put down the donut and scowled. “Stop pretending to care.”

“I’m not pretending. I do care.”

“But I won’t sue you so—”

“Not about that.” He rounded the island and kicked my chair so it swung to the side and had me facing him. “I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“You have? Because I’m fine. I’m not going to die or something, so my death won’t be on your conscience.”

He growled. “For god’s sake, Zahair, you misconstrue everything I say.”

“Maybe because you aren’t really saying anything! I’m so confused by—oh!”

He cupped my face in his hands and lowered his lips to mine. Shocked, I didn’t struggle, and he pressed closer, his tongue licking at my lips. Warmth pooled in my groin, and I moaned and thrust my tongue into his mouth. It seemed to be the response he was looking for. He kissed me harder, moving his lips over mine while he swept his tongue inside.

Oh god, Mr. Gilchrist is kissing me. How do I make it last?

I clutched the front of his shirt and shifted forward in the chair. When he pulled back, I protested, “No, that’s not enough, Mr. Gilchrist.”

He smiled and dropped a kiss on my nose. “You have to call me Brody after that kiss.”

So we were talking about the kiss, then?

I’d thought it would become one of those things you did but never mentioned it. A few guys like that had passed through my life. I didn’t always have my shit together, and like Elliott, I, too, had wandered around, looking for affection in all the wrong places.

“But I like calling you Mr. Gilchrist. I mean, think about it. ‘Mr. Gilchrist kissed me’ sounds much better than ‘Brody kissed me.’”

Brody laughed. “That’s what I liked about you almost instantly, Zahair. You’re always open, even if it’s not the right thing to say.”

“Wait, did you say that to me before?”

“Last night, but you were pretty out of it, so I doubt you remember much.”

“Oh god,” I groaned. “Don’t tell me I professed my undying love to you or any such thing because I was highly medicated. You can’t trust anything that comes out of this mouth.”

“Well, you didn’t say it last night, but I’m glad I’ve heard it just now.”

I pleaded silently for help. Any kind of help to extricate me from this situation. A tornado, perhaps?

“I like you, Zahair. I really do. More than I’ve liked anyone in a long time.”

My heart skipped a beat at the sincerity in his eyes. “You can’t like me.”

“Why not? Are you seeing someone else? Because after the way you kissed me, I’d have to politely ask you to break up with them.”

“No, I don’t have a boyfriend, but you fired me.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t the smartest decision I’ve made.” He sighed. “I can make a hundred sensible decisions concerning my business every day, and I’ve done nothing but make terrible ones with you.”

He brushed a hand against my cheek in a tender caress, and I froze. Could he actually be serious?

“I meant what I said about not suing you, you know. You don’t have to pretend you like me back.”

“Pretend? I had to fire you or keep making a fool of myself in how many times I went to the copy room.”

“It wasn’t *that* often.”

“For me, it was. I’ve never set foot in the copy room until you started working for me.”

“So you fired me?” I couldn’t have been more bewildered had he confessed he was really the Pope.

He exhaled deeply. “I’m ashamed to say I did. But I had every intention of taking care of you until you found a new job. If you wanted a new job. You don’t have to if you’d rather not work.”

“I’m so confused.”

“I should start from the top.” He pulled out the stool beside me and sat close enough that our knees bumped. He took my hand in his. “From the moment I saw you when you were being introduced to everyone on your first day, I was taken by your bright smile. I could tell it wasn’t fake. People around me fake things all the time. They fake that they like me or that they agree with me, so you were a breeze of fresh air. I planned to stay away, but I couldn’t, so I found all sorts of excuses to come by the copy room.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because when I was a boy, Sterling went under after several lawsuits by women who claimed sexual harassment in

the workplace after starting affairs with my father. I had no intention of repeating those scandals. If I'd approached you and something went wrong, you might have used it against me. I didn't know you well enough yet, and I had to be certain the attraction and interest were mutual."

A warm fuzziness filled my stomach, and I squeezed Brody's hand. How could I believe this was true? That he genuinely liked me.

"It became too much, and I couldn't ignore it anymore, but the only way I could pursue a relationship with you without looking like a hypocrite was if you no longer worked at the company. I handled your termination, hoping you would understand without me having to explicitly state that it wouldn't be the last you'd see of me and not to worry, as I had everything planned out."

"Oh."

"Yes. I told you *we'd* get in touch, meaning me. I had to give it some days to cool off first, but when I tried to call you after, you wouldn't answer your phone."

"That's because I accidentally placed it on top of my car the day after I got fired, forgot it was there, and drove off. You can guess the rest."

"I can definitely see that happening. Interesting things seem to happen to you."

I couldn't stop staring at Brody. He wasn't wearing the mask he always did at the office. He actually smiled, and he

looked worried as if he thought I might not forgive him for the mess that was currently my life.

“So you think you can hit me with your car, apologize, and I’ll forgive you?” I tugged my hand out of his and raised my eyebrow, something he loved to do.

“I hoped you’d forgive me and go out with me.”

“Well, you’re wrong, Brody Gilchrist.”



7

BRODY

MY HEART SANK, AND I stared at Zahair. Had I messed up so much that he didn't want anything to do with me? I'd practically stayed up all night looking in on him and making plans for us. How I'd take him out and move him into my house or an apartment of his choosing—his decision. It might be a stretch to expect him to move in with me when we'd never even been on a date, but I couldn't bear the thought of him having nowhere to live, especially when it was my fault.

“Well, don't look so shocked,” Zahair said. “I'm not saying never, just that I might make you grovel a bit first.”

I let out a sigh that expelled the painful breath that had been trapped in my lungs. “Can't say I know much about groveling, but for you, I'll do it.”

His eyes flickered with surprise. “You will? I was kind of joking.”

“I will. Tell me what you want. Anything.”

He studied me long and hard. It made *me* long and hard. “There's not a single sprig of mistletoe in this house,” he said

softly.

“You want me to hang mistletoe?”

He nodded. “In all the doorways, so I’ll have an excuse for you to kiss me.”

“We don’t need mistletoe for that.”

“Mistletoe or no kissing!”

“All right. I’ll get the damn mistletoe,” I growled.

He licked his bottom lip. “And I love Christmas.”

I squirmed on the stool. “And…”

“It looks nothing like Christmas here. If you really want me to stay, you’ll ensure I’m comfortable, right?”

“Yes?”

“So I need a Christmas tree.”

He looked so earnest the no died on my tongue. “If you get me a tree, I’ll call you Daddy.”

I widened my eyes. How did he know? I swallowed hard. “Do you understand what that means? It’s not just sex for me.”

“I saw the room,” he said. “Sorry I snooped a little upstairs.”

“And you’re not turned off?”

“Hell no. I love it! Your last little must have had fun with all those toys.”

“Actually, it’s all new.”

“Huh?”

“After I fired you and couldn’t find you, I was going crazy. I needed something to occupy my time, so I started decorating and rearranging the room with the hope that one day I could show you and explain the lifestyle while holding my breath that you’d get it and not think it was all weird.”

“You really mean that?”

I nodded.

“Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“Really?” I teased. “Because you were doing well about making those demands.”

“I was. Wasn’t I?” His grin was adorable, and I wanted to hold his face and kiss him over and over again. “Actually, you don’t have to do any of that, but do you mind if I asked you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why do you hate Christmas so much?”

I squared my shoulders, and my body went rigid. I should have expected that question from him. Anyone else would have known not to ask me such a thing, but he never let fear stop him. Wasn’t that one of the reasons I was so attracted to him?

“I mean, I get it somewhat. I never grew up with parents, and I never had foster parents, so I spent all my Christmases at

the group home. But that's why I love the season now. I can do whatever I want with whomever I want."

"It's a long story."

He gestured at the island. "And I have a feast to devour. Tell me."

He took up the half-eaten donut and bit into it, never taking his eyes off me

"Okay, then." I drummed my fingers on the granite countertop. "I already told you my father ruined the company when he was sued by three different women for harassment at the workplace."

"Hmm." Bacon strips disappeared into his mouth.

"My mother and I had no idea how seriously in trouble we were. My father pretended that everything was just fine. The year we lost the house, he foolishly spent a ton of money to decorate and throw a big Christmas party. Everybody drank and had a good time. The next morning, we were without a home. That money he spent could have helped us to downsize. My mom moved us in with her mother. I've never forgotten that Christmas, and I don't buy into the whole commercialization of the season. People end up digging themselves further in debt all for a fabricated holiday that doesn't even have any meaning."

"I understand now." He wiped his fingers on a paper towel. "And I even agree about the overspending people do, but you shouldn't let a bad experience ruin the holiday for the rest of

your life. Maybe your father knew what was coming and wanted to give you one last great Christmas before he lost everything.”

“You don’t understand, Zahair. We had to move in with my grandmother because he couldn’t bear the shame of what he’d done.”

He gasped. “Do you mean he…”

“Killed himself. I was fourteen at the time.”

“Oh no!” Zahair sprang to his feet, wedged himself between my legs, and wrapped his good arm around my neck. “That’s horrible. I’m so sorry you lost your father that way.”

My throat constricted, and I hugged him, holding him to me. He was so sweet—everything I’d envisioned him to be. And he felt perfect in my arms.

“You don’t have to get the mistletoe,” he whispered. “Nor anything for the holiday. It’s okay. I’ll stay with you.”

“You will?” I pulled back. “I mean, I don’t want you to stay with me because of a sob story.”

“It’s not the story. I was already going to say yes to your proposal.” His eyes grew wide as saucers. “Not that you proposed. I mean, it’s way too early for that when we haven’t gone out yet. Not that I expect a proposal. Feel free to jump in anytime to stop my babbling.”

I laughed softly and cupped his face between my hands. I brushed my lips over his, and he moaned.

“Kiss me properly.”

“Even without the mistletoe?”

“Yes!”

Laughing and kissing made a messy combination, but happiness flowed into my heart. Zahair was finally in my arms, right where he belonged. I nibbled his bottom lip, licked it, and deepened the kiss. He opened up for me, and I chased his tongue, our kiss becoming harder and needier. He squirmed against me and little sounds emitted from him that made my cock hard in my sweatpants. I dropped a hand to his ass and felt his nakedness even through the shirt.

I groaned and pulled back. “You’re not wearing underwear.”

“What other observations have you made?” He took my hand and slipped it beneath his shirt to his hard cock.

“That you’re hard for me.”

“I’ve been hard for you since the first time I saw you. Strutting your hot stuff across the ground floor to get on the elevator. I’ve wanted to call you Daddy since.”

I stroked his cock. “Yeah?”

“Hmm. I used to fantasize a lot.”

“About what?”

“About you calling me to your office, spreading me out on your desk and...”

“And...?”

“Eating me out.”

“It’s not the office, but there’s a table.” I nodded at the table to the right. “But maybe you should finish eating, then take your pills. We have a lot to discuss before we make love.”

“Maybe, but before I make love to my Daddy, I’d like to page Mr. Gilchrist to punish me.”

“For?”

“Falling asleep on the job.”

“I see you left out photocopying your butt.”

He closed his eyes. “I’d like to forget that, thank you very much.”

I released him and slapped his ass. “Go over to the table. I’ll get a condom and lube.”

I hesitated. He hadn’t exactly said he wanted penetrative sex.

“What are you waiting for? It’s been almost seven months of waiting for you to make a move on me.”

I had the answer I needed.

We were moving way too fast. We had a lot of talking to do. We had boundaries to discuss and our living arrangement, but I made it up the stairs and back in record time. I came to a halt in the doorway and gaped at the sight of Zahair lying on the table with his legs spread. My cock liked what it saw, as it thickened in my underwear.

“Do you know your status?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ve no conditions. You?”

“It’s been two years, and the last time I checked, I was good.”

“But we’ll use condoms until we get tested together. Just to be on the safe side.”

“I’m okay with that. Now let’s pretend we’re in your office. Mr. Gilchrist, sir. I feel so naughty.”

“You should.” I inched forward until I was standing over him next to the table. “Look at you all shameless and begging for it.”

“Oh god, I love that,” he whispered. “Do you think you could pretend you’re coercing me into it?”

“I’ll give an Oscar-worthy performance.”

He bit his bottom lip. “Your secretary is outside the door, and this isn’t right. You’re my boss.”

“You’re not going to turn me down, are you?”

“If I say no, is my job on the line?”

“You don’t want to test that out, do you? Spread those legs for me, baby. I want to make you feel really good.”

I caught his firm thighs and pushed them apart, then bowed my head to nip their insides. He jerked and clutched the edge of the table. I fisted one corner of his shirt, wrapping the material around my fist and pulling up to bare his bottom half. His cock stuck up toward his belly, hard and thick.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” I murmured and slid my free hand up his thigh to cup and fondle him. “I love seeing you

like this, all spread out for me. How's your hip?"

"Fine."

"Your arm?"

"A little sore but doesn't hurt as badly."

"I'll be gentle."

I lowered my head and captured the tip of his cock between my lips. He let out a whine as I slid my lips down his cock.

"Oh god!"

His thighs firmed under my touch, but I didn't let up. I pulled off and licked around the plump glans, then sucked him back down my throat. My head bobbed with every stroke of my lips up and down his shaft. I pressed a hand to his stomach, and it danced and tightened from each suckle.

"Mr. Gilchrist, sir," he moaned. "You're not supposed to..."

A garbled sound left him when I trailed kisses over his sac and down his taint. I took him by the hips and pulled him gently down the table. I tapped my fingers against his tight hole, testing out his readiness. He squirmed beneath me.

"I know exactly what you need." I lowered myself and pressed my lips between his cheeks, kissing and stroking his hole with my tongue.

"Oh god, that feels good," he grunted. "Oh my god."

I spat at his hole and slid a thumb inside. So fucking tight. My dick tightened, wanting inside him right now. I reached for

the lube and squirmed a generous amount onto my fingers, then touched them to his hole.

“Kiss me,” he whispered.

So I did. I settled my mouth on his and slowly kissed him to the steady thrusting of my fingers inside him, stretching and relaxing his muscles.

“How does that feel?” I crooked my fingers and rotated them.

He gasped and clung to me with his good hand. “Please, more.”

I slipped a third finger into my eager boy’s hole, and he grimaced.

“Want me to stop?” I asked.

“No, it’s been a while.”

“Then I’ll take my time with you. I want you to enjoy it as much as I know I will. You’re so fucking tight.”

“You like that?”

“Yes. I’m already hard.”

“It’s not fair,” he gasped. “You still have your clothes on while I’m writhing on your table with no shame.”

“I like your no shame.” I slipped my fingers out of him and quickly got rid of my shirt, sweatpants, and boxers.

“Fuck, yes.” He took hold of my cock and stroked up the impressive length. “This is gonna hurt so good.”

“That’s how you like it?”

“One of the ways, yes. Where’s the condom?”

I ripped the condom open and slid it down my shaft. He pouted. “Soon you’re going to fuck me without it.”

“Yes, very soon. Push out for me, baby.”

I rubbed the head of my cock at his hole, and he shuddered. “You ready?”

“Yes. Please fuck me.”

“You have such a pretty way of asking.”

As I inched inside him, he tightened around my dick. Despite all the lube, his muscles wrapped around me in a chokehold my dick appreciated. When I was halfway in, I pulled out and fucked him shallowly, a few inches at a time.

“Oh, fuck, yes.” Zahair moaned.

“You like me being inside you?”

“So much.” He slipped a hand down to where we joined and stroked the few inches that had not penetrated him yet. “Give me more.”

He tugged me forward, and I had no choice but to give him what he wanted. He circled the width of my cock buried inside him with his fingers, then grabbed my balls and squeezed. I gritted my teeth and allowed him to explore our bodies. It gave me a few minutes to pull back from the precipice where I was already too close.

“I can’t believe you’re really here with me,” he whispered.

“You better believe it. I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

I kissed him and thrust, grinding my dick deep enough to make him gasp and push at my chest, but when I pulled back, he shook his head. “No, don’t stop,” he said against my lips. “Keep fucking me like that.”

So I did. I Fucked his tight little hole with rapid and deep strokes that made him whimper and bite his bottom lip. I tugged him down from the table and took a seat without ever leaving his body.

“No, your hip,” I said when he started riding me. “Let me.”

I held him by the hips and raised his body. I punched up over and over, taking in the gasps and drawn-out moans whenever I hit his prostate. I kept nailing that spot, and he fisted his cock, stroking himself furiously.

“Zee,” I groaned. “Gonna come, baby. Please don’t let me get off without you.”

A cry echoed through the kitchen, and a spurt of cum hit my chest. I let go of my resolve, punching up hard and fast, smacking my pelvis into his fleshy bottom.

“Fuck. Oh fuck. Want to come inside you so badly, Zee.” But was happy to come in the latex while being inside him. We’d have much more time to explore everything, including bareback sex.

My heart thumped crazily, and sweat dripped from my forehead. Beneath me, Zahair hummed as he stared back at me

with a smile.

“Good for you too?” he asked.

“The best.” I slipped out of him to remove the condom and got hooked on the sight of his hole contracting without my cock to keep him open. The one thing missing was my cum trickling out of that hole.

“You’re going to make an amazing boy,” I said softly.

“Ditto to you, Daddy. And I love you calling me Zee.”

“Let’s clean up, then get the rest of this food inside you. We can talk some more about what we both want and expect out of our arrangement.”



8

ZEE

I LOOKED AROUND AT the disaster in Brody's living room. After hours of being away, he'd returned in a truck loaded with the most beautiful Christmas tree and ornaments. He'd taken me to get my car after "breakfast," and although I'd told him I remembered the way to his house, he'd followed me as if afraid I would go away should he leave me on my own.

Just before he'd left again, he'd warned me that if I disappeared on him, he'd not only find me but handcuff me to him when he did. That'd been three hours ago. He'd arrived home an hour ago, and we'd been busy in the living room stringing up the tree and decorating his house.

"What made you change your mind?" I asked from my perch on his lap while I untangled the new set of fairy lights from the box.

"It's not just me anymore, and I want to make you happy. You love the festive season, and I want you to have a home where you can enjoy it to the fullest."

He was so sweet. I tilted my head and kissed him. "If only the people who work for you actually know how sweet you

are.”

“I’m only sweet with you.” He smacked my butt when I got off his lap. Although I had my clothes back, I was still wearing his shirt. The only thing I’d added was underpants. The room was toasty enough that I didn’t need pants at all. He had the fireplace lit, and it was all cozy from the fire.

“I need help with the lights!”

“It was too much to hope buying you the tree and ornaments would be enough, wasn’t it?”

“You know it.”

He walked up behind me and placed a kiss on my neck. I danced away. “That tickles.”

“Hmm, there’s still so much I don’t know about you.” He took the end of the lights from me, and I instructed him how to drape it from the top, tucked between the needles.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

“How did you end up at the children’s home?”

I shrugged. “I’ve always lived there. Never found out who my parents were. Someone left me outside the fire station when I was a baby.”

“Do you ever think about them and wonder who they are?”

“I used to when I was younger, but not anymore. The kids at the group home are my family.”

“Why did you still live there anyway? That’s unconventional.”

I chewed on my bottom lip as I fed him more of the lights. “The caretaker’s a bit mean and became more so when we lost funding for the home. They’re short on staff and can do with the extra help. She allowed me to stay there, provided I use whatever free time I have to help out. And I funnel whatever money I can spare into helping the kids with their needs.”

“That’s why I caught you sleeping at work that time?”

“Yeah. A few of the kids had a tummy ache from some leftovers they were given for dinner. I was up all night taking care of them.”

“Damn, I thought you were out partying. I’m sorry.”

“I haven’t been to any parties in a while. Not only don’t I have the time, but I have better use for spending my money.”

“Giving it away to the children’s home.”

“They need it more than me.”

After securing the last of the lights on the tree, Brody stepped back and took my chin in his hand. He planted a hard kiss on my mouth. “You’re an incredible boy. I’m glad to know my instincts about you weren’t wrong at all. Doing what I did was risky as hell, but now all I can think of is that it’s paid off.”

“Hmm.” I melted into the powerful wall of his chest and snuggled against his T-shirt. “This feels nice.”

“Then I’ll hold you like this for a while.” And he did.

“Okay, I’m good now. Let’s finish up. There’s still a lot to do.”

We chatted while we worked together. He told me about his mother’s death two years ago and how proud she’d been of him resurrecting his father’s company. He spoke of her with great affection in his tone.

“I have a half sister somewhere in the Caribbean,” he said. “I didn’t know about her until I was already older, and I tried to keep in touch with her, but we’d missed so many years and never quite connected.”

“That’s too bad. Do you have any other family?”

“No one close.”

“Now you have me.”

“Now I have you.”

In turn, I told him about all the kids at the group home and how I’d tucked them into bed at night and read to them. Or during summer nights, we camped out in the backyard.

“You really love those kids, don’t you?” he asked.

“I do. It never felt like a burden to use my money for what they need or my time. If anything, I wished I had more time to devote to them. In a year or so, they may have to close down the home for good, what with the little funding they get. The kids will likely be split up, which I hate. They’ve only got each other.”

“And you. They’ve got you too.”

“It’ll be harder to keep in touch with them all.”

He tugged at my nose. “Don’t you believe in the magic of Christmas?” he teased. “I’m sure everything will work out.”

I cared too much about the home to be too unrealistically optimistic. “We’ll see. I’ll put it on my list to Santa.”

As he brushed past me, he kissed my temple. “You don’t need Santa when you have me. I was dead serious about taking care of you. How much have you explored Daddy kink?”

“Just a few scenes. Never with an actual Daddy of my own. You’re my first.”

“Hmm, I like the sound of that. Tell me what you enjoyed about the scenes you did.”

“I really like winding down my day as a little. Even if I don’t get to play during the day, being a little at night is a must. The snuggles, bubble bath, bedtime stories, fun jammies, a bottle.” I bit my lip and peered up at him.

“What else aren’t you telling me?”

“Umm—”

“What age are you as a little, Zahair?”

“Anywhere between two and six.”

“Do you wear diapers?”

I nodded. “But I prefer Pull-Ups.”

“Okay, I’ve got both. What else?”

“Umm.”

Brody placed his hands on my hips. “I want you to feel comfortable talking to me about all this.”

I licked my lips. “Sometimes I’d like to be put in my own bed, just so I can sneak back into your room in the middle of the night.”

“Hmm, I’d like that. But that’s not what you were going to say, was it?”

I pushed my bottom lip out in a pout. “You’re too much of a smart Daddy.”

“And you’re stalling. I’m sure you know a kink relationship can’t work without openness.”

He was right of course. Didn’t make it easy to say, though, so I mumbled the words, “I like to be nursed at bedtime.”

Silence filled the room. When it lasted, I raised my head, bracing for the revulsion I expected to see. Instead, he wore an amused smile.

“You’re perfect.”

“I am?”

“Let’s finish putting up the decorations and talk about dinner. Do you want to eat in or dine out?”

“Wait, aren’t you going to react to what I said?”

“What do you want me to say, Zee? That I’m looking forward to bedtime tonight?”

I sucked in a deep breath. Was he saying what I thought he was? Didn’t my suckling fetish bother him at all? Only one

guy I'd been with had ever agreed to me suckling on his chest, and after a while, he'd stopped me, saying it squicked him out.

“What else do you like?” he asked.

“Umm.” I swallowed hard. “To be made love to in little space. Not rough but sweet and loving.”

“And outside of little space?”

“Fuck my brains out any time.”

“I'll make an appointment with my doctor for tomorrow,” he said. “How does that sound? Am I rushing?”

“Perhaps, but when I want the same things you do, it's all good.”

“Do you have any special toys?”

“Not anymore. I had a bunny because I like to pretend I'm a magician, but I gave it to one of the little boys at the home when I had to leave.”

“We'll go to the toy store and buy whatever you need. You put it in the basket, and I'll pay for it.”

“Are you going to spoil me, Daddy?”

“Yes,” he said without missing a beat. “I'm going to spoil you rotten and give you your heart's desire, especially after screwing up.” He took my hand and squeezed it. “Where did you go, by the way? I went to the home, you know, and what's her face said she didn't know any Zahair, but a teen told me she'd kicked you out.”

“I spent a couple of nights in a motel before my friend, Elliott, said I could have his spare room temporarily.”

“Then why did you have all your clothes packed in your car?”

“His boyfriend came on to me, and so Elliott asked me to leave.”

“Wait, what? He kicked *you* out for *his* boyfriend coming on to you?”

“You mean you believe me that I wasn’t the one who initiated anything?”

“Of course I believe you. I don’t think that’s something you’d ever do to a friend.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“I’m glad I found you. I’d started to worry, but now you’re right where you belong.”

My heart swelled the size of a helium-filled balloon. “You don’t mind how fast we’re moving? We’ve had sex and haven’t even been on a date yet.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you somewhere fancy tonight, and when we get home, I’ll draw you a bath and put you to bed the way you like.”



9

BRODY

I TOOK ZAHAIR TO dinner at The Houseboat, a small, exclusive intimate restaurant that only money and name could get one into. He'd been timid but also excited about a new experience, and I loved that about him. That he didn't let the way the hostess swept her gaze over his less-than-designer-named outfit affect our night. He seemed not to care at all except for being with me.

We sat at a table sectioned off from the other diners, which gave us privacy to enjoy our meal and further set his mind at ease. He gushed over the menu, wasn't shy in asking me to explain the dishes he didn't understand, and ultimately asked me to order for him. There was nothing better than taking care of my boy, and Zahair made me eager to do so with how gracious and sincere he was. He'd given so much of himself to others, and now it was my time to give to him.

Dinner went smoothly, only interrupted by the waiter appearing every now and then. He moved quietly to and from our table like the whisper of a ghost gracing us with its essence.

Zahair talked a lot, but it didn't annoy me. For the most part, it wasn't idle chatter, and even then, listening to him talk was comforting. He told me about his life growing up in the boys' home, and every word made me more desperate to give him the world. Zahair mentioned the woman in charge of the home, but from the way he tripped over his words, I knew that woman was nothing but evil toward the kids in her care. She should be removed from that position.

But how to go about doing that?

"So the long of it is that yes, I would have liked to have a biological sibling," he said. "But it's hardly important now, and honestly, the other boys were just like siblings to me."

By the time we finished dinner, he seemed more at ease with me. His eyes shone, though that could have been from the two glasses of wine he'd had. On the ride home, he roped me into a game of truth or *truth*. His words.

"Who was your teen crush?" he asked.

"Hmm, that was so long ago."

"Come on."

"Now don't laugh, but Bon Jovi."

"So you were into heavy metal?"

"I am, and that's two questions."

"Fine, then your turn to ask me two."

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

He gave a mock sound of outrage. “I’ve been grown up for a very long time. That’ll happen when you have to take care of yourself.”

“You know what I mean. In the future. You’re just twenty-two. Still have a long way to go.”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I kind of always saw myself at the home, still helping out with the children.”

“If you could get paid for doing it, would you rather do that than work in an office?”

“I took the office job because I didn’t want to be paid for taking care of orphans. They already have a tough life, and they need to know someone wants to look after them because they care and not because they are being paid to.”

Hmm, any doubt that had lingered about the lunacy of living with him so soon when we knew little about each other vanished. Zahair was a good person with a caring heart, and I was lucky he’d given me a chance after I’d messed up.

“You have another question to ask, and make it fun this time.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“July sixth and that’s not fun.”

“You ask a fun question, then.”

When I drove into the garage, he knew my favorite sex position, and I knew his. He loved missionary because he enjoyed the intimacy of kissing and looking into his partner’s

eyes while connected that way. I told him I liked to hold my partner down sometimes and fuck them into oblivion, to which he'd squirmed and replied he had a boner.

“Are you tired?” I let him inside the house ahead of me and peeked at my watch. It was still early. Just a few minutes after nine, and since tomorrow was Saturday, I didn't have to be up early.

“A little.”

“How's your shoulder?”

“Feeling a lot better and my hip doesn't even hurt anymore.”

“Given the wine you drank earlier, you'd better skip the painkillers tonight.”

“Good idea.”

Before he could take another step, I caught him by the back of his shirt and hugged him. I nuzzled his neck and kissed his hair. He leaned back into me and rolled his head to the side, exposing his dark skin as I kissed and sucked on it.

“I'm going to run you a bath,” I said. “Good little boys go to bed early so they get enough sleep to be alert the next day.”

“Hmm, okay, Daddy.”

With a pat on his backside, I sent him to the living room to watch his favorite cartoon while I prepared for his bedtime. It might take us a while to perfect his routine, but for now, I changed into comfortable clothes and filled the tub, then went

to his bedroom. I turned down the blankets, picked out a pair of jammies with penguins all over them, and selected his bedtime story.

When everything was ready, I fetched him from the living room. He was curled up in the corner of the couch with his thumb in his mouth and the throw clutched in his hand. He'd emphasized earlier that he could survive all day being an adult but he liked to wind down as a little. From the look on his face, he'd already slipped into little mode.

"Baby." I sat next to him on the couch. "It's time for your bath."

He tugged his thumb out of his mouth. "Carry me!" He held up his arms and opened and closed his hands quickly.

"Sure thing, little guy."

He climbed onto my back and laughed, the sound delightful and setting my mind at ease.

"Faster! Faster, horsey!"

I took the stairs as fast as I dared with my precious cargo clinging to my back. In the bathroom, I set him on his feet. He threw his arms around my waist and hugged me tight.

"That was the best piggy-back ride, Daddy!"

"Good. Now let's get you out of your clothes and into the tub for a nice, warm bath."

It'd been so long since I'd given someone a bath, but with Zahair, it felt natural. He wasn't a shy little but bold and

cheeky. He splashed me so many times I threatened him he would have to kneel in the corner if he continued being bad. When he pouted, I wanted to kiss him. One of the perks of bathing him was that I could explore his body and watch him squirm as I trailed my fingertips over his skin. When I washed between his legs, his cock was hard. I fondled him and teased him until he was panting.

“Daddy, I’m ready to get out now,” he said, his voice strained.

“Not yet. Turn around and kneel for me. Hold on to the sides of the tub.”

Zahair shifted in the water like I’d instructed. I soaped his ass and washed his hole, fingering him in the process.

“Daddy.”

“Yes, baby?”

“What are you doing?” He pushed his hips back, even as he asked.

“I’m making you feel good before going to bed, baby. Don’t you feel good?”

“I do. I just don’t want to get in trouble.”

“You won’t. Daddy’s the only one allowed to touch you like this. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good boy.” I slipped another finger inside him and cooed when he tightened up. “Relax, baby. That’s it.”

My cock pressed up hard against my pants, and my nostrils flared hotly. I couldn't take it anymore. Watching him stretch around my fingers was addictive, but I needed to be inside him again. I'd wanted him for way too long, and now that I had him, I couldn't get my fill of him.

"Let's get you out of the bath."

I rinsed him off and toweled him dry, then lifted him out of the tub. I placed him on the vanity and grabbed a bottle of lube.

"What are you going to do now, Daddy?"

"I'm going to make you feel even better, sweetheart."

I tugged my pants down to my knees, didn't bother to kick them off, slid on a condom, and slicked up.

"Where are you going to put that, Daddy?"

I rubbed the remaining lube on my fingers between his cheeks and fucked his hole slowly. "Right here, baby."

"Right there?" He gasped. "But it's so big, Daddy. It's going to hurt."

"I promise it won't." He'd mentioned he loved sex in little mode but tenderly. "I'll take good care of your body, baby. If it hurts, you tell me, and I'll kiss it better."

I kissed him as I pressed my cock to his hole and slowly opened him up. He bit my bottom lip and clenched my shoulders. "Daddy. It's too tight."

"Relax, baby. You want to please Daddy, don't you?"

“Yes.”

“Then trust Daddy,” I said between kisses. “You’ll feel so good when I’m finished with you.”

Tiny thrusts inside his body pushed me deeper and deeper inside his cocoon. When I was fully seated inside him, I hissed a breath against his lips.

“Look, Daddy,” he panted. “I’m doing it. I’m taking it all in.”

“Yes, you are, baby. Such a good boy you are, Zee.”

“Are you happy with me, Daddy?”

“So happy, sweetheart. You’ve made me so happy.”

I’d never fucked anyone so slowly in my life, but I saw how much Zahair loved it. The tender way I kissed his lips sweetly, his cheeks, nose, eyelids, all while slowly grinding into his hot little body.

“Daddy,” he gasped. “I feel weird. Something’s happening.”

“Just let it, baby. Let it happen.”

“Daddy!” He pushed his face against my chest and sobbed as he came. The force of his climax made his body clench around me, clamping me tight to him. So tight I could hardly thrust.

And it felt so fucking good. I clutched his hips.

“Oh fuck.”

I pulled out of his body, tugged off the condom, and stroked my cock. One long stroke and I spilled my seed all over his

stomach and thighs. My hand fell away from my dick, and I exhaled deeply and pressed my lips to his.

“Did you enjoy what you did to me, Daddy?”

“Yes, so fucking much.”

“Oooh, you said a bad word.”

“I’ll put a dollar in the swear jar.”

“It’s okay.” He pointed at the cum all over him. “What’s that, Daddy? It looks creamy.”

“That’s what happens when I show you how much I love being inside you.”

“Can I taste it? Feed it to me, Daddy.”

My cock twitched. Sweet Mary.

I scooped up some cum with my fingers and fed it to him. He made a face. “Ah. It tastes nothing like cream, Daddy.”

I chuckled and kissed his forehead. “You’ll get used to the taste.”

“Okay, then. Give me some more.”

I fed him my cum, and when most of it was gone, I brought us back into the shower to get clean. I brushed his teeth and did mine while he sat on the vanity, swinging his legs back and forth with his thumb in his mouth while he tugged on his hair.

In my bedroom, I dressed while he rolled around my bed, giggling. The cheerful sounds filled my room and my heart. He was so playful, and I loved it.

“Let’s go to your room to put your clothes on,” I said.

“Catch me, Daddy!”

He ran ahead of me, and I chased him to his bedroom, where I found him jumping on the bed.

“Zee, get down here.”

“No!”

We’d already negotiated light spanking as punishment earlier, and he seemed to be hankering for one. When I eventually caught him, I placed him over my knees and swatted his behind until he squirmed and promised to always listen to Daddy.

I knew he would do it again.

I put him in his Pull-Ups and tucked him beneath the blankets. He pulled them down and patted the space beside him. “Get in, Daddy.”

“Don’t you want your sippy cup?”

He shook his head and stared at my chest. Ah, that was what he wanted. My nipples tingled. “Let me grab your storybook,” I croaked out.

I settled in bed next to Zahair with a picture book in hand. He scrambled on his side and pushed at my shirt, so I tugged the material over my head and dropped it on the floor. No sooner was I half-naked than he lay half on top of me and latched onto my left nipple while he fingered the other between his thumb and forefinger. My chest rose and fell, and

I stifled my groan at the tugging motion of his lips over the hardened point.

I inhaled deeply and started the story of Pinocchio.



10

BRODY

“DADDY! DADDY. WAKE UP. It’s Christmas.”

I cracked an eye open and frowned. Zahair jumped on the bed, shaking me awake with his excitement.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Silly, Daddy. You know I can’t tell time.”

Oh right. He’d woken up deep in little mode this morning. He’d prepared me for it yesterday. Said Christmas morning was much more fun in little space, and he might be stuck in it for the whole day. I hadn’t counted on him being up at the ass crack of dawn.

I picked up my phone and glanced at the time. “Zahair, it’s just six o’clock.”

“So it’s morning, Daddy. Santa brought me lots and lots of gifts last night. I wanna open them.”

I yawned and sat up in bed. “All right. Can I at least get a hug first?”

“Yay! Merry Christmas, Daddy.” He threw himself into my lap and wrapped his arms around my neck in a tight hug. I circled my arms around his body and kissed the side of his neck. It was hard to believe we’d been living together for only one week. Instead of making long hours the way I used to, I came home early. Every evening when I entered the house, I held my breath until I knew for sure he was still there.

I patted his back. “Thank you, baby. Merry Christmas to you too.”

“You’re welcome, Daddy. Your hugs are the best.”

He scrambled down from the bed, and I slapped his padded butt. “Do you need a fresh diaper?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“All right. Let me use the bathroom, and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Okay, Daddy.” He sprinted for the door.

“No opening any gift until I’m there.”

“I’ll try my bestest, Daddy.”

I chuckled and walked toward the bathroom. My eyes burned a little from the lack of sleep. Last night we’d gone to bed late, as he’d been insistent on staying up to catch Santa coming down the chimney. He’d set out cookies and milk too, and when I finally convinced him to come to bed, it’d been Christmas morning already. After he’d fallen asleep, I’d snuck back downstairs to drink the milk and eat the cookies and place his gifts under the tree. I’d gotten him every single thing

he'd written in his letter to Santa I'd "mailed" to the North Pole.

After using the bathroom, I hurried down the stairs and made a quick stop at the kitchen to get the coffee maker going. I'd need it to get through the day and keep up with Zahair's energy.

"Someone's been naughty." In the living room, Zahair had already ripped a couple of his gifts open. He had on his magician's cape, wand, and top hat.

"Look, Daddy." He jumped to his feet and waved his wand. "Abracadabra. Guess what I am?"

"Hmm, a pumpkin?"

That set him off in a fit of laughter. "Silly, Daddy. I'm a magician. See, this is my wand."

"I see. Did Santa bring you that last night?"

He nodded. "Santa brought me lots of gifts. Can I open them all, Daddy?"

"How about you open two more, and after breakfast, you can get to the rest."

"No, open them all now."

"Zee."

His lips turned down, and he opened his eyes wide. "Please, Daddy."

Damn, I was such a sucker for those pretty brown eyes. "Okay, you can open half of them now and the rest after

breakfast. Does that seem fair?”

He nodded. “Thanks, Daddy.”

He oohed and awed over his gifts. Train set, ball, remote-controlled airplane, trucks, and even a drone. Maybe the drum set I had gotten him hadn’t been the best idea. My poor ears.

“Ah, Daddy, it’s perfect.”

He ran over to me and climbed into my lap. “I know Santa didn’t buy them, but you did, and I love them all.”

I groaned. “Did I give the Santa secret away?”

He shook his head. “You were very good, but I know Santa isn’t real.”

“Then why did we leave cookies and milk for Santa?”

“Because you’re my Santa. I wanted to leave them out for you.”

My heart melted. “You’re a sweet boy.”

He pressed against my chest and hugged me. “I’m so happy, Daddy.”

“Are you really?”

“Yes, Daddy, and I want to make you happy too.”

“You have, baby.”

“Happier, then.”

Zahair climbed from my lap between my legs and pulled down the waistbands of my pajama bottoms and my underwear. He took my soft cock into his pretty mouth and

sucked on it the way he did to my nipples every night I put him to bed. Then he lowered his head and took more of me in, his head bobbing up and down as he moved faster. My cock grew hard inside his mouth until his lips were pulled wide. He looked up at me in wonder.

I didn't move my hips, didn't fist his hair and fuck his throat. That was when he wasn't in little space. For now, I let him explore. He took his time running his tongue down my shaft, and it nearly killed me, but when I spilled into his mouth, he guzzled me down and licked his lips.

“You were right, Daddy,” he said. “Now I like the taste.”

“Come here.” I hauled him onto my lap and kissed him softly. “Thank you, baby.”

“Are you happiest now, Daddy?”

“I am. The happiest person in the world.”

Zee played with his toys while I made breakfast for us. Every now and again, he would run into the kitchen to show me something. He'd taken to the magician kit I'd bought him, and he worked on his magic skills.

“Come on, baby,” I called when I was finished. “Let's do a magic trick and get all this French toast to disappear.”

He ate messily, his hands and face smeared with syrup, but he wolfed down his breakfast. I had him sit at the table while I loaded the dishwasher, then marched him upstairs for a shower despite all his whining. We showered together, and the way he hugged me hard signaled he was coming out of little space. I

further confirmed it when he chose his adult clothes instead of the “kiddies” outfits we’d gotten him. The drawers in his rooms held his playtime clothes, while his adult clothes hung in the closet in our bedroom.

“Are you okay?” I tugged his shirt down his torso.

“I am. So happy.”

“That makes me happy, Zahair.”

“I never thought I’d have this with anyone,” he confessed. “Even if everything went to shit town now, Brody, I’d cherish every moment of this past week with you. You’re the best Daddy a boy could ever ask for.”

“And you’re the sweetest boy.” I pressed a kiss between his eyes. “You’ve changed me a lot.” I chuckled. “The office staff didn’t know what to do when I announced we’d have a Christmas party tonight for the first time.”

Zahair laughed. “Imagine how surprised they’ll be when they see you with me. Are you sure you want me to go with you? I can always stay home.”

“No way. I’m not ashamed of what we have.”

“And we’re nothing like your father and those he had affairs with,” I said. “There’s only you, Brody, and I care about you. I’d never take advantage of our situation and sue you just to make a buck.”

“I’d be hurt if you do because I care about you too, Zee. This Christmas was a rush, but I’ll make all the others better, I promise.”

“It’s a perfect Christmas, Brody. I couldn’t have asked for anything better.”

The doorbell rang, and I smiled. “I bet I can. I think that’s for you.”

His eyebrows knitted. “Another present? You spoil me.”

“And I’m happy to.” I kissed his nose. “You better get that.”

I followed him down the stairs. He looked nervous as he opened the door. Thirteen boys ranging from three to sixteen crowded the doorway. Behind them was the grudging face of Ms. Roper.

“Zahair!” A little boy around five pushed ahead and wrapped his arms around Zahair’s legs. “We missed you.”

“Bronson.” He swung the little boy up in his arms for a hug. “I missed you too. All of you.” He turned to me, his eyes full of tears. “But how—you did all this, didn’t you?”

I shrugged. “Like you said, this is your family, and family should be together on Christmas Day. Let everyone come in. We have caterers popping in soon. I kept hoping they wouldn’t get here before the boys all did because then the secret would have been out.”

Zahair hugged each boy and waved them inside. Ms. Roper was the last to enter. She barely mumbled “Merry Christmas” before following the boys inside, raising her voice as she called to mind their manners and not to make a mess.

Zahair hung back and took my arm. “I can’t believe you did this.”

If only he knew what I had planned, but I couldn't get his hopes up yet until I spoke to my lawyer and we worked something out.

“I knew it'd make you happy.”

“This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. And the best present I've received.”

“I'm glad. Now let's go hang out with our family.”

Our family.

My house and heart had never felt as full as it did in that moment, and it had all started with catching Zahair and a picture of his butt still at the bottom of a drawer in my office.



Epilogue

Zee

TWENTY-FOUR MONTHS LATER

Brody's message had seemed urgent, so when Claire waved me over, I reassured her I'd chat longer with her when I had seen "Mr. Gilchrist." She smirked and glanced at the wedding ring on my left hand. "I can't believe you still call him Mr. Gilchrist. Kinky."

I grinned and dashed toward the elevator. It was hard to believe that two years ago, when I'd worked here, the lobby had been lacking anything festive. Now a twelve-foot-tall Christmas tree took up a large area, and gold and silver Christmas decorations made it difficult to miss the time of the season.

I rode the elevator up to the fifth floor. Laura smiled when I got to Brody's office. "Zahair, how have you been? Haven't seen you since the wedding."

Well, she seemed to be in a good mood. Whatever Brody wanted to talk to me about couldn't be that bad, could it? Even when he'd mentioned a lawyer was involved.

I chuckled. The last time I'd thought this, he'd fired my ass. But then he'd spent the last two years making it up to me, and it'd been worth it. There had been fights, tears, and silent treatments along the way, but most days were filled with laughter, so much love, protection, and caring. I'd never give up any of it for the world.

“I’ve been busy helping out at the boys’ home for the holidays,” I said. “Is Brody in?”

She nodded. “They’re expecting you.”

So he had a lawyer with him. A divorce lawyer? I’d been my usual handful, but Brody didn’t seem to mind. I shook my head. Rubbish. We were happy and in love. This had to be about something else.

I knocked on the door and, after Brody’s “enter,” walked in. Across from Brody’s desk was a man I’d grown acquainted with: Chester Frankfield, Brody’s lawyer. They’d been working closely together, especially lately, but I’d never asked what that was about.

“Zahair.” Brody got up from around his desk and met me in the center of the room. He took my arms and kissed me briefly. “I’m sorry for springing this meeting on you so suddenly.”

“I’ve been curious.”

“It’s just that we’ve finalized our last project, and I couldn’t wait to tell you about it.” He nodded at the lawyer. “Chester?”

The man opened his briefcase and took out a sheaf of papers. “Congratulations, Mr. Gilchrist. Welcome to the board of Sterling Foundation. All we need is your signature to make this official.”

“Wait, what?” I looked from the lawyer to Brody. “I don’t understand.”

“Sterling Foundation is a nonprofit organization that focuses on community building.”

“Yeah, I know that.”

“We have a board of which I’m the chairperson, and we’re welcoming you on board to supervise our latest venture.”

“What venture?”

“The boys’ home.” Brody ran his hands up my arms. “Do you know how hard it’s been keeping from you that we’ve been trying to take control of the home? It’s taken longer than I’d hoped, but finally, the home officially belongs to the foundation.”

I blinked rapidly, at a loss for words. Brody had made it clear from the start that I didn’t need to work. He’d encouraged me to focus my energy on working at the boys’ home, which I’d done. He’d pumped resources into the home to improve the amenities and the day-to-day running with the directive that I oversaw the funding went to benefit the children. It’d been the most rewarding thing I’d ever done. The kids were happier than I’d ever seen them, and the additional staff we’d hired meant they had more care. The part Brody had played in all that had only made me fall even harder for him.

But this—this was...I couldn’t find the words.

“Zahair, are you okay?” Brody asked.

I nodded, tears streaming down my face. “I’m just speechless. I can’t believe you’ve done all this. You’re

amazing.”

I threw my arms around him and pulled his head down for a kiss that went on and on. Vaguely I heard his lawyer mumble something about leaving us alone to discuss, but all the discussion needed was poured into that kiss.

Brody tore his lips away from mine. “You’re not mad I kept this from you for so long?”

“How can I be mad at you? But what does this mean? Is Ms. Roper out of the picture?”

“Yes, she received a good severance package, given she’s run the home for so long, but the kids would never blossom beneath her care. They need someone like you with compassion and a genuine desire to see them do their best.”

“You think I can do this?”

“I know you can, and not only me but the entire board. This all took so long because I had to convince everyone of the work you’ve done there and all you’ve accomplished. You needed time to prove yourself, and without knowing it, you’ve excelled, baby. I’m so proud of you.”

“Just when I thought you couldn’t be any more perfect, you go ahead and prove me wrong. You’re so pure in heart.”

“Not so pure.” He smirked. “While your tongue was in my mouth just now, I kept wanting to get you naked on my desk. I think Chester figured that out, which is why he left.”

“Then do it, Mr. Gilchrist. Get me naked on your desk.”

Brody lifted me, walked us the short distance, and put me on his desk. I clutched his arms and kissed him, sliding my tongue into his mouth. He moaned and shoved his hand beneath my shirt. I sucked in a deep breath when his fingers found my tight nipples.

“The door,” I gasped.

“Let me get it. Lube’s in the bottom right-hand drawer.”

“You keep lube here?” I hopped off the desk and opened the drawer.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment for a while.”

I could believe that. Brody was a cautious person when it came to the company and his reputation. It could take him *that* long to make up his mind about us fucking on his desk during the busy workday.

I rifled through the drawer, lifting papers out of the way, and spotted the small tube of lube. And a faded picture I hadn’t seen before, but I knew exactly what it was. I picked up the paper and waved it as he came over.

“Brody, you kept this.”

“It’s my trophy. You should know I happen to love your ass very much. I keep that printout so it’s always here with me.”

I laughed and put the piece of paper back. “You silly man.”

“Nothing silly about what I’m about to do to you.”

“No?”

“Absolutely not.”

We didn't fully undress. He unbuckled his belt and pulled down his pants and underwear. My shoes, jeans, and underwear ended up on the floor, and he spread me out onto his desk, at the edge, and kissed my hole. I moaned and gripped his hair, writhing, when he licked my entrance over and over.

After he'd stretched me with his fingers, he lubed us both and entered me slowly. A long moan left me. "Fuck."

He held my hips down on the desk and thrust into me hard. I bit my bottom lip to hold back my moans, but they spilled out just the same. The phone on his desk rang. With one hand, he picked up the receiver and, with the other, covered my mouth. He didn't stop thrusting as he growled, "Yes." Oh my god. He couldn't be... My eyes rolled back in my head when he hit my prostate. He smirked down at me and stroked the same spot again and again. My chest heaved, and I clenched my teeth to not make the sounds I wanted to.

"Tell him I'll see him in twenty," Brody said. "And, Laura, hold my calls. I'm in the middle of something."

There was nothing middling about where he was inside me. He was fully seated to the hilt, and I loved every hard inch pummeling my hole. We spent so much time taking our time during my little space that I lived for these moments outside of it when he was more aggressive but just as sweet.

He pulled his hand from my mouth, and I bit into his palm as I shot my load. Fuck, maybe we should have worn a condom just to avoid the cleanup.

“Zee.” Brody leaned over and kissed me hard. I clutched his shoulder, locked my legs behind him, and took his pounding. He’d given me so much in these two years. I was always happy to give him this. To make my Daddy happy.

I clenched my muscles, and he gasped inside my mouth, his hips stuttering. He buried himself deeply inside me and stilled. I loved taking him inside any of my two holes.

“Well, Mr. Gilchrist.” I brushed his hair from his face. “You’ve certainly come a long way.”

He kissed me swiftly. “You’re a temptation I can never resist, though I’m going to want to do this again.”

“We should clean up. I still have cum inside me from this morning.”

“Think you can hold it all in it for another load tonight.”

I bopped his shoulder. “Why, Mr. Gilchrist, aren’t you being greedy?”

“Santa needs his energy if he’s coming down your chimney this Christmas with a bag full of gifts.”

He held out a hand to help me down from the desk. “You’ve given me so much. If you never give me another gift, Brody, it won’t make a difference to how I feel about you now.”

“I know, and that’s the reason I keep showering you with gifts. I love you, Zahair. The best worst decision I’ve ever made was firing you.”

“I thought that was hitting me with your car.”

“Fuck, yeah, that too.”

“But it’s brought us where we are now, and I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Find Me

I have a vibrant Facebook group that all readers are welcomed to join. I share lots of teasers, book covers, and author friends stop by for giveaways and parties. Looking forward to having you join us in [Gianni's Gems](#).

I also have a Patreon account where readers can join to access my exclusive book club, patreon serial, signed paperbacks, and artwork of my books. .Join my Patreon [here](#) and get exclusive access to NSFW stickers and mini prints of Baz and Andy.

Also By

The Grimm Tales of Smoky Vale

[Biker Daddy](#)

[Fable's Foes](#)

[The Mortician](#)

[Miles High](#)

[Crowe's Creed](#)

Daddy's Little Deviants (dark daddy kink romance)

[Daddy's Stepstalker](#)

[Daddy's Adorable Assassin](#)

A Hitman's Bait

[Lure](#)

[Hook](#)

Standalone

[Class Act](#)

[Ginger Kisses](#)

[Grudge](#)

[Love in Slow M' Ocean](#)

[Dear Daddy, Please Love Me](#)

The Love Permit Series

[Let Me Love You](#)

[Let Me Hate You](#)

[Let Me Remind You](#)

Taking Care Series (Daddy Kink)

[Take Care of You](#)

[Take Care of Me](#)

[Take Care of Us](#)

Secrets & Scandal

[Secrets](#)

[Scandal](#)

The Simple Rules

[To Not Fall for My Doc](#)

[To Not Date My Best Friend](#)

[To Not Marry My Enemy.](#)

The Runway Project series (May/December)

[Unwrapping Ainsley.](#)

About Gianni

Gianni Holmes is a former high school Spanish teacher who is fulfilling her dream of being an author. A mother of one, who hails from the Caribbean, she loves her romance with a bit of danger and intrigue. Join her on this journey of love is love.