



PARADISE BAY

*Christmas in
Paradise Bay*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CLAUDIA BURGOA

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Paradise Bay*

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*Proofreader by: Sistersgetlit.erary, Chrisandra
Johnston*

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ALSO BY CLAUDIA BURGOA

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For my readers

“Christmas is a piece of one’s home that one carries in one’s heart.” –Freya Stark

ONE

Cordelia



Who said that this is the most wonderful time of the year?

I want to meet that person and give him a piece of my mind. It's December fifteenth, ten days before Christmas, and I'm over the music, the drunks, and Christmas shopping.

Over.

It.

I'm not the Grinch, like my brother Heath, but I can't deal with what people call the *Holiday cheer*.

"Who thought it'd be smart to rent the room for holiday parties?" I mumble under my breath as I decorate said room.

My brother Huxley begins to cough. The asshole. I point at him. “I swear if you laugh at me one more time, I’m going to... to... to...” I toss my hands up. “I got nothing. All my energy is gone. I can’t even threaten you.”

“You’re funny when you get all worked up,” he dares to say. “Also... you’re the one who thought booking this was a good idea.”

I hate that this is just going to empower him to say no to my latest suggestion. Maybe I should start learning to do my own thing.

I groan. “Why did I have to be a twin? They say being an only child is best.”

“I’m the best part of you,” he claims. “Also, you have six older siblings. Even if I wasn’t around, you wouldn’t be an only child.”

The teasing tone is beginning to wear on the little patience I have left. “You know what I meant.”

“Actually, I didn’t.”

“You’re so infuriating. I think I’d be better off without you.”

He scoffs. “Sure, keep telling yourself that. I’m the one saving you from yourself.”

“As I mentioned, you’re the one who thought renting the room and having holiday packages at the SPA for corporations was a marvelous idea,” he dares to mimic me.

“Buying the inn is not an option,” he warns me.

“First of all, I don’t speak like that.” I pout, ignoring the part where he implied he’s made up his mind and we won’t buy it.

We will, I just need to find a better angle. And I hate that I don’t have a second thing to claim because the last thing I want is to get into a fight with him.

“But you do,” he says, taunting me.

I glare at him. “You’re an asshole.”

There's a loud clap and a whistle. "Are you two fighting again?" I almost fall off the ladder.

When I turn around, I spot Benedict Farrow standing only a few feet away from me. Tall, broad shoulders, whiskey-brown eyes and dark hair. He's not only handsome, but he's also the kind of guy who's friendly and pleasant.

He could be the perfect man for me, except for a few flaws. Like the dark secrets he hides and the playboy life he'll never outgrow.

Do I have a crush on Benedict Farrow—better known as my older brother's best friend?

Ugh, yes. Damn it, I hate to admit it. The stupid crush I've had on him since I was sixteen isn't gone yet. I've dated and fallen in love—sorta—but I just can't get over this man. This six foot two, good-looking, charming, womanizer asshole.

Benedict's so nice and helpful that he's now holding my legs and steadying me. "Careful there. You don't want to break another tree." He shakes with laughter.

"That's not funny," I say, pointing at him with an ornament. "This is a disaster, and we still have eight more parties to go."

"Why are you here?" Hux asks, still untangling the old twinkle lights we found at Mom's house.

This is what happens when you try to find ornaments only a few days before Christmas. No one has anything left. Maybe a forgotten Elf on a Shelf or a broken snowman.

One of our oldest brothers suggested cutting a fresh pine from our vineyard. Why would I do that? What if next time the room catches on fire?

"Sorry, Lysander mentioned last night's party was rowdy and you might need help."

"It didn't just get rowdy. It was a disaster. Everyone was drunk, and they decided to play with the ornaments," I clarify.

"Until the drunk uncle fell on top of the tree and started humping it," Hux continues. "We had to call an ambulance."

I'm not sure if his dick will work ever again.”

I close my eyes briefly. “It was a mess that none of us wants to deal with again.”

Benedict sighs. “Sorry that happened to you guys. But do you know what this town needs?”

“Please don't say another winery,” I say.

I understand we live in wine country, but Paradise Bay shouldn't have more than two wineries.

Ben chuckles. “That's not what I was going to suggest. You need a new doctor, maybe a clinic or a small hospital. Driving thirty minutes to the town next door to get good healthcare is not sustainable.”

Is he right? We have the town doctor. He even does house calls. Okay, maybe I shouldn't count him as a healthcare provider. He graduated during the great depression of the last century. It's a miracle that he's still alive. My doctor is in San Francisco, and so is Huxley's.

“Open a clinic here,” I suggest. There's no ulterior motive. None at all... I think. Would it be great to have Benedict in Paradise Bay instead of New York? Probably. Maybe he'll stop sleeping around and finally look at me.

“I'm a surgeon.” He seems appalled at my suggestion.

“What does that mean? Like if you come to a small town, you lose your ability to care for others?”

He glares at me, and I can't help but smile. I have years of experience as a little sister and know of many ways to annoy each and every one of my brothers. It helps that his best friend is also a doctor. We have all kinds of ways to upset Heath, our resident doctor, and I can use most of the material on this guy too.

“Stop blabbing and continue decorating this room. If we're lucky, we'll be done before we have to open the bar,” Huxley complains.

“Do you want me to help you tonight?” Ben offers.

“Yes, but why don’t you help Cory now while I go to the kitchen? We were having trouble with the oven.” Hux glances at me. “You okay?”

I nod because what else can I tell him?

Please don’t leave me with Ben because this time I might not be able to control myself?

TWO

Benedict



One of these days, I'll make good choices.

Not today, of course.

Not to sound like a child, but this is all my parents' fault.

If my family was less dysfunctional, I wouldn't be in Paradise Bay staring at Cory Spearman's ass and wishing I could get past the fact that she's my best friend's little sister.

Do I like her?

What's not to like? She's sweet, gorgeous, and loving.

Concentrate on these tangled lights, not the pretty round butt in front of you.

But the things I could do to it, if only...

Stop!

There are three things in life I try to avoid. Being alone in one room with Cory, my family, and married women—not necessarily in that order.

Why my family?

Since we should be celebrating the magic of the holiday season, I should be there. But the Farrows aren't just messy. We're terrible people—*terrible*.

Cory... Well, where do I start? Cordelia Spearman is my best friend's little sister. She doesn't need to be tainted with bad blood.

Married women are the only rule I have when it comes to sexual partners. Unless, of course, they're in an open relationship. But that's a whole different thing.

Me, I'd rather not be in any kind of relationship. Romantic attachments are the downfall of the human race. Maybe I'm jaded since my parents couldn't make their marriage work, but they also couldn't divorce without destroying each other and their children in the process.

"Are you visiting early because you don't plan to be here during Christmas?" Cory pulls me out of my head.

"What do you mean?" I narrow my gaze, trying to decipher what she just said. Maybe I should be paying more attention to my surroundings.

She smiles at me, and her gray eyes sparkle. I stare at her as her sweet voice responds to my dumb question. Thank fuck she doesn't realize I'm having trouble processing what she's saying. It's too fucking hard to think when she's around.

"Well, usually, you arrive on Christmas morning."

I'm so mesmerized by her beauty that I pinch my finger with the pointy plastic of the Christmas lights. "Ouch," I complain.

"Careful, those things are dangerous. It'd be silly if you hurt your million-dollar hands with them."

“That’s ridiculous.”

“What? You already poked your finger. I don’t think it’s absurd.”

“I mean the million-dollar hands.”

She tilts her head. “You don’t have them insured?”

“Nope. Does Heath?”

She shrugs. “I assume so, but who knows? You two like to live dangerously. Which takes me back to... why are you here?”

“The hospital made me take vacation.”

She gasps, giving me a horrified look. “The horror. No wonder you’re best friends with Heath. You two should just build a wing in a hospital and move in. It might make you happy.”

I glare at her.

She gives me a cheeky smile. “I’m just saying. But also, that makes no sense. Didn’t you take some time off when Fern’s twins were born?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t enough time off. Thanks to that time off, human resources discovered I haven’t taken leave in a long time.”

I’m not surprised by her skeptical look. Everyone who’s heard this story makes the exact same face. “How’s that possible?”

I smirk. “You don’t want to know.”

Listen, I don’t have an explanation. None, zero. My area of expertise is medicine. Give me a scalpel and I’m a happy man.

“Ew, do you sleep around with everyone to get favors?”

The horrified look draws a loud laugh out of me. If there’s something I’ve learned throughout the years, it’s to keep a playboy persona to push away the good girls. They can’t handle a manwhore and that’s exactly what I need to appear as for them to stay away.

“You’re disgusting,” Cory complains.

“No, I’m human.” I shrug.

“So when do you have to go back to work?”

“January second, like every other person who’s taking time off to celebrate.” I fake-shiver.

“The horror.”

“Exactly. It’s painstakingly hard to be away from the only thing that keeps me alive.”

“Well, if you don’t have anything to do, we could use a hand in the bar.”

Lysander already called dibs on my time, but if Cory needs me, I’ll adjust my schedule. And I know it sounds like instead of a vacation I’m finding a second or even a third job. This is why everyone calls me a workaholic. I learned from my father that the best way to avoid reality is by continuously working.

“When would you need me?”

“Mostly at night, during the parties,” she answers while trimming the Christmas tree with old ornaments. “We have everything else covered.”

“Why are you renting the private room for holiday parties?”

She looks up at the ceiling, taking a deep breath. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Why do I have a feeling there’s more to that?”

She blows out another exasperated breath. Okay, so our youngest Spearman is about to lose her shit, and that’s no bueno. It’s okay, though, if there’s something I love to do, it’s mend things.

“I want to buy Paradise Bay Inn.”

“Didn’t they condemn the building?”

“Yes, but we can have Elliot tear it down and make us something new that goes with the theme.”

I'm afraid to ask. "What theme and, most importantly, who is we?"

"The Spearman's keep taking over Paradise Bay." She grins.

"You're the only one actively doing such a thing."

The smirk doesn't leave her lips. "What can I say? I like this quaint town. If I have my way, I'll be the mayor before my fortieth birthday."

"That's too specific."

"It's a dream."

"What if your husband doesn't want to live here?"

She gives me a shrug with a not-sorry look. "Then he doesn't know me at all, and what's the point of even marrying that man."

That's too specific, but I'm glad she has a type. Her type is the man who'll settle in a small town and that's definitely not me.

"So, what do the parties have to do with the inn again? I'm confused."

She laughs. "It's obvious. I show Hux we can entertain tourists and keep them interested. I want him to buy the inn with me. We do everything together. It seems like the right thing to do."

Just like she loves Paradise Bay, her twin can't wait to leave, but without meaning to, she keeps him tied to the town.

"If you need the money, I can invest," I offer, fixing the issue for the two of them.

"You're a doctor. You don't like to get your hands dirty."

My dick hardens, and my mouth goes loose. "You want me to get my hands dirty, Cory? I can go full-blown filthy if it's required."

"Why are you talking about dirty things with my sister?" Heath appears through the door.

As if I didn't do anything stupid, I crank my neck and then look over my shoulder. "You came, huh? I thought you were too busy today."

He scoffs. "Like any of us had the option to skip the let's save the bar operation."

"There's an operation?" Cory frowns.

"Someone should call it that." Atzi enters the room, almost bouncing on her tiptoes. That woman has too much energy. She must get it from all the chocolate she inhales daily.

I should ask her to hire me to work in her factory while I'm here. I'll avoid the Spearmans and eat my weight in chocolate. I'd still be seeing Heath every second of the day since he usually spends his free time with Atzi—his best friend, favorite companion, and love of his life.

Not that anyone knows how he feels about her. Well, his family suspects it, but he's never confirmed it.

"What do you need me to do?" Atzi offers.

"Decorate this place," Cory answers vaguely. "Use your magical artistic powers, please."

"I got this." Atzi waves her hand. "You guys can all leave. This is one of my favorite things to do."

"Tell me about it," Heath grunts.

"Stop being a Grinch. You love how the penthouse looks." Atzi smiles blissfully.

And I think I understand what I saw earlier at his place. "Is she the one who replicated the North Pole?"

He gives me a sharp nod. "You saw it?"

"Yep. I stopped by your place first to drop off all my shit. I almost ran away, afraid Santa or an elf would attack me. That's too festive."

Atzi glares at us. "Out. Let the professionals work with... oh Lord, I wish I had known, and I would've brought all the leftover material I have in my warehouse."

“You have Christmas ornaments stored in a warehouse?”
Cory asks excitedly.

“It’s scary.” Heath releases a shaky breath as he hugs himself. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think she’s Santa.”

“One more complaint from you, grumpy, and next year—”
Atzi taps her chin.

“You won’t decorate my place?” Heath answers faking happiness.

“Nope. I’ll decorate your car. Maia would be happy to help me. She’s pretty artsy when it comes to transforming a car into a cow. We can create a reindeer out of your SUV, or we could use the Bugatti.”

Heath glares at her. “That’s not funny.”

Atzi grins. “Oh, but it is.”

“Fine, I’ll go to the warehouse and call you from there. You can tell me what to bring.”

“You’re the best.” She smiles, hugging him.

Heath pushes her away from him. He’s not into PDA. Well, he doesn’t allow her to touch him much. It helps his self-control. It’d be terrible if one day he kissed and humped her because he couldn’t contain his lust anymore.

That’s what happens when you’ve been in love with someone for more than fifteen years.

For Christmas, he should kiss the fuck out of her, but what do I know? I have a big crush on his sister and can’t act on it.

The holidays will be more than just fucked up. I’m not looking forward to them.

THREE

Benedict



We spend a couple of hours in the warehouse picking through the stuff Atzi wants to use at the bar. I'm surprised we make it on time to deliver the items. By then, there are a few more Spearmans helping and even Elliot, their brother-in-law, is there. I'm not shocked about it. The twins are Fern's favorite siblings. It makes sense to send her husband to help them.

Our next stop is supposed to be the winery, but I have another plan. This will take a few lies and a significant investment. However, if all works out the way I want, it'll be a great Christmas for one of the Spearmans.

"Did you know Paradise Bay Inn is for sale?" I ask Heath.

"I heard something about it. Why? Are you interested?"

I sneer. “No, of course not.”

He stops and pulls out his phone. “Wait, let me text Atzi. I want to make sure she knows we’re leaving early.”

“Are you planning something?”

“No, but it’s her day off. I don’t want her to spend it with my family.”

“Can you stop making up bullshit? It’s me. Ben. I know your deal with Atzi. If I were you, I would make a move on her, or someone will take her from you.”

“I shouldn’t.” He growls.

Many think that’s just angry Heath. It’s not. That’s my best friend agonizing because he refuses to be with the love of his life.

“She’s my friend, and we’re not—”

“Save the whole we can’t, we shouldn’t... blah, blah, blah.” I groan, exasperated. “If I could be with the woman I like, I wouldn’t be looking for excuses.”

He comes to a stop. “You like someone?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course not. It’s just a hypothetical situation.”

Heath Spearman is like a brother to me. We met during college orientation. Lucky for us, we happened to be roommates too. One thing led to another, and his entire family adopted me. We know each other pretty well. He’s a great guy and loyal to a fault. His big issue is that he doesn’t like lies, so lying to him is more than an art.

It’s a challenge that I happen to accept and win all the time. Do I feel like shit for doing it? More often than not, but sometimes lies save friendships.

“Do you think Lysander will notice if we never make it to the winery?” Heath asks after shoving his phone back into his pocket.

“Let’s find out,” I suggest, walking toward the opposite side of the winery.

“Where are we going?”

“I want to check the inn, if you don’t mind?” I lift my phone. “The realtor said she’ll be happy to walk me through the property.”

“Why?”

“It seems like a good investment. Just the other day, my brother told me I need to diversify my trust fund.” This isn’t a lie. My very old, very annoying brother thinks I need to think beyond the blue scrubs, scalpels, and surgeries.

“Which brother? You don’t get along with either one of them.”

“The oldest, Derek.”

Heath snaps his fingers. “Oh, the long lost one who is back.”

“That one.”

“Are you spending the holidays with him?”

“Nah. We’re just patching up shit, not becoming the Brady Bunch.”

“You need to rewatch the show because it doesn’t apply to your situation,” he corrects me.

He’s so retentive. “What would be the right show, oh wise one?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“So, are you coming with me?”

“I think Cory wanted to buy it.”

“She mentioned something.” I sound almost bored.

“Ben, if you buy it, it’ll be an asshole move.” Heath’s worried tone almost makes me smile.

Almost.

He just fell into my trap. Heath is right there, eating my convenient story. This is so easy, but I don’t gloat. I’ll never

gloat. Instead, I scratch my head as if I didn't think about it and it's a predicament.

Then, almost defeated, I say, "What if I buy it and sell half of it to her? Or I can just buy it, put her on the deed, and call it a Christmas present. You and I know she'll wait until Hux says yes and what happens if he doesn't make the decision on time and the building gets sold? It'll devastate her."

He bobs his head because everything I said makes sense. "That's a great idea. I can't understand why she doesn't like to start a business on her own. She's capable of that."

"Why are you looking at me? You know her better than I do." It's hard to stay in character. That semester of debate and speech I took in college comes in handy when dealing with the Spearman's.

FOUR

Benedict



There are not one but two potential buyers for Paradise Bay Inn. I have to act fast. The money is ready. I'm considered a cash buyer, which might give me some advantage over the others. I just need one more thing. Cory.

But I don't want to tell her what I'm doing. Heath gives me a potential solution to my issue. It involves one of the triplets and who everyone assumes is the oldest of the Spearman family—Aslan.

“You want me to what?” he asks after I hand him my iPad with the purchasing contract.

“I'm purchasing Paradise Bay Inn. Cory mentioned she wanted to rebuild it. Heath said you have a POA for Cory. Can you give me a copy and sign the contract?”

“Why do you want to do it?”

“The guy has three offers,” I twist the truth just a little more. “If she waits until Huxley decides to buy it, it’ll be gone. I’m just being proactive.”

He sighs, taking the tablet and scanning the document. “I’m a busy person.”

“We just need a few signatures from you and a copy of the POA,” I repeat. “In exchange, I’ll do anything you want. Anything.”

Aslan walks around his office and then takes a seat on his big chair. “Okay, but can you pick up Savvy at the airport next week and keep her entertained?”

Why does he want me to pick up his sister-in-law? She’s an adult, isn’t she? “That’s a weird request.”

He nods and grins like an idiot. “It’s an unusual request, but she’s Keaton’s Christmas present. I want to give it to her on Christmas Eve.”

I can’t miss the chance to give him a hard time. “Would you like me to use a box, wrapping paper, or a big bag for her?”

He glares at me. “That’s not what I meant.”

I roll my eyes. “You Spearmans don’t have a sense of humor.”

“We do,” he protests.

“Okay, you and Heath don’t. The rest do,” I amend. “I’ll pick her up and be her host for the day and even buy her an ice cream cone—two scoops—for you. Now, can we do this?”

“Fine, but if Cory gets upset at me, I’ll blame you,” he warns me.

“She’ll be thrilled.” *I hope.*

“I appreciate what you do for my brothers and sisters, but an inn is a little over the top. What are you getting me for Christmas?”

Shit!

They're going to expect something too, won't they? If I don't buy anything, they're going to be suspicious. After the shock, I grin and say, "You'll see."

I meant to get them the same as I usually do every holiday, a bookstore gift card. Now I have to think about what I'll be getting each one of them. Maybe I should call my brother. He seems to have a lot of connections.

FIVE

Keaton



This season can't get any more depressing. Mom died right before Thanksgiving. My sister is devastated, and now... she's probably not coming home. How am I supposed to pretend it's the most wonderful time of the year?

It sucks.

I've been trying to reach Savannah for the past couple of days, and she keeps sending me to voicemail.

I understand she's mourning the loss of our mother, but so am I, and I could use having my little sister with me.

"Is Savvy spending Christmas with us?" Aslan asks.

I put down my phone and sigh. "Nope. I'm pretty sure Savannah's staying in New York with Lex, and that's why

she's hiding from me.”

“Wow, you full-named her,” he says, and then adds, “And why do I feel like you're blaming me for that?”

“You encouraged him to go to college,” I say accusingly, and I know it sounds irrational, but why else is she ignoring me?

I thought... we're close, and she's all the family I have left. Okay, that might be a little over the top. However, besides my husband and his family, she's all I have. When she left for college, she promised to stay in touch. We swore to be there for each other, and... it should apply during the holidays, too, shouldn't it?

“Should I apologize for helping someone shape his future?”

I glare at him. “No, but you could've suggested Stanford, Duke, somewhere in Texas. Not Columbia.”

“He's going to NYU.”

I put my hands on my waist. “Are you correcting me?”

“If this is a plot against you, I would say that Admissions might have a role in this Machiavellian plan. Not me,” he dares to say.

“Are you mocking me?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. I'm trying to understand why you're so mad at me. If you want, we can spend the holidays in New York with Savvy and Lex.”

I frown. Is he crazy? “That'll be weird.”

“How come?”

“Imagine...” I don't have much to say.

“I'm trying, but you're just giving me a blank canvas and not painting a picture.”

I cross my arms. “We'll be two old people cramping their style.”

He huffs. “Hey, we’re not old, and we can do whatever we want for the holidays.”

I don’t know if it’s his tone or my mood that makes me perk up at the sound of his voice. I’m less annoyed and more... horny? “Whatever?” I say with a sultry voice.

Aslan grins.

“I can show you exactly how we can spend them right now, baby. All I need is you.” He doesn’t wait for a sign.

Aslan’s strong hands run down my arms and across my ribs. He turns me, stroking every inch of my back, and stops right by my butt. His lips nibble my neck before he flips me, backing me up against the wall.

“Aslan,” I moan his name. He turns me back around, capturing my mouth.

The mouth that belongs to me, and I love it almost as much as I love him. But I hope he realizes soon that I need more than just this tantalizing kiss.

I want his mouth to burn me, combust me.

“You seem hungry,” he teases me.

“Do I now?” I slide my finger down his torso until I touch the bulge that’s growing in his trousers. “Maybe you’re the one who’s starving.”

“Always,” he says.

I tighten my fingers in his hair and pull him to me. His lips caress mine, probing and teasing me. The world disappears as his mouth fucks mine. As he’s about to make me his—again.

It’s just us, and this is my favorite part about Aslan and me. This is why I love to be his wife. Even during my worst days, being with him like this makes everything better—perfect.

Without pausing the kiss, I unbuckle his belt and work down his fly. Clothes fall to the carpet as Aslan discards his expensive loafers and pants.

“It’s your turn,” he grumbles, undressing me slowly as if he’s unwrapping a present.

He kisses my bare shoulder.

Nibbling my skin inch by inch.

I shiver.

My nipples pebble, and my pulse races, exploding in pure need.

Aslan runs his hand over my skin. Broad, strong hands trace my curves. He drops to his knees, kissing the small of my back, nipping at the sensitive skin before lifting my leg. I moan, knowing what’s coming—and how hard I’ll be coming.

I’m already soaking for him.

Only him.

“Grab my shoulders,” he orders.

I do as he says, and that’s when he latches onto my core with such ferocity that my legs go weak. An animalistic moan rumbles in his throat. His tongue circles, strokes, and pushes inside me.

He suckles with such reverence I’m taken aback. I moan as his thumb sweeps over my clit.

I don’t want this to end, ever. Swirling tongue. Thrusting fingers. Teasing mouth.

I’m on the edge. He pushes his long fingers deeper and faster. My body convulses as I come inside his mouth. My thighs clamp, pressing myself against him.

“More,” I order. “More.”

Our gazes lock.

“Anything for you, baby.”

He takes me to the couch, and before he can react, I’m the one on my knees, ready to suck him dry. He hisses as my lips part, and I take his long, wide length in my mouth.

His hips jerk as my tongue slides over his blunt head and then circles the slit at the tip. My tongue swirls around the

girth of his cock. I nibble down his shaft. I tug at his sac while taking him deep into the back of my throat.

“Baby, I need to be inside you,” he begs.

I shake my hand, running my tongue down his cock and sucking his balls.

“Please,” he begs again.

And, of course, as the naughty wife I am—and he loves—I open my mouth wide and swallow him, deep-throating him. He’s so close to coming. This is a challenge. Who’ll give in first?

“I beg you to let me inside you.”

I take pity on him, and at that moment, Aslan pulls me to him. He kisses me deeply, and we move onto the couch without breaking the kiss. This time, I give in, opening my legs wide for him. He grabs his cock and slowly pushes himself inside me.

“Love when your mouth swallows me, but I think my favorite is when your pussy sucks my cock,” he says before taking my mouth.

We get lost in each other, losing track of who we are and becoming one. We fuse, melt, and become what the other needs.

“I wouldn’t mind doing this during the holidays,” I mumble.

“Your wish is my command,” he says, and we move together once more until we both gasp and scream while reaching nirvana.

SIX

Elliot



“Their plan is to kill me slowly,” I say as I sit on the couch.
“And you wanted three.”

My beautiful wife grins while adding the last decorations to the Christmas tree. “I was told we were going to have triplets. You lucked out with just twins.”

She’s joking, but deep down, we both expected the third one. As I said when they confirmed it was twins, maybe number three knew we wouldn’t be able to handle three at the same time and he or she is waiting for their turn.

But Fern is right, I’m the luckiest man in the world. Having her and our babies is the best thing that could’ve ever happened to me. Nothing will ever compare to the joy I live every day while they’re around.

That doesn't mean I won't die of mental and physical exhaustion before they turn one. Elijah and Alyth are the busiest babies in the world. I adore my children but being at the mercy of two energetic babies is dangerous.

Fern is hoping they'll start walking soon. Secretly, I'm praying they give me at least three more months because once they find the freedom that running will bring to them, I won't be able to catch up to them.

Fern's gray eyes sparkle almost as bright as the twinkle lights. "Are you so tired that we should go to bed already?" The sultry tone is like a kick to the old engine, and my entire body is fully awake.

"Not that tired," I say, wondering if I should put on some music and strip for her.

"Good, because we need to start wrapping presents."

"You're serious, aren't you?" I groan.

"Of course, I am. Christmas is in a few days. We're hosting the entire weekend."

"Remind me again why it's just us and... how many Spearmans are we expecting?" I should discuss this with my brothers-in-law. I understand they want to spend the holidays in Paradise Bay, but Gatsby and Aslan have houses in the area. We can split the events and make shit more equal.

"Six annoying brothers, three wonderful sisters-in-law, my favorite sister. We're waiting to see where the rest of the Spearmans are spending the holidays." She shrugs. "Between fifteen and fifty, give or take."

I massage my temples. "How are we supposed to host fifty people? We're not a bed and breakfast."

"Oh, it's easy."

My wife is the most loving person in the world. She's always taking care of everyone, but she has a big flaw. The woman believes that everything is possible, and it breaks my heart when I have to give her a reality check.

“Babe, this house only has eight bedrooms,” I remind her. “Eight.”

She glares at me as if I’m doing something wrong.

“Sure, you might want to add the guest house to the math. Still, it’s only eleven bedrooms. How are we hosting fifty people here? Now, if you were speaking to your mother, I would understand how half of those people can spend Christmas in Paradise Bay, but since we’re not inviting her...”

“Are you done?”

“Mostly.”

“Uncle James and Aunt Ari own a house in Woodland, which is less than an hour from here. It’s big enough for my cousins and their families.” She shrugs. “At least, they make it work. Though, my cousin Alex owns a place in San Francisco.”

“That takes care of two Spearman families. How about the rest?”

“My uncle Jasper and his family might be the only ones who come.”

“And the rest?”

She shrugs. “I don’t think they will, or we would be thinking two hundred people—or more.”

I forget how big her family is until we’re at a reunion. “When are they confirming if they’ll be here or not?”

“I just sent the email last night.”

“This impromptu holiday feels wrong.”

Fern crosses her arms. “Have you ever realized that you have control issues?”

“What does that mean?”

“Everything has to be perfect.”

That’s not true, except it is. I do it for her. I like her to be happy. Sometimes it’s almost impossible when things aren’t

how she plans them. Therefore, I go out of my way to ensure everything runs smoothly.

“Not really, I just want to make sure they work out the way you plan. I ask again, why did you start organizing this so late?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know why I waited so long. Maybe I was hoping Mom wouldn’t go out of town like she does every year. A part of me still hopes she’ll change.”

“Are you two ever going to make up?”

She shrugs. “Last week, we bumped into each other at the twins’ bar, and she ignored me. It was like I didn’t exist. I tried to talk to her, but she went out of her way to pretend I wasn’t there.”

“That’s...”

“Childish. The word you’re looking for is childish.” She looks at the ornaments she holds. “I couldn’t even go and get our old ornaments. It feels like she’s holding our childhood stuff hostage.”

“If her house is empty...”

“It doesn’t feel right.” She shrugs.

“We’ll make this holiday ours and special. Not just for our babies but everyone. If you make a list, I’ll get the food.”

“What about your family? Are they coming over?”

“Blake, Cruz, and Ryder might join us,” I mention my best friends, who are more like my family than my brothers and sisters. “I’ll have to check with them. The fam was here for Thanksgiving.”

She shakes her head. “You need to try harder.”

“I am,” I assure her. “Now, let’s talk about that extra energy we have in reserve.”

Fern smiles sweetly. “Take me to our bedroom, McPhee. I could use a lap dance, and maybe you can show me some moves.”

I take her into my arms and kiss her. Relieved that her stress lowered and happy because she's the last person I hold and the one I wake up with every morning.

SEVEN

Caspian



In the past, I went home for Christmas on the twenty-fifth and was back to work the next morning. It's not that I didn't care about my family, but after my youngest siblings turned eighteen, we stopped making a big deal out of them.

This year, everything is changing. Again.

Our family has three babies, and we all want to make it extra special for them. Also, I have a beautiful wife who loves the holidays—all of them. I'm in no way complaining, but that's one side of Rys I didn't know. On Halloween, we had the replica of *Pet Sematary* in our front yard. Atzi came to help her set an ofrenda for Dia de Los Muertos.

She skipped Thanksgiving, since I had a game in New York, and we spent it with the team and their families. During

my weekend off, we decorated for Christmas—Atzi came to help again. The place looks like the North Pole and rumor has it that our apartment in San Francisco looks almost the same.

I'm looking forward to seeing what Rys and Atzi did, but I still complain about it because it's cute to see Rys pout and roll her eyes.

Though, to be honest, I feel like she's going a little overboard with the whole holiday spirit shit. My current situation is trying to hold Ralph, our big, adorable mutt, so Rys can dress him.

"Babe, I don't want to say this, but we're becoming those people."

"What people?"

"The ones who dress up their pets against their wishes so they can get a picture with a fake Santa."

"Sorry, but we couldn't find the real guy to come to the clinic."

"You know what I mean."

"No, I really don't."

"I love my puppy kids as if they were my children, but do they really have to visit Santa?"

"People are expecting it."

I swear Ralph huffs at the same time I do. "You sound like Hadley," I complain and Ralph barks with me.

This guy gets me and since we're besties, I reach for the treats I have in my hand and give him one.

"I'm using her exact words," Rys says, then glares at me. "Stop giving him treats every time he sides with you. That's not what they're for."

"But they are. Didn't you say I should use them as positive reinforcement?"

"You two take advantage of me because I love you," she says as she finishes adjusting the scarf.

“Even though I understand why you think this is a good idea—”

“Listen, I think it’s adorable and before you start giving me shit about it, take it to your public relations department.”

“If Hadley thinks this matters, she should be the one doing it. She has a husband, children, and even pets. Why do my puppies need to be involved in some kind of holiday propaganda?”

“Mia and Ralph are not just any dogs. They’re the captain’s puppies,” she reminds me as she fixes Ralph’s reindeer antlers.

Talk about bad ideas. I can’t even remember when we started the puppies’ social media accounts, but they became a phenomenon. The fans stopped focusing on my personal life, my beautiful wife, and our marriage. They wanted to know all about Ralph and our little Mia. She’s a ten-pound Maltese mix who rules the house.

We adore both of our puppies, and I understand why the fans do too. Though, having to dress our girl with the latest outfits we receive can be difficult at times.

I look at Mia, who sports a red tutu and a pretty shiny sweater, and ask, “Where did you get those outfits?”

“Your fans sent them. We received many, but these two are the ones the fans voted as favorites.”

Hadley is great at promoting the team, but I can’t understand why she continues feeding the hype of our furbabies when it’s been over for months.

“When we have babies, we’re not going to do this, are we?”

Rys freezes and slowly turns her attention toward me. “When? Babies?” She studies me before saying, “You’re serious about that, aren’t you, Spearman?”

“Of course, I am,” I say with the calmest voice.

Why wouldn’t I want to have children with the love of my life? After my brother Gatsby and his wife brought Soleil into

this world, I understood the meaning of unconditional love. Afterward, my sister Fern gave us the most amazing niece and nephew, and I realized I wanted to have a family with Rys.

“I would love to have a little girl just like you.”

She smiles. “Like me. What does that mean?”

“Tiny, cute, and sassy.” I rise up and kiss her nose. “Loving and amazing like you, baby.”

I adore when her face turns red. She’s still getting used to compliments. “Be careful what you wish for.”

Every day I wish for more of her, of us. I don’t think I have to be careful with that. “I want a dozen little girls just like you.”

Rys frowns. “Don’t I get a boy or two?”

“So we’re talking a half-dozen children?” I guesstimate.

This is the first time we’ve talked about having children. We know we want them, but it’s a subject we haven’t discussed.

“Let’s start with one,” she offers.

“Feels like a good compromise,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows. “We can start now.”

She laughs. “Uh-uh. That’s not going to get you out of this photoshoot. We have to be at the clinic in twenty minutes so the photographers can get a few good pictures of us. After that, you can bring the kids back home.”

“I thought you weren’t working today. Not to break your plans, but we leave for SanFran at four, baby.”

“I’m just staying for a couple of hours to help the staff.”

“We had an agreement, doc.” One thing I adore about Rys is how dedicated she is to her staff and patients.

She’s like a modern-day Snow White. All creatures alive love her and she understands them pretty well. Hence, she’d love to be at the Santa event to ensure all the furry creatures who visit feel comfortable.

“If you stay with me, it might go faster.”

“You owe me,” I say.

She grins, licking her lips. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure Atzi gets me some melted chocolate or frosting for tonight.”

I wink at her. “Then we have a deal.”

EIGHT

Atzi



Next year I should plan this trip differently. Well, that was my plan for this holiday, but my aunt offered to schedule it for me. She wanted to make it less stressful—flying three days before Christmas is nerve-wracking. I hope there isn't a major storm hitting the East Coast.

It happened to me two years ago, and it was a complete disaster. I was able to arrive in New York, but I couldn't take off to Paris. Being stranded in the middle of a holiday wasn't fun.

Lucky for me, Benedict Farrow let me stay in his apartment, and Heath found a way to arrive on time for Christmas to keep me company. Okay, it wasn't bad because I

spent the holiday with my favorite person in the world, but still, it wasn't great.

"Are you sure you can't stay?" Heath asks without taking his attention away from the road.

"Aunt Cécile is waiting for me," I remind him. "The Lavigne family is celebrating in Saint-Émilion, like every year."

"Will you be back in time for the New Year's party, or are you going to Mexico?"

"I'm coming home. My grandparents will be in..." I draw a blank. "They've been traveling a lot for the past few years. I lost track of where they are."

He chuckles. "Well, at least you know they're having fun."

"That they are. I should be back home by the thirtieth. I'm helping Fern with the end-of-the-year party. Are you going to work that night?"

"Even if I work that day, I should be free before midnight."

I smile. "Good, it'll be weird to start the year without you."

"That's the only reason I'm doing it, so you can start the year right."

If he wasn't busy driving, I would poke him on the chest and give him a piece of my mind. "Why must you mock me?"

"That's my favorite part of our friendship."

Sometimes I can't understand why he behaves like an older brother. Lucky for me, I don't have one. If he could focus his big brother energy on his sister, things would be much better between us. Not that they're bad, but that's the one thing I don't love about him. "So why are we going to San Jose first instead of heading to the airport?"

"Gatsby helped me with your Christmas present."

I clap excitedly. "Oooh, what is it? An elephant? Did you find a live dinosaur? I hope it's not chocolate since I have plenty of that."

“You’re never going to guess.” He smirks smugly. “It’s definitely better than what you gave me.”

I laugh because he has no idea what I gave him just yet. He thinks it’s a coupon for unlimited chocolates during January. It’s not. That’s just a way to distract him from the real thing Benedict will give him when it’s time to open presents.

“Are you not even going to try to guess?” His voice is extremely high-pitched. Now I’m concerned because he’s always calm or grumpy.

Maybe I will be surprised. What in the world can he possibly give me? A building like they’re doing with Cory?

Instead of guessing, I’m going to try digging for information. He might just tell me before he shows it to me. “This is the year of weird presents.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maia asked for all the chocolate in the universe—with fries on the side.” I’m only half joking about it. She did tell me that if I was going to gift her anything, it would be amazing if she could get some of my delicious Mexican truffles. “Then there’s Cory getting an inn.”

Though, if she could choose her present, it would be Benedict Farrow naked in her bed.

“I bet Rys wants cupcakes.”

“She didn’t ask, but I might give her something like that. Still, I don’t think anything compares to what Cory will be getting from all of you.”

“Is that what we’re doing?” he asks as we enter a parking lot.

“At least, that’s what I think it is. I heard Ben discussing it with Fern. I offered to put money in, and for him to let me sign the card but he never told me anything afterward.”

“That’s weird. I thought he was going to buy it and sell her half of it...” He finds a spot and kills the engine.

“You don’t know either, huh?”

He finally looks at me and shakes his head. “I made him promise that he won’t cross my sister. But other than that, I didn’t pay much attention. Aslan should know what’s happening since he signed the papers on her behalf.”

“It’s not like it matters though,” I brush this off because I don’t want to make a big deal out of it. I brought it up to see if I could get some information out of him. But so far, I’ve got nothing.

“Cory is going to be thrilled to know that she can continue world domination.”

Heath laughs and his eyes crinkle. I adore it when he’s relaxed—which happens almost never. “Is that what she’s doing?”

I shrug. “Well, it’s more like Paradise Bay domination.”

He rolls his eyes, like the perfect annoyed big brother that he is. “It’s a small town.”

“Does it matter? Soon she’ll own almost everything.”

“Why would she want that?”

I rub my hands and cackle. “To make it the epicenter of wine country.”

“That’s ambitious.”

I scoff. “All you Spearman’s are overachievers.”

“I don’t see myself like that.”

“You’re a doctor. You want to save the world one healthy heart at a time. Unless you have to be in the ER helping with real emergencies. How many hours do you work a week?”

“You think being a cardiothoracic surgeon doesn’t have real emergencies?” he growls.

I laugh. “See, there’s my best friend, the Overachiever Heath Spearman.”

He shakes his head. “Let’s go down.”

I glance at the building and frown. “Gatsby and Maia’s company? Are you gifting it to me?”

“No.”

“Good, because I wouldn’t know what to do with a tech conglomerate.”

“You’re being silly.”

I nod and check my watch. “We’ll have to drive to the airport, and you know how nervous I get.”

He grins. “Actually, that’s my present to you.”

“Not arriving on time or just stressing the fuck out of me?”

“We’re taking a helicopter that’ll fly us to a private hangar where a chariot will take you to your final destination.”

I’m speechless. “You… why? I mean that’s incredible, but I thought Aunt Cécile bought my tickets.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, I asked her to let me do this for you. I want you to enjoy the trip and that includes not going through San Francisco International.”

If I could, I would toss my arms around his neck and hug him, but I want to respect his boundaries. He’s not much of a hugger. “You’re my most favorite person in the world.”

He shrugs humbly. “It’s nothing.”

“But this present is everything to me. But you know what will sweeten the pot?”

“You want more.” He crosses his arms.

“Listen, I know how much you hate them, but if I can have a Christmas hug. Just one, tiny little hug.” I bat my eyelashes.

He exhales harshly. “Let’s get your things out of the trunk, and maybe I’ll do it before you board the plane.”

Having a friend like Heath Spearman might be one of the best things in the world.

NINE

Heath



Am I happy that my best friend is leaving town?

It shouldn't matter. She often travels because of her duties as the CEO of Lavinge Chocolatier and having to build her fantastic chocolate sculptures. But it's Christmas, and I want to spend the day with her. I doubt anyone would grant me a miracle and keep her grounded in New York as it happened two years ago.

That was a once-in-a-lifetime wish come true, and I know it'll upset her if she can't get to her family this time. If it weren't for my siblings, I would just hop on the plane with her and follow her. Not that I should, we're only friends.

Am I in love with her?

Sure, but I'll never let her know how I feel. It's best for the two of us. When we arrive where the helipad is located, I spot Maia, Gatsby, and Soleil. My niece claps and stretches her arms when she sees Atzi. They have a pretty incredible connection. Not only that, Atzi is fantastic with children.

“My Tzi!”

“That's close enough,” I say, as we reach my brother's little family. “Any luck on getting her to say Heath yet?”

“Get in line, buddy,” Maia says. “Or bribe her with sweets like Atzi does.”

Gatsby chuckles and shakes his head. I wonder who else is trying to get my niece to say their name.

“How are you, Soleil?” Atzi takes my beautiful niece into her arms. “If I had known you'd be here, I would've brought something special for you.”

Atzi reaches into her purse and takes out a lollipop. “Here, I'm going to give it to your mom so that you can have it after supper, okay?”

“Otay.” Soleil gives her a sharp nod.

“When are you coming back?” Maia asks, taking her daughter back.

“If all goes well, on the thirtieth,” Atzi answers, giving a side-hug to Maia. “Feliz Navidad.”

“Did anyone notice that Atzi ignored us? It's all about my child, isn't it?” Gatsby complains.

Atzi smiles and gives my brother a hug. “Sorry, you're not as cute as her.”

“That's true. She has the beauty and charm of her mother. Thank fuck.”

“Gatsby,” Maia chides him.

“So you can say carajo all the time, but I can't say—”

“It's different.” Maia glares at him.

Gatsby narrows his eyes at Maia. "I'm watching you, Mrs. Spearman."

"We'll discuss this later." Maia winks at him and then turns to Atzi. "Ready for your trip?"

She sighs. "I am. Thank you for making this easier for me."

"Heath is the one who organized it. We just lent him the helipad, but if you ever need the jet or a helicopter, just call us, okay?" Gatsby says.

Atzi nods. "All your presents are already under Fern's tree. I hope you enjoy them."

My brother shrugs. "We'll have to celebrate Christmas again and give you your presents."

"I don't need anything." Atzi shakes her head.

This woman loves to give but has trouble receiving. It's tricky to give her a present. This is precisely why I thought arranging this trip for her would be better than finding the perfect pair of earrings, a new tool for her art, or some obscure book she might like to collect.

"But we love to gift, and you won't take the joy away from us," Maia says.

"Thank you." Atzi hugs her midriff.

"Will you be around when I fly back?" I look at Gatsby.

His brows shoot up, almost reaching his forehead. "You need us?"

"Not really."

"Why don't you drop by the house once you're done? Rys and Cas should be home soon. We can have an impromptu family dinner," Maia offers.

Any other day I would decline the invitation, but with Atzi going away for a week, I need to be around people. If Ben weren't in Paradise Bay helping Lysander and Cory, I would ask him to hang out with me.

“I might do that.” I tilt my head toward the helicopter. “Let’s get going.”

Atzi gives the three of them one last hug before heading to the helicopter.

Gatsby pats my shoulder. “You should tell her,” he mumbles, low enough I’m sure no one, not even Maia, can hear him.

“We’re friends.” I use the same tone of voice.

He shakes his head disapprovingly.

“Everything okay?” Atzi looks at my brother who’s walking back into the building with Maia and Soleil.

“Yeah, just Gatz being... Gatz.”

“Thank you again for doing this,” she says before I help her climb into the helicopter. I’m thankful that the pilot waits for us to be ready before turning on the engine and getting the aircraft ready for takeoff.

It doesn’t take us long to arrive at the hangar. The private jet is ready for takeoff. We watch as the crew loads Atzi’s luggage. Derek’s boss walks by us and nods. “Doc.”

I bow once. I guess doing favors for him pays off, even when sometimes I feel like I’m breaking the law and a few hospital rules. As long as he has clearance for me to work on him or the people he brings by my hospital, I don’t complain.

“Will you be flying her all the way to France?”

He nods. “Affirmative, and I’ll be staying there until it’s time to return her home. She’ll be safe.”

“Thank you.”

He shrugs an arm. “It’s nothing.”

“Who is that?” Atzi asks.

I wish I knew, but since I want her to feel comfortable during the flight, I say, “Benedict knows him. You can trust the guy.”

Atzi nods and then smiles shyly. “So, am I getting a hug?”

“You’re asking for a lot.”

She looks at me with those big doe eyes that make me want to conquer the world for her. “Just a hug.”

I open my arms and put them around her. I breathe her in, wishing I could do this more often, but knowing I have to keep my restraint.

“Merry Christmas,” I whisper, tightening my hold.

“Merry Christmas, grumpy. Promise you won’t be a Grinch while I’m away.”

“I’ll try.”

“You’re my favorite person in the world, Heath Spearman. Thank you for always making the world a better place to live.”

“Anything for you.”

She pushes herself onto her tiptoes and kisses my jaw. “Talk to you soon.”

I watch her climb the jet’s stairs and stay until it takes off, flying east with the only woman I’ve ever loved.

“Merry Christmas, love,” I mumble to the sky, hoping she returns to me safely.

TEN

Aslan



It's hard not to think about my father during the holidays. He loved them more than Mom did. As I grow older and look at the memories of my childhood through a different lens, I realize the one who insisted we had three different trees in the house was him.

Once Gatsby, Lysander, and I were old enough to learn that Santa Claus wasn't real, he made us his honorary elves. We helped him get the presents our siblings wanted—we always gathered the intel for him too.

After he died, Fern and the three of us made sure the house was decorated and everyone received the presents they wanted. Up until last year, we spent the holidays at our

childhood home, even though Mom avoids Christmas and the New Year's Eve party.

This is the first year that's different. We're celebrating the holidays in Paradise Bay, but instead of being at the old house, we're at Fern's home. Tomorrow, we're having brunch at my place and dinner at Gatsby's. I'm glad we found a way to spend it in our hometown, but it feels weird that it's not in the same place we grew up in.

I stop walking from one side to the other and stare at the old property. I hate that it doesn't feel like home anymore. There's something that pushes me away from it and I loathe it. Dad loved the place so much. He put all his heart into it.

"You okay?" I hear Lysander's voice before I see him.

I nod absently. "Yeah, why?"

"Other than you pacing around the porch and staring at the old house every five minutes?" He taps his head. "We have a connection, remember?"

I chuckle. "Of course, the triplet connection. You still haven't told me the deal with our mother."

"You're welcome," he says with a glee of satisfaction.

I glare at him. "Lysander, I'm serious."

He looks up at the blue sky. "She's toxic. I caught up with that years ago. I hoped she'd change, but obviously, she didn't."

His explanation doesn't make sense. It irritates me that he's keeping it to himself. I wonder if that's why, most of the time, he's sad and in his head. Gatsby and I believed it was because of his... I sigh, because I don't like to bring up his relationship, not even in my mind. What if he can sense it, and it fucks him up?

"Do you think she's spending Christmas away because of the memories or because..." I shrug, not knowing if this is a good change of conversation. Can I even call it that? Doubtful. I just can't stop thinking about our mother and the future of our family. "The first Christmas after she came out of the

catatonic state, I thought it was to avoid the ghosts of the past. Now I have so many questions.”

He chuckles. “I doubt it matters.”

“But it does. After what happened between Fern and Mom, the family is falling apart. I’m in no way accusing Fern of anything, but there’s more behind it—and you know it.”

He shakes his head. “We’re not falling apart, we’re just avoiding each other and our mother. My guess is that we’re trying to dodge another Dawntastrophe. If we don’t upset her, she won’t have another bad episode.”

“True.” I sigh. “We’ve already dealt with enough tragedy.”

“So that’s why you’re out here?”

“No. That’s just an added bonus.” I check my watch. “Ben is bringing Keat’s Christmas present.”

“What is it? A real man to replace you?”

I punch him on the arm. “You’re such a fucking asshole.”

He flinches. “That I am, but I’m still your favorite triplet.”

“No, that’s me.” Gatsby steps outside Fern’s house. “Everyone is worried about you. Keaton was about to come outside to check what’s happening with you.”

I sigh. “Thank you for stopping her.”

Gatz shrugs. “That’s what I’m here for, running interference and lending you my jet.”

“He knows about the present?” Lysander sounds hurt.

“Because I’m the favorite,” Gatsby gloats.

“So that’s how it goes, huh?” Lysander glares at me.

Maia and Keaton swear that even though we’re in our mid-thirties, we can’t outgrow our childish fights. At least we’re not punching each other. I call that a win.

“Yeah, I’m his favorite, you’re my favorite, and he’s your favorite. It’s a way to make it mathematically equitable.” Gatsby smirks.

“There’s the geek we all love.” Lysander chuckles. “So, what are you giving her?”

“Savvy.”

Lysander cocks a brow. “I thought she wasn’t coming home.”

“At first, she wasn’t, but I bribed her, and she’ll be here.”

“Shouldn’t you be at the airport?” Lysander asks at the same time Gatsby throws me an unexpected question. “Where’s Lex Luthor?”

“Benedict is picking her up.” My attention goes to Gatz. “His name is Lex, and he’s spending the night with his family. He’ll join us tomorrow.”

“Poor Ben, he’s been working really hard during his vacation,” Lysander says.

“Did we get him anything for Christmas?” Gatz frowns.

Lysander nods. “Of course I did. Well, I asked Cas to get it for me, but yes, we have something for him.”

I got him a huge favor. I used the power of attorney Cory granted me so he could buy a property. I think that’s plenty, isn’t it? But what does he get in exchange for that?

Lysander pushes me and asks, “Why else are you concerned?”

“I’m not,” I respond, but not even I believe me.

My mother-in-law died, Keaton isn’t in a good place, my mother is losing her shit, and there’s so much happening. I just hope that after today, Keat will come back to me. The rest can be solved later.

“If we both think something is wrong, there’s something seriously wrong with you.” Gatsby crosses his arms and stares at me expectantly.

“The situation with Mom concerns me. It feels like we’re losing our family.” I point at Lysander. “He doesn’t want to tell me what’s wrong with her.”

Lysander looks at both of us and then lets out a loud exhale. “Can we discuss it next year?”

“Why wait?” Gatz and I ask simultaneously.

“I don’t want to fuck up your holiday.”

“As long as you promise to tell me the whole thing,” I agree.

“I’ll tell you what I know. Is that enough?”

Before I can say more, the black SUV I loaned Benedict pulls into the property.

“Okay, call Keat.”

Gatsby salutes me.

“Are you okay?” Keaton comes out, almost running.

I nod, trying to hide my smirk.

She narrows her gaze and looks at the vehicle approaching us. “Who’s that?”

I smile, wait until the SUV stops, and open the back door. I help Savvy step out of the car, and when I hear my wife scream joyfully, I smile with satisfaction. There’s nothing better than knowing I made my woman happy.

She looks at me with big tears rolling down her cheeks and mouths *thank you*.

This is my Christmas present, looking at her relaxed and maybe coming back from one of the saddest months of her life.

ELEVEN

Lysander



I stand by the door, watching my nieces and nephew open their presents. Everyone is expectant. Gatsby and Elliot are recording every movement.

“Are you okay?” Fern leans on my arm.

I put an arm around her. “Shouldn’t you be beside the twins helping them open their presents?”

“Nope. Hux and Cory are having a blast doing it.”

“Those three little ones might be my favorite Spearmans in the world.”

“Too bad the rest of the family couldn’t come.”

“They promise to come to your New Year’s Eve party. That’s a start.”

She nods. “I hope we can make it a tradition.”

“Ma!” Elijah calls Fern.

“Go. Your public demands your attention.”

“If you need to talk...”

I nod because I wouldn’t talk to her or anyone else. I walk around and spot Heath on a video call with Atzi. He’s thanking her for getting him a very expensive watch. She’s great at finding things my brother wants, but he wouldn’t buy for himself. I wave at her and let them continue their conversation. If my brother wasn’t so fucking stubborn, he could be in France with her sharing the holidays.

“Are you okay?” Aslan approaches me.

“Perfect. I’m enjoying everyone’s reactions. Mostly the babies. Even though we had a strange year, I feel like we’re coming back together. I just hope this isn’t a one-time thing.”

“We’ll make sure to keep them together,” Aslan assures me. “We’ll continue the traditions Dad started when we were young and the ones our grandparents gave him. We’ll even make some new ones. They’ll reach our great-grandchildren.”

And I believe that we can make that happen, but since I don’t want to discuss the subject or the future, I get ready to leave the room. “Do you want anything to drink? I’m going to the kitchen.”

Aslan shakes his head.

When I pass the hallway, I spot Cory hugging Ben. He’s politely removing her from the embrace. One day, she’ll move on from that asshole. I love the kid, but he’s almost as broken as I am. Why would I want a guy like him around my little sister?

“Everyone, time for a picture!” Rys calls us.

Maia, Gatsby, and Caspian clear the wrapping paper. This is the end of the first Christmas away from home. We learned

something important today. It's not about where we spend it, but that we spend it together.

Rys sets up her camera and runs to stand in front of Cas. We're all in a very tight space, barely fitting inside the frame, but we're making it work, and I have faith that no matter what happens, we will stay like this forever.

"Merry Christmas, everyone," I say as the camera flashes.



Thank you so much for reading Christmas in Paradise Bay. I hope you caught up with your favorite Spearmans. There's more to come soon. If you want to read Heath and Atzi's story, make sure to preorder *The Way of Us*... but you can also read the first chapter ;)

Wishing you a wonderful holiday.

With all my love,

Claudia

ALSO BY CLAUDIA BURGOA

Be sure to sign up for [my newsletter](#) where you'll receive news about upcoming releases, sneak previous, and also FREE books from other bestselling authors.

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