

Christmas
BUBBLE

ANA ASHLEY

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Christmas Bubble

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DEDICATION

TO ALL THE larger-than-life and kind-hearted people of this world.

To all the Bubbles.

May all your Christmas wishes come true.

Ana

x

CONTENTS

Copyright

Dedication

About Christmas Bubble

1. Coach
2. Bubble
3. Coach
4. Bubble
5. Coach
6. Bubble
7. Coach
8. Bubble
9. Coach
10. Bubble
11. Coach
12. Bubble
13. Coach
14. Bubble
15. Coach
16. Bubble
17. Coach
18. Bubble
19. Coach
20. Bubble
21. Coach
22. Bubble
23. Coach
24. Bubble
25. Coach
26. Bubble
27. Coach

28. [Bubble](#)

29. [Coach](#)

30. [Bubble](#)

31. [Coach](#)

32. [Bubble](#)

[Also by Ana Ashley.](#)

[Who is Ana Ashley.](#)

ABOUT CHRISTMAS BUBBLE



A Christmas snowstorm.

Two opposites that most definitely attract.

Only one bed.

When the man of your absolute dreams slams their mouth into yours, there is only one course of action. Yours truly—that's me—has broken it down into four easy steps for your convenience.

You're welcome.

Step one: make sure he really is attached to you. Lips to lips. You're a clam. Do not let go.

Step two: climb him like a tree.

Step three: thank your past self for all the squats that gave you those thunder thighs.

Step four: enjoy every second of that kiss before said (maybe-not-so-straight) man realizes what he's doing and has a freakout.

Christmas Bubble is a low angst, standalone, Christmas novel featuring a petite but larger-than-life cheerleader, an older demisexual football coach and a winter cabin by the lake with only one bed.

Will this be the season when all their wishes will come true?

COACH



Do one thing that scares you each day.

Start a conversation with a stranger.

Wear your team's uniform and sit with the other team.

Blow Bubble.

The only one stopping you is yourself.

“THAT’S NOT RIGHT. It should be *blow bubbles*. Because you know, you don’t just blow one bubble, right? You blow lots of bubbles.”

I swivel my chair to see one of my star players staring at the motivational poster on the wall behind my desk. A poster I didn’t hang, but I one hundred percent know who did.

“Jackson, how can I help?”

The kid seems uncharacteristically lost for words as he takes his eyes off the wall and looks at me, fidgeting with his hands.

“My um...mom said that if you don’t have anywhere to go for Thanksgiving next week, you could come to our place since you’re kinda new in town and all.”

I rub the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes.

“I appreciate the invite. Thank your mom for me, but I have other plans already.”

“But the guys said—”

I raise my brow, and he gets the message. I don’t care what anyone says. Unless they have access to my personal diary,

they don't know a thing. Such as, I really have no other plans but to put a frozen pizza in the oven and drink a few beers as I watch football on TV.

Jackson looks like he's about to say something else but thinks better of it and goes back into the locker room. I catch one of the gym teachers staring at me and give him the finger.

He laughs. "Dude, this is the third invite for Thanksgiving that you've declined. Are you wearing some special cologne or something?"

"It's the fourth, and no, no cologne," I reply, hoping he'll leave me alone to work on the lineup for the Thanksgiving Day game.

"I'm just sayin', all these invites. What's all that about?"

I groan. "How should I know? I'm new around here, remember?"

He gets up to leave our shared office. "Ah, of course, the welcome committee. Man, those were the good times. I remember someone dropping off a casserole or a homemade cake almost daily when I moved here. You should make the most of it before you're the new old news. Although you're like a movie star here. The former Marinos coach here in Windsor coaching our kids? You can milk it for all you got."

"Not really interested."

He closes the door behind him, leaving me on my own. I share the office with the gym teachers and the other coaches, which makes for much tighter quarters than the office I was used to at the Marinos.

Not that I mind my colleagues. It's just an adjustment I wasn't ready for when I upended my whole life and said goodbye to my career in San Diego to start over in Windsor, a small town in middle-of-nowhere Connecticut.

It was your choice, Riley. Live with it.

I stare at my phone and the piling notifications I'm ignoring from my parents. Who'd have thought that at the grand old age

of forty-six, I'd still be playing hide and seek with them like a teenager in trouble?

The problem is I know exactly why they're calling. They want to know if I'm going back to the West Coast for Thanksgiving, and especially if I'm going to try to save my twenty-three-year marriage.

They don't know why Mel and I divorced, and there's no reason to destroy yet another relationship just because mine failed.

Mel has always been close to my parents, especially since she lost hers. Despite what happened with us, I can't bring myself to take that away from her.

I put thoughts of Mel, my parents, and my old life aside and grab my heavy coat.

Winter in Connecticut is much less kind than in California. Something else that's changed.

What made you think this was a good idea, Riley? I ask myself for the millionth time as I walk past the team in the locker room. We still practice most days, even though there are no official games until the new year, apart from the Thanksgiving Day friendly, of course.

It keeps the kids focused and out of trouble. Or maybe it's just good for my sanity to focus on something else rather than the fuck-up that is my life.

"Hey, Coach, have you seen this?" one kid calls as I reach the other end of the locker room.

"Seen what?" Even as I ask, I see what they're talking about. All over the walls are sheets of paper covered in googly eyes, and right above them, it says *Earthquake Detection Kit*.

The kids are all jumping around, trying to make the eyes move.

"Get back to your showers and get dressed. It stinks like a locker room in here," I say to get them moving.

"This *is* a locker room, Coach," another kid points out.

“It doesn’t need to smell like one. Now stop messing around before I get those things taken down.”

They all scramble, and I smile as I walk out the door. I miss the Marinos’ locker-room antics, but these kids can give the twenty-something-year-olds a run for their money.

They are more focused and hardworking than my generation ever was. One good reason I am happy to have made this move.

There’s only one person who could be responsible for the posters. The same person I try to avoid like the plague. A fruitless exercise since he seems to have taken it upon himself to be up in my business any time he wants.

Case in point, right now...

Even though there’s a fresh layer of snow on the ground, the coach of the cheerleading team, Bubble—whose real name I don’t know—leans against my car.

He looks like a human burrito, wrapped to his eyeballs in layers of coats, multiple scarves, and two knitted beanies, one of which has Christmas trees all over it.

“How may I help you...?” I say, just like I do every time I speak to him.

“Bubble. Just Bubble,” he says, giving the *B* a more pronounced sound and scanning me from head to toe.

His green eyes are so big and deep. They’re the color of the rainforest. Weirdly, I’ve never before given anyone’s eye color a second thought.

“I’m sorry. I can’t call you that.”

“Why not? Everyone else does.”

I see the challenge in his eyes, but I refuse to take the bait.

“I’m not everyone else, and I prefer to call people by their names.”

He narrows his eyes. “Anyway, did you like it?” he asks, changing the subject.

“Like what?”

“The present I left for you, of course.” He frowns and crosses his arms as if he’s annoyed that I don’t immediately know what he’s talking about. Which, of course, is bullshit.

“It’s hard to say which one because two weeks ago, the wall behind my desk was bare, and now I’m hard-pressed to remember the color of the paint beneath all those posters.”

“If we can’t find our own inspiration, it’s okay to find it in others.”

I chuckle. “What makes you think I need inspiration?”

“We all need a little inspiration every once in a while.” I don’t know what to make of the way he smiles at me. He seems to genuinely want me to believe all the words he’s stuck on the wall behind my desk. He takes a box out of his gym bag. “Here. I made this for you.”

“Why?”

He huffs and mumbles under his breath as he holds out the box, “*You didn’t need to bake the most delicious cream-filled Shaabiyat just for me, Bubble. But I’ll take it anyway and devour every bite of your specially-made gastronomical orgy.*”

I stare at him and then burst into laughter. “Did you just say *gastronomical orgy*?”

“Open the box, and you’ll find out.”

I do, and I’m immediately teased with the scent of orange, rose, and buttery, flakey pastry.

“What is this?”

“I told you. It’s Shaabiyat. I saw the recipe on a blog.”

“Shay-what?”

“Never mind. Have a bite and tell me if it doesn’t taste like the swinging sixties are making a return in your mouth.”

I raise a brow. “What do you know about the sixties? You’re a kid.”

He shakes his head, kissing his teeth. “Oh, Coach, Coach, Coach...I could show you aaall the ways in which I’m definitely not a kid. Just say the word, and I’ll give you a free ticket to the Bubble’s Privates Member Club.”

I snort. “You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

His gaze runs again from my eyes to the tips of my shoes. My winter coat suddenly feels too hot as Bubble’s eyes travel to mine again. I feel exposed in ways I can’t explain or understand.

“Am I?” he asks in a sultry voice, and I swear my dick reacts.

What the fuck?

Maybe it’s the cold. It’s getting to my head.

“I should get home,” I say, pointing at my car.

He moves around me, leaving a waft of strawberry scent in the air.

“Think of me when you’re licking the cream off...” He nods to the box in my hand. He walks toward the building for his cheerleading practice with strangely compelling confidence.

The kid can’t even be thirty yet, but he walks and talks like he’s sussed out the world and found it ripe for his taking.

BUBBLE



I CLAP my hands to get everyone's attention. "Okay, my supple cupcakes, let's nail this pyramid like you're a soft-serve ice cream."

"Melting in the sun, leaving your hands all creamy and sticky?" one kid says.

The entire team laughs. Even Justin, the assistant coach. I elbow him, and he snorts.

"No, we want a good sturdy base, a nice swirl, and those perfect cherries on top. Girls, are you ready?"

They get into formation, and I press play on the stereo. Music with a steady beat fills the large room. This routine isn't new, but I tweaked the ending. I know it'll push them a little out of their comfort zone, but I have faith. We're focusing on pyramid lifts today, which will be tough on them.

It takes the full practice to get it right, but they do it. Not that I had any doubt.

A year ago, this high school didn't even have a cheerleading team. And now they're well on their way to reaching the level needed to compete at the cheerleading high school nationals if they want to.

"Gather round my little muffins of amazingness," I call out to them as I turn the music off.

They all sit on the mat, slouching against each other, gathering their breath. Every single one of them looks exhausted and

exhilarated. The best feeling in the whole world. After good sex, of course. But I can't tell them that, or I'd be fired.

"Okay, can you tell me what you need to work on?"

"We're still a bit wobbly," Terry says.

I nod. "How do we fix that?"

Everyone looks around as if the person next to them holds the answer, which they do.

"You're a team, and you need to trust your teammates one hundred percent. Mary, Selina, Hannah, and Petra, the guys will hold you up, and they'll catch you if you fall. But if you don't trust them, then you won't fall right, which means you might do something that'll hurt them. If they stop trusting you, they'll be afraid of what you might do when you're up there. You all see how wrong it can go?"

The team nods.

"One team. One hundred percent trust. Now tell me what went well," I say. "Can anyone tell me what went well?"

"No one fell and broke their neck," Sasha says.

"True, but let's go for something a little less dramatic."

"I didn't have to call the nurse," Justin mutters next to me.

"Come on, people. A year ago, you couldn't do a cartwheel, and look at you nailing a twenty-person pyramid. Now, can *I* have a cheer for that?" I shout and jump on the spot.

They all stand and cheer, and the energy is electric. I soak it up like my own personal sunshine.

"Okay, okay, we'll keep working sections this week and building for a full run on Friday. You all up for that?"

"Yes, Coach!" they all shout.

"What was that?" I ask, putting my hand to my ear.

"Yes, Bubble!"

"That's better. I'll see you all tomorrow."

As the kids all spill into the locker room, Justin shows me the footage he captured with his tablet.

“I think Taylor needs to take a rest. Look at his face there. He’s clearly in pain but doesn’t want to let the team down,” he says, rewinding the clip to the moment Petra is flying down from the pyramid. You’d never notice Taylor’s pain unless you’re looking for it.

“Can you have a word with him?” I ask.

“I sure can. I reviewed some earlier clips during the practice and saw nothing else wrong. I think they just need more time on the mat.”

“Can you send me what you have?” I ask.

“Sure.”

We walk together to the coaches’ office via the locker room.

“Your earthquake detection kit still makes me laugh every time I walk past,” he says.

“I have my moments.”

He bumps my shoulder.

“You more than have your moments, Bubble. Since you got here, it’s like this place has lit up with happiness and joy. I know it sounds sappy as shit, but it’s true. The kids are focused, and they work hard. Even the teachers. All they talk about is you.”

I laugh. “That’s because I bake them cake. Everyone loves cake.”

“This is true.”

I think about the sullen football coach who only appears to smile when he’s coaching his team.

Not that I’ve been watching or anything. Okay, there was this one time when I forgot my lucky Sailor Moon keychain in the office, so I had to drive back to the school to get it.

I should have known when some douchewaffle tried to run a red light right in front of me that I was missing my lucky

charm. It wasn't until I reached to touch the keychain out of habit that I realized it was gone.

After running to the office to grab the keychain, I was on my way back to the car when I heard cheering and saw the coach running across the football field with the players. He was wearing these tight shorts that showed off his thick, muscular thighs, and I basically died on the spot.

That Sailor Moon keychain proved once again to be my all-time luckiest possession because *that* had to be one of the best man-drooling moments of my entire life. Considering I spend a lot of my time ogling men, that says a lot about the quality of Coach's goods.

Justin heads off while I spend some time looking through the footage he sent me. Even though I only work at the school part-time, I still have my own desk, conveniently positioned opposite Coach Dempsey's.

Okay, so maybe I moved my desk a little. But no one said I couldn't, so I guess it's okay.

I contemplate adding another inspirational quote to his collection, but I think he might kill me, so I better wait until Christmas. Who knows, maybe he's a Christmas person.

Everybody loves Christmas, right?

I reach out to pick up my phone when I hear the Lady Gaga ringtone I picked for my best friend.

"Juju, my beautiful doll, don't tell me how hot it is out there because I'm close to turning into a human strawberry-flavored popsicle. No one ever told me Connecticut was in the Arctic Circle."

She laughs, and the sound warms me from the inside out.

"I don't need to tell you, honey. You grew up here, and you know the way back too."

"Don't start..."

"I didn't. You did. Anyway...I was wondering if you're coming for Thanksgiving this year since you missed last year."

I pull the hem of my pink top. It's fraying a little, and with my picking, it frays a little more. "I can't, Juju. We have a game."

The sigh coming from the other side of the line makes me feel super guilty.

"Bubble, last year you'd just taken that job at the coffee shop, Spilled Beans. This year you're also coaching on top of that. Are you ever going to come home?"

No?

"Of course, silly. I'm just having such a great time here." I gasp. "I have an excellent, no, scrap that, a superlative idea. Why don't *you* come over for Thanksgiving? You can watch the game, and then we can spend the weekend eating our weight in cake and watching movies. Yes?"

"I can't, hunni. We're training for a competition. I could try to make it for Christmas."

I try not to show my disappointment through my voice. I miss her so much.

Since my grandmother died, Juju has been my only family. We're not blood-related, but we may as well be with how close we are.

"I'll hold you to that. How's everything else?" I ask, even though I'm not sure I want to know.

"We're going to nationals, as expected."

I hear the excitement in her voice and try hard not to feel jealous that I can't be part of that world anymore.

"Of course, and I bet you're going to win. Again."

She giggles but then stops and lets out a long sigh. "You should be here with us, Bubble."

"Yeah, but I'm not, and there's no point in crying over spilled glitter because that shit's a bitch to clean."

"How can you be so positive after everything that happened? After what that two-timing liar snake did?"

“Because I’m genuinely happy here, Juju. You know I always loved baking with my grandmother, so the job at Spilled Beans in Chester Falls is perfect. My boss, Indy, gives me free rein in the kitchen, especially now that he and his husband have a kid and he wants to spend more time at home. And I love coaching the cheer team too. I’m doing the two things I love the most. Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

The award for Best Liar goes to...Bubble! And the crowd cheers...

“I suppose you’re right,” she says.

“So get your perky ass out here for Christmas, or else,” I warn. “But bring extra layers on top of your extra layers because seriously, sister, this place in the winter is an icicle on steroids.”

When we end the call, I find myself in that weird state where I’m not sad but also not happy. Sappy?

Every day I walk into the school to coach the cheerleading team, my focus is on them. I want to teach them all the lessons I learned as a cheerleader.

Even when my trust was broken, and even when I was broken, I still learned something. Sometimes the lessons were painful, but the most genuine smiles come from those who have lived to appreciate the moments that made them smile.

And if there’s anything Bubble can do, it’s smile.

I grab my three scarves and wrap them around my neck before I put my coat on to leave.

Past Bubble was a super-genius for saving a Shaabiyat to have later, and Present Bubble is going to run home to have a warm bath before indulging in the sweet Lebanese dessert.

Thank god for sugar and baking blogs.

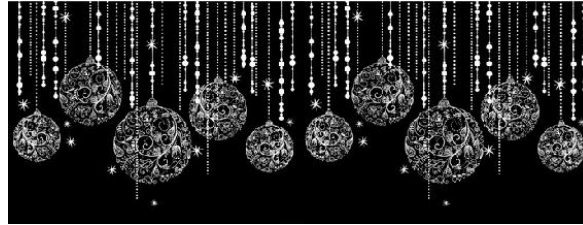
Once again, thoughts of Coach fill my mind. I wonder if he’s tried the Shaabiyat and what he thought of it.

I’d bet my Sailor Moon keychain he’s a cream man. Licking it all clean before eating the pastry.

And just like that, I have an erection.

Great.

COACH



THE OVEN DINGS as I turn the TV to the sports channel.

Pizza, beer, and watching football on TV after winning the Thanksgiving game with my team this morning. It can't get any better than this.

I put a pizza slice on a plate and head back to the living room, hoping to catch the rest of the Bears vs. Lions game.

I turn the heat up a bit and sit on the couch, resting my feet on the coffee table.

The pizza is adequate. Not the best I've had, but considering I can't cook for shit and didn't set the kitchen on fire, it does the job.

I can't help laughing at myself because I'm hitting all the bachelor stereotypes in a single afternoon. Then again, I never had the chance to be a bachelor or do whatever the hell I wanted.

I take a swig of the beer and finish the slice of pizza, reaching out for another one.

The doorbell rings, and I do a double-take. I'm not friendly enough with anyone in Windsor that they'd stop by my place. I don't think anyone at the school knows where I live.

I mute the TV and go to the front door. Even before I have a chance to react to the presence of my unexpected visitors, I'm enveloped by my mom's slim but strong arms and familiar floral perfume fills my senses.

"Mom. Dad. What are you doing here?"

I kiss the top of her head and let her go. My dad gives me a one-arm hug and a pat on the back as he comes inside before I close the door to keep the cold out. He's not a touchy-feely person. My mom has always done all the hugging and cuddling for both of them.

"Well, we couldn't let you spend Thanksgiving on your own, could we?" mom says, walking in front of me as if she's been to this place before.

She gasps at the sight of my pizza—minus one slice—and beer on the coffee table.

"Riley John Dempsey, don't tell me this is your Thanksgiving dinner."

Oh, how she loves to full-name me. I look at my dad for help, but he's conveniently distracted by the plain walls of my mostly bare house.

"Mom, I had a game this morning, and I live alone. Besides, you know I can't cook."

"Jeff, go get the stuff we got. I told you we were going to need it," she says to my dad, who knows the drill ingrained by almost fifty years of marriage.

She takes her coat off and drapes it over the couch.

"Where's your kitchen?"

She walks to the hallway leading to the bedroom, and that's a room I really don't want her to see. If she's disappointed with my choice of dinner, I'll never hear the end of it when she sees my bedroom has nothing but a bed and a dresser. Not to mention a pile of laundry on the floor that I was supposed to work through this weekend.

"Mom. Stop."

She comes to a halt.

"What the hell is going on? You don't exactly live around the corner, so you can just drop by. Why didn't you say you were coming?" I ask, guiding her toward the kitchen.

The sadness on her face gets to me, and I pull her into my arms. “I’m sorry, Mom. I don’t mean it that way. I’m glad you’re here. It’s just a surprise, you know? I didn’t even get a turkey or anything.”

Dad comes back, holding a few shopping bags.

“We didn’t get turkey either, but at least we can have a proper meal,” Mom says. “Now take me to your kitchen so I can prepare our dinner while we catch up.”

I give up on watching any football and give a passing glance at my now sad-looking pizza, but despite the shock of having my parents turn up unannounced, I’m glad they’re here.

Dad follows us to the kitchen with the bags and grabs a beer from the fridge before going out to the living room, leaving me with my mom. At least one of us gets to watch the game.

“This is a nice kitchen, Riley. Mel would have liked it.”

“Mom...”

“Sorry, honey. Force of habit.”

I try not to take it to heart and leave her to find everything she needs to prepare whatever dinner she’s cooking for us. I stand on the side, waiting to be told what to do.

“She still drops by every week and asks about you,” Mom says.

“I’m glad you’re still getting along, Mom. You’ve always been close, and I’d hate for her to lose you, but there’s no way back for us. You need to know that.”

Mom hands me the chopping board, the knife, and a bunch of vegetables. No need for instructions. We’ve done this plenty of times before.

“I know, honey. I just think that after all these years, it’s such a shame. You were so good together. Did you really fall out of love?”

“I love you for asking that, but it was a lot of things, not just that we grew apart.”

She puts the knife she's using to cut the chicken on the chopping board and faces me.

"You know you're not an only child out of choice, don't you?"

I nod. We've had this conversation before when my and Mel's struggle to conceive came up. They shared how they tried to give me a sibling, but it never happened.

"I know how hard it is to want that child so much, and it becomes everything. Sometimes you can lose yourself a little," she says. "I could see it in Mel's eyes."

I take a deep, steady breath. "Mom, can we not talk about this? Nothing is going to change things. Mel and I are divorced."

"I just...I never saw it coming. You two were always so happy together."

"We were, Mom, but it didn't work out. Let's leave it at that."

She lets out a resigned sigh. "Okay, sweetheart. I just want you to be happy."

"I know, Mom."

We work in silence until the smell of my mom's cooking reawakens my stomach. The slice of pizza I had before feels like a million years ago.

I set the table as she puts the dishes with vegetables and mashed potatoes on the table and takes the casserole out of the oven.

"Who'd have thought my Thanksgiving meal would be a real meal? Now, this is something to be thankful for," I joke.

"Riley?" Mom asks as I grab the drinks. "I promise I'll put it to rest now, but I just want to know. Are you happy?"

I look at my mom in her white cashmere sweater and jeans, her short blonde bob haircut and her nice soft skin. She doesn't look her seventy years by any stretch.

We've always been very close, and considering I've spent my life on a football field surrounded by alpha male-type guys, I enjoy talking to my mom. She has a way of making me feel balanced.

“Am I happy? I’m working on it. For the first time in my life, I’m putting myself first, which feels good. I just don’t know what happy looks like yet.”

She comes up to me and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“You’ll know when it happens.”

There’s a cynical part of me that thinks it’ll never happen, but another part of me hopes my mom is right. After all, I’ve already spent most of my life in a relationship based on a lie. I’d love the chance to find out how it feels to be with someone who is with me for me. No lies.

“Is dinner ready yet? Or are we waiting for next Thanksgiving?”

Mom and I laugh at Dad’s yearly line.

“It’s ready,” we both say.

The food is wonderful, which is to be expected. My mom has always been a wonderful cook. We catch up about all the things happening back home on the West Coast, and I tell them about my new life here in Windsor.

“I know you love me, and I’m your favorite son and all, but coming all the way from San Diego for a meal is a bit much. Who’s gonna fess up?” I ask.

Mom smiles wide and looks at Dad.

“Your mom has been pestering me to go on one of those floating bathtubs since I retired, so I guess we’re giving that a try,” he says.

“Mom, care to translate?”

“We’re going on a month-long Christmas cruise. We’re setting off from New York next week, and we’ll end up in the Caribbean for Christmas. We were hoping that you’d join us in St. Barts. You have vacation days over Christmas, don’t you?”

I stare at each of my parents in turn. Two people who’ve barely traveled out of state because they claimed there was no need to go anywhere else when they had the beach on their doorstep are now going on a month-long cruise.

“I...don’t know what to say...this doesn’t really sound like the kind of thing you’d do,” I say. “I mean, is it safe? Do you have good travel insurance?”

“Riley John Dempsey, don’t make me show you how strong my hand still is,” my mom threatens.

I stand from the table, collecting all the plates. “Sorry, Mom. That was out of line. I think it’s a good idea and you’ll have loads of fun. I can’t join you though. I’d planned to go to the cabin I bought by the lake in Stillwater.”

“You mean that old rickety place in those photos you showed us months ago?” my mom asks with concern. “Is it even heated?”

“Yes, Mom. It has a fireplace, and I have enough wood. Thank you for acknowledging that I’m a grownup and can take care of myself.”

She raises a brow. “Was that pizza on your coffee table your Thanksgiving dinner?”

“She shoots. She scores,” my dad says, settling the argument the same way he’s done since I was a child. Mom is always right.

“Fair enough. But I just want to go out there, do some work on it, and chill.”

I grab the dessert plates and the pie I was saving for later.

“Oh, what is this marvelous-looking pie? I know you didn’t do this yourself, and this is most definitely not from a store,” mom says.

“Someone from work made it for me. It’s pumpkin pie.”

“Whoever she is, she’s going to an awful lot of trouble for you, dear.”

“He.”

“What’s that?”

“He. The pie was made by the cheerleading coach.” They keep staring at me, and I realize I was no clearer than before. “He’s a guy.”

“Oh.”

They share a look I don't understand.

“What's wrong? Loads of men can bake. I think Bubble works in a coffee shop owned by a guy who's also a baker.” I don't know why I feel the need to defend him, especially considering how much he gets on my nerves with his inspirational quotes and strawberry scent.

“Nothing wrong, sweetie. We just wondered why your friend isn't here having his pie with you.”

I shrug. “He just left the pie on my desk. I think he's on a mission to fatten me up or something because he keeps giving me stuff to eat. I don't even know the guy that well.”

Mom and Dad share another look and dig their forks into their pie slices.

As with all the other baked goods Bubble has given me, the pumpkin pie is divine.

I really must ask him why he does this. But then, what if he stops?

Or worse. What if I have to confront this weird feeling in the pit of my stomach every time he's around?

Better just eat the pie. Yeah.

BUBBLE



“ONE DARK-SOUL ESPRESSO and a sad chocolate-chip cupcake coming right up,” I say to one of our regulars at Spilled Beans.

The customer stares at me, her eyes blinking.

“Would you like anything else?”

“Can I have a *happy* chocolate-chip cupcake?” she asks, tilting her head and making a cute face to get a smile out of me. Not happening today.

I look at the display in front of me. All the cakes and pastries created by my boss are impeccable, but I don’t see anything happy.

“No, sorry, sweetie. But they’re freshly baked and super delicious.”

“Let me think about it,” she says.

I’m finishing the drink as Indy, my boss, comes from the kitchen with a tray of freshly baked Dutch pepernoten cookies. The delicious scents of nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, and ginger follow him.

This year we have a few themed days leading up to Christmas, so we’re baking specialty cookies and cakes from around the world. It was my idea—a fantastic one, even if I say so myself. But Indy said it too, so I can be smug about it.

When I smell all our delicious bakes and look at the snow outside the coffee shop, people walking past with bags filled with Christmas gifts, I feel like I’m living inside a Christmas postcard.

“What’s going on?” Indy asks.

“What? Nothing,” I say noncommittally.

“I’ll take that cupcake after all, honey, and I hope your day gets better,” the customer says as I give her the coffee and put the cupcake in a specialized box.

Indy sets the tray on the counter, and I help him transfer the cookies to a smaller tray in the display cabinet.

I try really hard, but I don’t know if the cinnamon or the cloves remind me of my grandmother and her hugs and Christmas. I let out a very long sigh.

“Okay,” Indy says. “Let’s talk it out.” He pulls me by my hand to one table and makes me sit. “What’s up?”

“It’s the coach. I keep giving him things, and nothing happens,” I say, letting my frustration show. I tuck my hands in the front pocket of my Spilled Beans apron.

“I’m scared to ask. What *things* do you keep giving him?”

I shrug. “Cake. I don’t know which is his favorite, so I’ve baked him a chocolate cake, pineapple, vanilla, birthday cake, fruitcake, cake with frosting, cake without frosting, cupcakes, muffins, special pastries from around the world—” Indy raises his hand to stop me.

“I get the idea.”

“He returns the boxes I give him with those delicious cakes, and all there is inside is a sticky note that says thank you. There aren’t even any heart-shaped confetti or paper flowers. *Nothing.*”

Indy purses his lips, and I’m sure he wants to laugh. How can he want to laugh at the tragedy that is my life?

“Is that all?” he asks.

I stare at the table, and I’m sure my guilty look won’t fool anyone, let alone Indy.

“I may have also bought him a few other gifts.”

He gestures for me to expand on that.

“Okay, so maybe I’ve hung a few posters with inspirational quotes behind his desk at work. And he kept losing his pens, so I got him a pen holder.”

“Was there anything printed on that pen holder?” Indy asks as if he’s afraid of the answer.

I bite my thumbnail. “Um...*Stick it in me?*”

“Oh, Bubble.” He holds his hands out, and I put my hand in his. He holds it tight like he’s going to give me some bad news.

“Are you crushing on him?”

I snort and take my hand back. “No, of course not. Pfft. Me? Bubble doesn’t crush. I crush strawberries for milkshakes, which, by the way, does not bring all the boys to the yard, but no...I’m not crushing...nope...”

Oh, who am I kidding?

Indy raises a brow.

“Okay, maybe a little bit.” *Oh, who am I kidding? I have a crush on Coach the size of my bubble butt—thank you, squats—but I digress...* “It’s just that my grandmother raised me with good manners, and she always said, ‘Bubble, the way to a man’s good graces is through his stomach.’”

He sighs. “That only works if he’s not straight, hun. You know that, right? Unless something changed? You told me you thought he was straight,” Indy says.

“A guy can dream, right? Besides, he could come around.” I raise my hands like I’m praying. “Never give up on something you can’t go a day without thinking about.”

“That’s very insightful and true.”

I stand and go behind the counter again. I’m sure we’re due some customers any moment now. “I’m glad you agree. Winston Churchill said it, according to my inspirational quotes calendar.”

“Wait,” he says, following me. “So you’re basically stalking him, so that *you’re* all he’s thinking about until he comes

around?”

I try to ignore the pity in his voice.

“No. *He* is all I can think about. I can’t give up until he specifically tells me to leave him alone. You know, like how vampires have to be invited in? I have to be invited out.”

Indy laughs.

“Only a stupid man would send away someone who brings him cake daily.”

I grin. “Precisely. My grandmother was right. Anyway, Lebanese week was great, and Dutch week is going well so far. Are we really going to try the stroopwafels?” I raise my hands in prayer.

Indy rolls his eyes and bites his lip. “We can’t afford not to. It would be a sin to deprive this town of those beautiful thin wafers filled with that soft caramel melting over a cup of coffee.”

“Stop, you’re giving me a sugar boner,” I joke.

The front doorbell rings, and my smile widens when I see two of my favorite customers.

“Mr. and Mrs. Crawford. How nice to see you.”

“Good day, Bubble, my dear. Goodness, isn’t it cold out there,” Mrs. Crawford says.

Indy goes back to the kitchen, leaving me with them.

“You don’t need to tell me. I was cold by the end of the summer. I lost the feeling of my lower limbs by fall, and I’m pretty sure I’m just a walking frozen ghost by now. Anyway, what can I get you?”

“We’re going away until the new year but couldn’t leave without having one or two of Indy’s cinnamon rolls,” Mr. Crawford says. “Keep’em coming, Bubble.”

“Dear, remember what the doctor said,” his wife warns.

I smile at how they always warn each other about eating the treats they enjoy once a month at Spilled Beans. I never met

my parents because they died when I was a baby, but I always thought they'd be a little like Mr. and Mrs. Crawford. Never taking each other too seriously and just enjoying life.

I prepare their coffees the way I know they like.

“Where are you going on this adventure, if I may ask because I'm totally nosy?” I ask.

“We're doing a tour of Europe. Revisiting all the places we saw on our honeymoon,” Mr. Crawford says.

“But this time, we'll actually see them,” Mrs. Crawford continues.

I chuckle and give them their drinks, returning to the counter for the cinnamon rolls.

“So you won't be spending Christmas with your family?” I ask.

Mrs. Crawford is the one to speak up. “Our son and his fiancé are taking the kids to Florida for Disney World, so we thought that instead of sitting at home like two old fogies, we'd have our own adventure.”

I place the pastries on the table. “Oh shush, Mrs. Crawford,” I say, running a hand over her sweater. “Look at your style. You're ageless. There's no old in your vocabulary.”

“And how about you, dear? Are you doing anything special this Christmas?”

I beam. “As a matter of fact, yes. My best friend is coming all the way from the West Coast to visit. I haven't seen her since I moved to Connecticut.”

“Sounds great. I bet you'll have loads of fun,” Mrs. Crawford says.

I deflate a little. “I don't know. I'm afraid she'll find it a bit boring here. We'll obviously watch tons of Christmas movies and eat our body weight in cake, but I'm not sure what else to do.”

I leave them to it to go check on Indy and see if he needs help in the kitchen. I find him jumping on the spot while holding

his phone to his chest.

“Um...are you having an episode? Do I need to call someone? I should tell you I’m not good with blood, guts, or anything medical,” I say.

Indy turns to me with the biggest smile. “Bubble, my dear, you’ve just gained yourself a two-week paid vacation.”

I frown and look around to see if there are any cameras, and I’m being pranked.

“I, what?”

“You know Tyler is turning one this Christmas, right? Tate says it’s time for us to take a family vacation. We’re not going anywhere, but we’re closing Spilled Beans, and he’s handing his work to his partner so we can spend time together.” His face becomes all dream-like. “Can you imagine sleeping in until six a.m.? Ahhh, bliss...so anyway, that’s happening. So you’re getting a paid vaycay.”

He says it like it’s final.

“Thank you. That’s really generous of you, Indy.”

And now I’m the one with the nervous energy. What will I do with myself for two weeks during the school break? Even Juju will only come for a few days.

I go back to the front of the coffee shop, and Mrs. Crawford stands and comes over to me, dangling a set of keys.

“My husband and I just had the best idea. How would you like to give your friend a true white-Christmas experience?” she says.

I’m feeling a little lightheaded and confused from Indy’s vacation news and now Mrs. Crawford talking about a white Christmas. Did I eat something earlier that didn’t agree with me?

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple, dear. We have a cabin by the lake in Stillwater. It’ll be sitting empty while we’re in Europe and the kids are in Florida. It’s yours for Christmas if you want it.”

I feel tears prickling the backs of my eyes, and before I know it, I'm hugging Mrs. Crawford.

"Thank you so much. That's such a lovely gesture, and I promise I'll take the best care of your cabin."

She hugs me back, and I can barely contain my tears because she smells so comforting. This is the nicest thing anyone's done for me in a long time.

Apart from Indy giving me a two-week paid vacation that I now get to have in a lakeside cabin. Squee!

COACH



“COME ON, guys, two more laps. I can’t believe I’m barely breaking a sweat, and you’re dropping like flies. I’m supposed to be the old man here.”

“Yeah, Coach, but we’ve been playing for two hours,” Jackson complains.

“You should be warm enough for this run then.”

I’m running with the team. Something I enjoy occasionally doing after practice.

My career as a football player barely existed because I always wanted to be a coach, so after I had an injury that ended my playing days, I used it as a stepping stone after I graduated from college. It doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy playing.

I love being on the field and playing with the kids, especially when we don’t have any games scheduled, so it’s all just practice.

By the time we’re finished, I’m keeping a straight face, but I’m definitely feeling the workout in my muscles. After all, I have a good thirty years on these kids.

I’m glad the coaches have their own locker room with a shower because that’s exactly what I’ll need.

“Off to the showers with you all, and have a Merry Christmas. Don’t overdo it. Trust me. You’ll regret it on that first practice of the year,” I say as we walk back into the building.

“Oh, come on, Coach. It’s Christmas,” one of the kids groans.

“It’s also just a day.”

“You say that because you never had my mom’s meatloaf,” he grumbles. “Damn, I’m already feeling January in my body.”

I laugh.

The locker room becomes a noisy hub of teenagers talking over each other, messing about, and joking.

I’ve never let the teams know, but I’ve often just stood behind the door listening to the chatter, wondering what it would be like if I’d had my own kid.

Would they be like these kids? Or maybe they’d be more the kind to be found in the library with their nose in a book. Maybe even both.

I head off to the coaches’ office. There’s no point thinking about something that will never happen. I’ve made my peace with it, and that’s that.

There are a couple of coaches and a gym teacher in the office. I nod to them as I come in.

“I see you have another box from Bubble,” one of them says. “How come you’re the only one that gets your own cake, and we have to share?”

“He must be special,” the other one says.

“Do you put out?” the gym teacher says, and I throw a pen at him.

“Want to take it? At this rate, I’m going to end up six feet under before I’m fifty and, trust me, I’m not far off.”

“Nah, Coach. I’ve seen you with the kids. You can still run circles around them,” the gym teacher says as he high-fives me and heads off. “Merry Christmas, everyone.”

“I’m grabbing a shower, so if you’re gone before I’m back, I guess, well, Merry Christmas from me too,” I say, picking up my gym bag.

“Wait,” one of the coaches calls.

I stop and turn around.

The other coach hits his arm and shakes his head, making a weird face. “Never mind. It was about some stuff for the new year, but we’ll deal in January.”

“Ookay...” That’s weird, but to each their own. I turn back and carry on to the locker room.

There’s a semi-dark hallway we have to go through before we get to the locker room, and I’ve never understood if it just needs a new light bulb or if it’s supposed to be like that. As soon as I open the door at the end, I’m met with billowing steam.

I can’t see a foot in front of me. Thankfully, I know the bench by the lockers is close, so I feel my way and drop my gym bag on top of it.

Whoever is in the shower might be confusing it with a sauna because, within a minute, my T-shirt and shorts are sticking to me.

“Hey, buddy, are you going to take long?” I ask whoever is in here.

Jeez, it’s even hard to breathe. I try looking for a window to let the steam out, but I can’t find one.

There’s no reply from the showers, so I sit on the bench waiting.

“Doo bee doo in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine...”

I can only vaguely hear, but it sounds like whoever is in there is singing. The misty steam subsides after a while, so hopefully, they’re ending their shower soon.

After a few minutes, the water finally stops.

“Thank Christ,” I mutter to myself. I don’t want to be rude to whoever is in here, but did they need to turn the locker room into the scene of a bad horror movie for a shower?

I open the zipper of my gym bag to get my towel as the voice comes singing from the shower cubicle.

“Would you still love me when I’m sixty-foo...fuck!”

The guy clearly isn't expecting to see someone else in the room because he flails like he's trying to escape an attacker.

I can only move a step forward and hold him by his arms to stop him from slipping on the wet, tiled floor and breaking a leg, or worse.

"Fudging slippery squares of evil. I could have just died," he says breathlessly.

"Bubble. Are you okay?" I stare into his forest-green eyes, the scent of strawberries surrounding us, and that's when I realize Bubble is naked.

"So you *do* know my name."

His hair is sticking up in all directions and beads of water run down his skin.

Don't look. Don't look.

But I do because the steam must have gone to my head.

All I know is that Bubble is...well, thank god, not totally naked. The towel he probably had around his waist is now in his hands covering his...his...fuck...

Bubble is slim with a curved waist that is almost feminine, if it wasn't for the trail of light-brown hair leading from his belly button and disappearing under the towel.

He doesn't have any hair on his chest, just two very perky pink nipples.

My mouth goes dry. I know I need to say something, but somehow my brain has cut all communication with my mouth, and I can't utter a single word.

"Like what you see, Coach?" he asks in a teasing voice, and that's when I realize I've been staring longer than appropriate for a work colleague. Especially when said work colleague is basically naked. Or for a straight man to stare at a gay man.

I grab my bag and run out of the room, not stopping until I'm inside my car.

Even the cold outside does nothing to soothe the weird ache in my belly. And why is my dick so fucking hard?

I'm not attracted to men. I've always been with Mel, and I loved her and enjoyed having sex with her.

I grip my steering wheel hard. What the hell is happening to me?

Could it be the move to Connecticut? Maybe it's all this change. It's just a physiological reaction. Maybe I've been without sex for so long now that my body reacts to any naked adult.

I look in the rearview mirror and meet my own eyes. "Okay, change of plans. We go home, shower, and pack. Tomorrow, we do the grocery shopping and head over to the cabin. We need to get away from Windsor sooner than I thought. And the proof is that you're sitting in your car talking to yourself like you're someone else."

Fuck my life.

BUBBLE



THE DRIVE to Stillwater is pretty easy, even with the recent snow. Props to LA-born-and-raised Bubble for not crashing the car or killing an elderly person or animal along the way.

There's a woodland road to get to the cabin, as marked on the map, the navigation system, and the notes Mr. and Mrs. Crawford gave me.

I stop the car, but I'm sure I'm in the wrong place.

"Fudgesickles. I hope I'm not on the wrong side of the lake." I unfold the big map I brought and lay it over the steering wheel. At least it's nice and toasty inside the car.

With my finger, I trace the road I took from Windsor toward Stillwater and then out toward the lake.

I seem to be in the right place, but this cabin...well...it's much more than I expected.

When Mr. and Mrs. Crawford mentioned a cabin by the lake, I imagined something small and cozy, surrounded by trees. The kind of stuff fairytales are made of.

But this is more than just a little Hansel and Gretel-type cozy cabin in the woods.

"Well, only one way to find out if this is the real deal." I put my beanie on my head and scramble to put my coat on because I'm not stupid enough to go out there in just a sweater, no matter how close that front door is.

I turn off the car and brave the cold outside. This is the moment of truth.

“God, you’re dramatic, Bubble.” I pull the key from my pocket and put it in the keyhole. When it turns, and the door opens, I let out a little squeal.

I shake off most of the snow from my boots before going inside.

What I see when I open the door all the way is the magical wonderland of my dreams. I only remember to close the door behind me because it’s still freaking freezing, but otherwise, I’m mesmerized by what I’m walking into.

“Grandma,” I whisper. “Did you do this?”

I wait for a reply from heaven, but there are no noises.

The front door leads into a large open space with the biggest, comfiest-looking couch I’ve ever seen. It’s facing a fireplace, which I’ll need to figure out if I don’t want to freeze to death.

But ignore all that. All houses have kitchens, couches, bedrooms, ceilings, whatever. This cabin though...is like my Christmas winter wonderland come true.

I take my phone out and video call Juju.

“Hey, Bubbs, what’s up?” she asks, not even looking at the camera. “I’m packing right now. I’m so freaking excited. Do you think three pairs of heels is too much?”

“Juju, honey, look at me,” I say.

She grabs the phone, and my view goes from the ceiling of her bedroom to her gorgeous face. She’s wearing the off-shoulder slouchy top I gave her two years ago for her birthday. Oh, how I miss hot weather.

Anyway.

“Take those heels out of your suitcase. You don’t need them unless you want to risk breaking your neck.”

“But you said you’re taking me to a place near the cabin. What if I find myself a sexy lumberjack?”

I laugh. “First of all, I doubt that lumberjacks are into heels. You wear those jeans, you know, the ones that make your ass pop out like it needs its own TV show? You’ll get your

attention. And second, it's just a diner. Please tell me you bought warm clothes."

She puffs. "Of course."

"Anyway, Juju, you are not going to believe this..." I flip the camera so she can see what I see.

"Fuck me sideways and make me into a Christmas garland. Is that a Christmas tree? It's fucking huge!" She says.

"I know. It has to be at least seven feet, and it's fully decorated. It even has presents underneath. They're probably fake, of course, but it looks so beautiful." I'm getting all emotional just talking about it. "I can't believe Mr. and Mrs. Crawford would go to all this trouble just for us."

"I always say you have good karma, sugarpie. This is the universe giving something back to you."

"And look at all the decorations on the walls and the ceiling." I move my phone around until Juju complains she's getting dizzy.

I take her on a tour of the rest of the house, the main room—where I'll be sleeping—and the second bedroom, which will be Juju's. It's clear Mr. and Mrs. C's grandchildren usually sleep in there because it's full of toys.

"Okay, I need to unload the car now and figure out how to get this place warm. I'll see you in a few days," I say, blowing her a kiss.

"Love you, babe."

I leave my phone on the kitchen counter and brace myself to go back out in the cold.

Thankfully, the temperatures kept all the food safe outside, so I bring all that in first, filling the fridge until it's stocked to the brim. I wonder for a moment if I have too much food, but then I just laugh. Never.

I go back to the car and take two smaller bags, but the suitcase is much heavier, so I leave it for later. I'm dying for a warm cup of coffee.

“Okay, Mr. and Mrs. C, how do you get this place warm?” I ask the absent couple.

I noticed the main bedroom has a fireplace but no wood, so I guess it’s probably electric and works on a switch. But how about the one in the living room?

Oh lord, do I need to make fire?

Me. Bubble. A former cheerleader, who mostly wears pink, smells like strawberries, and sees the world through Bubble-tinted glasses...make fire?

“Oh, Grandma, this is not funny, you know?” A creaking noise startles me. “And don’t freak me out either. Everyone knows there’s only one degree of separation between fairytale woodland dwelling and horror movie cabin in the woods.”

Okay, if they have a fireplace, they must have wood somewhere.

Step one, find wood.

I chuckle at my thoughts but put on my coat and boots and head outside.

Sure enough, there’s a big pile of chopped wood under a tarpaulin on the side of the cabin. I carry a bunch inside.

“Step one achieved.”

Step two is how to make the actual fire. I grab my phone, and there are a bunch of how-to videos. I watch a few until I understand how it works in principle.

There’s a basket by the fireplace with some old newspapers and long matches, so I open the fireplace and start stacking all the elements. First, the scrunched-up papers and a few fire starters, and then the kindling, which are the smaller pieces of wood, followed by bigger ones.

“Okay, Bubble. This is it. You’re about to maybe make fire.”

I light a match and put it close to the newspapers until a few catch fire. When I see there are enough flames, I close the fireplace door.

“Shit, what was the next step?” I grab my phone quickly because I can see the flames already dying. “Why did Juju almost destroy my kitchen, making toast, and now I’m literally making fire, but the flames are going nowhere?” I say to myself, frustrated.

The man in the video talks about giving the fire some air. Huh? What?

“You want me to blow on it? Even *I* am not that good.”

I look around the edges of the door until I see a little knob. I try to move it, and suddenly the flames inside the fireplace come up again.

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” I stand and dance on the spot. “I made fire. Did you see that, Grandma? I made fire!”

I take my Sailor Moon keychain from my pocket and hold it to my chest, staring at the flames for a while and taking in the warmth. So many emotions hit me. I’m happy to soon see Juju again. Sad my grandma is no longer with us. Lucky and grateful to Mr. and Mrs. C for letting me stay here for Christmas.

Before silly, sad tears try to escape my eyes, I prepare myself a coffee and eat a slice of my lemon-drizzle cake. A recipe I got from the wife of a well-known British TV chef. It works every time, and it’s one of my favorites.

Once I’m done, I sit on the couch, staring at the flames again.

This Christmas vacation and the cabin are the perfect settings to help me refocus and regroup. I didn’t think I needed to regroup, but after Coach ran out on me in the locker room, my confidence is a little bruised.

Indy is probably right. No amount of baked treats and flirting will get the big, sexy, almost-silver fox to be interested in me if he’s not interested in men.

Why do I always go for the wrong ones?

As tiredness gets the best of me, I know I need to get my big suitcase from the car, but it’s still early. I can take a little nap and do that later.

With my belly full of coffee and cake and surrounded by my beautiful Christmas winter wonderland and my self-made fire—hashtag smug—I close my eyes and relax.

I hear a car nearby. *Sounds like I'm getting some neighbors*, is my last thought before I drift off.

COACH



IN THE DEEP, harsh winter, I admit my fixer-upper cabin by the lake doesn't feel like the best place to spend Christmas. Especially for someone used to the warmer winters of San Diego.

But two days after the incident with Bubble, I'm still reeling from embarrassment, so I'll accept my punishment and take it on the chin.

As they say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I'll either freeze to death or grow some more chest hairs. Or I could turn into a lumberjack because one thing's for sure, I'm gonna need a lot of wood to warm up this place.

Speaking of which, the first job is to get the fireplace going so I don't freeze to death, so once that's done, I finish bringing all my stuff inside.

The weather doesn't look too friendly. I'm glad I've brought enough food to last a while. I certainly don't want to drive to the nearest town to buy groceries.

There's a soft glow coming from the cabin next door. I guess the neighbors are spending Christmas here too. I bet their living conditions are a little more luxurious than mine.

"Don't moan, Riley. You wanted this."

I crack open a beer and take a swig. I made the rash decision to buy this cabin because there was no one to stop me. For the second time since I became an adult, whatever happened after I signed on the dotted line, I was doing something for myself. The first one being my divorce.

The couch in front of the fireplace is old but comfortable, and the comforter I bought covers the small tears.

There's a dining table with two chairs that I found in a yard sale. Once they're sanded and revarnished, they'll look like new. That's a summer job, but they'll do for now.

I finish the beer and take the bag with my clothes to the bedroom.

Again, it's a modest room with space for the bed, a chest of drawers, and a chair in the corner.

"Oh shit," I say when I look out the window. The old curtains looked like they belonged in a crime scene, so I threw them away. I have a new set at home, but I'm sure I didn't bring them with me. "I guess I'll be waking up with the sun."

After putting my clothes away, I head back to the living room.

"So, this is it. For the next two weeks," I say, doing a three-sixty turn and taking in all the details.

At least there's plenty to keep me busy. Maybe I should check out the storage shed outside and make sure it wasn't broken into while I was away. That's where I store my tools and everything I need to work on the cabin.

I grab my coat, boots, and gloves and head out. The one feature I love about my cabin that none of the other places around seem to have is a wrap-around porch. I guess at some point, the owners expanded the size of their properties and only kept the back decks facing the lake.

It may sound old-fashioned, but there's something really charming about being able to walk all the way around the cabin. You can set a chair or a bench anywhere you want.

You can follow the sun in the winter or the shade in the summer.

Maybe if I come over a few more times this spring, I can have the cabin fully finished by the summer. The thought gives me a new sense of purpose.

I'm glad to see the lock for the shed is still intact. I open it and grab my toolbox before closing it back up.

When I'm rounding back to the front door, I see the neighbor half-inside the trunk of his car, looking like he's struggling to get something out.

I set the toolbox by my front door and walk over to help. He doesn't look like a big person. Maybe it's the owner's kid.

"Hey, do you need help over there?" I ask.

The snow slows my steps but not by much, so I'm only a few feet from the guy when he pulls his head out of the trunk.

Pink cheeks and a bright-red nose from the cold, but those same forest-green eyes.

Who did I upset in a previous life?

"Coach!" Bubble says, with the biggest smile, as if he's just bumped into his best friend. "What are you doing here?"

"I live here...I mean...um, I own the cabin next door." Fuck. Why can't I string a whole sentence in the presence of this guy?

"Oh wow, that's...what a coincidence," he says, his smile widening. If that's even possible.

I'm pretty sure if Bubble was connected to a power source, he'd be lighting up the Christmas tree in the Windsor town square.

"I mean, I don't own that cabin. Have you seen the size of that? But I'm staying there. I know the most generous and stupendous couple, and they let me stay over Christmas."

The cabin is definitely an upgrade from mine. Up close, I can see it's been recently renovated. Even the wooden staircase leading to the front door seems new.

"You're here on your own?" I say tersely before catching myself, but he doesn't seem to notice my clipped tone.

It's none of my business what Bubble does or does not do, and with a cabin that size, I doubt someone as outgoing as he will be spending Christmas alone.

"Oh no, my best friend, Juju. She's coming from LA in a few days, and it's going to be great. She's never seen snow. Can

you imagine? She's going to drop dead when she sees all these trees and the white."

I'm mesmerized by Bubble gesturing at the surrounding landscape, lost in his own bubble. If there was ever a time for his name to fit him perfectly, it would be now.

"It's quite magical, isn't it?"

"Yes. Very... anyway, I saw you struggling with something."

He pulls his beanie lower on his head. I wonder if he didn't grow up in a cold-weather state because he seems to struggle with it as much as I do.

"Oh yeah, I need to take my suitcase out of the trunk, but it's stuck. I had to push it all the way back because of all the food."

I should go back to my cabin and avoid Bubble at all costs, but since I came over to help, I can't exactly run away now.

"Okay, let me see." I go around him to the trunk to see where the case is stuck.

I try to wedge it out, but it's not budging.

"Christ, what do you have in here? A dead body?"

"Yeah, I like to carry them around. My therapist says I have attachment issues."

I snort-laugh and end up bumping my head on the inside of the trunk.

"Shit." I reach for my head to see if there's any sign of blood, but I think I'll only end up with a bump.

"Well, at least neither of us is naked this time," Bubble says.

I'm not sure if it's the bump on the head, the freezing cold, or Bubble's smiley eyes. Eyes that are basically all I can see under his coat, beanie, and scarf, but his quick comeback makes me laugh.

It surprises me, and it seems to catch Bubble too because he stares at me for a second too long before pointing at the suitcase.

“Come on, Coach, let’s get Jeremy out of the trunk so we can have a hot cocoa by the fire,” he says.

“Who’s Jeremy?”

“He’s the top boss in my dildo collection. What did you think? That I really did have a dead body in there?”

I stare at Bubble, dumbfounded because I don’t even know what to say to that.

I sigh. “Let’s get Jeremy home then.”

Bubble claps as I rescue the suitcase.

He closes his trunk, and since the suitcase seems to weigh the same as three grown men, I also take it up the porch steps.

“Christ. How did you even get this from your place to the trunk?”

“Resilience and determination, Coach.” He walks past me to open the door. “Also, a neighbor was walking past. I guess I’m lucky with neighbors, huh?”

Bubble’s cabin is most definitely an upgrade from mine. He’d probably run a mile if he saw the old stained wooden floors and the lack of decent furniture.

“Can I treat you to a cup of hot cocoa for helping me?” he asks.

“I really should get going. I have a few jobs to do at my place. Thank you anyway.”

He seems disappointed that I declined the invite, but just as I’ve seen him do several times around other people, he quickly turns it into a smile.

I leave his cabin and walk over to mine, picking up my abandoned toolbox before going inside.

The temperature inside is now considerably more comfortable.

I sit on the couch in front of the fireplace and think of Bubble. He acts like he’s made of Teflon, but something tells me there’s more to him than meets the eye.

Maybe I've been a little too quick to judge, but it's hard to think straight around the guy who has somehow found a way to rattle my cage like no one else.

I've managed football players, the press, and my ex-wife, and not once have I lost my composure. What is it about this guy that seems to shake my foundations like he's found the winning Jenga piece?

A crumbling tower of memories crashes inside my head, one overriding them all.

Ben.

I can't remember the last time I thought of him.

He's who Bubble reminds me of. The boy who was so special, so alive, so beautiful, so generous, so kind that he was too good for this world.

My chest is suddenly too tight, but there's no point thinking about a past I can't change.

I just know I need to be careful around Bubble.

BUBBLE



I STIR the mint candy cane in my cup and take a sip of my cocoa, letting it warm me from the inside out. Hmm, I love mint-chocolate hot cocoa.

Shame Coach didn't want to stay to have one. Maybe I could have convinced him to have dinner with me or watch a Christmas movie.

He can say what he likes, but the way he keeps looking at me? It's giving me whiplash.

On the one hand, he runs. On the other, he stares at me like if I was a candy cane, he would lick me.

Of course, I had to go ruin it by being sassy.

"Not everyone can take your brand of crazy, Bubble. Sometimes you need to let them in gently," I say Juju's words aloud, like a mantra.

Speaking of which.

I put my phone on its love-heart stand and video call Juju.

This time when she answers, she's on her couch holding a glass of wine.

"What's up, babe? Afraid I've changed my mind about going?"

"I'm glad one of us has the stronger stuff," I say.

Her expression changes immediately, and she sits straighter. My bestest friend. Always ready to defend me. Always willing to kick someone's ass for me.

“Oh, Juju, what do I do? He’s *here*. Like, just *there*. You know, before, I didn’t know where he was when he wasn’t there, but now he’s just *there*,” I say a little too dramatically, even for me.

“You’re making as much sense as ice cream and fries,” she says.

“What? That’s gross.”

“Hey, don’t judge. It was the cheerleading finals, and I landed badly coming down from the pyramid. I hurt my ankle, and he-who-shall-not-be-named was a dick. I got home. There was drinking with my roomie. Thus, ice cream and fries ensued.”

I shake my head. “Anyway. *He*. You know...”

She’s staring at me. Her eyes narrow, and then it hits her.

“Oh! Your coach. Gotcha.” She whispers. “He’s there... *there*?”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t need to whisper. He’s not here in this cabin. He’s in the cabin next door.”

“How do you know? Did you see him through the window?”

“Ugh. Worse.” I cover my face with my hands.

“Wait a minute.”

She disappears off the screen and comes back a moment later with a bag of chips.

“You’re unbelievable.”

She stuffs a few chips into her mouth. “Nope. I’m just interested, and I want all the details so I can play matchmaker when I get there.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Jordana Silva,” I say, full-naming her to convey the seriousness of the situation.

She laughs. “Go on, tell me what happened.”

So I tell her about how Coach came to rescue me and the suitcase and how he turned down my offer of the most delicious, and in my opinion, un-refusable hot cocoa.

“Wait, you told a man you believe to be straight about the collection of dildos you’re traveling with?”

I shrug. “Yes...? I’m such a mess.”

“Oh, honey. You’re not a mess. You just...love too easily. Actually, that’s not right. You pick a person to love, and that’s it. They’re yours. It’s what makes you, you, and I never want you to change.”

I sag on the chair. “But I know I’m barking up the wrong tree with the coach. Hell, I’m probably barking up the wrong forest. It’s just that sometimes there’s something in his eyes that tells me he wants something. He just doesn’t know what it is.”

Juju finishes her wine. “You know my opinion on the fluidity of love. You never know. Maybe your coach might not even realize he’s flowing toward you.”

“Maybe...” I sigh.

“Gotta go, but keep me updated.” She winks and then disconnects the call.

I walk up to the window that faces Coach’s cabin. The curtains are closed, but I can see light through a little crack in the middle.

Is he going to spend Christmas on his own? I didn’t have a chance to ask.

Outside, snow lightly falls. I look up at the sky.

“What do I do, Grandma? Why do I feel like this particular man is the one I can give my heart to? I know what you’re gonna say. *He’s older, and one day, you’ll be left on your own again.* But what if this is my chance to be happy? To be loved? Doesn’t that count? Isn’t a few years of one hundred percent love more important than loads of years of fifty percent?”

I close the curtain and go to the main bedroom to take a shower. I’ve always liked really hot showers, even living somewhere warm like LA. Somehow, I feel more refreshed afterward, but in the cold weather, they really warm me.

As the steam builds around me, I can't stop thinking about the way Coach held on to my arms to save me from slipping on the tiles in the school.

His grip was strong, but it wasn't painful. I wish he'd run his hands over my body.

Goosebumps appear all over as I imagine how shy he'd be at first before he found his confidence, but then there would be no stopping him. He'd take charge, touching me everywhere, putting me at his mercy.

I reach for the soap to wash my body. My dick is so hard that I know a few strokes would make me come. This is so wrong. All these thoughts about a man I can't have.

But then there was his laughter when he bumped his head.

His joking about bringing Jeremy inside.

The bathroom is my sanctuary, and no one needs to know but me and my imagination.

I grab the soap and add a bit more to my hand, lathering it so I'm all nice and slippery.

Reaching behind me, I seek my hole, gasping as my finger teases the entrance.

What would it feel like to have his cock filling me up? Would he push harder when I demanded it, or would he always be gentle?

The coach in my mind seeks my little bundle of nerves with two fingers, knowing exactly how to take me to heaven and back.

I regret not bringing a toy into the shower, but my fingers are doing a good job. I wrap my hand around my cock, and after a few pulls, I'm coming so hard that I see stars in the backs of my eyes.

"Fuck me to the land of Oz and back. If this is what fantasy Coach does to me, real Coach will kill me."

I finish the shower and open the window to let the steam out while I dry myself.

Once everything is tidy, I close the window and settle into the big master bed.

I love that the fireplace is electric because I can have it on a comfortable setting all night.

I'm not sure what I'll do tomorrow. I'd planned on decorating the cabin for Christmas before Juju arrived, but since it's all done, maybe I should start baking.

The oven in the kitchen is top of the range, which is a luxury I'm only afforded at work, so I definitely want to make the best of it.

I open the book I bought at a book fair on the square in Chester Falls.

Maybe it's my recent orgasm or the day full of Coach, but I don't remember any of the words. All I know is that I spend the night dreaming of the big man that has me all twisted into knots.

The man has glued himself to my soul and won't let go.

Not that he knows it.

Which is a Bubbletastrophe.

COACH



I TOSS and turn all night. First, I'm cold, so I get some more blankets from the closet in the hallway. Then I'm too hot, so I push them down to the foot of the bed.

There's never been a time in my life when I've had trouble sleeping. Mel used to complain about it. She always liked to talk about her day and ask about mine while we were in bed.

She called it pre-sleep chit-chat. But I've always been an early riser, and because I am very active in my coaching practice, I usually fall asleep easily.

Since I can't get any shut-eye, I may as well start one of my many projects around here. One good thing about being married to Mel was that she never let me slack when it came to doing things around the house.

My status as an NFL team coach didn't matter as far as she was concerned. Whether there were games, press conferences, or trips away, I still needed to fix the sink or put a picture up when I was home.

So I have plenty of practice and skill when it comes to home projects. Not to mention all the years I spent helping my dad as a teenager. It seems the women in my life always have something that needs hanging.

I put on an old Marinos tracksuit I've worn more times than I can count and head over to the kitchen. The coffee machine, my one luxury here, brews a fresh pot in the time it takes me to push the couch aside to set up a work space in the middle of the living room.

This could wait until spring, but what else will I do here on my own?

Knowing me, I'll start regretting not taking my parents' offer to join them in St. Barts, and that's just a sad thought for a divorced forty-six-year-old man to have.

I pour the coffee into a cup and take a sip. "Ahh, baby, thank you for that. It's just what I need," I say to the coffee machine, who's currently the best relationship I have in my life.

"So, what shall we do today?" I look around. I could do the floor, but that requires moving more than just the couch, which is now in an even better position in front of the fireplace. I might leave it there for now.

I could change the faucets in the bathroom, but if it all goes wrong, I could end up having involuntary cold showers. Better do that in the spring.

"The kitchen cabinets. That's it." They're old but solid. They just need sanding and revarnishing, and they'll look brand new. I bet under that dark stain is a lighter wood.

I finish my coffee and go get my tools.

By midday, I have one door sanded and one half-done. It's taking longer, even with my handheld sander, because of some of the intricate details I'm finding on the edges of the doors, which were covered by years of grime.

Removing those with a small tool before sanding them isn't fun, but the result is worth it.

I'm finishing a sandwich I prepared for lunch when there's a knock on the door.

There's no need to guess who it is, just a need to prepare myself for the unpredictability that is my current new neighbor.

I open the door, and I'm immediately faced with a box that I guess has something edible inside. This is Bubble, after all.

"Are you hungry? I made you lunch," he says.

I stare at him in confusion.

“Good morning,” I say.

He smiles, shyly holding the box to his chest. “Oh yeah. Good morning, Coach. What’s your name, by the way? No one ever says it.”

I raise a brow, but I’m not about to do an ‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours’ kind of thing. Especially not with Bubble. “It’s Riley. Riley Dempsey.”

He cranes his head sideways like he’s inspecting me. “Hmm, yeah, I can see it. You’re a Riley. You’re also Coach though. Anyway. Food?”

“No, thank you. I’ve just had lunch.”

He stares at me blankly. “But I didn’t see any smoke coming out of your chimney.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. “Last I checked, adding some cold meat and lettuce to two slices of bread didn’t require any special cooking skills.”

“You had a sandwich?” His eyes bulge out like I’ve committed a cardinal sin.

“Yes. Now, can I help you with anything? I’m kinda in the middle of work here.”

“No,” he sighs, “I guess not.”

He walks away, muttering something about nutrition and big chunky thighs. I have no fucking clue what he’s talking about, but I’m not calling him back.

I take a deep breath to smell the forest air, but all I get is strawberries.

My dick stirs, so I slam the door shut and go back to work.

There’s a TV in the cabin, but I need something louder. Something that’ll penetrate my brain and push my thoughts aside.

I turn the radio to the loudest setting and continue my work.

As I see the kitchen cabinet doors lined up behind the couch, I know I made the right decision. It’s getting darker outside, but

now I can't stop.

My arms ache, and I need a hot shower. One more and all the upper cabinet doors will be sanded.

The wood beneath the dark stain is clear, as I suspected. I'm not a wood expert, but if I had to guess, I'd say it's pine or maybe a light oak.

I can't wait to put them up again. At least I don't have a huge amount of stuff inside the cabinets, so it won't take long to clean them inside and sand the frame.

My belly rumbles, so I prepare myself another sandwich and eat it in a few bites, downing it with a beer as I stand back. For the first time since I bought the cabin, I can see what it will look like when it's all finished.

The sense of pride takes me by surprise. I've had a long career of feeling proud of my achievements through my players' success. Whether it's a team win or a player getting a contract for a bigger team.

I've always felt proud of the barely out-of-high school kids who had never been away from their parents but still gave it their all. Going on to become amazing players and outstanding men, giving back to charity and their community.

But this thing in my chest is new, and I like it. Maybe next time my mom asks me if I've found my happiness, I can tell her I've located some of it.

With renewed energy, I continue to work on the doors until they're all sanded, and I have a neat row of light-wood doors ready to be stained with a clear varnish.

I put them to one side and brush the sanding dust into the trash before finishing it with the vacuum cleaner.

"Now, this is what I call a productive day. Maybe tomorrow I can take a break from work and walk around the lake. Get some fresh air and maybe stop talking to myself aloud."

I think I hear a thud, so I turn down the music and hear someone knocking.

“Bubble, how can I help?” I ask even before my door is fully open.

“Aww, you’re using my name,” he says.

“I don’t have much choice since I don’t know your real name.”

He puts his finger to his chin like he’s thinking about it.

“Maybe soon. Anyway, how did you know it was me?”

I chuckle. “Could be a lucky guess, or it could be that I don’t know anyone else around here.”

He looks around and points at the cabin on the other side of mine. “Really? Why? Are they like...weird people or something?” he whispers.

“No,” I whisper back. “I’ve never seen them before.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, how can I help you?”

“You look like you need a shower,” he says.

“Thanks?”

“Sorry, that was rude. I’m bringing you dinner since you refused your nutritious lunch.”

I sigh. “Bubble, I don’t need you to bring me food. I’m more than capable of making my own.”

“Did you have a sandwich for dinner?” he asks, resting one hand on his hip while holding the box with the other.

“Yes, but—”

“I rest my case.”

“Fine, I’ll take it if it makes you happy.”

He thrusts the box in my direction and leaves.

“Sorry, gotta run. Have a job to do.”

I shake my head and go inside.

After a much-needed shower, I inspect the contents of Bubble’s box, and I’m shocked to see a fully prepared meal of grilled chicken, steamed vegetables, and rice. Even though I

had my sandwich earlier, I eat every single bite, and it's delicious.

The early day followed by all the work and a full belly makes me tired, so I clean up and retreat to the bedroom. Maybe I'll scroll through the sports news on my phone before I sleep.

I turn the lights out in the kitchen, and as I walk past the window that faces Bubble's cabin, I can't help but look in that direction.

His curtains are drawn back, and while his lights seem to be off, he must have some kind of smaller lamp, or maybe it's the glow from the fireplace.

He's lit from beneath, and he's dancing.

I'm frozen in place as I watch him move gracefully. He's wearing a tiny top that shows his abs and the shortest shorts I've ever seen. On a woman, I'd call them hot pants. But is that the same for men?

Suddenly, he grabs a hat out of nowhere and does some tricks with it before it ends up on his head, and then there's a chair. I don't know where it came from.

He stops, and I think he sees me, but he seems to be talking to someone.

He said he had a job. What kind of job?

I don't even want to think. He waves at something, and then the chair and the hat are gone.

A moment later, he's moving again, this time at a slower pace. He raises his arms above his head, twirling his hands.

It's so fucking sensual. One hand runs slowly down Bubble's arm toward the back of his neck before passing over his mouth. I see his lips follow the trail of his fingers.

He moves to the beat of whatever he's listening to, lost in his own world.

There's no doubt he's a man. For starters, there are no breasts. But he doesn't lack in lines or curves. His stomach is tight, just as you'd expect from an athlete, but when he turns around,

there's an unmistakable curve leading to a round and very perfect ass.

I run my hand over my head. Why am I reacting to him? Is it because he's an artist? A dancer? Or is it *him*?

I've never looked at a man and thought about how sexy he is. Though in the past, whenever Mel commented on some of her favorite actors on TV, I couldn't deny they were attractive men.

Fuck, I'm too tired and horny. I haven't had sex with anything other than my right hand in over a year. My brain is fried, and Bubble's strawberry perfume probably has some kind of pheromone power mix.

In my semi-freaked-out state, I don't realize Bubble has stopped dancing and is staring at me through his window.

Naturally, my reaction is to drop to the floor, escape to the bedroom on my knees, and pretend this never happened.

BUBBLE



“GOOD MORNING, sky. Good morning, sunshine. Good morning, birds outside. Good morning, snow on the trees... hmm...” I stretch under the covers like a cat and burrow again into my fluffy warm world.

I look at the clock, but it’s too early in LA to call Juju to tell her I caught Coach staring at me last night. Damn time zones.

“Okay, world, what shall we do today? Apart from being uh-mazing, of course?”

I get up from the bed and straighten the covers. There’s an extra spring in my step, and nothing will burst Bubble’s bubble today.

With Juju arriving tomorrow, I double-check that her room is ready for her. I’ve been turning on the electric fireplace in that room for two hours each day so it gets acclimated to the rest of the house. I know all too well how much colder the cold feels when you’re not used to it.

I prepare a bowl of yogurt with my favorite granola and a cup of coffee before scrolling through the news on my phone.

There are some emails from the school and the kids sending pictures of the things they’re getting up to over the Christmas break.

I head to the large double doors facing the lake and snap a few photos to send back as my replies.

Once I finish breakfast, I wrap up warm and go for a walk. There’s fresh snow on the ground, but it should be okay as

long as I don't go too far from the cabin.

I debate for a moment about asking Coach if he wants to come with me, but something tells me he's still hiding from me.

The path along the lake is well marked, and from the foot and paw prints, I can see it's already been well used this morning.

This place isn't too far from Windsor, so I might come over in the summer. I wonder if Mr. and Mrs. C would let me stay in the cabin again. This time I'd rent it out, of course.

More thoughts of the coach fill my head—as if they ever leave.

There's not a shadow of a doubt he watched me last night. I wasn't dancing like that for him on purpose.

If I had been, I would've put on a better show. But when I started the video call with a friend to show him some choreography moves for his audition, it was still daytime, and my curtains were drawn back. I didn't notice when it became dark outside.

The music I'd been playing changed from the upbeat tempo of my friend's audition song to something more mellow, and I felt like swaying to the sound of the melody.

Most days, I'm at the coffee shop, the school, or traveling between. I love both my jobs, but it can leave me with little time to do anything else. Enter my obsession with Coach Riley, and I have even less time.

Last night, I lost myself in the music. I stopped thinking about anything and just felt. It was beautiful, and then I opened my eyes and saw Coach watching me from his window.

He seemed lost while staring at me, so I wondered if he was even watching. When he vanished from the window, I knew I was right.

Now all I want to know is if he liked it. And I'm terrified that the next thing out of my mouth will be something that'll push him further away.

I stop and look up at the sky, filled with snow clouds. "Grandma, you need to give me a hand with this. If he's the

one, I need something. Anything. Come on, it's Christmas, and you already owe me a bunch of presents from all the years you've been gone."

By the time I get back to the cabin, it's almost lunchtime, so I take a hot shower and then make myself a warm drink and something to eat.

I feel rejuvenated from my walk, so I think I'll make the cookie dough for the Christmas cookies this afternoon.

The cabin has a TV, but I don't feel like watching anything. I tune into a local radio station on the Crawford's stereo.

Christmas music fills the cabin, and I twirl around as I line up the ingredients I need to make the cookie dough.

There's no mixer in the cabin, but that's not a problem because I brought mine, just in case. I set it on the worktop, which is when I remember I'm not wearing my apron. And I'd rather not get flour all over my clothes.

I'm whistling along with the tune on the radio when my phone dings.

I grab it mindlessly and see a message from my friend.

Bubble, I owe you big time. I nailed the audition, and they've offered me a part. I'm going to be a backup dancer in an off-Broadway show.

I am going to kill that little bastard. My fingers fly over the keyboard as I type my reply.

Brandon, you sneaky little shit, why didn't you say THAT was what you were going for?

The speech bubbles start immediately.

Because you'd have been more nervous than I was. This way, I got pure unrestrained Bubble. And it worked. You really should come to New York.

I smile.

Nah. Too big for me. My bubble would burst too quickly, and there would be no more Bubble left.

I see the speech bubbles again, so while he's typing, I quickly run to my bedroom to get the apron from my suitcase.

As I return, I glance out the window and see smoke coming from one of the windows on Coach's cabin.

Oh shit. Shit. Shit.

I slide my feet into my boots, not bothering to tie them, and run over there as fast as possible. I knock on the door.

"Coach? Are you there?" There's no answer.

Ugh, can I knock the door off? I mean, I can do a bunch of cheerleading stunts, so I can try.

I knock again. "Riley! Coach? Are you okay?"

I'm banging so hard on the door that when it opens, I fall forward and land with my hands on a chest. A naked, hairy chest.

Grandma, I never knew you had it in you, but thank you. Best Christmas. Ever.

I take a step back, reluctantly letting go of that oh-so-de-ugh-licious chest, which is when I notice there's nothing but a towel around his waist.

Don't hyperventilate, Bubble. And for the love of all things sweet. Do. Not. Look.

I war with myself in front of the semi-nude man of my dreams while he's completely unaware that if he told me to roll over and bark, I'd do it.

And, of course, I fucking look. Who wouldn't?

He has the most perfect-looking bulge under that towel. I bite my lip.

"What's wrong? Why are you knocking on my door like the world's about to end?" Coach asks.

I open my mouth to talk, but it's as if the connection between the part of my brain that makes words and the part that instructs them to come out is broken.

"Can you not stare?" he asks.

“I’m sorry...um...I saw smoke...there was...”—I point to the area where the smoke disappears through the window—“smoke.”

He scratches his head, which causes his pecks to flex, killing my two remaining brain cells.

“I put bread in the toaster before I jumped in the shower. It got stuck, so the toaster didn’t turn off. Unfortunately, burned toast makes a lot of smoke, so I opened the window to let it out.”

“Oh, so no imminent danger of your cabin burning down,” I joke.

“Not today. Look, I feel a little underdressed here. Do you mind?” He gestures for the door.

“No, I don’t mind at all. I guess we’re even now, Coach. Although...” I take a step forward and whisper. “I had a lot less towel than you, so you still owe me.” I wink.

“Get out,” he says with a clipped tone, taking me so much by surprise that I step back and almost trip on my bootlaces.

I run back to my cabin.

When the door shuts behind me, I close my eyes, feeling every single bit of my pride dented, and then I close the curtains on the window facing Coach’s cabin.

My phone is full of notifications, and I remember I was messaging Brandon before I saw the smoke. There’s a bunch of worried texts, which I don’t understand, so I scroll up to where I left off our conversation.

I know you won’t want to see this, but I figured it’ll be all over the news, so it may as well come from a friend. Click the link and call me after if you want to talk. Love you xx

I click on the link in the message below, which takes me to a sports news website. I almost fall to my knees when I read the headline.

Harley Bruce makes history as the first-ever NFL male cheerleader.

I skim through the article as the journalist gives a brief history of Harley's cheerleading career leading up to this key moment.

What they're missing are all the lies he told from the moment I met him until he ruined my dream.

COACH



THE MAN HAS BEEN FUCKING with my head since I met him. The fucking inspirational quotes. The fucking pen holder. All the fucking cakes.

And even when I came to the place I bought to be on my own, he's still fucking here.

I spent all morning chopping wood because it was the only activity I could do to expend the most energy. It wasn't until my back was killing me and my stomach demanded food that I stopped.

All fucking morning, I couldn't get the image of Bubble dancing from my head, and that was after a restless night where he seemed to be the main character in all my dreams.

And then, he turns up again to check on the non-fire I caused by leaving the toaster unattended for five minutes.

I get dressed and throw some shit between two slices of bread. I need to learn how to cook if I want to have more than sandwiches for lunch and frozen meals for dinner.

My phone rings and I answer without looking to see who's calling. "What?"

"Riley John Dempsey, is that how you answer a call from anyone, let alone your mother?"

Shit.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I wasn't thinking. Just having a bad day. That's all. How's your vacation?"

“It’s wonderful. We’re just calling because we saw the news about the weather up where you are and we’re worried. It looks like there’s a bad storm coming your way.”

With all the thoughts of Bubble and working on the house, I haven’t turned the TV on in days.

“I’ll have a look at the news later. Don’t worry. I have enough food and firewood to keep warm.”

She relays the message to my father.

“As long as you’re okay. We do worry about you, you know?”

I sigh. “Mom, I’m not a child. I can look after myself.”

“I know, I know, but you’ve never really lived on your own. It’s a big change.”

“It’s a change I needed, and I’ll get used to it.” Not to mention I’m forty-freaking-six years old.

Christ.

“Anyway, how are your projects going?” Mom asks.

“Well, I thank Dad for everything he’s taught me about woodwork because my kitchen is starting to look as good as new.” I can’t hide my pride as I tell them about my progress with the kitchen and what I’m going to work on next.

“Just remember to also rest a little, honey. It’s Christmas, after all.”

Her mention of Christmas reminds me of the cabin next door with all the decorations. Or rather, the person staying in it.

“Mom, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, dear.”

“Do you remember my friend, Ben?”

She pauses. “Yes,” she says, and I can hear the sadness in her voice.

“What do you remember about him?”

“He was one of those rare people with a special soul. Such a kindhearted boy, always cheerful and wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

I remember Ben rescuing a baby bird that fell from a nest and spending the afternoon trying to climb a tree to put the bird back with its family.

“For a while, I thought...” Mom laughs.

“Thought what?”

“Oh, it’s silly and doesn’t matter anymore. I clearly got it wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

She lets out one of her *this is a pointless conversation* sighs but answers my question.

“I just thought that you and he might have feelings for each other, you know? You two were inseparable. All you talked about was Ben this, Ben that. But then that god-awful accident happened and everything changed.”

My breath catches. “Mom, say that again.”

“Which part?”

“That last part. You thought I was gay?”

She sighs again. “I didn’t know. You always kept everything so close to your chest unless you were talking about sports. When Ben came along, I wondered if maybe you were into boys. When Ben died, you closed off again and didn’t speak about another person until Mel. I saw you were truly in love and she was the one for you, so that was that.”

I’m not sure how to digest what my mom has said, so all I muster is, “Thank you, Mom.”

“Well, I don’t know what that was about. I hope you’re feeling okay and not drudging up old memories and feeling sad. Especially this time of year.”

I groan. “Mom.”

“Yes, yes, you’re forty-six. I’m just saying. I still worry about my only son. Anyway, we must go. Stay safe out there, honey.”

“Bye, Mom. Love you.”

The call with my mom leaves me paralyzed to my core. For the second time in a year, I feel like my whole life has been a lie. But this time, it's all my fault.

Did I repress my childhood memories? Was it because I was grieving for the friend I lost? Or was it because I felt more for him and didn't know it at the time?

Even though Ben has been hiding in the recesses of my memories all this time, now it's as if he was never gone. His floppy dark hair that wouldn't hold a style, no matter how much he tried. The happy brown eyes that always made me feel like life was an inside joke between the two of us.

Has Bubble reawakened something that's been lying dormant inside me? Did I repress my feelings for Ben to help me through the traumatic way he was taken from us?

"Fuck," I say aloud.

And what does this mean? Could I be gay? No. I loved Mel, and when we were together, I always desired her in every way. Am I bisexual? Pansexual?

I've never felt arousal in the presence of another man, and I've lived my life in locker rooms full of athletes that are desirable by anyone's standards.

But I get hard when Bubble is around. Just the smell of his strawberry shampoo, shower soap, or whatever it is, drives me insane. I got hard watching him dance yesterday. His sunny disposition never fails to make me smile, no matter how much I try to deny it.

And I fucking got hard earlier when I had nothing but a towel on. I was dangerously close to showing Bubble the effect his presence has on me.

I let out a long sigh.

It's not his fault that I'm so messed up.

All he's done is try to look after me, even when I didn't ask.

I owe him an apology.

It may be snowing outside, but I don't care. I grab my boots and coat and the keys to the shed where I keep my woodworking tools.

I can't cook a meal to make up for being a dickhead, but I can do something else.

Thirty minutes later—with both my nuts about to shatter into tiny frozen pieces—I've collected everything I need, and I head back to the cabin.

The snow is coming down heavier, so maybe my parents are right and we're on the path of a storm.

I wonder how Bubble is coping on his own in the cabin. He comes across as a social person, which is why I think he bakes for everyone. It's a good excuse to talk to people.

Does he feel bored on his own? Is he warm?

He said he's waiting for his friend to arrive. Is that tomorrow? Christmas is in just two days.

Now I feel guilty for being so wrapped up in my own world that I never checked on his. He came to me to offer food twice. He came when he thought my life was in danger, and I didn't even check if he knew how to keep a fire going.

No clue as to who wins the prize for asshole of the year.

I put all my work aside to focus on my apology gift for Bubble. It takes me the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, but I finish it.

BUBBLE



“OKAY, world. It’s a new day. Let’s make sure we don’t upset anyone. Let’s not look at the news. And Juju is coming later, so yay!”

I push the bed covers down and get up.

“And, Grandma, I’m not talking to you today. Well, apart from this part where I’m telling you I’m not talking to you. And if you must know why, it’s because after you gave me almost-naked Coach, he shouted at me. Not to mention the news about he-who-shall-not-be-named.”

Along with my new positive outlook, I should also change the bedsheets. Tonight, I shall sleep in fresh linen and have nice dreams.

But first, clothes and then breakfast.

I pick the pink skinny jeans that make my ass look amazing and always make me feel like I can take on the world, and then I line up my Christmas sweaters.

“Which one shall I wear today?”

The red one with the pink hearts is perfect, but I’m not sure I’m feeling the love today. The green one is...too green. I open my suitcase again and find exactly what I want to wear. The sweater I knitted with my grandmother.

It’s not the prettiest or perfect, but it’s bubblegum pink, has Christmas trees, and something tells me this one is the one I’ll need today. I put it on over my cotton T-shirt with the pink rainbows and leave the room to face the day.

As soon as I get to the living room, I notice a heavier layer of snow on the back deck. It's a shame it's cold because I'd love to sit outside. But definitely not now. I shiver just at the thought, even though it's warm inside.

I've been waiting for Juju to arrive so we could turn on the Christmas tree lights together. It's so tempting to turn them on for a little bit, but I won't do it because the big reveal won't be as special.

Still, the tree is such a wonderful sight that I eat my pancakes while sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of it like I used to do when I was a kid.

Our tree wasn't like this one. It was much smaller, and all the ornaments were handmade and passed down through the generations. They're all in my car. Somehow it doesn't seem right to mix them with all these pretty store-bought ones.

But it's okay, I'll use mine again next year.

I clear my breakfast plate and quickly change my bedsheets, putting the dirty ones in the washer before I forget.

"That's one job ticked off the list. Well done, today-Bubble."

I remember Juju's favorite chocolate-chip cookies just in time. They need to cool in the fridge before baking, so I should prepare the dough now.

No need for recipes with this one. I watched my grandma make these cookies so often that even if she hadn't given me the recipe, I'd still know how to make them just from my heart. As easy as breathing.

I'm putting the batter to chill in the fridge when there's a knock on the door.

"Holy cake batter. Grandma, what have you done?"

There can be only one person on the other side of the door. My hands shake as I walk to answer it. I really don't like it when people are upset with me, and yesterday, Coach really was upset with me.

"Deep breaths, Bubble. Maybe he just needs to borrow a cup of sugar... or maybe he had a lobotomy and forgot how

you've basically been throwing yourself at him for months in a not-very-subtle way. Yeah, he probably just needs sugar..."

Another knock.

"Bubble?"

I open the door slowly.

"H...hi? Do you need sugar?" I ask.

He stares at me and then laughs.

If he's laughing, maybe he's not too upset...right?

"No, I don't need sugar. But I do need to apologize to you. Can I come in?" he asks.

I stare at him. Wha...what?

"Bubble," he calls.

"Yes..."

"It's a bit cold out here."

"Sorry. Come in, I just..." I laugh. "For a moment, I thought you said you were coming to apologize. That's funny. Let me put some sugar in a small box for you."

I go back inside and leave the door open. He follows me, and I hear him shake the snow off his boots. When I turn around, he's right there in the kitchen with me. His boots are by the door.

"You didn't need to take your boots off. I could have brought you the sugar. I know those laces are a pain in the butt to do up. You would think a state that expects snow on a yearly basis would have invented some kind of slip-on boots or something."

"Bubble," he says, catching my arm and holding me in place. His nearness feels unsettling, especially because, this time, I'm not the one causing said nearness.

It also feels so good when his big hands hold my arms, just like that time in the locker room. Coach is strong but gentle, and my mind can't help thinking about other things.

Does everybody feel like this? Is this how people know they found their one? All the tingles from the tips of your toes to the ends of your hair. Your heartbeat going crazy. And you just want to get close to them.

And what happens when you find your one and they don't find you back? Do you just hurt forever? That...that would be so sad.

"Hey, Bubble. Where did you just go? You look like you're about to cry," Coach says.

"Oh, nothing. Just lost in thought. I don't know why you're here. I'm really sorry about yesterday...and all the days." I move my eyes away from his.

He sighs. "Come, let's sit." He leads me to the couch, adds another log to the fire, and sits next to me.

"We're sitting," I prompt, stating the obvious.

He smiles, but his expression changes as he looks into my eyes. "I've been an asshole to you and want to apologize. I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did yesterday. You were worried about my safety at the expense of yours. For the love of god, you didn't even have a coat on."

"I'm sorry."

"No, please stop apologizing. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Okay," I say. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do I make you uncomfortable? Like...am I too much, too in your face"—I look away—"too gay?"

I don't know where the sudden courage to ask him these questions comes from, but it's out there now and can't be taken back. Maybe it's too much to hope he'll say what I want him to say. But if not, then I don't understand him.

Sure, most straight guys don't like getting attention from gay guys, but he hasn't exactly been pushing me away. He never told me to stop baking for him, never took down the inspirational posters. He didn't trash the pen holder.

“What’s your real name?” he asks, and I don’t know why this is important to him, but I give in.

“Curtis John Merroll.”

“We have the same middle name,” he says.

I smile. What an inconsequential piece of information, but somehow, I feel it opens the door between our worlds so we can finally meet.

“Why Bubble?”

“I was raised by my grandmother. She used to call me Bubble. Said I was always in my own little world. Nothing and no one could ever burst my happiness. It was as if I floated under the power of my own special magic. It kinda stuck after that.” I scrunch my nose. “And it’s a thousand percent better than Curtis.”

He laughs. “Thank you for telling me that, Curtis.”

If he was anyone else, I’d punch him in the ribs until he called me Bubble, but hearing my real name for the first time in years coming from his lips is indescribable.

This man is going to grind my heart into dust, and worse, I’m going to let him.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I say.

He leans forward, resting his arms on his knees, staring at the fire in front of him.

“Yes, Bubble, you make me uncomfortable, but not—”

My phone rings, interrupting Coach. I want to throw it to the other side of the room because I need to know what he’s going to say next, but when I see Juju’s name come up, I freeze.

She’s supposed to be mid-flight, and last I checked, you don’t get Wi-Fi in Basic Economy.

“I need to get this,” I say as I swipe the screen.

Coach nods.

“Juju, who did you flirt with to get an upgrade?” I ask.

“Huh?”

“You know,” I say, stating the obvious, “your upgrade. Is he super sexy? Did you get his number to see him again?”

“Bubble, honey, my flight was canceled. Haven’t you seen the news? Everything is closed because of the storm.”

I’m glad I’m sitting because if I was standing, my knees would buckle.

“The...storm?”

She sighs. “You’ve been baking and singing Christmas songs and totally forgotten about the world, haven’t you?”

“You’re half right,” I say.

“I’m so sorry, honey. I hate that you’re all on your own out there. Maybe we can have our Christmas dinner and open our presents together via video call.”

She’s trying to sound positive, but I can hear the disappointment in her voice. She forgets I know her as well as she knows me, but I play along.

“Yeah, sure, let’s do that,” I say.

“Okay, speak to you later.”

She ends the call, and I just stare at my phone for a moment.

“Is everything okay?”

I look up.

Crap, I forgot Coach was here. You’re okay. You’re strong. This is going to be okay.

“Yeah, sure. It’s just my friend. Looks like her flight is canceled, so she can’t come after all. Anyway, can I get you a coffee or something?”

I stand and walk to the kitchen before Coach answers. He follows me, but I ignore him. Maybe if I click my heels together, he’ll disappear back to his cabin. Then I can feel sorry for myself for a little while until I can face him again to finish our conversation.

I mentally run through what I packed, and sadly, I don’t think I have any red heels. I guess my fluffy pink slippers will have to

do. And cake, of course.

“Bubble, are you okay?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t—”

Suddenly the front door to the cabin opens with a thud and the blondest child with the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen runs inside.

He stares at me and gasps.

“Are you our Christmas elf?”

COACH



THE KID'S face is comical. He looks around the cabin, and with each thing his little blue eyes focus on, there's a new gasp of wonder.

A moment later, a little girl comes running in and almost bumps into the boy.

"Look, Megan, we have a Christmas elf," the kid says.

The girl gets closer to the boy and says in a hushed tone, "Are you sure he's not a stranger?"

"No, you silly. Look, he's small, wearing Christmas trees, *and* there's Christmas decorations everywhere."

"Oh yeah," the girl says, looking around the cabin and then turning to Bubble. "Do we need to go outside so you can finish your elf job? It's a little cold, but we can wait. Will we get in trouble with Santa?"

She holds the boy's hand and pulls him toward the door, but the boy doesn't budge.

Bubble looks up at the ceiling and mumbles something I can't make out before looking back at the kids.

"Sorry, kids...I'm not an elf. Also, not small," he says, going around the kitchen island with his hands on his hips, sounding quite indignant. "I'm perfectly formed, thank you very much."

I almost snort-laugh at his comment.

"Holy snakes, even his pants are pink," the girl says.

“They’re awesome, right?” Bubble says, twirling on the spot. “Anyway, I’m Bubble. Who are you?”

“I’m George, but you can call me Gigi, and this is my sister, Megan.”

I’m pretty sure I’m the only one in the room finding this situation a little...strange.

Bubble smiles and crouches to their level. “Are you twins?”

“No, silly. We’re not really brother and sister yet. Our dads are getting married in the spring,” the girl says like that explains everything.

“And where are your dads...?” Bubble starts.

“Don’t worry. We can distract them,” George says.

“Or maybe they can’t see you because they’re grownups, right?” Megan adds. “Only children can see you.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, they’re all kissy, kissy anyway, so you can finish deco—” George stops and looks at me. “Who’s he? Is that your boss? He doesn’t look like an elf.”

Megan gasps. “Is that...Santa?” And then she hushes again. “Is he supervising you to make sure you do a good job? Are you going to get a promotion? My daddy got a promotion at work.”

“Your dad works for Santa?” Bubble asks, and I groan.

“Curtis, has it occurred to you to question who these children are, where they came from, and how they got through the door?”

Bubble stares at me like he’s about to state the obvious. “They’re Gigi and Megan. They’re probably staying in another cabin and got in because you didn’t close the door all the way.”

“And I’m also *probably* Santa Claus.”

Both kids squeal. “Are you really?” George asks.

“Who’s really what? In trouble for not helping out? You both are,” a deep voice says before a tall guy comes into the cabin

holding two large boxes.

A slimmer guy with long blond hair carrying a suitcase follows him. “I can’t believe we made it, bab—”

Bubble is rooted in place as the two guys put their stuff down and slowly come to the realization they’re not alone.

“Daddy,” Megan says, pulling the hand of the bigger guy. He crouches to her level, and she whispers something in his ear. He frowns and then looks at the other guy holding onto George.

“We’ll see, sweetheart. I’m not sure we have enough room for...um...elves to stay until Christmas...or Santa.”

Bubble takes a small step backward like he’s feeling intimidated or unsure, which I never thought I’d see in him. He always looks so confident and unrattled.

“Hi, I’m not sure what’s happening, but who are you?” he asks.

“I’m pretty sure we’re the ones who should be asking that, but for the sake of making this less awkward, I’m Fletcher Crawford, this is Harrison, and I own this cabin. You are?”

Bubble opens and closes his mouth, looking at both men and then at me before looking back at the Fletcher guy.

“You’re Mr. and Mrs. Crawford’s son and fiancé?”

Fletcher nods.

Bubble sags against the kitchen counter.

“I’m Bubble. I work at the coffee shop your parents often visit in Chester Falls. They kindly offered to let me stay here for Christmas. My friend was coming to stay with me, but her flight was canceled. They said you’d be in Florida.”

Harrison shakes his head, and Fletcher looks apologetic.

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. When they told us about their traveling idea, we knew that if we said we were coming here for Christmas, they’d cancel their plans to stay with us. We knew how important this trip was to them.” He looks at his partner. “So I made up a little white lie.”

“We’re going to Disneyworld in the spring, right, Daddy? After your honeymoon?” Megan asks.

“Yes, honey. We are.”

“We’re not allowed to lie,” George says matter-of-factly. “It’s a really bad thing, but Daddy explained it was okay just this one time because it was to help Grandma and Grandad.”

Fletcher smiles at his kid, and I can’t help smiling too.

“Well,” Bubble says, a little too chirpy. “It’s a good thing I’ve changed the bedsheets already, isn’t it? Do you mind if I hang around to pack up my stuff? I’ll be out of your way in no time.” Then he crouches to the kids’ level. “I’ll even bake you some chocolate-chip cookies before I go.” Then as if he remembers I’m in the room, he turns to me. “I’m sorry, Coach. It looks like I’m leaving earlier than I expected. Maybe we can catch up when school starts...or whenever?”

“Um...yeah, sure.” I walk to the door and put my boots on, tucking in the laces instead of bothering to do them up since it’s only a short walk to my cabin.

I take one last look at Bubble and leave.

The feeling of unease doesn’t disappear when I get inside the warmth of my cabin and slip off my boots. I look around at all the tasks I have to do, but I don’t feel like doing any of them.

I wanted to speak to Bubble and apologize. Maybe get to know him better. Who knows, maybe we could even be friends.

The gift I made for him is still on the kitchen table. I’d planned on giving it to him later.

I guess it’ll be a post-Christmas present, I think as I put it away.

For the first time since arriving at the cabin, I turn the TV on but keep the volume low. Maybe that’ll distract me from the fact that Bubble is leaving. I’m unsure why I don’t like the idea that he won’t be next door for Christmas.

It’s not like we were going to spend the day together or anything.

Light snow has started falling again.

My stomach feels weird like I'm hungry but not. I stand again and walk to the fridge, opening and then closing it because I don't see anything I feel like eating.

“What the fuck is happening to me?”

Is this because of Ben? All the memories coming back? Is it because I didn't finish my conversation with Bubble?

Curtis.

I like his real name. It's such a grown-up name. He's right. It doesn't fit him the way Bubble does. I can't help feeling like sometimes Curtis wants to come out, but Bubble works hard to hide that part of himself.

My coffee maker starts spluttering into the pot, making me jump. I forgot I put it on a timer earlier so I'd have fresh coffee for lunch.

I look outside again, and the snow is coming down heavier. Bubble is dragging his huge suitcase down the cabin stairs with the big guy behind him.

What the fuck? How can he go anywhere in this snow?

He's going to get stuck somewhere, or worse, crash into a tree or ditch.

I slip my boots back on and run over to him.

“Where are you going?”

“Joseph, Mary, baby Jesus, and the three shepherds, Coach. Can you not jump a guy like that? I have a skin routine, and this has aged me at least a week.”

I do a double-take at all the stuff he says and proceed to ignore it because he needs to see sense.

“You can't go anywhere in this weather.”

“That's what we've been telling him,” the tall guy says. “But he's adamant he's leaving. We've offered for him to stay in the spare room. The kids can share the couch.”

I hold out my hand. “I’m sorry, we haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Riley.”

“Harrison. Pleasure to meet you.”

I nod. “Harrison, are there any hotels or places where Bubble can stay so he doesn’t have to drive all the way to Windsor?”

“No. That’s what I was telling him. The next town is Stillwater, where we’ve just come from, and the roads were already getting too dangerous, even for those who know them well.”

Bubble waves at me. “Hello? I’m here and can hear you. Thank you. I’m also an adult and can make my own decisions.”

“What if the decisions you make are stupid ones?” I say, my voice rising. “Are we supposed to stand by and let you get on the road and kill yourself?”

“Pfft”—he waves me off—“I’m too pretty to die young. God wouldn’t do that to me. Besides, what do you suggest? Would you like to share your bed with me?”

I stare at him. He takes a step forward, coming close enough that I can once again smell strawberries. “I’ll be the little spoon if you want.”

His eyes are filled with challenge. What he doesn’t know is that he’s challenging the most competitive person he’ll ever meet. I wasn’t the Marinos coach for nothing.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

BUBBLE



COACH GRABS the handle of my suitcase, picks it up like it weighs nothing, and starts walking to his cabin.

I look at Harrison, who shrugs. “Don’t look at me. Last time I argued with a dude, I ended up falling in love with him. Let me get the rest of your stuff.”

He goes back inside his cabin, and it takes me some time to process the situation.

Did Coach just say...what I think...he just said?

Surely not. “*Must be the cold, and the longer I stay out here, the more brain damage I’ll sustain. Next thing I know, I’ll be imagining Coach saying lunch is almost ready and we need to decorate a Christmas tree,*” I mutter to myself.

Harrison comes back out with the box containing my mixer and most of my groceries and walks past me toward the cabin next door.

I hurry after him, fresh snow crunching under my boots. Okay, maybe it would be a *really* bad idea to drive in these conditions, but I can’t stay with Coach.

That would be horrible and wonderful all at the same time. I’m not sure I can handle it.

Hell, I’m not sure he can handle *me*.

I run up the steps of his porch and almost bump into Harrison as he comes out.

“Be back in a sec with the rest,” he says.

“If I’d known you were so eager to get rid of me, I wouldn’t have baked the cookies,” I say in his direction.

He laughs. “But then you’d have to answer to the two little people in my cabin who still think you’re Santa’s elf. I’m not sure if I should thank you or hate you for that because it’ll be impossible to tell them one day that Santa doesn’t exist when they’ve seen a real-life elf.”

I roll my eyes and go inside Coach’s cabin.

“What’s going on, Coach? First, you’re running away from me, then you’re coming to apologize, and now you’re asking me to move in?” I put my hands on my hips, trying to look indignant, which I know is hard to pull off when you’re dressed head to toe in pink with a Christmas tree print.

He ignores me and fills two cups with coffee before turning around and handing me one of the cups.

“I’m only trying to stop you from killing yourself out there by freezing to death. Case in point, you’re shivering and you look like a strawberry popsicle.”

“I wasn’t supposed to stay outside that long. Just long enough to load the car and go.”

Coach points to the couch, so I sit and drink my coffee. Harrison comes in a moment later with the rest of my groceries, my coat, and my smaller suitcase.

I feel my face warm at the thought of Jeremy in the middle of Coach’s living room. He’ll probably kick me out when he realizes, so I keep quiet about it. The coffee is not only delicious, but it’s also doing a great job of reversing my frostbite.

“You have a lot of food here,” Coach says, looking inside the boxes.

I sag into the couch.

“I was going to cook all of Juju’s favorite meals.”

He puts away everything that needs to be in the fridge and leaves the rest on the counter.

“I’m sorry the weather has ruined your Christmas plans,” he says.

I shrug. “It shouldn’t really surprise me. Bad things come in threes. That’s what my grandma used to say. I have the first two down.”

“Hey.” Coach comes over and kneels in front of me. “What’s happening? This isn’t the Bubble I...well, barely know, but anyway, it’s not you. You’re positive. Full of energy. Nothing can push you down.”

That draws a smile from me. “You’re right, Coach. Let’s turn the frown upside down, right?”

I stand and walk over to my suitcase. “Where’s your spare room?”

Coach’s face scrunches a little. “I don’t have got one.”

“You what now?”

“I only have one bedroom.”

I look down at my suitcase. “Jeremy, this is about to become a little awkward.” And then I turn to Coach. “When I said... outside...” I gesticulate to the vague area where my car is parked. “You know, me little spoon...”

Coach laughs. “Okay, first of all, I’m an awesome big spoon.”

People of this kind planet. It’s official. Bubble is deceased.

And then he continues, “But what I mean is that you can take my room. I’m happy sleeping on the couch. I’ve done it plenty of times before.”

“Oh.” And now I feel like a deflated merengue for thinking Coach might’ve actually been serious. I mean, I was also panicking a little at the thought, but mostly, I was hopeful.

Spending the night with those big arms wrapped around me? Where do I sign up? Who do I have to kill or inflict mild pain upon? I’ll do it.

“Absolutely not. This is your cabin, and you’re doing me a favor by taking me in. I should be the one sleeping on the couch,” I say.

“I have a proposal.”

“Go on...”

“Since you seem so insistent on feeding me, I’ll exchange my bed for your hot meals.”

Dammit. I can’t fault his reasoning.

“Fine. But if I sleepwalk and end up on the couch anyway, it’s your fault,” I say.

“Do you sleepwalk a lot?”

No, but I have also never slept under the same roof as the man starring in all my dirty fantasies. I am not responsible for what my subconscious mind gets up to when I’m not awake.

I shrug and point to where I think the bedroom is. Coach nods, so I take my suitcase and make myself at home for the second time in a few days.

Coach changes the bedsheets while I arrange my clothes in color order, which is easy since eighty percent is pink. I leave Jeremy’s suitcase closed. Coach doesn’t need to see what’s in there unless he asks very, *very* nicely.

By the time I come out of the bedroom, I’m feeling hungry and weirdly wired. I wonder if Coach will let me bake something.

I don’t see him in the living room, and since the whole place is pretty small, I don’t need to guess that he’s not in the cabin.

A thudding sound comes from outside, so I look out the window and see Coach stacking wood logs against his shed.

“Holy lumberjacks. The man should come with a warning, and I need a cold shower.” I look down at my dick. “You’re lucky most of my jeans are too tight for you to give yourself away, you horny piece of Coach-addicted meat.”

I step away from the window and fix myself a small sandwich since I’ll be cooking Coach a nice dinner later.

Getting my bearings in the smaller cabin doesn’t take as long as it did in the other. The place is strangely cozy, though it lacks any kind of personal touch.

There are no decorative pieces or picture frames on the walls. The couch looks old and worn, but the kitchen cabinets look like they've recently been renovated.

“Are you a work in progress?” I say, walking around, touching the bare walls. “I think Coach is a work in progress too.”

While Coach is outside and I have free rein in the cabin, I rearrange the contents of the kitchen cabinets. Clearly, Coach doesn't like or know how to cook because most of the stuff here is canned. I take a peek in his freezer, and as I suspected, it's full of ready meals and frozen pizza.

If he thinks he's going to have anything but a good meal while I'm staying with him, he's got another think coming.

I play some music from my tablet and start taking out the ingredients I need for dinner. It's early enough that I can cook the pork slowly, and it'll be nice and tender by dinner. The only problem is that Coach only has one oven so I can't bake a cake.

“Okay, let's make a mousse instead. I think Coach is a chocolate man. What do you think, cabin?”

I sing along to the Christmas music as I create my chocolatey masterpiece. I have Indy to thank for the technique I use to make the mousse extra fluffy, and it never fails.

“You, my beautiful light and fluffy delight, are going to melt in Coach's mouth and make him beg for more.”

I'm placing the ramekins with the mousse in the fridge when the video call app rings on my tablet. Juju's photo appears on the screen, so I rush to answer.

“Hey, honey,” I say.

“Hey. You're...happy for someone who's been dumped by their best friend.”

I put all the dirty dishes in the dishwasher and wipe the counter so it's all clean again.

“Don't make me sad again. I've had too much sad already,” I pout and grab the tablet, taking her to the couch where I get cozy in front of Coach's fireplace.

“Hold on. You’re in a different place. Where are all the Christmas decorations?”

I gasp. “Oh. My. God! That’s what’s missing. The Christmas decorations. Stay right there, honey.”

“Where would I go?” She rolls her eyes, and I place the tablet on the couch.

One look out the window, and I see Coach is still stacking wood. There’s a big pile of cut logs near him, so he might be a while.

I put my boots on and grab my car keys.

“What on earth is going on, Bubble?” Juju calls from the table.

“Shh,” I say. “He can’t hear us.”

“Who’s he?”

I ignore her and don’t even bother putting on a coat before I step outside.

The biting cold takes my breath away, but this will be quick. I run over to the car and grab the only box that didn’t make it into the other cabin. I take it back to Coach’s place, but I’m missing one important element...

The thud from the other side of the cabin continues, which works perfectly to disguise my steps as I walk through the snow to the Crawford’s cabin again.

After a couple of knocks, Fletcher opens the door.

“Um...sorry to bother you. Do you have an axe?”

He stares at me.

“Oh, I’m not murdering anyone. I just need a tree.”

He tilts his head and narrows his eyes. “An axe murderer wouldn’t admit to being an axe murderer.”

“Have you ever heard of one asking around for an actual axe?”

“Fair point.”

“Besides. How many axe murderers do you know that wear pink?”

He seems to think about it for a moment, which is a little scary. Does he actually know axe murderers? I shake my head to clear the ridiculous thoughts.

“Look, I just want to give Coach a Christmas tree. His cabin is like the saddest place on earth. It *needs* some Christmas cheer.”

Fletcher goes inside, and a moment later, Harrison comes outside. I’m starting to shiver again, though not as badly as before. Maybe the adrenaline from wanting to make this a surprise for Coach is keeping me warm.

“Fletch says you want a tree?” Harrison asks.

“Yes. It doesn’t need to be big.”

I follow Harrison into the forest next to his cabin, and ten minutes later, I’m carrying the most perfectly imperfect small Christmas tree back to Coach’s cabin. It’s a bit wonky, some of the needles have fallen off, and quite honestly, it looks a little sad. It’s absolutely perfect.

Harrison helps me place the tree by the fireplace using a spare stand he had in his cabin, then he leaves.

“Hello?”

“Fuck!” I screech.

“Curtis John Merroll. You never...or rarely curse. Which means you’re doing something you’re not supposed to do.”

I pick up the tablet and catch Juju up with the events of the day while I quickly check on the pork. It’s starting to smell divine inside the cabin.

“So let me get this straight,” she says. “The guy who you have a crush on, but is straight and seems to keep running from you, has invited you to the cabin he owns where he has only one bedroom?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Babe, that has bad romance written all over it. You be careful.”

“Psht.” I wave her off. “Nothing will ever happen. He’s straight. But it seems that we can be friends, and friends would decorate each other’s cabins if we thought they needed sprucing up, right? What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t give my friend the best Christmas?”

She drinks the rest of her tea and quirks a brow. “How many times can you say friend in one sentence? The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

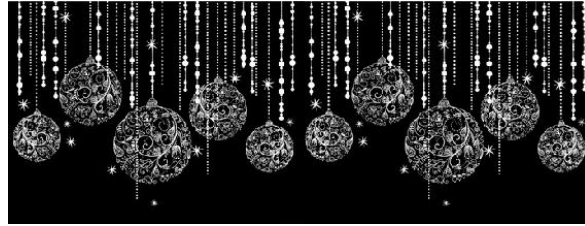
“And methinks it’s time for you to go and...do something.”

She laughs but blows me a kiss and hangs up the call. I put my tablet on the charger and pick up the box with the decorations.

I sit cross-legged on the floor in front of the tree with the box next to me. The last time I opened this box, Juju was with me. Last year, I couldn’t bring myself to take them out.

“Grandma, you better have a plan because my gut feeling tells me this is the right thing to do.”

COACH



I HAVE no idea how long I stay outside stacking the wood under the tarpaulin on the side of the shed. Two things are certain, I'm definitely not cold anymore, and I have enough chopped wood to last me all winter if I lived here full time.

Sweat runs down my forehead as I grab the last few logs. I'll take those indoors to keep the fire going. Something tells me Bubble doesn't do well in cold weather, which I sympathize with.

I'm still not sure what came over me, basically demanding that Bubble stay in my cabin. I only have one fucking room.

But it's not like I could let him drive in this weather. I just hope I don't come to regret my decision.

The conversation with my parents. The memories of my childhood best friend that I'm starting to think could have been more if tragedy hadn't struck.

Everything runs on a loop in my head.

All because every cell in my body reacts when Bubble is around. Which is fucking annoying because most of the time, his endless positivity and happiness irritate the hell out of me.

I sit on the porch steps even though I can feel the cold snow seeping through my clothes. Christmas music plays inside the cabin, and the smell coming from the kitchen makes my mouth water.

I'll sleep on the floor for the chance to eat whatever Bubble is cooking in there.

So why am I so scared of going in?

I've survived making two of the hardest decisions of my life. Asking Mel for a divorce and leaving the Marinos. Going inside my own log cabin shouldn't be that scary.

After all, Bubble is all of five and a half feet of...

My traitorous brain brings up the memory of Bubble dancing like he was doing it for himself and no one else. The graceful way he moved, looking so free, like nothing can nail him down.

I let out a long breath, and even before I see it disappear in the cold air, I stand and walk inside, grabbing the basket with the logs.

"Dammit, I need to build a mud room or something," I mutter as the snow from my jacket and boots is too much to stay contained within the large mat I have inside the door.

I hang the coat and put the boots on a tray to catch the melting snow attached to the bottoms of the soles.

When I turn around, I wonder if I've stepped inside someone else's cabin.

There's a small Christmas tree by the fireplace with decorations and presents underneath. Twinkly lights are wrapped around the supporting beam in the middle of the room, tinsel hangs from the ceiling... How the hell did he get it that high up?

Is that mistletoe hanging above the couch?

My eyes zero in on Bubble, who's staring at me with a worried expression. He's holding one arm around his waist while the other is in front of his chest.

He's biting his nails nervously, but all I can see is that he's changed clothes. He's now wearing a tight pair of pink yoga pants that highlights every curve of his shapely legs to his slim waist. He's paired it with a wide-necked oversized sweater that falls off his shoulder.

His green eyes are open wide like a scared deer. One wrong move and he might bolt.

Except he's not the one that needs to bolt. I am.

I put my boots back on and pull the laces but don't bother tying them. I tuck them in and leave.

I run toward the forested area by the cabin and keep going until my lungs burn from the cold.

"Fuck." I shout, but it comes out like a cough. "What the hell is happening to me?"

My cabin is like a sensory overload of lights, smells, and everything that wasn't there before, but all my mind can think of is the exposed skin of Bubble's shoulder.

If I hadn't run out of the cabin, I'm afraid I'd have run toward him and done something really inappropriate.

"For fuck's sake, the kid is...a kid. He doesn't even know what he's doing when he throws himself at me."

My dick throbs in my pants. I lean against a tree and palm my erection.

Months of pent-up energy that I couldn't name before bursts to come out.

The heavy snowfall makes it unlikely someone else will be out in the woods. Before I think about it too much, I lower my zipper and take out my cock.

The relief of touching myself is counterbalanced by the cold. But my dick isn't bothered by it because whatever spell Bubble has put me under is enough to melt the ice caps.

The only way I can go back to the cabin is to take care of myself right here.

"It'll take the edge off so you can think clearly around him," I mutter as I stroke my length, trying to stop a moan. I don't know how far sound travels here, and the last thing I want is to be caught.

The tree is rough against my back. I lean my head against it and imagine how it would feel if Bubble was on his knees, wrapping his sweet lips around my cock and fulfilling all the promises he's eagerly teased me with.

The more I think about him, the more I question what the hell I've been doing my whole life.

His practically naked body in the shower, the exposed shoulder, his sweet face hidden by the wool hats, even his sheer determination to get his giant suitcase out of his car.

But even as those thoughts fill my head, I stroke myself furiously until I feel the build-up of my orgasm. I'm panting like a racehorse, my steamy breath floating away in the cold air.

I put my free hand to my mouth to muffle my sound. I can't help shouting his name when my orgasm hits me and I come all over the white snow in front of me, "*Curtis!*"

I put my hands on my knees to keep myself upright when my body wants to let go and relax. In my post-orgasmic trance, it's easy to forget the snow is cold, even if the air around me is finally seeping through my clothes.

When my breathing returns to a somewhat normal rate, I tuck myself in and zip my pants.

"Riley!"

Hearing the call, I move away from the tree and the evidence of what I've just done and walk toward the cabin. But Bubble isn't yelling from the cabin. He's running toward me.

"Riley."

He's holding my coat in his hands and looking at the ground. "I'm so sorry. I...shouldn't have done that without asking you first. I just thought the cabin needed to be cheered up, and I got carried away. I can take it all down. Please don't ask me to leave."

The last few words are an almost-silent plea.

I take the coat from him and put it on. It smells like firewood and a hint of strawberry. The last thing I want is for Bubble to think any of this is his fault, so I lean over a little to encourage him to meet my gaze.

"Hey, you didn't do anything wrong."

“Then why did you run?”

“Would you believe it if I said I forgot my hat outside?”

He rolls his eyes, and I chuckle.

“You’re not wearing a hat.”

I put my hand on my head. “Oh yeah. I couldn’t find it.”

He gives me a push, and I take a couple of steps back, laughing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you with my reaction. Honestly? The cabin looked a little sad. I’m happy you added some life to it.”

He narrows his eyes. “Sooo, you ran away because you’re happy I decorated the cabin...?”

“Let’s go back inside. It smelled divine, and my belly is rumbling,” I say, resuming my walk toward the cabin.

“No. Don’t treat me like I’m dumb. I thought you were better than the rest. I’m leaving.” He goes around me at a pace I almost struggle to keep up with.

“Bubble, wait. What do you mean? You’re not dumb. You’re anything but that.”

“Then why are you avoiding my questions? Why are you behaving so weirdly? Do I gross you out or something? Did seeing me in your kitchen look too domestic and you’re afraid to catch the gay from me? You know that’s not how it works, right?”

He doesn’t turn around, but he doesn’t need to. I know exactly how fiery his eyes are. How flushed his cheeks are.

I grab his arm and pull him back. He crashes against me, which is when I forget about everything right or wrong. How old I am. How old *he* is. If I’m in the middle of a midlife crisis, or if I’ve just been asleep my whole life.

Everything dissipates in the cold air around us as I crash my lips against his.

BUBBLE



WHEN THE MAN of your absolute dreams slams their mouth into yours, there is only one course of action. Yours truly has broken it down into four easy steps for your convenience.

You're welcome.

Step one: make sure he really is attached to you. Lips to lips. You're a clam. Do not let go.

Step two: climb him like a tree.

Step three: thank your past self for all the squats that gave you those thunder thighs.

Step four: enjoy every second of that kiss before said man realizes what he's doing and has a freakout.

Please, god, let him not have a freakout.

With each pass of his tongue over my lips, I swear I lose a brain cell. Every time he sucks my lips between his, I see the pearly gates of heaven. When his tongue seeks entry into my mouth—spoiler alert, I let it in—I'm sure somewhere there's a headstone with my name on it.

Here lies Bubble. He lived a good life. Died young, but that kiss was so worth it.

Have I ever dreamed of kissing Coach? Duh.

Have I ever thought it would actually happen? Hell no.

Which is why even though he's kissing me, his tongue exploring mine, I still can't get out of my head.

Why am I the one freaking out?

Though not enough to stop the kiss. Stupid, I am not.

His big, strong hands on my ass hold me in place, and I wonder if he can tell what I'm wearing under my yoga pants. We move until I feel something rough against my back. A tree.

My lips must be three sizes bigger already from the way he's sucking them like I'm his favorite flavor of lollipop, but I can't stop kissing him. Or letting him kiss me. At this point, I'm not sure who's in charge here.

He moans, and I open my eyes. His are on me. Dark orbs, laser-focused but also filled with something. Questions? Desire? Who is this man?

Since I'm trapped between him and the tree, and I'm using my super thighs, he releases my butt. His hands cradle my face, and it's the first time he breaks the kiss.

My breathing is labored, and I'm terrified this is the moment something bad will happen.

"You're not dumb, Curtis. You're amazing, beautiful, free, graceful, creative, generous, and you make me feel things I've never felt before in my life. That's why I run. Because I don't know how to deal with all the feelings that constantly ping-pong around my body. Since the day you came into the school with your cheerful and upbeat mood and a box filled with cake, I haven't had a good night's sleep."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah right."

He shuts me up with another kiss, and I catalog all the stupid shit I can say for him to shut me up this way. Oh hell, I can have an encyclopedia before dinner.

I break the kiss. "Oh shit. Dinner."

"Huh?"

Coach stares at my swollen lips, dazed, as he runs his hand over his mouth.

"Dinner is ready," I say.

"Right. Yes, of course."

He puts me on the ground but takes a moment before he releases me.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“We can talk about what happened later.”

He nods.

I take his hand and pull him toward the cabin. Having just explored the back of my throat like he was looking for gold, he better not get funny about holding my hand.

“Do you want to grab a shower while I finish the vegetables?” I ask when we get in.

It’s clear he’s processing what happened. Hell, I’m processing what happened.

Although I’m sure we’re processing it in very different ways.

When Coach goes into the bathroom, I lean against the kitchen counter and stare out the window. It didn’t snow the whole time we were outside, but there are a few flakes falling again, and it’s getting darker.

How did I miss that?

Apparently, the worst of the storm is due to hit any time now.

This is one of those times I would call Juju and tell her everything. She’d probably argue that I’m being stupid and putting my heart on the line or tell me to stay away from Coach.

I can’t do that. I just can’t. If there’s a little part of him that wants me, I’m going to give myself. All of it.

I hear the shower going, so I start preparing the vegetables. The pork is cooked to perfection, if I say so myself, and the roasted potatoes are perfectly crispy.

“Grandma, I hope you’re right on this one because if he doesn’t ask me to marry him after this meal, then you’ve failed as my cooking teacher.”

Coach comes out wearing a pair of sweatpants and an old Marinos T-shirt. His hair is still wet from the shower, sticking out in all directions like he got ready too quickly.

“Everything smells amazing. What is it?” he asks.

“Pulled pork belly with roasted potatoes and boiled vegetables.”

His mouth literally gapes.

“You did all that today *and* you decorated the cabin?”

“Yup. Now sit and be prepared for the gastronomical orgasm of your life.”

He coughs. “Did you just...? You know what? Never mind, let’s eat.”

He picks his seat while I bring the food over.

“How come there’s a tablecloth? I don’t have a tablecloth,” he says.

“I didn’t know how equipped Mr. and Mrs. Crawford’s cabin was, so I overpacked. At least now I get to use all this stuff.”

He takes a piece of pork, a few potatoes, and a considerable amount of vegetables.

I wait until he eats something.

Self-confidence has never been an issue for me. I can easily get wrapped up in my world and ignore what everyone else thinks about me if I believe I’m fabulous. Now, I’m second-guessing everything I do and think.

What if Coach doesn’t like the way I seasoned the pork? What if the potatoes are too crispy? Or the vegetables not cooked enough?

“How did you learn to cook? And bake? Your cakes are amazing. I’ve had to start running with the kids to keep up with the amount of sugar you feed me.”

I laugh. “Eating it is optional. But I’m glad you like my cakes. I’ve been trying to figure out which one is your favorite.”

“I’ll let you know one day.”

“One day?”

He tastes the pork and moans. “It’s in my best interests to keep my options open.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised since your job is literally to strategize for the winning outcome.” I laugh.

He shrugs. “I’m not going to apologize for that. And this is delicious, by the way. You also still haven’t answered my question.”

“I learned to cook from my grandma. My parents died when I was young, so I was raised by my grandma in LA. She taught me everything I know.”

“Sounds like a wonderful woman,” Coach says.

“She was.”

With the logs burning in the fire, the lights twinkling, and the Christmas tree in the background, I feel like I’m in my own personal Christmas dream.

“I’m really happy you like the food. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to see someone enjoying something I’ve cooked or baked.”

“Oh my god, are you serious? This is the best thing I’ve had. My ex-wife was an okay cook, but when you spend half your life in hotels, you get to try all kinds of food.”

I add a bit of everything to my plate, with a few extra potatoes because potatoes are life.

“I forgot you used to coach the Marinos. What was it like?”

He puts a piece of carrot in his mouth and chews while staring out the window. It’s dark outside, so there’s nothing to look at.

“It was great,” he says. “My dream job. I loved every second of it.”

“Why aren’t you doing it anymore?”

He lets out a choked laugh. “It’ll take more than a make-out session to get to that topic.”

I laugh. “Make-out session? Oh, Riley-Boo. You eat all your veggies like a good boy, and we’ll have a make-out session so good you’ll forget your name and social security number.”

“So I guess we’re talking about it then.”

I put my elbows on the table and lean my head on my hands.
“I guess we are.”

COACH



I KNEW this moment would come. I replayed it in my head a million times while in the shower. Or at least how I'd imagined it would go.

But now, looking into Bubble's forest-green eyes, I don't know anything anymore.

We finish dinner, and I insist on doing the dishes since Bubble cooked everything.

He disappears into the bedroom, but he's back by the time I'm finished. I drink a glass of water and steady myself for the conversation I probably should have had with myself a long time ago. Except now I'm having it with someone else.

Someone twenty years my junior and who I can't stop thinking about doing things to. Even if I've never done those things before.

After I went to bed last night, I couldn't fall asleep. I still had so many questions. So I did what any respectable old man does. I went on a porn website, of course.

I started off with my usual but changed the category to gay porn.

The relief that came over me when I didn't get hard watching other men have sex almost made me laugh out loud. There I was, watching two men going to town on each other and feeling happy because I wasn't physically reacting to it.

But then one of them looked at the screen. He had green eyes, and soon enough, those green eyes were Bubble's. My dick

hardened instantly as the green-eyed guy let his head fall back while his partner kissed his body until it reached his—

“Do you want dessert?”

“What?” I turn to face Bubble as he pulls me from my thoughts.

“I was asking if you wanted dessert.” He looks at my crotch. “But if you’re offering, then yes, please. I don’t even need the cherry on top.”

I look down at the outline of my erection in my sweatpants. At least I’m wearing underwear, or I’d be sporting a nice tent with these loose pants.

Bubble giggles but walks past me to the fridge. He grabs a couple of ramekins and then takes two spoons from the drawer.

“Come on, Coach. Let’s use that nice couch of yours.”

I draw a deep breath before following him, my eyes on the perfect curve of his ass. I’ve always been an ass man.

I guess that hasn’t changed.

“What have you got there?” I ask.

“Not an erection, but if I catch you checking out my ass again, I can’t promise it won’t happen.”

I groan. “Curtis.”

I sit on the couch in my favorite spot. I’m not surprised when Curtis sits cross-legged so close to me that all I can smell is his strawberry scent and feel the warmth of his body.

Don’t small people usually run cold?

He gives me one of the ramekins and a spoon.

“This is chocolate mousse,” he says. “It’s one of my favorite desserts, so I only have it on special occasions.”

I scoop a portion of the mousse. It looks fluffy and light, like the kind I’ve had in restaurants.

When I taste it, though, there’s a stark difference. It’s so much better. The texture melts in your mouth, and the chocolate is

rich without being too much. It's absolute perfection.

"Hmm, this is amazing, Curtis. I really don't know how you do everything so perfectly."

He stares at me. "What? Pfft. I don't. I just like making people happy."

"That may be so, but you're a talented baker and cook, and I've seen how you've built the cheerleading team at the school from the ground up."

I notice the skin on his neck reddening. He finishes his dessert and places the ramekin on the floor by the couch, and then looks at me.

The vulnerability in his eyes breaks my heart, especially because I'm probably the reason he's feeling like that to start with.

"I guess we should talk about what happened earlier," I say, placing my ramekin next to his.

"Can I ask one question before you say anything else?"

"Sure."

"Do you regret it?"

"No." I take his hand until he gets the message and straddles me. "I would do it again."

He smiles and puts his hands so lightly on my chest that it's like they're not even there.

"Do you want to touch me?" I ask.

He bites his lower lip. "Yes, but I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

I laugh. "This is about to be the most uncomfortable conversation of my life. I don't think anything you do can make it any worse."

He raises a brow. "Even a blowie?"

I drop my head back. "Fuck, Bubble. I need to think straight."

"I think that's the crux of it," he says. "Are you?"

I let out a breath and hold his hands, resting them against my chest. “I don’t know, and that’s the most honest answer I can give you. I married young and have only ever been with my ex-wife. I’ve always considered myself straight. I’ve never even looked at another woman.”

“So...you tripped on a tree log because of the snow and lost consciousness. Sustained some mild brain damage, and when you came to, you decided you wanted to kiss me. Is that it?”

I laugh. “I’m not sure about the brain damage, but I think I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time.”

“That must have been difficult to get your head around.”

He raises his hands to my face and circles my temples with his thumbs until he wraps his fingers around my hair.

“I’ve always known I like boys. I mean...I wanted to be like the girls. I envied them. But I always knew I wanted to kiss the boys. It wasn’t easy growing up being me. I loved all the things no one else in my class loved, so I didn’t have many friends. I guess that’s when I turned to myself and decided I would be my own best friend.”

He smiles, and I see no regret or sadness.

“I love every part of me. Yes, I’m a little crazy. Juju says I’m Bubblelicious. My boss and other friends may use different words to describe me—”

“Alive. That’s what you look like to me, Curtis. You are life.”

He lowers his gaze. “When you say things like that, you make me want to rip my clothes off and ride you like I’m the last cowboy in Texas. I’ve never even been to Texas.”

I shake my head. “See? Who else would say that?”

“I’d hope no one. I don’t deal well with competition.” He frowns.

“Competition for what?”

“For you, you big, sexy, silly hunk of almost-silver sexy fox.”

I bump his shoulder. “Hey, there’s no silver in this fox.”

He leans over so he's more on top of me and starts inspecting my hair.

My body, as usual, reacts to his nearness, and he's not immune either. I can tell he's pretending not to notice, but the slight shift in his voice when he tells me he found a gray hair tells me otherwise.

I run my hands up his back and inhale. He rests his head in the crook of my neck, and we just stay like that.

"You always smell like strawberries. It drives me insane," I whisper.

"It's my favorite scent. I use it in my shampoo and shower soap."

He feels so small on top of me. I know he's not fragile. He's an athlete who keeps a fitness regime. I felt the gripping power of his thighs earlier in the forest.

I slide my hands slowly toward the curve of his lower back. His loose sweater hides his shape, but in the position we're in, it's ridden up. When I feel warm skin under my fingers, I can't help wanting more.

"What do you want from me, Riley?" he asks.

Curtis places his hands on my chest and raises his head to meet my gaze.

"I don't know. I just know that you make me want things I've never wanted before, and I'm running out of excuses not to give in."

"Then give in, Riley."

I cup his ass, pulling him closer.

"I don't want to use you, Curtis. You deserve better than to be an experiment, and I can't promise I can give you more. Just because I'm discovering something new about myself doesn't mean I need to act on it."

He sits up, his eyes greener than ever. "Everyone deserves a chance to be themselves. If I can help you discover yourself, please let me do it. Trust me. It's not a hardship."

I laugh.

“I’m not joking, Riley. I’ll ride you, blow you, aaanything you want, and I’ll even feed you.”

I shake my head at the ridiculousness of this conversation. My dick gets harder at his suggestions.

“Think about this as our own Christmas bubble. Whatever happens here stays here.”

I look into his eyes to see how serious he is, and he’s staring back with the same determination he’s had when leaving gifts for me in the coaches’ office or bringing me a new cake he’s baked. Always confident I would never decline them.

“Our Christmas bubble?”

“Our Bubblelicious Christmas bubble,” he says.

“So, how do you propose we start my journey of self-discovery?”

He bites his lip and points down at the very clear hardness in my sweatpants.

BUBBLE



I MIGHT BE VERY brave or very stupid, but I think I've just convinced a man, who up until today I thought was straight, to have free rein when it comes to using me.

Juju would definitely have my head cut off as well as my balls.

I know Riley's been hard from the moment he pulled me onto his lap. He may be confused about his attraction to men or me, but his body has no doubts about what it wants. That's a language I speak fluently.

"What do you"—he swallows—"mean?"

"I'm just going to help you take the edge off, okay?"

He nods.

I remove my sweater and help him take off his.

"Christ on a pedestal, Riley." I knew he kept in shape and often trained with his team, but this is a whole new level of sexy I wasn't prepared for.

"You're one to talk," he says. His hands run down my chest, tentatively touching my peaked nipples. "You're so graceful when you move. There's no doubt you're a dancer and an athlete. That day in the locker room...I had to run away because seeing you was too much. I think it was the first time I started wondering about my sexuality. Not consciously, but I was rock hard all the way home, and it didn't go away until I took care of myself."

I gasp. "Tell me what you did." I press my hips against his, and it has the desired effect. There's no need to remove any

more clothes. I want him to feel comfortable, but there will be no mistakes here. He's getting the orgasm of a lifetime.

"I went inside my place," he says, leaning his head back on the couch.

"Any particular room?"

"The hallway. I was so hard that it was painful."

I pick up the pace of my thrusts, trying not to moan because what I'm doing to him feels good to me too.

"Did you take yourself in your hand right there and then?"

"Yes."

"Tell me how you like to stroke yourself."

"Curtis," he moans.

I lean forward so we're skin to skin. My nipples are painfully hard and so sensitive to every pass against the hairs of his chest.

"Fine. I like to grip it tightly, with long strokes. Sometimes I twist my wrist as I get toward the head."

I whisper in his hear. "I'll have that head in my mouth soon, Riley. It'll be so good it'll blow your mind."

"Fuck, Curtis."

"I know. Feels good, doesn't it?"

He doesn't answer. Instead, he puts his hands on my ass, turning the tables on us. Suddenly, I find myself lying on my back with Riley on top of me.

"Wrap your legs around me like earlier," he commands, and I obey.

What happens next is the best race to the finish line I've ever not entered.

"I'm sorry, I can't go slow. You feel too good," he says against my lips before taking them in a searing kiss that doesn't stop until we're both crying out through our orgasms.

I don't care that my cum seeps through my underwear and yoga pants. There's no way this won't be messy.

Coach moves only slightly, so most of his weight isn't on me, then peppers my neck with kisses until he reaches my mouth again. It's sweet and tender, and I don't want it to end.

"Riley?" I say when he releases my lips.

"Yeah?"

"I think it's safe to say we know each other well enough that you don't need to sleep on the couch anymore."

He gives a carefree laugh that settles in my chest as a good omen.

"Are you inviting me to your bed, Mr. Merroll?" he asks.

"Since it's your bed, I'm simply inviting you back, except now you get to be the big spoon to your own Christmas Bubble."

He snorts. "You are not going to start referring to yourself as my Christmas Bubble."

"Didn't I just bring you joy?" I pout.

He sucks my bottom lip into his mouth. My dick hardens again, especially as his thick leg is between my thighs, giving me the perfect position to rub against.

I moan. "Riley..."

"Hmm?"

"You keep kissing me like that and I'm not responsible for what might come next."

"Does it end in an orgasm?"

I nod, swallowing another moan. The man has discovered the sensitive spot on my neck. He might not know, but if he keeps licking and sucking my skin, I'll come again in about three seconds.

"Riley."

"Take what you want, Curtis."

Fuck, if I take what I want, I'll be riding his dick. I haven't seen it, but from what I felt when he was hard against me, Riley has top-of-the-range equipment down there.

It's not enough. I rub against him, but I can't get there. I love his weight on me. I love the way he's still sucking and kissing my skin. His hands explore me anywhere they can reach.

I know my pants are a mess, but I need to touch myself, and I'm too far gone to care. I need this orgasm now.

I reach for my pants, but Riley pushes my hand away.

"Let me do it. I've never touched another man's dick, but it can't be that different from mine, right?" The nervous but determined tone of his voice takes me back down a little.

"You don't have to, Riley. We can stop right now."

His eyes are on his hands traveling down my body. "I want to."

"It's going to be messy down there," I warn.

He laughs. "I'm a guy, remember? I know how messy it can get down there."

I want to argue because it's one thing to feel your own mess, but someone else's mess is different, especially when you've never been with a man. The last thing I want is for him to backtrack because of the ick factor.

"Hey, Bubble. Get out of your top head so I can rub your bottom head and give you an orgasm."

I stare at him. "Did you just Bubble me?"

"I did." He kisses me. "Now, let me make you feel good because we both need a shower, and it's getting late."

He pulls my pants down, and I cringe at the thought of my cool cum all over me. Riley truly doesn't seem to mind because the next thing I feel is his strong hand wrapped around my length. *Holy mother of Christmas hand jobs, the man has skills.*

We're practically glued head to toe, staring into each other's eyes as he seems to study my reactions.

I want to close my eyes and give in, but the competitor in me wants to challenge him.

He leans his forehead against mine and whispers, “You can resist all you want, Curtis, but you may as well let go before I make you.”

My cock feels hard and flushed like I haven’t come in a week.

“I like that you’re soft everywhere,” he says. “Not that I’d mind if you had hair, but all these places I’m touching with my hand, I want to taste them tomorrow. I want to see if you taste like strawberries all over, Curtis.”

I’m practically rutting against him in rhythm with his strokes. Then he stops. I’m about to complain when his hand slides down until the pads of his big fingers touch my recently neglected hole, and I’m done.

I open my mouth to shout his name as I’m coming, but he slams his mouth onto mine and swallows my moans, kissing me as I ride the orgasm until I’m practically ready to pass out.

“You...Mister...Coach...” I say, breathing heavily, followed by a yawn. “...are the devil.”

He chuckles and then gets up from the couch, taking me with him.

“Where are we going? Can’t I just stay here in front of the fire, all cozy and warm?” I ask, struggling to keep my eyes open.

“Trust me. You’ll thank me in the morning.”

I’m pretty sure I fall asleep halfway through my shower...our shower. Holy ravioli, I’m taking a shower with Coach Riley Dempsey.

“Thanks, buddy, you did good today. We’ll play some more tomorrow,” I mutter.

“Are you talking to your dick?”

“Yes. Everyone needs a little praise, and tonight was a special night for him. He’s been looking forward to this for a looong time.”

Riley laughs, rinsing my shampoo, which was already in the shower because I cleaned up after cooking earlier.

When he's done, he tilts my head up. "Tonight was a special night for me too, Curtis. Thank you for listening and understanding. And thank you for making me feel so comfortable. I know we could have done other things that you're—"

"Don't finish that thought, Riley," I say, interrupting him. "Tonight was perfect. If you're discovering yourself, one of the most important things is to be accepting of yourself. Everything we did was beyond amazing. Now take me to bed because tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and we have a packed day."

"We do?"

"Yes. We have to bake cookies, build a snowman, turn on the lights on the Christmas tree, pick the perfect place to leave treats for the reindeer, and probably have some sexy time."

"Probably?" he asks, cupping my ass.

"Definitely. One hundred percent."

We dry out as much as we can be bothered to and then go to Riley's bed. I try not to overthink it because my mind and heart are pushing all these wonderful thoughts about a lifetime of bliss with my Coach. So before my brain starts planning my own wedding without my consent, I get under the sheets and cuddle up to him.

"Hmm, you're the perfect big spoon," I say, yawning again.

"You're perfect."

He wraps his arms around my waist, and as I drift off to sleep, I hope we haven't taken too many steps too fast. Because going from straight to sleeping naked with a man in less than twelve hours has to be a record.

Go, Bubble!

Thank you, Grandma. You really are the best.

COACH



I WAKE up lying on my back with Bubble wrapped around me as if he's afraid I'll run away while he's sleeping.

Mel was never a cuddler in bed. Always complained I was too hot and made her sweaty. She liked to talk before bed, and we never had an issue with our sex life. But when it came to sleeping, she turned away and fell asleep like I wasn't even there.

Bubble shivers a little, so I pull the covers up to his shoulders. He lets out a contented sigh.

Feeling someone in my arms in bed is nice. It's Christmas Eve, it's cold outside but warm under the covers, and I wonder how long we can stay like this before he wakes up. He seems to have quite an ambitious schedule for today, not including his plans for us.

Christ, what turn has the world taken that I have a man in my arms and everything feels just right? Why am I not freaking out over this? He called it our Christmas bubble. Is that why? Because while we're here, we're safe, and no one has to know?

I don't want to be that person. Too many of my players have been in that situation, and I've watched as fake girlfriends turned up for events while their long-term partners were at home.

While it wasn't my place to make them come out before they were ready, I have control over my life. From the conversation

with my parents, I already know they'd accept me being with a man, and I have no doubts about my work.

It's really all down to me. Am I ready if the only person that makes me feel this way is young enough to be my son?

Bubble makes the cutest sound and stretches like a cat. When he opens his eyes and looks at me, his smile takes my breath away.

"Merry Christmas Eve, Riley."

"Merry Christmas Eve, Curtis."

He stretches up to kiss me, and I help him by placing my hands on my current favorite place on his body. His ass. I'm sure I'll find other favorite places, but I haven't had a chance to explore yet.

"My name doesn't sound so awful when you say it," he says.

"What people call you is an extension of who you are. Most people call me Coach because it's all I am."

He rests his chin on my chest. "No. It's all you let people see. Like Bubble. You're the only one who's seeing Curtis. I must be slipping."

"Maybe, but football has been my whole life. Nothing else has mattered as much, so I guess even I've started to see myself as only Coach."

He frowns, but then his expression changes again. "We should have breakfast. Come on, I'll make you pancakes." He jumps off the bed like he's on springs.

I sit up and watch as he debates on the perfect Christmas Eve outfit. When he's finally satisfied that his painted-on green jeans and white sweater with the Christmas decorations are it, he turns around.

"What are you doing still in bed?"

"Waiting for you to leave the room."

"Why?"

Because watching you saunter around naked has made me hard, and I'm slightly embarrassed about it?

He walks up to me and sits on the side of the bed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just need some privacy to get dressed."

"Oh...sorry. I'll get out then." He stands, but I hold his hand to stop him.

"Curtis, wait. I'm just embarrassed, okay?"

"Of what?"

I take his hand and place it on my lap.

He laughs and cops a feel.

"Do you think I don't have the same problem, Riley? Your dick has been poking my back all night, which resulted in me sleeping with a hard-on, which is fucking uncomfortable."

My mouth opens wide.

"The only reason I didn't jump your bones when we woke up is because we haven't had the safe-sex conversation, and I don't know if you're ready for that yet."

"I'm negative. I was tested when I ended my marriage and haven't been with anyone," I say.

It's his turn to look shocked. "I'm negative, and I'm on PrEP."

"I guess that answers one of the questions."

He swallows. "How about the other?"

I put my hand behind his neck and pull him in for a kiss. "Make me breakfast, and I'll tell you then."

He melts into the kiss, making me wonder if it's always like this with Bubble or if it's because this is all new to him. As he confessed, he's been wanting me for a while.

"You're a tease, but I'll make you breakfast. Ten minutes."

One last kiss and he leaves me and my considerably harder dick to get ready.

Are all young people this forward and at ease with their sexuality? Next to Curtis, I feel like a virgin, and not just because he's the first man I've ever been with.

It was a while before Mel and I took the step into penetrative sex because it felt like such a huge step for us at eighteen.

I scoff.

It was a huge step for me, at least.

I put that thought aside and get dressed to join Bubble in the open-plan living area. The cabin next door may have all the trimmings, but I do like how there are no frills to my cabin.

You come out of the bedroom and you're in the living space. It's small and cozy. At least it is now that Bubble is here. I'll have to think about bringing more decorative stuff when I come back in the spring.

I have some photos of my dad and me working in the garage together and of my family on vacation.

Curtis is already plating the pancakes. There are two cups of coffee on the table by the time I get to him, stealing a kiss before I sit.

He blushes, and I can't help feeling somewhat satisfied that I do that to him.

I shouldn't be surprised that his pancakes are fluffy, delicious, and leave me wondering about my need to increase my post-Christmas workouts. Especially if I keep eating at this rate.

"Okay, so what's next on your list of things that must be done today?" I ask.

He smiles with glee. "We need to build a snowman."

"A snowman. Outside. Where the temperature must have dropped considerably with the storm?" My pitch increases slightly with each word.

"Yup." He joins his hands together in excitement and then takes a box from under the table. "I have a scarf, a hat, and buttons, or maybe a tie. I haven't decided yet. Also, some extra accessories just in case."

“You are aware that we’re both from the West Coast, the side that doesn’t get snow, and we’ll freeze our nuts out there.”

“Aww, Coach, don’t worry. I’ll look after your nuts. Speaking of which.” He gets up and comes to straddle me. “You owe me an answer.”

My hands go instinctively to his waist. “I didn’t exactly come prepared. I wasn’t expecting to...you know...”

“End up having mind-blowing sex?”

I laugh. “You’re setting a high expectation there.”

Curtis tilts his head and sensually runs his hand up his neck, making my mouth dry and my balls tight.

“I know my skills,” he says, letting his indicator finger skate over his lips before taking it in his mouth and sucking until it comes out with a pop.

“I was talking about mine,” I swallow. I’ve never had doubts about my skills in bed, but Curtis is so different from anything I ever thought I’d experience.

He cups my face and looks into my eyes with the most earnest expression I’ve ever seen. “Riley, if you want this and I want this, it’ll work. We’ll fit together like cheese on pizza, like butter on bread, like icing on cake, like—”

“Are all your analogies food related? You’re making me hungry, and I’ve just had breakfast.”

He laughs. “How about we’ll fit together because my ass has been waiting for that big dick of yours for months, so it’ll fit. We’ll not only fit, it’ll be magical.”

“Christ.”

He cradles my face and looks into my eyes. “Do you want it? I’m not pushing you, am I, because Juju always says when I set my mind on something—”

Shutting him up with a kiss is my new favorite thing to do. The moment my lips touch his, there’s an automatic switch in Curtis where his walls come down and he lets me in.

“I want it, Curtis.” I close my eyes and say a silent little prayer. “Come on. Let’s build that snowman. I need to cool down now.”

He practically jumps off me and runs to the door. He puts on his boots, complaining about the laces, and then his coat, hat, and gloves.

“You forgot your box.” I grab it and take it to him. I get ready, and we both leave the warmth of the cabin to face the freezing cold outdoors.

It’s significantly colder than yesterday and the layer of snow is deeper. I’m not convinced we can do anything, but Bubble is like a kid in a candy store.

“Look, I found his arms!” He comes back from the edge of the forest with some twigs. He sets them by the box and puts his hands on his hips. “Okay. How do you build a snowman?”

I shrug. “I skipped that class to watch the cheerleaders practice.”

He pushes me, and I lose my footing and end up sideways in the snow.

“You ass, you’re going to pay for that.” I bunch up some snow and throw it at him, but he’s too fast and avoids being hit.

“Don’t underestimate the cheerleaders.” He sticks his tongue out at me.

“I wouldn’t d—” A snowball hits me square in the face.

I stand and run to catch him, but the bastard is lean and fast.

“You’ve been overfeeding me on purpose,” I shout. He’s at least thirty yards away.

“It was all part of my master plan.”

The door to the other cabin opens, and the two kids run out.

“Are you having a snowball fight? Can we join?” George asks.

His dad comes up behind him, shaking his head. “What did I say?”

George sighs and turns to Curtis. “Please?”

Curtis laughs. “I think I’ve already won the battle, troops. The old man over there won’t take another one.” I snort and watch as he leans to the kids’ level. “But we could use your help with something else.”

Both kids look like their days have been made. “We can help,” they say in unison.

“Do you know how to build a snowman?” he asks.

“Yes!” Both kids scream excitedly, but Curtis’s face of delight hits me unexpectedly in the one place of my heart I’ve been trying to keep buried.

“Hey, Riley, want a hot cocoa?” Harrison asks.

“Sure.”

I walk up to Curtis. His smile is so genuine and carefree. At this moment in time, all he’s thinking about is ticking off his list of things he’s never done at Christmas. He has no idea of the turmoil he’s just caused inside me.

“What’s up?” he asks.

“Nothing. Go make the most Bubblelicious snowman this place has ever seen.” I give him a quick peck on the lips and walk up the steps to Harrison’s porch.

BUBBLE



I TRY NOT to look at Riley's ass as he walks away, but it's impossible. I may as well just give up right now. I'll never not watch his ass when he's walking away from me.

My head, my heart, and my belly are full of emotions, and I don't know what to do with them.

Waking up to Riley? Best thing ever. Hands down.

The only thing that would have topped that is if he'd topped me so we could start the day with a bone-melting orgasm. But somehow, not doing anything felt more intimate. Like there will be plenty more mornings of waking up together, so there's no need to rush.

The way he keeps looking at me is disconcerting. On one hand, it feels like he's stripping me naked every time his eyes so much as look in my direction. On the other, I feel his fear like it's a living, breathing thing.

I'm scared too. I'm scared I'll fall in love with him and be left to nurse my broken heart all alone, again. I love living in Windsor, my two jobs, and all the kids I work with. Moving again because of a broken heart would just restart the cycle.

Two little coughs pull me out of my head. I know Megan and Gigi aren't siblings, but in some ways, they're so alike. It's adorable.

"Yes?"

"You said we were going to build a snowman."

I chuckle. “I absolutely did. There’s only one problem.” I bend over a little to match their height. “I don’t know how to build a snowman.”

Megan frowns and elbows Gigi.

“What? Just because he can’t build a snowman doesn’t mean he’s not a real elf. Elves are busy making toys. They don’t have time to build snowmen,” Gigi says matter-of-factly.

“I guess.”

I bite my laugh. “So, are you going to help me?”

They both nod, and before I know it, I’m being pulled by each hand over to the space between the two cabins.

“Are you going to teach the other elves how to make a snowman?” Gigi asks.

“Absolutely.” I may as well go with it. Who knows, I may have actually been an elf in my previous life, but I just don’t remember. It would explain a lot about my current earthly presence.

“We have to start by making a snowball,” Megan says.

We pack some snow together and shape it until we have a small ball.

“Now what?” I ask.

“Now we roll it around until more snow sticks to our ball and makes it bigger,” George adds.

I’m surprised by how easy it is and how quickly we end up with a considerable-sized snowball. The kids pick the spot where they want the snowman to be and we leave the snowball there to start a new one.

The second and third balls are smaller, which is a good thing because I never considered they’d be so freakin heavy. I don’t want the kids to get hurt, so I try my best to stack each of the balls on top of each other without their help.

“They’re not perfect,” Megan says, pouting.

I scratch my head over my hat. “You’re right. It needs to be rounder. Do you think it helps if we add chunks of snow and then smooth it out?” I mean, it works with buttercream, so why not with snow?

“Uh-huh,” they both say.

While the kids are distracted by smoothing out the snowman, I look in Riley’s direction. He seems to be lost in conversation with Harrison. I don’t know anything about the big guy, but considering his size, maybe he used to be a football player.

My stomach sinks a little at the thought of Riley finding more to talk about with a stranger than he could with me. I mean, what do I even know about football?

I know how to perform during a game, but it never interested me enough to figure out the football rules. At least not beyond hooking up with some of the many players in the closet.

But that’s all in the past. I have no inclination to hook up with anyone.

Not true, Bubble.

I sigh. I’m totally inclined to hook up with Coach—Riley. My Riley.

He’s not yours, Bubble.

I want to smack the voice in my head in the face. Riley is mine for now. At least until we go home after Christmas. And if that’s all he can give me, then that’s...sad, but I’ll live.

Riley looks my way, and I wave. His smile is warm, and the way he looks at me is different now. Maybe it’s too early to understand him, but I know something’s changed.

We didn’t wake up together in bed for nothing, right?

I look at the white sky that promises more snow and smile. My grandma is up there somewhere. She’ll guide me in the right direction. I know it.

“Okay, my little helpers, are you ready to beautify our snowman?”

“Yes!”

I show the kids my box of delightful snowman clothing and decorations. They squeal over all the options, taking everything out while they decide what goes best.

“Is Santa your boyfriend?” Megan asks.

“Who?”

She points to Riley on the porch with her dad, drinking cocoa.

“Oh. His name is Riley. He’s...not really my boyfriend.”

“But you’re spending Christmas together. Mommy says Christmas and important holidays should be spent with our family. Boyfriends are family.”

“Where’s your mommy?” I ask, hoping I don’t get some tragic reply like she’s dead or something. I’d need to bake a dozen cakes to make up for upsetting the kids.

“Oh, she’s going to meet Dr. Mike’s parents. He’s her boyfriend.” She comes closer and whispers, “Did you know they are going to get married just like Daddy and Fletcher. Dr. Mike asked me if it was okay for him to ask Mommy to marry him, and I said yes. Mommy doesn’t know yet.” She clasps her gloved little hands in front of her in excitement.

I smile. “That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“We asked our dads for a baby brother or sister for Christmas,” Gigi says.

“Oh really? And what did they say?”

Both kids shrug, and then Megan says, “Daddy looked really scared. Like his eyes opened really wide, and Fletcher laughed.” She chuckles. “Maybe my mommy and Dr. Mike can have babies soon.”

“Would they still be my brother or sister?” Gigi asks.

“Duh,” Megan replies.

I ruffle the beanies on their heads. “You two might be the most adorable people I’ve ever met. Fact.”

They both smile wide, and then Gigi whispers something in Megan’s ear. Megan’s eyes go wide as she turns to me. “Does

that mean we get what we want for Christmas?”

I shrug. “I don’t have the right clearance with Santa to know that information. But I’ll tell him you’ve been really good and so helpful teaching me how to build my very first snowman.”

They seem happy with my answer and go back to picking the accessories for the snowman.

I stare at them. I’ve never thought much about having children before, but these two kids make me want to be a dad.

What would a couple of little Bubbles be like? I chuckle to myself. They’d be a handful, that’s for sure.

I turn to Riley once more, and my heart skips a beat.

Be still. Be still.

COACH



I SIP from the huge mug filled with steamy cocoa and marshmallows that Harrison gave me. “God, this is too good to be good for my health.”

“Don’t look at me. Fletch says at Christmas, all calories are free.”

I laugh. “If only that were true.”

“How are things going with you and Bubble? We really feel awful about the situation we put you both in.”

I wave him off. “You had no way to know, just like Bubble couldn’t have known. Things are working out okay.”

He raises a brow. “Just okay? Was that a kiss I just saw before I went inside for the cocoa? Correct me if I’m wrong, but my impression when we arrived was that you weren’t *that* close before.” He takes a sip of his drink and sighs. “Christ, I’m spending too much time with Fletcher. I’m sorry. It’s none of my business. You can ignore anything I say, and we can just supervise the kids to make sure they don’t turn into icicles.”

I chuckle. “It’s okay. You read the situation right. We weren’t that close. I’d go as far as saying we weren’t even friends. When you arrived yesterday, I was here to apologize to Bubble for being an ass to him the day before.”

Harrison laughs.

“What’s funny?”

He clears snow off the porch rail and sets his mug down.

“I met Fletcher at a charity bachelor auction. He won me and was so forward about his intentions that I took an instant dislike to him, even though he was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen. A few months later, I moved to Stillwater with my ex and daughter.” He takes another sip of his cocoa. “Guess who also lived in Stillwater? Guess whose kid was in my daughter’s class? Let’s just say we had a rocky start, but we found our way to each other in the end.”

“What he means is that he was mine from the moment I bought him. He just took the longest time to figure out it was nonnegotiable. He’s mine forever,” Fletcher says, coming out of the cabin with his own drink and settling against Harrison’s side.

They really look like they’re in love. The kind of in love that you’d give up anything for.

The kind I’m not sure I ever had with Mel, no matter how much I loved her.

I look out at Curtis and the kids. They’ve rolled three giant balls of snow that Curtis stacked to make the snowman. Megan is sticking in the twigs to make the arms, and George is holding up a scarf and tie to Curtis, who looks like he’s pondering the most important decision of his life.

The guys next to me talk about their plans to sneak the kids’ Christmas presents under the tree that night. They also talk about some of the arrangements for their wedding.

It sounds so natural and domestic. I feel like I’m intruding in their personal space, so I keep quiet and observe the person turning my world upside down and making me consider a new start at forty-six.

Harrison’s phone rings, but Fletcher takes it out of his hand before he has a chance to pick it up.

“Stella, honey, we need to talk,” he says.

Harrison rolls his eyes.

“Is that Mommy?” Megan asks, running up the steps to meet us.

“It is, sweetheart,” Fletcher says. “Do you want to talk to her?”

“Yes, please.”

Megan takes the phone and runs back down the steps, apparently changing to a video call so her mom can see their snowman-making efforts.

“What’s the point of being best friends with your ex-wife if you can’t get past your fiancé to even say hello?” Harrison jokes, shaking his head at Fletcher.

“Stella and I have a lot of understandings.”

Harrison rolls his eyes. “I bet.”

“Wait. Your ex is a woman?” I ask before I realize how rude and inappropriate I sound. “I’m so sorry. That was out of line and not my business.”

Harrison smiles. “Apology accepted. Yes, I’m bisexual, and so is Fletcher. We’re used to people assuming we’re gay because we’re in a relationship. It’s okay.”

I nod. I always tell my team that if they have anything they need to talk about, they can talk to me. Family, personal, or school issues. It’s sometimes easier to open up to a stranger than to someone you’re too close to.

Curtis drapes a pink scarf carefully around the snowman.

Could I talk to these two guys? They’ve been with women. Maybe they understand this confusion, transition, or whatever this is going on inside me.

“You look like you’re thinking too hard about something,” Harrison says.

“Um...yeah. God, I don’t know how to say this or why I’m even saying it. I’m straight. Or at least I’ve always considered myself straight. I was married for twenty-three years and never once looked at another person. And now?” I bring my hands to the bridge of my nose.

“You’re attracted to someone who isn’t a woman,” Harrison says, glancing at Curtis.

I nod.

“Someone I never expected I’d be attracted to.” I look at Curtis, too. “How can I get to my age and not know I’m attracted to men?”

“Are you attracted to men? Am I attractive to you? Or Fletcher?”

I think about it. Yes, they’re good-looking, like most of the men I’ve worked with throughout my career, but there’s no other reaction. My body doesn’t feel anything. I don’t feel anything.

“No.”

“I don’t like labels, but since I realized I liked both guys and girls, I’ve found that the bisexual label is one I’m comfortable with. Maybe this is something for you to discover for yourself, but you might want to look into demisexuality or pansexuality.”

I stare at the last of my cocoa. I’ve wondered about pansexuality but never demisexuality.

Since some of my players came out as part of the LGBTQ+ community, I made sure we supported not only the player but also their community. We did a lot of charity work and learned a lot about gender and sexuality. One of my regrets since leaving my job at the Marinos is that I miss doing that kind of community work.

“Hey, Coach, do you want to help us dress Mr. McChilly?” Curtis shouts.

“Are you really asking *me* for fashion tips?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He winks. “Come on, my little elves. Let’s see what else we have in the magical box of treats.”

Once again, I watch in wonder as Curtis helps the kids pick the right accessories to dress up their snowman, and then he picks them up so they can reach the snowman’s head. He’s really good with them. I wonder if he wants to have children one day.

It's dawning on me that even though we tried so hard to have a baby for such a long time, Mel never took an interest in other people's children. How can you want to be a parent and not react to children around you? Then again, the foundation of our marriage was a lie, so nothing surprises me anymore.

"Thank you, Harrison," I say. "Sometimes you can walk your whole life blind to what's happening around you, can't you?"

"And sometimes all you have to do is open your eyes and everything you need is right in front of you," he says.

I let out a breath. "He's too young."

Harrison smirks. "Really? That's the excuse you're going with?"

"You can't deny there's a significant age gap between us. He's only twenty-six. I'll be a retired old man when he's still in his prime. He has so much life. I can't be the one to hold him back."

"That might not be your decision to make. Given how he keeps looking this way every few seconds, I'd say he might be more into whatever you have than you think."

That's what I'm afraid of. For so long, I didn't understand why Curtis got to me. Now it's starting to become clearer, but the air is still too misty, just like in the locker room at the school.

"Look, Daddy!" Megan shouts. "Is this the best snowman ever, or what?"

We all go over to inspect the hard work of the young team.

Curtis sidles up to me as soon as I'm close enough, and I wrap my arm around his shoulder. It feels so good that I pull him closer and kiss his temple.

In true Bubble fashion, the snowman isn't like other snowmen. The scarf around the neck is pink, of course, and it has Christmas decorations hanging from it. The buttons are black to match the hat, but there's a sparkly pink stripe around the hat to match the scarf.

The snowman even has a pair of snow boots.

“Is the snowman sparkly?” Fletcher asks.

“Yeah,” Curtis answers. “I used edible glitter, so it’ll all dissolve when the snowman melts.”

“You did a great job,” I say.

“Great? Megan, Gigi, did you hear that? Coach says we did a great job.”

Both kids shake their heads, and I look at Curtis in confusion.

“What did we do?” he asks them.

“We built the most superlicious snowman ever,” they say in synchrony.

I bow to them. “I see how that is a million times better than great. My apologies.”

“Okay, you two,” Harrison says. “Time for you to go back inside and warm up.”

The kids run over to Curtis and hug him, and me by extension.

“Thank you for making a snowman with us. Maybe tomorrow we can make Christmas snow angels,” George says.

“I’d love that,” Curtis says.

Some emotion lodges in my throat, and I know I need to take Curtis and go back inside the cabin. I need it to be just the two of us for a while.

Once the kids are out of earshot, I put my hand on his chin so I can look into his beautiful green eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his eyes flicking between mine. I see worry etched in them.

“I need you, Curtis. All of you.”

BUBBLE



THERE'S something raw in the way Riley looks at me. Like he wants to consume me and is both afraid and eager to get started.

“Okay, let's go inside.” I take his hand, and he follows me.

We don't talk as we hang our coats and shake the snow off our boots before putting them on the tray.

The silence is killing me because I don't know what he's thinking. I want to know if he's really ready for this, if he's feeling what I'm feeling. It's okay if he's not, but I need to know.

“Are you hungry? I could make you something to eat,” I say, walking over to the fridge.

“Curtis.”

“Nothing too complicated. I'll give in and make you a sandwich. A proper one, not one of those things you call a sandwich.”

“Curtis.”

His voice is closer now. I shiver at his closeness. Why does taking this next step scare me so much?

Because you already care too much about him and you're afraid to get hurt.

Oh shut up, stupid brain.

“There's some leftovers from last night. Pulled pork and—”

I squeak as my sock-covered feet are lifted off the ground, and I'm taken to the bedroom over Riley's shoulder.

He drops me on the bed, making me bounce, and then follows, covering my body with his.

"Tell me you still want this, Curtis." His voice is raw, vulnerable.

"More than anything, Riley."

He closes his eyes like he's in pain. I reach over and massage his temples.

"Does it bother you that I'm much older than you?" he asks.

"What? No, not at all."

"I'll be fifty-six in ten years. Will you feel the same way then?"

I smile. "I've loved many things for a lot longer and haven't changed my mind. Riley, I might be Bubble, but remember, I'm also Curtis. Sometimes I don't want to be the one to cheer everyone up. Sometimes I want to cuddle in bed with a book. Sometimes I want someone to bake me a cake."

"I can't bake," he says.

"I know an excellent place in Chester Falls."

He smiles and leans his forehead against mine.

"I don't want to ruin this. You are too special, and I don't want to hurt you."

"You will only hurt me if you want me but refuse to follow your heart."

"I followed my heart once, and..." He closes his eyes like it's a painful memory. "Can I touch you?"

I whisper. "I'm yours."

He runs his hands through my hair. "I love how your hair smells and how soft it is." Then he kisses my forehead, my cheeks, my neck, but doesn't come anywhere near my mouth.

I raise my arms to encourage him to remove my shirt, which he does in the slowest way known to humankind. I'm burning

from the inside out with how slow he's taking this.

When he kisses my sternum, I thread my fingers through his hair to encourage him to get closer to my nipples, but he grabs my hands and places them above my head.

"You're killing me, Riley."

"You said you're mine. I'm just savoring you."

"Can you savor me quicker?"

He chuckles but doesn't change what he's doing. His trail of kisses carries to my stomach, and I bite my lip to stop from moaning. Not that it helps much because his slow touches could make me come in my pants just from anticipation.

"FYI, if you pay attention to my nipples, I might like it," I say, trying to sound less bratty than it actually comes out.

He comes up and kisses me until I'm chasing his mouth when he lets go.

"FYI, making demands will only get you so far."

"But it'll get me *somewhere*."

When his lips meet mine, I feel his smile. I know he'll give me what I want.

When he *finally* pays attention to my nipples, I let out unrestrained moans because, fuck me, the man knows what he's doing. He licks and sucks them into peaks before biting them, blowing soft breaths, and then licking again.

"Fuck, fuck, Riley. I need more. Please."

He undoes the buttons on my jeans and pulls them down. Because they're so tight, my underwear follows.

My dick is flushed and leaking. He gives it a few slow strokes.

"I never thought I'd say another man's cock is beautiful. But looking at you, Curtis. Your body begging for release because of the way I'm touching you. It's the most beautiful thing I've seen in my life."

He raises himself on his knees and removes his pants and underwear too.

“Holy mother of well-endowed men. I’m going to start going to church.”

He looks down at his engorged cock and gives it a long stroke.

“You saw it yesterday.”

“*After* you came. I didn’t think it was going to grow *that* big.”

He smirks. “I didn’t take you for a size queen.”

I sit up to pull him back down on top of me, making sure his torpedo dick is in the right place. “I’m not, but I’m looking forward to spending the whole of January remembering this moment every time I so much as move an inch.”

God, I love how giant and heavy he is. I hold on to his thick arms. They bulge as he holds himself, and I can’t help running my hands over the straining muscles. He is totally fit for his age, and like the best of wines, he’s going to get better and better.

“I’d like to try something,” he says.

“Okay.”

He doesn’t take his eyes off mine as he scoots down my body, sucking on my skin here and there. I’m sure there will be bruising tomorrow.

Fuck, I hope there’s bruising tomorrow and the day after because I’ll need a reminder at some point in the future, when this is all over, that it really happened.

Maybe I should take photos. I make a mental note to do that.

Coach’s mouth moves closer and closer to my flushed cock. My body hums with anticipation. Is he going to touch it again like he did yesterday?

As I hoped, he holds my cock and gives me a few strokes. Then he runs his tongue from the root to the tip and takes my mushroomed head in his mouth, and I cry out in pleasure.

“You taste like strawberries all over. Just like I thought,” he says.

I want to make a joke and ask him to try my ass to verify if it's true, but my words become stuck in my throat when he takes more of my cock into his mouth.

He gags a little when my head hits the back of his throat, but that doesn't stop him.

This man. What is this man doing to me?

I open my legs wider to give him more space, but instead of getting more comfortable, he stops.

“What's wrong? Do you want to stop? It's okay if you do, but I'll kill you if you don't at least finish me with a hand job,” I say, pouting.

He smiles, his lips glistening with his spit and some of my precum. He's never looked so sexy. He licks them as he looks down.

“I failed mind-reading class, Coach. What's happening down there?”

“Shh, give me a moment.”

I lean my head back on the pillow. I did promise he had free rein of my body, so I guess, if I must, I could exercise *some* patience.

But I really want an orgasm.

I mean, I want two. I need the first to take the edge off before I'm relaxed enough to take Coach's power-rocket dick inside me.

My cock throbs at the thought of him filling me up. It's been such a long time since I had a good, satisfying fuck.

“What position will be more comfortable for you to take me?” he asks.

“On my belly with a few pillows under me or on all fours.”

He seems to think about it for a moment and then flips me over. My face plops down on the pillow, so I use my elbows to get on all fours and watch what he's doing behind me.

I see him reach over to the nightstand and grab a bottle of strawberry-flavored lube. I raise a brow.

He has lube in his cabin that smells like strawberries? How long exactly has he been thinking about this?

“That was a coincidence,” he says, “the store ran out of the nonflavored ones.”

“Sure.” I smirk, and he slaps my ass. It makes me hornier than it should, and it seems I make all the right noises because I get a slap on the other cheek to even it out.

My cock leaks onto the comforter underneath. “Nghh, fuck...”

He smooths the area with his hands, and I have no doubt my skin is all flushed. “In case you’re wondering, I’m not into spanking.”

“You could have fooled me,” he says.

“Ass.”

He runs his hand up and down my spine, humming. “You’re wound up like a spring.”

“That’s because I need to come, and you’re a fucking tease.”

He laughs. “Okay, let me see if I can make it quick for you, Royal Highness Demander of Orgasms.”

I bite my lip, wondering what he has in mind considering the position I’m in. Is he going to finger me until I come? That would certainly help get me ready to take his dream cock.

My mind is coming up with all the different scenarios when the least likely one happens. His wet, warm tongue covers my hole before he sucks and then proceeds to French-kiss my ass like I’m a can-can dancer.

“Cupcakes, fudge, sprinkles, and holy fucking stars,” I shout. “Please don’t stop.”

My orgasm is teetering on the edge. As if he knows it, Riley strokes my cock at the same time that he penetrates my ass with this tongue, and that’s it for me. I come on a string of curses like I’m starting a new religion.

“You...this...fucking hell...Riley.” I fall onto the comforter, not caring that I’m basically lying in a puddle of my own cum.

He lies on his side, stroking my back. “Hey, I said I’ve never been with a man. I never said I didn’t know what to do in bed.”

“Smug bastard.” I’m facedown on the pillow, so my insult comes out muffled and with zero malice. He can eat my ass any time he wants. I’ll make a sign and everything.

Bubble’s Ass Open for Business. Free buffet. Eat as much as you want.

I turn my face to him. “What do you propose we do now? Because you’ve noodled my legs.”

He leans over for a kiss. “Let’s test that young age recovery rate and do it the old-fashioned way.”

“Like I said, Coach. I’m all yours.”

COACH



I TURN BUBBLE AROUND, and sure enough, his stomach is coated in his release. It doesn't bother me. None of this bothers me.

Quite the opposite, I've never felt so horny for someone, so in tune with someone else's needs. Not that I have any experience beyond Mel, but I thought I'd feel more nervous or apprehensive.

I was in the beginning, but seeing Curtis react to my touch has removed every ounce of doubt about what I'm doing and how I feel about being with another man.

"Does it gross you out?" he asks, looking down at his stomach.

I run a finger over his release, feeling his taut muscles beneath, and then bring it over to my mouth to taste him.

He groans, and then he's on me. His tongue searches mine, tasting and teasing. I feel his cock harden again between us.

His kissing is so distracting that I don't even realize I'm on my back with him straddling me.

"Coach, you are a bag of dirty treats tied with a nice neat bow. No one would ever tell what's really inside. But now that I know, I want to keep looking to see what else you have."

I laugh. "It seems that you're ready for something else I have."

He looks down at where our cocks are sandwiched together. "I was born ready. Hand me the lube."

I grab it, and he steals it off me, uncapping it and squirting a good amount on his fingers before reaching behind himself.

“Turn around. I want to see,” I ask.

His green eyes go impossible dark, and he does as I ask. We’re in a reverse cowboy position, and I have a prime seat to watch the beauty that is his ass.

He adds one finger, and my cock jolts at the sight of it disappearing into his hole. It looks so small.

“I’ll never fit in there.”

He chuckles and then adds two fingers, letting out a moan. I grab his ass cheeks and spread them so I can see better.

“Enjoying the show, Coach?”

“It’s exquisite.”

“I promise it’ll fit, and it’ll feel so good.”

A third finger goes in, and now Bubble is riding his fingers. His head is turned to face me, so I stroke my unattended cock to show him how much I can’t wait to be inside him.

I grab the lube and generously coat my cock. He may have done a good job of preparing himself, but it’s going to take some effort to take me.

“God, your ass is a work of art.”

“All talk and no play makes Bubble an impatient boy.” He pushes his ass back, and I take the hint.

I align my cock with his hole, holding it in place as he lowers himself on me.

My head feels like it’s about to explode. I’m only an inch in and seriously doubting my staying power. He’s so fucking tight.

“Jesus, Curtis, you’re...fuck.”

He doesn’t say anything. His hands are on his legs, and I see his muscles flex as he slowly impales himself on me.

When he’s fully seated, he lets out a breath.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Three cups of flour, three cups of sugar, four eggs—”

“What are you doing?”

He huffs. “What do you think? I’m trying not to fucking have an orgasm here because your torpedo dick is filling me up like a corndog at a football game. If I so much as think a sexy thought, I might just come.”

I laugh because he almost sounds angry at the prospect.

He finishes what sounds like the recipe for a cake or something and then turns his head.

“Ready for the ride of your life, Coach?”

“I thought you were the one riding,” I say.

He gives me a smile and licks his lips, which makes me want to pull him down for a kiss. Then he raises himself until it’s just the tip of my cock inside him before coming back down again.

Sweat beads on my forehead as I try to keep it together.

“Fuuck, Bubble, you feel too good. So fucking tight.” I grit my teeth.

He keeps a steady rhythm, but I see his thighs shaking. He’s either tired from the position, or he’s hanging by a thread as much as I am.

I sit up and hold his waist when he’s fully seated.

“You’re so amazing, Curtis.” I suck the skin below his neck. He’s so light and small I could move anywhere with me still inside him. I keep that thought for another time. For now, we both need to find relief.

I snake my hands around his back and gently pull him down so we’re lying with his back to my front.

“Slide your feet forward and move now.”

His skin reddens at my command.

“You like being told what to do?”

He bites his lip and nods.

“Then do it.”

He raises his hips and comes down again.

“Riley,” he shouts, and this is different from before. His body shakes as I meet his thrusts with mine.

“Baby, I’m so close,” I say in his ear. “Will you come for me?”

I reach out to his cock, but he takes my hands and laces them with his. Our joint groans must be heard for miles, but we’re both too far gone.

We keep the pace, me thrusting into him as he falls onto my cock like he’s coming home. It doesn’t take long before Curtis comes in the most beautiful full-body orgasm I’ve ever seen.

I hold him as he shakes through it, calling my name.

A couple more thrusts and my orgasm follows as I fill him over and over again. It’s a pure raw, carnal release.

His head rests on my chest. His hair is wet with sweat, just like mine. We’re sticky and will soon feel the cold, but neither of us seems ready to move.

“I think your cannon dick killed me, Coach.”

I snort. “You’d certainly win gold at a rodeo, that’s for sure.”

He chuckles. “Damn right. Yeehaw.”

My dick softens slowly and eventually slips out. Is it weird that I want to see my cum spill out of his hole?

What’s happening to me? Why do I feel like I’m claiming this guy like a possessive animal?

I slowly raise to a sitting position, taking him with me and then lifting him so I can carry him to the bathroom.

His arms are folded close to his chest, and the way he looks at me makes my heart skip a few beats.

“You are adorable when you’re tired, you know that,” I say.

“Give me a twelve-minute halftime break, Coach, and I’ll be ready for the second half.”

I set him down on the bathroom tiles and turn the shower on. This cabin has an old system that takes a while to heat, so I turn back to my strawberry-flavored insatiable man.

Wait. Mine? Keep it cool, Riley. He's not yours. Christmas bubble, remember?

“Twelve minutes, you say?” I place my hands on either side of him, trapping him against the sink.

He narrows his eyes and bites his lips before licking them sensually. Then he looks down.

I follow his gaze, surprised to see he's already half-hard.

“Holy mother, what do you eat? I don't remember recovering that fast at your age.”

He hooks his arms around my neck and lifts himself so he's holding on to me like a koala. I smile and help him stay in place with my hands on his ass. It's definitely not a chore.

“First of all, Riley.” He kisses my cheek. “You make me stupid horny. I can't help it.” He kisses the other cheek. “Second of all, John, I've been waiting for you to notice me for about a billion years and five-hundred cakes.” He kisses my lips, and this time he lingers until my own dick is at half-mast. I know I won't manage a full erection, but what this man does to me is beyond incredible.

“And third, Dempsey,” he finishes with my surname. “I have no third. I just want you. Despite the storm and not seeing Juju, I feel like I've been given the best Christmas present ever.”

“I'm sorry you can't see your friend this Christmas. I know you had a lot of plans. Will you tell me more about her?”

He looks at me for a moment and nods.

“Okay then. Let's get clean.” I carry him inside the shower and then set him down.

We wash each other without any rush until both our stomachs rumble.

I change the bed while Bubble arranges something for us to eat. I made him promise he wouldn't do anything too complicated. He needs to relax a little too.

After we eat the sandwiches he makes—which taste like gourmet sandwiches because the man doesn't do anything by half-measure—we sit on the couch in front of the fireplace.

“So tell me about your best friend,” I say.

He sits so his back is to the arm of the couch and his legs are on top of mine. He's now wearing a pair of lime-green yoga pants and a top that's so cropped I can see his abs. I put my arm over his shoulder, bringing him closer, and rest my other hand over his exposed skin.

“If you get me hard again, the only thing we'll be talking about is your submarine dick docking in my ass.”

I laugh. “I'll behave.”

He raises a brow and points at where I'm mindlessly running circles with my thumbs over his belly.

“Okay, okay. I'll stop.”

He sighs. “Don't stop. Anyway, you want to know about Juju.”

BUBBLE



RILEY IS DEFINITELY one-thousand times more comfortable than the couch. If only I could take him home with me at the end of this vacation. I'd sit on him all the time, and not always naked. I do have some self-control.

"I met Juju in college. We were both on the cheerleading team. I looked at her, and she looked at me, and it was as if the universe aligned itself. We became best friends that day."

Riley smiles. "That's such a strange concept because I can't see how I'd let someone in so quickly, but somehow, it's totally you, isn't it?"

I nod. "When you know, you know. We became inseparable. If I'd lived in student accommodation, we totally would have been roomies."

"Where did you live?"

"With my grandmother. She became ill when I finished high school, so I went to the local college so I could stay with her."

"Did you have other plans? If she wasn't sick, I mean," he asks.

"I did. I wanted to go to the University of Kentucky because it has the best cheerleading program, but then I switched. Grandma was so mad she didn't talk to me for days."

I smile, remembering how she even stopped cooking. As if it would make a difference to the grandson she taught all of her recipes to, even her secret ones.

“I eventually won her back by baking her cookies. And she could never stay mad at me for too long. I’m too adorable.”

Riley brings his hand up to my face and cradles it. “That you are. And persistent too.”

I grin.

“Anyway, anytime I wasn’t at school, I was home, so Juju came over a lot and also got to know my grandma. Juju doesn’t get along with her family because they wanted her to work in the family diner like her sister, but she wanted to go to college and do something else. She spent so much time with me that my grandma kind of adopted her. I wouldn’t have survived my grandma’s death if it wasn’t for Juju.” I lean my head on Riley’s chest. “She was everything. Made sure I ate, didn’t miss class, and even went to all the cheerleading practices. We ended up winning our league championship that year.”

“Wow, that’s quite amazing. Congratulations.”

I smile, but I don’t feel it.

“With my grandma gone, I felt lost, so I put everything into cheerleading. My dream was to be the first male cheerleader to perform at an NFL game. Juju made me change colleges, and she came with me. We were the dream team.”

“Why do I feel like this story doesn’t have a happy ending?” he asks. His voice is gentle and soothing. I want to lean into it and let it lull me to sleep so I don’t have to remember the bad times.

“I’m here with you, aren’t I?” I ask, running my hand up his chest, smiling as his breath hitches under my touch. “That’s as happy an ending as I could ever wish for.”

“Curtis.”

I’m not sure if he’s saying my name as a warning to stop teasing him or bullshitting him.

“I had an injury eighteen months ago. The kind you don’t recover from if you want to be a professional cheerleader.”

“I’m so sorry, baby.”

I shrug. “Nothing to be done. I decided on a fresh start in Connecticut. I traveled a while before I settled on a place. I saw the advertisement to work as a barista at Spilled Beans in Chester Falls. When Indy, my boss, found out I could bake, he hired me on the spot. I love working there.”

“But you live in Windsor, right?”

I elbow him lightly. “Want to stalk me, Coach?”

He chuckles.

“Yeah. I couldn’t afford anything in Chester Falls, so I had to look farther out. It worked out well in Windsor because I overheard a few high school students mentioning cheerleading when I was out grabbing a coffee. I talked to them and then went over to the principal to ask if they were interested in starting a cheerleading program.”

Riley stares at me with a look of pure awe.

“Just like that. You went to the principal, pitched a program, and that was it?”

“Did you forget the part where I mentioned I’m adorable? I’m also irresistible.”

His brows furrow. “You and Principal—”

“What?” I stand from his lap and walk as far away from him as I can. “You think I’d sleep with someone to get a job?”

“No, of course not. Curtis.”

“Really? Because that’s what it sounded like to me. For your information, I was the best male cheerleader on my team. I was being fast-tracked for a special program at UK, until Harley...” I run to the bathroom and lock myself in. I can handle anyone making assumptions about me, but not Riley... not him.

Remembering what happened still makes me feel raw inside. Like I’m bleeding and someone keeps squeezing lemon juice on it.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll always be here for you,” Harley says.

“I’ll never cheer again.” Tears stream down my face as I lie on the hospital bed. “I’ll never dance. I’ll never be...me.”

“Hey, shh.” He kisses my forehead. “Don’t say those things. You don’t know. Maybe the doctors can help. Let me go outside and see if I can speak to someone, okay? I think Juju is on the way.”

“Thank you, Harley.”

“Anything for you, baby.”

Juju comes running inside the room. Her face pale and worried.

“Curtis. Please open the door.”

I don’t answer. I’m hurt by what he insinuated and angry that I’ve lowered my defenses to the point those words got to me. Words I’ve heard before and learned to ignore.

“Fight back with kindness, Bubble.” My grandma used to say. “Show them what you can do, and they can’t argue with the evidence.”

If only it was that easy.

“Curtis, please.”

His voice sounds broken, just like I feel.

Except I’m not broken. I’m strong. I fought, I recovered, and I have a new life.

I reach over to the door and unlock it.

Riley opens the door and comes inside. His eyes look wild, like he doesn’t know what to do.

“I’m so sorry, Curtis. I was jealous. It’s stupid. You said you were irresistible, which you are. Let’s face it. I thought I was straight until you barreled into my life with your strawberry scent and your cakes. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to think about you with anyone else.”

He looks like he wants to touch me, so I take a step forward into his arms.

“You’re forgiven, but you better not do it again. FYI, the principal is not only the straightest man ever, he’s also so not my type.”

He holds me tight. “What’s your type?”

“You, you giant muscly with maybe just one gray hair duffus.”

“I thought I was a fox,” he says, stroking my hair.

“A foxy duffus.”

He chuckles, and the rumble of his chest makes me feel better.

“Do you think maybe we could go to bed?” he asks.

“That would be nice.”

We brush our teeth, peeking at each other and smiling. It’s weirdly domestic.

Did we just have our first fight? Should we make out?

We’re going to bed, so I’ll suggest it.

“You’re checking out my ass again,” I say as I go to my side of the bed.

“You have a very checkable ass.”

I remove my clothes until I’m fully naked, and he does the same. We stand on either side of the bed, staring at each other and smiling.

“I decided we should make out,” I say.

“Oh really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because we just had a fight, so now we have to make out. It’s the rules.”

He brings his hand to his mouth.

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

I put my hands on my hips, which isn't nearly as effective when you're naked and half-hard.

"Nuh-huh. I was married for twenty-three years. I know when to shut up and admit I'm wrong."

I get on my knees on the bed. "You better not be comparing me to your ex-wife, or we'll have serious issues."

He lies down and pulls me to lie on top of him. "It's clear in more ways than just the obvious ones how different you are from my ex-wife."

I pull the covers up and snuggle on his side.

"What was she like?"

"She's not dead," he says, laughing.

"You know what I mean."

He looks up at the ceiling. "She is beautiful, funny, strong-willed, and my parents love her."

"Can I ask what happened?"

Riley looks at me. "She lied about something unforgivable."

He doesn't say anything else. I'm curious, but I don't think it's the right time to ask. It may never be. It's in the past, after all, and if he asked me about Harley, I think I'd feel the same way.

I turn his head to face me and kiss him.

He tastes minty fresh and like my coach. This kiss is different. I don't know how I can tell, but I feel it.

When we part, I keep my eyes closed and bring up a memory of my grandmother when she was still healthy, cooking my favorite meal.

I still miss her so much, but with Coach by my side, it doesn't feel so bad.

I'm just scared of what will happen when Christmas is over and the bubble bursts.

COACH



WHEN I WAKE UP, I immediately know I'm alone because I'm cold, even with the covers over me. I rub my eyes and get up, putting on a pair of joggers, forgoing underwear.

There's a chill in the air, so I pick a warmer sweater. I look through the window and see a thicker layer of snow.

I don't need to guess where Bubble is because the cabin is small enough that there's only one possibility. That and I hear him curse like a sailor.

One quick trip to the bathroom, and I join the racket in the living room. It smells like Christmas has exploded in here. Cinnamon, spice, and all things nice.

"Freakin stale muffins and soggy breadsticks."

I hear him, but I don't see him until I get to the middle of the room and see his ass up in the air while he's halfway inside my fireplace.

He's wearing green tights, and whatever is over it has ridden up to give me a nice view of his shapely thighs and small but round bubble butt.

I clear my throat.

"Crumbs," he groans as he hits his head on the top of the fireplace. "Ouch."

I wince, hoping it didn't hurt because I didn't mean to scare him.

When he turns around to face me, I bite back a laugh. Bubble is wearing a long green sweater with a red Santa hat with a fluffy rim and tip. His face is covered in soot and ash, and he doesn't look happy.

“Did I catch you at a bad time, Santa?” I ask.

That gains me a smile, so I cross the space between us and start rubbing some of the soot from his cheek.

“Not at all. I was just checking if you were a good boy this year,” he says, his hands snaking around my waist but landing on my butt.

“What do you think?”

He bites his lip and pretends to think for a moment. “I think you tried really hard to be good, but ultimately you gave in to temptation. I'm afraid you get a piece of coal in your sock.”

I twist my nose. “Is there anything I can do to reverse this outcome?” I pull him closer so he feels my dick harden between us.

Curtis's breath catches. “You could let me see if I can fit up your chimney, but that would still make you a bad, bad boy for giving in to your temptations.”

“Oh really?” I ask. “Because the last time I went up someone's chimney, they were praying like they found a new religion. That's a good thing, right?”

“I suppose you have a point.” He releases his hold on me. “I should check on the cinnamon buns.”

I reluctantly let him go. He goes toward the oven, stopping midway and turning back to me.

“Wait...” He shakes his head. “Hold on, cinnamon buns first.”

I'm rooted in place until he's satisfied the cinnamon buns are ready to be out of the oven, which makes the whole cabin smell even nicer. He sets the tray on the stovetop to cool and then comes over to me.

“Did you say...what I think you...said? I mean...you said...your chimney...”

I laugh. “Yes, I said what you heard, and I meant it.”

“But...”

I take his hand and lead him to the sink, getting a cloth wet so I can clean the soot from his face. He looks adorable, with his big green eyes, blinking like he can't believe me.

“Look, I don't know how to say this, but I'd like to try having you inside me. I understand if it's not your thing. If you prefer to bottom. I just thought that since we were experimenting, maybe I could do it with someone I trust.”

His mouth is open. He closes and opens it again as if trying to find the right words.

“Um...I used to be more versatile when I was younger and mainly with guys my age. We all experimented both ways to figure out what we liked. I found that I prefer to bottom, but I don't mind topping.” He takes a deep breath. “Holy Christmas morning.”

“Shall I take that as a yes?” I ask to make sure this is really something he wants too.

“I'd be honored to be the first...um...person to go up your chimney.”

“Good. Oh, there you are,” I say, removing the last bit of soot from Curtis's face. I lower my lips to his, letting them linger and sucking his bottom one lightly. His breath hitches as he wraps his arms around my shoulders.

I lift him and set his ass on the counter. This way, he's taller than me, which gives him an advantage he doesn't often have. He takes over with a hunger that matches mine.

Fuck, why hasn't kissing been like this all my life?

When I break the kiss, we're both a little breathless. I'm hard and too hot for the clothes I'm wearing.

“Merry Christmas, Riley,” he says. “Thank you for letting me spend this time with you.”

“Merry Christmas, Curtis. I'm the one who should be thanking you. On my own, I would have spent all my time finding ways

to keep busy, so I could stop thinking about you. Now I don't have to. This is the best Christmas I've had in a long time."

He holds me in a tight hug. "Me too." When he doesn't let go, I stay in place, running my hands up and down his back. It must be hard not seeing his friend again, especially now that his grandma isn't around anymore.

His eyes are a little red when he pulls away, but I don't see any tears. "Hey, today is a happy day, okay? Let's have breakfast. I'll fix the fireplace, and then we can do anything you want for the rest of the day."

"Can we watch Christmas movies?"

"Of course."

He beams. "Which one is your favorite?"

"*Die Hard*."

He gasps. "*Die Hard* is *not* a Christmas movie." He jumps down from the counter and starts grabbing the stuff we need for breakfast.

"Of course it is," I argue. "It's set at Christmas. There's a Christmas party."

I check the fireplace, add a few logs, and start a fire.

"Is not. There are guns and people dying everywhere."

"People get hurt in *Home Alone*, and no one argues that it's a Christmas movie," I say.

He huffs.

I'll admit it's funny seeing him get all riled up over such a topic. But when he starts waving a knife at me before using it to spread the icing on the cinnamon buns, I get worried.

"Hey, baby," I say, coming up behind him. "Why don't you hold that anger in and let it out later in bed, huh?"

Bubble turns around after, thankfully, putting the knife down. "You like playing with fire, Mr. Dempsey."

I kiss him. "Only when it's you doing the burning." I take the plate with the cinnamon buns and put it on the table. He brings

the coffee and two cups and announces that since it's Christmas morning, he's going to sit on my lap for breakfast.

We take our time feeding bites of still-warm cinnamon rolls to each other, drinking coffee, and talking about what Christmas used to be like when we were kids.

Bubble is so easy to talk to that I keep forgetting there's a twenty-year age gap between us. He may be bubbly, full of life, and seem carefree, but he's also responsible, caring, and very mature.

The way he put his grandmother first and his dream second says everything about the man he is.

He's talking about the decorations on the Christmas tree when my phone rings with a video call from my parents.

He starts to move from my lap, but I hold him in place. His cheeks redden. It's one of the few times I've seen him looking less confident.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad," I say when I swipe to answer the call. I prop the phone against my empty coffee cup so I don't have to hold it.

"Hey, sweetie. Merry Christm—oh, you have company," Mom says.

"Merry Christmas, Mom. This is Curtis. He's the cheerleading coach at my high school. Remember the pie you had at Thanksgiving? You can thank him for that."

Curtis is as still as a mouse while my mom doesn't miss a beat.

"Nice to meet you, Curtis. Your pie was delightful. You'll have to share your recipe or let me know how I can get my hands on one next year."

I already have my arm around Bubble's waist, so I run my thumb in circles to reassure him that it's okay.

"Um, thank you, Mrs. Dempsey."

Mom waves him off. "Oh, pfft, call me Jan. So, what have you boys been up to? Has the storm passed already?"

It's my turn to blush. "Well, I...um...I've removed the doors from the kitchen cabinets, sanded them, and restained them. They look like new. Curtis decorated the cabin, so it looks like one of Santa's elves escaped the North Pole and is hiding here."

"For the last time, I'm not an elf. I'm small but perfectly formed," Bubble says, crossing his arms in front of his chest, looking outraged. Then he seems to catch himself, and his whole face goes an adorable shade of pink.

"It's been great having Curtis here. You know me, I'd have had sandwiches and frozen pizza for dinner every day," I say to my parents, trying to take some of the attention away from him.

"How exactly did he end up there? I thought you were going to be on your own," Dad says.

"Bubble...um, Curtis was in the cabin next door, but there was some confusion when the owners turned up. Because of the storm, it wasn't safe for him to drive home."

Mom leans her elbows on the table they're using to prop their tablet. "That's very generous of you, honey. How handy that you were there."

Curtis and I share a look. "Yes, very handy."

"Well, we'll let you enjoy the rest of your day. We just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas. Be good, boys," Mom says, and Dad only has time to wave before the call ends.

"Oh my god, that was mortifying," Curtis says, hiding his face with his hands. "Your parents totally know we're fucking."

"How would they know?"

"I'm on your fucking lap, Riley. Do you have the habit of keeping your friends this close when you video call your parents?"

I hadn't thought of that. He feels so right on my lap that I don't want to let him go. I didn't think about how it would look to my parents. Although it is the first time since my

divorce that they didn't bring up Mel. Maybe I should keep Curtis with me every time they call.

"Are you going to freak out?" he asks.

"No, why do you keep asking me that?"

He huffs and tries to get up. I keep him in place.

"Let me go, mountain man."

"Not until you tell me why you keep thinking I'm going to shout *no homo* anytime I so much as have a semi-serious expression."

BUBBLE



“No. It’s Christmas Day, and the reason I sometimes say stupid things does not belong in this cabin,” I say. “I am sorry though. This isn’t about you. It’s all me, okay?”

I really don’t want to drag Harley and his shit in here. He doesn’t deserve to occupy space here.

“I just met your parents.” I repeat it because I can’t believe that just happened. “They seem really nice.”

“They are.”

“Why didn’t you spend Christmas with them?”

Coach picks a crumb of cinnamon bun and rolls it around the plate. “They were on a Christmas cruise in the Caribbean and stopped in St. Barts for Christmas.”

“Do they travel a lot?”

He laughs. “Believe it or not, no, they don’t. They’ve lived their whole life in Denver. Turned up out of the blue on Thanksgiving Day to tell me they were traveling over Christmas. I’m happy for them. They deserve to enjoy their retirement.”

“How about you?”

He raises a brow. “I’m way, *way* off from retiring.”

I pinch the muscles on his arms. “Hmm, I don’t know, old man. I’m not convinced. Maybe you should take me into the bedroom and show me how you’re not quite ready for retired life.”

The chair scrapes against the floor as he stands, taking me with him.

“I could get used to being carried everywhere, you know?” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I can’t help it. You bring out my inner caveman.”

“Take me to your cave then.”

I don’t think I’ve ever spent so much time in the bedroom over any Christmas vacation. There’s something to be said about it, I think.

There are still plenty of cinnamon buns, and I can rustle up a quick dinner later. Go hungry, we will not. Even with all the sex.

Correction. All the best sex of my entire life.

Screw you, Harley. You were lousy in bed anyway.

Coach sets me on the bed but doesn’t follow me.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” he says when I pout.

“Fine. I guess I’ll undress myself. Don’t blame me if I get the show running before you get back,” I shout to the door he disappeared behind.

I remove my clothes, setting them carefully on the floor by the bed. I wanted to do my sexy elf dance for Coach, but it may have to wait for tomorrow. I missed a morning orgasm, and now that my belly is full of food, I want to satisfy my other needs.

He comes back, holding something wrapped in a piece of fabric.

“What’s that?” I ask, sitting with my back toward the headboard of the bed.

He sits on the side of the bed next to me. “The day I realized I’d screwed everything up with you, I wanted to apologize, but I didn’t know how. I couldn’t face you without wanting to touch you, and I’d just been so rude to you.”

I put my hand on his. “Hey, it’s okay. We’re past all that. Now when you shout at me, we’re both naked, and I’m asking for it.” I wiggle my brows, and he coughs, adjusting himself in his pants.

“Anyway. I made this to give you as a gift. I was going to take it to the cabin that morning when I went to apologize, but the glue hadn’t set yet, so I hoped you’d still forgive me and I could give this to you later.”

My chest expands, and I feel like I’m about to burst with emotion. All the emotions.

“Riley, you didn’t have to do anything. Your apology was enough. Besides, you gave me a place to stay, and I’ll say that living around your dick is a thousand times better than what I’d be doing at home alone.”

He laughs. “What would you be doing?”

“Thinking about how I could convince you to let me impale myself on you permanently.”

He shakes his head and places the fabric-wrapped gift on my lap. “It’s nothing much but...I always enjoyed making things out of wood with my dad. It was the only gift I could make you here.”

I unwrap the present to reveal a beautiful wooden book stand with hand-carved strawberries.

My throat feels tight, and I have to take a deep breath. “You... did all of this? On your own?”

“Yeah. It’s not great. Carving isn’t my best skill, but the wood had a few natural raised areas that made it perfect for it, so I couldn’t resist. Since you always smell like strawberries, I figured you’d like it.”

I run my fingers over the smooth wood. “I don’t like it, Riley. I love it. This is the most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me, other than my grandma’s recipes. She had to give those to me because she had no other grandchildren to pass them on to, so she was kinda obliged.”

“I’m sure she loved every minute of teaching you her recipes,” he says. “I don’t know if you have cookbooks or you use a tablet when you follow a recipe, but I thought this might be useful.”

I put the gift to one side and wrap my arms around him. Slowly our mouths find their way to each other.

“I want to give you something else, Curtis.” He looks into my eyes, and his are dark and needy. Afraid but full of trust.

“Are you sure?”

He pulls his sweater over his head and drags his sweatpants down. His cock stands thick against his stomach. “Absolutely.”

I run my hands over his muscles. Is it strange to want to see what he’ll look like with more silver hair? To want to see him grow older and even sexier than he is right now?

“Then let this be my gift to you, Riley. I’m going to make it so good.”

“I know, baby. I know.”

He puts my gift on the nightstand where the bottle of lube still sits, then jumps over me to the middle of the bed, taking me with him so I end up straddling his legs.

“I love it when you handle me like I’m super light.”

“You *are* super light,” he says.

I run my hands over all the deep ridges of his abs. He has such beautiful definition, and still, if this belly was flat or even round, I don’t think I’d care.

His cock is hard and flushed. I want to make this so good for him. My hands shake a little as I give him a couple of strokes.

God, I love the way his breath catches when I touch him, like he’s never been touched this way before. I want to be angry at a woman I don’t even know because she had him for twenty-three years and couldn’t make him feel this way.

Or maybe I’m assuming too much. He hasn’t talked much about his marriage or why it broke down. Just like I haven’t

spoken about Harley. I guess we all have our past. Our secrets.

Coach wraps his hand over mine, tightening his grip. I lock eyes with him as we stroke him lazily. When he looks a little more relaxed, I point to the lube, and he hands it to me.

“I’m going to go slow, okay? At least my dick isn’t as ginormous as yours.”

He chokes a laugh. “Thanks.”

“Open your legs.”

He does, and I fit between them. He releases my hand and places both of his on either side of his body.

“You look like the best dessert, Riley. You’re going to make me reconsider giving up my bottom crown, aren’t you?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute.”

I uncap the lube, and once again, his whole body trembles. “Riley, we don’t have to do this. Bottoming won’t make you more or less gay or bi or whatever you are.”

“I...just feel a little exposed like this. But I don’t want to stop.”

I look around, but he doesn’t have a lot of pillows.

“I’ll be back in a sec. Why don’t you add a little lube to your hole and rub your finger around to get used to the feel of having something there?”

He nods. I run to the living room and grab the cushions from the couch and a blanket. It doesn’t take me long, but I wait a few seconds to give him privacy to explore himself.

When I feel I’ve taken long enough, I go back into the bedroom. The sight of Riley naked in the middle of the bed, one hand stroking his cock, the other playing with the rim of his hole, almost makes me come on the spot.

He sees me by the door, but instead of stopping, he continues like he’s enjoying it so much he can’t stop himself.

“Scoot up against the board,” I say, placing the pillows covered with the blanket behind him. I return to my place

between his legs and add lube to my fingers.

I straddle one of his thick thighs, and he instantly opens his legs wider to give me room.

He pulls me for a kiss, so I take advantage and start exploring, just like I wanted.

I take it easy, testing my way around his rim, feeling as he contracts when I'm too close.

"I'm going to need you to relax, okay? Breathe out when I push in." We keep our gazes locked. I hope that not having my face down there makes him feel less open and vulnerable. He's in total control of the situation, but I'm not sure he understands how much power he really has.

He breathes out, and when I feel him relax, I push a finger in.

"You're doing good, baby," I say, distracting him with more kisses. Soon I'm able to slowly move my finger in and out. "That's it. You're doing great."

A small bead of sweat rolls down his forehead, and I lick it clean. God, what this man does to me that I'm now licking sweat.

He groans and plunges his tongue into my mouth. It's hard to keep my thoughts straight when he's doing that, but I manage to add another finger while he's distracted.

He moves on to kiss my neck and suck on my skin.

"You're so amazing, Curtis. I want to be all yours."

My heart thunders in my chest.

Focus on this, Bubble. Don't let the silly dreams get to you just yet.

Riley starts moving against my fingers, so I feel for his prostate. I know I've found it when he gasps like he's been hit in the chest.

"Holy fuck, what was that? Don't stop, please."

"That, my sexy coach, was your prostate." I add a third finger, but with the way he's moving, I know he's ready for me. "Just

imagine when my cock rubs against that spot over and over again.”

He groans and then holds my wrist. “I’m ready. Please, Curtis.”

I have to take a slow breath before this next step. It’s been years since I topped someone. It was with a friend who discovered then that he was definitely not a bottom. The experience isn’t exactly something I want to remember.

Except it’s all I can think about now. What if I can’t do this right?

“What’s the matter?” Riley asks.

“What? Nothing.”

“You seemed lost for a moment there.”

“Just a little nervous.”

He takes the lube and squirts some directly onto my cock before spreading it around. Then he slides down on the bed, removing a couple of the pillows behind him, and aligns my cock with his hole.

“I’m all yours, baby.”

“Okay,” I whisper. “Breathe out and relax for me.”

He does as I say, and maybe it’s because my cock isn’t that big—I mean, it’s perfectly proportional to my body, thank you very much. But it’s not a torpedo dick, that’s for sure.

Maybe it’s that, or maybe it’s because we’re really, truly meant for each other, but I slide in without any problems. I try to go slow, but Riley pulls me closer until I’m all the way inside him.

“God, I feel so full.”

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” I ask.

“It’s...different.”

I withdraw a little and then push back in. His mouth opens, letting out a breath with no sound, so I do it again and again until he’s moaning and asking me to keep going.

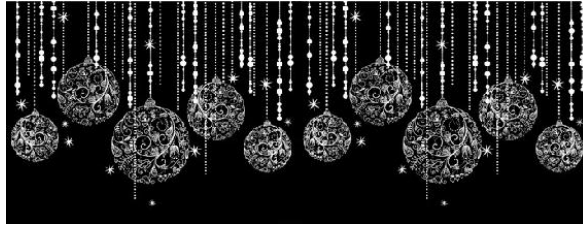
His cock, which went flaccid when I first penetrated him, is hard again.

I take it as a sign he's enjoying this. I know I am. He's tight and hot, and even though my hole hasn't been invited to this party, I don't feel like I'm missing anything. The friction of my cock in his channel is enough to take me close to the edge.

“Fuck, Curtis. Faster. More.”

I change the angle of my thrusts, and he cries out as I hit his prostate over and over.

COACH



MY BODY IS on fire and begging to roll around in the flames. I feel my orgasm cresting, like a group of firemen coming to relieve me from this pleasurable pain.

I want them to come, but I also want to send them away.

“Fuck...Curtis...don’t...stop.”

I’m holding on to him so tight that I’m not sure he has enough room to breathe. All I know is I’ve never felt like this before. I feel vulnerable but safe. Teetering on the edge but reluctant to jump.

“Riley, I’m getting close.” His voice is muffled against my chest.

We’re all groans and moans, curses and desperate touches. I don’t know if I can come like this. Every time he hits my prostate, I feel like I’m going to burst, but then it goes away.

“I...can’t.”

He raises his head and meets my eyes. His hair is wet around his face, but he’s never looked so beautiful. It hits me then. I could have this. More of this. More of his green eyes, his sunny personality, more of *him*.

“Riley,” he whispers. He seems to want to say something else but catches himself. Instead, it’s like he finds a renewed energy source and starts fucking me like his life depends on it.

My cock is so hard I’m afraid I’ll do permanent damage to it if I don’t come soon. Though it’s my ass that I should be worried about because there’s no doubt I’ll be sore after this.

I try to reach for my cock, but we're practically glued together, and Bubble's focus on pounding my ass drives me insane.

How can someone so small have so much strength and staying power?

My orgasm builds again. This time there's nothing I can do to stop it.

"Curtis," I shout as I spill between us like I haven't come in a year. He follows me, digging his teeth into my peck, which I'm sure will leave a nice mark. Little fucker.

"Fuck a duck, Coach. I've earned all the candy I've hidden in my bag." He moves slightly to slide out of me, and I wince, feeling both the loss and the pain as he settles against my side.

"You have hidden candy?"

He doesn't move or look at me. Just shrugs. "I always have hidden candy. And glitter. You never know when the situation might call for it."

"Glitter?"

"Open your drawer and pass me the small pink bag inside."

I do as he says, and sure enough, there's a pink bag I've never seen before. I hand it to him. He opens it and takes out two pieces of candy. He puts one in his mouth and gives me the other. It tastes minty.

Then he takes something else out. He pulls a string, and before I can say anything, we have confetti raining down on us. It sticks to our skin because we're all sweaty.

"Thank fuck it's not glitter," I say.

"Congrats, Coach. You're no longer a butt virgin."

I slap his ass. "We need a shower. I can feel your cum seeping out of my ass."

He sighs. "It's wonderful, isn't it?"

He glances at me when I don't reply. "Fine, you can borrow the bottom crown occasionally, but you're a total top, aren't you?"

“I guess?” I say honestly. “That was more than amazing, and I want to do it again for sure, but the feeling of filling you and then leaving some of me behind? It makes me think things a man my age shouldn’t.”

Bubble stays silent against me, and I can’t read him. Have I said too much? This is just temporary, isn’t it? Our Christmas bubble. It’ll be over when we go home. I have no right to want more. No matter how perfect it feels to be with him, age gap be damned.

“Come on, let’s get you clean. I want to bake some cookies and take them to the kids next door. Then we’ll do a Christmas movie marathon, but this time we’ll do it for real. No distractions,” he says.

I wince when I get up from the bed, feeling a lot sorer than I thought I would. “I can be on board with that...if you bake me some cookies too.”

“Only if you help out.”

I laugh all the way to the bathroom. Has he not seen already how I should not be allowed in the kitchen unless it’s to fix something broken or to eat?

We end up taking our time in the shower, and I thank him for his gift by eating his ass until he comes again, this time against the bathroom tiles.

Note to self: Curtis thrashes around when he has really good orgasms. The bathroom tiles are a health hazard. Thankfully, I hold him in my arms as he loses control of his legs and slides down my body until we’re both sitting.

Another note to self: well done for making the original shower cubicle much bigger.

Over the next few hours, I follow his orders as he tells me what to do in the kitchen with the precision of a military sergeant.

It’s hot enough that my forty-six-year-old dick is ready to go again. A fact that doesn’t go unnoticed, especially since I’m wearing a pair of sweatpants and nothing else.

Curtis? He's back to wearing his elf outfit and throwing heated looks in my direction.

While he decorates the cookies, he tells me what to do with dinner. Thankfully this only involves rubbing some spices and herbs onto a piece of meat and then putting it in the oven to cook on a slow heat.

By mid-afternoon, we're making our way across the snow to the cabin next door.

George cracks the door with Megan right behind him.

"Daddy!" Megan calls and opens the door for us to come inside.

Harrison peeks out from a hallway, holding a bunch of bedsheets in his arms. He waves for us to take a seat on the couch. "I'll be with you in a second, just need to get these in the wash."

"Daddy and Papa just had a shower," George says. "They said they had some messy Christmas presents from Santa."

"I think they spilled them on the bed too because they're doing the laundry again." Megan rolls her eyes.

I bite my lips so I don't laugh because I don't need two guesses as to what their parents were doing with whatever gifts Santa gave them.

"And what did Santa bring you?" Bubble asks.

"I got a new train set," George says.

"And I got five books," Megan says, adding, "Daddy said Santa knows we're going to Disneyworld in the spring, so he's giving more presents to children who need them because we're very lucky already. When I finish reading my books, I'm going to donate them to the Goodwill store."

"Yeah," George says, "and then she can play with my train set."

"Sorry, guys, we were...um..." Harrison looks a little flushed, coming out to the living room.

"Babe, I think they know," Fletcher adds.

“We don’t want to interrupt your Christmas. It’s just that Santa left these cookies at our place, but I think he really meant to leave them here,” Curtis says, holding up a box filled with his cookies.

Megan and George look at each other with wide eyes and big smiles.

“That’s very kind of Santa to do that. Are you sure it wasn’t too much trouble?” Harrison asks.

“Absolutely not,” Curtis says, and then he leans over like he’s telling a secret. “I’m pretty sure I overheard one of the elves say that Mrs. Claus baked these cookies herself. She made so many that she asked Santa to give them to the bestest boys and girls.”

The kids look at their dads, who nod, and soon the box is taken from his hands.

“Don’t eat too many, or you’ll ruin your—” Harrison starts but doesn’t finish. He likely knows it’s hopeless on a day like today.

“Would you like to join us for coffee and some of those Mrs. Claus cookies?” Fletcher asks.

“Thank you, but we’ve got a Christmas movie marathon this afternoon, and I need to check on dinner. Thank you though,” Bubble says.

“I don’t suppose you know when the road out will be cleared,” I ask.

“They’re usually pretty good. As soon as they know the storm is over, they clear the roads. They know folks will need to get back home to their jobs since most of the cabins are vacation homes,” Fletcher says.

“Thank you. That’s useful to know.”

We leave the family and walk back to my cabin. Curtis is strangely silent.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I laugh. “Really? You think you can fool me that easily?” I bend and pick up a chunk of snow and make it into a ball. “Maybe I can persuade you to tell me what’s wrong.”

“You should know by now there are much better ways to persuade me to do anything for you, Riley.” He continues walking but goes toward the trees instead of the cabin.

I catch up to him and put my arm over his shoulder. He sags against me and lets out a deep sigh.

“Oh no. Not a sigh. This must be serious.”

He elbows me. “I just...when you asked about the roads, it reminded me that at some point, we have to go home, that’s all.”

“You don’t want to go home?”

He turns to face me. “Right now? No.”

“Curtis.” I’m not sure what to say.

“I’m sorry. I’m just being overdramatic. Juju says I do that a lot, but it’s endearing...well, sometimes.”

I take my gloves off so I can touch his face with my hands. “I like when you’re dramatic. I like when you do a lot of things. And I don’t want to go home either.”

“You don’t?”

I shake my head.

“I don’t want the bubble to burst.”

He narrows his eyes. “Bubble?”

“The Christmas bubble. I know you said what we do here stays here, but...”

Our breaths fog in the cold air. Curtis’s cute nose is red, even though he’s wearing a hat that covers almost his whole face.

“I thought you wanted to experiment,” he says. His voice is small and unsure. “I didn’t want to put any pressure on you. I know I was coming on too strong and you were straight.”

I stop him with a kiss, loving how he responds immediately. Each pass of my tongue over his is met with a moan. When we

part, his eyes are glassy and half-lidded.

“I think it’s safe to say I’m not exactly straight. I spoke to Harrison when you were building the snowman. I think I may be demisexual, although I don’t really care what label is attached to it. I just know that I like you, Curtis. I like you a lot.”

He puffs out a breath and his cheeks redden. He’s like the cutest elf I’ve ever seen.

“If my age doesn’t bother you, then I don’t want the bubble to burst, Curtis. I want to take you on an actual date when we get back home. See if we can make it out in the real world.”

“Really? You don’t think I’m too much, too over the top, too pink?”

I smile. “Baby, those were the things that made me want you. You never gave up. The gifts, the cakes. You burrowed under my skin with each day that passed. It’s amazing I lasted this long.”

“This really is the best Christmas ever.” He holds me tight, so I kiss his head.

“I agree. We don’t have to think about leaving just yet, so how about that movie marathon? We can cuddle naked under the blanket.”

He releases me but pulls my hand and starts walking with purpose toward the cabin. “You have the best ideas.”

BUBBLE



PACKING IS BITTERSWEET. I've had the best Christmas vacation ever and the best present. I mean, who gets a boyfriend for Christmas? At least, I think we're boyfriends. Riley wants to take me out on dates. If we're dating exclusively, then we're boyfriends.

Yes. I've decided.

Probably should tell him at some point.

The last couple of days have passed quicker than I wanted. Riley got me to agree that *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie by letting me ride his dick while we watched the movie. We both came during an explosion scene. I saw stars. Thus, it's a Christmas movie now.

I'm sure I should write a letter to the movie cast and director apologizing, but it was a damn good orgasm. We had hot cocoa with tiny marshmallows afterward. It was perfect.

I've never had so much good sex in my life, and what's even better is that I don't have to give it up. Because, as stated above, boyfriends.

Riley is outside making sure everything is in the right place and locked. He's a bit of a neat freak when it comes to his tools and all the stuff in his shed. It's kind of adorable.

It took me a while to pack because I really made myself at home in his cabin and had to rummage around for all my stuff.

He comes from the side of the cabin as I'm dragging my suitcase out.

“Hey, you should have called me. Let me help.” He lifts the suitcase like it weighs nothing and takes it to my car. Since we ate most of the food I brought, I’m happy to travel home a lot lighter. The Christmas decorations are already in the trunk, so I’m almost done.

He closes the trunk and pulls me close. “Do you think Jeremy feels neglected? He spent all this time in the suitcase.”

I laugh. “Nah. He doesn’t have self-confidence issues. Besides, once I introduce you two properly, I’m sure you’ll get along fine.”

He raises a brow.

“What? Playing with toys isn’t just for kids, you know,” I say.

“Harrison sent a message to say the roads are clear from here to Stillwater. I’m sure they’ll be fine the rest of the way to Windsor. Are you all packed up?”

“Yes, but I still don’t want to go.” I pout, but the only outcome is Riley pulling me in for a kiss, starting by sucking the pout straight out of me. Damn, he’s so good at it.

I run my hands through his hair. “I’ll miss you. Sorry if that sounds silly and desperate, but I don’t care.”

“I’ll miss not having you around all the time too. Who’d have thought, huh?” He kisses my nose. “Get in your car and warm up. I’ll just lock up and then follow you home, okay?”

“You don’t have to, you know? I got here perfectly fine on my own,” I say.

“I know, but I’ll feel better knowing you’re home safe. Besides, you have that big suitcase, and in case you missed them, I have a few muscles to spare.”

I lick my lips. “Coach, your flirting game is on.”

“Now that’s something I’ve never heard before.”

I poke his chest. “And never will again unless it’s from me. Got it?”

He raises his hands. “Yes, sir.”

“Ooh...park that thought for the end of our first date.”

He gives me one last kiss and makes sure I'm in the car.

My phone rings with a call from Juju, but I don't want to answer now since we're about to get on the road. I'll call her back when I'm home. It's only a forty-minute drive.

I pick my playlist and turn the music on, singing along to my favorite songs as we leave our Christmas bubble and get ready to face the real world.

I'm just glad I still have until the new year off from Spilled Beans because I can spend some time with Riley before the start of the spring semester. No doubt we'll be busy once school starts again, but at least we'll both attend all the football games.

My mind drifts from thoughts about Riley to some ideas I had in the last few days for the cheerleading routine. Before I know it, I'm stopping in front of my building.

Riley parks behind my car and comes to help me with the suitcase.

“Bubble!” I hear a scream from a very familiar voice, and when I turn toward it, I almost faint.

“Juju! Oh my god, how are you here?”

“I tried calling, but you didn't answer. The airline offered to reschedule the flight, so I took the chance.”

I hug her tight. She smells like airplane, flowers, and gummy bears, her favorite flying snack. “God, I missed you.”

She looks behind me and her chin literally drops. “Wow.”

“Oh, Juju, this is Riley.” I turn to Riley. “Riley, this is my best friend, Juju.”

“Nice to meet you, Juju,” Riley says. “I've heard a lot about you.”

“Everything he said is a lie,” she says, pointing at me. “Unless it's true.”

Riley laughs. "I guess I'll need to get to know you better to figure out which is which."

Juju meets my gaze, and I'm sure I'm melting on the spot, even in this cold weather. Yes, my boyfriend is being super-duper-sweet to my best friend. Is it legal to jump him in public and kiss his handsome face? Because I so want to do that right now.

She scratches her messy bun, her expression suddenly going serious. She spares a glance at Riley and then back at me. "Um, I'm not on my own. It wasn't my idea. It was more that I didn't have a choice. Trust me, I wanted to cut off his balls during the flight, but I heard there's always an Air Marshall present, and I didn't want to get arrested."

"What are you talking about?"

My blood goes cold and my legs almost give out when I see the one person I swore I'd never want to see or hear from again in my life.

"Wha...what is he doing here?"

"Babe, are you okay?" Riley is there next to me, his strong arm keeping me steady.

Harley smiles like we're long-lost friends or lovers who haven't seen each other in a while and miss one another. "Boo-boo! Wow, you look fantastic."

He's dressed in clothes that are totally inappropriate for this weather. His leather shoes alone will get him killed if he doesn't die of frostbite first.

If only.

The closer he gets, the more my blood thaws until it reaches a boiling-rage temperature.

I don't want to make a scene, especially not in front of Riley. The last thing I want is for him to decide I'm far too much drama after all. Not to mention that my whole story with Harley is too humiliating.

Harley comes so close I can smell his cologne. The one that always made me nauseous. I should have known even then he

wasn't right for me.

I freeze when he comes even closer, but Riley holds out his hand to him, effectively providing a safe barrier.

"Riley Dempsey. You are?"

Riley's voice is deeper and more assertive than I've heard it before.

Harley takes a step back and gives Riley an assessing look. He doesn't take Riley's hand, which is probably a smart move. "Harley Bruce. How's life been since you left the Marinos, Coach Dempsey?"

"Mr. Bruce. I read the sports news headlines too," Riley replies with a cryptic tone, and I swear I see some of Harley's color drain from his face.

What's that all about?

"Well, this was a nice little reunion, but you've seen Bubble, so you can get on your way, Harley. Ciao," Juju says, attempting to push him away.

"Not so fast. I'd like to catch up with Bubble," he says without taking his eyes off me.

"Bubble?" Riley's voice is gentle, and I love how he didn't call me by my name. Harley has no business knowing my name. I know Riley has my back if I want him to send Harley away. But now that he's here, I want to know what he has to say for himself before I kick his ass to Timbuktu.

I look up at Riley. "I'll text you later, okay?"

He stares into my eyes, and I wish I could tell him what I don't want to say aloud in front of Harley. "We're still on for tomorrow, yeah?"

"Of course." And with that, he returns to his car and leaves.

I watch as the car containing the person I want to be with disappears while the one I want to murder is still a few steps away.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Harley?"

“I came to see you, baby. You disappeared after I left the hospital. I was worried sick.”

“You were so worried sick that you went and got my spot on the cheerleading team. Tell me, did you sleep with the coach to get in, or was it a straight knife in the back situation?”

I don't bother with my suitcase or any of the stuff in my car. I walk to my building, picking up Juju's suitcase by the door. Even though the last thing I want is to have Harley anywhere near my personal space, it's cold out. Juju is also wearing unseasonable clothing.

“I didn't stab you in the back, Bubble. You were injured. Someone else would have taken the spot. Wouldn't you have wanted that person to be me?”

I open my front door and walk inside my small apartment. It's cold because I haven't been in for a week, so I turn on the heat. My new personal goal is to get Harley out before the apartment gets warm.

Juju stays silent. I love her, but our conversation about this whole thing will happen later.

“You know what, Harley? You're right. I would have wanted you to have the spot. If you'd talked about it with me. If you'd asked me if I was okay with it. But I was in the hospital with my whole career destroyed in one single moment, and what did you do? As soon as you could stop playing the caring boyfriend, you left me.”

He at least has the decency to look ashamed. “I did love you, you know?”

“You had a funny way of showing it. But you know what? I don't even care if it was real anymore. I just want you out of my life. I don't know why you're here, but you've seen me. The door is over there.”

This is one of those rare times when I hate that my usually cozy apartment is too small. I can't make a dramatic exit unless I go hide in the bathroom or my bedroom, so I go to the kitchen and start brewing a pot of coffee.

“I know what I did was wrong, but I was hoping you’d put it behind us and—”

“And what? Want to get back together? Fuck no.”

“I need your help,” he says.

I laugh. “I have no money.”

“It’s not money I need.”

I turn around and cross my arms. This should be good.

“I went out to celebrate my spot on the new team and someone spiked my drink. Nothing bad happened, but there was a random drug test the next day, and I failed. Now I have to audition again if I want to get back in.”

I look at Juju. “Did you tell him I helped Brandon with his audition?”

“No. This dickwad just came over and refused to leave until I told him where you were. I already had my flight booked to surprise you, and he just followed me.”

Harley stares at me. “You’re the one who helped Brandon get his role?”

“No, asshole. Brandon helped Brandon get his role. When will you get through your head that only you can help yourself? No one else can do the work for you. I just gave him some choreography ideas, and he ran with them. Anyway, you’re still here. Go away.”

“So you’re not going to help me?” He stares at me, and I see his vulnerability. But then I remember coming back from my surgery, and he wasn’t there. Waiting for him to visit me at home, and he never did. Not a single flower, card, or wish that I would get better enough to follow my dream.

“No. Please leave. I’m not asking again.”

“But I came all the way here,” he says, like it’s the grand gesture I’ve been waiting for all my life.

“I didn’t ask you to come.”

“I don’t even have a suitcase or clothes.”

“Believe it or not, there are shops in Connecticut too.” I gesture to the door.

Harley looks at Juju, who’s made herself comfortable on my couch under one of my many blankets. She’s not even looking at us.

It’s not until the door clicks shut that I finally take a breath.

I lean on the breakfast bar, and a moment later, Juju is there with her arms around me.

“I’m sorry. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn’t listen. I tried to warn you, but you didn’t pick up your phone all day.”

“That’s because I was busy having all the morning sex with my boyfriend before we came home.”

She screeches and grasps her hands in front of her chest. “Fill me up with a cup of that coffee and *all* the details. Let’s order in food. I can’t believe you scored your Coach. He seemed pretty pissed when he left.”

“I know. I’ll call him later. Probably should cancel our date tomorrow. I don’t want to leave you on your own.”

She hits me in the head. “You will do no such thing. Did you see the way that man looks at you? You are not standing him up for me. I can take care of myself for one night. And you better stay over at his place if you’re going to fuck like bunnies.”

I hug her again. “Oh, how I missed you.”

As I start pouring the coffee, the cup suddenly cracks. We both gasp and look at each other.

My grandmother used to say that was a sign something was about to happen.

“That’s...just a delayed reaction from Harley turning up,” Juju says.

A shiver runs down my spine. “Yeah...”

COACH



I REST my head against the back of my seat and close my eyes. I've barely slept over the last three days, but my body refuses to give me any kind of rest.

My suitcase is still by the front door of my place, abandoned.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Mom asks.

“Yeah.”

“You look tired.”

“I'm good.” I give her a smile and bring her hand up to my lips.

I'd barely arrived home after leaving Curtis with his friend and the other guy when I got a call from my mom. Dad slipped on a wet floor and broke his foot.

I'm glad it wasn't something more serious, but since they were about to leave St. Barts, they missed their flight back.

Her trembling voice over the phone is something I won't forget anytime soon. This was their first vacation abroad, so even though they had insurance to help with costs, I know this was a scary experience for my mom.

She may be brave most of the time, but she's a total mother hen to my dad and me. I can only imagine how helpless she felt seeing him in the hospital and not knowing what to do.

The only thing I could think to do on the spot was to fly out and bring them back home with me. I could arrange their

flights back to Denver once we figured out what kind of support my dad would need at home.

Like me, he's not a small man, and with his mobility compromised, there's no way my mom can do everything for him.

"We'll be landing soon," I tell her, and she smiles. Dad is a few rows in front of us, reading a magazine. At least he's taking it all in his stride.

I stare at my phone. In the rush to pack clean clothes in a duffel bag, I forgot to grab the charger that was in my suitcase. Thank god for airport stores because I'd hate to think I couldn't have contacted Curtis to tell him I wouldn't make our date.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, willing my headache away.

God, I miss him so much.

It's been three days, and I can't stop thinking about him, worrying about if he's okay. I don't know what that thing between him and Harley Bruce was, but I didn't like how he looked at Curtis like he owned him or something.

I also didn't miss how Curtis tensed as soon as he saw Harley. The dickhead thought he'd be able to scare me off, but I know exactly who he is. I just don't know his connection to Curtis other than they're both cheerleaders. Maybe they used to be on the same team.

"Fuck," I say between gritted teeth, but it's loud enough that my mom puts her hand on my knee and pats it.

What if they were together? What if Harley wants to get back with Curtis?

"Honey, you look like you're about to jump out of your skin. Please tell me what's going on. Is it because you're having to deal with us at the last minute?"

"What? God no, Mom, of course not."

"Then what is it? We used to talk about everything, but you've closed yourself off from me." She sounds hurt, and she has reason to be.

I let out a sigh. The guy sitting on the other side of me is asleep. I turn in my seat slightly.

“Mom, if you found out that someone you love has a secret that could destroy your friendship but doesn’t involve you, would you still want to know?”

She takes my hand in hers. “If the secret has the potential to destroy a friendship, then I’d say it already involves me. I’d want to know.”

“Even if it’s about Mel?”

“You are my only son. I’m so proud of the man you are. Nothing you could tell me would make me love you any less. Mel has become a daughter to us, but we know she’s not perfect.”

God, I want to hug her.

“Oh, Mom. I love you so much for being so open. You and Dad made me the way I am. You’re always loving and accepting, which is why this is really difficult for me.”

She squeezes my hand. “Let it out once, and we’ll never speak of it again.”

“I can’t have children, Mom. I’m infertile.”

Her eyes go red and fill with tears. “Oh, baby.” She cradles my face, looking into my eyes until the information sets in.

“When did you find out?”

“Before I filed for divorce.”

Her brows furrow because my mom has been there for twenty-three years of miscarriages and heartbreak. She was the shoulder Mel cried on like she would her own mother had she been alive.

“My whole life was a lie, Mom. When Mel got pregnant at eighteen, I was so scared about the prospect of being a father so young. We’d never...you know, had sex. Even though I was scared, I was devastated when she lost the baby. We both were.”

“But if you can’t have any children...?” Mom gasps. “She didn’t know...” I see the pieces being put together in my mom’s head. I don’t need to tell her Mel cheated because it’s obvious.

I nod. “We stayed together and got married and...then she lost another baby. I don’t know why she did it, but since I’m infertile, you can guess how many times before and during our marriage she’s been with other men and had unprotected sex. She put herself and me at risk. I couldn’t forgive her.”

“How did you find out?”

“A friend saw her leaving a hotel with a man while I was away with the team and told me. When I confronted her, she confessed to being lonely because I was always away. When I asked her about the first pregnancy, she couldn’t even look at me. That’s when I went to the doctor to get tested for STIs, and while I was there, I also asked about my fertility. It’s ridiculous now to think we never considered one of us couldn’t conceive. She probably just assumed those babies were mine.”

Mom runs her hands through her hair. “My god, what have I done?”

“What are you talking about?”

She sighs. “I didn’t want to be a burden to you, so I asked Mel if she could come to help us fly back home.”

“What do you mean, Mom?”

“Oh, son. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have done it. I’ll call her when we land and cancel.”

“Cancel what?”

“She’s flying to Connecticut and staying in a hotel while we make the arrangements at home. Then she’s flying back with us. I was just so scared of doing all of this with your dad on my own.”

The announcement for the landing comes on.

“It’s okay, Mom. It’s probably a good idea. She’s someone you know and trust to help you get home.”

She scoffs. “Well, my trust in her has changed severely in the last few minutes, but if life has taught me anything, it’s that sometimes we have to fight one fire at a time.” She holds my hand in hers. “And what about that young man who was at the cabin with you? We may be old, but we’re not blind. Dad and I talked about it. We think your age gap could be a concern in the future, but we saw how he looked at you when you weren’t looking, even in that short call. If you two love each other, then we’re happy for you and fully supportive.”

I smile, bringing her hand up to my lips.

“Thank you, Mom.” As soon as we’re home, I’ll call Curtis and set up another date. I don’t want there to be any misunderstandings between us. I have to trust that what we had in the cabin was real, and if I have to fight that shithead who turned up at his doorstep, then I’ll do it.

BUBBLE



I HEAR a noise at the front door and, soon after, steps approaching my room. I close my eyes.

“You can pretend all you want, but I know you’re awake,” Juju says. “I’m going to put a pizza in the oven unless you want me to destroy your kitchen with something a little more gourmet, like a salad?”

“Salad isn’t gourmet. It’s just stuff tossed in a bowl.”

She jumps on the bed and tickles me. “So you *are* awake.”

“Get off me, ridiculous woman.”

“Make me.”

I turn around and start tickling her back. We end up on the floor, tangled in my bed covers and laughing until we’re crying.

“Thank you for being here,” I say as we lie facing each other.

She grasps my hands close to her chest.

“Ew, I’m touching boob.”

“Shut up,” she says. “We’re having a moment.”

“We are?”

“Yes. The moment where I tell you that you need to stop moping around and pull yourself together. Okay, so you miss him. He’ll be back soon, and you can get back to having all the hot sex.”

“What if something bad happened?” My heart starts palpitating. “What if he’s in the hospital and can’t talk, and there’s no one with him. Oh my god, Juju, we need to start calling all the hospitals.”

I move to get up, but she grips me with the strength of a thousand vices.

“Stop being dramatic. Why would he be in the hospital? You said he went to get his parents from St. Barts.”

“How do you know? He could have slipped on a wet floor and knocked himself out, and maybe he has a concussion and lost his memory. He’ll never remember what we had this Christmas.” My voice hitches and my lower lip wobbles.

Juju closes her eyes and takes a deep breath like she’s giving up. “Okay, why don’t you have a shower and get dressed in anything but yoga pants. We’ll eat pizza and then go to his place. If he’s not there, we’ll ask his neighbors if they’ve seen him.”

“Okay...I suppose that sounds like a reasonable plan.”

We stand, and I take the opportunity of a messy bed to put the sheets in the wash. I quickly put fresh sheets on the bed and then jump in the shower.

When I come out, I smell the delicious scent of tomato, cheese, and garlic. If Juju also got us some buffalo wings, I might just have to smother her with kisses.

I’m getting dressed when my phone rings on the nightstand. I see Riley’s name pop up and almost trip over myself to get the phone.

“Hello?”

“Curtis, baby.”

The way he says my name like a prayer—god, it does things to me.

“Riley, god, I was so worried. Okay, I may have been a little dramatic about it too.” He chuckles on the other side of the line. “But I’m really happy you’re back, and I’m sorry your

dad got hurt on vacation. Your mom must have been so scared.”

“It wasn’t easy for her. Dealing with all the insurance, the doctors. But we’re all home now, and that’s what matters. I need to help them arrange some support for my dad at home in Denver before they can fly out.” He pauses. “Fuck, I miss you. I miss feeling your warm body against mine, your strawberry scent, your smile, your forest-green eyes.”

I fall on the bed like an infatuated teenager. “I missed you too. And by the way, your phone voice is sexy as hell. Do you have five minutes to read the phone book while I get myself off?”

He laughs, and the sound reaches all the parts of my body that have been neglected in the last few days, especially my heart.

“I promise to make it up to you.”

“You better.”

“Listen, I gotta go. Call you later, okay?”

“Okay.” I resist the urge to say *love you* at the end because it’s ridiculous. We’ve been together a week, and we’re not even officially boyfriends.

I jump off the bed with renewed energy.

“Wow, is there some kind of illegal substance in that new soap you bought?” Juju says when I come out of my room.

“Nope. Better. Let’s eat because I’m starving, and then I need to bake a pie.”

“Okaay.”

Over lunch, I tell Juju about Riley’s call, and she hits me on the head with her *I told you so* expression.

Riley’s mom and dad liked the pie I made for Thanksgiving, so I check my cabinets, and I still have all the ingredients I need.

Juju turns the TV on, picking one of her reality TV shows to play in the background. I’m not letting her anywhere near my pie, so we chat about anything and everything.

When the pie is ready, I take it out of the oven and put it to one side to cool down. Then I go to the bedroom, pick my favorite outfit, and get ready.

“What do you think?” I ask Juju, doing a full twirl in front of her.

“I think that if I was your coach, I’d be eating that pie off your body.”

I look at my pink cropped shirt with the oversized collar. “Should I tone it down?”

“No, babe. You be you. Go surprise your coach with your nice gesture.”

“Okay. I’ve got this.”

Despite my initial excitement, as I’m approaching Riley’s place, nerves get the best of me. What if he doesn’t want me to come over unannounced? What if he’s not ready for me to properly meet his parents?

Shit. I didn’t even think of that.

Well, it’s too late now. Besides, I don’t have to come in. I can just give him the pie and leave. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do.

I walk up to the door and ring the bell. A moment later, the door opens, but it’s not Riley.

“Um...hi.” I stare at the woman. It’s not Riley’s mom. I remember her from the call.

The woman stares at me in confusion. She’s beautiful, with blonde hair and bright-blue eyes.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

“Um...I’m looking for Coach...I mean, Riley.”

She smiles. “Oh, you must be one of his work colleagues. I’m Mel, his wife.”

The way she says the words with such certainty and confidence almost knocks me sideways.

“Is Riley here?” I ask.

“He’s gone out to do some shopping. We’ve all just flown in, so it’s a bit of a mess.” She straightens her long hair. “Is this work-related? Can I pass a message? Riley has always been a workaholic.” She giggles.

“Um, no, it’s not important. I heard his dad had an accident and thought he might want some pie to cheer him up.”

She holds out her hands to take the pie from me. “Aw, that’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you. We really appreciate your support. We’ll write a note of thanks to the school.”

I stand there speechless and confused.

“Was there anything else you wanted?”

“No. That was...no...” I walk back to my car.

I sit there for a while trying to process what just happened. He called me. He said he missed me.

But he never said his ex-wife was with him and never invited me to come over. It reminds me how little we really know about each other.

I’m on autopilot all the way home.

Juju runs to me as soon as I’m through the door.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

I sit on the couch with my coat and shoes still on. “His ex-wife was there. She referred to herself as his wife. He never said she was there when he called.” I look at Juju. “Do you think he lied?”

“Why don’t you call him?”

I shake my head.

“Fine, I’ll call him.” She grabs the phone from my hand before I can stop her and calls his number.

I hear the sound of the ringtone. It rings a few times until someone answers.

“Hello?”

Juju stares at me and mouths, “Is that her?”

I nod as tears start running down my face.

“Who is this? Your name comes up as Bubble, which must be a joke. Either way—”

Juju disconnects the call and wraps her arms around me.

“I fell in love with him, you know?”

“I know, sweetie. You have such a big heart.”

“Why does no one want it?”

She rocks us in a soothing motion while running her hands up and down my back.

“I think it’s time to open that bottle of wine you have in the fridge,” she says.

“And then margaritas.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And rum punches?”

“Whatever you want, babe.”

We collect all the alcohol I own plus what Juju’s bought while she’s been staying with me, and it all goes on the coffee table. I don’t remember going to bed, but that’s where I wake up the following morning.

And because it’s New Year’s Eve, we decide to remain drunk because no one wants to be hungover on New Year’s Eve before the party.

We eat and drink ourselves silly.

Within reason, of course. Juju, the saint she is, makes sure I keep drinking water and eating carbs.

New Year’s Day passes in a flash, and then Juju is gone.

I’m left to patch my wounded heart on my own.

I haven’t heard from Riley since our last call. Although, to be fair, I turned my phone off, so maybe there were calls. I don’t

know.

In a moment of weakness, when I know Juju is up in the sky flying back home, I turn it on.

There are some voicemails from Riley, but I can't bring myself to listen to them.

I'm too scared.

So I keep ignoring them and the new calls that come through.

The day before class starts, there's an email from the principal asking all teaching and administration staff to come in for a meeting.

I know I'll see Riley then and consider resigning from my job until Juju's voice in my head tells me to stop being dramatic.

There's only one thing to do.

I'm not Bubblelicious for nothing.

I'm going to fight fire with fire.

COACH



I END the call with my parents and get ready to go to school. I'm glad they've settled back at home fine and Dad is behaving.

It's time to get back to my life, including winning back the man I've fallen in love with.

When Mom told me about Curtis coming over with pie while I was shopping, I wanted to throttle Mel.

Thankfully, Mom did it for me by sending her back to her hotel before I got home. Mom had been helping Dad settle on the couch when the doorbell rang, so Mel answered the door.

I saw the pie on the kitchen counter as soon as I put the groceries down. For a moment, my heart soared, and I ran to the living room, thinking Bubble might be keeping my dad company.

Between arranging care and flights for my parents to return home after New Year's Day and making sure they were both comfortable in my much-smaller house, it didn't leave me with much time for anything else.

I called Curtis, but the phone seemed to be off. I left voicemails that were ignored.

In the end, Mom's parting words gave me the best idea.

"Your boy needs a grand gesture. Since you last saw him, you missed your date, but he still turned up with pie, and then he had to deal with facing your ex-wife. Show him you're deserving of his love."

So I made a few other calls and put a plan in place.

I look at the watch. It's time to leave, so I give myself another check in the mirror.

I'm wearing a white button-up shirt and the best pair of jeans I own. It's nothing special, but I know Curtis doesn't care about fancy stuff. He cares about being genuine and being yourself.

I grab my coat and leave.

When I get to the school, everyone is already there. The cheerleading team, the football team, and the school band. God, I love these kids.

"Hey, Justin. Everyone okay?" I ask Curtis's assistant coach.

"Coach, this is going to be epic." He goes to join the kids, holding a tablet in his hand.

Bubble should be arriving any moment now, so I take my place in front of the door leading to the locker rooms and our office.

My hands shake, so I put them in my pockets. This could go so fucking horribly wrong.

"He's here," I hear someone say.

I can't see anything because of the crowd of kids in front of me. I'm sure someone is recording this because the kids put so much work into practicing the routine at the last minute.

When I called Justin, he couldn't have been more excited to help.

He said there was some kind of unofficial bet going on among the cheerleading team because Curtis's crush wasn't that secret. They wondered when I'd finally break down and kill him or date him.

I don't know who's on the winning team, but I fell in love with the pint-sized, strawberry-scented, permanently cheerful man. I think I'm the one winning here. If he'll have me.

The band starts playing the song I heard him singing in the shower the day I first saw him almost naked, the Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four."

The lyrics have been slightly tweaked, which was Justin's idea, but the main part remains the same.

I hope he will still love me when I'm sixty-four.

Cheerleaders jump high in the air while the football team throws balls between each other. As Curtis walks through, they're supposed to create a walkway that leads directly to me at the end of the song.

I don't see much until he's closer, and then he's there. Only a few feet from me.

A few students stand between us. Cheerleaders doing their routine and blowing kisses at Bubble after they land on their feet. Footballs create an arch over his head.

It's amazing, but it doesn't compare to the shine in his eyes. The smile of pure joy seeing everything happen around him.

He covers his mouth with his hands when the cheerleaders do something particularly daring, and then he hugs them at the end. They push him toward me, which is when he finally sees me standing there.

He stops, and I can't read his face. The music is still playing. The cue for the kids to disperse and leave us alone is when the music ends.

When that happens, there will be nothing between us. No more lies or misunderstandings.

I mouth at him, "I love you," and his eyes fill with tears.

Please don't run from me. I need you.

He keeps walking forward until he crashes into my arms. I wrap mine around him and hold tight. He's not getting away from me anytime soon.

The music ends. He looks up at me.

"No. When you're sixty-four, I will love you more than I love you today because even after all the heartache and the things we need to talk about, you're still the only one I want."

I cradle his face and kiss him.

In seconds, we're surrounded by kids cheering, jumping, and clapping. It's insanity.

When we part, Curtis's cheeks are pink and his lips are red from me sucking on them.

"Go on, you've seen everything. You can go home," I shout so everyone can hear.

"Go, Bubble!" the cheerleaders shout.

"It's odd how they seem to have this weird vested interest in us being together," I say, placing my hand on his chin and turning his face back to me.

"How did you put all of this together?" he asks.

"Justin helped. He's a total enabler. My low-key surprise turned into a one hundred-people flash mob."

I take his hand and pull him inside the building, locking the door behind us.

Curtis raises a brow but doesn't ask questions.

His earthquake detection kits are still on the walls as we walk through the locker room, but it's the office I want him to see.

"Are you ready for it?" I ask.

"Is there another band and more music?"

"No."

"*Magic Mike*, but naked?" He wiggles his brows.

"What? No."

He shrugs. "That's okay. You can put on your own show for me."

I open the door and let him through.

"You moved my desk?" He runs his hand over his desk, where it joins with mine. They're side by side. His inspirational quotes have been moved so they cover the space behind both desks, and now I can see the paint on the wall.

"You belong next to me, Curtis. In every way possible." I pick him up and place him on his desk, pushing his coat off his

shoulders so I can get closer to him. “I’m sorry about Mel. Anything she said or implied wasn’t true. My mom was so angry when Mel said you’d dropped off a pie. She wanted to meet you.”

“Mel didn’t know who I was,” he says.

“No. That is true. But the polite thing to do would have been to invite you in.”

“Do you think she knew? That you maybe were with a guy.”

I shrug. “No, and it doesn’t matter. I came clean to my mom about what Mel did and the reason for our divorce. I will tell you the story later, but there’s something more important that I think you should know.”

“Okay.”

God, his eyes hold so much trust.

“It’s a few things, actually. The first and most important one is that I love you. I love you so much. I can’t stand the thought of not seeing you every day, waking up to you, or hearing you mumble about ridiculous things. I love you to the point I want to know your best friend. I want her to visit you as often as she can. I want you to pursue your dreams and be happy. I just hope they also include me. I hope we can make our Christmas bubble last forever.” He opens his mouth to talk, but I put a finger over his lips to stop him.

“I’m also infertile. I always wanted children but didn’t know I couldn’t have them until recently. When I got divorced, it became one of those things I accepted I’ll never have. But I’ll just put it out there, Curtis. If you want to be a dad, I’ll be the best dad our children could ask for. If you don’t, then that’s also okay. Whatever we decide together will always be the right thing. I will never want anything more than you. Do you hear me?”

He looks up at the ceiling. “I always thought my grandma was up there looking out for me. Now I know it’s true, and she really outdid herself this time.”

Then he looks at me, his eyes red with unshed tears. “I ran away to Connecticut because someone I thought I loved made

me feel like I was nothing more than a stepping stone to getting what he wanted. Now I know that every moment in my life was designed to take me to this exact spot where I can tell you that I love you back. I will give you as many children as you want because the only way I can see my future is with you, Riley Dempsey.”

Our mouths meet in a soft, loving kiss that becomes hungry and desperate. Teeth clink together, nipping and biting. He tastes just how I remember. My favorite flavor of all time.

Strawberry Bubble.

“Take me home, Coach, and fuck me like you wanted that first time. Let’s pretend we’re in that shower.”

“How did you know I wanted to fuck you then?” I nip at his neck, sucking his skin so it leaves a mark.

“It was in your eyes.”

I grab his coat and help him put it on, zipping it up until he looks like the most delicious human burrito.

Before we leave, Curtis notices the new additions to our stationery. Pen holders. One that says *I’m his* with an arrow pointing to the other that says *He’s mine*.

“Just so we’re clear, this doesn’t mean you get cake every day now,” he says.

“What? Are you kidding me?”

He goes up on his toes to kiss me. “But you can eat my ass any time you want.”

“I’ll take that.”

By the time we come out of the building, there’s no one around.

Thank god the Principal is a Marinos fan, and I managed to get him a shirt signed by all the guys on the team.

I’d get shirts signed by all the teams in the NFL for the chance to get my Bubble back.

“God, I can’t wait to be inside you again,” I say, pulling him by the hand over to my car. We can get his tomorrow.

“Then we better be quick. Then again, my dick has been neglected for over a week. It won’t take much for me to come as soon as I have your monster cock filling me.”

“Christ, Bubble. You’re going to make me come in my pants.”

We get to my place in record time. Since my new favorite sport is carrying Curtis everywhere, I lift him up when we get out of the car and don’t let him go until we’re inside the bathroom in my bedroom.

Clothes are discarded, and I think my shirt is now missing a button or two. Curtis turns the shower on, and we wait until the water is warm before we go under the spray.

He puts his hands on the tiled wall and sticks his butt out for me. It’s the most beautiful sight.

I drop to my knees and suck him until he’s pushing back against my face.

“One of these days, you’re going to sit on my face, and I’m going to eat you until you come, baby,” I say.

He moans his reply as I replace my tongue with my lubed fingers.

“Fuck, I missed your fingers. Give me more, Riley.”

“Patience, Curtis.”

“Fuck that. I needed your dick inside me yesterday.”

My dick thickens as I think of sinking into his tight hole. I stand and apply lube to my shaft before lining it up with his ass.

Using both hands, I open him so I can see as he takes me inch by inch.

“You look so good with my cock buried to the hilt inside you, Curtis.”

“Ugh, why do you make my name sound like it’s the sexiest name ever?”

“Because I love you, baby. Your name from my lips will always be a prayer.”

He turns his face sideways to meet my gaze.

“Then take me to church, Riley.”

I pull out and thrust back in one move. Curtis screams my name and more.

I need to see his face when he comes, so I pull out and turn him around.

“Wrap your legs around my waist.”

His thighs pressing around me remind me of how strong he is. He may be small, but he’s not weak. I grab my cock and put it back inside him.

With my hands on his ass, I don’t even need the wall for support.

“Oh my god, Coach. This feels so good. God, you’re hitting it right there every time. Fuck, don’t stop.”

I grit my teeth and use my hands to help him bounce on my dick until he’s coming. Rope after rope of white cum coating our stomachs.

“I want to taste it,” I say.

He runs his hand over his chest and then brings it to my mouth. The salty, bitter taste of his release and the fact I was already on the verge of coming take me over.

I fill him with more than a week’s worth of cum. Just like him, I haven’t touched myself. Even when all I could think about was Curtis, I needed my next time to be inside him.

Our breaths mingle in a lazy kiss. I pull us back under the water spray and put him down so we can wash each other.

I never thought I’d have a second chance at love at my age, but I know now I never stood a chance against Curtis. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

BUBBLE

A YEAR-ISH LATER



“IT’S ENOUGH, BABY. TRUST ME.”

I stare at the man I love above anything else, although right now, I wonder why.

I raise my hand, pointing at my fingers. “First, you can never have enough decorations. Second, yes, the cookies on the Christmas tree must be edible. Otherwise, what’s the point. Third, we still need to hang the garland on the wood beam.”

He takes his shirt off.

“What are you doing?” I grab his shirt and attempt to get him dressed. But his hands are already on the waist of his gray sweatpants. My traitorous dick reacts. “No. We are not having sex right now. Your parents will be here any moment, and we haven’t finished decorating.”

He’s fully naked. His super-cannon dick pointing at me, taunting me.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “Fine. But we’ll need to be quick.”

He lifts me over his shoulder and takes me to the bedroom.

Thank you, lord, for small mercies. I wouldn’t want to have to clean cum from the couch cushions right before his parents arrive.

“Ass up,” he commands, and I obey. I love it when he gets bossy.

I expect him to rim me, but instead, I feel cold lube on my ass. He opens me and something other than his fingers slides inside me.

“What the hell?”

“Relax, baby, it’s only a plug.”

“Why does it feel weird?”

He laughs. “You’ll see. Now on your back.”

Hmm, okay...

I don’t know where this is going, but the more he touches me, the more I want to come, and the less I think about Christmas decorations or his parents coming with Juju from the airport.

We’re staying at the cabin again this year, and after speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Crawford, they reassured me that no one was using their cabin this Christmas. We’ve rented it out for Riley’s parents and Juju. It’s going to be great.

Riley straddles me. He reaches behind his back and pulls a plug out of his own ass.

Sneaky bastard.

Then he aligns his hole with my cock and sits on me in one go.

“Fucking...fuck...” I scream. His weight makes the plug in my ass press against my prostate and the double stimulation is going to make this ridiculously quick.

“I’m going to move now, baby. It’s going to be quick and dirty,” he warns.

“Yes...please.”

For a man who’s just turned forty-seven, Riley has stupid stamina. I’m sure I’ll die well before him. He rides my dick like a cowboy late for a rodeo.

His cock is flushed and leaking like a faucet. He’s holding on to my legs behind him, so I know I’m hitting his prostate.

When his movements become jerkier, I know he’s getting close.

“You ready, baby?” he asks.

“Fuck yeah.” This is his show. I’m going to let him come before I allow myself to release, but the moment the first rope of cum hits my chest, the fucking plug in my ass vibrates and pushes me over.

I push my hips up with a strength I didn’t know I had as my body gives in to the pleasure. I think I pass out for a moment because I don’t remember the plug being turned off or removed from my ass.

Riley comes over with a warm cloth to clean his release from my chest. Some even hit my face. Then he lies beside me and pulls me into his arms.

“Was this you trying to kill me? Because you nearly succeeded,” I say.

He chuckles. “No. That was me trying to relax you.”

“Consider me relaxed.” I lift one arm and let it fall back on the bed like it weighs a hundred pounds.

“You’ve been too stressed, baby.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s been crazy, hasn’t it? I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much.”

He cradles my face. “I’m so incredibly proud of you, Curtis.”

“I know. But I wish I had more time to spend with you.”

This last year has been a total whirlwind. Brandon mentioned me to someone he worked with on Broadway, and they wanted me to move to New York to work with them.

Me. Curtis John Merroll. A choreographer on Broadway.

In.Sa.Ne.

I was excited at first, but right before I was supposed to meet them, I got a serious case of anxiety. Coach came with me to New York, and we had a great time.

He proposed to me in Central Park—*Yes, we’re engaged!*—but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off.

In the end, I decided it wasn’t for me, but my meeting opened other possibilities, so I enrolled back in college to study

choreography. I still coach the cheerleading team, but Justin does a lot of the work since I sometimes have class and miss training or games.

I suggested resigning, but the principal was having none of it, especially after the squad won their first national competition.

Coach is still with the team and loving it. Every so often, one of his old players comes to visit, which brings the reporters into town. It all becomes a circus for a few days until it all goes back to normal.

Juju is still in LA, but she's seriously considering moving to Connecticut, especially after I graduate. We've been talking about opening a dance school together.

I haven't heard anything about he-who-shall-not-be-named since he left my apartment. That's not entirely true. Juju heard through the grapevine that the story he spun about his drink being spiked wasn't true. He was actually taking illegal drugs to help his performance on the mat.

As my grandma used to say, you make your own luck. I guess he thought he needed to steal it instead of working for it. I don't care anyway.

We grow and our dreams change. My dreams now include a lot of new changes in our lives.

I hear a car outside. "Oh shit. They're here." I jump off the bed and start picking up my clothes.

"Baby, calm down. They can't come in without a key, and they'll probably settle in next door first, anyway."

"But the decorations!"

Riley sighs, giving up the fight. "Come on, Bubblelicious. Tell me what I need to hang and where."

Riley's family and Juju send us a message to say they're unpacking and warming up the cabin and will join us for dinner. That gives us more time to put everything together.

I need it to be perfect.

We spent a lot of time at the cabin this summer, and Riley finished all his home-improvement projects. Then he indulged me with a shopping spree to buy new blankets, frames to hang our family photos, and decorations.

The cabin now feels like a home. Our little home away from home. A sanctuary we can escape to.

There's a knock on the door.

Riley opens the door, and the family spills in one by one.

Juju runs over to me straight away, hugging me tightly before stealing a piece of the meat I'm cutting for dinner.

Then it's Riley's parents, who are so adorably like Riley. I love them both.

"Did you make some more of that pie, son?"

"Sure did, Dad."

And that's another thing. They insist on me calling them Mom and Dad. The first time they said it, I cried like a baby and ran out of the room. After clarifying my reaction, they understood how special their request was to me. They've been Mom and Dad since.

"Dinner's ready," I announce.

Everyone takes their place while I bring all the food to the table.

Before we start filling our plates, Riley looks at me and smiles as he clears his throat.

"Mom, Dad, Juju," Riley says. "We have some news. If you look under your plates, there's a small envelope we want you to open."

They all lift their plates and look at what we left for them.

Riley puts his arm around my shoulders. We watch as the most important people in our lives find out that our family is about to become a little bigger, thanks to our amazing surrogate.

When we had a chance to talk about everything a year ago, Riley told me more about his attempts at having a family with

his ex-wife. I know this is a big moment not just for him but for his parents too.

His mom comes around and gives me a tight hug. “My sweet child. Thank you for being everything our Riley needs.”

“Mom, you know I’m not actually pregnant, right?”

They all laugh, and as everyone fills their plates with food, we talk about baby names, nursery decorations, and where the baby will go to school.

Mom and Dad announce they have no excuse not to move to Connecticut now. They visit us often enough, and the subject has come up in conversation. I guess all it took was one grandchild to make up their minds.

I think about my grandmother and smile to myself. I would love to have her with us, but I know she’s around us. After all, she managed to push me toward my coach.

“I wish I’d met her,” Riley says in my ear as if he can read my thoughts.

“Me too.”

So here we are.

A year ago, I was single and pining for a man I thought was straight. Little did I know that all I needed to do was invite him to my Christmas bubble, and he’d be mine forever.

Dear reader, I hope you’ve enjoyed Bubble and Coach’s story. I had so much fun writing them, especially Bubble. He’s one of the most delightfully funny characters I’ve written.

As a special treat for my readers I commissioned a piece of Bubble art. If you like coloring in scenes from your favorite books then sign up for my VIPs to receive a downloadable copy of Bubble and Coach’s first kiss.

Sign up here: [Bubble Bonus](#)



Are you curious about some of the secondary characters in the story? Indy from *Spilled Beans* and his husband have their story in [How to Catch a Bachelor](#) and Harrison and Fletcher have theirs in [Antagonist](#).

Be sure to follow me on [Bookbub](#) to be notified of new releases, and look for me on [Facebook](#) for sneak peaks of upcoming stories.

For giveaways, sneak peaks, ARC opportunities and general caffeinated fun times, please join my facebook group! [Café RoMMance - Ana's Reader Group](#)

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bit.ly/AnaAshley

WHO IS ANA ASHLEY

ANA ASHLEY WAS BORN in Portugal but has lived in the United Kingdom for so long, even her friends sometimes doubt if she really is Portuguese.

After getting hooked on reading gay romance, Ana decided to follow her lifelong dream of becoming an author.

These days you can find her in front of her laptop bringing her stories to life, or in the kitchen perfecting her recipe for the famous Portuguese custard tarts.

Ana Ashley writes sweet and steamy gay romance set in America, often in small towns where everyone knows everyone.

You can follow Ana on the usual social media hangouts.

For access to exclusive teasers, content, and general book and food related goodness you can now join Ana in her [Facebook Group, Café RoMMance - Ana's Reader Group](#)

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