

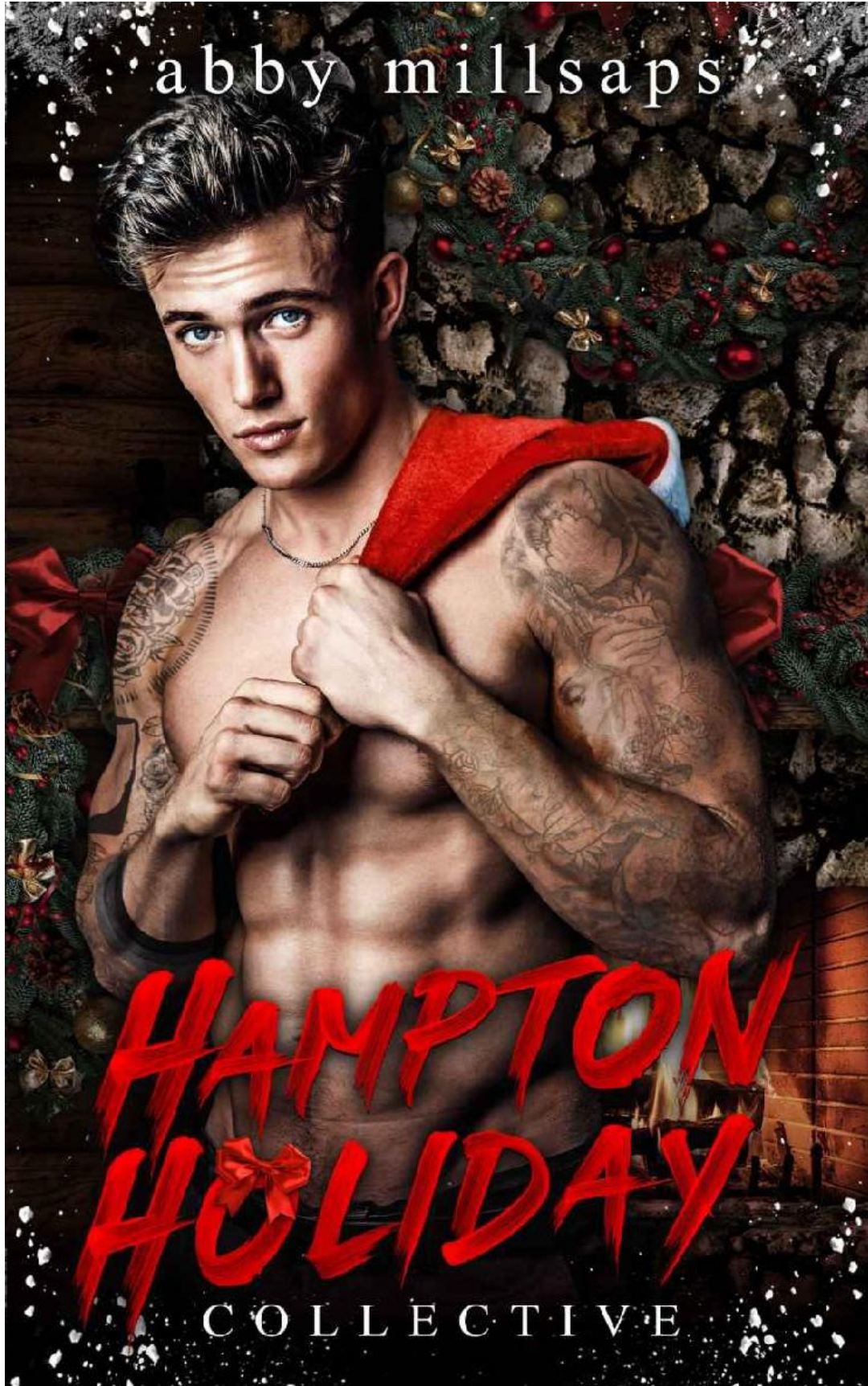


**Hampton
Holiday
Collective
(Hampton**

Abby Millsaps

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**HAMPTON
HOLIDAY**
COLLECTIVE



HAMPTON HOLIDAY COLLECTIVE

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Hampton Holiday Collective is a collection of four novelettes featuring the characters from the Hampton Hearts series by Abby Millsaps.

Stories include:

When We're Together

Tori and Rhett

Full Out Feast

Fielding and Daphne

I Saw Daddy Kissing Santa Claus

Jake and Cory

Haas Party of Four

Maddie and Dempsey

To the readers who have been with me from the beginning— this one is for you.

Content Warning

Hampton Holiday Collective contains content some may find triggering, including explicit language and themes of grief and loss.

A Note From the Author

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of the Hampton Holiday Collective! This collection of novelettes was written with two goals in mind: to bring a smile to your face and to say a final farewell to our beloved friends from Hampton, Ohio.

Each novelette is a snapshot into the lives of our favorite couples years after their original stories occur. We'll see them navigate adulthood and parenthood during the holiday season, but there is no major conflict or tension within the novelettes. You'll never once question the happily ever afters that have already been established in their prior stories. Every couple featured in this Collective has at least one full-length book that chronicles their relationship.

When You're Home

(Tori and Rhett's first book)

While You're There

(Tori and Rhett's second book)

When You're Home for the Holidays

(A Hampton Hearts Novella)

When You're Gone

(Tori and Rhett's third book)

Rowdy Boy

(Jake's prequel novella)

Mr. Brightside

(Jake and Cory's book)

Fourth Wheel

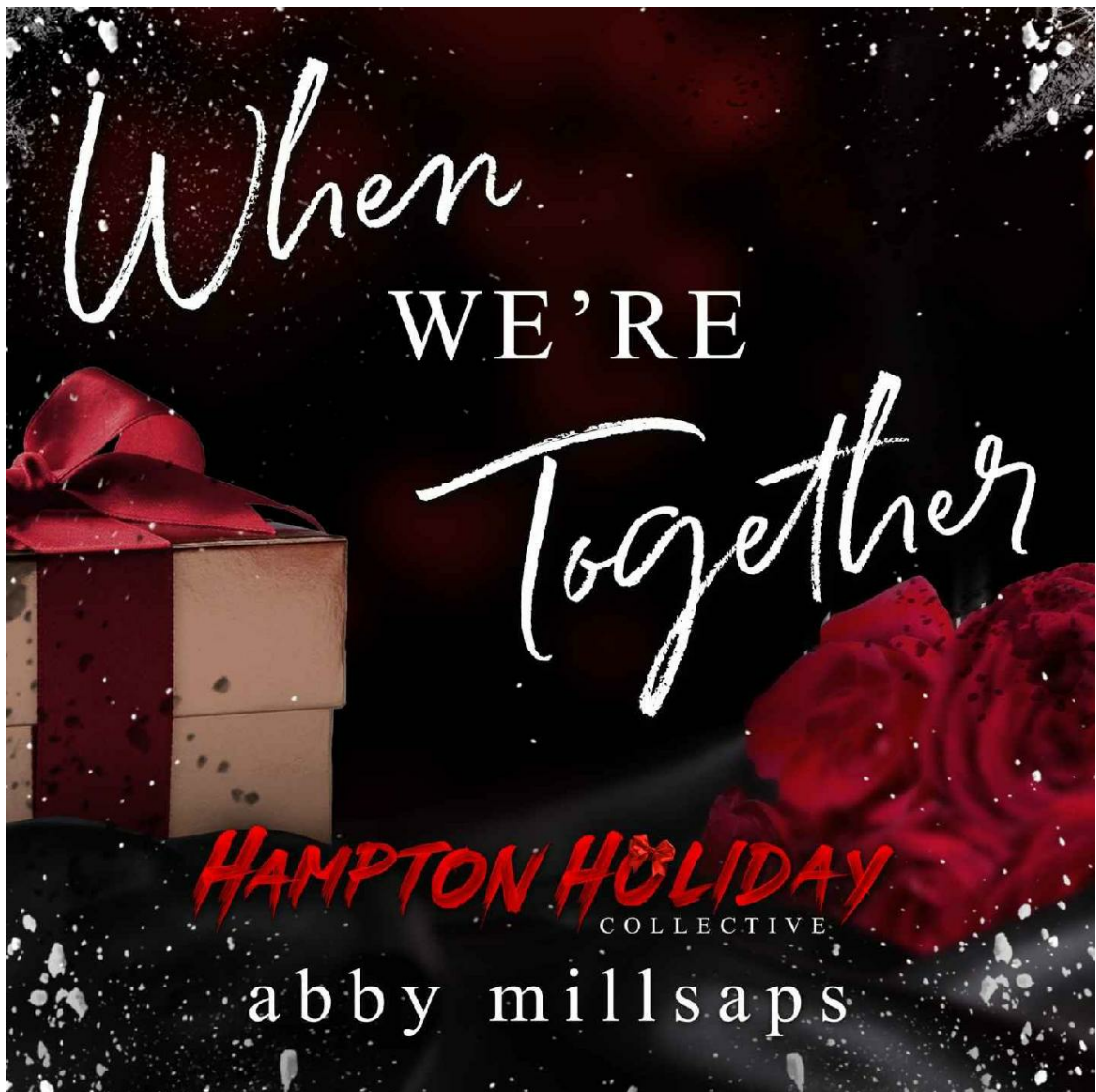
(Maddie and Dempsey's book)

Full Out Fiend

(Fielding and Daphne's book)

You'll also notice that each novelette includes more than just the couple featured in that story. The Hampton universe is interwoven in beautiful and sometimes unexpected ways. So even if you are only here to read about Jake and Cory, or you're only familiar with Fielding and Daphne, I encourage you to read the full collective and make the most of your time in Hampton.





Chapter 1

Tori

“R ight there, beautiful. *Fuck. Yes.* That feels so damn good.”

My determination surges with his praise, so I dig my fingers in deeper. Straddling his thighs, I bear down on my hands, pushing against the tense, coiled muscles of his low back.

A drawn-out groan confirms I’ve hit my target.

“You seriously need to go to a real massage therapist. Or a chiropractor.” I press down with both hands spread wide one final time, eliciting another grunt from my husband.

“No time,” he grumbles before gingerly lifting to his hands and knees, then rolling to sit. “And your hands are the only ones I want on me.”

He grabs my hips, encouraging me to straddle his lap.

With my arms wrapped around his neck, I hold him close, savoring the way the stubble on his jaw scratches against my cheek. I spread my legs wide, heat rising instantly when our bodies connect.

But a moment later, I place my palms on his chest in warning. For both of us. “We have to get ready.”

Except my warning does little to discourage my determined husband. His fingers tease at the clasp of my bra, his lips and sharp jawline skimming down my neck until he’s kissing the spot that he *knows* always does it for me.

“Ev... we really have to get going,” I protest.

“You’re the only thing I want to get going,” he retorts with a familiar glint in his gray-blue eyes.

I can’t help the laugh that bubbles up at his cheesy line. The lightheartedness of the moment is short-lived, and my mood deflates as I think about the day ahead.

“I’m sorry today is so busy.” I sigh, apologizing for what has to be the tenth time this morning.

Attending back-to-back work functions is not exactly the way I’d hoped to celebrate Rhett’s thirty-seventh birthday.

“Not your fault,” he reminds me. Again.

First on the schedule is the volunteer appreciation luncheon for the New Hope Foundation.

Although it’s a relatively casual event, I’m in charge of the awards ceremony. Then tonight NorfolkStar Transport is being recognized for its support of Virginia Voices of Recovery. The organization specifically requested Rhett be the one to accept the award, so we’ll dress up and attend the gala at the historic Bukszar Manor this evening.

With two big events happening this weekend, it didn’t make sense to host a party or plan a birthday trip—we’re heading to Hampton in a few weeks to spend Thanksgiving with Cory, Jake, and the kids anyway. We can have a birthday celebration for Rhett then.

Today will be filled with small talk and obligatory, mundane responsibilities. Although I do have a surprise planned for the birthday boy.

“I can’t believe you’re officially in your late thirties,” I tease, running my nails through Rhett’s bedhead and kissing him softly on the lips.

“Age is just a number, beautiful.”

“True. But every year feels like a milestone—like something worth celebrating...” I trail off, my thoughts going to my mom without my permission. She never reached her late thirties. She didn’t have the privilege of navigating middle age.

Thinking about her, even for a moment, inevitably leads to spiraling into the murkiness of what if.

What if she had lived longer? What if I hadn’t been part of the research study that provided early screenings for the genetic cancers I carried? What if I hadn’t had two major prophylactic surgeries in my early twenties?

What if, what if, what if?

Knowing me as well as he does, Rhett has a knack for sensing when my thoughts turn dark like this.

He wraps his arms around me tighter, anchoring me against the warmth of his chest.

“I won’t ever take for granted the birthdays we get to spend together,” I whisper against his lips.

“I know, beautiful. I know.” He squeezes me closer, letting me feel the depth of my emotions but not letting me fester in my grief for too long. “I love you,” he whispers, kissing me softly and pulling me back to the here and now.

Making the most of every day with this man is my purpose in life. I’ve made it my personal mission over the last decade to savor the moments we have together, and to appreciate every way in which he loves me so well.

“I love you,” I repeat, his warmth enveloping me as we hold each other in the softness of the moment.

He hugs me for a few more seconds, then shifts forward, breaking us out of our reverie and reminding me of all the places we have to be today.

“I would stay in this bed and hold you all day if I could, beautiful, but I’ll also blame you for making us late if you don’t dismount. I can’t be held responsible for what happens if you keep straddling me like this.” He tries to playfully tilt his hips forward, his erection

pressing against my center, but a sharp hiss has him freezing in place.

I scramble out of his lap, then offer a hand to pull him to his feet.

“Come on, old man,” I tease. He’s slow to rise, placing both hands on his low back and gingerly stretching with a grunt.

“Seriously,” I scold, eyeing my shirtless husband up and down appreciatively while trying to maintain a stern expression.

“Chiropractor. Next week. That’s not a request.”

Chapter 2

Rhett

A roar of applause echoes through the greenhouse as Tori concludes the awards ceremony. I beam with pride—I can’t fucking help it—as she’s swarmed by volunteers and a few reporters on stage.

Shifting in the flimsy garden chair, I sit straighter in hopes of finding some semblance of relief from the aching pressure in my low back. It feels better to stand than to sit, and the pain gets worse throughout the day—I’ll probably have to suck it up and make an appointment to have it looked at next week.

I pull my phone out and snap a few photos, capturing my gorgeous wife in her element. People love talking to Tori—they flock to her authenticity and glow in her orbit.

I know the feeling.

It’s not often I get to sit back and admire her like this. In her element, surrounded by colleagues and peers.

When she looks at someone, it’s like they’re the only person in the room—in the world. She’s executive vice president of operations these days. I won’t be surprised when the board of the New Hope Foundation names her executive director in the coming years.

Tori’s vision and her dedication to reaching as many kids as possible is the entire reason the organization is in Norfolk—and Atlanta and Dallas and St. Louis and Houston and San Diego.

They’re set to hold their first camp in Vancouver next summer, making the New Hope Foundation an international organization.

My phone vibrates in my hand as I rise to stand. Buttoning the front of my suit jacket, I give a courtesy nod to the other people seated at the table and excuse myself before heading to the back of the greenhouse.

Fuck. My back feels like it has its own pulse.

More than anything, I need a solid surface to stand against.

Eventually, I find an empty wall to lean on, rolling out my shoulders and subtly arching and rounding my back to try and ease the pain. Glancing down at my phone, I grin, then swipe up to open the message from my sister.

Maddie: 28 weeks today! The babies are supposedly two pounds each. Somehow that doesn't make me feel better about the thirty pounds I've gained so far.

I love these weekly updates. And the accompanying photos Dempsey takes of her growing stomach.

Seeing my sister pregnant is a trip. Witnessing the way her petite frame changes to accommodate not one but two gigantic Haas offspring is something else.

Rhett: You look amazing, Maddie Girl. How are you feeling?

Maddie: Exhausted. Anxious. Pissed off that I married a man who's not only 6'2" but also a twin.

I chuckle at her expense. My back hurts just looking at her latest picture. I guess I shouldn't complain.

Maddie: Happy birthday, by the way! Doing anything fun today?

Rhett: Tori and I both have work events, so I wouldn't exactly call it fun.

I send off a picture of the greenhouse, followed by another I took of Tori on stage.

I'm still focused on my phone, waiting for Maddie's response, when a featherlight touch along the collar of my shirt grabs my attention and sends tingles down my spine.

"Hey, you," Tori greets, sinking her body into my side.

"You were fantastic," I praise, squeezing her against me with one arm and kissing her hair.

She hums in reply, a soothing sound that blossoms from her chest and warms my insides with its familiarity and ease.

“We have to get going,” she whispers, still tracing the collar of my suit jacket with her fingers and teasing at the short hairs on the nape of my neck.

“Lead the way, beautiful.”

Tilting my head one way, then the other, I crack my neck out of habit, ignoring the twinge of pain dancing along my spine. The Virginia Voices of Recovery gala is one of the biggest charitable events

of the year in Norfolk. They specifically requested I accept the award this year, which I happily agreed to before they announced the official date.

Attending a black-tie gala is honestly the last thing I want to do tonight.

I’m not one to fixate on my own birthday—Tori’s birthday or our wedding anniversary, yes. Even Jake’s birthday and our godchildren’s birthdays are nonnegotiable in my mind. November eighteenth is inconsequential in a lot of ways. But for some reason, this year feels different.

Maybe it’s because, like Tori said, I’ve officially reached my late thirties. Or because if I assume my life expectancy is similar to that of my parents, then I’ve passed the halfway mark of my life.

Tori’s dad passing away last spring added another layer to my sense of mortality, too.

We’re both parentless now. For as much as the grief of losing a parent has played a role in Tori’s life, I didn’t expect it to catch up to me in such unexpected ways. Some days I just wake up sad. I’ll pick up the phone to call my mom or catalog details of an event to tell her about later, only to be hit with the realization that I’ll never be able to call her again.

It’s the remembering that hurts the worst. It’s been almost six months since my mom died, and my dad’s been gone nearly three years. Some days I barely have time to miss them. Then other days the recollection rams into me like a freight train.

There’s no rhyme or reason to grief. At least not one I’ve discovered. It rears its ugly head when it wants, making itself known—forcing its presence to be felt and processed—on its own terms and with relentless tenacity.

Lately, my grief has been churning up more often because of Maddie's pregnancy. She's only twenty-nine years old, and to think she's going through something so monumental without our mom by her side... It's not fucking fair.

I sigh, resigned. Because as much as that thought kills me, there's no changing our reality.

"Can you zip me up?" Tori asks, banishing the dark thoughts percolating in my mind. She steps in front of where I sit on the bed, putting in earrings as she turns and exposes her back to me.

The red silk of her gown cascades into a pool of fabric that rests low on her spine. Unzipped, I get a peek of the top band of her patterned stockings flush against her waist. I can also see—and appreciate—the lack of any other underwear.

"These are incredibly sexy," I pronounce, grazing both hands over the see-through black material before smoothing my hands over the slippery red silk covering her ass. I gather the fabric of her dress and zip up the garment as requested. Then, with one finger, I trace her exposed spine, fully appreciating the design of the backless gown.

"They help keep everything in place," she teases with a wink over her shoulder.

I swat at her ass playfully to signal that I'm done, and she hurries back into the bathroom. My wife does *not* need any help keeping things in place. At thirty-six, she's still a smoke show. Honestly, if I wasn't constantly trying to keep up with her and Jake in the fitness department, I wouldn't be half as fit as I am.

"Ready?" She steps out of the bathroom again, beaming. Her hair is in big curls, swept all to one side and tumbling over her shoulder. The neckline of the dress reaches all the way to her throat. The high slit over her right thigh is going to taunt me all damn night. The way the deep crimson gown clings to her body has me even more frustrated that we can't blow off this event and stay home tonight.

"Ready. But we have to hurry. If you keep standing there looking like that, we'll never make it out the door."

She grins, straightening my bow tie and gazing at me with complete adoration. The simplicity of her actions wraps my heart in the warmest embrace as we head down to the car, hand in hand.

Chapter 3

Rhett

I eye my wife curiously as she shifts in the back seat again. We've slowed to a crawl now, the car inching forward as guests are dropped off at the front entrance of Bukszar Manor.

"Everything okay, V?"

"Yes," she insists in a rush, but I don't buy it for one second. She keeps side-eying me with what I think looks like irritation.

I reach for her hand and play with her infinity ring, hoping to distract her. If she's uncomfortable and wants to go home and change, we have to do that right away. Dinner is in half an hour, and the awards ceremony will follow immediately after.

"Why are you so squirmy tonight?" I tease.

"I'm not!" she defends sharply, crossing her legs in a huff.

Huh.

Okay then.

Her attitude is a total departure from the sweet playfulness of an hour ago.

My driver Charlie stops in front of the mansion, and I rise from the car slowly before turning back to offer Tori my hand. The way her cheeks flush and her breathing picks up as she makes her way out of the car is hard to miss, but also perplexing.

A visible shiver courses through her body when I sweep my hand across the small of her back to guide her toward the manor's ornate staircase.

But I don't have time to overthink her peculiar behavior before someone is calling my name.

Just inside the entry, we're greeted by a few board members and their partners, as well as Angelica Kramer, Executive Director of Virginia Voices for Recovery. After we exchange pleasantries, we join the line for coat check. Next to me, though, Tori's face is screwed up in discomfort.

Discreetly, I drape one arm around her, pausing her forward momentum.

I press my body against hers, my lips skimming the shell of her ear, and whisper, "You feeling okay, V?"

"No," she chokes out with a full-body shudder.

Panic flares in my mind and my chest goes tight, but I don't have time to demand more information before she pulls on my arm and takes off at a clipped pace down the ornately decorated hall.

Her heels clack against the polished marble as we rush past catering stations before turning into a private alcove.

I can't help the questions that tumble out of my mouth when she finally stops, leans against a wall, and closes her eyes, her chest heaving.

"V, you're scaring me. What's wrong? Are you sick? Do we need to go?"

Tori doesn't answer right away. Instead, she blows out a long, slow breath and smooths one hand down the front of her body. I track her movement, adrenaline coursing through me at the prospect of her being ill.

After several deep breaths, she opens her eyes and focuses on me. Except now, instead of the discomfort I was so worried about moments ago, something else entirely emanates from her.

And it looks a hell of a lot like desire.

"I think I made a mistake," she confesses in a breathy whisper.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, my mind still teeming with concern despite the heat behind her gaze.

I close the space between us, resting one arm next to her head and hovering over her, as if my domineering presence can somehow cure whatever's ailing her and protect her from further harm.

Her body responds to mine immediately—instinctually—shifting forward until the slippery fabric of her dress is rustling against my tuxedo. She doesn't look sick or even uncomfortable anymore. And the way she's rubbing against me—*fuck*. I have to suck in a breath between my teeth to fight back a stronger physical reaction.

"What kind of mistake?" I ask evenly, curiosity and concern warring inside me.

Instead of answering, she bites down on her bottom lip—it's painted the exact same shade of red as her dress—and eyes me with potent desire. Then she reaches for my free hand and slides it across the smooth fabric over her hip and around her body until it's resting between her ass and the wall.

She shimmies backward, trapping my forearm as I grip a handful of her behind. When she presses back and shifts slightly to the left, we

both gasp at the way my fingertips sink between her ass cheeks.

My eyes widen in shock—then amusement—when I land on something hard.

“The kind where I thought I could get through this night wearing a butt plug. Clearly, I was *very* wrong.”

Chapter 4

Tori

A nimalistic need flares in Rhett’s eyes the second I confess my secret. His mouth is on mine a second later.

His tongue dips into my mouth, teasing me while he squeezes my ass and brushes against the plug again. I return his affection with a frenzied onslaught of my own—kissing him so deeply he moans, then grinding my hips forward, desperately seeking more pressure.

“You put this in for me?” he growls, pressing against the plug and forcing a whimper out of my mouth.

I nip his bottom lip before pulling back. Smiling coyly, I nod, loving the way his gray-blue irises darken as both hands travel to my back and spread my ass wide.

“For your birthday,” I explain, before adding, “for when we’re home.”

He smirks, then looks over his shoulder to the empty hallway before turning that mischievous expression back to me. “You’re not going to make it that long,” he taunts seductively, tickling the bare skin of my back with one hand while tracing the other up my leg through the high-cut slit of my dress.

“I’m not,” I admit with a breathy whimper, lost to the ministrations of my husband’s hands as he teases the waistband of my pantyhose.

“What can I do to help you, beautiful?”

I roll my hips forward, desperate for more of his touch. Teasing me through my dress or even through the nylon of my hose is inadequate compared to what those fingers feel like when they’re pressing into my skin.

“What do you need?” he demands, latching on to my neck and biting the sensitive skin just below my ear.

I can barely form coherent thoughts as he kisses me, his mouth fanning the flames of the fire building low in my belly.

“Do you want to take this out?” he asks, nudging the plug while devouring the sensitive skin of my neck.

“No,” I rush to reply. “I want you to take it out tonight,” I insist, inspiring another animalistic growl from deep in his chest. We’re both breathing hard, way too worked up. Especially since we’re at a charity event. And Rhett has to be on stage within the hour.

“Can you get me off really quick? Just to take the edge off?” I plead, panting when he grips my hips in both hands to steady me. Or maybe to steady himself. Hell, we both could use an anchor right now.

“V...”

It’s a warning. His subtle way of telling me I’m testing his patience and his self-control. But that’s the beautiful thing about our marriage. After knowing each other for decades and loving each other for more than half our lives, I know just what to do to push his buttons in all the best ways.

“Ev, please. I need you.”

His mouth capturing mine in a searing kiss is the only confirmation I get.

Game on.

Before I have time to react, he’s worked one hand up the slit of my dress and into my pantyhose, while the other hugs me firmly in place against his body.

He nudges the plug deeper as two fingers connect with my clit. If he wasn’t bracing me against his body, I swear my knees would give out and I’d be a puddle on the ground.

“Eyes on me, beautiful.”

My head snaps up on command. When his gaze penetrates my soul, I nearly come. In that moment, I am completely entranced by him. Every touch. Every breath. Every tremor building inside me, just waiting for him to unlock my pleasure in the way only he can.

“You look like you’re about to burst, you naughty girl.” He pushes against the butt plug again, my ass clenching around the intrusion as pleasure builds steadily in my core.

“So naughty. And so perfect for me. You gonna come for me, naughty girl? You gonna come right here with this plug in your ass, pressed up against a wall at a charity event where anyone could walk by and see you unraveling?”

I can't even come up with a response. The combination of his words and his fingers working hard and fast against my sensitive bundle of nerves sends me flying over the edge. I raise a hand to my

mouth in an attempt to stifle my own cries as my center clenches around nothing and my orgasm stuns me into stillness.

My ass tightens around the plug with every spasm. Rhett lets me ride out the waves, his movements slowing and bringing me back to earth. Then he pulls my hand away from my mouth and kisses me deeply again.

My entire body relaxes and slumps against the wall in relief, but I'm nowhere near satisfied. When he pulls back and purses his lips in amusement, I know he knows it, too.

He purposely got me off as fast as possible. He did just what I asked. But I already want more, and he knows it. I'm quite possibly *more* worked up now than I was five minutes ago.

"Maybe that was a bad idea," I say, still breathless, readjusting my pantyhose and dress as Rhett steps back to smooth out his pants.

He cocks a brow in question.

"Now I'm even hornier than before," I admit with a small shrug and a smile I can't hide.

He groans and turns away to adjust himself through his pants, but he doesn't go far, and in seconds, he's got a hand on my hip again, holding me while I work to steady my breathing.

After a few minutes, we're both calm enough to rejoin the crowd. He offers me his arm, peeking out from our private alcove to make sure the coast is clear, then we step out and make our way to the ballroom.

"Come on, naughty girl. Let's get this over with so I can get you home and properly take care of you."

Chapter 5

Rhett

Getting through dinner is almost unbearable now that I know the state my wife's in. *Fuck*. Every time Tori shifts in her chair, my mind wanders. I can't help but fantasize, planning every detail of how we'll be spending the rest of my birthday. I'm desperate for this

dinner to end so I can get her home and properly appreciate her from head to toe.

We go through all the motions—making polite conversation with the people seated at our table, listening attentively to the speeches, clapping when required.

After dessert, I slip my hand under the table and trace the slit up her dress, inspiring Tori to whimper under her breath and snap her legs together.

I hold back a laugh and cock one eyebrow at her while a knowing, heated smirk teases at her gorgeous red lips. A moment later, when my name is called from the stage, I pull my attention from her and clear my throat.

Slowly, I rise from my seat, adjusting my tuxedo jacket and patting my pocket to be sure I have my phone. I grip the back of Tori's chair to steady myself before bending low and whispering in her ear.

“Meet me in the hallway as soon as I've accepted the award. Charlie's out front with the car. I can't wait another minute to get you home.”

It was a mad dash to get back to the sanctuary of our home.

Heat. Desire. Anticipation. It's all been building between us for hours. I need to devour my wife the way she deserves.

She steps out of the bathroom and strides to the center of the room in nothing but her pantyhose, her hair still swept over one shoulder and her bright red lipstick perfectly in place.

I rise to greet her, unable to control the savage longing coursing through me. My earlier back pain instantly dissipates at the gorgeous sight in front of me.

“Get on the bed, V. Hands and knees. Ass up. I want to see for myself what's had you all out of sorts all night,” I demand.

She brushes against me as she approaches, slowing when our bodies are flush against each other before hooking her fingertips into the top of her pantyhose.

She startles when I catch her hands and halt her movements.

When her eyes find mine, I smirk playfully and give her a slow shake of my head. My words come out husky with desire.

“Leave those on.”

She whimpers. Whether in protest or arousal, I don't know. But she listens, nonetheless.

“Good girl,” I croon, my fingers scratching against the thin black nylon as she gets in the exact position I requested. “*Such* a good girl,” I can't help but repeat as I smooth both hands over the orbs of her ass.

I pull her hips back until she's right on the edge of the bed, then finally take in the view I've been fantasizing about all night.

The bejeweled end of a cherry red butt plug sparkles from beneath the see-through fabric of her stockings. Entranced by the way it glitters and moves when she wiggles her hips, I tip forward and spread her cheeks wider, then use my mouth to nudge the plug.

“Hold still, beautiful.”

My gorgeous wife divulged her secret and essentially tortured me with it all night. Now I'm determined to return the favor and draw this out for both of us.

From plug to clit, I lick her over and over again, until she's grinding back against my face. I know damn well she can feel the wetness of my tongue and the heat of my breath against her core. I also know it's not nearly enough.

“*Ev.*” She shifts her hips back in desperation. “I need you,” she pants, lowering her head to the mattress and offering herself to me.

A feral groan rises from my chest as I scramble to get a hold of the seam of her hose and rip them right down the middle, exposing the plug and the lips of her pussy.

She shudders when I finally, mercifully, lick her completely. I latch on to her clit and suck, long and hard, while spinning the plug slowly with one hand.

I reach out for the edible lube I set out while she was changing out of her dress and drizzle it all over her center, spreading her open and piercing her with my tongue.

I take my time to play with her clit and the toy in her ass, building her up at a slow, torturous pace. I swear I can feel her center trembling around my tongue. Her ragged breaths and moans give away just how close she is.

“You look so pretty like this, V. And you taste so fucking good,” I add, swirling the tip of my tongue around the sensitive, puckered flesh of her asshole.

Her whimpers grow more urgent. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Ev. I’m, I’m going to—”

“I know, beautiful. I know.”

I don’t stop my assault, just continue pushing her, savoring her, groaning into her delicious ass as I crook my fingers against the soft, tender trigger of her g-spot.

She comes so hard I can’t move my hand. Her whole body spasms, her pussy and her ass convulsing as she cries out as loud as always. I smile against her folds, then kiss her rear end tenderly as she slowly comes back to earth.

Chapter 6

Tori

I don’t even know how long my orgasm lasts. Minutes? Days? Weeks? Every muscle in my body trembles with the aftershocks created by my husband’s skillful hands and tongue. When I finally gain enough clarity to sit up, he wraps his arms around me from behind, hugging me against his bare chest as he kisses my back and my neck.

We’re both still, our breathing in sync, reveling in a connection that has consumed us for decades.

Fighting against our pull—trying to resist this? It was always futile. I may not have understood it at eighteen—but I know it now. It’s moments like this where everything aligns, and I feel nothing but gratitude to be married to my best friend.

It was always supposed to be like this. Us. I will never take for granted how close we came to not having forever.

I don’t know how long we hold each other, but eventually I register that Rhett’s breathing hasn’t slowed as much as mine, and that the hard length of his erection is pressing into me from behind.

Glancing over my shoulder, I meet his gaze. His pupils all but eclipse his gray-blue irises, signaling just how needy my husband is after putting me first. Twice.

“Go lay down,” I indicate, nodding toward the pillows on our king-size bed.

He cocks a brow but doesn’t question me. Wordlessly, he settles into the mattress with his hands lifted behind his head and his attention fixed solely on me. His lips are tipped up in a sly grin.

He makes no comment as I peel off the destroyed pantyhose and crawl from the foot of the bed to straddle his hips. I capture his lips in a kiss, then brush my still-slick center over his length.

He moans into my mouth. “You gonna spread those pretty lips and sink down on my cock, beautiful?”

“Yep,” I confirm, popping the *P*. “Lay back and enjoy the ride. It’s your birthday,” I remind him.

“But I’ll turn around so you can fully appreciate the view.”

With a saucy smile and a wink, I swing my hips around, straddle him in reverse cowgirl, and impale myself on his cock in one motion.

I sink down hard and fast, the pressure of his dick against the plug so intense it’s almost too much.

We groan in unison, the sensations familiar, and yet something I’ll never tire of.

“You feel so good,” I whisper with another glance back over my shoulder.

“You feel as good as you look,” he counters, biting down on the inside of his cheek before shifting his attention to my ass, then back again.

I right myself, give my hips a few small rolls to adjust to his girth, then move in earnest, shifting up and down, gripped tightly around his length.

Rhett makes quick work of smoothing down my bare back, digging his fingers into my hips, then playing with the toy still lodged inside me.

Every touch makes me shiver. Every thrust makes me moan.

It doesn’t matter that I’m on top—that I’m riding him. I am entranced by the hold he has on me. I never want him to let me go.

The way this man consumes me—the way it’s always been him—it’s an out-of-body, transcendental experience to be loved by Everhett Wheeler.

With his hands on me, his body connected to mine, his hunger for me evident in every touch, warmth pools in my core quickly. I steady myself without slowing and grip his inner thighs, playing with his balls and rubbing them on my clit as I ride him.

Even without seeing his face, I know he’s close. I can sense it—the way I can sense him in a room, or the way I know when his gaze is

on me. We've spent decades tuning our bodies to react to one another in perfect synchronicity—even when we were fighting it.

“I feel you gripping my cock, beautiful. You have me in a fucking chokehold. Always have,” he grits out. “Always will,” he adds with a swift slap on my ass.

His words send me spiraling at the same moment I feel his release blast off inside me as I mindlessly gyrate up and down his shaft.

He's everywhere. Inside me. Around me. Holding me to this earth, fueling my purpose in this world. The gravity of him is a promise and a balm.

I'm still pulsing with pleasure, holding myself up on shaky arms, when Rhett lifts my hips, pulls out, and lets his release trickle down my thighs.

“Yes?” he confirms, twisting the plug in my ass.

“Fuck. Yes. *Please.*”

A low rumble grows from his chest at my response. My breath hitches as he slowly pulls the toy from my ass, teasingly twisting it as he does. I practically fold over on myself, still straddling him, the tingling burn consuming me. I'm pulsing around nothing—bare and empty, desperate for him to fill me right back up.

Gathering his cum off my thighs, he wastes no time painting it across my gaping ass, then pushing it into my hole.

I whimper in encouragement at the intrusion.

“You're so fucking pretty, V. So fucking pretty and so fucking greedy. You want me to fill every hole tonight, don't you?”

Two fingers dip in and out of my ass.

“Turn around and let me see you.”

I reluctantly dismount, only because it feels so damn good, then frantically crawl back into his lap as he sits up to join me.

Holding me in his arms, Rhett nuzzles into my neck, inhaling before leaving a trail of soft kisses on the skin between my collarbone and ear. “What do you want, beautiful?”

I wrap one arm around his neck, then run my nails through his hair. The hair at his temples is peppered with a hint of gray these days—he's less than amused when I point them out, but the silver fox look seriously does it for me. I love it almost as much as I love what those gray hairs represent.

Years of love and commitment. The privilege of growing old together.

“Put your dick in my ass and make me come again,” I whisper, my voice throaty with need.

Rhett huffs a quiet laugh, then lifts my hips slightly and fists his still-hard cock. I reach for the lube and drizzle a generous amount over him.

“You just can’t get enough, can you, beautiful?”

I bite down on my bottom lip as he lines himself up.

“You want to feel me filling every hole?” He doesn’t give me time to respond. “Such a greedy, naughty girl.”

I sharply inhale as he works himself into my ass. Hours of prep from wearing the plug are still no match for the girth and solidness of my husband.

“Relax for me, beautiful,” he croons, gently circling my clit with his thumb and dipping two fingers into my pussy. “Relax and let me in. I want to make you feel so fucking good.”

My body goes lax in his arms, my trust in him and his ability to know exactly what I need and how I want it trumping all lucid thoughts. Slowly, I sink further onto his length, until finally, mercifully, he’s seated deep.

“Ride me, V. Ride me with my cock buried deep in this ass and let me fucking feel you.”

I moan and pant, lift and shift. His mouth is everywhere, his cock and hand both buried inside my body, inspiring a flood of warmth and stoking the sparks of another orgasm.

An overwhelming cacophony of sensations set my body ablaze from the inside out as I unravel. My climax builds and builds until I can’t make sense of anything but him.

The first waves of release compete with the continual climb—I’m coming apart from the inside, cracking right down the middle, screaming out his name, and riding him in frantic, arrhythmic motions.

He digs his fingers into my hips and sinks his teeth into my neck, silently signaling that he’s right there with me, climaxing again, filling me with his load.

The feel of all of him everywhere is too much this time. I dismount and pull away in a rush, only to crawl right back beside him and curl up in his arms.

We lie together, panting, wordlessly marveling at the depth of all we share while he runs his fingers through my hair and I press a hand to his still racing heart.

Us. There's never been anything I want more in this life than us.

Chapter 7

Rhett

I roll over in bed, groaning as my low back catches. According to the clock on my phone on the nightstand, it's still early. The sun won't rise for another few hours.

Gingerly, I rise out of bed and head to the bathroom in search of ibuprofen. Our activities last night probably didn't help the situation, but they were more than worth a little extra pain. I'm still blurry-eyed and drowsy when I pop a few pain relievers and make my way back into the bedroom.

That doesn't prevent me from stopping in my tracks and admiring my beloved sleeping soundly.

I haven't been up for more than five minutes, and already, Tori's splayed out in the middle of the bed, breathing steadily, her arms and legs starfished wide.

Some things never change.

And for that, I'll always be grateful.

Our lives have transformed over and over again during the last few decades. The shifts have been sharper more recently, first with Maddie and Dempsey's elopement, then with the losses of our parents. Job responsibilities have changed, and we've moved half a dozen times since Tori joined me in Virginia. Most days, life feels busier than ever. But there's a single truth that lives in my heart, and that guides me through each day.

I'm more in love with my wife now than ever.

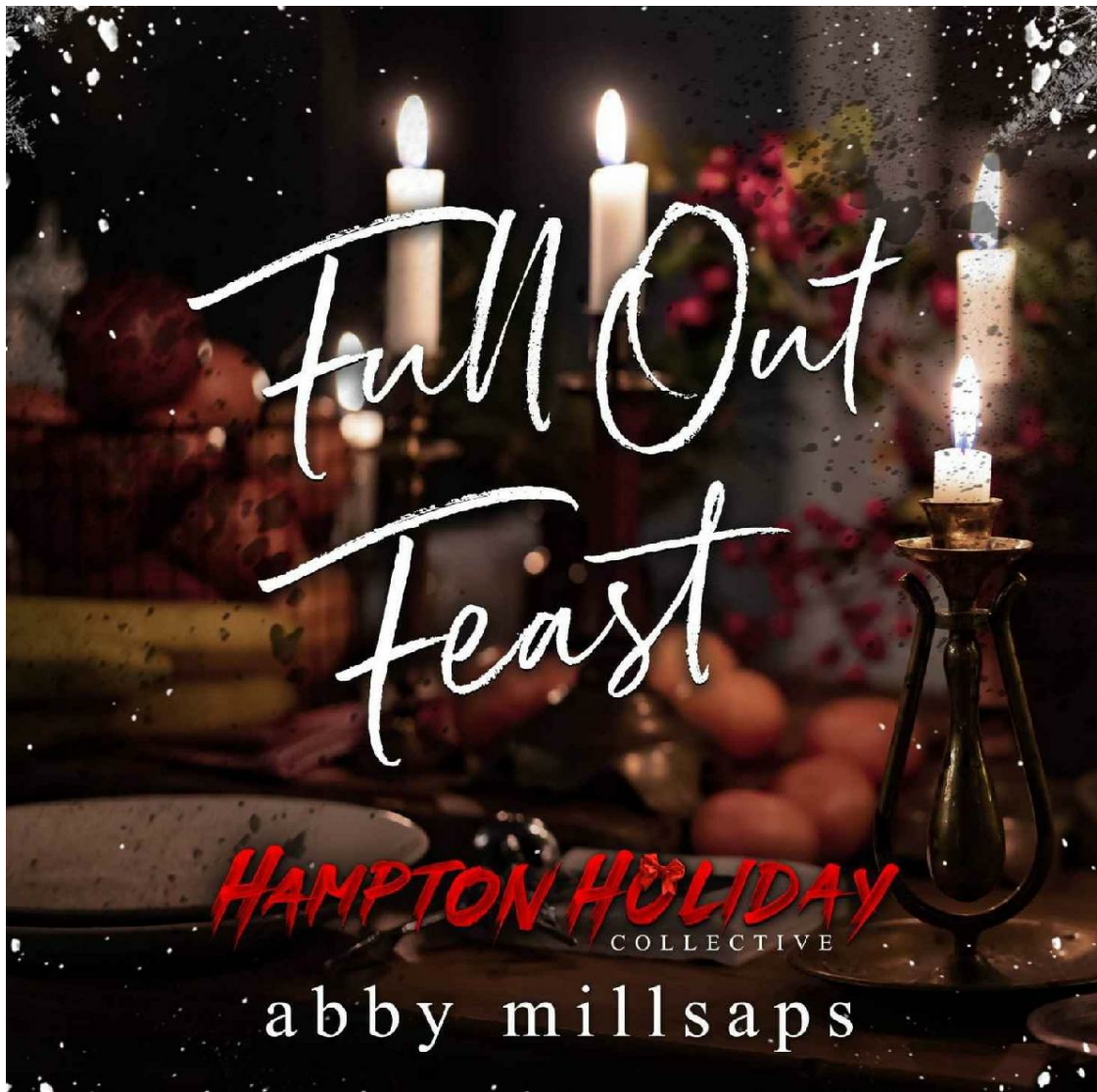
Regardless of our work demands or what the future holds, we'll always prioritize one another and make the most of all life throws at us.

I crawl back into bed and rearrange Tori's body so she's still splayed out, but splayed over me.

Her touch is all I need. Her closeness is all I crave. Demons that once haunted me—a darkness I fought against for years—are meager and inconsequential compared to the swell of joy I feel when I hold my wife in my arms.

I sigh contentedly, then yawn and close my eyes.

This is how it was always meant to be. I won't let a day go by when I don't savor and appreciate when we're together.



Chapter 8

Fielding

My sister-in-law groans for several seconds, arms stretched overhead, enormous belly bumping against the edge of the table. “I’m stuffed,” she declares as her full-body yawn wanes.

“Oh yeah?” I can’t help but leer.

Maddie glares, but it’s my brother who scolds me.

“Did you really just make a sex joke about my pregnant wife at the Thanksgiving dinner table while your children play in the other room?”

Fair point. I shrug in indifference.

“Every party has a pooper,” I tease, rising to clear the table. “You used to be more fun, Little Wheeler.”

Dempsey curses under his breath in warning.

“I used to not be huge! Or swollen!” she counters, pulling herself up and revealing the girth of her stomach.

Is it possible it’s grown even more since dinner started?

“Hey, don’t get sassy with me. It’s not like *I* did that to you,” I counter, jutting my chin toward her baby bump.

Heat flares in her eyes, and my brother curses my name loud and clear this time.

“You may have not impregnated me, but *your* stupid twin genes made me *this* big and *this* miserable!”

She’s not wrong.

Thankfully, I’m saved from the wrath of pregnant Maddie by my middle child skipping into the kitchen.

“Come on, Uncle Dumpty. You promised!” Wesley whines, reaching for my brother’s hand and tugging. Dempsey grins at my boy, equally eager to get on with whatever game he’s committed to playing.

I can’t help but smile at the sight of the two of them together. Wesley is like Dempsey in so many ways: my quiet, thoughtful son. He’s a stoic little saint and the least likely to cause mischief. Most days I don’t have to actually parent the kid, which is a relief, since his little brother creates more than his fair share of chaos.

“Hey, who’s on Wyatt duty?” I ask with a pointed look.

“Winnie’s got him,” Wes assures me, mimicking my expression as if to question how I could possibly doubt him.

Not even a second later, a resounding crash rings out from the living room. Dempsey and Wes rush toward the noise, while Daphne and I exchange an exasperated look.

“Your turn,” she chides, her tongue in her cheek.

If she says so. I don't bother keeping track anymore—we both respond to multiple Wyatt riots each day. If Wesley is our little saint, Wyatt is, without question, our little devil.

“Don't think you're getting out of dishes, either!” Daphne calls after me as I follow the boys toward the commotion.

“Wouldn't dream of it, angel.”

I wink at my wife over my shoulder then stumble over my own feet when her eyes flare with heat.

She schools her expression quickly, though, like we often do with three kids in the house, shaking her head at my salacious attempt at flirting.

“Go,” she grits out with a grin.

I shrug off her mock-scolding. What can I say? It's not my fault she's hot as sin and looks exactly like what I want to eat for Thanksgiving dessert. Maybe there will be a little homemade whipped cream left over after we serve the pie tonight that I can put to good use.

We've been together for more than seven years, and the only itch I'm scratching is the one that makes me want to nail her into the mattress every single night and put as many babies in her as she'll allow.

We're at an impasse about whether we're done having kids. I'm typically team keep going, but the daily disasters from Wyatt are enough to keep my breeding kink in check most days.

By the time I enter the sunken living room, there's an entire scene unfolding before me. Wyatt's on the floor, but not of his own volition if his big brother's position straddling his chest is any indication.

Winnie, our oldest, has her hands on her hips and is scowling at her younger siblings in disapproval.

“A little help here, Dad,” Wesley grunts from where he's got Wyatt pinned.

“What seems to be the problem?” I ask, lifting Wes off his three-year-old brother, who pops up and immediately clambers up onto the ottoman.

“Here, take this,” I grunt toward my brother, thrusting my five-year-old into Dempsey's arms before lunging for Wyatt. I snatch him up

and brace him against my chest just as he squats low, ready to launch himself off the back of the couch.

“What do you think you’re doing, little devil?” I question playfully, giving him a gentle noogie as he flails and tries to dislodge my grip.

“I’m in da pa-wade!” he wails, trying his hardest to wiggle out of my hold.

My focus instantly goes to Winnie. She speaks Wyatt. And she knows that I have no idea what the hell he just said.

“He said he’s in the parade,” she translates with a roll of her eyes. “He thinks he’s a giant balloon, like the ones on TV this morning.”

“Is that so?” I spin a few times, and instead of clinging to me like most kids would, Wyatt leans back, arms flung wide, bursting with happy squeals from the adrenaline rush.

This kid’s too much. He loves hard. Plays hard. He goes all out, all the time.

“Which one are you, then?” I ask, righting him after a few more rotations so I don’t have to clean up puke.

“I’m da gween one!” he screams, his little arms swinging in front of his body in an attempt to cross them.

I meet Wesley’s and Dempsey’s gazes. They’re wearing almost identical exasperated expressions

—matching furrowed brows and pursed lips—but neither can hide the curiosity in their eyes, like they want to see how far I’ll take this.

“Which one is the green one?” I fake-whisper out of the corner of my mouth.

“I think it’s Baby Yoda,” Wesley advises.

“I thought it was Kermit!” Winnie chimes in.

“No, no, no, no, *no!*” Wyatt screams, kicking his legs as he works himself into a tizzy.

“Hey,” I soothe, squeezing him tighter. One of the benefits of having a kid who acts just like me is knowing exactly what he needs when he’s unraveling.

“Talk to me, little man.” I run my hand up and down his back as I sit on the couch with him in my lap. His body goes lax a few seconds later. “Which one is the green one?”

“Da one with da heart. Da one with da Max!”

I hold back my chuckle as realization dawns.

“You’re the green one? You mean the Grinch?”

“Da Gwinch!” he screams in confirmation.

Laughter erupts in the room, but Wyatt isn’t trying to be funny. I shoot a warning glare at my other children. Wesley goes quiet right away, but Winnie keeps snickering under her breath.

“Tell ya what,” I proffer, turning back to my little devil. “I’ll let you watch a whole movie about the Grinch tomorrow if you promise to stop jumping off the couch.”

“But I’m in da pa-wade!”

How’s the saying go? You can’t negotiate with terrorists? The same could be said for ornery toddlers.

Rising to my feet, I change tactics.

“That’s where you’re wrong, kiddo. You can’t be in da pa-wade because you’re about to be in da tub. Bath time for all the little Haases!”

Wyatt protests, Wesley grumbles, and Winnie gleefully skips ahead since she’ll shower on her own in her en suite bathroom.

“Angel—I’m sticking these stinkers in the tub, then I’ll be back out to do the dishes,” I call out to my wife as we head to the bathroom, but I can’t quite make out her response from the kitchen.

Wyatt eventually gives up his fight and clings to my neck like a monkey, which is an exponentially easier way to carry him than when he’s imitating a wet noodle in hopes of breaking free.

Maddie makes her way into the living room just as we’re heading down the hall, yawning again, eyeing the couch, and snatching up Dempsey’s hand to pull him along with her.

“Don’t go running up to your wing while I’m putting the kids to bed,” I call back my brother. “I still need help carrying up all the boxes from the basement tonight.”

Chapter 9

Daphne

I feel his presence without having to peek over my shoulder to confirm he’s there. The expectation of his touch doesn’t dilute the thrill that tingles through me when Fielding sidles up behind me at the sink and grips my hips with both hands.

“I told you I’d be back to do the dishes,” he whispers, not-so-subtly grinding his dick into my ass as his fingers tease along the waistband of my leggings.

I dry my hands on a towel, then wrap my arms around his neck. Leaning back into him, I savor the rare quiet moment.

“I don’t mind,” I insist, playing with the hair at his nape. “I can finish these so you can play with the kids and your brother.”

He nips at my ear, the sting of his teeth on my flesh making my nipples harden. “The kids are fine.

There’s only one person I want to play with right now.”

His fingers venture into the waistband of my pants, but I catch him, gripping his wrist tightly before he gets carried away. Spinning in his arms, I stare up and attempt to glare.

He locks me in his gaze, those lagoon-blue eyes boring into my soul and making all sorts of promises to my body as we silently regard each other. I shake my head slowly, biting back a grin.

“Angel,” he murmurs, grasping my face in his hands and tilting it up, then angling in to steal a kiss.

“Don’t deny me. It’s Thanksgiving. I’m just trying to show my wife how much I love and appreciate her,” he teases against my lips before deepening the kiss.

I’m lost to his touch, if only for a moment. It’s just enough time for him to bend low, grab the backs of my thighs, and hoist me onto the countertop.

“Fielding,” I try to scold through my laughter.

He bites down on my neck, then licks the spot to soothe the sting. I have to physically stop myself from wrapping my legs around his waist and pulling him closer.

“I’ll make you a deal,” I offer, hands on his chest in an attempt to fend him off. “I’ll do the dishes, and you go wear out the kids. If they’re exhausted enough, maybe everyone will stay in their beds all night... and we can pick this back up in a few hours.”

He raises a fist to his mouth and bites down on his knuckles with a groan. “You drive a hard bargain, angel.”

“I look forward to when you drive something hard into me tonight,” I retort.

“*Daph-ne*,” he groans, dropping his head to my shoulder dramatically.

“You guys okay?” Maddie asks, pulling us out of the moment.

Fielding shoots up straight, then turns on his heel to glare at his sister-in-law. I catch his elbow and squeeze in warning.

“We’re good,” I assure her, holding back a smirk.

Maddie yawns and pulls out her phone. “What time are we leaving in the morning?”

We have plans to go Black Friday shopping, followed by a girls’ lunch. This will be Winnie’s first time going out with us, and she’s over-the-moon excited.

“Is four too early?” I ask.

“Nope,” Maddie assures me with a smile as she sets an alarm on her phone. “I’m usually up at four to pee, and half the time I can’t go back to sleep anyway.”

“I’m heading up to bed now, though,” she explains through another yawn. “Dem’s got the kids watching some weird history of Thanksgiving special on the Food Network.”

“Uh-oh,” Fielding mutters. “Better go save the kids from boredom.”

He turns back to where I’m still perched on the countertop and looks me up and down, his eyes bright and sincere.

“You’re sure you don’t want my help?”

“I’m good,” I assure him. “But if you want to handle bedtime on your own, I won’t object since you’ll be gone the next two nights.”

Typically, I don’t mind when Fielding works the night shift at the children’s urgent care in town.

But it’s been a long day already, and while Winnie typically goes down without a fuss, the boys are hit or miss in terms of cooperation.

“I was already planning on it,” he tells me with a grin, then kisses me on the tip of my nose. “I’ll have Dem help me bring up decorations once the kids are down, but then I’ll find you and make good

on that deal.”

Chapter 10

Fielding

I pull off my sweater, discard my jeans, and roll out my shoulders before glancing at the clock on the nightstand.

It's just past midnight. The boys gave me a run for my money at bedtime. Surprisingly, it was Wesley who needed the extra snuggles and water tonight. Then it took Dempsey and me almost an hour to find all the Christmas totes in the basement and haul them upstairs.

I drop my clothes in the hamper, then glance to where Daphne is snuggled under the covers in bed.

She's quiet and still, the only noise in the room her slow, even breathing. I climb into bed as quietly as possible, intent on letting her sleep since she has to get up in just a few hours.

But as I shift toward the middle of the mattress to wrap her in my arms, I'm surprised by the tickle of fuzz between my fingers. My heart rate ratchets up as I smooth one hand over her ass and discover more unfamiliar fabric.

I scramble for my phone on the nightstand and turn on the flashlight, setting it to the lowest brightness so I can investigate exactly what's going on here.

I can't hold back the appreciative groan that rises out of me when I flip back the covers and get a good look at what she's wearing.

Daphne's lying flat on her stomach, her head turned to one side, dark hair fanned out around her, donning a red and white Mrs. Claus-inspired nightie. The red lacy fabric just barely covers her ass, and the whole damn thing is trimmed in faux white fur.

That's going to feel insane on my balls when I ram into her. My angel is anything but virtuous in the bedroom. She likes it rough; and I always aim to please.

I shuck off my boxer briefs and throw them to the side, then fist my cock as I settle between her legs.

She knows how much I love Christmas. She seriously bought this and put it on just for me? *For fuck's sake.*

She may be asleep, but she won't be for long.

I know just what she likes: My teeth clamped down until her perfect, pale skin wears my mark. My hand wrapped around her throat when she climaxes. Waking up to my cock buried deep inside her.

She loves it all. I know without a doubt she'll have no objection to my tongue lapping at her folds as she drifts awake.

I push up the red and white fabric to expose the apex of her creamy, supple thighs.

"Merry Christmas, Kevin," I murmur to myself, planting a hand on each side of her body and lowering my head to feast on her pussy.

Before my mouth can even touch her, Daphne stirs beneath me.

"Did you just quote *Home Alone* into my ass?" she asks through a yawn.

Busted.

"You're surprised by that?" I ask, shoving up the lingerie with more fervor now that she's awake.

"I'm just surprised you didn't go the filthy animal angle," she jibes, shimmying down on the mattress until her ass is firmly in my hands.

"I'll show you a filthy animal."

I spread her cheeks with my thumbs, spit right onto her cunt, then lap it up a second later, my tongue tracing a line from her clit to her asshole, then back again.

"Fuck," I grit out in reverence. "This is so fucking sexy, angel. I would have come to bed a whole lot sooner if I knew you had *this* planned for tonight."

"You're here now," she pants, pushing back against my mouth in need. "Prove how much you love it."

I bite down hard on her clit.

Challenge fucking accepted.

Chapter 11

Daphne

I yelp in surprise, then moan in pleasure when he catches my clit between his teeth. He bites down, then sucks hard, clearly determined to rise to my challenge.

I'm so indecently exposed—and so mindlessly turned on—as he uses both hands to hold me open and eat me out.

With both hands over my head, I brace against the headboard and find enough purchase to push back. Fielding doesn't hesitate to grind

his mouth against me harder, ravaging me with his tongue, his lips, his teeth.

“Give it to me, angel,” he grits out, lapping at the arousal leaking from my pussy. “Fuck my face and drown me.”

I push up onto my knees, careening back even harder as molten lava pools in my core. While he fucks me with his tongue, his fingers make quick work of rubbing hard against my clit. Then, while still sucking and biting my bundle of nerves, he shoves three fingers inside me, massaging my g-spot and fucking me with his hand so hard my body jolts with each thrust.

My orgasm builds so quickly, there’s not time to prepare for the onslaught before it’s ripping through me.

“Fuck yeah,” Fielding murmurs into my folds, but he doesn’t slow. He works me over just as ferociously as I come.

The walls of my pussy are still clenching around his hand when a hard, fast smack reverberates through my ass.

“Fuck, angel. Mariah Carey had it right. All I want for Christmas is you. You and this weeping, needy cunt. You and this perfect ass and gorgeous tits. Turn over and let me see the front of this little number before I rip it off your body,” he demands.

I roll to my back, then shift up the bed, smoothing over the see-through red fabric and rearranging the white faux fur until it’s all in place.

Fielding rises to his knees, looming with desperate hunger in his eyes as he takes in every inch of me. “I’m fucking you with this on.”

“Do it,” I challenge. “I bet you can’t mark me how you like if I’m wearing this, though.”

His eyes blaze with desire as he fists his cock in hard, frantic tugs.

“Watch me, Mrs. Claus.”

He lines up and slides home in one fluid motion, my pussy greedily sucking him in and locking him in place. I’m tight and tender from the way he fucked me with his mouth, so his cock feels even bigger as my nerve endings fire off in rapid succession.

Pulling my hips into his lap, he angles himself so he can fuck me and keep his hands free. My eyes practically roll back into my head as I track the movement of his huge hands cupping both my breasts.

He smashes them together through the fabric, then bites down on one nipple, then the other, moving back and forth between them like a starving man. The thin lace of my lingerie is no match for the way he's lavishing my tits, his frenetic bites sending bolts of lust straight to my pussy.

My arousal soaks his cock, and soon it's almost too slick. At this angle and when I'm this wet, we risk losing contact every time he pulls back.

"Hold these for me, angel," he instructs with a grunt, moving his hands from my breasts so he can brace himself over me with one arm.

He dips into my cleavage with his other hand, then travels up my chest, teasing me every inch of the way before he wraps each individual finger around my neck. He kisses me savagely, leaving me breathless, then smirks and squeezes my throat.

"Harder," I pant when he pistons into my pussy. I honestly don't need anything beyond what he's already giving me— *because it's everything*—but he loves to hear me beg.

"Fuck... Fielding. Harder. *Please*," I moan through raspy, panting bursts.

His hips drill into me. His hand tightens around my throat. My husband fucks me with animalistic fervor, the muscles and veins in his forearm flexing as he holds me down and gives me his all.

The sight of him going full out is enough to send me teetering toward the edge of my orgasm. When he bends low and clamps his mouth around the peak of one nipple, I topple over the edge in a burst of ecstasy and expletives.

He ravages me through my release, then finally lets himself come with a satisfied, blissful groan. In repetitive prayer, he chants my name as he thrusts through his own orgasm.

My vision blurs slightly around the edges as he continues to squeeze my throat, so I dig my nails into his forearm, and he immediately peels his hand away from my neck. Resting back on his heels, panting, he smirks down at me, his eyes shining in reverence.

"Fuck, I love you," he whispers, his words inspiring my pussy to clench around him.

I grin up at him and bite my bottom lip, already ready for round two. "Merry Christmas, ya filthy animal."

Chapter 12

Fielding

I carry another tote into the living room toward the big windows on the east wall. Setting it down gently, I glance over to where Wesley's lying on the couch. "You're not even going to help us with the Christmas village, little scrooge?"

Dempsey makes a sound of disapproval under his breath like the jab was directed at him.

"I still don't feel good," Wesley whines in protest.

No doubt the boys were up and sneaking sugary cereal sometime between when the girls left and when I got out of bed this morning. Wyatt was bouncing off the walls, per usual. Wesley was fine before lunch, but now he's listless and less than enthusiastic about our traditional day-after-Thanksgiving decorating.

Doesn't matter. I'm not particular about much, but I do like the Christmas decorations to be set up just so, as proven by the numerous times I've had to rearrange things my brother has placed all willy-nilly. It's honestly easier when the kids don't help.

We'll decorate the tree later this weekend when everyone's home. The girls are still out shopping, and I have to work the night shift for the next two nights. Dempsey and I have a friendly wager going for whether Maddie or Winnie will be the first to lose steam.

It sure as hell won't be Daphne. My angel has stamina for days, as proven by our almost all-night fuckfest last night.

I lost track of her orgasms, but I came three times, and her little Mrs. Claus number is officially ruined. If she doesn't order a new one stat, she risks ending up on my naughty list.

"Again!" Wyatt cries from his beanbag chair on the floor, startling me. "Again, again!" he screams when no one immediately reacts to his demands.

"Hang on, little devil." I pick up the remote and restart *The Grinch*. That's the other thing I've lost count of—how many times we've watched it so far today.

I'm turning back toward the windows when Wyatt speaks up again. Although "speak" isn't the way I'd describe this communication—my youngest does nothing by halves, so every word out of his mouth is either a cry of glee or a scream of agony.

“Mo cw-ackers!” he wails, flinging his snack bowl in my general direction.

“Wyatt. We do not throw,” I scold, channeling some serious Dempsey energy and mustering up my best authoritative face.

“Sowwy, Daddy.” He hops to his feet and scrambles over to hug my legs. With both arms wrapped around my knees, he cranes his head back, rests his chin on my thigh, and affects the most earnest expression. “Can I have mo cwackers, pwease?”

My attempt at stern-daddy mode shatters at the look on his face.

“That was very nice, Wyatt. Yes, you may. You want something, too, Wes?”

When he doesn’t reply, I spin around to repeat the question, but he’s zonked out on the couch.

That’s not typical for Wesley. Maybe the sugar crash from this morning is finally catching up to him.

I turn toward the kitchen, but Wyatt’s latched on to my leg like a baby spider monkey. Chuckling, I step off with one foot, then drag the one he’s suctioned himself to, Dempsey trailing behind.

“You ready for this?” I tease, holding tight to my waistband with one hand and nodding down to Wyatt, who’s giggling as he clings to me, nearly de-pantsing me in the process.

Dempsey blows out a long breath, his eyebrows pinched together. He’s high-key panicked about becoming a dad, and it doesn’t help that he’s about to dive into new parenthood with not just one newborn, but two.

“It’s crazy to think that there’ll be two more to take care of next year,” he admits.

“*At least,*” I add.

“Seriously? After that one,” he glances down at Wyatt with a lighthearted scoff, “you’re honestly not done?”

I scoop up my youngest son and tickle him under one arm, then hug him close. He may have boundless energy, but he’s a snuggler, so he doesn’t hesitate to wrap those little arms around my neck and squeeze his cheek to mine with more force than necessary.

My whole world is wrapped up in loving on my kids and being the best father I can be. I would have a dozen more if Daphne would agree.

“We’ll see,” I acquiesce. “Daphne might be done. I’m okay with three if that’s our final number.

But honestly, there’s nothing I love more than being a dad. Except maybe knocking her up in the first place.”

“Hold this for me.” I swing Wyatt once before placing him in Dempsey’s waiting arms.

My boy quickly latches on to his uncle’s neck and squeezes a little too tight. I can’t help but grin.

He loves big.

“I’ll get him settled with a snack so we can finish the Christmas village, but then I need a nap before my shift tonight.”

“Uh, do you think the girls—”

“Yes, they’ll be back soon,” I confirm, anticipating my brother’s question before he can voice it.

“Daphne texted about an hour ago and said they were finishing up at the last store. I know better than to leave you in charge of the little devil,” I tease, glancing down at the wiggly three-year-old in my brother’s arms.

A yawn catches me by surprise, once again reminding me how little sleep I got last night.

“If you’re good staying in the living room with Wes, I’ll take Wyatt back to the bedroom with me and he’ll take a nap, too.”

“Deal,” Dempsey rushes out.

I have to fight back a smirk at the way he warily eyes his wild nephew. Without having to ask, I know what he’s thinking.

Expecting twins doubles the likelihood of him ending up with offspring like Wyatt. *Like me*. It’s not like Maddie has a sweet, docile personality, either. My genes and hers blended together into one child? That wrinkle between Dempsey’s eyebrows will be permanent in almost no time.

Chapter 13

Daphne

“This was the best day ever. We have to do it next year. Please, can we do it next year?”

I glance over at Maddie in the passenger seat and scan the road in front of me before looking up in the rearview mirror to smile at my

daughter.

“I think we officially have a new Black Friday trad—” I confirm.

She squeals with excitement before I’ve finished the declaration, but I shut it down quickly in hopes of managing her expectations.

“We have to be flexible, though, sweetheart. Aunt Maddie will have two new babies to take care of next year.”

Maddie humphs in protest. “Oh no. I’m not giving up this tradition for these little goobers.” She rubs her belly with both hands. “Uncle Dumpy and your dad can handle the twins,” she tells Winnie with a wink. “We’re definitely going Black Friday shopping next year.”

I remind my daughter for the dozenth time to keep her brothers’ presents a secret as we drive up the ridiculously long driveway. Once we park, we unload several bags from the trunk, but I end up leaving half of them in the car in case the boys get any bright ideas and try to snoop.

The house is surprisingly quiet when we push through the garage door. Fielding is standing at the kitchen sink, already wearing his scrubs, chopping up cabbage and cauliflower to take with him to work. Dempsey has Wyatt in his lap and is helping him play a game on the iPad.

“Where’s Wes?” I ask, slightly breathless.

Fielding glances up from the chopping board and gives me one of his famous mega-watt smiles.

Electricity passes between us, just like it always does, as I remember all the ways he made love to me last night. I squeeze my thighs together, the coarse fabric of my mom jeans doing nothing to tamp the arousal rising up inside me.

My husband knows the effect he has on me. Always has. With a knowing, cheeky smirk, he walks over, grips the back of my neck, and kisses me. Hard.

I would push him away if I wasn’t so surprised. Or so turned on.

“Hi, angel,” he murmurs against my lips, keeping a firm hold on my neck but pecking me with soft, reverent kisses when I try to pull away and stop the show he’s putting on. “It was devastating to wake up and not still be inside you this morning,” he whispers seductively into my ear.

“I’m sure it was,” I taunt, my cheeks going warm as I recall how we fell asleep. I had to shower far too early this morning. There was no

way I could have gotten away with just throwing on clothes and heading out the door after our escapades.

Fielding turns to Winnie then, peppering her hair with kisses and wrapping her in a hug before asking about her big adventure.

“Mommy!”

No longer absorbed in his game, Wyatt leaps off Dempsey’s lap and takes a running start before slamming into my legs and almost taking me down.

“Easy, little devil,” Fielding chastises softly, picking him up and carrying him back into the kitchen.

“Wait, where *is* Wesley?” I call after my husband.

It’s Dempsey who answers instead.

“He’s in the living room, on the couch. He hasn’t felt good all day, and he’s napped more than he’s been awake.”

My heart squeezes in concern for my sweet, serious guy, but Fielding’s already easing my worries before I can ask follow-up questions.

“He’s fine,” he assures me. “I think he ate too much sugar this morning. Or maybe Uncle Dumpty’s grumpiness is wearing off on his mini-me.”

Dempsey rolls his eyes, then turns back to me. “He’s been really out of it,” he adds half-heartedly before turning his attention to Maddie.

“I’ve gotta go in twenty minutes,” Fielding reminds me when I join him in the kitchen.

Wyatt is perched on the counter, trying to open one of the cabinets overhead that, thankfully, is childproofed. Leave it to this kid to climb up to the highest cupboard and pry it open before he was eighteen months old. I swear we’re the only people I know who have to baby-proof cabinets that are six feet off the ground.

Fielding zips up his lunchbox, then scoops Wyatt into his arms. “The kids’ pajamas are set out for tonight, and Wesley and Winnie both have bookmarks in the books we’re reading. Want me to start

heating up leftovers before I leave or get something else started for you?”

I slide in under his free arm and hug him around the waist, tipping my head up to give him a small smile. “No, I’ve got it covered. We’ll do leftovers tonight, then early bedtimes for everyone. Have a good night at work.”

“I’ll try my best,” he concedes with a dramatic sigh. “But you know it won’t hold a candle to last night,” he adds with a wink.

“What happened last night?” Winnie asks as she breezes through the kitchen.

“Say good night to your daddy, kids,” I announce louder than necessary, giving my husband a pointed look.

My eyes shoot open, while my body remains completely still. Although I hold my breath and listen to the quiet of the night, I’m certain it wasn’t a noise that woke me.

It was a knowing.

Call it intuition, or just the sixth sense I’ve developed as a mom. But something isn’t right.

I lie quietly, listening, trying to pinpoint what—who—needs my attention.

After a long moment, a little whimper carries from down the hall.

Slowly, I rise and grab for my phone, noting that it’s already two. I throw on one of Fielding’s sweaters overtop my pajamas, then pad softly out of our room.

The sound comes again—a whimper, then a groan. I’ve only taken three steps before a pitiful

“Mommy” drifts out from Wesley’s room.

Picking up the pace, I turn on the flashlight of my phone, not wanting to startle him if he’s dozing or still asleep.

As soon as I crack open his bedroom door, I smell it.

I shine the light toward his bed, where my son is slumped over next to a puddle of vomit in the middle of the mattress.

“Oh, baby.” I head into the bathroom first, where I grab a washcloth and wet it, then hurry back to the bed. I ball up the puke-covered comforter, dab at Wes’s cheeks and chin, then pull him into a hug.

“I don’t feel good,” he whimpers into my shoulder.

“Shh. I know, baby. I know. What hurts? Your tummy?”

Fielding mentioned the boys may have overdone it with the sugar. But that was so many hours ago, and my gut tells me this is more than too much sweet stuff.

Instead of answering, Wesley lets out a deep cough. It's wet enough that I lean back on instinct—is he going to be sick again? When the coughing fit subsides, he slumps against me.

“Does your belly hurt, baby?” I press, sweeping wavy blond curls off his forehead and realizing then that he's burning up.

“No, my tummy doesn't hurt,” he answers before being hit with another coughing fit.

Alarm bells go off in my mind. Granted, it's the middle of the night, but he's slow to respond and clearly has a fever. If his stomach doesn't hurt, that means he coughed hard enough to make himself sick.

Wesley groans again, and he sounds so pitiful, I just know. Something is not right.

Picking up my phone, I make a split-second decision and shoot off separate texts to my brother-in-law and to my husband.

Dempsey's hovering outside Wes's bedroom door two minutes later, ready to help me bundle up my middle kiddo and load him into the car.

“I'm sure Fielding will tell me I'm being overly cautious, but I think he needs to be seen.”

Dempsey regards Wesley closely, his eyebrows pulled together in concern. “He's definitely worse now than he was earlier today. I think you're making the right call.”

Once Wesley is loaded up, I close the back door of my car and offer Dempsey a weary smile.

“Winnie won't give you any trouble, and Wyatt *should* stay asleep,” I hedge. Our youngest sleeps through the night about half the time. The other half... I grimace at the thought of my brother-in-law having to deal with a middle-of-the-night Wyatt riot.

“Text me if you need *anything*,” I insist.

“We'll be fine,” he assures me. “I'll grab my pillow and sleep in one of the guest rooms on your end of the house. Text me as soon as you know something,” he adds through a yawn, jutting his chin toward the car window and a dozing Wesley.

“I will. Thanks, Dem.”

Chapter 14

Fielding

I'm on edge, rereading Daphne's texts, worried about her driving across town in the middle of the night and concerned that Wesley's taken a turn for the worse.

Instead of waiting for the pediatrician's office to open tomorrow morning, she insists he needs to be seen tonight. I trust her judgment. But I really didn't think Wes was that sick.

I whistle to myself and scrub my hands, trying to churn up a sense of optimism. Thank God Maddie and Dem are staying with us while their new place is being renovated. I shudder to think what Daphne would have gone through if she'd had to get all three kids loaded up into the car in the middle of the night by herself.

Before I hear them, I know they're here, and then the soft patter of Daphne's flats confirms their approach. When I glance down the hall, I spot her carrying Wes, his body slumped over her shoulder while she balances his coat and her purse in her other arm.

I rush to them and lift my son from her grasp, freezing in place when the heat rolling off his little body soaks into me.

“He's burning up,” I whisper, wide-eyed, whipping my focus from him to Daphne, then looking down at a limp Wesley again. His eyes are closed, but his face is twisted in a grimace. There's a slight wheeze to his inhalations, and he's sickly pale.

Shame and worry slam into me as I fully process the state of my son. He's so very clearly sick—

how the fuck did I not realize it earlier?

Daphne clocked his temp at 102.8 when he woke up, then 103.4 before they left the house. She held off giving him any sort of fever reducer so as not to mask the symptoms before they got here. He threw up an hour ago but hasn't complained of stomach pains or been sick since.

My brain is working overtime, flipping through signs and symptoms and likely diagnoses—he had a cold a few weeks ago, but it cleared up on its own, and he's not prone to ear infections. I lift his shirt and

prod lightly at his stomach, but he doesn't react like the pressure adds any additional pain.

What the fuck did I miss?

"Hey." My wife squeezes my bicep, pulling me out of my near panic. "We're here now. He's going to be okay."

I swallow past the lump of failure lodged in my throat, then suck in a deep breath to steady myself.

"Let's get him checked in," I concede. "He'll have to be seen by Dr. Park, but we're slow tonight, so I can be in the room, too."

I roll my shoulders back and crack my neck from side to side. These chairs are the fucking worst.

Especially for someone who's six-two, stressed as hell, and trying to cradle a forty-five pound child in his arms.

Our kids have all had bouts of illness. Winnie was in the NICU for a few weeks when she was born. Wyatt has already broken two bones and has been in for stitches on three occasions during his short life. Of our three children, Wesley is the last I would have expected to require a middle-of-the-night visit to urgent care.

He's so cautious. Docile. Sweet. My loving little saint of a son. I practically ignored him all day, blowing off his symptoms and half-heartedly placating him when he tried to tell me he was sick.

For fuck's sake.

"Come here, buddy," I choke out, fighting back tears as I cradle him to my chest. He's sick. He's so clearly sick. What kind of father am I to have missed all the signs?

Daphne soothes a hand over my back as we wait for Dr. Park. I would have preferred to see the images and to talk to the radiologist myself, but with the way Wesley whimpered and clung to me when I tried to hand him over to his mom, there was no way I was letting him go to examine his results.

Doesn't matter. I already know what the X-rays will show. As soon as I put my stethoscope to his back, I heard it. I heard it and I fucking knew. I failed.

Dr. Park knocks once before entering the room.

"Just as we suspected." She pulls up the images of Wesley's chest, using the cursor on her laptop screen to indicate a patch of cloudiness in one lung. "Pneumonia."

I curse silently, berating myself for missing something so critical. I'm a pediatric physician at a children's urgent care center. I diagnose a dozen cases of pneumonia each fucking week.

If only I had slowed down rather than getting all wrapped up in decorating nonsense all day. Or if I'd taken his complaints seriously and checked him out when he told me he didn't feel good over and over again...

I tune out everything else my colleague says. I miss most of the follow-up questions from Daphne. I already know what he needs: antibiotics and plenty of fluids and rest. What I don't know is how the fuck this happened on my watch.

Chapter 15

Daphne

"He's *okay*," I assure my husband for what feels like the hundredth time.

Wesley gave no indication he was even sick until yesterday afternoon, and he's already got the first dose of antibiotics in his system. He's sleeping between us now, in our bed, while Maddie and Dempsey keep the other kids occupied.

"He's not okay," Fielding counters, his frustrated gaze set on our son's chest as it rises and falls in a steady rhythm.

"You heard what Dr. Park said. Pneumonia can come on suddenly in little kids, even after it seems like they're getting better."

"I do remember a thing or two I learned in medical school," he bites out sarcastically.

I let out a quiet sigh. There's no use arguing with him right now. I know my husband well enough to know he's convinced himself this is his fault.

He has always worried about being enough. A good enough partner. A good enough husband. A good enough doctor. And above all else, in his heart of hearts, he worries about being a good enough dad for our kids.

Never mind that he was made for the role. That our children adore him. That we've created a healthy, happy home for our family, and that he showers them with infinite amounts of love, support, and guidance every day.

Fielding is blaming himself for Wesley's illness.

Usually, he takes life in stride. But every now and then, the slightest hiccup will trigger his impostor syndrome and send him spiraling.

I learned long ago that Fielding does nothing by halves—including processing his own emotions.

So instead of trying to reassure him— *again*—I make a last-ditch effort to get through to him by reframing the situation.

“You’re going to fuck up again,” I whisper.

His hand freezes where it rests on Wesley’s chest, and his eyes dart up to meet mine, burning a fiery blue in outrage.

Before he can open his mouth, I continue. “Remember when you let Winnie play beauty shop because she wanted to be like mommy, then she cut off all her bangs?”

His mouth thins into a scowl.

“Or that time Wyatt convinced you to let him ride Wesley’s electric scooter by himself, and he crashed it into a tree? He needed four stitches after that incident.”

Fielding’s brows furrow so intensely that, for one millisecond, I swear it’s Dempsey lying beside me instead of my husband.

“Head injuries bleed a lot. The stitches were really just for cosmetic reasons,” he meekly defends.

“Remember when Wesley was a baby, and you were holding him during dinner, and you accidentally dropped a meatball on his eye?”

His pupils narrow to pinpoints, fury flaring behind his gaze, and the slightest huff of frustration comes from deep in his chest.

“Winnie bumped my elbow at the table. Besides—he was sleeping, and his eyes were closed. He didn’t even cry!”

Wordlessly, I reach across our son’s body and take my husband’s hand. I interlace our fingers, then lift his knuckles to my mouth, giving him a soft, reassuring kiss before settling our joined hands on the pillow above Wesley’s head.

“We’re both going to make mistakes—over and over again.”

Fielding regards me, his eyes finally softening to that lagoon blue I adore, and he visibly swallows past his insecurities.

“But you care so deeply. And you’re so concerned about getting this right and being the best parent and role model you can be for our

children. *That* is what makes you an amazing father.”

I smile at Wesley between us, then turn to my husband. “You were made for this, Fielding Haas.

You were made to love these kids. There’s nothing you could ever do that would permanently mess this up. But you have to forgive yourself when you don’t get it right. You have to give yourself the same understanding and grace that you give everyone around you.”

He’s silent for several minutes. Nothing but the sounds of Wesley’s breathing fill the space between us.

Finally, in a voice filled with trepidation and emotion, he asks, “And when I fuck up again?”

“When you fuck up again, I’ll be right here. Lifting you up. Reminding you that it’s okay. Just like I know you’ll do for me.”

Nodding, he snuggles closer to Wesley, kissing our son’s head, then my hand.

“I don’t want to let you down, angel. I don’t want to fuck anything up when it comes to our kids.”

“The only way you could fuck anything up is if you gave up. Our worst parenting mistakes and all the wrong calls we’re bound to make over the next two decades amount to nothing compared to the way you love our family so well.”

His body stills, my words heavy between us.

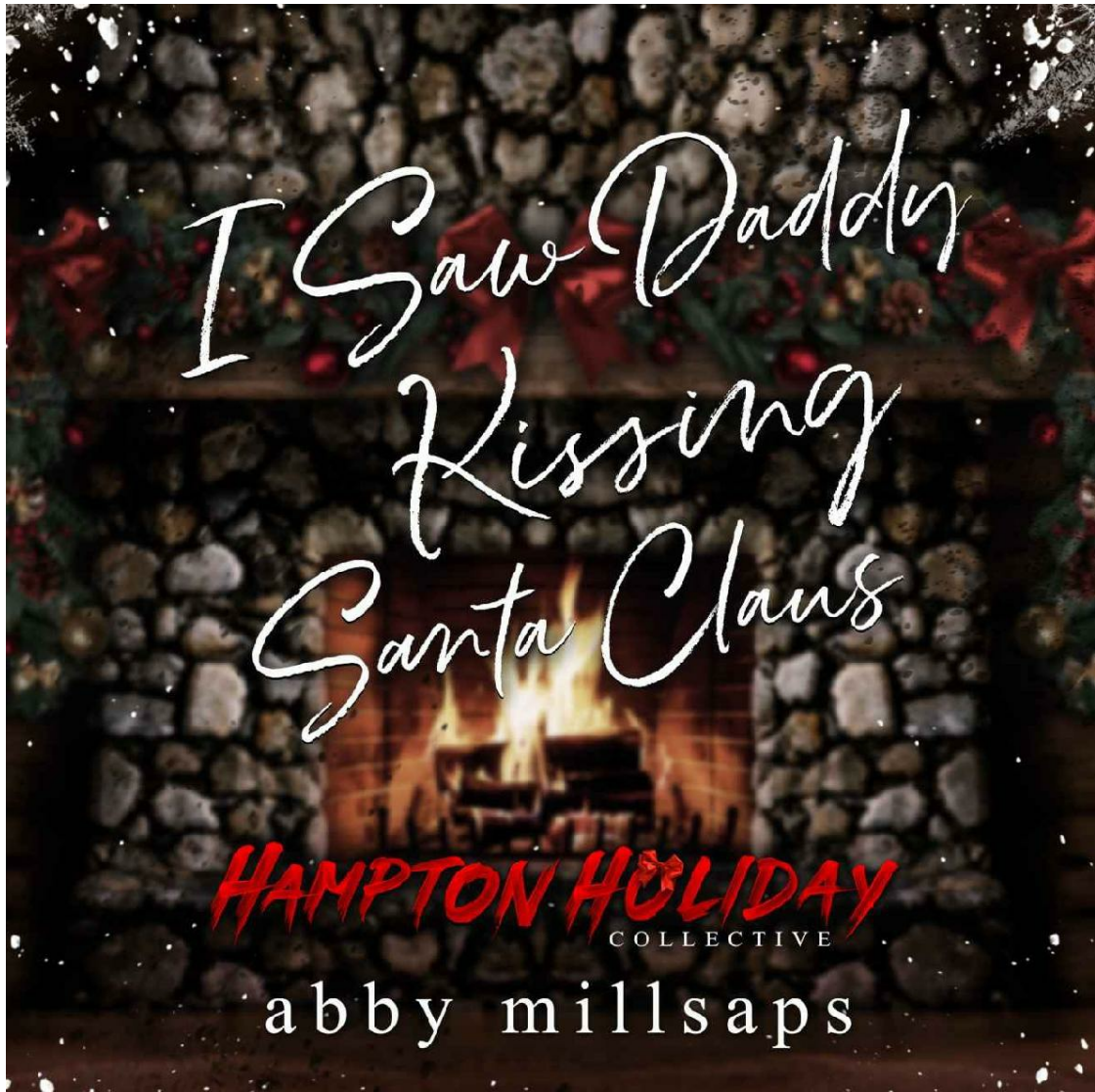
Finally, his signature smile graces his face, and once again, all is right in our world.

“How did I get so damn lucky that I get to do life with you?”

“Daddy said a bad word,” Wesley pipes up between us before turning to his side, letting out a drawn-out yawn, and immediately dozing off again.

I stifle my laughter with one hand, eyeing Fielding while he pets Wesley’s head and gazes down at our son.

“Daddy can’t help it,” I whisper, waiting for my husband to meet my gaze before I add, “he only knows how to love full out.”



Chapter 16

Jake

White-knuckling the smooth leather of the steering wheel, I eye the road warily. Snow whips across the turnpike in billowing waves. Visibility is limited to just a few yards, and I swear the vehicle rocks as another gust of wind blusters over the road.

Typically, I wouldn't be concerned, but we're on the third showing of *Little Baby Bum*, and my nerves are fried from listening to those stupid kittens whine about their goddamn mittens. Plus, the traction of a minivan doesn't compare to the all-wheel drive of my beloved Jeep.

"I have to unmute again," Cory mutters in warning.

Fuck. I'm up.

“Okay, kiddos—Papi has to talk on the phone. Let’s play the quiet game. Winner gets a Goldfish snack.”

I lower the volume of their show, only to be met with brute protests.

“I can’t hear da baby bum!” Matteo screams.

At the same time, Stella gripes, “I don’t even like Goldfish!”

She liked them just fine yesterday.

I glance back at my kids through the rearview mirror and huff out a long breath. I’ll have to up the ante if Cory stands a chance of being heard on his call.

“Hey! Shh-shh-shh. Be quiet for just a few minutes, and I’ll give you M&Ms.”

They both cheer, victorious in the art of small child manipulation, while Cory reaches over and gives my thigh an appreciative squeeze.

I do my best to smile back and mean it, but damn, I’m already exhausted, and it’s only two in the afternoon.

I got the kids fed and ready this morning like usual. Then, after I cleaned up the kitchen and wrapped a few more gifts, it was a mad dash to double-check that we hadn’t forgotten anything important and pack up the car. Every time I turned around, one of the kids was pulling out something I packed, adding in a few extra toys, or—worst of all—trying to get a peek of their Christmas gifts.

Christmas at the cabin used to be a helluva lot simpler when my only responsibilities were bringing a case of Christmas Ale and getting Tori and myself safely to Michigan.

“I expect it to get worse before it gets better,” Cory says into the phone, indicating that he’s no longer muted.

I give another quick reminder *shh* to my children.

“If last year’s numbers and data from this Thanksgiving are any indication, we’ll be slammed over the next few days. Our first priority is fulfilling our mission, but not at the expense of any of our staff or volunteers.” He clears his throat and goes on. “I want the break room fully stocked, with lunch and dinner catered in each day from now until January first. Break periods are not to be missed, and mandatory respite days still need to be honored, no matter how much someone might insist they’re fine. I refuse to let anyone on the team burn out this week—we take care of our own, because that’s the best way to take care of the people we serve.”

Hot damn. I love when he goes all bossy executive director like that. Especially when he's advocating for his staff and volunteers.

My husband clears his throat and gives me the side-eye, almost as if he can sense how turned on his stern conference call voice is making me.

I raise my brows in challenge and smirk before focusing on the road again.

Dozens of people will keep the phone lines and text message service running twenty-four seven this week for Better Yet, the non-profit organization Cory founded. It's one of their busiest times of the year—at-risk LGBTQ youth rely heavily on their support because many are in more vulnerable situations during the holidays. Whether it's sitting across the dinner table from a bigot uncle or being forced to attend a church service where who they are as human beings is condemned, there are unavoidable situations that threaten their mental health and general wellbeing.

It's a struggle each and every year to convince Cory to take time off for his birthday and Christmas.

He'd be manning the phones himself twenty-four seven if he could. So this is our compromise: we keep up our tradition of going up to the cabin to spend Christmas with Tori and Rhett, but he stays connected and in constant contact with his team.

"Daddy," Stella says in a hushed voice behind me, and before I can respond, she's whisper-yelling,

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"

"*Daddy*. Stella needs you!" Matteo informs me at full volume.

My son is never more like me than when he wants someone's attention.

"Shh!" I remind them again.

Cory holds up one finger with an apologetic grimace.

"Keep it together, Team Vargo." I grit my teeth and grip the steering wheel tighter.

We somehow manage to survive another three minutes, then I pull off at a rest stop so Stella can go to the bathroom, Matteo can get out his wiggles, and I can dole out the promised M&Ms.

I blast the heat once we're back in the car—it really is frigid out there, and the snow is relentless.

“We’ve got less than an hour to go,” I reassure the fam and turn to my husband. “Permission to resume their show?”

Cory blows out a long breath. “We should be okay. I have to be in one more meeting at three, but I don’t think I’ll need to speak. I’m sorry it’s such a crazy day,” he apologizes, his voice soft and his eyes full of concern.

“We’re good,” I assure him. “Almost there,” I add and squeeze his arm. “I just feel bad that you have to manage everything from the car. I wanted to get the drive behind us so we could fully enjoy your birthday tomorrow, but maybe that was unrealistic.”

“About that…”

“Baby,” I groan.

“I have to be on two calls tomorrow afternoon,” he explains.

“So our birthday lunch date is off, then?”

I put the van in reverse, pull out of the parking spot, then hit the gas a little harder than I should as I merge back onto the turnpike.

Christmas Eve is chaotic and fun in all the best ways. But it’s hard to balance making Cory’s birthday special while also making cookies for Santa and wrangling the kids’ off-the-charts energy. A few years ago, we started going out to lunch that day, just the two of us, to celebrate him. It’s like the calm before the storm that is Christmas with small children.

“No, no. We can still go. I’ve been looking forward to it all week. We just have to be back by two.”

My patience is stretched so thin that I don’t trust myself to reply. Wordlessly, I nod and turn up *Little Baby Bum* per Matteo’s demands.

“Hey.” Cory reaches across the center console and grips my thigh. “It’ll be great. I can’t wait for alone time with you.”

His heated stare melts some of the tension wearing on my frazzled nerves. But then Stella gives a swift kick to the back of the driver’s seat because Matteo threw a fidget ball at her, and I quickly have to right the van into the lane and focus on the road. This last hour is going to be a long one.

Chapter 17

Cory

I corral the kids while Jake grabs the first load from the car, and we hustle to get inside the cabin and out of the blistering storm that's been dumping snow on us all afternoon.

“Auntie Tori!” Stella cheers the second we're through the door, rushing past my legs and tracking snow all over the entryway as she beelines for my best friend in the kitchen.

Tori picks her up and spins her around, their mutual squeals of delight echoing against the cavernous ceiling.

Tori and Rhett's cabin in Michigan is one of those places that just feels like home. Especially at Christmastime. We've been coming up here to celebrate with them over the last several years, and Jake, Rhett, and Tori speak fondly of their holidays here before I was in the picture.

Everything in the cabin is warm and glowing—twinkle lights adorn every ledge, with the scent of evergreen and cinnamon wafting through the space.

The tension clinging to me starts to thaw as I exhale a long breath.

We made it. After a nonstop week and a harried drive, we're finally here. And it's almost Christmas.

This year more than ever, the holiday season has been a nonstop hustle—between work, the kids'

activities, and the rush of doing everything we could to make the season as special as possible, I admittedly haven't had time to let myself feel any semblance of holiday spirit.

But walking into this cozy, welcoming place with friends we love like family sends a surge of warmth and joy through me.

“Nope!” Tori declares, squeezing Stella tighter against her body in an all-encompassing hug as my little girl giggles. “I haven't seen you since Thanksgiving. I'm not ready to let go.”

Stella beams and soaks up her godmother's praise. “I can't wait to make cookies tomorrow! I want to make chocolate chip and crinkle cookies and spritz! Then we'll have caramel hot cocoa while they bake!”

“I help too,” Matteo declares defiantly from his perch in my arms. Stella darts a look at me, panicked, and I do my best to not laugh at her worry.

I shake my head subtly, and Tori bends low to whisper to Stella that they'll bake cookies when Matteo takes his nap. Relief floods her

little body with the assurance.

Jake finally appears in the doorway, his hair and shoulders covered in snow. It's really coming down hard, guaranteeing we'll have a white Christmas.

Rhett rushes to greet him and take some of the bags from his hands. The sheer amount of luggage and packages and tote bags we brought makes it look like we're staying for weeks. But we honestly need everything we hauled. Factor in two adults, two small kids, and anything and everything we could possibly need for Christmas, and it's just a lot of stuff.

My husband and his best friend hug, then Rhett moves over to greet me with a handshake and a one-armed hug.

"Matty boy!" he dotes, pulling back and reaching out for my son.

Matteo grips my neck tighter, clinging to me as he thwarts Rhett's attempt at taking him from my arms.

Chuckling, Rhett backs off immediately, both hands raised as he glances at Jake in question.

"He's going through a serious Papi phase right now," my husband explains. He arranges a few bags on the kitchen island and rubs his hands together to get warm before he has to head out for the next load.

"I've been working a lot over the last few weeks," I offer as an explanation, rubbing a soothing hand up and down Matteo's back. It hurts Jake's feelings when the kids take preferential sides like this. But it's impossible to reason with a determined three-year-old who just so happens to share Jake's DNA.

"Daddy says you've been working way too much," Stella declares with an edge to her tone. She's shucking off her coat and making herself at home, completely unaware of how her words have sliced through the room.

"It's our busiest time of the year," I rationalize softly, hugging Matty to me and glancing over to Jake for back up.

He's busying himself with putting away the groceries we bought, his head down and his attention fixed on the task.

"Things will slow down in January," I offer, louder.

"I know. They always do," Jake confirms without meeting my gaze as he continues to unload bags.

Stella is already skipping into the living room, and Rhett and Tori are looking at one another, quite possibly to avoid looking at me.

An awkward silence follows, so thick with unease that I feel compelled to dig my heels in and defend myself again.

“It’s important work.”

“It’s life-saving work,” Tori finally chimes in, coming over to stand beside me. With one hand on my back, she ruffles Matteo’s hair and plants a kiss on his cheek.

Jake blows out a long breath and nods, but he doesn’t attempt to argue or engage in the conversation. I feel foolish defending myself to no one. I recognize that my own insecurities fuel a lot of the guilt I have as the primary working parent in our house.

Tori whispers something that makes Matteo giggle. Then he’s unexpectedly wiggling out of my arms.

“I’ve got a craft set up for the kids in the living room,” she explains, taking Matty from me and propping him on one hip before ruffling his hair again. “Why are you so stinkin’ cute, Matty Vargo?”

“‘Cause I look just like my daddy!” he explains without missing a beat, his eyes alight and a grin spread across his face. We all chuckle at his bold self-confidence, clearly one of the many traits he inherited from Jake.

“I’ve got them,” Tori insists with a smile. “We’ll be busy for at least an hour if you’ve got work to do.”

“Do you have work to finish up?” Jake asks a little too evenly, jutting his chin to the laptop bag slung over my shoulder.

I do. I hate it, but I do.

“I’ll be less than an hour,” I say with a grimace, then head toward the basement so I can work in peace.

Jake gives me a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes, meaning his one dimple doesn’t come out to play. His neutral acceptance and unwavering support prick at my guilty conscience. But the sooner I get these emails wrapped up, the sooner I can focus on our family.

“I’m gonna get another load from the car.”

Rhett is hot on his best friend’s heels, grabbing his coat as they head to the door.

“I’ll help you, bro. Let’s get everything unloaded, then we can start on dinner.”

“*Don’t* overdo it,” Tori scolds, giving her husband a pointed look. “His back’s been bothering him,” she adds quietly for me.

Her concern is warranted, I’m sure. We know our husbands well enough to know that they’re most likely to let their competitive edge get the best of them when they’re together.

“Come on, little one,” she tells Matty, wrapping me in a quick side hug before heading into the living room with my son. “Wait until you see the tree!”

Chapter 18

Jake

“Come on, old man,” I lob at my best friend. “There are a few pillows in here I bet you can handle.”

Rhett grumbles under his breath and shoves his hands into his coat pockets, but he doesn’t bother rebuking my jibe.

I hit the trunk release button, and we stand, wordless, as the cargo door of my minivan lifts in slow motion.

A quick glance confirms my suspicions—Rhett’s biting the inside of his cheek, trying to hold back a grin.

“*Don’t* say a word,” I threaten.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“You were thinking it,” I counter, grabbing two suitcases and directing him toward a laundry basket filled with the kids’ blankets and stuffed animals with a jut of my chin.

“What do you *think* I was thinking?” Rhett smirks, cautiously lifting the basket.

The taunt lands squarely alongside all the frustration that’s been building inside me today and swirls into an outburst I’m powerless to hold back. “That this car is the most ridiculous hunk of metal I’ve ever driven!” I bite.

My best friend stares at me for a beat, then another, one brow cocked. He’s one of three people in this world who know me even better than I know myself. I can be honest to a fault with Rhett—I don’t have to hide what’s hard or pretend to be okay when I’m not.

“It’s not a Jeep,” he deadpans. Apparently, he’s going to let my bad attitude slide.

“No shit,” I huff, turning back toward the cabin. “But it’s got a built-in entertainment system, and the kids each have their own captain seats. It has a ton of trunk space, and it’s even Wi-Fi enabled so

Cory can work or Stella can play on her tablet.”

“It’s practical,” Rhett offers objectively, passing me on the slick walkway to grab the door and hold it open. The snow continues to pummel us—we have to practically yell to be heard over the whip of the wind.

“It’s lame, I know,” I lament, dropping everything I’m holding as soon as we clear the threshold.

“Not lame,” he promises before adding with a grin, “But I probably won’t be asking to borrow it anytime soon.”

“Good. I don’t have to worry about you crashing it then.”

“*Yikes*,” Rhett hisses with a jolly chuckle. I’m an asshole, and I swear—the man’s got the patience of a saint. “We need to find you some holiday spirit.”

I grumble a non-reply and turn back to fetch another load from the car.

“Hey.” He stops me, flinging one arm over my shoulders and pulling me into him as we step back out into the snowstorm. “Come on, bro. It’s Christmas. We’re together. The kids won’t be little forever. Let’s make the most of it this year.”

His words bop around in my mind. I know he’s right, but I still feel put out by this whole ordeal.

Christmas didn’t used to feel this hard. I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t excited about the holidays. But here we fucking are.

I won’t spoil it for my kids. I’ll put on a happy face and play my part. And I’ll try my best to muster up some elusive Christmas spirit. But pretending might just be the best I can do this year.

We walk side by side back to the van. “You’re in the basement like usual,” Rhett offers. “Tori and I will be upstairs in the loft this year.”

“Really? Why?”

“Maddie refuses to come if she has to climb up and down the stairs all night to go to the bathroom,”

he explains.

Fair.

Fourth Wheel and Dempsey attended the Thanksgiving pageant at Matteo and Wyatt's preschool last month, and already, she looked like she was about to pop. Although I didn't say a word about her rotundness, she was quick to reprimand me anyway. I kept a straight face for all of three minutes as she lectured me about how her body was not meant for twins before lamenting that she still had the entire third trimester to go. I can only imagine how miserable she must be now.

Maybe we can be grouchy together this holiday season.

"They're not coming until Christmas day, probably around dinnertime, so the bathroom's available if you want to let the kids play in the jacuzzi or use the sauna or anything."

"Got it," I grunt, hauling more than my fair share of bags up the snow-covered path. "Let's get this shit in the house so I can finally defrost." "Fire's already going, and Tori has wassel on the stove.

Let's get you warmed up and find some of that holiday spirit."

Chapter 19

Cory

Prickly stubble tickling my neck is the first sensation to register as I yawn awake.

A large, warm hand dipping into the front of my buffalo plaid pajama pants, teasing at the waistband, comes next.

It's dark, and based on the lack of movement and general commotion, it's still early. Jake typically gets up before the rest of us at home—getting in his workout, packing lunches, and showering so he's ready for the day before I even roll out of bed at seven.

He presses a slow, wet kiss to the side of my neck before sucking until I moan.

"Happy birthday, baby."

His tongue travels up my throat and over my Adam's apple as his hand locks tight around my morning wood. Upwelling arousal courses through me as he peppers kisses along my jaw, then finally claims my mouth.

His minty breath and the familiar smell of his body wash are intoxicating—he obviously didn't forgo his morning routine just because we're at the cabin. I kiss him back lazily, my mind reluctant to fully wake up from this delicious dream. Just when I think I've

figured out his rhythm, he pulls his hand away, spits, and goes back to stroking my dick, but this time with more fervor.

Another moan almost escapes my lips, but he swallows it up, teasing my tongue with his. Of their own accord, my hips match his rhythm, the haze between sleep and consciousness making every sensation all the more sensual.

He grips me tight, jerking me the way only he can, until I'm a panting, needy mess in his hands. I hiss when he runs his thumb over the slit of my cock, gathering the drop of precum and massaging it into the head. Even after all these years, I'm a sucker for everything he does. He knows exactly what I like.

A soft knock on our closed bedroom door jettisons me back to reality.

"Mierda," I curse as the door cracks open and light streams into the room.

"Papi said a bad word," Stella yawns sleepily as she shuffles in.

Rhett and Tori remodeled the basement several years ago, turning the open-floor concept downstairs into two separate bedrooms, plus a game room. The kids' room has two sets of bunk beds.

Stella can't wait to be big enough to claim a top bunk.

I softly groan at the intrusion—I knew it was too good to last. Jake chuckles against my lips before giving me a quick peck. Then he deftly removes his hand from my pants, sits up, and locks eyes with me as he pops the thumb that was just grazing the head of my cock into his mouth.

"Stella? Get me!" Matty cries from the other room. He doesn't give his sister time to answer before he's kicking the wall that separates our room from theirs.

"It's almost Christmas! It's almost Christmas! Somebody get me *out!*"

"Relax over there, rowdy boy!" Jake calls out, shifting to the end of the mattress and subtly adjusting himself through his gray sweatpants before rising.

Matteo's bed is affixed with a bed rail that keeps him from rolling out and also keeps him from escaping the confines of the space—which is necessary, based on past experiences. Just another one of the many ways our kids are polar opposites. Raising our second born

has been nothing like parenting Stella. Jake isn't joking when he calls him rowdy boy.

Stella skips over to wrap her arms around my neck. "Happy birthday, Papi. Can I take Matty upstairs?"

"Yes," Jake answers before adding, "but don't try to trick Uncle Rhett into giving you sugar this early. I'll be right up to make breakfast."

Stella scurries out of the room, and the sound of Matty's feet hitting the floor echoes in the hall a moment later. He doesn't bother coming in to say good morning—the boy loves his breakfast, almost as much as he loves his morning shows. The sound of little footsteps racing up the stairs gives us another private but all too brief moment alone.

I rake my eyes up and down Jake's impossibly perfect frame—the bulk of his tatted biceps, the cut of his solid eight-pack, the curls of his perfectly trimmed happy trail—and soak him in as he stretches his arms overhead with a yawn. When I move to sit up, he turns and pushes me down, bending low and kissing me deep.

He pulls away quickly, leaving me breathless with want as my cock twitches.

"*You* stay in bed, birthday boy. I'll get them going on breakfast, then bring down your coffee."

"Just regular coffee is fine," I tell him through a yawn, fluffing my pillow before settling back in to snooze.

Jake lowers over me, hovering an inch from my lips, just out of reach. "Baby, it's your birthday. I made the espresso last night and put it on ice so you can have it exactly how you like it today."

He pecks me once more, then strides toward the door.

"You're the best," I call after him before he can leave the room.

"I love you," he replies, pausing at the threshold and grasping the doorjamb with one arm, the muscles in his forearm flexing in a way that makes me even harder. "And I really wanna get you alone later and show you how much," he adds with a heated stare.

Heaven. Being married to Jake is blissful, wonderful, brilliant heaven.

Chapter 20

Jake

Melancholy lingers between us on the walk from the van to the cabin. I enter the security code and wrap my hand around the door handle just as Cory grabs my arm. Pausing, I glance over my shoulder and study my husband for a long moment.

His eyes are a storm of emotions, none of which I'm responsible for inspiring.

This sucks. But it is what it is.

I no longer panic when his eyes get distant and his mood goes somber. The mental and emotional demands of his work during this time of year toe the line of unsustainable. But what he's doing is so important, and he's so committed to his team and to their mission.

I know he can do this. Just like I know now is not forever. Things will ease up after the holidays.

They always do.

I squeeze his hand in solidarity, offering him my best attempt at a sincere and understanding smile.

He squeezes back, but it's lackluster at best.

Lunch was a disaster. We shouldn't have even bothered. It took us longer than expected to get out the door, with Matty inventing a million little reasons why we (or more specifically, Cory) couldn't leave.

By the time we finally made it to the restaurant, we had missed our reservation, so we sat at the bar. Or rather, I sat at the bar. Cory had to take an emergency call after we ordered drinks. Then we rushed to eat and pay the check before his scheduled conference call.

He spent half the car ride to the cabin on the phone, and the other half apologizing profusely that he couldn't give me his undivided attention.

It's a merciless cycle we go through each holiday season: Cory feels guilty about his workload.

Then I neglect my own feelings in an effort to build him back up and keep him in the best headspace

possible to lead his team. None of it is easy. But in the end, it's worth it.

We'll get through this. We always do.

But this year more than ever, I'm ready to move past the holiday season. I really miss my husband.

I push through the door to the sound of Tori and Stella belting out the chorus to a song from the *Frozen* holiday special.

“You’re home!” Stella squeals, skipping to me and hugging my legs before doing the same to Cory.

“Papi!” Matteo screams, wiggling out of Rhett’s arms and running toward us at full speed. Cory scoops him up, hugs him tight, and spins him around.

It’s the middle of the afternoon, but the kids are already in their matching Christmas jammies.

“Say hi to Daddy,” Cory encourages.

“Hiii, Daddy,” Matty sasses with all the three-year-old attitude he can muster.

I ruffle his hair, but he immediately bats my hand away in protest before Cory turns to follow Stella into the living room.

I blow out a long breath and turn toward the coat stand. Tori catches my arm before I make it two steps.

“You look like you need a hug,” she teases, poking me in the side.

“Nah. Just salty about not getting a warmer welcome,” I lament.

She grips my arm tighter, preventing me from taking another step. “I’m happy to see you. Why don’t we go on a walk?”

Side-eyeing her skeptically, I pull a face. The snow’s not coming down like it was yesterday, but it’s still wicked cold outside.

“I don’t want to go on a walk.”

“Well, I do. And I want you to go with me.”

I stare at her blankly. What’s her angle? We really don’t have time for a walk. There’s a long list of things to do to get dinner on the table. Plus, we always watch the *Muppets Christmas Carol* with the kids on Christmas Eve—if we don’t start it by six, we’ll mess up their bedtime routine.

Tori plants one hand on her hip, and that single move tells me I’ve already lost. Then Rhett walks into the kitchen and seals my fate.

“What’s going on?” he asks, observing the silent standoff.

One side of Tori’s mouth turns up, just slightly, before she speaks.

“Jake won’t go on a walk with me.”

My eyes practically bug out of my head. “You’re such a brat! Are you really tattling on me to your husband right now?”

Ignoring the battle of wills waging between his wife and me, Rhett takes two steps closer, his face etched with concern.

“Bro, what’s wrong? Do you want to—”

“Fine! Fine. I’ll go on a stupid walk.”

Walking with Tori is more tolerable than being grilled by Rhett.

I shuffle to the door and wait for Tori to slip on her coat and hat and lace up her boots.

“Tattletale,” I mutter under my breath as she smugly links her arm through mine.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

We walk in a peaceful silence for a few minutes, down past the bench swing and along what should be the shoreline of the lake. The world is quiet in the way only fresh fallen snow can hush it into stillness. The cold air sears my lungs with each inhalation, but it soothes more than it burns.

Surprisingly, I feel less harried with each step we take. Not that I would admit that to Tori.

“Where’s your holiday spirit this year?” she eventually asks, breaking the silence and bursting my bubble of solitude.

I shrug nonchalantly, my shoulders riddled with renewed tension. Time to downplay my feelings.

Again.

“Just not feeling it this year.” With my hands in my pockets, I hunker down deeper in my coat to avoid the icy wind.

She keeps her attention fixed on the path ahead of us and asks, “Is everything okay with you and Cory?”

Fuckin’ A.

Leave it to Tori to not beat around the bush. I should have trusted my gut and refused this stupid walk. There’s no point in attempting to bullshit her. She’ll see right through me. She always does.

“Yeah, mostly,” I hedge. “I mean, yes. We’re fine. Our relationship is rock solid. Nothing is specifically wrong. But between the kids and his work, we never have time for each other around the

holidays. It's just hard at this time of year. He's under a ton of pressure, and I'm trying my damndest not to add to his plate."

I trail off, and she doesn't try to fill in the silence.

"I feel stupid complaining. Really, nothing is wrong, and we'll get through this, just like we always do. But between you and me, it's hard being just a dad," I confess.

Tori halts beside me and pulls on my arm, forcing me to stop, too. "What do you mean *just* a dad?"

I blow out a frustrated breath. Nothing's coming out right today. I hate to sound like a whiny little bitch. But she's the one who made me come on this stupid walk in the first place.

"I mean, that's all I am these days. Cory's working twenty-four seven to support and fucking *save the lives* of at-risk LGBTQ youth, and what am I doing? Getting Stella ready for school. Taking Matty to gymnastics and preschool and art class. Waiting in the damn parent pickup line for a solid five to six hours a week."

"What about work?" she challenges.

I scoff in spite of my successful business endeavors. "The bar and the restaurant run on their own.

They don't need me there—my managers have it covered. The staff are all fifteen or twenty years younger than me now anyway. I may sign the checks, but I don't belong there anymore."

Ready to move on from this topic, I take a determined step forward, which she quickly matches so we're once again walking side by side.

Vulnerably—because this is Tori, and she's been a safe place for me since we were kids—I work through what's at the heart of my frustration. "Cory has this vibrant, important career, and he's *needed* there."

"He runs an organization that *you* helped fund," Tori reminds me, hooking her arm through mine and pulling me closer.

"True. But their advancement team is solid now, and they've been operating on their own annual budget for almost three years. I'm obsolete."

She scoffs but lets me continue.

"I take care of the kids. Pick up groceries. Schedule appointments and make play dates. Like I said: I'm just a dad."

I stare straight ahead, focused on the gray, overcast sky. She lets me stew in my self-pity. Which isn't like Tori at all. I let the moment shroud me in comfort as we walk silently side by side.

"Your dad was just a dad," she finally declares.

I shudder at the mention of Joe Whitely. She doesn't harp on him, though. She keeps going.

"Even though he tried his best, my dad was also just a dad. And although Rhett's too kind to say it, his dad was just a dad."

I prickle at the idea of being in the same category as any of those men. I want to be so much more—

I want to do better by my kids than our fathers did for us.

"You are *not* just a dad, Jacob Vargo. You're a caregiver. A role model. A boo-boo-kisser. A pretty decent Blippi impersonator. A phenomenal husband. A caring, selfless partner.

"You pour yourself into being there for your family—in supporting them and building them up. Your businesses and Better Yet are rock solid because of you. *You* are the very foundation for so many people and so many things."

She doesn't give me time to protest.

"Stella and Matty will never wonder if they're loved. They'll *never* know the insecurity of feeling alone in this world. You love so hard, and your love is so cherished. You are *so much more* than just a dad."

I gulp down a surge of emotion and examine the ground in front of me, feeling equally scolded and inspired.

"Well, when you put it that way..."

She hugs my arm and rests her head on my shoulder. We come to a stop then, turning to the lake and watching as the clouds transform from soot to charcoal. It'll be dark soon. But the cabin will be full of light and life tonight.

It's Christmas Eve. A night I've been planning for and looking forward to for months.

This exact moment is still hard, yes—where I'm at right now is nowhere near where I thought I'd end up in life. But Tori's right: what I have now is so much more beautiful than anything I ever thought I deserved. This moment might be tough, but it's just one

string in the tapestry I'm damn proud to have sewn together for myself and my family.

The white puffs of our exhalations mingle for a few more breaths before Tori speaks again. "Let's head back. What still needs to be done for tomorrow?"

Tomorrow is Christmas. And it's going to be fan-fucking-tastic.

"Not much. Everything's wrapped, labeled, and sorted. I've got their special Santa note ready to go, and the stockings are filled, so they just need to be hung up. I have a personalized video message from Santa set to come through my email after dinner. We just need to arrange everything under the tree once the kids are in bed."

Tori snorts. "'Just a dad,' my ass."

I smirk to myself as a lightness I haven't felt in weeks washes through me.

"Thanks for being a brat and forcing me on this walk."

She hums contently, then hugs my arm again. "This is what we do. Lift each other up. Pull each other forward. From darkness to light, for the rest of our lives. You know I'm always here for you, rowdy boy."

She pulls me around and leads me back toward the house.

"I'll tell you what," Tori continues. "Why don't we do the Christmas eve dinner as planned, then after you get your email from Santa, Rhett and I will stay in the basement and listen for the kids."

My eyes must bug out of my head based on the grin she aims at me.

"What? You don't want to be alone with your husband tonight? It's his birthday, and it sounds like you could use a few hours to yourselves. Spend some time together, then set up whatever you need to under the tree. We'll keep the littles in the basement."

I pull her into a suffocatingly tight side hug, overwhelmed with gratitude for her friendship. She's always seen me in a way almost no one else can.

I kiss her hair before pulling back and whispering my thanks. "Don't tell Rhett—but you're my favorite."

"I know." She smiles, and just like that, my whole night—my whole damn outlook on life—is turned sunny side up, thanks to Tori.

Chapter 21

Cory

I pull the door closed for the third time in ten minutes and send up a silent prayer that the kids are finally settled for the night. It's nearly an hour past their usual bedtime. They're unreasonably excited about tomorrow, but it's been a long day, and they need to actually go to sleep before Jake and I can tackle the rest of our to-do list.

I keep my hand on the doorknob—I swear Matty can sense it if I walk away too quickly—but startle when my husband presses his lips to the back of my neck.

“I have a surprise for you, birthday boy.”

I shiver at the deep, sultry octave of his voice.

“Oh yeah?” I whisper, finally releasing the doorknob and leaning back into his arms. “What kind of surprise?”

He nips at my earlobe before murmuring, “The hot, naughty, birthday sex kind of surprise.”

I silently chuckle but reach one arm up to grip the back of his head and nuzzle against him. I appreciate the gesture, but I know that's not in the cards for us tonight. “We both know the kids won't sleep through that,” I acknowledge with a sigh.

Jake doesn't stop kissing my neck.

“Tori and Rhett are coming down to keep an ear out for them for a few hours. You and I have a date in the sauna.”

I still at the very idea of a few hours alone with my husband, almost like if I react too quickly it won't really happen.

“Leave your damn phone down here,” he demands. Which I can do. I owe it to him—and to myself

—to not be glued to work updates, even if it's just for a few hours.

“Leave your clothes down here while you're at it. There's a robe in the closet—get changed, then meet me in the master bathroom in ten minutes.”

Jake takes off before I have a chance to question him. Eagerness percolates low in my belly. I rush to our room, whip off my clothes, and put on a robe, then I hurry back to the hallway.

“Have fun,” Tori murmurs as she passes on the stairs, startling me. She gives me a wink and holds up a cup of cocoa in a mock toast. Rhett is a few steps behind her and gives me a knowing bro nod as they make their descent into the basement.

I'm too excited to feel even an ounce of embarrassment that they know I'm about to let my husband defile me in their sauna.

It's not just his touch or the promise of release I'm chasing—it's the intimacy that's hard to come by with two small children in the house and a demanding, nonstop career.

My expectations for today weren't high—it's not a milestone birthday, and this is the reality of where we're at in our relationship and as parents. The daily grind doesn't stop. I love our life—

wouldn't change a thing about it. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit how much I've missed my husband lately.

It's not him. Not at all. If anything, it's me.

I have everything I ever wanted because of Jake. He helped make my dreams come true. But my work is relentless and never ending.

I'm exhausted after work, and I put all the energy I can into helping around the house and getting the kids down for bed each night because I know the monotony of being a stay-at-home dad wears on him.

To have a night to ourselves—where we can lock the door and know the kids won't interrupt—is idyllic.

I grab a water bottle from the fridge and chug it on my way into the master bedroom. If he wants to meet up in the sauna, I'll be ready. He's all I want for Christmas and my birthday combined.

Chapter 22

Cory

I try to keep my cool as I swing open the door to the sauna. I stop short at the threshold, though, because Jake isn't here.

I drop my robe anyway and lay a towel on the lower-level bench, inhaling deeply as the dry heat and the scent of cedar overtake my senses.

Jake doesn't keep me waiting long.

With his perfect head of hair slicked back and dripping, my husband saunters in, wearing nothing but a crimson red towel slung low around his waist.

He eye fucks me while I return the gesture, drinking him in and admiring the peaks and valleys of his smooth abdomen along with the bulging muscles under his tatted arms. He lets the towel fall, making me grateful, for once, to see laundry on the floor.

My attention drifts to his dick—to the way it hangs hard and heavy between his legs, to the perfect pearl of precum teasing me right on the tip.

It isn't until he clears his throat and takes a step toward me that I notice the two bottles in his hands.

One is a bottle of our preferred lube. But the other...

“Is that—”

“Caramel sauce.” He flips the bottle twice through the air and catches it in one hand. “I swiped it from the hot chocolate station,” he confesses with a twinkle in his eye.

“And what, exactly, do you plan to do with that?” I ask, my voice catching in my throat as he straddles my lap.

He hovers over me, his knees on the bench on either side of my hips and his thick thighs locking me in place before he licks up my neck to my ear and whispers, “I plan to make myself a salted caramel husband for dessert.”

A moment later, he catches my mouth with his and kisses me senseless until I'm a panting, sweaty mess under his tongue. With a hand on the side of my neck and his thumb under my chin, he tilts my head back and devours me from above, fucking his tongue into my mouth over and over again in a carnal claiming.

“Fuck, baby. I've missed you so much.”

Mierda. The feeling is undeniably mutual.

“Tonight I'm going to show you just how much.”

He kisses a path back down my neck, biting and licking possessively, groaning every time I tilt my hips up and our cocks rub against each other.

Then he shifts back, putting a little more space between us, before shoving me back against the bench and holding me down with a palm to my chest.

“Everyone needs you lately, baby. I'm a patient man, but it's my fucking turn. Right now, you're mine. All. Fucking. Mine.”

He thrusts against my pelvis for emphasis, then reaches over for one of the bottles.

“Say it, Cory.”

“I'm yours,” I groan as he coats my nipples with caramel sauce.

“That’s right, baby. You’re fucking mine. Now what should I do with you?”

The sinister smirk tells me he already knows *exactly* what he wants to do with me.

Jake spreads his legs wider, straddling my lap and sitting on my thighs, essentially pinning me in place. He makes quick work of cleaning off my chest—lapping at my nipples and moaning with each swallow of the sugary concoction mixed with my sweat. Without relenting, he works his hand between our bodies and wraps a fist around both our dicks.

I try to thrust up, to give in to the aching desire to move, but the weight of him and the force of his gaze keep me locked in place.

“You like that, baby?” he teases, sucking my lower lip into his mouth. “You like to feel how hard you make me—how hot I am for you?”

He strokes us in unison, the velvety skin of his dick sending sparks of lightning up my shaft and straight to my balls. He feels so fucking good rubbing up against me. I could come from just this touch—
—from the physical and verbal confirmation that I still do it for him.

Before I can form a coherent response, he hops off my lap and sinks to his knees.

I fight the urge to let my eyes roll back in my head when he drizzles caramel all over my dick.

Mouth agape, I watch in admiration, mesmerized by the intricate pattern he creates on the crown.

He smirks up at me when he catches me staring.

“Don’t forget, baby. I was the best damn bartender in Hampton before I became a husband and a daddy.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve always been a daddy.”

I grunt when he wraps his lips around my dick and sinks down a few inches. He hums in appreciation, then takes me deeper, the trail of his tongue and the suction of his mouth forcing my balls to seize up immediately.

He licks me again, moaning in encouragement every time I thrust up and hit the back of his throat.

“Fuck, baby. You always taste delicious. But your dick covered in caramel sauce is fucking divine.”

I grip his hair and force him to swallow around my length as rivulets of sweat drip down our bodies. He gives me a few more deep pulls before he pops off my dick and peers up at me with a hungry look I know all too well.

“Hand me that other bottle now.”

I do as he asks, panting and biting back a groan when he pops the cap on the lube and pours a generous amount into his hand.

His fingers make quick work of finding their target—first caressing along my perineum, then teasing my hole in slow, languid circles. The moment he pushes in, he takes my cock back into his mouth, massaging and sucking all the right places until I’m a writhing mess under his hands and tongue.

“Jake,” I warn with a strangled cry. It feels so fucking good. He’s always known just how to work me over and make me come undone.

Instead of keeping pace, he pulls off my cock, lifts his head, and looks me right in the eye.

“Mine,” he grits out, two fingers buried deep inside me and crooked at just the right angle. “I’m so fucking lucky you’re mine.”

My cock pulses with release the second his lips wrap around me again.

Chapter 23

Jake

While Cory catches his breath, I rest my head in his lap. I kiss along his softening dick, then up and down in thighs. Savoring him, desperate for this moment to last as long as possible, I caress the indents of his abs and trace the veins along his hips.

He mindlessly plays with my hair, and I swear I can feel him physically unwind as the minutes tick by. His shoulders sag and his thigh muscles go lax. Whether from the orgasm or the heat of the sauna or just the opportunity to connect for the first time in weeks—this moment, right here, was exactly what he needed.

When I finally lift my head, I meet his gaze, surprised to see that his dark brown eyes are molten.

“What do *you* want, Jake Vargo?” he asks huskily, the desire coursing between us amping up and making this damn sauna burn even hotter.

I close my eyes and shudder. The sound of my full name on his lips is fucking heaven.

“You,” I reply earnestly.

“And how do you want me?”

I spring to my feet, then climb on the bench, straddling him once again. Sweat drips from the ends of my hair all over his chest as I lean forward to whisper in his ear.

“I want to sit back and watch you bounce on my dick until I fill you with my cum.”

Cory pushes me off him and forces me down before I have time to process what’s happening. I spread my arms wide on the back of the bench, then groan appreciatively as he backs his perfect ass right into my lap.

“There ya go, baby,” I encourage, easily working two fingers into him as he bears down on my hand. “I’m going to fill you up and make you feel so fucking good.”

With another squirt of lube, I slide in another finger, then coat my rock-hard cock and notch up into his ass. I let him control the pace, taking me an inch at a time until he’s desperate for it all. Once he’s fully seated, he leans back, the angle and the intimacy indescribable. The feel of his body and his natural scent are so familiar and so fucking hot.

Neither of us moves right away. His back is slick against my abs, our bodies dripping in sweat and burning from the inside out.

His ass clenches around me. My cock twitches in response. But still—neither of us moves.

I explore his torso with slow, steady hands, reacquainting myself with his body. I work my way over his pecs and along his neck before sinking my fingers into his hair. He mewls in appreciation, all soft and pliant in my arms as he lies back and lets me hold him.

I retrace my path, but journey lower this time, smirking when I find him hard for me again.

“I love you,” I whisper in his ear. “Through every challenge. Through every season of life. I. Love.

You.”

He leans back and puts his lips to mine, and the movement finally breaks the spell. Our kiss grows from loving and tender to

passionate and pornographic in a matter of seconds. I'm thrusting up into his ass a moment later.

Cory leans forward and plants his feet on the floor, riding me exactly the way I like and working me into a frenzy in no time.

"I'm close, baby," I warn him. "So fucking close because you're so fucking good."

He moans, then fucks me faster, my cock disappearing inside him over and over again.

"Fuck, I wish you could see this view, Cory. See how good you look stretched out and gaping for me."

My head hits the back of the bench as my toes curl in ecstasy.

I come in hard, forceful spasms, crying out as I pour into my husband. The tingle in my balls goes on for what feels like forever. Pleasure rakes through my body until I am completely and entirely drained.

Cory stands and eases off my dick, but I catch his hips before he can step away.

"Stay," I murmur, rising to join him. I trail two fingers down the length of his spine, then travel lower, between his cheeks. Gathering my release as it drips out of him, I grab for the caramel with my free hand.

"Turn around," I whisper, biting down on my lip when he pivots and eyes me curiously.

"Open for me, baby."

He does so without hesitation: opening his mouth and sticking out his tongue as I squirt a dollop of caramel right in the center.

"Don't swallow yet," I command, holding up my cum-coated fingers in offering and smirking when his eyes go wide.

He leans forward savagely, capturing my hand in his mouth, then moaning with pleasure as I feed him my release. I swear to God my dick starts to harden again as he bites down on my fingers, then sucks them until my hand is completely clean.

Fuck. I love this man.

I collapse back onto the bench, pulling him down with me and assuming the position we were in moments ago. This time, though, I really do just want to hold him. Hold him and savor this moment.

Hold him and remind him just how much he means to me.

Chapter 24

Cory

Jake is practically vibrating with excitement as we set up gifts under the tree. It's late—so late, I don't even want to check the time or think about how soon the kids will be pounding on the wall and begging to get up. But everything about this night has been worth the extra caffeine we'll need to get through tomorrow.

I smile and stand back, watching as he meticulously stacks two separate piles of presents in front of the tree.

“You have more room on the right side,” I observe.

“No, these with the special wrapping paper are Santa presents. They're the gifts they'll open first, so I want them to be front and center,” he explains.

Santa paper. Perfectly stuffed stockings. Gifts he helped the kids pick out and wrap for each other.

Presents I know he went overboard with for me.

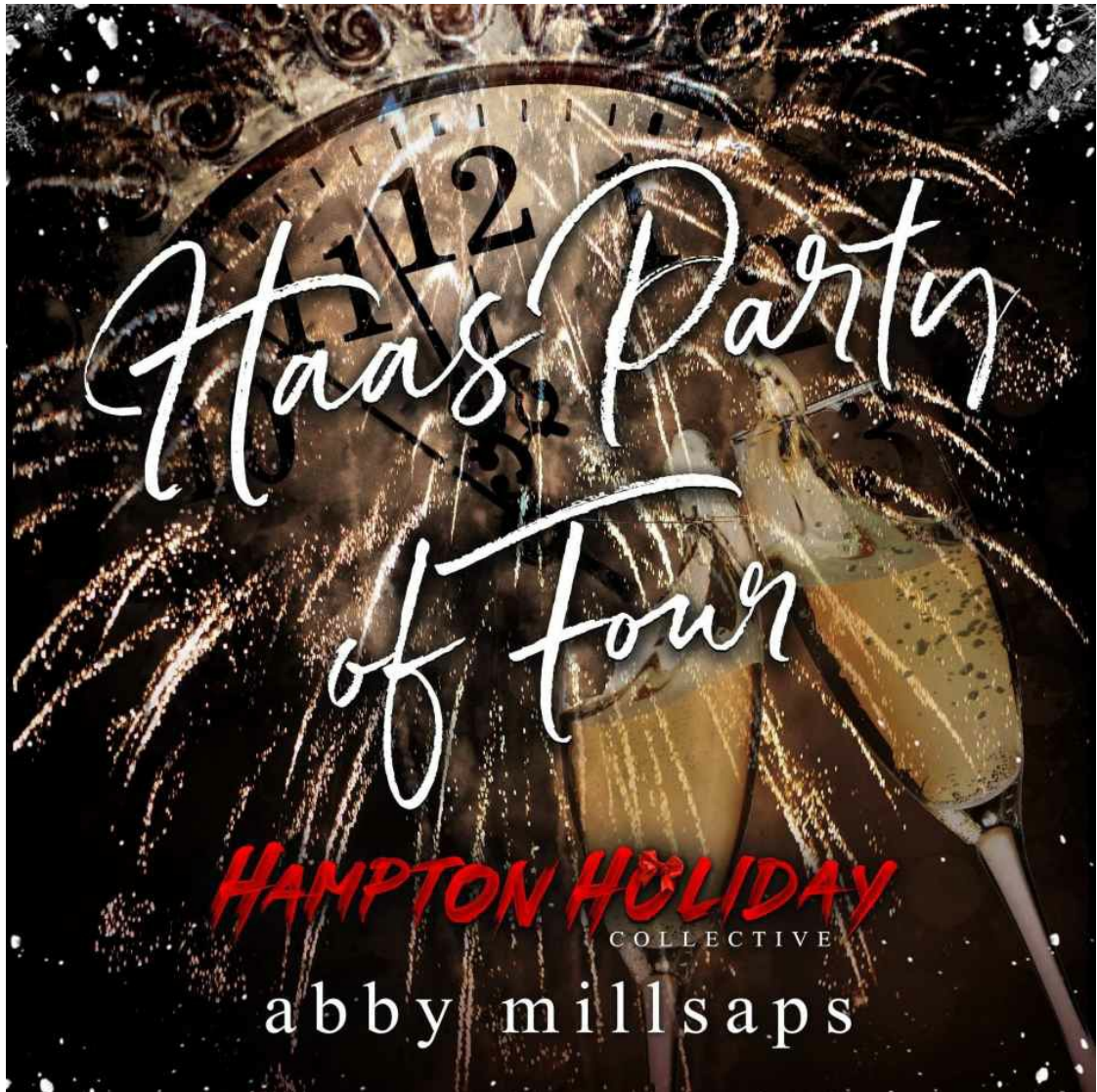
Unsurprisingly, he put an incredible amount of thought and care into making this holiday perfect.

When he rises to his feet, I can't resist wrapping him in a hug from behind. “They're going to have the best Christmas,” I murmur, resting my chin on his shoulder as we admire his handiwork. “You did so good, Jake. You always do. The way you take care of and love this family—we're so lucky you're ours.”

He spins in my arms, beaming.

“Kiss me,” he urges, gripping the back of my neck and pulling me into his orbit. “Kiss me in front of the Christmas tree and tell me again that I'm yours.”

“Merry Christmas, Jake Vargo,” I murmur against his lips. “I love you, and I'm so lucky you're mine.”



Chapter 25

Dempsey

“D em,” she pants, her voice thin and needy. “I’m coming.”

Fuck. Again?

Pretty sure I won’t outlast her this time. She’s insatiable and I love it. Almost as much as I love her.

It’s not out of the norm for Maddie to orgasm more than once. She’s so responsive, and our sex life has always been phenomenal. But now that she’s pregnant, she’s unbelievably horny. All. The. Time.

My brother tried to warn me—but I figured that was an overshare specific to his relationship with Daphne. This is *unreal*. Maddie outlasts me nowadays, which never used to happen.

I try my hardest to hold back, but the sensation of her tight channel pulsating around me is too much.

She's warm and wet: gripping my cock in a vise as she writhes in pleasure. A man can only be expected to keep it together for so long. And I've officially reached my limit.

Gritting my teeth through my own release, I hiss and clip out all the praise.

"Goddamn, baby girl. You feel too good. I can't resist you." I thrust in twice more before falling forward and catching myself, hovering inches over her body.

"I can't hold back when you come that hard. You did so fucking good for me, princess. I want to stay buried deep inside you forever. Such a good fucking girl."

Her eyes are glassy and sated. Her smile lights up my world as she turns her head and kisses me.

I ease out of her body, groaning when I see the evidence of both our releases puddling between her thighs.

"Look at this mess, baby girl. You did so fucking good for me." I bend low to kiss her hip bone and the outline of her growing bump before cupping her pussy in reverence. "I love making you come that hard. I love everything your body gives me."

I give her an appreciative once-over, hoping the praise and assurance are enough. There are very few positions that work for us these days, and she's—unnecessarily, in my eyes—self-conscious about the size and girth of her stomach.

She's thirty-five weeks pregnant, carrying our boys.

Yep. Two boys. Identical twins.

I'm equal parts elated and terrified.

Fielding, of course, was thrilled when we found out. Maddie was shocked, and to be honest, she's still in denial about what's coming.

It's a lot to take in. So much change. And a reality far different from the plan we had in mind. But we're both trying our best.

"Fuck," Maddie whimpers, her arm thrown over her eyes.

I smirk at her reaction, pleased that she's been thoroughly fucked and should be satisfied for at least a few hours.

But then she repeats the curse in an entirely different tone.

"*Fuck*," she groans again, clawing at my arm and digging her nails deep enough to leave little crescent-shaped indents.

“What’s wrong?” I urge, panicking as she writhes on the bed, and this time not from pleasure.

“Charlie horse... in my... calf,” she grits out, trying but failing to stretch out her leg.

I jump off the mattress to help her up, only to be swatted away as she insists she can sit up herself.

So I watch her struggle, helpless, her face screwed up in pain.

The muscle spasm lasts almost as long as her last orgasm, which would be ironically funny if it wasn’t so cruel.

She’s miserable. And there’s little I can do to make it better.

Eventually, the pain subsides. She sits on the edge of the bed and catches her breath, massaging her tender calf. I’d offer to do it for her—but I’ve already been swatted away once. She hates when I hover.

Maddie’s always been wildly independent, but there’s a lot about this experience that stifles her autonomy.

I’m thrilled she’s pregnant. And I can’t wait to be a dad. But there’s a constant undercurrent of worry—and a twinge of guilt—harbored deep inside me that flares to the surface at times like this.

“Why don’t you take a bath? Or a nap?” I suggest, circling the bed and smoothing back the blond hair clinging to her forehead. “I’ll go downstairs and make you a snack.”

Sex and food. They’re the only guaranteed cure-alls I can offer. I can’t help with much, but keeping my wife satisfied and full are things I *can* do.

She hums appreciatively, nodding, then yawning as she crawls under the covers. As soon as I open the bedroom door, Hudson comes flying into the room, tail wagging. Except he doesn’t stop to give me a second glance. He beelines for the bed, then lithely hops to the foot and curls up at Maddie’s feet.

She murmurs something to him. Then I watch, admittedly jealous, as he lets out an exaggerated yawn and settles in to snooze, too.

I would be put out by our dog’s shifting affections if it wasn’t so damn sweet. He knows our lives are about to change in huge ways. I just don’t think any of us are truly prepared for what comes next.

Chapter 26

Maddie

I shift into a sitting position, groaning when my low back audibly cracks and a searing shot of pain radiates through my hips.

Fuckity fuck. Pregnancy sucks.

How the hell has Daphne done this three freaking times? Once is proving to be more than enough for me. Although she never had to fit a pair of gigantic Haas twins in her pelvis. The OBs and ultrasound techs *love* to marvel at how big the boys are measuring—nearly two weeks ahead of schedule, which is way too fast for my body to handle, as proven by the angry purple tiger stripes clawed across my stomach.

My right hips spasms as I trek to the bathroom once again. I relieve myself, almost falling asleep on the toilet because I'm so exhausted. Which is ridiculous. I didn't actually *do* anything today.

I helped Winnie with a perler bead kit she got for Christmas and watched Wesley and Dempsey play endless rounds of air hockey. Then I ate dinner and tried to read a chapter of my new e-book, but fell asleep a few pages in, only to be startled awake when my Kindle tilted forward and smacked me in the face.

As someone who used to pull fourteen-hour days at the office on the reg, I'm disgusted by how little I actually accomplish while pregnant.

A swift kick to the bladder jolts me out of my semi-conscious thoughts—and makes me grateful I'm still sitting on the toilet. I pee — *again*—then I wash my hands and waddle back to bed.

I groan as I hoist myself onto the mattress and roll to my left side, hoping this isn't one of the nights where one or both of the boys throw a dance party the second I get comfortable.

Dempsey runs his hand up my leg a moment later.

“You okay, princess?” he asks, his voice deep from sleep.

It's a loaded question.

Physically, I'm miserable. Mentally, I'm exhausted. Emotionally, I'm anxious and floundering, existing in this weird state of limbo where I know my life's about to change, but nothing has happened yet.

But there's next to nothing Dempsey can do to change any of that. Before I can offer a reassuring response, though, he shifts closer, covering my back with his torso and spooning me the best he can.

My body reacts to his on instinct. I push back into his crotch and grind my ass against the solid muscles of his thighs.

“What do you need, baby girl?”

Hmm. I like this line of questioning a helluva lot more.

“You.”

“Again?” he teases, toying with the hem of my sleep shorts and tickling the skin of my inner thighs.

With a huff, I try to shift away. But he’s too strong, and I’m too large and slow. “Not if you’re going to have an attitude about it,” I grunt, annoyed that I can’t just roll out of his hold.

He chuckles into my hair, his warm breath inspiring goosebumps down one side of my body.

“You know I’ll give you what you want whenever you want it. I just need to up my hydration game to keep up with you.”

“Forget it,” I gripe, wiggling again in an attempt to escape. “I’m miserable no matter what. Sex at least takes my mind off how enormous I am and how awful I feel. But if you’re not up for it—”

He cuts me off with a growl and rises to his knees, shimmying my sleep shorts down my legs as he goes and tossing them to the floor.

That’s more like it.

“I never said I wasn’t up for it,” he rebukes before spitting into his hand and slapping my pussy, the sound sharp in the quiet of the night.

I jolt in surprise, then melt into the mattress as arousal coats every one of my nerve endings.

Moisture seeps out of me from that single movement alone, and suddenly, my back doesn’t hurt, nor am I annoyed about my pregnancy insomnia.

I wiggle my ass suggestively, hoping he’ll do it again.

He teases his fingertips through my pussy—featherlight touches I can barely feel that inspire instantaneous kitty flutters. Then he lifts his hand and slaps me again, this time focusing his aim on my swollen, needy clit.

Physically, I go soft, completely pliant and desperate for his touch. But I still manage to lift my head and cock one eyebrow in

challenge, attempting to heave myself onto my back and push him away in fake protest.

Dempsey doubles down then, probably catching on to my intention. He holds my legs together and pushes my knees forward, exposing my pussy and lining himself up at my entrance. “I’m gonna fuck that attitude right out of you if you don’t stay still and let me put it in,” he warns.

He spits again, fists his cock, then thrusts inside me in one fluid motion, burying himself to the hilt.

Fuckity fuck. That’s more like it.

I can’t hold back the satisfied whimper once he’s fully seated inside me. I’m not usually a pillow princess, but this side angle is one of the few positions that lets him go deep while hitting right where I need him most.

But instead of thrusting like I’m so eager for him to do, he holds himself still, deep inside me. He grabs my chin, tilting my face up until I have no choice but to stare into his eyes. “You did that on purpose,” he accuses.

I smile like the Cheshire cat. I did. But I’m not about to admit I went full brat mode just to get him to fuck me again. “I promise you *nothing* about how I feel right now is on purpose. I can’t be held accountable for my actions in this state.”

He shakes his head and thrusts deeper, forcing a moan from my lips so loud it fills the room. “Don’t try to lawyer me, Ms. Wheeler.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Mr. Haas.”

He groans and repositions himself, lifting my legs slightly so he can sink even deeper. “Okay?” he confirms, conscientious, as always, about how I feel and what’s best for the babies.

“More than okay, Dem,” I grit out impatiently.

His concern is admirable. But sex is one of the few activities that truly allows me to get lost in the moment. I want to feel like myself right now. And I need my husband to remind me that *this*—what we share, and how our bodies come together in perfect fucking harmony—won’t change.

“Hey, Dem?” I murmur, a new idea coming to mind.

He stills his hips and meets my gaze.

“Will you try to make me come by sucking on my tits?” I ask sweetly.

His eyes go wide at the plea, flaring with heat and shifting dark blue. My man loves a challenge, and he’s brought me to orgasm twice over the last few months just by lavishing my sensitive nipples. I can practically see when the idea takes root in his mind and his decision is made.

“I’ll do you one better, princess. Two better, if we’re keeping track. First, I’m going to make you come all over my cock just like this. Then I’m going to lap at your clit until you unravel. For your third orgasm, I’ll suck on your tits until your pussy squirts and soaks these sheets.”

I whimper, pulsing involuntarily at his delicious and oh-so-descriptive dirty talk.

“Is that what you want, baby girl? You want me to make you come until you’re a fucking puddle?”

I bite on my lip and nod eagerly as my husband gets to work. His cock nudges against my g-spot, building toward the first of my promised orgasms.

More. Fucking. Like it.

Chapter 27

Maddie

I yawn into my Clinton’s mug, desperate to savor the final few dregs of the only caffeine I’m allowed to have today.

“What’s the latest update on the house?” Daphne asks, glancing from the kitchen island to the living room where Wyatt and Winnie are working on a puzzle with Hudson stretched out beside them contently.

“Trying to get rid of us already?”

“Never,” she assures me sincerely. “We love having you here.”

I believe her. But I can’t help but feel like we’re intruding. The house in question is nowhere near ready.

I never envisioned leaving New York, honestly. Dempsey and I talked about starting a family for months before finally committing to the idea. I figured I’d take a few months off work for maternity leave, then we’d hire a nanny like most of our friends in the city and resume our lives as usual.

All those plans evaporated the moment we found out we were having twins.

Together, we decided to take leaves of absence and come home to Hampton for a year. We're keeping our place in Brooklyn, but for now, this is home.

We planned to stay with Fielding and Daphne temporarily. Dempsey bought a historical home in downtown Hampton, assuring me that it would be move-in-ready by Christmas, and that it would make a great investment property when it was time to head back to the city.

But the renovations are behind—like, really, really behind—and I'm starting to doubt that we'll be moved in before the babies arrive.

"House updates are non-existent," I confess before I throw back the last swig of coffee. "Dempsey is beside himself, but between that ice storm a few weeks ago and the holidays, they've barely

worked on it this month. I'm worried we might be bringing the babies here when they're born," I admit, glancing over at my sister-in-law cautiously.

Her eyes grow wide, sparkling with warmth and love.

Daphne can insist all she wants that it's Fielding who wants a dozen kids. But she's not fooling me.

She loves being a mom more than anything in the world.

"It'll be so nice to be with family when you bring the twins home."

My throat clogs with emotion and fear trickles into my consciousness. She came eerily close to identifying one of the hardest parts about this pregnancy, and she doesn't even realize it.

It's not the aches and pains. Or the stretch marks. It's the sad reality that I'm doing this without my parents. More specifically, without my mom.

She's been gone for less than a year. Actually, I found out I was pregnant the morning of her funeral.

Dempsey swears the timing was kismet: that these babies are a blessing she sent to us, and that wherever she is in the ether of the afterlife, she knows our children and will love them from there.

As much as I'd like to believe that, I can't help but feel cheated.

I whispered my secret when it was time to say our final goodbyes at her graveside. But it wasn't enough. It'll never feel like enough.

She never got to experience the joy that would have come with learning she was going to be a grandmother. I never got to see her reaction to the news. I'll never be able to call her seeking parenting advice. And I'll never have a photo of her holding her grandbabies.

As if sensing my sadness, Daphne brings a little levity back to the conversation.

"We love you, and we would be honored to have the babies here. We want to help in any way we can, you know that," she assures me, reaching across the table and squeezing my hand.

"Besides, Fielding is a fiend for newborns. He'll show Dempsey the ropes, both in terms of taking care of the twins and taking care of you."

"I don't need him to take care of me," I protest with a huff.

"Maddie," Daphne gently chides. "You're likely going to have major surgery that will result in your family literally doubling in size. Well, I guess not doubling in size, but doubling in quantity and mouths to feed."

"Oh no. That's not all on me! Dem already knows that I am *not* breastfeeding," I declare. "No freaking way. I love my boobs too much." I shiver, thinking about last night and how much Dempsey loves them, too.

Daphne laughs and waves her hand dismissively. "That's fair. It's your choice." She smiles and peeks over at her kids with their puzzle again. "But please don't be resistant to help. From us, from Dempsey... you're going to need it. Accepting it gracefully will make things easier on everyone."

Chapter 28

Dempsey

"This is ridiculous," I grouse, watching my brother position another log in the center of the tree stump. "Why can't you buy firewood like a normal person? Hell, I'll buy it for you and have it delivered to the house if it means we can go inside and you stop this nonsense."

I shove my hands deeper into my coat pockets, puffing out a breath as I watch him raise the ax again.

"There's this guy on TikTok..."

I glare at him, already exasperated by the ridiculous explanation I know he's going to offer. No reason he could give is good enough to

justify standing outside in Ohio, on December thirtieth, chopping logs like he's a goddamn lumberjack.

"Don't judge me!" he refutes when he looks up and catches my surly gaze. "Daphne likes the TikTok log guy. And I like doing things that get my wife all hot and bothered." He whips out his phone then and turns the camera to selfie mode while slinging the ax over one shoulder. He makes a ridiculous face and snaps a picture, then another. "It's not like I made you come out here," he adds without looking up from the screen.

"You're right. You didn't." Frustrated as hell, I turn to the house.

"Wait," he calls out before I make it two feet. "Why *are* you out here?"

His question is so sincere—as if it has only now occurred to him that I'm not out here just to shoot the shit and watch him recreate internet thirst traps.

I freeze in place and debate with myself for a long moment. *Do I really want to go through with this?* Sighing, I circle back to the conclusion I landed on earlier: something's got to give. And I sure as hell don't know what to do. I'll take any and all advice at this point. Even if it means suffering through my brother's lumberjack performance and asking him for help.

"It's about Maddie," I admit.

He takes one look at my sorry state—at the desperation I'm sure is rolling off me in waves—and wedges his ax into the middle of the stump before taking a seat on a covered patio chair and patting the spot beside him.

"Sit. Tell Dr. Haas what's troubling you."

I would punch him in the face, but then I'd have to explain the black eye to his kids.

"You're *not* that kind of doctor," I scold, but I drop down beside him anyway.

He lets the jibe roll right off him, waiting silently for me to continue with his elbows on his knees and his eyes on me.

"Maddie's miserable. I've never seen her like this in all the years we've been together. And I don't know how to fix it." I let out a long breath and squeeze the back of my neck. "It's not just the physical stuff—she's so unhappy all the time. I don't know what to do. I can't help but feel like I did this to her."

He gives me a smirk, and that's the last fucking straw.

I wrap my arm around his neck, locking his head in place and grinding my knuckles into his scalp.

"You know what I mean," I grouch, noogying him hard, then releasing him with a shove.

He grunts, sits up straight, and fusses with his hair for a long-ass time before he replies.

"Newsflash for you, bro. Maddie's miserable. But you're insufferable these days, too."

Tell me something I don't know, asshole.

"You want to know what I think?"

Yes. That's why I'm fucking out here. But I'm not interested in stroking the ego of "Dr. Haas," so I stare at him, deadpan, and wait for him to continue.

"I think you need to pump the brakes. Let go of your expectations and all your plans. Admit that you're both scared—"

"I'm not scared!" I counter in frustration.

"Dumpy."

Fuck.

Having a twin who knows exactly how my mind works is all well and good until he finds an opening and calls me out on my bullshit.

"I can't admit I'm scared," I relent, my voice barely above a whisper. "I have to be strong for her."

The doctors keep warning us the twins might come early, and that there could be complications—"

"Who are you trying to fool? You don't think Little Wheeler's scared, too?"

"Of course she's terrified! None of this is going how we thought it would go. But if she's scared, I can't be too!"

I shove to my feet, unable to sit with my confession, and pace the length of the patio table, pivoting on my heel and stomping back toward my brother.

I feel his eyes following me, assessing, like he's working out how to play this.

“So you’re both going to walk around pretending everything’s fine until the babies magically appear?”

That’s ridiculous.

But it’s sort of what we’ve been doing.

“Is this gonna be like that time you were madly in love and wouldn’t admit it to each other, so you let her move back to California? Like when you wallowed in pure misery for six weeks, only to find out she was just as wrecked without you?”

My head snaps up at his shrewd assessment, and I fix him with the scowl he’s expecting from me.

He counters with a spiteful glare.

It’s not that Maddie and I don’t communicate. We’re both just so strong-willed that we forget that it’s okay to be vulnerable sometimes. More than anything, I don’t want her to think she can’t count on me to support her, especially right now.

I know better than to argue. Because he’s not wrong in his assessment. But there’s so much about our situation that I can’t fix for my wife.

She’s pregnant with twins, and maybe we should have anticipated the possibility, but two babies at once was never part of the plan we envisioned. The house I promised would be ready by Christmas is at least six weeks behind schedule. Her mom’s gone, and her only close female relatives are Tori, who’s never had kids, and Daphne, who loves making babies with my asshole of a brother.

I can’t take away her fear. There’s no point in trying to predict what our future holds, not after the universe has turned our lives upside down this past year. And Maddie’s got more than enough worry eating at her. I doubt she wants to hear me complain about how I’m choking on anxiety about parenthood and what comes next—but I’m out of ideas on how to play this. Maybe my brother is right.

Maybe admitting how I feel would make a difference.

“Fine!” I relent with a huff and stop my pacing to focus on my brother, who’s kicked back in a lounge. “But if this blows up in my face...” I trail off, then slump down next to my him again.

I flinch when he wraps his arm around my shoulders—but relax when, instead of retaliating for being roughed up earlier, he rubs his head of unruly blond hair against my temple. For the first time in a long time, my shoulders relax, if only just a little.

“You can do this, bro. Be honest and be vulnerable. What do you have to lose? You said it yourself.

Maddie’s only *not* pissed off when she’s either eating or having sex. It’s not like you can make things worse.” He shoots up straight.

“Wait. That’s it! Tell her while you’re fucking her! Or feeding her. I guess you could try both at the same time—”

I shove him, but he just wraps his arms around me again and hugs me tighter.

“Seriously, Dumpy. Have an honest conversation with your wife. I promise it won’t be as bad as you think, and you’ll both feel better when it’s done.”

Chapter 29

Maddie

The bedroom door swings open with force, startling me from my drowsy state. I came in to read in bed for a little while, but we’re going out tonight, so I told myself it was okay to doze off and enjoy a little power nap if needed.

Adrenaline rushes through me as I take in the state of my husband. His shoulders are coiled with tension, and his brows are pulled together so tightly he’s got two wrinkles in the middle instead of the usual one.

He watches me from the doorway for several seconds, his expression never changing, then stalks toward the bed. “I’m scared, Maddie. I’m fucking terrified.”

I scan his body, looking for signs of distress or injury. When I realize he’s not physically hurt, my mind eases slightly and I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. He’s okay. Although he’s very clearly not.

I wait, anxious and unsettled, as he perches on the edge of the mattress but stays quiet. His gaze is set on the floor in front of him, and he doesn’t elaborate right away, prompting me to sit up and scoot toward him.

My scoot is more of a full-body roll these days, but once I’m seated beside him, I place one hand on his elbow and rest my head on his arm. “What are you scared of, Dem?”

He turns to me and slow blinks. It’s the only warning I get before he’s back on his feet, pacing the length of the bed.

“Of this! Of you! The babies. What our life is about to become! I’m terrified about being a dad.

About knowing what to do or what to say. I’m scared that I ruined your ten-year plan and that instead of supporting your dreams, I destroyed them.”

Oh. Just that?

I almost laugh, but not at his expense. We’ve been dancing around this conversation for months.

Every little fear has avalanched as we’ve inched closer to the finish line of pregnancy.

“Dem.”

He runs his hand through his hair in frustration, tugging on the ends so hard they stick out in an almost-comical way.

“Come here,” I urge.

He joins me on the bed again, a little closer this time, but looking just as tense as when he first entered the room.

“Lay with me,” I insist, pulling him toward the pillows and settling on my side so we can face each other.

He takes his time easing down, uncertainty obvious in his hesitant movements and the lines of concern on his face. Probably in fear of how I’ll respond to the feelings he word-vomited all over the bedroom.

“I’m scared, too,” I admit, interlacing our fingers and snuggling closer to his body.

He softens, then swallows audibly before he speaks again.

“Fuck. I hate this. I hate that you’re scared, princess. I’m sorry I haven’t been stronger for you.”

I snort and shove at his chest playfully. “That’s some toxic masculinity bullshit if I’ve ever heard it.

Have you been watching those lumberjack TikToks your brother’s obsessed with? You don’t have to be strong *for me*. But you do need to be honest and real with me.”

He lifts his head and meets my gaze, nodding earnestly in agreement.

“If I tell you what scares me, will you do the same?”

“Of course,” he insists.

I suck in a steady breath, steeling myself to speak my truth.

“I’m scared that I won’t know how to be a good mom, and that things won’t come naturally for me,” I admit, soaking in the calming way Dempsey strokes my hair as he takes in my confession. “I’m also scared I won’t be able to tell them apart.”

He clears his throat and whispers his own confession.

“I’m scared *I* won’t be able to tell them apart. Or that something will be wrong with one of them, and we’ll be separated in the hospital.”

I swallow past a lump of emotion, nodding. That’s one of my fears, too.

“I’m scared my body won’t ever be the same. That everything will be stretched out and saggy, and that you won’t look at me the way you used to.”

He cups the back of my head in his palm, kissing my forehead in reverence.

“I’m scared I won’t be as good of a dad as my brother.”

With a hand to his neck, I stroke my thumb along his jawline.

“I’m scared that you’ll be as great as your brother, and that you’ll go baby crazy and beg me to have ten more,” I tease.

He can’t help but smile at that one.

We could probably lie here all night and not run out of worries. This isn’t about assuring each other that our fears are unwarranted. This is about being vulnerable and recognizing our personal insecurities that have festered throughout this pregnancy, regardless of how absurd or irrational they might be.

“It’s okay to be scared. We’re both out of our depths here.” I smooth our joined hands down my stomach, grunting when one of the boys kicks hard. Dempsey’s eyes light up in wonder, like they do every time he gets to experience their movements.

He’s allowed to be scared. But there’s not a doubt in my mind that he’s going to be an amazing father.

“I need you,” I confess. “But I don’t need you to act a certain way or meet specific conditions. I just need *you*. We can fake it ’til we make it where the babies are concerned. But we have to be open and honest with each other.”

“Agreed.”

“I love you. There’s no one else I’d want to do this with, even if it is really fucking scary.”

Dempsey leans forward and rests his forehead on mine, but we startle apart at the crash that echoes from downstairs and the ensuing chaos as Wyatt’s wails carry into our wing of the house.

“*That’s* what we should be scared of... winding up with one that’s as wild as Wyatt.”

“Nope. That’s where you’re wrong,” I insist. “One would be okay. Imagine if they *both* take after their cousin and their uncle.” I mock-shudder at the notion, then grin when Dempsey bursts out laughing.

Chapter 30

Dempsey

“We don’t have to go,” I remind her for the tenth time in as many minutes.

I’d prefer to stay in tonight anyway.

I glance down at my phone—again—scrolling through the group text with Jake and Rhett. They’re already at The Oak, pregaming before dinner.

Apparently, it’s common for thirtysomethings to ring in the new year on December thirtieth these days. Cory’s abuela has a hot date tomorrow night and can’t babysit then, and Tori and Rhett are heading back to Virginia tomorrow morning.

So December thirtieth it is.

“We’re going,” Maddie declares defiantly from the closet, her voice muffled as she continues to search for something to wear. “We don’t know how many more date nights we have left! I just have to find something to cover this damn bump...”

I saunter into the walk-in, then wrap my arms around her from behind. I feel so much lighter since our heart-to-heart this afternoon. This newfound levity is a welcome sensation compared to the impending sense of dread I’ve felt for weeks.

“I really like your damn bump,” I tease, stroking both sides of her bare stomach.

“You can’t even wrap your arms around me anymore,” she gripes.

“If we stay in tonight, you could wrap your legs around me instead.”

She hums in what sounds like consideration, but eventually peels away and continues her search for an acceptable outfit.

“I’ll be ready in ten,” she tells me over her shoulder with a wave of her hand, banishing me back to the bedroom.

I pull out my phone and type out a text to let her brother and our friends know that we’ll probably be another hour.

“Um, guys?”

We’re all packed into one of the big booths that line the back wall of The Oak, sipping on drinks and chatting about the holidays. Jake arranged for a tech-savvy Santa to send a personalized video to his kids on Christmas Eve, and Rhett’s got all sorts of ideas on how to monetize and scale the concept. It’s not a bad idea, actually, especially if the service launched early enough in the year.

I look up to meet Maddie’s gaze where she stands, back from her second trip to the bathroom, then practically knock over my Christmas Ale when I see her wide-eyed, panicked expression.

“I think my water just broke.”

The whole table goes quiet—then two seconds later, Rhett and I are scrambling to our feet and rushing to her side.

“Sit,” I insist, pulling out her chair at the end of the booth. “Are you having contractions? How far apart are they?”

Before she has a chance to answer, Rhett’s squatting low in front of her.

“Breathe, Maddie girl. It’ll be okay. Is your hospital bag packed? Do you want me to call the hospital so they know you’re coming?”

Maddie narrows her eyes and purses her lips while she scrutinizes her brother. He’s doing that signature Rhett Wheeler jaw tic. A pointed glance from Maddie to Tori is all it takes for him to be wrangled back into the booth. I would laugh at his expense if I wasn’t drowning in the exact same concerns.

“No contractions,” she finally answers, turning back to me. “But, uh, I probably shouldn’t have sat down.”

Oh. Oops.

From the corner of my eye, I catch Cory fighting back a grin and wrapping his arm around Jake in reassurance.

“Just add it to my tab,” I joke. I know better than to let Jake and Maddie get into it right now, even if their bickering is all in good fun. We don’t have time to exchange jabs; we have to go. I have no problem buying a new chair if we ruined this one with amniotic fluid.

“Do you want us to go to the hospital with you?” Tori asks, looking from Maddie to me.

I hold my breath as the question lingers between us. We have a solid plan in place for this moment

—a plan that doesn’t factor in Tori and Rhett being in town. They’re rarely in Ohio these days: just around the holidays and for special occasions, so they were never part of our birth plan. But if Maddie wants them there...

Thinking about all the fears and worries we shared this afternoon, I curse silently as a new one washes over me.

I’m scared my brother won’t be at the hospital with me like we planned. Like I need him to be.

But I won’t deny my wife the opportunity to have her family by her side if that’s what she wants right now.

“No, I really don’t,” she insists, looking at her brother apologetically before turning back to me with an intense focus. “We have a plan.” She squeezes my hand. “And I want to stick to it. But we should get going.”

Relief washes over me as I grab our coats, then offer her my hand.

“Wait, what about me?” Jake asks, neck craned so he can not-so-discreetly check out the state of the chair as Maddie rises to stand. “I’m excellent in labor and delivery, Fourth Wheel. They probably still have my picture hanging on the wall and everything.”

Rhett scoffs and chucks a crumpled napkin at his best friend’s head. “They probably do. Hanging next to a notice that forbids you from entering the labor and delivery floor ever again. You got into a fight with a nurse when Matty was born, bro.”

“That he did,” Cory confirms, grinning from ear to ear.

Jake grumbles something unintelligible before Tori piles on.

“Jake—they literally made you leave the room,” she reminds him, her eyes alight with mischief. “I wouldn’t classify that as being ‘*excellent at labor and delivery.*’”

The table erupts in laughter at his expense.

“We gotta go,” I remind them as I send off the official text to my brother before stashing my phone in my pocket.

Tori stands up and hugs us goodbye, and all the guys follow her lead. I guide Maddie out of the crowded bar, grateful that I snagged a decent parking spot on the street.

We’re quiet but thrumming with nervous energy when I help her into the car. This is it. It’s really happening.

She buckles her seatbelt, and I can’t help but bend down and capture her lips in a kiss. “I’m really fucking scared,” I confess. “But really fucking excited, too.”

“I know. I am, too,” she admits with a smile, her eyes locked on mine and brimming with tears.

“We’ve got this, baby girl. We might be scared, but we’re doing this together.”

I close the car door and hurry around to the driver’s side as the bells of the clock tower ring out through downtown Hampton.

Chapter 31

Dempsey

“How committed are you to their names?” my brother asks, shifting his nephew higher on his chest and glancing over at me.

I feel ridiculous sitting in a vinyl hospital rocking chair next to my twin, shirtless, each of us holding a nearly naked baby against our bare chests. But he insists this is great for bonding, especially for preemies who may struggle with maintaining their body temperature.

We’re in the NICU, which is on a different floor from the maternity wing. It’s only been two days, but it’s like an entire lifetime has passed over the span of forty-eight hours.

When we arrived at the hospital, they admitted Maddie for observation. The babies both looked great, so they didn’t rush her back into surgery like I expected. Instead, they gave her steroids and antibiotics and scheduled a c-section for the next day.

Technically, she had an “emergency” c-section, but more emergent pregnant women kept showing up and bumping us back on the schedule. The twins weren’t born until late last night: one at 11:53 p.m., and the other at 12:02 a.m.

Our New Year's babies may be identical twins, but they have separate birthdays. Even different birth *years*.

Miraculously, they've required almost no medical interventions so far. Fielding has cautioned that things could change—they have to prove they can put on weight and maintain their body temperatures, and there's something about jaundice and a hearing test they still have to pass, but so far, so good.

I glare at my brother but whisper since Griffin is asleep in my arms.

“We're not changing anyone's name,” I reply sternly.

Maddie and I spent months coming up with the boys' names. Once we finally settled on Griffin Everhett and Ledger Fielding, we knew we got it right.

“I'm not proposing a name change right away,” he insists. “But we knew within weeks—actually, maybe it was only days—that Wyatt took after me. What if that one has more of me or Maddie in him than you're prepared for?” He nods his head toward Griffin, and my brand-new son grunts at the same time. I frantically check him over to make sure he's still breathing.

“He's fine,” Fielding chuckles, glancing up at one of the screens above our heads. “They're monitoring his heart rate, respiratory rate, and oxygen saturation. One of the alarms would go off if something was wrong.”

I breathe out a sigh of relief, although his assurance doesn't totally erase my concern. Is this what parenthood is like? A relentless stream of reminders that something could go wrong at any second?

Maybe Fielding can convince them to let us take all these monitors with us when the boys come home.

“Oh shit,” Fielding murmurs, holding Ledger to his chest as he slides his phone out of his pocket.

I resist the urge to ask him to use two hands—one, because he'd make fun of me, and two, because he's completely at ease balancing a barely five-pound baby against his body as he swipes up and unlocks his phone.

“I have to go in about an hour. I promised Winnie we'd make waffles together this morning, so I need to be home before she wakes up.”

I look at the clock on the wall— *5:17 a.m.*

“Do you ever sleep?” I ask through a yawn.

“I’ll take a nap before work this afternoon,” he insists, fighting back his own yawn in response to mine. “I can’t disappoint my little angel.

“I’m getting the impression that this parenthood gig takes exhaustion to a whole new level.”

I blow out a long breath, grateful that Maddie’s resting back in her room.

“Bro. You have *no idea*.”

A few tense seconds tick by before I find the courage to speak my truth. “I feel overwhelmingly underprepared for this.”

A beat passes, then another. When I find the courage to look up and meet his gaze, there’s nothing but sincerity shining in my brother’s eyes.

“Are you kidding me? You’ve been perfecting your stern brunch daddy vibe for years. You’ve got this.”

Ledger grunts in Fielding’s arms, his little head lifting as his mouth gapes open, then closed. He settles back into my brother’s chest a moment later.

“That’s rooting,” Fielding explains. “He’s going to want to eat, and soon. If you can feed him at the first signs of hunger like that, you’ll be way better off. Hit the nurse call button, and they’ll bring in a bottle. I can show you how to feed and burp him before I have to go.”

I do as he says, then turn back to him, marveling at how he just knows things. “How do you keep it all straight? Remember everything—and keep them alive each day?”

He presses his lips in a thin line, no doubt trying not to laugh at me. He’s lucky he’s holding one of my babies. Otherwise, I’d reach over and smack him upside the head.

“It’s not going to make sense until you’re doing it,” he offers. “And most days, you won’t be sure you’re getting it right. Look at me over Thanksgiving. I’m a fucking pediatrician, and I didn’t realize my kid was legit sick.”

“Pretty sure you called him scrooge all day.”

Fielding grimaces, then offers Ledger a pacifier when he roots again. “Not my finest moment,” he admits. “That’s the thing about parenthood, though. You’re gonna fuck up as much as—if not more than

—you’re gonna get it right. But you can’t dwell on it. Just commit to showing up for your kids every day, and the hardest part is done.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It’s not easy, Dem. But it’s not impossible. You can do this. I mean, look at what you made. These little guys are perfect.”

He beams at me with a baby in my arms, genuine pride radiating from him.

“I’m really fucking excited for you guys,” he adds, gently pulling the stocking cap off Ledger’s head and nuzzling his nose into his nephew’s hair before inhaling deeply.

“Why’s that?” I ask, hoping to distract him long enough to take a little whiff. I peel up Griffin’s hat

—just a little on one side—and take my own deep breath.

Well, shit. His head really does smell good.

“First,” he starts, “Little Wheeler’s been cranky as fuck since you knocked her up. Thank God the babies are out and she can go back to being sassy instead of murderous.”

I can’t deny it, but I bite my tongue, refusing to speak one ill word against my wife.

“And second—when have you *ever*, in our entire lives, needed me for something?” He pauses for emphasis before raising a fist and pounding it on his chest.

“You’re sitting in the presence of a seasoned father *and* pediatrician. You’re going to be the one calling me for advice from now on.” His mega-watt smile is filled with smugness. I don’t bother arguing. He’s not wrong.

But I won’t admit that to him. “You’re such an asshole,” I grumble, just as Griffin grunts and Ledger cries out.

“But you love me,” Fielding counters, shifting forward and adjusting my son in his arms before reaching toward my chair and popping a pacifier into Griffin’s mouth.

“Yeah,” I acquiesce. “I really do.”

Afterword

I’ve never felt such finality as when I typed “The End” on the Hampton Holiday Collective. In all honesty, I never planned to write *another* holiday novella about this set of characters. But as I moved

through the standalone books of this series, my favorite moments were always when I got to mention Tori and Rhett on page, or include Jake and Cory in a scene.

Thank you for journeying to Hampton with me one last time. I hope these novelettes brought a smile to your face and maybe even a tear to your eye.

If you haven't read all the books in the Hampton Hearts series, there are eight more stories waiting for you! You can find a full list of my work at the back of this book.

And if you have already read everything I've ever written? Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

[I have a new series in the works, so be sure to sign up for my email newsletter or join my Facebook](#)

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About The Author

Abby Millsaps is an author and storyteller who loves to write messy, steamy, emo romance. Her characters are relatable, lovable, and occasionally confused about the distinction between right and wrong. Her books are set in picturesque small towns that feel like home.

Abby started writing romance in 7th grade. Then in 8th grade, she failed to qualify for the Power of the Pen State Championships

because “all her submissions contained the same theme: young people falling in love.” #LookAtHerNow

Abby met her husband at a house party the summer before her freshman year of college. He had a secret pizza stashed in the trunk of his car that he was saving for a midnight snack— how was she supposed to resist?

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