

*Naughty
or nice?*

HER CHRISTMAS

Spy

MINIK

HER CHRISTMAS SPY

MINK



Her Christmas Spy

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HER CHRISTMAS SPY

MINK

I'm not here for holiday cheer. I've been hired to do a job—find out how Snow Hills cheats its way into winning a holiday decorating competition every year. I'm going to get to the bottom of it, I'm going to get paid, and then I'll be done with this postcard-perfect town.

At least that's the plan until I meet Liza Grable. She's like the Christmas fairy of Snow Hill, all curves and sweetness. I'm supposed to be investigating her and her mother, the mayor, but the thought of her being a cheater simply doesn't fit.

What does fit? The two of us together. Snow Hills was supposed to be easy money, a brief bit of work before I moved on. But the closer I get to Liza, the more I realize I've found something rare and beautiful. Something I have to keep close to my heart. But I'm not the only one who can't let Liza go ...

“As I’ve said, there’s simply no way Snow Hills has won for the past three years without cheating.” Mayor McGovern thumps his palm on his desk. “Especially with that harpy Ellen Grable in charge. She’s practically a witch. Her and her daughter.”

“Her daughter is the holiday consultant you mentioned?” I try to steer the mayor away from ranting about the Grable women. He’s been doing it for the better part of an hour. I didn’t come here for small-town gossip. I came here for a job and some easy money.

“Yes. Liza. She’s just as bad as her mother. Maybe worse. She’s the one who’s in charge of the town’s Christmas decorations and the big show they put on. It’s ridiculous really.”

“Don’t you do the same thing every year?” I ask.

He sputters, his cheeks going red. “Of course I do! Here in Winter Heights, we do it bigger and better than those idiots in Snow Hills ever could. That’s how I know they’re cheating. Why, last year, our Tinsel Queen was voted the most beautiful woman in the state!”

“By who?”

“The Winter Heights Cigar Club.”

I sigh and force myself to stay put. *Easy money, easy money, easy money*—that’s the mantra I have to keep repeating to myself. This is the perfect way to lay low and take it easy for a

while. I've attracted too much heat in the Boston underworld, and working as a private investigator for this blowhard mayor is the perfect cover—and use of my skills. Still, it chafes. Being told what to do by a complete bozo isn't exactly a piece of cake for me.

He waves a hand. “None of that matters. It's in the past. This year, though, is my year. I'm up for reelection next year. I want to go into campaign season with the Spirit of the Season Cup as the crowning jewel of my tenure as mayor. I'm going to win this time, Mr. Windham. I have to. But I need you to make it happen. You have to catch them in the act. Do you understand?”

“Yes. The job is for me to go to Snow Hills, set up shop as a new resident, and keep an eye out for any wrongdoing by the mayor or her daughter. Is that correct?”

“Look, I really want you to *get in there*. Make them believe you're one of them. That's the only way you'll ever get access to all their dirty little secrets. I hired an investigator last year. He got nowhere. They could smell the city stink on him.” He looks me up and down, taking in my perfectly tailored gray suit. “You have to make more of an effort to fit in. Understand? Play along with all their bullshit and get the dirt I need.”

“What exactly do you think they're doing to sway the Spirit of the Season Committee?” The more I talk to the mayor, the more I regret agreeing to this meeting in the first place. He's clearly unhinged over some stupid holiday competition. *Easy money, easy money, easy money.*

“Probably doing sexual favors. Or bribes. Or maybe some sort of bribery with pictures of their feet.” He clears his throat. “They are attractive women, I suppose.” He leans over his desk. “But that's how they lure you in. With their feminine wiles and what have you. They honeypot. The judges fall for it every year.” He sneers. “But not this time. This time I'm going to catch them. I mean, *you're* going to catch them.”

“I got it.” I stand. “I'll head to Snow Hills tomorrow. Is there anything else I need to know?”

He rises, too, a little flustered as he digs around in the papers on his desk. “Here’s a photo of them. Their addresses. Everything my other PI found for me.” He hands me a folder. “I want daily updates. Let me know as soon as you get the incriminating evidence. I’ve already got my contact at the county newspaper chomping at the bit for the whole sordid tale.”

I take the folder.

He holds on to it. “I can count on you, right?” He looks up at me, his beady eyes narrowing. “I heard about your reputation. This should be an easy bit of work for you.”

I pull the folder free. “If you heard about me, then I don’t have to answer that question.” I turn and stride out, letting the door slam behind me.

Once I’m in my car, I flip open the folder and pull out some sheets of information and a thumb drive, which I assume has all the same materials on it. A photo falls out, and I pluck it from the floor.

It’s an older woman in a red pantsuit holding the Spirit of the Season Cup. She has a warm smile, and beside her stands a beauty with golden hair and big brown eyes. She favors the older woman but has her own style—a poofy red skirt and a green cardigan with a kitten embroidered on one lapel.

I stare at her image, at the way she smiles and engages with the camera. For a moment, I feel like she’s smiling just for me, and the thought of it warms my heart. I bat the feeling away. These two are my targets, and it’s my job to bring them down.

“I can’t wait to bring you to your knees, Liza.” I can think of all sorts of things she could do for me from that position.

Starting my car, I pull away from the Winter Heights town hall and set my sights on Snow Hills, on easy money, and on Miss Liza Grable.

I can't help but have a bit of pep in my step today. Not only are we starting preparations for the holiday city decorations, but there has been a dusting of snow falling all day. I find it rather perfect and lucky. That was until a loud hiss filled the quiet library. I glance up over my glasses from the stack of books I'm sorting to see Eve and Krampus up to their normal antics. Those two can be a handful when they get this way.

"Why do you bother him?" I shake my head as Krampus bats at my best friend's hand.

"Cause I'm gonna make him love me sooner or later." She leans down to say it in his face in a baby voice.

Krampus only hisses louder.

"Fine. You're a brat." They glare at each other until Eve finally breaks. Krampus wins their staring competition. He always does. "I don't know why he dislikes me so much."

I've explained to her time and time again that if she would just leave him alone, then maybe he would come around. That's a big *maybe*. But she can't help herself when she's near him. I think Eve enjoys the challenge. If there is no challenge, it's no fun.

She hops up onto the checkout counter, her dark ponytail bouncing. "He doesn't like anyone," I remind her. Except me.

"If he hates people, why do you bring him to work with you?" Krampus sits on his new bed that I got him so he could relax

while I work. Of course I had to get him a new one for Christmas. Something more festive.

I didn't find anything online good enough, so I ordered a plain green one and decorated it myself. I even put it on a stand that has lights strung around the bottom. It's a small Christmas throne for him to sit upon and judge us all.

"Because he's an introverted extrovert," I respond.

"What does that even mean?" Eve gives me a look like I've lost my mind. It's the same one she's been giving me since she moved to town three years ago when she took a job as my mom's executive assistant.

"He enjoys getting out of the house, but he doesn't enjoy social interaction. He only wants it in small doses, if at all."

"So what you're saying is he wants to people watch."

"Pretty much."

"I love to people watch. We would do it together if you'd retract the claws, Krampus," she tells him.

He ignores her and starts to clean his front paws, dismissing her completely. I don't always bring him to work. Only when he nudges at me before I'm about to leave or if I know I'm going to be out of the house for a long period of time. It's only the two of us, and I hate leaving him by himself if I don't have to.

Also, the Christmas lights are being hung on the house today. I know that would drive him bonkers if he was alone with strange men outside the windows. He'd have a hissy fit. Literally.

"What are you up to?" I ask as she starts to go through the pile of books I have piled up in front of me.

"Did I read this one or is it new?" She holds up the holiday romance book that has a winter bride on the front. I bet a winter wedding would be the most magical thing in the whole world. At least to me it would be.

"It's new. You'll like that one."

“Secret baby?” Her eyes get big. I give a nod. That’s all I’m willing to spoil. “I love when you do the holiday romance section.” She lets out a dreamy sigh. “Too bad there aren’t any good men around here.”

“There are some nice men around,” I rebuff. There’s the veterinarian, Clark, or Deputy Anderson.

“Then why aren’t you dating them?” She lifts one of her brows.

“Because it’s weird for me. I grew up with all these people.” Clark is a nice guy, but he’s gotten around. Who wants to date someone who has dated someone you know? And I know everyone in this town. Plus, I’ve never felt that sort of attraction for anyone.

“Yeah, so you know them super well and wouldn’t date them but think I should?”

“Anderson is nice.”

“Nice.” She gags. Now I’m the one that gives her a crazy stare.

“What’s wrong with being nice?”

“I want naughty.” She wiggles her brows. I push my glasses up my nose as I try to hide the warmth that fills my cheeks. “I see it. You want naughty too. Don’t even try to deny it.”

“Take these over to the table.” I push the stack of books toward her before I point to the table I’ve already strung lights around. To me, it’s not only about making the outside festive; the inside has to be decorated too.

The spirit of the holiday needs to flood out from each building. You can put up lots of decorations on the outside, but if there is no warmth behind it, I think it takes some of the magic away. People always ask why we win the holiday competition each year. I believe it’s because you can feel our Christmas spirit, not just see it.

It’s not about winning; it’s about all the fun we have doing it. Well, it is for me. Eve and my mom can be a bit competitive. Okay, maybe it’s more than a bit.

“Fine.” She jumps down from off the table, pulling another book out of the stack to keep for herself before she hauls one load and then another over to the table for me.

I check the time. We’re closing up early today for our traditional town meeting. We have it every year in case anyone has any new ideas they might want to bring to the table for decorations or events. I have a few things up my sleeve. But I never divulge all of my secrets. I like to surprise people.

I think this year is going to be the best year yet. I glance down at the books Eve set aside for herself. As I scan them for checkout, I stare down at the cover with the happy bride. I love Christmas. It’s my favorite time of year, but living in Snow Hills makes me wonder if I’ll ever have the Christmas that I’ve always dreamed of.

S now Hills is just as picturesque as it sounds. It's nestled on the top of a gentle ridge overlooking a wooded portion of countryside. It strikes me about the same as Winter Heights. A lovely little town full of boring people with boring lives. I doubt they have any idea there's a whole wide world outside the bounds of this place.

My gaze flicks to the photo of Liza I've propped on the dash. I wonder if she feels content here in this small town. I suppose she must. After all, she's in charge of making this place a Christmas town each year. From the photos I searched on the web, she's damn good at it, too. Makes sense that Mayor McGovern is gunning for the Grable women.

I drive slowly down Main Street, the shops on either side of the road beginning to put out Christmas décor. The light poles are wrapped like candy canes, and old-timey wire lights in shapes like angels and holly glow at the top of each one. It's a far cry from what I'm used to, but I suppose it has its charms for some.

There's a banner strung across the last poles on the street. It says there's an annual town meeting tonight. McGovern told me it's a planning meeting, so I intend to get my first taste of what Snow Hills is planning.

Pulling up in front of the town hall, I park and pull the rearview mirror over so I can see my reflection. I look ridiculous. My dark brown hair is a bit mussed, no longer in smooth, straight lines like I prefer. I'm wearing a pair of

glasses with simple brown frames, and the rest of my clothes make me want to laugh. A buffalo-check button-down shirt, blue jeans, and a Patagonia jacket. The only thing I wouldn't compromise on was my shoes. They're boots, but not some damn Land's End bullshit. These are Italian leather with a decent shine to them.

A family parks beside me and gets out of their car. The man gives me a two-fingered wave. It raises my hackles. Does he want his ass kicked? I shove the rearview mirror away and glare at him.

His eyes widen, and his wife walks up and gives me the same wave.

Oh, shit. He wasn't being a dick. He was genuinely waving at me. To be *nice*. And now he looks like he's about to piss himself.

I plaster a fake smile to my face and give him the two-finger salute, which makes me snort in and of itself.

He grabs his kids and hurries his family away from me.

Not good. I need to work on fitting in. That means waving. And smiling. And being generally non-threatening. Fuck. I'm not good at any of that shit.

I sigh and remind myself this is for easy money.

Opening my door, I enjoy the brisk cold of the falling night. The entire place is already covered with a dusting of snow, giving it an even more idyllic glow. If I were the kind of person who made judgments about ridiculous Christmas towns, I'd say this place is nice. But I don't. So I won't.

Another family walks past me, the little ones bundled up against the cold. I follow them, keeping an eye on their mannerisms and mimicking them whenever possible.

A sheriff stands at the entry doors. Shit. Law enforcement and I aren't exactly on good terms. Then again, I don't think I have any active warrants on me at the moment. But that's just a guess.

The family greets the cop and walks through the bright doors. I keep my head down and follow them.

“Hey.” The cop is talking to me. Of fucking *course* he is.

“Yeah?” I meet his gaze.

“You’re new around here.” He holds out his hand. “Sheriff Vance, but everyone just calls me Clark.”

I try to match his smile and reach out to shake his hand. “Crane Douglas. Just moved to town.”

“Welcome.” He gives my palm a firm shake. “We don’t get a lot of new folks, so it’s good to have you. You moved into the old Smith place, right?”

And there it is. He already knows who I am—at least he knows me as *Crane Douglas*, which isn’t my real last name. His tone is still friendly, but there’s more curiosity in it than I’d like.

I squeeze his hand right back then let it go. “Yeah. It’s a little dusty, but I think it will clean up fine.”

“You have a job somewhere in town?” Typical cop asking questions that are none of his damn business.

“I work from home.”

“What line of work you in?”

“Cryptocurrency, commodities trading, a little cybersecurity, things like that.”

“Bigtime.” He chuckles. “Welcome to town, Crane. Go on in. It’s our annual Christmas planning meet and greet. I made the hot chocolate myself.”

“Sounds good.” I try on a goofy smile and stride past him. It works. He doesn’t ask any more questions, and then he’s on to making small talk with the people behind me.

“Would you like some?” a woman calls from a table with cups of hot chocolate.

I recognize her right off. Mayor Grable. The man next to her is faithfully depositing marshmallows into each cup.

“Sure.” I take a cup from her.

“You’re new. I’m Mayor Grable, but you can call me Ellen.” She smiles at me, the same warmth in her eyes as I saw in her photo.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Crane.”

“And this is Carlton.” She gestures toward the blond man in the Christmas sweater with bells on it.

“Hi.” He gives me a smile. “Extra marshmallows?”

“I’m good.” I lift my cup to him. “Thank you, though.”

The mayor clasps her hands in front of her. “We’re so happy to have you with us in Snow Hills. Did you take the old Smith place?”

I’ve quickly discovered that there are no damn secrets in this town. If that holds true, I should be able to get to the bottom of the Christmas controversy pretty quickly.

“I did. It’s a nice little house. Just needs some work.”

“Are you handy?” she asks as she hands out some hot chocolate to some other townspeople.

“I like to think so, but I suppose I’m about to test that theory.”

She nods. “Let me know if you have any questions about the town or if you need help. I know everyone here, and I promise you people would jump at the chance to help you fix the house up.” She leans closer and whispers. “That way they can get the scoop on you. Everyone loves a new face.”

I smile. This time it’s almost genuine. “No scoop here. I’m pretty boring. But I’m happy to be here in Snow Hills.”

“We’re happy to have another handsome face.” Carlton hands out more hot chocolates as people pass by.

“Thanks.” I have no idea what else to say to that.

“Carlton’s right. We’re happy to have you.” She gestures down the hall. “The show’s about to start. My daughter—have you met her yet?”

“Not yet.” I sip the hot chocolate, pleasantly surprised at how good it is.

“Well, she’s the one who puts this thing on. She wants to get input from everyone on the Christmas theme and plans for the season. Helps create a—what does she call it?” She taps her chin and looks up. “A consistent feeling of Christmas—or something like that.” She waves a hand. “This is her territory. I just sit back and watch her go.”

“I’d like to do the same.”

She smiles, completely oblivious. “See you in there.”

“Thank you.” I tilt my cup toward her, then follow the small trickle of people into a large meeting room at the back of the building.

When I walk in, I’m surrounded by the scents of cinnamon and gingerbread, and the stage is covered by a deep crimson curtain.

Making my way past several filled rows, I find a spot near the front. Unfortunately, it’s between two families with small children. Kids have always loved me. I don’t know why.

“Hey. Your shoes are shiny.” A little girl stares down at my feet, then looks up at me, her nose red and snotty.

“Thanks.” I sigh.

“What’s your name?” She wipes her nose on her sleeve.

I try not to cringe. “Crane. What’s yours?”

“Anna.” She grins, her two front teeth missing.

“I’m Ted.” A little boy steps in front of me, his eyes wide.

“You’re so big.”

“Ted.” His mother grabs him and gently herds him to her side.

“Sorry about him.”

“No problem.”

“I’m Fran. Are you the new tenant at the Smith place? Crane, isn’t it?” She smiles.

Holy shit. The entire town already knows about me.

The lights lower, and the audience gets quiet as the curtains pull back.

And then I see her. Liza Grable. That's when I realize I've taken a job that might be the end of me.

Who in the jingle bells is that? I bumble through the first part of the opening, thanking everyone for coming. My eyes keep flicking over to the handsome man sitting right in the front row. No matter how many times I silently tell myself not to look, I can't help but do it. Is it some relative of Fran's? No, that can't be it.

I would have met him at some point over the years. And I would most definitely remember him if I had. Who would be able to forget that solid jaw line that has the perfect amount of stubble on it? He either forgot to shave this morning or he's so manly he's already got an eight o'clock shadow instead of five. And then there's that damn flannel he's wearing. They've never been my thing, but I might be having a change of heart.

I jerk my eyes away from him, focusing on everyone else before I make a complete fool of myself. Some already think I can be a bit odd and on my way to spinsterhood with my cat.

"Let's not forget that while this is a competition, it's really about having fun. If we have fun then we win no matter what," I remind everyone.

"If you're not first, you're last!" Eve shouts from the back of the room where she's standing. Everyone cheers with her.

"Cool it, Ricky Bobby, or I'll put Krampus in the back seat of your car." Everyone snickers then. "Now for the task at hand, I want to open the floor to suggestions of anything new you think we should do or something we can change. There is no idea too big or small."

People start to raise their hands to give different ideas. Snow Hills always becomes a popular spot for people to venture over for a day trip when we have the town in full swing of holiday cheer. I jot down a few of the ideas, though there are a few I dodge.

“Now, for the annual holiday party, I’ve left a clipboard at the back of the room for people to sign up to help with setup or who might be willing to donate things such as food or what not. You all know the drill.” I motion to where the clipboard is.

“I think we should spice it up this year,” Eve again shouts from the back. “Bachelor auctions.” She wiggles her brows, and I know she is only joking, but it might not be a horrible idea. I’m not so sure how that’ll play out. The single men outnumber the single women in this town.

“It might be better if it were bachelorette auctions.” I smirk at her. “We can donate the normal toy gifts everyone brings along with a check. What a great suggestion, Eve. I take it you’ll be at the top of the list?” I give her the sweetest smile.

“Hey.” She glares at me.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Why don’t you grab a paper and make a list of any other ladies that would be willing to join in.”

“On it.” Now Eve smirks back. “I’ll sign you up too while I’m jotting my name down.” I hear a few murmurs. I’m going to kill my best friend, but this might be a brilliant idea. I bet we’ll make a killing on her in the auction. The men around town are always trying to get her attention. It never works. She even tells them to drop dead sometimes, which only makes them chase after her harder.

“Are there any more questions or suggestions?”

“Miss Liza.” Anna waves her hand in the front row. My eyes have to swing back toward the handsome man who is staring right at me. Of course he is. Everyone in the room is staring at me on the freaking stage.

“Yes, Anna?”

“Will there be crafts after school this week?”

“There will be. I’ll have stations set up in the library for anyone that wants to come and participate.” This is actually one of my favorite activities to help with decorating the town. Not only do I get a ton of adorable decorations covered mostly in glitter, but I lure the children into the library. It’s two-fold really.

“Yay!” Anna wiggles in her seat.

“All right. I think that covers it. Let the holiday magic happen.” I give a small bow.

“And let’s take first place again!” Eve shouts from the back of the room again. Everyone erupts into cheers. I just shake my head at her.

“And have fun,” I say loudly, but I don’t think anyone hears me. They’re still in the midst of cheering. All of them except for the giant handsome man in the front row. He’s still staring right at me. Who the heck is this guy?

I make my way down the stairs on the side, intent on finding out who this stranger is without being too forward. My mom steps right into my path.

“I think the auction idea is brilliant.”

“Of course you do.”

“Why do you say it like that?”

“Cause you are trying to get me hooked up with someone.”

“Not hooked up.” My mom and dad were high school sweethearts. Their love for one another is adorable, but I know for a fact I’m not falling in love with anyone from my high school. Ever.

“Look at them.” Eve pops up next to my mom, her thumb pointed over her shoulder to where she put the sign-up form. I see half the single men from town lingering around, trying to see who might sign up. “This date thing will suck but might actually pull in some money.” Eve elbows my mom. “That will look really good for you. The mayor donating all this money to the hospital. I think I should get a raise.”

“Eve.” My mom gives her a hard stare.

“What?” She shrugs. “Just saying. I’m killing it at this mayor assistant thing.” Eve is teasing, but she actually is really good at her job. She only moved here for the position. I think her plan was to start in a small town to have a reference later on for a bigger city, which I hate cause that means one day she’ll leave.

I glance over my shoulder to see that the handsome man is now talking to a small circle of people who have surrounded him. No one stays a stranger for long in this town.

“Who’s that?” I nod toward the man, who glances my way. I quickly turn so I’m not busted staring. He towers over the people around him. He’s even bigger than I thought.

“He’s the person that’s staying in the old Smith place,” my mom says.

I’d completely forgotten someone was moving in there. I’ve been so wrapped up in getting ready for the holiday season that I haven’t had much time for the town gossip. I obviously need to catch up.

“That’s her new neighbor?” Eve asks, eyeing the man up. A weird sensation I’ve never felt burns in my chest.

“He’s handsome.” My mom gives voice to my own thoughts.

“You know what that means?” Eve asks.

“What?” Now I’m wondering if she knows something I don’t.

“That he’s an asshole. All the good-looking ones are.”

“You think he’s good-looking?” The burn in my chest spreads.

“Nah, his shoes are too shiny.” She shrugs as if that’s a normal reason to turn down the idea of dating someone. The funny feeling in my chest fades away. I love how strange my best friend is.

Liza stays behind to talk to townspeople, all of them buzzing with ideas for this year's Christmas display.

I linger, which seems to serve as an invitation for people to come up and ask me questions. It's not something I'm used to, but everyone seems pleasant enough.

"You'll have to come over sometime this week. I'll make you my famous scotch-spiced cookies." A tipsy woman winks at me, her long faux lashes practically creating a breeze.

"All right, Dolores, let's go." Her husband pulls her away, an apologetic look on his face.

"You coming to the library for crafts?" Anna has managed to climb onto the railing by the steps and then higher onto a ledge that runs behind it.

"Isn't that for children?" I glance around for her parents. They're wrangling her siblings into a minivan.

"Sure, but grownups help, too." She sniffs and puts her arms out to balance as she walks along the wall. "You could help. I bet you're great at Christmas crafts."

"You'd lose that bet. Hey, it's icy out. How about you get down before you—"

She squeals, and her feet go out from under her as she tumbles backward.

I jump up two steps and catch her before she crashes into the concrete steps. "Shit!"

She squeaks again, then bursts into laughter. “Again!”

“Kid, you could’ve died.” I set her firmly on her feet and glare down at her. “Don’t do that again.”

“What? That was epic!” She fist-pumps.

“Anna!” Liza runs up and drops to her knees, pulling the girl into her arms. “Are you all right?”

“I’m good. The new guy caught me.” Anna hitches her thumb at me.

“Thank you!” Liza turns her eyes to me, her gaze open and warm. “Thank you so much. That could’ve been really bad.” She holds Anna at arm’s length. “You sure you aren’t hurt?”

“I’m sure.”

“Anna?” her harried mother calls from the passenger side of the minivan. “Get on in here before you freeze!”

“Bye!” Anna skips away, then stops. “I’ll see you at the library tomorrow afternoon. Don’t worry. I’ll save the good glitter for us before my brother can eat it all.” She keeps skipping into the minivan.

“Thank you again.” Liza stands. “I mean it. Anna is kind of a mess, but she’s such a sweet child. I’m Liza, by the way.”

“It was nothing.” I hold out my hand. “Crane.”

She takes it, and I swear my whole body warms at her touch. With a wry smile, she says, “Oh, I know your name, your star sign, your address, and pretty much everything about you. Word travels fast around here.”

“Everything?” I ask, still holding her hand.

“You’re a Leo, right?”

I chuckle. “I am.”

“See what I mean?” She steps a little closer, our hands still clasped. “Well, I know we’re all glad to have you here.”

“Glad to be here.”

“Mom said you’ll be taking over the old Smith place.”

“Yep, I didn’t bring much with me, so it’s good it came furnished. But I’ll be honest with you, it needs a lot of work.”

“If you need help, I’m right next door.”

“Is that so?” I play dumb. “I didn’t realize.”

“Yep. Mine’s the Craftsman house with the yellow shutters.”

“Great. I’m going to start airing stuff out and painting tomorrow. Feel free to stop by whenever you like.”

“Okay.” She looks down at where our hands are still joined. “I think you’ll need that hand back if you intend to get any work done.”

I squeeze her fingers gently and force myself to let go. “Are you always in charge of the Christmas décor?”

“Not just decor.” She beams. “I mean, yes, I oversee all the town decorations and coordinate with the businesses and homeowners to sort of advance a cohesive theme for the season, but I like to think my main job is to ensure that everyone *feels* the spirit of Christmas. Décor is one way to do that, and acts of service are another. That’s why we raise money for various good causes like snacks for hospital staff and patients, food and litter for the animal shelter, and lots of other things. We don’t just want to look like we love Christmas. We want to show everyone that holiday magic exists in their own lives.”

I raise a brow. “None of that was in the brochure when I moved here.”

“Do you think it should be?” She smiles.

“I think if the brochure had you in it, this place would be bursting at the seams with new residents.”

Her cheeks turn a bright pink that has nothing to do with the chilly winter wind. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

“Not kind at all. Just the truth.”

“Liza, are you going to introduce us?” A woman—one I recognize as the mayor’s assistant—hooks her arm through Liza’s.

“As if you don’t already know. Eve, this is Crane. Crane, meet Eve, my pushy, nosy, bossy best friend.”

“Guilty as charged.” She shakes hands with me.

I notice Liza staring hard at where we touch, then seeming to loosen up a little when we let go quickly. Interesting.

“Don’t get too friendly with Liza, buddy. I need her to be mysterious and unobtainable. That way she’ll fetch more money at the bachelorette auction.”

“Oh my God, *Eve*.” Liza gives her a deadly glare.

“What?” Eve shrugs. “You know what I’m saying, right, Crane?”

“I understand. But don’t worry, I already find her plenty mysterious and unobtainable.” That’s not a lie. What drives her to invest so much in this Christmas thing? I’m curious about her. And the unobtainable part—well, I’m not here to seduce her. I’m here to get dirt on her. All the same, seducing her has already jumped all my other priorities and landed at the top of the list. It doesn’t make sense, and I don’t pretend to understand it, but just being near her makes my blood heat in a way I’ve never felt before. I want to keep talking with her, to have her share her passions with me. But that’s not my job. It’s not why I’m here. I need to keep my eye on the ball. *Easy money*.

“Good.” Eve nods. “The feminine mystique is still intact.” She pulls on Liza’s arm. “Let’s go. I’m freezing, and I’m certain Krampus is wondering why you aren’t home yet.”

“My cat,” Liza says when I look at her questioningly. “He’s a sassy little guy.” She lets Eve pull her away. “It was nice to meet you, Crane.”

“Nice to meet you, Liza.” I watch her walk away, her hips swaying under her coat as she and Eve hurry to her car.

I watch until they’re gone, their taillights disappearing onto Main Street.

The good news is—I’ve managed to fool these people so well that they think I’m one of them. The bad news is—I want to

know more about Liza, and it has *nothing* to do with professional curiosity.

“*W*hy are your lips so shiny?” I put another bottle of glue onto one of the tables I’ve set up for decorations. I’m not surprised Anna is the first to arrive. Nor am I surprised she noticed the slight change in my appearance. She’s very observant.

“Lip gloss.” I push my glasses up my nose.

“You look different.” Anna tilts her head to the side to further examine me. Kids can be brutally honest.

“Is that bad?” I hope not. I might have put in a bit more effort when I got ready for work this morning. I also may have popped into the bathroom a few minutes ago to freshen up. You know, just in case a certain handsome somebody decides to show up for craft time.

“No.” She shrugs. “Just different.” She wiggles out of her jacket, letting it fall to the floor.

“On the rack.” I point before she can try to hop into one of the chairs. She lets out a small huff but grabs it and runs over to hang it up. I almost tell her not to run, but it’s too late. She is almost back already.

“I have to get a good spot.” She circles a few of the tables, inspecting the bottles. “I’m just gonna—”she picks up a bottle of blue glitter and swaps it for the gold glitter that’s at another table—“switch these.” She eyes a few more tables before she plants herself into one of the chairs. “Perfect,” I hear her say under her breath.

I wonder if I had a little girl one day if she'd be as excited for Christmas as I am. She could favor Halloween instead. I wouldn't be mad about it. I already decorate a bit for Halloween, but it's nothing compared to my Christmas decorations.

Carlton hurries in the front door, more craft supplies in his arms. "I'm here, Liza. Construction paper out the wazoo." He dumps it all on the big table nearby.

"Thanks," I call to him as he starts organizing his pile.

"Miss Liza? Are you listening to me?" Anna snaps her fingers.

"I'm sorry, what did you say, honey?"

"I'm saving this seat." She taps the one next to hers. "So don't let anyone take it."

"All right." I grab one of the reserved table signs and put it in front of that chair for her. "Where is your brother? Will he be here soon?"

"It's not for him." She scrunches her little nose. "Here they come." She sighs as kids start to pour into the front doors of the library. "Bunch of glitter-stealing hooligans." She eyes them suspiciously.

"Anna!" Fran comes rushing into the library and heads straight toward us, almost bowling over Carlton, who's headed out.

"Miss Liza! You have to tell her I came early to help set up," Anna says in a hushed whisper.

"Huh?" What is she talking about?

"Did you sneak out of school early, Anna Bell Parks?"

Oh crap. Fran is coming in hard, using Anna's full name.

"Oh, I'm sorry. She was helping me." It's not a lie. She moved some bottles around. Fran's eyes bounce between Anna and me. "Where's Ted? Is he joining us?"

"Probably outside getting his tongue stuck to a pole." Anna giggles at her own joke about her brother.

“He’s coming.” Fran sighs. I direct my attention back to the other kids grabbing up chairs.

“I’ve got some snacks over here, but you have to eat them at these tables,” I tell them. They know the drill, but I remind them just in case. My eyes keep lingering over toward the door, wondering if Crane is coming.

“Miss Liza. This one won’t open.” Kennedy holds a bottle up in the air. I come around to her table and help her with the lid. I do the same for a few other kids. I love helping them make their own creations. It’s all part of the magic that goes into the holiday season.

“Looks like you’ve got your hands full.” I spin around at the familiar deep voice from yesterday.

“You came.” I smile up at him. I thought maybe the memory I had of him being so handsome was a little exaggerated, but seeing him again tells me it wasn’t.

“I did.” My breath hitches when his thumb swipes across my cheek. “You had a little something.”

“Glitter.” The gold sparkles on this finger. “It really gets everywhere.”

“Crane! I saved you a spot!” Anna shouts even though we’re only two tables over.

“This is still a library, Anna,” I remind her.

“But you guys are old. Maybe you can’t hear me or somethin’. Gotta speak up.”

“Ouch.” Crane puts a hand over his heart like he’s wounded.

“Come on.” This time she whisper-yells at him.

“I guess I’ve got to go.” He gives me a half-smile before he does as he’s ordered. It’s a bit adorable, but I thought we were having a moment. I read too many romance novels. I shake my head and get back to it.

Cora and Liby help me keep the kids wrangled while I still manage with the front desk in case anyone wants to check out a book. I bounce back and forth, helping as many of the kids

as I can. Whenever I steal a glance at Crane, I notice he's looking my way or maybe it's because he's facing this way.

"Liza." Mick pulls my attention away from Crane. "I got the lights fixed. Not sure what happened with the ones around the front windows."

"Oh good. I'm sorry if it was any trouble." When I'd gotten home and seen them up, I was excited to turn them on. But when I flipped the button to set the timer, the ones that wrap around my windows and the two pillars out front didn't come on. I had to call Mick. He does my lights every year.

"I'll swing by later to make sure the timer is good so you don't have to worry about it." He leans up against the front desk. Mick was a few grades above me in high school. After he graduated, he took over his father's company. They do everything from hanging Christmas lights to fixing a leaky sink.

"You don't have to do that. I know how to set it."

"It's really no trouble. I should salt your driveway anyway. Temps are gonna drop, and it may get a bit icy."

"I can salt it. I bought some down at the hardware store this morning, and I'm right next door. I'll do both of ours." Crane comes to stand next to my desk.

"You the new guy?" Mick asks. "Cane?"

"Crane," he corrects. A cold chill fills the space around us. I glance to the front doors to make sure they're shut. They are, so it's not that.

"Right, Mick." Mick only gives a chin nod which surprises me since a handshake is standard around here.

"Mick does the lights around town. You should get him to do your place."

"I don't need him to do my lights."

"Booked up anyways," Mick fills in.

"You don't want lights?" I ask, ignoring Mick being rude. "You'd be the only house without them." I stare up at Crane.

His place will be this black spot on the block if he doesn't have lights. "I bet blue lights would be pretty on your house," I suggest, trying to make sure he doesn't ruin Christmas.

"Blue lights it is," he responds, giving me a half smile. I let out a small breath of relief that he's willing to decorate.

"I said I'm booked." Mick pushes off my counter to stand fully. I bite the inside of my cheek so I don't laugh. I'm not sure what is happening here, but one thing is for sure: Mick is puffing out his chest. Mick isn't a small man, but he is compared to Crane.

"And I said I don't need you to do my lights." Crane's tone is dismissive. "Come." He reaches around and snags me by the wrist. "Settle an agreement between Anna and me," I think I hear him say but all I can focus on is the roughness of his hand against my skin and what it would feel like on other spots of my body.

“*Y*ou’re great with the kids.” Liza slides into the booth at the diner on Main Street.

I move to sit beside her, then remember myself and take the bench across from her. “Anna was giving me a run for my money. Is she always that bossy?”

Liza laughs. “That kid has a big future ahead of her. She’s either going to be the president or run the state prison from the inside. I don’t know which yet.”

I smirk. “She definitely has a talent for getting her way. In fact, I still think I have glitter in my hair.”

“You do.” Liza nods. “But I like it. Very festive.”

“Thanks.” I glance around the place, Christmas lights in the windows and garlands draped along the bar. “And thanks for coming to dinner with me.”

“You stayed late with the kids and helped me out with Anna. You deserve a meal on me.”

“I had a good time, and I’m paying. You don’t owe me anything, Liza.” I mean that. She somehow managed to keep the library going while supervising a handful of kids armed with glue and glitter. She’s the one who deserves a good meal.

“Liza, how’s it going? And is this the new guy?” The waitress sidles up to the table.

“Carrie, good to see you. Yes, this is Crane. He’s moved into the old Smith place.”

Carrie gives a rusty laugh, one that sounds like menthols with a dash of hard liquor. “I lost my virginity in that house back in ‘88. Kyle Smith had the biggest d—”

“Carrie.” Liza clears her throat, her cheeks already turning pink. “Do you all still have that patty melt with the fresh mozzarella on it?”

“Of course. Terry can whip it up no problem.” She scribbles on her pad. “Fries?”

“Yes, please. And a root beer.”

“Got it. And for you, handsome fella?” Carrie looks at me.

“I’ll have the same, thanks.”

“Got it.” She winks at me.

Liza covers her face with her hands for a second. “Sorry about that. Carrie is ... well, she’s ... She’s very colorful.”

I shrug. “I was entertained. Too bad we didn’t get the *full length* of the story.”

“Oh my God.” She groans. “Was that a pun?”

“Maybe.” I don’t know what I’m doing. Maybe the flannel shirt has sent a signal to my brain for me to morph into a corny small-town guy or something. *No*, I remind myself. *I’m only playing a part. That’s all.*

“Terrible.” She laughs and takes a sip from the root beer Carrie just delivered.

“Couldn’t help myself.” That’s the truth. Something about Liza brings out a playful side of me. “Now that we’ve covered Carrie’s history, tell me about you.”

“Me?” She takes a longer sip. “I mean, I’m kind of an open book. My mom’s the mayor. We’ve lived here all our lives. I went to school here, then college out of town but always home on the weekends. This town is my whole life.”

“You’ve never felt the itch to leave?”

“I do, but not permanently, you know? I’d love to see the world. Mom and I go on vacation somewhere new every

summer. But by the end of our time, I always feel just a little homesick. When we get back, I can relax again. Everything's comfortable and familiar."

"So you like a thrill, but only if you can come back to home base when it's over?"

"That's ... that's it. Yeah." She gives me a sheepish grin. "I've never really thought of it like a thrill, but I suppose you're right. So what about you? What brought you to our little town?"

"I guess I got tired of too much thrill. I grew up in Philadelphia, then spent time working there and in Boston, along with parts in between."

"What sort of work?" she asks.

"Consulting for large businesses. Security for high-level clients. Stuff like that."

"Wow, really? That sounds bigtime."

I'm not lying exactly, just not filling in all the details about how my 'security' work included various degrees of wet work.

"I don't think we really need much of that around here. My mom's door is always open, and Clark is always keeping an eye on things."

"I'm working online now. Nothing up close and personal. It's a nice change of pace."

"I'm glad you're here." She takes another big drink of her root beer as she opens her eyes wide and stares at the table in clear embarrassment.

"I'm glad to be here, too." I reach across the table and take her hand. "Hey, go easy. You don't have to murder the root beer on my account."

She releases the straw and looks at where my hand has hers.

"Sorry. I guess I've just never ... you know, done this."

"Never had root beer before? In that case, slurp away." I don't let her go.

She laughs, and I'm beginning to love the sound of it. "No. I'm a home body, and I've never accepted a dinner date from anyone."

"This is a date?" I sit up straighter.

When it pulls another laugh from her, I can't help but smile.

"I didn't mean like a *date* date," she hurries to add.

"What if *I* did?" I squeeze her fingers. "What if I fully intended to take you out on a date tonight? That would be okay, wouldn't it?"

"Yes." She nibbles her bottom lip. "It's great, actually."

"Food's up." Carrie slides our plates onto the table, and I have to pull my hand away from Liza's.

"This looks great, Carrie." Liza thanks her.

"Holler if you need anything." Carrie walks to the next table to get their order.

"I don't think I've ever had a patty melt with mozzarella before." I eye the sandwich and say a silent prayer that my Nonna can't see what's on my plate. Otherwise, she'd be rolling in her grave.

"It's great. I mean, it sounds weird, but I promise you the cheese makes it." She picks up half her sandwich and takes a bite. The sound that comes from her makes my cock stand at attention. "So good."

When in Rome, I suppose. I take a bite of my own sandwich and am pleasantly surprised. It looks all sorts of wrong, but it tastes right. The cheese is perfectly melty, and the beef patty is well seasoned.

"What do you think?" She dabs at her mouth with her napkin.

"I think you're right." I take another bite. "The cheese makes it."

"Told you."

The fries are hot and crispy, and Carrie keeps our root beers filled to the top. The entire meal is better than I ever expected,

but the best part of it has been Liza. She doesn't hide herself. When she said she was an open book, she wasn't kidding. Her emotions always come through, and I'm enjoying how real she is with me. It makes me wonder if I can be real with her, too. Not that I should. This is about the job. *Easy money.*

The diner door opens, and the sheriff strides in, his hat cocked to one side. When he sees Liza, he makes a beeline for us.

I tense. I'm not a fan of the law to begin with, and I absolutely despise the way this guy is looking at Liza. If I were back home, I'd get up and knock his fucking teeth out. As it is, I stay seated.

"Liza, fancy meeting you here." He gives her a hat tip, then looks at me. "With our newest resident, too."

"Sheriff."

"Oh, everyone calls me Clark." He smiles, but it isn't meant for me. It's for Liza.

I reach behind me and pull out my wallet, then toss down a couple of twenties. "We were just on our way out."

"That's too bad. I was hoping I could have a word with you." He smiles at Liza.

"I'll drive you home. The roads are supposed to get icy tonight." I stand and hold out my hand.

She takes it and gets to her feet. "Okay. Sounds good."

"I can take you home, Liza." Clark rests one hand on his belt.

"Oh, no, that's okay, Clark. I'll go with Crane. He's right next door."

"All right." The sheriff's tone tells me that it is, in fact, *not* all right, but I don't give a shit.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Douglas," he calls as I walk Liza out of the diner.

I give him the two-finger wave as we walk out into the cold evening.

"Thanks." She digs around in her bag. "I'll see you later."

“What?” I pull her gently toward my car.

“You don’t have to keep pretending. I can drive home. Clark can be sort of insistent sometimes, so I appreciate you helping me out.” She pulls her keys from her bag.

“You think I’m pretending?” I pull her to me, pressing her close as I look down in her eyes. “Nothing about this is fake, Liza.” I glance at her lips and lean closer.

Her breath hitches.

Then my mantra chirps through my mind. *Easy money.*

I step back from her and open the passenger door. “Get in, Liza. Let’s go home.”

Why didn't he kiss me? It's the only thing I can think about on the short drive to our homes. The inside of the vehicle is too quiet. I peek over at him as he pulls down our street. I was so sure he was going to. His mouth had been so close to mine. Had I read it all wrong? He seems stiffer now. One second he was there with me, and the next he wasn't.

He pulls into his driveway. "Thanks for the ride." I unclick my seatbelt to bolt out of the car. I'm barely out the door and he's there standing beside it, closing it for me.

"I was going to get that for you." He gives me one of his half-smiles.

"That's very gentlemanly of you." The glowing Christmas lights on my house reflect off his eyes, making them sparkle. Again, his gaze drops to my mouth.

"I'll walk you to your door."

"You don't have to do that." He puts his hand on the small of my back and starts to guide me toward my house. Why is this suddenly so awkward? Is it me? Am I making this weird? I reach into my purse to find my keys.

"Thanks again." I fumble with them and end up dropping them. He picks them up before I can. He slides the key into my door, unlocking it for me before he hands them back over. His fingers graze mine.

"I'll take you to your car tomorrow."

“You don’t have to do that. I can—”

“I’ll take you to your car tomorrow.” Normally a man being so pushy would annoy me, but for some reason, with Crane, it’s having the opposite effect.

“Okay.” I lick my lips, drawing his attention there once again. We linger for a long moment before a very loud meow sounds from inside the house.

Crane turns his head toward the sound. “Krampus?”

“You remembered his name.” I have to say I’m pretty impressed. I bet neither Mick nor Clark would remember Krampus’s name, and they often drift into the library and see him.

“I pay attention to everything you say,” he responds easily.

“Being in your line of work, I bet you’re used to paying attention to your surroundings.” I hadn’t missed how he always takes everything in when he enters a room. He even did it at the diner. His eyes drifted across everyone inside.

“I think with you, I pay even more attention.”

I peek up at him through my lashes. Then how can he not tell I want him to kiss me?

A loud hiss sounds from the other side of the door this time. “I should feed him. He can get grumpy when his dinner is late.”

“Tomorrow,” he reminds me as I slip inside.

“Tomorrow,” I agree as I close it. My fingers linger on the deadbolt. Why does it feel wrong to flip it with him still on my porch?

“Lock it, babe.”

Babe, I mouth to Krampus, who is glaring at me. I flip the lock. “Good girl,” he says before I hear his feet go down the stairs as he makes his way off my porch.

“Good girl? Did he really say that?”

Krampus gives me an annoyed meow, breaking me from my thoughts.

“Fine!” I hurry into the kitchen and get his wet food before I pull off my coat and drop my bag on the counter. Krampus clearly isn’t going to help me out with this, so I call the one person that might have some kind of advice. Even though I know I’ll probably regret it at some point, I dial my best friend’s number. She’s so gonna run with this ball.

“I swear I’m turning my lights on right now. I forgot. There is a special that came out on Netflix about serial killers, and I got distracted,” Eve immediately says.

“I’m not calling about the lights, but I’ll wait while you turn them on.”

“You do know this is a cell phone? I can turn the Christmas lights on while I’m on the phone with you.”

“Why don’t you just have the timer thing set so they come on by themselves?”

“Screw Mick, trying to charge extra for the timer thing. I’m insulted. Like he thinks I’m going to forget to turn them on. I mean, I *am*, but he needs to mind his own business. I guess I should say his daddy’s business.” She lets out a laugh at her own joke. “So what’s up if you’re not calling about the lights? This have something to do with you and the new guy having dinner at the diner tonight? Your fingers all touching while you made goo-goo eyes at each other.”

I blow out a breath. “Really?” Word travels even faster than I thought.

“Yep. Carlton texted me with play by play *and* a photo.”

“Oh my God. He really needs to get a boyfriend.”

“I bet he’s lonely. I’ve never even seen poor Carlton with a date.” She munches something, crunching sounds rustling through the phone. “Okay, moving on, tell me more about—”

“He didn’t kiss me,” I blurt out. “But he did call me babe and a good girl when I locked the door when I got in the house.”

“Doesn’t sound to me like you want to be a good girl, Liza,” Eve teases me.

“But why didn’t he kiss me?”

“Cause men are stupid?” Krampus meows in agreement with Eve for once before he prances his booty out of the kitchen.

“This is the worst,” I huff.

“Liza, you want to kiss him?”

“Well, yeah. Why else would I be acting like this?”

“Then go kiss him. The Liza I know goes for what she wants.”

“I do.” I stand up a bit straighter. I don’t want to play games. I can kiss him. Why the heck not? Then he’ll know where I stand on the matter. Even if I’m terrible at it. Which I most likely will be since I don’t have an ounce of experience.

“Go get that kiss, tiger,” Eve says before I hang up the call. I head back out my front door and across the yard over to his place. Before I can try to knock on the door, it swings open, my hand still in the air.

“Something wrong?” He steps out and assesses the street.

“Yes, something is wrong. You didn’t kiss me.” I grab the front of his shirt and yank him down to me. He comes willingly as I lift up on my tiptoes to meet him halfway. His mouth connects with mine. His lips are softer than I thought they would be. Everything else about him is so damn hard.

He licks the seam of my lips, and I part them for him. His tongue slips right in. I moan into his mouth. His fingers dig into my hair, pulling my head back to deepen the kiss even more. I press myself against him. This feels so natural, his mouth on mine as he takes control of the kiss. I start to rub myself against him. Both my hands are now clinging to him.

“Fuck.” He grunts, lifting his head. I gasp for breath, my lips tingling. I realize we’re going at it on the porch. It might be dark out, but anyone could pass by and likely see. Crane slowly releases his hold from my hair. “Liza.” My name comes out gruff. Damn, that’s sexy.

“Tomorrow,” I say, dropping my hands from his chest before stepping back.

“Tomorrow,” he agrees before I turn and head back to my house. I can feel his gaze on me the whole way. I pause at my

door to peek back at him.

“I’ll lock it,” I tell him before I slip inside.

“Good girl,” I hear him say as my door falls closed and I flip the lock. I lick my lips that are still tingling.

Tomorrow now sounds like forever away.

After a sleepless night of me going over our kiss again and again, interspersed with my *'easy money'* mantra, I'm up early to drive Liza to her car.

I have to stop obsessing over the woman. This is just work. Nothing more. I adjust my scarf and reach for the door handle.

My heart jumps at the prospect of seeing her, of stepping outside and walking over to her place. I wanted to drag her inside my house last night, throw her down on the floor, and give her every bit of me. I was a breath away from doing it, too. Fuck, the way she marched onto my porch and demanded a kiss—I don't think I've ever been more turned on in my life.

It took all the willpower I had to stop myself from taking her.

Now I have to put all that aside and act like a fucking professional. I failed to even ask her relevant questions at the diner last night. It was like she'd put me under a spell, one that made me forget this whole thing is a charade. But I've got my head on straight this time.

I knock on her door.

A loud meow sounds from behind the wood, and then I hear her shooing Krampus away. She opens the door.

"Hey, I'm running a little behind. Sorry. Come in." She opens the door, and I see she's wearing only a robe. "I'll only be a minute."

She turns and gestures toward the living room. "Have a seat. I'm hurrying."

“No rush.”

She’s already dashing away beside the stairs.

What’s under that robe? I close the door and lean against it. Is she wearing panties?

I feel something on my ankle and look down. Krampus is weaving between my legs, his tail straight up.

“Are you ... purring?” I glare at him.

He doesn’t seem to care that he’s getting fur all over my pants. Luckily, I’m not in one of my suits. As it is, I think my jeans can handle it.

I drop to my haunches and hold out my hand. He doesn’t even sniff me, just pushes his whiskers against my fingers, then flops onto his side on the floor.

“Is this a trick?” I don’t feel exactly safe when I reach for his fluffy stomach. But once I rub my fingers along it, he rolls to his other side, then flops back and stretches.

“Oh my God.” Liza’s eyes are wide as she peeks around the staircase. “This can’t be happening.”

“What?” I stand, and Krampus jumps onto the couch beside me, his big yellow eyes on me.

“You ... you petted him. And you didn’t come back with a bloody stump.” She hurries up. No more robe, sadly. She’s wearing a forest green cardigan and a red skirt that falls to her knees.

“He seems pretty easygoing.” I shrug. “I’m not a pet person or anything.”

“Easygoing?” She snorts a cute little laugh. “Krampus? Never.” She walks to him and scratches under his chin. “Are you feeling sick? What’s wrong, Krampus?”

He takes the pets then settles down on the back of the couch, looking like a loaf of bread.

“You think he’s sick because he let me pet him?” I ask.

“It’s just so ... strange.” She stands back and crosses her arms over her chest as she stares at him. “He hates everyone. I mean *everyone*. Even Eve.”

“The friend of yours I met?”

“Yeah. I’ve known her for years, and Krampus hasn’t warmed up to her one bit. Not her, not Clark, not Mick. Honestly, he tolerates my mom, but he doesn’t go out of his way for her.”

“I didn’t realize he was such a tough customer.” I give him another head pat, and his purr rumbles to life.

“This is surreal.” She reaches in the purse on the couch and pulls out her phone. “I need a photo or Eve won’t believe me.”

I tense. “You want my picture?”

“If you don’t mind. Just keep petting him.” She aims the camera at me.

I should tell her not to take it, but I don’t. She seems almost overjoyed that her cat isn’t a total asshole. Besides, if it comes to it, I can wipe her phone and Eve’s before I leave town.

“Okay, I got it.” She sends it off to Eve, then puts the phone back in her purse. “She is going to lose her mind.”

“You look beautiful.” I can’t seem to help myself. I reach out and take her arm, pulling her to me.

Her breath catches in her throat. “I, um, I know last night I was a little forward, but—”

“I like it when you’re forward.” I move my hands to her waist, feeling how warm she is. I bet her skin is soft beneath these clothes, so soft that I could spend hours just running my fingertips along every inch of her.

“We just met. We should probably take it slow.”

“Why?”

She blinks a few times. “Well, because we just met.”

“Doesn’t sound like a good reason to me.” I lean closer to her, our breaths mingling.

Her phone rings, the sound set to the Carol of the Bells. “It’s my mom.” She glances at my mouth, her tongue darting to her lips. “I should be at City Hall by now. I always stop by before I go to the library. She’s probably worried about me.” Nervous, excited, maybe a little bit of both—she talks in rapid-fire bursts.

“Answer it.” I ghost my lips across hers, then reach for the door. “You can talk while I drive.”

She digs in her purse and follows me.

“Wait.” I grab a heavy coat from the hook beside the door.

“It’s not going to be that cold today. I could probably—Oh!”

I spin her around and help her get the coat on.

“It’s cold. Do you have gloves?” I look around.

“Mom?” She answers her phone, then digs in her pocket with her other hand and shows me her gloves. “Yeah. I’m just running a little late. I’m on my way.”

I pluck them from her, put one on her free hand, then have her swap the phone so I can do the other.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. My car’s still there because Crane drove me home last night. Didn’t mean to make you worry.”

I walk her out to the car and open the door for her.

“Mom.” She cuts a look at me. “Mom, stop. Mom!” Her voice turns into a hiss. “He’s with me right now. *Stop!*” She sits then gasps. “No, I didn’t sleep at his place!”

I close her door and can’t stop my chuckle as I walk around to the driver’s side.

When I get in, her phone is in her purse, and her cheeks are a beautiful pink.

“Let’s just pretend you didn’t hear any of that.” She looks straight ahead as I pull onto the road.

“Any of what?”

“Good.” She flashes me a smile that melts another piece of my heart. She’s so fucking adorable, and she doesn’t even know it.

I love easy money. But Liza may be the one thing I'm starting to love more.

“Oh, gosh.” I groan when Crane pulls up in front of City Hall, which is across the street and down a block from the library. Eve always has morning coffee ready to go, so it’s been a bit of a routine to swing by their office in the morning before I head over to the library. She and Mom both are hovering in the doorway, whispering between them.

“Let me get your door,” Crane says. Before I can tell him that’s a terrible idea, he’s already out of the car and coming around to open the door for me.

“Thank you, but—”

“Crane, why don’t you come in and have a cup of coffee with us.” It’s not really a question. Not when it’s coming in that tone of voice from my mom. I take a deep breath and prepare myself for the line of questioning that she and Eve are about to go into.

“I got food too.” Eve takes a giant bite of the bear claw she’s holding in her hand.

“I’d love to.” Crane gives them a smile.

“You don’t have to. I’m sure you have—”

He drops a quick kiss on my mouth, shocking me into silence. It was fast, but still.

I gape at him. “You can’t kiss me in front of my mom.”

“Just did.” He takes my hand and pulls me out and away from the car door so he can close it. “Morning, Ellen, Eve.” He

gives them both a nod.

“I guess it *is* a good morning.” Eve wiggles her eyebrows at me. I glare at her, my face starting to warm.

“I can’t stay long. I’m already running late.” I pick up my pace, practically dragging Crane toward my mom’s office.

“So it looks as though you’re enjoying Snow Hills?” Mom asks Crane.

“Mom!” I’m going to kill them both.

“What?” She laughs. “I’m asking if he is enjoying Snow Hills. Not my daughter.”

“I can’t.” I want to die. Crane lets my hand go. I’m guessing to bolt out of here. Instead, he only shifts to drape his arm over my shoulder to pull me in close.

“Snow Hills has been nothing I’d expected.”

“You came at the perfect time.” Mom smiles. Her eyes bounce between the two of us.

My face goes bright red at my mother’s innuendo. “You really did.” I try to recover. “You’ll get to see Christmas in full swing around here.” I glance up at Crane. He still needs to get lights on his house.

Mom gives me a sly smile. “That’s not what I meant. I didn’t know I raised a daughter with such a filthy mind.”

“Have you ever seen her Kindle?” Eve asks my mom.

“Eve!” I snap. Aren’t they supposed to be giving Crane a hard time? Not me. The heck. I shouldn’t be shocked; the two of them always gang up on me.

“What’s on your Kindle?” Crane asks.

“Just books or whatever.” I stumble over my words. “There is only so much space in the library.” I try not to sound defensive or suspicious, but I’m sure I’m failing. My face always shows every emotion.

“And some of those covers or title names can’t be poking out in there with little eyes and hands roaming around, right,

Liza?”

I glare harder at my friend. Crane lets out a deep, sexy chuckle that has me melting into his side.

“What I meant was”—Mom circles back around to her point —“a few of the ladies from the Frost Angel Sewing group had their grandsons coming to the auction to bid on you. I overheard they were sending a picture of you to them.”

Crane’s hold on me tightens. He’s not laughing anymore.

“So you better be ready,” she tells Crane.

“I’m always ready.” His response is simple, but it’s laced with something else I can’t put my finger on.

“So, coffee.” I change the subject. “You want sugar cookie creamer? It’s wonderful, but you can only get it this time of year.”

“I normally take mine black, but that does sound good.”

I slip out from under his hold to make us both a to-go cup.

“You look like a man that takes his coffee black and has to shave twice a day.” Eve polishes off her bear claw and grabs another. I have no idea where everything she eats goes. She’s like a damn bottomless pit. If I ate the way she does, it would go straight to my hips.

“I bet you’d look handsome with a bit of scruff.” I hand him his coffee. “Hope it’s not too sweet.”

“Never.” He winks at me before he takes a drink. My face flushes with more heat, but I turn to go back to get my own coffee to hide it. I steal the donut covered in green and red sprinkles and powdered sugar that I know was ordered for me.

Both Eve and my mom pepper Crane with questions about his job and where he’s from. Things he already told me last night. He sips on his coffee and answers them all without hesitation.

“You sound like you drift around a lot.” Mom cocks her head to the side. “You don’t like to stay in one place long?”

A tightness fills my chest that I can’t explain.

“I’ve been looking for a change of pace. Something different.” His eyes come to mine and linger there.

“I should really get over to the library,” I say, not wanting to talk about the fact that Crane could only be here temporarily.

“I’m going to walk you,” Crane says before polishing off his coffee and dropping it in the small recycle bin. “Thanks for the coffee, ladies.” He gives them the same nod he had when we came in before he snags my hand again.

“Bye, guys.” They both watch us go. “I’m sorry about them,” I say again when we exit out of the front of City Hall. Crane is from the city. I’m sure he’s not used to people being up in his business.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” he reassures me.

“Morning, Liza, Crane,” a few people say as we pass them on the sidewalk.

“Everyone really knows everyone around here,” Crane observes.

“Yeah, Snow Hills has more good to it than bad, but there are for sure some downsides.”

“As?”

“I’m sure everyone in this town is buzzing around talking about the two of us.” I peek over at him to gauge his reaction to that. “This is probably the most excitement they’ve had in a while.”

“Good.”

“Good?” I stop walking when we get to the front of the library.

“Yeah, good.” He leans down and kisses me again. This one is not as quick as the other, but it’s definitely not all-consuming like last night.

“They’re really going to talk about that.” I can feel people’s eyes on us even now.

“Let them talk.” He gives me that half-smile of his. Okay, maybe a small town won’t scare him away. He’s so unfazed by

what others might think or say. It only makes him sexier. “I want to walk you in.”

“All right.” I put my key in and unlock both front doors before I step inside. I gasp when I see my front display of holiday romance novels dumped over. “How the—”

“Don’t move,” Crane orders, pushing me back out the doors before he pulls a gun out of the back of his coat. “Stay right here until I’m back.”

“Should I call—”

“Give me a second.”

I nod, my heart racing as he slips into the library. I swear an eternity passes before he’s back, his gun now gone.

“Maybe the table just gave out. One of the legs or something,” I suggest as he finally lets me step into the library.

“Someone was in here.” His voice is solemn. “This building needs a security system. I don’t understand why it doesn’t have one. You should have one at home, too. You’re a single woman walking into these places all alone.” Everything about Crane has changed. His demeanor is no longer playful. It’s like a different man stands in front of me.

I don’t remind him that this is Snow Hills. It’s safe—at least I thought it was. “How can you be sure someone was in there?”

“They destroyed all the decorations we laid out to dry last night.”

My heart sinks. “No!” I gasp and rush past him toward where they’d all be laid out for me to collect today. My eyes fill with tears when I see the destruction. All the hard work the children put into them is ruined. “Why would someone do this? It’s the children’s.”

Crane doesn’t respond. He pulls me into his arms, holding me close, stopping the tears from falling.

CRANE

I survey the damage and hope we can save some of the kids' work. But whoever busted into the library did a good job of wrecking it all.

"It's all right." I hug Liza tightly.

"No. They worked so hard." She sniffles. "Why would someone do this? Should we call Clark?"

"Wouldn't do much good. Could be teenagers just being assholes." I doubt that's the case, but I don't want to alarm her anymore than she already is. The guy left a little calling card on Liza's office door. I already cleaned it up and sprayed the whole fucking thing with Clorox I found in the bathroom. But I'll swing by the hardware later and order her a new door. "You don't know of anyone who has it in for you, right?"

"For me?" She looks up at me, her lashes teary. "No. I mean, I can't think of anyone."

Of course she can't. There's no way she has any real enemies. Well, other than me, I suppose. I was sent here to learn her secrets so Mayor McGovern could beat her in the Spirit of the Season competition. No need to get hung up on technicalities, though. Besides, I'm not the one who busted a nut all over her damn door.

"You took pictures of the kids with their work yesterday, right?" I wipe the tears from her cheeks.

"Yeah."

"Send me those pics. I'll get to work."

“You mean ... You mean you’re going to remake their stuff?”
Her eyes widen.

“As best I can, yeah. Though I don’t know if I can recreate the level of glitter on Anna’s snowman. She went a little overboard.”

She smiles, and I feel like my heart beats more freely. “Anna always does.” Then she shakes her head. “You can’t waste your day here with me. Don’t you have your own stuff to do?”

“I’ll be fine. You just go about your day. I’ll be over here with the glue and the crayons.” I cup her cheek and kiss her.

She sighs against my lips, then wraps her arms around my neck.

I feel her soft breasts pressing against me, the way her body molds to mine. I can’t help myself. I grab her ass and lift her. Her squeal is like fire in my blood, and I run my hand down to her thigh and hike it up on my hip.

Licking along the seam of her lips, I get her to open for me, and then I taste her fully. I want to drown in her, in the way she’s warm everywhere. I’ve never known someone like her. It’s like she short-circuits a part of me, sending me into overdrive when she’s near.

When I finally have to let her take a breath, she licks her lips and runs her fingers through my hair. “Is this really happening?”

“Am I kissing you when I should be doing toddler crafts? Yes.”

She laughs, the sound breathy and sweet. When she runs her hands down my shoulders, and then lower, her gaze flicks back to mine. “You had a gun.”

Fuck. I didn’t even think when I pulled it out. My instinct kicked in the moment I could tell the library had been broken into. Protecting Liza became my only concern.

I set her on her feet. “Yes. I have a gun.”

“Why?”

“Doesn’t seem like a bad idea now that there’s someone breaking into the library, right?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” She walks past me and starts picking up the books from the display.

I grab most of them and help her right the table. “Here. All fixed.”

She moves to walk past me.

“Hey.” I grab her arm. “Look. I used to be in a pretty rough business, all right? That’s why I have a gun.”

She nods slowly. “It just surprised me is all.”

“I know.” I sigh. “I’m still getting used to small-town life. The gun is remnant of my old life, but it’s not for offense. Only defense. All right?”

I can tell she’s not a fan of guns, but she clears her throat. “That makes sense. And I guess as long as you’re safe with it, it’s fine.”

“I’m safe.” For her, I’m safe. For whatever piece of shit broke into the library, not so much.

“Okay. I believe you.” She lets out a deep exhale then glances at the door. “We’ve already got visitors.”

“I’ll get to work on the crafts. You do your thing. Okay? If you need anything, I’ll be right here.”

Her eyes soften, and she takes my hand, squeezing it. “Thanks. I really appreciate you helping.”

“Of course.” I’ve never deemed myself the helpful sort. Professional? Yes. Calculating? Yes. But I never work for free. With Liza, I find that I don’t mind, even if it means walking out of here with glitter in places glitter should *never* be.

Right as I sit down to work, my phone rings. Glancing up, I find Liza talking to an elderly patron, so I take the call and hurry to the back of the stacks.

“What?” I answer with a harsh tone.

“That’s how you speak to clients?” Mayor McGovern bites back. “I haven’t heard a damn thing from you. Give me the goods. Are they bribing the committee? What are they planning for this year? Tell me what you know!”

“Now’s not a good time.”

“It better be! I’m paying you good money to get me this information!”

“Calm the fuck down.” I peek toward the front desk and see Liza still chatting. “I’m on the job as we speak. I’ll have something for you tonight.”

“You’d better.”

I end the call and pocket my phone before returning to the craft table. Working off what Liza sent me, I start recreating the projects. Luckily, we still have all the same materials. Trying to mimic the child handwriting is the hardest part, but I find using my off-hand works wonders. I’m elbow-deep in glittery pipe cleaners when the library doors open and the sheriff strides in, his eyes on Liza.

“Hey, Clark.” She barely looks up and goes back to sorting some books on the counter.

“Howdy, Liza. Slow day? I was wondering if you’d like to have lunch with me at—” He stops talking when he sees me. “What in the holly is this?” He smirks.

I stand, craft bits coming off me in a small shower. “Liza already has lunch plans. With me.”

“With you, glitter fairy?” Clark snorts.

I couldn’t give two shits about being called the glitter fairy, but I do give a shit that he’s at the top of my list for suspects in the break-in.

“Yes, with the glitter fairy.” I give him a big grin. If he’s the one who left a jizz-o-gram on Liza’s door, I’ll cut his dick off and nail it to the town Christmas tree as an ornament.

I swear everything the man does is sexy. At the top of the list today right behind him spending his day helping me is him not giving a shit what other men thought of him. Clark tried to poke at Crane because he was covered in glitter from making snowmen and snowflakes.

Crane did not give one shit what Clark thinks of him. If it had been Mick, it would have been a whole ordeal. Crane all but told Clark to fuck off, but in a very polite way. He might be getting the hang of this small-town thing already. Then he'd taken me to lunch and been great company, so much so that Eve was texting me that the whole town was abuzz.

"I've never seen someone multitask the way you do." Crane leans up against my front desk. "Checking out books, reading, and talking to everyone while still setting up for the holiday party. You're quite busy."

"It's not hard. I mean, maybe if I had a family at home with kids but it's only Krampus at home waiting for me." I pack up two of my binders so I can go over a few more details tonight. The whole auction idea Eve threw out there is something new I have to set up. Normally, it's a lot of the same with a few changes here and there to shake things up. But this is a whole new concept that is going to take some planning.

"How does the competition work? Who even judges such a thing?" Crane asks.

I slide everything into one of the tote bags I have under the desk. "There's a committee." I can't recall how many are on it.

“They’ll pass through at some point. I’m not sure.”

“You don’t know who they are?”

“Honestly, I try not to know. I get Eve and my mom are into the whole winning thing, but I think if I put that into my mindset, it would ruin my spirit.”

“You’re not competitive?”

“Not really. Is that strange? I mean, I’ll cheer for my team when I’m watching a game, but if I’m playing Monopoly—which I will never do with Eve again—I’m not out for blood. I want to have fun. That’s the whole point. When you’re so focused on winning, you miss part of the experience. Plus, sometimes it’s nice to see someone else win. Eve will do a whole victory dance. That in itself can be worth losing for.” I smile, remembering how ridiculous she acted the last time she won.

“Are you saying you might have thrown a few UNO games in your life?”

“Maybe.” I shrug. “Obsessing over being competitive, I imagine, is overwhelming. I guess I just want to use my energy for something else.” Him being that something else. Why had I said we should take it slow? What the heck was I thinking?

I have to admit that the gun he pulled out had taken me a bit by surprise, but a small part of me thought it was pretty badass how he went inside to check things over without hesitation. Then he blew Clark off, took me to lunch, and finished all the decorations. He’d been able to save some, piecing them back together.

“You’re different, Liza.” He slips around the side of the desk, picking up my bag for me before his hand comes to my hip. I drop my head back to stare up at him. I can’t help but smile. The man has glitter everywhere. He’s dark and shiny all at the same time.

“Is that bad?”

“No, it’s refreshing.”

“You’re different too, Crane.” I’ve never met anyone like him before. There is something about him that pulls me to him. This inexplicable attraction. I love my romance books, but I thought falling in love so quickly was crazy at times, but now I can see myself doing the same with Crane.

I raise up on my toes. Crane meets me halfway, his mouth claiming mine. His tongue sweeps past my lips as he lifts me off my feet, sitting me on the desk. My legs spread to make room for him to step between them. He’s already got me so turned on I don’t know what to do. It’s like he’s able to flip a switch in me that turns me into a needy mess.

A vibrating sound breaks me from the moment.

“Crane? Is that your phone?” I get out through little puffs of breath. His mouth is now traveling down my neck, making it hard for me to even form words at this point. He reaches into his pocket, his lips never leaving my skin as he clicks and clears the call.

“You’re with me, babe.” He nips my neck.

“Yes. Forget what I said before. Screw going slow.” I swear I can feel him smile against my neck.

“You want to be a bad girl?”

I lick my lips. I’ve never been more turned on in my life. My clit is starting to ache.

“I want to be your bad girl.”

A groan leaves him. His mouth comes back to mine. His hands go to my ass, pulling me to the edge of the desk. His cock grinding against my sex through my skirt.

“Then don’t move,” he orders before he starts to pull my skirt up. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. I wasn’t prepared for this. My panties have little kittens on them with candy canes. Not only that, I can feel the giant wet spot that has formed.

“Hold it.”

I grip my bunched skirt to hold it up for him.

His fingers rub the wet spot. “This for me?”

I nod.

“Tell me.”

I can feel the heat rush to my cheeks, but I’m so turned on that I don’t even care. I want whatever it is he’s going to give me. “It’s for you.”

“Careful what you say.” His fingers keep rubbing up and down against the spot outside my panties. “You’re telling me this is mine.”

“Please,” I beg. My hands fist my skirt, needing something to hang on to.

“Please? Now you sound like a good girl.” His fingers slip past my panties, pulling them to the side and exposing me to him.

“Crane—” I want to move to do something, but he told me not to.

“I’ll take care of you.” He drops to his knees, burying his face between my thighs. With only a few swipes of his tongue, I’m already coming. I’d be embarrassed if I wasn’t crying out his name in pure pleasure. I’m sure he can sense how inexperienced I am. He’s barely touched me, and I’m already orgasming.

Not that it stops him. His mouth devours me, drinking down my release only to push me toward another. “Crane, I oh.”

“Give it to me. It’s mine,” he growls before he sucks my clit into his mouth. His tongue strokes me back and forth. I cry out again, my hips thrusting forward. Crane grabs my hips, keeping me in place so I don’t fall off the desk.

My eyes flutter open as I start to come back down to earth. Crane slips my panties back into place before he rises to his feet and then rights my skirt.

“That was...” I trail off, not having words to describe how good it was.

“Perfection,” he responds before kissing me again. He groans into my mouth when I deepen the kiss. I want more. I want to give him the same pleasure he just gave me.

“Is it too late to—” I jerk back from the kiss and turn my head to see Martha standing in the doorway of the library. We closed twenty minutes ago, but I hadn’t locked the door. I never do until I leave.

“It’s fine,” I tell her. Crane grabs my hips, lifting me off the counter to put me on my feet. My eyes catch the screen of his phone as he snags it off the counter where he’d dropped it. Six missed calls show on the screen.

Six? Someone must really need to get a hold of him. My first thought goes to another woman. Someone from back in the city. Maybe not a girlfriend but a fling or booty call.

“I just wanted to grab one of these.” Martha shakes me from my thoughts. She goes straight for the romance holiday book table and snags up two. I proceed to check her out as quickly as I can. The entire time, she eyes up Crane, who is clicking away on his phone now. Who the heck is he talking to?

Martha slips back out of the library, and I’m sure she’s going to let a handful of people know that she walked in on Crane and me kissing. Luckily, that’s all she saw. A few seconds sooner and she really would have had something to talk about. I peek over at Crane. I’d let him go down on me right here on the front desk in the library.

What’s gotten into me? Crane, that’s what. A man I know very little about. One I think only grows more mysterious as I grow closer to him. How is that possible? I don’t know, but it is.

CRANE

*M*y phone buzzes again, but I ignore it as I open the car door for Liza.

She slides in, and I lean down and fasten her seat belt.

Once I'm in the driver's seat, I head toward the diner.

"We're going to dinner?" she asks.

"I heard your stomach growl." I reach out and take her hand.

She looks straight ahead and worries at her bottom lip.

"What is it, babe?" I squeeze her fingers.

"Nothing. I just ..."

"You can tell me." I hope she doesn't feel like I took things too far in the library. Hell, I want to take them a lot further. She's irresistible, and I still have a trace of her on my tongue.

"I, um, saw you had a lot of missed calls." She glances at me from the corner of her eye. "And you were talking to someone."

"That's just work."

"It was?" She turns all the way toward me now.

"Yeah. I did sort of take the day off unannounced." I shrug.

"Oh, that makes sense." Her face brightens. "Actually, that makes *total* sense."

"Who did you think it was?"

She looks away again. “I didn’t know if maybe you were seeing someone before you came to Snow Hills.”

“No.”

“You weren’t seeing anyone?”

“The only person I’m seeing is you, Liza. I’m not interested in anyone else.”

She beams at that, and my tension begins to ease. I can’t exactly give her details on why Mayor McGovern was blowing up my phone, but I’m not lying to her. He was calling me incessantly as part of my work. The asshole is impatient for news about how Snow Hills pulls off the win every year. But I don’t have anything for him. Not yet. Liza doesn’t even know who the judges are.

“Does your mom talk to the Spirit of the Season judges?” I ask.

She cocks her head to the side. “Not that I know of. Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious. It seems like a big deal to win it, especially three years in a row. I bet she’s really proud of your work and would love to brag about you to the judges.”

“It’s silly, really. I want to decorate because I want everyone in town to feel loved and warmed by the holidays. Like I said, I’m not into competition.” She sighs. “I wouldn’t care if we didn’t enter the competition at all.”

“But your mother insists?” I ask as we pull into the diner parking lot.

“Not ‘insists.’ I mean, we pay the entry fee every year, but if I told her I didn’t want to do it, I’m certain she’d sit it out for me. But it makes her happy, and plenty of the residents love being winners, too. I wouldn’t want to take that away from them.”

I nod. “Makes sense.” The more I get to know Liza, the more I’m certain there’s no way in hell she’s cheating to win. But that doesn’t mean someone else in town wouldn’t do it.

“You sure are interested in the competition. I’m beginning to think you might be as cutthroat as Mom and Eve when it comes to winning.”

“I’m competitive when it comes to things I want.” I bring her hand to my lips and kiss it. “Now, let’s get some food in you. Then I’ll take you home.” I jog around and open her door right as a rust bucket truck pulls up nearby. Ladders are haphazardly strapped along the back, and the exhaust pops a few times before the engine dies a rattling death.

“Oh, great.” Liza stands and forces a smile for the man who steps from the truck. “Hey, Mick.”

“Liza.” He gives her a nod, then looks at me. “Evenin’. You two getting dinner?” He glances at the diner. “Me too. Maybe we can all—”

“Actually, I was just picking up an apple pie for our dessert. I’m making dinner for Liza at my place.”

“That so?” Mick tucks a greasy strand of dark hair behind his ear.

I glance at Liza.

“Yes. I’ll just, um. I’ll go in and get the pie.”

“Tell them to put it on my tab.” I watch as Liza makes a hasty escape.

Mick walks up to me as my phone buzzes again. “You gonna get that?”

“You do a good job with the lights.” I glance at the nearest power pole with the old-timey Santa at the top. “I’m sure Liza appreciates your hard work, especially when the town wins the Spirit of the Season award.”

“She appreciates me, but not as much as I appreciate her.” He glares up at me.

I step to him. “I suggest you keep your appreciation to yourself.”

“That’s how it’s going to be, is it?”

“That’s how it *is*.” I try to size him up, to figure out if he’s the one who broke into the library, but he gives nothing away.

“We’ll see.” He turns and goes back to his truck, starting it up as Liza comes out with a pie in her hand.

“What happened?” She waves at Mick as he backs out in a hurry.

“Nothing. Let’s go.” I help her into the car, then wrack my brain about what I can possibly make for dinner.

When I get back into the car, I sit for a moment.

“Crane?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s gone now. We can go in and eat at the diner.”

I catch her trying to hide a laugh behind her hand.

“What? I can cook.” Now that’s a bald-faced lie.

“You were just doing a thousand-yard stare, and I’m pretty sure it’s because you have nothing to eat at your place.” She laughs. “Come on, let’s go in. ... Wait.” She holds a finger up.

“What?”

“Just so you know. I’m keeping the pie.”

“That’s fine.” I lean over and kiss her. “I’ve already had dessert.”

“**S**orry,” I tell Eve as she drives us back to town. I’m clicking away on my phone, responding to a few emails.

Okay, I might be checking to see if Crane texted me, but he hasn’t. We’ve gotten into a bit of a routine with him taking me to work in the mornings. He comes inside every day and lets my mom and Eve pepper him questions. Lately, he’s even been asking some of his own. I’m not sure if he’s truly interested or just trying to be friendly. Either way, I adore that he’s making an effort with them. I think they’re enjoying it as well.

“He text you?”

“I was responding to an email about the stage that has to be put up.” It’s not a lie. I had responded to that email. Then I checked my text messages again. Maybe I checked them before I emailed, too. But who’s keeping track?

Gah, what is wrong with me? Why am I obsessing over this? We’d done our normal routine this morning, but I’d taken the afternoon off to go into the city with Eve. Cora and Libby are watching over the library for me. They’re two seniors from the high school that always help out when I need spots filled.

“Liza, I know you better than you know yourself.”

“Fine,” I huff. “He hasn’t texted me. Not a single message all afternoon.” I drop my phone and fold my arms over my chest. I know I’m pouting, but I don’t care. Only Eve can see me.

“Is there something more going on? He’s probably busy working.”

“Whose side are you on?” I glare at her.

“Fuck that motherfucker. Let’s slash his tires.” I burst into laughter. She totally would do something like that if I asked her. “After he sees that dress you got for the bachelorette auction, you’ll never be free of that man.”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into that.” I glance to the back seat where the garment bag containing the dress is hanging.

“You’re going to bring that money in. One look at you in that dress, and the men will be emptying their pockets.” She gets an evil smirk on her face.

“Funny how you hated all the dresses when it came to picking one out for yourself. I don’t care if it’s in jeans, you’re getting up on that stage too. This is all your doing.”

“I have some dresses stuffed in the back of my closet from when I did volunteer campaign crap in college.” She does dress nice every day for work in slacks and a blouse. “So? Are you going to tell me why you’re on edge?”

“I’m not on edge.”

She flicks a glance my way as we pass the sign that says *Welcome to Snow Hills*.

“Since that one day we haven’t really done anything past some kissing. What if he’s losing interest or realized how inexperienced I am?”

“The man takes you to work every day.”

“He’s nice and worries about the ice.”

Now it’s Eve that snorts a laugh. “The man wants to fuck you. I promise you that.”

“You’re so crude.” I shake my head but smile.

“I wasn’t the one that was getting eaten out on the library front desk.”

“Hey!” I smack her arm.

“Naughty girl.” She wiggles her brows.

“Eve.”

“Honestly, he seems like a good one. He’s sweet to you and protective. I’ve noticed. I think he might respect you.”

“Maybe he could disrespect me a little bit.” I put my hand over my mouth.

Eve howls with laughter. Did I really say that?

“I kind of love this side he’s brought out of you. I mean, I always knew it was in you. We read the same books, but it’s nice to see you acting on those desires. And if you ask me, this is good. You see that he can be a gentleman. It’s just behind closed doors you two get to play another game.”

“Well we’re behind closed doors all the time, and he only gives me quick kisses.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

“It’s only been a few days,” she reminds me.

“You’re right.” I sigh. I’m reading into everything way too much. It’s just at times I swear he puts a bit of a wall up, but maybe I’m misreading things. I’m so new to this and the things he makes me feel. “He’s working. I’m sure he has to make up time.” Guilt starts to fill me.

“Now what are you making up in your head over there?”

“Nothing,” I say too quickly.

“Well, Krampus even adores him, and that’s saying something.” Now she’s the one pouting.

We pull up to the front of my place. “I would say thanks for helping me find a dress, but I’m not sure how I feel about it still.”

“You’re going to be the gold star.”

“You’re just trying to get the attention off you and on to me.”

“You do handle it better. I bite.” She chomps her teeth.

“Well don’t bite whoever wins the date with you.”

“He could be into it.”

“I can’t with you.” I lean over and give her a hug before I get out and grab my bag. My gaze flicks over toward Crane’s door. He told me to come over when I got home, but I should leave the man be and let him get his work done. I still have a few boxes of decorations to unpack, but they’re for the inside of my house. I suppose I’ve been a bit distracted too.

I unlock my door, slipping inside. I drop my bags by the front door but hang the garment bag on one of the coat hooks. Krampus pokes his head out from his holiday cat house.

“Yes, I’m home early.” I walk over and give him a few pets before he tucks himself back inside. It’s naptime for him. That doesn’t sound half bad.

I toe off my shoes and take my coat off, dropping it on the chair that sits adjacent to the sofa before I let myself fall onto it. I grab the fuzzy holiday quilt the ladies from the sewing club made for me the first year I’d won the Spirit competition for Snow Hills.

I grab the remote and turn on one of my favorite holiday movies: *The Family Stone*. I think I love it so much because of how big and close the family is. I’m close to my mom and dad, but I was an only child. I love the idea of having a family as big as theirs. Hopefully one day it will be in the cards for me.

I snuggle into the quilt as the movie starts. I barely make it past the opening scene before sleep pulls me under.

CRANE

*T*inker with the last set of lights, looping them along the back edge of the roof. Wrapping them all the way around seems like overkill, but that's what Liza does, so that's what I'll do. I want her to be proud of my display. Which is nuts, of course. A month ago, I wouldn't have been caught dead on a ladder putting up Christmas lights, but here I am. And not only that, I want the lights to be impressive.

Liza has done that to me. Made me into a different version of myself. But how much of it is the real me? I'm beginning to suspect the man I am when I'm with her—that's the real me. She makes me better in ways I never imagined.

Clipping the end of the strand onto the edge of the gutter, I lean back and admire my handiwork. The whole house should be nice and bright, though it won't take away from Liza's house next door. Her lights are multicolored and extra festive. Mine are a warm white that will complement her house perfectly. At least that's what I'm hoping for.

I climb down the ladder and stow it in the shed behind my house. Once I get to the front, I sort out the extension cords, then plug them in. The house lights up, sending a warm glow through the chilly air. I've been working at it all afternoon, so I'm pretty proud of myself.

My phone vibrates, which dampens my mood immediately. I know who it is before I answer.

“What?”

“Where is the dirt I ordered?” Mayor McGovern snaps. “You’ve been there plenty long enough to have what I’m after.”

“I already told you I’ve found absolutely nothing to indicate Snow Hills is cheating.” I sigh. I’m getting tired of this blowhard.

“You need to keep digging.”

“I am. I’ve spoken with half the town, and no one even knows who’s on the Spirit of the Season committee.”

“That’s bullshit!”

I grit my teeth. “I think you need to accept that you’re beaten, Mayor. The past three years, you’ve lost fair and square. There’s no evidence of anything underhanded going on here. If there was, I would’ve sniffed it out. Like knows like, after all.”

He bellows something unintelligible, and then I hear the sound of something crashing.

I don’t know if the easy money is worth his bullshit anymore. It’s not like I’m hurting for cash. I just always like to have more of it. But this asshole is wearing me out with his tantrums.

“Calm the fuck down.” I stomp up to my porch and sit down as one of the townspeople drives by and waves. I wave back.

“I’m calm!” He huffs and puffs a few times, then clears his throat. “I’m calm.”

“I did the job. I didn’t find any dirt. I expect the rest of my payment wired into my account by the morning.”

“Wait!”

“Mayor, I don’t want to go into detail about what will happen if you don’t come through on your end of the deal.”

“I’ll send you the money,” he says quickly. “But I’ll pay double if you do one more thing for me.”

That perks me up. I was already overcharging this bozo. Double would be a king’s ransom. “What thing?”

“You’re part of the town now, right? They trust you. That means you’re in the perfect position to do a little work to ensure Winter Heights takes home the trophy this year.”

I narrow my eyes. “What kind of work?”

“Nothing big, of course. Nothing that would draw attention. But I hear they’re putting on some sort of a bachelorette auction in a few days. They want to donate the money they raise to charity to make themselves look like they give a damn about anything other than winning the cup, though of course I know it’s all a sham.”

“Of course.” I roll my eyes.

“All you need to do is take the money they raise.”

“I don’t think stealing charity money is going to be the win you think it is, Mayor.”

“You wouldn’t be keeping it. After you took it, you could plant it at Mayor Grable’s house, then take some incriminating photos. I can tell you the *Winter Heights Gazette* would be more than happy to break that story of town embezzlement wide open, and there’s no way the Spirit of the Season committee could ignore it.”

I glance at Liza’s house. She’s home now, her front curtains lit from the TV inside. Double the money is a lot. More than enough for me to spirit her off to an island paradise for a month to keep her away from this dirty business. Her mother’s a grown woman who can handle herself. Liza doesn’t need to be involved.

I’m fully aware that I’m lying to myself. This scandal would ruin Liza’s mother and hurt Liza in the process. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Well?” he asks.

“Can’t do it.”

“What? Why not?”

“Double isn’t enough for that sort of heat. You want me to steal charity money and frame the mayor.” I wait, wondering

when he's going to slam his cell phone on his desk and end the call.

He sighs.

I keep waiting.

"Triple," he bites out.

Holy shit. This is real money. I can only imagine he's pulling it from the city's coffers, because there's no way he's got that sort of cash on hand.

I glance at Liza's house again. *Triple.*

"Take it or leave it, but I won't be making this offer again," Mayor McGovern says.

Maybe there's a way for me to get the money and keep Liza out of the mess. The island idea is promising, but surely I can figure out a way to protect her while also doing this one last bit of dirty work.

"Done." The word's out of my mouth before I can stop it.

"Good. I expect those photos the day after the auction. I'll be waiting." He ends the call.

I stand and run a hand through my hair. "Fuck."

Something rubs against my leg. I look down to find Krampus weaving between my ankles. "What the ..." When I look up, I find Liza's front door ajar. "Come on, big guy." I scoop him up and carry him to her porch.

Pushing the door open, I see Liza asleep on the couch, the TV set to a Christmas movie.

This is unacceptable. Liza left her door unlocked—maybe even open, unless Krampus is clever enough to open it on his own, which he may well be—and fell asleep. Anyone could've busted in here. What the fuck?

I stalk toward her, fire in my blood.

She sleeps soundly.

I can't let this stand. I grab her arm.

She yelps as I pull her up from the couch. When I sit in the chair beside it and put her in my lap, her eyes widen. “How did you get—”

“You left the door open, babe.”

“I did?” She glances toward it. “I must’ve forgotten when I came home. I was—”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Yes.”

“You’ll have to be punished.” My cock goes hard as an iron rod as the words leave my lips.

“Wh-what?”

“You heard me.”

She swallows hard as I pull the throw blanket off her, then ease her down onto my knees. “Crane?”

“Just take it, babe. You brought this on yourself.” I lift her hips so her ass is in the air, then pull her skirt up.

When I peel her panties down her legs, she gasps.

“Count for me.”

“Count wh—ow!” She yells as I bring my hand down on her ass, the slap so goddamn satisfying.

“That’s one.”

“One!” she cries, then wriggles.

I ease my hand along her ass and then lower. “Fuck!” She’s wet for me, her pussy almost dripping. “I knew you’d understand.”

I rear back and hit her again, her ass turning the most beautiful shade of red as Christmas music plays on the TV and the lights outside twinkle.

“Two!”

What the hell is going on? One second I'd been dreaming about Crane and the next I'm draped over his lap with my panties yanked down my thighs, my skirt flipped up with him spanking me. Another smack sounds through the room. My sex clenches with each strike.

"Four!" I shout. I don't think I could not count them at this point even if I *should* be resisting. I'm not, though. I'm actually lifting my ass higher and silently begging for another. Why does this feel so damn good? I never understood the appeal when I read it in some of my romance novels, but with each slap, the sensation shoots to my clit, which is now throbbing.

"Five!" I squeal and try to push my thighs together. I need some kind of pressure.

"Bad girl. You keep those thighs spread," he orders as another smack lands on my backside.

"Crane, I'm sorry. Please," I beg, needing some relief. His hand rubs the spot that he hit, caressing me gently.

"You should be sorry." His hand slips down my ass and between my spread thighs to cup my sex. "Anyone could have walked in and taken this."

I close my eyes and whimper. He guides one finger along the seam of my lips, barely grazing my clit. Another whimper of need leaves me.

“I’m not sure this is enough punishment. I think you’re enjoying yourself a little too much. My hand is soaked.”

“No!” I shout when he pulls his hand back from between my legs. I turn my head to look over my shoulder at him to watch him lick the wetness from his finger. He lets out a groan as he sucks my taste into his mouth.

“No?” His hand comes down on my ass again. “Are you telling me to stop?”

“Please don’t,” I beg. My whole body aches. My breasts even feel heavy. He grabs one of the holiday throw pillows on my sofa and drops it in front of us. I don’t get a chance to ask what he’s doing. In one quick move, he has me on my knees between his spread thighs. The pillow is soft against my knees, protecting them from the wood floor.

“You beg so sweetly.” He reaches out, cupping my cheek with his hand. His thumb swipes over my lips gently at first before he starts to press it past them.

“Suck.”

I do as I’m told. I watch as Crane’s breathing grows heavy. I suck harder, my eyes dropping to the outline of his hard cock in his pants. “See something else you want to suck on, naughty girl?”

I nod. He pulls his thumb out of my mouth. “I should spank you more for that stunt with your door, but maybe I’ll just show you what someone else might do if they’d found it open.”

If he’s trying to scare me, it’s not working. He goes for the button of his jeans then pulls them down past his hips enough to free his cock. My eyes widen as I watch him stroke himself. His cock is a bit intimidating now that I see it up close. My sex clenches, and I wonder if it would hurt to have him inside of me. Would it be the same kind of pain as my spanking? Would it give me the same sweet ache of pleasure I didn’t know existed?

A bead of cum leaks from the head. I start to reach for him, but he stops me. “No,” he snaps. “Bad girls don’t get to play.”

He digs his hand into my hair, pulling me forward. “Open wide.” He guides me to the head of his cock. I part my lips, taking him into my mouth. “Fuck,” he groans as I take as much of him as I can.

I do the same as I did with his thumb, sucking while hollowing out my cheeks as he guides my head up and down. His hips make shallow thrusts upwards. The ache between my thighs is becoming unbearable. “I bet you can take more.”

I moan my response around his cock. He thrusts deeper into me. His cock hits the back of my throat. “That’s my girl. Swallow me down. Show me how sorry you really are.”

I swear if he keeps talking dirty to me like this, I’m going to come without him even touching me.

Warmth explodes into the back of my throat. I swallow over and over again as my name pours from Crane’s lips like a prayer. Slowly he pulls my head back, his cock slipping free of my mouth. I lick my lips, still tasting him. He releases my hair to pull me up into his lap, his mouth claiming mine in a deep kiss.

His hands grip my ass, pulling me closer as my thighs spread over his. “Crane,” I moan when his bare cock grinds against me.

“I want to feel you come.” He slides me up and down his hard cock, rubbing my clit against him. “Sweater off,” he orders. I pull it over my head without hesitation. “Bra,” he growls out. I reach behind me and unclip it, letting it fall away until I’m in nothing but my skirt that’s bunched up around my waist.

He has full control. His hand grips me tightly to move my body as he wants. I brace my hands behind me on his thighs, thrusting my chest out. His mouth comes down to lock on to one of my nipples. If anyone walked in right now, they’d think we were having sex.

I want to lift higher and let him slip inside me, but I can’t. There is no way I can move anywhere until he lets me. There is something about that thought that throws me over the edge. The orgasm explodes out of me. It goes on and on as he keeps

moving me up and down, his cock rubbing my clit just where I need it.

“Liza,” he groans against my breast. I drop my head to watch him come again. His release spills between us, dripping down my sex, marking me with his cum.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest and burying his face in my neck. The only sound in the room is our heavy breathing.

“Crane?” I whisper.

“It was too much.” I’m not sure it’s a question. Does he think he was too rough with me? I loved every second of it, and I want him to know that. I don’t want to go days again without his touch.

“This is only going to make me be naughtier.”

His hold on me tightens. “Leave the door open again, and I won’t let you come.”

I gasp. That would be pure torture.

“I’ll be a good girl and lock the door,” I promise, knowing I can come up with other ways to be a bad girl.

His naughty girl.

CRANE

Liza's mother smiles at me. "I know you had a busy night, Crane."

Liza spews coffee onto Eve's desk.

"Hey!" Eve throws her hands up. "What the hell, Liza?"

"Sorry! I'm sorry." She tries to wipe some of it off a few of the papers.

Mayor Grable gives her daughter a weird look. "I was just saying Crane's house looks nice with the lights on it. He must've worked on it last night, because I passed by, and it was sparkling brightly."

"Oh." Liza swallows hard and keeps trying to clean Eve's papers. "Yeah."

I can't help my smirk. Liza is so fucking cute when she's embarrassed.

"I got them up right at dusk. I'm glad you like them."

"I do, but I'm not sure what's going on with my daughter." She turns to Liza. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," Liza says hastily.

"I have a few ideas of what could've gotten into her." Eve swats Liza's hand away. "I'll clean it up. Don't worry."

Liza's mother narrows her eyes at her daughter, but she seems to decide against pressing the issue. Instead, she says, "I think

everything is in order for the bachelorette auction tomorrow night. The town is abuzz about it.”

“I knew it was a great idea.” Eve dabs at a few coffee spots on her desk. “I’m smart like that.”

“I expect you’ll be bidding on Liza?” she asks me.

“She’s as good as sold.” I pull her to my side so she’ll stop trying to clean up the coffee.

“Good to hear, but I warn you. She’ll fetch a high price. Plenty of men in this town have their eye on her.”

“Mom!” Liza shakes her head. “Stop.”

“What? I’m just telling the truth.” She shrugs.

“Okay, great chat. Time for me to get to the library.”

“Fine. Have a good day, honey.” Her mom waves us out, and Eve gives me a sly look. I think she knows exactly what had Liza spewing coffee all over her desk, and it wasn’t my Christmas lights.

“Like the inquisition in there!” Liza wipes a hand across her brow. “Right?”

“Sure.” I keep her tucked under my arm as we walk down the main corridor.

“Liza, hey.” Carlton, the mayor’s aide, walks past, his arms full of notebooks. “We’ve got all the town square decorations underway, though I do need to go over a few things with you.”

“Okay. I can do it tonight or after the auction.”

“After the auction is fine.” He gives me a smile. “Nice to see you again, Crane.”

“Good to see you, too, Carlton.”

He keeps going. “Catch you two later.”

“Bye,” Liza calls as she hurries me out the town hall. She whirls as soon as we get outside. “Oh my God. I really thought she was talking about you and me!” She covers her face with her hands.

I laugh and pull her to my chest. “How would she have any idea about that?”

“I don’t knooooow.” She groans. “I just panicked.”

“I noticed. It was adorable.”

“Tell that to Eve. She’ll be cleaning my coffee off her desk all day.”

“I think she was happy for the entertainment.” I kiss her crown. “Don’t worry.”

She takes a deep breath and lets it out. “Okay. I just need to move on, right?”

“Right. I’ll walk you to the library.”

“Yes. Good plan.” She looks up, and I drop a kiss on her lips.

“I think there might be an ordinance prohibiting this sort of display, but I’d have to look it up to be sure.” The sheriff stands at the bottom of the steps and looks up at us.

“Oh, hey, Clark. We were just leaving.”

He smiles, but it seems more than a little forced. “I was only messing with you, Liza.”

I take her hand, and we walk down the steps.

“I guess this means you’re sticking around, Crane?” he asks when we get to the bottom.

“Looks like it.” I squeeze Liza’s hand.

“Good to know.” He nods. “Best get to the library. The temperature’s dropping by the hour. Looks like it’s setting up for a snowstorm here soon.”

“I love it when the town gets covered in snow.” Liza beams. “It’s so pretty, especially when the lights are all up.”

“The square is already coming together. It’ll be nice, as long as the power doesn’t go out from the storm.” He looks up the stairs toward City Hall. “I’m off to a meeting with your mom. See you tomorrow night.”

“You’re going to bid on the auction?” she asks.

“That’s my intention.”

“If you want to win Eve, you’ll need to bring big money,” Liza teases.

The sheriff tips his hat to her. “I’ll be bringing my cash. Don’t you worry.” Then he shoots me a look that tells me he has zero intentions of bidding on Eve. His sights are set on my girl. I want to crush his skull between my hands, to do a goddamn Riverdance on his dead body. Instead, I just give him a stern nod.

He walks away as I escort Liza down the street.

“You realize he has a crush on you, right?” I ask.

“Me?” She shoots me a look of disbelief. “No.”

“Yes.”

“Clark is like a brother to me. I’ve known him all my life.”

“That doesn’t mean he sees you like a sister.”

“I’m not interested.” She shrugs.

I grab her and spin her around before pinning her to the wall beside the drugstore. “I know you aren’t interested.” I kiss her hard, probably too hard, but the jealousy that rises in me demands I mark her as my own. “You’re mine, Liza.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me back, her body molding to mine as I slip my tongue inside her mouth. She moans, and I grip her waist, pulling her to me so she can feel how hard she makes me. I want to fuck her against the wall. Let’s see what ordinance violation Sheriff Dickhead can find for *that*.

Her fingers tangle in my hair, and she spreads her legs, letting me put my knee between her thighs. That’s when I feel her heat. Fuck, she’s so warm, and I know I’d slide right in. Just the thought makes me groan.

I have to pull back. I don’t want to, but Liza isn’t the kind of girl who fucks her boyfriend against a wall on Main Street. So I break the kiss and back up a step.

She looks up at me with dazed eyes. “That was ...”

“Let’s go.” I take her arm and ease her back onto the sidewalk.
“It’s too cold out here for you.”

“I’m perfectly warm.” She leans against me as we walk. “Hot, in fact.”

“I know you are. I want to taste that heat again.”

She shudders and leans even more into me. “I want that, too,” she whispers.

When we get to the library, her car is out front in its usual spot, but the driver’s side window has been busted out.

“Crane.” She slows her pace.

“Go to the library door and stay there. Don’t go in until I come up.” I look around, but there’s no one on the street.

I ease up to the car. It’s empty, but I can see the wetness on the steering wheel. Some sick fuck put his cum there, and recently too, from the look of it.

“I don’t have anything in there. No money or valuables. It’s dumb for someone to break my window,” she calls.

I agree. And when I find the dumbfuck who’s stalking my girl, I’m going to gut him.

“*W*ere you not going to tell me about your busted window?” Eve asks me. I start to answer her, but she stops me. “I said don’t move your mouth.”

I glare at her but keep my lips parted as she applies my lip stain.

“Okay.” She pulls back, inspecting her work. She talked me into letting her do my makeup for the auction. I agreed because I knew it would keep her busy and hope it will stop her from asking me too many questions. I should have known better.

“I forgot?”

“You forgot that someone broke your car window?”

I shrug. “There’s a lot going on. Besides, Crane took it to get repaired for me, and he drives me everywhere these days, so it slipped my mind.” It’s the final countdown to the holiday party. On top of getting everything pulled together, I also have to get all dolled up for this freaking auction.

“Is there anything else you haven’t told me?”

I think for a second. I’d told her some of the things Crane and I have done but not all the details. It’s not that I’m too shy to share with Eve. I know she’d never judge me, but for some reason, I love the idea of the dirty things Crane and I do together being our little secret. I don’t want to share the play by play with anyone.

“Oh, the library!” I remember telling her the story. “He redid all the decorations.” I’m smiling so big my cheeks are starting to hurt. Crane is too good to be true. The man is sweet and sexy with a dash of badass. Okay, more like a whole scoop of badass.

“Hold on. You’re saying not only was your place of work broken into but also your car window was broken? Do I have that straight?” Her face is dead serious now. “Two crimes involving you.”

“Oh.” I think for a moment. She’s right. “It could have been a coincidence. Or maybe it was just some kids who broke my window. I mean, I’ve left my car out there for days on end at this point.”

Eve shakes her head. “Did you report this?”

I cringe at her question, knowing she’s not going to like my answer.

“Liza!” she snaps.

“No, but Crane knows, and he’s in security.” The logic is sound to me. “What’s Clark really going to do?”

“It’s not about him doing something. It’s about there being a record. What if you have some angry stalker?”

I snort a laugh because she’s being ridiculous. “No one is going to stalk me.”

“I love your innocence, Liza. I really do. It’s one of the most endearing things about you, but this isn’t okay. You need to get an alarm installed in your house. You need to protect yourself. Have you ever shot a gun before? We’ll get you some mace for now. You need to be prepared.”

“Slow down.” She’s being a mini-Crane right now. It suddenly dawns on me now why he was so pissed about me not locking my door. He must be thinking along the same lines as Eve. That the two break-ins weren’t random. That someone is targeting me specifically. It explains why he insisted on sleeping over the last two nights. Not that I minded in the least. “Is this why Crane has been all over me?”

“He *is* your shadow. I never see you without him unless you’re at the library working, and there you’re surrounded by people, so he’d know you’re safe.”

“I don’t know if that’s sweet or a blow to my ego.” I huff. That’s why he spent the night. Damn it. I knew things were progressing fast with us, but I hadn’t cared. I’m thinking now it’s not what I thought after all.

“The man is into you. He’s so worried about something happening to you he’s up your ass all the time.”

“Good point.” I stand from my chair. My eyes flick to the dress I’m supposed to wear tonight.

“People are arriving.” My mom pokes her head into the back room Eve and I are using to change and get ready. I’ve been here all day. Crane was even here up until an hour ago helping me set things up before he ran home to shower. That was after Eve showed up. I’m sure he would still be here if I were alone. Do they really think someone is targeting me?

“We’ll be right out,” I tell my mom.

“You both look so beautiful,” she says before slipping back out of the room.

“Do not tell her about this tonight.” I point my finger at Eve. Her lips purse. “I don’t want her to worry.”

“Fine, but this isn’t over.”

“If someone *is* stalking me—and that’s a big ‘if’—why would they do mean things? Shouldn’t they be sending flowers or candy if they’re trying to get my attention? This is the opposite.”

“You’re right. This person is pissed, and you know why?”

“No.” How would I? It hadn’t dawned on me until now that I was being targeted.

“Because you’ve got yourself a boyfriend. This all started when Crane entered the picture.”

“A boyfriend?” I smile, loving the sound of that. Not that Crane is a boy, but still. It implies he’s mine.

“Focus.” She snaps her fingers in front of my face.

“You’re right. There’s a holiday party to be had.” I start to wiggle out of my clothes to put the dress on. Eve does the same.

“All I’m saying is this person is clearly pissed that someone has taken you off the market.”

“But that would mean it’s someone from here, and everyone from Snow Hills is sweet. I’ve known most of these people the majority of my life.”

“Right,” Eve says dryly. I turn so she can zip me up into the gold dress that fits me like a glove.

“This isn’t fair. I stand out like a freaking bright star, and you’re wearing a black dress.” At least hers fits her snugly too.

“You *are* the star of this whole town, Liza.”

I slip into my heels before I step in front of the mirror to get a full look at myself. “Oh my snowflakes,” I say when I see myself.

Eve comes to stand behind me. She towers over me in the mirror.

““Oh snowflakes”? I think it’s more like ‘Oh, I’m losing my virginity tonight.’”

“Eve!” I shout.

“What? You thought it too.”

“Maybe a little,” I admit, my face warming.

Two nights Crane and I shared a bed, and he hasn’t tried to have sex with me. We’ve done other things but not that. It’s because of that I have a sliver of doubt that he’s not as into me as I think, and he’s more protecting me than anything. He’s a good man. I’m sure he’d do that for anyone he thought was in danger. Not the sharing their bed part but the protecting them.

“Come on. Let’s go give everyone a look at what they’re bidding on.” She sighs.

“This was your idea,” I remind her.

“That was before.” She hooks her arm with mine, leading me out of the back and toward the party. My eyes search the room for Crane. Half the town is already here. I pull out my phone and check the time and text him.

I try not to fidget in my dress as Eve and I make our way slowly around the room talking to different people. Everyone is commenting not only on my dress but also the decorations. I think they’ve turned out the best they ever have.

“Crane did all these,” I tell Clark, motioning toward the display over the desserts.

“And where is Crane?” he asks.

“We’re wondering the same thing,” Eve mutters under her breath.

“He ran home to change. He spent all day helping me.” I rush to his defense. He’s brand new to this town and has helped so much.

“Auction is at seven.” Clark taps his watch. “Only five minutes to go.”

“Yeah, we should go get all the ladies in the back and roll this thing out,” Eve says, pulling me away from Clark. “He’s on my suspect list,” she whispers. “He kept looking down your dress.”

“What?” I glance down at my boobs. I barely have a sliver of cleavage showing.

“You shouldn’t report it to him now that I’m thinking on it.”

“I think your imagination is getting out of control,” I whisper back to her as all the ladies start filing into the back. Eve shakes her head that she doesn’t think she’s getting a bit carried away.

I check my phone again as my mom takes the stage to get this rolling. I have no response from Crane still. What if he doesn’t show?

What if this stalker is the person that ends up winning me?

CRANE

*M*y copied key works on the mayor's office, no problem. I slip it into my pocket and head down the hall, Mayor Grable's voice coming through on the loudspeaker from the presentation room.

Once the auction is over, all I'll have to do is wait around for her to stash the funds for safekeeping, take them, then get into her office. After that, I can stage the money and take a few photos, then leave and send the dirt to Mayor McGovern. Easy.

I stride into the presentation hall and take a seat.

"Hey, ready to bid?" Carlton sits next to me. "This is going to be prime entertainment." He smiles.

"I've brought my money clip, if that's what you mean."

He nods. "All right. More money for charity is always a good thing."

It seems like the entire town is here to watch this little spectacle, not to mention a large contingent of men. Mick is here looking uncharacteristically clean and groomed, and so is the sheriff, Clark. I know they have their eye on my girl, but Liza is going home with me tonight. No one else.

The mayor smiles. "This was a wonderful idea, and I couldn't be happier to serve as your auctioneer for the evening."

The crowd applauds.

“We have a great roster for this evening, and of course, all the proceeds go to charity. Not to be a stickler, but all winners must pay in cash *before* they’re allowed to escort their bachelorette for the evening. Also, we want all participants to have fun in this family friendly event, so remember that you’re buying the bachelorette’s good will for the evening, nothing else. But I’m certain that doesn’t need to be said. So without further ado, let’s get to the bidding!” She claps as the curtain opens behind her, revealing a row of women.

Not that I look at anyone except the stunner in the gold dress that clings to her like a second skin. I feel like a bomb goes off inside me the moment I set eyes on her, on the way she gives a demure smile and stands primly in her vixen’s dress.

“Holy shit.” I clench my fists and glare around the room, well aware that every man in this place is staring at what’s mine. That’s when my ears start to ring, and before I know it, I’m on my feet.

The mayor looks down at me, her eyes widening as I climb to the stage and stalk toward Liza.

Liza’s eyebrows rise in alarm as I go right to her, bend over, and throw her over my shoulder, then carry her off the stage.

My ears are still ringing, my heart pounding, my palms going sweaty as I carry her backstage and to the first room I see. Once inside, I claim her mouth in a rough kiss, my body needing hers in ways too primal for me to understand.

She grips my shoulders, whatever protests might’ve been on her lips dying away. I’m starved for her, for all of her, and I’ve been trying so hard to keep my cock out of her. Guilt had me in a goddamn twist, but all that fell away the second I saw her up there in the spotlight, her body a tantalizing monument to lust and beauty.

“I couldn’t let anyone else see you.” I don’t even recognize my voice as I reach between her legs and cup her hot cunt. “Because this is mine. Say it.”

She whimpers, her breaths coming hard and fast as she looks up at me.

“Say it.” I run my fingers along the seam of her panties.

“It’s yours.”

“What’s mine, Liza? What belongs to me?” I slide her panties to the side and ease a finger inside her wet heat.

“M-my ... my pussy.”

“Good girl.” I kiss her hard again, tasting every bit of her as I work two fingers inside her. There’s no holding back anymore, not when I need to mark her as mine. No other man will ever know the sweetness between her legs. Only me.

Twisting my fingers, I yank her panties away and stuff them into my pocket, then reach for my belt, undoing it, then my pants.

Her mother’s voice hums in the background, taking bids on the other bachelorettes. That’s fine. But no one is going to bid on my woman. Not fucking happening.

“What are you—”

“I’m going to fuck you, Liza. Right here against this door. Tell me now if you don’t want it, because if you don’t, I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop.” I rub her clit, pinching it between my fingers.

She gasps, her back arching. “I want it.”

That’s all I needed to hear. I position my cock at her entrance, then take her mouth as I push all the way inside her. She squeals, and I swallow the sound, then wait for her to adjust. I don’t want to hurt her, but I’m going to make her feel so fucking good that any bit of pain will be a distant memory. She feels so good, so goddamn perfect, that I wonder if I can last. I have to, because I won’t come until she is. I want to feel her squeezing my cock.

I pull back and press my forehead to hers. “You all right?”

“Yes,” she breathes. “But I need more.” She moves her hips.

I grip her ass harder and pin her against the door as I start to rock into her. Before long, I’m pistoning deep inside her as she grips my face, kissing me as I give her everything I have. I’m

too rough, too desperate, too much—but I can't stop. Not now that I'm inside her. With a yank, I pull down the top of her dress and cup one of her tits. Her nipple is hard, and I twist it the way she likes. Her moan spurs me on faster, my need to claim her like a whip at my back.

A hard knock sounds on the door.

Her eyes pop open.

I slow down but keep fucking her. "What?" I bark.

"This is the sheriff. I'm going to need you to unhand Miss Grable."

I lick my thumb and place it on her clit, rubbing it as I pulse inside her.

She throws her head back.

"Miss Grable is busy at the moment." I swirl my thumb in a circle, then push my hips forward to pin her hard against the door. I put my other hand over her mouth.

"Mr. Douglas, you can't just take a woman off the stage like that. I need to know she's all right."

"She's more than all right." I speed up my pace, staying deep inside her as I rub her clit.

Her legs start to shake, her body getting even tighter, squeezing my cock until I feel like my balls are going to disobey me and lose it inside her.

He knocks again. "Open up. I'm serious."

I thrust hard into her, then stroke her clit faster. She comes, and I press on her lips, keeping her quiet as I watch her shatter. My cock kicks, and I release, my groan low in my throat as I coat her with my seed. Fuck, I've never felt anything this good. I come so hard I wonder if I'm going to pass out, but I stay standing and keep rubbing her clit as she shudders, her cunt soaked and her body going lax.

"I said open up!" Clark yells.

I remove my hand from her mouth and kiss her, then lower her to her feet. She looks up at me, her eyes dazed, and I

straighten her dress then tuck my cock back in.

When I open the door, Clark is glaring at me with nothing short of hatred.

“What can I do for you, Sheriff?” I wrap my arm around Liza’s waist.

His gaze goes to her, and I want to punch him in the fucking face until he doesn’t get up again, but I stay where I am. “You okay?”

“I, I um.” Her lipstick is smeared, her eyes glassy, her dress wrinkled—and she looks fucking perfect. “I’m good.”

“You sure?” He gives me a narrow-eyed glance. “He hurt you?”

“No.” She gets on her tiptoes and kisses me on my cheek. “Everything but. I’m good. Thanks.”

Clark’s glower grows deeper, but he steps back. A sigh leaves him as he turns and walks away down the back hallway, but he doesn’t say anything else.

She looks up at me, then gives me a sexy little smirk. “You were supposed to pay first.”

I break into laughter, a real one that pulls amusement from deep down in my chest. I pick her up and kiss her hard again, my heart full and my head fuzzy. That’s when I remember why I’m here, what I have to do, and what that will mean for Liza and me.

Fuck.

“Don’t think for one second that you’re not paying up. My girl was gonna—” Eve trails off when she gets a good look at Crane and me. Her eyes widen in surprise. “Back it up. Hold on a second here.” Now she’s aimed her attention at me.

“What?” Crane’s hand that’s holding mine tightens. My whole body is buzzing still. Crane storming the stage when he saw me and going all caveman possessive has me falling harder for him. Actually, I think I’m done falling. I’m in love with him.

“You can’t let her go out there looking like that. Oh my God! No wonder Clark was pissed all the way off. You better drive under the speed limit for the rest of your life. Which better be spent in Snow Hills after this.” She waves her hand up and down at me. Thankfully, we’re still in the back hallway, so no one is witnessing this.

“What?” I glance down at myself. Crane pulled my dress back into place. I still feel his release, though. It’s slowly trickling out of me and coating my thighs.

“Clark can fuck all the way off.”

“Crane, everyone already knows she’s yours. She doesn’t need to go out there looking thoroughly fucked.”

“What!” I squeak this time. How the heck does she know what we did?

“You’re with me.” Eve grabs my other hand and tries to pull me back toward the room Crane and I exited moments ago.

“Give me a second.” I squeeze Crane’s hand. He’s not letting me go, and I’m about to become the rope in a tug of war battle between the two of them. With Eve’s competitive nature, I know I need to nip this in the bud before I possibly lose a limb.

“I’ll wait.” He doesn’t look happy about it, but he lets my hand go only to fold his arms over his chest and stand there in the middle of the hallway as Eve pulls me back into the room.

“It smells like sex in here,” Eve says the second the door closes behind us. My face starts to warm. “See? Look at you. You’re blushing, and it’s only me. We need to touch up your makeup and fix your hair or everyone is gonna know what Crane and you did.”

“Is that terrible?” I bite the inside of my cheek.

“Not really.” Eve laughs. “But maybe your mom doesn’t need to see all that.” She motions at me again. I walk over to the mirror in the green room to see what she is talking about.

“Oh, crap.” It does look like I was well fucked. I thought she was just guessing, but there’s a difference in my appearance. It’s not only my hair, makeup, and clothes being a little disheveled, either. I actually look a little different. I have a glow to me or something. Who knew sex would make me look this way?

“Did you two really—”

“Have sex against that door while Clark banged on the other side of it.” I fill in for her.

She bursts into laughter. “I thought he just saw you like this. I didn’t know all that.” She laughs harder.

“It was hot,” I told her.

“Crane storming the stage was something else. It was like it was plucked right out of one of our naughty holiday romance books. I think I actually like him.” She smiles at me in the mirror.

“Well, I’m glad because I think I’m in love with him,” I admit out loud for the first time.

“That’s probably good because that trash can is empty so I’m guessing you didn’t use a condom.”

“Eve!” I hiss. It shouldn’t surprise me in the least that she checked.

“Just sayin’.” She shrugs before spinning me back around to start fixing my hair. In no time, she has me put back together.

“Did everything go well with the rest of the auction?”

“Yeah, I think once some of them realized you weren’t up for grabs, they opened up to bidding on others.”

I roll my eyes. Eve thinks everyone is in love with me.

“Wait! Who bid on you?” Her lips purse at my question. “Who?”

“Marco,” she huffs in irritation.

“Marco as in Marco Marone? He was here?” How the heck did I miss that? Marco is almost twice Eve’s age, but you wouldn’t know that from looking at him.

He moved to this giant cabin that sits right outside of the city limits in the country years back. He only comes to town maybe once a month for supplies. I don’t know what he does out there. If I had to guess, he chops logs all day. He’s got that whole lumberjack style going on. Not that I think he’s trying for any particular style. The man is the definition of not giving a fuck. He barely talks to anyone when he comes to town, only grunting his responses. But it hasn’t gone unnoticed by me that he always stares at Eve.

“Are there any other Marcos around here?” Sarcasm drips from her words.

“You think when you go on this date you can ask about that gnarly scar that cuts through his eyebrow?” The scar only makes him fiercer. With a town that loves to gossip, there have been all kinds of made-up stories of how he got it.

“Seriously?”

“I mean, if anyone has the balls to ask, it’s you.”

“Probably got it wrestling a bear.”

I snort a laugh. "I bet he won."

"Whatever. You're all fixed up. Let's get a drink." She changes the subject. Someone is a bit touchy. I let it go for now. When we step back out into the hallway, Crane is still standing there waiting for us. "You go pay your tab?" She lifts one of her eyebrows at him. I swear she's like a dog with a bone.

"She's not a tab." He pulls me into his side. I know she's only teasing him. A lot of times, Eve pokes at people to see how they respond. It's her way of getting to know them.

"Hope you have enough money for a ring after you pay her bid. I'm going to put her price at top dollar plus a grand." Eve smirks at him before strolling off.

"That was a joke," I rush to tell him.

"It wasn't a joke." Crane's hand slips to my hip, gripping me tightly as he lowers his head for a kiss. "I've got enough money for both," he says before claiming my mouth in a kiss, taking my breath away in more ways than one.

CRANE

The presentation hall is still abuzz when I stride in. Plenty of bachelors seemed to have left lonely, but there are many more chatting with the bachelorettes they've won bids for.

I bypass them and case the table along the back where the mayor sits with Carlton. He has a money pouch in his lap, and from the look of it, there's plenty of cash inside.

I suppose I'm the last one to pay up. I pull my money clip from my back pocket and hand it to Carlton.

He looks up at me, baffled. "How much of this—"

"Just take the whole thing. Winning bid on Liza."

His eyes widen, and he drops the money into the bag.

The mayor levels me with a stare. "Where is she?"

"With Eve, getting a drink."

Her eyes narrow. "She's all right?"

"She's great." I shrug. "I just needed to have a private chat with her."

"About what?" Now the mayor is smirking a little, though I can tell she's trying to keep it under wraps.

"Christmas spirit. You know, that sort of thing."

"She has plenty of that." Carlton zips up the money pouch.

"I gave her a little more."

“Mm-hmmm.” The mayor raises a brow, then holds out her hand to Carlton.

He passes her the pouch. “I’m going to lock this up then ask her myself.”

“By all means.” I back up and bump into Mick.

“Watch it.” He frowns at me.

“It was an accident.” The woman on his arm rubs a hand on his shoulder.

He nods. “Yeah. Guess so.” When he looks at her, his face lights up, the gloom fading.

That’s when I know he’s not the one who’s been stalking Liza. There’s no way someone who’s obsessed with her could ever look at someone else like that. I know from experience.

That leaves one suspect. The sheriff who’s walking straight toward me, his brow wrinkled.

Fuck.

“Did he pay?” he asks the mayor.

She gives him a nod, then leaves with the money pouch under her arm.

“Might I have a word?” He asks it like a question, but it’s clear he’ll escalate if I walk away. I’m thinking about doing just that, but then I think of Liza. The last thing she’d want me to do is start shit with this guy, though I suppose I’ve already done that by fucking her against a door as he listened.

That thought makes me smile. “Sure.”

He steps closer, his voice low. “I don’t appreciate what you did back there with Liza. Not at all. I had people telling me to arrest you. You upset the town—at least the pearl-clutching residents. I don’t like that. I don’t like trouble in my town.”

“I understand.” This isn’t going the way I expected. I was thinking more along the lines of chest-beating and him claiming Liza for himself. Except that’s not what has him concerned at all.

“Do you? Because we didn’t have these kinds of shenanigans until you turned up. I’m going to need your word that you intend to be a law-abiding citizen, one who puts the best interests of this community first.”

“I put Liza first.” I’m not going to lie to him. Not when he needs to know where I stand now that I intend to stay here. Whatever stupid plan Mayor McGovern cooked up—it’s over. I’m not taking his photos for him, not framing Liza’s mother. It doesn’t matter how much he pays me—I won’t do anything to hurt my girl.

He considers me for a while, then says, “That’s good enough for me. Liza deserves someone who will always put her first. She gives a lot to this town. It would be nice for her to have someone who gives her as much or more in return.” He sighs. “I thought that might be me.”

I tense, my desire to smash his teeth in shooting up like a geyser.

“But now I see how she lights up for you. I didn’t want to believe it at first. But now I do.” He looks down. “I only hope I’ll find someone like that one day.”

My anger subsides at his frank words.

I hold out my hand. “I’ll always put Liza first. You have my word on that.”

He reaches out and shakes. “Sounds good. Just make sure you treat her right. If you don’t, I won’t be the only one on your case. The whole town will be out with pitchforks and torches. Understand?”

“I’d expect nothing less.” I grip his palm firmly then let go.

He gives me a nod then walks off toward the main hallway.

I walk out to find Liza. It’s time for me to come clean about the real reason I came to Snow Hills. I don’t know how she’ll react, but I can’t imagine it’ll be good. Even so, I hope she can forgive me. Especially when I offer to provide screenshots to the Snow Hills Daily of the bullshit Mayor McGovern was trying to cook up.

“Hey, where’s Liza?” I find Eve at the table set up for drinks.

“She went to the bathroom.” She arches a brow. “To clean herself up. Because there was a mess *someone* left.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” I smirk at her.

“Sure you don’t.” She tosses her hair. “If you hurt her, you’re dead. You already know that, right? You’re a smart man, so you know I will murder you if you ever make her cry.”

“I’m aware.” I glance toward the bathroom.

She sips her drink, then looks in the same direction. “She’s been gone for a while.” She walks toward the door, then opens it and peeks in. “What the hell?”

The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and I push the door all the way open. The bathroom’s empty, the window is busted, and there are drag marks in the snow outside.

I groan, reaching up to rub my eyes. My brain is foggy. Did I have too much to drink or something? I try to think back to the last thing I can remember, but I freeze when I realize my hands are linked together, my wrists touching. What the heck?

“Crane?” I sit up, my eyes not yet adjusting to the darkness. Were we playing some sex game and we fell asleep? I can still feel the soreness from when he was inside me. He took me roughly, and I loved every second of it. He didn’t treat me all sweet like a pretty prize to put on his shelf. That’s what I often think of some of the men who’ve tried to date me in town. They have this cookie cutter image of what kind of wife and mother I’d be.

Sure, I do want those things, but I want something else too. Now I know what that is. Crane. He doesn’t handle me with all those manners or preconceived notions. He somehow knew what I needed deep down. Maybe it’s why we’re so drawn to one another. We know we’re a match.

“Crane?” I call again. I start to shift off the bed when I realize this isn’t my bed. Did we go back to his house? We always stay at mine. A chill breaks out across my skin when more comes back to me. I’d been in the bathroom, and then someone else was there.

A door creaks open a moment before light floods the room. I blink my eyes again, trying to adjust.

“Don’t say his name.”

“Carlton?” He finally comes into focus.

Carlton stands in the doorway, but my attention is drawn around the room that is covered in holiday decorations. The walls are painted green, the drapes over the windows a deep red. I spot at least three trees in the small room. White holiday lights hang from the entire ceiling. My mind finally processes that’s where all the bright light is coming from.

“Is this your place?” I thought he lived over the laundromat, which is a studio.

“It’s ours.”

“The town’s? Are you making some holiday house tour or something?” Oh, I’d never thought of a Christmas house tour. It would be like how some of the other towns do haunted house tours for Halloween. It’s not a terrible Idea.

I try to lift my hands again, which reminds me they’re stuck together. Duct tape is wrapped around them, keeping them pinned.

“Not the town’s.”

“There’s duct tape on me.” I lift my arms to show him.

“I’ll take it off once you’re more trained. Don’t move.” Carlton turns and leaves the room, closing the door behind him. A loud click sounds, letting me know that he’s locked me in here.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. What the hell is happening here? I close my eyes. This is a weird dream. It has to be. Images of Carlton flash in my mind. He’d been in the bathroom. I’d seen him in the mirror before... My heart starts to race. He put something over my mouth and nose.

The same click sounds again before the door swings back open. Carlton comes waltzing in with a tray in his hand. He walks toward the bed. I find myself scooting backward as quickly as I can until my back hits the headboard. My stupid dress rides up my thighs in the process.

“Don’t be like that, sweetheart.” Carlton sets the tray on the bed, his eyes traveling up my legs. He licks his lips. I honestly

thought Carlton was into men. A part of me hoped he'd be open to telling me at some point. "I've got all your favorite Christmas treats." He gives me a giant smile as though what he's doing is perfectly normal.

All of my favorites are on the tray—from hot chocolate with extra marshmallows, sprinkle cookies, and those white fudge Oreos that only come out around this time of year. I notice the hot chocolate is in the same mug I use at home when I make it. Goosebumps form on my skin at the thought of how much he knows about me.

"I can't eat with my hands like this," I tell him.

"I'll feed you." He lifts one of the cookies.

"I'm not really that hungry. Maybe—" I stop talking when the smile drops from his face. An expression I've never seen him wear before takes over. The Carlton I know is gone.

"Maybe a bite? I should try them. Did you make the sprinkle cookies?"

The creepy smile returns. It's a touch more settling than the other look he'd had there for a second. He brings it to my mouth.

"I made them for our first night together."

I part my lips and take a bite.

"You know I thought we had so much in common. I had no idea you needed to be treated like a whore."

I almost choke on the cookie.

"Did you let him fuck you?"

I can't get words to come out.

"If that's what you need, then I'm sure we can work something out. You're going to be tied up for a while anyway." He brings the rest of the cookie to my mouth. I just open and take the bite. My mind is swirling, a cold sweat breaking out all over me.

"Carlton?"

“That’s not an answer, Liza!” he shouts, jumping up from the bed. He grabs the tray and throws it. It hits the wall, and everything goes flying. “You are *mine*.” He points at me. His whole face is turning red. “Not his. You know how many whores I went to the city and fucked to learn how to be the lover you wanted? But all I needed to do was treat you like one of them. I *loved* you. *Built* this for you, and you went and fucked him,” he spits. His heavy breathing fills the room. He turns his back so I can’t see his face. I don’t think I know Carlton at all. I also don’t think those city trips he was always making on the weekend were to see his mom.

“You’re mad I slept with Crane while you’ve been sleeping with hookers?” I ask when the room goes silent for too long.

“For you!” He spins back around and takes a step toward the bed. My heart starts to race again. “So you’re admitting it. You let him fuck you. Did you let him come inside you too, Liza? Are you a bad girl?”

My stomach turns as my fear skyrockets. It’s so different when it’s not Crane saying dirty things to me.

He grabs my face hard by my chin.

I whimper.

“And I told you not to say his name. Last warning or you will be punished.” He releases my chin but gives me a little smack to my cheek. It stings, making my eyes water.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I had no idea you wanted me in that way. You should have told me.”

“You’re right. I waited too long, then he forced my hand.” I know he means Crane. I guess he can’t say his name either. “Did you know there is no Crane Douglas that matches the man he claims to be? In fact, it’s not his name at all. He’s known to most as Crane Marconi. He’s a criminal.”

I shake my head.

“He had you all fooled, but I knew something wasn’t right about him. He focused right in on you, though. Used you for something. That’s what I still can’t figure out.”

The man really is nuts.

“You don’t believe me? I thought that might be the case. Liza, you’re so sweet and naïve. It’s one of the many things that drew me to you.” He runs the back of his knuckles down the cheek he smacked. I have to fight not to flinch, fearing it will anger him. “I’ve got the proof you need. I’ll show you who he really is, and then you’ll be all mine. I’ll make you forget him.” He drops his hand from my face.

“Let me get what I have on him and clean up this mess I’ve made. I’m sorry, love. I’ve got more. I’ll make another tray. You stay put. I’ll be right back. Then we can go to bed.” He walks over to the door. “Our first night together. I promise it will be one you’ll never forget,” he says before leaving, the lock clicking into place.

I slowly slip from the bed and tiptoe over to one of the windows. I pull the curtains back but only find a wall. I rush to the other window. It too isn’t really a window. My gaze bounces around the room. There is no way out. I run my tied hands along the wall. I’m underground.

Fear makes my knees buckle, and I sink to the cold floor as tears well in my eyes. This is already a night I’ll never forget.

CRANE

“*T*here was a car here.” I’ve followed the trail through the snow to the back parking lot at Town Hall. My blood is pounding in my ears as my worry creeps higher and higher. This is the work of Liza’s stalker. I have no doubt of it. But it’s not Mick or Clark—both my prime suspects. Who else could’ve taken her? I fist my hands, my ire rising. Whoever put their hands on her is going to pay dearly. “Is this parking space assigned to anyone in particular?” I ask Eve.

“No. We don’t have assigned parking.”

“What’s the problem?” Clark strides up.

“Liza’s gone!” Eve cries. “The bathroom window was busted out, and there are drag marks in the snow.” She points. “Look!”

I drop to my haunches and look more closely at the parking spot. The center of it is dry. The snow on the ground fell earlier in the morning, which means the car that was parked here had likely been there all day.

“What’s happened?” Mayor Grable hurries up to us. “I heard a window was broken.”

“It’s worse than that. Someone’s taken Liza.” Eve wrings her hands.

I stand and look around the parking lot for any more clues.

“What do you mean ‘taken’?” The mayor stares at the trail through the snow.

“Kidnapped.” Clark pulls his walkie from his shoulder and sends out a be-on-the-lookout for her, then starts giving orders to set up a perimeter around town to stop cars.

“Why would someone take my daughter?” The mayor looks around, her face dazed. “Why would anyone want to hurt Liza?”

“I’m going to find her, Ellen. I promise you that.” I take her hand and squeeze it. “Do you know who parks in this space? Is there a regular?”

She looks down and blinks, as if not fully comprehending my question. She’s in shock, I realize. The thought of her daughter being taken has knocked her off her feet.

“Mayor.” I point to the empty space. “Who parks here? Do you know?”

She looks around. “Um, it’s a white car, I think. One with tinsel in the back window for the entire year.”

Eve puts a hand to her mouth. “That’s Carlton’s car.”

“Carlton?” Clark and I say at the same time.

“I thought he was gay,” Clark says.

“Me too.”

“I don’t care what he is, if he’s hurt Liza, he’s about to be in a world of shit.” I pull out my phone. “Where does he live?”

“Over on Beechnut. The house with the really sharp roof,” Eve says.

“I’m on it.” Clark takes off at a jog.

There’s no way he took her to his house. He was too messy leaving a trail. He’s got another spot, a hideaway somewhere.

“He wouldn’t hurt her. Would he?” Mayor Grable grabs my arm. “Right?”

“I’m going to bring her home.” I do a quick search in some not-so-legal databases for Carlton’s name. I get a few hits. Mostly speeding tickets and a few misdemeanor arrests for solicitation of prostitution in the past year. Otherwise, there’s

nothing. I switch tactics and look up his relatives. The only living one he has is his mother.

“What are we going to—”

“Just give me a minute.” I go back to my search. Enid, a 72-year-old, has a spotless record. I keep scrolling, then search another spot. That’s when I see it. She incorporated a business called Tinsel Vibe two years ago. “Not a fucking chance that’s her,” I mumble, then click through the company. It’s a shell that owns another company. *That* company has a few assets, one of which is a parcel of land in the hills nearby. “That’s it. He owns property in between here and Winter Heights.”

I meet the mayor’s gaze. “I’m going to bring her home. Sit tight.” With that, I take off toward my car that’s parked out on the road.

Once I’m in, I see Eve trying to catch up. I don’t have time to wait, though. And considering what I’m about to do to Carlton, I don’t need witnesses.

I gun it down Main Street, then out onto the highway, my phone giving me directions as I take several turns that eventually lead me to a gravel road on the side of a steep ravine. I turn onto it, winding my way through switchbacks until I’m at the top of the ridge. Up ahead in a grove of trees is a cabin. It’s well hidden, nestled between tall pines and done in colors that keep it inconspicuous.

Killing my headlights, I roll to a stop then reach into my glove box and pull out my Glock. Getting out, I push the door lightly shut, then stalk around the property, getting a good look at windows and doors, marking where my quarry might run out. Just like old times.

I hope Carlton likes his little psycho shack, because he’s never leaving it.

The back door is locked, but I hear Christmas music wafting from inside. Also, the smell of hot chocolate seems to float through a cracked window to my left. I do a quick peek inside and see movement.

It's Carlton. He's opening a door, then heading down some stairs. Once he's gone, I open the window and pull myself into the small kitchen. Sweets are everywhere, everything decorated in green and red sprinkles. The entire place looks like Santa threw up in it. If I didn't already know Carlton was a nut job, I'd know for sure right now.

I creep to the door and open it. It swings on silent hinges as I hear Carlton's voice.

"Let's try to have a nice evening. No more talk of that person. It's just you and me from here on out. Everything will be perfect." He sighs. "Now get on the bed."

"Carlton, please. If you could undo my hands, I could—"

"I said get on the bed!" His anger is instant. "You're a slut, Liza, and I know how to treat sluts. Get on the bed and spread your legs."

That's it. That's all I have to hear for my vision to go full-on fucking red as I storm down the stairs and into the room at the bottom.

Carlton whirls, the tray in his hands falling as Liza cowers back into a corner.

"What are you do—"

I raise my gun and pull the trigger.

Carlton falls, his body collapsing at my feet. I step over him and rush to Liza.

She's shaking violently as I pick her up, step back over the body, then run her up the stairs and out into the snowy evening.

"Are you hurt?" I put her down and grab the duct tape around her wrists, ripping it free.

She throws her arms around me. I hold her tightly as she sobs, her body still shaking.

"You're safe now. You're safe, Liza. I promise." I scoop her into my arms and carry her away from the cabin. "Please, babe, tell me if you're hurt. I need to know so I can help you."

“I’m not.” She sobs. “H-he was going t-to...”

“Shh. I know.” I kiss her forehead and ease her into the passenger seat. “He’ll never touch you again.”

She looks up at me, her cheeks wet. “You shot him. H-he said you were a criminal. H-he said you weren’t—”

“I’ll tell you everything, Liza. Every last detail. But first, I need to get you out of here. All right?” I snap her seatbelt into place.

She nods as I wipe her cheeks.

“Stay here for just a second.”

“Where are you going?” Her voice rises with fear.

I kiss her forehead. “I need to do one thing. That’s it. I’ll be right back. Can you stay here?”

She looks like she wants to say no, but she gives me a small nod.

“Good girl.” I kiss her forehead again.

I return to the cabin and make quick work of setting the entire hellhole on fire. By the time I get back to the car, it’s already smoking heavily from the kitchen window.

I get into the car and head back down the road to the highway. Once we’re away from the ridge, I pull to the side and turn to her, cupping her face in my hands. “I love you, Liza. I will always come for you, always protect you. I need you to know that. No matter what my name is, no matter my past. You’re my future, if you’ll have me. Do you understand?”

She nods, more tears falling.

“Good girl.” I kiss her gently. “Let’s get you back to town.”

I hold her hand the entire way, the same way she holds my heart. Carefully, and with love.

EPILOGUE

1 year later

“*I*’m going to murder him!” Eve shouts, storming into the library. Thankfully, it’s closing time, and everyone has already left for the day. It’s Friday, and the town is gearing up for the annual holiday party.

“Can you kill him tomorrow? Because I need your help with the party.”

“No, it’s happening today. You’ll never believe what he did to me.”

“Actually, I’m not shocked by anything Marco does to you.” I don’t know how the man did it, but he got Eve to marry him in a quick ceremony. So quick it was even before I got married in early spring. Not only that, Marco also knocked her up. Eve isn’t showing much yet. I’m a few months ahead of her, and my baby bump seemed to pop up overnight.

“Twins, Liza. Twins!” She points at her stomach. Oh my. I want to squeal in excitement for her, but I don’t think that’s the response she wants from me right now based on the look she’s currently wearing.

“Told you I wanted two kids.” Marco’s deep voice rumbles through the library as he steps inside. I had a feeling he was close. I swear that man is like Eve’s shadow.

He’s gone from a man I never saw in town over the last year to always being around. I think he’s perfect for Eve, and he and Crane get along well. They’re both possessive and

overprotective, so they share a bond. They band together against us in the same way we sometimes do against them.

“Not at the same time, you big giant. They better be girls. I can’t carry two boys that are your size.” She motions with her hand up and down toward her husband.

“I didn’t come out this big.” He smirks. I bite the inside of my cheek so that I don’t laugh. Another thing I love about the two of them is I think Marco has gotten Eve to call Snow Hills her forever home. Whenever my mom is ready to step down, I think Eve is going to step right into her shoes.

“You were ten pounds!” she squeaks. I have no clue if we’re having a boy or a girl, but I know there is only one baby in there. We’d decided not to find out the sex of the baby. I want to be surprised.

“Are you hungry? I’m going to make your favorite tonight.” He ignores her outburst and changes the subject.

“Chicken marsala?” Eve seems to conveniently forget the news of there being two babies in her belly at the mention of Marco making dinner.

“I know my wife’s favorite dinner. Of course it’s chicken marsala.”

“Fine, I guess I’ll go home.”

“So we can murder him later?” I shout after her.

“Yes, later!” she shouts back, making me laugh.

“Who do I need to murder?” Crane enters as they exit, Krampus scurrying around his ankles in greeting.

“You don’t get to make murder jokes.” I give him a hard stare, but I can’t hold it. A smile takes over my face. It always does when Crane is near. He makes his way over to me, coming around the front desk. He doesn’t stop until his mouth is on me, giving me a deep kiss that leaves me breathless.

“Your dress is too short.” He pulls it up higher.

“It’s only short now because of this.” I rub my stomach.

This is one of my favorite holiday dresses. I have a whole section in my closet just for Christmas wear. I can't wait to show Crane the matching sweaters I got us for the party tomorrow. They light up and might have cats on them. He'll shake his head at me, but he'll put the sweater on because he knows I'll love it. That man will do anything for me.

"What kind of panties you got on?" He yanks the dress the rest of the way up to reveal my panties with little candy canes on them. He lets out a groan. I wiggle. I thought Crane turned me on before, but now with all these hormones, I'm always ready to go. I have no shame. "You want me to take the edge off?"

"Please." I grip his shoulders as he slips his hand into my panties. His fingers go straight for my clit.

"Come for me." I do as I'm told. He muffles my cry of pleasure with his mouth. The man is in full control when it comes to my body. He can get me off in seconds if he wants, or he can draw it out. I have to admit that I actually enjoy both ways depending on what kind of mood I'm in.

He pulls his hand out, licking his fingers before fixing my dress for me. I'm leaning into him, my knees still weak.

"I'm ready for a nap and a snack." I let out a small yawn.

"Not yet. I've got your Christmas present waiting."

"My Christmas present?" I perk up. "But it's not Christmas yet."

"I've been working on this one for a while, and it's finally done." Now I'm really curious. He takes my hand after he grabs my bag and sets the alarm for the library before we head out to the front of the building where his truck is sitting.

When he gets into the driver's seat, he reaches over and grabs my hand. His fingers stroke the underside of my wedding ring. That was my Christmas gift last year.

Last Christmas almost seems like a lifetime ago. Crane got my mom a disgraced Mayor McGovern. She doesn't actually know that, but after Crane admitted everything to me, he said he had to take care of McGovern, which hadn't been hard. He is in prison for a list of things from tax fraud to taking money

under the table. I still can't believe the lengths that man went to, all over winning a holiday competition.

Honestly, I'm a bit thankful to Mayor McGovern. Without him, I would have never met Crane, and I don't want to think what could have happened to me when Carlton finally snapped. He would have at some point. Crane's being here had sped it up.

"Where are we going?" He passes by my house, driving toward the edge of town and down a winding back road. "Where did this road come from?" Crane doesn't answer any of my questions as he pulls down a lane that I realize is a driveway.

I gasp when lights flicker on, covering the trees that line the driveway. There must be thousands of them. "Crane?"

"Look ahead, babe," he says, drawing my eyes to look out the front windshield. I let out a louder gasp, my hands going over my mouth when a house suddenly lights up. It's a beautiful white house covered in so many lights it reminds me of one of those homes you see in a magazine. It looks like someone took it off the pages and dropped it out here. A giant red bow is on the front door.

"How?" He built a whole house without me knowing? The front door opens, and people pour out of it. I see my mom and Eve first. Anna jumps, bouncing out the door. The porch that wraps around the house starts to fill with faces I've known my whole life. This moment couldn't be more perfect.

"I might have had some help."

Tears slip down my cheeks.

"Everyone was more than willing to help with my secret for you, Liza. They said you've brought so much joy into their lives over the years that they wanted to return the favor."

If he keeps it up, I'm about to be sobbing like a baby.

"Crane." I unclick my seatbelt and crawl over into his lap. I kiss him. I pour everything I have into it. I can hear everyone cheering, but I ignore them. "I love you."

“I love you too.” He kisses me.

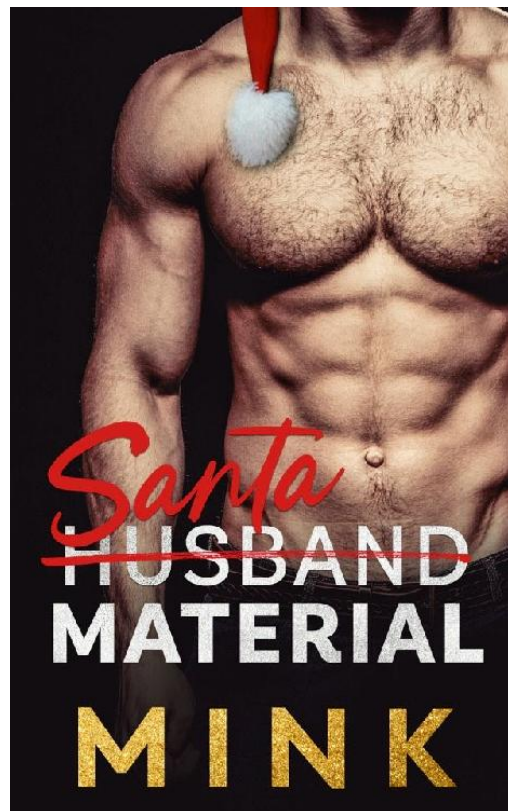
We won the spirit competition last year once again, but I won the only thing that mattered. My husband. My Christmas miracle.



Want to read Eve’s story? Check out [Her Christmas Surprise](#) by Santa’s favorite elf **Lucy Darling!**



Still in the mood for more MINK Christmas? Read [Santa Material](#) now!



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ALSO BY MINK

Protecting Zoe

Leone

I meet Zoey at the worst possible time and in the worst possible place. Saving her life is like breathing, something I'm hard-wired to do. She's innocence and sweetness, two things that have no place in my dark world, especially when they make her a beacon for bad men who want to hurt her. But they won't, not on my watch. It doesn't take long for me to realize that protecting Zoey is what I was born to do.

Zoey

My sister is missing. I'll do anything it takes to find her. That is, until I meet the dark, mysterious Leone. He saves me and makes me want things I've never even considered. His touch is addictive, and when he promises me he'll help me find my sister for a price, I'm all too eager to pay up, no matter how much it might cost me.

Guardian's Obsession

Vivian is my ward. I'm tasked with taking care of her and handling all her needs. The only thing is, I was expecting her to be a child, one I could easily hand off to a nanny. But she isn't. She's a grown woman with wicked curves who fascinates me.

I'm in charge of her inheritance. I want to be in charge of her. All of her. I'm the sort of man who'll stop at nothing to get what he wants. I've crushed my competition again and again over the years, and now I'll turn my skills on my young ward, breaking down her defenses until she's completely open to me. When I finally get a taste, I'm hooked, and I realize I'll never let her go.

But her foolish brother has other plans, and he's made deals involving my sweet Vivian. He'll find out just how ruthless I can be when it comes to protecting what's mine, and Vivian irrevocably belongs to me, just as I belong to her. Forever.

Rebel Tempts the Beast

As one of the biggest players in the Yakuza, I do my duty and rule my syndicate with a hard but fair fist. I follow my own rules and adhere to my own sense of duty.

Until Mei.

When my mentor sends his daughter to live with me and instructs me to put her on the correct path, I try to use a strong hand to guide her. But that hand tends to gravitate to her rear end, especially when Mei runs her smart mouth. She's young, fiery, and looking for love.

Though I follow strict rules and enforce them in my life, Mei bucks them with ease. She's a little rebel, one I never want to break. In fact, I fall for her just the way she is. She's the one I never saw coming, and the one I can't live without.

When an enemy sees an opening and tries to use her against me, I'll burn his lineage to the ground and salt the earth behind me. For Mei. For our future. For our family.

Treasured

He's an art thief. She's a mafia man's daughter. She's also kinda clumsy ... With broken ancient vases and a grumpy hero turned mushy for his woman, these two are a perfect match.

Christmas Crush & Christmas Grump

This Christmas in Reindeer Valley is sure to steam up your Kindle. A second chance romance plus a grumpy/sunshine romance all set in the same small town? Sign me up!

Married to My Stalker

He's so obsessed with her that he wifes her stat. But when she starts to figure out his dark side, she realizes she wants it to come out and play ... dirty.

Plump

He's a mafia boss. She's *plump*.

Obsessed Love

He's fresh out of prison. She pulls him over. So, naturally, he puts her in his trunk and takes her home to make her the queen of his illegal empire. Nice.

Crazy Love

He has a screw loose because of a head injury a while back. But he still knows his true love when he sees her. If only her mouthy cat—whom he can hear—would stop distracting him with all its sassy comebacks!

Claiming His Kitten

He wants her father's fortune and will go to any lengths to steal it out from under her. But, let's be honest, he's kidding himself. What he really wants is *her*.

Vetting His Kitten

A bad man who goes all warm and cuddly for his one true love. Gaaaahhhh, I love this one!

Wrecked

He knows how to fight, but can he learn to protect the one woman who's ever made him feel hope?

Nanny Tempts the Beast

She needs a job. He needs a nanny. And then he needs only *her*.

Unforgettable

Amnesia romance with a sassy kitty and a tantalizing mystery? What's more MINK than that?

Bodyguard's Obsession

He's supposed to protect her, but he ends up needing to stay *very* close to her. For, ya know, *safety*. *wink wink*

His Clever Kitten

She takes him hostage to save her kitty cat shop. It just so happens he's a mafia boss who'll do anything to stay locked up tight just for her.

His to Keep

A bodyguard's work is never done, especially when he can't keep his eyes off his client.

119 Kitty Lane

MINK takes a trip to Cherry Falls in this sweet romance.

Santa Material

A big bear of a Santa and the handy woman he loves. Spoiler Alert: He's going to stuff her full of Christmas cheer.

Taming His Bride

Book 4 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Stealing His Bride

Book 3 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Claiming His Bride

Book 2 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Knocking Up His Bride

Book 1 of the Blushing Brides Series.

Four brides, four rough men with a soft spot for the women they love.

Under His Spell

A haunted house, a ghost story of lost love, and a brand new love blooming under a full moon. This spooky sweet story is sure to get your blood racing for all the right reasons.

Beauty Tempts the Beast

Revenge is his life's work, but when he finds his Beauty in the heart of an enemy, will he be up for a career change?

Loan Shark's Obsession

He knows priceless objects when he sees them. So when he sees her, he *knows*.

His Stolen Bride

Her first husband never touched her. He's dead. Now she belongs to Santino, and there will be much, *much* touching.

His Stolen Princess

They were meant to be ... until they weren't. So, he steals her. Logical. Also, there's a cat.

Stalking Her Sweetly

Who's stalking whom?

Hitman's Heart

He's a badass who kills without remorse. She's a good girl who gets caught in the crosshairs. He saves her, but can he keep her?

His Secret Treasure

He says artifacts belong in a museum. She says he stole an ancient box that belongs to her. Can they come to terms over her box?

My Hero's Secret Baby

He's a hero to her, the boogeyman to everyone else. Can they have a future together?

His Tiger Queen

She's a princess in a heavily guarded tower. He's the prince next door. Did I mention there's also a pet tiger?

His Virgin Heiress

She's a thief. He keeps her safe. But can she give up jewel heists for love?

Cuffed Love

MINK's personal favorite. Seriously. I love this book.

Stuffed

Stuffies, hitmen, true love, and accidental homicide? MINK at her finest.

His Sweetest Sin

He's a priest, not a sinner ... Until he sees her.

Locking Her Down

She broke into an animal shelter. He's the only one who can help her, but this attorney knows what he wants in return (hint: it's not justice.)

Marco's Girl

Marco is the bad boy prince of a mafia empire, but his heart is set on a darling good girl.

Pop-up Love

Mobsters, mayhem, a Hallmark movie, and a pop-up shop full of love? Yes.

Beauty and the Boss

She wants to bring her cat to work. He wants to bend her over his desk. Win-win.

His Virgin Queen

He killed her husband and took her for himself.

His Deadly Darling

She's spicy. He's determined. Together, they're unstoppable.

Hitman's Prey

He always seemed so nice ... (and hot).

Snow Angel

She wants to beat him in the lights competition; he just wants her. This Christmas is lit.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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