



**HOLIDAY  
DADDY**

DADDY KNOWS BEST

**KELLY MYERS**

# HOLIDAY DADDY

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[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

KELLY MYERS

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## BLURB

### **Did I just drool over my single dad boss?**

#### **I think I did...**

Eric is bad, bad news.

Not because he's a billionaire.

And definitely not because he doesn't know what to do with his late sister's kid who is now his responsibility.

He's bad news because he doesn't believe in love.

A woman from his past is to blame for creating this Grinch-like businessman.

And now I have to pay the price for that as his nanny.

Being his employee and sleeping with him comes at a huge risk.

I can't afford to lose my job.

Yes, our age difference bothers me.

Along with his cold heart, and no desire to have children.

So imagine my shock when I found out that he was going to become a father... *and my baby daddy.*

Eric may be my exact opposite, but he's the only one that lights me up.

*The question is... will he open his heart to me, or will he break mine so I'm never able to love again?*

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## ABBY

The “T” rumbles down the track bringing me closer to Massachusetts General Hospital. This part of the Red line is on an elevated track and I lean my head against the window, looking out over the gloomy city. Today, Boston is overcast and cold. The November sky looks like it’s on the verge of bursting with rain and I’m glad I brought my umbrella.

Everything around me matches my mood. Normally, I’m a very happy, bubbly person. Maybe a little too much of a Pollyanna for some people because I always look for the good in life. But lately, I’ve been struggling more than usual to see the silver lining.

I’m also struggling to find a job and pay off my student loans, which are hanging around my neck like a lead weight. I graduated over a year ago and finding a job in my field of study has been impossible. If I could go back, I wouldn’t have chosen psychology as my major. But hindsight is 20/20, right?

All I can do is keep my head up and believe. I may not have an apartment of my own anymore, or a job, and I’m the eternal single gal, but I don’t let it get me down. By nature, I’m a bubbly, positive and very happy person. I’ve had people tell me that I view the world in rose-tinted glasses. But it’s simply that I have an innate belief that everything will work out if I just believe.

At this point, I’ve had to move back in with my parents and as much as I love them, I really miss having a place of my own. And, let’s face it, not having any money sucks big-time.

The holidays are right around the corner and I was hoping I'd have a good-paying job by now and would be able to treat my family to some amazing Christmas presents this year.

So much for that.

*It's okay*, I tell myself, desperately searching for that tiny sliver of hope. I'm going to find a job, pay off my debts and make something of myself. That's my New Year's resolution. It's understandable that anything worthwhile takes time. Patience is a virtue and I'm going to need to work a little bit harder, that's all.

As the platitudes run through my head, the train pulls up to the Charles Street/MGH station. I pop up out of my seat and walk off with the rest of the crowd. This is the nearest T-stop to Mass General and it's right across the street. But I'm not going in. Instead, I wait on the corner for my sister, Stella. She works as a nurse and we're meeting on her lunch break to grab something to eat.

Stella Tate is single like me and works far too hard. There's always some crisis at the hospital demanding her time and attention. She loves her job, though, because helping people is just a part of her DNA. We're very close and Stella is not only my older sister and confidante, but also she's my best friend in the whole world.

When I see her crossing the street, I lift my hand and wave. It's starting to sprinkle out and we dash over to one of our favorite cafes, making it inside right before the rain splatters down.

"Hey!" I exclaim, out of breath from our jog. "How's life in the ER?"

Stella smooths a few wisps of blond hair back and grins. "Crazy! So far today, we had three car accidents, a stab wound and some kid got a Lego stuck up his nose."

"Oh, geez. I don't know how you do it," I say in awe as we get in line at the deli counter.

"I love it. To work the crazy, long hours I do, you kinda have to or you'd burn out fast."

“Seriously. When was the last day you took off? Not a random day off, I’m talking about a personal day just for you.”

“Personal day?” Stella laughs. “What’s that?”

“That’s what I’m saying! One of these days, I’m going to kidnap you and we’ll go Christmas shopping. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good,” she says.

After ordering a couple of sandwiches, I look down at the chip selection but don’t grab a bag. I’m on a strict budget that doesn’t include anything extra. Like carbs. Stella notices me looking at my favorite dill pickle chips, swipes them up and adds them to our order.

“Lunch is on me,” she declares and hands the cashier her card.

“Stella—”

“No, sorry. You can treat next time.”

I give her a small grateful smile and we wait for our food. The place is pretty packed with people on their lunch. A lot of hospital employees come here, and why wouldn’t they? The food is excellent.

When our paninis are toasted and wrapped, the guy slides them across the counter and calls out our number. My stomach growls as I scoop mine up and I can’t wait to dig in. We walk through the crowded dining area and luckily a couple of girls are getting up to leave so we grab their table and sit.

“This place is a zoo,” I exclaim, unwrapping my grilled veggie panini.

“Always,” Stella agrees, sliding the bag of dill pickle chips over to me.

“You know me too well.” I rip the bag open, pop a chip in my mouth and crunch away. *Mmm delish.*

“I think you’re the only person who eats those disgusting things,” Stella comments with a grin.

“Fine by me. Then I can have every bag in the city.”

She chuckles. “How’s the job search going?”

“Awful,” I admit and take a sip of my water. “But I refuse to give up. There has to be something for me out there.”

“I’ll ask around the hospital and see if I hear of anything,” Stella promises.

“Thanks. At this rate, desperation has set in and I don’t even care if it’s in my field or not. I just need to start making some money. To be honest, I’m on the verge of going down to Star Market and filling out an application.”

“You’re not going to work at the grocery store. You have a psych degree, and we’re going to find you something.”

“Soon, I hope.” My gaze wanders over the crowded cafe as I take another bite of my sandwich.

“How’s it going being back in Quincy?”

“Oh, fine, I guess,” I say, reaching for another potato chip. “As fine as being 25-years-old and living with your parents can be.”

“Is Dad following you around and making sure you’re turning off all the lights after you leave a room?”

“Of course,” I say and we both chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Abby. I would totally invite you to come live with me until you start making some money, but my place is the size of a cereal box. One of those single-serve ones.”

“I know, plus where would I even sleep?” Stella’s apartment is just up the block because she wanted to be close to work since she spends eighty percent of her time at the hospital.

“The couch which, trust me, is lumpy and uncomfortable.”

“It’s okay, Stella. It just lights a fire under me to find something because I can’t live with Mom and Dad for the rest of my life.”

For a moment, we eat quietly and I look over at the rain which is coming down harder now outside.

“So there’s this new guy at the hospital who’s really cute,” Stella says slyly a moment later, but I’m already shaking my head.

“No thanks. I’m in no position to start dating anyone. Besides, you know how I feel about blind dates.”

“Once, Abby! You had a bad experience one time.”

“And it will be forever etched into my brain.” The so-called date that my friend Shelby set me up on turned into a flaming disaster within five minutes of meeting the guy. He was a die-hard Red Sox fan and that’s fine. I know what city I live in and I love the Sox just as much as the next Bostonian. But it’s all he could talk about. Of course, we were at a sports bar and the moment the baseball game started, he completely forgot about me, focused all of his attention on the TV and proceeded to yell obscenities at the screen as he guzzled beer and the Sox lost. *So embarrassing.*

Nope. No more blind dates for me. That’s a hard pass.

“Need I remind you that you’re twenty-five and have never had a serious relationship?”

“That’s because I’m saving myself for my Prince Charming. He’s out there somewhere, Stella. I know it.”

“What if he’s not?” Stella gently presses.

“I don’t want to kiss any more frogs,” I tell my sister. With a frown, I look out the window again at the rain now coming down in buckets. In the distance, thunder rumbles. “He’s out there. I just know it.”

“Maybe,” Stella says carefully. “But, in the meantime, you could date around.”

I sigh and try not to let her realism dash my optimistic dreams. Maybe I do have high, fairytale standards, but why shouldn’t I? And sure, I’m a 25-year-old virgin, living at home, with no job and no love interest.

Some people might freak out about that, but not me. Deep down, I know everything will happen for me when it’s supposed to. I truly believe that with all my heart.

And it's okay. I'm figuring my life out. Nothing is perfect, but I refuse to give up on finding true love. That is my non-negotiable.

"You could try online dating again?"

"Same goes for you, sister dear," I say sweetly, reminding her that she's just as single as me.

"I'm too busy with my career," she instantly replies.

"Online dating was another experience that didn't go very well, if you remember correctly."

"There was that one guy you were talking to for a while," she reminds me.

"Joey," I say and shiver. What started out as having potential quickly escalated into a near-stalker situation.

"Oh my God, I forgot about him! I was thinking of what's his name," she says, snapping her fingers, trying to remember.

"Ronnie," I tell her. Another dud who now that I think back on it, also lived with his parents. But he rarely left the basement and preferred playing fantasy video games to actually going outside and meeting me.

"He was nice, wasn't he?"

"I want more than nice, Stella," I say. "I want magic and passion and butterflies bursting in my stomach every time I see *him*. I want to be so madly in love that I can't see straight."

"Do you want a real boyfriend? Or do you want a book boyfriend?"

"I firmly believe that I can have both!"

Stella chuckles. "Well, if you find him, let me know where because, sis, I don't think what you're talking about actually exists. Not in real life, anyway."

"You're just jaded," I say. "You see too much bad stuff every day in the ER."

"Are you kidding? That's where all the good stuff happens!" she exclaims.

We both laugh and finish our lunches. Then we deposit our trays on the counter and head over to the exit. Stella gives me a big hug before darting out into the rain and rushing back across the street, dodging puddles.

Standing under the awning as the raindrops splash on the sidewalk, I think over my disastrous dating history. It hasn't been pretty, but that's not going to make me settle. *No way.* I'm too much of a romantic. I watch every Hallmark movie, read romance novels, and I'm a complete sucker for a good rom-com movie.

No Joey or Ronnie or anyone else is ever going to make me settle for anything less than my own happily ever after. Because I truly believe the perfect person is out there for me somewhere, just waiting to be found.

Maybe he's even looking for me just like I'm looking for him. And the moment our paths cross, we'll both know it. And it'll happen just like it does in the movies.

*Insta-love*, I think with a little sigh, popping my umbrella open and dashing over to the "T" station.

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## ERIC

“I don’t understand. It’s like these idiots are living in a fucking fairytale,” I grumble. I’m practically grinding my teeth and my assistant Fiona is doing her best to calm me down. “We’re on a schedule here so why can’t they stick to it? I’m about to fire everyone.”

“Eric, there’s nothing we can do about it. You’re just going to have to be patient and wait until the inspection passes. In the meantime, there are other things we need to do. Like finish this walk-through with the contractor,” she says, trying to placate me.

A growl of frustration rumbles up my throat and I lock down the urge to kick something. I’ve never been good at waiting, especially when it comes to work. Things should always be rolling along smoothly and if we do hit a bump, I need competent people who can resolve any issue quickly.

Because it’s true when they say time is money. And I don’t like to waste either.

I’ve been a real estate developer for the past ten years and this new site is giving me a massive headache. It’s in the middle of Boston’s Financial District and I snatched it up as soon as it became available. It has so much potential. Unfortunately, we’ve been hitting roadblock after roadblock and I’ve had enough.

I glance over at my faithful, long-time assistant who keeps my life running smoothly. *Poor Fiona*. She also puts up with

my mood swings, which can be daunting. I make a mental note to give her a bigger bonus this year.

Because when I say Fiona O’Leary is a saint for putting up with me for as long as she has, it’s no exaggeration. The feisty, little Irish woman is 50-years-old and just became a grandmother. She couldn’t be more thrilled, and I’m happy for her.

Of course, after the disastrous end of my marriage two years ago, I have absolutely no desire to ever have children of my own. Or a second wife, for that matter.

*No, thank you.*

Miranda Harrington, formerly Mrs. Miranda Sullivan, now known as “My Nightmare,” made my life a living hell. She’s catty, materialistic, and difficult. All charming qualities that I chose to ignore in the beginning of our relationship because we were too busy fucking like bunnies.

With hindsight, I know that we were a match made in hell. She was only ever concerned about money and her reputation. When our marriage went up in flames, that spiteful bitch tried to take everything, despite coming from wealth herself. Luckily, I hired a good lawyer, but after paying him, I wasn’t left with a whole lot in the bank.

Instead of being angry about it, I started working harder and smarter. I took a different direction with the real estate and began buying and flipping properties, then selling them at a higher price. Real estate in Beantown isn’t cheap, and soon my bank account was not only refilled, but also on the verge of looking like I’d won the lottery.

And now here I am, having just crossed the line into billionaire status. It’s kind of strange to have so much money considering I came from nothing. Growing up, we lived upstairs in a duplex in Dorchester. It was a working-class neighborhood and not the best area, but we didn’t have many options, especially after my dad left.

My father was a drunk and all he left me, my sister Anna, and my mother were bad memories. He took off when I was

ten and I didn't miss him. Half the time, he scared me because he was loud and abusive. He ended up dying of Cirrhosis, which wasn't surprising considering how much alcohol he drank.

I can't say I miss the bastard.

My mom, however, I miss every day. We were very close, but she had a stroke and passed away five years ago. She was the one constant light in my world. When she died, everything got darker.

The nasty divorce with Miranda made it pitch-black. But, I have to say, I'm glad my mom wasn't around to witness that. It would've only upset her.

My failed marriage was a terrible experience and left a bad taste in my mouth when it comes to women. *All women*. As a result, I haven't allowed myself to fall in love or have a committed relationship. I'm not a glutton for punishment or some kind of sucker. But if I want sex, it's not hard to find and I never let things get serious. If I get the feeling a woman wants more than a night or two, I make sure it's crystal clear that I do not.

So far, it's worked well for me and I plan to keep it that way.

After reining in my anger, I sigh and realize there's nothing I can do about this current project. Fiona calms me down and we continue our walk through the building. Everything with this job has hit a snag whether it's been delays, unforeseen problems or things falling through. I've had about all I can take and I'm beginning to wonder if I should bail out and put the building back up on the market.

But that would be admitting defeat and I'm a fighter. I don't give up easily and there's an unquenchable fire inside me that demands I succeed. Sometimes it just comes down to figuring it out and I've never shied away from a challenge.

We're up on the tenth floor, discussing the electrical problems when my cell phone rings. Normally, I'd ignore it,

but I get a strange feeling in my gut when I look down at the screen and see it's the Maine area code.

"Excuse me," I say and step away from the contractor and Fiona. Turning to look out the large window at the rain falling, I swipe the bar over and answer, "Eric Sullivan."

"Mr. Sullivan?"

"That's right." The hair on my arms and the back of my neck suddenly stands on end, but I have no idea why a chill runs through my entire body.

"This is Officer Matlin from York County Police and I'm very sorry to inform you that there's been an accident."

Dread passes through me. My younger sister Anna and her two-year-old daughter Skylar live up in York County, Maine.

"Anna Sullivan, your sister, was involved in a hit and run earlier this afternoon and she was killed instantly."

*Anna-Banana, my baby sister, is dead?* My throat constricts and words get stuck in it. How do I even respond to such tragic news?

"Mr. Sullivan?"

"Skylar," I force out. "Is my niece okay? Was she in the car?" *Fuck. Please, say no.*

"No, your niece wasn't in the vehicle," he confirms.

"Thank Christ." My shoulders slump in relief.

"Skylar was at daycare when the accident occurred. Currently, she's in the custody of Child Protective Services. Until you pick her up, that is. I can give you their phone number."

"Pick her up?" I ask dumbly.

"That's right." He starts rattling off a phone number and I'm too frazzled to write it down. "Uh, hang on." I start searching for a pen and paper, but there's nothing. Fiona, always ready, appears at my side with an open notebook and her pen poised. I repeat the number and she writes it down.

“Again, I’m very sorry, Mr. Sullivan.”

“Yeah, okay.” I hang up, caught in a daze of disbelief. *My baby sister is dead.* It hasn’t sunk in yet and for someone who normally has all the answers, I’m at a fucking loss right now. I swipe a hand through my dark brown hair and Fiona looks up at me, eyes full of questions.

“Anna died,” I say, my voice raw. “A hit and run.”

“Oh my Lord,” Fiona exclaims. “I am so sorry, Eric.”

I’m trying to process the situation, but I’m in a state of stunned shock.

“Skylar?” she asks softly.

“She’s with Child Protective Services. He told me I could pick her up.”

“Then that’s what you need to do.” She rips the page with the phone number out and hands it to me. “Don’t worry, I’ll finish up here. You go get your niece.” She’s all business-like and efficient and, at this moment, I appreciate that more than words can say.

Nodding, I thank Fiona and walk down to the elevator on numb legs. Although I hadn’t seen my little sister in a couple of years because of my divorce and trying to rebuild my business, we spoke at least every other week. *Or maybe it was more like once a month,* I think with a slight grimace. I don’t know. It’s like I lost all sense of time over the last two years.

*Hell.* I’ve been so busy with my life that I haven’t even met Skylar yet. At least not in person. We’ve had Facetime calls, of course, and I’ve seen her on the screen, but it hits me like a ton of bricks that I never took the time to actually drive up and meet my niece.

*Two years.* I’ve had two years to do it and now I’m finally on my way up and it took a fucking death.

I feel like the world’s biggest asshole.

My sister should’ve yelled at me and been angry that I hadn’t visited. But she wasn’t. She was always a happy person

and even when that useless ex-boyfriend of hers knocked her up and left, she stayed positive.

Guilt washes over me as I slip into my Lamborghini and pull out of the underground garage. Memories of Anna wash over me and I can't help but smile. Like our mom, she was a positive, bright light who always put others before herself.

Seems like I took after our father. I'm definitely a more selfish person than the women in my family.

My family. *Christ.* I don't have any family left anymore. Well, except for Skylar, who I've never even met. What am I going to do about her?

As if in answer, my phone rings and I immediately answer it, stealing myself for whatever other bad news is coming my way. "Eric Sullivan," I say grimly.

"Mr. Sullivan, my name is Jody Calloway and I was your sister's lawyer."

My heart sinks. "Yes."

"I'm very sorry about your loss."

"Thank you."

"I'm calling to let you know that Anna named you guardian of Skylar if anything ever happened to her."

"What?" I ask in disbelief. *Me?* A grumpy, 40-year-old bachelor who never even met the kid? What the hell was Anna thinking?

"Since you're her only living kin and the child's father left, Anna wanted her daughter to be with you."

*Her only living kin.* My heart clenches. Shit, the poor kid isn't even three yet and she only has me? I feel bad for her.

"Of course, if you don't want to accept custody of Skylar, she has no other option and will be put into the foster care system."

The lawyer's cool tone bothers me. Does she really think that I'd let Skylar go to strangers? I've heard horror stories about kids in the system and I can't let that happen to my

niece. Granted, I'm hardly prepared to take care of her, but there's no other fucking option at this point.

"I'm coming to get my niece," I say in a firm voice.

I just have no idea what I'm going to do with her.

The drive up to Maine passes quickly and when I reach the Child Protective Services office, it suddenly becomes real. I'm picking up a baby and it's going to be my responsibility to raise her until she's eighteen.

*Holy fuck.*

I start sweating and begin to wonder if I'm making the biggest mistake of my life. I don't want kids. I never did. And now I'm an insta-Dad? As they go get Skylar, I'm starting to feel nauseous.

A minute later, two women return, one carrying Skylar and the other carrying some big seat with straps and buckles hanging from it.

"Here she is," the first woman says and hands Skylar over. She's a chubby little bundle wearing pink pajamas covered in what looks like dancing elephants. Or koala bears? I'm honestly not quite sure.

I've never held a two-year-old before in my life and I reach for her, not quite sure what to do exactly. I end up holding her out straight and she's hanging kind of sideways, legs dangling, and I'm looking into her big blue eyes.

She giggles and kicks her tiny feet.

I think I shit my pants. *What am I going to do with her?*

"She's not going to bite," the woman says and pushes her closer. "And here's a car seat for you."

"Car seat?" I ask dumbly.

"You need to secure this in the back of your car and buckle her in good."

"I don't have a back seat," I announce.

The women must take pity on me because they follow me out to my car to help. I swap Skylar for the baby seat and carry the monstrous contraption out, thoroughly relieved to hand her back over to Lori, the first social worker.

They ooh and ahh over the black Lamborghini for a minute and then rig it in the front seat. “Is this your only vehicle?” the woman named Donna asks. “Because this is illegal.”

“No, I have a Range Rover.”

“Oh, wonderful. Then you can move the car seat into that. But, for now, this will just have to do.”

After buckling Skylar in, Donna hands me a small duffel bag with some things Anna had packed for Skylar when she was at daycare earlier. I thank them, shove the bag down between the glove box and car seat on the passenger side and slip into the driver’s seat.

I start the car and glance over at Skylar.

*I am not prepared for this. Not even slightly.*

Not prepared is the understatement of the fucking century. Totally lost, beyond clueless and completely terrified are more apt. Within two hours of being back at my house in Brookline, I’m on the phone, begging Fiona to come over and help me.

“You do realize it’s almost 9pm,” Fiona says in her nonsense voice.

“I’ll pay you anything, Fi. Please. She’s been crying for forty-five minutes straight and I’m pulling my hair out. I think I might’ve broken her.”

That’s kind of a lie, because I’m trying really hard not to touch her. But I’m so damn desperate.

“Did you drop her?” Fiona asks calmly.

“No, of course not!”

“Then she’s not broken.” Fiona heaves an enormous sigh into the phone. “This will be considered overtime and double-time since it’s after my agreed-upon work hours.”



My heart soars. “And I’ll kick in a bonus. Extra vacation days, whatever you want. Just please, for the love of God, get here immediately!”

“I’m on my way,” she says very reluctantly, making it clear that she’s not happy.

“You’re a gem, Fi,” I tell her. *And a lifesaver.*

My amazing assistant arrives twenty minutes later, picks up a squalling Skylar and has her asleep in under ten minutes.

“What the hell kind of magic did you just work?” I whisper.

“Magic that just cost you about two hundred dollars,” she informs me with a small grin.

“I’ll add it to your check. Why don’t we just make it five hundred?” I ask, so damned pleased that the screaming has stopped.

Fiona frowns, looking around. “Where should I lay her down? Do you have a crib?”

I shake my head and scrape a hand over my lower jaw. “Not yet. I was hoping maybe you could do some shopping for me?” I give her my most charming smile, but Fiona’s frown deepens.

“Eric, I know you’re in over your head and I am sincerely sorry you lost Anna. But we need to get one thing straight– I am not a babysitter. I am your executive assistant and I don’t plan on changing roles.”

Rubbing my temples, I squeeze my eyes shut. “You know me, Fiona. I’m not equipped to raise this kid, but there was no way I could abandon her, either.” I toss my hands up, at a loss. “What the fuck am I supposed to do? I have a business to run. I don’t want this ‘being a dad’ crap. It’s not me.”

“I think the solution is quite clear,” Fiona says evenly.

*It is?*

“You need to hire a nanny.”

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## ABBY

**F**rustration fills me when I open my email the next day and see a big, fat rejection from my most recent job interview.

God, what is it? Am I that unlikeable? Why is no one hiring me? Do I come off as incompetent or stupid? Is it the blonde hair? With a sigh, I slam my laptop shut and drop my face in my hands. It's time to suck it up and go down to Star Market and fill out an application.

Then a horrible thought hits me. What if they don't hire me? What if my last alternative tells me thanks, but no thanks. How humiliating. At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised.

I guess I can kind of understand that potential employers don't necessarily want to hire an inexperienced, recent college grad. But if I can't even snag a low-paying, bottom of the barrel job at the grocery store, what does that say about me? Maybe applying for a cashier's position is aiming too high. Chewing on my lower lip, I wonder if I should apply for night stock.

After getting dressed, I'm about to head down to the grocery store, ready to apply for 'aisle sweeper' at this point, when Stella calls. "Hey, Stella," I say as I'm grabbing my coat.

"I might have the perfect job for you," she says in a sing-song voice.

"Really?" Excitement fills me and I slowly place my coat back on the rack. "What is it?"

“My friend here at the hospital knows someone who needs a nanny. Now I know it’s something you did during college and might not be interested in—”

“I’ll do it!” I exclaim. “Tell your friend I’m interested. I’m more than interested! I can start right now!”

Stella chuckles. “Okay, but here’s the catch. It’s a live-in nanny position.”

“Totally fine,” I say. “It’ll be like killing two birds with one stone— I can move out of Mom and Dad’s *and* have a job. I’m really good with kids. Can you tell your friend that?”

“I already did and he said he could pass your name and number along.”

“God, yes! Oh, thank you so much, Stella. I was on the verge of crying because I got passed over for *another* job I interviewed for last week.”

“Well, from what Cash said, it sounds like his friend is pretty desperate for help. I’m sure you’ll hear something in a couple of days.”

“I sure hope so.”

We talk for a few more minutes and after hanging up, I slump down in a chair. My dad appears and, as he walks past me, he pauses to ask, “Do you think I own the electric company, Abby? You left your bedroom lamp on again.”

“I’m headed back up right now,” I assure him, struggling not to roll my eyes. He humphs out a disgruntled reply and I stand back up, praying to hear from this family soon about the potential job. Even though it’s been a while since I’ve been a nanny, it was always something I enjoyed. And kids love me.

Heading back up the steps to my room, I think over the last family I worked for who lived in Braintree. They had twin girls and a younger boy. We always had fun and I took them everywhere. Sometimes it was hard juggling school and a job, but the parents were good about working around my classes with me. Normally, I’d schedule morning classes and then head over afterward and watch the kids from early afternoon until evening.

My phone starts ringing in my hand, interrupting my thoughts. I look down at the screen which reads “Unknown Caller.” I swipe the bar over and lift it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Is this Abigail Tate?” a deep voice asks.

“Yes, this is Abby.”

“This is Eric Sullivan and I’m calling you about the nanny position. I’d like to set up an interview.”

“Oh, hi!” I can’t hide the surprise from my voice. *That was fast.* “That sounds good.”

A sigh of relief fills the line. I can also hear a baby screaming in the background. “Wonderful. Can you come right now?”

“Uh, now?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No,” I quickly amend. “Just, ah, tell me your address and I can come right over.”

It’s a little strange that he wants to do it immediately, but he sounds overwhelmed and desperate. Normally, I’m used to dealing with the wife/mother of the family, but maybe she’s busy and it sounds like they need to hire someone ASAP.

After he rattles off an address in Brookline, he tells me to buzz the intercom at the gate when I arrive and it will open for me to pull up the driveway. Then I can park in front of the house. *Sounds fancy.*

I tell him that I’m on my way. I fix my hair quickly, brush my teeth and swipe some lip gloss on. Then I grab my purse and keys and yell to my dad that I’ll be back later.

The drive from Quincy to Brookline isn’t that bad because I take back roads and avoid the traffic on the highway. Once I hit the quiet, winding road, the GPS takes me to a large wrought-iron gate and I double-check the address that Mr. Sullivan gave me.

*Wow.* Looking through the fence, I get a glimpse of the house set back from the road and it’s beautiful. Fancy isn’t the

right word. More like imposing, with its tall white pillars and brick facade.

House really isn't the right word either— it's more like an estate. Or a castle.

I lower my window and realize I'm too far away to reach the button on the intercom. After some reversing and maneuvering, I pull up alongside the panel and hit the buzzer.

“Yes?” a female voice answers.

“Hi, I'm here about the nanny position.”

“Ah, yes. Come right in.”

A moment later the gate begins to roll open and I figure that must've been the wife who answered. I can't imagine she wouldn't want to be here when I interview.

As I drive closer to the house, it seems to get even bigger. It's a flipping mansion. These people definitely have some money and I wonder what they do. This place is easily worth ten million dollars or more. Suddenly, I feel nervous and hope they aren't expecting me to be all Harvard-educated and high society.

Because I'm not. My family is about as middle-class as you can get and I'm drowning in debt from attending four years at UMASS Boston over in Dorchester. It's a lowkey commuter school and not nearly as fancy as its campus over in Amherst.

I pull up behind an expensive-looking sports car and feel my nerves kick up. Rich people always intimidate me a little. Pulling down my mirror, I check out my reflection and make sure I don't have any chandeliers in my nose (AKA bougars) and that my minimal makeup isn't smudged.

Okay, all set.

Taking a deep breath, I get out of my sad, little Toyota and walk up the steps. I lift my hand, knock and wait. A moment later, the door opens and an older, attractive woman with her hair pulled back in a bun answers. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if she's the housekeeper.

“Abigail?” she asks.

“Yes, but please call me Abby.”

“Come on in,” she invites me and steps aside. “I’m Fiona O’Leary, Mr. Sullivan’s assistant.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say. She has a warm smile and kind energy. I also get the feeling she’s extremely efficient and I instantly like her.

“So you’ve been a nanny before, I hear,” she says, leading me through the foyer and down a marble-floored hallway.

“That’s right. I used to work for a family while I was in school.”

We walk past tables with fancy-looking sculptures and vases and I look up as we pass by expensive artwork hanging on the walls. The place doesn’t feel very homey, but it reeks of money.

“That’s good,” she says. “And you enjoyed it?”

“Oh, yes, I love kids,” I gush.

Fiona smiles. “Lovely. Well, as you’ll soon find out, this all just sort of happened rather fast and little Skylar fell in her uncle’s lap unexpectedly. Between us, he needs someone with experience to help out around here.”

I nod, but still don’t quite understand the dynamics of the situation. *Where is Mrs. Sullivan? And what does she mean by “fell into his lap?”*

“Right here,” she says, and we stop in front of a closed door. “I’m going to let you and Eric, Mr. Sullivan, talk and then you can meet Skylar.”

“Sounds good.”

Fiona pushes the door open and I follow her inside the large study. There are floor-to-ceiling, built-in bookshelves and the whole room is dominated by dark wood furniture and pulses with masculine energy.

My gaze moves to the massive mahogany desk where a man with dark brown hair sits, talking on the phone. He

motions for me to sit as he finishes his call and Fiona gives me an encouraging smile before she disappears, pulling the door closed behind her.

The first thing I notice is Eric Sullivan's amazingly blue eyes. They're a bright aqua and incredibly intense. He's looking at me and I swallow hard, averting my attention to the window where I see a sprawling backyard that looks absolutely perfectly-manicured. Not a blade of grass out of place.

While he finishes his call, my gaze drifts back and slowly moves over his neatly-organized desk then zeroes in on the man sitting behind it. I can't resist another look at him. I'm not sure what I expected – a middle-aged father, I guess – but Eric Sullivan is extremely attractive and, though he may be in his late thirties or early forties, he has my heart beating faster.

*No dad-bod here.* My eyes move to his button-down shirt, pause on his chest, skim over to check out his broad shoulders. Sliding up the tan column of his throat, I study the dark stubble on his face and pause to admire his lips.

When his throat clears, my attention snaps up and our gazes collide. *Oh, shit.* Was I really just checking him out so blatantly? A blush heats my cheeks and I clasp my hands in my lap and force myself to look down.

I hear him say goodbye and after he hangs up, I allow myself to look up again. *Yep, he's still just as good-looking as before.*

"Hi," he says, eyeing me.

I shift in the chair. "Hi." My belly does a little swoop.

He clears his throat again then leans over his desk and offers a large hand. "I'm Eric Sullivan," he says, introducing himself. I reach out and we shake. "Thank you for coming so soon."

"No problem. I'm Abby." His hand is big and warm, instantly swallowing mine up. When we finally let go, I wonder again where Mrs. Sullivan is. All I know is she's a damn lucky lady.



“It’s nice to meet you, Abby.” He leans back in his leather chair, assessing me with those gorgeous eyes of his. “I’m going to cut to the chase. I need a full-time, live-in nanny to take care of my two-year-old niece, Skylar. Preferably someone with experience and I heard you were a nanny before.”

“That’s right. In college.”

“Great,” he responds. He taps a long finger on the desk. “So are you interested?”

My mouth opens in surprise. I’m expecting to answer a bunch of questions, but it seems like he’s ready to hire me on the spot. “Very,” I say. “Do you, ah, have any questions for me?”

“Not really. Do you have any for me?”

*Is he kidding?* “Well, yeah.” I sit up straighter and lean an arm on the edge of the desk. “I’d like to know what constitutes full-time, what day I’ll have off, how much you’re willing to pay and...well, I kind of want to meet Skylar. What if she doesn’t like me?”

Eric leans forward, too, and meets my gaze. He has very serious eyes. “Full-time constitutes every day, all day. If Skylar wakes up at 3am crying, it’s your job to get her to go back to sleep. I have a company to run and can’t be dealing with a screaming baby.”

“Fair enough. But I will need a day off,” I insist. “I’m not a machine.” I chuckle, but he looks annoyed that I’m asking for something so basic.

With a sigh, he relents. “Saturdays off?”

I nod. “That works.”

“What did you make at your last job?” he asks, reaching for a pen.

I tell him but then remind him that it was only part-time. And definitely not a live-in situation.

He starts to jot something down on a pad of paper then tosses the pen with an annoyed sound. “If I ever had a pen that

actually worked, it would be a damn miracle,” he grumbles. He slides a drawer open, pulls out another one, and apparently it works because he writes a number down and turns the paper around so I can see.

*Sixty-thousand dollars.*

I nearly choke.

“How does that sound? To start out with. Assuming things go well, we can increase your salary after three months.”

“Sixty?” I repeat, throat going dry. “Like sixty-thousand *dollars*?” He can’t be serious. I could pay off my debt in no time making that insane amount of money.

His mouth edges up. “Dollars, yes. Would you rather be paid in some other form of currency?”

“No. Dollars are good,” I say and he chuckles.

“Okay, then what else is there?”

I raise a brow. “Meet the baby?”

“Oh, right.” He must notice my dry tone because he frowns. “Sorry, I’m just not used to having her here. It’s only been a couple days since...” His voice trails off.

“Since what?” I ask. There’s an underlying sorrow in his words and I’m beyond curious.

“Since my sister Anna died. She was a single mom and I’m the only family Skylar has left. So I picked her up and now here we are. I have no experience with children and never had any desire to have one of my own. The whole situation has thrown me for a loop and I’m incredibly ill-prepared. Fiona informed me she will not be babysitting and that I should hire a nanny. Hence, why you’re here.”

As his words sink in, I realize what a huge, selfless thing he’s done. “That’s very admirable,” I say softly, looking at him in a new light. “Taking your niece in to raise her. And I’m so very sorry about your sister.”

He gives a slight nod. “Thank you,” he murmurs.

Suddenly, a baby starts crying and Eric sighs.

“Are you sure you’re ready to meet her?” he asks. “My niece who hasn’t stopped crying since I brought her here?”

It’s clear how overwhelmed he is and I can’t help but take pity on the poor man. “Let’s do it,” I say with a confident smile.

I mean, how bad can one, little two-year-old be?

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## ERIC

I guide Abby down to the spare bedroom where I've set Skylar up in a makeshift playpen with blankets. Well, as best as I can. Basically, I've pushed furniture together and created a little cage for the toddler. She doesn't have anything but diapers which are running out fast and I need to remedy that. Fiona is holding the crying kid and looking extremely put-out.

"Well, hello," Abby says and reaches out for the unhappy baby. Fiona gladly hands her over and we both watch as Skylar calms down, looking up at Abby with big blue eyes. Abby turns her and then begins bouncing her up and down on her hip which makes Skylar stop crying.

For the moment, at least.

I exchange an amazed look with Fiona. After the past twenty-four hours of constant screaming, fussing and crying, I thought something might be wrong with Skylar. But Abby is slowly working magic and I stand there as she coos softly to the baby, beyond astonished.

My gaze skims over the curve of Abby's soft smile and zeroes in on the light dusting of freckles across her pert little nose. Her light blonde hair looks soft and has a slight wave to it. Out of nowhere, my fingers itch to run through it. Clenching my fists, I turn my attention back to Fiona who starts backing away.

"I'm going to head back over to the site," she informs me.

"I was going to go, too—"

“Don’t worry, I can meet with the contractor. You have things to take care of here.” She gives me a look that says “don’t you dare mess it up with this one” and inclines her head in Abby’s direction.

She’s right. I’m desperate for help and can’t lose Abby as a nanny for Skylar. Fiona ditches us fast and I can’t say I blame her. She didn’t sign up for this and neither did I, but Skylar is my responsibility. It’s up to me to take care of her now and that means hiring Abby.

“You’re really good with her,” I say, observing the way they interact with each other. It’s clear Abby loves kids.

“She’s adorable,” Abby gushes. “I love children.”

“I can tell.”

Abby looks over at me. “Most people do, though. How can you not?”

I release a breath. “I haven’t been around a baby since I *was* one,” I admit. “She just showed up in my life and now I honestly don’t know what to do with her. I never planned on raising a kid on my own. Or at all.”

Abby studies me with those pretty blue-green eyes of hers. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine.”

As nice as that is to hear, I have my doubts. At this point, as long as Abby doesn’t have a prison record for kidnapping, I’m ready to hire her. Then Skylar begins to fuss and whine again. I grit my teeth together. Maybe she’s just an unhappy baby. Because nothing seems to please the kid for long.

“She hates it here,” I say. “From the moment we got here, she’s been miserable.”

Abby looks down at the blankets on the floor and the sad excuse for a playpen. “Does she have a bed? A room of her own?”

“Not yet. I was planning on getting to that soon. Today,” I quickly amend when Abby gives me a concerned look. *Shit*. I’m already a terrible uncle.

“Maybe she’s tired. Where’s your room?”

“My room?” I ask, not sure why she’s asking. “There’s a guest bedroom—”

“*Your* room,” she clarifies.

With a slight frown, I lead her down to the master bedroom. Abby lays Skylar on my huge bed and uses my pillows to surround her so she doesn’t roll off.

“Having a familiar scent surrounding her might calm her down,” Abby explains.

“We just met,” I admit.

“You just met your niece?” she asks in a surprised voice.

“I’ve been busy,” I say lamely.

For a moment, Skylar appears content but then she starts screaming. My eyes slide shut and I’m about ready to lose it.

Abby scoops Skylar up and I watch in confusion as she walks back out. Curious, I follow her to the kitchen.

“Do you have a glass?” she asks. “And a towel. Preferably a washcloth.”

“Uh, sure.” I take a glass out of the cupboard and she nods to the refrigerator.

“Fill it up with ice. And bring me that washcloth.”

I plunk the glass against the lever and fill it with ice cubes. Then I wander down to the bathroom and grab a washcloth. I have no idea what she’s doing but if it quiets Skylar, I’ll be thrilled.

Back in the kitchen, I look at Abby for further instructions.

“Wrap some ice up and then hand it over, please,” she directs me.

I do as she says without question. Abby takes the washcloth and gently holds it against Skylar’s mouth.

“She’s teething,” Abby explains.

“Teething,” I repeat blankly.

“Her gums are swollen and they hurt. This should help a little.”

Skylar seems to like it because she starts sucking on the wet cloth.

“They have teething rings you can buy,” Abby tells me.

“Right.” I lean against the counter and cross my arms. “I was hoping whoever I hire can take care of all that. Of course, I’ll pay for whatever she needs, but I have no idea what to buy. That’s where you come in.”

Abby’s gaze snaps up.

“Assuming you’ll accept the position,” I say and give her my most charming smile. *Please accept it. For the love of God and all the angels and saints above, please, please, please.*

As Abby thinks it over, I wait with baited breath for her answer. *She has to do it.* If she walks out, I’m going to lose my shit. I’m never going to know a moment’s peace and what if I can’t find anyone else? What if—

“I accept,” she says, and I sag in relief.

*Thank Christ.*

“Good,” I say, resisting the urge to weep with happiness.

“When do you want me to start because—”

“Immediately,” I interrupt. “Let me give you a quick tour so you know where everything is.” Even though it looks like she wants to say something more, she doesn’t and, honestly, I don’t let her. The moment we begin the tour, my phone starts buzzing. More problems at work, but I tell them I’ll call them back.

My home is large, but I take her through the place lightning-fast because I have to talk to Fiona about the latest roadblock we just hit. “And here’s your room,” I say, finally showing her the extra bedroom where she’ll be staying. I chose the upstairs bedroom at the end of the hallway because it’s quiet and right next door to Skylar’s room. It’s also furthest away from my room. The last thing I need is to be woken up every hour when Skylar starts screaming.



Abby looks around and seems satisfied.

“Help yourself to anything and make a list of whatever you’re going to need for the baby,” I tell her, pulling my phone out of my pocket. “I have to handle a work problem.”

“Wait,” she says, and I pause. “Where are all of Skylar’s things? I mean, she has to have some stuff.”

“It’s all up in Maine. I haven’t been by my sister’s place yet.”

“So we don’t need to rebuy everything,” Abby says. “We can just drive up there and I’ll pick out what she needs.”

“Money isn’t an issue,” I tell her.

“I assumed it wasn’t,” she says, gesturing at the room and house, in general. “But there have to be personal things, too. Things that Skylar may want one day.”

*She means things that belonged to Anna*, I realize. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” I know that I have to go back up and settle things, anyway, so I may as well take Abby up on her offer to help.

My phone starts buzzing again and I answer it. After conferring with Fiona for a few minutes, I hang up. “I have to go over to the site,” I tell Abby. “This project has been a huge pain and I need to take care of things before—” I stop talking and wonder why I’m bothering to explain myself. “So we’re good?”

Abby shifts Skylar in her arms who is still sucking on the washcloth. “We’re good,” she says.

“Great.” I head for the door then pause, glancing over my shoulder. “You have my number, right? From when I called you earlier?”

“Yes, Mr. Sullivan,” she says.

The way she says my name like that – almost flirty – makes my groin tighten. “Call me Eric,” I say. *Damn*. My voice comes out way huskier than I intend.

She nods, her mouth edging up in a smile. “Sure thing.”

I give my head a shake and walk out, hoping whatever strange attraction just kicked up goes away. The last thing I can afford to do is start lusting over my much younger nanny.

*Shit.* I have enough problems on my plate. A constant hard-on over the blonde beauty now living under my roof and taking care of Skylar doesn't need to be another one.

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## ABBY

**A**fter Eric leaves, I realize I'm in this huge house all by myself. With Skylar in my arms still sucking away on the wrapped ice, I begin to walk around and explore. I don't mean to be nosy or anything, but I'm always very inquisitive. However, my paranoid side also reminds me that he might have hidden cameras strategically placed. But now that this is going to be my home, too – at least temporarily – I need to know where things are located. I'm also extremely curious about the man who lives here and I wander from room to room, taking it all in.

To be honest, it's a little overwhelming.

When I had my own apartment, it was small and cozy. There's nothing cozy about this mammoth place. Even my parents' house is lived-in and welcoming. But this house almost feels like a museum. There are lots of expensive-looking things and not even one piece of furniture that I've seen even looks comfortable. I also notice that everything is very white or cream or beige. All light-colored couches, chairs and walls. Even cream carpet.

*That won't last long with a toddler,* I think, and look at the little girl in my arms. Drool drips down her chin and when a string of saliva drops and lands somewhere on the floor, I cringe. "Oops," I say and wipe her mouth.

Yep, the messes are going to be coming nonstop and I hope Eric Sullivan is prepared for his perfect, clean, extremely white world to be turned upside down with stains from crayons, markers, and sticky baby fingers.

I manage to get lost a couple of times and wonder if I'll ever be completely comfortable here. I seriously doubt it.

As we pass by the open study door where Eric interviewed me earlier, I pause and look inside. This time, I take a closer look, but he doesn't seem to own many knick-knicks or personal items. No framed pictures, nothing that clues me in to what kind of person he is and what he likes.

Once again, I wonder what exactly he does for work. He mentioned going over to the site and called it a project. I'm not sure, but I guess he must be involved in some kind of construction or real estate.

"What does your uncle do?" I ask Skylar and brush a wisp of hair off her forehead. She just looks up at me and smiles. "Oh, right. You just met him, too," I say and she gurgles in reply.

A few minutes later, we find ourselves back in the kitchen and I grab some fresh ice and wrap it in the washcloth. Skylar has stopped fidgeting and seems quite content now because her gums must be feeling better.

I'm not going to lie, she's growing on me fast and I have a feeling that before our little tour of the house is over, I'm going to be madly in love with this little girl. I feel so bad that she lost her mom. I can't even begin to imagine growing up without a mother. My mom and I are very close and for a girl to not have that in her life...

My heart constricts and I brush a light kiss against her temple.

I suppose her hot uncle will end up getting married one day. The women probably swarm him like mosquitoes attack me on a warm summer evening.

"I know this is a new situation," I say. "For both of us. But I have a feeling that we're going to get along very well, little one. I'll make sure you have everything you need because, let's face it, your uncle is clueless. And we're going to hang out together every day and have a lot of fun."

We head toward a corner of the house that I haven't been to yet. I step into a large doorway at the end of the hall and look around. "What's in here?" I ask in a dramatic voice and shift Skylar to my other hip. "This place is a freaking castle. Bigger than Hogwarts."

It takes me a moment to realize I'm in the master bedroom. A slight sandalwood scent hangs in the air and I remember Eric, er, Mr. Sullivan smelling like that. When he leaned forward across his desk to shake my hand, I got a decent whiff and the man smelled sinfully delicious. Like a really expensive candle that I can't afford. Even though I know I shouldn't spend the money on it, the temptingly good smell makes me want to be reckless and splurge.

"Immaculate," I murmur. "Not one thing out of place. Why am I not surprised?" Although I don't know him, Eric Sullivan strikes me as a man who likes things neat and organized. Also someone who likes to be in control.

"It seems like he's ready for anything— except you," I say to Skylar, and she giggles.

After a quick glance around, I back out of his bedroom and decide to go find mine. Once I locate the staircase, we head up and my room is past Skylar's and at the very end of the house. The room is beyond huge and bigger than Stella's downtown apartment. There's a big bed covered in a white comforter and throw pillows, a walk-in closet and attached full bathroom. It's beyond extravagant and much more than I need.

I grab the bougie-looking faux fur blanket off the end of the bed and spread it out on the floor. Sitting down, I lay Skylar beside me and look down into her big, blue eyes.

"You know what? As nice as this place is, it doesn't feel very homey, does it? No personal touches or holiday decorations or anything. It looks like it was done by a designer and your uncle never changed a thing."

Stretching out on my stomach, I keep up the one-sided conversation with the drooling baby.

“Why do you think that is? Unless he’s never home? Or maybe he just doesn’t care?” I’m not sure why it bothers me that the house feels so sterile and museum-like, but I vow to make it more homey.

Pulling my phone out, I try calling Stella, but it goes straight to her voicemail like I figured it would. So, instead of chatting, I leave her a message. “Hi, Stella, it’s me. You’re never going to believe where I am right now— a mansion in Brookline! I got hired for the nanny job, pretty much on the spot, and I’m so excited. The little girl is incredibly sweet and my boss is incredibly...well, more on him later. Thank you so much for hooking me up with this. Okay, call me! Bye!”

That ought to grab her attention. Stella loves having the inside scoop on everything, so I’m sure she’ll call me back as soon as she’s able. In the meantime, I decide to make some lunch for us. I scoop Skylar up and we go back down to the enormous kitchen.

It’s difficult because there’s no high chair or anywhere to set her up. We really need to drive up to Maine tomorrow and get her things. Otherwise, this poor baby is going to be on the floor constantly. So with Skylar in my arms, I manage to put together a couple of sandwiches from the peanut butter in the pantry. I’ve never been a big fan of adding jelly, so we’re going to keep it simple. I’m also super excited to find a big bag of dill pickle potato chips which I open and start munching on. After rummaging around in Skylar’s small bag, I find a sippy cup and fill it with apple juice, and I snag a bottle of water for me from the fridge.

We sit down at the kitchen table, her on my lap, and eat. Skylar mostly smashes her hand against the bread and flattens her sandwich, but she does eat a little. Maybe she doesn’t like the fancy organic peanut butter.

“Definitely not as good as crunchy Jif,” I agree.

After lunch, I sort through the items in Skylar’s bag and it isn’t much— just some basics. I’m not sure what Eric plans to do tonight, but when he gets home, I’m going to need to go

back to my parents' house and pack up my things. I have a feeling he's not going to want to hear that.

And I'm right.

"I can send someone to pick your stuff up," he says later, looking absolutely terrified to be left alone with his niece.

"That's silly," I say. "No one else would know what I want to bring. And besides, I really don't want some stranger digging through my, ah, personal items."

"Oh, right, sure," he mumbles and turns away.

"I set Skylar's room up for the night and hopefully she'll be in better spirits since we've iced her gums."

"What if she starts screaming again?" he asks, looking panicked. "Once she starts, she doesn't stop."

"Then get the ice and washcloth, okay?"

He nods, looking so miserable that I almost laugh.

"There are a few more diapers in case she needs one during the night. And I went through her bag and pulled out everything I think she might need. But we definitely need to drive to Maine tomorrow and pick her things up. Otherwise, you're going to need to re-buy everything."

Eric looks thoughtful for a moment. "I was planning to just have you order it all online, but I need to go up there anyway and sort things out. Can you get back here early?"

*Wow, he's needy,* I think. "I can be back by 9am with my stuff and then we can head up. If that works?"

"Sure. Although I wish you could spend the night."

My stomach swoops at his words. "I'll be back bright and early," I assure him. "You guys will be fine. Look at it as bonding time."

"Yeah," he says, not sounding convinced as I hand Skylar over to him.

*Poor guy.* He looks like he's headed for the gallows.



“You got this,” I say softly and pat his arm. Eric sighs wearily and I give him a bright smile before heading out. “See you in the morning!”

I toss him one last encouraging look over my shoulder and head out into the night.

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## ERIC

**G**od Almighty, I think, and force myself to sit up in bed. Skylar is crying again and I don't know what to do. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I glance over at the glowing numerals on the clock on my nightstand which read half past two.

This is awful. She's unhappy, I'm miserable, and nothing I do seems to make anything better. At least not for long.

We need Abby. Clearly.

I'm counting down the hours, no minutes, until she's back because I am getting to the point of delirium. This kid doesn't want to sleep and it's making me crazy. I've only been back in my bed for twenty minutes and she's already screaming again. Last check, her diaper was dry, she didn't want her bottle and what else am I supposed to do?

I wish I could just write her a check and she'd happily go away like every other woman I've ever met.

But, no. Skylar seems to want me.

With a frustrated huff, I glare at nothing in particular and stalk down the hall. I'm sleeping in the other upstairs guest room so I can be closer to Skylar tonight. *Lucky me.* Stalking into her room, I remind myself that Abby will be taking care of this kind of thing from tomorrow moving forward. I can handle it one night. *Can't I?*

Looking down at Skylar's red face and teary eyes, I do feel bad. Even though she doesn't know what's going on, she did

just lose her mother. Maybe on some subconscious level, she's aware of this.

Against my better judgment, I lean over the pile of pillows I set up around her and scoop her up. And she actually stops crying. The ear piercing wails have turned into soft sniffles, anyway. Looking down into her big, wet eyes, I sigh.

"I'm sorry, kid," I murmur. "Everything changed and now you're stuck with me. Guess I can't blame you for crying."

It suddenly occurs to me that maybe her gums are hurting and it's the whole teething thing that's keeping her, and me, up. Heeding Abby's advice, I take Skylar down to the kitchen and put some ice cubes in a wash cloth like Abby did earlier.

And, believe it or not, Skylar latches onto that thing like a gold digger to my wallet.

"Ahh, so it's the teething thing again, huh?" I wonder how long this lasts and when I look into her tiny mouth, I realize it's going to be a while. The kid barely has two bottom teeth. "Sorry, little one. You've got a ways to go."

I'm hoping our trip to Maine will hold lots of useful things because if there's anything that can help with this, Anna will have it. Some sort of numbing spray or something. In the meantime, though, it's all about the cold cloth.

For whatever reason, Skylar seems to like being in my arms. Not sure why and it's been a while since any woman has been there all night, but she seems settled and I take her back into the guest room with me. I lay her down, stack some pillows up and lie down beside her. Turning on my side, I stare at the little munchkin who is turning my entire world upside down.

"Not exactly sure what I'm going to do with you," I admit. She glances over at me and yawns. "Yeah, you should be tired. You've been up all night. Don't worry. Your friend Abby will be back in the morning and then you won't have to deal with me."

She coos softly and I watch as she drifts off to sleep, the wash cloth clutched between her little fingers and soaking

through the sheets. *Finally.* A few minutes later, I follow my niece straight to dreamland.

Normally, I never sleep in because my mind is always buzzing with whatever the current project is that I'm working on, so when I hear a throat clear, I jump up, startled. Momentarily confused and still half asleep, I see Fiona standing in the doorway.

"Sorry to wake you," she says. Fiona looks completely befuddled because she knows better than anyone that I get up every day by 6 am.

Every. Single. Day.

I swipe a hand through my dark hair which is sticking straight up. "What time is it?" I ask, feeling a little groggy.

"A little after nine," she says and my eyes go wide.

"After nine?" I bellow, unable to believe I slept this long.

As if right on cue, Abby appears and her eyes track over my bare chest. "Good morning," she murmurs. "We're still going to Maine, right?"

"Morning," I grumble, sliding out of bed. I can't believe it's so late. "Fiona, Abby and I are driving up to Anna's."

"And Skylar," Abby adds.

"What?" I ask, feeling grumpy and caught off-guard.

"Me, you and Skylar," Abby clarifies as she walks over, sidles past me and reaches for Skylar.

I swear, she takes another look at my chest and I raise an involuntary hand and press it against my pecs. My gazed dips to her ass as she leans over to scoop the baby up. *Fuck.*

"I'm going to take a quick shower and then we can go," I say with a frown, trying to block out her luscious curves. Feeling all out of sorts, I walk toward the door.

"You're going to Maine now?" Fiona asks in surprise.

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No," she states.

“Oh, well, yeah. We have to go get Skylar’s things. Call me if you need anything. Otherwise, I’ll be taking the day off.”

“You don’t ever take a day off.” She looks stunned.

“Yeah, well, I never sleep in, either. Guess a baby who keeps you up half the night changes things.” With a wry grin and one last glance in Abby’s direction, I head downstairs to my room.

After a quick, cold shower, I slip on a pair of jeans, a gray henley and my boots. I don’t bother shaving because I would much rather get some caffeine in my system than waste time with a razor. Hearing voices in the kitchen, I walk down and pause in the doorway. Abby and Fiona are laughing about something while Abby feeds Skylar some breakfast.

When Fiona notices me, she nods to a thermos on the counter. “Just filled it with hot, fresh coffee for you,” she says.

I grunt a thanks, swipe it up and take a long, satisfied drink. I’m a grumpy asshole without my morning coffee and Fiona knows me too well. Once the caffeine hits my bloodstream, I perk up. While Abby takes Skylar up to change her into the last of her fresh clothes, I discuss business with Fiona. Once she knows what needs to be done today, I feel better. I have full faith in my long-time assistant. The woman has been known to work miracles and I know she can handle things while we’re in Maine.

After Abby returns, I tell Fiona to call me if anything comes up. But, of course, she assures me that things will be fine. The car seat is still in my Lamborghini and I motion to it.

“Guess we should move that into the Rover.”

“You’re not supposed to have a baby seat in the front,” Abby tells me.

“Yeah, that’s what I hear. But since there isn’t a back seat, the only other option was up on the roof.” My mouth lifts in a mischievous smile and I shrug. Abby shakes her head as I set to work unbuckling the monstrosity. Once I yank it out, I carry

it over to my Range Rover and try to set it up in the back, but the damn thing keeps falling over.

“Why are there so many fucking straps?” I grumble.

With a frustrated growl, I shove my hair off my forehead and look up to see Abby smirking. I crawl out of the backseat and narrow my eyes.

“You know how to do this?” I ask.

She nods, looking highly amused.

I make a sweeping motion with my hand and she steps forward and hands me Skylar. Stepping back, I watch her clamber inside and my gaze drops to admire her ass. She gets the damn thing hooked up in under a minute then slides back out.

“All set,” she says.

“Great.” I hand her Skylar and let her deal with strapping the kid in because at this rate, I have lost all faith in myself to even attempt it.

Once we’re all settled which takes a ridiculously long time, I glance in the rear view mirror. I’m still trying to process the fact that there’s a baby seat in the back now, much less an actual baby.

*Who am I?* I wonder.

As I pull the car onto the highway, I can feel Abby’s curious gaze on me and I glance over. Her eyes look so bright and pretty in the sunshine. Like sparkling blue-green ocean waves and all I want to do is dive beneath their surface.

“What?” I ask softly, wondering what she thinks of me. I’ve never cared in the least about what people think when it comes to me. But for some odd reason, I want to know what Abby thinks about me.

She shrugs a slim shoulder. “Just wondering how last night went. You two seemed awfully cozy this morning,” she adds with a chuckle.

“Cozy as in exhausted because she was up crying until almost 3am?” I ask.

“You survived,” she says with a cheeky grin.

“Barely,” I grumble and take a sip of black coffee from the thermos.

“So I packed up my things and brought over the basics,” she continues. “The room you put me in is much bigger than I’m used to, but it’s lovely. Thank you.”

I nod, not sure how to respond. Most people always have their hand out and expect something from me. I rarely hear a thank you. “You’re welcome,” I murmur and glance over at her. Her light blonde hair is up in a messy bun and shines in the bright light and those freckles across the bridge of her nose are killing me. They’re fucking adorable and I get the sudden urge to kiss every single one.

Pulling in a deep breath, I turn my attention back to the road. We have a couple of hours to drive and the way her soft vanilla scent is filling my nose, teasing me with its sweetness, I’m not sure I’ll make it. *Not comfortably, anyway*, I think, and shift in my seat, trying like hell to ignore the way my dick is getting hard.

*Fuck. Stop lusting over the nanny*, I reprimand myself. I crack the window and let some cold air in to try to help clear my head and heated thoughts.

“So, Eric, tell me something about yourself,” Abby says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“What’s your job?”

“Commercial real estate. I buy properties, fix them up and sell them to companies.”

“Sounds...interesting.”

I arch a brow. “Really? Because the way you say that, you sound bored.”

She chuckles. “I don’t know anything about it. But if it makes you happy then that’s all that matters.”



“Makes me happy? Or pays the bills?”

“Makes you happy,” she emphasizes. “Being stuck in a job you hate, no matter how much it pays, would be awful.”

“So you would choose happiness over money?” I ask, not able to disguise the disbelief in my voice.

“Every time. Wouldn’t you?”

I consider her words. “I guess that all depends. Am I in my current position or homeless on the street? Because you don’t have much choice if it’s the latter.”

“You always have a choice,” she informs me.

“Well, if my choice is a king-sized bed or the cold curb, I’ll choose the bed every time.”

“Fair enough.”

“What about you?” I ask.

“I’ll choose happiness every time.”

“What if your happiness doesn’t pay the bills?” I bluntly ask.

“That’s not what I mean,” she says carefully, and I wait for her to continue. “My ultimate happiness isn’t connected to a job. I’m not saying it’s okay to be a slacker and not try or have a good work ethic. Right before you called, I was about to head down to the grocery store and fill out an application. Would that have been my dream job? No. But I would’ve viewed it as a stepping stone and appreciated the much-needed paycheck.”

“What if you would’ve hated the job and it made you unhappy?” I ask, deliberately baiting her.

“Then that would’ve given me the incentive to keep looking for something better.”

The edge of my mouth lifts. “You’re a real Pollyanna, you know that?”

“I love that movie,” she says and I burst out laughing. “What’s so funny?”

“I’ve just never known anyone who can see the positive in every situation like you do.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing,” she says.

“I guess I’m just more of a realist.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that. As long as you don’t become jaded.”

I stifle a snort. I passed jaded territory years ago. Now I’m stuck somewhere in the bitter badlands. “How old are you?” I abruptly ask.

She tilts her head, studying me. “Twenty-five. How old are you?”

*Twenty-five.* She’s fifteen years younger than me. That should instantly deflate my lingering hard-on...but, it doesn’t. *Dammit.*

“Forty,” I respond, mentally telling myself that she’s far too young for me to be thinking the inappropriate thoughts I’m thinking. *Oh, hell.* Is this where the term ‘dirty, old man’ comes from?

Swallowing hard, I try not to let this beautiful, young woman pull me into her world. But I’m finding so many things attractive. And it’s more than just her looks. It’s her outlook on life. I’ve never met anyone like Abby. She views the world as a glass more than half-full. She’s innately happy and sees the good in everything. Quite frankly, it’s refreshing.

Ever since my divorce, it’s been hard for me to do that. Impossible really and it’s not that I don’t want to be happy. I do. I just lost my belief in happy endings when Miranda tried to take every last dime and leave me with nothing. Not even my pride. Because, of course, she told everyone I was an asshole and spread vicious lies. She took zero responsibility and cast me as the villain.

Maybe I’ve just been running in the wrong circles but it seems like all my life, I’ve dealt with conniving, catty women who are only interested in me because of my money. Is that just a poor reflection of me and my bad choices? *Probably.*

“That’s still young,” she says.

“Forty is halfway to dead,” I say gloomily.

“Not if you live to be a hundred,” she informs me with a sunny grin.

I can’t help but chuckle. “Pollyanna,” I say accusingly.

“Scrooge,” she immediately responds.

Shaking my head, I don’t deny it. Over the years, I suppose I have turned into a bit of a scrooge. Not because I’m stingy. I’d like to think I’m actually quite generous. With my money, anyway. But if we’re talking about my time and love, then yeah, I’m Ebenezer Scrooge to the max.

Because sadly enough, I’ve learned that most people aren’t deserving.

Hell, that even includes me.

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## ABBY

**W**e arrive in Maine and after two hours in the car with Eric, one thing is crystal clear: he's extremely attractive and beyond jaded. A terrible combination. At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Plus, he's my boss and I can't afford to screw this up. I need this job.

Even so, there's no doubt in my mind that I'm attracted to him. I can't un-see his naked chest from when I walked into the guest bedroom this morning and found him in bed. He looked and sounded utterly delicious— hair ruffled, plaid pajama pants hanging low and voice still scratchy from sleep.

Be still my beating heart. *Gawd*. The man could make a nun think impure thoughts.

I'm not going to lie— being trapped in that car with Eric, so close that I could smell his tantalizing sandalwood scent, left me all discombobulated. But now that I'm away from him, my shoulders sag in relief and I put Skylar in her swing, turn it on and give her a teething ring that I found in the freezer. While she's occupied, I start sorting through the things in her room, deciding what is absolutely necessary and what we can leave here.

I'm not sure what Eric is doing, going through Anna's things I assume, but I need this distance. The man is making me feel things no guy ever has before. I'm talking beyond the normal butterfly flutters and more like full-on ridiculously big rollercoaster thrills. And it's terrifying because it's like I just realized my lap belt is loose and I could fly out at any moment.

*Stop thinking inappropriate thoughts about your boss, I scold myself.*

After packing a bunch of stuff, I step back and survey the room. My heart breaks for the little girl in the swing who will never know her mom. There's a framed picture of Anna and Skylar on the dresser and I make sure to wrap it up carefully in a blanket and tuck it in a diaper bag.

Eric pops his head in a minute later looking more delicious than ever. "How's it going?" he asks.

"Good," I answer. "I found all the essentials and figured we could just pick up anything we don't have room to take now."

He nods, then his gaze drops to Skylar who is quietly amusing herself in the swing. "I don't think I've ever seen her this quiet," he remarks in a mock whisper.

I chuckle. "She's two. What do you want?"

"To sleep tonight," he states.

"Have you ever heard of the phrase 'the terrible twos'?" I ask teasingly, and he makes a face. "Well, you're living it."

"Great," he mumbles.

"They say it gets easier," I tell him reassuringly.

"I don't think it really does," he says dryly. Instead of expanding on his cryptic comment, he motions to the pile I've made. "We're taking all of that?"

"Yes and maybe even a little more."

He looks down at Skylar's pile of goods. "How can one tiny thing have so much crap?"

"Babies do not travel lightly," I tell him, and he rolls his eyes. "Think we can get all this in the back of your car?"

"I'll try."

While Eric starts carrying things out, I do a final sweep, making sure that I didn't miss anything important. "I think we have everything we need," I tell Skylar then lift her out of the

swing. Before we leave, I carry her down to Anna's room. A wave of sadness washes over me as I look around.

"I'm so sorry, Skylar," I murmur. "It's never easy to say goodbye, but your mom will always be watching over you. Because she loved you very much. Even though it might feel like she's far away, she's not. She will always be in your heart, baby girl. Don't ever doubt it."

I wander over to the dresser, lift a bottle of perfume and smell it. I tilt it under Skylar's nose, too. "Smells like a field of flowers." I dab a tiny bit behind her ear. "Now you can smell like your mommy. Never forget how much she loves you. I know I'm just your nanny and pale in comparison to her, but I promise that I will take very good care of you and always be there for you, sweet girl. And I'm sure one day your very handsome uncle will find you a new mommy. And she won't ever take Anna's place, but she will love you and take care of you and—"

Hearing the floor creak, I spin around and see Eric standing in the doorway. Clearing my throat, I shift Skylar to my opposite hip and feel my heart speed up. I have no idea how long he's been standing there or what he heard me say. *Oh, God, I hope he didn't hear me say he was handsome.* My cheeks burn and I try to pretend like I didn't just admit Eric is hot right in front of him. "So I, ah, thought maybe we could take a couple of Anna's things for Skylar to have. You know, for when she's older."

Eric is staring at me with a funny look on his face and I want to sink into the floor and die.

"Yeah, of course," he finally says. "That's a good idea. Take whatever you think. I figure I'm going to donate everything else."

"I'm not sure," I say slowly, looking around.

Eric moves up beside us. "What would you want? If you were Skylar in twelve years?"

My gaze zeroes in on the little jewelry box on the dresser. "Something personal that she used to wear? Maybe like a

necklace or something?”

Eric follows my gaze and reaches out, flipping the jewelry box’s lid up. He lifts a charm bracelet out and I gasp.

“That’s perfect,” I whisper, admiring all the different charms on it. He also chooses a necklace with a butterfly on it and a ring with channeled rubies.

“Rubies were her birthstone,” Eric says.

“I think Skylar will love all this. In fact, bring the whole jewelry box. And I was thinking of grabbing a sweatshirt or something that maybe smells like Anna. We could put it in Skylar’s crib with her. It might help her to sleep.”

“Having Anna’s scent around her,” he murmurs. “That’s a good idea.”

We end up spending the next half an hour choosing items to bring back with us. Eric tells me that he has to come back up here and talk to Anna’s lawyer, and he’ll finish going through things then. I can tell it’s taking a bit of an emotional toll on him and, at one point, he leaves the room. He says he’s going to get us something to drink, but I swear that I hear his voice crack.

*God.* I feel bad for him, too. Anna was his sister and even though I don’t know anything about their relationship, I can sense his sadness. Her death hasn’t been easy for him and the suddenness of it all is so tragic. I’ve been cradling and consoling Skylar and now I feel the urge to do the same with him. Pull him into my arms and hold him.

Eric finishes loading the Range Rover while I take inventory and make sure we have everything that we’re going to need. I think I got it all.

The ride back isn’t quite as interesting as the ride up because Eric spends most of it talking business over the phone. While he’s speaking to Fiona and contractors, I amuse myself with games on my phone. It’s probably for the best, though, because I need to squelch this attraction brewing on my end.

By the time we get back to Boston, it’s getting dark. Eric orders dinner and then helps me set up the basics in Skylar’s



room. It's nice now that she has her crib, swing and changing table. Babies really do have a lot of crap. Skylar falls asleep in her swing, which she clearly adores, and I get her ready for bed while Eric goes down to get the food when it's delivered.

Once Skylar is tucked in and sound asleep, I head down to the kitchen where Eric organizes the Chinese food, plates and utensils on the island.

"Help yourself," he says and pops a carton of fried noodles open.

I scoop out some white rice and orange chicken then sit on a stool. As I begin to eat, I look around the enormous kitchen and marvel at how much my life has changed in the last few days. Eric and Skylar were complete strangers a week ago and now I'm living with them. It's so odd, but I feel comfortable and I'm beyond grateful for the job.

"Food okay?" he asks.

I look over and nod. "Delicious," I answer. "Thank you." Pulling my gaze away from his incredible aqua eyes, I try not to think about how very handsome he is, but it's hard. He's also pretty serious, too, and I wonder if he's always been that way. As I chew on some chicken, I surreptitiously study him for a moment.

"What?" he asks, not even looking up from his food.

*How did he even know I was looking at him?* I wonder, thoroughly embarrassed. When he finally looks up and our gazes collide, I swallow hard. "Nothing," I instantly say. "I guess I was just wondering what you do for fun."

"Fun?" he repeats blankly.

I chuckle. "You even say the word as though you don't understand its meaning. You just always seem very serious."

"I can be fun," he insists.

"Really?" I arch a brow and lean forward. "Tell me, Mr. Sullivan, what do you do for fun? Balance your checkbook?"

"Ha ha," he remarks dryly.

“Seriously, though. What do you like to do? Travel? Collect things? Do you have any cool hobbies?”

He lays his fork against the edge of his plate and frowns. “What do you do for fun?” he shoots right back instead of answering my question.

“I like to read, watch movies, binge TV shows and hang out with my sister. Just simple things make me happy. Oh, and I love dill pickle chips which I noticed you have. Are you a fan?”

“Hell yeah,” he says. “I try to eat healthy, but they’re my guilty pleasure.”

“Same. Although something that you enjoy shouldn’t make you feel guilty. Otherwise you lose some of the joy in it, right?”

He looks at me like I have two heads.

“So, hobbies?” I press.

“I don’t have much time outside of work,” he says.

“Surely you do more than just work. Spend time with your girlfriend?” I ask, trying to sound as innocent as possible.

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” he responds.

Our gazes collide and my heart speeds up. He’s looking at me like he’s hungry. But not for Chinese food. “Oh,” I simply say and force myself to look away.

*O. M. G.* My heart is thundering in my ears and I’m trying really hard not to read too much into that look he’s giving me.

“Ever since my divorce, I’ve avoided anything serious.”

My head snaps up. “When were you married?” I ask, instantly intrigued. Who in their right mind would marry this man and then leave him?

“A couple years ago,” he says with a vague wave of his hand. “Clearly, it didn’t work out and I’ve had no desire since to have a relationship. If I’m being honest, I’ve never wanted a family. So you can see why this whole thing has been...an adjustment.”

I prop my chin in my palm, unable to believe what I'm hearing. All I've ever wanted is a family of my own so I'm having a hard time understanding why he wouldn't want one. And, let's face it, the man would have beautiful children. "So...you don't want kids of your own?"

"No."

His answer is instant and firm. Like zero doubt in his voice. "Oh."

"Does that make me a terrible person?" he asks.

"No. But you do have Skylar now so that technically puts you in the role of caregiver."

"Yeah, and I'm terrible at it, just like I knew I would be."

"You're not terrible at it," I say. "It's just new and takes some time. You became an insta-Daddy to a little girl you never even met. If you weren't having doubts right now, I'd say you're a robot."

"The last thing I want to do is mess her life up. They told me that she'd go into the foster care system if I didn't take her, and I really thought adopting her would be the right thing to do. But the more I think about it, I wonder if it would be better to give her to someone who knows what they're doing. I never wanted kids and I'm clueless. Maybe this was a huge mistake."

When he heaves out a frustrated sigh, my heart clenches. Without thinking twice, I stretch my hand out and lay it on top of his. "You're doing amazing," I say. "You hired me, right?"

His hand is warm beneath mine and when he turns it over and wraps his long fingers around mine, my breath catches. "I guess I did something right then," he murmurs, locking gazes with me.

I swallow hard as the moment seems to stand still and something electric passes between us.

"Do you always see the bright side, Miss Pollyanna?" he asks, voice husky and teasing.

"Do you always see the dark side, Mr. Grinch?"

A laugh erupts from his throat. “Most of the time,” he admits.

“Maybe it’s time to change that,” I challenge him.

He studies me thoughtfully and I slowly pull my hand away, instantly missing its heat. *He’s your boss, idiot*, I scold myself. Nothing can happen. Nada, zilch, niente.

I really need to get that through my thick skull, but every time he looks at me with those amazing aqua eyes, my resolve crumbles a little more. God, why does he have to be so yummy? *Be strong, Abby*.

“It’s been a long day,” I say and stand up, breaking whatever spell has us in its grip.

“Right,” he agrees and follows suit. When I reach for my plate, he takes it. “I got it.”

Our fingers brush and another tingle zings up my arm at the contact. Releasing a shaky breath, I turn around.

“Abby?”

Bracing myself for whatever he’s about to say, I slowly turn around. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. For all your help. You’re a godsend.”

“No problem,” I say, not quite sure how to interpret his words. He’s reverted back to his normal serious tone and I begin to wonder if I just imagined everything that happened.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I murmur and walk out, heading upstairs to check on Skylar and then settle down for the evening.

Eric Sullivan is a complete mystery and it’s probably best if I leave him unsolved.

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## ERIC

The days turn into weeks and time flies. I'm crazy busy with work and I trust Abby implicitly to deal with all of Skylar's wants and needs. And she's marvelous. We fall into an easy rhythm around the house and even though I go to the building site a lot, I also find more reasons to stay home.

And although I know I shouldn't, I like to watch her. The way she interacts with Skylar is adorable. Hiring Abby was the best decision I could've made and there's no doubt in my mind that my niece loves her.

After finishing a call with my lawyer, I hang up and don't hear a sound. It's suspiciously quiet and I wonder what the girls are up to. I stand up, stretch the kinks out, and head out of my office and over to the staircase. Climbing up, I hear Abby talking in low tones and when I reach the top, I see an entire blanket fortress built in the hallway. Blankets are clipped to doors and hanging over railings and even though Skylar is too young to fully appreciate it, Abby doesn't care. She'll do anything to bring a smile to that little girl's lips.

"What's going on?" I ask, lifting the edge of a pink quilt and peering beneath it.

"We are having a tea party at the castle with the fairy queen," Abby explains in a British accent and motions for me to come inside. "Won't you join us, fair knight?"

I quirk a brow, crack a smile and then find myself crawling beneath the covers. Skylar lays on her stomach playing with a

saucer and I cross my legs and look around at the little setup. “Fancy,” I comment.

“You should expect nothing less when you’re visiting the queen of the fae realm. Isn’t that correct, Princess Skylar?”

Skylar laughs and I notice a new tooth. “Hey, she’s got another tooth!” I exclaim, feeling proud. If you would’ve told me I’d be getting excited over a two-year-old’s new tooth a couple of months ago, I would’ve said you’re insane. And yet here I am, thrilled for Skylar.

“She does,” Abby confirms. “It’s one of the reasons for our royal celebration today.”

I lean closer and smirk. “And what’s the other reason?” I ask, playing along.

“The upcoming holidays, of course.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Thanksgiving is coming up fast and then before you know it, it’s going to be Christmas.”

“I didn’t realize fairies celebrated the holidays,” I tease.

“They certainly do,” she tells me and pretends to pour some tea into a cup. Beside her, Skylar giggles, clearly enjoying the game. “Would you like some tea, noble knight?”

My mouth edges up. “Noble knight?”

“That’s right.” She tilts her head, thinking for a moment. “You’re Sir Eric of Brookline.”

“And who are you?” I ask, playing along.

“I am merely a maiden and close confidante of Princess Skylar.” She passes me the tiny teacup and I lift it in a toast and pretend to take a sip.

“You have quite the imagination,” I comment, and set the cup down.

“I know. My sister and I played together growing up, but sometimes I’d shut my door and want to play by myself. I used to create entire worlds and stories and characters.”

“Like this?”

Abby nods. “Sometimes I think my imaginary worlds are more exciting than my real life. So it’s nice revisiting,” she adds, blue eyes twinkling.

I know I shouldn’t say what I’m about to, but my mouth moves of its own accord. “You need more excitement in your life?” I ask, sounding far too flirty. Almost challenging.

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt,” she admits.

My gaze drops to her full lips and my body’s reaction is instantaneous. The urge to kiss her fills me, but I can’t do that. But maybe Sir Eric could.

*Dammit.* I give my head a shake and pull back. I’m not sure what it is exactly about Abby Tate, but she’s reeling me in like a fish hooked on a line.

“Maybe you should find yourself a boyfriend,” I suggest, trying to play it cool.

“I don’t have any luck with that.”

“With dating?”

“With anything that has to do with relationships.”

Well, I can certainly relate to that. “Yeah, me neither.”

“What a sad pair of lonely hearts we make,” she says with a chuckle.

“It is a little depressing, huh?”

“And it doesn’t help with the holidays coming up. Even though I’m eternally single, it’s always the hardest at this time of year.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have to stress over buying some woman a gift. Miranda never liked anything I gave her.”

“Miranda is your ex-wife?”

I nod. “I call her ‘The Nightmare’ because she’s done her best to make sure my life has been exactly that since our split.”

“I’m sorry.”



“It’s certainly not your fault.” I study the dusting of freckles across her nose and resist the urge to lick them. They remind me of brown sugar crumbles. And this whole damn blanket fort smells like vanilla because of whatever perfume she’s wearing. “She’s just not a very nice person. I didn’t realize that until it was too late.”

“Well, I think you deserve someone who will treat you with kindness and be grateful for every single gift you give her.”

Before I can comment, my phone rings and I pull it out of my pocket. I’m reluctant to end our little imaginary tea party, but it’s Fiona. “I need to take this,” I say and start backing out of the fort. I stand up then give her one last grin. “Thanks for the tea, my lady.”

“You are ever so welcome, my noble knight,” she says in the British accent.

As I turn around and head downstairs, I notice my pants are suddenly far too tight. Stifling a low groan, an image of Abby naked and writhing beneath me taunts my mind. And she’s screaming my name in that accent.

“Hi, Fiona,” I answer, trying to banish the sexy thought as I readjust myself.

I get stuck in my office for the rest of the day and miss dinner with Abby and Skylar. It’s become my favorite part of the day, so I’m annoyed that I wasn’t able to sit down with them and unwind after working.

It’s after 8pm and Abby is probably putting Skylar to bed, so I don’t want to interrupt. Throwing a quick ham and cheese sandwich together and grabbing the dill pickle chips, I sit down at the island and eat alone. Afterward, I go down to my room, take a shower and drop into bed.

Sometimes it’s difficult for me to sleep because I have so much constantly buzzing around in my head. It can be hard for me to quiet my mind, and sleep is something that I never needed very much of.

Laying back against my pile of pillows, I turn on the large screen TV hanging up on the wall and flip aimlessly through hundreds of channels. Nothing holds my attention for long and I wonder what Abby is doing.

Is she in the shower right now? Her body naked and wet. I groan and squeeze my eyes closed.

That tempting little nanny of mine is getting harder and harder to ignore.

Eventually, I doze off and the sexual frustration must be getting to me because I dream about Abby. We're lying on the bed and she's in my arms, naked and arching up beneath me, whispering naughty things in that delightful British accent.

*Ah, Christ, it's enough to drive me mad.* We're kissing, touching and exploring each other's bodies and right before I can sink inside her wet warmth, my eyes snap open. My massive erection lifts the sheet, reminding me of the blanket fort Abby built earlier.

"Fuck," I hiss and roll out of bed. After taking care of myself in the bathroom, I realize I won't be able to fall back asleep without a little help so I decide to go down to the kitchen and have a glass of whiskey.

Hopefully, it'll help take the edge off because I'm hungering for this woman like a starved man is for food.

As I walk down to the kitchen, I see the light is already on and I pause in the doorway. Abby sits at the island, her hands around a glass of water.

"Hey," I say softly. "Everything okay?"

Abby looks up, startled. "Oh, hey. Yeah, fine."

I pad across the tiled floor and stop beside her. "Can't sleep either?"

She slowly shakes her head. "Even though I've been here a few weeks, it's still not exactly home. No offense."

"None taken."

“Sometimes I just don’t sleep very well in a new place. Skylar woke up about a half an hour ago, too, and I just couldn’t fall back asleep. What about you? Why’re you wandering the house at 2am?”

“My mind doesn’t always shut down just because it’s bedtime and I’ve never needed a lot of sleep to feel refreshed in the morning.” I lean a hip against the counter and scratch my chest. Her gaze instantly dips and I try not to smile. After she has a good look, I turn and reach for a couple of glasses and the bottle of whiskey. Against my better judgment, I pour us each a couple of fingers’ worth, walk over and slide one to her. “This usually helps, though.”

“Thanks,” she says.

I toss my whiskey back and then watch as she does the same. She coughs and a little shiver runs through her body. Even though she’s bundled up in a robe, she wraps her arms around herself.

“Are you cold?” I ask.

“A little,” she says, rubbing at her arms.

“I can turn up the heat,” I offer. “Or you can just do another shot?”

“Maybe both?” she counters.

I pour more whiskey into our glasses then wander over to the thermostat and raise the heat. It kicks on and we both take a sip this time instead of shooting it all at once. Sitting down on the stool beside her, I turn my glass in my hands, suddenly at a loss for what to say.

If it were up to me, there’d be no talking and I’d sweep her up into my arms and carry her down to my bed. Or just lay her out on the island here and fuck her senseless.

Damn, I really need to get my thoughts out of the gutter. Yet here I sit, wondering what she’s wearing beneath that robe.

“Eric?”

“Hmm?” I murmur, lifting my gaze to meet hers.

“You should know that you’re doing really, really well.”

As I contemplate her praise, I take another sip of my drink. “I don’t know about that, but thank you.”

“So much in your life has changed these past few weeks and I think you’ve handled it extremely well. Remarkably, in fact.”

“I’m not going to lie and say I haven’t felt the pressure, because I have. Between work and Skylar, it’s like a lead weight on my chest some days.”

“That’s to be expected. And remember, I’m here to help you however I can.”

My already lurid thoughts turn dirtier at her words and I think back over my dream. How good it felt to have her beneath me, skin to skin. The way she moved and how sweet she tasted. I can’t help but wonder what it would be like in real life to bed this woman. To slide deep inside her wet body and fuck her hard until we were both exhausted and satiated.

Trying to banish those tempting thoughts, I try to change the subject. “What’re your plans for Thanksgiving?” I ask.

“Usually I have dinner at my parents’ house. But they’re going out of town this year and Stella is working.”

“Your sister, right?” She nods. “Would you like to have dinner with me and Skylar?”

A slow smile lifts her mouth. “I’d like that.”

“Are you a good cook?”

“I manage. What about you?”

“Not at all,” I admit with a crooked grin.

“Okay, so maybe I’ll be in charge of that. But you need to help me get everything at the grocery store.”

“Deal,” I say. We finish our whiskey and I put the glasses in the sink.

Abby slides off the stool and I try not to look at her bare leg when her robe parts. “Night,” she says.

“Goodnight.” I watch her walk away and while my mind is yelling at me to back off, my curiosity and attraction to this woman is off the charts and not something I can simply ignore any longer.

Even though I know I should keep my hands to myself, they’re itching to touch her.

And I know that it’s only a matter of time before I give in to the temptation.

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## ABBY

Living with Skylar has been nothing but a joy and she's the sweetest little girl I've ever had the pleasure of watching. Living with Eric, on the other hand, has been nothing but sweet torture and the more my attraction to him grows, the more scared I become.

I think the thing that unnerves me most is I get the feeling he's on the same page. Sometimes I catch him looking at me and there's an unmistakable hunger in his eyes.

We've grown more comfortable with each other and our late night kitchen talks while sharing a nip of whiskey have happened on several occasions. I'm not sure if that's good or bad. All I know is that I enjoy them immensely. Way more than I should.

It's the day before Thanksgiving and I just got back from taking Skylar on a walk in her stroller. The weather is a little brisk and there's a definite chill in the air, but the sun is shining and it feels good to get outside in the fresh air. The neighborhood here is nice and I push Skylar down to the small park nearby where we sit on a bench near the pond and watch the ducks swim for a bit.

Almost an hour later, as I'm pushing her stroller back up the driveway, I see Eric saying goodbye to Fiona near her car. And I catch the tail-end of their conversation.

"Just like the Grinch," she says with a chuckle.

"What's like the Grinch?" I ask, wheeling Skylar up.

Eric shifts, clearly looking uncomfortable.

“I was just telling Eric that ever since you two arrived, it’s like his heart has grown three sizes larger.”

I can’t help but laugh and Eric frowns.

“Get out of here, Fi,” he growls, blue eyes narrowing. “And have a Happy Thanksgiving.”

“You, too. See you next week,” she says with a mischievous grin and gets into her car.

“Next week?” I echo as we head inside the house.

“Yeah. I gave her off ‘til Monday. Both of us actually.”

“Really?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Because you’re a workaholic. I wasn’t even sure if you knew what a day off was.”

“I know,” he says in a dry voice. “I just don’t usually take them.”

“I know,” I respond cheekily and lean down to pick Skylar up.

“Are you ready to go pick up some groceries for tomorrow?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

As we walk out, I see my sister’s car pull up. Fiona must’ve let her in as she was leaving and I grin. “That’s my sister,” I tell Eric, walking over to meet her. He follows and Stella steps out of her car.

“Hi! What’re you doing here?” I ask and give her a sideways hug because I’m holding Skylar.

Stella looks from me to the baby to Eric. “I had to swing by and say Happy Thanksgiving. Sorry, I’ve been meaning to visit, but you know I practically live at the hospital.”

“Stella, this is Eric. My boss,” I add quickly.

“Nice to meet you,” he says and shakes her hand.



“You’re Cash’s friend,” she says. “Nice to meet you, too. I’m glad everything worked out with you hiring my sister.”

“It’s worked out better than expected,” he says and I can feel my face flush.

“And this is Skylar,” I say quickly.

“Hello, Skylar,” Stella says. “She’s adorable.” Her gaze moves over the three of us then she turns to me, looking contrite. “I’m so sorry to be working tomorrow when Mom and Dad are going out of town.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. I should’ve made sure I had the day off so you wouldn’t have to spend Thanksgiving alone.”

“She won’t be alone,” Eric replies, snagging both our attention.

Stella raises a brow and I say, “Eric invited me to have dinner with him and Skylar. We were heading to the store right now to pick up some things for dinner.”

“Oh,” she responds, clearly surprised. “Well, thank you,” she tells him, then turns her attention back to me. “Because I’d hate for you to be by yourself.”

“I won’t be,” I assure her.

“Okay, well, I don’t mean to hold you up. I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing.”

“Everything is going great,” I tell her.

“You’re welcome to come visit any time,” Eric offers and Stella smiles.

“Thank you. Maybe we can do dinner on one of my nights off.”

“What night off?” I ask. “You’re a workaholic just like him.”

“Hey,” Eric says, nudging me with his elbow. “I’m getting better.”

“True, but barely.”

“I’m taking the long weekend off, aren’t I?”

“Supposedly, but we’ll see if you try to disappear into your office.”

“Maybe I should lock it and give you the key for safekeeping?” he suggests with a grin.

When I realize Stella is watching our interaction closely, I clear my throat, suddenly uncomfortable. “Well, uh, we should probably get going. The grocery store is going to be a madhouse.”

“Right,” she says and gives me another quick hug. “Happy Thanksgiving, Abs. Call me later, okay?”

“Okay. And Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Eric says and Stella waves before slipping back into her car.

As she drives away, I turn to get Skylar situated in the car seat in the back of Eric’s Range Rover.

“She seems nice,” he says. “She’s older than you?”

“Three years older,” I say. “And we’re best friends. It’s just hard sometimes because she’s always at the hospital. But she loves her job and she lives to help people.”

“What does she do?”

“ER nurse.”

“Oh, Cash is in the ER, too.”

I finish strapping Skylar in and close the door. “Lucky for us, isn’t it?” I ask and turn to get into the passenger side. Eric opens the door for me and I slip inside the car. I think I hear him murmur what sounds like “very lucky” under his breath before closing the door, and my heart does a little spin in my chest.

*Very lucky, indeed, I think.*

The next day, we quickly realize that neither of us is a chef. Although we try, the small turkey is so dry it tastes like

cardboard, the cranberry sauce is watery and nasty, and my mashed potatoes are so full of lumps they're nearly inedible.

Despite our failed attempt at cooking, we laugh it off and even though we don't have much to show for it, we had fun. At least, I did. I love seeing Eric's playful side and he had it going full-force today. Every time he came up beside me, his arm would brush against mine and a little thrill would shoot through my body. We also exchanged quite a few looks and I'm not exactly sure what they meant, but I found myself getting extremely turned on.

Since dinner didn't turn out, Eric suggests we order in, but we quickly realize after a few phone calls that every place is closed.

"It's okay. I know what we can have," I say after scavenging through the pantry.

"What?" he asks, voice low as he moves up beside me, looking over my shoulder at the shelves of food.

*God.* He's so close that his warm breath rustles the hair near my temple and his sandalwood scent infuses me. Swallowing hard, I press my lips together. He's so tall that I have to look up.

"How about you throw some frozen french fries into the air fryer and I whip up some grilled cheeses?"

His mouth edges up. "Sounds very Thanksgiving-ish," he teases and I elbow him in the side. With a chuckle, he heads off to take care of the fries while I stand here in the pantry, overheating, and trying to regroup. I fan a hand in front of my face, swooning, and not quite sure how to handle this growing attraction.

*It's probably only one-sided,* I tell myself. But then why does he sound so flirty sometimes? And why does he give me that adorable, little smile that makes my heart flutter?

Grabbing the loaf of bread, I start making the sandwiches and try hard to not think about how much I want Eric to kiss me. I mean, it's crazy. And impossible. He's my employer and that alone is reason enough to keep things professional. He's

also much older than me— by fifteen years! I don't need a man or the complications this particular one would bring.

No matter how attractive he is and how much I want him, I'm staying away. Or so I try to convince myself.

The problem is, I can't stop wondering what it would feel like if he took me in his arms, lowered his head and kissed me thoroughly. I have a pretty good feeling that my knees would threaten to buckle because Eric looks like the kind of man who knows exactly how to make a woman giddy.

He's very experienced, divorced even, and I'm the complete opposite. I wonder if he can see the big "V" practically stamped on my forehead? No, impossible. He couldn't possibly know because we haven't been in any kind of intimate scenario yet.

*OMG.* I thought 'yet.'

Pulling in a deep breath, I drop the buttered bread slices and cheese in the frying pan and squeeze my eyes shut. This man is seriously testing my will power. And I'm not sure if I have the strength or desire to clear my foggy brain and stay on the straight and narrow path. Because if he ever makes a move, I know I would welcome it. Maybe even encourage it?

*Shit, shit, shit.*

But it's just wishful thinking. There's no way he'd ever try anything with me. Just as the thought rolls through my head, Eric moves up beside me, pressing his arm against mine, and my stomach flips. He's so warm and he smells so good. I chew on my lower lip, unable to make eye contact, because I'm scared he's going to see little hearts floating around in my eyes.

"Smells good," he murmurs.

I swallow hard and flip the first sandwich with the spatula. "I know it's not your typical Thanksgiving Day dinner fare, but I make an excellent grilled cheese."

"Actually, I was talking about you. You always smell like vanilla."

*Oh, God.* I swallow hard and can't even choke out a reply.

When he finally steps back, I can breathe easier. It doesn't take long for the food to be ready and after getting Skylar situated first, we sit down and dig in.

"This is really good," Eric says, sounding surprised. "What's your secret ingredient?"

"If I told you then it wouldn't be a secret, would it?" I ask, unable to keep the flirty tone out of my voice.

A smile lifts his mouth as he chews. "I won't tell," he promises.

"Miracle Whip. I won't eat a grilled cheese without it."

"It's surprisingly good."

"You doubted me?" I place a hand over my heart.

"After the way the rest of our dinner turned out, I wasn't so sure."

"We still have dessert, though," I remind him. "I don't think we screwed that up too bad."

"No, it actually looks pretty good."

After dinner, I pull the apple crisp out and add a dollop of whipped cream on top. We both take a bite and simultaneously moan.

"So damn good," Eric murmurs and, I swear to God, my ovaries release an egg right on the spot.

He looks over at me, aqua eyes shining, and I lick my lips. I don't mean to do it on purpose. It's just a reaction. I mean, I might have some whipped cream on my mouth. Or so I try to tell myself.

But the more wicked part of me knows that I did it on purpose. Because Eric is stoking a fire inside me like never before and I'm scared nothing is going to be able to quench these flames.

Nothing that can happen, anyway.

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## ERIC

I t's clear that the dynamic between Abby and I is changing, heating up with an intensity that I haven't felt with a woman for a very long time. Hell, maybe ever. I don't think I ever got this worked up over Miranda in the beginning.

Maybe it's because Miranda fell right into bed with me after our first date. With Abby, it's like this long foreplay that's been happening between us for a month. It's been building and growing, and I know that I'm not just imagining it. Every touch, every look that we exchange, is loaded with need, want, desire.

We're constantly finding reasons to brush against each other and get too close. She's tempting me to no end and every night, I lie in bed and think about her upstairs and how easy it would be for me to go up and join her.

But I can't.

First of all, I'm not a creep. And second, I'd need to know for sure that she was all in with me, too. Just because she's flirting with me doesn't automatically mean she wants to fuck me. God knows, I'm all onboard the fuck-train, but Abby is so young and I have the impression that she's still somewhat innocent. Not necessarily a virgin, but she's definitely had a lack of partners.

Hell, she's only twenty-five and has been living at home the past year. I doubt she was inviting men over or shacking up. At least I hope that's the case. The idea of her not having a lot of experience with other men is extremely appealing. I've

only slept with sexually-seasoned women. Shit, Miranda once dropped her number and I was floored for a moment.

*Over twenty.* At that point, I was trailing behind her and I wasn't sure I even wanted to catch up. While sex is important, work is more important to me. I can get so wrapped up in a project that I don't think about sex for months.

But with Abby living here, things have reversed. She's got me hard half the time and I've been imagining all kinds of sexual scenarios with her. It's a huge, yet welcome, distraction. For the first time in my life, I'm becoming more concerned with something other than the next building I want to buy.

Abby took Skylar with her to go pick out some Christmas decorations because she told me the lack of holiday decor around here was depressing. I gave her my credit card and told her to knock herself out. Now I'm wondering if I should've given her a limit because if my Miss Pollyanna Sunshine is as big into the holidays as I fear, this place could end up looking like a Christmas Wonderland or Santa's fucking workshop.

*Ah, well. Too late now,* I think, as I hear the Rover pull up outside. Curious to see if she's bought out the entire holiday section at Target, I head to the front door and throw it open. I walk out and she hops out of the SUV and gives me a sheepish look.

"I may have gone a little overboard," she immediately says and I cross my arms, my gaze moving to the back of the car. But the windows are darkened and I can't see inside.

"I had a funny feeling you were going to try to turn this place into a scene from Elf." I try to sound firm, but my mouth twitches. If decorating this place with ornaments and wreaths makes her happy then I'm all for it. I'm in total support of anything that brings a smile to her beautiful face.

"Let me take Skylar in and then I'm going to need a little help unloading everything," she says.

While she takes the baby inside, I open up the back and blink. It's jam-packed with bags and a huge box that can only



be an artificial tree. There are a couple of other large boxes, too, and one says “Dancing Reindeer” on the label.

“Oh, Christ,” I murmur. As I start pulling the large boxes out, Abby appears and gathers up as many bags as she can.

I toss her a sardonic look.

“A little overboard?” I ask with a grunt as I drag the tree out.

“Just a little, but if you think about it, I was starting at square one. You have no decorations and that’s just not acceptable.”

“Dare I ask what you plan to do with this large ‘dancing reindeer’?”

She claps her hands together, blue eyes sparkling. “I’m going to set him up right next to the snow globe!”

“Snow globe?” I echo.

“It’s so cute. You plug it in and the snow flies all around the Santa Claus inside. You’re gonna love it.”

“I’m sure,” I say dryly.

“C’mon, Scrooge,” she says and bumps me with her elbow. “I need your help setting stuff up and then Skylar and I can decorate if you find it that distasteful.”

“I don’t find it distasteful,” I tell her, dragging the big faux tree in behind her. “I just question why people put so much time and effort into something that you only have up for two or three weeks. What’s the point?”

Abby abruptly stops and places her hands on her hips. “What’s the point? It’s fun! Getting into the holiday spirit is the best part of decorating.”

I arch a brow, not convinced. “It just seems like a lot of work.”

“Alright, Scrooge, we’re going to do this the right way and you’re going to enjoy every single moment of the process,” she informs me in a bossy voice that I really like.

God, I wish she was talking about something other than decorating. “You think you can convince me that spending so much time preparing for one day is worth it?”

She steps up to me and we’re practically toe-to-toe. “I’m going to try,” she says with a little smile. Then she pulls her phone out and a minute later, Christmas music fills the air. “We have to set the mood.”

I’d rather be setting the mood with wine, candles and satin sheets, but instead I’m stuck with Mariah Carey singing “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” While Abby tells me to start putting the artificial tree together, she dumps all the bags and begins by wrapping tinsel around the banister while Skylar amuses herself in her playpen.

“So have you always been obsessed with Christmas?” I ask as I put the base together and then screw the bottom of the tree to it.

“I wouldn’t use the term obsessed, but it is the best time of the year.”

“Why?” I ask. “Because you get presents?”

Abby frowns. “Don’t you know that it’s better to give than to receive?”

I shrug and begin to fluff the flattened pine boughs. “Every woman I was ever in a relationship with at this time of the year gave me a list of things she wanted. And you know what I got in return?”

“What?” she asks, tilting her blonde head.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Well that’s not right.”

“No shit.”

For a long moment, Abby doesn’t say anything. “Do you think it’s because you have so much money? So people take advantage?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“That makes me sad.”

I almost laugh but then realize that she's being completely serious. "Why're you sad?"

"Because I don't like that. Christmas is when you're supposed to give and think of others."

"In a perfect world, sure," I say.

Abby walks over, a strand of lights in her hand, and shakes her head. "So pessimistic."

I shake my head. "No, I'm a realist."

"Well, today I need you to realize these lights onto the tree," she teases. "Can you start them up on top? I can't reach."

"Sure," I say and take the lights. Grabbing a small stool from the closet, I step up and lean forward, wrapping the multi-colored lights around. When I reach the end, Abby already has another strand ready to go and we attach them together.

Once the lights are up, we take a step back and she hits a button. They go from steady to blinking. "We have a lot of options," she says and switches it to a faster blinking choice. Then there's a nice fade which changes into a waterfall and finally a strobe-like effect.

"Shit, that'll blind Skylar," I say and squint.

Abby chuckles. "Who would ever choose that?" She goes back to the slow-blinking option and I nod.

"That's nice."

"I think so, too."

After we settle on that, Abby points to a pile of stacked boxes, each one full of ornaments. We open them up and start hanging them up on the tree branches. Once again, we find reasons to get too close and brush up next to each other. The tension keeps building and by the time we're done decorating the tree, I need a cold shower. Or at least a cold drink.

"Want to take a break?" I ask. "I'll grab us a couple of waters."

“Okay, thanks.”

After cooling off, we spend the rest of the day decorating the house and front yard. As soon as it’s dark, Abby steps back and waits with baited breath, Skylar in her arms, as I plug in the gigantic snow globe and reindeer. A blizzard starts whirling in the clear plastic globe around Santa Claus and beside it, the life-sized reindeer looks like it’s dancing.

Skylar laughs with glee, Abby cheers and I’m not sure if I want to laugh, roll my eyes or cheer right along with them. We’ve spent hours and hours turning my professionally-decorated home into the Griswald’s house from Christmas Vacation.

Truth be told, I’ve loved every second.

It’s cold and we don’t spend much time outside admiring the decorations. It’s also late and Abby excuses herself to go put Skylar down for the night. I know their nightly routine by heart now and it takes them thirty minutes— a bath, followed by a bedtime story while Abby rocks Skylar until she falls asleep. Sometimes a bottle is involved, depending on how cranky Skylar is, and then Abby tucks her in.

Exactly thirty minutes after Abby leaves, I walk up the steps, trying to talk myself out of what I’m about to do, but to no avail. Pausing in the doorway of Skylar’s room, I watch as Abby rocks the baby. The room is lit up by a rainbow of colors that move over the walls as the small night light, a carousel, turns on its pedestal.

It takes her a moment to realize I’m standing there and when she does, she slowly stands up and places the sleeping baby in her bed. After covering her with a blanket, she quietly backs out, pulling the door halfway shut.

Once Abby takes Skylar upstairs each evening, I rarely see her again for the rest of the night. Unless we have one of our late-night kitchen chats. But I certainly never follow her up here. And I definitely have never cornered her in the hallway or backed her up against the wall and tucked a loose blonde lock behind her ear.

After releasing her golden hair, I lay my palm flat against the wall beside her head. Our gazes lock and we're both breathing hard. It's like the air between us is charged and I can't resist her a moment longer.

We both move at the same time, our hungry mouths colliding. It's like an explosion goes off between us and we devour each other. Her lips are so damn soft and I plunge my tongue between them, determined to taste every dark corner.

I slide my hand around her neck, force her head back, and drink deeply. She tastes even sweeter than I thought she would and I want to taste other parts of her body, too. I'm dying to know what every single corner and hidden curve tastes like.

But just like a shooting star, our passion burns hot and bright for a moment then we pull apart, panting, and the enormity of what just happened hits us both like a ton of bricks.

What looks like panic flashes through Abby's eyes and she takes an unsteady step away from me. "We can't," she says.

"Abby—"

"Good night," she cries and then turns and practically runs down to her room.

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath. "Good job, idiot."

Sliding a frustrated hand through my hair, I suddenly feel like I just made a huge mistake. We just crossed a line that we shouldn't have and now I could be in danger of losing her altogether.

*So damn stupid.* Why couldn't I just think with my brain and not my dick?

I've always been able to control my desires. But with Abby, for some reason, it's different. I want her so damn badly.

Now I just risked everything.

And what did she do?

She ran. *Fuck me.*

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## ABBY

Once I'm safely in my room, I close the door and fall back against it. I'm still reeling from that all-consuming kiss and I touch my lips, at a loss and not sure what to think. That was certainly the best damn kiss I ever had and my knees are still shaking.

*Holy hell.* We crossed the employer/employee line and now I'm terrified. What does this mean? What's going to happen? Is Eric interested in me or just satisfying his curiosity? Because let's face it, we've been flirting hardcore with each other for weeks and the intensity has been ratcheting up with every encounter. And now it's like we just exploded and had to know what it would feel like to kiss each other.

After that steamy encounter in the hallway, I don't think I'll ever be the same. So much about Eric fascinates me, but I'm also so confused.

*Now what to do?* I wonder.

Ignoring the situation and pretending like it never happened probably isn't the best solution. And I've always been someone to handle things head-on. So I guess that's what I should do. Just go down to his room and talk to him about what just happened.

*Oh, God.* I'm so embarrassed, though. What if he isn't into me or worse yet, he regrets it? That would hurt my feelings, but it's something I need to be prepared for. I know I'm not his normal type. I'm an inexperienced virgin who is desperately yearning for true love and her happy ending which includes a



husband and children. Eric, on the other hand, is a middle-aged divorced man who straight-up told me he's never marrying again or having children.

I don't see how we could ever compromise.

Pulling in a deep, steadying breath, I walk out of my room and half expect him to still be out in the hallway waiting for me. But he's not. I don't know if that's a good sign or a bad one. I go downstairs and walk down to his room. The door is open and as I step inside, I rap my knuckles on the door frame.

Eric stands there in his low-slung pajama pants, shirtless per usual, and my heart skips a beat. "Can we talk?" I manage to ask.

"Come on in," he invites me, his aqua eyes serious and searching. "Sit." He drops down on the bed, and I walk over and sit down next to him.

"I don't want things to be weird between us," I say, looking down at my hands clasped together in my lap.

"I don't either," he agrees.

"So the best thing to do is talk about what happened instead of pretending nothing did. Right?" I finally look up and he's staring at me so intently that I shift uncomfortably beneath his stare.

"Abby..." His voice trails off and when he slides a hand along my cheek, cupping my face, I nuzzle against his warm palm, closing my eyes. When I hear his swift intake of breath, I open my eyes and see the desire swimming in his deep blue gaze. "I can't pretend I don't want you. Because I do. So damn much, I ache."

Without thinking twice, I turn my face and press a kiss to his palm. "I want you, too," I whisper. Overwhelming attraction is guiding me, not rational thought, and the next thing I know, we're kissing again. And it feels so good.

I moan into his mouth, tentatively meeting his tongue with mine, and he encourages me, tilting my head, making me accept everything he's giving. And I love it. I love everything about the way he takes charge. We're both hot and hungry, but

he keeps it gentle enough that I don't panic or get nervous. In fact, I trust him, more than I've ever trusted any other man, and I cave to him.

Whatever he wants at this moment, he can have. The feeling that I belong to him fills me.

Eric pushes me back onto the big bed, moving over me, and pressing me into the mattress. He keeps his weight off me, but still holds me down and I wrap my arms around his neck, kissing him with everything I've got. He dips his head and begins leaving a hot trail of kisses down my neck and I arch up.

"You taste so good, sweetheart," he murmurs, his voice husky. "And I've been wanting a taste for weeks now."

My toes curl and I drag my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck. *Mmmm*. He tugs the neckline of my nightshirt down and his tongue dips and swirls in the hollow of my throat. Meanwhile, his other hand pushes my robe open and slides up under my nightgown, skimming up and down my thigh.

From far away, I hear Skylar start crying and I tense.

*What am I doing?* I'm the nanny and my job is to care for Eric's niece. Yet here I am, in his bed, acting like I'm his girlfriend. Which I am not. Not even close.

*Oh, God.*

I slip out from under him and mumble something unintelligible about Skylar needing me. Hurrying out of his room, I run up the stairs and straight into Skylar's room. I scoop her up and bounce her in my arms until she settles down. Then I change her wet diaper and place her back in her crib. I stand there for a while, brushing her soft hair back, watching until she drifts off to sleep, all the while cursing myself for making out with Eric not once, but twice.

What the hell was I thinking? Clearly, I don't have one rational thought in my head when it comes to Eric Sullivan. Once I'm sure Skylar is settled and slumbering peacefully again, I walk down to my room and drop down on the bed.

I can still feel his hands on me, moving under my nightshirt, and how his warm chest felt pressed against mine. My breathing picks up and my panties are soaked. I'm not sure how to handle this situation. Clearly, the attraction is mutual, but that doesn't mean he wants anything more than one night.

Maybe that's all we need? To get whatever this is out of our systems? As I'm debating that line of thought, Eric appears. *Oh, God.* The sight of him in the doorway with nothing more than those plaid pajama bottoms on is my undoing. I stand up and we both collide halfway to each other, mouths moving hard and fast.

Suddenly he pulls back. "I'm sorry. I came up here to apologize. I don't want to make you uncomfortable in any way."

"You didn't," I say softly. "It's me. The truth is, I'm falling for my employer and I'm not sure what to do or how to handle it."

Eric's gaze blazes an unholy blue at my confession.

My face flames, and I can't believe that I just admitted my feelings to him. I'm terrified of his reaction, but it's pretty instantaneous. He pounces.

"Oh!" I cry as we fall back onto the bed. His big hands are roaming all over me and he's kissing me hard, forcing my mouth open, tangling his tongue with mine. When he rubs up against my hip, there's no mistaking the huge bulge in his thin pajama bottoms and I pull away, gasping in a breath of much-needed air.

"Do you have any idea how much I want you?" he rasps.

"I want you, too," I whisper back, unable to believe those words are coming out of my mouth. "But..."

He lifts his head, blue eyes hot and focused on me. "But what? I don't care that you work for me. This isn't going to affect that. I promise, okay?"

A frown pulls my brow together. "It's not that. I mean, that's a part of it, but there's something else."

“What, sweetheart? You can tell me anything.”

“Well, I sort of...umm...have never done this.”

“Done what?” he asks. It takes a moment, but then realization seems to dawn on him. “Oh. You mean—” He brushes my hair back with his index finger. “Sex?”

I force myself to nod even though it’s humiliating. Meanwhile, something that almost looks like triumph flashes over his face. “I’ve just always had bad luck when it comes to men. But you’re different.”

“I am?” He arches a dark brow and I can tell that my words please him.

With a shy nod, I realize that I’ve been wondering for weeks now if Eric is my person. The man who will be my first. I know that I want him to be, and it feels like fate brought us together. I can feel myself falling for him— falling really hard.

But I have no idea how he feels and that’s scary. Even so, I want this. I want him.

He presses a light kiss against my lips then drops another kiss along my jawline and then one on my cheekbone. Then several across the bridge of my nose. He’s dropping them all over my face and I can’t help but giggle.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

“Kissing your freckles,” he says. “I love them.”

My heart stutters in my chest when he says the “L” word even though I know it isn’t directed at me. Still, though. A girl can dream, right?

When he stops and pulls back, he’s back to serious Eric again. “Can I be blunt?” he asks.

“Please,” I encourage him.

“From the moment we met, I’ve imagined this. And over the passing weeks, it’s gone from wanting you to needing you.” He moves his lower body against my hip again. “I’m here for you, sweetheart. Right here, right now, I will fuck you so thoroughly, you’ll never know what hit you. If you want.”

“You’ll make my head spin?” I tease.

“I’ll make your sweet pussy spin.”

My mouth drops open and I blink. I didn’t expect serious billionaire, real estate mogul Eric to talk dirty in bed much less for it to be so damn sexy.

He leans down and sucks my earlobe into his mouth, as though to emphasize things to come. I bite down on my bottom lip and sigh.

“How wet are you?” he asks, voice low in my ear.

I can’t find the words and even if I could, I’m not exactly sure how to respond to his naughty question.

His wicked hand trails back beneath my nightgown and I gasp when his fingers move between my legs. Those long fingers slide up and down the front of my panties then pause at the top, finding my throbbing clit and pressing and rubbing through the cotton fabric.

“You like that?” he asks. “Or more like this?” He changes the pressure and my hips jerk.

“Oh, God,” I cry, shamelessly arching against his hand.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Go on, move against me. Let me know what you want.”

He’s blowing my mind, pushing me to the edge of someplace I’ve never been before and I squeeze my legs together.

“Uh-uh,” he murmurs. “Spread your legs for me.”

Everything inside me is tightening and I ignore him and press my thighs tight.

“You’re not listening,” he chastises. “So let’s try this a little differently.” He pulls away and the sudden loss of his warmth brings me back to reality. Before I realize what’s happening, he’s slipping his fingers beneath the elastic of my panties and sliding them down and off. Then he nudges my legs apart, holding them open with his shoulder, and I glance up.

My face burns as I lay before him, completely bared and wide open. I try to twist away, but he grabs my waist and holds me in place.

“Don’t. You’re so pink and wet. Glistening for me.”

Then he lowers his head and when his mouth closes over me, tongue lapping up my crease, I gasp at the intimate sensation. He continues to lick and flick his tongue, and I swear I almost pass out. The pleasure skyrockets and I fall back and cry out, my nails digging into the bedspread.

“Eric!” I cry, not sure how much of this I can handle.

He doesn’t stop and I can feel my body begin to pulse, the pressure building, and the moment his lips wrap around my clit and he sucks, my self-control snaps. My hips rock against his face and I shatter.

Sinking into the mattress, thoroughly wiped out, I can barely remember my name as Eric slides back up my body and gives me a long, slow, sensuous kiss. I can taste myself on his tongue and lips, and it’s strange.

When he pulls back, I gaze up at him, at a loss. I have no words for what just happened and my lower body is still pulsing from the release.

“Okay?” he whispers, fingers making small circles on my bare thigh.

I force a nod. “Yeah,” I finally manage to say. “That was...” My mind searches for the right word and his mouth edges up in an amused smirk.

“What?” he coaxes.

“Orgasmic,” I finally say and he chuckles.

“Oh, sweetheart, I haven’t even gotten started yet.”

My insides quiver at his words.

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## ERIC

**A** bby is everything I imagined and more. She's so responsive and I'm encouraging her to talk to me and be vocal. And she doesn't disappoint. The virgin is whispering in my ear about how good my chest feels as her hands wander all over it. I'm hoping those hands of hers get bolder and head south.

At the same time, I plan to take my time with her and make sure that we're both incredibly satisfied tonight. First thing, though, is to get this nightshirt out of the way. I tug it up and she lifts her arms, helping me. I toss it, taking in her perfect body. She's slim, but has enough curves in all the right places to make me salivate. Dropping my head, I swirl my tongue around a perfect, rosy nipple. Abby arches, moaning softly, and I feel that sound in my dick.

*Ah, fuck.* She's got me so hot and bothered, I can't see straight. So I close my eyes and suck on her perfect breast until she's writhing. Her hands twist in my hair and pull, and I move my attention over to her other breast, scraping my teeth across it. Goosebumps prickle on her flesh and she shifts beneath me. I know she's getting restless and wants more. Needs more.

It occurs to me that I don't have a condom. I let out a sigh and push back. "Be right back, okay?"

She goes up on an elbow. "Where are you going?" she asks, blue-green eyes so wide and innocent.

"To get protection."



“Oh, right.”

I press a quick kiss to her lips. “Don’t move.”

She gives me a little smile and I hurry downstairs. To be honest, I haven’t been with a woman or focused on getting laid in a while and I hope to Christ I have a condom somewhere. My heart sinks when I don’t see one in my nightstand drawer.

“No, no, no,” I mutter, turning around and storming into the bathroom. I yank a few drawers open, getting desperate, then finally see one. I grab the lone packet and send up a silent prayer of thanks to the universe.

Jogging back up the steps, two at a time, I tear the condom open with my teeth and I’m on the verge of dropping my bottoms when I suddenly remember I need to slow down. This is Abby’s first time and I need to make sure she’s ready. More than ready.

I need her wet and whimpering beneath me.

The good thing is it doesn’t take long for me to achieve that goal. Instead of my mouth, I use my fingers and she’s bucking against my hand five minutes later, head thrown back in ecstasy.

“That’s it,” I encourage her. “Come for me. Just like that.”

Abby cries out and she’s drenched. I’m hard as steel when I finally yank my bottoms off and kick them aside. I roll the condom on and move between her legs, fisting myself, then drag my twitching length up her soaked seam. Propping myself up on an elbow, I start to push inside her, and she digs her nails into my biceps. The moment she tenses, I freeze.

“Okay?” I rasp, breathing hard, dying to sink all the way inside her hot, pulsing body, but restraining myself.

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Hang on,” I say, pulling out and then gliding deeper. *Damn.* She’s so tight and I don’t want to hurt her so I take it slow, easing in and out, allowing her body to stretch around me and adjust. When she begins to relax, I thrust all the way

and she cries out. I hold steady, make eye contact, and she nods.

“Don’t stop,” she whispers.

I don’t think I could stop if my life depended on it. Her body feels like heaven, wrapped around me, so hot and wet. I rock my hips, picking up my pace, and reach down to find her swollen clit. I thrust faster, massage her slowly and kiss her deeply.

Small mewling sounds escape from her and I’m panting like a rutting dog. Everything feels more intense and vibrant than it ever has before. And, I swear to God, if Skylar wakes up and starts crying right now, she’s going to have to wait because I’m balls-deep in this beautiful woman, fucking her brains out, and my thoughts are half-incoherent with lust. Absolutely dizzy with pleasure, I bring her right to the edge with me then make sure she climaxes first. Once I know she’s good, I sail over an imaginary cliff and bliss consumes me as a powerful orgasm racks through me from head to toe.

“*Christ,*” I hiss as a shudder rips through me. Dropping down beside her, I blink stupidly, not quite sure what just happened. It’s been so long since I’ve had an orgasm that intense and it throws me. Maybe I’ve never had one that strong. Has it just been too long? Or is it specifically Abby?

Whatever it is, I’m wrecked. Somehow, I manage to roll out of bed, take care of the protection, and then crawl back under the sheet with her. I’m not sure where we go from here, but I know that I want her close to me, so I pull her into my arms. She curls up, spooning her body against mine, and I once again wonder what the hell just happened.

A few hours later, Skylar’s cries echo down the hallway and we both wake up. Abby slips out of my arms, puts her robe on and pads away to take care of the baby. The loss of her warmth feels wrong and I sit up. I’m not sure my body has ever felt so satiated. Sex with Abby was more than I ever guessed it could be and even though I’d like to do it again the moment she returns, I don’t have any more condoms.

It's probably best if I get out of here now before I do something really careless like fuck her bare. Because I'm already getting hard just thinking about it. I drag myself out of bed, slip my pajama bottoms on and walk down to Skylar's room where I find Abby rocking her back and forth.

Abby looks up as I enter the room and I move around behind her, lay my hands on her shoulders and gently massage them. Once Skylar is asleep again, Abby gets up and gently lays her back down in the crib. When she turns back around, I reach for her hand and guide her out into the hallway.

Pulling the door shut a bit, I turn and haul Abby up into my arms. She wraps her legs around my waist and I turn, pressing her back against the wall, kissing her passionately. She slips slightly and I grind my hips against her core, letting her know just how much I want her again.

With a shaky sigh, I lift my head and look into her passion-glazed eyes. "As much as I want to fuck you senseless again, I'm out of protection. I don't suppose you have anything?" I ask, even though I'm pretty sure I already know her answer.

"No," she whispers, gyrating her pelvis against my erection.

"You gotta stop that, sweetheart, or I'm gonna blow," I warn her.

She immediately stills and then begins nibbling on my jaw. "Anything I can do to help you out?"

"Yeah, but not tonight," I say and set her down on her feet. She gives me a pouty look and I swear it looks like she's about to stomp her foot. "As much as I want to stay with you, I have to go downstairs or I won't be able to resist you."

"You think I'm irresistible?" She bats her lashes at me.

I take her face in my hands and give her a long, leisurely kiss. "Delightfully so," I say after we break apart. Leaning down, I press my lips against her forehead. "Sweet dreams."

She steps back looking a little dazed. "Sweet dreams," she echoes.

Leaving Abby and going back downstairs all alone to my big, empty bedroom sucks. But it's too dangerous staying up there with her. And far too tempting. There's no way I could just go to sleep in the same bed with her when I want so much more.

She's got me aching for her again, but the last thing I plan to do is slip up and get my nanny pregnant. *Fuck*. What a nightmare that would be.

But first thing in the morning, I plan to drive over to the pharmacy and buy the biggest box of condoms I can find.

And that's exactly what I do.

It's only Friday and we have the entire weekend together since I said I wasn't working. The strange thing is, I don't miss working. In fact, I don't even give it much thought at all and, for me, that's not normal. But I'm far too busy hanging out with Abby and Skylar to worry about anything else, and we have so much fun together. During the day, we watch movies, play games or just hang out, and it's like we've become this little family. Then when night comes, we put Skylar to bed and go into Abby's room where we jump on each other.

I don't think I've ever been so excited to take a woman to bed before, but Abby has me so ready to go that by the time 8pm rolls around, I'm ready to tackle her down and have my way with her. We spend two more glorious, mind-blowing nights together and then Monday inevitably rolls back around.

Fiona shows up bright and early and asks if Santa Claus visited over the weekend because of all the decorations. Abby laughs and I roll my eyes. She also must sense something has shifted because she's looking from me to Abby, eyes narrowed and a shrewd, knowing expression on her face. Of course, I just sip my coffee and Abby continues feeding Skylar breakfast. I'm not sure what tipped Fiona off, but she's one smart cookie and has always been good at reading people. Maybe it's the lingering looks Abby and I keep exchanging. I can't fucking help it.

Whatever it is, a part of me knows that we should tone it down. But the other more reckless part of me that I never

knew existed wants to claim Abby Tate as mine and shout it from the rooftops. I'm feeling extremely possessive over Abby and that's a foreign emotion for me. After thinking about it, I realize it must be because I'm the only man she's slept ever with.

As the week progresses, everything changes between us and suddenly it's like we're a real couple, and the three of us are playing house. I'm not exactly sure how I feel about that because it's not something I ever wanted.

Then again, all this feels pretty damn new. In a really good way.

We go to the grocery store, the park, the mall, the movies and out to eat together. Anyone who didn't know us would assume we were a normal family. I find myself delegating more jobs to Fiona and the crew onsite at my building and choosing to spend more time with my girls.

By Wednesday, I know that I need to get Abby alone so we aren't interrupted by Skylar constantly. I decide to call Cash and ask if he and his wife Rebecca would be willing to babysit Skylar over the weekend. Cash agrees and probably assumes that I have a business trip and Abby is busy. I don't lead him to believe anything differently either.

When I get Abby alone later that night, I invite her to go up to my house in New Hampshire on Lake Winnepesaukee.

"A lake house?" she asks, blue-green eyes widening. "That sounds fun! I'm going to have to pack Skylar's things tomorrow and—"

"Just us," I interrupt. "Cash and his wife Rebecca are going to watch Skylar for the weekend."

"Oh," she says, a little breathlessly. "Just us?"

I nod. "No interruptions. Just me, you and lots of hot sex. How does that sound?"

She visibly swallows. "Really good."

"Great. It's a date then."

The next two days finally pass and by the time Saturday morning arrives, the anticipation hangs heavy. Abby waits in the Rover while I take Skylar and her bag up to Cash and Rebecca's home in Chestnut Hill. Abby already wrote a couple of pages of instructions and after answering a few questions, I leave my niece in good hands and jog back out to the SUV.

"All set?" she asks.

"All set," I confirm, reaching over to take her hand.

*Let our weekend getaway commence*, I think, lacing my fingers through hers.

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## ABBY

The drive up to Eric's lake house is comfortable and we keep up a steady stream of conversation. There's so much more that I want to know about him and he's still slightly guarded, but I can feel him slowly opening up to me.

It's hard to believe how much has transpired in the past week. First of all, I'm no longer a virgin and I'm in a sexual relationship with a man— and other than me and Eric, no one knows. The secrecy makes it feel exciting, special and also a bit illicit. When we get back to town, I know that I'm going to have to tell Stella or I'll burst. I've never been great at keeping secrets and this is just too huge not to share. I'm not sure how she's going to react, but I hope she's happy for me.

As the wooded scenery flies by, I lean my head against the window and take a moment to acknowledge the fact that I'm developing serious feelings for Eric. I turn my attention to him and admire his handsome profile. It's easy to understand how I fell so hard, so fast. Eric is the first man who listens to me, pays close attention to each word I say, and that's huge. Most of the men I've gone out with barely ask me a thing because they're so busy talking about themselves or interrupting me with some comment that they deem is more important than whatever it is I'm talking about.

Eric also makes me feel extremely desired and that's a feat no man has accomplished. He not only tells me I'm beautiful, but also shows me by the way he touches me. To me, it's more than sex. It's true intimacy, and when he's inside me, I feel a deep connection between our bodies, minds and souls.



Maybe I'm just being naive; letting myself get swept away so quickly and completely because he's my first. But I don't think so. It truly feels like so much more. Something very special.

Of course, I have no idea if I'm just a pleasant diversion for him or if he's catching feelings, too.

Either way, I think this weekend alone will be a good opportunity for us to explore whatever is happening between us further. Because Eric Sullivan is twisting me all up inside and I need to discover more about him on a personal level.

Eric glances over, catching me looking at him, but I don't bother trying to hide it. What's the point? It's clear I'm a smitten kitten and the second we get to the lake house, I'm going to jump him.

"How much longer?" I ask, crossing my legs and trying to ignore the blossoming wetness between my thighs.

"Are you in a rush?" he asks, voice low and suggestive.

"Maybe," I murmur, sliding closer, and laying my hand over his muscular thigh. His body tenses beneath my touch as I let my hand roam higher.

"Sweetheart," he grits out warningly, snaking his fingers around mine and halting their upward progression. "If you touch me like that, more specifically where I think you're headed, I'm going to get in an accident."

With a smirk, I squeeze his hand. "Guess I'll save it 'til later."

The sky begins to get that look it always gets right before it snows and I crack my window and breathe the clean, cold air in deeply. "Smells like snow," I predict.

"What does snow even smell like?" he asks.

"Haven't you ever noticed that right before it snows, the air smells different?"

"Like when it rains?"

“No, not like smelling the ozone. I mean, it just smells...I don't know. Cleaner.”

“You're just making shit up now,” he says with a grin.

“No, I'm not! I swear, I can always smell snow right before it falls. And I'm telling you, it's going to snow.”

“The weather report didn't report any snowfall.”

“Since when are they ever right?”

“How about a bet?”

“What kind of bet?” I ask.

“If it doesn't snow then I win, and as my prize...” His voice trails off.

“What do you want?” I ask, my voice breathy.

“I'm thinking,” he answers huskily. “But definitely something involving you naked. And maybe your mouth,” he adds wickedly.

Squeezing my thighs together, I slowly nod. “That can be arranged. But I'm going to win so it's going to be your mouth on me.”

I see his Adam's Apple bob up and down. “That's not really a loss for me because I love going down on you, sweetheart.”

His indecent admission makes my cheeks burn. “Wicked man,” I whisper. But I like it. I'm quickly getting used to the dirty things that come out of his mouth. I never would've guessed the restrained businessman had such a naughty side.

When Eric's phone rings, he glances down at the screen and I immediately see him tense. Without a word, he silences the ring, brow drawn together in a furious frown.

It makes me damn curious to know who was on the other side of that call. But he doesn't say a word which of course makes me wonder even more.

“You could've taken that. I promise I won't hold it against you— even if it is a business call,” I tease lightly.

“It wasn’t business,” he says in a tight voice.

*That’s it? No further explanation?*

His phone beeps indicating someone just left a message. An annoyed sigh escapes from between his clenched teeth, and now I have to know who just called. “Eric?” I ask tentatively.

“What?” he barks. He must hear how harsh he sounds because he immediately backtracks. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

“Who was that?”

For a long moment, he doesn’t reply. Then he sighs again. “Miranda,” he finally answers.

“Your ex-wife?”

“The one and only,” he responds dryly. “I have no idea what she wants and I don’t care. I’m not going to let her spoil our weekend, okay?”

I nod and he reaches over and squeezes my hand. Luckily, we arrive at the house a few minutes later and all thoughts of Miranda take a back seat as I look out over a huge, blue lake.

“The house is right back here,” he says, driving us up a long, private driveway.

The moment it comes into view, I gasp and lean forward, staring through the windshield. “It’s beautiful,” I say, slightly in awe. “Do you come up here a lot?”

“I haven’t been up here in almost a year,” he says. “But I have a cleaning service come every couple of weeks and make sure it’s ready if I make a last-minute trip.”

After he parks the car, I get out and look up at the enormous house. It’s bigger than my parents’ home back in Quincy. It’s quite impressive on the outside, so I can only imagine what the inside looks like. Sitting almost at the edge of the water, I notice there’s a large side deck to sunbathe on during the summer and a three-car garage in the rear of the property. I don’t see a neighbor anywhere nearby so it’s very private.

Eric grabs our bags and we walk up to the front door. He unlocks it and when he pushes it open and motions for me to go in first, my eyes widen. With soaring cathedral ceilings and a wide-open layout, I can see everything at once: the living room with a large brick fireplace, the spacious kitchen and a staircase that leads up to a big loft that overlooks the entire downstairs.

“This is gorgeous,” I say, walking further inside and checking everything out. “And you haven’t been up here in a year? I’d visit every couple of weeks.”

“Work has been busy,” he simply says.

“That’s the bedroom?” I ask, pointing up to the loft.

He nods.

I whistle under my breath. “Having a place like this would make me want to leave the city. It seems so peaceful up here. Where’s your nearest neighbor?” I ask, walking over to the big picture window and looking out over the lake. I see a few houses across the way and there are whitecaps on the water because the wind picked up. *Yep, it’s definitely going to snow, I think.*

Eric moves up beside me, but instead of answering my question, he slides my hair over and begins kissing the back of my neck. “Far enough away that when I fuck you up against the glass, no one will see.”

My belly flips and molten heat arrows straight down between my legs. With a sigh, I lean back against his chest. His hands glide over my hips, move around and unfasten my jeans. In one quick motion, my jeans and panties drop to the floor and Eric wastes no time pulling my shirt up and tossing it. My forehead drops against the cool glass and when his fingers start working their magic, my heavy breathing fogs it up. It doesn’t take long before I’m riding his hand and lost to the pleasure that’s flowing over me in waves.

“Oh, God,” I cry, my release hitting hard. My entire body shakes and when I reach around to touch him, Eric grabs my

hands, flattening my palms against the glass, and holding them there.

“Don’t move,” he grits out.

Everything in me tightens with anticipation when I hear him shed his pants and boxer briefs. Then he grabs my hips, lifts me slightly, and I feel his cock push against my folds from behind. He doesn’t enter me, just teases me mercilessly.

I don’t think he put a condom on yet and what he’s doing right now is making me crazy. “Please,” I beg, pushing back against him.

“You like that?” he asks, rubbing against me. Pushing in just a little and stretching me just enough to make me lose my mind.

“God, yes!” I reach around, my nails digging into his firm ass, and wiggle against his steel cock. “Do it,” I hiss, trying to draw him into my body.

With a loud groan, he sinks inside me and then starts thrusting hard. My body jerks up and I’m plastered against the glass, taking everything he’s giving me.

“Yes! Oh, Eric, please,” I cry, my body tightening and pulsing around him.

It’s like we’re half feral and he has me coming hard and fast in no time. Right before his release, he pulls out and I feel him come against my back. His face drops against the curve between my neck and shoulder, and he’s breathing hard.

“Sorry,” he whispers. “You felt too good and I—” His voice trails off.

“It’s okay,” I tell him.

He pulls me away from the window. “C’mere,” he murmurs, swiping up our clothes, and guiding me toward the kitchen. He cleans the warm stickiness off my back then turns me in his arms, lowers his head and kisses me hard, almost desperately.

When we finally come up for air, he glances away, looking almost guilty.

“I’ve never lost control like that before,” he admits. “But I pulled out in time.”

Our gazes lock and I don’t see any reassurance in his aqua eyes. “I’m sure it’s fine,” I say, but I’m not sure in the least. In fact, I’m a little nervous that he didn’t. But at the same time, feeling him inside me with no barrier felt amazing. And as stupid as it is to think it, I’d do it again.

I think it’s time I look into getting on birth control.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, pulling his clothes back on.

“Starving,” I say.

We end up making a couple of salads and spaghetti from the groceries we brought up. Since neither of us is a great cook, we decided to keep our meals simple. After dinner, Eric and I walk down to the lake. It’s definitely colder out and as we talk along the shore, the first snowflakes begin to fall.

I look over at him with a triumphant smile. “Told you,” I murmur.

Eric pulls me into his arms and kisses me. “Guess you won our bet.”

“I did!” I exclaim.

“That means my mouth is going to worship you tonight, sweetheart.”

His words make my stomach somersault.

Later that evening, after Eric has a roaring fire going in the large fireplace, he slowly undresses me, lays me out on a blanket in front of the warm flames and keeps his promise. I come so hard on his face that I see stars.

After a magical night of making love in front of the fireplace, morning comes and we decide to go have some fun outside. It looks like a Christmas Wonderland out there and we dress warmly and head out. Although the lake isn’t frozen yet, it’s still freezing outside. The air is brisk and smells so clean here away from the dirty pollution in the city.

We're both in a playful mood and I scoop up a handful of snow and whip it at Eric. He immediately returns the favor and it's not long before we're in a huge snowball fight. I peg him good a couple of times and then I see him come after me with a massive snowball. With a scream, I duck around a tree and he gives chase. Weaving through the maze of pine trees, Eric catches up, grabs me around the waist and spins me.

"Naughty girl," he whispers in my ear.

When he sets me back on my feet, I turn in his arms and give him a mischievous smile. "I'm glad we came up here," I say, leaning my head back and gazing up at the snow-covered branches above. "It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful," he says and leans down, capturing my mouth in a kiss so hot that I'm surprised our body heat doesn't cause the snow around us to melt.

"You know what sounds good? Hot chocolate."

"Your wish is my command," Eric says, pulling me toward the house.

It's not long before we're sitting in front of the fireplace, sipping the yummiest hot chocolate I've ever had. They're just packets of cocoa powder we bought at the grocery store, but it tastes so delicious. I'm not sure if it tastes extra yummy because I'm having such an amazing weekend or what. It feels like we're the only two people in the world and when it starts snowing again, I curl up against Eric's side and I've never felt so happy or content in my life. As I stare into the flickering orange flames, I know that I'm falling head over heels in love with this man.

And even though it's scary, it's also exhilarating. At this moment, here in his arms, I can see a future with him, and nothing has ever made me happier.

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## ERIC

**T**wo days up at the lake house, completely alone with Abby, has been wonderful. We've been together, lost in our own little bubble, getting to know each other more deeply on every level, and it's been incredible.

But now we're on our way back to Boston, back to reality, back to instant fatherhood and...a girlfriend? Are Abby and I in a serious relationship? Is this something that has a future? I've gone over it from every angle about a million times and I keep coming back to the same conclusion.

I want to try this with her.

Despite my general distaste toward relationships and kids, it's odd how I find myself suddenly thrust into a situation with both. And so far, I'm not running for the hills, so I'm going to take that as a good sign. In fact, quite the opposite has happened. I've been spending more time building a relationship with my girls, as I now think of them, rather than allowing my entire life to be consumed by work.

It's kind of a nice change.

But the real world always comes calling, as did Miranda. I didn't listen to her message because like I told Abby, I didn't want to give her the power to ruin our special weekend away. After we pick up Skylar and return home, it's already getting late so Abby takes her straight up to bed and I wander into my room and pull my phone out. Gritting my jaw, I retrieve Miranda's voicemail and hit play.

True to her nasty nature, Miranda's message is exactly what I expected and, at the same time, worse.

Her low, breathy, always patronizing voice comes over the line and I try not to cringe. "I'm not sure if you fell and bumped your head or if you've lost a few brain cells, but you should know that the gossip about you and that twit you hired as your nanny is raging. It's embarrassing, Eric. The things people are saying, like how young she is and how you've been parading her all over town, you should be ashamed of yourself. She could be your daughter."

"Hardly," I mutter, getting angry. Luckily when I was 15, I didn't know Miranda yet and I certainly wasn't having sex that early.

"You better knock it off," she warns me. "Even though we're divorced, my name will, unfortunately, always be attached to yours. I do not appreciate your actions, so I suggest you get your act together and stop embarrassing us both." She pauses and then delivers the final blow. "Is she even legal, Eric? Jesus."

Click.

My blood boils at her insinuation and I want to reach into the phone and strangle her. I've never met anyone as selfish and infuriating as Miranda Harrington. God, what the hell ever possessed me to marry that woman, I will never know.

But whatever is happening between me and Abby is none of her damn business. I don't owe her or any of the hoity-toity snobs she runs with any type of explanation about who I'm sleeping with. I hate how gossipy they all are and I know it must be killing her to hear about her ex-husband shacking up with his new, much younger nanny.

Maybe I should gloat or feel triumphant, but I don't. Truthfully, I don't give a damn what Miranda thinks anymore. Two years ago, I did. I tried to save the sinking ship we found ourselves on, but our relationship was doomed before we even said "I do."

Miranda and I started out hot, it impressed me that she came from a wealthy family and I had hoped her father would help introduce me to the right kind of people who could help build up my company.

But none of that happened. Miranda and I were too tempestuous, always fighting when we weren't fucking, and even that initial spark faded fast. I waited and waited for her to talk to her father about my business and to put in a good word for me, but she never did. She would, however, hold it over my head and threaten me with it daily.

“Eric, don't you want my father's help? If you want me to have him introduce you to his associates, then you'd better...”

*Fill in the goddamn blank.* She always had something that she wanted me to do for her and she wasn't above threatening or twisting the situation around to get exactly what she wanted, when she wanted it. After a few months of marriage, I discovered that Miranda Harrington is a manipulative bitch who doesn't care about anyone but herself.

But, hey, hindsight is 20/20, right?

I've always been wary of women, love and relationships, and that miserable year married to Miranda confirmed exactly why. I didn't trust her or even love her and it came as no surprise when I found out that she cheated on me with her divorce lawyer. In fact, throughout our entire nasty divorce, she flaunted their relationship in my face. I felt like an idiot, showing up in court and watching her fawn over him. She was so blatant and disrespectful toward me and, in the end, I think it's what caused her to lose. Because everyone saw it and I looked like the poor cuckolded husband. She tried to take everything away from me, but the judge didn't let that happen. Although Miranda did manage to walk away with a lot and I had to rebuild my company, her poor showing in court worked to my advantage.

After our nightmare marriage, I vowed to never have another serious relationship in my life. That's the path I was on, too, until I bumped into Abby. And now she's making me

rethink all the things I said I never wanted. She's making me want things I thought were impossible.

Dropping back down on my bed, I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to let Miranda's nasty words roll off me. She always knows how to get under my skin, where to dig the tip of the knife in, and it usually annoys the shit out of me. But for the first time, it's not hitting me quite as hard as usual.

And I know it's because of Abby. My little Pollyanna Sunshine has brought so much joy to my life and she helps me see the world differently. It's almost like she shares her rose-tinted glasses with me, and I'm seeing things in a way that I've never seen before.

I'm seeing that the world is a good place and there's so much happiness out there if you're willing to look.

"Christ," I grumble, looking up at the ceiling. "Who am I?" I'm in danger of becoming Mr. Pollyanna Sunshine.

Yet the thought makes me smile. If Abby is involved, then I'm all in.

As the week progresses, we fall back into our daily routine, but everything is different. What started as a spark between Abby and I has burned into an inferno of epic proportions. We're insatiable and every chance we get, we're all over each other. Abby intoxicates me and, if anything, my desire for her has grown even stronger.

It's also getting harder to keep our romance a secret because we can't keep our hands off each other. I know it's only a matter of time until Fiona catches us in a compromising position and it happens sooner than I expect.

Fiona and I are working in my home office all morning, but only half of my mind is on business. Looking at my watch, I know Abby should be taking Skylar into the kitchen right now to start lunch. She's got the baby on a strict schedule and I learned that's a good thing. I'm tapping my pen on the desk, feeling distracted, when Fiona looks up and frowns.

"What's going on?" she asks, blunt as always. "You can't seem to focus today."

Standing up, I stretch then shrug my shoulders. “I think I just need some more coffee. Be right back.” I pause and glance over my shoulder. “Do you need anything?”

“No, thank you,” she says and looks back down at the cost reports we’ve been going over.

I hustle down to the kitchen, spot Skylar already in her high chair, and Abby stands at the counter, her back to me. I walk over on silent feet, slide my arms around her waist and begin kissing her neck. She gasps in surprise, not expecting me, then melts back against my chest, tilting her head to allow me better access.

“I’ve missed having you all to myself,” I murmur, swirling my tongue up and around the shell of her ear. I feel a little shiver run through her body and I slide my hands beneath the edge of her shirt and trail my fingers over her flat stomach.

“I can tell,” she murmurs softly, pushing back against my rising erection, gyrating her ass against me teasingly.

“Oh, sweetheart, you are playing with fire right now.” As my hands slide upward to cup her breasts, I hear a throat clear behind us. Abby and I jump apart and turn around to see Fiona standing there, and the look on her face is unreadable.

*Shit.* I step away and reach for the pot of coffee, trying to pretend that nothing happened and no one saw anything. After I fill my mug, I toss a wink at Abby whose face is bright red, and walk past Fiona saying, “Ready to get back to work?”

She raises a quizzical brow, but follows me back to the office. Once we’re inside and seated again, I know it’s time to address the issue and not play games. Fiona is far too smart for that. Besides, I’d never insult her and lie.

“Yes, Abby and I are together,” I begin, trying to read Fiona’s expressionless face. Damn, the woman missed her calling as a professional poker player.

For a long moment, she doesn’t say anything. Then she says, “I had a feeling something was going on.”

“You did?” I ask, unable to hide my surprise. I thought we’d been doing a pretty good job flying under the radar with

all of our little heated looks and touches. Apparently not.

“I’m not blind, Eric. And you two are not subtle.”

“Huh,” I murmur thoughtfully. “I really thought we were doing a good job keeping it under wraps.”

“Not even a little,” she confirms. She’s also grinning and I take that as a good sign.

“I’m not making a mistake,” I tell her. “I really like Abby. What we have is...”

Fiona arches a brow.

“Well, I’m still trying to figure it all out. But she’s really special, Fi.”

“She is,” Fiona agrees. “Honestly, Eric, if Abby makes you happy then I’m thrilled. It’s been far too long since you’ve given any attention to your personal life. This is a good thing.”

Her acceptance means the world to me because I respect and adore Fiona. “So you’re not going to lecture me about her being so much younger?” I ask.

Fiona makes a scoffing sound. “The first man I seriously dated was 20 years my senior.”

My eyes widen. “Fi, you temptress!” I tease good-naturedly.

“My advice?” she asks and I nod, grinning. “Just enjoy your life, Eric. You work far too hard and if you don’t take the time to nurture the other aspects of it, you’re going to die a very rich, but very lonely man. And I don’t want that.”

“Thanks, Fi,” I say quietly, so grateful that she isn’t judging me right now.

“I support you and I hope you find love. It’s a good thing, Eric. A wife, children, a family— everything that comes with it is a blessing, not something to run away from or fear.”

I don’t comment on that because I have no idea what to think about potentially opening myself up to things that I’ve convinced myself that I don’t want or need. But Fiona is one smart lady and I always take her advice to heart.

Even though I have massive doubts and misgivings about ever marrying again, Fiona gives me more to think about. I just wonder if it's too late for me. A zebra can't change its stripes, can it?

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## ABBY

**A**fter Fiona catches Eric fondling and kissing me in the kitchen, I want to crawl under a rock and hide from embarrassment. *God, how humiliating.* I'm hoping to avoid her for the rest of the day, so when Stella calls and asks me if Skylar and I want to join her for a little bit of Christmas shopping, I jump at the chance. Christmas Eve is coming up fast and it occurs to me that I haven't bought one present yet.

I decide to make it an excursion, pack Skylar's bag up, bundle her up in the stroller, and take the "T" over to Faneuil Hall where I'm meeting Stella. The outdoor shopping area is in an old, historic section of downtown and decorated with wreaths and lights that will turn on later this evening. There hasn't been any accumulation of snow yet in the city, so the roads are clear and it's easy to push the stroller along the cobble-stoned streets.

When I spot Stella, I wave and she hurries over and gives me a big hug. She leans over and smiles at Skylar who gurgles happily. "Hi, pretty girl."

"So where are we going first?" I ask.

"Who do you still need to buy a gift for?" Stella asks.

"Um, everyone," I admit.

"You haven't started your shopping yet?" she asks, eyes going wide. "You do realize Christmas is next week, right?"

"I know. It's just been really, um, busy."

Stella pauses and points to a bustling coffee shop. “Let’s grab a couple of peppermint mochas. And busy how? Doesn’t this little one nap half the day?”

“Ha!” I scoff as we go inside the warm, cozy cafe. “I wish.”

We get in line and I realize Stella is staring intently at me. “Something is different about you,” she observes. “What is it?”

I shift from one foot to the other, not sure how to tell Stella that I’m sleeping with my boss. “Well, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to throw it out there. I’m falling for Eric.”

“Falling for...” She frowns. “Your *boss*?”

I nod, and swallow hard. “I think the feeling is mutual, too.”

At that moment, the girl behind the counter asks for our order and interrupts our conversation before I can reveal more. Stella orders the drinks, quickly pays, ignores my offer of money, and we move over to the side to wait.

“What exactly has happened between you two?” she asks.

“E-ver-y-thing,” I say slowly, nervous for her reaction.

Stella’s mouth drops open. “Did you sleep with him?” she whispers loudly.

I cringe, hoping no one heard, and give a small nod.

“Oh my God!” she exclaims.

“Before you judge,” I interrupt, “I want you to know that I’m falling in love with him.”

For a long moment, she’s speechless. “And how does he feel about you?”

“Well, that’s the real question. I mean, it’s clear he likes me, but I’m a little scared that my feelings might be stronger.”

“Oh, Abs,” she murmurs. “This is huge. He’s your first, so it’s easy to think you’re in love when you might not really be.”

“No, I’m sure. He’s everything I’ve always wanted, Stella. And when we’re together...oh...my...God.”

“Oh, geez. You’re blinded by lust at this point.”

We laugh and hear the barista call out that our drinks are ready. After we grab them at the bar, Stella turns to me and asks, “How are we supposed to go shopping now when we have so much to discuss? I can’t believe my baby sister is banging that gorgeous man.”

My mouth edges up. “He is pretty easy on the eyes, isn’t he?”

“You can say that again. When you first introduced us, I had to hold the drool back.”

We burst out laughing and head back outside, strolling past shops, and talking. I don’t want to give up too many details about how it happened or how we ran off to his lake house, but I do confide my fear that maybe Eric isn’t on the same page.

“Do you know anything about his ex-wife?” I ask.

“Only what I’ve heard from Cash. He said she’s a first-class bitch.”

“Yeah, I get that impression. But do you know why?”

“They got divorced a couple of years ago, but I remember him telling me that she told everyone he cheated when she was the one who actually did. I don’t know, though. Cash swore up and down that Eric had remained faithful, but it sounds like a lot of he said, she said.”

My heart clenches in my chest when I think about her lies and all the damage they’ve caused. “He’s wary of love and marriage. He straight-up told me that he doesn’t want kids.”

“But you do,” she reminds me gently. “You want the whole happy ending.”

“I do. Without a doubt.”

“So if neither of you is willing to compromise, how can you have a future together?”

Stella has a valid point and brings up what's been eating away at me. "I don't know," I admit. "We're going to have to figure it out."

"Be careful. I don't want you getting your heart broken."

"Me neither."

It's clear that Miranda left Eric with sour feelings when it comes to marriage and children. But, secretly, I hope I can change those feelings.

We spend the next couple of hours wandering around the marketplace and Eric texts me: *Where are you, sweetheart?*

I smile at the endearment and write back: *Christmas shopping with my sister and Skylar. Miss me?*

*Like you can't imagine,* he responds.

I let him know that we'll be back later this evening and send a little heart emoji. But not the red heart. I don't want him to read into it, so I send the two little pink ones, which he'll hopefully think are from Skylar, and a smiley face which he can think is from me.

Maybe I'm reading too much into it, but I don't want to scare him off.

I end up getting Skylar a couple of Christmas presents—two new books to read before bedtime and a little jacket with fur around the hood. It's too adorable and even though she'll grow out of it by spring, I can't resist.

I'm also keeping my eyes open for a gift for Eric, but nothing catches my attention until I see a DVD special-edition copy of *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. I chuckle to myself and buy it. I'll never forget when Fiona compared him to the Grinch. I also see a fancy, silver pen that you can get engraved in a store window that makes me pause. It's really expensive, but I decide to splurge and get his initials etched in it. It even comes in a super fancy velvet box and I know he's going to love it.

After shopping, we eat dinner at a cute little Italian restaurant. I can tell that Skylar is getting tired because she

starts fussing. It's been a long and adventurous day for her, so Stella and I say goodbye and I turn the stroller toward the "T" station.

On the train ride back to Brookline, Skylar falls asleep from the rhythmic rumble and swaying, and I lean my head into my palm and think back over the day. I hope Eric likes the gifts I bought him. It's getting late and when we get back, Fiona is just leaving.

*Ugh.* I was hoping she'd already left and we could avoid running into each other because I'm still embarrassed from earlier. I'm praying she'll just leave with a quick goodbye, but she pauses.

"Abby?"

I bite my lower lip and turn toward her, dreading what's to come. Is she going to judge me or infer that I'm a terrible person because he's my boss? Or, worse yet, does she think I'm only interested in his money? I'm rapidly trying to come up with answers to defend myself when Fiona smiles at me. A real, genuine, friendly smile.

"I want you to know that I can see the difference you're making in his life."

Her words catch me by surprise.

"The day Eric hired you...well, he's never been happier. He hasn't been the same since his mom passed away or since Miranda hardened him."

My heart swells at her words. Fiona's approval is crucial for Eric and I to have a future together.

"I can't tell you how happy it makes me to hear you say that," I say. "I was terrified that you wouldn't approve of us."

"You're a good woman, Abby. And good for Eric."

Her words make me so happy and I suddenly know that Fiona is on my side. And that's priceless. "Thank you, Fiona. I can't tell you how much that means to me. I know how much you and Eric respect each other, so your support means the

world to me.” My eyes swim with tears and Fiona motions for me to come give her a hug.

As we embrace, she says, “You’re nothing like Miranda, thank God. But that woman caused a lot of damage.” She pulls back and eyes me. “Damage I’m hoping you can help undo.”

That’s a lot of pressure, but if I can help Eric get over the terrible things his ex inflicted then I will. “I’ll do my best,” I promise.

“I know you will. He’ll try to fight it,” she predicts. “So use your feminine wiles and charms to outsmart him.”

We exchange smiles.

“Before you leave, can I ask you about Miranda?”

“What would you like to know?” she asks carefully. It’s clear Fiona is loyal to Eric first and I love her even more for it.

“Did she cheat on him?” I ask.

“With her divorce lawyer,” she confirms without hesitation.

“And she also accused him of cheating, didn’t she?”

“She did, but they were lies from a desperate woman.”

I sigh. “I guess I’m just trying to get a better idea of what happened between them so I can better help him, you know? She called and when I asked him more about her, he refused to talk about her and completely shut the conversation down.”

“I’m not surprised,” Fiona replies with a sniff. “Miranda is a difficult woman whose only concern was ever about wealth and prestige.”

“How long were they married?”

“One year and it was a disaster almost from the beginning. That’s why he’s so wary now.”

Her words make my heart twist in my chest. “That just makes me really sad.”

“You and me both,” Fiona says. “But like I said, I’m hoping you can help switch that around.”

“Me too,” I say sincerely.

After saying goodbye, I lock the door behind her. Having Fiona’s blessing means everything. I feel so much better about what’s happening between us and I take Skylar upstairs to wrap Christmas presents.

I have a feeling that it’s going to be a very memorable holiday.

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## ERIC

**T**ime passes so fast and it's like I blink and it's Christmas Eve already. The work site is under control and things are finally getting back on track. *Thank God.*

I'm not sure if I was merely feeling generous or maybe I was hit with the Christmas spirit, but I gave Fiona the next week off and told her I'd see her next year. She was thrilled—especially when I handed her an envelope with a hefty bonus and a gift card to her favorite craft store.

Skylar has a stack of gifts under the tree that I ordered online with Abby last week. I'm still adjusting and not exactly sure what to buy a two-year-old, so we sat down together and filled an Amazon cart with over a thousand dollars' worth of things for her. I know that's a lot for a kid who still sleeps in a crib, but I don't care. I plan to spoil her rotten for the rest of her little life. She lost her mother and now she has to deal with me; taking care of her financially is the least I can do.

I also went to the jewelry store and bought Abby a diamond bracelet. Sure, it's a little extravagant, but I wanted to get her something, and what woman doesn't like jewelry? I can't wait to see the look on her face when she opens it.

All morning and afternoon, we're in the kitchen baking and decorating cookies and making candy from recipes off the internet or ones that Abby's mom gave her. Neither of us is any kind of award-winning chef, but we do pretty damn well. We also get into a massive food fight and end up covering half the kitchen with powdered sugar. Not to mention each other.

But I have no complaints. Licking sweet things off Abby was a pleasant diversion from baking.

Of course, we didn't let things go too far with Skylar nearby. But I've never been so tempted to shove everything off the island, hoist Abby's sweet ass up on it and fuck her hard.  
*Later.*

For Christmas Eve dinner, we keep things fun and make personal pizzas. Skylar ends up throwing most of her shredded mozzarella cheese on the floor, but she loves the pepperoni and is double-fisting the little, round meats.

Once the pizzas are done, we sit on the island stools and eat them with a little red wine. Skylar makes a wonderful mess, but we just laugh, amused by her antics. Dessert consists of our creatively-decorated Christmas cutouts. I think I'm eating what's supposed to be a stocking, but it looks more like a blob. I'm surprised at how good it tastes, though. And that's really all that counts, right?

After cleaning up, we gather around the tree and help Skylar open her mountain of presents. Even though she has no idea what's going on, she laughs and tears at the wrapping paper. She also seems to enjoy how excited we are for her first Christmas with us.

I look from Abby to Skylar and again think "my girls." Because they truly are. My heart expands in my chest and what I'm feeling can only be described as love. And that's a strange feeling for me.

*Love?* I mean, yes, I love my niece. She's the only family I have left, and now I'm stepping in to raise her. My gaze shifts over to Abby who swoops Skylar up and spins her around.

I'm still not sure how to classify my feelings for Abby, though. That's a bit more complicated.

"Are you ready to give your present to your uncle, my little gingerbread?" she asks Skylar. Then Abby bends over, grabs a gift and hands it to Skylar to give to me.

"Tell your uncle Merry Christmas," she says and they offer me the gift bag. Skylar gurgles some nonsense and my mouth

edges up as I take the bag.

“Thanks, kid,” I say and reach inside. It’s a framed photo of me and Anna when we were younger and my heart catches. “Where did you get this?” I ask, my voice low and full of emotion.

“I found it in Anna’s bedroom when we were up there. I hope you don’t mind that I took it for you.”

The strangest sensation passes over me and I swallow back the lump in my throat. “No, of course not. Thank you.”

I’m extremely touched.

“How old are you there?” Abby asks softly. “You look like a baby.”

“This was taken on Christmas and I must’ve been twenty-four, maybe twenty-five? God, we look so young.”

“I really like that picture. You look happy.”

“Not my usual grumpy self?” I ask, trying to lighten the mood.

“No, Mr. Grinch.”

I tuck the frame back in the bag and decide I’m going to keep the picture on my desk in my office because that’s where I spend the majority of my time.

“I have a gift for you,” Abby tells me.

“I have one for you, too,” I say.

“You do?” she asks, a smile brightening her face.

“Of course. Why don’t we exchange presents after you put Skylar to bed?”

“Sure,” she says, then hesitates. “You don’t want to join us?”

“I’m going to clean up,” I say and start picking up discarded wrapping and tissue paper.

“Oh, okay.” She turns, starting for the staircase.

I can sense her disappointment and surprise because I've been helping her put Skylar to bed all week. But it might be better to pull back a little. *Aw, hell, I don't know.*

The other day I was talking to Fiona and she warned me to be careful. She also told me she believes Abby is in love with me. I'm not going to pretend that didn't freak me out a little. Then, right on cue, as though she were reading my mind, Fiona told me not to freak out.

"Abby is the best thing that has ever happened to you," Fiona told me in a stern voice. "Don't make the mistake of mixing her up with Miranda. They're nothing alike."

And as much as I know that's true, it still scares the shit out of me. Love is not something I've let myself even contemplate since my divorce. I was open to love, marriage and a family way back in the day when I was young and clueless—right around when that picture was taken.

Not now, though. And I know those are things that Abby wants. Things I can't give her.

So am I being unfair? Am I leading her on? I think we're going to have to have an important conversation sooner rather than later, but what if she gets pissed and leaves? I'm in a horrible situation because I can't afford to lose Abby as Skylar's nanny. I also can't afford to lose my heart.

After filling a black trash bag with the shredded wrapping paper and other assorted garbage from opening gifts, I toss it and add some logs to the fire burning brightly. Sparks fly and the wood pops as it burns. Sitting down in the nearby chair, I sip a glass of whiskey and debate how I'm going to tell Abby that whatever is happening between us is wonderful, but it has no future.

At least not the future she wants. I can't give her the happily-ever-after that she desires. But I can fulfill her physical desires for as long as she wants. At some point, though, it's not going to be enough for her. And that's what I'm dreading.

I have no intention of spoiling her holidays, though, so whatever conversation we have about our relationship will be after the new year. I know I can be a dick, but I'm not a complete asshole. I do care about Abby. A lot. It's just...

There's something inside of me that is terrified that what happened with Miranda could happen again. Because it all starts out with sunshine and roses. Then it ends horribly.

*It's fucking inevitable*, I think, and swirl the amber liquid around in my glass.

"Hey."

I look over and see Abby walk over and perch on the edge of my chair. I automatically wrap an arm around her waist and she hands me a gift bag covered in red and green glitter.

"Merry Christmas, Eric," she says with a gorgeous smile.

"You didn't have to get me anything," I say.

"I wanted to," she insists.

I squeeze her hip and then pull two wrapped gifts out of the bag. "You double-wrapped it?" I ask with a chuckle.

"If you haven't noticed, I tend to go a little overboard at Christmas."

"Oh, I noticed when you came home with the entire holiday collection from Target, including a life-sized snow globe and a reindeer now dancing on my front lawn."

"Just open your presents, Mr. Grinch."

"Ha! You should know that this is the most holiday spirit I have ever displayed."

"Oh, I know," she says.

"Minx." I pinch her ass and she squeals. Curious, I open the small, slim present first and instantly recognize the expensive brand name etched on the box. "Abby..."

She shouldn't have paid so much for a pen. But it's top of the line and will last a lifetime with refillable ink. I pick the pen up and see my initials engraved in its silver surface.

“I thought it would be nice for you to use for work. You’re always complaining about your pens.”

“Not anymore,” I say and lean over to press a kiss to her lips. “Thank you.”

“There’s one more,” she reminds me and I can’t help but suppress a smile. She’s so damn cute and way too excited over exchanging gifts.

The second box is flat and fairly light. I tear the paper off and see it’s a DVD special edition of “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas.” My mouth drops and then I grab Abby’s sides and tickle her.

“I can’t believe you still think I’m a Grinch. After I let you decorate this place until it looks like Christmas Vacation with the Griswalds?” She screams and twists, but I yank her onto my lap. The tickling stops because I grab her face and kiss her hard. Our tongues slide against one another and she tastes like the eggnog she was drinking earlier. I tilt her head, deepening the kiss, and our mouths meld, becoming one.

When we finally pull back, we’re both panting, and I’m ready to rip her clothes off and fuck her beneath the tree, but she gives me a little smile and brushes a wayward lock of hair off my forehead.

“You said you got me a gift, too?” she asks shyly.

My thoughts instantly turn dirty and I’d like nothing more than to give her the hard dick in my pants, but instead I nod and slip her off my lap. I grab the slim, wrapped box from beneath the tree and hand it to her.

Abby’s eyes glow in the slow-blinking lights from the Christmas tree and we both sit down on the floor in front of it.

“I had no idea what to get you, but you should like this,” I say with a grin.

With careful fingers, Abby unwraps the box and when she sees the famous Cartier logo, she hesitates. “Eric...”

“Open it,” I encourage her.

She pops the lid up and eyes the diamond tennis bracelet for a long moment. It's hard to read her expression and I frown.

"You don't like it?" I ask.

"It's beautiful," she says quietly. "I just didn't expect such an extravagant gift."

"You've earned it," I say, then instantly regret my poor word choice when she looks up at me like I just insulted her. "Shit, that's not what I meant. You know that's not what I meant, right?" I ask, hating the doubt in her pretty blue-green eyes.

"Thank you," she murmurs and closes the box.

"Don't you want to try it on?" I ask. I'm getting the feeling that she isn't overly thrilled with my gift and I have no idea why. Isn't that what all women want? Expensive jewelry?

"Not right now."

"If you don't like it, we can exchange it for something else."

"It's not that," she says tentatively.

"Then what's the problem?"

"No problem. It's lovely, thank you."

Narrowing my eyes, I'm starting to get annoyed. I don't understand. Miranda loved jewelry. She expected it. Every time I gave her some shiny bauble she—

*Oh, fuck.* My eyes slide closed and I realize how badly I messed up.

Abby isn't Miranda. Not even close. So why did I assume she'd be superficial like my ex and only appreciate an expensive gift? A gift that is completely thoughtless. Abby took the time to buy me something I'd appreciate, give me something from Skylar and then add a gag gift on top of it all.

And all I did was buy the first sparkling thing I saw and hand over my limitless credit card. I didn't make it personal or put any thought into it. It occurs to me that Abby doesn't even

wear bracelets and Skylar would probably try to rip it off if she did. Suddenly I feel like a heel.

Time to make up for that.

“Get over here,” I growl. Abby’s eyes widen at my feral tone and I don’t even give her a chance to respond. I lunge for her and she gives a yelp as I drag her down beside the tree. Covering her with my body, I capture her lips with mine, but keep the kiss gentle and seductive. I nip at her lips and tease her with my tongue and teeth, moving my hips in a slow circle against her core, inflaming her desire as the fire crackles behind us.

I fucked up with her Christmas present the moment I bought her something that I knew Miranda would’ve liked. So now I’m going to give her a different kind of gift beneath the branches of the shimmering tree.

*One that she’s going to love*, I think, kissing my way down her body. And that will make her forget about the stupid bracelet. At least for a little while, anyway.

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## ABBY

**I**t's still dark out when I wake up on Christmas morning and it's not because I hear Skylar through the monitor.

Nausea hits me hard and I race into the bathroom and throw up. I feel clammy and disgusting. *Ugh*. The last thing I need is to be sick on Christmas Day when all I want to do is celebrate and have a good time with Eric and Skylar.

Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do about it. If I'm coming down with the flu or something nasty, I really don't want to pass it on to Skylar. I decide to wait and see how I'm feeling in another hour or so.

After brushing my teeth, I slip back into bed and my gaze falls on the Cartier box sitting on my nightstand. I reach over, open it up and study the diamond bracelet. It's positively stunning and maybe I should've acted more grateful because I'm sure Eric dropped a pretty penny for it.

But, the thing is, it isn't me. Not even a little. And the fact that he bought it for me makes me wonder if he knows me at all. Maybe my gifts weren't as expensive, but they had meaning behind them. Doubts fill my head and I'm scared that Eric and I aren't on the same page.

*I'm in love with him.*

There's no doubt in my mind that I want to spend the rest of my life with Eric and Skylar. They've become a part of my heart and I can't imagine my life without them in it.

But I know the time is coming when I'm going to want more. The question is will he be able and willing to give me

my happy ending? Or is he going to break things off and leave me heartbroken?

Just the thought makes me go running for the bathroom again where I puke my guts up. My future feels so unsure and that doesn't help my queasy stomach.

Later that morning, we gather in the kitchen over breakfast. I don't eat anything because my stomach is still roiling and Eric immediately asks what's wrong.

"I'm not feeling that well," I tell him.

His brow draws together and he lays a concerned hand on my arm. "Why don't you go back up to bed and rest."

"What about Skylar?" I ask, looking over at her in the high chair.

"Hopefully we can find a way to manage for a few hours alone," he teases with a smirk.

"Are you sure?" I ask. "If you need me—"

"Go," he tells me. "We'll watch that movie she likes with the dinosaur. And then maybe we'll watch the Grinch."

"Okay," I murmur, grateful to get back up to my room before I puke again. "Thank you."

He nods, pries the fork from my fingers, kisses my forehead, and takes over cutting up Skylar's pancakes.

I lay down in bed feeling nauseous and convinced I have the flu. Cursing my bad luck, I rest and hope it's only a twenty-four-hour bug. But strangely, after only a couple of hours, I feel better. Good as new, I realize, so I freshen up and head downstairs.

I wander over to the family room and immediately see Eric stretched out on the floor beside Skylar. They opened one of her Christmas presents – a board that lights up and makes noises – and he's telling her some kind of story to go along with the light and sound show he's creating.

My heart trips in my chest as I watch them interact. For him to say he never wants to be a father is a shame because

he'd make a wonderful one. And he pretty much is one already whether he realizes it or not. Even though Skylar is his niece, he's taking on the role of her father, her caretaker, her protector.

Am I the only one who can see it? Why doesn't he?

I can't help but wonder what it was that made him so hesitant about having his own family. I have a feeling there's more to it than just Miranda. Besides, they never even had any children. Why is he so reluctant?

I want him to know that I think he'd be an excellent dad. Honestly, I can't believe how adorable he's being right now with Skylar. He looks absolutely comfortable and like he's even enjoying himself.

"Having fun?" I ask, stepping into the room.

Eric looks up from the glowing board. "This was a great idea," he tells me. "She absolutely loves it."

"Looks like you do, too," I tease.

"It is kind of cool," he says with a grin. "How're you feeling?"

"Much better. I thought I might have the flu, but my appetite is back and I'm craving Christmas cookies. I hope you two haven't eaten all the peanut butter blossoms."

"I've eaten way too many of those damn things and am probably going to gain ten pounds over the holidays," he grumbles. "We're never making them again."

I shake my head. "We'll see," I say. Sitting down next to them, I reach over and squeeze his muscular arm. "I know you're not convinced yet, but I certainly am."

He cocks a dark brow. "About what?"

"About the fact that you're going to make an amazing father one day."

He instantly tenses beneath my touch and pulls away.

"I already told you, I don't want kids."

His voice comes out harsh and I frown. “Look at you. You’re down on the floor, making this little girl laugh. You’re practically her dad. You’re certainly doing everything a real father would do,” I assure him. “And you’re doing it so well, Eric. You need to know what a great job you’re doing.”

He shakes his head. “I’m her uncle. Nothing more.”

I know I shouldn’t say it, but I do anyway. “Well, maybe if you settled down with the right woman, you’d change your mind.”

I’m inferring that the right woman is me. *Big mistake.*

Eric instantly moves away and turns cool. “I’m not getting married, settling down, having babies, none of that shit. I already told you this, Abby, so why’re you pushing your dreams onto me? It’s not what I want. Why do women always try to change men? I got roped into this out of guilt,” he says and motions to Skylar.

The complete shift in his mood makes me feel awful. I shouldn’t have pushed it, but I wanted him to know how fantastic he is with Skylar and this whole situation. “Eric, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean you should change. I just thought—”

“It’s fine,” he interrupts, cutting me off and standing up. “Whatever.”

I have no idea why he just got so defensive and confusion fills me. “Where are you going?”

“I have to check some emails”

“I thought you weren’t working.”

“Yeah, well when you run your own business and give your assistant the week off, who else is going to check them?” he asks, grumpiness in full effect.

“It’s Christmas,” I remind him. “No one is emailing you about work.”

His nostrils flare and he looks seriously annoyed with me. “What I do really isn’t any of your concern. I hired you to be Skylar’s nanny and I know lines have been blurred but maybe we need to reevaluate things.”

My heart drops and I can't believe those words just came out of his mouth. It's like my worst nightmare come true. He's clearly putting me in my place and reminding me of my station.

And it's not by his side or as his girlfriend. He's talking down to me— like I'm merely the hired help and nothing more.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes and I turn to Skylar, scoop her up and head toward upstairs.

“Abby—” He sighs heavily.

But I ignore him and hurry up the steps to Skylar's room, my feelings so hurt, tears streaming down my face.

I knew there was a possibility this day would come but that doesn't make me any less hurt or upset.

The rest of Christmas day passes quietly with me hanging out with Skylar. Eric pretty much avoids us until dinner time and instead of cooking like we planned, he suggests carryout from the Chinese place down the street. I don't argue with him. His mood is still dark and his Grinch side is out in full-force. My feelings are still hurt and neither of us is in the mood to talk.

I had much higher hopes, but it is what it is.

The week between Christmas and New Year's goes pretty much the same way— me nauseous every morning, Eric watching Skylar while I rest in bed for a little extra time, then me feeling better and taking over. I also sleep in my own bed and we haven't been together since he took me three different ways under the tree on Christmas Eve.

While Eric is clueless and thinks I have a mild case of the flu, I pull out my calendar and start counting days. Cold fear trickles through my belly when I discover I'm a week late. My cycle is always regular so panic flares in my gut. The morning sickness I've been having is a huge red flag and I sink down onto the edge of my bed.

Could I be pregnant?

*Oh, God.* Talk about the worst case scenario. He couldn't make it any clearer that fatherhood is his worst nightmare. What if I'm carrying his baby? The thought makes me sick all over again. But this time, it's my heart that's sick.

Whatever the answer is, I need to know, so I schedule a doctor's appointment early on New Year's Eve morning. Eric has been encouraging me to go all week, so he watches Skylar while I drive over to my doctor's office.

A little over an hour later, I'm back in my car, slightly stunned, knowing that my entire life just changed in the blink of an eye when the doctor confirmed my pregnancy.

I've always wanted to be a mother, but I always assumed it would be with a man who wanted to be a father. *Shit.* Leave it to me to get knocked up by a man who doesn't want a family. If this doesn't make him fire me or go running off then I don't know what will.

How am I supposed to tell him? The moment I merely mentioned he would make a good father, he got all defensive and pissy. And now I'm going to confirm his fatherhood.

*Ugh.* I feel so sick. What if he hates me? What if he thinks I planned this and tried to trap him?

No. Every time we've slept together, it's been completely mutual. I've never plotted and he's never been anything but upfront.

Sadly, we're just on two totally different pages.

And that's what makes this all so confusing. I have no idea what to do, but there's no question in my mind about the little life growing inside of me— I'm going to have our baby. He or she just isn't going to have a father while growing up, I guess. I'm sure Eric will provide financially, but when it comes to spending quality time together and doing things that normal families do, he's made it crystal clear that he isn't interested.

Chewing on my nail, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to imagine leaving Eric and Skylar and raising our baby by myself. I'm going to be a good mom and I'll always put my

child first. But once I leave, what's he going to do? Hire a new nanny? Forget all about me?

Am I going to be his dirty, little secret?

The whole situation gives me anxiety like I've never experienced before. But I know that the sooner I tell him, the better. Why drag out the inevitable?

With that thought firmly planted in my mind, I head back to Brookline. But once I get back, I hesitate when he asks me what the doctor said. Swallowing back my nerves, I do the only thing I can do.

I lie.

"Just a bug," I say. One that will go away in about nine months.

"Good," he says, sounding relieved. "Do you want to rest for a while? I can watch Skylar."

"Yeah, thanks," I say and head toward the stairs without another word. I feel awful for not telling him the truth, but that would just spoil everyone's New Year's. So for better or for worse, I decide to wait.

Unfortunately, waiting doesn't make anything better. In fact, I think it makes it worse. Things are still tense between us and I miss being in Eric's arms. I long for his kiss, his touch, the way he makes me feel when he's deep inside me. I hate keeping such a huge secret from him.

Exactly one week later, I realize that there is no perfect time or right moment to break my news. That's just not how life works. So once I put Skylar down for her nap, I muster up all of my courage, head downstairs and start walking toward his office. My stomach hurts and my nerves are shot, but I can't put this off any longer.

*It'll be like ripping a bandaid off,* I tell myself. I just have to do it fast and get it over with.

The moment I walk past the front door, there's a knock. I pause in my tracks, walk over and open the door. An ice-cold wind whips inside and I see a beautiful woman standing there,



bundled up in a long fur coat wearing a matching fur-lined hat and boots. Her blonde curls flip up beneath the fancy hat and she looks like a model. Tall, elegant and cool.

“Can I help you?” I ask and offer her a friendly smile.

She doesn't bother to return the smile or hide her condescension. Her scathing green eyes practically slice through me as they slide down my body. “Ah, so you're the promiscuous nanny everyone's been hearing so much about. Can you get my ex-husband?”

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## ERIC

**T**he moment I hear Miranda's voice, my heart sinks. *What the fuck is she doing here?* I wonder. I drop the pen I was writing with – the one Abby gave me for Christmas – and stalk out of my office. With each step, my fury builds. She has no business coming here and I'm going to kick her ass to the curb so fast her head will spin.

I hate dealing with her and I'm not in the mood. This last week has been depressing and lonely since Abby and I had our disagreement. I miss her warm body in my bed, pressed against me, and all the kisses and conversations. And now I have to deal with Miranda's spoiled-rotten, snarky ass.

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse.

As I walk up the hallway, I see her with Abby. *Oh, hell.* I didn't want Abby to have to meet Miranda, but it's too late now.

“What're you doing here?” I growl.

Miranda is taller than Abby and dressed up in head to toe fur. She looks like she's ready to leave on an expedition to the Arctic. But I'm not surprised that she looks ridiculous because she's always been a slave to fashion to the point of taking it too far.

Even though Abby puts a good face on, I can tell she looks a little shaken and I wonder what Miranda said to her. When she mumbles something about giving us some privacy and turns to leave, Miranda lifts a fur-trimmed glove and shakes her head, her blonde curls bouncing.

“Oh, no, please stay,” she says in a saccharine voice. “After all, this concerns you, too.”

“Me?” Abby echoes.

“What do you want, Miranda?”

She steps inside and stomps the light snow off her boots. I close the door against the cold wind and turn to face her, crossing my arms over my chest. *Christ, this woman has a lot of nerve.*

“I warned you, Eric, but you didn’t listen,” Miranda says.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I respond.

“Well, if you’d use your little brain and think back, you might remember the message I left a few weeks ago.”

“If you left me a message, Miranda, you can be assured that I deleted it without thinking twice or listening to it,” I lie.

She rolls her eyes. “Always a selfish bastard.” She turns her scathing emerald eyes on Abby. “I have no idea what you see in him. Probably nothing, but he always was a good time in the sack. At least in the beginning,” she adds nastily.

Gritting my teeth, I try to maintain some semblance of control, but this woman knows how to push my buttons like no one else. “Either tell me why you’re here or leave. I’m not in the mood to play your games.”

Miranda drags her attention off Abby and stares daggers at me. “Everyone is gossiping terribly about you and it’s making me look bad.”

“I hate to break it to you, but this isn’t the Miranda Show. We aren’t married anymore and I can do whatever I want.”

“No, you can’t,” she retorts, her voice rising. “Not when you’re dragging my good name through the mud!”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” I deny and look over at Abby. But she’s looking down at the floor, lips pressed together, and on the verge of bolting.

“Oh, really?” Miranda asks, her voice laced in sarcasm. “How about the fact that you’re fucking your nanny?”

“That is none of your goddamn business,” I hiss and take a step closer, pinning her with an angry gaze.

“It is, though!” she yells. “You’re making a fool out of yourself. A forty-year-old sleeping with his employee who’s half his age. Disgusting. And you...” She turns her attention back to Abby. “You’re nothing but a whore and a gold digger who’s trying to weasel her way into the billionaire’s life. Well, newsflash, honey, it isn’t that hard getting into his pants or wallet. But you’ll never get him to marry you. I’m the only one who accomplished that.”

Abby looks hurt and stunned by Miranda’s verbal attack and I’m one step away from throttling her. “You are a bitch,” I growl. “How dare you come into my house and insult me and her. You have no idea what’s going on here.”

“Oh, I know. Most of Boston does and that’s why I’m so angry. You should be embarrassed. Both of you.”

From upstairs, Skylar begins crying and Abby hurries past us and jogs up the steps, two at a time. Hands clenched, I take a deep breath and count to ten. I can’t let her get under my skin. I know how she is and how she operates. Getting into a wicked fight with her isn’t going to solve anything. All it will do is open a whole new can of worms and I’m not interested in that. I just want Miranda out of my life forever.

Reeling my temper in, I remind myself that getting upset over her stupid accusations isn’t worth my time or effort. What I do is my business, not hers.

“I may have married you, but that was the biggest mistake I have ever made. And in case it slipped your empty, little head, we’re divorced. That means I can do whatever I want and I don’t care how that makes you look or feel. But I do care how it makes Abby feel and if you ever come back here or make her feel bad or beneath you in any way, you’re going to have to deal with me. Do you understand?”

Miranda’s green eyes narrow. “Why are you sticking up for—”

I grab her arm in a vise-like hold and squeeze until her eyes practically bug out of her head. “Do you fucking understand, Miranda?” I demand.

She forces a nod then yanks her arm away. Pulling her coat tighter, she gives me her haughtiest look. “Idiot. Go ahead and look like a fool then. I don’t even care!”

Reaching around her, I yank the front door open. “Just leave.” The moment she stomps by me, I slam the door shut, hoping it hits her in the ass on the way out. *Horrible woman.* She always knows how to make me miserable. And now she’s hurt Abby, too, and I feel terrible. Abby is the best person I know and she didn’t deserve that.

Knowing I need to apologize and check in on her, I head up to Skylar’s room. They’re playing quietly on the floor and Abby looks up when I enter the room.

“I’m sorry,” I say, not mincing words. “Miranda is a bitch and you didn’t deserve that.”

For a long moment, she doesn’t say anything. “Why did you marry her then?”

“What?” I ask, not expecting that question.

“You must’ve loved her at one point. Although I have no idea what would’ve possessed you to want to spend the rest of your life with someone like that.”

My mouth opens and I’m not sure whether I should laugh or be mad.

“Did you ever plan on having children together?”

“Miranda and I?”

She nods. “Or were you always dead-set against them?”

I’m not sure what she’s getting at, but I can feel my walls shooting up. “I have nothing against children,” I clarify, looking over at Skylar. “I just have no desire to be a—”

“Father,” she interrupts and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I know! You remind me every single day what a horrible burden it would be. The worst thing in the entire world. Well, I hate to

break it to you, Eric, but what you're doing right now..." She motions to Skylar. "The role you've taken on...It's a father figure role and you can stew and drag your feet and be angry about it all you like, but it's the truth. You're acting as Skylar's *father*, not merely her uncle, so accept it already."

I'm not sure where this outburst comes from, but I narrow my eyes and cross my arms. My temper is on a short fuse because of Miranda's unannounced visit, and arguing with Abby is the last thing I want to do right now. But she seems itching to have a fight.

"Can I ask you something?" she asks.

"What?" I snap.

"What kind of relationship did you have with your dad?"

The air rushes out of my lungs and the question catches me completely off-guard. I am not about to have a discussion regarding my low-life, abusive father who used to hit me and my mom, and then drank himself to death. "None of your damn business," I grit out.

"What is wrong with you? Why won't you talk to me? I'm trying to understand, Eric."

"There's nothing to understand," I stubbornly say.

"Yes, there is!" she insists, standing up and stepping closer. "You have this innate fear and I'm trying to understand why."

"You don't need to understand, Abby. Just let it go." My voice is harsher than I intend, and I see the hurt flash through her blue-green eyes. I have a hard time opening up. It's just something I don't do. Even while we were married, I never told Miranda about my father or the terrible relationship we had. I don't like to dwell on the past; it's a waste of time. Yeah, maybe it's not good keeping things bottled up, but I don't care. It's what works best for me.

"I'm trying to help you," she says, and reaches out to touch my arm.

"I never asked for your help, Abby."

Her hand falls away and something unreadable flashes through her eyes. “Can I ask you something?”

I shrug a shoulder, not saying yes or no. I don’t know why she’s pushing me to talk about things that are done and better left alone.

“What is this?” she asks, motioning between us.

I clamp my jaw together pretending ignorance even though I know she’s asking about us. “I’m not sure what you mean,” I say coolly.

“*Us*, Eric. What’s going on with us? Am I merely a diversion, a way to pass the time when you aren’t working? Do we have any kind of a future together? Other than me being Skylar’s nanny and your employee?”

She’s backing me in a corner and I instantly resent it. “I don’t do serious relationships and you should understand that by now. So if you’re looking to me to provide your happy ending, don’t. Look somewhere else, Abby. Because it’s not something I can give you.”

The moment her eyes brighten with tears, I regret my blunt, cruel words. Abby runs out of the room and I scrape a hand through my hair and drop my head back, completely frustrated.

“Shit,” I hiss, angry at her for pushing me, angry at Miranda for getting me riled up, and mostly angry at myself for handling it all wrong and being a dick. Even though I’m tempted to race after her, I don’t. What’s the point? I can’t give her what she wants.

Dropping down on the floor beside Skylar, I sigh. *What a fucking mess.*

I watch Skylar for the rest of the day while Abby holes up in her room with the door closed. At one point, I think I hear her sobbing and it kills me not to go to her. But maybe she needs to hate me in order to let me go. At least to let the idea of a future with me go. So I leave her alone and accept the fact that I am the world’s biggest asshole.



I'm not sure how long she plans to stay angry and avoid me, but the next morning, she's up before me and when I walk into the kitchen, she's feeding Skylar breakfast. *Good*. I have to go to the building site today and it's going to be a crazy busy day. A potential buyer is interested and now we're going through the long, drawn-out process of finishing the renovations and inspections. I'm hoping all goes according to plan so I can move on to a new project and get rid of this current one which has brought me nothing but trouble and aggravation.

"Good morning," I say, trying to gauge Abby's mood as I reach for the coffee pot.

"Morning," she says.

Her tone is cool, but at least she's acknowledging me. "I'm working on-site today," I tell her and take a sip of coffee. "I'll probably be gone all day."

"Mm-hmm."

She hasn't even looked up at me yet and I realize how much it bothers me. But it shouldn't. I should be happy she's just doing her job now, right? And not trying to force roles on me that I don't want.

But I'm not happy. I hate that she's basically ignoring me. I've missed her being in my bed and waking up with her in my arms. But I know we can't keep that up— it leads straight to a dead end because she wants more and I can't give it to her.

There's no compromise. As difficult as it is, it's best to end things between us.

At least that's what I'm trying to convince myself.

"Fiona will be by in an hour or so," I say, though I'm not sure why because Abby barely nods. She carries on with Skylar, completely ignoring me, so I finish my coffee and walk out. A deep sigh bellows out of my lungs as I grab my keys and head out the front door.

Normally, I get such a sense of purpose when I'm on my way to a site, but right now it feels as though I'm an empty shell.

It feels like I just screwed up royally and lost the most important thing in my world. And even though I said it's something I didn't want, it still hurts like hell.

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## ABBY

**T**here is no other word to describe the way I'm feeling right now except devastated. After our argument yesterday, I couldn't even face Eric because I was scared I'd burst into tears. I cried all night and maybe got an hour of sleep. It feels like my heart was ripped from my chest and Eric just stomped all over it without a care in the world.

After thinking long and hard, I came to the very sad conclusion that the sooner I leave here, the better off we all will be. Skylar is getting too attached to me and Eric and I are finished. There's no way I can look at him every day when I want us to be together. And the fact that I'm carrying his baby makes the situation so much more complicated. I know I still have to break the news of my pregnancy to him and I'm sure that will be the final nail in the coffin for us.

The moment Eric leaves for work, I take Skylar upstairs and start packing my things up. I really don't have that much. After it's all organized, I pick up the box that holds the diamond tennis bracelet Eric gave me for Christmas. I stare at the way the stones glitter under the light and wish with every ounce of my being that things had gone differently. That Eric could've opened up to me. But he didn't. I truly thought we had a chance and I could help him overcome whatever was holding him back, but he is too closed off and stubborn. Snapping the box shut, I leave it on my nightstand.

I lift Skylar up into my arms and look into her big blue eyes. "I want you to know how much I've enjoyed getting to know you, little one. And your uncle. The last thing I want to

do is leave, but I think it's going to be best for all of us if I do. I'm so sorry, sweet pea. Please don't think I'm abandoning you."

My voice cracks and I struggle not to cry as I press a kiss to her chubby cheek. Before Fiona gets here, I stash my bag and the few things I have in my car. Then I put an animated movie on and sit down in front of the television with Skylar.

My mind drifts over my plan. I really don't have one to be honest. I suppose I'll have to move back in with my parents until I find a new job. I can tell you this, though, I'm not applying to be a nanny for any more single fathers.

When the front door opens and Fiona walks in, I wave and do my best not to give any hint about how sad I am right now.

"Hello, Abby," she says and walks over to join us. "And good afternoon to you Miss Skylar, the best baby in Brookline."

I force a smile as I stand up. *Here we go.* "Fiona, would you mind terribly if I ask you to watch Skylar while I run to the grocery store quickly?" I know my request is a little strange because I always pack Skylar up and take her with me wherever I go. "It's just not worth dragging her out in this freezing weather. I wouldn't want her to catch a cold."

"No, of course not. It is supposed to snow tonight," she says.

"Thank you." As I walk by her, she reaches out and touches my arm.

"Abby? Can I ask you something?"

Chewing on my lower lip, I slowly turn and raise a brow.

"Eric was in a foul mood over at the site and I was just wondering if you have any idea why?"

*Oh, that Fiona is too smart for her own good,* I think. But I just shrug a shoulder. "His moods change quicker than a woman's, Fiona," I say lightly, trying to make a joke out of it. "Your guess is as good as mine."

I'm not sure if she buys my answer, but I don't care. I'm leaving and never coming back. It's my only option at this point and it sucks.

"Okay, well, see you soon," she says. "Oh, and Abby? If you ever need to talk to anyone, you can confide in me. I just want you to know that."

A little piece of my heart breaks at her words and I don't trust myself to speak. I nod, grab my purse and practically run out the front door. By the time I'm in my car and heading down the driveway, I'm a sobbing mess.

I don't want to leave, but what choice do I have? My first priority isn't myself any longer, it's the little baby growing inside of me. Even though Eric doesn't want children, I do. Turning toward downtown, I call Stella and can barely get a word out because I'm crying so hard.

"Abby, what's wrong?" she asks. "Are you hurt?"

When I hear the panic in her voice, I assure her that I'm okay, at least physically. Emotionally, I'm a damn wreck.

"Okay, take a deep breath and try to calm down while you're driving. I don't want you getting in an accident."

"O-okay," I sob.

Thank goodness, she's home right now because she switched days with someone at the hospital and she tells me to come right over. I turn my phone off and drop it back in my purse. The drive to Stella's apartment is a total teary-blur and I try to focus on the road, but it's hard. Luckily, I make it in one piece and when I knock on her door, she throws it open and pulls me into a huge hug.

Once we're seated on the couch and I've blown my nose with the tissues she gives me and regain some semblance of control, Stella asks what happened.

"I thought he cared," I say.

"Oh, no. What did he do?"

"I know you warned me to be careful, and you were right. I never should've gotten involved with him. He doesn't want

kids or a wife or a family or—” My voice breaks and Stella rubs a hand up and down my arm.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” she tells me.

“Stella, there’s something you don’t know,” I say softly. “I’m sort of...pregnant.”

My sister’s mouth drops open. “Oh my God. Does he know?”

“No, not yet. I know I have to tell him, but what’s the point? He’s probably going to be angry and—”

“Abigail Tate,” she says firmly. “If that man is angry at anyone, it should be himself. You were his employee and completely innocent when you started that job. He should’ve kept things professional and not acted like an irresponsible, horny teenager. How could you not use protection?”

“We did!” I say. “Well, except the one time.”

“Clearly, that’s all it takes,” she says in a dry voice and I burst into tears all over again. “Oh, Abs, I’m sorry, but how could you two be so reckless?”

“I know. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid. You’re in love.”

“Same thing,” I say miserably.

Stella smiles. “It feels that way sometimes, doesn’t it?”

I nod and start picking at the polish on my nails.

“So what do you want to do?” she asks me.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you quit? Do you want to stay here with me?”

“Oh, could I? At least for a couple of weeks?”

“Of course. It’s just a tiny place and you’re going to have to sleep on the couch.”

“That’s okay and I promise I won’t overstay my welcome. I just need to figure things out and have you here to talk to so I

don't lose it. And, yes, I walked out. Eric just doesn't know it yet."

"So what exactly happened?" she asks gently. "It seemed like things were going so well between the two of you."

"They were up until Christmas. I made the mistake of telling him he was more than just Skylar's uncle. He's like the father she never had and you'd think I accused him of beating her. He got all defensive and he's made it clear from the beginning he doesn't ever want to get married again or have kids. Looks like that's going to change. I hate forcing him to become something he doesn't want to be."

"Abs, it takes two to tango and pregnancy is a common end result if you aren't careful. He's a grown man and needs to take responsibility for his actions."

"I know. And I have no doubt that he will financially. It's just— I don't want to be someone he resents and I certainly don't want him to begrudge our child."

"He does well with Skylar, right?"

"So well! That's why I'm so surprised by his strong negative response toward the whole thing."

"Is he close to his father?"

"I mentioned it once and he got pissy and clammed up."

Stella nods. "He clearly has Daddy issues. Do you love him?"

I nod, knowing there's no point in denying it. "So much."

"Then you need to try to help him through whatever is holding him back."

"I've tried! Any time I bring up fatherhood or marriage, he shuts down. It's exhausting," I lament.

"Well, I'm sure his ex-wife hasn't helped the situation. Cash said she's awful."

"She is," I agree. Stella raises a curious brow. "She stopped by and reamed out Eric, accusing him of flaunting me



around town and saying people were gossiping. She said we should be embarrassed.”

“Are you serious? How is it any of her business what he does? They’re divorced.”

“That’s exactly what he said and they got into it. I ended up sneaking off when Skylar started crying, but it was awful. She’s not very nice.”

“She sounds like an absolute witch and a troublemaker.”

I sigh and curl up into a ball, tucking my feet beneath me. “I’m sorry to dump all my problems on you like this,” I say.

“That’s what sisters are for,” Stella reminds me. “And you know I will always have your back.” Her gaze drops to my stomach and she gives me a little smile. “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to be a mom.”

“No matter what happens with Eric, you know you can always count on me, mom and dad. We’ll make sure you and the baby are taken care of, so don’t even worry about that. In the meantime, stay here and take as much time as you need. I’m not around too much, but I’ll be here for you.”

“I know. Thank you, Stella.”

“You’re welcome,” she murmurs and we hug each other. “Did you eat dinner yet?” she asks after we pull apart.

I shake my head. “I’m not hungry.”

“Oh, no. You’re eating for two now and you have to keep that little nugget inside you nourished. C’mon, let’s make something. At least some soup and crackers, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” I say. Even though I’m not hungry, she has a valid point.

We end up making a can of chicken noodle soup and eat it with a buttered chunk of french bread. I’m glad I force something down and afterwards, I’m so exhausted that I just want to go to sleep. The day has been too emotionally draining and I haven’t even dealt with Eric yet. He’s probably going to

flip out when he finds out I left. He's always made it quite clear that he doesn't have the time or desire to watch his niece. At least not full-time.

Even though it's still fairly early, I wash up for bed and Stella gives me some extra blankets from the linen closet.

"Make yourself comfortable," she tells me. "Goodnight, Abs. I love you."

"Love you, too, and thank you."

After Stella goes into her bedroom, I curl up into a tight ball and cry. I can't help it. Emotions overwhelm me. I'm heartbroken and scared and I've never felt so alone in my life.

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## ERIC

**F**rom the moment I woke up this morning, today was a shitty day. So it shouldn't have come as any surprise that it turns worse. Fiona has called me three times and said Abby went to the grocery store but never came back. At first I panic and start frantically calling her phone which drops straight into her voicemail. When I get home and see all of her things are gone, the hard truth becomes evident.

She left.

I'm expecting panic to seize me because now I'm stuck dealing with Skylar all by myself, but that's not what happens. Instead, my chest hurts. It's not really a feeling I've experienced before, but it aches and I rub a hand over my heart as I look over her empty room.

Dropping my head back, I squeeze my eyes closed and try to shut out the overwhelming hurt that washes through me.

*How could she just leave without saying goodbye?* I wonder. When I see the Cartier box on the nightstand, I walk over and pick it up. She didn't even take her bracelet.

I'm not sure if I consciously sit or my knees give out, but a moment later I'm sitting on the edge of the bed and my thoughts are swirling. How could I have fucked up so badly? Because clearly I did. Abby ran off and wants nothing to do with me now.

All she did was tell me I'd make a good father and I got so angry. I know she meant well, but anything that brings up

memories of my father leaves me upset and resentful. Now I wish I could have expressed that to her instead of lashing out.

“Eric?”

I look up and see Fiona in the doorway. “Thank you for staying with Skylar,” I say.

“Of course. She’s in her playpen but needs to be put to bed soon. Did you get a hold of Abby?”

I shake my head. “Her phone’s off.” I swipe a hand through my hair. “I fucked up, Fi. I handled everything wrong, from Miranda’s visit to—”

“You can’t let Miranda control your moods,” she interrupts, brow furrowed in concern.

“I know. I try, but her snarky little digs drive me insane. She was miserable as always and insulted Abby and me. Of course, Abby handled it with grace. Me, not so much.”

“Miranda is enough to push anyone over the edge.”

“I can’t believe she quit,” I murmur. The shock has worn off and I find myself starting to get mad. “She could’ve at least tendered her resignation in person and not just run off, leaving you with Skylar.”

“Other than Miranda’s visit, is there any reason she would’ve been upset?” Fiona asks, digging for more information.

I frown, not answering her question.

“What did you do, Eric?”

“Fi,” I growl in warning. “It’s really none of your business.”

“Don’t you dare tell me that. Whatever you said or did to that girl had her running from here in tears. She tried to hide it, but I’m not stupid and I won’t stand for you telling me to mind my business when your happiness is my business.”

Every once in a while, Fiona will put me in my place and really let me have it. Even though it pisses me off, I love her dearly for it. No one else can do that and get away with it, so I

suppose it helps keep my ego in check. It also reminds me that she's as fearless as they come.

"Abby is the best thing that ever happened to you," Fiona continues. "So you better get your act together. For your sake and Skylar's."

"Do you think I can convince her to come back?" I ask.

Fiona sniffs. "I suppose it depends on how big of a jerk you were. She left a letter on your desk."

My head snaps up. "She did?" I didn't realize that, and I pop up off the bed and head downstairs to read it.

I spot the plain white envelope and tear it open. My eyes skim over the page. It's her resignation letter. *Fuck*. I crumple it up and throw it across the room. She really left and even though I know I'm to blame, a part of me doesn't understand why she pulled a disappearing act. It's cowardly. And why am I being punished because I don't want certain things? Why does that make me the bad guy? I never pretended or hid the truth and always made sure I was upfront and honest.

Narrowing my eyes, I pull my phone out and call her. Not surprisingly, her voicemail picks up.

*"Hi, you've reached Abby. Please leave me a message."*

She couldn't sound any more chipper. My Pollyanna Sunshine. *Grrr*.

Beep.

"Abby," I snarl, "where are you? Is this how you quit a job? Just pick up and leave with no notice? It's completely unprofessional and unacceptable and I demand you call me back the instant you get this message."

I'd slam the phone down if I could, but since I can't, I stab my finger against the "end" button. Anger rolls off me in waves and I wouldn't be surprised if you could see steam pouring out of my ears.

"I'm sure she'll call you right back after that lovely message," Fiona says dryly from the doorway.

I just want to yell “fuck off” to the world. Instead, I pull in a deep, trembling breath and my anger morphs into panic. *I can't lose Abby.* For a multitude of reasons. Yanking my phone back out, I text her a message: *Ignore my voicemail. I'm sorry...I didn't mean it. Let's talk. Call me.*

Waiting on pins and needles to see if she'll respond, I start pacing back and forth. I'm not used to people ignoring me or putting me in my place. Yeah, okay, maybe I deserve it. I could've handled things better and I've been a first-class ass this past week. When Abby tried to get me to talk to her and open up, I should've at least given her a little insight into why I am the way I am. But I didn't. Instead, I closed myself off and pushed her away.

Regret washes over me and my gaze drops to the fancy silver pen on my desk. Picking it up, I roll it in between my fingers and wish I could go back in time and do things differently. But I can't. There's still no response from Abby and I realize that she probably has her phone turned off.

“Eric, it's late,” Fiona says.

“Go,” I murmur. “Sorry you had to be here so late.”

But she hesitates. “Are you going to be able to handle Skylar okay?”

“Guess we'll find out,” I say wearily. “Thanks for staying, Fi.”

“You're welcome.” She pats my arm. “Give Abby some space and time to think, okay? In the meantime, you're going to have to take care of Skylar and be prepared to do some serious groveling if Abby considers coming back and working here again.”

*If Abby considers coming back?*

My heart sinks. Those aren't the words I want to hear and I need to find a way to make things right again. In the meantime, I glance down at my watch and realize it's way past Skylar's bedtime. Then it occurs to me that it's Friday and Fiona won't be back here until Monday.

*Shit.* I'm going to be on my own with Skylar for two full days. "Fiona," I say, ready to entice her with a bonus, "what if I offer to pay you a ridiculous amount of money to come over this weekend and help—"

"No," she says firmly.

My eyes narrow.

"I'm sorry, Eric, but you got yourself into this predicament and you need to figure it out. And it'll be good for you and your niece to have some bonding time, don't you think?" she adds sweetly and heads toward the door.

I bite back a response. Fiona wants me to learn a lesson and I can't blame her. When she glances over her shoulder one last time, I grit out, "Have a nice weekend."

"You, too," she says and disappears.

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath and toss the pen back onto my desk. "Well," I say to myself, throwing my arms up, "you got yourself into this situation. Suck it up and deal with it."

I walk into the living room and look at Skylar cooing in her playpen.

"Looks like it's just you and me, kid," I tell her. For a moment, I think she's going to start crying and I can't say I'd blame her. But then her expression clears and she merely stares at me with those huge blue eyes of hers. "I guess it's past your bedtime."

Leaning over, I scoop her up, prop her against my side, and we stare at each other.

"Sorry I've been such a terrible uncle," I apologize. "I know this isn't the ideal situation and I know how much you loved Abby. We all did."

The moment I say the words, I pause.

"You know, because she was so good with you and just around here. In general." I think I'm explaining my words more to myself than Skylar because, let's face it, she has no clue what I'm saying. Then it hits me, how easy it is talking to her, and I begin jabbering on like a gossipy old biddy.



“I screwed up, big time, though,” I tell Skylar as I carry her upstairs. “Abby probably hates me because...” My voice trails off. “Because I’m broken, kid.”

I lay Skylar on her changing table and hesitate, not sure what to do next. Usually Abby gives her a bath before bed, but I think I’m going to pass on that tonight. It’s already too late and what’s one missed bath?

I lean down and sniff. “You smell fine to me.”

Very carefully, I take off her little sweatshirt and matching sweatpants with pink teddy bears all over them. God, she’s so tiny and fragile. It makes me nervous. Luckily, her diaper is clean and dry, so we don’t have to go there yet. I grab her onesie pajamas and maneuver her miniscule, yet extremely chubby, body this way and that, trying to get her in them, but it isn’t easy because she wiggles like crazy.

After five minutes of struggling, I give up and throw the pajamas across the room.

“Fine. You want to sleep in something else? Works for me.” I rummage around in the dresser and pull out a long-sleeve top with cupcakes on it and pull it over her head. That should keep her warm enough. Plus she has blankets and I have the heat on high enough that the house is cozy despite the frigid weather outside.

This is usually about the time that Abby reads her a story and rocks her until she falls asleep. I grab the first book I see and sit down in the rocking chair, shifting Skylar, and trying to get us both comfortable. Once she settles back in my arms, I open the book and sigh.

*How in the hell did I get here?* I wonder and look down at the title, “Hammond The Bear.”

“Once upon a time, there was a bear cub who couldn’t roar,” I begin. “Although all of his brothers and sisters could growl fiercely, Hammond couldn’t make a peep.” I pause and frown. “Hammond? What the hell kind of name is Hammond for a bear? I’d say that’s his first problem.”

Skylar gurgles some nonsense, but I'm pretty sure she's agreeing with me. I turn my attention back to the story and keep reading. I know Skylar doesn't understand a word I'm saying, but she likes listening and lying in my arms. For whatever reason, I'm enjoying it, too.

By the end of the story, Hammond learns to roar and he realizes it was something he could do all along, but he was scared to try. When his family is threatened, he steps up and saves the day with the loudest roar anyone has ever heard.

*Shocker.*

If only life were like these silly stories.

I close the book and look down to see Skylar sleeping. *Thank God.* Very carefully, I stand up and then lower her down into her crib, doing my best not to wake her up. She gives a little snuffle, her eyes momentarily flutter, then she's out again.

*Whew.* I draw the blanket up over her chunky thighs and look down at her for a long moment, a little at a loss. Skylar is manageable and I can handle it. But for how long? She's going to start walking, talking, need to be potty-trained, go to school, start dating boys...

I am not prepared for any of it.

But she's mine now and it's up to us to stumble through this life together. And that means with or without Abby, Fiona, or some other nanny or assistant I hire.

"In the end, it all comes down to me and you, kid," I whisper. An uncharacteristic wave of emotion fills me and it occurs to me that Abby was right. I am so much more than Skylar's uncle. I'm raising her and it's up to me and, ultimately only me, to make sure she has a wonderful life and that all of her needs are met.

And even though I've shied away from the role of father, that's exactly what I'm doing. Even though she isn't my actual daughter, she's still my blood and I love her. *Fiercely*, I realize, and do my damndest to fight back the tears threatening to fill my eyes.

*Fuck.* I swipe my hand across my face and turn, flipping on the carousel night light. Then I grab the baby monitor and take it back downstairs with me. I can't sleep so I go straight into the kitchen, grab a glass and pour myself some whiskey. Slumping down on a stool at the island, I think about how many times Abby and I met down here in the middle of the night and talked.

*Abigail Tate is the best thing that ever happened to me.*

The thought comes out of nowhere and hits me upside the head like a sledgehammer. Fiona was right. But then again, when is she not?

It also occurs to me that I've gone through every emotion since I found out she left. I think about all of the mercurial texts and messages I've left her. From "You're fired" to "Please, come back" to "How could you just leave us?" to now...

I type out: *I miss you and I'm sorry.*

I need her back. No, it's more than that. I want her back in my life and I'm going to fight to make it happen.

I just hope it's not too little, too late.

The next morning, I get Skylar dressed as best as I can and into her coat. She looks like stuffed sausage. Since I have no idea where Abby currently is, I'm going to have to track her down. And then grovel like hell. Because last night after two glasses of whiskey, I stopped fighting my feelings and the present situation.

And I realized two things at the same time: I am the only father Skylar will ever know and I am so in love with Abby that my heart aches.

Once I came to terms with those facts, my entire world felt lighter. And now I'm on my way downtown to Mass General where Abby's sister Stella works. I know they're extremely close and I'm hoping I can convince Stella to tell me where to find Abby.

After parking and wrestling Skylar into her stroller – why this thing has so many buckles and straps and belts is beyond

me – I go into the hospital and ask for my buddy Cash. He'll be able to help me find Stella. When Cash comes down to meet me, his dark eyes widen.

“You look like shit, Mr. Mom,” Cash says.

“Thanks,” I mutter and run a hand through my hair which I forgot to brush. “I need your help. Is Stella working?”

“Yeah, why? And why do you have the baby? Isn't that what you hired Abby for?”

“Cash, everything is such a mess right now,” I say, needing to unload my problems onto someone other than Skylar. I need a fellow adult. “Abby left and she's upset with me and I never wanted any of the things she did. At least I didn't think so. But now that she's gone, I miss her so damn much. I didn't think I could love anyone again after Miranda,” I admit, unable to stop talking. It's like a dam burst and the flood just pours forth.

“Love?” he echoes.

“Yeah, I know I sound insane, but it's true. And now I need to tell her, but I have no idea where she is and I'm sure Stella knows.” I take a deep breath, but before I can start talking again, Cash raises a hand.

“Okay, calm down. I'll go get Stella.” Cash crosses his arms and eyes me. “Damn, I've never seen you like this before.”

“What do you mean?”

“You're normally so calm and controlled. And always a little grumpy.”

“I'm still plenty grumpy,” I assure him and he grins.

“Be right back,” he says and slaps my back.

As I wait for Stella, I've never felt this vulnerable before and it's a horrible feeling. It's one of the reasons I closed myself off to love, family, and relationships. But the idea of never seeing Abby again, of never kissing or touching her, leaves me bereft.

I sink down on the nearest bench and pull Skylar's stroller over against my knees. Once the floodgates opened, I can't seem to stop talking so I look down at Skylar and say, "Being a father is the one thing that scares me the most. I always thought I'd be terrible and I refuse to repeat what my dad did to me."

As the hustle and bustle of the hospital surrounds us, no one pays any attention, and I keep confiding in Skylar. "To be honest, I never wanted that kind of pressure. To have a little life depending on me. But when I took you in, I guess all that changed, huh? And so far, you're still alive and seem to be doing pretty well. I haven't failed you...not yet, anyway."

Skylar looks up at me, drooling around her teething ring.

"I mean, every once in a while, I have been known to be wrong. I know that's hard to believe," I say and she grins. "Oh, shit, kid. You're getting another tooth in," I exclaim and marvel over it longer than necessary.

Sitting back against the wall, I sigh. *Maybe I'm not as horrible at this parenting thing as I thought I'd be. Maybe, just maybe, I can figure it out.*

All I know is I want Abby back in my life; I miss her sunshine terribly. And this Grinch needs that bright light or I get too serious and in my head. As I wait for Stella, I vow to make things right with Abby again. For starters, I'm returning that bracelet and buying her something far more thoughtful and with meaning.

I'm also going to pick out an engagement ring. Even though I had one failed marriage, I finally realize it's because I was with the wrong woman. But Abby is the right woman and I'm determined to make her see that we belong together.

I just hope she'll listen.

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## ABBY

**J**ust when I think I'm all cried out, the tears start pouring all over again. Then Stella calls.

"Eric was just here at the hospital and he's on his way over now to see you," she blurts out.

"What?" I pop up off the sofa and run over to the nearest mirror. I look like death warmed over. "You told him I was here?"

"I'm sorry. He's very convincing and, besides, the sooner you two talk, the better, right?"

"I gotta go," I say. "Call you back later."

After hanging up, I race into the bathroom, splash some water on my face, brush my teeth and redo the messy bun on top of my head. Less than ten minutes later, there's a knock on the door and I immediately panic. I take a calming breath and go open the door to see Eric standing there looking almost as disheveled as me.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi."

"Can I come in?"

I take a step back and let him inside. Turning around, I cross my arms and wait to see what he has to say.

"You didn't answer any of my calls or texts."

"I don't work for you any longer," I remind him and his aqua eyes narrow.

“So you just ignore me? After everything that’s happened between us?”

“Where’s Skylar?” I ask, ignoring his question.

“With Rebecca.”

“So I leave and you dump her on someone else?”

“No, I—” He abruptly stops speaking. “I just wanted to talk to you alone.”

“So talk.”

He opens his mouth, closes it. “Why’re you being like this?”

“Like what?” I ask even though I know he’s referring to me being cold and distant. Well, what does he expect? He got me pregnant and broke my heart. These past few days without him have been the worst in my life and I’ve been trying so hard to convince myself that I don’t need him and can do this without him. But it’s not working. I can’t stop thinking about him, I’m dreaming about him, and my poor heart can’t take it.

Eric pulls in a deep breath then says, “I want you to come back, Abby.”

“Why?”

He frowns. “Why? Look at me? I’ve been a fucking wreck without you. I can’t work, I can’t sleep, I can’t eat.”

“So hire a new nanny.” I refuse to make this easy on him.

Eric stalks over and grabs my upper arms. “That’s all you think this is about? A nanny for Skylar?”

“Isn’t it? You just said you can’t get anything done.”

“Not because of her. I can’t focus because I miss *you* so damn much. I fucking need you, sweetheart. Like I’ve never needed anyone before.”

His words catch me by surprise and I just blink.

“Come home with me. Please,” he murmurs, searching my eyes.



As nice as his words sound, he has no idea about the secret I'm carrying. And the moment I reveal it, I can guarantee his entire tune will change. "Eric, I can't," I say, pulling back, but he won't let go. "Working for you isn't an option any longer."

Confusion flashes across his face. "What're you talking about? Why not?"

"Because a situation has come up," I say carefully.

"What situation? Whatever it is, we'll figure it out."

Time to rip the bandaid off. "I'm pregnant, Eric."

His aqua eyes widen in shock and he instantly releases me, taking an unsteady step backwards.

*Whelp, that did it.* Why am I not surprised?

"Pregnant?" he echoes, a terrified look on his face.

*And this is where he runs for the hills,* I think. With a nod, I watch his reaction and it speaks volumes. He may have wanted me back to warm his bed and watch Skylar, but he's not ready for any type of serious relationship.

"Your worst nightmare, right?" I ask with a sardonic half-smile.

He doesn't say anything, but I can see the panicked gears turning in his head.

"Do you want to be a father, Eric?" I ask, needing to hear his answer. Needing a reason to move on and forget all about him.

"No," he admits softly.

The last bit of hope I was holding on to flickers out. "Get out," I say between clenched teeth.

"Abby—"

"Go! Leave! Get out of here now!" I yell, my voice rising with each word.

Eric takes another step back, surprised by my outburst, but I can't take it any longer.

“I don’t even want to look at you,” I hiss, consumed by hurt and betrayal. I shove a hand against his chest and push him toward the door. “Leave!”

Without another word, Eric walks out the door and my poor heart shatters as I slam it shut behind him. Tears stream down my face and I collapse down onto the carpet and sob. I sob because it’s over. Even though I’ve missed Eric and Skylar tremendously and don’t want to live my life without them, he will never be able to step up and take responsibility.

And that leaves no other option but for me to move on, pregnant and alone.

Eventually, I pick myself up off the floor and curl up on the couch under a blanket. Despite wanting to close my eyes and forget about everything, sleep eludes me. So I decide to torture myself by turning my phone on and going through all of Eric’s messages. They range from demanding to angry to sweet to absurd. If I didn’t know him better, I’d say he was bipolar.

Unfortunately, I’m not surprised by his reaction to my pregnancy. But that doesn’t make it hurt any less. In fact, it may actually hurt more because he came over here to win me back. And all I had to do was threaten him with being a father and he was out.

*Idiot man.* He already is acting as a father in every single sense of the word to Skylar. Though one baby is hard enough for him to accept. *Two?* Ha. Forget it.

I suppose I should at least respect his honesty. He’s not playing games and he’s always been clear from the start about his feelings toward family and marriage.

It just hurts.

All day, I lay here and feel sorry for myself between bouts of crying and fear of a future alone. Well, not completely alone, right? I will have a baby. Eric’s baby.

Right as I’m contemplating dinner, there’s a knock on the door. I open it and a delivery man hands me a package. I assume it’s for Stella, but when I look down, I see my name.

Frowning, I thank the man and set the box on the counter. Using a pair of scissors, I slit the tape and open it up. There's a card and a smaller, gift wrapped box inside.

I instantly recognize Eric's handwriting and my chest constricts. Curiosity fills me and I open the envelope and slide a card out. It's a Christmas card. "My Dearest Abby," I read aloud, "I screwed up and I need you to know how sorry I am. I think I've been screwing up since the moment we met, but let's not go back that far. I need you to know how much you mean to me and I'm sorry I freaked out.

"You asked me if I wanted to be a father and I couldn't lie to you. I told you the truth. No, I don't, because it scares the holy hell out of me. But you showed me that I already am acting as a father to Skylar and I must be doing something right because the kid is still alive and I think she might even like me. Maybe love me? I know I love her.

"And I love you—" My voice drops off as his words repeat in my head. *I love you.*

*Oh, my God.*

Eric loves me?

I continue to read silently: "I want to tell you all of this in person, so please answer the door in five minutes, okay? I'm on my way over. All my love, Eric."

Sure enough, there's a knock at the door less than five minutes later. I haven't even opened the gift yet because I was so startled by his declaration of love.

Swallowing hard, I walk over, half in a daze, and pull the door open. Eric stands there looking cold and wet.

"It started snowing," he murmurs and runs a hand through his damp hair.

"Three hours ago," I say.

"I went for a walk. I needed the cold air to clear my head after leaving here earlier. Did you get my gift?"

"I read the card, but I haven't opened it yet."

He waits for me to say more and I invite him inside, motioning for him to follow me back over to the counter. I carefully tear the paper off the small box and then open the box and pull out a snow globe.

I lift it up and amidst the falling snow, I see a miniature replica of his house decorated for Christmas with what looks like him, me and Skylar in my arms. We're standing on the front porch and his arm is around my waist.

Not sure what to make of it, I look up and wait for an explanation because I certainly don't want to read too much into it.

"I took the bracelet back and had this made for you instead," he says. "I made the mistake of thinking you'd want an expensive gift like Miranda. When you got upset, I didn't understand. It took me a minute to realize you're nothing like her. You wanted something meaningful and the price tag didn't matter."

"Exactly," I whisper.

"All my life, I've done my damndest to avoid certain things that hurt me in the past."

A light clicks on in my head and suddenly I think I know what Eric is about to reveal.

"My own father was an awful person. He used to drink too much and then would turn abusive toward me and my mom. My mom was far too good for him, but she stuck by him until the day he died. I'll never understand why, but I remember her telling me that he wasn't always like that. That he had his demons. I didn't care, though, or understand. Especially after he whipped me with his belt when I was only eight."

"Oh, Eric," I say and touch his arm. He catches my hand and pulls it into his.

"I don't ever talk about any of this, Abby. Not my dad, my childhood, the way I would hide from him when he used to go on a bender. All I know is I never wanted to be anything like him. He used to always say, 'Never have kids, Eric. All they'll do is suck you dry— emotionally and financially.' And I guess

somewhere along the line, I started to believe him. I don't have one good memory of him."

"There has to be at least one," I murmur softly, trying to find a crack of light in his darkness.

For a long moment, he doesn't say anything. "Not with me, but one time I remember he took my mom's hand, kissed it and told her he was sorry for the man he'd become."

"That's so sad," I say, tears filling my eyes. "But that isn't you, Eric. I've seen how you are with Skylar. You're loving and you take good care of her and treat her like your own daughter. So don't let your father's demons become yours. Please," I beg him.

He lifts my hand and places a kiss in my palm. "They already have, though, Abby," he says, voice raw.

My heart sinks at his words. He believes he's a lost cause and it's going to be up to me to prove to him that he's not.

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## ERIC

“No,” she murmurs, squeezing my hand. “That’s not true.” Then to my surprise, she drags my hand down and presses it against her stomach. “This little one is depending on you, Eric. And so is Skylar and so am I. I’ve seen how amazing of a father you are and I know you’re going to get even better once you fully embrace it. I have no doubt in you and there’s no one else in this whole world who I would choose to be this baby’s father.”

Her words hit me hard because I know Abby isn’t bullshitting me. She truly believes everything she’s saying.

She believes in me and that makes all the difference in the world.

“Are you sure?” I ask hesitantly. “Because now would be the time for you to bail.” Even though I try to pass it off as a joke, I’m serious.

“You’re the father of my child, Eric. The last thing I’d do is bail. Besides,” she adds with a little smile, “I’d miss your grumpiness.”

My mouth edges up and I nod to the snow globe. “It plays a song, too,” I tell her and reach over to turn the small silver knob on the base. A moment later, the theme song from *The Grinch* fills the air and she bursts out laughing.

If Abby has faith in me, maybe I should learn to have some in myself, too. It’s not going to happen overnight, but it’s something I can work on and, with her help, I know I’ll be able to be a good dad.

And hopefully a husband, too.

While the music tinkles, I take a deep breath and pull out the engagement ring that has been burning a hole in my pocket since I got here. It's a simple, perfect diamond solitaire set in a platinum band. Its classic beauty instantly reminded me of Abby. Sure, it's probably bigger than she would've chosen, but I'm buying her the biggest damn rock I can get my hands on, no doubt about it.

Her mouth drops when she sees the ring and I lower down on one knee. "Abigail Tate, I know our relationship has been a whirlwind these past couple of weeks, but that hasn't stopped me from falling in love with you. The moment I met you, everything about you intrigued me— from the freckles on your nose to your sweet, yet sassy personality. I know I'm too serious, too grumpy, too focused on business, but you showed me there's more to life than just working. You helped me learn to relax more and see the fun side of life again. But most important of all, you helped me open my heart again – to love, to family – and that's something I never thought would happen. Thank you, sweetheart."

I reach for her hand and slide the ring on her finger. It's a perfect fit.

"You've changed my life for the better in so many ways, Abby, and I can't imagine living without you. I want to marry you, take you home and never let you go. Will you marry me?"

When I meet her pretty blue-green eyes, they're swimming in tears and she hesitates. *Oh, fuck.* It's like my balls shrivel up in my body and I feel like I'm going to hurl. She's going to say no and that thought nearly kills me.

I know I deserve it, though. *You've lost her,* I think, my heart shattering.

"On one condition," she finally murmurs and my heart starts to thwack against my rib cage.

"Anything," I whisper hoarsely.



“Me, Skylar and our baby need you to accept the fact that you’re an amazing father, whether you like it or not. And I want you forever so you better not have plans to go anywhere.”

Relief washes through me. “I’m right here, sweetheart.”

“And it’s okay if you mess up. We’re both going to screw up along the way, but we’ll figure it out together, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper and press my forehead against her hand. “I just can’t lose you.”

Abby squeezes my hand. “Eric?” When I look up, she tilts her head and gives me a cheeky smile. “You can’t lose me because you need a nanny?” she asks, trying to lighten the mood.

“No. Because I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She looks down at the ring and her face lights up. “And I would love to marry you.”

I pull her into my arms and as we fall back on the floor, I ply her face with kisses. It’s been too long and I capture her mouth in a long, thorough kiss. When we finally pull apart, we gaze into each other’s eyes for a long moment. I slide my hand through her hair and around the nape of her neck, cupping it.

“God, I’ve missed you. Come home with me, Abby.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she whispers.

We can’t get back to Brookline fast enough. Abby calls her sister on the way and tells her what transpired and the next thing I know, it’s starting to snow hard as I pull through the gate and park in front of the house. We rush inside and the second the door closes behind us, we start ripping each other’s clothes off.

It’s been weeks and I’ve missed this beautiful woman so damn much. We pause for a brief moment so I can toss another log on the fire and she lays a blanket down nearby. The Christmas tree is still up and I plan to do all sorts of wicked things to her under it again.

Abby stretches out on the blanket and I move on top of her. Our mouths collide, and we're starving for each other. Passion consumes us and all control slips away. I'm ready to slam into her, but I force myself to slow down and make sure she's ready first. Sliding my hand down her side, I dip it between her legs and find my sweetheart already drenched. Even so, I slip a finger inside her as I kiss her deeply, moving it in and out while swirling my thumb over her clit.

Her nails dig into my upper arms and she arches beneath me, crying out my name as she comes hard and fast. "That's right," I encourage her. "I've got you. Let go."

Abby drops back and I position myself between her legs, fist my cock, and sink home. "Ahhh, Christ," I hiss, sliding into her soaking heat, feeling her body stretch to take me. It's exactly like coming home and nothing has ever felt so right.

I thrust harder, deeper, and she arches beneath me with a cry. She feels like heaven and my pace increases. It's like a wildness comes over us. I'm slamming into her with a desperate need and she's scratching her nails down my back and whimpering.

The need to be as close as possible fills me and I lift her legs over my shoulders and sink even deeper. We both groan and our gazes connect. The intimacy is beyond anything I've ever experienced and after several more thrusts, we both shudder through intense, simultaneous orgasms.

That's never happened to me before. After I empty into her body, I fall down on top of her, trembles running through me. I can feel them running through her, too.

I don't want to hurt her so I roll off and gaze up at the ceiling, breathing hard as the fire crackles beside me and the Christmas tree lights blink slowly. Turning my head, I look over and Abby seems as shaken as I am.

"You okay?" I ask.

She rolls over to face me and then presses her lips to mine. It's a long, steamy kiss that's making me want to start all over again.

“Never been better,” she confirms after breaking her mouth away from mine. She traces a finger along my bare chest. “You’re really good at that.”

“I try to please,” I say with a crooked smile. Then I reach for her and pull her into my arms. She lays her head against my chest and I stroke a hand through her soft, blonde hair. “I love you, sweetheart. So much.”

“I love you, too.”

My hand slides down her side and moves around to cover her flat belly. “I can’t believe our baby is growing in here.”

It scares the shit out of me, but I’m slowly beginning to warm up to the idea because it’s us. It’s me and Abby, and there’s no one else in the whole world I would do this with except for her.

Abby reaches down to lay her hand over mine and our fingers lace. “Never doubt yourself, Eric. You’ve got this. We all believe in you.”

“Your faith in me means everything.”

“I have all the faith in the world in you, my love,” she murmurs.

With our hands locked and pressed against her stomach, the sound of the fire lulls us to sleep. Right before drifting off, I place a kiss against her bare shoulder and thank God for the day Abby Tate walked into my life.

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# EPILOGUE

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## ABBY

**I**t's early September and I am as big as a house and uncomfortable ninety percent of the time. The baby is late and if I don't go into labor tonight, my doctor wants to induce tomorrow morning. But this kid inside me is stubborn, so there's no telling what will happen.

I wouldn't expect anything else from Eric Sullivan's unborn son.

Eric dotes on me like crazy and makes sure I'm as comfortable as possible. He's done a complete one-eighty degree turn these past nine months, going from someone who feared being a husband and father to a man who gives it his all every single day to make sure me, Skylar and our baby are taken care of in every way possible. Throughout my entire pregnancy he has been supportive, loving and the kind of man I want our future son to grow up to be like.

We just finished eating dinner and Skylar is babbling away in her high chair when the first contraction hits me.

"Uh oh," I say and round a hand over my huge belly.

Eric stops washing dishes at the sink and spins around. "What? Are you okay?"

"I think it's time to go to the hospital," I say and smile at him.

"Oh, shit," he exclaims and moves over to me fast, his hands dripping water all over.

“Eric, turn off the faucet,” I say and point to the running water. “Don’t worry. We have plenty of time.”

He nods, looking panicked, and flips the water off then takes my hands in his. “Just stay here for a minute. I’m going to grab your bag and we’ll drop Skylar off and go straight to the hospital, okay?”

I nod. He runs out of the kitchen like a chicken with its head cut off and I suppress a smile and look over at Skylar. “I think he’s nervous. So am I, though,” I admit. “I hope you’re ready for your little brother because he’s ready to come out.”

Skylar claps her hands together.

Twenty minutes later, Skylar is with Rebecca and Cash and we’re at the hospital. Eric drove like a maniac, but we made it safely. I’m in a wheelchair and, as the attendant rolls me to a private room, another contraction hits me hard. With a gasp, I double over and Eric is right there, rubbing my back and talking me through it.

I couldn’t do this without him and as the hours drag by, he does everything in his power to make sure I’m comfortable and taken care of in every possible way. Stella pops in to visit me, too.

Almost seven hours later, I don’t want any more ice chips or words of encouragement. I just want this baby out.

“You’re so close,” Eric tells me. He’s holding my hand and talking me through the final stages of the most excruciating experience I’ve ever been through.

The doctor is somewhere down between my legs and orders me to push.

I’m so exhausted though and I don’t know if I can take much more of this torture.

“C’mon, sweetheart, you can do this,” Eric says and presses his lips to my knuckles. “One last big push, okay?”

Even though I want to give up, I draw in a huge breath and then bear down with every last ounce of strength within myself. A cry erupts from the back of my throat and I squeeze

Eric's hand so hard that I'm scared I might break it. But he doesn't even flinch.

A moment later, a baby's cries fill the air and I drop back against the pillows, beyond exhausted.

"Congratulations," the doctor tells us. "You have a healthy baby boy."

Tears fill my eyes and I'm just so damn relieved it's over. I feel like I just got run over by a truck followed by a train. Eric brushes the hair off my sweaty forehead and the next thing I know, the nurse places our swaddled baby on my chest.

We look down at the red-faced bundle and a tear slips down my cheek.

"I can't believe we made him," I whisper. I count each of his tiny fingers and toes. "He's absolutely perfect."

I look over at Eric who hasn't said anything yet. His aqua eyes shimmer with tears and he presses a kiss to my lips.

"Do you have any idea how strong you are? I have no idea how you just did that. I'm in awe of you, sweetheart."

"Well, let me tell you, there's a reason they call it labor."

He chuckles and gently touches our baby's teeny tiny fingers. "He's so ridiculously small," Eric says. "I'm scared I'm going to break him."

"Skylar was small when you first got her," I remind him.

But Eric shakes his head. "No, she was always a little chunk."

We both laugh. Skylar recently turned three and she's into everything. I can only imagine what she's going to be like when she turns thirteen and becomes a teenager. She's already a handful, so spirited and independent, and she becomes prettier every single day. Eric is going to have a heart attack trying to keep the boys away from her.

Eric and I ended up eloping a few weeks after he proposed. I didn't want to look like a beached whale in our wedding pictures so we ran off to Hawaii and exchanged our vows on



the beach at sunset with the waves washing up around us. It was perfect in every single way. Then after we returned home, we had a party with my parents, Stella, Fiona, Skylar, Cash and Rebecca.

No one has ever made me happier.

I always knew that one day I would find my perfect person. It's why I held out and refused to settle for so long. Little did I know that my Prince Charming would need some rescuing of his own. And happy endings? Nope, he wouldn't believe in them.

Luckily, I have enough optimism for the both of us. He still calls me his Pollyanna Sunshine because I always see the good first in everything and everybody. It's just my nature. And I still call him the Grinch when he turns grumpy. I'm pretty sure he likes it, too.

As we look down at our baby, admiring him, Eric presses his head to mine. "So what do you think? Does he look like an Andrew?"

"I think Anna would like that," I say, smoothing a hand over his soft head, already covered in Eric's dark hair.

"Me, too."

"I can see so much of you in him."

"Really?"

When he looks up at us with aqua eyes the same color as Eric's, I smile. "He's going to be your little mini-me," I predict.

Eric laces his fingers through mine and we squeeze each other's hands. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm kind of excited."

I arch a brow, waiting for him to elaborate.

"About this whole dad thing. I know I fought it for so long, but now I have no idea why because it's the best damn feeling in the whole world."

A huge smile breaks out over my face and our lips meet in a soft kiss.

“I never doubted you,” I tell him. “I always knew you’d be the best dad and husband in the whole world. You just had to believe it yourself.”

“Thank you for helping me get there,” he whispers. “I love you, sweetheart. So damn much.”

“I love you, too,” I whisper, leaning my head against his shoulder.

*Everything will work out if you just believe.* I’ve lived by this motto for years and it hasn’t let me down yet. Our little family is blossoming and I couldn’t be happier. Eric’s change of heart about fatherhood over this past year touches me deeply and I think that having the three of us in his life has made his heart grow three sizes bigger.

Just like the Grinch.

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# EXCERPT: DIRTY LITTLE SECRET



**My best friend hates me because of what I did.**

**And for good reason...**

***I slept with her father.***

The same man who employed me.

Oh boy, what have I done?

Brandon owns the gaming company that I was so interested in working for.

My best friend, Hayley, was about to be an intern.

That's what got me through the door.

And now... I regret taking the job.

I regret the way I responded when Brandon touched me for the first time.

I hate that I agreed to keep it a secret.

Even from Hayley... *especially* from her.

But I clearly couldn't help myself.

And now I'm standing at the crossroads.

*I could either lose my sanity and be with Brandon...*

*Or lose my heart and leave town.*

## **Chapter One: Brandon**

It had been months since I'd last seen my little girl. Well, she wasn't so little anymore. Hayley was twenty-two, just weeks away from graduating with a degree in Creative Writing, and I had a huge surprise for her.

I walked to the kitchen, where my parents were cooking a feast for themselves, me and Hayley, just as excited about her return home as I was.

"How's it going, Ma?"

My mother, Liora, was a woman in her mid-sixties, with graying hair and perpetual rosy cheeks.

She looked up from the meatloaf she was checking to see if it was cooked and smiled. "All good here, Bran. What time is Hayley due?"

I glanced at the watch on my wrist. "Just about now."

"Perfect, I'll open some wine," my father, Richard, replied.

I was lucky that, despite being a single father, I could offer financial security not only to my daughter, but also my parents too, who'd done the grunt work in raising Hayley when she was younger, so I could focus on my video games development company, Phantasm Studios.

After Hayley, Phantasm Studios, was my pride and joy, and I had dedicated the last twenty-years to making it the

success it was today.

I'd been right around Hayley's age when I'd first conceived the idea, with my best friend — and now business partner — Aiden James.

I'd known Aiden nearly my whole life, as we both shared a love for the fantastical, and while I was writing *Lord of the Rings* as a tween, he'd been drawing breath-taking pictures of Rivendell. We pretty much lost our minds when Peter Jackson released his *Lord of the Rings* movie series. The characters and the settings that we saw on the big screen was our final push to follow our dreams.

If Peter Jackson could do it, why couldn't we?

And so, with both of us still at university, we'd founded Phantasm Studios. Twenty years later, we'd released two critically acclaimed fantasy RPG games, heavily influenced by our beloved *Lord of the Rings*, and a third game was currently in the final stages of production.

Of course, it wasn't *all* smooth sailing. Right around the time Aiden and I founded Phantasm Studios, I'd also met Lisa Johnson, a pretty young bartender at the local bar. Honestly, I'd been surprised that someone as attractive as Lisa had been drawn to a self-proclaimed *geek* like I was. This was before comic books and video games became popular and mainstream like they are today. But Lisa and I hit it off instantly, and nine months later, along came Hayley. Yes, I know. My future self would go insane at the thought of twenty-one-year-old me having sex without protection, but what can I say? We were young and dumb. I did the right thing though, and as soon as Lisa told me she was pregnant, I proposed. We got married six months before Hayley was born. But married life wasn't for Lisa. We tried to make it work, but with me spending long hours at the office developing Phantasm Studios first video game, Lisa was left alone with Hayley a lot of the time. The end result was that she walked out on me and our daughter when Hayley was just two years old. The last I heard, Lisa was living with a man half her age, in Cuba, running a nightclub there or something.

Thankfully, my parents were there to step in and fill the void Lisa left, so that Hayley was never alone, and I did my best to split my time between work and raising my daughter. I admit, I wasn't around as much as I should have been, but I made sure to attend all the big events, like sports days and parents' evenings, and even some of the smaller stuff, too, when I could.

Luckily, Hayley was a chip off the old block, with a vast imagination just like mine. Even when we were at the height of game development, I always made sure to come home — even if it was just for an hour — so that Hayley and I could read *Lord of the Rings* together before bed, and as Hayley grew, we introduced each other to more fantastical worlds.

The sound of the front door opening jerked me out of my thoughts, and I hurried from the kitchen, into the entranceway, where my daughter was pulling in her overstuffed suitcase. Even though she was only stopping for a few days, her bag was filled with her favorite novels, and of course, notebooks for all her ideas.

A chip off the old block indeed.

Hayley's warm-brown eyes sparkled, and a grin spread across her face.

"Daddy!" she pulled me into a tight embrace.

"It's good to see you, Kiddo," I said, taking a step back to study my daughter. Was she thinner than the last time I saw her?

"Are you eating enough?"

Hayley rolled her eyes. "You're as bad as Grandma. I can already smell her meatloaf. I assume she's trying to *fatten me up*."

We both laughed as we walked through to the kitchen, where my dad handed us glasses of wine.

"Thanks Grandpa," Hayley said, pulling him into an embrace.

We settled at the dinner table, and were soon joined by my mom, who placed down a large golden-brown meatloaf, which smelt amazing. The scents of beef, onions, thyme and Worcestershire sauce made my mouth water. Alongside the meatloaf, my mom served creamy, mashed potatoes garnished with butter and chives, and a dish of steamed vegetables.

“Everyone tuck in,” Mom said, as she settled at her place at the head of the table, me to her left and my father to her right. Hayley sat at the opposite end, facing her grandmother, and the two women smiled at each other.

Hayley was almost the mirror image of my mom at her age, with the same warm-brown eyes I’d inherited, and the long, chestnut brown hair. Any hints of her mother, Hayley had started disguising and hiding as she grew into a teen and began to resent the parent who abandoned her. These days, we didn’t talk about Lisa at all.

“How is your assessment project coming along?” I asked, as we all began eating.

Hayley’s degree grade was based on the assignments she’d completed during the course of her three years of study, with one final assessment — a 10,000-word major independent study project — due before graduation.

Hayley smiled. “I just finished my final draft, and it’s with Mark for beta reading.”

I was still getting used to the idea that my *little girl* was dating, even though she and Mark had been together for almost eighteen months now. He was a good guy, someone any father would be happy to know was dating their only child, and he shared mine and Hayley’s love for literature, though he preferred science-fiction to fantasy. Still, it was hard accepting Hayley was growing up, and soon wouldn’t need me at all.

“We’ll have to have him over for dinner soon,” my mom insisted.

“Yeah, that would be great. I would have asked him to join us tonight, but his parents are eager to see him.”

“Of course. Whenever you’re both free,” I reassured. “And is everything else going well?”

“It is ...” Hayley paused, her eyes darting around the room, before she asked, “You haven’t heard from Lisa, have you?”

Hayley had been calling her mother by her first name for years. It was part of distancing herself from her mom since the woman abandoned her when she was two.

My heart felt like it was breaking. “Sorry, honey, I haven’t.”

Hayley adjusted her features quickly, showing no sign of hurt or disappointment, and simply said, “Figures.”

Wanting to cheer her up, I decided to announce my surprise now.

“I have something to tell you,” I said.

Hayley’s eyes sparkled with interest. “Are you finally dating someone?”

This had been Hayley’s favorite topic of conversation lately, and when she’d visited last, all she’d spoken about was how I’d done so much for her and the business, and worked so hard, and that I deserved some happiness.

“I don’t think I want to get back in the dating game right now,” I dismissed. Even though I had my own successful business, being a divorced, single father still came with some stigma, and it was hard to meet women. Especially women who appreciated my interests. For me a perfect date would be walking around an old bookstore or visiting the local comic book shop. Apparently, women my age weren’t into that sort of thing, and wanted to be wined and dined at expensive restaurants. Honestly, I found it boring, and the food was often overpriced and over hyped.

“Actually, I’ve been speaking to Aiden. We want to offer you an internship at the company.”

Hayley’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. “For real?”



“For real. I’ve read your work, Hayley, and know you’d be a good addition to the team. After the internship, hopefully, we can find you a permanent position. But if not, having it on your resume will go a *long* way to helping you find a job.”

“Thank you, Dad. But I can’t have you giving me a job just because I’m your kid.”

“Good job that’s not the case then. You know Aiden would *never* let me get away with that shit.”

Hayley chuckled. “That’s true. Uncle Aiden is ruthless.”

“Exactly. But when I showed him the short story you recently self-published, he was completely on board. We’re going to begin working on our fourth game soon, and we need fresh, new voices.”

“Okay, but I want to have a proper interview, and everything. I won’t accept *hand-outs*.”

I smiled. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

My daughter had also inherited my strong work-ethics.

“And can I ask another favor?” Hayley asked, adopting a soft, girly voice. The same voice she used to use to get extra dessert when she was younger.

It was the voice I couldn’t refuse, and she knew it.

“Oh god, what am I about to agree to?”

We all laughed, and Hayley quickly rushed into the entranceway to grab something from her bag. “It’s nothing bad, I promise. You remember my roommate, Bethany, right?”

The name rang a bell, I think I’d met the young woman once or twice when I visited Hayley at her dorm.

“Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“Well, she’s about to graduate with an art degree, and she’s looking for an internship too. Could you possibly think about giving her one at Phantasm Studios? She’s a fantastic artist, and I know she’d work really hard and—”

“I’d need to see her work first. Is this it?” I asked, gesturing to the leather-bound sketchbook in Hayley’s hands.

“It is,” my daughter said, and handed over the sketch book.

I opened it on the first page, and my jaw dropped open. It was a stunning landscape of a red-bricked castle, with a large dragon flying overhead. The colors and details almost leaped off the page, and the painting was so intricately designed I could almost *feel* the rough texture of the stone.

I turned to the next page, which depicted a close-up of the same dragon from page one, its scales glimmering in the sunlight, a realistic droll handing off its long, large fangs.

As I flicked through the book, there were more and more similar pictures. While there were some real-world portraits and other more ‘classical’ pieces too but the majority were fantasy scenes, creatures, castles, knights in armor and fair maidens in beautiful gowns. A chill — akin to the one Aiden and I had gotten when we’d seen the first *Lord of the Rings* trailer — went down my spine at the sight of a beautiful, semi-naked elf-maiden with long, purple hair, bathing in a rushing waterfall.

And there on the final page was a scene from my latest video game — *Siege of Adrium* — depicting the hero *Karolus the Magnificent* in his gleaming, golden armor; his long dark hair flowing in the breeze, as he raised his greatsword, *Orenmir*.

I glanced at Hayley to see a sly smile covering her lips. She’d *known* this picture was in here, and that I would be blown away by it.

“So, what do you think?” she asked, as though she couldn’t already guess.

I grinned. “Please, give me Bethany’s number, and I will call her up to arrange an interview straight away.”

Hayley’s sly smile morphed into a grin to match my own, and she pulled a business card out of her pocket and handed it to me. “I was hoping you were going to say that.”

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## INVITATION TO JOIN KELLY'S NEWSLETTER

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